

Wichega

Must have been near enough sixty years ago, the day Daddy came back, when we all drove down to our new home. It was out by the big highway that ran like a ribbon of dreams all the way to the far blue horizon. I watched all the folks in their automobiles, and wondered if where they was headed was better than where they'd been. I didn't know then how Daddy had no place left to go.

Daddy carried a duffel and an old suitcase off the freighter, but he weren't wearing no uniform. I asked him why. He looked at Mamma and didn't know what to say, but Mamma knew. 'Daddy's been discharged from the Navy, Sweet Pea. He's come home for good.'

Daddy hugged Mamma and kissed her long and slow. I caught hold of Daddy's hand and held it to my face. His fingers smelled of cigarettes and soap. My little sister, May Alice, stood on his shoes and put her arms around his legs.

Outside of seeing Daddy again, I guess the best thing that day was when they winched out his new car from the bottom of the ship and swung it high into the sun. It was sparkling and shiny and dripping with chrome, and the white wall tyres were clean as cotton. We all looked up and held our breath. Men in greasy coveralls put calloused hands to their eyes and watched that great yellow dream come swaying through the blue, swinging like a sunbeam down to earth. 'Sure is one beautiful automobile!' they told Daddy, and I felt proud. 'What kind they call that?'

Daddy smiled with all his teeth. 'Oldsmobile Super 88. Got a 185-horsepower rocket V8 engine, four-barrel carburetor, four-speed hydramatic automatic transmission, independent front suspension with coil springs, and power-assisted four-wheel drum brakes.'

Daddy watched them unhook the big rope net from around the Olds, then walked around real slow, looking at every inch. I was scared he'd cry if he'd seen one little bitty scratch. Daddy sure loved that car.

Mamma scolded him. 'Where'd you get that thing?'

'Bought it from the first mate. Got a good deal, too.'

'Bought it or win it playin' cards?'

Daddy bent down to look at a wheel and said nothing.

When it came time to go, I got in the back and slid around on the shiny leather seat that smelled like a new baby. May Alice sat up front between Mamma and Daddy.

‘Daddy? This car got a radio?’ I asked.

‘You kiddin’? This car’s got everythin’! Hold still now, girls.’

I watched Daddy start her up with a roar like a bear and then we all drove off down the dock like kings and queens. I waved at the people and some waved at me. Daddy laughed and even Mamma smiled.

‘I wanna hear the radio!’ shouted May Alice, and so we did. Daddy found some nice music and sang along.

It took all day ’til we got to where we was going – our new home. Only it weren’t new; it was Mamma’s old place, where she’d growed up back in the time when she was young as May Alice and just as dumb. Mamma didn’t have no parents no more. I watched her step out the Olds and stare like a lost child at the squat old house with the screen door that needed fixing, loose shingles on a roof that dipped, flaking paint just about everywhere. The yard was all dirt and crab grass. I ran around back and found a swing hanging from an old tree.

Mamma looked kind of sad and helpless, but she smiled when I told her, ‘I like it here already.’ Then she looked at Daddy. ‘You promised you’d settle down. This the last time, you hear?’

Daddy dropped his bags and put his arm around Mamma. ‘I ain’t never goin’ back to the Big House. I’d sooner die.’

I heard him and called out from the swing. ‘What’s the Big House, Daddy?’

Daddy looked sad and Mamma told me to hush. ‘That’s a name they got for the Navy, Sweet Pea. But don’t you never use it.’

May Alice started to cry. ‘Mamma, I’ll sleep in the car. This place is real old.’



Those were the good times, when the long hot days waved to me like a bunch of new friends. I’d grab a hold of their hands and be off seeing what was to be seen all about, just roaming and watching for hours ’til I was too hungry to

spit and trailed home. Seemed like that summer the air was full up with heat and bugs and things blown about. All I had to do was hold out my fingers and catch life on the wing. Felt like all the joy of living was in that air, with the earth calling out to me that the world was new and all woke up.

‘Sweet Pea, don’t you never go near the highway, you hear? That’s no place for a child.’

‘I only sits in the grass by the pond down there, Mamma. It’s real cool under the trees, and they got a bridge. Ain’t no hurt in that.’

‘That’s the worst place for a girl to get, don’t you know that? There’s a Wichega lives in that pond. That dirty critter eats girls for breakfast and don’t think nothin’ about it.’

‘A Wichega? Ain’t no such thing!’

‘Don’t you never go down there, you hear me?’

Alone, May Alice and I whispered about what Mamma told us. My sister was scared of the pond and the Wichega, but she was just a bitty girl and I was eight going on nine. ‘Ain’t nothin’ to be scared of, May Alice. No such thing as a Wichega ever been born on this earth.’

‘But we’s new here, Sweet Pea! They got one here, maybe.’

‘It ain’t so! Mamma’s done told us about the Wichega since I can hardly remember. Nobody nowhere no how ever seen just one.’

‘I seen one!’ May Alice took a hold of my arm, her eyes filled up with nightmare. ‘It’s got claws and fur and lives at the bottom of the water. It hides in the grass and drags you down just when you thinks it’s safe. Ain’t nothin’ you can do about it ’cos you’s already died. Then it eats you and it hurts somethin’ awful.’

She sure made me shiver, but I couldn’t let on. ‘You just pretendin’!’

I’d dream nights of the big dark pond lying quiet in the trees, all covered in weed and full of water moccasins. It had a bridge that rattled like old bones. The highway people had put up a wire fence around the pond, but I knew where the ground dipped down around a post that hadn’t set right. I could lie me down on my back and hitch my way under the wire and then be up and running, my dress kicking high on my skinny brown knees and my old shoes filling with dry dirt on account of the holes. I’d hear the whoosh of the highway and the thunder of them big trucks taking beer and food and all the

fixings to folks who lived too far away to have a name. Then I'd see something big and slow come slinking out the water.

