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Two Midnights in a Jug

Follow any hollow in the Ozarks and it'll come to river or stream where soft clay the color of rust covers jagged limestone along the banks. Mountains cut by water dot the horizon, their peaks smoothed over millennia into knolls and greened with trees. In Eminence, MO, folks call trailer courts neighborhoods and hundred year old farm houses with acreage equal to a football field are mansions. There's one high school, and you'll get sidelong looks if you finish. People will talk, call you learnt, expect you to work at the mega hog farm as manager with an education. You'll need a wife, finding her's easy cause every household's got at least one daughter ready for marriage, and you won't meet her at a bar, there's only a few in town. More likely it'll be at a church, there's twenty inside city limits.

Here is where you're born and here is what you are.

Margret Jean lives in a single wide trailer with her husband and son at the bottom of a hollow east of Eminence, just downwind of the mega hog farm. She rolls out of bed in her neon orange muumuu bought at the flea market. Her bare feet touch cold linoleum beneath her bed, some of the tile edges curl upwards till their ends make a knife of plastic. She walks to the kitchen, avoiding the painful tiles without looking, walking by memory to the kitchen, the trailer floor heaving and shaking all the while.

She sits at the foldout table next to office filing cabinets stained with grease. This is her pantry. Her husband Cordell made coffee before he left coon hunting and the pot simmers on the propane stove. The trailer was once an office for Pequod construction before Cordell bought it at auction when the bank took the house. Thirty-two feet long by eight feet wide. Margret Jean and Cordell sleep in what used to be the manager's office next to the one bathroom in the trailer, the plumbing unconnected but they still use the commode. A five gallon bucket sits beneath the trailer to catch waste, and they drop a handful of lime after each use to cut the smell, emptying the bucket at night.

Margret Jean looks outside at the ash falling softly against the kitchen window from the manure fire at the mega hog farm smoldering since early June. She pours herself a cup of coffee and looks at the calendar tacked to the fridge. Three weeks now, gonna turn to four and fire's still burning.

She turns her nose to the bathroom. Smells like Abe didn't clean the shit bucket out. She walks to the far end of the trailer and searches for her son Abner. The main room has wood paneling from floor to ceiling with a sleeping bag in one corner of the floor for Abe, a plasma television hangs from the far wall. When she finds Abe gone, she walks to the trailer door and kicks the towel away at the foot of the threshold put there to keep ash coming through the void and filling the trailer with the smell of burnt hog shit while she slept.

Margret Jean opens the door and sticks her head outside. Beyond the far ridge of the hollow a cloud of ash from the hog fire rises skyward, just as it has done now for near on a month. A thin snow of ash falls steadily from the sky. Everything stopped growing because of the ash. Yard full of yellow fescue, the stalks brittle and short. The few acres of soybeans Cordell still owned and planted spread out in front of the trailer, the leaves of the soybeans a hue of dark green, growing white at the tips, and sagging under the weight of the ash until they touched the soil where they rot. Some of Cordell's hounds huddle beneath the trailer to keep out of the ash fall.

The smell from the ash lingers over everything, causing bile to rise in her throat. They were used to the smell of the hog farm, the wet heavy stink of processed hog waste left to dry in the open air till it becomes manure, but smelling it burnt was altogether different, like barbequed bacon simmered in rancid lard. Margret Jean looks over the dead grass and rotten fields of soybeans. So this is kingdom come.

Off to her right is her husband's seventy-six Chevrolet Nova, the tires long flat, and the lime green paint all but sandblasted off, replaced with gray primer a shade lighter than the ash covering its windows. She hollers for Abe when she doesn't see him in the yard or out in the field. The windshield wipers click on the Nova, the blades screech against glass, brushing away the fine layer of ash on the windshield. Abe stares at her from behind the driver's seat, his fourteen year-old face pale, eyes narrow, brow furrowed in concentration, no doubt imagining how

it would feel to take the Nova out on the highway.

“You, Abe.” Margret Jean brings her hands to her hips. “Get your ass over to the shit bucket and dump it.”

Abe puts his hands on the wheel and ignores his mother. Margret Jean shakes her head. Her son left school in the spring and wouldn't be returning come fall. His education was over, a job at the hog farm his likely future, but Cordell wouldn't have his only son work there while the fire still burned.

She cleans the satellite dish bolted on the skin of the trailer, wiping away the ash covering it. One of the hounds moans beneath the trailer. Margret Jean leans down and pets the dog named Trixie, one of Cordell's favorite bitches. Bandages cover the dog's hind end from where Cordell burned Trixie's ass with buckshot. Cordell aimed too low when he fired the shotgun, and instead of just busting the air above the dog's head and frightening her, some of the shot had rolled off her back, peeling away her fur and ripping her skin, and one of the pellets had penetrated and shattered the bone in her left hind leg. Trixie lost the leg. Now she hobbled under the trailer with three legs, howling and crying at all hours.

Margret Jean stops petting Trixie and looks at Abe. “Make sure and give Trixie her medicine.”

She walks back inside, passing the Pequod construction logo stenciled in six foot tall letters of garish red paint on the trailer's white aluminum siding. The living room is empty of furniture except a pair of recliners still covered in plastic Cordell bought to go along with the fifty-inch plasma television hanging on the opposite wall. Margret Jean sits down in the left chair and flips on the Weather Channel, her bright orange muumuu bunching around her knees as her ankles slid along the cold plastic, revealing a web of varicose veins on her feet. The only books in the trailer are a *TV Guide* and a Pentecostal bible. Margret Jean reaches for the *TV Guide*, hoping the channel lineup might offer relief.

Not long after this, Louvinia arrives at the trailer. She's in her late forties and goes to the same church as Margret Jean. The two women have known each other for years. Louvinia brushes ash from the crushed blue pant suit she wears for her job as a secretary out at the hog farm. “Fire gonna be smothered later today. Brung in bulldozers,

Margret Jean, bulldozers. Would've been doused weeks ago if the damned EPA let us use hoses." She finishes brushing off the ash. "My," she says, staring at the television hanging from the wall. "When did you get that?"

Margret Jean doesn't move from her recliner. She turns to Louvinia. "Cordell bought it with money the church done raised for use on account of the fire."

Louvinia sits in the other recliner. "Supposed to use Christian charity for essentials." She lets her hands run along the plastic. "And these chairs, my word."

"Cordell says football's more important." Margret Jean bites her lip. "Did you bring it?"

Louvinia reaches into her purse made from fake alligator skin and pulls out a bottle of Cialis and sets it on the coffee table next to the bible. Margret Jean mutes the TV. Both women stare at the bottle.

Louvinia grasps Margret Jean's hand. "You didn't tell me Cordell suffered from the dysfunction."

Margret Jean straightens her posture, letting her large breasts sag in the muumuu. "I'm the one needing them pills, not Cordell."

Louvinia takes her hand away. "Now that's silly. These here pills won't work for a female."

"Don't matter who they're made for, I'm needing'em something awful."

"Whatever for?"

Margret Jean shakes her head. "Cordell told me last time we had relations I was as dry as sandpaper."

Louvinia pats Margret Jean's arm, then rubs her shoulder. "Why you're just goin through the change is all."

"The hell you say. I'm only thirty-eight."

Louvinia presses her palm to her chest. "I wern't much older than you when it happened."

Margret Jean sighs, then folds her arms beneath her chest. "It's just a question of excitement is all."

Louvinia lets a grin spread across her face. "Is it excitement, or Cordell's technique?"

"Now hush. His technique's just fine. He hasn't changed it one bit in twenty years of marriage."

“Maybe that’s the problem. You ever ask him to try new things?” Louvinia sticks out her tongue and waves it in the air.

Margret Jean’s face turns red. “Cordell’ll think I’m a prevert.” Louvinia moves her tongue from side to side. Margret Jean rises out of her chair. “Now you stop that.”

The blueticks huddled under the trailer sound long, plentiful howls. Margret Jean looks out the window and sees Cordell tromping out the woods with a coon flung over his shoulder. He stops at the trailer door, kicks off his brogans then hangs the coon carcass on the skin of the trailer to let the weather sweeten the meat for three or four days. Cordell quiets the hounds then steps inside the trailer.

“How do,” Louvinia says.

Cordell ignores her. He unbuttons his flannel shirt and tosses it on the linoleum, revealing his bare chest to the women.

Margret Jean stamps across the room. “Can’t you see we got company? Put your shirt back on.”

“Lay off,” Cordell says, flipping the television over to ESPN. “I’m tick bit and tired.”

Margret Jean stares at the small deer ticks attached to Cordell’s skin. She goes in the kitchen and gets the borax and vinegar needed to kill the ticks. She returns and kneels at his side. Louvinia pulls the recliner handle and stretches herself out and tells Cordell how the fire at the manure plant will soon be over. Cordell scratches at the ticks, and pretends to listen to what Louvinia is saying while Margret Jean mixes the borax and vinegar together.

Margret Jean finishes mixing the concoction and searches for ticks on her husband. Beginning with his arms, she uses her fingers to needle the coarse gray hairs that cover his forearm like fur, his muscles flexing beneath her touch. They never discussed sex and she knew that Cordell would never do such a thing as Louvinia suggested. He spent most of his time hunting since they lost the house, and when he wasn’t hunting, he was sitting in front of the television.

She runs her palms along the insides of his arm pits, the damp hair smelling of sweat and dirt. Cordell nods his head dumbly at Louvinia’s words, only focused on the television, ignoring even his wife’s soft fingers. She can’t remember the last time Cordell touched her, let his hands run over her body when they made love. She moves her fingers

along his bicep then along his shoulders until they touch the base of his neck and the start of his wiry beard. She finds a deer tick among the whiskers, fat on blood. Cordell winches when she pulls the head of the tick out from his skin and tells her to go easy. The only time he ever pays attention to Margaret Jean is when he's afraid of her.

Down along Cordell's chest and peppered round his navel are dozens of seed ticks, each no bigger than the head of pencil. Margaret Jean makes a bowl out of her hands and pours the mixture of borax and salt onto her husband's gut and watches it pool in his navel. Louvinia stops talking and goose flesh rises on Cordell's skin as they all watch the ticks drown in the sizzling mix of vinegar salt.

Margaret Jean looks up and catches her husband's eye with her own, and she thinks she sees desire in his eyes. She covers his hand with her own and parts her lips. Cordell notices the little bottle on the table. He reaches for it, but Margaret Jean snatches it away, rises and walks into the bedroom. Cordell follows his wife. Louvinia watches them leave then takes up the remote and begins searching the channels to see her afternoon stories.

Margaret Jean sits on the bed, looking at the linoleum. Cordell hovers above her, vinegar salt dripping off his stomach.

"You sick?" he asks, reaching for the pills. Margaret Jean loosens her grip and Cordell takes the bottle, reads the label, then furrows his brow. "Says these is for e-rectile dis-function."

Margaret Jean rests her hands in her lap and shows her husband a calm face. "I bought'em and I aim to use'em."

"Not on me, you won't."

"They ain't for you, you big dummy" Margaret Jean says, pressing a palm to her chest. "Them pills is for me."

Cordell shakes his head, and waves the bottle in front of his wife. "I'm as virile as ever."

Margaret Jean rises from bed and closes the door. "Keep your voice down." Cordell walks to the other side of bed, dripping vinegar salt all over the floor. The two face one another with the bed between them. Margaret Jean keeps her calm.

"Know you for a born liar if ever you claim I'm impotent."

"Now, hush. Cordell, I done told you them pills is for me and I want'em back."

“Bullshit.” Cordell shoves the bottle in his pocket. “You think I can’t satisfy you no more?”

Margret Jean’s arms begin to shiver. There’s a flyswatter on the nightstand she uses to smack insects that get in the trailer. She picks it up and looks at her husband as if he were a horse fly.

Cordell watches her raise the flyswatter above her shoulder. “Just what you gonna do with that?”

“Damn you Cordell Meacham Cochrane,” she says. “If you don’t gimme them pills — ” Cordell side steps towards the door. Margret Jean moves her body and blocks him.

“By God,” Cordell says. He grabs hold of the nightstand and lifts it in the air to use as a shield. The nightstand drawer opens, spilling papers and a bottle of perfume onto the floor. The bottle breaks when it hits the linoleum. The room fills with the smell of ripe strawberries. It’s Margret Jean’s favorite perfume. She wears it each day to keep the smell of hog shit off her skin and her clothes. Both of them stare at the broken bottle. Margret Jean’s eyes begin to well up.

“You sonofabitch.”

He sets the nightstand down. “Now, darling — ”

“I’ve abided you my whole life, didn’t say nothing when the bank took the house and kept my mouth shut when you dragged us to live in this sardine box, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let you go bout breaking my things.” She lurches forward, swinging the flyswatter at her husband’s head. Cordell ducks, but Margret Jean smacks his temple with the wire handle of the flyswatter. He covers his head. She takes a step back. “Now gimme them pills.” Cordell reaches out with both arms and pushes his wife onto the bed and rushes out of the bedroom.

He passes Louvinia on his way outside of the trailer, her eyes glued to her stories, she doesn’t even notice him leave.

Outside, Cordell stands red faced and bare chested in the ash fall. He and his wife had never been alike before they married, but he believed that they had grown alike over the years. He’d come to know her moods. Could tell when she wanted something by the nature of her silence. But losing the house changed things. Now, he couldn’t tell what was on Margret Jean’s mind no matter how hard he tried.

Abe walks over to his father. Cordell wipes the vinegar salt from his stomach. Flakes of ash stick to his wet skin. He looks at his son. “Never

once did I put hands on your mother. But she hates me still.”

“You did smack her round last year.” Abe nods, remembering. “It was bout the time we lost the house.”

“Hit her with an open hand, it don’t count when it’s with an open hand.” Cordell lowers his head. “She come at me with those damn knitting needles big as ice picks. Would’ve kilt me if I hadn’t stopped her.” Cordell pulls the bottle of Cialis from his pocket, and hands it to Abe.

Abe reads the label and whistles. “Goa’ll,” Abe says, staring at the bottle. “Didn’t know your pecker gone soft, pa.”

Cordell takes the bottle away from his son. “I always rise to satisfy that woman, even when I’m dog tired, and after twenty years together she hands me these damned pills.”

“Mama spent good money on them pills.”

“Course she did, but damned if I know why cause I ain’t the one with the problem.”

Beneath the trailer, the hounds call out. Cordell eyes Trixie set off from the group. He walks up to her and Abe follows. Trixie stands wobbly on three legs, wagging her tail at the men. The other hounds are tied to cinder block columns supporting the trailer at the opposite end. Six hounds all told, and Trixie the only bitch amongst them. Cordell runs his hands along her brown fur, sees that she’s in heat and unties the chain. He leads her across the yard toward the lean-to where he keeps baled hay, three walls of unevenly spaced two-by-fours covered by a few shards of scrap sheet metal. Cordell wraps Trixie’s chain around a four-by-four post then he pulls out a twenty-five pound hay bale and sets her hind end on top.

Abe eyes Trixie’s stump. “Sure did a number on that poor hound.”

Cordell smiles. “Dog wouldn’t point.” Trixie looks up at Cordell and he stares at her swollen rump. “Best thing for her is to turn her out bitch, maybe get a litter out of her before she dies.”

“She ain’t strong nough for that, pa.”

Cordell cocks his head toward his son. “What you know bout the female of the species anyhow?”

Abe’s face is sunblush from tromping the woods all summer. There’s a shadow of beard growing along his cheeks, spreading down his neck and darkening his chin, but it don’t compare to the full beard

of his father. He scratches at it with his fingers, thinking. "Raised me round bitches my whole life." He pats Trixie on her head. "And I say she's had 'nough, what I say."

Cordell walks back to the trailer. "Ain't no son of mine gonna tell me he knows more bout breeding bitches than I do." He unchains two of the biggest hounds and they stick their muzzles to the hard pack clay surrounding the trailer till their noses foul in the thin ash covering the soil. They pick up Trixie's scent and drag Cordell back to the lean-to. The strongest one mounts her. Cordell hands the chain of the weaker hound over to Abe.

It takes the larger hound a moment to set the rhythm, and when he does, the hay bale slides along the lean-to's rustic floor. Cordell sticks his foot on the front of the bale to keep it from sliding. He nods to Abe. "Look at that now."

Abe pulls out a pack of menthols and raps them against his palm to settle the tobacco. "Seen it before. Need to pull that stud off her before she pops one of them there stitches." He points to the smear of blood spreading along Trixie's bandage. "She gonna bleed out."

"The hell she is." Cordell raises his foot until it rests beside Trixie on the hay bale. He takes a smoke from Abe and watches the two dogs longingly. "If ever I seen an animal built for breeding, it's Trixie. Why, she's given me four litters. Ain't never had a bitch push out five litters, and I reckon she's got one left in her."

Abe lights a menthol and shakes his head. "I don't know, pa. Maybe if you treated her right, but with only three legs —"

"Now that there's a hell of a thing to say. I give her a meal everyday, plenty of table scraps too, a warm spot out of the wet under my trailer, and you saying I don't treat her right? Trixie is my prize bitch. It don't matter how many legs she's got. A good bitch don't even need legs. Suppose you'd want me to love on her, let her climb into bed with me nights and rub gainst me? That'd ruin a bitch for life cause the only thing a bitch understands is meanness." Cordell's face is red. "Boy, don't you know that's what love is?"

Blood drips onto the hay bale from the stump where Trixie's leg used to be, turning the light golden hay dark brown. Trixie pants, her tongue hanging from her mouth like a piece of wet leather. Abe looks down at her, his face is blank. "And if it kills her?"

Cordell raises his hands to the sky. "Only some weak-minded sonbitch treat an animal like it can't be replaced."

Abe turns his back on his father and looks at the trailer. He knows Trixie will be dead before nightfall. The stud hound finishes and Cordell switches him with the other dog. Abe looks down at the hound which just finished with Trixie. It sits at his feet panting, tail between his legs in a posture of fear.

Abe's watched his mother suffer the loss of their house. Saw what it did to their marriage. Now he sees what it has done to his father. Abe looks at Cordell. "Mama's friend done told me the fire gonna be put out at the hog farm today."

Cordell flicks the spent menthol outside the lean-to where it lands on the ashes from the manure fire. "What of it?"

"Figure it's time I put in my application."

Cordell spits. "Only if they smother that goddamn fire. Till then, go dump the shit bucket. Your mother's got company."

Abe takes the hound back to the cinderblocks where the rest of the pack waits. Some of them sniff the returning hound and try and mount him. The returning hound snarls at the pack, but still they try and mount him because they can smell Trixie's scent and it drives them wild.

Inside the trailer, Louvinia lays flat in the recliner watching her stories, the volume on the television maxed out. Margret Jean sobs in the bedroom, the sound loud enough to be heard above the television. Louvinia sighs, mutes the television and rises out of the chair. She stumbles over the cracked and peeling linoleum and opens the bedroom door, finds her friend sitting on the bed, the room stinking of strawberry perfume. The drapes covering the only window are sheer, made from thin cheese cloth which hardly cut the light streaming into the room.

Louvinia sits alongside her friend and wraps her arm over Margret Jean's shoulder out of pity. "Stop this sobbing right now. Cordell's a good man."

Margret Jean stops sobbing. "I've shamed myself, Louvinia."

"You pity yourself now, you'll pity yourself forever." Louvinia smooths back hair covering her friend's eyes. "Show Cordell your shame and let him see your hurt." Louvinia cocks her head toward the light streaming through window, and lets out a soft sigh. "The power

of Jesus will let you share all things with your husband.”

Margret Jean wipes her eyes. “The what?” she asks, rising to her feet and looking down on her friend. Louvinia’s face has the same look of ecstasy Margret Jean saw at the Pentecostal prayer meetings.

“Christ’s love gonna set you free once you let him in your heart.”

Margret Jean frowns. “That’s asking a whole hell of a lot.”

Louvinia rises to her feet. Sensing a change in her friend, she reaches out and tries to grab her. “Why, you hasn’t lost the spirit, has you child?”

Margret Jean avoids her friend’s hand, straightens herself till she stands proper, shakes the wrinkles from her muumuu and looks Louvinia in the eye. “Maybe you need to look yonder at them crops to see what I lost, or take a gander at this shit box of a trailer I’m living in before you go asking a question like that.”

“The bible says — ”

“Says what?” Margret Jean storms out of the bedroom so fast her bare feet tear on the linoleum, leaving bloody smudges along her floor. She picks up her copy of the Pentecostal bible and holds it to Louvinia’s face. “Go on and tell me what it says cause I’m fixing to know.”

Louvinia keeps her composure. “It says true wisdom and power are found only in God’s counsel and understanding of his children’s plight are his own.”

Margret Jean lowers the bible and slumps her shoulders and Louvinia allows a smile of triumph. The trailer is quiet. Shifting light from the moving pictures on the television casts strange shadows of the women against the fake pine wood lining the walls. Then, Margret Jean smells the ash from the outside inside her trailer. The towel she kept beneath the threshold lies away from the door. Cordell forgot to replace it when he left the trailer and ash blows through the void, covering the floor and spreading the stink of burnt hog shit through the trailer. Margret Jean sees this, and the bloody foot prints running along her floor. She begins to shake. She flips the book open. “That what the bible says?” She grabs a handful of pages and rips them from the spine and throws the book to the floor, then she wads the pages up in her hand and hikes up her muumuu and moves the pages between her thighs. “I wipe my dry cunt with it.”

Louvinia grasps her mouth in shock after witnessing her friend’s

act of unfaithfulness. Margret Jean pushes past Louvinia and walks into the bathroom where she crushes the paper into a ball and drops it down the toilet.

Outside, Abe sees the wadded paper land on top the thin layer of lime covering the contents of the shit bucket. He one-arm lifts the five gallon bucket, the contents shift, releasing the smell of stale urine mixed with congealed bowel movements. The lime cuts the smell some, but it also drifts out of the lip of the bucket, burning his throat and making his eyes water. He takes the bucket away from the trailer up the ridge of the hollow along a path of loose shale and rain slick clay, the trees leafless in the ash. Ahead, he can see the line where the ash fall stops, a stand of cypress with rich green leaves surrounded by a copse of oak trees. A special place. Year before Abe was born, his father promised the Pentecostal church all the timber on the land. Said it was an acre set aside for God. Full of rich wood, strong and healthy. But that was before the fire at the hog farm, before the family lost the house and most of their land. The ash hadn't touched the trees set aside for the church. It choked the land the family planted in and fell directly upon the trailer, but this is where it stopped. Abe walks to the center of the green acre, the trees tower above him, their full leaves shading him. He can hear bird calls around him. Hoot of an owl. He tips the bucket and spreads the contents along the green grass and blue moss covering the floor of the woods. There's a pile next to this some two feet in height where he's dumped other buckets since the fire began almost a month ago.

Abe walks back down the ridge. He sees Louvinia's car leave as he walks back, the windshield wipers set to high, clearing the film of ash that has settled on her car since she arrived. He walks to the trailer, opens the door and finds both recliners empty. He's grown accustomed to seeing both his parents in their chairs, sitting together in front of the television. But tonight is different. Hushed sounds come from the bedroom. Abe moves to the door and hears his mother's voice whispering instructions to his father. The door is cracked open, and he sees his father lying on bed facedown between his mother's spread legs. Bedsprings creak under the weight of shifting bodies. A sighing comes from his mother. It's loud and rises in volume, but doesn't last long because Cordell lifts his head.

"Why'd you go and stop?" Margret Jean asks.

"Cause it tastes like cesspool perch."

Abe backs away from the door. His parents don't notice him. He grabs the keys to his father's truck and exits the trailer, careful to pull the old towel beneath the void of the threshold when he leaves. The pack of hounds lies restful beneath the trailer. Trixie's tied to the lean-to, and her body rests unmoving between two bales of hay. Abe likes to think she's just sleeping, but he knows different.

It's late afternoon, and soon the evening shift will be coming on at the hog farm. Abe knows the manager, a boy not much older than himself, and thinks that he can get hired today. He backs the truck to the rotting soy field. The crops only useful now as hog feed. Abe drops the tailgate, takes out a flat nosed shovel and begins loading the pickup bed with the rotten plants. He's made trips out to the hog farm with loads of soybeans before, and he's used to the wet slopping sound the leaves make when he drops shovelfuls of plants into the truckbed. It doesn't take him long to load the truck, the roots of the soybean plants are just as rotten as the leaves and they tear from the soil without much effort.

He drives the truck along the road with ease, already a year under his belt since he got his farmer's license and he's mastered the short trip to the hog farm just over the ridge in the next hollow. As the truck climbs the shifting gravel road up the ridge it leaves the ash fall and Abe passes the old family house the bank took the year before. It escaped the ash fall, and the fields surrounding it are just as green and healthy as anything you ever saw. The trailer and dead soy fields reflect in the rearview mirror, and Abe can see the hurt in the land, feel the pain inside the trailer pinch his gut like a hornet sting.

At the hog farm, three sheds a hundred yards wide and two acres long hold over two thousand hogs. Fans the size of monster truck tires ventilate the sheds, spreading the sickly smell of warm hog shit into the air. The manager's office sits at the entrance, and Abe passes it on the way to unload the soy plants. He backs the trailer to the mouth of the nearest hog shed, steps out the truck and stares into the black entrance. There are no lights inside. The sound of squealing hogs throbs in his ears. From the mouth of the shed walks a boy, not so different from Abe. His mouth is covered with a rag and his overalls are stained

brown from his waist down. He passes Abe, eyes downcast, unseeing. Abe stops him, asks him how much this load of hog feed will fetch.

The boy lowers his mask, brown mucus edges his nose, drips down the front of his face till it hangs off his upper lip. He looks at the load of rotten feed Abe brought and shrugs. "Bout twenty dollars," the boy says, then walks away.

Abe watches the boy leave, and sees his future in the way the boy moves. A vague tremor of terror runs along his spine. The sounding of the hogs calls to him from the mouth of the shed like something out of a nightmare. More men appear from the blackness of the shed pushing wheelbarrows ahead of them to unload the soy plants from the truckbed.

Behind the shed, the manure is spread out on a slab of concrete shaped like a bowl with a circumference surpassing an Olympic-sized swimming pool. One corner of the manure pile smolders, sending up the cloud of ash covering his family's land. There are stakes wrapped with chicken wire set along the edge of the burning section to keep the fire from spreading. Three bull dozers sit idle next to the fire. The machine operators lean against the treads, waiting for the order to snuff the fire.

Abe sees the manager standing with the men next to the manure fire and walks to him. The bulldozer drivers climb into their machines before Abe reaches them. Their engines crank on and they drive into the manure pit. The manager sees Abe, waves him over.

Abe shakes the man's hand. "Brung you a load of feed. Might put in for a job today if you'll have me."

The manager nods at the manure fire. "Know your family suffered cause of this here fire. If you can stand working here, I'll put you on today. Least I can do."

The bulldozers move to the fire, crushing the chicken wire and toppling the stakes separating the burning section of the manure pit. Abe turns and looks back at the shed. The rear entrance is just a large drain into the concrete slab and a constant watery mix of liquefied hog shit flows from the shed where it's left to dry on the slab. Abe thinks about the shed, one giant mouth at the front, one big asshole at the rear with a thousand stomachs in-between. Some of those stomachs will be eating the rotten soy bean plants he just sold and process out

the contents into the shit pool where it will dry and add fuel to the fire spreading ash over his family.

The dozer blades dig into the smoldering fire, there are no flames, and it looks like a constant wind is blowing against the fire, causing dust to swirl in the air. The blades spread out the burning parts of the pile in hopes that they can bury the fire. But the treads of the dozers carry embers to sections of the manure pile that haven't caught fire and these embers start little fires of their own. The manager sees this, tries to stop the dozers, but it's too late. Little fires catch hold, and the whole pile now smolders, sending up a cloud of ash that blurs the evening horizon. Let night come on early. The land's used to it.

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