

Chapter 10

Peyton

Peyton Gruber had decided he would die that day. But I didn't know it when he drove his old Chrysler into Buckingham's Gulf Station that Saturday morning in October, nineteen and forty-eight. He parked beside the gas pumps, just like he did every Saturday.

And just like I always did, I walked over to the window on the driver's side and asked, "What can I do you for, Peyton?"

Peyton pushed back the bill of his Cincinnati Reds ball cap and gave me a little smile that raised both ends of his mustache ever so slightly. "Fill 'er up with regular, Freddy."

I'll bet we'd had that small exchange thirty times. I thought later that if somebody had asked me at the time I filled Peyton's gas tank, "How's it going, Freddy? What's your day like?" I would have said, "It's a beautiful fall day. The air is crisp and the leaves on the old oak tree behind the station are turning yellow and gold. There's a bright blue sky and a warm sun. It's much like yesterday, probably similar to tomorrow." Nobody asked, so I didn't say all that. But later I thought about it, and how wrong I had been about the day. Well, not exactly wrong. A day can be beautiful but it's not the whole truth about the day.

Peyton got out of his car and stretched, put his hands in his pockets and walked with his shoulders slouched to the oak tree where Phil Buckingham and Hartford Wilson sat in lawn chairs. As I filled Peyton's gas tank, my thoughts centered on my new dark blue corduroy ball cap. It had the words "Gulf Oil" in light gold letters stitched on the front of the cap on top of the dark gold outline of Gulf's round company insignia. The

nicest ball cap I'd ever owned. I thought about different ways to position it – down over my eyes, pushed back on my head, small tilt to the right, major tilt to the left, depending on how I felt at the moment. When I walked out to Peyton's car I wore the cap level, about half way down my forehead. In my reflection from the front window I looked right businesslike. Eighteen years old and Buckingham's assistant manager of front end services.

Before Peyton had retired from his job the previous year at the insurance agency, every Tuesday afternoon after work he and his wife Hanna Mae would drive their Chrysler to Buckingham's for a tank of gas – week in, week out, twelve point five gallons.

Phil Buckingham said, "Uncle Peyton and Aunt Hanna Mae are folks of routine."

Each week after I filled the tank I cleaned the windshield under the watchful eye of Hanna Mae. Before I finished wiping the water off the glass, her wiry frame would scoot across the front seat, and her white head would move back and forth while her eyes moved slowly, left right, up down and around every inch of the windshield. Then she would point her right index finger at the spots she felt needed more attention. She never failed to find one or two of them. I took pride in my work and always winced when she began begin her inspection.

Hanna Mae would smile and say in an encouraging way, "Freddy, you're getting better at cleaning, but you've got to sharpen up just a tad."

Sometimes I couldn't see any dirt where she pointed. But I smiled back at her and cleaned the glass beyond the end of her finger. "Thank you, Hanna Mae," I'd say, though inside of me I didn't feel like smiling.

One day I said to Phil, “I think the woman has twenty-ten vision. She sees dirt where no normal person’s eyes can see it.”

Phil counseled me, “Remember, Aunt Hanna Mae is first of all a teacher. She takes pride in pointing out things the rest of us need to learn.”

During Hanna Mae’s windshield inspections Peyton would sit behind the wheel with a serious expression on his face and look straight ahead. Sometimes he would take off his Cincinnati Reds cap and run his hand over his bald head, or he might twist the ends of his mustache and rotate the rear view mirror in order to take a peek at it. His mustache didn’t quite qualify as a handlebar mustache, for Hanna Mae insisted that he keep it trimmed, but it came close. When Hanna Mae visited her family over in Parkersburg, he’d let the mustache grow, even start waxing it if she stayed away long enough. But the day before she returned he always trimmed it. Phil and I used to tease Peyton about it. He’d smile, and say, “Well, boys, I live with her, not with you.”

After Peyton retired from the insurance agency he drove in every couple of days. “Fill ‘er up,” he’d say, but Peyton came in so often it turned out to be only a few gallons. I figured he didn’t have much else to do. At least Peyton didn’t care about a spot here or there on the windshield. He would hang around and visit with Phil and me and whoever had brought their car in for a lube job or oil change, or the folks who walked in to sit a spell. Phil kept three old dark green metal lawn chairs in the front end of the station and encouraged folks to sit and talk, share a cup of coffee. Kettle always had something going on worth talking about – tobacco crops, hogs, weather, and new babies. In good weather we moved the chairs outdoors under the oak tree beside the station. More than once

Daddy joked, “If Phil Buckingham got paid by the word instead of by the gallon he’d be a rich man.”

While I pumped Gulf regular into the Chrysler’s tank, Peyton went to the pop cooler and got himself a Dr. Pepper. Then he joined Phil and Hartford under the oak tree, seated himself in the third lawn chair and sipped his drink. After I filled Peyton’s tank with gas I parked his car in the area on the far side of the station where we put vehicles after we finish working on them. Phil called it the playpen, the place where kids wait on their parents to pick them up.

Hartford, too, had a reputation around town as quite a talker. He and his wife, Iretta, had owned and operated Wilson’s Dry Goods for over thirty years. People often visited the store to talk with Hartford, not to buy fabric or factory-made goods. I could see him and Phil laughing about something, though Peyton had a serious expression on his face. Hartford’s big belly laugh boomed so loud that I heard it over by the gas pumps. He had gained weight in recent years and I thought his laugh had gotten louder too.

I walked over to collect for the gas, a dollar twenty-two, just as Peyton said, “Wasn’t that the Christmas pageant of nineteen and forty-two?” He handed me two dollars.

Hartford replied, “Was it that long ago? Dang, Peyton, I think you’re right. It was forty-two.”

After I returned with Peyton’s change I sat down in the grass and leaned against the oak tree. Hartford, Peyton and I, along with Doc Simonton and William White Wallace, had been in the Christmas Pageant of forty-two. Hartford, Doc, and Peyton, being much older, had the roles of the Three Wise Men. William White and I, twelve

years old, had been shepherds. The story of the nineteen and forty-two Christmas Pageant varies a bit, depending on whether you hear it from Peyton, Doc, Hartford, or William White. I'll tell it my way, the only way I can tell it.

During the summer of forty-two, William White took me and Shufflehead Meadows into the living room at his house, placed his right hand on a stack of four Bibles, his left hand on a New Testament and then swore to us that that he would not be in the Christmas pageant that year. We couldn't figure out why in the heat of the summer William White would be so concerned about an event of next winter. I later learned that it had to do with a private dispute between William White and his Mom over William White's middle name, and his recent discovery of the fact that there nobody on either side of his family who had the first or last name of White.

His Mom had told him in a tone of voice William White described as ending any and all debate, "William White, your Dad and I chose the word 'White' with careful thought and deliberation. The name has the quality of cleanliness, even stainlessness, one that will help steer you towards a life of sinless purity."

One evening at supper I mentioned what William White's Mom had told him about his name. Momma laughed lightly and said to Daddy and me, "Anybody can see that even at age twelve, a path of sinless purity seems hopeless for William White."

I laughed too and added, "It wouldn't be no fun, neither."

Momma smiled and said, "You mean 'any fun, either' and you don't know until you try it."

William White's threat made sense when I thought about the importance of his Mom to the Kettle Methodist Church Christmas Pageant. Each year the pageant's printed

program listed the people in it and the roles they played, as well as the Christmas carols sung and who sang which solos. At the bottom of the last page, year after year, the program had the words, “The Christmas Pageant was produced and directed by Junetta Teague Wallace.” William White viewed his threat as a major weapon his battles with his Mom. But his weapon turned out to be a dud. For the second year in a row he appeared in his shepherd’s outfit.

Junetta Teague Wallace had become known around Kettle as a leader in The Three Names Movement, a local effort to encourage people to call each other by their three given names, including, of course, herself and William White Wallace. When the Women’s Club or a church social needed a speaker, Mrs. Wallace would put other things aside and speak about what she called “the dignity achieved when using three names.” The founder of the movement, Ovieta Blankenship Roosevelt, often introduced her.

In her talks, Junetta Teague Wallace mentioned famous people like Louisa Mae Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson, along with Henry David Thoreau, William Jennings Bryan and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. That year she added Claire Booth Luce to her list. One time William White attended a meeting where his Mom spoke, and at the end of her talk added with a big smile, “Mom, don’t forget John Wilkes Booth.” The next day his Mom made him do extra chores as punishment. She said that in addition to being a smart-aleck, he’d damaged the Three Names Movement.

On the evening of December twentieth, nineteen and forty-two, a large congregation filled the dimly lit sanctuary of the Kettle Methodist Church. The air carried the aroma of the fresh-cut evergreens that had been hung along the molding next to the ceiling on all

four sides of the sanctuary. On either end of the altar six red candles burned in each of the two silver candelabra. Two small spotlights had been set up in the last pew. The beam of one lit the Christ Child in the manger along with Joseph and Mary standing beside side him. The other light beamed on the shepherds, William White and me, on the opposite side of the altar from the manger. William White discovered that if he carefully positioned his arm he could get the spotlight to reflect off the crystal on the face of his wristwatch. And then, with a sober look on his face, just a poor shepherd tending his flock, he could throw his own beam back into the darkened congregation. Miss Hattie McClintock flinched as William White's beam of light penetrated the veil of her hat and hit her smack in the left eye.

The spotlight turned from William White and me to the Three Wise Men, dressed in robes and turbans of rich colors. They walked down the aisle led by the first Wise Man, Peyton Gruber in a bright red robe and matching turban. Hartford Wilson, in a blue robe and turban, followed right behind him, then Dr. S.I. Simonton, our town's physician, wearing gold. All three men sang in the Kettle Methodist Church choir, though Hartford had become known as a high-risk singer after his solo performance during a Thanksgiving special music presentation. When he reached and held one of the higher notes in his solo, the upper plate of his dentures fell onto his tongue and caused him to crack the note. Then Hartford garbled the words of the verse as he attempted to continue his solo and, while holding his hymnal in his left hand, put the fingers of his right hand in his mouth and restored his upper plate to its correct location. Hartford later blamed the whole incident on what he called, "The danged poor quality of the sticky stuff that held my dentures in place."

When the Three Wise Men had walked about halfway to the altar, they paused while the organist, Mrs. Hazel Dickensheets, rendered one verse and chorus of the hymn, “We Three Kings.” Then they resumed their deliberate walk forward, each step coordinated with the slow movement of the hymn. In unison the Three Wise Men sang the chorus of the hymn.

Peyton’s solo, describing his gift of gold for the Christ Child, would be sung as the Wise Men approached the manger. After the chorus ended, Peyton took a deep breath and then, a second before he began to sing the first word of his solo, his red turban slipped and dropped over his eyes. Peyton’s head became mouth, moustache, nose and turban. Mouth and moustache stopped moving and Peyton didn’t sing. He stood motionless, as if transformed into a zombie by an unknown power. Mrs. R.R. Whitcomb later commented, “Peyton’s suddenly frozen position made me think of the poor people of Pompeii, trapped forever in all those strange positions when Mount Vesuvius erupted.” She paused and gave an ever so slight smile, then added, “including some who were in bed.”

Peyton’s quick stop caused Hartford to plow into Peyton’s back, and Doc Simonton in turn to crash into Hartford’s back, knocking Hartford’s gift of frankincense for the Christ Child out of his hands. It clattered across the sanctuary floor underneath the first pew. Hearing the noise, and not hearing Peyton’s voice, Mrs. Hazel Dickensheets stopped playing the organ. The sight of her standing and craning her neck towards the manger caused people seated in the sanctuary to stand up and crane their necks to get a good look at whatever had happened. Only the squeaks and shuffles of standing and neck craning sounded across the sanctuary.

Peyton stood motionless, rooted to the spot where he had ceased all forward movement, his red turban resting on the bridge of his nose. Then he extended his arms straight in front of himself, still holding his gift of gold for the Christ Child in his left hand. He rotated his body towards the choir, like a slow-moving fixture in an amusement park. Then he rotated in the opposite direction towards the congregation and during his turn began a low but rising moan, “Ohhhhhhhhhhh,” that continued unbroken sound for at least ten seconds.

Later Peyton said that suddenly seeing nothing but the red of his turban, he believed he’d had a heart attack. Then, when he turned towards the congregation, the beams of the spotlights caused a brightening of the field of red before him. “I expected to be dead within seconds.” We laughed when he told us, but at that moment, in the middle of the Christmas pageant, everybody stared at Peyton and listened to his low and rising moan.

Doc Simonton handed his gift of myrrh to Hartford and walked forward to Peyton. Doc pushed Peyton’s turban up on his forehead and gave him a couple of gentle pats on his back.

Peyton’s ceased his moan, opened his eyes wide and blinked. He looked first at Doc Simonton, then across the congregation and exclaimed big and loud in his deep baritone voice, “I’m alive – thank God, I’m alive!”

Hartford commented that while this may have been an important discovery for Peyton, to those of us in the pageant and, he imagined, most folks in the sanctuary, it seemed that Peyton had interrupted the Kettle Methodist Church Christmas Pageant to make an announcement about something that everybody knew anyway.

In the silence of the moment that followed Peyton's announcement, William White yelled, "Praise the Lord."

Jimmy Lunceford and Harley Bill Cremeans, at the time about six years old and seated in the front pew of the church, broke up laughing. Harley, a tow-headed kid, had a high-pitched squeaky laugh that infected people and made them want to laugh along with him. In a few seconds laughter passed through the congregation like a wave, rolling from the front to the rear pews of the sanctuary.

After folks recovered from their laughter, the Three Wise Men reassembled themselves and Mrs. Dickensheets struck up "We Three Kings" again. Peyton, followed by Hartford and Doc, sang their solo verses, then one final chorus in unison.

A car pulled up to the gas pumps and I walked over to wait on the folks. When I returned to the little group, Hartford had moved his chair a foot to the right to position himself in sunlight. I sat down in the grass.

Hartford said, "Peyton, you were in rare form the night of the pageant."

Peyton removed his Cincinnati Reds cap with his left hand, and rubbed his right hand across his bald head. He smiled. "Well, Hanna Mae reminds me of my brief career as an actor every once in a while."

Then Peyton's face became very somber. "Hart, do you think I could have been an actor?"

Hartford looked up into the branches of the old oak tree. So did I. Towards the ends of many branches the leaves had turned a bright golden orange. Sunlight fell through the tree's limbs, lingering on the gold leaves and transforming the green patches

into dark blue. Then Hartford looked at Peyton and in a serious voice said, “Peyton, I think you could have been anything you wanted to.” He paused then smiled and added, “That is, if Hanna Mae would approve it.”

Hartford cut loose with his big belly laugh. Phil and I laughed too. Peyton didn’t, though he smiled and nodded. Then he smoothed the ends of his moustache.

“What’s Hanna Mae up to these days, Peyton?” Hartford asked.

“Oh, the usual. Running the house and all. Now that I’m retired, each day she makes sure I get my chores done.” Peyton paused and a smile washed over his face. “But we find time to enjoy things together. Little things. We work in the garden. And on rainy days we read or listen to the radio. Yesterday afternoon Hanna Mae baked cookies and we had tea on the side porch. As we sat there I wished Bubby had lived longer and married. Maybe a grandchild would have been there to have cookies with us.” Bubby, Peyton and Hanna Mae’s son, Peyton Gruber, Jr., died in an auto accident not long after he finished medical school.

“Most of the time, though, it’s chores.” His smile disappeared. “I swear, sometimes I think retirement is like a new job. Only there’s often more demands than at what I used to call work.”

Hartford chuckled and said, “Well, Peyton, maybe you could find a quiet little place where you could escape all that.” Then he really hoo-hawed and slapped his knee.

I laughed too. Phil had told me about what happened the summer Peyton figured out how to escape the never-ending list of chores that Hanna Mae handed him each Saturday morning. Any chores that didn’t get done that day would float forward into the evenings after work during the following week. And it seemed like Peyton could never

get all his chores done, even though Hanna Mae added new chores at a slow rate. He once told Phil, “I feel like I’m bailing chores out of a leaky boat that takes them on faster than I can bail.”

Hanna Mae told her friends, “Those chores just hang out there like a wet wash on a rainy day.” She went on to say that Peyton always seemed to be working on them, though sometimes she couldn’t find him.

In the heat of the summer Peyton had found an escape. He would crawl through an opening in the house’s foundation and relax in the cool darkness under the house. He’d lie on that sweet black earth and snooze away an hour or two.

One hot and humid Saturday in July – the temperature must have been ninety-five degrees – Peyton went outside to complete his list of yard chores while Hanna Mae did her weekly house cleaning. Along about three-thirty Hanna Mae began to polish the maple table that had belonged to her Mother. She dropped her can of furniture polish when she heard the screams of a man’s voice coming from beneath the floor in the back section of the house. She ran through the house, out the kitchen door and into the back yard.

Hanna Mae exclaimed to her friends, “I thought the noises were coming from under the rear section of the house. Just as I started to poke my head through the opening in the back section of the house’s foundation, Peyton’s Cincinnati Reds cap appeared and he came right behind it, scrambling out of there.”

Peyton flopped to the ground and laid on his back, panting and wheezing.

Hanna Mae looked down at Peyton, her arms akimbo and her mouth gaping. After she regained sufficient control to speak, Hanna Mae asked, “Peyton, just what the devil is going on?”

Peyton just laid there looking up at her. Then he raised himself to a sitting position and said, “I guess I’ll have to tell you. Truth is, I felt tired and went under the house to take a little snooze.”

Hanna Mae learned that after Peyton stretched out on his favorite sleeping spot, an area where he had scooped out indentations in the earth to form body contours that matched his shape, he found an unexpected guest in his makeshift bedroom.

Peyton’s voice took on a small quiver as he described to Hanna Mae what happened. “A few minutes ago, in the darkness under the house I stretched out in my spot and my right hand brushed something unusual. I grasped it, something round, long, wet and slick. Then I grabbed the other end of whatever it was with my left hand. ‘Oh my God!’”

Phil said he figured that at an intersection in Peyton’s brain the sensations from his right hand met the sensations from his left hand and registered the presence of a recently shed snakeskin, one of significant size. That’s when Peyton began to scream and jump and bump his way out of there.

Phil ended the story by saying, “From that Saturday forward there was a remarkable increase in Uncle Peyton’s productivity.”

After the snakeskin incident a slight change seemed to take place in Peyton. He had always been fun to be around, though never what anyone might call the life of the

party. But after the incident Peyton didn't seem to smile as much as he used to. I asked Phil, "What's happened to Peyton? He seems a little under the weather these days."

Phil replied in a thoughtful voice, "Well, Uncle Peyton got himself into a pickle with Aunt Hanna Mae because of his little hideaway under the house. She's on him these days. Now when she gives him a list of chores to do, beside each chore she puts an estimate of the time she figures it should take him to complete each one."

I guess I must have looked dumbstruck. Phil laughed and put his hand on my shoulder, "Maybe I should hire Aunt Hanna Mae and have her run this place. She'd get some real work out of you, Freddy."

I laughed at Phil's joke, but the thought of Hanna Mae Gruber bossing me around didn't seem all that funny. I looked across the room we called "the front end" and thought of all the things she could find to be cleaned up. Just for openers the display stack of oilcans hadn't been lined up properly and the windows could use a good washing. Today's *Huntington Herald Dispatch* and *Charleston Gazette* lay on the floor near the stove. The guys who came in and read the newspapers left their disposable coffee cups on the floor beside the stove. And the floor needed to be swept. Hanna Mae would have a field day with this place. And me.

Peyton's life in retirement seemed to be a mixed blessing for him. He would come to Buckingham's a lot, then I'd see him over at Bertha's Place, or over at the Post Office. At the bank. Just hanging around. You might say moping around, like an old beagle looking for somebody to pet him, or a place to lie down.

During a slow period one morning in August, Phil and I had just poured ourselves some coffee when Peyton came in and said, more to Phil than to me, “I can’t believe it. I just stopped by the insurance office. The place where I spent thirty years of my life. Nobody had the time of day for me. What’s the world coming to?”

Phil said, “Sit down, Uncle Peyton. Have a cup of coffee.”

Peyton sat down and as he took his first sip of coffee Phil asked, “So, other than a stop over at the agency where those folks were so thoughtless as to do their work, what’s been happening this morning?”

Phil had no sooner got the word “morning” out of his mouth when four cars suddenly drove in. Two of them stopped at the gas pumps. The driver of one car blew his horn and yelled, “Please hurry, I have to go to Beckley,” like he had to complete some kind of mission. A fellow driving a Buick told Phil he wanted a lube job and oil change right quick, he had to get to Huntington by noon. Miss Hattie McClintock parked her Ford squarely before the front door where it blocked everybody’s movement and said, “Phil Buckingham, there is a strange noise coming from under the hood of my car. I want you to please have somebody fix it.”

In the hustle and bustle of taking care of all the customers, Phil and I forgot about Peyton. When things finally settled down again Peyton had gone, though before he left he’d washed his coffee cup and put it back in the cupboard.

The following week Peyton came into Buckingham’s looking concerned and serious. “Where’s Phil?”

“Phil’s out on a run to Myrza Jane Bixby’s house, Peyton. Her Chevy’s battery is dead, needs a jump-start.” I paused, then added, “Peyton, I hope you don’t mind my asking, but you look like you just lost your last friend. Anything wrong?”

Peyton poured himself a cup of coffee then walked over to a chair and dropped into it with a sigh. “Freddy, I just came from Doc Simonton’s office. Recently I’ve had a shortness of breath when I do chores or walk for a spell. Doc looked me over and told me I’ve got a heart problem. ‘Nothing to get all upset about,’ he said. Easy for him to say. It’s my heart, not his.”

Then, the day before Labor Day our local ambulance, a black Cadillac hearse from the Smith Sisters Funeral Home with its flashing red lights turned on and a cot instead of a casket in the back, sounded its siren big and loud as it left Kettle. The ambulance didn’t slow down for our town’s only stoplight. About an hour later Phil called to tell me he had driven his Aunt Hanna Mae to the hospital in Huntington. Peyton had suffered a heart attack. The Christmas pageant came to mind, and how we laughed when Peyton looked into the red of his turban and thought he’d been hit with a heart attack. At the hospital Doc Simonton counseled Peyton that his heart attack could’ve been a lot worse; he’d be back to normal in a month or two.

After he got out of the hospital, Peyton often came into Buckingham’s and reflected on Doc’s counsel. One day he said to Phil and me, “You know, normal is a funny word. Normal after a heart attack just isn’t the same as normal before a heart attack. And now they got me on a strict diet. No more grits and butter. No more breakfast with sausage and gravy.” After a long pause he said, “No more ice cream.”

Ice cream may be something most folks can enjoy or not enjoy; take it or leave it. But for Peyton ice cream had special qualities. One warm summer afternoon he and I sat under the oak tree at Buckingham's while he slowly ate a cone of chocolate coconut ice cream. Peyton licked the ice cream and described the many taste sensations of chocolate coconut. "Freddy, it makes a difference if you eat chocolate coconut fast or slow. Fast will dull the taste of it. No sir, slow is the way to do it, and with two rolls of the tongue, one on the cream and one when you bring the cream inside of your mouth. That's the best method in order to appreciate the full flavor of chocolate coconut ice cream. The nuttiness of the coconut alters the impact of the chocolate on your taste buds.

"You may not realize it," Peyton went on, "but the differences between chocolate and chocolate coconut are greater than you might at first think." Once Peyton started to compare different flavors of ice cream it typically set off a lengthy lecture about the large and small shadings that separated the flavors of ice cream. I excused myself to go finish a chore Phil had asked me to do.

Now, on that beautiful day, Peyton, Phil, and Hartford had been sitting and talking under the oak tree for well over an hour. A few cars had come in for gas and I had taken care of them. I did some inside work, swept the floor under the lube rack and straightened up the tools on the workbench beside the rack. Every now and then I walked over to the oak tree for a little more of the conversation.

The talk turned to gardening and Peyton complained, "This season the birds seemed to get more enjoyment out of my sunflowers than Hanna Mae and I did."

Hartford smiled and replied, “I had the same problem. I rigged up a scarecrow with bottle caps attached to long pieces of twine I hung from the scarecrow’s arms. The bottle caps swang in the breeze and spooked the birds out of the garden.” Phil and Peyton nodded thoughtfully.

“I should’ve thought of that,” Peyton commented. “Anyway, seemed like I scared the birds away myself. We had so much rain, every time the sun came out I had to hoe the weeds out of the sunflowers. Out of the bean patch too.”

When Peyton said the word “hoe,” I knew what would come, I just didn’t know how long it would take. Peyton must’ve had the same thought. The moment he said the word his face resembled a scared rabbit, or at least a rabbit who thought he might be scared but had to wait to find out what would happen.

Hartford extended his legs in front of his chair, put his hands behind his neck, and arched his back. He exhaled the word “Well,” stretching it out as he stretched himself, then continued, “a hoe is a marvelous little tool. It can do many things. Though, of course, it has its limits. Sometimes a rake works better.” He turned to me and winked.

Peyton had a slight smile on his lips but it didn’t extend as far as his eyes. Along with Phil, I grinned, though with some sadness in my heart as I remembered what happened the night of the hoe and the rake.

Hartford spoke in a speculative manner and said, “Yes sir, I suppose a fellow could even use a rake to fight a raging house fire,” then he looked at Peyton and whooped a good belly laugh.

Peyton snorted a small laugh, “Hart, we’ve been through that a hundred times.”

One evening in November, nineteen and forty-six. Momma, Daddy, and I had been invited to dinner at the Gerlachs'. On the other side of the hollow from Peyton and Hanna Mae's place, below the Gerlachs', Mr. Gerlach had built a large log cabin as a summer getaway. He hadn't used it much. Most folks couldn't figure out why he had built it, only a hundred yards or so down the hill below his home. In nineteen and forty-four Mr. Gerlach sold the log cabin and a couple of acres to Phil Buckingham's newly married sister, Audrey, and her husband, Prescott Ben Blevins, their first home.

We had just set down to Mrs. Gerlach's roast beef dinner when the phone rang. After Mr. Gerlach said, "Hello" he listened for a short time, then turned to all of us at the table and announced, "It's Albert Higginbotham." Albert and his brood of little Higginbothams lived further up the hill. Mr. Gerlach listened for a few seconds then replied with concern, "We'll look into it Albert, thanks," and hung up. "Albert said there's a bright orange glow that appears to come from behind Audrey and Prescott Ben's place."

I jumped up from the table and ran to the front window and looked down the hill. "Holy cow!"

Daddy and Mr. Gerlach rushed to the window. Mr. Gerlach yelled, "There's orange light all right. Could be a fire!"

Daddy told Momma to call the Kettle Fire Department, and then Daddy, Mr. Gerlach, and I headed out the door. We ran down the hill to Audrey and Prescott Ben's place. Mr. Gerlach tripped and fell over a branch in the yard but Daddy and I kept on going.

The log cabin had no lights on and no cars in the driveway. Flames had crawled up the back wall of the house. Daddy spotted an outdoor water faucet near the far corner of the rear of the house. We searched for a garden hose but couldn't find one.

Daddy told me go back to the Gerlachs' and get a garden hose. As I ran up the hill Daddy yelled into the darkness and across the ravine towards Peyton and Hanna Mae's home. We had seen Peyton working in his garage when we drove to the Gerlach's. Daddy made his voice real deep and stretched out his words. "Pey-ton, Pey-ton," then again, "Pey-ton, Pey-ton." I wondered if Peyton would hear him. He might have gone inside the house; could be listening to the radio.

Peyton's voice returned Daddy's call, crossing the darkness of the hollow, "Yes, Gas-ton, Wha-at? Wha-at, Gas-ton? Wha-at is it?"

"Pey-ton, bring a hose, bring a hose."

No reply.

"Pey-ton, bring a hose, bring a hose."

"O-K. I'm com-ing."

I continued up the hill and ran into Mr. Gerlach. He said his hose had sprung bad leak at the end of the summer and he hadn't replaced it.

I ran back to the log cabin and reported to Daddy what Mr. Gerlach said. The flames grew larger. I wanted to do something, but had no way to fight the flames. I felt helpless.

But Peyton's hose would change things. Daddy stood near the outdoor faucet ready to go into action. I stood near Daddy and prayed with all my might for Peyton to bring that hose. "Come on, Peyton, come on, come on."

In the distance the fire siren on top the Kettle Police Station sounded long wails. Momma had made her call. But the firemen had to drive from their homes to the fire station, and then drive the fire truck the two miles from town to Audrey and Prescott Ben's place. That could take another ten minutes, and the flames kept growing larger and hotter.

After what must have been no more than two minutes but seemed like an hour, footsteps clapped across the small footbridge in the darkness of the ravine between Peyton's home and the Blevins's log cabin. I closed my eyes and prayed it for it to be Peyton with his hose. Sure enough, in the light of the flames Peyton appeared out of the darkness and ran up the hill towards Daddy with something long in his hands. Daddy stood at the faucet ready to connect the hose, like a runner at the start of a footrace waiting for the starter's gun.

Out of breath, Peyton gulped for air, cheeks red. He extended the object in his hands towards Daddy. "Gaston," he said, "I couldn't find a hoe, but here's a rake."

Daddy and I stared at the rake now in Daddy's hands.

Daddy tossed the rake aside, yelled, "Come on," and the three of us ran to the cabin's front door. Daddy put his shoulder to it, but the heavy oak door wouldn't budge. He moved to the window beside the front door and raised his foot to stomp through the screen and break the window. A boom sounded inside the log cabin and flames shot through the room behind the front door. The inside of the house first glowed blue, then bright orange as furnishings burst into flame. "Propane," Daddy yelled. Flames licked at nearly every window, like big angry dogs wanting to break out of their pen. We backed

off the porch and watched the house glow an ever brighter red-orange. Then the flames broke through a window, then another and another.

Peyton looked at his shoes and spoke sadly, "Sorry, Gaston. Freddy."

Daddy put his hand on Peyton's shoulder. "Well, Peyton, hose, rake, or hoe, it wouldn't have mattered one stitch. In fact we might have got ourselves in a peck of trouble. We could have been in there when that propane blew."

The distant siren of the Kettle Volunteer Fire Department's bright red truck became louder. The engine in the old truck, a nineteen and twenty-eight Ford, strained in second gear as it climbed the hill to Audrey and Prescott Ben's place. Behind the truck came a long column of cars with sirens and flashing red lights, volunteer firemen. Phil Buckingham once warned me, "Never step into the street when the fire siren is blowing. Those boys come at top speed, fixed on fighting flames."

The fire truck and cars roared into Audrey and Prescott Ben's driveway and spread across the front yard. The fellows hooked up a three-inch hose to the tank on the truck and began to pump water into the flames. Daddy walked away and said, "We might as well fight a brush fire with a water pistol."

The fire truck's water supply didn't last long. Ten years ago the town of Kettle had bought the truck, fully outfitted, at an auction. The old Ford had once been part of the fire department on Henry Ford's estate in Dearborn, Michigan. Folks in Kettle took pride in their fire truck, but it had been outfitted to fight fires where firemen had access to water hydrants, as they did in Kettle. Not country fires like this.

About the time the roof caved in, sending flames and a shower of sparks into the surrounding trees, Audrey Blevins arrived. She stood in the front yard, crying. Peyton walked over and put his arms around her.

Hartford stretched again and said, “Well, boys, I been sittin’ under this ol’ tree and jawin’ with you far too long. It’s noontime and my stomach’s startin’ to rumble. Iretta gave me some chores to do. I better get home and do ‘em.”

Phil snapped his fingers and said he forgot to put a bushing in a truck. He went into the shop.

When Hartford stood up Peyton looked at him with a sad expression on his face, and in a voice to match said, “Hart we’ve been friends a long time. Done a lot of things together.”

“Yep, Peyton, we have.”

Then Peyton stood and gave his friend a bear hug and patted him on the back.

Hartford’s eyes got big and a look of surprise passed over his face. He returned Peyton’s hug, patted him on the back and grinned. “See you ol’ buddy.”

Peyton had tears in his eyes.

A car pulled up to the gas pumps and I left the shade of the oak tree to wait on the driver. When I finished Peyton and Hartford had gone.

That afternoon, shortly after the clock at the bank chimed three, the phone rang. Hanna Mae asked, “Freddy, is Phil there?”

Phil spoke with her. Right before hanging up, he said, “Freddy will be there shortly.” Then he said, “Freddy, I’d like to finish the bushings job on that truck. Would

you take the pickup and drive to Aunt Hanna Mae and Uncle Peyton's place? She hasn't seen Uncle Peyton for a couple of hours. With his heart problems and all, she's worried about him. It's a nice afternoon. He's probably taking a walk in the woods. Take a look around. If you can't find him, stay with her until he comes back. I'll take care of things here."

I said, "Hey, it beats pumping gas." Phil laughed.

The station's old Dodge truck stayed in second gear all the way up the hill to Peyton and Hanna Mae's place. Then I nudged her into neutral and coasted down their driveway, past the brick outdoor grill Peyton built. The driveway looped around the garage, a separate building from the house. I parked between the garage and the back of the house. I started to knock on the back door but before my knuckles touched the wood Hanna Mae had the door open.

"Freddy, I'm worried about Peyton."

"Phil told me, Hanna Mae."

"He seemed to be in such an odd mood this morning. He asked, no, he insisted, that I fix grits, sausage, gravy, and eggs for breakfast. With his heart condition, I didn't want to do it. But he seemed fixed on it, so I did. I told him not to ask for this every day. He said I needn't worry about it. A couple of hours ago, he came back from town eating a cone of coconut chocolate ice cream. Then he told me he had some outside things to do, gave me a hug and went out the door. He never gives me a hug before he goes outside."

"He's probably just taking a walk. I'll take a look around." I walked up the driveway to the path across the front of the garden. Maybe I'd find some scuffed dirt or some other sign that Peyton had passed this way. I meandered along the Gruber side of

the ravine, the one Peyton crossed the night the log cabin burned. Then I turned and walked along the edge of the woods below the house.

“Peyton? Peyton?” I called towards the woods, loud enough for him to hear me, but not so loud as to disturb Hanna Mae. I continued around the lower edge of the front yard, then past the woods towards the small yard that trails over the hillside.

I had a cold RC Cola in the pickup truck, and walked back to get it. I opened the bottle and took a long pull on the RC. The carbonation made my eyes water.

The truck sat next to the single-car garage. Peyton might be in there – maybe his heart had acted up and he’d sat down. Even fallen asleep. It’s possible he could’ve passed out.

The double doors on the front of the garage had been left partly open. I walked in and looked around. The Chrysler took up most of the space. A heavy workbench extended across the far end of the garage, beyond the front of the car. Some shelves extended along each side of the garage and boxes had been stored in the overhead rafters.

I walked past the left side of the Chrysler towards the workbench, glanced inside the empty car. Then as I approached the workbench, two scuffed old brogans dangled in front of me. My knees buckled and I fell to the dirt floor. My chest constricted and my vision blurred.

Peyton hung with his feet dangling above the hood of the Chrysler. His head lay against his left shoulder. Just flopped over. His face had turned reddish blue. Until now, outside of a church or the Smith Sisters’ Funeral Home, I had never seen a dead man.

I ran into the yard and threw up. My stomach continued to heave long after it had emptied. I sat down with my back against the wall of the garage. My breathing finally

came back to something close to normal, but I couldn't stop my hands from trembling. Every time I shut my eyes I saw Peyton's dangling shoes and then his reddish blue face.

I walked back into the garage, steadying myself by placing my hand on the car. I looked up at Peyton and had thoughts of the morning, of Peyton, Hartford, and Phil, stories under the oak tree. Then I wept. In my crying, my stomach contracted over and over. I knelt and breathed in gasps. After a short time the gasps stopped, but when I looked up at Peyton they started again.

After I got myself under control I wondered what I should do. It seemed wrong to leave Peyton hanging there, and at the same time it seemed wrong to move him. I had to do something. Hanna Mae shouldn't have to see this.

I leaned my head forward against the wall of the garage and closed my eyes. "God, help me get through this. Give me strength to do what I have to do." I remained in that position for a full minute after my little prayer. Then I climbed up on the workbench and spread my feet and braced myself. I pulled Peyton towards me then lifted him until I supported his weight with my left arm. In right hand I had my Barlow pocketknife, the one Daddy gave me when I finished tenth grade. I reached up and cut the rope from the rafter, then gently lowered Peyton until his brogans touched the workbench. I guided his body as it slowly sank to the surface of the bench. I laid Peyton on his back then jumped down and poked around the shelves in the garage. I found an old blanket and spread it over him. My knees felt like old screen doors that'd come unhooked and moved back and forth in a strong wind.

I sat down, and leaned against the left front tire of the Chrysler, took deep breaths. I cried again. Afterwards I stared at the rounded blanket on the workbench and thought

about Peyton. Kidding him about his mustache, chores for Hanna Mae. His friendship with Hartford. Ice cream. Heart problems, then retirement.

My thoughts turned to Junior Don, Mary Sue, and Lucy – they didn't have a choice in their deaths. Why had Peyton done this? How would I tell Hanna Mae?

I dragged my heels as I walked to the house. The moment I stepped on the back porch Hanna Mae appeared at the kitchen door.

She looked at me then brought her hands up in front of her face and began to weep. Her body shook.

I put my arms around her. "I'm sorry, Hanna Mae."

She rested her head on my shoulder. Her sobs shook her body and mine. In between breaths she kept repeating, "I knew it. I knew it."

Then Hanna Mae took a step back, "Where is he, where is Peyton?"

"He's in the garage. I put a blanket over him."

"Was it a heart attack?"

In a shaky voice I said, "No, Hanna Mae, he did it himself."

Her knees gave way and she fell into a kneeling position. I gently lifted her up and led her to a chair. I placed a glass of water in front of her. "I'll call Doc Simonton."

After my call Hanna Mae said, "Freddy, I'd like to be alone for a few minutes."

I sat in the yard, leaned my back against the side of the garage. Hanna Mae once told Phil that she and Peyton had fallen in love as children, the first time they saw each other. There'd never been anyone else for either of them. I thought of Beverly, how we'd met in fifth grade. How much we loved each other. If we had a life together would it end this way?

I took off my Gulf Oil cap, shut my eyes, and wished for Beverly to be sitting beside me, holding my hand. I turned my face skywards. The warmth of the late afternoon sun soothed me – the same sun that had lit the morning’s blue sky and the gold leaves of the old oak tree beside Buckingham’s. “What can I do you for, Peyton?”

A day can be beautiful, but it’s not the whole truth about the day.