

## SUGAR HOUSE

The Sugar House used to be a real tavern over on old Route Nine—one of them tiny places with four stools and a jukebox. It's got a big oak rocking chair now for me, but it used to be a place to buy beer and hang out. You wouldn't want your girls over there, but you'd hope your boys chose it over a lot worse places.

Well this whole little honky-tonk was lifted up onto a flat bed truck and brought over and set down on a new slab right here in the trees at the edge of the Youth Center grounds. Every child when he's growing up, needs to go across the tracks to the bad side of town once in awhile. Here at The Youth Center, that's what The Sugar House is, a runned down place to sneak off to and pretend you're not a child.

Now if that surprises you, let me tell you something else—that it was a judge that did it—bought the place herself and plunked it down here twenty years ago and sent me to be the cook instead of sending me to the penitentiary.

I guess this isn't going to make any sense unless I go on and tell you that I killed my husband. Shot him in the neck with his own rifle. My lawyer said it was a crime of passion because of the awful fight that was going on at our place, but between you and me, it felt like cold blood.

I'm big, some say fat, but I'm as strong as any man in this whole institution even if I am an older woman. There are folks who will be afraid of someone as big as me, my own kids were, I'm ashamed to say, especially Ronnie, the oldest, who caught the worst of it.

I used to try to tell the details of my husband's killing so folks wouldn't be afraid of me, but I quit that. My pastor at Graceway got me to stop. He was real young then and kinda odd, talked more like one of the psychiatrists around here than a Baptist minister should. He said, "Lena, forgive yourself." That sounded real strange to me 'cause in those days I was stark ravin' crazy hoping God and the children would forgive me for killing their daddy. They'd all been screaming—Ronnie and my oldest girl trying to help me, and the little ones too scared to move. 'Course afterwards they were all hanging on me and telling me it was okay, but I knew they'd never forget what they saw. And sure 'nuf, when I'd go to whup one of them, I'd see the fear in their eyes.

Now you're wondering what happens to the six kids of a woman who shoots her husband. Judge Martin had known my family when we all lived in Ardmore. She sent all my kids to the Industrial School, what The Youth Center was called then, and sent me and the Sugar House along too. My kids and me had our own cottage, and they went to school with the rest of the kids. They're grown up now, pretty much okay, law abiding.

Here at the Youth Center we mostly get your incorrigibles—chronic truants, runaways, little boys who've been selling themselves to buy drugs—kids whose folks have turned them over to the state to raise. There's more of that than you think, sometimes rich kids—thirteen or fourteen years old whose folks have given up on them—broken-hearted little cusses who feel totally evil. Like this new kid who came in last night except he was only eleven or twelve—dark straight hair, small for his age, still had baby soft pink cheeks. He had a big expensive leather jacket slung around his little shoulders. I'd been told in staff meeting that we had a hard case named Stephen, but this was his first time to come my way.

He sat all hunched over with his head down on one of the back tables away from the music and the counter, almost out of my sight, 'cept nothing is really out of my sight 'cause that's how the Sugar House is made—one big room where I can serve snacks and keep an eye out for the hard cases. When I see this kid come in, I go over and say, “What'll it be,” and he gives me and a couple kids that's playing checkers real mean looks.

I've seen this look before. I call it feeling swampy—feeling all dark and snaky inside, like something that creeps along in the ooze, the worst, most loveless thing God made. And I'm smart enough to know when a kid is feeling swampy, he'll strike out—stab you with a pencil or an ice pick if he can get it. And this little guy was like that.

After awhile he raises his head and starts trying to gouge a hole in that old table with one of them plastic spoons. Well I know he's doing that so's someone will say, 'Quit that.' So I go right back and say, “Quit that, kid. That ain't no sand pile. How about digging into some ice cream, instead.” What does this little hard case do but ups and turns the table over—would have hit my toes if I hadn't jumped. He's standing there with his hands on his hips trying to look tough. The leather jacket on the floor.

“Stephen, you put that table back the way you found it.”

“No, you old bitch,” he says so loud that the other kids get up and leave, probably embarrassed 'cause they've known me a long time or maybe just giving me room.

“Now listen,” I says, “we don't talk that way here, and nobody tears up the Sugar House.”

“Oh, yeah,” he says and reaches behind him and rips the Michael Jackson poster off the wall.

“Yeah,” I say. Then before I know it that kid scoots across the floor like greased lightning and slides behind the counter. He grabs a Pepsi bottle out of the rack, smashes it on the counter, and holds it up like he’s the bad guy in some gangster movie. Well, I been here twenty years. This kid and his jagged bottle ain’t nothing new to me. But he wasn’t crying, and his eyes looked kind of frozen.

I sit down real slow in my rocker like I’m taking my place in the pew at church. I know violence. It’s got three mean triggers: Fear and rage and pain, any one will blast out and fire up the other two. The only thing to stop it in yourself is to fling your mind out somewhere’s else, and this little guy don’t know how to do that. So, sitting there in the rocker, I commence real serious-like to study a hangnail on my little finger. He’s standing there wielding the bottle at nobody and trying to keep up his fierceness, and I say, not looking his way, “Did you ever go to a rodeo?”

“Everybody’s been to a rodeo, stupid!”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

“This isn’t a real place, it is?” he asks.

“You mean the Sugar House?”

“It isn’t really away, is it? It’s part of the prison.”

“That’s right,” I say. “Yonder across that field there’s black jacks, and when the leaves is all off in the fall, you can see Cadillac’s water tower through the fence.”

“I hate you,” he says, and that bottle is flying right in my face. I duck and come up to see him yanking the cord out of my toaster. I jump up so fast I turn over a table. The toaster’s on the floor, the plug’s still in the wall, and he’s holding the cord with two wires hanging out. And what he does next like to paralyzes me. He opens his mouth and starts to stick the wires in.

“No!” I scream and reach across the counter to yank the cord out the wall. He runs out from behind, but I grab him around the middle, pinning his arms to his sides. He’s kicking like the dickens.

“Lemme go, lemme go!” he screams.

“No!” I flip him up so’s I got him like a baby, the legs up against me with one arm and his top half with the other, and he’s pitching like an alligator, but I hold on and carry him over to the rocking chair. He’s screaming bitch and old cow and a lot of other stuff, and I sit down with that bucking creature in my lap.

“I hate you!” he screams. “You are the biggest, fattest, bitch I ever saw.”

“Old Dan Tucker was a fine old man,  
Washed his face in a fryin’ pan.”

I begin to sing and bounce my knee in time just to wear him out.

“Combed his hair with a wagon wheel  
And died with a tooth ache in his heel.”

Then I start really bouncing big, letting fly with the old knee so’s I’m bucking more than he is.

“Get out the way for Old Dan Tucker  
He’s too late to get his supper.  
Supper’s over and the dishes washed  
and nothing’s left but a piece of squash.”

Well, we go through about six rounds of this—me singing “Dan Tucker” and bouncing my knee and him screaming dirty names and trying to get loose. Finally he slows down, exhausted, but I don’t let go because I know like any little landed fish he’s got a few leaps left in him. So I switch over to “Yankee Doodle,” still bouncing some, still acting like we’re fighting. He’s feeling pretty heavy now, and by the time I get to “O Susanna” the poor thing is more dead than alive, and we’re both soaked with sweat.

“What do you want to hear?” I jiggle him like I’m trying to keep him awake. “How about ‘Jesus Loves me’?” I say.

“I hate it,” he says

“Well, I love it, so you’re going to ear it,” and I start in with “Jesus loves me, this I know...” and I’m singing and looking him right in the eye and he’s looking back like he’s seeing a crazy woman.

This poor creature in my arms ain’t got nothin’ inside to lift his heart, and he’s a dead weight in my arms. So I do “How Great Thou Art,” to pick me up. After that, “He Leadeth Me” and then, my grandmother’s favorite:

“I come to the garden alone,  
While the dew is still on the roses.”

That one always makes me cry because I think of her and how she poured out her heart trying to make up for all that was missing in my life. And I cry thinking of Ronnie.

The hard case is lying still, a great big boy with his legs hanging down, and his wet face against my shoulder. I sing real soft now.

“Abide with me  
Fast falls the even’ tide.”

Stephen snuffles and right as I’m closing down says, “Know what?”

“What, Stephen?”

“I never got to see a rodeo.”

“Aw, that’s a shame.”

Then he gives one last shuddery little sigh and closes his eyes, me still holding onto him, singing, same way as I hold on to myself.

THE END