

THE TICK IS FULL

by Carl Wooton

Mark felt the tick even before he opened his eyes and saw it. Its head was buried in his thigh and its body was dark and swollen, full of his blood. It had fallen from the elm tree onto the windowsill and then onto the bed jammed up against the window. There was no screen on the window. His father had promised to put up a new screen, but he never had time before he left to go out to Wichita to see about a new job. That is how the tick got in. Mark's problem was how to get it out. He sat up and looked at it. It must have had its fill because it had stopped growing. He pinched it easy and gave it a couple of tugs. He did not pull too hard because he did not want to break it off and leave its head buried in his leg. He was afraid of tick fever. He rested a minute and tried again. This time the tick just seemed to back out of its own accord. Mark threw it out the window at the barrel standing across the yard beyond the pump. When it hit the barrel it made a sound like a soft rock.

Nature called. He grabbed his pants off the iron footrail of the bed and rolled them up. He moved slowly to keep from waking his brother who still slept in the bed on the side away from the window. If he woke him they would fight. That would wake his mother and sister, and his mother would come into the room and yell at them. She would stay and look at them until her eyes started getting wet and cloudy, and she would turn away and leave the room, leaving behind her a wake of heavy, unspoken eloquence that he did not want to have to bear again. Not in the morning.

He eased out of the window, making sure there were no ticks on the sill, and dropped onto the grass. He wondered what time it was. The sun was on the other side of the house, but he knew the day was well started because the cloudless sky was so bright. He pulled on his pants and made a straight line for the path of planks that made a walkway to the privy. There were no ticks there, only spiders. Mr. Fields, the farmer they rented from, had warned him about the spiders in the privy. He had said to watch especially for

black widows and, with an exaggerated laugh, added that he knew a man once who got bit on the end of his tallywhacker and it swoll up almost three times normal size. Mark never knew whether to believe Mr. Fields or not, especially when he talked about how popular that man had been with the women for miles around until the swelling went down. But when he used the privy he looked around carefully and kicked the boards in front of the hole because Mr. Fields had said that scared the spiders away.

He did not see any spiders that morning. On his way back to the house he stopped at the pump, and with three or four motions of the handle, he started a stream of clear water that he caught in the cup hanging from the pump by a piece of baling wire. It was cold, the coldest water he had ever tasted from a well, and almost sweet. He lifted the pump handle again, gave it a slight nudge and let it fall slowly of its own weight and momentum. He held both hands under the spout until the thin stream filled them and then he splashed the water into his face. The shock brought him to standing upright sucking in breath.

He was turning to go back into the house when he heard the tractor coming fast. He liked the steady, high whining sound the tractor made when it was in the road gear. He liked the way it sounded and felt, especially when he sat on the seat, high off the ground, in control of the most powerful machine he had ever seen. He heard the tractor gearing down in front of the house and then the big wheels crunching the rocks used to fill up ruts in the driveway. It backfired once, and then the engine noise stopped. Mark walked around the corner of the house just in time to see Mr. Fields climbing down off the tractor.

Mr. Fields said, "Morning, Mark boy. Your momma up?"

Mr. Fields always called him that—Mark boy—and it always sounded to Mark like the man was imitating somebody he had heard once in a movie or maybe on the radio.

Mark said, "No, sir. I'm the only one."

Mr. Fields said, "Well, Mark boy, you better get her up. Your daddy called and he's gonna call back at nine. It's probably after

eight by now. It was three or four to when I left the house.”

Mark said, “Yes, sir.”

He turned to run to the house and stopped. He heard, saw, or maybe only sensed something, someone, movement no one else would have seen, and he knew his sister, Angie, had been standing in the shadows behind the screen door and that she was already on her way to wake up their mother.

Mr. Fields said, “You come with her, Mark boy. I got some things need done around the yard.”

Mark turned back and saw Mr. Fields was already up on the tractor. Just as Mark was about to answer him, the man hit the starter and even the thought of an answer was washed away by the explosion and roar of the machine firing. Mr. Fields waved at him and backed the tractor onto the road and drove off toward his house. Mark stood and listened to the buildup through the gears until the sound reached that high whine that leveled off and hung in the air like it was part of the boiling dust cloud thrown up by the big rear tires.

The back screen door slammed, and in a moment he heard the pump handle working. He walked round the side of the house and found his mother at the pump. She was bent over the bucket she had just pumped full and was splashing water onto her face. She had a little towel on her shoulder, and she was still wearing only her nightgown. Her hair was dark and straight, hanging down long, past her shoulders in the back. Mark watched her a moment. He thought she probably was pretty, but he did not always like being made to recognize she was a woman. It especially bothered him when grown men, like Mr. Fields' son, Herschel, talked about how fine she was.

His mother dried her face and said, “Isn't it a beautiful day?”

He said, “Yes, ma'am.”

She said, “Your daddy's gonna call.”

“What do you think he wants?”

“I don't know, but I hope it's because he found a job.”

“Does that mean we're going to move again?”

Something in his voice made her stop toweling herself and look at him.

“Probably,” she said.

“To Wichita?”

“Wherever,” she said.

Mark looked down at his feet. The conversation had taken a direction he did not want to follow. He did not like it where they were. He did not want to move again. He looked up at her.

He said, “Mr. Fields wants me to come with you. He has some work for me to do around the yard.”

She stretched her arms out and up and reached back and fluffed her hair. Her woman's shape pressed against the cloth of her gown and Mark turned away toward the house.

She said, “You better eat something if you're going to work. There's some cereal. I think there's enough milk. Don't you and Angie fuss!”

He did not answer. In the kitchen he took the milk bottle from the refrigerator. The glass felt cool. It was not cold. Nothing was ever kept COLD in that refrigerator. He got a bowl and a box of dry cereal from the pantry. It was not really a pantry. It was a packing crate that a large piece of furniture had come in. His father had brought it from town, stood it on end, put shelves in it and called it a pantry. His mother had seemed pleased with it, but when Angie had laughed at it, his father had gone out and walked down the driveway into the darkness. He came back after everyone was in bed, but Mark was still awake and heard his father and his mother talking in their bedroom. He looked at the stars through his window and now and then he caught a word or two, especially Wichita, but mostly heard sounds like they were moving around a lot. He wished—had been wishing every night—they could live in a house that had rooms farther apart and doors and windows that could be kept closed, and he would not have to hear what went on between his parents, especially at night.

Angie came into the kitchen and saw the nearly empty bottle of milk on the table.

She said, "You took it all?"

He said, "Momma told me to eat 'cause I have to go to work."

"Work where?"

"For Mr. Fields."

She said, "I know what you're going to have to do."

"What's that?" he said.

"Shovel shit," she said.

"Angie!"

Neither of them had noticed their mother come into the kitchen. She carried a bucket of water to the sink.

She said again, "Angie!"

"What!"

"Why do you talk like that?"

Angie said, "Because it's true. Yesterday afternoon I saw that Herschel pulling a wagon full of manure into the front pasture. You know for sure HE isn't going to unload it. Not when they've got Markie boy here to do it."

She laughed. She was seventeen, three years older than Mark, and Mark thought he never could tell whether she merely despised him or hated him intensely, or why she acted like she was truly worried about him last winter when he had pneumonia if she despised him even a little bit. She was not quite pretty, he thought, and sometimes she smelled funny. He had shouted at her once to stay away from him until she took a bath, and his father took him for a long walk and tried to explain about girls' monthlies and how it was a terrible thing women had to put up with and men had to learn to put up with it too. She wore shorts and a halter that was pulled up real tight he thought to show she had breasts even if they were small.

His mother said, "Mark, we have to hurry."

Angie said, "Markie boy!"

"Stop it, Angie! Mark, get your shoes and wake up Will. Tell him to fill the barrel. Angie, when I get back I want those dishes done you was supposed to do last night."

Angie said, "I was going with you."

"You're staying here. And I want you started on those dishes before I leave. Mark, hurry."

Mark went to the bedroom and shook Will. He pulled a t shirt out of a drawer and pulled it on. He took the pair of socks that he had worn the day before and had hung wrong side out over the back of a chair, and put them on. His shoes were under the bed, one nearly to the wall. He got them, put them on and shook Will again. Will sat up in a sudden motion and swung at Mark, but Mark saw the swing coming and jumped back.

Mark said, "Momma said you got to fill the barrel."

Will said, "Why me?"

"I got to go to work at Mr. Fields' house."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know. Just make sure you put that barrel in the sun before you start to fill it."

"Why I gotta fill it?"

Mark said, "Momma said so, that's why. Now get up."

He picked up his St. Louis Cardinals cap off the floor and put it on.

He said, "Put that barrel in the sun."

"Mark!"

"Coming."

The road was gravel, and a fresh load of rock had been dumped on it only a few days earlier. They walked on the edge when they could, along the ditch, but most of the time the edge of the ditch was either too steep or too full of milkweed and thistles. The sun was already up at a little more than a forty five degree angle. If Mr. Fields had been with them he could have told them within a quarter hour what time it was.

Mark's mother walked in front. She had on a wide brimmed straw hat to keep the sun off her head. She wore a thin summer dress that had tiny flowers all over it, and he could see all the straps of her woman's underclothes. She was thin, and she fought rather than stepped through the loose gravel. Her hair was pulled up under the hat, and small ribbons of dampness had already begun to

form in the cloth of the dress on her back. Once she stopped and pointed at the fence on the other side of the road. It was covered with blackberry vines heavy with nearly ripened fruit.

She said, "It's going to be time to pick berries soon."

Mark said, "Not if we move."

She looked back at him. He caught her look and held it for a moment. There was something in her eyes that unsettled him. She stumbled and looked forward again. Mark looked up at the sun and the sky and thought about Will getting up without anyone there except Angie to make him do his chores right. He bet that Will would move the barrel next to the pump to fill it. That would put the barrel in the shade of the elm nearly all day and there would be no chance for the water to warm.

They turned into the driveway that led to a large frame house that sat nearly a hundred yards back from the road. The fence that defined the front pasture ran along the drive to within forty feet of the house. And Mark saw Angie was right.

The large flat bed trailer stood in the middle of the pasture. A dark, irregular mound rose up from it, and he already knew how bad it was going to be, the sun already having worked on the manure for three or four hours. And that was just this morning. It had been out there since the day before. He could even see the thin handle of the fork sticking up out of the pile on the wagon.

Mr. Fields met them at the cattle guard that ran across the road where the front pasture ended and the house yard began. He held out a hand for Mark's mother to grab as she stepped carefully on the gapped pipes of the cattle guard. Mark wished he had thought of helping her. Mr. Fields took out a large pocket watch on the end of a leather fob and looked at it.

He said, "Nearly nine, Ma'am. You better go on into the house. The old lady's waiting for you. Probably in the kitchen. I'm going to get this boy started. Day's half gone and there's a whole bunch of work has got to get done. Come along, Mark boy."

Mr. Fields walked toward the front pasture. Mark watched his mother go toward the house. He had hoped to go with her, to be

there when his father called. He ran to catch up with Mr. Fields.

“Herschel put a wagon of barn manure out in that pasture yesterday. Spread it all around, far as you can. You know how to do it.”

Mark knew how to do it. He had done it before. The first time he had tried to work too fast in order to get off the wagon as soon as he could. For days his back hurt, his arms ached, and at night his legs went into spasms that he thought would hurl him out of bed. He learned to pace himself after that. He took smaller loads on the fork, bent his knees the way his father had shown him and used his legs to lift and throw. He thought it was the worst job on the farm, but somebody had to do it.

Herschel had said, “You doing it beats the hell outta me doing it.”

On the wagon Mark took the fork in his hands and began to lift and throw the manure. He was glad he had remembered to wear his cap. There was no shade and the sun seemed to get larger as it climbed higher in the morning sky. He lifted and threw, trying to spread the loads around on the ground. He worked steadily and tried not to think about how his stomach felt about the smell and the flies that seemed all around him. He wondered about his mother and what his father was saying to her. He thought about Will and hoped he had put the barrel in the sun. He did not notice Herschel walking across the pasture toward the wagon.

Herschel said, “Spread that manure around good, boy.”

The voice crept up the back of Mark's neck like the sound of a rake pulled across concrete. He turned and saw Herschel grinning up at him.

Mark said, “I know how to spread it.”

“Just checking on you, boy.”

Herschel said BOY as though he was about to laugh every time he said it.

Mark said, “Why you checking on me? Ain't you got your own work to do?”

Herschel said, “Don't get uppity, now. A three dollar a day hired kid don't have much room for getting uppity.”

Mark looked at him a moment. Herschel was a short man, and he had gray eyes that never seemed to focus on anything. He was strong. Whenever there was a problem with an animal, including the Guernsey bull Mr. Fields rented for stud, Herschel handled it. Mark was a little bit afraid of Herschel, not so much of his strength as his strangeness. He was always talking about women other than his wife, and he pestered Angie every chance he had. And when he and Mark worked alone together in the barn he talked about his parts and teased Mark, asking him if he had a man's parts yet. Mark turned away from the grin and the eyes that seemed to be looking somewhere else and picked up another load on his fork and threw it.

Herschel said, "Hey, boy, you think your sister's a virgin?"

Mark said, "I don't know."

Herschel said, "How 'bout you, boy? You a virgin?"

Mark jammed the fork into the manure, and Herschel laughed. It was louder and deeper than Angie's laughter, but it had almost exactly the same mocking tone hers sometimes had.

Mark said, "What you laughing at?"

The laughter stopped, choked off, and Herschel's face was red. He took a dirty handkerchief out of his overalls and wiped his forehead with it.

Herschel said, "I'm laughing at you standing up there on that wagon pitching shit."

Mark put the fork into the soft, moist manure that was held together by pieces of hay, dirt, and feed, and lifted it up. He threw it out in the same general direction he had been throwing it before, but a little closer to Herschel. Herschel stepped back.

He said, "What the hell you doing, boy?"

Mark turned his back to Herschel and stuck the fork into the manure again.

Herschel said, "You better watch where you throw that manure, boy! You hit me with any of that, I'll come up there and wash your face in it."

Mark picked up another load on the end of the fork. His back was still turned to Herschel, but he knew Herschel was watching

him. He bent his knees and made a slight jerking motion to adjust his grip on the handle of the fork. Herschel backed up, tripped and fell. Mark strained and threw the manure forward onto the ground on the side of the wagon opposite from Herschel. He stooped, picked up another load and threw it forward again.

Herschel picked himself up off the ground and said, "Too bad you're moving, boy. I was hoping you'd stay around awhile. I figured I might get to hear your sister's cherry pop."

Mark did not turn around. He lifted another load of manure, but it was too heavy to throw. He shook some loose, threw the load, and stumbled a little. One foot jerked too far forward and his shoe was covered with brown and green muck. MOVING. Now he knew why his daddy had called. THEY WERE. He did not notice Herschel leave. He had known it probably would happen. AGAIN. He had heard his father and mother talking about it at night. Once he had thought he had heard his mother crying. He could not be sure that was what he heard, but much later than night he was still awake, looking at the stars through the holes in the elm, and hearing it again. It was like the sound of the wind that stirred the leaves of the elm, but softer.

Women's voices came from the house yard. Mark saw his mother and Mrs. Fields standing outside. His mother walked away a few steps, turned back and spoke to Mr. Fields, walked away and turned back again. He watched her. She was too far away for him to talk to her. He wanted to know what his father had said. He thought of Herschel learning before he did what his father's message had been, and he jammed the fork down too hard and stuck it in the wood bed of the wagon. He worked it loose and began again to lift and throw. He glanced between each load to see where his mother was until she disappeared where the blackberry vines were the thickest along the fence.

He worked faster, and with each fork full he measured what he had left to do. He wanted to go home. He wanted to hear his mother talk about what his father had said. He jabbed, lifted, and threw. Sweat ran down from under the band of his cap, and he

wiped at it with his arm. The sun moved higher, was nearly straight overhead when he heard the tractor and turned and saw Mr. Fields driving toward him. He scanned what was left on the wagon, looked up at the sun and knew it was lunch time. He needed ten minutes. Mr. Fields drove the tractor to the side of the wagon and sat with the motor running and watched until Mark threw the last fork of manure onto the ground.

Mr. Fields shouted, "It's dinner time, Mark boy."

Mark nodded against the roar of the tractor, laid his fork down on the wagon bed and stepped onto the frame of the tractor. He stepped up to a narrow place beside Mr. Fields and held on to the seat as Mr. Fields put the tractor in gear and eased it forward. He drove slowly into the barnyard and let Mark off at the water trough in the empty pen nearest the house. Mark understood, and he turned the valve on the spigot over the trough. He put his head under the flow of water coming from the pipe. The water was not as cold as the water he had pumped from the well at his house, but it cooled him. He let it flow over his arms and hands. He turned just in time to see Herschel coming toward him holding out a towel and a bar of home made soap.

Herschel said, "Full of shit, ain't you, boy?"

Mark took the soap and rubbed it in his hands and up and down his arms. It was rough and stung the inside of his arms, but it got him clean.

Herschel said, "I put your towel on the trough. Hurry up."

A huge sycamore shaded the front corner of the house. Under the tree there was a wooden table with two benches streaked with dirty, gray scabs that had once been white paint. Mark's plate and a glass of milk were already on the table with a knife and fork wrapped in a cloth napkin. He ate: roast pork, potatoes, gravy, slaw, peas, more than he could hold comfortably. He had hardly finished when Mr. Fields and Herschel came out the kitchen door and walked toward him. Mr. Fields sat across from him and Herschel slid in on the bench next to Mark.

Mr. Fields said, "Had enough, Mark boy?"

"Yes, sir."

Herschel's hand clamped on the fleshy part of Mark's thigh, right where the tick had been. Mark squirmed and looked down at his plate. He felt tears coming into his eyes, and he knew without seeing him that Herschel was grinning. It was a game Herschel liked to play. Mark dropped his fork onto his plate and Herschel let go. Mark looked up and wondered whether or not Mr. Fields knew what was happening under the table. Herschel's hand stroked Mark's thigh twice, then patted it, and Mark squirmed away from him.

Mr. Fields said, "Herschel told you your daddy said you're moving?"

Mark said, "Yes, sir. To Wichita."

Herschel said, "Where the hell is Wichita, boy?"

Mark knew where it was. After the third or fourth night he heard his father and mother talking about it, he looked it up on an old U.S. road map his father had brought home. It was a long way from Indiana, across Illinois and Missouri. It was going to be a long ride, even if Illinois was a narrow state on the map.

Mark said, "In Kansas."

Mr. Fields said, "Your momma said he's got himself a real good job in an airplane factory."

Herschel said, "How come your daddy don't ever stay with nothin'? How long you think you'll be in Wichita before you move again?"

Mr. Fields said, "Leave him alone, Herschel. What his daddy does isn't your business."

Mark slid off the bench, picked up his plate and utensils and carried them to the little stoop at the kitchen door. His thigh hurt him, he could still smell the manure in his nostrils, and he wanted to go home to help his mother pack. He turned from the stoop and collided with Mr. Fields. Mr. Fields grabbed Mark's hand and pushed a crumpled bill into it. It was a five. He usually paid him only three dollars and never before the day was over.

Mr. Fields said, "You better go on home. Your momma needs

some help. Tell her I'll be around later to see if she needs anything from town."

Mark mumbled a thanks, shoved the money into his pocket, and started for the front pasture. When he was with his mother he used the driveway and the road, but when he was by himself, he cut diagonally across the front pasture and climbed the fence. He was already thinking about what he had been told and wondered how they could possibly move tomorrow.

He pictured the map and the highway that wound toward Wichita, and he knew that even if his daddy drove all night, he could not get home in time to leave TOMORROW. He walked along the fence until he was well past the line that would have taken him near the wagon and the spread manure and turned toward the farthest corner. He was a little more than halfway when he heard the sound of the smaller tractor, of Herschel's tractor, coming behind him. He did not look around. He broke into a run for the fence, but he was not quick enough. The tractor with Herschel sitting on top of it pulled in between Mark and the fence. Herschel was grinning.

Mark said, "What you want?"

Herschel said, "I want you to do something for me."

"What?"

Herschel took a folded piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and leaned down to hand it to Mark.

Mark said, "What's that?"

Herschel said, "Take it. Take it, boy. It ain't nothing gonna hurt you."

Mark reached up and took the paper from Herschel's hand. He looked at it and started to unfold it.

Herschel said, "Uh huh. It ain't for you. That's for your sister. You take that to Angie and don't you read it. You read it and I'm gonna find out about it and I'll take meat out of your leg next time."

Mark said, "What's this for?"

"Never mind. Just bring it to her, but don't you let nobody else see you giving it to her. And I promise, I'll know if you don't give it to her just like I said."

Herschel pulled himself back up straight on the seat of the tractor, released the clutch, and the tractor jumped forward. Mark felt the movement of air caused by the tire almost taller than he was rolling inches in front of him. The tractor was just past him, and he took off on a run for the fence. The blackberry vines tore his shirt and the barbed wire scratched a hand. He got over the fence, jumped the ditch and tried to run in the new, loose gravel. He fell twice, picked himself up and moved to the side of the road where it was easier. Running, he didn't notice the milkweed and thistles.

He stopped to catch his breath and realized he still held the piece of paper Herschel had given him. He unfolded it, and at that moment he knew that Herschel's threats had guaranteed his reading the note, that he would have crawled through fire and a whole army of South American soldier ants that eat everything in their way, just to read the note: ANGIE. TONIGHT AFTER YOUR LIGHTS GO OUT. THE OLD BARN. H.

Rage flooded over him. H! As though Angie would know who that was, as though she had been familiar with him before. He stood on the edge of the road and looked up at the afternoon sun, a large white ball of fire that seemed nearly to match what was happening inside of him. Tears of fury streaked his cheeks. His thigh where the tick had drained his blood and where Herschel had squeezed it hurt him. The smell of manure mixed with dirt and straw and covered with green flies came rushing across a thin wisp of cloud in the pale blue sky with Herschel, dark, powerful, chasing her toward the dark purple of a distant thunderstorm.

"Mark! Mark!"

His mother's voice called him. She was standing in the road by the mailbox. He shoved the note into his pocket and ran through the loose gravel of the road toward her.

She said, "How come you're not working?"

He said, "I finished spreading the manure and Mr. Fields said you needed help. He said we had to leave by tomorrow."

"That's right."

"How can we do that? Daddy can't get back from Wichita that

fast.”

“He's not in Wichita. He called from St. Louis. He'll be home tonight, if he doesn't have any more car trouble.”

They walked toward the house. TONIGHT. He saw the barrel standing next to the pump in the shade.

He said, “Look at that! Will put the barrel in the shade.”

His mother said, “I'm sorry. With everything on my mind I just didn't pay any attention to what he had done. I'll get you some clothes. Looks like you need shoes, too. Just drop those dirty ones in the bucket by the steps when you finish.”

Mark looked at the barrel. Will had filled it to within inches of the top, and that meant the water was cold enough to take away breath, cold enough to make lips turn blue. Even if it had sat all day in the sun, the bottom would be cold, but now, after sitting only a few hours and in the shade, there would be no part, no depth that would be bearable. The kitchen door slammed shut and Will came toward him carrying clothes and a towel and soap, the same kind of harsh soap that Herschel had brought to the trough. Will came within a few steps of Mark, dropped the bundle and ran back to the house yelling,

“Momma!”

Mark shouted, “You better run!”

He stripped and threw his dirty clothes in a pile. Taking a bath was awkward. The upright barrel was too tall to step into, and he wanted to hurry. He picked up the soap and lifted himself up and into the barrel and let himself down slowly into the water. The cold exploded through his body. He felt his scrotum shrivel. The water came up almost to his armpits and he tried to fight against the consciousness of the pain by jumping up and down. He rubbed himself with the soap as quickly as he could, submerged once and pulled himself up and jumped out onto the ground. His flesh looked like a fresh plucked chicken. He heard somebody giggle and turned around only to see nothing more than movement behind the screen door. It was Angie. He kept himself covered in the front with one end of the towel and wiped at the rest of his body with the other

end.

He was not dry, but he dressed anyway, picked up his dirty clothes and remembered Herschel's note. He fished it out of a pocket, dropped the dirty clothes into the bucket beside the back step and ran to the privy. He pulled the door shut behind him and threw the note into the hole.

Angie was in the kitchen taking things out of the cabinets and putting them on the counter and table. Mark found his mother in her bedroom. Her bed was covered with clothes. Drawers were pulled out and a half dozen empty boxes took up most of the bare space on the floor. His mother looked tired. She folded clothes slowly and laid them on the bed in stacks, as though the decision of what else to do with them was at that time more than she could handle. Mark promised himself he would spend whatever it took to help her get ready for moving.

She said, "Help Angie in the kitchen. And leave Will alone. I got enough to do without having you two start up."

When Mark returned to the kitchen, Will jumped toward one end of the long table that filled the center of the room. Mark ignored him and watched Angie stuffing newspaper in glasses and placing them in boxes. He thought Angie's eyes looked strangely red and puffy.

He said, "What's the matter?"

Angie said, "Nothing. Here, you do this. Do the glasses first, then the other dishes. Be careful. Pack them tight."

"You've been crying."

"Mind your own business. Here, this oughta be easier than shoveling cow dung."

She handed him a glass and piece of newspaper. He took them and looked at her. She had a bright yellow barrette in her hair, but she wore no make up. He watched her and he knew he had done the right thing with the note. He thought she may not be very pretty, but she was too, too fine for somebody like Herschel Fields. He finished wrapping the glasses she had put out on the table and looked about for something else to do.

Angie said, "Daddy found a house."

Mark said, "I hope it has a bathtub INSIDE."

Angie said, "I just hope it's in town and not stuck twenty mile from nothin' in the country."

They worked steadily the rest of the afternoon. Their mother moved about packing, directing them, giving them new jobs as they were about to finish others. Mark worked and watched Angie. Most of the time they worked well together. Once Mark tripped, juggled the bowl he was carrying to her, stumbled forward and finally got his balance and set the bowl on the table. Angie laughed, and it made Mark feel good because it was not mocking or taunting laughter. He laughed, too, picked up the bowl and acted as though they would go through the routine again. They both laughed, and Mark had to set the bowl down to keep from dropping it. They had to stop working, and they laughed only because they were tired and because they were laughing together. Mark put out his hand as though to keep from falling, and his hand landed on Angie's shoulder. Angie pushed him away, stopped laughing, and began packing dishes again, all, it seemed to Mark, in more or less the same motion.

Mark was outside getting water at the pump when Mr. Fields drove into the driveway in his pickup truck. It was still light, but the sun had fallen behind the row of trees that hid the old barn from the house. Mark went to meet him.

Mr. Fields said, "Your daddy called again, Mark boy. He's not gonna get here 'til real late, maybe not 'til after midnight. His water pump busted in Effingham

"Tell your momma I'll come back in the morning to settle up everything."

Mark said, "Where's Effingham?"

Mr. Fields said, "Somewheres in Illinois."

Mark thought of the shape of Illinois on the map and tried in his mind to picture just where his daddy might be with a busted water pump.

Mr. Fields said, "You're a fine boy, Mark. I wish you were staying."

Mark said, "Yes, sir," because he did not know what else to say.

Mr. Fields backed the truck down the driveway, and Mark waited until it was in the road before he ran to the house. He told the others what Mr. Fields had said. They all continued to work, but what had been plain fatigue quickly became complete exhaustion. They worked and watched the clock on top of the refrigerator. They strained to make the time pass faster.

Finally their mother said, "That's it. Enough. We'll finish in the morning."

Angie and Mark protested but not strongly. Their mother promised to wake them if they were sleeping when their father came home. They discovered that Will had already given up and was unconscious in his bed. Mark climbed over Will and lay against the wall. He brushed off the window sill, and through the holes in the elm he watched the stars. There were two very close together, and he imagined they were himself and Angie, twinkling, moving across the cloudless dark sky.

A dog barked somewhere, and another answered. Then the second one barked again, and Mark recognized it. It was Herschel's small mongrel that yapped in a high, whiny voice and ran away if anyone ever turned at him and said boo. He watched the moon, a three quarter ball of light with shadows made to dance by the elm leaves moving only slightly in the air, and he heard the yap again. It was closer, from the wrong direction, and Mark knew that Herschel was going to the old barn to wait for Angie. He held his breath and listened. The dog yapped and stopped too suddenly, as though it had been cut off in midyap, and nothing else made a sound except the crickets. Herschel was waiting.

Mark grabbed his pants, leaned over the foot of the bed and found his shoes. He eased out of the window, dropped to the grass, and stooped against the side of the house and listened. Nobody stirred. He pulled on his pants and put on his shoes without any socks and went down the line of planks and past the privy. The grass in the field was wet with a heavy dew. He headed straight for the tree line to the west where the sun had gone down and where the moon was

already aiming. The three quarter ball hung in the sky and, with the stars, made it easy for him to find his way. When he came to the tree line, he stopped and caught his breath. From the darkest shadows of the trees he saw the old barn not more than thirty yards away.

The old barn looked frozen, a shape of light and dark grays, lines that ran into and met somewhere in shadows that seemed to hold their breaths. Nothing moved. The stars and the moon gave off a light that gave him a slight chill even though the night air was still and full of heat. An owl hooted in the woods a hundred yards or more on the other side of the old barn, and there was movement in the shadows farthest to his left. Herschel's mongrel ran into the light and came straight for him, found him and began circling and yapping. Mark tried to move around a tree into even deeper shadows, but the dog shifted with him. It was smart enough to stay just out of reach of Mark's foot. The heavy door of the barn creaked open, and Mark saw Herschel coming toward him. He ran to the next tree.

Herschel said, "Don't run. I've got something good for you."

Mark retreated to another tree.

Herschel said, "Come on out, Angie. You know you want it. That's why you came out here."

Mark turned and ran, tripped, fell, got up and ran again until he realized that he was out of the shadows and in the light. He stopped and turned back toward where he heard Herschel running. Herschel stopped, too. He stepped out of the shadows and took a couple of steps toward Mark until he realized it was not Angie who had come to meet him.

Herschel said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Mark backed up a couple of steps. Herschel matched his movement forward.

Mark said, "I came to tell you you're not doin' anything to my sister."

Herschel stared at him and then threw his head back and laughed. It was the strangest laugh Mark had ever heard. His legs

suddenly were weak.

Herschel stopped laughing and said, "Okay, Markie boy. You want it instead, that's okay. Hell, yeah."

Herschel lunged at Mark, but Mark was quicker. The lunge made Herschel lose his balance and he fell spread out on the ground. Mark ran. He did not know where he was running. He went around the old barn and his own blood pounded in his ears and his breath came in gasps that sounded like small screams. He heard Herschel coming behind him, heavy footed, muttering curses. The little dog ran after him, circled him, snapped at his heels, ran back to Herschel and caught up again with Mark, yapping all the time. Mark crossed the one wooden fence remaining behind the old barn and ran for the woods. He looked back and saw Herschel coming over the fence and then veering off to his right. Mark had made a mistake. He had forgotten the ditch and the barbed wire fence that ran along the edge of the woods. There was only one place he could cross the ditch, and Herschel had in a few steps cut him off from it. He stopped. Herschel stopped, and they faced each other.

Herschel said, "Got you now, Markie boy. Your ass is mine."

There were still twenty yards between them, and Mark turned and ran back toward the barn. Mark reached the fence and was up on the first rail with the little dog scooting under him and yapping and jumping at him when he heard the sounds of boards cracking and splintering and Herschel yelled. The dog jumped high and turned in air and before its feet touched ground it was running toward where Herschel had cried out. Mark looked and could not see Hershel.

The little dog ran in a ten or twelve foot circle, yapping at the ground. Mark let himself down from the fence and walked toward the place the dog was circling. He saw the broken boards first, a row of rotted planks set side by side to cover a hole. Herschel's heavy step had been too much for the boards brittle from rain and sun bleaching and rotting them out. Then he smelled the stink. Herschel had fallen into an old privy hole that had never been completely filled up, probably left there when the barn was

abandoned. The little dog jumped on Mark, not snapping now, just jumping and running around yapping at the opening where Herschel had disappeared.

Then came a sound, a low, soft moan coming from the hole. The dog went into a frenzy. It yapped and leaned so far forward that Mark thought it would fall into the hole. He heard the sound again, louder, and the moan turned into a roar.

“Get me out of here. Help me!”

Mark moved to the edge of the hole and looked down. He saw something move, something large, deep in the darkness of the hole, and heard it splash in water.

“Get me out of here. There's things down here. They're crawling on me. Get me out of here. Markie! Markie! Help me!”

Mark yelled, “You're gonna hurt me.”

“No! I promise. Get me out. I'm drowning in shit! Come on, boy!”

“What can I do?”

“Beside the barn, they's some fence posts that wasn't ever used. Get the longest one and bring it here.”

Mark climbed the fence and looked alongside the barn. He almost missed them, but there were a half dozen or so long posts lying in the weeds next to the building. Mark pulled three or four of them out, took the longest one and dragged it back to the hole. The dog still yapped and Herschel was making slapping sounds.

When Mark looked over the edge again, Herschel yelled, “What's keeping you, boy? They's leeches down here sucking my blood in all this shit. Oh, damn!”

Mark said, “What do I do?”

Herschel said, “Put one end down here. Easy. Hold on to that other end. Don't let it fall on my head.”

Mark lowered the post into the hole. It was hardly halfway in when he felt Herschel's strength pulling on it.

Herschel said, “Don't let go dammit.”

Herschel was wedging one end of the post into the side of the hole. Mark felt Herschel's weight almost tear the post out of his

hands. He dug his heels into the ground and hung on. In a moment Herschel's head and shoulders appeared above the ground, and Mark wanted to run. Herschel must have realized Mark's fear because he screamed.

“Don't let go!”

Herschel pulled himself up onto the edge of the hole, and Mark felt the release of Herschel's weight from the other end. Mark turned the pole loose and ran to the fence, climbed over it, and hid in the shadow of the barn. He watched Herschel moving around almost like he was doing a little dance, slapping at himself, until he suddenly started taking off his clothes. Herschel wasn't wearing underwear. When he took off his overalls and his shirt and his shoes and socks, he was left standing naked in the pale, washed out light of the waning moon. He pulled at things on his body.

Herschel yelled, “Leeches!”

Suddenly Herschel kicked his clothes into the hole and walked away across the field toward the gravel road. Mark thought he limped. The little dog ran ahead of him and back to circle his heels and ahead of him again. Mark watched them until Herschel became a dark, indistinct figure in the distance. Mark thought he could tell when Herschel reached the fence that ran beside the gravel road, and then Herschel disappeared.

Mark walked back to the house, and the first thing he noticed was that his father's car still was not there. He walked around the house to make certain no one was awake. He stopped by Angie's window and looked in. She lay on her bed uncovered. She wore the pale cotton nightgown she always wore, and her hair lay loose and spread out on her pillow. She turned toward him, moved as though to stretch, then curled up, her knees almost up to her chest. She breathed easily. Her body rose and fell in a slow, rhythmic motion, and Mark caught his breathing matching her rhythm. He watched her only a few minutes and moved away from the window afraid she might wake and see him. The moon was gone and few stars remained. The night was darkening with heavy clouds that moved rapidly across the sky. He had no idea what time it was, but he

knew he was not going back to bed.

Through the field on Angie's side of the house he could reach the path that ran alongside the road up the small hill to where he could see the headlights of cars traveling the paved highway. He walked easily, looking now and then up at the sky and wondering if it was going to rain. At the top of the hill he sat and leaned against a fence post and waited. To his left the hill sloped easily back toward the house where his mother and Will and Angie slept safely. He could see the tree line beyond the house, but the barn behind the trees was out of sight.

He looked at the dark outline of the house and thought of Angie lying in her bed, sleeping, breathing easily with her knees tucked up under her chin. Every now and then he saw again the ugliness of Herschel's face and heard the heavy footed sound of Herschel running after him, but it all disappeared when he saw the headlights turn off the highway onto the gravel road. He jumped up and ran onto the road. He had forgotten about the tick that stole his blood, and the weight of the fork loaded with manure pulling on his back and arms, and the fear that had kept him running when Herschel was close behind, and the smell of the hole Herschel had fallen into. He was already thinking about the days ahead with no more Herschel and Angie safe and all of them moving to Wichita. He had never been happier in his life than he was right then, standing in the middle of the road with his arms over his head flailing wildly in rhythm with his heart.

