

*Audie*

My brother Vernon went on ahead. I woke up and felt for him but the bed was dry and my brother Creed was already up. He had his overalls on and he was telling me that I had to get up too because it was after four-thirty and the cows wouldn't wait. The bed was cold but it was dry. My brother Vernon was still in it and he was cold like the bed was since he had gone on. That left me here with Creed. It made me the oldest.

*Preston*

I wouldn't have been surprised if we'd lost the both of them at the same time. Vernon and Audie I mean. That's how close they've been ever since they were boys. Vernon would lead the way and Audie would follow right along behind. Not that they were two peas in a pod, not by any means. Vernon was the brains of the operation and Audie had problems. *Has* problems.

I was sitting in the kitchen with my coffee and down the hill Creed opened the barn door the way he always does first thing, but instead of opening it and looking at the day and then going right back in he kept coming. I've known those boys since they were boys, I've lived right here alongside their place since the thirties, and they've always run in the same track. Everything goes the same today as it went yesterday. That's how it is around a farm. A farm is the master of you and not the other way around. So when Creed opened the barn door and came out and kept on coming instead of going back in, I knew something wasn't right. I believe I stood up at the kitchen table and said so to Margaret. I said something wasn't right.

He was coming across the field toward our place and I guessed by how he was coming that it'd be a good idea to meet him halfway if I could. I put my coffee cup down and I went out onto the porch and then I came back in to put my coat on because it was cooler outdoors than I'd expected it to be and I guessed I might be out there for a while. Creed had on that old wool coat of his that's torn up the back and covered all over with cow manure. It's either his coat or Vernon's. I can never remember. They all swap things around. It's the way they were brought up. Anyway he was wearing the wool coat. That house of theirs doesn't have anything much in the way of insulation, so they probably have a better idea of the weather outdoors than we do. That's why I had to go back in for a coat of my own. Outdoors is no different from indoors to them, except outdoors there's more breeze and it smells better. Even in the barnyard. I don't know if he slept in that coat or not but he might have.

That poor old boy looked like he was about to have a heart attack and I was glad I'd gone out so he didn't have to keep coming up the hill. "Vernon died in the night," he said. He was shaking a little, like he was about to have a fit. I'm no doctor but that's how it seemed. A doctor might tell you something else, or put it another way. "My brother's awful cold," he said.

So we went down. I got him turned back around and we went down the hill and in through the barn instead of up on the porch and in by the front door. Not that I think they ever lock that front door. I don't guess those boys ever owned a lock other than the one on that room they closed off thirty years ago. Why would they? But we didn't go in the front door anyhow. We cut straight through the barn. The cows were coming in all by themselves and they were complaining the way they will, but they were going to have to wait.

The house has just the one room that they use. Audie was on the floor and Vernon was in the bed. I wouldn't say he was cold but he wasn't much better than room temperature. It seemed

to me he was stiffening up some. Creed didn't seem to mind my touching him, but I minded it enough for both of us. I've been around death enough that it ought not to bother me, but now that I'm getting nearer to it myself it's different. It's different for an old man.

Audie was the one who needed a hand. He was curled up in a ball in his long johns and he was shaking all over like he was freezing to death. Moving all over, every part of him, the way his brother Creed had done outdoors but worse. Audie will do that some anyhow, just as a regular thing, but this was worse than usual. I said his name and he didn't say anything back. I got down on my hands and knees in front of him and I looked at him hard and I said his name louder. I made an effort to kind of bark it, the way Vernon used to when he wanted to get his attention. I slapped the floor with the flat of my hand and a cloud of dust rose up and I got a splinter but never mind that. He heard me and his eyes popped opened wide and he looked at me like he'd seen a ghost. Or like I was the ghost and he was looking straight through me at something else. Maybe Vernon, up there on the bed. Audie's pretty near blind and one of his eyes is clouded over some, but I've never seen anything so blue.

*Audie*

When I came out onto the front porch they were turning.

A little wind had come up and they were all faced in the same direction and they were turning. I couldn't see them all that clear but I could hear every one separate. They all make a different sound. Every one. I didn't make them that way on purpose, but that's how they turned out. They can't help it and I couldn't help it either. They come out how they come out. Vernon says they're like children that way. They were turning in the little wind and I listened to them

turn and I felt some better.

*Donna*

It was Margaret who thought to call the sister.

Margaret Hatch, who'd watched from her kitchen window as her husband walked down the hill between the houses and who'd kept watching when he didn't come back. Margaret, who'd watched as the sun came up and the shadow of her house gathered itself and pushed down the hill to poke at the Proctor boys' barn, and who'd moved with her coffee out onto the screen porch to keep on watching as the shadow withdrew a little and the heat of the day began to rise and the state trooper's patrol car came roaring up the dirt lane.

She figured the boys' telephone must work or else they couldn't have called the troopers, but she didn't figure they would think to call Donna. She was right. She looked up the number and stood in the kitchen and dialed. She wished she had a cigarette, and the idea of it surprised her completely. She hadn't smoked since Harry Truman, but she thought that right now a cigarette might be just the thing to calm her nerves.

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The house smelled like cow manure and dry rot and spoiled food. Like tobacco and burnt rope and rat droppings. Like old men and sickness and death. Del Graham was the captain and he arrived first. He walked past the old man who sat rocking on the porch with his long white beard pooling in his lap and his hands knotted over his hairless skull, and he went through the open

front door as into a mouth full of rotted teeth. The disarray and the stink. The order and the purposefulness gone to no use in the end.

Creed was sitting at the table alongside the neighbor, Hatch. Preston Hatch who'd made the call. The telephone was on the table between them, and they sat composed on either side of it like a formal double portrait. Titans of industry, awaiting a message from some distant outpost of commerce. The telephone was solid black, square and heavy. All business. The cord that connected it to the wall was wrapped in a kind of woven material that Graham didn't remember having seen for a long time. It looped easily and snakelike in spite of its age, and although it was frayed in places it looked made to last. The telephone was the old fashioned kind with a dial, rotary phones they called them, and the numbers under the dial were either worn away from use or obscured by dirt. He figured the second. Either way, in the absence of the numbers a person would need to count in order to make a phone call. Graham guessed that such a telephone probably didn't get much use, considering. It was a conduit to a world that had no business here.

The bed was in the corner beyond the table and the man on it had no pulse. There was one empty chair at the table and Graham came back and took it for himself. These two looked like individuals who could be trusted to know death when they laid their hands on it. He knew Creed by sight. He was the double of the old man on the porch except for a full head of hair pushed up crazily in some places and flattened down in other places. He looked about used up. His cheeks were hollow beneath his beard and his mouth was caved in. His nose was spotted and bulbous, something grown underground and dug up and left to wither. His pale eyes, heavy-lidded and sunken, were vague and weary of witness.

“So what happened.”

“Vernon's dead. My brother.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“My brother Vernon.”

“I know who he is.”

Creed held a Red Man cap in his knobby hands and he wrung it. “He weren’t dead last night when he went to sleep but he’s dead now.”

“We’ll have some fellows up here soon’ll take care of him. I live just down the West Road a little, so I came straight from the house. Those other fellows’ll be right along.”

Creed reached behind him, into a teetering pile of what looked like trash. He drew out a pouch of tobacco. “You mind if I chew?”

“It’s your house.”

Hatch touched Creed on the arm but only briefly. “You do what you like.”

“This ain’t no crime scene I guess.” He fiddled with the pouch. “I ain’t disturbing anything.”

“Not so’s I can tell,” said Graham. He took off his flat-brimmed hat and hung it on his knee. He looked at Creed. Then with the palms of both hands he smoothed back the hair on each side of his head, as if he needed to.

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DeAlton answered the telephone in his businesslike way and Margaret asked for his wife without identifying herself. It was no business of his who she was, and he didn’t ask, and that suited her fine. Donna got on the line and Margaret told her that there was a state trooper at her brothers’ place. Told her everything she knew: That she had seen Creed come out as usual and that she had seen Audie sitting on the porch. That she could see him there still or at least his legs,

kicking. But that no, she had not seen Vernon. Not this morning. Not yet.

Now there were a couple more troopers and an ambulance too. That last had come slow up the dirt lane with its lights off. Donna had better drop everything and come.

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The room was too small to fit everyone, although it had once been two rooms. The part near the door and the part by the bed were different colors and there was a ragged four-inch line dividing them where a long time ago somebody had torn down a partition wall. The headboard was pushed up hard against another door that was sealed with a padlock. The hasp on it was oversized and rusted and weathered down, and it had probably seen use on a barn door at some time. The padlock was rusted too from prior seasons in the outdoors. If a person could find the key for it in this mess he'd be eligible for some prize. It was surely rusted tight anyhow. A single solid piece of stubborn ruin.

Two troopers and two emergency technicians had crowded around the bed for no reason anybody could tell anymore. One of the troopers went out to his car and came back in and handed the other one a jar of Vicks so he could rub a little under his nose against the stink. They usually reserved the Vicks for around bodies a good deal more decomposed than this one, but Vernon had the same effect in that department whether he was alive or dead.

A little wind came up and the sheer lace curtain that hung over the front window pushed into the room upon it and fluttered some and died back. A creaking arose from outdoors.

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Donna pulled up and parked in the dirt lane since there were no places left in the yard. The technicians had Vernon strapped onto a stretcher already and covered over with a sheet, and everyone had had to clear out of the house to let them angle him through the door clean. Not that it mattered how rough they were. Graham held the door and the two other troopers were up against their cars smoking and Preston Hatch was leaning on the porch rail next to Creed, who chewed and spat into the dirt yard and gave the impression of thought. Preston as short and round as Creed was tall and thin. Preston as pink as Creed was white. The pair of them an apple set against a parsnip, one clean and ruddy and the other dirt-rimmed and root-threaded, arranged for a kind of still life.

Creed spat and wiped his lip on his sleeve and spoke to his sister. "Vernon died."

"Vernon." Coming toward the porch.

"He ain't been so good lately."

"I know. I know that."

"I think he had the same cancer killed her."

Donna looked at Graham and saw him for the authority here and explained that Creed was talking about his mother. Her mother. A long time in the ground. "Where's Audie?" she asked.

Hatch looked around and noticed him gone for the first time and said, "Audie? I don't know. Maybe he's in the barn. If he is, he's the only one of us that's got any sense."

*Audie*

They all came out together. They came out together alive and dead both. The humming of

their talk and the grinding of their feet on the boards. The knocking of that plank against the doorframe like Vernon wanted something. I thought I would go feed the turkeys but the cows were calling from the barn all mournful. I heard them through the barn wall so instead of going out to the schoolbus where we keep the turkeys I pried open the track door and slid on in among them. I got a pail and the milking stool and I squatted down and took hold of the first teat that come to hand and I worked it. I was shaking some and a little of the milk caught me in the knee when it spurted out and it ran down my leg and reminded me how the bed was dry when I woke up. The bed was dry and Vernon was dead in it and I was the oldest, the oldest and left to follow him. But not all the way. Not yet.