The Edge of Night

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Abstract

JOEL McWRIGHT paused and listened once again for the sound of the bell, before he unhooked doubletree and plow from the traces and led the mares along the edge of the creek, facing the sun, which now seemed no higher above the earth than his own shoulders...
Ran down the face of the white stone,
Ate wrinkles in the yellow clay,
Seeped into the sod—
Sought out the intruder.

Roots followed the rain.
Pale, thread-like,
Their tiny fingers gathered the resting dust,
Blended it into a shoot . . .
   A stem and leaves . . .
   A trunk and limbs and leaves.
Embodied the timeless dust in a new frame.

**The edge of night**

JOEL McWRIGHT paused and listened once again for the sound of the bell, before he unhooked doubletree and plow from the traces and led the mares along the edge of the creek, facing the sun, which now seemed no higher above the earth than his own shoulders. There was no wind and the smell of the mares was strong. He had not removed the halter or bit, for he was tired; and he walked slightly stooped, one leg seeming to stride farther than the other. He had rolled his sleeves past his elbows in small folds, and the sunlight glistened from the skin of his arms and face.

It seemed unnatural to have to begin planting so soon, but that year, when the end of March came, the sun broke out with too much warmth and the fields dried and all over the countryside the land was plowed. His own land stretched out before him, like an oblong piece of charcoal grooved and curved. He felt that a part of himself had been lost each year by the sudden upheaval of earth, as though time moved ahead of him when planting was over, so that he could see himself growing old, gradually, the way leaves fall, without sound, from an oak.

He was always measuring time: by listening to the sound
of each step along the creek as he walked home at dusk; by counting check-line stakes evenly spaced in a field, like armless crosses in a cemetery; or recalling a day from another time, a day when dusk came too soon and he was young; or hearing the harsh staccato of a gin whistle that marked the end of autumn. And now, with each turn of the plow, it seemed that he had measured time in a foreign land and waited for the bell to ring.

He knew that the sound would come across the pasture like a shadow moving across a field in the brightness of noon; that he must wait and listen for the sound. And he felt that once it reached him it would break through his skin. It was as if he stood outside a brilliantly lighted room hearing the voices and laughter inside and knowing that not one step forward could be taken until the door was opened. He had stood near the square of light once—when Joe Doyle was born—but was able to move no more than an inch before the door closed. At the sound of the bell there would be, this last time, another chance.

His actions had been clear in his mind the past few months when he thought of what he would do, as though a line had been drawn for him which he could follow; even if Fern's image heavy with child would be before his eyes: he would not run, he would go first to Dr. Reed's, then to her. But at the close of each day the line had grown fainter, so that he could now see no part of it at all.

He remembered Fern lying in bed near the coal-oil lamp with the baby beside her, its pink skin, and her hair spread unevenly over the pillow. Its hair was a softer gold than hers. He could not remember the day they found out Joe Doyle was blind; he did not want to remember. He had prayed for a strong son, one who could walk with him in the fields, speaking of picking time or the coming harvest and, when he himself had grown old, carry part of his very being beyond his time.

He often thought that it was because of this feeling that a wall seemed to be between Joe Doyle and himself. The wall had risen gradually during the past twelve years so that its height was now greater than his own. He had tried to tear it down; but before him, at night when he called Joe Doyle to
his side, was always the image of Fern holding their son, with a circle defined around her into which, he believed, he would never be able to step.

Each night after the evening when she first told him, he lay awake in bed and prayed: *God, let me forget her tenderness for Joe Doyle. Let him love me as much as he loves her. I am not sorry for wanting his love. But let me have another son so that I can forget her tenderness...* It seemed to him that the tenderness was about her even in bed, like a curtain drawn between them, so that he could touch neither her nor Joe Doyle. But he knew that soon, very soon, the curtain would be drawn aside.

The mares jerked impatiently against the check lines and he wheeled sharply around. He led them across the creek to the last gate of the pasture and, after unharnessing and turning them out, walked back. Small footprints ran along the sand near the wild honeysuckle, like knotted twine unwound from the spool. The boy had been going toward the sun. There came to him, only for a moment, a thought that he might meet, walking toward himself, his own image, young once more, with laughter in his eyes—it was the strangest feeling in the world. He wanted to say, I wish the image had been Joe Doyle’s—instead of my own. He knew that the words would fall in the silence, as though he heard them while searching for a time long ago, a time that might never have been, and make him cold.

When he neared the bend in the creek, he stopped and climbed through the barbwire fence into the pasture. The clouds were streaks in the evening sunlight, like thin slender fingers outstretched for something beyond their grasp.

Before he had reached the dead oak in the center of the pasture, the words stopped sounding in his mind and the image faded—as though the oak’s bleak form would still for all time everything that moved toward it. He paused and looked at the trunk, then let his glance go past the limbs to the sky beyond them. Last year, after the spring rains came and ended, when May was nearly over, its leaves had shrivelled, without falling immediately, so that when the wind blew they made a sound like crumpling of cellophane. For some reason it had died. He did not have it cut down be-
cause it had been there since he was a boy and was as much a part of him as his own hands or arms. It was like the way he read at night to Joe Doyle: something sacred, never to end.

There was one book both of them had singled out as being better than all the others, and once, when he was reading from it, Joe Doyle found an error. It was on page seventy, in the center of the page. He had risen and started to sharpen a pencil to correct it, but Joe Doyle took his hand and said: *You don't have to change it, Papa, I'll never see it's wrong.* After a minute he put one arm around Joe Doyle's shoulder and read the words aloud, changing them in his mind as he read.

He moved slowly toward the oak, as if he might pause and touch the trunk when near enough. Its limbs made shadows on the ground, like veins on the back of an old person's hand. At exactly the moment his foot struck the shadows, the bell rang. The three sharp sounds seemed to make the skin near his spine grow taut. It rang again, but he did not run. It was the same way he felt one time when he was walking alone through the woods by the Simpson place and heard a soft treading noise behind him. He was young then and had started to run, but something seemed to grip the muscles of his legs and neck so that he could neither run nor turn his head. When he neared the edge of the pines, the sound had suddenly ended and night engulfed him.

And then he was running. His shadow darted in jumps beside him, seeming to grow shorter and shorter with each stride, until finally he reached the fence and climbed through it into the grove of pecans. He had taken only a few steps before he saw Joe Doyle standing near the house, one hand still holding the mallet of the dinner bell. Joe Doyle turned and ran a short distance toward him. "Papa?"

"It's me. What is it?"

"Mama's sick."

For the first time, above the sound of his own breathing he heard the low moaning.

When he came into Fern's room, her head was turning from side to side on the pillow, her body huge and very still beneath the sheet. He knelt beside the bed. "Fern . . ."
lifted her wrist and felt for her pulse. "Can't you hear me?" Her arm was moist and cold. He stepped to the window and called, "Son, run get Dr. Reed!" Before the sound of the words ended in the quietness, Joe Doyle was running away from him, as though caught in the last rays from the sun and guided by their light.

He called again, "Joe D." Joe Doyle ran beyond the wall, then slowly stopped beside a pecan, without turning toward him, as if he might go on. "Come here to me . . . Here, by the window." He rested one hand lightly against the bark. After a while, his whole body began to tremble. Then he turned and walked back. Joel said, "Wait for me and we'll both go . . . You started the wrong way. Go out to the barn. I'll be there . . . after I see how your Mama is." He watched him go away and when he could no longer see him he believed that something had ended forever. He had wanted to say, Don't ever leave me; you're all I've ever had . . . For a moment a feeling came over him that Joe Doyle might go anyway, and he turned and started toward the door, then stopped.

He knelt beside Fern and slightly raising her head, placed one ear near her nostrils; he could scarcely feel her breath. There was no sound, no movement in the room, except the slow rising and falling of her breasts. He loosened the sheet over her and started to speak; but he did not know what to say.

After a minute he went to the kitchen and soaked a cloth in the wash basin. He came into the room and knelt beside her again. There was a damp film over her upper lip. He brushed the hair away from her cheeks and gently bathed her face. Her hair was a soft gold in the dim light. He said, "Fern, I told Joe Doyle to get Dr. Reed— I didn't mean to . . . I forgot . . ." The words sounded strange—as if he spoke to himself, with no one else in the room.

And then her breathing stopped. At first he did not believe that it had stopped and pressed his head close to her face and held her wrist tightly. There was no breathing, nor could he feel her pulse. The odor of Death seemed suddenly to enter his nostrils and there was a fierce, quick ripping inside him, like the tearing of a curtain. He drew back.
Silently, with no warning, Death had come and as silently, left.

He stood motionless. He thought that all the harsh words ever spoken between them might rise to one shrieking voice and echo from the walls. But no voice came.

After a while he walked to the screen door and called, "Joe D!" He did not call again because he could see a mare moving swiftly along the path near the pasture. A small satchel was tied to the saddle.

Dr. Reed reined the mare in near the corner of the house and slowly got down. His hair seemed grayer than it was, as though dusted with chalk. He opened the door. "How is she?"

He started to speak, but Dr. Reed stepped past him and lit the coal-oil lamp near the bed. Though he had not turned, he could see Dr. Reed lifting Fern's arm for a moment, then slowly letting it fall. He put his hand to his face.

Dr. Reed held his arm. "Kathryn Gibson's boy came. . . He said they heard the bell . . ."

Joel did not say anything.

"You've got to understand. . . she told me not to tell you. . . Her heart—there's nothing you could've done—but only wait."

Joel turned and lifted one hand, as if he might strike the wrinkled face. "You could've killed it! I would've told you to if only I'd known."

The hand gripped his arm tighter. "You wouldn't have wanted that, Joel—no more than she did. She knew you wanted another child. . . ."

He walked away. When he heard the screen door close quietly behind him, he thought that it sounded like the sealing of the door of a tomb.

He went to the alley of the barn and called. A lantern burned near the stables at the other end. No one was there. Then he walked toward the house.

Dr. Reed stood on the steps. He looked down. "Maybe you'd better take Joe Doyle over to his Aunt Mildred's. I . . ."

"I can't find him."

"Did you look in the barn?"

"Yes."
“That’s where he usually stays.”
“I called and he hasn’t come.”
“He’s a sensitive boy, Joel. He hears things you or I can’t see. That’s why I don’t want him around when . . . .”
Night came like the silence between them; he had not noticed until then how dark it was. He said, “I started to send him after you . . . I forgot—”
“Did he go toward the ravine?”
“He stopped. I didn’t think he’d go.”
Ravine. Ravine. He turned and ran to the saddled mare and rode down the path near the pasture, toward the ravine.
He reined the mare in at the edge and swung down. The moon was full and bright and he could see the jagged rocks pointing upward along the incline, like swords buried in a field. He called, “Joe Doyle!” He called again. He could not hear Joe Doyle’s voice, but only the business of the night and, for the first time in his life, it sounded like the slow grating of a file. He began walking toward the grove of pines on his left. The air was damp and cool and about him was the smell of pine needles.
When he came to the clearing, he stopped and listened. A poplar grew on the opposite side, like a long white streak against the edge of night. He tried to think of the sound of Joe Doyle’s voice; for a moment he could not and it made him afraid. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine a world without color or light. He could see Joe Doyle’s face and golden hair and the thin, frail body. It pained him to want to embrace his son—pained him because he believed that there would be, even now, the wall between them.
Joe Doyle’s love was like the edge of night—there, across from him; though he might move to touch it, it would recede and be lost in the darkness: it was something beyond him that he, alone, could not create nor destroy.
He called again and when no answer came he walked back to the mare and rode near the ravine’s edge toward Dr. Reed’s house. There were patches of mist along the path and as he passed through them they seemed to break like a thin veil. He remembered: When you grow older you’ll see someday. We’ll take you to Dallas and get them operated on. There’s one of the best doctors in the country there and
I talked to him and he told me you'd be able to see. Almost three years had passed, slowly, as though each day would make a scar upon his lips for having lied. Joe Doyle was nine then. One night he called him to his side and started to tell him that he had lied; but when the eyes looked up, clear and searching, he did not say anything, for he felt that the words would pierce them and blood pour onto his hands.

When Dr. Reed’s house loomed faintly before him in the darkness, his heart began to pound and he made himself think, he must be here; there's nowhere else to go. He stopped the mare beneath the apple tree at the corner of the yard. After a while the silence came upon him like the first, slow falling of rain and he swung down. He had run only a short distance before he heard the sound. The screen door opened and Joe Doyle stepped onto the porch; his face was pale and thin. “Dr. Reed?”

“No. It’s me.”

“He’s not here. I tried to get him.” He looked upward, as though to search Joel’s face, to see if it was angered. “I lost my way.”

“Come here.” Joel held him close to his side. “We’re going to your Aunt Mildred’s. He came. We’ll ride his mare.”

Joel hoisted Joe Doyle up behind him and they rode away from the house, along the path toward his pasture. He slowed the mare to a stop at the large, east gate, then opened it without getting down. They rode through, onto the moonlit grass.

“Did you close the gate.”

“No. I’ll close it when I ride back.”

After a while Joel asked, “How did you get over to Dr. Reed’s?” The small hands were clasped about his waist. He opened them and felt of the palms with his thumb. There were long scratches on them.

“I went along the barbwire near the pasture.”

“I know.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Why did you go?”

“I was afraid about Mama. You're not really mad at me, are you?”

Joel did not say anything. When they were almost half-
way to the other side of the pasture, he stopped the mare and sat very still. "If anything ever happened to your Mama, would you still love me, as much as you do her?"

"I've never thought about it like that. I love both of you."

Then Joel said, "I'm not mad at you." They rode on again. "I'm going to leave you at your Aunt Mildred's for the night. Do you want to stay?"

"Yes, if you want me to."

When they reached the fence, he turned and lowered Joe Doyle to the ground. "Wait'll I tie the mare." They walked through the gate. Joe Doyle ran ahead of him and stood near the kitchen steps in the square of light from the door. "Aunt Mildred!"

"There's no one here; I guess they're gone."

"Where?"

"I'll tell you after while . . ." He opened the screen door and stood waiting beside it for Joe Doyle, who went past him into the kitchen. He said, "We'd better doctor up those hands . . . before we make you a pallet."

Joe Doyle stood near the table—with his face turned toward the light—and his eyes were like shadows. "Is the lamp on?"

"Yes. It's near the window. They forgot to turn it down."

"I can smell it burning."

As he watched Joe Doyle's face he caught himself searching for some vague enduring strength, as though finding it there might mean that he could tell his son; he did not want to tell him. He remembered: *He's a sensitive boy, Joel. He hears things you or I can't see . . .* For a full minute he stood motionless, hearing the very sound of the words, then he knelt beside him and held the hands to the light. The scratches were like long, brown scars. "Do they hurt?"

"Yes."

"We'll have to wash them . . . Close your eyes and it won't hurt as much . . ." He took a yellow bar of soap lying on the drain board and broke the scratches open, then washed them. When Joe Doyle moved closer, Joel could feel the short, drawn breaths against his cheeks. "I'll get some cloth . . ." He was almost whispering. He found white broad-
cloth in the machine in the bed room and tore it into long strips. Joe Doyle walked to the door and stood still.

Joel said, "I'm going to soak these in coal oil."

"Will it burn?"

"A little . . ." He turned down the wick and took the chimney away, then raised the wick from the bowl and let the coal oil drip onto the strips. It was dark and he could not see.

"Why did they leave?"

The words seemed to shake his whole body, but he did not move. "Wait'll I finish bandaging . . ."

When he was through, he found a quilt in the hall closet and spread it out on the living room floor. "I'll get a sheet."

When he returned, Joe Doyle was lying on his side in the dim square of moonlight from the window. He spread the sheet over him and stretched out by the quilt. After a while he took both of the small hands from beneath the sheet and rested them on his chest; but he did not speak.

"Is the moon still out?"

"Yes. It's shining in the window . . ."

"Sometimes I love you more than I do Mama, because you're so good to me."

". . . You know I've always loved you more than anyone else. I've never told your Mama that, but she knew. And she forgave me for it . . ." He remembered again: He's a sensitive boy, Joel . . .

When Joe Doyle did not say anything, he rose and left the room. He did not want to leave; but the silence was like a thick veil that seemed to smother him. He sat near the kitchen window and looked outside. He could see beyond the tiny specks of light coming from houses near the fields, to a place, it seemed, so distant that even his thoughts would no longer carry that far. Suddenly Joe Doyle was standing in the doorway. The small arms embraced him and their hands touched, only for a moment, like wings of frightened birds.

"You'll stay with me if they don't come back, won't you?"

"Yes," he said. Then he closed his eyes—as though he might shut out all of time beyond—and leaned further into the window and wept.