

The Old Man's Rocking Chair Is Moving Slower, Boy

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The dog just appeared one day and never did leave. He had a short and mangy coat, skewbald in color, and he was skinny as a coyote in wintertime. That was all right. The old man didn't mind the company anyhow. Since lightning struck the old black walnut tree he hadn't even had squirrels to entertain his eyes. He tried to think back, the pup had been with him. . .what? Three months or was it five? He let his arm hang over the rocking chair and slowly pet the dog, Boy. He rocked forward then backward, watching the shadows grow longer and longer as the sun set behind him.

He reminisced about his father's itchy wool blanket that was dyed a green the color of sickness. He couldn't stand the feel of the thing or the mannish odor. But, his father could hardly separate himself from it, as if his corporeity depended upon his physical contact with the thing. His father spread it over his bed before he crawled in and, when not in bed, he shogged around the house with it wrapped around him as if cold, looking like a peapod. This brought to mind his mother's sunshine yellow cornbread and how it was too dry and she would never let him put enough homemade honey butter on it. There were the men who came into the kitchen for lunch and pinched his mother's behind with their dirt-stained hands. He tried it once on Janet Berkley. He chased her during lunch break, trying to pinch her. She was fast but was slowed in her running by the length of her oversized hand-me-down dress. His mother laughed when the young farmhands coyly bit her neck and then retreated back to taking bites of their fried chicken and spoonfuls of beans. Janet Berkley didn't laugh when he finally caught her. She cried.

"I tell you, Boy, my mother gave me a real whipping for being so late for lunch," the old man chuckled. The dog watched a comb-legged spider crawl across the porch and climb up a wood beam where it began to build its evening web.

When he got back to school after lunch, the teacher, Mr. Barnum, spanked him bare-palmed on his butt in front of the entire class, as he did to all the naughty boys. After that he didn't like Janet Berkley anymore.

"It was painful sitting for the second half of school that day after two whippings. Still think of her every time I hear the word *tattletale*." The dog's ears twitched as his owner talked and rocked. The dog let his ears lie back down when the old man became quiet and reminiscent again.

He remembered Ruth Anne Gillman leaning on his new car, sucking on a lollipop while he tried to both impress and keep his hands from shaking as he eyed her hips. How could he forget that? Then there was his second wife, Emily Tan. She was a fashionable strawberry blonde devoted to her own womanhood—baker of burnt pies and cook of over-seasoned meats. She was a real city woman wearing shades and ruby red lipstick. And then there was Lilly Mae, his daughter and only child, with dark hair like Ruth's. Last he saw her was in the kitchen working on her algebra, age thirteen, swatting at gnats, a chewed up pencil in her mouth and another in her hand scrawling a stream of numbers across a sheet of lined paper. She kept a bug collection. She'd pin little insects and put them in a glass case lined with foam that she stored underneath her bed. Lilly Mae would creep out long after her bedtime to study the fruits of her hobby and sometimes Emily would catch her and threaten to toss the girl's whole collection into the trashcan.

The old man's thoughts drifted to when he abandoned the family farm. He sold all the farmland and his mother kept the house and three acres of overgrown lawn and outbuildings full of neglected and

rusting equipment. He gave her the money, only keeping a hundred dollars himself that he took along with the car. He drove away from the Nebraska farming life to become a mechanic.

He recalled how the farmhands would squeeze his mother while she peeled potatoes and boiled them corn. The old man remembered her giggles and how she'd turn and clasp her arms around them, getting cornbread batter on their overalls.

The money working on cars was never enough after Lilly Mae was born. So, he moved Ruth Anne, Lilly Mae, and himself to Sioux City hoping for steady work in what was then the largest cow town in Iowa. He had to take a job in the stockyards doing everything from moving cattle through the maze of wooden fencing, chutes, and ramps to clearing away fly-covered cow shit. He remembered later—after Arizona—getting a job for more pay at the slaughterhouse. As the cows came up the chute to the fifth floor he'd kill them one by one. Then the body was rolled out onto the killing floor. Two other guys hooked and hung the bovine upside down and stuck the neck so the blood would drain. The Polacks put their tin cups under the stream of falling red and each had a warm glass.

Working at the stockyards earned him enough money to take his family on vacation. Ruth Anne wanted a change of humidity. She wanted a dry place, a place that would work with her hair so she'd look pretty on vacation rather than sweat-drenched from humidity with her hair frizzed out like a victim of electrocution. They chose Arizona as their destination, packed up their car and left the Corn Belt behind. The landscape became dustier. Lone birds prowled the sky in large sweeping circles. The road shimmered like an illusory sea. Ruth Anne loved it. Lilly Mae was five and brilliant. As they drove, her mother would quiz her in math and Lilly Mae would answer. The two did this addition and subtraction as a game. They stopped along the roadside to stretch their legs. Ruth Anne sat against some rocks posing for a picture of an Arizona evening she wanted to send her mother. She leaned her head against the rock and smiled. He flashed their Kodak camera as the wasp stung her neck. They had no idea she was allergic, that she'd swell up and be unable to breathe. Ruth Anne might have lived if she was stung on an arm, the leg, the lip, or maybe if she was stung somewhere geographically closer to a city, to a hospital.

After Ruth Anne's death was when he changed jobs, leaving the stockyards for work at Armour, one of Sioux City's big three slaughterhouses, to try and make up for the income she had brought in. At the slaughterhouse to kill the cows he cracked their skulls with a little hammer, slammed right in the center of their beefy foreheads. Sometimes brains would squish through their eyeballs. Blood would drain out the nose. He pictured a wasp in the middle of their foreheads and slammed his hammer on the insect again and again and again, each time killing it only to see a dead or dying cow and feel a hotter wrath burning in his arms. Sometimes he got confused and pictured Ruth Anne and sometimes he thought he saw her flop on the floor for a second, her face swollen from the sting and her brain matter oozing out of her eye sockets. He vomited more than once from this vision.

He tried to talk with one of the other men he worked with regularly about his wife and the cows, but Sully would always change the subject. One day, years later, he came back from break to relieve Sully from the hammer and found his co-worker collapsed and bloodied, surrounded by a group of panicked men and a dead heifer where it shouldn't have been, in the corner of the room. He froze before the aftermath of the tragedy's horrific scene, but of Sully's broken body he would not speak and sitting with Emily and Lilly Mae, scraped his dinner off his plate that night with a tense and chary choice of words.

He remembered his mother calling late and casually mentioning during their conversation that she didn't feel well and hadn't eaten in days. She said there was something coming out of her skin. He drove the six hour drive in four to get her because by this time doctors had stopped making house calls and she refused to leave her property to visit a doctor for her complaints. She had kept the pain and discomfort to herself, the bowel problems and the anemia. He didn't know how poor her health was; but, he sensed that his mother needed him after all these years of simple, compulsory holiday visits. She was so thin he could see the worms slithering underneath her skin. She kept saying, "I thought it was blood moving through my veins." She was lying in the backseat of his car when she died on the way to the hospital. They had come out of her ankles when she walked and then the day she died the dead, little red worms had started to come out of her eyes whenever she squeezed them. She was scared, but tried not to show it.

The old man could not forget the smell of blood from the killing floor. He could not forget the taste of raw cow, blood as spray, blood as mist, blood in the sound of a cracking skull. He couldn't forget the work boots, knee-high and made of rubber which he used when wading through the blood. He couldn't forget his work clothes turning red and redder and so red by the end of the day that it was black, black like the flies that followed him into the car, heated by the summer sun—a car that his daughter complained smelled just like her daddy.

His mother finally forced his father outside. He recalled being a young teenager when this happened. He remembered his father, who was not even forty then, rarely leaving the bedroom or even his bed. The hired hands ran amuck and his father's only perspective was from a window with broken blinds that let the sun in, but kept the world out. It was like that for years until one day it seemed the farmhands stopped flirting and started calling his mother *Mrs.* It was around that time she finally forced her husband to step outdoors. "He trembled as he walked out," the old man's mother said. "I thought he was frail but he was actually afraid." The old man's father disappeared in the middle of the front lawn. "He was there and then just wasn't," his mother said over and over again. She told her husband to get to work and pushed him out of the house, but clutched his blanket as he stumbled out, unwinding it from him. It was a summer day, but his body trembled like he had stepped into the cold brightness of an arctic sun. Then he looked back at her or at that blanket she held and then was no more; or so she said. She'd walk out to the spot where her husband disappeared and watch it for hours. An anthill appeared late every spring right in the spot where he vanished. But, she always pointed out, there were never any ants, just an anthill with no workers to build the mound.

Although the old man tried not to let the memory cross his mind, he remembered looking at his daughter and telling her goodnight. He didn't hug or kiss her, knowing he smelled of dead cow and dried blood. She said goodnight, only glancing up from her homework, not even taking the pencil out of her mouth. He had been packing his suitcases for three days while Emily cooked dinner or went shopping. He left early the next morning as if going to work. Instead, he drove away from Sioux City—away from the cows and the blood. For months afterward he had nightmares about Sully's failure to kill the young and heavy heifer. He would see Sully lift the hammer and come down too soft. Then he'd see the fallen bovine rise up angry and injured, see it knock Sully in the chest with its head and then trample him, toss him in the air and trample over him again. This would go on until someone got to the emergency rifle and shot the injured animal to death. In each dream he was a helpless observer and the gun was always locked in a case or needed bullets loaded into it. The gun was never fired soon enough to keep Sully from being half paralyzed, just as he was in real life.

The old man recalled the road, how he drove from one small town to another. He followed the Niobrara River. At each town he'd offer his services as a mechanic and fix cars for cash or in exchange for a fill of gasoline and a home-cooked meal. Eventually, he ended up farther north, across the Nebraska state line in a little South Dakota town where he rented an apartment and had a telephone installed. He advertised in the newspaper and phonebook as a car doctor and made house calls to repair vehicles. After getting settled, he first let Emily and then his mother know he was okay. His mother talked about his missing father and his second wife sent him the divorce papers.

He stayed in that town for over twenty years. Eventually he rented a garage, needing more time than he had to drive out to every vehicle in his queue, a list of names and house numbers that kept burgeoning less from need or lack of auto mechanics than from praises passed along from those whose cars he hunched over or crawled underneath, finding and fixing even the most esoteric troubles. He remembered emptying tin toolboxes. They were red, green, and peach, stuffed with wrenches, ratchets, pliers, wires, and every other implement he might need in his daily scouring through the metal bellies and oily tubes in search of solutions to doctoring the cars back to health. He took joy in organizing the ragbag of equipment, placing them in drawers and hanging them from hooks he spaced along the wall. The shelves were lined with bottles of oils and antifreeze. There was a large closet he turned into an office, building a crude desk from spare lumber and plywood. He kept a calendar and ledger.

He recollected weaving through the ruck of cars and trucks that clogged the alley where his garage was located. He moved the vehicles around in a careful dance, sliding them in and out of place, slowly forging a path to the garage. It could not be helped; there were so many cars. Yet, he only had a few people he considered friends, but even these were no closer to him than Sully had been and most in that town whom he knew by name were customers and he understood their cars, but their lives were foreign—simply set on the same stage, in the same small city—meaning no more to him than had the lives of the Polish immigrants in the slaughterhouse of his youth. He talked with the men, explaining to them their car troubles in detail. He shook their hands and called them by their first names. With women he remained polite, but referred to them by last name, using the perfunctory title *Mrs.* or *Ms.* He did not shake their hands. He recalled the bartender, Emit, a Navy veteran: bald, bearded, tattooed, and a person he considered his closest friend. He went to the pub on Friday nights. He sat at the bar and would chat with Emit while he drank. He gave the barman hints about cars and talked baseball with him. Emit was polite and set a new mug in front of him without asking whenever the old one got down to the foamy dregs.

Then he got the phone call from his mother. She was shilpit and pale, wrapped in the green blanket. She sat in a chair, her face down on the kitchen table. Scattered throughout the floors of the house and looking like yarn clippings, were the red worm carcasses ejected to make room for the living parasites amassed inside her. Ochreous tears trickled down her face and she wheezed in shallow breaths. Few came to the funeral. Most were siblings of hers, long unseen, some of whom came along with children and grandchildren, and most of these young, tearless mourners having never met the woman in the casket who spent her latter life secluded in a farmhouse and, they said, was abandoned by a husband, heartbreak driving her insane. The old man remembered their whispers, their heads shaking in pity as they looked down into the open coffin at the wake, her frail corpse enshrouded in her husband's green blanket. In the end he regretted honoring her final request to be buried with it snugly encasing her; he wished he had taken it and burned it in the long unused bonfire pit in the farmyard. Instead he washed it, a washing that turned the sickly green blanket to a pallid, even more lifeless color, and then handed it

over to the funeral director with instructions to dress her in it for the grave. He watched first at the wake and then at the funeral for his ex-wife and daughter, but they did not come nor did he really expect them to.

He remembered visiting Sully in his home after his accident. A young native woman let him into the house. Sully wasn't anticipating him. The woman did not ask who he was, seeming to think he was a relative. He guessed she had been there only since the accident to help assist the crippled man. He walked into a bedroom of bare wooden walls; against one was a red dresser with a stone vase atop it containing white and pink flowers. Sully was in a bed, looking out a window, bright morning light falling through the pane.

"Hi Sully," he said.

Sully turned and looked at him. Half his face drooped as if it were made of wax slowly melting. He used his left arm to brace himself as he turned. His right eye shuttered in the socket, broken and roving blindly. "What are you doing here?" he said. "Get out of my house. You hear? Go away." Then Sully turned back to the window with effort and no more was said between them again.

He stood in the room a few seconds longer and before he turned to leave he noticed a shadow move in the light of the window. He squinted at it, the thing Sully was really looking at, and realized it was a worm on the other side of the glass weaving a cocoon, preparing for its long absence from the world.

After his mother's funeral, he returned to town. He took his phone off the hook to stop the carking ring and worked on the vehicles he had waiting. He drained oil, fixed fan belts, replaced spark plugs, cleaned carburetors, and worked through the night into the next day until he finally floated into sleep lying on his shop creeper while working underneath a truck. If anyone stopped by for anything other than to pick up a car, he turned them away. A week passed before all the vehicles had left, leaving his alley empty. He sat on the cement floor of his garage and undid the laces on his shoes. He walked discalced in a circle, oily cat litter stabbing his soles, and as he walked he grabbed tools from the walls and shelves and threw them into the center of the circle of his progression until he made a heap of them on the floor. The old man tried not to remember this, but when the pile had grown large, as large as a pile of fall leaves ready to fill a garbage sack, he collapsed onto the mound and, crying, picked up the tools and rained them down on his head. When he was done he went back to his apartment, slept, and began the process of packing the next day.

The old man tried to recall all of the places he had traveled to after that. There were many temporary residences: first one small town, then another even smaller. He'd stay for a while, fixing cars, and then moved on. He roamed across the broken prairie until he was alone, so alone the stars shone to the edges of the horizon without a tint of orange city lights burning the sky.

He remembered running home, crying for his mother, covered in blood. It was a stick sharpened and used as a toy sword. Somehow, in play he had fallen on it, puncturing himself. He recalled the butt of his denim overalls soaked in red. Or, running through the fields did he slip on a dead calf, ripped open by coyotes and filled with maggots? Or maybe, he remembered, it was when he ran home, smiling, covered in red barn paint.

The sun set; the dog and the old man were left on the porch in darkness. The spider finished its web, clung to the threaded center and waited. Boy looked out into the dim night and it was quiet. It was

so quiet that the chair softly creaking was like a lament wailed into the night. The old man's rocking chair began to move slower and slower, until it stopped; and when it stopped there was no breath of wind or man to disturb the silence. Boy sniffed at the stillness and the creak of the chair continued as a lonesome memory echoing in the dog.