

The Donkey Man

Walter Thomas Bowne

HARDING

Katherine (née Riedt), age 41, on June 14, 1952, wife of loving husband Stuart Harding Sr. Mother of one. Sister of Jay and Reggie. Viewing at May Funeral Homes, 4th and Walnut Streets, Camden, NJ, Friday, June 30th at 1:30 P.M. followed by Mass at 3 P.M. at St. Joseph's Pro-Cathedral, 2907 Federal Street, Camden, NJ.

—Come on, boy, give momma a kiss goodbye.

The boy twisted away from the gray box, knowing she never smelled like white flowers, *her cheeks blooming*, but now she's wrapped in them, like *the pictures of flowers I draw, red like her favorite dress. Not this white dress*. He stared at the sheen of his black shoes. *Water in moonlight*, he imagined, his feet dangling,

rustling the white skirt around the box. *She has golden sweet hair like a beehive.* The boy pictured the laughing faces behind him, *them staring at me, laughing at my dumb drawing.* —She don't smell right.

—That's as right as right gets, the man replied close to the boy's ear, holding the boy with hands veined with ink. His breath was the cornflower yellow of pipe tobacco. The boy wriggled. —Now don't you go hurting my back, you dummy, or I'll whip ya. Now lean over and say your goodbyes. Don't you love your momma?

—Why she smilin'?

—Because she's free of us, that's why. The angels have taken her to a better place.

He considered the angels and what she would look like there, if laughter lived there, but he curled with pain at the thought of being alone *here*. The cold, white walls closed around him. The room was hot. He touched her forehead, wanting to open her eyes, but he yanked his fingers away, knowing *it don't feel like momma anymore*. He hoped to smell her real again, *like the way her pillow smelled in the morning sun*, but he just smelled the white flowers and the pipe tar. Sweat dripped from his forehead onto her cheek. The boy sealed his eyes, sucked his lower lip, and kissed her moistened cheek, thinking *red is warm*, and whispered, —Don't leave me here, please.

Dear Mom,

I'm boored in Atlantic City. Dad said I could mail this. Not much to do. I met this young kid named Stuey yesterday who just lost his mom. His aunt is taking care of him. He believes anything I tell him. Poor kid. He's fun to play with, you know, to tease. He's a good kid, I guess. I'll be home on Friday. Can you make my favorite chicken dinner?
Johnnie

Johnnie told the boy if he waited under the boardwalk, he could hear the donkey man. But the boy had to stay quiet, or he'd stuff him in his sack. The boy wanted to know his name, and Johnnie

said he'd already told him, like a hundred times. The Donkey Man.
—He don't need any other name than that.

—Like God, right? the boy asked. God don't have no name but God, right?

—Now you sound like your old Aunt Flo.

—You want to ride with the donkey man? the boy asked.

—That's for little kids like you.

—Bet you scared he'd take you like the other boys you know.

—Not me! I'd rip open his sack and run so fast he'd never get me.

The boy mumbled that he wouldn't mind him taking him away. Johnnie got excited as he saw the donkey man approach. He told the boy to listen to the cowbell. —Now lay flat, he instructed, laughing, burying the boy. I'll cover you with sand so the donkey man don't smell you.

—What about you?

—Don't worry about me, Johnnie said.

Sand caught the corners of his mouth as he stared through the cracks. While he held his breath, shadows passed through the rays of light that steeled through the seams of the boardwalk. He heard the dull clang of the cowbell. With eyes closed, he pictured what the donkey man looked like, what his breath smelled like. After a few minutes, Johnnie came running back, excited, and they climbed through the steel rails along the boardwalk, and stood staring at the donkey man who carried a rounded-bottom sack, strapped over his left shoulder. In his other hand he held a long stick. A short rope dangled from his wrist and looped up to the donkey's apple-red collar. A brown burlap bag, tied around his waist, smelling earthy, swung against his leg.

The boy wanted to know where the donkey man lived. So Johnnie told him the whole story. The donkey man was an old pirate who lived on the ship of the moon. At dawn he anchored his ship, walked down the gangplank, and looked for buried treasure and young boys to kidnap. At twilight, he walked back, his bag full of coins, and perhaps a boy or two in his sack, and then he suddenly disappeared. —When the moon's new, you see, his ship's empty of treasure and floats, Johnnie said, but when the moon's full, his ship

is heavy with gold, and he sails off to bury his treasure.

—There's water in the sky?

—There's water here, why not there? Sometimes water looks black, sometimes blue and white. And water falls from the sky. Water gets there somehow. When you were in your mom's belly, you were floating in there. And I've heard that we were all once fish with gills on our neck and that we were sick of the ocean and started walking around on the beach.

—Really?

—Sure as anything in any old book.

—How does he get up there?

—He's not like us. He can do almost anything.

—Is he an angel?

—No pirate would ever want to be an angel. Just not respectable.

—Angels take people up.

Johnnie just shook his head.

—Angels take people down too, the boy said, that's what my pop says when I'm bad. My Aunt Flo says I need to be a good boy for Jesus. And I pray to Verge and Mary every night.

—Jesus ain't nothing but a middleman.

—Can I ride on the donkey?

—You'd better get a nickel from your Aunt Flo. He don't take free rides.

To the Donkee Man:

**I now you r a pirite. My name is Stu Harbing. I
dru this fer you.**

The boy played alone in his bedroom, on the top bed of the bunk beds. He heard the television in the next room and wondered if he should risk asking Aunt Flo to take him to see the donkey man. The wind blew the curtains like sails on a ship as the wind chimes twinkled. As he closed his eyes, the imprint of the curtains sun-stained his eyelids. The blue rug moved in waves. He tossed a blanket, warm from the sun, over the side of his bed, tucking the blanket firmly underneath the mattress, making the bottom bunk a

dark galley, ready to hold treasure. He smiled.

Then drawing on white paper over a hardback book of fairy tales, the boy said the donkey man was easy to draw. *He has a short body, his tree trunk legs in brown, baggy pants, brown like a shopping bag, which flap like two flags on windy days, and he has this shirt, all white and torn, covering a forest of white hair on his chest, white like those thin, white trees, and a red scarf around his neck and his hair should be wild and gray, his white whiskers, sharp like Johnnie's knife, and his eyes look like blue marbles sinking in a glass of water, and his eyes are that blue because he spends his life on the ocean underneath that blue sky. Now I need to write my name slow, so he can read it, so he knows it's me and not some other boy, cause if he's an angel, I want him to take me away.*

The boy tucked the paper under his shirt and poked his head through the bedroom door. He thought he heard his pop, and he stepped back. But it wasn't him. Just the TV. He saw Aunt Flo's head, all curly and high and yellow looking, yellow like a lemon, from behind the floral sofa. Aunt Flo's butt had slipped behind the cushions of the sofa. Her purple, spidery-veined fleshy legs stuck out over the cushion. It looked liked the sofa was eating her, but then stopped. On the side table with white ring stains like a Slinky was her drink, and her drink was now vapory light gold in melting ice. There was a gray pyramid in the ashtray. The boy used to take her lipstick-ringed butts and make mountain passes in the ash. The boy's momma always hated when he played with ashes, saying it was dirty.

—Aunt Flo? Aunt Flo? You sleeping?

Aunt Flo, all groggy-like, asked why he couldn't take pity on her.

—I was in the middle of a good dream.

—Didn't know you were dreaming, Aunt Flo.

—It's all I got anymore.

—Thought you were just praying hard with your eyes closed.

—I pray that God gives me more time to dream. She reached over for her cigarettes and lighter. Her face was red and bright for a second. —You know, I wish God would help those who can't help themselves. Now I guess you woke me up so I could take you to the

beach. If I was a little girl, that's what I'd ask for.

—Can you take me?

—Will that boy you been hanging 'round with be there?

—Don't know, ma'am.

—What's his name again?

—Johnnie.

—Bet he laughs at me.

He shook his head.

—Now don't you lie to your Aunt Flo. Ev'ry time he laughs at me, he laughs at God. I'm created in my Maker's image, so we all can have a chuckle at the universe. She set her cigarette down.

—Now don't you go a-looking so sad. Now give me a kiss. I know it's been hard on you, Stuart, with your momma. I worry about you with that Johnnie. When's he leaving?

The boy didn't know so he shrugged his shoulders.

—Well, we better get dressed then.

—Can Johnnie come?

—Only if he tells me his jokes.

—Can he have a nickel, too?

—Now haven't you stolen enough nickels from your poor old Aunt Flo?

Donkey Rides: 5 cents

—Are you for real?

—Is this your ball, young man?

—My friend Johnnie, he threw it over here, 'cause he thinks I'm scared. The blue ball was nestled in a hoof print in the sand.

—Johnnie's really smart, and he knows lots of stuff about the world cause he says he listens when he ain't supposed to, as that's when to listen the hardest, and he has this really sharp knife, and he tells lots of stories about you. The boy hesitated. Aunt Flo sat on a bench with a cigarette.

—Where's your friend?

—He ran off.

—Is that your mother up there?

—No, my mom’s dead. That’s my Aunt Flo. She’s okay. He whispered, —She loves God.

The donkey man handed the ball back to the boy. —I’m sorry. What’s your name, son?

—Stuart Harding. He gazed at his feet. —Why do you need nickels?

—It’s my job.

—Don’t you have enough treasure?

The donkey man laughed. —I’m just an old man trying to earn a living. He picked up the boy and placed him on the donkey. The boy sensed a new wonder at such a height and grabbed tight the reins and stared at the funny long ears of the donkey, *like corn-on-the-cob ears*. The donkey was warm.

—You are very brave, Stuart. He led him around on the donkey, circling in the sand.

—I have a nickel, sir.

—Thank you, young man. He took the nickel, dropped it in his brown bag, and jingled the bag. Stuart reached out for the smooth, gray fur, keeping his head down, rubbing circles on her belly. —She likes the way you pet her. You are very gentle. Not all boys are so gentle. The old man said it was nice to meet him and he looked forward to seeing him again. He winked at the boy, and the boy knew what he meant.

—I have this for you, sir. It ain’t another nickel, but it’s something else. The boy handed the donkey man the picture he drew in his room, and before the donkey man could examine the picture away from the sun’s glare, Stuart retreated to underneath the boardwalk, hoping that the donkey man could read his name. The boy wanted to wait for the sun to set, to see the donkey man disappear, but he heard his aunt, Florence Watkins, calling, knowing pop would be mad if dinner was late. —I’m not hungry now. Remaining with the litter swirling in the shadows of the boardwalk, he whispered, —He is a pirate. A good pirate.

POLICE REPORT: A six-year-old boy was found alone on the Vantor Avenue beach this morning with a bag of clothes. He was brought home to the

custody of his aunt, Florence Watkins.

The boy greeted the dawn with newborn eyes, gazing at the breath mark of the moon. The sea circled and buried his feet. The hem of his brown, baggy pants sloshed in the foam. Rubbing two nickels, he expected to see the donkey man again. Johnnie said he was just lying about the donkey man, but he could be lying about that too. Since Johnnie's gone, he wouldn't need the extra nickel so I can ride twice.

—What you doing out there, boy? A uniformed man in a hat walked towards him.

—Where's your family? Your mother?

The boy wanted to run, trying to lift his feet. —She's dead, sir.

The officer blocked his escape. —Then who's taken care of you?

—My pop's sister.

—At first I thought you were something washed up on the beach.

—I'm waiting for someone.

—A date with a mermaid? Smiling, the officer tried to put his arm around the boy, but the boy stepped back. —I thought you were a piece of driftwood. Do you have a name?

He said it was Stuart Harding.

—Let me take you home. What is your aunt's name?

—Aunt Florence, but everyone calls her Flo. The boy reached into his pocket and gave the man a nickel. I can come tomorrow. He'll be here tomorrow. He swung the bag of clothes over his shoulder. —Here, my friend's not coming. I won't need this.

The officer took the nickel. —Thank you, young man, but why are you giving me a nickel?

—Maybe the donkey man will take you, too.

—Now who is this donkey man?

The boy told him the whole story and the officer laughed and said that boy Johnnie was just pulling his leg. —He fooled you with a bunch of silly hocus-pocus. The boy didn't know what he meant, but the laugh was enough and the boy's legs collapsed and the officer felt the dead weight. —Now why you so upset?