

Second Chance

by Marcia Meier

He arrives at the appointed hour, driving up the dusty road in his '68 Ford truck. On the side is stenciled "Sampson's Farrier Service." He parks in front of the barn. Patience watches from the front porch, where she has just set down a bushel of fresh peaches she picked from the orchard.

As he sets the brake, she realizes she is wearing one of her oldest work dresses. Her hair, still auburn but starting to show a little gray at the temples, is caught up in a bun at the nape of her neck, small tendrils hanging down at the sides.

He climbs out of the truck and glances up at her as she walks toward him.

"Hi, Patience. I'm here to see about your mare's shoes."

"Well, of course you are, Jared. I've been expecting you. I must look a fright, though."

She pushes back the locks falling around her face.

"Yes'm," he says, then corrects himself. "No, I mean, you look fine."

"It's terribly hot for this time of year, don't you think? The whole Western Plains must be on fire today. I don't remember it being this warm in May," she says.

"Yes'm."

She motions toward the barn. "Well, let's go see her, shall we?"

They walk across the yard and into the cool darkness of the cavernous barn. The air is sweet with fresh hay and the warm breath of the mare. They walk down to the third stall on the right and look in to see the old Bay. She stands quietly, munching the alfalfa Patience left for her half an hour earlier.

Patience unhooks the latch and pushes back the stall door, and as she does she notices his eyes upon her. She is suddenly self-conscious, and, for a fleeting moment, she remembers that day so very long ago, when he had grasped her hand and almost asked her the question. Then, the only answer was "no."

She moves into the stall and takes the mare's halter, turns her around and leads her out to the cross ties. Jared goes to work wordlessly, moving quickly from foot to foot, examining each hoof and making little clucking noises as he does. He checks each for stones, and assesses how much growth has occurred on each since the last time he came out. Then he pulls his clippers and knife from the toolbox and begins with the right rear leg, pulling the old nails out of the hoof and removing the worn shoe. He clips the growth, using the knife to trim the toe and sides, then rasps it smooth.

She watches him work, quietly admiring his movements. Even in his 50s, he still has the strong shoulders and trim waist of a man thirty years younger. His dark hair curls around his ears and falls about his collar. It has always been longer than was fashionable. She liked it.

"She look okay?" Patience asks, just to make conversation.

"Yup."

"You remember Sally Brideley?"

"Yup."

"You hear she died last week? Breast cancer, I heard."

"Yeah."

"So sad. 'Member when she got caught putting tacks on Jason Miller's seat in seventh grade? What a hoot! When he sat down it was like he'd been launched off it by a rocket." She chuckled, then added. "I just heard yesterday from Mandy Montgomery. She's kept in touch all these years."

"Uh, huh."

"So sad," she repeated.

"Uh, huh."

She watches him move to the next hoof, while the mare stands quietly. "Reminds me of that time we all went down to the swimming hole near the Swensens' farm, the summer between ninth and tenth grade, 'member? Sally decided to jump in stark naked, even with all the boys around! What a scandal. She had such a figure, didn't she? So sad."

"Uh, huh. Looks like this left back hoof needs some attention. Got a small crack in the toe. Want me to patch it?"

"Yes, of course. Whatever she needs."

She pauses. It isn't often she gets to talk with someone, being alone on the farm most of the time. But she knows he isn't big on conversation. So she falls to considering that day, more than three decades ago now, when it seemed there might be something between them. Something enduring.

She was just 18, a few months after high school graduation. Life had seemed so full of possibilities then. She couldn't have imagined she'd be alone all these years later, milking cows and hawking fresh butter every week at the farmers market, just like her parents. She was no beauty; she knew that. But once upon a time she had a decent girlish figure, and her straight, thick hair fell down her back and nearly reached her waist. She had striking blue eyes, but her face, while not unpleasant, was rather plain.

He had come by her house with his dad, who had been the town's best, and only, farrier, for years. Jared had been learning the trade since he was old enough to wield a blacksmith's hammer.

Patience had come into the barn to watch, and noticed Jared staring at her every time she glanced his way. Once, he was so engrossed he didn't hear his dad ask for the hoof knife, and was startled back to reality by his dad's gruff scolding. She had smiled, but was embarrassed, and sorry she had been the cause of his humiliation.

Later, he had shyly asked her if she would go to the movies with him the next night, and she had said, "yes."

He picked her up at 7, for the 7:30 show. On the way downtown to the theater, she chatted amiably, and he listened.

"I'm going into Kansas City for a whole weekend to spend my graduation money on clothes. I can hardly wait," she had gushed. "And Mary Louise Saffers is driving us. She has the cutest little blue Mustang, you know. And it's fast — I don't know how she learned to drive that stick so well, but that car is amazing on the highway. Have you seen it?"

He smiled and nodded.

After the movie, they walked across Melrose Avenue to Arnoldi's Café on the corner for a late bite. She ordered a cheeseburger, fries and a vanilla shake. Jared asked for a double bacon burger with onion rings and a Coke.

"Tell me your deepest desires and dreams," she said once the waitress had left with their orders.

He laughed then, and for a moment she felt wounded. But then he said, "I'd like nothin' better than to settle down and raise a family, I think."

"Don't you want to travel, to see the world first?" she asked. "There is so much out there. I read about places all the time in books and all I can think is, 'I want to go there!' "

She studied his face for a moment then. Noticed his fine nose, and high cheekbones. His deep brown eyes and the thick shock of brown hair that fell over his eyes and brushed his collar. He was handsome, there was no getting around that, she thought. And his long, lanky frame seemed to ooze sensuality. She sucked in a breath. Then smiled at him.

He smiled, too, and stared at her for just a moment longer than necessary, making her suddenly feel self-conscious.

"So, what are your plans for the rest of the summer?" she asked, acting as nonchalantly as she could.

"I was hoping to spend a lot of time with you." Again, he looked her straight in the eyes until she dropped her lashes.

"Um, so, what'd you think of the movie?"

"Liked it, but mostly because I saw it with you."

This time she laughed a bit, and for the first time, couldn't think of a thing to say.

The waitress arrived just then, and put their food in front of them. Patience was grateful for the distraction.

"This looks great, doesn't it?"

They talked easily then, and after they finished eating they walked back to his truck holding hands. As soon as they were in the

truck, he surprised her by leaning over and kissing her — passionately.

She felt her heart quicken, and kissed him back.

It was the beginning of a summer that progressed each day with the beat of a growing passion. He was all she thought about. When he was with her, she wanted more of him. When he was gone, she pined.

They went to the movies. They visited friends. They swam in the river near the woods that marked the edge of town. They walked hand-in-hand through her parents' orchards.

One day toward the end of summer, he asked if he could come by that evening. He had something important he wanted to say.

When he arrived, she was dressed in one of her prettiest sundresses and had put her hair up on top of her head, to make her look older and more sophisticated, she hoped. He suggested they go for a walk, so they headed into the orchard in the late summer sunshine. When they got to the far side of the orchard, they sat on the bench her grandfather had fashioned from a great willow that toppled in the storm of '32. They hadn't spoken since they left the house, but now he started to talk.

"Patience, I want to ask you something," he began.

She put her finger up to his mouth. "No, please don't," she said. "I'm not ready to talk about anything yet."

They were sitting next to each other, and he placed his hand over hers between them. She turned over her hand and laced her fingers in his. They sat like that for a long while, and then he took her chin in his left hand and turned her face to his and kissed her. A long, probing kiss that she felt deep in her groin. He unlaced his fingers and moved his right hand to her waist, then under her shirt and up to her breasts. Her breath quickened and deepened, and he leaned into her. They moved then, almost as one, down to the grassy carpet below the bench.

"I'm not sure this is...." She started to protest, but couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence.

She allowed herself to sink into his passion.

As she opened herself to him, she felt her whole world unfurl. She imagined leaving the farm, and her mom and dad and all her chores. The smallness of her universe melted away and she saw herself traveling — through exotic lands she so longed to see, to the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Adriatic seas, to the vast deserts of the African continent, where the lions sprawled among the trees, and elephants tromped the veldt.

He opened her blouse and moved his lips down to her belly, kissing her softly. She breathed in deeply, moving her hands under his work shirt. She felt his warm chest and the muscles in his back. She stroked his sides and placed her hands under the waistband of his jeans. He pushed himself between her legs and unbuckled his belt, unzipped his pants. She released herself to him completely, felt his passion entwine with hers. And when it was done, she felt such deep, profound peace, she couldn't speak.

He lay on top of her for a long time, neither of them willing to break the spell they'd created. The bond they'd forged. It felt like they would never leave each other, never release the touch, the connection.

A month later, she was pregnant, and it was never the same. He came to visit that last time. They walked again through the orchard, but they avoided the bench, walked past it as they discussed what to do. He wanted to marry her. She wanted more. A life away from their tiny farm town, unencumbered by family obligations. A baby? No. It would never work. As much as she loved him, she couldn't do it.

So that fall, when she was almost two months gone, she took the bus to Kansas City and found the address her friend, Hannah, had written on a piece of paper: 2974 Meadow Street.

She walked in the front door, marked only with the street number. Inside, a stern-faced woman behind the desk took her name and led her to the exam room. She undressed as she was instructed. Presently, the doctor came in, a squat, balding man with a pencil-thin mustache.

"I'm Dr. Fagaro. We'll begin the procedure as soon as I've completed a brief exam. You're seven weeks along, is that right?"

She nodded.

"Okay, then. We'll have you put your feet in these stirrups."

The stern-faced woman came in wearing a smock and surgeon's mask. The doctor put a mask on his face, then moved to the end of the table and gazed at her between her legs.

"You'll feel a little pinching in the cervix as we open it up to do the D and C. You may feel some cramping as we scrape the uterus. It will only take a few minutes."

She closed her eyes. When it was over, the doctor told her to lie there a while. He'd be back to check on her.

She felt the tears well up and fall down the sides of her face and onto the exam table. She could feel the cramps in her uterus grow stronger, and she imagined the little fetus she had just killed. She forced herself to think of something else. She didn't want to feel anything. It was over, and now she could go on with her life, with her plans.

But it wouldn't turn out the way she wanted.

Now here she was, foolishly reliving a life she knew in a dream, with this man who then wanted something she didn't. Though she wanted him. She still wanted him.

He didn't want her, not after. He was angry. Cursed her in the driveway. Slammed the truck door and punched it with his fist. And then he drove away. He'd never spoken to her of it again. All these years she'd cared for the farm and churned her butter, and he had cared for all the neighbors' horses. And they had politely said hello, and exchanged pleasantries, like today. All these years.

She didn't know what made this day different. She had no idea where it came from. But while he was finishing up the mare's last hoof, she spoke.

"You know, I loved you."

He stops rasping the hoof.

Momentarily, he says, "I think these shoes'll hold now till spring."

She feels her throat tighten and puts out her hands. "Jared, I couldn't, don't you see? I couldn't face a baby. I wanted more, then. I would have died."

And then, in a whisper, she adds, "I'm sorry."

He looks down at the hoof between his legs and purposefully pulls the rasp across it again.

She walks over and touches his shoulder.

He stops. Looks up at her. Then down at the hoof.

Rasp. Rasp. Rasp.

She feels tears come, pulls her hand away and turns to go.

"I have always loved you," he says, so quietly she isn't sure she hears it.

Rasp. Rasp. Rasp.

She turns and looks at him. He stands and his eyes meet hers.

After a long minute, she says: "I have fresh lemonade in the house. Want some?"

He nods. Pats the horse.

They walk back to the house together. As they cross the porch, he stoops to pick up the bushel of peaches. She opens the door and he carries them inside.

