

The Boy Who Sang for Others

by Michael Meddor

This issue seems to have several contributors whose names might not be familiar to most of our readers. Case in point: Michael Meddor. Mr. Meddor's first published story, "The Wizard Retires," ran in our Sept. 1999 issue and went on to find a place on the final ballot for that year's World Fantasy Award. Mr. Meddor remains silent when asked if he has published any work under other names, and instead hastens to note that this new story has its origins in a talk given by storyteller Sheila Kay Adams. Mr. Meddor and his wife recently moved to a new home near Charlotte, North Carolina.

I were always scared of Granny when I were a little girl, and my Daddy had a lot to do with that, as you all know, because he were always talking about her behind her back. It were her fault that Momma run off, and it were her fault that Momma never come back. Some of you say she had a good mothering instinct, but she weren't never no substitute in my eyes. You all sit there in your rocking chairs, talking about the good old days, and you let her off by saying she were a mountain woman and she had her ways, but I tell you she had a hard look around the jaw, and she were hard on me and Bobby. I guess she loved us though. She always helped us out when she could.

You want to know about that time she came to live with Daddy and me and Bobby. Daddy never let me tell that story when he were alive. He had his reasons, but he kept them to himself. Daddy clammed up whenever somebody asked him about it, and if it looked like I might up and answer for him, he would say, "Ain't you got dishes to do?" Or he might say, "About time you got to mending that dress of yours, don't you think?" Of course my dress never needed mending because I wouldn't let myself be seen in a torn dress.

When my brother, Bobby, were eight years old, he got kicked in the head by a horse. I always thought Little Betty is probably the one that done it. She never had much patience, and Bobby always loved to pester the animals. It happened in the barn and no one saw it nor knew just when it happened. When Daddy found him lying in the dirt, Bobby were babbling something under his breath that Daddy couldn't understand. Strange, Daddy said, because the boy were unconscious and limp as he could be. He had never seen anything like it in the war or since. We put Bobby to bed, which was all we could do, and he stayed unconscious for many days. He come real near to death. Me and Daddy prayed right hard over him.

We sent for the doctor, but he didn't come right away. We prayed for

Bobby, like I said, and now and then we got some water down him, but never no food. Then one day he just woke up. I were standing right next to him when he opened his eyes. He saw me, but he didn't recognize me, and that's when I guessed that he wouldn't be Bobby anymore, poor thin little thing that he were. The doctor finally came, but there wasn't anything he could do. That's when Granny come to live with us, because I couldn't take care of everything by myself. I were only twelve.

Granny stood no more than five foot two, but she were heavy and round. She had her own method of keeping house, and she let everyone know it, especially me. It were her special delight to scold me by way of teaching me how to cook and clean. I didn't like it, but Daddy said that's the way it's got to be.

Granny said, "The boy will come back to us one day. He'll be as strong as ever. We just got to be patient." I knew that weren't right. It would take a miracle, so I prayed for Bobby every night, and I waited for the miracle. Granny wouldn't help me pray. She never said why.

I made up a plan because I thought it were up to me to bring my little brother back to normal. Daddy couldn't do it because he were too busy with the farm, and I didn't have no faith in Granny. I decided that Bobby needed to see his friends. He needed to play and run around and get to being his old stinky self. I announced this plan at dinner one night. Granny had a biscuit in her hand, and she stopped it halfway to her mouth. She said, "It's too soon, dear. It's not safe." I had no idea what she meant by that. What's not safe?

Daddy had taken a big drink of cider. He let it settle for a second. He said, "We'll let time take its course. Time and prayer." I said okay, fine, sure, but I wanted to get it done, and, I have to admit now, I wanted the credit. I wanted it to be me that fixed Bobby. But I had to bide my time.

After a couple of months, Bobby walked around the farm without falling down and he ate with his own spoon and mostly took care of himself in the bathroom and whatnot, but he never said nothing except to babble under his breath. He couldn't do chores, and sometimes he got lost if he went around to the back side of the barn, but Granny would send me to find him and he'd always be okay. I thought he were doing real good, and Daddy believed that our prayers were what done it, so I said we should take him to church one Sunday. I thought he might meet some of his friends that way, though I didn't say so. Daddy didn't object to the church idea. "Be good for the boy," he said. "A little church never hurt nobody." Granny shook her head, but that were a battle I had won before it even started.

It were me, and Daddy, and Bobby. Granny didn't go. She never went to church. That were a big reason that Daddy talked bad about her. Anyway, being in a crowd did not bother Bobby. Folks said Hi and Glad To See You, and he seemed to take it okay. He knew which pew to go to although I had to give him just the tiniest shove before he would enter it. The service began and everything were fine until we sang the first hymn. We got a little way into it and then Bobby started singing along with us even though he had never said a word back to anyone. He sang loud and sort of like a girl, and the rest of us kind of trailed off to hear him, we were so surprised, but he kept right on singing with only the organ helping him. And then Mr. Bellamy broke down a few pews back of us. "It's Mary Jane," he cried, and after that he couldn't say anything more. And we all knew he were right. Bobby sat real still in the pew singing like Mary Jane who were that very year dead and buried right outside. The organ stopped playing, Bobby stopped singing. Or were it Mary Jane stopped singing? Mr. Bellamy left the church and I swear he didn't show up again for two years or more.

The preacher back then were the Reverend Mr. Silver, the one who had the buggy with the yellow-painted wheels. I'm sure you remember how even-tempered he used to be. He picked right up where the service had left off. He gave a reading and a short sermon. We come to another hymn. The organ played and we all sort of half sang, half listened for Bobby. He sang, but it weren't Mary Jane this time. Everybody took a deep breath and their singing got better. But I knew, even if no one else did, that Bobby were singing for a boy he used to play with named Craig who got run over by a tractor.

After the service we walked on back home and no one stopped us to say Hi, and everybody kept their distance. I knew why. I said, "Daddy, Bobby has other people inside him."

"Don't talk nonsense, Alice."

"But you heard him," I said.

"It ain't nothing. He sings like folks he heard before he got hurt. Ain't nothing surprising in that."

"Maybe we should leave him with Granny next Sunday."

Daddy thought it over, his face crinkling up. He always squinted when he had to think. "I guess we'll try it again. Church is the best thing for him. Jesus saves, not old women who don't believe." I thought he were probably

right, and maybe then the other kids would say Hi.

In the end though, after a couple more weeks, the Reverend Mr. Silver asked us not to bring Bobby to church anymore. Too many people heard their dearly departed in Bobby's voice when he sang, and everybody had got pretty spooked. Attendance had dropped way down. The Reverend Mr. Silver feared for his flock. It near broke my heart that even the church were against me and Bobby.

I didn't dare give up, though, and I prayed that something might happen to make him happier and bring him back to himself. That summer there were a picnic over to Lamarr which is where Granny lived before she come to live with us. I thought it were a good chance. Didn't nobody know me and Bobby over there, so I thought it would be okay to go there and show Bobby a good time. I saw by Granny's face that she were against the idea, but she also wanted to see her friends back home, so for her part she agreed. Daddy decided to go too.

And Bobby did seem to be pretty happy there for a while, sitting at a picnic table. He ate up a prodigious load of sweet potatoes plus all the hot dogs I brought him, and he laughed to see the other children at their games. But then some fellers with guitars and a banjo started playing and singing at the next picnic table. Bobby swayed and hummed and then he took up singing along with them. Seemed like he knew all the songs, even at his age.

Granny and me noticed that Bobby sounded like someone different every time he sang a new song. I begun to get worried. Daddy were away somewhere looking over horses and tractors. Nobody seemed upset though, so I held my peace and we let Bobby go on.

One of the guitar players got up to go take a nature break, and he gave Bobby his instrument to hold. Bobby strummed it. The man asked, "Do you play?" but Bobby didn't say anything. He would have said no if he could talk. When the guy walked away, Bobby put the guitar on his knee and played. It were real pretty, but we knew it weren't Bobby. Then he sang something and right away Granny took notice. "This is not good," she said.

"Do you know who it is?" I asked.

"Yes."

The man came back for his guitar. Bobby wouldn't give it to him. The man reached out to take it. Bobby raised the guitar up high and threatened

by his gestures to bash it to pieces on the picnic table. His eyes went black and his face went white. It was like his flesh had been pulled away leaving only the skull behind. He roared out a challenge to everyone in the park, and glared at the closest ones with his skull face. No one dared go near him. The man who owned the guitar ran away, and I guessed he were going after a shotgun. Bobby settled back into himself then, and took to playing and singing some more, only it were rough singing, angry singing. Whenever anyone took a step to get near him he rose up a little and showed that skull face.

That were the end of the picnic, obviously. The people gathered up their children and they all hightailed it for home. I wanted to run away too, but it were Bobby, and I daren't move. Bobby played and played. Granny and I hugged each other as we watched. I tried to pray for God's grace, but it were hard to think of words. Daddy returned at last, only he couldn't do anything either. He couldn't get close without bringing out that awful face. Bobby's soft little fingers started to bleed on the strings, the drops falling onto the knees of his jeans, but whoever had him by the soul wouldn't let him stop playing. Bobby cried as he sang, his tears rolling down his cheeks bright in the sunlight. I prayed, and I prayed, and I prayed.

Some rocks come sailing out of the woods. They landed all around the picnic table and some of them bounced off it until one of them hit Bobby. He stopped singing and sort of slumped off the picnic table. The guitar slid out of his grip. With the instrument gone the bad part were over. Daddy picked Bobby up and held him like he were a little baby. After a while Bobby stopped crying. I knew Bobby wouldn't be getting off the farm ever again. How would I ever save him?

When we got home, Granny washed Bobby's fingers and covered the tips with gauze and tape. When that were over, Daddy gave Bobby his most prized possession. It were the leather-bound copy of the New Testament that he got from his own Daddy for Christmas one year. "You hold on to this, Bobby. You keep it with you always and you won't have no more trouble with demons."

"Ghosts," Granny said.

Daddy stared Granny down, the only time I ever saw such a thing happen. From the look she gave him I guessed they both knew who the ghost were, but neither would give it a name. Daddy said, "Whatever it might be, it's after my boy's very soul, and it ain't no coincidence."

I thought, that's right. Because it can't get the soul it really wants. So I

hated Granny for Bobby's sake and I knew that her soul were already lost and black as sin.

Granny sat in Momma's rocker looking at me kind of sad like, and she didn't say anything back to Daddy.

Daddy took hold of Bobby by both of his little patched up hands and said, "Ghosts or demons or whatever evil thing might come our way, you have no reason to fear. You hold tight to this good book, for Jesus is in every page, and Jesus saves us all." Daddy's hands were rough and scarred from the war and from working with the plow, yet he pressed Bobby's hands ever so gently around the New Testament. "Do you hear me, son?"

Bobby showed no sign that he heard any of us. Even so, I felt better for Bobby having that good book.

Later that night, after I went to bed, Granny poked her head in the door of the room where me and Bobby slept. She whispered, "Don't cry, Alice. Don't cry. There's still hope."

I sat up in bed and yelled at her. "You leave him alone, you old witch. Don't you ever do nothing more to him, or I'll get you, I swear." I had more to say, but Granny were gone.

Over the next few days Bobby might sing three or four words of something and then catch himself. He would grit his teeth and work the muscles in his jaw to keep the next note from coming out. He always seemed to have tears in his eyes. Daddy made sure every morning that the New Testament were in Bobby's jeans pocket. It were too big for the front pocket of an eight-year-old boy, but it fit snugly in the back pocket. "It gives him the strength," Daddy said.

"Something gives him the strength," Granny said. "But for how long?"

I didn't like her talking against Daddy.

There came the day that Daddy had to go over to Jefferson County for an auction. I don't recall what he needed, cows or horses or what. But he were up before dawn and out of the house before any of the rest of us stirred. He left me a note on the kitchen table, and the note said that while he were gone I should do what Granny said.

Granny got Bobby up and dressed him which normally Daddy would

do. She put a big wool shirt on him and I didn't say nothing even though it were going to be a hot day. She brought him out to the parlor and sat him on a stool in front of the fireplace. He started to sing, but Granny said, "Hush," and he fell silent.

"I'll go get breakfast," I said.

"No. We'll have breakfast later. Right now we got to save Bobby."

I got some crazy pictures in my head, like we were going to do some witch dance right there in the parlor, or do something else equally bad that we were warned about in the Bible. I knew I had to prevent it, whatever it turned out to be. Granny opened her purse and pulled out a little silver pistol, the kind Daddy always called a woman's gun. And there Bobby sat staring at Granny with his back to the stone fireplace, the perfect target. And I'm thinking, do we got to kill Bobby to save him?

I grabbed Granny's arm to take the pistol away from her, but she shook me off like I were a little straw doll. I jumped up and stood in front of Bobby with my arms stretched out to keep him from getting shot. Granny checked her pistol to make sure it were loaded and all, then she dropped it into her apron pocket. I reached for the back of Bobby's pants to get the leather-bound New Testament, but it weren't there.

I begun to worry that Granny would shoot me in the back, and I begun to shake because, one, I couldn't go look for the New Testament and leave Bobby to get shot, and, two, without the New Testament I couldn't protect Bobby from Granny and whatever evil had got into her.

I heard an odd noise and I spun round to face her. From behind the sofa Granny had lifted out a brand new guitar and the odd noise come from the strings brushing the cushions. Lord knows where she got the guitar or how long it been hiding back there.

She come over to the stool. Bobby reached for the instrument. I tried to keep him from getting it, but Granny pinched me in the ear just so, and I fell away. Bobby took the guitar and right away that bad face were there, that bad thing.

Granny backed away. I saw her hand settle on the silver gun in her pocket. I cried out, "No, Granny, No!"

The white skull and the black eyes, they grown large and smoking. They defied her. Granny said, "You can't have him, Earl. He ain't yours and

he ain't mine." She showed the gun. The flaming eyes died back a bit. Granny said, "Now you get out of there, Earl. I mean it." The skull face seemed to get meaner and madder. Granny said, "I killed you once with this very gun, you unholy bastard, and I'm fixing to do it again." She raised the pistol and took aim. The ghost or demon or whatever it were howled in fear. I can still hear it today. I shouted, "Bobby, look out!" as I charged Granny. I rammed her with all my strength, but she wouldn't budge. I pulled at her arm with both of mine, but she just sighted down that barrel and pulled the trigger like I weren't even there.

The bullet lifted Bobby up off the stool and tossed him into the fireplace. And even though it were summer and we had no fire, poor little Bobby started to burn. I knew he were dead, but I found the strength to run to his slender little body and pull him out of the fireplace. I beat at the flames with my bare hands, and then he slapped at me and fought me off and he were coughing and wheezing and he weren't dead after all.

Granny helped me sit him back on the stool. She opened his big wool shirt, and there, tied to his chest, were Daddy's copy of the New Testament. Granny opened it up. The bullet had penetrated almost all the way through. Granny said, "Jesus saves."

Bobby said, "Alice, look at this bruise." His whole chest were turning purple. "It's a big un," he said.

I couldn't believe that he were speaking to me after all this time.

"They fear to get trapped in dead uns," Granny said. I like to have hauled off and punched her for that, but I guessed she wouldn't even feel it. "I'll go make breakfast while you two get acquainted," she said. And that's what she done.

Daddy never spoke to Granny again. More than once he told me that Granny were the cruelest person on the planet not to tell me what she planned to do. But I think she needed my fear, my panic, and my love for Bobby to make her bullet work. And that's why, a few years later, I forgave her.

So, maybe she were a mountain woman like you all say, and when you say it you ain't saying all that you mean, or maybe she were just old and knew things we ain't learned and maybe never will, but either way I were not afraid of her no more. I were grateful to her, mean as she were, because she were the one who fixed Bobby.

