

A Good Blanket

by J. Kyle Kimberlin

*It's just love lingering
in a gray day alone.
Just love, or the pull of the wind
to where it goes beyond the hill.*

He sits at the kitchen table with both hands flat, palms down, letting his fingers slip in and out of the grooves routed in its cool oak surface. He stares for a time down over the yard to the pond. It is morning but hard to tell how early. He feels like he'd been up a long time since he came in from the barn, hours before first light. But the sky is overcast, a gray dome of diffused indifferent glare. There is just a little wind.

The clock above the stove says not yet eight, and he knows that she would not like to proceed in such weather, but the task cannot be put aside. He is burning daylight. Clouds or no, the day is getting warmer, and the heat of day can only bring more misery.

In the barn, he goes first to her stall and looks down where she lies on her side in the hay. Her head is covered with an old Navajo blanket, but he knows her eyes are closed because he closed them. He has folded her legs and curved her neck to make her body more compact, and she looks like a deer curled, sleeping in the hay. This he did with soft old ropes in the dead of night, by lantern light, before stiffness made the task impossible. Her tongue is a little out between her teeth, because there was nothing he could do about that. But her coat is russet and shining in the light from the doors. He thinks about brushing her one more time, but she is truly through with such things.

He considers calling a neighbor, so maybe he can get some help. *No. All I have to do is this, then that. The next right thing. Like words in their order, or how you tie a knot. Step by step until I get it done. It's mine to do and mine alone. Not every man has fallow land and half a day to spend on death, let alone kindness.*

He uses the sling, the block and tackle, and in an hour has her up and swung out to the center of the barn, laid gently on a tarp. This he folds over her, wraps her well and binds her around with rope. Then backs the front-loader through the doors and chains it to the load. And so they go, old man on the tractor, horse in her great canvas blanket. Down over the yard, past the pond and up the hill. The sun brakes through slowly as he uses the machine to make the hole, pauses to remove his cap and wipe the sweat from his head with a rag.

He knows it's over. Of course it is. His mother raised no fools, and he has reached his time. He will lease out all his land, all but his house and yard, and just to the far side of the hill. He will wash his coveralls and a blue check snapbutton shirt, shave and go to town. He will go to the pound, where they keep the animals lost of their homes and nameless in the world. He will choose a little dog, one that won't eat much or take after the jays where they come to wash their food, in the bath he made for them of fenceposts and hubcaps in the shade.

He thinks of this, climbing down from the tractor where he's backed it into the shed. Sore and exhausted from burying the horse, he walks out into the hot sun, smelling the dirt he knocks from his clothes with his gloves. It matters what you name an animal. The horse was Cinnamon for her color, and for his memories of his mother's baking. He called the horse Cindy sometimes. He will choose a dog and pick it up, and the name will be there in its eyes.

Cinnamon never flinched from work in hard weather or rough ground, but was always there for him, supporting him. She heard him carefully when he spoke and stepped carefully so he wouldn't fall. When they were together, the path was clear. So he has buried her carefully, soberly. He holds the gift of her memory like something sacred, a long bone of spun glass, a window into the peace he needs just to fall asleep and rise again with daylight. But now that the horse is dead, he will be too much alone.

Tomorrow, he will have breakfast, put on his good hat – the one with no sweat stains showing through – and drive to town. He will pay the shelter what they need for trying to keep love alive, despite the cold indifference that drives it out from bleak houses, to wander hungry and nameless. But tonight he takes a long shower with strong soap. And as the hot water un-knots the muscles in his back, he lets himself cry for the horse. She deserves it, for not bucking at the sight of snakes, for carrying him and a calf as well sometimes, for letting him talk about life and sing about pain.

There is just a little wind. It comes from the east, from the hill and over the pond. It is morning again, and again his time to notice small things. To begin something like life, so that light and time are not wasted. He stands in the kitchen, eating sliced cantaloupe from a plastic bag. His coffee mug is from the Grand Canyon, a gift from his brother's grandson. *Ditat Deus*, it says: God Enriches.

And so He does. Sweet fruit from his refrigerator. Hot coffee with powdered creamer. A good hill for burying his animals. He is afraid to get a dog and bury it beside the horse, who already isn't alone up there. But he will. The dog is waiting, and the man will choose the oldest there, the most urgently in need, in God's time, of a good blanket.

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