

Buried

by Joseph Thompson

Rachel stretched out her arm and pulled the hanging switch on her bedside lamp. In the soft warm incandescence, she saw Sydney standing at the foot of the bed. He was naked.

A yell scraped through her throat with deep diaphragmatic force and in an instant, as if her cry were the inanimate whistle, which calls men out of their idleness and into the grind and halt of their industrious activity, the motion in the room appeared purely mechanical. The circular pivot of Sydney's body corresponded in swiftness and direction to Lawrence's sporadic and erect movement; he had woken up already leaving the bed. Thus, as Sydney left the room, Lawrence was at the foot of the bed, and their invisible tandem kept them equidistant as they raced through the unlit house.

And as Lawrence reached the foot of the bed, Rachel called out of the same depths from which her initial shock came, "Lawrence, the gun!" And as he left the room, he reached out his arm with indistinct momentum and grabbed the dusty shotgun off its rack just outside the door.

The sounds of stumbling and the banging of doors could be heard coming from the dark hall through the bedroom door. Rachel listened to this with rapacity of breath and repetitive shudders and then there were the shots.

The first report startled her and a short high-pitched cry escaped her lips. Momentarily another could be heard. There were no more after that, but this did not matter: Rachel stopped listening. She knew without much discourse that he could only be firing at the darkness; there was nothing outside could be seen. She

sat up with her head bent forward, creating small spinal ridges, which found the headboard at tangential points and did not listen. Even the sounds of Lawrence's return through the house, the slow righting of furniture and the squeak and bang of doors, windows and locks fell on her ears unheard and she only became aware of their moment as Lawrence emerged out of the dark hall and into the lamplit room.

He walked in and looked at her from where he stood just inside the doorway. Her eyes were turned to him blankly, with vacant inquisition and he breathed deeply as he shrugged his shoulders, shook his head and walked over to her.

He sat down on the bed beside her and she gazed stolidly at the floor. Dark shadows fell on her face as she leaned away from the lamplight and laid her head on her husband's shoulder. The soft rustle of bedsheets and a gentle breeze filled the room with noises and in this near-quiet, Rachel muttered her curses.

"Damn him," she whispered in earnest exhaustion.

Lawrence moved to look at her face, which was turned toward some blank dimension outside the space of the room.

"Damn him," she repeated in soft and steadier pronunciation. "Damn that goddam boy." Her words seethed out of her teeth.

She wept thick, heavy moans with hard syllables, continuing to curse the young man, whom she did not recognize at first in that citrine lamplight revelation.

Lawrence's shoulder grew damp with her tears. He held her close and said nothing. His face was marked with trepidation and amazement, lost.

Her sobs grew quieter and she no longer spat damnation. At last, Rachel was quiet and her breathing grew regular and finally slept.

Lawrence reached slowly down to the bed and took a fistful of the sheets into his grip. He pulled them up around his shoulders, slowly, deftly, with care not to disturb her.

He spread his arms around his wife and wrapped her and himself into the sheets, enveloping each and all in the soft shell of linen and thin corduroy. He breathed deeply and stared out through the window, out past the dim shadows of the garden fence and the young poplar, out past the thin rows of low-lying crops that stretched on and on in impressive acreage, out to the horizon where he set his gaze and waited for daybreak.

Before the sun came up, Lawrence quietly lay his wife down into her pillows and rose from the bed. He had not slept after the youth's appearance. Quietly, he set about getting dressed and after a short time stepped out of the house into the cool summer morning.

In the grey predawn, Lawrence could make out the dim figures that surrounded his house. The barn stood out in the dark silhouette against the paling sky and in the west tall pines stood in indistinct clusters. The sun, rising over the curving earth, lighted their very tips. They stood like candles in small bunches and the light traveled slowly down their lengths like a flame consuming wax and wick.

Lawrence squinted against the dimness. He stood still and surveyed the illuminated land. It was mostly quiet; the whistling melodies of the birds were lost in distraction and disregard.

Inside the house, he heard the bathroom sink running and the irregular splash and shock of water in the basin and thought of the regularity in her waking motions.

The sun was slowly emerging and more distinct shapes could be seen in the burgeoning daylight. Lawrence looked out at the south gate, which stood at the end of the long, rude pathway that led in semi-straight lines to the porch. A dark spot lay underneath the gate, oblong and irregular.

Lawrence slowly moved down the lane. The birds were livelier now and the air was filled with the persistent drone of cicadas and bees. The soft shuffle of Lawrence's feet kicked up small clouds of dust, which clung to his scarred leather boots and the hem of his jeans.

He stopped a few yards from the gate and looked down at the dark misshapen spot, then kicked at it. The dust enveloped and dissolved into it, lightening its color; the spot thickened into something turbid: blood.

Lawrence lifted his hand to the latch and slowly drew it back. The cicada had not stopped their loud alarm, but the bees were not to be heard since he had moved away from the bushes.

Lawrence unhurriedly opened the wooden gate. As it arced along its path, creaking on its hinges, something scraping in concomitant motion was heard, increasing in volume and soon the gate opened wide enough for revelation. A foot leaning against the gate lost its support and fell to the ground with a soft thud, throwing up a small cloud of grey dust.

Sydney's strong, naked body was lying on the ground before him. His limbs were splayed awkwardly, indicating a vain attempt to catch himself as he fell from the top of the tall gate. His face lay in the soft dirt and the blood was dark

and muddy around him. On his back, the well-defined shotgun wound was contrasted to his pale skin, like the single blossom of a chrysanthemum, whose petals, compounded in the center forming a dark and solid mass, expand outward more and more distinctly in random and radial spray.

The front door opened behind him and Rachel stepped out onto the porch, calling his name. He turned and saw her coming toward him. He moved quickly toward her, vainly releasing the gate, for she had already seen. The gate swung slowly against its spring concealing the body. It banged against the jamb as Rachel's limp frame fell into the strong arms of her husband.

Sydney's final moments came hurriedly and not merely contradicting his expectations but occurring beyond any conjecture yet formed in his imaginings. Thus in rapid and grasping recollection he retraced the moments of the night.

He lay on his face in the coarse, talcy dust outside the gate and his blood thickened the earth beneath him. His right arm stretched out in a straight line with his body, pointing out past his head in the direction of his unsuccessful flight. His other arm lay at his side, bent at the elbow and his hand was spread out near his face. This positioning gave him the look of a sleeping child whose fingers escape the security and warmth of its small mouth in somnolent movement. His leg was propped up against the wooden gate for he had not been pushed down far from it.

The first recollection did not reach far back, but was merely a repetition of the shock of falling, a reconfirmation of his new condition. He remembered how the inversion of scope, where the horizon sat erected perpendicularly to his perspective, was incomprehensible and how he tried to pick himself up and run

on. Then he had stretched out his fingers in tension and he clutched the ground for support, but his body denied him leverage.

Though he could feel his limbs in their various positions, he could only grasp their weight. Thus, it was the disparity of his strength in proportion to this new gravity which revealed the incapacitation of his body and pointed to its harrowing cause.

And then he recalled the thunderous snarling, which in like time bonded to his movement off the fence, that sounding which simultaneously brought him to rest on the cool and receptive earth and *this, too*, he thought, *must be the heaviness*.

His mind turned back along that path of flight to its origin and he saw her face in the lamplight turn from inquiry and passive receptivity to anger and fear. And his backward-moving recall recrossed the dark spaces of the house, through which he fled, thinking, *What? What?*

His face now trembled with the grasping motion of his eyes in ponderous attempts to bring to light the events in his dark consciousness and his breath was violent and hungry.

And he remembered how he was not even yet over the gate, how he still straddled it almost, with one leg on top of the frame and his hands like an Olympic racer before the gun and how he was pushed by that compounded force of small bodies over the fence as if on a lateral axis, so that he fell and landed on his face, like the door of a cellar being blown shut by the wind. But he, now and muttering, out of breath, managed, "I guess...I guess it was luck, I guess."

And, now in remembering, he had heard the second shot fly past him overhead and the staccatoed crack of stray shot on the wooden fence posts. Then

his breathing was soft and untroubled and there were dark, dry lines on his face where the dust and tears commingled and rested.

He muttered inaudibly to himself and looked off across the dark line of the horizon. There, out in the distance, he saw headlights. He watched them move along their linear and invisible path but he did not have the strength to turn his head to follow their motion and soon they were out of sight.

Blood trickled from his mouth more slowly now and he licked it off his lips in slow, dry motion. The soft smack of his wet lips could be heard when softly, audibly, gurgling, he said, "Well...well, I never..." Shortly after this, he died.

Coming to, Rachel saw no more than the large blue swallowing expanse of sky and then her husband in the periphery looking down with care.

Then his hand was under her pressing upward and she, cooperating, gained equivalence with her surroundings. Lifted, she rose and the scenery gave her position, resurfacing the vague spectacle of Sydney's corpse lying just beyond the gate. Then, she could see him, too, in the space beneath, though the image was incomplete; the rough-cut edges of the worn door guarded most of his body from sight. But she saw his pale bloodless uncoloring and shape as well as the dark staining outline amassed around him.

Her face had no shock or scandal but the hard yet passive consternation of paradoxical comprehension.

"You didn't know it did you? Tell me you didn't," she asked, her voice dry and lacerated. And though she did not take her eyes from Sydney's body, she

caught the shake of her husband's head, denying culpability, affirming remorse. "I know it. I had to know it," she replied. "Baby, what happened?"

But this to nobody, though, Lawrence looked up at her; sharp lines of jaw and nose, which ran almost parallel off her face. He formed questioning words on his lips and began the out-rushing syllable of a breath but then she spoke again.

"How could he? This is our home." She was not angry. Her brows bent up and outward, matching the deep sloping of her shoulders and frame in positive gesture of deepest sorrow. "Dammit, Lawrence, it was his."

They sat and the dry breeze came in and their clothes already began sticking to their skin underneath, which responded to the moist and saturated wicking and collection of air.

Then slowly she moved forward, onto her knees and then her hands so she was then crawling. Lawrence moved, as well, upon one knee now and placed his hand on her back and the other ready to catch her in falling. But she moved out of his reach. His hand slid off the soft thin fabric of summer dressing she wore and he watched her crawling slowly toward the gate.

She reached it and looked under, lying low to the ground. She saw his face, stained by dark channels of tears and dust and she reached out her hand through the small space between wood and earth and held his foot in her small, dirty fist. She laid her face to the ground and looked at him and the oblong admixture of blood and dirt smeared her forearm where it lay under her reach.

Lawrence heard her.

"Stupid boy, I'm sorry. Child, forgive us. Oh you poor stupid boy, don't anymore be angry."

The tight vehement clutch left no mark on the young man's foot when she let go. She drew back her hand and lay in the dust weeping.

Tears fell down Lawrence's face in slow acceleration down the long rise and fall of his cheeks and he called his wife's name several times in the cupping of his hands against his face. He heard the shift of silent earth and the short rattling conversation of the gate between its latch and hinges and looked to see her sitting now against it looking back at him.

"What do we do with him, Lawrence?"

He stood up slowly, laboriously, and looked around, squinting against the morning brightness. The trees in the west were fully lit and all around there was the buzzing activity of industrious insects. He looked out to the large magnolia tree that stood behind the barn and pointed.

"Let's put him under the magnolia." His voice was choked, unpracticed. He walked over to her and took her by the hand, lifting her up from the ground and he held her there.

She spoke into his shoulder, "He came back though, didn't he? I knew he'd come back to us." And together they opened the gate and stepped around his naked body. Squatting they took his arms over their shoulders each and held the other's in Roman fashion behind his back and carried him such through the gate and down the path into the large field, which led to the barn. His feet dragged through the dirt and then also the trimmed grass without much noise and finally they lay him down awkwardly, lovingly against the thick dark trunk so that he sat up in dead rigidity. His front side was smeared with blood and dark streaks of soil.

Lawrence left to get a shovel and Rachel made off to the house for a hymnal or maybe a prayer book. They returned, not long gone. The sun was higher now and shone like a diamond in soft azure, cloudless and clear. But in the shade, they stood under the cool protection of the thick waxy leaves; the bright thick petals and blooms having long since blossomed.

Lawrence had a pickax too and took it up marking out a plot and then set to breaking the dry ground. Rachel walked about, flipping through her hymnal and found an old revival hymn and began to sing:

Just like a tree

That's planted by the waters

I shall not be moved.

She repeated the chorus again and again, walking around the tree, into the sunlit periphery and back again into the shade, picking up sticks and small rocks for a marker of sorts and Lawrence dug into the ground and she walked and bent, singing still against the shuck and scatter of disturbed earth:

Like a tree by the waters

I shall not be moved.