

By Wayne Halm

Really it was a pointless trip. I knew that seeing the old house would not do me any good, but I wanted to see it anyway. After all it was the house that I grew up in.

No, "grew up in" isn't right. I lived there from the time I was a baby until I was a young adult. I've had to do a lot of growing up since then. I left there with my new bride and a job offer in hand, headed east to the big city, ready to take on the world. Me and Mary against the world, and we didn't do badly either, we won quite a number of rounds. Of course we lost a few recently, but the record is still good. Maybe that's why I wanted to go back, to start at the beginning again. Me against the world, and I was going to set new records.

I hadn't seen the place in 10 years and driving out there I tried to imagine what it would look like. This was pointless too but I couldn't help it. An hour or so into the trip I began to worry that the old house had been abandoned. The grass had grown up 12 or 14 inches high with a weed here, there, and yonder. The fence had a few pickets missing and the paint was peeling off the rest. The gate still had the swirly que designs but only one hinge. The front steps still looked strong and the porch solid. Thought the swing, not in great shape the last time I saw it, hadn't fared too well. The railing was still there but I wouldn't trust it. The door knob was rusty and six window panes were broken on the front side. Bare wood was exposed down most of the sunny side and weeds grew in the gutters. The down-spouts were gone. I just couldn't help it, driving down the

road gives the mind a lot of freedom.

I stopped for gas at the little crossroads town without a name. It hadn't grown much. The service station was new but it was on the same site as the old one, I suspected that the owner's son ran this one. Mary and I had stopped there going east, newly married and excited about our new life. Then I stopped there again going west, newly divorced and trying to adjust. The attendant filled the tank, checked the oil and water, and took my credit card. He didn't know any of this.

On the road again I felt confident. The car always ran better on a full tank of gas and that put my mind at ease. I began to wonder if the house had been bought by a retiree from the suburbs. The grass was perfect from fence to fence, all of the bushes and trees were cut for ease of mowing. The picket fence was gone entirely replaced by chain link on all four sides. The front steps were molded concrete and the porch looked freshly painted. On the chains was a new oak swing but it didn't look used, the railing was iron. The door was still there, stripped and varnished and sporting a big brass handle. Air conditioners hung out of the two front windows and white aluminum siding covered the walls. Gutters and down-spouts evidently came with the siding.

At lunch there was a squeeze bottle of ketchup on the table. As I squirted it on my hamburger I recalled how bitterly Mary would complain about me putting ketchup on my food. Ketchup wasn't the only problem that we had, but it was

Short Story:

The Old House

a good example. Personally I thought the hamburger was good. How could two people who grew up next door to each other let ketchup bother them? Yet it did.

With my stomach full I wasn't even out of the parking lot before I was remembering how the old house had looked the last time I saw it. The grass was cut, that's one thing Dad always insisted that I do. However he didn't mind the path my brother and I wore from the steps to the corner of the fence, we never used the gate. He even cut six of the pickets off shorter so Mike could jump the fence easier. The third step from the bottom had my initials JHB in one end and a big notch that Mike carved in the other. The swing squeaked whenever someone sat in it, and it always squeaked because Judy was always in it. My little sister spent half of her teenage life in that swing, once she told me it was so the boys could see her. I guess it worked, she, Bill, and the kids seem happy. The door was open, the door was always open, so were the windows. Two in each window were little pots of red and pink flowers, I never knew what they were called, they were just Mama's flowers. Even then the paint was peeling off the gutters.

I'm not sure what I expected as I turned down Willow Street but I wasn't prepared for what I saw. The house was gone, completely gone, all of the houses on the right side of Willow Street were gone. In their place was the plant and parking lot of Northeast Bottle Company, Inc. "Makers of the finest one-way bottles in the world". Or so the sign said, I never thought of throwaway bottles as being fine or otherwise.

It was pointless but I walked to the

corner of Willow and sixth and counted my steps back to the place where the old house had been. Then right there in the middle of the parking lot, I looked out my bedroom window toward Mary's bedroom window. I saw a muddy green pickup with a half empty beer bottle on the dash.

I stood there for 15 or 20 minutes completely blank. Somehow the parking lot had shattered all of my plans for starting over. As I drifted back to the car I had no idea what I was going to do. Before I reached the car a uniformed security guard intercepted me. It was Tom Harrison a high school classmate, he recognized me. We reminisced for a while, Tom doing most of the talking. Then he told me about seeing Mary the week before and gave me a letter she had left for me. All I could do was stare at the letter. A bell started clanging and Tom had to run. I was still staring at the letter thinking how well Mary knew me. I turned the letter over and over as I walked to the car wondering if I should open it or throw it away.

In the car I opened it.

John,

I came out here planning to start over. This crushed me. But it made me realize that you can never start over, you have to pick up from where you are.

I still don't like ketchup but give me a call at 645-1143 and let's talk about it.

Mary

P.S. I hope you open this.

Six blocks down the street I found a pay phone. Mary answered on the second ring.

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