



"The cemetery in single file"

NOTE: The following short fiction is taken from the last section of a novel by Jim Wilson. Jim is a graduate of the University of Nebraska in English.

Madison. Wisconsin: April. It is done. Nicholay is dead. A little ways outside of the depot. Where we first arrived here, seven years ago. The train was slowing down. It was the brakeman who saw him.

April burst quickly upon us, winter burning into Spring. The ice is gone and the waters of Lake Mendota have moved, gray to blue. The earth has blossomed into green—the pigmentation of Spring. The far-away paths are trod once again, and everywhere the people breathe the freshness of rebirth. And Nicholay is dead.

Melissa and I are packed. The house is in order. The stale musty smell of atmosphere in storage. Until the day one of us will return, someone will return. We stand on the porch. I drive the nails into the board, barring the door to the past. And the present. Melissa is by my side. Her appearance is the same, but she seldom smiles. Or speaks. Her emotions have been dulled to a point beyond grief or sorrow, to what can only be called sadness.

I pick up the suitcases and we walk down the driveway to where the taxi is waiting to take us to the depot in Madison. Melissa climbs in first and I turn for a last look at the old house. Its sides are gray and unpainted against the sky, and it seems to sag downward as if exhausted by the long winter.

The taxi pulls away and the house and Nicholay become only scattered moments of memory. Comprehensible only when seen from afar. Melissa is perched on the seat absently, like a careless bus-rider whose thoughts are lost on Beethoven or Bach or Tolstoy. Her round freckled face is beautiful, and her long brown hair curls down her back.

We are silent. There is nothing more to say between us. The taxi drops us off at the depot and we walk through the stone columns and into the waiting room. The casket is already aboard, so we make our way through the trickle of people to the train and find our seats toward the rear of the car. A half-hour later the train gives that first jerk and moves out of the railroad yard, heading into the dusk.

Melissa lets her head rest on my shoulder, "I wish it were over."

"It will be. Tomorrow. One more day."

"It's lasted so long. This winter, I mean." She closes her eyes and I brush the hair out of her face with my hand. On the other side of the window the hills and dairy barns roll by. The grayness of twilight turns everything to shadows, silhouetted against the dying sky. And the sky is colorless. An absence.

My eyes wonder aimlessly over the darkened landscape. Hour after hour. Unable to face the world on this side of the glass. The world of tears and tangled emotions embroidered by the dark window and the faces in the other seats. And so we ride on, speeding into the darkness. The two of us in the seat. No past. No future. With a feeling that everything must end; the train ride, the night, ourselves, everything. That if you get to the heart of things you find sadness for ever and ever. But a beautiful sadness, like a Christ's face.

Sleep. The night passes. Lincoln at daybreak. Father meets us at the depot and we follow the hearse back to Saltillo. The community church. Tottering on the edge of the pew to the dreamy rhetoric of the priest, with a feeling of unbelief at the whole unreal pageant of death. The cemetery in single file. A mile east of town. On a hill overlooking the fields with a scattering of dying pine trees and wasted marble tombstones. The raw gap in the black earth. The patter of dirt upon the coffin. The wasted hunch-back figure of the old man standing over his son's grave long after everyone has left.

Melissa and I walk back to town. The country road is wet and slippery with the thawing of the earth and she holds my arm. "Will you take me back to Lincoln. There's a train leaving at Midnight. I have to get away." "Where will you go?"

"Back to Boulder for a while. Spend some time alone. That's what we we're going to do after Madison. Will you still be coming?"

"I think so. In a few days." I put my arm around her shoulders. "Maybe it'll be like it was again. Before Madison."

"Yeah. Maybe."

Evening in Saltillo. Melissa and I alone on the porch. Passing the hours. Soft words and gentle caresses. Eleven o'clock. The drive to Lincoln.

Lincoln Burlington Station: Midnight. A deathly heavy dew. The sound of footsteps on the wet glassy pavement. Yellow pools of reflected light. Strands of steam dissolve into the dew like the vapors of a Greek oracle. Standing on the platform with Melissa. To kiss her goodbye. She is going to Boulder and I am supposed to follow, but in the hysterical rush of steam I sense that we may never see each other again. The soft passionate kiss and the round face fill me with emptiness. And panic. From somewhere in the darkness comes the rumble of the baggage cart and voices, muffled and far away. I press her tightly against my body to hold back the tide of emptiness. The faces move by, suspended in the yellow pools. Melissa pulls away, the tears sliding gently down her cheek, and climbs aboard the train. And I am left standing in unbelief, in front of the silver-dark body of metal. And it is only as the train begins to move that I feel Melissa is really leaving. Feel her absence grow heavy. "Melissa!" I call out but the long pull of the engine stifles all sound and the silver shadow slides off into the blackness. I stand alone with nothing but the reflections in the yellow pools and the sound of laughter somewhere deep inside the empty depot.

