



POTATOES

Andrew Miller

Karl Anderson spotted the gray-white chimney as he started down the hill, then the rectangle of dirty ashes and smoking timbers where the house had stood, and finally, patches of burnt-to-stubble grasses, naked sumacs. Behind the chimney stood two apple trees, red fruit blackened, once-green leaves curled and twisted. He edged the Studebaker pickup off the gravel road and stopped by a charred wooden table and four chairs.

The twins stuck their heads out the window. “What happened?”

Karl peered through the windshield. “Johnson’s place burnt last night.”

“Chimly’s standing.”

Karl drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

“Anybody kilt?”

“Mrs. Johnson and their two-year-old boy.”

One of the boys pointed to a tall figure stooped over the ashes, canvas bag in one hand, hoe in the other. Part of his shirt had burned away revealing a blackened undershirt. His forehead, cheeks, and lower arms were smudged with soot.

“That Mr. Johnson?”

Karl nodded, shoved the door open. “You boys stay put.”

“Oh, Jesus,” said Karl as he trudged through knee-high goldenrod and white clover toward the foundation. A curtain of burnt wood and leather hung in the air, stung his nostrils. “Hey Bo,” he called, “what’re you doing?”

Bo Johnson scraped the hoe along a smoking timber, then dropped to his knees, reached into the ashes.

Karl stopped next to a pile of broken plates. “What’s going on?”

Bo snagged a crushed bucket, glanced at it, then tossed it over his shoulder. He snatched up the hoe, jabbed at the remains of a wooden dresser. The twins jumped out of the truck, ran toward the men. They picked up sticks and started punching the ashes.

Karl yanked a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and wiped his forehead. “Bo, it’s me, Karl—Karl Anderson.”

Bo struggled to his feet, gripping the bag with both hands. “Hey, Mr. Anderson.”

Dabs of foam clung to the corners of Bo’s mouth, his pupils were the size of olives, burn marks crisscrossed his hands, ears, scalp, and forehead, the hair on the back of his head was singed.

Karl laid a hand on Bo’s shoulder. “Did anybody look at them burns?”

Bo reached into the canvas bag. “Potatoes,” he said, “getting me these potatoes.” Two inky lumps sat in his palm.

“Jesus,” said Karl, “Jesus Christ almighty.” He kicked at a clump of scorched grass. “You don’t hafta do that. I’ll get fellas from the mill to come by. They’ll go through the ashes for you. Christ almighty.”

Bo dropped to his knees, peered into the bag. “Most a these are no good—they’re burnt real bad.” He tossed three into the clover.

One of the twins shouted, “I got one, Mr. Johnson.” He brushed off the ashes and held it overhead.

Bo leaned back on his heels. “You’ve a good eye, boy.”

Karl squatted down, facing Bo. “Myrtle’s got a couple a chickens in the oven. Come up to the house. Have dinner with us.”

The boys started to laugh. Each held a potato at his crotch, pretending to pee on the ashes.

“Mine’s longer’n yours.”

“Yeah, but mine’s bigger around.”

Karl jumped up, jerked off his hat, whacked it against his thigh. “Paul—Jonathon—Stop that!”

Karl helped Bo to his feet. “You been here all morning? Thought you was staying with your sister.”

Bo pointed toward the ridge. “She lives right up there. Her and Jeffery.”

The men walked to the truck. Karl beckoned the twins. “Get in back—were going.”

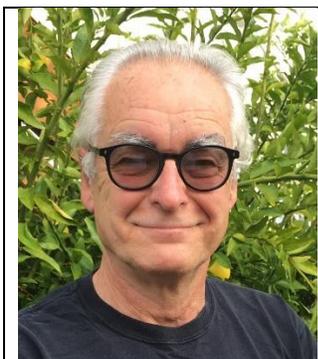
Karl opened the door, helped Bo onto the front seat. “Let’s have the potatoes.” He dropped them in back, climbed into the cab, started the engine. “We’ll get you to the house. Look at them burns. Call Doc Svenson.” He wiped the corners of Bo’s mouth with his handkerchief.

One of the boys thrust a potato through the window. “Look, Mr. Johnson, this one’s hardly burnt.”

Bo touched the crusty skin with two fingers and a thumb. “That there’s a Russet Burbank. It’s a keeper.”

End

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Andrew Miller has spent most of his career working in research on environmental issues and teaching in a small University in Georgia. He retired several years ago and now has time to consult on environmental issues and pursue his interest in creative writing. His previous publications have all been nonfiction, dealing with aquatic ecology and environmental issues.