

# The Boy

By R.S. Courier

The boy runs. He runs the swaggering, hobble, half-step run that his clubbed feet and round body allow him. In dreams, his legs are long straight and lean colored white with a hint of bronze from the sun. Images of a hot summer day and a trip to the racetrack with Grandpa come to mind. Except on this day there were no horses or dogs to be wagered on. Instead, he saw men on the track. Tall men in white shorts built from hard crafted angles. Grandpa said they were racing for something called the Ooolimpicks. The boy thought they looked like angels in flight as they rounded the track.

Right now the boy weeps for legs like those as he pants and swishes through the tall grass. The grass. Most days he loves it. Most days it's earthy, sweet and green. Most days the boy can lie for hours in an earthbound heavenly bed making shapes out of passing clouds. But, this is night. The grass is wet, suffocating, binding and unforgiving; like wading through a field of damp hair.

Still he moves on. Fear and panic have gripped his simple mind. His chest burns, his knees hips and back grind and pop, his eyes burn with tears and sweat, yet still he runs. He can see 'The House' in the distance, hear the faint muffled shouts of hatred, sense the horrifying tension. Even his simple little mind can tell the difference when people speak of 'the house' or 'The House'. 'The House' is usually spat out venomously and harsh with unspoken warnings of damnation and death on the tones of tongues. For so very long, the boy had never gone within mere eyesight of the place. Tales from the townswomen of sin and horror and pain haunting hidden chambers of his skull made sure of that.

Now he can't seem to get there at all. The all encompassing fury of nature and fight wrestle with him, chastise and ridicule him. He defies it with a rage both righteous and frightening to him. A rage that came on so sudden and fierce, so blinding and without warning that it stole the boy's breath. One simple sentence. One little phrase in passing conversation between a barber and his customer and the boy knew his life would never be the same again.

The boy sat in Grandpa's shop whittling tiny little figures of people he knows and animals he loved from scraps of dead limbs he'd found. Whittling with Grandpa's knife stamped U.S. Navy on the blade, something Grandpa called a 'KayBarr'. Mayor Sweeney showed up for his Thursday night cut, tossed his hat and coat on the rack, flashed the boy a smiling nod and took his place in Grandpa's chair. The boy had heard the mayor call Grandpa 'The best colored barber in these here parts' time and time again. He wouldn't trust his thinning hair to anyone else. The boy whittled away, admiring here and there the work he had accomplished.

"I hear 'The Boys' are headed out to take care of 'The House' once and for all." The mayor exclaimed when Grandpa asked what the news was. Grandpa's hands shook, ever so slightly, his breath sucked in sharp, and his eyes shot to the image of the boy in the wall to wall mirror. The boy returned Grandpa's gaze with eyes that could only ask 'why?' The boy knew who 'The Boys' were; everybody did. They lined the pews with their wives and children every Sunday, heads solemn, shouting 'Amens and "Praise

Jesuses with the preacher. They also lined the bar at 'Happy's' every Saturday night hailing the retribution of sinners, niggers, and whores. The boy always saw them as soldiers. Heartless minions of necessity and righteousness. The physical manifestations of damnation. Although, he would never use such words. He simply calls them men. Real men.

The boy thinks of Miss Katasha as he runs. He knows she's at the heart of this. He knows she's what they're after. He knows she's in trouble. He knows he runs for her sake and none other.

The shouts get louder. There are screams now. The boy can see dark shapes moving around the front lawn of the house. Torches are blazing and the smell of gasoline tickles his nose. He can see the front door. He knows he can make it there if he tries. But his bones are weary. His body is taxed. He staggers like a gut shot deer onto the lawn. Crawling and flailing across the now short-cut grass towards the immense Victorian front porch of 'The House'. All lights are out, but he can hear the hushed whispers and sobs of those inside as 'The Boys' empty their gas cans. He is almost halfway across the lawn when giant, strong, forceful hands grip his shoulders.

"Where ya goin', boy?" The voice is harsh and condescending. The boy knows his place in life. He knows he cannot defy these men. These Real Men. He knows he's not worthy. He knows to keep his mouth shut 'cept when to say 'yessah'. He knows when not to interfere. But, this time he just can't follow the rules.

"Please missah. Let Miss Katasha outta da house. Please missah. She aint done no harm." Spit, snot, and tears dribble from his fat oversized lower lip as he pleads with the angry righteous men around him.

"Don't you fret about that whore no more boy. We know how to handle the likes o' her." The man is tall, proud, and reassuring. The boy knows this man speaks well. The boy knows this man speaks with God on his side. Yet, the boy struggles. He fights this authority. He fights what he knows to be the law, and he does not know why. He wrestles free and rushes with all that he has to the door of 'The House'. But, now he is grabbed by two men. Their grip is much less forgiving, much less patient.

"Simmer down now, Tunny. You don' wanna be gettin involved in this, now do ya?" This second voice smells like bourbon. It has that sick, repulsive overconfidence that only whiskey can bring.

"Please missah. Please missah." The boy is out of breath. He can't struggle, fight or move at this point. A level of desperation he has never felt is sinking into his heart. He knows why they're here. He knows what the scripture says. He just doesn't care. "Please let Miss Katasha go, please missah." The boy sobs now. He sobs with a pain he can't understand.

"She's done bewitched you boy. You don't need worryin' bout the likes o' her. She's the devil's temptress. Best you just let us handle this." The man smiles and chuckles to his cohorts. They know the boy is simple. They know he doesn't know any better. They know they can save him.

The boy strains against the strong, hateful arms that hold him back. He screams for the woman in the house. Then something happens. He hears a tremendous 'smack', like an axe splitting wood, then a sensation, a feeling, an awareness that the boy has never felt before races through his skull. He feels pain in the back of his head; intense pain. Yet, a calm comes over him like a suffocating dark blanket. He falls, face first,

onto the lawn. His eyes can't focus. He can't think. His mouth can't close. He wonders for a split second if he's going to die. Then, he wonders why this doesn't bother him.

But his peace is short lived. Through fluttering, unfocused eyes, he sees the house erupt into flames. He hears screams; fearful, panicked screams from within the house; hateful, jubilant screams from outside. Purpose comes back to his thoughts; dire, unyielding purpose. He comes to his hands and knees, crawling slowly across the cut grass, all the while feeling like he is going to fall. It reminds the boy of the time Grandpa let him drink a whole beer by himself. He had never been so dizzy in all his life.

Again, the hands grab his shoulders. The fingers bite into his skin as his body is pulled upright. The strain is too much for his groggy mind and his stomach empties its contents all over the front of him.

Then he sees her in the doorway. She's coughing, staggering and holding her belly as she makes her way down the stairs of the porch. Her black hair is pulled back from her smooth face and dove neck. She's wearing a short night shirt that stops right above skinny, wobbling knees. Shiny tears cut white streaks down a soot covered face.

The boy's mind flies back to the first day he met her. Grandpa had told him to go out to The House and pull all the weeds on the compound. Grandpa told him it would probably take him a couple of days. Grandpa told him the Madame would pay him a nickel for every day he was there. Grandpa told him not to talk to any of the other girls. Grandpa told him they were nothing but trouble, and would probably try to trick him out of his money.

For three days, the boy did exactly as he was told. He sweated in the hot sun pulling and slashing at the dead foliage around The House. Breaking dawn every morning and bringing home a nickel every night. But, on the fourth day, at the back of the house, working in the orchard, he saw her. Actually, he heard her first. It was no surprise to see one of the girls out back, hanging linens on the clothes line. Everybody does that, he had thought to himself, why would these girls be any different. But, on this day, hidden within the rows of dripping, hanging bed sheets, he heard the soft sound of music. Now, the boy was no stranger to music; he loved music. He stamped and clapped to the choir every Sunday. But this was different. The tone was strange, he couldn't understand the words, and the single voice sounded like a tiny little choir in itself.

The times he had defied Grandpa's rules in his life could be counted on one hand, but such a voice had to be approached, such a voice could not be ignored. He felt it would be a sin not to find its source. This is where the boy met Katasha Goebechevski. What he saw was not so much a woman, but a tiny angel divinely beautiful in the simplest ways. From the time the boy first spoke to her, she showed a kindness he never thought possible. When asked what she was singing, she said it was a welcoming song for the little one in her belly. On every encounter from that day on, the boy was always greeted with a smile mothers only give babies. On every encounter, she would tell the boy stories of lands far across the ocean and tales of proud warriors. She told him of Gods he had never heard of. Gods like Perkunas, the giant winged serpent; master of thunder and water; benefactor of the wise. She opened his feeble mind to worlds he would carry into his dreams at night. She said he would be there when her little one was born. She said it would be his little brother.

Now, this creature the boy has grown to love as a saint begs and pleads through choking lungs to the men of God surrounding her. She begs for her life. She begs for the life of her unborn child. She begs for the life of the boy struggling to reach her.

“Well, come an’ get ‘im then ya nigger lovin’ whore!” The boy looks up at the man of God yelling at his saint. The man is Nathan Fellows. He owns the bank. The boy had been called nigger before, plenty of times. He always took Grandpa’s advice and never gave the word much thought. But he remembers the day he washed Mr. Fellows’ car. He made it shine like a diamond in the sun. Mr. Fellows told him never to let anyone call him that name ever again. Told him he was one of the ‘decent black folk’, and shouldn’t be lumped with the rest.

Now, in that simple utterance of that simple word, his simple mind escalates into rage. Against the pain, against the fear, against all he knows to be just and right in his little world, the boy lunges with the simple intent to kill Nathan Fellows. Nathan Fellows, the betrayer. Nathan Fellows, the Accuser. Nathan Fellows, the Devil.

The boy hears another ‘smack’. However, this time he feels it between his shoulders, just to the left of his spine. He feels something hard within him break, feels parts of him shift and pull in ways their not supposed to, feels his arm go limp and numb all the way to his fingers. His eyes go wide. He is overcome by a primal understanding that his body will never again be the way he has grown accustomed to. He takes in the faces of the men of God. He sees the wicked smirk on Nathan Fellows’ face. He knows that neither he nor Katasha will survive this night.

She’s sprinting now, running as fast as her condition will allow, running straight at their aggressors. Running right into the mouth of the lion. She runs until she’s close enough to look them all clearly in the eyes. There she stops, her bare feet sliding slightly in the wet grass. She stands tall, stares each one down and finally settles her glare on Nathan. To him she wails with all the force her tiny lungs and deliver, “IT’S YOUR BABY, NATHAN!”

The boy had noticed the shovel in Nathan’s hands earlier, but had never given it much thought. A shovel was a tool, a tool for digging. He’d seen Grandpa using a shovel. He’d used a shovel himself. Never had he ever seen a need to fear a shovel, until he saw the blade of Nathan’s shovel smash into the smooth, angelic cheek of his beloved saint. Her head twisted back, too far back, and then slumped forward with her chin cocked to the side. Her eyes rolled up till all that could be seen was the whites. Her fingers seized and contorted so hard her arms shook uncontrollably. Her knees shook and buckled inwards. The boy thought for a moment that she looked like a baby horse learning how to walk, until she fell into a soft, limp, heap onto the ground.

The boy’s teeth grind. He feels a hole forming in him, just inside of his belly button. A hole icy, silent, and black sucking all that he is into it. His teeth begin to chatter from the cold within him. No longer does he feel that he is a part of his body, but rather, that his body is a tool, and instrument his mind must use. He controls it remotely, telling his good arm to raise and strike those around him. He watches their skin split, watches the bones in their faces shatter like glass, watches their bodies fall to the ground. Only vaguely can he hear their cries of hatred and protest. Only vaguely can he feel the blows they give in return. Sticks break his bones, blades cut his flesh, but they all seem so distant and unimportant.

He recognizes the pistol for what it is when he sees it. He knows that it is a weapon. He knows that it will end his life here and now. He knows that he does not care. There is a bright flash, a searing, hot pain in the center of his chest, a feeling that the front of him is moving towards the back of him.

Then there is a brightness all around him. All things seem to glow. He can smell Jasmine in the air. He hears a soft song calling to him from somewhere in the glow, a song with words he can't understand.