

check ~~word~~
adjectives ending
in f

Beck and Barn

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 nappy 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 hightop brown shoes. Both were ^{keep smiling} 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 paper windows and doors taped to the green velvet curtains.

✓ Night breezes through the tall rippled ^{on Beck & Barn's right} windows would carry in the scent of cooling earth, like raw peanuts, and the static ringing of katydids, while ~~inside~~ the monotonous voices of the actors droned on to the creak of ~~the~~ folding wooden seats. A standing child might cry out after dropping into the slot between the seat and the back.

Beck would turn, look, report to Barn, "Lil ole gal of Barbran and Skink's," 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 scrolled wood 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 quarelled and babies cried, and young men lingered, smoking in the dark. Then the set-back silence at the end of the road and the pinewoods that stretched thirty miles east to the Okefenokee ~~the~~ timberland deeded to Beck's older brother King sometime back when their daddy died, ~~and~~ and the southwest corner of palmetto-nestled flatwoods, a mere ~~half~~ ~~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 jug of moonshine 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 her house and porch; and if he is 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 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, 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 ~~cold~~ smut, two rocking chairs and a mantelshelf with a ^{set} metal-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'd} spewing snuff into a slow fire. ^(last line) Brown furry streaks, ^{snuff} like rat tails, ^{dried in} on the caving concrete hearth. Sipping corn whiskey from a cracked white mug, crock jug alongside for comfort. ^{clock ticks and stop}

✓ The good people of Cornerville ^{came & cornbread} brought her ~~brisket~~ stew and fresh blackeyed peas with lots of liquor, ^{keep her favorite} 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 11:53,} placed her can of Peachtree snuff on the mantelshelf, ~~next to him,~~ ^{and dragged} pulled her brown-checked cardboard suitcase from under the ^{iron} bed made up smooth 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} up 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.

~~(detail to designate time--~~

###

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 from the Trailways bus at Hoot Walters' store, and with short mincing steps, she ^{walked} ~~headed~~ up the sidewalk, along the plain frame houses fronting 94, to the old schoolhouse.

Her regular-size face was wrinkled and splotched as the brown papersack she toted in one arm. Her green eyes were ^{squinted} ~~narrowed~~—her nose like a fist in the center of her face--and her lips set tight against grief. She was going home. ^{para} Well, what else could she do? ^{she went} Up the horseshoe gravel road, ~~behind~~ behind the schoolhouse, to the bend where the row houses of the Negro quarters shared one rich black yard, dogs barking ^{red} and naked and near-naked children chasing ^{red} along the backdrop 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 ~~her~~ *the* suitcase and ~~papersack~~ *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.

(detail what she sees in ashes) She stepped into the ash block that outlined where her cabin used to be and over to the the caved hearth, then sifted in the ashes till she found an edge of the *black wood* burnished metal frame that ~~used~~ *had* ~~to~~ *displayed* contain Barn's picture.

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

When her eyes adjusted ~~from~~ *from* the bright sky to the gloomy ~~ashes~~ *ashes*, she ~~sees~~ *saw* the Count standing in the doorway of ~~the~~ *his* low porch: slick clay face and ~~pointy~~ *pointy* chin, mangy pants bunched at the waist, tall and skiny with a crest of brown hair ~~on~~ *on* top of his broad head. He looks ~~fashioned~~ *created* ~~from~~ *from* crossed tobacco sticks. He is smoking a hand-rolled cigaretted.

"Burnt to the ground, Sister," he says. "Weren't a thang in the world I could do about hit." He stepped across the sorry porch, to ~~the~~ *the* doorsteps and sat as if he had just stepped inside after ~~fighting~~ *fighting* the fire. He smoked the cigarette, ~~held~~ *held* between his smutty thumb and

forefinger, ^{then ed it} thumps ~~the~~ cigarette to the dirt where a broken ^{glass} shine jug
^{+ tin cans} glitters in the sun, like a bubble. Tin cans, jars and an old logging
chain ^{cracked along} are under the edge of the ^{porch} house. Her ashy black frying pan ^{sits}
in a broken chair ~~on his porch.~~

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

She stepped into the greasy ^{shade} 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 upwars ^{ds} 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 square phid}

"Couldn't see no whiskey revenuer coming up the road's what," ^{narrow shade}
^{He totter}
^{red gums}
^{show}
she said. "So you burnt hit to the ground." She held up the edge of
the picture fram ^y, 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." (~~toothless red gums shinging.~~)

"Barn's picture," she said and ~~trunked~~ ^{trunked} back through the ashes with her brown hightops now powder gray, to the scorched crepe myrtle and her suitcase and ~~paper~~ ^{the} sack.

start here She was still holding the ~~metal~~ ^{strip of picture frame} frame edge, evidence or keepsak, as she started down the road again.

indirect 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 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 his name that way and who would end up burning the old schoolhouse and the very courthouse, where Beck's evidence was determined not-evidence, to get rid of the land ~~deeds and~~ records bearing proof that The County's daddy had left vast acerages of timberland to his older brother King.

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

(here she wants the count in jail)

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, but was tall as ~~the~~ Count, but ^{sturdier - built.} ~~stouter~~ 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

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 Lilly 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 ~~piece of picture frame~~ ^{frame strip} on the counter next to a nail with ^{green} ~~stabbed~~ with receipts. "Picture frame ain't no ^{evidence} ~~eveidcen~~, is what he said."

"Besides," she ^{ad} ~~adds~~, "said if he was to put Count in jail, you'd just bail him out, cause of that promise you made ^{The} ~~Mama~~ on her deathbed."

"Said I'd take care of him."

"And you have, Brother, for a fact. ^{you have.}"

"Worst day of my life was when I made that promise to ^{Mama} ~~Mama~~."

"Well, what's done's done," she ^{id} ~~says~~ and starts ^{ed} ~~out~~.

"Go on^over there now to my house and tell Lilly I said to put you up. We got room aplenty."

"ain't no place to stay I need right now," she said and floated out in the dust specks of the bothered sunlight.

###

When school started in Septemer, Beck was sitting on King's front porch and watching the school buses pass along the shortcut between the quarters and 94.

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

"Hit"--burning Barn's picture--was now ^{the} ~~the~~ Count's biggest crime on record.

Lilly rocked back, rocked forward, spat a cord of snuff to the raked dirt along the tall brick pillars of the porch. She rocked.

"Lilly, I want you to see to hit that King makes him own up to hit." (Beck didn't expect ^{the} ~~the~~ Count to say he was sorry; he'd done worse in other people's book--stole, liked, you-name-it--but not to her. And like King, before, she ^{used to} would take up for her baby brother.

From the schoolhouse to the post office, to Hoot's store, she stopped at houses, telling how her own brother had burnt her only picture of Barn (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) Though when spring ^{come} ~~comes~~ again, and the school plays start^{ed}, only Beck and the yellow dog seemed even to remember. And though she carried the viruletn iridescent fragment of frame inher apron pocket, Barn's face was fading, turning into a fragment the size of the frame (growing to the size of the frame) and

the grudge against the Count was turning into a sluggish --til 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 tells the postmistress, Miss Cleta, standing in the window with her long white fingers interlaced.

"Like I said yesterday, Aunt Beck," said Miss Cleta, "he'll come around." *She* sorted letters, placed a stack in one of the black boxes to her left.

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

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

###

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

He "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 come back for something else."

###

Hosier Sharp: "No 'um, *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 patch like a cattle trail along the shoulder of ~~forked-tipp~~ ^{split-tipped} smut grass, and she could pick out Barn's headstone from the plain old look-alike stones on the south side with green backdrop hollies, ~~babys~~ and scruboaks and pines of the river bank. Like ~~the~~ other headstone, Barn's was looking a bit moldy. ~~later,~~

She trodded over prickly pears and centipedes ~~snaking~~ through 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 Lilly were anything but kind. But he was not home there, you understand.

In the sougning of the wind, Beck listened for Barn's words, as always--~~sometimes~~ ^{some} times 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; she had to get along with the living just ~~as~~ as he was getting along with the dead. Though for a fat ~~the~~ voice in the rattle of leaves, sounded like somebody else, ^{is} 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, standing on the ^{to the Count} line where her yard started.

Only the chimney remained on the ^{asky} spot as a reminder of where her house used to sit and the mantel shelf where the only picture of Barn used to stand.

"You're my own blood brother," she said to ^I the Count on the porch.

The yellow dog slumps ^{ed} to the dirt with a groan.

"I hain't done hit, Sister," he said and shook his shaggy head.

^{It} "It's a know fact, I burn up stuff, but I hain't done hit this time." He stood up, speaking loud, hands on his waist and hip cocked, "I'll build you another house to prove the old one wadn't in my way."

By winter, he has ^{ed} rigged up a one-room shack of stolen 2x4s and junk lumber. Looks ^{ed} like an outhouse.

It stood due north of the site where Beck's old house once stood, ^{in the pine woods} on the ~~property~~ belong to King.

*He would
have right
hand over
the half
acre he
shared with
her.*

Sumner

F 7 head, now, even, back,
right left, down
~~her~~

sound of sandy dirt. "That's all."

Swearing in her long dress, what words were they?

she listened to the breeze in the trees and...

his picture she had received...
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