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## Quiet Johnny

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## Quiet Johnny

The black walnut trees on Mr. Josiah's farm stood misshapen, branches sagging with dark, blotchy fruit, twisting down, down towards the yellowed grass. Husk flies crawled over the rotting fruit.

The chicken coop squatted between the trees and the farmer's house, white paint peeling away from its own stench. The coop had a door for people on the one side facing the house, and a door to the brooding hatch on the orchard side, making it perfect for a boy to nab a chicken. Or to hide. Henry opened the door to the brooding hatch and wriggled in first. He swatted at the flies around his head, waiting as Silas, Milton, and Leroy followed. They made double-sure the coast was clear. They were so busy being secret they didn't notice three new holes ripped through the wooden planks along the wall, bullet-sized, splintery, and fresh.

They were on the lookout for Mr. Josiah and his rifle because he'd sure shoot any thief in the chicken coop, boy or fox. A fox was good meat this year, what with the harvest being killed by that midsummer frost, and a boy, well, a boy was one less empty belly.

They were also on the lookout for his pretty little girl, Missy, who liked to chase squirrels up the trees and race the songbirds that flew into her yard. Henry liked to watch her run and run, always smiling. But Missy and Mr. Josiah weren't around. Henry figured they must have gone into town.

Inside the coop, the four boys noticed that Old Red was perched on the highest beam. He was usually a devil bird that chased them around the yard in the spring and gave them a good laugh. Now, Old Red was frozen up there. He stared at the four boys, keeping his floppy red crown and long black tail perfectly still. Watching them. Measuring them.

Henry, skinny and knobby like an apple core and dressed in green, sneered at the king. "We ain't gonna steal your ladies," he said with his chin. "We's just gonna steal all the eggs! This one and this one and this one and all these going in my belly!"

Silas was dressed in red and smiled at everything Henry said.

Carrying today's stick, he pointed it at the rooster's eyes, and then drew a line in the air following the rooster's gaze. To his surprise, Old Red was looking past them, into the far corner of the shack where the wooden planks didn't quite meet and the sunlight cut the floor into golden slices, thin as Missy's hair. Quiet Johnny's corner. Where Mr. Josiah's odd son, Quiet Johnny would sit all day, flattening the hay with his wide bottom. Petting anything fluffy and slow enough to get caught. Kittens, chicks, squirrels. He had big shoulders but Quiet Johnny's hands were the quickest.

He never told his father about the boys in the chicken coop, even though Mr. Josiah needed money from selling the eggs. Needed it badly. With their mother dead from influenza last winter, every penny was for food or whiskey. When there was more whiskey in the house than food, Quiet Johnny made sure Missy ate before him, but that was about all the good he could do. Quiet Johnny got confused and angry sometimes, especially when he was alone, or when he was with his father which was a lot like being alone. Mr. Josiah put Johnny in the coop when the boy got too odd or confused or angry.

But Quiet Johnny wasn't there.

"Say Milton!" Silas leaned on his stick. "Where's Quiet Johnny?"

"No idea," Milton said. Milton put Ladybird the chicken back in her cubby. He found one egg today, and he tried to be careful as he put it in his pocket, but the shell was so soft his thumb pushed through, and the yolk ran out over his fingers. He winced imagining what his mother would do when he came back, again, with empty hands. Mr. Josiah almost sold Ladybird to Milton's mother once, but she was too skinny. Milton sure would've liked the meat today, though, even just a few bites. He wiped his hands on his trousers and turned back to the other boys. "Any of you check if he's stuck up the willow tree or something?"

Henry threw a rock at Old Red but missed horribly. "We don't climb the willow tree anymore, that's where the girls play. What about the log pile?"

Milton stood up. "They burned that, on Saturday." Milton

brushed his hands on the chest of his thin, black hand-me-down wool coat that he couldn't move too good in anymore, on account he had grown another inch since May.

"How long Quiet Johnny been gone?" Henry asked them. He was looking through the gaps in the wooden planks on the wall, searching for pretty Missy in her usual spots. "When's the last you seen him?"

"Not since before sundown," Milton said. "He didn't come out to dig for fish bones in Desert Creek last night."

"We'd better find that dumb billy goat before he crack his head open again," Leroy said.

"I think we better ask his Pa," Silas said, standing in Quiet Johnny's corner, his back turned to the rooster and the boys.

"Well, what is it now?" Leroy asked, walking over with his hands on his belt "buckle" which was really just a knot of rope but it reminded him to push his chest out and make his shoulders look as big as they could. Leroy's clothes were made from burlap, scratchy and pale.

"Let's have a see," Henry shoved past Leroy and peered around Silas' shoulder.

Silas was standing there with his head heavy on his neck like a grown man. He pointed his stick and moved a few pieces of hay. He'd found four little colorful mounds, four little bodies there, no bigger than his hand.

"Well them's just birds the barn cat was munchin on!" Henry shook his head. "What we starin at bird bodies for?"

"It wasn't no cat," Milton said. "Look, no feathers pulled out. Just the beaks. One by one, just the beak."

"What kind of cat eats bird beak?" Leroy asked.

The three boys rolled their eyes. "Now why you gotta go and ask dumb questions, Little Leroy?" Henry said. "Milton just said it wasn't no cat."

Leroy wasn't the littlest there, but he was smaller than his all his brothers, and the other boys never let him forget it. Leroy didn't care much for being called "little" by Henry, who was actually the

littlest and also the loudest. He curled up his nose. "I ain't the dumb one, Quiet Johnny's the dumb one, he's the one pulled off their beaks! Now why did he go and do a thing like that?"

"Yellow feathers, that there's a meadowlark," Silas said, pointing and squinting. "And that one's a yellow finch, that's a yellow warbler. This one might be yellow-belly wren..."

"Songbirds," Henry said. He didn't move. The other three looked at him. He wasn't really looking at anything. "Fast. Faster than bunnies and mice and squirrels all together."

Leroy leaned towards Henry and whispered "Did you know Johnny could catch song birdies?" but everyone could hear him.

Henry looked at Silas.

"No," Silas said. Silas gave the little birds a quick turn over, thinking. Four little birds, and Quiet Johnny had two big hands. How did Quiet Johnny catch such little things without bending a feather? Why did he want to catch songbirds? Why'd he kill them?

"Birds ain't things he likes to cuddle with," Leroy said, echoing Silas' thoughts. "And why'd he come to the coop to finish em off in front of the other birds?"

Old Red started crowing to his girls.

Henry crawled out the secret hatch they came in, and with that they were off to check Quiet Johnny's hidey holes. Leroy carried the little bird bodies in his big pockets. He wanted to ask Quiet Johnny how he did it. Henry wanted to try and catch Missy, if he could, to ask her where her brother was, ask her about her day, if she liked fish bone necklaces and other things girls wanted to be asked.

Quiet Johnny wasn't near the old log pile, because that was gone. He wasn't in the dark corner of the hay loft with the barn cats, or behind the shed where his father hung the chickens upside down. They'd searched the farm end to end in under an hour. They'd found nothing. There was nothing left to do but ask Mr. Josiah, so they turned back to go to his house with tight eyes, tight fists.

Their thoughts were racing, and so were their words.

"Did he chase the birds or did he surprise 'em?" Milton asked.

Silas tapped his stick stylishly against the dirt like a cane. "He

must've stood still and caught them, fast as a bullet."

"People can't go as fast as bullets," Milton said.

"Guess he can."

Leroy turned to Henry. "I bet he made a trap, I bet he used his teeth." Henry said nothing.

They passed through the rest of the orchard in silence.

The house was there, leaning and creaking in the wind like a rocking chair. It was short and brown against the flat gray sky, with an unstained wraparound porch, and the planks didn't quite meet in the corners but there wasn't any sunlight left to try to fill the gaps.

Henry didn't wait for someone to be brave. He pushed Silas forward. Silas swallowed, climbed the lopsided porch steps, knocked on the rickety storm door, and quickly backed away to stand by Henry. Milton kept his eyes on the rifle lying on the porch swing, like a snake frozen in its sleep. They were not surprised when Mr. Josiah stumbled into the door and shouted at them to leave his goddamn private property.

"We're looking for Quiet Johnny, sir," Silas said. Mr. Josiah looked past him.

Leroy stepped up, hands out like a beggar holding the four little birds. "He went and did this, Mr. Josiah? We think."

Mr. Josiah scratched his head real hard. He growled and nearly dug the beard right off his cheeks.

"We just wanna talk to him. Just for a minute," Milton said, standing behind Leroy. Mr. Josiah sniffed into the back of his hand. His cheeks were wet.

The wind pushed hard on one side of the house and it let out a loud creak. The four boys didn't move. Mr. Josiah was in the doorway, Henry and Silas on the bottom step, and the brothers Milton and Leroy stood behind them.

The step creaked underneath Henry. He winced, because now he had to speak. "If Quiet Johnny's sick," Henry asked, "can his little sister come out and play? Can Missy play today?"

"If Quiet Johnny would talk, he'd say he wanted Missy to come out and play today," Leroy said. "Please, Mr. Josiah?"

Mr. Josiah snarled at Leroy. “Little boy Leroy, you besst be on your way, you git far away now, I don’t want you, any of you’s on my property!” His words slurred into the back of his fist. “Dirty mutts! And git those dirty things out of my face. I don’t want your bird fever!” He smacked Leroy’s hand and the birds had one last flight that ended with a bounce and a roll on the dry, packed dirt.

Silas turned to Henry and said into his ear “His words are swimmin’, we best be off.”

“Are you snickering at me? Boy, you best not be talkin smart at me. Think you’re shiny and smart. I will belt you!”

But Mr. Josiah didn’t go for his belt, he went for the rifle on the splintered porch swing.

Silas and Henry jumped back, careful not to look at the man. No one looked him in the eye. Silas kept his stick pointed towards the ground. “Okay then, thank you kindly, sir,” Silas said.

All the boys but Henry had enough sense to start walking away from the porch. “But,” Leroy whined quietly, “where is he? Why’d he do it?”

“Where’s Quiet Johnny, Mr. Josiah?” Henry asked without moving his feet. “And... where’s Missy?”

The boys froze.

Mr. Josiah’s chin sunk into his chest. His shoulders followed, curling down, and the rifle in his hand turned into nothing more than a walking stick. His shirt was dribbled on, whiskey stains on the front, but his shoulders... On his shoulders and all the way down his back was ruddy, brown, dried blood. It had dripped slowly, slowly.

Mr. Josiah leaned his forehead into the porch railing. “I chased him...chased him down, I put that dog down...” He shook his head. The boys listened closely. “She had a feather in her...hair. He made a game. His game...his damned game, she hollered and his big damn hands couldn’t...and he... she was so pretty...You bet your asses I chased him down and...she was all I—all gone, everything! I had to. He wa’n’t *right*. Ran like hell, fast. Grabbing at the trees. Thought he could hide in the...chickens...I got him. Damned thing wailed and moaned, holding those damn—” he pointed at the little dead birds.

Then he pointed back into the orchard with his rifle. He took a few quick breaths and spat, “He wa’n’t *right*.”

The boys ran off in the direction Mr. Josiah pointed, back through the orchard, where they hadn’t wanted to go. Leroy took a few extra seconds to lean down, grab the little bodies and put them back in his pockets. He needed to ask Quiet Johnny why he did it. How he did it. If Quiet Johnny could catch a pretty bird like that, he could do anything. He might not be such a dummy, and if Johnny wasn’t a dummy...

The boys dashed through the low-hanging branches until they reached the river and Silas dug in his heels and hollered for everyone to wait. He pointed his stick at the house and drew a line in the air to make sure they were in the right spot. Satisfied, he looked around the river bank and threw his stick aimlessly.

It landed on a pile of freshly turned dirt under the bare branches of the willow tree. The pile of dirt was shallow and small.

On an unspoken signal, they all decided the same thing. They rushed over and started digging. Their hands were spades. Henry dug like a badger, throwing dirt back and back. Leroy scratched and pulled at the dirt with curled fingers. They were rabid, and they did not stop to think. Their thoughts were so big their heads would burst if they stopped now. Old Red sang a long way off, but no one payed him any mind.

They dug until their sleeves were covered in ruddy stains. That’s when the first blow flies started crawling out. Henry screamed when one crawled up his wrist and he took to shaking his arms like mad. But it was a small swarm, and it didn’t scare Leroy. He dug further down until he hit wood. Leroy wiped all the dirt and worms away.

Silas and Milton were able to drag the little wooden box up and out of the hole but no further. Silas’ hands rested on his red knees. Henry sat next to him and hugged his own elbows.

It was Leroy who finally reached over and gently pried open the lid. Henry stooped over Silas’ shoulder. Milton leaned over Leroy’s.



It was dead, it was very dead and it smelled something awful, but it was pretty. It was pretty little Missy, not Quiet Johnny. Pretty up until her nose and her mouth. Her nose was badly broken and the little bone above her buck tooth smile was caved in. Her hair was still blonde and clean, but the front of her dress was all bloody. Milton closed the lid.

“Missy? Pretty pretty little Missy?” Henry’s lip quivered. “I don’t... Did Mister—?”

Leroy plucked one yellow feather for keeps before tucking the songbirds in there with her, and Milton quickly pushed and pushed the box back into the hole. Leroy silently gave the feather to Henry.

Milton glared at the feather, which was prettier than Old Red’s tail feathers. Why should Henry be the only one to get a feather? It was a very pretty feather. He prayed the gift would make Henry quit his belly aching. He didn’t. Henry started crying.

“Don’t,” Milton said. “Don’t start with that—”

“But Quiet Johnny! Where’s Quiet Johnny?”

Silas pointed his finger at another big fat blow fly crawling on the ground. He kept his finger pointed directly at it as it lifted its wings and buzzed right by Milton’s head and kept flying, until it joined the blow fly army that was swarming over a kill. The brittle, black, savage things feasted on something about twenty feet away, by the dried-out part of Desert Creek that slithered though Mr. Josiah’s property.

Leroy was not afraid. His burlap shirt and pants were thick enough that he did not feel the little legs pricking his arms. He began his approach, leaving the other boys huddled under the willow tree.

“No,” Henry wailed. “No, no, no, no...” Silas held Henry’s head against his shoulder.

“What is it?” Milton called. “Is it him?”

Leroy stood, too little to stand over his brothers but tall enough to look down on the body by the bank of the dried-up creek. Leroy looked back at his friends. He lifted his finger and put it in the middle of his forehead. “Bullet through the brain pan,” Leroy said.

“Johnny! Johnny!” Henry started to wail. Silas patted Henry’s forehead.

“No, no, he loved Missy, he wouldn’t—” But Milton couldn’t say that because he didn’t know all Johnny couldn’t do. Johnny could catch songbirds without bending a feather, but he couldn’t say his own name. Milton couldn’t look at his brother who was staring at the grave, or Henry, who was crying on Silas’ shoulder.

When Henry’s tears ran out, they tried to move the body but they’d lived off roots and yokes sucked out of small brown eggs. They didn’t have the strength. Instead, they sat between the tree and the creek, keeping watch until the sun set and a cold rain started to fall. It ran right off the dirt and chased the blow flies away, but couldn’t quite carry off the body. Far off, Old Red sang without seeing the sun because he was a devil bird.

Finally, when the rain almost blinded them, and their teeth chattered so hard they couldn’t talk, they turned to home.

Milton and Leroy couldn’t meet eyes at the dinner table, where their mother had stolen and slaughtered Old Ladybird for supper. The boys slept in the same bed, far apart.

Silas took Henry to his house without bothering to tell Henry’s folks because Henry often spent the night when they played for too long, and besides, Henry lived on the other side of town. Silas’ house also usually had food. Seeing them all wet from the rain, Silas’ mother ladled a bit of hot broth for them. Silas tried to tug on her sleeve and ask her why people had to die, and if Johnny went to heaven, and when Silas died would she bury him by the willow tree or leave him out on the dirt for the blow flies, but soon Henry and Silas didn’t talk because their mouths were full.

Henry was sad he’d never look through the planks of the chicken coop and see pretty Missy smile and run with the birds. He was sad that Johnny would never tell how he caught the birds, but even if he was alive he probably wouldn’t say it anyway. That made Henry sad in a different way. Henry fell asleep in Silas’ narrow bed near the fireplace, holding a bright yellow feather which he bent in his sleep.

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