



THE ACTIVIST





The Activist

“I ain’t going to stand for it,” Mama said. She said this often.

She held a small dead human about as long as an ear of corn. Even though the head was too big, the hands too small, you could tell it might have been somebody.

“Push down,” Mama said.

My sister moaned. With a gush of blood the afterbirth slid onto the bed. Her skin was white as wood ash.

“I don’t feel good,” she said.

“Shut up, Pearl Anne,” Mama said. “Shut up and grow up.”

“I’m seventeen.”

“You’re acting like a two-year-old.”

“I’m going to throw up,” Pearl Anne said.

I wasn’t feeling so hot either.

“Go get some towels, Ether Mae. Help get Pearl Anne cleaned up.”

I didn't move. Pearl Anne got herself into this fix, not me. I'd never had a boy put his thing into me. Pearl Anne said it felt funny but not so good that she couldn't do without it. So she'd decided to quit. She wanted more respect. She quit too late.

Now Mama moaned and held this dead thing. "My grandchild," she said. "Didn't I tell you get some towels?"

"Don't want to." I backed away a little.

"You'll get the stick. You're too old to have me telling you what to do." I was eleven.

I found some rags and two towels and got them wet under the faucet in the sink, then squeezed the water out.

"Goddamn it. Wring them out. You're dripping all over the floor," Mama screamed.

"What's that doctor's name wouldn't treat you, Pearl Anne?"

Pearl Anne put her hand to her mouth and wiped away some vomit chunks. "Lady doctor."

I started wiping up blood on the bed. I picked up the afterbirth, holding it between two towels so I wouldn't have to touch it, but I could still feel the warmth. I dropped it in the toilet and flushed it down. I got Pearl Anne on the potty. She still had lots of blood that came out in chunks like sliced cow's liver. Her belly skin was pale with blue veins snaking around.

While I worked to get the blood off Pearl Anne, Mama sat at the kitchen table. She had a shoebox. She took a face cloth, pink with a white border, and laid it in the bottom. Then she put Pearl Anne's dead thing inside. She took a piece of Saran

wrap and covered the top so you could still see Pearl Anne's dead thing's little face and hands and its legs all drawn up. Mama put the top on the box and took a black felt-tip Magic Marker and smeared in tight strokes with lines next to each other so the entire box top was black.

"What's that, Mama?"

"A coffin."

I thought she was a little crazy from losing her only grandchild. "It's a shoebox," I mumbled.

She whacked me across the side of my head half-hard, but still serious.

"Don't want no disrespect for the dead. This is kin."

"What kin?"

"Your nephew."

I stared hard but didn't feel any kinship.

Mama pushed me ahead of her into the bedroom. Pearl Anne's bed was wet and still stained with blood.

"She's got blood in her crotch," Mama yelled.

"I ain't doing that," I said. So we decided to put Pearl Anne in the bathtub.

The water heater wasn't working right and I had to heat water on the stove. Mama and I got Pearl Anne in the tub.

"I'm going to faint. I'm going to faint," Pearl Anne whined loud and ornery.

After we washed her, I helped her out of the tub and Mama led her to my bed.

She fell asleep. Snoring.

"Come with me," Mama said.

“What about Pearl Anne?”

“Only one thing wrong with her; she can’t say no.”

Mama climbed into the pickup on the driver’s side, setting the little shoebox on the seat. After I got in she said, “Don’t let it slide onto the floor.”

I put my hand on the box and turned it so it was long against the back of the seat. I imagined the ink stain on my fingers.

Mama drove dead stop to forty-five to dead stop. She blasted the horn at people walking in the road, at old people driving too slow. She breathed scratchy and deep. Her blazing eyes reflected light from the windshield as if her eye globes were marbles, and her hands gripped the wheel so hard her scruffy red fingers were white at the joints.

“Where we going?” I asked.

“Watch the coffin. You’ll see soon enough.”

We drove over the Chattahoochee River Bridge, past the old mill with the missing roof and broken windows, then the abandoned railway station. The *We Care* health clinic was at the mini mall just ahead.

Mama stopped a block away where a pay telephone was tacked to the wall of the 7-Eleven store. She dialed 911 and the local TV station. Mama got back in the truck and sighed. “I bet they won’t come.”

“Why you do that, Mama?”

“Shut your mouth. We doing what’s right for our family.” She grabbed my hair and yanked my head so my face was looking right at her. “You got to fight for every bit of justice in this world. Don’t ever make me say that to you again.”

“Let go.”

“You don’t deserve to be a Crawford.”

I wished I wasn’t a Crawford. Or a kid. Or living in that doublewide trailer with Pearl Anne and Mama. But I kept my mouth zipped tight.

Mama got the truck started, and in thirty seconds she double-parked in front of the clinic even though there were other spots open. “You grab the coffin,” she said.

We got out of the truck and marched into the clinic. Doctor’s names were spelled out in white plastic letters on a black felt board. A star marked the “physician of the day,”--a woman doctor.

“Follow me.” Mama yanked my arm so hard I almost dropped the box.

We marched right by the receptionist into the back.

The woman doctor stood writing at a chest-high counter. Both the doctor and the nurse looked at us.

“You the doctor?” Mama said to the woman. She said “dock-tooor.” Mean-like.

“Doctor Paterson.”

“A real doctor?”

Mama pushed me forward.

“Yes.”

“You got ALL the training or are you IN training.”

“I’m a special fellow...”

“Ah! If you was ALL trained my grandchild would be with us today.”

“You’ve got your facts...”

“Give me that box,” Mama screamed at me.

I shoved the box forward thinking Mama would take it.

“Take off the lid” she said instead.

I could see magic marker all over my fingers and I had a sinking feeling it would never come off.

“Turn that lid upside down.” Mama grabbed the box so the doctor could see through the Saran wrap. “This child is dead because of you.”

The doctor stared like the grandchild might breathe fire or rise from the dead. I could see her hands tremble.

“My daughter, Ms. Pearl Anne Crawford, seen you day before yesterday. You told her go to the welfare hospital.”

The nurse sitting behind a desk tried to speak up but her mouth was working like a dying fish on a dry dock in the hot sun. “We can’t take Medicaid,” the doctor said. “I checked her. She was all right.”

“She weren’t all right. Her baby died.”

“She was fine. This girl was with her.” The doctor pointed down at me scary, like God from the stained glass window in my Mama’s Church of the Apocalypse.

I started to say Pearl Anne was fine when the doctor saw her but Mama bumped me with an elbow before I could finish.

“I referred her to the County Hospital,” the doctor said.

Mama hated the County Hospital worse than she hated sinners. “We ain’t never going to that hell hole,” Mama went on. “You made my daughter grieve.”

I thought of Pearl Anne snoring on my bed.

The nurse whispered to the doctor. "I'm calling the cops."

"That's good. We need some arrests here," Mama said.

A man and woman from 911 rushed from the lobby through the inner door carrying bags and metal tubes and a little tank. "Emergency?"

"Goddamn right there's an emergency." Mama peeked out the open door looking for the TV crew.

"Where?"

"Give me that coffin, Ether Mae." I handed over the coffin. My nephew now was on his side, his arms still out and touching the cardboard like he might be trying to get out. Mama twisted the coffin so the 911 people could see.

"Dead."

"It's a fetus," the 911 woman said.

"Kilt. Refused treatment. Put that in your report. By her." Mama pointed an accusing finger at the doctor, who was shaking all over now and looking angry with Mama.

"Weren't her fault, Mama." The doctor had treated Pearl Anne really kind.

Mama hit me so hard I dropped the coffin. The Saran wrap came off one side and my nephew rolled out on the floor, ashamed, I thought, of being naked and paraded around by Mama.

"You dropped our kin." She hit me again. Softer, but it still hurt.

Mama peered out to see about the TV people. But cops with black uniforms and caps with shiny plastic bills came in, a white guy tall as an apple tree and a skinny little black lady.

“What’s the matter?” the big cop said.

The nurse spoke up quick. “It’s her.” She pointed to Mama. “Brought a dead fetus and says we’re responsible. Threatening us.”

“I didn’t threaten no one. I want them arrested.”

“For what?” the woman cop asked.

“Killing my grandchild. Making my daughter grieve. Going against the will of God!”

I could tell there were a lot of feelings whizzing around that room, but no sympathy, not for Mama. The 911 people looked at Mama as if she were a lunatic. The nurse and receptionist thought, “white trash.” The doctor still shook with anger. Both cops stared at Mama, wondering why they ever went to cop school and planning what to do next.

“Can you take that baby?” the big cop asked the 911 guys.

“I can’t take a dead fetus we ain’t treated.”

“Against regulations to keep it here,” the nurse said.

“You ain’t doing nothing with my grandchild.”

“Did you treat this woman’s daughter, Doctor?” the lady cop asked.

The doctor gripped the edge of the counter with both hands. “I checked her but didn’t charge her.”

“No-pays!” the receptionist said. I scooped up my nephew with the side of the coffin box and settled him inside. His head was twisted on his neck a little like he might have been hurt.

“The baby was alive,” continued the doctor. “It moved.”

“Nothing wrong?” the cop asked.

“Blood pressure up a little. I suggested the County Hospital.”

“We can’t accept Medicaid,” the receptionist said.

“Look here, Dr. Smart Girl,” Mama spat, “we ain’t never going to the County.”

“That’s where we work,” said the 911 woman.

“Well, let me tell you. The devil’s got you. My husband, Horace Crawford, God rest his soul, sat with blood pressure and diabetes and his heart failed so bad you could see it thumping in his chest. He went to your County Hospital; I was sitting beside him, waiting for nine hours. Every time I walked up to the counter they told me they’d get to him as soon as they could. Well, they got to him. But by then he was as cold as a slab of hog hanging in a chill room.”

“That’s too bad,” said the 911 woman.

“Criminal,” said Mama. And she was crying tears. Pearl Anne said crying was when Mama was at her best. The people here didn’t know what to think. The 911 guys looked like they’d just seen the ghost of my papa.

“He wouldn’t have been cold. Takes a long time to get cold,” the 911 man said.

“He was dead. Dead cold,” Mama said in a voice so controlled and angry the 911 man looked out the door to avoid the hatred in her stare.

The police told 911 to get on, and they sat Mama down in a chair in the waiting room. "I know you're distressed," said the woman cop, "but you're out of line here. My partner wants to book you."

"I ain't done nothing."

"Disturbing the peace. But I told him to let you go."

"They kilt my grandchild."

"They did what was right. Now you get on."

I sat in a waiting room chair holding the coffin on my lap. Mama was thinking about what she could do.

"I ain't moving until you arrest them."

"I mean it. Move along or you go to jail."

"Go to the truck, Ether Mae."

"And take that dead thing with you," spat the nurse.

"Watch your words," the woman cop warned the nurse as I started out.

A few minutes later, the cops shoved Mama out the door.

As soon as we got home, Mama went to pray at the Church of the Apocalypse and talk to her friends about a demonstration at the clinic, probably burning candles and a protest fire. "You keep your nephew safe," she said as she left, and I sat at the kitchen table looking through the Saran wrap at my kin. He seemed like he was trying to catch his breath so I took off the Saran wrap. He liked that, I thought. I smiled at him, 'cause he was so small and helpless. "You came at the wrong time," I

said. "For you," I added. I thought for a moment. "But sure was the right time for Mama." I thought he might have smiled a little.

Pearl Anne was still asleep in my room. I just sat with my nephew for a while. He seemed so nice all balled up and laying on his back on the pink-and-white facecloth little blanket. I got thinking about respect . . . him being dropped in the clinic and falling out of his coffin and all. About being gawked at naked under his Saran wrap. And I thought, it ain't right. "You only got me," I said to him. I knew he was dead, but he heard. I was sure of it. "You need help."

I turned my little nephew in his coffin so he was comfortable on his side. I got four stones the size of chicken eggs from the garden and put one in each corner. Then I put the Saran wrap back on top. The lid was torn, but I made it whole with Scotch tape. With the same roll of tape, I sealed the coffin lid on tight and put it in a plastic grocery sack.

I walked, holding the coffin flat so the rocks wouldn't move, to the Chattahoochee River. I'd heard Chattahoochee was some Indian god. Probably had long pigtails and feathers stuck in his hair. Even though the Indians I'd seen never smiled much, I thought Little Nephew would be happier with them than he would with us. I walked to where the highway crossed over, along the guardrail to the center of the flat bridge, and let the bag with my nephew in his coffin fall into the water.

Plop. The coffin floated away from the bridge and disappeared where the river and the sky were the same shade of dark.

I closed my eyes. I could see my little smiling nephew sitting in my papa's lap at the right hand of God. Those Chattahoochee Indians had taken him home.