

Three's A Crowd

The house sits in a clearing, a pebble path winding up around a hill, pointing towards the distant twinkling lights of town. An oak tree digs its roots into the soft damp ground, blocking the rising moon. The night air is saturated with an impending storm, and a cool wet wind blows fog over the curve of the hill, down into the clearing. Beyond view of the porch, a barn slumps in the mist, doors flung ajar. The night is silent, save for the chirping of cicadas.

They sit there in the dying light, three silhouettes of men, young and old. None of them look at one another, but rather at anything else: one gazes out in the gloom at the large oak rooted in the yard, hands folded in his lap; another stares cross-eyed into his glass, watching the shifting light caught in crystal, the remains of whiskey pooling at the bottom; the third contemplates a hangnail with rigorous attention, periodically biting at torn skin with crooked teeth. Not one of them considers talking.

The swinging screen door creaks open and slams shut. In her hands, Myriah carries a bottle of whiskey and a worn wooden box. She places the box in the center of the table, lifts the lid and slips a plug and lighter from her apron pocket. As the men pass the instruments, chopping off the butt of each cigar and lighting them one by one, Myriah prances delicately around the table, refilling each of the three containers – one a large wooden beer tankard, another of crystal glass, the third, a chipped ceramic mug with broken handle. Myriah pours slowly into the mug, careful not to spill. Andrews, with his arm hooked over the wicker chair, slyly reaches down and wraps his hand around the back of her knee beneath the table cloth as she pours. They do not look at one another, but he

feels the muscles in her thigh tense suddenly as his fingers continue up under the length of her skirt. Brandy slops over the side and runs down the broken stem of the mug.

“Myriah, that’s enough.” Perkins drums the table with his large fingers, his cigar slanted in his parted lips.

“Oh, oh! Sorry, I’m so sorry Mr. Andrews.” She withdraws the bottle, wipes at the spill with the hem of her apron.

“That’s quite alright’, little miss Myriah.” He quietly pats her calf. “Quite alright’.” She screws the cap onto the whiskey bottle, blinking rapidly, color rising in her face.

“Myriah, go on inside. Now.”

“Yes, Father. Sorry.” She sets down the bottle, scoops up the lighter and plug from the table, dropping them in her apron pocket, and floats inside on bare feet, the skirt of her dress swishing as she walks.

A silence hushes over the group. Andrews returns to picking at his hangnail. Perkins stares grievously across the table, watching the gnashing teeth, hooked nose and twisted smirk. “Just what do you think you’re doing, Andrews?”

He looks up, finger stuck in his mouth. “Pickin’ at a nail?”

Johnson chuckles, sipping at his whiskey, continues to watch the gentle quivering of oak leaves. He arcs his neck back, pushes the full-brimmed cap tilted on his head to cover his eyes.

“I meant with my daughter.” Perkins grinds his teeth.

“Oh, come on now, Perkins. We both know it’s nothing she don’ want.” He spits out a jagged bit of nail over the railing of the porch. “It would be a hell of a lot simpler if you jus’ led her marry.”

“The girl is just that – only a girl. I will not let you prey on someone twenty years your junior.” He rests his arms on the table between them. “Much less my daughter.”

Andrews leans back in his chair, props his feet up against the railing. His boot taps against a pillar. “You don’ know nothin’, Perkins. That ain’t no girl – those little hips, the way she skips around in that skirt, those breasts just beginning to fill– “

“Watch it, you son of a bitch.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen.” Johnson closes his eyes, takes a long drag on his cigar and exhales the smoke straight up in a series of rings. “I was under the impression we were here to get piss drunk and discuss the state of the nation. Why don’t you have some more whiskey?”

Perkins leans forward, the cigar burning slowly between his teeth. He squints, examining Andrews through the curling smoke. The porch is silent for a moment, apart from cicadas singing in the tree tops, the whisper of the wind, the rhythm of finger drumming and boot taping.

“Perhaps, Perkins,” Andrews drops his feet to the porch, “you’re just jealous you can’ marry her yourself.” He takes a sip of whiskey, sneering and sucking air through his teeth as he swallows. “It runs in the family, don’ it? What is it that your mother– “

Perkins snatches the ceramic mug by the handle and hurls it past Andrew’s head, splashing his face with whiskey. The cup shatters against the siding of the house, covering the porch in shards of pottery.

“Get off my porch, you son of a bitch.” He stands, grinding his teeth, his finger pointed across the yard towards the distant road. “Get, now, or I’ll kill you.”

Andrews leisurely slides back in the wicker chair, wipes at his face with a shirtsleeve. "Fine. But do let me know when little miss Myriah becomes a woman." His boots clomp down the stairs. "I'll be waiting," he looks back, "eagerly." Soon his silhouette is lost beyond that of the oak in the evening fog.

"Son of a bitch." Perkins sucks on his cigar, a red ring of embers blazing at the tip. He exhales, grabs his glass and downs his whiskey. "Son of a bitch."

"It was just a jest, man." Johnson slides the bottle across the table.

Perkins takes the bottle in his fist, gulping zealously. Whiskey dribbles out of his mouth as he speaks. "You don't know what it's like to be a father." He drinks again. "To be the father of such a child. She's seen someone, been seeing someone, I know it. She goes into town every weekend, wearing clothes I've never seen before. She's started skipping out at night, says she's going to bible study, a dance or what not. And without Molly, I just don't- " He drinks again.

"Do you know who it might be?"

He drinks again. "No, but I pray to God it's not Andrews, that son of a bitch."

"Have some more whiskey."

"No, no, oh, I don't know." Perkins hides his face in his hands, the cigar stuck between his fingers, smoking slightly. "You don't know what it's like..." He mutters inaudibly, running his fingers through his hair. Johnson leans across the table, rests his hand on the other's shoulder. They sit there for a moment, listening to the cicadas hum.

"Forgive me, but I must be going to bed." Perkins stands slowly, sucking on his cigar. "Do you need a ride? I can bring the buggy out."

“No, no need to bother.” Johnson stands, pushes in his chair, makes his way off the porch. He stamps out his cigar on the pebbled path. “See you tomorrow, Perkins.”

“Certainly, certainly.” He turns and waves over his shoulder. “Goodnight.”

Johnson walks down the pebbled path, watches behind him as Perkins shuts the screen door, then slides behind the shadow of the giant oak. Through a fork in the trunk, he waits, listening to Andrews bumble about in the kitchen, talking aloud to himself. As the lights in the house begin to wink out, Johnson stalks through the long grass to the barn behind the house. A pale cream mare snorts and whips its head, pacing quietly in its stall. Johnson steps over, strokes the mare’s head gently until it calms itself. He goes back to crouch in the dark entrance. Storm clouds roll in over the house and a gentle rain begins to fall. Cicada song rings out under the patter of rain on the barn roof. As the final rooms in the house go dark, Johnson climbs the leaning ladder up to the loft. A worn riding blanket is laid out on a pile of hay – Johnson lies down, fingers laced on his stomach, breathes in the scent of horse and hay and lingering cigar smoke, waiting.

After a time, the ladder creaks, and a head peeks above the loft floor. “I put him to bed. He’s out like a light.” Myriah crawls onto the platform, sliding next to Johnson on the hay bed. Her hair is plastered to her face and her white blouse is soaked through, clinging to her skinny frame. “He’ll sleep until noon.”

“Good.” Johnson turns towards her on the blanket, drags his fingers up the length of her thigh and under the hem of her dripping skirt.