

One of God's Finest Creations

Chuck Holmes

It weren't much different from where I lived.

It was just one room. Where I lived up in Flat Tree Gap was one room. And there was just one window. Just like my cabin. I suppose the difference was there was a lock on the door here. I didn't have one at the cabin. And here they wouldn't let me come and go just like I wanted to.

In the morning, they let me out, and I mopped the floors in the hall in front of the cells, and I mopped all the empty cells. Mostly they were empty, except on weekends when they brought in two or three who were afflicted with moonshine. I knew most of them. I'd sold them corn liquor.

It was in the afternoon, and—best I could figure—I only had twelve days left. I'd been here for seventy-eight days, and the judge gave me ninety days. That was a few more than he usually did. I guess that he was just tired of seeing me. I'd made the scratches on the bunk, one for each day I was here so that I could keep up with it. One time before they'd made me change cells, so I lost count. This time there were seventy-eight scratches on the corner I was using.

I was just laying there, thinking about how I'd get the copper I needed for my new still. The sheriff's people had chopped up my old one. Maybe they had sold off the copper. Either way, I didn't have it, and I couldn't get it. I still hadn't figured it out when Kenton showed up at my door. Kenton was one of the sheriff's deputies, and he stayed around the jail most of the time.

Kenton was a big man, mostly in his belly and his legs. His legs were so fat that he had to walk with them spread apart. Sort of like a duck.

"Get up, Ethan," he said. "I got to take you somewhere."

I shook my head. "Nah. I already mopped the floors. That's all they said I had to do."

“Ain’t got nothing to do with mopping. Get out of the bunk and come on.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I didn’t think the sheriff was going to put me on a road gang. I just had twelve days left. Besides, he didn’t have enough prisoners to make a road gang. But I got up and walked to the door. About as slow as I could.

Kenton unlocked the door and walked down the hall. Didn’t say another word. Didn’t look back to see if I was coming with him. We walked by the empty cells, through the jail door, and into the sheriff’s office.

Bailey Adams, the sheriff, was sitting back in his chair with his feet up on his desk. I always thought that it was a mark of the sheriff’s good character that he still wore brogans. He was not one for putting on airs. Bailey’d been sheriff about as long as I had been a bootlegger, and generally we got along. Every few years, sometime before the elections came, he’d have to arrest somebody. Sometimes it would be me. It was sort of a show. He’d make a big deal out of chopping up a still, and he’d usually get his picture taken pouring out the shine.

I knew that, even when he had me in handcuffs somewhere behind him in the picture, it wasn’t my moonshine he was pouring out. He kept that for himself and his family. There were enough bad moonshiners around that he didn’t have to pour out the good stuff.

“How ya doin’, Ethan?” he said.

“Tolerable,” I said.

“You rehabilitated yet?”

“Don’t know. Have to wait and see, I guess.”

“I guess,” he said. He took his feet off his desk and leaned toward me.

“Got something I need for you to do,” he said. “Might not be something you want to do. Don’t know. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to.”

It wasn’t like Bailey to beat around the bush like that. I wasn’t sure I liked it. Nice thing about being in jail was I didn’t have to make a lot of decisions. But I couldn’t help being a little curious about what Bailey was beating around the Bush about. So I just stood there.

“I got Joe Spivey in the solitary cell. He’s going to be hung this afternoon.” From the look on Bailey’s face I could tell he didn’t like the idea.

“Hung? What’d he do?”

“I let Joe tell you that. I told him I’d get him a preacher, but he said that he didn’t want one. I told him you were here. He said you’d be alright.”

Joe and I had been neighbors, but up in the Gap that meant he’d lived two or three miles from me. We’d talked sometime and seen each other in town.

But Joe and I, we didn't spend a lot of time together. He didn't drink. He went to church. He was married, and best I could tell he was glad of it. Not much in common between us. But if Joe wanted me instead of his preacher or some other preacher, it was about the least I could do for a man about to get hung.

I nodded, and Bailey nodded.

"Come on, then," Kenton said. He left the office. I followed along.

I'd never been in this part of the jail. Nobody gets hung for moonshining. Sixty days. Maybe ninety days. That's all there is. That's the reason I never truly thought about giving up making liquor. It's what I knew how to do. What my daddy did. And it made me enough to live on. Didn't need much since nobody wanted to marry me, and I didn't want to get married.

There were only two cells, and one of them was empty. They were both kind of dark. Kenton unlocked the one on the right, and I heard somebody stirring.

"Hey, Ethan." I still couldn't make out who it was, but I figured it must be Joe.

"Hey, Joe. Hear you got yourself in a mess?"

"I guess. Won't be much of a problem much longer. They going to hang me at three."

I didn't know what time it was, but I knew I'd eaten. That meant it was probably getting close to three.

Now I could see Joe. He was sitting on the edge of his bunk and had his elbows on his knees. He was just staring at the wall. Joe was always a skinny sort, but now all I could see was his knobby wrists sticking out of the sleeves that were hanging off his boney shoulders. Like somebody had sucked all the flesh right off his bones. I wondered how a man that skinny could make an honest living. He shifted down a little so I could sit down on his bunk.

I sat down and stared at the wall with him for a minute. It seemed like what he wanted to do. But I couldn't help wondering what he'd done that was bad enough for them to hang him.

"How did you get into this mess, Joe?"

"Wasn't hard. I killed Avery Spence. Then I walked into town and told the Sheriff what I'd done."

"Damn! When was this?"

"Little over a week ago. On a Tuesday, I think."

"And they're going to hang you today? That's real quick."

“Don’t take long. ‘Bout the only thing I said to the judge was I did it. Seemed to be enough.”

“Well, maybe if you had a good reason, they wouldn’t hang you for it.”

“I guess my reason was good enough. I guess hanging’s good enough, too. I don’t want to go down to Alto for the rest of my life.”

He went back to staring at the wall. I did too. But in a minute, there was something else I wanted to know.

“Why did you kill Avery Spence?”

“Seemed like the thing to do.”

I thought maybe he had some kind of better reason than that, but before I could ask him what, he started talking again.

“You know Nancy?”

I did. Nancy Spivey had one time been the best looking woman in the Gap. She still was prettier than most. She had long hair that bounced on her back when she walked. A little waist. Hips that went back and forth at the ends of her hair. Most everybody, especially the men, knew Nancy Spivey. Some of them probably thought of her some. I didn’t. Not just because she was married to Joe Spivey, but because I couldn’t figure out why Nancy Spivey would want anything to do with me.

She had some education. She’d been to the school up at the Gap until she finished there. That was eight years. Then she helped her mama on the farm after her daddy died. Then she married Joe Spivey, and he took over running the farm.

“Yeah, I know Nancy, but what’s that to do with Avery Spence.”

“She took up with him. Behind my back. Maybe he took up with her. Anyway, they were together.”

“You mean she was running around with Avery Spence?”

“I think I said that.”

“And you shot him for it?”

“Nope. That won’t be the reason. I figure she was about as much responsible as he was for the running around. If I was going to shoot one of them, I’d had to shoot them both.”

I could see how he was right about that. One did about the same thing as the other, in a general way. Seemed like reason enough. I heard him make a noise. When I looked, his boney shoulders were shaking, and he had his face stuck in his hands. I moved a little further away on the bunk. In a minute, he wiped his face on his sleeve.

“I loved her. I couldn’t of killed her, no matter what she did.”

He wiped his face again, dragging his sleeve across his eyes.

“You know, I never could figure out why she married me. I know I’m not a lot to look at. I never had a lot of money. There was something. Her mama said it was because I knew how to plow a rocky field and get corn in the ground. Maybe that was all there was to it. If it was, I didn’t care. I figured whatever made her want me in her bed, whatever made her want me at her table, that was good enough. I didn’t ask no questions.

“But she changed. I thought it was something I’d done. But it didn’t matter what I said or what I did; she still didn’t seem like she used to. I’d try to be warm. She’d just turn away. Then she started going out. Never said where she was going. I’d just sit home and wait for her to come back.

“One night when she left, I went after her. Just to see where she was going. She walked down the path and around the edge of the creek. Then she crossed it and went into the woods.”

We heard a noise at the door and saw Kenton standing there.

“Here’s that peach you wanted, Joe. You sure you don’t want something else.”

Joe shook his head and got up to walk over to the door. He took the peach from Kenton through the bars. He looked at it, then rubbed it on his shirt sleeves.

“No, thank you, Kenton. I don’t reckon I’ll be around long enough to get real hungry. Obligated to you.”

“You let me know if you decide you want something else, Joe. Everybody should get a last meal.”

Joe held up the peach.

“This’ll do fine.”

He sat back down on the bunk, looking at the peach.

“You know,” he said, “there’s nothing much better than a ripe peach. I’m gonna miss that. Sweet with peach juice running down my chin. One of God’s finest creations.”

He took a little bite of the peach and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“You followed Nancy into the woods?”

“Yep. Not hard to follow somebody who don’t know they’re being followed. I just walked real quiet and stayed a ways behind her. Nancy came into a clearing and just stopped and sat down on the ground. I thought maybe she just came out here to think. I do that sometimes. But then Avery Spence comes up. Nancy gets up and kisses him. She kissed him harder than she’d kissed me in a long time, maybe ever. Then they lay down on the

ground, and Avery started putting his hands on her.”

“What’d you do, Joe.”

“Nothing. I just stayed behind the tree and watched. I watched, and when they finished and stood up, I crawled away.”

I didn’t know how a man could watch another man take his wife. I’d never had a wife. Never really had a girlfriend. I don’t know what I would have done, but it wouldn’t of been just to watch.

“If you didn’t kill him for that, why’d you kill him?” I asked.

He just sat there, taking little bites out of the peach, wiping the juice off his chin.

“I followed her there two more times. I wanted to say something, do something, but I didn’t know what. I just knew that I didn’t want to lose my Nancy. Then the third time I followed her down there, hunkered down behind that tree, something was different. When he came into that clearing, she didn’t kiss him. She just stood there.

“I watched Avery Spence come over to her and grab her by the shoulders. She shook her shoulders, trying to get his hands off her. Then she said something. I don’t know what it was, but I could tell she was mad. He still had hold of her shoulders. She said something else, and he shook her. I thought he was going to break her neck.

“Then he hit her. Avery Spence hit my Nancy, and she went down on the ground. He just turned around and walked away. I wanted to run to her, but I couldn’t let her know that I followed her. I stayed there ‘til she got up and wiped off her face. Then I went back. Made like I was asleep. After a while, she came in and got in bed. I think she was still crying.

“I laid there, thinking about Avery Spence, and in my mind, I saw him hit Nancy again and again. She kept falling on the ground crying. The more I thought, the madder I got. I guess I figured out what I needed to do. When Nancy finally went to sleep, I got up, took two shotgun shells out of the box, and went to the barn.

“It ain’t hard to make a slug for a shotgun. You just empty the shot out of the shell. Then you pour in some melted lead. In a while you got a lead slug that’d kill most anything if you can hit it. It’d take down a bear. I made two slugs, then I got my shotgun and cut across the field and through the woods to Avery Spence’s house. It was just about getting light.

“I put the two slugs in my double barrel and settled me down behind a bush between his back door and the outhouse.

“It wasn’t long, right after first light, when he came out the back door, still in his nightshirt, scratching and yawning. He was walking toward the

outhouse when I stood up and yelled out his name.

“He turned around, looked at me, and said ‘What?’”

“That’s when I shot him. Shot him in the face, and that slug near took his head off his shoulders. Then I walked up to him and shot him in the dick with the second slug. There wasn’t a whole lot left. Then I walked to town and told the Sheriff what I’d done.”

I just sat there for a minute, trying to get a picture of headless, dickless Avery Spence in my head. Couldn’t feel sorry for him though, messing with Joe’s wife like that. I knew that Joe could forgive her for going to Avery Spence, but he couldn’t forgive Avery for hitting her. I didn’t know whether that was real love or real crazy. Didn’t much matter now.

“Would you do me a favor, Ethan?” he asked

I told him I would, but it’d be twelve days before I got out. Could it wait that long?

He said it probably couldn’t, but maybe I could tell the sheriff.

“I want a decent burial,” he said. “Probably not in the churchyard. Don’t think they’d have much use for a cold-blooded murderer, no matter what the cause. But in a nice place. There’s a hill on the farm that would make a good resting place, not far from the house with a big oak for shade. If Nancy wanted to, she could come visit it. I’d like to think she would. And would you tell her that right up ‘til I quit breathing, I loved her? Don’t make no difference what happened.”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to the sheriff, and I’ll talk to Nancy. Did she come see you?”

“No. I asked the sheriff to tell her not to. I didn’t want her to see me locked up. I know I was never much, but I was never behind bars.”

He took another bite of the peach.

We heard a noise in the hall, and Kenton was unlocking the door.

“Time to go, Joe,” he said. Kenton’s voice was just about a whisper.

“Can Ethan walk with me?”

“Yeah, you get somebody to go with you. Usually, it’s a preacher.”

“Rather have Ethan, I think. Can’t imagine a preacher would want much to do with me now.”

“You might be surprised, Joe,” I said. I thought about some of the other people I’d seen go to the little church and what I knew about them. I thought some of them were a lot worse than Joe Spivey. He’d done one real bad thing, and he had cause. Some of those other folks did bad things about every day, for no good reason except they wanted to. That was part of the reason I didn’t go to church.

We walked down the hall, Kenton in front, then Joe, then I followed along behind. At the end of the hall there was a thick wood door, probably about twice as thick as most. Kenton pushed it open and walked in.

The hanging room wasn't big, maybe 10 feet each way. In the middle there was a rope, a noose, and some kind of cutout thing on the floor. The hangman, Tommy Gomer, was standing just the other side of it. The sheriff was standing off to the side. Joe walked in and looked around. He nodded to Tommy and the sheriff.

"Tommy. Sheriff."

They both nodded back. The sheriff walked up beside Joe.

"Here's how it works, Joe," he said. "You know what the noose is for. That square on the floor is a trap door, about six feet of space under it. When Tommy puts the noose on, and you say any last words you want to say, he'll pull that lever over on the wall. The trap door'll open, and you'll drop through the hole. The noose will break your neck so it'll be over quick."

Joe nodded. "That's good."

Then he stepped onto the trap door and looked at Tommy.

"Might as well do it, Tommy."

Tommy put the noose over his head and tightened it up.

"Do you have any last words you want to say, Joe?" Bailey asked.

"Some. I asked Ethan to tell you about my last wishes, and I'd take it as a favor if you could do that."

Bailey nodded.

"And I want to thank Ethan for coming and sitting with me. I told you and the judge what I did, but I never told anybody why. Telling somebody, that was important to me."

He turned and looked at me.

"Thank you, Ethan. You done a kindly thing."

Then he held out the half of a peach that was left.

"I'd like for you to take this. It'd be a shame for half a good peach to go to waste."

I took the peach out of his hand. He looked at Tommy and nodded. Tommy pulled the lever for the trap door. The sheriff was right. It was over quick, and Joe Spivey just hung there, as dead as Avery Spence. We watched while his body swayed back and forth some at the end of the rope. He had sort of a surprised expression on his face.

Tommy told us that we could leave, that he'd wait for the doctor to pro-

nounce Joe dead. That was just something that had to be done.

So we all walked back into the hall, Bailey, Kenton, and me, leaving Joe dead and Tommy waiting for the county to say so. We didn't talk on the way back to the other part of the jail except for Bailey to ask me what Joe's last wishes were. I told him about the place on the farm where he wanted to be buried. I told him that he hoped that Nancy would visit the grave, though I didn't much think she would. I thought she'd left Joe a long time ago.

Bailey said he'd take care of it and that I could go get my stuff. I told him that I still had twelve days, and he said that I'd miscounted. I'd done a good thing today, and that had to count for something.

I went back to my cell and sat on my bunk. Eating the last half of Joe Spivey's peach. He was right. A good peach is one of God's finest creations.