

The Last of the Dogsitters



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is a newspaper editor, a freelance writer, and as TWA board member, edits **The Tennessee Writer** newsletter for Alliance members. Her mom says Tomi didn't write her first words, she wrote her first story. Mom said, "I pretty much knew from then on what she'd be when she grew up."

Momma found the canister full of money on the day of the flood. She was clearing out a mess of old canned peaches and bags of flour from the pantry when she felt something new back there, something foreign in the familiar jumble that has been her domain for so many years. She had to push elbow deep past tins of beans and preserves, old friends to my mother, to get to the stranger in the corner of the dusty shelf.

"What in the world?" she said, snaking her arm back out through the village of cans and jars, many with labels half peeling away or gone outright. Momma held the ceramic canister, the mottled blue of a face underwater, away from her body.

She looked at me, and I wiped my hands on my apron before taking the canister from her. She closed the pantry door and we sat at the kitchen table. I set it down between us, and we stared at it in the gathering morning light from the window over the sink.

"This was Betty Jenkins' smallest canister," I said, touching the lid. "What in the world is it doing in your pantry, Momma?"

Momma got up again and walked through the house one time before returning. Light footsteps down the hall, tapping once in the great room, once in the bedroom, and back to the table. "No one's here," she told me, sitting. "Go head and open it."

I pulled the top off Betty's old canister, the one she kept baking soda in. I dated Bobby Jenkins for a while, before he went off to war. I sat in their kitchen many a evening, watching Miss Betty tap out flour, sugar and baking soda from these canisters, listening to her talk about the letters she got from her son with colorful foreign stamps, until the day she received the last letter, from the government, and Miss Betty quit talking. The canister set was a gift to Betty from one of the gentlemen passing through, a condolence.

"Why, it's money," I said, a certain rush moving from my chest through my arms, into my fingertips. "Dear Lord above, Momma, it's a *lot* of money."

Momma pushed her chair back with a scrape over the floor that made me crumple the bills in my fist. She moved like a pulled puppet to the sink. "Is there a letter," she said.

I pulled out all the money – it had to be hundreds of dollars – and let the bills sift across the table as I ran my fingers along the inside of the canister. I turned it upside down and peered inside. "No," I answered.

Momma nodded, not turning. She looked out the window at the thicket of trees beyond the house where she'd lived since the day she married Calvin Roberts, the son of a fire and brimstone preacher. This was their homestead, had been in the Roberts family since God himself was a child. Only preacher he'd ever known had his own house, not beholdng to a congregation, Calvin Roberts had said more than once. This was his homeplace and he wouldn't leave it, flood or no flood.

Momma was waiting in the rocking chair with the canister in her lap when Fat Daddy got home. I was in the kitchen peeling

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potatoes when I heard his shuffling on the front steps, the heavy drop of his boots outside the front door, the screen door's squeal and slam.

"And just what," I heard Momma say, "were you going to do with this?"

"You're in my chair, woman," Fat Daddy answered.

I dropped potato chunks into a pot of water and wiped my hands on my apron. Some people have to wash their hands after handling raw potatoes, but I don't mind the starch on my fingers. Makes me feel like I've done something of a day. I moved closer to the kitchen door, where I could see the shadow of the rocking chair thrown up against the hearth, mimicking the flames in the fireplace. That fire's been burning for three generations of Fat Daddy's family, he's said more than once, and it ain't going out now, flood or no flood.

The men at the Five and Dime had laughed, chewing on peanut husks and spitting off the store porch: "'That's what you think, Roberts. That flood's coming whether you move or not. They gonna flood this valley for the 'lectricity, and that's the Lord's truth."

"I found this canister in the back of the pantry, Calvin," Momma said, "while I was cleaning out all the food that'll swell and rot. If you're going make us stay here we might as well be floating in a clean house."

I pressed my back to the wall and slid down until I was sitting on my heels. I pushed my fingers into my eyes until all I could see was yellow stars, red starbursts, and all I heard was the rush of my own blood through my head.

"Taint no business of yours, wife," Fat Daddy said. I felt the rumble of his steps across the plank floor toward my mother. His weight jarred my bones. "That there money was sent to *me*, was addressed to *me*, and belongs to *me*."

"Addressed," Momma spat. "It was addressed to you? Did it come with a letter? Did she send a letter with all this money, or did she just send a wad of cash, Calvin?"

"Weren't no letter," Fat Daddy said, but I could hear a catch as he turned his face from her.

The floorboards moaned as Momma stood from the rocker, and I reached back and grabbed onto the doorframe to pull myself up, too. She stands, I stand with her. There was a flurry of movement in my belly, and I touched it with my white fingertips, sticky still with starch.

"She wouldn't send money without a letter for her momma. Not my Rebecca, no sir."

"Well, hate to disappoint you, but there weren't no letter none of the times. That there money's been coming for months now, but I ain't about to use no filthy Authority money for nothing. I don't take no handouts. I work for ever red cent I have, I earn it with my own two hands. Don't need no traitor daughter or yellow-bellied son gone run off to work for the Authority to send me none of their blood money, oh no."

"Momma," I called, "it's getting about dark, now. We need go on and get this supper on."

"Where'd this canister come from, Calvin?" Momma asked.

"From your shelf, I reckon."

"Calvin, this is a Vulcan-made canister. We've never had money for Vulcan canisters in this house. Merry Beth saw these canisters in Betty Jenkins's kitchen with her own eyes, and I want to know how it got in my house."

Fat Daddy was silent, but I could imagine him cutting off some chew, tucking it into that cankered place between bone and flesh, and carefully folding it back into the tin he kept in his hip pocket.

"I want you to tell me, Calvin, that you did not go over to Betty Jenkins's house and go in there and get this canister yourself." I heard the sudden, heartbreaking shatter of that canister on the cabin floor. "Please, Calvin, tell me you did not raid that woman's home."

"I didn't *raid* nothing, Betty Jean," Fat Daddy said finally, and spat into the flames. "Taint raiding if no one's there no more. Betty Jenkins been gone nigh a month now, she ain't gone miss no Vulcan canister she done left behind anyways."

Momma moved closer to him, and although she was a full three heads shorter than Fat Daddy, her shadow leapt behind her, springing up the wall and skittering on the ceiling. I have always been a little scared of the shadows in this valley, the tricks of light through tree and glade. When I was little I wouldn't move off the front steps until my shadow disappeared beneath the porch, wouldn't allow myself the cool relief of sweet creekwater till the light was

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at a certain slant so I could see whatever swam beneath the surface, the flickers of light that could be a streaking tadpole or a snake disturbed from the reeds.

"How long you been doing this?" Momma asked now, her voice a current beneath the wake of breaking glass. "How long you been going to people's houses? What else you got?"

I felt him before I saw Fat Daddy turn the corner into the kitchen. He stopped when he saw me leaning against the wall inside the door. His eyes went straight to my belly, where I'd tied my apron high on my waist. He closed his eyes and ran a hand down his face, shook his head. "You might as well go on in there, Merry Beth," he told me. "Ain't no sense standing in here listening when you could be sittin' in there listening with your feet up."

He moved past without looking at me, opened the cupboard above the ice box that hadn't been cold in over a month. Ice man quit bringing blocks after the announcement, just before the last of the speeches, long after Cal and Rebecca left. Daddy took down a Mason jar half-full of clear liquid, clean moonshine old Doc Rayburn had cooked up for the last of the dogstoppers, as he called people like my daddy, who held out as long as they could before succumbing to Jake Mahoney's honeyed words, his moneyed promises.

"Here be the last of these," Doc Rayburn had said, handing over a battered cardboard box of Mason jars to Fat Daddy on our front porch two days before he headed out to his sister's place in Alabama. "Made this'un batch just for you, Fat Daddy, the last of the dogstoppers. I say, you'll still be a'sittin on this porch, here amongst your coon dogs and that ole mutt there, Sissy, watching the sun set as the floods tear down ever tree, house and mule from here to Kingdom Come."

Fat Daddy had plucked one jar from the box and held it up to the failing light, the pink dusty sun making the moonshine glint like the tangle of a little girl's plastic jewelry melting in the sun.

"My, but don't she shine," Fat Daddy had said, and clinked jars with Doc before taking a tentative sip.

Now Fat Daddy unscrewed the lid and took a hearty swig, wincing as he set the jar on the kitchen table. He planted both hands on the heavy oak, let his head hang between his shoulders. "This here is my home, Merry Beth, do you understand that?"

"Yessir," I said.

"And a man don't leave his home, you understand that too?"

"Yessir, but - "

Fat Daddy's face jerked up, and he looked more like our scarecrow come to life than my daddy, more like straw and stick held loosely together with scraps of tie and twine than a real man. Even his face didn't work right, his mouth turning up into a grin while his eyes stayed flat as Leaper's Fork Creek before a storm. Calm, still, but with so much life teeming beneath the surface you were afraid to dip in a fingertip, much less throw yourself in body and soul.

"Ain't no but," Fat Daddy said. "Ain't no but about it, this here's our land and we're staying. I don't need nobody telling me where I can or cannot live, what's to be done to land that's been in my family, that we've worked on and bled on and birthed on for nearly a hundred years now. I don't need no Authority representative comin out here to tell me they going to take this land for the government, going to flood it all, drive us out, make us leave so they can provide 'lectricity for the rest of the goddamned free world. I don't give a good goddamn about the rest of the South, bout no rural regeneration project, I care bout my farm and my family and by God I'm going to keep them."

"But Daddy," I said, moving to the table. "Jake Mahoney said - "

"Jake Mahoney is a damned traitor and a fool!" The Mason jar rattled on the table. "Jake Mahoney was raised up by that damned fool widder woman what run the boarding house, no telling what nonsense those traveling men set up in his brain anyways! Him running round in short pants and them white shoes out the Sears Roebuck. And now look at him - workin for the government, telling us how good it's going to be now that we gone have 'lectricity and lights and no telling what else. They got to him, too."

"Oh, Daddy, I really don't think -"

"Think?" Fat Daddy threw back his head and laughed, a sound like coyotes barking, calling to one another from hilltop to hilltop, alerting the valley below of the shiny teeth and dripping jaws waiting in the night. "You, girl,

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don't *think*, that's pretty safe to say."

I sat down at the table with him, took the jar of moonshine in my hands and twisted off the lid. While he wiped the tears from his eyes and finished with a few low chuckles, I put the jar to my lips and took a long sip, steeling myself from wincing or giving him any satisfaction that this vile liquid was searing everything inside me, burning me from the inside out, that I would not breathe fire when I finished.

I lay awake all night listening to Jake Mahoney's last words to me, his hands covering mine as we swung on the front porch of his momma's boarding house in the last fading light of fall. Pink light made his hands glow in my lap, and my fingertips, peeking from between his fingers, were bright flashing as the opals in Momma's antique brooch. I watched them, our hands and fingers intertwined and swaying together like a nest of gold dropped into a sunset-lit lake and sinking to the bottom to rest, to sleep, until someone catches a glimpse of light and unearths the treasure from its depths.

"What are you thinking about?" Jake had asked.

I looked up at him. "About things sinking and drowning. About dropped jewels at the bottom of a lake."

"It doesn't have to be this way, you know," Jake had said, squeezing my hands. "You can leave with me and momma, with the rest of us. There's still time. You don't have to stay just because your daddy says so."

But he knew I would never change my mind. In my predicament, staying here was better than leaving and starting over on my own, with no family to speak of and another mouth besides my own to feed. I knew even if I did leave with Jake Mahoney and his family he would not marry me, he would never marry me because he was in love with Rebecca, my traitor sister. He had lain with me in a vain attempt to touch her, to move within her, to love Rebecca who had been the smartest of us all and left here long before we knew we were to die.

The pounding came before sunrise, a distinct, insistent knock that stirred me from what could not pass as sleep. I pulled myself off my pallet using the unsteady rocking chair, my weight always more of a burden in the morning, before I could center myself with it. The weight came upon waking, as I opened my eyes and breathed, deep, settling, before moving.

My sister Rebecca was never the pretty one, or the fun one, or the good one; she was the smart one, the daughter who read books and newspapers and talked back when she didn't agree. She and Fat Daddy had so many knock-down drag-outs that Momma would sometimes just walk out back, into the forest, and wait for the yelling to subside, saying she'd rather take her chances with the coyotes than wade into the depths of their wars.

"My god, but you've gotten fat," Rebecca said, elbowing past me into the house. I stuck my head out the door and looked around, but there were no bags or suitcases on the front porch, just a beat up little car in the turn around in front of the house, dust still settling in the lane.

I followed her into the kitchen. "Want some coffee?"

She turned and stared at my belly, raising one eyebrow, lips working to dam up the stream of words she so direly wanted to say, the questions she dared not ask.

I cocked my head and looked at her.

"Nevermind, nevermind," Rebecca said, waving a hand. "No coffee. I came to get you people out of here. This is complete nonsense, this staying here, Merry Beth, you know what's going to happen."

I put the coffee pot on the stove. The familiar metal ring of sound vibrated up my arms, through my chest.

Rebecca moved around the kitchen like a bird caught in the house, banging off things and knocking over everything she touched. "I said no coffee. There's no time." She jarred a metal canister off the sideboard, and I wondered what had happened to the money Fat Daddy had hidden.

I felt the rumble before I heard anything. I turned and looked at Rebecca, who was still talking, and saw behind her Momma and Fat Daddy coming into the kitchen, Momma's face white and still, Fat Daddy staring beyond me, out the window. I heard the sound of twigs snapping, of a train coming, and when I looked down my feet were wet.

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Rebecca said she came back to get us out of the house, lead us to higher ground. She was just starting to persuade Fat Daddy into packing his things when she began to cough, and water trickled from the sides of her mouth, trickled over the pearl stud earrings I just now noticed. I tried to comment on them but my mouth filled and I gagged.

Momma's hair floated in a perfect fan around her face, and I was glad that she didn't keep it bound at night, that she let it down to rest along her back, twine around her arms. Her face was white and still, her eyes closed and her head back, her throat a perfect canvas, and as I watched the blue veins there glimmered to the surface, creating a pristine patchwork quilt where I wanted to lay my head, to tuck into the soft curve of my mother's neck, but when I tried I found my nightgown had snagged on the branch of a tree, and as much as I flailed and tugged to be free, I could not reach my mother's hands, and her pretty face floated out of reach.

Fat Daddy found me. He took me in his arms and put his face to mine and I could breathe, but the air was wet and foul and I coughed, pushing him from me. He was chasing moonshine from Doc Rayburn's jars, drinking so much he was filling the whole house with his poison, our little cabin was filling with it, and I thrashed away toward Momma's rocking chair to warm myself by the fire.

The fire crackled merrily and popped but was not warm. I pushed forward, past the battered chairs and beneath the rug knotted by old Maw Mai, a kerosene lantern knocking against my elbow, the dresses of old dolls from my girlhood catching on my toes. I wiped my eyes but still could not see much so I took a deep breath to anchor myself, felt that familiar burn through my chest, and that's when I saw that the fire of my father's family, the flame which had been tended and stoked for three generations, was out, was cold, was wet, and as my head knocked against the roof I cried out for my daughter, swimming inside me, who would never see that fire and would never know how close she came to breathing.