Revenge of the Lawn

My grandmother, in her own way, shines like a beacon down the stormy American past. She was a bootlegger in a little county up in the state of Washington. She was also a handsome woman, close to six feet tall who carried 190 pounds in the grand operatic manner of the early 1900s. And her specialty was bourbon, a little raw but a welcomed refreshment in those Volstead Act days.

She of course was no female Al Capone, but her bootlegging feats were the cornucopia of legend in her neck of the woods, as they say. She had the county in her pocket for years. The sheriff used to call her up every morning and give her the weather report and tell her how the chickens were laying.

I can imagine her talking to the sheriff: 'Well, Sheriff, I hope your mother gets better soon. I had a cold and a bad sore throat last week myself. I've still got the sniffles. Tell her hello for me and to drop by the next time she's down this way. And if you want that case, you can pick it up or I can have it sent over as soon as Jack gets back with the car.

'No, I don't know if I'm going to the firemen's ball this year, but you know that my heart is with the firemen. If you don't see me there tonight, you tell the boys that. No, I'll try to get there, but I'm still not fully recovered from my cold. It kind of climbs on me in the evening.'

My grandmother lived in a three-storey house that was old even in those days. There was a pear tree in the front yard which was heavily eroded by rain from years of not having any lawn.

The picket fence that once enclosed the lawn was gone, too, and people just drove their cars right up to the porch. In the

winter the front yard was a mud hole and in the summer it was hard as a rock.

Jack used to curse the front yard as if it were a living thing. He was the man who lived with my grandmother for thirty years. He was not my grandfather, but an Italian who came down the road one day selling lots in Florida.

He was selling a vision of eternal oranges and sunshine door to door in a land where people ate apples and it rained a lot.

Jack stopped at my grandmother's house to sell her a lot just a stone's throw from downtown Miami, and he was delivering her whiskey a week later. He stayed for thirty years and Florida went on without him.

Jack hated the front yard because he thought it was against him. There had been a beautiful lawn there when Jack came along, but he let it wander off into nothing. He refused to water it or take care of it in any way.

Now the ground was so hard that it gave his car flat tyres in the summer. The yard was always finding a nail to put in one of his tyres or the car was always sinking out of sight in the winter when the rains came on.

The lawn had belonged to my grandfather who lived out the end of his life in an insane asylum. It had been his pride and joy and was said to be the place where his powers came from.

My grandfather was a minor Washington mystic who in 1911 prophesied the exact date when World War I would start: 28 June 1914, but it had been too much for him. He never got to enjoy the fruit of his labour because they had to put him away in 1913 and he spent seventeen years in the state insane asylum believing he was a child and it was actually 3 May 1872.

He believed that he was six years old and it was a cloudy day about to rain and his mother was baking a chocolate cake. It stayed 3 May 1872 for my grandfather until he died in 1930. It took seventeen years for that chocolate cake to be baked.

There was a photograph of my grandfather. I look a great

deal like him. The only difference being that I am over six feet tall and he was not quite five feet tall. He had a dark idea that being so short, so close to the earth and his lawn, would help to prophesy the exact date when World War I would start.

It was a shame that the war started without him. If only he could have held back his childhood for another year, avoided that chocolate cake, all of his dreams would have come true.

There were always two large dents in my grandmother's house that had never been repaired and one of them came about this way: In the autumn the pears would get ripe on the tree in the front yard and the pears would fall on the ground and rot and bees would gather by the hundreds to swarm on them.

The bees somewhere along the line had picked up the habit of stinging Jack two or three times a year. They would sting him in the most ingenious ways.

Once a bee got in his wallet and he went down to the store to buy some food for dinner, not knowing the mischief that he carried in his pocket.

He took out his wallet to pay for the food.

'That will be 72 cents,' the grocer said.

'AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!' Jack replied, looking down to see a bee busy stinging him on the little finger.

The first large dent in the house was brought about by still another bee landing on Jack's cigar as he was driving the car into the front yard that peary autumn the stock market crashed.

The bee ran down the cigar, Jack could only stare at it cross-eyed in terror; and stung him on the upper lip. His reaction to this was to drive the car immediately into the house.

That front yard had quite a history after Jack let the lawn go to hell. One day in 1932 Jack was off running an errand or delivering something for my grandmother. She wanted to dump the old mash and get a new batch going.

Because Jack was gone, she decided to do it herself.

Grandmother put on a pair of railroad overalls that she used for working around the still and filled a wheelbarrow with mash and dumped it out in the front yard.

She had a flock of snow-white geese that roamed outside the house and nested in the garage that had not been used to park the car since the time Jack had come along selling futures in Florida.

Jack had some kind of idea that it was all wrong for a car to have a house. I think it was something that he had learned in the Old Country. The answer was in Italian because that was the only language Jack used when he talked about the garage. For everything else he used English, but it was only Italian for the garage.

After Grandmother had dumped the mash on the ground near the pear tree, she went back to the still down in the basement and the geese all gathered around the mash and started talking it over.

I guess they came to a mutually agreeable decision because they all started eating the mash. As they ate the mash their eyes got brighter and brighter and their voices, in appreciation of the mash, got louder and louder.

After a while one of the geese stuck his head in the mash and forgot to take it out. Another one of the geese cackled madly and tried to stand on one leg and give a W.C. Fields imitation of a stork. He maintained the position for about a minute before he fell on his tail feathers.

My grandmother found them all lying around the mash in the positions that they had fallen. They looked as if they had been machine-gunned. From the height of her operatic splendour she thought they were all dead.

She responded to this by plucking all their feathers and piling their bald bodies in the wheelbarrow and wheeling them down to the basement. She had to make five trips to accommodate them.

She stacked them like cordwood near the still and waited for Jack to return and dispose of them in a way that would provide a goose for dinner and a small profit by selling the rest of the flock in town. She went upstairs to take a nap after finishing with the still.

It was about an hour later that the geese woke up. They had devastating hangovers. They had all kind of gathered themselves uselessly to their feet when suddenly one of the geese noticed that he did not have any feathers. He informed the other geese of their condition, too. They were all in despair.

They paraded out of the basement in a forlorn and wobbly gang. They were all standing in a cluster near the pear tree when Jack drove into the front yard.

The memory of the time he had been stung on the mouth by that bee must have come back to his mind when he saw the defeathered geese standing there, because suddenly like a madman he tore out the cigar he had stuck in his mouth and threw it away from him as hard as he could. This caused his hand to travel through the windshield. A feat that cost him thirty-two stitches.

The geese stood by staring on like some helpless, primitive American advertisement for aspirin under the pear tree as Jack drove his car into the house for the second and last time in the Twentieth Century.

The first time I remember anything in life occurred in my grandmother's front yard. The year was either 1936 or 1937. I remember a man, probably Jack, cutting down the pear tree and soaking it with kerosene.

It looked strange, even for a first memory of life, to watch a man pour gallons and gallons of kerosene all over a tree lying stretched out thirty feet or so on the ground, and then to set fire to it while the fruit was still green on the branches.

1692 Cotton Mather Newsreel

O 1939 Tacoma Washington witch, where are you now that I am growing towards you? Once my body occupied a child's space and doors had a large meaning to them and were almost human. Opening a door meant something in 1939, and the children used to make fun of you because you were crazy and lived by yourself in an attic across the street from where we sat in the gutter like two slum sparrows.

We were four years old.

I think you were about as old as I am now with the children always teasing and calling after you, 'The crazy woman! Run! Run! The witch! The witch! Don't let her look at you in the eye. She looked at me! Run! Help! Run!'

Now I am beginning to look like you with my long hippie hair and my strange clothes. I look about as crazy in 1967 as you did in 1939.

Little children yell, 'Hey, hippie!' at me in the San Francisco mornings like we yelled, 'Hey, crazy woman!' at you plodding through Tacoma twilights.

I guess you got used to it as I've gotten used to it.

As a child I would always hang my hat on a dare. Dare me to do anything and I'd do it. Ugh! some of the things that I did following, like a midget Don Quixote, trails and visions of dares.

We were sitting in the gutter doing nothing. Perhaps we were waiting for the witch or anything to happen that would free us from the gutter. We had been sitting there for almost an hour: child's time.

'I dare you to go up to the witch's house and wave at me out of the window,' my friend said, finally to get things going.

I looked up at the witch's house across the street. There was one window in her attic facing down upon us like a still photograph from a horror movie.

'OK,' I said.

'You've got guts,' my friend said. I can't remember his name now. The decades have filed it off my memory, leaving a small empty place where his name should be.

I got up from the gutter and walked across the street and around to the back of the house where the stairs were that led to her attic. They were grey wooden stairs like an old mother cat and went up three flights to her door.

There were some garbage cans at the bottom of the stairs. I wondered what garbage can was the witch's. I lifted up one garbage can lid and looked inside to see if there was any witches' garbage in the can.

There wasn't.

The can was filled with just ordinary garbage. I lifted up the lid to the next garbage can but there wasn't any witches' garbage in that can either. I tried the third can but it was the same as the other two cans: no witches' garbage.

There were three garbage cans and there were three apartments in the house, including the attic where she lived. One of the cans had to be her garbage but there wasn't any difference between her garbage and the other people's garbage. So . . .

I walked up the stairs to the attic. I walked very carefully as if I were petting an old grey mother cat nursing her kittens.

I finally arrived at the witch's door. I didn't know whether she was inside or not. She could have been home. I felt like knocking but that didn't make any sense. If she were there, she'd just slam the door in my face or ask me what I wanted and I'd run screaming down the stairs, 'Help! Help! She looked at me!'

The door was tall, silent and human like a middle-aged

woman. I felt as if I were touching her hand when I opened the door delicately like the inside of a watch.

The first room in the house was her kitchen and she wasn't in it, but there were twenty or thirty vases and jars and bottles filled with flowers. They were on the kitchen table and on all the shelves and ledges. Some of the flowers were stale and some of the flowers were fresh.

I went inside the next room and it was the living-room and she wasn't there either, but again there were twenty or thirty vases and jars and bottles filled with flowers.

The flowers made my heart beat faster.

Her garbage had lied to me.

I went inside the last room and it was her bedroom and she wasn't there either, but again there were twenty or thirty vases and jars and bottles filled with flowers.

There was a window right next to the bed and it was the window that looked down on the street. The bed was made of brass with a patchwork quilt on it. I walked over to the window and stood there staring down at my friend who was sitting in the gutter looking up at the window.

He couldn't believe that I was standing there in the witch's window and I waved very slowly at him and he waved very slowly at me. Our waving seemed to be very distant, travelling from our arms like two people waving at each other in different cities, perhaps between Tacoma and Salem, and our waving was merely an echo of their waving across thousands of miles.

Now the dare had been completed and I turned around in that house which was like a shallow garden and all my fears collapsed upon me like a landslide of flowers and I ran screaming at the top of my lungs outside and down the stairs. I sounded as if I had stepped in a wheelbarrow-sized pile of steaming dragon shit.

When I came screaming around the side of the house, my friend jumped up from the gutter and started screaming, too.

I guess he thought that the witch was chasing me. We ran screaming through the streets of Tacoma, pursued by our own voices like a 1692 Cotton Mather newsreel.

This was a month or two before the German Army marched into Poland.

1/3, 1/3, 1/3

It was all to be done in thirds. I was to get ⅓ for doing the typing, and she was to get ⅓ for doing the editing, and he was to get ⅓ for writing the novel.

We were going to divide the royalties three ways. We all shook hands on the deal, each knowing what we were supposed to do, the path before us, the gate at the end.

I was made a ⅓ partner because I had the typewriter.

I lived in a cardboard-lined shack of my own building across the street from the run-down old house the Welfare rented for her and her nine-year-old son Freddy.

The novelist lived in a trailer a mile away beside a sawmill pond where he was the watchman for the mill.

I was about seventeen and made lonely and strange by that Pacific Northwest of so many years ago, that dark, rainy land of 1952. I'm thirty-one now and I still can't figure out what I meant by living the way I did in those days.

She was one of those eternally fragile women in their late thirties and once very pretty and the object of much attention in the roadhouses and beer parlours, who are now on Welfare and their entire lives rotate around that one day a month when they get their Welfare cheques.

The word 'cheque' is the one religious word in their lives, so they always manage to use it at least three or four times in every conversation. It doesn't matter what you are talking about.

The novelist was in his late forties, tall, reddish, and looked as if life had given him an endless stream of two-timing girlfriends, five-day drunks and cars with bad transmissions.

He was writing the novel because he wanted to tell a story

that had happened to him years before when he was working in the woods.

He also wanted to make some money: ⅓.

My entrance into the thing came about this way: One day I was standing in front of my shack, eating an apple and staring at a black ragged toothache sky that was about to rain.

What I was doing was like an occupation for me. I was that involved in looking at the sky and eating the apple. You would have thought that I had been hired to do it with a good salary and a pension if I stared at the sky long enough.

'HEY, YOU!' I heard somebody yell.

I looked across the mud puddle and it was the woman. She was wearing a kind of green Mackinaw that she wore all the time, except when she had to visit the Welfare people downtown. Then she put on a shapeless duck-grey coat.

We lived in a poor part of town where the streets weren't paved. The street was nothing more than a big mud puddle that you had to walk around. The street was of no use to cars any more. They travelled on a different frequency where asphalt and gravel were more sympathetic.

She was wearing a pair of white rubber boots that she always had on in the winter, a pair of boots that gave her a kind of child-like appearance. She was so fragile and firmly indebted to the Welfare Department that she often looked like a child twelve years old.

'What do you want?' I said.

'You have a typewriter, don't you?' she said. 'I've walked by your shack and heard you typing. You type a lot at night.'

'Yeah, I have a typewriter,' I said.

'You a good typist?' she said.

'I'm all right.'

'We don't have a typewriter. How would you like to go in with us?' she yelled across the mud puddle. She looked a

perfect twelve years old, standing there in her white boots, the sweetheart and darling of all mud puddles.

'What's "go in" mean?'

'Well, he's writing a novel,' she said. 'He's good. I'm editing it. I've read a lot of pocketbooks and the *Reader's Digest*. We need somebody who has a typewriter to type it up. You'll get ⅓. How does that sound?'

'I'd like to see the novel,' I said. I didn't know what was happening. I knew she had three or four boyfriends that were always visiting her.

'Sure!' she yelled. 'You have to see it to type it. Come on around. Let's go out to his place right now and you can meet him and have a look at the novel. He's a good guy. It's a wonderful book.'

'OK,' I said, and walked around the mud puddle to where she was standing in front of her evil dentist house, twelve years old, and approximately two miles from the Welfare office.

'Let's go,' she said.

We walked over to the highway and down the highway past mud puddles and sawmill ponds and fields flooded with rain until we came to a road that went across the railroad tracks and turned down past half a dozen small sawmill ponds that were filled with black winter logs.

We talked very little and that was only about her cheque that was two days late and she had called the Welfare and they said they mailed the cheque and it should be there tomorrow, but call again tomorrow if it's not there and we'll prepare an emergency money order for you.

'Well, I hope it's there tomorrow,' I said.

'So do I or I'll have to go downtown,' she said.

Next to the last sawmill pond was a yellow old trailer up on blocks of wood. One look at that trailer showed that it was never going anywhere again, that the highway was in

distant heaven, only to be prayed to. It was really sad with a cemetery-like chimney swirling jagged dead smoke in the air above it.

A kind of half-dog, half-cat creature was sitting on a rough plank porch that was in front of the door. The creature half-barked and half-meowed at us, 'Arfeow!' and darted under the trailer, looking out at us from behind a block.

'This is it,' the woman said.

The door to the trailer opened and a man stepped out on to the porch. There was a pile of firewood stacked on the porch and it was covered with a black tarp.

The man held his hand above his eyes, shielding his eyes from a bright imaginary sun, though everything had turned dark in anticipation of the rain.

'Hello, there,' he said.

'Hi,' I said.

'Hello, honey,' she said.

He shook my hand and welcomed me to his trailer, then he gave her a little kiss on the mouth before we all went inside.

The place was small and muddy and smelled like stale rain and had a large unmade bed that looked as if it had been a partner to some of the saddest love-making this side of The Cross.

There was a green bushy half-table with a couple of insect-like chairs and a little sink and a small stove that was used for cooking and heating.

There were some dirty dishes in the little sink. The dishes looked as if they had always been dirty: born dirty to last forever.

I could hear a radio playing Western music someplace in the trailer, but I couldn't find it. I looked all over but it was nowhere in sight. It was probably under a shirt or something.

'He's the kid with the typewriter,' she said. 'He'll get ⅓ for typing it.'

'That sounds fair,' he said. 'We need somebody to type it. I've never done anything like this before.'

'Why don't you show it to him?' she said. 'He'd like to take a look at it.'

'OK. But it isn't too carefully written,' he said to me. 'I only went to the fourth grade, so she's going to edit it, straighten out the grammar and commas and stuff.'

There was a notebook lying on the table, next to an ashtray that probably had 600 cigarette butts in it. The notebook had a colour photograph of Hopalong Cassidy on the cover.

Hopalong looked tired as if he had spent the previous night chasing starlets all over Hollywood and barely had enough strength to get back in the saddle.

There were about twenty-five or thirty pages of writing in the notebook. It was written in a large grammar school sprawl: an unhappy marriage between printing and longhand.

'It's not finished yet,' he said.

'You'll type it. I'll edit it. He'll write it,' she said.

It was a story about a young logger falling in love with a waitress. The novel began in 1935 in a café in North Bend, Oregon.

The young logger was sitting at a table and the waitress was taking his order. She was very pretty with blonde hair and rosy cheeks. The young logger was ordering veal cutlets with mashed potatoes and country gravy.

'Yeah, I'll do the editing. You can type it, can't you? It's not too bad, is it?' she said in a twelve-year-old voice with the Welfare peeking over her shoulder.

'No,' I said. 'It will be easy.'

Suddenly the rain started to come down hard outside, without any warning, just suddenly great drops of rain that almost shook the trailer.

You sur lik veel cutlets dont you Maybell said she was ~~holding~~ holding her pensil up her mowth that was preti and red like an apl!

Onli wen you tak my oder Carl said he was a kind of bassful loger but big and strong lik his dead who ownd the starmill!

Ill mak sur you get plenti of gravi!

Just ten the caf door opend and in cam Rins Adams he was hansom and meen, everi bodi in thos parts was afrad of him but not Carl and his ~~dead~~ dad they wasnt afrad of him no sur!

Maybell shifard wen she saw him standing ther in his blac macinaw he smild at her and Carl felt his blod run hot lik scallding cofee and fiting mad!

Howdi ther Rins said Maybell blushed like a ~~flower~~ flouar while we were all sitting there in that rainy trailer, pounding at the gates of American literature.