The Journey Home

John Graves*
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"I GUESS you're gonna have to leave, Mat. I can't afford to stay open all night for just one man."

"Hell, Johnnie, it's only nine," Mat roared. "What a you mean, closin' at nine on Saturday night?" Mat picked up the bottle and started to pour the rest of the beer into the glass. His hands were large, but they lacked the callouses usually common to the farmers who frequented the tavern. His hand shook, and he poured part of the beer on the bar. "Bring me another beer."

"No, I gotta close up. You better be gettin' a place to stay here in town tonight. The way it's stormin' outside, you'll never get home." Johnnie wiped his hands on the apron hanging over his big pot belly and looked out the window at the blowing snow. "This damn storm sure played hell with my Saturday night business."

"Bring me another beer, Johnnie. Just one more beer, an' then I'll go home to my old lady."

"Well...I guess I can let you have one more," Johnnie said, "but don't take too long with it. I'd kinda like to get home." He got Mat another beer and then started washing a few of the dirty glasses that he took off the bar.

Mat reared back on the stool and poured beer into his glass. "Yes, sir. By God, I gotta have another beer before I go home. Beer's about the only thing that'll keep a man warm in this kind of weather." He hooked his hands through the suspenders of his overalls and looked down at the glass of beer.

"Don't be takin' too long with it," Johnnie said.

"I'll get her down." Mat grinned broadly, swelled his chest and sat up straight on the stool. He picked up the glass
of beer and gulped it down. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. His face was clean shaven, slightly wrinkled, and red.

"I guess I'll just leave my trailer here in town tonight," Mat said importantly. "I don't wanta be bothered with a trailer behind the car when I'm tryin' to go through drifted roads. Anyway, I won't be haulin' anything the next few days in this kinda weather."

Johnnie looked at Mat and frowned. "I'm tellin' you, Mat, you'd better stay in town tonight. The way it's been snowin' and blowin', the roads'll probably be drifted full. Why don't you just use my phone and call your wife and tell her you're goin' to stay in town tonight?"

"Naw," Mat said grandly, "I can get through. I've drove over that road many a time, in worse weather 'an this. An' when the roads are muddy or fulla snow, I've walked her plenty of times, too."

"Well... do as you like."

Mat tipped the bottle and watched until the last drop had drained into the glass. He picked up the glass and emptied it in about three gulps. "Ah... Well, I told you I'd leave, Johnnie, an' I'm gonna keep my word. I'm gonna leave right now." Mat got off the stool. He surveyed the unsteady world and then stumbled to the back of the tavern to get his big black overcoat off a nail in the wall where he had hung it about four hours earlier. He managed to get one arm through a sleeve, but he couldn't find the sleeve for the other arm. Johnnie came to the back of the tavern.

"Here, let me help ya, Mat." He took Mat's arm and shoved it through the sleeve.

Mat fumbled with the buttons of the coat and finally got them fastened. He took a big pair of yellow gloves out of one of the overcoat pockets and put them on. "Well... I'll see ya, Johnnie." Mat walked unsteadily to the door.

"Take it easy," Johnnie said.

Mat waved his hand and stepped out the door. He blinked his eyes and shook his head. God, it sure was cold. He pulled his cap down lower over his gray hair. He could hardly see the streetlight for the blowing snow. Everything
looked deserted, so he started walking up the street to his car. He couldn’t seem to walk too straight. Well, he could drive better’n he could walk, anyway.

Mat always parked his car in front of old Jim’s grocery store on Saturday night, because it helped him to remember to pick up the groceries his wife ordered over the phone. Jim still had a light on. “The old fool. It’s a wonder he hadn’t gone home so I couldn’t get my groceries,” Mat thought. He opened the door to the store and stepped inside.

Old Jim and another fellow were sitting at the back of the store by the big potbellied stove. The stove sat in a box of sand, and the sand and the lower part of the stove were covered with tobacco juice stains.

Jim got up and came to the front of the store. “Your wife called a while ago, Mat. She wanted to know if you’d got the groceries yet, an’ she said to tell you you’d better stay in town tonight because it’s really a-driftin’ out your way.”

“Don’t you worry,” Mat said. “I’ve got home over that road in a lot worse weather ’n this.” He took an unsteady step forward. “Got my groceries?”

“Yep. This box right here on the counter. Want me to carry it out to the car for you?”

“Naw, I can take it okay. You just hold the door open for me. I can carry it okay.”

Jim held the door open and Mat stumbled outside with the box of groceries.

“He sure is a funny feller, ain’t he?” said the other old man who was sitting by the stove. He spit at the base of the stove, and the brown liquid sizzled as it hit the hot metal.

“Yep,” Jim said. “He’s been a comin’ in here on Saturday night to pick up groceries for the last twenty-five years. His wife calls in an’ tells me what she wants, and I fix it up for her.”

“That so? He keep his grocery bill paid up?”

“He don’t, but his wife does. She raises quite a few turkeys ever’ year. Pretty good woman. Mat hauls a little junk now and then, and he hauls away people’s cinders in the spring, but that’s about all. He used ta bootleg a little.”

Mat opened the door of his old Model “A” and put the
box of groceries on the front seat. He slammed the door and went around to the back of the car to unhook the small two-wheeled trailer. It took him ten minutes to get the trailer unhitched. He thought about pushing the trailer across to the other side of the street to the parking area, but decided if it got in anybody's way they could move it. He got in the car and drove down the street to the highway.

Mat leaned forward over the steering wheel and peered at the snow swirling through the light ahead of the car. It made him dizzy. There was a lot of snow on the highway, but it hadn't drifted too bad yet. When he turned off the highway onto the dirt road, it might not be so easy, though. There were trees and brush along both sides of the old road, and it might just be drifted full. Well, he'd know pretty soon. Just as soon as he got over the next hill he'd be to the dirt road. Hell, he could drive that two miles of dirt road in any kind of weather. He tried to concentrate on the highway. He sure didn't want to run off in the ditch on a night like this.

He slowed the car as it started down the hill, and then he turned off on to the dirt road and shifted into second. The road was drifted, all right. The old car went about fifty feet and then stalled in a drift.

"Maybe I'd better back out a here and go back to town," he thought. "I doubt if I'd ever get the car through this mess. Never remember seein' it so bad before. I sure as hell don't feel like walkin' through two miles of snow in this weather, either. Shoulda got the tire chains fixed last week. I sure wasn't expectin' a storm this early."

He shifted to reverse and then let the clutch out too fast and killed the engine. He started the car again and raced the motor. The wheels turned, but the car didn't move. He tried to go forward again, and then back. He stopped the car and turned out the lights.

He tried to think clearly. "I can't stay here all night. There's no traffic on the highway, so I can't catch a ride back to town. Damn, it's cold. I sure do hate to walk through this storm. I'm dizzier 'n hell. Maybe the cold wind'll snap me out of it."
He took a flashlight out of his overcoat pocket and then got out of the car. The icy wind and stinging snow cut into his face. He was still dizzy. He started down the road, wading awkwardly through the snow. He flashed the light on now and then to see where he was going. He tried to bury his head deeper in the collar of his overcoat to get away from the stinging snow.

He was beginning to get short of breath, and he was breathing heavily. God, he sure was gettin’ tired. His feet dragged through the snow. He took about two more steps and then fell face forward into a drift. He rolled over slowly and sat up. “God damn, dirty son-of-a-bitch,” he shouted into the storm. He knocked the snow off the flashlight and tried to brush the snow away from his collar and cuffs. He flashed the light on and looked around through the swirling snow. There was the big cottonwood tree by the side of the road, so he must be half way home. Just a mile to go. He tried to get up, but fell down again. Damn, he was tired. He sat in the snow to rest a minute and then finally got up.

As he stumbled on through the snow his hands began to get cold, and his body was getting chilled. God, he was just about all in. The bridge oughta be along here somewhere. Then he would turn the corner after he crossed the bridge, and he would only have a quarter of a mile left to go. He kept flashing the light through the storm, hoping to catch a glimpse of the bridge. By God, where was that damn bridge? He was walking slower now.

When he got to the bridge, he put the flashlight in his pocket. He put his hands down on the bridge railing and leaned against it to rest.

“My God,” he thought. “I’m all in. I’m colder ’n a son-of-a-bitch. Still dizzier ’n hell. Just a quarter of a mile to go now. I’m almost home. Maybe I can smoke a cigarette and get warmed up a little.”

He stood up and reached inside his overcoat to the pocket in the bib of his overalls and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. His hands were stiff and cold, but he kept fumbling with the pack and finally got a cigarette in his mouth.
He got his lighter out, but it was so windy it blew the flame out. He bent over low with his back to the wind and cupped both hands around the lighter and the end of the cigarette. He lost his balance and stumbled forward. He tried to straighten up. He grunted as the rotten wooden railing hit him in the stomach. There was the sound of splintering wood. He grabbed wildly at the side of the bridge.

He lay sprawled on the frozen creek, face down, with his head twisted around under one arm. The red cap lay a few feet away and the wind ruffled his hair. The swirling snow began to collect around his body.

John Graves, Ag. Jr.

The Land

(BIRTH)
The rolling hills of my home
Are the warm, sweet breasts of a fertile woman.
As the corn springs from her fecundity
And is nurtured in her rolling hills,
I have sprung from the land
And must return for life.

(LOVE)
In a warm, maiden spring
The land was my first love;
And years and loves hence,
In the winter, I shall lie down again,
And the land will be my last love.

(RETURN)
Though there were many before me,
I was born to a land fresh and virginal;
I stray from it now, etching it ever so minorly,
And when at last I return,
The land, as I, will be old and worn.
But beyond change, we will know each other.

James L. Wickliff, Chem Grad.