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Broken to His Hand

He ate apples seeds and all. Tony ate the core. He plucked the stem from his lips like a fish bone.

I have never tasted the wood of an apple, although the spongy slivers were my practice – an apple every day: the top topographical with leaf mold, the top of a small world; and the antipodes red as the inside of my mouth or his tongue. *A is for apple.* There were no fruit trees in our yard; it was a car yard, a lot. I was straight as something pliable but standing, unweathered, a young willow, maybe, a sapling. I sat in other people's broken cars, in the dusty muffled heat of upholstery. I described the ticking of katydids and the dashboard clocks, the hollow throats of trucks, the clanging bell of freight trains traveling latitudinally south to north. Scrub pines grow pliable and strong by the tracks, ripe with sap and nutty cones.

He smoked pot, seeds and all, and they popped with tiny spots of red as the token was passed from mouth to mouth. It embarrassed me because it burned with all the sloppy slap-happy reality I developed a vocabulary to stop from describing. "Pass the joint," he said, nodding toward Larry or Steve or Sammy as they sat in broken armchairs in his garage. And I would, keeping my eyes down.

I stood like a scrub pine along the tracks bending tip to branch as stacked lumber yearned north, kathunk, ka-thunk. And yet I didn't want to leave.

I was rooted.

I kept annotated lists, starred, crosshatched, of every book I read. X = mine; * = borrowed; triangle = library book; then the date; how many times I'd read it; and commentary: good/great/super great. I filled notebooks, seven entries a day, a divot in my middle finger from the pencil. Everything I ate and wore, where I went, what people said when I got there. Complaints, family histories, coincidences. How my ancestor

was famous from revolutionary days for hanging some Tories on a copper beech near Cox Plantation. How my mother's people married my daddy's people a few generations back, and how there were people in my school, in my grade, with the names of my aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers. Even my name.

How names run in families, just like humors do, both the joking humors and the personality ones: black bile, red bile, phlegm and blood. Tony, Anthony, Antony, Toni. My husband's brother's first wife has the same name as his sister; the second wife has his mother's name. His sister married a man with the name of both my stepfather and her father, and named her son that name, too. Tony, Tony, Anthony, Antony – and, of course, Toni. Devotion, melancholy, bile, retribution.

Toni was my first, before any of the variant Anthonies. Toni the bowlegged coal-black pony. She was no companion, no confidante. She never even let me ride her. Most horses nibble with hairy lips along your palm, delicately gobbling an apple or sugar cube. Feed Toni some hoary Junie, some fallen fruit, and she'd sheer the skin right off your palm! Then grin at you with her sharp teeth.

But my Paw Paw she loved. Jealously, black glint in her eye. He'd bought her at auction, just like Big Red, Strawberry and Little Bit -- all "unsellable" and got for cheap, sick with pneumonia and the dry heaves or, like Toni, delinquents that'd cock a leg for a kick at the small of your back, knees, or butt. She wasn't tall enough to clock your head – unless you were dumb enough to check her shoes for stones.

Paw Paw could nurse any horse to health. He would sleep for days in the barn, holding the horse's head, blanketed, over the steam of a boiling pot of water. Or he would broke them "to his hand" as he called it. I saw him break Toni. I remember him settling his six-foot girth on Toni's back, his stirrups only inches from the ground, his braided whip in his right, the reins looped in his left. It was a mystery to me what he was going to do but I knew it was something about controlling another living thing and I was excited. First there was a preliminary revolution of the dirt ring, Toni's coat twitching, her small-ankles bowed under his weight. She tolerated his guidance for the moment, seeming to roll her shoulders as if calculating his weight to the ounce. I could read her coal-black mind: how much *push* would catapult this lanky burden from her back? Then

she started to buck, back legs on springs, clouds of red dust rising, and Paw Paw commenced to whip her with his quirt, the leather braided like a horse's tail, a gift from me a few weeks earlier, my first gift to him. *Quirt, quirt*, the word bitter on my tongue as I sat on the hitching post like it was a saddle and watched Toni buck and my grandfather, his long upper lip stiff and sour, hang on. His whip arm never stopped pumping. He leaned on the reins, turning her head so that she reared in tight circles, never allowing her to bolt or bash him into the side of the barn. As she tired the circles got bigger. Around and around. Soon she was walking, him rared back against the bit in her tender mouth, arching her neck, forcing her head to a kind of rigid stillness while her mane shook, *no, no, no*.

The sun so hot it was like a slap against my cheeks.

After she was broken, she followed Paw Paw like a dog. When we drove up to the barn, the motor of his blue pick-up brought her at a canter from the pasture. She'd hang her head over the barbed wire and just stand there, seeming not to hope for an apple, a sugar cube from his scarred hand. He'd tip a pail into her trough and scratch the forelock between her ears as she scabbled in the feed. "Toni the Pony," he'd croon, naming her. And she'd flick her coarse tail contentedly. But if I tried to pat her cheek, she'd pull her lips back from her teeth and snap.

This is what I remember about Toni. What follows I'm not sure if I remember from my own experience, or if I've just imagined it after hearing the stories my grandmother told.

And yet, I can see her so clearly: Toni the Pony through the plate glass window of the poolroom café. Across the street, by the railroad tracks in front of the textile mill: her shaggy blackness peeping through snowball bushes. The very picture of "hang-dog."

"Richard," called the waitress, laughing, a pale hand at her hairnet. "Look what's yoo-hooing in them bushes!"

"Huh?" he said, walking slowly in his pointy Oxfords to the window, leaning one elbow on the sill. "What you talking 'bout?"

Then he straightened up. "God-damn."

He who never cursed much, who moved slowly and with intention, was out the café door, hat in hand, hat on head, crossing the street, cutting between cars, and into the

bushes. Traffic stalled as people on their way to the second shift or just off the first, leaned out their windows to watch. The horse shuffled, foot to foot, not looking at him as Paw Paw approached, shot out his hand and grabbed her bridle.

“That horse shore ‘nuff jumped the fence and walked all the way from Spindale Street,” said Corrine, her hand on her stomach as if she had a pain there. “She shorely is devoted to your granddaddy.” And then, just as she finished speaking, she sucked in her breath sharply as we watched him sucker punch the pony. Straight and hard from his cocked elbow, his fist smashed into her jaw. Toni stumbled, but Paw Paw held her fast by the bridle and there was nowhere she could go. She shook her head a few times as if disturbing flies then stood quietly.

A car honked. The light changed. Traffic moved and a few people called out jocularities. Paw Paw stood, ignoring everybody. Toni hung her head, her long horse-lashes beating. Some of the regulars came in from the poolroom’s double doors and stood by the window. A couple good ol’ boys went out on the sidewalk to watch. They lit cigarettes and leaned against the brick to wait for Paw Paw to come within earshot for teasing. Corrine opened the take-out window so she could hear what they were saying, which wasn’t much.

Paw Paw and Toni among the snowballs. In profile, my grandfather was a little like a plump Jimmy Stewart: a long Scots face beneath a pomaded pompadour, sensitive lower lip pouching out, drawn-down eyes. He was thinking. Then he was moving, leading the pony across the street and stopping cars with a friendly hand. He may even have paused on the white line to light a cigarette with his silver lighter. One-handed.

“Who’s your friend, Richard?” one wag hollered.

“Damned if this pony didn’t come a’lookin’ for me. She got my scent in her nose like some goddam hound.”

“She hairy like a dog, too,” said Shorty, a barrel-chested fireplug of a patrolman, flattop on his flathead.

“Here,” said Paw Paw, and handed the pony to Shorty, who took the bridle in his big hand then stood staring at his hand and what it held. Toni balefully glared and bared her teeth.

Paw Paw came back into the café.

“You ever seen the like?” he said to Corrine. And to me: “Well, what should I do, Suzy-Q? Ride her back to the barn barebacked? Or should I put her in the back of the truck and drive her back and hope she don’t jump out? I’m a good mind to sell her to the renderer and be done with her.”

What I said, and how he got her back to the barn I can’t remember. But I know that she turned up again a few days later, her belly bleeding from the barbed wire fence she’d jumped, her tail full of burrs from the fields she’d crossed to get to the Front. Toni the Pony on Main Street in Spindale, watching for that Richard Guffey, king of Rex Billiards. Even when I grew up, people still remembered Paw Paw’s bad penny, the way she kept turning up at the poolroom. They recognized my grandmother, maybe, or they saw Paw Paw in my cowlick and oblique eyes. “And what about that horse who followed him like a babe, you remember, Miz Guffey? That doggone horse that was so devoted to Richard?”

She’d nod, her eyes filling with tears.

But were the tears for his memory? Yes, they were. When he died the light went out of our family like the last ember dying in the hearth. Like the flame in Jesus’ thorny heart extinguished. And yet. Her tears may also have been from self-pity for the dogged love she felt for him, just like Toni, the devotion shared by the waitresses at the café buying Paw Paw cologne from Avon and cooking the little messes he loved: gravy biscuits, footlongs all the way with slaw.

“He ate tomatoes like they was apples,” Maw Maw said, enjoying the memory. The way he’d sheer their firm skin with his long teeth, pulp running down his chin and into his starched hankie. How his eyes would crinkle with pleasure of that sharp juice!

As for Toni the pony, she was sold. Traded, actually, to a farmer on the far side of Washburn for a truckload of fresh red tomatoes.