

S i c k l e M o o n

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My Mother was born OPHELIA ROBERTA BURKE, the seventh child and the seventh girl of many. When I was born, my mother wasn't yet sixteen, young even for those days, and just two fingers over five feet high. By then, my father was unpredictably present. Mother was so lonely for someone to talk to, she comforted herself by talking into my ear, even though I was just a child and as glassy eyed as a doll. The truth is, I believe she thought of me as another one of her many sisters.

In an even dozen there was only one boy, Little Hal my mother called him. This arrangement was all bad according to Grandfather Burke. To his dirt grave, the old man bemoaned the damnable truth that eleven out of twelve of his young were girls. He found even less joy in the fact of his only son. It was as if Hal had never lived at all. To Jake Burke, little Hal was an irony of nature, a pitiful mistake. He said, "The boy's good for whining instead of working."

You see, Hal was the youngest, and it seems like the runt of a large litter, he was disadvantaged physically. While the Burke young inherited their father's moody eyes, they inherited Grandmother Burke's trivial bones. An added insult was the fact that Hal was the baby boy with eleven older sisters, all too eager to coddle. This made poor little Hal sniveling and dependent even for the tiniest things. Mother said he didn't utter a word before the age of five.

When he finally did speak a complete thought, he looked into his father's smoky eyes and asked, "Pa, when will I be getting my doll?"

With eleven older sisters, little Hal thought getting your own doll was a natural right bestowed on everyone eventually.

Grandmother Burke pleaded the boys' case.

She said, "Little Hal is only confused. What boy wouldn't be with so many sisters

dressing him up like a little toy in floppy ribbons and lacey anklets? Be patient with the boy. Let him grow up.”

But Jake Burke was not a patient man. His consternation gave way to fierce contempt. Every twinge, angst or rage with the world was made real each time Jake Burke cast eyes on his last born. It’s as if he punished Hal for the very act of breathing, and dealt his temper with a heavy hand or a leather shave strap. He said, “My aim is to toughen the pink petal hide of that clumsy little sissy.”

My mother and her sisters tried their best to shelter the boy, scouting unlikely hiding places. Jake Burke would find him hidden in the grain box or behind a split in the wall of the barn. Hal would go as limp as a dead kitten as Jake Burke dragged him away, dangling his son by the arm. My mother recalls wailing and screaming as her father let loose his rage on the boy, but the only sound out of little Hal was the clap of his skin each time it met the strap.

Though their father had little use for any of his daughters, something stopped him short from raising hand or belt to the tender hide of any one of them. Little Hal suffered Jake Burke’s wrath for them all.

Some say you have to earn your right to die in this world. It was a bitter mercy that one hard January, a grey flu swept down with the wind and carried little Hal away. After Grandfather Burke covered the last mound of dirt over his son’s wooden box, he staked the spade in the ground and Hal’s name never crossed Jake Burke’s lips again.

“In this land of rocks and thorns, it’s not the meek who survive,” Mother said. Poor little Hal was proof.

Mother Ophelia said as the seventh girl she was all but invisible, just one in a crowd of many. She distinguished herself by a stubborn streak that was as pointed as her tongue. Those in the know took special care not to get Mother riled. That is, if they valued any hope for peace of mind. Lo, that woman could shriek like a peacock. This was compounded by a tendency to nag.

Her father said that was a secret best kept. “Pity the poor man to get that bullhead. He’ll get nothing but fire and spit in his eye.” It was because of her spitfire tongue, that Jake Burke cut Mother a wide girth.

“It’s either squash or be squashed,” my mother told me. ‘No man will ever wipe his boots on me. No two ways about it.” All five feet of her was steel and nails.

I suppose under normal conditions Mother’s fragile features and colourful eyes would have been enough to set her looks apart, but among her sisters, her beauty was only average.

To Jake Burke she was just an open, squawking mouth. But to the rough, young men in the mining and logging camps, that crowd of blue-eyed creatures was a mysterious lot, as sprite and enchanting as an assortment of winged fairies. It was said that Jake Burke’s pixie batch of girls were as good as a legend that spread like trumpet creeper from the Idaho panhandle clear to Missoula.

Of course, this made Grandfather Burke’s farm a choice stop for eager young suitors. And Jake Burke didn’t waste any time putting them all to use chopping wood, digging fence holes, or stripping the hide from a steer for butchering.

He’d tell them, “Let’s see if you’re as potent as the lust in your britches.”

We all knew full well, in this land of calloused hands and blisters, the measure of a soul’s worth, man or woman has always been in how much you do. There was fierce competition to win the good graces of Grandfather Burke, and it led to some testy clashes of fists.

By the time my mother was fourteen, her five eldest sisters had been carried away to distant places like little birds. Places that Mother could only imagine by the sounds of their names like Alaska and Utah. Mother said the sounds reminded her of the word *aloha*, which she heard was the way people welcomed you to paradise.

She imagined her sisters in exotic surroundings, traveling on trains, in ornate dining cars with maroon velvet walls. They’d be sipping Chinese tea out of shell-thin china with their pinky fingers in the air. In her mind’s eye, she could see her sisters dressed in shiny clothes and wearing sweeping hats with grand peabird feathers that tickled peoples’ noses when they turned their heads from side to side.

It was the October just following Mother’s fifteenth birthday that Hanley James called on the Jake Burke farm. He arrived with a somber face, dressed in a black coat and white shirt like he was headed for a funeral parlor. Mother said what a mysterious

man-sized figure he was. He stepped off the edge of his buggy and brought his long leg to the ground in one sure stride.

He knocked on the door, and when Grandmother Burke answered, the soaring man removed his hat to reveal a rugged face with its share of lines. The mystifying visitor asked to speak to Jake Burke, and the two men walked tall and deliberate down to the barn. After a few hours of bragging and corn still, the arrangement was sealed and it was announced that my mother would marry my father.

Jake Burke glared at Mother and whispered a warning. "You'll watch that straight blade you call a tongue if you know what's good for you. I won't see you back on my porch." When my mother told me her recollections of the event, I could almost see her miniature bones quake beneath her skin.

Father was thirty-eight and worked then as foreman for the silver mine by way of Hangman's Creek. He'd been working since he was old enough to pick an ax, so he had something modest to show for himself. He could prove his worth in more ways than simple sweat. The two men settled their business behind the closed door of the barn, like they were trading on a young ewe or a veal calf. My mother had no say at all in the matter. Before that time she'd only seen my father in passing, on trips to town with her sisters and mother. Of course her head was filled with notions of paradise and fancy rail cars, so she was galloping to go with such a big, mysterious looking man.

He'd arranged with the preacher in advance, to say his blessings before he took my mother back to his homestead that night.

For the brief ceremonial words, Grandmother Burke tended Mother's hair in pretty curls high on top of her head to show off the soft skin of her dainty neck. She powdered Mother over in cornstarch and laced her up tight in a canvas corset. When the last lace was yanked and tied, Mother's waist was no more than fifteen inches round.

Grandmother Burke sent my mother away with the same advice she gave each of the Burke girls before their blood was to be broken.

She said, "Little Ophelia, I want you to stay brave and it will be over quick enough. You're obligated only so long as the honeymoon. When the honeymoon is over you can say no whenever the opinion strikes you. Then you can say what for all you

want.”

Of course this was coming from a woman who had twelve children. Mother could have taught Grandmother Burke a thing or two about saying what for. Lo, that woman had a fierce set of lungs and a tongue that could scald iron.

Grandmother Burke covered her daughter in a lacey bodice sewn from an old tablecloth. Mother must have looked as pretty and delicate as one of those china dolls, too breakable to be unpackaged.

She was startled to the bone by the fiery stare that Hanley James laid on her when he spied her slight frame all laced and starched.

Grandmother Burke gave Mother one last hug. “The honeymoon will be over before you know it.”

“Poor old fool,” Jake Burke said.

Now mind you, this mysterious man who now gripped Mother by the arm and hurried her toward the buggy was closer to her father in age.

After the preacher read the marriage psalm, the preacher’s wife snapped my mother’s portrait for four bits. Father settled the debt without saying a word. Mother said if she looked faint in her wedding picture it was due in no small part to her corset ties. The lower chambers of her lungs were as good as wadded with cotton. She could breathe out but not in. When the blue light of the camera bulb flashed in Mother’s eyes it made a hollow whoop, like the sound of a hawk descending on a young rabbit.

The moon glowed full in the sky as they rode the trail back to Father’s place with no words exchanged between them. Night dew clung in a powdery crust to the tips of the grass. A solemn quiet settled over the night, like a suspended breath girded against the coming winter. Mother couldn’t bring herself to meet his blazing eyes, but she could feel his stare piercing clear through to her insides. She couldn’t tell if her shivers were from the chill October night or the thought of what would come next. She had a full mind of what lay before her from conjecturing with her sisters. They had all watched plenty, in wide-eyed astonishment as the rams took after the ewes with a vengeance.

When they pulled to a stop in front of Father’s place, there was a damp wind stirring outside of the grey slat structure. They entered the front room of what Mother

referred to as little better than a hut. The kitchen and the living room were all the same space, and the bedroom was in the back of the house like a black cave. There was a single window to the outside, in a habitat cold and austere, with only a dim light cast from the ocher glow of the moon.

Father set Mother's trunk in the middle of the floor. "You get yourself settled how you like," he said, and left outside to stable the horse.

Mother stood breathless, frozen in place, waiting for him to leap in a swift grip as soon as he reentered. But after an afternoon of corn still, Father stripped down to his johns and collapsed on the bed. Within two winks, he was snoring and letting out his wind.

Well of course, Mother promptly twisted her arms to her back and untied her corset. After gulping some air she sighed in stone relief. It was a far cry from paradise, but she'd managed to skirt any hammering of the flesh.

She had herself a good look around, poking in spaces as she pleased. She decided what changes there would be to make the place halfway livable...curtains and a table cloth to match, throw pillows here and there. After her curiosity was satisfied, she rinsed her face and changed into her bed gown. Careful not to wake the windy giant, she slipped onto the far edge of the bed beneath the quilt. She folded her arms neat as an invitation over her chest and after a whirly day closed her eyes to a hard sleep.

Long past midnight she felt a hot poke pushing and grinding back her insides. Her innards caved and snapped like a dried up wishbone. Just as she was about to cry out into the chill air, all was still and swollen.

After the consummation of her thin flesh, she didn't lift her eyes to meet her husband's lusty stare. A fortnight passed of amber moons hidden behind low black clouds.

Mother only nodded when he told her he liked his meat cooked so blood juice ran in the middle. She prepared the fare in the makeshift kitchen and the two sat across the meal table without a word between them. The only sound was the fork scraping against the big man's plate and the tine of metal against his big teeth. When he did speak, it was to grunt or bark an order in a way more animal than man.

She ached to tell him a thing or two. He had it coming. But Mother held her tongue, swallowing hard with her eyes fixed on the surface of the rough wood table. She was waiting. Her time waxed near.

That night, before she slipped into her white bed gown, before she stiffened and entered the open mouth of that black bedroom, she ran to the window ledge to check the moon. In that flashing instant she looked to that glittery sky and noted the hour. The change had come. The colour of honey had finally dripped from the moon and it had turned thin and silver, set against the fire of a trillion stars.