The Right Hand

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The boy stood tense, holding the post steady and straight in the post-hole his father had dug to fill the broken line in the fence. He was a young boy, twelve or so, with light blond hair, like his father’s where it had not turned gray, and with eyes the color of smoke, holding the even cool color in his eyes as he looked across the hill into the valley where the neighbor lived. The boy watched the neighbor come slowly up the hill, across the cornstalk-littered ground, turning now deeply but sparsely green with the new spring crop of oats. The neighbor was still a long way away, but the boy scrutinized him closely as he approached.

They had come there in the spring; the boy and his father and the family of six not counting the mother, had come to this cold farm with its spiny trees like thistles and the old, unpainted buildings crouched between two hills like broad-backed snuffing gray-colored hogs. The boy had come with his parents and his five brothers and sisters, but for two months he had seen no stranger except at the country school—only his father had visited around, talking to the neighbors and returning home to tell what the neighbors knew.

The cows broke out the day before, snapped the rusted wires and the rotted posts that harbored fat white slugs and the sawdust manure of wood-boring bugs, and had trampled across the neighbor’s oats field, chewing up the harrowed land turning green with young oats with their hooves, before the boy and his father got them turned back. The cows were still in the yard and he and his father worked on the fence, putting the posts in first before the wires could be pulled up and repaired. The day was cloudy, portending rain, and the clouds slid fast from behind one gray hill, over them, to the other hills beyond, drizzling lightly, only to be told by the sensitive pricks on bare arms, leaving a coldness like a snake-skin chill.

“Kick in some dirt, Clayton. Don’t just stand there,” the father said with a voice thick and slow but still reflecting a kind of impatience. The boy looked down to the half-moon slit around the post and pushed some dirt into the hole with his foot. The father told him to stop then, and he bent, kneeling beside the post, and tamped the dirt tight and hard. The old man used a long slender steel rod to tamp the dirt in. The boy watched the arm and the steel rod pump up and down, leisurely but
powerfully, saw the sweat-drenched shirtsleeves move with the slow, strong movements of the old man.

"There's man coming up the hill," the boy said. The old man did not say anything. He acted as if he hadn't heard.

"There's a man coming," the boy said again, insistently.

"I know," the father said, his voice flat with indifference. "I seen him an hour ago. Now pass in some more dirt."

The boy pushed in the dirt and watched the man come to them, the shoes of the man heavy in the mud of the new oats field.

"Howdy," the man said, when he was near to them, and the father turned on his knees and laid the bar aside.

"Howdy," the old man said, grasping the post and standing with heaviness and tiredness. The father squinted at the face of the neighbor, hidden partly behind the pulled-down cap, while the boy gawked at it. It was a face bloodless and yet suffused with a blood color, a face with a scraped lavender birthmark, the mark starting at the temple, hidden partly by the cap, and cutting down the left side of the face from the ear to the jawbone and fringed at the lips with the deep-purple shade, the color of a rotted plum that the worms have eaten into, and the mark branded the eye with a living, livid, sore redness, making anyone who saw the man look instinctively at the inflamed texture around the left eye. The birthmark pulled the lips crooked, made them seem open, even if they were not, made them look dead with that deep-purple, bloodless, blooded color. It was the purple of something dead—the purple on dead horses' heads before the rendering truck or hogs come to them. The boy stared at this face, the face reflecting the sorrow and the sufferings of lifetimes, a face with the mark of Cain perhaps, or just of the man's parents; it was a face with that naked hurting look of a burn or a brand healing and yet never quite healed, always inflamed and sensitive and sore; it was a face of terror and of bad dreams, giving to anyone who saw it a weird and evil-fearing anxiety.

"You're Ezra Stark," the father said.

They both—the boy and the father—watched the lips of Ezra Stark to see if they were alive, if the purple face and the drooping red-bordered eye were something living or dead.

"Yes," Stark said, his lips hardly moving, and he looked at the boy, but the boy did not notice the eyes; he only saw the inflamed worm-lavender cheek and the sagging corner of the raw mouth.

"I was over to your place the other day," the father said. "But there was nobody home."

"I must have been in the field," Stark said. There was a faint lisp
in his voice, a faint struggle to form words and speak. He spoke very slowly, and his voice was deep.

“We're just putting up the fence,” the father went on. “My cows busted out.”

“I seen the oats field,” Stark said. He looked at the gawking boy again, studied the boy's face a moment and looked away, at the old man again. The father noticed the boy then, too.

“What you looking at, boy?” he said. “You never seen a stranger before? You can finish up this post—that'll give you something to do while men talk.”

The boy knelt obediently and pushed dirt into the black half-moon and tamped the clods, crushing them, sealing the post in.

The boy felt a shudder—it was not the air and the wisps of drizzle. He knew what it was—there was evil here. He had a swift recognition of the evil of something warped, the terror of darkness and the strange; he had felt it before, on cold lightning-fired nights, in the chill of the church on Sunday mornings, on entering an unlighted barn. This had always held a secret terror for him, for he went much to Sunday school and church, and he had heard much of evil, had known it to be rampant and secret, and it had always been hidden secretly from him, behind bannisters on stairs, in the darkness of doorways at church, behind corners cringing in barns, in the dank, tree-overhung lagoons that were nursed with bad water and a stench down along the river. It had always been a secret terror for him before, but now it was here, very near to him—he could look up and see the heavy, mudded shoetops of the neighbor with that face strange, carved as if from red and rotted wood with the purple bloodless leer and the red-rimmed, gouged eye.

The boy breathed quickly, not so much from the work, placing the post, as from the quick fear and hot, nerve-catching fascination of being so near to that which he had feared and had always wanted to see, face to face, all his life, but had never seen until now.

The boy moved his slight shoulders and patted the earth, smoothing it carefully around the post. He knelt and looked from beneath his blue cap bill at Stark, at the man with the hideous evil face. He wondered what the man thought, if there were evil thoughts, plans, sweeping through him, like spiders crawling inside that reddened skull, and if the spiders too had that cold and dead and bloodless purple look, like rotted plums. He thought of it and felt the sudden fascination and hatred come over him again. He was afraid to look at the man's face, looking instead at the heavy mud-laden shoes, hearing the voices of his father and Stark speak from a distance.

His father did most of the talking; he was always one for that, never
missing an opportunity to visit even if no one else wanted to talk, as they did not want to around this, their new, place. His father talked of oats and went to scrabble in the wet dirt to look for seed that hadn’t sprouted, and the man, Stark, followed him, and stood in half-crouched posture, bent from the waist, as if he were hardly interested in what the father did. The boy watched him now, watched with a calm intensity, expecting the man to do something, violent and sudden, and if he did the boy knew what he would do; he would spring to the aid of his father in that struggle, he would swing the long steel bar, he saw it now—the swift, crushing, sodden violence, and the fine muscles in his arms grew rigid in preparation, but the man did not do anything at all.

The man, Stark, went away then, down the long slope towards the shack and the outbuildings partly hidden by trees, partly by the hills, moving with heavy, mud-laden feet, pulling up the oats turf worse than any cow had done.

“He has a bad scar,” the father said to the boy. They went to the next post, and the father dug the spade in and turned the earth out, preparing to make the hole.

“What did he get it from? Did he always have it?” the boy asked.

“It’s a birthmark,” the father said. “He never goes anyplace because of it. I’m surprised he came up here to talk to us today.”

“He probably had a reason,” the boy said, with faint insinuation.

“What reason?” the father asked, gasping with the work of the auger.

“Oh, the cows—no, he wasn’t mad about that. He didn’t even mention it.”

The boy listened to his father and knew the old man did not understand as he understood.

The boy could move like a shadow or like smoke, noiseless and swift, more often not moving at all, standing silent, blending in with where he stood. He had learned it hunting with his father, had learned to stalk rabbits and squirrels and an occasional rare deer, moving as silent as smoke through the woods, blending by his careful tenseness into the trees and the corn. Sometime when he was younger—it was on another farm, another time—he had recognized his ability to be silent, to tread with smoke softness, and he could come nearly to neighbors’ yards and there he squatted and watched and listened and when he was satisfied he drifted off again. He was quiet, the boy; he told no one of what he did or what he had seen or heard—he knew much, for he heard many of the intimate and violent man-and-wife arguments of his neighbors—knew more than the neighbors would ever admit aloud, and no one ever questioned him. There were six in the family and he was the third, and
they were all too busy to notice him except when they needed him for work or chores—milking or egg gathering. The boy helped with the chores on summer evenings, milking down in the hot, fly-infested barn, and then, later, he sat in the wooden chair by the yellow kerosene lamp in what was called the living room, although the only thing that made it different from the kitchen was that it had no stove and dinner table, and there he dutifully did his catechism work. He was to be confirmed in the church in the spring, and it was important that he know his lessons of devoutness and godliness, and his mother listened to him recite before he could go out again.

The summer nights were thick with hotness and liquid heaviness, giving the evening a warm, oily texture like warm bacon grease, airless in the hollows between the hills where the corn grew lush and tall, crowded with the small intimate sounds of locusts and crickets, sounds that mixed and settled in the hot, pollen-laden air, but jarred somehow by the strange-ness and loudness of human voices and the slamming of doors far away. The evenings lingered, dusty and quiet and warm, lingered in a dusty lethargy, like a fat and squashed too-ripe pear silked over with dust.

The boy moved then, after his Bible history and catechism lessons, drifted like smoke across the barbed fence, hardly raising a sound, and across the road to the other fence and was submerged in the cornfield. He followed the corn row down the hill, moving with alacrity and swift-ness and utter stillness, with less sound than the bees above the cornfield or the rustle of the blue-green bayonet leaves themselves, which no one ever hears consciously, and he stepped carefully from foxtail clump to clump, so that there were only a few random footprints in the dirt.

He came at last to the farmstead, to the bleak, unpainted buildings in the hollow. The boy slid on his belly along the fence until he came at last to a stop in the shadow of brush that had once been a plum thicket and there he squatted and watched the yard. The house was near to him, on his left, and to his right stood the gray outbuildings, the barn and the corncrib and granary and chickenhouse. It took the boy a moment to sense where Stark was; he listened and turned his head carefully until at last he recognized the faint sounds of movement in the barn. Stark was milking. The boy squatted and clasped his hands between his knees and waited.

He had come there many times, to this spot or to places near it, and he had waited and watched. He was never impatient, and sometimes he did not see anything and at other times he saw much. He remembered especially, clearly, the time Stark brought the basket full of movement up from the hogyard. The boy saw the wet slimy head of a newborn calf over the edge of the basket as Stark carried it up, and the boy wondered
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why he carried the calf to the house. He saw for a moment incantations, weird magic in firelight, sacrifices of newborn calves with blood dripping endlessly from slashed, furred throats, all this and more behind the sagging screendoor of Stark’s house. The light came on in the backroom where the shades were always pulled—the boy had learned quickly that Stark always went there soon after sundown and lit the lamp, making the tan, always-pulled shades glow with a weak yellow color, and then there was a light, too, in a nearer, a front room, that must have been the kitchen, but there was no other movement and no other sound, and then the lights were extinguished, first the front one and then the one in the backroom and there was nothing else at all, no light, no sound. The boy slid down the little slope until he knelt by the porch, but still he heard and saw and smelled nothing. It was as if all living creatures had vanished from around him and he was utterly alone. It terrified him and fascinated him, as seeing Stark that first day had done. He returned night after night, intent on seeing the calf; he changed his vantage point until he was certain it must still be in the house, or perhaps in Stark himself, or perhaps still bleeding as some evil sacrifice to a terrible, purple-faced, livid god. And then one day he saw the calf again, saw Stark lead it out, his hands under the calf’s belly, quite gently, across the porch, and the calf could not walk, and it tried to stand and could not and it collapsed, bellowing a strange, squeaky, and broken half-wit bellow. The boy understood then; he had seen newborn calves chewed by hogs, and he knew this calf had its forefeet chewed off to nubs, and Stark had wrapped the feet, and the bandages were red with iodine and sticky with some khaki-colored poultice. Stark lifted the calf and set it carefully in the grass and weeds flanking the house, folding the calf’s struggling legs so it would lie down, but the calf kept trying to stand up and would not lie down, even when Stark was there holding it. Stark tried to feed it with a bottle, but it would not take the nipple. Later on, the animal tired from its violent struggle to stand, and Stark came out in the late-evening gloom after the milking and he was able to feed it a little, but it was apparent to the boy, who had often trucked out dead pigs and chickens and even calves to the fields to rot, that the calf would die, and yet Stark tried to feed it and keep it alive. It was all like something mad, something utterly fierce and crazy, the way the gaunt, disfigured man came out and struggled with the weak, dying calf, and tried to feed and nourish it. When Stark was not there on later evenings the animal tried to rise, and it fell on its side, and rose again, and it undid the bandages in its threshings and the white hard nubs of the bones stood out like something naked and hurting, and polished whitely, like ivory, and the boy thought “kill it, kill it” with a fury at the man who would want to keep such a thing alive, but
still Stark tried to feed it and nourish it and he replaced the bandages and lathered them heavily with vaseline. After two days the calf would not eat anymore and even then somehow it managed to stand, its sides transparent against the toothpick, tiny-slat ribs and it wandered thus, falling and rising and floundering in the dust of the yard, like some mad tormented creature, driven by something inexplicable and terrible, seeking to hide in the shade of the plum brush, but always falling and being drawn in the wrong direction, wandering, mad and awful, disfigured and torn, yet somehow, madly, relentlessly living, driven like its master to live, in spite of the want for death, until at last it did die, with even the last death motion feeble, and the calf bellow only a gurgle in the quivering throat, and in the evening when the dust had cooled and Stark came back in from the fields, he took the calf and carried it up the pasture hill and buried it. The boy could see the place where he went quite clearly from where he watched.

After that the boy had even a deeper terror of and hatred for Stark. It was not because of the calf; he had no sympathy for it, for he had seen suffering, he had witnessed agony and seen the dumb struggling eyes of animals in pain, and he had grown used to it, had felt nothing at seeing death—no, that was not it—it was that Stark could want something so misshapen, so awful, around, and would want to make it live. The boy wanted to destroy the calf the first time he saw it because it was so badly disfigured, just as he had calmly destroyed ducklings with misshapen beaks and pigs that were born with their guts outside themselves. That which was misshapen and marked was evil, was not natural, and needed to be destroyed, and he felt a shudder run through him, remembering how Stark wanted to keep the animal alive. There was something terrible in that effort at prolonging the life of something already wrongly there.

Stark had finished milking and he came across the yard from the barn, carrying the pail in one hand and the lantern in the other and the lantern made the shadows of his legs appear black and huge, swaying jerkily as he walked. Stark disappeared into the house, and again the light in the backroom came on first. The boy edged along the fence row behind the house until he squatted only six feet from the window with the yellow, drawn shades. There was no sound; nothing. He wondered about the light, what it could mean, why it was so important that a light burn there whenever it was dark. Perhaps, he thought, Stark was really not alone; a thousand thoughts swung through him, and he bent his head to listen but there was still no sound, no movement. He heard the locusts in the trees and the friendly crickets and then Stark turning the cream separator in the kitchen, and then the separator, too, was silent. The boy heard the door slam and he knew Stark was going out to feed the
calves the skimmilk. The boy stood up and moved back towards the plum thicket. It was completely dark now and he moved by ear, and it was then, as he came to the corner of the house, that he sensed someone, even as the other person, startled, sensed his presence, and the boy threw himself back as the hands reached towards him, clutching his shirt, tearing it.

"Who are you?" Stark said, his voice loud and near, and the hands tore for him, but the boy was very quick and he ducked, turning all at once, and he hit the fence and doubled over it, feeling quick pain cut him and forgetting it as he was up and running again. At the top of the hill he stopped and listened. It was dead silent. He stood, breathing hard, pausing in his breathing to listen, and tried to figure what had happened. Stark had been surprised, too, he knew, probably more surprised than he. When it was light he would come up the hill, following the tracks. The boy felt ashamed, for he had prided himself on his quickness and quietness and cleverness, too, and to be nearly caught was something to feel ashamed about. Perhaps Stark was clever too, he thought, and this made him feel better. It was a kind of contest now, a contest of wits and observation that it had not been before. He caught his breath and then doubled back, and turned and went down the hill away from both the Stark place and his own, making firm tracks, and when he reached the bottom where there were trees and grass, he walked carefully and lightly up to the road, and then crossed the road, brushing out his tracks behind him. After he crossed the road he was in their own pasture again, and he walked quickly up the hill to the house.

He did not go down to the Stark place for several days after that, but finally something drove him back; it was a curiosity, a compulsion. He wanted to know about Stark, about the lighted backroom; he wanted to see again and watch again and he wanted to feel the fear and tenseness and the terror. He knew he wanted that—the terror and the disgust, and yet somehow he hated it too; he wanted to feel the hatred and shuddering disgust burn through him, and still he wanted to destroy it. It was this that drew him back; it was something like the pleasure of hunting, of fearing to kill something and still wanting very much to kill; it was like the sweet feeling of bringing death—death to something that shouldn't or needn't live except as a target for a rifle.

He chose his vantage point differently this time, moving between two box-elder trees, protected from the yard by the battered sway-sided hump of a collapsed garage, but still able to see the yard quite clearly. He was only a few yards from the backroom where the light came on and then, that evening, the front door slammed and he saw Stark moving,
lantern and pail in hand, to the barn, his legs throwing great grotesque shadows as he moved.

After he had passed out of sight, the boy moved, with the lightness of smoke, across the weedpatch yard to beside the yellow window. He tried the window but it was tight, locked from the inside. The boy hesitated. He knew he must see the room, see what was there. Again he felt the swift thrill of terror and excitement, if he should be seen or if he should get caught, come face to face with the lavender scar and the red-rimmed eye. He circled the house and waited to see if Stark was anywhere in sight, but then he saw the lantern swaying down in the yards. The boy moved soundlessly across the porch and swung open the screen-door. The kitchen was dark; he knew it was the kitchen by the soured odor of the cream separator and by the heavy smell of fried potatoes. He went quickly through the room and through another one to the room with the lamp. He stopped and looked about him. It was only a bedroom, quite neat and clean, with a bed and a dresser and a chest of drawers. The lamp stood on the dresser and beside it were some slender books, a half-dozen or so, with titles the boy had never seen before, and there was a picture, too, of a family. The boy looked at it; it was the only thing to look at in the room. It was an old picture, taken years before, quite yellow now. The man sitting rigidly in the straight chair with arms folded across his chest had on a stiff celluloid collar, and the woman had a frowzy tormented look on her face. In the picture, too, were a boy and a girl, the boy younger, both plain, vacant-faced children, like any other boy and girl. And on the picture, written very faintly, but carefully, too, as if it had been written a long time before, above the man's head were the words "Ezra Stark, Sr., died 1938," and above the woman's "Mathilda Stark, died 1943," and "Carl" beside the boy, and "Harriet" beside the girl. He did not know why the picture was there, and he did not really care.

The boy surveyed the room again. He was genuinely disappointed. He had expected something, of a purpose perhaps, overwhelming and evil, a mad old woman, an opium den, a room full of glowing icons, but instead there was only the single dull picture. He turned to go when he caught the swift light sound of a step on the porch. The boy felt a swift clutch of fear—the windows were no good, the bed too low. Now that he was inside, in a strange room, he felt trapped and confused—outside with space and movement he could think and act, but here, here he did not know where to turn. He pulled the closet curtain back and stepped inside, burrowing beneath some coats hung on the bar above his head. The curtain trembled after his movement and he tried to still it, but there was the faint vibration as he heard Stark come slowly from the kitchen into the room. The boy held his breath; he dared not breathe,
for he could hear every breath, every movement of Stark. Now that he needed to hold his breath, every second demanded a new one. The blood flooded his temples, there was a filled choking feeling in his throat, he had to breathe but Stark was still there, and he did not breathe. He saw the silhouette of Stark against the curtain, saw Stark move across the room, and then slowly turn and go away again, and still the boy did not breathe, even with the blood pounding in his temples and his hands like ice. He heard the footsteps move away, heard the creaking of the floor in the other room and then the half-musical springgging sound of the screendoor opening and closing, and yet the boy waited, breath drawn in, until the stillness settled again, dropped with that heavy silence that could be only the silence of one alone. He moved then, looking carefully past the edge of the curtain into the lamplit yellow room, and then he crossed the room to the dresser. He shielded his eyes against the lamp and looked out into the late half-light, half-darkness, and then he turned the lock on the window and opened it. The window was very dusty and had not been cleaned for a long time. There was no screen and he shoved the window up and prepared to go out when his arm touched the lamp and jarred it and he had a quick breathless moment catching it, keeping it from falling, and then suddenly, quickly, quite deliberately, he flung the lamp on the floor, smashing it, sending kerosene and the flame eating after the kerosene across the floor and beneath the bed. It was a small blue-yellow flame at first as he watched it, growing yellowly, with a faint fuzzy orange color as the flames caught at the blankets overhanging the bed. The boy slid out the window and moved in a crouched half-run across the yard. He did not look back until he reached the hilltop in the cornfield and then the whole house was a rich cherry glow in the valley, the flames licking the roof and the sides of the house like cherry drippings on chocolate, and the boy watched, feeling the tightness in his chest from running or from fear, he did not know which.

He walked now, carefully, mocking the sounds of the late-evening doves from the trees in the pasture. He thought someday he would go hunting them. There was no one around the place when he got there; even the mother was gone. The boy slipped up to the porch, drifting in perfectly soundlessly, so that even the sleeping dog did not awaken until the boy was already in the kitchen door. The boy went into the living room and sat down in the straight chair by the lamp and opened his catechism and waited. He heard the cars go by the place, all going down towards Ezra Stark's place, and much later even a firetruck from town, and then the cars began coming back, and the mother came in the house, and looked at him, with some excitement and some surprise, and she asked where he had been; there was a fire at that old bachelor's, Stark's,
place, and the boy said he wondered why all the cars went by, down there.

A long while later the father and the brothers came back, and the father took off his soot-covered cap and sat down.

"It was awful," he said. "I never seen anything so awful."

"What?" the boy said.

"Wasn't you there too, boy?"

"I was studying my catechism."

The father nodded. "The fire at Stark's—it was terrible. Stark must have gone into the shack after something, I don't know what, and we found him in what used to be the bedroom. We could smell him a hundred yards away."

"Was he dead?" the boy asked, leaning forward suddenly.

"There was hardly anything left of him," the father said, "or of the house either. It was awful."

The boy felt a great warmness ride him, cover him as if honey or an anointment bathed him, as if some great evil had lifted from him, from everyone now. He would not need to go down there again; it was all finished, there was no longer anything for him to do. He closed his eyes and luxuriated in the rich, good feeling it gave him.

"It was some fire," one of the brothers said. "You should have been there to see it."

"It was terrible," the father said.

"I was studying my catechism," the boy said.