**The Last Mr. Tefertiller**

Tara Williams

The first Mr. Tefertiller arrived in the American colonies sometime before the Revolution, subsequent generations migrating steadily westward. The last Mr. Tefertiller, a descendant of the Tennessee Tifertellers (surname altered by a careless census-taker’s transposition error), was born in a house on a hill in California, a stone’s throw away from the Franciscan mission that gave the city its name, and within sight of the western edge of the North American continent.

Woodrow Wilson Tefertiller, as an eldest and only son, had been named, according to family tradition, after the president in office at the time of his birth. Neighbors referred to him as “old Mr. Tefertiller,” which distinguished him from “young Mr. Tefertiller,” Franklin Delano, who was old Mr. Tefertiller’s only child.

Old Mr. Tefertiller lived in a tall, narrow clapboard house built by his grandfather, William McKinley Tefertiller. The house had been built over an unmarked burial ground where several thousand Mission Indians had been shoveled into mass graves during a century of genocidal afflictions.

Old Mr. Tefertiller’s stoic grandfather had paid little heed to his home’s troubled past. Only 13 Indians remained in the county at the time of the house’s construction. As a boy, old Mr. Tefertiller had simply accepted the house’s cold spots, the occasional midnight-to-3 am moans and whispers. He was not, by disposition, an imaginative man.

He was, however, deeply sentimental, particularly concerning the house, which he regarded as the seat, the embodiment, the sum total, really, of all that was noble in the Tefertiller line. Not only had he been born within its walls, his wife—the only person old Mr. Tefertiller had ever truly loved—had given birth there to Franklin Delano. Old Mr. Tefertiller, still a young man on that ill-starred morning, had made a decision amidst the blood-blackened sheets of his marital bed that he would never again set foot outside the white picket fence enclosing the property where he and his wife had shared the few moments he deemed worthy of remembrance in his otherwise unremarkable life.

Like an ant trapped in amber, old Mr. Tefertiller became immobilized in time and place. Marooned at an early age with the pendant weight of his albatross father hung around his neck, Franklin Delano Tefertiller, having inherited the peculiar imaginative void characteristic of all males in his family, never married or ventured beyond the county line.

Twice a year, on Father’s Day and Christmas, Franklin Delano brought his father gifts, tokens of affection that old Mr. Tefertiller rarely opened and never actually used, with the single exception of a battery-operated flashlight, which the old man employed occasionally on warm summer nights to pluck ripening cherries from the backyard tree he and his wife had planted on their wedding day.

And so it came to pass, one moonless night, that old Mr. Tefertiller, flashlight in hand, ascended the weathered rungs of a small wooden ladder resting against the tree’s slender trunk, for the purpose of gaining access to the last of the season’s cherries hanging high in the uppermost branches. Somewhat precariously balanced, old Mr. Tefertiller reached his knobby-knuckled, claw-like hand toward a small firm cluster of perfectly ripe cherries. In that exact moment, a tiny blood vessel burst somewhere deep in his wrinkled brain, and in slow motion, like a cartoon character, still clinging to the ladder with his hand extended upward, he fell backward onto the soft wet grass, the ladder and the flashlight bouncing softly to the earth on either side. And there he lay, unable to move, his pale, glassy eyes wide open and fixed in the general direction of the house.

Somewhere in the ground beneath him, soft voices susurrated. The air began to bristle with an accretion of energies as the many dormant spirits still tethered to the place assembled, pressing together in onion-like layers that accumulated inside the house and through the walls to fill the yard outside, where the hairs on the old man’s paralyzed arms stood on end.

A cold breath of wind blew over the kerosene lamp he’d left perched atop a pile of old newspapers. Old Mr. Tefertiller’s wide-open eyes reflected unfurling tongues of flame as they licked and devoured the walls that had sheltered his ten decades of existence.

At that precise moment, Young Mr. Tefertiller, nearing 80 and no spring chicken himself, arrived at the house where he had been born, and his father and his grandfather before him. The sight of it burning so unnerved him that he drove his car right through the white picket fence.

Franklin Delano Tefertiller dashed up the porch and ran inside, calling for his father.

The roof collapsed with young Mr. Tefertiller trapped inside. Out on the lawn, old Mr. Tefertiller expired in the same instant, the shriveled bulb of his fossilized heart swelling and bursting in an anguished and final efflorescence.

And in the obsidian sky above the burning house, neighbors swore they heard voices singing in a strange and unintelligible language. Some saw a weeping Franciscan priest, and still others saw Native dancers in full regalia, stomping on the distant stars.

Sometimes, in summer, by day or by night, often on a dare, local children will jump the decrepit fence and wade through tall weeds grown over the house’s ruined foundation to climb the gnarled tree and pluck its reddening fruit, only to discover the cherries have gone bitter.