

THE PLOW

A photograph of a wooden plow leaning against a rustic wooden fence. The plow is made of dark wood and has a curved handle. The fence is made of horizontal wooden planks and vertical posts. In the background, there are green trees and tall grass in the foreground.

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No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

Chapter 1

Iowa, 1899

Thomas struggled with the plow, attempting to keep it upright as the horse pulled the reins under his collar deep into his neck. Sweat poured from him as he labored under the heat of the early spring sun—planting time in Iowa. *I hate this*, he thought as the horse plodded along.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with one hand, struggling to keep the plow in the furrow. With each step, the dry, starved soil broke into dust clouds that stung his eyes and clogged his throat. As the plow sliced through the ground, the old, dead growth turned under, preparing the soil for new life.

Reaching the end of the field the horse paused and waited. Thomas stared straight ahead, blinking the mud from his eyes—for a long time.

“Problem son?” said Frank Thornton, calling from the far side of the field.

Thomas snapped back to attention. “I’m sick of following this horse around and eating dust all day,” he said with a sigh.

“Job has to get done, son. We plant in a week.”

Thomas didn’t answer. *I wasn’t born to be a farmer*, he thought as he turned the horse and dropped into the next furrow. He stared across the field at his father and wondered how he could spend so many years barely scratching out a living. *Didn’t he want to be more than a poor dirt farmer?*

* * *

“What’s the matter, son?” said Nadine Thornton as she set a plate and silverware in front of Thomas. “You look kind of down.”

“Oh, nothing, Ma; just tired I guess.”

"He's not too happy about plowing I think. Was complaining about the dust and dirt today," said Frank as he took his place at the head of the table.

Thomas rubbed the back of his neck and looked away from his father.

"Ain't that right, son?"

Was his father looking to start something, or just getting in some digs?

"That's right, Pa. Hot, dusty, and dirty out there and I didn't much enjoy it."

"Another day or two and you'll have it licked."

"I guess," said Thomas, not saying what he really wished he could.

"If you're going to be a farmer son, you gotta buck up and work harder."

"What if I don't want to be a farmer?" There, without thinking he had said it. Thomas slumped back in his chair and waited.

Carrying the last of the dinner to the table, Nadine shot a glance at her husband, unsure of how he would react.

Frank's eyes narrowed as he looked straight at his son, his normally calm demeanor descending into an icy stare as he leaned forward.

Thomas could feel the heat rising up within him, the feeling of dread filling him from inside.

"Don't want to be a farmer?" said Frank flatly. "This farm has been in our family for more than three generations and you don't want to be a farmer?"

"Well I just—"

"You what? You want to throw away all the work my father and his father before him did here? This is who we are; it's up to you to carry on when I'm gone."

"I'm not sure I'm cut out to spend my life on the farm."

Frank leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms across his chest, his gaze never wavering from his son. Thomas knew what was coming next.

"Jesse would have carried on," said Frank flatly.

Thomas looked down at his empty plate as silence fell across the room. *I can't go through this again*, he thought.

"Come, let's eat," said Nadine.

"I'm not hungry, Ma," said Thomas as he pushed his chair back from the table.

"You will sit down, and you will eat," said Frank sternly.

"No I won't, Pa," said Thomas as he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Did you have to go there again Frank?," said Nadine.

Frank rubbed his face as he looked at his wife, noting the sadness in her eyes.

"That boy will never amount to anything," he said as he slapped a heaping spoonful of

potatoes on his plate.

“Oh Frank, he can hear you.”

“I don’t care—the boy needs to grow up and take some responsibility instead of being a dreamer.”

Nadine folded her hands in her lap and sighed. *Another meal ruined.*

* * *

Thomas stumbled out of bed long after sunrise. *Pa’s still mad or he would have dragged me out early.*

In the kitchen, Ma was working the squeaking water pump, filling a tub for dishes.

“Where’s Pa?” said Thomas as he dropped into his chair at the table.

“He’s out in the barn, hitching up the horse so he can plow.”

“So he’s still mad from last night I guess,” said Thomas, certain of the answer.

Ma wiped her hands on the damp towel and turned to face him. “Yes, and I tried to talk to him but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“He said to let you sleep,” said Nadine, not relaying what Frank really said about, as he put it, the “useless dreamer.”

“Why is it every time he’s mad at me he takes over and does what he asked me to do?”

Nadine wanted to tell Thomas his father was a hard man—a stubborn and proud man. But she would not speak ill behind his back, trying rather to play peacemaker between father and son.

“You know how he is, son.”

Thomas knew full well his father held a grudge and nursed it like a living thing to be both detested and treasured.

“I saved you some breakfast,” said Ma as she placed a plate in front of him.

Thomas ate slowly as if to prolong the encounter that lay before him.

* * *

Thomas stepped out into the bright morning sun, glancing towards the barn, then beyond the garden to the field where he left the plow the day before. Pa was already behind the plow, guiding it as the horse trudged along. He didn’t want to go, but it was unavoidable.

“Pa,” said Thomas as he reached the field. His father was at the far end of the furrow and appeared not to hear him. Thomas called again, this time louder as the horse turned

and started back towards him. His father looked up, and saying nothing, looked back down at the furrow.

As he reached the end of the row, he stopped the horse in front of Thomas and looked directly through him.

Pa spit tobacco, wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand, and said, "You working today, boy?"

Thomas hated it when he called him *boy*. He was twenty-one, a man not a boy. Lashing out would do him no good. He gritted his teeth, looked at the ground and said, "Yes sir."

"Then get to it. I want this field done by noon and the last finished by tonight."

Thomas knew the task was impossible, but they always were. Maybe the field could be done by evening, but there was no way he could complete the other.

"Pa, I—"

"Get to it. The more you talk the longer you're going to be working tonight."

Thomas nearly swore at him, but bit his tongue and took his place behind the plow. Pa pulled his gloves off and slapped them together, sending dust flying as he walked away, not saying a word.

Thomas watched as Pa headed to the house. *It's going to be a long, hard day.*

* * *

Pa isn't going to be happy, thought Thomas as he led the horse to the barn in the dark. Though he worked all day, stopping only when Ma brought him meals, he didn't finish plowing the last field. He was forced to quit when darkness fell and he could no longer keep the horse headed in the right direction.

With the horse brushed down and resting in the barn, Thomas trudged slowly to the house, hoping Pa was already asleep. He pushed the door open slowly, only to see Pa in the rocking chair, smoking his pipe and staring at the fire in the fireplace. He didn't turn to look as Thomas entered.

"Get 'er done?" he said flatly, his gaze fixed on the fire.

"I got almost half of the second field done; had to quit when I ran out of daylight."

Pa shook his head and sighed. "I guess I should have done it myself," he said, prompting a quick glance from Ma who was sitting in her chair, knitting.

"I tried," said Thomas. "I don't know what else I could have done. I stayed out until it was too dark to drive the horse."

"Maybe you should have started earlier," said Pa, still staring into the fire.

"I'll finish it tomorrow," said Thomas, clenching his jaw. "Then I'm leaving," he said as he walked from the room.

“No need,” said Pa, raising his voice. “I’ll do it myself.”

“Must you be so hard on him?” said Nadine.

“It’s his fault we’re struggling.”

“You can’t blame him.”

“I can, and I do. His irresponsibility has nearly run this family off the rails.”

“It wasn’t his fault,” said Nadine, her voice trembling slightly.

“You’re wrong,” said Frank, his gaze drifting back to the fire.

* * *

Frank entered the kitchen, pulling his suspenders up over his shoulders. “Coffee ready Nadine?”

“Yes, dear,” she said, pouring him a morning cup and setting it on the table as he slid into his chair.

“Thanks,” he said, lifting the cup and taking a gulp. “Where’s the boy?”

“He was up before sunup—been plowing for an hour already.”

“Hmmp. I figured he left after last night.”

“No, he’s trying to do the right thing Frank. Can’t you be easier on him?”

“That’s the problem with the boy; he’s had it too easy.”

“Well if you don’t ease up on him, he will leave.”

“Let him.”

“You stubborn old coot,” said Nadine, crossing her arms and stomping her foot. “If he leaves, you won’t be planting or harvesting anything this year.”

“I’ll hire somebody.”

“We can’t afford that.”

“If it comes to it, we’ll get by. I’m not going to beg him to stay.”

“You’re a stubborn man Frank Thornton,” said Nadine as she shook her head and returned to the kitchen.

* * *

Thomas strained against the plow, his back and shoulders throbbing from the continued battle to keep it upright and on course. He was drenched in sweat, throat parched and coated with dust as he reached the end of the last furrow. *Pa should be pleased.*

Thomas unhitched the horse from the plow and led her to the water trough for a well deserved drink. His thoughts drifted to the night before—his threat to leave shouldn’t

have been voiced. He had been formulating his plan for some time, yet revealing it in anger wasn't how he wanted it to unfold.

Leaving the farm wouldn't be easy; leaving Ma would be nearly unbearable. Yet, he couldn't see being stuck on this patch of land until he died. *I want more than a farmer's life can offer.*

Thomas took the horse to the barn as the afternoon sun elongated the shadows around him. He made certain to take care of the horse and tack—no need to risk Pa's ire more than necessary. Finished, he sat on a bale of hay for what seemed like a long time, his head in his hands as he worked out how he would tell them when the time finally came. As his thoughts swirled about him, the barn door creaked in protest and swung wide open. Thomas looked up—it was Pa.

"I see you got the plowing done."

"Yes Pa."

"I'm going to town to get some supplies."

"I'll go and help you."

"No, I'll go alone," said Pa as he worked at hitching up the horse and wagon.

Thomas looked down at the dirt floor, rubbing the back of his neck. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I don't need your help. Maybe your mother does."

"Okay, Pa," said Thomas as he headed for the barn door. It was clear he was not welcome. *Just as well anyway*, thought Thomas. At best, the trip would have been one of forced conversation and at worst, awkward silence. Thomas closed the barn door and headed to the house.

* * *

Ma was sitting at the table, sipping a cup of tea. "Sit down, son. Can I get you anything?"

"No Ma, I'm fine," said Thomas as he slid into the chair across from her.

"You look tired."

"I am, a little. I'm just glad the plowing is done. I think the horse is glad too."

"I'm sure your father is as well."

"Wouldn't know it by talking to him. I offered to help him in town but he didn't want me to go."

"It was nice of you to offer son."

"I try, Ma, I really do."

"I know," she said, then paused and stared into her tea cup, her hands clasped around it. She didn't look up.

"What's wrong, Ma?"

"I have to ask you something," she said, still staring into the bottom of her tea cup. "Are you really planning to leave?"

Thomas took in a deep breath. He wasn't really prepared to face this yet, but with the events of the last two days, here it was.

"Ma, I don't—"

"Just tell me son. I need to know."

Thomas stared at the table, his hands in front of him. "Ma, I can't stay here—you know why."

"I think you can work it out, son."

"Nothing I do is good enough. Every time Pa looks at me he thinks of that day."

"It's not your fault."

"You're the only one that believes that, Ma."

She reached and put her hands on his. "Thomas, if you leave where will you go? What will you do?"

"Well, I've been thinking about heading west, maybe work in a logging camp."

"You don't know anything about logging, son."

"No, but I could learn. Or maybe I'll become a miner and head north. I hear there is a gold rush on the Klondike."

"Surely you can't be serious. That's so far away."

"I don't know Ma. There are plenty of opportunities out West. I just want to see what fits me."

"You know if you leave we won't be able to manage all the work here."

This was the one regret that nagged at Thomas. Leaving the farm might drive Ma and Pa into ruin. He battled it back and forth in his mind, all the while knowing he could never be happy under his father's critical eye.

"I know Ma, and I'm really sorry about that. Can't you hire someone?"

"We will have to, I just hope—"

"Ma, you know I would stay if I could."

"I know son, I know. You're old enough to make your own decisions, but we will miss you terribly."

"I doubt Pa will."

"You might be surprised."

"I guess I'll never know."

"When will you leave; after planting?"

"Ma," he hesitated, "I'm planning to leave tomorrow."

Nadine sighed and looked out the window. Thomas wondered if she was crying; if she was trying to hide her tears from him.

"Thomas," she said, her voice quivering, "When will you tell your father?"

He knew he couldn't draw out his departure; it had to be quick, decisive, to minimize the conflict. "I will tell him in the morning."

By the time Frank returned, Thomas was in bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering what tomorrow would bring. His things were packed; he was ready to go. All that remained was the final, painful scene with Pa. Eventually the knot in his stomach subsided and he drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Thomas awoke late, tired from a fitful nights sleep. He could hear Ma in the kitchen, working on breakfast. He dressed, picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder, then quietly opened the door to his room and peered out.

Pa was sitting at the table, smoking and drinking a cup of coffee. Thomas entered and dropped his bag at the end of the table.

"Morning, Pa."

Pa nodded his head ever so slightly, then leaned back in his chair.

"Going somewhere?"

Thomas glanced at his mother laboring over the stove, then slid into a chair and looked at Pa.

"I'm leaving, going west," he said, then held his breath.

"When?"

"After breakfast."

"I see," said Pa. "And what exactly are you going to do out West?"

"I'm not sure yet—lots of opportunity out there. Maybe join the gold rush to the Klondike and strike it rich."

"You're a fool if you think you can just go traipsing all over the country without any money or job."

Thomas face was slowly reddening. "I've saved up some money," he said flatly.

"Go then. I don't need your help."

"Frank, I think—"

“Stay out of this, Nadine,” Frank said sternly.

“You’ve never forgiven me,” said Thomas. “That’s what this is really about. It wasn’t my fault.”

“Really?” said Pa, his eyes narrowing. “Whose idea was it to skip your chores and go swimming—even after I warned you about the creek?”

Thomas stared at the table as the events of that day flooded his mind, that dreadful day Pa went to town—the day he and his older brother went swimming instead of working. The swollen creek, the log jam, the current sweeping Jesse under—he couldn’t bare the thought of that last desperate glimpse of his brother.

“Your brother is dead; you didn’t even try to save him.”

“Pa, I swear, I tried to save him but couldn’t reach him.”

Pa held up his hand, palm out flat and nearly hitting Thomas’ face. “I don’t want to hear it; I’ve heard it all before.”

Thomas put his head in his hands as Ma moved closer and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Frank, it was an accident,” she said.

“No, the fault lies with your irresponsible son. Jesse is dead; I have no one to carry on; no one to help me. For that I can never forgive him.”

“I’ll be going now,” said Thomas as he slid his chair back and stood up.

“You need some breakfast, son,” said Ma.

“No Ma, it’s fine. I need to go.”

“Let the boy go, Nadine.”

Thomas grabbed his bag and stepped out the front door onto the porch, his mother close behind.

“I wish you wouldn’t leave, son,” she said, a tear running down her cheek.

“I’m sorry Ma. I’ll write you when I get settled.”

He hugged her tightly as he whispered, “Goodbye Ma.”

“Goodbye Thomas,” she said, the tears flowing freely now.

He stepped off the porch and turned towards town, looking back to see his mother standing there; alone.

Jesse was dead; the memory of his brother on that terrible day burned in his mind. He tried to save him and couldn’t. It was Jesse’s idea to go swimming; but Pa would never know.

As Thomas passed the barn he paused, taking a last look at the rusting plow, then continued on the long journey ahead.

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