

IN SCHOOL-DAYS

*...He lives to learn, in life's hard school,
How few who pass above him
Lament their triumph and his loss,
Like her, – because they love him.*

Eva had her back to the window but heard the rattle of the harness in the yard and the contented snort of the mare as she waited to be unhitched. Skewed rectangular beams of afternoon sunlight stretched blindingly across the kitchen table behind her, while she stood in the darkly contrasting shadow near an inside wall. Eva's hands continued working the dough while her head struggled to remain cool. The man coming through from the barn was returning much later than he had led her to expect. A bowl of cold stew, a napkin, and a large gray spoon lay in the sunbeam at his end of the table.

"Took Dad to the cemetery today," Hollis Brenner hollered from the el. One boot thumped heavily to the floor, and he cocked his leg to pull off the other. It too landed hard, making Eva ponder just how a piece of cow skin can sound so wooden.

"Trey told me," Eva answered when he had stepped quietly, as fitted his gentleness, into the kitchen.

"He was supposed to." Hollis sprawled in a chair next to the table and watched his wonderful wife of thirty years move efficiently around the plain, spacious room.

"Took a long time," she ventured. It was really an observation, not a challenge.

He knew it. So he told her, not as a retort but as fact, what had been different. He took his father to the cemetery at least one Sunday a month. Sometimes Eva went along. Sometimes Treyton, their son, and particulars of his family came too. Their daughter, Beulah, came along maybe once a year. That's about how often she was back for a visit to the farm. She was raising a family with a husband from over in Illinois, where

they lived now. But it was just across the state line. Usually, though, Hollis went for the cemetery visit alone with Samuel, his eighty-ish dad.

They had been keeping to this routine for twelve years, ever since Mom had died. Dad had gone alone daily at first, but in time his schedule of attendance relaxed, and now he was too unsteady either to drive a gig or to walk the uneven bury field, as he called it, by himself.

So father and son visited the family graves together. The number of markers gradually grew as uncles and aunts were added, as occasionally an infant died, and as now and then a young cousin was cut down in his prime in a farming accident or a drowning. Every now and then Dad would grasp Hollis's forearm and lead him around to a few other markers and they would both stand before the name of a prominent shopkeeper or preacher or just plain neighbor, and Dad would regale his son for a while, telling about fiery sermons or rescuing cows from flooded fields or running up a high bill at the farmer's union, which he always paid in full in very short order. These people before whose stones they stood would remember those things too, if they were still living. Dad made the rounds in this manner only when he and Hollis were there alone.

"Dad introduced me to some more old acquaintances today. I never realized there were so many families in this county that I knew so little about."

"Probably half of what he's telling you are memories he invented," Eva said. She was rolling out a pie crust, and Hollis mentally measured the force with which she laid the rolling pin down and pushed it away from her across the sideboard again and again. She was sprinkling flour onto the dough, although not dusting the kitchen with it as she might if containing some anger, and, true, she was not slamming the wooden rolling pin down but was efficiently spreading the thin crust, not beating it, preparing one of her finest creations – most of it for him.

"I would have thought so, too. But then he made me stay put while he wandered way over to a far-off set of markers, down in the corner where the fence is toppled. I let him go. Didn't think he had any marker in

particular in mind, because he sort of wandered. Then I realized he was having difficulty reading them as he went along. The headstones gave him less trouble, I guess. He passed most of them by without stopping at all.

"Then he stopped and stood, kind of with his back to me. After a minute or two he took his hat off, and I knew he was where he wanted to be."

"Who's in that corner down there?"

"I thought about sneaking up behind and taking a look. Probably smart that I didn't. He knelt down and then looked over my way. I don't think he sees well enough to know whether I was watching him, but he knew I was where he'd left me, so he sort of prayed there or something for several more minutes.

"Took him a long while to scrape back over to the gig, and when he looked at me I could see he wasn't in no condition to talk. He just kind of nodded and I helped him up and climbed in myself."

"There must be more to tell. That doesn't account for four or five hours that you could have been home."

"No, it don't," Hollis agreed, and stared at his wife's back as she worked. Her dark-brown, gray-streaked hair hung the way he liked it, loosely gathered at the back of the neck and left to drop from there straight to the mid-point between her shoulder blades. "No, it don't," he repeated. "Dad said, part way home, 'I'd like to go out to Pike Run.' 'Nothing there but fields, Dad, I said. 'I can show you fields hereby.' He just gave me this pleading look, so I drove out there. Thing I forgot was the old brick schoolhouse. He wanted to see the schoolhouse that sits there all by itself. So again he told me to wait after I helped him down. He walked up that lane and 'round and 'round the school. For a spell he had 'hold of the vines running up it, just looking into the distance, and I thought he was close to collapse, but I stayed back where he could see me holding the horse. Around the side where I couldn't see, I think he could have been peering inside, or maybe he just sat in some shade. I don't know.

"Finally he bobbed and shuffled back to the gig. 'Thanks, Son,' was all he could say, but his voice broke, as if something were painful. And he kept his eyes down where I couldn't see him square to. I knew he was

crying, or more just turned all sad. At the house I delivered him to Missus Knaille and asked her to kind of keep an eye on him today. Dad said, 'I'll be just fine, Son.'

Eva asked: "Did you talk to him about the schoolhouse?"

"I didn't put him to no test." Hollis stood and walked to a different chair, where it was easier to see the side of his wife's face. She turned toward him.

"I would have wondered what was significant about the schoolhouse, and so I would have asked," she said with a slight scold in her voice.

Hollis thought. "That's where he went to school, as long as he went to school. Where I went too for my first couple of years, before they abandoned it and took over the basement of the town hall."

Eva shrugged. She deftly picked up a membrane of pie crust and draped it over a pie plate, then trimmed the entire edge with one sweep of a short knife. She like that part of the job the best. Hollis enjoyed watching the brief act. He was proud of his skill for sharpening knives.

Hollis went on: "I went back to the cemetery. The grass was still flat where he'd been kneeling. The marker read: Margaret Irene Bay, April 5, 1840 - October 29, 1879."

"Wasn't there a Bay gentleman with the government or something?"

"He was next to her. Hugh Something Bay, 1842 to 1910, I believe it was. Brother and sister. He was a lawyer around here when I was a kid. There were some older Bay markers, too. An Edward and wife from the 1790's, and a Morris, probably their son. And there was another stone broke in half and the name mostly gone. Year of death was 1868."

"They don't mean a thing to me."

"They did to Dad. I was struck with an idea just before I left there. The caretaker of the cemetery before Caverly – Old 'Spade' Vellison – I thought: He's still alive. And I knew he used to have that set of cabins below the trestle – used to let them out to all his own sons and daughters when they were still children but

having each other's babies. I figured, it being Sunday and people being free to visit and all, I could go down there and talk to him.

"He wasn't much in the way of conversation, but some woman was tending him and she sort of fed him the questions I had and kind of read the answers he regurgitated, like she was reading tea leaves.

"Old Spade, even when I was a kid I always thought he was as old as he is now. Guess how old he is."

Eva pinched a pattern into the edge of the empty crust and then slipped the pie plate into the pie oven atop the kitchen stove. "I don't even know the man, Hollis. When would I ever meet a cemetery caretaker?"

"He's six and eighty. He buried most of them Bays. And he remembered the one called Irene. Didn't rightly let on that he remembered Dad at first, but said he was still in school when the Misses Bay first started their education."

"Misses?"

"Two girls. Irene and a younger sister, he remembered, name of Blanche. Said they always thought the younger one's name was appropriate, seeing how white she always looked and sickly."

"What does all this have to do with your father?"

"Don't you see? Dad's eighty-two. That makes him born in 'forty-one. The Misses Bay were in school with him."

"Did your caretaker friend know that?"

"That and a good bit more. There was a teacher came to town in the 'thirties. Few years later the town built him that school on the premise that he be required to educate any young girls that a family might want to send, and there arose a controversy about girls being educable."

"I thought the school was built in the 'seventies. You mean that old square schoolhouse over toward the river?"

"The one we visited today. That's the one Dad attended. It was a while after the school was built that the

teacher, Bloomfield, lived up to his part of the deal, and the Misses bay were the first young girls admitted. Dad was already a student. He must have been about eleven when the girls first arrived. For his part, Spade Vellison was about done school. Not that he'd learned anything, he said. But Bloomfield had begun setting standards and then began jacking up the requirements. Told the older boys that they'd better take a certificate while they could or else they'd be eight or nine years in school and nothing to show for it.

"When the girls arrived and sat side by side with the boys and began showing better minds than most of the boys who'd been there even four or five years, Vellison and a few more worked their hides off and took their certificates."

"I understand that Old Vellison had to include a lot of useless detail in relating all this to you, but can you leave out some of the minor details for me. Did the school have a privy?"

"In fact it did, by 1851..."

"That's what I mean! Don't tell me about the privy. Don't tell me about the bushes outside and the knife marks in the benches."

"Oh. All right. You're right."

"Thank you."

"There was one young colt of a boy that Vellison knew of couldn't keep his wits about him with the girls around. Always showing off. Ever notice how Dad drags his right leg?"

Eva looked at Hollis as if to say: 'Don't veer into details.' Instead she said, "I thought he came by that during that train wreck, when your mama was injured so bad."

"That's when I became aware of it as a matter-of-fact limping."

"She came out the worse of the two. Never did recover. But I still think that's not what she died from," said Eva. She was pouring a blackish mixture from one black-stained wooden bowl into another.

Hollis Brenner thought about his mother for a moment. "Dad always walked funny after that. But Vellison

told me how, in school, some boys came early one morning. Scaled the school wall to the eaves, they did. The older ones, that's as high as they could get. The Brenner boy, he said, pulled himself past the eaves and tried to climb to the peak but lost his purchase and slid down the slate roof. Would have gone straight to the hard ground, but a shingle on the edge snagged him and snapped that leg right in his breeches. Left Dad hanging by his pant leg with a broken knee and wailing for half an hour until Bloomfield arrived. Spade said young Brenner never walked right until he went off to fight in the War. Had to straighten out his gait or they might not have taken him in the army."

"I'm sorry, Hollis, but where is this all leading?"

"The Misses Bay. I had to put up with the urine-house smell and the dirt-floor dankness of Vellison's hovel in order to get this story, so I guess you can bear with me while I trim it to fit the remainder of the day. I listened to a good deal more slobbering and coughing by him than I'm bothering to relate to you here."

A whistle wailed in the east. Hollis closed his eyes and watched a conjured image of the long, gray-streaked locomotive, reddened by long, evening sun rays as it rolled into town on the riverbank, far below the farm. He wished he appeared pensive, but his digression didn't fool his omniscient wife.

Eva smiled warmly and wiped her hands on the green-checked apron. Her husband opened his eyes when she lifted his hands from his lap and nestled her skirts there instead. Locking onto his eyes and holding them with utmost confidence, she waited until the last echo of the whistle faded. Nearly nose-to-nose with him she said, "If it don't fit the remainder of the day, you can talk me right to sleep with it, and after that you can carry on to the spiders and flies and anyone else who'll stay awake for it through the night."

Hollis probed the deep blue of her eyes and his narrow mouth smiled a sheepish smile. He willed her much wider mouth to smile too, but it held clenched teeth, challenging him to get to the point. "I drove up to see the Reverend Pulsifer. The markers were in his section of the bury field. If these Bays were citizens such as would include a lawyer, maybe they needed an advocate in a higher realm. So I discussed this thing with him a little

bit. We walked back across to the church and he withdrew the ledgers. Sure enough, there was enough to show that at least two descendants might still be living right here in town. One would be a 57-year-old son of Hugh Bay, and the other a daughter of Blanche, about 57 also. Well, I'm 53, yes? And I don't remember anyone of that name, but this is a town of at least fourteen thousand, and they would have preceded me by a few grades in school, so I could see why I might not know them. The man's name would be Charlie Bay, son of Hugh, nephew of Irene and Blanche, and the woman's would be Annabel Leighton, niece of Hugh and Irene.

"The Reverend Pulsifer helped me track down an address for each, and was also kind enough to water and bag the horse while we talked. He had some thoughts on things the churches in town could be doing together and, my being a deacon in ours and his being well-established here, he thought we could explore this further some day. So we made an appointment for next Saturday morning..."

Lips warm and flour-flavored suddenly swooped in on Hollis's. They fitted his perfectly and swallowed his next few words. Then they withdrew and leveled with his eyes in a wide, embracing smile.

Hollis licked his lips, then regained his mission. "The man named Charlie Bay has a telephone, so I rang him from the church, but no one was home. I tried Missus Leighton next. She asked to speak with the Reverend, and he vouched for me and gave me a letter of introduction to hand her, and so I drove up to Sherman Hill. I hain't been up there in ten, fifteen years. Big old houses like that are getting pretty run-down looking. Including hers. But it was still dignified, and so was she.

"I expected that, if she was the child of a frail woman named Blanche, who had died young, she'd be frail too. But here she was a woman my height and pretty plump to boot."

"Pretty, you said?"

"Pretty plump. But I expect she could be thought a pretty woman, too. Widow, she told me. I said she'd get on great with my wife, just to assure her that I had only business-like intentions."

"Then I shall be meeting this lady-friend of yours?"

"I don't know. We concluded our interview in one session, I believe. I introduced myself and explained that I had learned this same day of her relationship to Miss Blanche Bay, whose married name I had not learned. She supplied it: Heierling."

"The furniture people."

"The same. So this Annabel Heierling became Missus Clarence Leighton, as I met her today. Her mother, Blanche Bay Heierling, whose grave marker was the one broken and half missing, died when Annabel was only two years old, after catching a fever. There were one or two older children, but that's not important. As Missus Leighton was relating these facts there was a knock at the door and a Mildred Freeze or Freeds, I didn't quite make it out – a neighbor next door – came in to see who the gentleman caller might be. This older lady was very lively, probably ten years younger than Dad, and joined right in the conversation."

Eva began to rise from her husband's lap, but he yanked her back and locked his arms around her. "I explained to them what Dad had done at the cemetery and at the old school, and that I was merely trying to understand why he would have been so moved by the visit to the Bay family plot.

"Missus Leighton hardly said a word after that. Missus Freeze, who is no relation to that family but seems to know its business better than the Bays themselves, told me what matters.

"There was indeed a boy in the old school who left his mark, in more ways than one. Missus Freeze herself, as a schoolgirl, had sat at the desk where the initials S.T.B. were gouged into the wood and linked with the initials M.I.B. Everybody knew of this young colt who had gone before. He even affected the hearts of girls as young as this Mildred. His devotion to one Irene Bay had been widely known, along with the revolving nature of her changing affections toward him. When the boys went off to the War they were heroes even before they marched out of town. Samuel Brenner was the most gallant one of all, said Missus Freeze.

"When I asked what she meant by 'changing affections' she found it difficult to explain. Missus Leighton was more helpful. Her aunt, this Irene Bay, was a real fair beauty, and so there were boys a-plenty for her to

touch with her charm. It seems that she cast her glances on one and all, and each thought he was the favored one. But the first upon whom she ever placed her childish favor, and everybody knew it, was Samuel Brenner.

"As Miss Irene Bay grew into her young womanhood and proceeded to confer her favor on another young man and then another, young Brenner was unwilling to relinquish his childish claim to the girl. He became the biggest show-off in the town. People still talk about the hay-wagon rescues and how Dad came upon the accident and saved six or seven children from drowning. Well, they weren't such little children as couldn't swim or save themselves. Dad must have been about fourteen himself. Missus Freeze said that Miss Irene Bay was one of those on that wagon, and Dad was only hauling bodies out of the water until he found hers. It so happened that there weren't any more in the water after he found her, or else one might have drowned, sort of muddying his heroism. Missus Freeze reckons that he looked under the bridge and recognized the horse or the wagon and wasn't so much bent on becoming a hero as he was on making sure his lady-fair was not lost.

"But Miss Irene was evidently not so impressed that she would swear lifelong fealty to Dad, so he continued his antics and heroics."

"Was that when he wrestled the bank robber and earned that citation from the governor?"

"About the same time. He took up fast riding then, too. Bragged he would be going west to join the rodeo if his leg would only heal. He admitted that to me himself, that he kept up that promise about going west for as long as he was in school.

"Miss Irene, according to her niece and Missus Freeze, permitted many young men to pay court to her, but would spurn poor Dad. Yet, she always seemed to lead him on just far enough that he learned and practiced good manners and must have felt that he always had a chance of winning back her affections as they approached the age of decision.

"Dad's last great heroic act was to enlist when the call went out after Fort Sumpter. Now here's where Missus Freeze, who must be the Sherman Hill busybody, was even hard pressed to make her story plain. I

suspect that what she passed on was more a woman's notion of what transpired.

"After Samuel Brenner had marched off to Maryland, Irene Bay suddenly ceased to entertain suitors and visitors of all kinds. I rather wondered if it weren't because all the decent men had joined up and gone off. Missus Freeze holds that without Dad there for her to make jealous Miss Irene saw no point in playing the game. After a year or more went by and Dad didn't return, Miss Irene accepted some sort of offer to go study in England. Missus Freeze believes that if we looked through Dad's stuff we might find some letters from abroad."

"When did you say she died?"

"1879."

"Age about..."

"Thirty-nine," Hollis supplied.

"When did Dad marry your mother?"

"I didn't want to put that together myself. I was ten years old, so it was 1880."

"He never married before that."

"Nope."

"He waited until she died."

"Yup."

"Did she ever marry?"

"According to Missus Leighton, Miss Irene Bay never did."

"Did she ever return from England?"

"Not until she was embalmed."

"I never heard such a love story, if that is what you want to call it."

"I asked Missus Freeze: If each was waiting for the other, why didn't one of them just pull the curtain aside,

so to speak, and declare it a stalemate?

"Miss Irene, she said, became indispensable in the service of some duchess or something like that, and would have acquiesced if Dad had come to England, possibly as a stable hand or something. Dad was intimidated by the thought of hanging around royalty and was too proud to be a barnsweep to some high-and-mighties."

Eva slowly shook her head. "So they waited one another out."

"I learned something else. Missus Freeze looked me up and down and asked how old I might be. I made the rejoinder that if I had been a lady I would take that as a highly inflammatory and personal question, but since I don't fancy myself a sensitive lady, I would take no offense at the question. I said I'm fifty-three. So her quick mind summed up that I must have had, originally, a father other than Dad.

"I allowed that she was very astute, and of course she asked me who it was. I asked myself: What could this woman possibly know? Now, I never sought to know, but one day after that train wreck, when Mama wasn't too clear-thinking and she believed Dad was going to die on account of the accident too, she told me to go look in her mother's family Bible. So I went to her mother's and paid a call and casually looked in the Bible. That's when I found it."

"You never told me this."

"It didn't make sense to me at first. Mama was a good ten years younger than Dad. Grandma's Bible listed my name under Mama's, with Samuel Brenner as my father."

"I don't understand. You mean her first husband was not mentioned?"

"There was no first husband. You know how I was led to believe that my original father went off and left us when I was a baby? Grandma's Bible put the lie to that fabrication."

"I still don't understand. It lists Samuel Brenner when he became your mother's husband."

"No. It lists Samuel Brenner when he became my father. Alice Ann Tillotson, age 19, mother of Hollis

Grant Tillotson, father Samuel Brenner, age 29. I spent ten years calling myself Hollis Grant and believing that was all the name I had and that my absent father was related to the President."

Eva shifted on her husband's lap, then relaxed again. "What did you answer Missus Freeze?"

"I don't have any shame over any of that. Mama's gone, and Dad's too old to be shamed by it either. So I told her the truth. Missus Leighton began to cry, then. I'm still trying to figure out the exact cousinage, but Grant, you see, is my Grandma Tillotson's maiden name. It was also the maiden name of Irene and Blanche Bay's mother."

"Samuel couldn't have the one he loved..."

"...and the sister, Blanche, took a husband in the meantime..."

"...so he dallied with a cousin. Sired a son. But waited until his lady fair had passed from this life before he owned up to the responsibility he had created for himself."

"He really loved Mama, Eva. He did right by her."

"I realize that. I've been around him long enough to know. Hollis?"

"What?"

"Are you going to go through his things and look for those letters?"

"I was thinking. I think I'll suggest to him that on Sundays from now on I'll help him go through his things and cull out the stuff he doesn't want to leave as a legacy. He did that with Mama, and I thought it was a kindness. She told him what to destroy and what to leave behind for Gladys and me to remember her by.

"He's been telling me he wants to show me how that straw shredder works that he invented. So I'll tell him, Dad, it's time. I'll explain to him that I'm not interested in making off with his treasures. And I'll tell you as a fact that I'm not going to be snooping for letters from England. Even if I run across some, I think I'll let him be the one to 'find' them. As for me, I'd be content to let them go into the stove if that's what he decides to do with them."

"I think that's all a good idea. Hollis?"

"What?"

"I want to meet your cousin Annabel."

"I guess that's fair. She'll be receptive to that, I think. But let's leave Dad out of it, okay?"

"Agreed. We'll ask her to do the same. I think she'd prefer not to meet him anyway."

"Hollis."

"What."

"Can we get a telephone?"

Hollis fumbled with his wife's elbows and wrists until he could draw one of her kitchen hands from the creases of her apron. He found some flour between two fingers and tried to taste it. Eva recoiled. Then she leaped to her feet, stepped quickly to the oven, and pulled the hot, empty pie crust into the kitchen's fading afternoon shadows.

"Hollis," she said as she worked with the mixture of dark berries and other magical ingredients.

"What."

"Name my mother's three sisters."

"There's Miriam, Frances . . . And your mother was Luella. I'll think of the other one. Come on! Three out of the four are dead – I'm supposed to remember them all?"

"Hollis."

"What."

"How many grandchildren do you have?"

"Seven."

"Eight. Can you name them?"

"Beulah has – oh, that's right – four: Amybeth..."

"Hollis."

"What."

"How could you memorize that entire web of names and people that you discovered today and you can't even name the folks in your own family?"

"I can do it. Really I can. Give me a chance. There's Amybeth, Joseph..."

IN SCHOOL DAYS, John Greenleaf Whittier

Still sits the school-house by the road,
A ragged beggar sunning;
Around it still the sumachs grow,
And blackberry-vines are running.

Within, the master's desk is seen,
Deep scarred by raps official;
The warping floor, the battered seats,
The jack-knife's carved initial;

The charcoal frescoes on its wall;
Its door's worn sill, betraying
The feet that, creeping slow to school,
Went storming out to playing!

Long years ago a winter sun
Shone over it at setting;
Lit up its western window-panes,
And low eaves' icy fretting.

It touched the tangled golden curls,

And brown eyes full of grieving,
Of one who still her steps delay
When all the school were leaving.

For near her stood the little boy
Her childish favor singled;
His cap pulled low upon a face
Where pride and shame were mingled.

Pushing with restless feet the snow
To right and left, he lingered; –
As restlessly her tiny hands
The blue-checked apron fingered.

He saw her lift her eyes; he felt
The soft hands' light caressing,
And heard the tremble of her voice,
As if a fault confessing.

"I'm sorry that I spelt the word:
I hate to go above you,
Because," – the brown eyes lower fell. –
"Because, you see, I love you!"

Still memory to a gray-haired man
That sweet child-face is showing.
Dear girl! the grasses on her grave
Have forty years been growing!

He lives to learn, in life's hard school,
How few who pass above him

Lament their triumph and his loss,
Like her, – because they love him.

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