

Brother Melrose

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THE OLD MAN WALKED OUT from under the line of high, heavy trees bordering the cemetery. He stopped. He looked up, blinking his eyes. He held his hands palms up to the fading April sunlight. It was early evening the Saturday after Easter.

"Well," he said. "Well."

He nodded his head and then started down the dirt road toward the town, which was not far away. It was not a large town. He did not walk fast. He stopped to look at a horse in a field. He whistled, and the horse raised its head and walked over to the fence.

He rubbed the horse behind the ears and petted his neck.

"Good old Red. Good old Red."

The horse raised and lowered its head.

At the next field he stopped to look at a cow and her calf. The cow walked toward the fence; the calf followed. He stopped to watch a flock of pigeons flying above the trees. When he crossed the bridge just outside the town, he stopped and looked down at the water.

"Well," he said.

Looking down at himself, he brushed off his suit jacket and pants with the flats of his hands.

He was dressed in a new black suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He wore shiny new shoes. He did not have far to go; his house was on the edge of town. He left the road and got on the sidewalk. He stopped to smell a rose.

Across the street an older woman out hoeing her peas waved to him. He waved back. She stood and watched him as he passed. She put up her right hand to shade her eyes, pushing her head forward like a chicken. She rested her hoe against a gooseberry bush and walked to the fence, but the old man had passed by already.

"I could have sworn . . ."

She stood there looking at his back. She shook her head and turned toward her garden. She stopped and turned once to look after the old man and then went on. She took up her hoe again; she stood there holding it.

A brown dog came out to bark at the old man, but then walked up to him sniffing and wagging her tail.

"Well, hello, Iris," the old man said. "How are you?" He reached down and petted the dog. Iris whined. "Good old dog, Iris. Where's Joey?" Barking and jumping, Iris circled the old man and then ran down the sidewalk ahead of him.

A pickup truck coming in the opposite direction passed the old man and then stopped suddenly in the middle of the road. The driver got out and stood looking at the old man. The driver walked to the back of his pickup and watched the old man approaching the gate of a comfortable-looking, white-framed house set deep in the yard.

Another pickup stopped behind the first pickup. A heavy-set man stuck his head out the open window.

"You out of gas, Heber?"

"No, no, George. I just thought I saw old man Melrose." He nodded toward the old man entering the gate.

George looked toward the white house. He shook his head.

"Better drive into Springerville to the clinic and get your eyes checked, Heber. Old man Melrose's been dead and buried for nearly a year. Don't expect him back either. Probably a bum looking for a handout. Stole himself a nice suit of clothes somewhere. See you, Heber. I'd make that appointment." He laughed.

"No, I . . ."

Iris leading the way, the old man walked up on the porch of the white house.

"Grandpa! Grandpa! Grandpa!"

The screen door flung back, and a blond-headed boy came running out of the house.

"I knew you'd come back! I knew you would! I just knew you would! I told Mom you would! You just had to. I prayed you would all the time. I prayed and prayed."

"Yes, Joey, I know."

The old man bent over to hug the boy. Barking, Iris jumped up and down.

Joey put his arms around his grandpa's neck and squeezed tight.

"Oh, Grandpa, it's so good to see you."

"You bet."

"Mom will be so happy. Mom! Mom! Grandpa's back! Grandpa's back!"

Joey let go of his grandpa's neck, jerked open the screen door and ran into the house.

"Mom! Mom!"

The old man walked into the house. He stopped to breathe in deep the smell of fresh-baked bread.

"Joey, I've told you your grandpa isn't coming back. He's dead. Now what is this nonsense." The woman came out of the kitchen and into the front room wiping her hands on her apron. "I'm making pies for Sunday and your father will be home for supper. I haven't got time . . ."

Looking up, the woman screamed, the scream sharp and piercing. She fell into a sofa chair near where she stood.

"Now, Elsie, there's no need to act like that."

The old man leaned down to take the woman's hand.

"What's wrong with my mom, Grandpa? Is she sick?"

"You go get your mother a glass of water. Now, Elsie."

"No, no, no, no." Lying back in the chair, the woman rolled her head from side to side like she was taking a fit. She seemed to hold her eyes closed intentionally.

"Here, Grandpa."

"Thank you, Joey."

The old man took the glass and held it to the woman's lips.

"You'll feel better."

The woman opened her eyes and closed them again.

"Nooooo," she said, like a woman shouting down a tunnel.

"Come on now, Elsie. It can't be helped."

Staring at the man, the woman sipped the water.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Elsie, it's me I'm afraid."

"But."

"I know. I know. It can't be helped, right now anyway."

"Are you okay, Mom? What's wrong with you, Mom?"

"It's just not possible. It's not. What are people going to say? You had such a lovely service. Everybody came. They all saw you. Everybody said how nice you looked. You had a new suit just like you wanted, and new shoes too, although why a person would want new shoes I don't know."

She took the glass from the old man. "Here, I need the rest of that."

She emptied the glass and then sat holding it with both hands.

"The whole family was there, even Kenneth and Ruth and their kids, and they don't usually come to anything in the way of family, not even weddings. You know that. The Relief Society sisters fixed such a nice lunch afterward. The flowers were so nice. People went out of their way to say such nice things about you even though you weren't buried in temple robes. You looked so peaceful. Mom must have been waiting at the veil when you got there. Your service was so nice. I can't believe it. I can't. I can't. It's too much."

Elsie kept her head pressed against the back of the chair for support, as if she was afraid her head might fall off.

"I know."

"You know? How could you know?"

Elsie shook her head.

"I can't believe it. I won't believe it. I was to get this house when you died. We've been painting and fixing up things till I've got a decent roof over my head finally for the first time since I married Fred. I used the money you left me for that. Of course it was Mom's money to begin with. The Melroses never had a dime and never will have. It was the Thatchers had money."

"I don't want it back, Elsie. You don't have to worry about anything."

"How in the world?" Shaking her head, she closed her eyes and then opened them again. "Where's the bishop? Where's the stake president? Both of them off somewhere of course. Never around when you need them and always standing at the door when you don't."

"But, Mom, Grandpa's come. Shouldn't we be happy?"

"I know he's back. If anybody would be coming back it would be him. He was the most stubborn man I ever . . ." She looked at the boy, as if noticing him for the first time. "Now you go out and play. Your grandfather and me have things to talk about. What your aunts are going to say about this, I don't know. Of course it wasn't them that took care of him for ten years either."

"Oh, Ma."

She raised her head and looked down at the boy.

"Go on now, and take that dog with you. That wretched animal is on my new carpet. Why the Wilsons can't keep their dogs chained up or build a fence I'll never know. They have a dog, but they expect *me* take care of it of course."

The dog was lying on the brown carpet, her head between her paws. She stood up.

"Oh, Ma."

"Just do as you've been asked. You've got to have a bath too. It's Sunday tomorrow, don't forget."

"Gee whiz. Come on, Iris. Goodbye, Grandpa. See you later."

"Goodbye, sonny boy."

Joey pushed open the screen door, and he and Iris went out onto the front porch.

"Fred. I'll call Fred to come home early. He's your son-in-law. It's his responsibility too. You'd think he might be of some use in a situation like this."

She stood up from the chair.

"Well, while you're doing that, I need to go to the bathroom."

"Bathroom. I didn't think people . . . Well go on then while I call Fred. He'll just have to come home early, that's all, whether Mike Jones likes it or not."

"That bread sure smells good, Elsie. You always made good bread."

"It does, does it?"

"It's nice to be back."

"Nice? I would think . . . Oh, well."

Elsie walked to the phone on the wall just inside the kitchen door and dialed the number. Listening to the ring, she looked down at her unfinished pies. She shook her head.

"To think that . . . Fred? Is that you, Fred? Well, I want you to come home right now." Elsie held the telephone cord with her free hand as if hanging on for support. "I know you're supposed to stay and lock up that store. Don't you do that every night. I know what you do, Fred Williams. This is an emergency." She looked at the wall. "No the house isn't on fire. I wish that's all it was. Now listen, Fred. Just listen for once in your life. Your father-in-law is back." She closed her eyes and opened them again. "No, I'm not crazy, but I may be if you don't get home here as fast as you can."

Still hanging on to the telephone cord, she sat down on the chair below the phone. "No he hasn't got wings, and he didn't land on top of the roof. This is no time for your humor, Fred. Just get home here. I need you. What are people going to say? This is terrible." She shook her head. "What's he doing? He's in the bathroom." She listened. "Well how would I know what he wants with a bathroom. What a person usually wants, I suppose. You can ask him when you get home, if you think it's important."

Elsie stood up.

"No, you don't need to come home and take me to see Doctor Rogers. What good would he do me now? You'd think eighty-seven years would be enough for anybody. He was just like a child the last three years. Wandering all over town talking to people, and horses and cows if he couldn't find anybody, and even chickens. How could a man talk to a chicken? Joey was the only one who could talk sense to him. I'm not going through that again. Now you just get home, Fred Williams, as fast as you can." Elsie hung up the phone. "You'd think a man could find a better job after thirty years than just being a clerk in a hardware store."

She shook her head. She listened to the toilet flush down the short hall and then the tap run. The old man came out of the bathroom and into the kitchen.

"You've fixed the bathroom up real nice, Elsie."

"That's one of the things we had done." She turned on the kitchen light. "We got a new furnace too, and a new roof. The house needed a lot of fixing up. Every dime you left me we spent on the house. I didn't let Fred get his hands on any of it, you can be sure of that. There's none left."

"I don't want the money back, Elsie."

"Well, that's good because there's none to give back." She looked at the old man. "Why don't you go in the living room and sit in your rocking chair there by the big bay window for a few minutes while I think. You used to like to do that. I've been going to paint that chair, but I haven't got around to it yet. There's so much to do around here, you never get done. I'll pull it over where you used to like it."

"You're making pies."

"Pies. Of course I'm making pies. Tomorrow's Sunday."

She led the old man out of the kitchen, through the dining room, and into the sitting room. She pulled the rocking chair into the alcove formed by the window.

"This is nice." The old man sat looking out the window and rocking just slightly. "Where's the rest of the children, Elsie?"

"Of course Fred junior and Billy are married and gone, and Ellen is married now and living in Springerville. Thank the good Lord for small favors."

"Yes, we knew about Ellen getting married. He seems like a nice boy."

"Well, how could you know about that? It was three months after you . . ."

"Well, your mother and me kind of keep track of things. Important things anyway."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't she come with you if you had to come?"

"I didn't know I was coming."

"Why did you have to come at all?"

"Well, because of Joey, I guess."

Elsie shook her head.

"If it isn't one thing with that child, it's another. How is Mom?"

"Just fine."

"How's her arthritis?"

"It's all gone, Elsie."

"Well, at least there's some benefit to dying. I sure hope she's enjoying herself finally. Worked herself to death. Yes, and she tried all her life to get you to go to the temple, but she might as well talked to a wall. It's a wonder you and Mom are together. I would have thought you would be somewhere . . ."

The phone rang. Elsie walked back into the kitchen.

"Yes, Liza."

Holding her hand over the receiver, Elsie turned to look through the kitchen door at her father. There was no wall or doorway between the dining room and the living room.

"It's Liza Campbell." Elsie spoke loudly so the old man could hear. He nodded but didn't turn to look at her.

Elsie took her hand off the receiver.

"You were out in your garden and you thought you saw who?" Elsie sat down on the chair. "You thought it might be a tramp bothering me. Well I guess that's who you did see. What? No not a tramp, Liza, my father. Yes, he's sitting right here in his rocking chair." She listened. "Yes, Liza, I'm feeling just fine. And, no, I haven't been out in the sun. But thank you for asking. Yes, yes, I know Liza. Yes, yes, Liza, I'm just fine. Nothing wrong with me. No, of course not. Thank you for your call, Liza."

Elsie reached up and hung up the phone. She didn't stand back up. She turned toward the old man.

"Now she'll phone everybody in town to tell them I've finally gone crazy. It won't surprise very many people, I expect, and they'll be over here poking their noses in. There's not much peace in this life, I know that. You think things are going to settle down, but they never do. There's always something. I'll never get those pies finished now, or anything else I suppose, and tomorrow's Sunday again already, and I've got a Primary lesson to get. Teaching those eight-year-olds is no joke, I can tell you that. They think because I've got Joey, I can handle 'em, but I can't. Joey was a big surprise, I can tell you that. Fred and his grand ideas about what can't happen. Well it did happen."

The old man didn't turn to look at her. He sat smiling and looking out the window. He waved.

Elsie stood up from the chair by the phone and walked back into the dining room. Fred was just opening the screen door. Joey and Iris stood behind him, but they didn't come in. Joey pressed his nose against the screen, the end of his nose flat and white against the wire.

"Now, Elsie, what is all this nonsense? There's people outside on the lawn as I drove in. You've probably had one of your spells." Just as Fred spoke, he turned to see the old man in the rocking chair. Fred leaned forward like a tree about to fall over. He turned back to look at Elsie and then at the old man again. "Well, I'll be damned." He looked at Elsie again. "It ain't possible."

"Well, see'n is believ'n, ain't it, Fred. And please don't swear in my house. Now what are we going to do about this situation?"

The old man turned in his chair. He nodded and smiled at Fred and then turned back to look out the window.

"It's him all right."

"Now what are you going to do about it, Fred?"

"Do about it? What is there to do about it? What do you want me to do, haul him back out to the cemetery and bury him again? Maybe we should have another funeral. The first one didn't seem to work so well."

"Now, Fred, I want you to be serious."

"I am being . . ."

"Well, looks like the sheriff had to come too, of course."

Elsie stood looking out the screen door. Fred turned his head to see the sheriff turn off his headlights and red flashers. The sheriff held on to the top of the door to get out of the car.

"Thank the Lord he had enough sense not to use that siren of his. The whole town would have followed him. They'll be here quick enough though. Nothing else to do on a Saturday night, of course, except bother me."

The sheriff came up on the porch and opened the screen door. He didn't ring the bell. He was a big man. Joey and Iris stood at the screen looking in.

"Well, I heard you folks have been having some trouble. Some bum walking in your house or something, Elsie? Heber Jones called me. Is this the intruder?"

The sheriff turned and walked into the living room. "Now look here, mister."

The sheriff stopped, stepped back, then leaned forward, squinting his eyes like a man who thought he might be going blind.

"Oh, sweet Jesus." It wasn't blasphemy but more like the beginning of a prayer.

"Hello, Bob. I see you're still sheriff."

The sheriff turned to look at Elsie and Fred.

"It's all right, sheriff. You can talk to him. Dad's not going to evaporate."

"Well, Brother Melrose, this sure is a surprise."

"Yes, I expect it is. I'm a little surprised myself."

"Well, how are you feeling?"

"Fine. Fine. Looks like folks are coming by. That's nice, ain't it?"

The sheriff didn't walk over to shake the old man's hand. The sheriff looked out the window.

"Seems like you got some folks on the front lawn, Elsie."

Elsie and Fred both turned to look. Maybe a dozen people stood on the lawn in the light from the street lamp.

"That has to be Liza Campbell's work. She never did know when to keep something to herself." Elsie walked to the screen door. "Well, they're not coming in here on my new carpet unless they take off their shoes, and that goes for the cousins too. Or they can just look through the window if they don't want to do that. I expect church will be a circus tomorrow. What the bishop is going to do about this, I don't know. He's supposed to be back in town late tonight."

She turned on the porch light.

"Well, it says the dead will rise again, Elsie."

"I know that, Sheriff, but there's no rush as far as I know. What's so special about my father is beyond me, even if Joey . . ."

"Well I think I better stay around for a while and keep things orderly. I think I'll just radio Hank at the office and have him run out to the cemetery and have a look around. See if there's any more of these folks about there wandering around. They may need a ride. Your family plot's over by the gate, ain't it, Elsie? At least, that's what I remember."

"Yes, Sheriff, that's where it is. I hope there's nobody else from my family. One's enough right now."

"Well, I'll let you know what Hank finds out. I don't want half the town out there either. It's too dark. Somebody could fall in a hole and break a leg, or worse. Have to haul people all the way to Springerville to the hospital. It's expensive."

The sheriff got those neighbors lined up who wanted to come in the house and see Brother Melrose. They took off their shoes on the porch. There might have been thirty people on the lawn. Some didn't want to come in. Others came in the house but didn't go into the living room to shake old Brother Melrose's hand. They just stood in the dining room with Elsie and Fred, their arms folded tight across their chests, looking, and occasionally shaking their heads.

Her arms folded across her chest, Dora Jenkins stood next to Elsie.

"I don't want to shake hands with him," Dora Jenkins said. "At least not yet. Thank you, no. I'll just stand right here. Shakin' hands would be too much for me. Maybe tomorrow, but not tonight. Something like this takes time."

The overhead light shone off her eyeglasses when she moved her head.

"Your father never seemed like a man much concerned about heaven, Elsie. Not like your mother. She was looking forward to it."

"Yes, and with good reason."

It was mostly old people who went in to shake hands with Brother Melrose. The sheriff kept the line moving, so all they had time to do was shake hands and say hello, not ask questions. Some of the old sisters patted Brother Melrose on the shoulder.

Liza Campbell walked over and stood by Elsie and Dora Jenkins.

"Well, it's him all right, Elsie. No question about that. I knew it was when I was out in the peas, but you can't be sure about a thing like that, can you? Just now, when I shook Brother Melrose's hand, I wanted to ask him about my Gordon, but there wasn't time. But maybe he wasn't there where Brother Melrose was anyway. I always told Gordon he was going to hell, all that drinking and carrying on. I sure don't want him back. I enjoy my peace and quiet too much to wish that. I've often wondered what he does all day. Of course, it would be nice to have my Jennie back. You remember, Elsie, Jennie died of the whooping cough when she was five."

"I remember."

"But then I'm seventy-four. What would I know about raising a child that age? I guess she'd come back the same age, just like Brother Melrose. She wouldn't be grown, would she, Elsie?"

"Heavens, Liza, how would I know? I wouldn't think so though."

"A thing like this just throws everything out of kilter, it seems to me, just everything."

The sheriff came in to tell Elsie that Hank Green had radioed and told him that nobody else was out at the cemetery or walking along the road toward town either. He'd gone over to the Melrose family plot. He said only the one grave was open.

"What does he mean open?"

"Well, just like it was freshly dug I guess, Fred. He said the lid was off the vault and the coffin lid was up."

"Well, I guess the old man just didn't seep up like swamp gas or something then. That's important to know."

"Fred, stop talking blasphemy, because that's what it is. The graves shall be opened, remember that, and not like cans of tomatoes either."

"Joe had to run some teenagers off that came out nosing around."

"Thanks, Sheriff. We don't want anymore trouble than we've got already. How long is this all going to take. Pies don't make themselves. That's for sure."

"Well, I don't know, Elsie. I don't think people are going to be satisfied just coming by. You're going to have the tv and newspaper people here. All over the state, and probably the country too, people are going to want to know once this gets out. It's unusual. People are going to have a lot of questions about what it's like on the other side. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see the governor come around, maybe even the president. Who knows? All the churches will be sending people, including ours. They'll be sending somebody down from Salt Lake to check on this, you can depend on that, probably an apostle. Of course, it's going to take a while for people to actually believe it's true, but when they do, there's going to be a lot of excitement for a small town."

"We could charge admission, Elsie. We'd get rich. Buy a new Ford pickup. People would pay to see him. They could talk to Dad and shake his hand and ask questions about what it's like and what he does all day. Maybe ask about loved ones and what they're doing. Why not? We could rent the Jensens' barn and clean it up. They're not using it now. Joe sold his milk cows. We could go on tv. We could write a book all about it."

"Fred Williams, you make more sense when you're asleep. How did a woman ever marry such a man?"

She turned back to the sheriff.

"Oh, it's going to be terrible, I know that. What did he have to come back for? Why didn't he wait until everybody else was ready, and we could all come together. We'd all be in the same boat so to speak. It isn't

even decent. How long's he going to stay? What on earth is there for him to do? I don't want to be rich. I just want my peace and quiet and a chance to do a few things I want to do." Elsie looked up at the clock on the wall. "Good heavens, look at the time. Joey should be in taking his bath right now. I still haven't got my Primary lesson done, or my pies. It's time to stop all this, Sheriff. Dad looks tired out anyway."

"I don't hardly think they'll be doing much in church tomorrow, Elsie. The line's pretty well ended for now anyway. I'll just chase off the rest. But I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you didn't wake up to a whole crowd of people standing on your front lawn bright and early in the morning. When the rest of the town hears about this, they're going to want to see Brother Melrose too. They'll have a lot of questions."

"Everybody's life's going to be upset, just because of one stubborn old man. If it was anything my father was it was stubborn, stubborn as a mule, and lazy too unless talking is work. Everybody said that. Even his own mother couldn't deny that. I'm not calling my sisters tonight, and that's certain. They'd just throw a fit, both of them, and have their husbands drive them down here in their big new cars. Plenty of time for fits tomorrow. Why a man would want to be buried in a pair of expensive new shoes I don't know. What would he need . . . well."

"You never know, do you, Elsie? You just never know. I've been sheriff long enough to . . ."

"Fred, you go get Joey in here. He's been running around out there all night."

"I'll just send folks on home, Elsie. It's time they were going. Tomorrow's going to be a big day for this town. I'll keep Hank outside for a while, so people don't bother you."

"Thanks, Sheriff. That'll be a help."

Elsie and Fred said goodbye to the last neighbors to come through the line.

"What a wonderful blessing to have your father back, Elsie," May Bell held Elsie's hands in both of hers.

Elsie said nothing. When May Bell was gone, Elsie put the catch on the screen door and stood looking out.

"Blessing. I've got another word for it and it ain't blessing."

"Now, Elsie, this whole thing just might turn out to be a blessing in disguise." Fred looked over at the old man.

"Yes, and I know what kind of blessing you're thinking of too, so don't think I don't."

"Now, Elsie."

"Joey, you get in here right this minute."

Elsie lifted the catch off the screen door.

"I thought you were in the house. That dog's not coming in. She can go back home to the Wilsons where she belongs."

Elsie held the screen open for Joey then put the catch on again. Iris cocked her head and whined.

"No, you're not coming in. Just go home where you belong." Elsie closed and locked the door and turned off the porch light.

"You should be in bed. You never can get up in time for church."

Joey walked over and put his arm around his grandpa's neck and leaned his head against him.

"Can Grandpa come up and help me put on my pajamas and say my prayers, Mom, please, just like he always did? He always turns off the light like you want."

"I suppose, I suppose. Get yourself a glass of milk and be sure and wash your face and hands. It's too late for you to take a bath. You take one in the morning."

Joey drank his milk and the old man followed him up the stairs.

"I prayed and prayed you'd come back, Grandpa. I knew you would. I just knew it."

"I appreciate it too."

When the old man came back down the stairs, Elsie asked him if he wanted some supper. "I guess you eat, don't you."

"Yes, Elsie, we eat. Some bread and milk would be fine. Pies ain't done yet, I see."

Fred sat at the table while the old man ate. The old man stopped once to take two more teaspoonfuls of sugar.

"Mom ask you to tell me anything, Dad?" Elsie turned from putting a crust on a pie.

"No, Elsie, she didn't. I didn't know I was coming."

"Well, they might have given you a few minutes to say goodbye, you'd think anyway. How's the rest of the family?"

"They're fine. About the same, I guess."

"How's Grandma and Grandpa Thatcher?"

"They were fine the last time I saw them."

"And Aunt Doris and Uncle Jim?"

"Just fine."

Fred picked up the salt shaker that was on the table and poured salt into the palm of his hand.

"What do you do all day, Dad?"

"Oh, about the same as you do here, I guess, Elsie, pretty much."

"You mean it's not different?" Elsie turned again from her crusts.

"Oh, it's different in some ways, Elsie. It's not so bad. It's all right."

"Well, I just hope there's a little time to do what you want, maybe rest a little." Elsie poured fresh-cut apples into another pie shell. "The Savior's there, of course?"

"Yes."

"That must be wonderful."

"Yes."

"Be nice to see him. Well, it's been a long day, Dad. I expect you must be tired. I'll put you in one of the back bedrooms. Of course, Fred and I have the big bedroom now."

"I'd like to sit out on the porch in the swing for a while, if that's all right. I want to listen to the crickets and watch the bats."

"Yes, I know. Well, if that's what you want to do. I'll leave the light on in the room. I'll set out a pair of Fred's pajamas. I guess we'll have to be buying you some new clothes. I gave all yours away."

"Well, there's no hurry, is there? Thanks for the bread and milk. You always made good bread, Elsie."

The old man got up from the table.

"I'll just be on the porch."

Later, after she had everything finished, Elsie came out with a blanket. Iris lay by the old man's chair. He stroked her head. The porch light was off.

"Now don't stay out here and take a chill, Dad. I brought you this blanket. Your bed's ready."

"Thank you, Elsie. It's been nice to visit with you and Fred and Joey. He's a fine boy. Good night."

"Well, don't stay out here all night then. Good night, Dad." She looked down at him. "I'm sure we'll manage somehow. We always have and I guess we always will." She bent down and kissed him on the forehead. "The pies will be cool enough to cut a little later, if you want a piece."

"Thank you, Elsie. Thank Fred for me too. He's a good man in his own way." The old man reached up and patted her hand.

"Yes, I suppose."

The old man sat and listened to the crickets and the other night sounds, watched the bats fly in and out of the light from the street lamp, and stroked Iris.

He sat there in the porch swing all night. He got up twice to get a piece of pie with vanilla ice cream on top and to go to the bathroom. Just as it began to grow light, he took the blanket off from his legs and stood up. He folded the blanket and laid it on the swing. He walked down off the porch. At the gate he turned and looked at his grandson's bedroom window. He smiled and lifted his hand.

The old man opened the gate and walked slowly down the sidewalk. Twice he stopped to smell roses. He talked to a grey cat sitting on a fence. He stroked the cat. Iris didn't bark; the cat didn't hiss.

Iris walked at the old man's side. When the sidewalk ended he walked out into the road. Crossing over the bridge, he stopped to look down at the water. The cow and calf looked up as he passed. Old Red stood at the fence.

"Good old Red." He patted the horse's neck.

Standing at the edge of the trees bordering the cemetery, he stopped to watch a flock of grey gulls fly slowly out toward the fields. He bent down and petted the dog on the head.

"You go on back now, Iris. Good dog, Iris. Go find Joey."

The dog looked up at the old man. She whined and then turned and walked down the road. She turned once to look and then kept going.

The old man watched her, and then he walked in under the trees.