The Man Who Killed D. B. Cooper

Susan Roe*
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The old man had to be crazy. Leon had suspected it for years, ever since Alma died in '72, but now he was sure of it. He yanked at a withered tulip stalk and heard the muffled pop it made when it separated from the earth.

Leon Purvis understood tulips, how the plant fed the bulb long after its bright petals lay scattered by the wind. Hjalmar had been after him for two weeks to clear away the tulip bed on the south side of the garage so the marigolds could be planted. Leon waited until the stalks turned yellow-brown under the warm sun. When they were dry and crackling as harvest-ready corn, he told Hjalmar they were ready to be pulled.

"These bulbs need to be lifted this fall. If you let them bury themselves, pretty soon none will come up in the spring." It was the first time Leon had spoken since breakfast. He had intended to break the silence with other words but his mouth wasn’t ready to form them.

"No." Hjalmar sat in a lawn chair a few feet away, a gray sweater buttoned across his narrow chest.

Leon decided not to argue. Alma used to tell him stories when he was a kid, about Hjalmar and his brother Thor, Leon’s grandfather. Hjalmar, she said, was only the second most stubborn Norwegian ever. Thor died the year Leon was two, from a punctured lung suffered when he fell off the roof of his house. Thor would have lived, Alma liked to say, if he’d agreed to go to the hospital. Instead, he died the next day in the house where he was born. Alma said that was the day she knew she made the right decision by choosing Hjalmar instead of Thor.

Leon tossed the last stalk on a compost pike at the corner of the garage and reached for a tray of marigold seedlings. The were pale and sickly-looking in the bottom halves of quart milk cartons. Few of the cartons held enough dirt to support the expanding root systems. Hjalmar had started the seeds in the kitchen windowsills weeks before. It was impossible to tell that he had fussed over them daily. But then, Leon conceded, Hjalmar had never been much good at growing anything from seed. His hundred acres tillable were cash leased to Tjernagel across the section for years before Hjalmar retired and sold the land outright to Tjernagel’s son.

"Are you going to transplant them today, then?"
Leon counted to five. "I thought you wanted me to."

"Not necessarily today." Hjalmar tapped his cane against a chair leg in an aggravating rhythm of wood against aluminum. "It’s going to rain tonight. Should be a good one. I’d hate to see them washed right out of the ground. Maybe you could wait until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow’s Monday. I have to go to work, remember?" Leon set a plant into the hole he had dug and scooped the black earth around it. He pressed the dirt
firmly down around the stem.
Hjalmar didn’t answer. When Leon looked up, the old man had lifted his face, eyes closed, to the sun.
Leon jabbed a trowel into the soil and dug a space for the next plant. “I’ll cover them before I go to bed.”
Grains of dirt filled the short shelves of his fingernails and his shirt was sticking to his back when he finished transplanting the marigolds. He stood and stretched, joints cracking.
The sky held no clouds to signal the rain Hjalmar predicted. Leon remembered what it was like to hope for rain that didn’t come in time. He uncoiled the hose and wet the flower bed with a slow trickle. Hjalmar didn’t seem to notice.
“If what you said at breakfast is true, what did you do with the body?” Leon bent over and turned the hose on the back of his neck. Cold water ran through his short hair, past his ears where the brown faded to gray, and dripped off his nose.
“I buried him there by the garage. I planted the tulip bulbs on top of him the next fall.” Hjalmar’s eyes remained closed, as if the conversation wearied him.
“You what?” Leon stepped away from the garage. “Here?”
The creases in Hjalmar’s face grew deeper but he didn’t smile. “Yep.”
Leon pulled the tail of his shirt out of his work pants and swiped at his face.
“And you never told anyone about him? There must have been some kind of a reward.”
“I think there was. It’s been such a long time ago. Sixteen years. And I wasn’t paying much attention to things like that. I knew right away that I couldn’t turn the body over to the FBI.”
“Why the hell not? The man hijacked a plane and got away with two hundred grand.”
“A lot people admired him for it, too. Did you know somebody wrote a song about him? ‘The Ballad of D.B. Cooper.’ I heard it on a diner jukebox in Las Vegas.”
Leon disconnected the hose and began to loop it in a loose circle around his arm. “Somebody wrote a song about Bonnie and Clyde, too.”
“It’s not the same.” Hjalmar leaned forward, eyes open and intent on Leon.
“Every November the folks in Washington state have a big celebration in his honor. He’s a hero to a lot of people.”
“Some people need heroes. I don’t.”
“You’re right. Some people need heroes. That’s why I couldn’t tell anyone. I didn’t want to be the man who killed D. B. Cooper. I didn’t want that responsibility.”
“You told me he died of his injuries. From the parachute jump out of the plane.”
“He did,” Hjalmar said. “I don’t mean it - how do you say it?”
“Literally?”
“Yes. I didn’t mean it literally. I mean, I couldn’t kill the part of him that lived on in other people. What would the ones who sang that song think if they knew he died before the words were even written?”
“Where did you say you heard that song?” Leon didn’t like the trap he was setting, but he had begun to wonder if Hjalmar might have had a stroke. Nothing serious, no paralysis or slurred speech. Just a little rearrangement of the brain cells.
“In a diner in Las Vegas.”
“You never went to Las Vegas.” Leon sprung the trap.
“Yes, I did. After Alma’s... after Alma died.”
“You went to Florida. You sent me a postcard. It had flamingoes on it.”
“I went to Florida after I went to Las Vegas. I -what do you call it? I laundered the money.”
Leon tried to imagine Hjalmar in a casino, standing at a roulette wheel with a small fortune in the pocket of his good suit. “You’re crazy, old man. I’m not listening to any more of this.”

The backyard needed mowing, and after that Leon remembered a broken hinge on the barn door. There hadn’t been any animals in the barn for twenty years and there probably would never be again, but he hated to see the acreage go downhill, even though it wasn’t more than a house, a few buildings and twenty acres of scrub pine and cottonwood trees.

He repaired the hinge, then stepped into the dusty interior of the barn. Little had been touched since the last steer switched its tail through the gate on the way to market. Leon looked up at the roof, memories nudging their way in. He had climbed all the way up there when he was eleven, on a dare from his cousin Donny. Donny sold computers in Iowa City these days. “I’m glad I got out while the getting was good,” was all he had to say when he came to visit.

Leon sat on the wide beam that separated the haymow floor from the livestock pens. He had come here to sit two years before, the day of the auction the bank held at his own barn nine miles away. Hjalmar had a cat then, an ugly yellow and white tom starved for attention. It curled up on Leon’s lap while he waited for the day to end.

The cat was gone now, too. Leon dusted off his pants and went back to the house.

Lunch was Hjalmar’s specialty, canned beef stew and cottage cheese. The stew was simmered until its consistency was like that of the cottage cheese. Leon didn’t notice.

“What did you do with the money?”
“I spent it.” Hjalmar poured heated milk into his coffee and wrapped his
hands around the mug.

"Two hundred grand? What did you spend it on?" Leon couldn’t look away from Hjalmar’s hands. Under the almost transparent skin, blood pulsed slowly. Leon didn’t know how a heart so listless could power its fading husk of flesh.

“It wasn’t that much. He lost some in the jump.”


“And I dropped some in Las Vegas.” Hjalmar forked a mangled bit of carrot out of his stew.

Leon turned to a silver picture on the screen of the television on the corner cupboard. A man in a dark suit pointed to a map of the United States. Gray blobs of cloud shapes were massed over western Iowa. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t blame you. But it’s true.”

“Prove it.”

“I will,” Hjalmar said. “After lunch.”

An hour later, Leon plowed through the underbrush of the timber, his pants sticking to every burr until he felt like that new-fangled stuff called Velcro that kids had on their shoes instead of shoelaces. The timber seemed to stretch on forever, though he knew the end of it was less than half a mile from Hjalmar’s barn. He tripped over a fallen limb and cursed.

Suddenly, there it was, as Hjalmar had promised. A Chevy, ’67, just like the one Leon and Alice had bought brand new, their first new car. The same car that Alice and the girls drove away in ’72. Alice had said that life had to be better somewhere else, and she had driven off to find out. Leon wondered briefly if she had ever found a place to be happy. Then the thought passed and the car in front of him was not the one he had washed and waxed on Sunday afternoons such as this.

The car, once white, showed rust over the wheel wells and the tires were flat. Leon wiped at the driver’s window and could vaguely make out the miles on the odometer. It looked like 42,000, but the first number could have as easily been a nine. Both doors were either locked or rusted closed.

Leon faced Hjalmar on the back porch. “There aren’t any blood stains on the front seat like you said. There’s not even much of a front seat left. Looks like the mice moved in.”

“Did you look at the license plates?”

“Yeah. So what? That only proves that the car was from Washington state. Anyone could have driven it here.”

“Into my timber?” Hjalmar tapped his cane against the porch floor.

“If you let them. Or maybe you weren’t here when they did it. Maybe you were in Las Vegas.”

Hjalmar was silent for a moment. Leon thought the old man had begun to
realize that his outrageous story wouldn't wash.

"I've got the title somewhere. It shows the name and address of the man he bought the car from, and he signed it in case he got stopped while he was driving."

"Yeah. He signed it D.B. Cooper. And then he hung a sign on the trunk of the car that said 'F.B.I., here I am.'"

"It's signed over to Dennis B. Cooperman. It's dated, too. November 24, 1971. If I can find it, will that be enough proof?"

"Drop it, old man. Just drop it." Leon watched a shadow cross the meadow, now overgrown with weeds. He looked up. A single cloud moved away from the sun.

He talked to Judy on the phone an hour before supper. Talking to Judy always made him feel better. She didn't mind that the future he could promise her was twenty acres of worthless timber, an empty barn and a house shared with a stubborn, crazy old man until Hjalmar's days were through.

Her youngest, Joanie, was only seven. Joanie made Leon tuck her into bed at night when he was there. He liked doing it, too. Joanie was about the age of his youngest when Alice decided to run away. It would be nice to hear the noise of children in his ears again.

He cooked supper, sausages, and potatoes from a box, wondering if he could get used to eating real food again. Judy was a good cook. And she'd be there every night when he came home from work, to understand and soothe away the rage he felt at no longer being his own boss.

Hjalmar didn't eat much. Leon told him a dirty joke he'd heard from Christian Tjernagel the week before, but Hjalmar didn't seem to want to hear the punch line.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you, old man." Leon had lectured himself as he fried the sausages. Lots of people went crazy at the end. Hjalmar had just as much right as anyone else.

"If I find the car title, will you believe me?"

"I believe you." Leon washed the dishes and left them in the drainer to dry. Outside the window over the sink, the western sky hid the sun behind a bank of clouds.

"No, you don't. I have to prove it to you."

"What difference does it make? It's been your secret for sixteen years. Why tell me now?"

"It's all I have to give you." Hjalmar got up slowly and shuffled over to turn on the kitchen light. Leon noticed that his hand was unsteady on the switch. Hjalmar hadn't been to see Doc Watson in a while. Maybe if he worked a Saturday morning, his boss at the Co-op would let him have a weekday off to take Hjalmar to town for a checkup.

12 • Fall '87
“All that money. All gone.” Hjalmar sat, dropping his head in his hand. “When the bank took your place, I thought you’d do what Willy Chelsvig did. I wish I had saved some of D.B.’s money. I could have helped you.”

“No,” Leon said. “Oh, sure. You might have been able to finance me through a couple more seasons. But there’s not enough money in the world to change what’s going on. There’s not a damned thing to be done about it, either. The life we knew doesn’t exist any more.”

“You’ll get this place before long. Donny doesn’t want it, and your mother never did like the country. It’s not much. You’ll never make it produce a profit. It’s a roof over your head. That’s not enough. And there’s no insurance. I never believed in it until I couldn’t get any. I thought... I wanted to give you D.B. Cooper.”

“What am I supposed to do with him?”

“Nothing. Just know about him. It’s - I can’t explain it. When Alma died... She made me bring her home to die. I didn’t want her to die. I did everything I could but it wasn’t enough. A man has to have something of his own.”

“I’ve got Judy.”

“It’s not the same for you and Judy as it was for Alma and me.”

Leon knew it was true. Judy was a good woman. She’d make a good wife, far better for him than Alice had been. But she’d never fill the void within him that the farm had occupied. No woman ever could.

He pulled a beer from the refrigerator and drank it on the front porch. Beyond the barn, Tjernagel’s young corn stood in dusty rows separated by the magic black earth that grew crops regardless of the name on the ownership deed. Sometimes when he drove the Co-op truck, he imagined that he was riding the old John Deere and the road ahead of him was that narrow strip of earth between two rows of corn. His corn.

“All that money...all gone...A man has to have something of his own...I did everything I could...I never believed in insurance...” Present faded to past. While he was trapped in Alice’s plans to search for life, Hjalmar was trying to prolong Alma’s life. All those trips to Rochester, medical equipment, a special nurse around the clock. That was where the money went.

Leon found Hjalmar upstairs. The old man had opened the door to the unfinished room that served as an attic.

“You’re not supposed to climb these stairs. What do you want? Tell me and I’ll find it for you.”

Hjalmar leaned on his cane. “A white box. Medium sized. I think it’s over there in the corner. No, not that one. Smaller. Yes. That one.”

Leon carried the box downstairs and set it on the kitchen table. He broke the flimsy seal of yellowed masking tape and opened the box.

“I’ll come back later.” Leon turned away from a picture of Alma as he
remembered her from his childhood, young, her dark hair curling around her face.

Hjalmar nodded and Leon left him alone with his box of memories. Outside the air had cooled and gone gray. The yard light glowed on against the premature dusk. Across the mile a dog barked. The corn was a blur. Leon leaned against a corner of the house and watched the shadows gather. A faint flicker of lightning forked in the west.

The sound of the television through the kitchen window told him Hjalmar had finished with the box. He went inside.

“Here.” Hjalmar pushed a manila envelope across the table. “Open it.”

Leon picked up the envelope and walked to the cupboard where Hjalmar kept a copy of his will and all the papers from Social Security. “Maybe later.” He slid the envelope below a stack of papers.

Hjalmar nodded slowly. “It’s up to you. I’m going to bed. It’s been a long day.”

“Good night, old man.”

Hjalmar turned in the doorway. “Don’t forget to cover my marigolds.”

“I won’t.” Leon went out to the garage when he heard Hjalmar’s bedroom door close. He collected a length of fencing and the rest of a roll of plastic he had used to cover the north windows of the house the winter before. It didn’t take him long to erect a shelter over the plot along the garage. He secured the plastic at the ends of the wire tunnel as if it was Joanie’s blanket at the foot of her bed. The first drops of rain began to fall and he ran to the porch. Hjalmar would be sure to say “I told you so” in the morning. Leon smiled into the dark. “Goodnight, Jude. Goodnight, Uncle Hjalmar. Goodnight, D.B. Cooper.”

-Susan Roe