

MEETING

Harland smeared the grime to one side of his gas gauge window. Almost empty. Damn, he didn't know if he'd have time to get gas before he got to the meeting. And the Brothers always got so mad if anyone was late. Usually they just locked the doors and left you outside knocking, wondering what was going on inside. Then you'd have to hope someone would tell you where the next meeting would be. Damn.

Harland spied the lumber truck in front of him turn down a dirt road, a dusty snake of a road slithering through the pine trees. He remembered that road. Nothing on it but some shacks in a clearing about halfway through the woods. The perfect shortcut. That'd give him time to get gas and maybe even eat supper. Skipping supper always left him in a bad mood.

His truck rattled louder than usual and sputtered as he turned it onto the bumpy path. Dust still hung in the air from the lumber truck though it was out of sight by now, speeding along as it was. Harland's pickup hit a dip in the road, and he slowed down a little. No point in bumping out his muffler even if he was running late. He saw a clearing up ahead where the shacks stood, and wondered if anyone still lived back there.

He looked through the dust and saw a small boy kneeling by the side of the road. Black as the ace of spades, his father would've said. Harland chuckled to himself, wondering why the fool child was sitting right there by the road when a big truck had just gone thundering past. Hell, there was still a dust devil swirling around right in front of him.

Harland looked out his window at the boy as he rattled past. As soon as he saw the tear stained face, he lifted his foot off the gas. At the boy's knees was puppy, a little one, probably not more than two months old. Just a baby of a mutt, as limp and lifeless as a wet biscuit. Harland pulled his truck over to the side of the road and looked in his rearview mirror. He didn't have the time for this, but he couldn't abide a child's tears. Even this fool child still sitting right by the road.

Harland got out of the truck and stepped into the dust, slamming the truck door behind him. The boy looked up, a little afraid, no doubt seeing the confederate flag sticker on the back of the truck. Harland tried to smile a little, but with the dust settling on his face, he worried that it probably looked more like a grimace. He could see the boy's lower lip trembling. The boy couldn't be more than seven or eight.

"What happened? Harland asked.

"My puppy got hit by a truck." The boy choked the words out. "Do you think you can help him?" The little boy held out the puppy to Harland, who took it from him.

Thank God it was already dead. But it was still warm and floppy. He looked down at the puppy, its fur so soft, its velvety muzzle caressing his callused fingers as he moved the head around in his hand. It was just an ordinary puppy, a brown and white mongrel, but it reminded Harland of the puppies his father had bred for hunting when Harland was a boy himself. He would play all day with those baby dogs, smelling their puppy breath and letting them chew on his fingers and wrists with their needle teeth. This one was gone though, and nothing was going to bring it back.

“No, boy, I can’t help him. I reckon I can help you bury him though.” Harland motioned to his truck with his head, trying to avoid looking at the boy’s eyes. “I’ve got a shovel in my truck.”

The boy’s face crumpled with despair, and tears spilled out of his eyes and down his face, cutting shiny trails through the light layer of dust on his brown skin. Harland cleared his throat and handed the lifeless puppy back to the boy.

“Here, you hold him real gentle now, while I get the shovel.” Harland walked to the truck and pulled out a shovel from the back. He propped it up against the truck, then opened the driver side door and rummaged in the area behind the seat, finally pulling out old towel bearing the words “Holiday Inn.” He draped the towel around the back of his neck and strode over to the boy.

“Where do you want to bury him?” Harland said, casting his glance around the property, such as it was. The house itself wasn’t much more than a shack, maybe two rooms, with a sagging front porch and a corrugated tin roof rusted the color of the flesh of a rotten apple. So much paint had flaked away that it was hard to say what color the house had been. An outhouse sat in the backyard, and an old-fashioned water pump stood beside the house. The ground beneath the pump was dark brown, with just a hint of a puddle in the depression. Not even indoor plumbing, Harland thought. Things hadn’t changed a bit since he’d taken the road the last time as a teenager.

“Back here near the trees, mister. She don’t like to be hot.” The boy looked up at Harland once, then walked on in front, carrying the puppy in front of him like an offering. The boy kept his head down, and he shuffled a little through the dirt.

They reached the edge of the woods behind the house, and Harland picked a spot where the dirt looked softer, where he'd be able to dig deep enough to keep animals from digging the little body up.

"This all right with you?" Harland asked.

The boy nodded, his jaw clenched. Harland could tell the boy didn't want to see him crying anymore.

Harland dug the hole as fast as he could and still make it deep enough. In his mind he heard the clock ticking, and he pictured himself standing outside the door of the meeting place. The Brothers sure as hell wouldn't consider this little task a decent excuse to be late to the meeting.

When the hole was dug, Harland took the towel from around his neck and spread it out across his hands.

"Put her in here," he said to the boy.

The boy laid the puppy in the towel. He looked at her for a second, then reached over stroked her head. "Bye Sadie," he creaked through the tears which had pushed through his attempts to stay straight-faced. The boy swallowed so hard that Harland could hear it. Harland wrapped the terry cloth shroud around the puppy and laid her in the hole. He could feel through the thin fabric that she had already lost her warmth. She was just a thing now.

Harland lifted up the shovel, then put it back down.

"You want to say a prayer?" he asked the boy.

The boy nodded and looked up. Harland could see the boy wouldn't be able to say it.

Harland cleared his throat, thought a minute, then bowed his head. "Dear Lord, please take care of this here puppy until this boy can come meet her when his life is through. This was a good puppy and she'll make you a fine companion, just as she did for him." He paused. "And thank you for taking her quick, so she didn't have to suffer to come be with you." He looked down at the boy, who was nodding vigorously, even as some tears hit the dirt near his feet, leaving tiny dark spots in the dust.

Harland leaned over and whispered to the boy. "Is there anything you want to say?"

"She likes bacon," the boy said.

"Bacon?" Harland said. He looked at this little boy with no shoes, his shirt worn thin at the shoulders, and knew that bacon wasn't around much at this house. This puppy's bacon had come from this boy's plate.

"Okay then." Harland said, straightening up. "And Lord, please let this puppy have some bacon every day. Amen." Harland put his hand on the boy's head as he finished the prayer, and it struck him how soft the hair felt under his fingers. Not unlike what his own hair would feel like if were curled so tight. He removed his hand and quickly filled in the hole, trying to block out the sound of the dirt hitting the body and the boy's sniffing by humming "Amazing Grace."

“I’ve got to get going, son.” Harland took his shovel and walked quickly to his truck, hearing the clock ticking in his head as he went. He put the shovel in the truck bed and opened the door to the driver’s side. He turned to the boy before getting in.

“Thank you, mister. We ain’t got a shovel. I don’t know how I’d’ve buried her proper.” The boy held his chin up, though it still quivered.

“That’s fine, son. ’Glad I could lend a hand.” Harland squeezed the boy’s shoulder, shuddering a little as he felt the small bones so close to the surface, so scantily covered by flesh. He climbed into the truck. “You stay back from the road now, you hear?” The boy nodded and stepped back.

On the road again, Harland tapped at the glass of the gas gauge. Maybe the gauge was broken again and he would have enough to get to the meeting without having to stop. Once he got off the dirt road onto the highway that led to his house, he leaned on the gas, passing cars, chancing a speeding ticket. He’d been locked out one time already this year, and the Brothers began to think you didn’t belong if you were late more than once.

He screeched to a halt in front of his house so he wouldn’t have to waste time pulling out of his driveway. He rushed into the house, slamming his screen door behind him. He washed the dirt off his hands in the kitchen sink, splashing water all around and glancing at the clock over the window. He could still make it if he kept hurrying. No time for anything to eat though. He grabbed a dish towel on his way to the bedroom, wiping his hands and forearms as he went. He threw the dishtowel on the bed and walked to the closet.

From the top shelf of the closet, he pulled out a large flat box. He opened it and laid the top and bottom on the bed. He reached into the closet and pulled out a robe, startlingly white and ironed stiff as plywood. He started to fold the robe to put it in the box when his stomach began to growl. It rumbled a little, and Harland told himself he was really hungry, but he knew it felt a little like something else. Nausea, maybe. He'd worked hard today, then buried a puppy to boot. Surely a man shouldn't go without eating after a day like that.

He fingered the rough white fabric, remembering how much he hated ironing it. Hated having to fold it just so to make sure it wouldn't wrinkle on the way to the meeting. He thought back to the silky feel of the puppy's fur, to the feel of the boy's curly hair, tight and soft against the small brown skull, and to the feel of the shovel handle in the arc of his palm, worn smooth as a marble by his own hands. Good feelings, not like this unyielding cloth.

His stomach made a sound again. Harland unfolded the robe, put it back on its hanger and hung it back in the closet. He let his hand rest on the closet pole for a moment, then pushed the robe to the back of the closet, back where it belonged, behind the door. He put the box together and slid it under the bed. He wouldn't be using it again.

He went to the kitchen to get himself something to eat. Surely a man deserved a decent meal after a hard day's work.