

New or Used

The ghosts came to the funeral late. The other guests squirmed and shifted in row after row of uncomfortable pew. Jerry sat next to Marjean in the front, in the most uncomfortable of seats. He worked to settle his breathing, made erratic by his close proximity to so many flowers, by his close proximity to Marjean, by the funeral itself—his mother in the box up front.

He had removed his glasses to rub his eyes, which teared and ran and teared some more. The motion created that smack, smack sound he knew Marjean hated. Marjean sat in between Jerry and his brother Carl. She was soon to be Carl's wife but had been Jerry's wife first. That was something, at least, that he had married her first.

Jerry could feel Marjean's meaty hands balling into fists next to him. He rearranged his thick glasses onto his face with care, weighing his options, wondering what might happen if he reached for Marjean's hand.

And when he opened his eyes, his hand poised mid-air, the ghosts, the ladies, ringed his mother's coffin. They dripped creek water that pooled alongside the baskets of flowers, that ran underneath the one large wreath with its one large card, the slanting script so big even Jerry could read it: Chivington Furniture.

Jerry had been four years old when the ghosts, the ladies, first showed themselves to him. That was what his mother called it "showing themselves." She had words for them and their actions in Cheyenne, too, but Jerry had never learned the language well enough to say them with confidence.

The stories, though, came alongside the ghosts. That evening in their Denver apartment, he sat on the kitchen's smooth linoleum, banging a wooden spoon onto an overturned pot, drumming like he'd

seen people do at powwows. Carl bucked and lunged in his highchair, his dark curls flying, his wide-set eyes following Jerry's every motion.

At the stove, their mother cleaned the dinner dishes. Spaghetti, if Jerry remembered it right or if it were a Wednesday. Their mother kept to a strict rotation of low-cost meals, even later when they left Denver for Lubbock, when they could afford more. History and habit and memory did not seem to change with location.

"Dance," Carl said. "Dance, dance." He swung his arms above his head and fanned his fingers out like the cool air pleased him. It was November—the ghosts showed themselves in other seasons, too, but Jerry would learn they never missed a November.

The boys' mother laughed and waved her arms above her head, smiling at Carl. Soap suds surrounded her fingers, and a few lone bubbles sailed toward the ceiling. She wore glasses just like Jerry's with big, rectangular lenses a quarter-inch thick. She'd cut and permed her dark hair, and it fuzzed out from her head in tight spirals.

Earlier, she had shushed Jerry's drumming twice, but then Carl joined in with his singing and highchair dancing, and she'd turned her smile on Jerry, too. Everyone smiled at Carl—women at the grocery store, men at the bus stop, the other children in their building. Sometimes, the smile carried over to Jerry; sometimes, it did not. Even at four years old, Jerry was learning to hate and love Carl in equal measure.

Jerry worked to relax his grip on the wooden spoon. His palm hurt, and his fingers had grown stiff. He held his hand up to his mother—she would rub it for him, maybe—but it was not his mother who held a hand back up to him.

Outside the glass of the patio door stood a woman who looked like his mother but with hair like his mother had before—long and straight down her neck. The woman's dress hung crooked off her

shoulders, and Jerry wondered why she didn't pull it back to where it belonged. He frowned at her and she nodded back and when he refocused his eyes, another lady had joined her. And then another and then another.

“Mom,” Jerry said, but she raised her sudsy hand to shush him.

She froze a moment and then she was all motion, moving from the kitchen counter toward Carl, her eyes fixed on the glass doors.

“Carl?” She tilted her chin and wiggled her fingers toward the door. “What do you see, Carl?”

“Bubble,” Carl said. He reached his chubby fingers high above his head. “Mommy, bubble.”

Their mother looked from Carl to the door and back to Carl.

Jerry sat in between, the spoon now set aside.

“Good,” she said, advancing further. She bent at the waist, her face all furrowed concentration, and pushed her glasses up, leaving a wet smear across one lens. “But what else?” she said. “Carl, what else do you see?”

But Carl did not see the ladies in their shawls and old dresses, no matter how many times their mother asked. And no matter how many times Carl said “bubble,” their mother did not turn toward Jerry, did not see him, off to the side, pointing at the door, at the ladies beyond it. And when the creek water pooled outside the patio door and began to trickle inside, Carl did not see it either.

Jerry stopped his pointing and made his way down the hall toward the closet, wondering about the ladies, the water—wondering about the tight feeling in his stomach and chest. Back in the kitchen, he had to pull on his mother's shirt, once, twice, three times, before she noticed him standing there, before she took the towel he held out to her.

Carl and Marjean huddled together in the far corner of the church basement, eating small bites of cake and drinking coffee down fast. They had started wearing rings, but as far as anyone knew, hadn't really become man and wife. It was curious and hurtful, and the glint off the silver made Jerry's eyes smart. Marjean was taller than Carl—that was something, at least. She wore her brown hair all spiked up now, and the style suited her. Her eyes met Jerry's a moment, and he turned back down to the cake. When he raised up his face, she had hers leaned down, close to Carl's.

It had been a mistake to put them in the same rehab facility, to pay for their treatment, even, maybe. Their times at rehab were not supposed to overlap, but Carl had stayed in longer, state-sponsored. Only Carl could talk his brother's wife into the bottom bunk of a rehab room while his roommate was in group. Only Carl would say this was love and fate and what could a man do?

Jerry's eyes had stopped watering, but he felt ill all the same. He set his piece of half-eaten cake on an empty chair.

"It's good," Carl said. He had snuck up on Jerry from behind and picked up the cake, was forking in bite after methodical bite while Jerry shook his head.

"About later—" Carl said.

"What about later?" Jerry stretched his long frame to its full height and leaned forward himself. He had a good three inches on Carl, at least. He would use it.

"It's our house now," Carl said. "And you said you wouldn't sleep at the house with us there. You said—"

Carl's voice rose at the ends of his sentences like a petulant child's. *You said, you said.* Jerry had the urge to singsong it back at him, but he refrained. He was thirty-six years old; Carl, thirty-two. It was time one of them acted grown.

“I’ve already moved my things out,” Jerry said, waving his hands at his brother. “I’m done.” He took the cake plate from his brother, mid-bite, and dropped it into the trash.

Once outside, Jerry’s heart slowed, but then the sign was there, blinking across the street at him in the brightest neon: Chivington Furniture, New or Used. Why had they sent a wreath? It was vulgar and strange, both. Jerry leaned against his car, turning his back on the sign. The metal had cooled in the brisk, November air, but his face had not. He would go over there. He would go over there right now and find out.

He passed a man in a suit, finishing a cigarette, and the man waved to Jerry. It took Jerry a beat to place him, the assistant to the funeral director, maybe, or the assistant to the assistant or something. The man handed Jerry a small stack of programs.

“These are the ones your brother asked for,” the man said. “I almost forgot.”

“Oh?” Jerry said. For the relatives who couldn’t make it, maybe? For someone, somewhere’s scrapbook? It was not like Carl to be considerate, to think of others, to think.

“It’s a little weird, yeah?” the man said. He shrugged, stubbed out his cigarette.

“Yeah,” Jerry said, but he had already turned toward the street, was making his way across.

The door of Chivington Furniture dinged shut behind Jerry before he was certain he wanted to enter. The fluorescent lights hummed and buzzed overhead like a wasp swarm. Jerry started toward the counter with purpose, but the bowl of peppermints lay in between him and the young man behind the counter. The bowl sat in the same place as thirty years ago; it was the same bowl, even, maybe. Jerry sank into a plaid loveseat, his head so heavy he was not certain his neck was up to the task.

“Ah, hey,” said the young man, “can I, uh, help you?”

“No,” Jerry said, his own voice small and coming out all wrong. “I don’t think you can.”

He shouldn't have been in there—of all places, on all days. Jerry tried to rise, but his legs buckled under him, and he sank back down. The program fluttered from his hand, and the young man grabbed it. He sat in the chair opposite Jerry and handed the program across. His smile pulled tight at the corners now, and he shook his head at Jerry. He did not seem to be able to stop shaking his head.

“I'm so sorry for—” he began.

“Okay,” Jerry said. “Alright.”

Jerry curled the program up like he planned to swat flies. He was nervous now and angry. He did not belong there. He should not have been there to start.

The anger helped, and he pulled himself together some, up and toward the door on his long, thin legs, which still wobbled but were holding him, at least.

The young man's face squinted back at Jerry as he turned for the door.

“I just meant—” he said.

“Yes?” Jerry said. But his voice had gone back to being polite, to being both polite and so very tired.

“I helped them pick all that stuff out,” he said. “I met her.” The young man gestured toward the program. He shrugged, the collar of his wrinkled button-down bunching up around his shoulders. “It's just sad. That's all.”

“I don't understand,” Jerry said.

“The couple,” he said. “Newlyweds? I helped them pick out all their new stuff. It was just delivered. And then for her to go like this, so sudden.”

“I don't understand,” Jerry said again.

The young man leaned in and took the program from Jerry and smoothed it back out, picture side up this time: Marjean. The photo showed Marjean on their own wedding day.

“You family?” the young man asked.

Jerry nodded, not trusting his voice.

“It’s okay,” he said in a low voice. “In a case like this, you know, the debt is forgiven and all.”

He gestured toward the program again. “It’s just a shame,” he said. “They seemed real happy.”

At his mother’s house, Jerry sat in the driveway. The keys had not worked in the lock, but he had not expected them to, not really. Through the window, Jerry saw the furniture—the new sofa and television and dining table set. He could imagine the bedroom but was glad he didn’t have to see it—the king-sized canopy Marjean had always wanted. He steadied his forehead against the glass. He would not cry.

When Jerry opened his eyes, four ladies ringed the new dining table. They bent to grab a leg each, and soon, the table lay face down. Next, the chairs disappeared down the hallway toward the bathroom, and Jerry could have sworn he heard the shower turn on. He sat down, right there on the dirty step, not caring about his only suit, not caring about how Carl and Marjean were going to blame him for what was happening inside.

The first time Jerry had been inside Chivington Furniture, he had been with his mother. He was six years old and was enjoying a day alone with her since Carl had been left with the Texan. Yes, they were there to pick out a “big boy” bed for Carl, but, still, their mother was holding *his* hand, was patting *his* head as they entered the store. It was the end of the day, stores closing down all over town.

So they ducked in through the dingy door together, laughing a little at their collective luck, Jerry daring to reach for a peppermint by the cash register, even though they hadn’t yet made a purchase.

The man came from the back with short, brisk strides. His hairline swooped back off a broad forehead with dark, beady eyes under it. Jerry pocketed the candy and stepped back, his mother’s arm holding fast to his shoulder.

“Good afternoon,” the man said, “but I guess by now it’s almost evening.”

Outside, it was warm for late November, but the air inside the store held in a chill.

“Do I know you?” their mother asked. She clutched her free hand to her throat, the other pulling Jerry tight to her.

He’d never seen this look on her face before, not quite. It was worse than when the Texan stayed out late drinking, worse than when he and Carl wrestled into breakable things, worse, even, than the time he’d microwaved that fork.

“No,” the man said, “no, ma’am, I don’t think so.”

Jerry tried to wiggle his shoulder free, but his mother held fast. The store featured row after row of recliners and couches and dining tables with chairs, and he wanted to run through the rows, to sit on the cushions and bounce, at least for a little while.

But that look on his mother’s face stopped him.

“I do,” she said, “I do know you.”

They were moving backward, inching toward the door then, and the man advanced, his arm out toward them. He reached out again, holding out his card, maybe, but they were through the door and into the car, his mother backing it out wildly before Jerry even was buckled into his seat. But not before he saw the ladies in their torn shawls, moving row to row amongst the recliners and sofa tables, moving light but sure like shadows.

At home, Carl and the Texan had gone out. Jerry’s mother splashed her face in the kitchen sink again and again before going to the bookshelf in the living room.

“There,” she said, stabbing at a wide photograph in a thick book. “There.”

The picture lay under a caption that read *Sand Creek Battle*. Someone had crossed out the last word and written in *Massacre*. The man in the photograph was John Chivington, and he’d led men with

guns into a peaceful village near a creek on November 29, 1864, and, yes, their mother was right about the man in the store—she, their family, did know him or his father’s father or his father’s uncle—his family. The man had the same face as the one in the picture, the same wide stance, those same eyes.

“There,” she said, pointing her finger to another, smaller photograph, tucked further down the page. “Our relatives,” she said, “our family.”

“The ladies,” I said.

“Yes.”

That night, Jerry lay awake, thinking of what he’d learned—more than a hundred dead, most of them women and children, family. He slept in fits and starts, rising in the morning much later than usual.

Jerry awoke to Carl hovering over him, his grin so wide Jerry could see it even without his glasses.

“What?” Jerry said, rubbing his eyes. But before his glasses were settled onto his face, he knew. He smelled it—Carl’s hot peppermint breath that he huffed and blew toward Jerry. Carl crinkled the wrapper back and forth in his sticky hand, too.

“Mine,” Carl said.

“Okay,” Jerry said, the bile rising in his throat.

He straightened his glasses onto his face, but he kept his eyes screwed tight. Just a little longer. Jerry could smell the creek, there with the peppermint, and he squeezed his eyes and he held his breath. Just a little longer. He would try not to see, just a little while longer, he would try.