Unwanted Creatures

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Merriam Weatherford had always considered herself an excellent reader of people. She could remember even from an early age that her ability to peg others was inscrutable. For instance, when she was but five years of age, a new preacher had come to her church. She knew from the first Sunday he stood at the pulpit, something was amiss with the man. She tried to tell her parents, but they only laughed and told her to give the new elder a chance. Not one month later, rumors were flying around the church that he was carrying on an affair with one of the sisters and one of the deacons. Another month and another preacher was standing in the pulpit. Though her skills had yet to be honed, she knew right then she was exceptional.

Another time, when she was fourteen, her mother remarried. Merriam knew her stepfather was no good from the first moment she met him, and after four years of abusing her mother and verbally abusing Merriam, he was gone as quickly as a lighting bug’s flash. Again, when she was twenty-two, she met her husband for the first time and knew instantly he would be the man she married. There were countless other times when Merriam had met someone and pegged the stranger immediately.

It was because of this innate gift of hers for judging character that she didn’t think twice about picking up
the man on the side of the highway. He was standing with one hand in the pocket of his worn, muddy jeans and the other with his thumb sticking out toward the road. She took one glance at the man and knew instantly he was a good man, hard worker, and just down on his luck. It was her duty to help him on his way.

Merriam maneuvered her maroon Buick sedan to the side of the road just ahead of the hitchhiker. She snatched the most recent copy of *The National Enquirer* that occupied the front passenger's seat—the one with the blazed headlines on the cover proclaiming Oprah’s most recent lesbian affair and the mystery behind Tom Cruise’s alien baby—and tossed it into the back seat.

“Hop on in!” She greeted the man heartily. He muttered a thanks in reply and took a seat beside her as he shuffled his scuffed boots into the floorboard to the right of Merriam’s enormous bag. She never had any impulse to move her purse closer to her or to the back seat; she trusted this man.

“So, where you headed?” She asked warmly.

“Iuka.”

“Really! I’ve got family from that neck of the woods. My mom’s family was good ole’ Mississippi people. My dad’s family, they were from North Alabama, and that’s where I’m from. I’m headed back home, but Iuka’s on the way. This is your lucky day, son!”

“Son” didn’t offer a response. He stared out the window at the passing Mississippi countryside and the wide-open fields of growing cotton that wouldn’t be ready to pick until November.
“It’s a hot one out there,” Merriam observed. “I think it’s just crazy how early summer starts down here in the South. Here it is, not even the end of May, and the temperatures are already hitting the low nineties. The weatherman said it might even hit 95 by the end of the week! I contemplate every year moving north, but I never can seem to tear myself away from this good ole’ place. Besides, the winters are a killer up north anyway. And as old as I am, it’d be just silly to leave what little family I have here and cart my life somewhere across the country.”

The man made a grunting noise that Merriam took for agreement.

“So where are you from?”

“Here and there,” the passenger replied.

“Oh, so you’re a traveling man! A rambler! How excitin’! I always did want to travel, but I never was able to. I got married, had me a few kids, but when Harold died, I just couldn’t make myself visit all the places we had always talked about goin’. He wanted to see the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the pyramids in Egypt and the Great Wall of China. ‘Course, he never did like the Asians much. He fought during Korea and Vietnam, and he never could forgive those Japs for what they did to our fine men in uniform at Pearl Harbor.

“You ever served in the forces?”

“No.”

“Well, one of our sons did, and we was always so proud of him. I really didn’t want him to go, at first, scared that he’d get blasted away by some of them crazies over there in the Gulf, but we was proud of
'im nonetheless. Well, I guess Connor’s about your age! How old are you anyway?"  
   “Early thirties.”  
   “Why that’s how old Connor is! He’ll be, now let me think, he was born in . . . , yeah, yeah, I guess he’ll be thirty-three this year. My, how time gets along. Now he’s married—a really sweet girl from Huntsville— you know where that is?”  
   “No.”  
   “Really! It’s the nation’s capitol of aerospace travel! Well, anyway, they’ve got two kids, Grace and Harry. He’s named after Harold. Grace is an angel, but Harry is high-spirited and he’s not yet three! But he’s gonna to be like his granddaddy, that I guarantee you! Yes sirree! You got any kids of your own?”  
   “Don’t think so.” The man’s comment caught Merriam off-guard for a moment, but she didn’t want the man to feel she was judging him. She kept her head toward the road as she stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye and kept up the conversation.  
   “Well they’re just a blessin’, I tell you. They’re a handful, and kids are awfully expensive these days, but they’re worth it. They really are.”  
   The man cleared his throat uncomfortably, which drew Merriam’s attention. His face was turned away from her as he studied the clear, blue sky hanging above the oaks whizzing by off the highway.  
   “Why, heavens!” She exclaimed suddenly, nearly frightening the man off his seat.  
   “What.”  
   “I musta forgotten my manners! Where my head is these days, I don’t know! My name is Merriam. I
figure if we’re gonna be travelin’ companions for the next little while, you gotta know my name.”

She paused, expecting the man to give her his name. He didn’t.

“So, you got family in Iuka?”

“Not really.”

“Well, what brings you to this here parts? Or better yet, what gets you stuck out here on the side of the road on such a toasty day?”

“Nothing really.”

“Just doin’ some sightseein’ huh?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, ain’t that something. You just better watch yourself. Hitchhiking back in my day was one thing. People were trustworthy generally, but these days, there’s a bunch of crazies in the world! Ever since the seventies, there seems to be an outburst of men pickin’ up poor little girls off the side of the road and doin’ unmentionable things to ‘em and then killin’ em. Just an awful world we live in, but you can trust us Southerners. We’ve prided ourselves for centuries on the outstanding hospitality and good-naturedness that you just can’t find nowhere else in the country. And believe me, I know!” Merriam paused for a moment.

“Well, actually, I guess I don’t know, since I’ve never been out of the South, but from what I hear, we’re pretty nice.

“So, you got business in Iuka?”

“Maybe.”

“Spoken like a true ramblin’ man! I admire that. You young people these days just go where the wind
blows you, and I really admire that. I wish I had more guts to do somethin’ like that. If I did, I tell you, I’d pack up and move off to the jungles of South America. Live with the monkeys! You ever seen a monkey?"

“No,” the man sighed heavily.

“No? Not even at a zoo! We should stop at a zoo before I drop you off in Iuka! I just can’t believe you’ve never seen a monkey. The similarities between monkeys and humans are remarkable. Anyone who can say we didn’t evolve from those creatures are just stupid.”

“I don’t believe in evolution.”

“Oh, really?” Merriam asked as the pitch of her voice got higher.

“Really. And I assumed, with you living in the Bible belt and everything, you wouldn’t believe in evolution either.”

“Well,” Merriam laughed nervously. “I don’t think it matters enough to get into an argument. Who cares how God created man? We’re here aren’t we?”

The man didn’t reply. Merriam snuck another glance over at her passenger. He continued to watch the scenery go by. Merriam stared down at his plain gray t-shirt and could see the outline of his broad chest muscles. Her eyes traveled to his tattered dark-gray jeans and on to his shabby black boots. The man appeared as though he needed money and needed it badly. She turned her attention back to the road and was momentarily blinded by the sun’s high rays reflecting wildly off her two right-hand rings as she steered the wheel. The ring finger of her left
hand still displayed her large wedding set, and she wondered if the man was eyeing it with interest.

Merriam checked her hair in the rearview mirror. Her hair was done-up well for an old lady, and she was dressed smartly and without hindrance. She had come rolling up to this man in her $100,000-plus Buick sedan. What could I have possibly been thinking, she wondered to herself. Suddenly the car seemed much smaller than before, and Merriam had difficulty breathing.

“So, do you have a trade?” She asked, trying to regain her composure.

“I’ve got a buddy in Iuka I’m gonna stay with for a few weeks ‘till I can find me a job.”

Great, Merriam thought. He probably has no money.

“How about we pull over for a minute?” Merriam asked.

“Huh?”

“I just thought we could stretch our legs for a moment. Get some fresh air?” Merriam glanced up ahead and saw a sign proclaiming “Corinth Flea Market: 1 mi ahead on left.” She had always thought such establishments were tacky, but she felt if she didn’t get out of the car immediately, she would implode.

“That looks delightful,” she said aloud, turning on her right blinker.

“I’d really rather not,” the man said quickly. “I’d like to just get where I’m goin’.”

“No harm in stopping. After all, it’s not the destination that makes the journey, but what you experience along the way.”
“Really,” the man grumbled under his breath, as he slouched down in his seat.
“It’ll be fun!” Merriam said.
“That would depend on your definition of fun.” Merriam steered her sedan across the highway and into the parking lot of the flea market. She slung the car into an empty parking space and jerked up the emergency brake, nearly throwing the man through the windshield.
“Are you crazy?” The man asked between short breaths.
“Aren’t we all a little crazy? That’s why you should always wear your seatbelt.”
“Thanks for the tip.”
Merriam led the way into the flea market with the man a few feet behind her.
“Come along now,” she said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were embarrassed to be seen with me!”
The man offered no reply as they began to survey the endless tables of junk. Collectable beanie-babies, crappy t-shirts, and second-hand furniture littered the aisles of the market. Merriam and the man squeezed through the lane made through the center of the bazaar until they finally stopped at a table displaying a wide variety of pocket-knives.
“Ya know what?” Merriam said. “I’m gonna to get you a present.”
“That’s really not necessary,” the man assured her.
“No, really,” she insisted. “I think since we’ve been travelin’ buddies, I should get you somethin’.”
“You really don’t have to,” the man said, almost
pleading.
“I know I don't have to. But I want to. How about one of these knives? Every man needs a pocket knife. You never know when it might come in handy. My Harold collected guns and pocket knives. He’s got ‘em from a bunch of different countries, the ones he served in. They’re in display cases in the study. I still keep ‘em polished and lookin’ like new. He’d be so proud of me for doin’ that. You know how Southerners love their weapons! I miss him so much. But I can still go into his study and just sit down at the desk, and I can still smell him. That familiar aroma of cigars and shaving salve. You would have liked Harold. He was a man’s man if ever there was—” Merriam was interrupted by an extremely loud gunshot that flooded the entire market. She screamed and clutched her purse to her chest.
“It’s alright, ma’am,” the gentlemen behind the table told Merriam. “That’s just the Civil War battle reenactment goin’ on just down the road.”
“Oh, my,” Merriam said as she steadied herself. “For a moment, I thought . . . oh, never mind. Just the silly whims of an old lady.” She let go of her purse and returned it to its usual place over her shoulder.
“Say,” Merriam said, nudging her companion. “Why don’t we go down and check out that reenactment. Whadaya say?”
“I’d really like to be getting on my way,” the man answered.
“Oh, come on! It’ll be fun, cultural, and educational.” Merriam dragged the man by the arm back to the parking lot. More gunshots began to fill
the air as they walked down the block and found the Corinth Civil War Memorial Battlefield.

“All this war is makin’ me famished,” Merriam said as she spotted a hotdog stand. “How about us getting’ some lunch?”

“I am kinda hungry,” the man answered.

“Finally!”

“What?”

“You’re finally letting me buy you somethin’!”

Merriam dug through her purse until she found her wallet and pulled out a ten to pay the vendor. The two companions took their hotdogs and sweet-teas and made their way toward a crowd of people to get a closer look at the battle. Set on a gently sloping yard with a few trees and a tall white monument, the battle consisted of about twenty men in gray uniforms and twenty men in blue uniforms. They stood across the way from each other, about fifty yards apart, and shot their rifles loaded with blanks at the opposite side.

“Brother fighting brother, father fighting son, neighbor fighting neighbor!” A historian in the middle of the crowd was attempting to yell above the gunfire his narration of the “pivotal battle” of Corinth.

“Yeah,” Merriam laughed. “So ‘pivotal’ that they’ll never mention it in your high school American history class.”

Merriam and the man continued to watch the battle as the soldiers began to fall. One of the gray. Two of the blue. Another one of the gray. And another. Another blue. Three more gray. And so on, and so on, until no one was left alive.
“Well, that’s silly,” Merriam said. “They can’t all die.”

As the rest of the crowd dispersed and congratulated the actors on their wonderful and brave portrayals of Union and Confederate soldiers, Merriam made her way through the smoke-coated battlefield to a small gravestone.

“Can you read that?” Merriam asked the man. “I can hardly make it out.”

“We care not whence they came / Dear in their lifeless clay / Whether unknown or known to fame / Their cause and country still the same / They died—and wore the gray.”

“Well, isn’t that touching,” Merriam said as she shuffled through her purse for a tissue. She first dabbed the corners of her eyes and then wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“Sounds kinda stupid to me,” the man replied.

“I wouldn’t expect you to find it touching,” Merriam said, suddenly turning cold. “You haven’t served in the forces like my Harold and Connor did. You don’t know what people have had to sacrifice for this country.”

“Because I don’t support the Confederates? Because they fought to protect slavery?”

“They fought for their way of life.”

“It doesn’t make it right.”

“Those boys in gray fought for what they believed in and died for what they believed in.”

“So do terrorists! Does that mean that they’re justified to blow up buildings and kill innocent people?”
Merriam stood by the monument staring at the man. Two young men, one in a blue uniform and one in a gray uniform, ran by them toting a massive Rebel flag and shouting, “Long live the South!” and “The South will rise again!” But the display of pride did not stir the locked gaze between Merriam and the man.

“None of us are innocent,” Merriam said. She returned her tissue to the depths of her bag and looked up suddenly at the man with a wide smile on her face. “Ready to go? I could use the air conditioner!” She dropped her empty cup and hotdog wrapper beside the monument and led the man back to her car.

Once back in the car, with the AC blasting on max and Hank Williams pouring from the speakers, Merriam’s car had found the highway. Its passengers remained silent until they had put Corinth in the rearview mirror.

“Do you want me to take you to a specific place in Iuka?” Merriam asked. “If you just give me the address, I’m sure we can stop and ask for directions. Or I might even be able to find it. I’m pretty good at navigating myself when it comes down to it. Now Harold, he was positively horrible at following directions, and you know men and how they are. He never wanted to stop and ask for help.”

“You can just let me off at the Iuka exit.”

“Now, I’m sure not going to let you do that! I picked you up on the highway, and I feel like we’ve gotten to know each other pretty well, so I’m not about to just drop you back off on the side of the road.”

“Really, it’s quite okay.”
“Well, if that’s what you really want, I guess I can’t say no. I never could say no to a soft-eyed man. My Harold was soft on the eyes. I wish you could have met him. He was such a nice man. Well-mannered and a hard worker, much like yourself, I’m sure. He didn’t have your sense of adventure though.” Merriam traveled deep into another one of her memories, but she was hardly paying any attention to what she was saying. A sign flew by that let her know Iuka was only seven miles away. Seven more miles. Seven more minutes. She wondered what the man was thinking. Merriam seriously doubted the man was actually listening to what she was saying. Surely, the man would be thinking, I can take seven more minutes of this old brawd. Then I'll be on my way, and I'll never have to deal with her again.

Merriam wondered if the man felt sorry for her. She had no one to talk to. Her children were grown and had plenty to keep them busy. Harold had barely been dead five months, and she just wanted someone to listen to her and share some time with. Merriam stopped her random string of thoughts and tuned in to what was actually coming out of her mouth. Some nonsense about Harold and their wedding.

“Oh!” Merriam exclaimed suddenly.
“What,” the man asked in a dismissive tone.
“That car just flew by me doing well over 90, I’m sure. But she was a nice gal.”
“How do you know?”
“Oh, I can just tell. See, I've been blessed with the gift to read people. I'm a reader. All I had to do was see the side of the girl’s face, and I knew she was a
nice girl. I have no doubt that she was hurrying off to help a friend or tend to her sick mother."

The man snickered from the seat beside her, but Merriam ignored him. So he didn’t care. He obviously didn't care two cents about her and her generosity. Blinking a tear out of her eye, Merriam looked ahead in the road just in time to see a gray armadillo slowly crawl across the road into her lane. Before she knew it, she heard a squishing crack and felt the car thump.

“Dear me!” Merriam laughed as she wiped a tear off her cheek. “Wasn’t that thrilling?”

“Thrilling?” the man asked.

“No? I always find it thrilling to rid the earth of unwanted creatures. Possums. Squirrels. Armadillas. They’re all such revolting plagues to this planet, and though I’m not necessarily out for a kill, I never avoid the chance to get one of ‘em. And boy, did I get him good!” Merriam was sure the man was rolling his eyes just out of her line of sight. She continued to stare at the road, counting the white stripes running by on the cement, hoping they’d lead them to Iuka very soon. Luckily, they did.

“Well, here we are.” Merriam pulled over to the side of the highway. Just ahead of them stood a green Iuka exit sign.

“That’s great,” the man said. “But before I go, I want to give you something for all your trouble.” He reached down into his pocket, and Merriam expected him to pull out a twenty. A ten, she thought, would be sufficient. Instead of a greenback, however, she was suddenly introduced to a silver switchblade.
“Oh my,” she said calmly.
“Give me your money,” the man ordered.
“Dear me,” Merriam said, searching to see if maybe there was a state trooper in eyesight. Maybe she could flag down someone if she had to. “Wait a second,” she said. “Is that what I think it is?”
“Recognize it?” The man turned his knife over and the sunlight reflected off the blade. “You should. You offered to buy it for me at the flea market.”
“You stole it! We could have gotten caught! You could have gotten us both arrested!”
“Stop trying to stall for time and give me your money, or I'll cut your fuckin' throat, bitch!”
“Okay. Okay. Let me just get my purse, and you can have any cash that I have.” She slowly reached for the bag sitting in the floorboard by the man. She gently placed it in her lap and began searching for her wallet. “I know it’s in here somewhere. Silly me. Harold always said I carried too much stuff with me, even for a woman. I would just laugh and tell him what did he know, and then—”
“Did I ask for a fucking story?” The man asked. “Just give me your money. Now.”
“Okay. Here it is. I knew it was here somewhere, I just had to find it.” Merriam retrieved her wallet from the caverns of her bag and opened it up.
“Just be glad you’re not any younger,” the man told her. “I might want to leave with more than just your money.”
Merriam smiled nervously as she inspected her wallet. “How’s two dollars, and,” she counted her change, “thirty-seven cents.”
The man paused from shock. Disappointment. Then outrage.
“Two thirty-seven! Are you kidding me? Two fucking thirty-seven!”
“That’s it! I’m sorry. I don’t really keep much cash on me anyway, and then I bought our lunch today.”
“You’re sorry? You’re sorry? You are sorry! I want your jewelry and your credit cards, too.”
“Okay. You can have my jewelry. They have more sentimental value than anything for me. Harold used to buy me jewelry on all our anniversaries, and I—”
“I don’t give a shit! Your credit cards!”
“Oh, well, I don’t have any credit cards with me. You can have my checkbook, though. I have a little bit of money in the bank. They’re still trying to settle Harold’s life-insurance, so I haven’t gotten it yet.”

Merriam looked into the man’s eyes and knew he was debating right then whether he should slash her throat or not. She doubted that he wanted her blood on his hands, but she wasn’t sure he could control his rage much longer. She could feel her heart start to race, but it wasn’t a feeling of panic that began to flood her body. Merriam realized it was more a feeling of excitement and adrenaline.

“Okay. I see you’re unhappy,” she said.
“Really, dumbass?”
“What about this.” Merriam felt a smile slowly spread on her mouth as she dug around in her bag again. Before the man realized what was happening, Merriam had a black barrel pointed in his face. “Well, hows about it? You want this, mister?”
“What the fuck!”
“Well? Huh? Do ya? How’s it feel to have a lethal weapon pointed in your face? You know how it feels now, dontcha? Now, you give me all your money.”

“Are you insane, bitch? I already told you, I have no money!”

“No money, huh? None whatsoever?” Merriam reflected for a moment as she let this new feeling of adventure soak into her bloodstream. It was an incredible feeling. She hadn’t felt this good since sex with Harold in their thirties. “Don’t make me search you. I think I’d get more pleasure out of that than you would.” The man reached in his back pocket and pulled out a twenty and a ten.

“Here, you old money grubbing whore.”

“Now, now, that doesn’t sound like thanks to me, does it? You should be grateful to someone who gives you a lift and helps you on your way.”

“Yeah, well if I knew you were gonna rob me, maybe I’d rather have been stuck back there.”

“You see, I told you I was an extraordinary reader of people.”

“But you were wrong about me,” the man said.

“No I wasn’t. If this long life of mine has taught me anything, it’s you can’t trust anyone. From the time I was fourteen to eighteen, I went to sleep every night to the sounds of my stepfather slapping and punching my mother. When my mother was finally able to get a divorce, I swore to myself that I would never let any man treat me like that. Thank God, I found Harold, who taught me how to protect myself.”

“You were the one who put yourself in this situation, not me.”
“Maybe so, but you put yourself in this situation. We're all responsible for our own actions.”

“That’s a really nice lesson, lady. And it’s only cost me thirty, fuckin’ dollars.”

“Don’t be in such a rush to leave,” Merriam said as she felt bolder and bolder by the second. “Let’s just say, um, how did you put it? Just be glad you aren’t any older. I might want to leave with just your money.”

“You can forget it.” The man said once he realized what Merriam was getting to. He began to fidget in his seat, and Merriam could see the beads of sweat begin to gather on his forehead.

“Gun,” Merriam reminded him with a smile.

*     *     *

As Merriam crossed the bridge over the Tennessee River into her hometown, she looked in the seat beside her. A mischievous smile broke out across her wrinkled face. There sat, instead of her National Enquirer, a pair of rugged black boots and a pair of dark gray jeans. Leaving the man on the side of the road in his white boxer-briefs and gray t-shirt probably wasn’t the nicest thing Merriam could have done, but she knew Harold would still have been proud of her for keeping the upper hand.