

In Harvest Teach

J . R . P A T T E R S O N

The spring Granddad died there was hardly any rain. The country seemed to go with him, the land tightening at the edges, puckering from thirst. As we lowered him down into the hardpan, the soil pile beside his grave was nothing but dry crumb. Scuds of it lifted with the wind and blew onto the newly sown fields beyond the graveyard. There was none of the usual promise of rebirth in that warm spring air. Winter had gone out wolfish, hard and cold. The snowpack had long blown away. Everyone felt very wise saying it would work out in the end, in just the same way they said “Nice day,” no matter what was going on. Father said neither, especially where his own crops were concerned. *Goddamn-motherfucking-sonofabitch* was all he said about that.

Father wasn't inside much then. That spring he spent almost two months prowling the fields, looking for some sign the crop would come out all right. By the time I woke every morning, he'd already be gone, out walking over the black loam, cooking under the rising sun that was already too hot, kneeling here and there to scratch in the dirt with the folding pocketknife he'd taken from Granddad's effects. Mother said many things when he was out there. She said that he was praying for the wind to carry in some clouds that would bring along a change, to make everything whole again. That he was using his special farmer's eye to see how the seeds were sprouting. That he, more than most, needed his time alone. “Alone” I took to mean “away from us.”

When he came home each evening, he came in parts: a cloud of fine dust behind him, ahead of him a spear of low and steady words, less like

a prayer than a curse. *Fucking-goddamn-sonofabitch-motherfucking-piece-of-shit*. Clear and heavy, the words cut through the air before him, their steel point granting him passage through the world unharmed and intact. It could've been funny were it not the way he talked every time things didn't go his way, which was often.

When he went down that dark path, Mother always told me not to bother him. As advice, it was as pointless as it was obvious; I'd always given him a wide berth. But in those times, he was like an animal caught in a trap, one driven mad by the choice of either gnawing through its paw or waiting for the trapper's killing blow. Mother blamed it on Father missing Granddad, but that didn't seem right to me. Father had been that way well before Granddad had died. He'd never had many kind words for Granddad, anyway. He hadn't even cried at the funeral.

It didn't take Father's special eye to see the changes as the year went on, but to me, what had started so drearily began to seem almost promising. Egged on by a few showers, I watched from the porch the back field change from a dot-work of small cabbage-sprouts into a green tangle of canola, and then, for one glorious week, a luminous grid of dense yellow flowers. I turned eleven as the late summer sun turned those canola vines brown, the roots splitting the land as they went deeper and deeper in search of something to nourish them. As they did that time of year, Father's thoughts turned to harvest, his mind two steps ahead of the rest of us. One night at the supper table, he said he was tired of having me sit inside while he worked. It had been Mother who'd helped him when he needed it. After he drafted me, she largely stayed inside because, as she said, the dust didn't agree with her, and the work was giving her permanent red-eye. Supper was over, and, while Mother cleared the plates, Father polished Granddad's pocketknife. It had been sharpened so many times, all that remained of the blade was a thin sliver of metal. Pinching a corner of fabric, Father rubbed at a little mark of rust that had formed near the hasp. His hand worked in circles, daintily rubbing oil over the blossom of orange that had eaten into the steel. I watched his thick hands, the muscles in his forearms working like the rods on a pumpjack.

From then on, I spent my summer days with Father, standing useless and idle as he prepared and repaired equipment. I wilted in the heat, but I could see it was worse for him, tightening sieves, cranking cylindrical belts, calibrating the seed scale in the dead heat. I could only watch, and pass him the inevitably wrong tool—a three-quarters wrench instead of

a five-eighths, snips instead of pliers, a Phillips screwdriver instead of a Robertson. *Piece-of-shit*, he muttered, whenever a bolt slipped from his fingers, or every time he grazed his knuckle on a flange, which, again, was often. I had a need both to watch him and to not. I was under the impression I was there to learn, but he looked uncomfortable under my gaze, and there were moments when he guarded his movements, hiding his work with his body as though I was judging him, waiting for some wrong move. What was that look in his eyes? Betrayal? Anger? The years have blurred those edges. But I realize now my presence there with him wasn't out of any pretense of education but rather one of duty, an obligation neither of us understood. I began to sense that if it weren't for me, he wouldn't need to be there at all. It was me, and not the work, that was the burden. This was all the more obvious when it came to the few responsibilities I was given: the wrenches I handed him were the wrong size, the screwdrivers' ends ill-fitting. At the end of each day, I was grateful to him for keeping silent at the supper table, for not betraying me to Mother as the nuisance, the effete work shirker, I clearly was.

One day, Father was under the hay mower, replacing the old cutting blades with new. He had finished cutting the last of the year's hay crop, which, in his estimate, hadn't amounted to a good goddamn. He'd need to buy more, which would be at a premium, of course, because every goddamn asshole in the country was planting canola and beans, canola and beans, and there were hardly any honest-to-fucking-God cattlemen in the country left who put up food that was worth a shit-stained nickel.

It was my job to hold the box of new mower blades. Father wrenched the old, worn, and pitted blades off the cutting disc, and trade me for a new one. The box was heavy, and the blades were covered with a thin, yellow oil. It was going well until I dropped one of the new blades onto the ground. Father reached out to catch it, and he did, though he managed to both bang his head on the crossbar *and* cut his palm on the blade doing so. The diatribe that came out of him was of impressive unholiness even for him. He didn't want to stop working, and the hanky he wrapped around his palm quickly gelled to his hand by the fresh blood he pumped into it with each thrust of the wrench.

The cicadas were out in force that year. Boiling to a fever pitch, their whirring clamour drilled into everything: the air, the soil, my brain, before snapping off in a sudden silence that left my ears ringing with a phantom drone. With the noontime heat pushing down on me like a wet blanket, I looked across the yard to see one of the many farm cats making its way

into the middle of the yard. It was a nameless, but recognizable presence on the farm, its tortoiseshell figure often stealing along the edge of the fields, peering out from the bale stack. He was uncatchable, untamable, untouchable. Now, though, it made its way toward me dragging a hind leg. It came within ten yards and stopped, apparently still cautious even in the sorry state it was in, and gave a long, ragged yowl. One ear was missing. The ear canal was a dark, uncovered hole in the top of its head, a well leading into the empty cavern of the skull. The left eye, still attached to the optic cord, was a distended bulb, dark with blood and stuck to the matted fur below the empty eye socket. I was afraid to touch it, and Father found me hunched and staring.

“*Jesus-fucking-Christ,*” he said. “What a sight. Must’ve been caught in the haybine. Poor bugger. You’d think they’d hear it coming.” He clucked his tongue sharply, then brought his boot quickly down onto the cat’s skull. There was a wicked crunch as the dark jewel of the loosened eye burst, oozing blood into the gravel. Bending down, he picked up the limp, soiled body by the tail and flung it into the bush like he was swinging a baseball bat singlehanded. I stayed crouched with my chin on my keens while he sauntered into the machine shop to whet Granddad’s knife on the grinding wheel. After a few moments of honing, he pulled off his belt. Immediately, I prepared myself to receive a beating. He had never beaten me before, and I had no concept of what I might do to prevent it, or take it properly. I only wondered what might set a man off to beat his son. I supposed it could have been anything; the dropped hay blade, anger over the tomcat. I was staring at him, waiting for him to come for me, when he laid the belt on the workbench and with the tip of the knife, prised a new hole. He looped it into his jeans, the leather squealing like the wire of an old rusted fence as he cinched it tight. The symphony of cicadas rose again, trilling their highest monotone note, a loud, vicious note that contradicted their short life.

Harvest finally came, spilling from the dam of summer like a rush of soothing water, the promise of work it demanded more soothing than the profits it implied. Father even seemed happy as the two of us crowded into the combine harvester. It would be my job to run it, but he rode with me twice around the field, pointing to switches and levers, and speaking of the belts, conveyors, and cylinders that rumbled in the machine below us with the casual, offhand manner of someone who had too long ago mastered a complicated task, and who no longer had the words to explain it simply or see it clearly. None of that really interested me; I was more

focused on the critters I could see running from the ceaseless march of the machine. There were mice and voles, but I kept a particular eye out for cats. I wouldn't do to any of them what Father had done to the tomcat. Father drew the combine to a stop, and then he was gone, disappearing out the door into a cloud of grain dust, leaving me alone at the helm of the great, hungry engine upon which I sat. The wheel in my hands was broader than my shoulder, and my feet swung six inches above the cabin floor. I steered it onto the endless ribbon of swath and began to feed the insatiable creature.

It wasn't long before my distractions got the better of me. From somewhere within the throat of the combine came a horrendous clanking and grinding. I drove on, willing the wad to pass, but the grinding worsened. The flow of seed into the hopper ceased; the tang of hot oil rose in the air.

Even today, I can still see him coming across the stubble, waving his arms and yelling something impossible to make out over the roar of the engine. As he came through the dust and chaff, the cloud seemed to part before him. Then, in one motion, he was at the cabin door, wrenching it open, hollering for me to "Shut the goddamn-motherfucking thing off!" Then he was gone again, back into the dust.

That familiar hollow, empty, rotten feeling came over me. I killed the engine, my hands shaking even after the sieves stopped vibrating and the machine decrescendoed into a deep silence. Despite the heat, my skin was a raised bed of goose-pimples. The air was full and thick with bits of chaff that papered the inside of my mouth and caught at the back of my throat. Poppling over my hammering heart, my breath slipped out in a continuous slender river of air, upon which came a pleading I was ashamed to recognize as my own. *Please-no-please-be-okay-please-please-I-don't-know-just-be-okay.*

I found Father at the back of the combine, his knees in the dirt, his arms reaching into the machine. He was heaving at a mass of tightly wrapped canola stalks. He gave a few solid tugs, his fists white with strength, but he could only loosen a few brittle stems. The back of his neck, red and dirty as a July beet, was flecked with chips of chaff and little beads of sweat. I had to hold myself back from touching them, from drawing my finger through their moisture. I stood there dumbly, frozen by the knowledge it was my wreck, that it was a part of me now. Without looking back, Father said quietly, as though to himself, "Are you going to stand there all goddamn motherfucking day? Or are you going to get

down here and fix your mess?” I knelt beside him, and tugged at the stalks wrapped too hard and tight for even that man to budge. Through the air choked with dust, I could hear Father’s prayer to his work Gods, his low and clear mantra. *Sonofabitch-asshole-motherfucking-piece-of-shit.*

Rallying my strength, I gave a good hard tug on a stalk. I leaned back, my arm extending, overextending, hyperextending, my muscles burning. When it gave way, I fell backward onto the hard jags of stubble. Above me, in the empty sky, a hawk circling low and lazy. A trail of sweat leaked into my eye, burning like acid. When he saw me lying back, Father sprang on his haunches and pitched his cap down onto the ground. It was an action so cartoonish, so exaggerated, I almost laughed. But everything else, his burnt red face and anvil hands, his loose, faded shirt, the strong smell of sweat, were too frightening. I wanted to sink into the ground, to cover myself with straw so that he couldn’t find me. “*Goddamn-fucking-hell-piece-of-shit.*” he said, not to himself, finally, but to me. “Stop your goddamn crying. If you’d kept your fucking eyes open, we wouldn’t be doing this. I ought to make you unplug the whole goddamn thing yourself.” But he didn’t. Instead, he put his hat back on and pulled out Granddad’s pocketknife, and slashed at the plug. It was not up for the job, and did little to break the hard pack. With a single thrust, he drove it home, sinking it into the straw up to his fist, leaving it there as though to say he’d killed the bastard. Quietly, so that he might not even see me, I crept up beside him, pulling timorously at the stalks, letting my breath slip out long and slow so that I might manage to keep everything within myself. So near to him, I could feel the great engine within him burning, its heat so strong I feared he would catch alight, that I, and the field, and, somewhere beyond us, Mother, would burn around him.

Finally, the mass was cleared. As we had before, I climbed up to the combine cab ahead of Father. This time he did not leave, but sat beside me in silence for the rest of the long day. I moved as carefully as I could, wanting to make every right decision, wanting to be everything he wanted me to be so that I could make it right again. But there was no righting it, and beside me and above me, he was silent and tense, burning with his stovetop heat, the drone of the combine undercut by his own. *Jesus-goddamn-Christ. Holy-goddamn-sonofabitch.*

It wasn’t until we’d gone another five rounds that he remembered the knife he’d stuck into the wad. It felt like courage asking if we should stop to look for it, but his answer—*Fucking forget it; it’s gone; it’ll be under a mountain of chaff; I’ll find it tomorrow; the fucking thing was dull as*

a hoe; better get it; don't want a cow picking up hardware later; there wasn't hardly nothing left of the blade anyways—once again reduced my thoughts to the ridiculous, the pointless, the thoughts of a fool, a coward who could neither think, nor work, nor kill as the moment required.

I was waiting for him to say something about the cat. I thought he would reveal some hint as to whether he considered what he'd done to be mercy or cruelty. About the fairness of life or the pointlessness of it, which is how it seemed to me then. But he did not.

Of course, that is how he died in the end. Trying to pull the wadded straw from a plugged baler. Always impatient, he didn't turn the machine off before setting to it. First one arm, then the other became caught by the rotating pickup, half pulling him into the machine. They found him like that, on his knees, his arms stretched out like a man seeking alms. This was long after I'd left the farm, long after any of it had anything to do with me.

Instead of saying anything, we continued on, encased less in silence than in quiet. What was important was continuing on. A scab on Father's right hand had peeled away. A bead of blood rose up from the open wound and quivered. This he wicked away continuously, refusing to let the hard bark regrow over the tender new flesh.

When we finished the field, the sun had fallen beneath the lowline, and the haze of dust in the air was a dark orange. The air was cool, and I began to shiver within my thin crust of dried sweat. The house smelled good and warm with Mother's cooking. I felt something of the day could be salvaged. But when she met us in the kitchen, standing and smiling and too kind, I knew I couldn't keep myself from breaking. I ran straight upstairs to my room where I lay face down on the cool sheets. Some minutes or hours later, Mother came up and sat on the bed. She placed her hand on my back, and I could feel her cool touch through the crusted sweat on my shirt. Her hand was so heavy, and I was so weak, she could have crushed me had she been so inclined. She told me to come down for supper but I didn't move, and instead pushed my face further into the pillow. I stayed so still that maybe she thought I was asleep. I said an inner prayer *Please leave no don't leave never leave* but she was deaf to it and after a long moment, she told me again about supper. Then Father yelled something from the kitchen, and she drew away. Soon came the sound of dishes and then the television. I felt hungry and empty but kept my head pushed into the pillow, and felt the rims of my eyes turn thin and raw from the saltwater.

When the television went off, I listened for the sound of talking but there was nothing for a long time and I stopped trying to hear. Everything was dark. My thoughts came hot, a flaming pinwheel burning through my mind, that was only broken by the sound of footsteps outside my room. Surrounded by the darkness of the pillow, I could sense the light from the hallway, and the shape in the door. I held my breath and waited for something, anything, saying over and over to myself Please-please-say-something-I'm-sorry-please-tell-me-it's-alright-please. There was nothing but silence until the shape said Goodnight and closed the door.