



The Coffin Maker

By Robyn Corum

My daddy made the coffins.

Uncle Sawyer cut the wood and brought it over. He stacked it up in piles as high as the house; the whole place smelled like pine.

They asked my daddy 'cause he was the best carpenter around these parts . . . well, I hadn't thought about it till now; but I guess he mighta been one of the only carpenters left, too.

Those flood waters were mean, I tell you. I ain't never seen nothing like it. Mister Walter Dillon's house floated right off its foundation and wrecked into houses two blocks down. That hurricane tore the front side off the Post Office and all that mail was found as far away as Milk Bend. And the whole town of Belle Glade is gone, I reckon. But worst of all was the dead people. I went into town with Daddy when the waters first started going down to see if we could help out. They were pulling bodies out of the water two and three at a time. It was the most horrible thing I ever saw.

Mrs. Sylvia Reed, from down at the Methodist Church? She was one of the bodies they pulled out. The waters had beaten her so bad she didn't have any clothes on and she was black and blue. Right then and there my daddy got real quiet. He told me to get on home, but it was okay, 'cause I wanted to. He didn't let me go back again after that.

He worked helping in town for most of the morning times, then he would come home and work on building those coffins for the rest of the day. Most times he'd work way on into the night and he'd pound those nails like the devil was after him.

My daddy was the finest carpenter you ever saw. Where it would take another man four or five whacks to drive a nail, my daddy could do it with one blow. Them men in town used to take bets on it and come out to see, but he wasn't doing it for show, now. He'd take two long boards for each side, though depending on the size of the planks my Uncle Sawyer cut, sometimes he could use just one board for them long side-pieces. Every one of them coffins had to be seven foot long, thirty inches wide and twenty-five inches deep. Later on, when the bodies were so bloated and changed, Daddy had to modify them dimensions somewhat. He'd let me help a little with building the coffins.

We heard reports all along of the missing. Four of the girls from my school were gone, nine of the boys. Sallie Nell's brand new baby sister had been ripped from her daddy's arms and killed, and seems like every migrant worker we ever had in these parts had drowned. Some of the men in town said that didn't matter, they was colored folks, anyway. I saw my daddy's jaw tighten like it does when somebody takes the Lord's name in vain, or when one of us kids uses his tools and don't put 'em back. I thought sure there was going to be a tongue-lashing, but Daddy just stared at the ground and then walked off.

The Red Cross came and said one thousand, eight hundred and ten people was killed in that hurricane . . . but my daddy just shook his head. He took me to the shed and showed me a strip of leather with holes punched in it. I held it up to the light and the sun's beams shone through it like hundreds of twinkling stars in the middle of the bright day. I stretched out on the soft green grass and began to count. The sun had moved a full position over my head by the time I finished: there was two thousand, two hundred and ninety-six holes.

I asked Daddy one night at supper what had been the worst part. I knew my mom had been rubbing liniment on his arms every evening, and, between you and me, I'm sure I heard him crying one night after he come in from making

those coffins. Well, my daddy looked at me, and then he tightened his jaw like he does sometimes. For some reason he looked down at my plate, which was almost empty. "Eat your beans, James!" he said in the roughest voice. "Be thankful you've got 'em!" Then he stormed away from the table. He almost knocked his milk glass over when he went. If I hadn't caught it, the glass would have spilled for sure.

Well, I looked over at my mother in surprise, but she just went to stand by the sink, looking out the kitchen window into the dead, dark night. She was quiet a minute, thinking, I guess, then she looked at me hard. "It was burning all those bodies, James."

I knew better than to say anything.

"There were mounds and mounds of them, hundreds and hundreds, I guess. And the men were left with no choice. Here it is, weeks gone by. And having to worry about disease... James, they boxed up every one of those bodies in coffins, those good men did. But then they burned them. And I'm telling you this, son, 'cause it's now a part of the history of this place. But you pray God you never have to do a thing like that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, you heard your daddy. Eat your beans."