

Alden Nowlan

THE LAST OF HER SONS

SKIPPER WAS THE YOUNGEST of the five sons of Ethel and Judd Syverson. As a small boy, Skipper, like each of his brothers before him, feared and hated his father and entered into a wordless pact of mutual defence with his mother.

Judd, as he himself said, was a hard man. For sixty hours in every week he carried deal at the saw mill, balancing the long, green boards on a leather-padded shoulder and bearing them from the trimmer saw to the lumber piles. Week-nights he lounged about the kitchen, sluggish and sullen, until nine o'clock, then went to bed. In his father's presence, Skipper adopted his formal manners, as though before a stranger: he walked softly and seldom spoke. In conversations with his mother, Skipper spoke of "Judd", never of "daddy" or "father". For his part, Judd demanded respect and obedience but otherwise left his son pretty much alone. On Saturday night, like almost all of the mill hands, Judd went to town and came home, violently drunk, at two or three o'clock the following morning.

When with his drinking companions, Judd was usually sportive and exuberant. But when he came home drunk, he cursed his wife, called the boys her brats and wished they were kittens so he could sew them in a sack weighed down with rocks and drown them. On several occasions he beat Ethel with his fists and once he kicked her and sent her sprawling while Skipper stood by, screaming. And many times he yanked Skipper out of bed in the dead of night and, on one pretext or another, flogged him with a cowhide strap. At such times, if the weather was warm, Ethel led Skipper out into the night where they sat, wrapped in one another's arms, on the hillside overlooking the house and listened to night-insects until Ethel felt certain that Judd's rage had been extinguished by sleep.

In a curiously dispassionate way, Skipper hated his father. He loathed the mill where Judd worked himself into dumb exhaustion. He detested the men who came for his father with rum bottles hidden under their overalls bibs. And, on

numerous occasions between his sixth and his fourteenth year, he vowed to his mother that never, as long as he lived, would he taste strong drink.

Ethel fostered those aspects of Skipper's character which Judd most despised. While a white-haired little lad in cotton shorts and a polo shirt, Skipper often brought her bouquets: handfuls of violets or bunches of mayflowers or daisies. She thought him cute and manly. And she never took such gifts for granted; they touched her to the quick, like presents from a lover.

She encouraged Skipper to daydream. She had done this with his brothers before him. When he grew up, she said, he would be a clean, sober man who would wear a white shirt and necktie to work. He would go far away from the village and, of course, his mother would accompany him. Perhaps he would never become rich—but he would be a gentleman.

And Skipper listened attentively to all that she told him. She was his guide and his refuge. A snivelling brat, Judd called him when he saw him clinging to her skirts. His daydreams were foolishness, Judd asserted brutally. When Skipper grew up he would go into the mill, as his father and grandfather had done before him. He would become hard, because a man had to be hard to survive. And if there was any man in him, when Saturday came he would get drunk, because the ability to drink was one of the measures of a man.

Skipper told his mother that he would die rather than allow this to happen to him. Often, at night, Ethel slipped into his room and lay on the bed beside him, and listened to him whisper of his thoughts, feelings, and ambitions.

He liked to play with crayons. She bought him a water colour set. To Judd's vocal disgust, he spent many evening hours making pictures at the kitchen table. On her infrequent visits to town, she bought him books. First, Hans Christian Andersen. Later *Robinson Crusoe*, *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*. She rejoiced, watching him run his finger affectionately along the edges of the pages.

In Skipper, Ethel saw her last hope. His elder brothers had followed the old, brutal pattern to its conclusion. Harold, for example, had left school at fifteen to go into the mill. There, he had learned to drink. At eighteen he got a girl in trouble and had to marry her. By the time he was twenty-two he had four children. And Ethel's daughter-in-law told her that now every Saturday night he came home roaring drunk like his father. The others, for whom she had once had such high and splendid dreams, were replicas of Harold. They were no different from any of the men who worked in the mill and lived in the village. Ethel's love for them had been curdled by disappointment and hurt. Sometimes, thinking of what they had done with their lives, she almost hated them.

In the summer of his twelfth year, Skipper killed a sparrow with his slingshot. Ethel regarded this as an evil omen. To his astonishment, she wept and berated him. For several days, following this incident, she refused to speak to him.

For his fourteenth birthday, Judd gave him a .22 calibre rifle. This gift, Ethel knew, had been inspired not by affection but by the knowledge that she would hate it. Sick at heart, she saw Skipper go hunting birds with his father. He came home dragging a partridge, a poor, bloody thing with dead, fear-crazed eyes. She could not bring herself to refuse to cook it. But she would not taste the meat. And she detested her son when she observed the gusto with which he attacked a greasy drumstick. "That Skipper's a dead shot for sure", Judd bragged, eying his wife slyly. And Skipper grinned proudly, relishing his father's praise. For the first time, the man and the boy had established a bond of fellowship.

Still, she refused to believe that he would be like the others. And it was not until the autumn of his sixteenth year that she saw for certain what the future was destined to bring.

It was Saturday night. He had gone to town with the boys, something that he did frequently now. Most of these boys had left school and gone into the mill. Ethel harboured a dark suspicion that they were already learning to drink. She knew that they fought with their fists and picked up strange girls. She warned Skipper about them. "Be careful, honey", she said. And he patted her hand, reassuringly. But she hated the amusement and arrogance she detected in his grin.

She was waiting up for him when he got home. Judd had not come back from town. Ethel sat in the kitchen and listened to her son's movements in the porch. He was trying to be very quiet, she knew. The knowledge that she was going to surprise him gave her a strange sensation of triumph.

"Eh! Hi, Mama!" he grunted in surprise, as he opened the kitchen door.

"Hello, Skipper".

He wore his cap at a rakish angle, like the boys who worked at the mill. There were mud-stains on the sleeves of his jacket.

He grinned at her, insolently.

"Skipper . . .", she began.

"Yeah".

He continued to grin, swaying back and forth on his heels.

She got up from her chair and went over to him. She inhaled deeply, smelling his breath.

"Skipper, you've been drinking!"

He laughed.

"I guess maybe I have, Mama".

She put her hands on his shoulders.

"Oh, Skipper, you know what it will do to you! You know what it does to Judd! Skipper, you promised me!"

He shrugged. She had a momentary vision of him coming to her in his shorts and polo shirt, his hands full of flowers.

"I'm a big boy now, Mama", he chuckled. "I ain't no little boy any more, Mama. You gotta remember that".

Hopelessly, she returned to her chair and sat there, staring sightlessly at the floor.

"Yes, I have to remember that".

He shuffled his feet on the linoleum.

"Look, Mama", he said, "I was talking to Bill Spence tonight".

Bill Spence was foreman at the mill. "Don't say it", she prayed silently, "please don't say it."

"He says he might be able to find a job for me".

"Yes".

She would not argue. She would not try to reason with him. Already, she had given up. For the fifth time, she had been defeated.

"We need the money, Mama".

"Yes".

"I didn't tell him yes and I didn't tell him no".

"No".

"Are you listening to me, Mama?"

"Yes, yes, I'm listening, Skipper".

He burst into laughter. She looked up at him. "I just thought of something funny", he explained.

"Yes?"

"The old man really tied one on tonight. I seen him in town. He was drunk as a skunk".

In his voice there was a strange alloy of contempt and understanding. Never before had she heard him use this tone of voice in speaking of his father.

Wearily, she rose and started toward the stairs.

"I'm going to bed now, Skipper".

"Yes. I guess I'll wait up for the old man, Mama".

She did not answer. As she left the room she saw him throw himself into a

chair by the table. It was the chair in which he had sat painting his water colour pictures so long ago.

Ethel got into bed and switched off the light. In a little while she heard Judd arrive. Then, for a long time, she lay in the darkness listening to Judd and his son laughing together in the kitchen at the other end of the house.

CLOWNS BETWEEN BOOK ENDS

G. K. Fischer

I bought you for valid cash!
 You dare not try
 To question the purchase. Don't deny it.
 You were not borrowed, I was rash
 To squander good legal tender,
 Buffoons!
 I, royalty of amber afternoons,
 Command you to entertain, amuse *me*.
 The punishment for the offender,
 If one be blank or tedious
 Shall be the stake.
 I can afford the pack
 Of you, each rake
 Fine jacketed. Of golden trinkets there's no lack either.
 Titled you are!—Well, where's the repartee?
 Be witty, show some brilliancy!
 Regale me with a dazzling escapade!

Oh, I have known it long and well enough
 How Sancho's jolly belly made
 La Mancha's gauntness target to the view.
 Life's marginalia, too late to be unlearned,
 You leave me trembling,
 Taken like the king
 Who heard his jester laugh
 And in the voice discerned
 A seismographic tremour shivering through
 The hall. You sport your best, I know, you paint and sing.
 And even in the mask's bright urges to entertain
 The curtain flares, falls—velvet melting away,
 And drop by drop I see: the glitter is the rain,
 The rain that raineth every day.