
EXPECTATION

The boy is eighteen, shrill and insistent. He wants to know who and when and how, and he wants his answers now. To him, it is simple. We are friends. I was there. I should tell. I have been a fool to think we were past the point of pure obligation, his or mine. In his company, I must always reassess. I knew his father. I should not be surprised.

And who better to ask than me, a specialist in conclusions? His mother hardly knew his father, nor does she have the perspective that I have. The boy's grandmother, his father's mother, by necessity, lives in a "facility" now. She greets visitors—the boy and I included—with a slow, cocked smile, a nod of momentary recognition, and a savage twisting of her rings before she turns away, back to her window, blank and staring. His father, his uncle, his grandfathers, his other grandmother—the rest of the boy's family—all dead, and I am not long. The knot in my gut has unraveled, the doctors say. The boy may suspect.

And even if he does not, he insists nonetheless, as he has always done in one way or another. When he was little and would lisp in my ear as I carried him on my back across his family's fields, he would point a stubby finger across my shoulder to a tractor crawling along the horizon. "Da?" he would pipe, precise and ruthless

to one still raw with memory. Then I could quietly say no and let it go at that.

Later, the questions began to appear again in the letters I encouraged him to write to me during the school year. Perhaps some memory of our walks and my hesitancy caused him to plant them half exposed, like stones that snag a plow, among his thoughts on the drudgery of multiplication tables and his triumphs at soccer. "Did my dad hate math?" "What sports did my dad play?" It is a lawyer's distinction, but I answered each directly, if not completely, then since I knew, even if the boy did not, the larger questions to which they led.

Now he believes he must march to sand and blood. Old men with motives no more revealed or understood than the boy's childish questions have told him they need him to avenge the lives lost and the souls pierced when the Towers burned and shattered.

He is energetic. He is altruistic. He is prey. The old men see him and his naive generation as instruments in the fulfillment of pride and the settling of scores. I know about old men and the way they treat young men, as he will see, but at his age, I cannot stop him.

And with his resolve, his curiosity has evolved into something direct, obsessive, blunt. I fear that he will become bitter that he must ask at all: "Who was my father? How did he die? Why?" And I fear even more his reaction when he finds that I have no better answer to the last question than anyone else. Still, he is owed, and accounting, if not reckoning, is the least we require of justice.



This much I do know: For a time around noon on only a few days early in June, Holoce County is encased in crystal. It is held fixed like a scene in an antique globe on an end table in an aunt's parlor. The soil's promise impels the land, stretching thin the air and nudging the sky deep into blue. Poised against that rim is an armada of white clouds that dapple the land in shadows below. There, inlaid among blocks of yellow wheat, green threads of young crops seam

thick stripes of black soil. Sunshine defines these facets; a low, steady breeze turns them to the light.

All this, you take in by looking straight ahead. The shimmering heat that blurs the vision later in the season has not yet arrived. But clarity's price at these moments is stillness. Birds forsake the sky. Their songs may ring off the landscape, like a moist finger pulled across a wine glass rim, but mar its surface with flight? They do not. Only men are conspicuous, carving and buffing soil yet another time. Their growling machines rattle the birds from their perches and bat them aggravated back into the sky.

Once in a while though, when they're young and maybe again when they're old, some realize the bargain that is offered. They will turn off their tractors, stand perhaps, and gaze. And in silence comes purchase. A few understand the yearning and feel no guilt when they must turn the key again. Fewer still feel no regret when the note comes due and they find they could never afford it in the first place.

It is not merely an old man's sentiment that causes me to begin this way. I have spent damn near fifty years in a profession that rewards observation, evidence, and logic. I have seen the farmers in my walks, I have stopped myself, and I would have the boy understand at least that much to balance the other.



The question then is how to proceed. I must be truthful this time and objective. Third person would be best, but I know myself well enough to make no promises and, at any rate, it is not enough. The testimony of the witnesses and the gossip of the town were, by necessity, neither entirely accurate or complete.

Still, my neighbors' ways do help. In Holoce County, we are given to prefacing our small daily judgments with "I 'spect." "I 'spect he's gone to town." "I 'spect she's pregnant." Whether we expect or suspect is not always clear, even to someone like me who's lived here nearly all his life. Sometimes it seems both so that neither the "I

reckon” or the “I guess” we occasionally use in its place is adequate. “I speculate” is accurate but affected. “I imagine” comes closest to the mark. Therefore, I imagine:



On one of those painfully clear days in June, in the year before you were born, a redwing blackbird bobbed on a cattail that topped a deep drainage ditch that cut one boundary of your grandfather’s farm. The bird had turned its attention from insects to a tractor lumbering toward it in the distance. Through the wire fence separating the ditch from the field, the bird could see the machine weave. The blades of a cultivator the tractor pulled diligently carved dollar signs across the parallel tracks of the packed-clay lane. The engine complained against the drag, and the bird’s head jerk-turned with each belch and groaning surge. As the nose of the tractor snagged and stretched fence wire, a locust post bent, snapped, and exploded in splinters. Instinct conquered curiosity. The bird leaped from its perch in blurred flurry of scarlet and black.

A front wheel dropped over the edge of the ditch and the equipment keeled with a gentleness that belied the whump when it hit the ground. Driven by the force of wheels that still turned, the tractor ground to the bottom of the ditch and jackknifed back into the cultivator. A blue, billed cap tumbled out of the wreckage and into the mud at the bottom of the ditch. Given everything else that happened afterward, perhaps it is some small comfort to know that by that time, in the opinion of the coroner, your uncle was dead.

RELIANCE
