

details-similies

Pagination

fresh descriptions---really see them

f7--Lilly (Rose), end, head, now, even, back, right, left, down, it,

ain't (hit, hain't), stood

heap, edge, end, used, stood

Beck and Barn

*Remember woman
path --*

Walty - for story

At school plays, Beck would back down the aisle of the old portwine brick auditorium, leading Barn to his seat with outstretched hands. Like a child's game or some old-timey dance. Though age had rendered him blind, he was still tall, bland-faced with curly gray hair, tilting on the downslope like a pine in the wind. She was midget-sized with the body of a girl and an old woman's horsey face; her gray hair was skinned back in a knot on her nape, and she wore long print frocks, bleached homespun pinafores, and brown hightop shoes. Both were smiling and plump from partaking of their homemade corn buck. Happy with nothing but each other.

Seated, she would proceed to tell him who was doing what on the stage, the narration salted with local family names and details such as white paper windows and doors taped to the green velvet curtains. A jangling ring onstage. "They got a real telephone, Barn--black, like the one they just got at the courthouse."

Night breezes through the real window on Beck and Barn's right would carry in the scent of cooling earth, like raw peanuts, and the static keening of katydids--a hypnotic mingling with the read-aloud

voices of the actors and the satisfied creaking of folding wooden seats. Until a standing child would cry out after dropping into the slot between a folded-up seat bottom and the back.

Beck would turn, look, report to Barn--"Lil ole gal of Barbran and Skink's got hit's legs stuck in the seat"--in that rusted out voice.

Play over, she would lead Barn up the aisle again and out into the spring night, speaking to everybody under the brick archway, "Goodnight." Barn's feet would shuffle on the concrete walk, to the gravel road of the bus runaround behind the school, along the dirt strip through the Negro quarters where couples laughed or quarrelled and babies cried, and young men lingered, smoking in the dark. Then the set-back silence of the east fork at the end of the road and the pinewoods that stretched thirty miles to the Okefenokee, timberland deeded to Beck's older brother King sometime back when their daddy died, and this southeast ^{corner} of palmetto-nestled flatwoods, a mere acre, jointly deeded to Beck and her younger brother, The Count. A perfectly understandable arrangement since Beck was only a woman--a little woman, at that--and The Count would have swapped his inheritance for a fifth of whiskey one dry day, ~~and~~ ^{Besides,} King would take care of them both for as long as he lived and then some, had even hired two-room cabins built for Beck and The Count, her front porch facing south, with a view of the woods, and The Count's front porch facing west, with a side view of Beck's house and porch; ✓ and if he was lucky, a glimpse of the road, through her tin cans and pots of Mother-in-law Tongue and purple Wandering Jew and Hen and Biddies and any other flower she could beg a cutting of from the good

people of Cornerville. So far, except for numerous but minor disagreements, they had managed to get by, shared the water from the brick well between cabins, and even a ^{ask Seward} yellow cur dog.

The red coal of a cigarette flared in the seething dark of The Count's porch. Hunkered-down silence, smells of rancid lard, ~~whiskey~~ ^{whiskey}, sour dirt and piss. The yellow dog leaped from the low porch, barking. "Hesh up," said The Count, "and get on back here."

"How you tonight, Brother?" Beck said, backing up the doorsteps with Barn attached to both hands like a mule to a trace.

"Brother," said Barn, shuffling with her across the screaming porch floor and through the door of the neat cabin that smelled of her lye scouring.

And then the sudden yellow glow from the lit kerosene lamp through the east window.

Goodnight.

###

Only Beck woke up the next morning, in the room with the cold fireplace smelling of smut, two rocking chairs and a mantelshelf with a gilt-framed, coffee-tinted picture of Barn in his soldier uniform-- it could have been any war, but it was World War I.

✓ Only one chair rocked, and for close to a month, Beck sat watching the picture and ^{spew} spewed snuff into a slow fire. Sipping corn whiskey from a cracked white mug, crock jug alongside for comfort. Brown furry streaks of snuff, like rat tails, dried in on the concrete hearth, and the windup clock on the mantel ticked down.

The good people of Cornerville came and brought fresh blackeyed peas with lots of liquor, and cornbread--her favorite, Hopping John-- which she didn't eat and didn't eat and finally didn't even sip the cornbuck or dip her snuff.

One morning she just gazed at Barn in the picture and the clock stopped on 11:55, placed her can of Peachtree snuff on the mantelshelf and dragged her brown-checked cardboard suitcase from under the iron bed made up smooth ^{as an iced cake} and tight with bleached homespun sheets. She packed white drawers and aprons and print frocks and put on her brown hightop shoes and headed down the road, through the quarters, past the school, to Cornerville and Hoot Walters' store where she caught the Trailways bus to Miami, Florida, to visit Barn's sister Minnie.

###

She stayed gone for six weeks, then one Friday at midday, midsummer, while the whole town of Cornerville was sitting down to dinner, she stepped ^{down} from the Trailways bus at Hoot Walters' store, and with short mincing steps, she walked up the sidewalk, along the plain frame houses fronting 94, to the old schoolhouse.

✓ Her ^{giant} regular-size face was wrinkled and splotched as the brown papersack she toted in one arm. Her green eyes were squinched--her nose like a ^{fish} ~~fish~~ in the center of her face--and her lips set tight against grief. She was going home.

Well, what else could she do?

Up the horseshoe gravel road, behind the schoolhouse, she went, to the bend where the row houses of the Negro quarters shared one rich black yard, ^D dogs barked and naked and near-naked children chased

along the woodline, ~~of scruboaks and bays, pines and blackgums.~~ A
finger-on-the-buzzer sound of locusts.

On to the straightaway and the tiny cement block Church of
Christ, where she went when she wanted to, and then more shanties up
to the curve where at the end she could see the front of The Count's
unpainted cabin with tall pines in the background, and in the
foreground the lone brick chimney and the cold settled ashes that
used to be her house.

The yellow cur with lit gold eyes and a heart face lunged from
the Count's porch, barking. She stopped, waited, looked, set the
suitcase and the papersack of Florida oranges and crochet work from
her sister-in-law Minnie next to the scorched crepe myrtle with
blooms the color of dried blood.

She stepped into the ash block that outlined where her cabin
used to be and over to the the hearth, then sifted in the ashes till
she found an ^{2-shaped} edge of the burnished gilt frame that used to display
Barn's picture.

She stared up at the leached blue sky with its white sun
centerpoint, like a crocheted daisy, ~~and trekked on across the ashes~~
~~to where her kitchen used to be,~~ stepped over the charred hull of a
foundation beam, to the crumbling brick well she had shared with her
brother all those years.

When her eyes adjusted from the bright sky to the gloomy ash
^(cinders)
heap she saw The Count standing in the doorway of the his low porch:
slick clay face and sharp chin, mangy pants bunched at the waist,
~~and~~ tall and skinny with a crest of brown hair ~~that~~ looked fashioned from
crossed tobacco sticks.

Cinders

*QUIFFS or Quiffs
With each step
planted her
high top shoes
white ash
rose in little
puffs.*

*He was
tall and
rigged from*

*if the
like a created
scarecrow*

✓ "Burnt to the ground, Sister," he said. "Weren't a thang in the world I could do about hit." He stepped across the sorry porch, to the doorsteps and sat as if he had just stepped inside after fighting the fire. He smoked a hand-rolled cigarette, held between his smutty thumb and forefinger, then thumped it to the dirt where broken glass and tin cans glittered in the sun. A rusty logging chain snaked along the edge of the porch. Her ashy castiron frying pan sat on a broken chair by the door.

"Did my derndest to put hit out," he said.

She stepped into the greasy shade of the tin porch eaves.

He looked down with that amazing self-pity he was best known for in Swanoochee County--except for arson and thievery, that is.

Finally she spoke: "You burnt up my house. You burnt up my only picture of Barn, didn't you?"

✓ He stared up at her with those nickel-rimmed green eyes. "I hain't done no sech a thang." He pointed to the aluminum bucket hanging from the well teackle. "See that bucket yonder, I toted hit back and to for upwards of a hour, trying to put hit out. Old fat litard'll burn," he said.

"Will when you set hit afire," she said.

"Aw, Sister, you know me bettern that." He stood, straightening his brown belt that hung like a tail between his legs.

"Was in your way, my house was," she said, "so you got shed of hit."

"In my way of what?" he said, bowing up like rooster and squaring his narrow shoulders. His toothless red gums shone.

"Couldn't see no whiskey revenuer coming up the road's what," she said. "So you burnt hit to the ground." She held up the ^{ell} edge of ~~the~~ picture frame, a strange iridescent, like oil on water. "You burnt up Barn's only picture and I aim to see you in jail for hit."

She turned and traipsed back to the line she had drawn in her mind over the years of where her yard started and his stopped.

"Your own baby brother," he called out. "You'd put your own baby brother in jail over a picture?"

"Barn's picture," she said and kept walking through the ashes with her brown hightops now powder gray, to the scorched crepe myrtle and her suitcase and the paper sack.

She was still holding the ~~strip of~~ ^{the ell of} picture frame, evidence or keepsake, as she started down the road again.

The yellow dog they used to share followed her to the biscuit white two-story courthouse and plopped bellydown with a grunt in the oak-~~shaded dirt~~ ^{shade} by the doorsteps and waited while she went inside.

Of course, the evidence wasn't much evidence, and what can you do with a no-account like The Count? The Count, who got the last part of his name honest and the first part for his being dishonest and too proud to own up to his dishonesty or ^{even to} say I'm sorry. The Count, who would end up burning the old schoolhouse--another story--and the very courthouse where Beck's evidence was determined not-evidence, to get rid of the land records bearing proof that The Count's daddy had left, ^{piddly} vast acerages of timberland to his older brother King and only a half-acre to The Count.

She crossed 129, under the sole traffic light in Cornerville, set to blink on red, to King's cressote-pine commissary on the southwest corner of 129 and 94.

The one-room commissary was dim and cool, coming in out of the sun, smelled of dry cottonseed meal and the stale water of the red Coca-Cola box by the open door.

King was stacking crates of cola bottles behind the carved-on mahogany counter on the west end of the store. Bottles rattling hard enough to break. He stopped when he saw her floating in her long dress between the shelves of Vienna sausages and potted meat and soda crackers.

He had the same slick clay countenance as The Count, was tall as *A* the Count, but sturdier built and neat in starched green twill. "You home, I see," he said in that high muffled voice. He stood with his great hands spread on the counter.

She walked on up to to the counter, facing him. "Reckon you know *Burnt up my house* The Count burnt up my house?"

"Looks like hit, don't hit, Sister?"

"He done hit," she said. "Burnt up my only picture of Barn."

"Go on to my house and let Rose fix you some dinner."

"Ain't hongry, just mad. Done been to the courthouse to take out a warrant on him."

"What the sheriff say?"

She slapped the ~~picture-frame~~ *strip* on the counter next to a nail with stabbed green receipts. "Picture frame hain't no evidence, is what he said."

"Besides," she added, "said if he was to put The Count in jail, you'd just bail him out, cause of that promise you made Mommer on her deathbed."

told her
"Said I'd take care of him."

"And you have, Brother, for a fact."

"Worst day of my life was when I made that promise to Mommer."

"Well, what's done's done," she said and started out. "Just wish if he'd took a notion to burn something, hit wouldn't a been my only picture of Barn."

"I wouldn't put hit apast him, but since hain't no proof what you gone do?" King followed her to the door where the yellow cur waited. "Now go on over there to my house and tell Rose I said to put you up. We got room aplenty. I'll see to hit he says he's sorry."

"Hain't no I'm sorrays I'm after; I want him in jail." She floated out the door in the dust specks of ~~the~~ bothered sunlight.

###

When school started in September, Beck was sitting on King's front porch with Rose, watching the school buses pass along the shortcut between the ~~quarters and 94.~~ *Courthouse & the school*

"All I want is him to own up to hit," Beck said.

"Hit"--burning Barn's picture--was now The Count's biggest crime to date.

Rose rocked back, rocked forward, spat a cord of snuff to the raked dirt along the tall brick pillars of the porch. "You oughta took hit with you. You oughta took that picture to Minnie's with you." Her hard dark eyes made her look mad, pious, opinionated, but she was none of those, and seldom sided with either wrong or right. She just listened.

"Rose, I want you to see to hit that King makes him own up to hit." Beck no longer expected The Count to ~~go to jail~~; ^{he arrested} he'd done worse in other people's book--stole, ^{burned barns,} ~~you-name-it~~--but not to her. And like King, before her house burned, Beck ^{had been known} used to take up for her baby brother.

From the schoolhouse to the post office, to Hoot's store, she stopped off at houses, telling how her own brother had burnt her only picture of Barn, and asking everybody whether The Count had ever owned up to his tresspasses against them. ^{irony: at first she wants} ~~him in jail, then to own up to it, then say he is sorry, then she ends up forgiving him--town is growing numb to her story)~~ ^{delete}

When spring came again, and the school plays started, only Beck and the yellow dog seemed even to remember. And though she carried the virulent iridescent ^{strip} of frame in her apron pocket, Barn's face was fading, memories of what made Barn who he was and special grew as mottled as the strip of frame, and the grudge against The Count was turning into ^{only} a sluggish recollection, till ^{finally} it was only one more in a growing number of The Count's sins.

"All I want is him to say I'm sorry for burning up Barn's only picture," Beck told the postmistress, who stood in the window with her long white fingers shuffling mail like playing cards.

"Like I said yesterday, Aunt Beck," said Miss Cleeta, "he'll come around." Dark head low, she went on sorting mail, then stepped left behind the wall of black mailboxes and began placing the mail into separate ~~boxes~~ *chambers*.

"He ever say he's sorry for robbing your roll of package twine?" says Beck.

Miss Cleeta stepped to the window again, *cloche* of wavy black hair, solemn face. No answer. Then, "I got mail to put up, Aunt Beck," she says, "now you run on."

###

Beck drifted door to door from the post office to the string of stores on the north corner across from the courthouse.

"The Count ever say he was sorry for snatching up them ice potatoes ever time he heads out your door?" Beck asks Hoot Walters.

"No 'um," said Hoot, "and I don't want him saying he's sorry, cause when a debt's cleared with that no-account, he'll *be* back for something else."

###

Moses Sharp:

~~Hosier Sharp:~~ "No 'um, and weren't looking for no I'm sorrys out of that scoundrel--beg your pardon, ma'am. Run off with one of my Fashion Frock order books to give to some woman. A old book, I'd of give it to him if he'd just asked." *# # #*

Beck walked west along the shoulder of 94, about one-half mile to the cemetery on the right, this side of the wooden Alapaha bridge.

Her hightop shoes had worn a path like a cattle trail along the shoulder of split-tipped smut grass, and she could pick out Barn's headstone from the plain old look-alike stones on the south side of

the cemetery, with its green backdrop of hollys, bays, scruboaks and pines along the river bank. Like the other headstone, Barn's was looking a bit moldy lately.

She trodded over prickly pears and centipede grass knitting over ~~the~~ sand, and on to Barn's grave with a Mason jar of dead magenta phlox she had picked on her way last time.

"I just want him to say I'm sorry," she said to the scabbed over mound of sandy dirt. "That's all."

Swaying in her long dress, squat shadow heaping on the mound, she listened to the breeze in the trees and told Barn how she needed his picture now to remind her of how he looked. She told him she was lonesome and she wanted to go home--not that King and Rose were anything but kind. But ~~it~~ was not home there, you understand.

In the sougning of the breeze, Beck listened for Barn's reply, as always. Sometimes when it was storming he sounded mad at The Count too, but this time he sounded sweet and mild as he really was and told her in the slurring of the breeze that she need to let it go, ~~that~~ she had to get along with the living just as he was getting along with the dead. Though for a fact, the voice in the rattle of leaves, sounded like somebody else's voice, or maybe she was forgetting how Barn sounded just as she was forgetting how he looked.

###

"I come to say I forgive you for hit," she said to The Count sitting on his doorsteps. She was standing on the line where her ~~yard~~ ^{halfacre} used to end and his started.

Only the chimney remained on the ashy spot as a reminder of where her house ~~used to sit~~ ^{once sat} and the mantelshelf where the only picture of Barn ~~once~~ stood.

"You're my own blood brother," she said.

The yellow dog slumped to the dirt with a groan.

"I hain't done hit, Sister," ~~he~~ ^{The Court} said and shook his shaggy head.

"Hit's a known fact I burn up stuff, but I hain't done hit this time." He stood up, spoke up, hands on his waist and hip cocked. He waved one hand over the ~~pitiful~~ ^{pitiful} acre of sand and ash he shared with her. "I'll build you another house to prove the old one wadn't in my way."

By winter, he had rigged up a one-room shack of stolen 2x4s and junk lumber. Looked like an chicken coop.

It stood due north of the site where Beck's old house ~~once~~ ^{had} ~~stood~~ ^{been} in the pinewoods belonging to King.

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Sammy
Message

Rock