

**The Woman
Who Would
Not Die**

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A novel



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Title: The Woman Who Would Not Die

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This book was printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-60458-262-8



To Daniel and Fiona
To Ellen
And to the Wednesday Night Writers
Of Tallahassee

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One

How strange to meet Bill King on this quiet suburban street with its lawns and sidewalks, and windows guarded by Venetian blinds, so many years after that terrible day. How odd that we should ever meet again. He was out of place here, pink-skinned and fragile in his beige knit sweater buttoned at the waist, a light gray cardigan bulking underneath. He belonged to another time and setting: an old cypress swamp or thickets of saplings and river oaks, a rifle in the crook of an arm, wearing heavy boots, a wide-brimmed hat, and a two-day beard. I did not welcome him. Four decades had passed, almost to the day. I wanted done with all that.

Bright yellow leaves swirled into the street, tossed lightly into the air from bare-limbed trees and browned centipede lawns. Recovering from a slight fever, I had not been outdoors for two days. Too many hours inside on my back had left me weak and irritable, annoyed at my own infirmity, tired of watching shadows play on walls. I had stepped outside shakily, restless, wrapped too warmly at Angeline's insistence in a fleece-lined jacket, muffler, cap, and gloves, and saw him moving slowly toward me from the opposite side of the street. He jabbed a reed cane at the roadway, balancing carefully, but he walked nearly erect, looking ahead, exploring the neighborhood with curious eyes. I thought at once that I might know him.

As we closed the distance between us he called out jauntily, "Hallo," as though to welcome conversation with a stranger. "Just moved in up the street," he volunteered. "Me and Miss Vera."

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I crossed over to greet him, removing my glove.

“Hello. I’m Frank Judd.”

He returned a firm grip with his bare hand, fingers long, thin, and cold, and replied simply, “Bill King.”

I blinked and released his hand. *Sweet Bill*. I found it difficult to breath. I had thought he was dead. A strong breeze pushed against us. I coughed, turned half away from him and tried to conceal my discomfort. I pulled my glove on again and looked closely at him.

He was an old man, now, his thinning hair and full eyebrows completely white. Fair skin sagged in pink folds beneath his chin and drooped in heavy pouches above and below deep brown, almost black eyes that faded where pupils met the white. The starched cuffs and collar of a long-sleeved shirt gleamed at his neck and wrists. Gray wool slacks above black leather, “old man” shoes completed his dress, as though costumed for the part by “Miss Vera.” I had remembered him being much bigger.

“Judd,” he said. His expression changed as he considered my name. He looked at me intently, suggesting that he knew. I wondered if he saw family in me. Did he recognize the eyes, the line of the chin, the lips? People had said I took after Mother. *Dear Sweet Bill*. My God! How different it could have been.

“I knew some Judds, once. They’re dead, now.”

“Who was that?” I asked, not wanting to aid his memory. I might gladly have passed on with it unconfirmed, but I would know that he lived on the next

street, and every time we met I'd wonder if he had made the connection. I had spent many years coping with it and had won only a restless peace.

"Jay and Martha," he said without hesitation. "Jay J. was a photographer. Had a little shop down in Pine City. Took school pictures, weddings and such. I'll bet he was your daddy." He looked straight at me without flinching, as if daring me to deny it. There was a time when I might have, but not now. I no longer had the energy for it.

"Yes, he was."

Another stiff breeze blew over us, bringing fresh-browned leaves and bits of yard debris. We turned our backs to it and hugged our hands to our bodies. I hadn't expected to confront the old nightmares again, certainly not this day. They didn't wake me in heavy sweats, anymore, but they lurked nearby, waiting. I'd always had problems with memory and dreams, most recently revived by the fever, waking up and finding that what seemed so real was mere shadow. Over the long years I had sometimes preferred the dream.

Standing at street-side with this shade of a man, images of decades past rushed upon me. "*Choose,*" Grandma said, *her long finger pointed at my chest. "Don't look at me with them big lips of yours. Look in your heart. See the thing that's there. You know what's in there," she rasped.* Stepping back from him and facing away, hunching my shoulders against the push of the wind, I sniffed the back of my hand.

"I knew your daddy well," Bill King murmured, glancing away, his voice softer, thoughtful. Then, stronger, "We was boys together." He nodded as if to emphasize the truth of that, and something of his old self-assurance flitted across his face and the set of his shoulders. "Good friends."

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“I know. He often spoke of you.”

“You favor your mother. Which of the boys are you?”

“Franklin. The oldest. Jesse was killed in a crash at seventeen.”

His brows lifted. He nodded again, certain, now, of the memory that had risen before him. “Yes, I remember. Jay’s boy.” He said the last in a whisper and his eyes shifted to my chest, then to the pavement. He sighed. “Lord, that *was* a long time ago.”

He had not expected this, I told myself, and it could not have been any more welcome for him than me. He looked too old to bear the weight of it. I knew its heaviness, too, had carried it with me all my adult life, had continued to bear it because, as Grandma Roess insisted, “*Suffering is the price we pay for sin.*” It occurred to me that this might be a dream, too, like so often before, and I blinked my eyes to test the light.

He stared at me, as if to inquire what I was doing there, why I had come. “They called you ‘Preacher-man,’” he said, evoking a quiet surprise, his memory now fully refreshed.

“Yes.” I watched closely, anxious to see whether Bill King would push back the folds and speak about the thing we had unwillingly shared. A part of me hoped he would. After all these years it still needed confronting, something that Angeline pointed to when I grew silent and remained so too long. But I had let it fester, counting it a test of will, of strength, and of dogged determination to fight it like an infection of the blood, which it may have been, in some sense.

“Well,” he said, sounding eager to end our short reunion. His head cocked to the left, chin lifted, eyes looking down at me through narrowed lids. “Good to see you again,” he murmured stiffly. For a long moment he looked at me, his eyes expressing curiosity and caring, before he turned away abruptly to continue his walk.

Old visions rose up from within almost as a hiss. “Mister King.” *Sweet Bill.*

He stopped and looked back at me, wearied, leaning heavily on the cane, his shoulders slumped, as though spent by our chance encounter. Surely this meeting stirred up old sediment for him, as well, clouding whatever pleasure he had taken in discovering his new neighborhood.

“I wonder if we might sit and talk, sometime. My daddy never said a bad word about you.” *I untied the ribbon and let it fall away from the small packet of letters bearing Mother’s cramped writing. “Dearest Sweet Bill,” I read. “Sweet Bill.”*

He breathed out slowly and looked away.

I stepped closer. “There are questions ... things I’d like to settle, once and for good. For myself, of course. It would help to have answers.” I saw the reluctance in his face. “Maybe you’ve carried them, too.”

My throat began to close. I coughed and shook my head. “*I miss you so much,*” she wrote. “*I ache all over for you.*” My next words came on their own, almost as a demand. “I would ... like to talk about it.”

“Some things best left alone.”

I shook my head. “Not this.”

“You sure?”

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“No.”

“Best leave it, then.”

“Choose,” Grandma insisted.

The old infection flared within, pushing against my lungs. I felt stifled.

“Best leave it be,” he repeated, softer. The cane repositioned. His shoe scraped the pavement. He began to move away.

I exhaled loudly. “Things need saying.” The words tumbled out.

He stopped again and turned half toward me, stiff-necked, probably arthritic. After a long moment he pointed with his cane, indicating a corner house a block away. “Me and Miss Vera live right down there.” He nodded coldly, eyes half closed. “Come any time.”

I watched him shuffle onward, cane jabbing the roadway, his body clutched against a fresh breeze. The sun flickered beyond scudding clouds and disappeared. It would not get any warmer this day.

Two

“Why haven’t you talked more about your grandmother?” the lady therapist asks, crossing her legs and leaning attractively on her left elbow, which rests on the chair arm. She has pushed the leather recliner away from her desk and pulled a matching footstool closer, now sitting with feet and ankles comfortably elevated, expensive snakeskin shoes on display. She props her chin between thumb and forefinger and looks at me from beneath shaped eyebrows. Manicured and painted nails gleam against the pale and expert make-up of her face. Her lips are precision-painted a complementary color.

“She was a nutty old woman,” I reply, careful to disguise my impatience. “I got wise to her years ago.”

“Tell me about it,” she urges, glancing toward the window to her left, where a mockingbird has settled and begun to sing. We both listen for a moment to its song. I think back to the beginning of these appointments, me frantic, worried that I had inherited a mental illness yet suspicious of anyone who wanted inside my head. She, young, very bright and newly professional, licensed by the state within the year to practice the healing art of psychological counseling. I had found her name in the phone book. Her very first question set the stage in our relationship. “What is it you don’t want me to know?”

It scared me to death. There was so much.

When the bird flies away, I reply, additionally, “I don’t think it’s connected.” I try to sound reassuring, barely able to conceal my annoyance. My grandmother is best kept out of these sessions. I have already said too

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much.

“Why shouldn’t I make that judgment?” The nib of her pen touches the paper of her notebook but writes nothing.

“It was a long time ago.” A lifetime ago. Forever ago.

“But you still dream about her. She still appears to you, talks to you.”

You see, I’ve said too much. She forgets nothing. Her notes remind her. With growing discomfort I realize she hasn’t overlooked a word I’ve said. Her scribbles apparently can be recalled at any point, even years later, neatly correlated with anything new. I have underestimated her.

“Yes,” I say. “Sometimes.”

“You don’t want to talk about your grandmother taking over Allie’s role in your dreams and shooting you through the heart?”

Stated that way, it sounds like the excuse of a crazy man. I avoid her gaze. And I hope I’m not crazy. Worried, yes, but not wild-eyed, stark raving mad. I don’t make this stuff up! But if I tell her everything, all that about ... Hell, Gran was crazy if anybody was. I was just trying to survive. I’m still trying to survive. When I pushed her off the porch it was only a kid pushing back against a force that seemed limitless, overwhelming. I think if I hadn’t pushed back that day I wouldn’t have made it at all. I think I’d have died. Maybe that’s why it scared me so. Maybe I knew, way inside, that I’d found a way out, but it was so sudden, so unexpected! Like a magic

door that opens to the light after years of darkness. I pushed, and, “Open Sesame!” I began to see! Of course, initially I was sort of blinded. I couldn’t sort out the shapes. I mean I couldn’t grasp what they meant. A fact is a fact, but what it means is another thing entirely. That’s the key to this whole business!

Gran is at the center of nearly all my early memories. Anything terrible, haunting? Grandmother is there. A quarrel in the family? Grandmother’s name comes up. She was everywhere. I often had the feeling we were puppets in a play under her direction, and she intended to control us, what we did, and most of all, *what we knew*. What I couldn’t see at that time was the meaning of the push and all that followed. Meaning is everything!

I glance at the lady therapist. What in hell should I say? I don’t want to go through it all again. I don’t want to talk about Gran. And if I do, where to begin? Some things you have to live with. No giving it back. Hand washing doesn’t work. This is one such thing. There’s a price, of course. *Suffering is the price we pay for sin*. I understand that. Either that or . . .

She lifts her head and looks me squarely in the eyes. With a start I realize she has asked me a question.

“What?” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“I asked about your grandmother,” she replies, her tone suggesting some annoyance at losing my attention.

“Oh.” I look away from her eyes. “I don’t like to talk about her much.”

“Why is that?”

I don’t look up. I know her eyes are boring into me. I can feel them in my stomach. I take a breath. “I don’t think she’s connected to my . . . problem . . . in the sense that you might. She’s way in the past. She died when I was

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twelve.”

I hadn't wanted to hurt Gran. It was a protest, mere reflex, a child's rebuke. I recall being utterly frustrated at failing to satisfy her demands, unable to please her, totally inept at gaining her love or respect. *“You can't fool me,” she said. “You got your daddy fooled and your grandpa, but I ain't fooled. I know what you are.” She pointed. “I see what's in your heart.”*

I yelled “No!” and rushed her. My palms pushed into her chest.

She had lurched off the porch with a “Whoops!” and, after the slightest movement, looked up at me from the ground. Her lips half formed a word. Her eyes stared, fixed.

“Gran?”

She didn't answer. She didn't blink.

“Are you hurt?” I squatted at the edge of the porch and watched, waiting for her next breath. Thomas the cat came to me and rubbed against my leg, then sat and observed Gran with a cat's interest. He began to clean a paw with his tongue. I reached and touched Grandma's shoulder. *“You okay?”*

She stared back at me.

I started to cry.

I hurried inside and climbed the stairs to the room I shared with Jesse. *“I didn't mean to, Gran. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.”*

I take a deep breath, lifting my head and meeting

the eyes of the lady therapist, very brown, and penetrating, sitting across from me in her official leather chair, pen poised above the yellow pad on which she records her observations. “You think it isn’t pertinent?” she says.

Three

I got out of the car with my bag. The driver pressed the gas and sped away, tires slipping on loose gravel at the roadside, eager to make up time lost with me. I stared at the house across the road. Mother's Ford, a replacement for the one Jesse wrecked, was sheltered by the carport. Dad's battered truck stood in the yard to the right, positioned for loading from the kitchen door. A sluggish yellow light drifted through the bare window into the darkness.

My father would be in the kitchen, Mother in her room on the back side. They had slept apart since Jesse was three.

I crossed the roadway and stopped. I was half-ready to wait for the next passing car and a ride back to the university. This was not a weekend I looked forward to. Dad and I had hunted together the first week of deer season since I was ten, but it bored me, now. I had given up homecoming and the chance for a date in order to give us an early start, skipping Friday classes and thumbing a ride Thursday evening.

I took a deep breath and let it go. "Ah, well."

They would be quarreling when I came inside. Or they would have just quarreled. I walked around to the kitchen door, opened it, and dropped my bag on the floor as I entered. The toilet flushed. Dad stepped into the hall from the bathroom, buttoning his trousers.