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THE SCORCHED MEADOW

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The Atlantic Ocean was not as pleasant as the spring like dreams of Jurgis Petronis who was coming to America. The April wind attacked the deck of the ship with icy gusts. Gasping for fresh air, the passengers, wrapped in their frayed overcoats, sought protection from the wind. Although the weather remained fair, every night a bone-chilling fog enveloped the ship. Occasionally, the gusts would rain down on them soot from the smokestack, further destroying the grim beauty of the sea, often etched beautifully in song and tales. And when Jurgis finally caught sight of the still distant lights of the metropolis in the promised land, a wave of warmth flooded him, not a gentle warmth of a hearth, not the fragrance of spring, but rather one of anticipation.

Having been driven to the railroad station after disembarking, Petronis was afraid to stir. Surrounded by people, he felt painfully lonely, like one abandoned in a huge impenetrable forest, where life rustled on all sides, but, at the same time, was deafeningly desolate.

Jurgis knew in detail the troubles of his aunt and uncle, the Senkuses, and also the misfortunes which befell their family, yet those things did not bother him too much. He had never seen his aunt or uncle before, and the chances are that he never would have met them had he not made this post-war voyage to America. That the troubles of his relatives could be of any importance to him, did not now concern Petronis. Only one thought kept crossing his mind — how will he make his living? This was a rich land, yet each one somehow had to earn his own way, and the question — how? — tormented him.

The Senkuses had a daughter, Antoinette, the same age as Petronis, and a son, Stasys, who was the same age as their neighbor's boy, Carl. Coming from the same European country, common problems and a common tongue drew the two families together. This tie was manifest when yet another child was born to the Senkuses, tiny Geraldine. Petronis's aunt, a good and quiet woman, had smiled and said,

"Carl, she will be your wife, and you will be my son-in-law."

The ten year old lad gazed and smiled. The tiny Geraldine pleased him, but everything else would have to grow as the years passed, still in the sightless and undefined future. Almost unconsciously every one began to call Carl and Stasys brothers-in-law. Quite often Carl's mother would say to Mrs. Senkus,

"You know, I had to paddle that son-in-law of yours; he's getting spoiled."

The son-in-law-to-be was still young. Both he and Stasys played catch together in the alleyway. The baseball would ricochet from garage roof to fence as little Geraldine would lie in her crib, either crying or in a dream world of her own. As the years passed, the boys grew bigger and little Geraldine, having learned how to walk, began to get under their feet. Both boys dropped out of school and began to work. The magical allure of money and cars was stronger than school. Each of them bought an old model used car and cruised around the streets. You couldn't say that they alone were bad boys. They were just like thousands of other young people. Money talks, now. School would bring rewards, but only after long tedious years. After all, you only live once, and youth is the time to enjoy life. Such was their reasoning. Even Petronis's uncle could not envision the potential benefits of an education. He too was blinded by the additional source of income and this sufficed to justify his son's abrupt end of formal instruction. The boys continued to hang around together. Life went on as usual, but at a tempo, as with so many lives in the new world, which Petronis, imbued as he was with old world standards, could not fathom or understand.

The neighbors kept on calling both lads, now approaching their twentieth birthdays, brothers-in-law. And, as the boys constantly clattered around the blocks in their old jalopies, the neighbors would often complain aloud,

"We never get any peace with these two always driving around."

The boys were rapidly growing into manhood. During the war years, due to the shortage of manpower, money came easily and in all respects it seemed that life was really worthwhile, if indeed they ever took the time to seriously ponder its meaning.

One season shaded into another. During an early spring, after the leaden rain soaked sky opened, the sun poured down its rays upon the earth. From the dampened ground the grass sprang up and the grey buds covered the branches of the trees grimy with the city's soot. Everyone with time to spare sat outside and read about the end of the war in their newspapers. The streets and playgrounds reechoed with the happy noise of children. Stasys stood near his house and listened. Somewhere Carl was goading his car into fits of anger with a sudden step on the gas, now a foot on the brake pedal. The jalopy, alternatively accelerating and shrieking to a halt, bellowed angrily. Carl was a willing center of attraction as everyone glanced at his antics. At this moment, little Geraldine ran up to Stasys and thrust out her doll at him.

"The doll's hands don't move," she kept whining. "Fix it."

Stasys took the well worn doll and looked at it. The spring was broken. Inside, something rattled. The doll's arms hung limp, where before, they could be spread apart or drawn together, making them move like a young child who wants someone to lift it up.

"This is nothing but rubbish," muttered Stasys as he angrily hurled the doll into the middle of the street.

"My doll, my doll," cried Geraldine. She bounded out between two parked cars, after her doll, and ran right into Carl's speeding auto.

It was a clear afternoon. Death was the farthest thing from anyone's thoughts; yet, death suddenly appeared, causing a chill to run through the people of the neighborhood as they heard the screeching brakes of the car. Within a few minutes the whole neighborhood had gathered. In the middle of the street stood a police car, its red beacon flashing, a silent witness to man's helplessness in reversing the course of events. Mrs. Senkus, not quite grasping yet that the horrifying sequence of events could not somehow be replayed, wept aloud. Her husband silently bit his lip, as though he has just awakened, and by biting, he was testing that it was all not really a dream. Carl stood in the street protesting all the while his innocence.

"Don't blame me. Stasys threw the doll."

The police made a careful check of the witnesses. The people gazed blankly at the pavement as if the scene before their eyes was not now their concern. The parents accused each other's son. During the next few days, as the child was lying in the funeral home, everyone from the neighborhood came to pay his respects. Accounts of similar misfortunes appeared almost daily in the newspapers, but for them, this was different. Geraldine wasn't just another name or another statistic; she was almost from their own household. The child was laid out in the coffin, dressed all in white like a real bride in miniature. Even the young priest could not hold back the tears as he said,

"In my fifteen years as a priest, I have never had to officiate at such a touching service as this."

The little bride looked like an angel. Her hair was even fairer than her dainty face. Scarcely anyone left without tears in his eyes.

Most newspaper readers, as soon as they had scanned the story in their papers, hurried on to the next item of news. After a few days, it ceased to be the main topic of conversation on the block. But between the two families concerned, the tragedy boiled over into bitter animosity.

"Don't blame me," Carl insisted, "Ask Stasys why he threw the doll."

"So now he's trying to justify running over our daughter. Why didn't he watch where he was driving," replied the dead girl's parents.

Carl was found guilty of careless driving and the matter would have ended there had not the Senkuses taken Carl to court again. After a long drawn-out trial, Carl was fined three thousand dollars, half of which disappeared into lawyers' fees.

This stoked the fire of hatred between the two families even more. Each family avoided contact with the other. They severed all relations of their past friendships. The parents had little occasion to cross each others paths, but for the young folks it was difficult to avoid meeting. When they would meet on occasions, Carl and Stasys exchanged belligerent and hateful glances. In this ever enlarging ill will, there was no longer any concern whose fault it was and about the money involved in the lawsuit.

A beautiful autumn started to set in. No longer was it stuffy, only fair and breezy. The early fall was calm and enticing. The electric factory where Carl worked held its annual fall outing. About fifteen hundred people gathered for this farewell to summer. The union and the company supplied beer free of charge, and even those who normally drank very little partook, feeling that not to avail themselves of this free opportunity might be an injustice. Near one of the tables stood Stasys with some of his friends. One of them, spotting Carl standing a short way off, pointed and said,

"Oh look!, there's your brother-in-law! I really can't imagine why you're called by that name."

This sudden crude statement angered Stasys. He could no longer stand Carl, and every mention of the name 'brother-in-law' pierced through him.

"Because he murdered my sister, that's why!," he shouted.

Hearing these bitter words, Carl glared at Stasys.

"You yourself as well as pushed her under the tires."

The blood rushed to Stasys's neck.

"I pushed her, I pushed her!? Come over here. I'll push you under the table!"

"You think I'm afraid of you!?" Carl grasped his bottle of beer and started over.

"Just come over here," said Stasys striding forward and holding a can opener in his right hand. The desire to see a real fight infected the crowd that was standing around. The young girls, their hair untied and their blouses rippled by the soft breeze, were singed by the fire of curiosity. Right before their eyes they could experience a real brawl, something they had only witnessed on film before.

"Let's see what you can do," said Stasys, drawing close. In his left hand a cigarette was burning; in his right he kept on holding the can opener. The young men were wearing light shirts, and it almost seemed that you could see the hatred seething through them in the bright sunlight. Hatred filled the air and the evil smell of the brawl excited the onlookers. Suddenly Carl, his fist clenched, threw back the half-finished beer bottle and, leaping forward, landed a blow on Stasys's chin.

"There, you call that running away!?"

Stasys reeled backwards as though he would fall flat on his back, but suddenly he straightened up and lifting his right hand as though he intended to embrace Carl, he threw himself forward and buried the can opener in his opponent's back. Carl slowly sank down, made some attempts at getting up, but couldn't. One of the union officials shoved Stasys away. Several times he spit out some blood which had trickled into his mouth from his split lip. Carl, sitting on the ground, held back a scream with difficulty. It was obvious that he was in pain. A slow splotch of dark blood seeped through the back of his thin shirt. The bystanders, having lost the stomach for a scuffle, stood around as if in a trance. A couple of men started to lift Carl up, but when he screamed "No, No!", they put him down again on the grass. An ambulance arrived. It took Carl away while Stasys left in a squad car. Gaiety returned once again to the outing. The bright sunlight shone through the branches of the trees; the free beer continued to flow. Some young folks, their lips quivering, whispered mutual confessions of love. Others blurted out crudities or swore. The fight episode was merely one small detail of the activities of the outing. Later on, a couple of other fights broke out, one of them even between two women, and this gave a certain bittersweet and animal satisfaction.

Carl's spine had been injured. When he was released from the hospital, one of his legs dangled uselessly, while the other could be pulled slowly along the ground. Stasys got a year in prison. In court, Stasys protested that he had to defend himself when attacked, but at home he boasted that he had avenged his sister. At the trial he presented himself as a martyr; at home he played the hero. And now, when Jurgis Petronis was arriving in America from Europe to stay at his uncle's house, Stasys was finishing his sentence and was to return home in only a few weeks.

When Petronis, short and in need of a haircut, and wearing a raincoat several sizes too big, got off the train at the station, pretty Antoinette, his first cousin, ran up to him. Young and slender, wearing very high heeled shoes, she brought Petronis over to the waiting group. Petronis's aunt was stocky and heavy set and met him with a guilty smile on her round face. In appearance she reminded him much of his mother. She seemed to be making excuses for her sister's son who was in such a sorry state and who turned up at such a bad time. Actually, Petronis's presence was the last thing they wanted, but his arrival couldn't decently be shunned. His uncle a heavy set man of small stature, with grey hair, was examining the newcomer like a piece of merchandise, or like a hired hand, appraising him with narrowed, sharp eyes. Petronis, his own anxiety gnawing within him, was disheartened by this meeting, and withdrew into himself as if whipped, and felt even smaller. When Antoinette's husband, Frank, who was of Italian ancestry, drove up in the car, Petronis, surrounded by this unfamiliar family, felt such a pang of self pity that he wondered whether it would not have been better to remain in Europe, since he had left his homeland and was unable to go back.

It was late in the evening when Petronis had gotten off the train, and the city seemed to him to be burning with thousands of flickering lights. The neon lights adorning the walls of the tall buildings hurried by with their multi-figured designs. They dissolved into space and started again from the bottom. Everywhere the lights blazed out — vivid, brilliantly proclaiming the unsurpassable quality of some product or other. On the streets the headlights of the cars scurried past, at times casting their long beams. They pierced with their wide spread the space darkened in spots. Everything often merged into a uniform hum and flickering. In the car, Petronis didn't have opportunity to see much. He sat there, apprehensive and continually answering questions.

"Well, soon you'll be an American," said Antoinette gaily. Her husband caught this and chuckled aloud. He knew about a hundred Lithuanian words, acquired so he could communicate, at least on an elementary level, with Petronis's aunt who barely knew English. All her life her husband had managed everything, and she wasn't even aware that she didn't comprehend because everyone she had anything to do with spoke Lithuanian.

"He will have time. He's still young," she said. Then her husband added,

"I have lived my whole life here without becoming Americanized. Yet our children are Americans from the day they are born. We ourselves just can't understand how it happens here. You have a child but he's no longer Lithuanian."

The trip from the station took only twenty minutes. When the car stopped in front of his uncle's house, Petronis snapped, as it were, out of his trance. It was a frame house with a porch. Close by grew some trees, which had already begun to sprout. All this somehow had a calming effect upon him. The place was secluded and didn't seem to be part of the city. The surroundings corresponded to Petronis's spirits. The supper was good. On the table stood a couple of bottles of whiskey which at that time didn't appear as repulsive to Petronis as later. His aunt, after gazing at her sister's son for a long time, finally said,

"You'll have to get a haircut soon."

"Men wear their hair short over here," added his petite cousin. "You want to look like an American, don't you?"

Petronis didn't want to. Such a question annoyed him. He considered it a needless meddling in his personal freedom and said,

"No, I don't want to. However, I will have to get a haircut."

That was his first evidence of non-conformity and individuality. Petronis didn't want to be told what he wanted. At this time that was hardly the way of arousing the admiration of those who had brought him over.

It was already late in the evening. Antoinette and her husband, Frank, said good night to Petronis. Frank's mixture of Italian and American joviality seemed sincere and almost child-like. Petronis liked him immensely. He couldn't follow too much of the evening's conversation, but he tried and added a few comments whenever he could. When Petronis had stepped forth while saying good-bye, his shoes had squeaked, and Frank, in his broken Lithuanian, had said,

"Your shoes — to cry."

With that, Petronis felt more at his ease, and the question about his hasty Americanization slipped from his mind. Furthermore, his aunt and uncle began to ask him news about his home town. He had to tell them about the fences which were no longer there, about the crosses — which ones had tumbled down and what new ones had been erected, about the synagogue, about the parish church, about the poplars in the churchyard — which ones had died because of age, and which ones were still standing, resolute and silent witnesses to eternity, just as the old belfry was, with the screeching of the crows which at times drowned out the peal of the small bell. Although Petronis had left his native land only a few years before, much of what he didn't recall his aunt and uncle still remembered. In his replies he either made up some stories or recreated them according to his imagination, striving not to injure their memories, vivid to the smallest detail.

"Time to go to bed now," said his aunt. "Your uncle has to go to work tomorrow."

"Now don't worry, feel like at home, you won't have to pay for anything. Now, you'll rest up, and I will pay for the trip," his uncle explained quietly.

"Why do you mention that now, father? He's just arrived and already you're talking about money," replied his aunt, but Petronis didn't believe that his uncle had said this through stinginess. She uttered this in such a way that Petronis felt sorry for his uncle because of his aunt's scolding. Both of them were from the same small town, and their fond memories of their native land, which had never been extinguished, almost brought tears to Petronis's eyes. His uncle silently took off his shoes and looked for his slippers.

"In a month, our Stasys will come home and we shall all be together again," his aunt said softly.

"Yes, and say that he will be home from prison," added his uncle directly; and Petronis gave a start. After the war and the post-war years full of political persecution and concentration camps, the word 'prison' had shaken him. He had come to America to try to forget this word.

"It's not a prison but a reformatory," said his aunt, beginning to cry, and she picked up a photograph of a wide-eyed little girl holding a small puppy. "A boy ran her over. After that, our Stasys beat him up."

"Horrible misfortune," said Petronis, and he wanted to add that in the war millions had died, but he decided against it.

"Pity or not, you can no longer correct it. Well, let's go to bed," said Petronis's uncle. He stretched himself and pushed open the door into a small room which was almost completely occupied by a wide bed. "Rest up, don't worry, everyone has problems, but life must go on. In this country, one can live."

"Good night," said Jurgis softly, and he sat down on the bed.

A sense of emotion again fell upon him and throbbed like an ache. He was tired but he couldn't fall asleep. He thought about the little girl with her puppy, about his cousin whom he had seen only in the photograph, and about his own childhood spent, as they sing in songs, somewhere beyond the sea. Raising the window shade, he looked outside. Nearby loomed a park, and over it, the dark and deep expanse of the sky, and further on had to be the Atlantic Ocean. Somewhere in the distance he heard a train whistle. In the expanse, through the rack of clouds, a star kept on twinkling. The sky had to grow brighter. Not far away pounded the Atlantic, and Jurgis listened straining to hear its roar. However, the city was humming with activity, and the trees were rustling, and in the next room his uncle was sound asleep and snoring like an engine. Yet Petronis could not understand that even in this land there were calamities. After all, Saint Christopher on his own shoulders had transported Christ to this land and had waded across the Atlantic, but Christopher Columbus most probably was merely a legend. His heart ached with these thoughts which he could not comprehend, and Petronis tossed about. The bed creaked like a ship in a storm.

The night passed quickly, although the whole time Jurgis wanted to wake up. He was tormented, like someone who was reaching for something, but couldn't quite grasp it. He woke up from the doleful pealing of church bells nearby and from the steadily increasing noise of the cars. Later on his uncle got up and slowly dawdled and got ready for work until the front door banged. It was seven o'clock, and Petronis was glad that his aunt had risen. Half an hour later, both of them half-heartedly ate a long drawn-out breakfast. Then, she went out to the store, saying,

"You can sit here on the front steps. It's a nice day and I'll be back in about an hour. Don't worry too much. There's no work yet, but everyone gets a job, and you'll get one, but until you do, stay here for a visit. There will be enough to live on in America. You can take the place of our Geraldine and Stasys." She said this with such tender feelings that Petronis turned away and looked toward the park. Several benches were standing on the hillside and the trees having begun to bud showed only a little grey. Their branches exhibited a delicate greenish lace.

"I'll look around and see what comes up," he said. "Don't worry yourself."

On the doorstep an English language newspaper had been tossed. Opening it, Petronis looked at the pictures and made an attempt to understand the captions. He made sense out of some of it, and even this little knowledge of the language put him into a brighter mood. The sun rose higher. The day was bright and warm. Petronis looked toward the park, watched the fleecy clouds out over the Atlantic, and wanted to go down to the shore and gaze at the endless expanse of water so immense and unfeeling. He fancied the shore he remembered from his childhood, and he felt an implacable yearning in his heart.

'Clip-clop, clip-clop.' The sound caused Jurgis to give a start. A young man, dressed in a brown jacket like a soldier's, was coming from the city toward his uncle's house. He walked dragging one leg, and the other one, as if out of control, would suddenly strike the pavement. Petronis felt ashamed, staring so intently and inquisitively, and he turned away, but the man at that time was already standing in front of him, and he said in English,

"Would you be the one who has come from across?"

"Yes, from Europe," replied Petronis in English.

"You're Lithuanian," he said, speaking that language with a heavy accent, "and you have come to live at your uncle's. I thought that Stasys had returned, and I came here to kill him," he said viciously. His jaw was set and his eyes were wild and it seemed that he had been drinking.

"I haven't seen Stasys yet," answered Petronis, standing on the steps, and he looked at the man.

"It's good that you have come. To tell the truth, you do resemble your aunt. If Stasys had arrived first, you would never have seen him. I swore that I would pay him back," he said in a mingling of Lithuanian and English, and what he said sounded threateningly convincing.

Petronis shrugged his narrow shoulders. Needless to say, he was frightened. The lame man, having noticed this, said,

"Don't be afraid. Nothing will happen. You can tell your old aunt that her son-in-law Carl had called," he laughed bitterly. "You know who I am; I'm Stasys's brother-in-law. He plunged a knife into my back, and for that reason, I walk like this. When he gets back from prison, I will meet him. But that's nothing to you. You shouldn't have any fear. When Stasys won't be around, you are bound to inherit something from your uncle. As far as I'm concerned, nothing worse can happen to me."

Petronis kept silent. A slight shudder seized him as if he felt a sudden chill.

"Well, so long for now. I assume that we shall meet again," said Carl, and then he turned toward the park. "I knew that someone had arrived yesterday."

'Clip-clop, clip-clop' echoed his steps. A small lad on a bicycle shot past him, almost knocking into him. On the other side of the street, a young woman in high heels was walking by. Otherwise, this forenoon, the street bordering upon the park was almost empty.

'Clip-clop, clip-clop' kept on being reechoed, although Carl was nowhere near anymore. He turned into the first side street. Petronis stood on the steps and once again looked at the trees of the park, and the greyish clouds over the park and the Atlantic, out of view. High up an airplane was moving. It seemed that it was not flying itself, but that the wind was moving it as it does the clouds.

When he looked around, his aunt was not far away from the house. She was carrying a bundle and walking very slowly. Petronis walked down the steps, and as he met her, he took the bag.

"No phone calls, nobody came?" she asked.

"No one," he answered without thinking. And then he added, "There was a strange, limping fellow."

They both stood near the door, and Petronis noticed that the expression on his aunt's face changed.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He called himself your son-in-law, and came here because he thought that Stasys had returned."

"There will still be trouble then when he does return," said his aunt softly.

They both went inside and Petronis watched as she unloaded the food from the bag to the cupboards and the refrigerator. After a little while, his cousin, Antoinette, arrived. She worked close by and generally went out for lunch. She seemed very attractive, and the nearness of this woman, even though a relative, was appealing to Petronis. Despite the fact that she was 'Americanized', she appeared elegant, and Jurgis was openly charmed by her. However, the aura of enchantment vanished when she held out a couple of dollars.

"Take this, Jurgis. Go to the barber and get a haircut. You'll be a much handsomer man."

She did this quite matter-of-fact, but Jurgis's mood vanished. He was ashamed to take the money which he needed so badly. "Thank you," he blurted out, squeezing her fingers. She gently withdrew her hand. Her eyes sparkled and there was a smile on her lips.

"I'll buy you a suit, some new shirts, and some shoes, and Saturday evening we will go out. Do you know how to dance?"

"Of course," he smiled.

When she returned to work, Jurgis walked out to the steps with her and his gaze followed her and the graceful tapping of her high heels on the pavement. Near the corner she turned around and waved back.

Petronis began to like his first day in America.

After lunch he got his hair cut. The barber took no money; he only told him to come back another time. Close by was a bar which he entered. He downed a couple of glasses of beer, but again it was not necessary to pay. Everywhere he was still a guest. After that, he walked down to the Atlantic. In the park the young leaves were swaying. Some pretty weeds were trying to blossom. They seemed far prettier there in the park than in some vase. The Atlantic was roiled; its waters seemed muddied, but further out it was greenish. The sun shone and it seemed that the sea nymphs were lifting their sea-weed strewn hair from the sea. But, at times, it visibly darkened. And once again a nostalgia gripped Petronis, because there, on a distant shore, his childhood remained, the house with its battered chairs, and the thatch of the cottage, combed down by the wind, and outdoors, the names of children carved unevenly into the logs, and the scratching of dates or heights. The Atlantic churned and the vivid pictures, the recollections of his childhood swam before his eyes.

In the evening, they all settled down in front of the television. His graceful cousin tried to give him some pointers about baseball. Frank smiled continually. Petronis watched, but he didn't understand what was going on, although he himself had once played in this manner, hitting a brown ball made from cow's hair with a small stick.

It was interesting, but one ever-pervading thought selfishly depressed Jurgis and cast a pall over everything. Even food had lost its pleasure and, at night, sleeplessness would suddenly appear and it kept bothering him. The fit of depression made him want to take off. There was still no work, and this was a sufficient reason why his anxiety and despair, like a spreading rust, were eroding him more and more each and every day. Everyone had promised, both at the place where his uncle worked, and where Frank worked, but it was necessary to wait. He read the want ads in the newspapers and walked futilely along the streets. He had lots of time. The overabundance of time was maddening. For a time, Petronis stood before the display window of a store and looked at the fashionable handbags longingly and thought that if he only had some money he would buy a gift for Antoinette. Suddenly Petronis gave a start. Close by he heard a familiar sound:

'Clip-clop, clip-clop'.

When he turned around, Carl was standing nearby and smiling with irony. He was perhaps only twenty, but he seemed much older, and it was hard to understand how such a young man could assume such a devilish attitude. Without any preliminaries, Carl said,

"In America, if you don't have any money, you can only look. No money, nothing. For a buck, some men even kill here."

Indeed, his words sounded bitterly correct.

"Yes, I can't find work," replied Petronis without any pretense.

"I'll find some for you. In return, you'll give me three days' pay. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"O. K.," rejoiced Petronis. "What kind of work?"

"In a shop making electrical equipment. The work isn't hard there. I once worked there, and if I wanted, I could get work, but why should I work when I can't use my legs. Tomorrow, come right to this place. I'll take you over there."

Petronis had been disheartened by too many empty promises, so now, he didn't want to let the opportunity slip by.

"Let's go now."

"It's too far to walk. I don't have any car now."

The two men deliberated for a little while; then they rode off on the street-car. The foreman of the shop was pleasant and knew Carl. After half an hour, he promised work at a dollar an hour.

It was still early afternoon. Carl paused after a few steps and said,

"I shall wait for you right here after your first pay. Don't feel bad, an employment agency would have taken much more. And, if you try not to show up, your back will feel the blade of my knife."

"I'll be here; I'm really grateful," said Petronis sincerely, but timidly. He had been rescued, regardless of the price. He knew that the food would no longer choke in his mouth because he would no longer be a beggar.

"I got a job," he announced to his aunt when he had entered the house, but when he had told the whole story, she stared uneasily and showed no joy.

"You got mixed up with him to no purpose," she said.

"I don't care, I have no dealings with him," answered Petronis. "It doesn't make any difference to me." He realized that his words displeased his aunt, and he added, "There was no work. Don't you see? I had to find some job. I go where I can get some work."

"Maybe yes, maybe not, but he did that on purpose, so he might annoy us even more," his aunt reflected aloud, having clasped her hands as if at prayer, and at that moment, she was so like Petronis's mother that he wanted to go to her and put his arms around her. But he only said:

"That doesn't make any difference; work is work. The pay goes to me, and not to Carl."

His aunt made no reply, and Petronis went outside. He noticed that the sun suddenly shone brighter, the grass appeared greener, the young girls on the street were more beautiful, and the homesickness for that land existing, as they say, across the sea, suddenly grew less. Still, the smiling face of his cousin bothered him and it was annoying that she was married,

and even more, a relative. Now he wanted to go to the city, to drop in at some bar, and he realized how frustrating it was when his heart was full of longing but his pockets were empty. Once again he went to the park and he recalled some poem about Luna Park. It was quite pedestrian, but pretty, just as the hair of a brunette is dyed blond. It was untrue, but nice. It seemed strange to him that there weren't many people in the park, but, as soon as he had started to work, he understood why. Somehow, he just didn't have the time when he returned from work. His place of employment also pleased him from the very first day. It wasn't hard to set the parts into the electrical apparatus. In every respect, America was growing better. In the evenings, Petronis would sit in the parlor and reminisce with his aunt and uncle, about things or places, which were often more vivid in their eyes than visible things right here. The details of the past stood out in their eyes, revealed in time, as if polished and having taken on a brilliance, scrubbed in the flowing stream of days gone by, days now smoldering in ashes. And then, when Petronis would speak with his cousin and her husband about baseball, the game no longer seemed so foolish to him. Everything that seemed at first turned topsy-turvy here, slowly began to appear right-side-up, and Petronis began to sever the ties that bound him to Europe.

On the day that he got his first pay, Petronis met Carl. He had scarcely gotten through the gate. Carl, dragging his bad leg behind him, approached the gate. It was obvious that he had already been walking for several minutes.

"Did you get your pay?," he asked without even greeting Petronis.

"Yes, but I haven't cashed the check yet," said Petronis.

"Let's go into this bar," Carl dragged his limping step near to him, and Petronis had to slacken his pace. The tired workers hurried by them, happy with their pay and thoughts of the week-end. The street was noisy. It was stuffy, and one could smell the burnt oil.

At the crowded bar Petronis cashed his check and took out three days' earnings for Carl. This was the first money Petronis had earned here, and somehow the dollars rustled sweetly in his hands.

"Buy some beer," ordered Carl. "When your cousin returns, I'll have lots more money and then I'll buy the beers."

Carl drank his beer with whiskey. Petronis left him half drunk and went home. His cousin, Antoinette, arrived with her husband and they ate supper together. They were all in good spirits, and his uncle said,

"In a week we'll have another welcoming party. Our Stasys will be coming home."

After these words, his aunt hung her head down, and everyone assumed that she was thinking about her little Geraldine. Only Petronis alone recalled Carl's words about money, and having pushed aside all other thoughts, wondered what they could possibly mean.

The week passed, hot and stuffy. The humidity was oppressive, but it didn't rain. The closeness was stifling, almost suffocating. And in the Senkuses' house, there truly had to be a party. Stasys had come home. A festive dinner had been prepared. Petronis, having received his full check, bought a bottle of whiskey. It was apparent that it had to be a gay time, yet, for some reason, it was tense. Petronis looked at his cousin, and saw in him something of his own mother, but he couldn't quite pin it down. But otherwise, Stasys was glum, and while looking at him, you couldn't really say that Americans were always laughing.

Antoinette talked gaily, and Petronis, feeling the effect of the beer, couldn't take his eyes off her. He knew that Frank noticed this. However, the woman attracted him so much that he wouldn't be able to bear such an intense interest much longer. Suddenly she said,

"Stasys, you're now like an immigrant and you have to look for work."

"No, he'll now go on a vacation," asserted Petronis's aunt.

"Vacation!?", blurted his uncle, "why!, he's just had a sufficiently long holiday."

All this, although from his father's lips, rang insultingly, and Stasys's blood rushed to his head,

"Don't worry; it's none of your damn business. I'll do what I want and I'll get a job," he snapped.

Petronis reflected that prison worsens people. However, the evening, in comparison, passed more enjoy-ably than it appeared at first. It was cooler, outside the trees rustled, in sections, the sky would quietly turn black, the reflections of the stars glittered on the surface of the Atlantic.

A couple of days later, when Petronis was getting ready with his uncle for work, his aunt stated as she had gotten up,

"I'm going to go to church," and she quietly got ready.

Petronis left the house first. It was a clear morning. High slightly yellowish clouds were floating in the sky, being pushed hurriedly on by the dry wind, and in the streets there wasn't the customary smell of exhaust fumes. It was as if everything was suddenly returning to spring or being transformed into autumn. Petronis had plenty of time, and halfway to work, he had dropped into a tobacco store. Having made his purchase, he lit up and was glancing at the headlines of the newspapers lined up on the counter. Suddenly, through the screen door, Petronis heard a familiar grating sound,

'Clip-clop, clip-clop.'

Petronis turned his head. Carl, wearing a brown jacket, walked past him. Petronis nudged the door and glanced back. Carl walked slowly as he looked around. People went by him, and this obviously irritated Carl, because he walked throwing his leg to the right, as if he was cursing or talking with somebody angrily. Petronis looked for an instant through the store window and again turned toward Carl. On the other side of the street, still quite a ways from him, a small white hat came into view. Petronis didn't need to be told that it was his aunt. Time was growing short to get to work; even now he was almost late, but curiosity was getting the best of him. He stood, and for a moment or so, feigned interest in the variety of articles in the store window. When he lifted his eyes, he saw a pair of bobbing shoulders wearing a light brown jacket and the white hat right next to each other. Suddenly he lost them from view. Doubtless they had met, and Petronis, unable to grasp the situation, went on to work. He thought about the meeting all through work, and reflected upon it all the way home, until he again met his aunt in the house. Stasys wasn't home. They had supper, and the evening was just like all the others. As it was getting dark, Stasys returned. The day before, he had been drinking; during the day he had gone out for more drinks to try to cure the hangover, and now he had returned in a nasty mood.

"I'm not afraid of anyone. I'll run him over in the street, with a car, like a dog. I'll break his other leg for him."

"Calm down, try to forget," said Petronis's aunt, "let's just try to forget all about it."

"I knew it, he wants to get revenge, but I'll run him down with the car like a dog." repeated Stasys, as he went and slammed down the kitchen window.

"It's hot," said Petronis, "let the window stay open."

"What do you know, you jerk, coming from Europe!? If I close it, then I close it. You know, this rotten guy will throw a knife into you too, not only me; someone could really get hurt."

Petronis grew angry. Now he'd say nothing, if Carl wanted to teach his cousin a lesson. However, Petronis realized that Stasys' nerves were made raw by alcohol, and he understood that Carl's threats were important to Stasys. Perhaps it was a bluff, but in this poker game, somebody could lose. Stasys knew this and he was angry, stretching his nerves as far as they would go.

The summer was going by. Sometimes the lightning would flash, and from the Atlantic an angry wind swept by, and here and there knocked down some limbs. Then sometimes a cool rain fell, and it was nice. Petronis still felt like a visitor. Everyone seemed to be looking at him. Were it not for the Italian, Frank, and his wife, Petronis's delightful cousin, Antoinette, he would be a stranger here. Stasys did no work at all. He drank and kept on shooting off his mouth. Petronis's aunt was worried, and it appeared to Petronis that she was visibly growing old. One morning she left the house earlier than Petronis. That wasn't unusual, but, after he had walked a little ways on the street, his aunt met him and said,

"Jurgis, you have been here for a few months now. You have a job; you don't spend much; lend me a hundred dollars. I will repay you with interest, only don't say a word to anyone, not even your uncle."

This request for money grieved Petronis. He did not even consider that she was his mother's sister, although so strongly did she resemble her that at times his heart would begin to ache, but money was now indispensable for him, the start of a new life, and he abruptly said,

"You know, I don't have it. I need money myself. You know that I'm beginning life anew. And, what do you need it for, aunt?"

"Oh, my boy, please don't be angry; you see, I am always repaying, a little at a time, the money we received in settlement for our little Geraldine. It seems to me that I have sold our dead little girl. I am repaying the money; Carl needs it too. If I shall not do it, he has threatened me. He said that he would shoot Stasys, because life no longer makes any difference to him."

"Hand him over to the police; let them put him in prison," cried Petronis, so that the people passing by on the street turned and glanced at him, "This is blackmail."

"You don't know America. They will arrest him; afterwards, they will set him free; then you won't be able to protect yourself. And what will happen if he hurts my Stasys? Antoinette doesn't have any children. Our Geraldine is dead. Don't you see? Our Stasys will remain safe, perhaps he will get control of himself, then marry, and maybe I shall live until I have a grandchild," she said as the tears rolled down her cheeks. It seemed to Petronis that it was his own mother who was

crying, so great was the resemblance between them. He tried to be angry, but he couldn't overcome the pity that he felt, and he said,

"All right, I shall lend it to you only because I feel I'm giving it to my own mother."

"I'll really repay you provided I stay healthy."

"Go home. I'll see that you get it this evening," said Petronis and he turned to go. He wanted to curse and rebel. Why couldn't these 'brothers-in-law' really cut each others throats; then, that would be better for everyone. For the whole day, the thought that he had to get away from here, from this malignant cancer of America, into which these bonds of relationship were drawing him, oppressed Petronis. Now Petronis knew why Carl so willingly provided him with work. He was afraid that his rapidly aging aunt would have many more expenses if there were any more people not working.

Petronis imagined all day how he would smash that smirking mug of Carl's, how he would take care of everything himself and then would leave his aunt, but when he came home in the evening, he took out for her the money from his pay. She was so pitiful and sad that she seemed to Petronis like his very own mother, whom he had left behind in the old country on that rainy and dismal day of departure.

Summer was going by. Petronis swam in the Atlantic and would try to catch his cousin, Antoinette, in the water as the good natured Italian, Frank, smiled while lazily turning over on the sand his darkly tanned limbs.

One time, they were all watching a baseball game. Petronis wasn't really interested, but he was glad as Antoinette enthusiastically experienced all the activity of the game. Excitedly she would pound Petronis on the shoulders or the chest, and, because of that, it was almost delightful. But his aunt, however, grew sicker. She was ailing. Petronis knew that, in addition to some illness, fear and the lack of money were incessantly gnawing at her. Petronis no longer wanted a part of it. He wanted to leave for another city, but again it was necessary to start laying money aside. One day his aunt did not get up.

She had been ailing for ten days. Once, having summoned Petronis, she said to him,

"My boy, I shall give you one hundred dollars. Take it to Carl. He will be waiting tomorrow morning near the church." She twisted for a while in the bed. With difficulty she pulled out from beneath the pillows a wad of money and held it out to him, "Tell him when I get better I will give him more. Now it is too difficult for us. Although we have the money, nevertheless I can't take it without my husband's knowledge."

"All right," Petronis quietly looked at her. He barely kept himself from adding some angry words. It would be better for her to repay the debt to him. After all, it was his money. "All right," he repeated and thrust the wad into his pocket, as his uncle walked past onto the porch.

The night was warm, but it wasn't because of this that Petronis couldn't sleep. He thought whom the money belonged to, and in the morning he left for work tired and confused. However, when he met Carl near the church, the fatigue and doubt vanished. Petronis began calmly but got increasingly angrier.

"My aunt is sick and she does not have any money. She will no longer give you any, and that's that. All this time, Stasys has been toting a gun, and he has been saying, only let Carl try to get near me. He'll kill you like a dog. If she recovers, perhaps my aunt will give you some money, but now she doesn't have any. She has already borrowed some from me. My cousin has no job, and you know, in prison one only gets worse. Maybe you'd better watch out for him."

Carl looked quietly at him. He obviously realized that one day this was bound to happen.

'Clop-clip, clop-clip'; he stepped backwards and said,

"What belongs to me, she will return to me, and even though dying, she will have to bequeath it to me. Tell that to my 'mother-in-law'." He spit angrily into the middle of the street, and for a moment watched where it landed.

"Fine, and now I have to get to work. But watch out for Stasys," said Petronis and he speedily left. When he turned around, in the distance a pair of shoulders was jerking. One could easily single out Carl from the others.

Out over the Atlantic dark clouds were gathering. Doubtless, a storm was brewing.

Petronis had now gotten back a part of the money. He certainly had to go away somewhere else, far from his relatives, from all this misunderstanding, and from his cousin, Antoinette, whom he felt so sorry for. And even because he felt sorry, he had to leave. This nearness was senseless, and somewhere else there would obviously be more people among whom someone like Antoinette could turn up. When he saw his aunt at home, his timidity surprised him. He did not fear Carl with his threats, but now he feared this woman, bedridden and wasted by sickness. So he wouldn't have to lie when she asked, Petronis said,

"I laid it on the line to Carl, while I was speaking with him, that he'd better not threaten Stasys and he'd better forget all about this blackmail," and so he could turn the conversation elsewhere, he slowly added, "I want to get away from here since I have not yet completely put down roots. I'll look for some good luck elsewhere."

His aunt kept silent. For her, this was moving; she almost wanted to weep. However, Petronis, who had left his own mother, had to overcome this feeling of pity.

After a few days, he bid farewell with expressions of exaggerated gratitude, and when Frank, along with Antoinette, took him to the station, Frank attempted in Lithuanian,

"You to look at, to look at her," and then he added in English, "Take a good look at each other, because you probably won't meet again soon."

At these words, a blush swept over Petronis. It seemed he had never expressed to anyone what he felt and thought.

"I will write to you," he said, and, trying to be jovial, he added, "If there's any bad news, write to me. I have left the address with my uncle." And then farewell.

The city was brightly lit. In the distance the trains could be seen, and when one of them carried Petronis off, it seemed to him that this whole span of time, this deep-seated malice, the anxiety and longing of the summer, had never existed.

However, after a few weeks, Petronis had to return. For a long time he pondered whether it was worth the effort to come to his aunt's funeral. She had died from cancer of the stomach along with another incurable disease, old age. He really hadn't been able to be present at the funeral of his own mother. Now he didn't have the money, but he was able to make the trip from the money which he had not given to Carl. This would be as if an acquittal of that one lie in the presence of his dead aunt. Yet, in the bottom of his heart, he wanted to see Antoinette again. And this decided the issue for him.

It was a clear beginning of autumn. From the cemetery trees the leaves, turning multi-hued from their summer green, were falling and rustling sadly. Petronis, having clenched his teeth, watched how quietly they lowered the coffin. He did not weep, for here there was not that terrible sound as the clods of earth rained down and danced upon the top of the coffin.

"When I leave this time, probably we shall never meet again," Petronis said to Antoinette. She was weeping, experiencing the loss of her departed mother whom she would never see again. This was a difficult time, bearing witness to the impermanence of human life. Petronis too fought to hold back the tears; however, everything was suddenly over, for a short way off stood Carl. Perhaps the thought that she would leave him something had attracted him. Doubtless, both Stasys and Carl had noticed each other. They did not shoot at each other, not shout abuses at one another, for their hatred was so strong that, like a knife's blade, it did not allow one near the other. But their hatred some day had to erupt to the surface. This was the parched meadow, the meadow, which could be scorched and destroyed any moment from a small spark. The revenge did not die together with the mother, who wanted to help her children and offered herself to an angry, strange, yet surprisingly close man, Carl, as if wanting to help his 'once betrothed' Geraldine. At times Antoinette would write to Petronis, but she never mentioned anything about any clash between the 'brothers-in-law'. All this could end suddenly, or it could drag on endlessly. It has been repeated from the beginning of the world, but the scorched meadow some day would catch fire because the blood and the rage to live had inseparably joined the hatred of both of them.

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