

Gähmpa

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You could not step twice into the same rivers; for other waters are ever flowing on to you.

— *Heraclitus, Greek philosopher*

I

Because he accepted. Though his will was strong, like iron—it was possible to bend, twist and hammer it into shape. He was like that. Annealed by life.

We watched him through all those times. After awhile we just expected him to remain the same as he always was, even in the face of all his hardships. We looked to him as a source strength for everything we did. He inspired us with his fortitude. But we finally realized later on that there was something he had that we didn't. No matter how much we desired to be like him we knew that ultimately we would falter where he prevailed. We're not saying he wasn't one of us—he was most certainly that. But the way we figured it, wherever he went or whomever he met would say that about him. We didn't know if it was that Irish grin or the firm warmth of his hand when he greeted you, but there was a charisma about him that put any man at ease. Of course there was folks that didn't like him. But it was more out of a fear that any man could be so strong that made them shun him. Those men were afraid of change and if he was to show them how to live a better life, they didn't want to see it.

Joe Sullivan came to Chalmersville after being discharged out of the army at the end of the Spanish-American war. He had inherited a farmhouse along with a few acres of land and was eager to claim it. We didn't figure that it was quite what he expected it to be. No one had lived in the house or farmed the land for a number of years. The lot was so overgrown with vine and Wistaria we plumb forgot there was a house somewhere within it. We reckoned after all those years of neglect, the barn out back was just as good a shelter for a man and we heard that's where Joe slept for a time.

It took him around three weeks to get that house in order. He didn't ask, and though any one of us would've gladly helped, none of us offered. There was a confidence in his eyes that prevented us, as if he had already made up his mind that he wasn't going to be able to rely on anyone but himself. Once the vine and weeds were cut away we saw (some of us) for the first time the old Sullivan house. None of us had ever known Joe's father. He had abandoned the house so long ago it was a wonder anyone even remembered that a man named Sullivan

had owned it. Now it looked renewed; a fresh coat of paint, patched roof, new windows. Come spring, Joe plowed the field and planted.

That summer he disappeared for three weeks. That is, no one saw him leave, we just noticed he was gone. One only had to pass by the Sullivan farm to realize that. Joe was never idle. He was often outside, tending to the horses, chores, or fixing up the place. And he always waved to people passing by, whether he knew them or not, whether they waved back at all. It was when we started to worry what happened to him that it dawned on us that while we didn't even really know the man, we already felt close to him. We were happy; relieved to see him ride back into town drawn by them two black mustangs. And weren't none of us surprised to see a woman in that buggy, neither. What did surprise us was how far along she was. We learned later she was a big-city girl, an English lady whose name was Alberta.

II

Aside from coming into town to buy feed, sell crops, or pay his taxes, we never saw much of Joe in those days. Only in July when the fair came to town did we see him with any regularity. It seemed he had a weakness for cards and a love for music. He would spend a great part of each Saturday walking up and down the fairway holding hands with Alberta, their little boy George stumbled along beside them. They would take in all the sights and sounds and shows, playing the hawkers' con games till dusk—after which Joe rode them back home. I don't know for sure if he ever even slowed that buggy down long enough for you to say that it actually stopped before he had it turned around and headed for town again.

It was then we learned that Joe had a quality about him that so many men lacked, or maybe didn't know how to harness. He loved life. Not in a reckless way; but deliberate, sound, focused.

The pattern never altered. Joe would head straight for the saloon, or wherever there was a band playing. It was not liquor he needed or even wanted, none of us ever saw him drink. It was to play music. True, sometimes he would be content to stand in the corner and just listen, but that was rare. It was the creation he desired. It must have been as clear as raw whiskey to the other musicians, because somehow, some way, he always managed to finagle his way into the band. It didn't hurt that he could play any stringed instrument, and sang with a voice as engaging as a Shakespearean soliloquy. When there was a need for a fiddle, he fiddled. When there was a banjo to pluck or a guitar to strum he employed it. Once in awhile he even made his way behind the piano bench—caressing the ivory slowly at first, head cocked to one side, drawing out the melody slow until his confidence took over and the

keys surrendered a burst of lively notes. And all this time, a smile across his face creased his eyes to tiny slits. The rest of the band fed off his energy, so much so that even drunkest of men at the bar put down their drinks to turn and see what all the commotion was about. If only for a moment, they were sobered by what they saw.

By the end of most nights the other musicians would be imploring Joe to stay, to join them on the road, make him a permanent part of the traveling band. But after a hearty handshake for each member, Joe would tip his hat and wave goodbye. There were Alberta and George at home and soon to be one more. Her name would be Agnes. Aggie to most, but Joe called her Honeydear.

Aggie hung onto Joe like a cocklebur, it seemed from the time she could walk she was always nearby no matter where Joe was or what he was doing. While he worked in the fields she stood on the plow or rode on the horse's hindquarters, always facing towards her papa. When he came to town there she was, holding on to his pant-leg, helping him pick out the fruits and vegetables. George would run on up ahead, picking out weeds to chew on and throwing rocks at the crows, while Joe walked slowly to accommodate for Aggie's short stride, his callused hand reaching down to stroke back her wispy curls. We began to worry a bit when Joe showed up in town for the weekly card games with Aggie trailing along beside him. "She ain't going to bother nobody," he would say. "Will you, Honeydear?" Most of the time Aggie buried her head in Joe's lap and fell asleep anyway, so we grew accustomed to her being around even then. And though some of the women folks in the town thought that it was bad to expose a child to such an environment, what with the gambling and drinking going on, we knew better. Joe would never let anything happen to his little Honeydear.

III

As the town grew and the years passed by, Joe became somewhat of an icon to the folks in the community. Men sought him out for advice, about their farms, about their horses, about ways to help them improve their productivity. His opinion was highly regarded. Though he rarely attended the town meetings, we all wished he would come more often. He brought with him a sense of security, stability. It was because he was so successful at doing the things all of us were trying hard to do. He raised a family, his farm increased in size and acreage to the point where he needed to hire men to help him run it. He bred and sold fine horses and later he began to raise cattle as well and seemed to do it all with such ease; almost effortlessly, though we knew that wasn't the case. Everybody knew he had money, knew he had started out with very little and made it prosper and grow. And some folks were

soured by that, the jealousy and envy carved out the good they once felt for Joe, and replaced it with hatred.

Darrel Rhinehart was one of those men. And there isn't a man in Chalmersville that will ever forget the time when that hatred reared up like a stallion who has just been given the bit for the first time. Darrel was not a drinking man either, so you couldn't blame it on the whisky. It was a crisp October night, when the raw air sings the nostrils just enough to remind you what a harsh winter will feel like. It had been a hard year for Darrel. His wife took ill and died, his farm was neglected, the harvest was poor. It was not his fault, but these were the cards that were dealt him, and now he was seeking to win back some of what he had lost with a real deck of cards.

Aggie was a young lady now, she no longer accompanied her father into the backroom of the saloon where the weekly games were played. No one knows or remembers how the stakes got so high but they did and soon there was a gleam in Darrel's eyes that we had never seen before. Some of us at the other tables quit playing and began to watch just how this one particular game would turn out. There sat Joe, stoic as he ever was while arranging his hand, Darrel across from him and three other men who all were plainly hoping against hope to have the winning hand. I'll raise you and I'll see that and raise you another ten and on and on went the terse dialogue. At last there was Hyatt, Joe and Darrel, each still and confident, staring at each other across the table. You could hear the chairs creak with their shifting weight.

Then something in Joe's physiognomy changed, like a piano wire that popped off after being tuned too tight. He put down his cards. "I fold," he said evenly, without regret. A buzz went up in the room like so much hot air released from a balloon. The game ended. Hyatt displayed three Kings, before Darrel, with the grace of an artist, neatly spread out his cards. A full house—queens over tens—He sat back in his chair, relieved and for the first time in a long while, smiling.

And then he snapped to attention as quick as a bullwhip and pointed across the table at Joe's cards lying face down on the table. "What did you have, Joe?" he said. "You weren't holding out all that time just bluffing." Joe having stood up and readied himself to leave, attempted to push his cards into the rest of the pile fanned out on the table next to the mound of dollar bills and change, but Darrel was too quick. He flipped over 4 nines and an ace that were Joe's discarded hand. His face turned gray and the wrinkles in it turned into deep crevices. "What kind of game are you playing, Joe?" said Darrel. "You ain't lost here. You can't fold

with a hand like that." Darrel's eyes were a watery red that began to shine with his contempt. "You are a goddammed fool. Who do you think I am?" Veins swelled like rivers on his forehead as a blanket of silence fell over the room. "I don't take no charity from no one, mister. You hear me? Take your goddamn money you son of a bitch. *You won.* Take it, I said." He paused and then added more vehemently, "Take it!"

Joe stood unmoving. He seemed to grow more imposing in his simple silence. It solidified him, made him whole. His eyes spoke instead to Darrel, reaching out to him, offering.

Darrel's hand went to his pocket and we all straightened as he displayed a pistol. The barrel slowly raised for what seemed an eternity and then stopped, centered on Joe's chest. In a low and controlled voice enunciating each word carefully and distinctly, Darrel repeated. "Take your goddamn money now, or so help me, I will kill you, Joe Sullivan."

We saw it then, in Joe's eyes. We had seen it many times before and now even in the midst of this emotional turmoil it was there, as clear and sharp as the night air. Confidence. Love of life. As though it had challenged him, was testing him, and he recognized it still.

"Kill me then," said Joe, in a flat, even tone. Darrel stood there, as the violence inside him broke down into something he didn't know how to harness. He blinked twice, heavily, as though numbed by adrenaline, and we all watched while Joe turned and walked out the door. The barrel of the gun lowered, and Darrel would have fallen to the floor had not someone steadied him.

IV

Chalmersville was a small town, and it stayed that way even as other towns around it slowly grew into cities. The people of Chalmersville are quiet folks, traditional. We liked things simple and unhurried. When automobiles began to speed through the square, stirring up dust and spooking the horses with their putt-putt-ing and honking, we didn't like it one bit. At first it happened about once a month. But soon the four-wheeled apparitions came through town four to five times a week. We determined that they were coming mostly from the north; Killington. It was agreed that one or more of us should venture up to Killington City Hall and advise them: there is more than one road to Hanover. Take one that runs outside of Chalmersville rather than through it. Though we knew it was a fight we would inevitably lose, we resisted change. It was the principal of the matter that drove us.

Since Joe had a way with words and a gentle persuasion we chose him to go to Killington

and file a formal complaint. He seemed mildly amused by the whole ordeal, but he agreed to go. The next day Red Hawthorne and Joe hitched up a horse and buggy and trotted off to Killington. Red was a quiet, amicable man, whose enormous stature made him an imposing figure. We figured the two of them together would make quite an impact on the townsfolk of Killington.

We watched and waited all day for them to return. Even Alberta seemed a little anxious that they were gone so long. We saw her working in the yard and ever so often looking up towards the road, while George and Aggie spiraled and danced about on the grass, oblivious. It was almost time for the evening chores when we saw the horse and buggy make it's way toward Joe's house.

When the buggy pulled up Red jumped down and began to unhitch the horses while we all gathered around in the yard, waiting for the news. "Where's Joe?" Alberta said.

"Oh, he bought a car and is driving it home," said Red in a soft deadpan tone that struck us all numb.

Alberta put her hands on her hips and said, "But Joe doesn't know how to drive a car." Red stood up straight and tall, hands at his side and peered out towards the orange horizon where the sun was sinking below the dirt road. "He does now. Look here he comes."

And we watched, stunned and silent, as a car wove it's way unsteadily along the road, a cloud of dust looming in its wake like some ominous ghost propelling it forward. Sure enough, there was Joe behind the wheel, tooting the horn. Beep, beep, beep.

Joe decided that if something moved faster than a horse and buggy, he wanted to have it. Though our insides churned with anger and hurt we were checked by an immobilizing curiosity. It was like gazing upon the dead, no matter how hard you try to look away, you can't. We didn't.

The chrome shone with the red rays of the fading light. The rubber tires were smooth and warm to the touch, wheels with spokes of iron like the bars of a jail cell. We poked at the leather seats, and ran our fingers over the hot metal. We reached in and turned the steering wheel this way and that and checked to see that the front tires actually moved in unison. Joe raised the hood and we stared inside at the guts of this unholy beast. The vaporous smell of gasoline and crackling noises of the cooling engine had us all captivated, amazed. We hated and loved it at the same time. And as we gazed upon the car, touched it, smelled its smells,

we knew we could not forsake it. The automobile had arrived in Chalmersville.

In a short time thereafter others of us followed Joe's lead and purchased automobiles of our own. On Sundays after church, men gathered and drove their cars up behind the orchards where a flat stretch of road seldom traveled provided an ideal racetrack. The hours went by like the blur of the trees beside us, as two by two we sped along the mile long stretch of Orchard road.

Joe led the way, blazing a path in his Winton Flyer with a collapsible top that was always down. He wore a leather skullcap and goggles to fight the dust and wind, and looked a bit like the Red Baron when his scarf sailed out like a banner behind him. Alberta was usually there too, laughing and cursing at him to slow down, though we didn't think she ever really wanted him to, one hand held her hat onto her head and the other the windbreaker. Even little George and Aggie were allowed to sit in the back—but since there were some potholes in Orchard road, they had to sit on the floor so they wouldn't fly out. These were happy times in Chalmersville, long summer days when men and their families celebrated life, their burdens eased, if only for a short while.

V

Chalmersville seemed to prosper as Joe Sullivan prospered. With Joe around, folks seemed to find a little extra cash towards the end of the month, to spend on themselves and their families, something they never indulged in before. In a few years he passed us by, amassing over 7 automobiles, each one having a unique quality that Joe couldn't part with. And the incredible part of this was that we knew Joe was a successful farmer, but he was not a rich man. He just wasn't afraid to spend his money on something he had a passion for. He carefully considered the speed of the vehicle before each new purchase. When we saw him drive into town in a car we hadn't seen before the first question was always: "How fast does it go, Joe?"

He soon built a barn just to park his cars in. And after that, he decided that his back yard just wasn't big enough, so he bought the adjoining farm next to his for fifty thousand dollars. He had taken out a loan from a bank in Killington and financed it. He showed us the papers, showed us how we could put up our own homes as collateral and borrow money as well. Again, though this was not the traditional way for us, we knew he was just giving us a peek at what the future would have in store for us. In years to come everyone would be doing it.

He hired Red and a few other men to help him with the new farm and to watch over his when he was away. He went into Killington almost every day at that time. We knew he was talking to people and learning about something but we didn't know what. We didn't find out until weeks later at the weekly card game. He had looked distracted the whole game, thinking, watching the money changing hands, the pot growing, winnings collected, counted up and then slowly making their way back into the center of the table and eventually into the hands of another player. It came to him then, all that learning he was doing, and now that he understood he was ready to tell us about it, or maybe he just wanted to hear himself explain it out loud. The cards were put aside and we all listened as he began to explain to us what he knew about the stock market.

Though he spoke of the stock market with the same passion that he displayed for his cars, and we all felt a part of his excitement about it, this was one experiment he was going to have to undertake alone. No man there was convinced that this was a proper way to invest his hard-earned money. We'd have just as soon stuffed our savings into an envelope shoved under the mattress than take a chance on a big city venture like the market. We knew enough about it from the way that it affected our harvests and livestock each year. What a man could get for a bushel of corn and 2 dozen head of cattle changed as often and as unpredictably as the weather; no—*more* often than the weather. Still, we didn't much worry that Joe would find the key to making it work in his favor.

George had grown to be a stout, well-rounded young man with curly black locks and the disposition of his father. He worked the farm alongside Red who seemed to consider George his very own, so close they were.

Aggie too had matured into a fine young lady over the years, which brought many a lad from all the towns around seeking her company. We knew her to be wise beyond her years just by the way she carried herself. Alberta had done well. And clearly Joe, who still called Aggie 'Honeydear,' was bursting with pride and love for his daughter. They had plans for her to attend school to be a beauty operator when she graduated.

It was around that time it happened. The stock market crashed. People lost their homes, their farms, practically everything they had. Joe was one of those. By sundown that day, Joe had lost the fifty thousand-dollar farm, the barn and all 7 cars in it. He was forced to let go all his hired men, including Red, much to the dismay of everyone, but especially George. There were tears and anger and fear among us when we realized what had happened. We all felt the loss as if it were our own.

We stood in Joe's front yard the day the bank auctioned off the farm acre by acre. They had already come and taken the cars and some farm machinery as well. No one said much, as we huddled around the porch, our hands in our pockets, chewing on willow-weed stems, spitting and pacing. Every once in awhile we'd stare down one of the Killington folk that had come to bid on the property.

In the afternoon we heard breaking glass and found Red taking a baseball bat to the headlights of the Killington folks' automobiles, while George was letting the air out of the tires. We were able to stop them before they did too much damage, and thankfully the folks whose cars were damaged didn't make a big deal out of it. They felt fortunate that it wasn't their heads that bat was swinging at.

Alberta, Joe and Aggie had remained inside all day, coming out of the house just as the last column of cars pulled away with their new deeds and promissory notes. We each looked at Joe, waiting to see what kind of effect this had had on him. All that was left was the few acres and little old farmhouse Joe had inherited long ago. He looked around at all of us and nodded, then took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose for a few moments. Aggie leaned up against a porch pillar, pushed the hair from her face repeatedly and stared coldly into the setting sun. Alberta held up one finger and tapped her lips, thinking, and finally stopped tapping long enough to say: "What are we going to do now?"

Joe thought awhile then said, "We'll start over." He put on his glasses, took his hat in one hand and dusted it off with the other, then adjusted it snugly back on his head. "That's what we'll do, Berta. We'll start over."

And they did.

VI

None of us thought that it was going to be easy, but Joe made it seem so. It seemed that change inspired him—even though the change might have been something he hadn't counted on. He never complained about having to hitch his horses back up to the buggy, nor ever muttered a bitter word about losing his farm or the cars. He even made friends with his new neighbors who had purchased the land once farmed by him, and gave them advice on how to get high yields come harvest. Not only did they listen to him, but also came back for more advice on a variety of other issues. Joe was always willing to help out wherever he could. Before long, he had convinced his new neighbors they should hire Red, whom he touted as the hardest working man this side of the Mississippi. They agreed, and were not

disappointed.

As the years passed Joe worked hard and happily, even when his health broke. The Irish grin never let go. He had his Berta, his Honeydear, and a son who was a fine strong lad. That was all that mattered to him. That, and a chance to play with the band on Saturday nights.

Joe was never able to financially recover from the loss of his farm. Sadly, he never owned another automobile, a guitar or any musical instrument. No, it was never the work that was hard for Joe, it was the thought that he didn't have a fifty thousand dollars to leave his children. Joe revealed this to Aggie on the day that he died.

Nearly all of Chalmersville came out that bright autumn day to Joe Sullivan's funeral. We each paid our respects to the man that had showed us a way of life that we had never known. The man who made us realize the sparks of life within us could be kindled to flames. Because he accepted.

A few of us were chosen that day to say a few words at the funeral. As we recalled times past, we cried and laughed too, as Joe would have wanted us to. None of us worried about Alberta. She assured us that Joe would still be looking out for her, and we all believed he would too.

Aggie spoke then, and told us of Joe's heartbreak at not being able to pass on a fortune to his loved ones. It was then that we realized that Joe's spirit lived on in Aggie. She was most like him. She said, "I told him that the love we had for each other surpassed anything that money could buy. For the ability to love, to trust and to work things through even when the going is tough, I thanked my father for showing me about life and how to live it."

We all remained silent as Aggie brushed away the wetness from her eyes. Then she continued. "His answer to me was something like this: 'You had better write down all these things you are saying so you can read them to yourself when you need to hear them. Write them down, Honeydear.'"

So some of us got together after that and thought and thought about it and thought about it some more. Then we began to write it all down, what we were thinking.

This story is for you, Honeydear.

j. Wilford, 12/99