

Notes on a Father by Jenny Maloney

The swamp smells like the ocean, thick, mossy, and flavored with salt where the sea encroaches into the coastland, or maybe it is the prairie that melts into the water—either way the result is the same. Long, tangled vines provide cover for cottonmouths, mosquitoes, and shallow boats filled with men carrying guns. The whiplash report of firing rifles causes even the toads to fall quiet.

Therese wanders into the swamplands in her dreams. Sometimes she is on a bicycle, the wheels whishing along the hot asphalt on the periphery of the wetlands. Other times, she is in the swamp itself, with boots up to her thigh and her father motioning her to silence. It is the silence she remembers because swampland is never silent. Cattails rustle in salty breezes. Crickets warble inconstant tunes. And her father steps in a mud hole; his boot gets stuck. He hands her his gun. She holds it carefully, by the well-worn grips, as he works his boot out of the marshes. The release of the boot is accompanied by a huge sucking pop and a smell of old, dead things—like dinosaurs and oil.

"Can you hand me that water bottle, sweetie?"

He gestured to the dresser across the room. The piece was made of oak and, unlike everything else in the hospital room, was not on wheels. Therese released her father's hand, nothing more than sweating bits of bone, and pushed off the bed with her feet. Her wheeled chair slid across the tile with only a slight rattle. She picked up the sweaty water glass.

The hospital reminded her of the swamplands. The sterilizing cleansers tried and failed to cover up the scent of dying things—the way weeds released their spores to mask the scent of ancient reptilian flesh.

She watched him sip. The ice cubes were almost melted but there was still a barely-audible clink. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. He flinched. Everything grated his esophagus, like gravel stabbing at the tumors all the way down. Therese looked away and saw the clock. Only five minutes had passed since she'd arrived.

She could still smell the false-clean smell and felt nauseous. She swallowed hard and knew the saliva went down smooth—no stabbing sensation.

Her father looked at her, his eyes hazy beneath hairless eyebrows. He hadn't gone bald naturally; there'd been a full head of dark hair, with just a touch of gray at the temples, before his diagnosis. Therese looked away from the bare brows, back to his eyes and saw the glimmer for a moment, very brief, before he blinked and the stoic blue eyes were once again dry. He opened his mouth to speak and she felt her own throat bleed.

"Still just you and me, kiddo."

Her father rubs his eyes, as if to block out the image of lumps of rich soil dropping into the hole, covering her mother. Therese can't stand watching and leaves her father's side, wandering past the cluster of mourners. She ignores their sympathetic glances and makes her way to a stone bench on the far side of the cemetery.

The swamp is here too, in the drooping limbs of trees that simply cannot hold anymore. It's in the church built four feet up from the ground to escape flood waters. The humidity muffles the world, suffocating her, even at sixteen. Her father hollers at her right before she sits down, but the thick air grabs his voice. Then he is next to her, hurling her bodily away from the bench. She hits a gravestone – someone she'll never know – and her elbow cracks against the granite, splitting the skin.

He doesn't turn toward her. He stomps on the ground beside the bench, three, four times, a hundred times. Clods of grass fly into the air, twirling before landing upturned on the ground with roots reaching into the air. When he stops, his breath heaves from the throat that will eventually kill him and there is a black rope on the ground. A long, scaly rope with a mouth gaping open and fangs jutting out from a cloud.

"Are you all right?"

She was fine, so she said, and explained her life—in brief. He nodded at everything about her job, about the guy she'd been seeing, the grand total of which was not much to be said. She watched the I.V. pump liquefied foods into his veins. He still insisted on drinking by himself.

Mostly, she stayed quiet. When she spoke, then he would speak back and the grating was just too much. In the gaps, there were still questions.

"Do you remember that deer?"

"Ten point, wasn't it?"

Noise from wildlife is good when hunting—it means that the animals haven't been frightened away. The creaks and chirrups and buzzing meant they were doing fine.

Therese sees him first. All the marks of a fawn have long-since left him. His chest is larger than the surrounding trees. He has not noticed them yet. By the time she lifts her finger to point him out, her father has already seen. He lifts his rifle to his shoulder. Therese covers her ears but she keeps her eyes open. Her father squints into the sight. The trigger finger begins to pull and she can see the knuckles turn pale with the effort to avoid jerking. He would apply steady pressure all the way back.

Something moves, Therese sees it out of the corner of her eye. The flash of a white tail through the bushes, a brief glimpse of a miniature deer,

a fawn, fast. Therese waits for the squeeze, waits for the report that will be too loud, no matter how tight she presses her ears. She waits for the smell of spent firecrackers. But the finger on the trigger relaxes. He tilts the whole rifle to the ground. Therese still waits with her hands over her ears. He turns to her and, in the moment before he smiles at her pose, he looks sad.

"It's time to go home, Therese. It's late."

Therese nodded and tried not to show her relief. She couldn't look at him anymore. Looking anywhere, the walls, the sheets, was easier than looking at the man. She closed her eyes and saw the deer. Why didn't he shoot? She opened her mouth to ask the question and accidentally looked at him.

Suddenly she's eleven again and her father is about to kill a deer, then she's sixteen and about to sit on a cottonmouth. Then her daddy smiled at her from the bed, like every time he took her out of the marshes onto solid land. Therese nodded again. She leaned over and kissed his forehead. The thin skin felt soft; it shifted like paper over his bones.

She left the sick room and entered the hallway that smelled like disinfectant. The world lit up and she blinked. Therese walked away, towards the elevator. She tried to pretend the door clicking closed did not sound like the echoing report of a rifle.