

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable

The Man Up at the Miller Place

Mark Bastable



Here is a wide, flat field of ripe wheat, the fat grains swollen with a long summer of sunshine, the stalks swaying in the gentle harvest breeze, yellow-gold, rustling and whispering. And closer to the house, an orchard, the boughs of the trees weighed down with fruit - good red apples in tempting clusters, perfect and pure as God's own Word.

A swing hangs from the thickest branch of the oldest tree, and on the swing there sits a boy, looking out at the wheatfield, and crunching into a rosy, juicy windfall that he can hardly hold in his small hand. The boy kicks back from the ground and starts to sway on the swing. He drops the apple core. He wipes his mouth on his sleeve and grabs hold of the ropes. He arches back, legs straight out. He leans way forward into the downward sweep of the swing. Back and forth, higher and higher. The wheatfield rises and drops in front of the boy, and the bough creaks above him. But he has no fear. However high he goes, he never gets scared - because he's swung on this swing for as long as he can remember - higher and higher - and he knows that the ropes are tough and the bough is strong. Higher and higher, as the sun flashes between the branches and his moccasined feet seem to touch the sky.

And the boy laughs and laughs as he swings, just for the sheer happiness of being a boy on a swing, with his chores finished and the whole afternoon of sunshine ahead of him, with nothing else to do and nothing to fear.

*

Alvin Miller was the man of house – no question about that. Ask any of the two hundred inhabitants of Deanville, and they'd say it straight out. "Alvin's the boss up at the Miller place - yessir." Even Joe Quench – who'd been the Millers' handyman on Ridgeback Farm since God was a greenhorn – deferred to Alvin.

"Mornin', boss-man," he'd say, as Alvin came out onto the back porch to survey the paddock and the orchard beyond. "Another beautiful day, huh?"

Sure, it was Amy Miller who drove the truck when she and Alvin went into town for supplies and to pick up mail. And it was Amy too who paid for the groceries and the shotgun cartridges and the new fence-pales for the hogpen. But when the two of them walked into Leonard's Trading Shack and Post Office, making the bell jangle as they pushed on the door, Mr Leonard would touch his brow to Alvin before addressing Amy. And that's exactly what he did one bright spring morning in 1946, when the bell jangled and Alvin held the door open for Amy to step inside.

"Good to see you, Mr Miller," said the storekeeper, touching his brow. "You too Amy. What can I get you folks today?"

"Reckon we got a fox out by the run, Mr Leonard," Alvin replied, hiking himself up onto the stool by the soda fountain. "Lost two more last night."

Amy produced the list Alvin had written sitting at the kitchen table, as she'd opened the cupboards and peered in, calling out what was required.

"Canned tomatoes, yeast, baking soda..."

"Need a trap for that fox," Mr Leonard suggested, gathering the items as Amy read from the back of the brown envelope. "Sly sons of bi..." And then he glanced warily at Amy. "Sly critters, foxes."

Alvin nodded sombrely and turned his attention to the row of bottles on the shelf behind the soda fountain. He was deciding which to sample this time. Every trip to town, he was faced with this dilemma, and every time he pondered it for as long as it took Mr Leonard to fill that week's order. Usually Amy would sit next to him, her palm on the small of Alvin's back as she called out the list, but today she was edgy, distracted.

"...four cans of beans. No, six. And..." She stopped and let her hand fall to her side, still holding the envelope. "Jackson," she said, addressing the storekeeper. "Don't do this to me. Is there anything?"

Jackson Leonard paused, his hand reaching for the beans, and he turned his head and grinned at Amy. "Well, you know, I believe I did see a letter with your name on it. Appears to have come in from Californy." He scratched his head and looked around, puzzled. "Now, what the hullo did I do with that thing?"

"Jackson!" Amy exclaimed, and the tone was near to pleading.

Mr Leonard chuckled and reached under the counter. "Figured you was coming in, so I had it right here ready for you." He handed her a letter that carried a government stamp.

Amy tore it open as Mr Leonard looked on, biting his lip in gleeful anticipation. She unfolded the sheet of paper inside, and scanned it quickly. She gasped, then looked up at Mr Leonard, and her eyes were gleaming with happy tears.

“Next week. He’ll be home sometime next week.”

Mr Leonard clapped his hands. “Amy, that’s great news, great news!” He turned to Alvin, who was swinging his feet as he studied the bottles of syrup behind the soda fountain. “You hear that, Alvin? Your daddy’s coming home.”

Alvin looked over at his mother. “Will I still get a soda in town when Daddy comes home?”

Amy couldn’t speak. She was holding one hand to her mouth and gulping, the tears streaming down her face.

“Well, son,” Mr Leonard said, a little crossly. “Think you might be a little more excited. Your daddy’s a hero – an honest-to-goodness war hero, boy!”

“It’s okay, Jackson,” Amy managed. “He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t even remember Judd.”

Mr Leonard nodded. “Yeah, I guess. Still,” he added, walking along the counter to the soda fountain, “a celebration, huh? What you want? It’s on me.”

*

Alvin noticed a change in his mother over the next few days. She had Vera Elkins come over to do her hair, and she dressed up every day like it was Sunday. When Alvin was eating his breakfast, she would hover around him, telling him to hurry up, and as he put his spoon down after the last mouthful, she’d whisk the bowl away and wash it and dry it and put it in the cupboard right then, before wiping down the breakfast table and taking her apron off, and checking her hair in the mirror.

And she cleaned all the time. Dusting this and polishing that. When Alvin walked in from the chicken run, just like normal, she screamed at him to take his shoes off because she’d just spent an hour on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. Alvin tutted, and went back outside.

Old Joe was out there, whitewashing the fence. Even he seemed grouchy.

“Don’t you touch nuthin’, boss-man. I don’t need your momma bawling me out when you get covered in whitewash.”

Alvin went down to the orchard, and sat on the swing. He jutted out his bottom lip and scowled. Then he shrugged, and lifted his feet and began to get up some speed. Higher and higher, the fresh-green apple trees looping and dipping as he swung to and fro. A sudden breeze wafted flurries of white apple-blossom into a swirling slow-motion cloud through which Alvin whooshed upward, and then back. He laughed and reached out with one hand, trying to catch the flakes of petals in his outstretched palm.

“You’re dead!” An arm went around Alvin’s neck, and pulled him backwards off the seat at the height of its backswing. He was held in mid-air for a moment, dangling, until he felt a hand under his backside, and he was lowered to the floor, breathless and shaking.

“See, if I’d a been a Jap, you’d a had your throat cut for sure,” Judd Miller told his son, laughing and showing his teeth. He was gaunt and hollow-cheeked, and he wore a black patch over his left eye. “One thing I learned over there – never let your guard down.” He bent forward and picked up the eight-year-old, hooching him up on to one hip.

“So how you bin, son?” Alvin’s daddy asked, as they headed up towards the house.

“You’ve grown some, that’s for sure.”

Alvin swallowed, still shaking, and looked back over his father’s shoulder towards the orchard, where the swing was swinging and the apple blossom was swirling in gentle clouds, just like it did every spring.

*

Dinner that night was a special affair, like Thanksgiving or Christmas. Amy told Alvin to put on his best clothes, and she combed his hair and wiped a smudge off his cheek with spit on the corner of her apron. Alvin’s daddy was in the bathtub – you could hear him singing “The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B.”

When he sat down at the table, his mother said, “No, baby. Sit on the side there, by the hutch.”

Alvin was taken aback. “But I always sit here. This is my place.”

“Not now. Daddy’s home.”

The good silverware was out, and proper serving bowls – not the usual dish-it-up-at-the-stove arrangement that Alvin was used to. He sat and fiddled with his knife and fork, and made a tent of his napkin.

“Alvin, stop fidgeting with things,” his mother snapped as she walked to the bottom of the stairs. “Honey, you about dressed?” she called. “I’m ready to put it on the table.”

“Well, if that’s where you want it...” Judd Miller chuckled, as he came down, knotting his neck tie.

“Shush!” Amy scolded, frowning and smiling all at once, and glancing towards Alvin.

Judd sat down in the chair at the head of the table, as Amy brought over the roast chicken from the oven.

“Home cooking,” Judd declared happily, tucking his napkin into his collar. “Seems like forever since I had real home cooking.”

“We got rice and sweet potatoes, peas and baby corn and gravy,” Amy announced, taking the lids from the serving plates. “What can I give you, honey?”

“I want lots of everything,” Alvin said.

Amy shot him a look. “You wait till after your daddy.”

“No rice for me, sweetbuns,” Judd said. “Reckon I’ve seen all the rice I ever want to see.”

“Oh – honey. I’m sorry,” Amy said hurriedly. “I didn’t think...”

“I like rice,” Alvin put in. “Rice is my favourite.”

Judd turned his one eye on his son. “You wouldn’t be so eager for rice if you’d seen what I seen, son.” He leaned forward. “You know what the Japs can do to a man with rice?”

“No,” Alvin admitted, dubiously.

Judd brought his face close to Alvin’s. “They’ll force feed a man with raw rice. Push it down his throat. And then they make him drink water. Quart after quart of water.” He reached to the bowl in the middle of the table and picked up a fat, ripe tomato. “The rice in the man’s belly soaks up that water, and it swells and it swells.”

Alvin’s eyes were wide and frightened, fixed on his father’s face, flicking back and forth between the one clear blue iris and the blank, black patch. Judd’s hand, holding the tomato, was between them, but Alvin could look only at his father’s thin face.

“Pretty soon, that ol’ belly is so swoll up, it looks like it’ll burst wide open. And then the jap bastard will take a knife, and make a little nick – just a little nick – on the guy’s swollen belly and...”

Judd squeezed the tomato and its skin split, spewing out red flesh and spurting seeds that ran down between his tightening fingers, and squirted across Alvin’s cheek.

“Oh my God!” Amy gasped. “They did that?”

Judd laughed, sitting back and tossing the split tomato into the sink.

“Yep – seen it with my own eyes.” He leaned towards Alvin again, who was wiping tomato juice from his cheek, and biting his lip. “With my own eye, that is, huh?” He took some bread from the basket and tore off a chunk with his teeth. “Tell ya – one thing I learned out there – keep well clear of Jap cooking.” And he laughed again, his mouth open, so that Alvin could see the chewed bread inside.

*

Alvin lay in bed, curled up, thinking about a stomach splitting in two, and everything spurting out, like the red flesh of a ripe tomato. He could hear the murmuring of his parents talking in the room next to his.

He felt his dinner in his stomach, and he could imagine the rice in there swelling up, bigger and bigger. He turned onto his back and put his hands on his belly, as if to try and hold it together.

And as he lay there, he heard his mother in the next room, moaning. Quietly at first, but gradually louder.

“...oh, my God. Oh, God. Jesus Christ, Judd!”

Alarmed, Alvin sat up, his fists clenched.

“Jesus! Please!” Amy Miller’s voice rose to a scream, and then suddenly, there was silence.

Alvin listened for a few moments, anxious and tense. Then he heard the door of his mother’s room open, and her footsteps on the landing. He slid off the bed and opened the door, seeing her heading for the bathroom.

“What’s wrong, mom?” he asked.

She jumped, startled. “Alvin! Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I woke up. Are you okay?”

His mother tutted. “What are you talking about? Go back to bed – it’s late. Go on.”

And as Alvin, dismissed, went back to bed, she called after him, “And mind your own business!”

*

As the summer came in, and the apple trees lost their blossom, and the little fruits began to form in clusters on the branches, the rhythms of Alvin’s life changed. He wasn’t the man of the house anymore.

And his mother was different too. Back before daddy was home, Alvin and his mom would sit on the swing-chair in the porch every evening before bedtime, looking out at the hills and the road to Deanville winding between them, and they’d talk about the day just past, and what was to be done tomorrow. Alvin would mention that he’d seen a possum down by the creek, and Amy would say it was time they made a scarecrow for the field. They’d sip their lemonade and Alvin would lean against his mother’s side until the sun sank behind the hills and she would take him up to bed.

But now Amy sat on the swing-chair with Alvin’s daddy, and Alvin had to sit on the step in front of them, listening to them talk about the farm and the neighbours and who’d married or died while Alvin’s daddy had been away at the war. And if Alvin tried to contribute to the conversation, his mom would just say, “That’s nice, Alvin,” and carry on talking to the one-eyed man. Or, worse, she’d offhandedly scold the boy for interrupting when grown-ups were talking.

So Alvin had taken to trudging down to the orchard after dinner, and sitting on the swing, out of sight of his parents, his back to the sunset.

Old Joe was walking up across the orchard from the field, swigging from a canteen of water.

“How y’doin’ there, boss-man?” he asked Alvin, as he reached the old apple tree.

“Kay,” Alvin murmured.

“That right? Seems to me you bin kinda blue these past weeks. Am I right?”

Alvin looked down at his feet, dangling a few inches off the ground. “No. I’m fine.”

Old Joe hunkered down and tapped the boy’s knee. “You findin’ life strange, now your daddy’s home?”

Alvin glanced up. “I don’t like him. He’s scary.”

Joe nodded. “Well, he teases you – I seen that. But he don’t mean nothin’ by it. It’s just his way of bein’ friendly.”

Alvin frowned at Joe, biting his bottom lip. “It was better before,” he said. “I wish he would’ve stayed at the war.”

“Ah, now, boss-man,” Joe said, smiling a little. “You shouldna oughta say that. Your daddy loves you – you know that, doncha?”

Alvin thumbed a booger from the rim of one nostril and studied it.

“No,” he said.

*

From the kitchen window, Judd Miller looked out at the boy sitting on the swing, talking to Old Joe.

“Been too soft on that kid, Amy,” he said over his shoulder. “He’s a pantywaist.”

Amy looked up from the pot she was scouring. “He’s missed having a man about the place, is all.”

Judd sat down at the table and poured a coffee. “He needs toughening up. One thing I learned over there, a man needs to be tough. Show no fear.”

“Weren’t you afraid, ever, Judd?”

“Afraid?” Judd laughed. “Jesus, I was shit-scared most of the time – but I din’t never show it. See – soon as a man shows fear, it takes him over. I seen guys break down, lose control. Next thing they’re running for the trees, don’t care whether they live or die, as long as they can

stop being scared. They're like rats. Just run for the nearest hidey-hole, and the hell with everything."

He looked out of the window again. "Needs toughening up, that boy." He slurped his coffee, and turned back to Amy as she sat down at the table. "Say, when's the last time you purged the barn?"

Amy furrowed her brow. "More than a year, anyway." Then her eyes widened. "Oh, no, Judd. He's barely eight..."

"Old enough. One thing I learned over there, you're never too young. We'll do it tonight."

*

It was three o'clock in the morning and the barn was vast and dark. At one end, high wooden doors opened out to the yard, and at the other was a wall of hay-bales, stacked to the roof, twenty feet up. Over to the right, the wheat-threshing machine was covered in tarps, awaiting the fall, when the harvested grains would be flailed from the stalks and poured into sacks for taking into town.

Judd walked across the yard, seeing his way with a flashlight. Joe followed, carrying two baseball bats. Judd opened the door a crack, and peered in, playing the flashlight across the expansive floor of the barn, and back towards the wall of hay.

"Crawlin' with 'em," he muttered to Joe. "Set up the flares right here outside the doors – I'll go get the boy."

Judd turned back to the house, and walked in through the kitchen. Halfway up the stairs, he met Amy coming down, holding a lantern.

"He's fast asleep, honey," she said. "Maybe you should wait until next year..."

"I know what I'm doing," Judd told her, brushing past. "Now's as good a time as any. Bring that light up for me."

He opened the door of Alvin's room, and stepped up to the bed, gently pulling back the covers. He picked Alvin up, whispering to him.

"Got a job for you, little guy. My daddy got me to do it, and now it's your turn."

Alvin, not yet awake, rested his head on his father's shoulder as he was carried down the stairs, his hair stuck to his forehead with sleep sweat, his face flushed with drowsiness. Amy stood aside anxiously to let them pass. Judd walked through the kitchen and out across the dark yard, as Alvin murmured sleepily.

"...where we going?"

"You'll see, little guy."

At the door to the barn, Judd took the baseball bats from Joe with his free hand, and slipped into the dark building, whispering, “One minute, then set off the flares.”

As he walked towards the back of the barn in the blackness, a scurrying and scratching could be heard from around Judd’s feet. A few yards from the wall of hay, he set Alvin down, and turned him towards the door. He took Alvin’s hands and closed them around one of the baseball bats, and then he stood next to his son in the darkness, the other bat held loosely by his side.

Alvin swayed groggily, blinking, as the doors of the barn swung open and the faint light of the stars appeared. There was a brief hiss of a fuse and then a brilliant white-blue light flooded the barn, illuminating the wide floor which was alive with suddenly-terrified rats. Just as Judd had told his wife, the panicking rats fled for the nearest cover – the wall of haybales – and they were oblivious of any obstacle that stood between them and sanctuary. Blinded and spooked, they scurried squeaking towards Alvin and Judd, and teemed over them. Judd began to lash out with the baseball bat, but Alvin still half-asleep and transfixed with shock, stood stone-still as the rats climbed him, their little claws tugging at his pyjamas, their fur brushing against his face.

“Hit ‘em, boy!” Judd yelled, as he swung the bat, sending screeching rats flying through the air. “Don’t show no fear! Smash the little bastards!”

Alvin blinked, tried to flap the rats from his body with one hand – and then, galvanized, he gripped the baseball bat and began to flail around him. His mouth was a circle of terror as he felt the wood connect with a random furry body, then another, and another. He struck out left and right, in hatred and revulsion, crushing and pounding the dirty-brown rats. His breath came in whimpering sobs as he turned, smacking the rats that were now scampering up the wall of hay, over and over – smack, smack, smack – feeling the eggshell crack of rodent skulls and the snap of spines, hearing the flop of the dead bodies as they fell to the barn floor which was slick with blood under his bare feet.

And Alvin’s father, still striking out at the thinning horde of rats, glanced at the boy, and grinned.

“There you go, son,” he said, grinding a twitching rat under his heel. “Make a man of you yet.”

And Alvin, hearing nothing but his own sobs, swung the baseball bat around him, pounding the floor and the haybales blindly, trembling with a loathing that was not directed solely at the shrieking rats.

*

Two months later, Joe Quench died in mid-sentence. He and Alvin were collecting apples. Joe was at the top of the ladder, and Alvin was sitting out on a branch, passing back the fruit for the old man to drop into the yoke basket on his back.

“Don’t you lean out too far, boss-man,” Joe was saying. “You keep a good grip with your other hand. I don’t need to be telling your mama how you fell off and...”

And he stopped, suddenly, his eyes wide. He put one hand to his chest, quite gently, and stared at Alvin. Then his knees buckled and he slid down the ladder, his face rapping against every rung on the way down.

Alvin looked down at the old man crumpled at the foot of the tree, quite still but for the blood trickling from his nose and mouth. Harvested apples rolled from the yoke basket down the grassy incline towards the field. It was a ten foot drop to the ground – too far to jump – but Alvin didn't want to climb down the ladder and have to step over Joe. So he sat there on the apple branch, watching the ghostly moon rise and take shape. At last, when it was dark, his mother came out to look for him.

Joe was buried under the flowering cherry at the edge of the orchard, as he'd always wanted. The preacher came and said some words, and then he and Alvin and Alvin's parents went back to the house for poundcake and lemonade.

Later, when the preacher had left, Judd opened a beer and turned on the radio as Amy prepared the meal. Alvin sat in the armchair, feet slung over the side, trying to read a comic-book – but he was imagining Old Joe lying in a box under the ground out by the flowering cherry. He thought about how dark it must be in there, and cramped. He knew Joe was dressed in his good suit. Joe hated when he had to dress up like that – said it made him feel strapped-in and trapped. Alvin had mentioned this, and suggested that Old Joe would rather wear his overalls, but Alvin's mother had said that that was no way to meet your Maker.

Judd kept the radio on during dinner, listening to Jack Benny and guffawing with his mouth full of corned-beef hash. Alvin just kept thinking about Old Joe, out there in the cold ground, maybe listening to the laughter from the house, feeling lonesome. As Amy cleared the plates from the table, she said, "It'll be strange not having Joe around the place. Seems like he's always been here." She turned from the sink. "Lord, look at the time. You 'bout ready for bed, Alvin?"

Judd poured the rest of his beer from the bottle to the glass. "Joe'll still be around. When a man's been close to a place a long time, he don't just leave so easy." He glanced at Alvin. "Guess we'll feel Joe's ghost about us. He'll be right here, you'll see."

"Oh, Judd," Amy said, glancing at Alvin's wary face. "Don't go putting ideas in the boy's head."

"Hey," Judd protested, grinning slightly, "no point lying to the kid." He turned to Alvin. "You never know when you might see Joe again. He could be waiting there on the stairway right now, ready to see you off to bed."

Alvin looked at his mother, anxious. "That's not true, is it, mom?"

"Sure it is," Judd insisted. "Say, I bet Old Joe's dug himself out of that grave, and come in through the wall, just to tuck you in, boy. You give him my regards when you see him, okay?"

"Judd, that's enough," Amy put in. "Don't you pay any attention to your daddy, Alvin. Just get yourself upstairs to bed."

Alvin looked from his father to his mother and back again. “Mom, will you come up with me?”

“Sure...” Amy began.

“No, she won’t,” Judd interrupted, holding a hand up to silence his wife. “You’re not a baby. If you’re scared, you gotta face it, understand? Don’t show no fear, boy.” He stood up, and pulled open the door to the stairs. He looked at Alvin. “Now – tell me you ain’t afraid.”

Alvin’s lip trembled. “Can’t I stay up a while longer, mom?”

“Don’t you defy me, boy!” Judd suddenly roared. “Tell me you ain’t afraid and then get your ass up those stairs to bed.”

Amy’s eyes flicked towards her husband as she wound the dish-towel between her hands. “Do as your daddy says, Alvin,” she said quietly.

Alvin slid down from his chair and walked slowly towards the door. He picked up a lit lantern from the kitchen dresser, and turned to his father. His eyes were brim-full and he was sucking rhythmically at his bottom lip.

“Daddy...” he managed.

“Don’t you cry, boy,” Judd warned, low and throaty, leaning forward and grabbing the child’s elbow. “Don’t you dare cry, or by God I’ll give you something to cry for.” He straightened up. “Now – tell me you ain’t afraid.”

“I’m...not afraid,” Alvin whispered, swallowing, blinking, his face pale.

“Then you won’t need no lantern,” Judd pointed out, taking it from him. “Get.” He put a hand on Alvin’s shoulder and guided him into the hallway. “Don’t you forget to give Old Joe my best,” he reminded the boy as he shut the door.

Alvin stood alone in the hallway, breathing shallowly. The radio in the kitchen was playing big band music, and a little light crept through the crack of the door - but just a few steps up the stairs it was pitch black. Alvin put his hand on the banister, and lifted one foot onto the first step, which creaked. Alvin could imagine Old Joe sitting in the dark on the blanket-chest by the bathroom, dozing, but opening his eyes as he heard that creaking stair.

Alvin put his other foot – gently, gently – on the next step. Step by step, he made his way up the stairs, holding his breath, leaving the pencil of light from the kitchen behind him. As he reached the stair that brought his head level with the upstairs landing, he stood on his tiptoes, gulping, trying to see if Joe was there. The shadows and shapes of the furniture seemed to flow and coalesce into the form of an old man, and then, as smoothly, resolve themselves into familiar objects, motionless in the dark.

Alvin made it to the top step, and looked along the inky hallway to where he knew his bedroom door was.

“Joe?” he whispered, his voice quavering. “It’s me, Alvin.” He took a step or two along the hallway, past the bathroom. “Joe?”

Outside the window, a cloud slid from in front of the moon, and the light on the landing shifted – and there, slumped against the wall beside Alvin, was Old Joe in his good suit, his face smashed up and blood dripping from his nose. Alvin gasped and leapt back, pressing himself against the upstairs banister, his breath coming in sobs. But it wasn’t Joe - just the moonlight throwing shadows across the tallboy, and the curtain fluttering in the breeze from the yard.

Alvin whimpered and scurried to his darkened bedroom. His shoulder knocked against the rocking chair, making it clatter against the dresser. The boy squealed, and dived onto his bed. He scrambled under the blankets fully-clothed, chewing the knuckle of his thumb, wide-eyed, breathing loud and short.

Eventually, he fell asleep, images of Old Joe resurrected swirling in his head.

*

“Oh, God, Judd! Please...”

Alvin opened his eyes, woken, as he so often was, by his mother’s cries from next door. He listened, brow furrowed, his eyes moving left and right.

“Oh, Jesus!”

Alvin pulled the covers over his head. “Stop it. Stop it. Stop it,” he whispered into the blankets. “Stop it, stop it.”

There was a creak of wood. The rocking chair.

“You know what they’re doin’, boss-man, doncha?” came a wheezing, quiet voice.

Under the blankets, Alvin gasped, clenched his fists, stiffened. He stayed very, very still, listening. He heard the creak of the rocking chair again, and he could imagine Old Joe sitting there, looking at him, all dressed up in his best suit, but grubby with dirt where he’d dug himself out of the ground by the flowering cherry.

“You know what’s goin’ on in there, huh, boss-man?” The voice seemed close, like a whisper right by Alvin’s face. Like it was coming from everywhere. Almost like it was inside his head.

Trembling, Alvin whimpered and clamped his hands over his ears, the comforter gripped tightly in his fists. But still he could hear the rocker creak.

“Joe?” Alvin whimpered under the blankets. “Don’t hurt me. Please.”

“They’re gunna make a baby, boss-man. A little brother or sister for you. Man alive, I bet they’re just gunna love that little baby. Won’t have no time at all for you, Alvin.”

Alvin sobbed silently. The rocker creaked louder, and then banged back against the dresser, like it did when someone stood up and got out of it.

There was a tug on the comforter, like someone pulling at its bottom corner

“You know I’ve never lied to you, boss-man. Doncha?”

“Yes. Yes,” Alvin breathed, his fingers gripping the covers tightly.

“Oh my God! Yes, honey!”

The low throaty voice seemed even closer now. Alvin could smell pipe tobacco and wheatfield sweat.

“You think about what I’m tellin’ ya here, boss-man. Just you think about that.

Okay?”

Alvin nodded his head. “Yes,” he whispered. “I promise.”

“Good boy.”

And the covers went slack in his clenched fists, and he suddenly felt very alone.

Alvin shifted the knuckle of his thumb to his mouth and bit hard on it. He closed his eyes and saw Joe walking away across the orchard, back to his cold bed.

Next door, the shouting – the never-ending, terrible shouting – was getting louder.

“Judd, honey, give me a baby, give me a baby!”

Awake and alive there in the dark, Alvin knew that Old Joe had never lied to him.

*

The next morning, before his parents were awake, Alvin went downstairs, and out into

the yard. The day was bright and clear - a blue mist on the hills, a heat haze shimmering already over the wheatfield beyond the brook.

Alvin wandered to the chicken-run, and checked the traps for foxes, just as he always used to. He liked this time of day, when only he was awake. He could almost make believe that nothing had changed, that the one-eyed man had never come to Ridgeback Farm, that his mommy was stirring alone in her bed, about to come down to the kitchen and make pancakes, before calling out to him that his milk was on the table and that he should come in and wash his hands.

Alvin went across the yard, past the barn, to the hogpen, and peered over the wall.

“Oh, wow,” he breathed.

The largest sow was lying on her side, five tiny piglets jostling and snuffling at her teats, tails up in the air.

“I din’t know you were going to have babies, you fat old hog,” Alvin said, smiling as he climbed up onto the wall. He drummed his sneakered heels against the brick as he sat there, watching the piglets shove each other from teat to teat, each squeaking as it was pushed out, before trotting around and barging in amongst its siblings again. One of the piglets had a black patch on its back, like a saddle, and Alvin decided to root for that little guy. “Don’t you let them push you around, piggie. You be sure to get your fair share, okay?”

From the house, Alvin could hear the clanking of pots and the chink of coffee-mugs. He looked over his shoulder, seeing his mother at the sink. She waved to him.

Alvin turned on the wall, and jumped down, looking forward to telling his mother about the new piglets.

In the kitchen, Judd slurped his morning coffee. “No point having a harvest dinner after all the work’s done – that’s what my daddy used to say. The crew need feeding up before they get to working.”

Amy scooped eggs from the skillet onto a plate, and put them in front of her husband.

“I remember him saying that, clear as day,” she agreed.

“The Millers’ve always thrown a harvest hog-roast first weekend in September – all the folks around here know it,” Judd went on. “It’s a tradition in these parts.”

“That’s right, honey. How’re your eggs?”

“Just fine,” Judd told her. He grinned. “How’re yours?”

Alvin stopped outside the kitchen window, listening. He was hoping that the one-eyed man would go back upstairs and leave his mother alone, so Alvin could come in and tell her the news.

“I’ll go into town today, get some provisions and put the word around ‘bout Saturday,” Judd mumbled through a mouthful of yolk and bread.

A shudder of relief skittered along Alvin’s spine. A whole day without his daddy about the place.

“Why don’t you take Alvin with you?” Amy suggested. “He loves a ride in the truck.”
“Guess I could. Where is that boy, anyways?”

A chair scraped on the kitchen floor, and Alvin turned to run down to the orchard – but his daddy’s head appeared around the door.

“What you doin’ there, son? Come eat your breakfast, then we’ll go into town.”

Alvin’s shoulders sagged. “I don’t wanna go,” he murmured.

Judd raised his eyebrows. “I ain’t asking you, boy. I’m tellin’ you. Now get in here and eat something.”

As Alvin pushed oatmeal around the bowl, and his mother wrote a list for Mr Leonard to fill, Judd went out to fetch the truck. Alvin waited until his daddy was out of sight and then put down his spoon.

“Do I havta go into town?” he asked.

“Well, sure, baby,” his mother said, looking up from the grocery list. “You like that.”

“I don’t,” Alvin said, shaking his head.

“Sure you do. You’ll get to ride in the truck, and daddy’ll buy you a soda at Mr Leonard’s. You haven’t been to town in a coon’s age.” She stood up and opened the cupboard, scanning the contents as she tapped the pencil against her pursed lips. “Did we use all that flour already?”

Alvin picked up his spoon again, paddling it in the lukewarm oatmeal, his chin rested on his free hand, elbow on the table.

“What if I get scared?”

Amy turned her head and looked at the boy, frowning a little. “How do you mean, scared, honey?”

Alvin kept his eyes fixed firmly on the congealing oatmeal. “...of Daddy,” he said.

Amy paused a moment. Then she walked over to the table, and crouched down beside Alvin, putting a hand to his face and turning his head so that his eyes met hers.

“Alvin,” she said, low and firm. “You mustn’t be scared of your daddy. Understand?”

“But...”

“You listen to me.” She took Alvin’s hand in hers. “Some terrible, terrible things happened to your daddy while he was away. Things you don’t want to know about. Things that’ve...” Her eyes flicked around the room, searching. “Things that’ve changed him. But he’s still the same deep down, Alvin. You understand me?”

Alvin said nothing – just looked into his mother’s clear green eyes and listened to his own breathing.

“He’s still the same, Alvin,” she said again. She squeezed the boy’s hand hard, and he winced a little. “He is. I know that. I know that for sure.”

She stood and went back to the cupboard, picking up her grocery list from the counter.

“Everything’s just like it was,” she said briskly, as she moved cans and packets around on the shelves. “And that’s the way we’re going to keep it – just normal and regular. And no one’s going to be scared of anyone.” She put her hands on her hips. “Lord, I swear I don’t know how we get through so much sugar.”

Alvin slumped back in his chair, defeated. His stomach rumbled, and he put his hand on it, thinking about rice.

“Bout ready to hit the road, boy?” asked Judd, coming in from the yard.

“Here’s the list,” Amy said. “Oh, wait. I have another one – some things I need for my sewing.” She rummaged in the letter rack on the dresser.

“Hell, I gotta ask Jackson for women’s stuff?” Judd chuckled. “She’s gonna shame us in front of the whole town, huh, Alvin?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Alvin muttered.

*

“Hey, Judd. How y’doing?” asked Mr Leonard, as they walked into the store. “How’s things up at Ridgeback?”

Alvin wandered over to the stool at the soda fountain and looked at the syrups as his father and Mr Leonard talked about the weather and the crops. He rested his chin on the counter-top and drummed his heels against the hoop of the stool, bored.

Judd asked Mr Leonard to spread the word about the hog-roast – “Just tell ‘em to show up with a jug o’ hooch, and we’ll do the rest.” – and the storekeeper filled boxes with the provisions on the grocery list.

“Hey, Jackson,” Judd said, pulling a second scrap of paper from the back pocket of his blue jeans. “I almost forgot. Need some crap for Amy too. Hell – I’m damned if I know what it all means. Women’s stuff, right?”

Alvin was thinking about raspberry soda. Lately, he’d been coming to the conclusion that raspberry was his favourite.

“Gonna havta order that bolt of cloth,” Mr Leonard said, looking at the list. “I’ll have it for you next week. Blue thread – yeah, I have that right here.” He walked along the counter towards the soda fountain, and took down a spool from the shelf.

“That’s not right, Mr Leonard,” Alvin said, glancing across. “Mom’ll want the light blue. Same as she used for the new drapes.”

Mr Leonard smiled. “Guess you know best, Alvin...” he began.

“Whatchoo say, boy?” Judd interrupted, sharply. “What kinda queer shit is that?”

Alvin tensed and paled, shrinking back from his father’s glare. “But Mom always...”

Flushed with anger, the one-eyed man strode over to Alvin and pulled him off the stool by his arm. “Go get your pantywaist ass in the truck, dammit.” He shoved Alvin towards the door, and the boy stumbled, falling to his knees and hands on the sawdust-covered floor.

“Get up on your feet!” his father roared. “Stand up like a man, you goddamn little freak!”

Alvin fled to street, tears hot in his eyes, and clambered into the truck, where he sat and gulped back sobs. He clenched his fists and pressed them into his eye-sockets, trying to stop the tears from coming – knowing that his father wouldn’t allow him to cry.

“You see how much he hates you, boss-man?” said a low, throaty voice.

Alvin opened his eyes and turned – then immediately jumped back, flattening himself against the door of the truck, his spine pressed hard into the handle. There in the driving seat sat Old Joe – smiling, but pale as the moon. Dried blood flaked on his upper lip and around his mouth. His suit was smeared with dirt, and when he lifted his hand to smear away the blood from his nose, his fingers and nails were encrusted with mud and blades of grass

“No need to be afraid, boss-man,” Old Joe said, winking. “You know I’m your friend – always have been. Ain’t that right?”

Alvin nodded slowly, still wide-eyed. “I guess so.”

“Sure.” Joe’s voice was soft and close – right in Alvin’s ear, like a whisper, though the old man was an arm’s length away.

“It was better before, huh, boss-man? Before your daddy came home.”

“Yes. It was,” Alvin agreed, relaxing a little, sliding back into the seat. “Just you and me and mom.”

The old man nodded. “Be good to get back to that, huh?”

Alvin nodded again. “Yuh-huh.”

“That’s right,” Old Joe agreed. “Maybe we can work something out.”

The bell over the shop door jangled, and Alvin turned around to see the one-eyed man coming out carrying boxes, followed by Mr Leonard who was bringing some more.

“It’s my daddy...” Alvin hissed, turning back to Joe. But the old man was gone.

*

The journey home to Ridgeback was wordless. The one-eyed man drove, tight-jawed, his grip white on the steering wheel. Alvin tried to be small and inconspicuous, staring out of the window, attempting to sniff noiselessly.

When they arrived at the farm, Alvin's daddy growled, "You wait right here in the truck, boy," and he stalked off towards the hogpen, slamming the truckdoor behind him.

Alvin waited. He could see his daddy ushering one of the pigs from the pen to the barn – it trotted obediently, all waddle and curiosity as it disappeared through the big doors, Judd following. Alvin heard squealing – loud, childlike screeches from the fat hog – and the clanking of chains. The boy clenched his fists and bit his lip – not knowing what was happening in there, but not liking it, whatever it was.

Then Judd emerged from the barn and called out to Alvin.

"Come here, boy." He was scowling and impatient. "Gonna make you a man if it kills me," he said, as Alvin climbed out of the truck and trudged reluctantly across the yard.

Judd gestured the boy into the cool dark of the barn – and there Alvin saw the hog suspended by its hind legs from the traction rail that was used to swing machinery around. The animal was writhing and screaming indignantly, its head a few feet above an aluminum tub.

Alvin's daddy pushed the boy forward, until he was standing in front of the panic-stricken pig.

"Time to do some man's work around here," he said – and he lifted Alvin's wrist and closed his fingers around the handle of a gleaming, curved machete. Alvin whimpered, his eyes tearful, flicking from the blade to the stubbly, inverted face of the squealing pig.

"One cut – right there on the critter's throat – that's the way. No foolin', no hesitation. Just cut right through clean."

Alvin felt his tears brim over and run down his cheeks.

"No," he said, in a whispering sob. "I don't wanna... Please, Daddy. Don't make me."

He felt his daddy grab his wrist again, and lift it high.

"Be a man, you little queer-boy. Do it. Do it."

"No! I can't! Don't make me," Alvin pleaded. He turned his head and looked up at the flushed, thin-lipped face of the one-eyed man. "I'm scared!" he wailed.

"You ain't scared!" Alvin's daddy roared, and he swung the child's arm around in an arc – and Alvin, eyes tight shut, felt the blade of the machete jar in his hand; felt it slice through soft flesh; heard the hog's truncated squawk. A hot, thick splash hit Alvin's face – and another; and another, drenching him in steaming pulses, soaking through his cotton shirt, sticky on his skin. Alvin could taste warm, viscous salt on his lips – blood and tears.

He tore his arm from the grip of the one-eyed man, and ran, blinded by crimson, out of the barn towards the orchard, where he flung himself down in the long grass under the old apple tree and sobbed, breathless, as the pig's fresh blood cooled and coagulated on his dark lashes and in his ruffled hair.

*

Despite Amy's pleading, her husband was adamant that their son didn't deserve to be part of the harvest hog-roast party.

As dusk fell, Alvin sat by the window of his bedroom and watched the townsfolk laughing and filling their plates and topping up their glasses under the lights strung out on a wire across the yard. He could see his mother ferrying bowls of potato salad and steaming corn-cobs from the kitchen, and his father sitting on the old tree stump, surrounded by the fellas from Leonard's, all swigging beer and listening to stories of the war.

Alvin reached for one of the sandwiches that had been left for him – Monterey Jack and ketchup – and tore a hunk off. He chewed and watched, tearless, twisting one finger in the buttonhole of his flannel pajamas.

By the time the moon was high and pale, all the people had left and Alvin's mother was collecting the glasses and plates to take back inside. Alvin could hear her piling the china in the kitchen, and he could hear his father's voice, a low murmur punctuated by hooting guffaws. The moon skimmed the top of the old apple tree.

“Guess you're going to have to run away, boss-man.”

Alvin turned to see Joe rocking in the chair at the end of the bed. He was paler than ever – and grimmer. His Sunday suit was stiff with orchard dirt.

“But then – where would you run away to?” he asked.

“Dunno,” Alvin admitted.

“Don't matter none where you run to. Your daddy wouldn't miss you. And – well, guess your momma's just gonna go along with whatever your daddy says.”

Alvin nodded. “She doesn't pay me any mind now he's here.”

“You got that right,” Joe agreed, pressing tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. “Say – that was no fun, slaughtering that hog, huh, boss-man?”

“No.”

“But – you know what?” Joe sucked on the pipe as he held a match to its bowl. “Sure died quick. You notice that?”

Again, Alvin nodded.

“Yep,” Joe continued, blowing out a stream of smoke over his bottom lip. “God’s creatures just die real quick if you do it right. No coming back from that – that’s for sure.”

Alvin looked down at his feet swinging above the rug as he sat on the windowsill.

“People too?” he murmured.

“People too,” Joe said, checking how the tobacco was smouldering in his pipe. He paused, and looked up at Alvin, his black-ringed eyes steady and unblinking. “Just need to do it right.”

Outside, the moon slid behind a lazy grey cloud, and Joe’s face melded with the shadows.

“My mommy likes my daddy,” Alvin said quietly, as he slipped down from the windowsill and clambered up onto his bed, dragging the quilt over himself.

Joe gave a coughing chuckle in the darkness.

“You think?” he asked – and Alvin, eyelids heavy, could just make out the gleam of the old man’s yellow teeth against the black of the warm, still night.

*

The moon was bright again when Alvin was woken by Joe’s cold, calloused hand on his shoulder. Alvin could smell tobacco and soil, and something like sweet spices.

“Come see, boss-man,” the old man rasped.

Joe led Alvin by the hand out along the landing. From the big bedroom emerged panting shrieks and a regular, whistling swish. Alvin looked up at Joe, quizzical.

The old man put one finger to his blood-encrusted lips, and then pushed the door of the bedroom open, just a fraction.

“Look,” he mouthed, gesturing Alvin forward with a tilt of the head.

Alvin tiptoed forward and peered through the crack of the door. His mother was face down on the bed, naked, splayed. And the one-eyed man, still in his bib-overalls and work boots, was bringing a switch down across her back, measuredly, calmly – face blank, but his one eye bright and alive.

“Ahh! God, Judd... Jesus God,” Amy breathed, gritting her teeth.

The one-eyed man leaned forward, close to his wife’s ear. “Who did you go with when I was away? Huh? How many?”

“None! No one! I swear...”

The switch came down again, hard across Amy's buttocks. Alvin caught his breath, about to cry out, but Old Joe clamped a hand across the boy's mouth.

"Wanted to, though – dincha?" his father insisted.

Amy twisted her head around. Her bangs were sticky on her forehead, and her cheeks were flushed. "Yes. I thought about it. I did. I'm bad."

"Yes – bad girl..."

As the one-eyed man raised the switch once more, Old Joe pulled the door closed, and looked down at Alvin, who was standing rigid, wide-eyed, every infant muscle tense.

"You think she likes him for that, boss-man?" he asked, smiling his wise, familiar smile.

*

The following day, the harvest started in earnest.

At dawn, as the crew arrived in trucks from town, Judd Miller hitched up the threshing machine to the tractor and hauled it out to the field. Dew was still glistening on the grass in the orchard, but already the work was smoothly underway – every man in the gang familiar with his task, each understanding where he fitted into the busy annual process of bringing in the grain.

Alvin was sitting with his back to the old apple tree, watching the bustling activity down in the field. Last year – every year he could remember – when his mom had organised the crews for the harvest, he'd been a part of it. The hired hands had deferred to him, joshed with him, called him 'boss-man', taking their cue from Old Joe. He'd rode the tractor and eaten lunch with the men, listening to them talk, laughing when they laughed, though he didn't understand most of what they said.

But this year, he was banished to the orchard.

"You stay out of the way, boy. Ain't no room for a pantywaist kid when there's real work to be done."

Alvin tugged a long blade of grass from the ground and twisted it around his finger, tight. It hurt, but he pulled it tighter, watching his fingertip darken to purple. He bent the joint, flexing it, still tugging the blade tighter and tighter, till tears started in his eyes.

"Don't do that, baby," his mother said, walking up behind him. "You'll do harm."

"Don't care," Alvin told her, dropping his head.

"I brought you some lemonade. Here." She sat down beside him on the grass, and nodded towards the distant hills. "Not a cloud in the sky. Good harvest weather, thank the Lord."

Alvin unwound the blade of grass from his finger and held the glass of lemonade in both hands, looking sideways at his mother from under his eyelashes. He said nothing.

“Guess you’d like to be down there helping, huh, baby?” Amy asked, putting an arm around his shoulders.

“Daddy doesn’t want me around,” Alvin shrugged.

Amy nodded. “Well, you’re just a little boy. Could be you were growing up too fast anyways. It’s good you get the chance to be a little boy.”

Again Alvin shrugged.

“Hey, look,” his mother said, nodding towards the field. The one-eyed man was bending down to tug at the ignition cord on the threshing machine, yanking it once, twice, three times, until the engine turned over and caught. Amy glanced at her watch. “That’s good – only three hours in and threshing already.”

The machine chugged and spluttered, sluggishly at first, but getting up speed as the men pitchforked the loose sheaves of wheat onto the belt that would carry them up to the thresher, where the grain would be separated from the stalks by mechanical flails, before dropping through the hopper into waiting sacks.

Amy took the glass from Alvin and sipped a little, still looking out across the field. “Alvin,” she said, “how would you like a little brother or sister to play with, hm?”

Alvin looked around sharply.

“No,” he said, flat and final.

“Aww, c’mon,” his mother said, smiling. “It’d be fun – having a little baby around the place. That little baby’d just think you hung the moon, honey.”

“No,” Alvin said again, fiercer this time, his cheeks colouring.

Amy pursed her lips. “Well, you may just have to get used to the idea, Alvin – that’s all I’m saying.”

“No!” Alvin yelled, scrambling to his feet. “No baby! No baby!” And he brushed roughly past his mother, and ran towards the house – fists clenched, sneakers slipping on the long grass.

“Alvin!” his mother cried, brushing spilt lemonade from her blouse – but Alvin paid her no mind.

He looked towards the barn as he ran, and there stood Joe in his mud-caked suit, smiling. His arms were outstretched and in his hands he held the black-patched piglet from the hogpen, like a gift. And although Joe was way over there, beyond the orchard fence, on the other side of the yard, Alvin could hear his voice, low and warm.

“God’s creatures just die real quick if you do it right, boss-man. Man alive, I bet they’re just gunna love that little baby. Won’t have no time at all for you, Alvin.”

Alvin turned towards the barn, rounding the orchard gatepost, running towards Old Joe, who was nodding calmly - smiling and nodding. Alvin skidded to a halt and accepted the little piglet in his arms.

“Real quick, boss-man,” Joe said with a wink.

“Yes,” Alvin nodded, panting - and he turned back to the orchard and ran again, clutching the wriggling piglet. Across the orchard he ran, dodging past his mother who had followed him to the gate. Down towards the brook he ran, feeling the smooth pink skin of the piglet against his cheek, hearing its plaintive squeaks against his ear. Out across the stubbly wheatfield Alvin ran, weaving in and out of the legs of the harvest-gang, who turned to watch him pass, shouted at him – “What the holy hell are you doing, kid?” – but Alvin’s eyes were on the threshing machine. Running, running.

He could smell the gasoline breath of the machine, could hear the clunky whirr of the belt that rose to the threshing chamber way up above, could feel the hot live wriggle of the piglet against his chest. Still he ran. As he reached the bottom of the moving belt, he saw his daddy coming around the front of the tractor, face twisted and yelling – but Alvin didn’t stop.

He scooted in a leap on to the moving belt, stumbled, the ridged rubber carrying him upwards as he clasped the piglet to his chest. He heard the thrashing swip-swip-swip of the threshing arms as he neared the top, and he launched the screeching piglet towards the open mouth of the chamber, watched its little trotters waving as it turned belly-up in the air and fell into the hopper. Alvin dived sideways off the belt, and as he fell, he too turned in the air – and dropped, slow, slow, watching the sudden fountain of scarlet above him as the squeaking stopped in an instant. He gasped as he hit the ground – wheat stubble stabbing his back through his cotton shirt, and a gentle, fine ruby rain descending on him like a benediction, salt and viscous on his lips – blood and tears.

“No baby,” Alvin whispered - and the sun dimmed, and silence gathered around him and everything was black.

*

“Fuckin’...crazy...little...freak...”

Between each word, the belt thwapped across Alvin’s back and thighs, as his father held him by the neck, face-down against the comforter.

“Judd – no! That’s enough – you’ll really hurt him!” Amy wailed, hovering on the landing, peeking around the door, afraid to look.

“You bet...I’ll hurt...the crazy...bastard,” Judd assured her, punctuating the words with whups to Alvin’s prone body.

Amy dashed into the bedroom, and grabbed her husband’s raised arm in both hands.

“You listen to me now, Judd – that’s enough. That’s enough!”

The one-eyed man half-turned, wresting his arm free and striking his wife across the face. She clattered against the dresser, sobbing and shocked.

“The kid ain’t right, Amy,” Judd yelled. “Ain’t right in the head. Gonna beat that outta him.”

“...you’ll kill him,” Amy sobbed quietly, one hand to her reddening cheek. “Sweet God – you’re really going to kill him.”

And as the blows from the belt traced fire across his back, Alvin winced and bit his lip. But he didn’t cry out. Tears ran down his face, but the boy barely made a sound. He just kept his eyes on Old Joe, sitting there in the chair, nodding as he rocked to and fro, holding up one reassuring hand as if to say, “It’ll be all right, boss-man. It’ll all be all right.”

*

Alvin didn’t leave his room for three days. His mom brought him his meals, but he barely touched them. He just sat at the window, looking out beyond the orchard to the wheatfield, his eyes always on his father – starting up the threshing machine, ordering the crew around, driving the tractor full of grain up to the barn and back again, empty.

And as he watched, Alvin thought over the months since his daddy had come home. He thought about rice swelling a man’s belly until it split like a ripe tomato. He thought about white flares outside the barn in the night, and rats squealing under the baseball bat, flopping to the floor, writhing and scrabbling. He thought about the sow, suspended from the rail in the barn, and her hot, salty blood spurting across his face, dripping from his chin. And he thought about the black-patched piglet, flayed to a chunky spray of scarlet in the thresher.

He leaned back against the window-frame, and he winced. His skin was still welted, raw. He pressed harder, tears starting in his blue eyes. He bit his lip and pressed again, breathing in short gasps – but not crying. He wasn’t going to cry. Only pantywaist little queers cried.

As the pale moon rose at the end of the third day, Alvin watched his father calling so long to the crew as they set off to town in their trucks and cars. The boy sat on the wide sill, testing his weals against the frame of the window, as his father hauled the threshing machine behind the tractor across the yard, opening the barn doors and driving the whole rig inside. And as he walked out of the barn towards the house, Alvin’s daddy glanced up, and Alvin met his one-eyed gaze – and he didn’t blink or shrink back. He did nothing. He wasn’t afraid.

His father stopped, looked down at the ground, and then up again at Alvin. Then he shrugged, and went inside.

Alvin slammed his back against the window-frame, and closed his eyes tight. He let his breath out slowly, and looked out to the orchard, where the branches of the apple tree were pinned by the moon to the darkening sky, and the silhouette of the old swing twisted in the slight breeze, as if a small boy had slipped down from it moments before, and run back to the house at his mom’s call, knowing there would be flapjack and fresh milk on the porch, and another day of cool autumn laziness tomorrow.

In the dim room, the rocking chair creaked.

“Hi, Joe,” Alvin said, without looking round.

“How you doing, boss-man?” came Joe’s dry, nicotine rasp.

“Good.”

Smoke from Joe’s pipe drifted across the room, and curled against the window.

“So – you had any more notions about running away?”

Alvin turned and dropped from the window-sill to the floor.

“No. I’m not going to run away.”

“That right?” Joe nodded, tamping the bowl of his pipe with his thumb. The embers clung to his skin as he lifted it, but he seemed not to notice.

“That’s right,” Alvin said, as he climbed onto the bed. He looked out of the window.

“It’ll be real dark soon. But by morning, it’ll all be all right.”

“Well, I said it would be.”

Alvin pulled his knees up to his chin, and wrapped his arms around them.

“Yeah – it will be,” he said.

*

The moon slunk behind a cloud as Alvin trotted silently across the yard. He was carrying a baseball bat and a book of matches he had taken from beside the stove.

Slowly, slowly, he swung open the doors of the barn and slipped inside, heading for the bin in which the flares were kept. He lifted out three and went back into the yard, where he drove them into the soft ground, in a line. Returning to the inky barn, ignoring the scrabble and scratch of tiny claws around his feet, he approached the threshing machine, and found the ignition cord. He wrapped his fist around the handle, and pulled. The cord whirred uselessly against the spool inside. Alvin pulled again, sweat beading on his brow. Again a whirr, and silence.

Alvin took a deep breath – two, three - and again he yanked on the cord. The engine of the threshing machine coughed weakly. Once more Alvin yanked – and the machine spluttered and choked, and the engine caught. The boy threw the brake that held the belt, and it started to move, jerky at first, but then smoothly and inexorably, rolling up towards the hopper where the flails were already slicing empty air.

Alvin scooted outside, fumbling with the book of matches. He struck one as he knelt beside the first flare, and touched the fuse. As it fizzed, he struck another match, and moved to the next flare, and the last. Then he ducked back into the barn, and picked up the aluminium tub from behind the door, stumbling with it towards the thresher. He put the tub down on the far side of the running belt, directly across from the ignition cord. He ran back around to collect the baseball bat from the floor – feeling the sleek fur of rats against his hand – and he scurried back behind the chugging machine, and hunkered down next to the tub. And he waited.

*

“Hell is going on out there?” Judd mumbled, woken by the brilliant white light thrown across the bedroom.

He rolled from the bed and pulled on his overalls as his wife, groaning, opened her eyes.

“What is it, honey?” she asked.

“Dunno. Stay here.”

Grabbing his shotgun from the rack in the hallway, Judd Miller stalked through the kitchen and opened the door. He followed the line of the buildings right around the yard, keeping to the shadows as he’d been taught during his service, so that he came up on the barn from the side, shielding his single eye from the white-hot glare of the flares. He nosed the barrel of the gun round the door, careful not make himself a target against the hissing light – but, despite his efforts, he could see nothing but the dim outline of the threshing machine, which was growling and purring on the far side of the broad barn.

“Who’s there?” he yelled. “Come out now and we won’t have no trouble.”

Nothing in the barn moved, but for the vibrating thresher. Judd sidled around the hinges of the door, and pressed himself against the inner wall, his finger on the trigger of the shotgun.

“Don’t make no sense to hide,” he shouted. “Ain’t no one going no place.”

He bided his time, eye moving left and right, the barrel of the gun tracking slowly to and fro across the width of the barn.

“Hey – Davey. That you in there? That’s you and your fool brother, right? Just fuckin’ with ol’ Judd, you crazy sonsabitches.”

He listened, still ranging the gun from side to side.

“I ain’t scared, you assholes. Take more’n a coupla no-good town drunks to put the fear into Judd Miller – you hear?”

He pointed the shotgun towards the roof, and pulled the trigger. A solid, thick retort echoed and bulged in the barn, causing unseen rats to screech and scurry.

“Davey – you come out now, ‘fore some dumb bastard gets their head blowed off.”

Judd waited a further two minutes, but there was no response from the recesses of the barn. So, for want of any other action to take, he walked stealthily across the dark floor to turn off the threshing machine before a spark from its throbbing engine ignited the hay and sent the whole place to hell in a blaze that would be seen way over in Deanville.

*

Alvin, peering under the belt of the machine, saw his father’s feet against the light of the flares as he advanced towards the thresher. Silently, he climbed in a crouch onto the upturned aluminium tub, clasping the baseball bat in both hands. At the moment his father reached the machine and slung the shotgun under one arm so that he could flick the off-switch next to the ignition cord, Alvin stood up on the stool and swung the bat in a long, swift arc.

The bat smacked Judd Miller clean across the left temple, and he crumpled soundlessly, his one eye rolling back into his head. Alvin tumbled off the stool onto the packed dirt, seeing his father collapse on the other side of the machine.

Alvin scrambled to his feet and ran around to where the one-eyed man lay. He bent and grabbed the shoulder-straps of his father’s overalls and began to pull him towards the foot of the thresher’s belt. He gasped and tugged, yanking the heavy dead-weight inch by inch, his little fists whitening on the denim straps, his breath coming short with the effort. As he leaned over his father, Alvin’s face was close to the black eyepatch, and he could smell whisky-breath and harvest sweat.

The one eye opened.

“Fuckin’ kill you, boy,” Alvin’s father slurred.

Alvin shook his head, and carried on pulling, inch by inch.

The one-eyed man lifted one feeble, unresponsive arm, paddling at Alvin, catching the top of his head, as if he was stroking his hair.

“Gonna kill you,” he promised - insistent, murmuring like a seductive drunk.

Alvin heaved on the shoulder-straps of the denim overalls, shifting the body another inch.

“I’m not afraid,” the boy muttered.

The one-eyed man grinned lopsidedly. “Good fer you.” He reached up and grabbed the collar of Alvin’s shirt. “Gonna fuckin’ kill you.”

Alvin grabbed his father’s unresisting wrist and pulled the limp hand from his collar. He was nearly at the foot of the belt now.

“It was better before you came home,” he said. He ran around to his father’s feet and grabbed him by the ankles. “You hurt Mommy.”

Trembling and damp through his shirt, Alvin stepped onto the belt, feeling it shift backwards under him. As it began to carry him towards the roof of the barn, he tightened his grip on his father's ankles, feeling the heavy body lift from the hips, dragging up onto the belt.

Alvin glanced over his shoulder at the hopper, the flails whistling and thwipping, hungry. His hands were slipping on his father's feet, and he grabbed at the legs of the denim overalls, grabbing upwards, over shins, knees, thighs – keeping his balance as he walked with shuffling little steps against moving rubber, pulling the one-eyed man towards him.

“Kill you,” Judd Miller mumbled, his hands reaching out madly for a firm hold on the air. But his torso was on the belt now, his head lolling over the side, and the machine was carrying father and son upward, to the ravenous hopper.

Alvin released his grip and stood up straight on the moving belt.

“I'm not afraid,” he breathed. He stepped forward, straddling his father's waist. “I'm not afraid of you!” he screamed, leaning forward, almost nose-to-nose with the one-eyed man.

Judd Miller flung his arm sideways, catching the boy's leg at the knee – and Alvin fell forward onto his father's chest. Judd grinned at his son.

“You better be,” he croaked, as he brought his arm around the child, hugging him to his chest.

Still the machine carried them upward. Judd heaved himself sideways, and the two of them, embraced, toppled over the edge of the moving belt and crashed to the floor of the barn.

*

The flares had died. The barn was dark. Only the show-off harvest moon gave any light, throwing a path of clear white across the two figures lying still on the hard floor.

Alvin couldn't breathe. He was pinned under his father, who had not moved since they had fallen from the thresher. Whisky-breath and harvest sweat. The black eyepatch. The trickle of blood from one temple. The rough chin-stubble against the boy's cheek.

Above them, the inexhaustible thresher chugged on. All around, the rats scurried, sniffed, came to investigate. To one side, the gun lay with its barrel pointed at Alvin's head.

Alvin closed his eyes and tried yet again to wriggle, push, slide from under his father's unconscious body. But it was no use. He looked up into the darkness of the barn, and tears of expectant fear ran silently down his grimy face.

Suddenly, the one-eyed man groaned and shifted. Alvin jerked sideways, manoeuvring one shoulder free. His father rolled a little towards the thresher, and Alvin slid a few inches towards the barn door, both arms released now. The one-eyed man put a hand palm-down on the floor and lifted himself a little. Alvin, gulping back fear, worked his legs gently but swiftly from under his father's body, and rolled to one side. He was clear.

He whimpered with relief, and made to stand – but he felt a hand close on his ankle.

“Din’t I make you a promise, queer-boy?”

Judd yanked at Alvin’s leg, and the boy felt himself tugged back to the floor, a hand closing on the back of his neck.

“That what you hit me with?” the one-eyed man asked, staggering to his feet and dragging Alvin upright by the hair on the crown of his head. “Hit your daddy with a fuckin’ bat?”

He bent forward unsteadily and picked the bat from the floor of the barn, hefted it in his hand.

“Ain’t right, ‘swhat I’m sayin’,” he nodded.

Alvin was on his tiptoes, pulled upwards by the fist clenched in his hair. He grimaced and gasped.

“I’m not afraid,” he whispered.

“Damn well should be, queer-boy,” his father advised.

The one-eyed man shoved Alvin backwards, and his spine thumped against the chugging threshing machine. Alvin pushed himself upright.

“I’m not!” he shouted. “I’m not afraid of you!”

The one-eyed man swayed, feet set apart, the baseball bat weighed in one hand.

“Well, damn me if I didn’t teach you somethin’ after all,” he said. He lifted the bat. “Too late now though.”

And he brought the bat around in a wavering swing towards Alvin, who lifted his arm – and felt the hot sudden snap of his wrist shattering as the bat connected.

Alvin clasped his hand to his chest, swallowing tears as his ruined arm throbbed and screamed from fingers to shoulder. He looked up at his father.

“I hate you! I wish you would have died in the war!” he yelled, his anger and frustration more painful than any fracture. “I wish the Japs had got you!”

The one-eyed man shrugged. “I beat the Japs, and I’m gonna beat you, little pantywaist.”

Again, he raised the bat. “One thing I learned out there – kill or be killed. That’s the law.”

“Judd – you stop now.”

Amy was standing in the door of the barn, the moonlight behind her.

“I mean it,” she said. “That’s enough. You stop.”

Judd turned, letting the bat fall to his side.

“You tellin’ me what to do now, Amy? Tellin’ your own husband what to do?”

Amy walked a few paces forward.

“You’ll kill him, Judd. I won’t stand by for that.”

The one-eyed man shook his head and grinned mirthlessly.

“Guess the queer-boy ain’t the only one who needs to learn a little respect around here, huh?” He lifted the bat again, and turned back to Alvin. “Go back to the house, woman,” he ordered. “I’ll deal with you when I’m done here.”

“No, Judd!” Amy screamed, and launched herself at her husband’s back, bringing her arms around his neck as he fell sideways, rolling over with him in the barnfloor dirt. The one-eyed man flipped away from her and they scrambled to their feet, facing each other.

Alvin, still nursing his broken wrist, looked from one to the other, and then to the shotgun on the floor.

Amy took a step towards her husband, holding her hands out.

“Judd, baby, listen to me – you’re sick. You...”

She was stopped in mid-stride by a swinging punch to her face that tumbled her back into the haybales.

“Warned you,” Judd said, shrugging as he strode back to Alvin, the baseball bat raised again. “Now – your turn, freak.”

The bat came down hard, and Alvin ducked to one side, wincing as he hugged his arm across his chest. The blow fell on the moving belt of the thresher, with the dull thwack of wood on rubber. Alvin stumbled and fell - almost beneath the threshing machine now - as his father shifted his feet and raised the bat once more.

But as Alvin curled himself into a huddled ball, a booming, chest-thumping shot rang out – and the one-eyed man yelped, twisted, clutching his thigh and going down on one knee.

“You have to stop, Judd!” Amy shrieked, weeping as she held the smoking shotgun, blood seeping from a cut above her eye. “Have to stop!”

Judd pushed himself upright, using the bat as a stick, and looked at his wife.

“You’re gonna be sorry for that, Amy,” he said, shuddering. He staggered a few steps towards Alvin, his one eye wide and staring. “Deal with you when I’m done here...”

As Judd raised the bat again, Amy pointed the shotgun at him and pulled the trigger – but it clicked uselessly. With a sob, she ran across the barn, just as the one-eyed man brought the

bat down towards the prone boy, and she swung the shotgun by its muzzle, smacking the stock across the back of her husband's head. He stumbled forward onto the belt of the threshing machine, arms twitching, fingers grasping nothing.

Amy stood back, dropping the gun, her hands to her mouth. "Oh, my God," she wailed, as the belt carried her husband up towards the flailing arms of the thresher. She made to reach for the brake that would hold the belt, but Alvin was there first, standing in front of it.

"No," he said simply. He glanced up and backwards.

"Alvin! Get out of the way!" Amy screamed. She looked frantically at the still body of her husband riding the slow, rolling belt. "Move, Alvin!" She grasped the boy's shoulders, but he shrugged her off, standing his ground.

"No," he said again. And as he said it, the one-eyed man lifted his head and looked back at his wife and son, and seemed about to speak – but the belt tipped him neatly and efficiently into the thresher, which squealed and sang, and bloomed red as the dawn that was seeping like a stain over the hills beyond the wheatfield.

*

"It was an accident, Alvin – you understand?"

They were sitting on the porch, both gazing at the barn in the flat morning light. Alvin was cradling one arm against his chest, his face calm and blank.

"We were cleaning the threshing machine," Amy went on. "It was... it started up and we all fell. You hurt your arm, and your daddy..."

"That's right," Alvin agreed.

Amy nodded, dabbing her sleeve against the blood that still trickled from her brow.

"Happens all the time on farms," she said – her voice was shaky and uncertain. "You understand, Alvin?"

"Yes," Alvin said simply, still gazing at the open doors of the barn, and the silhouette of the thresher inside.

"Yes," Amy nodded. "Now – I'm going to get cleaned up and... we'll go into town and..."

"Don't be afraid, mom," Alvin assured her. "It'll all be all right."

Amy stood up. "Yes, it will," she said, a sob catching in her throat. She turned and went into the house.

Behind Alvin, the swing-seat creaked.

"Hello, Joe," the boy said.

“Quite a night, boss-man,” the old man croaked.

Alvin nodded. In the damp stillness of the morning, the only sounds were the muted chug of the thresher and the cawing of crows in the orchard.

“Better go shut that thing down,” Alvin said. He stood and walked across the yard, his broken arm folded across his chest. He stopped at the door to the barn and looked in. “It’s all back to normal now,” he said.

“You think so?” Joe asked – and though Alvin knew that the old man was back across the yard in the swing-seat on the porch, his voice was close to Alvin’s ear – almost inside his head.

The boy frowned. “Yes.” He could smell the thick, rich smoke from Old Joe’s pipe, all mixed up with the gasoline breath of the droning thresher. “It’s just you and me and mom – like before.”

“Well,” the old man mused, “won’t be for long. I reckon your momma has a baby in her belly already. Man, I bet she’s just gonna love that baby.”

Alvin chewed his bottom lip and gazed at the ground – thinking about the baby, and how his momma would love it.

“Whut then?” Old Joe asked, almost in a whisper.

Alvin nodded contemplatively, and raised his eyes to the purring, hungry thresher.

“It’ll all be all right, Joe,” he murmured. “I’m not afraid.”