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MIDDLE WEST

By Sam Mitchell

Maybe it was Kansas, maybe Nebraska, maybe Illinois. Edward couldn't remember. Even at the time those landscapes melted together, just a massive plain of perpetuity whose endless lines of corn stalk marched toward an impossible horizon. The monotony was relieved only by the slice of his '71 Buick Electra as it hummed across the straight blacktop highways. Back and forth he traveled his routes, those black arteries that fell across the map of the Middle West like a delicate lace. Edward stopped at hundreds of farmhouses, in almost every small town, and many suburbs of the bigger ones, with an endless line of household labor saving products he had been paid to sell. Each new town was much the same as the last--flat and uncrowded, but somehow oppressive to him. Their small diners were filled with men in overalls and women with beehives who liked to smack big, chewy wads of gum in their mouths and stare at him out of the corners of their eyes.

Outside, the unobstructed sky pressed down on him from every angle as he made many hopeful treks up dirt paths and front walkways. Most of these were followed by disappointed steps off front porches, slammed screen doors, hyper dogs, awkward squeezes from impetuous housewives, even calls to the police. All became part of the humdrum routine. But Edward pushed on, happy to have a job with a company car so early in life, no matter how low on the ladder he sat. Soon all the residences he visited and all the faces, like the mighty plains around them, just blurred together before Edward. So it was then, and so it certainly was now, nearly forty years later.

But one thing stood out.

It was a small wooden farmhouse in the most massive cornfield Edward could imagine. The farm was bisected by a straight stretch of highway between two silver cities on Edward's route, and each time he drove through that farm he reckoned that some European countries could probably be plopped down comfortably within its boundaries. Thousands of acres surrounded the stretch. The corn, overwhelming, pressed the side of the road so closely that stalk leaves sometimes brushed the sides of Edward's bottle green Buick as the car greedily hovered up the


miles. Landmarks were sparse. Here and there scarecrows rose from the fields; two barns with blood-red paint squatted maybe a half mile from the road; and two dome-topped silos cast long shadows over the rippling fields. If he had climbed to the top, Edward thought, he would probably have seen Omaha, maybe even Chicago. On a clear day, at least.

But the house was what stood out most, even though it was far shorter than the silos. To Edward, it was the absolute quintessence of all farmhouses. The first time he saw the house it reminded him of that famous Grant Wood painting. It was a beautiful vision of whitewashed wood rising out of the green cornfield, much as the white stone monuments of Washington rise out of the green mall. It cast itself with a sort of terrible sentimentality into Edward's image of the nation. It had a whiff of Victorian elegance in its architecture, but the simplicity of its design kept with the practical landscape of the midwest.

Every time Edward passed the house its windows were open. White curtains could be seen flicking out of the windows by changes in the wind. A windmill in the side yard churned, directing the swaying stalks of corn below. Rocking chairs on the porch pitched slightly, lending the illusion that someone had just vacated the seat. It was a house in motion. For some reason, it took Edward several years to stop there. Somehow he couldn't force himself to flip on his signal and make the turn into the dirt drive. Visiting the house would only ruin his expectations, because things couldn't be as perfect as they looked. The house, Edward thought, was best left to his thoughts.

One hot day in July Edward finally did stop. His legs had been aching from pushing the accelerator for hours, and the heat baking into his car seemed to evaporate all the breezes coming in through the open windows. So without much decision, Edward turned into the dirt drive, as if it were his very own home. The drive was much narrower than the highway itself; corn swiped each side of his car as he trundled toward the house. Suddenly Edward regretted this decision. The empty windows upstairs stared down at him, blank eyes, their curtains suddenly stilled. The double screen doors seemed suddenly restless, nudging each other slightly, anticipating a move. Even the corn stalks, as they squeaked across his windows, tittered back and forth the slightest whisper of a long-forgotten secret.

Then at once the curtains upstairs danced again in the wind; every blade of grass in the tidy yard stood in chlorophyllic ec-



stasy; the sun shone a welcoming light on the front door. Within seconds Edward forgot his momentary feeling of unease.

A white picket fence encased the yard, its only opening a kissing gate that let on to the dirt road. Edward eased his Buick next to the gate, shut off the rumbling engine, opened the door and stepped out. Normally he pulled his traveling sales case out of the car with him, but the muscle memory accompanying this familiar maneuver failed. He simply stood between his car door and the gate staring at the house and the fields of corn that snuck upon it from every direction. Behind the screen front doors Edward could see dimly into the house, which was filled with more sunlight and dust motes, and he could distinguish vague figures moving toward him. He stepped forward and pushed his way through the gate, ignoring the sad whimper of a rusty hinge, and walked up a stone path toward the front porch steps.

Before he could reach them, the screen doors swung open. From out of the gloom stepped Edward's parents, his mother in a cherry-dotted apron and yellow dress, his father in blue jeans, plaid shirt, and a baseball cap. Their faces were lit with jubilant smiles, and they scurried down the wooden steps to meet him. The screen doors slammed (boing-THWOMP) behind them. Edward stood stunned on the front path, not only because his parents had been dead for seven years, but because he had somehow known that they had been here all along. Why hadn't he dropped by before?

His mother hugged him tightly and laughed. Her bubbled hair-do mashed into his face, and he felt her body tremble with joy as he held her. She was so happy to see him, she said, which was odd, because when they broke apart from the hug Edward saw that she no longer had eyes. The skin of her upper and lower eyelids had been sewn together with thick blue yarn. Edward opened his mouth to ask her what had happened but nothing came out. His father scooped him into a one-armed squeeze, looking him deeply in the eyes, an expression of pride melting over his face. He was pursing his lips together tightly--probably choked up, Edward thought. Dad always had trouble showing emotion.

"We knew you'd come by, Edward!" his mother cried. "Get inside, it must be a hundred degrees out here! I've got some nice lemonade and oatmeal cookies." She clutched his elbow and steered him up the steps toward the door. The wood seemed less sturdy underfoot than it looked, a bit like the way a rotting

tree feels soggy in the rain. He sensed a disturbing smell, a mixture of cornbread, vinegar, and chicken shit, which seemed to seep from the house itself. But in a moment it was gone, and as he stepped through the doors with his parents the smell was replaced by the sweet breeze of warm summer air flowing through an open window. He could also smell fresh lemons and a baking, yeasty smell. All the familiar smells of home, he thought, as his mother and father showed him to a comfortable easy chair in a cozy room off the front hall.

His father sat on a sofa opposite him, staring at his face with a glint of pride still shimmering in his eyes, while his mother bustled into the kitchen. Goodness knows how she saw anything, Edward thought, with her eyes sewn shut like that. The room was bright and cheerful and as clean as could be, the furniture as plainly charming as the house itself. There was no television, but a stack of board games sat in one corner. From the state of their tattered boxes, it looked like they were frequently used. Somewhere in the house Franki Valli squeaked about how to walk like a man through the speakers of a radio.

Edward turned to his father and started to speak in a hoarse voice.

“I’m sorry it’s been so long. I didn’t realize.... If I had known,” (but he had known, hadn’t he?) “I would have stopped earlier. I had been told you two were dead.”

Edward’s father did not speak, just nodded in understanding. He took off his baseball cap, rested it on his knee, and laced his fingers together across his plaid shirt. Edward suddenly realized that his father’s mouth was still closed tight, not voluntarily, but sewn shut like his mother’s eyes.

A minute later his mother came into the room with a tray of cookies and a squat pitcher of lemonade. Beads of condensation dripped onto her hands as she poured three cups of the lemonade, jabbering away at Edward who could hardly take his eyes off his father. It was not just that his parents were dead (and Edward knew they were, had identified the bodies in a St. Louis morgue the night of the wreck) or that he had never seen them in such a rural setting as this (the rooster clock on the wall screamed against his mother’s urban, refined taste); it was the fact that the baseball cap on his father’s knee had a cardinal on it that disturbed him. Edward had grown up in St. Louis, but his father was from Boston and had always pulled for the Sox.

His mother passed around glasses of chilled lemonade and a




plate loaded with crumbly cookies, so unhindered by her optical handicap that Edward found himself stifling laughter. She told him of the exciting county baseball game they had attended the night before; of the startling rate at which the corn was growing this year, despite the dearth of rain; of her knitting projects; of Dad's newfound skill at amateur carpentry. Finally she fixed Edward with her stitched stare and asked him, "So how has life been for you, Eddie?"

"It's been good," Edward began, shifting in his seat and setting down his empty glass on the rustic coffee table, one of his father's own creations. "O.K. at least. I never get to stay in one place for long, but I get most of the winter off which is nice for Janice. She misses me when I'm not at home. It's hard on her with the baby, all by herself. We have a baby now, Momma. I know that might come as a surprise."

"Oh, I think that's wonderful Eddie! Just wonderful!" his mother said, patting him on the knee.

"She's seven months this Tuesday. We named her after you, Momma. I couldn't think of any other name that suited."

"That's sweet of you dear," his mother smiled, and refilled his glass of lemonade. "I hope I can meet her sometime. Do you have a picture of her?"

Edward produced a small photo from his wallet, a bit crinkled but decent enough. It showed his baby girl in the backyard of their duplex in the city. She was pulling up blades of grass, smiling at the camera, glowing in a little green dress.

"Oh, she has my eyes, Edward!" his mother beamed.

"She does, momma." Edward passed the photo to his father, who looked at it with a humored smile and an appreciative nod. He returned it to Edward, then put his cap on his head, stood up and headed for the door, clapping Edward on the shoulder as he went.

"He's probably heading for the barn," his mother said, slightly exasperated. "Can't keep him away for too long; his hands start to get anxious. Always wanting to create something new. I don't know where we're going to put all of the things he's coming up with; we're running out of room. Maybe you could take a piece back?"

"Maybe, momma," Edward smiled.

He stayed for dinner against his own judgment. He knew he didn't want to sleep in the house, and the nearest motel was about forty miles away. But his mother insisted that he sit and

relax on the back porch. It was a small, screened room with wicker furniture. The entire view was filled with corn and sky, and as the sun went down fireflies began to tap glowingly against the screen. When he had woken up that morning, Edward would never have dreamed he would be waiting for a dinner with his parents later that night. Their death had been sudden and incredibly hard to deal with. Looking back on it, Edward could not remember a funeral. The last thing he remembered was seeing their broken bodies.

But Edward had dealt with it and moved on. That was the only thing he knew to do. Now he had a family of his own, and he didn't feel the need for his parents any longer. He plucked the picture of his baby girl out of his wallet again and examined it in the warm evening light. He really did not want to stay there in this house any longer.

By seven o'clock dinner was on the table: a gorgeous golden turkey, mashed potatoes, corn pudding, green beans and grape Jell-O. The three tucked in and ate steadily for twenty minutes, his mother doing most of the talking between bites. His father put the food to his stitched mouth, ready to drive the tasty bites home, but it all fell into his lap. Edward felt embarrassed for the man, so he tried not to look. For dessert his mother served them scandalously large slabs of cherry pie. It was sickly sweet, but it slid down Edward's throat with such ease that he couldn't help having seconds.

When it came time to leave, his mother protested. The guest bedroom had clean sheets, it was too dark to drive safely; they had more visiting to do. But Edward was adamant. His father stood in the corner of the front hall, hands in his pockets, smiling at the situation, and eventually his mother gave in. His parents hugged him fiercely on the front porch, made him promise to come back soon, and waved him down the drive.



Three weeks later Edward found himself on the same stretch of highway (Nebraska, it had to have been) near the farmhouse where he had spent an evening visiting his dead parents. It was late, his bladder was aching, and his destination for the night was almost an hour away. Soon the twinkling lights of the farmhouse came into view through the rows of corn. Edward did not want to stop, could only half admit to himself that he had even stopped before, much less fathom exactly what he had seen there that night. He cruised past the dirt drive that led up to the house,

refusing to turn his head and look at the glowing windows. Still, his bladder was fixing to explode.

Less than a quarter mile from the dirt road, Edward pulled off to the side of the highway, turned his head lamps off, and quickly hopped out of the Buick. The road was deserted, but Edward still felt a need for privacy. He walked into the corn stalks about ten yards deep. His bladder, sensing the portent of relief, began to contract more severely. Edward stopped on the spot and undid his zipper. With almost unbearable relief, he sighed and cocked his head up to the sky above. It was littered with the most splendid array of stars he had ever seen in his life, impossible to count. He tried to take it all in at once, to observe every corner of the endless sky, but he couldn't. Never before had he realized just how enormous the sky was.

Suddenly Edward felt a brush of cold metal against his back. Startled, and with a pinch of pain, he stopped urinating. He turned around to find the muzzle of a shotgun now aimed at his chest. He looked up to find the owner of the gun staring him dead in the eyes. It was his father, his mouth sewn shut, a leer of hatred and disgust furrowed on his face. Get the fuck off my land, the face communicated.

"I'm sorry," Edward began, knowing that, whatever this thing was before him, it was probably not actually his father. "I'll get going now, sir."

He turned slowly, forgetting those glorious stars above, and ran for his Buick.



Edward soon had his route changed with his company, so wary was he of having to cross paths with that farm again. But curiosity has a way of catching up with a man, and less than a year later Edward found himself riding down that same blacktop highway toward the house which he had last left with his zipper down, but which had never quite left him.

It was May, and a more gorgeous day could not have been possible. It was entirely too hot for the season, Edward thought, but he couldn't roll down the windows because it upset his little daughter. She was in the front seat next to him, sucking happily on a pacifier and staring out at the blue skies. Edward was on his way to Denver where Janice's parents were planning to meet with him and see the baby for the first time. Without realizing what he was doing, Edward had pointed his car toward the route that led past the farm, even though this would add about an

hour to his trip. He needed another look at the house--safely, in the daylight, with hopes that a youthful family would be out in the side yard enjoying a new swing set, or that an unfamiliar farmer would be tooling through the corn on a polished tractor. Anything that could contradict what he had seen the previous summer was what he wished to see.

The corn looked just as healthy as it had the previous year, though it was not quite as tall. The hot days, so early that year, would change that soon enough and send those stalks skyward. Edward knew he was drawing close to the farmhouse when he passed the two large silos. His hands were sweating on the wheel, and beside him his little girl had dozed off to sleep. A moment later he could see the little white house in the distance, and soon it was racing toward him with unnerving speed. Without realizing it, Edward had settled into a steady speed of eighty, and only at the very last second did he see the body lying in the middle of the road just in front of the house's dirt drive.

Edward stomped on the break pedal; the car fish-tailed in the road before coming to a rocking halt on the opposite shoulder from the house, its backside slashing into the stalks of corn. Edward jumped out and closed the car door behind him. He ran to the body in the middle of the road, knowing it was the thing that appeared to be his father. It was flat on its back, the thick stitching across its mouth popped loose, dark blood trickling out.

"Dad! Dad!" Edward shouted at the thing on the road. It didn't move a muscle. It had the flat look of a corpse, Edward saw, as if it was sunken into the road itself. Edward grabbed its arm and checked for a pulse. Silent. He bent his head to the thing's chest, listening for a heartbeat. But nothing was ticking except his watch.

From up the dirt drive Edward heard clomping footsteps coming toward him. He knew it was his mother before he looked, but he looked anyway. She was racing down the drive, an apron patterned in cows coming loose in the back, her bubble hairdo glowing in the sunlight. Her eyes were still sewn up, but as she reached Edward and the body on the ground, he saw that tears were leaking out of them.

"I was sitting on the porch when I saw him fall!" she blubbered breathlessly. "He was just checking for the mail. Oh Edward! Thank goodness you were driving by, you can help carry him!"

"I think he's already g--"

“Bring him in the house, I’ve already called the ambulance!”

Aware of the futility but unable to completely control himself, Edward picked up the body that looked so like his father and began to jog with it up the drive. It was lighter in weight than it had any reason to be, and its head bobbed awkwardly against Edward’s arm with every stride. At one point the Cardinals hat came loose and fell to the ground. Edward didn’t bother to pick it up.

The house was not the same as earlier. The once cheery façade and yard were now forlorn and untended. Paint was beginning to chip off the side of the house and the fence, and some areas of the grassy lawn were brown and crisp. Edward thought that somehow this depressed air suited the space more genuinely. The odious smell of vinegar was more apparent, and for the first time since he had been there initially Edward remembered that he had encountered that smell for a brief moment before entering the house.

He burst through the screen doors and laid the body on the quilted sofa. His mother rushed into the room with a cool rag and a glass of water. She poured some of the water into his father’s ripped mouth under the delusion that it could somehow revive him. Edward did not worry about him choking. There was no life in the pathetic body left to be lost.

It was nearly an hour before ambulance sirens began to warble in the distance, vaguely. In the meantime Edward’s mother sat stroking her husband’s hand, whispering to him that he would be all right. She had insisted that Edward stay with her while waiting for the ambulance, but she did not look at him. He felt stunned, sitting in the same easy chair he had sat the previous July, his eyeless mother looking over him as if he were merely another piece of furniture. He noticed a shotgun propped in a corner of the room where the board games had been the last time he was in the room. Sitting on the coffee table beside the sofa, his mother sobbed silently over her husband’s body, but her back remained straight with hope. Edward sat slumped in the easy chair. Every few minutes he would feel an enormous urge to leave. His knees would twitch, as if ready to leave the chair in a hurry. But then the feeling just passed.

The ambulance rocked up the dirt path, sirens rising in crescendo, and stopped in front of the kissing gate. The stretcher was wheeled up the front path by two men in white uniforms. The body was swiftly loaded into the back of the ambulance, but

the men may as well have drawn the sheet over its face. From the looks on their faces, they too knew it was hopeless. Edward's mother followed behind the stretcher, turning back toward Edward as she jumped into the back of the ambulance. "Meet us at the hospital, Edward!" she shouted, her stitched eyes looking as if they may have just been squinting in the sunlight. Edward stood on the porch and waved at the ambulance as it squalled back down the drive. A dusty haze followed it, and by the time it settled the ambulance was well out of sight.

The cornhusks rustled in a mild breeze under the baking sun. In the distance, perhaps even on the back porch, a wind chime rang out. The bell was an oddly pelagic sound to be heard here in the deep plains.

Edward slowly began to descend the porch steps, his hands in his pockets, feeling more serene than he knew he had any right to be. He wouldn't follow the ambulance to the distant hospital, because those weren't his parents riding in the back of it. At a steady, slow pace, he made his way back toward his car without a backward glance. He understood that everything that had happened here was absurd, and he wished to contemplate it no more. He was certain this time that he would never travel past this old farm again.

When he reached his car he realized what he had done. He had left the doors closed, and the windows were rolled up. It had to be a hundred and thirty degrees in there. He fell to his knees on the hard, hot blacktop that stretched through that godforsaken farm. Above him, the wide Nebraskan sky pressed down on him mercilessly.

Or maybe it was Kansas.



Nearly forty years later, he prefers not to remember. It wasn't until he saw the farmhouse on the news that he really thought that any of it had happened at all.

Smoke filled the screen, and the camera rocked restlessly as the news van in which the reporters were riding hurtled down the highway. Edward could see the silos, still recognizable after all these years of forgetting, ensconced in a web of smoke. As the camera sped closer to the horrific wreckage, Edward could make out the house in the distance. It was the same house, fixed upon its little hill. Two trucks and a Hummer sat beside it, Edward could see. A new family had moved in.

The screen switched to a helicopter shot. The back tail of the

plane in the cornfield had the words DELTA painted across it. The flames seemed to be dying down around the actual fuselage, but the fields of corn around it were just getting started. Blue passenger seats and unrecognizable debris were scattered everywhere, impossible to count, some still blazing like hideous stars.

At the bottom of the screen, the news banner identified the location as Iowa.

