

BENEDICTION

Kent Haruf

PICADOR

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WHEN THE TEST came back the nurse called them into the examination room and when the doctor entered the room he just looked at them and asked them to sit down. They could tell by the look on his face where matters stood.

Go on ahead, Dad Lewis said, say it.

I'm afraid I don't have very good news for you, the doctor said.

When they went back downstairs to the parking lot it was late in the afternoon.

You drive, Dad said. I don't want to.

Are you feeling so bad, honey?

No. I don't feel that much worse. I just want to look out at this country. I won't be coming out here again.

I don't mind driving for you, she said. And we can come this way again anytime if you want to.

They drove out from Denver away from the mountains, back onto the high plains: sagebrush and soapweed and blue grama and buffalo grass in the pastures, wheat and corn in the planted fields. On both sides of the highway were the gravel county roads going out away under the pure blue sky, all the roads straight as the lines ruled in a book, with only a few small isolated towns spread across the flat open country.

It was sundown when they got home. By then the air was starting to cool off. She parked the car in front of their house at the west edge of Holt on the gravel street and Dad got out and stood looking for a while. The old white house built in 1904, the first on the street which

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wasn't even much of a street then, and still only three or four houses there yet when he bought it in 1948, the year he and Mary were married. He was twenty-two, working at the hardware store on Main Street, then the old lame man who owned it made up his mind to move away to live with his daughter and he offered Dad the option of purchasing it, and he was a known man in town by then, the bankers knew him, and gave him the loan without question. So he was the proprietor of the local hardware store.

It was a frame house sided with clapboard, two-story with a red shingled roof, with an old-fashioned black wrought iron fence around it and an iron gate with spears and hard loops at the top. Out back was an old red barn and a pole corral grown over with tall weeds, and beyond that there was nothing but the open country.

He went inside to the downstairs bedroom to put on old pants and a sweater and came back out and sat down in one of the porch chairs.

She came out to find him. Do you want supper now? I could make you a sandwich.

No. I don't want anything. Maybe if you could bring me a beer.

You don't want anything to eat?

You go on ahead without me.

Do you want a glass?

No.

She went inside and returned with the cold bottle.

Thank you, he said.

She went back in. He drank from the bottle and sat looking out at the quiet empty street in the summer evening. The neighbor Berta May's yellow house next door and the other houses beyond it, running up to the highway, and the vacant lot directly across the street, and the railroad tracks three blocks in the other direction, all of that part of town still empty and undeveloped between his property and the tracks. In the trees in front of the house the leaves were blowing a little.

She brought a tray of crackers and cheese and an apple cut up in quarters and a glass of iced tea. Would you like any of this? She held

out the tray to him. He took a piece of apple and she sat down beside him in the other porch chair.

Well. That's it, he said. That's the deal now. Isn't it.

He might be wrong. They're wrong sometimes, she said. They can't be so sure.

I don't want to let myself think that way. I can feel it in me that they're right. I don't have much time left.

Oh I don't want to believe that.

Yeah. But I'm pretty sure that's how it's going to be.

I don't want you to go yet, she said. She reached across and took his hand. I don't. There were tears in her eyes. I'm not ready.

I know. . . . We better call Lorraine pretty soon, he said.

I'll call her.

Tell her she doesn't have to come home yet. Give her some time.

He looked at the beer bottle and held it in front of him and took a small drink.

I might get me some kind of better grade of beer before I go. A guy I was talking to said something about Belgian beer. Maybe I'll try some of that. If I can get it around here.

He sat and drank the beer and held his wife's hand sitting out on the front porch. So the truth was he was dying. That's what they were saying. He would be dead before the end of summer. By the beginning of September the dirt would be piled over what was left of him out at the cemetery three miles east of town. Someone would cut his name into the face of a tombstone and it would be as if he never was.

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NINE O'CLOCK in the morning, he was sitting in his chair beside the window in the living room looking out at the side yard at the dark shade under the tree and at the wrought iron fence beyond the tree. He'd eaten his breakfast. He hadn't been hungry but he'd eaten it and he was thinking he wasn't going to eat anything anymore he didn't want to eat, and he was thinking how he wasn't going to paint the iron fence again in this life, and then Mary came in the room.

She was carrying a watering can. She had washed and dried the breakfast dishes and put them away in the cupboard and had gone out back to set the sprinkler going on the lawn, and now she had come inside to water the houseplants. It was a clear hot day. Not a cloud anywhere. But crossing the room she all of a sudden went down on the floor like a little loose pile of collapsed clothes. She threw the water can away from her as she fell. The water splashed up on the rose wallpaper and there was a stain growing on the wall.

Darlin, Dad said. You all right? What's going on?

She didn't move, didn't answer.

Mary. Goddamn it. What's going on here?

He stood and bent over her. Her eyes were shut and her face was sweating and very red. But she was breathing.

Mary. Sweetheart.

He got down on his knees beside her and felt her head. She felt hot. He pulled her toward him and slid his arms under her, propping her up against the couch. Can you hear me? I got to call somebody. I'll be right back. She made no sign. Is that all right with you if I leave a

minute? I'm coming right back. He hurried out to the kitchen and called the emergency number at the hospital. Then he returned and got down on the floor again and held her and talked to her softly and kissed her cheek and brushed back her damp white hair and patted her arm and waited. After a little while he heard the siren outside and then it stopped and people came up on the front porch and knocked.

Come in here, Dad called. Christ Almighty. What are you knocking for? Come on in here.

They entered the house, two men in white shirts and black pants, and looked at Dad and his wife on the floor and knelt down and began to attend to her. What happened?

She fainted out. She was walking across the room. Then she just went down on the floor.

The younger of the men stood up and went out to the ambulance and brought back a gurney.

Can you move back, please? he said.

What's that? Dad said. What are you saying?

Sir, you'll need to move back so we can take care of her. Are you all right yourself? You don't look too good.

Yeah, I'm all right. Do what you got to do, and hurry.

They lifted the old white-haired woman onto the wheeled cart and buckled the straps across her chest and legs. Dad got up from the floor and stood watching. He put his hand on her.

You won't let nothing happen to her, he said.

No sir. We'll do our best.

That's not what I'm saying. Your best might not be good enough. This is my wife here. This lady means everything to me in the world.

I hear you. But—

No. I won't have no objections on this. You do what I say. Now go on. He bent over close to her face and patted her cheek and kissed her.

The two men wheeled her out to the ambulance. Almost immediately he heard the siren start up again in front of the house, then the diminishing sound of it retreating up the street.

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SHE STAYED in the Holt County Memorial Hospital at the south end of Main Street for most of three days. They could find nothing wrong with her except that she was old and she was working too hard and she had exhausted herself by taking care of her husband by herself.

By nightfall of that first day she was a little better. But at the hospital they said she still needed her bed rest. The nurse said, Don't you have somebody that would come in and help you?

I don't know, she said. Maybe. But I'm worried about my husband. He's all alone.

Your husband told them he was all right there in the house.

Told who?

The men who brought you in the ambulance. They asked him and apparently he said he was all right.

Well he isn't all right. He wouldn't let on how he really is. Not ever to strangers.

They said he seemed like he could be a little bit hard to get along with.

No, he isn't. He just gets set in his ways about things. He doesn't mean anything bad by it. But he's not well at all. He's alone in that house without me.

Isn't there a neighbor or somebody?

Maybe there is. She looked across the room. Would you bring me that phone?

You want to call a neighbor? It's kind of late, Mrs. Lewis.

I want to talk to Dad. I want to speak to my husband.

But you shouldn't be talking to anyone on any phone right now. You're not supposed to be upsetting yourself.

Would you bring it to me, she said. I want to make a private call, please.

The nurse looked at her and then brought the telephone and set it on the bedside stand and went out. It took a long time for him to answer.

Yeah. This is Dad Lewis. His voice sounded rough and old.

Honey, are you doing okay?

Is that you?

Yes. It's me. Are you doing okay?

You're supposed to be asleep. I thought you'd be resting.

I wanted to see how you are.

Did they say I called this morning and another time this afternoon?

No. They didn't tell me that.

Yeah. Well. I did.

What did they tell you about me? she said.

They said you need to rest. You need to take it easy and get your strength up.

I'm all tired out, honey, she said. When I got here and woke up I was all wet with sweat.

You were wet when they come for you. You don't remember that.

No.

But will you be all right, do they say?

I don't have any pep. That's all.

Outside the room people were talking in the hallway, and the nurse had come back in to check on her.

She's telling me I got to get off the phone now. Did you get some supper, honey?

Yeah. I had something.

What did you have?

I heated up some soup. But you need to take care of yourself, Dad said. Will you do that?

Good night, honey, she said.

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They still always slept together as they had since the first night so long ago, in the old soft double bed in the downstairs bedroom, even though he was sick and dying now and moved restlessly in the bed in the night. She insisted on being there close beside him, she wouldn't have it otherwise. Now in the night it was unfamiliar and lonely, and he was desolate without her. At three o'clock he woke and went to the bathroom and came back to bed and lay awake thinking for a long time, until the room began to get a little gray and he could make out the brass handles on the dresser drawers and the mirror on the door to the closet.

In the middle of the morning the old neighbor woman came over and knocked on the front door and then cracked it open without waiting. Hello? Dad, are you here?

Who is it?

It's Berta May from next door.

Yeah. All right.

Can I come in?

Come ahead.

She came in with a young girl behind her and they stood in the living room looking at him. He was in sweatpants and an old flannel shirt.

Mary called, Berta May said. She said you was alone here by yourself.

Well I don't know what she did that for.

Well she was worried about you.

Yeah, but I'm okay.

Maybe you are. Maybe you aren't.

Dad looked at her and looked at the girl. You going to sit down? I'm not going to stand up.

No. I come over to see if I could help. To see if you needed something.

I don't.

You're sure of that.

I'm doing all right. Who's this here you got with you? he said.

This is Alice, my granddaughter. Haven't you met her before?

I see her out in the yard over there across the fence.

She's living with me now. Say hello to Dad Lewis, honey.

The girl was eight years old, a thin brown-haired girl in blue denim shorts and a white T-shirt.

Hello, she said.

Hello back to you, Dad told her.

Berta May said, You don't mind me looking out in the kitchen to see if anything needs to be done, do you.

It's okay out there. It's just not tidy.

Well, I'll just take a look. She went out. The girl remained, looking around the room and then at Dad Lewis in his chair.

Why do they call you that? she said.

What?

Dad.

Because I got a daughter like you. People started calling me that when she was born. A long time ago.

I don't have a dad. I don't even know where he is. I don't ever see him.

I'm sorry to hear that.

Are you sick or something? she said.

You could say so. I got this cancer eating me up.

She studied him for a moment. Is it in your breast? That's where my mother had hers.

I got it all over me.

Are you going to die?

Yeah. That's what they tell me.

She looked out the window. You can see Grandma's house from here. You can see the backyard.

That's where I saw you. I noticed you yesterday back there, Dad said.

What was I doing?

I don't know. I couldn't tell what you were doing.

Was I down on the grass?

Yes. I believe you were.

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Then I was working.

What kind of work?

Digging dandelions. Grandma pays me for every one. She's got a lot of them.

Why don't you come over here and dig some.

How much would you pay?

The same as your grandmother.

I don't know, she said. I better go see if she needs any help.

The neighbor woman Berta May washed up the dishes and swept the kitchen and afterward she and her granddaughter went back home and at noon she sent the girl over with a tray covered with a white dish towel. Alice came in and said, Where do you want me to put this?

What have you got?

Grandma made you some lunch. The girl set the tray on a chair and removed the dish towel. There were potato chips and a ham sandwich and a little hill of cottage cheese on a paper plate and a piece of cake wrapped in wax paper. Grandma said you could drink water or make your own coffee.

You want some of it? I'm not hungry.

Grandma's waiting for me to eat with her.

Tell her I appreciate this. Will you do that?

The girl went out, and through the window he could see her going along the fence and on into the yellow house.

Late in the afternoon of the third day, without any warning Mary came through the gate out front and up on the porch and into the house. In the living room Dad was sitting in his chair by the window reading the *Holt Mercury* newspaper. He looked up and she was just standing there.

Well, what in the hell. What are you doing here?

They let me out, she said.

I didn't hear any car out front. How'd you get here?

I walked.

What do you mean you walked?

I walked home.

You walked home from the hospital.

They couldn't bring me right away. They were out on some other call, I guess. And I didn't think we had to have the expense of that anyhow. It's going to cost too much as it is. They told me I had to wait but I didn't want to. I wanted to get home.

Well, Jesus Christ, Dad said. You were in there because you got too worn out and now you walk home in the hot afternoon clear across town.

It's not so hot out right now, she said.

What's wrong with those people, letting you go like this.

They didn't want to let me go. I just left. I wanted to make you some good supper.

He was staring at her. Well, by God, he said. If you keep this up, I'm going to die right now and not put it off any longer, just to keep you from doing this again.

She came across the room and stood in front of him, small and straight and old, and spoke slowly, directly. Don't you say that to me. Don't you say such a evil thing. Don't you ever say it again. You don't have any right. Are you hearing me, Dad?

He looked away from her.

I mean it. I won't have it. You're going to break my heart yet, you damned old man. I believe you will. But you can't say something like that. Now what would you like for supper? I don't remember what we even have in this house for sure.

I don't know. It doesn't matter to me.

I want to fix you something nice.

She bent forward and kissed him on the head and wrapped her arm around his shoulders and raised up his old age-spotted hand affectionately and held it to her cheek for a long time.

I'm going out to the kitchen, she said. It seems like I was gone for three weeks instead of three days.

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After supper, after she had washed the dishes and had put Dad to bed, she called Lorraine in Denver. I think it's time to come home now, dear. If you can.

Is Daddy worse?

Yes. I wasn't going to tell you yet.

Tell me what?

The doctor said he only has about a month more.

Mom, when did you find this out?

Last Friday.

Why didn't you call me?

Oh honey, I'm trying to get used to it myself. I can't talk about it yet. She started to cry.

Mom.

I was in the hospital too, she said. You might as well know that too.

What's this now?

They took me to the hospital a few days ago.

Why? What was wrong?

I was just too worn down, they said. I fainted on the floor, right here in the living room.

Jesus, Mom, are you okay?

Yes, I am. But I'd appreciate it if you could arrange to help out here a little. I had Berta May come over, but that's not right. You're our daughter.

I'll be there as soon as I can. I'll have to tell them at the office. But I'll be there.

That'll be good. Now I didn't ask you—are you all right yourself, dear?

Yes.

And Richard?

He's all right. Richard doesn't change.

Well.

I know. It doesn't matter. I'll be there as soon as I can.

The next day Lorraine drove into Holt on Highway 34 after the sun had already gone down and the blue street lamps had come on at the corners. It was all familiar to her. She turned north off the highway and drove along past the quiet night-lighted houses set back behind the front yards, some of the yards bare of trees or bushes next to vacant lots filled with weeds—tall sunflowers and redroot and pigweed—and then there was Berta May's house which had been there when she was a child, and then their own white house. She got out and went up to the porch, a pretty woman in her mid-fifties with dark hair. The air was cool and smelled fresh of the country in the evening out on the high plains.

In the house Dad was already in bed and she went with her mother back to the bedroom.

Is he asleep already? It's only eight thirty.

I don't know if he's actually sleeping. He goes to bed early. He always did. You know how he does.

They stood in the doorway. He was lying in the bed with the window open and the sheet drawn over him. He opened his eyes. Is that my daughter? he said.

It's me, Daddy.

Come over here so I can see you.

She crossed the room and sat down on the bed and kissed him. Mary went out so he could have Lorraine to himself. Dad stared up at her for a long time. Lorraine's eyes were wet and she took one of his Kleenexes and wiped at her eyes and cheeks.

Oh, Daddy.

Yeah. Ain't it the goddamn hell.

She took his hand and held it. Are you in a lot of pain?

No. Not now.

You don't have any pain?

I'm taking things for it. Otherwise I would. I was before. Well, you look good, he said.

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Thank you.
How was your drive?
Okay. A lot of traffic but it was all going the other way, to the mountains.
How's work?
It's okay.
They let you off to come here.
They'd better, she said.
Yeah. He smiled. That's right.
Can you sleep now, Daddy?
I can still sleep, that's one thing. As long as Mom's here. I didn't sleep much when she was gone. They had her to the hospital. Did she tell you?
She told me.
She walked home. Did she tell you that too?
No.
She did. It was hotter than billy hell out there. I'm glad you've come. She's all tired out. I'm afraid she might get down too far. I never wanted her to have to take care of me like this.
I know, Daddy.
Well. All right, then. You're here now.
You go to sleep. I'll see you in the morning.
She kissed him again and went out to the kitchen. He looks so bad, Mom.
I know it, honey.
He's gotten so thin. His color's so bad.
He won't eat. He isn't hungry he says. He just fusses with it.

Sunday morning at the Community Church on Birch Street on the back page of the bulletin there was an announcement about Mary Lewis. It said she had been admitted to the Holt Memorial Hospital and had been released, and it said Dad Lewis was no better. The congregation was asked to continue their prayers for him. There was another brief notice that said Lorraine had come back home.

On Monday, Reverend Lyle and the two Johnson women came to the house to call on the Lewises in the afternoon, all of them within the same hour. Rob Lyle was a man in his late forties, new to town, a tall thin man with black hair and dark eyes. The Johnson women were longtime residents of Holt County. Willa Johnson was a widow with long white hair worn in a knot at the back of her head in that old way and she had thick glasses; and Alene, her unmarried daughter, was over sixty and had taken early retirement after teaching children for almost forty years in a little town on the Front Range, and was back home for the summer now and maybe longer. They lived east of Holt, a mile south off the highway on a county road in the sandhills.

Lyle was in the living room when they came to the house, sitting on the couch talking to Dad Lewis and Mary, and Lorraine had brought him a cup of black coffee and some cookies on a little china plate. Then the Johnsons came to the door and Lorraine got up and showed them in and Lyle stood up. They shook hands. Lorraine carried in a chair for herself and one for Alene from the dining room.

Well, Dad, how are you doing today? said Willa. Are you doing any better?

If I am I can't tell it. I'm better to have my daughter home, I can say that.

Yes, it said in the church bulletin she was here. Willa turned to Lorraine. You couldn't stay away now, could you.

Not after Mom was in the hospital.

It announced that too, how she was admitted to the hospital. It was the first we heard of it. You might have called us, Mary.

I didn't want to bother you, Mary said. You wouldn't of either, if it was you.

Well, Dad could have.

I'm glad he didn't.

Lorraine's here now, Dad said. That's enough.

All right, I'm going to be quiet, then. I can tell when to keep my mouth shut.

You don't have to be quiet. It's not that, said Mary.

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That would be the first time if she did, Alene said.

Oh now my daughter's attacking me too.

They all laughed a little.

On the couch Lyle watched them talk. After a time he said, I think I'll have to go now. Before I do I wonder if we might pray together. And he bowed his head, they looked at him, at his dark head, and they all bowed their heads too and he prayed, O God, Our Father, we ask you to take particular care of this family and this man here. We ask in your infinite mercy that you bring him the comfort and peace that passeth all human understanding and the assurance of thy son's own death and resurrection. While he prayed Lorraine looked at him sitting on the couch across the room with his head lowered and his hands folded together and she looked at her father and he was watching the preacher too. Then Lyle finished and said, May you hear our prayer, oh Lord. Amen. He stood and shook hands all around and touched Dad Lewis on the shoulder and Lorraine went with him out the front door onto the porch.

Thank you for coming, she said.

I don't want to bother your father, but I'll come again if that's all right.

Yes. I think it would be.

I don't know that he's very religious.

No. Not in any orthodox way.

I understand that. In his own way perhaps.

Perhaps.

Well. I'll be going. He held out his hand to shake hers and instead she surprised him and hugged him. He was a good deal taller than she was.

Thank you for coming, she said again.

He went down the walk to his car parked at the street and she stood and watched him drive away. Then she sat down on the porch swing in the shade of the house and took out her cigarettes and smoked. The air was hot and dry and clear, but it was better in the shade. Then Alice, the girl next door, came up in front of the wrought iron

fence. She turned and looked out at the empty street and then turned and looked at Lorraine.

Hello, Alice.

How do you know my name?

My mother told me. Why don't you come up here and talk to me.

I don't know who you are.

I used to live in this house. When I was a girl like you are.

I don't know if I should, Alice said.

You can ask your grandmother, if you want to. Your mother and I used to play together.

The girl stood looking at her, then she looked out at the street again and finally she opened the gate and came up on the porch.

You can sit down if you want. Here, beside me.

The girl slid onto the swing and they began to move it slowly. Lorraine took out her cigarettes again.

Do you always smoke?

Once in a while.

My mother's boyfriend smoked all the time.

Lorraine blew smoke out to the side and they rocked the swing in the hot air so that it felt a little cooler as if there were a breeze.

What did you play with my mother?

Well. She was younger than me. She was closer to my brother Frank's age. We played at night under the streetlight at the corner up there and we played out back in the barn.

What was she like, my mother?

She was very nice. She was fun to be with.

Oh.

That's right, she was, and I'm so sorry she died like she did, so young, Lorraine said. I'm very sorry. She was a good person. I miss her.

Grandma says I'm lucky to have someone to take me in.

Yes, I guess so. I guess you are. And you can come over here and see us if you want anytime.

He's dying too, isn't he.

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My father?

He's dying, isn't he.

But you don't have to be afraid of him. He's just an old man who's sick. He wouldn't hurt you. You can come over and see me. We can do something together.

Like what?

I don't know. We'll have to think of it.

Are you done smoking now?

I'm done with this one.

Alice got up and brought the ashtray from the porch rail and held it for her.

Thank you, Lorraine said and stubbed out the cigarette.

You're welcome.

She put the ashtray back and sat down again and they swung in the hot afternoon.

In the house the women were still talking.

Is he Mexican, did anyone ever say? Willa asked. He's so dark.

No, Mary said. I don't think so.

On his mother's side, I mean.

No.

Or Italian maybe.

Not if he's in the Community Church. A Mexican wouldn't be a preacher in a Protestant church. He'd be a Catholic.

He's kind of good-looking, Alene said.

Her mother turned toward her, her eyes seeming overlarge behind the thick lenses.

He is, Alene said.

He's married. He has a wife and a teenage son.

He can still be good-looking.

They sent him here from a church in Denver, Willa said. He was an associate minister there.

We heard he was, Mary said.

I doubt if he's accustomed to small towns.

He better start getting accustomed to them, Dad said.

The women turned and looked at him. They'd thought he was asleep. His head was turned toward the window and he wasn't looking at them when he talked.

Nothing goes on without people noticing, he said.

They waited. But he said no more.

After a while Willa started talking again. He had some kind of trouble in Denver, I heard. I believe that's why he was sent here.

What kind of trouble? said Mary.

I heard he was disciplined by the church for supporting some other preacher who came out homosexual in Denver. I believe it was something of that nature.

Wherever did you hear that, Mother?

A woman friend. Somebody from out of town told me about it.

Well, they're people, Alene said.

Well, of course. I know they're people. I'm not saying that. I'm only saying as an example of the kind of man he is. What we might expect.

The room was quiet then. They could hear Lorraine and the young girl on the front porch, the soft talking and the regular small complaint and recover of the porch swing. The hot sunlight streamed in through the window beyond Dad.

I think I'll go outside, Alene said. Excuse me, please.

There's more coffee, Mary said.

No thank you. It's good to see you, Dad. He looked over at her and nodded.

She rose and straightened the skirt of her dress and went out to the porch. Willa and Mary watched her leave.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do, Willa whispered. You see how she is. She's been this way ever since she came home.

She's not happy, Mary said.

Nobody's happy. But she doesn't have to be unpleasant in somebody else's house.

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We're glad to see her, Mary said, and stood and went back through the dining room to the kitchen. She looked out the window to the west. The backyard was in shade from the trees, and beyond, the corral and barn were in hot bright sunlight. She brought the pot of coffee and poured some into Willa's cup.

Just half, Willa said. I need to go pretty soon.

Mary looked at Dad. He was asleep now, his old bald head fallen onto his chest, his big hands folded in his lap.

Out on the porch they made room for Alene on the swing and the three of them, the two women and the young girl, moved slowly in the heat. Lorraine introduced the girl to Alene.

I've been waiting to meet you, Alene said.

Do you know my grandmother?

I've known her a long time. She and my mother have been friends for years.

Grandma has a lot of friends.

Yes. She does.

But she doesn't do anything with them.

You don't when you get older. But maybe you and I could do something together.

That's what she said. The girl looked at Lorraine.

We'll all do something, Lorraine said.

What grade are you in, honey?

I'll be in the third grade this year.

That's the grade I taught.

I don't know my teacher here. I don't know who she'll be.

Do you want to find out?

I guess so.

I'll take you up to school if you like. Maybe we can meet her. Or at least find out who she is.

Do you teach here?

No. I taught in another town close to the mountains. I've stopped teaching now.

We used to live close to the mountains. When my mother was alive.

Willa came out on the porch and they introduced her to Alice, and then the two Johnson women went out to their car and drove home to the sandhills and Alice went back to her grandmother's house.

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FORTY YEARS AGO, when it was over, Dad Lewis was only surprised that it had taken so long to find him out. He hadn't been all that clever about it.

After he'd made the discoveries, Dad wouldn't put it off and on Saturday after they'd closed for the day and the last meager purchase had been made and the change tendered across the scarred wood counter and the last customer had gone out the front door onto the cold darkening sidewalk on Main Street, Dad said, Are we locked up?

Clayton was standing before the front door looking out at the empty winter street. It looks like it wants to snow, he said.

Does it, Dad said. Has everybody gone?

Yeah, they're all out. I'm ready to go too. I'm wore out today. We were busy.

Come back here to the office first, Dad said.

Something more to do?

No. Just come back to the office.

He turned and walked past the long narrow ranks of plumbing supplies and the assortment of plastic elbows and metal clamps, past the spools of chains and nylon ropes and thin cording hanging at the end of the aisle and went into the office at the rear of the building back at the alley and sat down behind the desk.

Clayton, the young clerk, followed him and stood at the door, leaning against the doorframe, rolling down his blue shirt cuffs as he did every day after they closed.

Sit down, Dad said.

Something going on?

Come in and take a seat.

I hope this won't take too long. Tanya's waiting on me. We was talking of getting a sitter and going out for dinner somewhere. Having a night out.

Were you. Have a seat first, Dad said.

Clayton stepped into the room and sat down. What is it? he said.

Dad looked at him and looked past him out through the open office door for a moment. A car went by in the alley, the top of it visible through the square window in the outside door. He turned in the swivel chair and took down the wide blue-backed cash receipts ledger from the shelf behind him and turned forward again, coming around slowly in the chair, and opened the book on the desk, finding the pages he wanted, and turned the book a half turn so it was right side up to Clayton. You want to say something about this? Dad said.

Clayton looked at him and then down at the ledger pages. He studied the figures and then looked up quickly. I don't get what you mean.

I think you do.

No, I don't neither. Are you accusing me of something?

Are you going to make this harder than it needs to be? Dad said. You sure you want to do that?

He pointed his finger at the total for the month just finished and turned back a page and indicated the total for the previous month.

Have you got those numbers in your head?

I don't get what this is about, said Clayton.

I'm showing you. Keep watching.

He turned back the pages in the ledger to the same months four years earlier. You see these? he said. He pointed to the total for the earlier year.

The store's making an average of three hundred dollars a month less than it did four years ago, Dad said. How would that be? What would be the cause of something like that, do you think?

I don't have no idea. People started going someplace else maybe.

Benediction

Where would they go? This is the only hardware in town.

Maybe we're just not as busy.

No. We're still as busy. Inventory tells us that.

Then I don't have no answer for you.

You could be missing something.

Like what do you mean?

Like something you lost. Something that might of fell out of your jacket pocket when you hung it up on the back hook this morning and never noticed.

Dad leaned sideways and stretched his leg out straight so he could reach into his pants pocket, he withdrew a small key and bent forward and unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk. He sat up again and laid out on the desktop a small receipt book that had half of the pages missing. The perforated ends inside the binding were still there but the carbons that should have been in the book were torn away.

I found this laying on the floor below your coat back in the hall, he said. Kind of leaning up against the wallboard. So then I could see how you were managing it. A customer comes in and buys something and you give him a receipt out of this private little extra book here of yours and then after he goes out the door and the door is shut good you pocket the money and nothing shows. It couldn't be nothing too big. Because I would notice that. And you had to be sure I was at the back of the store or back in the office here or maybe gone home to lunch, and I don't guess you could of done it too often or even somebody as trusting as I used to be would get suspicious. Then too I suppose you had to worry about somebody returning some shovel or garden hoe and presenting this false receipt to me and not you, to get reimbursed. You had to worry about that a lot, I guess. But somehow that never happened, did it. But I figure after a while you got too greedy, didn't you. If you was only taking three or four hundred dollars a year I'd never of noticed anything. Or maybe even a thousand dollars a year. But that would have to be only if you hadn't of lost this little ticket book out of your coat pocket, isn't that right.

Dad stopped and stared at him. Clayton didn't say anything.

Well, I'll tell you, Dad said. It makes me sick. That's what it does. It makes me wonder about the whole goddamn human race. And I don't want to think that way. What's wrong with you anyway?

Across from him Clayton's round face had begun to sweat. Later Dad would remember that, how Clayton appeared to burst out in a sudden sweat, and it was wintertime, February, cold outside, and it was not even warm in the little windowless office there at the rear of the hardware store.

How much time will you give me? Clayton said.

Time for what?

To pay you back.

You can't pay me back.

Not right away. But I could if you gave me enough time.

No you couldn't. I'm not going to have you around here anymore. You don't work here. I don't want to see you again.

But I got a wife and two kids to think of.

Yes, Dad said. I know you do. You should of been thinking about them, what you brought them to by this.

Clayton stared at him. He wiped his hand across his forehead and dried it on his pants leg.

Are you going to the sheriff? he said.

No. I decided not to. On account of your kids. But I'm going to have you sign this.

Sign what?

This paper here.

What is it?

Dad removed a sheet of paper from the drawer in front of him and pushed it across the desk. Clayton read it. The paper was typed out neatly, telling how he'd stolen from the store and admitted as much and it said how many thousands of dollars the sum was and it said he admitted that too and then there was a place at the bottom of the page for him to sign his name and to provide the date.

What will you do with this if I sign it?

Oh, you're going to sign it. There's no question about that.

Benediction

All right. Say I do. Then what?

Then I'll keep it locked up in the safety box at the bank. In case you ever think of moving back to Holt.

But I'm not leaving Holt.

Yeah, you are.

You mean you want me to leave town too?

I'd have to run into you sometime, Dad said. I'd have to see you again on Main Street someplace.

But I grew up here.

I know. I knew your father and mother. Son, this is a sorry goddamn mess all around.

But what am I supposed to do?

You'll have to figure that out. That's not for me to say. Maybe you will learn something. I don't know about that.

What about—Clayton looked desperately around the little office—what am I going to tell my wife? How can I explain this to Tanya?

That's one more thing I don't have no idea about. It's not going to be a lot of fun, I know that. It wouldn't be for me.

Clayton studied Dad's face, but there didn't appear to be anything forgiving or tractable there. All right then, goddamn you, he said. He took up a pen from the desk and signed the paper quickly and shoved it away from him back across the desk.

Dad reached forward and took up the paper and looked at it, examined the signature and the date, and folded the paper twice and put it in his shirt pocket.

Now I think you better go.

This isn't treating me fair, this way.

No? I thought to myself I was being more than fair.

I deserve better. I've been working for you for going on five years.

That's why I'm saying you better go now. Otherwise I might forget that.

The next day, Sunday, Clayton phoned Dad at home early in the afternoon. I need to talk to you, he said.

We did all our talking last night.

I know. But I need to have one last talk with you.

About what?

Can you meet me at the store?

What are you going to do, shoot me or something? Dad said.

No. Christ. It's nothing like that. I just need to try to make this right.

You can't make it right.

I'm asking you. I'm saying please will you. Just talk to me.

Dad thought about it for a moment. All right then, he said. I'll go in by the back door and let you in the office. In one hour. Two o'clock sharp. Don't make me wait. This is not going to make no difference though.

Thank you.

Just before two, without telling Mary what he was doing, Dad went out to his car and drove across town to the hardware store and went in by the alley and left the door unlocked and turned the lights on. He entered the little office and switched the light on there and checked to see that the gun was in the drawer of the desk and then put it back, then he heard the car and Clayton was coming in at the alley door. He sat and waited, only it wasn't Clayton who appeared. It was his wife, Tanya, the young blond woman.

Where's your husband? Dad said.

He isn't coming. I'm here.

What are you doing here?

She stepped into the little close windowless office. She was wearing a long coat, a man's raincoat, a kind of slicker. She came around the end of the desk and stood three feet away from Dad. Then she opened the coat. She was naked under it. A young woman who had had two children in rapid succession and she showed it. Her belly was round and slack and had white stretch marks. She had wide hips. Her large breasts sagged a little. But she wasn't bad-looking.

Benediction

You can have all this, she said. You can have all this as often and regular as you want it for an entire year. I know some special things too that might interest you.

If what, Dad said.

If you tear up that paper he signed last night and we all forget anything ever happened.

He looked at her face. Her face was quite pretty. She was watching him closely, her eyes fierce and hard and scared, daring him. Waiting.

No, he said. No, I'm not interested. You're going to take this wrong but I'm not going to do anything like that. Your husband's wrong as hell to get you into this.

I don't care about that, she said.

You will.

She opened the front of the raincoat wider, as if she hadn't offered herself sufficiently. She changed her stance, pushing herself forward, displaying her body. She put a hand on one hip, moving the skirt of the coat out of the way. She turned slightly to show herself in profile.

Do you see? she said. Are you looking?

Yes, he said. And I'm married and my wife is all I want and all I'll ever want.

You're not looking good enough, she said.

Yeah I am. I think you better go on now.

You're going to regret this. You're going to wish you could change your mind.

No. That's not going to happen, Dad said. Now I want you to get out of here.

She pulled the coat together and looked at Dad sitting in the swivel chair at the desk. Then the coat came open once more and her breasts swung and bobbed with the violent motion and she slapped him as hard as she could across the face. It left a bright red mark. Then she turned and went out of the office.

It snowed that night as Clayton had predicted the day before that it would. A wet snow more like one in March or April than one in

February, and the next day Clayton and Tanya took the two children and some few quick belongings in suitcases and cardboard boxes and drove a hundred miles south and moved into a house with her parents.

In the spring a couple of months later on a slow day Dad received a call. He was in the little office again, in the middle of the morning. The voice on the other end, a female voice, was already screaming when he picked up the phone.

You son of a bitch! He killed himself! You son of a bitch.

Who is this?

You know who it is. He went to Denver and started drinking and took a gun and blew half his head off. He never even left a note. Because of you. You did this. You're the one that made him. Oh I hope you rot in hell! Oh goddamn you! I hope you burn in hellfire forever.