W. L. (from The Honeyman Land)

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THE MULES trudged up the dusty lane towards the house. Behind them clattered a cultivator with W. L. riding in its iron seat. Shadows stretched before them, the evening sun still hot on W. L.’s red leathery neck.

W.L.’s back ached from the jolting seat. After dinner he had walked alongside for a while, but his short legs had grown weary. He was tired. The sinking ache throughout his frame glazed over his thoughts. He tilted back his head and began to sing in a low, loud baritone voice, ‘‘I a-am-m a po-o-o-er wayfarin’ stra-a-anger-r, a tra-a-velin’ through this wor-r-rld of woe--’’ The Guernseys down in the pasture stopped grazing and stared at him as he sang. ‘‘An’ there’s no sickness, toil, or-r da-a-anger-r in that br-right wor-r-rld to which I go-o-o-o-o.’’ The cows headed deliberately toward the barn. W.L. couldn’t remember the rest of the words. ‘‘Lah-la-a-ah, la-o-o-oh, lah, la-la-a-a-a-ah.’’ The mules quickened their step as they neared the buildings.

Dog-tired and hungry-weak, W.L. started chores. Unharnessing the mules, he led them to water and curried the dirt and sweat out of their hides. The Guernseys waited at the barn door. He grained them in the stanchions and then sat on a one-legged milking stool as he started to milk.

‘‘Dahlia, you sure do keep me awful warm on this July evening. Warmer ’n hell!’’ W.L. laughed and slapped the big yellow cow’s back as he finished with her and moved on to the next cow.

Routinely, he finished the rest of the chores. Graining the steers, feeding the fat hogs and sows and mules. He
threw some corn to the hens and gathered the eggs. In the twilight, he headed for the back porch carrying the eggs in his cap in one hand, and the last bucket of milk in the other.

The house was dark, the stove cold. W.L. sank into a kitchen chair and gulped water from the icebox water bottle. He stared into the quiet loneliness of the front room.

Humph. It was Saturday night. Saturday night always snuck up on him. All week long, worked every day from five in the mornin' 'til dark, and then caught without plans or too tired to make any. Well, at least tomorrow was Sunday.

W.L. pushed the Saturday Evening Post and Collier's magazines to one side, crossed his arms on the table, and put his head down.

A thunder boom jolted him from his sleep at the table. In the darkness, he could hear rain drumming on the kitchen window. His sweat-soaked shirt had dried stiff. He uncoiled his arms to stretch. Leaning back in the chair, he yawned and reached with arms and fingers outstretched. A good soakin' rain would sure help the corn.

A flickering light through the window caught his eye. He got up and stepped outside to see what it was. Wasn't like a lightnin' flash. More like fire. The barn roof.

Grabbing the water bucket with a dipper in it that sat on the front porch, W.L. raced to the machine shed to get a ladder. Leaning the ladder against the barn, he stuck the dipper in his back pocket and climbed the rungs while clutching the bucket bail in one hand. The rain was letting up.

 Flames leaped into the darkness, hot on W.L.'s face. Smoke burned his eyes and throat. Flames, surrounding a hole in the roof, reached for more shingles. W.L. splashed the bucket of water on part of the flames, hurried back down the ladder and ran over to the horse tank. The rain quit and the breeze began to pick up.

Dipping another bucket full of water, he dashed back to the ladder, scrambled up the rungs and slung the pail of water on the flames. Back and forth. Frantically. Down the
ladder, over to the tank, back up the ladder. But the damn fire got hotter, the flames higher, lighting up the whole barnyard. He couldn’t keep up. The goddamn hole in the roof kept gettin’ bigger. He wasn’t gettin’ anywhere. Damn. Couldn’t carry the water fast enough. Back up the ladder . . . faster . . . more water. But . . . maybe if he poured the water on slow and steady—sort of stretched out what he could carry.

W.L. jerked the dipper out of his back pocket. The heat was too intense to look at, but steadily, dipperful by dipperful, he poured the water on the fire. He got water on all the flames, at least once. It seemed to be working. But he needed more water. Back down the ladder, to the horse tank, and back.

But while W.L. brought another bucket, the wind fanned the flames. Damn it. He couldn’t get ahead of it. He needed more water up here.

Dipper by dipper—another bucket and another . . . and another. But each time, when he went to refill his bucket, the flames regained their intensity. At least the fire was not gettin’ worse—but it sure as hell wasn’t gettin’ any better—

A pair of lights turned in the yard. The car roared up and stopped. Cam Scott jumped out. ‘‘Damn, Warren! Where’s another bucket?’’

‘‘Inside the stanchion’s door.’’

Cam hurried to fill the buckets, carried them to the ladder, and began passing the buckets up to W.L.

Slowly, the two men gained control of the fire. Only glowing rafters hissed as the last buckets of water were splashed on. Soon a smoldering black hole in the roof was all that remained of the fire.

Exhausted, the two turned their buckets upside down and sat. Watching the steaming black roof for any sparks. Coughing the soot out of their lungs. Spitting black on the ground. Wiping the grime off their sweaty faces. Their shoulders ached. In the east, the sun was just comin’ up.

‘‘Mighty glad you came over, Cam. I probably wouldn’t have got it put out alone.’’
"Ya should've called me. Damn good thing I saw the fire from my place."

"Yep. I'm grateful to you, Cam."

"A-a-ah, 'at's what neighbors are for," Cam stood up.

"'Welp, I better get home an' start chorin'. Take care, Warren.'"

"Yep, well . . . thank ya, Cam." W.L. got up slowly. Cam drove out the lane and over the hill.

Weary and weak from lack of food and rest, W.L. trudged to the house and got some bread and cheese for breakfast. He carried the food with him back outside to start his chores.

After chores, he washed up at the pump and then went inside to get shaved and cleaned up for Sunday dinner at his mother's in town.

W.L. felt better after he had shaved. His shirt felt clean and starched. He warmed up the Chevrolet coupe and headed out the lane and down the mud road to town, following the ruts made by churchgoers earlier that day. As he steered the coupe back and forth, zig-zagging through the mud, he began to whistle. His left arm hung out the window with his hand on the top of the car door. His fingers drummed out a rhythm on the Chevrolet's roof. The rhythm of the tune that he was whistling. It was a new rather light tune. W.L. liked it. Last fall, the Democrat President, FDR, had used it in his campaign.

W.L. wheeled the coupe into town, up to his mother's little white house. He walked up to the back door and went in.

"Warren, dinner's 'bout ready. Git warshed up." His mother bent over the stove stirring and tasting the various steaming pots. Her grey hair was coiled on the back of her head into a bun. A wash apron covered her good dress that reached to her ankles. W.L. went to the sink and scrubbed his hands.

"What's for dinner?"

"Fried chicken."

W.L. spotted a cake cooling in the pantry.

"Get on into the dining room and sit down. It'll be
Mother always fixed more food than he could eat. She carried the mashed potatoes in. Her arthritis must be actin' up after the storm last night. She moved slow, in short steps from the kitchen to the dining room. Her wrinkled face twisted up in concentration as she stumped back and forth.

At last the table was covered with food—arranged just the way the old lady wanted it. She sat opposite W.L., wiped her forehead with the handkerchief from her apron pocket, and bowed her head. She muttered grace and then began passing the food to W.L.

"Got a good soakin' rain last night, Ma, but lightning struck the barn and caught the roof on fire. Cam Scott and I had a heck of a time puttin' it out."

"Don't curse at the table, Warren Lee."

W.L. was used to his mother's sternness and she hadn't mellowed with age. But she looked very tired today. Old . . . and sort of weak—like the strength was drainin' out of her tired body . . . her fried chicken sure tasted good though. W.L. ate ravenously, his empty stomach reminding him of his hunger.

"How much rain did we get, Warren?"

"Inch an' forty-five hun'ers. We needed it, too. Paper said it was a real general rain. Reported better than a inch all over the state."

As his mother cleared the dishes, W.L. finished and sighed deep. Sunday dinner weighed heavy on his belt and his eyelids. "Ma, I'm going to take a little nap. That was a mighty fine meal."

"Warren, wake up. James is here from Vinton to visit." W.L.'s mother peered at him from the door.
"Warren, ya hear me?" W.L. grumbled, rolled over several times, and finally swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He sat with his head in his hands, trying to wake up. After a bit, he walked out to the front porch where Jim, his brother, was sitting. Jim’s Buick gleamed in the street.

"Hullo, Jim."

"Warren! Good to see you."

W.L. sank into a chair. Jim was a big man. The suit he wore looked too small on him. His huge hands held the coffee cup and saucer with amazing ease. His hair was thinning. Heavy jowls hung on each side of his face, framing his giant nose. Jim, the only brother of the seven that had not farmed, owned and operated the drugstore in Vinton. W.L. thought of Jim in his apothecary coat, weighing out tiny amounts of medicines for his customers. Big brother Jim sure looked out of place behind that drugstore counter. Them big hands. That big ole’ nose. Even if Jim wasn’t a farmer, he sure was a Heinemann—just couldn’t hide it. Them years gettin’ his degree at Northwestern in Chicago couldn’t cover it up. But that college education was mighty fine.

"Pretty good rain here last night, Jim. How about over in Vinton?"

"Yes, we had a thunderstorm, but I believe you received a little more over here. We certainly needed it."

"Yep ’at’s for sure. Corn was startin’ to hurt."

"Everybody will be in town tomorrow with this rain. I’ll be busy all day, I imagine."

"Lightning struck the barn roof last night. Caught the roof on fire."

"How bad was it, Warren?"

"Well, Cam Scott came over an’ we finally got it out, but we had a hell of a time. Damn wind kept fannin’ it up. Left a hole in the roof on the north side."

"Well, I’m glad it’s not too bad. Say, Warren,” Jim leaned forward, “I—I saw Nettie in Dysart last week. Didn’t realize she was back from California. She had the boy with her."

W.L. stared at the floor. Nettie—W.L.’s wife—and
Lee, their son. "Yeah, she's back—the lawyer finished up the divorce three months ago . . . an' she just got moved back to Dysart, so Lee could start to junior high this fall.''

Uncomfortable silence came between the brothers until W.L. interrupted, "I don't understand it, Jim. Just can't figure that woman out. I . . . I begged her to come back . . ." W.L.'s voice . . . faltered.

"I know, Warren."

"She won't let me talk to Lee or even see him. He was just a little fellow when she left. He used to ride on my lap when I was cultivatin'. An' then when he got tired, he'd get off at the end of the corn rows and play—all by himself—good as gold—that little guy. He'd take his little fingers and make fields in the dust and then make rows and have his own little farm—right there—while he was waitin' for me to make a round."

W.L. wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Jim, I saw Lee on the street in Dysart the other day and he looked at me as if he wasn't sure who I was. Jim, he's the only son I got . . ." W.L. caught himself and the silence separated the men again. Hunched forward in his chair with his hands gripped tightly together, W.L. stared at the floor, lost in his thoughts.

Methodically, Jim wiped the dust off his black oxfords with his thumb and finally interrupted the silence. "I . . . I stopped to see John and Mame last week. John seemed kind of tired—didn't have much to say. Have you been down there lately?"

"Huh?" W.L. broke his stare and looked at Jim.

Jim continued, "The homeplace looked kind of shabby. A lot of junk around. House needed painting. And John's corn didn't look too good, either. Warren, how is John getting along? Is he getting that mortgage paid off—or not? What's going on over there?" Jim sat his coffee cup down on the table next to him.

"Well, let's see, I talked with John about it the other night when his hogs got out, an' I went down to help him get 'em in. We talked for quite a spell, sittin' out in the yard after Mame'd fed us supper." W.L. scratched his head.
'He talked quite a bit. Said that Metropolitan had sent foreclosure notice, but that government moratorium had stopped them from selling the land. So he's payin' Metropolitan so much every month, I guess. John still holds the title, but it didn't sound too good to me, Jim.'

"What sort of arrangement is it, Warren? Is he going to be able to pay off that mortgage? I am concerned about the whole matter. Does he need some help?" Jim's brow wrinkled up in concern.

"Well, Jim—I don't know. I 'magine he'll get it worked out."

"Warren, listen to me," Jim was sitting on the edge of his chair now peering into W.L.'s face. "I don't see how. John's getting old. He's spending more and more time away from the farm. Mostly running that truck to Omaha, or running the threshing rig or doing some other custom work. His hired man does most of the farming. There's many a time John doesn't get home from Omaha 'til after the milking is done the next morning. Then he's no good for two days." Jim threw up his hands in disgust. "He is simply going to lose that farm and one of us in the family needs to be ready to bail him out. Mother has always done it in the past, but she's not well, Warren. As I see it, only you and I are financially able. We must not let that homeplace sell to just anybody. I worked hard on it. Sweated on those hills. I won't see it lost because of John's slipshod farming and his slap-happy living." Perspiration rolled down Jim's red face.

Amazed, W.L. tried to quiet him, "Jim, Jim, it's not that bad. I think—", W.L. stopped himself. Jim might be right. John'd been slippin' all right an' not workin' there on the farm. Not makin' it pay. Ole' John could lose that land . . . that land—right between W.L.'s two farms. Homeplace fit right in with his land. Borderin' on three sides . . . maybe he should try to buy the homeplace, like Jim had said. He was right there—close—an' he ought to buy it from John before Metropolitan took the farm over. That ground ought to stay in the family an' he, W.L., ought
to be the one that made sure it did. It’d be a lot of work, but, hell, he could do it—work never scared him before. That homeplace’d fit right in. Them three farms together—in—a workin’ unit. ‘‘Jim, we can’t let that place of John’s, the homeplace, be sold. We got to keep it in the family. I’ll keep in touch with John and let you know how things are going.’’

Jim seemed relieved. He nodded and leaned back in his chair. They sat together on the porch a little longer. ‘‘W.L., I must be heading home. It was good to talk.’’ Jim went to tell their mother good-bye.

W.L. sat in the quiet of the front porch, head in his hands, staring at the floor.

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After an Interview on the Tomorrow Show
(or, On the Divinization of Man)

by
Mark Osing
English 2

The song of the spheres is under assault but the attacker is a mere plastic iconoclastic Mrs. M. M. O’Hare (five college degrees) decrees her abused rights (while bruising rites). Yet what faith! More in herself than a lot of theists have in God. O the Ultimate Icon Man! But anyway, at least she has faith in something.

p.s. Help! I’m being held prisoner on a global pantheon with 4.5 billion gods.