

# A Place to Wait

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Frances Jo had pulled a 3-to-11 at the Crispy Creme on top of her regular day shift at the Levi's factory. Her feet and legs hurt clear to her tailbone. She'd poured herself half a tea glass of bourbon, kicked off her oxfords and flopped, face down, across the unmade bed when the telephone rang in the kitchen. She thought about not answering, but then it might be Silas.

"Hello."

"Jodie." Silas had called her Jodie since they were kids.

"Yeah, Baby. What do you know good?" Her voice warming.

"Not much." Then he paused and it stopped sounding like just another one of his late-night calls she'd come to expect.

"What's the matter, Silas?"

"Hon, your old daddy's had a stroke."

"Oh, Lord, how bad is he?"

"Well, he's down and not able to take care of himself. Different ones are looking in on him."

"When'd it happen?"

"Last Tuesday. Figure him and Buster was on one of their walks because he was taken down back of the house. Buford Ellis just happened by and found him."

"Lord! I'd better get ready and come down there and see about him."

"Well now, Jodie, it don't look like he's in any danger, it's just that your sister and her old man's talking about him going to live at their place."

"At Sister's place?"

"You heard me right. You know Mr. Red's totally agin' it, but them two won't listen. That's why he sent me to

call you."

Silas went on to say that Sister and her husband were going to stick Daddy in a room built onto the back of their house and not let him keep his dog. That would be bad enough, but working through Frances Jo's mind, the whole time Silas was talking, was the fact that her daddy needed whiskey to get along. Sister wouldn't let him have anything stronger than iced tea.

"Silas, you can look for me day after tomorrow."

Frances Jo left Selma on a Trailways bus, her boss's threats rattling around in her head like steel balls in a Prince Albert tin. By the time the bus pulled into Wewa the next day, her body ached like she'd been dropped to the ground from the top of a fire tower. There wasn't a soul to drive her the five miles home, so when Silas offered to take her when he finished patching Miss Ida Mae's recap, she thanked him.

While waiting, Frances Jo stood outside the filling station, picturing the town square the way it had been, hating it that they'd torn down Gaskin's drugs to put up a Western Auto. Her daddy had taken them to Gaskin's on Saturdays for double dips of strawberry ice cream. He'd say, "Miss Jodie, I got a taste for strawberry cream. Don't reckon you'd consider riding along with me?" With that, the family had loaded up in his maroon, four-door '49 Dodge and raced along the bumpy road to town.

No matter how hot it got, the drugstore had stayed cool. Overhead, big fans had turned, and the black and white marble floor had stored the coolness, giving it

up just as they walked across the floor. Frances Jo had been careful to step only on white for good luck.

Just inside the front door, hidden from view by a case of hunting knives, there'd been a swirling rack of comic books. Her daddy would say, "Here you go, girl, this quarter about to rub a hole in my pocket."

Momma hadn't known about the comic books or the fifteen cents change. If she had, she would have burned the books and made Frances Jo put the change in the Sunday school offering plate. At night, Frances Jo had read to Sister under the covers using a flashlight, and that may have been the only thing Sister ever did that their momma hadn't known about. It hit Frances Jo for the first time how Sister and Momma had sat in the car and eaten their ice cream like that had been the best part.

Sister's real name was Elizabeth Ann. She'd grown up to be like their momma—fair-skinned, squatty, and overweight. Her clothes bunched on her body like lumpy bedcovers. Like Momma, she hated drinking, dancing, and everything that made men and women sweat, except for what Momma had called honest sweat. Together, they'd seemed duty bound to look down on most of what Frances Jo and her daddy were partial to. To top it off, Sister had married a preacher, a so-called faith healer.

Frances Jo didn't put much stock in the notion that a mortal man could heal just by laying his hands on folks and shouting, "Be healed!" She figured when most men put their hands on you, they weren't interested in healing, just fixing their own hurt.

She didn't believe in doctors or home remedies, until she and this man she'd slept with one winter back in Selma had a little too much to drink and he'd driven his pickup into a big oak, breaking Frances Jo's right leg in several places. To her way of thinking, that really hadn't been a sickness, just something that happened. But it sure made standing on her feet, pulling doubles, rough.

That's why she'd started taking a little all along. The whiskey eased her leg and nobody had been the wiser. Her daddy had taught her how to handle liquor. He'd said, "Gal, if you gonna drink, then drink good Kentucky bourbon, straight. Thataway your drinking won't never hurt you."

It was a quarter to six before Silas knocked off and they started. Back before Frances Jo had left Wewa, she and Silas had talked about marriage. He'd been her first, though she was sure she'd not been his. Riding along in the truck, she thought maybe he'd remember. Yeah, she thought, fifteen years and a case of varicose veins can stomp the shit out of romance.

"Huh?" Silas asked, searching her eyes like he'd been left out of something private going on in her head.

"Nothing, Baby, just something funny from the old days."

Frances Jo had been fifteen in '55, and that was the same year she left home following Roy Dale Pitts. Lord, she thought, he'd been one more smooth-talking son of a bitch, making her forget Silas and her daddy and 'most everything she'd ever been taught about acting sensible. Maybe it was because Roy was the first to have told her about places where she could be better off than she had ever dared to hope for. She'd loved him well enough to have stayed through half the small towns in south Alabama. But when he'd gone from job to job hardly working, she'd stopped loving him long enough to stay behind. They'd split in Selma with nothing more than, "Roy, sug, I can't keep up this running from town to town, living hand to mouth."

He'd drawn her close, squeezing her ass in his big hands, and he'd rubbed his hard against her, grinning when he'd said, "Girl, you gonna miss it." Then he'd taken the rent money from the sock beneath the mattress, and walked through the door, heading north.

Silas pulled the pickup off the main road and stopped at the lane. The quar-

ter of a mile to the house was shaded by a canopy of sweet gum, hickory, and wild persimmon. Frances Jo noticed how the trees and bushes were dry and brittle.

Silas turned toward her, looking sheepish, and said, "Jodie, you reckon you can make it from here with that one suitcase?"

"You bet, Baby. Thanks for the lift." She figured Silas wanted to say he was late because he'd given her a ride, but only as far as the lane. Which meant to his wife that he'd not gone up to the house where he could have gotten out and gone in. If she was satisfied with that, then it didn't make a tinker's damn to Frances Jo. She fared just fine with married women's lies about their men.

By the time Frances Jo had walked half way to the house, her feet and legs were covered in dust. She grinned when she noticed how badly the farmhouse leaned toward the late afternoon sun, while the front porch slouched back the other way, making the house seem uncertain as to which way it meant to fall.

Standing in the open door, she called, "Daddy, it's me, Jodie."

When he didn't answer, she stepped over the threshold into the front room, washed in late afternoon shadows, and eased toward the half-closed door of his bedroom. She pushed open the door, finding him lying in a rumpled bed, a dirty pillow with no case wadded beneath his head. He stared up at her from eyes encased in deep hollows, and he showed no signs of recognizing her.

"Daddy," she whispered, touching him lightly on the shoulder, "it's me, Jodie. I've come to see you."

Lying there under one of her momma's quilts, he looked to Frances Jo to be shriveled to half his real size, and his face, showing from beneath the covers, was the face of a stranger. It was fixed forever in an awful condition, like it had been split down the middle and reglued badly out of alignment. His good eye was rimmed in pus, and the other wide and white like that of a dead fish. He

smelled like a pile of dirty rags. He tried raising up on one elbow and speaking, but dropped back onto the bed. Yet, in his effort, she'd seen a flicker of the moment in his eye, and he seemed relieved.

In one way or another, her daddy had spent most of his life around politics. He'd set up rallies, big fish fries with fiddlers, pickers, and singers making music off the backs of flatbed trucks. He'd told her often enough, "Good music perks up a crowd. Makes honest folk hear more in what politicians say than good sense would oblige." What folks really wanted to hear, he'd said, was that favors would be there when their kin got in scrapes with the law or needed on the dole.

Her daddy was taller than any man she'd ever known, except for Avis, a freak who'd stayed behind when the circus left town. Everybody had always said she'd taken after her daddy's side of the family—tall and slender with bony hands and feet.

Men had greeted him wherever he'd gone, and when she'd been along, they'd teased, "Who's that fine young lady you got there, Mr. Red?" They'd called him Mr. Red because he had hair that color, and they'd called her Little Red, even though her hair had been light brown, not red, or sometimes blonde, like now.

Mr. Red's leftover dinner sat on a straight chair next to his bed, swarming with flies. The kitchen cupboards were empty, except for a sack of grits, two cans of pork and beans, a jar of peaches, and some bug-infested flour. Frances Jo went to the chicken yard for whatever eggs might be there. After gathering eight brown eggs, she fed the chickens dried corn and fresh water before going back to the house. She cracked each egg in a cup. A rotten egg is like a bad man, she thought; he can look good on the outside, but crack one and you never get over the smell.

After she fixed grits and scrambled some eggs, she carried a plate to her daddy and sat with him while he tried

eating. When she failed to understand his lame speech, he quit talking, and for the first time ever a silence dropped between them. He'd not eaten much when he gestured that she should feed what was left on his plate to Buster. She took his plate to the kitchen, fed Buster and sat at the kitchen table to eat. She ate a lot, for she'd only had an RC and a Baby Ruth since leaving Selma.

The last time Frances Jo and her daddy had visited was five years ago, the day they buried Momma. Everybody but Silas had gone and Frances Jo, her daddy, and Silas had sat around the kitchen table, polishing off a fifth of whiskey. Frances Jo had not been sure what Silas had told his wife that night, but after what she and Silas had done in the back of his truck, she bet whatever he'd said was a lie. But this night, she took her daddy a warm sweetened toddy to his bed, poured herself a whiskey, and went to sit on the porch, alone except for Buster.

Over the next three weeks, Frances Jo scrubbed the house from top to bottom, washed and ironed everything on the place, and even had something left to pull weeds out of the marigold bed that ran along the edge of the porch. Silas came with his tractor and turned the kitchen garden, so she could sow some turnip seeds, but mostly Frances Jo and her daddy had the place to themselves. They sat evenings on the porch, when he'd felt like it, and their new ways became familiar.

On one of those evenings, Frances Jo said, "Daddy, you remember nights when this porch would be running over with menfolk sitting, drinking whiskey and telling stories?"

He tried nodding.

Back then, Frances Jo had hidden beneath the porch, filling up on stories, taking to their storytelling like respectable women took to revival meetings. On this evening, it was Jodie who spun the tales and her daddy who sat listening, while rubbing at Buster's ear like he meant to take away the bobcat fight that

had torn most of it off.

"Remember the time Miss Trixie, Mr. John the undertaker's old lady, marched into the pool hall just after dark on Wednesday night and shot out all the new electric lights, just put there by the REA? She claimed them new lights had thrown Mr. John to be late for prayer meeting two Wednesdays already, and she meant to put a stop to it before shooting pool under electric lights got to be a habit."

Mr. Red struggled, raising his good hand in the air, and a warped smile sidled up one side of his face, spreading to the corner of his good eye. His eye, a watery blue, shimmered like when he'd walked into the courthouse, folks putting aside what they were doing to shake his hand. His laughter sounded ripped from his throat, and only the untwisted side of his face matched the hoarse sounds coming from his mouth. Frances Jo believed he'd tried imitating the clucking hen sounds the men had made teasing Mr. John, when he drooled down the front of his shirt, spit dropping between his feet onto the freshly scrubbed floor. Buster licked at the spit as though he meant to wipe away any shame that might have fallen there.

When Frances Jo's storytelling had worn her daddy down, she helped steady him while he prepared for bed. "There, you're set for a good night's rest," she said, and he reached for her hand, giving it a light squeeze.

"Yes sir. You just rest, I'm going to sit on the porch for a while longer, but I'll be where I can hear you if you need me."

Sitting again on the porch, Frances Jo remembered how Momma and Sister had stayed in the kitchen, keeping away from her daddy's friends. Momma had hated them, and she'd spat words of reproach in Daddy's face each time they left, calling their stories filthy and them shameless drunkards. She'd said politicians were poor excuses for people, and that their ways were crooked, and that they'd sooner lie than tell the truth.

She'd believed they took money they had no business to, instead of working like ordinary men. Daddy had said, "If that be true, then they're no different than your preachers."

Frances Jo remembered nights she'd lain in bed, waiting for her daddy when he'd not come back until early morning. On one such morning, Frances Jo had understood her momma, when Daddy agreed to replace the icebox with one Momma said kept food cooler.

After what his stroke had put him through, Frances Jo couldn't see how anybody, even the dead, could stay mad at him. If he'd had any settling up to do, then the stroke had squared all debts.

Most days he got by sipping a little whiskey and sitting crouched over in his chair. On good days, he sometimes felt well enough to walk down below the house to where he'd kept a still. Leaning on Buster and a cane, he made it there and back without Frances Jo's help. The three of them were a sight, him staggering off across a fallow field, choked with briars and beggarweeds, holding to Buster, and Frances Jo standing on back steps, chewing on the corner of a dishrag, holding back as long as she could.

As Frances Jo saw it, there was nothing wrong with the way they worked things out. She'd stay until he was back on his feet, able to do for himself, then she needed to go back to Selma and try getting her job back. But as it turned out, Sister and her husband had other plans. They thought Frances Jo's coming back meant she was there to get what their daddy had.

On Tuesday, after she'd been back a month, Sister and her husband came to the house. That was the first time Frances Jo heard about their daddy's so-called fortune. Even though she'd bought groceries and paid the light bill since being back, Sister figured Daddy had money. At first Sister dillydallied around, then she came straight out and said, "You know he's got it, going clear back to FDR times from social security

and hush money."

Sister claimed a check was due in the box by the fifth of the month, which explained their being there. But Frances Jo had gone to the mailbox after dinner and there had been no check.

Then Sister's husband got in on it. "Now Frances Jo, you keep that up, and you'll make us have to get the law in on this. Truth is, we can provide a Christian home for your daddy and you can't."

Then Sister spoke up and said, "It's like Preacher says, Frances Jo. Besides, cashing somebody's check, even if it's your daddy's, is clearly agin' the law."

Frances Jo's chest felt like it would rip apart with hurt and anger, and she screamed, "Hold on there, you sanctified bitch. You known damn well everything Daddy's got will fit fine in a flour sack. In your book, he may have been a drunkard and a womanizer, but you know he never took money from folks who trusted him with the truth."

"Merciful Jesus, the Lord'll punish you, Frances Jo Taylor, for your filthy, low-down-talking mouth."

Their daddy struggled to raise his good hand like he meant to strike them.

Sister's husband snatched her away, and they stormed off the porch, threatening to bring the law. Yet Frances Jo believed they'd not meant what they'd said.

Bud Haley was the sheriff, and their daddy had helped put him in office twenty years earlier, passing shine among loggers who'd worked Spider Creek. But it seemed Buddy had a weak memory. He came to the house with a paper saying Mr. Red was to go and live at Preacher's. He said Preacher had been put in charge of Daddy's affairs and if Frances Jo went back to Selma and didn't make any more trouble, they'd forget about any wrong she'd done.

Buddy went on to say Mr. Red had signed away his social security to the Word of Faith Primitive Church, and it sounded to Frances Jo like Sister hadn't

known what her faith-healing husband had been up to when she'd yelled about missing checks. Come to find out, Sister's husband had cashed the checks each month, sending groceries, a little rot-gut shine and tobacco to Daddy, and keeping the rest for what he called the Lord's work.

Frances Jo said, "Looks to me like the Lord's had a little too much help getting at Daddy's money."

"Don't reckon you've got much room to talk, you off in Selma when things needed deciding."

"Buddy, there weren't no deciding needed. You talk like Daddy's dead and gone, totally out of the picture. It's clear he wants to live right here in this very house where he was born."

Frances Jo had been gone so long from Wewa she didn't know where to turn after Buddy lined up solid like he did with Sister and Preacher. His taking their side puzzled her until Silas said, "My God, Jodie, he knocked up the judge's wife, and that damn s.o.b. Preacher's got him hog-tied on this thing."

The day Sister and her husband came for Daddy, if he knew what was happening, he didn't let on. Frances Jo hadn't figured out what to tell him beforehand, so she didn't say anything. But after an early supper of peas, creamed corn, cornbread, and peach cobbler, she bathed and dressed him in his newest khaki pants and a starched and ironed white shirt. He looked respectable, the way she remembered. Then they sat on the porch, Frances Jo waiting and wringing her hands and her daddy sitting easy, stroking Buster's broad head.

Sister's and her husband's place was about twelve miles from Daddy's, and they didn't come before they had to. When Sister told Daddy to get in the car, he pried himself out of the chair and hauled himself down the steps, shaking off her offer to help. Leaning on his cane and Buster, he made it to the car. Sister opened the back door, and he stopped, turned stiffly, and waved good-

bye to Frances Jo. He patted Buster's head and motioned him back on the porch. As they drove away, he didn't look back. Frances Jo wasn't sure why; maybe it was his stiffness or maybe he'd already forgotten he'd left her behind.

The next day Frances Jo locked the old house against she didn't know what, and was waiting when the deputy came to drive her to Silas's station to catch the bus back to Selma. Silas had offered to take Buster to his place.

After Sister and her husband moved Daddy into town, it all happened about like Frances Jo had feared. Sister kept Daddy away from whiskey, and when he didn't go on his good days with Buster to the clearing, he quit having good days. He died just before Christmas, three months after Frances Jo left Wewa.

The funeral was in the middle of the week, so she didn't get time off. When she'd asked, the boss yelled something about her being damn lucky to have her job back after the stunt she pulled. For sure, she needed the job, but after taking a dollar and five cents an hour, like she was just starting out, and sleeping with him to boot, she'd not felt one damn bit lucky.

Silas called, saying, "There was a good turnout, considering everybody who'd really known Mr. Red was either dead or past going." Then he added "Hon, your daddy looked real natural."

Frances Jo knew the part about him looking natural was just something people said. She'd said it herself often enough. She just wished Silas had said he was sorry for her pain, and that everybody at the funeral had said it hadn't mattered that she couldn't make it back. But that hadn't changed a thing.

Then Silas said Buster had turned up missing. He figured the old dog had gone in the woods and picked his place to die.

After Silas hung up, Jodie poured herself a drink and thought about what he'd said about Buster, and she decided that seemed like the right way.