Down in the Valley

Ervin Krause*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

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IT WAS TOO LATE for any visitors, but the dogs were barking. Mrs. Garnett was already in bed and the old man had taken off his shoes and was airing his large bony feet. He was reading the “Capper’s Weekly.” He noisily rattled the paper and turned to his daughter Mildred, who was turning the radio dial back and forth.

“Millie, stop fiddling with the radio and see what the dogs are barking about,” he said.

Mildie listlessly continued turning the dial. “Darrell can go,” she said, pouting.

“I can’t either,” Darrell said quickly, opening his books. “I got to study my catechism, Pa.”

“Now, Millie,” Pa said, “do like I say, and don’t go back-talking.”

Mildie unhooked her bare feet from around the chair rungs, stood up and went to the door. The dogs were still barking with panting, intended ferocity. She peered out into the darkness beyond the feeble wedge of light the lamp cast across the porch.

“Trix, Shep, stop that.”

She shook the screendoor to unsettle the mass of flies that clung there and slipped out onto the porch. “Trix, Shep, stop that this minute!” she shouted.

The dogs were quelled for only a moment before they took up their panting, salivary barking again.

“Must be something out there,” Pa shouted from his rocking chair.

“Anybody there?” Millie’s voice quavered. She moved carefully to the edge of the splintery wooden porch floor. “Here, Trix, Shep, come here now,” she commanded, clapping her hands.

The dogs came panting up. They barked once or twice, nervously, and then lay down with trembling impatience in the warm dust in front of the porch.
She could see now, in the moonlight, the figure moving up the rutted lane towards the house.

The dogs rose again when he came through the yard gate.

"Here, now, be still," Millie said, quieting them. She backed across the porch to the door. "Pa," she called, "somebody's comin'."

The overalled figure came suddenly into the yellow light of the lamp.

"Hello, Millie," he said, with a gruff, soft Nebraska voice.

It was Ben Hooker, a neighbor down the road.

"Oh, hello Ben," she said. "Pa, Ben Hooker's here," she called.

"You wanta come in, Ben?" Millie asked.

"No," he said, "I'd like to talk to your old man." He scraped his foot impatiently in the dirt. "Your lane's sure full of ruts," he said.

"Yes," she said. It was then she first noticed the shotgun he carried, half-hidden behind him. "You been huntin' or somethin', Ben?" she asked.

He shook his head. The wooden rocking chair squeaked and groaned from the living room.

"Pa's puttin' on his shoes," she said, looking in through the doorway. Darrell peered out through the screendoor at them.

"Hey, Pa, Ben's got a shotgun," Darrell said. He stood in the doorway in his bare feet, hands stuffed in his pockets. "What for you got a shotgun, Ben?" he asked.

Ben didn't answer. He swung the gun further behind him and stood uneasily, looking at the two in the doorway.

Old Man Garnett's footsteps creaked across the kitchen. He came onto the porch. "Hoddy, Ben," he said. "Can't you even invite folks in, Millie?" he asked, looking inquiringly at his daughter.

"He didn't want to . . ." she began.

"No, Chris," Ben said, "this ain't a social call. I don't want to scare anybody or raise a fuss or nothin', but anyway, somethin's happened you should know about," he went on. He adjusted his denim cap and looked at Millie and Dar-
rell. They stood planted as before, watching him.

“Rudy Gerling done his wife in,” he said quickly. He paused again, looking at the two children.

“Millie, Darrell, get in the house, so’s we can talk,” Pa said, waving them inside with a sweep of his big hands. “You better wake up Ma, too, and tell her to come out here.”

Millie and Darrell slowly went into the kitchen. The men stepped down from the porch and talked in low tones.

Ma was already up. She came padding across the floor still in her nightgown, and holding the squat kerosene lamp before her.

“What is it?” she asked. She had gone out on the porch before they could answer.

“Ma, Ben Hooker’s here,” Millie said, ashamed for Ma just being in her nightgown.

Millie and Darrell stood at the doorway, trying to hear what they were saying.

“Hello, Mrs. Garnett,” they heard Ben say.

“Leastways, what I heard was they got in a helluva row over something, and she started screaming and having a fit or something,” Ben continued. “I don’t know what happened then, but the kids was sayin’ Rudy took a hammer to her. They don’t know where Rudy is now.”

“Oh, my Lord,” Mrs. Garnett said holding her head.

“Is the sheriff out?” Pa asked.

Ben nodded. “Ya, he’s been out there for about half an hour. He figures Rudy took his boat upriver. He figures they might be able to git him tonight.”

Mrs. Garnett clicked her tongue and shook her head. “And where’s the kids?” she asked.

“They’re home,” Ben said. “I guess they’re practically out of their heads, too, the shock and all.”

“Mercy, I would think so,” Mrs. Garnett said.

“The sheriff’s up getting Canfield’s hounds now. The sheriff doesn’t think they should let him get too far, if he did go wild, like that.”

The old man shook his head. “God, you’d never thought that of Rudy, would you, always so quiet and everything.” He shook his head again.

“No, it was a big surprise, I tell you,” Ben said.

“Did you see if his boat was still where he always keeps
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it?” Pa asked.

“Ya, we looked,” Ben said. “It’s gone.” He made a vague motion with his hands. “The sheriff says they might take a plane scouting tomorrow if they don’t get him tonight.”

They stood there, silent for a moment.

“You know,” Ben said, “when I was doin’ chores, I heard some yellin’ and screamin’ from over towards their place, but I just thought it was the kids yellin’. He didn’t even have the chores finished when it happened.”

“Ya,” the old man said, “I suppose we better go down and help out.”

“I’d better go too,” Mrs. Garnett said. She shook her head and clucked to herself. “Those poor kids,” she said. She turned and came back in the house, holding the lamp and shooing the flies before her.

“You goin’ too, Ma?” Millie asked her. Ma nodded. She went into the bedroom to change her clothes.

“Can I go, Pa?” Darrell asked again in a whiny tone.

“Talk to your ma,” the old man said. The men moved off a little.

Darrell came slowly back into the house. “Ma, can I go along?” he asked his mother when she came back into the kitchen. She had their big flashlight in her hands.

“No,” she said. “You stay with your sister.”

“Aw, cripes.”

“Darrell, don’t you dare talk like that. You got to study your catechism, anyway,” Mrs. Garnett said.

She went out and down the yard to where the men were standing. The old man whistled to the dogs to follow and they moved off, the flashlight weaving down the lane as they walked.

“Cripes, I coulda just as well gone along,” Darrell said, pouting. He went into the dining room and opened his books by the lamp.

The house was very quiet but for the buzzing of the bugs along the ceiling and on the screen door. Millie leaned against the reservoir on the black Monarch range, and watched the little black bugs bounce away from the yellow circle the lamp made on the ceiling.

“Cripes, I know my lesson real good,” Darrell said. He
closed his books and hung his legs over the arms of the rocking chair.

“You’d better study your lesson and not worry about anything else,” Millie said weakly. She picked up the tatter­
ted rubber flyswatter and half-heartedly began swatting
at the bugs on the cream-papered ceiling.

Splat, splat, the swatter went every time she hit, but she
couldn’t seem to kill any of the bugs.

“Gee, it’s hot in here,” she said. She ran her hand back
across her damp forehead and through her black hair. “I
wish it would rain,” she said.

She moved across the creaking linoleummed floor to the
hump-backed chair by the table.

“It just rained day before yesterday,” Darrell said. He
began to rock slowly back and forth on the shrieking rock­
ing chair.

“You suppose her brains were all over the floor?” Dar­
rell said suddenly. “I bet you can see it yet,” he mused in a
faraway tone.

“Darrell, don’t talk like that,” Millie snapped.

“I was just wondering,” he said. He began to chew on
his fingernails.

“I wonder what he killed her for,” he said.

“Darrell, you stop talking like that this minute, and
study your lesson,” Millie said. She stood up again and went
to the bedroom door and closed it. She paused to look out
the open back door before she came back to the table and
sat down.

“I do wish we’d have a breeze,” she said. She opened her
blouse and shook it, fanning herself.

Darrell opened his red catechism and idly leafed through
it. “You know,” he said, “maybe he just went nuts and is
gonna go around and try to kill everybody.”

“I don’t know how you can think of such things with your
catechism open like that,” Millie snapped angrily.

“I don’t know what that’s got to do with it.”

Millie went to the screeendoor and leaned against it. She
dully watched the sluggish flies walk buzzing up and down
the screen.

“I wonder if Rudy went upstream like the sheriff said,”
Darrell said. “Do you suppose?” he asked Millie.
“I don’t know,” she said absently. “I wish it would rain or we’d get a breeze or something.”

“Cripes, this weather ain’t nothin’,” Darrell said. “Wait till it’s July.”

He began to rock harder, making the rockers squeak horribly.

“Will you please not rock the chair like that,” Millie said, turning on him.

“Oh, for cripes sakes,” he said, continuing rocking, “what is wrong with you?”

She did not answer. She slipped out through the sagging screendoor, brushing quickly through so the flies wouldn’t come in. The door spring ground with an almost musical, springing sound as the door closed. She moved across the creaking porch and down the splintered steps and onto the soft warm dirt of the yard.

There was a moon out. It was past full and was very silvery and white, except for the darker patches of grayness that made the eyes and chin of the man in the moon.

Millie scuffed through the dust a little way on her bare feet. She knew she shouldn’t have, for she’d have to wash her feet again.

She looked down towards the river. It looked like glass where the moon reflected from it. It was very clear and white and flat looking, except where it swung curving in behind the bluffs. And below the bluffs there was nothing, but the rough black outlines of the willows and cottonwoods.

She walked a little farther. Her feet touched the soft stiffness of the weeds and the grass that edged the yard. The dew was coming on and the coolness of it made her feet tickle and curl. She stood at the sagging, broken-down hogwire fence and watched and listened. The dogs were barking up-river, and far off, across the river, other dogs answered. Millie shivered, hearing the mournful barking of the hounds.

A sow snuffled loudly from the area of the forbidding dark shapes that were the farm buildings. Millie heard a hen ruffle its feathers from the chickenhouse and a screech owl shriek from down in the valley.

There was the sudden squeak of the pump in the yard. Millie turned around, looking towards the sound.

“Is that you, Darrell?” she asked hesitantly. All she could
see in the darkness was the shadow of a man with no face. He held the old rusty dipper to his mouth, drinking. He was looking at her.

"Oh," she said, staring at the figure. She pushed herself away from the fence. It grated and squeaked with terrible loudness. She stood, frozen, her hands clenched before her. Her face and neck were suddenly very cold.

The figure bent to pump some more water at the squeaking pump. He drank some and poured the rest on the ground. He carefully hung the dipper on the wire on the pump and straightened, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

He came across the yard and stopped a few feet in front of her. She sucked in her breath with sudden sharpness. It was Rudy Gerling.

"Hello, Millie," he said, very softly. His voice was rough and cracking and he sounded like he was going to cough.

Millie could not say anything. Her mouth and throat were filled up. She only stared up in the dark shadow where his face was. She had begun to tremble so hard she had to press her hands to her chest to control it.

"It's hot tonight," he said in his soft cracking voice. "And quiet, but for the dogs." His head nodded upriver. "Your dogs ain't home," he said.

She swallowed, trying to speak, and could not, and swallowed again. "No," she said, "I don't know where Pa went with the dogs. I don't know . . . ."

It's quiet and cool out here," he said, not listening to her. "It was quiet and nice down in the valley too. I like it quiet."

Millie sidled slowly around him, trying to get to the house.

Rudy took off his cap and ran his hands through his wet hair. "I been runnin'," he said. "I'm a little tired." He twisted the cap in his hands. "Could I sit and rest a while?" he asked her almost apologetically. "Up here where it's quiet."

She nodded dumbly. They walked to the porch.

Suddenly Millie darted across the porch and into the kitchen, slamming the screendoor shut behind her. She clung
to the screendoor and peered out at the shadowed gray face that was almost sad, looking in at her.

“Can I come in?” he asked in a strange pleading tone. She gripped the door and stared dumbly at him.

The flies are bad,” she said weakly. She let loose the door and backed to the cold iron stove.

Rudy Gerling waved at the flies and opened the door and came in.

“Somebody here?” Darrell asked from the next room. The rocking chair shrieked once more as he stood up and came curiously to the door. His mouth froze to a frightened oval when he saw Rudy in the doorway.

“Darrell, get Rudy a chair,” Millie said to him.

“Uh, Darrell cried, as though wounded. He turned suddenly and raced through the dining room and out the back door.

“Darrell, where you goin’?” Millie shouted. She ran into the next room. “Darrell!” He was gone and the screendoor was still swinging. She darted to it and looked out across the empty yard. “Darrell, Darrell, don’t leave me!” she shouted. She pushed open the door and ran onto the porch. “Darrell, come back!” she screamed desperately, sobbing. “Darrell!” and Rudy’s hand suddenly clamped over her mouth. The sudden force of it drove her teeth into her lips, making her moan. His other hand circled her waist.

“What you yellin’ for?” he asked, and his voice was like a rasp, flat and deadly. He twisted her around and shoved her down on the floor of the porch. “Don’t yell, don’t ever yell,” he said. He paused, leaning over towards her as though he were going to hit her. “I told you I don’t like people yellin’,” he said.

She stared silently up at him. The blood was beginning to run down the side of her mouth, mixing with the tears and sweat on her face.

Rudy stood in front of her, his hands clenched. He breathed very deeply and then he straightened. The sweat was pouring off him so hard he could see the beads of light reflected by his face even in the half-darkness. He stared at her, and then began to rub his cheek with his finger. His shoulders sagged suddenly.

“You better go in the house,” he said to her.
She slowly stood up and backed to the door, watching him, and went in. He followed her. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve. It wasn't bleeding so badly now, but she could still feel the hotness of the blood along the inside of her mouth.

They went to the kitchen again.

“All I wanted to do was rest a spell,” he said, with a vague gesture of his hands. “The boy will be gettin’ the sheriff and the dogs,” he said, matter-of-factly. “And they will be up here, yellin’ and shootin’ and barkin’.” He clenched his fists and the knuckles of his hand tightened and grew white.

“It’s hot in here,” he said. He ran his hands across his sweaty dark face. He went to the window and peered out into the darkness.

“It would have been all right,” he said distantly, “if she hadn’t started yellin’ and screamin’. I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head, “I don’t know why people can scream and dogs can bark and everything. I remember my old lady...” he began, but turned away from the window and would not go on.

He looked at her. “Are you all right?” he asked, quite gently. She nodded, without looking up from the linoleummed floor.

“You shouldn’ta yelled,” he said. “Nobody needs to yell. From a kid up, folks been screamin’ at me, and I can’t go it no more. No more.” He flexed his hands and went to the screen door.

“I can hear the dogs now,” he said. “Hear ’em?” he asked her.

She listened absently. They’re a long ways off,” she whispered.

“They’ll be here in less’n an hour,” he said. He moved abruptly out the door and across the porch.

She could hear the pump squeak once more, and she imagined seeing him drinking as she had seen him before. Then it was quiet, but for the sounds of the dogs up the river.

She braced herself against the stove and straightened. She walked slowly into the next room and sat down at the table. She opened Darrell’s red catchism, but she could not see to read it. She closed her eyes and rested her head on
her arms, with her hands over her ears, and waited for the dogs and the barking and the men and the shouting to come up from the valley.