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If I Should Die...

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If I Should Die . . .

KEN FOLKERT

The wind was cold, but there was some scattered sun. Not enough to melt even the top layers of mud, frozen into ruts left by the last wagons. The fence he had put in during the summer was leaning forward—toward the road. It had been dry then. So dry that his hands had blistered before the postholes were deep enough, and the powdery earth had refused to hold the fence up straight. So now it leaned, pushed by the wind, frozen for a season in acute angle with the withered grass and dead daylily leaves.

Those, too, he had planted, and watered. And they would live, for they were tough. Tougher than I am, he thought.

He walked behind the barn, where the wind was gusty from buffeting against the buildings. There were more ruts there, some filled with ice. The ground here had no dead grass on it, for here the turkeys had run all summer. There had been a wire fence between the corner of the barn and the old chicken coop, and the fence had circled around behind the coop and the corn cribs and had come back to the other corner of the barn, where the silo stood.

Only a few feathers remained in the sheltered corner between the silo and barn. And the ruts full of ice, and broken down doors and windows without any glass in them. One corn crib was half-full of corn, and the elevator still stood there, ready for more. But it was too wet in the fields. So it would stay half-full, because Dad didn't have time since he works, and the other guys aren't so hot on working around the place. God knows they have enough time, though.

Well, what the hell, raced through his mind.

He struck out at an angle across what had been the turkey yard. His path took him between the corn crib and the coop. He paused there, by the pile of stones and scrap metal that had been there as long as he could remember. Once the stones had been the buildings of an imaginary city, and the weeds had been the trees. Right next to the weathered building were the remains of an old grindstone—one that had worked spasmodically in the days of the great city.

Now the stone was broken in half, and hung lopsidedly on its axle. The pedals had rusted away, and so had the seat. Turkey

droppings, frozen and crumbling, nestled among the buildings of the city. And there were no trees.

Farther out, in the yard itself, a thin layer of new grass had sprung up to cover the bare ground before the frost had come. Now the thin layer of snow that was on the ground made it look green and new. Something beautiful about ground that turkeys have eaten bare when it comes back to life, he mused.

He stepped gingerly across the ridges that criss-crossed the wallow that the big white birds had made in the back corner of the yard. There was no snow on them, but it was so cold that the dust was like powder underfoot.

Circling around, he passed behind two brooding houses that stood, surrounded by dead weeds and all manner of empty oil cans, old barbed wire, barrels, old brooder stoves, and bits of wood.

Now he was at the back end of the tool shed. He remembered when they had put it up. Mom had taken some movies of it. Dad and two neighbors had done it, and it was hard work, for the shed was of corrugated steel, with steel beams. Now some of the concrete footings were freezing out of the ground, and the beams were out of line.

The doors on the back, or west end, had blown off from their hinges, and the combine stood there, exposed to the weather. Sheltered from the wind, he lit a cigarette. His coat whipped slightly in the breeze that came in under the edges of the walls. He looked at his shoes. The fresh shine was dulled. He had not shaved yet today.

Then the feeling within him boiled up. Why not stay here at home? There's plenty of good, rewarding work to be done here. I know this place. I remember it. I've experienced it.

He surveyed the open end of the shed. A few two by sixes and some celotex would seal it up well for the winter. There's some unused celotex in the barn. We'd have to drill holes in the steel and bolt up the wood, but it wouldn't take more than a day.

And all that junk by the brooder houses. I could clean it up. I know this place.

Then the cold air and the cigarette suddenly made him very dizzy. He stubbed it out on the side of the shed, and headed for the house. I'll make a fresh pot of coffee. I'll cheer Mom up. I'll put on some records. They're defeating themselves here. I can't let them die.

Then he opened the door. The baby was crying. The floor was dirty, like all back kitchen floors. The rugs were grimy. She wouldn't appreciate the music. She wouldn't know why I feel good.

They're dead already.

