Three

Once Again to the Farm

In October of 2024 and into my seventh decade, I returned to the farm of my first life at the invitation of Albert Messner, who now owns the property that his father owned when the Walters lived there from 1950-1966. A desire to go back there had pinged at me over the years, but within the last year or so the feeling had grown so strong that I made a definite plan, purchased airfare, and made arrangements to stay in a cabin along the Rock River at the southern terminus of the marsh. Albert had texted me with a date and time to meet him at the barn.

"I thought that was your dad getting out of the car!" Albert exclaimed from the seat of his open-air, two-seater John Deere gator utility vehicle as I approached and greeted him. I'd last seen him in the spring of 1966, when he was my physical science teacher at Oakfield High School. Albert remembered my dad fondly as Wally. Generous with his time and whatever he possessed, Wally taught Albert to lay and tuck-point concrete block and introduced him to welding, and when he was financially able to afford the purchase of a new welder, he gave his old but still useful one to Albert. A natural problem-solver endowed with ingenuity and resilience born of

necessity, a self-effacing humor and genuine friendliness that endeared him to others, my father lacked for nothing except money, opportunity, and two or three inches in height.

"I'll never forget the meals your mother made for us when the men and boys gathered to bale hay together or bring in the grain for harvest, especially her pies, but I never even knew her name; I always called her Mrs. Walter."

"Esther," I solved his puzzle. Except for Sunday mornings when she sat at rest in a pew at the congregation of St. Luke's or when being driven to and from the Kroger store in Waupun on Saturdays to barter her chicken eggs for grocery staples, my mother was always doing something. Introverted, thoughtful, and knowing her station, she possessed an unassuming acceptance of life as it was given. A sufferer of trauma, at the age of five and in the bleakness of winter she had borne an unimaginable loss, her own mother dead of the flu; her childhood upended and her youth thwarted and misused at the command of a stepmother. Left within her eyes were traces of a sadness unhealed and without end; in her spirit patience, tolerance, and a resolve that every child should feel loved and that none of her children would experience an upbringing as she had.

In the throes of the Great Depression and with the Walter family farm being lost to repossession by the bank, Wally and Esther moved east from Marquette County, with my paternal grandparents in tow, where circumstance and nothingness had drawn the curtains behind them. Over the course of the 1930's and amid the worst of times, their first family of four-girls-in-sequence arrived, shortly followed by a much-anticipated first-born son, whom they affectionately called Buddy. The 1940's brought Wally and Esther a second family of four more children, the middlers, two boys and then two girls, and a move to another tenant farm in pursuit of better circumstances and a place to call home. In 1950, Wally and Esther moved yet again to where Albert and I now stood on this wooded Oakfield Township farm at the ledge, where their best of times came to pass, and their third family—me and my little sister Putsy—was born and where Puts and I lived our childhood years.

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Albert and I climbed into his gator, he at the wheel, and headed eastward through the fields to the woods with his dog Cookie running alongside, finding and attempting to give me sticks, the dog's bliss rivaling my own. The brittle twigs and leaves snapped under the wheels of the gator, every rotation of the tires producing cracking and crunching sounds.

"I knew your dad had a truck, but did your family have a car?" Albert queried loudly over the noise of the gator's engine and branches busting under the wheels. "Surely there must have been a car, or how would everyone get to church?"

"Oh yes, we had a car; I remember that it was a Pontiac—blue I think, or some other dark color, green maybe—because of the Chief Pontiac hood ornament," I blathered before the gator stopped suddenly short.

The crick that swept time away had run dry. In all of the years that he'd wandered, explored, and loved these woods by the ledge, never had this phenomenon ever happened, Albert said apologetically after his abrupt braking at the crick's parched bed, an unresolved curiosity defining his expression. The air felt dry against my skin and smelled sweet of fallen sugar maple leaves on warm earth, and once we crossed the pathway where the spring water had always flowed, I began to wonder if time was not what I always thought it to be; that perhaps it does not expire but only changes things and can be relived in the imagination of a moment. I pictured an imperturbable compose of my dad, riding a Flambeau Red Case tractor across the fields; over and back, over and back again; a steward of the land surveying his charge, left behind in a world that was turning and changing forever. And I mused about my mother too, envisioning her in the garden,

alongside a bucket of water with a tin cup in hand, moving from one seedling to the next, painstakingly nurturing the young plantings through weeks of drought with life-sustaining water. Like an artist that affixes a signature to a creation complete, she reserved the first row of the garden for gladiola bulbs that bloomed colorfully in the August sun, beautifying her efforts. Strangely, somehow, it felt as though they were both yet here.

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A blank stare occupied my face, in transition to a daydream, when Albert showed me a wide swath of aluminum silo dome that had torn away, been found afield, and been kept after a small tornado had spiraled across the marsh and touched down on the farm. Nearly all of the workshed was blown to smithereens, he expounded, now painstakingly reassembled as it was before the storm and pretty much as my dad had left it there. An interior wooden door and frame, upon which almost seventy years ago I had painted the names *Puts* and *Ricky*, was the only part of the structure left untouched when everything else flew to the winds. I stared at the door, feeling at first a bit disoriented with past and present entangled in an absurdity of moment, and then fully embodied as my six-year-old self—transported to the back seat of the old Pontiac, alongside Puts—on a long ride home from the first and last time I ever saw my maternal grandfather.

In the front bench, Muma tried to make peace with her thoughts as Daddy looked at the way ahead.

It was days' end and the sandhills of Marquette County seemed foreign and dark as I peered out of the car's window. Into the East the headlights examined and then dismissed bits of the roadside. Dots of orange and red pin-holed the ditches, reflectors marking the entrance to driveways, leading the eye to places where blackness made golden the windows of homes on either side of the road. Clustering the farmhouses, raised both outward and upward in silhouette, gnarled limbs of immense Bur Oak trees praised the stars of an arresting sky as a Buck Moon shone over sedge meadows in places I thought to see open fields.

Settled within the upholstery of the past, Puts and I endured the return journey through suspended time whose only measure was tolerance for one another in the back seat. With the innocence of the tired, Puts curled up in the corner, toed off a leather sandal that fell to the floorboard beneath her, then kicked the other sideward, propelling it across the dark and in front of my face. Shrinking back to avoid being glanced, I yelped in both surprise and retaliation, "*Pew-sus!* Smells like chicken poop." Disturbing her comfort, those words having landed their blow, Putsy's brow

closed as she chose her reply from where it had dropped beneath her and I got ceremoniously assailed with her sandal's sole.

"Don't fight, you two," Muma implored; and, with a seriousness that she brought to everything, continued without even the slightest rise of voice, as if she already knew the story of our lives and as a matter of fact could foretell, "someday you will wish that you could see each other again."

Set straight by sincerity, the squabbling stopped and silence fell within the Pontiac. A pause for thought, and tenderly as though the dust-up between us had never happened, I put my arm around my sister, longing to be noticed, and broached the peace, "Is this good, Muma?" There was no

reply but, as she turned to look back, I met the eyes of hazel that we shared uplifted in a look that needed no words. Illuminated by the ambient light of the dashboard and captured in the rear-view mirror, I caught what Muma saw too—smiling faces with rubescent cheeks from a day in the warm summer sun that captured the best of who Puts and I were together, and always will be, as long as anyone can imagine it.

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I wondered if Albert noticed that I'd been absent as we looked down the slope from where we stood at the door of the workshed, feeling the warmth of October afternoon sunshine, to where the new house sat. "We couldn't save the old house," Albert said, "I don't even have a picture of it." Both dry- and wet-rot had left no other choice but to tear it down and rebuild. The long gravel driveway was still there where it had always been, fronting the new house now, as it did the old then, and, as my eyes followed the path down from the house to where it met Fond du Lac County Road B, the ruts within it pulled me back to a midsummer evening in the 1950's.

From the distance I saw myself as a boy on the front porch of the old farmhouse, with Puts, amid a sundry clutter of playthings—cap-guns, a six-inch molded Rin Tin Tin replica, a Slinky, and an eye-mask for playing Zorro. Set against the white clapboard siding and under the front room's

porch-side window was a rubber tomahawk and bow-and-arrow that were carried, in either hand, by the one of us that would end up being chased by the other in possession of the sheriff's badge and a plastic gun, complete with holster and belt. Prominent among all the toys was a large plastic scale model of a TWA Airlines jet, unpacked from a Grant's Department Store gift box and set aslant on a pedestal as if in take-off, a gift to me from a married couple of Daddy's second cousins called the Van Gorders, named on my baptismal certificate as sponsors, whom I never saw again after delivery of the aircraft.

With the suddenness of a dream, I was no longer looking; instead, I sat transformed into my six-year-old self, cross-legged and barefoot on the porch. On the painted cedar floorboards that also served as an airport runway, a makeshift fleet of planes was made complete by a couple of lesser-looking gliders assembled from balsa wood kits and stamped *Made in Japan*. One had a partially broken wing, a consequence of a prior crash landing, that caused it to list to the port side as I sent it aloft. From a bush at the corner of the house and in the space between Puts and me were two small piles of heart-shaped lilac leaves that grew in pairs, the leaf that emerged first larger than the other. We separated the pairings and valued the leaves as five or ten dollars each, accumulating as much as we desired,

our wealth far beyond the small, and frequently raided, cache of wheat pennies, buffalo nickels, and the occasional dime or infrequent quarter that we deposited into our amber-colored depression glass piggy banks. A tortoiseshell cat named Rainbow sat with us in the sunshine, soft-footed her way toward Puts who scratched behind Rainbow's ears as the kitty pushed back the arch of her neck into her hand, twisting her head for want of affection.

The day wore a mask of the usual, exposed by a sky that had begun to darken over the marsh to the southwest and the peculiar appearance of the family's chrome-heavy, skylark blue sedan moving down the driveway with the torso of Daddy frantically running along the driver's side of it, Buddy at the oversized steering wheel, a full seven feet behind Chief Pontiac's protruding nose on the hood ornament. Captivated, Puts and I watched; something was not right. Unaware of what talk had transpired before the car stopped front-and-center of the porch, we sat baffled until it became clear that Buddy wanted himself out of here, was hell-bent on taking the car with him, and that Daddy was equally insistent that he was not to leave. Muma peered out of the kitchen's eastward-facing window; three uneven lines of her brow deepened in furrow.

In the ticking moments of pause, having already arrived at the end of his petitions, Daddy turned on Buddy a look of insistence, wedging his foot directly in harm's way of the bulbous front tire, daring Buddy to defy him by crushing the bones of his foot. From the kitchen window, Muma mouthed an appeal of *Please God* to make the unfolding scene not-happen.

We all sat in an unnerving quiet that thickened. An angular concern chiseled Daddy's profile as the sky over the marsh grew even darker. He had fixed his gaze on Buddy's face in an attempt to meet his eyes, as if waiting for any sign that the gulf between them may have narrowed; but with shoulders taut, Buddy held steadfast a glare through the windshield, his lips in a pressed line. In a gust of wind, the petals of the lilac bush rippled while holding tight, exposing the underside of pastoral. Sensing something untoward, Rainbow made haste from the porch in a dash toward protection of the barn.

Inside of himself and under a low cloud of resentment, Buddy uttered a comment that from the vantage of the porch may have been profane, and in the heat of the moment threw the transmission into reverse, leaving but the ghost of his breath in front of Daddy as the Pontiac lunged uphill, taillights forward, abruptly braked as the tires dug; cranked the steering wheel severely to the left, then floored the foot feed for a forward burst with

intent of circling the north side of the house in a tight arch, instead abrading the edge of the garden where a wide swath of gladiolus were relieved of their duties, gravel and tomatoes spewing from beneath the rear right rear tire; sped down alongside the house, shearing branches of the monied lilac bush and under the limbs of two towering northern white cedars whose skew toward the western horizon offered the illusion of a bow to Buddy as Chief Pontiac bounced across the front lawn, the sedan scraping its undercarriage in the deepest rut upon return to the driveway within inches of the ditch where a Red-Winged Blackbird fled from the stalk of a cattail as if to make clear the way; met the road with a sharp turn to the right, a shift into second gear and a blast of the tailpipe, the final stones thrown; bolted northward up the center of the road on County B, raising up the Sputzies that homed in the bracken across from the Flury house. Grasping a pillar with one elbow to anchor a lean outward from the edge of the porch, I arched my neck like the cat and angled my face to follow the Pontiac as it grew smaller in the distance, then out of sight. Puts, frightened and undone, cried out in a broken sob, “Buddy come back!”

The spectacle that seemed to have come out of nowhere had made rigid my spine and brought heart to throat. Daddy, with the dropped shoulders of a man suffering an overwhelming defeat, turned on his heel to

head up the slope. My eyes fell the moment I saw him walk away, not wanting to meet his, but unseeing was impossible. Through the doorway left ajar, without a word or a look back, he entered the dim of the workshed and closed the door. At bench in the fading light of the eastward-facing window above, his countenance fallen with the look of a decade greater than his years, his spirit sat alone under encroaching clouds, pondering the torn moment—holding on or letting go; over and back, over and back again; hoping to find a way forward.

At the garden, Muma had arrived in the distress of one whose effort was upended by life without control. The selflessness that defined every day of her life succumbing to despondency, she brought down one knee upon the grass and then the other. On all fours grounded by the earth, from tended soil she pulled up by their stalks the dismembered gladioli to cull and set aside the bulbs. From the back door of the house, agape at sorrow, Puts and I watched and listened to her talking to an inner self, as she was wont to do, saying that there would be another year to bloom; that tomorrow is another day. With a look upwards, she would see the life of a world to come. Those thoughts and hope forever kept as she turned the page for nothing more than what happens next, lost in a story she could not fully understand. There, at the cusp of her pride, she wept.

Rain fell.

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As Albert and I approached our cars, the bottom of afternoon suggesting a time to take leave, the firmament began to bridge the chasm of decades in a glorious hue of blue that was so affecting it could mend the souls of children. I turned my head, looked down the driveway, and saw again Puts and Ricky, on the old farmhouse porch, so near yet impossibly distant, invisible to them as I set to linger one last moment.

Wearing coveralls and walking down the slope from the barn to the house, a redeeming westerly sun making bright his face, a different Buddy appeared. Beneath a crown of coiffed hair, with wide-open eyes and an upturn of the mouth, he projected the fulsome expression of a young man who knows he is the bearer of the irresistible, a gift beyond adorable outpouring from his pocket. In a jolt of surprise upon spying the puppy there, Puts leapt from the porch in a rush toward Buddy with Ricky close on her heels, the look of joy upon their faces both unmistakable and endearing. As I watched, the three chattered excitedly, passing the puppy back and forth, and decided then and there to call her Penny because she was so tiny and the color of the least of coins found at the bottom of life's pockets; and

with clarification, as was her due, being granted the final say-so, I heard the voice of Putsy say, “the brown one with grain on the back!”

Then time switched back on and I heard Albert say, as he surveyed the cluster of farm buildings below the ledge, opened the door of his car, and prepared to take leave, “It’s a beautiful farm.”

“Yes,” I said, thinking that for Wally and Esther, it was the best place they ever lived, a home that proved endurable and a land that held their signature upon it. It’s entirely possible that they each made one last stop here before eternity. And for all of the Walters—each of whom by some

measure of love *became* here—even with all of its want, escapism, disappointment, and uncertainty, it was, as well, a beautiful life.

"Spring is really nice in the woods, with all the wildflowers in bloom," Abert suggested as my attention returned to him; "You're welcome to come back anytime, just let me know."

"I'd like to come," said I, a daydream believer, once again to the farm.

End Notes, *Once Again to the Farm*

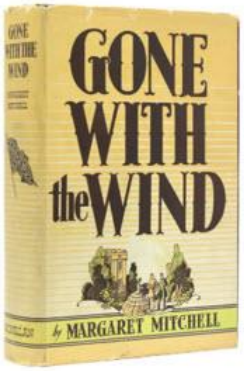
An artist's representation of the farm at N2997 County Road B, the setting for this story, as it might have appeared in the 1950's. Watercolor by Thomas Traush, American Impressionist, of Woodstock, Illinois.

The narrator with Albert Messner, October, 2024.

Bearing the names *Puts* and *Ricky*, this door and frame was the only part of the workshed left standing after a small tornado destroyed the structure.

Early 1950's Pontiac Chieftain hood ornament.

Esther's oft-repeated truism, "tomorrow is another day," is the last line in Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind*, an admonition to not dwell on misfortune but instead focus on hope.



Marquette County, in south-central Wisconsin, is named for the French explorer *Father Jacques Marquette, SJ,* and is the boyhood home of renowned naturalist John Muir. It's small cities and towns are surrounded by gentle rolling hills, valleys, and sedge grass prairies where massive Bur Oak trees are common. Many lakes and wetlands are found in the county.

E.B. White

"I'd like to come," said I, a daydream believer, once again to the farm.

This story was inspired by "Once More to the Lake," an essay by E.B. White (author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*), a reflection on time and childhood memories. The last line includes a reference to "Daydream Believer," an upbeat tune first performed in 1967 by The Monkees about remaining optimistic despite life's disappointments or lack of the things that money can buy. It can be heard by clicking here.