

Burnt Corn

Reina McKeithen

I could tell it was going to be a bad summer the way the bitterweed bloomed like little yellow suns all over the fields. Sims' daddy said the fish would be drinking sand by August. Mamaw said the Farmers' Almanac said it was going to be a dry year but Sims and his daddy had gone ahead and planted anyhow. Sims said that's what farmers do they plant. In July the springs started going dry all over the county. Sims tried to put a stopper in ours. He worked on it all one morning but it wasn't nothing but a wood box and everybody knows wood don't stop water if it wants to go someplace but those Mahans are stubborn and he tried it cause he said it didn't cost him anything and it might of worked. It didn't though. Our well didn't dry up but it wasn't hardly enough water to take a spit bath in every other day. The corn looked like a canefield it raised its leaves straight up to the sun like it was surrendering.

The first time I just dropped the dishcloth and walked across the porch in the middle of the day and down the steps I got in the car and started to drive off but Sims stopped with the tractor run it right in front of the Studebaker before I could get the thing in reverse. He opened the back door which couldn't ever be locked, the front door didn't have no handle, and he jumped in and leaned over the seat and turned off the key. He pulled it out and put it in his pocket with a pat that said this is where it's going to stay and he said where do you think you're going to?

I went back in the house without answering him. The little boys was still setting at the table eating hadn't even stopped chewing from where I'd left them with a pan of cornbread and a pot of beans and fatback they was dipping their hands in like they never heard of spoons. Sims moved the Studebaker back up under the house

and the tractor behind it where it couldn't be moved and brought my suitcase in. He set back down in his place and smeared a chunk of cornbread with butter and dipped it in the potlikker since he'd already ate his beans. Five pairs of flat blue eyes stared at me over those chewing mouths five different ages of the same face 1, 3, 4, 5, 24 I don't want no more. It was them faces with them same eyes that made me run in the first place though I had thought about it a lot before I won't tell you I hadn't I just hadn't done nothing about it. Everyday those same faces and eyes staring at me over chewing mouths. I couldn't see myself in those eyes now, those eyes said you ain't going to get nowhere.

The second time I tried walking out when Sims was to town. I left the little boys making dirt pens and roads and things under the house for their little cars and some bugs they caught. It was two o'clock, not a cloud in the sky like my mama's blue china bowl the baby broke I forget which baby, one of them when it was two so it couldn't be the baby now so it ain't his fault not any of their faults maybe not Sims' fault neither maybe not even mine but the bowl was broke all the same. Sims mended it went to the store and got a special glue and put all the pieces together again good as new he said, if you don't put water in it. What good's a bowl won't hold water? I could see cracks like the little lines in the palm of my hand sweating hard shiny beads of glue.

I made the mistake of packing a suitcase and walked out got all the way uptown in heat like a glass window pressing down on me. Sims has this homing sense like a hound has for a coon or squirrel, he homed in on me all the way uptown and drove til he saw me toting that suitcase too and put us right in the Studebaker, drove home without saying a word. He took the suitcase in the house and dumped everything in it on the bed and then he took it off to his mama's I reckon, I never seen it again didn't matter anyhow old beatup cheap thing to start with. I already figured I wouldn't take nothing with me next time.

Sims didn't say nothing, that wasn't his way, but he knew there'd be a next time. He taken to watching me all the time now. Him and the little boys, they was good boys as good as boys can be, didn't fight no more'n others or whine much. Their noses ran all winter and summer they was sunburnt to a goldy brown just like Sims but their eyes fastened onto me and their little hands was like hooks in my skin.

It was a long waiting summer, Sims was waiting for the crops to come in worrying about rain. He had to tote water from town in barrel drums and couldn't get but one in the car at a time. The truck was broke had a cracked block or radiator or something and as soon as he poured it on the corn the dirt just sucked it right up. Even his mama told him not to take this land it was like a sieve but Sims wouldn't never listen to nobody leastways not to his mama. Thin white lines like strings ran tight from the corners of his eyes. He stared at the sky looking for clouds that weren't there. He watched the corn turning brown and he watched me doing the wash hanging out clothes sweeping the bare board floor that was always gritty from all the sand. It was white and stuck to our bare feet and looked like Sims' cheeks when he didn't shave for two days felt like it was too on bare feet. At night in the lamplight it would shine in the cracks sometimes. I carried wash water out to the tomatoes but they was wilting in that sand that could blind you in the sun in the middle of the day but in good years grew the sweetest tomatoes.

I didn't have no fixed plans for running, I'd already used up all my plans, I was just waiting. Until one hot August night the Rucker brothers come over and said there was a rabid animal in the spring woods, claimed they heard it digging around in the dry spring.

Might of been a dog or a fox or a coon. Rabid creatures got to have water. We got to get it Noah Rucker said.

Ellsworth Greer and the rest of the men come around and they all had their guns and Sims got his and they headed out through the cornfield to the spring woods. I don't know why I followed. A rabid animal is a dangerous thing and so's a bunch of men with guns but I did. It's no sight to go see but the little boys was in bed and I went. For once Sims wasn't watching me, I was watching him.

The men was ahead of me, the Rucker brothers had their jacklights so the night was full of flashes from that. The woods sounds was all around buzzing and whinging and the dusty pine needle smell don't nothing smell better than fresh pine but when it's dry don't nothing smell drier.

The men reached the spring place and bunched up while they looked for the rabid animal then the younger Rucker brother caught it in his light and yelled there it is it's a fox and they all com-

menced to shoot but I saw it too and it wasn't no fox it was a dog, a bitch lying on her side heaving and there was foam all around her mouth but it wasn't the foam of madness, she was in labor gone wrong. I saw that, saw it plain as my hand in front of my face when her eyes was caught in the light and I saw her pain.

No I screamed and the dog looked at me. Run I screamed but she just lay there having them puppies and I was drowned out by the shooting they shot and shot til there wasn't nothing left of that dog nor the puppies inside of her just a red pulpy mess that could of been anything but not anything alive no more. Some of the shells must of went into the dry pinestraw the dog was laying on, it caught fire. The men wouldn't go stamp it out they was afraid to go close to that pore old dog in case the rabies might jump up like a devil and get them. In a minute the fire spread all around where the spring wasn't this summer and the men hollared and jumped around and tried to stomp it out but they was too late, they had theirselves a real fire now.

I run back to the house with my hands over my ears I could hear that dog crying though she didn't make no sound I could still hear her. The boys was awake and watching the fire I could see them filling up the window their eyes their little bare legs dangling every which way outside it, they scratched at bugbites. They didn't see me get my purse I still didn't have no plans I put my shoes in my pockets and went out. The little boys was still watching the fire.

I started out through the cornfield away from the spring wood. The dirt was warm on top cooler where my feet broke through the crust. The moon come up out of the woods behind me three quarters bright and the parched cornstalks was shining like torches lighting me through the field.

Behind the spring wood was all orange with fire, little black men jumping around the edge, Sims was on the tractor and men chopping trees making a firebreak before it got to the corn, they yelled like devils. All of them had taken off their shirts in the heat of the fire and I could see Sims' sweaty back as he turned the tractor and I followed the moon path out of the cornfield. Let him find me now.