

# Possum Grape Wine

By : w e turner

Jake Bodre (pronounced "Bo-dree"), a lifelong bachelor living on a farm near Caroline, Missouri, finally decides to take a wife. This story is one of a series of stories told as transcriptions of oral histories provided by James E. (Jim) Johannson, the owner and bartender of "The Beer Joint" in the fictional town of Caroline, who considers himself the historian of the town. Jim does not appear in this story, but the tale is told in his voice. Note: This is not actually a novel, but a short story that did not fit the short story length limitations of this site.

Published on  
**Booksie**

[booksie.com/w e turner](http://booksie.com/w_e_turner)

Copyright © w e turner, 2015  
**Publish your writing on Booksie.com.**

## **Table of Contents**

Possum Grape Wine, Part One

Possum Grape Wine, Part Two

## Chapter 1: Possum Grape Wine, Part One

Possum Grape Wine

by W.E. Turner

Back in the late summer of '67 there was some news over in Lawrence County, around the town of Caroline, that caused quite a stir for a while. This news spread quickly, travelin' by the telephone lines that were saggin' under the weight of the mournin' doves that time of year. Now, them doves would all magically disappear the next week, when September First and dove huntin' season rolled around, but them doves wasn't what the news was all about, anyway.

"Did you hear?" one party-line member would say to another after dialin' that neighbor's two-digit access code, "The Old Bachelor's gettin' married."

"You're kiddin'," the person at the other end might come back if she hadn't already heard the news. "Who in the world would wanna marry that dirty old man?"

"Twila Thiery, from down by Sarcoxie," came the reply. "She's known 'im ever since they were kids in school. Evidently, Jake came a-courtin' 'er sometime last week...."

"Who?"

"Jake. Jake Bodre. The Old Bachelor."

"Oh, yeah. That's his name. I 'member, now. Only thing we ever call 'im is 'The Old Bachelor,' seems like. But why's Twila gonna marry him? He ain't nothin' but a dirty old man."

The same conversation would repeat, much like this or somethin' similar, as each of the people from the first conversation would call up someone else to tell them the news. Other things that might also be included in the conversation of the two women (or whoever was talkin') would be a discussion on Jake's reasons for wantin' a wife and Twila's motives for acceptin' his offer and then they'd go on to discuss all the other gossip that kept those people on the party line occupied most of the time.

Now, Jake Bodre was, indeed, a dirty old man. It's not that he leered at women or pinched their bottoms or made suggestive remarks when they drove past his farm or anything anti-social like that; he was simply filthy. When Jake was outside workin' on his farm and his heavy, dark-green Dickies work shirt got too warm (which it usually did about mid-April), he'd take the shirt off and continue his chores in his undershirt.

Now, this undershirt was a sight to behold. It was the only one Jake owned (or, at least the only one people ever saw him in) and by the middle of April, it was already a rusty tan color because it probably hadn't been taken off since Jake bought it and put it on that January. Then, all summer long, Jake would tend his cattle, get in hay, mend his fences, cut firewood for winter and do the million other things that had to be done on a farm, all the while wearin' that undershirt above his dark-green Dickies work pants. Jake didn't go in for overalls, like so many other farmers in this part of the country do, but he did wear one of those AC-Tick work caps. If you was to ask him about it, he'd tell you how he figured that if he wore overalls and that work cap, too, that'd make him look more like a railroad engineer than a farmer. And Jake never wanted to fool anyone about just who and what he was, so he wore Dickies instead.

## Possum Grape Wine

As the summer progressed, the sweat stains under the arm holes of Jake's undershirt would gradually get longer and darker and the body of the shirt would get browner, just like Jake's skin. Some folks said The Old Bachelor had Indian blood in him and that might have been true, 'cause he did get awful brown in the summer; so brown that even his dirty undershirt was light-colored by contrast. To make matters worse, Jake chewed and was not too careful about where he spit, so that added another dark streak down the shirt's front where it stretched across his old-man's potbelly. By the end of summer, when the possum grapes out in the woods were just turnin' purple but were still sour, Jake's undershirt would be as dark as his work pants. Then, about the time a hard frost came along and the possum grapes turned sweet, the dark-green work shirt would go back on and at least Jake would look cleaner. It's not like Jake never washed. He'd wash his hands and face and take a bath at least once a year and he'd shave about once every four or five days. But you could tell he never washed that undershirt.

Once a year (usually around January, when merchandise like that was on sale at the store in Caroline), The Old Bachelor would go to town to buy himself a new, white sleeveless undershirt. You know the kind. It has those little vertical ribs in it and, when it's new or washed, all those ribs are tight together and even a large-size one looks like it would just barely fit a child. Jake would go in and just pick one shirt up off the shelf there in Paul Frieberg's Feed and Hardware and he'd take it up to the counter. Paul would always greet The Old Bachelor with a real friendly, "Hi, Jake," as he rang up the sale and if there were any other customers in the store, that would be the first time most of the other folks knew he was there. You might think folks could smell him as he came in, but that wasn't so. Seems like Jake always took a bath and got all cleaned up before he came to town.

Now, some folks might think the Old Bachelor, livin' alone like he did and never havin' anyone to talk to on his farm except his cattle, would take an opportunity like this to discuss farm prices or the weather or to make some other kind of idle chit-chat, but he didn't. Oh, he might tell Paul he needed some feed or nails or somethin' else for the farm but that was about all he'd say. Or he might go out and fill his old Hudson pickup with gas from the pump out front of the Feed and Hardware, then tell Paul how much he'd put in the tank, but that's all. The Old Bachelor didn't ever seem to talk much. He'd just pick up what he needed, pay for his purchases and then drive on back out to his farm.

The whole thing about Jake buyin' a new undershirt was just a normal, everyday business transaction, but it always caused a bit of a stir among the citizens in the town.

After all, there wasn't much goin' on in Caroline anymore, since the Lead Mine closed down. Paul Frieberg's Feed and Hardware and the grocery next door (which Paul owned, too) were the only two businesses left in that town since Ruby Gutterman closed down her beauty shop. That is, those were the only two unless you count The Beer Joint across the street from the grocery as a business, too. Now, lotsa folks don't consider a beer joint a legitimate business, but The Beer Joint (and that was its name) probably did more business than any other place in town except maybe the Post Office.

Anyway, everyone figured Jake had come to town and bought himself a new undershirt because his old one fell apart from all that dirt and sweat and everything that had gone into makin' it look so filthy. Jake's buyin' another undershirt almost became an annual event there in Caroline, but you never knew just when it was gonna happen, exactly, so it didn't draw a crowd or anything. But word always got around that The Old Bachelor got a new undershirt and that'd give everybody over at The Beer Joint and all the folks on the party line somethin' to spice up their conversation with for the next couple of days.

Now, people knew Jake had runnin' water and a bathtub in his farmhouse, but nobody knew for sure how often he used it.

## Possum Grape Wine

Most of the older folks could even remember hearin' about when Jake's papa had installed the indoor plumbin'. Their's was one of the first farms in that part of Missouri to be so equipped (usually, back then, just the people in town had indoor plumbin' and even some of them didn't). To put the plumbin' in, the elder Bodre had used some of the money he'd gotten from the Caroline Lead Company for the lease of his land. The land where the Caroline Lead Mine got dug was all Bodre land.

Caroline was on the east edge of that vein of galena, or lead ore, that used to run from Caroline, through Carthage, Webb City and Joplin, Missouri and on over into Kansas, where there's even a town named Galena. Now, I know there's a town called "Galena" in Missouri, too, but their lead mine was two-three miles out of town. That ain't quite like Galena, Kansas, which was built right on top of the lead mine. In fact, ever once in a while a little bit of Galena, Kansas, disappears into one of the old mine tunnels when the ground under some of their buildings collapses.

Anyway, when the lead had all been mined out and used up for bullets and put into gasoline to cause smog and keep engines from pingin' or made into paint that would make people sick years later and such, nothin' much was left of that land where the mine was dug but a bunch of holes in the ground and great big piles of slag and rock that had been dug out of the mines. Later, someone discovered that some of the slag contained a workable amount of sphalerite, or zinc ore. The refiners came back, then, and smelted the zinc out of the sphalerite so somebody could galvanize all those corrugated tin panels farmers roof their barns with, and they put what was left over of the slag back into the holes left from the lead mines. This kind of flattened the land out a little but it still left big ol' piles of rock all over the place because all the mined-out rock wouldn't fit back into the mine shafts. Of course, nothin' much would grow on that overworked land where any of the mines had been but, after the miners and smelters got done with it, they turned the title of the Caroline Lead Mine land back over to the Bodres. By then the family had lots of money from the rent of their land and a lot of land where nothin' much would grow but scrub oaks and pokeweed and possum grapes. Eventually, all the Bodres died off except Jake.

No one knows exactly when folks started callin' Jake "The Old Bachelor." Of course, any unmarried man is known as a Bachelor and in that part of Missouri back then, if a fella was older than about 21 or 22 and still wasn't married, he was known as a Confirmed Bachelor; just like any girl who wasn't married by 19 or 20 was a Spinster and if she got to be as old as 25 and still hadn't found a husband, she was known as an Old Maid. But everybody figured that Jake was probably the most confirmed Confirmed Bachelor around those parts.

Now, Jake Bodre probably got to be known as "The Old Bachelor" because he always just looked old, even when he wasn't. Bein' out in the sun on his farm all the time wearin' nothin' but an undershirt (and pants and shoes, of course) his skin got wrinkled up pretty bad. Then, too, he had a goiter on his neck where his thyroid had got all swelled up (it kept him out of the Army durin' the war) and that and his three or four-day growth of beard and wrinkled skin and white hair (also caused by his thyroid condition, some say) just made him look old. Then, too, maybe folks started callin' Jake "The Old Bachelor" because it was kind of a mean thing to say, like he wouldn't ever find a wife.

Folks liked bein' kind of mean to Jake for a couple of reasons. One was because he always looked so mean himself when he stared at people as they passed by his farm on that rocky, dusty road that ran past the old lead mine. You'd drive by in your car and you'd see him out in the barn lot or sittin' on his porch or on the upstairs veranda in a stiff-backed, cane-bottom chair and he'd stare at you as you went by. If you'd wave at him as you passed, he'd wave his hand back at you, like folks always do out there in the country, but he never smiled or let his eyes light up with any kind of recognition. He'd just look at you like he was the meanest man in the world. Not that he was mean, or anything, but he looked mean.

Another reason folks kind of liked bein' mean to The Old Bachelor was he wouldn't let people hunt on his land. He had a lot of land, too, in different places around the county. Most of it prime huntin' ground, too. In

## Possum Grape Wine

fact, that land where the lead mine was, with all it's scrub oak and pokeweed and possum grapes and all, was always just thick with mournin' doves and quail and rabbits and squirrels and 'coons and fox and deer and all kinds of other game. But Jake wouldn't let you hunt on it. Now, there might be a reason for that, though, other than just meanness. Seems like back in the '30s, after the lead mine closed down but before they started pullin' the zinc out of the sphalerite, some kids did go huntin' on that land around the mine. And somehow, one of them kids died when he got buried under a pile of slag that slid down off one slag heap. Jake's dad felt pretty bad about that. Even though it was just an accident, it was still his land it happened on and he felt responsible. So old Mr. Bodre wouldn't let anybody hunt on the mined land after that. About five years later, his father died and afterwards, Jake just kept on enforcin' the ban his dad had started. Ol' Jake was a creature of habit, just like lotsa folks are. That's why him gettin' married came as such a shock to everyone.

By the time he married Twila, The Old Bachelor must have been pushin' 60 or so. Of course, Twila was no spring chicken herself. She wasn't a bad lookin' woman, though.

She a widow lady that attended the Church of Christ and knew just about everybody in that part of the state. One of her daughters lived up north of Caroline and her son lived in Pierce City and her other daughter lived down in Sarcoxie, so Twila was always goin' back and forth between them. Everybody around there knew her and liked her. She was a clean-livin', God-fearin' woman, but they all knew she was independent-minded and had kind of a sharp tongue. Now, even though everybody liked ol' Twila, they always made sure they stayed on her good side. If you was to cross her, she could just flay the skin right off you in nothin' flat with that sharp tongue o' hers. Some folks even say that's why her first husband died: that she nagged him to death. But it wasn't. It was a heart attack.

After folks got over the surprise of The Old Bachelor gettin' married at all, they decided Twila was just the type of woman he needed. When you say she was "clean livin'," it meant just that. She always kept herself and her house clean and tidy and folks figured she accepted The Old Bachelor's offer because it offered a kind of a challenge to her. They knew that was just the type of thing Twila liked. They think she enjoyed the idea of cleanin' up The Old Bachelor's house and cleanin' him up, too. Those same folks also thought that's the very reason Jake proposed to her. They figured he asked her to marry him just so she'd come and clean up his house, which still had the same curtains hangin' in the windows that Jake's mother made, and his Ma had been dead for twenty years. Those folks figured there was twenty years of unswept floors, unwashed clothes, undusted furniture and unmade beds in Jake's old two-story farmhouse. They figured that house was just like Jake's undershirt; fallin' apart from age and neglect and dirt and all, so he thought he oughtta get himself a wife to clean it up for him.

Nobody knew exactly when Jake and Twila slipped over to Mt. Vernon, the county seat, and got married. A neighbor, Charles Gutterman (whose wife used to run the beauty shop), said he got a phone call from Jake one Monday and Jake asked Charles to look after his cattle for a few days while he was out of town. That wasn't really unusual, 'cause The Old Bachelor would usually ask Charles to do that when Jake took steers to market or went off to buy more cattle or somethin' else for the farm. But four days later, Jake showed up back at his place with Twila and all of a sudden, folks realized they couldn't call Jake "The Old Bachelor" any more. First thing you knew, people started droppin' over for a visit (somethin' that never happened when Jake was livin' there by himself) and before long, there must have been fifty or sixty people at Jake's house, just like they'd been invited, which they hadn't.

Lots o' those folks saw the inside of Jake's house for the first time in twenty years that night. It was kind of a disappointment to some of 'em. It wasn't like they expected it to be at all. The wallpaper was sort of dingy and the rugs were a little worn and threadbare in spots and, of course, Jake's mother's curtains were faded and thin, but otherwise the house was in pretty good shape. There wasn't any piles of trash and dirty clothes everywhere and there was no thick coat of dust on everything, the way some folks thought there would be. The bathtub showed signs of bein' used regular (you could tell because of the stains caused by the hard water from Jake's

## Possum Grape Wine

well). Folks even found a Maytag wringer washin' machine and a clothesline out on the back porch of the house and that washer looked like it got used regular, too. Now, don't ask why Jake didn't ever wash his undershirt in that washer. He just didn't. Some things, you know, are just a mystery.

But those people did find one thing at Jake's house that they hadn't expected to find at all. That was Jake's Possom Grape Wine.

Now, the plant that folks around this part of Missouri call the "Possum Grape" is just a wild grape; small (about as big around as a man's little finger) and it's sour, even when its color has gone from green to dark purple, like it does about the end of August. But when a good, hard frost comes along, those grapes turn sweet (that why it's called a "Possum Grape," because it plays 'possum until a frost).

After it's all sweetened up, though, the Possum Grape tastes kind of like a Concord Grape, only not as sugary. Kids love to find a bunch of Possum Grapes in the fall, after a hard frost has come along, because that meant they could eat the sweet grapes, get their mouths all purple and spit the grape seeds out through their teeth at other kids. The vines the possum grapes grow on can usually be found in thick woods or any thicket that isn't Bushhogged regular, but most of the plants never bear fruit. That's because the vine is kind of like the lilac bush; it needs to grow about seven years or so before it will flower and get enough grapes on it to make 'em worthwhile to pick.

Jake, of course, had all that land where the Caroline Lead Mine was that was too rocky to run a Bushhog through and which had been lyin' fallow for years, so you might say he had his own private vinyard there. Every autumn, Jake said, he'd wait until a hard frost came along to sweeten the grapes and then go out to the mined land and pick buckets and washtubs and barrels just full of possum grapes. Then he'd bring these possum grapes back to his barn and run them all through the cider press his dad had owned, strain the juice, add yeast and and whatever else you add to wine and then let it ferment in big, wooden tubs out in the barn. When the wine got hard enough, Jake would draw it off into Mason Jars, seal the jars and label 'em as to what year it was bottled and store 'em all in his cellar to let 'em age. He even laid the jars on their sides and would go through his cellar and turn 'em over every once in a while, 'cause he read somewhere that was what real winemakers do. Jake could tell you, too, which years were the good ones for the Possum Grape Wine and which ones were not so good.

Jake's Possum Grape Wine was a big hit with everybody. Charles Gutterman, who thought he was some kinda connoissuer of wines (and he might have been, too; after all, he always ordered 'Michelob Dark' beer and all sorts of other fancy stuff at The Beer Joint in Caroline) said the taste of Jake's Possum Grape Wine reminded him of "Nouveau Beaujolais." He must have liked it, too, because he drank so much of it he got fallin'-down drunk and threw up in the yard before Ruby could get him back into their car to take him on home.

Now, bein' a newlywed and all, of course, Jake was kinda the center of attention at this little charivari, I guess you might call it. He was all cleaned up, too. He had on a clean white shirt and some dark slacks that looked new. Everyone wondered where his dirty old undershirt was but nobody, of course, had the gall to ask him about it. But one look at Jake could tell you he wasn't comfortable. Before everyone left from this little impromptu party, Jake disappeared.

After the last guests were gone and the house was back to bein' quiet, Twila found Jake sittin' in his straight-backed chair on the upstairs veranda.

"What's the matter, Jacob?" Twila asked him. Twila was probably the only person besides his mother that ever called Jake "Jacob," and nobody ever heard her call him anything else.

Jake just kind of snorted and reached down beside him to pick up his jelly-jar glass of Possum Grape Wine.

## Poosum Grape Wine

"I ain't used to this," he said after a while in that slow, drawlin' way he had o' talkin'. "Ain't used to havin' a bunch o' people around me."

"I know," Twila said with a little bit of a sigh and a little bit of a smile. "But it'll get easier. You'll see."

Again there was a long pause as the old couple looked out over the Caroline Lead Mine land.

"Twila," Jake said at last, "I wanna be respectable. That's somethin' I ain't never been. My family was always respectable, but somewhere 'long the way, I lost it. I'd kinda like ta get it back if I can."

Twila just reached over, laid her hand on Jake's shoulder and didn't say anything.

"So," Jake went on after a while, "if I ever get back to the way I was..., ...you know, all dirty an' smelly an' everthang. Well, you just tell me, 'Jacob. You need a bath.' And I'll do 'er. I'll do 'er 'cause I'm kinda likin' this feelin'. Kinda like bein' respectable. Wanna keep on bein' this way. Wanna see if I can be as respectable as you."



## Chapter 2: Possum Grape Wine, Part Two

### Possum Grape Wine

#### Part Two

By W. E. Turner

Well, for a long time then, Jake Bodre was respectable. He'd wear clean undershirts while he was workin' on the farm and would always come in to dinner when Twila called him. Twila took him to the Church of Christ with her a couple o' times and even though Jake didn't really seem to get much out of it, he didn't disrupt anything, either. He even took to wearin' thick eyeglasses after Twila found out he had to use a magnifyin' glass to read the Western novels he liked (one of the upstairs bedrooms was just full of books) and after that, Jake could recognize people who'd drive by on the road and wave at him. He'd wave back, then, and kinda smile 'cause he knew who it was. He didn't look so mean any more.

Meanwhile, Twila was fixin' up Jake's house. She put up bright, flowery wallpaper and made new curtains. She put down new rugs in all the rooms and washed all the windows. She even picked out a new color for the outside of the house to replace the dull slate-gray paint that had been on it since anybody could remember and had a couple of her older grandkids and her son paint the sidin' of the house one color and the trim another. Made it into a real pretty farmhouse; one people could admire.

Just about everybody got used to Jake and Twila being married after a while. Twila seemed happy and Jake... Well, Jake was just Jake.

But there were some problems, though. Like one night, not too long after they got married, Jake and Twila went over to Charles and Ruby Gutterman's to play Pinocle and drink a little of Jake's Possum Grape Wine. That's when Jake and Charles got into a kind of argument about an old plow horse Jake used to own.

Charles started it all by reminiscin' about how much things had changed on the farms around Caroline over the years. He talked about how when he was a kid, folks had still been plowin' with horses and he talked about threshin' machines and barn raisin's and lotsa other things like that.

"Ya know," Charles said, kinda fallin' in love with the sound of his own voice after a while. "Most kids today just don't know what it was like back then." Then he started tellin' 'bout the time, several years ago, when Jake had loaned Charles his plow horse so Charles could show his grandkids how folks used to plow with horsepower instead of tractors. This horse, whose name was Hack, had been part of a team of horses (Hack and Loy), that Jake had raised from colts and worked as a pullin' team on the farm and at county fairs. Back at his house, Jake still had some of the ribbons that he'd won at the fairs with those horses.

Twila knew about the horses and Jake because she'd seen 'em perform at those fairs, but she didn't know what had become of those animals and didn't realize the horse Charles was talkin' about was one of that team.

"What ever happened to that team of yours, Jacob," she asked, just as she picked up the cards and started to shuffle and deal another hand. "You know, the team you used to bring to the Fair?"

"I'd ruther not talk about it," Jake said, kind of curt-like.

"But why, Jacob?" she asked him.

## Possum Grape Wine

"Yeah," Charles said, suddenly actin' a little nervous, like maybe he'd said too much about somethin' and maybe had caused some hurt with what he'd said. "I think it might be a good idea if we didn't talk about it no more."

Twila was puzzled by this but she let it all go by with a shrug and the four of 'em just went on with the game.

Then, a hand or two later, Jake suddenly turned to Charles and said, just out o' nowhere, "You know, you shouldn't oughta fed my horse corn."

"What?" Charles said.

"I said, 'you shouldn't ought to have fed corn to my horse,'" Jake replied, sayin' each word distinctly, but forcefully.

Ruby and Twila and Charles all just sat there, kind of stunned. Finally, Charles asked, "Jake, are you still holdin' a grudge over that damned horse?"

"Yes," Jake replied, slowly. "I am." And with that, he picked up the Mason jar of Possum Grape Wine that he'd brought with him, stood up and walked out the door.

Twila was the first one to recover from bein' pole-axed by this quiet little outburst. She stood up, said, "Ja-cob! Wait a minute," and started after him.

Charles and Ruby, still not movin' or sayin' anything, just sat there. They could hear Jake and Twila arguin' out on the porch but they couldn't hear most of the words. What they could hear, though, there at the last, was the sound of Jake's raised voice sayin', "I'll be damned if I'll stay in the same house with that horse killer."

After a minute or two, Twila came back in. "He's walkin' home in the cold," she announced to Charles and Ruby. "He gets that way sometimes, you know. I don't know why he got so damned upset over somethin' that happened such a long time ago."

"Well," Charles told her, "Jake just thinks about some things too much sometimes, and it tends to get 'im upset."

Then Charles told Twila about that team of horses, Hack and Loy, that Jake used to have. He told her about how much Jake prized those horses, doted on 'em, always made sure they was always well-groomed and well-fed. Told how they won ribbons at Fairs and plowed the fields on Jake's farm and how Jake was always so proud of those animals. Then Charles told her how one day, Loy pulled up lame with an infection in his hoof that the Veterinarian couldn't seem to cure and about how that horse just kept on gettin' sicker and more crippled until, finally, Jake had the Vet put it down.

And Charles told Twila and Ruby about how, back when he was just a kid, Jake had two older brothers that he admired more than anything else in the world. To a 10-year old kid, like Jake was then, these two brothers could do just about everything and do it better than anyone else. But in 1918, just as the First World War was windin' down, an epidemic of influenza hit the country. Thousands of people, especially farm people who had little or no resistance to disease, died from the effects of the influenza. Now, Twila was familiar with this. She'd lived through it herself and even had two aunts and an uncle who all died during the same epidemic, but she listened politely to Charles' description of it, even though Charles (bein' about ten years younger than her and twelve younger than Jake) had only heard about this from others. Then she just sat there as Charles concluded, "...and two of the people who died from it were Hack and Loy Bodre. Jake's brothers. After that, Jake's Ma kept him home. Made 'im quit school,.... Ever'thing. Protected 'im. Told 'im not to never leave the

## Possum Grape Wine

farm. Now, Jake was always a good boy and he done what his parents told 'im. I think that's why he's lived there by hisself all these years, 'cause his Ma told him to stay home and not go around other people any more than he had to."

And Charles told Twila about that day he'd used Hack to plow his garden and about how, when he got done plowin' and had given all his grandkids rides on Hack's broad back, Charles had gone over to his corn crib and got out several ears of corn and gave 'em to the horse. It was kind of like a reward 'cause old Hack had done a good job and just impressed the hell out of his grandkids. But when Charles got up next mornin', the day he was supposed to take the horse back over to Jake's, old Hack was dead.

Now, nobody could prove that it was feedin' 'im corn that killed Hack or if the horse just died of old age, but Jake did kind of blame Charles, even though he said he didn't. Charles told Twila about the way Jake, just before he climbed into his pickup that day to follow the renderin' truck that had picked up Hack's carcass, had turned to Charles and said the same words they all heard earlier: "You shouldn't oughta fed my horse corn."

"And," Charles went on, "I know it sounds a little far-fetched and all.... But I think it was him seein' Hack dead like that, and knowin' that Loy was already dead.... I guess... I know it might seem silly. ...but, I guess, it was kinda like him seein' his brothers die all over again. Now, I don't know for sure, but that's what I think. Anyway, he got reminded o' that tonight. Got reminded of how it is to feel bad. How it is to feel sad. He's always been a sad, lonesome old man, you know. Some folks usta think he liked it that way. But I don't really think he did."

Twila just sat there quietly for a long time, then she thanked Charles, picked up her purse and her coat and went on home.

There was a hard frost that night and the next mornin', just like nothin' ever happened the night before, Jake took Twila out with 'im to pick Possum Grapes. He'd promised to do that when the grapes got sweet, and he did. Twila liked to tell about how funny it was to see ol' Jake climbin' around on the rock piles and up in the scrub oak trees, squattin' on a branch just like a monkey, pickin' grapes. She said he seemed just as happy as a little ol' kid and she said it made her feel like a kid, too, to see him enjoyin' himself so much. Over the course o' the next few weeks, Twila helped Jake press and strain and ferment those Possum Grapes and bottle 'em up in Mason jars.

That incident over at Charles' and Ruby's house must have bothered Jake a little bit, though. About a week afterwards, ol' Jake called Charles up on the party line. He said he was sorry it happened and then Jake and Charles was back to bein' just as good o' friends as they always was.

Twila and Jake lived there in that old house happily, it seemed. Lady friends would come over to visit Twila, sittin' in the kitchen sippin' coffee and tellin' 'bout grandkids and who was marryin' who and who was divorcin' who and who was seein' who on the sly and all the other stuff women like to gossip about. The first couple o' times visitors came over, Jake tried to sit in and listen to the goin's-on of peoples' families and all, but not bein' used to small talk like that, he kinda lost interest after a while and slipped off somewhere. Later, though, when other people'd come over and Jake was in the house, he wouldn't even try to join in. He might sit in the parlor or at the kitchen table (wherever the conversation wasn't takin' place) and read his Western novels or somethin'. But after a while he would usually slip off somewhere else; go to the barn or the upstairs veranda. He still didn't feel comfortable around other folks, it seemed.

And Twila was good to her word, too. A few times, when folks was there visitin', Jake would come in from the fields or the barn or someplace and he'd be all hot and sweaty and dirty, with his clean white undershirt all damp under the arms. And Twila'd kind o' look at him and smile and say, "Jacob, you need a bath."

## Possum Grape Wine

And old Jake, he'd dip his head up and down a couple o' times, in kind of a jerky motion that didn't quite come together with his words, but he'd smile and he'd say, "OK, Twila." Then he'd go take a bath.

All this went on for better'n a year. That January and the next, folks kinda missed it when Jake didn't come into town to get himself a new undershirt (Twila did all his clothes shoppin' for 'im these days), but Paul Frieberg didn't go broke because he missed Jake's business and the folks in The Beer Joint found somethin' else to talk about. But, still, somethin' seemed missin'. And Jake,... he didn't seem to ever come to town any more. Of course, he'd always been kinda distant from other people. Folks thought havin' Twila around might bring him out of it. But it didn't quite seem to work. And nobody knows exactly when it happened, but after a while Jake didn't smile at people as he waved when they were passin' his farm, and sometime after that, he even stopped wavin' back. Now, that was just about the most unfriendly thing anybody could ever do in them parts. The fact was, Jake was startin' to look mean again.

Early that spring, Twila's twelve-year old grandson, Andy, came over to visit one weekend. After Twila had gone into town to get groceries, the boy found Jake alone out on the porch. Jake was sittin' there in his straight-backed chair and he had a jar of his Possum Grape Wine.

"What's that you're drinkin', Grampa?" Andy asked Jake as the boy flopped down into Twila's rockin' chair.

Jake just looked over at the boy, like he was tryin' to decide what to say. "I ain't yer Grandpa," he said, after a while. He didn't say it mean-like, or anything, he just stated it like it was a fact, which it was. "Yer Grandpa's dead," he told the boy.

"I know that," Andy said, kind o' snooty. "But you married my Gramma. That makes you my Grampa, whether you like it or not. But what's that yer drinkin'?" Now, Andy was kind of a mouthy little kid, like most twelve-year-olds, and he could be down right obnoxious when he wanted to be, which it seemed like he did most of the time.

"It's wine." Jake said, not lookin' at the boy any more.

"Oh," Andy said. He kept on waitin', like he figured Jake was gonna say somethin' else. When it got to be clear Jake wasn't going to say anything, he asked, "Didn't you never have no kids or nothin'?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Jake thought about that for a bit. He sat there, blinkin' his eyes, like he was still figurin' out what to say. "Cause I'm a Bachelor," he said, at last.

"Well, you ain't one no more. You're my Grandpa, now. Can I have some o' your wine?"

"What if I don't wanna be yore Grampa?"

"You mean you don't wanna be?"

Jake looked at the boy for a long while, like he was still tryin' to decide what the answer to that question was. "Well," he said, "that ain't s'posed ta be th' way ya get grandkids. All sudden-like."

"How do you get 'em, then."

## Poosum Grape Wine

Jake just snorted, like he was on to Andy's little game. "You know," he said.

"No, I don't"

"Well," Jake said. "First, ye're supposed to get married. Then ya have kids. Then, when yore kids get growed up and get married, they have kids. Then ye're a Grampa."

"But how do you get kids?" Andy asked.

"That," Jake said, "is somethin' yer folks oughta be tellin' ya about. Not yer Grampa."

"Aha!" ol' Andy said, like he was trumpin' somebody's Ace in a Pinoacle game. "So you admit you are my Grampa!"

Then Andy just sits there in the rockin' chair, all triumphant-like, rockin' away, actin' just like he put one over on old Jake.

Well, old Jake got real quiet, like he was thinkin' over what just happened. "Go get a glass," he told the boy, finally. "I'll give you some wine."

By the time Twila got back home, Jake and Andy had killed off pretty near that whole jar of Possum Grape Wine and Andy was just drunker'n hell.

Twila lit into Jake immediately with that sharp old tongue of hers. "Jacob, you dam' fool. What the hell have you done?" she said. "What in the world could you have been thinkin' about? Seems like anybody with even half a brain'd know better than to give liquor to a twelve-year-old child." She went on like that for a long time, just flayin' him up one side and down the other. She put the boy into her car and slammed the car door, then followed Jake into the house, yelled at him some more, tellin' him how worthless he was, an' how stupid he was an' how he didn't have no business livin' 'round civilized folks. And then she stormed out of the house, slammin' that door, too, and took Andy on back over to his folks in Sarcoxie.

When Twila got back to the farmhouse, Jake was sittin' at the kitchen table with another jar of Possum Grape Wine in front of him. Twila'd calmed down quite a bit on the drive back and she started to apologize for all the nasty things she'd said. "Jake," she said, "I'm sorry...." But Jake cut her off.

"Take that," Jake said, noddin' toward a piece of paper on the table. "It's yours."

Twila picked up the paper. It was a check for \$10,000, made out in her name. "What's this for?" she asked him.

"Jus' take it an' leave," Jake told her. He said it mean-like and hard, with his back straight and stiff. His eyes were hard, too, behind his thick glasses.

Twila just stood there, sayin' nothin'; lookin' down at the check and tryin' to figure out what Jake meant and why.

After a few seconds, Jake relaxed a bit and a looked came into his eyes that was maybe a little softer, a little sadder. "I just can't do it, Twila," he said. "I can't be respectable. I just don't know how. I want you to take that money an' leave."

"But Jake," Twila said. "I don't want to leave you."

## Possum Grape Wine

"I want you to. I tried it. I've tried and I've tried to be respectable, Twila, but it just ain't in me ta be." He nodded at the check again. "Now, I appreciate everthin' that you done with the house an' everthang. But I want you to take this money an' leave. I wanna pay you for yore time"

"I don't want your money, Jacob," Twila said. "I want you. I want us to be able to live out our lives here, together. In our house. In our home."

Jake stiffened again. "It's my house. My home," he told her firmly. "An' I don't want you here."

"But why, Jacob?"

"I done told ya. I cain't be respectable like other folks. It ain't in me. All's I'm doin' is draggin' you down. You are respectable, Twila. I ain't. I cain't be. Hell, I ain't even sure I wanna be."

For a long time, the two old people stared at each other, sayin' nothin' else. Finally, Twila turned away. She picked up her purse, leavin' the check on the table, and walked out.

Jacob just sat at the table, starin' at a red and silver rose in the wallpaper pattern as he heard Twila's car start up and drive away, its tires crunchin' the rocky gravel in the road that lead back to the blacktop, back to Caroline and on to Pierce City.

In the months that followed, Jake saw a lawyer over in Mt. Vernon and filed divorce papers. Twila didn't contest it, even though lots of her friends and her family said she should take half of everything Jake had (and that was close to a million dollars and more than 1200 acres of land in different places around Caroline), but she wouldn't do it. Jake did set up an account for Twila at the bank in Sarcocie and deposited the \$10,000 in it. Later that year, though, they found out Twila had cancer and after only a short time, it seemed, all that money was gone.

But Jake paid Twila's doctor bills. At least, everybody assumed it was Jake that paid 'em. Twila's son started inquirin' around after he saw a few of the bills for her operations and for her treatments at the Sanitorium over in Mt. Vernon were showin' up as bein' paid in full. He knew his mother didn't have that much insurance, but he never could find out for sure who paid those bills. The bills totalled out to more than \$50,000, and everybody knew Jake Bodre was about the only person in that part of the country that could afford to pay that much.

And as for Jake,.... Well, he went back to livin' the way he'd always done before. He took one of the new undershirts Twila'd bought him and he wore it all that next summer and he let it get just as dirty and stained as all those other undershirts had been. He picked Possum Grapes in the fall after the frost came and he made himself another batch of wine. The next January, even though he still had plenty of the undershirts Twila had bought him, he cleaned himself up and went into town to buy a shirt when they went on sale at Paul Frieberg's store, just like he'd always done before. Some folks say he did it just so the folks in The Beer Joint and on the party line would have somethin' to talk about.

Twila was in Paul's store when Jake got there. Jake didn't know if this was just a coincidence or if Twila had planned it that way, but she was at the counter when he came up to pay Paul for the shirt and for a fill-up of gas for his pickup. As Jake put his wallet away after paying, Paul discretely made his way to the back of the store to check on something.

Twila, her eyes shining like they usually did when they looked at Jake, just said softly, "Jacob, you need a bath."

## Possum Grape Wine

Jake looked back at her, rock steady for a long time, but kinda puzzled, like he couldn't figure out what she was talkin' about. After all, he'd just taken a bath. He looked at her a while longer and she just smiled at 'im.

Then his head dipped once, twice and some sentimental folks might even say his voice cracked just a little as he said, "OK, Twila."

Later that spring, in the evening of a picture-perfect day of warm sunshine and green and growin' things, Charles Gutterman went over to see Jake. He found the old man on his porch, sittin' in his straight-backed chair. He was drinkin' some Possum Grape Wine. Charles sat down next to him in the rockin' chair that used to be Twila's.

"You want some wine, Charles?" Jake asked him after he'd sat there a while.

"Don't mind if I do, Jake. Thanks," Charles said, starting to get up. "I'll go get a glass."

Jake stopped him. "Got another jelly glass right here," Jake said. "I 'spected you'd drop over tonight." He poured a liberal amount of the wine into the glass.

"You did?" Charles asked. As he took the glass, he noticed Jake's white hair was damp and that the old man was freshly shaven. Charles thought he could even smell the sweet talc and the aftershave Twila had given him their last Christmas together.

"Yeah," Jake said as he put the Mason jar back on the floor of the porch.

Charles sipped at his wine and rocked in the rockin' chair a little, listenin' to it creak and hearin' the coo of a mournin' dove out on the mined land. He breathed deeply of the cool, spring-scented air, wonderin' how he could bring up the subject he knew he had to bring up pretty soon. "It's nice out here," he said. "You can smell the new grass an' the wild roses and the dogwood and redbud...."

"Ya cain't smell no redbud," Jake said. "Nor Dogwood, neither. Ain't got no scent to 'em, ta speak of."

Charles sat there, embarrassed and silent, wonderin' what he was gonna say now. "How'd you know I 'uz comin' over tonight, Jake?" he managed to croak out at last.

"Twila died this mornin'," Jake said. "I figured you'd be by to make sure I knew."

Charles looked away and nodded. "Are you OK, Jake?" he asked his friend.

"Yeah," Jake said, quietly. After a while, he held his glass of wine up toward the risin' moon, just comin' up over the hill back east of Caroline. He looked through the glass to see the warm glow of the moon through the deep color of the wine. "This is some of the wine her an' me put up that fall," he said. "Ain't the best I ever made. It's kinda sharp. Sorta like Twila." He took another sip of his wine. "But don't you worry 'bout me none," he said. "I'm all right."

The two old men sat quietly there on the porch, drinkin' wine, saying nothin' that didn't need to be said, until late into the night.

## Possum Grape Wine

Created from Booksie.com

Generated: 2015-01-29 05:35:08