

Chicken Hill

- by Joy Williams

She didn't know what had possessed her to participate in such a thing. A little boy had been run over by a sheriff's deputy, and there was a memorial fund-raiser at the Barbed Wire, a biker bar in a somewhat alarming part of town, and Ruth had gone and bought a beer and put thirty dollars into an empty terrarium, for funeral expenses. The place was loud and crowded, and she was given a plate with a tamale on it. Outside, someone had brought a pony and was providing pony rides for the dead boy's friends. No one spoke to her directly, but she learned that the boy's name was Hector and that his father was suing the sheriff's department.

Good, Ruth thought.

But Hector's death, it seemed, was Hector's fault. He had run into the street against the light. His fault, against the light—the details were so paltry. Ruth could have told Hector's father that he would find no satisfaction with his lawsuit, but she never returned to the Barbed Wire, where she might have found him, to express this belief. It was a tough little place. Going there had been one of the last journeys she had taken, though, of course, she did not know this at the time. It had been difficult to find. The closer she got to it the more frequently she'd had to ask for directions. People had assumed that she was looking for something else and had not been as helpful as they might have been.

None of Ruth's friends knew about her excursion to the little fellow's memorial, which, Ruth had to remind herself, had been scarcely a memorial at all but a fund-raiser, which she had respectfully participated in, though why she had given the curious amount of thirty dollars was a puzzle. It was probably all she'd had in her purse at the time—all she ever seemed to have in her purse. No one had spoken on behalf of the boy, and there hadn't been a single photograph of him there, not even a duplicate of the poor one that had appeared in the newspaper, cropped from a group of people, it seemed, his little face shaded by a preposterously large cowboy hat and quite blurry.

It was probably just coincidence that a child appeared not long after that. This one, a girl, belonged to the doctor who lived nearby in a house painted a prominent aubergine. The house had once been invisible from Ruth's veranda, or what she called her veranda, but the doctor had removed a stand of cottonwoods in order to install solar panels, and now she could make out a sliver of the sprawling place. The removal had been modestly controversial, but supporters of the doctor's actions had argued that the trees were running on fumes, anyway, and, being as starved and delusional as they were, could be dangerous. She supposed the fools were talking about memory—the trees' memory of some water source that had now dried up.

Greetings between Ruth and the child had never been exchanged before. Nor were they now, exactly.

It was a hot day, as all the days were, and Ruth was on her veranda, eating a tuna-fish sandwich. She seldom ate tuna-fish sandwiches, because she found them an uncomfortable physical experience. After a few swallows, she felt as if she were having a heart attack. There was the tightness in her chest, her esophagus constricting, resisting passage, her oppressive baffled alarm. It was as if the splendid and courageous giant of the oceans were rising up in horror, disputing what had been done to it, and why should it not. . . .

Putting the sandwich aside, Ruth took large gulps of air and then small ones, trying to restore order to her thrashing chest. The girl watched her gravely. Ruth suspected that she was there to request permission to play in the gully behind her house, which Ruth considered an attractive nuisance, though it was by no means attractive. Indeed, it was more like a ravine, a dark peculiarity, than a gully. But the child did not request permission, which Ruth wouldn't have granted anyway.

Instead she said, "I would like to draw you in plein air."

"No, thanks," Ruth said.

"Do you have dogs?"

"I do."

"May I see them?"

"No," Ruth said.

“You used to have dogs. To reassure you, I could show you some work I’ve done in the past.”

She was not an appealing child, but she didn’t seem mentally deficient or malformed, either. Still, she was something of a runt, made more runtlike by the enormous backpack she wore. From this pink, somewhat smelly apparatus she extracted several pieces of construction paper.

“These aren’t good at all!” Ruth exclaimed. She was sincerely dismayed.

“I’m just beginning,” the child said. “I should be encouraged.”

“Not by me, I’m afraid,” Ruth said.

“Do you give blood?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you ever give blood?”

“No,” Ruth said.

“You should. Only thirty-eight per cent of the population is eligible to give blood, and only eight per cent of them actually donate. The need for blood is constant and ongoing.”

“Maybe I’m not eligible.”

“I bet you are. You probably are.”

“I’m old. I need my blood.”

Was this what they talked about at the doctor’s house—blood? And the efficient avidity of those hideous solar slabs?

Ruth had no children but many friends. Or she thought she had many friends. They stood up pretty well to her requirements, but sometimes they didn't. Actually, she could probably count fewer friends now than she'd had even a year ago.

As for children, though her experience with them was limited, this one here seemed a doozy. She wondered if the girl had ever encountered little Hector, but quickly dismissed the possibility. The two travelled in different circles, lived in separate worlds, the doctor's daughter and the felon's son—for it had been disclosed that Hector's father had a rap sheet as long as your arm, though he hadn't done anything recently.

That backpack needed to be washed and thoroughly aired. "Would you like some of my old jewelry to play with?" Ruth surprised herself by saying.

"I guess," the child said.

"You go away now, and when you come back in a few months, say, I'll give you some jewelry."

"I'll come back tomorrow."

"That's so soon!" Ruth protested. "But all right. The day after tomorrow. The important thing is to go away now."

Ruth retreated inside and watched the child trudge back to the aubergine house, the sliver of which was so unpleasantly visible. The backpack all but eclipsed her. It must be quite heavy, Ruth thought, or something.

When the child appeared again, Ruth was back on her veranda, staring without much interest at her right hand, which had recently completed a letter of condolence to her mechanic's widow. As a rule, the mechanic had not accepted Toyotas, but he had made an exception for Ruth, and though he had worked on her car with some indifference and disdain, he'd kept it running, and at a fair price. People were dying right and left around Ruth. Death was picking up the pace. Two poets she had never met but read with great pleasure were taken on the same day. Her pedicurist had died, and what would Ruth do without her unjudgmental services? It was so easy to let oneself go.

"You're here for the jewelry, I suppose," Ruth said.

“I’d forgotten about the jewelry. But O.K.”

Ruth had actually gone through her jewelry some time ago, but she was still amazed at how much of it she had. She could remember the provenance of only a fraction of it.

“Provenance,” the girl said. “That’s an interesting word. What does it mean?”

Ruth wasn’t aware that she had uttered the word aloud, though there was no reason not to, it being a perfectly benign word.

The child was paler than Ruth remembered and scrawnier than ever. The pink backpack could quite possibly weigh more than she did.

“Do you really need that thing?” Ruth inquired. “Doesn’t your mother ever wash it?”

“The doctor?”

Ruth supposed her own question had been merely rhetorical.

“Bring it up here, take everything out of it, and I’ll scrub it with a good bar of soap.” The thought of some of her jewelry (for she had no intention of giving the girl all of it) being lowered into that stinking sack prompted her to action. Also, she was curious as to what could be in the massive thing.

The child hopped up the steps, unstrapped herself, and began unzipping the backpack’s numerous pockets. This took some time.

There was nothing. It held nothing.

Ruth decided that she didn’t want to tackle the problem with a good bar of soap. It was all right. Whatever. Sometimes you try to fix something and it ends up more broken than ever. Or broken in a different way.

“You don’t even have your drawings in there. What happened to your drawings?”

“I decided that was the wrong approach. What would you say your discomfort level is right now, on a scale of one to ten? One being your most comfortable or least uncomfortable, of course.”

“I’m quite comfortable, thank you,” Ruth said.

“Mine’s around a six.”

“To be honest, perhaps mine as well.”

Neither chose to elaborate on these disclosures.

A little breeze wound past them. Ruth remembered that breeze and was always grateful when it reappeared. The veranda was somewhat oppressive and in need of paint. Portions of the floor had rotted through, and you had to stay away from those.

“Can I see your dogs?”

“Not today,” Ruth said.

“Thomas Aquinas said that friendship between humans and animals is impossible.”

“That’s idiotic. I’ve never heard of anything more ridiculous.”

“What could he have been thinking, right?” The child was hunched into her backpack again. “Once you’re dead, you shouldn’t be read.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Ruth said.

“I have brothers and sisters, you know. A whole mess of them.”

“Really? I haven’t been aware of them. I mean, I haven’t seen them.”

“Just me.”

“What?”

“You’ve just seen me.”

“Yes,” Ruth said.

Ruth thought she’d walk up to the doctor’s house. Take a good look. Figure this thing out. Get to the bottom of it. She dressed as well as she could, for the weather was every which way; it was hard to know. First dry and hot, then such humidity that it was difficult to breathe. She selected a skirt and blouse, a sweater. Her closet was stuffed with things she hadn’t put on in years. She pulled out a pair of shoes that were velvety with mildew. One more wear and then out they’d go, she decided.

She ate a bowl of cereal. The milk had gone bad. Sometimes the refrigerator took pride in keeping things cool and crisp and sometimes it didn’t seem to care.

She began cautiously. The way was slippery, greasy almost, and tipped upward toward the aubergine house. The solar panels lay there, ruthless and withholding. The house was silent and looked pretty much the way it always had to Ruth. She hadn’t really examined it before, but scrutiny afforded her nothing new. Other than its perplexing color and the depressing row of stumps on its southern border it was unexceptional. The child did not appear; nor did any “mess” of others—not that Ruth would have been surprised if she were told by a responsible party that they didn’t exist. The girl was prone to enlarge on the truth, and her knowledge was exaggeratedly spotty, certainly.

Ruth tried to think of herself at that age. It was winter, and she was sliding down Chicken Hill on a piece of cardboard. No one had real sleds with runners. Everyone had a piece of cardboard. It was called Chicken Hill because it ended at the road. You had to know what you were doing. She’d been a far more robust child than this one, and not as humorless or demanding. Though the girl was demanding only of her time so far, which wasn’t much or was everything, depending on how you looked at it.

Chicken Hill, Chicken Hill, what a place! The world! She could feel the purity of its cold core and see the slick ice shining. Her sled had once been a carton that held gallon jugs of maple syrup. It was so strong—the finest, fastest board on Chicken Hill. . . .

The sounds of children laughing and screaming faded, and she found herself standing dumbly before the doctor’s house, which exhibited no sign of life whatsoever. She turned and made her way down the street again to her own unkempt home. She saw this clearly: the place needed some fluffing up. But she had five

dogs—there was a lot of wear and tear. More than five would have brought her to the attention of the authorities. “Keep the authorities at bay as long as you are able” was her motto. On the steps she paused and kicked off the foul shoes. She opened the door, hoping the dogs wouldn’t knock her over in ecstatic greeting. They had no idea of their size and were always so glad to see her.

But the dogs were not there. They had vanished as though they’d never been, along with their bowls and beds. That last detail, that their belongings were gone, too, gave her hope that, despite appearances, a cruelty had not occurred.

Naturally, Ruth was heartbroken. She loved her dogs. If such a thing could happen, anything could happen. Someone might suggest that she had not had the dogs at the same time—after all, five was a lot to handle at her age, and they’d been big dogs, too—but had a succession of dogs over the years. But that would have been mean and not helpful in the least.

You can’t live a life that’s no longer your own.

Which was a truth that surely didn’t apply only to her, for many must feel they are living lives that they no longer inhabit, just as sometimes the tears you shed seem to come from the eyes of another.

Ruth was concerned that the child would ask to see the dogs, as she usually did, but she did not. Of course, Ruth could have said “No” or “Not today” once again, but it wouldn’t have been the same.

“One of my classmates died,” the girl announced. “She was in my grade at school.”

“And what grade is that?” Ruth asked, quite irrelevantly, she knew. Her voice had become faint with disuse. If it hadn’t been for the child’s visits she might have lost it altogether, and the visits were becoming less reliable. Their connection was wavering; Ruth could feel it.

“The second. She had a rare form of cancer. They said they’d never seen such a cancer before, behaving the way it did.”

“Oh, they’re always saying that,” Ruth said impatiently.

“So many people came to her funeral. You’d think she’d taken a bullet for a senator or something.”

“You must be sad. It’s quite sad.”

“I know,” the girl said piously.

“Death’s got the bit in her teeth these days, I’d say.”

Ruth saw it then suddenly, as she would a picture, her horse, Abdiel. She would ride him on Chicken Hill in the summer, when the grass was high and smelled so sweet—grass could no longer smell as sweet. He was a big horse, probably too big for Ruth as a child, but they seemed to have an understanding, the two of them. Abdiel. Her mother and father had named him for the angel in “Paradise Lost”—“faithful found, / Among the faithless, faithful only he.”

They had loved books; their house was full of books, all in other hands now, or worse, the books and pictures and animals. Ruth hadn’t been much of a reader herself. As a child, she’d wanted to possess herself, only herself. This was her duty. Yet she was aware that any moment could take away the assurance that this was possible. Her mother and father had not been very sensible. They were bohemians, romantics, clever and hungry and bright, believers in the wild freedoms that life bestows and which time and death are so eager to unsustain.

Her father had said that Abdiel looked like Tolstoy’s horse, the one in the famous photograph, black and spirited, his gleaming flesh forever rippling and shuddering, as though grazed by an unseen hand, as they galloped on Chicken Hill—Chicken Hill, what a place! The world!

“I believe,” the girl said, “and it saddens me to say this, but I believe we’ve come to the end of our options here.”

“Have I told you about the horse, my horse, Abdiel?”

“You have,” the girl said.

“Oh my, I did? Because I haven’t thought about him in ever so long. And he was so real, such a living force, my determinant.”

“Quite real,” the child agreed. “He was the last real thing, I think.”

“Not a piece of harmless cardboard, not a scrap of my imagining.”

“Imagination only fails us in the end, when the stories we tell ourselves have to stop. You don’t mind me saying that I’m going, do you? The doctor’s packing us all up. We’re going away.”

“Where?” Ruth managed, but she didn’t hear her voice saying anything. Her voice had nothing to say.

“Who knows? No one tells me anything.”

Ruth was almost happy, getting to the bottom of it, for she felt that she had. The corners of her poor veranda were dissolving into shadow. She didn’t see the child leave her. She didn’t even see herself leaving, having just, at last, gone.