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Ellis Waddell believed in God and the Devil and feared them both. He knew the difference between good and evil. He knew right from wrong and he tried to live a virtuous life, which was often difficult.

Sunday mornings he would go to church. He'd sing and pray with his family and the rest of the small community. From time to time, as one of six Elders, he'd be called upon to read aloud the day's scripture lesson, assist in a baptism or some other ceremony. Ellis was, by all accounts, a good man. This is not to say that he was a religious man. That wouldn't be exactly right.

He was, as many are, a man of habit more than faith. He went through the motions hoping someday to be able to say that he truly believed. These convictions had been part

of him since before he could remember, handed down to him like his father's old suit; familiar, maybe a bit out of style, but well worn and comfortable. Sometimes though, we change and things don't fit so well anymore.

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A galaxy of fireflies shimmered over the swaying corn like candle flames flickering on some huge, distant altar. The clear blue light of the nearly full moon seemed dim by comparison. There had been no rain for fourteen days and the air was crackling dry. A warm breeze carried the scent of cornstalks and the swinging sound of "String of Pearls". Three Hundred miles away the Glen Miller Band was playing at the Aragon Ballroom in Chicago.

As the music pulsed out of the small radio and into the soft night air, Ellis and Heather moved slowly, quietly, gliding over the porch. They never danced much in public. There was seldom any time to get away from the farm and besides, the sight of Ellis towering over his wife on the dance floor often caused people to stop and stare, making them both uncomfortable. In the sanctuary of their home, they more than made up for it though. They dipped and twirled their way around three cats, a busted radiator, and old Lazarus who'd fallen asleep, belly up, with a bone still hanging from his mouth.

The music ended. From across the way the cattle lowed their apparent approval of the tune. They paused. He caressed her long, black hair as she held him tightly, pressing her cheek against his rib cage for a moment. Ellis bent low, kissing Heather's hand.

"Thank you, m'lady. You dance divinely," he said, doing his best impression of Ronald Coleman, which was not good.

Heather laughed. "Must be all my years in ballet school." She put her hand to her mouth and turned her head away in feigned humility.

While the announcer extolled the virtues of Burma Shave, Ellis flopped down beside his son, Will, sitting on the old wooden swing. It hung from the ceiling on rusty chains and creaked something awful whenever anybody got to swinging in it. Some candles shone unsteadily behind the hurricane glass as the unpredictable wind blew one of the napkins off the makeshift dinner table and across the whitewashed porch. It came to rest against Ellis' large dusty boot.

Momentarily taking his arm from around his son he leaned down, scooped up the errant napkin, and with a sinking pitch that could have struck out *The Bambino*, threw

it into the empty salad bowl sitting amongst the dirty dishes.

"Strike three, he's out, Yankees win," Ellis shouted.

"You boys hush up now or you'll wake the baby."

Heather held a long finger up to her pursed lips.

"Sorry," they said in unison.

"That was a great throw Pa, you should pitch for the Yankees," Will whispered. After a pause he added, "Do you think they'd take you?"

"Oh, I don't know son. Besides, who'd look after the farmin' if I was to head for the big city?"

"Well, Ma and me could do most of it, I reckon. I'll be big enough to drive the tractor soon."

"You keep eating like you did tonight and it'll be real soon," Heather said as she came out to finish clearing the table. "You had two helpings of everything!"

"He worked awful hard today sweetheart, we both did. In fact..." Ellis rose from the swing and rubbed his hands together, "I think I'll have me another piece of that sweet potato pie."

"Oh, you go on and stay there dear, I'll bring it out to you. Like you said, you worked hard today too." She

added another plate to the tall stack she was already carrying and moved toward the doorway.

"Can I have one too, Ma? I'm still hungry."

Heather laughed as she went off into the moonlit kitchen.

Ellis smiled, "Ya' know son, we're mighty lucky to have a woman as good as your Ma around."

"Yeah Pa, I know. God's been pretty good to us I guess huh?"

Yes, He has son." Ellis glanced around at his home, out toward the fields, and finally down at his son, "He surely has." He nodded his head and smiled. The breeze kicked up again. Ellis sipped his coffee.

"He surely has," he repeated quietly, this time to himself. He stared into the night sky and was silent. He had a fine son in Will, a new baby, Thomas, his farm was prospering and his wife was the best woman he'd ever met. What had he done to be so fortunate? It really was like a dream. Every now and then he half expected to be awakened by his father's angry voice shouting at him to get his lazy ass out of bed, and find that it had been a dream after all. It didn't seem possible.

For years he had been on the verge of losing the Homeplace, which is what they called their farm. Most people he knew were a bad harvest away from being put off their land, and he had had a stretch of, let's call it bad luck, which he was only just recovering from.

Two winters ago, Will had been so sick with the influenza, Doc Newkirk told them to prepare for the worst. He and Heather were mad with grief at the thought of losing their little boy, but somehow he pulled through. Several of the folks nearby had already died from it, most of them elderly or at least sickly in some way, but the disease had also claimed Ralph Gunderson, a man nearly as big as Ellis and only a few years older. After his death, Ralph's wife and daughters had tried to make a go of the farm without him. Ellis and some of the other men had tried to help out whenever they could, but they had farms of their own to worry about and eventually Mrs. Gunderson was forced to sell and she and the girls moved in with her brother in Iowa.

Looking back on the episode the doctor said it was a miracle someone as young and frail as Will had survived when someone as strong as Ralph didn't.

"It was God's doing, not mine," Dr. Newkirk would say whenever the subject came up, and Heather agreed, but she

knew there was more to it than that. She and Ellis, nearly the whole town in fact, had prayed night and day for Will's recovery. At the darkest of times, when it seemed they were sure to lose the boy, Ellis abandoned prayer for the more immediate comfort of whiskey.

He had tried often to give it up before this, but especially now that he was "a family man" he fought even harder. Ultimately though, powerful as he was, Ellis was no match for the bottle. One night in desperation, he made a deal with God. If He would let Will live, Ellis would quit drinking, once and for all. He didn't really know if he could carry out his part of the bargain, yet he had to try. The morning after the bargain was struck, Will's fever broke and his recovery was rapid. A few days later, he told Heather what had transpired and wondered whether she thought there was any real connection between the two events. Of course he knew her answer before he'd even asked. When they'd first met, her faith was one of the things he'd found so attractive about her. He had always hoped that perhaps, over the years, he too might come to believe as strongly as she did in the presence and goodness of God.

However, even tonight, as he sat on the porch with his arm around Will and reflected on the apparently miraculous

past, Ellis wasn't really sure what he thought. Try as he might to feel otherwise, it still seemed to him that regardless of all the hymns and prayers, God did as he pleased. Of course, there were wonders and miracles. Anybody who works the land and depends on it for their livelihood wouldn't deny that, but those were little, natural miracles that farmers take for grant. Now they had another of those small miracles, their new baby, Thomas.

Ellis and Will sat silently together for a while until Will said "Hey Pa, I wonder how DiMaggio did in the All-Star Game today? You think he hit any homers? I bet he did, Pa, I bet so!"

"You're probably right, boy. Who do ya' think was pitchin' for the National League? Derringer?"

"No, Pa, I bet they had Bucky Walters start."

"Maybe there'll be somethin' on the radio 'bout it." Ellis looked out at the night sky trying to determine the approximate time. "The game should have been over a long time ago."

"Can I stay up and listen?" Will asked eagerly, excited by the prospect of not having to wait until the next day to find out how his favorite player did.

"We'll see, Will," Ellis said.

Heather returned with a couple large glasses of milk and two thick slices of pie daubed with whipped cream. "Now Ellis," she said as she handed them their plates, "don't get the boy all riled up with your stories! You know how he gets when you talk about baseball. He'll be awake all night dreamin' 'bout it."

"I'll go to sleep right away, Ma," Will said, his mouth stuffed with pie, "I promise."

"Me too, Ma," said Ellis, as though he were also nine years old.

Heather looked at him for a moment, then swiped her index finger through some of the whipped cream on Ellis' pie and plopped it on the end of his nose.

Ellis' crossed his eyes as he looked down the bridge of his nose. He turned toward Will and pretended to try and lick the whipped cream off. Will giggled at his father's funny face; Heather grinned, and soon all three were laughing together.

Ellis wiped away the whipped cream. "I guess we better get to bed soon, we got a lot of work to get through tomorrow and I don't want to fall asleep on the tractor. Finish up your pie there son, and I'll help get the rest of these dishes into the house." Ellis scooped the last bit of

filling out of the crust of his desert and finished the milk in one huge gulp.

"Mmmm-mmm, that's mighty tasty Sweetheart, mighty tasty." Ellis ran the back of a big, rough hand across his lips.

"Yep, mighty tasty Ma, mighty tasty," echoed Will wiping his mouth on his sleeve, though somewhat less successful at it than his father had been. Heather lay the palm of her right hand on Will's cheek and brushed the remaining crumbs away with her thumb. She smoothed back his hair with her other hand and gazed at the boy. Ellis watched her looking at him. It was as if she were memorizing him or trying to fix the image in her mind so that somehow, somewhere, this moment would always exist. The radio crackled in the background and the spell was broken.

The man on the radio brought the bad news. "In today's All-Star Game the National League shut out the American League in a four to nothing victory."

"Aw, gee," Will said quietly.

The announcer continued, "The National League was off to a great start with a three run homer hit by Max West in the 1<sup>st</sup> inning."

Ellis laughed. "Well, that's good news and bad news. He's on the other team, but he's from Missouri."

"In World News, the Nazi controlled French Government announced plans to move its headquarters to Vichy, a town some 200 miles south of occupied Paris."

Ellis switched off the radio. He shook his head as he and Heather exchanged glances. It was a terrible thing that was happening in Europe of course, but it was all so far away. Surely the Nazis would soon be stopped somehow. In the meantime however, prayers would continue to be said on behalf of the people whose lives had been destroyed.

It was getting late and they needed to make an early start in the morning. In his mind Ellis began to run through a list of the next day's chores: mend the hen house roof, get some more gravel down on the road to the creek, move the cows over to the meadow and begin haying the pasture, but most importantly, find the coyotes that had been after the chickens. The dog would help with that.

"Lazarus, here boy," Ellis called, setting his plate with the now empty piecrust on the porch. True to his name, Lazarus sprang suddenly to life and in one apparently miraculous movement flipped from his prone position onto his feet and crossed the floor before Ellis had even managed to let go of the plate; a deft move for an old dog.

"Well, I guess he seems to think it's pretty good too," said Heather.

"You finish that up, boy, we got us some work to do tomorrow," he said, patting Lazarus on the back of the neck. "And you boy," he turned to Will, "you go on to bed. We got work tomorrow too! You, me and old Lazarus here are gonna find us some coyotes and maybe I'll get another chance to teach you how to shoot."

"Yes, Pa. G'Night," Will landed with a thud as he hopped off the swing. "Night Mom," he hugged her around the neck.

"Good night, son. You sleep good now," she kissed him on the forehead. "I'll be there in a minute to tuck you in all right?"

"Okay," he yawned, stretching his arms over his head as he walked into the house. "Will you help me say my prayers too? There's a lot of people need prayin' for, and I don't wanna forgot none." Will paused for a moment, as if deep in thought, then his face brightened, "Hey Pa, should I say one for DiMaggio? He's probably pretty sad about losing today?"

Ellis laughed. Where does that boy get these notions? "That's a good idea son. That's right thoughtful of you."

Ellis' huge hand engulfed Will's head as he rumbled the boy's soft, blond hair and sent him on his way.

Ellis loved his children so much it frightened him at times. Like most fathers, he wanted his sons to have everything he did not. He wanted them to be happy; he wanted them not to be afraid of anything, but above all, he wanted them to feel loved. By insuring this for them it was as if he could somehow erase his own past, and experience childhood again through them. This was the strange dual nature of his fatherhood of which he was only superficially aware.

Dropping down onto the swing next to Ellis, Heather sighed.

"Long day, Sweetheart? He asked.

"They're all long days," she replied. "But good days, and I wouldn't trade them for...all the tea in China."

"You sure about that? I reckon that's an awful lot of tea you know."

She took his hand in hers and stroked it carefully, her head resting on his brawny shoulder.

"Yep, I'm sure."

They rocked together for a few minutes. The Homeplace was so quiet now. Just the rhythmic creak of the Elm swing

and the wind blowing gently through the huge, old. If things could simply stay like this; if the new day never dawned; if, for the next hundred years, he and Heather could just sit next to each other on the swing, he would be happy.

I bet DiMaggio doesn't get much of this in New York City, he thought. He may have the world on a string and be married to some famous actress, but Ellis wouldn't change places with him for anything, even all that tea.

"You're a good man Ellis Waddell," said Heather as if she'd heard his thoughts. They often knew what the other would say or do before it was said or done. They had been together for twelve years and he was still surprised by how close they had become. To know someone so intimately was an awesome responsibility, but one that he felt he wanted. He wondered what it would be like to have been married for fifty years. It wasn't that unusual in this part of the country. His own parents had already been married thirty-eight years; another twelve and he would be able to just ask them.

"I better go tuck Will in before he's back out here asking for more pie," said Heather. She stooped to retrieve the pie plate "I think I'll go to bed myself. Will you come tuck me in?"

Ellis smiled, "I'll be along shortly."

The sound of Heather's footsteps echoed down the hall.

Having risen to a high point in the sky, the moon shone brightly on land surrounding the homeplace. To the north, Ellis could see as far as the creek where the moonlight glinted off the surface of the nearly still water. South, past the main barn and across a field of corn, was Sherwin's Forest.

Ellis's father had bought the land from a man named Kastens shortly after the turn of the century. Nobody seemed to know who Sherwin had been or what he'd had to do with the forest or if there ever really was a Sherwin to begin with. People always told him he should call it something else, after all, it was his forest now. He'd thought about it, but in the end decided to leave it be. Those trees held a lot of memories for him and the name was part of them.

Will could be heard at his prayers now, "God bless Grandma and Grandpa..."

Ellis remembered how, as a child, he and his grandfather had gone out to the forest one bitterly cold afternoon shortly before Christmas to cut some old timber for firewood. Granddad had been drinking. "A little holiday

cheer," he would always say. Trouble was, for Granddad, there always seemed to be a holiday to be cheerful about.

They were busy chopping large logs into pieces small enough to haul back. It was hard work for a small boy and an old man and clouds of breath formed in rapid succession before their faces. Granddad decided to take a break and have a few pulls at a flask which was always with him. Ellis paused to watch as the whiskey warmed his grandfather like liquid heat. Granddad looked at him, then at the flask in his hand. He held it out for Ellis saying it would warm him up. Ellis took a sip. He'd heard people call it firewater, now he knew why. He almost spit it out, but he'd heard his grandfather say it was a sin to waste good whiskey. Ellis coughed and sputtered like an old jalopy, but managed to get it down. Granddad made him take a couple more swigs and then made him promise not to tell anyone.

Granddad said he was going to go "make room for more whiskey" and told Ellis to start loading the wood onto the wagon as he headed off into the woods. When he had finished, his grandfather was nowhere to be found. Ellis had begun to experience the after effects of the alcohol and felt more than a little frightened. He called out for his grandfather, but there was no response. After a few minutes he went looking.

About half an hour later Ellis saw him sitting on a tree stump down where the now frozen creek ran through the woods. Again, Ellis called his name and again, no response. He was confused and scared. Why was his grandfather ignoring him? Was he angry about something? Ellis walked slowly towards him. Granddad was completely still and no breath could be seen hovering in the icy air. He had fallen asleep in the subzero Missouri air and frozen to death.

Ellis had seen many dead animals before, but this was the first time he ever saw a human corpse. That, combined with the whirling fog of the whiskey frightened him so much that he ran all the way back to the homeplace. His grandmother lived many years after her husband passed away. Everyone had thought she would follow him quickly, but she surprised them all. Ellis missed her a great deal.

"...God bless baby Thomas..."

He and Heather had always planned a large family and now that he seemed to have his drinking under control, Thomas was the next step toward that goal. Being an only child was hard enough, but being the only child in a farming family was a real struggle. There was just too much work on a farm for a small family to do, and in bad years there wasn't enough money to hire extra hands. As a youngster, Ellis had known some children who had been born

more out of a need for free labor than out of love. However, it wasn't that way with baby Thomas or Will. He hoped they'd both stay on the farm and eventually take it over, but nowadays you just never could tell what kids would do when they grew up. There were so many new things in the world to distract them from life in a rural community. All he could do was hope, and pray.

"...God bless Ma and Pa..."

Without Heather, Ellis knew he would have come to a bad end. She was able to find goodness in people whom others had dismissed as a waste of time. She saw that goodness in Ellis and made him believe in it himself. Whenever he was angry, which wasn't so often anymore, or worried about something, she could calm him with a look that made him forget whatever it was that had first unsettled him. He was a lucky man and he knew it.

"...God bless Lazarus, and help him and Pa get that coyote that's been eatin' the chickens. Oh, and please help Joe DiMaggio not be sad about losin' the game. Amen."

His life was just about perfect. Whether it was God's work or merely luck he wasn't sure, but he was grateful and said "Amen" just in case.



Steam was still rising off the biscuit as Ellis tossed it gingerly from hand to hand. He split it in two with a knife and dropped it on his plate. He sliced off a pat of butter and swirled it together with some sorghum molasses until the mixture was a rich orange-brown color and spread the concoction on the inside of the two halves. As soon as it hit the hot bread it turned to liquid and soaked into the biscuit. Next, there were three or four scrambled eggs, a thick slice of country ham, toast and lots of fresh, hot coffee. Will was working his way through a tall stack of hotcakes and some bacon. Heather wouldn't stop to eat until the men had finished. The Homeplace never smelled better than in the early morning when breakfast and the day's baking were underway.

The sun was not quite up yet, but everyone had been awake for a while choring. Ellis had fed and watered the cattle, pigs and horses. Will liked to feed the chickens so that was one of his official duties. He had been the one to discover the mangled remains of two of the birds a few days earlier. He mended the fence right away, which stopped anything getting in at the chickens, but something had been digging nearby and they were spooked. Ellis was sure it was one of the coyotes that lived in the area and he wanted to