

JOHN MUCCI

In Heat

For years and years I have tried to tell this story. A few people know it by word of mouth. Doctor Bell told me I should write it up and send it to someone who'd print it. Even though I agree, I can't do it for that reason. I've tried of course; my cedar chest is full of half-pages. There are sheets and sheets of this clumsy handwriting of mine: for though I am shy two fingers on my right hand, I can still hold a pencil.

Jesse's grave lies out back. I go see it on holidays to pull out the weeds. I'd kneel and give him a few lines from the psalter, but the ground is always wet from this Montana swamp that crept in a few years after we buried him. "There ain't justice." That should have been written over him. He said that a lot. People still remember him by those things.

They remember how hairy he was, and how one tooth stuck out when he smiled, and they remember that he worked at the distillery and an accident there killed him. But they've forgotten so much. His stubbornness, for one thing. He used to curl up his lip and let his craggy tooth stick out even when he was a baby; I remember one time he was poking Giddy's son--the simple one we used to call Rover who died back in 1917--and she came running out of her store and bellered for me and Jesse to quit, and how could two brothers be so mischievous, and on and on. Right in front of her Jesse put his arm around my shoulder and sneered in her face, then poked her son once more for good measure.

Then again, almost no one associates Jesse with Phenena. They know that she still lives alone in what was her uncle's home but they can't imagine that this spinster was once the woman who drove Jesse into pining late at night when he sat out on the porch and shaved stick after stick into long strips.

It would be foolish to say that Phenena was the only flame in his life; I am sure my brother had his eye on a few more--and married one of them. Compared to the time he spent on the sisters who lived on the hill, Phenena was only a sliver of the whole pie.

He used to go over to her house when they were only fifteen or so, and they'd throw stones into the quarry pond; then Phenena's father found out about it and barred the door the next time Jesse

rang the bell. He saw her less and less after that, and each of those times on the sly, until her house burned to the ground and her parents were found choked to death near the front door. Phenena, who had been found alive in her mother's protective arms, was taken to her uncle's house, across the street from Giddy's store. Jesse saw her once after that; he told me she had a look on her face as though she were trying to stare down a brick wall. He didn't even say a howdy to her and she didn't see him. Then began the courtship of the sisters on the hill. I didn't hear him talk about Phenena for eight whole years.

It was in that awful winter of 1911, when the icicles hung off the porch roof like the pipes of an organ, and the wind sliced open your teeth and blew into your lungs like broken glass, when we saw her again. Jesse was twenty-three, and I was a year shy of that, but I was fat—well over two hundred fifty pounds even then. Jesse said I should have been the warmest of everyone, but he had all the hair, and I shivered bitterly.

The porch was one griddle of ice. We chipped our steps clear one morning, and, when we sat down to rest my brother smiled up and said, "I want to go swimming."

It had rained the night before; the forsythia bushes were all cased in ice and were swaying in front of the sun, bright and clear as though burning, but thick and cold with an unbearable freezing weight on each branch. "You want to what?" I said, turning to him, the breath blowing out of my mouth like a smoky club.

"Swim. You know, there's men up in Birnim County who get together in weather like this, crack open their swimming holes, strip naked, and swim."

Now Jesse always knew more than I did, and I saw no reason to not believe him. But when I thought of myself blundering through the clinking forsythia bushes, I had to fill in the one question blank in my mind:

"Why?"

"It preserves their manhood."

"What does that mean?"

"Some of those men are eighty years old. They jump in that cold water and their blood runs through them as fast as rabbits."

"So?"

"Then they go to the cathouses and spend all night with three or four women."

I must admit that it didn't sound so bad for eighty years old. "But what good'd it do you?"

"Me--and you--it'll keep us young, with black hair and good teeth 'til we're a hundred, And it improves what you've already got."

More things people don't know: Jesse had a hand on every barmaid in town, but he and his friends went to that cathouse in Birnim a couple of times. Jesse way too shy, they said, to do much but listen to the pianola, and I believed them. He loved to show off his hairy chest to me, but no woman ever saw more fur on him than an inch above his wrist in summer, and the beard he'd raise now and then.

Jesse looked at me from the corner of his eye and said, "Get me?"

I shifted my weight around and looked him straight in the face. "I don't care how big you say it gets you, you're out of your skull."

"I'm not asking you to take me there. I'm going. You can come or not."

So he stepped off the porch, and, careful not to slip on the walkway ice he headed for Giddy's pond.

I got up and followed. Seems Jesse always liked to walk a little faster than me, and I ended up looking more often at his back than his side.

Giddy's pond was bigger then. It had one side covered with big boulders -- they went for the town hall foundation in 1926 -- and about two hundred feet of reeds and pines separated Giddy's store from the water. We came around the back road and the air was so crackling cold the needles on the trees hit together like stiff tappings on some weird instrument.

"How deep you think it is now?" I said. "You'll dive in and break your head."

"About four inches of ice, then four feet of clear water, in the middle."

He motioned to me to help him pick up a sizeable rock, and we threw it on the ice. There was an awful sound of all those pounds of frozen water cracking and breaking up, the sound of an ax wedging in the face of a wet log. We threw a good dozen stones in, and finally there was a space cleared with thick chunks of ice bobbing in the water. Almost immediately the water began to re-freeze the blocks together and I had visions of Jesse getting stuck there like a duck with his feet frozen in.

Jesse took his coat off, then his boots and laid them near the boulders. Then his shirt, then his pants, and after two minutes of unbuttoning he stood there like a skinny bear, naked as a peeled bough, and he waded in the pond, throwing out big pieces of ice to make room. He was blue.

I expected him to pop out in a second, look sheepish, and we'd go home. But he paddled around, dove under a few times, and finally gave three snorts of smoking breath like a horse; he whelped, splashing around, steam rising off him as though he was cooking.

"Come on, come on!" he started waving me in. "Beautiful! I can feel the blood running in me!"

To see him there, naked, all that hair sprouting off him, splashing, chattering, let me tell you through all my fat it hit my heart; we were brothers and we could swim: it didn't matter why. I threw off every stitch of clothing and flopped in next to him.

The water was a vise around my thighs: I stood still and wouldn't move in deeper. Jesse cupped his hand and splashed me; there was nothing to do but slide in the whole way, up to my armpits, my nose. I could feel my skin shrinking as I bent my knees, covered my face in the pond.

But we swam. We swam in circles, and I watched his hairy hams break the water. As I went to paw after him I could see my hand was blue as a robin's egg.

We stood up in a foot of water and suddenly started to laugh and splash to keep the water from freezing. Then Jesse stopped and looked over my shoulder.

On the boulder above our clothes, Phenena stood, her arms wrapped around her.

Jesse started to shake a little. I could picture Phenena looking at us, one black with hair, one white as a fish belly, and I don't blame her in a way, but she huffed a few puffs of air, then broke out and laughed. She laughed like a bat, like a monkey screaming. Jesse, instead of covering himself, started to splash at her with a look on his face I can only think of as rage; he splashed with all his force, wetting her, the boulder, the clothes, and me.

She backed off, laughing all the more, then ran through the frozen reeds toward her house.

My brother was in a terrible fit and he was shivering like a lost dog. "Damn woman! Ain't no justice in that, damn woman!" he chattered over and over.

Whatever blood that was running through him seemed to run out of him. As though he had lost some fight, his shoulders slumped, and the manhood he was trying to improve and preserve was a white, guilty bulb that seemed to be no part of all the hair.

It was no easy matter to put the clothes on. We were wet, they were wet, and a breeze had suddenly come up to make things worse. My pants were soaked to the seams from Jesse's splashing and it was a good mile of walking to our place. Jesse, determined as ever, shucked on his clothes and walked off, furious. For me, it was harder to draw on my bulky stuff, but I hastily threw on what I could and followed, steam rising off the shirt, off the pants. I looked at Jesse. His hair was slick as a piece of glass.

I touched my own, and it was so hard, that when I flicked a strand with my fingers it broke off clean, as though it was snipped. I called for Jesse to wait.

"Don't stop walking," he says, "keep your knees moving." Anger was all out of his voice. Now he was afraid, just as afraid as me of what might happen. Before we made it to the road my arms began to stiffen. Near Giddy's house my pants were starched with ice, and about fifty feet beyond I was so heavy, I couldn't walk right.

"Jesse!" I called, and he came back to me, "I can't move my arms; this shirt is heavy and like a board!"

"Keep moving your knees," he said. "Don't freeze up on me or we'll be two snowmen." His coat was buttoned up tight; but in haste, mine was wide open and the wind played around my belly as though I were a barrel out in the middle of nowhere. The temperature must have been dropping steadily. My arms felt useless and my legs were too heavy. I stopped to breathe some, and when I went to walk again I couldn't move a muscle.

And then a thin pole -- or what felt like a hot thin pole went right through me, and I knew it was the heat of being afraid; but it didn't warm me, only nailed me better to the ground. I called to Jesse, but it came out more like a bleat. He heard me, came back, and walked round and round me.

"All right," he said, shaking: "all right. I'll get Giddy." He walked off quickly, but it seemed like it took five minutes for him to take two steps. My flesh was warm, but I could feel the clothes, more like the metal body of a car than cloth; I knew they were freezing the skin faster than my own heat could melt them.

It started to snow. Giddy's house got more and more blurry as

Jesse walked into the big flakes, flexing his arms across his chest. He stomped up the stairs, banged on her door with both blue hands, and went inside. Then the wind came up and blew my eyes shut and I couldn't open them again. As I fell forward, stiff as a salted fish, I remember hearing the wind, and my nose burned as it hit the ground and I couldn't move; not one inch, not one muscle.

I wish I was Jesse so I could have seen them carry me in. That simpleton son of Giddy's, Vernon, was only fifteen then, and it must have been a regular circus act with me so fat to have the two drag me down the road. But they got me in the kitchen, and Rover undid my clothes and dumped me in a tin tub and they poured warm water all over me until I came to.

Well, when I opened my eyes into that face of Rover's, he gave me a smile with more buck-teeth than a buzz saw, and I started to chatter.

"Cold, ya, 'scold out today, 'scold." he said over and over. The idea of being in water again made me feel like puking. The big teeth flashed again. "'Scold, like ice out there," Rover said. I patted him on the head, and as I did I saw my fingers were dark blue.

"Here comes another bucket!" Giddy opened the door and backed in, because she knew Rover had undressed me completely. I had another dousing from the eager boy and I chattered all the more.

"Your brother's upstairs getting some clothes on," Giddy said, facing the wall. "But he ought to get doused too. Frostbite ain't nothing to sneeze at."

Rover busted up laughing.

"Look at your fingers," she said to me. "They were dark when we found you and I'm worried for 'em. Land alive," she said walking out of the room, "neither one of you ever did have any sense."

Rover splashed me a little more. "You fell in?" He winked and laughed. "You fell in the pond and got wet." I pushed his hands away from me and splashed myself.

In one day, my right hand swelled up, and the tips of two fingers turned black. Doc Bell didn't have to look twice to know they had to go. He looked at my toes too, but they were all right. Right down to the last joint my index and littlest fingers were lopped off. Jesse wouldn't look at them, even after the scars healed.

That spring, Jesse soured. Every second thing he said had to do with Phenena and our meeting last winter. While I sat next to him on the porch playing the ocarina as best I could without my re and ti fingers, Jesse got up and put his hand on my shoulder. "We go back!" he said, too loud. I tucked the ocarina back in my pocket.

"You want to have another go at her?"

"Not for me," Jesse said, sitting down again. "After all those years when she wouldn't let me get near her -- then she laughs at me, and, cause of it, you're mangled."

"What do you want to do with her?"

"Just show her your hand. That's all. She doesn't know about it. I want her to know."

"Jess, I'm not gonna stand in front of her flapping my hand just to make her feel bad."

"It's only fair," he said. He went into the house and brought out a bottle of bourbon. "Drink up now."

Shot for shot the bourbon went down our throats. Jesse, like a tired puppy, stared into the ground, his eyes swollen.

"What *is* it about her?" I said.

"Am I so goddamn ugly?"

I shrugged. "Hell, no. I'm the one with the lard."

"I want to know, that's all. I want to hear her *say*--"

Then his fists balled up like he was ten years old, and the lip curled up. In a second, I knew what he was really after.

"You want to look at her."

He took another shot, and his teeth looked huge in the bottom of the glass as he tipped it up.

"I don't care. She owes you a look at that hand. At least."

It was a few more nights before Jesse did anything. He came out onto the porch with a railroad spike, a piece of rope, and a kerosene lamp.

"Let's go," he said. It was about eleven-thirty.

I thought a second, then got up and followed. I would have felt at fault if Phenena got hurt, and I knew he'd go alone if I didn't go along. So I put on a light coat and we headed off to Phenena's house with a half moon bright in the sky.

Giddy had told us once that she saw the light on at Phenena's long into the night, and that the house was full of books, which her uncle had left her when he died the year before. When we got to her place, one second-story lamp was lit.

"Why don't we try knocking first?" I said.

"We swig first." He brought out a hip flask and took a long gulp. Then me, then him again.

"We won't bust in. We'll just pry the door open and call for her. She'll come down and we'll talk things over."

As he put the spike to the lock his hands were shaking worse than they were last winter. The door was old; it gave in easily and we stepped inside.

All the furniture where we were was dusty; she probably lived upstairs. And books were everywhere: there wasn't a foot of clear wall: doorways and bookcases. I took down a few and flipped through them. They all seemed to be novels with a lot of talking and romance in them. I put them back. Jesse was looking at a picture of Phenena taken with her parents. Even then her face was white, like Jesse said, white as unstepped-in snow.

Then Jesse stood at the bottom of the stairs, and with as deep a voice as he could do, called up:

"Phenena!"

Nothing, then a little rustle.

"Phenena!" He called again.

Her head craned around the doorway, and seeing who it was, she stepped out onto the landing.

"Jesse. Don't come up here. Go back home."

She was slow in her voice, but I could feel her shuddering. Jesse went up one step.

"How come you brought your brother, Jess?" she said.

"Don't you like him?"

"I like him fine," she said right at me, and backed off a little.

"You see his hand?"

Jesse waved his hand up three or four times to tell me to show off my cut hand. I'm sure he wanted it raised nice and high, but I barely let it clear my waist when I fluttered the three fingers and stuffed the hand in my pocket, embarrassed.

"You did that to him, woman, you know?"

Phenena backed up against the landing wall.

"And what kind of woman'll laugh out at a man like that?"

She hissed out. "I did nothing!"

"What kind of justice is in this world when a fine bit of woman can stand by laughin' when this boy here gets chopped?" Jesse kept wiping his hands on his pants; they were sweating all the time and I

could see little damp blotches on the railing as he moved up another step.

Then he stood stock still and yelled, like before, "You like my baby brother? Or maybe you like me? Or maybe I'm too old for you?" I never expected him to move so fast: He bolted up three more stairs before I could catch his leg. I brought him down onto his belly and he fell down a few steps. Then I lumbered up past him and gave Phenena a smile. I've been mulling over just why I did that. I guess it was to tell her that no matter how Jesse put it, I didn't blame her for the fingers; I would give them up to her, *offer* them to her if she would only see how much my brother wanted her; had planned and dreamed of her and how he would please her. And despite his clumsy way of leaping at her maybe I could make it right by setting him aside, and with the proper words, tell her myself. She leaned forward with a wild glance and spit straight in my eyes.

About then Jesse hauled onto my belt and pulled me back, trying to crawl over me. As we struggled on the stairs, Phenena ran into the bedroom again. He was panicky, sweating.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"You're not going to touch her. I swear to God you won't get near her."

He put his hands around my throat, and I was going to kick him when I heard the cocking of a gun.

"Get up, the two of you." She stood above us with a twin-barreled shotgun in her hands, leaning back to brace herself against the weight. "I want both of you to get up." She came down the stairs a little, and as we two were sprawled out and tangled, we had a time getting to our feet.

"I would love to kill you both," she said, "kill you and your brother both; I'd love to cook you two and be done with you!" She had her eyes wide open and her hair fell down on either side of the barrels; with the kerosene-lamp's light I remember her looking hot, orange from below. As Jesse backed down, he stumbled into the damn globe and knocked it over, spilling kerosene on the floor which blazed up instantly.

She made a little grab outward with her hand, then covered her mouth. A rug was nearby, and we used it and our jackets to pound the flames down into a sticky, black hole that seemed to be in the shape of an animal. We were sweating like hell. Jesse got up and went up to the stairs; Phenena had collapsed and was lying on the

runners. He picked her up, brought her down, and set her gently, flat on the couch.

Poor Jesse! I watched him look at her, and to think of what ran through his head then was too much for me. All those nights when he'd come home from courting the sisters on the hill and he'd hate himself and cuss how ugly they were and kick the railings saying how only one woman ever *could* be right for him -- what could I do to right all that? He touched her neck, let his hand slip down and he undid all the buttons on her nightgown.

God of mercy what a sight to see she was when he pulled the cloth away. Scars and welts on one half of her, twisted round her waist; burned skin shrivelled and folded over itself: white stitchings like rivers on a map wound through it. Jesse looked at her and ran out the door.

I followed. He stopped about fifty feet down the road, and I have never seen him so wild-faced. Spit blubbered around his mouth.

"She's devil-sent," he said.

"No, Jesse; Doc Bell can keep secrets as well as any."

"She's devil-sent, damn her!"

"She couldn't ever please you, and she knew it."

"I should kill her."

"You should go back, maybe."

"Maybe, maybe, damn her; she don't want me; she don't want anybody." He fell on his knees and covered his face.

The same cocking sound came from behind. Phenena stood in her doorway, her nightgown wide open and fluttering behind her.

"Come back," she said, "Come back and have supper, children. Touch, touch me more and we'll all swim!" Then she let both barrels go over our heads, and we took off, never looking back.

Jesse, so far as I know, never told anybody about her. Old Giddy may have known all along. Phenena never reported a thing to the constable and never spoke to anyone in our presence again either; and God knows, I don't blame her.

From then on, I talked to my brother as though we were back to back: like Giddy that day she brought in another bucket, facing the wall so as not to really see me. Our eyes, I noticed, would see just a hair beyond one another, and it was like that until Jesse died.