

/ I TAKE THEE... /

by

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I Take Thee . . .

In the early morning, Dianna Miller studied the mountains of photographs covering the kitchen table. A new pool of coffee formed drip by drip in the decanter. One picture, taken as her son, Blake, was leaving for the jungles of Colombia, showed Blake standing with his arm around his mother. They were flanked by Ed, Blakes's father, and by Allen, his brother. It wasn't a particularly good photograph, definitely not artistic, but it was one of Dianna's favorites because it showed them all together. Two years now since Blake had sent a picture, Dianna thought. Now, he was coming back, today, to be married on the farm to a girl whom Dianna had never met -- a foreign girl who couldn't even speak English.

A large white placard leaned up against the back of a nearby chair. Blake, measured rows of photographs, stared back at her. Each picture captured a year of his life. But conspicuous were four white spaces on the last row of Blake's history. The last two spaces were fresh, clean, white, and empty. The first two showed small scars in the paper where tape had been torn off. Dianna had worried for days, finally deciding to remove the first two photographs, each of which had shown Blake with his first wife, Sally.

Sally had called earlier that week, wondering when Blake was getting back, fishing for information on his new bride. Sally still loved Blake, no doubt about that, Dianna thought. Such a shame it hadn't worked out. Sally was so sweet, a local girl, one of Blake's classmates, the perfect wife, even if she wasn't Catholic. But she had planned on converting. She wasn't beautiful, but nice looking. Dianna didn't know what to tell Sally. She knew very little about this girl herself.

Dianna searched the pile for photographs she could put in the first two spaces. Allen, who'd arrived late last night, and Ed stumbled in and plopped into their chairs at the table.

"What you got all these damn pictures out for?" Ed mumbled. "Don't we have enough to do today?"

"What you doing, anyway, Mom?" Allen broke in.

"Oh, I guess it's a little silly, but I was trying to find some pictures for the posterboard. I thought it best to take off the pictures with Sally. I've heard those Latin women are really jealous."

"Clinging-vine type, most likely," Ed said. "Can't see Blake marrying that kind."

"Got any coffee, Mom?" Allen said.

"I'll get it," she said, waving her hands down to indicate that Allen should remain seated.

"Still can't understand why he divorced Sally," Ed said. "But I guess we don't need to keep rehashing it."

"Sally called, Allen," Dianna said, fumbling about in the cabinets for some coffee cups, her uncertainty surprising Allen, who remembered cups always being neatly tucked away in the same spot.

"Just asked when Blake was getting back," she continued. "Asked about his new bride . . ."

" . . . Ligia, Mom. Her name is Ligia."

"You know I can't pronounce her name."

"Say, LEE-hee-uh," Allen coaxed.

Dianna started several times, but kept messing up the name. She whistled every time her tongue caught on a syllable until, disgusted, she turned back to the cups and poured out the coffee. Ed tried, and pronounced her name fairly well.

"You've got to say it, Mom. She's going to be here today."

Dianna handed the full cups to her men, who shuffled through the pictures to clear a spot on the tablecloth.

"I didn't know what to tell Sally," Dianna said. "It must be difficult for her right now."

"That marriage did kind of end all of a sudden," Allen said. "The way they talked around us, I always thought they were getting along fine."

"Both were just damn well spoiled," Ed said. "Her parents wouldn't let her go and Blake didn't even have enough backbone to get up and tell them where to go."

"He did so," Dianna said. "He quit that job at the mill that Sally's father got for him and got one for himself at the plant in Wichita."

"Sixty miles from here," Ed said. "when he had the chance to get that place a mile from here and help m" His voice trailed off.

"I was kind of surprised he didn't come back and work for you, Dad," Allen said, "especially since he always liked farming so well."

Ed didn't answer, but picked up a handful of photographs and began shuffling them in his hands. Dianna curtly told him to handle the photographs by the edges so he didn't put fingerprints all over them.

"Did I say something?" Allen asked.

"Nothing, boy," Ed said. "I'm just not awake, yet."

Dianna continued to putter around the cabinets while Ed shuffled the photographs. Allen wondered what to say, finally breaking the silence abruptly: "Judy's awfully sorry she couldn't come, but Jenny's still not over the measles."

"I wish he would've stayed," Dianna said, her thoughts still centered on Blake, seeming not to have heard Allen at all. "Sally and Blake

could've worked things out. My God, he's living in some god-forsaken jungle."

"He's living in the capital city," Allen countered. "There's a difference."

"Not the way Americans are getting killed down there," Ed butted in. "Hell, this foreign girl he's marrying's probably some kind of terrorist."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ed," Dianna said.

"Are they going to live back here?" Allen asked. The entire family had been wondering for weeks whether Blake and his bride would stay, but Allen thought maybe his parents had heard something new.

"If he does, I doubt he'll be working here," Ed said, seeming to know Allen's next questions, but answering so suddenly that Allen caught the note of tenseness in his father's voice.

Dianna didn't like hearing that. She scurried about the kitchen cabinets, banging bowl after bowl, dish after dish onto the countertop.

"Settle down, Dianna," Ed said. "Quit banging about."

"I'm not banging," she admonished Ed. "I just don't like you talking like that without even knowing." Whirling about, hands on her hips, leaning forward slightly, she prepared to combat. "I'm surprised he'd even come back here for the wedding, the way you two acted the first time."

"No worse than you and your damn religion crap," he said.

"It's not crap, Ed. He might've been able to get an annulment, if you would've helped me talk him into seeing the Bishop."

"Dammit, Dianna, He got a divorce. That's all there is to it. So, just let it drop."

Allen interrupted: "Look, you two. Just settle down and quit being so damn nervous. The wedding'll go off fine. He'll be getting here early afternoon with Ligia."

Allen wanted peace between the two. He shifted the discussion and noted that the day promised to be beautiful: no wind, warm but not hot, plenty of shade for the guests, and a beautiful lawn (thanks to the above-normal rainfall that spring). But neither one listened. Dianna clanged dishes and Ed drummed the bottom of his cup with his spoon, both producing a war-like song.

"I'll admit that I'd like to have seen him stay with Sally." Dianna spat out her words. "But that don't have nothing to do with religion. I'd be just as happy with this new girl. If he'd just talk with the Bishop, I'm sure that something could be done."

"It's his life, Mom," Allen said.

"She just don't like him marrying a damn wetback," Ed told Allen.

"That's not true, and you know it," Dianna countered.

"She's Colombian," Allen said.

"Figures he'd do something like that," Ed said.

"Let up on him, will you two?" Allen said. "At least he's doing what he wants. We may not like it, but that's the way it is. For God's sake." Allen felt his stomach begin to churn, and the coffee now smelled foul, as if oil bubbled in the pot. "Enough's enough. They'll be here today, so let's get on with it."

"I'm tired of this whole damn conversation," Ed said. "Where's breakfast?"

Dianna quickly shoveled the photographs off the table into a brown shopping bag, refusing Allen's offer to look for pictures while she cooked breakfast. She grabbed the placard, taking it and the shopping bag back into the hall closet.

"Doesn't make any difference," she said. "I just won't put it out today."

Throughout a breakfast of bacon and pancakes, Ed and Allen spoke of things to be done before the ceremony at four, but were unable to entice Dianna into their talk.

"How's harvest going, Dad?" Allen asked, knowing his father had taken the day off, despite the urgency to get the wheat out before any rains came in.

"Cutting on the south quarter today," Ed replied. "One combine's still down. May get the parts late tonight. Sure as hell hope so."

After breakfast, Ed and Allen slipped out the front door while Dianna cleared the dishes and began preparations. Throughout the morning the three busied themselves with a variety of chores -- preparing dishes of food, setting up tables, discussing possible parking problems. As the kitchen cabinets grew covered with a host of sandwiches, drink and fruits, Dianna allowed the morning's argument to fall dormant in the back of her mind. Then the call came: a problem with the second combine. Ed hurried to the fields, leaving Allen to take charge outdoors, directing cars and greeting friends and relatives. A car pulled into the driveway, and Allen saw that the driver was a priest, surely the one that Blake had written about. Allen followed the car, then shook hands with the emerging priest.

"Huh . . . Buenos dias, padre," Allen said, searching his memory for the few words of Spanish that he remembered from his high school classes. "Tiene . . . huh . . . tengo lo placer . . . huh . . . de . . ."

"I'm Father Hernandez Zorrotero y Valles," the priest said. "I speak English. Didn't Blake tell you?"

"He just said you were going to be back in the States and he wanted you to do the ceremony. He isn't here yet, and we were afraid we'd have to use a Spanish dictionary just to explain the wedding setup here."

"Set up here? It's not in a church?"

Allen was surprised. "The wedding's going to be here on the farm."

"Oh, Dios mio," the priest exclaimed. "I am afraid that is impossible."

"But we had it here last time."

"I know, and I am sorry, Allen. But we cannot have the wedding here. We must have it in a church."

Horried, Allen ran into the house, leaving the priest standing next to his car, gazing about. Cornering Dianna, he sputtered out the situation. Her eyes grew large, and, in a sudden stupor, she ambled through the house into the back bedroom. Allen, at a loss, stood still in the kitchen for a few moments, then followed the path of his mother.

"Goddamn that Blake," Allen said. "You'd know he might do something like this. We've got a farmful of people waiting around for Blake to get here so they can see his bride. Only when he does, we're going to have to tell everyone that the wedding's off because Blake forgot to tell us it has to be in a church. Shit."

"Don't you say anything to anybody," Dianna said. "Send me the priest. Nothing is going to stop the wedding. I've planned too long, worked too hard, to see Blake disappointed."

Allen left and Dianna repaired the smudged makeup about her eyes. She dashed some new powder on her cheeks. Despite the hasty repair, her face appeared drawn and tense. Re-entering with Father Zorrotero, Allen stood back against the wall while Dianna invited the priest to sit in a bedroom chair near her. Dianna glared at the priest, who

quietly gazed back, neither one attempting to scale the silent wall between them.

"Things are improving in Colombia, I hope, " Dianna said, slowly drawing out her words. "When Blake called just before they started back, he said the general strike was all but over."

"Everything is tense, but it is improving."

"It is a long distance from Colombia," Dianna said.

"It is."

"And a long distance from here to the nearest Catholic church, as well."

"That I am sorry to hear," Father Zorrotero said.

"The wedding must be held here on the farm," she demanded, firmly.

"I cannot allow it."

"Our parish priest performed a similar one several years ago, right here on the farm. You can do no less."

Her voice growing lower, Dianna quickly added that Blake had received an official dispensation from the church dissolving the marriage, a situation which the entire family was ashamed of, but that every effort had been made to bring the couple together. As she spoke, the priest watched her closely, noticing how her shoulders involuntarily twitched and her head bobbed slightly. The priest reached over and touched her shoulder. Dianna jumped, withdrawing quickly from his touch.

"Senora," the priest began, speaking softly, "the situation in my country -- in most of Latin America -- is much different. Sometimes the rain buries everything in mud. Sometimes the heat makes our workers so sick that they can no longer turn over a shovelful of dirt. Often, there is little food. More often, there is yet another child on the way. Our men go to bars to drink away the heat, the rain, the family. Many times the men must leave, must find another life for themselves."

"I am sorry, Father. But what does that have to do with ---" Dianna began.

"Should we," the priest interrupted. "Should we follow the Church and say one must never marry again? With five children and no husband, should we say that one must turn away another man who will plant the fields, or that one must turn away a woman with whom the man may find solace?"

The mother and the priest locked eyes in understanding.

"You knew?" Dianna said.

"Blake told me."

Allen pushed his back up against the wall, feeling the imperfections in the sheetrock behind him -- lumps of plaster that had never been sanded smooth. Mother caught lying to a priest. Mother, the converted Catholic so staunch on Catechism lessons and church on Sunday. It was almost funny. So pious all the time, but she had sworn them to secrecy never to let anyone know that Blake hadn't received an official annulment. She'd even enlisted Sally, who probably thought that she might get back with Blake if the divorce were never officially recognized by the Church, especially if Dianna kept working on him. She just refused to believe Blake quit the church. Apparently he hadn't, Allen thought, since he asked for a priest for his second marriage. Of course, Ligia was Catholic, as was most of the population in Latin America. Ligia's probably the reason, Allen thought, not because of Mother's prayers that Blake would return to the Church (he'd quit it when he went to college). She deserved to be caught in her lie, Allen thought.

Dad, born into the religion, took things a bit easier. Allen remembered Sunday after Sunday on which Dad took him and Blake to early Mass, Mom liking to go at noon. They always arrived late and left

right after communion. In that way, Dad shaved off nearly twenty minutes from the hour-long service. That habit got them both into trouble once when, going to church on their own, an usher caught them coming in late and standing out in the entranceway, attending mass by watching through small glass portals in the door. Blake told the usher: You aren't my father. You can't tell me what to do." The usher threw both of them outside when they refused to go in.

Allen slowly emerged from his reverie, focusing in on the priest's voice:

" . . . not misunderstand me," the priest was saying. "I believe in the sacredness of marriage. But Rome is very far away. And my people come to me. They cannot afford to go to the big churches in the city."

"Our Houses of God, our little country churches that the people work for years to build, are very important. They live and die on their fincas. But in the church they are married, and the church is the symbol which gives them hope. The steeple on our church can be seen for miles around. Our little church gives them strength, the cross their faith."

"I know Blake," the priest continued. "I know of his life. I know of his need for a steeple."

"Blake's always had good religious training," Dianna protested.

"Senora, your training is just that . . . it is training. It is Rome. But it is not the people."

"You sound so much like Blake did after going to college," Dianna said. "I could never fully understand what he said. He started out in agriculture, you know."

"He helps many of the local farmers," the priest said.

"But he never finished it," Dianna said. "He switched to English. And the more he studied that, the more he grew away from us."

"Perhaps he needed to be with people, not with machinery."

"I . . . we . . . thought he'd be so happy here. With us. And his first wife. Has he told you much about her."

"He has."

"About his first wedding? About Father Britley?"

"Blake never told me everything," the priest said. "Only that he felt bad that he had involved you."

"God, I feel so guilty," Dianna said. "I lied to Father Britley, too. But I thought it was necessary. To have the wedding. The Father wasn't going to hold it, and Blake insulted him to his face. I could never forgive Blake for doing that. I could never forgive myself. But the wedding had to be."

* * * * *

It was such a mess, she began, everyone running in and out all morning long, leaving tracks on the carpet, bottles and glasses and cups everywhere. Blake milled about, talking to the guests and making sure everyone had what they wanted. But he seemed so detached, so serious. I asked him his problem, but he told me it was only "bachelor jitters," so I didn't pay much attention.

Father Britley arrived and asked Blake to help unload various items for the service. Instead, Blake asked several of the guests to help the good Father, and walked out into the grove. I started to follow, but my sister, Mary, corralled me in the kitchen to ask directions about making the wedding punch, and I forgot about Blake for awhile.

Mary called out to Blake when she saw him swing through the kitchen into the front room. He gave her a quick smile and hello, then disappeared through the doorway. Mary exclaimed that he was acting strange, so I followed, finding him near the bedroom where Father was dressing for the wedding. He was comforting a crying child, Sally's young cousin, Sherry.

"What's wrong, Blake?"

"Nothing, Mom. Everything's all right."

"Should we get her mother?"

"No," Blake said. "She just wants to help."

To keep her busy, I told her to take all the dirty bottles and cups to the kitchen. She scampered off, and Blake chuckled when he saw her pick up some cups that people had put down for just an instant.

"What was that all about?" I asked Blake.

"Pretty funny," he said. "I caught her peeking into Father's room. She wanted to see if he talked to statues."

"What?"

"Apparently Sally's mother's been telling her that Catholics pray to statues."

"Sally's mother should know better," I said.

"Oh, I don't know," Blake said. "To outsiders, all this hullabaloo probably does seem pretty strange. What am I saying? It is strange. When you think about it, we pray and talk to statues all the time."

"Blake!"

"I know. But it is a bit absurd. Remember during Lent when I had to kneel in church for 40 hours just to keep watch over a bunch of statues. A kid. Having to do that. You gotta admit, that's pretty strange."

"I'm ashamed of you."

"Now, Mom, don't get your tits in an uproar. I just said it looks strange, that's all."

I was just about ready to give him a lecture on how he should have continued Catechism lessons in college when Mary came bursting in on us and complained the well water was too dirty to use in the punch.

"Why doesn't Dad get you a water purifier," Blake said disgustedly.

"Your father says it'll just clog up the machine."

"But that's what it's for, for Christ's sake," Blake said.

"He's set in his ways . . ." I began.

"That's normal."

"What's that mean?"

He didn't answer, but talked soothingly to calm down Mary. He asked her about the bottled water brought in from town that morning. It had disappeared from the back porch, Mary said.

"No water, no punch," she threatened.

"Let them drink beer," Blake said.

"That would set well with your Protestant relations," I said.

"I don't give a damn."

That shocked us. Blake suddenly broke into his little boy look, smiled sheepishly, and said he was only kidding. Blake and I sent people searching everywhere: the barn, the granary, even behind the house. The bottles were discovered in the brooder house -- that smacked of Ed! Sure enough, he said later that he'd moved them: "If people can't drink our water, they can drink beer instead." That made Blake laugh, and I just rolled my eyes and said, "like father, like son." Only then, Blake became quiet, and quit smiling.

Blake helped a couple of men cart the bottles back indoors. Mary soon had everyone doing something in an elaborate punch-making session.

As many bowls and pitchers as she ordered prepared, you'd have thought she was still teaching high school home economics. Blake stood about, watching the preparations, or moved back and forth between the kitchen and the front room. Yet, he never joined in, never chattered about all the unimportant things that fill the void before the ceremony.

Before long, Father Britley rushed past Blake, who was standing in the doorway, and burst into the kitchen. Only half-frocked, he jabbered something about not having his holy water. He always gets shook, I thought, then starts stammering and making no sense whatsoever. Except when he's saying mass, then he never misses a word. Blake used to bet with Ed on when Father Britley would make a mistake. In church, Blake poured over the missal, searching out every word that Father spoke. Each time, he lost his bet and came away from church with his forehead all scrunched up like an old man's. Blake always paid off his bets, though, never letting Ed get the best of him. He'd refuse whatever portion of his allowance that matched that particular bet. After starting college, he stopped going to church with us, even when Ed tried to entice him with a new bet. Anyway, Blake almost burst out laughing, standing there and watching Father Britley babble. I looked at him sternly, so Blake came forward.

"Father, calm down," Blake said.

"My holy water's missing."

"You sure? Did you check your room?"

"No. Yes. I mean, it's not in my room. I'm sure of it. I excused myself to the bathroom, just for a second, and when I came back, it was gone. Somebody stole my holy water."

"Now, Father. No one stole your water. Are you sure it isn't in your car?"

"No, goddammit. I told you it was in my room."

"Father!" I couldn't help it, and I yelled out before I thought. I had never heard Father Britley curse like that before. Blake smiled.

"I'm sorry," the Father said quickly, recovering himself. "But I simply must have my holy water."

"I'm sure we can find it," Blake said. "What did the bottle look like?"

"I didn't bring my decanter. It wasn't in the vestibule -- perhaps I need to check the rectory. Anyway, I poured the blessed water into a jar, making sure the lid was on tight so it wouldn't spill while driving on these old dirt roads."

"Look Father. Why don't you just bless some more?" Blake said.

"What?" The Father sounded like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"I'm serious. Watch."

Grabbing a dirty cup out of the sink, Blake turned on the tap. The cup filled with brown water, smelling like oil and encrusting the cup. A white film floated on top of the gunk. Blake held out the cup, his arms outstretched.

"It's all the same in the eyes of the Lord," Blake said.

I could've killed him, right then and there. Father's mouth dropped open a couple of inches, and I could see several missing teeth. He'd left his bridge at home, I thought, probably next to the decanter. Father screwed up his face, his nose redder than a beet, and his ears burning mad.

"Blake," I said. "Stop that this instant. What do you think you're doing?"

"Take it easy, Mom. I'm just trying to lighten the mood."

"There is absolutely no reason to be sacrilegious, especially when it concerns the sacredness of this holiest of ceremonies," Father admonished Blake in a less than pleasant voice.

"What's more important Father, marrying two people or using sparkling, clean holy water?"

"Blake!" I yelled.

The good Father turned his shoulder to Blake -- I didn't blame him -- and spoke directly at me.

"If the blessed water is not found, I simply will have to drive back to the rectory and find my decanter. The wedding will have to be postponed for an hour or so."

Clicking his heels together, he stormed into the front room. Blake muttered, "Fascist." I glared at him but he shrugged his shoulders and again gave me his injured, puppy-dog look. Smiling at me, he took a big drink out of the cup he'd offered Father.

"That was a stupid thing to do," I said.

"Yeah, Father is being a bit unreasonable."

"You know what I mean."

"You know what I mean," he shot back.

It takes an hour to drive to church, another hour to get back. To top it off, Sally's minister was already in the front room arguing with Father that the wedding should proceed on time.

"Look what you've done, now, Blake."

"I've got to hear this."

Leaning against the doorway casing, he surveyed the commotion--the chattering, Father Britley bouncing about half-frocked, Pastor Freeman constantly holding up his hands to try and silence the Father: "There's no need to get upset, my comrade in Christ. If this water won't suffice,

don't you think we can make do without it? After all, we don't want to make the children's wedding too late."

"The ceremony requires the use of sacred water for the final benediction," Father Britley snapped back.

Blake just couldn't stay out of it.

"Pastor Freeman's got a point, Father," Blake said. "I don't remember ever having read in the missal that the ceremony explicitly demands its use."

"It is tradition, Blake," the Father said. "You know that as well as I."

"It does not require it," the pastor pressed, picking up where Blake left off. "I am quite well informed about other religions, I wish you to understand."

"It is my tradition," the good Father replied, holding his temper quite well, I thought. Every wedding of Father's I ever attended always had water, except one -- during a draught -- when Father wanted to symbolize the traumatic conditions of his parishioners.

"If, indeed, you follow the covenants as prescribed by your Pope, you will not need the water," Pastor Freeman said.

"Do not tell me what the Pope declares. I am quite aware of his edicts."

"Then surely you must realize that personal tradition must be put aside for the sake of the couple. Do you not agree, Blake?"

"I certainly do," Blake said. "Look, Father, I'm sorry the water's gone. But, after all, it is our wedding. I don't mind. I'm sure Sally won't mind. Why don't we just forget it. I wasn't lying back there when I said that I'm sure it's all the same in the eyes of the Lord."

"Blake, I'm absolutely ashamed of you," Father Britley said. "After all these years in Catechism, and you're taking the side of someone outside your own faith."

"He's right, Father."

"Perhaps your mother is right," the Father declared. "Perhaps it was college that taught you to take the side of those who have corrupted the traditions of the church through the ages by refusing to listen to the laws of Christ and, thereby, breaking Peter's rock."

Blake was taken aback, one of the few times I've ever seen him speechless. I don't remember ever having said quite that to Father, at least in those words. But I'm sure I simply don't remember. Blake stepped back a few paces, as if defending himself against an attack, then quickly turned and walked into the kitchen.

Pastor Freeman made some snide comment about Godly love, and he and the Father were off arguing. Guests glanced at the holy war, then at each other. One started to giggle, another laughed, and soon everyone was laughing so hard that they were holding their sides. I felt so ashamed. Sherry, Sally's little cousin, stood there for a moment watching. Pretty soon, tears welled up and she ran from the room. Then Sally's mother came up to me.

"Can't you control your own priest," she demanded.

"I don't control anyone," I told her, flatly.

"Apparently you never have, if Blake's actions are any indication."

"Wait just a moment," I told her. "No one, absolutely no one, criticizes my family. And that goes double for you."

"It's time someone did," she snapped back. "This wedding's turning into a complete disaster. Sally's in the bathroom wondering what's going on. How am I to tell her that her wedding's off because your priest lost

a peanut butter jar full of water."

"Don't talk to me in that tone," I told her. "Your pastor needn't condemn Father Britley. He's the one causing all of this."

"Catholics," she said, in a very unpleasant tone of voice, I might add. She brushed past me and stormed toward the bathroom, I imagine to comfort Sally. I wanted to tell her where to go, but Blake came over and hugged me around the shoulders.

"Don't worry," he said. "Everything'll be fine. Everyone's just a little nervous right now."

"Blake, you started this whole mess, I hope you realize."

"Mom, all we got to do is have a room-by-room search. It'll turn up and everyone will be happy. C'mon. Let's find some volunteers."

Giggling guests volunteered and the search began with a vengeance. Father Britley and Pastor Freeman, too heavily involved in theological matters, worked their way outdoors. Blake and I searched Father's room first, carefully and respectfully, mind you, but the water wasn't there. Blake noticed little Sherry peeking into the room. He told her to come in, but she shook her head violently and backed away.

"Don't be sacred," Blake said.

"I . . . I . . ." Everytime the poor little dear tried to speak, she just kind of stopped up and I thought she was choking on something.

"Is God going to strike me dead?" she bawled out, suddenly.

"What?" Blake asked her.

"She told me to do it." Sherry pointed an accusing finger at me and talked real fast. "I was only helping."

"Did you take the bottle?" Blake asked her.

"She told me to do it."

If looks could kill, I'd been dead right then and there, a knife in my heart.

"She told me to pick up the glasses and cups."

Blake winked at me, but I didn't think it quite so humorous. God wasn't mad, he told Sherry, but, he'd like for her to tell what she had done with the water.

"I poured it in the punch," she said.

"What," I yelled.

Sherry howled. Blake broke out laughing, kneeling down on the floor.

"Now the shit's really gonna hit the fan," I said, sighing and leaning up against the wall.

Blake took Sherry in his arms, wiping the tears off her cheeks, and told her that she had only been trying to help and not to worry.

"Where's the bottle, honey?" he gently coaxed her.

"I threw it in the trash. I'm not going to hell, am I?"

"No, sweetie, you're not going to hell. God meant for that water to be drunk. C'mon, now, show us the bottle."

Taking her hand and throwing me a "Be quiet about this" look, we walked into the kitchen. The trash was gone. Putting Sherry in Mary's care, we ran out and rummaged through the can barrel. Nothing. Next, Blake poked through the paper barrel, coming up black-handed, but with no jar.

"For Christ's sake, Mom. Why don't you switch priests. This is ridiculous."

"You embarrassed him back there, Blake."

"He embarrassed himself."

We sat down and rested on the edge of the sidewalk. I felt a headache coming on. Blake stared out into the wheat field.

"It'd be funny, if it weren't so damn serious," he said.

"You seemed to think it was all pretty funny a while ago," I said.

"Why did you do that back there? After all that Father's done for us."

"Just what has he done? Huh? Stand up there Sunday after Sunday spouting off the same words, again and again. How does that help anything?"

"Blake. You know that's not true. He's been our priest for thirty years. He baptized you and Allen. Do you realize how much work he's gone through, how far he's driven, so that you could have the wedding on the farm?"

"I know, and I appreciate it."

"Then why did you do that?"

"All this just got to me," Blake said. "All the planning, the expenses. Chairs in a certain order. Flowers tilted slightly to the right. New, grey socks to match the suit."

"I'm sorry, Blake. I just wanted the wedding to look nice."

"It's not you, Mom. But who cares what it looks like."

"I doubt Sally would see it that way."

"Sally's no better than Father Britley, or her pastor. She's already bitching at me to go to her church. Hell, I don't even attend my own church."

"Once a Catholic, always a Catholic," I said. "Never give up your religion."

"You're all alike," Blake said, his voice harsh and agitated. "Go to church. Get married. Plow the east eighty exactly six inches deep -- don't waste fuel."

"I don't understand you, Blake."

"It's like when I was studying agriculture in college. We memorized the rules, regurgitated them for tests. But we never thought, never created. It was disgusting."

"Is that why you quit Ag school?" I asked.

Blake didn't answer. We sat there a few minutes more, knowing we should get up and look for the jar, knowing that the wedding would be late if we didn't get started. For just a moment, neither one of us wanted to move away from that hard piece of sidewalk, to move away from that field of ripe wheat back into the crowds.

"Your Father's proud of you, Blake," I said. "So am I."

Blake glanced once more at the field, then turned toward the crowd mingling in the yard. I followed his eyes and thought maybe he was looking at the cross on the altar in the yard. The cross had been woven out of wheat, especially for this occasion.

"It's my ceremony." Blake spoke with determination. "Father is going to have to do it my way."

He pulled me up off the sidewalk and started herding me toward the house when we caught sight of a young boy sneaking around the corner of the barn. Afraid the child might be heading for the machinery, we followed. But when we turned the corner, I froze in disgust. The boy was relieving himself in Father's peanut butter jar.

"Don't," I yelled. "That bottle held blessed water."

The boy whirled around, all shook up, unable to control himself now that he was caught doing an act that he knew was wrong, only he couldn't figure out why. How could I explain to a little boy, and make him understand, that rules must be followed. Otherwise, he finds himself outcast, out-of-place with his family and religion. How do I explain to a little boy whose crying out of embarrassment that a natural act must be stifled, no matter how hard or uncomfortable it is, no matter how much it hurts.

"I wasn't doing nothing wrong," the boy kept saying.

"I know," Blake said as he grabbed hold of the boy and taught him the proper method of using outdoor convenience. "But why didn't you just pee on the ground?"

"Daddy told me never to do that. The neighbors might see. But he makes me use a bottle in the car. I thought it'd be all right out here and . . . are you going to tell my Daddy?"

"No," Blake said. "It's out little secret. Dads sometimes can be real tough. They don't always remember, do they?"

"I promise I won't do it again," the boy said.

"It's all right," Blake said. "Why don't you run back and play."

The youngster shot off. Blake, his face serious, looked at me for a moment. Then he burst out laughing, tears streaming from his eyes.

"I'm glad you find it so funny," I said. "What are we going to do now?"

"We could always tell Father this is the holy water."

"Blake! Don't be sacrilegious."

"This whole goddamned wedding's sacrilegious," he said. "We should have stood out underneath a tree, away from everyone and said, 'I take thee without any preconditions.'"

I cried, right then and there. Every Sunday I pray that he'll go back to church. Ed says, "Wait, he'll come around," but the way Blake acted that day, I just don't know. And it's not just me. It seems like he doesn't care whose feelings he hurts. His father's, mine. I didn't answer him, and finally he started for the cow tank.

"We'll just put in distilled water and he'll never know the difference," Blake said.

"Lie to a priest?"

"You want everyone hanging around until Father goes clear back to church and gets more?"

What could I do? While I kept watch, Blake washed out the jar at the tank, intending to sneak in the back door and fill it with distilled

water. But the water dribbling from the tank's feeder pipe turned out clear as day.

"I laid these pipes to the tank," Blake said. "If Dad would've listened, we'd done the same for the house. Then, none of this would've happened."

He filled the jar, and we snuck in the back door. Blake yelled out that we'd found the bottle, that somehow the jar got shelved with a bunch of canning jars. Mary, declaring success, retrieved a now beaming Father Britley (though still a bit miffed from his theological discussions).

"Praised be God," he said. "Now, Blake and Sally can be properly blessed in His Holy Name."

I felt a bit guilty when Father sprinkled the benediction on Blake and Sally, even worse when he sprinkled a blessing on me and your father. Blake winked at me, but I held myself rigid, making sure no one saw that I was nervous. Everyone liked the punch, too, saying it had a tangy taste. Sherry didn't tell anyone, although she scurried away like a rabbit every time Father Britley even looked like he was coming in her direction.

Just before leaving on their honeymoon, Blake dragged me over to the punch bowl and poured a cup for each of us. Requesting silence, he toasted me.

"To a beautiful mother, without whose perserverance and tenacity this wedding would never have come about. I drink this glass of punch in honor of this special tradition. I hope that our first son will provide as much enjoyment for her as did the children here today."

I about choked.

* * * * *

Finishing her story, Dianna shivered slightly. She cocked her head, looking first at Allen, who stood rigid against the wall, then cautiously seeking out Father Zorrotero's eyes. The mother and the priest of Blake stared at each other. Allen inched toward the door, seeking escape from a battle which, by default, forced him to be a participant. He sought neither to support nor condemn either player. But the silence bore at his mind until he had to say something, to tilt the balance of power.

"Mom," Allen began, "I . . ."

She glanced quickly at her oldest son, his voice forcing upon her the reality that he had heard her confession. She had forgotten he was there. She abruptly averted her eyes and started picking up jar after jar of makeup that she had placed in the bedroom earlier that day in case Blake's new bride could use them. She opened the lids, then resealed them, in a continuous twisting motion. Finally, she arranged the jars in perfectly-straight lines, then turned her attention to a jewelry box (containing years of accumulated glitter), opening and closing the lid in rapid succession. The clicking filled the room like that of an old grandmother's clock.

Allen knew he had intruded, that his mother had opened herself in a manner he had never seen, even less understood. The priest looked at him. Allen padded softly out of the room, not wanting to hear more, not wanting to be enslaved by secrets. He carried enough of his own. Left alone, the priest focused his attention on her face.

"Senora," the priest began, "what you have told me is saddening, but we all fall to temptation, to appearance -- and that leads to lies."

Dianna's face remained cold, graven.

"He's been excommunicated, Father. Father Britley wouldn't even come today, not even as a guest. Blake can't receive communion. Bringing

you here, having you perform a ceremony -- it's all a lie, a sham, by me, by Blake. And I don't think Blake even cares."

"He cares, Senora. He did not tell me the wedding was to be on the farm. He should have known me better. But many things must be considered."

"We shouldn't have done that, Father. We never should have done that."

"It is too late," the priest said. "We have only today, not yesterday, not tomorrow."

"There will be no wedding today," Dianna said, her voice trailing off. "There is no church."

The priest fidgeted in his chair for a moment, then closed his eyes and remained perfectly still for several minutes. Dianna studied the priest: his humped shoulders, his crinkled face, the black garments that fit him improperly, his long arms extending far beyond the cuffs. He opened his eyes and smiled.

"I will speak to both of them before the ceremony," he said, his voice hard with conviction. "I will speak in Spanish, and we shall have it appear as if the ceremony is true. Then, tomorrow, we go to church and perform the actual ceremony."

Dianna's eyes opened wide, a look of hope entering her downfallen eyes. She trembled slightly, then reached for the priest's hand. She kissed it, then brushed it against the side of her hair. He withdrew from her.

"It is a lie we perform today, may God forgive both of us," the priest said.

"Father, I am sorry," Dianna said.

The priest stood and pulled her gently to his side. He asked to be left alone. Dianna nodded and walked out of the bedroom, smiling,

into the crush of guests drinking coffee and beer, into a pall of cigarette smoke that fogged the living room. She saw Allen, briefly explained that everything was set, then walked into the kitchen where a mass of food waited on the counters. Outside, files of chairs faced the makeshift altar and the crucifix woven of golden wheat.

By midafternoon, almost everything was in place except for the wedding cake, shaped in the form of a duck in the middle of a pond, that had been made to Blake's exact specifications. At first, Dianna and Ed had tried to persuade Blake to have a more traditional cake. But he had refused, saying he and Ligia had spent a great deal of time at just such a pond in a park in the middle of the Colombian city. Everything else in that city was concrete, with scattered trees here and there. And the city was surrounded by miles and miles of almost desert-like land. The pond reminded Blake of the farm, he had said, and Ligia, not overly conservative herself (Blake said), had agreed that the cake symbolized their love, Blake's history, and, hopefully, their future. Dianna, of course, had taken that to mean that Blake and Ligia were considering moving back to the farm, and she clutched on to this hope despite warnings from Ed and Allen not to get her hopes up. Allen believed Blake to have too much wanderlust to ever settle down on a farm in the middle of nowhere. But it was Ed who emphatically strived to dissuade Dianna out of her hopes. Each time, she would ask why, but Ed steadfastly refused to explain, only saying that he doubted very much whether Blake would ever work again on the farm, no matter how much they talked about it. Always, he kept his reasons to himself.

Earlier that morning, the specialty shop which had made the cake had called and said the delivery truck had left around nine for the three-hour drive to the farm. Ed had returned from the fields at noon

after getting the second combine cutting again. He met the priest, and was told of the plan for a sham wedding. He said it was a good plan. Now, he worked his way among the guests in his work clothes, sipping an occasional beer, waiting for Blake and his bride to arrive. Dianna, once again in command, buzzed about the kitchen, rearranging food and double-checking drinks and the punch. Allen found himself with little to do, so he hit the keg along with the other men until he felt a slight buzz coming on. He noted the Spanish priest also sipping a beer. Mother hadn't explained how she got him to perform the ceremony, but Allen felt glad to be away from the house, free to sit and enjoy the rest of the afternoon unhurried, unhampered.

Suddenly, he saw his father pushing out the front door, his forehead wrinkled in furrows, walking toward the granary in the hurried, determined steps that Allen knew meant business. Most of his friends said he had the same stance, something which Blake could never emulate. Allen remembered Blake practicing for hours in front of a mirror in his room, which always made Allen laugh. Finally, Blake had said, "To hell with it, Patrick Wayne never matched his father, either." But everytime Blake got drunk, he tried to imitate his father's stance.

"Allen, come with me," Ed yelled at him from the granary. "We've got a problem."

Not bothering to see if Allen responded, Ed walked into the granary and started backing out the pickup. Allen quickly filled his glass from the keg and jumped into the passenger's seat the minute Ed cleared the shed.

"What's up?"

"The damn catering truck's stuck in a ditch about three miles from here. How in the hell he got stuck when the ground's hard as cement I'll never know. But the driver called from Bob Shantel's and said he'd be late because he had to get a goddamned tow truck. Your mother's in a tizzy."

They found the truck on a side road used only by local farmers to get to their fields. The road was covered with weeds. Only two narrow strips of earth distinguishing it from the ditches. The driver still wasn't back. Allen and Ed walked around the truck, high-centered on the road edge.

"Damn fool tried to make a three-point turn out here. Now, if you was driving, would you think somebody lived down this road. Probably never been out of the city before."

"Probably not," Allen agreed.

"Well, get the chain out of the pickup and we'll see what we can do."

"The driver's got the keys, Dad."

"Don't need them to pull it out. He left the doors unlocked."

Ed turned his pickup around in a perfect, three-point maneuver while Allen crawled under the delivery truck and hooked the chain.

"You sure you got that hooked right?"

"Yeah. Hooked all right."

"Get in the pickup," Ed said. "I'll drive that truck."

Allen watched in the mirror, smiling at how his father swaggered John Wayne-style around the truck once more, then lurched into the driver's seat. With a wave at Allen, Ed gripped the steering wheel and waited as Allen inched the car forward to tighten the chain. As the pickup pulled down under the strain, Allen pressed harder on the accelerator. Neither vehicle budged.

"Give it more gas. More gas," Allen heard his father yelling at him. Dammit, Allen thought, Blake's the one who enjoyed this kind of work. Allen jammed the accelerator. With the tires chewing into the ground, a cloud of dust enveloped the catering truck. The tires spun, spun, until they began to smell of burning rubber. The cloud grew larger and billowed all around the pickup. He began to choke. Suddenly, the driver's door popped open and the large, rough hand that Allen knew so well punched his shoulder and forced his body down into the seat.

"What the hell you doing?" Ed yelled.

Coughing and a bit ashamed, Allen searched through the dust for his father's face. His head felt heavier than it had all morning. He smiled a sickly grin, then felt his stomach turn over. Pushing his way out of the pickup, which was still trying to inch forward in idle, Allen swaggered into the ditch and began throwing up.

Ed turned off the pickup, went over and knelt down by his son, who had fallen on his knees in the ditch.

"What's wrong, boy? Drink a bit too much?"

"Nothing's wrong." Allen spit a mixture of dirt and stomach fluids onto the ground. "Not one damn thing's wrong. I'm just tired of all this shit. Why in the hell didn't Blake get married down there where he could've taken care of all this crap?"

"Can you imagine what your mother would've said if he'd done that? I wouldn't have heard the end of it for ages."

Ed brushed some of the dirt off his arms and shoulders. Easing his bulk down onto a spot next to Allen, he began picking at grass in the ditch.

"You all right, now?"

"Yeah, just give me a minute to rest. I haven't done this shit in a long time. Not quite as good at it as Blake."

"Never much did care for farming, did you boy?"

"Oh, it isn't that, Dad. Just other things, I guess."

"I always kind of thought you'd take over, you know."

"What about Blake?"

"That boy? Christ, I had enough trouble just keeping him out of his momma's kitchen, let alone him taking over the farm."

"He liked farming, you know that. Better'n I did."

"Sure got out of agriculture fast enough when he got to college."

"Yeah, he did. I never much understood that," Allen said.

"He can be one big bastard, that's for sure."

Allen never heard his father speak quite so bluntly about Blake. His face must have shown his surprise, because his father took a look at him and began to laugh. Allen watched the wrinkles in his father's forehead deepen until they connected into a gridwork around the eyes. As children, Allen and Blake used to stick their fingers in those wrinkles and follow them down across their father's face. Growling, their father would snap at their fingertips, which always made them giggle and giggle. But one time Ed accidentally bit Blake's fingertips when the child didn't jerk his hand away quickly enough. The bite broke the skin and caused them to bleed a bit. "Need to move quicker, Blake," Ed had told him, "especially if you want to play football." Although Blake made the football team in high school, he never touched his father's face again.

"Too bad you two never had younger brothers," Ed told Allen. "We'd have more hands to help out today."

"Just more weddings in the long run," Allen said.

Ed kept plucking the grass, tearing out the tender young shoots striving for life against the older, mature blades. He began to laugh hard.

"What you laughing at?" Allen said.

"You remember that old blue pickup I had. The one with the nice camper that Blake wrecked?"

Allen nodded.

"Never should have sold that damn thing. Cut off my nose to spite my face. But, dammit, Blake shouldn't have wrecked it. Only a couple of nights before he married Sally. Nearly got you two killed."

"Dad, you've got to underst. . . ." Allen began, but Ed interrupted him.

"Trucks could be replaced, your mother said. The main thing was that you two weren't killed. Is there ever a time she don't stick up for that boy?"

Allen didn't try to interrupt. He lay back against the embankment. His head pounding now, he listened to his father's voice -- deep, gravelly, dusty, like the road and ditches that held them at bay.

"Blake wasn't much like you, Allen. Never much cared for sports. He could've done well in football." Ed was quiet for a moment, then continued: "Things would have been different with another child. Then your mom wouldn't have tied him up in her apron strings. Wrecked the truck -- best truck I ever had, too. I swear, that kid lost his sense somewhere. Quit Ag school, went into English. Now, what good was that?"

"That's what he wanted, Dad," Allen said.

"Changed his attitude, that's what it did. Wouldn't listen to anything I'd tell him. Always being contrary, not thinking through his actions. But I told him. I told him the day of his first wedding."

Ed quit talking, but now Allen was interested. Everyone knew something happened that day between Ed and Blake, but through the years neither had spoken of it. But after that, Blake hadn't gone to the farm as often, never staying more than a night.

"What happened, Dad?" Allen wanted to pump his father. Judy and I got there late, remember?"

* * * * *

The pump burned out early morning, just kicked the breaker and sizzled down there in the well.

"Jesus Christ, Blake," I said. "You ain't been away to college long enough to have forgotten you can't use water for everything at once."

"It wasn't my fault, Dad," he said.

"When you put too much pressure on that pump, something sure has to give out, or didn't you read that in your studies?"

"If you'd stuck in a new pump instead of using that damn thing Grandpa put in fifteen years ago, we'd still have water," he shouted back at me.

"You're the only thing wrong with that pump," I said.

"Go to hell."

"What did you say, boy?"

"I said, 'Go to hell,'"

"As long as you're here on my farm you ain't going to talk to me like that."

"Your farm? Hell, you inherited it from Grandpa. I've got as much right to it as you do."

"Like hell you do, boy,"

At that, Blake gave me the bird -- his own father -- and walked off into the grove, though I told him to get back there and help me fix the pump. Goddamn, I was mad. He knew better than to water those trees while your mother was washing clothes and dishes. Hell, your Aunt Mary was taking a shower. Damn him, I told him those trees were all right.

He had come up that morning and told me to stop spraying the trees with insecticide, though he knew if I didn't we'd have a lot of bugs during the wedding that afternoon.

"It's field insecticide," Blake said. "It's too dangerous to be around right after you've sprayed. You know that."

"Where'd you learn that? In your English classes?"

That was a bit nasty, I'll admit that now. He got this funny look on his face, kind of mean-like and disgusted, and walked off to the house. I hated doing that, but sometimes that boy seemed to have gotten too big for his britches. I've been using that stuff for years, and I don't give a damn what he learned in college. It don't make you sick, not if you're careful. But I knew what'd happen next: Dianna comes out and tells me I've sprayed enough. To top it off, Blake hooks up the garden hoses and starts watering the yard and trees.

"What the hell you doing?" I demanded.

"Do you read cans?" he said. "Those chemicals are dangerous. We've got to dilute them. You don't want anyone to get sick."

Do I read the cans? Hell, you don't need to read them every time you use them. Sometimes, he makes me so damn mad. But with his mother on his side, it wasn't no use, so I just shrugged my shoulders and thought to hell with it. But then the pump burnt out. That's when the tiff got out of hand and he flipped me the bird and walked out to the grove.

We couldn't go all day without water, and I had to have help, so I went out to the grove and found Blake looking up at some of the trees we'd pruned after the ice storm last winter.

"We got to fix that pump, Blake."

I thought he'd apologize, but he didn't say one damn thing, didn't even look at me. Instead, he walked into the granary, put on some old clothes he had hanging out there, and went for the well. I handed him down the tool chest. I swear, for a boy who could fix damn near anything, he sure as hell fumbled about down there.

"Don't drop the O-rings down the well," I shouted down at him. "And make sure you put the bolts on the shelf. I don't want to lose them. Only cost us more time."

"Yes, Dad."

"You all right?"

"Yes, Dad."

"How's it going?"

"All right, Dad."

He handed up the pump. God, it smelled bad. Blake crawled out while I called Bill at the hardware store. Nearest pump like that, Bill said, would be in Newton.

"Any bright ideas now, Blake?" I could have bit my tongue for saying that, but it was too late.

"I'll fix it."

"It's burnt to a crisp."

"I've fixed a lot of things you said couldn't be fixed."

"Not this time, Blake. We don't have time."

He ignored me. He picked up the motor and walked off toward the workshop in the granary, walking by the pickup he'd wrecked just a couple

of nights ago. He slapped the hood and disappeared into the side door. He must've felt guilty about wrecking the truck and pump, and rightly so, by God. I called a couple of local boys who worked for me during harvest. I sent one of them to Newton, and told the other to pick up about thirty gallons of distilled water at the Co-Op and bring it out to the farm. That cost a bit, mind you, but at least we got our hands washed.

I knew better than to go out to look in on Blake, knew we'd get in another fight, especially if I had to walk by the truck. My truck. Told me he was going to fix it. On what? That salary out at the grain mill, working for Sally's Dad? Getting married? Having to rent a place in town (When he took that job, he refused to rent that place a mile from here -- too close to the farm.). Now, he said the farm was as much his as mine. Not without my say so, by God.

Damn, I liked that truck. Got it for a good price, too. Told ol' man Ellis it probably needed a lot of fixing up, considering it'd been sitting in his garage for so many years. It was old, sure. But they don't make trucks like that any more. You sat in the cab and felt secure. Good, strong metal all around, not like that cheap tin they put in cars now days. I could sit in that truck all day long, watching the hands run the combines. And if there was a problem, all I had to do was turn the key and I'd be rolling out to the trouble, not worrying about the ruts and sand and clods that'll throw a truck here and there, messing up the driver and making his ribs hurt so bad he'd think he'd been plowing all day. That seat was so damn soft. It just kind of wrapped around you, held you in. Sure, the truck was old. But you know what they say: "The older the fiddle, the better the tune." That engine sang like the melodies your Granddad fiddled. I'd run my fingers over that steering wheel like your Granddad stroked that fiddle neck. But Blake wrecked it.

Brought it back with a smashed windshield, the fenders crumpled, dirt and mud all over it. I couldn't hardly look at it, parked there near the granary, a pile of limbs stacked near it. A pile of trash next to a pile of junk. No, I couldn't look in on Blake. I couldn't help him with that pump motor. It was burned to a crisp, gone, something to be thrown into the back of the truck. And he told me he had a right to the farm.

I couldn't just stand around waiting to do nothing. So I made a final check around the place. I found a couple of trees with some broken branches we missed when Blake and me cleaned up after that ice storm. I got out a chainsaw and ladder and sawed a few of them down. Made the trees a bit odd looking, so I cut off a few more branches to try and even up their looks. About that time, my hired hand drove up with the distilled water and we unloaded the bottles into the back porch. One of the bottles slipped out of my hands and broke on the sidewalk. The glass shattered and spewed water every which way. My language wasn't exactly pretty after that happened. Your mom heard me and came out running scared as hell, wondering what happened. I was all right, I said, but I was getting damn sick of this whole wedding. She told me to hush and not to worry, she'd clean up the glass. We finished unloading. Blake was still in the shed, and the new pump hadn't gotten back (I was wondering if it ever would), so I went back to do some trimming.

I sat down on top of the ladder, just to rest a bit, and remembered looking for the longest time up the driveway out to the road. Pretty soon more and more people would be rushing in, clogging up the drive, parking in the grass, leaving ruts in the lawn. Why the hell did Blake insist on having the wedding on the farm. Hell, Sally's parents were even willing to have the ceremony in a Catholic church. But Blake was bull-headed about the whole thing.

"I know it's going to be a lot of work," Blake told your mother that winter before the wedding. That was the winter the ice came all at once, in just a couple hours, three inches covering everything. The roads were so slick that a tractor couldn't stay in line. Blake had come to talk about the wedding and became trapped here by the sudden storm. We was sitting in the kitchen, next to the stove, trying to keep warm.

"If you really don't want the wedding here . . ." he began.

"It's not that, son," I told him. "But, considering all the people Sally wants, there isn't that much room out here, and, well, your mother has enough to do."

"Of course he can have it out here, Ed," Dianna interrupted. "It won't be much trouble."

Now, both of them knew what could happen. My god, it's hard enough to keep things in order with just a family and a farm crew, let alone having a bunch of people on the farm snooping around. Most people don't take care around machinery, and before you know it they've gone and cut their hand, or scuffed their shoes, or torn their clothes.

"Dad, I'll help watch everyone and get everything prepared," Blake promised. "It's just that I've always wanted to get married here, underneath the cedar in the south yard. Its branches are a perfect canopy. And, well, I thought you guys might be proud to have your son married on the homestead."

"Let me think about it son," I said.

I couldn't understand it, but Blake got angry, his face turning red. He started jabbering something about he had the right to be married out here -- he even demanded it. I got a little worked up, too, and we started in on each other. Your mother told us to stop fighting or she was going to hit us both in the head. We quieted down, not saying a

word to each other, holding our coffee cups against our hands for warmth, in our cold kitchen, next to the heating stove.

That's when we heard the first groan, the kind that comes low out of your gut when you're in bed sick with the fever and you know you got to be outdoors working, getting ready to plant the seed. Then came a sudden pop, as loud as a chain breaking, and then a crash, the sound just kind of hanging in the icy air, echoing across the ice and snow covering the yard and grove.

"The grove. The ice," Blake said. Seemed to me that his voice groaned just like the trees did as their trunks and branches bent under the weight of ice. Those trees looked like old men, so stooped over that their backs finally gave out in one, big pop. I watched the branches reach out like hands grabbing for support as those old trees tumbled down. Now, they'd start rotting at the feet of the younger trees.

More groans, more crashes followed while we stood at the kitchen window, watching trunks crack and branches break. It continued off and on for a week, but the majority seemed to break that day, all within a few hours of each other, and us standing there, helpless, watching the years of tending and pruning and watering end up on the ground as nothing more than shredded trunks and crumpled branches.

We sat down at the table, still hearing the groaning, while Dianna put on another pot of coffee. The electricity was out, lines having gone down with the trees, and it would be several days until the county crews plowed open the snow-packed roads.

"Well, that takes care of the wedding here, I guess," I said after awhile.

Blake looked kind of surprised, then said, "I still want it here."

"Won't be too pretty now, boy."

"Doesn't matter," Blake said. "I spent a lot of years in that grove, Dad. We've cut a lot of branches. We'll just have to do it again."

"A lot of work."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "I'm still proud of it. I don't give a damn what other people think."

I didn't answer him, not thinking it worth the trouble to start up another argument. He left just as soon as the plows broke through the roads, carrying away a promise by your mother that the wedding would be here. And I'll admit, he came to the farm just as often as he could, given he was working real hard for Sally's father at the grain mill. We kept cutting down branches and trunks and piling them up in the field. Setting them on fire, we'd stand there watching the flames, watching years of tending floating away on that smoke. I'll admit, he helped as much as he could. But there was so many branches, so much trash, that I was still cleaning up all the way to the day of the wedding.

I don't know what it was, but while cleaning up that grove Blake and I got along like we hadn't for years. For so long, we always seemed to be at each other's throats, no matter how hard we tried to get along. He just wouldn't listen, always trying out a new way of plowing or seeding, or using a different herbicide when he knew damn well that the old stuff worked just fine. But cleaning up those trees, we worked together just fine. He worked furious-like, spending all his time out in the grove on weekends, like there was something eating away at him, and refusing to cut down any tree that he thought could make it (even though a few should have come down, not having hardly enough branches to carry the sap to the splotches of leaves trying to make a comeback).

"Proper trimming is the key," he'd say, as if I wasn't the one who'd taught him that in the first place. "You cut it wrong, or cut off too much, and you can kill the whole tree."

Weekend after weekend we cut and pruned and trimmed and got along fine.

"Dad, what are you doing now?"

Blake's voice startled me so that I almost dropped the chain saw right on his head. But he jumped out of the way, and the saw hit the ground with a thud.

"I'm sorry, son. You surprised me."

"I can't fix the pump. The motor's shot." He spoke quietly, more to the grove which he faced than to me. Then he looked up. I only nodded.

"I found a few branches we missed before," I said.

Blake stared up into the tree, not saying a word. He handed me the chain saw, then grabbed hold of the bottom of the ladder, asking if it was steady enough. I cut back a couple more limbs, yelling out for him to watch for falling branches. Then I eased off the ladder, stepped back, and looked up at the tree.

"Picture pretty, don't you think?"

"Looks real nice, Dad. Real nice."

We gathered up the tools, raked the yard and carried the branches out to the pile next to the pickup. Every time we passed the truck, he'd shoot me an "I'm sorry," type of look, but it didn't help. Couldn't help.

A few guests had arrived, and your mom was getting a bit nervous about not having any water. The hand had called from Newton, saying he was on his way back, but it'd still be another hour before he got there. Father Britley had gotten there and was walking around the yard, talking to a lot of people and checking out preparations around the altar. He called Blake and me over a couple of times and had us rearrange the chairs around the altar so that the shade would hit us about the time of the

wedding. After a bit of work, Blake and me grabbed a couple of beers and sat down for a while in the shade.

"He sure does like things perfect, don't he," I asked Blake.

"Father Britley's all right, I guess," Blake said.

"Don't like him, huh?" I looked over at Blake.

"Sometimes he bothers me, I guess."

"Me, too. But your mom swears by him. Been around forever. Getting along in years, too. I guess he kind of gets set in his ways."

Blake looked at me and smiled.

"You noticed it too, huh? Well, he's all right. Gets a little carried away with his sermons, though. I swear, sometimes it's pretty damn hard not to fall asleep when he's talking -- unless you're betting on what he says."

I winked at Blake, who gave me a wide grin. Then he returned to watching Father Britley arrange and rearrange the altar.

Before long, the hand drove into the yard and Blake and me shot out of our seats. He lowered himself into the well house and I handed down the pump -- a new, shiny one, all ready to go. He tinkered about down there for a few minutes.

"It won't fit," he yelled up.

"Of course it'll work," I said. "It's brand new."

"The fittings are different."

"Let me down there."

Pulling himself out of the well, Blake told me it wouldn't do any good, but since he knew I had to see for myself, I might as well go down. Below ground, the well house smelled damp and stale. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling, and the shedded skins of snakes crunched underfoot as I

worked my way back to the pump. A single bulb barely cut through the dark, only strong enough to light up the area around the pump. The corners remained dark, hidden. I never much liked working below ground in that cramped housing, concrete walls around me and smelling of old, unattended earth. I hadn't been down there for years. I looked over the pump, then twisted it around, trying to get the pipe ends to line up. One fitting screwed on all right, but the other was almost half an inch off. I pulled on the pipe while pushing the pump with my foot. The pipe broke and I fell backward, hitting my head against the cement wall.

"What are you yelling about?" Blake called from outside.

"The damn pipe broke," I yelled.

"You tried to force it, didn't you?"

Blakes's accusing voice echoed down the throat of the well housing, coming back to me to bounce against the cement walls. He was right. But the pipes were old, rusty. Good pipes wouldn't have broken. After a few moments, Blake clogged up the well exit as he dropped down, then worked his way back to where I was. Now it was cramped, and I could smell each of us, our sweat fouling the already stale air.

"You just had to force it," he said. "You're always forcing things, trying to make them fit whether they should or not."

"The pipes were old," I said.

"We could've put on some pipe extensions. We got some out in the granary."

"Well, why in the hell didn't you say so in the first place."

"You know they're out there," Blake said.

"None of this would've happened if you hadn't tried watering the trees."

"I told you years ago these pipes needed changing. They're probably rusted all the way back to the house. The only good ones are out to the cow tank, and I put those in."

"They don't need changing," I said.

"You just don't listen, do you."

"I listen well enough. I know what I'm doing."

"Any bright ideas now, Father?"

Blake was being nasty. It wasn't what he said, but the way he said it, the way you tell a dog to get out of your way before giving it a good kick in the side.

"We ain't going to get nothing done down here."

I started to crawl by Blake, but he grabbed my arm and wouldn't let go.

"I'm telling you only once," Blake said. "Don't try to blame me for this stunt."

"Boy, you take your hand off me or I'm going to lay you flat on the ground. This is my farm."

"Try it, Dad. We'll see who the old man is around here."

He was actually going to hit me. His own father. Right there in that cramped and filthy hole. An old man, he called me. He glared back at me, but his eyes were mere holes, hidden in shadows created by the light bulb hanging behind him. I looked at him, and suddenly I started to shake. I had to get out of that hole, away from him, out into the clean air where I could breathe and the sun would warm away the cold.

"Let go of me," I yelled suddenly. "Get away from me." Blake, startled, let go, and moved back a few paces. "You know, boy. It's a good thing you got that job at the mill, because you ain't never gonna have a piece of this land."

I squeezed past him and scurried as fast as I could for the mouth of the well. The sun blinded me for a moment, and I gulped in air until I settled down. But the shakes came again. The more I shook, the madder I got until I felt like I'd burst. I didn't want nobody seeing me, so I went out to the granary, not giving a damn whether the pump got fixed or not. It was his wedding, not mine. Out there, looking at the tools and checking on the bins, I could hear rats crawling around inside, eating away at the seed left over from planting. I called Rusty and threw him in the bin. Growling and barking like mad, I'll bet he killed damn near a dozen rats before they escaped by climbing up the walls. I threw a couple of buckets of rat meat out in the pasture -- my pasture. Let the birds have at it, or let it rot in the sun.

But I knew the pump had to be fixed. I'd been out in the fields almost an hour, so I walked back and found Blake closing the lid down on the well housing.

"I jerry-rigged the pump," he said, matter of factly. "Put on some new fittings and clamped on some hose between the pump and pipe. I'll last for a while, but you'll need to fix it as soon as you can."

He walked away, and I let him.

Didn't do a lot of talking with Blake the rest of the afternoon. All the guests came and he got tied up, and so did I. But before he left that night, he came up and thanked me. Said he was sorry our tempers flared a bit. I was right, he said. It was my farm and he'd forgotten that. I passed a twenty dollar bill to him, just a little extra for his honeymoon.

"Keep your money, Dad. You'll need it to fix the pump, or the truck." He barely spoke above a whisper, but, you know, suddenly I wanted to cry. Then he said he was sorry again and took the money from

my hand. You know what he did? He kissed me on the cheek. Said he loved me. I'll be damned. I'll be damned.

* * * * *

Allen marveled at how much Ed had talked. Lying on his side in the ditch, covered with grass and dirt, Allen propped his head on his hand and watched his father. Ed had nearly plucked the spot in front of him bare of grass.

"He can be a real bastard sometimes. I can't always understand him," Allen said, watching the wrinkles in his father's forehead deepen even more. Ed turned slowly and looked at Allen.

"You never spoke to me like that, Allen." Allen shrugged and looked down at the ground. "I don't know what got to me worse," Ed continued, "him wrecking the truck or wanting to hit me."

"It's okay, Dad. Everybody has fights. You make up."

"Yeah, maybe so."

The heat of the sun felt good, cooking Allen's slightly swollen head. Lying back, wanting to say more, but not knowing how, Allen looked up at the clouds.

"I asked him to come back here and get married," Ed said.

"But Mom said . . ."

"I know. But I wrote Blake. I asked him to, and he said he would."

Allen kept watching the clouds as his father quit talking. The two of them sat silent next to the wheat field where the stalks rustled and whispered. The slight breeze felt so good, and the sun helped burn out the cobwebs in his mind. The baking sun, the cooling wind . . .

"Allen. Allen." His father's hand shaking his shoulder startled him. He recoiled instinctively, shrinking from the grasp. "Easy, son.

You're falling asleep. The driver's coming down the road. C'mon. Let's go."

Although a bit angry at them for trying to pull the truck out before he got there, the driver quickly surrendered the keys at Ed's urgings. Allen crawled into the pickup and, again, jammed the gas pedal. The pickup lurched forward, the chain clanging as it tightened against the sudden strain. With rear wheels on both vehicles digging the dirt, the delivery truck containing Blake's cake slowly pulled free.

"Follow us," he told the driver. "And for God's sake, don't get off on another road. I'll watch you in the mirror."

Allen saw the driver's face turn red. Periodically glancing in his rearview mirror, Allen smiled everytime he saw the driver's lips jabber frantically, a sneer on his face -- the driver's action repeated again and again all the way back to the farm.

Blake's cake arrived in good shape, only a few mars here and there from the jostling in the ditch. On the table, the cake stood immune to flies and afternoon gnats, enshrouded by white, delicate mosquito netting. The cake shone against the yellow fields and the lawn's green grass. Allen set in a chair, sipping lemonade now, studying the cake. He traced the different patterns by moving his finger through the air. People checked on him periodically, but he shooed them away, not wanted to be interrupted in his studies. Allen thought of Judy and their own wedding, held in the church with all the proper trimmings. Maybe he liked this one better, he decided, although he hadn't much cared about listening to his mother with the priest, or to his father out by the delivery truck. He felt like an intruder in their private affairs. Families shouldn't hide things, his mother had always told him. But she knew as well as he

that she lied even while she said it. It was the lies that bothered Allen the most. Mother lying to the priest. Father lying about why Blake had left. Allen still found it hard to believe that Dad had told Blake to get off the farm -- at least, that's what Dad meant when he told Blake that the farm would never be his. Allen had left the farm years ago, right after marrying Judy. He knew then, had always known, that he'd never make a farmer. He wanted to live in the city, near the Quik-Trips and the theatres. Driving a tractor bored him, and seeing the plants sprout green before the snows set in wasn't reward enough for all that labor. Funny how things work out, Allen thought. He was the one who always wanted to travel overseas, to take a banana boat anywhere he could. But then he met Judy, in a bar in Wichita, and within two years Jenny was born. And Blake, always the one to make plans for the farm, the conservative one, ended up in Latin America, forced away, marrying a girl who couldn't even speak English. Allen felt a little disgusted about it all. It was all so stupid. None of them -- Mom, Dad or Blake -- would talk to each other. Instead, they wrapped themselves in their own little cocoons, afraid to emerge lest they should eat up each other. Allen didn't want to hear any more from them. He wanted to be left alone. Yet, he wanted to talk to them all, make them understand about Blake, and about him. Suddenly, he felt hot, and a little angry. Looking at that absurd cake, hearing all the people chatter in the background, he felt like he wanted to run away from it all. He wanted to strike out at this display, this stupidity, this difference. He felt unhappy, almost ready to cry, and angry. Angry at Blake for leaving for Colombia, for leaving the United States and his family, for leaving the farm when Blake knew that Dad wouldn't be able to handle it alone forever.

Allen jumped up and turned his back on the cake. He cornered someone (from town, he thought) and informed the man that he had a beautiful wife, whoever she was. Again, he bore off, shifting from person to person, making snide comments, until finally he surrendered to the pleasure of a chair near the altar. Dianna sat down next to him.

"Don't you think you're hitting the keg just a bit early, Allen?"

"I haven't drunk any beer since this morning. Don't worry. I'm not drunk, not even tipsy."

"You're certainly acting like it," Dianna said.

Allen reached out and touched her cheek, then brushed the back of his fingers against her hair. He gazed a moment, then jumped up and pulled Dianna from her seat.

"C'mon, Mom. We've been too serious today. Let's liven up this shindig. Let's dance."

The wind played a raspy tune as it vibrated the stalks of wheat, accompanied by the chattering of guests which rhythmically throbbed in Allen's ears. Dianna moved a few slow steps with Allen, then gently pushed away from him.

"Perhaps we should wait until later -- after the wedding," she said, her voice gentle and smooth. "There's still a bit left to do before Blake and . . . and . . . his bride get here."

Allen inched close until they nearly touched noses.

"To hell with Blake," he said.

Dianna caught her breath, then slapped Allen in the face and walked quickly back to the house.

"Bitch." Allen leaned back in his chair and stared up through the branches toward the dark blue sky. He imagined each of the limbs to be a step leading to heaven, and a cloud way up there to be St. Peter's gate.

Good old obedient Peter. You got your reward, didn't you, Pete ol' boy. Standing up there telling everyone if they've been good enough to enter God's gates. Bet everyone's listed in that book: Mom, sweet wonderful Mom; good, always right Dad. I'll bet even Blake's listed in that. You know, St. Peter's got Dad's wrinkles. Sure enough. Look at that. Go clear across his forehead and right down around his eyes. Beautiful. Looks like a big prune. One, big massive prune.

"Allen. You're acting like an ass."

The prune turned into his father's face.

"Your mother's heard the guests complaining. You drunk, boy?"

"Why is it," Allen asked, "that people think you're drunk if you have the least bit of fun. If, for once, you say, "To hell with your rules," and act the way you feel? Why is that, Dad?"

"C'mon, boy. You need to rest."

Ed pulled up Allen, who reached up and started to run his fingers across his father's forehead.

"Allen. For God's sake, your a grown man. Stop it."

"Are you going to snap at my fingers, Dad? Don't bite them, okay?"

Allen kept reaching for his father's face as Ed shouldered him into the house and through the crowd. Once in the bedroom, Ed flopped Allen down on the bed and asked him what the hell he thought he was doing out there. Allen merely looked up at his father, his face sweaty and sober.

"We've all been asses, Dad. I just thought I'd start acting like one."

Ed started to say something, but Allen's mother, who had followed the two in, intervened and told Ed that Allen obviously was a bit drunk. Allen swore to the contrary, and Ed suggested that the boy had been out in the sun without a cap for too long this morning.

"You know, Dad. Someday you'll quit calling Blake and me 'boys.'"

"Then grow up," Ed said, "and start acting like it."

Allen lay back into the softness of the mattress. His head did hurt, and his mother, touching his forehead, spoked concernedly that he might have a fever. He brushed aside her hand. He raised himself up on his elbow.

"Do you know we nearly caused Blake to kill some people?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Allen. You're talking like a drunk," Ed said.

"No. I mean it," Allen countered. "You really want to know why Blake wrecked the truck. Because of us. Because we forced him into it."

"You're talking crazy," Ed said. "Rest for awhile so you can come to your senses."

Ed started for the door, and Allen called out after him: "You just don't listen, do you?" Ed paused, a single moment of hesitancy, then walked out, closing the door quickly behind him. Allen turned to his mother, who sat in a chair near the bed. "He just won't listen. He doesn't even want to hear."

"I don't understand what you're saying, Allen," Dianna said, her voice halting and unsure. "Blake told us he'd drunk too much at the bachelor party, passed out at the wheel and drove the truck into a cement culvert."

"It's all a lie Blake made me promise to tell."

"Why?"

"He was tired of all the hassles. He knew you'd believe that story. You might not like it, but you'd believe it. He was leaving home, Mom, but he wanted to come back. Only, all the hassles just got to him. After what he did, he didn't want you and Dad to think worse of him, worse than

you already did. But the lie, that's something you could believe possible."

"I don't understand," she said.

* * * * *

That night we drove to Raymond for a drink. Back in high school, we spent a lot of time there in The Brewery and Soda Shoppe, especially after Blake's football and basketball games. Wasn't the smartest thing to do since they were our rivals, I suppose, but kids are kids. Sitting down in a corner booth, I ordered us a couple of beers. Not more than fifteen minutes later, Sid, Charlie, Dave and a couple of the other guys from Blake's class popped in. That's when Blake figured out it was a surprise party.

We drank for a while, swapping school lies and enjoying ourselves when Moose swaggered over to our table, chugging off his beer and tossing the can on the floor. A big, burly bastard, Moose was Raymond High's star player back when Blake and I were playing. He must've weighed nearly 260 pounds, larger even than back in high school.

"Ain't you boys from Clear Lake?"

All of us looked up at him, then back to talking, ignoring him completely. He thrust his bulk against our table, shoving it back a couple of inches.

"Can't you pansies hear me? Ain't you from Clear Lake?"

Others in The Brewery looked over. Soon, four or five guys gathered around Moose, staring at us.

"Look, guys," Blake told us in a calm voice. "Let's just play it cool."

"Play it cool, huh," Moose said, turning to Blake. "You wasn't so damn cool when I creamed the fuck out of you back in high school. You

assholes always looked so damn funny all sprawled out on the ground."

"Hey, mouth," I said, starting to get up from the table. Blake grabbed my arm and said to forget it, high school was a long time ago. But I told Blake that fucker had gone just a bit too far. Hell, Blake never really cared that much. But my squad went to state twice.

"You can remember back that far, huh," I sneered at Moose. "Back in the glory days. You still shoveling shit for a living?"

"You got a big mouth for such a little man," he told me.

"You got a big body," I replied, "for such a little brain."

"You mother fuckers." Moose slapped Blake's beer mug, tipping it over, splashing beer on Blake's shirt and pants.

"Hey, goddammit." Blake shot up from his seat and grabbed for Moose's shirt. Our guys jumped up, and both groups moved toward each other. Blake backed up, and Moose sneered at him.

"No fighting," Blake said. "I don't want to get arrested."

"In this town? You gotta be shittin'," Moose yelled. "I'll take those bastard on, too."

"Okay, assholes," Moose said. "Outside."

I told him "outside" was using his head as good as when he was in high school. Blake wanted to leave, but Moose kept calling us names, goading us on, until the groups agreed to meet in half an hour out at the old bridge north of town.

We piled into the blue pickup truck, the other guys in back and me and Blake in front. On the way out, Blake stared quietly out the window, looking at the fields lit by a full moon. The light made his face hollow, his eyes mere holes. Trembling, he clutched the seat edge.

"This is stupid," he said.

Suddenly, Blake lunged across the seat and clawed at the steering wheel, trying to pull it toward him. I struggled for control as the truck swerved back and forth across the road. The truck banged about as the tires screamed out against being forced from their straight path.

"What the hell you doing, Blake?" I screamed. "Let go of the wheel. You're going to wreck us. Let go, dammit."

I punched at his chest and neck with my right hand until he relaxed his grip and flopped back against his door. Sid and the others in the back pounded on the window, yelling at us to slow down before we all got killed. I steered the truck back into the proper lane, then got madder than hell.

"Goddamn Blake," I said. "You could've gotten us killed."

"Stop this truck right now," he said, "and let me out."

"You a coward or something?"

"Yeah. I'm a coward. Now, let me out."

"Relax," I told him. "You think I'd let my little brother get messed up right before his wedding?"

"That's exactly what's going to happen."

"Look. Before we left, Dave called some guys. They're going to hide behind some trees out there. We'll just stand in the road, and when Moose and those shitheads come up to us, those guys'll jump out and it won't be no problem at all. Those guys'll run with their tails between their legs."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about if you think they're going to run." He looked at me accusingly. "Why the hell you want to do this shit, anyway?"

I just shrugged my shoulders. "No time to explain -- we're here."

"I'm not fighting," he said.

I pulled off into a field entrance about a hundred yards from the bridge and killed the lights. The guys in back climbed out and we started walking down the middle of the road. Moose still hadn't gotten there, so I yelled out for the guys Dave called. No answer. About five minutes later a car sped by us and stopped on the other side of the bridge. I yelled out again.

"Those bastard must've backed out," Blake said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Moose and his friends got out from their car and started walking back toward us.

"It's too late," I said.

"Damn, this is stupid," Blake said.

We squared off about thirty feet from each other.

"You ready, mother fuckers?" Moose screamed, then spat on the ground.

Suddenly, Sid yelled out, "Jesus Christ, I ain't no teenager."

At that, Blake turned white. I swear he glowed in the moonlight. He started backing up. I heard running, turned and saw Sid, Charlie, and Dave scampering down the banks for the trees.

"Run, Allen, Run," Blake yelled, then high-tailed it toward the ditch. Behind us, I heard Moose yell out to "get those gutless mothers." Blake and I hit the undergrowth full-speed and didn't stop until, gasping for air, we flopped down on the ground in a shallow ditch about two hundred yards from the bridge. Blake grabbed his sides and heaved, unable to fill his lungs. Blood pounded in my temples from exertion, but I managed to rasp out that I thought we were safe.

"What the hell did we think we were doing?" he said, looking at me, his cheeks puffing in and out. Turning his head, he spat on the ground. He threw his arms forward, digging his palms into the ground, and rocked

back and forth on all fours, trying to force more air into his lungs. I threw myself down on my back and gazed up through some tree limbs at the stars.

"We could've gotten ourselves killed back there," he said, finally catching his breath.

"I haven't seen you sprint like that since you were in football," I said.

"You think this is funny?"

"Relax, Blake. We're safe, now."

He cried out, "Jesus," and lunged over and hit full force directly on top of me, pinning me against the ground.

"I saw some lights over there," he whispered.

"Maybe our guys," I told him.

"Christ," Blake said. "They're going to find us here."

"Where we going?" I whispered.

"Where's the truck from here?"

"You'd think they'd be stupid enough not to have someone there?"

"You think I'm going to leave Dad's truck there?"

We lay there quietly for awhile longer, but the flashlights and voices kept creeping toward us.

"We've got to get out of here." Blake's voice was shaking. "We'll circle back and see if they're still around."

We kept watching the flashlights as we crawled along the ground on our bellies toward a draw. After scooting into the depression, we sat upright, our backs against an old, dried tree that had fallen down years ago. The wood not already rotten was petrifying. I motioned with my hands, and Blake answered by pointing north. Doubled over, we walked quickly up the draw for about a hundred yards when my back began to ache

so badly that I had to rest. I grabbed his shirttail.

"Stop, Blake."

"Forget it, Allen."

"You got us into this mess. Now, you're just going to have to hold up 'til we get out of it."

I must've looked like I was in pain, because Blake relented and stretched out on the ground on his back and gazed into the darkness. Damn him, for someone who'd run like a jack rabbit, he seemed for all the world not to have a single care at that moment.

"If we get out of this alive, I'm going to kill you," Blake said, his soft voice a mere whisper from the distance.

"Relax, dammit."

"I mean it. I don't know why you wanted to get into a scrap tonight. For God's sake man, you've got two kids. Moose is mean. He'd just as soon beat the hell out of you as look at you."

"You've done this before," I said.

"That was a long time ago. Way back in high school. I don't have any desire to do this shit anymore. What got into you?"

"I don't know," I said. "I was just looking to give you a good time back there. But when that asshole came up to the table and started spouting off, well . . . I don't know. It just seemed like the thing to do."

"Yeah, I guess I got mad, too. But hell, Allen, all we had to do was drive away."

"Right. That would've looked good."

"Who gives a shit what it looks like. What's gonna happen, someone come up and call you a coward?"

"Yeah. That's right. Someone'd come up and say, 'Hey, you hear how those Miller boys turned tail and ran.'"

"You're stupid."

"Watch your mouth, Blake."

"Why, you gonna punch me out big man?"

Blake rolled over on his side, showing his back to me. So many times when he was a boy he'd do the same thing. I used to pick on him a lot. Try to force him into a fight. But he'd always back down, just walk away. He was so damn spoiled, always hiding behind apron skirts, telling on me to Dad. Sometimes, I just got so tired of it. He'd never hit me, even when I'd punch him in the mouth. Never. Yet, he was always getting in fights at school, often getting the hell beat out of himself.

"Why wouldn't you fight me?" The words crept out, inching toward that back -- blank and unadorned -- that stared silently back at me. I never meant to say those words.

At first, he didn't move, just lay there, perfectly still. Then, I saw his arms start to twitch and his shoulders start to quiver. Slowly, like a rabbit quivering at the end of a chase, he turned his head toward me.

"You picked on me just to show how much bigger and stronger you were, especially when Dad was around."

"I did not."

"Don't lie, dammit. It was my fault, too. If just once I'd punched you out, it'd all been different. Now, I just don't give a damn."

Blake jumped up into a crouching position.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's go. I'm tired of this. I want to go home."

We kept low, resting every once in awhile. At one point, Blake tripped

in a hole and sprawled forward onto the ground. Groaning, he lay there for a couple of minutes, not moving. I worked closer to him.

"You all right?"

"I'll be damned if I didn't fall in a pile of cowshit."

I started to giggle. I tried not to, but he did look ridiculous, what with all that slime on his shirt, right in the middle of his breast. Blake glanced down at his shirt, then started in laughing, too. After awhile, we calmed down, drawing in deep breathes to get ourselves under control.

"Oh well," Blake said, "you always did say I was full of shit."

I helped him into a sitting position. Cursing softly, he used twigs and leaves to wipe off the cow dung.

"Makes me glad I went away to college."

"Get off it, Blake," I said. "Why don't you just tell Dad you want to farm with him."

"Don't be a fool."

"I'm serious," I told him. "You afraid he'll say no? He knows there's no way I'd go in with him -- I don't like the farm. Why you think he was so mad when you got out of agriculture?"

"Won't work," he said.

"You ought to talk about it with him."

Blake grew angry: "That old bastard never listens to one thing I say."

"He isn't that bad."

"He doesn't ride you like he does me. I swear to God I've never been able to plow a furrow straight enough for him. About the only time I can remember us getting along was this spring when we were cleaning out the grove. And I still don't know why we were able to, then."

"The problem is that you're both exactly alike," I said. "You should talk to him."

"Yeah. Sure."

We started out again, sticking to the draw. We worked our way through a field of wheat and circled back until we hid ourselves in a hedgerow near the road we'd driven in on. Blake motioned me to be silent. We listened for several minutes, but all we heard was a serenade of cicada and the occasional rustle of a bird in the trees. We must've waited like that for several hours, then slowly worked our way, crouched low, to the sides of the pickup.

"Let me drive," Blake whispered.

"I can manage it," I said.

"Let me. I used to work for old man Castnell near here. I know the roads better than you."

I gave him the keys. The doors squeaked open, the sound echoing across the railings of the bridge and slapping against the surface of the slowly-moving creek. No other sound answered. Crawling inside, Blake shoved the key into the ignition. The motor raced, its new life shattering the world of the cicadas into silence. Blake jammed the gears into reverse, and the tires churned as he punched the accelerator and backed out onto the highway. A pair of headlights flashed on from across the bridge.

"I'll be dammed," Blake said. "They were waiting after all."

On the highway, Blake nursed the pickup to higher and higher speeds, the mud tires whining as they gripped at the patches of asphalt that served inadequately as a smooth road. I kept glancing through the rear window.

"They're coming up on us," I yelled.

The car pulled alongside and several guys inside started throwing beer bottles at us, the glass shattering against the side of the truck.

"Quit it, you bastards. The fight's off," Blake yelled out.

More bottles pelted the truck, beer spewing inside the cab, glass catching on the wiper blades. Blake grew more vindictive, yelling curses and threatening the men: "Leave the truck alone." Suddenly, screaming out, he jerked the steering wheel, slamming the truck into the side of the other car. As quickly, he twisted the wheel the opposite way. We shot off into the ditch, clipping off several roadsigns which slammed back into the windshield with a dull, smashing thump. Minute cracks bloomed across the windshield -- a myriad of crystals glowing in the dashlights. I screamed as the truck crashed along the ditch -- rumbling, bumping, up and down -- until we slashed through a barbed-wire fence and stopped in a field about twenty-five feet off the road.

Blake groaned, opened his door and fell out of the truck. I ached, from my head, down through my neck, into my shoulders, back and legs. The truck barely idled, the engine choking on its own gas. I slapped at the ignition switch, and the truck went silent. I remember looking through the windshield, the damage almost a perfect circle of millions of little cracks, through which filtered the light of the moon. I opened my door and stepped out, only to tumble into the pasture grass, my legs unable to hold me. I lay there for a long time, trying to catch my breath.

I heard the crickets first, chattering, then a squeaking coming from the nighttime sky. I concentrated on the whine, trying to figure it out. It sounded like crying, a little child with a bandaged hand crying as he swung on an old swing, the chains grinding against their metal hooks.

"You all right?" Blake's voice came from over me.

I looked up into the bloody mess that was his face.

"You don't look so hot," he said to me. "Those bastards didn't even stop. C'mon, let me help you."

My legs wobbled as Blake led me toward a cow tank directly underneath a windmill whose axle squeaked as the wind turned the blades. We moved forward, slowly, placing our hands one in front of the other, our knees tagging along behind, until we reached the tank brimming with night time water. I pushed my face into the water, crying out at the sudden cold. But I've never felt anything better in my life. I opened my mouth and let the water rush in and gurgle around my tongue. I splashed water on my back and neck. Blake stood up, then toppled into the tank, yelping a bit when the water hit the cuts on his face.

"Bad?" I asked.

"Don't think so, but it hurts like hell. You feeling better?"

"You intentionally hit them."

"Guess so."

"You could've killed us all."

Blake looked at me, and even in the extra light of the full moon, I couldn't tell whether the water on his face was from the cow tank or not.

"You don't think I know that."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I really don't know. They kept throwing bottles at the truck, and calling us names. I told them to stop, to leave us alone. The fight was over. There was no fight. But they kept throwing bottles at the truck, glass smashing all over and beer flying in my face."

"You could've slowed down, let them go on."

"I didn't think of it. Hell, I didn't want them to."

Blake climbed out of the tank, and, without talking, we rested against its side. After a while, we felt strong enough to walk back to the truck. The blue paint camouflaged the truck in the shadowy outlines of the pasture hills. But even in moonlight we saw the bruises and hits of the truck's fight with the ditch and fence. Blake leaned over the fender and rested his body on the hood.

"Smells like beer," Blake said. "Dad is going to be one mad son-of-a-bitch."

"Thank God we're all right."

"Yeah. There's another old bastard whose been looking out for me all these years. Right fine job he's done, too."

"Hey. We could be dead."

"That's one way of looking at it."

"We gotta tell the police," I told Blake.

"Don't be an ass," he said. "You want me to get a ticket, maybe charge me with assault. I tried to run those bastards off the road."

"They'll report it."

"Right. Sure. And get charged with assault, just like me? They won't say anything. Hell, they probably think they caused the accident. They won't say anything."

Blake twisted away from the truck, then kicked it hard in the fender.

"Why in the hell didn't I take my own car."

"Don't worry," I told him. "Dad'll be pissed. But he'll understand."

"You stupid ass, don't you know anything?"

"Hey, don't call me that."

He looked at me, screwing up his face. I stayed silent, but suddenly felt very hot.

"Hell," he said. "Can you see Mom hearing about her fine, young son attempting to kill someone with a car? She'll like that. Damn, and I'm supposed to get married on Sunday."

The truck, surprisingly, started right up and we drove out of the field through the tear in the fence. Blake edged the truck out of the ditch; we didn't say anything as we drove into town. Thirsty as hell, we pulled into a closed filling station and shoveled change into the Coke machine. Blake guzzled his, then tossed the can into the pickup bed.

"Don't tell anyone what happened tonight," Blake said. "Just say I got drunk. Nothing more. If anyone else found out, there'd be talk all over the place. We don't have to live here, but Mom and Dad do." Blake was silent for a moment, then spat out: "I'll sure as hell never will, now."

Blake walked around the front of the truck, giving the dented hood a heavy slap as he passed by, and crawled into the driver's seat.

"C'mon," Blake said. "We gotta get home. I'm getting married in a couple of days."

* * * * *

At the end of Allen's story, Dianna sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes glancing back and forth between the tree outside and her son.

"I can't believe Blake would do such a thing," Dianna said.

"You see. Blake was right. That's exactly why he never wanted me to say anything. You'd never believe Blake capable of hating this farm, his family, so much that he'd want to kill."

"Don't be ridiculous, Allen. He doesn't hate us, any more than he tried to ram that car. It was an accident, nothing more."

"Christ," Allen said. "You're as bad as father."

Limbs cast shadows on the carpeting in front of Dianna, forming a maze of narrow and thick lines which whimsically changed as the wind moved the branches. Dianna traced the shadows, not needing to look at the clock on the dresser to know that the wedding was less than two hours away.

"Your father asked Blake to come to the farm and get married," Dianna said.

"He told me this afternoon."

"He doesn't even know that I know. He pretended that Blake had asked for it. Blake never said a word. But I knew. He presses so hard when he writes, and the impressions were still on my writing tablet." Her eyes moistened as she looked at Allen. "Why didn't he tell me? Why did he have to make it look like Blake asked for it?"

"Maybe for the same reason you didn't tell Dad about the water bottle," Allen said, "or maybe why I never told you about the wreck, or why Blake never wants to admit he wants to come back here and farm."

Forcing himself to a sitting position, Allen suddenly felt nauseated -- a black light centered itself in his vision. He refused to collapse back into bed. He stood up, wobbly at first, and hung on the bedpost until the ground steadied. His steps, hesitant at first, grew bolder until he ambled about the room, stopping to tighten the lids on the jars of makeup sitting on the dresser.

"I've often thought, thinking back to the wreck, that I caused it just as much as he did. Maybe I even wanted it. I know for damn sure that I wanted a fight. I wanted something different, and maybe that's why I both liked and disliked this wedding. It's different, and that's what I can't have. Sometimes I'm so damn jealous of Blake."

Allen fell back against the wall, feeling the slight imperfections in the sheetrock. With sandpaper, he could scratch the walls smooth, repaint the grey tones into a bright yellow that would glow in the afternoon sun. No, he thought. He had his own walls in his own house in his own city. These walls were no longer his, this bedroom only a container of memories. He looked at his mother, still tracing shadows on the carpet with her toes.

"You, me, Dad -- we forced Blake to ram that car, picking at him over and over to make sure he did what we wanted. Then we lied to each other to make sure that no one ever found out."

Allen started for the door, saying he was going to do his damndest to enjoy the rest of the afternoon, but stopped when Ed pushed open the door.

"Up and at it, huh? Feel like helping me finish setting up the chairs?"

Before Allen could answer, Dianna quietly asked Ed to come inside and close the door behind him. At first he protested that there wasn't time. But when he saw she was upset, he went to the bed and sat down in front of her. She still clung to the arms of the chair.

"Why didn't you tell me you asked Blake to have the wedding here?"

Ed glanced quickly at Allen, knowing the trust he had placed in his son had been broken.

"I didn't tell her," Allen said. "She read the impressions you left on her writing tablet."

"You had no right to do that," Ed said, glaring at his wife.

"Just like you had no right to order him off the farm" she accused.

"I didn't," Ed said.

"Don't lie, Ed. I'm tired of all of us lying. That's all we do."

"I don't know what this is all about. But I'll be damned if I'm going to sit around in here and be insulted."

"Tell him what happened, Allen."

Allen quickly recounted that night. As Allen talked, Ed's face reddened and his breath grew short. Allen noticed a slight flaring about his nostrils.

"Jesus Christ, Allen. You two could have gotten killed."

"You're not listening, Ed," Dianna scolded. "Listen to what he's saying about Blake and the farm."

"Dad knows, Mom. He's always known."

"What are you talking about," Ed demanded.

Dianna's mind raced, trying to understand why Ed refused to see, trying to fit all the little pieces of information, all the doubts that had plagued her all these years, into a coherent pattern. Suddenly, she realized that all the photographs she had tried to assemble in neat little rows on a placard -- images of Blake -- would never fit together. She couldn't force them, any more than she could force the shadow maze on the carpet into a symmetrical pattern. Everything shifted. Everything must shift -- the farm, her family, Father Britley. The only truth is in change. Despite her racing thoughts, her words came slowly, mechanically, as if she had distanced herself from her husband and son, registering the present as a future memory that, like all memories, are distorted by time.

"We wrecked his first wedding," Dianna said. "Let's not wreck the second."

"You're talking nonsense," Ed said.

"You know exactly what I mean," she said. "We always tried to fit him into our little patterns, trying to get him to pick the right wife,

the right job, the right religion."

"Has the sun gotten to you, too?" Ed asked, his voice lower, more hesitant.

"No," Dianna said. "But perhaps Father Zorrotero was right. Maybe Blake needs a steeple, something that he can gaze at each and every day. It could have been the farm. I don't know, now." She hesitated, then said resignedly: "Maybe we shouldn't have the wedding here."

"Now, you are talking crazy," Ed said. But his shoulders hunched, and he began rubbing his sweaty palms up and down the sides of his pants. His body swayed like wheat in the wind. The muscles in his jaw loosened and tightened, his teeth grinding, his throat undulating.

"I got to finish up out there," he said, chewing the words, spitting them out bit by bit until the sentence became whole and palatable. "I got to go finish the chairs."

Pulling himself up off the bed, placing one foot in front of the other, struggling toward the door, Ed planned his escape. But Allen grabbed his wrist.

"Dad, ask Blake to farm with you."

Ed shook his head: "He'll say no."

"Probably," Allen said.

Nodding, glancing down at his feet, Ed said, "I'll try" and left the bedroom. Allen glanced quickly at his mother, and she said she'd be out in a minute. Allen followed his father.

She crossed to a wall mirror and patted her hair into place. Wetting her handkerchief, she rubbed under and around her eyes. There'll be peace, now, she thought, and Blake won't fight so hard. If we listen to him, maybe he'll go to church with us when he gets back from his honeymoon. Maybe he'll find a job around here -- there's a place a mile from here that

could be fixed up. Ed could help him. No. No. He'll never stay. He'll go back down there, somewhere. But we'll fly down and see him. We'll see. Primping, she straightened her dress, rubbed her feet about in her shoes, then moved briskly to the door and into the chaos in the front room.

After an eternity, she heard a shout outdoors and peeked out through the kitchen window, watching as Ed and Allen and a host of guests crowded around an arriving car. She caught glimpses of the young, dark woman being helped out by the Spanish-speaking priest. Then she concentrated on the face of her youngest son as he worked through the sea of outstretched hands and smiles toward the kitchen door.

She came first, a little woman in a cream-colored dress that shone against her brown skin. Dianna noted the deeply tanned hand clasping the bride's shoulder, then looked up into the browned face of her smiling son.

"Mom," he yelled. "We made it, and even on time."

Patiently, Dianna waited as Blake and his hesitant bride walked toward her. The young girl extended her right hand, the fingers quivering so much that her fingernails, painted a bright red, twirled about in tiny circles.

"Senora," the young woman said, her voice breaking slightly. "Mucho gusto."

Dianna glanced quickly at Blake, her nervous face demanding a translation.

Blake laughed lightly, then said, "She's glad to meet you."

"Oh. Tell her I'm glad to meet her, too."

"Tell her yourself, Mom."

"You know I can't speak Spanish."

"Doesn't matter."

Dianna looked into the eyes of the young woman, eyes so deeply brown that they looked almost black. But they were kind, shy eyes, befitting for a young bride so nervous as to be ready to cry.

"I'm happy to meet you, Ligia. Did I say that right, Blake?"

"Good enough. At least you didn't call her Sally."

"Blake," Dianna scolded him.

With one arm clinging to Ligia's shoulder, Blake placed the other around his mother's and drew all three of them together.

"Finally, I have my two favorite women right next to me."

"Oh, Blake," Dianna said. "I'm so glad you're home."

She kissed him on the cheek. Blake kissed his bride on the cheek. He glanced back around him and smiled at Ed and Allen. They walked into the front room.

Critical Afterword On

I Take Thee . . .

In "I Take Thee . . .," members of the Ed Miller family entrap themselves in self-made and self-perpetuated webs of misunderstanding which lead to estrangement and near-destruction of the family unit. But by each member's acceptance of the need for tolerance, the family achieves a limited understanding of themselves and of the inherent falseness in their judgments and their perspectives. The story, then, becomes a symbolic exploration of the relativity of truth, which is the inability to gain reliable knowledge because of perceptual errors. This concept is explored in the themes, characterizations, and structure.

The story is constructed of three vignettes, each a flashback into activities related to the first marriage of Blake Miller. These vignettes are placed into and contrast with an overall frame story which details activities as the Miller family prepares for Blake's second marriage, this time to a foreign girl. In both the vignettes and the overall frame story, Blake's mother and father, Dianna and Ed, and his older brother, Allen, progressively discover and partially correct misconceptions about themselves and Blake. Although the individuals never achieve a complete understanding, they learn tolerance and acceptance by reaching an appreciation of values different from their own. They recognize that what they believe to be true really depends on the feelings, desires and perspectives affecting them at any particular moment.

The characters discover their mistakes by recognizing that truth is really little more than a collection of falsehoods which control their lives. These falsehoods, which are corollaries to the relativity of truth, are used to perpetuate the characters' own desires and feelings.

As Allen says, "You, me, Dad -- we forced Blake to ram that car, picking at him over and over to make sure he did what we wanted. Then we lied to each other to make sure that no one every found out." The characters, then, must confront the lies upon which they have based their lives: Dianna hides in her religion so as not to face why Blake has rejected his family and roots; but she willingly subverts her religious doctrines -- to the point of lying to priests, the living symbols of God in her life -- to accomplish personal goals of saving face and furthering maternal domination. Ed refuses to recognize his own mortality, choosing rather to hide behind tradition in attempts to prevent the waning of his power over his family and the environment (the farm) that he has created. Allen refuses to recognize his sibling jealousy, pretending that he doesn't yearn for the "differences" in lifestyle that Blake has attained, while he must remain entrapped in what he views as the banality of marriage, children and job. Their reactions to Blake exemplify the falseness inherent in their perspectives.

This falseness is the one truth learned by the characters. Through discussions and events -- the process of "progressive discovery" -- they begin to understand that they interpret events as they wish them to be, not as they are. This concept of distorted perspectives and falseness being directly related to the relativity of truth is rooted in the 17th Century doctrine of philosophic skepticism. Briefly stated, this philosophy asserts that the world cannot be accurately understood because humankind relies for truth on its senses; thus, reliable and truthful knowledge is impossible to gain. The characters subconsciously learn this philosophy and, again following this doctrine, they become aware that the only possible solution to their problem is to understand

that beliefs, their own and others', are nothing more than opinions. In doing so, the characters realize that they may achieve a limited understanding of why they react as they do to each other. This limited understanding, they realize, is enough to rebuild relationships on.

Everyday occurrences prompted me to choose this concept as the basis for my work. My in-laws underwent great personal difficulties in learning to accept the impending marriage of their daughter to a Bolivian national (unable to speak English). They had to confront and understand their Midwestern prejudices and beliefs, recognizing that their view of the world, and what is right and wrong, depends to a great extent on their cultural influences, which conflicted directly with customs and attitudes of other cultures. I applied their emotional and philosophical distress to my own experiences in growing up. The story, then, is an amalgamation of my own observations, prejudices and experiences. As did the Miller family, I experienced "progressive discovery," recognizing that I also misjudge (and, at times, unjustly condemn) certain actions because they do not agree with my own system of beliefs. As did the characters, I began to understand that I have created my own world of inaccurate perceptions. Therefore, I learned that I must accept others on the basis of their perceptions of themselves and not try to fit them into my own mold.

The purpose of "I Take Thee" is my attempt to express -- through a series of actions and the characters' thoughts -- my belief in the relativity of truth. A work must instruct and not be mere symbols and words; it must attempt to modify existing beliefs which produce the lies that prevent acceptance and understanding. As Shelley states, art must engender "in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange"; that is, it must prompt the reader to look at his beliefs and prejudices, and to

change them in order to provide a union between "exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change."¹ Shelley's comments on forming unions between opposites was one of my concerns in the development of characterizations for this story. Each character represents a union of contradictory feelings and beliefs.

Dianna, the traditional housewife and mother, revels in her role as the guardian of the family structure. She persists in the misconception that her Catholic religion, with its band on divorce and its emphasis on traditional family values, will provide the moralistic power to help her keep the family together. But when Blake renounces his religion, mocking its commandments through blasphemous actions and divorce, she is confronted with an almost unendurable contradiction. She places the blame on Blake's education and on his father, refusing to believe that her own coercive use of religion helped precipitate the family's estrangement and Blake's cavalier attitudes. She protests that "Blake's always had good religious training," only to be jolted by the charge that her narrow religious attitudes are manipulative: "Senora, your training is just that . . . it is training," charges a radical Latin American priest. "It is Rome. But it is not people." The charge works at her subconscious as she confesses her deceptions in the name of religion and for the love of her family. But, finally, she recognizes the artificiality of her own behavior and how she must not force others to believe as she does:

Suddenly, she realized that all the photographs she had tried to assemble in neat little rows on the placard -- images of Blake -- would never fit together. She couldn't force them, any more than she could force the shadow maze on the carpet into a symmetrical pattern. Everything shifted. Everything must shift . . ."

Ed is a traditionalist. Not based on religion, his traditionalism stems from an almost fanatical instinct for self-preservation. He constructs and protects his self-made environment to the extent that he becomes his own God, seeking omnipotence and casting off anything, including Blake, which he views as a hindrance to his continued domination. All his perceptions uphold the concept of singular immortality: prograny is unnecessary for continued life. He mistakenly believes that he will endure in the form of the farm, failing to recognize that Blake possesses the knowledge and desire to continue the farm, although in a modified state, following the father's death. Ed confronts his error in the well house, below ground, when he recognizes in Blake his own death and loss of power:

An old man, he called me. He glared back at me, but his eyes were mere holes, hidden in shadows created by the light bulb hanging behind him. I looked at him and suddenly I started to shake. I had to get out of that hole, away from him, out into the clean air where I could breathe and the sun would warm away the cold.

Refusing to admit his perceptual and philosophical error, he forces Blake away, preferring to blame Blake for being immature and incapable of assuming the mantle of authority. Eventually, he relents and recalls his son, only to find that it may be too late:

"Dad, ask Blake to farm with you."

Ed shook his head: "He'll say no."

"Probably," Allen said.

Nodding, glancing down at his feet, Ed said, "I'll try," and left the bedroom.

The catalyst for Ed's recognition is Allen, the liberal older brother who acts as a balance between the parents and Blake. Wishing to escape rural life, he trades the mundaneness of the farm for what he perceives to be the mundaneness of marriage, children and a factory job. Entrapped, he seeks solace in the glory of his high school days, a pride which promotes a fight with a group of rivals and leads to a serious car accident involving Blake and him. His error is in not recognizing himself as a cause for the fight and wreck, instead seeing both as symptomatic of Blake's free-spirited life. He condemns Blake for his wanderlust, although Allen himself yearns for similar adventures:

He was the one who always wanted to travel overseas, to take a banana boat anywhere he could. And Blake, always the one to make plans for the farm, the conservative one, ended up in Latin America, forced away, marrying a girl who couldn't even speak English. Allen felt a little disgusted about it all.

Allen seeks the freedom he feels Blake has, but is frustrated because he knows such freedom is not within his grasp. His inner yearnings work at him, causing him to react against the decorum expected during weddings and to find solace in drinking too much. But his behavior is seemingly without reason, and he is ridiculed (though he doesn't recognize it) by the laughter of guests and admonishments from his parents. But in reviewing his own actions and those of his parents, Allen recognizes his error:

Allen fell back against the wall, feeling the slight imperfections in the sheetrock. With sandpaper, he could scratch the walls smooth, repaint the grey tones into a bright yellow that would glow in the afternoon sun. No,

he thought. He had his own walls in his own house in his own city. These walls were no longer his, this bedroom only a container of memories.

Knowing his perceptions to be false, he accepts his life on its own terms instead of seeking a life that is impossible for him to have.

Blake's character is purposely ambiguous, a precondition dictated by the structural and philosophical demands that he be viewed through the faulty perspectives of his family. Each member points out an aspect which may or may not be true: a wayward son; a pompous, college graduate; a free spirit. He is, of course, an amalgamation of all viewpoints, a non-traditionalist who has broken free from his mother's hypocrisy, his father's intransigence, and his brother's jealousy. Although he rejects the perspectives which seek to judge and categorize him, he yearns for the lifestyle denied him:

It's just that I've always wanted to get married here, underneath the cedar in the south yard. Its branches are a perfect canopy. And, well, I thought you guys might be proud to have your son married on the homestead.

He marries on the farm, but his ultimate goals are defeated as he becomes increasingly estranged from his family. In almost unbearable frustration, he attempts to ram a car with his father's truck, his symbol for family and rural life. But this act assures the loss of his goals and preordains the failure of his first marriage and the necessity of a voyage in search of himself. Blake is the victim of the false perspectives and judgments of his family. But, ironically, his own views are as faulty; he refuses to learn tolerance or to accept other viewpoints, as is demonstrated in

his rejection of what he considers to be artificial conventions: religion, agricultural studies, and traditional wedding customs. The circle of estrangement and false perspectives becomes complete.

False perspectives as symbols of the relativity of truth are also explored in the structure and rhetorical devices. The structure is a modification of the one used by Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales. As with Chaucer, characterizations are first established, then modified through language and stories which reflect on the speaker's personality and his perspectives. Also echoing Chaucer is the use of vignettes interwoven into an overall frame, each story semi-independent, but alluding back to specific characters. Primary differences occur in compression. Chaucer intended a major work encompassing a variety of tales and themes which slowly would reveal character and group traits. Because The Canterbury Tales was never finished, characterizations remain underdeveloped. In "I Take Thee . . .," a long short story, I used only three vignettes and the external frame to highlight characterizations and major themes, preferring not to follow the form inherent in Chaucer's more casual development. I also studied Chaucer to see how he used everyday language and everyday characters to develop portraits that simultaneously are individual and typical. As Chaucer wished to present a picture of English life in the 14th century, I wished to present a picture of rural American life in the 20th century. Unlike Chaucer, however, I chose to be more didactic, although, like him, I sought to allow characters to reveal their own faults through their actions, speeches and thoughts.

My technique for incorporating characters' thoughts into the story is patterned broadly after William Faulkner's device of stream of consciousness, in which emotions and explanations burst forth suddenly

and forcefully. Unlike Faulkner, however, I avoided sudden intrusions into the narrative by maintaining traditional grammar and by not using italics to offset emotional flows. In this way, I sought to provide an uninterrupted continuum by which the reader passes easily between interior monologue and the exterior arena of the story's events. This technique produces a series of seemingly mixed or convoluted perspectives and, therefore, a shifting point-of-view. I did not want to establish a central authoritative perspective that would signal to the reader the validity or invalidity of other perspectives. For example, Allen's perspective is not intended as the "right" one by which to judge the perspectives of Ed and Dianna. Instead, all perspectives are relative to themselves, and no one perspective carries the authority of truth. Therefore, the story works with an ever-increasing number of perspectives, including those of the four primary characters and various combinations of them as perceived by the reader. Since it is impossible to achieve reliable "truth" for any situation, the most that can be achieved is recognition of limited perceptions.

Studies of techniques used by Chaucer and Faulkner aided in solving a variety of problems. But throughout the writing and revising process, focus caused me the greatest difficulty, requiring the deletion and/or revision of numerous events and situations. All characters and events had to relate to the concept of the relativity of truth and to Blake. However, early drafts allowed the focus to stray more toward Allen, because he was the single element present in all the vignettes and in the overall frame. All the other characters tended to talk to and through him, which gave his perspective too much "authority." To correct the situation, I de-emphasized Allen by removing him from active involvement in certain events. For example, in earlier drafts I had Dianna confessing

to Allen. In later versions, Allen heard her story, but left the room before Dianna confessed to the Spanish-speaking priest her feelings of guilt stemming from her lies. Allen's perspective was then shown to be limited because he no longer shared in all secrets.

The character of Allen was further de-emphasized by restructuring the third vignette in which Allen and Blake are involved in wrecking their father's pickup. Originally, this vignette pitted the two brothers against a gang of men who had been their high school rivals. Allen enlisted the gang members in a mock fight as part of a bachelor's party joke on Blake. The gang was to feign an attack, but decided to turn the joke into reality. They chased and eventually caught the brothers. The two escaped by Blake playing a hero reminiscent of Mark Twain's Colonel Sherbern in Huckleberry Finn. However, this scenario created a variety of tactical and thematic problems, including making Allen a villain and a fool for wanting to perform such a joke on his brother. It also made Blake uncharacteristically heroic because he had to undo Allen's seemingly malicious acts. A hero vs. villain scenario was never intended; therefore, the fight scene was deleted and replaced by Blake wrecking the truck (in earlier drafts, bashed in by the rival gang) out of frustration and in symbolic defiance. This change decreased Allen's significance and increased the focus on Blake.

The lack of focus was further complicated by the failure of earlier versions to provide the reader with sufficient motivation for character's actions and reactions. In other words, my concept of progressive discovery was not functioning as it should. This was resolved in later versions, where motivations were suggested in observations or situations at the beginning of each vignette, then progressively clarified. Each subsequent story, while elucidating the concerns of the particular

individual involved, also modified and/or supported contentions made in the previous story: Allen's story revealed certain perceptual errors in Ed's story, which in turn modified perceptions in Dianna's story -- all which attempted to match the progression and intensity of the overall frame. Thus, through the process of progressive discovery, each character recognized his false perspective and, thus, the relativity of truth.

The process of progressive discovery was further underscored by rewriting the moment of revelation between Dianna, Ed, and Allen. This moment occurs in the bedroom scene toward the end of the story. In earlier drafts, this moment involved a strong verbal fight, prompting Ed to realize that Blake wished to work on the farm, Dianna to realize that her religion and hypocrisy helped force Blake away, and Allen to understand that his own jealousy made him wish Blake to be hurt in the chase by the rival gang. In later versions, these revelations were modified and dispersed throughout the entire story, providing for a more subdued conclusion which had been documented and foreshadowed throughout.

Notes

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. II, ed. M. H. Abrams, et al., 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 791.

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"I TAKE THEE...

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

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ABSTRACT OF I TAKE THEE...

The primary theme of "I Take Thee..." is the entrapment of members of the Ed Miller family in self-made and self-perpetuated webs of misunderstanding. The story is a symbolic exploration of the relativity of truth, which is the inability to gain reliable knowledge because of perceptual errors. The story is constructed of three vignettes, each a flashback, placed in an overall frame story set in present day. The vignettes explore the beliefs and relationships of the family as it prepares for the first and second marriages of Blake Miller. In the first vignette, Blake's mother, Dianna, confronts her religious and familial attitudes as she and Blake search for a missing bottle of holy water. In the second vignette, Blake's father, Ed, confronts his own mortality and his domineering spirit as he and Blake attempt to fix a broken water pump. In the third vignette, Allen confronts his sibling jealousy and his desire to escape the tedium of his life as he and Blake are pursued by a gang of thugs following a bachelor's party. The vignettes enhance the intensity and pace of the overall frame story, which details the preparations for the marriage of Blake, his second, to a Latin American woman unable to speak English. In the final segment, each character recognizes his perceptual errors.

A critical afterword explains the relationship between perceptual errors and the relativity of truth. Symbolism, characterizations, and structural techniques are defined. Finally, problems and their solutions encountered during the creative writing process are explained, and literary influences are reviewed.