Holy Days (an excerpt)
Jan Richards

Momma was the one who changed everything.
Momma was the one who committed the first sin...

Momma stood in front of the full-length mirror, gazing at her tiny frame as she held up three dresses to compare. They used to call her “runt” when she was little. When she reached the third grade, she tipped the scales at a mere 76 pounds. She was always petite and full of piss and vinegar, my Grandma used to say. She liked her reflection, the long neck and cascading black waves down her back. Poppa did not like his girls to cut their hair much, and Momma’s reached past her small waist. She hated her hair, wanted desperately to hack it off as short as a boy’s, much like the hairdos in those magazines she flipped through down at the beauty parlor while she waited for Aunt Jean to complete her weekly styling. The women always teased her whenever her older sister would let her tag along, saying that if she did not put some meat on those skinny bones of hers, no boy would ever look twice. She would show them tonight.

Momma picked a lavender print dress, sleeveless and showing the cut of muscles on her upper arms that she had earned working the farm. She pulled her hair back with bobby pins on the sides and covered them with two matching shades of ribbon that she had stolen from Aunt Jean’s sewing box downstairs. If she were caught leaving the house wearing lipstick there would be hell to pay, so she tucked the slender vial under the elastic of her panties and prayed that it would not fall out before getting out the front door and past her sister’s ever watchful eyes.

“I’m leaving now. Don’t wait up!” she tried to squeak out of her lips before her sister could catch up to her. But Aunt Jean was fast on her heels, even as full as her belly was with child. She informed Momma that she better be in by 10 o’clock, the same hour that was engraved into her skull by my grandfather. Momma never answered her, just ran as fast as she could down the gravel road without tripping in her sandals. The local school hosting the festival was only a half-mile away. It was a little brick building with about a dozen classrooms, big enough for the children of
all the local farmers. Most of the boys never made it to high school before they dropped out to work by their fathers' sides in the fields. The last time most of those sons saw the inside of a classroom was around the age of fourteen. Their folks were so poor and in need of help, they signed the withdrawal papers with the same sighs as their parents had uttered when they were young and told them it had always been that way.

When Momma got there, she stood on the edge of the playing field where tables were set up and brimming with food. They were saturated with the best pickings of the local farms, and every woman in the county had cooked something to share. The men were doing one of two things: basting pork bar-B-que ribs over grills that roared flames hotter than those dancing in hell, or swirling beer in little paper cups, smiling at their own pleasure as they huddled in groups and talked about the weather. Kids were running freely over the entire area as loose giggles and Kool-Aid grins painted their faces. It was the biggest gathering of the year for them. They had earned such indulgences with the sweat of their brows and the strain of their backs.

Bobby Lee was enmeshed in secret conversation with the older boys, standing with one leg up on an old bench and clutching his paper cup with rough hands and dirty fingernails. There were about seven of them, all with the same sun-weathered skin and lascivious smiles. They had more than coleslaw and cake walks on their minds. When my momma had the balls to just walk up to them and interject her opinions into their conversation, Bobby Lee was stupefied. He was purely amazed that such a little thing could be so goddamn bold and beautiful at the same time. His eyes swept over Momma's face, lost in her own emerald greens that were softened behind long and luscious lashes, fixated on the tiny mole laying gently at the bottom curve of her throat, and the hypnotic sway of her breasts with every breath.

He stuttered when he tried to talk to her. His friends immediately laughed at the bright pink glow in his cheeks. Momma was a pistol and proudly filled with tomboyish energy. She could shoot the shit with any hired hand, whether it was about a new John Deere or what tobacco leaves were going for at the auction house that morning. Bobby Lee was sucked into her unique spirit she was unlike most
other girls he knew with their soft words barely uttered above a shy whisper and equally naïve pillow talk. He wanted her that first time he saw her away from her sister’s apron strings.

He talked Momma into taking a drive in his old Ford pick-up, scarred from too many drag races around dangerous turns down Clinch Mountain. She was not quick to accept his offer. In fact, it took several sips of his hot beer to convince her that she would be home in time for her curfew. They drove down to the lake and parked under a weeping willow tree. Its tender furls caressed by the soft winds of the evening broke shadows across the lake. Combined with the stagnant humidity and touch of alcohol, the willow’s dance almost made her sleepy. But, she was too enthralled with Bobby Lee. He spoke incessantly about wanting to become a stock car racer and dreamed of traveling the countryside in search of a first-place victory. It was so odd to hear him talk about a fast life when most boys she had met could never see beyond the tobacco fields that bound them with hard labor and stunted imaginations.

That night, Momma felt a kind of freedom that she had never experienced in her young life, the freedom of mind. With Bobby Lee, she was never suspended or held hostage to the old South; he unbridled her to fresh dreams and new expectations. Yes, Annie Joan Penley wrapped herself around that young man with everything that had tied her down for fifteen years. He unleashed her imagination and consumed her dreams. A week later, on the grounds of a drive-in movie, my momma lost her wits and her virginity in the back seat of Bobby Lee’s borrowed Chevy. With that single act, everything changed. To hear some people tell it, God Himself reached down and smacked her with retribution for her sinful ways.

Her punishment was me.