

The Well

by John Riley

In the woods that begin a stone's throw from the old man's well-house and stretch for nearly a mile to the river and onward, across the hills that were once mountains, onward west to the outskirts of an empty town called Star, the wildcats are screaming. The old man sits at a broad table, writing in a hard-covered notebook about the long dead old man who, when he first came the farm as boy, an appendage of his newly widowed mother, told him he must learn to draw the water, the lowering of the galvanized bucket into the well with the cranking handle, the watching it drop into the dime of mirrored water, the lifting the cast iron bucket into the light of day by cranking the rusty lever of the old well that was still outside, only feet from where he wrote. The boy had soon loved lowering the bucket into the distant water as the old man stood soundless, refusing to offer help or to begrudge any emotion toward the boy's wrinkled brow and determined mouth.

It was by the well on one cold early spring morning, the boy's bare feet cold against the black soil, his still small blue hands squeezing the iron bar as he lowered and raised the bucket, that the old man began to tell him the first story. The boy and his mother had lived in the house nearly a year and until that morning the old man had limited his words to instructions and modifications of instructions. Bend over to drop the seeds to plant the beans they picked in late summer; hold steady to the bar if you don't want a bruise on your forehead. Even the instructions had been rationed out as they worked the garden or raised the water or tended the acres of tobacco.

The boy was mystified in a way he was not yet able to understand when the old man began telling him the story. It had no connection to the water drawing and for him to hear about anything but what was happening at that moment was such a new experience that for the first moment he wasn't sure if the old man was talking to him or if his mind had become a foreign animal, like the wildcats that

howled on spring nights from the woods. (The progenitors of the wildcats he could hear now, here alone, writing, an old man himself, protected from the night beneath the now rusted tin roof, writing furiously in a small pool of light cast by a single bulb in a single unshaded lamp.)

On that cold spring morning the old man's mouth seemed disconnected from his stern features as he began to talk with no preamble or hesitancy, as though he had memorized what he wanted to say and held it in trust.

"This comes from my mother's own lips," he began, his eyes staring over the boy's head at the well's wench and pulley. "She was standing here by this well, alone, not yet a woman but well on her way, when she watched the bedraggled soldiers from Massachusetts or Michigan or other places she would never see or long to see ride across the untended fields. She didn't run or long to run. She was tired of working and praying, tired of the foolishness of men that had brought her to this place where she stood with a full bucket resting on the well top, brothers gone and father dead the winter before, absently wiping one wet hand on skirt, as the seven dusty and bone weary soldiers pulled up their horse's progress.

'There they stood. A riderless young woman and seven young men brought to this point by hatred imposed upon them from outside. Hatred that had no foundation or roots in her or their experience, hatred that came from Washington and Richmond and Charleston and New York, not from her heart or the heart of these mill boys and dock workers and merchants and railroad workers slumped wearily atop their weary horses.

"Water," she eventually said careful to not make it a question, to suggest she was pleading and nervous about their intentions.

"That would be appreciated," the one in front, the leader clearly, although she could see no insignia that said he was placed at the forefront of his men by official act. No badge or oft-folded piece of paper had given him that privilege, she knew. It had been assumed with the inevitability of water pouring from the bucket.

'She reached for the tin dipper hanging on the wall behind the well and filled it. The first drink, again without thought or consultation, went to the leader. He had dark eyes that she knew had grown darker as he sat under the shade of the old oak that stood between the well house and the house itself. Outside of the tree's shadows they may become blue or green or maybe a rich brown like the deep hills of the west she longed to escape to, away from this piece of land she hated but would never escape.

'The man was not yet a man except by the demands the war had placed on him. He was like bread that had been baked too quickly, still soft around the heart, not yet in love and as virginal in his soul regardless of what his body might have done. At that moment she knew she felt what might be love for the young man sitting before her on his tired and too small horse. She loved him for the moment he was there, and would stop loving him when he was no more. Not carnal love, not the need for flesh she would feel later, but a love of his mystery and of his fate. She knew that it was a moment's love no less strong for its transience, never doubted its force, just as she knew she would still be standing there, whole, intact, virginal, when the dusty and weary men turned and rode away.

'He drank and handed her the dipper and she, one by one, moved down the line they had organized by some well-practiced, unspoken system. When each man had had his fill she went into the well-house and found two old water buckets and drew water and filled the buckets and by turns gave each horse his fill. One of the young men started to slip off his horse to help, placed the reins down across his weary horse's neck, but she looked at the young man, the leader, her momentary lover, and he held his hand out and the soldier picked up his reins. She worked steadily until each of the horses had been watered. Then she returned the buckets to their place and returned to her place before the men and looked again with unflinching eyes at the leader, the dark-eyed boy she saw now was not a man and suddenly knew in that way she would know most things in her life that he would never become a man. That before this rich man's war had ended he would lie dead in a Virginia wood.

'She knew that you see, son, she knew it as sure as she knew he'd protect her at that moment. That he would turn his men around and head away without looking back. He would ride toward what waited. What she couldn't know was if he knew what she knew. Did they share a knowledge of his death, that the young woman waiting for him in the northern cold, writing a daily letter between her chores, stoically marching through her own life until he returned, would age into adulthood and old age, who would see a new century full of automobiles and telephones and telegrams across the oceans, would die on the eve of the European war alone.

'That was her curse, you see, boy, that she could see the grief waiting for him and her. She never saw the joy because joy was random and happened only in the midst of a steady stream of lack of joy and no one could possibly see when it'd raise its tiny head, gasping for air in the midst of the stream.

'The men turned and rode away without so much as a glance back. She watched them disappear, alone she stood, but alive and facing a long life of husband and children and dead children and me, here, alone as she knew I would be the morning she forced me from her body.'"

Why is he telling me this the boy, who is now an old man in a too large room hunched over an old notebook, pen in hand, writing the words that trail his own un-lived life, words no one would ever read, while the wildcats screamed outside, had thought, and had known in the way a boy knows without thinking that the hours would follow the hours like horses across the dusty acres without an answer.

