



THE TROUBLE with heroes is that they're hard to recognize. Some people talk big about what they're going to do, but then they never do it. Others do courageous things and never talk about them. So it's hard to tell who's a hero and who isn't. I learned this lesson after the Alamo fell to Santa Anna's Mexican army. Then, nobody else thought Sam Houston was heroic. They damned him for retreating, but I knew—I had to believe—that he would save Texas. And now all Texas calls him a hero.

Now, my father, Gordon Jennings, he was a hero. And Johnny Jenkins? I think maybe he was too. Only he was the most stubborn hero I ever met.

And me? I'm Cat Jennings, and some say what I did was heroic. But I don't think so. I just did what I had to do to save Texas. As it turned out, a lot of heroes—and a few foolish men who just wanted adventure—did just that.

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I WAS working in Ma's vegetable garden that morning when I saw a rider coming toward me. It was March, and the air

was cool enough that mists rising from the ground made the figures look almost ghostly. The rider was still so far away that I couldn't tell who it was, so I went back to my hoeing, working like a demon to get it done before the day heated up. The morning was cool, but I knew I'd raise a sweat by noon if I wasn't through by then.

It wasn't my first choice—to be hoeing away the vines and rubble of last year's crop of squash and potatoes and carrots. If Pa'd been home, he'd have done it. I thought that Charlie, my older brother, should have done it, but he'd left home two days ago. "I'm goin' to help Pa," he told me. I only offered to clean out the garden 'cause I knew Ma would do it herself, and she had enough troubles without killing herself working in that patch of black dirt.

As I worked, I kept thinking, "If Pa was home . . . if Pa was home." That phrase rattled around in my brain like the refrain in a church hymn. Sometimes something deep within me would whisper, "Pa's not coming home," but I'd push that thought down and begin to think about the day he'd ride up that same road, yelling, "Texas is free! Texas is free!"

You see, my pa had gone off to fight Santa Anna at the Alamo. Pa was a big man, gone bald on top with a fringe of gray hair around his head. His beard and mustache, though, were dark, just shot through with gray, which I thought made him look dignified, like a lawyer or a doctor, not a farmer. But his hands gave him away. They were big, gnarled with work, and he always had dirt under his fingernails, no matter how hard he tried to clean them. "You can't get the farm out of a man's hands," he'd say with a chuckle.

Pa had a farm in Missouri when he met Ma. She was a widow with a young son—my half-brother Charlie, who wasn't but three years older than me (sure not old enough to go off and fight at the Alamo). Anyway, Ma and Pa got married in Missouri and lived on his farm, but he heard that land

was cheap and plentiful in Texas. He talked about it, Ma said, for a long time before he finally persuaded her to move. They came in 1825.

I didn't remember the trip to Texas because I was so small, and I generally told folks I was born a Texian. A little white lie like that didn't hurt anything. I sure felt like a Texian, after all the times I'd heard Pa complain about the control of the Mexican government. Texas, he said, should be a state in the Union, not a Mexican province. "We're not like them," he'd say, "and they shouldn't tell us how to live our lives and when to pay their outlandish taxes." Other times he'd say, "They treat us like servants." But he'd never been sure that rebellion against the government was right. He told Ma one night that the idea of war attracted a lot of hotheads from the States who didn't have anything else to do and just were looking for adventure. "Most of 'em aren't even Texian," he'd said.

"Stephen Austin is certainly a Texian," Ma had replied.

"But he's not leadin' an army. Word is he's at San Felipe trying to establish a government."

"Amounts to the same as leading an army."

"You're right," he'd acknowledged, with the good-natured chuckle that always emerged when Ma bested him at logic. "And I suppose if Austin thinks we should rebel, then I'll be thinkin' so too."

The rider was much closer now, and with a lurch in the pit of my stomach, I saw that it was Johnny Jenkins. He preferred to be called John, now that he was fourteen, but I still called him Johnny. It irritated him, and I knew it. Johnny was two years older than I was and always said he came out to see Charlie. I was sure that sometimes he came out when he knew Charlie wasn't there, and then he'd spend a long time talking to me. Sometimes, like now, talking to him made my stomach lurch with a funny fluttery feeling, and I was glad to

see him but—oh, sort of self-conscious about it. Other times, Johnny Jenkins made me so mad that I wanted to spit at him.

I looked down at myself, wearing one of Ma's calico dresses that she'd cut down so it sort of fit but didn't really. Faded from the sun and too many washings, it hung on me like the flour sacks some of my clothes had once been. I shrugged. Johnny'd seen me like this before.

"Charlie's not home," I said as he rode up. "Went to find Pa at the Alamo."

Johnny didn't say anything, just sat there on his horse, staring at me with the strangest look I'd ever seen. For a minute, I thought he was going to turn and ride away.

"You gonna get off that horse?" I asked.

When he spoke, his voice was flat, and the words came out so slowly that I wasn't sure I understood them.

"The Mexicans took the Alamo," he said.

When the words finally registered on my brain, I went back to hoeing. "No, they didn't, Johnny Jenkins. You're just saying that to frighten me."

Johnny got off Thief, his horse, and stood there holding the reins and looking miserable enough that I stopped to stare at him. "Cat, the Texians . . . there weren't enough of them. They couldn't hold it. The Mexicans ran over them. A week ago—I'm not sure. Riders came through Bastrop today before daybreak. They'd been to Gonzales 'fore they came up here, so it didn't just happen."

I went back to hoeing, my heart refusing to believe what my mind was telling me. "Then Pa'll be home soon," I said. "Wonder why he isn't here yet? He can hoe this garden, and I won't have to."

Johnny still had that miserable look on his face. "They were all killed," he said and then repeated himself. "They were all killed, and the Mexicans"—his voice broke a little—"they burned their bodies."

Then I knew it was true, and the lurch in my stomach was entirely different than the kind Johnny sometimes caused. “What about Charlie?” I whispered. “He left two days ago to go join Pa.”

Johnny looked stricken. “God in heaven, maybe he was too late to get in. Maybe . . . maybe he’s all right.” He didn’t sound convinced.

That deep, dark thought that had tried so hard to push to the surface of my mind was true. My pa wasn’t ever coming home again. He and probably my brother had been burned beyond recognition. Something went through my body—a weakness, a flash of pain, a sense that the world was swimming. I thought I might drop right there in the dirt.

Johnny reached his arm toward me, but he was awkward about it, as though he didn’t know what to do. It was me that grabbed on to him with a death grip, as though if I let loose I would fall flat. Tears began to trickle down my cheeks, first in a slow stream and then steadily until my shoulders were shaking with sobs. I threw myself against Johnny, and he put an arm, still awkward, around me and patted my shoulder.

“It’ll be all right, Cat,” he said.

That was the dumbest thing anyone could have said. “No, Johnny,” I said. “It will never be all right. Pa isn’t coming home!” When I looked, Johnny had tears in his eyes too, and I remembered that Pa had been like the father Johnny never had.

You know sometimes how you want to replay the past and change it? As I huddled there against Johnny, my dress wet with tears, I remembered the night Pa had told Ma that he was going to the Alamo.

They sat at the scarred wooden table around which we prayed and ate and studied our lessons and pored over letters from relatives in Missouri. It was late, and Charlie had long since gone to the barn loft to sleep. I was in bed with the

three younger ones. They were asleep, but I was restless and still awake. In a one-room cabin where sleeping areas were just curtained off, there's not such a thing as privacy, and I could hear every word they said to each other, even though they kept their voices low.

"You're too old, Gordon Jennings," Ma had said in her flat, no-nonsense voice. "Young men will have to defend the Alamo. You've a family to take care of." She hesitated, and her voice softened a little, "And to keep safe if the Mexicans come this way. Besides, you've always said you weren't sure about this rebellion business."

"Man's never too old to fight for what he believes is right," Pa had answered. "And I wasn't sure till I heard that letter today. Catherine, you should have heard it. They were readin' it to a whole crowd in town today."

"What letter?"

"Travis wrote from the Alamo to the people of Texas and all Americans. It began, 'I am besieged' and called for men to come to his aid in the name of liberty and patriotism and everything that America stands for. It ended with 'Victory or Death.' I'm telling you, Catherine, it was the most moving thing I've ever heard. Even I had tears in my eyes."

"Victory or death," she'd mused. "And yet you'll go, when there's no possibility of victory."

"I have to," he had said simply.

I thought maybe he'd kissed her then, but I didn't know. I hoped he had.

But now I wondered what would have happened if I'd gotten out of bed and thrown my arms around Pa and begged, "Don't go. Please don't go!" Would that have stopped him? If Ma couldn't stop him, why did I think I could? I didn't know much about how things went between adults, but it seemed to me that Ma could have argued harder against his going.

I knew I was never going to hear Pa's laughter again, never hear him come whistling in from checking the cattle, shouting, "Where's my supper? A man gets hungry workin' hard as I do!" Then he'd clap his hands and call out our names—Cat, Benjie, Susanna, and Holly. We'd come running, even me, grownup as I was, to get his hug and smell the good, earthy smell of him. I'd never smell that again.

When that thought struck me, I screamed aloud, a great, drawn-out "No!" The tears began again. I buried my face in my hands, and felt Johnny put both his arms tight around me this time.

"Shh, Cat," he whispered. "I've got to tell your mama. Don't alarm her by crying."

Fat lot of good that would do, I thought. My face was surely red, my eyes swollen. Even a complete stranger would know I'd been crying, let alone my own mother. I wiped at my wet face with my hands and then with the hem of my dress, leaving dirt streaks across my face, although I didn't know that until I saw that Johnny almost had a grin on his face.

"What?" I asked in my still shaky voice.

"You just got dirt all over your face," he said. "Now you look worse than ever."

Do you see why I sometimes wanted to strangle Johnny Jenkins? I gave him the dirtiest look I could muster in my present circumstance. Then I stood straight and, my voice much firmer, said, "I want to tell Ma." Under my breath I muttered, "She already knows. She knew all along."

As we walked toward the house, Johnny said that General Sam Houston, in charge of the Texian army, was gathering men at Gonzales to go to the Alamo, but now they were too late. The two vaqueros who had ridden through Bastrop had brought the news to Gonzales first. "Houston tried to arrest them as traitors," Johnny said, "but they weren't. He was just

really upset about the Alamo.” He paused a minute. “But Houston’ll fight the Mexicans,” he went on, “and he’ll win. We’ll be free of Mexico. I just know that he needs more men.”

“Maybe that’s where Charlie is,” I said hopefully.

“Yeah, maybe,” Johnny said, but he sounded unsure.

“Let’s tell Ma that anyway,” I said.

“Yeah,” he muttered. Then he brightened a little. “You know, Cat, if Charlie couldn’t get through to the Alamo, he’d probably have gone to Gonzales. He really could be with Houston.” He stared off in space for a minute. Then he said, “I wish I could go. Maybe they wouldn’t know how old I am.”

“Johnny Jenkins, your mama needs you. You can’t go.”

Johnny’s father, a no-good man named Frank, had disappeared years ago, just ridden off into the wilderness, the coward’s way. There was no question—that man wasn’t a hero. Johnny’s mother was left with six kids to feed, and Johnny was the oldest. Mrs. Jenkins ran the post office in Bastrop and a small general store, but they were as hard pressed as we were or more so, and she needed Johnny. I knew that.

He shrugged. “It’s hard to see everyone else go.”

I let loose my strongest arrow. “You’re only fourteen,” I said, scorn in my voice.

“And you,” he said, “are a pain.”

For just a fleeting second there, we had put the Alamo and Pa and Charlie behind us and forgotten that we were headed to tell Ma the horrible news.

Ma was making bread, throwing the dough on the table, turning it, and throwing it again. When she looked at me and saw my dirt- and tear-streaked face, she paused motionless for just a minute. Then she went on kneading the dough.

“Good day, Johnny,” she said. “What brings you out here? Charlie isn’t home.” Her voice was tired.

“I know, Mrs. Jennings,” he said, and he started to say more, but I kicked him. “Johnny, wait outside a minute, please?”

“Yeah, sure.” He left, backing out the door.

Ma fixed me with a hard look. “It’s the Alamo, isn’t it?”

I looked down at the floor. “Yes, ma’am,” I said. “The Mexicans took it.”

“Were there any survivors?” Her hands kept throwing and turning that dough.

“No. Johnny says they burned all the bodies.”

The hands stopped, and Ma let out the only wail I ever heard from her. “Burned them! We can’t even bury him!”

And then we were in each other’s arms, sobbing together. I could feel the warm saltiness of her tears dripping down onto my face, and I hugged her tighter than I ever had, wishing that we could both hug Pa.

“Charlie?” Ma asked, pulling away to look me straight in the eye.

I looked at the floor again. “Johnny says it’s possible he couldn’t get through the Mexican lines by the time he got there. He may have gone to join General Houston at Gonzales.”

“But we don’t know that for sure?”

I shook my head. Ma let out one more sob and then shoved her fist into her mouth.

Johnny stayed for noon dinner, and we had fresh-baked bread that day. Ma wouldn’t waste that dough she’d been throwing.

After dinner, Ma asked Johnny to find a flat board or maybe a couple of pieces of lumber that could be nailed together. She wanted to mark a spot for Pa, as though he were buried on the land he loved and for which he’d given his life. “Look in the barn,” she said. Then she added bitterly, “Tear down a piece of it if you have to.”

Johnny came back some time later, with two boards nailed together in the shape of a cross. Ma heated an awl on her cook stove and painstakingly scratched “Gordon Jennings” and the year—1836—into the wood.

We all trooped out and stood under a spreading live oak at the far end of the pasture. It was a place Pa loved, because the tree stood on a good rise in the land, and he could stand there and see his cabin and his barn, his children and his cattle. His kingdom, as he used to say.

The little ones didn’t really understand what was going on. Holly, only two, kept wailing, “My daddy, I want my daddy,” and Benjie would try to shush her. Finally Susanna, five, said, “Pa’s not coming back,” which made Holly wail all the more. Ma picked her up and held her while Johnny drove the marker into the ground. Then, still holding Holly, Ma offered a prayer.

“Lord,” she begged, “receive thy servant Gordon and know that he was a good man, strong, loyal, and courageous. He will be missed”—here her voice caught just a little—”but we know that he died for something he believed in. Let his death inspire others. Amen.” Her voice may have wavered, but her eyes were clear and dry.

As we walked back across the pasture, Ma asked Johnny tensely, “What will happen next, Johnny? Will the Mexicans march across Texas?” She was worried about all of us, I knew, but she was also worried about Charlie.

Johnny puffed with pride to be considered an authority. “I bet they’ll go to Gonzales, unless Houston heads toward Bexar first. He’s at Gonzales gathering his army. He needs a lot more men ’fore he can fight Santa Anna”

“Cat said that’s probably where Charlie is,” Ma said, and I could tell that her fingers were clenched into fists of nervousness. She wanted to believe Charlie was there and that he hadn’t died at the Alamo. I wanted to believe that too.

Johnny glanced at me as though I'd told an outright lie. Then he muttered, "Yeah, probably. I could go look for him."

"John Jenkins," Ma said sternly, "you'll do no such thing. Your mother needs you, and with Charlie gone, Cat and I may even need your help. And we can't have yet another one to worry about."

Johnny looked at the ground and muttered, "Yes, ma'am."

All at once, there it was. A voice telling me what I needed to do. I had to ride to tell men to join Houston, and then I had to find Charlie. But first I had to get people to fight with Houston—if Charlie was dead, I could do nothing about it. If he was with Houston, I could make sure that Houston got more men. That would make Charlie safer and the chances better for freeing Texas. It all seemed so simple and logical to me—except that Ma would have a wall-eyed fit.

Back at the cabin, Johnny said, "I surely am sorry to bring you this sad news. If I can be of any help . . ."

"You can," Ma said flatly. "Don't go to Gonzales. Stay home and take care of your mother and your family."

I walked part way down the road with Johnny, and he led his horse so we could talk.

"Ma knows you're going to sneak off and go to Gonzales," I said, trying to get a rise out of him.

"She'd be a lot angrier if she knew that you want to go," he replied tartly. "You better not even think about it, Cat. She's lost your pa and Charlie, at least for a while, and she couldn't take losing one more of her family." He spoke as sternly as a fourteen-year-old whose voice was changing could.

Blast Johnny Jenkins for knowing what was in my mind!

Johnny rode off, and I spent the afternoon hoeing the garden with new energy. As I swung the hoe and dug it into

the earth, pulling out old roots, my arms and back ached, but my mind was racing. The Mexicans had killed Pa, and I wanted to kill a Mexican in revenge—or ten or twelve or twenty! And here I was, a twelve-year-old girl who could do nothing. Nothing that is, except ride a horse better than most grown men.

Sam Houston would have to get revenge, but I didn't know anything about this man beyond the little Johnny had said—was he a hero? Could he defeat the Mexicans? I kept remembering Johnny's words, "Houston doesn't have enough men." He probably wouldn't have enough men ever, unless word spread about the fall of the Alamo. That wouldn't happen fast enough. We'd found out where the Alamo was because of Johnny and because Pa was there and because Bastrop wasn't all that far from Bexar.

There must be hundreds—thousands?—of Texians who didn't know about the desperate situation. If they did, they'd join Houston to fight, of that I was sure. But folks in most of Austin's colony, or in East Texas, up around Nacogdoches and down to Harrisburg would have no way of knowing they were needed. If Houston was going to march on Bexar, he needed every man from all those places.

I knew exactly what I had to do. I had to do just what I'd told Johnny not to—defy my mother and leave her alone. I remembered Ma's reading me the story of Paul Revere and how he rode through the land spreading the alarm that the British were coming. I would have to spread the word that the Mexicans were coming, and I'd have to start right now: before daybreak, before Ma woke in the morning.

By the time I went to bed that night, my plan was firm in my mind. When no one was watching, I'd rolled some clothes into a bundle and hidden them in the barn. I was too excited even to think about sleep, so I knew I'd wake in time

to leave before Ma was up. On my way out the door I'd sneak a napkin full of that bread we'd had for noon dinner and maybe some cheese.

I decided to ride Clearfoot, that old gelding that Pa named because he lifted his feet so high. "No matter how deep the mud," Pa had said, "his feet clear it, so he's Clearfoot." Ma told him it was a silly name, but she smiled when she said it. Clearfoot wasn't fast, but he was steady and reliable.

Ma went to bed not much after I did, but she didn't sleep. I guess she thought we were all asleep and wouldn't hear her, 'cause she gave in to grief and began to sob. She cried and cried—great loud sobs—until I wanted to run to her. I knew that she only cried now because she thought she was alone and didn't have to be strong for us. Still, it was the most heartbreaking sound I had ever heard, and I wondered how I could ride away in the morning and leave her.

Then another worry struck me. What if Ma never went to sleep, just cried the whole night through? How could I sneak away? At long last—it seemed hours—the sobs lessened, and pretty soon I could hear the regular breathing of sleep. And then—to my later horror—I fell asleep.

I startled myself awake just as an ever-so-faint light crept up the sky. Ma was still sleeping. I could hear her breathing. She was probably exhausted. As quietly as I could, I slipped out of bed, grabbed the store of food I'd planned, and sneaked out the door. I'd slept in my clothes, so I didn't have to stop to dress.

In the barn I saddled Clearfoot, who looked distinctly annoyed to be bothered at this hour of the morning, and grabbed the roll of clothes I'd hidden there the night before. Then, muzzling Clearfoot's nose so he wouldn't neigh, I led him out of the barn and down the road. Once I thought we

were out of earshot, I jumped on Clearfoot's back, and we flew down the road, at least as close as Clearfoot would ever come to flying.

When I took one last look back, I saw Ma standing in the doorway in her nightgown. For just a moment there, I hesitated, started to turn back. Then I thought that Texas was more important than anything else. Pa had died for it, and I had to do what I could to save it. I gave Ma what I hoped was a reassuring wave, but I knew she wasn't fooled into thinking I was going to Bastrop for supplies.

It was the hardest thing I'd ever done, but I turned away from home and all that was safe and set out to save Texas. I couldn't bear to look back at Ma again.