Peaceful Till Mornin’

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—Wayne Hunt

YES SUH, AH still rememba' dat nite like it was only yestuhdee. Why ah ain't nevah changed mah mind about any one man so much in so little time.

De wind was a blowin' like de judgemint day had come, an' cold an' snowin' outside—hoo-wee—jes like it was nevah gonna quit.

An' der sat mah o' mammy, both hands a danglin' 'tween her knees, starin' intuh de fire like a los' soul. De ol' cabin nevah changed much since ah been gone. Still de same as when ah growed up der: grass a juttin' thru de floe, chipped dishes sittin' on de cupboard, an' de ol' crooked wood table an' chairs mah pappy made. But she kep' it clean, yes suh, der weren't no dirt no where. Mah mammy kep' it clean as a baby's cradle. But ah cain't say ah felt at home. No suh—ah felt like ah was der fo' de furce time. So, ah watched de ol' lady, an' ah watched her close.

Fuhst, she'd sit der like ah said befo', her ol' hands jes a danglin' 'tween her knees. Den, she'd rest 'em on her lap an' take a deep breath like she's goin' unduh water or sumpin'. Den she'd move 'em up, slow-like, tuh dat coal-black face an' rub her fo'head. But she kep' her eyes on dat fire, yes suh, she kep' 'em glued tuh dat fire.

It was quiet in de room, quiet like a church. All ah could hear was mah pappy's heavy breathin' behind de curtain. He was a dyin' dat nite, no doubt about it, sixty-two years ol' an' he was a dyin'. Das why de white doctuh was der, an' das why ah was der. Ah cain't say ah felt bad bout him though. He was a mean man, always snappin' n' growlin'. Ah only seen him smile three times, n' den his gums stuck out so fah he shoulda kep' his mouf shut. Ah felt bad about de ol' lady though, ah hated tuh see her fret so. She was sech a fine woman.

Jes de breathin', das all we could hear, an' each wheeze seem tuh go thru mah mammy like a knife. She was twitchin' an' tremblin' like a young rabbit. Ah thought she's gonna
Sketch

fall off de chair till she got up an' walked to de fireplace. Sixty years ol' an' not a bit o' fat on her—mah oh mah—why ah bet dat ol' woman coulda beat me in a footrace—mah oh mah. She stood der fo' a minute lookin' at a ol' whisky jug on de shelf. Den she reached up an' took it down an' walked toad de windah. An' Ah'll be switched if she didn't lift dat ol' jug to her mouf an' start a tootin' on it. Sounded jes like a damned ol' ferry boat chuggin' down de rivah. Why ah almos' laughed right out loud when ah saw dat. I' was like she forgot where she was—like she was fah away.

"Jesse," she called still lookin' out de windah, "you nevah knowed yo' pappy when he was a young man like yo'self." She paused, an' turned, an' her eyes danced round de room like she was lookin' at a Christmas tree all lit up wid candles. "Why he was so strong weren't no two men dat could wrestlin' him tuh de groun'. But he was sweet an' gentle too, Jesse, jes like a young colt." Now ah knowed mah pappy was strong, why he used tuh knock me fum one end o' duh room tuh de uduh. But ah nevah seen him be sweet tuh nuthin', 'cep' maybe a jug o' corn liquor.

She rubbed de neck o' de bottle real soft wid de tip a one fingah. "All de men respected him, Jesse, an' all de girls loved him. Why ah 'member at our weddin' he drunk up dis whole jug an' ast fo' mo'." She began to squeeze de jug close tuh her an' giggle like a silly girl. Mah ol' mammy, standin' there gigglin' an' wipin' her nose an restin' her chin on dat ol' bottle. Why ah felt so good jes fum watchin', ah like tuh bust out laughin' agin.

Den she looked straight at me an' grinned. She walked over an' pulled her chair close tuh mine an' sat down right in front o' me. Ah nevah seen her so gay an' smilin' in all mah life. She began to talk agin, kinda slow an' dreamy-like.

"You know, Jesse," her eyes began tuh dance, "he used tuh come in fum de fields jus sweatin' an' tired as he could be. But ah'd fix him sum grits an' sum possum an' de mo' he et, de happier he got. Why one time, aftah he's done eatin', he jump up an' give me sech a swat on de ass, it like to bust my tailbone, boy!" She stood up an' slammed de jug down on de table an gave me a look dat woulda made even ol' Lucifer turn tail. Den, she eased back down in her chair an began tuh grin like a cat.

"He was a tough one alright, Jesse, an' mean as a goat.
But every nite over on dat bed, he was jes as meek an' gentle as a young colt. Strong, mind ya—woooo-whee—" she laughed, "why some nites he like tuh crushed me tuh death. But when it was all quiet, nuthin' but de crickets an' de breeze outside, we'd lay an' talk. An' ah'd rub his big back an' neck an' he'd tell me all about his dreams. An deh was good dreams, Jesse. How he was gonna raise de finest horses dis state evah seen an' sell 'em to rich white folks fo' good money, so's we could have sum nice things stead o' dis ol' shack an' ragged clothes. Yes suh," she sighed, "deh was good dreams alright."

Den she laid her head on mah shoulder an' shut her eyes, an' ah seen she weren't young no mo', she was jes mah ol' mammy once agin. Ah put mah arm roun' her an' squeezed her shoulder, an' she began to whisper wid her eyes still shut.

"Deh wouldn't let him, Jesse," she sighed. "Damn White folks in town hated him. He came home once jes drippin' wid blood, yellin' an' cursin' an' lookin' fo' his shotgun. Eight men, Jesse, eight o' dem white bastuds beat him up, called him nigger an' tol' him tuh stay out o' town. He was goin' back tuh shoot 'em all, but ah stopped him. Deh jes woulda killed him."

Ah bent down an' kissed her, easy like, on de head. Ah couldn't think o' nuthin' else tuh do but ah knew she was ready tuh cry. She lifted up her head an' smiled soft, like she used tuh when pappy'd git mad at me.

"You 'member de time you broke dem eggs, Jesse, an' yo' pappy whupped you so bad."

"Lawd, do ah 'member dat," ah laughed, "ah wished 'ahd nevah been born dat day."

She smiled agin. "He went tuh town for dem eggs, Jesse. Said he was gonna git me sumpin' special. Paid double price fo' 'em an' like to got his horse kilt too, but he got de eggs anyway." She paused agin an' ah felt her hand touch mah leg. "He nevah talked much about his dreams aftah thet, Jesse. He'd jes lay der, an' ah could feel de strength slowly drainin' fum his shoulders an' arms. Ah knowed den he was dyin', jes like he is now. Ah'd jes hold him an' rub his neck till he'd drop off tuh sleep, an' he was peaceful till mornin'."

We both sat der, holdin' each uduh, an' watchin' de fire die out. De room got dimmer wid each flicker an' mah ol'
mammy began tuh shivah. Den, all was quiet, der was nuthin', not even a crackle fum de fire. Suddenly, mammy's head jerked up fum mah chest an' peeked ovah mah shoul-dah. De white doctah stood der, not sayin' a word, one hand in his pocket, de udder one holdin' de curtain. Den, jes quiet as hell, he began tuh nod his head up an' down, up an' down, wid both eyes starin' at de floe.

Mah mammy watched him silently, till his head stopped. Den she followed his eyes tuh de floe.

"Help me up, Jesse," she sighed, "Ah wanna see yo' pappy." She got up an' walked stiff-like to de curtain. Ah followed close behind—ah wanted to see him too.

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**Smoke**

—*John Pehrson*

Gray wisps
Rising slowly
From just-lit cigarettes
Intertwine against dark windows
In dynamic Rorschach smoke-blots,
And clashing, break quickly
Leaving cool, gray
Ashes.