

I Remember the Miracle

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In summer 1946 I helped Jed, our mill foreman, save our town.

I was only seventeen. The war had passed over me, but I knew that a man will be called, and he must step forward, and he may receive pain. Not every man can endure the pain that may come to him, but I can endure mine, because God sent me a miracle that whirls continually in my memory. I see it, I hear lamentation, I hear a thrumming string. It soothes me. It reminds me that I did right.

I looked on Jed as a father. He had given Mama a job in the mill's office to sustain us in her widowhood, and he had taken an interest in me, teaching me things that a boy must learn from his father in order to become a man. I looked up to Jed's natural son, Tony, too, like a kind of older brother, though Tony, a veteran of the war, was so much older than me that he and I had rarely ever conversed during our childhoods.

A lot of younger boys in town looked up to Tony. Female hearts broke when Tony went off to war, but the war changed him. When he came home, Tony ripped the patches off his uniform jacket and wore it ruined wherever he went. He hung his head and did not seem to hear our greetings when he passed us in the streets. His mind seemed occupied.

One Sunday that summer in the center of our town Tony walked past Lila, a small, middle-aged colored woman, who stood on the curb every Sunday evening with her Bible and her pamphlets testifying to the love of Jesus Christ.

Tony and most all of us in town, white and colored, were saved Christians. Tony was saved. Jed, our most important citizen but now and then drunk, had been saved many times. Lila was saved and a little crazed by her love of the Lord, almost too bold in her religion for a colored woman. We Christians had felt the frenzy of the Lord's touch, so we tolerated Lila's preaching.

We saw Lila step out of her place at the edge of the sidewalk into Tony's path. She apologized to him but asked would he accept

Jesus Christ his Lord and Savior into his heart that instant.

When Lila affronted Tony, he looked as if she had shaken him awake from the thing that had occupied his mind ever since he had come home. He looked as if he had never before in his life seen Lila or heard of the Lord Jesus Christ. Tony opened his mouth as if he would answer Lila, but he did not speak.

Lila told Tony that Jesus's arms were open, Jesus would take his troubles unto His breast and ease his vexed spirit. Would Tony get down on his knees to God now?

So they knelt on the sidewalk. Lila held her Bible in her left hand and raised her right hand over Tony's head. He put his hands together and closed his eyes to receive Jesus's mercy. Lila prayed aloud, and when she came to the end of her prayer she praised Jesus and hugged Tony. Tears ran down his face.

We who saw their prayer that day believed that Jesus had healed Tony of wounds he had received in war. I did not know that Sunday, when I saw Tony and Lila pray, that wounds received may be less painful than wounds given.

The following Tuesday evening Jed came over to our house for his coffee after dinner, which on weeknights he often did. Jed was faithful to his wife from their teenage years to his death, but he visited my mother most nights of her widowhood, and some folks said that they sinned. I know that they did not, because I was there to overhear them every night that Jed came. My mother and Jed always comported themselves decently. I only ever saw Mama touch Jed once, to console him in his mourning, but that was on a later evening.

Jed told Mama that Mr. Henderson, the mill owner, had called him up to the big house Monday. Mr. Henderson had told Jed he was going to move his family south to Georgia because Lila's son was stirring up the colored folks. The town wasn't safe any more, not safe for decent white women. In the street the other day, Jed said, one boy had given Mr. Henderson's youngest girl a look that had chilled Mr. Henderson's blood. Mr. Henderson told Jed that he planned to

move his family and his mill down South out of the way, before such troubles got worse. The costs in the mill would be cheaper there, and Mr. Henderson figured the mill would do better in Georgia, with Georgia workers.

Lila's son had been 4-F in the war because of his eyes, which he ruined at a young age reading more than was good for him. The boy always seemed outwardly respectful, but when we watched him we could see that he was measuring folks, both black and white, through the little eyeglasses that his mother had scrimped to buy. He was never cheerful in the way of other colored children generally. When he turned fifteen his mama had sent him away to a live-in school, paid for partly by her church, then to a fancy white college in Ohio that took in one or two smart colored boys every year on scholarships. Now he was back, grown, and a highly educated troublemaker.

Oh, the Bible tells us, in much wisdom there is much grief, and he that increases his knowledge increases his sorrow.

Jed called me into the kitchen and asked did I want to go down with him and Tony next day to reason with Lila's son. Of course I said yes, because it was an honor, a lesson, and a duty. Without that mill our town would have fallen through. Jed needed to save our mill, and the men of our town who were mindful of their duty to their homes and their people would need to help him. I was nearly a man and must learn what Jed would teach me the next day by his example.

Mama was flustered, but Jed patted her hand and told her it would be all right, she needn't worry, I'd be safe enough. Tony and I were strong, young men, and the colored folk in our town were good ones, if confused momentarily by a troublemaker. The colored people would see the right of it soon enough and stand clear. We just had to give Lila's son a stern warning, get him to stop, maybe run him off, back to Ohio.

Next afternoon Jed picked me up in his grey Plymouth. Tony rode in the back seat looking away from us out the side window.

A long-barreled .38 in a waist holster, strung on a belt like a cowboy's gun, hung over the front seat between Jed and me. When Jed stopped the car on Fredonia Avenue and got out, he strapped on the pistol. Tony stayed in the car.

Jed leaned in the window and swore at Tony to get out. Hearing Jed curse his son that way shocked me.

Tony got out, but he didn't close his door. He stood in the road, put his hands on his waist, raised himself onto his tiptoes and bent left and right to ease his back, huffing and looking over at the nearest shack, which hung a gold star in the window.

Jed called Tony to come on.

Tony shut the door and fell in a ways behind Jed and me. We strolled down the middle of the empty street. Now and then Jed stopped and turned, as if to show his gun, left and right. There were no colored folks in sight, no dogs, no cats, no sounds, not a curtain twitching.

When we came up in front of Lila's shack, Jed spread his legs and braced himself in the middle of the dirt road facing her front door. He hung his arm down on his right side by his pistol. He called to Lila to send out her son.

There were voices inside, hushed and arguing. Tony stood aside with his back to his father. He combed the back of his head with his fingers and blew out his cheeks.

Jed hollered to Lila a second time, cursing and saying that he had no intention of hurting anybody but wanted only to give her boy counsel, but Lila shouted back to him, denying that her son was in her house.

We could all hear that there was a man inside with her, so Jed called Lila a damned liar and warned her not to make him have to come into her house and drag him out.

To answer him Lila pushed open her screen door and walked out onto her porch alone. She wore an apron over a long brown shift. She held her hands up to us, and they trembled. If our intentions were Christian ones, she wanted to know, why had Jed come to her

house with a gun?

She wanted to know why Tony had come, and she pointed to me and called me a child and asked why Tony had brought a child with him. Was Tony leading me down a sorrowful path? Was that the work of a soul so recently saved?

Tony stepped over in front of Jed's pistol, not quite between Jed and Lila. He looked into his father's eyes, and told Jed that he had done enough and should quit now.

Jed barely turned his eyes to his son. He told Tony to get back in his place beside him.

Tony plucked at Jed's sleeve.

Jed smacked Tony's shoulder back and told him to stand up. He cursed him and told his son to remember that he had been a United States Marine and should act like one now.

Then Jed raised his voice to the colored boy in the shack. He called the boy a yellow coward, hiding behind his mama's skirts, too yellow to own up to the trouble he had been causing. He said it would be worse for the boy if he didn't come out, because he would have more to be afraid of if Jed was forced to come through that door after him.

The screen door banged open behind Lila, and her boy stormed out, empty-handed, blinking at Jed through his spectacles. He had grown during the last seven years and put on muscle, a fine figure of a full-grown colored man now. He presumably would have rushed down off that porch if his mother hadn't screamed and wrapped her arms around him to hold him back. She was small and skinny, so with little trouble he dragged her along behind him as far as the edge of the porch, where he started to step down.

Tony turned his face to the heavens and cursed.

Jed took the gun out slowly and pointed it at the colored boy's chest. A strong gust swirled dust into our faces. I recollected a passage from the Book, about a man who has no profit of his labor because he labors for the wind.

Jed called to Lila to release her son so that he could come down

into the road to meet his death. Jed hadn't intended to kill the boy today, but if that was what the boy wanted, then Lila should release him and let him come. Jed said Lila was a decent colored woman, he owed it to her—born and raised in Jed's town and a good citizen all her life—to give her son a plain warning, and that was all he was trying to do, but on the other hand he wasn't afraid to kill him today, either. It suited Jed's purpose either way. Die, or take himself and his troubles out of Jed's town. Her boy could choose.

The wind increased, blowing Jed's hair and rippling Lila's dress. Then Lila's son let go a little and slumped in his mother's arms. She pulled him back from the edge.

Tony stepped over and whispered to his father, plucking at his sleeve again and urging him to leave.

The colored boy spoke up insolently, calling Jed by his first name, calling him a working man, and saying that our town's working men had nothing to fear from him.

Jed told the boy that his mother was respectable, but he was not, and Jed owed him nothing. Jed cocked his gun, but Tony jumped forward and grasped the revolver, holding its hammer back and stopping Jed's shot. Tony twisted the gun out of Jed's hand, broke it open, and used the rod to shuck the bullets. He worked fast, click-click-click, until the chamber emptied. Then he put the gun into one of his trousers pockets and the bullets into another.

The town police car drew up behind us. The chief got out. He put his cap on his head and hitched up his belt.

The police chief looked at Jed's empty holster and asked him if he was armed, and where his weapon was, but Tony told the chief that his father didn't have a weapon.

The chief turned and spat a brown stream toward Lila's porch, asking Lila and her son what the hell they were looking at, that this was white folks' business and they should get the hell back inside their shack.

Lila's boy stepped forward and started to answer him, but the police chief hitched his belt, swung around, and took two steps to-

ward him. Lila grabbed her son by the upper arms with both hands, whispering to him and turning him away.

The chief warned the colored boy that he had better get back inside his damn shack before the count of three, and he counted to two, and Lila helped the boy back inside, and her screen door snapped closed behind them.

Jed's hands were shaking and his mouth curled. His gaze flashed to his son, then to the blackness behind Lila's screen door, back to Tony, and back again to the blank doorway.

The policeman put his hand on Jed's shoulder and said he had made his point and had better go home now.

Tony tried to put his arm around his father, but Jed twisted away from him with a shrug and strode to the car alone, ahead of Tony and me. We came along behind him, like brothers, side by side.

The police car drove off in the other direction.

That evening when Jed drank his coffee in our kitchen he shook his head in sorrow. He said he thought probably Tony had got into the war too late. Jed said that he had asked Tony about his service, but Tony wouldn't tell him much. Tony had admitted to Jed that he had never been in a battle and that no one had ever shot at him. Tony had manned a small gun on the deck of a ship his whole tour. So there it was, plain proof of how little Tony had experienced. Jed thought that little bit had weakened him. Jed wasn't complaining that Tony was safe, he wanted him safe, but Tony had been a tough kid before the war, and now he was backing down from a fight.

Mama said maybe Tony just wanted peace.

Yes, Jed said, that was it exactly. Tony missed out, not landing on the beaches with the other Marines. And Tony missed a big sea battle, too. Jed read about it in the paper. Tony's admiral had sailed away from the fight, and by the time Tony's task group sailed back, the battle was finished. Tony must have seen some wreckage, fires, and bodies floating on the sea, the leavings of war, which would discourage him, but not the fight itself, which would have strengthened his heart.

In the early morning toward three o'clock my bedroom door creaked open. The shadow of a tall man, rolling like a sailor used to the motion of the sea, crossed to my bedroom window, where he looked out. The moon lit Tony's face. He spoke to me in the darkness.

Tony needed me to write some things down for him, some things he needed to tell, and that people needed to hear. Mostly, Tony said, I needed to hear them, because people lied, and I would need to remember what he told me when people came to me and told me that everything was going to be all right. He raised a bottle and took a swallow. Would I do this for him?

I turned on the lamp on the table that served as my school desk, and I took out my pencils and my school notebook from the year before. There were blank pages still in the back of it. I opened to the first blank page and waited for Tony to speak.

Tony said to title it "I Remember the War."

I wrote that on the top line, in capital letters.

Then Tony said, "When a man is swimming in the ocean and you chop him up with a machine gun, so much blood will come out of him that the water will turn red for a minute, and his guts will blow out of him in long tangled ropes."

Tony took another drink.

"Or his head will explode," Tony said, "if you hit him there, and his brains will spray into the sea like rain."

It took me a time to get all that down on the paper.

Tony read over my shoulder and shook his head. He waved his bottle, shaking his head all the time, and said it was the wrong place. He would need to start at the beginning, and that wasn't it.

I drew one large X through what I had written.

Tony cleared his throat. I could tell he was heavy with woe.

Tony said, "At Pendleton I shot so good I nearly qualified as a sniper. But they sent me to sea, and they assigned me to guard the ship's brig, which was easy duty."

He leaned over and watched me write it. Then he told me to

scratch that out, too, because it wasn't the start of it, either.

Tony went back to the window and took a breath of night air, as well as another long pull from his bottle.

"A warship in my task group depth-charged a Jap sub to the surface. It came up near us, and a half dozen Jap sailors jumped out of it, and they swam over toward us. Now, that was a problem, because we had no space for them, and we sure didn't want the Jap Navy to come and rescue them, either, and put them back to work shooting at us, so the captain called for a volunteer. I knew I was the best shot of anyone on board, so I stood forward."

He watched me write it, then picked it up and read it. He put it back down on the table and tapped it with his finger. Yes, that was it, he said.

"Then after that there were more Japs in the water. No one else wanted the work. I got let off all my other duties. The worst day was after the big battle. So many Jap ships sunk or burned, so many Japs swimming, and our ship turning among them all day to make sure I got them all, leaving not one alive, me at the rail with my weapon, chopping them up."

I wrote it down carefully.

As the Eastern sky took light, Tony stopped speaking and fell backward onto my bed. He started to snore.

I changed out of my pajamas and took a walk outside to leave Tony to his rest.

When I came back he was gone and the pages I had written for him were ripped out of my notebook.

Two days later Jed called a Citizen's Committee meeting in his garage. He said I was old enough to come, along with Tony, Harold, Harold's brother William, and of course Jed himself. Harold and William drove up in their pickup, which had a cross-tee mounted in the bed. They backed into Jed's driveway all the way up to the garage door. They let down the truck's gate and sat on the bed. In the bed was a roll of rope, some barbed wire, two old baseball bats, and a can of gasoline. We passed around a pint of sipping whiskey.

Jed had a report for us, based on news which he got from several white men who worked at the mill, each confirming the others' story. Lila's son had not run off. He was still going down to the mill at the end of each day to pluck at the sleeves of the colored men coming out. Most of them stopped their grinning and chattering and walked right past him, cold, without a glance, but not all of them did. Some stopped. The boy talked to those who stopped and gave them a Communist pamphlet, which some folded up and stuck into the pockets of their jeans.

The pulsing of my blood through my brain was louder than Jed's voice, for I knew clearly what must be done now. We all knew, but then Tony stepped forward and spoke against it.

Tony said that none of us, not his father, nor Harold, nor William, nor I had ever murdered, and that what we were talking about was murder. Murder changed you, Tony said, murder ruined you, you could never forget or forgive it, you couldn't stand it, and he wouldn't have his father become a murderer for any reason. No, nor any of us.

Jed told Tony that there came a time when a man must kill, and that is what he hoped Tony would learn, that a man must become a cold killer whenever his home and his people are threatened, and that that kind of killing is never murder.

Tony said that Jed was always after him to learn what he had done in the war, well now he would tell him, and he looked at me when he said that, and I could see the tears starting in his eyes. Tony said that in the war he had broken God's commandment against murder, just as Jed was planning to do that day. He had murdered helpless men, Tony said, dozens, maybe a hundred, maybe more, anyway more than he could count, and he knew what murder was. He couldn't stand to see us murder Lila's son. He would die first, he said, and he walked back to the house.

We all took a pull from the bottle, except Jed, who watched after his son.

When it was getting near dark Harold and William drove back

with sheets for us to wear, but Jed threw them down in the dirt, saying we were not afraid to show our faces. We were doing our duty, saving our families and our neighbors, both black and white, if truth were told. Twice Jed went back into the house to call Tony out, but Tony had locked himself in his bedroom and wouldn't speak. His mother was still calling softly to him through the door when Tony blew his brains out with Jed's long-barreled .38.

Jed broke down Tony's door. His mother screamed and fell on her knees. Harold and William drove off to find the police chief, and I found the pages from my notebook on Tony's nightstand. Tony had scratched out the title he had given me and written in its place, "My Confession." I folded the pages and took them away in my pocket secretly, so that they would not add to Jed's grief.

Nearly every white person in town was in church for Tony's service. Wisdom giveth life, the preacher read, and who can make that straight, that God has made crooked? Mrs. Henderson played a thundering hymn on the organ. When I grasped a handle of Tony's casket, a man in uniform, a stranger, stepped out of the crowd and took hold of the handle on the other side from me to help us five local boys carry Tony to his grave.

Over the grave the preacher read, Woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he has no one to help him up. Then they lowered Tony into his grave, and his mother and his father threw dirt on Tony's coffin.

Behind them, where Jed was forced to see them as he turned away, many of the town's colored stood to pay their respects to Tony from a distance. Lila and her boy stood in front.

Jed screamed such a high yowling note that you would not think a man's voice could utter it. He cursed Lila and her son. He raised his fist and made to run at them, but the preacher held him back. Lila and her boy walked away quickly. Jed wept.

On the appointed day, in the early evening, Harold and William came to Jed's house drunk for our task. They drank even more after they got there, I suppose to raise their courage higher and higher.

With all their delays we did not start till near two hours before sunrise. Harold and William wore white hoods despite what Jed had said. They yelled, fired off their pistols, and swayed unsteadily on their feet as they stood in the bed of the truck on either side of the cross-tee as we lurched along the rutted roads through the colored section, with torches burning on either side of the truck's cab to show the colored folks the example we had made. Jed, stone sober, drove, and I rode beside him in the truck's cab.

Jed drove to the bank of the creek and parked under a big cottonwood, its sturdiest limb. I got out. Harold and William wore leather gloves to unwrap the barbed wire that held Lila's son to the cross-tee. He had been stripped for his night ride, and Jed's beating had swollen his eyes and mouth shut. To end his life, Harold put a noose around his neck, William threw the rope's end over the tree limb, Harold and William jumped down from the bed to wind the other end of the rope around the trunk and tie it off, and Jed turned on the truck's engine.

Until that moment, I had performed no duties.

Then God tested me, as He had tested Tony.

Above the bank of the creek, backlit by the morning sun, I thought I saw Jesus Christ Himself rise into the sky. Jesus came floating over the bank and His feet alighted. The Lord ran down to us over the mud, suffused by the dawn behind Him. As He ran, He commanded us to spare the boy's life, His child. The shadows of Jesus's heavenly robe swirled around His ankles, His pierced hands rose to beg our mercy, and His thorned crown, surmounting His curly hair, threw out a golden halo that lit the sky. Then Jesus ran down farther, the light improved, and I saw that it was Lila.

She jumped into the truck bed and threw the noose off her boy, crying to Jed to spare his life as she had tried to spare Tony's. She caught her boy and held him across her lap, weeping for divine mercy.

But Jed and I were not divine. Jed turned to me, his face set.

I don't believe he knew me at that moment, but he ordered me to hang her.

It was my turn to step forward, as Tony did, as men before Tony had done, as men after me would do. All of us would remember our pain. Some, like me, would endure it, and some, like Tony, would not, and they would disappoint their fathers.

Lila's boy tried to interfere as we struggled with his mother, but the boy had been beaten feeble. Harold easily held him back while William held Lila, and I fitted the noose around her tiny neck.

As Jed drove the truck forward, Lila grasped at the noose, and as the truck went out from under her she began to whirl and kick. The rope thrummed as she danced, and her son screamed his lamentation, his blood and spittle pouring in a string from his mouth as he watched his mother hang. I looked into her twisting face, and God flooded me with a holy awe that drove me down onto my knees into the mud.

"God bless you," I said to her, above me.

God showed me her death that day, the agony of a purely innocent soul, a martyr to His Majesty, the image of His own Son's pain, the holiest and rarest of His miracles. God blessed me and soothed me with that sign on the bank of the creek that flows west of here, past our mill, where Lila whirls eternally in my memory.

For she took a long time to die, and so did her son.