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Deliverance

James Calvin Schaap

When it comes to seeing and knowing, we've got a leg up on most of you. But then only the Maker has total omniscience, so now and then we suffer false alarms—*we*, meaning squads of old friends or fishing buddies, beckoned for what we call a deliverance. Things don't always go according to plan.

Old-timers say deathbed ritual was a bigger deal 100 years ago, when small crowds formed around those on their way up the hill, family and friends gathering to hear some parting blessing or the final utterances of a man or a woman bound for glory, as if whatever the dying might divulge were something akin to gospel. Such gatherings weren't as silly as they might sound—take it from someone who's been there, both on the bed as well as hanging around, spook-like, waiting for someone like Tom Holland, the postman, to go, a man who up until my own death had quite regularly stopped for coffee when he delivered the mail. "Ten minutes," he'd say pointing two fingers, scrupulously. Often enough it was twenty, but the mail always got through.

When he died, I was there. Attending a deliverance is good work, among the finest you can draw up here. Mostly. People are serious at that moment, deadly serious. Sorry.

You might think that what's said at a man or woman's death bed could prompt a snicker from us, given what we know and they don't; but we're bigger than that post-mortem, and all of us remember when we too saw through a glass darkly—which doesn't imply, by the way, that we're clairvoyant these days.

Mailman Tom just wore out. That happens.

He'd never married, had no kids, but wasn't lacking for friends, me among them. My office wasn't the only stop on his route. He knew everyone, went to every ball game the high school ever played, and almost always wore a winning smile one simply doesn't see all that often down in the vale of tears. Let me put it this way—and take it from a veteran—Tom Holland didn't change much when he got up here. I'm serious. In life already Tom was something of an angel.

Okay, that's stretching it.

He died at home, as he wanted. And we were there, four or five of us, taking up no space. Wilma, his only sister, was there, as were her two girls, MaryAnn and Betts—and a baby. You don't regularly find a baby at a deathbed, but MaryAnn couldn't get a sitter for her little one, not so much a tail-ender as the last in an almost endless string. And it was a joy for us since we don't often share a room with a toddler. You're never too old or dead, for that matter, to forget what pure joy a child can be. The little girl was silent as a toad, as if she knew what was in the offing. Tom's preacher was there, of course. It wasn't tight, just comfy.

The Hollands are solid singers, Wilma a choir member since the late '50s, her daughters-in-law often singing duets in church. So when they broke into "Abide With Me," it was, even for us, quite touching, Wilma holding her brother's hand. We sang along, which gave the music even more girth than they were capable of giving or picking up, and then we were ready to take him with us up the hill, and they were ready to let him go.

But old Tom didn't cooperate. It wasn't his time exactly, so you might call it a false alarm—like I said, but we're not all-knowing. When he fell off to sleep, we all waited—and waited, and

waited, until the nurse came and shrugged her shoulders because she didn't know how to call it, and the fact is no one does exactly, although there are a dozen or more odd stories about the dying actually predicting their time, to the hour. Not this one. Tom's eyes closed, but his breathing eased, as if he'd decided that another dream or two would be just fine.

Reluctantly, a half-hour later or so, the women and the baby left when the nurse assured them that she'd call should something happen.

Two days later, we all gathered again, and once more the women sang "Abide with Me," plus, this time, "Blessed Assurance," "Trust and Obey," and "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms. All of it, in waiting. This time there was no baby.

"You can go now," Wilma told her brother, hand-in-hand with him. "You don't need to stay."

People say things like that, tender things. Deliverance is a good assignment, being attendants like that I mean, not that we learn much. Most often, you get to see people at their best, a blessing all its own.

Tom's eyes wandered around the room—they wore that pallor between gray and blue—and then he said, "They're here for me. I see 'em." He was talking about us.

That happens. People get close and they see visions.

MaryAnn looked around, straight at us, in fact, blind as a boxcar. "Maybe there's angels hovering," she said, a description that felt, well, succinctly honorable.

"My time is up, I think," old Tom said. His false teeth were out, so not everything came out all that clearly, but we could catch his drift. And then he managed a smile, glancing back up at us. "I'll just be up the road anyway," he told his sister and his nieces. "I can see now," he said, "and it's not all that far away. They're here all right."

No need to shush him. What Tom told his sister is not something people normally utter on their death beds, so we found it a little amusing, even—how can I say it?—a bit revealing, as if the four of us were suddenly caught undressed in front of the ladies.

"Who's here, Uncle Tom?" MaryAnn said. She's a straight-haired girl who, we all know, has taken a lot during her short life.

"Snooker," he said, slowly. He wasn't all that wrong—Jed and Cal and I were regulars at the Senior Center a decade or so ago.

No matter. The three women looked pleasingly at each other, smiles that have been all too rare in their lives.

Tom's eyes blinked hard and quick, as if something got caught up beneath the lids. And then he steadied himself into the Doxology, perfectly fitting and in character. But there wasn't much oomph, nor much tune left in him, nor enunciation, so we were the only ones who picked up that old favorite.

"It's up the hill," he told those women. "It's just up the hill where I'm going to."

"I think he's talking about the cemetery," Wilma said. "I bet he's talking about the graveyard."

"Not heaven?" MaryAnn said, as if hurt somehow.

"He must be talking about the cemetery," Wilma told her. "I don't know what's going on in his mind."

Quite frankly, I think it's better they don't know. Besides, who am I to question the Maker?

"Finally," Tom said, but that's all. Then again, "Finally."

And then, as if he knew the curtains were coming down, he opened his eyes, looked at his loving sister and her two daughters, and whispered, "It's snowing, isn't it?"

It was mid-June, and no one was thinking snow but Tom. So what?—not everything makes sense. Who knows why he got a kick out of the snow so suddenly. Up the hill after some snowy nights, everything sparkles, a newborn quilt shivering with diamonds in the swelling moonlight. Maybe he saw the pearly gates like a first pure snow.

And then he went. Or came. That was it, the moment. He rose out of that deathbed as if he were commanded to do so, and we were there like proper church ushers to lead him home.

Okay, it wasn't as dramatic as some, but all of us thought the whole thing vintage old Tom.

I've never attended a deliverance like that without noting that something happens to those who haven't yet departed, in this case to Wilma and her daughters. They believe they've experienced something profoundly holy, something rich with life, even though it's death.

Tom sat up from that bed and looked straight at us, his charmed face wearing that same wholesome smile. We took his hand to help him up the hill, as is our task, although we stayed, respectfully, for the preacher's prayer, which was aimed at them—at Wilma and her daughters left behind, and rightly so because Tom didn't need anyone's prayers just then. They did, as is always the case—and as I now hope to prove.

It was all women at Tom's bedside because Harold, of Wilma, was busy in the field, I think—or busy anyway, and only a brother-in-law, not a brother. Harold has a thousand acres out west where the land starts to roll up to the comely shoulders of the Big Sioux, and he was more than a little ornery about Uncle Tom having left his considerable fortune to the town (library remodeling), the school (a grade school gym), and some church relief agencies. Oh yeah, and Habitat, for whom he'd worked himself for years on weekends and even during vacations. Wilma got none because of her husband, Harold, who didn't need it and wanted it more than any human being should. We know all of this, of course. Tom told us.

Tom said he'd told his sister a year ago already that they weren't getting much, once it became clear that his brother-in-law never once wore a smile of the kind Tom was never seen without. Harold was just about everything Tom wasn't, voraciously hungry to build a kingdom—his own. Tom always claimed he didn't hate his brother-in-law, but simply couldn't be in a room with him much longer than it took to throw down a Thanksgiving turkey.

Harold and a few others believed Tom Holland was gay because he'd never married and almost certainly could have, Harold being the kind of man who couldn't believe that a real man could live without sex. Certainly he couldn't. What Harold thought about his brother-in-law's sexual preference may well have been true, but some of us, at least, never stopped to ask.

Meanwhile, you know what they say about death and taxes. Brother Harold hated both of them, although he certainly thought less about death until the grim reaper himself rode up to his place, looked him in the eye, and told him that he, Harold Fridsma, was going by way of lung cancer. In a way—and I can say this—cancer was a provi-

dential choice for Harold, a slow, lingering demise.

I should also mention that neither of Tom's nephews were there when Tom died because, like the old man, they were just plain too busy. And mad. And sometimes even a little ashamed of their Uncle Tom the mailman, who they jokingly referred to as the "not-mailman." Once upon a time, most men up here would have called those boys—and their old man—assholes, but no more, even though they were and are. It's just that we don't use that kind of language, at least not often. But I'll let it stand a sentence or two back because it's true, and I'm only saying what would have been widely heard.

There's an old water pump out back of Harold and Wilma's farm place, something Wilma decorates with a basket of flowers in late spring. It's pretty much useless otherwise, unless you jump on the handle long enough to bring up a trickle of rusty water. Harold was on his way out back one day, when he tripped on a crack in the sidewalk that he knew was there but caught him anyway. He stumbled for three drunken steps and fell, banged his head just above the ear on the iron spout of that old pump, and knocked himself out cold.

Wilma looked out her kitchen window and saw him lying in the grass, no blood to speak of, because the open wound he took from that pump was on the side of his head she couldn't see. She thought him dead—she'd been after him for forty years to stop smoking, but when she got outside, she saw the blood and realized it was just a fall.

Again. It had happened before, three times in the last few weeks. Once more, he just hadn't picked up his size 14s high enough to clear a sidewalk bump or a root from dry ground or something else poking up in the barn or yard. He was falling way too often, and this time, since he needed stitches, she took him to Doc Carpenter, who told him it was time they did some tests. That's when cancer came riding up with staff and hood. Not really. I'm just being literary.

Now there's a part of this story that I can almost skip over because it's pretty much cliché. Think of Levi, the priest, and his ornery sons. Think of King Lear and his daughters. I'm sometimes not sure of what Jesus said about money being the root of *all* evil—after all, Tom and a dozen others don't have a dime's worth of Silas Marner in them. But some

do. Many. Especially out here, where a thousand acres—what with ethanol and corn prices—means you'll need a loader just to cart the loot away when some old landowner takes his place up here with us. We're talking millions, and I'm not kidding. It takes real saintliness not to get bamboozled by that level of pay-off.

And Harold's boys were not saints. Or angels. Everett De Haan told us the bank refused their business a few years ago, when it became clear that the two of them were spending too much time at the new casino out there on the state line.

Nothing nurtures the soul like a date with the hangman, they say, and for Harold Fridsma, cancer became, simultaneously, his destroyer and his redeemer. When finally it killed him, it also gave him life. For the first time, he found himself growing more and more powerless, which just happens to be the prescribed attitude for those who want to know blessings of faith. His cancer cured him, like bacon or wine or a good cheese; so when his time came—his bedside leave-taking—the strife was o'er, the battle done. All of this, we knew.

Once again, we came down the hill, this time for old Tom's brother-in-law, Harold, who once upon a time would have had more than his share of enemies up here if we didn't quite miraculously shed grudges. Let's just be clear—we all think coming down the hill for deliverance is an honorable task, and we're not above the rejoicing that quite naturally occurs when some wandering sheep is retrieved from "out on the hills away, far off from the gates of gold," as the old hymn goes, even though the line is overwritten.

Let's say this about Harold Fridsma—he is himself a child of his own upbringing, a man who did absolutely everything with a passion, everything connected with his work, that is. He had an eighth-grade education, milked cows already at seven years old, a fact he never let anyone forget. To him, work was fulfilling, *and* redemptive. He *did* church because it was part of the ritual of his life, like the seasons, a discipline that came to mean something to him only in those months when he became more and more powerless. Cancer gave him four years and six months to think, and in that time he became his own hanging judge. All that stuff about the death of the old man—it's not just conventional wisdom. We know. Blessed Har-

old cried more tears in the last few months than he had in 70-some years. Credit him that.

And I'll never forget this either—how, once we got to that hospital room, Tom, his brother-in-law, already one of us, cried, joy flowing from his ample soul, that lovely smile still there.

The doctors offered some creative measures to him to keep him alive, more machines to which to hook him, more hardware, more options; but he chose to go. Maybe we're prejudiced, but up here, those kinds of decisions we tend to applaud.

So for Harold Fridsma that final leave-taking held no real mysteries, no possibility of a false alarm. The doctor was turning off the switch, so we knew we weren't going to return empty-handed.

And they were all there, Wilma and her daughters and their husbands, sober-faced and antsy, as well as their contrary husbands, two men old enough only to be seduced into thinking they're still in their prime.

They're not tattooed and ear-ringed. Dick and LeRoy Fridsma, lean and mean, specialize in all-night hog barbeques and all manner of wheeling and dealing with their considerable wealth. They are not above work either, not in the least lazy; but they didn't inherit their father's passions and never once saw their work as redemptive. For them, nothing really was, save weekends at the lake cabin their father built, a play-time palace. I feel unkind for saying all of that, but mostly all we deal with these days is truth, God help us.

Here's the picture. We're at home, in Harold's living room, where his wife moved his bed six months previous. One of those aerial views of the farm hangs on the wall opposite the picture window, but it's badly faded and tells only half the story since the Fridsmas run cattle elsewhere and own such sizeable chunks of Iowa land that, should some aerial photographer take a portrait now from several hundred feet higher, Harold's land, marked in red or something, would turn the surrounding sections checkerboard. Above the dining room table an old man prays over a half loaf of bread. Faded too. The only new pictures in the room are a half-circle of grandchildren on a coffee table at the foot of the bed, where Harold could see them.

Ample chairs—even a couple from the kitchen—and a leather corner couch offer plenty of seating. The women are standing, the boys seat-

ed, arms up over the shoulders of the couch, legs crossed, both wearing their Sunday Tony Lamas. No grandchildren, except in pictures.

And Tom the mailman is here, Jake Tuinstra, Cal Soodsma, and myself, the old snooker teams, inconspicuous as always, except to Harold, who seemed to notice us the moment we came in—that's how close he was.

And let's be clear here. What every last human being in that room knew—as did we—is that for forty years or more, while what relationship existed between Harold and Wilma Fridsma might well have been defined as a marriage, it was little more than mutual co-existence, Harold being a man almost beyond love, Wilma, a woman forsworn to the oath she took one cold day in May, convicted beyond doubt that a broken marriage was a summons to hell. That they'd stayed together, locked up as they were, wasn't necessarily odd or unusual around here; but elsewhere, I think, it would have been, to many, something of a horror.

But all that brokenness died with the cancer, once Harold really needed to be loved. And Wilma, too, in her undying faithfulness—and her husband's stark need—began to think of Harold's illness almost as if it were a blessed second chance, the first forty years thankfully dead and gone.

It's what he told us when he spotted us first outside that picture window, looking in. "Who's going to take care of Wilma?" he asked us, as if we knew the answers. "I'm ready, but leaving her is tougher than grizzle. I could just cry," he said. "It's taken me most of my life to understand what a good woman she is. What did I know? And then he squinted. "You here for me, right?"

We nodded and walked right through that window to take a place out of the way.

"I'm ready," he told us. All he could move was his eyes, but he firmed up his lips in a way that even those in the room understood as a commitment to get this life over and start in on something he knew very little of, a cadre of ushers ready to show him to his place up the hill. He was ready to die.

"You got anything to say to your father?" Wilma said just then, smiling to those sons of theirs. Begging, really.

Dickie undid his legs and then swung them the other way, just as he did to that chunk of tobacco

in his lip.

"There's so much I did wrong," Harold told us. They didn't hear him.

"Shussh now," Tom told him. "Plenty of time for that later."

"I'm leaving a train wreck," he said.

"Matter of a few moments and that'll be history," Tom told his brother-in-law.

"Well?" Wilma said to her sons, pointing at their father.

Dickie didn't know where to go with his eyes. He never minded his mother all that much, just like the old man hadn't. But it was hard for him to look at his father, to see him laid up like that, snorting tubes, gizmos galore. He was looking directly into the face of death, the skeleton and skulls. Dickie wasn't seeing his father—he was seeing death and seeing himself—*memento mori*. In that field of study, we know what we see and what we're doing.

"It won't be long and your father will be leaving us," Wilma said.

Dickie, a man with a ready flood of words, stood strikingly bereft.

"See there," Tom told Harold. "Your boy can hardly hold back the tears."

Harold's featureless face still looked skeptical.

"Come here and hold his hand," Wilma told her son. "He's your father, and he's going now. Talk to him," she said, with some bitterness. "He needs to hear you."

Half-truth maybe. She was the one who needed to hear her son say something good.

Dickie put his hands down on the leather couch and pulled his angular self up.

"Whyn't you take his hand?"

"He can't feel nothing anyway," LeRoy said.

"Take his hand," she said again, more demanding than she'd been in the last dozen years, and Dickie did as his mother told him.

"Now speak to him," she told him. "Talk to him for once in your life about something besides cattle and beans."

"Is he with us?" Dickie said.

"He can hear everything—he knows," she told him.

Harold wasn't saying a thing to anyone—they or us; but he was focused on what was happening.

"This ain't easy," Dickie said.

“Not for him either,” Wilma said. “He’s the one dying.”

And she was not wrong. That farm house living room was full of folks attending a deliverance, but leave-taking is something one always does all by one’s lonesome.

“Go on,” Wilma said again.

“I don’t even know what to call you,” Dickie told him.

“He’s your father,” she told him.

“Sounds like God,” Dickie told her because for almost his entire life he’d called the old man, “the old man.” “You brought me up right,” Dickie said, standing there as if his bunions were killing him. “Working hard, taking care of cattle. And church, too—and to take care of things, take care of the land. He didn’t hold his father’s hand as much as put his over them. “You taught me just about everything I know.” He looked up at his mother. “You taught me to to make sure my family had good things.”

“Listen to that,” old Tom told his brother-in-law. “You hear that, Harold—you hear what your boy is saying?”

Somehow a couple tears got squeezed out of those blurry eyes. Dickie reached down and pulled out his shirttails to find something to wipe their trails from the old man’s cheeks, and when he did, something else gave way in him and he almost fell over his father, put his head down on his old man’s chest and started into crying, not sobbing, but real tears.

I’m not lying when I say the two Fridsma boys are roustabouts. The truth is, on those hunting trips to Montana and those Canadian junkets when they catch a couple hundred walleye, they spend lots of time and money in seedy places most Highland folks don’t even know exist. Not all that long ago, Dickie went after a babysitter, who was so scared that she never told a soul what happened when he brought her home and stuck a hundred dollars in the pocket of her blouse. I could go on. We’re privy to whole stories, not that all the revelations are joyous, let me say.

“I’m going to be better,” Dickie said, raising his face just a bit off his father’s chest. “I swear it, Pa, I’m going to be better. I’m changing my life now, starting now.”

I didn’t know what to think. Wilma swallowed

almost audibly, but Dickie’s wife, Betts, looked—I checked—as if the words her husband sang were a melody from heaven.

“Spare me,” his brother LeRoy said from the couch, where he sat all arched up like a snake. “You’re such a faggot, Dickie.”

Right then, I wished we could have taken hold of one of Harold’s limp hands and pulled him up from those machines to take him home.

LeRoy never got up off that leather couch. He sat there with his legs crossed. “All he’s doing, Ma, is trying to get into your tender mercies,” he said. “It’s pantomime is what he’s up to—i’n’t, MaryAnn?” I swear she looked like a stone sculpture right out of the Depression. “It’s an act,” LeRoy said, “and if you buy it you’re dumb as bare ground. It’s all about you now, with the old man gone—or going,” LeRoy said. “It’s all about wooing you—you’re the one holding the deed. That’s what ‘s going on here.”

“Hold your tongue,” Wilma told him.

“It’s the plain truth,” LeRoy said. “The old man never gave a crap about this. All he ever give us is the back of his hand if we didn’t do as we were told. He never loved us a dime’s worth, and now my brother is pissing and moaning as if Pa was some saint, which he’s not.”

LeRoy’s wife, MaryAnn, cowered right then, and I couldn’t help wonder what other horrors she’d already lived through. Standing right beside me, old Tom was fit to be tied, but he knows the rules.

“Dickie’s got one thing on his mind, and we all know it,” LeRoy said, still sitting. “It’s just another form of sweet talk, and if you believe him, Ma, then you’re even dumber than he is.”

“Your father’s dying,” Wilma said.

“I know,” LeRoy said, “but Dickie’s not and neither am I.”

LeRoy sat there with his arms crossed over his chest, as if he’d just now finished a hot day’s work. Sometimes up here, you forget how cold real live people can be.

“He hears you,” Wilma told him. “He hears every word you’re saying.”

“Well, that’d be a first,” LeRoy said. “High time, but don’t you think it’s a little late?”

“Look what he gave you—look at the blessings,” Wilma said. “You got more land than any-

body in the township—what you think he was working for all those years?”

“Me?” LeRoy said. “You think he ever cared a bit about us?”

“Why else would he work as hard as he did—tell me that.”

We can’t step in here and bring some peace. Be-draggled MaryAnn is stiff and lifeless, and Harold himself hasn’t said much except to us. The way I saw it right then, the only people who had a voice in all this dysfunction were the two brothers, their distraught mother, and maybe Betts, Dickie’s wife, who was praising the Lord for what He’d done in the life of her husband.

“You’re the problem here, Ma,” LeRoy said, and he finally got up off the couch so that he could stand there a foot taller than his mother, stand there over her like a looming shadow. “My old man goes out of his head when he’s dying and gives you control of everything, like an idiot—I mean, what do you know about agriculture?”

Wilma had a look on her face that wasn’t far afield to what you see when clouds come up like huge fists of storm.

“And now I got to go through you all the time when I think there’s things we can do to build up what we’ve got. You never had a thing to do with the operation.” LeRoy stayed maybe two feet away from his mother, but hovered like a demon. “You’re like talking to a kitchen sink.”

“Don’t go,” old Tom said to his brother-in-law. “I know you want to, but it ain’t time yet.”

Harold’s creamy eyes looked supplicant and ready.

“You still got things to do.” Old Tom came up close to a brother-in-law, who’d never had the time of day for him and stood there on the other side of the bed, just beside MaryAnn, who looked like Lot’s wife back then when she once turned her head.

“Get me out of here,” Harold said to us.

“Heaven’s ready,” Tom said, “but you aren’t.”

“Then coach me through this,” Harold said to his brother-in-law, begging.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” Wilma said to her savage boy. “Don’t you talk to your mother like that, LeRoy.”

“He did,” LeRoy said, pointing at the old man, and the truth is, too often in life, he had.

“I’m sorry,” Harold said, but we were the only ones who could hear him.

“You’re going to want to turn up the volume,” old Tom told him. “This family of yours got beans in their ears.”

“It don’t matter what he said, Ma,” LeRoy said. “It don’t matter at all because when push comes to shove, I’m taking over. I’m the oldest boy, and that’s the way it’s supposed to be.” He pointed down at his father. “The old man’s been gone too long already. His word is suspect—any court’ll tell you that.”

“Tell him no,” old Tom told Harold. “Tell the boy he’s way off base. Tell him off, Harold,” he said.

But Harold had trouble finding the right gear. He was seeing us better, I think, than he was seeing his family. For months, he’d been thinking about dying, not living, because he knew where he was going. He’d been planning the trip. He was just enough human to know that what he was leaving behind was more trouble than he cared to face.

“I’m the one making the decisions,” Wilma told her son, but those words had nothing behind them and I knew it, and so did Cal and Jake and Dickie and Betts and LeRoy the asshole. Pardon my French.

That’s when LeRoy finally came right up in her face, like the bull he is, and said, “Over my dead body.”

“Now,” old Tom said, and then he whispered in his ear.

Somehow, God gave Harold the strength and temerity to sit up in that bed, put an elbow behind him, and say, “Don’t you talk to her that way.” Wasn’t garbled either. Wasn’t exactly threatening, but it seemed out of nowhere, out of death itself, and for a moment it stopped LeRoy dead in his tracks. And then this, more faintly, but just as distinct. “I’m sorry.”

It took nearly every ounce of what Harold had left in him for him to lean up that way on his elbow and deliver those few words, but there was enough in him, and all of us—not just old Tom, but all of us—nodded at him as if he were nothing more or less than a wise old sage.

And there we all stood like an old painting, the grandfather clock tolling, I swear. The dead had spoken, a ghost had come alive.

Then, out of the silence, comes the voice of a woman who hadn't said a thing all afternoon, the voice of MaryAnn the Silent, LeRoy's longsuffering wife, who some would call a saint for putting up with what she has, but most still call a bloody fool.

"You take your land, LeRoy," she told her husband. "You take your land and your tractors and your hogs and your beef and whatever else you're lord over, and you make yourself happy because I'm taking my children and we're leaving."

"You're an idiot," LeRoy said to his wife.

MaryAnn pulled her sweater around her, not as if she were shivering, but as if she was more than ready to take a step outside the cage, just as she'd promised. "I *am* an idiot," she told him, "but I won't be no more."

She walked over to the other side of the bed, took Wilma in her arms, and then turned to her husband and stood there before him, beneath him, really. But from somewhere close to the back forty of that place, she reached back with her right arm and like an ace on the mound wound up and delivered a slap to her husband's face that every soul in that room, dead and alive, saw coming even though none of us truly believed. "Now go feed your damned hogs," she told him. "Your father is dying."

No, you shouldn't be thinking that with this whack across the face, MaryAnn Fridsma had actually employed the hand of God. Don't jump to impossibly divine conclusions. LeRoy Fridsma has started and finished more late-night brawls than most of those who live in our valley can count, and he's taken much tougher blows; but he never suffered one so absolutely unforeseen. Still, he walked out in such a way that those boot heels cracked on the hardwood floor, and then slammed the door on his dying father as if the war had only begun.

And what about MaryAnn, who for a time looked more like Lot's wife than anyone else in all of scripture? Her face didn't change a bit. She wore no Uncle Tom smile, her cheeks didn't bloom, and she looked no less bedraggled and beat on than when she'd come in because she too knew the war had only begun. But at least she'd come to understand that there was life after what she'd just now accomplished, something she'd wanted to do for a long, long time.

"Not you, Mom," MaryAnn said. "I'm not leaving you, even if I'm leaving your son." And then she looked down at Harold, who'd fallen off that elbow and was back on the bed, ready to go. "We're going to try—all of us," she said, looking around at Dickie and Betts and Wilma too. "We're all going to work hard at making this all work," she said. "You go now, Pa," she said. "We're all ready for you to go. Things are going to change."

Harold looked up at old Tom, who held out a hand; and it wasn't long and three of us picked up another resident and brought him with us up the hill.

Deliverance. That was one I won't forget soon.

I turned around while we were on our way up because I wondered—you know. You remember, I told you they were singers, all of them. They went back into "Abide With Me," just as they had with old Tom, and then, once again, there were tears, Harold's cold body right there beside them, husband and father.

But this time they had Dickie too, who held a bass line that wasn't bad for a man who hasn't been in church as often as he should. There's a lot of penitence in that old hymn, but right then it felt like a fighting song—I swear. Press on.

But you can be sure we'll keep an eye out. We all will. It's what we do mostly from up here. It's what we do, praise the Lord.