Summer XVI

by Parker Tettleton

It was the truth, you'd say. Then someone else would step in, someone who knew the situation. It wasn't long before the entire population of our sleepy little town became accustomed to your routine. It was even welcome in some circles. Those circles were made up of people with the same peculiar interests you had. People that liked beheading a bullfrog on their front porch just to watch the body strike a final pose and the head, with eyes slightly bigger than usual, go bouncing into a cat's mouth. People that swam naked in the creek that ran behind your family's farm, touching their pale bodies against one another in the black and brown muck of the bank. People that went to the theater on Sunday afternoons instead of attending service. People that wore their underwear only on the odd or even numbered days of the week. Anyone reading this has got the idea. Like I said, everyone became accustomed to you almost right away.

It was a warm, sticky day in June and Pa had brought us all into town to be fitted for our new suits and dresses. Ma looked happier than she'd been since she lost the baby. That had been a Winter right out of hell, Pa used to say. No, that was Ben, my oldest brother who said that. Pa never did much talking. At least not to us kids. But I do remember what he said when you came into town. He said if that boy turns out anything like his pop, he'll be swinging from these here gallows ‘fore long. You never spoke of your Pa, and I sure as hell knew better than to ask. But he must've been something for Pa to say that. Yes, sir. I'll hear those words until the day I am free of this Earth. Maybe longer, if you have anything to do with it. But this ain't about me. This story is yours and I'll tell it to the best I can recall. I have the right I guess, being your first and only friend by anyone's recollection.

The war had just begun. We knew it was serious. Pa rode into town and brought back a newspaper one day. It was only the front page, but it was the first damned print I'd ever seen in his hands. I

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was a year behind you in school, though you weren't fit to be in the first of them grades. Ma told me to walk with you, seeing how you was new to town and we were your closest neighbors by a good mile and a half. Pa never took to the idea but Ma was stern and held her ground against the old man. He never could argue when supper was at stake, no way no how. The first morning of Fall, you were hammering away at me. Come down to the house after school, and you're chicken and why don't you, scared a bit? kept coming out of your mouth until my ears burned as bright as the sun. I agreed, said have your way, but only for an hour. Then I'd have to go home and wash up. Those were the rules. One hour, then time to go home and wash up for supper. Ma and Pa would be expecting nothing less out of me. You agreed, said fine. I should've known better. As poor as you were at school, you never had trouble convincing anyone of anything outside that classroom. When studies were over, we took our arithmetic in our satchels and headed down the path.

Before I finish, let me just say I am not one for tales. No sir, I've been whipped for much less in my time. Pa was no dreaming man, and he wasn't going to raise us any different. At least that's what he intended on doing, God rest his soul. Even now, with silver in my hair, I can't tell you he is in my eyes and between my ears like you. Not that anyone else is, but somehow I always thought he'd be the one to outlast you. Damned sorry he didn't. But life is life and I am old and should finish this story before I keel over myself. I'd never been inside that house. I had played in the near distance, seen the faces of your Ma, your brothers and you yourself in the window many a time, but never stepped so much as a foot inside that beat up screen door. Pa used to talk about that door. Never understood why ya'll didn't make another, or at least work on the one ya'll had. That door was the last thing that kept me between the old and the new version of myself. I can't say why, but I just knew that day. I stepped onto that porch, past that rusted disgrace of a door and someone new stepped back out. But that was much later. Much later than the hour I'd promised. For that one hour back I'd give my Ma, God rest her soul.

There, you said. In the kitchen. Don't you see? I couldn't see a thing. It was so damned dirty the windows weren't letting in any light. All I could do was follow close by you, stand at your back, and my breath was like ice in my lungs. I want to leave, I said. Now, by damn. No more fooling around. But you turned me, took my hand and God only knows why I stayed. We kept moving, very slowly, towards it. I smelled something. It smelled awful. I was out of breath but couldn't bear taking any air in. It was just that damn bad. A little further, you said. Stay close and it'll be fine, you said. I am here to tell you nothing was further from the truth. We were near the sink now. I could make out the faucet by the dripping sound: a sliver of light had made its way through the filthy panes and reflected off the dripping faucet. Just reach a little, you said. I wanted to know for what but you wouldn't answer. I swore if I got fish guts on my hands you were in for a punch in the jaw as soon as we got outside. A punch in the jaw was the least of your worries. I clenched my fists in the dark, wondering if you'd notice I was holding still. Go on, don't be a chicken, you said. Scared a bit? you said. By this time the sweat was gathering in the cracks of my eyes and I knew if I didn't reach now I'd be in worse shape not being able to see and letting you guide me. My fingers were stiff as a bone but somehow they found what you wanted them to find. The cool ran from the tips of my fingers through every nerve of my body. Your Ma opened the screen door and started screaming. She didn't intend for any of this. She'd had six boys by the age of twenty-three and wasn't ready to stop. Only God stopped her, we heard her say. So God was the cause of all this, you said. I mean to tell you, there was no God under that dripping faucet, in that dirty sink. Even God wouldn't have stepped foot in that house.

I guess your family split that very night. At any rate, I never saw any of your kin around these parts again. When Pa came home to me shaking in a bucket of cold water before the fire, he went straight for his rifle. He come back after an hour saying he'd not seen hide nor hair of anyone, having gone as far as the hill just before the school. I thought of the first time I'd seen you and how my Pa had

not mentioned your Pa since. One October morning, about ten years after I'd moved into town and took up my own saloon, I came in to find a newspaper slipped underneath the door. I was much obliged, as I couldn't regularly afford one in those days. On the front page was an article about a young man who'd gone missing. It said he'd lived pretty much all around these parts and his Pa had up and run out on him and his family one day. It said his Pa was never seen or heard from again but had been right trouble all his life. Speculation was he'd either headed off to war or took to carrying on with another woman. At any rate, the paper said that as a boy, the missing man used to tell everyone he encountered about his long lost Pa and how he was coming back one day. It was a morbid routine, as the paper called it. It was welcome in some circles. It was the truth, you'd say.