

Bend

Mr. Charles Harvey took up all of the land along the Yellson River Bend and groomed it into an estate like those in the English country where he spent his childhood at sleep-in school. In Yellson Bend, we slept in our school too, but during class and when the flood came and when the desperados were besieging. When I said Mr. Charles Harvey—his name was actually Mr. Charvey in town—groomed the land into an estate, what I meant by it was that he hired a workforce of drunks and Chinese to hack away the vegetation and coyotes while he sat under an awning on Crest Hill with a glass of Scotch in his hand and a gilt hunting shotgun across his lap. When they were done with the hacking, those who didn't collect along the water and go back to drinking continued on in Mr. Charvey's employ and built a mansion, a main street, a church, and a collection of sheds for the inebriated contingent—largely to prevent them from rolling out of bed and into the river. After that, the builders again divided themselves into sippers and employed: the former operating the saloons in a confused way, and the latter gardening the mansion's grounds. Soon after, women showed up, and I was born along with my fellows.

My mother was Katherine Hessley of Iowa City, and she passed away when I was five. I missed most of the process, because I was on a fishing expedition with the little half-breed Andrew Chang and Click Spanner, one of The Pickle's sons. When we came back, the burial was on and I knew that my mother was the one in the coffin because my siblings were the only children dressed in black. They said she was run over by the rum cart while taking her laundry across the street.

Ten years later, I was asleep on a cot in the attic of the drug store, and I wasn't dreaming. A hand flicked my nose until I sat up.

"Good morning," the voice attached to the hand said from the darkness, "I'm sorry to give you a morning before it's light. That's the first apology you get from me; there's one more coming."

I instinctively threw my hands up before my face to fend off any incoming fist.

"No, relax."

I didn't relax.

The hand came back into view and patted me on the shoulder. Another hand lit a match and then a cigar, and the glow illuminated Mr. Charvey's jowls and tousled hair.

"I own everything in this town. I stand in my mansion and I look down past my garden and see my saloons, my general store, my train station, my dock, my Chinese laundry. I own the land it's all built on and the sidewalks they all walk on. I own the smoke that comes out of every goddamn cigar," he said before gifting a cloud of that smoke to my bleary eyes. "And every

goddamn cigarette. I own this drug store. I probably own this cot.”

He stood up and paced before the foot of my cot. I followed the trail of his cigar cinder back and forth and held the blankets up to my chin, speechless.

“I like owning it all. I want to keep owning it all. Reverend Bishop can spit all he wants about the hereafter, but in the end he’s spitting about it in my goddamn church. From my goddamn pulpit to my goddamn pews.”

“In church they be goddamn?” came a choppy, accented voice from the darkness.

It was the voice of the girl we all thought about at night, the voice we all wanted to hear in our beds, us maturing men. It was the wonderful daughter of the woman who pressed shirts. She was called The Oriental Flower in the saloons, The Empress on the docks, and Ting-Ming by the outlaws who ran off with her periodically. With one hand, I gripped my sheets.

“Excuse me?” Mr. Charvey asked.

“I say, ‘In church they be goddamn?’ ”

“I heard you. I just don’t have any goddamn idea how to take your meaning,” Mr. Charvey answered exasperatedly.

“In church God all good. Damn is something from street. Reverend say damn thing don’t cross thresher.”

“Goddamn son of a bitch!” Mr. Charvey vociferated. “What the nonsense that man says. Thresher? What palsy whore gives a shit if his thresher is damned or baptised in the Ganges? There isn’t any sainted thresher, that’s true, but no goddamn damned one neither. Bless the reverend.”

“I give shit if church thresher damn.”

“The church hasn’t got a damn thresher, Ting. That ain’t no language for a damsel, neither.”

“Church got a thresher, Mr. Charlie. Got a thresher sure as The Pickle stink Sunday.”

“Sure, and the church got a little barn to put it in for the off-season,” Mr. Charvey chuckled, now. “Got a little alter boy to grease it and adjust the belt.”

“Got a thresher, Mr. Charlie,” The Empress insisted.

“And a little repairman comes twice a year to tune it.”

I hadn’t the nerve to interrupt, faced as I was in the middle of the night with the singular man no one in Yellson Bend could ever look in the eye and the singular woman no one in Yellson Bend could ever take their eye from. The confused dispute they pursued passed unhindered through my ears while I sat open-mouthed and unblinking in the darkness.

“You tease me, Mr. Charlie. I go church seven days. You go church when? Summer, you went church one day. Got no damn in church and final.”

“If you didn’t look so swell...”

“We come here talk with boy,” The Empress interrupted with victorious command. “Talk with boy.”

Mr. Charvey gave an exaggerated sigh and turned to me. He looked steadily into my eyes for a long time, while I traversed the wild landscape of his hair in the gloom.

“Well, it was my own prophecy I set, but set it I did,” he eventually began, “So, here’s the second apology: I’m sorry for waiting till now, the moment of my elopement, to tell you you’re my son. It’s wicked, leaving you to grow up as you did with no father—and with a mother dead most of the time.”

“I’m your son?” I stammered.

“Illegitimate, of course. I never married your mother.” He grimaced at my dour aspect then added, “You’re my favorite bastard, though. Always have been.”

“I’m your favorite?” I asked pointlessly, overpowered by momentary shock.

“Yes, your bright little eyes top the pie. I always thought you got brains, working in a drug store and leading all the other little men around on campaigns.”

I grunted assent the way the Chinese did.

“Got a poor habit of mumbling, though. Speak through your mouth, not your nose, if you ever want to get somewhere.”

“Yes, Mr. Charles Harvey.”

“Now, I’m going to take Ting here and go off somewhere with less goddamn dust. With no intention of coming back, I’ve got to put all this in civilized hands.”

He made a motion in the darkness, but I couldn’t tell if he was motioning out the window toward Main Street or toward me.

“Can’t have a drunk running things, can’t have a yellow-speaking nitwit prancing about neither. So, I brought you all my papers.” He knocked about then exclaimed, “Where’s my goddamn briefcase?!”

“You brought here, Mr. Charlie. Always shouting.”

“Here? That’s a goddamn table leg.”

“No, you brought here somewhere. Didn’t leave with furs and gold in mansion.”

“Again the nonsense!” Mr. Charvey shrieked. “Of course I brought the goddamn briefcase. The reason we came here was to deliver the goddamn briefcase to my goddamn bastard son.”

A series of crashing sounds and mutterings commenced. I pulled my covers an inch further up my face and tried to reflect upon my situation. I’d never applied much deduction to the matter of my father. There were no men in town I’d have chosen, so I’d decided long ago that he was some charismatic traveler. He was a young man on his way to California, from New York, who kept a journal and made naturalistic sketches. Now my father was someone very different. He raged around the room in a fit of curses, turning my little attic space into something very undesirable. I made no negative value judgment regarding my new father, though, for I’d been taught to admire the rich.

“It here.”

“I know it’s goddamn here. Where, in the righteous picnic of God’s good creation, is it, though?”

“It here, Mr. Charlie.”

“Shut up, you goddamn harlot of creeping mischief! I’ve a blessed search to conduct.”

“It here, Mr. Charlie! And I no harlot, Mr. Charlie.”

Mr. Charvey turned on The Empress with a raised fist but stopped before advancing. She held a small black briefcase up before his eyes and beamed like a ray from heaven.

“Well,” he said quietly, straightening his tie and cuffs, “I see what you mean.”

The Empress ceremoniously passed the briefcase to Mr. Charvey who tossed it onto my cot.

“It’s got all the deeds, all the contracts, and all the blackmail dirt. This here briefcase is the goddamn town.”

He looked around at the overturned room with a hint of embarrassment but then shrugged.

“You can sleep in the mansion, now.”

“You want me to be the mayor?” I asked, though I knew it sounded stupid.

“I want you to be the mayor, the judge, the governor, the goddamn president. I’m clearing out of this dump and taking the Oriental beauty with me.”

Mr. Charvey took The Empress’s hand and strode to the door.

“And tell me where you keep the laudanum. I need something for the road.”

“It’s in the forth drawer from the left of the third row up, behind the counter,” I stammered.

“Much obliged,” he waved, “Goodbye, dear boy.”

“With love etcetera,” The Empress bowed.

The couple disappeared down the stairs. I heard more crashing and indistinct arguing, followed by a victorious cry, and finally the sound of a stagecoach racing away into the night.