Hailstorm

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TED crouched beneath the greasy belly of the tractor and stared at the reddish clay of his field. The heavy rain had already turned it gummy, and small rivulets of water were running between the rows of corn. It had been an unusually hot day for June, and he’d plowed since early morning, with his shirt draped over one fender and no hat to keep off the sun. The shiny steel blades had cut reluctantly through the hard-baked soil, enveloping him in a cloud of fine dust. His dry mouth still tasted gritty.

It hadn’t rained for weeks, but the air was sultry and too still. He’d known a storm was coming when a chilly breeze sprang up, rustling the row of cottonwoods along the fence. He should have quit then and gone to the house, but something kept him in the field, doggedly riding up and down the rows on the old green tractor, pulling a two-row cultivator.

It had been a late spring, and the corn was still too small to plow, but he had been eager to get in the field. There was too much time to think, just puttering around the barnyard at odd jobs.
Guiding the tractor between the rows wasn’t demanding enough, though. He hated the clumsy slowness of plowing. He could see the storm rolling toward him, and his muscles were tense, aching to hold it back by sheer force. A slow, soaking rain could save the parched corn. If he had had a rain like that last year, he could have gotten a hundred bushels to the acre. But it hadn’t rained at all last June, and the late ears had been only half filled out. It wasn’t too late yet for this year’s crop, but he didn’t like the way the sky looked.

The big, puffy clouds turned a smoky gray and then almost black. The first drops of water made muddy lines on his dusty arms and chest. Even when the scattered rain-drops changed to sheets of water he didn’t raise the plow and head for shelter. He thrust his arms into the sleeves of his worn chambray shirt, but it soaked through at once and clung to his back. The air turned still colder, and the sky gradually took on a mysterious gray-green cast.

Now he crouched under the still-warm engine and watched silently as the heavy pellets of ice fell around him, bouncing against others already on the ground. He wasn’t a man who ever said much, but he had to clench his teeth now to keep from crying out. It seemed to him that a personal enemy was challenging him to mortal combat, and he longed to destroy it as it was destroying his hopes. The rough white balls hit the tractor with dull thuds, but they fell silently on the ground and the corn.

A single hailstone bounced off a tire and rested in front of him. He picked it up, testing its weight in his calloused right hand. He rotated it with his fingers, feeling the roughness and irregularity of the sphere of ice. He could imagine the brisk, animated voice of the radio announcer in town: “Hailstones as big as golfballs have been found. The record diameter brought in so far is . . . .”

He hurled the ball away. Beside him a row of new corn plants hung in limp shreds. The broken-off leaves were so flat against the ground they looked painted on.

It was over in a few minutes. He crawled out slowly, stretching his cramped muscles, and got back on the tractor. He drove to the edge of the field and then around it to the
gate. The worn tires were coated with mud, and the tractor moved reluctantly up the lane. He left it in front of the shed and turned toward the house.

The sun was out again, hotter than ever, and unless he looked down there was no evidence of the storm. His shirt was almost dry, and the sky was back to its usual warm blue. In the barn lot a calf was bawling for its mother, and a flock of starlings on the light wire chattered noisily.

He shoved his fists into the pockets of his levis and stared at the ground, still seeing the rows of young corn plants limp and broken. Here there were only a few torn leaves lying in the gravel, and the balls of ice were disappearing under the blazing sun.

He unhooked the wire and went through the yard gate. As he crossed the lawn to the back porch, Margaret ran out to meet him. Her sleazy blue housedress was rumpled and her short brown hair hung in tangles, but she looked relieved and happy.

"Ted! I was getting worried about you." She slipped her arm through his and looked up into his lean brown face. "I was afraid you'd got caught out in the hail."

"I crawled under the tractor." His voice was expressionless, and the fine lines around his eyes, from years of working outside in sun and wind, didn't tighten into a smile as usual.

She put one arm around his waist and hugged him hard for a moment. "It's not that bad, you know. We're all safe, and some of the corn will surely pull through. Here, look." She drew him to the edge of the porch, and he went without protest, holding himself stiffly erect. "Something survived, anyway. I suppose the lilac bush sheltered them."

He bent his head and stared where she pointed. A double row of pink and white petunias stared back at him. They were beaded with drops of water, but the hail hadn't touched them.

Margaret's voice went on. "Nancy was scared, but I had to pry Timmy away from the front window. I heard it break just when I'd got them to the cellar. Can you find some cardboard or something to cover it with?"

He nodded, still staring at the little pink and white
flowers against the peeling boards of the porch.

"Fine, then I'll get back in the house. I don't like to leave the kids alone with all that broken glass. Timmy's so curious about everything." She turned and went inside, the screen door banging behind her.

Ted scarcely noticed she was gone. The flowers were stiff and erect, and in the brilliant light their color was garish and unreal. Slowly, deliberately, he drew his mud-caked shoe through the middle of the row and crushed them.

The Cock of the Golden Morning

by Del Nett

Education, Grad.

RAFAEL, his black chauffeur's cap tucked under his arm, stood at a respectable distance, saying: "Are you ready yet, Miss Tracy?" He whispered it so gently that the slender young blonde wondered how many times he said it before she turned. She pulled her veil down and, putting her gloves in her purse, walked down to the black limousine waiting in the street.

Rafael opened the door and Tracy slid onto the cold leather seat, where, leaning her blonde head back, she closed her eyes against the vacant afternoon. For a few moments an unordered dark hovered behind her lids, and the weight of her emptiness seemed beyond the darkness. Rafael's door slamming interrupted her senses and Tracy opened her eyes again. The car was moving now through the curving streets.

Rafael studied her through the mirror, his young face a mask behind his dark glasses; then whispering through the speaker system, he asked: "Where shall I take you?"

"The beach," Tracy answered, staring at the impassive face in the mirror until it turned away. The beach would be empty and blue by late afternoon and she would frolic