

Jimmy's Glass Eye

by Steven Gowin

Uncle Jimmy wore a glass eye... left eye was glass.

He was our bachelor uncle who worked out there for Suzanne McQueen's dad on their farm North of Booneville. He didn't lose an eye in any war, so we don't know what happened, how he lost it, and Mom won't say.

We weren't supposed to talk about it. We just had to watch it stare at us all wonkie, without knowing a thing about it. Jimmy was my Mom's Dad's brother and had a nice Buick Skylark that he drove.

Uncle Earl had a nub for a right hand. He was another great uncle but on the other side. They outfitted his Pontiac Star Chief with a special shifter arm that wrapped under the steering wheel so Earl could change gears with his left hand. And the steering wheel had a steering knob with a picture of a brunette movie star in its handle so he could steer with the nub.

We didn't have to wonder about Earl's nub hand. Everybody knew he'd caught it in a combine or hay bailer or some such thing, and that was how it all happened. Must've been a good bit of blood, I imagine. Seeing him use it was a joy. He could drive that Pontiac straight eight anywhere.

Minnie Stone had a glass right eye, a brown one; Jimmy's was blue. She was an E U B, Evangelical United Brethren, where Grandma and my mother tortured us through Sundays and vacation bible school until we wised up and hung with Dad at the American Legion for a beer Sunday mornings. Minnie's eye? Rheumatic fever or pig influenza. She was but a child.

They say when that glass eye dried out and the socket went all itchy, she'd just pop the eyeball onto the palm of her hand, pop it in her mouth to moisten and clean it up a little, and pop it on back in its socket. She walked everywhere even though she only had one good eyeball to see where she was going. Minnie had no automobile.

Lloyd Patterson's right hand only grew four fingers. Anna Bieseles lost a toe chopping wood. Randall Dickie's left leg was shorter than

the right from birth, and poor Marcia Smith had a bald spot on the top of her head that Mom said was "bad genes... what an outfit." All but one of them owned Plymouths, by the way.

Of course you couldn't know what seeing through one eye was like, or how it felt to shift left handed and nub steer with the right, or how cold a bald spot might be in February, or what it took to balance without a big toe. But you could know how it happened, talk about it if you liked with those folks.

You could sympathize with the sufferers or ask if, hell, maybe they didn't suffer; that was possible too. So when Earl picked you up from school to drive you on your paper route, or you split a gut because Minnie disgusted some proper old biddy at the E U Bs, or Anna Biesel square danced off balance but fast as a dervish anyway, the universe grew. You won.

But when Jimmy told a joke at Thanksgiving, you couldn't laugh. You just didn't know what to do. Had he thought about that lost eye? Was it a car wreck? Or did some bruiser poke it out with a broken Jim Beam bottle?

Did he fight over some flooze; was she worth it? Did it break his heart forever? Hell we didn't know, couldn't know any of it. Jimmy'd take you for a nice ride in that Skylark, and he'd probably tell you if you asked, and it would all be just fine.

But as it was, it wasn't right. Mom said don't let Jimmy drive you around, and don't ask about that eye.

