

Good Country. People.

by Heather Fowler

"Some can't be that simple," she said. "I never could." Girl's name was Treble, Treble Ann Joiner, and as of one week ago today, she was twenty-three years old, but now sat talking to her mother's pet, would-be boyfriend, Mister loved-Treble-so-much Ray Adams, who had been trying, in his own vacuous way, to enter her man-trousers for years. Ray Adams was forty-four.

"His dick don't even work, likely," she was fond of telling her friends when they came by or called, which was infrequent. Nobody came this far into the backwoods without a good reason.

"And if I could be that simple," she said, twirling a string of her ratty brown hair on a spit-wet finger and relishing the idea, "I wouldn't."

To this last bit, Ray Adams nodded without listening.

Treble expected no response, often spoke just to hear the melody of her own voice playing in its various registers, and often it was like she was mimicking somebody, her mama, Johnella, more than likely, or her mama's friend, or her mama's mama — maybe even the mama of somebody else like-a-nobody to whom her mama spoke in the oscillating fan-swirled smoke of the home's inner parlor, chatting an interminable amount of time as some kind of greens were cooked in the grease of slaughtered pigs and the other adults, as she called them, as she called anybody not her and over thirty, spoke on in blue yammering streaks due to mourning the loss of the impossible, or possibly non-existent, gentry inside of themselves.

No adults ever truly addressed each other, she'd decided years ago, just engaged in the type of ceaseless monologues most folks made while deciphering their own life's riddles, responding as if interacting, and interjecting here and there a few slightly tangential relationships to the topic at hand, to appease the idea of participation. For this reason, Treble Ann often said things completely unconnected, as outbursts, not to add to the discussion, but to disrupt it.

And there was Mama, Treble Ann thought, overhearing the bustle of swish of garments moving in the back room, putting on yet more perfume for Ray Adams that would stink up the smoking parlor, which was already flavored perfectly with Ray Adams lit pipe, likely buttoning closed some dress she'd bought out-seasoned and too small at a bargain sale, in the hopes of finally *enticing*, in the hopes that Ray Adams might summarily give up his highly inappropriate crush on Treble Ann and put his lewd intentions where they'd get more use. After all, the Bible in her mama's boudoir was too oft consulted for no good temptation and Johnella itched for contrition, but hadn't enjoyed a lick of wrongdoing in months. *Poor mama, Treble Ann thought. You gonna die out here and no suitable man will ever come calling. None so good as daddy. But there sits stupid Ray Adams.*

As if in sync with Treble's thoughts, "Ray Adams?" Treble Ann heard her mother call. "Can you come take a look at this here shelf in my hall? It could use some straightening."

"Iffen I help her," Ray Adams said, "you gonna finally give me a kiss, Treble Ann?"

Treble Ann snorted, said, "I'll give you a kiss with my fist, Ray Adams. No problem." His face reddened and he cleared his phlegm-happy throat. She spun another curl on a newly licked finger. "What I will do, if you fix it," Treble Ann continued, "is not tell my mama you been asking me to kiss you again, Ray Adams — because you get free supper here all the time you lazy no-account bum. And you know that... In fact, why not scam early?"

Aggrieved, as if it pained him, "Coming to help just this minute, Johnella," Ray Adams shouted toward the back room, before fixing upon his beloved a forlorn look. His hair had thinned. He was a man stretched like string shadows with a ball lump where his belly had spread while the rest of him hadn't. But he was weak — couldn't open the stored fig bottles, wouldn't even spar on account of Treble's fake hand, he said. Didn't want to hurt her, he'd opined oncet, but he'd seen her punch a block of wood in the yard with her club-fist a number of times, take down some neighborhood boys, too,

so when he muttered that malarkey about not wanting to harm her, all tender, ready to burst with his own tremulous would-be goodness, she'd dressed him down right quick, whispering immediately under her breath, "You afraid I'm gonna tear your face off with this hand of mine, Ray Adams, aren't you? You and every other boy round here. Because I would — or I can. You negligent piece of shit."

He took a few weeks before applying his next flirtation. Brought her a few gifts that wouldn't be noticed. Lima beans? She had graduated high school the previous June. "Biggest nightmare, I'm going to get so bored here now," she told herself just then, listening to the shelf banter in the hall, picking up Ray's smoldering pipe and taking a toke, "is that I might actually change my mind about him. Now, liking Ray Adams would be a terror. I'd rather punch his lazy face."

She practiced boxing regularly. Her father had been dead so long, thirteen years as it were, so it seemed his long ago pugilism lessons were fading, though ever-present, like the memory of his hands as he'd helped her up so many times, so she now extended these teachings with the help of his spirit's ghost inside her, for he was the only one she listened to, and she could hear him talking to her sometimes, when she paid attention quite close, encouraging her, like he had when she'd lost her hand at age ten — falling on the road, concussed after a few night rounds in his ring, laid on the road side with her palm pointed upward toward the sky, alone and spread on the asphalt, as a '36 Plymouth full of liquored teens barreled down the country pass and ran her hand clean over, crushing every bone.

"Treble Ann, you gotta fight this," her daddy said then, "like you fight for everything. Don't let it take you down." Viewing the stump, lacking the digits that once wrote and picked up tools, no one thought she'd finish grade school, or high school, no matter her new prosthetic — but she had! Though her daddy'd passed soon thereafter, she learned to write with the other hand, fought more, fought harder, and kept his training paces. She used her prosthetic

better than most gimps around, excepting she didn't want the tool hand so often. She wanted the blunt fist her daddy made her just before he died, the hitting hand that fit like a charm below her boxing glove and did damage.

The real prosthetic she wore just for at work at the Five and Dime. At home, she brandished the hard wood replacement, rounded, the one that bore no resemblance to the pronged metal creeper, and she lorded this about like an ever-held rock used to bang things.

She grew. She learned. As her mama would say, she had blossomed. Through the years, she ran in the mornings, rain or shine, to keep her stamina, breathing in the good country air, checking out the thorn vine growth from time to time, and climbing the hills steadily then, insistently then, breezing down them on her long, strong legs, darting behind and between houses in a pair of torn grey sweats getting shorter by the year, like a ghost of a girl who had always been a boy at heart. So powerful while running and hitting, she had no care for romance. Never had.

Probably why Ray Adams took a shine to her. He enjoyed no immediate competition, so often said when outside Johnella's earshot, "You shore do have a pretty face, Treble Ann," again and again, like the effect of an already poor compliment could increase by repetition. Treble Ann didn't want her pretty face. She wanted to fire her boss and re-open her daddy's store to sell hard liquor and playing cards out the backdoor, like he'd done when he'd been shot. She wanted to own every person in this town by knowing their secrets — the Cottons, the Hopewells, the Freemans, the Joneses, the Townsends — because you could know a family by what they bought: Who's an anorexic false slut? Glynese Red-head Freeman! Who's sticking it to someone else's wife and hiding it? Edgar J. Cant. Sure enough. Look at all that baby repellent he buys!

Treble Ann first wanted to re-own her daddy's store, and then maybe she wanted to beat every lousy boy at St. Mary's Christian Fellowship Academy who'd ever given her a moment's cruelty over

her gone hand. That, or join a circus, though she had no marketable skills.

Still, the daily boredom wore her down. Mama's checks from the insurance were long gone, all casinos miles away. Most days, the house was still like a witness on the stand, this rotting house, and between Johnella's door wreath fixings, selling hens' eggs, and working odd days at the Post Office, plus Treble Ann's small earnings from the Five and Dime, they had plenty of victuals, but no hope of expanding their horizons — unless there were a bank to be robbed or an inheritance to be swindled. So the urge to hit something. Hitting things relieved her.

If Treble Ann had been born a boy, she woulda been a champ welter-weight. Woulda been on television, knocking those fool boys out, even the black boys who thought they were something. Truth was, even though female, or because of this, she didn't really miss her hand, often speculated that if she came upon some trouble, the wood her daddy had fashioned as a fist would work better than any fragile hand of skin and bone. Her wrist had not grown. The club-fist would fit forever, though was rough-hewn with the beatings she gave it. The car that had rooked her fool hand could run over the club-fist five or six times, and it wouldn't be worse for the wear.

It was this longevity and durability she thought about, strolling to the wood porch, as she saw a new stranger sauntering up their drive, a young man — and what a sad sack of shit in an eye-popping blue suit he was, carrying some red-handled black valise like he was the Reaper's son, walking so full of himself, so inappropriately erect, like somebody had rammed a thick stick clear up his rear and into his spine. He was thin, coltish, none too clean, a half-smile perched on his face like a flatulent frog.

Initially, she had no hopes about his impending arrival, scrawny as he was, until realizing that, because he was a boy, because he was new around here, he might want to wrestle. Since attempted wrestles with Ray Adams had been more about restraining the hands of a deliberate tit-grazer than pure athletic sparring, she smiled at Mr. New-Thin-Whatever-His-Name-Was, hoping to appear

engaging, or at the very least nonviolent. "Treble Ann, you must hide how aggressive you are," she'd heard her mama say so many times, like this was even possible.

"Shut up your head mama," she'd wanted to say each time. "I studied boxing, not philosophy." But she viewed the new boy arriving with interest. His novelty sparked her inner fire.

"Why, hello, ma'am," the boy said, coming up to the porch, tipping his toast colored hat from below.

"Hi, you," she replied, like she didn't care. "Fine day, no?" Tumescient clouds gathered on the hill's horizon, thick as clots. Where the day was blue and cold before, she could smell the impending rain.

"Your mama home?" the boy asked, hat in hand.

She rolled her eyes before answering, even waited to create some suspense. Then, "Yep. She's here," she finally agreed, tapping her club-fist lightly three times on the banister. "But she's enticing Ray Adams again, so you'll have to come back." Treble smiled slyly. "Because she may not want your interruption."

"The Lord is never an interruption," the boy replied, sassy as a varmint. "Besides, I just walked clear across that field with all the pink flowers to get here. Up and down a buncha hills."

"No mean feat," Treble said, unimpressed.

"All right then," he replied. "Can you let me see her?"

"Ha." Treble Ann put her hands out in front of her, folding the whole one over the club-fist delicately at her waist. "Can I let you see her, salesman-boy?" she asked, raising the tail end of her inflected sentence. "Like I got a lease on yer dumb eyeballs? Or maybe you think I can just pull a curtain cord, and out Mama will come?"

He gave a disgruntled look.

She laughed, eying him scornfully, then asked, "How's about we whistle and see if that works?"

"I don't think you got a lease on my eyeballs," he replied, attempting cool and collected. "Any more than I got lease on yours." But his gaze had settled on her breasts, the large breasts she had

never wanted but gained as God's gifting curse, those that filled out her blouses and dresses too fully ever since she could remember.

She felt a flush, asked, "What're you looking at now?" crossing her arms in front. "Bet you was just wishing you had tits like mine in your shirt," she went on. "Cause then you'd never leave home. Am I right?"

He considered her words like they merited his evaluation, touching his pointy nose with his left hand before saying, "Nome. I could just touch yours without having my own." He held out his palms like he would.

"But you won't," she said, stepping back and turning half away. "Can't touch mine. Won't ever."

"But I could," he replied. "Right now. As we speak, I'm even touching them with my mind." He didn't step close, just kept his dirty eyes right where she could see them, glued to the front of her shirt.

"Could and will are two separate things, sales-boy," she said. "What you selling, anyway? Bibles I bet. Something not worth my trouble in this whole world of things not worth my trouble; just figures. Nobody sells nothing worth a shit 'round here."

He giggled in a way she deemed girlish. "Yeah, I got Bibles," he said. "But hey, don't tell your mama I said nothing 'bout your tits and maybe I'll kiss you behind that tree later," he replied. "I'll kiss you good and long and tell you I love you, maybe. After I get through with my business in there."

"Mama has a Bible," Treble Ann said, turning on her heel to enter the house, her head turned uncomfortably as she spoke, like to watch him from behind while walking forward. "You ain't got no business here. But on come up, if you're itching for it. You can try your wares on her."

The boy smiled with half his face, revealing a crooked tooth that Treble Ann liked. Her estimation of his attractiveness rose each time he went silent. "So what's your name, anyway?" she asked, sizing him up again, wetting her finger with spit and rolling another curl.

"Jeremiah Godman," the boy said.

“Bull. Shit,” Treble Ann replied.

“Jason Strepper,” he tried again.

“Hail Mary, Mother of God, what a lie,” Treble Ann responded.

“Okay. Reginald Klepheart.”

“Better,” Treble Ann said, “but keep practicing that one.” She hollered for her mama and then whispered to him, like this was some secret, “Well, Vesper C. Klitosis, make your home in our kingdom and come on in.”

From the outset, Ray Adams did not like the boy. Treble Ann knew from the way the elder man stood stock-straight in his skin, like there'd be some cockfight or wager coming soon. Truth was, Treble liked him more and more all the time. If not for his own good traits, then for the distraction. Two men and two women here now — a good balance, even if you liked neither man. “This here boy is good country people, out selling Bibles today, mama,” she announced as they entered the parlor. “I told him how much you love the Lord's Word, how avidly you dote upon that Word, and though we ain't short of any Bibles here, we might think to show him some hospitality before long.” She paused a second before saying, “He wants to sell you his favorite keepsake edition, gilt-edged Bible, from inside that there black luggage, don't you, James?”

Johnella smiled at the boy and then Treble. Her perfume filled the room like a platoon's funeral bouquet. “What's his name again?” she asked.

“Henry P. James,” Treble Ann replied.

“Henry?” Johnella said, astonished, “you don't say!” as Treble apishly smiled. “Why, that's my late father's name! You come on into the kitchen, now, boy, and take the weight off. Any child named after my father — “

“Yes, show her your special fancy Bible then, Henry James,” Treble Ann prodded. “You know, the one you shown me.”

The boy opened his luggage, propped upright on the kitchen floor, but peeked in just a crack. Ray Adams stood as if to follow the boy's gaze into the darkened slit, staring him down, but the boy paid him no mind, groping in the hole of the aperture at what few books he

must have assembled therein, rifling like submerging his hand in a narrow hole. He finally selected a blue Bible as he pandered to Johnella, talking all the while about how he had sold seventy-eight Bibles in the last five months, with four more on promise. He spoke up a storm, said he was born been a middle child, always overlooked, until he'd decided to find his way by selling the Word of GOD, but that he was frail in the way of a lamb, with an ailing heart, mightn't live past thirty five. "And heaven bless the Word of the Lord," he announced at that, near fervent enough to encourage a strong emotion in Johnella, assuming a red glow about him that passed for zeal and suffused his gaunt cheekbones and his neck with enough blood to lend an appearance of boyishly optimistic.

"Sit down and relax," Treble's mother said. "Supper's almost on."

Every so often, he leaned close to Johnella as she cooked or cleaned the table, and clutched her hand, peddling his overwrought sincerity like a lemon on a car lot.

Johnella liked the attention and liked better his hand clutching hers. Before long, they sang a hymn or two and she invited this boy to stay for supper, which disgruntled Ray Adams but tickled Treble Ann, who kept humming, after the singing stopped, "Who's that yonder, dressed in black?"

"How we all going to eat?" Ray Adams asked. "I'm not splitting a chop with nobody."

"We'll make do," her mama said.

"Maybe you should split a chop," Treble Ann said, staring pointedly at his stomach. And, *Ray Adams can suck my dick*, Treble thought, bored of his proprietary erroneous righteousness. When she tired of the mixed banter betwixt he, her mother, and the kisser Bible boy, after choking down some grits and green beans without the benefit of a chop, Treble Ann went back out to punch her boards. They couldn't see or hear her from inside and besides, if she had one hope it was that her mother would kick Ray Adams out for the evening and get it on wild-boar style with Bible boy so Johnella'd have something salacious to talk about at church or in coming weeks. The desire for this indiscretion was so strong, it welled

within her, and Treble even began to imagine how the scenario might play out, the bony hips of small boy ratcheting atop her plump mama on the parlor floor, like a chicken's wishbone resting or trying to pop back in, by force, to the plumper cooked meat.

Treble laughed. But because it was her mother in the fornication fantasy, she soon grew so repulsed that the urge to vomit rose steadily as she blasted at the splintered wood with her ragged club-fist, not to say she still wasn't hopeful.

"He who loseth his life shall find it," was one thing she remembered the boy had said, and oh Lordy, did Treble Ann want something found, maybe just something nice for her mama, who was a good woman no matter what anybody said. It did rather trouble Treble that Ray Adams wouldn't give Johnella any sugar. Not like her mama didn't make him dinner, do his dishes. Not like he had a chance with Treble Ann.

Soon enough, though, Ray Adams left for the night, skulking, and the sun hung low in the sky. Not long after, Treble watched the boy exit, pressing his silly lips to her mama's round hand, kissing it again and again, like in queenly tribute. But they hadn't, Treble Ann speculated, done nothing.

Boy was still simpering, still too kind. Woulda had a taller gait. How boys were when they'd pounded something, and "Fuck it all," Treble Ann then said, sweaty from her exertion. She went into the field to run sprints. Again and always, while running, she pretended she was a boy. Maybe an Olympic contender. She was right in the middle of fantasizing she had won an enormous race, the crowds cheering madly, as Bible boy came up on her. She would have let him walk right past, too. But he took to watching her through five sets of sprints.

At their conclusion, she huffed and puffed, ignoring him. Finally, she sat in the tall grass, crushing it below her. Then, "Why you still watching me?" she asked.

"Cause I want to," he replied.

She smiled before saying, "You sell any Bibles in there, Holy Man, weak-hearted boy?"

"No, but I think your mama mighta wanted me in her bed," he admitted.

"So do it, already," Treble Ann replied. "Would it kill ya? I'll give you a nickel."

The boy's eyes widened as he took an insuck of breath. "You say you want me to do your mama?"

She cocked her head, inspecting his lapel, his dirty pants dragging dust on their hems. "You or somebody better."

"What's that on your wrist?" he asked, sat beside her, and said, "It's a wood-club, right? What? Can't afford a real hand? Not going to grab anything with that."

"I don't use it to grab," she said.

Giggling again, he then took her club-fist and brushed it over his cheek.

She pulled it back. "I got a real prosthetic," she said. "I just don't like it. But what else you got in that valise besides Bibles?"

"Oh, nothing," he replied. "Nothing you'd want."

"I bet something," she argued. "You don't know what I want."

"We should trade," he said. "You tell me just what you want out of this shitty asshole of a life — and I'll show you what's in my bag."

Treble Ann said, "Deal. I want to own my daddy's old store that he lost to the bank, I want to fire my boss, and I want to know everybody's business here. Good enough? Now, open your damn bag."

"You're kinda pretty, Treble Ann," the boy replied. "Dirty hair and all. Think your mama can see you and me out here in this tall grass?"

"Why you ask?" Treble Ann said, interested. "You want to wrestle? Because I am happy to."

"Yeah. I want to wrestle against those tits," he said. "Be a good girl and give 'em to me."

"Oh, I'll give 'em to you, all right," she replied. "Stifle your face with them till you can't breathe. Like this." She made a couple of asphyxiated faces, clowning, then said, "But first show me what's in the bag."

The boy scooted his bony butt closer on the grass, weirdly whispering again, "I got a girl's leg in here. I got another girl's eyeball. Can I have your club-hand now, Treble Ann? To place in my hand. To put in my valise. I think I want it."

"No, you stupid piece of shit," she said. "You can't have nothing you want."

He laughed, another stream of high-pitched giggles, and then said, "Peep in the bag if you want to."

She grabbed his valise and threw it open. There they were. Just what he said. And a real Bible and a fake Bible too. "Shitfire," she said. "You weren't kidding."

"I may look like one, but I don't kid," he murmured, tracing his fingers across her breasts. She trembled. The sensations were confusing, sweet and menacing at once. Not like she'd had much romance, nor cared for it, but since she remained quietly under his touch, in shocked deliberation, he put his other hand deep in her trousers just after unbuttoning them, watching her eyes blink rapidly as he started to massage her there with his dirty digits, saying, "Oh, yeah, sweet thing, let's get to know each other a lot better," before shoving one sharp finger deep inside her.

With his other hand, he pushed her down. On the ground was his open valise. *There's a girl's leg in there*, she thought. *Another girl's eye*. Using one wrist for two of hers, he trapped her arms above her head. She did not resist. "I could scream," she announced, like she was weighing it.

"Sure could, babycakes," was his reply, leaning over her with breath reeking of whiskey. "But you won't. Who is going to hear you, Miss Treble Ann? Your mama, drunk as a skunk, hymn singing in the smoking parlor — the gone Ray Adams? Your neighbors are a mile away. So, come on, Treble Ann. Let's have a good time. I'll get to know you real good inside. And then I'll take your hand. But first I'll be gentle, so let's see what Mother Nature gave you." He unbuttoned her shirt, leaning heavily on her and saying, "I want to see those big ole tits now. Let 'em out."

Treble Ann viewed him like some kind of monster, one forged from both hope and desire. Maybe she wanted him too, or just knew nobody new came around too often, but it took until he unbuttoned his pants, still thrusting his other hand's fingers, one to three, in and out of her while licking and kissing on her bare chest, that she realized she should put a stop to this.

"I don't want to get pregnant," she said.

"You won't," he replied. "I'm sterile."

"I don't believe you," she said, staring at the button of the tip of his erect member now pointed to her or at her, fully freed and flopping, as he yanked at her pants with a series of pulls to take them first down her hips, then to her knees, and finally to her ankles, taking her undergarments down with them.

"I'm gonna do it," he said. "I'm gonna do whatever I want, girl. Because I ain't like anybody else. I take what I want, and now I want you. You want some whiskey first? It'll make it hurt less. You're different and special. I can see that."

He pulled out his immersed hand, the one that stroked inside her, away from her body, and used it, wet and gross, to grab then unscrew the flask in his nearby valise, leaning heavy to hold her down, swigging a gulp, and then pouring some liquor into her unready mouth such that she coughed and sputtered, whiskey flowing down her face.

"I could take you down, Scrawny," she said. "You're not taking my club-fist with you, or anything else — even though I have another hand at home."

He smiled, said, "You're already down, girl. So now we gonna have us a real good time, but don't you cry — cause I don't like that none. But if you don't cry, I'll be real sweet; I promise."

"You gonna need that Bible in a minute, sinner," Treble Ann replied, the sexual heat in her blood cooling faster than grease dropped in snow as she realized that he regarded her as a lamb, his dumb waiting lamb, whom he would enjoy taking — and harming. He was, she saw, a harmer. He reached down, stroked himself, smiling, sipping more whiskey, and pressing what he could of his

body tightly against her, rubbing against her. "Any minute now," he said. "I'll be ready."

"So, come on then," she replied. "Get all down here and get to know me."

As he settled his skinny limbs onto her, reaching to position himself, she pressed her legs together tight for a second, aware she could whip and hog-tie this boy any day of the week, but kissed him once, drawing his hands to her breasts, before she kned him hard in his privates and pushed him off. She stood, pulled up her pants, zipped them, buttoned them, and said, "You want to fight me now, boy? Really fight? Let's have a go."

Wincing, in fury, he stood, eyes flaring with rage. "I'm going to take that fist of yours today," he taunted, wheeling around. "I'll have it with me before I leave this hill." Him in her periphery, Treble Ann looked at the innocent hill, the pink flowers so delicate on the upslope, glowing faintly with the dropping sun. She dropped into her fighting stance.

"Gonna be night soon," she told him, tilting her head, and using her club-fist to gesture he should approach.

He came, but feinting and jabbing, quick and easy on ground, she took him down in three blows, ducking his attempts to hit her. She hadn't had a real scrapple in a long time and couldn't quite explain the anger that multiplied within her as she touched him, made her want to hit him more and more, even after he stopped fighting, stopped moving, but she kept swinging her club-fist, pummeling his face until it was as red and unrecognizable as a tainted valentine outside of the month of February, and he rested still as the fake shutters adorning a distant house, his lips and cheeks a chop of bloody meat.

"That'll swell something awful," she said. "Iffen you should wake up. But I don't think you might."

She took the girl's club leg out of his black valise, hefted its weight, and swung the stump like a bat in a wide open swing cracking the air to the stars, then whacked him with that too for good measure, boxing his ears with the tapered end. From the

valise, she took the other girl's eyeball and held it aloft, as if it could see all around her into the tall grass and beyond. The eye was blue. The hills rolled gently as always. Mama must be sleeping.

He'd do nothing for her, this fool. Couldn't even fight anymore. "You ain't got no real name, any which way, Bible boy," she said. "No skills. And nobody could find you now, even if they wanted to. Nobody saw nothing round here but the hollow sky of evening turned to night... You can bet on that." She thought about being simple country folk, simple and complex, regarding again her thwarted seducer, monologuing with him for the sake of being an adult of sorts in his company, holding court, admiring his toast-colored hat with the wide red band, which was fine, which had been fine, which was now hers and which was laid beside him on the ground like a man-lily corsage gone wrong. She then commenced to digging him a hole.

