**Side by Side**

Diane Raven

I saw my father cry only twice. The first time, in 1957, I wasn’t much older than eight. We were living in the cinder block basement of our house at the time—seven feet below the ground. Two sump pumps monotonously sucking water from the square cement pits, in the basement floor, sounded like kids slurping milk shakes from straws. I developed a habit of counting the footfalls of my parents and siblings as they descended the twelve steps into the basement; each person’s cadence was as distinct as their fingerprints. My father’s tempo was usually quick, but today it fell on my ears like a drawl. He stopped short of the pallet that sat at the bottom of the stairs. I waited for him to step down and walk through the opening as usual, but he didn’t, so I walked in front of the opening. He quickly wiped his hands over his eyes, cupped his bloodied face, and cried—A bundle of rabbit hides lay between his feet. I stepped up into the darkness and sat beside him. We didn’t talk, and I didn’t cry.

That first time, I didn’t know why my father was crying, but eventually, I pieced together enough fragments of the story, as kids do when they begin to pry into the chinks of their childhood, to understand. On the basement stairs that day, nothing was coherent or logical, but the sweet smell of freshly skinned rabbits crept into my nostrils and lingered as I watched the thin hides dry and crack like parchment paper.

Throughout the day, a tragedy, far greater than the death of my father’s rabbits, hummed in the background. Before I went to bed, my parents told me that my Uncle Eddie died. We would be traveling, 200 miles, from Wisconsin’s Fox River Valley, southwest to Beetown, to attend his funeral. Beetown isn’t far from where I was born and my father’s family still farms. In my parents’ bedroom that night, my father’s hushed tone cued my attention—“For the Christ’s sake, he burnt to death in that trailer. He was drinking, wasn’t he! The rabbits are taken care of, so we’ll leave early tomorrow morning.” My father’s anger and my mother’s silence confused me. I fell into sleep listening to her sniffles.

For as long as I can remember, we’d drive down to my grandparents’ farm, in the sweltering heat of the Midwest’s summers, to help bale hay from the windrows of timothy grass. By day’s end, our arms looked like plucked chicken skin—all bumpy, red, and prickling. After haying, we’d drive down to the hollow to visit my Uncle Eddie, Aunt Ruth, and my cousins, Kenny, Denny, and Terry. Denny and I were the same age, so we usually played together. My uncle would roast a suckling pig on a steel pipe—its burnt umber skin glistened and cracked as it hung above the cement pit while its fat dripped and hissed on the applewood embers below. And my aunt would bake the sweetest, sour gooseberry pies. Visiting my relatives in the hollow was like living in slow motion—their vowels were long and lazy, and their laughter danced like dust particles suspended in the towering planks of sunlight radiating from the oak-hickory canopy. While the adults laid back and talked into the night, my cousins and I would rustle down the sharp hillside to catch fireflies along the creek bed.

The same people who attended my Uncle Eddie’s funeral service, at the church, also came to the cemetery: my relatives, their farmer friends, and my uncle’s co-workers from the Beetown Cheese Factory. The pallbearers were all farmers; their sun-dried, wrinkled skin looked odd sticking out of their starched, white shirts and well-pressed suits. Without hats, their foreheads were white as milk. After the burial, those same people drove down to my Aunt Ruth’s house. Just below the house and in the lee of the hollow, the charred exoskeleton of the trailer sat like a gargoyle on the wet, sandstone ledge.

At the wake, we were distracted from the sadness around us by the vast amount of food, waiting for us, on the long porch table. We filled our plates with macaroni and cheese, thick slices of ham, deviled eggs, and gooseberry pie; headed to the horse barn, and ate our food on benches braced against a wall of bridals, rusty bits and saddles. I don’t remember talking, but the smell of horse sweat and saddle soap washed over me like a hard spring rain. After we ate, we grabbed our Mason jars, and under the darkness of a new moon, we captured hundreds of fireflies from the creek bed. We worked our way up to the top of the hill where my Uncle Eddie used to sit against a massive oak—and drink. At dusk, my Aunt Ruth would tell the boys to fetch him.

After reaching the top, we looked down into the darkness; it was as though the stars had fallen from the sky. There were blinking green and yellow lights everywhere. My cousin Denny and I sat down, side by side, against the deeply furrowed bark of the old oak, and cupped our Mason jars with both hands. I could see the others heading back down the hill to the creek bed, and some were already climbing the hill toward the house. Denny opened his jar and scooped out a handful of fireflies, quickly crushed them between his hands, and rubbed them over his face. I didn’t say anything. Tears and bits of fireflies ran down his face like lava flow. Head down, he said, “Don’t tell anyone.”

The second time I saw my father cry, I was 34. My mother was scheduled for early morning surgery; her foot was being amputated. When I stood in the doorway of the dimly lit waiting room, he was alone, elbows on knees, and hands cupping his face—crying. I sat beside him. We didn’t talk. I sobbed uncontrollably.