

Kenneth A. Yoder

Before Nightfall

He awoke inside the hour and began to make himself a breakfast of bacon he'd cut himself, biscuits and honey, as well as a plate of eggs for Vaughn, who still slept. The old man knew his son would be a corpse by Christmas, and had advised him more times than he cared to remember not to waste time dreaming. But there he was, as usual, sleeping his life away. The young man laid in the bunk the girls set up in what had been a room the old man once used to store household goods and old clothes. It had been a small guest room before that. He'd given it to his son when the stairs had become too much of a struggle a few weeks back. The sick room was what the girls called it.

Bacon spattered, biting his cheek. Royal didn't much like having Vaughn downstairs. He could hear every whine and bark the young man made both day and night. He was harder to ignore. Though Royal would never say he looked forward to the young man's death, he told anyone who would listen that he was not cut out to be a nursemaid. Still, the old man had felt gypped when the doctor stood shaking his head and told him that his son was dying. The episode reminded him of his wife's own visit to the town doctor six months before he buried her. For Sally he'd had to pay \$50, which was \$5 less than this last visit cost, not to mention gas and time, he recalled.

"Anything you can do?"

"His disease was treatable a year ago, but it's metastasized." Royal appeared baffled by the statement. "The cancer's spread too far," the doctor explained. "It's invaded the surrounding organs, other body parts." He slowed his words progressively, each seeming to carry more volume than the last. "He can't be treated."

“That’s some tough medicine with him being only, what?” Royal counted the years before he looked up and stared into the younger man’s eyes. “28? Must be something you can do.”

“Cancer shows signs. He never complained?”

The son of a bitch had some vinegar to insinuate that it was anyone’s fault but the boy’s own, and the inability to cure him was anything other than a problem of doctoring. Those people hadn’t helped the woman, or wouldn’t, and this one sure as hell wasn’t going to help the boy any better.

The phone rang just when Royal had seated himself at the kitchen table. He stood and picked up the receiver from its cradle on the wall. Loni’s voice sprang to his ear.

“Just calling to remind you I’m coming over to help you clean up. Evelyn is coming by later to take you to the store,” she said.

He didn’t remember. Though there was plenty to clean and put away, he didn’t much want to see his daughters, or their children.

“What time did you have in mind, again?” he asked.

“Why? Like you got an appointment, like you got other company coming over?” she said. “We’re going to be there whenever we get there.”

“Vaughn’s not doing well. He’s not up to company, and I am not inclined to leave him by himself right now.”

”Roy, you need to come with us and get out of the house awhile,” she continued.

“Vaughn’s not up to a visit,” he repeated. “And I am not inclined to leave him alone right now.”

“If he doesn’t want company, why not let him set alone awhile?” she said. “We’ll be gone two hours. He’ll live ‘till you get back.”

He paused and listened to his daughter breath a moment, a sound full of cigarettes and hard work.

“Maybe Joan can stay with him while we’re out,” he finally wondered aloud.

“You can ask.”

She hung up and he sat down again, took a sip of coffee, and considered how, when she was young, Loni had pushed and kicked her way past her sisters and brothers. She'd torn through the housework, schools and schoolboys, and later the farming camps they'd settled into out west before the decent neighborhoods, before she found her place, a respectable place, as wife of a hardworking town man, and the mother of two fearsome children. Loni, everyone said, was her father made over, but he always knew she was better than him. She'd not let herself get trapped into a small life.

He finished his plate, and noted the shotgun still in the corner alongside the bag of rags, wire and oil he used to clean it. He picked up the thin rod and cloth he used to wipe the bore, and laid them flat to the back of the long shelves outside the door and stowed the oil under the counter. Finally, after a rinse, he dropped his dishes into the sink, and turned off the oven he'd heated long enough to keep Vaughn's plate of biscuits and scrambled eggs warm.

He walked onto the cluttered porch to stand by the screen. He held the outer door a moment before walking down the short stairs and stepping onto the drive, his feet falling heavy on the gravel. Warming rapidly and humid, the air pressed against his cheeks. He rebalanced his weight as the gravel ended and the soil shifted into dips and berms, ragged and small, the wake of heavy machinery that had cut it open at its last planting. Impatient for winter to come and pass into the growing season, he imagined his fields filled with corn and sorghum.

Loni arrived in her blue Malibu just as Royal was putting dishes away clean in the cupboards.

"You've left your firearm out again, and that porch looks like trash lives here," she said. "The glassware's going to get broken." After Sally died he had promised her the lemonade set, a glass pitcher and tumblers. To keep her from taking them right then he promised her they would be hers when he passed. She reminded him at every visit. He'd been too tired to clean after fooling with the shotgun and Vaughn the evening before. He'd not noticed the mess.

"When did you last take a bath?" She sniffed.

He grunted, pulled one of the used egg cartons he stacked under in the pantry, and pulled a bowl of eggs from the refrigerator. "Town has nothing I want."

She stayed the hour. As he loaded the carton, he told her about the neighbor boys. She walked to the garden with him and looked at melon vines, nodding agreement when she saw the cuts. Deer didn't take them off so clean, and gophers scratched from underneath, bit through the stem and dragged the melon, young and small, leaves and all, into their holes. This was a problem of trickier, more obvious thieves.

Royal was mad as hell, and let Loni know it. Days before he'd seen the boys sneaking around the north fence with their mangy dog, and made sure to let off a shot that scared them gone.

"You better be careful of that business, out here all alone, crazy old fool," she said as soon as she was able to control her guffaw.

"I don't need you telling me my business," he said. "You know very well you wouldn't put up with it yourself."

"But I wouldn't be firing shots, even over their heads. You need to take it up with their daddy. He's a reasonable man."

Royal grunted and didn't mention how the fool had driven over with threats of calling the sheriff. As if a man didn't have a right to discharge his weapon on his own land, as if he didn't know what this was really about, trying to push him out and take what little remained, his get rich quick neighbor, the same young buck he'd been himself not too long back.

"How's Vaughn?" she asked.

"He's taken to sleeping nearly all the time," he said. "He told me he'd like to see your boys." He opened the screen door and walked back inside. "Maybe they'd like to see him. He'll be gone soon."

She stopped and stood a moment looking at the yellow tiles before she leaned across the counter. "I'll be goddamned if I'm bringing my children into this house," she said. "If you had gotten him to the doctor when I told you to, you wouldn't be in this damn mess! Now would you?"

The old man sat silent and still before her glare. She had listened and said nothing when Vaughn's doctor had opened his white door and stood in his white smock staring down his creamy white nose at him, a delicate thing sitting in

the middle of a face the sun never touched, or if it did, never in the fields in which working men labored. Then, as now, he suffered watching her kowtow to the man like a proper churchgoer before a preacher.

The young doctor had shaken his head and stared at his shoes. “Mr. King, six months ago we might even have stood a chance. That chance is gone.”

Royal kept to himself for the rest of his daughter’s visit, vigilant even after the Malibu disappeared in a cloud of dust around the bend of the road. He retrieved his shotgun and returned to look again at the short horizon of his property. When, at last, he turned away, he took a half step, enough to bend his knee, and, to his own astonishment and wonder, swung the barrel of the shotgun across the low bench that butted against the open studs, shattering the pitcher and the cups that Loni so coveted and trusted him to keep safe for her until the day he died. They flew across the planks, larger pieces breaking again as they cracked against kickboards that stapled and protected the screens from the feet of his grandchildren.

Loni was right, he decided. Tableware didn’t belong on the porch. She was right. He needed to put things away, put things right. She was right to blame him when they stood alone in the clinic before the doctor returned. She had been right about Vaughn and the hospital when Sally was still alive, and had been right to criticize him when he took her mother’s side and refused the doctors’ advice. She was right about the gun and tumblers, and the boys. Tumblers belonged in their cupboard. They were as out of place on the bench as the cuts on the vines, the cuts that put him in this place, standing on the porch, an old man with a gun and wild fury that no longer threatened anyone or anything but a goddamn bit of glass and lemonade gone bad. A pathetic old man with a gun he’d failed even to load.

He held his arms against his body, hugged the shotgun, its barrel rising from his shoulder, and sank onto the bench. He endured his impulses until he just felt tired and spent, relieved the metal screens removed any potential witness to his impotence. He walked back inside then, and dropped the shotgun in the corner by the door of the front parlor. He made his way past Vaughn’s door to the master bedroom where he sat for a moment on the quilt of the bed before

toppling onto his side. His feet, still shod, pulled up behind him. He napped, his boots soiling the bedding enough that Sally would not have let him hear the end of it.

He didn't sleep, at least not much. He lay flat and bent, and considered what had brought him to answer the doctor's nosy questions with any words approaching respectability. Probably he was trying not to mortify Loni more than she already was.

"No signs," he'd told him.

"Said nothing about his problem?"

He'd tried to do right by all his children, his son and wife too. Worked himself into a sweat most days on the roads to bring home a paycheck. Babies gobbled everything up. Sally had so many. Pregnancy followed pregnancy, binding him while the sun burned his back, asphalt burned his skin, and the boss burned his pride, just like that smug white smock had worked to beat him down under the bright light of shame.

He recalled how the doctor glowered over the rim of his glasses. Loni had kept shifting about in her hose and heels, quiet as a cricket, all chatter until that fellow, a company man if ever he saw one, entered the room. Her head stayed down for the duration.

"Well, what about what you could see and tell? Any blood in his stools, or spit?"

"Mister, it don't do to tell what I see. But I don't check other people's shit, since you're askin'!"

She didn't speak to him for a week.

Restless, lonely, he rose from bed and turned on the radio, which he knew would wake his son. He picked up a broom and swept the glass from the porch into a cardboard box. He walked it towards the metal container at the far end of the yard beside the drum he used to burn their garbage.

Vaughn called to him before the chore was done. He expected that he'd shit himself again. He had to admit that since that office visit, he'd checked a lot of stools. That's how it worked with the medicine, the best he could do the doctor said before shaking his head and walking out the door. Stopped him up a while before the dam would break. Two

days after he'd filled it, the boy soiled his trousers for the first time. Not that it was anyone's problem but his own. Until he couldn't get up without help.

Getting him to wear a diaper had stirred such a ruckus -- Vaughn had sworn he'd drink the whole bottle and end his life with dignity before he'd wear such a thing. Royal took the bottle away, administered the syrup himself twice a day and at night. He always tried to give him some melon to take the taste away, and help keep him regular. Melon those boys had stolen.

The boy had always been a problem. The runt of the litter, he'd been lucky not to drop dead before being put on the tit. Royal already had other sons, men grown, and plenty of daughters. He didn't need to spend time crying over Vaughn's spilled milk. The way he saw it, the boy was the one who spilt it. Nor could he blame Loni for her misplaced trust in doctors' medicine. She didn't know that what ailed Vaughn had always been beyond anyone's reach.

How Sally had loved the boy.

"Roy!" He turned his head. "Royal!"

He kicked the ground before walking back. The screen slammed behind him as he detoured into the kitchen and pulled the medication and teaspoon from the cabinet. He returned to the front parlor, sidling past the floor lamp and chair to stand in front of Vaughn's door. He felt the cool of the knob against his palm and paused a moment to collect himself. The shotgun caught his eye. It needed to be stowed, he new, or he'd catch hell again if Loni ever did bring by her boys.

The old and very young always needed this and that, and called out their demands without shame, wanting what only a strapping youth like his could provide. He had always provided, always satisfied the needs of his family.

The one thing he knew to a certainty was that he could provide still, was still a young man, much younger than his years, not yet grown old, with opportunities out in front of him like the California ocean he gazed upon when he was truly young, gone West to work the asphalt onto the roads for Ike, freed for a time of played-out farms and the dreams of his childhood, ambitions proven false and unsatisfying, while his children worked peach and almond orchards every day but Sunday to bring home the extra cash required to keep them all in fried hens, okra and Brussels sprouts. That time had not

just been a new lease on life, as Sally whispered into his ear late at night lying stretched out beside him on sheets rumped before the cool inland breeze. That time away from the land of his forbears had been life itself.

Vaughn had come during those days.

He carried the gun in his left hand when he entered the sick room. He fought to contain his arms, to keep them from jerking about in another of their fits of destruction. His thoughts were fumes of disappointment and grudges, as numerous and specific as they were implacable. Morning sun, filtered white through linen the girls had draped over the windows cornering the small bed, lit up the narrow room. The sight of Vaughn swimming in his sheets and blankets, every inch a network of physical torment and waste, his eyes large, doe-like, still wet with life gazing from hollow sockets, pulled the old man from his rumination. He made his way to the sick bed where the smell of defecation greeted him.

Vaughn had fallen silent as soon as the door opened. His brown eyes, the color of soil, gazed wide and open into his own.

“Help me,” Vaughn said.

“You shit yourself again, boy?” Royal heard himself ask.

“Maybe so.” His head turned slightly to the side and he examined the shotgun dangling from the old man’s grip.

“I got something for you here.” He held up the spoon and bottle. “But you got to sit up awhile and eat. I got your breakfast warm still.”

“I can’t.”

“You do not sit, you do not get.”

Vaughn looked at the gun for some time.

“Shoot me,” he finally said.

Royal’s lower lip began to quiver and he stood looking at his son. The lines of the sick boy’s face were those of his wife, his chin small, though not weak, his hair as red as fire, cheek bones high with the blood of her father, the old

Choctaw, a half-breed who farmed until he died of drink. The prettiest girl in the county, the boy's mother had been glad to come to him, saw him as he always hoped others would, and he'd felt himself wrapped in gold when she stood before the preacher with him those years ago. Vaughn's eyes shone the hazel of her own, and his fingers, long and clever, reaching for him, desperate for relief, were hers as well.

"I want you to do it."

Royal remained silent, still examining the boy as though he'd noticed him for the first time. The old man wondered how his children considered him. What had he left unsaid, if not undone? They had known him all their lives. Their whole lives.

"You got my permission."

The old man stood silent a moment longer before answering.

"I do not need your damn permission," he said, his back straight and lips firm. "I need you to sit up and eat."

Royal stowed the weapon in the gun rack against the far wall.

"You do not sit, you do not get."

His hands lost, Vaughn shifted under the sheets. He let out a breath.

For three quarters of an hour they worked together, only silence between them, rustling sheets and pillows after the old man steadied his hand long enough to drop two teaspoons of the bitter syrup into his son's mouth. He proceeded to change his diaper, re-pinning a fresh one with the practiced, unwanted skill of a father of eight children before retrieving his son's breakfast. He bullied Vaughn into eating two bites and poured juice down his throat, holding a kitchen towel under his chin as he gagged and spit. Loni, during her last real visit with them, had watched a version of their routine from the doorway, and afterwards questioned whether it wasn't wrong for him to encourage her brother into living longer than need be.

"You need to let him be," she said.

She pushed him, as only she could, and would not stop. He knew to expect more of the same when she wheeled up the drive later in the afternoon. She would again gravel to a stop too close to his door, as was her way.

“We should let him pass,” she’d say.

He knew she was right. Vaughn, silent in the face of trespass and theft, useless and a burden in his house, absent a place in the grand scheme of existence, would never be so right and sensible as Loni.

“There’s no burden here for you to take,” he heard himself tell his daughter when she did arrive.

Before dark, Royal fed and cleaned Vaughn again before giving him another spoon of medication, and the last piece of melon he’d held back for his own desert. Watching his son eat, Royal admired the joy with which the young man savored the fruit, how he held his head as he swallowed. He wiped his face with a damp towel, and took away the dishes.

When he’d finished putting everything in its place, he returned and sat down in the wooden chair beside his son, and waited with him for night.