

THE WALTZ OF DEVIL'S CREEK

by Justine Carver

EXCERPT

“Is becoming an author,” Mr. Felder said, “what you really want to do, or is it just something you’ve thought might be...fun?”

Refusing to take his bait, either, I remained poised.

“Oh, no sir,” I said, placing my hands within my lap. “What I really want to be is an astronaut.”

Mr. Felder cocked a sharp brow; William looked confused; Mrs. Felder just kept smiling.

“Astronaut?” Mr. Felder inquired.

I took a moment to understand the confusion around the table. “The Death’s Head Meteor”? I offered. “Neil R. Jones?” I brushed a dismissive hand in front of me. “Oh, it’s just a word from a story I read in a magazine my pawpaw had.” I continued to get blank looks, even from William, who I thought could tone it down some. “*Air Wonder Stories*?” I tried once more, but there were no takers. I assumed a family that could afford a television probably didn’t have much time to read.

I shrugged it off.

“I’d like to be a space traveler,” I explained, using terms they better understood. I looked up at the ceiling, the light from the fixture overhead burning yellow in my unfocused vision as I dreamed out loud. “Imagine it, the first person in space could be a woman—it could be me.” Oh, how long I’d dreamed it; I was four years old when my momma first took me out into the field to show me the stars. It had stuck with me ever since.

“If anybody ever goes to outer space,” Mr. Felder put in, pulling me back down to Earth and reality, “it won’t be a woman.” He pointed at me with his fork. “Maybe you shouldn’t read so much Jules Verne; you might start to worry aliens will invade like in *War of the Worlds*.” He dug the fork into his mashed potatoes and took a bite.

William looked into his plate nervously, pushing his food around. Mrs. Felder remained unchanged throughout the dinner: smile intact, perfect posture, carefully selected words, like a submissive housewife that played a role and nothing more. I wondered if aliens hadn’t already invaded and taken over Mrs. Felder’s body.

In response to Mr. Felder’s jab, I clenched my fists on my lap and bit down on my tongue—but it wasn’t enough to hold it.

“Jules Verne didn’t write *The War of the Worlds*, Mr. Felder,” I corrected him. “H.G. Wells did. Verne wrote *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. And I believe women can be more than nurses and telephone operators and...secretaries.” My eyes skirted Mrs. Felder; I had started to say “housewives”, but I knew that would have made me the uncivilized country rat Mr. Felder believed me to be.

Sweat stains darkened the fabric around William’s armpits; he’d stopped eating, the fork paused over his plate. He begged me with his eyes from across the table: *Please, please, don’t Judith...you promised.*

Mrs. Felder stood, and she smoothed her hands down her shirtdress as if to even-out wrinkles that weren’t there.

“I’ll get the cake.” She slipped into the kitchen.

His pride stung by my response, Mr. Felder chewed his food slowly, swallowed, and then went in for more, pretending he had been unfazed by my display of knowledge, and his lack thereof.

“Perhaps you’ll be the next Mary Shelley, then,” he said indifferently between bites.

“Maybe I will.” I’d said it respectfully, but in my heart, I’d meant it with the bite of a rabid dog.