# What Bleak Land

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This morning I got a phone call from the contractor I hired to build our new house. He said his men had dug up a box while leveling the hilltop where the house is going to stand. It was a brass box, he said, and its lid had been soldered in place. Since it might contain something of value, he thought I should be there when they opened it. I told him I would drive out.

That’s one of the advantages of being retired. You can do anything you want to whenever you please. It’s also one of the disadvantages. You have too much time to do things, and more often than not, there’s nothing to do.

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I have not been retired very long. Only six months, in fact. Most people who live in this section of the country move to Florida to spend their “golden years.” I am not one of them. Years ago when my sister and I sold the land our father left us, I saved the highest hill. It’s a lovely hill from which you can see the lowlands and the lake, with maples and oaks and locusts growing on its slopes. I’ve hung on to it all this time, and now, having hung up my fiddle and my bow, I’m going to live on its crest.

I’ve never gone very far from the hill. The farthest was during WWII when the army, trying to make maximum use of my services, moved me here and there in the States and finally shipped me overseas. After the war I went to work for Houdaille Industries and moved to the city to be near my job and bought a house there. But the hill is where I’m going to live now, as soon as the house is built. I and my wife, Clair. We have no ties: Our children long ago grew up and got married and moved away. In the summer the land below us will be pied with daisies and Queen Anne’s lace. In fall there will be goldenrod and mayweeds and asters. In winter there will be snow. I may stagnate in my later years, but it will not be from an endless succession of hot, bright, dreary days that have but a single face.

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I asked Clair if she wanted to drive out to the hill with me. She said no, she had shopping to do. I took the throughway and got off an hour later at the Fairsburg exit. I drove through the little town, fighting off memories. The hill is only a mile beyond. I drove past the housing development that now occupies part of the land my father used to own. The hill rose before me, like a green and earthbound cloud.

The contractor’s heavy equipment had made a road of sorts up the slope, but I refused to jeopardize the undercarriage of my Caprice and got out and made my way skyward through the maples and oaks and locusts. The July sun beat down through the foliage and was hot upon my back, and I was sweating when at last I reached the crest.

A bulldozer was churning back and forth, leveling recalcitrant humps and filling in hollows. Bill Simms, the contractor, was standing by his pickup truck, talking to a big, burly man. Two other men were working on the motor of a backhoe. Simms walked over to meet me. “Glad you could come, Mr. Bentley. I guess we’re as curious about what’s in the box as you are.” He pointed to a ragged area near the edge of the leveled land. “It’s over there.”

We walked over the raw earth. The big, burly man followed. Simms said, “This is Chuck Blain, my foreman.” We nodded. The two men who had been working on the backhoe motor followed us, too.

The box had been pulled out of the torn earth. Verdigris had turned it green. It had been cast out of brass and was about sixteen inches long, about twelve wide, and about six deep. As Simms had said, the lid had been soldered into place.

I had never seen the box before; nevertheless, it struck a note ofdéjà vu . I said, “Let’s open it and see what the treasure is.”

Blain had brought a crowbar. He found a place where the solder hadn’t taken, and wedged the pinched end of the bar beneath the lid. He pried down, and the lid broke free. I knelt down and raised it.

When I saw what the box contained, I knew it was Rone’s.

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Rone was the only name we ever knew him by. If he had a first name, he never said so, and we never asked him. When I first saw him, I took it for granted he was just another bindle stiff. He looked like one—tall and gaunt and ragged, his face discolored by coal smoke. My mother thought he was one, too, when she came to the back door in answer to his knock. I was in the back yard, chopping wood.

Lots of bindle stiffs used to come to our door. The Pennsy and the New York Central tracks ran through Fairsburg and skirted our farm (they’re the Norfolk and Western, and Conrail tracks now), and when the freight trains stopped at the Pennsy or New York Central station to uncouple or couple cars, the bindle stiffs who rode the rails would sometimes get off outside of town and go around to people’s back doors, panhandling. Since they liked to keep a low profile, they usually stuck to the houses on the outskirts, and as our house was well outside of town and close to the tracks, we were sitting ducks.

Whenever one would come to our door, he’d stand there on the back steps holding his little bundle of belongings in one hand (I never saw one who carried his bundle on the end of a stick the way they were sometimes depicted in cartoons), and when my mother would answer his knock, he’d take off his hat and say, “Could you spare a bite to eat, ma’am?” My mother never turned any of them down. She felt sorry for bums. Sometimes some of them would offer to perform some chore in exchange for the handout. More often, though, they’d just walk away.

My mother fixed Rone a sandwich and gave him a glass of milk, and he thanked her and sat down on the back steps. I could tell from the big bites he took and from the way he gulped down the milk that he was half starved. He had no bundle of belongings, and the suit he was wearing, although ragged and dirty, looked as though not long ago it had been new.

It was a warm September day, and I’d just got home from school. It was hot chopping wood, and I spent more time resting than I did swinging the ax. After he finished eating, Rone opened the back door wide enough so he could set the empty glass inside, then he took off his suit coat, came over and took the ax from my hands, and started chopping wood himself. He had a narrow face, kind of a long nose, and gray eyes. I could tell from the way he was swinging the ax that he’d never chopped wood before, but he caught on fast. I just stood to one side and watched.

My mother watched, too, from the back door. He chopped and chopped and chopped. After a while my mother said, “There’s no need for you to chop any more. You’ve more than earned the little bit I gave you to eat.”

“That’s all right, ma’am,” Rone said, and set up another chunk of wood.

My father, who’d driven into town for chicken feed, pulled into the yard and backed the old beat-up truck he’d bought for twenty-five dollars up to the barn door. I helped him unload the two bags of feed. He was a tall, lanky man, but he was twice as strong as he looked and didn’t need my help. But he pretended that he did.

He looked over at Rone, “He chop all that wood?”

“I chopped some of it,” I said.

“Your mother feed him?”

“She gave him a sandwich and a glass of milk.”

We went into the house. My mother had just finished paring potatoes, and now she put them on to boil. She did all her cooking on a wood stove. “Hell,” my father said, “maybe we should ask him to stay to supper, too.”

“I’ll put on another plate.”

“You go out and tell him, Tim. And take that damned ax away from him.”

So I went out and told him and stood in front of him so he couldn’t chop any more wood. He leaned the ax against the woodpile. His eyes made me think of somber winter skies. “My name is Rone,” he said.

“I’m Tim, I go to school. I’m in sixth grade.”

“Oh.”

His hair—what I could see of it below the edges of his cap—was brown. It needed cutting. “I wonder if I could wash my hands.” He talked kind of slow, as though measuring each word.

I showed him where the outdoor faucet was. He washed his hands, and his face, too, and took off his cap and combed his hair with a comb he found in one of his shirt pockets. He needed a shave, but there was nothing he could do about that.

He put his suit coat back on and stuffed his cap into one of its pockets. I saw that he was looking over my shoulder. “Is that your sister?”

A new Model A had stopped in the road, and Julie had gotten out and was coming across the yard. The Model A drove away. Julie’s girlfriend was Amy Wilkens, and often after school she used to stop at Amy’s house instead of walking home with me, and sometimes Amy’s father would drive her home. He worked in the post office. We always thought the Wilkenses were rich. Compared to us, they were.

“How did you know she’s my sister?” I asked Rone.

“She looks like you.”

Julie glanced at him as she walked by. His presence didn’t disconcert her in the least, because she was used to bindle stiffs. She was only nine years old and real skinny, and it made me mad that Rone said she looked like me, because I thought she was homely. I was eleven.

After she went in the house, Rone and I went over and sat on the back steps. Not long afterward my mother called us to supper.

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Rone didn’t eat like a bindle stiff. I guess maybe the sandwich he’d wolfed down and the milk he’d drunk had curbed his appetite, and maybe that was why he didn’t grab. We had hamburger patties, and my mother had added water to their juice so we could put it on our potatoes. Rone kept glancing at her. I couldn’t see why. To me, she was beautiful, but I took it for granted that this was because she was my mother. She wore her dark brown hair combed back into a little bun on her neck. In winter her skin was milky white, but spring always added a touch of color when she planted her kitchen garden, and summer turned her skin to gold.

Rone had already told her and my father his name. “What part of the country you from?” my father asked.

Rone hesitated for a moment, then said, “From near Omaha.”

“Things tough there, too?”

“Kind of.”

“I guess they’re tough all over.”

“Please pass the salt,” Julie said.

My mother handed her the shaker. “Would you like some more potatoes, Mr. Rone?”

“No, thank you, ma’am.”

Julie looked across the table at him. “Do you ride the rails?”

He didn’t seem to know what she meant. “She means, do you ride under the freight cars so the railroad bulls won’t see you?” I explained.

“Oh. Yes, I did.”

“You know, that’s none of your business, Julie,” my mother said.

“I only wondered.”

My mother had baked a coconut cream pie. She served everyone a big piece. Rone took a bite of his. He looked over at her. “May I ask you a question, ma’am?”

“Of course.”

“Did you bake this pie in a wood stove?” He had seen the stove when we came through the kitchen.

“Well, I guess I must have,” my mother said, “since it’s the only stove I’ve got.”

“I believe,” Rone said, “that one of the main troubles with mankind is that they look for miracles in all the wrong places, while the miracles that are taking place beneath their noses totally escape their attention.”

Now who would ever have expected a bindle stiff to say something like that? I guess all of us just sat there and stared at him. And then my mother smiled and said, “Thank you, Mr. Rone. That’s the nicest compliment I’ve ever had.”

We finished the meal in silence. Then Rone looked first at my mother and then at my father. “I will never forget your kindness.” He got up from the table. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’d best be going.”

None of us said anything. I guess none of us could think of anything to say. We sat there listening to him walk through the kitchen, and listened to the sound of the back door open and close. Then my mother said, “I guess wandering’s in their blood.”

“I guess it is,” my father said.

“Well, I’m glad it’s not in yours.” My mother looked at Julie and me. “Julie, you can help me with the dishes. Tim, I suspect you’ve got homework to do.”

“Only just a little.”

“Well, the sooner you get to it, the sooner it’ll be done.”

I lingered at the table. So did Julie. We liked to keep abreast of things. I heard the rumble of a freight train. I listened for it to slow, but it didn’t. The house shook a little as it went by. Maybe the next one would have to pick up or leave cars in Fairsburg, and Rone could catch that.

My father said, “Emma, they’re starting to take grapes at the factory Monday, so I’ll be going back to work.”

“All those long hours again.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Mr. Hendricks said I could pick for him again this year. He’s going to start next week.”

“Maybe,” my father said, “we can get far enough ahead this year to buy you a gas stove.”

“We need too many other things, and the kids need clothes.”

Fall was always when we had lots of money, with my father working at the grape juice factory and my mother picking grapes. My father worked at the factory during bottling season, too, but bottling season was off and on, and spread out over the year, and at the most he’d work only a total of three months. But we always were able to get by because of the additional money he made raising string beans and corn and tomatoes. The farm wasn’t a big one, and most of it was too hilly to work, but what my father raised on the rest of the land was enough to keep us out of the poorhouse. Besides which, we had a cow and chickens.

I tried to linger at the table a little longer, and so did Julie, but it didn’t work, for my mother said, “Off to your homework, Tim. Julie, start clearing the table.”

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Julie and I used to have to walk to school before our father bought his truck. Then he began driving us into town every morning, but he still made us walk home, except in bad weather, saying the exercise would do us good. Before he bought the truck, our only means of transportation was an old Model T that kept breaking down all the time and that my father didn’t trust well enough to drive us to school in.

It was Julie’s turn to ride by the window the next morning, which was why she was the one to spot Rone. We were halfway between the farm and town when she cried, “Look, Dad, there’s a man lying under that tree!”

My father slowed to a crawl and looked out over her head. “Well, he didn’t get far, did he?”

He drove on. Then he put on the brakes and brought the truck to a stop. “Damn it!—we just can’t leave him lying there.”

After he backed up, all of us got out and went over to the tree. The grass was wet with dew. Rone was lying on his side and he had his cap pulled down over his ears and his coat collar turned up. He was shivering even in his sleep, because the ground was cold.

My father nudged him with his foot, and he awoke and sat up, still shivering. He should have hopped a freight by this time and have been long gone.

My father said, “You planning to stay around these parts?”

Rone nodded. “For a while.”

“Do you want to work?”

“I would—if there was any work.”

“Well, there is,” my father said. “For three or four weeks. This time of year the grape juice factory hires lots of men. They pay thirty cents an hour, and you get lots of hours. It’s on the other side of town. Why don’t you go there and ask for a job?”

“I will,” Rone said.

My father was silent for a few moments. I could tell from the expression on his thin face that he was trying to make up his mind about something. Then he said, “I know you haven’t anyplace to stay, so if you want to, you can sleep in the barn till you get your first pay.”

“That’s—that’s kind of you.”

“You go back to the farm and tell Emma I said for her to fix you some breakfast. I’ll drive you over to the factory after I take the kids to school.”

My father was softhearted. Most men would have driven right on by and paid no attention to Rone. I guess his softheartedness was why we were always so poor. Anyway, that was how Rone came to live with us that fall.

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Rone didn’t have any trouble getting a job. During pressing season the grape juice factory hired anybody who came along. Over the weekend he ate his meals with us and slept nights in the barn, and Monday morning he and my father piled into the truck and went to work. My mother had fixed each of them a lunch and had found another thermos bottle somewhere so Rone could take coffee, too. She had baked a cake Sunday and gave each of them a big piece.

It was after nine that night before they came home. Their faces and arms and hands were stained with grape juice, and their shirts were splotched with it. This was the way my father always came home during pressing season. His job was making “cheese,” and he said that this year the superintendent had made Rone his helper. The job paid thirty-five cents an hour instead of only thirty because it was so hard.

I knew all about the job because I used to take my father his lunch on Saturdays and sometimes Sundays, and I used to hang around and watch. When the grapes came into the factory, they were dumped from their crates onto a conveyor and sprayed with water as they were borne aloft to the kettles. They were then boiled till they turned into a juicy mixture of skins and stems and pulp. Then the mixture was funneled through thick rubber hoses to the ground floor, and my father or one of the other “cheese” makers would open and close the valve of his hose and fill press blankets that he and his helper spread out successively on flat wooden sheets. Each blanket had to be folded over its contents, and when the “cheeses” were piled high enough, they were put under one of the presses, where the juice was gradually squeezed out. It was no wonder the company paid thirty-five cents an hour instead of only thirty!

Rone and my father had supper in the kitchen. Julie and I stood in the kitchen doorway and watched them eat. They’d washed most of the juice off their faces and arms, but it still stained their hands. My mother had made dried-beef gravy and boiled a lot of potatoes. She had also baked another cake.

After he finished eating, Rone said good night and went to the barn. My father had fixed up a bed for him in the loft, if you can call blankets laid on hay a bed. He had also given Rone one of his razors, and since he and Rone were about the same height and build, a pair of his old work pants and an old shirt.

My mother began picking grapes the next day, so Julie and I had a lot of chores to do when we came home from school. This didn’t set well with Julie, because now she couldn’t goof off over at Amy’s anymore. She had to feed the chickens, and I had to milk the cow. I thought it should have been the other way around, because in my mind, milking cows was a girl’s job. But our mother had laid down the rules.

My father and Rone didn’t get their first pay for almost two weeks. Rone laid two ten-dollar bills down on the kitchen table when they came home from work that Friday night. “That’s for the two weeks I’ve been here,” he said to my mother.

“Well, you aren’t going to pay me ten dollars a week for board,” my mother said. “Five dollars a week is plenty.” She picked up one of the ten-dollar bills. Being in the vineyards had turned her face a deeper gold. Then she picked up the other ten. “You are now paid up for the next two weeks—if you still want to stay.”

“But even ten dollars a week’s not enough!” Rone objected. “I would have given you more, but I’ve got to buy some clothes.”

“I wouldn’t dream of charging you ten dollars.”

Rone tried to argue, but my mother paid no attention to what he said. Instead, she looked at my father and said, “Ned, since we’ve got a spare room, why in the world are we making Mr. Rone sleep in the barn?”

“I don’t know why.”

“It’s a real small room,” she said to Rone, “and the mattress on the bed is kind of hard. But it’ll be better than sleeping in the barn. Tim will show you where it is after supper.”

Rone just stood there looking at her. He didn’t sit down till she put the meat loaf she’d warmed up in the oven on the table.

After he got through eating, I took him upstairs to his room. It was real small, as my mother had said, and there was nothing in it but a bureau and a bed. He went over and touched the bed. Then he sat down on it. “It’s kind of hard, isn’t it?” I said.

“No,” he said, “it’s as soft as eiderdown.”

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When she got her pay two weeks later for picking grapes, my mother took Julie and me into town Saturday morning and bought us new school clothes. She also bought us overcoats and overshoes. My father was fall plowing, so Rone drove the truck. Pressing season was over, but neither he nor my father had been laid off yet, and they were working five days a week storing away the crates that had been let out to the farmers and all of which had been brought back.

The clothes and the overcoats and the overshoes put a big hole in my mother’s pay, and the school tax and the mortgage on the farm had already eaten a big hole in what my father had brought home, so we wound up almost as poor as we had been before.

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Once a month my mother would give my father and me a haircut, and while she was at it, she would trim Julie’s hair. But picking grapes had thrown her off schedule, and my hair was beginning to creep down over my collar, and my father’s was beginning to creep down past his. So I wasn’t surprised Sunday afternoon, after she and Julie did the dinner dishes, when she called my father and me into the kitchen and said it was time to shear the two bears.

She placed a chair in the middle of the kitchen floor and got out her scissors and her hand clippers. “You first, Ned,” she said, and my father sat down and she covered him up to the neck with an old sheet and pinned it in place. Then she set to work.

At first she used to give us awful haircuts, and the kids in school used to laugh at me. But they stopped laughing before long, because she got so she could cut hair better than a regular barber. My father looked like a new man when she got done.

“You’re next, Tim.”

After she cut my hair, she trimmed Julie’s. Although I always thought Julie was a homely kid, I could never stop marveling at her hair. It was the same color as my mother’s and, like hers, as soft as silk. It had grown so long this time that my mother had to cut off at least two inches where it hung down past Julie’s shoulders.

All this while, Rone had stood in the kitchen doorway watching. The somber winter skies of his eyes had acquired the faintest touch of blue. When my mother finished with Julie, she looked over at him. “You’re next, Mr. Rone.”

His hair was twice as long as mine had been. My mother always used to say when my hair got that long that I looked like a musician, but she didn’t say that to Rone. His hair was wavy, and she cut it so the waves on top still showed. Looking at him after she got through, I couldn’t believe he was a bindle stiff.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said when she removed the sheet. And then: “Why don’t you go sit down in the living room, and I’ll sweep up.”

And my mother did. That evening she made fudge, and all of us sat by the radio and listened to Jack Benny and Fred Allen.

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Early in November the weather turned nippy. Julie and I began wearing our new overcoats to school. There had been a hard frost, and the last of the leaves were drifting down from the trees. I couldn’t wait to see the first snow.

Julie borrowed a book from the school library titledThe Time Machine . She was always reading books that were too grown-up for her, so I wasn’t surprised when she showedThe Time Machine to Rone one evening and asked him if he’d read it and explain it to her. Somehow I wasn’t surprised when he said he’d already read it.

We were sitting in the living room. My mother was darning socks, and my father had dozed off. Julie climbed up on the arm of Rone’s chair.

He riffled through the pages of the book. “What Wells did, Julie,” he said, “was use the capitalists and laborers of his own age as a sort of springboard. That was how he came up with the Eloi and the Morlocks. You could say he took a class distinction by the horns and spread them farther apart by making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Factory conditions in his day were even more wretched than they are in this country right now. All of the factories, of course, weren’t underground, but enough of them were to give him the idea of putting all of them underground.”

“But he turned the laborers intocannibals !”

Rone smiled and said, “I guess in that respect he went a little too far. But he wasn’t really trying to predict the future, Julie. His main reason for writing the book was to attract attention to what was happening in the present.”

“What do you think the future really will be like, Mr. Rone?” my mother asked.

Rone was silent for some time. Then: “Well, ma’am, were you and I to predict the future with any degree of accuracy, we would first have to forget the wordextrapolation . We can postulate wars, yes—there will always be wars. But otherwise, too many unpredictable factors will enter into the equation for us to take what we know now and predict tomorrow on the basis of those facts alone.”

“What factors do you think might enter in?”

Again Rone was silent. Then: “You, your husband, and Tim and Julie sit here in this room, a family of four. And I, an outsider, have temporarily become part of it. Family life is almost indivisible from the present-day scheme of things. Were we to try to predict the future with that fact alone in mind, we would predict one in which family life remained intact. But suppose forces of which people have no inkling today were to manifest themselves and weaken the patriarchal-matriarchal harmony that holds this and other families together? Were to weaken it to such an extent that families were to fall apart? InThe Time Machine , Wells accredits the disintegration of family life to the disappearance of the dangers that, according to him, made it a necessity. But the appearance of new dangers would more likely be the cause. Suppose, for example, the moral code that people live by today were to atrophy? That new attitudes were to take the place of old? I don’t mean to imply that men and women today are saints—far from it. But the fact remains that divorce is uncommon. Part of this can be accredited to the fact that in many instances, people who want to divorce each other can’t afford to; but in most instances this isn’t true. People remain married to each other because theywant to. But suppose this Zeitgeist should change? Suppose people began to fancy themselves liberated in a new kind of way? Suppose, as a result of this, divorce became common? More and more children would then be brought up by a single parent and, in the case of remarriages, in two different households. Consider the effect this might have on their attitude toward family life.”

“But there’s simply nothing in the present on which to base such a prediction!”

“That’s what I meant, ma’am, about unpredictable factors entering into the equation. To carry my supposition further, the breaking up of family life could eventually lead to a greater and greater cynicism on the part of both the parents and the children. The construct of marriage might altogether disappear and family life along with it. The state might take over then, and instead of children being brought up by their parents, they would be brought up in institutions, their thoughts and actions molded by mentors incapable of love or affection. Family scenes like this one, which you and your husband and Julie and Tim take for granted, might he relegated to the past and all but forgotten about in the new society, or accorded a place in history no more important than the present-day price of eggs.”

My mother shivered. “You paint a grim picture, Mr. Rone.”

“Yes. It is quite grim. But it isn’t something that could happen overnight, and even after the process had been set in motion, it would be a long, long time before the new society came into being.”

He handedThe Time Machine back to Julie. “There’s something else I don’t understand, Rone,” she said. “How did the Time Traveler travel in time?”

Rone smiled. “Wells neglected to tell us, didn’t he? He couldn’t very well have, since he didn’t know. So what he did instead was mislead us with a lot of talk about time being the fourth dimension. Well, in one sense it is, Julie, but in another it may not be. The Time Traveler arrived in the future on the very same spot he’d set out from. But while he was traveling through time, Earth might have rotated beneath him—not much, for he was traveling fast, but a little. For instance, if he’d started out here, he might have arrived in the future five hundred miles west of here. So if he wanted to travel back through time to the same place he’d departed from, he would have to journey five hundred miles to the east, and then an additional five hundred miles in the same direction to compensate for the distance he would lose going back.

“But the complications might not end there. Traveling through time at a terrific rate of speed might very well create an eddy in the time stream, in which case the Time Traveler, before he returned, would have to wait till the time that had passed in the future or the past exactly equaled the time that had passed in the present. But aside from all this, Julie, time travel would be too complex an undertaking for one man to accomplish alone, and a simple time machine like the Time Traveler’s simply wouldn’t do the trick. If time is tied in with light, what the true time traveler would need would be a photon field whose controls were operated by other men. Using the field, the other men would cast him into the future or the past and, after he equalized the time and space he had lost, would use the field to bring him back.”

Most of this went way over my head. I knew it went way over Julie’s, too, but she seemed to be satisfied.

Rone got to his feet. “If you folks’ll excuse me, I think I’ll turn in.”

Julie stood up on the seat of the chair and kissed him good night. “Good night, Mr. Rone,” my mother said, and I said good night, too. My father was still asleep in his chair.

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The first snow fell in the middle of November. Julie and I wore our new overshoes to school. Rone borrowed my mother’s camera, bought some film, and in the days that followed began taking pictures. Neither he nor my father had been laid off yet, but I knew that soon they would be. I was worried that then Rone would leave, and I knew that Julie was worried, too. In one of her classes at school, the teacher had all the kids make Thanksgiving cards on which she instructed them to write down what they were most thankful for. Julie brought hers home to show my mother, and my mother showed it to the rest of us. It said:

I am thankful for:

My mother

My father

My brother Timothy

And Rone

On the front of the card, she had drawn a turkey, which looked more like a walrus than a bird, and colored it bright red. My mother hung the card upon the kitchen wall.

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My grandparents on both my mother’s and my father’s side had dinner with us on Thanksgiving. They didn’t like each other, but my mother was certain that since it was Thanksgiving, they wouldn’t get into any arguments. They didn’t, but I think that this was because they were united on a common front, rather than because it was Thanksgiving. They disapproved of our letting a bindle stiff live with us; and throughout the meat and afterward, they looked down their noses at Rone.

On Saturday morning of that same week, Mr. Highbee’s hardware truck pulled into the yard and backed up to our back door. My mother came out to see what Mr. Highbee wanted. It had snowed all night, a soft, wet snow, and Julie and I were in the back yard building a snowman. My father had gone into town for a bag of flour so my mother could bake bread.

Rone, who had been working on the tractor in the barn, came over to the house. Mr. Highbee climbed out of the truck. He was short and portly. “Good morning, Mr. Rone. I’ll need your help to carry it in.”

“First,” Rone said, “we’ll have to carry the old one out. Hold the door open for us, will you, Tim.”

I did. They set the wood stove down in the snow, and the snow made it look even blacker than it really was. My mother stood by the back steps, watching. Julie stood beside her.

Mr. Highbee opened the rear doors of the truck. We saw it then. “Hold the door for us, Tim,” Rone said.

They carried it in and set it down on the floor where the old stove had been. Sunlight slanting through the kitchen window bathed it in brightness, and its whiteness threw forth a thousand particles of light. My mother and Julie had followed me inside. Neither of them said a word.

Mr. Highbee went outside and turned the gas off. He brought wrenches and pipes and valves and a pipe threader into the kitchen, and he and Rone connected up the stove. Then Mr. Highbee went back outside and turned the gas back on. He said goodbye to us, and Rone helped him carry his tools back to the truck. We heard the truck drive away. We heard Rone come back in.

My mother was standing by the kitchen table. She hadn’t moved in all this time. “It’s not meant to be an insinuation that you don’t cook well, ma’am,” Rone said.

“I know,” my mother said.

“That right front burner needs tightening. I’m going out to the barn and get a six-inch crescent.”

After he went out the back door, I turned toward my mother. I was going to say, ‘Boy, now I won’t have to chop any more wood!’ But I didn’t, because I saw that she was crying.

\* \* \*

The following Friday both my father and Rone got laid off. Julie and I came down to breakfast the next morning with long faces. My mother had fixed oatmeal. She didn’t look at us when she filled our bowls. My father was standing before the back door, looking through the little window on top.

“Where’s Rone?” Julie asked. She was afraid he’d already gone. I was afraid, too.

“He took the truck into town. He had something made at the brass foundry and wanted to pick it up.”

“What did he have made?” I asked.

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

We never found out what it was, because when Rone came back, he didn’t tell us; and whatever it was, he must have hidden it in the barn.

\* \* \*

The weekend passed and the new week began, and when Rone said nothing about leaving, we began to think he was going to stay. Then Thursday night he came into the living room and said, “I’m going to be on my way.”

For a while none of us said anything. Then my father said, “There’s no need for you to go. You can stay with us this winter. As soon as bottling season begins, I’m sure I can get you a job.”

“It’s not just because I’m not working. There’s—there’s another reason.”

“Are you leaving now?” my mother asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But it’s snowing.”

“No, ma’am. It’s stopped.”

“We—we wish you would stay.”

“I wish I could.” The touch of blueness had vanished from his eyes, but they were no longer the same somber gray they had been before.

A train whistled. The sound seemed to stab right through the house. “I’ll fix you some sandwiches to take with you,” my mother said.

“No, ma’am. That won’t be necessary.”

He had his old clothes on. “Your new clothes,” my mother said. “Aren’t you going to take them with you?”

Rone shook his head. “No—I’m traveling light.”

“But the jacket you bought—you’ve got to take that. You’ll freeze in just that coat!”

“No, ma’am. It’s not that cold. . . . I want to thank you people for your kindness. I—” He paused. Then he went on, “I—I didn’t know there were people like you. I—” He paused again, but this time no more words came.

My father got up and walked across the room and shook hands with him. My mother went over and kissed his check. Then she turned her face away.

“You’ve still got a week’s pay coming,” my father said. “Can’t you give me an address so I can have them send it to you?”

“I signed it over to you.”

“I won’t take it!”

A smile tiptoed across Rone’s lips. “If you don’t, you’ll only be making the rich richer.”

All this while, Julie and I had sat in silence on the couch, unable to move. It was Julie who snapped out of her paralysis first. She ran across the room and jumped up and put her arms around Rone’s neck. Then I ran across the room, too. Rone kissed both of us. “Goodbye, you kids,” he said.

Julie was crying. But I didn’t cry. Not quite. Rone walked out of the room real fast. We heard the back door open. We heard it close. All we could hear then was the sound of Julie’s sobs.

\* \* \*

For a long time I lay in bed that night listening for a freight to slow as it came into town, but all the freights I heard rumbled right on by. Passenger trains never stopped in town at night, only in the morning. I heard one scream by in my sleep.

In the morning I got up before the sun came up, and after I dressed I put on my new overcoat, because it was cold outside, and my new overshoes. I followed Rone’s footprints in the snow. I could see them clearly in the dawn light. He hadn’t headed for the tracks; instead, he had struck off across the fields in the direction of town. About a hundred yards from the tree he had slept under, the footprints came to an end.

I stood there in the cold as the first rays of the sun shot over the land. Where the footprints ended, they were side by side, indicating he had come to a stop. Perhaps he had stood there for a while. It looked as though the snow around them had begun to melt and then had frozen again.

I thought at first that for some reason he might have jumped several feet ahead and then resumed walking. But the snow beyond the pair of footprints was unmarked. And then I thought, perhaps he walked backward, planting his feet exactly where he had planted them before. But if he had, I would have seen another set of tracks veering to the right or the left, and I had not. Besides, why would he have done such an illogical thing?

Somehow he had vanished in the night.

I stood there for a while longer, then I walked back to the house. I didn’t say anything about the footprints to my mother. It was better if she thought Rone had hopped a freight. I never said anything about them to Julie or my father either. Instead, I buried the footprints in my mind, and there they have remained for all these years, and it was not until I looked into the box that I dug them up again.

\* \* \*

I took out the album first. On the first page there was a photo of the utterly beautiful woman who had been my mother. Next to it was a photo of a lovely little girl and a little boy with corn-color hair.

Below the photo of my mother was one of the tall, lanky man who had been my father.

On succeeding pages were other pictures of my mother and of Julie and me. There were photos of the house, and there was a photo of the barn. There was one of the snow-covered fields and one of the highest hill.

Beneath the album I found a card with a picture of a walruslike turkey on it. I remembered that it had come up missing from our kitchen wall. I turned it over and read the words again:

I am thankful for:

My mother

My father

My brother Timothy

And Rone

There was a pair of socks my mother had darned for him. I found the razor my father had given him. I came upon a notebook. There was nothing written in it. Instead, flattened between its pages, were two locks of hair. One of the locks was dark brown and as soft as silk. The other was the color of corn.

He must have been robbed when he first arrived. I’m sure they wouldn’t have sent him back without specially printed money. Broke, he had had to ride the rails. Then he had had to wait till the eddy he had created in the time stream straightened out; till the time that had passed in the future exactly equaled the time that had passed in the past.

Maybe if we hadn’t taken him in, he would have starved to death.

He must have had orders not to take anything back to the future with him. And he must have been sent into the past for a reason. Or maybe just to find out what the 1930s were like. The way, perhaps, Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins were sent to the moon to see what the moon was like.

I looked at the album and the Thanksgiving card. At the razor and the darned socks. At the notebook, which I still held in my hands.

What bleak land did you return to, Rone, that made the memory of us so dear?

\* \* \*

I arranged the contents of the box exactly as I had found them and closed the lid. A long freight began rumbling by on the Conrail tracks. “Do you have a soldering iron and solder on your truck?” I asked Simms.

“You want the lid soldered back in place?”

I nodded. He didn’t ask why. “I haven’t got an iron,” he said, “but I’ve got a small acetylene tank.” He turned to one of the backhoe mechanics. “Dick, go get some solder and the tank. It’s not heavy.”

When Dick came back with the solder and the tank, Chuck Blain took over. It took him only a few minutes to reseal the lid. Then Simms turned to the other backhoe mechanic. “Larry, carry the box down the hill for Mr. Bentley.”

“No,” I said. I placed the box back into the hole it had been pulled from. I hope no one disturbs it again, Rone. I stood up and pointed to the bulldozer. “Tell the operator to bury it,” I said.