

MALINDA FILLINGIM

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## Wars, Near and Far

“I wasn’t always an only child. I used to have an older sister but she ran away from home a few months after my older brother did. I have a younger brother too, but he got put away for people who are different. I miss him but not the other two.”

Jack sat quietly as he always did when I talked, listening to both me and his wife who talked to him so softly only he could hear her. The fact that she was dead didn’t stop him from talking to her, so I never brought it up. We sat on the screen porch he tacked up to his trailer so he wouldn’t be stuffed inside all day, it being hot without any air conditioning, a luxury only for the rich back in 1970.

I was in fourth grade and talked endlessly to him because I was the new girl and nobody talked to the new girl, except for Kitty who was my best friend because she was desperate for friends. Kitty looked like a boy and acted like one too, scratching without shame and belching more than Jack. I liked Kitty even though my mother said she was a bad influence on me. My mother was a bad influence on me but there wasn’t anything I could do about that.

I liked listening to Jack because I thought he needed someone to talk to about his pregnant wife who died while he was over Vietnam fighting for something he said made no sense. I was his only friend and everybody needs a friend, even if it is a girl who was as lost as I was, being dumped off here and there like a kitten nobody wanted. Kitty came over and sat with us on the porch some, but talk of death scared her. She rode her bike all over the dirt road that encircled our run down trailer park, the road that went nowhere. She said death was for old people, although Jack was the same age as my brother; the one who ran away, not the one

who had no choice. She said it was easy to die, but hard to live. I knew that to be truer than anything Kitty ever said.

Kitty was smart about things not learned in school, maybe that's why she failed two grades already and was taller than our teacher. Kitty said her mother was real smart, but old enough to die the day Kitty got born. I told Kitty it wasn't her fault but she said it was, maybe she kicked too hard to get born. Kitty carried her guilt around like the big bag of empty glass bottles we redeemed for money. They were Jack's beer bottles mostly. He said that was the only thing redeemable about him, but I disagreed. Jack had a lot redeemable about him, but he was just too empty to notice.

I was smart too, but in a different way than Kitty. My mother said I was arrogant, having dreams bigger than my britches. She had dreams once, but drowned them in Jack Daniels. I was smart about biscuits, fishing, thinking up stories, and God. I took hold of God's hand back when I was eating ice cream with my Grandpa B. He said God wasn't stuck up with so many rules you couldn't live. He said God was about what you could do; loving one another like the whole world was your best friend. He was the best grandpa ever and when he died, I ate ice cream for three years missing him.

Jack drank beer and I drank Pepsi, although I liked Coke better. Jack said since we were in North Carolina I should drink Pepsi, so I did. Them that mourn have rights. Jack said the baby was going to be a girl and maybe like Pepsi and maybe like to talk a lot like me, had she not died. I never knew what to say to Jack, never knew what I had to give someone so far gone down that pot hole of sadness. I sat there trying not to belch and nodded mostly, listening and agreeing when it seemed the right thing to do, wondering what it would be like to die, wondering what it would be like to really live, to dream so big you'd have to live in a two story house. Mother said dreams were only for rich people. I said dreams were for people who believed in them.

Every day when I got off the bus, I sat on Jack's porch so I wouldn't be a latch key kid and so I wouldn't have to sit alone and talk to myself. I talked about everything from tater tots to spelling bees, and what it was like to be an only child, a temporary girl whose trailer moved before weeds had time to grow under it. I talked about as much as Jack did, only I let him talk more since I tried to respect my elders and listening sometimes was hard for Jack, him with all those flashbacks of loud noises. I had flashbacks too, but mine were about brothers who loved me and a sister who was prettier than me, all gone now except for in my memory. I tried to have flash-forwards about things I wanted, not things that happened bad to me. I got stuck in

neutral a lot, but Jack said that was because we lived on a dirt road and it was easy to get stuck on dirt roads.

It happened one day that I came home from school crying so large Kitty told Jack that I needed a beer. I refused the beer, me already being baptized twice since one wasn't bona fide. Some of the rich kids on the bus called me trailer trash. Kitty threw her boots at them, but all that did was made her barefooted. I tried yelling back at them, but all the anger I tried to muster up came out as tears, a whole pool of them, so many I thought I had wet my pants.

Jack got out his gun and said he was going to shoot them rich kids, them hurting one of his own. Kitty ran home because she hated guns and I sat there trying not to cry anymore. I told Jack to put down his gun because the school bus was gone. Jack said he was sorry they called me that, said I wasn't trailer trash. I think I cried because I believed those rich kids, me with my hand-me-down clothes, two sizes too big, and tape around my shoes to keep them together and no big brother to defend me. I was a poor, temporary girl tossed out wherever her mother landed. I wanted to be a permanent girl, the kind that stayed long enough to plant something and watch it grow up straight and tall without being uprooted.

Jack put up his gun and said he was sorry again, sorry I had to hear that kind of talk, and sorry I had to put up with stupid people. He assured me he'd shoot them come Monday morning when the bus came back around. I told him that would just make another man sit on a porch and cry about his dead child, just like him.

Jack nodded. He knew I was right. He bought me a six-pack of Coke the next day and some peanuts to put in them, the way I used to have it when my siblings lived with me. He had listened to me after all, not just sit there and think about his own sorrows. Jack never shot the rich kids on the bus, but just knowing he would made me feel stronger, like I wasn't alone after all, like I could dream bigger.

I didn't know exactly what to say to a man whose mind stayed in the grave of all that mattered to him. But what I figured out was this: we each had a mountain of grief to climb and it sure was easier climbing it together on a screen porch put together with tacks than all alone in a house of gold waiting for redemption.

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