

STEPHEN
KING



FULL DARK,
NO STARS

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FULL DARK, NO STARS

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STEPHEN
KING

FULL DARK,
NO STARS



POCKET BOOKS

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AFTERWORD

'UNDER THE WEATHER' Excerpt

For Tabby

Still.

1922

Magnolia Hotel
Omaha, Nebraska

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

My name is Wilfred Leland James, and this is my confession. In June of 1922 I murdered my wife Arlette Christina Winters James, and hid her body by tugging it down an old well. My son, Henry Freeman James, aided me in this crime, although at 14 he was not responsible; I cozened him into it, playing upon his fears and beating down his quite normal objections over a period of 2 months. This is a thing I regret even more bitterly than the crime, for reasons this document will show.

The issue that led to my crime and damnation was 100 acres of good land in Hemingford Homestead, Nebraska. It was willed to my wife by John Henry Winters, her father. I wished to add this land to our freehold farm, which in 1922 totaled 80 acres. My wife, who never took to the farming life (or to being a farmer's wife), wished to sell it to the Farrington Company for cash money. When I asked her if she truly wanted to live downwind from a Farrington's hog butchery, she told me we could sell up the farm as well as her father's acreage—my father's farm, and his before him! When I asked her what we might do with money and no land, she said we could move to Omaha, or even St. Louis, and open a shop.

"I will never live in Omaha," I said. "Cities are for fools."

This is ironic, considering where I now live, but I will not live here for long; I know that as well as I know what is making the sounds I hear in the walls. And I know where I shall find myself after this earthly life is done. I wonder if Hell can be worse than the City of Omaha. Perhaps it *is* the City of Omaha, but with no good country surrounding it; only a smoking, brimstone-stinking emptiness full of lost souls like myself.

We argued bitterly over that 100 acres during the winter and spring of 1922. Henry was caught in the middle, yet tended more to my side; he favored his mother in looks but me in his love for the land. He was a biddable lad with none of his mother's arrogance. Again and again he told her that he had no desire to live in Omaha or any city, and would go only if she and I came to an agreement, which we never could.

I thought of going to Law, feeling sure that, as the Husband in the matter, any court in the land would uphold my right to decide the use and purpose of that land. Yet something held me back. 'Twas not fear of the neighbors' chatter, I had no care for country gossip; 'twas something else. I had come to hate her, you see. I had come to wish her dead, and that was what held me back.

I believe that there is another man inside of every man, a stranger, a Conniving Man. And I believe that by March of 1922, when the Hemingford County skies were white and every field was a snow-scrimmage and mudsuck, the Conniving Man inside Farmer Wilfred James had already passed judgment on my wife and decided her fate. 'Twas justice of the black-cap variety, too. The Bible says that an ungrateful child is like a serpent's tooth, but a nagging and ungrateful Wife is ever so much sharper than that.

I am not a monster; I tried to save her from the Conniving Man. I told her that if we could not agree, she should go to her mother's in Lincoln, which is sixty miles west—a good distance for a separation which is not quite a divorce yet signifies a dissolving of the marital corporation.

"And leave you my father's land, I suppose?" she asked, and tossed her head. How I had come to hate that pert head-toss, so like that of an ill-trained pony, and the little sniff which always accompanied it. "That will never happen, Wilf."

I told her that I would buy the land from her, if she insisted. It would have to be over a period of time—

eight years, perhaps ten—but I would pay her every cent.

“A little money coming in is worse than none,” she replied (with another sniff and head-toss). “This something every woman knows. The Farrington Company will pay all at once, and their idea of top dollar apt to be far more generous than yours. And I will never live in Lincoln. ’Tis not a city but only a village with more churches than houses.”

Do you see my situation? Do you not understand the “spot” she put me in? Can I not count on at least a little of your sympathy? No? Then hear this.

In early April of that year—eight years to this very day, for all I know—she came to me all bright and shining. She had spent most of the day at the “beauty salon” in McCook, and her hair hung around her cheeks in fat curls that reminded me of the toilet-rolls one finds in hotels and inns. She said she’d had a new idea. It was that we should sell the 100 acres *and* the farm to the Farrington combine. She believed they would buy it all just to get her father’s piece, which was near the railway line (and she was probably right).

“Then,” said this saucy vixen, “we can split the money, divorce, and start new lives apart from each other. We both know that’s what you want.” As if she didn’t.

“Ah,” I said (as if giving the idea serious consideration). “And with which of us does the boy go?”

“Me, of course,” she said, wide-eyed. “A boy of 14 needs to be with his mother.”

I began to “work on” Henry that very day, telling him his mother’s latest plan. We were sitting in the hay-mow. I wore my saddest face and spoke in my saddest voice, painting a picture of what his life would be like if his mother was allowed to carry through with this plan: how he would have neither farm nor father, how he would find himself in a much bigger school, all his friends (most since babyhood) left behind, how once in that new school, he would have to fight for a place among strangers who would laugh at him and call him a country bumpkin. On the other hand, I said, if we could hold onto all the acreage, I was convinced we could pay off our note at the bank by 1925 and live happily debt-free, breathing sweet air instead of watching pig-guts float down our previously clear stream from sun-up to sun-down. “Now what is it you want?” I asked after drawing this picture in as much detail as I could manage.

“To stay here with you, Poppa,” he said. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. “Why does she have to be such a . . . such a . . .”

“Go on,” I said. “The truth is never cussing, Son.”

“Such a *bitch!*”

“Because most women are,” I said. “It’s an ineradicable part of their natures. The question is what we’re going to do about it.”

But the Conniving Man inside had already thought of the old well behind the cow barn, the one we once used for slop-water because it was so shallow and murky—only 20 feet deep and little more than a sluice. It was just a question of bringing him to it. And I *had* to, surely you see that; I could kill my wife but must save my lovely son. To what purpose the ownership of 180 acres—or a thousand—if you have no one to share them with and pass them on to?

I pretended to be considering Arlette’s mad plan to see good cornland turned into a hog-butchery. I asked her to give me time to get used to the idea. She assented. And during the next 2 months I worked on Henry, getting *him* used to a very different idea. ’Twasn’t as hard as it might have been; he had his mother’s looks (a woman’s looks are the honey, you know, that lure men on to the stinging hive) but not her God-awful stubbornness. It was only necessary to paint a picture of what his life would be like in Omaha or St. Louis. I raised the possibility that even those two overcrowded antheaps might not satisfy her; she might decide only Chicago would do. “Then,” I said, “you might find yourself going to high school with black niggers.”

He grew cold toward his mother; after a few efforts—all clumsy, all rebuffed—to regain his affection

she returned the chill. I (or rather the Conniving Man) rejoiced at this. In early June I told her that, after great consideration, I had decided I would never allow her to sell those 100 acres without a fight; that would send us all to beggary and ruin if that was what it took.

She was calm. She decided to take legal advice of her own (for the Law, as we know, will befriend whomever pays it). This I foresaw. And smiled at it! Because she couldn't pay for such advice. By then I was holding tight to what little cash money we had. Henry even turned his pig-bank over to me when I asked, she couldn't steal from that source, paltry as it was. She went, of course, to the Farrington Company office in Deland, feeling quite sure (as was I) that they who had so much to gain would stand good her legal fees.

"They will, and she'll win," I told Henry from what had become our usual place of conversation in the hay-mow. I was not entirely sure of this, but I had already taken my decision, which I will not go so far as call "a plan."

"But Poppa, that's not fair!" he cried. Sitting there in the hay, he looked very young, more like 10 than 14.

"Life never is," I said. "Sometimes the only thing to do is to take the thing that you must have. Even if someone gets hurt." I paused, gauging his face. "Even if someone dies."

He went white. "Poppa!"

"If she was gone," I said, "everything would be the way it was. All the arguments would cease. We could live here peacefully. I've offered her everything I can to make her go, and she won't. There's only one other thing I can do. That *we* can do."

"But I love her!"

"I love her, too," I said. Which, however little you might believe it, was true. The hate I felt toward her in that year of 1922 was greater than a man can feel for any woman unless love is a part of it. And, bitter and willful though she was, Arlette was a warm-natured woman. Our "marital relations" had never ceased although since the arguments about the 100 acres had begun, our grapplings in the dark had become more and more like animals rutting.

"It needn't be painful," I said. "And when it's over . . . well . . ."

I took him out back of the barn and showed him the well, where he burst into bitter tears. "No, Poppa. Not that. No matter what."

But when she came back from Deland (Harlan Cotterie, our nearest neighbor, carried her most of the way in his Ford, leaving her to walk the last two miles) and Henry begged her to "leave off so we can just live a family again," she lost her temper, struck him across the mouth, and told him to stop begging like a dog.

"Your father's infected you with his timidity. Worse, he's infected you with his greed."

As though she were innocent of *that* sin!

"The lawyer assures me the land is mine to do with as I wish, and I'm going to sell it. As for the two of you, you can sit here and smell roasting hogs together and cook your own meals and make your own beds. You, my son, can plow all the day and read *his* everlasting books all night. They've done him little good, but you may get on better. Who knows?"

"Mama, that's not fair!"

She looked at her son as a woman might look at a strange man who had presumed to touch her arm. And how my heart rejoiced when I saw him looking back just as coldly. "You can go to the devil, both of you. As for me, I'm going to Omaha and opening a dress shop. That's *my* idea of fair."

This conversation took place in the dusty door-yard between the house and the barn, and her idea of fair was the last word. She marched across the yard, raising dust with her dainty town shoes, went into the house and slammed the door. Henry turned to look at me. There was blood at the corner of his mouth and his lower lip was swelling. The rage in his eyes was of the raw, pure sort that only adolescents can feel. It is rage

that doesn't count the cost. He nodded his head. I nodded back, just as gravely, but inside the Conniving Man was grinning.

That slap was her death-warrant.

* * *

Two days later, when Henry came to me in the new corn, I saw he had weakened again. I wasn't dismayed or surprised; the years between childhood and adulthood are gusty years, and those living through them sprout like the weathercocks some farmers in the Midwest used to put atop their grain silos.

"We can't," he said. "Poppa, she's in Error. And Shannon says those who die in Error go to Hell."

God damn the Methodist church and Methodist Youth Fellowship, I thought . . . but the Conniving Man only smiled. For the next ten minutes we talked theology in the green corn while early summer clouds—the best clouds, the ones that float like schooners—sailed slowly above us, trailing their shadows like wakes. I explained to him that, quite the opposite of sending Arlette to Hell, we would be sending her to Heaven. "For," I said, "a murdered man or woman dies not in God's time but in Man's. He . . . or she . . . is cut short before he . . . or she . . . can atone for sin, and so all errors must be forgiven. When you think of it that way, every murderer is a Gate of Heaven."

"But what about us, Poppa? Wouldn't we go to Hell?"

I gestured to the fields, brave with new growth. "How can you say so, when you see Heaven all around us? Yet she means to drive us away from it as surely as the angel with the flaming sword drove Adam and Eve from the Garden."

He gazed at me, troubled. Dark. I hated to darken my son in such a way, yet part of me believed that and believes still that it was not I who did it to him, but she.

"And think," I said. "If she goes to Omaha, she'll dig herself an even deeper pit in Sheol. If she takes you, you'll become a city boy—"

"I never will!" He cried this so loudly that crows took wing from the fenceline and swirled away into the blue sky like charred paper.

"You're young and you will," I said. "You'll forget all this . . . you'll learn city ways . . . and begin digging your own pit."

If he had returned by saying that murderers had no hope of joining their victims in Heaven, I might have been stumped. But either his theology did not stretch so far or he didn't want to consider such things. And there Hell, or do we make our own on earth? When I consider the last eight years of my life, I plump for the latter.

"How?" he asked. "When?"

I told him.

"And we can go on living here after?"

I said we could.

"And it won't hurt her?"

"No," I said. "It will be quick."

He seemed satisfied. And still it might not have happened, if not for Arlette herself.

* * *

We settled on a Saturday night about halfway through a June that was as fine as any I can remember. Arlette sometimes took a glass of wine on Summer evenings, although rarely more. There was good reason for that.

She was one of those people who can never take two glasses without taking four, then six, then the whole bottle. And another bottle, if there is another. "I have to be very careful, Wilf. I like it too much. Luckily for me, my willpower is strong."

That night we sat on the porch, watching the late light linger over the fields, listening to the somnolent *reeeeee* of the crickets. Henry was in his room. He had hardly touched his supper, and as Arlette and I sat on the porch in our matching rockers with the MA and PA seat-cushions, I thought I heard a faint sound that could have been retching. I remember thinking that when the moment came, he would not be able to get through with it. His mother would wake up bad-tempered the following morning with a "hang-over" and no knowledge of how close she had come to never seeing another Nebraska dawn. Yet I moved forward with the plan. Because I was like one of those Russian nesting dolls? Perhaps. Perhaps every man is like that. Inside me was the Conniving Man, but inside the Conniving Man was a Hopeful Man. That fellow died sometime between 1922 and 1930. The Conniving Man, having done his damage, disappeared. Without his schemes and ambitions, life has been a hollow place.

I brought the bottle out to the porch with me, but when I tried to fill her empty glass, she covered it with her hand. "You needn't get me drunk to get what you want. I want it, too. I've got an itch." She spread her legs and put her hand on her crotch to show where the itch was. There was a Vulgar Woman inside her—perhaps even a Harlot—and the wine always let her loose.

"Have another glass anyway," I said. "We've something to celebrate."

She looked at me warily. Even a single glass of wine made her eyes wet (as if part of her was weeping for all the wine it wanted and could not have), and in the sunset light they looked orange, like the eyes of a jack-o'-lantern with a candle inside it.

"There will be no suit," I told her, "and there will be no divorce. If the Farrington Company can afford to pay us for my 80 as well as your father's 100, our argument is over."

For the first and only time in our troubled marriage, she actually *gaped*. "What are you saying? Is it what I think you're saying? Don't fool with me, Wilf!"

"I'm not," said the Conniving Man. He spoke with hearty sincerity. "Henry and I have had many conversations about this—"

"You've been thick as thieves, that's true," she said. She had taken her hand from the top of her glass and I took the opportunity to fill it. "Always in the hay-mow or sitting on the woodpile or with your heads together in the back field. I thought it was about Shannon Cotterie." A sniff and a head-toss. But I thought she looked a little wistful, as well. She sipped at her second glass of wine. Two sips of a second glass and she could still put the glass down and go to bed. Four and I might as well hand her the bottle. Not to mention the other two I had standing by.

"No," I said. "We haven't been talking about Shannon." Although I *had* seen Henry holding her hand on occasion as they walked the two miles to the Hemingford Home schoolhouse. "We've been talking about Omaha. He wants to go, I guess." It wouldn't do to lay it on too thick, not after a single glass of wine and two sips of another. She was suspicious by nature, was my Arlette, always looking for a deeper motive. And of course in this case I had one. "At least to try it on for size. And Omaha's not that far from Hemingford."

"No. It isn't. As I've told you both a thousand times." She sipped her wine, and instead of putting the glass down as she had before, she held it. The orange light above the western horizon was deepening to a otherworldly green-purple that seemed to burn in the glass.

"If it were St. Louis, that would be a different thing."

"I've given that idea up," she said. Which meant, of course, that she had investigated the possibility and found it problematic. Behind my back, of course. All of it behind my back except for the company lawyer

And she would have done *that* behind my back as well, if she hadn't wanted to use it as a club to beat me with.

"Will they buy the whole piece, do you think?" I asked. "All 180 acres?"

"How would I know?" Sipping. The second glass half-empty. If I told her now that she'd had enough and tried to take it away from her, she'd refuse to give it up.

"You do, I have no doubt," I said. "That 180 acres is like St. Louis. You've *investigated*."

She gave me a shrewd sidelong look . . . then burst into harsh laughter. "P'raps I have."

"I suppose we could hunt for a house on the outskirts of town," I said. "Where there's at least a field or two to look at."

"Where you'd sit on your ass in a porch-rocker all day, letting your wife do the work for a change? Herd fill this up. If we're celebrating, let's celebrate."

I filled both. It only took a splash in mine, as I'd taken but a single swallow.

"I thought I might look for work as a mechanic. Cars and trucks, but mostly farm machinery. If I can keep that old Farmall running"—I gestured with my glass toward the dark hulk of the tractor standing beside the barn—"then I guess I can keep anything running."

"And Henry talked you into this."

"He convinced me it would be better to take a chance at being happy in town than to stay here on my own in what would be sure misery."

"The boy shows sense and the man listens! At long last! Hallelujah!" She drained her glass and held it out for more. She grasped my arm and leaned close enough for me to smell sour grapes on her breath. "You may get that thing you like tonight, Wilf." She touched her purple-stained tongue to the middle of her upper lip. "That *nasty* thing."

"I'll look forward to that," I said. If I had my way, an even nastier thing was going to happen that night in the bed we had shared for 15 years.

"Let's have Henry down," she said. She had begun to slur her words. "I want to congratulate him on finally seeing the light." (Have I mentioned that the verb *to thank* was not in my wife's vocabulary? Perhaps not. Perhaps by now I don't need to.) Her eyes lit up as a thought occurred to her. "We'll give 'im a glass of wine! He's old enough!" She elbowed me like one of the old men you see sitting on the benches that flank the courthouse steps, telling each other dirty jokes. "If we loosen his tongue a little, we may even find out what he's made any time with Shannon Cotterie . . . li'l baggage, but she's got pretty hair, I'll give 'er that."

"Have another glass of wine first," said the Conniving Man.

She had another two, and that emptied the bottle. (The first one.) By then she was singing "Avalon" in her best minstrel voice, and doing her best minstrel eye-rolls. It was painful to see and even more painful to hear.

I went into the kitchen to get another bottle of wine, and judged the time was right to call Henry. Although, as I've said, I was not in great hopes. I could only do it if he were my willing accomplice, and in my heart I believed that he would shy from the deed when the talk ran out and the time actually came. If so, we would simply put her to bed. In the morning I would tell her I'd changed my mind about selling my father's land.

Henry came, and nothing in his white, woeful face offered any encouragement for success. "Poppa, don't think I can," he whispered. "It's *Mama*."

"If you can't, you can't," I said, and there was nothing of the Conniving Man in that. I was resigned to what would be would be. "In any case, she's happy for the first time in months. Drunk, but happy."

"Not just squiffy? She's *drunk*?"

"Don't be surprised; getting her own way is the only thing that ever makes her happy. Surely 14 years

with her is long enough to have taught you that.”

Frowning, he cocked an ear to the porch as the woman who'd given him birth launched into a jarring but word-for-word rendition of “Dirty McGee.” Henry frowned at this barrelhouse ballad, perhaps because of the chorus (“She was willin’ to help him stick it in / For it was Dirty McGee again”), more likely at the way she was slurring the words. Henry had taken the Pledge at a Methodist Youth Fellowship Camp-Out on Labor Day weekend of the year before. I rather enjoyed his shock. When teenagers aren't turning like weather vanes in a high wind, they're as stiff as Puritans.

“She wants you to join us and have a glass of wine.”

“Poppa, you know I promised the Lord I would never drink.”

“You'll have to take that up with her. She wants to have a celebration. We're selling up and moving to Omaha.”

“No!”

“Well . . . we'll see. It's really up to you, Son. Come out on the porch.”

His mother rose tipsily to her feet when she saw him, wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her body rather too tightly against his, and covered his face with extravagant kisses. Unpleasantly smelly ones from the way he grimaced. The Conniving Man, meanwhile, filled up her glass, which was empty again.

“Finally we're all together! My men see sense!” She raised her glass in a toast, and slopped a good portion of it onto her bosom. She laughed and gave me a wink. “If you're good, Wilf, you can suck it out of the cloth later on.”

Henry looked at her with confused distaste as she plopped back down in her rocker, raised her skirts, and tucked them between her legs. She saw the look and laughed.

“No need to be so prissy. I've seen you with Shannon Cotterie. Li'l baggage, but she's got pretty hair and a nice little figger.” She drank off the rest of her wine and belched. “If you're not getting a touch of that, you're a fool. Only you'd better be careful. Fourteen's not too young to marry. Out here in the middle of fourteen's not too young to marry your *cousin*.” She laughed some more and held out her glass. I filled it from the second bottle.

“Poppa, she's had enough,” Henry said, as disapproving as a parson. Above us, the first stars were winking into view above that vast flat emptiness I have loved all my life.

“Oh, I don't know,” I said. “*In vino veritas*, that's what Pliny the Elder said . . . in one of those books your mother's always sneering about.”

“Hand on the plow all day, nose in a book all night,” Arlette said. “Except when he's got something else in *me*.”

“Mama!”

“Mama!” she mocked, then raised her glass in the direction of Harlan Cotterie's farm, although it was too far for us to see the lights. We couldn't have seen them even if it had been a mile closer, now that the corn was high. When summer comes to Nebraska, each farmhouse is a ship sailing a vast green ocean. “Here's to Shannon Cotterie and her brand-new bubbies, and if my son don't know the color of her nipples, he's a slowpoke.”

My son made no reply to this, but what I could see of his shadowed face made the Conniving Man rejoice.

She turned to Henry, grasped his arm, and spilled wine on his wrist. Ignoring his little mew of distaste, looking into his face with sudden grimness, she said: “Just make sure that when you're lying down with her in the corn or behind the barn, you're a *no*-poke.” She made her free hand into a fist, poked out the middle finger, then used it to tap a circle around her crotch: left thigh, right thigh, right belly, navel, left belly, back again to the left thigh. “Explore all you like, and rub around it with your Johnny Mac until he feels good.”

and spits up, but stay out of the home place lest you find yourself locked in for life, just like your mummy and daddy.”

He got up and left, still without a word, and I don't blame him. Even for Arlette, this was a performance of extreme vulgarity. He must have seen her change before his eyes from his mother—a difficult woman but sometimes loving—to a smelly whorehouse madam instructing a green young customer. All bad enough, but he was sweet on the Cotterie girl, and that made it worse. Very young men cannot help but put their first loves on pedestals, and should someone come along and spit on the paragon . . . even if it happens to be one's mother . . .

Faintly, I heard his door slam. And faint but audible sobbing.

“You've hurt his feelings,” I said.

She expressed the opinion that *feelings*, like *fairness*, were also the last resort of weaklings. Then she held out her glass. I filled it, knowing she would remember none of what she'd said in the morning (always supposing she was still there to greet the morning), and would deny it—vehemently—if I told her. I had seen her in this state of drunkenness before, but not for years.

We finished the second bottle (*she* did) and half of the third before her chin dropped onto her wine-stained bosom and she began to snore. Coming through her thus constricted throat, those snores sounded like the growling of an ill-tempered dog.

I put my arm around her shoulders, hooked my hand into her armpit, and hauled her to her feet. She muttered protests and slapped weakly at me with one stinking hand. “Lea' me 'lone. Want to go to slee'.”

“And you will,” I said. “But in your bed, not out here on the porch.”

I led her—stumbling and snoring, one eye shut and the other open in a bleary glare—across the sitting room. Henry's door opened. He stood in it, his face expressionless and much older than his years. He nodded at me. Just one single dip of the head, but it told me all I needed to know.

I got her on the bed, took off her shoes, and left her there to snore with her legs spread and one hand dangling off the mattress. I went back into the sitting room and found Henry standing beside the radiator. Arlette had hounded me into buying the year before.

“She can't say those things about Shannon,” he whispered.

“But she will,” I said. “It's how she is, how the Lord made her.”

“And she can't take me *away* from Shannon.”

“She'll do that, too,” I said. “If we let her.”

“Couldn't you . . . Poppa, couldn't you get your own lawyer?”

“Do you think any lawyer whose services I could buy with the little bit of money I have in the bank could stand up to the lawyers Farrington would throw at us? They swing weight in Hemingford County; swing nothing but a sickle when I want to cut hay. They want that 100 acres and she means for them to have it. This is the only way, but you have to help me. Will you?”

For a long time he said nothing. He lowered his head, and I could see tears dropping from his eyes to the hooked rug. Then he whispered, “Yes. But if I have to watch it . . . I'm not sure I can . . .”

“There's a way you can help and still not have to watch. Go into the shed and fetch a burlap sack.”

He did as I asked. I went into the kitchen and got her sharpest butcher knife. When he came back with the sack and saw it, his face paled. “Does it have to be *that*? Can't you . . . with a pillow . . .”

“It would be too slow and too painful,” I said. “She'd struggle.” He accepted that as if I had killed a dozen women before my wife and thus knew. But I didn't. All I knew was that in all my half-plans—my daydreams of being rid of her, in other words—I had always seen the knife I now held in my hand. And that the knife it would be. The knife or nothing.

We stood there in the glow of the kerosene lamps—there'd be no electricity except for generators in

Hemingford Home until 1928—looking at each other, the great night-silence that exists out there in the middle of things broken only by the unlovely sound of her snores. Yet there was a third presence in the room: her ineluctable will, which existed separate of the woman herself (I thought I sensed it then; these years later I am sure). This is a ghost story, but the ghost was there even before the woman it belonged to died.

“All right, Poppa. We’ll . . . we’ll send her to Heaven.” Henry’s face brightened at the thought. How hideous that seems to me now, especially when I think of how he finished up.

“It will be quick,” I said. Man and boy I’ve slit nine-score hogs’ throats, and I thought it would be. But it was wrong.

* * *

Let it be told quickly. On the nights when I can’t sleep—and there are many—it plays over and over again every thrash and cough and drop of blood in exquisite slowness, so let it be told quickly.

We went into the bedroom, me in the lead with the butcher knife in my hand, my son with the burlap sack. We went on tiptoe, but we could have come in clashing cymbals without waking her up. I motioned Henry to stand to my right, by her head. Now we could hear the Big Ben alarm clock ticking on her nightstand as well as her snores, and a curious thought came to me: we were like physicians attending to the deathbed of an important patient. But I think physicians at deathbeds do not as a rule tremble with guilt and fear.

Please let there not be too much blood, I thought. Let the bag catch it. Even better, let him cry off now, at the last minute.

But he didn’t. Perhaps he thought I’d hate him if he did; perhaps he had resigned her to Heaven; perhaps he was remembering that obscene middle finger, poking a circle around her crotch. I don’t know. I only know he whispered, “Good-bye, Mama,” and drew the bag down over her head.

She snorted and tried to twist away. I had meant to reach under the bag to do my business, but he had pushed down tightly on it to hold her, and I couldn’t. I saw her nose making a shape like a shark’s fin in the burlap. I saw the look of panic dawning on his face, too, and knew he wouldn’t hold on for long.

I put one knee on the bed and one hand on her shoulder. Then I slashed through the burlap and the throat beneath. She screamed and began to thrash in earnest. Blood welled through the slit in the burlap. Her hands came up and beat the air. Henry stumbled away from the bed with a screech. I tried to hold her. She pulled at the gushing bag with her hands and I slashed at them, cutting three of her fingers to the bone. She shrieked again—a sound as thin and sharp as a sliver of ice—and the hand fell away to twitch on the counterpane. I slashed another bleeding slit in the burlap, and another, and another. Five cuts in all I made before she pushed me away with her unwounded hand and then tore the burlap sack up from her face. She couldn’t get it all the way off her head—it caught in her hair—and so she wore it like a snood.

I had cut her throat with the first two slashes, the first time deep enough to show the gristle of her windpipe. With the last two I had carved her cheek and her mouth, the latter so deeply that she wore a clown’s grin. It stretched all the way to her ears and showed her teeth. She let loose a guttural, choked roar, the sound a lion might make at feeding-time. Blood flew from her throat all the way to the foot of the counterpane. I remember thinking it looked like the wine when she held her glass up to the last of the daylight.

She tried to get out of bed. I was first dumb-founded, then infuriated. She had been a trouble to me all the days of our marriage and was a trouble even now, at our bloody divorce. But what else should I have expected?

“Oh Poppa, make her stop!” Henry shrieked. “Make her stop, o Poppa, for the love of God make her stop!”

I leaped on her like an ardent lover and drove her back down on her blood-drenched pillow. More harsh growls came from deep in her mangled throat. Her eyes rolled in their sockets, gushing tears. I wound my hand into her hair, yanked her head back, and cut her throat yet again. Then I tore the counterpane from my side of the bed and wrapped it over her head, catching all but the first pulse from her jugular. My face had caught that spray, and hot blood now dripped from my chin, nose, and eyebrows.

Behind me, Henry’s shrieks ceased. I turned around and saw that God had taken pity on him (assuming He had not turned His face away when He saw what we were about): he had fainted. Her thrashings began to weaken. At last she lay still . . . but I remained on top of her, pressing down with the counterpane, now soaked with her blood. I reminded myself that she had never done anything easily. And I was right. After thirty seconds (the tinny mail-order clock counted them off), she gave another heave, this time bowing her back so strenuously that she almost threw me off. *Ride ’em, Cowboy*, I thought. Or perhaps I said it aloud. That I can’t remember, God help me. Everything else, but not that.

She subsided. I counted another thirty tinny ticks, then thirty after that, for good measure. On the floor Henry stirred and groaned. He began to sit up, then thought better of it. He crawled into the farthest corner of the room and curled in a ball.

“Henry?” I said.

Nothing from the curled shape in the corner.

“Henry, she’s dead. She’s dead and I need help.”

Nothing still.

“Henry, it’s too late to turn back now. The deed is done. If you don’t want to go to prison—and your father to the electric chair—then get on your feet and help me.”

He staggered toward the bed. His hair had fallen into his eyes; they glittered through the sweat-clumped locks like the eyes of an animal hiding in the bushes. He licked his lips repeatedly.

“Don’t step in the blood. We’ve got more of a mess to clean up in here than I wanted, but we can take care of it. If we don’t track it all through the house, that is.”

“Do I have to look at her? Poppa, do I have to *look*?”

“No. Neither of us do.”

We rolled her up, making the counterpane her shroud. Once it was done, I realized we couldn’t carry her through the house that way; in my half-plans and daydreams, I had seen no more than a discreet thread of blood marring the counterpane where her cut throat (her *neatly* cut throat) lay beneath. I had not foreseen or even considered the reality: the white counterpane was a blackish-purple in the dim room, oozing blood as a bloated sponge will ooze water.

There was a quilt in the closet. I could not suppress a brief thought of what my mother would think if she could see what use I was making of that lovingly stitched wedding present. I laid it on the floor. We dropped Arlette onto it. Then we rolled her up.

“Quick,” I said. “Before this starts to drip, too. No . . . wait . . . go for a lamp.”

He was gone so long that I began to fear he’d run away. Then I saw the light come bobbing down the short hall past his bedroom and to the one Arlette and I shared. *Had* shared. I could see the tears gushing down his waxy-pale face.

“Put it on the dresser.”

He set the lamp down by the book I had been reading: Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*. I never finished it; I could never *bear* to finish it. By the light of the lamp, I pointed out the splashes of blood on the floor, and the pool of it right beside the bed.

“More is running out of the quilt,” he said. “If I’d known how much blood she had in her . . .”

I shook the case free of my pillow and snugged it over the end of the quilt like a sock over a bleeding shin. "Take her feet," I said. "~~We need to do this part right now. And don't faint again, Henry, because I can't do it by myself.~~"

"I wish it was a dream," he said, but he bent and got his arms around the bottom of the quilt. "Do you think it might be a dream, Poppa?"

"We'll think it is, a year from now when it's all behind us." Part of me actually believed this. "Quickly now. Before the pillow-case starts to drip. Or the rest of the quilt."

We carried her down the hall, across the sitting room, and out through the front door like men carrying a piece of furniture wrapped in a mover's rug. Once we were down the porch steps, I breathed a little easier. Blood in the dooryard could easily be covered over.

Henry was all right until we got around the corner of the cow barn and the old well came in view. It was ringed by wooden stakes so no one would by accident step on the wooden cap that covered it. Those sticks looked grim and horrible in the starlight, and at the sight of them, Henry uttered a strangled cry.

"That's no grave for a mum . . . muh . . ." He managed that much, and then fainted into the weedy scrub that grew behind the barn. Suddenly I was holding the dead weight of my murdered wife all by myself. I considered putting the grotesque bundle down—its wrappings now all askew and the slashed hand peaking out—long enough to revive him. I decided it would be more merciful to let him lie. I dragged her to the side of the well, put her down, and lifted up the wooden cap. As I leaned it against two of the stakes, the well exhaled into my face: a stench of stagnant water and rotting weeds. I fought with my gorge and lost. Holding onto two of the stakes to keep my balance, I bowed at the waist to vomit my supper and the little wine I had drunk. There was an echoing splash when it struck the murky water at the bottom. That splash was like thinking *Ride 'em, Cowboy*, has been within a hand's reach of my memory for the last eight years. I would wake up in the middle of the night with the echo in my mind and feel the splinters of the stakes dig into my palms as I clutch them, holding on for dear life.

I backed away from the well and tripped over the bundle that held Arlette. I fell down. The slashed hand was inches from my eyes. I tucked it back into the quilt and then patted it, as if comforting her. Henry was still lying in the weeds with his head pillowed on one arm. He looked like a child sleeping after a strenuous day during harvest-time. Overhead, the stars shone down in their thousands and tens of thousands. I could see the constellations—Orion, Cassiopeia, the Dippers—that my father had taught me. In the distance, the Cotteries' dog Rex barked once and then was still. I remember thinking, *This night will never end*. And that was right. In all the important ways, it never has.

I picked the bundle up in my arms, and it twitched.

I froze, my breath held in spite of my thundering heart. *Surely I didn't feel that*, I thought. I waited for her to come again. Or perhaps for her hand to creep out of the quilt and try to grip my wrist with the slashed fingers.

There was nothing. I had imagined it. Surely I had. And so I tugged her down the well. I saw the quilt unravel from the end not held by the pillow-case, and then came the splash. A much bigger one than my vomit had made, but there was also a squelchy *thud*. I'd known the water down there wasn't deep, but had hoped it would be deep enough to cover her. That thud told me it wasn't.

A high siren of laughter commenced behind me, a sound so close to insanity that it made gooseflesh prickle all the way from the crack of my backside to the nape of my neck. Henry had come to and gained his feet. No, much more than that. He was capering behind the cow barn, waving his arms at the star-shaded sky, and laughing.

"Mama down the well and I don't care!" he singsonged. "Mama down the well and I don't care, for my master's gone *aw-aaay!*"

I reached him in three strides and slapped him as hard as I could, leaving bloody finger-marks on ~~downy cheek that hadn't yet felt the stroke of a razor.~~ "Shut up! Your voice will carry! Your—. There, fool boy, you've raised that god damned dog again."

Rex barked once, twice, three times. Then silence. We stood, me grasping Henry's shoulders, listening with my head cocked. Sweat ran down the back of my neck. Rex barked once more, then quit. If any of the Cotteries roused, they'd think it was a raccoon he'd been barking at. Or so I hoped.

"Go in the house," I said. "The worst is over."

"Is it, Poppa?" He looked at me solemnly. "Is it?"

"Yes. Are you all right? Are you going to faint again?"

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"I'm all right. I just . . . I don't know why I laughed like that. I was confused. Because I'm relieved, I guess. It's over!" A chuckle escaped him, and he clapped his hands over his mouth like a little boy who had inadvertently said a bad word in front of his grandma.

"Yes," I said. "It's over. We'll stay here. Your mother ran away to St. Louis . . . or perhaps it was Chicago . . . but we'll stay here."

"She . . . ?" His eyes strayed to the well, and the cap leaning against three of those stakes that were somehow so grim in the starlight.

"Yes, Hank, she did." His mother hated to hear me call him Hank, she said it was common, but there was nothing she could do about it now. "Up and left us cold. And of course we're sorry, but in the meantime the chores won't wait. Nor schooling."

"And I can still be . . . friends with Shannon."

"Of course," I said, and in my mind's eye I saw Arlette's middle finger tapping its lascivious circle around her crotch. "Of course you can. But if you should ever feel the urge to *confess* to Shannon—"

An expression of horror dawned on his face. "Not ever!"

"That's what you think now, and I'm glad. But if the urge should come on you someday, remember this: she'd run from you."

"Acourse she would," he muttered.

"Now go in the house and get both wash-buckets out of the pantry. Better get a couple of milk-buckets from the barn, as well. Fill them from the kitchen pump and suds 'em up with that stuff she keeps under the sink."

"Should I heat the water?"

I heard my mother say, *Cold water for blood, Wilf. Remember that.*

"No need," I said. "I'll be in as soon as I've put the cap back on the well."

He started to turn away, then seized my arm. His hands were dreadfully cold. "No one can ever know. He whispered this hoarsely into my face. "No one can ever know what we did!"

"No one ever will," I said, sounding far bolder than I felt. Things had already gone wrong, and I was starting to realize that a deed is never like the dream of a deed.

"She won't come back, will she?"

"*What?*"

"She won't haunt us, will she?" Only he said *haint*, the kind of country talk that had always made Arlette shake her head and roll her eyes. It is only now, eight years later, that I had come to realize how much *haint* sounds like *hate*.

"No," I said.

But I was wrong.

I looked down the well, and although it was only 20 feet deep, there was no moon and all I could see was the pale blur of the quilt. Or perhaps it was the pillow-case. I lowered the cover into place, straightened it a little, then walked back to the house. I tried to follow the path we'd taken with our terrible bundle, purposely scuffing my feet, trying to obliterate any traces of blood. I'd do a better job in the morning.

I discovered something that night that most people never have to learn: murder is sin, murder is damnation (surely of one's own mind and spirit, even if the atheists are right and there is no afterlife), but murder is also work. We scrubbed the bedroom until our backs were sore, then moved on to the hall, the sitting room, and finally the porch. Each time we thought we were done, one of us would find another splotch. As dawn began to lighten the sky in the east, Henry was on his knees scrubbing the cracks between the boards of the bedroom floor, and I was down on mine in the sitting room, examining Arlette's hooked rug square inch by square inch, looking for that one drop of blood that might betray us. There was none there—we had been fortunate in that respect—but a dime-sized drop beside it. It looked like blood from a shaving cut. I cleaned it up, then went back into our bedroom to see how Henry was faring. He seemed better now, and I felt better myself. I think it was the coming of daylight, which always seems to dispel the worst of our horrors. But when George, our rooster, let out his first lusty crow of the day, Henry jumped. Then he laughed. It was a small laugh, and there was still something wrong with it, but it didn't terrify me the way his laughter had done when he regained consciousness between the barn and the old livestock well.

"I can't go to school today, Poppa. I'm too tired. And . . . I think people might see it on my face, Shannon especially."

I hadn't even considered school, which was another sign of half-planning. Half-*assed* planning. I should have put the deed off until County School was out for the summer. It would only have meant waiting a week. "You can stay home until Monday, then tell the teacher you had the grippe and didn't want to spread it to the rest of the class."

"It's not the grippe, but I *am* sick."

So was I.

We had spread a clean sheet from her linen closet (so many things in that house were *hers* . . . but more) and piled the bloody bedclothes onto it. The mattress was also bloody, of course, and would have to go. There was another, not so good, in the back shed. I bundled the bedclothes together, and Henry carried the mattress. We went back out to the well just before the sun cleared the horizon. The sky above was perfectly clear. It was going to be a good day for corn.

"I can't look in there, Poppa."

"You don't have to," I said, and once more lifted the wooden cover. I was thinking that I should have let it up to begin with—*think ahead, save chores*, my own Poppa used to say—and knowing that I never could have. Not after feeling (or thinking I felt) that last blind twitch.

Now I could see to the bottom, and what I saw was horrible. She had landed sitting up with her legs crushed beneath her. The pillow-case was split open and lay in her lap. The quilt and counterpane had come loose and were spread around her shoulders like a complicated ladies' stole. The burlap bag, caught around her head and holding her hair back like a snood, completed the picture: she almost looked as if she were dressed for a night on the town.

Yes! A night on the town! That's why I'm so happy! That's why I'm grinning from ear to ear! And do you notice how red my lipstick is, Wilf? I'd never wear this shade to church, would I? No, this is the kind of lipstick a woman puts on when she wants to do that nasty thing to her man. Come on down, Wilf, why don't you? Don't bother with the ladder, just jump! Show me how bad you want me! You did a nasty thing to me, now let me

one to you!

“Poppa?” Henry was standing with his face toward the barn and his shoulders hunched, like a boy expecting to be beaten. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes.” I flung down the bundle of linen, hoping it would land on top of her and cover that awful upturned grin, but a whim of draft floated it into her lap, instead. Now she appeared to be sitting in some strange and bloodstained cloud.

“Is she covered? Is she covered up, Poppa?”

I grabbed the mattress and tugged it in. It landed on end in the mucky water and then fell against the circular stone-cobbled wall, making a little lean-to shelter over her, at last hiding her cocked-back head and bloody grin.

“Now she is.” I lowered the old wooden cap back into place, knowing there was more work ahead: the well would have to be filled in. Ah, but that was long overdue, anyway. It was a danger, which was why I had planted the circle of stakes around it. “Let’s go in the house and have breakfast.”

“I couldn’t eat a single bite!”

But he did. We both did. I fried eggs, bacon, and potatoes, and we ate every bite. Hard work makes a person hungry. Everyone knows that.

* * *

Henry slept until late afternoon. I stayed awake. Some of those hours I spent at the kitchen table, drinking cup after cup of black coffee. Some of them I spent walking in the corn, up one row and down another, listening to the swordlike leaves rattle in a light breeze. When it’s June and corn’s on the come, it seems almost to talk. This disquiets some people (and there are the foolish ones who say it’s the sound of the corn actually growing), but I had always found that quiet rustling a comfort. It cleared my mind. Now, sitting in this city hotel room, I miss it. City life is no life for a country man; for such a man that life is a kind of damnation in itself.

Confessing, I find, is also hard work.

I walked, I listened to the corn, I tried to plan, and at last I *did* plan. I had to, and not just for myself.

There had been a time not 20 years before, when a man in my position needn’t have worried; in those days, a man’s business was his own, especially if he happened to be a respected farmer: a fellow who paid his taxes, went to church on Sundays, supported the Hemingford Stars baseball team, and voted the straight Republican ticket. I think that in those days, all sorts of things happened on farms out in what we called “the middle.” Things that went unremarked, let alone reported. In those days, a man’s wife was considered a man’s business, and if she disappeared, there was an end to it.

But those days were gone, and even if they hadn’t been . . . there was the land. The 100 acres. The Farrington Company wanted those acres for their God damned hog butchery, and Arlette had led them to believe they were going to get them. That meant danger, and danger meant that daydreams and half-plans would no longer suffice.

When I went back to the house at midafternoon, I was tired but clear-headed and calm at last. Our few cows were bellowing, their morning milking hours overdue. I did that chore, then put them to pasture where I’d let them stay until sunset, instead of herding them back in for their second milking just after supper. They didn’t care; cows accept what *is*. If Arlette had been more like one of our bossies, I reflected, she would still be alive and nagging me for a new washing machine out of the Monkey Ward catalogue. She probably would have bought it for her, too. She could always talk me around. Except when it came to the land. About that she should have known better. Land is a man’s business.

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