

Chapter One: Walker

Years of hard-slog on foot to thank, he called himself *Walker*...and *Judson* because the saying created a most pithy tang. *Walker Judson*—the vibrations formed nicely in his mouth to move smoothly over tongue and lips. *Walker Judson*—he liked to say it. And renaming himself had been a thing of great comfort.

With no further need to walk, countryside speeding by, on this day he drove a big rig. Country-and western tunes blaring, sky dropping rain *whump-shump* went the windshield wipers as Walker whistled away. Yet with each passing mile, his chest crimped tighter.

Rounding a bend, spotting a seersucker-suited man in the roadway, he swerved, eased the rig on past, parked, jumped out and ran back to ask, “You OK?”

The fellow tried to point; his arm, half-lifted, twisted, oddly. “Help! I can't. Someone...,” the gent mustered.

Eying the curve, Walker envisioned a vehicle barreling round it. “It’s not safe here.”

Good arm raised, the man indicated a smashed guardrail; skid marks ranged over its top. Down the embankment, chrome glinting, a car lay on its side, wheels spinning.

“I’ll go check,” Walker said, returning, “but first, you must move.” The man failed to budge. “OK then...” Walker dragged him from harm. “I’ll be back.”

Rain thumping earth, guardrail vaulted, branches smacking his face and ribs, Walker crouched to avoid taking a tumble, but slid out anyhow.

Chug-a, chug, the car’s engine rattled. He scooted over to peer inside. Nobody within. Mud sucking his boots, rocks shifting, giving way underfoot, he skidded further, grabbed an upturned root and glanced about.

Blood scenting the air, legs cocked at immodest angles, there she lay.

Full-up with dread, moved adjacent, Walker shed his coat to cover her thighs.

Lips, arms, legs—all flesh a perfect match to the indigo of her dress; with his ear to her mouth, he could not detect breath. Fingertips at her neck. No throb, either.

Glass embedded the woman’s skin and hair. A fist-size shard nearly cleaved her throat. Blood gushed around it. Given the extreme bend of her neck, it appeared broken.

Guidance whisked his ears—*take her pulse*. He gripped her wrist and felt the tiniest flicker. Faint,

waning flutterings trickled beneath flesh: the woman hovered at death's lip.

“Lord,” he implored, “what next?” He sat back on haunches to wait.

As if an epileptic, his body took up with the shivers and quakes. Try as he might, he could not contain them. Tremors intensifying, he shut his eyes.

Eyes open again, inquiring hand upon the woman's chest; still no breath.

But then...spasmodic articulations, barely perceptible, sparked beneath his fingertips.

Light visible to his eyes now—mostly at the woman's elbow and knee joints, thin murky streamers leached out.

Walker pulled back. *Is this the egress of her life force?*

Deep inhale, then exhale, calm descending, filament-like tentacles trickled from his spine's base. As if he'd taken root, they sunk, twisting, wending, to anchor him within the soft spongy earth.

Something primal birthed within, heat passed upward, to fill every cell and crevice of his being, but then spewed, mightily, out from his skull's top. Overtaken by a rolling surge, breathless, amazed, Walker gazed down from above. Palms, fingertips aglow, no longer himself, but something other, he metamorphosed into ethereal mist to comprise *All that Sees and Knows, All that Has Ever Been*.

Shrunk to dot size, imperceptibly small, he entered the woman's psyche to witness the crash replay itself. Rubber screeched. He felt the car flip, dive into free-fall, hit rock with an immense *whump* as metal crumpled.

A body, hers, suspended, weightless—soft *woof*, thudded back to earth. Air sucked inward, chest imploded, breath gone, she departed her body.

“God, a little help here!” Walker called out.

Motes of confusion whirring about, inexplicably foreign to his usual self, he heard himself coo and burble.

Touch her head and then her heart, came the command.

His hands obeyed; her body sparked slightly.

Rush, rush. Intuiting the precise means to create a circuit, he touched the woman's neck, arms, and chest. Hands roving, he massaged her temples, stroked her chin, brushed fingers through her hair—anything to gain purchase—to call back a life.

Blood gush ebbing, the woman's pulse throbbed softly. Heartbeats rippling hair follicles, gradually

those pulsations expanded outward in layers, steadily strengthening.

Walker gripped the woman's head, positioned her neck, and yanked, grinding bone against bone, twisting. Gagging, he wretched, then leaned back, applying steady traction.

Eyes blurted open, the woman convulsed, then flailed. Walker tapped her brow. She lay back, becalmed.

Long suck of air, pain—her pain—swept through to overwhelm. Yet, never had he known such joy.

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Stink of mud swarmed round as Walker paced the hospital corridor. Doors swung open, a doctor emerged, scruffing his chin to announce, “We’re treating the gent for a broken arm and for shock. The woman has cracked ribs. She bled so bad, the trauma alone could’ve killed her. Don’t know what to make of it; she also suffered a recent spinal fracture that seems to be on the mend. Judging from its location and severity, she should be dead, but isn’t. And”—he eyed Walker—“her companion claims you slid his ulna and radius back inside and closed up the hole with a flash of light. Likely, trauma and shock altered his mind.” The doctor paused, expectant.

“Imagine that,” Walker muttered, noncommittal. Inwardly, however, he grinned.

Chapter Two: Young Walker

Many a time the boy spied Ma, lips moving, soundless, sniffing air as if an apron-wearing hounddog. His take, this meant she’d departed and...that she kept secrets.

Would she disappear altogether?

Often, he feared she just might.

“Does Ma plan to leave us?” he’d once asked Pa.

“Ask yer Ma,” Pa practically hollered, “see if she’ll say!”

The boy had a secret of his own—a pretty good one. He saw things invisible to others; light emanated from and surrounded folks. First time it happened, Pa caught fire. No one else saw. Not Pa, nor Ma.

Late one night, just turned ten, he came upon his parents, faced-off in the kitchen. “You lost your mind?” Pa hissed, barely audible. “Where’d you put it, then?” Sorrow, confusion, permeated his

question.

Ma jutted her chin. "I cannot tell, Hollis." Air highly charged, sparked and sizzled.

"I suppose you'll say," Pa growled, "Almighty God gave you the right? But, I say, go git it!"

An expectant hum clung in the air as Ma shifted, warily. "I can't." Pa made fists.

Tiny pricks stabbing at innards, closer, the boy inched.

Pa tried a pleasant tone, "Who'd you give it to, then?"

Ma's eyes darted, blinking fast. "It's not like that."

Pa tensed again. "Git it back tomorrow, first thing. Hear?"

"It's gone. I..." Ma wavered. "I won't—can't—get it. Not now—not ever."

"Do as I say!" Pa's balled fist shot out, colliding with Ma's jaw.

Ma flew backward, but kept right on, in the exact same tones she used to calm the chickens, "You can't make me obey."

"Hush, Ma!" the boy blurted.

Ma whipped round. "Get to bed, son. This is no matter of yours."

"Show you who's in charge! Sure as hell, it ain't your God!" Grin insanely wide, arm unfurled, Pa whapped Ma's belly. Ma doubled over, then stumbled.

"Pa don't!" the boy yelped, wrung his hands.

Pa punched again. Ma teetered, then toppled, tangling legs in a chair as she went. Pa kept coming. Quick, hard kicks. Boots collided with Ma's bones, teeth, and skull.

Despite darkness, the boy saw all. Drops of sweat laced Pa's brow. Spray arced from punches. Ma's flesh took blows, then caved in. Smells—hot, rank—sickened.

Ma tried to stand. Pa slammed her to the wall.

"Stay down, Ma!" The boy pushed between them. "Stoppit, Pa!"

Scooted back, Ma cast her son a quick, wild glance.

"Mind me, woman," Pa menaced. "Return what's mine. Else, I pound you to bits!"

Full-up with feeling, unable to catch breath, the boy saw himself charge, headlong, pummeling with

windmilled fists. Heard himself howl, saw himself grab the frying pan, swing it, braining Pa a doozy. Hands at his sides, feet glued to floor, he emitted a mere puny croak, "Stop knocking Ma!"

"Git outta here, son!" Pa gave him a shove. The boy stumbled, cracked his head on counter's edge, tried to stand, but his legs slid out.

Slumped, dazed, blood whooshing his ears, he looked to Ma.

Nightgown hiked up, moonlight illumined her thighs, as Pa loomed above her. "No more prayin' to your Almighty God. If he knows all, no need botherin'—is there? Like I said," Pa enunciated real slow, "git it back tomorrow, else I'll whup you good." He then swiveled to bark, "You try my patience, boy!"

Fumbled upright, the boy stepped out of reach.

Then it came...

Soft flames, comprised of light and variegation, drifted up, then off from Pa's hulking frame.

Blink, blink—the boy worked to clear his vision.

The flames remained.

Mouth shaped to give warning, instead the boy stared transfixed.

Pa smoothed hands down his shirtfront; smoky puffs unfurled from his fingertips.

"Clean up this mess," Pa directed Ma; murky streamers blurted forth from his lips. "Then come to bed." Pa hadn't noticed anything amiss.

Blink, blink—the boy stared again.

"Git a move on!" Smoke frothed out Pa's nostrils.

Even this, Pa failed to catch. "What're you starin' at, boy?" Vaporous trail retracted, it then disappeared.

Had Ma seen? The boy checked.

Eyes looking dully out from swelling flesh, Ma slumped, panting. *No, she couldn't have.*

Pa yanked Ma to her feet. Then they leaned together as if to whispering endearments; the boy hoped they might make up.

Pa grunted, then gave Ma a shove. "Second thought, don't bother comin' to bed. I'm sick of the sight of ya." Ma stumbled, let out a yip, then gripped the sink rim.

Senses swarmed the boy: murder, rage, prominent amongst them. Yet, feet smarting on floorboards, off

he scurried to bed.

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Sunup next morning, Ma shuffled about, painfully slow. Care taken not to bang pots, she shut cupboards with most deliberate intent, and seemed scarcely present at all.

Pa hovered at the radio, absorbing the weather report as he chomped away at his grits. Coffee slurped down, he stood, wiped his mouth, and went out.

On her way to the sink, as Ma caught his stare, crimson blotches swept up from her collar to overtake her cheeks. Heart jolted at sight of the night's ravages, the boy too went blotchy.

If asked, she'd claim a wayward hoe fell off its peg, whacked her up-side the head, gashed her cheek, swelled her eye and split her lip.

But he knew different.

Why'd she defy Pa? And why not just go get It?

It—he guessed, referred to one of their cows, sheep, goats, or chickens. Ma could fix the problem if she wanted; easy-peasy. Go get *It* back, and peace would be restored.

Napkin fretted to tatters, he hoped she'd do just that.

But Ma never left the farm that day. Never shed her apron, never combed her hair, or donned her town-going hat to fetch back what had gone missing.

Ma *did* grope her way onto the porch to sit in her rocker. Occasionally, she moaned, swayed, and clutched at herself. The boy couldn't tell if she prayed or wept, but there she stayed till day's end.

And *It* stayed gone. As if arm or leg had been hacked off to leave an ugly scar, always, the boy felt *Its* absence as a familiar clench in his heart.

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Subsequent months, voices—high, pressing, insistent—mostly Pa's, echoed the house. “Can't trust you, Bethel,” Pa liked to shout. “You betrayed me!” He pounced, pounded. “And I can tell you how to keep the peace—just stop praying.” Heedless as to consequence, grainy whispers frothing from lips, onward Ma communed.

Naturally, this provoked Pa all the more.

As if blows were kisses, Ma permitted Pa's fists to meet her face, ribs, thighs, shins and gut. Yells, silence, followed by a thud; repeatedly she fell undefended. Pa near-to killed her.

One episode, Pa smacked every tooth clean out from her head. Caved in about the cheeks and mouth,

she seemed kin to a wizened apple-headed doll. Although still young, Ma wore ill-fitting dentures ever after.

Formerly ramrod straight, she grew stooped. Her hands trembled as if volts of electricity ran through them. A black eye or a gashed cheek was common. Bruises purpled her neck where Pa's fingers indented.

Despite abuse, Ma seemed ever so smug. Chin up, nostrils flaring, arched poise to her neck, she leaned in to the blows. Each split lip, every bruise (all wounds seemed treasured)—unspeakable illumination, outright joy, arose from her suffering.

Fascinated, repulsed, the boy's breath came ragged from watching.

Inwardly fuming at being forced to witness, he tucked away his colossal hatred of Pa and his yearning for Ma. See, he understood enough to keep such matters hidden.

Daily, he walked off his fury and guilt for his impotence. Trudging through pastures and into ravines, he hurled vile oaths at Pa, promised to wreak vengeance, contrived diatribes and affronts, and imagined acts of extreme violence.

No violence on his part ever *did* transpire. Yet his heart cleaved with anguish. And his exertions allowed him to pass through days without the public humiliation of tears, howls, or vomiting.

Outwardly, he tried to help. Raucous, quick, darting movements made Ma flinch. So he spoke in low tones and moved with slow, fluid grace, careful not to bump, trip, or tumble—manners unlike lads his age. Always he came when called, did chores when bidden, and never lollygagged or sassed.

Hoping a tidy appearance might organize his inner tumult, the boy traded natty coveralls and work shirt for a moth-eaten business suit and yellowed dressshirt found in the attic. Untroubled that his limbs shot out from the cuffs several inches; by his estimation he looked downright snappy. Moreover, without the garment's tight, press of snugness to swaddle him, he feared he might sproing apart, going every which way.

Faithfully, he wore this get-up while slopping mush for the hogs—even while chasing down calves. Hottest days, heat unbearable, he luxuriated by undoing the topmost button.

“What's this?” Pa came along, limp-wristed, mincing steps, first time he saw the attire. “Too high and mighty for the likes of us?” Humiliation, tumbled through. Ma laid eyes on him, gargled a bit, but offered no protection.

Schoolmates called him Preacher Man, snickering behind hands. Kids teased. Pa scoffed. Everyone poked fun. Still, Ma said nothing.

Yet in time, using the look to separate himself, he proudly suffered the fuss. See—the greater the unease he caused, the gladder he felt.

##

“You think Pa’s a monster?” Ma asked one day. The boy glanced up from chopping vegetables.

A long moment shimmered past.

Of late, hands pressed firmly to ears, he’d acquired the habit of crouching within confined spaces: in cupboards, beneath beds, under tables, mostly inside Ma’s closet. Calm best achieved therein, he liked to bury his face in her clothes, soaking up the smell of her and her soaps. And, even still, he heard his parent’s wince-making groans and shouts.

One time, when she came upon him, he claimed, “I’m inspecting the innards of things.”

“I’m the monster,” she now announced, emphatic.

“Why’s that, Ma?”

“Fights between me and Pa are my fault.” She motioned him close. “Really, Pa’s a decent man.”

Briefly, the boy considered this, but found it hard to fathom.

“After Pa hits, he’s terribly sorry. I...I just can’t obey.”

“Aw, Ma—” The boy tried to shush her; she talked right over him.

"Mustn’t hold a grudge, son. Ma deserves all of it."

Maybe, he reasoned, *she did!* Ma’s prayers posed an appeal to God. But, for the boy, prayer meant loss—that she abandoned him. And all that praying...for what net result?

Ma risked Pa’s temper, ignored her son, prayed for help that never seemed to come. Yet for her, prayer meant everything.

His take: prayer meant empty conversation and seemed just plain dumb. “Why not stop praying, least not so Pa knows?”

“It’s not my choice. Besides, that’s not the crux of our troubles.”

“What is?” The boy leaned in. Raised cleaver in hand, Ma paused, considering.

“I can’t explain.” Knife set down, she turned away.

Nearly as strong as Pa, Ma could tote two full apple sacks and was as nimble as you please. *It would be*

so easy, he thought, *for her to defend herself. And then Pa would leave her be.*

Plainly though, Ma lets Pa have at her as penance for wrongdoing.

“We’re done here; you can go.” Ma gave him a nudge.

Out he went, crossed over to the barn, climbed up to the hayloft, flung open the baling doors, flopped onto the straw, and gazed out.

Shortly, Ma came onto the porch. Eyes cast upward, hands primly folded, she took up her rocker, immersed herself in a force mighty powerful, and slid off to that far-away place yet again. Face ecstatic, polished sheen to cheeks, clutter abounding, potted plants—some vibrant hued, others crispy leafed—surrounding, she swayed and hummed. A doorless refrigerator stood nearby. Waist-high newspaper stacks ran the porch length. No vacant space remained.

Hugely fascinated, sight of so much praying and swaying turned the boy light-headed. Root of his tongue achy with longing, sweet plum-like tartness surged his mouth.

Cows’ warmth radiating up from below, their familiar grunts and snuffles comforted as he tried to imagine being slurped up inside Ma’s brain to have a look-see.

Ezra, a most resplendent rooster, batted wings, hopping up the ladder to root through the boy’s hair and poke his pockets for edibles. Barnyard animals as his only pals, his recent friend-making venture had sorely failed.

Hank Stedum, a grade ahead in school, possessed an admirable talent for hawking and spitting. So the boy took up walking with a hitch and greased his hair into a perfect pompadour, same as Hank.

Hank, certain such mimicry was meant to poke fun, had socked him, hard.

On the porch now, as Ma moaned, wagged her head, blurted a giggle, nodded, shimmied about, acting ever so strange—the eeriest notion cropped up: *Ma was loony! Crazy! Gone round the bend!*

Except that very morning, at Bixby’s Dry Goods, Mr. Bixby slid his glasses down his nose, eyed their egg flats, and announced, “Them eggs is pretty scrawny. Eight cents or nothing.”

Anyone who cares, knows; eggs fetch a dime a dozen.

So Ma had set her jaw, crossed arms, and affixed herself, firmly, to the spot. Seemed a surety she had nothing better to do: that she’d block the register all day if she had to, as customers, begging her

pardon, reached past to pay for wares.

“Chrissake, Bixby,” crabbed an old lady, “don't be a cheapskate; pay the woman!”

“OK, OK!” Mr Bixby had counted six dimes into Ma’s outstretched palm.

No word of thanks, Ma had huffed out.

Not exactly the act of a loon!

Breezes picked up, creaking the barn. Across the way, Ma rocked some more.

Dark came early those days. Stars pocked the sky. The moon—a sliver—passed behind the trees.

Hunched to pluck burrs from his socks, shame engulfed the boy. Pa wasn’t too nice. Ma made some mysterious mistake; for this she kept paying.

Much more lurked, hidden. And, although he only grasped the tiniest speck, he too was tainted.

But then, heart lifted, he’d seen Pa on fire—seen it for real!