Flight to Obscurity (Literature)

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FLIGHT TO OBSCURITY
Jo Medlin
Short Story
Second Place

There were more cars than usual on the road that day when we walked from Jimmie Joyce's house down to the cave. It was Sunday afternoon, though, and the fishing poles sticking out the car windows reminded me that Town Creek Fishing Camp was just twelve miles down the mountain toward Guntersville. Lots of people from Martling and Asbury went there to fish on weekends.

Grandma Hodge would have said different, though: "Huh! Those loafers give all their time to drinking homebrew and gamblin'. Them fish ain't running no risk at all."

Dust rolled up as a big Ford flew by. The Stevenson sticker on the bumper made me feel funny again just like at school Friday. The big candidate rally in the gym on Thursday night had been fun, but the next day at school, everyone seemed to know we were Republicans. Daddy said it didn't matter, though; it was worth being in a smaller crowd to be on a winning team. Everybody in J.J.'s family was a Democrat, but today, we had silently agreed to avoid that subject for one of our favorite adventures—sneaking off to Old Jackie Beam's cave.

Jackie Beam was a real hermit. Everybody knew he kept bats for housepets, too. Sometimes we would meet him walking to Moody Fossett's store with a towsack over his shoulder. He was always barefoot and wore overalls with no shirt. J.J. said that was all, too!

"He doesn't wear anything underneath; probably doesn't even have any underwear," she giggled.

In the wintertime, he wore red longjohns under his overalls and never cut his hair or beard. Daddy said he shed his coat in the spring like our old hound dog, Trouble. Old Jackie hated kids, too. Sometimes when I had to walk to the store for Mama, I would nearly faint if I saw him coming my way along the road between our house and Moody's. His beadly eyes were enough to tell me he wouldn't like anyone snooping around in his cave, either. The memory gave me a sudden chill.
“A cat just ran across my grave, J.J.,” I shuddered as I clutched her sleeve with a sweaty hand.

I hadn’t really wanted to go to the cave that day, but J.J. wasn’t afraid of anything, and I didn’t want her to think that I was, either.

“I wish it was down on our bluff,” I said. “This is just the best place to hide out and play.”

“And the safest place to smoke these! Aunt Edith will never miss them.” She produced two Camel cigarettes from her jacket pocket. “Besides, it’s more fun to sneak in and out under Old Jackie’s nose.”

“Yeah, it is more exciting this way,” I lied through a mouthful of cotton, “but Mama said she’d whip me if she ever caught me down here.”

Our last meeting at the cave had made me swear I’d never go there again. Holly McCauley got mad at me because I wouldn’t walk down to the creek with him. I was afraid he’d try to kiss me again like he had at Edna Reed’s birthday party. I shuddered and felt goose pimples. His lips had been all slippery and he’d smelled like Beechnut Tobacco.

Anyway, we had all sat around inside the cave and played our favorite game, Pleased or Displeased. Holly had brought a kerosene lantern, and the light on the walls showed up all the dancing ghosts who lived there; they all had Jackie’s beady stare.

That would have been our best meeting ever if Holly and Johnny Roden hadn’t got into a fight. Holly kept bragging about the home run he’d hit at school that day, and Johnny finally called him a showoff. Holly got a bloody nose and started to whimper. He left, taking his lantern and all the ghosts with him. It wasn’t as scary after that, and everyone started leaving. I was disappointed. I had hoped when we played Pleased or Displeased I could walk down to the creek with Johnny. I knew I wouldn’t mind if he tried to kiss me. A warm feeling ran all over me, and I wondered if J.J. noticed, but she was whistling and flipping a box of matches in the air.

We cut off the main road onto the trail through the woods. Suddenly, we walked faster even though neither of us had said we should hurry.
I actually smelled the cave before we came to it, a cool dampness that clung in my nose, a dampness that made my neck feel funny, too. I slowed down as we got closer, picking my way through the huckleberry bushes and tall johnson grass that grew around the opening of our secret den.

"This is probably how Old Jackie smells, too, but," I added in a moment of conscience, "he has no place to take a bath, I guess."

People at Martling said that Jackie didn’t have any kinfolks, but Mama said he was Miss Dickle’s cousin. Miss Dickle was a school teacher down in the Blue Bend community; she was a real fine lady and went to Birmingham twice a year to the D.A.R. meetings. After Jackie came back from the war, wounded and crazy, he started preaching on the courthouse steps in Guntersville, preachin’ and hollerin’ about how the war was a crazy thing to do. After that,
Miss Dickle wouldn’t speak to Jackie anymore. After all, patriotism was real high on her list; it was her favorite subject when she spoke to the D.A.R.

I was thinking how sad it would be to have kinfolks who wouldn’t speak as we found our seats on a ledge inside the cave.

A match lit up the gloom.

“Jody, remember that secret meeting we had here back in May?” J.J. was already puffing on her cigarette and blowing smoke rings like Rita Hayworth.

I was about to answer her when something warm and furry brushed my hand.

“A bat!” I screamed and saw Trouble standing there switching his tail and looking grateful for having been invited to our secret hideout.

“That damned dog is going to get us caught.” J.J. picked up a stick. She chased Trouble toward the opening of the cave, but he faked and darted to the rear. We had not seen the bottles until we heard the crash. The sickly, sweet smell was not new to my nose. I knew right away what it was.

“Dammit, J.J.! That’s Jackie’s homebrew,” I shouted in dismay as Trouble jumped and barked trying to lap up the foaming liquid.

We ran from the cave with Trouble at our heels. The trail seemed much longer, now. Back on the road, we slowed to a fast walk, but my heart never slowed at all.

“That’s the last time I’ll ever let you talk me into that, J.J. God! Are we lucky!”

“Lucky if no one saw us. If you’d make that stupid dog of yours mind, or stay home.” J.J. was breathless from walking so fast, and I couldn’t talk at all; my chest was hurting. I felt relieved as we got closer to J.J.’s house. It was getting late, and I suddenly wanted to be home.

“Don’t forget to chew the gum I gave you.” She disappeared through the back screen door.
I climbed the hill up to our house, wishing I didn't have to walk alone. I knew I'd be scared if I didn't get home before dark. I wondered if Old Jackie ever got lonely. Maybe he did get lonely, but I knew he would never be scared.

I hoped that no one would even see me as I walked along from J.J.'s house to mine. When I got home, Daddy was on the back porch with Trouble.

"This ramblin' dog has cut his foot again." He was pouring water into a pan, and Trouble was whimpering and licking his paw.

I gave my friend a knowing pat on the head and went straight inside. In our house I felt safe again, but I was sick from the cigarette and the excitement.

"Can I just take a bath and go to bed early," I asked Mama, even though supper was on the stove.

"Yes. And you've stayed out walking too long in this October wind again." She felt my face. "Eat some of this soup before you go to sleep. You won't rest if your stomach is empty."

My dreams were not the sweet ones she wished me. All night long, a kind, old man kept calling and calling to me through the woods. It didn't fit, because I knew the old man would not be kind; we had spilled his homebrew. Finally, I heard voices that didn't belong in my dream and realized I was awake in my own bed.

Daddy was in the kitchen telling Mama about Old Jackie while she cooked breakfast. Daddy always walked up to Moody's early on Sunday morning and talked to Moody and Willie Brown and Herschel Beard while Mama cooked breakfast. The three cars at Jackie's shack had been a real good sign that something was wrong, especially since one of them was Doc Isbell's.

Our Hermit was dead in his own front yard.

"A heart attack," Doc Isbell had said. "That and too much homebrew."

I went to the refrigerator for some milk, trying to hear everything without listening.

"It's a sin and a shame for any poor soul to die that way when he's got
"Yeah, but sometimes when a man's mind goes, even kinfolks can't do anything with him or for him." Daddy poured some coffee into my milk and gave me a good-morning pat.

I wondered if anyone else would ever live in Jackie's shack as I watched Mama cut out biscuits. The plain, flat dough was left in little diamond shapes when she lifted out the circles.

"Everything changes." Mama wiped her hands on her apron. "Grandma Hodge says that Jackie was once an up and comin' young man. He used to write for the newspaper in Albertville; even wrote poetry. She said the war ruined him."

Mama leaned against the counter and rested her back.

"People here thought Jackie would always be around. I guess he lived like he wanted to, though. He didn't work for nobody, and I don't guess he had any bills to pay, either."

I tried to think of Jackie wearing an army uniform or even a tie.

"I don't think Jackie ever did any of those things," I mumbled and glanced at Mama. She was busy setting the table.

Daddy was standing at the back door staring off into the woods where he and Trouble went hunting sometimes.

I moved over beside him.

"Daddy, I don't think Jackie ever wrote any poetry, do you?"