

Early Dark

It didn't start out with darkness closing in and me sitting in a cold sweat thinking about murder.

It started out with Grandma's mumbled warning, "touch pitch. You get fouled." Only way back then I was too ignorant to make sense of any of all that. Maybe still am.

But even before me ever hearing Grandma's words like distant thunder, it must've really started with that very self same Grandma I only knew as setting all day long wrapped in a ratty bathrobe covering up her swolled up ankles and gumming away without any of her teeth, squirreling away her own kind of dark, foul pitch – money. A lot of it. Maybe a million or more, me not knowing the actual figure being just part of the problem since I have never yet seen the will.

Not knowing or seeing is thanks to Randolph my older brother the lawyer, out in San Fran, saying none of my bee's-wax each and every time I've asked. Besides, says he a will as any fool should know never stipulates a precise fiduciary amount. Right there, of course, I needed Marcie's help. She'd been one year away up to state college and she says he means amount of money.

Still in the hopes of seeing some of that amount, whatever number it might be, here I sit my hands pressed together in the cold sweat of the dying sun. I keep on asking since it was I who spent all of my schooling years living up by Gram's which is what my brother the smart one called her. Getting up early enough to chip ice out of the kitchen sink so she could stir up breakfast; cutting, carting, stacking wood; feeding the Franklin stove, which never could be made to draw right; keeping the outhouse clean; bringing in the eggs and all that before the clanging bell called me out and through three miles of woods to find and see if some of the hard knuckled women could knock some learning into me. And then on the evenings when my own mom couldn't do the fixing, I was

up there again after school with my homework by the kerosene lamp listening to Grams grumbling around in the creeping dark, lamenting and lambasting and cursing and warning “touch pitch get fouled.”

In the beginning it was a mighty puzzler for me. Alls I could figure she was quoting something grandfather must had taught her about baseball. He loving the game bout as much as I did and knowing all about pine tar on the bat. But over the years I begin to get the sense of it. Grams was worried about the results of fighting evil. Evil was dark and sticky like pitch and it was everywhere you looked or leastwise she looked and it had to be fought constant just to keep it down. She saw evil under the kitchen sink, in the electric sockets she kept naked of light bulbs, at the top of the stairs where her bedroom was where she used to sleep with grandfather, himself another powerful source of evil carried forward from the spirit world into her everyday present battle. And it was that ever lasting fight what stirred Grams up to be repeating all the time that fighting evil made who so ever was doing the good lord’s fight to stand within touching distance of evil and a little was sure to splash off. Hence, you touch pitch even if it be only to fight it you get fouled by pitch.

The other thing Grams said was “Seeing is Believing” which was much the easier for me to make out since if I saw the ball I’d smack it. Which is how the game should be played and why I was pretty good at the seeing and believing and hitting part.

I once asked Grams if the touching pitch idea was scripture since that’s all she ever read but Grams rapped the arm of her rocker sharp and said, “No.” Cocked her head sideways like a crow bird might to look at me and added. “Any fool’s born knowing that.” Making me wonder, not for the first time, how low her opinion of me was. I figured it was no doubt just part of her private horde of things, like Reader’s Digests dating back to from forever and recipes clipped from the back of Quaker Oats boxes that she was determined to pass along to

her near kin.

All through senior high, up by Gram's my sleeping spot was on what had been the porch, now closed in mostly to keep the chord wood dry. Gram's must have felt that keeping me at a cool temperature was the surest way to keeping me free from temptation and from evil. And mostly as Marcie herself would testify, it's worked. Honest, best as I can remember, I do not recall a time when my brother, the student, Randolph, no one ever called him Randy or hung any nickname on him like most of us had, set foot up on her property; not for the latrine digging, nor the fencing, nor the mowing, nor shoveling, nor wood splitting - not for nothing - since he'd be too busy studying except maybe once or twice to a Sunday dinner after church and then he'd leave before it was time to heat the water to do the dishes.

Still and all, right after our folks died, first thing I done when Grams passed, I figured damn the cost it was the right thing to do, I called Randolph long distance. I got to leave a message with a secretary who did not seem to know who I was or what I was calling about but assured me that my brother would promptly return my call. Second thing with Marcie's help, since I'd already learned women were born to know these things, I took care of getting Grams tucked in the ground; the coffin and the flowers, and the food and the drink. Two weeks beyond when we'd stood together in the slanting light and tugging wind up to the cemetery I get a letter saying brother Randolph was in receipt of my message and would be back in contact right away when he got time to help sort things out after he had a chance to "peruse" the will. After I asked Marcie about that word, 'peruse', which I'm not ashamed to say had me stumped, I thought what he wrote was the proper and right thing to do since I didn't know any about wills and I was sure after I was done cleaning up the old place I'd want help dealing with all the money problems of settling things up.

Nothing much happened for another month or two. I sent brother a letter

trying to explain what needed doing and asking what he wanted and explaining that I'd been careful to divvy up what looked to be of any importance or value such as the rocking chair and the fireplace screen and the pictures one of Jesus and the other of George Washington in a boat and wondering what he suggested I do with the rest of the stuff, which for myself I wanted to do in a bonfire knowing that was one of the surest ways to stay clear of dark and dirty things and did he want to check first if by any chance there were other things that might be of any value or worth any amount of money and whether he was ready to put the old place up for sale, all the time keeping from him my worry about staying away from the pitch, which I reckoned still lurked all about and around Grams' place even with her mortal remains being six feet under.

I didn't hear back from him. Instead I get a letter from the court up in Boone county. Marcie saw that letter and she said I better say a little prayer before opening it since her uncle got one once that looked like that and his life went down hill from there on out. I kind of looked at her and laughed and said I didn't have no fear I hadn't even had a traffic ticket since we'd gone up to the fair in Tunville and I was free and clear in my conscience. So I opened the letter and it was written mostly in Latin. I found Grams' name, Gertrude Fullering Tillinghast, my name and I found my brother's name, Randolph, a lot, mostly I would say on every page, including that he was named the 'executor.' Right away I said, I didn't know nothing needed executing but I was kind of glad he was the one to have to do it since I'd done enough chicken head chopping, pig gutting and trucking and mucking around her place to last me through my next promised life time. Marcie said I should wait to see what gladness would follow.

Sure enough within the week I get a long letter from San Francisco not exactly from my brother but signed by him. Sitting at the kitchen table my elbow next to Marcie's as the day's light fled from the sky, it took a long time to read and a lot longer to understand. There was money which by itself was a

gladdening surprise, going to be left to me. But first I had to agree to a couple of things. Marcie got up and clicked on the ceiling light. I liked the money part since I figured that would cement things with Marcie and maybe might if we was lucky enough help ease us up a little bit but I didn't understand fully all that I had to agree to first. There were words like probate and court assigned and beneficiary. Right away Marcie said, I should see a lawyer. I was against that three ways to nothing, which for those less alert is equal to a strike out. First, lawyers was and meant trouble and second, they cost and third, the only lawyer I knew outside my own brother was Henry Billinger who had been a couple of grades ahead of me but who couldn't hit for shit. I used to strike him out even when I was in the ninth and couldn't yet be on varsity. Marcie was stubborn on this. She said if it's a question of money I needed a lawyer, but I guess I was a little set in my ways too, 'cause of a thought I couldn't much say even to myself. Somehow lawyers reminded me of pitch something about hell stones and brim fire and lawyers formed a picture inside my head strong enough to stop me. So all I said was, "I'll think on it but Randolph's both a lawyer and my brother and ain't that enough."

Marcie come right back, "Forget brother and forget Billinger. Get a lawyer who does estate work."

It was the first time I'd heard Grams' place and estate together and I had to laugh. I said you gonna call that an estate you might as well call this place a palace. But Marcie is not always easy to relax. She picked the letter back up and stabbed at it more than once with one finger and said that according to what she read, I had a lot to do. I had to guarantee that Grams' place remain intact that her possessions and belongings and outbuildings and things and objects within the environs had to be maintained. I stopped her to ask what 'environs' was. And by this time, Marcie had begun to lose patience with me a little like most of

my teacher's had.

A month or so after I got a registered letter from San Francisco. Never had gotten one of those things before and it made me laugh when Miss Tracey at the P.O. said I had to sign for it. I thought she was funning me at first. Sign for my own mail, was she sure? Well on the wrong day Miss Tracey can be a little like her mother who taught me in first grade and she said, "Sign. It is the law."

So I signed.

As far as I could make out the letter was asking me for money, like a bill. Sort of talking aloud to myself I asked if I'd misunderstood something that instead of getting money Grams' passing was going to cost. In a way that made more sense. Miss Tracey startled me by rapping on the barred window and saying, "Take your own business out of here."

I started walking home kind of shaking my head as the sun set and the shadows got deep like night. Maybe paying for the funeral was only the beginning. I figured maybe I still owed, even if I'd done for her when she was alive. That night I was having dinner up by Marcie's folks with meat loaf, gravy and mashed potatoes and mac and cheese and Jell-O. I showed them the letter I had had to sign for and there was a lot of general talk not all of which I followed about how as a caretaker, because that's what I was supposed to be, Randolph, the executor, and I the caretaker, which made perfect sense that I had duties which if not met as specified added to the costs of keeping up the place. While they kept chewing it over amongst themselves I thought to myself, but in another way, whoa now, hadn't I already been gone and done a lot for Grams, caring for her and her place and accompanying her to church service nearly every Sunday but at such a good dinner I didn't voice my opinions so as not to roil up the social time. I just sat next to Marcie and brooded to myself on how a burial which might mean to most folks the end of cares now seemed like to signify it were just the beginning of struggles and I had a lot more chores to go on top of

my eight to five at the garage. That night in my own bed as the dark settled in close I begun worrying if I was touching pitch and somehow didn't know it, which seemed somehow to me the scariest thing, a little like Grams must have thought about the evils flying around not all of them see able even by someone as careful as she was to keep one eye open at all times.

Next thing I know a guy named Wilmot is calling me on the phone at the garage right around ten in the morning. He says all in one breath: he's a lawyer over by Newtown which is just over the next hollow and Marcie told him to call. I didn't want to talk to him at all except he keeps repeating that Marcie says I should and he has just one question for me.

So I finally give in and say, "Shoot."

And he says, "Have you seen the will?"

I say, "What will?"

He says, "The deceased, Mrs. Gertrude Tillinghast's last will and testament."

I knew Mrs. Tillinghast was Grams but I was very surprised to hear a stranger using her christened name of Gertrude and I figured deceased was what she was, dead.

"No." I said.

He said, well I had to do that first.

I said OK. He should mail it to me.

He says it's not that simple. I knew right then I should've hung up the phone. Turns out according to Mr. Wilmot that only my brother has seen the will and that I need to get a copy and read it.

So naturally up by Marcie's I sit down with her and write to my brother. This time I get an angry letter back asking why I'm dragging in extra lawyers since they are going to cost money and whether I don't trust him and reminding me he is a lawyer and also he is my older brother. Sitting at my kitchen table reading that letter felt like a high hot one in right under my chin. It was cloudy and dark

outside, the kind of darkness I could remember from up by Grams in the evening time just before she'd snuff out the lamp and start grumbling about pitch as she humped her way up the creaking stairs. It was hard getting to sleep. I got to worrying maybe the pitch was inside of a person which was part of what made it hard to see. And that made Grams other saying come calling in her ghosted voice, 'Seeing is Believing.' Turning and smacking the pillow to lie comfortable I wondered if I could make the darkness within me visible would it be a lot easier to combat. But lucky to me after long twisting and turning sleep came to snatch me out of that nightmare and I got to get back up in time to work in the real world.

It hadn't lightened all that much the very next morning at CC's garage when Mr. Crumb shouts out to me to pop into his office. He's got his boots up on top of his steel desk so I know he ain't all that pissed at whatever it is but he begins in his hellfire voice, "Big doings you into, Shortstick." which ain't the name nobody else calls me but Mr. Crumb. I don't feel any need to speak yet. His father before him owned the garage and before him it was his grandpappy and greatgrandpappy who ran the blacksmith yard. My own dad worked for him part time, so he's kind of owned all of us forever, or at least for a couple of generations so he gets to call us whatever and I take no offense. He goes right on "Got a call from a west coast law firm." He heaves himself up in his swivel chair, digs around amongst the spark plugs and distributor caps, piled all which ways over his desk and pulls out the stub of his smoke and throws a huge flame at it from his pocket lighter, shifts his weight back, blows smoke at the ceiling and repeats, "A call from a law office in San Francisco." He points his smoke right at my chest and rumbles on, "Now you'd think any honest person would be made nervous by news like that." He squints one eye over the smoke at me. I still don't say nothing partly because by now I think I know a little about where this is coming from but sure enough the next bit is a surprise.

“The lawyer people want to know if you're real regular like. They wants to know if you treat the time card right and whether you got your finger prints on things that ain't yours and whether things go missing from my establishment.” He lurched forward in his chair and blew smoke right at me. “Now what you got to say for yourself?”

Inside I'm thinking this sounds like the darkness of true pitch but out loud I start, “I hope you have no cause”

And then Crumb laughs like hub caps banging together. “Shortstick you go on back to work and quit wasting my time. We don't have no time clock here and you know it and I figures I's just as smart as they is. It being just your brother's way of trying to check up on you. That's what older brothers are for to check up on the runts of the litter.”

I knew then on my way home after work with the sun pulling down early and the cold creeping in fast that I was getting closer to the pitch and I wasn't sure how to fight it.

And sure enough, about a month after things got a lot darker. Driven by the hope of paying off the most pressing bills, I wrote one more letter to Randolph asking if he was going to show me a copy of the will and help explain what was going on and about two weeks after that late on a Friday, a red Mercedes, one of those German cars, big and low to the ground and expensive built with parts you gotta order from Atlanta or some place even further away and which'll as likely cost you, just the part, mind you, as much as a good used pickup. This red Mercedes swoops into CC's minutes before shut down time on Friday. A lot of heads turn. They stay turned when a trimmed woman steps out dressed in a skirt that don't come even near to her knees. She sweeps her hair back like she don't want it messed by us looking at it and she just stands there still with her motor running. I figure she needs directions 'cause nobody was going to bring a car like that into a place like CC's for fixing or mechanic work so I wipe my

hands on the seat of my jumpsuit and come out into the fading light.

She doesn't want any directions. She holds out a little white card in between thin, white fingers with painted nails and says her name is Alicia Morel and she is looking for a Peter Tillinghast.

I swallow twice before I nod. I guess I didn't make myself clear because she repeats slowly like I might be in third grade or dangerous, if I know where Peter Tillinghast might be.

I say just as slowly he might be right here standing in front of her.

She looks me over from boots to hair and smiles. Her teeth are very white and shiny. She says and you might be?

I finish the idea for her by saying my name.

Turns out she has driven up from Charlotte at the request of Randolph Tillinghast my near relation and lawyer in San Francisco. She says all this standing right in front of me in the reddish light of the setting sun to take me out to dinner.

I am a lot of things all at once but mostly surprised. Before I can even ask she says there is no need to change and no time either since this is a business dinner and she has a reservation for two. I had never so much as seen a place where you eat that needs a reservation but as I'm thinking on that she explains like to a little child that she will be paying all of our expenses so if I would just follow her and she walks around to the passenger side, opens the door and closes it after me. I keep my greasy hands folded in my lap and don't dare even lift my head up as we peel out of CC's for fear of what the guys might be looking like but I do think to myself that it was near enough to five o'clock that old Crumb shouldn't make a fuss when I get back on Monday and that Jack could easily finish up the oil change we were doing on Mr. Henniker's four-by.

We get to Parkville in under an hour and I admire the way Miss Morel drives and the way the Mercedes rides and I say so. And she says back, I am a good

looking guy and I look pretty strong. To which I cannot think of a thing to say since I was not about to begin to think about what she looked like except to think I could tell the guys at CC's, but not likely Marcie, that she looked more like a model than any lawyer and that I was closer to the real thing than I had ever been outside of looking at some of those pictures you can see in some of those glossies. I just kept looking straight ahead at the smoothed out road sailing by and breathing nice and steady.

There was a guy at the door of the restaurant who looked like he was dressed to go to his wedding. He stared at me near most as hard as I stared at him and I never did figure out who all he was waiting for but Miss Morel walks by like she's at home and says her name to a woman who follows us along like we might get lost to a table with more plates, glasses and knives, forks, and spoons than I'd ever seen bunched together at one time except maybe at Thanksgiving at Marcie's for family and cousins. Another thing I never did figure out was what kind of business meeting this was. I watched Miss Morel pretty close and kept just one easy step behind her. Napkin; hands in lap; sip of water, and when I was thinking it might be good to have a beer she asks for a whole bottle of wine and pours me a full glass. Never drunk nothing like. I remember the second bottle but am not sure about a third or much else. Candles, a couple of guys, sometimes talking in a language only Miss Morel can get, piles of bread and butter, must have been food and not much more I can remember until I wake up in the dark in a big bed in a big room.

I felt like pitch inside and out. The room was empty except for me. I got dressed. There was a note saying how the money was for bus fare back and all the way back on that bus I was making up my mind what I was going to be able to tell Marcie. In most part because there was not a whole lot I remembered but I knew I was going to have to have a good story. If only I'd have known then what was to come later the dark, dark pitch.

I didn't see Marcie until church on Sunday by which time I knew no more what I was going to say than when I had woke up in the dark alone in that big room but from her look she must have known more than I did. It was like we'd never said so much as 'Hi' in passing on Main street. It took me most of the month to settle with her by which time I found out that seems like this Alicia Morel had been to near every spot in town to announce herself as looking for me: Pat's General store, the P.O., where she had a long chat with Miss Tracey, up to Brenly's diner, even to First National, before she lit on me at the garage.

Then two things happened near right on top of one another. First, Wilmot called again. He called middle of the day up to CC's. I stood in the corner as far from Crumb's desk as one can get on his phone chord. Wilmot had some news which he figured might interest me especially if I was some place where I could sit down. Did I know the initials G.M., or A.T.T., or I.B.M.?

I'm staring out the plate glass window at the pumps thinking first on initials of the guys at CC's 'cause we used to play those kinds of games in junior high but nothing comes up.

"Are you seated?" Wilmot booms. I lean back against the Coke machine and he says, "They be the initials for stocks."

I'm thinking I don't know any stock cars which go by initials.

He goes right on, "Stocks worth a ton of money."

I say, "O.K." and bunched up the grease rag I was holding as I was ready to get back to work.

"Have you seen that will yet?"

I say, "No."

"Turns out that grandmother of yours, Mrs. Gertrude Tillinghast had a lot of stocks. A lot. And nothing but blue chip. Serious money. Very very serious. Of course I have not seen the will yet but it does suggest that there would be a fiduciary interest of yours in seeing it."

About the only word I understood was money, so I says, "That's probably something you best take up with my brother, Randolph, since he's a lawyer, too, you know." I couldn't help myself there at the end and maybe I shouldn't have slipped in that last part but it was the middle of the day and ol' Higgans was driving up to the pumps and he was never in a mood to wait.

When I got home from CC's I guess I was fired up by Wilmot's talk about money. I was beginning to smell it. I put in another call to my brother since in San Francisco they seem to work way later than we do hereabouts. In school I know once they did some explaining about that but since I figured I was never going to work no place that far away I let it slide. I got past the first secretary but got caught short by the second one, who had a voice scarily like Miss Tracey's, so I had to leave my message instead of saying it in person, which I figured might have made it stronger. "Show me the will." That was my message. I liked it because of the tie-in to the movie and also because short is almost always better or so some people say when they want to make you remember something they said from one time to the next.

Three days later the second thing that was to happen did. Another registered letter to sign for at the P.O. I made no jokes and acted like I knew exactly how to do this and figured I had got the will. Lucky chance there because I took it all the way back to my place before I sat at the kitchen table with that fat envelope. I popped myself a beer. Of course I knew I was going to have to show it anyway to someone else, like Marcie, which right then seemed a good idea because it could help bring us back together tight but all at the same time I thought it was good to give myself a few minutes just to look at it, digest it like, and maybe even see if I could spot some numbers on it. I took a good swallow, pulled a knife from the drawer, swiped it on my pants, just for luck, since it was already good and clean, slit that envelope open and tipped out the contents on the table.

There right in front of me was the pitch, dark, dark, sticky pitch. I started to tremble. Before I found the note and read it I knew way ahead of any thinking that I was going to have a hard time shaking off this pitch. Grams had it right in two ways. I had touched pitch and I was seeing it which was way too close to believing it.

On the kitchen table were four photographs, big glossy ones. They were never nothing I was ever going to show anyone. My first thought was burn 'em 'cause I didn't want anyone ever seeing me naked in bed; me naked in bed with that she-devil by the name of Alicia. Those two were hard, dark enough, but the bad ones were the next two; me naked and a little girl also naked lying next to me and the last, me naked and a little boy naked. Right away I turned those last two over so as not to see them and picked up the note. It was typed in caps:

YOU BE DARKER THAN PITCH.

NEVER AGAIN ASK TO SEE THE WILL.

It ends now me sitting in the cold kitchen with the early dark closing in, clenching and unclenching my fists and thinking. Thinking really hard.

