

## My Good Man

"My Good Man," that was what she called him. Good for what, was what most people asked, but all my ma would do was smile. He hung around a lot the spring and summer I was seven and since he was strong enough to bring in a full kerosene can, she let him stay on through the winter. After a while, her will took over. She gave the whole reservation a case of forced amnesia, and everyone forgot his real name, calling him MGM, which eventually evolved into Gihh-rhaggs, the Tuscarora word for "lion." He said it was because of his fierce growl and his thick beard and full head of hair. What he never knew was the fluidity of our language, since he didn't know how to speak it at all, and that we might say "lion," when we meant "lyin'."

My ma was off cleaning houses for white women in the rich village below the reservation five days out of seven and spent most Saturday nights serving at cocktail parties for those same women. This cycle worked out because sometimes she could get a party-guest's wine-spill from a rug at the actual party and it wouldn't have had time to set before she came back to clean on Monday or Tuesday. My auntie Rolanda would come over at six o'clock every Saturday night, carrying both of their little black dresses with the white collars on one hangar. That was their deal. My ma would drive them to wherever they were serving and my auntie would make sure their outfits were clean.

I would stand on a dining room chair and zip them both up after they'd gotten dressed in my ma's bedroom, the backs of their white collars closing on my fingers like huge flower petals. The last thing my ma would do was take her teeth out and brush them in a dish of water and toothpaste. It looked like a much easier time than I had with my teeth and I wanted mine pulled to have those perfect removable teeth like she had.

Gihh-rhaggs generally stayed out of the way while my auntie was there. She would ask in that voice she had used before my deaf grandfather had died when my ma was going to find a man who would at least help with the bills. My ma would say as loudly back that he did what he could and that she didn't see any men knocking on my auntie's door. She said he got me up and off for school, which was true enough, but I am not sure my ma knew the whole story about him doing what he could, not that I knew, either for sure.

I don't remember exactly when it was that Gihh-rhaggs took over for my ma in waking me. I imagined he thought it was a clever way to get me to not notice he was spending nearly every night at our home and by the next year, he was as much a part of our lives as the coffee cans we put out around the house to catch the leaks when it rained. He would come into my room and do trampoline knee-drops on the foot of the bed until I woke up. It was like waking to an earthquake five mornings a week and at night I would concentrate on willing myself awake the next morning before he got there, trying to train my ears to hear him enter the room or to sense him when he leapt into the air. I wasn't picky. I just didn't want to wake up in the air for the rest

of my school career. My ma was already scrubbing the shit from someone else's toilet long before I had to be up so she figured since Gihh-rhaggs was there anyway, he could get me to the bus on time.

He made coffee the first morning as I dressed and fought brushing my teeth. "You wanna keep those teeth as long as you can, junior. You never know when you're gonna need them." Then he offered me a sip from his cup and that was enough coffee for me. "Good thing," he said. "It's a bad habit and there'll be plenty of those to choose from once you get old enough. You'll like this, better," he said, pouring hot chocolate from the stove. He must have made it before jumping on the bed. "Your old man ever come around?" he asked. I shook my head. I had been what they politely call a later life baby, a gift, a surprise, or more unkindly, a mistake baby. My dad had not wanted kids at all, said he had a hard enough time feeding two mouths and still having any money left over for anything fun, and he was sure my ma had gotten pregnant just to spite him. He'd been looking for an excuse to fly for years, from what I hear, and I was just the one he needed.

I hadn't seen my dad since before I had started school, and even then, it had always been at a distance, from some far end of a crowd at different reservation events: community fair, National Picnic, Christmas bazaar. I got to recognize his legs from afar because if he ever saw me coming, he would make a quick disappearing act back into the crowd. The year before at the National Picnic, I had actually gotten within eight feet of him for several hours and he never even caught on, and then I walked away as it got close to being time for

Fireball. It was not like if I snuck up on him, I could capture him and suddenly, he would want to be my dad again.

Gihh-rhaggs nodded and said it was time for the bus. He walked up the driveway with me and when the bus came up, Bonnie opened the door, but she didn't look at me, staring out at Gihh-rhaggs instead. Lots of out-of-work reservation men waited out with their kids in the morning to catch a glimpse of Bonnie in those outfits she wore. I didn't know then what impressed men about tight-fitting tank tops, but some of the older kids were kind enough to inform me. She had a smile for every one of those unemployed men too. Gihh-rhaggs looked back at her and nodded as she shut the door and got moving again. She watched him in the rearview mirror and he watched her and I watched the two of them until he disappeared around the bend.

He waited with me every morning as it grew warmer and there was less of a worry about me getting cold, or frostbit or whatever it was he thought he was preventing by being there. Gihh-rhaggs also never waited in the afternoons, when Dave drove us home.

"How long you had that driver?" Gihh-rhaggs asked one morning.

"Dave?" I asked, knowing that was not who he meant.

"The other one."

"Since I've been on the bus, pretty much," I said, which was true. There might have been some others at first, but Bonnie became the regular driver quickly and any other faces I'd seen rapidly faded to the point that Bonnie had forever been our driver. Everyone liked her, not just the employment-challenged. Even the bad kids behaved for her, or at least in front of her. Down the road a bit, some kids

had a retarded uncle their ma took care of who waited with them and he had struck up a waving relationship with Bonnie and after a while, they would say hi back and forth and she gave him cigarettes sometimes when the mood struck her right. The kids told me their uncle believed he and Bonnie were dating, and they found this way too funny to inform him any different. They said sometimes they would call him from someone else's house if they knew he was home alone, and pretend to be Bonnie. I was glad they lived too far away to want to consider me as a friend.

I was beginning to think, though, as Bonnie and Gihh-rhaggs became more friendly, waving, saying hi, watching each other in the mirror, that there might be some real phone calls coming to our number. I wondered if that bus ever made a stop at my house while my ma and I were out for the day in our respective prisons. Bonnie grew nicer and nicer to me, the more she and Gihh-rhaggs became bolder, sometimes giving me a candy bar the way she passed cigarettes to the retarded uncle. It was possible, as I didn't know what Gih-rhaggs did during the day, or even if he had a job or not but he seemed to never be without money and as soon as my ma and auntie left in their black dresses every Saturday night, he and I were out the door ourselves in his junker car. He maintained to my ma that it never got out of second gear so they took her car whenever they went anywhere together but it had no trouble getting where he wanted to be whenever he and I headed out past dark.

The first place we usually hit was the Golden Pheasant, where all the women petted on me, buying me Cokes and potato chips and putting

me up high on a bar stool to watch the pool games without getting in the way, while he went into the back room and played some cards. Sometimes, one of the guys would bring my barstool over and teach me how to shoot with the balls remaining after someone had sunk the eight. Later we would go to a few other places in the city but at those places, I mostly sat in the car. He would stop along the way somewhere and pick up a few fast food burgers to leave with me and whatever I didn't eat, he would finish off as we made our way back to the reservation.

"Why you wanna live with us, anyway?" I asked one Saturday night as we passed the bullet-pocked sign that indicated the reservation border.

"You don't want me to live with you?" I think it was the first time an adult had ever asked for my opinion and meant it.

"I don't care," I said. "I guess it's all right. You don't spill the kerosene. But you're white," I added, as if this fact were not obvious. When my ma went for a white man, she went all out. He was about as blond and blue eyed as they make them, even his beard was blond and not that red-brown you see so many blond guys with. As summer came on, his skin was burning or peeling, white or red; he never browned. "We have to live here. You don't. You could go anywhere, maybe live in those houses like the people on TV." I had been to some of the houses my ma cleaned and they did live luxurious lives, had toilets and sinks and their houses were not wired with extension cords from the one set of outlets near the box. "Wouldn't that be great?"

"You could go anywhere, too. Your mom is the one who won't leave. I've been trying to get her to move for a while and finally I just gave up and came to live with her since she wouldn't come to live with me." I didn't buy it. I might have been seven, but I had already learned to add.

"Well where'd you live? Where'd you want her to move to?"

"Around," he said. "It doesn't matter. The point is--she wouldn't come because of you. She said she wanted you to grow up on the reservation, learn the language, all that shit. Are you learning it in school?" I nodded. "Does that name everyone calls me really mean lion?" I considered lying, myself, but then confessed that it was. "Hah, I knew it," he said, running his fingers through his beard. "They all wish they could have this."

"Maybe on their belts," I said. He probably didn't like that but it was going to take more than a few hamburgers to win me over, even if I was learning to shoot pool long before I could ever reach the table proper. He won some points though late in August and I never made scalping jokes after that.

Gihh-rhaggs let me climb all over his car, to treat it as if it were mine. He even told me I could have it when I got old enough to drive, so I had better be nice to it in preparation. A lot of other kids from down the road would come over if they saw his car parked under the walnut tree. He was like my exotic pet. Most of them had never seen a white man that close before, and certainly not one as white as Gihh-rhaggs. Some of them asked if his pecker was as white as the rest of him. I told them I hadn't the foggiest. If he came

outside while we were playing, they would stare into his blue eyes and he would smile, drinking a beer, and ask them what they were looking at and that was usually all it took for them to retreat back to playing with me on his car.

One of those days we had discovered we could reach a thick branch of the walnut tree from the car's roof and then hanging on, could swing out across the hood and down to the ground, just like using a Bat-rope. We kept this up for a couple hours it seemed but eventually the older kids said they didn't want to swing anymore and I just thought: more turns for me. They knew what I didn't and about five trips across the hood later the thick branch cracked, a loud and painful moan, like the noise a kid's body makes against the road after going over a bike's handlebars.

They all immediately called me "tree-killer" in as loud voices as they could muster. They wanted anyone in hearing range to know I had been the one to do the damage before they went home to their own yards full of intact trees.

Our house was nearly in the woods, surrounded by trees, but my ma loved the black walnut growing outside the kitchen window. She collected the nuts every fall and though they stained her fingers black and the shells were tough as rocks, she cracked them and harvested every nut she could find. I tried lifting the branch and leaning it on the others so she wouldn't know, but that night I lay in bed and thought about killing that tree. That last swing had been a pretty serious act. That move might get me a name for the rest of my life, and though Gihh-rhaggs was a dreadful enough one for my ma's old

man, I participated in the ritual, and I most certainly did not want to go through life being named Tree-Killer. I had hoped for a much better reservation name and I had been getting to about the age where one would come up on me unexpected, some unforeseeable life-event changing my name forever. There was a woman named Buffalo-Head just because she happened to watch some movie with buffaloes in it with a bunch of other people who noticed right then that her head was bigger than it should have been for her body. This move could be bad.

Worse than the name, though, was the idea that I had killed something, and the fact would not leave me no matter what I tried to think about. There were things I had already regretted at the age of seven, but up to then, those lapses in judgment had been retrievable, erased or at least held at bay by an apology and an expectation that there would be a payback at some point. The vengeance of school children is not monumental but it is exact and I had already understood that fact. But for this action, no one was going to kick me in the nuts when adults weren't looking, no one was going to shove my head in the toilet at school until I could not breathe and then finally flush it at the last possible moment. No one would go to the trouble of pinching my jaws open and spitting down my throat and no one was going to stuff sulfur powder up my nostril over this singular death. None of those kids who had watched me kill it cared about the tree at all; they just wanted to distance themselves from the blame.

I knew little of the ways of trees, but I knew that even as I lay in bed, leaves were beginning to fall and I would have to go out and face the corpse every day for the rest of my life, watching it grow

gray, wither, eventually fall into decay, depriving my ma of her walnut harvest from that point on.

The next morning, I wasn't hungry. My ma was already waxing someone's kitchen floor and Gihh-rhaggs was taking his responsibility of getting my breakfast seriously. He offered a number of things, cereal, eggs, pancakes, most of which we did not actually have in the house, but he was willing to go buy them. I refused even more stridently. I didn't want him to go outside and see the tree's corpse. He would know for sure that I had done it. At that moment, though, I realized he would inevitably use his car.

"I need to show you something," I said.

"I knew something was up. What is it? Are you sick? Something happen? Did you shit the bed or something?" I shook my head and took his hand, dragged him outside and confessed to the murder. He frowned, looked up, saw the branch and pulled it down. He was a tall man and it was an easy reach for him.

"I killed that tree. It was an accident, but I murdered it, by not thinking about it. Jonesie said so. He said everyone would remember what I had done for the rest of my life."

"It's not dead. See? Look here." He lifted me up on his shoulders and showed me where the break was. I didn't want to see it but he grabbed my hand and laid my fingers on the wet pulp. "It's still alive. This happens to everything. It'll heal over. You watch. You gotta quit worrying about this shit. This is like all that craziness you had with the tornados earlier this summer."

"Well, they said on the TV--" I started. I had become aware of the Emergency Broadcast System a few months before and anytime they did their tests on the television I ran into the room and stared at the Civil Defense image on the screen while the warning tone filled my ears. Our house was over a hundred years old, had belong to my grandparents before my ma, and it had no basement, not even a dirt cellar. You could look between the cracks in the dining room floor planks and see the dark and wet earth beneath. I had tried to negotiate with friends who had basements, to see what I could give them in trade for room among the canned vegetables and their dads' dirty magazines hidden in that box under the stairs in event of an emergency. I had secured reasonable assurances for my ma and me, but none of them wanted a white man in their cellars, and particularly not one as white as Gihh-rhaggs was, even though he had been with us for over a year by then.

"I know what they said on TV, but I've lived here my whole life and I haven't seen one tornado. It might happen, I suppose, but this tree will probably outlive you. Your kids'll be picking the nuts off the ground. It's strong. Everything that's meant to survive does, and there's nothing you can do about it. Now let's get rid of this branch and get you some breakfast, okay?" We did.

Sometime maybe a month later, when everything was going as it generally had, things changed forever, and the Emergency Broadcast System alarm had never even sounded. It was the late autumn by then, and the leaves had already fallen from the trees. Gih-rhaggs had been right. The tree had scarred over and otherwise seemed as healthy as

it ever had. My ma never noticed the gray stump on the walnut, but I saw it every time I walked by it. I took to coming and going from the house using the front door, even when the kitchen was more convenient. In the mornings, Gih-rhaggs would lay my clothes for the day on top of the kerosene heater, so all I had to do was run down there to the big room and get into my warm clothes and begin waking up in earnest.

The first thing I noticed that morning was that I had awakened by myself. I had finally trained myself to wake up before Gih-rhaggs came up to jump on the bed. I waited and waited, but he never came. I eventually got up and looked down the staircase, where I could see there were no clothes on the heater. I grabbed a set from my dresser and got dressed, heading downstairs to see if the country had experienced a nuclear attack and I had slept through the Duck and Cover Drill the one time it had really counted.

My ma was sitting at the table, just out of sight of the stairway and as I got close, I thought she was laughing at something she'd just heard on the radio, her body rocking forward, her hand gripping her forehead. I touched her and asked her what it was. She looked up, not laughing at all and was, of course, crying. I didn't recognize it because this was something I had never seen. In none of the time that she'd come home from working those parties with her feet looking like loaves of bread they were so swollen, she never once complained. I asked her one time why she was so quiet over something that hurt and she said complaining didn't do any good, so why waste the energy.

"My Good Man is gone," she said, and I immediately thought of Bonnie. I pictured her pulling up in her bus earlier than anyone

expected, so none of the kids caught it, until her empty bus slowed to our driveway and Gih-rhaggs grabbed onto a grocery bag of clothes he kept in my ma's dresser and stepped onto the striped stairs behind the wheel well, allowing those folding doors to close on our life. She probably put the bus in motion even before he stepped beyond the white caution line. Those two were so sneaky.

"I bet I know where to find him," I said, picturing the large garage and fenced in parking lot just at the edge of the reservation where all the school busses rested when they weren't being used.

"He's dead," she clarified, straight out, like she had read me a headline from a newspaper. "That stupid car of his. Exhaust fumes, they think. He was on his way home from the track, had this in his pocket. Hit a telephone pole." She pointed to the counter where we kept the sugar, salt, anything she might have used as a seasoning, and the big bucket of well water we drank from. "His daughter dropped it off this morning. She said he was probably intending it for us."

"How much is it?" I asked. I had never seen so much cash in my life. Our dollar bills had been precious few and we kept them orderly, like those little cards you sometimes see in the mirrors at the houses of the more Catholic Indians on the reservation. I had never seen most of these bills before and read off the names of the men, Jackson, Hamilton, Grant, Franklin, faces I had only ever seen before on the classroom walls. It was easier to concentrate on these faces of other grim white men than to think that Gih-rhaggs' goofy bearded face was gone for good.

I put my coat on and walked out the kitchen door. His car wasn't underneath the tree. She hadn't been mistaken. He'd been wrong, I thought, looking at the walnut, or lying, after all, when he said this was the natural order of things, that things just died sometimes, that things would heal over. All that shit. There wasn't a natural thing about that morning. I wanted to go in and tell her about what I thought was true of Gih-rhaggs and Bonnie, then maybe she would stop crying. I knew it would not be right to say all the crying in the world wouldn't bring him back, but I wanted her to stop. I decided to get ready for school on my own. I told her I was going and she just sat there, staring out across our lawn. I bet she knew Bonnie would be showing up, ready to get her morning flirt in, and I was going to help her out and be just the person to set things straight. I went out and waited in the cold, trying to not think about the fact that Gih-rhaggs was gone, and trying to remember how I was going to tell Bonnie off, even if it got me kicked off the bus for good.

When the bus arrived and the door opened, Dave greeted me instead. I asked him where Bonnie was, and he said she had called in that morning. I stood at the caution line and asked as casually as an eight year old can if he knew why she had called in.

"I don't know for sure, but I think someone at the garage said her dad had died sometime during the night. They weren't close, but a person's dad is a person's dad, right kiddo?" Dave looked up at me and smiled.

"I guess," I said. I started to ask him if he knew what Bonnie's last name was, but then I realized it wouldn't matter. I had no idea

what Gih-rhaggs' last name had been, myself. It had never occurred to me that he'd ever had any other life but the one with us, any other life where he'd needed a different name than the ones he'd had with us.

"Now get back behind that line and have a seat so we can get a move on, okay?" I crossed the caution stripe and he pressed in the clutch, shifted into gear and pushed us on through the falling leaves.

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