

Golden Brine

Blood pumped hard against my skin, and my muscles strained and burned. My face was hot, and the drying trails of tears were stinging my cheeks. My surroundings were blurry, and I had no idea where I going. My head was in a state of nothing, my mind was utterly blank. I couldn't remember my name much less why I was so upset. I was floating on air, my body carrying my incapacitated mind to the realm beyond.

My consciousness was starting to come around, my senses sharpened. I could remember simple things again, like my name was Ann Claimer; the year was 1892; I had brown hair; hazel eyes. And then it hit me like a bat to the head. Uncontrollable woe flooded me, my eyes started to trickle up again.

Jimmy.

I would have broken down right then and there, but my mind and my body weren't connected anymore. That boy I loved, my other half, my world. Jimmy with a gun in his hand. My body started shaking, and I fell on the ground, my head pressed into dirt. I started heaving and gasping, my heart and lungs couldn't keep up with each other. What would happen to him? Would he go away? Questions knocked inside my skull, whizzing around.

I don't know how long I laid there on the ground; it could have been weeks for all I knew. Finally, I pulled my worn out body to its feet. My eyes refocused, and I looked around. I was on the ledge of a huge cliff; if I had taken another step I surely would have fallen. I gulped at the thought of that. I half expected to see a river below me, but when I looked down I saw a large plain of sunflowers. The field continued into the horizon, the flowers blending in with the setting sun, almost like the field never ended. In the fall light the yellow of the petals was tinged a golden-brown. The wind blew, creating sparkling golden waves.

It was hard to imagine how all of it happened. I couldn't remember at all how it all started, just that it happened fast.

"I'm gonna count to three, and your gonna put her down!" Jimmy threatened. His hand was on the trigger. Mr. Hanks' hand was wrapped around my mouth, the other holding a gun to my head. I squirmed, tossed and screamed, trying to break loose. His grip only tightened.

“What are ya gonna’ do with that gun, boy? You weren’t thinkin’ about shootin’ me? Were ya?” He breathed on my neck, I reflexively moved away, but he pulled me back in.

“I mean it!” Jimmy’s face was red, his eyes flaring. “One!”

“You gotta be joking me kid! How ‘bout you go to your mamma and she’ll get you a glass of milk!” he laughed a drunken laugh that blared in my ear.

“TWO!” Jimmy pointed the barrel at Mr. Hanks head. “THREE!”

A gun fired. Mr. Hanks fell on the floor, pulling me down with him. I slammed against the dirt floor of the saloon. The shock of the fall sent a jolting wave through my body. I felt all the blood wash out of my face, and I was paralyzed on the floor. Then, I took one look at Jimmy. He looked horrified, his body was shaking. His hands were rapped around the gun so tightly his knuckles were blue.

Then I ran.

I stood there, watching my golden ocean tug and pull with the wind. I was trying maybe too hard to forget my thoughts. It was hard to focus only on the beautiful rolling sunflowers. It was bittersweet, how even though my life was turning upside down, the rest of the world was content and happy. They could go on with their lives when I could not. And I wished they would all suffer, feel the pain I felt. Loose their life like me. Why did this have to happen to us? Jimmy and I were fine until....

“Ann?”

Jimmy.

I turned to face him. He looked calm enough, ambling along like a lost puppy. He was slouched over, walking towards me cautiously. When he reached me he just stood there, staring down at the ground. I couldn’t contain myself. I latched myself to him, and I buried my face into his chest while I sobbed uncontrollably. We held each other for what could have been forever, but when he pulled away from me, forever wasn’t long enough. He held my face in his hands, examining my expression. I wondered what he was seeing. Pale face, bloodshot eyes, leaves in hair; I bet I looked like a madman.

He looked like he always did, mussed-up blond hair, big blue eyes. He really did look like a boy, except there was something in his eyes that I couldn’t make out. Maybe it was just the look you get in your eyes when you kill a man.

“Ann, I...I” He couldn’t finish his sentence. But I knew what he was trying to say. I knew what would happen.

“Things aren’t going to ever be the way they were again, are they?” I meant it more as a question, but it turned into a fact right in my mouth. He sighed and said nothing. We stood in the silence for a while; he took my hand then started walking us down to the sunflower field. All I could think about was how much more time I would have with him, and even if I would ever see him again. That was the question that made my heart clench and swell. The sun swooped down on us as he pulled me down the hill. We approached the beginning of the field, and I was actually surprised by how much taller the flowers were than us. It looked so big, I felt like I was an ant. Then he pulled me into the field, and taking great strides he reached the heart of the meadow and sat down.

“Well, you are going to sit with me ain’t you?” He said looking up at me, one eyebrow cocked. I was surprised by his sarcasm, but sat down with him anyway. He laid

down with his arms behind his head. I nestled my head on his chest and we looked up at the sunflowers above us. The fading sunlight peeked over the tips of the petals, creating patchworks of shade and light. It was warm, too, like the quilt my ma made for me when I was a baby.

“Are you going to leave?” I asked, suddenly I was afraid of the answer. He just closed his eyes. “Please?”

“Yes.” He said with hesitation. “But not for long,” he said looking at me, “Maybe a month, or two. To let things calm down.” He wasn’t doing a good job of reassuring me; I doubted he even believed his own words.

“Well, you can’t live in the woods!” I said harshly. “Where are you planning on going, may I ask?” I was suddenly angry with him.

“You’re not my ma” He retorted.

Then I knew the reason for his stupid remark. The button I pushed that set him off. “You’re not a man, Jimmy.” I said, my eyebrows pulling together. “You are sixteen. You can’t do this to yourself, you think you can just go out into the world? What are you going to do? Hop on a train, like some loner?” at this rate I was spitting the words out at him.

“You don’t have the right to say that!” his face was red, more from embarrassment than anger. He was sitting up now, his face in mine.

“Oh? And why not?” I could feel the heat radiate from his face, it was so close to mine. But then his face turned white, his eyes lost their rage; he frantically grabbed my shoulders and pulled me to his face. His eyes were desperate and wild, like this would be the last thing he ever said to me.

“Please, just please. The reason he is dead is that your not. I *had* to keep him from hurting you.” The words were ripping him apart; his voice cracked. “Please don’t think I did this to prove I’m a man, I did this so I could see you again.” He held me to his chest; he wept gentle sobs in my hair. I held him for a long time, maybe an hour even. I didn’t want to pull away, but I was tired, the sun had already set, and I couldn’t keep my eyes open. He lay down on the warm ground with me.

“When?” I yawned; I had to blink twice to keep my eyes from closing.

“My train leaves at four in the morning.”

“So soon?” The answer woke me a little.

“Yes, it was the only one I could get that wasn’t in day light.” I could hear his heartbeat, it thumped in perfect time. I wanted to spend every moment of the night with him before he left, but I knew for me that wouldn’t be possible. The lullaby of his heart was making staying awake impossible.

“Where...?” I asked fading away. I never heard him answer.

He cradled me in his arms, and my consciousness started to slip away little by little. Soon I had forgotten all about the gun. All that mattered was Jimmy’s heart, and the quilt of sunflowers above me.

When I woke he was gone, and I was in my bed. I looked around wondering how I had gotten in my bed. I tried to sit up, but my head swooped around the room and I laid back down. I pressed my hand to my head, and then I realized that there was a sunflower in my hand. I smothered the sunflower to my chest and cried gently. I placed the sunflower on top of my ma’s quilt, I blended in, too. I almost forgot that the pattern of

my quilt was sunflowers. Maybe she had been with Pa to the sunflower field like me and Jimmy.

I had to stop thinking about Jimmy, and I knew it. Now I had to walk tall, Jimmy was gone, and I had to go on with life until he came back. There would be church in the morning, the children would go to school, neighbors would greet each other. I had to keep quiet and go on like everyone else.