

TRAVELING THROUGH TIME



HISTORICAL FICTION

BY KATHY WARNES

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Love is a Tarnished Flute

By Kathy Warnes

Jacob stood there at her front door with his hair slicked down so neatly that she knew he had used some of that new fangled grease on it. Fear twanged her nerve endings, fear at this new phase of knowing him. Bertha smiled and held out her hand. Trying to conceal the tremor in her voice, she invited him to come in and sit with her in the parlor.

Mama and Papa were within calling distance, so the sharp eyes of Mrs. Timmons next door peeking through the curtains of her kitchen window would be satisfied. Wisely, Mama and Papa sat in the kitchen. Papa stretched out on the love seat with his feet toward the fire, reading the paper, and Mama sat in her rocker, knitting the endless stockings needed for a large family.



Bertha led Jacob to the parlor. “Here, Jacob, sit by the fire. It really is getting colder outside, isn’t it? Papa says that spring is coming but I wonder if it will ever arrive. Even though Tilly Adams is bringing out her May bonnets, it still feels like February to me.”

Bertha’s laugh sounded forced even to her own ears. “Why Jacob, there’s even some snow on your collar,” she said brushing it off and putting his hat on the closet shelf. “Here, let me hang your coat. My, you’ve worn your thin one already. Anna never got it out until at least May.” She hung the coat on a hook.

Blinking back the tears, Bertha sat across from Jacob in the low, wooden rocker that Papa had made for her when she was eight years old and needed to rock her dolls. She felt a little like that eight year old as she gazed at Jacob. Looking at him was like being in heaven and hell at the same time. Hell, because Anna had only been dead a year. Every time she looked at him, she still saw Anna smiling, happy, beside him, her arm linked through his and their proud glances locked on their two children playing in the garden. Heaven, because she loved him. She had loved Jacob ever since he and Anna had come to her house on their wedding day visit.

Bertha had known and loved Anna since they were little girls together in Germany. Their families had sailed across the ocean together to settle in Milwaukee, the city of promise and prosperity. Anna's father had found a farm in the country about ten miles from the house in the city where Bertha and her family had settled.

"If Papa hadn't liked working at the brewery in the city so well, we could have lived beside each other," Bertha often joked to Anna, but she was secretly disappointed that they didn't live closer together. It was true they saw each other every Sunday at church and often afterwards for Sunday dinner, but there were many times that Bertha wanted to whisper heart secrets to Anna and she had to wait until the dawn fresh newness had faded from them before she saw Anna and could whisper them to her.

Then came the day when Anna and Jacob knocked on the door of the city house. Anna had knocked gently, as she did most things. Jacob had stood behind her and pounded, like he wanted the entire city to hear. "We're going to be married!" Jacob shouted at her as soon as she opened the door. "You must be Bertha! We wanted you to be the first to know!"

Bertha had been happy for her best friend. How well she knew that quiet, gentle Anna was as fresh and good as the newly baked bread she baked for her family in the country and that she would now bake for Jacob in their city house. How well she knew that Anna could make the keys of the church organ sing songs better than anyone else and she drowned out the flute that Bertha had played since childhood.

Anna often heard songs that no one else could. How well Bertha knew all of these things about Anna and how well she loved Anna, but deep inside of her heart like a thorn, grew a love for Jacob that she couldn't rip or reason out, no matter how hard she tried. She went about her daily life, taught school as she had been trained to, helped her mother and sister at home and enjoyed a modest church and social life.

For a time, Bertha even entertained a suitor or two, because after all at age 22 she was becoming old maid material, but she just couldn't bring herself to marry someone else, because she knew even marriage and children wouldn't wash Jacob's face from her heart. She decided to be an old

maid school teacher and spinster aunt, dipping into other people's lives, peering wistfully through the window but not being able to enter the door.

When Bertha turned 30, she bought her niece Mathilde a puppy, and continued to practice her flute. When the puppy was a year old and she was good enough on the flute to play in the orchestra of Mr. Klinger, Anna died. Bertha didn't rush to Jacob, proclaiming her love. In fact, she avoided him. He had his life and she had hers. She had so rigidly forced her thoughts into this mold that even when the structure of Jacob's life had changed, the structure of her thoughts hadn't. They marched along in the same straight line of duty and purpose that they always had. She steeled herself rigidly as any corset to smile and accept the news that Jacob was going to remarry. He had to remarry for the sake of his two small boys. He had to for the sake of his own desolate life.

Jacob came to her in church about six months after Anna died. "Please, Bertha, you were a friend to both of us. May I call on you just to talk? I think I am going mad."

As much as she wanted to shield herself, Bertha couldn't refuse him. He came, bringing his sorrow and his violin that he played as well as the piano. She brought her flute and her heart brimming full of love for him. The music spoke at first more than he did, but gradually he told Bertha the thoughts of his heart as Anna once had done. Sometimes she felt Anna there with them, sitting by the fire laughing when they hit a sour note in their music, frowning at them when they disagreed or made each other unhappy.

Now he was here again, and it was becoming increasingly difficult for her to hide her feelings from him. She had even taken to swearing at herself in secret, calling herself a damn fool woman like she had heard Papa call her sister Sarah. She bit her lips until they bled, because she was being so stupid. None of this helped. She still loved Jacob as naturally as breathing, as simply as knowing, and as complicated as living the knowing.

She didn't know what to do so she sat across from him in her rocker and rocked. She wished she had one of her dolls, at least then she'd have something to do with her hands."How are the

boys?” Her voice sounded like one of the frogs that John, the oldest, was forever catching and showing her.

“They are well, but they miss you. They asked me to have you come over more often, Bertha.”

“I will try, Jacob, but there is school and church. Sometimes the hours in the day are too short.”

“I know of a way to make them longer, Bertha.”

“And how do I do that, Jacob?”

“You can marry me, and then we will be together, the boys and you and me.”

She stared at him, her dreams crumbling around her like her doll Hattie’s face had done when her brother had dunked her in the Milwaukee River.

“Marry you, Jacob?”

“Marry me, Bertha. The boys love you. They need a mother. And I...”

“And you what, Jacob?”

“I find you easy to talk to.”

She stopped rocking and stared down at her hands clenched in her lap. What had she expected, the scene that Anna had described to her in such loving detail? Should they be sitting on the piano bench looking into each other’s eyes, unable to pull their gazes away? You expect too much from life, Bertha. You expect too much from him.

Jacob spoke again. “You were Anna’s best friend. You knew her and you know me. I can’t perform the courtship duties again, Bertha. They died with Anna.”

“I am glad you are being honest, Jacob. I would not want you to lie to me.”

But you are lying to yourself, Bertha, her heart said. You want him to perform the courtship duties, this time for you, only for you.

“Then will you marry me, Bertha?”

“I can’t, Jacob.”

His head sunk to his chest and he looked almost like he had the night of Anna’s death, standing outside of their bedroom door, sobbing. She couldn’t bear to see him look like that. She jumped out of the rocking chair and ran over to him. She put her hand on his shoulder.

“Am I so hard to care for?” he mumbled.

“Hard to care for! That is why I can’t marry you, Jacob. I have always loved you!”

He stared at her. “You have? But you were always so distant from me. You barely talked to me when Anna wasn’t around.”

“Because I couldn’t let either of you see how I felt. That would have been the end of our friendship. I dreaded the day when the end would come and how here it is, now- today.”

“Why is it the end, Anna.” He started. “I mean, Bertha.”

“That is why. You are still married to Anna. You will always be married to Anna. There is nothing I can do about it.”

Bertha felt dull and clouded, like her flute had looked when she first bought it from the secondhand shop.

“Bertha, we can have a good life together, you and I. The children will soon grow up and go away. You and I will remain and endure. With the help of God, we might even prosper.”

“I do not want to be second choice, Jacob.” She bit her lips and picked up her flute and fingered it so he wouldn’t see the tears streaming down her face.

“Second choice, Bertha? Did you not tell me your flute was a second choice, maybe even third or fourth?”

She smiled. “Probably fourth. It was so tarnished that it looked as if no one had polished or played it for years.”

“What did you do with it, Bertha, that second choice flute of yours?”

“You know what I did with it, Jacob. I took it home and cleaned and polished it. I blew softly into it like this until all of the dust had danced into the air. I still polish it every day.”

“Second choice can be a beautiful choice, Bertha. Sometimes it outshines an original choice.”

“That is a chance, a possibility, Jacob. It is not a reality.”

Quickly he stood beside her, taking her hands in his, so that they held the flute jointly. She thought she saw tenderness in his eyes. “Won’t you take a chance on me, Bertha? You are not second choice, you are a different choice. But I ask you, will you be patient with me? Can we not polish our lives together until they are as bright as your flute sparkling in the firelight?”

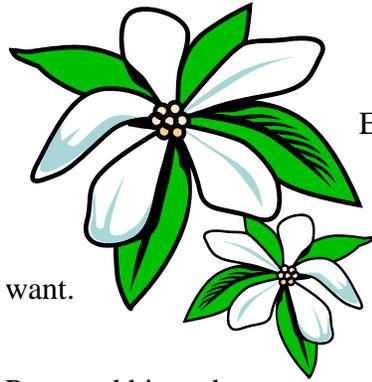
Together they put the flute back in its velvet case. He is right, Bertha thought as her hand brushed his. Love is like that. You must polish it constantly and store it in a velvet case or it will tarnish.

She sat the flute case beside her rocker. “I’m going to play it the first thing in the morning, so I’ll just leave it here,” she told Jacob. “I have to keep in practice so I can teach the boys.”

Bertha looked at her flute, sparking like new in the family-circle firelight and smiled.

As the Crab Apple Blossoms

by Kathy Warnes



want.

Eva put down the telephone receiver and then picked it up again and called the owners of the house where she used to live. “Oh certainly you can take a look at it,” they told her. “Look all you want. You can even have some crab apples if you want them.”

Papa and his crab apple tree! He used to tell her, “Fly away little one!” when their lives changed and she was frightened.

Fly away little one!

Now she stood under the flowering crab apple tree her father had planted. Luckily she was alone. Jordan had final exams to grade and a thesis to oversee. He had asked her permission to stay home and she had gladly given it to him. She wanted to be alone to kick and pound the crab apple tree’s rough bark with her fists and tear its glossy leaves. She shouted and screamed defiance at it. That crab apple tree had defiled the reality of her life and now she wanted to tear it apart like the first rays of sunrise rent the fabric of sable dreams. Despite her best intentions, her life had been patterned shadows of Papa, but now in her death she would not be placid or patterned.

On that day so long ago Papa’s first reaction had been to go to Baumgartens bookstore and buy ten books about immortality. His second reaction was not to worry her mother. While mother attended a bridge luncheon with her marcelled friends, Papa sat home alone in the living room reading his new books, trying to adjust to his mortality.

And Eva, ten years old and curious, burst into the living room, demanding, “What’s wrong? Why are you blinking your eyes like you have tears in them, Papa?”

“Because I have tears in them,” he answered gently.

Besides being curious and reading books to quench her curiosity, Eva knew everything. “You can’t have tears in your eyes, Papa, because men never cry,” she asserted. “Especially Papas.”

Papa’s eyes were wet and shiny, but he smiled at her. “I am just yawning, Eva. I always get tears in my eyes when I yawn.”

“Papa, will you stop teasing me? We have work to do. You promised to help me with the garden, don’t you remember?”

“Of course I remember, liebchen. It just slipped my mind for a moment, a temporary aberration.”

Eva sighed. Papa sometimes talked like the professor he was. Often she wished that she had a father like the other kids, one who spoke in simple phrases like yes, no, and even occasionally ‘get lost kid.’ When her German-Jewish born and educated father spoke to her, he always called her liebchen. And his phrases weren’t simple yeses or nos, they were nein and yah and fly away little one for now. Eva was often impatient with him for not being more American. After all, they had lived in this country for five years. Papa didn’t have to look and sound like he had just stepped off the boat.

“Papa, what’s a temporary ab-b, whatever you said. And are you coming to the garden with me or not?”

“Of course, liebchen, of course. What better place for a professor of botany to be than in a garden? Come, what are we planting today?”

“Mama wants some tomato plants put in because when her friends come over for lunch she likes to have tomatoes in salads. And she said she wants us to plant some orchids because they’re so elegant”

Papa clicked his tongue against his teeth “Achhh! I must tell Mama once again that orchids require special care. You cannot just put them out in the garden and expect them to grow any more than you can transplant people from their homes into camps and expect them to grow.”

“Mama insisted and finally I said that I would have to talk to you.”

Papa laughed, his deep booming bass laugh. “I will talk to your mother about the orchids, but in the meantime, let’s go put some tomato plants in the back garden.”

To Eva that summer day in the garden with her Papa was as vivid in her memory as if it had happened yesterday. But now yesterday was as vague as her tomorrows would be.

Papa and Mama and Eva knelt side by side in the soil, the sun beating down on their backs. Eva was happy.

“Here, I have a new seed in my pocket,” Papa said. “Would you like to look at it?”

Eva had been more interested in taming the soil around the roots of the scrawny looking tomato plant she was trying to coax into enthusiastic growth. She barely glanced at the small, oval brown seed that lay in Papa’s calloused hand. “Is it for the garden?” Eva asked.

“No, it is for a legacy,” Papa said. “It is a seed from the flowering crab apple tree that grew in my mother’s garden. I managed to grab it the day the Nazi’s came for us.”

Eva turned off her inner hearing after that. Papa was off into another of his stories that she’d heard so many times before. His stories exasperated Mama and right now, they exasperated Eva too.

“Papa, will you help me plant these tomatoes instead of talking about something that doesn’t have anything to do with what we’re doing?”

“Ach child, you are so like your mother. You must have the thing in front of you to touch before you believe it exists. But what of the dream, the apple blossom hidden inside of the brown apple seed?”

“Papa, let’s plant the tomatoes!”

“Yes, Henry. I must have tomatoes! Simply everyone has them in their salads this year. I bought ten plants. Are you sure that will be enough?”

Mama had come up behind them so quietly that Eva hadn’t even heard her. But Papa, with that sixth sense he had when it came to Mama’s presence already had jumped up and was brushing the dirt off his hands. He bent over to kiss Mama. “Adele, how good of you to come out to help us. You don’t do this very often.”

Mama brushed an imaginary speck of dust from her skirt and backed away from him. “Henry, don’t touch me, Your hands are filthy! I have a committee meeting to attend in five minutes. I just came out to ask you if you could have the orchids grown by the charity dance next month. I told the ladies I would get some beautiful orchids for decorations.”

“Adele, as I already told you, we would have to build a special greenhouse to grow orchids in this climate. The temperature has to be carefully controlled and they need special nutrients and constant care. It would be a lot of care and expenses on an expatriate botany professor’s salary. I’m not sure...”

Mama’s scorn interrupted him. “Henry, you’re never sure of anything. You weren’t sure we should have gotten out of Germany and if I hadn’t insisted we leave when we did, all of us would no doubt be in some concentration camp or worse. If I hadn’t insisted you take the position at the university here in New York, we would have ended up out west at some God forsaken place without any culture! And if I hadn’t insisted that Eva go to Walton’s private school instead of that horrid public school where you wanted to send her, she’d probably have her elbows buried in dirt like you always do. Henry, you have to wake up and live in the real world. Grab today while you can because tomorrow may not come.”

Papa sighed and his shoulders sagged, but he held out his hand to Mama. “Adele, I have a seed here that it is important that you help me plant. It is a legacy for our daughter.” Papa drew Mama down beside him and tried to press the seed into Mama’s hand. Mama jerked away and flung the seed at him.

“Henry, now you’ve gotten my arm dirty. Take your seed and plant it yourself! And if you refuse to grow orchids for me, I’ll find someone who will!”

“Adele, please wait. I didn’t mean to offend you. Please listen to me. I have something to tell you and I am trying to find the best way to say it.”

Mama was already on the way up to the house. She didn’t turn around. Eva and Papa watched the back of her flowered print dress until it was out of sight. Eva was still child enough to be torn between two loyalties. “Papa, why do you and Mama argue so much?”

“Ahhh, liebchen, we don’t argue as such. We just have very different ways of looking at life. I am a dreamer and your Mama is a realist. Who is to say which is the right or wrong philosophy?”

“Why did she throw the seed at you?” Eva asked as she bent over to retrieve it.

“Because she didn’t understand what I was asking her and trying to tell her,” Papa sighed, smoothing the seed in his hand.

Impatience bubbled in Eva, because she didn’t understand what Papa was talking about either. She wanted to get on with the business at hand, a trait that she most certainly inherited from Mama’s side of the family.

“Are we going to plant the rest of the tomato plants?” she asked Papa. “If we can’t give Mama orchids, we can give her tomatoes.”

“Yes, we can give her tomatoes, multitudes of tomatoes. I’ll plant the apple seed myself, later,” Papa said.

“Papa, help me set this tomato plant in straight.”

The garden that summer did produce multitudes of tomatoes from the plants that Papa and Eva planted together. That summer also produced changes in her life. That summer Papa died of cancer as he knew that he would. Mama packed Eva off to boarding school as Eva never dreamed Mama would. Perhaps Mama didn't quite know how to handle a daughter, being an only child herself. And now without the benefit of Papa, Mama was without moorings herself.

Fly away little one!

Eva didn't think about Papa's apple seeds until the summer vacation after Papa died. After she arrived home and settled into her old room, she went for a walk in the garden. Perhaps she was looking for Papa's ghost or at least something familiar to assure her that the entire world wasn't upside down just because her personal one was upside down. She passed the skeleton of the greenhouse that Mama was having built for her orchids. Eva walked to the spot in the garden where she and Papa had planted their tomato plants a short year ago.

Eva didn't know what she was looking for—perhaps a trace of Papa's personality in the soil that he so loved to run through his fingers. Was she looking for a whisper of his personality in the summer daisies dancing in the wind? She stopped and stared. There close to the spot where she and Papa had planted the tomato plants the year before, grew a shoulder high flowering crab apple tree, still vulnerable and fragile in the forceful wind, small and still insignificant under the panorama blue sky and snowdrift clouds.

The tree stood straight, rooted deeply and bending with the wind. Even though Eva was only twelve years old, she understood what her Papa had left her. She ran over to the tree and threw her arms around it, hugging it tightly. It seemed to her that she was hugging Papa again. She felt his strong arms around her and heard his laughing voice saying, “Dreamers leave a legacy of hope and love that's not so terrible, liebchen.”

When Mama found Eva, she was still standing there with her arms around the tree.

“Eva, where have you been? I have been looking all over for you. Why ever are you standing there hugging that tree?”

“Mama, I want to tell you something about this tree.”

“Eva, I don’t have time to listen to your fancies right now. Robert is picking me up for the opera and I must see to the cocktails and flowers. We’ll talk about it some other time.”

“Mama, this is the time. You must listen to me.”

“Eva, you’re turning onto a talking in riddles dreamer just like your Papa was. I’m glad I’m marrying Robert. He’ll help you face the realities of this world.”

Fly away little one!

Now, fifteen years later the flowering crab apple tree was the only part of her childhood house that still belonged to Eva. When Mama died, Eva sold the house that she had lived in with Papa and Mama. She and Jordan and their possible children lived two hours away. Two hours! Her life might now just last two hours. How could the possibilities of children grow into reality in two hours? ‘The story is over,’ she thought.

Fly away little one!

Today, after she talked to her doctor, she knew that she had to end the story with Jordan. Papa would have appreciated the irony of the situation-she and Jordon and their marriage and children! The circle was complete. Here she was, walking with the new owner’s permission under the same tree Papa had planted. Yet, this was not the same tree. This tree was full grown with pink blossoms stretching a flowery canopy over the sturdy forked trunk. Instead of bending with the wind like it had in her youth, the tree now stood upright and defied the wind.

“Just like I do,” Eva thought. “I face reality with all of my illusions gone and sneer in its face.”

She would reason with Jordan, make him understand that there was no hope. The strong wind ruffled her hair and sent a shower of blossoms floating around her like April rain. Soft footsteps came up behind her. Her back stiffened.

“Papa, are you coming back to lecture me again?”

“Fly away little one!”

Jordan’s well loved voice said, “Eva, I knew I’d find you here.”

She didn’t turn around. “How did you know where to look?”

“You told me what your father did when he found out he was going to die. You’re a lot like him.”

She whirled around to face him. “I’m like my mother. Why did you come?”

“The doctor called me,” Jordan told her.

“Jordan, go away. The possibilities of life and children are gone!”

“Eva, I..”

“The possibilities are gone, Jordan.”

Eva watched the flowered print of his shirt retreat from her as she had once watched the flowered print of her mother’s dress retreat from Papa and her. She clenched her teeth. “Mama, are you proud of me?”

She stood there, smelling the fragrance of the blossoms from Papa’s apple tree, remembering the sound of his voice as he told her how he had snatched a seed from under the noses of the Nazis who were trying to destroy his people. She reached up and picked one of the apple blossoms. She rolled a tiny seed between her fingers. Her fingers made the motions of throwing the seed on the

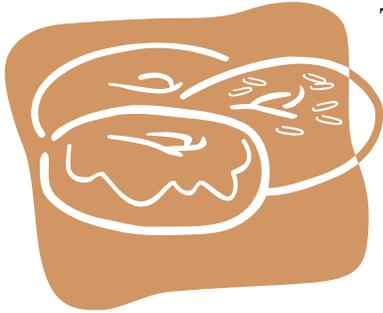
ground, as she faced the question mark of her remaining life. She touched the possibilities of the seed. Life. Children. Jordan. Love. Could she throw them away before the seed had a chance to blossom?

Eva held the seed tightly and she ran to catch up with Jordan who had circled the flowering apple tree and leaned against its trunk, waiting for her. She held out her apple seed and he folded his warm hand over hers as he took it from her.

Fly away little one!

The Future of Jelly Doughnuts

by Kathy Warnes



The wind whistled and the windows rattled like teeth chattering.

An especially strong gust pushed me and my school friend

Bernadette through the wooden front door of our apartment in the row of wooden barracks where I lived with Mama, Papa, and my brother Frankie. My teeth chattered with the windows.

Sometimes the windswept a long, straight path across Lake

Ontario scattering frothy waves like specks of white cotton against the shore. The waves reminded me of the sea at home in France. Some of the tones in the wind's voice reminded me of the Nazi soldiers as they ordered us off the trains at the camp.

Sometimes at night when I thumped my pillow instead of sleeping the wind's voice carried me back to the camp and I hid my face in the pillow and trembled for the rest of the night. I couldn't sleep because I had to stay awake to make sure that Mama called me to get up to go to school at with the rest of the children from the barracks. There was no school in the camp. Me and the other kids and the women just hauled rocks and broken bricks all day. Mama called me that morning and all of the mornings after. I had to forget the time before I went to school every day.

We had been living here in the barracks, in the safe haven at Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York, for a year now and the coal stove kept our three rooms warm, but I still shivered I hurried into our kitchen with Bernadette close behind me.

"Your mother wants to remember," Bernadette said.

"I want to forget, but Mama won't let me," I said to Bernadette as we took our coats off and hung them on a hook in the corner.

As usual, Papa sat at the kitchen table sipping hot tea from his saucer and as usual, Mama scolded him for drinking tea from his saucer. "Otto, we will not live like barbarians just because we are not at home," Mama said as she took Papa's saucer of tea and emptied it in the kitchen sink. She poured more tea in his cup.

"Now, drink this the proper way," she told Papa.

Papa, smiled at me. "I see your Mama is at it again," he said. "Welcome Bernadette. You will stay for supper."

"You will have a jelly doughnut with us," Mama said.

I could tell Bernadette wanted to run away, but her Mama had taught her to be polite, too. "I will have a jelly doughnut, but then I have to go home and do my chores," she said.

"Josie is excused from chores today because of the jelly doughnuts," Mama said. She turned around from the stove where she had been stirring a pot of soup that my nose told me was chicken noodle. She pushed aside the pan of hot fat that she had used to fry the doughnuts and put the left over jelly in the icebox. She picked up a plate of jelly doughnuts with sugar sprinkled on top and sat it on the table. She put two cups of milk diluted with tea in front of me and Bernadette, and then she sat down with a cup of tea of her own, strong and steaming.

"Now I will tell you," she said.

Swallowing a last gulp of tea, Papa pushed back his chair. "I go do chores with Frankie," he said. "There is wood to gather and the bakery has some loaves left to deliver." The wind slammed the door behind him.

"I will talk over jelly doughnuts," Mama said. She poured some tea in her saucer and blew on it. Then she took a sip. She shook her finger at me. "Don't tell Papa," she ordered with a glint in her black eyes.

I tried to keep Mama from saying what she would say next. She had done this so often with Bernadette and me that I knew the words she would say next.

“I remember the fence around the camp. The Nazis put up the fence to keep us in prison,” Mama said.

Mama got up from the table and walked to the window behind the small loveseat that Papa had brought home. He said one of the people from Oswego had given it to him in exchange for a table that he had built and carved.

Mama pulled back one of the curtains that she had sewn from burlap sacks. I had helped her cut the sacks, dye them a blue that matched the sky over Lake Ontario on sunny days and she had sewn them together. I hemmed a pair of them by hand and Mama hemmed the other pair. They made our windows look like the sky lived in our house. When Mama pulled the curtains back, the outside sky flowed in and outlined Mama like she was a visiting angel.

I took a big bite of my jelly doughnut and chewed slowly. I knew I had time to chew slowly because I knew what Mama would say.

Mama pointed at the fence. “They have us fenced in here, too, those Americans,” Mama said. “They brought us here by train like the Nazis used to bring us to the camp.. They put us behind a fence like the Nazis did at the camp. “

“But Mama, they let us out to go to school and go to town. They have summer camps for fun, Mama!”

“You want camps! The Nazis had thousands of camps, Josie!”

“Ft. Ontario is a camp but we are not prisoners, Mama.”

“We have a curfew just like you do, Josie. Papa and I have to be in camp by 10:00 o’clock every night. One night Papa stayed late at the café, and officers went to arrest him.”

“But he came home with you. He didn’t have to stay in the camp for two years before he came back.”

Mama walked back to the table and sat in her chair again. "They locked the gate behind us," she said.

"But Mama," they send us to school here. We learn and grow here. I like Americans. I want to be an American."

"You must never forget what they did to us, Josie. You must remind everyone. It is more important to remember than to be liked."

"They will like us when they know us better," Mama. They will like us when we become Americans."

Mama grabbed my shoulders and her black eyes blazed into mine. "You must not forget the old ways. You must not forget what it was like to be in the camp."

Bernadette kicked me under the table and gobbled her doughnut. I knew she wanted me to stop arguing with Mama so we could finish our doughnuts and she could go home."

I gulped down the rest of my doughnut, but Bernadette beat me. "Thank you for the doughnut, Mrs. Foster," she said. "I have to go now and do my homework."

Bernadette held a piece of doughnut in one hand and put her coat on with the other."

The words flew out of my mouth as freely as the gulls that flew along the seashore at home and along the lakeshore here in Oswego.

"Mama, can I spend the night with Bernadette?"

"No, you may not. Papa has a school board meeting tonight and I am to meet with the ladies to discuss getting more books for the library. You must stay here with Frankie. Mrs. Johnson will look in on you."

Bernadette didn't even look at me as she eased the door shut behind her.

I sighed. I had to spend another evening listening to my brother Frankie. He had been born in the camp and Mama had hidden him from the Nazis for a year before we were released. He didn't remember anything to forget. I remembered many things to forget.

Frankie came into the room like a fierce wind blowing off of Lake Ontario and Papa followed him like a summer breeze. Mama fed us chicken noodle soup, bread fresh from the oven, and meatballs that Bernadette's mother had sent over.

'Hurry up, Otto,' Mama urged. 'We must be punctual as well as faithful in our duties. 'Josie, watch over our home and Frankie faithfully,' Mama told me as they closed the door behind them.

'Do your homework,' I ordered Frankie as I washed and dried the dishes. Mama had left the plate of jelly doughnuts sitting in the corner of the cupboard. I slid them off the plate onto Papa's camp newspaper from yesterday, folded it up, and put the package in the garbage.

Frankie stuck his tongue out at me.'I'm telling Mama that you threw her doughnuts away!'

I flapped the dish towel at Frankie and ran after him. 'You aren't telling her anything. You didn't see anything!'

'I saw you do it!' Frankie yelled. I chased him into Mama and Papa's bedroom. 'You're going to keep quiet!' I yelled.

Frankie wriggled under Mama's bed to get away from me and I went in after him. We swam around on that wooden floor like we were swimming at the Lake Ontario beach down the hill. I grabbed Frankie's ankle and he yelled and twisted away from me. I heard his head hit something solid.

'OW!' Frankie yelled.

'What happened, Frankie? Are you hurt?' I said around the dust bunnies in my mouth.

“My head hit something hard,” Frankie said.

“Let’s see what it is,” I said. “Hook your fingers around it and I’ll pull you and whatever it is out.”

I pulled and I pulled. Frankie and whatever it was didn’t move.

“OWWW!” Frankie said again.

“Can you get hold of it, Frankie?”

“I got hold of it, Josie.” He sneezed. “Pull us out!”

I pulled and I pulled. “You ate too much supper, Frankie!”

I kept pulling and I could see Frankie’s back and arms now and his hands were wrapped around a long, narrow box with metal reinforced edges.

“Let go of it, Frankie! I’ll get it now”

He wouldn’t let go of the box. “It’s mine! I found it and I’m going to open it and see what’s in it!” Frankie shouted at me.

“I’m older. I get to open it first,” I shouted back at him.

We shouted at each other for a few minutes and then I got on my hands and knees and tugged at one of the edges of the box. Frankie plunked down next to me and tugged at the other edge. “I can help you open it,” he said.

We worked at the corners of the box together and finally they came loose.

“Maybe there’s buried pirate’s treasure in it,” Frankie said. “Do you see any gold and silver coins?”

“Not under Mama and Papa’s bed,” I grunted.

Together, Frankie and I slipped the lid off the box. It was filled with pictures.

“There’s nothing here but a box of old pictures.” Frankie stood up and kicked the box. “I wanted to find a treasure.”

“Maybe we did,” I said, as I took out a picture and looked at it. It was the picture of a young girl in a school uniform carrying a bag of books. She was waving at someone and I recognized the smile on her face. Her eyes that I knew were sparkling black even though the photograph didn’t show it, looked hopefully and happily into the future. Mama was pretty even when she went to school. I hope I resemble her as much as everyone says I do.

“It’s a picture of Mama. Come look at it, Frankie,” I said.

“I don’t want to look at dusty old pictures,” Frankie said. “I want to eat one of Mama’s jelly doughnuts and then I want to play checkers.”

I slid the box of pictures back under the bed. There would be time for me and Frankie and Mama and Papa to look at it together. I stood up and dusted off my skirt. I walked over and I pulled the newspaper packet of doughnuts out of the garbage.

“You must listen to me Frankie, before you eat a jelly doughnut.”

Miss Addy and My Daddy's Itch

By Kathy Warnes

When you get to be an old man like me, everybody thinks you're talking to yourself when your lips move and you make mumbling noises. But I fooled them all. I'm not talking to myself, I'm talking to Miss Addy. During the rest of the year, she just sits and rocks on a porch in my mind, but on her birthday, ah, then, she jumps up out of her chair and talks to me.

Today is Miss Addy's birthday you know, and every year on her birthday, I eat a whopping piece of chocolate cake in her memory. If they celebrate birthdays where she is, I know she's eating an extra piece of chocolate cake for me and Buford in memory of her adventures. She was good to the boy I was then, a skinny kid with knickers, long brown stockings and a cornstock of hair. And don't forget the heart that bruised like a Georgia peach.



Right then, my world was mama and daddy and my little town in the south. I used to scuff down Main Street in my bare feet, raising up dust clouds on my way to Sissler's general store, where I got groceries for Miss Tuttle. Her order was always the same, a loaf of bread, a half gallon of

milk, a box of cookies and a bottle of cooking sherry to test for cooking. In the quiet twilights she always sat on her porch swing, rocking gently and sipping the sherry.

“You know, I’ve never found a good enough brand for mama’s mincemeat cake,” she’d tell me. “But I shall be persistent, I shall keep trying.”

I didn’t spend all of my time shopping for Miss Tuttle. I had some pals that I got in trouble with regular. The guys I ran with – Ike Townsend, Bo Jensen, and Sid Carney, liked to chase things in the woods and fish and play ball. But our favorite activity was trying to spit across Bull Creek. If you could spit across Bull Creek you were the town champ. Most of my free time I spent practicing for that championship.

Then my daddy got the itch again. On Miss Addy’s birthday of all days. Daddy’s gotten the itch ever since I can remember. We would live in one town for a few months, then daddy would say, “I hear there’s a good wood working shop in Denver or Phoenix or Baltimore.”

“Harvey, must we?” mom would sigh.

“Ginny, this is our big chance. They’re offering me a lot of money. It’s too good to pass up.”

Mama would square her shoulders, pack everything into our pickup truck and off we’d go. Daddy had a sign he made out of a block of wood sanded smooth and varnished. On it he painted, “bound for” in thick, black letters. Then he left a space, because we had been bound for so many places he couldn’t letter anything in there permanently. The list of our bound fors kept growing through the years, until we finally landed here in Alabama. We had been here long enough so we knew everybody and everybody knew us. I heard Miss Tuttle say once that when she sneezes everybody in town says “God Bless You.” But I like that feeling and I like my friends here and don’t want to leave them.

“I’m getting too old to move around. Thirteen’s time to settle down,” I told daddy that night at supper. He was so busy talking to mama that he didn’t even hear me. I sat there staring at my plate and listening to him ramble on.

“It sounds like a real good deal, Ginny. A little town called Altonville in the mountains in Pennsylvania. Hastings, the owner of the wood working factory there, came through town on a sales trip the other day and I showed him some of my work. He liked it so well that he thinks they could even go into a line of my rocking chairs, custom made like the one I made for you.”

“It is a beautiful chair.” Mama gazed admiringly at the wooden rocker in the corner by the stove.

There was no doubt about it, my daddy did good work. If only he would do it one place.

“We can make about 20 percent profit on each chair,” daddy told mama. Can you think how quickly that will add up? Why, in no time...”

“Daddy,” I said.

“What is it, boy?”

“Daddy, I don’t want to go to Pennsylvania. I want to stay here. I don’t want to be a Yankee.”

He brushed me off like I was a fly on his arm. “We’ll start packing tomorrow, Ginny. I figure if we can leave by Thursday, we ought to be there by the middle of next week.”

“Daddy, I’m not going. I’m not leaving Bo and Sid and Ike.”

“Be quiet, Jeffrey. I’m talking to your Mama.”

“But Daddy...”

He reached over and swatted me across the face with his big, hard hand. His face was red and his beard wiggled like it always did when he got mad. “Now be quiet until you’re spoken to.”

Daddy ignored me for the rest of the meal. I squirmed in my chair. Inside, I was bubbling and boiling. Finally I couldn’t keep quiet no longer. I jumped out of my chair. “I’m not going!” I hollered at him. “You can’t make me. I’ll run away and live in the woods!”

Before Daddy or mama could stop me, I was out the door and down the path. I could hear Daddy shouting, “Jeffrey, you come back here or I’ll tan your hide until you can’t sit down for a week!”

But I kept running. I figured I couldn’t be in any more trouble than I was already. I wandered down Main Street, kicking two stones at once and feeling lower than a copperhead’s belly. I shuffled by Miss Addy’s little shack store where she sold the hats and other things she made, and peeked in the window. She was sitting at her work table, putting the finishing touches on a hat. Whenever she bent her head, her steel-rimmed spectacles slid down over her nose and she was constantly pushing them back up. Miss Addy wasn’t real dark black like the other colored folks in town, she was the color of a cup of coffee with milk in it. Her hair was gray and frizzled, but her spirits weren’t. She was always ready to laugh at my jokes or go fishing with me down at Millers Pond. She was even skinny enough to race with me and win sometimes, too! Miss Addy caught me peeking in her window. She smiled and waved me in the door. “Why hello, Mr. Jeffrey. What you up to today?”

“Nothin,” I mumbled, running my big toe in circles and staring at it. I could feel her sharp glance, but she didn’t ask any stupid questions.

“How about having a piece of birthday cake with me?” she asked. “Today’s my birthday and I made me a chocolate cake. It’s about time to stop and sample it.”

“How many birthdays have you had in this town, Miss Addy?”

“Lived here since my daddy came here right after the War between the States, Mr. Jeffrey. Never been away from here.”

“I don’t wanna leave here, Miss Addy. Ever.”

“Why child, who says you have to leave?”

“My Daddy’s got the itch again and that means we have to pack up our truck and go on the road again. Only this time, I’m not going. I ran away from home so I don’t have to go. Can I stay with you for a bit, Miss Addy? Leastways ’til I find me a place to live and a job?”

She pretended she didn’t notice the tears in my eyes and picked thoughtfully at her cake.

“Where’s your daddy planning on going?”

“He says we have to go to Pennsylvania.”

“Maybe that’s a good place, Mr. Jeffrey.”

“This here place is best. You know that, Miss Addy!”

She shoved a hunk of chocolate cake and a fork in front of me. “Eat, Mr. Jeffrey. Things sit better on a full stomach.”

I sunk my teeth into that chocolate cake and decided I was hungry after all. I made that cake disappear quicker than a crawdad. “Mmmm, Miss Addy, you sure do make good chocolate cake!”

She grinned. Buford likes it too.”

“Where is Buford? I haven’t seen him around this morning.”

Miss Addy grinned. “That ol basset hound! I call him my blood hound because he’s got such a big nose, but he never uses it for anything worthwhile. Just to sniff out dog biscuits and rabbits.

“What does he do all day while you’re here working on your hats?” I asked her.

“Sleeps mostly. Oh, once in awhile he’ll stand up and yawn and stretch, but he’ll turn right around and go back to sleep. He’s an energetic dog, that Buford is.”

“I wonder where he is?” I said. “Here, Buford. Buuuuforddd.”

Buford didn't answer.

"We'll go find him," Miss Addy said. "It'll just take me a few shakes to put the last of the stitches in this hat. Then we can go see what Buford's up to."

We left Miss Addy's shop and walked in the magnolia scented twilight to Jackson Street where she lived. She swung open her front door. "Buford, where are you?"

As soon as we got into the house, Buford ambled out of the kitchen to see what was going on. Miss Addy slipped me a dog biscuit and I held it behind my back. "Find it, Buford. Find the biscuit and you can have it."

Buford sniffed all over me. Then he tried to climb up the front of me like I was a tree. Finally I gave in and fed him the biscuit. Miss Addy took her apron from a hook behind the door. "Now, Mr. Jeffrey, what are we going to have for supper?"

She stood with her chin in her hand, thinking. Her face lit up. "Law, I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner. We'll go down to Brown's pond and catch us some frogs. We can have us some frog legs for supper."

"Oh boy!" I shouted. "Come on Buford!"

We grabbed a couple of nets and buckets and two flashlights and we headed down the dirt path that led to Brown's pond. It was a noisy night. The crickets chirped at the top of their voices, the frogs croaked and the night animals were moving around. I could hear the owls in Brown's barn hooting away. Buford dashed ahead of us, sniffing rabbit trails and such. He must have sniffed something real good, because all of a sudden he set up such a howl that you could hear him over in Crawford County, ten miles away.

"Buford, quit making so much noise," Miss Addy hissed.

As if the word noise was a signal, Buford took off, baying at the top of his lungs. I knew it had to be a rabbit or coon or possum to get him so excited. He sure was going to scare off all of the frogs if he kept up the noise.

“Buford, come back here right now!” I hollered.

Buford didn't pay any attention.

“Darn dog,” I grumbled. “He's scared every frog around to the bottom of the pond by now.”

Suddenly the baying turned to shrill yip, yip, yips.

“Something's wrong!” Miss Addy started running. “Shine your flashlight on the path Jeffrey, so I can see where I'm going.”

I shined the light in front of me and tried to see where Buford was. Not a sign of him. All I could see was trees reaching out their snaky branches to grab me and shadows moving around. That darn dog had to spoil the frog hunt and how he was getting me mixed up haunts to boot. I sure was going to lay back his ears when I caught hold of him!

Miss Addy and I followed the sound of the yips and pretty soon my flashlight picked up the brown and white of Buford's coat. Then I smelled the most awful smell this side of Limburger cheese and sulphur. Buford had gone and done it. That fool dog had snuggled up to a skunk and lost!

“Buford, you bad dog!” Miss Addy scolded. “Come on now, we have to get you home and give you a bath right away.” She grabbed him by the collar. “Buford, I declare, you smell something awful!”

“Here, Miss Addy. I had a rope around my bucket. You better put it around Buford's neck so he won't run away. He don't look too keen on the bath idea.”

We got the rope over the squirming Buford's neck and headed for home. I sighed. "Goodbye frogs, see you some other time."

"I'm sorry Buford had to go and spoil your frog hunt, Jeffrey, but we have plenty of time for frog hunting if you stay with me when your folks move. Like my daddy used to tell me, "Tomorrow's another day."

"Was your daddy a good daddy to you, Miss Addy?" I asked as we dragged Buford along.

"In most ways he was, but when I was younger I thought he was terrible mean."

"Why, Miss Addy?"

"He got it into his head that I was a mighty fine gal, and none of the young bucks around here was good enough for me to marry. No siree, I had to have me a city fella from Mobile or Montgomery."

"Did you get a city fella, Miss Addy?"

"Couldn't, Mr. Jeffrey. None of the city fellas from Mobile or Montgomery wanted to stay around here. Then Allen came along. He was the janitor at the grade school and he was real nice. We liked each other powerful enough to get married, but daddy wouldn't hear of it. 'You ain't gonna marry no damn Yankee,' he'd tell me time and again."

"Why did your daddy call him a damn Yankee, Miss Addy?"

"He came from up North. New York, I think. And he had what daddy called Yankee ideas. So daddy put up a big fuss when he found out I wanted to marry him. He still thought I could catch myself a city fella."

"Did you marry Allen, Miss Addy?"

“No, Mr. Jeffrey, I didn’t. I listened to my daddy and kept waiting for that city fella. He never came. So I lived here with daddy and made my hats and took care of him until he died.”

“Seems to me your daddy might have been wrong, Miss Addy.”

“I do believe he was, Mr. Jeffrey, just like Buford was wrong to get tangled up with that skunk and ruin our frogging trip. Do you know that, you mangy ol hound dog?”

She rubbed his ears, smell and all. “Everybody makes mistakes, including dogs and daddys. But I still love my daddy and I still love my dog.”

We finally got back to Miss Addy’s house and Buford’s aroma was still strong enough to knock a grown man two feet. “I’ll give Buford his bath, then I’ll make up your bed,” Miss Addy said.

“Uhhh, Miss Addy, you wouldn’t be mad if...”

Her eyebrows raised over her spectacles.

“Uhh, mama will need some help with the packing and I’m the one that usually helps her.”

“All right, Mr. Jeffrey.” Miss Addy smiled at me and hauled Buford off to the wash tub.

I could hear Buford’s howls all of my walk home. When I got home, I did some howling of my own, because daddy gave me some leather strap to keep me from running away again. We did move to Pennsylvania and a few other places and we never did get rich. Daddy, he got the itch off and on for the rest of his life. I never could hold it against him no more though. Not after Miss Addy and Buford.

So today, on Miss Addy’s birthday, I’m eating a piece of chocolate cake with her. And I’m still trying to be enough like here so my kids will forgive some of my itches!

The Train Chaser

by Kathy Warnes



P. Thomas Ainsworth is the name and selling Whipple Brushes is my game. You want short brushes, tall brushes, big brushes, small brushes, I'll sell you any size Whipple Brush. And I'll go anywhere in this here country to do it, even though my regular run is the big M- Minneapolis to the little B-Butte, Montana.

Things were going along pretty much normal in my brush selling game, until one day I saw that Indian and then my life got switched around quicker than a person chooses a Whipple Brush over any other kind of market. I still ain't sure I really saw that Indian. It was one of those things where you're between being asleep and awake and you're not sure if it really happened or not.

I tell you, I remember that first night I saw the Indian like I had sold a case of Whipple brushes. I got on the train in Minneapolis like always and made the acquaintance of several of the folks in my compartment, 'specially the ladies. I asked every one of them to have dinner with me at my hotel in Butte except for the bent old lady dressed in a black dress with a black lace shawl pulled around her shoulders. I was making polite conversation with her and she says to me, "I'm getting off in Fargo, North Dakota young man. I'm going to my son's farm because I'm getting too old to live by myself in the city. Do you know how to milk a cow, sonny?"

She reached in her suitcase and pulled out a thick book. "Here's the best book on milking cows you'd ever want to see. Look at these pictures of that fella milking cows. Isn't he good?"

“Thank you kindly, granny, but I already know how to milk cows. I grew up on a farm you know, out east in Pennsylvania and I’ve been milking cows since I was knee high to a fence post.”

“Well, then sonny, you surely know how. Is this the best way to place your fingers?” She cupped her hand and made milking motions with her fingers. “Am I using my fingers right? I sure do want to be useful to Albert.”

“You’re just a bit off center. Here, let me show you,” I said. We spent the next few minutes practicing milking positions with our fingers. Then the old lady started nodding. It must have been all of that exercise. She closed those blue-veined eyelids of hers and went to sleep. I slid across to the gentleman in the seat opposite me. He was dressed in one of them tailored, dark suits that made him look a lot like Deacon Peabody from the Sunday meeting. His expression was tailored too.

“Howdy sir. P Thomas Ainsworth is the name and how are you this fine day?”

“I bet your pardon,” the deacon said.

“P. Thomas Ainsworth at your service, sir. Here’s my card. Yes sir, that’s right. I’m a Whipple Brush Man.”

“What is a Whipple Brush Man?”

“A man who sells Whipple Brushes. Whipple Brushes are the best brushes in this entire United States, and mark my words, someday we’ll conquer the world!”

I took a Whipple Brush from my case and slapped him on the back with it.

“Will you please watch yourself with that brush sir?” he said, rubbing his back.

“Oh certainly, certainly.” I brushed his shoulders. “There, is this better? A Whipple Brush is guaranteed to keep you spic and span for the finer moments of life. Use a genuine Whipple Wisk Brush for assorted lint, powder, dust, and anything else your best black broadcloth collects. I made the Wisk Brush myself in our factory in New York. I worked there since I was nine years old, so I know how to make a brush from straw one to the handle.”

“I use paint brushes a lot,” the Deacon said. “Do you have any of those?”

By the time I’d gone through my childhood at the Whipple factory, I had The Deacon convinced that I had indeed custom made every Whipple Brush. Next, I moved over to sit next to the Indian who was sitting next to The Deacon. I can say the Indian was sure dressed like an Indian. He wore buckskin leggings, a buckskin jacket and a red feather in his hat. I didn’t let the fact that he was an Indian stop me at all. No sir, not me. I just went up to him and said, “How.”

“How do you do? My name is Chief Soaring Eagle and I am a descendant of Chief Sitting Bull,” he said to me in schoolmarm English.

“What are you doing riding a train?” I asked him. “Aren’t you supposed to be dancing around a campfire and war whooping?”

“I’ve been to visit the president in Washington and I’m returning to my people to tell them of his words.”

“What did the President say?” I asked him.

“He said we must sell more land,” the chief said. With a bitter twist of his lips he added, “At least he asks us now. For many years the white man just took our land without payment.”

“The white man has always been mean to us Indians,” I told him. “Did you know that I was an Indian, or at least some parts of one? My daddy was a half breed and I grew up on a reservation in Oklahoma. And it was brutal, I tell you, brutal. All the white man wants to do is rob Indians

and I think we should get together and do something about it. At least we can protest to somebody.”

The Chief stared at me, his face stony. “We protest, but our words bounce off the white man’s ears,” he said.

“Well, my daddy- the Great Spirit keep his soul- always said that you can’t get a fair deal from Washington, because there aren’t many Indians in the White House.”

We talked some more and pretty soon the Chief was asking me if I knew Black Feather and Red Bird and some of his other relatives. I guess I had him convinced of the Indian blood in me, and me being Scotch Irish!

Well, the afternoon raced away with all of the talking and such and pretty soon night slipped over the plains like a gunny sack over a pile of corn and the shadows played tag with the moonlight. I lifted up the curtain that was hanging over my window and I saw a full moon hanging in the sky like one of them Japanese lanterns. I was sitting there holding the curtain back, admiring the moon when the old lady in black tapped me on the shoulder. “Say young man, turn around and answer a question for me,” she demanded.

I turned around and there was the Indian Chief and The Deacon standing right alongside the old lady.

“I just want to know one thing, young man,” she said. “How did you manage to grow up in a factory in New York City, on a farm in Pennsylvania, and on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma all at the same time?”

Since I couldn’t come up with a good answer, I tried to change the subject. I grinned at the Deacon and the Indian Chief. “How about a game of five card stud?”

I pulled a bottle of whiskey out of my brush bag. “And a drink to go along with it?”

The Chief pushed me and the bottle away.

The Deacon looked doubtful. "I shouldn't...."

"But you will," I told him. "Just because you look like a deacon doesn't mean you have to act like one."

I got the two glasses out of my case that I always pack with the bottle and we tipped a few. The little old lady in black flounced off, so that left The Deacon and the Indian Chief and me to ourselves.

"I'll play with you if you can keep a straight story long enough to play," The Deacon said, watching me deal. "And don't try to sneak in any new cards, either!"

"Deacon, when it comes to poker I'm as straight as an arrow. No offense meant," I said to the Chief's stony stare.

So we sat down in the row of seats, me by the window, the Chief across from me and The Deacon beside me. We played a few hands and I took more swigs from the bottle and pretty soon I was feeling pretty good about the world and our part in it. The Deacon was feeling so good he blew a straight and I got the pot, which was fine with me.

"I was thinking about a new painting," he said, by way of explaining, but I knew better.

The Chief, he sort of sat there solemn-like, with his cards up in his hand like a sign post and his eyes fiery with war dances. I had to nudge him to make his move, and then he got me stuck. I had to try to bluff him or lose the game. I said I had a pair of aces in my hand and he called me. Since I only had a ten and a Jack, I knew I had to do something fast. I grabbed the whiskey bottle.

"Need another drink," I muttered.

Sort of accidentally I swung the bottle and whiskey splashed all over the curtains in our compartment. It also splashed all over the Chief and a few drops even landed on The Deacon and me.

“Clumsy white man,” the Chief scowled. He reached over and took the edge of the curtain and mopped his face with it. He pulled on that curtain so hard it tore completely off the window and the night was in our railroad car quick as a star twinkling. There was the full moon just hanging there like a lamp and it looked so close I wanted to reach out and turn it off.

“Hey, look at that moon,” I said. “Sure is pretty, ain’t it Chief?”

The Chief scowled at me. “Don’t try to get me to take my eyes off my poker hand,” he said.

“Come on, show me your two aces. I got my eyes wiped now and I can play real good.”

“Sure Chief, but first take a gander at that moon. It looks like a yellow glass ball out there.”

I pointed, meaning to show him some of the moon markings, and by Golly, I gulped and almost swallowed my uppers. Would you believe that there right alongside the window, close as a telephone pole was an Indian? Right away quick I looked for the Chief. Had he jumped out the window? But no, he was still sitting there, holding his cards in his hand. I looked back out the window to see if the other Indian was still there.

Maybe my eyes were still playing poker. You know, being so far away from Minneapolis and all and drinking whiskey and playing crooked poker. But no, he was still there all right. He bent over the neck of his horse and the horse’s mane flew so high in the wind that it slapped him in the face.

And what a face that Indian had on him. He had paint on him like a rainbow- red and green and yellow bands across his face and some on his chest and arms too. His skin was the shade of brown like coffee with milk in it and it glistened in the moonlight like he had rubbed his body with oil. This Indian bent real low on his horses’ neck and he didn’t look to the right where the prairie was or the left where I sat gawking out the train window. He just looked straight ahead

and kept urging on his horse. I saw him digging the horse in the ribs with his knees and pulling on his mane. And all the time behind him hung that moon like a big, yellow face, staring at us.

“Hey Chief, is that guy anybody you know?” I asked him.

The Chief looked out the window and grunted. ‘He’s a Sioux.’”

“Well, what’s he doing out there,” I asked him.

“I have to paint him. The Deacon said. “Even if he isn’t real, I have to paint him.”

“Hey Chief, you saw him too. Tell old stuffed shirt here that there’s an Indian on a horse outside the train window.” I leaned across The Deacon and pointed. “See, there he is. The horse’s hooves are stirring up puffs of dust from running so fast. And look at that! That Indian is making his horse go so fast he’s pulling up even with the engine. Listen Deacon, can’t you hear him? He’s war whooping! Listen to him! It sounds like he’s going to attack the train. And look at that horse, why don’t you! He’s running so fast the sweat is just pouring off his body. Looks to me like that fool Indian is trying to beat the train!”

The Chief glared at me. “You saw him, white man. You saw him the way the Indian used to be, wilding and free and running with the wind. I hope something in your life will disappear just like the Indian’s way of life disappeared when the iron horse came to the plains.”

“What the devil are you talking about?” I blustered.

I sounded tougher than I really felt. I was really trying to cover up how scared I was. Watching that Indian and his horse trying to beat the train made me think of some real old movies I’d seen when I was knee high. They looked solid, but if you peeked real close the figures in the film seemed to have a kind of shimmering around them and a wavering like they was—well, like they was ghosts.

Suddenly, just like the engineer decided he had to win, the locomotive picked up speed and the train pulled away from the Indian. I watched him, urging his horse to go faster and somehow he increased his speed enough to keep even with the train and look at me through the window. He had a calm, determined, honest look in his eyes that made my soul shrivel and made me wonder why I couldn't be an honest man.

Then he and his horse faded into the blue night shadows behind us. I pulled my handkerchief out of my pocket and mopped my dripping face. "Whew, I thought for a minute that Indian was going to beat the train. Where the devil did he come from anyway? And what in hells bells was he doing out here racing a train?"

"My people couldn't stop the iron horse from traveling across the plains," said the Chief. "They just kept coming like iron buffalo until they covered the plains and the land was no longer ours. The land belonged to the rails gleaming in the sunlight and moonlight. Maybe now since my people have gone to the happy hunting grounds, they have faster horses. Maybe now, they can beat the iron horse. Maybe they think if they win the race with the trains there is still a chance to force the white man to leave their hunting grounds."

"That's a bunch of soft bristles and you know it, Chief!" I scoffed. "There ain't no Indian here or in the happy hunting grounds that can outrace a train with a horse. That just ain't gonna happen."

"Maybe not, but did you notice the muscles of the horse straining and bunching and pulling with the effort he was making?" The Deacon asked. "Did you notice the determination and intensity of the Indian that made him race harder as the train went faster?"

For a second I didn't know what to say, so I picked up one of my Whipple brushes and looked at it.

"I'm going to paint him," The Deacon said. "I'm going to paint that Indian chasing the train."

The Deacon whipped out a pad of paper and some charcoal pencils and started to draw lines on the paper.

The Chief nodded solemnly and laid his cards on his lap. "The game is over," he said, rising slowly and stalking out of the car.

The Deacon didn't even glance at me, but just kept drawing. I figured he was through playing poker, too. I peeked over his shoulder and watched the Indian on the horse take shape. "You draw that horse real enough so he looks like he's going to start running any minute. You're a pretty good drawer, Deacon."

"Thank you," he said, filling in the yellow moon behind the horse and rider. "I like to think I am."

Then sudden as lightning I had this lightning flash idea. It was such a good idea it was better than winning any old poker hand. "Hey, Deacon, how's about doing lots of those drawings and let me sell them for you. I could be your salesman, you know. People are always crazy to buy Indian stuff and I'll bet these things would sell like peanuts at a circus. There is something about that Indian now that I look at the picture close. There's something in his face that no white man can steal away from him."

"I hoped it would show," the Deacon said. "If I've managed to capture that, then I've done a good painting."

"So what if the Indian is a ghost," I said. "The fact that he and his horse are ghosts will make a good selling point. How many people have pictures of a ghost hanging over their fireplace?"

The Deacon spent the rest of the night and the next morning while we were on the train drawing that Indian and his horse. By the time I got off in Butte that evening, I had about 25 pictures to sell and the Deacon promised to draw as many as I need. I looked for the Chief as I got off the train, 'cause I wanted to tell him it was nice meeting a real Indian Chief. I didn't see him nowhere. So the little old lady with the black lace shawl and The Deacon was the only two of my friends I got to tell goodbye. I put my pictures under one arm and got off the train.

Let me tell you, I made so much money selling those pictures in Butte and back and forth on my run that I finally gave up my Whipple Brush spiel and just sold pictures. I sold all of that batch, and when I got back to Minneapolis, I got in touch with the Deacon and he drew me some more. We kept doing things this way until I got comfortable enough off to buy a ranch in North Dakota near where the little old lady in black lived. I got to be such a substantial citizen that I even married a rancher's daughter who is almost as rich as me. All of this because of an Indian on a pony racing a train.

You know what? I even see that Indian and his pony sometimes now when I'm traveling through the Dakotas and Montana on the local train. And now when he looks at me, my conscience makes me blink.

Losing Out in Lover's Lane to An Old-fashioned Ghost

By Kathy Warnes

To begin with, the reason I know that Elmer is a ghost is because I saw him floating around over my head. And since he was my best friend, I guess I should know him if I see him, right?



My girlfriend Nelly saw him too. Fact is, she was so scared, she shinnied up me like a tree. I rightly remember when we saw Elmer. We were parked at the old covered bridge just outside of town. It's the best spooning spot around here for miles because once you get down the bank underneath the bridge, nobody going over it can see you.

Then you can really enjoy yourself,

'specially on the nights when there's a big bright harvest moon shining over the water like there was the night we saw Elmer.

I remember the crickets was chirruping and the night air felt soft as Nelly's hand and smelled like her perfume That bridge sure is a perfect spot for putting your arm around your best girl and stealing a kiss or two while you're cuddled up on the buggy seat. Fact is, that's exactly what me and Nelly was doing that night, sitting cuddled on the buggy seat. I was holding her hand and whispering in her ear.

"Nelly, you sure are pretty. Prettier than any other girl in town, I'll tell ya."

"Prettier than Mary Lou Hawkins?" she asked me, leaning back in my arms and looking up at me with those big blue eyes of hers.

“A whole heap prettier,” I murmured, bending my face over hers and eyeing those ruby red lips. Just as I was starting to kiss her, there was this awful moaning noise and our horse reared back like he was spooked something terrible. The buggy top slammed down like the barn door does in a wind storm. The horse reared up on his hind legs and I let go of Nelly and grabbed hold of the reins. Nelly’s head jerked up and she bumped my chin a good one. While I was rubbing it, she pointed to a spot above our heads.

“Ll-ook Simon,” she said. “It’s Elmer!”

I looked up and it was Elmer all right, floating up there above my head in a haze. He looked the same way as I had seen him floating in the water. You could see through him like he didn’t have insides anymore.

“Elmer, what are you doing up there?” I ask him.

He didn’t answer right away; jest looked at me with the saddest eyes outside of a basset hound.

“Elmer, why did you do it? Folks say you jumped off the covered bridge up there, that’s how you drowned. Why did you do it? Was it because of Susie?”

He nodded ‘yes’ and I seen droplets of water running down his forehead, though it had been a week since he drowned himself.

“Elmer, she ain’t worth it. I say you’re better off without her since she didn’t have no more sense than to run off with that traveling salesman.”

Elmer held up his hands in a ‘what can I do?’ gesture. He’s right. There isn’t too much he can do now about Susie running off or him being dead. At first I thought him and Susie was going to end up married with all of the spooning and courting they did.

I could’da told Elmer that Susie might break out of the harness before he had the bit tightened, but somehow my heart just stood still in my mouth and I couldn’t talk around it. Elmer couldn’t keep from courting Susie because he’s loved her since we were all in our one room school house

together. Susie's blond pigtails hanging down her back made good handles for Elmer to pull and dip in his ink well, since she sat right in front of him.

"Hey Elmer!" I hollered. "Do you remember how old lady Johnson used to holler at you when you dipped Susie's pigtails in your inkwell?"

Elmer nodded and more tears dripped down his face. When we got a little more grown, we used to go to dances at the school house and Clem the Fiddler played "Skip to My Lou". I looked up at Elmer again.

"Remember the times you danced with Susie 'til three in the morning? Then you took an hour to visit the covered bridge?"

Elmer brushed a tear off his nose and smiled.

"Then you worked for your daddy on the farm for two years to buy them back forty acres from him. Then when you got the deed to the back forty, you built a nice house and planted rose bushes around the front door, remember Elmer?"

He nodded, dripping more tears. I felt like I was in a rainstorm.

"And I remember how nervous you were the day you went to ask Susie's father for her hand in marriage. We stayed up all night and the night before, practicing. You talked and I listened and gave you some pointers. Hey, Elmer, what am I going to do when I ask for Nelly's hand? You're a ghost now. How are you gonna coach me when all you can do is float around in the air?"

Elmer held up his hands.

"I don't know either, Elmer. I just remember that I coached you and I did a bang up job because Susie said yes. You two set the date for June."

Nelly snuggled up to me. "Who you talking to, Simon?"

“Nelly, honey, you ain’t gonna believe this, but I’m talking to Elmer.”

Nelly moved away from me. “You’re crazy Simon Jenkins. Maybe I won’t marry you after all.”

“Well, I ain’t sure I want to get hitched up with you, either. Especially after I seen what a woman did to my best friend.”

“It wasn’t all Susie’s fault,” Nelly said, her eyes flashing sparks at me. “Some of it was Elmer’s fault for not putting his foot down.”

Elmer heard what Nelly said about him and suddenly her head and shoulders were all wet.

“What more did Susie want?” I asked her while she wrung water out of her hair. “Elmer talked to her father.”

“He did that,” Nelly admitted. “But after her talked, he shut up tighter than a bear trap. Wouldn’t sweet talk her hardly none at all,” Susie told me. “Maybe that’s why she ran off with that traveling salesman. He did have a good tongue on him.”

I snorted. “Sweet talk don’t put bread and butter on the table.”

“But it sure can butter the way to lots of snuggling,” Nelly told me. “It sort of gets a woman’s will ready for the kids and the grumpy man.”

Nelly scooted over and started to jump out of the buggy.

“Nelly, I was just saying that because Elmer was short on sweet talking was no reason for Susie to run away with that traveling salesman.”

“Maybe the church picnic was Susie’s first earful of sweet talk and she got swept away in it,” Nelly said.

“It was a good picnic for sweet talking, Nelly. The grass was starting to green, the trees budding and the birds singing.”

Nelly sat down beside me again. “I remember, Simon. Most of the town was there and Clem sawed dances from his fiddle while the ladies unpacked all of their picnic baskets.”

I saw it in front of me like it was happening all over again. The picnic buzzed and hummed and lots of eating went on. Elmer and Susie and me and Nelly was dancing to that fiddle music when this stranger came walking into the picnic. This stranger, he was pretty handsome – tree tall with dark, wavy hair and pearly white teeth. And he had a little black moustache that looked like he brushed every hair in it at least four times a day.

He had on one of them store bought suits and a string bow tie that he twirled around his little finger. He was what you call a dandy, and for sure, a lady killer.

Fact is, soon as the girls saw him sitting by his lonesome eating watermelon, they decided he needed company and pretty soon he was surrounded by white dresses and dimples.

“I don’t see how he’s so much prettier than the rest of us fellows,” I said to Nelly. “Put some city slicker type clothes on me and I’d be as good looking as him.”

“It’s not just his clothes,” Nelly said, looking at him with adoring eyes. “He’s got a sweet talking way about him that makes a woman’s heart beat extra fast.”

I crept up and listened to some of his talk and sure enough, he had a tongue slicker than a whistle.

“Hummp!” I said to Nelly. “I’ll get he doesn’t know how to slop hogs or break colts.”

“Maybe not, but he knows how to play the fiddle,” Nelly said.

And sure enough, that dandified stranger pulled a fiddle out of somewhere and started playing right along with Clem. Them two sounded real good together and pretty soon everybody was

dancing. First off, I didn't notice Susie was paying him that much mind. She was dancing with Elmer, but then I looked up and saw her standing real close to the stranger, like she was counting every word he said. And that city slicker, well, he was looking into her eyes and smiling to dazzle the sun. And all of the time, he was still playing that fiddle of his.

Finally, Susie sheeps-eyed that stranger into putting down his fiddle and dancing with her. The city slicker and Susie danced and whirled around the floor like they would never stop. I walked over to Elmer. He was just standing there watching Susie flirt with that city slicker.

"Hey Elmer, why don't you go over there and give him a punch in the nose?" I asked him.

"Can't," he said. "I ain't got no string bow tie or fast talking tongue."

"No, but you got her hand in marriage, according to her father. Why don't you do something?"

"I don't know what to do."

"Walk over and punch him in the nose for flirting with your girl."

"I can't do that, Simon. She's flirting back."

"You can show her you're a lot better than that city slicker."

"You really think I can?" he asked.

"Sure you can. Come on, I'll go over with you."

We walked over to where the city fella and Susie was sitting, and real casual like I says to Susie,

"Hey, Susie, Elmer's been looking for you."

She didn't take her eyes off the city fella. "Tell him I've been here right along."

"Susie, it's time to go home," Elmer said.

“HMMMM?” Susie murmured, still hanging on to that fella’s words like a squirrel does a nut. “What did you say, Hiram? I missed it because I have some pests hanging on my other ear.”

“Tell them to get lost,” the city fella told her. “I rented a buggy so we can talk more privately.

Susie squealed like a hog. “Oh Hiram, a buggy ride with you would be wonderful.”

The city fella held out his high falutin arm. “Let’s go, my dear.”

Without a backward glance at Elmer or without even giving Elmer a chance to punch the city slicker in the nose, Susie waltzed off to his buggy and they rode off in a cloud of dust. That’s when Elmer got mad. Maybe it was the fact that the dust from their buggy made him sneeze, but anyway he got mad.

“I’ll fix that fella!” Elmer hollered, shaking his fist in the direction of the buggy. “I’ll punch him so hard he’ll land over in the next county. I’ll throw him in the river where the quicksand is. Just wait ‘til I get my hands on him!”

But it was too late. The next morning, Susie’s father brought Elmer a note she had left on the kitchen table. Her father was real upset, threatened to take his shotgun to the city fella if he dared show his face in town again. In the meantime, the city fella and Susie had gone and eloped and downright broke Elmer’s heart in two. Susie’s father said that when Elmer read the note, he tore it up quick as a wink and took off running down to the river to their courting spot. Just took off running so wild that Susie’s father got scared and followed him, hollering, “Elmer, you gotta come back here. Come back and talk about it!”

Elmer didn’t listen. He ran down to the river with Susie’s father following him as best as he could, which wasn’t too good because of his rheumatiz and all. I myself didn’t get there until every last man in town was by the river, dragging for Elmer’s body. We drug all night and still didn’t find anything. I was standing there at the spot where he jumped in and my conscience gave me a good, swift kick in the pants.

I hightailed it over to Elmer's house, just in time to see his folks heading for the river. So we walked back to the Courtin Spot, and sure enough there he was washed up on the bank. He still had Susie's picture clutched in one hand and a note in the other.

Elmer's daddy read the note and that's when I cried. I looked up at Elmer and even now there were remembering tears in my eyes.

"You said it all in your note, didn't you Elmer? You said there won't never be another girl like Susie so you don't want to live without her. Elmer, I can see that! But when you said you were coming back to haunt all fool lovers until judgment day, did you have to include me and Nelly in that? Elmer, you spoiled my whole, entire courting evening."

Elmer nodded and more tears ran down his cheeks.

"Now just a minute, Elmer, you ain't going to do this again are you? I mean, here we are, Nelly and me, spooning away and then you show up and cause a big fight between us. Is that what you meant when you said you'd haunt fool lovers? Now come on, Elmer, I'm sorry your courting didn't turn out so well, but that's no reason why you should be the ruination of mine. Now Elmer, I'm asking you. Will you go away so's Nelly and me can court some more?"

Elmer shook his head "no" and the tears run down his face like river water. I knowed he was thinking about Susie and I knowed I'd never get rid of him if we stayed here. So I did what I had to do. I convinced Nelly to get hitched right away and we did.

Getting hitched seemed to make more sense at the time. We could court at home in our living room and it sure was more comfortable that way. Them buggy seats do get hard after awhile. And Elmer, well I hear tell he still floats above the heads of lovers that go down by the covered bridge to watch the harvest moon. After all, he did say he'd haunt fool lovers until judgment day. But he don't bother me and Nelly nomore!

Time is Stealthy, Silent Snow



by Kathy Warnes

“Bet you won’t go through with it! Albert’s a coward! Afraid of his own shadow! Coward!” The taunts of the boys rang in his ears as he tiptoed over the stone foot bridge that led to where she lay, shrouded

in snow.



“I am not a coward!” he shouted back at them, though they couldn’t possibly hear, not from their snug homes in town that they were running back to so quickly. There was no sound in this silent, white world, tucked in the corner of the woods outside of town.

He came to the stone foot bridge where they had stood together last spring, and leaned over the wooden rail to gaze at the creek trapped under its blanket of snow. The red yarn of his tattered mittens caught on a wooden splinter and he heard her gentle voice. “We’ll make them bright red, Albert. That’s a cheerful color and none of the boys can call it sissy.”

He watched her smooth, dark head bent over the knitting needles skating silver in the firelight. Her hands were always busy kneading bread, knitting, sewing or throwing a ball to him and his

brothers. Her cool hands soothed fevers from his body and smoothed out Papa's wrinkled forehead.

"Mama, come back," he whispered staring at the frozen creek. The water was locked up, held tightly in the imprisoning arms of the ice, just as tightly as his heart was locked up, frozen. Everything was frozen now that she had gone. Papa didn't come back from the store until late. Albert knew that John cried in his room over his schoolbooks, but when he knocked on the door, John always said, "go away."

Mathilda got their breakfast and packed their school lunches and when they came home she had supper for them. But Mathilda wasn't Mama, Mathilda was a gray shadow and Mama a blazing red sunset. Mama was warm, red and alive like the red mittens she had knitted for him.

Then one day, Papa had betrayed them all, especially Mama. Papa had brought the lady into the house. Stealthily, silently, like the snow, she came and sat in Mama's chair by the fireside. Papa forced Albert and John to sit in the chairs they had sat in when Mama was there and talk to that lady like they had talked to Mama. The lady knitted too, but her knitting needles didn't skate like Mama's had skated, they stumbled their clumsy way through the yarn, tangling it so she was always asking Papa to unsnarl it for her. Papa would laugh and untangle it, and then he would look at the lady the way he used to look at Mama.

"I hate you, Papa!" Albert shouted. His voice bounced against the oak trees that stretched black arms to the sky. It wandered between the cold gray stones on the hill and faded into the challenges of the crows perched like hooded, black death in the leafless trees. As Albert came closer, he crows stared at him silently like Mama had when he tiptoed into her bedroom to say goodnight. When he kissed her forehead, it had felt cold, as cold as the snow that noiselessly fell outside. He had shivered and pulled the curtains against its relentless, steady rhythm. Then he kissed her again and whispered, "How are you feeling, Mama?"

She had stirred and opened those blue eyes that reminded him of the summer lake, white sailboats, and golden sunshine.

"I'm feeling better, Albert. I'll be better tomorrow, I promise you I will."

Reassured, he had gone out of the room, shutting the door quietly so he wouldn't disturb her, but the coughing, the constant coughing, wouldn't let her sleep. The doctor's tried and true elixirs didn't stop the steady, deep coughing that ebbed away her strength like sand trickling through the hourglass sundial Papa had installed in her backyard garden.

"I brought you something for your cough, Mama."

He took off his mittens so he could feel the bottle of elixir safely hidden in his pocket. "You must take this for your cough or you won't get any rest. The lady threw it away, but I found it. She made me mittens, Mama, but I'll never stop wearing yours, no matter how shabby they are. Papa said I had to throw yours away and wear hers, but I won't Mama! I'm going to throw hers away right now. I'll just tell everyone I lost the mittens and soon they'll forget them just like they forgot you, Mama. I hate them and I hate sissy mittens!"

Tearing a pair of pink mittens out of his pocket, Albert flung them over the bridge into the creek so hard he thought for a minute the impact of their landing would break the ice. Instead, the hated pink mittens stuck on a long shard of ice and hung impaled, like his heart had been since Mama had gone and the lady came to live in her house. He pulled on the ragged red mittens and cupped his hand over the elixir. "I'm coming, Mama."

The sentinel crows watched him flounder through the deep snow, his footprints like gaping wounds puncturing the smooth, white expanse of skin. He had almost reached the top of the hill now and his breath came in short, shallow gasps like hers had that night the doctor had come and had not gone away until her hand hung limply over the side of the bed. The doctor talked to Papa in a hushed, sad voice while Albert and John stood in the doorway of her room. John had sobbed, but Albert felt like one of the blocks of ice the iceman brought for the icebox was resting on his chest.

"You didn't let me say goodbye to her!" he had shouted at Papa and the doctor.

All of this had happened to Albert last winter while the other boys skated on the river, thrusting their hockey sticks in front of them like guns. The lonely spring with Mathilda hovering had faded into blazing summer with Papa gone more and more often. When fall arrived with scarlet and yellow leaves, so did the lady. After he knew she was more permanent than the falling

leaves, Albert vowed he would never forget the way Mama's dark hair gleamed in the firelight or the way she smiled at him.

Fiercely he grabbed John's arm. "Promise you won't forget. You can't forget, I won't let you!"

"Albert, we've got her picture."

"That's not enough!" he shouted at John.

It wasn't. Even though he stared at Mama's picture every day memorizing each line in her face- the shape of her hair, the expression in her eyes- it wasn't enough. Even though her face was superimposed on his brain and the deep blue of her eyes etched in his memory, this wasn't enough. Time like the stealthy, silent snow began to melt the block of ice in his heart. The melting slowly flowed through his veins until one day he smiled at the lady.

"I can't do this to Mama. I'm going to visit her," Albert told John.

They boys had been daring him to come to this cemetery outside of town. Rushing through it, and the ultimate act of bravery, wandering through it after dark, had been a rite of passage into their gang as long as Albert had known them. He never had the courage to think about coming to the cemetery before. It was one of those things he shoved into the dark closet in his mind and never opened the door on until Mama had come here. Now he came here, but for different reasons than the boys though. He was going to do more than touch a tombstone and run, he was going to stop time, the relentless, silent enemy that eventually covered all remembering, no matter how vivid and deeply etched in the mind and heart.

Albert stared at the stones as he slowly trudged through the snow. How like people they were, some standing tall, strong reaching for the sky, others flat, hugging the ground, huddling under the snow for protection. He read the names on some of them, names that were the same as many of the people back in the living city. He looked for her name. "There she is! See, I told you I wasn't afraid," he told the darkening sky.

The wind rose in the trees, moaning like Mama used to when she thought no one could hear her and like the lady did now when she first got up in the morning. Papa had told Albert and John that the lady would give them a brother or sister next year.

“Life goes on,” Papa had said. “Time goes on.”

“Does it for Mama?” he had asked. No one would tell him, so he had come to ask Mama. She always had told him things he wanted to know. With his ragged mittens blazing red against the snow, Albert brushed snow from the narrow white stone that told him this was the place she laid. Cold snow sifted through the tears on his mittens and he shivered. But he was only cold, not afraid. Why should he be afraid of this twilight, silent place? What was there to be afraid of when Mama was here? She was here, he knew it. He felt her gentle, loving smile and saw her shining dark hair and sparkling blue eyes.

“I brought you something, Mama.” He fumbled the elixir out of his pocket. “You didn’t go very many places without this.”

He and Mama had been at the farmer’s market and she picked out a nice head of red cabbage so she could cook it with vinegar and spices for Papa’s favorite supper. The coughing started and when she reached in her handbag for the elixir, it wasn’t there. Between spells of coughing she gasped, “I must have forgotten my elixir, Albert.”

He had guided her to a corner where there were tables and wooden benches and a stout lady in a white apron bustling about bringing people tea and cakes. He had smelled strudel.

“You stay here and rest, Mama. I’ll go home and get your elixir.”

“Albert, you can’t do that. I don’t even remember where I put it!”

“I’ll look until I find it, Mama.”

He had run all of the way home, up the stairs and into her bedroom. Look in the place where she was last, he told himself. Panting, he sat on her bed and searched the room with his eyes. There

was the elixir sitting on her bedside table! He put it in his pocket, took several deep breaths, and ran back to the market. Mama sat at the table where he had left her, smiling. He thrust the elixir into her hand.

“I brought you something, Mama.”

She had smiled at him and squeezed his hand. “I’m glad you made me sit down. Resting made me feel better, Albert.”

Using a clean spoon from the table, she poured a dose of the elixir and swallowed it. She smiled at him again. “I’m feeling much better now. I’m feeling so good, I want to plan a picnic. Let’s have a picnic Saturday, would you like that? We’ll take sandwiches and fruit and cakes and pick some berries. It will be such fun!”

They were in the woods having a summer picnic. Albert and John picked blackberries. They came back with a few in their pails and more in their stomachs. Their mouths were stained blue. Mama and Papa had laughed and sent them back to “get some for the pail this time.” He knew Mama hadn’t been angry with him or John, because she had touched his cheek lightly with her fingers while she laughed. Later, Albert hid in the woods with John. Mama and Papa had found John with much shouting and laughing, but Albert hid better, deeper. And what a place he had found to hide in a burrow deep in a thicket of blackberry bushes by the creek. Their laughter had changed to shouting, “Albert, where are you?”

Then finally, Papa’s stern, “Albert, I order you to come out at once!”

When he had crept out of his thicket like a bear coming out of hibernation, Papa had attacked him like a bear – growling, his beard bristling, his hot breath whispering whipping threats against Albert’s neck.

Mama had hugged him. “Try not to hide so well again, Albert.”

Papa had laughed too and they all walked home together.

They sat one day in winter in front of the fireplace. Mama coughed, but in between she helped him do his arithmetic sums on his slate. The touch of her hand, the firelight on her hair, the gleam in her eyes when he knew the right answer, these memories were so close he reached through the snow to touch them. The stone felt cold, final, as real as the stone bridge he had walked over to get here. The stone felt as final as the fact she was here, buried under the snow.

“Mama, come back. I need you. I don’t want to forget you!”

Her arm had felt warm and strong around his shoulders as they sat together in the firelight. “I’ll never forget this moment, Albert. It is such a precious one.”

“Don’t we forget when we grow up, Mama? Don’t we forget when we . . . die?”

“We think we do, but the memories are still there, buried deep in our hearts and minds. Someday you’ll be sitting in front of a fire and suddenly you’ll see us here, working sums on your slate. At the most unexpected time you’ll remember and at the oddest happening like the hiss and crackle of a log like this one’s doing now or a certain combination of numbers like two plus two.”

Mama had a coughing spell then and the moment was gone. Or he thought it was gone, but now he felt her arm warm and strong around his shoulders. Albert put the bottle of elixir in front of her tombstone, right under the lettering. He touched the stone lightly like she always had his cheek.

“Goodbye, Mama. I won’t ever forget you.”

Floundering through the same footsteps he had made on his way to this spot, he reached the stone bridge and peered through the twilight. The crows were roosting in the trees and when they saw him they filled the air with cawed, indignant questions as to why he had the nerve to invade their territory again. Albert slid down the creek bank and inched his way across the ice to retrieve the pink mittens. Above their cawing, Albert heard it. As he bent over to pick up the pink mittens, far below in the heart of the creek he heard the faintest pulse, beating almost inaudibly,

an ancestor of a small drop that soon would be a trickle, gradually a torrent that would race swift and free with the coming of spring.

“I won’t forget!” he shouted above the noisy cawing of the crows.

He ran toward home.

Goodbye Daughter, Hello Son!

by Kathy Warnes



“You were wrong, Mom and Dad,” Betty whispered. She sighed and hugged the picture to her heart. The picture was all that she had left of James and she couldn’t bear to let it go. She couldn’t bear to look at it either, but she really didn’t have to look at it. The details in the picture had been etched in her mind with a chisel sharpened by memory and pain.

She felt her tongue slide between her teeth and its tip slide across her lips as she thought about the picture. The cars parked alongside the curb verified the fact that the dog eared, stained picture was at least sixty years old. The children in the picture stood on the sidewalk across from the vintage cars. The little girl in braids and suspenders holding up her trousers held the hand of a boy who appeared to be a few years younger. He wore a sailor hat, belonging to his father, and the short pants and high top shoes of that boys wore in the years right after the Second World War.

She heard Mom’s voice. “You were a goodbye baby. I was carrying you when your Dad left to serve on his ship in the South Pacific.”

“I was nothing to you but a goodbye daughter,” Betty whispered.

Then Betty sighed again and her sigh crossed the years from the time she had just picked up the photograph and several others on the same roll of film from Lovett's Drugstore Photo Department to carefully easing it from the family photo album and pressing it against her heart.

"You were wrong, Mom. You were wrong, Dad." This time Betty shouted the words. Then her guilty conscience prodded her to look quickly around the room. She knew that Bill wouldn't hear her because he was out playing golf with his foursome. Amanda and Roy were grown and off living their own lives in Florida and New York and Shaun, the Irish setter that allowed her and Bill to live in his house was busy in the backyard. They couldn't hear her, and her mother probably hadn't heard her. Her mother usually spent mornings in her room watching television and writing letters and she usually played the television loud enough to drown out an air raid siren. A tiny shout from her daughter Betty couldn't compete.

Betty relaxed and her thoughts returned to the picture.

Betty didn't have to take a second look at the picture to know that she was concentrating so fiercely that she had stuck out her tongue and ran it over her upper and lower lips. She had done that as long as she could remember, probably even before the picture had been taken when she was six years old.

Mom had constantly told her to stop sticking out her tongue when she concentrated. "You stick your tongue out so much it's going to fall off," she always said.

Dad would usually grab her tongue or pretend to grab it as she walked by.

Betty didn't even have to look in the photo album for pictures of her Mom and Dad. She knew most of them by heart. There were pictures of them when they were young, their eyes bright and looking eagerly into the future. There were school pictures, with their eyes sober and beginning to reflect life's cares and the responsibility of home work. There was a picture of Mom sitting in front of a Christmas tree proudly holding a doll. Betty remembered that Mom had called the doll a walking doll and it actually walked when a little girl's fumbling fingers pulled a cord implanted in its back. Betty stuck out her tongue at the doll in the picture. Compared to the technology

implanted in today's dolls, the walking doll was a Neanderthal doll and as far as Betty was concerned, the walking doll deserved to be obsolete!

Betty hadn't liked Barbie and her fancy wardrobe that they had presented to her when she was growing up. She was the little girl in trousers!

There were many pictures of her Dad playing sports. One of them showed Dad hitting a baseball, and another throwing a football. Several pictures showed him lifting weights and others froze him in the early 1940s, rowing on his championship rowing team before Pearl Harbor and the draft snatched him from the stern of a rowing shell and planted him firmly on a destroyer in the South Pacific.

When Dad and his buddies talked about their military service, they talked about "The War" and no one ever asked which war. That's how thoroughly the Second World War had shaped their lives. Even when they teased Betty about being a goodbye daughter who appeared soon after her father left for war when she got older, she knew exactly what war they were talking about. Even though he was only three years younger, Jimmy's generation had a wider selection of wars. Betty knew that Jimmy was a "hello again baby", part of what later became known as the Baby Boom Generation, but part of his generation were also caught up in Korea and Vietnam and the wars beyond.

Betty skimmed over the other pictures that showed her Dad and Jimmy playing baseball and throwing passes at each other. She skipped the pictures that showed her holding a Barbie doll and dressed up in Mary Janes and frilly dresses.

"The goodbye daughter and hello son don't have anything to do with it", her mother said quietly.

"The issue is between you and me."

"Dad had something to do with it, too," Betty said without looking around.

"I'll speak for him," her mother said quietly. Society was involved too."

Betty turned to face her mother.

“What does society have to do with anything? You and Dad didn’t dine regularly at the White House with the Roosevelt’s, did you?”

Her mother shifted her position in the doorway. “I meant what society expected of boys and girls then. Boys were supposed to be bread winners and the strong, dominant ones. Women were supposed to stay home and keep house and have families. They needed to be taken care of and if they were lucky, they were treated like princesses-queens in training so to speak.”

“Society has changed a little since then, Mom.”

Her mother nodded. “Yes, society has, but you haven’t, Betty.”

Betty patted the empty couch cushion beside her. “Mom, why don’t you come and sit down? We can look at pictures in the family album.”

“I can tell you’ve already been looking at pictures in the family album.”

“I don’t have to look at them, mom. They are part of my personality.”

“Betty, do you doubt for a minute that your Dad and I loved you?”

“Sometimes I doubt it for a second, Mom, but never for a minute.”

Her mother sat down decisively, bracing her legs against the side of the couch so she could sit up straight instead of sinking into the cushions.

“Betty, will you stop making lame jokes and talk to me?”

“Lame? You’ve been talking to Jessica again, haven’t you?”

Jessica was Betty's seven year old granddaughter and Mom's seven year old great granddaughter.

"I try to keep up with things now that I have time," Mom said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Betty, I was pretty busy when you were growing up. I didn't always take time to fine tune relationships and feelings."

"You always seemed to find time for Jim, Mom."

"Betty, aren't you a little old for sibling rivalry?"

"I'm not so old that I don't want to set the record straight, Mom."

"What record? Your father and I did the best we could with you and Jim and I think our best was pretty darn good!"

"Darn it!" Betty thought. Even though she was an adult, Mom still had the ability to make her feel like a pouting child.

Betty tried to keep her tone calm and even. "Jim thinks so Mom, but then Jim had a big advantage. You and dad believed in him."

Her mother put her arm around Betty and Betty stiffened her shoulders to resist the power of Mom's hug. "We believed in you too, Betty, just in a different way."

"Different? You treated me like a princess and wanted me to marry a prince and live happily ever after. You helped Jim go to college and establish a career. Now he's a high powered executive."

“And look at you, Betty. Bill adores you and Amanda and Roy and the grandchildren visit you often and enjoy it. Shaun walks calmly on the leash for you. You have everything. You grew up from being a princess to being a queen.”

“I never wanted to be a princess, mom. I never wanted to be a goodbye daughter. I wanted to slide into second base and get my clothes dirty. I wanted to keep wearing trousers like I had on in the picture. I don’t want to be a queen. I want to work like Rosie the Riveter and stay on the job all during the war, not be part of a goodbye, hello equation.”

Her mother stared at her. “I don’t understand you, Betty.”

Betty bit her tongue to keep from saying, ‘You never did. You just wanted for me what you wanted for yourself. You had to work alongside Dad instead of being a pampered princess. Even when he retired you still taught second grade. That’s what I wanted for myself.’

This time Betty hugged her mother. “We wanted different things for me, Mom.”

“It looks like we still do, Betty.”

“What do you mean still, Mom? My life is as firmly chiseled as the wrinkles in my forehead.”

“Only if you let go of the chisel.”

This time Betty didn’t bite her tongue and she said what she thought. “You just wanted for me what you wanted for yourself. You had to work alongside Dad instead of being a pampered princess. Even when he retired you still taught second grade. You still do substitute teach, Mom, even at your age!”

“Maybe I ‘m just set in my ways. Maybe I’m trying to set a good example even at this late time in my life.”

“Mom, I can’t change being a goodbye daughter and I can’t change the fact that Jim has always been the hello son.”

“You can talk to him about it. You can say hello to him and try to work beyond your resentment of him.”

“Mom, I have always been a good sister to Jimmy despite the fact that he has always thought that he was stronger and smarter than me.”

“He should be stronger, Betty. He’s a man.”

“He’s stronger and some ways, Mom. I’ll grant you that. But he’s not smarter!”

“I’ll grant you that, too, Betty.”

“Then why has he always thought that he’s better than me? I’ll tell you why. You and Dad taught him to think that he was better than me!”

“Your father and I were wrong. Even though we didn’t teach Jimmy that he was superior to you we implied that by the way we treated you two. We were wrong to treat you two so differently.”

“You were wrong Mom! You were wrong Dad!” Betty shouted.

Her Mom put her hands over her ears. “You don’t need to shout, Betty. My conscience has been shouting at me for years.” Mom removed her hands from her ears. “Now, I’ve admitted it and I’m certain that your father has also admitted it from heaven. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

Betty was sure the outrage she felt was popping out that pimples used to pop out on her face when she was still a teenager chasing her pesky little brother Jimmy out of her room. He used to stand in her bedroom door watching her put acne cream on her pimples and stick his tongue out at her while she was doing it.

“I’m not going to do anything about it, Mom.”

“Aren’t you even going to answer the telephone?”

“The telephone isn’t ringing, Mom.”

“It will. The hello son will be calling the goodbye daughter to talk about talking to each other.

To Betty’s disbelief, the telephone rang.

“Betty, you stick out your tongue so much when you’re thinking that it’s going to fall off,” Mom said.

Betty stuck out her tongue and ran it over her upper and lower lip. Then she laughed and picked up the telephone. “Hello Jimmy,” she said.

Barefoot Soldier and a Blade of Grass

By Kathy Warnes

I come marching barefoot home with Chickamauga dust on my toes, Shiloh dirt under my fingernails and Gettysburg powder in my pockets. Funny thing,

I knocked on my own front door and I had to pound so long I ran a splinter in my finger. I sat on the steps and picked it out, waiting for Emmy Lou to open the door.

The moon grinned at me like a slice of water melon and I heard an owl hooting.

“Whoos’ there?” Emmy Lou’s voice mingled with the owls.

For a minute, I couldn’t tell who was who. “It’s me, Lige. Let me in Emmy Lou.”

The door opened a crack. “Is that really you, Lige?”

“Yup. And I want something to eat and my own bed after four years fighting them Yankees.”

“You gotta pass a test first,” she told me. “What’s your true name?”

“Elijah Benjamin Hamilton,” I said.

“When did we get married?”

“The day Captain Benson rolled through Denton looking for cavalymen for the 6th Tennessee. We got married that morning and I rode off that evening.”



“Why did you marry me?” Emmy Lou’s voice reminded me of an acorn – stiff and brown.”

“I married you cause we’ve known each other since we were kids growing up on hinged farms.”
I told her.

“ Is that the only reason?” There wuz bullets in her voice.



“I married you ‘cause you had the prettiest brown braids I ever dipped in an inkwell.”

“Any other reason?” A squirrel could have cracked her voice for dinner.

“I married you cause you were the only gal that dumped the bottle of ink over my head when I dipped her braids in it.”

“Why else?” she demanded.

“Let me in the house, Emmy Lou! I need to shake this Yankee dust off my feet and sleep in my own bed. I want to forget the sway of the saddle, the smell of guns and death. I want to plow and live. Let me in, Emmy Lou.”

She opened the door wide, and stood there, a lamp clutched in her hand. I nearly fell over. Emmy Lou was skinny! I gotta admit she wasn’t skinny when I married her. She wasn’t what you’d call fat, either, but there was enough of her to hang on to and a little left over for tomorrow. Now, the lamp light shining through her nightdress traced a shape like the narrow, windy road that led up to our farm.

“Emmy Lou, what happened to you?” I gasped.

“I’ve been working the farm and tending Jady keeps me on my feet a lot.”

I sat my knapsack down so hard it jarred a plate right out of the cupboard. Neither one of us bent over to pick up its broken pieces scattered like creek pebbles all over the floor.

“Who the hell is Jady?”

“Jady’s our four year old daughter, Lige.”

“We ain’t got no four year old daughter.”

“We’ve had a four year old daughter for four years. She kept me good company after you left.”

“Where’d she come from?”

Emmy Lou scowled at me. Her brown hair rippled over her shoulders and back like a newly plowed spring field. “You remember the few hours we spent together before you made off with Captain Benson? That’s where she come from!”

Lord, I don’t believe it,” I said. I didn’t believe it.

Emmy Lou stuck her nose in the air the way she used to do when I teased her at school. “You can come in and I’ll leastwise feed you.” She picked up the poker to stir the fire. At least I reckoned that’s what she was going to stir, but I skipped out of range.

“I’ll feed you, then I’ll make you up a pallet in the barn,” she said.

Emmy Lou’s cooking was as good as I remembered while I was chewing on hard tack and drinking coffee that looked and chewed like muddy creek water. “Your cooking hasn’t changed any,” I said by way of compliment.

She smiled. Her smile hadn’t changed any either. It still looked like a sunrise sky spreading through dark clouds. She set grits and gravy and bacon in front of me and I fell to like tomorrow was never going to git here over the tops of the trees. I was still chomping when I heard this

crying noise that sounded like our cow. I got half way up off the bench. "I'd better see to Mathilda."

"That ain't Mathilda." She thunked a plate of eggs in front of me. "I'm coming honey," she cooed, like one of the doves in the barn. She ain't never talked to me like that, not even when I gave her the peach pit ring when we started keepin company.

"Mama," something said and then something whizzed by me and landed smack against Emmy Lou. Emmy Lou scrunched the thing up in her arms and it would its arms around her neck.

"Jady, this here's your Daddy," Emmy Lou said. "Right now he's a poor excuse for one, but that's all you got so you'd best make the best of him."

The creature looked at me and I looked back. It was like looking in the mirror, only she didn't wear brown whiskers and a beard. Her eyes sparkled black like mine do. Her nose was a little button like her Mamas, and she was glaring at me like her Ma.

"Say something," Emmy Lou said. I didn't know if she was talking to me or Jady. Jady didn't know either, so we both talked.

"What?" I squeaked.

"Daddy's gone," Jady said.

"Daddy came home. Remember honey, I said he would come home when the war's over. The war's over ain't it Lige?"

"The war's over," I said, but it was or it wasn't depending on which war you were talking about.

"Go hug your daddy." Emmy Lou pushed the little creature toward me. It was wearing a nightgown the same material as Emmy Lou's, but it didn't look as good on the little creature. It just hung flat. On Emmy Lou, it hugged the curves.

The creature ran toward me. The last time I was this scared was when a Yankee at Shiloh charged me with a bayonet. At Shiloh I could run and fight, but here I couldn't get away. The table stood behind me, Emmy Lou stood in front of me, and the stove backed me on one side and the bedstead the other. But I didn't fall back. I held the line the same way I had helped my buddies do against the Yankees.

Soft little arms wound around my knees. I felt how soft they were even through my rough trousers. The creature must have smelled my trousers, because she wrinkled up her mother's button nose and frowned my frown. "Your trousers smell," she said. She turned around and ran back to Emmy Lou.

"Mama, I want my breakfast," she said. Emmy Lou sat her at the table across from me and gave her a bowl of grits to eat. I watched her grab a biscuit and chew it with her two front teeth just the way I always do.

This was my first meeting with my daughter Jady.

"She's my daughter surer than the stars above," I said.

Emmy Lou stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at me. "How do you know that now when you weren't even beginning to think of it five minutes ago?" she demanded.

"She chews biscuits the same as me," I said. "And we smile and frown alike."

Jady smiled at me and I smiled back. "Two peas in a pod," I said.

Emmy Lou didn't bite on that anymore than the fish in the creek did when I went fishing later that day. 'Fore I went fishing, I walked on over to Amos Jenkin's place. Amos is the best shoe and boot maker this side of the mountains and I needed to get my bare feet covered soon as possible. Amos promised me boots in two weeks so I headed back home to see if Emmy Lou had changed any of her habits. My pallet was still in the barn, but there was some shirts and trousers hanging from the hooks on the wall. They hung on me like I was a scarecrow in a cornfield, but I left them on and went into the house. Emmy Lou was sitting in her rocking chair by the window

sewing on something. The Jady creature was rolling a red yarn ball around letting a black and white kitten chase it.

“What’s that barn cat doing in the house?” I said. “You know I don’t allow no barn cats in the house.”

Emmy Lou didn’t look up from her sewing. “I allow barn cats in the house,” she said. “That’s Jady’s pet.”

Jady picked up the cat and petted it. “Her name’s Zebra,” she said. “Want to pet her, daddy?”

She smiled at me and before I stop it my hand ran along the top of that cat’s head, petting it. The darn fool cat purred and the darn fool hand kept petting it. “She’s a nice cat, Jady.”

“I’ll have to fix those trouser ‘fore they fall off of you,” Emmy Lou said.

I smiled, hoping it would melt her. “Your cooking’ll fatten me up soon enough,” I said. “I’ll hitch a rope round them and commence plowing.”

“There ain’t no plowing to be done,” Emmy Lou said.

I knew better. April is the time for plowing in this part of Tennessee and here it was late May already. It had taken me a good month to walk home from the war. It was past time for plowin.

“It’s past time for plowin,” I said. “I’ll be lucky if I can make a crop this year.”

“The plowing done and the crop’s in,” Emmy Lou said.

I must of held my breath in surprise, ‘cause I felt my trousers settle under my hips. “Show me,” I said.

“I’ll show you,” Emmy Lou said. She showed me alright. The fields behind the barn were a patchwork of green shoots that would grow into corn, beans and potatoes and...

“What all did Amos plant?” I asked Emmy Lou. Before the war, Amos and me used to swap field time. One time we sowed twenty acres of corn in one day.

“Amos didn’t plant nothing. Me and Jady did it and before Jady was old enough to help me, I did it by myself.” Emmy Lou stuck her nose high in the air.

“It better not rain or you’ll drown,” I told her.

She put her nose down far enough so I could see her eyes. They were firing real Yankee bullets at me.

“You couldn’t have done all of the plowing and plantin by yourself,” I said.

“I helped Mama.” Jady had come up behind me quiet as a cat. She had pulled on a calico sunbonnet and carried a small hoe in both hands. “Time to hoe, Mama?”

“Where’d she get such a small hoe?” I asked Emmy Lou.

“I cut it down for her,” she said.

“That’s not the only thing you cut down,” I told her.

Emmy Lou’s eyes flashed fireflies at me. “I hope I took some notches out of that male pride of yours.”

Jady pulled at Emmy Lou’s skirt. “Time to hoe?”

“Go ahead, Jady. Just be careful that you don’t chop any of the plants. Just chop the weeds.”

Jady ran off, swinging the hoe like Sam Hawkins swung his fiddle at neighborhood dances. Now, Emmy Lou stood with both feet firmly on my pride. “Lige, you got a problem with me doing the work around here? Who do you think did it for four years? The Yankees? Even though I am a Yankee, the rest of my kind was off fighting the war, too.”

“You probably fought the Yankees on Sundays after church meeting,” I said.

“I did scare a few of Rebs off with that old shotgun in the barn, but it wasn’t on Sunday. I recollect it was a Tuesday.”

I knocked Emmy Lou’s feet off my pride, turned on my heel, and headed back to the barn. But I forgot about my pants and before I could catch them, they were swimming around my ankles. The world was down there too, swimming around my ankles. We fought hard and with good heart, but the Yankees had beat us. When I had left to go fight the Yankees, Emmy Lou and put her arms around my neck and cried and cried. She wrote letters to me with love words jumping off the page in all of them four years that I was fighting Yankees.

Now I had come home to find out that she had done plowing and sowing and shooting Rebs all of the four years I had been gone. Not to mention birthing and taking care of Jady. The only use Emmy Lou had for me now was a pallet in the barn .That’s where I laid myself for the rest of the day, the pallet in the barn. I weren’t alone. Jimmy Hanks was there. We’d fired side by side at the stone wall at Shiloh until a Yankee bullet had gone clean through his leg and they took him to the hospital tent. I listened to him screaming while they sawed off his leg.

Captain Benson galloped by on his black horse, Ebony, surrounded by the smoke and fire of Picket’s charge at Gettysburg. The farmer’s wife stopped by too. I don’t recollect her name, but she was the one who fixed me supper and gave me a long drink of water from her well when I collapsed bleeding on her doorstep. The farmer stood behind her. His name was Thomas and he carried me in his wagon to Hartwell, about five miles away to the doctor. I can still feel every jounce of that wagon and I can still hear him laugh when I called him a damn Yankee.

Lots of Emmy Lous stopped by. The old chubby Emmy Lou. The Emmy Lou that looked at me with a shine in her eyes and a smile on her lips. The Emmy Lou that didn’t know how to plow, the Emmy Lou who still needed me to plow for her.

“I ain’t sorry I learned to plow. I had to or we would have starved.” The new Emmy Lou stood over me.

I turned away from her. “You wrote me that you were living with your Mama.”

“I didn’t live with Mama after Jady was born. When Amos couldn’t plow our fields because he had to do his own and help his daughters with the plowing, I moved back home and learned how to plow myself. Would it have suited you better if Jady and me had starved?”

“It would have suited me better if you and Jady had stayed with your Mama,” I told her.

“Mama got in trouble cause I was staying with her!”

I sat up so quick I bumped my head on a tin bucket hanging on the wall. “It’s a wonder that bucket didn’t break,” Emmy Lou said. “Your head’s hard enough to break it!”

What do you mean your Mama got in trouble ‘cause you were there?” I asked her.

“None of your business,” she said. “You ain’t part of my family no more, so you don’t need to know.”

Then she got stiff like Jady’s cat when it sees a bird. “Shh, I hear something. Who’s there?” she shouted. Then she was gone.

I felt like I was on the Yankee side of Sherman’s March through Georgia. Then just when I thought I couldn’t feel any lower, Jady came out to the barn with my supper on a tin plate. “Mama said to give you this.” She uncovered the plate and there it was, my favorite beef stew with onions, dumplings, spoon bread and apple pie for dessert. Emmy Lou had even sent a jug of lemonade to wash everything down.

Jady stood there staring at me and she wasn’t smiling my smile at me. “You made Mama cry,” she said. “Why are you mean to Mama? She loves you.”

“I love Mama too,” I said. And I did. More than my pride about her plowing and sowing and having my baby without me there. All the more because she shot Rebs the same as I shot

Yankees. Saying that I love her out loud to my daughter took more courage than facing Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg.

Jady came close to me as my head and put her arms around my neck. "I'm glad you came home, daddy," she said. "Mama is too."

The stew sending messages up my nose didn't keep me from holding on to Jady for a long time. I had just finished telling her a story when somebody else stood there in front of us. The somebody else wasn't Emmy Lou, it was her Yankee mama, Granny Slocum.

"Run to the house and eat some supper with your Mama," Granny Slocum told Jady.

In a flash Jady was gone and I stood bayonet to bayonet with my mother in law. "Where have you been for the past four years?" she demanded.

"You know damn well where I've been," I said. "I've been fighting Yankees, trying to get them out of our country. We fought hard but we couldn't do it."

The wet stuff I felt in my eyes weren't tears. Only weak women cry.

"Soldiering is women's work too," Granny Slocum said, rifle steel glinting from her eyes. "And women folk aren't the only ones that cry when they lose someone they love."

By the way of talking I asked, "Did Alexander get home yet? I figured the Yankee soldiers would get home before we did, them taking over our horses at Knoxville and all."

"Alexander got killed at Gettysburg," she said. But his dying wasn't good enough for you Seesch folks. You still had to come around and burn our house and take our animals. You still had to threaten our daughter and call her a Yankee traitor, even though she was married to a Reb. She finally took her baby and went to your farm thinking maybe they would leave her alone there. That would show them that she was a Reb. It was a good thing she knew how to shoot because

they came to your house. Did she tell you she held off a pack of them with her shooting?”
“Sort of,” I stammered.

“Did she tell you grew enough crops to keep me and her father some of the neighbors from starving, it didn’t matter whether they were Union or Seesch?”

Standing up to that woman is like trying to stand up to a thunderstorm. I didn’t try. I just bent like a willow tree in a wind gust and whispered, “No.”

Lightning flashed from Granny Slocum’s eyes.” Did she tell you—?”

Grandma Slocum had stormed me enough. I grabbed my plate and ran back into the house.

Emmy Lou and Jady sat at the table finishing their supper.

“Your Mama’s coming to eat with us,” I said, pulling up a chair.

Two seconds later, Granny Slocum rushed in like rain and I spent the rest of the evening dodging her. Finally, she went home. I watched Emmy Lou tuck Jady into her trundle bed that fitted snugly under our bedstead in the daytime.

“I’ll get to work in the morning on the addition to our house,” I told Emmy Lou. Jady’ll need a room of her own and so will her sisters and brothers.”

Emmy Lou didn’t look at me. She took up her knitting- a sock it looked like to me.

I looked at her plenty. “I’m sorry about your brother Alexander. Why didn’t you write to me about him?”

“I couldn’t. Not until I knew how I feel about you being on one side and him on the other and my Mama and Daddy on one side and you on the other.”

“And you in the middle,” I said. “That’s a tug-of-war place to be.”

“I’m not in the middle anymore,” Emmy Lou said. “I’m a wife to you and I’m a daughter to my Mama and Daddy and a sister to Alexander’s memory and a Mama to Jady. These walls are what I am. Will they hold up our marriage or are you going to pull them down with a blade of grass?”

“I got an idea,” I said. “How’d you like to get a head start on tomorrow’s work by doin some moon light plowing.”

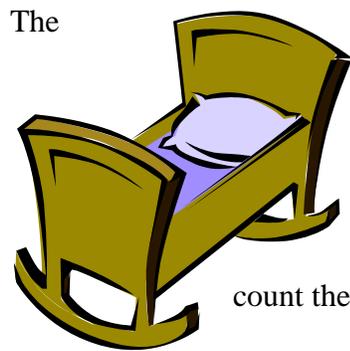
We made sure both Jady and the fire was out and went to the barn swinging the lantern between us. The plow glinted in the lantern light, reflecting the figures of a husband and wife, changing and growing and soldiering together.

We commenced plowing.

Splintered Cradle

by Kathy Warnes

Back home. Nancy stopped the thought after two words. Home. Her heart welled up in her throat at the word. Home with an oak tree in the yard for shade, lilac bushes by the front porch, roses and hollyhocks climbing over the wooden rails. Home, the place that Abel had built and she had helped build. She had sanded the runners for the rocking chairs on the porch and handed shingles to Able to put around the chimney on the roof. Home included the furniture that Abel had made. She could see the furniture without closing her eyes. It paraded solidly in front of her on the rugged forest trail, as real as her jouncing in the saddle on Rosie's back.



The kitchen table stood in a thicket of burning bush. The scarlet leaves matched the red and white checkered cloth that she used to cover the table set for the next day's eating. There were exactly ten steps from the oven in the wood burning cook stove to the table in the kitchen. She had counted them and multiplied then a hundred times over to count the meals she had cooked and served on their table.

Abel sat there in his cane seat chair. He said that the cane felt more comfortable than hard wood, so she rewove the seat for him every six months or so. He had been a solidly built man, and just sitting in the chair three times a day had given the seat a workout. He had often bounced in the chair with happiness when she cooked his favorite roast rabbit with new potatoes and carrots and apple pie for desert.

"Mind the seat," she would caution him and Abel, being Able, would spank her gently on the back of her skirts as she bent over the oven removing dishes from it. "I am minding the seat," he joked and she blushed redder than her face from the heat of the stove.

Amelia, their baby, had arrived on time and healthy. Abel had followed her instructions and tied the cord and washed Amelia. He handed her to Nancy and Nancy dressed Amelia in a white flannel gown and wrapped her in a soft yellow blanket that Nancy had woven just last summer. Nancy had spun and wove and sewn small gowns and caps and blankets for the last five years, anticipating her baby. Joseph had lived about six months, long enough to kick off the warm socks she had knitted for him, and Tabitha had started toddling around the table so that Nancy had to constantly watch her away from the cook stove and the fire.

Nancy watched as Abel and Jed Barker, their neighbor, lowered Tabitha's small pine coffin into the graveyard beside the Methodist Church in Clinton. As Abel had smoothed the wood and Nancy had watched, he said, "I am glad that pine is a soft wood. It shows the marks of our tears in it and she will take them with her to heaven."

Nancy couldn't answer him. Tears filled her throat and fell on the soft yellow blanket she had woven for Tabitha's cradle. She tended the herb garden she grew inside of the white fence that surrounded their cabin through her tears. She set meals on the table for Abel through her tears and after a bleak and barren midland landscape, she hugged Abel one night across the table. Amelia was born nine months later and healthy. This time, Mrs. Barker had time to come and help Nancy, but this time Nancy didn't need any help. Amelia had been anxious to enter the world and she appeared before Nancy could properly invite her. Abel had to hurry to catch her and endure her infuriated crying as he cleaned and dressed her. "She's a complainer," he grunted as he handed her to Nancy to nurse.

Nancy was immediately too busy settling Amelia at her breast and repositioning Amelia's fists so they weren't digging into her flesh to reply.

Amelia had kept Nancy running in circles from the day of her birth to the day of the fever. It seemed to Nancy that she had walked when she was only a few months old. Abel said she was about nine months old when she walked, but Nancy was too busy keeping her out of harm's way to count the months. Amelia crawled into the fireplace, luckily it was summer and there was no fire burning in it. Amelia toddled out of the front door out onto the porch. Nancy frantically

snatched her from the rocking chair where she was rocking “like Daddy,” just before she had rocked it off of the porch into the rose bushes by the steps.

Nancy felt Rosie stumble as she walked over a particularly large tree root and she clasped the reins more tightly in her hands. She stared straight ahead, concentrating fiercely on the scarlet burning bush. Finally, the table disappeared and all she could see was the bush. Now they were going up Coppercave Hill, the last hill before the road that led to the Foster farm. Rosie had climbed Coppercave Hill as many times as Nancy had cried for her babies and Abel, but this time as they lurched up the narrow dirt trail, she stumbled and went to her knees.

“All right, I’ll get off,” Nancy said, springing off of Rosie’s back. I should have gotten off before we started up the hill.”

She made her way around Rosie to check the cradle. It had shifted in the burlap bag, but she tugged it into place again just like she used to have to tug it away from the fire. Amelia had gotten so big and strong that when she moved in the cradle to rock it, she could rock it across the room to the fireplace. “It’s time for a trundle bed,” Nancy told Abel.

He had started to make Amelia’s trundle bed the day before the fever had come to their house. Now, he wouldn’t finish it and Amelia wouldn’t need it for a bed. The fever had swept through their bodies as cleanly as Abel swept his shop when he was finished working, as cleanly as Amy picked nut meats from the chopping block. Nancy buried them and cut them out of her life just as cleanly. She gathered the wooden table and chairs and twin rockers that Abel built for their house and piled them up in the yard. She piled small pieces of dried moss and kindling wood and used one of her precious matches to set the kindling on fire.

The Kendles, her neighbors from four miles south, rode over to her house when they saw the flames. She assured them that she was fine, she was just burning the fever out of her house. They sat on their horses and watched her throw the nearly completed trundle bed into the flames. When she was finished, they turned and rode silently back into the woods. Just as silently, she finished feeding the fire until the flames had eaten everything that Abel had made for their house.

The cradle was the only thing that he made that was left and she had picked it up, ready to throw into the fire when she saw Amelia tucked snugly into it with the patchwork quilt she had pieced under her chin and singing along to the lullaby that Nancy sang to her. Nancy held onto the cradle, her hands digging into the soft wood so fiercely that she ran a splinter under her fingernail. The pain of digging out the splinter seemed to match the pain she felt in her heart and spirit and she slept soundly that night.

The next morning, Mrs. Foster had sent her son Harold over to tell Nancy that she needed some help. Nancy loaded the cradle into a large burlap flour bag and slung it over Rosie's back. Now everything that reminded her of Abel and her babies was gone. Everything but her memories and maybe she could get rid of them by riding far away on Rosie. She could sell the land, the fevered land she now hated and ride away into the woods to make a new life.

Nancy got back up on Rosie's back and they reached the top of Coppercave Hill with the cradle safely in place. Nancy pulled the reins to let Rosie know that she could stop and take as many bites of the lushly green grass as she wanted while Nancy caught her breath. She saw smoke coming from the Foster's chimney so she knew that someone was there tending to things. Maybe Mr. Foster had come home from his hunting. Abel had never worried Nancy by going off hunting when she was near ready to have a baby, but Abel had a heart as kind as his eyes. Come to think of it, she better get down there and see who was tending to Mrs. Foster.

Carrying a small parcel, Nancy knocked once and then swung open the wooden door. Mrs. Foster sat up in the pole bed clutching her stomach and moaning. Her son Harold, the same one who had come to tell Nancy that his mother needed help, was watching a pot by the fireplace. "Mam told me to boil some water, Miss Nancy. It's a boiling for you."

"Thank you, Harold. Now go out and chop some firewood for your mother. Chop a big pile, because she'll need it." Nancy took her apron out of the parcel and some herbs and set to work. By the time Harold had returned about an hour later, Nancy had dressed the little girl in a soft flannel gown and wrapped her in a blanket. Mrs. Foster held her new daughter close to her breast while she nursed. "Harold, come meet your sister Catherine," she said weakly.

“Where’s she going to sleep?” Will asked. “Pa said he was going to make a cradle, but he didn’t get around to it before he went hunting.”

“She can sleep her with me until your Pa gets home,” Mrs. Foster said.

Now was the time for Nancy to take the cradle out of the burlap bag, the cradle that she had so painstakingly saved. The words hovered on her lips, but something about the way Catherine slept in her mother’s arms, her long dark lashes fluttering on her cheeks and her mouth making little ohs worked through Nancy’s numb heart and mind and she felt tears slide down her cheeks.

“Harold, go out and fetch the cradle out of the burlap bag that’s in the barn by Rosie.”

Harold quickly returned with the cradle cuddled in his arms like a baby. “It’s a strong cradle, Miss Nancy.”

“It is strong,” Nancy agreed.

“That cradle is valuable,” Mrs. Foster said.

“It is valuable,” Nancy agreed. “Catherine is just as valuable, so the two are a good fit.”

“What will you take for it?” Harold asked her as he sat it down by the fire.

Nancy ran her hands across the rougher wood under the cradle. “I’ll take a splinter!” she said.

The Sailor Suit

by Kathy Warnes



I've got a brother named Andy who's two years younger than me. Mom and Dad think he's great but I don't. I think he's a big pain in the neck. He's worse now since he wore Uncle Wayne's sailor suit, but now there's something about him that makes him different. If I didn't know better, I'd almost like him.

It was all Miss Bascomb's fault. She's the principal at our school and she and the other teachers said that we were going to have Spirit Week at school. We all groaned. It sounded like work.

Spirit Week was work! We had to write cheers and perform them which wasn't too bad. Sally and I did "Yeah Team, You're On The Beam," and Roy Jenkins smiled at me for the first time ever.

We had to dress like our favorite fictional character one day and that was fun. Andy and his pals dressed like the Lone Ranger and Tonto and Silver. Andy dressed like Silver (the horse and he looked so realistic!) Sally and I dressed like Pocahontas and Captain John Smith. I was Captain John Smith and Andy even let me wear his boots that lace all of the way up the front. That was fun. Next came Military Day when we had to wear military uniforms or dress as historical people who had served in the military.

Miss Bascomb said somebody could be Clara Barton because she was a nurse during the Civil War or Admiral Perry because he fought the British in the War of 1812. I didn't want to be Clara Barton and I didn't want to be Admiral Perry. At the dinner table that night I sat with my chin in my hands, so everyone knew I had a problem. Our dog Seigfried even put his head in my lap to let me know he sympathized. He usually just yells and sobs for food.

Finally dad looked at me and said, “Okay, Anne. What’s your problem? Something go wrong at school today?”

I looked at Andy. He kept on eating. “We have to wear a uniform tomorrow,” I said.

“My sister was a WAC in the second world war,” Mom said. “Maybe she still has her uniform. Why don’t you call her after dinner and find out?”

“Aunt Naomi?” My mouth must have hung open over my icecream bowl because Andy lunged at it with his spoon. “I’ll make a basket yet,” he said.

For once I ignored him. “But Mom, Aunt Naomi’s big,” I said. “I don’t want to wear a tent.”

“Anne, she wasn’t big then,” Mom said. “She weighed 120 pounds.”

I stared at Mom. “Are you sure that’s the same Aunt Naomi I know?”

Mom smiled. “She used to dance the meanest jitterbug I ever saw.”

“That’s right,” Dad said. “I danced with her once and she put me on the couch.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Mom said. “She danced him out of breath and had to lay him on the couch so he wouldn’t faint.”

“I’ll call her,” I muttered, still not one hundred percent convinced.

“What about me?” Andy came at me with the spoon again and barely missed my front teeth. I swung at him, but Dad caught my arm before I could connect with Andy’s teeth.

“I don’t have a uniform,” Dad said. “The moths finished it off a few years ago.”

“Wayne’s uniform is still upstairs,” Mom said quietly.

I couldn't believe the look on Dad's face. It went from laughing to the saddest I've ever seen in a second. "I don't know about that one, Nancy," Dad said.

"Why didn't the moths eat Uncle Wayne's uniform when they got yours?" Andy asked.

"Your Grandma had Dad's uniform at her house and she couldn't bear to use mothballs. You know how Grandma is about anything that's living," Mom said.

I nodded. I knew what she meant. Grandma even rescued spiders from the bathtub and deposited them safely outside the backdoor. She's incapable of killing moths.

"I have a cruel streak," Mom said. "I use mothballs and I put some in the trunk with Uncle Wayne's uniform. That's why it's still in one piece. At least I think it is." She pushed back her chair. "I'll bring it downstairs and we'll take a look at it. Is that all right with you, Ben?"

Dad still looked sad, but he nodded.

Mom grabbed Andy's shirt collar. "Come with me and help carry the trunk," she said. Andy couldn't get loose, so he went along with her to carry the trunk.

"When did Uncle Wayne get killed?" I asked Dad. Once in a while he and Mom talk about Uncle Wayne. I know he was in the Navy and I know he died a long time ago – at least ten years ago. "Was he on a battleship? Did he get killed on D Day? We're studying D Day in school and a lot of guys got killed at Normandy on the beaches."

Dad looked sadder. "I know, Anne. I was on the beach. Utah Beach to be exact and there weren't many beach umbrellas or pretty girls in bikinis."

I couldn't help it. I knew it wasn't cool, but I went over and hugged him. He looked so sad I had to hug him. "Did Uncle Wayne get killed at Normandy?"

"No, Uncle Wayne came home from the war alive, like I did."

“Then what happened to him, Dad?”

“He was too sensitive. The War did something to him.”

“Kitty didn’t help either,” Mom said from the bottom of the stairs. I hadn’t heard her come down, because Andy was making so much noise clunking the trunk down step by step.

“Andy, please pick it up,” Mom said.

“But it’s easier this way,” Andy said.

“Pick it up,” Mom said in her steel voice.

Andy picked up the trunk and clunked it in front of the couch. Siegfried immediately stretched out on top of it and closed his eyes.

“Off, Siegfried,” Dad said.

Siegfried began to snore.

Dad jumped up out of his chair and lunged at Siegfried. I couldn’t believe this was Dad. He normally loves Siegfried.

“I said get off the trunk, you stupid dog!” Dad yelled at Siegfried. He shoved him off the trunk.

I went over and scratched Siegfried behind the ears. That always comforts him when he doesn’t get enough steak or attention 24 hours a day. Siegfried retreated behind the couch, eyeing Dad reproachfully. He’s so big that his tail stuck out like a telephone wire.

Mom put her arm around Dad and pulled him onto the couch. “It’s all right, Ben,” she said softly. “This is a good way to honor his memory.”

Dad looked down at his hands. He played with his fingers.

I ran over, yanked the trunk open, and pulled out a sailor's uniform. I put it to my cheek.

"Mmm, it's soft, Mom."

"It's a winter uniform," Dad said. "You wear a white T shirt under it. There should be a tie there and if you roll back the sleeves you'll see the dragons on the them."

Before I could pull more of the uniform out, Andy cut in front of me and had the entire thing out. He looked at the wool trousers. "There sure are a lot of buttons on them," he said.

"Thirteen of them, I think," Dad said. "You have to allow some extra time for -"

"I know what you mean," Andy said. I stared at him. If I didn't know better, I'd swear he was blushing.

"Try the uniform on and if it fits, you can wear it for Military Day," Dad said.

As Andy left the room, I reached back inside the trunk and fished around. My fingers closed over something crackly and I pulled out a stack of letters rubber banded together. I handed them to Mom. "Who are they from?" I asked.

"Wayne wrote them to Kitty," Dad said.

"And to us," Mom said shuffling through them. "Here's one to both of us, Ben. Do you want to read it?" She held it out to Dad, but Dad pulled back like the letter was burning.

"I can't, Nancy."

It looked to me like Dad had tears in his eyes. I crawled over to the couch on my hands and knees and hugged him. Siegfried came out from behind the couch and licked Dad's fingers which were tightly laced together.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” I asked him. I felt my own tears on my face. I put out the tip of my tongue and licked them so no one would see them, especially not Andy.

“Wayne shot himself,” Dad said. “He couldn’t get a job and Kitty married somebody else and he shot himself. He was sensitive.”

Now I could see Dad’s tears run down his face and I was mad at this Uncle Wayne that I had never met. How could he hurt my Dad like this?”

Mom put her arm around Dad. “Life and hope still happen, Ben.”

At this point, Siegfried planted himself in front of me, barking for his nightly biscuit. I had to peek around him to see Mom and Dad and this takes some doing, because Siegfried isn’t tiny.

“Look at your son, Ben,” Mom said. ” Look at him!”

Andy stood in the doorway. If Sally had been here she would have slobbered all over him. He did look handsome. The sailor uniform fit Andy better than the Popeye suit that we had fought over when we were little did. He had the hat brimmed turned up and he saluted us. Siegfried even stopped begging for a biscuit and stood at attention.

Dad lifted his head and looked at Andy. Slowly he returned the salute.

“I’m glad you’re wearing Wayne’s suit, son,” he said to Andy. Then Dad turned to Mom and me. “Let’s read some of these old letters,” he said.

I stuck out my tongue at Andy. “You’ve got lint on your sleeve,” I said. “Why don’t you let Siegfried lick it off?”

Andy picked off a piece of lint and threw it at me. “He can lick it off of you first,” he said. But he wiped his eyes on the sleeve of the sailor suit when he thought I wasn’t looking.

Measuring Grandma's Wedding Chili

By Kathy Warnes

Today is my wedding day and here I am in the kitchen of our ranch, the Bar X. It's five o'clock in the morning and I'm measuring and making some of Grandma's famous chili for the reception. Having grandma's chili at family weddings has been a tradition in our family for two generations. Jeb and me will make the third, though right now I'm not one hundred percent sure-certain that Jeb is going to show up for the ceremony or that I even want him to. We had another one of our big fights last night. Fact is, we've been fighting a lot lately and it's about the same old thing - my family and its place in Grand Bison, Wyoming's history and tradition.



Grand Bison is my home town and I'm proud of it. So are the other 2,000 people that live here. The fact is, a lot of them are kin to me and we laugh and talk and fight together and most of all, love and stand by each other. This is hard for Jeb to understand because he comes from a family that isn't close and from a town a lot bigger than Grand Bison.

That's what our big blow up was about last night. We were at a party to celebrate our wedding and I was dancing with Calvin Perkins. CALVIN PERKINS, mind you. His dad's ranch is the next spread from ours and he's like a red-haired, freckle-faced, pesky little brother. He was giving me a wedding kiss and I was counting down to the finish line, when Jeb walked in and all thunder and lightning broke loose.

"You've got a lot of nerve kissing this guy behind my back!" Jeb shouted at me.

"Jeb, it's only Calvin Perkins! He's just.." I tried to explain. Jeb grabbed Calvin by the collar and punched him in the nose before I could blink.

By then, I was boiling mad. "You listen here, Jeb MacKay. If you don't cut out the caveman act, I'm going to take off this engagement ring and throw it over your left ear!"

He kissed me. "Melinda, honey, I'm really sorry and I promise you I won't do that again. I'll apologize to Calvin first thing in the morning."

"Jeb, you don't have to come first thing in the morning. Calvin works for Daddy, remember, and he gets up at five thirty to feed the stock. That's a little early in the morning for apologies."

"I'll be over at your place at five thirty," Jeb insisted. He wouldn't even take no for an answer when I told him the groom wasn't supposed to see the bride before the wedding ceremony. I expect him to be knocking at the door any minute now. I stirred the chili extra hard and a dab of it landed on the stove. I looked at Grandma's picture hanging over the kitchen table.

"Sorry, Grandma," I said. "I didn't mean to slop your chili all over the place, but I'm so riled at Jeb I could throw him on Old Lightning's back without a saddle!"

"Just let Old Lightning take care of him," a voice told me.

I looked over my shoulder. "You're up early, Mama."

"It's my daughter's wedding day. Am I supposed to stay in bed until sundown?" My brown-haired, blue-eyed pretty Mama yawned and sat in the chair under Grandma's picture. "What were you telling Grandma?" she asked through layers of yawns.

"Nothing much, Mama. I was just letting off a little steam. Jeb was acting up again last night."

Now Mama was wide awake and her blue eyes were serious. "Melinda, I've been meaning to talk to you about Jeb. Are you sure you want to marry him today? Are you sure you want to marry him ever?"

I stirred the chili so hard that a bean flew up and hit me right in the nose, before it fell back on the stove.

Mama picked up the bean and stared at it thoughtfully. "I remember measuring Grandma's chili when I was fuming mad too. It was on my honeymoon and your Father was being meaner than a bear with bees on his nose."

I stopped stirring the chili and sat on a kitchen chair. "How was Daddy being mean on your honeymoon and what did chili have to do with it?"

"Well, Melinda, when your Daddy and me decided to get hitched, we agreed that we'd live on the Bar X because Daddy inherited it from your Grandfather. We got married on my ranch next door and your Grandma made a batch of her chili for me to take with me to my new home. I packed that chili in an iron pot on the back of my old horse Susie and I put on some feather pillows and some other stuff too. By the time we headed for the Bar X a mile down the road, me and Susie were pretty well loaded down. Then it happened."

"What happened Mama?"

Just about then your Daddy decided to challenge me to a horse race. He figured he could surely win because I had so much plunder on Susie. I talked to Susie and off we ran."

"What happened?" I asked eagerly. Mama had never told me this story before and it was getting good.

"Well, I just had too much stuff on Susie's back, too many pillows and a big iron pot of chili. Your Daddy galloped way ahead of me on the trail, so I stopped Susie and unloaded all of that stuff from her saddlebags."

"What did you do with it, Mama?"

"I buried it underneath a hollow log and marked the spot with a red piece of cloth so I would be sure and find it after I won the race. When Susie and me finally galloped into the gate of the Bar X, there stood your Daddy right inside of it with a grin wide as our south pasture.

"What did you say, Mama?"

"Me, I got mad!" Mama said.

"What did you do, Mama?" I asked.

Mama grinned. "I turned Susie around and headed back home. I was madder than a swarm of hornets so I drove Susie extra hard and in no time at all we were back at the log where I had my stuff hidden, but when I turned it over, there wasn't anything under it at all. I looked all over that darned prairie for that red piece of cloth on the log where my stuff was buried, but I just couldn't find it. I finally got disgusted with the whole thing and rode home to my Daddy's ranch, crying like a rainstorm. I was sure -certain the coyotes or whoever found that batch of chili would be grateful to me for leaving it there."

"What happened next, Mama?"

I got to my ranch and there was your Daddy standing by the gate looking anxious and sad.

"Please don't be mad at me. I love you," he said.

"Well, I was still riled at him so I told him thanks to you I lost my best iron cooking pot and it was full of Mama's chili and my feather pillows and dishes!" Mama said. "Before I finished, he was laughing so hard that he got red in the face. I got red in the face too, because I was so red hot mad at him. Your Daddy hugged me and wouldn't let go of me no matter how hard I pounded my fists against his chest. "Can't you picture some coyote getting a mouthful of your Mama's chili and making a dash for the nearest river? You got to admit, it's pretty hot stuff."

"What did you do then, Mama?"

Mama smiled. "Well, Melinda, I couldn't help it, I started laughing too, and the next thing I knew, I was hugging and kissing him and I wasn't mad at him anymore. Then we went back to Mama's kitchen and we made another pot of chili. Your Daddy and me rode home with it swinging between us and the chili wasn't the only red hot stuff between us that night. The love between us was pretty red hot too and it has been for over thirty years. You know that, Melinda."

"Yes, Mama," I said thoughtfully. "So that's why you and Daddy are always making jokes about red hot chili. Why didn't you ever tell me about that before?"

"Honey, you never contemplated getting married before and I'm not so sure you should now. When you love someone, you trust them. Melinda, I don't think Jeb trusts you."

I tried to change the subject. In my heart I knew Mama was right. "How did Grandma start out making the wedding chili? It's a pretty strange tradition, chili at a wedding."

Mama laughed. "Your Grandma and Grandpa came out here to Wyoming to homestead. They started out from back east without too much of anything except spunk, a horse and wagon, and a few pots and pans. They brought some dried beans too. When they found a little piece of land near the river, mama planted a garden and grew some tomatoes, beans, and peppers. Daddy even put a log fence around the garden to keep the critters out. Melinda, it seems that the Indians were still a mite pesky then, and they'd come around for something to eat. One day, Mama had just made a big pot of chili when a war party headed for further west came by the house and the chief took a fancy to Mama. She was a downright pretty woman, don't you remember Melinda?"

"Yes, Mama, I remember."

"That old chief told Mama he was taking her with him to be his squaw. Mama argued with him naturally, but the chief insisted and even waved his tomahawk under her nose as a convincer. Now Mama didn't really want to be his squaw, so she did some fast thinking. While the chief wasn't looking, she slipped a big dipperful of chili powder into the pot. Then she put a bowl of chili in front of the chief and coaxed him to take a big bite. He did, and Melinda, that chief sneezed and choked and whooped and hollered and danced around the kitchen.

Mama said to the chief, 'squaw no good cook, no cook.' When the chief could talk again, he agreed. He and his band of warriors went looking elsewhere for a squaw. Mama had to throw out that particular batch of chili, but she swore from then on that chili at every wedding was going to be a family tradition because it saved her from being an Indian squaw."

I laughed. "Oh Mama, that sure is funny. So that's why we have chili at our family weddings. I like family jokes and family traditions. I don't think I can be happy without them."

"I don't think you can be either, honey," Mama said. "I hope you're measuring that pot of chili for Jeb."

I smiled. "Don't you worry about a thing, Mama."

I got up, added a little more chili powder to the chili, and stirred it some more. I knew exactly what I was going to do and I was ready for Jeb's knock when it came at the door. "Come in, Jeb! I'm up and busy already."

Jeb ambled into the kitchen. Even at this hour of the morning, he was a handsome hunk of man and it was all I could do to keep from giving him a big kiss, he looked so good to me. "Tell me where I can find Calvin," he said.

"Calvin's down in the bunkhouse," I told him. "Mama, will you go get him and ask him to come up here to the kitchen?"

"Sure will, honey," Mama said and hurried out the back door.

I turned to Jeb. "I want to talk to you about something."

"I've got something to tell you first," he said, easing his long, lean body into the chair where mama had been sitting. "I decided that we're going to move to Cheyenne instead of staying around here too long, Melinda. That's where most of the jobs are. You do want me to get ahead, don't you?"

"Jeb, you told me the reason you came out here was to get away from the city and its pressures and you never wanted to go back there again. Jeb, you know I'd never be happy in the city. I told you that from the very beginning and you said you were content to stay here."

"I changed my mind, Melinda. I can find a better job in Cheyenne."

"What's wrong with the one you have here in the garage?"

"I don't want to stay here!" he shouted. "I want to be married to you, not your family."

I threw my arms around him, chili spoon and all. "I will promise to forsake all others, but that doesn't mean I can't love my family and spend time with them. I want to keep my friends, too. And family traditions are important to me. You'll be part of that tradition, too, Jeb, as my husband. We'll carry on the traditions with our children, too. One of them is chili."

"Chili? What are you talking about, Melinda?" he asked me.

"The chili! I almost forgot the chili. I hope I didn't let it burn!" I dashed back over to the stove and gave it another stir. "Come over here by the stove and stir it with me and I'll tell you."

"Melinda, I don't have time for this funny stuff. I came to apologize to Calvin Perkins since you think that's so important. Then I have lots of things to do. I'm getting married this afternoon."

"I'm not, Jeb," I said quietly.

He stared at me. "What are you talking about, Melinda? Let's just get on with our plans."

"I'm getting on with them, Jeb. I'm getting on with something I should have done a long time ago."

I slipped his engagement ring off my finger and cupped it in my hand. I felt butterflies in my stomach and my hands were icy cold. I tried one last try. "I'm asking you Jeb. Are you willing to come over here and stir this chili with me while I tell you the story behind it?"

He came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. "Melinda, I'm telling you I want you to forget about this chili nonsense and get ready for our wedding today."

I shook his hands off my shoulders and turned around and pressed his engagement ring in them. "Jeb, I want you to leave and let me finish measuring my chili."

"Melinda, you've been listening to more of that nonsense your Mother puts in your head. That's one of the reasons I want to take you away from here."

The door behind us opened and I heard Mama's angry snort. "Love and family is not nonsense," she said in a hard voice.

Calvin stood behind her. "Neither is living where you belong," he said.

Jeb glared at me. "Melinda, I'm telling you one last time. Leave the chili alone and let's get ready for our wedding."

"Jeb, I'm not going to marry you."

Jeb's face got red as one of Mama's garden beets. "Listen you little cheat! You took my ring and said you were going to marry me!"

Jeb grabbed me, but Calvin suddenly stood between us. "You heard what the lady said," Calvin told Jeb. "Now get out of here and don't be bothering her anymore."

"I'll mop the floor with you like I should have done last night," Jeb growled. He swung at Calvin. They had a humdinger of a fight. While they crashed around the kitchen, Jeb accidentally knocked up against the stove and shoved that pot of hot chili right off it. By the way he hollered as he ran out the door, I'd say he got splashed and burned a little bit too.

That particular pot of honeymoon chili was ruined right along with the honeymoon, but Calvin stuck around and helped me and Mama clean up the mess. In fact, Calvin stuck around quite a bit after that. The pot of chili I made a few years later for me and Calvin's wedding was just as red hot and spicy as our love for each other. That's a recipe we're going to pass on to our kids on our ranch!"

Uncle Mosby and the Damn Yankees

By Kathy Warnes



My great, great Uncle Mosby was a peaceable man unless someone threatened his yeast. I'm talking about the strain of yeast that had been in the family for a hundred years, even before the Civil War. During the Civil War, he operated our family still in Mosby, Kentucky. This is when he faced the greatest crisis in his brewing life.

One morning when Uncle Mosby was peacefully working with his yeast and jugs, a neighbor galloped up the ridge on his horse. "Word's out that the Yankee's are coming!" the neighbor hollered to Uncle Mosby.

Uncle Mosby was a man of few words. "How far from here?"

"Last seen, they were over at the Hawkins place."

"About three miles down the road. That gives me time. Much obliged for the warning," Uncle Mosby said. He snatched up two jugs of the precious yeast and hurried back to the house, leaving the neighbor gawking at him from the horse.

"The Yankees are coming!" Uncle Mosby shouted to Aunt Hildy and their four young'ns in the cabin.

Aunt Hildy dashed out onto the front porch and leaned over the railing. "The Yankees! Laws a mercy, mother's silver!" Aunt Hildy screeched. "Jady girl, hurry up! Come help me get the silver together. We have to hide it from the Yankees!"

Uncle Mosby dashed out on the porch with his two jugs of precious yeast. "Hildy! Jady! We gotta hide this yeast before the Yankees get here."

Jady dashed out on the porch with a handful of silver. "Here, Ma."

Aunt Hildy grabbed a handful of silver from Jady. "We can hide it over here, Mosby."

Aunt Hildy ran over to the well in the front yard and cranked up the bucket. "I'll put the silver in the bucket and cut the windlass. Then they won't get suspicious."

"We ain't gonna do no such thing!" Uncle Mosby shouted. "Don't you cut that windless, Hildy. I'm gonna put my yeast down there."

"Mosby, your moonshine's bothering your brain! The silver is worth more than the yeast."

"Hildy, coons and hound dogs is best friends if that silver is worth more than my yeast."

Just then, Jady stuck her head out the window. "Pa, I hear horses galloping up the trail!"

Uncle Mosby ran to the well with those two whiskey jugs full of yeast and put them in the bucket. He cranked it down to the bottom of the well. Aunt Hildy was quick behind him. She jumped on his back, scratching and clawing like a mountain lion. "Mosby, you give me that bucket!"

Uncle Mosby outweighed Aunt Hildy by about 150 pounds, so you know who won that fight. Aunt Hildy didn't give up that easy, though. "Tarnation, Mosby," she yelled. She hopped off his back, grabbed the silver, and threw it by handfuls down the well. Faint plunking and splashing sounds drifted up from the bottom.

"You're gonna dive for every piece of that silver when the Yankees leave," Aunt Hildy told him. "I'm gonna stand over you with the shotgun while you do it."

Uncle Mosby shrugged her off like a drop of rain water and fastened the bucket rope to the windlass. "Gotta be able to get at that yeast when the Yankees go," he grunted.

"Pa, the Yankees are here!" Jady tugged at his elbow. "They're here, Pa. What are we gonna do?"

"We gonna go meet 'em," Uncle Mosby growled. "What else would a red-blooded rebel do?"

"The rest of you young'uns git out here behind me!" Aunt Hildy shouted.

Their three boys scurried out of the cabin like rabbits and huddled close to Aunt Hildy's skirts.

Jady stood a little apart from her Ma, as befitted the oldest and bravest child. The Yankees galloped into the yard. There were four of them on brown horses streaked with sweat and dirt. Their saddlebags bulged and the Yankee in the lead had a chicken slung across the saddle.

"Halt!" the Yankee captain shouted to his men. They stopped in a cloud of dust and cursing, as Duke, Uncle Mosby's hound dog, fastened his teeth in the man in the rear's boot.

"Call off your dog or I'll kill him on the spot," the Yankee Captain told Uncle Mosby.

"Hey old Duke, get your wagging tail over here," Uncle Mosby drawled. Old Duke ambled over and lay down in front of Uncle Mosby. Old Duke was always quick to listen to Uncle Mosby, that's why there are still some of Old Duke's great grand children running around today.

The Yankee Captain pointed to three scrawny chickens pecking around the yard. "I'll take them chickens."

Uncle Mosby shrugged. Aunt Hildy said, "They're yours if you catch'em."

The three boys behind her snickered. They knew about mountain chickens.

While the Yankees chased the chickens, Aunt Hildy threw the last silver spoon down the well. She thought she was being real sneaky, but the Yankees were sneaky too. They heard the silver spoon splash. The Yankee Captain ran over and grabbed Aunt Hildy.

"Whatcha got there, Reb lady?" he snarled.

She held out her empty hands. "I ain't got nothing."

"Then what did you drop down the well?"

"Nothing," Aunt Hildy said.

A Yankee soldier with a dirty yellow moustache drooping over like wilted cornstalks clumped over to the windlass. "What's this rope fastened to?" he asked Uncle Mosby.

Uncle Mosby studied the Captain hanging on to Aunt Hildy and the other Yankees heading toward his prize yeast. Who should he rescue first? Uncle Mosby headed for the damn Yankee who was about to cut the rope holding the bucket with his yeast in it.

Then Aunt Hildy took matters into her own hands. She twisted out of that Yankee Captain's grip and said, "I threw our silver down the well to keep you thieving rascals from getting it."

The Yankee Captain drew his pistol. "Do you have a rope that goes into that well?"

"Your man was about ready to cut it," Uncle Mosby said.

The Yankee Captain leveled the pistol at Uncle Mosby. "Go down that well and get the silver," he ordered. "Every piece of it."

Uncle Mosby went down the well. His first trip he cut the rope that was fastened to the bucket so the Yankee Captain wouldn't discover the yeast. Uncle Mosby handed up all of the silver to the Yankees, piece by piece.

"It sets a nice table when it's all together," he told the Yankee Captain.

"I intend to keep it together," the Yankee Captain said. "And my wife will polish it as a set."

When the Yankees finally left, the family silver, three chickens, and some corn bread that Aunt Hildy had just baked that morning left with them. Uncle Mosby was soaking wet and spitting well water. Aunt Hildy was madder than a swatted bee to think that the family silver had turned Yankee but Uncle Mosby's yeast hadn't.

Aunt Hildy glared at Uncle Mosby.

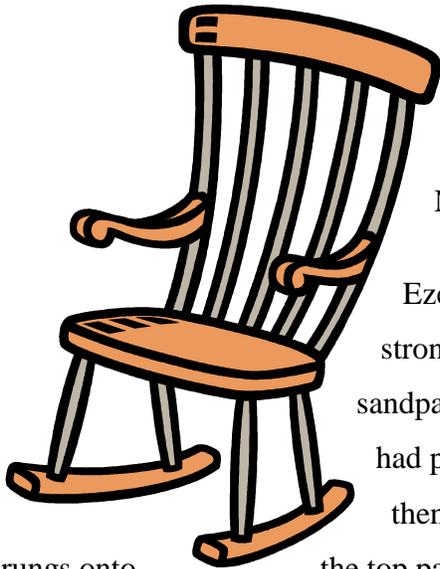
"Mosby, would you have let that Yankee Captain take me instead of your yeast?"

"That's a fair question," Uncle Mosby admitted.

He never would answer it.

The Pioneer Rocking Chair

By Kathy Warnes



May 1841

Ezekiel Wilkins traced the bottom rungs of the rocking chair with strong, sure hands. He smoothed out the wood with a piece of sandpaper that he had brought with him from New York. Harmony had packed it carefully between two pieces of oilskin paper and then put it in a trunk under the heavy quilts. He fitted the finished rungs onto the top part of the chair and fastened them securely with pegs. He attached the chair seat that Harmony had gathered, soaked, and wove rushes to make.

He walked the short, narrow path to the log house that he had built in this small settlement in Harrison, Ohio. Harmony was in the kitchen baking bread. His nose twitched, appreciating the smell of the bread, and the tang of the applesauce bubbling in a kettle on the hearth. Harmony smiled at him, her blue eyes sparkling. He knew that if her braids hadn't tamed her blonde hair it would be flying around her face, keeping pace with her enthusiastic movements.

Ezekiel smiled. "Are you ready to paint the chair?" he asked.

"I'm ready and Samantha is going to help me," Harmony said. Their six year old daughter Samantha sat on a stool in front of the wood stove reading her ABCs. She looked up and smiled at her father. Her eyes were the same shade of blue as Harmony's, and her hair just a shade darker. Samantha jumped up from the stool and threw her book down on top of it. She danced over to her mother. "Let's paint a flower, Mama. A big yellow flower."

Harmony laughed. "What about a big yellow sun. We will need a sun to warm us on our journey to Oregon!"

"But Mama, we need flowers, too. What if there aren't any flowers in Oregon? We need to bring some with us just to make sure we will have them."

Laughing together, all three of them went to Ezekiel's workshop. He watched Harmony and Samantha paint the sun and a meadow of sunflowers on the back and seat of the wooden rocker. The next day he put the chair in the kitchen in front of the stove and Samantha sat in it and read her ABCs.

May 1843

General Brock announced the time and place of departure and on May 20, as quickly as the spring grass began to flourish on the prairies, the party bound for [Oregon](#) Territory gathered at Fitzhugh's Mill near Independence, Missouri. Ezekiel stood in front of the covered wagon that he had made from his ordinary farm wagon by stretching a canvas over the top. With Harmony's help, he had filled the cracks in the wagon bed with tar to help it float when they crossed rivers and he had painted the canvas top with linseed oil to waterproof it. He and Harmony had packed the wagon with what they could take with them to Oregon. Luckily, he could make furniture out of the wood that grew on their new farm, so they had room for trunks and dishes and seeds, and the pioneer rocking chair. It occupied the place of honor in the center of their wagon.

Harmony and Samantha painted a large sunflower on the wagon cover. Ezekiel had sold their farm and all of their stock and horses to buy their oxen, Jim and Jake, who were hitched up to the wagon.

Samantha danced up and down. "Papa, papa, is it time to go yet? "

Ezekiel smiled. "Soon," he said. "Very soon, Samantha."

Soon, they jolted down the path in their wagon toward an endless flat horizon that blended with the prairie grasses and the twists and turns of the trail. A family by the name of Carter with two teenage girls, Charity and Hope, traveled in front of them. One night while Harmony spread out

their beds in the wagon, Samantha stood by the campfire soberly watching Ezekiel. "What's wrong, Samantha?" he asked her.

"Charity and Hope found a bottle of something to drink this afternoon, but they wouldn't let me drink any."

"Where and what did they find to drink?"

"They found a bottle of something in the sideboard of their wagon. I saw them drink it and I asked for a drink, but they said no. They told me to go away and I did."

"Sometimes it's wiser not to be curious," Ezekiel said. He hugged his daughter. "Go help your Mama get our beds ready for the night."

The next night while Harmony cooked supper over their campfire and Ezekiel sat mending a harness, Samantha slipped next door to the Carter's wagon and worked the bottle out of the sideboard. She drank its contents and came back to their campfire yawning. "I'm awfully tired Papa."

"Rest here with your head in my lap until supper time," Ezekiel said. He smiled down at his sleeping daughter, wondering at her ability to sleep so soundly. Not even the bawling of the oxen or the noise of other people eating their suppers disturbed her.

He decided not to wake her when her own supper was ready. "I'll put her on her bed," he told Harmony. "She can eat something later when she wakes up."

Samantha didn't wake up later that evening. She slept on into the midnight when Harmony and Ezekiel, now thoroughly alarmed, tried to wake her by walking her up and down and washing her face with an icy cloth. She slept on into next day and finally, the doctor told them she would sleep on into eternity. The liquid in the bottle was laudanum and Samantha had drunk the entire bottle.

The wagon train lost a day of travel in its race with the snows of winter to see which would reach the Willamette Valley first. No one complained because they were too thankful that they weren't

leaving someone they loved buried in a lonely prairie grave. Harmony and Ezekiel tried to make it less lonely by leaving Samantha some of the things she had loved the most. Harmony dressed her in her favorite pink dress and white collar. She tucked her doll Tilly in one hand and Ezekiel put the seat from the pioneer rocking chair with the sunflowers she had painted on it in her other hand. As the wagon creaked away, through their tears they imagined they saw Samantha dancing in the prairie sun and wind beside the sunflowers.

For the rest of her life, Harmony refused to sit in the pioneer rocking chair. After they reached Warrenton, Oregon, and claimed their farm, Ezekiel made a new wooden seat for the pioneer rocking chair but Harmony would not, could not weave another grass seat for it or paint more sunflowers on it. Even after they had another daughter, Hannah, and then their son, Paul, Harmony shrunk away from the pioneer rocking chair like it was a guilty reminder. Ezekiel treated the pioneer rocking chair the same way and it eventually migrated up to the attic of their farmhouse.

May 1915 to May the present

Ezekiel and Harmony's other daughter Hannah lived in the farmhouse in Warrenton, Oregon from the day she was born in October 1845, until the day she died on November 5, 1915. She remembered the pioneer rocking chair from her childhood. One day in 1862 when Hannah was sixteen, she crept up the attic stairs feeling frightened and alone. She had just returned from a visit to her cousins out east in Ohio. Hannah sat rocking in the pioneer rocking chair trying to arrange the words in her mind and trying to find the courage to tell her mother and father what had happened to her in Ohio.

She heard herself telling them about how the Yankee soldier she had met and loved for so short a time had to march off with his regiment to try to keep Morgan and his cavalry from invading Ohio all the way to Lake Erie. She heard herself telling them she was going to have his baby. She brought the pioneer rocking chair downstairs with her and she told them that same day. The soldier didn't come back from fighting Morgan. Hannah and her son, Gerald, lived in the Warrenton farm house. Hannah spent the rest of her life repairing her relationship with her

parents and Ezekiel kept the rocking chair in good repair. Gerald spent a lot of time in his grandfather's carpenter shop and he learned how to work wood and repair rocking chairs.

The pioneer rocking chair spent the next two generations from Gerald's daughter Marion to her son Tim down stairs in the farmhouse in front of the fireplace in the winter and camping out on the porch in the summer. Tim inherited his great grandfather Ezekiel's sensible disposition as well as the Warrenton farmhouse.

One day in May 1943, Tim's wife Pam sat in the pioneer rocking chair enjoying the early spring breezes. It was only ten o'clock in the morning, but she was expecting a baby and her stomach kept telling her that she needed to rest her feet. From the pioneer rocking chair, she watched an army jeep slowly come up the lane. Every part of her body screamed for her to run upstairs to her bed and pull the covers over her head. She sat glued to the pioneer rocking chair. She stayed and listened to them telling her that Tim wouldn't be coming back. She decided to store the pioneer rocking chair and hope up in the attic and raise her baby by herself. She raised her son, Joshua, in the Warrenton farmhouse. The pioneer rocking chair stayed up in the attic through Vietnam and the rest of the twentieth century wars.

In May 2003, Joshua's daughter Melissa lived in the Warrrenton farmhouse. An Oregon teacher, she met Randy at a teacher's convention in Ohio and they hit it off so well that they decided to get married. Melissa rented out the farm house and packed up her SUV, ready to drive across the country from Oregon to Ohio. While she was cleaning out the house, she found the pioneer rocking chair with the sun flower painted on its back in the attic. She rocked in the pioneer rocking chair for several nights before she had to leave for Ohio.

"I hope I'm doing the right thing." Her mind galloped in time with the rockers on the pioneer rocking chair. "This is a drastic move. What if things don't work out?"

A surge of enthusiasm swept her doubts away as she fastened her seat belt and adjusted her mirror. This could be the most important adventure of her life. She stared into her mirror at the pioneer rocking chair in the back seat.

Melissa traced the contours of the steering wheel with strong, sure hands.

Baptizing Water

By Kathy Warnes



My Ma wanted to keep me on the straight and narrow bridle path. She knew that I would look for God sitting next to me on a horse, so she made me ride to Epworth League. In our small Texas town, Union Grove by name, Epworth happens on Sunday evenings at 7:00 at Union Grove Methodist Church, Carmody Charles Collins, pastor.

Ma didn't know that a few Sundays when I was supposedly at Epworth I was really down at the race track behind Grearson's Livery Stable racing my shaggy pony Oscar against Black Bart, the fastest horse in town. Black Bart belonged to Jack Harris, the fastest man in town. Jack was the fastest talker, the fastest runner (on foot) and the faster spitter. He could even out spit me, which was a stretch. At 12, I could spit across Arkansas Creek, the one that runs right next to the church. No one has ever been able to do that, except me and Jack.

My fast spitting got me in trouble last Sunday night, though. I was spitting in the direction of the creek just for practice when Reverend Collins walked right into my bulls eyes. His price for silence? I had to come back to Epworth for the next two months or he'd tell mother. The Reverend told me this with a smile, pulling on his gray beard. Oscar agreed with me that we'd better lay low for a few months until the spit had evaporated from Reverend Collin's beard and his memory.

So one Sunday night around seven, Oscar and me headed through the scrub pine woods behind our house on the way to town and Epworth. We stopped at the end of a dusty dirt road at a ramshackle wooden shack. I gave our special whistle and Aubrey, my best friend, came running out. He scrambled up behind me on Oscar, digging in with his knees.

"You gonna wait outside the church for me, Aubrey? We can go fishing. Or we can get baptized to make us blood brothers. Or Jack's gonna race Black Bart again tonight."

"I'll wait for you, Tom. But if my Mama catches me I'll get whomped for sure. She's saying to me that I can't be seen around with you anymore."

I stared at him. "Why not, Aubrey?"

He didn't answer for so long I thought he fell asleep. He was scowling. "You know," he said. He wouldn't look at me. The sun rested low in the sky and sent faint gleams of light across his chocolate brown skin.

"I don't know, Aubrey. She didn't find out about my spitting on the Reverend, did she?"

"Naw, she didn't find out about that."

"Then what?"

"We ain't the same, Tom."

I scowled over my shoulder at him. "Gee Aubrey, I thought we were both boys."

"Our skin color ain't the same, Tom."

"So what? Didn't we cut our wrists and get to be blood brothers when we wuz just nine? Aren't we gonna get baptized together tonight to make it real official? What more does she want, Aubrey?"

”She wants me to be white or you to be brown.”

“Come off it Aubrey!”

“Tonight’s our last riding nit, Tom.”

“Not unless I say so.”

“They’ll hurt us if we don’t stop riding together.”

“Who?”

“The Night Riders.”

“Aubrey, Pa’s a judge! He won’t let anybody hurt us. And your Ma takes care of our house and cooks for us. He ain’t gonna let anything happen to her either.”

Aubrey didn’t say anything. He just looked at me with eyes as softly brown as his skin. But when I looked into them I saw a gleam of something I didn’t understand. Aubrey got into the world more than I did then. All I wanted to do was race Oscar, spit, and stare at Mary Alice Gordon coming out of the candy store. I still wasn’t sure if I liked her or the gumdrops she always carried.

“What have the Night Riders got to do with me and you having fun?”

“You’ll see,” he said. “Word says they’ll be out tonight.”

“Who’s word, Aubrey?”

“Folks.” Aubrey wouldn’t look at me. He just stared at his bare feet slapping against Oscar’s sides. “Tom, let’s go fishing.”

“We can’t go fishing now, Aubrey. We gotta go get baptized. Then I’m gonna go to Epworth.”

“I already got my church going in for today. Mama didn’t want to go out of the house tonight. Says the Night Riders are comin.”

“How does she know, Aubrey?”

“Don’t know how she knows. Ask her.”

I dug my knees into Oscar’s ribs and turned him around. Aubrey didn’t say nothing. He knew where I was going. We came up to his house in a cloud of dust and I was off Oscar’s back before

Aubrey could sneeze. I ran up the dirt path that led to his door. It hung on rusty hinges and squeaked as I pushed it open.

“Hilda!” I shouted. “Hilda, I got to ask you a question.”

She came rushing out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her flour sack apron. “What’s wrong, Tom?” She looked terrified. “Something’s happen to Aubrey. Lord, protect my baby!”

Aubrey’s out front getting’ off of Oscar. I got to ask you a question, Hilda.”

“What you want to ask me?”

“How do you know the Night Riders are coming?”

“I know. Now get along. You and Aubrey get along to wherever you were going. And pray.”

“We got some important business. Then I gotta go to Epworth. Can Aubrey come with me?”

She flapped her apron at us. “Get outta here, both of you.”

We got. I grabbed Aubrey and shoved him ahead of me back onto Oscar. We lit out of there, Oscar at a gallop. We didn’t slow down until we got to Culligan’s woods. That’s a piece of timber that stretches behind the church for a good three miles or so. There’s scrub pines in there and some oak and lots of brush. Ever so often I go in and cut the brush from the paths so I can ride Oscar in there.

I headed him down one of my favorite paths now. It started out wide on a flat stretch of ground with tall grass. Then it started to climb the hill and narrowed down to barely passing room. Aubrey and me could see the steeple of the Union Grove Methodist Church at the top of the hill as we climbed up the path. Then the tree frogs stopped peeping and the birds cut off their songs. Somebody or something was coming.

“Listen,” I hissed at Aubrey.

I stopped Oscar in his tracks and all three of us listened. We heard twigs cracking and the jingle of spurs. Some riders were coming. I didn’t sit there in the middle of the path waiting for them. I eased Oscar behind a flowering gush and Aubrey and me hunched down as low as we could on his back.

Right in front of us, so close we could have shaken hands with them, paraded a line of figures on horses. They had on sheets with holes cut for eyes, but on most of them cowboy boots with scuffed toes stuck out from under the sheets. I didn't even look at all of those men in sheets. I knew they wuz men because they didn't smell like women. I just looked at their horses. It was like a road map to the town telephone book. That horse belongs to Amos J.____, the undertaker. That one belongs to George____, the banker. There's Jack the horse who belongs to Charley from Charley's groceries, and that horse belongs to Leo____, a teacher at the high school.

Then I spotted two more and I didn't care if the riders heard me or not. I dug Oscar in the ribs and we galloped out of there. We galloped all of the way back to Aubrey's house.

"I gotta see Mam. Gotta see Mam," Aubrey said over and over like a prayer.

His Mam knelt praying in front of the smoldering ashes that had been their home. Aubrey slid off Oscar and ran over to his Mama. He hugged her and they cried together.

I said a prayer too, because I had seen a gray beard when the wind moved the sheet from the face of one of the riders. I watched that rider shave in the bathroom mirror every morning.

I cried. Then I rode Oscar right into them ashes and pulled Aubrey and his Mama up on his back. Oscar headed us back The to my horse and the Union Grove Methodist Church.

The next night, the night after the night riders, me and Aubrey got baptized together in the creek, we hurried it up a little because his Mama was waiting back at the burnt house for us. I hauled up the bucket of creek water, baptizing water now, and we headed back to Aubrey's house. We're gonna baptize the house with the water too. Then we're gonna start rebuilding it.