Home Place

The storm raged on, and everywhere water flowed. Wayne Dietrich slowed to twenty, then ten, then three to ford a low-water bridge where the stream slushed almost to his front bumper. He climbed again, with not three miles to go.

In the good old days, those gas-guzzling days when they drank and smoked marijuana and chased girls, when their strength was endless and their stupidity boundless, Wayne and his pals topped the last ridge at ninety, attempting to fly. Fortunately, you landed on a straightaway, and didn't need to brake until you saw the bicycle reflector Wayne had nailed to the mailbox.

Hillbillies. So full of fun.

In the rain he topped the ridge at thirty-five, and the mailbox itself was gone. He spied the lane only when he passed next to it: a length of dark water stretching uphill, shimmering when lightning flashed. Wary of the shoulders, he turned at the next crossroads, making a wide circle as if steering a boat. The exhaust echoed dully.

Creeping off the flooded road, he crossed his father's railroad-tie bridge over Plunge Creek. Navigating by memory, he thought of his mother's favorite quotation: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Where was that from? Corinthians? Hebrews?

The tires slapped against the planks and gripped the invisible lane again. Now he made out the outline of the house, but the storm had brought down a cottonwood directly ahead.

"That's all right," he announced, grateful for something physical to do, for a task that didn't require wit or clever retorts, fake sympathy or pandering. He reached over the seat for a wadded-up windbreaker, found a flashlight in the glove box, and dove into the rain. He found the back door key atop the propane tank, taped under the regulator hood, and shoved open the back door. He moved the light around, a little frightened—mice, certainly, but maybe also a raccoon.

Henry and Louise sold most of their furniture at auction but the wood range, heavy as ten dead men, remained in the kitchen. The firebox was clean; Wayne held a distinct memory of scattering the ashes. He opened the damper and lit a fire with kindling his father had split so long ago some of it had dry-rotted, and added oak slats from a broken pallet. The chimney drew strongly, and he pulled a can of soup from his backpack, and poured it into a sauce pan.

Shivering, he stalked the house, finding the rollaway bed in his childhood closet, some ragged blankets, and a limp pillow. He pushed them all into a corner of the kitchen, and went out into the yard again to rescue a plastic lawn chair.

In winter, late at night after Henry and Louise had gone to bed, he liked to prop his bare feet on the oven door, shifting them as they toasted. He read Jack London's Klondike stories here, as the wind howled out of the woods and slapped snow against the kitchen windows, and the imperfectly dried slab wood his father bought from the sawmill shrilled with escaping steam. He heated cocoa, solved his algebra problems, and fretted whether girls named Susan and Miranda and Meg would go out with him.

"Where are they now?" he murmured, sipping soup as if it would restore life. He visualized each teenaged girl even though they all were in their thirties now, married and

divorced and married again. The smart ones, the pretty ones, all left for the city and never returned. You couldn't make a living in Texas County.

He remembered Miranda eying him sorrowfully on her last day in town. So naive. So sweet. So silly, he thought, crawling under the blankets, doubling them over his cold feet, to remember a twenty-year-old glance across a room.

He was a romantic. That's why he pursued a degree in English, rather than math or computer science. You had to find a dream somewhere if you worked in the car business, and went home every night to rich, dull West County. High culture out there. Too high to feed the soul.

He sank in his chair and thought of beautiful women customers, their long legs tilting into Mercedes and Audis, their eyes drifting lustfully up. Wayne never strayed. He wouldn't allow Ruth the moral triumph. He kept his mouth shut, his eyes on the prize, and he earned the degree. He had his life back.

The woods dripped and steamed, bees moaned overhead, and up above a woodpecker banged its head against a cedar. Wayne carried his father's double-edged axe and bucksaw down the lane, filling with joy as he walked. He imagined himself a pioneer clearing a homestead claim: self-sufficient, alone, pure.

As he chopped the fallen cottonwood, he sang his mother's favorite hymns, "Shall We Gather at the River" and "In Canaan's Land I'm Camping," and felt her presence and that of his father, the two standing on the bridge, beaming with pride for their strong young son.

He slid back the door to the machine shed and sat in the semi-darkness, opposite the Ford 700 that still had the sickle bar attached. The tractor would run. It had to, but he'd

need to buy a battery at the least, and baby the thing along until he'd worked through its hibernation kinks. He used to come here when he was small and Henry had gone on a plumbing job. The tractor with its high, muddy wheels, and the lengths of chain and rope and oakum and wire that hung higher, still, were more mysterious than church.

A bench grinder, a drill press, a wood lathe. An electric welder. A cutting torch. Junction boxes, outlets, and switches. Faucets, nipples, unions, and a pipe threader. End wrenches, socket wrenches, pipe wrenches. Assortments of screws, bolts, washers—which Henry, not known for neatness, had sorted according to type and size, and meticulously labeled. Cans of paint, mineral spirits, linseed oil that he'd have to dispose of. An elegant ash level inlaid with brass. Atkins and Disston handsaws with apple handles.

He saw the old man crouched above the vise, drawing a file over the tiny saw teeth, playing with perfect rhythm his melody of screeches.

Wayne couldn't catch his breath. Dust lay everywhere, decades of dust. He staggered into the sunshine, his lungs pulling hard, his heart thumping. One, two, three, he said to himself. Go into Mountain Vale and turn on the electricity. See the man about the propane. Apply at the school.

More than once, after Henry and Louise died, he picked up the phone to list the farm for sale.

"Hold onto it," said Ruth, the ex-wife who despised the place. "You might need it some day."

Maude Townley, who'd been the school secretary since the War of 1812, remembered him as Wistful Wayne. He never knew who labeled his picture in the school annual. The

sobriquet made him still more wistful in the old days, but seemed beneficial now. “Look at old Wistful Wayne. Never thought he’d amount to—”

Pick your cliche: hill of beans, pig in a poke, diddly squat, zilch.

“Shouldn’t mention this,” Maude said. “But I happen to know, Jane Harpster’s four months along.”

Wayne knew the name Harpster, but not Jane. He gathered she taught English, and smiled wistfully.

Maude lowered her voice. “I’m thinking, along about March.”

“Wow,” Wayne said. “Thanks for—”

“And you’ll be substituting by the end of the month. We can pull you in for History, too. Ever coach volleyball?”

He hadn’t been in the teaching racket long, but knew you had to be on the good side of the secretary. That went for car dealerships, too. You couldn’t go trysting with a customer, dump her, and expect to live through the month.

Not that he’d gone trysting. Not wistful old Wayne.

He drove to Red Buck, too, but the secretary had the day off and the place was chaos. A pretty math teacher, Abbie Ferguson, took pity on him. She set him down at a computer and found the application page.

Abbie was too friendly. Wayne divined how miserable Abbie was, how much she wanted to return to Kansas City or at least Wichita. Small towns were hell on teachers if they couldn’t adjust their thinking, and worse for a single woman than a man. Good old boys and good old gals, themselves morally bankrupt, held exalted notions of teachers. Abbie couldn’t buy a bottle of wine at the supermarket without it being all over the county that she

drank. Bringing a man home was downright risky. She should seek out bird-watchers, or amateur astronomers, or local history buffs.

Abbie had that fish-out-of-the-big-city look. Wayne wanted Abbie, with her big, sad eyes, but she'd establish the record for rebound. The little hand pointed to one. He'd been divorced exactly three days.

He caught the principal on his way out, a doggedly cheerful fellow with girls and boys climbing all over him, all wanting favors, all with hopeful faces. Hopeful faces were the best thing about teaching. You'd do anything to keep from dashing those hopes.

"Next year, who knows?" the principal said. "But I'll call you for a substitute."

Back in Mountain Vale, he bought a battery for the tractor and then cruised the square. A woman wearing jeans and a western shirt smiled at him and disappeared inside of Louie's for a long night of drinking. Something you could do in a small town, other than church or drugs.

He found a corner booth at Sarah's Home Cooking, which had been professionally countrified with crosscut saws, horse harnesses, and paintings of old barns. On Wednesdays, Sarah's hosted a tea room. They couldn't be far from serving sushi.

"Everything all right?" asked the waitress. Rhiannon, her name-tag announced. She shook her thick black hair, revealing turquoise earrings in the shape of stars.

"Great," he said, pulling back from the spell she cast. The food hadn't changed: A green salad, mashed potatoes, beef and noodles, and blackberry pie with ice cream!

"I picked those blackberries," Rhiannon announced, leaning near to refill his iced tea. She smelled of vanilla extract, inspiring a memory. His mother daubed it on when she went to town.

"Where?"

"Along the Piney. You know that bridge under Highway 63?"

He smiled. "My dad took me fishing there."

She smiled, too."Haven't seen you before."

"I've been working up in St. Louis. Have a little farm down here, belonged to my folks."

"Wish *I* had a farm."

He didn't know any women for whom farm was a magic word, rather than a synonym for coarse or dumb, or at least hard work. Maybe the waitress was the horse-loving type—plenty of those in West County, Ruth among them. Hook up with Rhiannon, and he'd be chauffeuring Arabians all over the Midwest. Vet bills, fees for shows, a big truck to haul them around in, and horses ate—well, like horses.

Rhiannon glided off to the kitchen, and he couldn't think straight. As with Abbie in Red Buck, his idiotic penis volunteered for service. Three days! What a damn goat! Let some time pass, the counselor said. You'll keep telling yourself you're all right, but you won't be. You're emotionally frail, Wayne.

He was probably a year from a steady job. He liked the prospect of filling that year with hard work and reading. He'd grow a beard. Maybe he'd try to write a little, nature stuff like Wendell Berry, or in-your-face poetry like Walt Whitman.

"How are the beef tips?" Rhiannon asked.

"Wonderful," he said, and they were. He tried to keep his eyes neutral as he met hers. He tried not to think of sex. He couldn't understand why, in his time of noble celibacy, the universe brought such lovely women into view. It defied demographics. How many beautiful, single, interesting women could there be in this podunk county?

Three days, but it wasn't as though Ruth and he had been having sex. He couldn't remember the last time. "This farm you wish you had," he said. "What would you do with it?"

"I'd put a lot of it in easy vegetables."

"Such as?"

"Potatoes, bok choy, pole beans. Rows and rows of them, a week apart."

"Yeah, pretty easy." He nodded. "For the farmers' markets?"

"Yes. Also restaurants. And I'd make wine."

He sat back. His lust fled as he contemplated the amount of work her notions would entail. "Take a while to set that up. And in this country, you can't grow anything but Concord."

"Concord's fine. I think Muscadine, too. You'd have to work on the pH. And I'd raise goats."

"Goats!"

"With all the Middle Easterners in the cities now, there's a big market."

"St. Louis," he murmured, thinking, where do they live? Not in West County.

"Maybe Louisville."

Now he wanted to talk, but Rhiannon glided toward the window, where she poured coffee for an old couple. Then she disappeared through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. At the last moment, she threw him a thoughtful glance.

He left a big tip.

He woke at five in the morning, staring at the ceiling light. He didn't know where he was, but wait. The lights were on!

He plugged in the coffee pot, then went out to the machine shed. The tractor engine fired immediately, but spluttered and died, pretty much as he'd expected. He had a vague memory about the gas line, and unbolted it. Warily, he plugged in the air compressor, but it ran without complaint except for the wheeze it gave off even when he was a kid. He blew out the line, bolted it back on, and shot the carburetor some ether. The tractor belched fire, then ran like it had a brain and remembered when it was new.

By noon he'd mowed the lane and around the house, dragged off the cottonwood limbs, and cut a path circling the one tillable field. Walnuts had sprouted all along the woodline, and needed thinning. Once there were nearly fifty great trees, ancestors of these saplings. When he was a kid Wayne picked up the nuts and sold them. In a few years he'd do so again.

"So little money," he murmured.

Henry sold the big trees to pay for space in Beulah Land, a Baptist retirement home where meals and maid service were provided, but you could retain much of your independence. Louise was so arthritic she could hardly walk.

Or do the laundry, Wayne thought, skimming beggar's lice from his jeans with a pocket knife as he turned his attentions to the summer kitchen, which Henry and he had converted to a laundry room. He had to shove open the door with his shoulder, but yes, the washer and drier were there. The drier would function, but when he pulled out the washer he saw where the pipes had frozen. So much trouble for nothing.

Wayne sat on a stool, crying. That emotionally frail thing the counselor mentioned. He might as well cry. If a man cries in the forest, does anyone hear?

Louise claimed the old Maytag wringer washer aggravated her arthritis. Henry installed it where the burst automatic stood now, around the time of the KoreanWar, and Louise became the envy of every neighbor woman. Few farms had electricity then, and plumbing was far from universal. But the Maytag grew old, and Louise grew old, and her hands ached when she ran Henry's overalls through the rollers.

The Maytag outraged Ruth. "Is an automatic washer too complicated for your father—the *plumber*—to install?"

Wayne sighed. "He installs them, but doesn't approve."

"Because they make life easier?"

"He thinks they're designed to fail, and that you can’t fix them."'

"He can't fix them."

"Nobody can. The circuit board dies, you have to go to China to find a new one, and it costs more than the unit.”

Ruth nodded. “Sounds like a car.”

“The old Maytags never went bad, and if they did, the parts were simple." Wayne paused, to see if the ecological argument had had an effect. "It's Mom, too," he added. "She'll tell you clothes don't get as clean with an automatic."

"Nonsense. Imagine doing diapers in a wringer washer.”

Ruth was pregnant. To Wayne it seemed like immaculate conception, since they so seldom slept together. And they were drifting apart over Wayne’s insistence on his impractical English degree, and arguments with her father over just about everything. But perhaps a baby would keep them together, and somehow Ruth linked it to buying Louise a new washer. “I don’t believe your mother said such a thing. If she did, it’s because she doesn't want to make Henry mad. He is absolutely primitive."

"They can't afford—"

"We can."

You can, Wayne thought. You and your dad and your show room full of BMWs.

"You're right," he said at last. "But they’ll be in a rest home soon. Dad’s got along all these years by fixing things anybody else would say was junk. They grew up in the Depression. I'm afraid you'll—we'll—make them mad."

"Talk to Henry. Tell him it's a Christmas present."

"And you'll talk to Mom, I suppose."

"I already have."

That afternoon the women drove to Mountain Vale, and Wayne was faced not just with having to sell his father on the virtues of an automatic washer, but with announcing that one shortly would be delivered. Wayne wasn’t much of a salesman. He’d already demonstrated

he couldn’t sell fancy German cars, amd anyhow moral outrage was at work. Henry was a cave man, and had to be disciplined.

"It'll be a lot better for Mom," he said.

Henry shrugged.

A truck arrived bearing not just a washer, but a matching drier. Hanging out clothes aggravated Louise’s arthritis, too.

"I wouldn't a bought GE," Henry said.

"Maybe she got a deal."

"We coulda gone after it ourselves, saved a little money there."

"Part of the price, I suppose."

"You notice she didn't hire nobody to put it in. She knows that I know water runs downhill. We come up to visit, you'll have to point out the door where I come in."

Wayne fell into the stooge's role his father had assigned him when he was ten—hustling off to the truck for a hose clamp or pipe wrench, holding the flashlight while Henry bored a hole or probed for a wire between studs. But installing the washer was simple. They had no drains to dig. They needed only to haul out the Maytag, and stick the modern machine in its place. They ran a new gas line for the drier, and cut a hole for a vent.

They were both lying on the concrete floor, working the vent through the wall, when the women returned. Louise's thick legs appeared like hickory posts in the door. Ruth clomped across the linoleum with her heavy heels.

"They're here!" she said in a little girl's voice.

"It's a Christmas present, Henry,” Louise chimed in. “Isn't that nice?"

"Generous."

Ruth maintained the phony voice. "Is GE a good brand, Mr. Dietrich?"

Henry grunted as he tightened a fitting. "It'll outlast me."

At dinner Henry waxed philosophical about the days after World War II, when every farm wife decided she needed indoor plumbing. "Old farmers didn't care," he said. "Andy Hoskins, he lived there on the outskirts of Red Buck, had fifty acres down along the Piney. City come around and made him put in a bathroom. He done it, and went right on using the outhouse."

Hard to know what that meant, but it seemed conciliatory. Louise, after gleefully doing her first load of laundry, fell asleep in her chair. Ruth also was quiet.

In the morning Ruth, dressed nicely as if to sell cars, came out the back door and stood by the cistern. She waited for Louise, having announced she'd take her to church.

"Four years ago," Wayne murmured, as he backed the ruined washer out of the machine shed with a dolly. It hardly mattered, but he could just fit it into the Buick trunk, and haul it to the salvage yard. He was headed to town, anyhow, to buy a TV. Not five days divorced, and the silence drove him crazy.

Henry always claimed that it was an accident, that he'd meant to make a joke. Wayne stood where his father had, trying to envision Ruth. Just like that Sunday morning, the wind caught the screen door and slammed it shut; all that was missing was the click of Ruth's heels on the walk.

"She was trying to be a good wife," he murmured. Yet her motives weren't pure, and he saw what his father had seen again and again: an affluent, suburban woman, putting him in his place with her checkbook.

Long before, Henry had placed a plastic drum under a downspout from the summer kitchen, mounting it atop a platform to gain some pressure; during dry periods, he'd drain the water onto his tomatoes. Ruth took five of her bold steps, and Henry turned over fifty gallons of water at her feet. She shrieked, and stumbled off the walk. Her heels sank into the wet grass and she fell to one knee, then onto her stomach. Mud streaked her skirt and stockings.

Hardly an accident. Fifty gallons of water was four hundred pounds, and you couldn't dislodge it without a mighty, deliberate effort.

Hearing a scream, Wayne hurried out of the summer kitchen, and saw his wife flopping about in the muddy yard, his bewildered mother coming to her side. Wayne ran to help his wife but she tore away, and stumbled indoors.

Rough country humor? Only cruel Henry laughed, and Wayne had never seen his mother so angry. "Didn't mean to cause a fuss," Henry said sweetly. "Guess I kinda overdone it!"

Wayne stared. Later, he analysed the scene again and again. This was the spot where his marriage ended, but maybe that part of things wasn't his father's fault. He simply added gasoline.

Ruth changed, and drove Louise to church, but never again spoke to Henry, nor was it part of the old man's psychology to apologize. Ruth didn't return even for Louise's funeral.

And she miscarried. Something else might have brought it on, but Ruth didn't think so. They would have been combative parents, which didn't matter, either. In Ruth's mind that savage old man, Henry Dietrich, killed her baby.

In that last year Wayne himself joined his mother in the argument for Beulah Land. Louise would have almost no work to do, and could spend her last days talking about Jesus with her old friends. Henry never liked church, and round-the-clock church was even less appealing.

"We didn't hardly even make a garden last year," Louise said. "Henry wants me to put up beets and soup mix, but I just cain't no more. We don't need the farm now we got Social Security." She sighed. "I'll miss the place."

"You're gonna want the farm some day, Wayne," Henry said.

"Not likely," Wayne said. He regretted the sadness in his father's eyes.

Surprising them both, his father found another way: he sold the walnut trees. A veneering mill bought them, but some of the lumber made its way to the Amana Colonies in Iowa, becoming grandfather clocks and rocking chairs.

One year after the washer and drier episode, his mother and father moved into their apartment. Wayne visited regularly, and tried to bring Henry out to the farm. He imagined the two of them overhauling a lawn mower, or sculpting hammer handles with a spoke shave, but Henry wasn't interested. He was re-reading his twenty-odd Tarzan stories, and seldom lifted his head from the page.

Louise, in a wheelchair now, seemed happy enough. Giggling, she told how the widows chased Beulah Land's few bachelors—most of whom just wanted to go fishing. After two blissful years, she died.

"Wanta move back to the farm?" Wayne asked his dad.

"Lonely out there," the old man said. "Wouldn't be no point to it without Louise."

Wayne knew it was futile to ask his father to come to St. Louis, nor would Ruth have tolerated him, but he wondered about a trip to Florida. "You always liked Panama City. You always wanted to go deep sea fishing."

Henry nodded. "Winter sets in, maybe so."

In December, on a night when ten inches of snow fell, the old man disappeared. His truck was gone but he wasn't at the farm or anywhere in town. At first the people at Beulah Land surmised that Henry had, indeed, gone to Florida. It was only later that they discovered Henry sold his truck the week after Louise died.

A utility crew found his body in February, in the woods five hundred feet behind Beulah Land. Henry wore the blue corduroy jacket he'd worn for chores. He sat with his back against a white pine on a three-legged stool.

According to Louise's young minister, Henry Dietrich was inconsolable after his wife's death, although he had developed "a good relationship with Jesus." Distraught and not quite rational, he wandered into the woods, and, in the blizzard, lost his bearings."He's with Sister Louise now," the minister said.

Wayne knew better. There was the empty bottle of vodka by the body, for instance, and the old man never drank. He knew what his father had done because it was something he himself might do. His father had quite deliberately walked into the woods and found himself a place out of the howling wind. He sipped the vodka. He grew colder than he'd ever been crawling under houses, but the vodka numbed him, and in the end he felt warm again. All in all, it was a practical way to die.

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Wayne sawed wood until four, when he hit a rock and dulled his last chain. He was too exhausted even to read, and didn't want to cook, so he drove to Mountain Vale.

He hadn't foreseen the problem of loneliness. His theory about celibacy, that you wore yourself out with work and dropped off to sleep immediately, needed adjustment. If he were Catholic, he might have asked a priest about it. Maybe there were books.

Ruth all but shrank from his touch. With sex gone, they didn't have a damn thing, not even arguments in the end. But you've been through this, Wayne told himself. With Ruth, with the counselor. The marriage wasn't a true partnership. She had the money. Her dad held the cards. And finally, Wayne escaped.

He took a bath, shaved, and pulled on his last clean shirt. He might drive up to Springfield in a day or two. He needed a washing machine.

He dropped off his saw chains at the small engine shop, and tried to make conversation with the owner, but the man was duller than the chains.

Go home; read a book. That's what he should do, but he couldn't calm himself. Thirty-five miles to the nearest movie theater. There was probably a cornball dance, a country show, if he knew where.

He found himself circling the square. He had to eat; why not at Sarah's Home Cooking, when the alternative was McDonalds? But the restaurant's lights flipped off even as he cut the Buick engine.

Worse, it began to rain.

He stepped out of the Buick, and stood wiping his face with a shop rag. And now the waitress named Rhiannon ran across the street, the scarf over her hair making her look old-

fashioned. In the half-light of the square, her eyes swept over him, and he thought he saw her lips move. Then she slid into her Toyota, and started the engine.

But the click engaging the transmission never came.

Just five days, Wayne. You're crazy.

She has a history, too. Who says it even works out?

He ran across the street and tapped on the waitress's window. "Miss! Rhiannon!"