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## Gravel

by Cassidy Norvell

My hand was on the horn, and if Hap didn't emerge from his doorway in three seconds, I was going to let it blare for all the neighbors and their dogs to hear. We had been going on these midnight excursions to the abandoned feed mill on Jack Bailey Road ever since we were kids, and this was the first time I had ever had to wait on Hap. Usually, I only had to stop the truck long enough for him to slide into the seat next to me, grinning like he always did when he knew he was doing something he shouldn't. That night, I wondered if maybe he had done something wrong.

Fowler's Feed Mill had always been mine and Hap's place. We first became mystified by it when we would go there with our fathers. It was still open then. We were maybe six years old, and as any pair of mischievous six-year-old boys would do, we would always sneak off and play. It was a perfect place for hide-and-seek. When that got old, we didn't even have to build forts. We would just cower behind enormous sacks of feed and shoot each other. When one of us, usually me, would accidentally-on-purpose rip a hole in the bottom of a sack and let a pile of grain form on the floor, we had something better than any sandbox. Just as soon as Hap would get all but my face buried in feed, his dad would find us.

"You boys better get out of there." Dragging Hap by his collar and looking back at me as I dusted off my pants leg, "C'mon, Gabe. Fowler doesn't want kids in here for a reason." I never really knew what that reason was.

Fowler closed the mill down not long after our dads started bringing us along. Maybe we emptied too many sacks of Sweet Feed.

Hap and I rediscovered the mill the night I talked him into stealing his dad's truck just for kicks. We were fourteen, and Hap had no business driving. I thanked God every time we made it past a pair of oncoming headlights, but when he whipped onto Jack Bailey Road,

never hitting the brakes and barely missing the road-bank, my life flashed before my eyes. Frantically grasping at the slick dashboard and fighting the urge to pee down both legs, I convinced him to pull off into the gravel lot of the feed mill. "Here, Hap! Stop here! Now!"

After the dust from the gravel settled and our hearts went back to where they were supposed to be, Hap finally spoke. "Hey, Gabe?" I thought he was checking to make sure I was still there.

"Hm?" I grunted, still clinging to the dashboard.

"Isn't this that feed mill that our dads used to bring us to? Remember, we'd run off and always get into trouble." The lettering on the sign was weathered, but I could still make out the name, thanks to the burning headlights of the truck.

"I believe it is."

We told ourselves it was for old time's sake when we got out of the truck to see if we could get inside that shell of a feed mill, but it was more a matter of keeping our minds off knowing that we'd surely be beat within an inch of our lives when we got home.

I've noticed something in all my years: When guys experience any kind of emotion at all, we tend to express it by throwing something. If we score a touchdown, we thrust the football at the ground. If a girl rips our heart in two, we sling any object we can get our hands on. Then there is the obsession with hurling rocks because they are there. We skip rocks. We forget the skipping altogether and just see if we can clear the river or lake. And if there are old windows that have yet to be broken out, we're bound to chuck rocks at them until we've left our own personal holes in the glass.

Between the two of us, we had to launch something like seven rocks from the gravel lot before we made our mark on the mill. After that display of masculinity, we did about the least adventurous thing possible. We opened the front door. It was unlocked. It was always unlocked. It baffled me that there were no markings to warn

trespassers. And for the next seventeen years, not a soul ever bothered us. No one threatened to demolish the broken-down building. It was almost as if there was some sort of cosmic understanding that it was ours.

Finders, keepers.

From that night on, any time we'd come across a pack of cigarettes that needed smoking or some firecrackers that needed to be set off, we'd walk out there and take them with us. As we got older, if there was a party that needed throwing, we'd send everyone out to Jack Bailey Road. Hap and I sowed all of our wild oats in the dirt floor of Fowler's old mill. But the mill was more than just a place to wreak havoc.

As we became men, the mill became more of a safe haven. Since Hap's house was between mine and the mill, I would normally come by, pick him up, and we'd head out. About once a week or so, we would go out there just to get away from it all. There were no crying kids or leaky sinks at the mill. There were no bosses to please or townspeople wanting this, that, and the other. There were just gusts of the night air that rattled the tin roof, asking for nothing more than for me and Hap to stir in the musty mill.

As I headed out the back door one night, I could feel the rusty screen of the storm door against my fingertips and the concern in my wife Sandy's sigh press on my shoulders. When I looked over my shoulder, she was drying her hands with the dishtowel and looking at me with curious eyes. "Just what do y'all do out there?" Maybe she didn't believe me when I told her that all we really did was sit out there for hours telling stories, telling lies, and telling the occasional truth. Maybe she thought I was running off to the next town to meet up with some lover. I guess it was an odd habit for two fellas to keep. I kissed Sandy on her forehead, told her I loved her and that I'd be back later, and slipped out the door to go get Hap, quietly pulling the door to as to not wake the kids up.

Every once in a while, one of us would even cry. When we were kids,

those moments were few and far between, but as time passed, things changed and so did we. Caroline Yates broke my seventeen-year-old heart, and I broke Sue Ellen Ramsey's. A long line of girls on the cheerleading squad, yearbook staff, and academic team broke Hap's, but a waitress from the Whip 'n' Dip named Debbie stole it. Hap and Debbie married, and for years, they tried to have children. When the doctors found the cancer in her body, they stopped trying. Now, Sandy and I brought more than enough kids into this world, and if Hap really wanted some, I would have lent him a few. My mother made me promise her, just moments before her tired lungs pushed out their last breath, that I would keep an eye out on Hap. "That boy's going to need you." I guess she was right. He needed me more than he needed my kids. For all of these reasons, salty tears slowly nourished the feed mill floor.

During those long months when Hap's wife was in the hospital, when the walls of her room started closing in on him and the space of the house was intimidating, he would call me up, and I would spend a big part of the night at the mill listening to him tell me about her. As she grew weaker every day, we began going to the mill every night. I didn't do a whole heck of a lot of talking those nights as he told me all of this. I would sit with him on the old counter. I would listen to Hap fall apart. I would listen to the counter creak and groan, threatening to collapse beneath us every time one of us shifted our weight.

He told me how her frail body was almost unrecognizable, lying in that impersonal jail cell of a hospital room. He told me about how he would bring fresh flowers to her room every morning. Even though the tubes seemed to drain the life out of her rather than replenish her, she was able to muster a smile of appreciation. When he spoke of that smile of hers, I was almost able to see it reflected on his face. He loved her, and she loved him. She just couldn't say it.

He told me that as soon as any of those flowers began to wilt, to show the slightest sign of giving up, he would quietly whisk them out of the room and into the dumpster behind the hospital. He would bring more in the morning. He told me that he prayed, as he tossed each

vase of feeble flowers out, that he could have one more day to buy flowers.

Hap stopped buying flowers just three days after he and I sat there until golden hints of morning peeked in at us through the cracks in the mill walls.

For several nights after her funeral, Hap didn't want to go to the mill. I couldn't blame him, but it worried me, him being in that house all by himself. But I didn't push the issue. It just seemed to me that when something was wrong, or something was right, we'd go out there, have a beer, and become wise, old men. So sometimes I would go by myself, but I couldn't bring myself to go in. I'd never been inside without Hap, and it just didn't feel right. I would sit in my truck and watch the chickens for a while. Even though the mill had been shut down for two decades, Wilsey Gaines' chickens from down the road still roamed that vacant lot pecking for corn, but all that grain must have been long gone, all pecked away or decayed. I think they just pecked at the gravel. I remember my grandmother telling me that once, that chickens swallowed bits of rock. It helps them digest.

Within a month, Hap was ready to go back. "Gabe, I can't keep myself holed up in this old house too much longer. I gotta get out. Can we go on out there to the mill?" I assured him that we could, hung up the phone, and grabbed my keys.

Going out to the mill was like clockwork again. He was so eager to get out there, to find that familiar comfort in aged lumber of the mill walls, I suppose. Every night at 10:35, right after the Channel 9 Nightly News went off, I was in his driveway for no more than two seconds, enough time for him to hop in. He never missed a night. Sometimes, I wished that he would. Those every-night trips almost became a burden. Sandy's sighs kept getting heavier when I'd get up from my recliner and turn the television off. I knew instead hanging off at a run-down mill every night, I should have been at home with my wife and kids, but instead, I remembered what my mother had said and kept an eye out on Hap. He needed me. He needed me and the mill to keep him company.

For the first time, Hap was quiet. It seemed like forever since I had been the one talking when we were at the mill. It was always him who talked, but he had run out of things to say. He had already said everything he could about Debbie, and now she was gone. Hap seemed very content with just listening to the icy rain beat and rant on the leaky tin roof, but the air that was heavy with coldness and indifference made me nervous. So I talked, but I felt like everything I said was wrong. "Sandy wants me to build the kids a tree house," I offered. Wife and kids. Hap didn't have either one.

Hap watched a steady stream of rain pour from the rafters and form a puddle in the floor between us. There was an eroded place from the wear of time and running water, smoothed and wallowed away by the current. "Oh, yeah? You need help?" I was surprised he had even heard me, for he had seemed nearly possessed by the water, like he was mad at it for coming in and he could stop the flow if he stared at it hard enough.

"Sandy said I should use some of the lumber from this mill. I think it was her hinting that we need to tear it down." I looked at the sage walls. They looked like they could come crashing down any minute. "Maybe we should doze this thing over."

Hap kept staring at the water, almost suggesting that all that water had surely rotted the wood out. No, you can't do that, he seemed to say.

"But none of this wood would be sturdy enough to build a tree house with, anyway."

A silence fell again, and I checked my watch. It was 11:19. The rain had quit pounding down, and the stream of water was slowing down to a drip. And then it stopped, so we went on home.

I went ahead and honked, examining the warm, yellow light that came from every window in Hap's little house. He was still keeping all the lights on to fight the loneliness, but there was no sign of his

lean shadow stirring. Where on earth is he? I thought as I killed the engine.

Hap's driveway crunched under my boots. It was late November, and we were a couple weeks past the first frost. The gravel glistened in the glow of the security light. Frozen stillness. I neared the house, expecting to feel the warmth that seemed to radiate from it. Despite the cold, I was surprised to see my breath when I called out his name.

I climbed his frosty back steps and knocked on the door. "Hap?" I listened, but all I could hear was the lonely, persistent buzzing of the security light. I tried the door, but it was locked. It finally occurred to me that he wasn't there. I hadn't noticed that his truck wasn't in the barn.

Before I even neared Jack Bailey Road, I could see the glow. I wasn't quite sure what was going on, but my heart dropped with my foot onto the accelerator. And for a split second, as I swerved onto that country road, I was fourteen-year-old Hap driving his daddy's truck with fear pumping through my veins. I slid into the lot, paralyzed by the hungry flames that had already devoured the feeble old feed mill and were licking the sky, begging it to quench its thirst.

Years later, when my heart returned to its place and the news went off, I drove out to where the ashes of my childhood, my wild oats, my tears, and my best friend had finally settled. I threw some rocks from the gravel lot. At nothing in particular. Isn't that what we do to express our emotion? I believe it is.

### **About The Author**

Cassidy Norvell is an English education student at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky.