

The Quickening

It was one of those small envelopes, not the long official looking ones. It had a stamp in one corner, but the only other writing was in the center. Three even lines of blue ink. That was all.

It seemed a small enough thing, really and right up until its arrival, everything had gone pretty well. By then, it had been almost a month since they arrived at the Conroy's farm, looking for a place that would take the both of them. That day, he followed his father up the steps to the farmhouse.

Tucker peered through hair and smudged glasses to examine her. Though he was on the step below his father's, he had a clear view of her over his father's shoulder. She was little and wrinkled and her eyes were watery blue. His father did the talking, of course.

"I heard you don't got no Mexicans here and so I thought I'd come see if you was hiring. Goddamned Mexicans- they probably ain't even in this country legal, anyhow. Can't even speak English, can't understand a thing you tell em."

Tucker had begun working on a fingernail, gnawing it down as was his tendency, when he glanced up and saw she was staring right at him.

"He still in school?" she asked.

"Tucker, here? Yeah, he still is." Wayne Olmstead glanced at his son with a wry smile before he turned back to the old lady and winked. "Dumber'n shit, but tougher than all get out."

Her eyebrows narrowed and her lips pinched in. Just when Tucker thought she was going to send them on their way, she said she'd give it a try. As if in response, a high pitched bark came from the pickup and his father remembered.

“Oh, yeah. My boy's got a little mutt they give him at the last place. We'll keep him out of the way so he won't be no trouble. I'll make sure of it.”

A wave of relief swept over Tucker when she gave them a curt nod. When they climbed back into the truck, the small dog leapt into Tucker's lap and his father playfully swiped the baseball cap off his head. Tucker went to grab it back, but his father held it just out of his reach.

“You need a haircut,” he said. He was wearing that lopsided smile, the one he pulled out when things seemed hopeful.

And, in fact, things were hopeful for near to a whole month. He drank nothing but beer that whole time, and only after work was done. But like barbed wire on a pasture fence, a thing stretched to its limit is going to break sooner or later. He noticed the first signs of it the day the letter came. Mrs. Conroy gave it to him as he was leaving the barn.

“For you,” she said.

He was so surprised, he hesitated before taking it from her. He was sixteen and had worked many farms, but he'd never really known a letter to come to him personally.

After all, who would send a letter to a boy who could not read?

This was the question on his mind as he made his way to the barn for the 3 o'clock milking. When he got there, his father was beating on 134. Tucker transferred his chew to the other cheek and stood aside, watching the cow continue to turn back and his father continue to beat her with a flat board. Tucker could've told him that 134 only liked the middle slot and won't

go into the parlor first; actually, she liked to follow 254 and that was the real problem. He waited until the pulsing of the vacuum pump was silenced by the clash of wood on steel. When his father finally hurled the board across the parlor and stomped away, Tucker stepped in and guided 134 backwards. 254 was waiting and she lumbered her way into the spot she was used to. 134 followed, the wild panic in her eyes fading to relief.

A waning vibration lingered in the air. Tucker turned the radio up to get rid of it and ran his hand softly over the cow's full udder before he hooked her up. The soft swoosh of the valves took over and a soft calm descended over cow and man.

They weren't stupid, he knew. Cows, that is. After all, there were 150 spots out in the free stall barn, and 134 could find her spot every time. If it was taken, she'd just stand there and stare, wouldn't even eat if she couldn't get into that spot. What was wrong in knowing where you belonged and in following what always took you there? He breathed in the familiar smell of cow and hay and milk, soothed by the rhythmic hum of the machines, soft and predictable. Like a heartbeat you just expect will be there.

Flies hovered and tails flicked them away and all fell into the pattern he knew. That is, except for the letter. He felt it in his chest pocket every time the machines pulsed. He figured it was likely from school. He'd stopped going a few weeks back and had no intention of returning. Not after that last day when he'd come in late and that Goddamn Simmons kid was sitting in his seat in the back row so he had to maneuver his large body between the desks to the only empty seat there was. Bodies leaned away from him as he made his way to the empty desk and, too late, he remembered he'd forgotten to hose his boots off when he left the barn that morning. It seemed to take forever for him to reach the empty seat and heave himself down into it. The desk shook as his knees hit it.

“Glad you could join us this morning, Tucker.”

He remembered the heat of his face. He hated being late, he hated being looked at, but most of all, he hated the fact that that Simmons kid took his seat and now he had no choice but to take the seat right in front of Natalie Sanderson. She was probably looking at him, he thought, probably staring at the back of his head. Showering would have made him even later and he pictured silage dust in his ears and along the side of his neck. His hand started on its way up to wipe away what he could.

That’s when he became aware that everyone was looking at him.

“What?” He remembered to grin and struggled to keep it in place.

“Tucker, start us off by reading paragraph one.”

For a brief moment, he dropped his head and considered the options but he knew there was only one and he yielded to it. With force, he swept the packet off his desk and into the soundless air.

“Fuck you.” He made sure to say it clearly and loud enough.

The room fell silent. He could feel the eyes of others on him, but he kept his own eyes hard and cold and boring into the teacher. She was nearly shaking; she was so mad, she couldn’t even talk for second. But after a bit, she found her voice.

“Get out.”

With relief, he did. After two weeks, the school sent a Guidance Counselor out to the farm to talk to his father. Tucker saw the car pull in and intercepted him on the small porch.

Tucker drew himself up to his full height and puffed his chest out, all the while worrying, worrying he was going to have to let him inside.

Was the letter from the school? He should hand it over to his father, he knew, but after milking he found his father in no mood for letters.

But his father was watching NASCAR and bothering him during a race was unwise. Especially when the remains of a six pack rested at his side and corpses of crushed cans littered the floor at his feet. Sitting like he was, sunken into the couch like that, his father looked small somehow and Tucker wondered if the man was shrinking. It turned out he wasn't.

"You shut that lower gate this time?" he said. His father did not even glance up at him; his eyes were glued tight to the television screen.

Tucker said he did.

"You run the washer so it's set up for tomorrow?"

Tucker nodded.

"Milk out that fresh cow in the back pen?"

Tucker was midway through the task of taking off his boots and he froze at this. Then, he began to put them back on.

His father snorted and fumbled with another can, his glassy eyes never leaving the cars that raced in circles of fury.

"Boy could fuck up a mother's love," he muttered. The fingers then found the tab and the hiss split the air.

Later that night, he lay on the mattress on the floor of his room and looked at the letter again. He got thinking maybe the school had called up Social Services and the letter was from

them. He felt a wave of panic, but then reasoned they wouldn't send the letter to *him* and also he was older now and they couldn't so easy make him live where they said to. Besides, his father had gotten him out each time.

“Where I go, you go,” he'd say. It was the drinking that made him mean and restless, but in the end, he was his father.

Besides, this was different. This was a real letter. With handwriting on it.

But from who? The writing looked *girly* to him, but he didn't know many girls. As unlikely as it was, he entertained the possibility that it was from Natalie Sanderson. In Animal Science, she had smiled at him when they had to work together on a lab where they had to identify fish. He generally used group work time to get some shut eye, but this time there were pictures of fish and he pointed to each with a casual finger and identified them in a voice that he hoped sounded like he didn't care.

It was not often that he knew what others did not.

Thoughts of Natalie always tugged at a part of him he did not understand. His mind tentatively pawed around the edges of this need, but then his mother came into his mind and he winced at the intrusion. For a long time after she had left, he would lie in bed and think of her. His father didn't like to talk of her and had burned up all the pictures with his lighter one drunken night. Tucker had all but forgotten her face, but the smell of cigarettes still brought her to his mind.

Startled, he had a thought. What if the handwriting was hers? What if she was trying to reach him? One possibility bled into the next until his mind was tripping over them.

His mind was not used to possibilities.

His mind wandered back to Natalie. He'd seen her at the fair with her fag boyfriend, Craig Reynolds. They'd been over at the dart booth where Reynolds tried to win her one of those stuffed dogs, but every dart he threw hung limp in the board. As he dozed, Tucker imagined himself back there, winning the biggest prize for her. A big, blue stuffed dog.

And so it was not surprising that he fell into a deep sleep where he dreamed he was at the fair and a heifer was missing and he searched fruitlessly through the stalls and out onto the midway. His search became frantic; he looked everywhere even, ridiculously, in the trash. There, his eyes caught sight of something else. Amidst the wrappers and plastic cups, he saw the blue fur of the stuffed toy he had won earlier. He went to move some garbage to be sure and that is when he saw his letter there, soiled and ripped and almost lost to him forever.

Dawn found him staring up at his ceiling, stiff with fear. Though his eyes were open, he was dreaming of dogs and letters. Things discarded.

In the morning, his father was in no condition so Tucker took his shift.

He hurried through milking so he could get back to his letter. All the while he had been working, it had been on his mind and he felt anxious about. But there it was, right under his mattress where he had put it the night before. He felt oddly reassured by its presence and examined it once again.

He liked to think about what it might say. A love letter was quite a stretch but he liked to think it anyway. Then, he entertained the thought that he had won some kind of contest that he didn't even know he'd entered. Or possibly it could be from some relative he did not even know he had. Maybe it was someone trying to find him. He felt like a part of his brain had just woken

up and was filling up with things he'd never thought before. It was a good place he'd discovered, right there on the edge of what might be.

Of course, there was no guarantee that the letter would contain good things, but once he found that line of thinking, he preferred it. Often, the thought of his mother wiggled its way in. By now, she was little more than a distant memory to him, and he doubted she would she recognize him now that he was a man.

He was barely sixteen, but he knew what it was to be a man; he'd learned early. It meant doing what needed doing without crying about it. And without hesitating, that was very important. It was in that moment of hesitation that the line was drawn between a man and an almost man.

His father had taught him that.

New calves always made Tucker's heart go soft, but it was held in check by the knowledge that the bottle he held would likely be its last meal. They only kept the bull calves for less than a week; then the white truck would come and carry them off to the Sale Barn. This one had grown strong in only a few days and Tucker had to hold the bottle firmly as the calf rutted against it with impatience. Tucker had named him Veal Cutlet and he ran his hand across its glistening coat before he left it to its fate.

And walked directly into his own.

"You," John pointed at Tucker as soon as he saw him. "You and me got to talk."

Tucker felt the walls of the small office close in around him. He was keenly aware that Mrs. Conroy was still there, but he kept his eyes hard on John. He didn't know what it was

about, but in his experience it was better to be pissed off than pissed on. So he told John he had taken nothing and didn't like being accused of it.

John's eyes narrowed.

"No one said nothing about you stealing." The Herdsman walked slowly around the desk and sat down, his eyes never leaving Tucker. "Yet."

John was a big man, but Tucker had a good three inches on him and he reached for all of it, as animals do when threatened. When they're getting ready.

"I left a huge note in the milkhouse telling you we treated that white cow and not to milk her into the tank. So you tell me how it is we got a call this morning from the Co-op telling us our milk was contaminated? Seems they had to dump the entire tank."

Tucker kept his eyes hard but confusion flickered through him. He tried to think back. He'd been leaving in a hurry after milking to get back to his letter.

"That's four thousand gallons of milk." John said when Tucker did not answer, "That's \$7,500 you cost us."

John paused to let the numbers sink in. The heavy silence spread through the small room, but Tucker did not look away.

"I didn't see no note," he said finally.

"Didn't see no note? Didn't *see* it?" John took a piece of paper out of his back pocket, unfolded it and held it up for Tucker. Tucker had seen the stark white paper with the black writing the day before.

"You telling me you didn't see this? You must be blind then, cuz it was stuck right on the board where only a fool could miss it," John's eyes flashed with anger. Tucker kept his eyes on the paper while his mind tried to form a defense.

“Why didn’t you just put a mark on her like you usually do?” he asked John.

“Why didn’t I...? *Why?*” The vein in John’s neck pulsed. “Because I left a *note* the size of *Kansas* on the board!”

Tucker began a reply, but then thought better of it. He wanted this job.

“I didn’t leave a mark on her cause I said it *right here*,” John shook the paper at him, “Can’t you read?”

The question hovered in the stale air, but Tucker understood it did not require an answer. It was just something you said to people when they did something stupid. He waited for more, but the silence that followed made it clear to him that he was expected to say something.

“I didn’t see no note,” he said again.

John ran his hand slowly over his face before he spoke again.

“Look, Tucker, you are good with the cows and always here when you’re supposed to be, but this is the third time I had to talk to you about reading what’s on the board. And this time, you cost us a whole tank of milk because you were too goddamn lazy to do what you were told...I won’t tell you again. Next time, you’re done.”

By the time John finished speaking, he was standing in front of him. He was standing too close, but Tucker kept his large feet planted and firm. When John shoved the crumpled paper into his chest, Tucker made no move to take it and so it fell to the ground as John stalked out the door.

Mrs. Conroy stayed for a moment and he sensed she had something to say, too, but he didn’t look at her. Finally, she left him to himself.

His eyes were still on the words that laid there at his feet, screaming up at him. With slow deliberation, he covered them with his work boot, silencing them.

Boots could do that. Silence things.

There was bound to be consequences, he knew that. He'd screwed up and there'd be a price to pay, but the direction of meanness is always hard to tell.

As soon as the machines shut down, he heard the whining and knew right away something was wrong. His father always hated whining, just hated it, so Tucker hurried to stop the sound. But by the time he got there, the small dog lie on its side, shaking.

He was still tied to the tool bench where Tucker had left him, but all around him lay the broken bottles, their edges jagged and fatal. One had clearly found the animal's left eye. A large flap of skin, laced in fur, hung limply off the small dog's face and Tucker did not know what to do with it. As he lay beside him, he knew it was useless, but he tried to put it back, holding it there as if it would reattach.

But Tucker knew it was not the bottles, but the boot that did the real damage. Tucker ran his hand gently over the small dog's side, but the small dog whimpered pitifully under the softest touch and Tucker understood that gentleness would only add to his pain. It was like that sometimes. Sometimes, you just can't put the skin back.

The small dog licked his hand, very softly, and that decided it.

He weakened just before he fired. Later, he would remember how his hand had moved without his permission, jerking and straying from the target. The misfired shot blew the ear right off the small dog and it landed against the wall.

But he was a man and he moved closer and finished.

It all came down to the hesitation. He would never regret the fatal shot, but he would never forgive himself for that ear.

After he buried the small dog, he had walked back to the house, his rifle in hand with something cold building inside him. But his father was nowhere to be seen. He stayed gone for four days.

During that time, he worked in a fury of efficiency and looked for more to do. He left himself no time for grief or anger or thinking, at all. At night he fell exhausted into his bed, folding and unfolding the letter until the creases grew thin and sleep overtook him. Come daytime, he'd work even harder, moving shit from one pile to another, switching cows out, and hurling bales down from the loft with such force that Mrs. Conroy made him stop and sent him to the Feed Mill on an errand.

Gradually, the anger began to fade into fear. Maybe his father was gone for good. It gnawed at him all the while he drove Mrs. Conroy's truck to the Mill and that's when he came to his decision. He'd left the letter on his bed, but he knew it was time to stop this foolishness. It was time to stop being a baby about it and either find out what the letter said or throw it away. Time to stop all this useless dreaming and find his way back to what he knew.

As if to confirm he'd made the right choice, he looked up to see his father's truck in the drive. His heart leapt and he quickened his stride.

He found him sitting at the kitchen table, a bottle on the table in front of him, right next to a torn envelope. The letter itself was in his hands.

A relentless rush of blood coursed through him.

"That's mine," he said. He felt his fingers curl into a tight fist.

“This? This changes nothing,” his father said. His voice dropped low, the way it did when he got serious. Tucker planted his feet. He would be ready this time. But, instead his father drained what was left in the bottle and when he was done, he set the bottle down hard on the table. His eyes were not on Tucker, but were looking out the window.

“We’re getting out of this shit hole. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

His father raised a cigarette to his lips and Tucker heard the click of the lighter. His eyes dropped to the letter that lay on the table in front of his father. He didn’t like that it was so close to the lighter. After a moment, his eyes raised to meet his father’s.

“Where I go, you go,” he said and he brushed passed him on his way out the door.

Tucker heard the rev of the pick up and watched from the window as his father peeled out of the drive, reckless and wild, the mailbox helpless beneath his tires.

It took a moment for him to calm down enough to release his hands from the fists they’d curled into. After a bit, Tucker went out the back way, his insides so torn and raw that he almost missed what his father had left for him by the back door.

Not more than ten weeks old, she was. Her coat black and shiny, her tail wagging fast and hard.

They fidgeted and shuffled under the touch of his angry hands, but he couldn’t help it. His father had no right to open that letter. He had no right to read the words that weren’t meant for him. Those words, whatever they were, didn’t concern him. But, why did they make his father so mad?

While the machines did their work, Tucker took out the letter and laid it flat on the cart, smoothing out the wrinkles. Countless times he'd wondered how words could come so easy to some and not come at all to others.

John's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Mrs. Conroy says to stop up to the house when you're done. She got your check for you."

And so, after milking, he climbed her porch steps for the second time, this time his small dog at his heels. He figured she'd come to the door like before, but instead she called to come in, so he tied the dog to the railing and entered the house for the first time.

"Have a seat," she said, motioning for him to sit at the kitchen table with her.

He shrugged and tugged at his clothes, then worried he should have taken his boots off and left them by the door. Immediately, he felt too large in the small room. He'd never been in the house before and the kitchen was small and warm, all red and white with yellow curtains. It was a cheerful room, he thought, with tea cups and other breakable things. It was a dangerous room for someone like him. He saw no need to sit down to get his check but when he did, his knees shook the table and the tea cup clanked against the saucer it sat on.

"I have an offer for you," she said. "Your father, he's going to need to be moving on. But John tells me you are good with the cows and I'd like you to stay. Just you. Not him."

He blinked in confusion. Stay without his father?

"If you decide to stay with us, there's some paperwork. You're sixteen, so you can be declared independent. I took the liberty of filling out what I could, but it'll need your signature. This is what it looks like."

He watched her old hands move the pen across the paper and time seemed to stop for a moment, as if to wait for him to catch up. He watched it unfold as if it was happening outside him and he could do nothing to stop it.

He could only stare in cold amazement at the familiar blue ink in front of him.

It was her. In an instant, he saw the error of all he'd dreamed up, the error of dreaming at all because it was no mother, no lover, just a crazy old lady with a pen. His mind and heart raced against each other, chasing something or being chased, he did not know and it didn't matter because he wanted only to go back to yesterday. A heat he had never known was building inside of him, taking him over. His fists clenched in rage and for the first time, he understood what made you so mad you wanted to hit something, to break something, to show the world you weren't powerless. He understood his father.

He took the letter out of his pocket and held it up and he saw recognition flash in her eyes. His hands were shaking but she did not look afraid.

“Oh that? That's an application for the BOCES herd management program. They are looking for young people like you. I volunteer on the Board there so I send out the mailings. Are you interested in applying?”

Shaking the table between them, he shot to his feet, ready to fight though he did not know what to fight and what he was fighting for, but Mrs. Conroy didn't flinch. She just sat quietly at the table. Slowly, he understood that she wasn't looking at him, but at something behind him.

His father stood in the doorway, his eyes red and glassy and looking not at his son but at the old lady. The silence fell heavy on the room.

“Came for my check,” he said.

His father had been drinking and he was clumsy and bold as he moved toward them, but this could be deceptive. Tucker knew the quickness of the man and did not hesitate. Instinct moved him in front of the old lady. It was only then that his mind stumbled over the realization that his father was not a big man.

“Come outside a minute,” his father said.

Tucker followed his father out to the porch, relieved to leave the things behind him still intact. His father had left a bottle on the porch railing and he took a swig before he spoke.

“Found work over to St. Lawrence County,” he said and Tucker nodded in agreement. They’d worked there before. Pay was decent. Hunting was good.

“They only got room for one.”

Tucker opened his mouth to protest, but his father held his hand up and took another drink before he spoke again.

“Sometimes, you just got to look out for yourself.”

The small dog let out a whine just then and his father looked down at the animal. Then, he did something unusual. He reached down to scrub behind the dog’s ears. He ran his hand over his sleek head and down its back in one long graceful and tender motion. He gave his son a nod without quite meeting his eyes. And then, he was gone.

It was a long time Tucker stood on that porch. He lost himself in disbelief and fear and anger and grief and something else he could not identify.

It would be years later before he’d come to recognize it as gratitude.

