

A Boy and his Pa

A story by DONOVAN RUSSO

We stood in the farm, the pigs were rumbilin' around in the mud and the chickens were laying them' eggs. The sun was glistenin' down on the crops too and the ranch's red paint didn't look as chipped. I saw her on a horse, it was actually Musty- her horse from years ago. She wore this red bandana on her head, and her black cowboy boots. Or at least they were the boots I'd see in them' photos that my father had around the house. I stood there though, a gallon of freshly squeezed milk in my hands (don't ask me why) and we just looked at each other. As confused as I was, I didn't want it to end. You see, I knew it wasn't real. I knew it never could be. But man oh man, she felt real to me. And before I could sum up the courage to say anythin', she gave Musty a whip and that beautiful chocolate brown horse galloped them into the hills towards the sunset.

That dream started occurin' early on for me. I was seven in fact. I remember fondly one afternoon bringin' it up to my father- we were workin' in the field. I remember the sun beatin' down on me, and I had a splinter in my left palm. Yeah that's right, because I wanted to end the day early. But there wasn't a shot in hell that he would stop workin' before the sun went down. "If the Lord blesses us with another day of sunlight, you're damn sure we'll be out there," he would always say, lookin' into the sun with a pipe hangin' out of his mouth.

My father was a straight shooter, wore the same pair of blue shredded jeans each day, topped with his brown cowboy hat. He was a quiet man too, but prideful of his work. That afternoon was like no other, except he noticed that my head was in a daze when we were planting them' crops.

“Joeb, you finish milkin’ them’ cows?”

“Not yet.”

“What’s the matter with you? You don’t seem like yourself.”

“It’s nothin’.”

“Them boys botherin’ you at Sunday school?”

“No, nobody’s gone botherin’ me.”

He nodded and began to walk away, “Make sure you get to them’ cows.”

I don’t know why, but I couldn’t resist tellin’ him right then and there. “Had a dream about Ma.”

He turned around but refused to look up at me. He didn’t say anythin’.

“We were here on the farm. She sat on Musty.”

“Musty’s been down for years,” he responded.

“I know, but they were both there. She was just lookin’ at me.”

He shook his head and walked back inside, shoulders droopin’. We didn’t go speakin’ of her again till’ I was eleven.

She passed when I was young- they say it was one of them’ woman cancers. I think it was in her breasts. Although I don’t have many memories of her, I do remember he cradlin’ me in her arms, tellin’ me about them’ stars.

“When you look up to the stars, you can seen all the souls that God has taken. They guard over them’ loved ones, makin’ sure that they’re safe here on Earth,” she said.

At that point though, the cancer was so bad that her cheeks had sucken’ into her face and her lips had dried up. Most of her hair was gone too, just a few strands erected from her scalp

and hanged over her eyes. I didn't recognize this mummy lookin' woman, her touch was cold and her hands shook. But when she looked into my eyes, I knew my ma was still there.

Father came in shortly after that and gave her some sort of medicine to take. He had this look in his eye, they were misty and he sounded as if he had a frog in his throat.

Anyways, at age eleven I started noticin' that he would sit by a picture of Ma at night. He would sit in absolute darkness, hunched over in his chair, smokin' that dang pipe. There was also a glass of milk on the table always; he was never one for liquid courage. He would sit there though until he finished the glass, just starin' off into this picture of her posin' by Musty, with that bandana on her head.

Still till' this day I don't know what possessed me, but I asked him over supper why he would sit at the table every night.

"Excuse me, son?" He gave me an awful lookin' glare.

"Why do you do it? I peak and see you every night, just sittin' and starin'."

"Since when do I gots' to explain anything to you?" He slammed his hand down on the table.

I just looked at him, not sure why he had to be so mad.

"So lemme' get this straight? You've been peakin' on what I do past dark? Totally disrespectin' me?"

"I ain't disrespectin' you," I was able to murmur.

From there he grabbed me by the shirt collar and dragged me outside.

"Alright, you know the deal," he took off his belt.

I gulped, tryin' to hold back tears. I pulled down my pants, bent over and shut my eyes real tight.

Whack! The belt and it's metal buckle spanked against my rear several times. You see, my father believed in discipline. If you got in trouble at Sunday school, didn't do your chores or showed any kind of disrespect- you were gonna catch the belt. It wasn't personal- it was just the way things were.

Anyways, he continued to whip me far too many times than I thought he would.

"Now you'll know what to ask and what not too. That damn question ain't no question for a man to ask," he said as I cried my eyes out, rubbin' my bleedin' booty. "There's a line in this world defined by privacy, and you crossed it high and clear!"

I started to hate my Father after that, not for the whippin' though. Hell, part of every boy's childhood was to catch it from his father- you weren't livin' right if you didn't catch the belt. I started to hate him though because I thought he was tryin' to get me to forget about Ma, like it wasn't "manly" enough to discuss how we felt.

I would do everythin' I could to avoid him- includin' joinin' the military when I was eighteen. It was when I joined though that I finally earned his approval.

"A military man, a true man indeed," he always had a huge smile when I came home for Christmas. I think what really made his holiday though was that I brought home the gal who would eventually be my wife- we met at Fort David in Kentucky. She was workin' as a nurse back when I served. She's a pretty little redhead named Sue and she's even more gorgeous now than when I first met her. Sue was the one who kept me true to myself. She was the one who forced me to go back home to Arkansaw for the holidays. If it were up to me, I would've just

forgotten about the old man and stayed with her in Alabama. I got along with her family. Her father, a man named John, was a good Christian man. He took an interest in me, and Sue's Mother was one hell of a cook.

"I want to meet, Thomas," she demanded, lookin' deep into my eyes and holdin' my hand- referrin' to my father.

"He's nothin' special. Nothin' worth seein'."

"But he's all the family you got. Someday you won't have the option to see em' no more."

And so that's how it went. Pa and I would keep it civil, visits on Christmas that consisted of much small talk about the farm.

"How's them' cows?"

"Cows are good," he would nod.

When I was thirty though, I received a letter that his heart was bad and that he was stayin' in some medical center close to the farm. It was one of the nurses who wrote the letter and she urged that I come pay my respects before it was too late. Because Sue was pregnant with our son Philip at the time, I kept her home and went to visit him myself- the first time in twelve years that we would be alone together.

"Try not to excite him," the Nurse suggested.

He layed in the bed all shriveled and tired lookin'. His face had gotten all dry and he had this wheeze- I can still hear it. My own hands started to tremble- seein' him like this reminded me of that night under the stars with Ma.

"Hello, Joeb," his eyes were droopin'.

“How you feelin’?”

“They say I’m doin’ better but I know it’s the end of the line for me.”

“Don’t think so negative all the time.”

“It aint’ a matter of negativity. It’s what true.”

I took a seat next to him, this too reminded me of my childhood- dinner time with Pa.

“Where’s Sue?”

“She’s pregnant. We’re havin’ a boy,” I smiled- couldn’t help it.

“A boy?” He smiled too. “Be a strong father to him. It’s the most important thing that you could ever do for him.”

“What you mean by strong?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t think I do,” I was gettin’ irked.

“You’re a military man, Joe. A man’s man,” he said with a yawn. “Raise him the way I raised you.”

I took a deep breath and rubbed my face. Here I was, burdened with another impulse to cross that line again- just like that time when I was eleven.

“You remember when I was young, Pa?”

“I may be dyin’ but I still got my recollection.”

“Remember that dream I had about Ma? We just lookin’ at each other on the farm?”

“What about it?” He was hesitant.

“You never wanted to talk about it. I tried that day but you just walked inside.”

“Was a long day in the field. It always was.”

“What about when I was eleven? You remember whippin’ me over bringin’ up Ma and your late nights?”

“What is this? A trip down memory lane?” He snapped back.

“I hated you for that.”

“You had no right...”

“No right to what? To bring up my mother? To ask my father a question?”

He didn’t respond. He simply turned his head the other way and tried to go to sleep. I stood up and went to the other side of him.

“I needed you. I needed you in so many ways.”

“I was a decent father to you. You turned out okay.”

“But it wasn’t always a father that I needed.”

“I raised you to be a man, that’s what fathers do.”

“A ‘man’. But what makes a ‘man’?”

“What?”

“What makes a ‘man’? Deprivin’ your son?”

“You always went to bed with a full belly.”

“You’re missin’ the point!”

The Nurse came in and tried to push me out, “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

“Leave him!” My father said.

“Are you sure?” She asked.

“We ain’t done here.”

“Try not to excite him,” she said again to me. This time, she gave me a bit of a glare before leavin’ the room.

After she left, we stood there and looked at each other for what felt like an eternity. I didn’t know how to break the silence. But he looked at me with his hazel eyes, and I saw that same look that he gave my mother thus many years ago. They were misty, watery like puddles in the field.

“This how we gonna leave it?” He asked.

I put my head down, still unsure of what to say. My head was poundin’ and my heart was throbbin’. My hands even started to get clammy.

“I tried my best with you, Joeb. Didn’t know how to do certain things. I still don’t. But I never meant to fail ya,” that frog was back.

“Ya didn’t fail me. I just wanted more.”

“More?”

“Just to sit with ya. Have a real talk.”

He sat in silence for a moment. “You’re mother was always good to talk to”, he smiled. “That woman could talk for hours.”

I chuckled. “She could?”

He nodded, “But I loved every moment of it. Loved everythin’ bout her. She made me a better man,” looked at me dead in the eye. “I see a lot of her in you.”

“You do?”

“You’re carin’ like she was. You have a love for people.”

I put my head down again.

“You’ll be a good pa to your boy. I know it,” he smiled as his lip quivered.

There was no more speakin’ after that. We both had tears in our eyes and we both sat in silence- that’s right, I sat back down. But it was a good silence, a lovin’ silence. I even grabbed his hand and held it. I stayed probably for another hour. He drifted off to sleep and never woke up again.

Before I left, I kissed him on his forehead- the first time I ever did that.

So here I am in modern times, a retired Vet lookin’ to finally address my thoughts. I’m sittin’ here on my front porch, smokin’ a pipe myself, thinkin’ about my father on what would be his seventieth birthday. Philip just came runnin’ into the yard beggin’ me to chase him around. Sue’s in the kitchen cookin’ what I think is a pot roast. The stars are out early tonight, I even see a twinkle in em’.

I haven’t had that dream about my mother in a long time. But I did have a dream about my pa last night. I was a little boy again, woke up and was plannin’ on startin’ the day after I ate my oats. But I saw him out by the crops workin’. The sun was beatin’ down on him like it always would. He took a puff from his pipe and looked up to the sun. He breathed deeply as if everythin’ was okay. He saw me peakin’ through the window and he tipped his hat at me. He then began to walk through the field, leavin’ the farm and everythin’ behind.

He just kept walkin’ and walkin’. Sooner rather than later, he became nothin’ more than a spec in the light, taken fully by the sunlight. As I watched him leave, I took a deep breath myself, knowin’ exactly where he was goin’.

The End