

Antiques Week

by Stacie Brown

Warrenton, Texas. March 2011.

Martha sat across from Shelly at the old oak kitchen table sipping coffee and flipping through the paper. The gentle breeze flowing through the open windows and the soft flapping of the curtains usually had a soothing effect on her, but tonight it just pissed her off. She turned to page three. “Wonder when your daddy’s gonna drag himself home.”

Shelly looked up from her Algebra homework. Her mother’s face was steaming red, and she imagined smoke billowing out of Martha’s ears. “I dunno, why you asking me?”

“What? Oh, sorry, honey.” Her daughter and she had not been seeing eye-to-eye recently, and Martha was desperately trying not to lose her cool. She hated their arguments, and she prayed for the teenage years to be over with so that they might regain their previous closeness. She turned her attention back to the paper.

Thousands of people travel miles across the country to go junkin’ during the first full weekend of April and October each year. Some folks are on the hunt for a bargain, some are seeking the perfect gift for their loved ones, and some are trying to find that priceless collectible . . .

“Show’s coming up.” Martha narrowed her eyes at Shelly. “And don’t think that means you can spend all your time with that Durk boy. You’re gonna be helping me this year.”

“Really, mom,” Shelly rolled her eyes. “I always help out at the show.” She shrugged her shoulders and smiled sheepishly. “Jason’s a bonus.”

“Yeah, but that boy is crazier than he—”

Shelly perked up. “But Daddy likes him.”

Stress and worry had broken through, and Martha could not contain her words. “Daddy likes him cuz he’s Red’s son, and that ain’t a good reason. He ain’t good for you. Never has been, never will be. Period.”

Shelly slammed her book closed and stormed off to her room. Martha heard the sobbing from behind the closed door, but she couldn’t deal with that right now. She had one too many emotions boiling inside her. She took a breath and turned her attention back to the paper.

. . . If you’re in town for the Warrenton Antiques Show next week, stop by and show your support for local vendors. You can find Ray Guthrie at Bar W and Martha Schultze at Little House on the Hill.

“Well that’s good for business at least.” Martha snorted, and then turned the page to the Employment section. She never paid much attention to that section before; Bill had a secure job with benefits, and he made more than enough money for the three of them. Martha had gotten bored with the stay-at-home mom routine soon after Shelly started kindergarten, so she started creating metal yard art to sell at the show. It earned her extra spending money and kept her busy.

“Martha!”

She jerked her head up. What was Red doing here? Either East Tennessee got tired of him real quick or he got more vendors. No wonder Bill was so late getting home.

“Martha, call 911! It’s Bill!”

911? What’s going on? Red was probably drunker than Bill—or worse: high.

By the time she made it outside, Red was struggling to push Bill's limp body back in the truck.

"Bill?" Martha gently shook him, and his arm dropped from his chest and dangled from his drooping frame. "Bill, Bill wake up. What the heck happened? What's the matter with him?"

Red slightly backed away and raised his arms up. "He only had five beers, I swear."

"You dud," Martha jabbed Red in the chest. "He had way more than five beers."

Red bowed up. "Woman, go get the phone and . . ." He looked up to see that Martha was already gone inside. He heard her through the kitchen windows.

". . . came home passed out drunk . . . No, he won't wake up . . . Ok . . . Yes . . . Ok . . . We're on our way now." A few minutes later, Martha was in the driver's seat of Red's pickup waiting for him to crawl in the back seat.

"Hold up!" Shelly ran out of the house waving her arms. "I'm going with ya'll."

"It's bad . . ." Martha said. "Never mind, get in. Hurry up."

When they got to the hospital, it took four grown men to load Bill's 200-some-pounds on a stretcher. They rolled him in and he disappeared behind the grey automatic doors. Martha, Shelly, and Red headed for the waiting room. They found a spot in the corner and settled in.

"Shelly," Martha gently patted Shelly's leg. "Honey, go get us some coffee and snacks? We might be here awhile."

"Uh-huh." Shelly made a beeline for the cafeteria.

"What happened, Red?" Martha said. "And don't you lie to me. Give me the God's honest truth."

Red sighed and sunk down in his chair like a whipped dog. “I got over to Third Base I reckon about nine. Bill was hunched over the bar watching Sheila do her thing—looked like that’s what he was doing. That Sheila got a walk that could—”

“Come on, Red,” Martha said. “Get back to explaining.”

“Er, sorry. I went up to Bill and he was staring at the wall and mumbling about having to find work. What, they sacked him?”

“He got laid off a couple days ago.” Martha narrowed her eyes. “You’d know that if you weren’t so worthless.”

“Listen woman,” Red said. “You wanna know what happened or what?”

Martha sat back in her chair. “Yeah, go ahead.”

“I tried to make small talk, ask him how he’s been, tell him Jason’s been asking about Shelly. He just kept on like he was lost in his own head. Never seen nothing like it. I bought him a few beers trying to get him to talk some sense—like old times, you know. He was downing them so fast—ain’t no way I could have known he was already drunker than Cooter Brown!”

“You should have called me. You could have asked Sheila how much he’d had to drink. Hell, she’s the bartender; she ought to have known. She ought to have known better than to keep serving a drunk.”

“Sheila trying to make money just like you and me.” Red said. “Anyhow, Bill started sliding off the barstool, so I asked him if he was ready to go. Kinda dragged him out to the truck and shoved him in. He passed clean out as soon as he hit the passenger seat. Got to your house and he must have known he was home ‘cause he went to get out of the truck. Fell on his back when his feet touched the ground, banged his head pretty good on the way down. Reckon he

pulled himself part-ways back in the truck . . .” Red looked up to see Shelly on her way back in from the cafeteria. He nodded to Martha. “You know the rest.”

Martha got up from her chair and took a coffee from the tray Shelly carried. “What took you so long, honey? Was starting to wonder if I should send a search party after you.”

Shelly handed a coffee to Red and took a seat by the door. “Nothing. I called Kayla. And I got food and drinks.”

“Uh-huh. So what did Jason have to say?” Martha pursed her lips and cocked an eyebrow.

“Oh, uh, not too much I guess,” Shelly said. “He asked if Red was with us. I told him yeah.”

“Took you that long to just say that?” Martha said.

“I got some food too,” Shelly said. “And drinks . . .”

“Alright,” Martha said, and she settled in for a long wait.

An hour later, the doctor came back out to the waiting room. “Bill Schultze’s family?”

Martha stood up and the doctor came over to meet them. “How’s he doing?”

“Ma’am, there were some complications.” the doctor said. The rest of what he said was a jumble of words. She didn’t understand half of them, but the ones she did know rang loud and clear. Liver failure. Concussion.

Dead.

Syracuse, New York. March 2011.

“You really want to drive seventeen hundred miles to bathe in sweat, lurch through manure-covered fields, and rummage through piles of rusted old junk? Tetanus can be deadly,” Dean said as they were getting ready to leave.

“Too late for complaints, you aren’t going to change my mind. We have to get down there before the dealers buy up all the good—”

“Oh, Serena, you know if they buy up all the good stuff, you’ll just find the same cast-offs in some other manure-covered field to be sold again to the next sucker in line.”

“Yeah, but that same cast-off will be sold at a higher price. I have to get there first so I can get the best deal. Otherwise, what’s the point? Now, come on!” Serena grabbed her purse and headed out the door, truck keys in hand, to wait on Dean.

After checking to see if they forgot anything, Dean went out to the truck and slid in the driver’s seat. “Look,” he said, “I know you’re excited about your new hoity-toity client, but I hate being your pack mule. Wouldn’t it be nice to slow down a bit, get back to—“

“I don’t care what you hate, Dean,” Serena cut him off. “I need your help. You know this woman could either make or break me.”

“It’s just furniture, old broken down furniture—“

“Which I will refurbish to dazzle the art museum director. She knows some famous people who can make my career, Dean. You won’t have to help me forever.”

Dean sighed, adjusted his seat, and started the truck. “Guess we better get a move on.”

“I knew you would see things my way. That’s why we’re a good match.” Serena reclined her seat back and propped her feet up on the dash.

Dean drove down I-90 and pulled over at a truck stop outside of Erie.

“What are we doing?” Serena hopped out of the truck and went around to Dean’s side.

“Um, getting gas?” Dean said. “What does it look like?”

“We just got gas a couple hours ago, we could have kept driving.”

“Yeah, but my legs were cramping up.” Dean put his arms around Serena. “Hey, wouldn’t it be great to stop at Lake Erie and have a little picnic?”

Serena grimaced and wriggled out of his arms. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Well, uh, I just thought—”

“No, Dean, we are not stopping at Lake Erie. We should not have stopped here. We should have kept driving.”

Dean put his hands up to stop her icy glare. “No need to get your panties in a bunch. Let me go inside and get something to drink, and then we’ll be on our way again. Want anything?”

Serena huffed. “Just get me a water.”

Dean and Serena arrived in Memphis just after 11 p.m. and scanned the exit markers for a hotel. Serena spied a sign for a Hilton fifteen miles up ahead and told Dean to keep driving. Instead, Dean took the exit to a Holiday Inn at the next mile marker.

“I just told you about the Hilton.”

“I’ve been driving all day. I’m tired. We can sleep here tonight and tomorrow night we can stay at a Hilton.”

“No, Dean. We’re staying at the Hilton tonight. I’m not going to sleep in a roach motel.”

“Serena, I’m sure they keep the roaches to a minimum. Don’t forget, you haven’t hit the big time yet.”

“We certainly don’t need to sleep on stained bed sheets or in bug-infested rooms. It’s just 15 more miles.”

“Fifteen too many. I might feel a little different if you had driven like I asked you to.”

“I don’t drive well during rush hour.”

“Right, because of your lead foot.”

“I get antsy.”

“I get tired.” Dean said, and pulled into the Holiday Inn.

Warrenton, Texas. March 2011.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.” The pastor walked across the chancel, arms outstretched, preaching to the congregation.

“It’s ok, honey. It’ll be alright.” Martha looked up from the front pew with furrowed brows and squeezed her daughter tighter.

The sermon continued. Red sat in the back with Jason, Sheila, Bud, and a few more of the bar regulars.

“Poor Shelly,” Sheila said to Bud, “Losing her Daddy like that. She’s gonna be hurtin’ real bad for a while.”

Red nudged Jason and smirked at him. “Gonna need some comforting.”

Sheila gave Red a disapproving look. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, going on like that a funeral.” She turned to Bud for approval. Bud nodded his head and continued listening to the sermon.

“What? It’s true. My boy’s gotta learn when’s the easiest time to do some comforting.”

“You’re such a pitiful excuse for a decent human being,” Sheila said.

“Made no claim of being decent. Might not even be human,” Red shrugged and looked past the pulpit at the floor-to-ceiling cross decorating the front wall.

“You’re not even the slightest bit sorry?” Sheila said.

“Sorry? Sorry for what?” Red said. Sheila looked at him sternly and he caught on. “For trying to talk to my buddy like old times? Oh no, I ain’t sorry.”

The preacher cleared his throat.

Red and Sheila sat up straighter in their seats and stopped talking. The sermon continued.

But Red’s statement left Sheila in disbelief, and it got the better of her. “You mean to tell me you ain’t sorry for buying Bill’s beers? Surely you saw how drunk he already was. Didn’t that tell you anything?”

“Well, I was all tore up. Surprised I made it to the bar in one piece. ‘Sides, Bill coulda told me ‘no’ and went home. Reckon he wasn’t ready to go yet.” Red folded his arms, sat back in the pew and looked back to the pastor.

Sheila said, “Well I’d have thrown the both of ya’ll out if I’d have known you were buying him more beer.” Red started to say something, but Sheila shushed him and scowled. “Pay attention. You might learn a thing or two about decency.”

Sheila looked over at Bill. Bill shrugged his shoulders a bit, and they both turned their attention back on the preacher.

“Wonder what those Yanks is talking about.” Jason noticed Ray Guthrie sitting with Gena Walker and Ellen Billings a few rows up. Gena and Ray got together every show, but Jason thought it was strange that Ellen and Gena were sitting together. Ellen hated Gena for screwing Ray.

“Who cares,” Bud said. It was the first time he’d said anything since they sat down in the pew.

“Well look who came off his high horse and dropped down in the trenches,” Red said.

“Ain’t in the trenches with the likes of you. Just don’t like them Yankees none. Always tearing up our land with their big trucks and their big buildings. Barely can stand to look at you too. You’re the one that brings them here. Wouldn’t have no place to set up under if it weren’t for your darn tents.”

Sheila looked at Bud, “Who *are* you?”

Bud shrugged and turned his attention back to the sermon.

“Bill Schultze was a loving father and devoted husband. He never met a stranger.” The pastor continued.

“Momma, do you hear what those dealers are saying?” Shelly whispered to Martha.

“Yeah baby. I hear every word. People are gonna talk. That’s just how it is. Don’t worry about them.” Martha squeezed her shoulder.

But Shelly couldn't take any more and ran out of the church in tears. Kayla followed her out and found her sobbing by the cemetery gate. "What happened?"

"Those people are saying bad stuff about Momma and Daddy, that Daddy is nothing but a drunk and Momma don't know how to keep her home or her man in line. Those dealers don't know what's going on. The locals don't even know what really happened."

"We don't even know what really happened. We're just hearing bits and pieces here and there. Only Red and Sheila know what really happened at the bar." Kayla looked up and saw Jason waiting at the door to the church. Shelly followed Kayla's gaze.

"Don't go over to him. He's just using you," Kayla said.

"You don't know him like I do. He loves me."

"You think he loves you. Instead of buying you flowers and getting in good with your mom, he's buying his dope and getting in trouble with the law. That's no way to be," Kayla said.

Shelly looked at Kayla and shook her head. "You just don't get it." She left her dear friend staring after her as she ran to Jason's outstretched arms.