

*The Long Wait*

*This story is told and seen through the voice and eyes of an eleven or twelve-year-old boy. It is mere fiction.*

...The Long Wait

You know how it is when yer a kid. You do stuff that seems OK at the time, then later you get jumped on for it even though you didn't mean no harm. Well, that's the way it was when I told my mom what I'd done. She scolded me for a time, but then I explained to her that I really didn't mean to do nothing wrong, and just wanted to make a new friend. She finally broke down a little bit and got sorta soft about the whole affair, and said it was OK, but I should be extra careful next time. She sure could get sore over the littlest stuff. I guessed that I was off the hook for the time being.

What I had done was take a cake over to the nursing home for my aunt. She worked there and was supposed to bake up a homemade cake for a party gift trading they was having. You see, it was almost Christmas. Anyway, she got real busy with some house chores and didn't have time to whip a homemade cake with green and red icing. So, my mom baked up a three-layer job and gave it to me to take over.

Since we lived in one end of town and the nursing home was on the other end, it was quite a trip. It was cold and windy, so I got out my old faithful Hawthorne bike and placed the wrapped cake in the basket and headed to the other end of town. Sure thing, no problem. I managed to get there despite being half- frozen. The sky looked like it might start spitting snow any second.

As soon as I got inside, I found the hallway that led to the party room. I guess this is where my mom got sore at me, for bothering an old lady out of the blue. At any rate, that's when I first saw the old lady setting alone in her little room just staring out the window across a big, empty field. Everybody else was down at the party eating cake and ice cream and swapping them presents I told you about, but she just set there, staring. Like I said, everybody was whooping it up and being real jolly. I guess I felt a little sorry for her. I remembered a time at school when one of the kids in my class set through a Christmas party at school

and didn't get no presents or seemed to not a have a good time during Christmas. Anyway, that what I was thinking when I knocked on the open door and waited until she noticed me. I didn't want to just barrel in without her knowing I was there. Sometimes old people get scared or surprised and croak right there on the spot. My aunt said it happened all the time. Well, she turned around and sorta gawked at me like an old chicken does sometimes, you know, with one eye. I felt dumb all of a sudden and come near just leaving and forgetting the whole matter. But before I could get my feet to moving, she smiled friendly-like at me. I asked her if she was OK, and she said she was, but crowds made her kinda nervous. I knew what she meant by that. I asked if I could get her some cake and punch or something. I told her my mom had made a real yummy Duncan Hines cake out of a box with red and green icing all over it. At first, she didn't act like she wanted any, but finally she said OK, and I went to get some. I dropped off my cake at the kitchen, and then took a small plate and got the old lady a piece of cake with ice cream, and a cup of red punch. It felt good being able to do something

decent for an old person. They couldn't do things for themselves sometimes, and kids could be real helpful if they wanted to be.

When I came back, she was turned away from the window, and was facing the door. I had decided that I was a little hungry myself by the time I got to the party, so I ran back to the party and fixed me a piece of cake, too. Some of the old people in wheelchairs was in a circle, chatting with each other, and playing some kind of game where they took turns twirling something. I couldn't tell what, but figured that my aunt would tell me later if asked her. Across the room there was another bunch setting around a table playing some game, probably *Monopoly* because I heard one of them mention *Boardwalk*. They was all having a real time of it for sure.

Anyway, she was facing the door as if she was waiting for me. I felt kinda dumb carrying pieces of cake around. By the time we was done with the refreshments, she was beginning to talk to me a little. I figured she thought it was OK to talk to a kid since he wouldn't

remember stuff for very long, anyway. I asked her if she had any folks, and she said no, she was the only one left in her family. She said she had a brother who had died a few years ago. And she said that she had two sisters, but they was both dead, too. I could tell she was sad because it showed in her eyes. I wanted to ask if she had ever got married but thought that it would get her to feeling sad for no good reason since she seemed to be feeling kinda bad over her brother and two sisters.

I looked at her real good there in the light of her room. She had lots of wrinkles, and her skin drooped all over her face. But I guess when you get old, your skin doesn't seem to fit the way it used to. Maybe old people dry up and shrivel away, but their skin stays the same size. Anyway, I looked at her face, and at her hands since she kept them on her lap most of the time. They had odd-looking brown spots all over the backs, and purple-colored veins showed through the skin. And, every once in a while, she would fidget. But when I really looked at her face, I could see that she had been a pretty woman. I had seen pictures

of Katharine Hepburn, and Betty Grable when they was young, and they were pretty then. So, I figured that she looked as good as them women now, so she must have been pretty like they was back then.

After about fifteen minutes, she asked me if I wanted to know what it was

like when she was a teenager growing up on a farm. Since I didn't have nothing else to do right then, I said sure. She smiled and turned and looked out the window for a spell. I was beginning to be afraid that she had forgot that I was there, but shortly she remembered me and turned towards me. She set her napkin down on the side table. I saw a few crumbs fall and hit the floor. Then she started in...

“...When I was a young woman, I think about seventeen or eighteen, we lived in the county outside town here on the old Fletcher farm. Perhaps you've heard the name. Well, anyway, all my brothers and sisters were either married or gone off to college, and I was the youngest, thus, the only one left at home. My father was a farmer, and I

helped out a lot around the place. I used to get up at five a.m. and help milk three cows every morning. We didn't have enough cows to get those milking machines, so, we just milked the old girls by hand. It was a rough life." She sorta stopped there and appeared to be thinking about what she was going to say, or what she had just said. Anyway, I waited for her to remember I was there.

She started again, "My mother spent most of her time cooking and doing household chores. Living on the farm was never easy for any of us. There was always so much work. It was on one of those hot days of the summer in 1936-that's the summer that still holds many of the records for hottest temperatures -and down the drive came this old van a rattling and clanking, the dust a rolling out behind. Mother and Father were in town shopping, and I was the only one at home. And here came that van. It stopped in front of the house, the driver waiting a few moments for the dust to settle before he climbed out. There was a name on the side of the van with an address right under it. But I've



forgotten now what it said. All I remember is that young man who hopped down from the running board and came to the front door. I was standing inside a few feet from the door looking through the screen and waited until he knocked before approaching the door. He asked if the Mrs. was at home. I told him no, they were in town, and what could I do for him? He said that he was from Emporia, and he drove a route once a month through our part of the county, selling jellies, jams, and other confectioneries. He said that he had cakes and peanut butter and all sorts of sweets, and would we be interested in something? He said that he had a special on orange marmalade that week. With Mother and Father both gone, I didn't know what to do. We didn't have much money around the house, and all I had in my bag was a handful of change. I asked him how much for the orange marmalade, and he told me 'two bits'."

"How much is 'two bits'?", I asked. I remembered that I had heard one of the men down at the pool hall one time say that, and I almost

asked him what it meant, but they was always telling me to go away when I tried to talk to them. So, I didn't find out what it meant."

'Two bits' is twenty-five cents. A quarter is 'two bits'. So, I said that I would take a jar, and he hopped back out to the old black van and pried open the back door and returned shortly with a jar of marmalade. My mother made jams and jellies sometimes when the droughts didn't burn up the berry vines and bushes. But we never had any oranges around here, so orange marmalade seemed like such a treat. I paid him a half-dollar and he gave me back a shiny quarter. I probably still have that quarter somewhere. I don't think I ever spent it. Anyway, he tipped his hat and left, saying that he would be back in about a month. I stood on the porch and watched the trail of dust until it disappeared into the sun.

"When Mother and Father returned from town, they were surprised, but they weren't unhappy. I told them I had always wanted to taste orange marmalade. They both laughed and said it was all right.

I didn't see the young man for a few months. I started my last year of high school that fall and was almost always gone when he came back around, but my mother said that each time he stopped, he asked about 'her pretty, young daughter'.

“Then, in the latter part of the fall, I was ill and stayed home from school one day-Wednesday. He almost always stopped on Wednesdays. My mother really believed I was sick, at least she pretended she did, nonetheless. They were both out in the field tying stalks when down the lane came that old van. It had just rained a few days earlier and the dust didn't trail out very heavily. He came to the door and seemed surprised to see me. I told him that I had stayed home ill with a sore throat. But I said not to worry, that it wasn't catching. It was that sometimes I got sore throats without any reason. Later, a doctor said that it was tonsillitis. A few years later, I had them removed at the hospital.

“Since it was somewhat cold, I invited him inside the front door. I was sure it was all right to do that; my parents had said that he seemed

Like such a nice young man. We talked for a few minutes, and he told me about himself and his father's business of sales routes in ours, and in the adjoining counties. I asked him if he was attending college, and he said that his father was ailing, and he had to stay at home and drive the van since they couldn't afford to pay someone else to do it. I remember he had light brown hair that sprouted up in back when he took off his hat. His eyes were close together, and he had a strange way of squinting when he smiled. I felt myself beginning to like him more all the time.

“I told him I would buy three jars this time, and he sprang out the door and returned momentarily with three bright, shiny jars of orange marmalade. He told me ‘six bits’. I had three quarters in my hand waiting for him. My palms were rather sweaty, and I was embarrassed that he might have noticed the wetness on the quarters. If he did, he didn't show it. He merely took the money and said that he would return in about a month. I said goodbye and closed the door behind him, watching through the lace of the curtain until he had driven out of sight.

“Did you ever see him again?” I asked.

“Yes, I did. But it was quite a bit later. I think it was in the spring the following year. My parents said that he had stopped once a month all winter until January when he didn’t come. When he came in February, he told my parents that his father had died and he had had to stay in town to get his affairs in order. I take it that he had some rather heavy responsibilities placed upon his shoulders. And they said that he asked about me on each of his visits.

“I finally did see him. We had driven to the city on a Friday to buy a calf from the auction barn. There were livestock auctions every Friday then. While we were there, I persuaded Father to drive down to the south part of town to where the business was located. The black van was parked at the side of the building, but there was a closed sign in the window. About that time, he stepped out the front door, locked it and drove away. I got father to toot the horn, but I don’t think he heard because he just kept going.”

About that time I noticed the noise getting kinda loud down at the Rec. center. I figured it was something important so I excused myself and went traipsing down that way to check out the uproar. There, they was opening presents and congratulating each other. I got another piece of cake and went back to the room with the lady. I told her someone was telling a funny story since I thought the business of exchanging presents would make her feel depressed or something. I glanced around the room and didn't see any gifts at all. The only Christmas thing in the whole room was the cutout of Santa someone had pinned to the door. But I had seen them on all the doors.

Once I had set down again, she resumed up with her story. By this time, I wasn't so sure just how it was going to come out. I was beginning to think that she was just babbling. After all, she *was* an old lady. She finally began once more. "We talked in the truck about him after that, and my mother asked if I liked him. I told her that I did like

him, and that he was always polite when we talked.

“Anyway, we bought the calf and returned to the farm. But I kept thinking about him. Strangely, I didn’t even know his name...and he didn’t know mine. That was the only other time I saw him until after school was out. I graduated that spring and was working at home until September when I was planning to begin college. My parents urged me to attend a larger university, but I told them I wanted to go to the one in the city where he lived. I told them that it was closer to home. But I believe they both knew why.”

“It was the second Wednesday in June that he stopped next. But this time he was driving a different-colored van. I asked him what had happened to the black one and he said that it had thrown a rod and was ruined. I had heard my father talk enough about engines and knew what he was talking about. Not a good thing to happen to an engine. But I asked him anyway, and he told me. I remember how his eyes twinkled and squinted when he was telling me. We talked for a bit longer until he

asked me if I had done well in my last year in school. I told him that I had done just fine, and that I would be going away to college in the fall. He said then, that he lived not too far east of Emporia, and sometimes he came over our way on his days off ...Sundays. Then he asked if I would like to see a movie some Saturday night, that there was a good Clark Gable picture at the Lyric Theater in town. He said he saw the names on the front of the theater which sat about three buildings down from the pool hall. The same one you go to, young man. You do play pool, don't you?"

"I like to, but my mom don't let me go to the pool hall yet. She says I'm too young. But I go sometimes anyway. The manager don't tell nobody stuff about any of us kids. As long as we don't bust up the tables and rip the felt, he don't pay us much mind."

"I really wanted to go with him but was nervous about asking my parents. But since they weren't home, I told him that I would go with him. Times were different then. I was a high school graduate, eighteen



years of age, but it was still proper for a girl to get her parents' permission. I was almost certain that it would be all right. He had met my parents, and they seemed to like him well enough.

“That Saturday night came, and he picked me up in that same van he drove on his routes. He said that since his father had died, things had gotten rough with the funeral expenses, and all. I said it would be all right and he shouldn't worry about it; things almost always turned out in the end.”

“We saw *It Happened One Night*, and then went for a drive to one of the lookouts west of town. We sat in his van and talked about life and what we both wanted out of it. We watched the stars twinkle, and the lights flickering in the valley below us. We got better acquainted, then he took me home, saying he would see me in a week or two.”

She hesitated for a few seconds; I asked, “Didn't he call you or come visiting?”

She had a faraway look in her eyes. “No. He was coming to visit

a week or so later and was involved in a terrible motor accident. He was killed. His van was hit by one of those big trucks. It swerved over into his lane and hit his van, killing him instantly. We had a date set for that night. We were going to go visit his mother in his city so we could be introduced. But he never made it. He was such a nice young man.” She had tears in her eyes as she finished the story.

I began to feel real sad for her. I could almost see that guy in that old, beat-up van a whipping down the road with them jars of marmalade bouncing and jostling against each other in the back. But, like I said, I felt real sad for her but didn't get no tears or stuff like that. I figured I'd let her think about what she was thinking for a minute before talking again. I read in a book once where the main character was in a situation kinda like this where he just listened to a dying man. He didn't interrupt him or anything because he knew he was going to croak anytime. I didn't figure the lady would really croak, but she needed to finish what she was saying. Besides, my mouth was kinda dry, and I probably

Would've sounded dopey, anyway.

About that time, it began to snow. Through the window, I could see tiny flakes getting bigger as they filled the sky, and the brown, dead grass turning white like an old man's beard turning white and getting whiter with every minute. And people were walking past the doorway. The party was over and I could hear the attendants scolding some of them along. It reminded me of them cowboy movies where the cattle is herded into big pens for the trip to the packing plant. I sure hoped that I wouldn't be a pain when I was old and shaky.

The lady got real quiet and I figured it was time to go. I said I'd see her and took off for home. She was setting there in darkness with the lights off when I left.

My mom listened to my story about why I was gone so long, and didn't seem so sore at me afterward. She said she remembered the lady but didn't know very much about her, except that she had heard that once she was going to get married, but something went wrong, and she

didn't. And if she had gotten married, she couldn't remember.

I told Mom that the old lady didn't get no Christmas presents from anybody. It was like everybody had forgot all about her. Mom said that sometimes people get all caught up in their own affairs and sometimes peoples' feelings get forgot about. Especially, when they are quiet and don't make a fuss about stuff anyway.

About that time, I had an idea. Since the old lady didn't get no presents, I decided to get her one myself. I asked my mom for some money. She didn't quiz me about why I wanted it. She just fished around in her purse and latched onto a wrinkly-looking bill. I said thanks and that I needed to go to town for a second. It's probably dumb, but I went to the IGA and got a jar of orange marmalade and took it home and wrapped it all up in some left-over Christmas paper, and told Mom that I'd be back in a jif.

I stopped at the front reception desk and left the present there since I didn't figure I could act grownup long enough to give it to her i

person. Besides, I wasn't sure she'd even want it. I found my aunt and asked her if she would take it down to the lady's room after I was gone and give it to her. I figured she would maybe remember where it came from after telling me her story. I guessed I figured that if she could remember stuff that happened a hundred years ago, she could remember stuff that happened only about two hours ago.

When I got back outside, I zipped up my jacket and reached down and packed a snowball and threw it at the old elm tree that had grown by the corner of the building. It missed the tree by a foot and sailed out into the field where it disappeared in all the other snow. I squinted toward the west and saw the last bit of the sun slide out of sight, leaving everything in growing shadows.