

Sometimes It Looked Like a Heart

By John A.M. Ferguson Jr.

It's not like I didn't deserve my felony. I surely did and surely paid my time. But now I was out and waking up to all the things that had been kept away from me. Which is how I ended up trudging up the stairs to my lawyer's office. I couldn't let things get away from me.

My footsteps felt heavier with each riser on the staircase. I hadn't been in this building since before my plea 38 months ago when my lawyer, James T. Innes III, sat me down in his office and reviewed the terms of my plea bargain. He also provided a bill for his services—a bill I had made only a token effort to pay.

The main entry door was open and, as always, at the front desk sat Ms. Shonda, a prunish woman who tended to judge with her eyes. She looked up and squinted at me, as if that would help her remember my name.

“It's David Lee Crooks for Mr. Innes if he's in, Miss Shonda,” I said, adding, “I seen his car outside and wanted just a minute or so of his time.”

“Yes, I remember you, Mr. Crooks,” she said, rising from her desk. “Mr. Innes happens to be in at the moment. I will check for you.”

She spoke in a clipped tone and I thought that maybe she had taught second grade somewhere. She knocked lightly on his closed door, then went inside where I could hear her announce my presence. The door flew open and out came Mr. Innes, never breaking stride as he extended his hand.

“Ah yes, David Lee Crooks, the prodigal parolee returns,” he said, tossing his mane of white hair. “C'mon in here, m'boy, and catch me up.”

Maybe they taught that in lawyer school, but Mr. Innes had this way of treating me like I was some kind of an old friend. He motioned me to a chair in his office and shut the door behind us. He sat back in his leather chair and threw his feet up on his big desk like we had been talking all day. He asked about my momma. I told him about my parole conditions and my parole officer. I renewed my promise to get my GED. And I meant it this time.

“Mr. Innes, the big reason I’m here is ‘cause I gotta find a job and there just ain’t nothing out there,” I said. He nodded and smiled sadly as if he somehow knew what it was like. “What’s more, I know I shorted you. You got me a good deal and I know I still owe you \$800.”

“You can’t give me what you don’t have.” He looked away and then back to me.

“I promise, Mr. Innes. Soon as I find something, I’ll send you a hundred bucks a month.”

“David Lee, I think I can help both of us,” he said, and he tossed a large manila envelope on the desk. “That right there is papers I have to serve on the Lewistons. I tried mailing it and they wouldn’t sign for it. And my usual guy won’t go out there—says it’s too damn dangerous.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. The Lewistons lived in the Hitch, a lowland part of the county filled with junk cars and battered mobile homes that was home to a community of social outlaws who flat out hated authority of any kind. They sewed eagles on to their flags and flew them in the rain. They grew their own supplies. I knew every one of them.

“Just this afternoon, I was sitting here wondering how I was going to pull this off and then you come walking in.” He was leaning over the desk toward me, really selling the deal. “I know you know the area. Heck, son, doesn’t your momma still live around there? Deliver this envelope for me and I’ll take a hundred off your bill. What do you say?”

“Oh, man. Thank you, Mr. Innes.” I felt myself shake. “I know exactly where they live. And you’re right, my momma is staying just down the road.” I stood up, took the envelope from him and looked at the address. “But I can’t be around anyone with a felony.”

Mr. Innes clapped me on the shoulder. “Yeah, but as far as I know, no one living at the house right now has a felony. Your friend Jacob is still inside and his old man died last year.”

I nodded. We rose and I watched him put on his jacket.

“How was it?” he asked. “You were at Kinross, right?”

“Tell you what, I’d rather be there than county,” I said quickly as we walked down the stairs.

“You aren’t the first person to tell me that.” He chuckled at some private joke. Then he said, “You look good. You know what you look like? You look like you haven’t been drinking. Seriously, your eyes and skin look better.”

“Thanks,” I looked at the ground, but I smiled. Outside in the parking lot, I looked up at the sky. “I spent a lot of time looking at clouds in prison. They look better out here.”

“That one looks like a duck,” he said, tossing his briefcase in the backseat of his car.

“That one looks like a heart,” I said. We shook hands and I turned to my truck.

My mom had a fresh pie ready for me when I hit the door to her trailer. The smell embraced me and I wilted into a chair at her table. It was just her and me and she was so happy to have me back. She had gone through all of her flour and sugar baking in the three days I was home. My release paper was stuck to her fridge.

“I saw Innes,” I said.

“Good. He was good to you and to me, helping me out with the lease,” my mom said, like I needed reminding about the bill.

“Yes, I know. I am going to call Brabs and see if I can get work with him. I promised Innes a hundred a month.”

“Well, can’t get more fair than that.”

I stood up and went to my room.

“Where you goin’?” She was surprised.

“Change. Innes asked me to serve papers on Lewistons. Gonna take a hundred off.”

I came out wearing a clean t-shirt and put on my jean jacket. “I’m gonna go over to Lewistons. Get it done. I’ll be back soon.” I kissed my mom’s forehead and jumped off her deck to the ground. She said something I couldn’t really hear as I pulled away, so I waved and nodded to show her I understood.

There was no one on the road. It seemed the buds on the trees had become leaves in the few hours since morning. Everything on earth looked green. The sun warmed the cabin of my truck. The cloud that looked like a heart was now in front of me all the way up the road. The trip lasted all of 10 minutes, but I lived a lifetime of joy on that drive.

I turned into the compound where I knew the Lewistons made their home. Jeff Mulka was the guy that owned the acreage and he let four or maybe five families live in six old trailers on the property near to the road. Mulka let his dogs run free and somehow they knew to leave the six trailers alone. The trailers were not arranged in a special way, as if they were toys left behind by a child. There were clothes on a line, beat-up pickup trucks, a new motorcycle, and a couple of rusted-out grills. The trees provided such shade that there was still a small pile of snow from where the plows had dumped it. A plastic sled lay beside it. I saw one of Mulka’s dogs, but he trotted off aimlessly.

The Lewiston’s trailer had two cars in front. I didn’t recognize the red sedan, but that old blue pickup was a welcome sight. I switched my truck off and walked up to the door. The trailer was white with a green stripe along the side. The door had streaks of rust where the metal was slowly dying. I slowed my pace to hear inside. The TV was on. I knocked and Jenna Lewiston opened the door. When she saw me, she tightened her mouth. She didn’t reach for the storm door handle.

“Hi. Wow, Jenna. Hi.”

I smiled at her in disbelief. She was rail thin with braces when she was trying to keep up with Jacob and me three years ago. She looked like a fully grown woman now. She wore her hair longer and she wore makeup. Her hips bulged off of her light frame. She crossed her arms and I realized I had been staring at her breasts.

“What do you want?” She seemed to look right through me.

I held up the package. “I have something for your mom. Is Sally Jean here?”

“We don’t want nothing from you.” Her chest heaved and she started to cry. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I know I’m not welcome right now. I didn’t really know whether you would be here ...”

She cut me off and stared at me.

“Bull! Where else am I gonna go?”

She was right; that was bull. I was hoping I would see her. Four years her elder, she and I were starting something good out of a crush she had on me, her brother’s friend. She was easy to fight off when she was 15 but harder and harder over the next two years. She had kept on growing. I had kept on stealing. I started to explain myself, but she knew I had been in prison. She knew where I was. She didn’t write to me and I tried to be angry about that. Funny thing is, I couldn’t. And I didn’t know what to say or do.

“OK, I wanna make things right,” I started.

She shook her head. Her arms stayed crossed, protecting her from me. I was dumbstruck by her posture. I wanted to talk to her, just her. The way she looked at me took that away. I remembered why I was really there.

“Just take this.” I held out the package. “It’s for your mom and it’s not from me.”

“Then how did you get it?”

“My lawyer gave it to me to give you and your momma.”

“I think you better leave,” she said. She half turned to look at the small child walking up to her plaintively. The child was rubbing its eyes and carrying a yellow sippy cup. I tilted my head to look at the child, not really hearing Jenna’s protests about it.

“Is that ... I mean, is she?” I asked, pointing at the little girl who had my curly hair. I flashed back to the last night I saw her and remembered how she held me. I snapped back to the moment when I saw a long hairy arm scoop the little girl up and away from Jenna. It was Jacob. Then it hit me. My mom was saying that Jacob had been released. He set the girl down and shoved Jenna aside.

“Jenna’s telling you to go. Go.” He balled his hands into fists.

I nodded. “I didn’t know you were out. I was told you were still in.”

“Yeah?”

“Jacob, look, you take this and you let me see my girl and you stay out of it. We can deal later.” It’s not that I didn’t want to see Jacob or talk to him. It’s that I wanted to do it somewhere not in the Hitch.

But Jacob was yelling at me, swearing and cursing about the deal he knows I got and how I got it. As if I turned him in, but the sheriff’s deputy had him already. He went on about how he was gonna kick my ass. Jenna was yelling at him, too. Something about fighting or being with me or maybe both. My ears were burning red and I was just yelling at him to shut up. I couldn’t really make out what he was saying about knocking up his kid sister. But when he called my daughter a bastard, I ripped open the storm door.

Jacob is taller than me by a good five inches. I grabbed his shirt and drove my forehead into his teeth. He pushed back and came up with a knee into my gut. I lost my balance and he bull rushed me out the door and off the deck. I fell to the dirt butt first. Mulka’s dog came around, snarling and growling at me. I focused on the dog and tried to get to my feet. But Jacob jumped

down, too, and kicked my head. I saw a flash of light and then stars on the backs of my eyelids. The dog bit deep into my arm. I know I cried out. The bite cleared my head enough to get me to sit up. Jacob had turned around to grab something heavy and metal. I scrambled to my feet, carrying the dog with me. I staggered to my truck and the dog let go. Jacob smashed a tail light as I pulled away.

Back on the road, I was trying to drive with one hand. I cradled my arm against my side and leaned on the door for support—anything to sit up in the seat. I could taste something metallic in my mouth and I realized I was bleeding. Bad. My clean t-shirt was red with my own blood. So were my jeans. Dark red blood was running down my arm to my hand and on to my lap. I jerked the wheel to pull my truck back into my lane. I came off the gas a little. The outer edges of my vision were black. I cursed Jacob but not the dog. I felt no bitter taste as I assured myself that I had dropped the package inside the trailer. Whether Jacob liked it or not, I could tell Innes I served it. Now if I could just get back to my momma's.

The cloud that had cheered me on my earlier trip had moved across the sky. It was in front of me again. It looked torn, pulled apart by time. The full weight of my crime fell on me again. I had lost more than three years. I had lost my love and the whole of my child's lifetime. And the sadness I felt for myself at the loss of time far outweighed any sadness I felt for my wounds. I couldn't see out of my left eye. I realized I was drifting out of my lane so I jerked the wheel again. And I had to squint to see the cloud. Sometimes it looked like a heart, but it wasn't a heart. At that moment, I realized what made me saddest was that I didn't even get her name.