

Casket Fresh

News of the death spread quickly throughout Huet's Point. It moved in whispers across porches and through open parlor windows. Near dusk, it escaped prim lips and landed in Ellie Weever's ears as she walked home from Hodges General Store.

The next morning, Ellie rose early, before dawn, and dressed by lamplight, eager to welcome her guests. With every button of her bodice secured and her apron tied around her slight waist, she carried the lamp from her bedroom, down the stairs, and through the kitchen.

She listened to the ticking of the parlor clock, floating past the furniture and sparse décor of her home. It crept around darkened doorways and over the wooden floor. The sound seemed to grow louder against the silence of the house. Troubled by the ticking and the quiet, Ellie walked to the pantry. She was filling her pockets with peppermints when she heard the banging on the death door.

With her pale fingers, Ellie slipped a peppermint into her mouth. She tied a handkerchief around her head just below her eyes. The soft, lace edges tickled her chin as she unlocked and pulled the death door, located off the parlor, open. She sucked on the peppermint while a white man and a sturdy Creole woman carried the casket through the door and set it on the table in the center of the parlor.

For nearly an hour, the man leaned against the parlor wall as Ellie and the Creole woman bathed and dressed the corpse. Already grey with death, the body was filthy. Not just with the evidence of the violent end, but with evidence of how he lived. With a wet rag, Ellie wiped the corpse's chest, arms, abdomen, feet, and legs.

"No need for 'im to look perfect," the man leaning against the parlor wall said as

Ellie wiped her rag gently across a thigh. “He weren’t all that clean when he’s alive.”

Ellie ignored the comment. She took great care in readying men for burial, even more than the women she had prepared over the last two years. From the moment the death door rattled, Ellie viewed any man in Huet’s Point as her own, if only for the short time he lay in her parlor until the widow or mother or daughter appeared to take her man away.

After several more minutes, the corpse was dressed in a white linen shirt, black trousers, waistcoat, overcoat, and cravat. Although Ellie felt the cravat was a bit fussy for this particular guest, she always abided by the family’s wishes. She bent over the casket to fold the corpse’s arms over his chest. Her hand tingled when she felt rough calluses rub against her skin.

“You can go now,” Ellie said through her kerchief. “I’ll finish the preparations.”

“Suit yourself,” the man standing in her parlor said. “Guess you’ll be needin’ these.” He reached his own filthy hand toward her and dropped three coins into her hand. “Let’s go, Sabine.”

Ellie placed the coins in her pocket and locked the death door behind the two visitors. In the kitchen, she scrubbed her hands at the porcelain basin and then rubbed a lavender salve deep into her skin. She retrieved another peppermint from her pocket and sucked air through her nose as the candy melted against her tongue.

With two additional lamps, she returned to the parlor. The sun peeked through the crease of the drawn curtains, but she dared not open them. Ellie couldn’t stand the onlookers that gathered on the street in front of her house whenever she worked. And with the rate at which the people of Huet’s Point lined up for their final journey, she

could afford all the oil she could burn.

Ellie hoisted the heavy pine lid propped against the table and dragged it into the kitchen. She wouldn't need it again until after the viewing and felt it cluttered the space around her guest. As she pulled it over the lip of the kitchen floor, the wood slipped from her hand and smacked against the floor. She felt a jolt through her entire body as the sound echoed off the high ceilings, hard floors, and uninhabited rooms. The sting of a splinter pulsed in her finger as she walked back into the parlor and sucked harder on the peppermint.

“Well, Ray Don,” Ellie said, smiling into the pine box, “let's see what I can do.”

Ray Don Lawry, brigand of Huet's Point, may have been fresh in the casket, but he definitely didn't look casket fresh. His front was as horrific as the rear view. The bullet entered his left eye, split his skull, and exited out the back of his head. Considering the extent of Ray Don's wound, Ellie thought a simple burial would be best, but Widow Lawry had insisted on a viewing.

“Your lid got me good, Ray Don.” Ellie dug her thumbnail into her finger near the splinter and winced as the wooden fleck emerged from beneath her skin. She stuck her finger in her mouth and sucked on the wound for a second. “That was a bad 'ol splinter,” she told him, “but I forgive you. I know you didn't mean to hurt me.”

Ellie picked up the silver comb from her table of supplies and ran the comb through Ray Don's hair, as if painting gentle strokes on a linen canvas. “I really should thank you, I guess,” Ellie said. “Even though it seems awful to thank a man for dyin'. But the Good Lord provides, Ray Don. Yes, He does. Even if all He's provided me with lately are ne'er-do-wells.” Ellie paused and then said with conviction, “Yes, the Lord provides. He

brought you to me, and for that, I give thanks.”

Ellie attempted to stretch the dull grey strands of hair over as much of Ray Don’s last moments as possible. After a few minutes, knowing the old man didn’t have enough hair left to cover the entire wound, she gave up and placed the comb back on the table. She turned back to the casket and caressed Ray Don’s good cheek with the back of her fingers. A charge surged through her body as she wondered what his skin felt like before the cold of death.

“You were strong once, weren’t you, Ray Don? But tender, too. I bet you could be right tender.”

She leaned over the coffin. Little ripples formed on the bridge of her nose beneath the kerchief as she examined the fatal wound. Shaking her head, she told Ray Don, “I just don’t think Widow Lawry should have to see that hole in your face.” Then Ellie whispered near his ear, “Of course, if’n you ask me, Widow Lawry shouldn’t’a took on that name. And before you was dead! That’s just bad juju.” She pulled another peppermint from her pocket, licked it, and then pulled it into her mouth with her tongue. “A woman ought to be more grateful for a man in her life, ‘specially a big, strong man like you.” She tilted her head to the side and stared at the wound for several moments, and then, “Oh, I know just what you need!”

Up the stairs in her father’s former bedroom, Ellie opened the trunk at the foot of the bed, dressed with a lace-trimmed quilt and linens since her father’s death. She sifted through various mementos until she found his collection of eye patches, amassed over a lifetime of caring for the deceased, and chose a plain, black leather patch.

Back in the parlor, she opened her tub of greasepaint. Using an ochre-stained rag she

blotted Ray Don's skin with her homemade concoction of lard, cornstarch, and clay until, after several minutes, his complexion didn't look quite so haggard.

"It's a shame to waste good beets on you, Ray Don," Ellie teased as she smashed two fresh beets in a wooden bowl. "But, everyone should look their best to meet their maker. I'm just not sure who exactly made you." She dipped one finger into the red beet juice and dabbed Ray Don's cheeks. "Yes, with the devil runnin' through your veins, I wonder if you'd be tender at all. Maybe not," she said and felt the lace of her kerchief tickle her chin again below her playful grin. "Oh, Ray Don, you do tease, don't you?"

The patch was the finishing touch. Gently so to avoid the hole in the back of his skull, Ellie lifted the old man's head. "I guess only the Lord knows who killed you, huh? Everybody's talkin' 'bout you and how good the shot was, but nobody's saying who did you in." Ray Don's face grazed her bosom as she wrapped the strap around his head just above his ears, and positioned the patch over his left eye. For the third time that morning, her body prickled with longing. "It's just a cryin' shame to come to such a vicious end, Ray Don. Just a cryin' shame."

Ellie shook her head and then straightened Ray Don's shirt collar. She retrieved the three pennies from her pocket and balanced one coin on Ray Don's lips and one on his right eye. After a moment of contemplation while rubbing the third coin between two fingers, she closed her hand around it. "I guess you cain't see outta that left eye no ways. You don't mind, do you, dearest?"

Content with Ray Don's appearance, she glanced at the clock centered on the mantle. Ray Don's final preparations ate up most of the time Ellie had hoped to use preparing herself for the viewing. In a rush, she tossed her combs, greasepaint, bowls, brushes, and

rag in the leather satchel on the floor and picked up the bowl of smashed beets. Then she blew out the lamps and went to the kitchen where she scrubbed her hands clean a second time. Back in the parlor, she pulled the curtains open. Sunlight flooded the room and cast a warm glow on Ray Don's face.

"God bless you, Ray Don," Ellie said, as she wrapped her fingers around the stiff handle of her leather satchel and admired her latest creation. "And if He cain't do that, may He have mercy on your soul."

In her bedroom, she placed the penny from her pocket on her vanity, set the satchel on the floor just inside the door, and quickly undressed. Her frock and apron she threw into a heap on the floor and then slipped into her favorite funeral attire: long, black silk with a fitted waist and high lace collar over several starched petticoats. She glided around her bedroom for a moment and listened to the swish of the layers. Glancing at her reflection in the bubbled mirror, she stopped and pinched her cheeks. *Maybe today*, she thought to herself. Viewings for notorious no-gooders like Ray Don Lawry attracted every farmer, merchant, and fisherman across the bayou. *Maybe today*.

As long as the people of Huet's Point kept her in business she didn't need a husband, at least not financially, but she still held out hope that one day she wouldn't have to suck on peppermint or spread lye from the kitchen to the parlor and up the stairs or dig splinters left by pine boxes out of her fingers or scrub her hands raw four times a day or listen to the silence of the house. She could leave the curtains open and move the china hutch from the dining room to the parlor and block the death door forever, and really know how a man, his warm skin, callused hands, and broad shoulders felt.

"Ellie Weever," Widow Lawry yelled from downstairs. "Get your rear end down

here, now!”

Startled, Ellie grabbed the penny from her dresser and stashed it in the hidden pocket of her full skirt. “Widow Lawry,” Ellie called from the landing, “is there a problem?”

“What the hell is on his face?” Widow Lawry asked, pointing one sausage-like finger inches from Ray Don’s nose as Ellie rushed into the parlor.

“An eye patch, ma’am. I thought it best to cover the wound.”

“Well, you thought wrong.” Widow Lawry snatched the coins off his good eye and lips. “And he won’t be needin’ these where he’s goin’.” She extended her hand, palm up, to Ellie. “I know my idiot boy gave you three when he dropped off the old buzzard. Where’s the third?”

Ellie took the third coin from her pocket and gave it to the widow. Embarrassed, she avoided Widow Lawry’s gaze.

“Now you fix him right!” Widow Lawry shoved the coins into the crease between the two ample breasts threatening to escape her bodice.

“Ma’am?” Ellie asked the widow, taken aback by her harsh tone and offensive attire.

Pointing again at the eye patch, Widow Lawry demanded, “You take that thing off him right now.”

Ellie leaned over Ray Don and carefully removed the patch as Widow Lawry bent over the coffin, so close to Ellie that the widow’s skirt brushed against her own. The dowager’s hot, foul breath, like sulfur gas rising from the swamp, coated Ellie’s neck in noxious fumes. She hoped the smell wouldn’t linger in her hair as she slipped one hand into her pocket, digging for a third peppermint. Her pocket was empty so she held her breath as she removed the eye patch from Ray Don’s face.

“That’s better,” whispered Widow Lawry, and then with pride, “now everyone can see the shot that finally put the bastard down.”

Ellie looked into Widow Lawry’s eyes and was surprised by the absence of grief.

“You’re a smart girl, Ellie Weever, not to marry. Husbands only bring you trouble.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ellie told the widow. “If you’ll excuse me, I need a moment.” Ellie nodded quickly and then walked back up the stairs, aching to be away from the widow.

Alone in her bedroom, she grabbed a peppermint from the pocket of her skirt heaped on the floor. She thought of Widow Lawry’s dark eyes as she examined the candy and removed a fleck of lint from it.

“She’s wrong,” Ellie whispered.

She popped the peppermint into her mouth and bit down, grinding her teeth into the sugar. *Maybe today*, she thought again. *Maybe today*.