

Red Brick

by Darlin' Neal

The child could hear frogs chorusing outside and she wanted to listen only to that. Inside her grandfather gasped for air and she tried to keep her eyes normal as he smiled at her and put the mask back on. She did not want him to see how much she felt like running from the room that stank of whiskey and cigarettes even now, how much she felt like she was smothering too. They could try to hide it from her but she could sense how fearful he was dying drowning for air.

She had heard her parents talk about death. Her grandmother had died unexpectedly one October, the day before she turned fifty, the day before her parent's anniversary. The child had sat in back of the car and heard them talking about sad endings in place of beginnings. The child would listen watching light flicker through the trees, listen until she fell asleep with her cheek against the window or on the ledge if the window were open and the wind was cooling her hair. When she was a baby they took her driving to calm her crying and to let the wheels over the road rock her to sleep. They told her this. They told her, you like to ride and now she was almost always riding, traveling to some place new and here she was back in Mississippi where she hadn't been for a while, listening to Papaw try to breathe.

Her father sent her outside to get something from the car. The building she left was long and low, seemed small to her even as a child. She got in the car full of worry she would forget what was wanted and she did. There were cigarettes in the car, sunglasses, books she could not read in the back seat because she became nauseous when the car was moving. She felt sick she could not remember. She felt light headed. Goddamn, her father would say. Are you stupid? Rage always ready to boil up in him and send him pacing. She knew he probably would not talk that way here in this house, but he would be thinking those words and how could she forget when her grandfather was ill?

Poppies grew all along the front of the long building. It was so hot, the air felt like moving through sweat. She picked up cigarettes, a lighter. She did not see anything else that would help her remember. There were pliers on the floor. She picked these up too. Walking back toward the building she felt something slipping away through the air. A flock of birds flew up from a field of grass and back down. The world seemed to sigh in great sadness.

She entered a door and the white walls looked the same but everything was different. Air from a fan washed over her. Her parents were not there, nor her little aunt who had been talking to her on the sofa, nor her grandfather. Instead there were old men sitting round a table, a little surprised to see her, chuckling and saying hello. A man shuffled the deck of cards that had been the center of their attention until they saw her standing there. He said, "You're not going to smoke those are you?" She stood there trying to figure out how they had come into the room. Another man said, "Cat got your tongue?" People were always asking her this when she didn't feel like talking or know what to say. "You don't smoke those, you can pet the puppy," the man said and laughed again.

In a corner she saw a basket with the puppy inside and she came unfrozen and went to touch him. She wanted to bury her face in that soft fur. She said, "Where's everybody? Where's Papaw?"

"Can I be your papaw?" one of the men asked and she shook her head. "You're a pretty girl, I wish you'd let me." She went to the door and held her hand on the knob, afraid they might stop her from leaving. "I think you've come to the wrong place," said the old man as he dealt the cards and so she stepped into the yard.

It was out there she realized her mistake, out in the heat again. She took a chance and opened another door and got lucky. It was the right one. Inside the mood had gotten sadder. She saw her mother cradling the little aunt against her bosom. People were crying and she did not hear that breathing any more.

