

# Dirt

By Robert John Andrews

[7,587 words]

November 9, 2021

The wind awakened him, almost as if it were speaking to him in huffs of breath and whispers through the gaps in the window. It was one of those old wooden windows, each of the twelve square panes roughly glazed. A few glazing points were exposed where the compound had cracked and fallen away from the sash. A stick was propped on the sill with which to keep the screenless window open, hinting at a cord long frayed and torn. He woke in a confused fit, the way you do when you have drunk too much whisky and have fallen into a deep sleep in the leather chair in your den. Except this wasn't his den. He looked to where his desk clock should have been. What time is it? How long have I been asleep? Instead of the clock, he saw a drab painting of a covered bridge hanging off-kilter.

He felt equally off kilter, more so when he reached for his glass on the end table. No glass. No end table. The wind whispered through the window again, inviting him to look outside toward the expanse of the light grey sky. A plaid love-seat pressed up against the wall beneath the window. He couldn't tell if it were dawn or dusk. Pressing his hands down on the arms of the chair, he felt not the familiar comfort of the yellowed leather but wood, the varnish worn away. He was waking up in an Adirondack chair. The television which he had been watching when he fell asleep was now a wide field stone fireplace. A half burnt log lay across the blackened andirons. A bellows hung on the tool stand alongside the shovel and poker. The wind fluted across the top of the chimney enough to rattle the damper and waft into the room a hint of the smell of damp charcoal. On top of the mantel sat a half-filled Hurricane lamp and a box of strike anywhere matches. Above the mantel a gilded mirror had been hanged at an angle so you had to stand nearer the fireplace to see yourself standing on the braided rug. Running his fingers through his hair, he looked again to make sure his glass really was missing.

"What? Where?" he stammered, blowing through his mustache and rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. His clothes were the same. Black jeans. White shirt, untucked. Nothing else was the same. He leaned forward and pushed himself out of his chair and scanned the rest of the room. It was a large rectangular room with a window at the other end, book-ending the fireplace. A large wooden table with six wooden chairs of various design stood at the other end of the room. What he guessed was the kitchen, given the aqua green cabinets and drawers, opened up from the bottom of the table. Midway between the room was a solid paneled door with a carpeted stairway opposite it. The doorknob was made of glass, held by polished walnut. The keyhole was designed to fit a skeleton key. No sidelights to the door. No windows inserted in the door. To the right of the door, close to the dining room table, was the room's third window. Nowhere could he detect an outlet or light switch.

He walked toward the nearest window. A covered porch, the white rail alligating and peeling, ran along the full front of the house. A lawn much in need of mowing stretch out toward a dirt lane that separated the lawn from acres of a ploughed field. Trees in bud edged the far side of the field. "Why am I dreaming of a farm house?" he wondered aloud.

"I doubt you're dreaming."

He whirled and saw a man standing at the entrance to the kitchen. The man was taller than he was, his hair beginning to gray.

"Do you live here? What's going on?"

"No need to accuse me. The name's Dan. I only woke up a little while ago, here at the kitchen table. I heard you stirring. No, I don't live here."

"What the hell?" he stammered.

"Could be for all I know, although if this is hell, it's dreadfully mundane, dusty, and drab." said Dan. "Your name?"

"John. Just call me John. I don't feel particularly formal right now." John turned and stared outside the window. "Reminds me of where I grew up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. But that was a long time ago. Not where I live now." John pulled on his mustache. "Unless this is hell and where I live is now past tense."

"So this could be your nightmare rather than mine?" said Dan with an impish grin, which vanished into worry when they both heard the creak coming from the kitchen. John rushed to grab the poker from the fireplace and moved toward Dan who was watching what he guessed was a door to the basement slowly open. It was sideways to the door with glass panels that led into the backyard from the kitchen. For a second, a woman's face appeared at the narrow door before shutting it.

"Well, this is getting interesting," said Dan with a lilting, oddly disturbing, laugh. "Hello," he called out to the door. Silence. He tried again, waving to John to put down the poker. "Hello. We're safe. We're strangers too. We don't know what's going on either. If you want to, you can come out from what I assume is the basement."

"Where are we?" she squeaked from behind the door.

"I wish I could tell you," replied John, adding: "Some farmhouse, that's all I can guess. Come up and see for yourself."

Dan stepped forward. "If it'll help, my name is Dan, and before I fell asleep and woke up here, I was in bed in my house in New Jersey waiting for my wife to finish brushing her teeth."

"And I'm John. I'm a teacher from Fort Collins, Colorado. Like Dan here, I fell asleep in my chair watching TV, then, poof, here. Well, over there by the fireplace. Too much bourbon can disorient you. Take it from an expert."

"My husband preferred scotch." The door creaked open wide enough for her to stand on the top landing. "I'm Daisy. I come from Ohio. I had gone to bed too, watching the local news. Next thing I knew I was waking up on the bottom step leaning against the handrail."

Dan pointed toward the kitchen table. "I don't get any of this either but I woke up here in the kitchen and if you haven't noticed it seems as if someone was ready to welcome us. See there. Two decanters of red wine. I see plenty of yellow apples, red apples, and pears, a handful of strawberries, grapes too. I guess the growing seasons don't matter here. Different breads and cheeses." Dan chose not to voice his real concern -- are we guests with this table

laden or lambs fed for the slaughter? "Even the small garbage can under the sink is empty. I also tried the faucet and the water flows okay."

"I'm scared," Daisy whispered, peering back downstairs. "God, I hate basements."

"Me too," added John. "Scared, that is."

"That makes three of us."

"Or four." The voice came from the middle of the stairway. Standing there was a young woman.

"Welcome to the club," greeted Dan. "The plot thickens. Cornstarch to the stew."

"What kind of club is it?" the young woman asked.

"This here is Dan. I'm John. Daisy's over there standing near the basement door. And you are?"

"Frightened. Terribly frightened. Terribly confused. But my name is Rachel."

Thought John to himself: the wiser folk are those who know when it makes sense to be frightened. Melville, I recall, wrote how the utterly fearless can be a more dangerous comrade than the coward. The common tortoise shell kitty can school us foolishly reckless humans ever keen on proving themselves valorous, at all costs. To what end? My cat, far more sensible, knows when to high-hide and leap atop the back the sofa or duck behind the washing machine. Admire the prudent feline, friend mortal, who can also stand and fight with howl and claw and tooth when it must, but would rather not.

"Where are you from?" asked Daisy, emerging from the kitchen with an apple in hand, a McIntosh, tart.

"Most recently? What I assumed was the children's room upstairs. Before that, a little town called Atglen, Pennsylvania. More village than town, but we do have a couple of stop signs."

"Hey, I know Atglen," said John, grateful for some kind of connection. "I grew up near Paradise, Amish country. A pretty part of the country. Does this remind you of where we came from? It does me." John watched as Rachel descended a few more steps, stopped, and looked out the window. John followed her eyes. Did she see what he saw? John recalled when a friend who served in Pakistan visited him after his discharge. The friend couldn't believe the soil in Lancaster County compared to the ground he fought over. John really never noticed the soil, for him this kind of dirt was normal. John barely gave it any thought except when it was time when the farmers manured their fields. Then he noticed. Who didn't? There was an Amish farm that planted crops close to his family's back yard. Every morning during his visit, his veteran friend would stand out in the field palming a cup of coffee, kneel down, feel the dirt, crush the clods between his fingers. So rich. Rich loam. Black ground. "It's next to impossible to stop things from growing here," his veteran friend observed.

"Now there are four of us," Dan interjected. "Rachel from Pennsylvania. Daisy from Ohio. John here from Colorado. Me from Jersey. What? Nobody joining us from the south or southwest? All from America? Listen, I'm just trying to make sense of this. John was here in the living room. I was in the kitchen. Daisy came up from the basement. Rachel came down from upstairs. I don't know. I don't get it."

Rachel stepped onto the landing. "There is another room. I'd guess it might be the master bedroom. I didn't want to check it, look inside. I came downstairs when I heard you all talking."

"How about a bathroom?" John joked weakly. "Although this does appear to be an old farmhouse so I guessing it might be out back."

"Not that I'm going to go outside his house until I know what's going on," declared Daisy.

"Smart," Dan agreed. "But I'm thinking we need to check on that bedroom upstairs. I count six seats at this table. Anybody want to join me?"

"I'll go," John volunteered.

"I think we all should go together," Daisy suggested. "Safety in numbers..." she paused, "...besides, I don't know why we should trust each other. I don't want any of us alone. Maybe one of us knows more than he is letting on."

"Or 'she,'" corrected Rachel.

Dan led the way up the steps, the two women following singly, John trailed, noticing that the left hand railing was wobbly from missing spindles. At the top of the stairs Rachel pointed right. "Here's your bathroom. Beyond it is the other bedroom." She explained that the children's room where she had awakened was to the left, above the dining room table. A window was at the far end of the hallway. A hazy orange glow could be seen rising, the grey clouds brightening.

Without knocking, Dan reached for the door knob, turned it, and gently pushed open the door enough for them to peek inside the room. All they could see was a small dresser bureau with an attached mirror.

"Look at the mirror," John urged quietly. "The reflection. There's a bed in front of the rear window, the curtains are drawn. I think someone is on it. See where the quilt is bunched."

Dan pushed the door farther until it was stopped by some piece of furniture. All four stepped inside the room. A chifforobe had stopped the door. Next to it was a simple wooden chair with a round caned seat.

"Dottie, why are you bothering me?" complained the threaded voice from the bed, speaking toward the wall. "I told you I wanted to be left alone."

Dan coughed lightly.

"Dottie, please stop this nonsense. When I have reason to get out of bed, I'll get out of bed on my own time." The quilt was yanked tighter.

Dan turned toward the other three and shrugged.

"Let me," offered Rachel. "She reminds me of my mother." Rachel took a step forward. "Excuse me, I'm not your Dottie." She hesitated before continuing. "And there are several others here with me." Again she hesitated. "You might want to open your eyes and take a look around. I have a feeling you aren't exactly where you thought you should be."

The figure on the bed rolled over and pushed the quilt down to her shoulders. She appeared to be an older woman in her handsome years, when youthful beauty is matured but not yet turned aged and wrinkled by the seasons. She stared at them. Uncomfortably, they tried to smile back to reassure her. Searching for her glasses beside the pillow she found them and put them on. She looked at them for few more moments and then scanned the room. Her lips pursed. Her eyes betrayed confusion.

Rachel continued: "You are safe. Well, to be honest, we think you are." She added, rolling her eyes: "We hope we are too."

Dan jumped in. "Where do you think you are, if I may ask?"

The woman persisted: "Where's Dottie? My daughter. Or is this some kind of very annoying dream."

"If it's a dream, it's a shared dream," Dan replied. "And I've never heard of such a thing. Mass hysteria, yes. Given today's media, that happens all the time. Mass hysteria is all the rage these days, yes. Shared dreams, no. Please, tell us where you think you are, or at least, where you think you should be."

"My home. But this isn't my bedroom. My home in Florida. I had just watched Jeopardy and gone to bed. My husband and I moved here to the Villages two years ago."

"Your husband." Dan turned to the others. "That would make six – I thought so. If he were here." He turned back to the woman. "If I may ask, where is your husband? Forgive me for being so blunt, but we need to figure this mystery out. Did he go to bed with you?"

"That is indeed personal." She now hesitated, adjusting her glasses. Her voice turned flat. "No, he's not here. My husband died four months ago."

"I'm sorry," said John. "I know how it feels. My name is John. This here is Dan."

"I'm Rachel."

"And I'm Daisy."

The woman remained under the quilt. "My name is Naomi."

~~~

Downstairs, the five strangers sat around the table and told their stories. Daisy had brought the food and drink over from the kitchen table and placed it on the dining room table. John poured a glass of red wine and offered it to the others. Rachel took a glass. Throughout the morning they struggled helplessly to unearth connections between each other. Jobs. Friends. Adventures. Schooling. Religion or lack of religion. Interests. What further bothered them was how they couldn't figure out why each of them woke up in a different place in this farmhouse. Why? Why us? Why me? How come four of us went to bed in bedclothes but woke up in dressed in our regular clothes? John poured another glass. Running his finger around the rim of the glass, John spoke softly: "Maybe I should go outside. Check what is outside. Any neighbors? Any evidence of traffic? Somebody must have ploughed that field. And what about this food and wine? I want to see what's down that dirt lane."

"I'm beginning to sense that our only hope is sticking together," Rachel said with a dry throat, pensively sipping her wine.

They took turns describing how each of them had fallen asleep in their beds at their own home and awakened here, with the exception of John who had fallen asleep in his chair. John chuckled when he explained how that lately is where he usually ended up sleeping anyway. TV and a couple of drinks. "What a rotten, dumb life." He chuckled again.

Daisy scowled at him. "Why are you laughing?"

"If you must know, because I'm tired and fed up." He chuckled again. "In my case, I'm not sure there's much difference between where I fell asleep and where I woke up." He dangled the bottle in front of her. "Care for some wine?"

"That's not funny either."

"I didn't say it was. Besides, right now I really don't need either your attitude or your approval. Right. Wrong. It's all so damn meaningless. I really wish people would stop talking about getting justice when what they mean is judgment, revenge, retribution, recompense. We need another word. I've never seen justice ever doled out in this world."

"Please," Dan pleaded. "We need each other to figure out our problem."

John began pouring another drink when the shaking started, knocking over his glass. He held onto the bottle. They steadied themselves by bracing their arms on the table. Rachel pushed herself up from the table and rushed to hang onto the molding of the cased opening into the kitchen. Daisy joined her and held onto her.

"This doesn't feel right, too rhythmic." John muttered to himself. He remembered the earthquakes he experienced when living in California. That was like standing on a shifting sidewalk, like rolling on a skateboard. Nor was there any loud bang. This was different. He turned to look out the side window. The view showed the lawn, dirt road, and field heaving in waves like ocean combers, the trees, shrubs, even the farm's fieldstone fence lining the meadow on the western side of the house, were surfing the rhythmic waves, riding them up and down. John gestured with his head as an apple fell out of the bowl and rolled across the table and fell to the planked floor. It began to roll back and forth.

"Look outside," John urged. "The ground is being, well, acting like a roller coaster. Undulations. Up and down. But, see, with no damage. Even this farmhouse must be riding them. Feel it. Ride it. There goes that apple. Here comes another wave. It's unsteady, but we're not being shaken apart. Where's the destruction? No plaster cracking. Look, the worst of it is this glass that fell over."

"This damn well makes no sense," said Dan with a frown.

"I think... No, I don't know why either," John continued. "We just have to ride it out." He reached over and patted Naomi's arm. "You okay?"

"What do you think?" she said crisply. "But I see what you mean. I'm also looking where you're looking, and I see what you see. Impossible. That whole meadow and the stone fence is doing the same. It's crazy."

"Well, I'm not moving until this all stops," declared Daisy. Rachel nodded. "You all can let the ceiling fall on you if you wish. I like it here."

The ground waves continued for ten more minutes. Dan pressed his forehead onto the table, Naomi mystified, Rachel and Daisy huddling, John fascinated. Gradually, the ground subsided into a still calm, the heaving faded and relaxed. A sudden slapping at the window at the western side of the house startled them again. Naomi stared. Dan and John turned around in their chairs toward the noise. A vine with a long orange flower was slapping the window like a whip.

"That's a Trumpet Vine," Daisy said. "The wind couldn't do that." She took a deep breath. "I have two Trumpet Vines along my back yard fence. Hummingbirds love them."

"They can. Right now I don't," Naomi countered. "It looks as if it's trying to break the window. What's going on?"

Ivy joined the thickening vine, the tendrils covering the windows, seeking gaps, trying to open the windows. "Creeping Boston Ivy," Naomi instructed. "That at the other window is Grape Ivy."

"What the hell are we doing?" growled John. "We've been so busy at this table acting like Agony Aunts, fussing over our problem while we've ignored everything else. Is this a refuge or a prison? Is this our hell?"

"I hate this place," said Rachel grimly.

Dan strove for an explanation he could give the other four. "First the ground, now the plants. Dammit, it's like nature is attacking us." He looked around at all their faces. "Has anyone seen outside any kind of animal outside? A squirrel? A dog? A bird? Any bird-song? Any kind of livestock for a farm? Pigs? Horse? At least a cow? No? No one?" Dan broke apart a piece of bread and chewed it. "My son would love this. My son used to watch the Sci-Fi channel and they'd show morbid movies like this all the time. Nature revenging itself on us, on us animal kind. We eat them. They eat us now." Dan sighed. "I hated him spending his time in front of the TV or with his video games, but maybe my son was onto something. It'd sure explain why there's no animal life but us."

"That's a big leap, Dan," said John. "It doesn't explain us waking up here."

"Got a better explanation? Go ahead then, tell us."

"Look," Rachel shouted as she pointed toward the other windows in the front room. All turned and saw how all were now covered by the plants. The porch itself must be overgrown.

John looked at the door and saw a thin green tendril poking through the keyhole. Rolling up his handkerchief from his back pocket into a point, he walked toward the door and shoved the handkerchief into the keyhole.

"Look here, over here in the kitchen window," added Daisy, her voice trembling. "The rose climbers are banging on the window here. We're being attacked by flowers. This is an even worse nightmare."

The scratching and slapping of the thickening plants at the windows increased, covering each of the windows fully and darkening the room. The vines, ivy, rose canes, and branches rustled in a green frenzy, rose thorns marking the outside window frames.

"Can I wake up, now, please God," prayed Naomi.

Daisy's voice rallied. "If they're going to try to get us, well, I'm going to fight back. Only cowards quit. Only cowards give up. We have knives here. What kitchen doesn't keep scissors in a drawer?"

"How about the basement, Daisy?" asked Dan. Did you see any tools down there?"

Daisy hesitated. "No, can't say for sure. It was too dark. And as soon as woke up I wanted to get out of there."

"I'll check."

John pressed Dan's arm. "You won't need to. Look." The plants began to release themselves from the windows, leaving smudges of pollen and bits of torn leaves behind. Daisy placed her chef's knife on the kitchen counter.

"You still want to go outside?" Dan grinned at John. "You'll get strangled by a Butterfly Bush. There's the bloody greenhouse effect for you."

~~~

Naomi interrupted the silence. "I wish I stayed in bed upstairs. I hate it down here."

John reclaimed his handkerchief, walked over, and sat next Naomi. "Naomi, earlier this morning when we had to include you in all this weirdness, this madness, was there a reason you didn't want to get out of bed?"

Her answer was interrupted by Daisy shouting; "Oh, God, look, now!"

They all rushed to the window and looked out at the ploughed field. Cornstalks repeatedly grew in patches, blocks, from the soil. What normally took months of summer growth took place in seconds. Seedling. Stalk. Tassels. Silk emerging from the nascent, new ears. Two or three ears maturing on each stalk. Yet no one to harvest the ripe cob. The wilting of the leaves, the husks browning. Worms infesting. Dead stalks listless. The wind felling the corn. Decay. Dried leaves whirling away. Return to the soil. Within ten seconds, another cycle.

"What is this horrible place?" asked Daisy pressing her head against the window pane, her breath clouding the glass.

They watched the accelerated pace for five cycles. Before the six cycle came to maturity, the cobs thick with kernels, ripe for boiling and buttering, a dark cloud appeared over the budding trees beyond the field. The cloud flew over the blocks of corn toward farmhouse, now obvious as a swarm of insects. The five strangers recoiled as the windows were filled with the flying insects which landed on the window panes rather than smashed into them, swishing themselves into a splat the way an insect smacks into a car windshield. The five strangers bent over, closed their eyes, and held their hands over their ears to deafen the whirring noise of their wings. When they opened their eyes, the insects had flown away.

Rachel spoke first. "And now a plague? Locusts? What next? Frogs? First born child?" Rachel began to weep. Daisy wrapped her arm around her and drew her closer, letting her sob against her.

"The corn, the plague. I don't get it," Dan confessed. "I hate not understanding. I hate this confusion."

Naomi tapped the window. She held her hand to her mouth. "I don't think those were locusts," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" prodded John.

"I live in Florida, you see. My husband and often enjoyed walking around one of the ponds in the Villages. There was a bench we thought special. Our bench, though it really wasn't. We'd just borrow it. We'd sit, hold hands, look out at the water, and watch out for the gators." She giggled. "So pretty. The duckweed. The rushes. The sedges. Love the foxtail." She paused. "So do the dragonflies. You see, those insects weren't locusts. They were dragonflies. They were gold, turquoise, blue. Those bugs didn't fly to the crops, they came here. They came here."

"Where you sat with your husband," John repeated. "Who died four months ago. You must miss him."

"Miss him? Of course. Of course. We had a wonderful life together. Our daughter. Our son. Both happy and successful. Four grandchildren. We were supposed to visit our son but my husband died a week before the trip. Miss him? Of course. Of course. We had such plans." Naomi clasped her two hands together. "Now, I can't even reach the Dutch Oven in the cabinet above the stove. Damn. Damn."



"Dragonflies. Locusts. I don't care, I don't give a damn" cried Daisy. "I hate this place. I want to get away. This is a horrible place."

"I fear it is going to get more horrible," warned Dan. "It's like some sort of state of siege. Look now. I can't believe it. It's disgusting."

They each stood aghast as they saw a drizzle of rain fall upon the ploughed field, turning the clods into mud. From the mud emerged hundreds of snakes wiggling toward the farmhouse.

"Those aren't real," said Dan. "They're made of mud. Vipers. Rattlesnakes. Cotton mouths. Unbelievable. They're coming here."

"Can they get in?" feared Daisy.

"The windows are sealed," answered John, trying to assure her. "We've seen that already with the ivy and vines. There is small gap at the bottom of the door but I can stuff that with some of the rug. I'll think we'll be safe."

Naomi spoke up. "It won't be necessary. Come and see." Rain began to fall as the mud snakes began to slither up the steps of the porch. The rain fell heavier, dissolving them into the lawn.

"Goddam it. Who is in control of this? Is this some kind of sick test? Who is teasing us, taunting us? What threat next?" Dan's question was soon answered when another drizzle of rain showered the field.

"It's like we are being tortured on purpose," confirmed Daisy, still protecting Rachel.

John pulled at his mustache and watched, wondering, anticipating, what might come from the fields next. This time it was spiders. Thousands of spiders arising from the field. Mud spiders. Again, the rain fell as they reached the porch and the thousands of spiders dissolved. "The itzy bitsy spider climbed up the water spout..." said John in sing-song, gesturing thumb to pinkie, pinkie to thumb.

"This is cruel," sobbed Rachel. "How much more can we take?"

"Forgive me, Rachel, for sounding like an old grandma but you learn you have to take a lot."

"And forgive me, Naomi, but you at least had memories that you can look back on and be happy about."

"Child," Naomi said reaching out to Rachel, who abruptly pulled away. "What is your unhappiness?"

"Another wave," Dan announced stoically, trying to set an example for the others. "See now. Bats this time."

"Dirty things," cursed Daisy.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little bat," teased John.

"Cut it out, will you," said an annoyed Dan.

From the vantage of their window, they saw the bats melting in the heavy rain as they swarmed over the farmhouse.

A skulk of mud-foxes and mud-vixens limped out from the field. Rachel blanched at the ugly parade. "They are all mangled. They are torn up. They each are missing a leg. How cruel." The rain soon washed away this sight also.

"I think we are done with the small threats. Now they're getting bigger," observed Dan, pointing out the sloth of bears emerging from the ground. Will the pattern change? Who knows? Who can guess?

The pattern didn't change. Reaching the porch, the dozens of growling bears melted into the lawn. Same again with the next wave of mud creatures, a pack of snarling wolves.

John studied the ploughed field and looked at the sun, now directly overhead. "Something different is happening. Something's stirring."

The earth began to swirl higher and higher into a column. It thickened as it whorled, forming a tall, brown whirlwind of dirt. Unlike a tornado, it remained in one spot. They watched it in fear and wonder, each of the five hearts beating fast, hands trembling. From the middle of the whirlwind emerged the figure of a lion. The dirt lion stood there and faced the farmhouse until it backed into the whirlwind and disappeared. The column collapsed upon itself leaving a mound.

"What was that?" asked a stunned Dan. "All this, it must be a dream. What else can it be?"

"This is no dream, it's still a nightmare," wept Daisy. "I want to go home. One of you asked earlier if this could be a shared dream? No way. We come from such different places."

"I'm not so sure we do anymore," said John quietly. Remember where we each woke up. Where did you wake up, Daisy? Is there a message in that? What does it mean to you? A grief counselor once told me that what matters about a dream is what you think it means rather than looking for some archetypal meaning in the symbolism."

"I think I understand what John is saying. Who was it who asked me 'Why didn't I want to get out of bed?' Why? Because I miss him so much. The pillow smells of him. God forgive me, I also hate him so much for dying on me. We had so many plans for while we were still able to travel. We spent time in bed looking at brochures of where could go. Cruises. Take the train across Canada. And then he had to go and die on me and leave me alone. "

"You still have your children," encouraged Rachel.

"It's not the same, dear." You raise them to leave you and begin lives of their own."

"If you're lucky," mouthed Rachel.

Naomi grabbed John's arm. "Wait, John. Earlier when I told you that my husband died, you said 'You know how I feel.' Usually that's a glib statement from somebody who doesn't know what else to say. But I sense you really do."

John breathed heavily. He coughed. "Naomi, you said how angry you are at your husband for dying and abandoning you. You're a better person than me. I hate myself. I abandoned my wife long before she died. Breast cancer. God, I hate cancer. Oh, I did what was expected of the dutiful husband. Too much of the time, she was sick upstairs and I sat in my chair and drank myself to sleep watching the news."

Naomi pressed his arm tighter. "I think, John, you see what we can't."

"I think so. I'm afraid so. You see, where we each woke up says everything. Me in my chair where I drank and neglected her. She once told me how she simply wanted me to love her for who she was rather than for who I wanted her to be. Her words haunt me." John held his palm over Naomi's hands. "Naomi, you woke in the bed you shared with your husband for years, looking forward to good times together. Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be, saith the poet. A bed, now a bed of resentment."

Rachel began to sob. Through the tears, she cried: "No, no. I can't stand it. Me -- the children's bedroom. We painted ours yellow because we didn't want to know the baby's gender. No 'reveal party' for us. We wanted to celebrate the surprise. The crib was ready." The sobbing turned jagged. "I started labor early." She gulped. "They never told me if it was a boy or a girl. My mother-in-law thought it best. It was the way they do it in some rural areas. She took over. She always does. She wanted to protect me. That's what she said. It was as if she thought I failed her son. We never named it. Our child. There never even was a service or a burial. Nothing to hold. Nothing to love. My baby just disappeared. My mother-in-law thought it best."

After a thick silence, John turned toward Daisy. "And you, Daisy," "Forgive me, but you said you hate basements. You woke up in the basement. Why do you hate basements?"

"Don't ask me, please."

"We must," Naomi said kindly but firmly. "It seems that is why we each are here."

"God, no! I can't," she cried out as she collapsed to the floor. Rachel knelt to hold her. "That damn bastard! Selfish, selfish, bastard!" The heaving breaths slowed. "O God, our son went down into the basement to find his baseball glove. What he found was his father hanging. I raced down the steps when I heard my son groan." Ashamed, Daisy tried to compose herself. "The note he left said he was doing us a favor. He wanted to spare us from having to care for him when his cancer progressed. All he left us was a mess. Doing us a favor, damn him. I am so angry at him. I hate what he did to his son."

"It seems," John observed, "we aren't that different. Which leaves you, Dan, waking up at the kitchen table. Kitchen tables. The heart of a family."

"My boy. Daniel, Junior. So many rehab centers. Too many therapy groups." Dan exhaled. "Oh, the ugly fights we had over our kitchen table. One of the centers we sent him to had a framed inscription at the entrance that said: 'The Truth Will Set You Free, But First It Will Hurt Like Hell.' Ain't that the truth, if and when you face the hurt. If. What a goddamn waste. Opioid addiction, among other problems." Dan pressed his hands to his face. "He had so much promise, so many gifts. He, we, -- we all ran out of hope."

~~~

It is a peculiar feeling, feeling equally embarrassed and relieved. Easier with strangers perhaps than with close friends. Exposure is like that. Close friends will remind you of yourself, whether they mean to or not. But was exposing themselves to each other enough? What next? They looked around the table at each other realizing they still were kept together in this farmhouse. They felt safer than they did in the morning, yet they still felt lost, stranded. What next? Naomi suggested they should all go to sleep and maybe they'd wake up where they came from.

Dan eventually broke the silence. "You know, nothing has stirred from the outside since the whirlwind of dirt and the lion. No more attacks."

"No more attacks," mumbled John, reaching to tear off a piece of pumpernickel.

"What did you say, John?" asked Rachel

"Nothing. I'm just thinking out loud." John chewed and swallowed the bread. "It's been perhaps several hours since noon, and the outside world has been quiet. No more mud creatures. No more vines. No more dragonflies. They attacked us, but nothing happened. There was no danger, really. Nobody got hurt. All these nasty, scary things came at us here in this farmhouse, and we felt threatened. Naturally, who wouldn't?"

"I certainly did," agreed Rachel. "Especially those snakes. Made my skin crawl."

"Say that again."

"Made my skin crawl."

"No, really, can it be that obvious?" said John to himself. "Skin," he repeated.

Naomi smiled. "Dragonflies too. They weren't locusts. Locusts devour. Locusts destroy. Dragonflies bring beauty." Naomi tapped John's hand. "Have you ever heard of Gerard Manley Hopkins?"

John laughed. "I teach High School English, although the Victorians aren't much in vogue these days."

"Then you know." She leaned back and closed her eyes, reciting from a book of poetry she loved since her youth: "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame..."

"Hold it," she insisted, raising her hand, fluttering her fingers. "I can remember the rest."

"As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*"

She paused, inviting John to continue the recitation. John declined by shaking his head, the text not in front of him, inviting her to continue. She wanted to anyway.

"Í say móre: the just man justices;  
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
Chríst—for Chríst plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces."

The other four applauded her.

Naomi continued. "As I said, they weren't locusts. They were dragonflies. Dragonflies bring beauty, they bring light, iridescent light. Symbols of grace and transformation. God in us too, creatures of light even as we are mortal. Just beautiful."

"You've lost me," said Dan.

"Me too," said Daisy.

"Yes," Rachel chimed in. "'What in God's eyes he is...' We saw the plants, the spiders, the snakes, the crops withering in the field, and we felt threatened. We felt threatened because that's what we feel. We felt we were being attacked. But as John said, there's was no harm. What if we didn't feel threatened? What if we didn't feel as if the world was against us, hostile and evil? What if, despite the evil and hurt we each have experienced? Despite all our desperate losses. Husbands. Wives. Our babies. What if we didn't feel this way? What if they weren't sent to hurt us?"

"Like dragonflies," confirmed Naomi.

"Or snakes," suggested John. "Poisonous. Treacherous. Fangs. Dangerous. That's the common perception. Back to the story of Adam and Eve. But they also shed their skins. Skins. Snakes change. They transform. That's why snakes also are symbols of healing, like on a doctor's caduceus." He looked around at them intently. "What else did we see that we felt was attacking us? What if they weren't, as Rachel said? What if they were telling us something, just like where we each woke up this morning told us something?" John, for the first time in a long time, started feeling enthused, excited. "Look at each of us. Look at the horrible baggage we each are carrying. Defensive, bitter. Hate is consuming us. Hate wants to drive out whatever love we may have experienced. What if what we viewed as hostile evils, attacks, threats, weren't? They could be, but they could also be something good."

"What's good about an earthquake?" doubted Daisy.

Dan jumped in. "It wasn't an earthquake, though. We weren't shaken. We were buoyed along. We were carried, even when the ground outside was heaving, unstable."

"What message in the plants?" Rachel wondered.

John offered his guess. "Were they attacking us? Or were they wanting to touch us with growth, flowers, fragrance?"

"I love my garden," Naomi said with evident pleasure. "My garden in the Villages is smaller than my garden at the house we lived in. Before we retired. I still love it though. Gardens takes work – tilling, weeding, pruning. You also begin to see how all are interconnected, how all need water, sunlight to grow. Growth, any type of growth, takes work."

Daisy timidly added: "I remember my Sunday school days and the line that for everything there is a season. The corn disgusted me at first. Maybe I needed to be reminded how all things wilt, return to the soil in the end. We have worth, and then the worms. The worth should win, not the worms."

"That's disturbing," John joked, "but beautiful, Daisy."

"Bats are still able to fly when it is darkest," Dan said.

"Spiders are the most amazing of creatures," said Rachel. "Incredibly patient. Incredibly persevering, if that's the right word. Their webs are miracles of creativity. My husband and I always hang a spider on our Christmas Tree. It comes from the story of the spider that spun a web in front of a cave to protect baby Jesus and his parents from Herod's soldiers."

"Never heard that story," said Dan. Eagerly, he asked: "What about the wolves?"

"Out in Colorado, many of the ranchers think of them as pests. But find me a more intelligent, sociable animal – they trust each other to survive."

"It was the skulk of foxes and vixens that disturbed me the most," replied Dan. "Maimed. Limping. Remember how Rachel refused to keep looking at them? They were horrible. Mauled. Bloody. Bloodied. Then I remembered how back in the days when they would trap foxes, the trappers would sometimes find the trap sprung left holding the fox's leg. They'd chew off their own leg to escape and survive. They were maimed, yes, but they could still walk."

"You know," said Daisy, reaching for an apple. "I've always been fond of bears. Smokey Bear. Baloo. Fozzie Bear. Paddington. Pooh Bear. Bears protect their cubs. Strong. Furry. When they roar, it's for a warning. They don't want to hurt you."

"I think we're getting close," observed John. "And last, the lion? What say you all?"

"Nobility," said Dan.

"Courage," said Rachel.

"Pride," said Daisy.

"Lionesses don't hunt alone," said Naomi. "But, John, the lion wasn't the last, was it?"

"No, and that's why there's something I realize I have to do now."

Naomi guessed. "You can't."

"I need to find out if we are right."

"You can't leave the farmhouse."

"I have to, Naomi. We have to accept the invitation. All I know is that I can't stay here anymore. I can't stay where I am." Getting up, he patted the back of the chair. He remembered how his grandfather would say how the turtle don't get nowhere lest it sticks its neck out. John slapped his thigh. "Hell, what do I have to lose? This is nowhere. We got to get somewhere." John walked to the door and put his hand to the glass knob. "Friends, I believe I'll be back. I'm hoping I will." He pushed open the door and closed it behind him. He breathed deep. The air had a musky scent. He walked down the steps to the lane. He crossed the lane and walked toward the edge of the ploughed field. A refreshing wind began to blow across the field. He took a step onto the dirt, standing amongst the churned clods. He took a second step, a third. He stepped up onto the mound. He stood still.

The dirt began to swirl around his feet. The swirling dirt rose up, covering his legs, and thickened as it rose. The dirt whirled faster and faster as it reached his neck. John panicked and thought about holding his breath. He then said to himself: "No, trust it." Soon he was surrounded by a cloud of whirling dirt. Completely enveloped, he smelled the dirt. He tasted the dirt. He felt the dirt as it dusted his skin. The whorl of dirt cleansed him. He felt the hate washing away, the guilt redeemed into understanding, a daring hope. He gave his pain and loss to the whirlwind.

He sensed the words whispering from the whirlwind more than he heard them: "Tell them. Bring them. Let them come to us too."