

Marlin Barton

Domestic Relations

The morning was cool, particularly for April, but the sun burned down through the bright new screen wire and onto the narrow floorboards of the back porch. It warmed Conrad more than enough. His mother, May, kept coming out and asking him if he wasn't too cold. He said "no ma'am" each time, and she disappeared inside the large, old house. He hardly paid attention to her; he was much too preoccupied with the electric train that ran in hypnotic rhythm on the oval-shaped tracks before him. He had to be careful when it took the curves. If the train was going too fast the red engine would jump the tracks, and the cars would crash across the floor and end up turned on their sides in a jumble. Even though he hadn't had the train for very long, he'd learned to keep it running just slow enough so that it would stay on the tracks. His father had taught him this, and it was his father who had promised him so many months ago that as soon as Riverfield got electricity, and as soon as their house was wired, he would get Conrad an electric train. He'd ordered it from one of the salesmen who called at the store, and it had arrived in three weeks' time.

Conrad heard the back door open and was getting ready to say "no ma'am" yet again, but after hearing how quietly and gently the door was pushed to, he knew it wasn't his mother at all, or even his grandmother. It could only be Grandpa Wilkie, who had come to live with them a few months ago and who he knew was actually his great grandpa—that had been explained. And he also knew that there would be no mention made of how cold it might be. Grandpa Wilkie didn't talk about such silly things. It hadn't taken Conrad long to learn that about him.

The old man sat down beside him in a ladder-back chair, and Conrad stopped the train and waited respectfully. Grandpa Wilkie leaned over, disconnected the engine, picked it up, and blew smoke from his pipe into the back of it. Smoke came pouring out of the small smokestack. He did this twice more, and Conrad marveled at the sight of it. Then, with spotted hands, the old man put the engine back on the track and reconnected it. Conrad pushed the transformer switch, and the train lurched and picked up speed.

This had become their ritual. Conrad turned and smiled up at his great grandfather, and it was then that he saw the unmistakable wet shine in the old man's gray eyes. He'd seen it there before, often when the old man came out onto the porch. His mother had told him that very old people cried some-

times, especially if they were sick. But Conrad knew that Grandpa Wilkie wasn't crying because he was old; he knew that his grandmother had been mean to Grandpa again. She always made him cry it seemed like. Her own father. Conrad suddenly pushed the transformer switch as far as it would go, and the train shot down the track. When it reached the most dangerous section of the curve, the farthest, it jumped the tracks and crashed and careened across the porch floor, scratching it.

"It jumped again," the old man said. His words surprised Conrad because he didn't usually speak when he first came out onto the porch. "Seems like it jumps almost every time I come out here to our little get-away spot. You reckon it's the smoke I put in?"

"No, sir. It's not the smoke," Conrad said.

"Well, that wouldn't make much sense, would it?"

"No, sir." He glanced up again at his great grandfather and then reached over the tracks and set the train on them, pushing the cars back and forth to make sure each wheel was in line. He pushed the transformer switch again and watched the train pick up speed until it circled the tracks in its usual rhythm.

"She shouldn't talk to you like she does," he said.

"Don't be disrespectful. She's your grandmother." And then, more to himself than to Conrad, "Maybe she has a right."

At lunch all of them, including his grandmother and his father home from the store for an hour, sat at the dining room table and ate the meal the cook, Leathy Ann, had prepared. His father talked about the morning's business and asked Conrad what he'd been doing. Conrad was more quiet than usual; he barely answered his father, and he would not look toward his grandmother at all.

After the meal he went outside to march the geese. It was something he did on slow afternoons. He took his B.B. gun with him. It didn't shoot with much force. In fact, Conrad could even see the B.B. when it came out of the barrel, see it curve slightly to the left so that he always had to adjust his aim. He chased the geese from their resting spot in back of the house, and each of them moved quickly into single file, like soldiers given a command. He walked behind them then, popping one occasionally with a B.B. when it began to stray. He didn't have to shoot very often. They knew to stay in line, and he could march them anywhere he wanted. He loved to see the long and

perfect straight line they made, not one of them out of order.

After half an hour or so of marching his troops, he grew tired and sat down on the edge of the long front porch. Within a minute his grandmother came out, as if she'd been waiting on him, and sat beside him, right down on the porch itself, not in the rocking chair as usual. "You didn't have much to say during lunch, especially to me," she said. "You feeling all right?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"You sure?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm fixing to walk up to the store. You want to go along?"

"No, ma'am. I don't think so." He turned from her.

"I'll buy you some cookies."

He didn't answer.

She put her arm around him then and pulled him close. "You know I think you're the finest grandson anyone could have? You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"If you don't want to go to the store, how about we do something else. You want me to tell you a story maybe? Would you like that?"

He felt himself begin to give way now. Her arm tightened around him and she pulled him closer. "How about a story?"

"Could you tell me about the Mexican again?" His words had come out almost against his will.

"The Mexican? Your mama doesn't like me to tell you that one. If I tell it will you walk up to the store with me when I'm done?"

"Yes, ma'am. I will."

"All right. It was a long time ago, when I was just a little girl and lived in Texas. I had long, dark hair and was such a little bit of a thing that a hard wind would almost knock me down. Those Texas winds are strong. Early one morning Aunt Jane came into the kitchen where I was sitting. I hadn't been living with her for long. I'd just come from living with cousin Anne and her husband, where I'd been left right after Mama died. Anyway, Aunt Jane told me to go out to the barn, that she thought some chickens had started nesting out there again, and she wanted me to find them and bring the eggs. She was always giving me chores to do. Seemed like every time I turned around she had a job for me. She kept me running hard."

"So then you went to the barn," Conrad said, picturing it all: his grandmother as a little girl, her long hair, the open Texas countryside—big and lonely.

"That's right. I knew it was going to take me awhile to look in all those

stalls, but I started right in, going from one empty stall to the next. When I came out of about the fifth one, I had an egg in my hand, a brown one, and I was studying it. When I looked up, I saw a strange man, a Mexican, standing right in front of me. He was dressed in what looked like rags."

"And he wore a big old hat, didn't he?" Conrad said.

"That's right. And before I could run or yell, he grabbed me and put one hand over my mouth and put a knife up to my neck. 'If you scream, I'll kill you,' he said. I didn't move. I was too scared. Finally, he let go of me, but I still didn't move. He saddled one of the horses and kept watching me the whole time. His eyes looked so mean. I didn't doubt he'd kill me like he said, so I just watched him get on the horse and ride out the back door of the barn. After he was gone, I ran to the house as fast as I could, shaking. I missed my mama then. I surely did. It was her I wanted to run to."

Her voice sounded far away now. It always did, Conrad noticed, when she got to the part about her mama.

"I want you to remember, this was a long time ago and a long ways away, Conrad. You don't have to worry about anything like that happening to you. I'm not going to let it. I'll always take care of you."

"Yes, ma'am. What about Grandpa Wilkie?"

"What, child?"

"Grandpa Wilkie? Where was he when it happened? He's your daddy. How come you didn't run to him?"

She looked down at him then. "You never asked me that before. I don't know where he was, just gone. Like always."

"Why was he gone?"

"He just was."

She stood, and Conrad looked up at her as she walked inside the house.

"We going to the store?" he asked.

"Not now," she called back. "In a little while." Her voice sounded far away to him again.

When he entered the kitchen his mother was reaching up to turn on the light that hung from the middle of the high ceiling. It was almost dark out now. He put the bacon and corn meal that he'd carried from the store for his grandmother on the small white table. His mother took them and began getting out the food that Leathy Ann had left. Conrad sat down.

"Daddy said he'd be home for supper."

"Good," his mother said. "Go tell Grandpa Wilkie we'll eat soon."

"He said he didn't feel good when I went by his room, that he wasn't going to eat."

"I do wish he wouldn't miss meals. It's not good for him, and besides, I'll just have to take him something out there later." Conrad could hear the slight irritation in her voice.

He began to fiddle with one of the napkins on the table as he sat, and his mother started singing a hymn. She sang so softly he couldn't hear the words or recognize the tune. Still, he knew it was a hymn. She often sang them to herself while working. He listened, but he had something he had been wanting to ask her and as much as he didn't want to interrupt, they were alone and this was his chance. But he was afraid. He didn't know why, he just was. He'd never been afraid to ask her anything before, but now that Grandpa Wilkie had come, things seemed different around the house.

"Mama," he said finally, "why don't Grandmama and Grandpa Wilkie love each other?"

She kept singing for a moment, then turned to him "They love each other. They just argue sometimes."

"Grandpa acts like he loves her, but she doesn't act like she loves him." She didn't respond, only reached down some plates.

"You and Daddy never argue."

"Take these plates on into the dining room, Conrad," she said, handing them to him. She then turned away, silent.

Conrad walked into the dining room and set the plates out. After a while he heard his mother begin to sing again. This time he recognized the tune. It was "Church in the Wildwood."

Voices awakened him that night. They seemed to come from a long way off, as if they'd traveled from a place he'd been dreaming of, from some room far away in a house that he'd never seen, but could imagine, some house that maybe stood in the lonely Texas countryside with a little girl running toward it, frightened. He listened there in the dark of his room, feeling as if he were somehow dreaming while he was awake.

"You can't keep on walking out here. Not every night."

It was his father's voice, and his father didn't sound the way he usually did. It took Conrad awhile to understand, but then he realized, as he lay there huddled beneath the covers, that his father was angry.

Then, another voice: "I heard something, so I came out." This one was his grandmother's. It was always a deeper pitch than his mother's. "We can't

have people sneaking around out here at night looking to steal things. I'm going to see to it that they don't. I've got a family to protect. I'll shoot anybody who needs shooting."

In Conrad's mind flashed suddenly the image of the Mexican in his grandmother's story. He saw him standing ragged and mean-looking before the small, scared girl his grandmother had once been.

"Well, you came close to killing somebody tonight." His father's voice again. Still angry. He'd never heard his father angry at his grandmother before. There was something frightening in this. Then he thought, *Kill who? Some thief! Like the Mexican? Who?*

"If you hear something, you come wake me, you hear?" It was his father. "I'll see to it."

He heard another voice after a moment, one he couldn't quite make out. It was a whisper and seemed somehow removed from the voices of his father and grandmother. It spoke from a farther place. Again he imagined a lone house, silent and dark in the Texas countryside. Then sleep took him.

In the morning there were more voices, one angry, angrier than the night before, the other quiet. He lay in bed and listened. They were in the front hall. His grandmother's voice rang out clear.

"Were you just wandering around like some fool? I could have shot you. Do you know that? I almost did. I kept saying for whoever it was to speak up or I'd shoot."

"I was restless," came the reply, "so I went outside." Conrad had to strain to hear. It was Grandpa. He didn't say anything more.

Conrad didn't want to see the wet shine in the old man's eyes again. He imagined going and yelling at his grandmother himself, even imagined hitting her with his fists as her voice grew louder. *It isn't supposed to be like this*, he thought. *Mama and Daddy don't yell at each other.*

"Were you going to just wander off?" he heard his grandmother say.

"No, I wasn't."

"You're getting to be too much for me to take care of. You never took care of me when I was young, why should I take care of you now? You were always gone."

"I had to make a living," he said in a whisper, the same sort of whisper that Conrad had heard the night before, only this time, still straining; he could make out the words. "I couldn't take you just anywhere. Not back in those days. I'm sorry," he said. His grandmother didn't respond, and in their

silence Conrad felt a heaviness in the house. It pushed against him and slowly took his breath.

His father came home for lunch, but his grandmother and Grandpa Wilkie were absent, so the three of them, Conrad, his mother, and his father, ate at the small table in the kitchen. The meal was quiet. He felt the heaviness in the house still, even there in the kitchen. After lunch his father sat down on the back porch with him and showed him how to make the train run in reverse. By pushing the transformer switch on and off in one quick motion, then pushing it on again, the wheels on the engine would begin to turn backwards, and finally the whole train would pick up momentum. Here was something new to do, and his father even rolled up the sleeves on his white shirt, exposing the single rubber bands on each wrist that he kept there to wrap stacks of ones and fives with. He knew that when his father rolled up his sleeves he was going to stay awhile. "You run the train now," his father said, and the two of them kept taking turns.

The train ran smooth and only jumped the tracks once. Conrad even began to forget about the things he'd heard his grandmother say that morning. He felt good inside. His body felt light. But finally his father put on his hat and rolled his sleeves down. "I've got to get on back now. You keep playing," he said. Then Conrad was alone.

The train seemed to run even faster backwards, and he began pushing the switch a little farther and farther until the caboose would jump and all the cars and then the engine would crash and tumble across the porch in a racket. It seemed now that without his father he couldn't keep the train running slow enough. His hand kept pushing the transformer switch farther. And then the crash would come.

After the third or fourth crash he heard another sound. Loud voices. He seemed to be always hearing voices now, angry ones, and the things they said sounded like crashes to his ears, metal scraping against metal. This time they came from the kitchen. As he listened he realized that it was really only one voice: his grandmother's, of course, sounding just as it had early that morning.

"And all those aunts and cousins treated me like I was some darkey! Do you hear? Made me work hard. Told me I had to. Did you ever stay long enough to even see how they might treat me? No. And now you want me to take care of you? Want me to wait on you?"

There was a sudden quiet, a lull, and Conrad heard only the sound of the

train as it ran the tracks in reverse. Then a crash: a voice again. Her voice. Louder now even.

"I want you out of this house!"

Conrad, without bothering to stop the circling train, jumped up and ran to the half-open kitchen door. His breath caught in his throat. He opened the door wide and just as he saw his grandmother and Grandpa Wilkie standing there beside the table, his mother pushed past him and walked up between the two.

"Let me tell you something," she said, pointing a finger into his grandmother's face. "As long as I'm alive Mr. Wilkie can stay here. And if that doesn't suit you, *you'll* have to leave." She turned to the old man then. "You don't have to worry about anything, Mr. Wilkie. It's going to be all right."

Conrad stared at the three of them and watched as his grandmother, her shoulders thrown back straight, suddenly turned and marched past him as if he weren't there. The floor shook beneath her steps. His mother took Mr. Wilkie by the arm then and led him past Conrad and toward the old man's room. "Go outside and play for now. I've got to see to Grandpa," she called back to him.

He stood for a moment without knowing what to do. In the distance he heard his grandmother slam shut the doors to her room; then he heard Grandpa Wilkie's door close quietly. He walked back up the porch and knelt down over his train. It lay on its side, wrecked, the cars broken apart at the couplings. The transformer hummed with a low and dangerous sound.



The chill in the morning air began to disappear over the next few weeks, but somehow the big house with its high ceilings and thin pine floorboards held what little cold remained. Grandpa Wilkie stayed in his room mostly and wouldn't come out for meals. Conrad's mother complained, but she carried his tray to him, and when she walked back into the kitchen, she'd say how weak he looked.

His mother and father didn't talk to each other like usual now. He noticed it especially at night in the living room. The radio would be on, only they wouldn't really be listening. Each would sit in a chair across the room from the other, staring toward one of the doors. There would be no quiet talk about what they heard, no talk about what had happened during the day. He'd never cared about what they'd said to each other at these times; he'd only been aware of the quiet sound of their voices as it grew dark at each of the windows. Now he missed their voices.

His father would sometimes get up from his chair and go check on his grandmother in her room. She'd no longer come and sit with them at night. When his father came back into the living room and sat down, he'd stare at Conrad's mother and shake his head. "She still won't come out," he'd say in an ugly voice. "You didn't have to talk to her like you did."

During the days he often picked up his B.B. gun and went outside to march the geese; only now he began to shoot them before they had a chance to form their line. They would squawk and flap their wings. And after they were in their ranks, he might take a couple of extra shots, even if they didn't stray.

Sometimes at night he'd awaken to the sound of a voice. He'd raise up in bed and listen. "Who's out there?" he'd hear. "Who is it? I'll shoot." He'd hear the words and recognize his grandmother's voice. As he'd finally drift back into sleep he would sometimes see that same frightened girl who had been his grandmother running again toward the house he imagined in a dark and open countryside. And for some reason the house would always be dark too, no light in a window, no smoke coming from the chimney and spreading out across whatever piece of moon there might be—just dark and alone, like his room. He would burrow far down into his covers then. In the morning he might hear his grandmother again, only now she would be in the hall, or maybe the living room, and like as not, she'd be saying something about Grandpa Wilkie. "I don't see why he can't come out of that room. It's not like he's all that sick."

One afternoon his mother called him into the house from the steps off the back porch. He was playing by the well with his tin soldiers, and he told her in a loud voice, too loud a voice, that he wasn't ready to come inside. In a moment so quick he hardly realized what was happening, his mother came down from the steps, grabbed his arm, and jerked him up off the ground in a fury, knocking his soldiers down. "I don't know what's gotten into you lately, young man," she said.

He seemed to get into trouble often after this. He was slow to answer when spoken to, and he kept wandering off too far down into the pasture, even after his father had whipped him for it. He didn't let his grandmother take him to the store at all anymore or tell him stories, and she gave him hurt looks when she passed.

On a Saturday afternoon in late May he was sitting in the living room drawing when his grandmother walked in, sat down, and looked at him for a

brief moment. "If you're not going to talk to me anymore, maybe I *will* leave this house." With that she walked out. It was as if she'd struck him. At supper he hardly ate. When his mother asked him what was wrong, he didn't answer her.

In the morning, he woke early and without knowing exactly why, suddenly got out of bed. The wood floors were cold to his bare feet, but he didn't stop to put on socks. He walked out of his room and into the hall, then quietly opened the back door and stepped onto the porch. He walked past his train which he hardly played with at all now. The sight of it no longer made him want to run it around the tracks over and over again. He walked on slowly toward Grandpa Wilkie's room, then hesitated at the door. It was partially closed, and he couldn't see inside. His mother had told him not to go into Grandpa Wilkie's room and disturb him, not under any circumstances. But now he slipped into the room and saw with a start that the old man was awake. His head was propped up on his pillow. He didn't speak or motion in any way, but Conrad could tell that it was all right for him to come in by the way the old man looked at him. Conrad climbed onto the foot of the bed, leaned against the wall, and pulled a blanket around him. The old man's eyes were as large and clear as the sky had been the day before. His white hair, which was usually so perfectly combed, was unkempt. Neither he nor Conrad spoke. They sat for what seemed like a long time, without even looking at each other. There was a silence between them like before a prayer. Finally Conrad turned to him. "Which one of you is going to leave?" he said. The pressure behind his eyes broke then and the tears came. He couldn't stop them. The old man leaned forward, took his hand, and held it, tightly.

When he awoke he didn't know where he was at first but soon realized that he was back in his bed. He didn't know how he'd gotten there. For a moment he wondered if he'd dreamed about going into Grandpa Wilkie's room but knew that it hadn't been a dream. He could still feel the old man's grip around his hand. He decided that someone must have carried him back to his bed. He wondered who. Then he saw his grandmother sitting in a chair across the room from him. Her long gray hair was loose and hung past her shoulders. Somehow there in the dim light of the room with her hair down, she looked young, like the child he imagined running across the Texas countryside. When he opened his eyes again, she was gone.

Soon the old man stopped coming out of his room altogether. "He's very sick," his mother told him. "You can't be going in to visit him." Now it was almost as if he'd left them, and Conrad wondered from time to time if he was really in there or not. Maybe his grandmother had gotten rid of Grandpa Wilkie, and they didn't want him to know it. But Dr. Hannah, who lived in the house next to them, would come and duck into the little room from time to time, and he watched as his mother carried trays of food in and out. Sometimes he would see his grandmother walk out onto the back porch and look down toward the room. She would then frown and turn away.

Occasionally his father would step in there at night after he came home from the store. The two men would talk quietly, and Conrad always wondered what they said. His mother would finally call his father, and one night she whispered as he came out of the room, "He needs rest."

"What difference could that make now?" his father had said, then walked away.

One afternoon near the end of June, Conrad came up the back steps after playing outside and let the screen door slam behind him. He saw right away that Grandpa Wilkie's door was open and that his father stood inside. Before he could take another step his mother came out of the room and knelt beside him. Something was wrong. "Grandpa has passed on," she said. And then she added, "He died. You understand?" He nodded his head. He didn't cry, but his own breath seemed to choke him.

He'd seen animals that had been killed, and he'd had a dog that died. He knew what death was, and he knew that he would miss Grandpa Wilkie, just as he had been missing him so much already when the old man wouldn't come out of his room. He knew just as clearly that his grandmother had now gotten her wish. Grandpa Wilkie was gone, and she wouldn't have to fuss at him anymore and tell him that she didn't want him.

He heard his grandmother crying then from inside the house. She came out onto the porch and stopped where he was and knelt down. Her tears surprised him. They caught and hung on the gold rims of her glasses before falling. She reached for him with both arms, but he quickly turned and put his head on his mother's shoulder. He wouldn't let his grandmother touch him. He still didn't cry. He wanted to, but no tears came. Not now. Finally he saw his grandmother walk toward the little room. *You can't go in there*, he tried to say, but the words wouldn't come.

His father called to his mother, and she slowly let go of him. He stood alone, not sure what to do. Then he heard the honks of the geese as they walked across the yard near the well. They stopped and huddled together for a moment, their white backs shining brightly in the hot sun. They stretched

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their wings and turned their heads and bumped into one another as if they had never once learned to march in a straight line. And he found himself wanting to walk away from everyone on the porch and go down and sit quietly among them.