The Dead Man on Airport Road

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I bought my farm north of town just after the war for three hundred dollars an acre, and Jim Kryvanek told me I was crazy to pay that much. He had just inherited his farm adjoining mine, and he said that I’d go broke in two years time trying to make my bank payments. The funny thing looking back on it fifty years later is that not only did I not go broke, I survived every recession, minor depression, war and drought, but his son Nelson, who inherited Jim’s farm in the late seventies, did.

I was pretty much retired by then, and old Jim was dead, so I used to help Nelson out during the harvest, and I’d help him shell his corn when he thought the price was right. Lillian and I never had any children so Nelson was kind of like my son too. Especially after Jim was dead. It actually wasn’t really funny at all when he went broke. It happened real suddenly in the summer of eighty-nine. He’d been doing great until the year before when a real bad drought hit, and the prices still stayed low. Nelson didn’t have much of a crop to sell, and that was it for him. The bank foreclosed on the debt he inherited from Jim, sold the land, the machinery, and Nelson moved his family to Cedar Rapids where he got a job at the Quaker Oats factory, the largest cereal plant in all of the world. When all of that happened it kind of got to me. I didn’t handle it too well.

I remember that last summer when Nelson was still trying to make it. I remember taking my old grain truck and sheller over to his crib across the road from my farm. All those ears of corn in the crib had about five or six kernels on them apiece. Nelson and I watched those small, barren red ears coming out of the crib and going into the drag, then coming out of the sheller looking pretty much the same. The stream of corn going into the truck was like a faucet that drips. Half of the first side of the crib emptied out and we still hadn’t filled the first truck. Nelson didn’t really say much. I suggested that maybe he’d make out on the beef but he just shook his head, and I knew he wasn’t going to make out on the beef.

When it finally did fill, I took that first truck to the elevator at New Liberty, and most all the farmers there were telling the same story, without really saying anything. Nobody looked too happy about anything. It was if they were all ten years old and the
grinch had just stole Christmas. They were just unloading their trucks and wagons, not saying anything to each other, with their heads down like somebody had put lead in their brains. I figure the bank had to have been pretty busy getting ready for all those foreclosures. Lots of good people went under that summer.

Then when I got back to town Nelson was sitting there on the empty drag leaning up against the wood crib watching his boy pile up all the rats he and his dog had killed while we were shelling. Nelson had the most contented smile on his face. You’d never have thought by the way he looked that he was about to go broke.

“I gotta stay out here,” he said, shaking his head, after I’d parked the truck back under the spout and come up to him. “I gotta stay out here.”

I looked at what he was looking at, and I knew what he meant. Nobody that lives out in the country moves away voluntarily. I called out to the boy, “That’s some pile of rats you got there!”

The dog was jumping around playfully and the sun was just starting to set, it was early summer and everything was dark green and it hadn’t got hot enough yet to make things too dusty. All the cats were eying that pile of bloody dead rats, just waiting for that dog to leave. It was the kind of a scene that you see in paintings sometimes, not a cloud in the sky and the smell of the corn so sweet. There was nothing funny about Nelson going broke.

Normally I would have suggested to Nelson that we get to work, as the sun was going down, but he looked so peaceful there sitting on the drag watching his boy that I just opened up a glass bottle of cola on the tractor wheel and leaned up against the rubber and noticed how cracked it was.

“I remember when your daddy bought this tractor. Forty-tex was the biggest thing around back then. He said it’d last forever, he was sure of that.”

Nelson looked up at me, chewing a blade of grass, his face greasy from setting up the sheller, ball cap dirty and pushed back on his head, his flannel shirt sleeves rolled up, and he looked just like his father used to. He turned his head out to the fields in the other direction, and I barely heard him due to a slight breeze that stirred up chaff dust just as he talked. “This year’s comin’ in good,” he sighed, and I struggled to hear, “but I don’t suppose that means
a goddam thing though."

He leaned back again on the wood of the crib and laughed a little, still smiling, though kind of painfully. It reminded me of the way people smiled during the war. If you don’t laugh, you cry. That’s what my sergeant told me once, and I thought he was very wise for having said it.

Then I kind of lost myself for a while thinking about old Jim, how he’d always been so salty, but if you knew him well enough, then you knew that he never meant nothing bad by it. I remembered how I’d get out with the disc in the fields first thing in the spring, and old Jim would see me and then he’d be out there in his fields, even though his land was flatter and it took a week or two longer to dry out, just because he couldn’t allow himself to get behind me. It always gave me a good laugh to see him out there clogging up his disc with mud, cussing and swearing, but never for a moment thinking he should stop. Every fall when the corn was turning he’d be over almost every day just to see if I was getting my picker ready or not, and if I was he’d run back to his place to get started. In the fall he’d always ask, “What was your yield out there on that front forty?” and no matter what I said he’d say matter of factly that he’d gotten ten bushel per acre more than that. Then he’d laugh and nudge me in the arm and you knew it was just all for fun. Jim was a laughier, and he taught it to Nelson. No matter what happened, those two found a way to laugh about it.

Pretty soon the sun was completely set in the sky, all red and peaceful, the winds were picking up, and the boy and his dog had left. The cats were fighting over the bloody dead rats.

“Comin’ in for dinner?” Nelson asked me.

“I suppose that wife of yours would be offended if I didn’t.”

“Yep, she’d wonder what in the hell was wrong with you that you didn’t like her cooking.”

So I called Lillian on the phone and told her not to cook for me, and I stayed and had good time telling the boy stories about his grandfather.

The next morning I woke up at six to find the rain coming down real hard, and I got in my clothes and headed across the road to Nelson’s anyway, even though I knew he wouldn’t be shelling. He was up in his shop next to the house with the big door up, standing there, drinking a cup of coffee with his hat pulled down on his forehead, just like he always wore it before breakfast.
He smiled and told me, “Good Morning,” while contemplating the rain with one hand on his hip, and the other holding his cup. His green jacket was wet from having fed his cattle out by the barn.

“You hear the markets yet?”
“No,” he said, “I haven’t been listening lately.”
“Corn’s down another nickel.”

He nodded and sipped his coffee. I felt bad for him that the price was sinking even further, but I felt I had to tell him. “Yep,” he said, and then he put down his coffee on the bench and took off his jacket.

I watched him work on the tractor he had in there, hooked up to the cultivator. He was busy, getting ready to head out to fields again once the shelling was done. He was always busy it seemed. Just like I used to do, he put a lot of effort into his farm. Even when it rained he could find something to do. I guess that’s why I always went over there. Once I’d retired I kind of missed having things to look after, so I’d go over there to watch him working, talking to him while he worked and listened, and it always made me feel like old times.

Back when I was operating full steam, I used to get so wrapped up in what I was doing that sometimes I wouldn’t even go in for breakfast. But now being retired I never miss a meal. It’s something to look forward to, something to occupy myself with. So once I’d gotten all the little things that I wanted to say to Nelson off my mind, I told him I’d be back the next day, and I headed into New Liberty.

Then I sat there at Sheila’s place right up against the counter next to Norman Sapolowsky. He was older than me by ten years, had started farming before the war, was retired of course, and was now spending most of his time there at Sheila’s counter drinking coffee. I’d see him often, but only talked to him once in awhile. We spoke only when I felt like reminiscing about the old times, and you can’t do that everyday.

But that day I felt like talking with Norman. So I sat down next to him and we worked our way through a long conversation that lasted till just after eleven. He seemed happy to see me sitting down next to him.

“Hiya Wesly,” he said, smiling, “You hear corn went down another nickel?”

I told him about the four kernels of corn on each cob in
Nelson’s crib, and he shook his head and said, “That drought last year is breakin’ lots of guys. Lots of guys.”

Then he started listing off young farmers that he’d known had gone broke in the last year, or were about to. It seemed like he listed everybody in the whole county.

After he mentioned the first guy, I thought back to the depression, when I was a boy. “Remember how when the bank foreclosed on a guy before the war, how nobody would show up for the auction except for the guy’s neighbor, and then he would buy the farm for a buck, and hand it back to its rightful owner?”

Norman smiled and nodded, “It was different then.”

And it was different back in those days. Then there weren’t any corporation farms, just regular farms, and not so much competition. All you had to do back then was grow your crops like you knew how, and raise the animals. If you worked hard and did a good job, then you didn’t have to worry about going under. But things have really changed since then.

We kept talking for a while about all the guys from our generation who either died or were in the hospital. Norman would bring up some young guy who was either gone or getting there, and it would remind me who his father was, and then we’d talk about him, and shared lots of memories that we’d already shared before, but still enjoyed sharing again.

When the conversation was winding down, I said again how it was a much better life for our generation, how nobody went broke the way they do now.

Norman said, “But do you remember what happened to Melvin Kunn?”

Right as he said it Sheila told me that Lillian was on the phone and wanted to speak with me. I said, “Who is Melvin Kunn?” But then I had to go get the phone before he answered. I figured I’d find out who he was when I got back, but when I did Norman was gone, and I was stuck wondering just who Melvin Kunn was, and what had happened to him. The name sounded real familiar, but I just couldn’t remember him.

Lillian had called to tell me she was headed to her niece’s house to plan for Fourth of July — which was still several months away — and that she wouldn’t be cooking lunch for me. So I decided to go have a ride around.

I got in my pickup and headed south, past the old abandoned school, and out into the other side of town. I like to go over
there to see the crops. I think they get more rainfall down there, because things always look greener and a little bit taller. The rain kept coming down hard, and a lot of the fields had big sprayers going through them anyway. That’s how the corporations run things. They hire employees who don’t give a damn about the land, who just follow orders, and have to be told when not to go out in the fields. But that day nobody had told them yet. Probably the manager was still asleep, or on vacation. The tires on the sprayers were all caked with mud, and the corn plants were getting ripped out of the wet soil. It pained me to see something like that happening, so I headed towards Jungletown.

Jungletown isn’t really a town, it’s just an old stone building out by the river where the land is too rocky, hilly, and wooded to farm. I always liked driving by there because it reminded me of a lot of memories. When I was chasing Lillian after the war I used to take her out there and we’d listen to the crickets and watch the stars. Jim and I used to go out there with Nelson when he was a boy, and we’d spend a whole Sunday fishing, and teaching Nelson what being a good farmer was all about. Nelson listened to me more; I guess that’s just how kids are. They never want to listen to their fathers. I’d tell him how a guy has to have a respect for the land, how he must understand it, and always work hard to improve it.

But once I got there I saw something that made me feel worse than when I saw those sprayers ripping up the wet fields. There was a sign put up right in front of the stone building that read: Kreel Hog Farms, Inc.

I was real unhappy to see that. The corporations had taken over everything it seemed. Nobody was raising pigs in a shed next to the barn anymore. The pork industry was taken over by those massive hog lots that smell up the country and pollute the water. It seemed they always built the factories right where you’d think they shouldn’t, like at Jungletown. The land there wasn’t worth a damn but it was a nice place to look at, and a nice place to camp, and do some fishing in the river. Even though I’m too old for any of that, it still made me pretty angry to see that they were putting up a hot lot there.

It was about noon then, and since Lillian said she wasn’t cooking me lunch, I figured I may as well keep old Shelia in business, so I headed back there. When she saw me come in she said, “Didn’t your wife tell you to come home?”
I said, “Naw, she told me not to come home. Seems she’d rather have me out.”

Sheila laughed, but nobody else did. I looked around at the people there and I didn’t recognize any of them. They were dirty like farmers, but didn’t really look like farmers. I figured by the mud on their boots that they were probably the corporate employees who had been out ruining the land all morning.

They were the kind of people that never look up from what they’re doing, or say “Hello” to a stranger. You could walk into a place where they were at, and say something funny that should make them laugh, and set them at ease, but they never seem to notice. I was reminded of my honeymoon trip with Lillian. She’d wanted to see New York, so we went there, and all the people were like that. No real sense of community. Even here in New Liberty, the place that used to feel like the friendliest little spot in the world, there was no sense of community. Just a bunch of poor strangers probably from Cedar Rapids, looking bored, like they’d rather not know anything about anybody else.

I asked Sheila if she knew who Melvin Kunn was, and she said, “Hmm...sounds familiar. Probably someone from way before my time.”

I had to agree that he probably was somebody from before her time. I kept thinking back to all the old friends I used to have, but the name Melvin Kunn just didn’t ring a bell.

The rain let up while I was eating lunch, and when I got back to my place I had just come in and fed the wild cats that hung around when Nelson called. He wanted to get some more shelling done because he had a note that he was trying to pay off, one that had been past due since January. He didn’t tell me that then. He just said, “May as well use this sunshine.”

It was muddy, but Nelson had earlier that month chipped up all the cement from the old hog shed and spread it around the crib. So even though it had just stopped raining we could still maneuver the grain truck enough. That’s how Nelson was. He never let anything go to waste, and he was always full of ideas as to how to improve his farm.

So we worked hard the rest of the day, emptying out the first side of the crib and almost half of the other, and we only filled up one truck. Usually that crib would fill ten or twelve trucks. I took the truck into town just before the elevator closed, and they docked the price another nickel due to the small kernel
size. It pained me to tell Nelson about it when I got back, but he
didn’t seem affected much by it.

He sat there again in the drag leaning on the wood, chew­
ing a blade of grass and looking out at the fields. The boy and his
dog hadn’t come out, so no rats had been killed, and the cats gath­
ered and meowed at us. Nelson threw cobs with four or five ker­
nels of corn at those cats to shut them up.

The farm was covered in red, as the chaff dust from the
shelling clung to the mud and to the wetness of the white build­
ings, and again it looked like a painting out there. I stood drinking
my bottle of cola, Nelson sat there, and neither of us said any­
thing for a while. I kept thinking about who Melvin Kunn was. I
wanted to ask Nelson if he knew, but somehow I had the feeling
that he didn’t want to be bothered. He seemed like he was con­
centrating on something.

Then just as I was about to say I was going to leave he laid
out several bombshells to me. “I been figuring it in my head,” he
said, “and I don’t think this corn is goin’ bring me enough to pay
my note at the bank.”

He looked out at the corn in the fields, like he wished it
were ready to harvest so he could sell it. “When is the note due?”
“Last January.”
“Oh.” I knew it was pretty serious then. But still I didn’t fig­
ure it was the end of him. Usually it takes a few years of not pay­
ing notes before the bank auctions off your farm.

“And I’m already bankrupt.” He said it matter of factly, like
when you say, “My wife cooks lunch at one in the afternoon,” or
“Think I’ll probably go to church this Sunday.”

I didn’t even know what to say in response. When a guy
goes bankrupt it means that he has another couple of years to try
to come out of the red. Nelson was already bankrupt, so things
were very much worse than anybody knew.

“When did you go bankrupt?”

“Two years ago, in the fall, when beef prices fell and I
couldn’t keep up with payments. I figured I’d work hard and come
out of it. I didn’t think there was any need to tell anyone.”

One of those tall sprayers drove by on the road real loud,
dripping chemicals from its tanks and kicking up mud from its tires
twenty feet in the air, and it drowned out Nelson’s last few words.
You couldn’t even see the guy driving it, the cab was so high and
glassed in dark. It reminded me of the war for some reason,
watching that sprayer drive by so loud.

Once it was gone you could still hear it in the distance. Nelson continued, “My brother in law says he can get me a job in Cedar Rapids, at Quaker Oats. But damn, I don’t even want to think about that.” He looked around. “I like it out here. I can’t imagine working for somebody else, punching a time card, doing things not because you see that they need doing, but because somebody told you to do them.”

He seemed very calm, but I had a lump in my throat. It was not a funny thing at all. I though about old Jim, and I thought about how he’d been so proud of Nelson when he was growing up. “That boy works like an ox, you see him?” Jim would point to Nelson feeding square bales of hay to the cows and you just had to smile. I think that if Nelson hadn’t have been so calm that maybe I would have started crying. I looked at him and the expression on his face reminded me of someone, and then I remembered who Melvin Kunn was.

It hit me right then and I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten about what had happened to Melvin Kunn. He was a guy from way back; he died back when I first bought my farm for three hundred dollars an acre. He farmed about ten miles north of me on Airport Road, but they didn’t call it that ‘till after he was dead. While Melvin was alive it was called Kunn Road. I remembered how the City of Cedar Rapids decided to build an airport on his land, and how Melvin —who was just thirty-five then, and going strong as a farmer—wouldn’t give up his land. He got a lawyer, and sued the city, but the city won. The judge called it “eminent domain” and said there was nothing Melvin could do but sell at the price the city decided the land was worth. But Melvin —and I remember his face when he said it—was in no way ready to let them do that to him. It was at the hardware store —back when New Liberty had a hardware store—when a bunch of us were gathered there talking he said he’d die before he’d let them take his land. His face was calm and serious, like he really meant what he was saying. They found old Melvin hanging in his barn, his children did, with a big plywood sign hung around his neck that read, painted in mud, “Go Ahead and Build Your Airport”. And they did.

Nelson asked me to come in for dinner, but I said, “I feel I should just let you be alone.”

“Oh forget it Wes. Come on in. I can’t let you work for free.” He laughed and nudged me on the arm just like old Jim used
to do, and I went in and ate dinner with his little family. I could hardly swallow the food though. I was so broken up about the way things were.

That night I could hardly get to sleep, I kept tossing and turning, just like I did fifty years ago on my wedding night. I kept thinking of Melvin Kunn and Nelson, and all the other kids I knew about that weren’t getting on so well financially. I’d get real mad, so much so that I’d open my eyes up wide in the dark with my heart pumping fast. Then I’d think it over and decide that life was still good, just not what it used to be, and I’d almost fall asleep until the image of Melvin and Nelson would come back and I’d be mad again. I don’t remember exactly how I fell asleep, but I didn’t sleep too well. It was just like when I was in Europe. I didn’t sleep too well when I was there either.

Then I woke up like I always do at six, and as I put my clothes on I had the worst feeling of heartburn that I can remember. I figured that it was from the dinner I’d had the night before, so I took some antacid and went out.

I went over to Nelson’s and he wanted to get the shelling done in the morning while the ground was still mud, so that in the afternoon when it dried off he’d be free to do some cultivating. He was a hard worker right up to the end. Never gave up until they forced him off.

I helped him shovel the last of the ear corn into the drag, and got so out of breath that I had to lean over and rest every few seconds. Nelson told me I should take it easy and just wait in the truck, but I couldn’t do that. He was working so hard, and I wasn’t about to take it easy. That last truck of his corn was less than a fourth full. It was horrible to be taking in such a small load, one that surely would not bring enough money in for Nelson. I felt even worse when they docked it a nickel again. My chest was very tight as I drove back to Nelson’s, and I even had to pull over for a minute just to catch my breath. But I did catch my breath, and as I was driving back I started to feel a bit better.

When I came up on Nelson’s place I saw from the road his tractor out in the field with the cultivator behind it. It was really nice to see him out there hard at work, he waved at me and I waved back, and for a few minutes it felt like things were how they always were, normal and perfect.

Then in the back of my mind I kept thinking about how he was pretty near the end financially, and I realized as I climbed
down from the truck that it might have been the last time I’d ever see good old Nelson out there cultivating his crop, waving at me cheerfully. It was such a sorrowful feeling. I remembered when old Jim died, and I realized that he wasn’t going to come over and tell me that he’d gotten ten bushel per acre yield more than me, how I’d felt like it was supposed to be that way. Nobody can go on living forever, and when Jim died it was sad, but it seemed natural. But seeing Nelson out there cultivating for the last time didn’t feel natural at all. Something felt really wrong, like when I’d see people that weren’t even soldiers die in Europe during the war, it just seemed like it wasn’t supposed to happen.

I don’t remember how long I stood there next to the crib feeling like that, but I do remember a shooting pain in my arm, and I remember sitting down there on those cement rocks. I remember realizing that I was in some sort of trouble, looking at the sky, blue and sunny above, and wondering if I was dying. I just kept thinking about old Nelson, how’d I’d never help him shell his corn again, how I’d never watch him disc his fields in the morning through the bedroom window while I dressed, and how I’d never again see him picking up big square bales of hay out of the field with his forty-tent to feed to his cattle in the winter. And I thought of Melvin Kunn, how he died rather than give up being his own boss. Then it was sometime later that I was being loaded up into an ambulance with Nelson’s family standing around the paramedics, and I remember telling them that I just needed to catch my breath. The words didn’t come out too clear, and they looked at me with real pity. I hadn’t been looked at like that before, not in a long time. Not since I’d gotten back from Europe.

I wasn’t dead yet though, not by a long shot. The very next day I was awake and talking to all the visitors that came to see me. Sheila came in and left me a bouquet of flowers, Norman Sapolowsky sat down next to my bed and reminisced about the days when we were kids well before the war, and nearly everyone else I knew came and wished me well. Even the reverend with his young wife came and said a prayer with me.

Nelson came with his boy and his wife, and they talked just like nothing was the matter, as if I wasn’t lying there after having had a heart attack and Nelson wasn’t about to lose his farm. They made small talk for about a half an hour, and then it grew silent and they were just sitting there smiling. Things were still on my mind though.
“You know you young guys shouldn’t give up so easy,” I told him, “You shouldn’t just let the banks and the corporations take over. You got to stick by one another and put up a fight.”

I looked at him to let him know I meant what I was saying. He and his wife looked kind of like they thought I was just a crazy old man. Once you get old you can’t say anything meaningful, because people just think you’re senile and they don’t listen.

“Like they did during the depression,” I insisted, “You got to stick by each other. They tried to take over then too, but we fought it and we won. We had many good years then, all farmers did. You got to stand up for yourselves.”

He still looked like he thought I was crazy. “Wes, you need to settle down. You need your rest. You can’t be getting worked up like this. You have to relax.”

“But you do! I’ll be damned if I’ll sit by and watch the world go to hell, watch good honest hard working people taken advantage of in my lifetime. I won’t. You’ve got to fight for yourselves…”

Nelson started to speak again, but I caught my breath and I cut him off.

“What do you think? That the corporations are going to take over the whole world, and that there won’t be a farmer left? That can’t happen! You’ve got to fight them!”

“Wes, please, the doctor says you can’t have excitement in your condition. He said you need peace and quiet.”

As I was catching my breath I thought of something that would help him out, give him a chance to go on. “I’ve got one hell of retirement fund, you know that? But I don’t need it all. I can pay off the bank for you, and then you’ll go on farming, and you can band together with the other young guys that are left, and you can beat those corporations and banks.”

“Okay Wes, okay.” But I saw him rolling his eyes at his wife. I knew he wouldn’t let me pay off the bank for him, and I thought he was a damn fool. But I was too worn out to tell him so right then.

The next day Norman Sapolowsky sat down next to my bed for a couple of hours, and he told me that the bulldozers had just knocked over Jungletown and were leveling out the land. It didn’t make me as mad as I expected it would to hear about that. When Nelson came by later mentioned that I thought he was a fool for not accepting my charity, but that I understood that he was just
too proud. He said he was glad to see me calmer than I had been. We talked about old Jim, and I told him—though he’d heard the story before—how Jim would see me out with the disc on a field and then immediately rush out with his. Nelson laughed and it was just like old times. He showed up almost every night to see me while I was sick, more than Lillian did, and he’d gotten his job as a janitor at Quaker Oats before I was out. The factory was just across the interstate from the hospital, and he’d get off just after noon, so I’d see him during my lunch. I saw him proud in his blue uniform, and he was smiling and happy, so I figured he was doing okay working there. But I couldn’t help but ask him if he was at all sad about losing his farm.

“Well, you know. I didn’t want it to happen this way. But what can you do? It’s no good to get bent out of shape about things.”

And I agreed with him then. I always admired him. I thought of Melvin Kunn, and I admired him too, but in a different way. Melvin Kunn was the kind of guy that if you want to go on living, you’ve got to forget about. Nelson is the kind of guy you’ll always remember. He always saw the bright side of life, always laughed at things, and I admired him for it.