

The Passing of Jeremiah Martin

“He was such a wonderful man.”

“A real man. They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.”

“This town is sure going to miss him.”

I watched her studyin’ the line of folks as they filed by the center attraction at the end of the room. He was surrounded by every kind of the flower he despised, only a few here and there he would have liked. Deciding, there was nothing more of interest to her among the strangers, she came over to where I was sittin’ and plopped down on the floor by my swollen, twisted excruciating feet. Taking a deep breath, she sighed like the weight of the world was on her seven-year old shoulders, and laid her head over onto my lap.

“Granny, you smell like funeral home flowers.”

I stoked the shiny black head of hair that had taken up residence on my knees, thankfully finding some comfort in the act. “Well, I guess I should child. I feel like I been sitting here for days. My whole body is achin. I figure you ‘bout had enough of it yourself.”

“Who are those people talkin’ about, Granny?”

I almost laughed right out loud. “They’re talkin’ about your Grand-Daddy and my late husband.” I had to wipe a tear away at having said that.

“Wow. I didn’t know. I’m sorry, Granny.”

“That’s alright child. They’re talkin’ about a man you’re prob’ly too young to

remember. The man I married and the man they knew and loved. Not the man who wasted away these last four years in that wheelchair all hooked up to them machines that kept him going after he was done with it.”

“Oh.”

“I wish you could have known him when he was young. He was quite a rounder, your Grand-Daddy. Why he could make the worst old sourpuss cackle till they wet their britches.

There was this one time, not long after we got married. J. was working down at the railroad depot in Lawson. He'd been riding trains as long as I knew him and he missed it, having to stay put in one place all the time. Poor thing, was missing it right bad that morning so he was primed and ready when one of them fancy rich ladies from down round Charlotte come up to his window fussin' and fumin'. She was tryin' to get to Asheville for one of them high dollar weddins. She had a small child with her. Your Grand-Daddy felt so sorry for that little boy. Said that crazy high falutin' woman had that youngin' all dressed up like he was goin' right to be baptized. Shiny white shoes, white socks and white suit jacket with them little knee britches that just reached to the top of his stockings. You wouldn't remember those, you're too young, but they was the high fashion back then. That woman was a fussin' and carryin' on over havin' to wait fifteen minutes for their next train.

J. kept an eye on 'em while the woman took her seat on the bench to wait, still fussin'. That little boy was evidently use to her racket. Didn't seem to bother him not a bit. The boy sat quiet and waited till his Mama was all caught up in tellin' the gentleman who'd had the misfortune to take his leave 'crosst' from her about her problems. When

he figured his Mama wan't payin' him no mind, he slipped real easy-like out of his seat. Once he got hisself well out of range of his Mama, he went to hummin' to hisself walkin' around, just lookin' for somethin' to get into. Well your Grand-Daddy, he just couldn't stand not helpin' the boy out. J. felt sorry for him, like I said, but he also felt like that boy's Mama was due a lesson in bein' simple folks, a maybe a little Mama lesson to boot.

J. come out from behind the ticket window and motioned for the boy to follow him. That little feller didn't even hesitate. He took off after J. like a shot. You youngin's these days can't be doin' that 'cause folks is mean now, but it wan't that way back then.

Your Grand-Daddy steered the boy to a little room off the platform that he called his eatin' room. He got his lunch pail, and pulled out one of my fried blueberry pies. He said when he took the cloth out from around that pie, that little feller's eyes got bigger'n punkins. J. broke that pie in half and give half of it to the boy. Knowin' full well what kind of mischief he was makin', he told the boy he might ought to sit down at the table to eat it, so as not to waste it. Just to prove to hisself he wan't really tryin' to cause trouble, J. give the boy one of them rags he always carried in his hip picket to wipe his hands on and left him be to enjoy his pie. It wan't more than five minutes later, your Grand-Daddy heard the awfulest caterwaulin' he'd ever heard in his life. The litt'un had finished his pie and gone back to sit down by his Mama. He wan't quite the way he was when he left her though. Papa said that youngin' had them blueberries from one h'it to the other. All over his face, his hands, and all over that white suit. Even had dripped down onto the toe of one of them shiny white shoes. Ever'body in the place just fell out a'laughin'. Your Grand-Daddy right along with 'em. The boy's Mama jerked him up and

went to draggin' him toward the door. J. said that boy turned back toward him before his Mama got him through the door, and winked, smilin' from ear to ear. Said you could hear the child holler ever once in a bit from way out at the pump where his Mama was tryin' to wash out blueberry stains with pure mountain water. J. said it served her right. Dressing a fine young man like that all in white. He said they wan't no self-respectin' young man worth his salt be caught meetin' Saint Peter, in a suit a' clothes like that without a little dirt or stain on them somewhere.

See there. I told you. Here we are both smilin' and you a gigglin' and your Grand-Daddy layin' over there in that pretty maple box, dressed like he was goin' right to be baptized. Wish I'd a thought of that before I had 'em put him in that white suit. He just always looked so handsome in it."

My grand-daughter looked toward the casket and got to her feet. "I got somethin' I got to do, Granny. I'll be right back."

"All right then. Don't you wander far."

"I won't Granny."

They was another round of well-wishers comin' in the door anyway. About halfway through the last bunch of them that come to pay their respects, I noticed the funeral home director fidgetin' just behind.

"Is there somethin' you need?" I asked him. He was makin' me nervous and I wanted him to get whatever he wanted over with and get on with his business.

"Madam, I, well, I want to apologize. We were very careful, the suit being white and all, but I guess accidents do happen. I just can't figure this one out."

He was stuttering and stumbling all over hisself apologizing to me and I didn't

have the slightest idea what for.

“Spit it out man. What is it?” I had little patience for men of such a nature.

“It has been brought, unfortunately, to my attention that, well the white suit you had us so carefully attire your, um Mr. well, it has dirt on it, Madame and I am truly sorry. I have no idea how that happened. It is just so obvious. I don’t understand why no one mentioned it until now. We’ll have to change his suit, naturally before the funeral. Would you prefer to purchase one or did he possibly own another suit you would prefer?”

My first desire was to see if I could smack him hard enough to knock some of that stuffy out of him, and make his tongue work a little slower, but I held my temper. Gruntin’ and makin’ them old woman sounds that I’m prone to makin’ these days, I managed to get myself up out of that chair. My legs was tingling and I wan’t sure I was gonna be able to walk, but I needed to see what had that funeral home fussy so upset.

I wan’t lookin’ forward to it. I’d managed to avoid standin’ by his box with other folks around up till now. I didn’t think I’d be able to take seein’ J. there in that box in amidst comp’ny.

Taking a deep breath, I turned toward the prone, still body of my dearest Jeremiah. The Director was right. There on his left sleeve, pretty as though it had been put there on purpose was a tiny muddy hand-print. It’s source, I had no doubt, was just then placing her still grimy little hand into my own.

“You know anything about this, child?” I asked, looking down into a face that so mirrored the now still one that I had gazed into ever night and ever mornin’ for better’n fifty years.

“I reckon he’ll like that better, Granny.” She said.

I smiled. She was going to carry on for Jeremiah and she hadn’t even known him. I figured it was time she knew a little more about him, and I reckoned I ought to be the one teach her.

“I think he’ll like that just fine.” Chuckling, I turned to the Director. “He’ll do just fine the way he is, sir. No need to change his clothes”

The funeral director looked stunned.

“No self-respectin’ young man worth his salt would be caught dead dressed like that without a little dirt on him somewhere.” my Grand-daughter explained. “Specially not when he knows he gonna have to be face to face with Salt Peter.”

I think she’s gonna do just fine.

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