

Rebecca Davis

Resurrection

Judith Steele looked up from picking peas just in time to see her twin brother stumble at the plow. His neck got caught up in the horse's rope, and the end came as fast as a hanging. Judith could tell from how his body fell and didn't move again—how there was no sound—that haste wouldn't make a difference. Carefully, she stood up, lifted her basket of peas to balance against her hip, and made her way out to the field. The bite of the morning was wearing off, and Judith could feel the dampness at her underarms and the pits of her knees from where she'd rolled down her stockings. The fresh soil still held the chill of being unexposed, like a secret.

First, she unhooked Dandy, the horse. Then, she looked down at her brother; he looked just like he was sleeping, except for the abrasions left behind from the rope's sudden violence. His lips were parted, and his eyebrows arched in something like surprise. Perhaps he was surprised, Judith thought as she tapped his forehead with the soft leather of her boot, to be walking one moment and then to suddenly find himself dead. She could have called his name, but it was as useless as trying to reattach a peapod to the stem. Something within him had severed with a quick cleanness that couldn't be mended. There were plenty of things in life that couldn't be mended, and death certainly was one of them.

With the sun at her back, Judith pulled her straw hat up on her head. She slowly made her way to the house and sat the peas out on the porch for washing and shelling before she brushed her boots off by the door and stepped inside.

It was the usual scene. Mother was at the woodstove, cooking something in the cast iron, with fresh dough rising on the counter, while Father read the paper. Father flipped a page noisily as Judith positioned herself in the middle of the room. Despite her parents' bustle, neither had stopped to notice her. She could go on like that, standing in the middle of the room, the fresh earth rich with her

brother's death staining the homespun rug. That could be fine. Leave her brother out there until Father finally went out to see what was keeping him. Judith sucked in a breath and took off her hat but kept a firm hold on its brim.

"Paul's dead," Judith said to the room and to either parent, should they choose to hear it. "There was an accident."

Mother turned from the stove; her face was dripping with sweat. Father dropped the paper from his face to his lap. Together, they asked, "What?"

Judith cleared her voice and danced her fingers around the brim of her hat. "Paul fell and died out in the field. He was caught in the horse's rope."

Her father shot to his feet, stepped into his boots, and pounded to the door and outside, brushing past Judith as he did so. Her mother wiped her hands on her apron before clasping Judith's shoulders. She gave a little shake. "When did this happen? Couldn't you stop it?"

Judith shrugged, and her mother released her. "It was an accident, Mother. Nothing to do about that."

Mother didn't say another word, but she snatched the hat from Judith and flung it across the room. She heaved a bit and then her shoulders crumpled. Quietly, she ordered, "Judith, fetch the best sheets from the guest room. And then help me get the table cleaned off." Her mother removed her apron and crossed the kitchen to hang it on its nail on the wall. On the way, she stepped on Judith's hat. She paused as the bristles crunched beneath her feet. "Judith, I—"

"I'll get the linens, Mother." Judith mounted the stairs and counted the creaks. Her father had never fixed them because he liked to know who was moving through the house and where they were going. It had never mattered much to Judith, though it had been a constant complaint of Paul's.

The guest room smelled of dust. Judith stood tip-toe to get the linens from the wardrobe. On her way back, she glanced down towards the bedroom. The door was pulled partially closed, as if he'd left in a hurry. He had been in a hurry. He'd wanted to finish the farm chores and then go into town to try to meet the Richardson girl. The

newest of his interests; the girl had moved when her father had taken an office position at the medical school in Madison City. Judith heard the front door open, so she clutched the sheets to her chest and hurried downstairs.

Her father entered with Paul in his arms. The bruising around the neck was more pronounced, like the splotches of blackberry preserves her mother would make at the end of the summer. Father placed Paul on the table and arranged his hands to lay crossed over his chest. He took off Paul's shoes and the room took on the distinct smell of sweat and the human body. The only act of tenderness was when Father bent, gently, and touched his lips to Paul's, lingering there as if to breathe life back in.

Judith remained at the foot of the stairs. Her mother had moved back to the kitchen to continue cooking.

"I'll get Lindon and Borden for the arrangements." Father kissed Mother's cheek. He grabbed his good hat and opened the door. His eyes lingered on the body on the table. "We will be done by tomorrow."

"It'll be done nice. Paul'll appreciate it," Mother said as she peeled apples, setting aside the skins for chicken feed. She busied herself over the woodstove, sweat and stray hairs on her forehead. She did not look over at the body.

Judith picked her way across the room and watched Paul prone on the table. There was no rise and fall of his slender chest, no breathing beneath his folded hands. His nails were dirty underneath. He was beginning to change color; he looked irrevocably dead. Judith remembered the way he tripped, how elegantly the rope looped around his neck—was it fate?—and the jolt as he fell in the trench and didn't move again. He'd been a bit beautiful laying there in the dirt with the shoots of old plants all around him, his arms splayed out as if offering an embrace. Judith reached over and touched her brother's face which was so similar to her own. She expected him to be cold, but he was the temperature of the room; it was akin to touching raw meat that had been sitting out too long. What was the last thing he'd said to her? He'd called her from over the field. She hadn't listened. She'd stopped listening so long ago. Her mother came from the kitchen. She was

stained with flour. “Judith, we will need to wash him and dress him. I’ll get the linens ready. You go upstairs and get his new suit and nice shoes. You know the ones.”

“Yes, Mother.” Judith could see Paul’s eyes beneath his half-closed lids. She wondered what he could see. Surely the answer was nothing.

The Steele siblings had shared the upstairs bedroom, despite that they were both nearly twenty. Her parents would say that that wasn’t necessarily true, as Judith’s space was separated from Paul’s with a thin birch wall that her father raised once she’d blossomed. The upstairs was small—built before the parents could afford all the additions downstairs of the larger kitchen, the dining room, and a pantry—and they wanted to keep a bedroom spare for guests.

Paul’s part of the room was like any room: it had a bed, a desk that was never used, a wardrobe, a mirror, and a wash basin. Judith would come out many mornings to find Paul standing before the mirror in nothing but his underthings, shaving his face or working with his hair. Judith had a rack for clothes and a cot of her own, and mirror with a web-thin crack in the top corner. Her books and mending sat in baskets on the floor. She kept it swept up and sometimes would even get fresh flowers for her window.

She finagled with the door of Paul’s wardrobe; he had broken it once when he was drunk and unhappy, about what, Judith couldn’t remember, or she’d never known. He had several suits of clothes in there: pants and cotton shirts that she or her mother had to starch regularly and iron over and over for each wrinkle, no matter how slight. Several pairs of polished shoes occupied the bottom of the wardrobe, along with a trunk of ties and socks. Many of these things were gifts from girls or bribes from their male-relatives when Paul got a little too friendly. Judith chose the newest suit and the freshest shirt and the nicest shoes. Then, she knelt and opened the trunk. She’d never been in it before. There were silk handkerchiefs of all colors and socks of soft wool. Judith grabbed a pair and rubbed them across her face, the wisps of the yarn tickling before she settled on a pitch black necktie. It would be important that Paul’s collar was tight so that no one had to see the injury. She smiled a bit. The way Paul had died would be spoken widely—“Oh such a tragic thing. Bless those Steeles.

Paul was such a fine, young man”—but the evidence of death was too dreadful for them to see.

Judith laid the clothes out on Paul’s bed before making her way to her rack. Her crape was in the back, tied up in an old feed sack that had been washed and dried out in the sun. The dress was a heavy thing: two layers of skirts with a hem of black lace. The collar dove gracefully across her shoulders. Judith’s mother had passed it on to her from a dead aunt she’d never known. Judith had spent months sewing it up, refashioning it by the light of her window and the faded magazines she sometimes bought when in town. She ran her hands over the stiff fabric before taking it from the rack and putting it on her cot. She would get to wear the crape for months and months while mourning Paul; it was her best dress.

Back downstairs, Father had returned with Mr. Lindon, the preacher, and Mr. Borden, the undertaker. Borden was carefully examining Paul’s body, which now lay on a white sheet on the table with the other linens stacked neatly beside him, squeezing the arms from the shoulder to the fingers. “Such a shame,” he said, and then he whistled. He laid the arm back down and began unbuttoning Paul’s shirt. At that point, Mrs. Steele was seized by a sob—the first that Judith had heard since the accident—and retreated back into her bedroom.

Judith stood at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for the order she knew would come.

The men had all turned to watch Mrs. Steele and now looked to Judith. Mr. Borden had stopped the undressing. Mr. Steele cleared his throat. “Judith, your mother was getting water and the lavender soap to wash Paul. You will do it. We have matters to be discussed. Carry yourself with respect for your brother’s memory, am I understood?”

“Of course, Father. It would be my honor.” Judith nodded, regally, and made her way to the kitchen. Her mother had filled a pail from the basin and had the soap and cloths ready. Judith rolled up her sleeves and took up the task, but not before glancing over at the preacher. During church service, his face was dull and his voice a drone, but now he was animated and his voice loud. As he talked, he

moved his arms in wide circles. “It’ll be important to consider the burial because of robbers. One happened just last week, cause of that dreadful medical school in the city. It was all the rage in Europe year ago.” The robbers had been careful, bringing a tarp to hold dirt as they half dug up the grave, breaking only the foot of the coffin and pulling the body out, and then leaving all in the cover of the night.

Mr. Borden took a drink from the glass that Father had offered earlier. “Why on earth would you want a stiff?”

The preacher spoke with a nervous quickness. “No sir, I believe to sell them up at the medical school for cadavers. The pay is quite good, I’ve heard, though the act quite unchristen.”

Father remained quiet over his drink. Then he’d said, “Well, they’re just bodies. Dust to dust.”

From there, they settled into formalities: costs and coffins, prayers and hymns. Judith made eye contact with each of them and they smiled at her with a sorrowed grace. They were touched by what she did for her brother. Carefully, Judith removed Paul’s shirt, folded it, and put it on an armchair. She dunked the soap in the bucket to encourage suds, wet the cloth, and went about massaging the dirt from his chest. She followed a careful rhythm, though she felt nothing at motion in her brother’s body.

Perhaps Paul was attractive, well-formed at least—strange to say since they’d looked so similar. In a different situation, she could have chastised herself at her vanity. Judith washed his face. Accidentally, she flipped open his eyes and they stayed. There was nothing there now but the whites, the irises gone to the back of his head. Curiosity got the best of her, and she opened his mouth next. A puddle of bile dribbled out and she hurried to clean it up. Paul’s mouth didn’t close on its own either, so she shut it herself and then tried with his eyes though they would not close completely. “Here, try these.” Judith jumped at the voice by her arm. It was Mr. Borden, the funeral man, holding out two quarters.

Judith shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Our eyes want to stay ever open. The weight will hold them down for now. I’ll sew them up later.” He leaned in close to Judith and put his hand on the small of her back. “I’ll sew his mouth too.”

She shrugged away his touch. “Thank you for your help.”

“My pleasure.” He left his hand on her back a bit longer before retrieving a bottle of gin from the cupboard and returning to the other men.

Judith took a deep breath as she unfastened her brother’s belt and busied herself with removing his trousers. She found his pocket-watch in the front pocket. Judith checked the room, then slid that treasure into her apron.

She continued at her work until she had scrubbed her brother clean and he lay before her as he’d come into the world, except for the quarters pressing down his eyelids and the snapped neck. Judith took one finger and placed it on her brother’s forehead. There was a coolness now, like after a bath on a hot evening. His skin was soft and lovely, unmarked by the grime of life. She let her finger play down his nose, his mouth, his neck (and grave wound), his chest—to marvel at how clean her brother could be. What a gift she had given him: to enter the afterlife so pure. What had he ever given her?

Judith could feel the men now watching her, and they’d stopped talking. There was a sort of reverence in the room. Surely, they thought that she was crying or blushing—feeling something after the washing. But she’d seen this body in its entirety before. She’d come out of her birch walls one night when she’d heard muffled cries. “Paul?” she whispered. “What’s going on?”

“Get away, Judith.” He’d stood then before her. At his feet was a young woman—perhaps fourteen or fifteen—wrapped in his bedclothes and heaving. Judith hadn’t moved, so Paul crossed the space between them and took her in his arms. He shook her. “Get back in bed.”

“She needs help.” Judith couldn’t stop looking at the girl, who had moved to lay on her back before folding into herself. Her arms were bare and ghastly in the light of Judith’s candle.

Paul slapped Judith across the face so hard that she fell. She looked up at him and he towered before her. He reached for her, and Judith was shocked at the sound of the “No” that erupted from her lips.

The memory blurred then, as if she watched it through hot tears. Paul clawed at her, struck her, tore her clothes—but her parents had come upstairs. The girl had been a nobody; Paul had bought and paid for her in Madison City. A boyish transgression; it would be a humorous story for his own sons someday.

Judith draped the sheet over Paul, covering him up to his shoulders. She heard the mention of the cost of the coffin and the grave. “I’m finished.” Judith straightened at the table. “Do you need anything else, Father?”

“Yes, cut a few locks of his hair for your mother. She will want a keepsake.”

Judith obediently got her sewing scissors and snipped a bit of Paul’s bark-colored hair. She placed the strands in her father’s open palm before bowing her head to him. “Anything else?”

Mr. Borden got out a kit with needle and thread and approached Paul to sew shut his eyes and mouth and to carry out other final preparations. Mr. Lindon bid farewell and offered hurried condolences.

Father patted Judith on the cheek. “That’s all, Judith. Go rest. You’ll have a busy day tomorrow.”

Judith looked back before mounting the stairs. Mr. Borden had the body uncovered to the waist. He was trying to thread a large needled with black cording, and he knocked into the table. Paul’s head lolled to the side and the quarters clanked on the floor. Paul’s eyes were open wide, but Judith knew that he could not see her.

The funeral was in the morning at the grave. The sky was bright, and the birds and bugs sang; there was all the life of summer. Nature did not mourn.

Children were uneasy in their black clothes and danced from foot to foot, despite their mothers scolding. Father stood tall, while Judith held her mother who was reduced to quiet whimpers; the weight of loss had stricken her. Words were said—about salvation, resurrection, but Judith didn’t listen. She watched the wooden box and thought about her brother lying within. Still unmoving; Paul remained

dead. She should muster tears, but she didn't. It would be said later that she was so strong for her mother. Judith watched as the gravedigger chatted with Mr. Lindon before tucking his shovel behind a statue of an angel in prayer. Then, the two men made their way back to the church as the crowd of mourners dispersed.

Later, all the mourners in black crowded the Steele house for food and drink and talk. All talk of Paul. Seemingly everyone had at least one good story to share, one that was better than any that had been told before it.

Paul. He was a good boy. Remember when he carried that injured calf into town for his father? Remember when he helped with the barn raising? (Never mind that every man helped with that.) Remember that roguish grin? (Rapid fanning from several ladies.) Remember, remember, remember. No, Judith didn't remember. She sat in an armchair with coffee, running her fingers over the pattern of the black crape. The ticking of Paul's pocket-watch persisted at her side, where it was hidden in the skirts, reminding her that the time was marching on. Soon all of this would be over, and Paul Steele nothing but a memory.

After, when everyone was gone, Judith went out in her crape to feed the chickens. The plow had been left in the field, right where Paul had fallen. There were a few new peas to be picked, and the wheelbarrow, which Paul would have used after the plowing to spread some new seed, sat idle by the barn.

There was no moon that night. Judith climbed from her cot in the darkness, feeling her way across the room by instinct. She'd not changed from her crape, and it crinkled about her. She got a heavy quilt from the foot of Paul's bed.

The creaking stairs were her first challenge. Judith slipped off her boots and clutched them in one hand. She went slow, grazing the fingertips of her other hand across the wall as she proceeded, slowly, one-two-three—there were eight steps—four-five-six—there was a creak, long and shrill. Judith stopped and held her breath. She heard something stir in her parents' room. A feminine moan and then settled snoring. Judith breathed again and counted the final two steps. She

crossed the room on stockings feet, skirting past the bedroom door in time with the snores. At threshold, she slipped back into her boots and laced them. She stepped out and shut the door behind her.

The night was cool and comfortable. Crickets and frogs chimed. A cat yeowed somewhere and a dog barked. One of their cows let out a groan. Judith felt herself smile then. "I agree. This is a lovely night." She wandered to the barn and kissed the cows; she rubbed the muzzle of her favorite horse, incidentally the one who had killed Paul, a pretty draft named Dandy. She retrieved the wheelbarrow and dropped the quilt in it. She left, looking back only once at the quiet plank house and the fields.

At the graveyard, Judith carefully picked her way to Paul's grave, avoiding holes and sunken stones. If anyone asked, she'd come to lay by her brother. After all, they'd slept in the same room for their entire lives. Judith had read mourning poetry; she could muster the extremity of those voices. But there was no one around and Judith was relieved not to pretend her suffering any longer.

The dirt was fresh and unsettled. Judith took the shovel from behind the angel statue and started to dig into the loose soil. The bottom half was easy enough to remove; after all, Judith had been doing farm work for years, though she never expected to use her muscles like this. She scooped the dirt onto the quilt as quickly as she could. Judith uncovered the end of the casket and used the shovel to break the lid: one, two, three solid strikes broke through the planks. The sound seemed to amplify against the darkness, but no one came in alarm. The church remained quiet.

She removed the casket pieces, and then grabbed her brother by the ankles and pulled. He was heavier than she'd figured; he was, after all, settled dead weight. Judith tugged hard again and saw the glimmer of his gold belt buckle; he was halfway out. She felt the beads of sweat sticking to her forehead, but she didn't stop to wipe them. It was taking too long. Someone could come and see. She jerked as hard as she could, and Paul slid the rest of the way, his arms flinging out to sides from where they'd been laid on his chest. The stitches in his face strained to keep him placid.

Even in the darkness, Judith could see his skin was grey. Judith sat Paul up against a neighboring stone so he almost looked natural.

She put the pieces of casket back into the box along with some rocks nearby before shoveling the dirt from the quilt back on the grave. It all looked surprisingly neat. Judith wiped her forehead before tossing the shovel back behind the statue. She loaded Paul into the wheelbarrow (another ordeal of his weight bearing on her) and draped the quilt around him. Then, she started to walk. Though the load was heavy, it seemed lighter as she distanced herself from the familiarity of the churchyard.

Miles up the road and miles from home, where her family rarely ventured, Judith found a wagon pulled over, advertising rides into the city. She wasn't sure of the time. She didn't know how long she'd been walking, but she knew it had to be nearly dawn. Judith found the driver doubled over in the front seat, obviously asleep. "Excuse me sir? Are you running?"

He jolted up. "Yes! I am." Then he looked at her under the light of a lantern. "You look tired, miss. And is that man well?"

"I'm so sorry." Judith's voice cracked and she swallowed hard. "I know it's late. My brother is a student at Benson University. He came home for our mother's funeral and got so drunk..." Judith wiped her eyes and reached down to ensure that most of Paul's face was hidden by the folds of the quilt. "He must get back to school for classes in the morning. He wants to be a doctor. It's his dream, and our mother's...it was our mother's..." Judith let her voice trail off and hid her face in her hands.

"I'm so sorry." The wagon man got out and put his hand on her shoulder. "I can take you up to the university. I can do it for five dollars."

"I don't have any money." Judith clasped both of his hands in hers and squeezed before releasing them. "All I have is this." She held out the pocket-watch.

Of course the man took it. Judith spent the hour ride in the back with her brother, sniffing and wiping her eyes so there was no conversation. She couldn't help but notice that her brother smelled, not only of the fine salts they'd rubbed on him and the herbs in his pockets, but like a corpse. She hoped the wagon man was too tired to notice.

Judith got the man to drop them at the back of the medical school, and he knew the way, almost as if this was not the first time he'd had to unload a drunk student. She wheeled Paul behind some bushes. The building was stone and cold to the touch, and most of the windows were dark, save one. Judith thanked her luck; she hadn't considered the time and the first fingers of sunlight were only now pinching the horizon.

There was a man in there, busy over a woman's body. He had a blade in one hand and he carefully traced it down the body from the collarbone to the navel. He opened the cavity and began to remove things the size of fruits and placed them in labeled jars. Judith felt her gut rise. She looked away from the body and found the woman's head staring at her from the other side of the window, like some ghastly joke. Judith screamed then and fell back.

"What the devil?" The man—a doctor, or so his clothes would suggest—leaned out the window. "Who are you?"

"I've...I've come with something. I heard that you take—"

The man looked serious. "You've heard what? Speak up."

"You take bodies. Like hers." Judith pointed a quivering finger at the dead face that had been only inches from her own.

"I got hers from her family. They gave her to me." The doctor took off his gloves and pushed his glasses up on his nose. "I don't know what you heard, but don't accuse me of anything."

"No, that's not it. Can you come outside?"

"I will not. Tell me what you want, or I'll call the police."

Judith motioned towards the bushes. "My brother's body is there. He died in an accident. I want to sell him to you."

The doctor's response was to run outside. "Show me." Judith brought him over to the bushes and pushed Paul out. The doctor looked him over, pausing long at the injury. "Do you think anyone will recognize him?"

"We are from miles away. He'd come to the city, but not often. I think there's no risk." Judith watched as the doctor prodded her

brother, unfastening the dark tie around his neck fully and letting it drop to the ground. “How much for him?”

“A moment.” The doctor scurried back inside, and Judith thought that he may have been reporting her. For an instant, she thought about running, though she had no money and nowhere to go. She couldn’t return home after she’d dug Paul up from the ground and tried to sell him like a meat hog. Minutes later, the doctor came back with a gurney and an envelope. “Fifteen dollars. And secrecy.” He handed over the envelope and then offered his hand for a shake. “Your fellow humanity thanks you for this.”

Judith shook it, heartily, no quiver in her hand. “Thank you.”

The morning sun had almost taken full to the sky when a young woman in black crape moved hastily to a ticket counter at the rail station. She carefully held out a bill. “How far will ten dollars take me?”

“Quite far,” the man at the window said without looking up. He was waiting for his partner to bring him coffee. “Where do you want to go?”

“As far as I can,” the girl said, leaving the bill on the counter. “I want a ticket for as far away I can go.”

He looked up at her then with his sleepy eyes. She smiled. It was too early to ask questions, and she was a pretty girl. Her hair was white-blond and her eyes a mix of blue and green like woods in the spring. Though her clothes were a bit odd: heavy mourning crape and a straw hat with a white ribbon She didn’t seem afraid, not like the runaways he sometimes saw. Maybe a rich girl’s vacation, a bit of leisure. He rang up her ticket and handed it to her. “Have a good trip.”

“I will.” Judith took the ticket and gathered up her skirts. The other five dollars and the money she got from pawning Paul’s funeral clothes were hidden in the folds. Her parents would be waking up soon; disappointed to find that she hadn’t made breakfast. They’d still be mourning Paul. She didn’t know when they would notice that she was gone. Judith found her train and boarded with other people, all

busy, too busy to notice how her heavy mourning clothes contrasted with the victory on her face. Soon she'd be somewhere new. Start fresh and pure like she was newly born. Enter the world unmarred by what had come before.

Judith sat by the window and watched the world through the scratched glass. The sunrise was brilliant. Finally, finally, her brother had given her such a fine thing.