

*Sold **

By Wendell Berry (4756 Words)



IT'S ABOUT ALL finished now. I took sick in the night back in the fall, past frost. When Coulter Branch came over to see about me the next morning I was down and couldn't get up. Coulter called Wilma on the telephone. He was afraid to leave me to go get her, and she had to come from their house on the tractor, driving with one hand and holding the baby with the other. That's a good girl, I'll tell you. They got me up and fairly dressed and took me to the hospital. The hospital helped me over my sickness, but seemed like I was old after that and not fit to look after myself. And so the old place and all had to be sold.

They brought me from the hospital here to the nursing home at Hargrave. Rest Haven they call it, the end of the line. It's all right. I don't complain. But I was the last in Port William of the name of Gibbs.

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Before I married Grover Gibbs, I was Beulah Cordle. Annie May Ellis was my first cousin. She was Annie May Cordle Ellis. I was Beulah Cordle Gibbs. *Beulah* means “a land of peace and rest.” A preacher told me that, back when I was young. It made him blush to tell me, and I knew why. But I wasn’t cut out to be a preacher’s wife, and I reckon he could tell.

I didn’t have but one boyfriend, to say a real one, before Grover. But that one didn’t last. He was from down at Hargrave. He went off to Tennessee and sent me a postcard that said, “Hoping to be up in your parts by Sunday night.” You can’t love somebody you’ve laughed at that way.

I was seventeen when I married Grover. He was twenty-two. We couldn’t wait. We ran off to Indiana and waked up a preacher. He stood us in front of the fireplace and tied the knot. When he asked Grover to promise all those things “until death,” Grover said, “Would you go over that a little slower?”

That was him exactly. The preacher had to stop and laugh.

By both of us being gone, my folks pretty well knew why. They had some objections, but after while it got all right. And it *was* all right, pretty much, until death.

Well, I reckon you could complain about anybody you’ve married and lived with a long time. But then they’ve died and gone from you, and you look back, and you’re grateful.

Maybe it’s not that easy to tell about Grover. He was good enough at work—better than good enough, I think. But he was not hardly work-brittle. What it was, I reckon, he didn’t have what they call ambition, but he suited me. What we both wanted from this world was a living, our daily bread, if that means plenty to eat and a sound roof over our heads. Came a time when we had more, but we knew the more was extra.

Grover mostly never minded being delayed or interrupted. He couldn’t finish a day without going off after supper, still picking his teeth, to sit talking in Port William till bedtime. That was the old Port William schedule, you might say. The men would go to town after supper and sit in front of the stores in good weather, or inside somewhere in bad, talking and laughing and carrying on, the way people do who have always known

each other and are telling a long story that they all know as far as the night before. Grover did his duty and held up his end of the conversation.

Well, I loved him. He could be the funniest. You could look in his face, practically all his life, and see that he was just waiting to be invited to have a good time, and that as soon as the invitation came, he was going to accept. He always looked ready to grin, if he wasn't already grinning, even when he thought he was by himself. Because of that, maybe, when he was sad his face would be the saddest you ever saw. But he was always looking for fun, and just about always finding it, until he was almost dead.

When things went to drifting towards what Grover called fun, seemed like Burley Coulter and Big Ellis would sooner or later be into it with him. It would be hard to tell all the doings they did. And fun lasted them a long time, for after it had happened they'd be years telling each other about it, and the more they told about it the funnier it got.

As a usual thing, Burley and Grover didn't work together. Burley mostly worked with his family or Elton Penn or the Rowanberrys. But Grover and Big Ellis often would be helping each other, at our place or at Big's. Since they'd married cousins, they were sort of kin, and when one of them needed help the other one would likely go. And since Big Ellis and Burley were neighbors, sometimes Burley showed up too.

When it was just Grover and Big, they talked, probably, as much as they worked. Maybe they'd be in a tobacco patch with their hoes, where I could see them from the kitchen window. They'd hit a few licks and pretty soon stop and lean on the hoe handles. They'd look off at the sky and point and prophesy the weather. And then hit a few more licks. Or I would see Grover lean back and laugh at some outrageousness such as Big was always full of. Like that.

Grover would work as hard to play a joke as for a living. Well, I'll tell you exactly how he would do.

After the pickup balers had been in the country a good while—this was after we had got settled finally on our own place—Grover and Big went in partners and bought a pretty good baler, secondhand. Big was worthless at anything mechanical, so Grover took

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charge of the baler, always pulled it with our tractor, and did the baling. Grover loved an old tractor. He liked to fix things and he liked to drive.

One summer Big had a field of red clover to put up for hay. He got it mowed, and in a couple of days Grover went over and raked it as soon as the dew dried. After dinner he went back with the baler. Big had got Burley to come to help with the hauling. They were sitting on the wagon, waiting for Grover to bale a round or two before they started to load.

It was a blustery day, and the wind blew Big's hat off. He started after it but couldn't gain on it. When it blew past Grover, he pulled out of the windrow he was baling, put the tractor in a higher gear and cut in ahead of Big. Burley was just paying careful attention to see how it was going to turn out.

So there went Big, stumbling along in his version of running, and there went Grover ahead of him as fast as he could go and stay on the tractor, and there went Big's hat, tumbling over the windrows like it finally had a chance to be free.

Well, it was Grover that caught the hat. He baled it and slowed down and went back to baling hay. He never gave Big so much as a glance. He didn't even grin.

He and Big worked harder when Burley was with them. Burley was tuned up a little different. The people he ordinarily worked with, they went at it pretty hard. Burley was another one maybe not easy to tell about. He wasn't, you might think, all that serious, and yet he was. Time was, this country was full of tales about Burley Coulter. He was a right smart older than me, but I remember him when he was young. He had good looks and ways the women taken to. You'd accuse him of something outlandish you'd heard about him, and he'd say, "If they told it at the store, I reckon it's a story." Or he'd say, "That must have been the day I found myself lost." And he had a way of looking at you. You had to love him. There was a time or two, a night or two.

But he had that seriousness. More and more, I think. He saw his family through their hard times. His friends too. He was a neighbor.

But, Lord, how they did carry on—him and Grover and Big!

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Well, them old times are gone forever, but people were neighbors then. Your kinfolks were your neighbors, and your neighbors were your neighbors. You worked together. You saw each other in Port William on Saturday night, and in church like as not on Sunday morning. Now that I've got mainly nothing to do, I think and think about them all. It just seems natural to me now to expect to see them again over on the other side. I think of us all together, paid up somehow, and complete.

For a long time after Grover and I got married, we were tenants on other people's places, taking half of what we earned from the crops, which I'll say was hard sometimes. I mean you could have a hard thought or two about it. But for people with no land, that was what was possible, and was all right, a chance maybe to get ahead. We got half of the cash money, what there was of it, and back there in the '20s and '30s, there wouldn't be much. But we had our old ways. We had a garden, of course, and milk from our cows and meat from our hogs, and meat and eggs from our chickens, and our patching and mending and making do. And so we had our living.

The place we lived on longest was the old Levers place. Mr. Robert La Vere grew up on that place in the old house that a long time later we lived in. He was known back then as Jappy Levers. But he made a lawyer out of himself, and then he went by J. Robert La Vere. He hadn't been long dead when the tenant before us gave the place up, and we moved there. Run-down as it was, it was the best place we'd had, and we stayed on there until my mother died and I inherited our home place.

After Mr. La Vere was gone, his widow, Miss Charlotte, saw to the farm, and I'm telling you! She was something like nothing else. To see her come riding up in the backseat of that big car, wearing her hat and her fur and her white gloves and looking straight ahead through her little specs, you'd have thought she was the queen of Hargrave, which in a way she was.

She was just about the best thing that ever happened to Grover. She couldn't tell a cow from a bull, but she had no end of advice about farming. She would decide the barn cats were too thin, and tell Grover to see they got more milk, or more mice. We would take garden stuff to her when we had extra—we tried to have a little extra for her—and she would wonder if the green beans were ready in March, or roasting ears in November. Grover enjoyed everything she said, and remembered it all, and could talk just like her.

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Her driver and man of all work, Willard Safely, would pull up in front of the barn and blow the horn. If Grover was anywhere around, he would pretty soon show up. He would always stand back a ways from the car so she had to roll her window down and stick her head out to talk to him. Her way of doing that completely tickled him, but he would have the soberest look on his face and nod his head and say “Yes mam,” “Yes mam,” and memorize it all so he could tell me first thing, and then at town.

The next place we lived was our own. My mother and daddy didn’t have but one child that lived, and that was me. By the end of the war my folks were both gone, and we had no good reason to stay with Mrs. La Vere, “Miz Gotrocks” as Grover liked to call her, and so we moved home.

It was not a big or a fine place, a hundred and fifteen acres more or less, some of it steep, but my folks took good care of it and kept up the buildings and fences, and so did we. We were changed by having it, in all the world our own place, more maybe than we were changed by having the children. Grover was Grover, and he’d have been Grover if we’d owned a thousand acres or the whole county. But the hundred and fifteen that was ours made us feel permanent and serious, in a way safe, as we hadn’t been able to feel before.

We didn’t change anything much. We kept the best of the things my folks had and the best of the things we had. We stuck to our old ways of doing for ourselves. And we did all right. Grover always felt at home wherever we were, but I got back some of the old at-home feeling I’d had when I was a girl growing up. It was fine for me.

Back in 1920 was when we got married, both of us young but born in different centuries. Maybe that counts for something, but to look at us you wouldn’t have known. I’ll have to say we didn’t waste any time starting a family. Billy was born in nine months just about to the day. Grover would look at me when I began to show and just laugh. He’d say, “I reckon that must have been *some* night!”

And then in a little more than a year we had Althie. And then I lost a baby. And then six years went by, and then it was Nance, and then Sissy, and then Stanley, named after his grandpa and nearly spoiled to death by all the others. And after him, no more.

“Getting ’em’s one thing, and raising ’em’s another.” Grover made a saying out of that. You get ’em here, and then you have ’em to take care of and worry about.

Althie, I’ll say, was the best—the best one of all of us. The three littlest ones were raised by her as much as by me. She would be carrying them around and looking after them. Playing at being a mother, I thought, sort of doll-playing, but I pretty soon realized that when she was with them I didn’t need to worry. She put them first, and was always watchful.

And she hadn’t hardly got them of mine raised before she married Tommy Greatlow from down here at Hargrave and started raising her own.

She’s getting old herself now, and her health is bad, her heart, but she drives in here every day to see how I am and what she can do for me. Her heart is poorly now, maybe, because she’s given it away all her life to anybody that needed it, always *doing* for somebody. She and Tommy are still out there on their good farm in the river valley with the world dug up all around by the sand-and-gravel company. And they’ve got one boy, looks like, who’ll stick there and go on with it. He’s thirty-two, Tommy Junior is, a good boy, good to me.

The others, Althie’s, but mine too, are gone, long gone, scattered off to city jobs all over the country. When the time came for me to leave the old place, Althie and them of course couldn’t take it on, for they already had all the land they could look after, and having to depend on the Mexicans part of the time, as it was. The rest of them, children nor grandchildren, couldn’t even think of it. There was nothing in it for them, as they sometimes pointed out to me, nothing anyhow that they wanted.

The worst time in all our family-raising was when Billy was gone in the war. He was wild to fly, and he got into the Air Force. He was a gunner on one of them biggest bombers. He’d get the pilot, when they was supposed to be training, to fly low over our house and all over the Port William neighborhood, bringing everybody outside to look up, scaring the livestock, looked like almost touching the treetops, taking chances for the fun of it. “Boys!” Grover would say. “That’s boys for you!” He said if their brains were dynamite they wouldn’t have blowed their hats off. And with a war to fight.

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And then they went off overseas into the fighting, taking chances then sure enough, and Billy, you could tell from the little he wrote home, still excited about flying. I wonder if he could actually imagine then, at his age, that he actually could get killed. But I could imagine it, and I did. They were getting shot at, and the fighter planes going at them like the little birds after a hawk. Billy was on my mind, seemed like, even in my sleep, all through the war. And afterwards I realized I hadn't been young since it started.

Grover and I had had, I reckon, our share of troubles before that. Troubles, you know, that will come. And he could make me mad enough sometimes with that grin of his that I could have knocked him in the head with the skillet. But with Billy gone in the war, I saw something about Grover I'd not seen before. I'd be watching him, and I saw the worry and the fear slide across his face behind that grin, and I knew, I knew forever that, without talking about it the way I did, he was grieving and afraid, wearing it through, day by day just like I was. And then I'd say "Come here," and he would come, and we would hold each other.

When Billy came back, his head was full of stuff it had never had in it before. He went away to college, and into a suit and into business, and after that was away and away. He set the example, I reckon, for the younger ones. When their times came, they went too. I've worried about them all. You can get a plenty of that. Finally you see you've had enough. You've said enough goodbyes. You need one for yourself.

After we decided on the sale, and the children came as they got a chance to see about me, I told them to take what they wanted out of the house, and they did, a few little things, keepsakes. And then I gave the best piece of furniture in the house, an old cherry dresser, to Coulter and Wilma Branch. I just made them take it, because I'd depended on them ever since Grover died, and they'd been nothing but good to me. They'd lived all that time as tenants on the next farm, and I'd pretty much made family of them. All the rest had to be sold, all the farm machinery, all the tools, all the old bolts and nuts and washers and metal pieces that my dad and then Grover had saved in case of need, all the furniture and other household plunder. The cattle that Coulter had been taking care of on the halves, they had already gone off to the sale barn. Everything else, everything that would come loose, was auctioned off the day of the sale. The farm too, it had to go.

The sale was on a bright March day, warm for the season. The children all came home for it. Far off as they were in distance and in mind, they knew, they couldn't help knowing, it

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was a day that ended something that mattered, at least to me, and so they came. But Althie was the one who looked after me and stayed close, because she was Althie, and was used to me needing her. The others put in the day standing around, looking starched and uncomfortable even with each other, getting recognized by people they didn't recognize or couldn't remember.

Althie got me there early, and led me across the yard—me with my two walking canes, Lord help me!—to the easy chair that they'd carried out with the rest of the furniture and set under the sugar tree in the front yard. That was where they had the wagons that were loaded with household stuff and the hand tools and the odds and ends. When she got me settled in the chair and the afghan she'd brought tucked around me, Althie brought one of the straight chairs that had been in the kitchen and sat beside me. All through the sale, until it was over, her hand would always be touching me.

Arnold McCurdy cried the sale. He had his loudspeaker and two men to help him and watch for bids. They started the sale out in the barn lot with the farm machinery, and sold their way towards the house and the front yard where I was. I could hear them coming ever closer, Arnold McCurdy praising whatever it was he was about to sell, and then his singsong, and then stopping to praise again and plead for another bid, and then the singsong again, and then "Sold!"

And then he would start it all again, a little closer. And I waited, watching the people who were looking at the things for sale, the furniture lined up in rows across the yard and the smaller things, dishes and such, set out on the wagons. And I, who was not going to buy anything, sat there looking at everything that was for sale.

I had sort of got ready to see the household things carried outdoors and laid out to be looked at and sold. What I wasn't ready for was how poor it looked once it was out of place, all the marks of use and wear on everything, the fretted or shiny places on the furniture where our hands had rested, what I knew to somebody else would be the secondhand look of it all. The cracks and chips in the dishes, seemed like I'd known them so well I hadn't seen them for years, but now I saw them. Everything already looked like it belonged to somebody else.

I was getting spoken to and speaking, some of the women, old friends, neighbors, leaning over to give me a hug, but all the time I was listening. "Sold!" "Sold!" Every time I heard

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it, I knew that, piece by piece, the things we'd all of us gathered there so many years would be scattered and gone. All that had been used to make it a dwelling place, by my folks on back, by Grover and me, by just me with Coulter and Wilma to help me, all the memories of all the *lives* that had made it and held it together, all would come apart and be gone as if it never was.

After while, soon enough, the crowd had shifted into the yard, and Arnold McCurdy was selling the furniture, some that went for antiques and brought a pretty penny, some that didn't. He sold the kitchen table, painted how many times, that we bought when we married, before we had hardly anything to put on it. He sold the chiffonier that I think came from my mother's grandmother. He sold the walnut four-poster bed that Grover's dad sawed the posts off of when they moved into a house with low ceilings. Lord, what didn't he sell! He sold a rusty set of firedogs that had been wired to a rafter in the smokehouse as long as I can remember. He sold a set of curtain stretchers that he gave a man a dollar to bid on, and then sold to him for fifty cents.

When he got to the chair I was sitting in and was telling what a fine chair it was, somebody yelled out, "Does the lady go with it?"

And Arnold McCurdy said, "No, now, we're selling the chair, *not* the lady."

He sold the chair.

He sold even the doilies I'd crocheted for the stand tables and the back of the sofa.

He sold all the kitchen utensils, all the knives and forks and spoons, all the dishes right down to the sugar bowl.

When everything was sold off of the wagons and some were beginning to pay for what they'd bought and go to their cars, Arnold McCurdy kept his place, standing on the wagon nearest to me. He told about the farm, how big it was, how it laid, the condition of the improvements, and so on. And then he started his cry.

I knew Coulter Branch was going to bid on the place. He had taken good care of it ever since Grover died. He's Lyda and Danny Branch's son, and that's a family that *takes* care

of things. Coulter knew the place, knew how to farm it, he wanted it, and he needed it. Lord knows I wanted him to have it, him and Wilma. He was in the bidding from the start, and he stayed with it for a while, and then he had to give it up.

Coulter is a smart man, and thoughtful. He knew pretty exactly what the place was worth as a farm. What I didn't expect, and maybe he didn't, was that to a certain kind of person it was worth more as an investment than it was worth as a farm. And that kind of person, it so happened, was there. "Mr. Gotrocks" I call him, a man from Louisville with, I reckon, no end of money.

I was watching Coulter and trying to think fast enough to pray for him. When his final bid was topped, I saw him walk away with his head down. I'll not forget that. With my last breath I'll grieve over that. I'll die wishing I had just *given* the farm to Coulter and Wilma, but of course my children wouldn't have stood for it. Althie might've, but the others wouldn't.

And I'll tell you what happened then. Althie nor Coulter nor Wilma, none of my loved ones, would have told me. But it was talked about, it got around, and one of the old ones here told me about it.

Mr. Gotrocks hadn't any sooner paid his investment into it than he hired a man with a bulldozer to smash the house and other buildings all to flinders, and push them into a pile, and set them afire. He pushed out every fence, every landmark that stood above the ground, every tree. A place where generations of people had lived their lives. If they came back now, looking for it, they wouldn't know where they were.

And so it's all gone. A new time has come. Various ones of the old time keep faith and stop by to see me, Coulter and Wilma and a few others. But the one I wait to see is Althie. Seems like my whole life now is lived under the feeling of her hand touching me that day of the sale, and every day still.

I lie awake in the night, and I can see it all in my mind, the old place, the house, all the things I took care of so long. I thought I might miss it, but I don't. The time has gone when I could do more than worry about it, and I declare it's a load off my mind. But the thoughts, still, are a kind of company.

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