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## Second Cutting

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## The Second Cutting

The only road east out of town was packed hard and dry by the heat of the July sun. Clumps of clover and awkward thistle stems jutted from the edge of the road into the dusty ruts which pointed up the incline to the summit of the hill. Edgar Hartman walked slowly, for he was in no particular hurry to arrive on the job; Jung's second cut would not go so easy as the first, for the mid-summer heat and humidity made field work more oppressive. And, a healthy coat of dew still glistened on the roadside grasses, delaying, for a time, any thought of haying.

When he reached the top of the slope, he turned back to the little community of dwellings, practically hidden now by a stand of powerful oaks. The rectangular gray buildings looked remarkably similar from here, and there was that kind of closeness in the hamlet, the only home he had known in all of his fifteen years. Out of the face of a gusty west wind, he looked to the north over three foot corn and several acres of alfalfa, then to the south and already barren fields where June peas had been harvested. To the east lay more Wisconsin farmland, bordered finally by a belt of timber that underlined the gray-green horizon of water. As far as he could see to the left and right, the big lake touched the sky at the eastern horizon.

For several days now, winds from the west had turned this great body of water into a roaring king, and even from this point he could hear and feel, almost, the unusually powerful surf beating on the heavy shore sand. All night he had heard this relentless pounding from his own bedroom, a mile or so to the west. But Edgar kept walking now; nothing had been done yesterday, so he knew there was much to be done today.

The roaring of the waves last night had been as disturbing as the day itself. All day long his father's blacksmith shop had been full of quiet business; few men had spent all day in the field since the funeral brought entire families into town. The dusty main street was alive with subdued movement as farmers decided to use the trip to town to accomplish other purposes as well. Heels clicked all day long on the thick wooden sidewalks; horses and wagons moved constantly up and down the seldom-used streets, carrying a thick layer of dust into the shop.

His father had work to keep him busy yesterday, of course, keeping the fire hot, and, when things were busy, making the shoes themselves. But the steady clang of the hammer on the anvil was the only sound to break the unsettled order, for things were purposely hushed. The men of the village, usually brimming with talk of weather and fields and crops, were remarkably calmed on the day of the funeral. Even the usually spirited talk of the war in Europe failed to excite the contemplative atmosphere of shop and town.

Only the anvil spoke conventionally, as Henry Hartman's work proceeded, unhindered by outside events. Edgar's father was not a tall man, but his years as a blacksmith had molded his body into a straight, bulging stump of strength. He had seen his father working late into the day, the sun long set, only the jumpy rays of a noisy fire providing needed light. Late into warm, spring evenings his thick, muscular arms, wet with sweat, swung that hammer, always in the same monotonous beat, pounding, shaping, bending stubborn iron into implements for the farmers. But as

much as he admired his father's strength and perseverance, Edgar saw and knew him as the respected leader of the little Dutch community in which he lived, for Henry Hartman's impressive physical stature was equalled only by the strength of his character.

Men were drawn to his father somehow—family problems, church problems, financial problems—his father heard them all, it seemed, but Edgar heard none. Often, just as he was turning the glowing iron into an arc, he heard that quiet command, "Edgar, go to your mother," when some somber-looking man would enter the shop.

But last Monday things had been somehow different. Teunis Jansen had come in with the news. Gerrit Van Ess and Peter Blom were dead, drowned in the lake on Sunday afternoon.

His father stopped his work; he looked, distantly, at Teunis. The shop was very quiet, Edgar remembered.

The bodies were already found, one close to where they had gone swimming, the other far up the beach, near Amsterdam.

Edgar's father said nothing then; he glared, it seemed, at the anvil. The fire crackled and dimmed slowly. A few more words passed quickly, the funeral. . .the families. . .then Teunis left.

Quietly, his father motioned him to follow into the house. The wooden steps creaked under their feet. Edgar's mother greeted their unexpected entry with her eyes, and, without asking, heated the coffee.

"The boy of Van Ess, and the oldest boy of Blom. They are dead, Dina. In the lake yesterday."

His mother stopped moving momentarily, turning her face away sharply as if she'd been slapped. "Och heden," she said, mumbling almost, then she looked back to her husband. Saying no more, she continued her work, looking away again. His father rested his forehead in his hand; Edgar felt a cloud of anguish laying like lake fog in the steamy kitchen.

"On Sunday?" Mother asked.

His father assented. Silence returned.

Edgar watched his mother moving around the stove. He glanced at the bluish dishes hung from the wall and at the figure of the farmer on the shelf, all brought over from the old country. The oak chair creaked into the silence as he jerked up his hand to scratch his forehead. No one else moved.

"I must finish the shoe, father." He rose unsteadily, and then went back to the shop. All of this was new to him.

And he knew Gerrit and Peter, although they were older than he, for they too, he remembered, had sat here on these stools and barrels when they were younger, and waited with their fathers for shoes or shares. In recent years they had been well-known in the little town, for they were fine ball players, even heroes to the younger children. As they had grown older, the eyes of the village had seen their wagons standing outside the tavern across the street from the shop. It was no secret that they took out American girls. Their behavior had grown into something of a scandal in the otherwise settled community. Now they would never go to the war they had dreamed of. Edgar poked at the fire which had lost its force already.

His father returned. His silence was still conspicuous. He took up the hammer and returned to the anvil. With his left hand, he drew a piece of

glowing iron from the fire, and began, at his usual pace, to shape it into a shoe. Finally, he spoke.

"Edgar," he said, "you know the boys. How do they live?"

The boy jerked up his head. "I don't know, father."

Side by side they worked for several hours; no other words concerning Gerrit and Peter passed between them.

It was just after lunch that Monday when Cornelius Den Boer made his usual entrance to the shop. There was something different this time, Edgar realized, for his thick white eyebrows were drawn low and deep, adding even more wrinkles around the corners of his eyes. Nor were there any stories of Holland, or of the immigrants who set first homesteads in the Oostburg area. He sat slowly on an empty barrel near the door, after the conventional nod of greeting.

"You know, Henry?" His voice was harsh and raspy.

"Ja." Edgar stopped his work, looking at his father who stared at the guest.

"The Lord took them, you know, for a purpose." There was no spark of his usual jovial nature. He unbuttoned his black top coat as if he had just come in from the cold.

"Ja," came the reply, "He did."

"We can have little hope for their salvation." Den Boer pulled a stained yellow pipe from the pocket of his old black coat. He stuck the pipe somewhere in the thickly bearded jaw and struck a match across the rough cooling tank.

"We must teach our children to learn from this." The little flame illuminated the drawn face under the black, wide-brimmed hat. A huge mass of pale-gray smoke rose, then hung like a rain cloud about his head.

"We worship a righteous God, Den Boer, but we cannot judge these boys or the state of their souls so easily. We don't always know His will."

"There was no Christian life there, Henry. We know that, ja? They swam on the Sabbath. There is only hope for us if here we see the hand of the Lord."

Edgar, like his father, did not stop working. He expected to be excused from the shop at any moment, but as long as he did remain, he made a pretense of being quietly occupied with his work.

"Cornelius, the Lord always works in these mysterious ways." Edgar's father was forging a wagon hitch, slowly, but well. His respect for Cornelius Den Boer was obvious.

"Our children are losing the faith." Den Boer puffed gently at his pipe. "I been afraid, ja, more than once of things like this."

Edgar paused momentarily and listened intently. He did not face the old man.

"The Lord will punish us and our children for our sin. We do not obey the commandments as He wants us to yet. He shows us His wrath, and He has today, to teach us to believe in Him and obey His Law."

Den Boer removed his hat and hung it on a convenient nail. Edgar knew his visit would not be short, and the conversation itself would continue for a long time. It seemed only a year ago that he had heard some of these things, for then, he remembered, it was the death of his niece, a little girl

who had died unexpectedly of diphtheria. But Den Boer had mentioned very plainly that the boys were known to many women, and when Edgar heard this specific reference to sin, he would work even more intently to hide his embarrassment.

The old man did most of the talking, Edgar's father commented very little, trying vainly to restrain Den Boer's pessimism. As time passed, the old man's speech slowed considerably, and each word was chosen carefully. He sat and swayed evenly from side to side on the retired keg.

"People say that their teams led them home many nights after the tavern closed. But it is not only them, Henry, it is others too. Many others, they say, are spending their time in the ways of the world. These are our children. We pray daily for them. It seems of no use. . .the children of the covenant. . ."

"These are new times, Cornelius," he offered, slowly, the ring of the anvil underlining each phrase. "All the ways of the old country may not be taken so easily any more. We live in a new country. We covet the strength only the Lord can give to see through the difficult times."

"The Sabbath has not changed since we come to this country, Henry. My commandments read today the same like yesterday. We must change because of this new country?"

"The Lord's will, it is not always so easy to know." Edgar followed his father's silent command and forced a rush of air into the fire through the dusty bellows. Although the tempo of the work remained constant, the formal conversation finally began to wane, both participants wearying from the traditional arguments.

Cornelius sat silently; tiny whiffs of smoke rose like signals from the human statue. He was shifting and reorganizing himself, preparing for the last advance. His thorny hands moved slowly around the bowl of the pipe, withdrawing it, then placing it back within his tightly-drawn lips.

Henry pointed at the door, signalling his son to let in the fresh air. Edgar pushed through the stagnant cloud of smoke and threw both doors open to the street, blocking them open with thick iron poles. The mid-day sun brightened the shop's dark interior, and the fresh lake air rescued the men from the strangulation of an atmosphere thickened by steam and smoke. Shadows that danced and leaped against the walls were erased by the sun's penetration; the light from the fire faded in the face of the afternoon sun. Cornelius shifted his position to look out on the town. The triangular hitch hissed wildly as Edgar's father buried it in the cooler.

"The Dominie has to preach on these things. The people must understand that the Lord speaks to us in these things." Den Boer spoke through the open door as if addressing the street. His eyes stared into the little community, until, finally, his arms reached down to the rim of the keg and he lifted himself slowly from his seat.

"I must go now, Henry," he said, turning back to the shop and retrieving his hat. He buttoned his coat once again, making Edgar sweat even more.

"Tomorrow is the funeral."

It took Edgar no more than a few morning hours yesterday to realize

that the funeral would be an important event to the community. By mid-morning the staid farmers and their families had descended on the quiet village from all parts of the surrounding countryside. The church was full of friends and relatives, each coming to pay their respects and express their deep sympathy to the surviving family. Edgar saw no smiles there. He heard the community's grief in the tolling of the bell and felt their mournful acceptance in the heavy rhythmical chanting of the Psalms. But now he could remember little else from yesterday's funeral, for his eyes and thoughts had wandered from the caskets, to the families, then over the large assembly of worshippers before him, and finally, to Cornelius Den Boer, whose eyes were strained on the pulpit at the front of the church.

But the funeral wasn't the end. The atmosphere of the village was laden with emotion that day, as men acknowledged each other on the street, but rarely paused to exchange conversation. The women spoke quietly to each other, congregating in little groups of two and three. The July sun beat down heavily, but only the corn profited from its strength.

Edgar kicked at a lump of dry clay along the road. Today was another day. The tragedy of last Sunday was beginning to rein its oppressive effects, and while the story and its implications would certainly continue to be heard in the dark blacksmith shop, Edgar knew that most people understood it was time to continue and overpower yesterday's agony.

Now he kept walking along the rutted trail. His father's business had brought contact with many farmers, and frequently he had been requested to help with work which had piled up beyond the control of one man. Today his father had sent him to honor such a request. One of Henry Hartman's American customers had second cut of hay to do and needed some help.

The farm lay closer to the lake than the village and some distance to the north. The walk was pleasant this morning, the sun just beginning to breathe its warmth into the cool lake air which still lay over the lakeshore area. From scattered farms, all neatly kept, the dairy cows wandered out to pasture, their morning milking over.

Eventually he saw Jung's farm. It appeared as he rose out of a natural crevice in the earth where a river used to flow to the big lake. Tall pines grew all around the homestead, giving it shade from the sun and a shield from the wind. He could already see his employer walking about in front of the barn. Edgar had worked for this man before and was happy to return. Mr. Jung had treated him well in the past, and Edgar quietly enjoyed his jovial but salty tongue. Mrs. Jung always prepared massive feasts, and her husband paid as well as any of the farmers of the area, better than most Hollanders.

Jung waved as he saw Edgar approach. Edgar raised his arm and waved a reply. The early morning sun had now nearly rid the ground of the dew which temporarily postponed the work, and Edgar knew he would spend little time talking.

"Ja, Hartman," he said, "are you ready to work?"

"Ja, Mr. Jung," Edgar replied. "Good to see you again."

Jung removed the faded black hat he wore for field work and wiped the sweat which had already formed on his forehead. A thick standing crop of gray hair stood proudly on his crown above a ruddy, red-nosed face, round

and full, the kind of face that begged a smile. Edgar, despite his years, already stood above the man, but Jung's weight certainly surpassed the boy's. Packed into the shirt and pants he wore was a torso of lumpy and uneven bulk. He replaced the battered hat and looked back to Edgar.

"Hartman," he said, "let's go to Mama before we start."

Edgar willingly consented, and Jung put his grisly paw on his shoulder to lead him to the house. They sat down on a step before the house, and the old man roared for service. The humid air provoked more sweat from his blue-lined temples, as the temperature rose with the sun.

"Mama," he roared, "I want a beer and Hartman too." The command had been given, and a graying mother returned to the kitchen after greeting the visitor.

"So tell me, Hartman, what do the Hollanders say about the two boys who drowned on Sunday?"

"Their funeral was yesterday, Mr. Jung. Many people were there."

"It is a terrible thing, ja, what happened."

"Ja, terrible," Edgar repeated.

"The two boys, they were good boys. Van Ess, he worked here for me, too. The other one I don't know. But they be too young, ja, to die already."

"Ja, they were only 18." Edgar was reluctant to talk about the deaths anymore, but the old man sat on the step, looking like he had more to say. His belly hung heavily over his thighs.

"The Hollanders send them to Hell, I suppose?" An ironical smile spread across his face and grew into a belch of a laugh that exploded out of his round chest. He shook his head in apparent disbelief.

Edgar didn't reply, as Jung continued. "They're good boys, Hartman. Your father, what does he say?"

"My father is sad."

"Ja," the old man went on, "the lake, it's been rough, you know. Those boys, they should be more careful."

Mrs. Jung returned silently with two short glasses of beer, offering them to the men.

"Hartman, you drink a beer with me? Some of your people, they don't like it."

Edgar sipped of the slightly less than luke-warm beer and assented with a faint, sarcastic laugh. He was miles from Oostburg now.

"The lake, it was too dangerous, Hartman. Those boys, they should not swim."

As Jung's glass was nearly empty, he was back on his feet.

"We go now, work there is much of today."

Edgar swallowed the heavy brew and rose to his feet. The sun was now beating heavily down on the Wisconsin countryside. Together they walked to the old barn where Jung's team already waited. The burly farmer tipped his glass to the sun and the beer was gone.

Edgar watched Jung enter the barn while he waited outside. He saw his father again and heard the rhythmical clang of the hammer on the anvil. He glanced at his own nearly emptied glass, then poured the remaining contents into the light dirt of the path to the barn.

The air was becoming hot and heavy, and the day would be long and hard.