

Chapter 23

I walked in and sat down in the living room. She was standing in her house that she had been so long absent from, turning completely around surveying the place in silence.

The Old Man stood next to her. "Sit down and take a load off Clarisse. You don't want to over do it your first day back."

Clarisse guffawed him. "Walter, I've been laying on my back frozen in time for the past twelve years. I don't want to sit down. I want to get to work. There's so much that I've missed."

The Old Man said, "Fine, fine have it your way. You don't mind if I sit down do you?"

"Go ahead your old fool, "she said. She was shuffling her feet around the floor, "Oh, Walter, you've let so much dirt and dust into the house. These floors are in wretched shape. Where's my broom for heaven's sake?"

The Old Man motioned toward a closet in the kitchen. "Probably over there where you left it, woman." He laughed with a high-pitched giggle.

She walked over to the closet, withdrew an old straw broom and started sweeping the floor grit and grime towards the door. "Johnny, "she said to me, "Come on over here and open the door for me while I sweep this dust out."

I walked across the room and opened the door while she madly swept the dirt outside.

She walked back over to her husband and whisked him on the boots with the broom bristles, "Don't you got to get up and pick those old peaches today or is the season over already?"

"No, "replied her husband, "I suspect we'd better get them off the trees or we'll see a day's wages ripen and rot before our eyes. He

got up, took his hat off the wall peg and said, "You'll be all right Clarisse here, for a while I'm out in the orchard?"

"I'll be fine your old fool!" she replied.

"If you need me, there's that old cowbell in the kitchen. Just beat on it with a wooden spoon and I'll come running."

"I'll be fine." She reassured him.

The Old Man put his hat on and turned to Angela and me. "Ok you two, there's peaches to pick, let's get a move on."

"Walter..." interjected his wife. "You quit making those two work so hard, they're too young and fragile to be loading and hauling them bushel baskets all day long."

"Well, they've managed pretty well lately," retorted The Old Man.

"You just never mind that," she said. "You leave them here with me at the house and go tend to your peaches."

"Clarisse, when I was their age, I picked cotton from sunup to un down. Didn't bother me. I didn't complain."

"Oh hush, Walter. That was a million years ago when we had to go out to the woods to use the bathroom and down to the creek to fetch water to boil. Time change. You know that."

The Old Man let out a sigh, "Oh, alrighty then. I know I can't win this discussion. Not that I ever could." He smiled and tipped his hat to Clarisse. "Absolutely wonderful to have you back, dear," he added.

She walked over to him, gently embraced him and said, "You know I adore you Walter. I tried over and again to reach out to you all those times, all those years I was in that hospital bed, but nothing I could do would make my body move until that morning Johnny returned to us."

She turned to me and winked then turned back to her husband and said, "Now don't work too hard and too long. Be back here by suppertime."

"Very well." Said the Old Man.

"And Walter, why don't you just go to town this weekend and hire a couple of the local high school football boys to help you out with the remainder of this year's crop."

"If it will make you happy dear, "he said. And with that statement, he opened the door to walk out.

"Yes, it will, "nodding her head, "And Walter, one more thing before you go..."

He turned around again in the doorway and said, "Yes, what's that?"

"Are my supplies still in the canning cupboard?"

"Haven't touched them. Everything should still be there. See you this evening, dear." The Old Man walked out the door, down the porch, got in his truck and drove out to the orchard.