Two for One

By Dixon Hearne

The train arrived late from Beaumont, bound for Shreveport and points east. The last thing I wanted was to see Lee Ann set foot on the transport. She’d been trying to leave home ever since she was twelve. Anywhere looked better than here – so long as it had a crowd and lots to look at. When she turned fifteen, she ran off with a drummer who came into the Rexall one day with a line of hair-care products and turned half the ladies in town into blond vixens. The color lasted just about as long as his visit, though it took three months more for everyone’s hair to look natural again – instead of straw piles. Poor Lee Ann had to learn the hard way that beauty comes with a price – fifteen dollars, to be exact. Stripped her hair so bad she had to wear a floppy hat every time she left the house. And then, not one year later, she sent off a box-top ticket for a free makeover – and won the damn thing. It was me that had to drive her the hundred miles to collect on it. Not that she could tell a damn bit of difference later on. All they did was make up her face to the point she didn’t even recognize herself – and scare the crap out of me when they parade her out. But for three days, she was Miss Hollywood, and every last soul in town got a gander.

Today was different, though. She’d taken a job over in Atlanta. One of them travel agency jobs where they hire attractive young girls to escort groups on trips around the world. Actually, she ain’t supposed to go nowhere except to some islands off of Florida. Just the same, she’d got it in her head she’s meant for something bigger than Cutoff, Texas – and of course, anything is. Won’t settle for less, she says to me.

By the time her train arrives, she’s already late for her connection in Shreveport, which sets her off real bad. I says to her, it might be a bad omen. But she just jerks her chin at me and frowns. Then when it does finally arrive, the damn thing overshoots the station and has to back up a hundred yards to board folks. In the meantime, I’m getting a bad impression of the whole idea. I says to her again at this point, “Ain’t you ever considered the possibility that this might not be a good move?”

She lays into me like a buzz saw and blames me for holding her back so long. If there’s one thing we Futches are noted for, it’s speaking our mind – and sometimes that can take a spell. In this instance, I had to relive every last effort I ever made to protect her from herself: the time she joined that Little Pals group for sleepovers, and she woke up with all her Barbie dolls beheaded; the time she entered the Town Princess contest and lost her skirt in the baton twirling competition because I bought it too big; the day she fell off the homecoming float into the crowd when I made her turn and wave at me; and the time I sent that sorry Carl Trosper away when he came calling for her one night half-drunk.
This was one dream she said I owed her. So I just shut my mouth and buried my pride – along with my marbles – and bought the ticket. I even took her to town and let her pick out a new dress and a pair of high heel shoes she said she needed. Spent a day’s wages on it. Raisin' a child alone and barehanded ain’t no picnic – especially a girl. I had no idea what she needed, beyond the love I could give her. And that wasn’t enough.

I didn’t hear from her for a month or two – not a card or a call. I wasn’t sure yet how or where she lived. All I knew is that she’s got some young man living with her and she needs money. She don’t talk much about her job in the letter she finally gets around to sending me – just that it wasn’t what she was expecting. For one thing, she ain’t left the office to do any “escorting” like they said she would. And for another, she’s got to work more hours than they told her. Not that she’s complaining to me, of course. That might look like I told her so. Just that she’s surprised by what she finds when she arrives.

Finally, I decide to call the operator there in Atlanta and try to reach her. Four L. A. Futches in the phone book – if you can believe that! I call up every last one – polite as can be – and get cussed out by two of them. That’s just the way city folks are. And then I finally remember that boy’s name she’s living with – Brendan Burkette – and sure enough, I get an answer at his number. Everything is “Yessir” and “Nossir” – just nice and respectful as you can imagine. But up under all that niceness, I knew something wasn’t right. Like, why ain’t he at work? And how come the phone at her apartment is in his name? The whole thing makes me a bit unsettled. I left a message and then wait a week for a phone call from her – collect – and I ain’t heard a word. Knowing Lee Ann, I figure she’s just been taken in by one more fast-talking charmer. But it took a lot of stewing and calculating before I got mad enough to buy myself a train ticket out there. The last thing I needed was some more blame added to my record. Still, I didn’t care. She was my only child, and just like her mama – bless her soul.

Of course, I ain’t going just to pick a fight and drag her screaming back to Cutoff. She’s a grown woman now, tall and handsome, a fine figure any man would be tempted by. But she’s lost her direction, plain and simple. This much I’m sure of. That’s why I feel so right with myself when I march up to her door and ring the bell.

One ring. Two rings. It takes six rings to jar someone loose from the TV set blaring inside. An older woman finally comes to the door, and, sure I have the wrong address, I beg pardon and disappear. Minutes later, I reappear and ring the bell a half dozen times more. “I’m looking for Lee Ann Futch, ma’am,” I says to the woman. “My daughter.”

The woman smiles politely and places her index fingers behind her ear lobes. And though I don’t know what she’s up to, I’m struck by her gracious manner and fine features. “I say, I’m looking for Miss Futch, ma’am.” The woman nods and
presses her fingers to her ears again. The third time I announce myself, she decides to let me in – but not before I have to answer a question or two. This makes me mad, and I ask her why she’s answering my daughter’s door anyway. The discussion that follows is forced and uncomfortable – not to mention LOUD. And it ain’t long before Mr. Bradley Burkettee himself comes rolling out of bed and into the living room to see what’s up. A tall, skinny boy, pierced from head to toenail – which surprises hell out of me when I don’t see a single tattoo to go with it. The woman fumbles around trying to introduce us, but she’s cut short when the phone starts ringing.

“Hello!” The boy’s voice booms, clearly irritated by the call. “Oh, it’s you”, he says and then breaks into a giggly grin. His mama just stands there, wide-eyed and waiting. She knows that company comes before telephone calls. He don’t. I couldn’t help hearing enough, though, to know it was Lee Ann on the other end – grilling him to be sure he wasn’t lying about me being here. And then, SLAP went the phone. “I knew it was you, sir,” he says to me, “by your voice.” His mama just stares at each one of us in turn, still confused by the situation, adjusting and readjusting her hearing aid. “Lee Ann’s on her way home, sir,” he says to me next.

All I can think is that she must be plenty mad at me, taking off work in the middle of the day to come running home. It’s all I can do to keep from calling a taxicab to haul me back to the train station. Meeting everyone like this was all wrong. Nobody explaining themselves. Just being pleasant with each other till it hits the fan – which, by the way, don’t take long.

Ten minutes later, the front door busts open and in stomps Lee Ann. She throws her purse onto the sofa and charges across the room, where Mr. Bradley meets her with a glass of wine and a cigarette – neither of which I approve. But it’s no use. First, she starts in on me, old enough now to give me a good cussing for not announcing that I was coming. Then she sets in on Mrs. Burkette for letting me in the door in the first place. I figure if they ain’t upset with her temper by now, they just ain’t trying. That’s when I decide to lay down the law, only, poor Mrs. Burkette steps right up and takes charge, before I can open my mouth. She tells Lee Ann – Missy, she calls her – that she ain’t got no right taking a tone with her. “It’s hard enough watching you boss my Bradley around,” she says to her, “but I don’t have to put up with it, sister!”

For a stark moment, the only sound we hear is the TV set. Lee Ann is totally perplexed by the woman’s behavior, and her Mr. Burkette just stands there with his mouth wide open for the flies to come in. As for me, I’m completely lost for a minute, unsure whose side I’m on. Poor old Mrs. Burkette, who seemed so meek and fragile just moments before, loomed large and mighty right now. In my mind, she was tall as her gangly son.

It was a while before we got down to the purpose of my little visit. Lee Ann was still angry that I was interfering with her freedom. Swore she’d never forgive me. I,
however, was now more concerned about what to do with Mrs. Burkette. The poor thing had finally wilted back down to a fine gardenia again. Whatever notion of authority she'd ever desired had surely been satisfied. Nothing left but a whimper.

In the aftermath, I take off to the nearest Motel Six I can find, leaving the rest of them there to sort things out. Next thing I know, Lee Ann ups and elopes with her Mr. Burkette in the middle of the night and then comes charging back the next day announcing she wants to come back to Cutoff. Wants to make them all eat crow back home, she says – her being so worldly and sophisticated now. And married to a CPA from Atlanta. Of course, I’m all but ready to foot the bill for the train fare all around when I suddenly realize that poor old widow Burkette was now all but kicked out of her hive. She’d depended on the rent money from these two to make ends meet – which is no way for a fine woman to live at her age. And that’s when it comes to me just what to do. And that’s why I told this story to my widow-sister last time she called me up singing the blues about her son Reece leaving home. “You got to keep your eyes wide open”, I says to her. “Love sometimes comes”.

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