

"Ashes"
Short Story

(PARTY LINE collection)

✓✓

✓Ashes✓

"Edsel!" she called. "Edsel, git on up and git a fire agoing. It's turnt off cold in the night."

She lay breathlessly listening for the sounds his feet would lend to the wind howling and the rain rapping at her window.

It was dawn. She knew it by the short rhythms of her sleep, although the hand of darkness still snuffed the light.

He'll get up now, she thought, knowing that his body felt it also, that his feeble mind sensed it. He never did much for her, but he always built fires, roaring fires - sometimes causing a chimney blaze. Then everyone in Sowell, Georgia turned out to banish the fierce, red pipe, taking a chair from the porch to the yard for her to sit on, patting her shoulder while she scolded him. And he would scuff the dirt and flash his bare-gummed grin, his childish face beaming like the moon.

He ain't got ary dab of sense; that's how come Bubba to up and drink rubbing alcohol. I told him to give him a little shine til he could get offn it. Hog drunk it all hissself. My old man, says they named a aute'mobile after him.

"Edsel! You gitting up or ain't you?" she yelled, lower than she intended, listening to the raspy loneliness of it under the rain's pelting on the tin roof.

Hope he set out the pots to catch it, she thought, looking at the dark window. It was glazed with the fog her breathing made; so she lifted a bleaden hand and wiped it, allowing it to drop back to her side. Getting as bad as the other'un from the stroke, she thought.

She could see light now, but it was only the security light at the convenience store next door. No better than no light, not real. Little Miss Ella Fay would soon hurry past to open up. Six o'clock, everyday, when she came by in her man britches.

The wind lay in like a reply, jarring the whole window with its answer.

Yesterdy, I think it was, I was ascrubbing for Old Miss Lula, me and the younguns. No, Suggie ain't no youngun no more, and Bubba's done gone on to his reward. Drunk that old rubbing alcohol.

"Edsel, you up?" she called, listening for steps in the next room. In the wind's fierceness, the shotgun house creaked, like nails pulling.

She thought about him the last time she had seen him in the light - yesterday or day before - watching him from her window as

as he meandered home from his pilfering, pecking at the dirt with his stick cane. Ash-gray beard had frosted his face, and cataracts filmed his green eyes, like scalded milk skim. He had never used a cane before. Could he be getting old, she wondered? Remembering the capers of his youth, his randy antics, she decided not. Bout time he left womenfolk alone.

"Edsel, a front come through in the night and it's freezing cold. Come on and git a fire agoing."

Little Miss Ella Fay'll be acoming to open up any minute now, looking for me through the winder. I'll wave at her, like I always do. If he ain't up when she comes by, I'll call out for her to see if she can't check up on him, if it ain't too much bother. He always takes me to b'excused first thing in the morning before he gits out.

A chill stole over her as the cold rushed around the window. Deeper beneath the quilt she snuggled, seeing the patterns of it in her mind - not fancy patterns but square scraps of Bubba's and Suggie's old clotheys, hand-me-downs from Miss Lula's children. Each scrap reminded her of a day, a moment, a period of their lives that was gone, like the spring, but fresh as a resurrected jonquil.

That blue-brown, cowboy and indian shirt - flannel, it was - what Bubba had on when he cut his foot in two, tagging back of Suggie to the river. Suggie never did step on broke bottles.

"Ashes"

She was lucky like that. Even found herself an old man that didn't beat on her and didn't come back no more. Had herself a lil ole pinafore - red, seems like, she thought, fondling the memorized scrap on the quilt. Got the fire beat out've her at school that day, so I let her quit. She was going on thirteen then and smart as a whip. Didn't need no booklearning.

Bubba, now he got good marks til he fell off the playslide and broke his collarbone and Edsel got mad as a hornet. Jobbed holes all in it from up under it. Said they wadn't no use in no sech for younguns to fall offn. Got aholt of lil ole Bubba, too, for gitting hisself broke up. Took a dog fennel, that time, and blistered his r'arend.

"Edsel!" she called, hopelessly, allowing the name to drop like corn in wash tub.

Turning her head toward the room, she thought she could make out the potbellied wood stove with the crack - seeing the red crack in her mind's eye only. If she strained she could see the table, caked with grease and crumbs, and the sofa, covered with an olive-green army blanket. But she couldn't remember if it was scratchy or soft. Still the dark was as thick as the wind, and one, filling the space she breathed until her breath grew crowded as her mind, cluttered with memories like the room's junk.

A new calendar flapped on the wall, unseen. 1986. When did the last two decades glide past? Before they had galloped on thundering hooves, merging but separated by events she could pinpoint: the time Bubba slumped bleeding on the floor while the dogs sniffed him. And the time Suggie jumped in the well, yelling distant and hollow, "Mommer! Mommer! Help!"

And then there had been the fair, when Edsel got drunk and took them all to eat cotton candy and ride the ferris wheel. They had laughed that evening, seeing the tops of the oaks in Sowell for the first time, associating the roots and branches and trunks - the whole trees seen at once. And then dashing down to the ground with their stomachs rising in their throats.

She felt the giddiness rise in her and smiled.

As Edsel advanced in years, he pulled his belt tighter on his emaciated waist until it dangled like a tail between his legs.

"Babe, what'cha got cooking," he always said, coming in, sheepishly. She knew when he had been into mischief by the gleam in his eyes and the way he rammed his fists into his pockets, dancing from foot to foot. After his teeth fell out, he looked like a baby, innocent and churlish, creased cheeks reddening like crab apples.

"Don't tell me you ain't been up to nothing, Edsel Tate. I know you, good as I know myownself," she would snap, going on cramming the wood in the stove, expecting nothing.

He had never worked regular a day in his life; she had expected that, also. She knew when she married him that he was a loafer. But she married him anyway, for something to do, thinking to change him, forgetting it as she got caught up in work. They managed with her taking in washing and such.

Suddenly, the room grew lighter and her breathing leveled as she recognized the familiar wall where the calendar flapped. It had a picture of a girl leaning against a pine tree, the only reason for its being. Edsel had brought it home. She could smell the rank fragrance of them, her family, herself, like sulfur and

██████████ '6
"Ashes"

rancid lard.

"Edsel! Edsel!" she shouted, listening with all her strength, as if a breath, a twitch of a finger, lay between her hearing, between his inevitable arising.

She jerked her head toward the window, straining to see through the gray veil of dawning, through the wind and rain, her torturous companions in the dark. They flung the moss in the oaks with an angry zeal, less angry than in the dark, unseen, though.

A swift car passed on the highway, only a shard hissing like fire. And walking past, hunkered beneath a black umbrella, Miss Ella Fay hastened toward the store with her eyes bearing straight ahead.

Edsel's old lady struggled to sit and lifted a fist to the window pane, rapping, rapping, knocking knocking.

Miss Ella Fay walked on without looking to the left or to the right at the white face pressed in the window, like left-over traces of canned Christmas snow.