

MIRACLE  
*in a*  
DRY SEASON

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THOMAS



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For Jim,  
who sees the best in me and encourages me  
to live up to it.

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## WISE, WEST VIRGINIA

1954

CASEWELL'S STOMACH GRUMBLED. He hoped no one in the surrounding pews could hear it. He'd thought to eat some warmed-over biscuits this morning, but the barn cat had slipped into the house and found the bread wrapped in a dish-cloth on the back of the stove. Even though most of a biscuit remained, Casewell knew better than to eat after a cat.

His stomach growled a little louder, and he wondered what he could rustle up for dinner. Normally, he'd have Sunday dinner with his parents, but they were visiting his aunt, who had lost her son—his cousin Harold—in the Korean War a good two years ago. She had yet to get her feet back under her, as his mother put it, so they visited when they could. In the meantime, Casewell would fend for himself.

He could scramble an egg and fry a potato, but he'd burned more than one pot of beans, and his attempts at biscuits and corn bread never browned right. He'd always assumed he'd leave his parents' house for a home with a wife in it, but at the

advanced age of thirty-five, he lived alone in a house he'd built with his own two hands.

Pastor Longbourne invited the congregation to bow their heads for the closing prayer. Casewell sighed and did as asked. The pastor could get windy at the close of service, and Casewell thought to pray for a short prayer but decided it wasn't proper. He shifted his six-foot-four frame on the hard pew to find a better position and scratched his jaw where his red beard covered a scar that ran from his ear to the corner of his mouth. The wound had healed decades ago but still itched from time to time. A reminder of . . . Casewell forced his attention to the prayer. He didn't need any reminders.

The prayer was indeed long, and toward the end, Casewell's belly growled loud enough for the dearly departed in the cemetery outside to hear. He heard a giggle from the pew behind him. He dared to peek over his shoulder. A child—a little girl of perhaps five or six—covered her mouth as her mother placed a quieting hand on her shoulder. The girl stilled, but she grinned at Casewell so he forgave her giggles. He was grateful his parents weren't there to hear. His father would not hesitate to offer criticism.

"Amen," intoned Pastor Longbourne, and the congregation echoed him.

The pastor walked to the door of the church, and his flock began filing out past him, shaking his hand and offering compliments on the sermon. Waiting his turn, Casewell got a better look at the little girl and her mother—at least he assumed this was her mother. They were new to the church. The pair appeared to be accompanying Robert and Delilah Thornton, who lived in the heart of the little community of Wise—such as it was. Robert kept the one small store that served the im-

mediate area. Locals had to drive eighteen miles to reach a chain grocery store, and no one there would know the local gossip, so the Thorntons did well enough. Perhaps the woman and child were family come to visit.

The woman stopped to speak to the pastor, offering her hand and ducking her head. A little thing, she had cornsilk hair under a scrap of a hat, rosy cheeks, and pink lips. She was pretty enough, but Casewell knew pretty didn't guarantee pleasant.

The little girl peeped out at Casewell from behind her mother's skirt and giggled. He grinned back without even meaning to. And there was little point in considering how pretty her mama was—nice or not—since there was almost certainly a papa in the picture.

Casewell's turn to clasp Pastor Longbourne's hand finally came, and then he stepped out into the soft spring air of the churchyard, eager to make his way through the crowd so he could head home and find something to eat. He could always resort to a jelly sandwich, though it would be a far cry from his mother's Sunday fried chicken.

As he walked through the crowd, Casewell caught snatches of conversation.

"... young when she had the child ..."

"... what kind of husband would ..."

"... too pretty for her own good ..."

Casewell fought the urge to plug his ears. As he neared the gate to the churchyard, Delilah Thornton intercepted him and grasped his arm. "Casewell, allow me to introduce my niece, Perla. She's staying with us . . . for a time. You might remember her family—they moved from here back in '45."

Casewell wondered at the slight hesitation, but then Perla

stood before him, and her clear, blue eyes completed the pretty picture he'd been noticing inside. She smiled, though there was something solemn lingering around her eyes.

"Pleasure to meet you," he said, dredging up a vague memory of a girl with blond curls. "And is this your daughter?"

The little girl smiled up at him as she clung to her mother's leg. "This is Sadie," Perla said, placing a hand on the child's strawberry-blond curls. "She has little to say but finds a great deal to laugh at." Sadie giggled again, as if to prove her mother right.

At that moment Casewell's belly rumbled so long and loud that there was no question of pretending otherwise. Casewell felt his ears grow warm and scuffed a boot in the dirt.

"I'm afraid I missed my breakfast this morning," he said. "And I had best be getting home to my dinner."

He gave the group a nod and started toward the gate when Delilah said, "But your family is off visiting. I'm guessing there's not much in your cupboard. Please come eat with us."

"Right, Casewell," Robert said. "Put your boots under our table. There's a mighty fine pork roast in the oven at home, and Perla here has a knack for gathering spring greens. I know you won't get a better meal in all the county."

Casewell opened his mouth to decline, but after one look into Perla's china eyes, he heard himself agreeing to go along. He blamed his moment of weakness on the promised pork roast. The group walked toward the Thorntons' 1949 Chevy sedan. Casewell admired how good it still looked after several years of use—certainly better than his beat-up '38 truck with the paint peeling off the fenders. Sadie left her mother's side and slipped a little hand into Casewell's large, rough one. She looked up at him with huge brown eyes, and he felt his



heart squeeze. Whether or not the mother charmed him, the daughter certainly did.



The pork roast sat succulent under a crisp, roasted layer of fat. Casewell cut his portion carefully so he got a little fat with each bite. He also ate turnips boiled and mashed with butter and cream, fresh-baked light bread, and the promised greens wilted in bacon grease. Casewell was beside himself.

After eating his fill, he sighed and pushed his chair back a little. “That might’ve been the best meal I’ve ever eaten,” he said. “I thank you.”

“Perla did most of this,” Delilah said, smiling at the younger woman. “She claims she needs to work for her keep, but of course she doesn’t.”

Perla ducked her head and scrubbed at Sadie’s chin, as though the speck of grease from the greens couldn’t wait another minute.

“And you’d best take home a mess of these leftovers,” Robert said. “It’s the darnedest thing—anytime Perla cooks we seem to have leftovers for a week.”

Casewell protested but not very long or loud.

“Come see my dolly,” Sadie said, breaking into the adult conversation.

Perla shushed her daughter. “Don’t be silly, sweetheart. Casewell is a grown man and men don’t take much interest in dolls.”

“I make it a habit not to contradict pretty ladies,” Casewell said, feeling expansive. “But I’d be pleased to see Miss Sadie’s dolly.”

Sadie jumped up; then she plopped back down. “May I be excused?” she asked.

“Yes, you may, but don’t keep Mr. Casewell long. We’ll have some dessert out on the porch directly.”

These were quite possibly the only words that could add to Casewell’s feeling of satisfaction with his current lot in life. He stood and allowed the little girl to lead him into what Delilah referred to as the parlor. Casewell sat on the Victorian sofa with its high back and lumpy cushions. It sloped in such a way that Casewell felt the need to dig his heels into the carpet to keep from sliding onto the floor.

Sadie made a beeline for the corner, where a doll sat on a block of wood with a small board propped up behind it to form a simple chair.

“This is Amy,” she said, retrieving the doll. “She knows my secrets.”

“It’s important to have someone you can trust with your secrets,” Casewell said. “But then, you probably don’t have too many yet.”

“Only the one about not having a daddy,” Sadie said with a sigh. “Everyone else has a daddy, but Mommy says it’s our lot in life to get along without one.”

Casewell raised his eyebrows. A widow, then. Or she was . . . well, surely she was a widow. He started to ask and then caught himself. What a question to ask a child.

“Well, it’s good you have Amy,” he said. Then his eyes fell on the makeshift chair. “But is this all the furniture she has?”

“Yes,” Sadie said. “Mommy says I mustn’t leave Amy on the big people furniture, so she made me this chair. I wish Amy could have a bed, too, but she sleeps with Mommy and me for now. Mommy says that’s okay, since it’s just us.”

Casewell smiled to himself, thinking that he knew how he could thank Perla for the fine meal she’d prepared that day.

Delilah called them to the porch for dessert—huge slices of angel cake with sliced and sugared strawberries.

“The chickens have taken a laying fit,” Delilah said as she handed Casewell a slice big enough for two men. “Got to use all them eggs up somehow.”

Although the slice was large, it was so light and airy Casewell made short work of it. He declined a second slice for fear he might appear a glutton.

“Too bad you don’t have your mandolin with you,” Robert said. “A sweet piece of music would be just the tonic to settle that meal.”

Casewell grinned. He would play a piece of music anywhere, anytime, for anyone. Music was the only thing he liked better than a good meal cooked by a pretty woman.

“You’re a musician?” Perla asked.

“Oh, some would call me that, but I mostly just fool around with the mandolin my granddaddy gave me. I guess it wouldn’t hurt your ears.”

Robert laughed. “Casewell is one of the finest musicians in Hartwell County. He’s being modest. We’ll have to get up a dance here before too long—maybe after the spring planting gets in. You put Casewell on the mandolin, George Brower on the banjo, Steve Cutright on the fiddle, and sometimes I pitch in with the harmonica or some spoons, and you’ve got something you can shake a leg to. ’Course, Casewell here likes them solemn tunes that wail. But he’ll save them till everybody’s too tired to dance. Yes sir, mighty fine, mighty fine.”

“Oh, that would be fun,” Delilah said. “We haven’t had a dance in ever so long. I’ll start putting a bug in the ears of all the ladies as they come by the store.” She smiled at Perla. “It’s always up to the women to organize something

like this. The men just come when we tell them and eat up all the food.”

Perla’s smile seemed a little uncertain. She bit her lower lip. “I’m not sure I ought to be dancing,” she said.

“Whyever not?” Delilah asked.

“Well, with Sadie and all . . .”

“Nonsense. And anyway, if you don’t want to dance, you can sit and listen. There’s plenty of ladies who prefer to sit out the dancing and visit.”

“The old ladies,” Robert said with a snort. “And it would serve them better to exercise their feet and let their tongues rest a minute.”

Delilah frowned and Casewell tried to hide his smile.

“Oh, do have a little dignity,” Delilah said. “Perla can help with the food. She has such a knack for cooking, and we always seem to have too much for just us. What she needs is a crowd to feed.”

Casewell stood. “Well, I, for one, would be happy to play and to eat anything Perla cares to cook. Count me in. But for now, I’ll be heading home to tidy up my place before Ma gets back and has a fit over how I’ve let things go.”

“Bachelors,” Delilah said in a way that sounded scornful and affectionate all at once.

Sadie scampered inside to bring Casewell his Sunday hat. He dropped to one knee so she could help settle it on his head. Casewell felt self-conscious and awkward until he looked up and caught Perla watching him. The look in her eyes made him hope, against his better judgment, that she was a widow.



After helping Delilah tidy the kitchen, Perla went to the room she now occupied at her aunt and uncle’s house. Her

gaze drifted from object to object. The quilt her grandmother made lay folded across the foot of the bed, the Bible her mother gave her when she turned eighteen sat on the bedside table, her brush and comb on the dressing table. It was the sort of room she'd always dreamed of calling her own.

Her eyes came to rest on the child napping peacefully on top of the coverlet. Here was something she had not dreamed of. She adored her ginger-haired Sadie, just turned five, but some days being a mother was simply too hard. And now this.

Perla's mother had agreed that it was probably for the best when Perla suggested going to Wise to stay with her aunt and uncle. "Robert and Delilah have a real nice place. Least it was last time I went out there," her mother had said, as if that would make leaving easier. "You probably remember the store well enough from when we lived there. You can be a help in the store. Won't nobody know . . ."

Perla thought back to her mother's final words before her father drove her—in silence—the six hours from Comstock to Wise. "You hold your head up," her mother said. "If it weren't for all that food, I think folks would overlook . . . the child. But take the two together, and it makes everyone uneasy." Perla remembered her mother stepping forward to take her hand, squeezing it hard. "Daughter, God doesn't make mistakes, and I say that child and your way with cooking are both miracles straight from heaven. It's just miracles don't always feel like it at the time."

Perla hadn't wanted to come. She might have even whined about it a little. She'd certainly carried on more than a grown woman of twenty-four should. When her mother released her hand, Perla missed the pressure and the warmth. She'd felt oddly bereft standing there in her parents' house. She'd tried to tell herself she could always come back.