

TOBACCO FIELD

The day Dennis moved back to Royal City after graduating from NC State, his mom threw a party for him. A bigger party than he expected, too. Not just family gathered around a pound cake, there were at least thirty people in the backyard. They had an icebox full of beer and soft drinks, and Dennis became involved in a raucous game of horseshoes. He clinched the win with a dramatic ringer and everyone threw up their arms and yelled. After that he wandered around the yard, sipping beers with people who had known him since he was in diapers.

His apartment wasn't available until the next day, so he stayed on his parents' couch. Before going to sleep, he checked email on his phone. He found a message from Jeff, his roommate of the last two years, just moved to New York City:

Just realized I still have your driver and 7 iron. Sorry about that – bring them down over Thanksgiving. As far as the job with Analex, it's nice. Things aren't busy at the moment and I'm still getting a nice paycheck. My first salaried job, and I have to say I like it. Hope you can make it up here soon. If not, I'll be down in NC over the holidays.

Dennis knew that he should write back, but he was tired. He stretched out on the couch. His dad lay in the recliner, already asleep, a black-and-white Western on the TV and several empty beers on the end table. Dennis tried to watch, but fell asleep in minutes.

Dennis was the first in his family to earn a college degree. Neither of his parents finished high school. Frank dropped out when he learned that Dennis was on the way, taking a maintenance job at the Alcoa plant, where he had been ever since. Patsy stayed in school a little longer, but the rigors of having a newborn proved too much and she quit a few months shy of graduation. She had worked numerous jobs since then – at grocery stores, daycares, Yadkin County Parks and Rec – never staying anywhere for long.

College wasn't expected of most kids Dennis went to school with. It wasn't expected of Dennis either, but he had always liked school. Also, he had watched his father come home bitter and exhausted from the plant every night and head straight for the bottle, and he wanted to avoid a similar fate.

He almost didn't move back to Royal City. In the spring he had gone to New York City with Jeff and talked to a few companies. No job offers, but the interviewers were positive. Even when they called to reject him, they said he would be snatched up soon – a computer engineering degree, solid portfolio, respectable internship the summer before senior year.

But New York turned him off. He'd been on the fence anyway, and the vibe of the whole place soured him. He had never been there before, never been north of Virginia, and found it jarring. People jostled him in the streets, car horns blared incessantly, and on his first trip to a bar he ordered two drinks and was shocked to receive a tab of \$20.

In May, a week before graduation, he still hadn't decided on a job when he got a call from Todd Thorpe, the principal of Stonewall Jackson, Dennis' old high school. He was also the football coach and a deacon at River of Life Church, where Dennis had gone all his life.

“Your daddy says you're looking for a job.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, we have a spot that's yours for the taking. Mrs. Callahan's retiring.”

Mrs. Callahan had taught computer skills and typing.

“I appreciate the offer,” Dennis said. “I don't have a teaching license, though. Just a computer engineering degree.”

“Not a problem. You can do something called ‘lateral entry.’ You’ve got a degree in your content area, so you know your stuff. You work on the teaching credentials in your spare time. You’ve got three years to get certified.”

“Sounds interesting. Thanks for thinking of me.”

“Absolutely. Much as I can, I hire folks I know. That way there’s no question about character.” He cleared his throat. “Don’t jump in headfirst, now. Think it over and call me back in a few days.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dennis thought about it and called back the next day.

“I want the job.”

“Glad to hear it. Get with me when you come home and we’ll work out the details. I was hoping you’d help with football, as well.”

The more he thought about his new job, the more he liked it; it was everything New York City wasn’t. He was returning home, doing something honest and simple. Maybe he would do this for a career, maybe not. He wasn’t thinking long-term, just happy to finally have a direction. When he graduated high school and left for college, the idea that he might ever return to Yadkin County would have been laughable to him, so desperate had he been to leave, to get away from the insular Southern culture of his upbringing and the cycles of poverty he saw around him. The Mobleys themselves weren’t necessarily destitute, though Dennis had eaten free school lunch from kindergarten on.

But in spite of all that pushed him away, at 22 years old and with the freedom to go anywhere he wanted, Dennis felt pulled back home. This sentiment took shape in his final year before graduating. The summer after his junior year he did an internship in Charlotte and had stayed with Jeff’s family. Then throughout his senior year, he found himself going back with Jeff when he had a free weekend. Jeff’s dad was a financial advisor and his mom a lawyer and they lived in a three-story house in an exclusive part of town. Dennis went to their stylish mega-church, ate at nice restaurants, and tried to sound intelligent around Jeff’s older sister, a striking brunette who was in law school at UNC Chapel Hill.

He enjoyed visiting with them, but slowly, subtly, he began to feel ill at ease. It started with Mr. Wraley’s Mercedes – a gleaming red S-class that cost just shy of \$100,000. It began to have issues, and the dealership gave a steep estimate for repairs. He would have paid this without thinking had Dennis not insisted on taking a look. He immediately saw that the alternator belt was loose and fixed it in half an hour.

After this Dennis started to notice other things, or remember details he had glossed over in the past. Such as the fact that Jeff had never mowed a lawn, never changed his own oil. Or the time Jeff visited Royal City to help the Mobleys with the harvest and it was obvious he hadn’t worked outside a day in his life. Dennis never verbalized these observations, but they validated his decision to move back home. He was turned off by the idea of being separate from the world, gliding blithely along in an affluent bubble and paying others to get their hands dirty for him. When he first entered college as a working-class country kid, he had idealized the well-heeled suburbanites that populated his classes, thinking of his degree as a ticket to their way of life. But after four years in the ivory tower, he had transitioned from embarrassment about his upbringing to pride. He felt that he inhabited two worlds – the one he grew up in and the one he’d encountered at school.

Each offered its own set of costs and benefits.

The first Saturday in August, Dennis’ alarm buzzed at 5:00 and he stumbled into the kitchen for a cup of black coffee, then drove ten minutes to his parents’ house. Frank was in the driveway when Dennis pulled up, hooking the trailer to the back of his ancient F-250. Even though the

temperature was projected to be in the 80's, he wore a faded Redskins sweatshirt and his ever-present Levi's. Dennis parked in the yard and got into the passenger's seat of his dad's truck, sweeping a collection of fast food wrappers onto the floorboard. His parents farmed three acres of tobacco in the north end of Yadkin County, off Highway 268. It wasn't their livelihood, but the harvest provided a nice supplementary income every fall.

The help wasn't there when they showed up, a pair of teenage brothers named James and Sean Graeff. While waiting for the boys to arrive, Dennis and Frank walked between the rows and dropped five-foot sticks, which they would later use to spear the plants they cut down.

The crop looked good, shoulder high and green with hints of yellow. They had dropped two rows when the Graeff's dingy Ford Taurus pulled up and parked on the side of the road. Dennis and Frank walked over, stakes under arms.

"Mornin' fellas," Frank said.

The boys nodded sleepily. Frank handed the rest of the stakes to Sean, the younger of the two. "Finish dropping these. When you're done, tools are in the back of the truck. Rest of y'all, pick a row and let's get started before it gets hot."

The cutting took several hours. Dennis needed an entire row to even remember how to do it correctly, as it had been several years since his last harvest. The basics he still knew, but all the subtle motions that make for fast work had vanished from his muscle memory. Using a small tool called a tomahawk, each of the tall, leafy plants had to be cut several inches above the ground, then speared onto the sticks they had dropped. Each stick could hold four or five plants, and once full, it was left behind for later.

He kept missing with the tomahawk, in several instances mangling perfectly good leaves. When he was halfway down his first row, his father and James had already started on their second. His shoulders and lower back throbbed from the repetitive bending. On the other hand, his dad – overweight and a lifelong smoker – moved through his rows without pausing. He wasn't quick, but his pace never flagged. Dennis gritted his teeth and kept going, allowing himself to rest only after filling each stick. The pain eventually gave way to numbness.

They finished the cutting by mid-afternoon, the plants all speared and wilting in the sun, ready to be collected. Frank drove the pick-up into the field, up and down the rows with Dennis standing in a trailer hitched to the back, stacking the plant-laden sticks the boys handed him. When the trailer got full, they would slowly bump across the field to an ancient barn, where they hung the plants to cure for the next week. It took five such trips to get everything, at which point the sun was almost down. Standing outside the barn in the fading light, all four of them covered in dirt and sweat, Frank shook both boys' hands and handed them each \$100 cash.

Exhausted, Dennis drove back to his apartment to watch the end of the NC State football game. He didn't even change out of his work clothes, just plopped down on the couch. He awoke an hour later to his phone vibrating on the kitchen table. It was Jeff.

"Can you believe that ending?"

"I didn't see it," Dennis said, feeling oddly embarrassed. "Wore out from harvesting. I didn't think it'd be televised up there."

"Sure is. In bars, at least. There's a big alumni group up here. About twenty of us crammed into a little place in the Garment District."

Dennis had no idea where or what the Garment District was. "No kidding," he said.

"So the old man's got you out in the field? Shoulders feeling alright?" After his own experience helping with the Mobley's harvest, Jeff hadn't been able to lift his arms over his head for a week.

"Not so good right now. Still need to get accustomed."

"How's everything else? What's teaching like?"

“It’s alright.”

“Alright?”

It was more a statement than a question, and it annoyed Dennis. All through senior year Jeff had insisted that Dennis apply for jobs in New York with him. When he took the position at Stonewall Jackson, Jeff told him he was wasting his degree by teaching, that even without a job offer he should move up to New York and just crash on his couch, that things would surely work out for him in a city that big.

“It’s alright. That’s what I said.”

“OK then,” Jeff said. “Glad to hear it.”

There was a pause and Dennis could hear the noises of the bar in the background.

“Tell me about your job,” he said. “Is *it* alright?” Jeff worked at a firm in lower Manhattan that designed corporate websites, but that was all Dennis knew.

“It’s good. Mostly grunt work right now. Entering lots of code. And making the coffee every morning.”

Someone in the background called his name, and Jeff said he had to go. He’d be down in North Carolina for Thanksgiving and make sure to stop by Royal City.

Two weeks into the school year, Dennis wanted to quit. He didn’t plan to, but he wanted to. The kids didn’t care about his class and didn’t care about him. He would be teaching a lesson about internet research skills, and half the class would be on YouTube or shoe websites. He gave out 0’s for missed assignments and the kids laughed, telling him they didn’t need his class to graduate. When he taught a lesson on Computer Aided Design, one kid used the program to draw a large penis, which he labeled “mine” and projected for the whole class to see when it was his turn to present. Dennis had to call in an assistant principal to restore order.

The football team was small – only 25 kids. Unlike the bigger schools that routinely crushed them, Stonewall Jackson didn’t have a field house; the players changed in the same locker room they used for gym class. The pads smelled old and the helmets were chipped. Dennis felt a twinge of nostalgia to see that his #45 jersey was still in use, complete with the same stains and holes it used to have.

When Todd had initially asked him to “help out,” Dennis wasn’t sure what he meant. In the weeks leading up to football season, he entertained vague, idealized notions of his new coaching career – analyzing film, drawing up plays, grabbing kids’ facemasks and screaming encouragement, maybe even giving quotes to the paper.

As with teaching, reality didn’t match his illusions. He was the youngest and newest assistant coach, meaning that he took on the most menial of tasks. He held pads for tackling drills, fetched water, helped the equipment managers do laundry. The star running back – who was also a royal pain in the ass in Dennis’ 5th period class – mouthed off to him when the other coaches weren’t around. Dennis respected Todd too much to tell him of any kind of frustration, so he did the best he could, figuring he was paying his dues.

He had never been so tired before. He was putting in ten to twelve hour days, getting to work at 7:00 each morning and sometimes not arriving home until 7:00 at night, often still needing to make his lesson plans for the next day. For the first time, he began to understand his dad’s drinking, but he made it a point to not keep alcohol in his apartment.

Report cards went home at the end of October. A mother came to the school and yelled at Dennis, claiming that he lost her son’s project, causing the child to fail for the quarter. The next morning he arrived at work to find “Mobley sux balls” written in Sharpie on his door.

Teaching got no easier. The computers malfunctioned often, disrupting his lessons. The students also invented ways to avoid work, pretending to forget their log-in passwords or unplugging their computers and claiming they had mysteriously shut down. Having not started the year with a firm hand, he found it impossible to buckle down. His goal was January. He could hang on until the semester was over, then he'd get all new classes – a blank slate.

The day after report cards, while the janitor scrubbed away at the graffiti on his door, Dennis attempted to get through a lesson on Excel spreadsheets.

“Mobley, you know we ain't gonna use this in college. I don't plan on studying accounting.”

That was Darius, his running back.

“It's ‘Mr. Mobley.’”

“Yeah.”

After class Dennis found a gooey brown puddle of tobacco juice on his floor; one of his students' hidden spit cups had spilled. It had been a long day, another carefully planned lesson gone awry. The kids were supposed to create a spreadsheet for a business Dennis had made up, then organize the expenses, profits, and inventory into columns in an Excel spreadsheet. Dennis had spent a long time crafting this lesson, and thought the kids would be excited about it. But, as usual, they didn't care.

There were two types of kids in his classes – poor black kids from the Amherst neighborhood and poor white kids from the sticks. Anyone from Yadkin County with money sent their kids to private school in Winston-Salem. Some of his students would disappear for days at a time to help with harvest, others would disappear just because they could. As a student himself, Dennis had been kept from school numerous times on account of the tobacco field. The mother who berated him about the report card was an exception – most of the parents didn't care enough about grades to get angry. His own parents certainly never had.

He stayed late that night with the other coaches, watching game tape from the previous Friday's loss to Thomasville. Among other problems, the linebackers looked terrible. They missed tackles and generally seemed confused about assignments. Bob Davis, who was operating the tape, paused it after a particularly egregious blunder and swiveled in his seat to face Dennis.

“Wasn't you working with linebackers last week?” The old assistant's hands rested on his sizeable belly. He coached back when Dennis played and had not lost any of his smugness.

“Yep.”

“Reckon he should be prepping them this week, Todd? We can't afford that kind of play against Carver. Those 3A boys will run all over us.”

Todd agreed. “I'll work with linebackers. Dennis, you help with offense.”

Dennis nodded and took a sip of his Sun Drop, as if it were all the same to him. After the meeting, he sat in his car and bloodied his knuckles on the dashboard.

That Friday they upset Carver, bringing Stonewall Jackson's record to 2 - 3. Dennis spent most of his time that week with the receivers, and they played well – running crisp routes, catching the few passes thrown their way. The defense got credit for the victory, but Dennis felt good about the job he did.

The next morning one of his kitchen cabinets came off its hinge and he drove across town to borrow his dad's drill. Frank was waxing a black Dodge Challenger in their gravel driveway.

“What do you think?” he asked Dennis.

“I think the money for the harvest just came in.”

“Yesterday. How do you like it?”

“Nice.”

“Brand new.” He popped the hood. “Check this out. 6.4 liters, damn near 400 horsepower.”

Dennis nodded in appreciation. In addition to being huge, the engine was immaculate; his dad had obviously gone over it with the degreaser and compressed air. Frank gave him a tour of the inside as well. Dennis sat behind the wheel and admired the leather interior. When he felt that he’d paid the appropriate homage, he asked about the drill.

“Check the storage closet behind the kitchen.”

Dennis didn’t get that far. Inside the front door, his mother sat in front of a huge flat-screen TV, remote control in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

“Hey honey,” she said with a smile, waiting for his reaction.

Dennis ran several remarks through his head, then settled on an innocuous one. “You guys raked in this year, huh?”

“I guess. No more than usual. We just felt like treating ourselves.” Patsy pointed towards the kitchen. “Your check’s on the counter.”

Dennis had only helped out one day, when he’d harvested with the Graeff boys, so he didn’t expect much, maybe a hundred dollars.

“What was wrong with the old TV?” he asked.

“Nothing wrong. I just like this one. We got surround sound, too.”

She pointed to speakers mounted in the corners near the ceiling. Dennis nodded, then headed for the kitchen, not bothering to go through the motions like he had with the car. He rummaged in the closet and found the drill in the bottom of a five-gallon bucket. He disentangled it from a mess of extension cords and headed back out, swiping the check off the counter as he passed. His mom was fiddling with her new TV remote, and the words were out before he could stop himself.

“I thought you guys were needing to put away for retirement.”

Engrossed by her task, she didn’t even look up. “Where’d you get that idea?”

“Dad told me. Driving me back from school, he said the harvest money was going into savings. He said the Alcoa pension is tiny, and that y’all were going to put this in the bank.”

She gave him her full attention now. “I don’t know why he told you that.”

“I just don’t understand what you guys are doing. That car out front costs at least thirty grand.”

“Your daddy earned that money.”

“I know.”

“I earned this,” she said, pointing at the TV.

“Mom, I know. You guys earn everything. I’m just worried. This is just like the jet ski.”

He nodded his head toward the backyard when saying this, alluding to the Sea Doo that sat rusting on cinderblocks, having been used twice in the five years since they bought it.

“Dennis, we can take care of ourselves.”

He bit back further comments about the house, the same one they’d been living in since he was born. It had been run-down back then, and they’d done little since to improve it. Patsy’s allergies bothered her constantly, which Dennis insisted was related to mold in the walls. His childhood bedroom was crammed full of gadgets and trinkets, things his parents would buy on impulse, then forget about. In addition to keeping them stuck in sub-standard housing, these spending habits kept them from helping with Dennis’ college expenses – which they had pledged to do when he got accepted – leaving him with a decade’s worth of student loan payments.

“OK. Look — I’m sorry. It’s a nice TV.” In the yard he thanked Frank for the drill and said he’d have it back soon.

As he drove away, Dennis was sorry he came back home, sorry he turned down Jeff’s invitation to join him in New York. This spending spree was a yearly ritual for the Mobleys, as

predictable as Thanksgiving. The tobacco harvest was the one time of year they weren't poor, but instead of investing the money or saving it or upgrading to a nicer house, they blew through it. Witnessing this spectacle yet again reminded him why he was so desperate to get out of Royal City back when he was eighteen.

At college, when he felt alienated in a sea of affluent suburbanites like Jeff, Dennis sometimes romanticized his own upbringing. He would remember the satisfaction of finishing the harvest or the simple pleasure of being able to fix things with his hands. This feeling had spurred him to reject New York City and move back home. But every time he started to feel at ease with this decision, to feel like he belonged in Yadkin County, a moment would come along and slap him in the face – like the sight of an expensive car outside his parents' run-down house – and complicate things all over again.

For the next month, Dennis continued to help the offense. He worked with the receivers and actually began to feel that he was making a difference. Since Todd's offense passed infrequently, Dennis focused on blocking, finally getting some recognition during a film session when Todd snatched the remote from Bob Davis and paused the tape. A running play had broken for 40 yards, thanks to two key blocks by wide receivers.

"Fine work with the receivers. I've never seen them get downfield like that."

Quite unexpectedly, Stonewall Jackson began to play well. After a slow start to the season, the upset over Carver had provided the needed spark. They went on to win three more after that, putting them in contention to make the 1A playoffs for the first time in over a decade.

The third of these wins came on the Friday before Thanksgiving, a chilly winter night that found the stands filled nearly to capacity. Back in September, when the weather was good, they weren't even half full. They were playing South Davidson, an in-conference rival that normally gave Todd fits. This time was different, though – Jackson was up 21 - 0 at halftime. By the 4th quarter they had expanded the lead to five touchdowns, and Todd let Dennis take over the play-calling, telling him to give his receivers some in-game touches. Three plays later, all completions of over ten yards, they were in the end-zone. Grinning, Todd snatched the clipboard back.

"Enough of that. They're gonna say we're running up the score."

It was a busy weekend for Dennis. At 6:30 the next morning he walked into his church's kitchen, bleary-eyed and sipping coffee from a plastic mug, ready to cook pancakes for the annual fundraiser breakfast. Patsy helped organize it every year and had never been shy about soliciting her son's manual labor. She was the only person there, struggling to extricate a large skillet from a crowded cabinet. Dennis pulled it out for her.

"Thanks honey."

"What else do you need me to do?"

"Get the mixer – it's in the supply closet over there. I can't move it myself."

It was a large piece of machinery – dull silver, weighing at least one hundred pounds – and, lifting with his back, Dennis maneuvered it out of the closet and heaved it onto the counter. Patsy tore open a jumbo bag of pancake mix, poured it into the bowl, and added water. The metal arm began its hypnotic churning.

"Where's everyone else?" Dennis asked.

"Coming."

They were silent for several minutes. Dennis leaned against the ice-machine; his eyes were heavy and he rubbed them, taking another sip of coffee. He began to run through scenes from the previous night's game, trying to recall specific series on which his receivers had played well. His mom's voice shook him from his thoughts.

“I’m still mad about what you said the other day.”

“What? When?”

“At our house – when we showed you them things we bought.”

“Oh.”

That was nearly a month ago. He had seen his parents numerous times since then and she hadn’t seemed upset. He waited for her to elaborate, but she just scowled.

“I’m sorry,” he said, pretty sure that he had apologized at the time, also.

“Don’t be so quick to judge us, Dennis. Especially not your father. Honey, he didn’t get to spend time in college like you did – time to party and have fun. I got pregnant and your daddy quit school to work. That’s what he’s been doing as long as you’ve been around. So if he wants to spend that money on a car or a TV or...whatever...he oughta be able to. Not everybody gets four years of leisure time to mature.”

She emphasized this last word with a touch of spite and Dennis felt his blood rise. He wanted to defend his education, to remind his mom that nobody had handed him a college degree, nor even helped him pay for it. He also wanted to ask about his dad’s drinking, if a hard day’s work entitled him to come home and choose a six-pack over his family for twenty straight years. He caught himself, though.

“OK, Mom.”

She nodded sullenly. He thought she would stay mad all morning, but a few minutes later she came up behind him and gave him a hug. Soon after, others began to file into the kitchen – all women Dennis had known his whole life. A few congratulated him on the previous night’s win. His griddle was stationed beside his old Sunday school teacher Mrs. Winchester, a sweet lady who smoked two packs a day and had only three fingers on her left hand thanks to a childhood accident with an auger. As a kid he found this gross. Now he marveled at her dexterity as she churned out pancakes with remarkable speed.

After burning the first few pancakes, he began to get the hang of it. Soon he had five pancakes going at once, flipping them right on time and depositing the finished ones onto Styrofoam plates. When the batter was gone, he stood in the serving window, helping with seconds.

After breakfast, everyone gathered outside. The morning cold lingered and a breeze plucked orange leaves from the trees and swirled them around the parishioners. As Dennis and his dad stood off to the side, waiting for Patsy to finish chatting, Sheri LeGrand walked up to them.

“Russell is enjoying himself this year.” Her son was one of Dennis’ players, an undersized wide receiver who saw little playing time.

“I’m glad to hear it. He’s showing a lot of growth.”

“He definitely is. But really, I’m just happy that he’s enjoying himself. Boy’s been playing football since he was seven, and this is the first year it hasn’t stressed him out. He talks about you a lot, Dennis.”

This was a surprise. Dennis worked with Russell in practice, but hardly thought that he had a relationship with him. Mostly he yelled at the kid for running the wrong routes. He tried to think of a suitable response.

“Nothing too bad, I hope.”

“Honey, he thinks you’re the best. You’ve given him a lot of confidence.”

She gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek. “You just keep doing what you’re doing.”

When he got home that evening, Dennis tinkered with a unit he had just taught, thinking about changes to make for next semester. His mom called, wanting him to come over for dinner. Dennis had no other plans but declined anyway, preferring to nourish himself with a frozen pizza.

* * *

Frank picked up Dennis from his apartment at 6:00 the following morning. He needed help putting down the winter cover crop of rye. They stopped for a fast food breakfast and Dennis sat in a booth by the window, rubbing sleep from his eyes while his dad put in their order at the counter. Frank chatted affably with the girl cashier – a chubby blonde teenager with tattoos on both arms. Dennis recognized her as a student at his school.

He watched his dad, watched as Frank made the cashier laugh, then as he got two cups and tramped over to the coffee urn to fill them. Dennis paid attention to his walk, so much a part of the man that it was easy to overlook. Not a limp exactly, but a stiff walk, the result of joints that moved only reluctantly. Frank was so accustomed to aches that he hardly noticed them, at least not when up and moving. His knees hurt every day because the cartilage had atrophied and would never grow back. And this problem threw his whole body out of equilibrium, causing his back to hurt, his hips, even his neck at times.

He came over and dropped Dennis' biscuit on the table, then eased himself into his seat. They ate in a silence occasionally broken by passing comments from Frank about the traffic on 421 or that day's weather. Dennis found himself thinking about his mother's words from the previous morning. Last night he'd thought about them, and he thought more while driving to meet Frank. Nothing she said was news, just old information that hit him in a new way. Dennis felt like now he understood his father differently.

Certainly there were things about Frank he struggled to justify. Dennis hadn't grown up with a dad who gave him Hallmark moments. They never played catch, Frank didn't help with homework, and he and Dennis rarely did anything together besides tend to the field. But one also had to consider where the man came from. Dennis' grandfather, Frank Senior, was a dissolute, violent man who smacked his family around and gambled or drank away the rare paycheck he earned. By this standard, Frank was a remarkable improvement. He worked hard to provide and the angriest he got while drinking was when someone blocked his view of the TV.

Sitting there with his dad, eating fast food breakfast before hitting the field, as they'd done countless times before, Dennis wanted to communicate his newfound appreciation. Not directly, of course, but obliquely – to say something insightful about the crops, to compliment the Challenger or the new TV, even the jet ski. He could think of nothing, though. He settled for gathering up the trash from their table, then offering to drive the rest of the way. He'd noticed his dad's foot struggling with the stiff clutch.

"Suit yourself," Frank said, tossing him the keys.

As they got into the truck, Dennis felt an unexpected surge of exhilaration, all the small details of the morning hitting him at once – steam rising from his cup of coffee, fog hanging over the parking lot, the sound and smell of the diesel engine. This was what he'd been born into. He had left it for a while, but now he was back. It had been five years since he last helped with the winter crop, but it felt like no time had passed, like he was stepping back into a role that would always be there for him. It even seemed possible that he might one day take responsibility for the field himself.

If he ever set his mind to the tobacco crop, he knew he could turn it into a full-time income. He could take all the toil of his father and make it his own, using the education he worked so hard for to build his family's small farm into something his parents would marvel at.

And unlike his dad, he wouldn't let the hard work break him, wouldn't turn to a crutch like alcohol. Dennis came into this with his eyes open, knowing the sacrifices that lay ahead, the unavoidable struggles of anyone trying to make a living in agriculture. But he'd inherited his dad's toughness and, by combining that with his own ingenuity, he felt more than equal to the task.

All these thoughts came quickly, in the time it took him to pull out of the Hardee's parking lot. He was jolted from his reverie by Frank.

"Where you going?"

In his distraction, Dennis was turning left onto the highway, heading towards the field, when they needed to stop by Harold Ballard's house first. Twice a year Frank rented his Massey Ferguson: in the spring when the tobacco went down, then in the fall for the rye. Dennis corrected himself, and they went to get the tractor.

When they arrived at the field, the Graeff boys were already there, taking shelter from the morning chill in their idling car. Frank and Dennis unloaded the tractor and hooked their cultivator to it while the boys did a quick sweep of the ground, moving any stray branches that might get caught in the machinery, plugging rabbit holes. When it was ready for sowing, Frank cranked up the tractor and began to plow, Dennis and the boys following behind, dropping seed in the newly turned soil. When the cultivator got stuck, they would grab it and heave with their backs while Frank gunned the engine. The temperature was in the forties, but Dennis soon stripped down to his undershirt. All morning they followed the tractor as it turned the red North Carolina soil. The ground wasn't frozen, but the cold made it harder than usual and Frank ended up having to re-plow several rows.

For lunch they sat on the ground, leaning against the tractor wheels. James, the older of the brothers and a sophomore at Stonewall Jackson, mentioned that he was interested in playing football and Dennis encouraged him to try out next year. Ten minutes after they finished eating, none had moved. The majority of the labor was done. It would take no more than a couple hours to seed the rest of the field.

They sat facing east. Fifty yards in front of them was a large tree stump. It had been there when the Mobleys bought the land and sat right in the middle of the tobacco rows. They had always plowed around it. It was oak, and had been cut down years before by the field's previous owner, who also tried to uproot it, as evidenced by several deep gouges. It was stubborn, though. Frank tried moving it on a few occasions, but eventually decided that it was only a minor inconvenience, not worth the trouble.

"Mr. Mobley, mind if we take a crack at moving that stump?"

That was James. Frank laughed.

"Boys, that thing ain't moving. I've tried it myself on several occasions."

"I bet we could," Sean said. "We pulled one up in our yard the other day. Just hooked it to my uncle's truck and it came right out."

"No offense to your uncle's truck, but I guarantee whatever tree you pulled up was nothing like this one. I tried to get it with my old pickup once and it just pulled the bumper off."

"What about the tractor?" James asked.

"Well," Frank hesitated, suddenly interested. "You know I've never tried that. I only used my pickup."

Sean jumped to his feet and slapped the tractor wheel. "I bet this thing would yank it right out of the ground."

"You might be right," Frank said. "Tell you what. There are straps in the back of my truck. Grab those. If we can pull this thing up, I'll throw in an extra fifty for each of you."

Suddenly energized, James and Sean sprinted to the truck while Frank started the tractor and chugged across the field to the stump. The straps were thick canvas with steel ratchets dangling from the ends. The boys dropped them in a pile beside the tractor and set to work untangling them.

The stump had no bark and was slick with dew, so Dennis hacked at it with an old mower blade, creating notches so the straps wouldn't slide off. He then wrapped them tightly, hooked them to the tractor, and ratcheted them tight. All told there were four straps, each with a towing capacity of 5,000 pounds. When they were secured to Dennis' satisfaction, he nodded to his dad. James and Sean exchanged grins, excited by this unexpected task and the possibility of extra cash.

Frank inched the tractor forward. The engine groaned and the entire machine rocked back and forth against its burden, but made no forward movement. After half a minute of futility, Frank eased off the gas, shaking his head. James walked over to the straps, tight as a guitar string, and twanged them, confirming they were still strong, hoping Frank would not give up so easily. Dennis had a different concern.

“Dad, you’re gonna throw a rod in Harold’s tractor.”

Frank shook his head. “It’s alright.”

He stepped on the gas again; slowly at first, but gradually giving it more juice, and this time the stump moved. It tilted several inches, then stopped, its roots regaining the hold they had temporarily lost. Frank let off the gas.

“Look at that, Mr. Mobley!” James said. “You almost got it!”

Frank grinned. “Maybe.”

He gassed it and Dennis could hear roots tearing, even over the sound of the engine. When the stump was angled nearly 45 degrees, it got stubborn again and for a moment nothing moved. The tractor churned away, and Frank put his head down, willing the stump out of the ground. It had just started to give way when one of the straps broke. In all the noise Dennis didn’t hear it snap. He hardly saw it, just a blaze of red canvas, recoiling from the immense pressure. It whipped the ratchet with it, which caught James’ right knee and swept him down like grass under a mower.

They rode in the bed of the pickup on the way to the hospital, James’ leg twisted so awfully that he couldn’t fit in the cab. Sean and Dennis sat on each side of him and Frank tore down 268, taking several turns much too fast for his passengers in the back.

Jeff called on Sunday. Dennis sat on the couch watching football and let it go to voicemail, in no mood to hear about the fun alumni scene in New York City. He took a sip of beer. The six-pack in his fridge was the first alcohol he had brought home since living there, and he was only allowing himself to have two that day.

For dinner, he ate Chinese takeout. The healthy lifestyle of his college days had gone to hell since he’d been back home. He had no energy to work out. When he got home at the end of a long day, he would flop onto the couch like a limp rag, elevate his aching feet, and consume something thick and starchy while flipping channels.

He watched football until 10:00, and as he turned off the TV to get ready for bed, remembered that he had no lesson plans for the next day. With little enthusiasm for the task, he got out his textbook and found a busy-work assignment that would fill up 90 minutes.

In bed, he picked up his phone to set the next morning’s alarm and saw the new voicemail icon blinking. He checked Jeff’s message.

“Why aren’t you answering? Big news. One of the IT guys at my firm is leaving and I recommended you for the open spot. This isn’t even an entry level thing like mine. If you get hired, you’d be making more than me – you bastard. But seriously, call back soon. They’re want a resumé.”

Dennis noticed that Jeff spoke differently. He hadn’t gone so far as to adopt a New York accent, but his easy Southern drawl was gone, his words now coming out quicker and more clipped. Dennis thought he’d heard hints of this before, but now there was no mistaking it. He made a mental note to poke fun at Jeff’s urban pretensions the next time they spoke.

On Wednesday, Dennis sat in his classroom after school. He had fallen behind on grading and planned to work for several hours that afternoon, but found himself unable to focus. He would grade for a few minutes, then surf the internet, grade a little more, then walk to the break room to chat with co-workers. The weekend’s accident was present throughout, weaving in and out of his thoughts, images from the truck ride and the ER that he couldn’t shake. The previous day he had

gone straight from work to visit James at the hospital. The boy was lying in the bed when Dennis arrived, scrawny in his green gown, leg suspended in a sling.

Groggy from painkillers, he managed a half-smile when he saw Dennis, but otherwise didn't engage much, his glassy stare directed at a professional wrestling match playing on the TV. James' father Trent was there, a stern man who worked with Frank at the plant. He sat in a chair by the hospital bed, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the paper. When Dennis had seen him at the emergency room that weekend, Trent was irate, demanding to know what the hell Frank had done to his boy. However, he spoke cordially now, still asking questions about the accident, but with no hint of accusation. Dennis couldn't tell if he had legitimately cooled off or if these questions were the preliminaries for a lawsuit.

The visit unnerved Dennis. The accident had been grotesque, sure, but he'd seen broken bones before. He himself had suffered a compound fracture in a Pop Warner football game when he was ten – his splintered forearm poking through his skin – and had been back on the field the following season. He expected to find James downcast and to relay his own tale of injury and recovery, but at the sight of the boy's doped-up stupor, this story dried up in his throat.

Then Trent described the injury to him. The blunt force of the ratchet knocked the shin out of joint where it connected with the knee, fracturing bone and tearing ligaments. It also shattered his kneecap. Trent compared the image on the x-ray to a plate that had been dropped on the floor. The doctors pieced the kneecap back together as best they could, holding the fragments in place with an elastic band until they healed. Months, possibly years, of rehab awaited James.

Trent relayed this information to Dennis while his son lay there, making no effort to shield the boy from any of the graphic details or the fact of his long recovery. When they were done, Dennis expressed what he hoped were appropriate condolences, aiming for sympathy, not pity. With obvious effort, James lifted his head.

“Thanks for coming, Mr. Mobley.”

His voice was small and distant, muffled by the pillowy softness of his morphine trance. Taking this as his cue to leave, Dennis shook James' limp hand and the boy's head dropped back on the pillow. Walking to the parking deck through the brightly lit hospital, he wondered if he should have even come in the first place.

Back at his apartment, Dennis did internet research on James' injury. What he discovered was not encouraging. Shattered kneecaps, even once healed, often resulted in arthritis and a permanently limited range of motion. As for the dislocation, had it only involved the shin bone, it might have healed nicely. However, Trent mentioned nerve damage, and the medical websites Dennis visited were more dour when this was the case. Nerve damage meant the knee was unlikely to fully recover the functionality it had before the accident. Both injuries, taken on their own, threatened to have long-term complications. Dennis shuddered to think what their combined effect would be.

He shut off his computer and settled on the couch to catch the second half of the NC State basketball game, finishing off two beers in the process, the last of his six pack. He couldn't focus on the game, though, and his mind kept returning to the conversation he had with James as they sat in the field on their lunch break, when he had encouraged the boy to go out for football. Watching fit, athletic kids on TV just highlighted for him how dire James' situation was, how one mistake – standing in the wrong place at the wrong time – had left him crippled. Dennis couldn't shake the thought that the previous weekend's accident did not represent merely an obstacle, but an entirely different course for James' life, that the kid in the hospital bed was destined for a lifetime of hobbling around, his creaky knee feeling every change in barometric pressure.

He would fit right in here in Royal City, Dennis thought. Everyone had medical issues. He thought of his father, limping everywhere he went. Or the kids he went to high school with, toiling

away at construction jobs. Their bodies were strong now, but what shape would they be in after a few decades of that work? Even his sweet, pancake-making Sunday school teacher had missing fingers.

In his time with Jeff's family, one thing that struck him was how ridiculously healthy everyone was. Mr. Wralely ran marathons and Mrs. Wralely did yoga. Same with the people Dennis ran into at the Wralely's upscale church. No crutches, no limps, no amputations. They remained well-scrubbed and cheery into advanced ages, staying physically active and contemplating long, productive retirements. Something – money or family or class – shielded them from debilitation. And to Dennis, it seemed like the ills these people avoided didn't just disappear. Once they bounced off the protective veneer surrounding the Wralelys of the world, the misfortune found a way to trickle down to places like Royal City.

When the game was over, he turned off the TV and sat in the dark. He had a slight buzz after his two beers and wished he had bought a twelve-pack.

Dennis came into work the following Monday with a large stack of papers. Over the weekend he graded all the work he'd fallen behind on, as well as made lesson plans that would last for the next two weeks. When he had put in for a substitute, he requested a reliable woman he'd used before, and when she showed up that morning, he went over the lessons with her, explaining this would be a long-term gig if she was interested.

When Dennis had finally called him back, after several days of stalling, Jeff explained that the company was already speaking to candidates for the position and that they wanted to interview Dennis soon via conference call. Dennis liked the sound of this, but an hour after hanging up, he called back and told Jeff it would probably make a better impression if he just drove up there and did it face to face.

Once he had explained everything to the sub and left her in charge of her new classroom, Dennis went to the main office. Todd was in a meeting, and Dennis waited outside his office for half an hour. It was tempting to just walk out, leaving his letter with the receptionist, but he didn't, determined to resign in person.

By noon he was eating a fast food lunch in Richmond, his few worldly possessions packed into the back of his Jeep. The day before, he had taken his furniture to Goodwill and a \$300 check to his landlord for terminating the lease early. Jeff's couch was ready for him until he found a place of his own. New York didn't offer a job as much as it offered a lifestyle, a mode of being Dennis had come to know in college, around all those kids like Jeff who were from places bigger than Yadkin County. They went through life never having to contact certain realities, inhabiting a magical sphere of existence where one could work for thirty years and come out whole on the other end. Dennis saw the trade-offs inherent in such a life and at one point he'd thought it wasn't for him, but he had been wrong.