

Southwest Wisconsin, Summer, 1913.

Folks said hogs would eat a downed man, but Will O'Shaughnessy had never seen it. Not before now.

He ran to the barn for a pitchfork to beat them off, and after he dragged his grandpa's body from the pen, he couldn't bear to look any more.

After Will's grandmother, Doris Duffy, had died in an accident, the O'Shaughnessy boys took turns helping their grandpa keep the dairy farm going. Every week, one of the three came to their grandpa's. This was Will's week.

After Doris's death, Will's grandfather, Walter, had hired Sadie, a neighbor woman, to cook for him. As soon as Sadie rang the dinner bell, Will came straight from the barn to wash up. When the old man didn't appear, Sadie said, "I got it all ready to dish up, Will. Better go see what he's up to."

Will searched all around inside the milking parlor, hallooed down the pasture, and poked his head in the door of the shadowy machine shop. Finally he thought of the hog pen, and when he saw his grandpa there, motionless and face down in the mire, his knees buckled and he grabbed a fencepost so he wouldn't collapse.

They'd gone for the soft places — the face, the throat, even ripped through the old man's shirt and pants to his belly. Will ran back to the barn to find the canvas his grandpa kept in the feed room. Hurrying, he tossed it over the old man's body, and then he covered the ground to the house in great strides to get to the telephone.

But at the back door he pulled up short to steady himself against the wall. What was the use of calling anyone? Grandpa was gone. He'd known it the moment he saw him.

“That you, Will?” Sadie peered out the door, a pan of biscuits in one hand. “Didn’t you find him?”

“I found him.” Will gasped from his efforts. He shook his head and stared at his boots. “He won’t be needing his dinner after all.”

Walter’s mutilated body lay three feet above his head, but the cows still had to be milked. Will heard thunder in the distance. He looked up and shuddered.

He had wanted to bring Walter into the back parlor, but Sadie planted her ample frame in the doorway and said, “Not in here, not like that. Take him to the barn. I’ll go get Frank and your dad.”

So Will dragged Walter’s body toward the barn, but he twisted to look away from the grisly remains. When Walter’s coverall strap hooked a nail on the loft door, Will quickly turned away, threw a tarp over the old man, and then slammed the doors and ran to the milk barn below.

Will hurriedly stripped the last drops of milk from a stubborn teat. Lightning flashed through the isinglass window of the milk barn door. He knew he should shed tears, but Walter wasn’t a man you cried over. Hadn’t his grandpa told him, “You don’t let nothin’ stand in way of the milk’n’.” Walter had then spat a wad of red man to where he pointed his gnarled finger. “If I fall dead in that gutter, you finish the cows before you pick me up.”

The farm would be his now. But was he ready? He had planned to be a farmer all his life, had excelled in high school agriculture classes and attended university courses, but he didn’t even know how much income Walter made from ten cows.

“Move over, Bess.” Will pushed his shoulder into this half-ton milk factory and slipped the one-legged stool under him while he reached down for her soft, supple teats. Bess, a heifer, lost her first calf when she freshened last month. The syncopated rhythm of milk splashing the bottom of the tin pail calmed Will.

Lightning flashed through the window, once, twice, a third time, and thunder shook the barn on its foundation. Will looked up toward Walter above and hoped the roof didn’t leak down on him. He jumped off his stool and stepped across the gutter but knew it wasn’t necessary. This was Walter’s barn, not his dad’s. Rain pounded down around him, but no water seeped through the door.

Will knew that Walter had thought he could outdo him at milking, but Walter hadn't milked so fast near the end. Why, he used to tease the milk from three cows and strip them dry before Walter finished two. Will supposed it was the arthritis that had slowed the old man down.

Will dumped Bess's milk into the eight-gallon can and moved across the aisle to mazy. He was surprised the old man hadn't butchered her long ago. She hardly earned her keep these days. Will shifted his weight to lean under mazy and strip the last milk from her with a flurry of tugs on her teats. The pail was only a quarter full, less than half what the others gave.

Of course, he didn't have the farm yet, but his father said he'd get it. Farms always went to the oldest male heir, and Grandpa had no sons of his own. His youngest brother, Jesse, was convinced of that. He'd pestered Will for a share ever since agriculture classes — wanted to farm the back forty until he had earned his own grubstake. And Will agreed to half shares, but he didn't give it much thought. Walter was healthy as the barnyard bull, and with Jesse's fondness for the bottle, he probably wouldn't get very far with his crops anyhow.

Bess let out a mournful bellow. Her first cry pierced the wind and driving rain. The second one came soon after, and then a series of quick, desperate calls stabbed through the night air.

Will hoped they could get through this without trouble. He knew that Jesse had been drinking again. His dad was flushed from drink as well, but liquor didn't change Thomas's disposition.

Family, friends, and neighbors filed past the closed coffin. The men looked grim. Women cried. All paused a moment; some bowed, some kneeled, and some crossed themselves. They then offered condolences to Walter Duffy's only child, Will's mother, Gertrude, and Walter's three grandsons, Will, Frank, and Jesse. Will, the family's scholar, was twenty-four, a year older than Frank and two years older than Jesse. Frank looked and acted so like his grandfather that, despite the age difference, people sometimes called him Walter. And Walter only grudgingly acknowledged his ne'er-do-well grandson, Jesse. The three boys, with fresh cut hair, slouched and buried their hands deep into the pockets of rarely worn suits.

Jesse edged over to Will who stood alone and, in a slurred voice that shattered the silence of the large room, said, "Who'd have thought this many'd mourn the old fool?"

"At least wait till the funeral's over to berate him," Will said. "He may have been hard, but he didn't deserve this."

Will thought about how the family would change with him and Jesse gone. Could Thomas get by? He'd had his down times, too. Of course, losing Jesse wouldn't be noticed. Lucky for his dad, Frank would still be there, and Frank was always sober.

"Look at Frank," Jesse said, and he nodded toward their brother, who stood by the coffin as he received condolences. "Crying like a baby. His kowtowing won't get much now."

Father Murphy strolled to his pulpit and looked down on the gathering. "Please bow your heads. Dear lord, we gather to remember Walter Duffy, not to mourn his untimely death, but to consider his life. Walter was an industrious man, an honest man, a man you could rely on," the priest said.

Yes, but a hard man, narrow minded and unyielding.

Father Murphy raised his voice. "He gave his tithe and helped his brethren when there was need."

That he did — but always by his terms.

"And we know how difficult it was for him after he lost his beloved Doris."

The priest's words droned on, and Will lost touch with the present — the minister, the mourners, the casket. Will remembered that time. It had been the worst day of his life, the day grandma died.

After five years, the specter of his grandma under the overturned buggy still haunted his dreams.

The morning had started bad. A cow had calved during the night, but Walter hadn't finished the calf pen he was building.

"But, Walter," Doris said, "we never miss mass."

"Well, I'll be miss'n today. If I don't get that little one outa the rain and mud, she'll not be see'n the sunset. That's money lying out there on the cold ground."

“She made it through the night. The Good Lord’ll see her through His mass.”

“If the Good lord chose the Sabbath to put her in my hands, He probably expects me to tend her on the Sabbath.” Walter grabbed his slicker off the entryway peg and stepped out into the rain. “Come on, Will. Help me finish that pen.”

Will was carrying a keg of nails toward the barn when he heard shouts coming from the lane and saw Jesse limping toward him — trousers torn, leg bloodied, and mud-caked from top to bottom.

“Get Grandpa! Grandma’s under the buggy!”

Jesse collapsed before he took another step, but Will ignored him, dropped the keg, and raced toward the barn to get Walter.

They ran a half mile down the road, and when they rounded the curve next to the alder trees, Will saw Doris ahead, under the buggy, face down in water that collected in the ruts. Will hadn’t run so fast since his school sprint medleys, but he couldn’t keep up with Walter. “I’ll lift the buggy, Will. Pull her out.”

When he pulled Doris from the mud, Will saw the deep gash on her bloody temple.

Walter dropped the frame and bent over his wife. “Doris, are you okay?” He lifted Doris upright.

But when his grandma’s head fell limp, Will knew that she’d never be okay again.

For a moment, Walter held her head erect while he rung water from his dirty shirt and washed the filth from her face, his tears mixing with the stream that ran down her forehead.

“Run to the phone, Will. Get Dr. Ruggles out here.” He cradled Doris in his arms as if he were about to carry her across the threshold on their wedding night, and he stumbled through the mud toward home.

Will never learned whether it was the blow or the water that killed her, but he remembered the moment Dr. Ruggles pronounced her dead. In two steps Walter raced through the door and surged down the hall to the bedroom where Jesse whimpered in his misery, clutching his untreated leg. Walter snatched him off the bed as if he were a half-full flour sack and slammed him into the bedroom wall.

“You drunken sot.” He bent down until their brows almost touched. “You killed my Doris. I told you not to race down those rutted roads, and now you’ve gone and killed her. I hope you rot in hell.”

Will knew that Doris would still be alive if Walter had gone to mass.

And he knew that Walter thought it was the devil's work, and the devil lay at his feet.

"Turn to page 423 in the hymnal and follow Annabelle Murrish as she sings Walter's favorite song, 'The Old rugged Cross'."

Will knew the song by heart and he sang a few words into the refrain — "So I'll cherish..." the word turned Will's thoughts to Mary Tregoning. He could hardly get her off his mind lately. He blushed when, "Mary, will you marry me?" slipped through his lips, a ditty that he found himself repeating often.

But deep down, he worried that this lovely lady from Hinton, with her fine clothes and soft hands, wasn't meant to be a farmer's wife. She knew that he lived at home and worked for his dad, but that was different than being tied to his own farm. Would he have time to date her? Would she want to quit teaching to work by his side, work as hard as a mule while trying to get their future secured? That thought hadn't crossed his mind until now. But what could he do? He didn't know anything else, and, besides, he loved the farm.

Jesse rode to the burial with Will. "Now that you're about to get his farm, don't forget our agreement."

"You've reminded me often enough. Yes, you can farm the back forty until you get your grubstake."

"Grandpa wouldn't even do it on shares, and I offered him sixty percent."

"Grandpa did things his way. Did you ask dad?"

"You know he's not got enough tillable land, and not paid for, either." Jesse slammed his fist into the wooden seat. "I'll not get anything. You'll get it all."

"I've not got anything yet." Will snapped the reins. "Giddyap, Maud. It's not your age, Jess; it's the liquor. Grandpa would have forgiven you if you hadn't been drinking."

"To hell with him!" Jesse pounded the board again, took another swig from his flask, and tottered on his seat.

