

## **The Hand in the Hayloft**

Katherine was a toddler when a water moccasin coiled in her lap. Her mother had gone inside and came back out not knowing whether to scream or to shoo the venomous snake away with a rusty shovel. As soon as she took two resolute steps toward her daughter, the water moccasin slithered off back into the brush. Mabel rarely worried about anything dangerous happening to Katherine after that, even in the backwoods of the West Columbia prairie. She reckoned that her daughter's ironclad innocence or dumb luck would ward off anything. Seven years later, Mabel asked Katherine if she remembered the snake in her lap, and she merely laughed, "Maybe I was just telling it good morning, mama."

It was a late summer day at the Bertram home. Mabel was preening the roses in front of the house, their father Oscar was out guiding a group of fishing tourists, and daughters Katherine and Mary were picking pecans into a tow sack. The ubiquitous pecan trees had foreshadowed the approach of autumn, discarding their fruit in an inch or two blanket of nuts that covered a vast extent of the property. The southern Texan humidity was a little more oppressive than usual, and the soil was springy with the wetness of light showers the previous night, which made the labor of scooping up the pecans that much more intensive-- and less fun.

Soon Katherine and Mary grew bored of the pecans, realizing that their father wasn't there to make them pick, or poke and pry open the luscious morsels with his pocket knife. Mary, the eldest of two, was the first to suggest an alternative to the day's work.

"What do you say we do a little trailblazing?"

"Where?" Katherine asked; there was little the sisters hadn't already explored.

“You’ll see,” Mary said and leapt up from their bed of pecans, darting past the house, Katherine followed her onto the neighboring dirt road--that single artery leading to the rest of the world. Follow that road for 10 miles, and you would have reached the town of West Columbia. But that isn’t where Mary took Katherine that day. The daughters went south, further into the coastal prairie mire.

They had the entire road to themselves, besides the bluebonnets that grew along the shoulder with a chorus of other wildflowers. Yellow buttercups, spider lilies, jesus eyes and tiny stars, and other various and sundry beauties with names the girls did not know. Their initial sprint had slowed to a dancing saunter, then an adamant march down the dirt path, until Mary took a 180 off-road turn through an opening in the brush.

The new landscape before them seemed more at home to the wayward alligator, but the sisters weren't averse to necessary obstacles where fun was concerned. Still, the brambled and overgrown trail beneath their feet prompted Katherine to clarify their destination.

“Where we goin’ again, Mary?”

Mary paused as though considering the weight of ruining a surprise, “Ever been to the burned-out barn?”

“No,” Katherine said, brushing aside her black hair and shoving up her cat-eye glasses, slipping down from the sweat of the day. “I don’t wanna get kicked off no rancher’s land.”

“We won’t. Besides, the barn’s all burned up. Abandoned. I heard about it from some boys in school.”

“Now what are you doin’ talking to boys, Mary-Augustine?” Katherine mocked their mother’s accusing trill with a sneer.

“Shut up,” Mary let a laugh slip. “They said it was haunted.”

“Haunted? You sure they ain’t tryin’ to impress you?”

“I don’t know. Guess we’ll find out.”

West Columbia could hold its own with a fair share of ghosts and skunk-apes, and their elder brother Emil even fancied himself a professional hunter of the latter. Even though Mary was guilty of raising baby alligators in the bathtub on occasion, the girls had learned from their brother that having something to do was more of the point.

“Well, what happened to it? The barn?” Katherine asked.

Mary slowed and set down on a fallen tree. They were both panting from the rigor of drawing breath in the stifling heat, summer’s death grip.

“They said an escaped prisoner hid out there,” Mary said. “He lit a cigarette, fell asleep, and the barn caught fire. He burned himself to death.”

“Well why would he do that?”

“Because he fell asleep of course.”

“Doesn’t sound like a very smart convict to me,” Katherine said. “Or a very scary ghost.”

“You’re too much,” Mary grinned. “So are you still in?”

Katherine nodded, “I’m in.”

And they both set back on the trail.

A black mass soon materialized through the brush, its charred ruin and ashen pallor at odds with the verdant greens and golds of the coastal prairie. A collapsed house shrank before the graven barn, which by some luck of the flames or lack of tinder hay, had retained its bulbous crown and

hayloft. Being burnt to a crisp made the barn look older than it really was, like some primordial sentinel just waiting for everything else to turn pitch-black too. People build barns, Katherine thought, and anything that people build can burn up and not be the same ever again.

The sisters spent a few moments under the leering shadow of the barn, “So, is *he* in there too?”

“Who? Oh *him*,” Mary said. “Probably not. Nothing left of him anyway. Let’s go in.”

Katherine surrendered a laugh at her sister’s usual boldness, “We’ll be stepping all over his ashes then. Great.”

There wasn’t a door anymore to push and creak open, just an open interior occupied by fragmentary shards of light. The sisters stepped into the aisle of the barn, greeted with these miniature spotlights cast by the midday sun through missing planks. Alongside the aisle, shadows crouched in the old animal pens. The presence of blackness was heavy and poignant on her back, and Katherine’s eyes refused to adjust to its depth. But it wasn’t long before the sisters fully basked their faces in the musty air, and danced into a dramatic world of their own.

They were everything and all at once, mocking the gait of models on a catwalk for one moment, and then playing James Cagney and Burt Lancaster in deadly confrontation at the next.

And then Mary wrinkled her nose, and their string of laughter was muted.

“Do you smell that?”

Katherine inhaled, hearing her own breath, “Cigarettes.”

Mary nodded, and then the inky shadows weren’t just at their backs, but up above and all around them. Pervasive and claustrophobic, for the first time the upper hayloft groaned on its

tested wooden hinges, and the weight around them shifted into a feeling of being below *something*. They were no longer alone. And the darkness watched.

Katherine twisted around on her heels, “We shouldn’t be here.”

“Now hold on!” Mary tugged her sister’s arm and giggled. “You said you were *in* to come with me. So we better see this cigarette ghost for ourselves.”

Mary’s eyes trailed up the milky plumes of smoke above their heads, congregating in an acrid mass above the ladder to the hayloft. She took one step towards the ladder, and then another, her sneakers muffled on the floor of ash and sand. Mary placed one foot on the bottom wooden rung, when Katherine shouted.

“Mary *no!*”

A winding shadow suddenly whisked past Mary’s leg, hissing as it rushed out of the barn. Katherine only caught a glimpse of the snake’s arrow-shaped head when Mary let out a sharp scream.

“Run!”

The sisters dashed out the door and put the barn behind them, their running steps falling into the sodden earth with the heaviness of unknown pursuit at their backs. They made it to the edge of the brush, and Katherine stole a glance backward, her eyes shifting up from the barn’s roots to the hayloft.

A pallid hand came out of the center window, a cigarette poised in its long fingers, and closed the shutter.

Katherine and Mary didn't talk about it until they were back home and collapsed into the covered ground of pecans where they started. Out of breath, it was a struggle for either to speak out first.

"You said..." Katherine gasped. "You said *he* wasn't in there!"

Mary shook her head, her face still pale despite their rapid sprint home, "There was a snake in that animal pen! Forget ghosts, I'm not climbing up into some snake den."

Mary forced an unconvincing giggle, and Katherine couldn't bring herself to tell her sister about the hand in the hayloft. Her mind grappled with the humidity of the approaching summer evening. A ghost disguised in cigarette smoke, an arrow-headed black snake, and a pale hand that did not encourage words. Katherine couldn't stop thinking about it, and could seldom take her eyes off the neighboring road as the sun collapsed into the valley.

A sheriff's patrol car pulled in just as Mabel told them to come and get supper. With her husband still out and about in the encroaching dark, Mabel was apprehensive to the squelch of tires and a visit from a police officer this late in the day. The sheriff came to the door and knocked.

Mabel greeted him with the girls behind her, "Sheriff Nash, evening."

"Good evening, Mrs. Bertram," Nash said. "You girls out here all alone?"

"For the day," Mabel said. "Evidently my husband's still in the woods. Either fishing or with his hounds."

Nash nodded and gestured to Mabel and the girls, "Y'all see anything out of ordinary today? Strangers?"

Mabel almost laughed, "No one out here but us, Sheriff. Why would we?"

“There’s been an escape from the penitentiary,” Nash said. “A prisoner is still at large. If I was him, I’d hide out in these backwoods. Or seek out some good samaritans.”

Nash gave a smirk, his cobalt eyes meeting Mabel’s customary steely gaze. The girls were quiet, feeling the air between the Sheriff and their mother. Katherine was silent again about the hand in the hayloft.

“They won’t find any shelter here, Sheriff,” Mabel shrugged. “And if they try, then they have my Ol’ Betsy to deal with.”

At the expense of appearing as backwards hillbillies, Katherine and Mary both knew that their mother’s shotgun was endearingly referred to as Ol’ Betsy, and Sheriff Nash guessed as much too, chuckling.

“Alright then, you girls just be careful and have a good night. Come down to the station in town if you see anything.”

Mabel gave a curt nod, “We will, good evening Sheriff. Now let’s eat girls.”

Mary followed their mother inside for the awaiting supper, while Katherine stayed on the porch, watching Sheriff Nash walk down the yard and waving briefly as he went into his patrol car. The sun had lowered to its final setting place above the prairie, its magma light illuminating a thin, fluted line on the dirt road. A water moccasin. Severely out of place, unmoving, and nearly camouflage if not for the casting of its low, black-brown shadow. The water moccasin seemed to stare, and Katherine looked back.

Sheriff Nash started the car and reversed out of the driveway, directly into the claimed demesne of the sunbathing snake. His tires groaned on gravel, turning towards West Columbia.

Dust billowed and dissipated in the sheriff's wake on the neighboring road, and the water moccasin was gone.

Katherine smiled and went back inside.