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It was a slow freight in from Kansas City. I'd nearly emptied all the fluid from my gut sac. There were no weeds or water to fill it again. When the freight hit the outermost switching lines of the yards it was already dark. I rolled myself off the edge of the boxcar, hit running, went twenty feet fast and slipped, fell to my hands and knees, and tumbled over. When I got up there were tiny bits of white chalk stone imbedded in my palms; I rubbed them off, but they really hurt.

I looked around, tried to gauge my position in relation to the town, and when I recognized the spire of the First Baptist, set off across the tracks in the right direction. There was a yard bull running like crazy toward me, so I went dark and left him standing where I'd been, scratching the back of his head and looking around.

It took me forty minutes to walk into the center of town, through it, and out the other side, in the direction of Littletown—the nigger section.

There was a coal bin entrance to the All-Holiness Pentecostal Church of Christ the Master, and I slipped inside, smiling. In twelve years they hadn't repaired the latch and lock. The stairs were dim in the basement darkness, but I knew my way the way a child remembers his bedroom when the light is out.

Across twelve years, I remembered.

There were the occasional dim rumblings of voices from upstairs, from the vestry, from the casket room, from the foyer.

Jedediah Parkman was laid out up there. Eighty-two years old, dead, tired, at the end of an endless road down which he had stumbled, black, poor, proud, helpless. No, not helpless.

I climbed the stairs from the basement, laid my white hand against the dry, cracked wood of the door, and thought of all the weight of black pressing back on the other side. Jed would have chuckled.

Through a crack in the jamb I saw nothing but wall opposite; I carefully opened the door. The hall was empty. They'd be moving into the vestry now. The service would be beginning. The preacher would be getting ready to tell the congregation about old Jed, what a good man he'd been, how he always had enough heart for the stray cats and deadbeat kids he picked up. How so many people owed him so much. Jed would have snorted.

But I'd arrived in time. How many other stray cats had made it?

I closed the basement door behind me, slid along the wall to the pantry door that opened into the small room adjacent to the vestry. In a moment I was inside. I turned off the light in the pantry, in case I had to go dark, then I crept to the door in the opposite wall. I opened it a sliver and peered out into the vestry.

Since the bombing the chapel had been unusable. I'd heard about it even in Chicago: seven had been killed, and Deacon Wilkie'd been blinded by flying glass. They'd made do the best they could with the vestry.

Folding chairs were set up in rows. They were filled with the population of Littleton. They were two deep around the walls. One or two white faces. I recognized a couple of other stray cats. It'd been twelve years: they looked as though they were making it. But they hadn't forgotten.

I watched, and counted blacks. One hundred and eighteen. A few days ago, I'd been in Kansas City, there'd been one hundred and nineteen. Now the one hundred and nineteenth black man in Danville's Littleton lay in his casket, atop sawhorses, in the front of the room, surrounded by flowers.

Hello, old Jed.

Twelve, it's been.

God, you're quiet. No chuckles, no laughs, Jed. You're dead. I know.

He lay, hands folded across his chest. Big catcher's mitt paws folded, calluses hidden—sweet Jesus, I could see flickering candlelight glinting off his nails. *They'd manicured his hands!* Old Jed would've screamed, doing a thing like that to a man bit his nails to the quick!

Laying up in a shallow box, neat black patent leather shoes pointing toward the ceiling; kinky salt-and-pepper hair flattened against the silk lining of the box (eighty-two, and that old man's hair still had black in it!); lay in his best suit, a black suit, clean white long-sleeve shirt and a yellow tie. On display. Looking down at himself, for sure, from the Heaven he'd always believed was up there. Looking down at himself so fine, and smiling; puffing proud, yes *sir* !

On each of his eyes, a silver dollar.

To pay his way with the Man, across the River Jordan.

I didn't go in. Never intended to. Too many questions. Some of them might've remembered; I know the other stray cats would've. So I just laid back and waited to talk to old Jed private.

The service was a brief one, they cried a decent amount. Then it was over and they filed past slowly. A couple of women did the big falling down trying to get in the box thing with him. Christ knows what Jed would've done with *that*. I waited till the room emptied out. Preacher and a couple of the brothers cleaned up, decided to leave the chairs till morning, shut off the lights, and went. There was silence and a lot of shadows, just the candles still doing their slow motion. I waited a long time, just to make sure, then finally I opened the door a bit more and started to step through.

There was a sound from the door to the outside, and I pulled back fast. I watched as the door opened and a tall, slim woman in black came down among the chairs toward the open casket. Veil over her face.

My gut sac went total empty right then. Lining started to burn. I thought sure she'd hear the rumbling. Sprayed it with stomach juice and that would hold it for a while till I could get weed and water. Burned.

I couldn't make out her face behind the veil. She walked up to the casket and stared down at Jed Parkman. Then she reached out a gloved hand toward the body, pulled it back, tried again and then held the hand motionless in the air above the cold meat. Slowly she swept the veil back over the wide-brimmed hat.

I drew in a breath. She was a white woman. More than just ordinarily beautiful. Stunning. One of those creatures God made just to be looked at. I held my breath; breathing would release the sound of the blood in my temples, scare her away.

She kept looking at the corpse, then slowly she reached out again. Carefully, very carefully, she removed the coins from Jed's dead eyes. She dropped them in her purse. Then she dropped the veil, and started to turn away. She stopped, turned back, kissed her fingertips and touched the cold lips of the penniless dead one.

Then she turned around and left the vestry. Very quickly.

I stood unmoving, watching nothing, chill and lost.

When you take the money off a dead man's eyes, it means he can't pay his passage to Heaven.

That white woman sent Jedediah Parkman straight to Hell.

I went after her.

* * * *

If I hadn't keeled over, I'd have caught her before she got on the train.

She wasn't far ahead of me, but my gut was burning so bad I knew if I didn't get some grass or weeds in it I'd be in wicked shape. That happened once in Seattle. I barely got out of the emergency ward before they could X-ray me. Broke into the hospital kitchen, pumped about eight pounds of Caesar salad and half a bottle of Sparkletts water into my sac and wound up bareass cold in a hospital gown, out on a

Seattle street in the dead of winter.

Hadn't thought that for a second before I went over on my face, half a block from the Danville train station. Legs went idiot on me and over I go. Had just enough sense to go dark before I hit. Lay there, a car might run me over. No idea how long I was out, but not long. Came back and crawled on my belly like a reptile onto a patch of grass. Chewed, pulling myself on my elbows. Got enough in to get myself up, staggered the half block to the station, fell onto the water fountain stuck on the wall. Drank till the stationmaster leaned way over the ticket window, staring. Couldn't go dark, he was looking straight at me.

“You got business here, mister?”

I felt the lava juices subsiding. I could walk. Went up to him, said, “My fiancée, you know, a bad fight, she come down this way...” I let it wait. He watched me, wasn't giving away a little thing free.

“Look, we're supposed to be married next Thursday—I'm sorry I yelled at her. Half out of my, well, hell, mister, have you seen her? Tall girl, all in black, wearing a veil?” Sounded like a description of Mata Hari.

Old man scratched at the beard he'd sprouted since he'd come on at noon. “She bought a ticket for KayCee. Train's 'bout to pull out.”

Then I realized I'd been hearing the whoofing sounds of the train all this time. When my sac goes, everything goes. I started hearing and smelling and feeling the grain of the ticket counter under my hands. And bolted out the door. Train was just getting ready to slide; express freight was almost loaded. Behind me, the station master was bellowing. “Ticket! Hey, mister ... ticket!”

“Get it by the conductor!” And I vaulted up onto the coach platform. The train edged out.

I pushed open the door to the coach and looked down the rows of Pullman seats. She was there, looking out the window into the darkness. I started toward her, but thought better of it. There were a couple of dozen passengers between her and me. I couldn't do anything here, now, anyway. I dropped into a scungy seat, and puffs of dust went into the air.

I slid down and took off my right shoe. The twenty was folded neat against the instep. It was all I'd put aside. But I knew the conductor would be along to punch my ticket. And I didn't want to get caught like Jed Parkman. I wanted my fare to be paid.

We'd see about it in Kansas City.

It was a change. Riding inside.

* * * *

She went to a phone booth and dialed a place without looking up the number. I waited. She went out to stand in front of the terminal. After a while a car with two women came up, and she got in. I went dark and opened the back door and slid in. They looked around and didn't see anything in the shadows back there; and the heavysset woman, a real truck, who was driving, said, “Now what the hell was *that* ?” and the pimply one with the plastic hair, the one in the middle, reached over the seat back and thumbed down the lock.

“Wind,” she said.

“*Whatwind?*” the truck said. But she pulled out.

I always liked K.C. Nice ride. Even in winter. But I didn't like the women. Not one of them.

They drove out, almost to the Missouri border, toward Weston. I knew a bourbon distillery out there. Best ever made. The truck pulled in at a big house set apart from slummy-looking places on a street with only one corner light. Whore house. Had to be. It was.

I didn't understand, but I'd by God certainly find out soon. I'd arrived, but Jed was still traveling.

* * * *

The truck said, “You pay the girl.”

I picked out the tall slim one in the harem pants and halter top. She couldn't be smart, I thought. With a face like that, when her sand wasn't nearly run out yet, to come to rest in a slurry crib like this, was some kind of special stupid. Or something else.

We went upstairs. The room was like any bedroom. There were stuffed animals on the bed, a giraffe with pink day-glo spots, a koala, floppy gopher or muskrat, I can't tell them apart. She had a photo of a movie star stuck in the frame of the bureau mirror. She took off the harem pants and I said, “We'll talk.” She gave me a look I knew. Another freako. “That's two bucks extra,” she said. I shook my head. “Five should cover everything.”

She shrugged, and sat down on the edge of the bed, her thin legs straight out in front of her.

We stared at each other.

“Why'd you send Jed to Hell?”

Her head snapped up on her neck and she quivered like a hound on scent. She didn't even know how to ask me.

“You get the hell out of here!”

“I've got five bucks' worth of something coming.”

She bounced up off that bed, and went straight across the room. She was screaming before the door was open:

“Bren! Bren! C'mon, Bren! Help up here!”

I heard the foundations of the house shake and the rumble of artillery on the next hill, and then something big and hairy came at me. He had to come through the door sidewise. I put up my hands and that was all. He carried me straight across the room, into the bureau. My back snapped against the edge of the bureau and he bent me till everything started to slip up toward the ceiling. The girl ran out, still shouting. When she was gone I ended it for him.

There was a trellis outside the window. I went down until the ivy ripped loose and I fell the rest of the way.

That night I slept on the front porch of the house next door, in the glider, watching the ambulance and then the police cars come and go. There were two unmarked police cars that stayed very late. I don't think they were on duty.

* * * *

I waited two days, sleeping on the front porch of the house next door. I'd have gone dark more than I did, but there were three empty lots between me and the whore house, and the people with the front porch had gone away for a while. I suppose on a winter vacation, maybe. There was plenty of weed and grass around, and I let snow melt in an empty milk bottle. At night I'd go dark and steal Hydrox cookies and milk and beef jerky from a 24-hour market. I don't eat much, usually. Missed coffee, though.

On the second day I jimmied a window in the empty house. Just to be ready.

Toward evening of the second day, she came out.

I went dark, waited on the sidewalk for her, and she walked straight into my fist.

In the empty house, I laid her out on a canopied bed in the master bedroom. When she came to and sat up, I was slouched in a chair across from the bed. She shook her head, looked around, focused, saw me, and started to let go with the screaming again. I sat forward in the chair and said, very softly, "Bren, what happened to him, I can do that again," and she looked sick, and shut her mouth. "Now we go back to where we were," I said, getting up. I walked over and stood there near her. She lay back, terrified, no other word for it.

"How did you know Jed?" My voice was level, but I was hurting.

"I'm his daughter."

"I can make you tell the truth."

"I'm not lying, I'm his ... I was his daughter."

"You're white."

She didn't say anything.

"Okay, why did you send him to Hell? You know what it means to take the money."

She snorted a very shitty laugh.

"Lady, you better understand something. I don't know who the hell you are, but that old man found me when I was seven years old and kept me alive till I was old enough to go it on my own. Now he meant stuff to me, lady, so I can see myself getting mad enough at you to do just about *any* thing. More green than even Bren. So you feel like telling me why you'd do something like that to a man who was kind to everybody?"

Her face went very hard. Even scared, she hated. "And just what the hell do *you* know? Yeah, he had kind for everybody. Everybody 'cept his own." Then, softly, "Everybody 'cept me."

I couldn't tell if she was sick, or deluded, or just putting me on. Lying? Not where she was. No reason for it. And she'd seen that Bren. No, she was telling the truth—if she believed it.

A white girl with old Jed for a father.

It didn't make any sense.

Unless...

There are some you can meet—the strange, twisted ones—and you know them by an aura, a scent, a *feel* about them, that if you had one *single word*—like “junkie” or “nympho” or “hooker” or “Bircher”—a key word that labeled their secret thing, you would understand all the inexplicable off-center things about them. The one-word people. One word and you've got the handle on them. One word like “wino,” or “diabetic,” or “puritan,” or—

“Passing.”

She didn't answer. She just stared at me, and hated me. And I looked in her face to see it, now that I knew what it was, but it wasn't there, of course. She was good at it. And that explained what had been between her and old Jedediah Parkman. Why she'd kissed the dead meat and sent it straight to Hell. But not the kind of Hell Jed had consigned her to. If he'd had all that kind of love for stray cats like me, I could imagine how strong his hate and frustration and shame would have been at one of his own pretending to be what she wasn't.

“You never know about people,” I said to her. “He took in all kinds, and didn't care where they came from, or what they were. Just as long as they didn't lie about it. He had a lot of love.”

She was waiting for me to do something bad to her, what she thought she had coming. I laughed, but not the way Jed used to laugh. “Lady, I ain't your daddy. He's punished you all he's ever going to. And you and me, neither one of us is white, and we're too much alike for *me* to punish you.”

Passing. How about that. She didn't know what the color line even *looked* like. Black for white: hell, that's a cinch. Jed, Jed, you poor old nigger bastard. You knew I couldn't get home again, back to whatever world it was I'd come from, and you taught me how to pass so they wouldn't kill me, but you couldn't handle it when it happened to you.

I pulled my last five bucks out of my pocket and tossed it on the end of the bed. “Here, baby, get it changed and keep a couple of silver dollars for your own party. Maybe Jed'll be waiting and you can straighten it out between you.”

Then I went dark and started to leave. She was staring at where I'd been, her mouth open, as I paused in the doorway. “And keep the change,” I said.

After all, she'd paid the dues for me, hadn't she?

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