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LUCK BE A LADY

Kristie M. Betts

Although we gasped and shook our heads when Jebediah Turner ended up in jail for stealing his wife's severed foot, we all wondered if we would do the same thing. Or more to the point: if anyone would love us enough to steal back our body parts from County General.

When his wife Edith testified that the foot was hers, though the hospital called it "medical waste," their lawyer argued that no one could be prosecuted for stealing something that legally belonged to his wife. We all knew that Mr. Thaddeus J. Ebbers Esq. hadn't made very compelling arguments ever since his wife left him for a high school senior, but we complimented his silver tongue after Jebediah's acquittal. More compelling than Thaddeus's grandstanding might have been Jebediah's arm down around Edith's waist as she hobbled into the courthouse.



In his youth, Jebediah Turner had broken both legs jumping off of a barn, joined the Navy for fourteen days, and sworn never to return to his hometown. We all hoped he would return, ready to marry any of us and to bring his fiery laughter back. No other black-haired boy before or after Jebediah had lit us up in quite the same way. But when he did return, by his side was a woman our age with the hair of a teenager: long, brown, and unrestrained. A bit like Cher in sensible clothes.

Her name was Edith. We never did find out her last name, since Jebediah kept calling her Mrs. Turner. Later Massie Rozinsky let it slip down at the post office that "Mrs. Turner" wasn't yet divorced from the man she left for Jebediah. Not that Jeb seemed to give a groundhog's granny. He wound his arm around Edith and would occasionally rest his chin on the top of her shiny brown hair. At least he hadn't come back with one of those tall blond

Amazon women. That would have been worse. The ankle we could handle.

He brought this small woman he called “wife” back to meet his parents, but ended up purchasing property. When Edith’s foot started throbbing they turned the truck onto a dirt road and climbed through pine trees to the overlook, looking over a porous bowl of lush land, choked with viney vegetation and pocked with rumbling holes from underground streams. Jebediah stared in wonder while Edith’s foot threatened to jump out of her shoe. “We’ll find our fortunes here,” she said, wrapping her arms tighter around Jebediah’s waist. They bought the land the next morning (Ronnie Rexrode had been trying to sell it off for seven years) with the lottery money that resulted from Edith’s itch in a Kentucky 7-11, and posted a plywood sign on the Ponderosa pine: “Turner’s Point.” Edith painted the sign with red toenail polish from her purse. They were home.



The first person Edith opened up to was Massie Rozinsky, who drove up to Turner’s Point every day to deliver mail. Those of us on Massie’s route knew she never kept a strict schedule or cared about the calories in proffered cups of hot chocolate, and Edith always had questions about the mail. Over several weeks, Massie dropped bits of information as she wound through the valley.

Ever since she was just a girl, Edith had a gift. When Edith was five years old, her mother could not find the wedding ring that she had flung away from her in a fury. After searching the entire house, the frayed woman threw herself across the couch and sobbed.

“Edie, Edie, what have I done?! I lost it. What I am going to do, baby?” Edith’s mother cried. (When Massie Rozinsky told the story she did the mother’s voice in a drunken Elizabeth Taylor kind of way.) Edith, her young, tangled-headed daughter, stood by her side for almost an hour before the woman paid attention.

"Mommy, my foot thinks the ring is in the disposal." Without questioning her daughter's sources, the red-faced woman thrust her hand into the potato and carrot scraps and came up with her cubic zirconium set in real gold. She squealed and hugged her daughter; she even bent down and showered kisses on Edith's small blue flip-flopped foot.

"You listen to your body, baby. It knows. It knows." Her young mother wiped a bit of sludge off of her ring, screwed it on, and splayed her fingers in front of them. They both smiled. Lifting the ringed hand, Edith's mother swept her thumb down her daughter's cheekbone. "Yes, Edie, it knows," she repeated. Ever since that day, Edith jumped foot first into her future. We all knew about Jebediah and the lottery, so the minute anyone saw Edith buying up something, even if it was just beef jerky, no one could help but buy some too. Just in case.



We came under the cover of casseroles, searching for secrets of their coupledness as we glanced inside their cabin, and invited Jebediah and Edith to various events. They started to accept. At baby showers and barbecues, Edith filled us in. We listened intently, but sometimes just to gather bits of evidence. The only thing that threw Edith off track was her first husband. For fifteen years Edith's foot went numb as she puttered around a clapboard house, playing wife to a Tom Jenkins from Ohio—a distant cousin to the Cass Jenkinses. He ended up turning to taxidermy (partially in their kitchen) and other women.

"Didn't your ankle tell you not to marry that man?" we asked. "How could it lead you to Jebediah and not warn you about the wrong one?"

"I thought the fact that my ankle was silent was my answer," Edith replied in her slightly raspy voice (we imagined she had spent her dissolute youth smoking several packs a day even though she must have quit).

When they necked on the porch, behind Tom's barn and in

his car, Edith felt the same kind of itch she felt in her ankle, except in other places. "I thought that was the message," she told us. "Maybe the feeling I was supposed to get when I knew. After that I never felt a thing in my foot. I thought maybe because I had reached my destination." Even though apparently, from what Edith intimated in other conversations, those other currents barely rippled once the hot flush of adolescence faded.



Edith didn't love talking about Tom Jenkins, but we could always press her at Christmas parties to tell us about meeting Jebediah Turner in that parking lot. We would drag up someone who hadn't heard the story before, just as an excuse to get her to tell it again.

"I couldn't find my car," she always began. "A blue Ford." We all pictured a mall, a real one with more than just a Sears. In this real-mall parking lot, Edith walked in circles and could not remember for the life of her where she parked that car. Edith decided to close her eyes and spin around slowly, hoping to end up pointing in the right direction (this was where Edith's impracticality lived up to her younger-girl hair and flowing skirts). Spinning slowly as she counted, Edith planned to count to seven, her favorite number: the needles in her foot made her stop at two. Like something asleep coming back to life, Edith's lucky foot buzzed with a lunatic rhythm. She hadn't felt anything more meaningful than an ingrown toenail in more than ten years.

And there he was.

When Edith opened her eyes, Jebediah Turner stood transfixed in front of her. We could all picture this moment; his green eyes and Cherokee color from his mother's side. That tilt of his head that pokes his squarish jaw forward. The black tufts of hair swirling away from his cowlick. Neither one really remembered what kind of small talk they made (although we pressed them for their first words) but Edith left the blue Ford in the parking lot and never looked back. She wrote a polite letter to Tom,

telling him the general location of the car and asking would he please sign the divorce papers. According to Massie Rozinsky, who must have thanked her lucky stars for her new mail route, Edith asked everyday about official documents arriving from Ohio.

That jump out of the barn had busted Jebediah's left eardrum, which eventually gave him an excuse to leave the Navy. He told Edith that he had been hearing a ringing in his ears for close to a year now, like the whine of a drill four doors down. Earlier, he told his parents that the ringing was caused by them specifically (right before he hightailed it to the Navy). All we knew was just that he always was listening to something else, trying to shrug it off when we vied for his attention. That day in the parking lot the whine had gotten louder as he walked closer to the small woman turning with her shopping bags spinning out. When Edith opened her eyes, Jebediah's ears stopped ringing abruptly.

"That 'hello' was the cleanest sound in the world," Jebediah said to a bunch of us during Pioneer Days. We sighed and smiled.



Edith's foot did not go dead again. Anytime she was near Jebediah her toes prickled; we often stared at her shoes and longed for sandal weather, so we could see what changes Jeb wrought in that foot. The portentous whole-foot pin-and-needle ache would hit at key moments, like at the 7-11. As Jebediah waited in line to pay for the gas at a stop along the way, Edith grabbed sodas from the cooler. When she stepped next to her husband in line, her foot made so much ruckus that it threw her off balance. She thought at first that her right foot and ankle revisited the throes of her new love, but then she realized that Jebediah's left hand rested on the lottery machine. "We have to buy a lottery ticket, Jebediah," Edith said. Her husband ordered ten and when the next day's numbers were posted they were one hundred thousand dollars richer, minus tax.



Three days later, Edith turned her ankle in a sinkhole in the fertile porous valley beneath Turner's Point. As she left Jebediah that morning, she called, "Don't expect me to come walking back until I find more fortunes!" They both laughed and exchanged one more kiss. Edith was letting the palpitation in her foot and ankle lead in exploring the thirty-seven acres. Her ankle turned as her foot slid into the underground stream and her head hit a sharp outgrowth of rock on the way down. She realized that she had been with Jebediah for thirty-seven perfect days and smiled at her good fortune before her whole body was eclipsed by the pin-and-needle sensation emanating from both her ankle and the wound on her brow.

Busy putting a porch on their cabin, Jebediah didn't even worry about his wife until nightfall. When Massie Rozinsky walked their catalogues inside and asked after Edith, Jebediah just shrugged. He figured she was following her foot to the far reaches of the thirty-seven acres, looking in every tree hollow for the riches her body promised. When the day thickened into night, Jebediah began to worry and pace the thirty-seven acres.

Not until daylight helped him locate her small form pressed close to the ground did Jeb find her. When he saw her pale and crumpled, with her foot twisted in a sinkhole, he cursed his faith. Jebediah struggled with her body up the hill home, and drove to County General with her head in his lap, her lucky ankle poking out the truck window into the thick summertime air. A few of us drove past and thought the show of affection while driving a bit ostentatious, not knowing about the ankle of course.

In court, Jebediah told everyone that a high-pitched drone like a swarm of bees filled his ears. With tears in his eyes, he told everyone that he thought she was already dead. Why should he lift her body into someone else's arms? For someone else to sanitize and scrutinize? His Edith would not be delivered thus. No, even against the newfangled laws that wanted to keep you in order even after death, Jebediah would bury his wife himself. We all

felt our eyes filling up as he described the plan of his despair. He would get the shovel and find a beautiful spot so she could rest above the tips of the trees, sharp pine points made soft by the distance, trembling and shaking with the wind, making the whole valley shimmer like a body of water.

Perhaps as a reward for his virtuous decision, Edith opened her eyes before he turned around to find the shovel. "Baby my head hurts," she said. Jebediah skidded over to the side of the road and cradled his wife in a cloud of dust.

"It's your leg I'm worried about, Edie. You lost lots of blood."

"My leg doesn't hurt. I can't feel a thing."



Once they got to the hospital, we all knew what happened. The testimony at this point could have been spoken by any one of us sitting in that courtroom: she lost the foot, ankle included.

When the straight-backed Frances Rampling, R.N, with an angry line cutting across her broad forehead, approached Jebediah's plastic chair, he knew the news had to be bad.

"I'm sorry Mr. Turner, but we couldn't save her leg," Frances said shaking her head briskly. Several of us found ourselves shaking our heads in tempo with the story; Frances played herself on the stand and shook her head more vigorously so as to show off the new perm.

"But my wife—she's okay?" When Jebediah repeated his words in court, the judge stopped to mention that Edith Jenkins was not legally his wife. Jebediah pretended not to hear.

"She should be fine," Frances replied in her clipped "I'm a medical professional" tones. "We had to amputate below the left knee. She's weak from the blood loss and may experience shadow pains..." Frances continued to catalogue the medical specifics, but all Jebediah could do was smile.

"Mr. Turner? Sir?"

Frances's sharp voice penetrated his happy silent haze. She asked again if he would like to see Edith, who would be waking up

from the anesthesia any moment.

"Yes, yes of course. But I have a question." Jebediah shook his legs out of the small chair and tilted his head. Frances recalls the head tilt very clearly. When he stood up he realized that he stood a full foot taller than the severe nurse who had been the tyrannical majorette in his high school marching band.

"What did you do with it?" he asked.

"With what?"

"The foot. The leg. Did you throw it out already?"

"We have sophisticated and sanitary methods of disposal—you needn't worry about that."

"No, I'm wondering if we can keep it."

"There's no chance for reattachment. I assure you the doctors tried every available means to save the limb."

"Right, right. I realize they had to hack it. But can we have it? The leg?"

For a moment Frances Rampling's expression became entirely unprofessional, with not just the forehead thing but the full wrinkle of her beaky nose. She replicated that face when she was on the stand. Although she had an orderly life, Frances had gotten into several catfights in high school. All involving a lot of fingernail.

Perhaps Jebediah wanted to articulate a few more wishes, or maybe thought he could keep the foot pickled in a jar, like those two-headed babies in that Philadelphia oddity museum. When both Thaddeus J. Ebbers and the prosecuting attorney asked him to explain, he just said, "It belongs to Edith. I thought she would want it back." The wet shine in his eyes produced sympathy in the courtroom, but not from Frances Rampling with her passion for cleanliness and rules. Frances clicked her pointy tongue and said the word "unsanitary" five times in three sentences.



Edith seemed smaller under the scrutiny of the hospital's harsh lights. Jebediah had the foresight to buy his bride an orange soda.

"Thank you darling," she said shyly. "Is it terribly ugly?" She pulled back the crisp white sheet, uncovering a mess of bandages where her left knee used to continue.

"You are lovely. Just lovely." Jebediah kissed as close to the bandages as he dared. "Besides, your shoes will last twice as long."

After all the emotional moments, the whole courtroom cracked up at this one, releasing the tensions and bated breath. When Jebediah finally drove Edith away, he had already been released from County lockup on his own recognizance, and he acted as if he didn't miss that foot that got him arrested a bit.



The real acquittal came at the liquor store, two months after the "not guilty" allowed Jebediah back to fixing up the house for his (future) bride. On this Tuesday afternoon, with heavy air that smelled like snow, Jeb brought a bottle of Canadian whiskey to the counter, "for medicinal purposes." His eyes shone with his old sly humor, and his longer-than-ever hair flopped over his forehead comically.

"So how's everything going Jebediah? How's Edith?" Al Murray asked while sliding the whiskey into a brown paper bag. We waited for Jebediah to talk, outside of the official context. He and Edith had retreated to Turner's Point with only the occasional quick grocery sweeps.

"Well, I know now that I didn't need that foot," he said to Al Murray, knowing full well that three other people were in the store; plus Al Murray has a mouth the size of Seneca Caverns.

"Why's that?" Al asked for us all.

"We had enough good luck for any two people I guess," Jebediah said, bringing back that laughter that so many of us feel in the base of our spines. And then, no thanks to Thaddeus J. Ebbers Esq., we forgave them both.