

The Secondhand Life of Uncle Ray

by W. Scott Bowlin

Uncle Ray arrived with a duffel bag of clothes, a flask in his coat pocket, and a knowing smile, like he had just beaten someone at a game they didn't know they were playing. My father let him in with a shrug, my mother with a sigh, and I just watched, already knowing what came next.

He took the spare room—the one with the creaky bedframe and the window that didn't latch. He took the cigarettes from my mother's purse, the beer from the fridge, the twenties from the ceramic jar where I kept my summer lawn-mowing money. He took everything except responsibility.

At night, he hunched over an antique typewriter, hammering out Huckleberry Finn like it was a penance. Said he was going to rewrite it word for word, “just to feel how genius moves through the fingers.” The pages piled up beside an overflowing ashtray, the paper stained with nicotine infused whiskey sweat from his hands.

Between chapters, he trained my dog, Buster. He taught him to fetch bottle caps, roll over for no reason, and to play dead whenever someone raised their voice. That last one came in handy.

When he ran out of whiskey, he drank the aftershave from the bathroom cabinet, wincing as he swallowed but nodding like it wasn't half bad. Said it had a bite to it. “Like drinking a razor blade, but in a good way.”

The only time my father spoke up was the night he caught Ray slipping a fifty from his wallet. Ray just grinned. “Borrowing,” he said. “Call it an investment.”

“Out” Dad said. Buster spit out a bottle cap and rolled over.

The next morning, Ray was gone. The typewriter sat silent, a half-finished sentence frozen on the page. Buster whimpered at the door,

waiting for the man who had taught him to fall over and stay down.

Years later, when I saw Ray again—strung-out and thinner, still smirking like he had won something—I asked him why he never finished the book.

He laughed. "Because I already knew how it ended."

