





*Christmas dance, introduced by Elizabeth's father, a friend of Tyler's, and Tyler danced with her most of the night and took her home in the crisp mountain air, and they were married six months later. He was forty. She was twenty-two.*

*He rented a house outside of Charleston, the last of a farm cut down to two acres and a barn, garden plot, woodshed and root cellar. He bought a milking cow and a radio and watched Elizabeth move through the house, watched her as she slept, brought her clothes and perfume from Pittsburgh, and was gone every other week of the month driving up the green map of West Virginia.*

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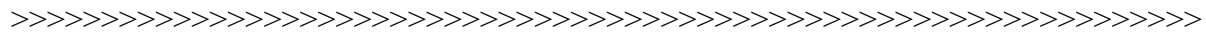
*The night of Edward Tyler's forty-first birthday, it rained: he remembered it well. It was the night his brother found Elizabeth in the woodshed, where she had ended her life with a deer rifle, sitting on a box of pine chips with her eyes open, looking exhausted and melancholy, the back of her skull open and wet on the dark wood. The gun had slipped from her grip and leaned barrel-up between her legs. Her hands lay empty to either side, palms gently opened as if they might speak.*

*For most of three weeks, Tyler sat in a single chair under a single lamp, not eating, only a distant awareness of the run of sympathetic visitors, his body fighting his mind's insistence on complete despair. He had seen no signs of trouble. Elizabeth was often silent, at times unable to sleep and drifting through the long hallways at night, but Tyler took it for diffidence and intensity - aspects of her beauty - and stared from his mourning chair cursing his ignorance and willingness to imagine an identity for a woman he did not know. He wanted to have a place for what his life had become but found none, and felt like an empty shape filling with apparitions and the soft drum of autumn rain. He would pass off to sleep sitting in the chair and start awake in the midst of nightmare, Elizabeth's corpse speaking to him from her death seat in the woodshed, her disembodied voice an emanation. Tyler gripped the chair's arms and rediscovered his face, aligned in a rigid mask of anguish and disbelief before he called himself back into being, trying to find a breath of air in the darkened room.*

*He wanted simply to understand, and saw that he could not, and would never.*

*In time he was back at work, back on his route. He moved out of the farmhouse and into a condemned caboose on a siding in the switching yards and though he had never been religious, he prayed. Jesus, he whispered, protect me from my innocence. Love me in my weakness.*

*His train was a friend, unwinding its way out of rain-misted hills. Through long stretches through the central part of the state he rode alone at the cab's window, knowing if he reached out to touch the rhododendron and chokecherry that crowded the roadbed splits, his hand would be pulled into a rapture of night, as sweet as blood. The train would break from undergrowth and forest, and meadows would stretch away filled with moonlight and ground mist. Tyler searched for a direction he could depend on, and thought of Elizabeth. On one late winter night, as his train rounded the long bend beyond the Afton station, he found himself in tears and saying aloud, "I didn't know you, girl, I didn't even know you," his voice lost in diesel roar.*



**5 KL:** People hear an intense story like that, and they automatically think, “This must be something that happened to you.”

**RC:** Well, it didn’t happen to me. It didn’t happen to any member of the family. Folks think, well, your grandfather, your uncle, some family myth, some legend. No. No, none of those kind of things. Most of the writing in my life is a process of evolution. It can spring from seeing a man, In this case, an engineer, just standing at the open window of the locomotive passing by. And beginning, for very mysterious reasons, I think, to imagine an entire life for this person. Out of that - out of that single image - came this character of Tyler and the situation that he faced.

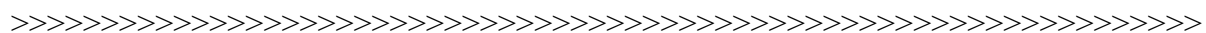
**KL:** When you write it, do you sit and make lists of what might happen to your character? Do you sit and just visualize your character? How do you do this?

**RC:** I’m very musical. I improvise. I sit and write the way a pianist composing might sit at the keyboard. I start with the very kind of central image that I just told you about and I go with it. And, you know, sometimes it doesn’t work. But generally, I’m looking for that point where the character will speak to me. And then I’m not exactly in control of it any more.

You’ll hear this, I think, from many writers, that mystical or quasi-mystical sense that some other kind of energy speaks through you. But I think that’s common in any kind of creative art form. It certainly would be true if I were composing music.

I listen for the sound of it. I listen for the chords. I listen for the way the themes move. And when it’s affecting me powerfully, and I’m finding that the rhythm is right, the downbeat is correct, the emotional movement is moving for me, then I’m hopeful that that will be true for other people.

**6 KL:** Richard says he writes some stories carefully, with many drafts, and others just stream out on the page like jazz. Here’s one of those pieces that just streamed out onto the page: “The Wars of Heaven,” from his short story collection by the same title. The main character killed a man and he’s running from the law on foot in the snow, holed up in a little church, thinking how he got to that point.



**RC:** *That’s how I came to be in on the robbery of Strother’s Store, over in the mining camp. The other boys wanted to do it, claimed old Strother kept a mint under the floor behind the cash box, and I said, “Well, OK.” When we got over there, I felt no fear. I still cannot explain how I walked right up on the porch and butted my rifle right through the plate glass and opened the door and walked inside like it was my store and not his. But let me tell you, it inspired a measure of confidence in those boys who went in behind me, yes indeed. And you know the strange thing is, I walked into that store holding my rifle up like I was looking to shoot something. Walked in and straight back past them tables all laid with canned goods and linens and bottled water. Right*







**11** *I came back into Red Jacket at dusk three days later, thinking our house would be gone, burned out or vandalized. It was our own home, land that had been in my mother's family, outside town limits and it was there, still standing pretty as you please, that old coat of ivory paint peeling black under years of coal soot. They had been there, somebody had: the front door stood open. It had rained in; dead leaves blew straight into the parlor. I went through every room, every closet, cupboard, shelf. I looked under beds and up the chimney until I was satisfied nobody was waiting for me. By then it was dark, and I turned on all the lights downstairs, drew the curtains to give the place a warm and homey look from the road. I locked the front and back doors and all the windows and took the shotgun from the hall closet corner. Upstairs I pulled off my boots and socks, loaded the gun with two shells full of number six buckshot and sat in my bedroom in the dark, shotgun in my lap, terrified of every little sound I heard. I had the time, sitting there, to think about my situation, to consider the plight of a man who dispatches his family to innocent country and sits afraid for his own life in his own home simply because he wants to trade his labor for a decent wage, and the Baldwin men stepped up on the front porch. Knocked politely at the front door. I kept my seat.*

*I heard them speak to each other, quietly. Then one said my name, calling me Mister, still polite as Sunday morning. He tried the front door, rattled it gently against the latch, then walked sideways along the porch, a heavy pair of boots under the room I was sitting in. After more than a minute of silence, I heard the back door window shatter. A moment later the door squeaked open and the boots were inside my house.*

*That was the meaning of forever, listening to those boots from room to room, slow as honey on a cold morning. Closet doors opened and closed. He went into the kitchen, seemed to stay there a full minute or two. When he crossed into the front hallway I got to my feet and came to the side of the bedroom door. He started up the stairwell, and I was useless for any purpose but holding my breath and staring into that patch of invisible future that stands directly in front of a man's eyes. It was peculiar now to recollect that in a moment of such overriding danger a man's imagination might rise like water to fill that place and show him a field of snow he last saw in his childhood. In such a moment you might think nothing would move in a man except the trace of his fear, the taste of his own salt burning his tongue and the corners of his eyes, and to this day I remember the brief light of that winter memory, traveling to see my grandparents in a sleigh, horses steaming and trees in silver freeze. The road was disappeared, rivers snowed under and forests lost in the white. I could hear my visitor breathing as he reached the top step.*

*The smell of slept-in clothes and poor man's tobacco was strong on the landing. He stepped into the doorway and stopped.*

*He was not a large man and looked as if he might be quick as he waited for his eyes to come around to the darkness in the bedroom. I pushed my shotgun's muzzle up against his neck.*

*He let out a small cry and stifled it. For a moment he didn't move, then he made to turn suddenly. I shifted the muzzle to just behind his head and let go one barrel into the empty hallway, and my visitor fell flat.*

























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