

By the Sweat of Your Brow

by

Dave Lockett

And so he came home. Fifty years old and home again, back to the house his grandparents had built and his parents had lived in all their married lives. Families lived together then. He'd hated the idea, moved out when he went to university, and had rarely returned. Until now.

It would be early retirement, the Board said. It wouldn't be redundancy, not really. True, they wouldn't be replacing him - Lawson was irreplaceable - but flatter management structures, just-in-time scheduling, core operations focus, lower overheads . . . you know how we've had to streamline to achieve that.

Yes, Lawson had said. I know it. I helped you do it. I swung the hatchet for you. I've watched their faces, seen the inwards crumpling, the loss, the dismay. I did it, I thought I knew all about it, and in the end I made just the same error that they had made. I thought that there'd be reward for faithful service, diligence, efficiency, hard work . . .

And you were right, they said, breaking in. Of course all your work will be rewarded. There's a retirement package. Plus your super. The Chairman remarked that he only wished he were in the same position as Lawson.

Retirement. The central city apartment he and Marcia had lived in had to go. No need to live near

the centre of things any more. He wasn't at the centre of things any more, and the overheads were too high.

There was the old house on the farm. The family had sold most of the land when Mother died, but the new owner had been joining land to land and didn't want the house. It was a useful holiday place, a tax break not too far from the coast. Lawson still had a one-third share in it, and Em's boys and George didn't gouge him too hard on the rest. Lawson was able to buy them out with most of his retirement package, and he had savings and the company pension to live on.

The house was sound, more sound than his assumptions had been. It was old, of course, older at the core even than his family's occupancy, added to haphazard over the decades and then let go. But the floors still flexed no more than they should, and the walls were firm and solid and straight, and the roof sagged not at all.

"There's a bit to do on it, but not much. Solid old place." The local builder had scratched his beard. "Good to see one of the family living in it again. I'll quote for the job." He climbed back into his pick-up and drove off, leaving Lawson in the wind, and alone.

Maybe if Marcia had stayed, half a decade ago, it would have been somehow different. Or maybe not. She hated the country, anyway, even worse than she hated failure. She had left at the first missed promotion, as soon as he was no longer moving up. Had to find herself, she'd said, and had found someone else instead. Last he'd heard, that had fallen apart, too, and Lawson tried not to find a sour satisfaction in the thought. He looked back at the old house, and beyond it at the evening coming fast. He slept poorly in the cold bed in his old room.

The next morning was better. The family had left the land around the house unsold, two and a half hectares of it. For a curtilage, the estate agent had explained, because that was the tax-free limit. Land, after all, was only valuable if it were cost-effective. It was untended, and had been so for many years. No-one had thought of it as their own in that much time. It had been left as a

holiday retreat, the rates paid but the power and phone cut off. Mother's kitchen-garden and the old orchard behind it were being overwhelmed in the march of the scrub. Young trees were pushing aside the stones of the path his grandfather had laid.

There was no newspaper to read, no reports, no figures to digest. He ate the cereal and drank the coffee he always had for breakfast, washed the dishes by hand, and that left the rest of the sunny morning stretching emptily before him.

Well, and why not? He found a hoe in the toolshed. The path needed clearing, and he cleared it, working among the tall weeds. There was the rosemary Mother had planted, tough as barbed wire, still growing. He'd cut it back. And the lavender. But all the rest of the herbs were gone, swamped and overrun by weeds that were becoming scrub. Further off, down towards the creek, the scrub was forest. The family had never cleared it.

How long had it been, he wondered. Ten years, twenty? Mother had died twelve years before, following her husband into an early grave, and she hadn't been capable of keeping the place up, near the last. Working like this will do that to you, thought Lawson, and he slowed his pace. He'd told them it would. You'd live longer in the city, he'd said.

Longer to do what? His father's down-turned half-smile winked in memory, on and gone like a lighthouse beacon. Better to wear out than to rust out, Father had said. Lawson's own mouth bent downwards, as he jabbed and chopped with the hoe.

The path was clear by the time the sun was half-way to its peak. He looked back at it and eased himself. His lungs felt warm and easy, and his heart was beating, strong but not fast. Lawson had kept in shape.

He had a rest, all the same, and then started on what had been the vegetable beds. This was harder, a slow-time march with the hoe as a pacemaker, forward one step chop and pull, forward one step chop and pull. The end of the first of the beds and noon arrived together. He raked up,

wiped the sweat out of his eyes, considered what remained, and added to it the long sweep of undergrowth stretching to the orchard wall. He shook his head and grimaced. No wonder Mother hadn't been able to keep it all up.

But it had to be kept up. He would have to do it himself. Why not? His own labour was free; indeed, his time was worthless. The company had told him so.

He made a short list and drove to town. The first thing was to clear the ground. He knew little about gardens, but any fool can read a gardening manual. The afternoon passed in plans and work. When it grew dark, he cleaned and oiled his tools, made his supper, and went to bed. He was pleasantly tired; this time he slept.

Weeks passed. Autumn slid into winter. A demolition site yielded a few hundred scavenged bricks for a garden wall - the local town was downsizing, too, just like the company. Everything was, including Lawson himself. His world shrank to a few hundred metres of earth and stone, to the wind in the trees and the distant voice of the water. He'd had the power restored, though out of a curious kind of respect he used it as little as possible, and he didn't bother about the phone, he who had spent years with a mobile attached to him like a leech. A car passing on the road was an event, and the nights were primeval.

The garden beds were cleared and turned and appropriately fertilised. He planted his garlic and his broad beans, a little late perhaps, but the weather was kind. There would be vegetables from the kitchen garden again.

He plunged into the work waiting beyond. There had been roses, and he found some of them struggling on in the undergrowth. He cleared and weeded and mulched against the cold and cut the shrubs back hard, studying the pruning diagrams in the book, and added others, to make an arbour.

Beyond the rose garden was the orchard, old trees soured and gnarled in the frosts. There would

be little fruit from them, but he liked the look of the trees, ancient and crabbed and enduring, and he shaped them and cleared the fallen branches and rubbish away. The timber burned sweetly in his stove, old dry fruitwood.

The first warmer days found him among the fruit trees. Green buds of the first leaves appeared, and then in a matter of days there were flowers. Bees hurried from blossom to blossom. His roses brought out new growth. His vegetables struck. He planted peas, shallots, onions, and they began to shoot up. The days were full.

He could do little yet for the wilderness beyond the gap in the old wall at the rear of the orchard. The creek bent around his land, cupping it like a hand under a breast, and in that curve the trees reasserted their kingdom. Hardwoods, even, had sprung up around the old trees that his parents and grandparents had left from when the land was cleared. It had been a woodlot, he remembered vaguely. It was a forest now.

He was alone, all day, most days. The builder came and made the minor repairs required. Once a fortnight Lawson went into town for supplies. He spent as little as possible, and was actually saving money. He'd never done that before, not even when he was earning five times as much. It was strangely familiar; his boyhood over again, as if at any moment around a corner he would hear his father and grandfather talking quietly together about crops and weather and work, or his mother singing in the kitchen.

Here, beside the roses, a path had wandered, made before his mother had planted the garden. He arranged the beds and lawn around it, and added more shrubs, choosing old-fashioned tea roses. When summer came, the scents would be heady.

He had his father's hands, he realised one morning. Thick, strong, capable, with chisel nails and heavy knuckles. He might as well have been his father. All that he did, his father would recognise and approve, and so would all his forebears, time out of mind.

The whisperings started then, as if that realisation had opened a gate. Or perhaps he had been hearing them for some time. He would hear them, and heed them, and the shape of the bed or the curve of the path would come right under his spade, not struggling against him. He accepted that with half his mind, and with the other half recalled that solitary children had imaginary playmates. That thought made him smile wryly to himself, the same downturned half-smile of his father.

On a day of sudden early warmth, he looked up from his work amid the hum of insects. Beans and tomatoes and squash reached green hands to the sun. Potatoes were showing. The earth smelt alive and warm, like new bread. On the other side of the garden, down at the bottom of the slope, his parents walked hand in hand down the path he had built.

It seemed to him an unremarkable event, as events in dreams always seem. They passed on through the gate he had hung, into the rose garden he had made. The sun passed behind a sudden cloud, and they were gone, and he bent again to his work, not assessing, pleased to have their approval.

He would see them, sometimes, after that. His father, in a dawn of dew and birdsong, staring pensively down the slope towards the creek, or Mother, seated on the log bench he'd made, enjoying the scent of their roses. Always at a distance, and always fleeting, and always with a vague echo of sweetness and acceptance.

Were they really there? He was not sure. What was meant by 'really', anyway? He could have failed to see them, of that he was certain, simply by telling himself not to; but he never gave the instruction. Perhaps, he thought, he did not wish to give up the company even of familiar phantoms.

The vegetables gave up their first harvests, and were replaced by later varieties. The rose garden bloomed, scented like paradise. Paradise was a garden, he recalled.

As things became established, so his workload dropped away. The vegetable beds stayed remarkably free of weeds, though he used no poisons. He had more food than he could eat; a little country barter with his commercially-farming neighbours saw to that, too. Gifts of fresh asparagus and spring greens were reciprocated with milk and frozen meat. He spent less and less on provisions.

The orchard, too, seemed to be tended by other hands than his, the trees coming early into lavish leaf, shaping themselves to the pattern of setting fruit. They should not have borne so heavily, for they were old and long-neglected, and Lawson, while taking the simple steps required for their care, thanked the folk that went before him, and did them due courtesy. It was no more than their right.

Such labour as was left to him wasn't like real work at all. It came naturally to his hand, as if the vegetables, and then the early fruits that he ate, or sold, or gave away, were nothing more than the products of the unaided earth. He spent his days in a kind of dream, planting, weeding, pruning, harvesting, referring to the gardening book less and less, as his hands learned of themselves the tasks that they were set. There were no decisions to be made. No figures to digest, no minds to influence, no meetings to address, no presentations to make, no markets to be read. No work to be done. All the calculation and liability of his life's work had been taken from him. Gardening was a hobby, a pleasant, useful and productive one for a man who no longer had real work to do.

He had a notion that he might dam the creek to provide a water source in the summer, but when the dam was built he went out one fine morning to find that trout had established themselves in the water, good fish of pan-size for the taking. The creek was rich in fresh-water crays, too. By and by he stopped needing to go to town at all.

The summer came on, and the crops continued to bear and come to harvest, hardly needing the touch of his hand. Fruit set, and the trees began to burgeon. Pears, pistachios, then apricots and

plums; then apples and raspberries; and in the orchard, wild strawberries in profusion.

His store-rooms and cupboards were full. He had never been a glutton. He took no more than he needed; and everything a man might need was here. A minor barter with a local store for some of his perfect berry crops - worth a mint these days, the storekeeper had said - had provided him with sacks of flour. He learned how to bake bread.

It was when he began to rise in the morning to the scent of it in the kitchen that he began to realise. There were two loaves, oven-perfect, on the table, and mixed in with the heady aroma of new-baked bread, a lingering sweetness. His mother had always enjoyed baking, he remembered. He walked in the garden. Everything was in order, and everything was bearing and ripening. In the orchard, the fruits of the season were set in profusion, ready to his hand. Walnuts and mushrooms and blackberries were everywhere in the woods, with the dry fallen timber that would freely provide his winter warmth. At the creek that bounded his land, with its dam now wide and yet unsilted, he dabbled his fingers in the water, and the trout came, innocent, to his hand. Innocent as everything else. He looked up, and the deer were coming down to drink, fearless, at the pool.

He knew it now. He was being served according to his deserts. He fled, knowing that it was a just retribution, and found, as he expected, that he could not. The car would not start, and the gate to the road would not open; and to keep him in the Garden, between him and the macadam stood his father, wearing the face that was both his and Lawson's own, and bearing a sword that rippled with pale flame.

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