

“Cicada”

When grandpa was naked, I didn't see his doohickey. I was on the porch an' his belly hung big an' low like a melon.

Mama said, “For the love of God, Charlie...” She called her dad *Charlie* 'cause she said he weren't no dad o' hers.

Cliff, Mom's sleep-over friend, said, “Is he drunk?”

It weren't that simple, mama said, on account o' grandpa bein' off his rocker an' it weren't a real sure read to say liquor was come to play.

So mama hadn't seen Charlie for ten years but his showin' up naked in the twilight of the front yard was just another rusted link in the great chain o' misery. Some people never laugh or smile. My mama never knew surprise from ordinary after daddy left. He took off with the savings an' the red-headed hairdresser at *Veronique's Cuts and Shaves*. For three years, mama turned down the sheets regular-like an' set an extra place, admittin' no surprise. Then Cliff come an' moved into the spaces where daddy used to be an' the neighbors said there'd be no surprise in that house.

“What are you doin' here?” mama said to her daddy.

“I'm readyin' to fly.”

Mama didn't say pea turkey 'bout that. She said, “Missy, get fixin' for bed.” And I knew better to argue.

Cliff didn't say pea turkey but when he was hungry or annoyed. “What are yuh gonna do with that old, naked fart?”

I bust a gut when I heard that. *Old naked fart!* Cliff looked at me like one of those lions that kills the babies o' him that was before.

Mama said, "He can sleep in the barn. More blankets than Frank Junior needs." Frank Junior was our horse. He was born o' the union of his mama, World's Fair, and a traveling salesman named Frank. My mama says there's no other explanation. Three hundred an' forty days later from cock's crow to cock's crow. She wasn't surprised.

We left grandpa cross-legged an' naked in the yard. He's got teats like a boar hog an' long white bunches o' hair an' arms an' legs skinnier than a cricket's.

Of a sudden, grandpa raises his fist at the lot of us, says, "I don't give a dried apple damn!" *Hallelujah*, I think.

So, I'm out an hour later sittin' with grandpa under the crab tree. I get naked 'cause fair's fair.

Grandpa looks at me and says, "I can hear the nymphs. I hear their song from the earth."

That's just crazy luck, 'cause my teacher, Miss Johnson, told us once that nymphs are beautiful girls asleep in trees an' things. But grandpa says I got my nymphs all wrong. He's talkin' bugs an' he tells me the story of the cicada nymphs that spend seventeen years underground eating tree roots before livin' as winged adults for only a few weeks. "I've been lost for seventeen years," he says, "and now I am come home to be re-born."

I tell grandpa that mama says he's been away for ten years. He seems puzzled by this, like he figures the number of spokes in the wheel was a done deal.

“Missy,” he says, “nothin’s true but believin’ makes it so.”

“Halleluiaah,” I say. “Jane Piccolo stole my butter pecan once an’ her sayin’ it was hers a thousand times made everyone think it were so.”

“Missy,” he says, “you and I are gonna make a world of myth and Jane Piccolo and her lies can go to hell.”

What with a word like *myth*, grandpa sure has a funny way o’ talkin’. His eyes bug out an’ he’s amazed. I take a shine to grandpa. What with daddy gone, and Cliff and Sneaky Pete down the road, I was thinkin’ like mama that men were last in line at creation. They got a bolt o’ lazy and a pound o’ selfish which means they’re always in a bad mood on account o’ wantin’ things an’ never liftin’ a finger to get ‘em.

But grandpa's different. “Missy,” he says, “it’s time to build the temple.” So, he gets up an’ walks over to the barn to fetch what it is he needs. It’s dark as molasses in there, but I can hear him movin’, and movin’ things. Sure enough he comes out dragging’ a tangle o’ chicken wire an’ God Almighty he’s got cutters, too.

That’s when all hell breaks loose. I was jus’ thinkin’ about Sneaky Pete an’ there he is in the road before the yard with a fishing pole in one hand an’ a jar o’ leeches in th’ other. He’s out for catchin’ more o’ them cats than he should, sneakin’ ‘em away in the dark. Anyway, he looks at me an’ grandpa an’ then runs an’ grabs me by the arm an’ pulls me toward the house raisin’ a god awful racket.

And mama and Cliff come down and everyone’s angry as the devil. Cliff an’ Sneaky Pete say grandpa's a pervert an’ I shouldn’t be naked with ‘im.

Mama says, “He’s a lot o’ things, but *that* he ain’t.”

Cliff says, "A man's desires change."

Sneaky Pete says, "Temptation is what made the crow fly."

I can go to my room or take a lickin'. From my window, I see Cliff in front of grandpa an' I hear the words *son of a bitch* an' Cliff pushes grandpa, leaves 'im sittin' beside the wire an' the cutters, like he wouldn't piss on 'im if he was on fire. *Big show*, I think. *Big show, Cliff*. I can barely see mama. She's standin' tall with one hand to her mouth, like a trunk cut through with lightning. I can't see her face. I don't imagine there's any surprise, anyway.

The next morning, I'm listenin' in secret to mama. She's tellin' Cliff in the kitchen that her daddy ran a junkyard an' fancied himself an inventor, used to be handier than a pocket on a shirt. Story had it he was God-fearin' once an' then he stopped believin' when the last o' the litter was born without arms an' legs an' a brain. He took to talkin' to himself an' walkin'. And walkin' and talkin' got 'im lost for ten years.

"Everybody breaks different," mama said.

I scarf my cornmeal an' grab my book bag for school an' go outside and God Almighty grandpa's built himself a huge bug statue outta wire. He's sittin' in the middle of it naked like it were a flying machine an' I remember what he said about fixin' to fly.

"Good morning, Missy," he says. "You'll be seeing a few changes around here. Hurry home if you're of a mind to witness the transformation."

*

I loved my teacher, Miss Johnson. She showed me to write *himself* for *hisself*, said I could go to college 'cause I sop like bread. She was young an' she

came from the city to replace Miss Carswell who had a breakdown. Miss Johnson dressed in clothing that was soft an' colourful an' she smelled like lilac. And all the boys were in love with 'er, too. Even though they were mostly stupid an' mean, all she had to do was look at 'em an' it was like Sunday School, Jesus puttin' out his hand an' tossin' the demons outta the pigs.

Anyway, that year, Miss Johnson taught us about evolution an' I was real curious 'cause Jill Patterson piped up an' said that her daddy said that evolution is a lie an' anyone who believes it is a *prostitute*.

Well, Miss Johnson bust a gut when she heard that an' because we all wanted to please Miss Johnson, we all bust a gut. But Miss Johnson stopped quick an' said she was sorry. I never heard a teacher say that. And Miss Johnson said we needed to keep an open mind about evolution.

And it *was* the most amazin' thing. We pushed the desks back an' she brought a kiddy pool out o' the coat room an' filled it with water that she coloured green with dye an' then we all got a chance to throw seeds in, bird and corn an' the like, an' then Miss Johnson put a green paper shade over the desk lamp an' asked me to turn out the lights an' then she said to get the dinosaur an' animal toys that we got from cereal boxes at the Hardware on Main an' stand 'em up around the floor an' while we did that, Miss Johnson put on a record called "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" that came all the way from South Africa an' we all sang the "wimoweh" part an' it was the right song, what with family startin' in the swimmin' hole in Africa for all of us.

“The world was once a big bowl of soup over 4.5 billion years ago,” Miss Johnson says. “All life evolved from the sea. Natural selection meant that the stronger species survived.”

So, we’re all dancin’ an’ singin’ *wimoweh* to “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” an’ some o’ the boys are playin’ *animal fights* around the big soup to see who would live an’ who would die an’ then Principal Early comes in an’ asks to talk to Miss Johnson an’ she goes away an’ comes back forever later. And you could see that she had been cryin’ an’ the rest of the day was like a funeral for God knows why.

We didn’t get a lotta evolution after that. Miss Johnson told us that God created the earth in six days an’ that the sun was created after an’ the whole thing took about 10,000 years. And then there was the garden an’ Adam an’ Eve an’ lickety-split a whole heap o’ trouble on account o’ God hoggin’ the apple tree for himself. You could see that her heart wasn’t in it. She read time to time from the same book I seen in Sunday school.

I asked Miss Johnston if she believed in the idea of the soup or the idea of the garden. “What’s goin’ on, anyway?”

Miss Johnson bit her lip an’ hesitated. Finally, she said, “I will speak the truth.” The truth had some relationship with the door ‘cause she kept lookin’ at it while she talked.

“People create what are called *myths*” she said.

I hollered, “My *grandpa*’s makin’ a myth! He thinks he’s a grasshopper!”

It weren’t exactly true, but Miss Johnson was dead serious. “Myths are stories that people believe in to comfort themselves. People are afraid. They need to believe there is an obvious reason for everything. There was no garden,” she

said. “No Adam and Eve. No apple tree of special importance. It’s just a myth. It’s not true.” And then Miss Johnson reaches into the cupboard under the sink, her eyes never leavin’ the door. Out comes a kinda model with monkey an’ human-like shapes on pins. An’ from one end to the other they get taller an’ straighter.

Miss Johnson clears her throat and says, “Today, I am going to tell you the story of *Lucy*.”

*

The day grandpa come, I was walkin’ home cryin’ ‘cause Principal Early said that Miss Johnson went away an’ she wouldn’t be coming back. Miss Johnson had important business back in the city. We knew that was a bald-faced lie, ‘cause there was adults goin’ in an’ outta the school an’ meetin’ with Principal Early an’ they looked like packs o’ wild dogs. An’ Miss Johnson wouldn’t leave without sayin’ goodbye. An’ God’s my witness Principal Early smelled like hooch.

And if that don’t beat all, I turn left at the John Deere, and there’s a mob in the road at my house, like it were a fair or a funeral. I drop my book bag and skedaddle. Grandpa’s crouched naked an’ high in the apple tree. An’ he’s painted himself like the cicada. He’s mud-black with orange body stripes ‘cept for his back where the stripes don’t meet but sorta wander south toward his butt. An’ God Almighty, he ain’t alone in that tree. It’s covered with adult cicada jus’ like he said. And folks are sayin’ it’s not to be believed. They come once every 17 years and this makes 10, tops. And Sneaky Pete says, “There’s only one way to explain it.” And grandpa sees me an’ he waves like it were a picnic.

“Missy,” he says, “I waited for you. The time has come.” And he tells me matter of fact that when he wore pants, he had pockets with the right papers in ‘em ‘bout the myth of the cicada. And I should read up on it when he’s done his two weeks o’ singin’ an’ flyin’.

And I look behind me at mama and Cliff. Cliff’s got his lips puckered like he were gonna spit crab apple juice, but mama? She jus’ stands there starin’ at her daddy like he’s a ghost.

An’ God Almighty if he don’t start singin’! An’ Sneaky Pete says, “That sparks o’ the real Mckoy. That’s *real* good. It’s your male,” he says, “that’s got the mating sounds. The female don’t got a voice.” He adds, “There’s two weeks o’ peace in the home.”

An’ then the whole tree is alive with the song o the cicada. An’ grandpa, maybe once in 10 or 17 years, has got ‘imself a place in this world.

An’ I’m watchin’ mama as grandpa prepares to fly. An’ what I hear next is an awful *smack* and – I’m sure of it – one less voice in the chorus. And what mama’s got on her face ain’t nothin’ like horror or when your breath goes with sadness or shock. Mama looks surprised, like all her expectations were contrary an’ the fact of it were hard up against her feelings ‘o doubt. An’ God if I didn’t know it outright, but Cliff’s days were numbered. *Hallelujah.*

*

In March of a much later year, the almond trees slumbered beneath a hoarfrost whose delicate embroidery threatened but did not subdue the bees and the blossoms; my second son, Charles, was born in the company of his father and my mother; and Miss Patricia Johnson tapped me on the shoulder in the Easter

chocolate aisle of Walmart. Oh, how my heart leapt! She was as a cordial to my supplicant in the temple of childhood worship: a soul in bliss, sweetly perfumed, elegant as Roman antiquity, principled as rain.

“Missy,” she said. And we remembered high school graduation when she was still as a picture against the gym wall.

Of course, inevitably, our talk turned to Principal Early. The gardens darkened in her eyes and the declension of her lips was immediately twisted with the stabbing and thrusting of her wet tongue.

“Oh,” she hissed, “he screwed me over, he did.” And even though I stop listening, I still hear the words, *son of a bitch*.