

How It Went Bad With Horsepen

by John Riley

You hate that damn Horsepen Jones. Out walking the hills with his shotgun. You know he'll soon be back with a fresh coon or rabbit or maybe a couple of squirrels and will stand outside the door picking the shot out of the meat, jabbering about how good it's going to taste, while you eat the gruel he made before he left.

How much longer can you bear up under his abuse? You're just a tiny girl. How much longer will it be before your stomach grabs your heart and squeezes it shut?

You didn't used to hate him. Truth is, the happiest time of your life were the few weeks you had alone with Horsepen, before things went bad. You felt like a whole other person when he hoisted you on his hip and totted you around with him pretty near everywhere he went. You never should have said it! That's what made things go bad. But he'd been so nice and gentle and had never once acted like he cared that your legs hadn't grown an inch since you were born. That even with someone holding your hands to keep you steady you can't raise yourself much over three feet.

You should never have believed your daddy when he said a man with half a dog was better off than a man with no dog at all. Your daddy loved dogs almost as much as he loved you and you knew he was trying to make you feel better about being half a girl. You'd go along with him and say, "But I'm a girl. I ain't no damn dog," and you'd both laugh. Sometimes after he had a few slugs out of his mason jar your daddy would get out the rope and tie you up into a ball and carry you down to the creek and see how fast you'd roll down the steep bank. How you loved bouncing into that cold water! And it made him so happy to see you bobbin around between the old rocks. Your daddy loved you, yes he did, and you never worried he'd

forget to come pull you out of the creek before you sank to the bottom and drowned.

When your daddy got sick Horsepen promised to take care of you. Sooner or later her insides gonna get knotted up, your daddy told him, and she'll pass on. There ain't room enough for all her female parts as it is. Then you won't have to bother with her no more and this place will be all yours. Free and clear. But while she's alive you gotta promise me she'll get some sun everyday and that you'll keep her fed and treat her nice. She's a sweet little thing and happy as God's favorite child and ain't ever once complained about her affliction.

Horsepen was already your best friend before your daddy died. When your daddy would go out drinking with Horsepen's mama the Widow Jones, you and Horsepen would stay home and play card games or he'd tell you stories about the things he'd seen over in the town called Star. One night he said that the town called Star was a shiftless place that didn't deserve its name and he took you outside where the night was clear enough for him to show you the pictures the real stars in the sky made. He'd learned about the pictures from Mr. Clack, the only teacher he'd ever had worth his salt Horsepen said. You rested your head against his and you two walked in a circle, your eyes peeled to the sky while his finger traced the star pictures for you to see. Yes, things were good between you and Horsepen, so when your daddy met his maker and it was just the two of you life were near about perfect for a while.

Then came the day he picked you up and set you in your daddy's old truck and said that you and him were going to take a ride. We'll just ride around, not going to no particular place, he said. It was near 'bout twilight before he pulled over to the side of the road and pointed out your window and said over there in that clearing under that thick stand of trees is where I got my first kiss from ol'Lucinda Hill. Then his eyes got sparkly and he said I ain't going to tell you what happened after that.

But you wanted to know what happened after that! You wanted him to carry you over to the same spot where he'd kissed Lucinda

Hill and lift you up so your face was in front of his face and kiss you even harder than he'd kissed her. That's what you wanted but you should never have said it. Never should have said you could be his plaything in so many ways. That you were tiny but your heart was bigger than the whole night sky.

The look on his face when you told him you loved him near about broke your heart. You'd never seen a person look so disgusted. You should of known he'd never think of you that way. That when it comes to some things a half a dog ain't good enough. You should of known he'd never look at you the same after you said it'd be like flying to heaven if he lifted you up and pressed his face to yours. You should have known to keep your heart to yourself, to stay quiet about what could happen over under the limbs of them trees.

