

By Wayne Halm

### Side One

Sometimes I know things before they happen, and that afternoon I knew things were going to get a lot worse. Knowing didn't help much though, I still had to accept it and keep walking. A stronger man would have had to accept the situation too, but he would have cussed and raved for a while. I just walked.

I knew what I'd see, but I look around anyway. The farmland was dead flat as far as I could see. No trees, no fences, no grass, just dark brown mud and cornstalk stubble. Above the mud, dark gray clouds with bottoms as flat as the land. Steadily falling from cloud to mud, a December rain. Behind the dirt road lay straight arrow back into the mist, I could see my footprints along the road, just behind me the water filling them was brown, further back the clouds made it look gray, still further back silver. Even in the dull afternoon light I could probably see the spot where I had last stopped to look around, but I couldn't be sure. It didn't matter anyway, it had looked the same then.

Ahead, save for the footprints, was a mirror image of what was behind. I pulled the collar of my canvas raincoat tighter around my neck and began to make the image complete. As I walked I could feel the dampness on my shoulders. The canvas raincoat was doing well but it just wasn't made for hours on end in the rain. I would be wet before dark. The rainwater burned the backs of my hands, rainwater always burns the backs of my hands, I pushed them deeper into the pockets, it helped some. My feet were wet almost to my knees, thankfully rainwater doesn't burn my feet.

When I came to the crossroad I realized how much the road looked like the fields. If it hadn't been for the tire tracks on the road I might have missed it. I don't suppose it would have changed anything if I had missed it but the tracks did give me something to think about. I couldn't really tell if the vehicle had come down the crossroad and turned away from me on my road, or if it had come toward me on my road and turned onto the crossroad. I looked at the tracks trying to determine which as I continued making my own tracks.

I heard the car before I saw it, I was spending a

lot of time looking down. But there it was, right in the end of it's tracks, big, blue, and stuck. The driver was shifting from forward to reverse and back again, spinning the wheels in each gear, but it was still stuck. As I walked up to the back of it he leaned his head out the window and looked at me. I told him that I would push and that he should put it in forward. With my hands on the edge of the shiny trunk lid I pushed, my feet slowly slipping in the mud, the motor roared, the wheels threw back a shower of mud on either side of me, and the car inched forward. Suddenly the tires caught and the car lurched forward. I fell flat on my face. A stronger man would have cussed but I just got up and walked over to the drivers side of the car which had stopped on a more solid part of the road.

The mud burned my eyes and my hands were too muddy to wipe it away, but I could see well enough as the electric window came down. I thought of how nice it would be if this were a farmer in his pickup truck. But this was no pickup, and the two men and two women dress in formal party clothes were not farmers, and I was not going to get a ride.

All four thanked me a number of times, called me a saint and a lifesaver, and all agreed that I should take care of myself. All I could do was stand there wishing that I were clean and dry and able to get in the car with these folks. But that was just wishing, I was muddy, wet, and cold, so I hoped that they would quickly drive away and quit looking at me. After a couple of minutes of uneasy silence the driver gave me \$10 for my trouble and did what I had hoped he would.

As the car drove away a stronger man would have cussed and thrown the money in the mud. I just started walking again, put the bill in my pocket, and wondered how I was going to keep on the road in the dark.

### Side Two

Damn but I wish I had stayed on the blacktop. What a mess. The damned traffic making us late, the damned muddy shortcut, and that damned helpful fool. Damn. Damn everything.

Things were bad enough this afternoon. I was running a little late and by the time I picked up Judy, then Bob and Nancy, we got caught in the

**Short Story:**

## December Afternoon

rush hour traffic. When we finally got out of town and on the highway Judy was moaning about being late. So I took this shortcut down some farm road that Bob knew about. Things got worse.

The mud was like grease. I tried to hold a steady 25 miles per hour so as not to get stuck, any faster and I was afraid of sliding into the fields and really getting bogged down. Well, I got stuck anyway. What a mess, we were all dressed and didn't want to get out in the mud. I rocked the car back and forth but it really wasn't doing any good. Then this guy walked up out of nowhere and told me that he would push.

He got behind the car and I stepped on the gas. The wheels were spinning and the car inched forward. In a minute the tires caught and we pulled out of the mud hole. I stopped and this guy walked up to the car, he was covered with mud, I mean from head to toe. I thanked him, hell, I even gave him \$10, but I couldn't let him in the car. He was covered with mud, I felt bad about it but I just couldn't. Nobody said anything for about 30 minutes after that. But as soon as we hit the blacktop again Judy opened her mouth.

The instant the tires touched the blacktop she told me that I should have given that guy a ride. Now that teed me off, I blew up. I told her that maybe she would have liked for him to have sat in her lap, that shut her up. She didn't say another word. Not another word until a few minutes ago when she walked over and told me that Andy and Sharon were giving her a ride home.

Damned. I'm going to have another drink. Why did that damned fool have to fall in the damned mud?

### Side Three

Now I gotta admit, my house ain't much. Jist one room with a wood stove, a bed, a table and a couple a chairs. But the roof don't leak the winders fit tight, and it's pretty near the road. Me and George, we're glad to have it.

The other day it had been raining all day. I was jist sittin' inside. Couldn't do anything cause of the rain. Didn't have much to do anyway, ain't much for a poor man like me to do this time of year. With the crops cut, the wood stacked, and the groceries bought, ain't much for me and George to do 'cept wait for spring plantin'.

Anyway late in the afternoon I was sittin' around rubbin' George's back when this car goes by. Kinda strange cause we don't see many fancy cars out here. Old pickups full a field hands sure, but shiny cars full a fancy folks, hardly ever.

I was still wonderin' what city folks was doin' out here when it got dark. The 'lectricity was off so I jist went to bed. George laid down beside me and we went to sleep.

Along 'bout midnight George got up and started barkin' his head off. It was his "there's somebody on the road bark". I couldn't imagine what kinda fool would be out in the road on a cold rainy night like that. After a while George quieted down so I guessed he walked on.

Next mornin' I could see his tracks on the road. Looked like he stopped and looked toward the house. Guess he heard George but couldn't see the house in the dark, anyway he walked on. Oh, I know I shouda seen what the fella was doing or tried to help. But you jist can't be too careful now-a-days.

### Side Four

Yea, I remember that afternoon, and I remember the next morning too. It was raining that afternoon, and cold, boy you bet your beak it was cold. I was worried that any minute the rain would turn to sleet. The next morning didn't change anything.

I had stopped in this cornfield for a bite to eat. The field had been cut but I spotted some milo plants, they were stunted and probably left over from the last crop but they were too good to pass up. After I had my fill I saw there four cornstalks broke over right together. It looked dry under them, so I decided to call it a day and hopped under them. I mean why not, my belly was full, my wings were tired, my feathers were getting soaked, and you don't find a dry spot to get out of a December rainstorm very often.

While I was sitting there a car came down the road. I started to take to wing but decided what the hell they probably wouldn't see me and they didn't look like hunters anyway. So I'm sitting there watching this car go by and wouldn't you know it, right in front of me it gets stuck in the mud. Right there, not 30 feet away! Well I thought about getting the hell out of there again but nobody jumped out of the car so I knew they weren't hunters. You know how hunters all get out and walk around in the mud whenever their

**Short Story:**

## December Afternoon

vehicles get stuck, or even come to a bad spot, so I knew they weren't hunters.

An hour later this car was still there, rocking back and forth but not going anywhere, when this man came up on foot. I was beginning to get real scared but he got behind the car and pushed it out of the mud. I was sure that he would get in the car and it would drive away. But no, the car just left him there. Then without a word he just walked on.

I saw him again the next morning. It was still raining but my wings felt good and I really had to get going. Anyway I saw him again still walking about 15 miles down the road. By his tracks it looked like he walked right past a house but didn't go in for some reason. Humans are strange creatures.

### Side Five

Got a letter this morning that made me recall that morning. It was a terrible morning, it had been switching between rain and sleet for three days. I was coming down the road in my old truck, didn't really have any business on the road in that weather but I wanted to be home for Christmas. Anyway I was driving down the road worrying about getting stuck and listening to the gas slopping around in the tank. I figured that I had just enough to get home, and I was sure praying that I had figured right.

Well that morning two kind of strange things happened. For one, this big crow flies past. My truck don't go very fast and this crow just flies right past me. You know how crows usually fly up high, well not this one, he wasn't more that 10 to 12 feet off the ground, and he didn't give a hoot about me being there either. That crow was following the road, he was I tell you. That crow was flying directly over the road and not taking his eyes off it. Up where the road crosses muddy creek it turns, goes up the creek a piece, crosses, then comes back down the other bank before heading out across the fields again, well that crow, he did the same thing. He was following the road. Do you reckon those things use the roads to find their way about?

Then the other thing. About half hour after I saw the crow I came upon this man walking down the road. Now what do you reckon anybody would be doing out there 40 miles from nowhere in all that rain? So I stopped and offered him a ride, he said that he would ride in the back because he was so muddy, I told him to get in the cab with

me, I've been muddy too. He got in, and man was he muddy, but I didn't mind, you can't hurt my old truck much.

He rode with me for near two hours, until I got to the turn-off. Likable fellow, told me his name but I don't recall it right now. He looked tireder than I was but he didn't go to sleep, he kept me company the whole way. At the turn-off I told him to come up to the house and dry off. He didn't want to, he said that he wanted to get home for Christmas too, then he handed me a \$10 bill. I told him that I couldn't take it but he insisted telling me that he had gotten it for not getting a ride and reckoned that he could give it to me for giving him one.

When he got out and started walking away I got the feeling that he \$10 was all the money he had. So I called to him and told him that if he wouldn't take his money back at least let me give him some change. He finally agreed if I would give him my address too. All I had was 23 cents. He took it and walked on down the road.

The wife sure was happy about getting the \$10 as it was only two days before Christmas.

Then this morning I got this letter, first time I ever got a real letter. I had my girl read it to me right away. It was from this fellow I've been telling you about, well actually it was from his little girl, I don't guess he reads or writes any better than I do.

Gracie, read it to me again will you.

### Side Six

December 25

Dear Mr. Johnson,

Last night my daddy came home. We are real happy that he is home.

This morning he asked me to write this letter for him. My daddy says that he hopes you got home ok, and that here is the 23 cents, as it turned out he didn't need it. He also says thank you.

Yours truly,

Mary Elizabeth Jones

P.S. This is from me. I don't know what you did for my daddy but whatever it was, thank you. I hope you and your family are having a merry Christmas Mr. Johnson.

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