

THE RED ROAD

by Sophie Berry

Virginia, 1893

The shadow of the hanging corpse stretched along the red ground, and swinging, darkened one by one the faces of the three girls below. It did not seem possible that he had died from the strain of his body pulling down on the rope; he was as light and spindly as a broken insect. He gently moved in the breeze, a dead fly on the end of a web. The girls tilted their heads back to stare at him. The breeze, humid as hot breath, disturbed their straw-like hair.

Mary, her features growing into womanhood, stood behind the other two with her hands lightly touching their backs. At first a flicker of sympathy had passed over her face, but now her brow was smooth and her eyes unreadable. The eyes of Elizabeth at Mary's side were similarly blank, looking without real knowledge of what they saw. But Sarah, not yet ten years old, was set apart from her sisters entirely. It was warm that evening, yet her paling face was cold and bloodless as a rising sensation filled her throat. She did not yet recognise the grip of shame, the icy rope which this time did not wrap around the dead man's neck but her own.

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Although he was tall, he moved as though he were smaller, pulling in his limbs, his head, his shoulders, wary of touching those around him. When he moved, it was quick and clumsy. He would make a quick gesture with a stiff, hesitant arm an instance before changing his mind, then go instead to rub his neck or scratch his cheek. All day he would sit in the sun, bent low, polishing white men's shoes, rubbing continuously with his blackened cloth, until the sun went, and he could no longer see his hands.

When the flow of customers subsided, he sat with his eyes chained to the ground, watching the passing feet. In fleeting moments of the day, he would glimpse two pairs of small pink and blue shoes, shifting the dust and tapping the ground, as high-pitched voices meandered through the hustling street.

Belonging to the shoes were two girls, whose straw-coloured hair hung loosely, failing to be neatened by the ribbons knitted into their braids. Opposing the man, they leaned against the cool side wall of a sweet shop. Here Sarah and Elizabeth would chatter occasionally when it was too hot to play. Sarah's voice was a constant flow of noise entering Elizabeth's ear.

'Ma says he steals from folk,' she said, nodding across the street.

'Really?'

'He's bin picking coins up from the ground, Daddy says all them blacks steal.'

Elizabeth nodded, absently. Sarah saw that she was moving stones on the ground with her foot. She tilted her head to one side and leaned in front of Elizabeth's face.

'What do ye think?'

'Ugh, I dunno,' Elizabeth replied, batting Sarah away. 'I'm going inside now.'

Sarah pouted, drew in the dust with her finger, before settling on the steps to stare at the road. Inside the shop her mother and her oldest sister, Mary, alternated between the shelves and the counter. The mother peered cautiously out, her watchful eye resting on her daughter, small and alone, before casting a hawkish glare across to the man on his pedestal.

Once mellow evening light had bathed the town, turning the road that ran down the middle into a pink river, a young woman approached the man as he packed his polish and his brushes. She was slight and smiley, with ruffled blonde hair. She scanned the street of closed shops before moving towards him and spoke in whispers when close.

'Hullo,' she said. She bent down, peering at his face hidden beneath his cap.

‘Hullo ma’am,’ he replied. He had a solid but lulling voice, one that was strong but used weakly. Once it was released into his surroundings, it subsided and failed to resonate.

The glance given to the street by the young woman had been anxious and neglectful of details. Across the street, an unnoticed, small set of eyes pierced through the shadows of an alleyway. Sarah appeared as a dark form perched alone on the back steps of the sweet shop, sucking a caramel. She watched the woman. Ain’t that Cassie? she thought. Cassie, the cobbler’s daughter. Sarah let her eyes linger on the two figures, both seeming misplaced when interacting with the other. Sarah’s eyes squinted with an interest that stemmed from seeing something unnatural and alien as Cassie leaned against the wall, close to the man whose mouth opened in reply but whose eyes were set upon his shoes. Sarah’s neck protruded forward, listening.

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Too young to work in the shop, Sarah stayed out of the way on the steps, watching the street during the day as she did at night. Her eyes followed Cassie’s blonde head bobbing into shops, turning cautiously when passing the man on his pedestal, who silently conversed with the dust. Only once did he lift his eyes to meet with Cassie’s. Sarah had been near enough to see his head dip in a small nod, the corners of his mouth edging into a faint smile. That same day Cassie dropped a handkerchief by his pedestal. He pretended to ignore it, then pretended to notice it, then picked it up.

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The morning after was cloudless. The air vibrated like the flies which hovered on the scent of sweating skin, such as the skin of the man who polished shoes in the exposed, glaring street. Hidden from the heat in the darkened alley by the sweet shop, Sarah spoke in secretive tones to Elizabeth.

‘Guess what I saw yesterday.’

‘Huh?’

‘An’ a few days before.’

‘What?’

‘Him, he was speakin’ to Cassie.’

‘He was speakin’ to Cassie?’

‘Uh-huh. Do ye know why?’

Elizabeth nonchalantly shrugged in response. At the front of the shop, their mother emerged, dampening her large neck with a wet cloth. She stood on the veranda, huffing. Her daughter's voices echoed in the alleyway.

‘I don’t know why she’d speak to him,’ Sarah muttered, her tongue playing with a horehound in her cheek. Her mind raced with thoughts, yet she was thoughtless of herself. She leaned back on the wall ungracefully, sucking her sweet, smacking and slurping noisily.

‘I mean, he called her over. He was persisting.’ The words came out of her mouth between the slurping. Her mother who stood still and relaxed while listening, narrowed her eyes. She carefully slunk around the shop, until her furrowed brow hovered over her daughter's conversation.

‘But I never did hear him raise his voice, are ye sure?’ asked Elizabeth. She was leaning in close to Sarah now.

‘Uh-huh. An’ now he’s followin’ her, with his eyes, I seen him.’

The frown on their mother’s face deepened.

‘What’s this?’ she asked. Sarah looked up quickly, her eyes large like a Jack Rabbit’s. The presence of this large woman darkened the shadows of the alleyway as she leaned over Sarah.

‘Ma-’

‘What ye talkin’ about?’

‘Nothin’ much. Just – well - I sit on them steps after dinner. I don’t go nowhere, I just sit. And when I was sat there, I saw...’ She stopped and her eyes dropped to the ground, before they flickered to the man across the street. Her mother watched her.

‘Saw who? Who did ye say has been followin’ Cassie?’ she said.

Sarah scratched her cheek with one finger and lifted the other to point.

‘The dark man who shines shoes.’

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Sarah had not known the finger she gingerly lifted towards the man was pointing a wave of damnation in his direction. The anger had grown within her mother - the hardness of her eyes was soon reflected in her father’s, then the neighbours’. The anger caused the men to march and shout, lifting their torches of hell fire to light a path of revenge towards the offender. It was hard for Sarah to change what she had said, to admit, so she stayed quiet. She watched not from the doorstep but from her bedroom window as her father and the other men disappeared towards the darkness surrounding the town. Cassie was not to be seen. The representative of her existence was her father who strode alongside the other men.

Even after seeing their parade out of town Sarah had not foreseen the aftermath of their anger. A pounding she had thought, or a talking to. Not what she saw when tilting her head back to stare at the man dangling from the large, shivering sycamore. Silence which had encased her before continued as she walked away from the corpse on the hill with her sisters, all thoughts unuttered. After creating distance between themselves and the corpse, Mary and Elizabeth’s chatting

began to ebb and flow, like they had only seen a rabbit killed in a snare. Unpleasant, but not worth talking about afterwards.

They passed by the fields on their way to the town. Dry oaks stood dark and twisted along the road, a wide dirt track which, usually soft and brown, looked crimson red in the evening light. Along it the sisters walked, the oak's cooling canopy of leaves protecting them from the sky, the trunks creating a barrier between them and the fields. Sarah looked between the trunks as she walked, staring at the figures dotted among the cotton plants. They were his kind, dark skinned, their backs bent low, leathery, and wrinkled from exposure to the unsparing sun. They moved slowly in the heat, submerging under the tall crops, in the fluid but steady motion of whales, then rising again above the surface. The white cotton heads dotted the sea of crops like foam, rippling in the breeze like water. Often these figures stood up, placing a hand on their lower backs before slowly and at length stretching it out of its curve. The work seemed tranquil, almost soothing to Sarah. She could not see their prickled fingers, of which all smoothness had been gnawed away by the defensive cotton plants. Although the figures were far away, Sarah felt that their eyes travelled with the wind over the crops to where she walked.

Where the black folk lived in wooden cabins, they sat or stood in what Sarah saw as primitive masses. They hid from the burning air in these enclosing trees, the only place they were protected from the heat, protected too from the burning eyes and harsh words of white society. One had found himself away from the shadows and exposed to the light, but he had been delivered back to the trees. Sarah could still see his figure on the hill. She wondered if they yet knew it was him hanging there, a warning to them, a phantom to herself.

Casting her eyes to her feet, Sarah suppressed all thoughts apart from those of the road. It was a smooth road that had never changed, only leading in one direction. She imagined the ghostly figures of her ancestors travelling upon it, sculpting its shape with their footsteps and their carts. In awe of this idea, she was comforted, until it was replaced with the marching figures of the townsmen, orange beneath the light of their burning torches. She turned her gaze from her feet to the fields once again.

The red sunlight that coloured the road was now spreading, seeping across the grass, and dappling the treetops on the hill, to where a reflection of the hatred passed down from her ancestors hung. His body was darkening against the descending sun, an orange glow tracing his outline, his wounds matching the sky. It seemed the woodland around him, the hill beneath him, the fields, the town, the road, were stained red not by the sunlight but by the blood that had flown from these wounds, dripped from his feet, and soaked into the ground.