

JIMTOWN ROAD

Freak Of Nature Brings Fear To Many Hearts Last Sunday
“...and fear, in more or less degree, descended
on the populace.”

— *Jeffersonian Democrat*, September 28, 1950

Curly Smathers was not a little man, but the closer he got to home, the old farmstead carved into the forest north of Hartsgrove, Pennsylvania, the smaller he became. It was a week to the day after Black Sunday. Above his head, across the sky, a skein of geese pointed him homeward like an ancient arrow, Smathers following in an old Ford pickup, clattering over the rock-hard dirt of Jimtown Road.

Just ahead, where the road crested the hill, two girls turned to stare at the truck crawling toward them, pails a-droop from the clutch of their fists. The hilltop meadow, gold in the afternoon sun, commanded a sweeping view of the colorful crowns of the surrounding hills, where the woods blazed red and orange. At the crest, the two girls stood on the horizon, surrounded by blue sky, anchored by golden ground, halfway between heaven and earth, almost afloat. Smathers shivered at the grace of the vision. A squeal escaped the brakes as he pulled to a stop beside them, watching their stares go wide, their mouths fall

open. Neither had ever seen a head so bald on a man so young, with eyes so bright and gay.

"Afternoon, ladies," said Smathers, flashing his jagged jack o' lantern smile. The older girl closed her mouth and nodded, the younger still showing the absence of her two front teeth. "Where you off to?"

"We're going berrying, mister," the taller girl said.

"Where bouts?"

"Grandpa says there's a big patch just over yonder by the edge of the woods."

"Oh," Smathers said. "Them's just blackberries—me, I'd sooner eat a nice fat bumbleberry any day."

"*Bumbleberry?*" said the younger girl.

"*Umm umm.* Puts me in mind of sugar candy."

"Mister," the older girl said, "there ain't no such a thing as a bumbleberry."

"Why, there sure is," Smathers said. "Lady by the name of Carrie May—she was my stepmama—she showed me a patch of 'em one day when I was just about your age."

"What do they look like?"

"Bluer'n a blueberry—rasbier than a raspberry. Some of 'em's bigger'n your nose." The little girl's eyes widened again. The older's were full of doubt. "Who's your granddaddy?" Smathers asked.

"Perry McCracken," said the older girl.

"Heck, I know old Perry," Smathers said. "That's his place just down the road there a piece." The little girl nodded. "Why, I went to school with his boy Luke."

"That's my *pa!*" the little girl lisped.

"Sure, me and Luke goes way back," Smathers said. "What's your names?"

"I'm Mary Lou," the older one said, "and this here's my sister Katie."

"Nice to meet you, ladies."

“What happened to all your hair, mister?” Katie asked.

“Katie!” said Mary Lou.

Smathers laughed. “My papa calls me *Curly*.”

“I’m sorry, mister,” Mary Lou said, blushing for her sister. “Katie don’t know her manners yet.”

“Well, you ladies take care now. I believe I’m gonna go pick me some bumbleberries.”

“I want to pick *me* some bumbleberries,” Katie said.

“No!” said Mary Lou. Then, to Smathers, “We’re gonna pick blackberries. Our Grandma’s gonna bake us up a pie.”

“Just as well,” said Smathers. “It’s a secret patch anyways. Carrie May made me cross my heart and hope to die I wouldn’t ever show it to nobody else.”

“He’s just teasing you, Katie,” Mary Lou said.

Smathers craned his neck to look up at the sky, an expanse so blue and clean he could not imagine it holding darkness. “Sure hope it stays light enough to pick ’em, though—heard tell it got mighty dark up hereabouts last Sunday.”

“It was like nighttime in the middle of the day!” Mary Lou said.

Smathers nodded. “Musta been a little scary.”

“Abner got scared!” Katie said. “He started in yipping and howling!”

“All the birds commenced their evening songs!” Mary Lou said.

“Pa thought the Russians dropped an automatic bomb!” Katie said.

“Atomic bomb,” Mary Lou said. “Grandma got scared too—she figured it was Judgment Day coming.”

“That’s what that piece in the paper said,” said Smathers. “I was setting in this here little diner in Paducah, Kentucky, last week when I seen this piece somebody was reading in the newspaper—said, *they thought the world was coming to an end*. Somebody’d drew a picture next to it, of where

it got dark—looked like this long, black finger pointing me right back thisaway, right back toward home.”

Smathers lit up his jagged jack o’ lantern smile, and it grew. The sweet nostalgia of his homecoming filled him to the brim, and kept on filling, overflowing, spilling from his eyes. He was no longer small. How he grew, along with his smile. And still the filling went on. It was a moment so rare and euphoric that he’d experienced no other like it in his thirty years on earth; only once or twice had he come close. The whole sky filled him, all its vast and immaculate expanses, and he understood in some way beyond the reach of his knowledge the oneness of the universe and all that was in it, from the giddy heights of heaven to the two bewildered little girls standing before him.

At the bottom of the hollow, just past the plank bridge where the brook was the color of rust, Smathers Road forked off Jimtown Road, heading up the hill through the deep, cool shadows of the forest. On either side were banks knee-deep in lush fernery. At the top of the ridge, the road followed cleared pastures—Smathers wondered who farmed them now—to more woods, even thicker. These were the woods he knew, where he’d trekked for hours, gun in hand, bloody meat in his poke; these woods were virgin timber, dark and hilly, scattered with boulders like the marbles of God. They extended forever northward, becoming the great Allegheny Forest. Two miles up Smathers Road, the woods on the left thinned, then ended—more or less—where the first of the *No Trespassing* signs appeared, at the beginning of the old Smathers farm, eighty acres over four fields, now being reclaimed by the forest: young saplings and evergreens, thick undergrowth, a tide of browning ragweed speckled with Queen Anne’s Lace. Up the easy slope, the road dead-ended at the farm.

At the sight of it, the memory of Carrie May stirred in his mind like a flower in the morning sun; the memory of the old man quickly followed, and his stomach rolled. He stopped the pickup where the road ended and the crabgrass commenced, near the burnt-out ruin of the barn. He was small again, incredibly small, the vast universe shrunk to this old farm house, boards weathered raw, tin roof curling to rust. He stepped from the truck, running a hand over his gleaming scalp, taking in the dereliction of the place: A few apple trees in the remnants of the orchard, and an unkempt garden near the house—scraggly corn stalks, tomato plants—were all that remained of the fertile acres, while the ragweed pasture beyond the charred relic of the barn hadn't been grazed upon in years. A scattering of scrawny chickens strutted and pecked. By the tilting outbuildings, a scramble of roses gone wild: Carrie May's roses. The surrounding woods inched closer and closer, a pack of wolves circling in for the kill.

He remembered going into the hen house the first time alone as a youngster to fetch the eggs; when the rooster had squawked up a ruckus and come straight for his face, he'd panicked and run, his heart slapping like the wings of the bird. Carrie May had marched him right back in again to face him down, insisting he be meaner than the bird. He'd left home, maybe ten years later, a couple of years after Carrie May was gone. It occurred to him that maybe he hadn't been leaving for the reason he told himself—to find Carrie May's aunt—maybe he'd been running away again. He felt his pulse reaching out to the tips of his fingers.

The old man stood on the porch, leaning into his stare. "I'd recognize that head o' hair anywheres!"

"Papa," Smathers answered, heading toward him. The old man came down the steps. A puppy scrambled down beside him, a brown, knee-high, yipping bundle of energy.

The old man sized him up. Big Vern was still bigger than his boy, who'd been Little Vern before he became Curly. The old man's cheeks were sunken, as were his eyes, frosty as his boy's were warm. His mustache might have dripped like dirty icicles from the ragged white thatch of his hair. Smathers was oddly comforted by the sight of his papa's shotgun, Old Aimee, still dangling from the crook of his hand.

"Your face looks familiar," the old man said, "but your feet has grown out of my knowledge." Then, to the puppy, still yipping, leaping like a trout around Smathers, "Bonehead, shut the hell up."

"Jesus!" Smathers said. "He's pissing on me!"

The old man nodded. "Happy to see you. We don't get much company."

"This here's a brand new suit."

The old man nodded again. Then he kicked the puppy hard, and the puppy yelped away across the yard. Smathers's ribs throbbed at the sight, old bruises rolling over. "Mighty fancy suit of clothes," said the old man, in his lusterless overalls.

Smathers shook his dampened leg. Neither man moved close to the other. "He your guard dog, is he?"

"Bonehead," the old man muttered. "So you're alive?"

"Alive and kicking," said Smathers. The old man spat in the dirt and turned back toward the porch. Smathers said, "Damn dog's happier to see me than you are."

The old man turned. His mustache rustled, hinting smile. "Hell, c'mon up. I'll be pleased to piss on your leg for you."

Smathers had to grin as he started toward the porch. Because he glanced down for the first step he never saw the old man's backhand coming, a wallop so hard it knocked him backwards, where he sprawled in the rubble of the yard.

The old man stood on the top step. “That’s for running off. And never letting a body know whether you was dead or alive.”

“Damn, papa,” said Smathers, rubbing where the gnarled knuckle had torn his cheek. He felt like giggling, so giddy was he in relief and delight. “You made me rip the ass right out of my pants.”

The old man nodded again, and Smathers thought he saw an actual smile this time. He was happy to see him. “Them fancy suits of clothes don’t wear too good up here in the country,” the old man said.

Smathers had worked up an appetite and his mouth was watering for fresh meat, not for the venison jerky and tinned beans begrudgingly offered by his papa. He set off with his old hunting rifle, a Marlin 30.06, down the easy slope of the wasted pasture, parallel to the road. He remembered sliding wild across the snow crust of this same field with Carrie May—he couldn’t have been more than four—wedged between her knees in a cardboard box, her shrieks of delight as they tipped near the tree line and rolled laughing in a spray of snow. Carrie May was a splash of color on a gray slab of memory.

She’d been Carrie May Wonderling until, orphaned by a car crash on Sugar Hill, she’d married Vernon Smathers, recently widowed when his wife bled to death giving birth to Little Vern. Carrie May’s age, halfway between that of Smathers and his father, made her an odd hybrid of sister and mother, daughter and wife. She was a small woman with large, capable hands, and a wide face full of eyes. When her eyes went big—in curiosity, concern, wonder, delight or any of a hundred other emotions that caused them to widen with every other blink—bright green irises floated free in pools of white.

When Smathers was ten, Carrie May's aunt brought her to Paducah to see Aimee Semple McPherson and her Foursquare Gospel Evangelical Revival. Carrie May came home converted. Her eyes were never bigger as she described the experience to her Little Vern—the glory and the joy—how she actually felt the Lord entering her body and taking her soul in His warm, loving arms. Then she set about, as Smathers later suspected her aunt had intended, the conversion of the old man and the boy.

The boy was an easy mark. Having lived all his life at the mercy of the moods and whims of an almighty father, the leap from papa-fearing to God-fearing was not all that great. He never knew when the wrath of the father might be visited upon him, when the cruel blows might rain down again—for a chore poorly done, for the look on his face, or for nothing but *being* in the middle of his sleep like a nightmare when the moonshine fumes hung heavy on the air. So he prayed with Carrie May because it pleased her, though he never knew for certain what became of the words once they left his lips, and nothing ever entered his body, that he could feel.

The conversion of Big Vern was less successful. From the first day Carrie May suggested he set aside his jug, the friction mounted. Little Vern sensed it for the most part, too young to see this cause or that effect, except for one: how much harder the old man now hit her. He'd never suspected him of pulling his punches before, when Carrie May, often as drunk as him, fought back, feisty and fearless, until afterwards, when she began turning the other cheek.

Then Carrie May was gone, simply swallowed up by the forest. Little Vern was thirteen, coming into manhood, and his papa thrashed him more viciously than ever, beating him for two, out of loneliness and rage, beating him for challenging his manhood by the mere claiming of his own,

for pushing him headlong toward the grave. And almost overnight, not long after Carrie May was gone, Little Vern's hair fell out. Within a week, he was bald as Old Aimee's butt, and the wrath of the father was forever altered; it intensified, while becoming less physical. Having lost respect for him, he beat his boy less, cursed and derided him more, sneeringly calling him *Curly*, despising him for his perversion of the natural way of things, for his weakness, his softness and smoothness, for his seeming reversion to infancy—for challenging his manhood by the abandonment of his own.

Now Smathers was back, brought home by the long, black finger of God, to face down his demons. After her conversion, Carrie May told him she faced down her demons every day. She confessed to all her sins, past and present: drunkenness, waste, lust, wantonness—the latter two Little Vern had never suspected.

He remembered her chattering as she fried potatoes for breakfast in an iron skillet, his papa at the plain board table contemplating his cup and his jug, his overalls stinking of silage and muck. He remembered a prosperous farm, a hired hand, the legend of his great-grandpa Smathers clearing the land with an ax, a farm house trim and fresh. But his visions of the past and present farms were unconnected. They existed in separate times and worlds.

Smathers thanked God from whom all blessings flow as he spotted a doe and two fawns through the trees, grazing on the forest floor, tails working in nervous blinks. He crept into range, distracted by the breeze on his backside. Sighting down the barrel of his Marlin, the raw flesh of his wounded cheek was tender on the gunstock. Smathers squeezed the trigger, the doe dropping in a heap amid a shower of golden leaves before the report had finished echoing through the trees and off the boulders. He gutted her where she lay, then dragged her back through the woods. Emerging from

the trees, the sun low in his face made it impossible to see beyond the moment, so he remembered Carrie May, unaware of the long shadow stretching out behind him, connecting him to the tree line, to the mountains beyond, to the very dawn of time.

They cooked venison steaks and roasting ears on an open fire Smathers built at twilight near the ruins of the barn. The old man butchered the doe, Smathers watching how he relished the wielding of the knife. After Smathers had rigged a spit to roast the meat and tucked the ears of corn into the red hot coals of the fire, he and his papa munched on soft tomatoes and stunted apples. It had been a hungry day's work. The old man never offered to share the jug from which he took his frequent pulls, so Smathers fetched himself water from the spring. Bonehead lay quiet and drooling, transfixed by the smell of the sizzling meat. After they'd eaten, Smathers foraged for dead wood to feed the fire as darkness spread over the farm, and they listened to the forest and fields come alive with the noises of the night.

"Where was you at last Sunday?" the old man asked.

"Illinois," Smathers said, "eating beans."

"Git dark up there? In the daytime, I mean?"

"Nope."

"Got blacker'n the inside of a grizzly here, middle of the day. I ain't lying. Got all dark and cold, but it wasn't no dark like night and it wasn't no cold like winter. Some kind of a sign, I figured—wasn't no good sign neither. I figured the Lord was fixing to call me on home. Why, I said hallelujah."

"Read where some folks believed it was World War III commencing," said Smathers.

The old man spat into the fire where it hissed. "Chickens all went to roost. Middle of the goddamn day. Old

Bonehead, he lays up there on the porch shivering in the corner like a coward. Quiet, too. Like a grave. I figured it was Doomsday come. I was listening for the trumpets.”

“Hallelujah, papa.”

“Chester Craven down at the store told me what it was was smoke. Forest fires up there in Canada. Wasn’t true. You couldn’t smell no smoke. I can smell a fire a mile away, and there wasn’t a goddamn whiff of smoke.”

Clear on the air came the sound of baying hounds, from the far ridge, miles off, carried close and loud by the echo over the hollow. Below, fog had begun to float from the ragweed, low puddles of cloud forming down the pasture. Hearing the hounds, Bonehead looked up from the bone he was gnawing and began to howl.

“Newspaper said it was fires too, papa. Must of been too high up to smell it.”

“That wasn’t no smoke, you little piss ant, you wasn’t even here. What it was was a sign. Wasn’t no good sign neither.”

Smathers said nothing. Bonehead howled.

“Put me in mind of a bruise,” the old man said. “First it gets all yellow, sickly yellow, then it goes to purple before it gets black. Like the worst shiner you ever seen in your life.”

“You oughta be a expert on shiners.”

“Wasn’t just the sky, mind you. It was all around you. Almost like it was coming up out of the ground. Like you was setting here in the middle of a goddamn bruise.”

“Like maybe the Lord give the whole world a licking?”

The old man stood to piss. Smathers saw a shooting star over his shoulder give a dazzling counterpoint to the puny, sputtering stream in the firelight. “Then you turn up.”

“Lord works in mysterious ways,” Smathers said. “Carrie May was always saying that.”

“Bonehead, shut the hell up,” the old man said to the howling puppy. But Bonehead howled on, at the far sound

of the baying hounds across the hollow. “Half expected her. Figured maybe that’s what the sign was for.”

“She’ll maybe turn up yet.”

The old man took a pull from his jug. “She’ll turn up all right. Come Doomsday, she’ll turn up.”

“And the earth shall pour forth its dead. Ain’t that in the Bible? Something like that?”

“You’d have to ask Carrie May.”

“Maybe she just up and run off. Like I done.”

“She never would of left less she was dead. She needed me to beat the devil out of her. You might not of thought so, boy, but we got along pretty good. Even cats and dogs get pretty sweet on one another once they been laying down together a while. We kept one another in line. She was a mean little jigger, she was.”

“So how’d she get dead, papa?”

Bonehead never knew what hit him. The old man caught him in mid-howl with the butt of Old Aimee, and he ran yelping into the darkness toward the house. “Goddamn puppies, never know when to shut the hell up,” the old man said. “For a long time I blamed you.”

“Blamed *me*?” Smathers ran his hand over his smooth scalp.

The old man nodded, and drank from the jug again. “I figure she got herself mauled by a bear up in the woods. Musta been a sick bear, maybe hurt. Then for a while I was thinking, if you’d of been with her like you usually was, like you should of been, that bear never would of took the both of you. But then the more thought I give it, I figured you’re such a little piss ant anyways, he probably would of. Took the both of you.”

“So you forgive me then? I thank you kindly.”

They tried to pin it on him, the old man told him indignantly. He told him about the sheriff and his court

papers and his bulldozer digging up half the farm, and Carrie May's kin—the Wonderlings from over in Dagus Mines—trying to burn him out, and the retaliations by Old Aimee and himself.

Smathers heard the baying of the hounds across the hollow growing louder. God works in mysterious ways. The old man's suspicions were contagious. The blackness *might* have been a sign; after all, hadn't it pointed him homeward?

“What brung you back?”

Smathers shrugged. “Ain't had nobody to call papa in a long time.”

The old man spat. “So you done a little time, did you?”

Smathers was impressed by his papa's perception. “Done a little.”

“What for? Spitting on the goddamn sidewalk?”

“For sticking a city slicker.”

“What'd you stick him with? A hat pin?” The old man tried to chuckle, a cracked sound, the joy all withered out of it.

The sound of the baying hounds across the hollow grew louder still. It was too loud to ignore, but Smathers said nothing about it, and neither did his papa.

The old man stood with Old Aimee and a wobble, then bent unsteadily to retrieve his jug. He started toward the house. “When you leave, leave quiet. Me and Bonehead needs our beauty rest.”

“So that's my homecoming, is it, papa?”

The old man turned and swayed. “Ain't your home no more, boy.”

The fire popped and hissed, sending red embers dying toward the stars that speckled the black of the sky. Smathers made no connection between the dying embers and the old man, nor between the embers and the stars. He could

only wonder at how so many points of light could try and fail to illuminate the night.

The hounds yowled on, an incessant mantra. From the porch, Bonehead soon took up the chorus, realizing the old man was safely inside.

Smathers lay on his back, awed by the first skyful of stars he'd seen in twelve and a half years. He drifted here and there on the pain and glory of the howling and the baying. Vividly in his mind, as much rumination as dream, Carrie May became Aimee Semple McPherson in a towering pulpit, arms outstretched like the wings of an angel, dazzling white robes flowing down like honey from heaven. Beneath the robes she was naked as the day she came into the world—naked as the day she departed. Naked as the woman he'd watched skinny-dipping in the moonlight. Her eyes of round delights shot lightning from above as the congregation cowered in awe, and trumpets sounded. She warned of damnation, fire, brimstone. Black smoke rose up all around her. She promised salvation, streets of heaven lined with gold. With the laying on of her hands, she could heal the sick, the infirm, the insane.

Could she also raise the dead?

Smathers had killed his mother claiming his own life. That knowledge had always fortified him, leaving him impervious to pain. From the porch, Bonehead's howl was full of terror, terror at the message of the hounds, terror at the smell of the smoke, terror at his utter inability to associate the wrath of the gods with his own howling, yipping, unalterable behavior. Smathers stood by the dwindling fire, stretching. Growing. Dew was beginning to dampen his new suit of clothes, and a half moon had topped the horizon. A few yards away the pickup hulked like a dark creature. Smathers went and lifted the tarp in the bed, like peeling back the night. A righteous chill of goose bumps

swept up his back toward the pure, clean skin of his skull, where the moonlight glinted like a halo.

He walked toward the house, ten feet tall. Picking up a rock from the rubble in the yard, he crushed the puppy's skull. There was already blood from the doe on his pants, so a little more wouldn't much matter.

He wondered if the old man would hear him. He figured not; he figured him to be too deaf to hear thunder by now if he hadn't heard the ruckus of the hounds searching for the McCracken girls across the hollow. The Trumpets of Doomsday would sound, and the old man would miss them as well.

Sure enough, he never stirred as Smathers came into his room, tiptoed over Old Aimee, and sat on the edge of the bare bed where the old man lay shrouded in burlap. Moonlight cast a pale glow. In the shadows at the foot of the bed, Smathers detected the old butter churn, wondering for an instant why it was there before the image came to his mind of Carrie May, sitting churning on the porch, glistening with sweat, smiling, eyes wide and dancing. When his papa opened his eyes, Smathers held the glistening knife in front of his face.

He wondered if the old man could hear. "This here's the bone-handled knife I stuck that city slicker with, papa. Same one." Smathers lit up his jagged jack o' lantern smile, bigger than the night. He wiped the blade of the knife on the burlap. "Dragging that doe up through the woods there kindly put me in mind of Carrie May. Yes sir, papa. They say you always remember your first."

