

THE UNWRINKLED HEART

Nancy Purcell

As she leaned over the front porch railing to shake the remnants of bean stems from her apron, Ollie's thoughts fell to the burden of expectation weighing on her. She swiped her brow with the back of her hand and turned toward her mother. Tuning her voice with authority, her words rushed out like an opened spigot. "Mama, I don't want to hear no more words about me marrying. I'm sixty years old. Sixty, Mama—can you understand that?"

During the past two years, Ollie noticed how her mother's thought patterns had been growing fuzzier, how she'd asked this same question every day—morning, afternoon, and evening. Although Ollie knew her mother's mind to be clouded from old age, the question still grated on her nerves.

The mother and daughter had spent the better part of the last two hours cleaning green beans picked from the garden early that morning. It was during

this bean-snapping, while rocking to and fro on hardwood rockers, when the older woman had declared interest in her daughter's plans to marry.

"Besides," Ollie added, "no man even knows I live in this old cabin, a half mile up a dirt mountain road in the dime-sized town of Bat Cave, North Carolina. No man except for the mailman, and I don't believe he ever laid eyes on me. To him I'm just 'Mr. Ollie Holmsted'—like the junk mail reads."

The older woman cradled a bean-filled colander in her lap and hummed "In the Sweet By and By," still rocking as she removed twiggy ends from the beans. When she broke the green remains in two, she tossed them into the large pot between where her and her daughter—the last of her offspring—sat to work.

Ollie held her ground, allowing her temper to cool. Her gaze fell on the crumbling rubber tire hanging by a braided rope from an oak's sturdy branch; old memories hung thick as the shiny green leaves attached to the giant's arms. The voice of her long-deceased brother, Ben, hollering, "Higher, Ollie, push me higher," came to her. She imagined his floppy brown hair swinging free and heard his words as clear as she now heard the woodpecker tapping high above her. She tucked a few loose strands of graying hair behind her ear.

“Mama,” she said, turning toward the woman made frail before her time, “it’s come clear that we have enough on our plates—so I’m begging you to stop asking me when do I think I’ll be marrying. I’ve seen enough fear and trembling for one lifetime.” There was no certainty her plea reached the old woman’s mind.

Still rocking and not looking up from her chore, her mother answered, “Now, child, the Bible warns us fate is cruel. It’s a blessing you and I are still here.” She had a way of putting periods on Ollie’s poetry.

Ollie tried not to let it trouble her, but today that was hard. Today her thoughts kept tracing over how one cruelty of fate just slammed into the next, starting with her daddy’s fatal heart attack in 1961. In 1965, when the government committed its first combat troops to Vietnam, the Army drafted her nineteen-year-old brother, Ben. Other than his short visit after boot camp, the family never heard from him again. Come 1969, when the maples turned red on the ridges, Sister Ruth’s epileptic seizures returned, the pills that had warded them off no longer doing their job. Ruth was only twenty-five years old, but something went terribly wrong with the wiring inside her head, and the hospital sent an ambulance to come get her. Before the snow flew she was gone forever.

So much of the past rested on Ollie's shoulders that she wanted to scream to the world, "I'm here. I'm alive." But she held her tongue, believing God never gave a body more than they could handle.

Once a week she hiked up the hill behind the house to visit the family cemetery and talked to the dead as she cleaned headstones or placed wildflowers on graves. Other times she would take a book with her and read to the empty space saved for Brother Ben.

"Whatever you say may be true, Mama, but my mirror don't lie. I'm not seeing much chance of a married life happening for me." Ollie returned to the rocker. She fixed her eyes on the oak tree and softened her voice, "You know, Mama, some nights I lay in the bed and give thought to what a man's arms would feel like, his head resting on a pillow next to mine. Would you believe I even kissed my own hand, pretending it was some lover's lips?" Romance wasn't a pleasure experienced on Ollie's mountain; for her it only existed between the covers of books.

"I declare, Ollie. Those books you read sure colored your mind. It's a worry to me, just like I worry about Ben. Do you think he's lost and wandering around in some forsaken land?" She paused and seemed lost to the world herself. "Is he dead or alive? Those government men never did return his dog

tags.” The old woman closed her eyes for a moment, then added, “But I can’t say as I’ve not wished for your daddy in that same loving way, Ollie. Guess women weren’t made to be alone.”

Ollie chastised herself. *You’re a stupid, stupid woman, Ollie Holmsted. You should’ve known better than to reveal your inner thoughts.* She pursed her lips in an effort to ignore her mother’s offhand criticism. The past two years of caring for the old woman wore on her emotionally. She slept all night and woke up tired, the certainty of losing her mother too much to comprehend. Just glancing at her mother’s wrinkled face, then eyeing her own tanned and wrinkled hands caused the anger to return. *Why me? What have I done to deserve this withering life?* She snapped at her mother like she snapped the beans. “All I know is, come morning, I wake up with common sense. No man’s looking up here for a sixty-year-old bride.” She rose from the rocker and went inside. *Let that put a period on it.*

Ollie hurried straight to her narrow bedroom and plopped onto the crazy quilt, fighting back tears. Books piled on her grandmother’s old rocker caught her attention. *Lord, the library bus is coming through tomorrow, and I still haven’t finished the Jane Austen book.* She squeezed her eyes shut, then

blinked away the remains of tears. *Guess I'll stay up all night reading. I've got to know the ending.*

§

The next day, like all her days, Ollie awakened to the rooster's call, collected fresh eggs from the chicken coop, and fixed herself a fried-egg sandwich. Back in her bedroom she looked in the mirror at her sun-worn face and her graying hair, and felt the loss of what she never had: the touch of a man's hands on her body, the feeling of life growing within her, the joy of a baby suckling her breasts—all gifts denied her. Her throat tightened with inner grief as she brushed long strands of hair and braided them into a single tail then tucked it inside her brother's old felt crusher hat. She gathered her book returns, slipped them into a canvas bag, and marched down the dirt road to meet the library bus parked next to Joiner's Gas & Groceries, all the while thinking about the next two weeks' worth of magical stories waiting for her.

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After filling her book bag with new library selections, Ollie took time to stop at the grocery store and approach Mary Joiner about adding fresh-baked cookies to the regular supply of pies and eggs she brought them. She hung around while Mary shared the local gossip. A bag of unread books and a few

minutes chat with Mary always worked like a tonic for her emptiness. With lifted spirits, Ollie hiked up the rutted road to home, whistling all the way.

Silence met her when she opened the front door: no humming of a hymn, no smell of coffee. She dropped her books and rushed to the kitchen—every chair empty. Ollie’s gut gripped with the terror of old fears; her stomach clenched and her heart raced. *Maybe Mama’s feeling poorly, needs a rest.* Ollie slipped into her mother’s bedroom and stood by the bedside, but only death’s stillness colored her mother’s fixed eyes. She felt for a pulse. It was nonexistent.

Ollie fell to her knees, grabbed Ben’s hat off her head, and buried her face in it. She wept for her mother and wept for herself. Shattered by her losses, Ollie crumbled into a fetal ball and held herself until dusk.

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Life’s like wheels running in the ruts of the road; it just keeps going. Ollie followed her old weekly patterns of attending church on Sundays in her small Ford pickup and devoted the rest of the week to preparing and selling her usual goods to Joiner’s, earning enough to keep the homestead running. She still spent time with Mary Joiner who, in turn, still rattled off the local gossip.

Today Mary's useless information didn't hold Ollie's interest. She checked her watch. "Whoops, got to go, Mary. Time's a-wasting," and she held up her canvas bag of old books. She pushed open the door, gave Mary a wave, and walked across the parking lot to the book mobile. *Just trifles, every bit of it*, she told herself. *Mary's stories are almost as good as some romance novels. But it does seem like nobody knows what they're doing.*

Once inside the library bus, Ollie searched among the bookshelves for novels rich with newfound romantic love and scandal. A heart always got broken after having loved too hard.

With ten new books checked out and stuffed into her bag, Ollie climbed the dusty road to home. She thought about the treasures in her book bag and said aloud, "I'm sure glad I live up this hill, away from all that foolishness." As she walked with careful steps, she realized for the first time the peacefulness of living alone.

§

On May 15th, Ollie's 61st birthday, her day was running on full routine, no different from any other, when someone knocked on the screened porch door and hollered, "Hello. Hello. Anybody home? Floyd Jenkins here."

Ollie heard him from the kitchen, but she was up to her elbows in soap suds, washing supper's dishes. *What's a man doing up here, anyway?*

"Hello? Miss Ollie? You in there?" The man's voice louder this time.

Ollie dried her hands on her faded floral apron and walked to the front door. She made note of the never-used shotgun propped next to it, then peered through the screen. "Whatever you're selling, mister, I ain't buying."

"Miss Ollie. It's me. Floyd Jenkins. From down yonder. We went to school together."

Ollie didn't get much out of his name and she sure didn't recognize his face. She squinted and remembered she needed to buy some all-day eyeglasses.

Floyd Jenkins coughed and shuffled his feet. "Miss Ollie, don't you remember? My brother Joshua was your Ben's best friend. I used to take them fishing over by Lake Lure on Saturday mornings." He removed his baseball cap and finger-combed his gray hair, still sprinkled with the red of his youth. A blush crossed his face. "My hair was sorta copper-colored back then—can't tell it now though."

Ollie's finger pressed down on the door hook. *Hmm. Floyd Jenkins. Joshua.* She stared harder at the old man on the other side of the screen. *I really need me new glasses and not just for reading.*

In a louder voice Floyd asked, "Can you hear me, Ollie?"

"Course I hear you, fool. I ain't deaf. I'm just thinking."

"You do remember Ben, don't you?"

Ollie drew herself up and snapped back, "Why are you acting like I don't remember my own brother? It's not him that's worrying me, it's you. I have a shotgun here, case you're wondering. Now, why are you banging on my door?"

"Well, if you'd kindly get me a glass of water, I'd sit out here and tell you. That's a mighty dusty road you have coming up here." He straightened himself, brushed off his shirt and pants, walked to the edge of the porch, and kicked his boots until the dust and dirt flew off.

"Just have a seat." Ollie took a step and, before she could stop herself, asked, "Might you want some lemonade too? I made it this morning."

"That'd be nice of you." Floyd crossed the porch and slipped into a rocker.

The hot sun began its late slide west, and a breeze floated down the mountainside. It wasn't cool but moving air was always better than still heat.

Ollie returned with glasses and a full pitcher. She sat on the porch swing her daddy and Ben had hung, back in one of those summers when everything was as it should have been; picnics on the lawn, cakes with candles and eve-

rybody blowing them out, Daddy strumming his old guitar and everyone singing. The chain of the porch swing squeaked its own song as it rode backward and forward.

“I could come up here one day, with your permission, and take care of that squeaking. Got me a tall ladder and some oil that’ll do the trick,” Floyd said.

“Thank you, but I fix my own things.” That quick she thought she heard her dead mother saying, “Hush, Ollie. Be nice to the gentleman.”

They sipped on lemonade and sat quiet for a few minutes, Floyd tinkling the ice in his glass while Ollie stared at the tire swing hanging from the oak tree.

“I think on Joshua almost every day,” Floyd said. “How he went off with Ben. How he didn’t come home neither.”

“My mama was right. War’s a terrible thing. She told me it was war that killed Daddy too. Said it had a way of breaking a man.” She stared at him with wonder. *Right nice-looking man*, she thought.

Something about Floyd’s hangdog look caused Ollie to smile. “I do remember you, Floyd Jenkins. Just now you looked like you did in school...on Valentine’s Day...when you sneaked a card in my desk drawer. Yes, sir, I know you.” She gave the swing a little push with her foot.

“Praise the Lord,” Floyd shouted. “For a while I thought you might have that old timer’s disease, when a body can’t remember anyone.”

As they continued to reminisce about school days, old friends, and other surface matters, the early evening sky showed red-orange and far trees became shadows.

“I still have my old motorcycle,” he offered. “Been to the beach lately?”

“No. I haven’t been to the beach since Daddy passed.”

“Been a hot summer,” he said.

“Never knew us to have a cold one,” she shot back, wondering why she did so.

After Floyd consumed a glass of water and close to a full pitcher of lemonade, he got up and stretched. “Ollie—might I visit the john before I burst? I can just go behind a tree if you’re worried about me being in your house.”

“Land sakes, Floyd. Ain’t we past the foolishness? Go on inside. It’s...”

“I know, through the living room and to the left.” An easy laugh escaped them both as he opened the door and stepped inside her world.

From her perch on the swing, Ollie heard the faucet running. *Hope I put a clean towel on the bar.* After a few back-and-forths on the swing, she got to thinking. *Having a man around brings on an awkward feeling. Don’t know*

why it makes me nervous—even giddy. Guess the whole thing just surprised me.

The screen door swung open, and Floyd walked across the porch to the steps. He looked up at the sky then down at his boots.

Ollie broke the silence. “You were right anxious about banging that door yonder. Lucky for me it’s still standing.”

Floyd looked at her. “I’d like to take a little walk up the hill, Ollie. I need to move a bit, if you don’t mind. And I got something on my mind I want to share with you.”

§

They walked around to the back of the house, neither one in a hurry. Silence hung on them like a heavy coat. They passed by the stacked logs Ollie’s cousin, Jeff, had cut two weeks ago, and followed the well-worn path past the garden. Ollie admired the rows of sunflowers she’d planted earlier, their heads now heavy with seeds that would nourish the birds over the next few months.

It was Floyd who spoke first. “Do you come up this way often?” He watched her face.

“Now and again. Just to check on things. I bring flowers and sit there awhile, doing some remembering.” Ollie filled her lungs and exhaled—releasing a long-held tension. Calmness visited her. She felt at ease with him. *Floyd’s no stranger. I see it now. He’s more like kin.*

The last part of the pathway grew steep. Ollie, not watching where she walked, stepped into a hole and stumbled. Floyd grabbed her arm for assistance but, by natural reflex, Ollie batted his hand away, as if she might have relaxed too soon. “I can still walk on my own, Floyd.”

Early evening air drifted over them, and Ollie caught the scent of pine and noticed the trees darkening as they gathered the last bit of daylight. She glanced out the corner of her eye at the man beside her and, for some odd reason, she felt she was walking a path she’d never tread before. She felt her heart unwrinkle like a blossom in spring. It scared her but she gave into the warm tingle that rushed through her and accepted the possible.

At the top of the hill, Ollie and Floyd came to a clearing—an area free of trees with plenty of light. They stopped by a split-rail fence that squared off a large section and was joined by a wrought iron gate.

Ollie pointed toward the inner space. “See those stones back on the far side? My Grandma and Pap-paw Holmsted are resting there. I was just a

youngster when Daddy and Uncle Lonnie put them up here.” Ollie walked to the gate and Floyd followed. She rested her hand on the wrought iron, not certain she wanted to take Floyd inside the plot, or even if *she* wanted to step in there. *It’s so personal—for family*, she thought. *Don’t open your heart too soon.*

“My daddy’s right in front of Pap-paw, and Mama’s next to him.” She pointed to a small marker on the left side of the lot. “Sister Ruth is over there all by herself. I reckon she knows I’ll be next to her one day.” Ollie turned toward Floyd. “So tell me, what’s brought you up this hill?”

“I have something that belongs to you, belongs to your family. Had it for too long, truth be known.” She thought his voice sounded shaky-like so she touched his arm and felt him shudder beneath her fingertips. He shifted his eyes away from her and let them skim the picture of eventide: the beauty of the place where they stood, the silver light rimming the mountains. He reached into his pants pocket and withdrew a chain holding a dog tag. “This is your Ben’s.” With gentleness, he opened her palm and placed the chain and tag in it. “I wanted to come by before, but couldn’t work up the courage, knowing you were up here alone. Knowing you’d have no one to cling to for comfort.”

Ollie's heart skipped in her tight chest, and she gasped for air. Her knees began to shake as she worried her fingers across the imprint on the tag.

Floyd stood silent for a minute, swallowed hard, and continued. "I had a dream a few nights ago and, I swear to the good Lord, I saw Ben and Joshua walking side by side up this hill." He stared at the ground, as if holding back the weakness of a man's tears.

Without a thought, Ollie leaned into him for strength. The long locked-up pain released and she cried out, "Dear God, you've brought our Ben home." He put his arm around her shoulder, and she gave in to her feelings and let the pain flow. With her head resting on his chest, her voice emerged slow and quiet-like. "Tell me how you got Ben's tag? The Army said they couldn't find him. Just like your Joshua."

Floyd moved them to the fence and they slid to the ground, backs against the fence posts. "It was after boot camp, when they were home before shipping out. They both left their tags in Josh's top drawer, in an envelope marked 'Just in case.' My folks never went in Joshua's room after they got the news. I never looked in there 'til I sold the old place after my divorce and cleaned it out." He stopped for a moment and looked at the woman he was holding.

Ollie moved closer to him and opened her hand, glancing at the gift. “Go on,” she whispered.

“Like I said, I was cleaning our Joshua’s room, opened the top bureau drawer, and there was the envelope. I opened it and inside was the tags. I expect they knew their chances of coming home were slim to none. I feel certain they got new ones before shipping out, but wanted all of us to have something of them if they ever got caught and...” His voice became ragged.

Ollie lifted her head and read suffering on his face; furrowed brows, watery eyes. She poked at the ground with her shoe and, in a voice just above a whisper, said, “Our Ben hadn’t even turned twenty-two yet.” She became still for a moment, finding comfort in the nearness of him.

“It was a sad sight, seeing my mama sitting in the kitchen, looking out the window, up toward the hill like she was expecting a ghost, some image of her lost boy. It was a blessing when she passed last year.”

“You’ve been so strong, Ollie, holding all this inside. Ain’t many women who could do what you’ve done.” He gently hugged her. “Now our boys are home. Everybody’s safe.”

As the light of day began to fade, it was Floyd who made the first move. He reached for Ollie's hand. "I believe we should be heading for the house. No need in us sitting up here like bear food."

Ollie grasped it, the hand of a man she'd earlier thought about shooting. *What now? How can I hold on to this? Think, Ollie.* "You're right, Floyd Jenkins. We've stayed here too long already."

"Mind if we hold hands going down the path? I'm not as familiar with it as you are." He added, "I promise I'll be a gentleman."

She smiled. "You've already showed me that, Floyd. Holding hands is a good thing. Besides, there's no need for either of us to break a leg."

The overhang of fully leafed branches turned the road almost pitch-black by the time they reached Ollie's house; a small light glowing through the kitchen window signaled them home.

They still held hands as they stepped up onto the front porch. Ollie could barely make out Floyd's face in the darkness. *Strange the way I feel; afraid and relieved at the same time. Yes, Mama, the Lord does move in mysterious ways.* Ollie inhaled the night air. "Smells good, doesn't it?"

"Smells like perfume to me," Floyd answered.

“Seems we got us a problem here. I don’t believe you can safely find your way down that rutted dirt road. Or have you forgotten how bad it was walking up here?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten a thing. I reckon I’ll be fine. Now, you just go inside and make sure you lock your doors. Don’t want you to have to use that shotgun.”

Bravery washed over her. “If you’re so dang worried about some stranger coming up here, why not stay the night in the back bedroom? Let’s not worry about the gun.”

Floyd still held her hand. “Are you sure? I wouldn’t want the neighbors to talk.”

“Don’t have any neighbors. And besides, I’m sixty-one years old. It’s time someone talked.” She shooed away a moth flitting by her face.

“Then I reckon I’ll take you up on the invite.” He let go of her hand and followed her inside. “I’ll pay you back and fix that squeaky swing tomorrow.”

Ollie didn’t hear anything after “I’ll take you up on the invite.” The sound of her heart pounding in her chest drowned out the rest. “I suppose it won’t be necessary for me to make up your bed, you being a grown man. The sheets are in the bureau’s second drawer. Tomorrow we have a chore to do up on the

mountain, putting Ben to rest.” She looked down at her dusty shoes, then held out her hand—the chain with tag attached, shining. “You’re home, Ben.” Ollie raised her chin and looked Floyd in the face. “I thank you, Floyd, for bringing Ben back to us and for adding joy to my day. It’s been lonely up here.” She held fast to all the other words on her heart for fear he’d leave.

As she turned to go to her room, Floyd reached for her hand. They stood there, not speaking a word until he said, “You forgot your shotgun.”

“I do believe I’m safer than I’ve been in many a year. Good night, Mr. Jenkins.”

Floyd lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Good night, Miss Ollie.”

Nancy Purcell served as a North Carolina Writers Network/Elizabeth Squire Daniels Writer-in-Residence, Peace College, Raleigh, NC, teaches Creative Writing in the Brevard College Community Education program, and Quick Coaches aspiring writers. Studied Creative Writing at the Iowa Summer Program. Seven years as County Representative for the NCWN-Netwest Writers. Presently serves as the Prose Judge for the Board of the Carl Sandburg Home Writer-in-Residence Program, Publications: 26 Short Stories to include: *RiverSedge*, *The MacGuffin*, *Pangolin Papers*, *Troika*, *LongStoryShort*, *The Square Table*, *DiverseVoicesQuarterly*, *The Final Draft* and *RCVRY* among others. Her stories were read on “Writers’ Radio Show” from Chattanooga, TN. and she was awarded 2nd place in the inaugural contest of Creative Writing Corner. A short story “Sisters” was entered for Best New American Crime Writers to Otto Penzler by agent Nat Sobel, 2010.