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Widowers' Woods

Donald Hall

I.

Mr. Thomas swayed in the back seat of the taxi as it turned into the cemetery through the white wooden gate. The driver slowed down, nearly stopping; when he had checked the gate outside his window, he accelerated. Mr. Thomas's vision behind his thick glasses was blurred, leaving only a tiny nugget of clarity in the center. In the nugget, he saw twin tire-tracks leading to the summerhouse. The cab charged up to it and braked, scattering cinders. Mr. Thomas heaved forward, bracing his hand against the seat cover to keep from falling. Charlie drove too fast. The lane was built for buggies.

The driver turned around and smiled at him. "Here you are," he said.

"You drive too fast. There are too many cars on the roads," said Mr. Thomas.

"Here you are," said the driver.

Mr. Thomas used his hands to help move his legs toward the door, which the driver leaned over to open for him. Mr. Thomas swivelled on the plastic cover and let his feet slide to the patchy cinders. When he felt steady, he leaned back inside the car and took out a long cylinder of green liquid. He propped it against the rail of the summerhouse and walked slowly around the taxi to the driver.

"Thank you, Charlie," he said. He took four quarters from his pocket and handed them to the driver.

"Name is Tony, Mr. Thomas. Charlie's dead. See you in an hour, right?" The driver smiled again. Mr. Thomas watched him go, in the keyhole of his sight.

It was hot. Mr. Thomas's mouth hung open. He walked into the green summerhouse and sat in the shade fixing his vision on the pump and the rusty watering can in front of him. Where should he start today? He stopped at James Hartwell 1812-1884 last week. Soon it would be Hettie again. He walked to the door. His fingers felt the roughness of the railing and when he looked he saw that the paint was peeling away. He looked at the wooden ceiling, and his vision played like the beam of a flashlight over the flaking paint. Then he stepped through the

door and saw that the outside paint was worse. Everywhere the wood was showing through, a dark brown fungus spreading over the summerhouse, reaching out its creepers. It was like October. The weeds turned brown and died, leaving bare patches of dirt when you raked the leaves. Then he remembered that he had mentioned it to the caretaker many times.

He picked up the green cylinder where it lay against the railing and walked into the graveyard. The breeze from the lake across the road came feeling through the heat. Mr. Thomas felt beneath his shoes that part of the grass was cut and part was not. He straightened and swept his eyes in a circle until he saw the power mower, a bare-chested man behind it. The man waved and shouted, but Mr. Thomas did not hear him or the rasp of the mower. What was his name, the one who did not wear a shirt? Dino.

He passed the Hartwells and paused to read William Perkins and Mary His Wife. Moss made the dates hard to read. Mr. Thomas leaned a little on his green stick and rested. His vision moved to the street beyond the cemetery and the stores of glass and tile. He heard a noise and turned around. "Hi, Mr. Thomas," shouted the fat bare chest. "Dino. How you doing?" Dino smiled widely in his sweat.

"Crab grass," said Mr. Thomas.

"You keep it in line," Dino shouted. "You got that thing." He pointed at the green stick. "That's a good thing."

"It's not enough," said Mr. Thomas. He began to feel despair again; Charlie would be back and he had not begun. He bent to the ground and found what he was looking for, the wide, scratchy, grey-green blades, spreading through the grass like crabs, pushing out the real grass that was frail and so easy to kill. He jabbed the point of his green cylinder into the center of the broad leaves and squeezed the bulb at the top.

"Well, so long, Mr. Thomas," said Dino, and rolled away hitching his trousers over his stomach.

Mr. Thomas moved slowly, searching with the slot of his vision, finding the leaves, plunging and killing. Every minute he stood up and breathed slowly for a while, searching out a breeze to cool himself. Then he bent again and continued his work. The power mower came close to him, receded, and returned again. For a while he was absorbed. He smiled and a march tune went through his head. But there were so many. He was still at the Perkins'. He looked ahead. After them the Bullmers, and then Hettie's single stone.

Then he heard noises and there were children running through the cemetery, so many children that they were like beetles scurrying in the grass. They had climbed the fence in some war of blocks, and they were firing cap pistols at each other. He thought of the 4th of July. His Uncle Harry's fife and drum corps, Victors of Vicksburg, had marched all day, full of cider. Boys threw fire crackers all day. Politicians talked, they denounced the Empires, the British Empire spreading all over the world. But then it stopped. An Italian threw a fire cracker into an old lady's firecracker stand. She died, and the State passed a law forbidding fireworks. The children defending the summerhouse, banging their guns, have black hair and dark faces. They are everywhere, spreading like a weed.

Mr. Thomas left the Perkins' plot and walked past the Bullmers' to Hettie's grave. He felt tired. Scanning Hettie's and his own grass, the swift shuttle of his eyes revealed a crop of crab grass larger than he had ever seen. Though a man fought it all his life, he could not win. It grew over everything, it grew over him when he stopped fighting it. He stabbed with his weed-killer, jabbing so violently that he missed the roots he aimed for. Everywhere crab grass spread its claws, the broad hateful leaves. He swung at them with his stick, shouting at them, and tears rolled on his cheeks. Then he was so tired and hot that he had to lie down. Slowly and carefully he got down on his knees and his forearms, and then stretched out flat. Little blades of crab grass outlined his shape.

He opened his eyes to look into the heart of a weed. In the center of each plant, he saw a dark grove of trees. If he could get inside, there would be shade.

II.

An old man in a farmhouse on the side of a hill in New Hampshire had been awake for hours. Ben had thought about the flavor checkerberry, about a baseball game between Andover and Wilmot in 1894, about his brother Willard who died of influenza at the end of the War, and about holes in fences. He lay for a long time remembering a quarrel with his father, which ended with his father telling him stories about the family. Now the sun had moved, which meant, in September, that it was time to get up. What were the chores for today?

He dressed quickly, long underwear and overalls and a brown shirt, thick brown socks and old black fancy shoes. In the kitchen the stove was cold. Ben struck a match and lit the oil ring which was set into the place where he had burned wood for fifty years. Slim pipes carried oil from a tank in the woodshed. The fire bloomed toward his hand. He set a kettle over the flame and spooned some Nescafe into a pink cup.

In the garden outside the kitchen window, which Nancy had tended herself, the long-legged snapdragons were standing, the horny flowers crumbled and brown with the frost of the night before last. On the lawn a rabbit sniffed at the tall grass. He thought of his gun. The sound of boiling turned him around. He drank the black coffee quickly, and felt the heat uncoil down his arms and legs. He flexed fingers and toes. Time to be doing. What chores were there to do? He used to go to bed tired and listing the chores for tomorrow.

When he was through with his cornflakes, he washed the empty dishes and let them dry in the rack. The news. He turned on the radio and sat in a rocking chair under the empty canary cage, listening to the news and the weather. Today they had pulled the boy out of that well. Flowered oilcloth covered the table in front of him. At the corners of the table the shiny surface had split and brown fibres showed through. He liked to rub his hand against the fibres. Above the table was a calendar, month September, with a picture of pumpkins and sheaves of corn. He rocked back and forth. The weather was fair, Eastport to Block Island.

He put on a cloth cap and a suit coat and walked to the barn. Dead cows turned to look at him as he walked in the empty tie-up. In a corner, where whitewash turned gray on spider webs, his three-legged milking stool hung next

to his pail. For a few seconds he milked the herd and cooled the milk. He looked out the back window, where the necks of twenty horses had worn the sill smooth, at the dry bed of a stream, and at weeds turning grey with frost.

On the main floor, the old boards were still wispy with hay. Clusters of harness hung from wooden pegs. Ladders he made himself led up to the first loft, and from there to the second. He put his hand on the silky polished wood of a rung. Everything turned smoother, though he remembered slivers when the ladders were new. Birds flew in and out, over his head.

There were lumps of hay, nearly black now, under the eaves of the barn. Hay reminded him of a chore. He walked down the hill to the shed where he kept the hayrack, and looked at the side with the missing spoke. In the woodshed he bent among pine sticks and picked one which he took back to the hayrack. He measured it against the gap. He drew a line on it with a pencil he found in his overalls. He was pleased to find it there. Then he sat on an overturned sap bucket and carved and smoothed the new spoke. His mind mumbled over stories, friends, smiling and shaking hands and eating fresh ice cream from a dish outdoors under a maple tree. When he was finished, he fitted the new spoke in place on the rack.

Back in the kitchen he hung up his cap and suit coat and lit the oil ring again. He rubbed his hands together above the flame, and set the kettle over it. He opened the refrigerator and took out a plate of lunch meat. Fourth day from that can. He sliced off a thick piece and put it on a clean plate, and added a handful of potato chips from a cellophane bag. The water boiled for his coffee. He sat at the set-tubs on a tall stool and ate lunch.

Then he washed and lay on the sofa in the sitting room, where the air never moved. He had not started the big square stove this fall, so he pulled a quilt over himself. For a minute he kept his eyes open, looking at the tall radio standing on its legs, at the glassed-in bookcase, stuffed with books and photographs, at the long table clock which never worked properly, and at the picture of Franconia Notch. What was a chore for the afternoon? Then he slept lightly.

When he woke the sun had come out, and it shone into the parlor past the trailing ivy which Nancy had put in the window. He stood and looked out at the hayfields, the big stone and the mountain beyond. The hay waved, tall and grey brown. Winter and the snow would trample it down, and the new grass would tangle with it next spring. A good hay day.

He clapped his hands together suddenly, making a noise like a rifle in the still room. He looked at the pictures on top of the piano and said out loud, "I'm going fencing." At least, he would take a look at the pasture fence. He was happy and he hummed a hymn tune, "I walked in the garden alone." A good day for walking in the pasture, sun and a light wind.

He put on his cap and jacket and walked up the road. Ahead of him was the big stone, a single boulder the size of a woodshed, where—someone told him when he was a boy—the Indians came together for their pow-wows. He smiled at it, as he always did. As he went past it, he paused to touch the stone arrow in the side, a strange indentation shaped like an arrow, as clean and accurate as if it had been chiselled. He ran his forefinger from the point of the arrow around

the whole shape of it, up the narrow stem, and into the wavy feather at the end.

He stepped through a gate in the fieldstone wall; the poles were out of their stone notches, lying on the ground. No need to set them back. He walked along the inside of the wall until it turned a right angle at the edge of his property and headed uphill. The wall turned into a fence of wire and felled branches, with holes where the wire had rusted through or a branch had rotted. He made a point of remembering the broken places.

As he walked more deeply into the old pasture, new pine grew tightly around him, and cowflops on the path next to the fence were grey and fragile with age. The pine made him think of coffins. But under his feet he felt the ridges of old ploughing. He had come to the potato place, as he had learned to call it when he was a boy, where his grandfather had cleared the timber and planted potatoes, way back in the thirties before the Mexican War.

The fence disappeared entirely. The pines grew smaller until they were gone. He climbed a rise and saw the bowl of a high valley before him, a smaller saucer of fertile land green with potato plants. At the far side three men and a boy were working, grabbing in the clods with long-handled claws for the potatoes. When they had dug up a hill they bent and gathered potatoes into the burlap sack each one carried with him. He walked across the harvested rows to join them. Anyone can use another hand. A man with a black beard leaned on his fork. "Will you give us a hand?"

He took over the tool which the boy had held. He dug a row of hills. Now the boy went row to row cropping potatoes into sacks. The men did not have to stoop and gather potatoes, and the rows moved faster. He dug easily and slowly in the loose soil, tossing aside the green plants with their brown, frost-bitten edges. The muscles in his back grew tired, but he felt good. The sun lowered. A woman walked toward them along the edge of the field, coming from the direction of the farm. She carried a white enamel coffeepot and a wicker basket. They sat under a sugar maple and drank hot coffee, milk and sugar already mixed in it, and ate a hard boiled egg and a piece of custard pie. The bearded man and his son sat with the woman, apart from the two hands who ate steadily and silently. The bearded man asked him, "Will you stay to harvest?"

It was late. His back ached. He felt happily tired. "I'm going back," he said. "I'm obliged for the coffee and the pie."

He left them while they finished their coffee under the maple. He walked back the way he had come. A bear crashed past him in the underbrush, not seeing him. First time he'd seen a bear since he was a boy. The trees were huge and old. It was colder. He'd better light the stove in the sitting room. Though he was sure he was near it, he could not find the fence. When he came to the flat part, where the road was, he could not find the road. He felt his way in the direction of the house, and came into a clearing where the big stone, as huge as a barn in the twilight, gathered the darkness of the forest. The side where he felt for the stone arrow was smooth.

Further, he found himself on a flat nook of land he recognized, but there was a grove of rock maple on it—great trees three hundred years old, trunks as hard as granite. He admired the broad, tough leaves, which were brilliant orange and

red, and delicate yellow. He was lost, yet a comfortable laziness came over him. He stood on the matted leaves, in the middle of his sitting room, and after a while sat down and leaned back against a tree.

III

When Mr. Thomas found his way into the woods, the harsh light retreated; he felt cool and strong. He walked on matted leaves, not caring about the animals. He passed a huge boulder. Then he saw that the woods were full of old men, sleeping or sitting quietly by themselves. Widowers' Woods, he thought, that's what they ought to call it.