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from Working the East Field

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The oak that had killed Mark wasn’t moving, probably hadn’t moved in over a century except for that night last July when a heat storm had brought down lightning so hard it had carved a deep crevice into its trunk about foot higher than the much smaller scar Mark had left it. Trevor watched it anyway. In his head he knew it was dead, the severity of its injury had seen to that, and when it had life it hadn’t had much, even for a tree. But since July it had lost so much color that Trevor knew it might fall, tearing its own roots right out of the ground, if the wind was right. If it was threatening to fall it was threatening Sir’s horses and Sir certainly wouldn’t stand for that. His father hadn’t felled a tree as long as he could remember. Trevor hadn’t felled one since Mark, but this one had to come down and he supposed that left it to him.

Trevor’s head rested against the rough, bare planks of the barn. A hard winter had stripped it of the last clinging spots of paint and it had been left to weather. It had stood like that, naked, for years until it was sapped of all pigment and left the color of ash. The roof of the milking shed sloped lazily away from the barn, more from gravity and age than design, and Trevor sat in the lee where they met. His mother walked toward him slowly. She was careful not to startle him, but to make enough noise that he knew she was coming.

Trevor rubbed his cigarette out against one of the flat, wooden shingles and turned to face her. He pretended he hadn’t been smoking. She pretended she hadn’t seen.

“You’re getting up earlier than Sir these days.”

“Morning, Ma.” He said.

When she smiled the skin around her eyes folded into hills and Trevor remembered how old she was. She was still wearing her robe, but had pulled on a pair of work boots for the walk. She was holding a cup of coffee. Trevor eased himself down from the roof of the milking shed.

“I hope I didn’t wake you.” He said.

“I was getting up anyway.” She handed him the coffee.

“Thanks.”

“Thought you’d need it. Weather’s turning north for good.”

“We’ve got a few more good weeks left.”

“Maybe you do. My winters seem to get longer every year.”

She looked east to where the sky was beginning to swell into a deep indigo
from the flat immensity of night. She smiled. The wind picked up, blowing the wet chill that had settled on the fields in a current around them. She looked small then, as the wind grabbed at her robe threatening to carry her away. She didn't fight it. Trevor put his arm around her, settling her against his chest. She put her head on his shoulder and sighed. Trevor could feel how thin she had become. He passed the steaming mug of coffee back to her. She held it close to her body, letting it warm her.

"Sun'll be up soon." He said.
"I know it."
They stood like that until the wind passed. She stepped back and looked at the house. A light had come on.
"Sir needs you in the east field today." She wasn't looking at him and the words came to him as a whisper. No one had worked the east field in two years. The silence of early morning was broken by the crack of the screen door against its jamb. Trevor turned and watched his father pick his way down to the barn.
"Morning, Sir." He said. Sir nodded back as he chewed on two pieces of buttered Wonderbread. He shaved every morning and in the dawning light his skin looked smooth and untroubled.
"You're going to work the east field today." He said.
"Ma told me."
"Do you think you can fell that old oak by lunch?" He asked.
"Shouldn't be a problem."
"Good, I'll move the horses into that gully past the south plot while you work, but I'd like them back in pasture as soon's you're done."
"You're not going to help with the oak?" He asked.
"Course not, I've never helped you before."
"Guess not."

Carol didn't move the knife, just rested it against her thumb while she turned the apple against the edge of the blade. Bright red spirals drifted over her hand, long curling strips of the apple's skin. Each turn of the fruit brought the high clear sound of ribbon being straightened. She had been baking apple pies every fall for the length of her life. She worked at the counter by the sink. It was small to begin with and looked impossibly cluttered with her bowls and measuring cups filled with flour and sugar. She knew if Sir came in he wouldn't understand. He'd insist she use the large butcher-block table he had bought for her, but she wouldn't. They had all taken to doing things differently. She made excuses not to eat at the table either, which wasn't very hard. She didn't have much of an appetite.

She stood with her back to the table, ignoring it. She felt badly sometimes. After all, it was just a table you certainly couldn't blame it for standing in the middle of your kitchen. She just couldn't stand to look at it since Mark bled to
death, spread out on its oak top. His stomach was cut open, perfectly straight from his sternum to the tender spot midway between his hips. His body was oiled with sweat and he was thrashing his way so violently into shock that Trevor could barely hold his brother steady as Sir tried to hold his organs in, yelling at her to call the goddamn doctor. She thought that he looked just like a fish, shiny and pale and cut open that way, trying to thrash out of his brother's hands. He looked like Trevor had just pulled him out of the lake.

Carol wiped the loose curls of skin into the sink and lifted the apple. Her fingers touched the wet, white flesh of it lightly as she plunged the knife into its center. She worked the blade smoothly around the core until it loosed and practically fell out. She tossed it into the sink with the pile of red skin and began slicing the apple.