Paradox

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beetle, a hideous thing at least five feet tall. But he was standing in front of that mirror — how — he was looking at himself. He was that hideous black thing. He had been transformed into a bug, a Dytiscida Coleoptera.

A shudder of disgust and horror slid up him, and he started to scream — but he could not even scream. Only great rasping churrepps came out. He tried to stop, but his great, jagged jaws kept convulsing open and closed, open and closed. With his claws he tore at the unyielding shell that encased him. Ripping and scratching, he fought to free himself from the smooth, shiny trap, but he could not. Suddenly he realized that he was not just trapped inside the shell, he was the shell; he was the bug.

He fought to control himself — fought to clear his mind. But he could only stand there clinging to the dresser and shaking. Now he knew what had been happening to him, but why? Why had it happened? He could only stand there gazing back at those glistening, motionless eyes.


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GEORGE TANNER felt a growing warmth as he came down the alley toward the little house that stood on back of ol’ man Cranley’s lot. Cranley had been glad to rent the shack to George. And George had been glad to take it.

Marie met him at the door and took his hand. Took his hand, squeezed it and he felt the strength. And he smiled, an apologetic confused smile, but a smile. She put her head to his chest and said, “My husband is home. My husband.”

“They laughed at me in church today, Marie. A couple women behind me kept talkin’ about how I wasn’t dressed to pray to the Lord.”

A big man, George Tanner. Not tall, but very broad, his delicate green eyes had the look of an old dog who has just realized that the shotgun is not for rabbits this time.
“And then when we all came out I could feel everyone watchin’ me. The little kids started in then and called me a dirty man and said I didn’t have any respect for God, but they got started throwin’ rocks at a beagle dog and I came on home.”

She slid a hand up to his rugged face, pressed it lightly against the rough weather-creased cheek. She said nothing, just looked at his face and searched it. Saw in this huge flat face with the wide-set eyes, a love that was whole, tinged by no wish for something new, no regret for his responsibility.

Patting her head George looked at her warm, small brown eyes and rounded midsection where their first child grew. The first child, a product of love, an object of love — instigator of an unrelenting security responsibility in the father, and the awesome power and wisdom of maternal affection in the mother.

The baby was due any day and since there was no money for maternity clothes and no sewing machine to let out her three dresses she stayed in the shack and wore her nightgown. It was dirty now.

George’s massive shoulders were rounded, and his shoulders hardly ever slumped. When he was a boy he had heard Pastor Friedle say, “Your body is like a cross. Your shoulders are the crossarm and must support the weight, as much as Christ’s cross supported him and with him, the sins of the world.” And young, stocky George Tanner had sat beside his mother and watched the man in front of him whose left ear was twitching and had hoped that he could hold it until he got home so he wouldn’t wet his pants, but he had heard the old minister. He had heard and remembered. The echoing boom of the old minister’s voice was implanted forever in his mind.

“Some of you will allow your shoulders to slump when you bend with a load but someone will be there whose shoulders will take the blow for both of you. And maybe someday you can do the same for him.” George’s strong shoulders had taken many blows for himself and for other people and even for a dog or two. When he was younger,
Dad had come home drunk and kicked him and called him a pie-eyed little bastard and had told him to get his slut of a mother out of bed so she could help the head of the household throw up his guts.

He sat down on the time-chewed, once over-stuffed chair. Gray-white chunks of cotton stuffing covered the floor under the chair and mice came from the canning factory across the street and saw the cotton on the floor, thought it was popcorn and were disappointed, but at least it was warm here.

Marie was graceful, he thought, even now, as he watched her fry hamburger and potatoes on the electric hot plate. Watched them sizzle and spit like wild cats or mad dogs or drunk people or sober people. The same meal every night. Every night he watched the liquid grease swirl in the pan. Marie brought him his potatoes and meat and he ate them and watched her as she sat on the bed, her plate beside her.

"Better eat it, Hon. I know it's flat but you have to feed the little one."

"I'm sorry," and she smiled, "I really like hamburger." She ate voraciously and George knew she hated the same junk every night, and he loved her. Always he would love her.

George was bothered a lot by the incident in church that morning and he couldn't keep it to himself.

"I have to go to church in work clothes, Hon. I know it's wrong to work on Sunday but I have to, you know that. Seems like a man ought to get more than sixty-five cents an hour to work in a gas station. I have to change tires and grease cars."

She smiled and got up, came over to him and touched his hand. A smile of earth, untainted by the venomous juice of material longing, free from the all powerful game within a life. A smile of love for the being she was about to bring into the world but even more for the man who was her life.

His flat forehead was furrowed but he felt better for her smile.
“One man with shiny black shoes said somethin’ about the communists takin’ over the church. I ain’t a communist, you know that. I remember once Mom told me how the ol’ man was put in jail for feeding a starving colored-man bum. They called the old man an anarchist. Just for feeding a person they threw him in jail.”

A small squeal came from the corner and they looked to see three mice attacking one large one. The large one didn’t seem to be fighting back, and when his attackers quit, he scurried away, then stopped and sniffed the air, didn’t seem to know which way to go.

“Seems like people just have to have somethin’ to beat. And then when they get to be a success maybe they say ‘Well, I got here the hard way. I did it all myself.’ And maybe they don’t see the welts in people’s lives, and the kicked dogs and maybe they don’t see their dead parents.’”

He looked at Marie and shook his head, looked into the small, live brown eyes. “Don’t really see much at all. Maybe a guy just don’t look down or back.”

He got up and went outside to get some coal. The snow made no sound as the soggy crystals parted beneath his number thirteen D’s. Guys always asked George why he didn’t cut off his feet and sell them for skis and he always laughed with them.

A snowflake fell on his nose. George always told Marie that snowflakes were messages from heaven. Holding his wide, flat face to the sky, he closed his eyes and stood there for a moment. Fragile particles cooled his face. Then he jammed the big scoop in the pile and carried the coal inside.

George went up to old man Cranley’s and borrowed the Tribune. Reading the evening paper was George’s only recreation. Front page, then sports, then check in between. The funnies he always saved until last so Marie and he could enjoy them together, could laugh with the characters in the cartoons and could laugh with each other. He was glad that they could laugh with things and not at them. Weak people laugh at things. Laugh at scared dogs and become mice, no, not even mice.

They sat on the bed and George prayed.
“Almighty Lord, God on High. I sinned today by goin’
to church in workclothes and I wasn’t shaved very good
either, but I only have one blade. I’m sorry as I can be
because I did it but there was no other way. I can’t afford
good clothes an’ I hafta work on Sunday. I’m sorry as I can
be about my sin, but there was only this one way.”

He looked at her and she was looking into his eyes with
tender adoration. Devotion to this man, maybe even more
than to God. Or is man God? Is God life, life—love.

“I did it with good meaning, Lord, and if it isn’t too
much I wish you’d kind of look over Marie’s shoulder for
the next couple of weeks until the baby comes. You don’t
have to look too close ’cause it’ll be sort of messy, but I’m
praying to you to guide us in these hard times and wherever
you lead us it will be all right. You’ve always done right
by us so far. Thanks and Amen.”

Marie put her head to his chest and he held her close to
him. “Husband mine.”

A muffled knock mushed through the tar-paper door.

“Come in.”

The door opened briskly and a man stepped in “Ah,
hello.” He was a tall thin man and his face had creases
where he smiled, but he shuffled uncertainly, stiffly.

Another man came in behind the tall one. The second
man was short and a bit paunchy. He was balding now,
probably in his late forties. Sniffing the air in the room, he
looked down as if he expected to step in something. A man
who volunteered for every committee in the church and
did nothing on them. A light bulb painted black.

The tall man shuffled his feet uneasily like a man trying
to get a foothold in a marble bin and said, “We’re from
the First Congregational Church’s welfare committee and
we thought that you might need some help. We-a-noticed
that you weren’t dressed very well in church today and we’d
like to help.”

The short man grunted and sniffed, shaking his head in
agreement.

George’s head spun and he wondered what to say. It
was a double hurt, a stretching agony. He wanted to go to
church, wanted to dress for church. These people thought it was a sin to wear dirty work clothes to church, and if a whole church congregation thought so then they were probably right.

He couldn't afford good clothes, not with the baby coming.

The tall man spoke. "I have some clothes I'll be glad to give you if you'll just come to my house tonight.

George thought, why must I have clean clothes, good clothes. Is the will of the people the will of God? Must each man discover the will of God for himself? Clothes don't make the will to worship God. Dirt was made by God. Dirt from cars carrying the sick to hospitals, dirt from tractors that tilled soil to produce crops that let people live. Dirt on work clothes that let a person live and raise a family—that wasn't dirt but life. The kind of dirt you can wash off.

"I won't be home tonight. Have to go to a party," said the tall man, "but if you want to you can stop by my home later on. There's a box on the back porch. Nothing fancy, but good enough. Well, we'll have to go now, but if you want something to wear just stop by 215 Lockport. Go right in and get the box. You can have it all. Goodnight."

"Good night, and—thanks," said George.

The smaller man looked back over his shoulder as he walked out of the door, wrinkled his lips and looked as if he would like to drown a nest of rats but was afraid he would get his fingers chewed off.

"If I just hadn't got laid off over in Wade. We were just gettin' started. Paper said the layoff didn't hurt much. Wonder why the paper said that?"

"...like to help you...not fit to pray to the Lord...sin, sin, sin...dirty clothes. People should dress properly to worship, should carry out the will of God. Will of God. Or man?"

He got up and checked the fire, touched Marie's face with a thick, tender finger.

Closing the door he walked down the alley. The only tracks in the fresh snow were those of a rabbit and then
George found the rabbit in the middle of the road. Quiet, dead, the carcass was not bludgeoned or strewn about on the snow. A weasel had drawn the blood, the purpose from the rabbit's life. Had done it quietly, had left everything fresh snow-white and nobody would even notice the rabbit. Maybe another rabbit would notice the frozen body but that would serve only as a futile warning, for he too would succumb some day.

The will of the people — the will of God.

Smoke from the light plant fell on the town and it was thick over the alley. Stinking smoke that saturated the air and the kitchens and the bed clothes but none of them smelled it because they were used to it. Nobody knew it was there — there was no smell. No stinking smoke.

George walked steadily to Lockport Avenue. Hunched forward, he trod through the light, clean snow and saw nothing. When he got to the house he felt guilty. Sneaking as quietly as possible he went onto the back porch. He reached the snow with the box and started to run.

"Stop. Stop or I'll shoot."

A short, quick blat and he knew he should have stopped, he couldn't stop now. He was running. Running forever. The second shot caught him in the back of the head. Big feet faltered, massive shoulders toppled forward. The box lay beside him, an old brown suit spilled out.

The rookie cop sobbed, "I didn't wanta hit him, didn't wanta kill him. Didn't want to hurt him."

And the old sergeant said, "You'll get used to it, kid. People gotta' learn they can't go against society and get away with it." And the kid felt better.

The lady who came out of the house next door screamed and vomited, then calmed down and said, "That man's awfully dirty, especially on a Sunday. Somebody ought to clean him up before they bury him."

When they lifted him from the snow, a white imprint remained, no blood, no dirt. No one would see the print of the body, except someone who was looking down.

Cole Foster, Ag. Jr.