

THIS IS THE ONLY TIME I'LL TELL IT

by Doris Betts

Maybe we should never have given Zelene the baby. Except for me, everyone else on those rocky farms had more babies than they could feed.

Tom Jamison could have fed his—he'll never get that excuse from me—that man was always crazy. After his wife died he got drunker and crazier, and it was nothing but accident that Zelene Bolick was walking past his house and heard that baby scream and keep screaming. She beat on the locked front door, she called, and finally ran on the wraparound porch to a kitchen window in time to see him sticking the baby headfirst down a bucket. How Zelene got inside she never said much about. The woman must have exploded through the glass. As usual, she wore half a blanket for a shawl; I guess she wrapped up her head and dove straight through the panes.

Did she remember, through some mended crack in a full-sized bone, anything at all? Was there a spot in her trained from the very first to know, some part that ticked far away to the words she read?

Tom, maybe thinking the whole wall would come next, let go the baby's feet and ran out the back door while Zelene yanked the baby's face out of the water and blew breath through the mouth. That picture—her with a scatter of bleeding cuts and her blanket shining with broken glass bits while she matched her

big lungs to those little ones—well? It affected us. The baby, a girl, was nine months old.

When she had brought back breath and screams, Zelene opened her clothes and fixed that naked baby flat against her naked breasts and buttoned her tight inside and started running to the crossroads with the blanket wadded to her front. The lump was still glittering with glass when Zelene ran yelling into my store. Blood on her forearms had stained down to the elbow points and dripped off.

While we waited for the Sheriff, she laid the bare baby girl on my counter by the cash register. "Give her your coat," said Zelene, breathing hard.

I wished that wooden surface was softer when I saw the bruises. Would you drive off a sparrow with a log? I just can't tell you.

The Jamison baby cried through my red wool coat. "He's bringing the county nurse," I told Zelene.

"O.K.," she said, stepping back to shake a few bits of glass to my oiled floor. "I'm going back and kill him." Before I could move, she lifted the biggest ax off my shelf and was gone.

She didn't find Tom Jamison, of course. Nobody did for six months, and then in another state. By the time he was safe in prison the baby was better, her arm bones grown back shut; and we Presbyterians had voted her to Zelene and told the State what we called a *righteous* lie about next-of-kin.

There's nobody can lie like a Presbyterian if he thinks good sense requires it. My wife's people, Baptists, are a lot more soft-headed; one of them would have read his Commandments wrong and weakened someday.



But we had 37 lifetime Presbyterian mouths gone flat against their teeth till Judgment Day, and 20 of them—not counting mine—had been heard to declare it was a shame Zelene had not drove home her ax.

Before the Jamison baby, see, Zelene has been pitiable herself. She was 38, and built like a salt block. Even the widowers needing a good worker in the house never thought of courting her. I don't believe her broad mouth was ever put to another human mouth until that day in Tom Jamison's kitchen; I don't think more than a washrag had ever touched her chest before. She owned an old cabin her daddy had left, two cows, some chickens, hogs, a garden to can from, one hound dog so dumb it split one ear and then two on the same barbwire fence. She had lived up the road so long alone that she went by touch and not talk. I know I often shouted the weather at her in the store—her nods and pointing made me nervous. She would pinch, too, if you took down sugar when she wanted tea.

But Zelene was a Presbyterian—God, yes.

Yes *sir*, I ought to say. On foot to church and prayer meeting, snow or not. Coming through the rain with her wide face wet, and leaving empty a whole back bench or two around her goaty smell. Bringing, not money for the plate, but one of those oakstave baskets that she wove, full of squash, beans, or wild fox grapes, for the preacher's table. The basket stayed with the food; I thought he must have dozens getting brittle in his loft.

She brought her own cow on a chain to be bred; she birthed the calves alone and slaughtered a hog in November and cured her own hams. Everything at Zelene's moved through the circles: what seeds she planted she had dried and saved; the cow's turds went straight to her garden rows; she never wrung a rooster's neck until the young cock had whipped him once. I sold her everything on trade. She put good handles on those baskets; I've carried stones in some of mine.

Zelene couldn't read—my wife brought that up at the special church meeting. Two of the elders rolled their eyes away from that Baptist flaw and toward me till I had to stand up, fast, and brag on the memorized Scripture any of our members knew by now. Somebody else said school buses would stop for anyone's children waiting by the road.

Before the health nurse brought the baby back, our whole church cleaned out Tom Jamison's house of whatever Zelene could use, even the mantel clock my wife would have liked to own. We carried the stuff a long way uphill to her front yard. Zelene came out wearing a blue dress I didn't know she owned, her mother's maybe. We formed a wheel of people near her woodpile for a baptism with cold water dipped out of a Bolick spring. The preacher bent, whispered to her, waited, poured a cupped handful on the head which now belonged to Silver Bolick. The people were expecting some choice more Biblical. My wife said the name would have better suited a cow.

All of us shook Zelene's big crusty hand. My wife told her Silver would never remember all of that early pain. A blessing.

Zelene shook her cropped brown hair. "The pain went *in* her."

Her fierce voice surprised us, she spoke so little.

"I wouldn't ever tell that little girl a thing about it," said my wife, avoiding the baptized name.

Nodding, Zelene only ran one finger down the thin arm that the crazy man had broken, saying in silence that the mark was made, made deep, that water meant for drowning had gone inside this child, that no grown body—at any size—would ever be fully dry of that knowledge.



Oh, yes, Zelene, a Presbyterian.

Listen. It's true. Count them by hundreds; terrible things are true. It's all I can take eating Christmas dinner with my wife's stribbly kinfolk. They live on *should be*; I live on *is*. Open your Bible, which Testament is longer? There's not a single good argument against Jesus picking His time back in Egypt, when the Jews really needed Him. Forty years His ancestors wandered to Canaan; He never needed but 33 to set up the whole system. If you were planning all along to walk on the water; why not to Noah?

First time I ever scattered a dandelion seedhead, I knew how much life was planned to be wasted. Right away, Abel was blown on the wind?

I slid my fingers once on the baby's damp hair. "Let's go home," I said to my wife.

You can't make Ruby see anything. She jumps from Genesis 1 to Luke 2 in a breath, and all the heathen before and since those times pass through her mind in some kind of a blur, without counting. I see their one-by-one breakable faces, so much like mine. Waking many a night, I have laid furious in my own bed, certain I could have run the whole thing with some speed and a lot more kindness. But you have to be Presbyterian to feel that bitter in the dark.

My wife Ruby sleeps sweetly through the nights like a Christian and prays over sins too small for a man like Adam or me to notice.



All that was back in the thirties. Ruby, who still thought she could pray out a child of our own, let that one go to Zelene with a smile. We have been waiting ever since.

I kept a close weekly eye on Silver Bolick, carried as she was through all weathers to church. When she could walk, I would keep her outdoors at services. We wrote and drew in that packed, hard dirt with sticks, while the high singing voices at our backs bounced through "By and By," and cut by tenor and soprano the Depression down to size.

Sometimes, at the courthouse, I put down a little on Zelene's land taxes. Sometimes for her I turned back the scales at my store. I told her people in town had paid cash for the baskets my mules were then eating from. Ruby wanted to carry the woman and child her own butter and pound cake; she is never going to live in these hills like a native.

All of us natives took on our voted jobs. Some, during church hour, forked more hay into her barn; others would lift Zelene's hens and add eggs. My job was to watch Tom Jamison, keep track of where the State sent him next, when he would come up for parole and how to keep him from winning. One time the guards found a knife in his mattress; I am not going to tell you how I did that.

When she was six, Silver stood behind the organ and said to the whole congregation the Children's Catechism. Thirty-one pages. Not a lip in the house failed to move through the words while she answered those questions, then to mouth prayers one syllable behind her voice. "Give me neither poverty nor riches," she said in this wire-thin voice of hers, "feed me with the food that is needful to me; lest I be full and deny Thee, and say, Who is Jehovah?"

All of us shared the recital except Shank Evans; that was his Sunday to cull out Zelene's two sickly piglets and replace them as near matched as possible. By August, Silver was half through the harder Westminster. That year, she got off the school bus at my crossroads and swept my clean floor every day till her shoes were paid for.



Slowly, I learned what her life with Zelene was like. Kerosene lamps blown out early, though by now the electric tower stood in her own pasture. Each eggshell saved to be fed to the chickens, each chicken bone sucked dry and crushed and sent back mixed with their feed. When the straw ticks went flat, they were emptied on the clean stable floor; what had been shoveled out steamed down her cornrows; every brown corncob started the morning fires. Wheel in a wheel. The girl could learn worse, I thought.

As she grew tall and got long in her limbs, I would try to tell which had been broken. You couldn't see it.

One time she told me her daddy had frozen to death just before she was born. Who would have guessed our Zelene could have thought of that? I passed it on. During cold winters, we took to recalling him for Silver. It was a night like this. So was the ice in the creek that day.

The talk molded Zelene's blunt face to a widow's. With her hair streaking now, with her head thrown back, she had gotten her beauty long past any practical use to her, at a time when our other women were pinching inward.

How to explain this. Well, have you ever walked up on a feeding deer and had your breath stolen? Knowing the deer had no slight intent of beauty, he was just eating grass? Like that.

With Silver, the good looks came early. She could give feed sacks a shape. Where Mabel Jamison's hair had been sparse and pale, Silver's was as full as a wheatfield and the edge curled under like a soft hem. Behind that swirl of yellow hair she had a brain you could almost hear humming; I would listen anytime she hugged me. She could outwrite and outspell the low-country children. Nobody else did the Psalms as well. Once when she did parts of Isaiah, I had to go outside and stand by myself in the heated air. She was reading from the late chapters, what they call The Rhapsodies. "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass." I stayed out there until everyone else had, on her voice alone, mounted up with wings as the eagles. Did she remember, through some mended crack in a full-sized bone, anything at all? Was there a spot in her trained from the very first to know, some part that ticked far away to the words she read? I could see nothing hurt or frightened in her, and her voice warmed up that whirlwind.

Then she was seventeen, and in my store trading rag dolls for cornmeal, when the man came in.

He looked at her. He was my age. He took a cold wet bottle from the drink box and paid for it in coins.

They did not look alike—let's settle that now.

"How you doing, Coley?" he said to me.

Even the voice sounded different. Last time I heard, he had fought with a prisoner and that fighting canceled his appeal.

"I don't know you," I said, and started Silver to the door. My hand was pushing on her back where the hair touched.

"Jamison," he said. He touched himself on the chest as easily? Well? I have seen flies set themselves down harder than that. He said, "I'm looking for Zelene Bolick. She still live up that road?"

Broke out, I thought, although they've got a lot of Baptists in State Government these days.



“She’s home,” said Silver, but I shook my head at her. My telephone was in the very back of the store. Once I thought that was better; you could call in while the thieves were still scraping back the screen.

How she did stare at him! Maybe her bones were looking. Maybe below her ribs there moved a memory of water. What if she raised against this man the arm that knew his hand had broken it? Well?

I kept my axes still on the very shelf. It was so light, the one I chose, that I felt a whole crowd of us had lifted it high, and swung. She did not scream until after he burst to the blade.

Babies should not be beaten; I do not care Who made this world.

RONALD MORAN

WALKING WITH A WOMAN *FOR DORIS BETTS*

I was walking with a woman once,
not my wife,
on a campus square that was ours
as much as anyone’s.

The woman was smoking a cigarette
in a holder,
and I was smoking, too, the blue puffs
trailing us,

as if we were two locomotives burning
blue wood.

The woman was a writer, one so good
the other writers

that haunted our campus, like specters,
knew the woman
was the best of all, and that’s not all:
She led programs,

taught with a skill the equal of her prose,
was married, mother of three,
and made a long commute to the campus
every day.

Somehow our talk turned to degrees,
the academic kind,



about which she said, *You can't lose them,*
no matter what,

but you sure can lose the title of Mrs. Now,
almost 40 years later,
neither of us smokes, and we both have lost
our mates—

the loves of our lives—to death's elastic arm.
But Doris,
they cannot take away your short stories,
your novels,

the awards you keep winning and winning
but never talk about,
as in the story that won an Oscar as a film,
and, as a musical,

the New York Drama Critics Circle Award.
Well, Mrs. Betts,
all's well with all of us, now that you're here,
my old friend.

PETE SIPCHEN

BRAVE GIRL

How small you were, slumped against the counter
Where kitchen lights etched fine shadowed lines
In your fallen face. How the chains, the iron confines
Of the day had chastened you, made you flounder

For your delicate balance. His hammering words,
Hard and inelegant, had broken the soft bones
Of your resolve, aged you like grief, cast you alone
Onto a dark shore. Yet by morning, as seagoing birds

Will kite above the waves, steady, ever diving,
You'd made of the battering wind a force for lift,
Found a foothold, dug in again atop that cliff,
Your lighthouse heart still standing, still shining.