

Hardly Used Tractors

by J.L.

The women at the counter said if I wanted to talk to the boss I'd have to come back on Monday. They also said I'd better call before I come down to make sure he's really in, and even if he is he might be too busy to see me with all the Very Important Things he has going.

So I pushed out the double doors, walked to the Massey I'd unloaded in the parking lot, fired up that red beast and drove it through the window of the Ye Olde Tractor Shoppe.

Now Carver Smithton has a paunched belly as stout as the beer that fills it. His upper lip is thick, fat and flat like a caterpillar run over by a semi on Highway 17. I sat atop the tractor still, wearing glass and blood and dirt, while he walked at me red-faced and dumbfounded. His belly led the way.

"Son — "

Son. I winced. The last person to call me that was Dad. Two days before.

"Son," he continued, in the kind of falsetto a man has when he tries to leash his rage, "What in the?"

He looked at me like I was an eight-legged cow, which I think is funny now, looking back, because behind him that three-headed hydra from the counter moved in, ticking off the details of the scene so as to most sensationally recount it later. The women are gossip mongers and sisters-in-law, each of them married to one of the three Smithton sons. There's Carver, bold-bellied but quiet, Buster, who's stupid and mostly stays home, and Butch, who Mr. Smithton left in charge last year. He was the one who sold the tractor to Dad.

Hardly Used Tractors is their shibboleth. *Hardly used* meaning antique and *tractors* meaning junk. Still, that's no reason to drive one through the window of the local dealer.

See, there are actually two good reasons for that.

One: Because you're crazy, and are expected to create spectacle from time to time.

Two: Because you're grieving, and have a temporary pity pass into the looney bin.

Since not much separates the State of Crazy from the Cavern of Loss, it's a little hard to tell which one people think you belong to.

Mr. Smithton: "Ah — Ah — Are you alright?"

He must've heard about Dad.

My mother's sedan pulled into the lot. I had known they were following me. My brother — Sorry, was that the nurse? She's coming back? Okay, anyway — my brother, at the wheel, had wide eyes and a slack jaw, while my sister, who'd already climbed out the backseat, looked mad. Probably because she's the kind of Type A who has to schedule emotions like business meetings. This wasn't on the calendar, but neither was Dad.

My mother's face took on a storyline all its own, its evolutionary components the formula for prose. There was confusion, then realization, then a melt into weepy oblivion. I can still see it from beginning to middle to end, when I shut my eyes.

I climbed from the tractor, which was by then surrounded by Carver's other customers and a few of the teens who'd been snacking on fries at the Burger & Shake Palace next door. I knew Sheriff Bud would come soon. Couldn't blame him for late arrival. When you cover a whole county, it can take time to get from call to call. You know this.

Anyway, laughter gurgled from me, hell knows why.

"I gathered you all here today," I began.

"Holden, what happened?"

It was my brother. I suddenly felt blind and dizzy.

And that's what I remember of last Sunday, one day after Dad's ugly red Massey Ferguson overturned and rolled down the hill next to our barn where my brother and me used to sled. Suppose they wrote something up in the paper. Wonder what it said. You read the paper Officer? Dad canceled his months ago.

