Disturbing the Peace

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FICTION

Disturbing the Peace

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Daddy reached for the green knobbed gearshift and yanked it into fourth.

"Jacob," he said, "don't forget what I told you. Stay put till I get this mess straightened out, you hear me?"

"Yes sir," I answered.

"Shouldn't of brought you along no ways," he mumbled, gazing out over the budding pastures. "You tell your momma and that tail's gonna be mine. You got that?"

"I wouldn't tell Momma about man stuff, Daddy. Besides, I can handle the wild side." Daddy raised his eyebrows and looked me up and down from across the cab.

"Well," he said, reaching up to adjust the mirror, "like I say, just stay in the truck. Liable to be over with by the time we get there anyway." As we turned onto Maple I spit my gum out into the wind and hoped that he was wrong.

Daddy was the sheriff of Willard County. That Saturday afternoon Gilmer Lewis, his chief constable, had called out home hollering for him to come into Beckton over to the courthouse lawn. Seems like the town nut had lost his bolt, and old Gilmer aimed for Daddy to head off any trouble. Momma had run over to Mrs. McKinney's to drop off some bread and wouldn't be back for a while, so I pounced on the chance to follow Daddy and watch him lay down the law as he had done so many times in my dreams.

The muffler hit bottom as we cleared the dip on Cherry Street. Daddy hung the curve onto Green.

The nut was a black man named Oscar Bradshaw, affectionately known as Frosty. Beckton called Frosty a town legend, but Daddy just

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Wade Stone, a student at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, says, "I consider myself a student of Appalachia, and pay close attention to similarities between the region and my hometown, Glasgow, Kentucky, in the central part of Kentucky."

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called him the town drunk. The old man, in his ragged clothes and gray knit cap, burned daylight sucking in Lysol from a brown paper bag as he shuffled around the square begging for the quarter that he never got.

It was told that one of the farmers on the outskirts of town let Frosty use an old horse stable as a shelter through the nights. But when winter rolled around and Frosty's feet began to numb, he would march straight to the police station, place himself directly in front of the wide glass window and drop his trousers as he polished off a fifth of whiskey and hummed a few bars of some ancient spiritual in that phlegm-clogged voice of his. Frosty's concert always resulted in the longest local jail sentence—four months or until spring arrived—for public intoxication, indecent exposure, and disturbing the peace not to mention the Reverend's wife who witnessed last November's indecency. Of course, all of this meant peace for Beckton and a warm bed for the notorious repeat offender. My father liked to call the arrangement a symbiotic something. As far as I could tell, the townsfolk called it justice.

But then spring would arrive, and the flowers would bloom, and the birds would begin to sing again. And there would be Frosty with a fresh smile and a fresh can in front of the corner drugstore, swaying from side to side.

As Daddy pulled into a parking place facing the courthouse, we spotted a small circle of people on the front lawn. Daddy let out a sigh and issued one last warning. "Now stay in the truck, Jacob. Oscar's usually harmless, but a fella can't take any chances. You ought to be able to catch plenty of that wild side by watching from here on the curb." Daddy popped the snap on his holster and headed out the door and onto the sidewalk.

As he crossed into the grass, the crowd opened up to let him through. In the center of it all staggered Frosty in what appeared to be a drunken rage, screaming at all the onlookers, spit riding the back of every stressed syllable.

Daddy stepped forward and confronted him. "All right, Oscar, let's wrap this up, whatever it is. C'mon now."

Frosty jumped back as Daddy reached for his arm. "You stay right there, Sheriff Baines," he stammered. "I ain't out to hurt no one. I's just mindin' my own doings and all the sudden there's talk of lockin' me up. Now I don't know what them rule books say but last I knowed, warn't no crime to mind ya own matters."

"Francine says she saw him with a gun, Rollin," reported Gilmer from the back of the crowd. "Says he was waving it around. Says it was a pistol of some sorts."

"Oscar?" said Daddy, seemingly unsure of what to think. "That true?" I drew my imaginary six shooter there in the cab in hopes that Daddy would follow.

"Aw, sheriff, you knows I ain't got no gun. I just been speakin' the words of Jesus Christ with this here Bible. Miss Francine do well to listen up or get her some sight, one."

"Let me see your Bible, Oscar," ordered Daddy, holding out his hand. I slid my piece back into my holster.

Frosty reached in his coat pocket, pulled out a King James version with a black leather cover, and handed it over. Daddy quickly flipped through the torn and crinkled pages and then smacked it shut in his hands. "I reckon all you're packing is the Scripture today, Oscar." Easing the book back into Frosty's hands, he continued, "You ought to be looking at what the Good Book warns about booze and unruly behavior before you pull this stunt again. Daddy turned around to the crowd. "All right now everybody, go on about ya business! Ain't nuthin' to stand in line for here."

I was disgusted. I could have caught more action at home watching one of Momma's casseroles brown in the oven. After shooing away the last of the curious, Daddy turned to Gilmer and said, "Gilmer, let's go inside for a spell. I'm gonna call the jail and tell them we're sending Oscar over there for the night."

Gilmer nodded his head and the two of them walked toward the courthouse door. Daddy turned and hollered out to the truck: "Jacob, you just sit tight. I'll be right out, you hear?"

"Yes sir." I watched Daddy follow Gilmer.

Ignoring all the commotion, Frosty had taken a seat on the bench beneath the poplar tree. I scooted up to the edge of the seat and rested my arms on the dashboard, focusing my stare. Frosty pulled his cap down to his eyebrows, stretched his legs out before him, and nestled his chin firmly against his chest. Was that it? Where were the guns? What about the commotion? We had peace and it needed disturbing. But then the more I thought about the situation, the closer I came to understanding. Attention was the last thing my father wanted. There were way too many people around. I mean, fathers have to be careful with those kinds of things. Acts of courage can't just be tossed around like rice at a wedding. Real heroes have to pick and choose. Daddy had simply decided to pass on this one.

But as for Frosty, what kind of legend was he? Why did he back down? I threw open the door, jumped down from the seat, and crossed over to the courthouse lawn.

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Frosty kept his head down as I neared the poplar tree, but I kept a close eye on him all the same. I stopped at the foot of the bench and looked him over, from the worn- down soles of his faded black boots to the raveled edges of the dusty cap that hugged and hid his head. I breathed a deep breath and then plopped down beside him.

"My name's Jacob," I said. "But my friends call me—"

"Jake," he interrupted without lifting his head. "Jacob Baines, the sheriff's boy."

"How did you know?" I asked, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees. Pausing, I continued and asked him, "Was you ever thinkin' about hurtin' my daddy?"

Frosty raised up just enough so that I could see his eyes peeping from beneath his cap. "I didn't wanna hurt your daddy, boy. Don't reckon I ever wanted to hurt nobody, 'cept for maybe a while ago when I's wonderin' if you was gonna keep starin' from that truck over yonder."

"I wasn't staring," I said looking down at my feet. "You saw me staring?"

"Saw ya?" he said. "Hell yes, I saw ya. If them eyes of yours had of bugged out any further from that scrappy head, I reckon they'd of been right in my lap." He coughed something up, cocked his head back over the bench and let it fly about ten feet in the air behind us.

Meanwhile, I heard the metal latch give way on the courthouse door, and I jumped up from the bench to run for the truck. But just then Mrs. Bennings came out of the building in a green striped dress, folding in her hands what appeared to be an old parking ticket. She never once looked our way and headed on up the sidewalk. I reclaimed my seat and steadied my shaking hands as Mrs. Bennings disappeared around the corner.

I looked over at Frosty. "What's the matter?" I asked. "Why are you so sad?"

Frosty looked at me curiously from the corners of his eyes. He let out a deep, raspy chuckle. "I'm afraid if I's to tell you my story, we'd be here till you was as old and gray as me. But I know one thing for sure. Old Frosty's at the end of his rope."

Then all of a sudden, Frosty's eyes got big and wild, and both legs began pumping on the balls of his feet. He turned and whispered crazily. "Little Jake best be gettin' his self back in that truck before his daddy come catch him with the crazy man!"

"Well," I said, "you sure was acting crazy today."

"You wanna know why, boy?" he shot back, pulling his legs in and

drawing his face nearer to mine.

"Why?" I asked, frightened.

Frosty looked me over in disgust, then turned away. "Ah hell," he murmured. "You just a kid."

"But I wanna know why," I pleaded. "All I know is that you're a drunk. The kids at school want to make you our team mascot, but I think it's for the wrong reasons."

"Is that so?"

"Yep," I assured him. "Some kids say they ought to change us from the Beckton Bulldogs to the Beckton Bums."

"Is that right?"

"Yep," I confirmed.

Frosty looked to the sky, pushed his cap high upon his forehead, and sighed. "I am sick and tired of being this town's legend," he finally said, slapping his hands down on his thighs. "Yes sir," he nodded, "I'll tell you my story. Ya see, I used to be someone, Jake. I know it's hard for ya to buy, but I walked these streets same as everyone else. I went to church, gossiped at the hardware store, owned property." Frosty pulled his cap back down.

"Then Momma died," he sniffed. "And the government took our land, the land I's supposed to tend to. Said I wasn't mentally able. They said Momma done all the thinkin' and all I done was labor. I knew what they was up to. Them boys just didn't want a black man holdin' a big old piece of the richest farmland in the county."

Frosty was letting it roll and I wasn't about to stop him. He spoke in a groove that didn't need skipping.

"They knew I wasn't about to fall for the stuff they fed Momma, prices being played with and all," he continued. "Hell, we was gettin' half of what the others was gettin' come time for sales. Momma never said a word. I reckon she figured we'd get even less if she argued. Besides, Momma didn't care for no trouble so I had to keep quiet and do what was best for her. Meanwhile, them government no-goods knew as long as she had a heartbeat that I wouldn't raise no ruckus. But all of that changed when the good Lord saw fit to take her soul, and I had no choice but to fight for what was mine, what was ours to begin with."

"You had land? You were normal?" I asked.

"Normal?" he scoffed. "You can't trust nuthin', boy. You can't trust what you see nor what you hear. Why, most times ya senses ride caboose on the train of truth."

"So was that why you started drinking whiskey?" I asked.

"Whiskey?" he sneered. "Why, I've never touched it."

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"But everybody's seen that bottle you carry around."

"Water," he said. "Spring water from over at Blue Spring. A man's got to do what he can to survive, and these old legs couldn't take many more winters round this square."

"What about the indecent stuff?" I asked.

"Aw hell, I just saw an opportunity and took it," he laughed. "Rinyard's wife kept shoutin' the Lord's name in vain, her wrinkled old hands clutching that ugly old purse of hers. Yeah, I reckon she feared I's gonna snag her belongings and shove'm down my underpants." He made an imaginary newspaper in the air with his hands. "Why I can read the headlines now—'Frosty Steals Rinyard's Riches and Stores Them with Rest of His Jewels.'" He chuckled and wheezed in delight.

I couldn't believe this was the same man we used to point and laugh at while hanging out the windows of our passing school bus. Come to find out, not only did Oscar once farm, but he also had a souped-up tractor that he kept in the shed. Some weekends, he'd haul it up to Temple Hill and run it in the pulls.

Anyway, the government took his tractor along with his land twenty-five years ago. Oscar found out along the way that some top dog in the Department of Agriculture had retired his red International to an air-conditioned garage up in Frankfort. He went on to tell he had plans of getting it back someday.

"Well, Jake," he said finally, "I reckon your daddy will be out here shortly, ready to tan your hide. You best get on back."

"Daddy don't hate you, Oscar, I swear. He just doesn't know your story."

"Oh I don't reckon he hates me, Jake," said Oscar. "But tell me something," he continued, rubbing his chin. "How old's your daddy?"

"Oh, I don't know. He must be getting close to fifty."

"And how long you reckon he's lived in Beckton?" he asked.

"Oh, Daddy's lived here all his life. He's always telling me stories of how he and his grandpa used to go fishing over at Ritter's Mill."

"And what do you suppose all this means, Jacob?" he asked.

"Well," I said, buying time to figure his point, "that Daddy don't like to move?"

Oscar stretched his legs out once again and crossed his feet, drawing his coat shut. "I'll tell ya what it means, Jacob. It means your daddy knows my story and was around when it was written. That's what it means." He stared at me intensely. "Your daddy's done a lot of good for me over the years, Jacob Baines. He's kept the wolves back when they was hungry as ever. He's even saved my life a time or two. He's

kept the peace." Oscar reached for my shoulder and gripped it firmly in his big strong hand. "But Jacob," he said, "every damned one of us can be actors now and then. And believe it or not, daddies can play some mighty terrible roles, and the only ones left to deal with their deeds is the likes of me." I looked over at the door. "Ya daddy's only human, Jake," he said. "He ain't no damn hero."

Oscar reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small black pistol. He pushed open the cylinder and dumped the shiny silver shells into his palm. Holding onto one, he tossed the rest over his shoulder and they landed on the thick green grass with scattered thuds. Oscar slipped the gun back into his pocket.

He stretched his hand slowly up into the air and held the single bullet out before the falling sun. The silver shone brightly against the backdrop of his grimy hands. Oscar gazed at it, cleared his voice, and began to sing.

On Christ the solid rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand
This shell will lead me to His land.

"You run on now, ya hear?" He rubbed the bullet on his coat sleeve and slid it back into his pocket. "I said you run on now, Jacob."

"Yes sir. I reckon I should."

"No need to worry about me, Jake," he said, winking with a grin.

I got up from the bench and took off for the truck. Just as I hopped in the seat and shut the door, I looked up and saw Daddy come out the courthouse door. He walked over to Oscar and the late afternoon light cast their shadows huge against the courthouse steps. Daddy's lips whispered something to Oscar and Oscar only smiled. They shook hands and patted each other on the back before Daddy turned away and came back to the truck.

He got in and turned the key. The engine sputtered to life. Daddy leaned forward, reached into his back pocket, and pulled out a pouch of tobacco.

"Pretty wild, ain't it, boy?" he said, stuffing a chew in his mouth.

"Yeah. You done good, Daddy." I said, looking down at the floorboard.

"Yeah, well. Man's got to do his job I reckon." He spit into an old beer can he had placed between his legs and grabbed the green knobbed gearshift, putting it in reverse.

"Did you mind what I told you?"

"Yes sir."

"I appreciate it, Jacob. Maybe you can come in with me again sometime."

"Yes sir," I said. *Not for a while*, I thought.

As we rolled away from the square, I never looked back.

Cataracts

Who programmed this event,
this film gathering in my eyes
like shadows of clouds?
I grow irritable
edged, off key
On the phone to my brother
I hear my voice say,
"I won't hold my breath
waiting for your letter."
Like my blind aunt
I save newspaper clippings
to communicate with my friends
making my point perfectly clear
making them strangers.

—Virginia Whayne DeVries