

Not What Women Do

By Jean Herreman

Soon's I saw that man coming, I should of run the other way, back to the pine grove where old Missus Talley lives. Should of had her put a hex on him with a gnat's whisker and a hen's tooth, but that's not what women do. All the warning signs flash like neon, bright enough to blind a person, and we squint behind our sleeves, as if we can't read them big red letters, the ones that spell T-R-O-U-B-L-E.

Wish I'd paid attention. Then I might of been in school, not getting married—had to, if you want to know. Told my daddy and all he said was, "I'm the kind of man lets my young 'uns make their own mistakes." He said it with a big, fat smirk.

Aggravated me a bunch, that did. Weren't too many chances to wander off the straight and narrow in Milford, Mississippi, and Lord, I was just fifteen. Biggest choice I had to make was should I buy the yellow shirt or the blue tank top? Wear my hair in a ponytail or cut it off to my chin? Get that double-heart tattoo on my shoulder or the rose on my behind? I never did nothing wrong before, not one time, and me with no mama and my daddy didn't give a hoot.

Lucky for me, daddy died of the cancer or I might of been stuck with Jimmy Lee for life. Wouldn't of dared do what I did. Wouldn't of given the mangy old ratfink bastard the satisfaction of seeing I'd made a goddamned *mistake*.

Sometimes even now I dream that Daddy's a Macy's parade balloon, all blown up like Mickey Mouse, hanging high above me, grinning that yellow, gap-toothed grin and slapping his knee sore.

"You made your bed, now lie in it," he cackles, puffing on one of Satan's unfiltered cigarettes. Camels, more'n likely.

My daddy's gone, but not in heaven, and neither's Jimmy Lee.

Jimmy Lee was a twin, had a brother named Jack that looked just like him. Should of been suspicious, should of guessed something wasn't quite right. Only makes sense that one egg split in two gives you two half-men; one gets all the good and the

other all the spite and evil. Least that's the way it was with Jimmy Lee and Jack. Sweet Jack prayed every morning that Jimmy Lee'd wake up and see the light. Said we were Jimmy Lee's family and we should give him the *benefit of the doubt*.

Tried to remember that the day I got home from work and found Jimmy Lee passed out in the rusty blue International pick-up he drove out to the cotton fields when he wanted a nip or two. I'd been tracking the banty hens, wanting eggs for supper, when I seen Jimmy'd pulled the truck inside the barn, where it was cool, and shut the big door. Thought I'd go in and have a smoke, tired as I was from standing on my feet all day at the Wal-Mart, morning sick all afternoon.

Didn't see Jimmy Lee 'til I opened the door and he fell out headfirst—not all the way, cause one foot got twisted up in the gearshift, the on-the-floor kind. Hanging there, his fingertips trailing in the dirt, he looked plumb dead. Acted dead, too. Didn't even wake up when his head cracked the running board and I screamed bloody murder for Jack, not 'til Jack dumped a Coke bottle full of well water right on his head. It was green glass, that bottle; used to take them to Nell's gas station for pennies.

Identical, they were, Jack and Jimmy Lee. People'd say to me, "How'd you tell them two apart, Molly? How'd you know which one to pick?"

"Easy," I'd say. "Wasn't up to me."

Women don't get to pick. Jimmy Lee wanted me and Jack let him have me. That was that.

I don't know why. It's not like they was close like some twins, ones they say know what the other's thinking. When Jack came home, after he'd been away near a year, up in Memphis loading trucks, Jimmy Lee started growing a beard. See, Jack had a beard when he left and Jimmy Lee thought he'd pull a joke on him, since Jack hated the look-alike part of being twins.

But Jack showed up smooth. Shaved his beard off, night before, he said, though he pretended he done it to look like Jimmy Lee.

I can't say where Jimmy Lee got twisted around, but I'd guess it was his mama. from someplace way up north in Canada. Had a college degree, don't you know. Except far as I could see, all she learned was airs. Claimed it didn't matter she never used that

fancy learning to be a nurse or a teacher or some such a thing, cause it made her a *better wife and mother*. Looked down her skinny nose at me when she said it, too.

Should of asked her husband what kind of wife she was. A more pickle-faced man than Jimmy Lee's daddy never drew breath, meek as mud, muttering, "Yes, dear heart. Right away." She wrapped him round her little finger so tight he squealed and I swear that man still thought he was boss.

Jimmy Lee wanted me to name our baby girl Jolene after that witch-woman and I threw a righteous fit.

"Good name for a mule," I said. "Better yet, a snake."

No way was my girl-child growing up to be a weaselly, twitchy prude like that awful woman, may she rest in peace. I named my baby daughter Melissa Lynn.

We were going to Smokey's for barbeque the night it all went bad. I put the baby's things in her blue bag with the yellow ducks and I wrapped her tight in the fuzzy pink blanket. See, the truck heater went out last winter and Jimmy Lee drunk up the fixing-it money Jack gave him. That's what made Jack say what he did, why Jimmy Lee got mad and went for the thirty-ought-six he killed that eight-point buck with four years ago, when he was going on fourteen.

Jack said Jimmy Lee was a daddy now and he'd better grow up. "You treat them right," Jack said. "For Mama." Jack was standing on the porch, not twenty yards away from the truck.

I was watching out the windshield when, quick as lightning, Jimmy Lee reached through the open door and grabbed his gun from the rack. Near knocked off my head, he did. Then he looked Jack square in the eyes and he said, "Mama always loved you best."

I thought he was fooling when he aimed that gun at Jack, but he pulled the trigger and shot Jack in the forehead, right where that lock of Jack's hair curled, over his left eye. Swear I saw the bullet hole before I heard the shot.

Jack look surprised and then he dropped to his knees and toppled over like a puppet when you let go of the strings. For a second, I couldn't think what to do, except get the hell out of there. I slid over where the keys dangled from the ignition and laid Lissy Lynn on the seat. I started up the truck and let the clutch out and I stomped the gas, hard. Jimmy Lee couldn't do nothing except fire one shot.

Soon's I shifted all the gears, I put out my hand to push Lissy back against the seat. That's when I felt the wet. Knew before I looked that it was blood. Bullet must of come through the top of the door, next to the mirror, where it was rusted thin as tin foil. Hit the baby instead of me.

Took my foot off the gas then. Didn't seem much point running away.

Jimmy Lee skidded up, cursing like a son-of-a-bitch. Stuck his finger through the bullet hole in the door and stared at me, all wide-eyed, wondering how I was still sitting up. His eyes moved away from mine real slow-like and stopped on that pink blanket, now wet-blood red.

He watched me open the glove box where he kept his Buck knife, saw me grab it out and snap it open. Even stepped aside, so I could open the truck door and get on down. He never saw it coming, not 'til the blade was buried in his chest, under his rib, right where Daddy told me to aim if anybody messed with me. The one useful thing that old man taught me.

Jimmy Lee always was dumb as a post, even sober, but he sure was pretty. Should of known soon as I saw him. Should of run the other way.

But that's not what women do.

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