

# MISSY

by  
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*Significant moments in a young girl's life.*

*Gulfport, New Orleans, the 1920s*

*She almost turned back. As soon as her feet hit the roadway instead of the grass verge she hesitated. It was late, it was dark and it was quiet. In those circumstances the sound of her shoes on the street was clear and distinct. Occasionally sparks would fly up from the hob nails as they scraped along the asphalt. She was reluctant to go back for two reasons: first it would take time and second she might lose her nerve. So she did what women do, she took off her shoes and carried them: until she reached the grass verge alongside the road that led to Hogg's Corner.*

*Hogg's Corner is not what it sounds. It sounds like it has something to do with pigs, the rearing or farming of hogs. But no, it is simply the place where Jefferson Hogg practised his trade as a blacksmith and where he lived. It is on a corner, as you'd surely expect, where the old East Park Road meets Debuys Road. Old Hogg retired when his trade dwindled as motor traffic increasingly took over from the horse and the calls for his services fell away, He struggled for a time making objects of wrought iron but his heart wasn't in it and he simply stopped. Unable to sell the smithy as a going concern he simply abandoned it and continued to live in the old house next door where he had lived for the last forty some years. And when he died there, leaving no kin, it was just another house that was slowly falling to pieces. The house was effectively a log cabin, a wooden rectangle sitting in the middle of a weed filled plot with the abandoned smithy at the end of a yard that almost shouted decay. There was a front door at the back of a sun porch from which the screen door had already succumbed to decrepitude and a back door which would have closed if only the door jamb had not been knocked away some time past in order for the squatter to gain admittance. Cracked glass filled the window sashes and in some places was missing altogether. Inside, the house comprised four rooms on the first floor and three rooms upstairs. Only the ground floor was actually available to the squatter, or indeed anyone, due to the absence of the staircase that would have allowed access to the upper floor. Whether it had been removed in its entirety for use as a replacement in another property or simply removed and burnt as fuel in the cold winter months it was impossible to say as not a trace of it remained. Downstairs consisted of a square sitting room (although appellations don't really mean much in the old Hogg House the accuracy of this was evidenced by the presence of an old beaten up settee and an armchair of dubious vintage) which led through to what could once have been a dining room, coming as it does between the living room and the kitchen, or it may once have been a study; those who knew Jefferson Hogg would be more inclined to the former view. This room,*

*intended for dining or other utility now served as a bedroom. A mattress covered by dirty bedding lay on the floor against the wall underneath the solitary window. There was an old bentwood chair, a wooden chest of drawers and a small wardrobe crammed into the space. A set of shelves attached to the wall that could (try to imagine it!) have held books at one time now held a variety of proprietary grooming aids. Passing through the dining room we step into a small corridor which ends at the back door, jammed close with a wooden wedge because the door jamb and consequently the door fastenings are missing. There are two doors off this corridor, the one on left is the kitchen. Kitchen, insofar as there is a stove. An old Brax, cast iron range, with double oven and hot plate. The condition of the stove was excellent, fair enough there were some splodges of cooking fat and probably a little spilled bean juice but in comparison to its surroundings it deserves its title of excellent. The range was still warm; the fire in its belly merely damped down for the evening. There was an old work table, covered now with dirty dishes and pans in which food mouldered. There were no cupboards of any description, a previous occupant had probably consigned them to the same fate as the missing staircase. There was a sink attached to the wall by a couple of rusted brackets, the wooden base that had provided additional support long gone: the draining board sagged at an angle of almost sixty degrees which explains why the dirty plates and pans were on the table. Everything, apart from the stove, was covered in a layer of greasy grime and there was a sweetish, sour smell that masked a more basic elemental aroma.*

*The room to the right is the bathroom but we won't even go there. As we work our way back to the front of the house we pass through the dining room cum study cum bedroom: we pick our way carefully for two reasons. The first reason is that it is dark and we don't want to trip over the discarded bottles that litter the floor lying among the discarded items of clothing left there by our second reason. The smell in here is bad. More sickly sweet even than that in the kitchen, the smell of unwashed body and the smell of Tooley's hooch and the lack of sanitation that pervades the whole house is mingled curiously with the aftershave lotion (Abe Grisholm doesn't even shave) and hair grooming toiletries on the old (book?) shelves. The living room is deserted unless you count more discarded bottles, plates and clothing and the rat that gnaws at a bone in the corner beneath where the staircase would have come to earth. The kitchen too is deserted of human life but not devoid of its share of rodent infestation. The bathroom we don't know about because we didn't have the courage to go in, did we? There is a light, a yellow gleam from an old oil lamp burning on the window ledge above the makeshift sleeping arrangements. Sitting on the bed, back leaning against the wall and the sputtering light falling over his right*

*shoulder is Abe Grisholm. Abe, not short for Abraham as generally supposed, but for Abel, the result of an evangelical father who, had he read the runes aright, might have thought to rename his offspring as the more sinful of the sons of Eve. He is reading, The Mysterious Rider by Zane Grey, okay, he stole it from Freemans but he is, nevertheless, doing something lawful for once. Because Abe Grisholm's default position is that of the outlaw.*

*Let's have a closer look at Abe. His father was a puritanical preacherman. That is to say his vocation was that of a preacher, his occupation was longshoreman until he was sacked for misconduct for assaulting the gang master. With no mother, she had long since abandoned her husband and seeing in Abe only a repeat of the same old thing she had left him behind too, Abe was left to his father's tender mercies. It is a funny thing that those who preach the most sometimes have the most to hide and so it was with Walter Grisholm. Walter was violent and cruel to his own boy while preaching love and forgiveness to the general populace. Abe could never be forgiven, not because his sins were too great, in truth his sins were negligible, the occasional cuss word or answering back to his father, no, he could not be forgiven because he was the mould that had to be broken and recast in Walter's image, he was the vessel that carried Walter's sins, his scapegoat. The inevitable happened and one day Abe snapped and fought back when his father attacked him. Walter should have seen it coming. At fourteen years of age Abe had been almost as tall as his father, at sixteen he was taller, heavier and stronger and, what is probably the most crucial thing, he had a bigger chip on his shoulder, a greater grudge. After pounding his father into submission Abe took all the money he could find and filling a small rucksack with the barest of essentials he left the family slum in one of the swampiest part of the New Orleans outskirts and lit off to pastures new. Pastures new were seventy two miles from his old home and were the remains of an old smithy and blacksmith's house. That was eight years ago. He subsisted on a succession of jobs. He could work hard and be reliable but only for so long. He was frugal with his money, what expenses did he have? No mortgage, no rent, no utility bills. For Heaven's sake he never even spent any money on clothes. So, every so often he would give up work and live off his savings. His main expense was Tooley but now that his money was short again he had the inspired idea of not actually paying anybody for anything. His sheer size, his smell, his belligerence brooked no arguments. Once he was challenged by an irate shopkeeper who, after losing two teeth in the subsequent fracas, decided that in future discretion would be the better part of valour. So it was that Abe Grisholm with his micro climate of fear was able to take what he wanted when he wanted. If he wanted food he took it from Mason's, if he wanted*

*candy or a book or a newspaper then Freeman's was the place and if he wanted a woman, why, they were everywhere!*

*Missy paused at the old Smithy and listened.*

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