Morning's Time Enough

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I got home, and the minute I put my foot to the back stoop I had the feeling that there was a lifetime ahead of me, doing just this, setting my foot to the first step with the sun going down behind me. Coming home from work tomorrow and the next day and every day, barring Sundays, like right now from the lumber mill or later on from the train station where my old man worked, always coming home from the job and feeling just this way . . . my mother in the kitchen every day at five, the old man rolling in half an hour later, then the eating, then the sitting around, then bed. That was what life panned out to, and I felt it didn’t really pay to grow up to it.

When I came into the kitchen there she was standing at the stove. I closed the back door quickly—not counting the wind, there was winter snap in the air already, and November only just starting. Without knowing I’d even noticed it, I’d seen how the chrysanthemums had turned brown around the edges, hanging from their stalks when I’d come through the back gate. I didn’t feel any pleasure, breathing in the warm kitchen smell. I just got busy with the buttons of my jacket.

She hadn’t a word to say.

“What’s for supper?” I asked. From where she was standing I could see the way her short gray hair curled a little over one cheek, and for some reason I remembered how my old man liked to make a cup of his brandy and pass it slowly over her hair in an arc when he was feeling good with her or with life in general. I tended to think the old man was kind of hard on her—he wasn’t an easy guy to have around. That’s what I meant, about the job and every day being like the next . . . Dad didn’t seem to mind all that. I made a little commotion, hanging my jacket on the chair, and she looked up, her eyes coming on me quiet and resting there.

“We’ve got to go over to see Mrs. Whitby after supper,” she said.

I felt a clunk in my stomach, as though I’d known when I came in that she’d say that, and why. “The trial over?” I asked her.
“It was murder in the first degree.” She looked down on the floor as though that was the only way she could get the next words out. “They gave him the chair.”

I stopped the business with my jacket and stood there with my hands hanging down at my sides. Whit. Whit was going to get the chair. “Judge Cokes phoned me. She doesn’t know yet. He thinks we should be the ones to break the news to her.”

“It’ll kill her,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to be the one to tell her.” “I’ll be the one.” Her face was tight, and some of the brown-edged feeling I had curled up—into pity, I suppose, for her or for Whit or for Whit’s old lady—I didn’t know for sure. “You two boys were good friends once, it’s only right you should be there. And Dad too.”

“Judge Cokes say where they’re keeping Whit? He still in the county jail?”

“Yes. He says they’ll be moving him to Sing Sing tomorrow.” “Yes,” I said. “Well, Jesus,” I said, thinking of Whit in Sing Sing. I finally got the jacket slung over the back of the kitchen chair. “He say whether they’re going to appeal?”

She turned full to me then, her cheeks pink as a girl’s in the open air. She always had a young look to her, even now with her face solemn and long, moving her lips like an old lady chewing on a thought. “It won’t do no good,” my mother said finally, “the Judge says she oughtn’t to be encouraged to throw her money away. It was an open and shut case.” I guess I’d known that. Most of the town felt it was pretty clear-cut, but there were still some of us who thought Whit’s age would play some part in the verdict. What I mean, he wasn’t twenty yet. You’d think they’d take that into account. But I guess the jury saw it different. Bill Hovey never had a chance to defend himself. Whit had been nursing that grudge for some time. He’d even said, and the fellas had heard it and I had myself, only thank the Lord they never asked me, that some day he was going to have to do him in. I even forget what was the particular reason, Whit had so many things like that going. It was the kind of a guy he was. But Christ, with a bowling ball!

So it was all over. I guessed Judge Cokes had to follow through on what the jury directed, you couldn’t put any blame on him. Somehow, though, I couldn’t think about Whit and what was ahead for
him, and I came on over to the stove to get a little closer to Mom. She'd be feeling pretty bad because of Ellen Whitby.

When I got near her I remembered a time I came running in after one of Whit's beatings, I was just a kid then, and my nose was all blood, and she was standing at the same place at the stove. That time, her face got white. I'd never seen her look like that before. Her hand holding the cold water-soaked rag was shaking so that I'd had to put my own over hers and hold it there to my nose. She's never cussed that I know of, but the way she held her teeth together with her lips drawn back made me want to clap my hands over my ears instead. When she calmed down she said—and her voice was like water moving down the creek under the ice—she said, "If he hurts you like this, Tod, don't play with him any more, you hear me? Stay away from that boy!" And the old man that night, after she'd told him: "Listen! Give it right back to him, in the mush, hear? Don't come snivelling home, you're big as he is, the little bastard!"

It surprised me, how Mom lit into Dad then. I could swear she felt the same way about Whit, but she defended him, saying something about boys always fighting. She'd been real friendly with Whit's mother then, and I guess hadn't wanted to start anything. Thinking of it and wondering whether she still remembered, I moved back away from her, toward the table. I'd heard my old man's car turn up the gravel.

I doubt there's a house big enough to hold the old man. Whenever he came into a room it was always as though a mountain moved in, for all that we were about the same height, and no matter what the weather was, winter or summer, he always carried a chunk of outdoor cold with him. I could feel the chill whenever I got within a foot of him.

I saw his big body through the glass and then the door opened and he was in. "I heard it, I heard all about it!" He closed the door so hard the panes rattled. He went over to the counter and set down his lunch box, then turned and peeled off the red scarf he had wound around his throat—it got pretty cold up on those boxcars long before winter put a hand to the ground below. Then he started pushing himself out of his heavy striped jacket. He turned his big moon face, red and puffed from the wind, down on the floor.

"Judge Cokes phoned today," my mother told him. "Bein' as Ellen and I was so close once, he thought I—we should be the ones to break it to her."
My old man grunted. "It's likely she knows already." But his voice put the lie to his words. Whit's old lady never did go to the trial, not on a single day, nor wouldn't ever listen to a word said about it. She'd said, way early down to the grocery store, how Whit was innocent and that it was an accident, and she should have known better than ever to have let him take that job over to the bowling alley, it was too dangerous, but she'd learned her lesson the hard way. Going on that way about it, you'd think Whit was ten years old. A blind spot, I'd heard my Dad say once, where Whit was concerned she had a total blind spot. She probably expected Whit to be acquitted the first day—she had got him this lawyer from over to the city. Everybody knew that accident stuff wouldn't pull, only nobody had the heart to let on to her.

Dad hung his jacket on the nail near the stove and came back rubbing his hands together and sniffing loud.

"It's going to be hard for her," my mother said. There was a sound to her voice, almost as though she was satisfied or something, the way she said that, but when I looked at her I saw her face bent down, moody and sorrowful. She was cutting bread into those even slices that she likes, and arranging them around the plate.

My old man laughed, a cut between a cackle and a crow. "Hard for her!" he said, and I couldn't bring myself to look at him. It didn't matter any more how things had been between Whit and me now and then. We'd used to call him a yegg, from those gangster movies, and he was that, some of the time. He was built heavier than me and he wasn't easy to get along with, but we'd had our good times. I'd shot baskets with him back in high school, and gone fishing with him a few times since, and for some reason I kept having these thoughts about the times we'd fiddled with Bunsen burners together, making chlorine gas and all, in chemistry. It was this way Whit lived in my mind, this old way, that the old man couldn't ever see, and maybe that nobody could.

"He's her son," my mother said, and from the way her voice was I knew without looking up that she'd raised her eyes and was holding them to me.

My father pulled out his chair without a word and sat himself down, and I did the same. I shivered as the block of air moved out and touched me.

Dad reached for the bread and the butter with both hands. "The
boy was never any damn good," he said. "She spoiled him and she ruined him. That's what's going to do her in, knowing that." His teeth clamped down over the bread and he moved his blue jaws up and down in rhythm. I had to move my head to the side as Mom set down the steaming plate of soup.

"You mustn't talk like that," she said to him, "going there tonight, don't you let her guess you ever thought such a thing. You're to let me handle it."

From the words, you'd think she'd wrapped up all her grievances for me against him—wrapped them up and put them away forever. But my ear caught that the tune was wrong. I suppose it was natural, and she wasn't alone in that . . . plenty of folks in town would be remembering the times Whit got into some of his mean moods, like the time he pushed Ben Nearing off the railroad trestle he and Ben and Ben's brother and I were crossing, and Ben broke a leg. Maybe it was too much to expect, her forgiving Whit all the things there were against him. Somehow, though, I could, and I knew of more things to lay to him than she ever could have. But they all shriveled up when I recollected where Whit was, and why.

I dipped in with my spoon. I wasn't sure what the old man meant by 'spoiled. Whit's mother and my own were pretty much alike. You'd expect that, they'd grown up and gone to school together here in town, and our two families were pretty close up to the time Whit's old man died of the flu. Whit and I were about twelve then, it happened the same winter he sneaked into the chem lab and busted up the microscope I'd made for the state science fair.

I don't think he did it out of cussedness. He'd toted it off to his house to show to his dad, who was sick abed then, claiming he'd made it himself and was going to win a science scholarship with it. He did it, I honestly believe, to give his old man some cheer while he was ailing, because if ever there was one thing Whit's Dad was hot on, it was higher education. He'd rail on about that to both of us all the time, and I think that was what gave me the idea of building the thing in the first place. I was pretty fair in science then, and Mom and I thought it wouldn't do any harm, me trying for something like that. But the heart went out of me when Whit dropped it in the snow and stepped on it. It was to go off the next day for the display, and of course it was ruined beyond help. I wasn't so all-fired put out about it, beyond the moment—I doubt that it would
have really got me anything. But Mom carried on about it something fierce. She was that wild. And there wasn’t a thing she could say, because Whit’s old man died that night.

Things sort of cooled off between her and Ellen Whitby after that. Mrs. Whitby claimed, later, it was an accident and she was sorry, but it was a nice though on Whit’s part, trying to cheer up the old man and all. I was plenty sore, but when you’re a kid you forget things pretty quick. We still palled around now and then, him and me alone or with the other guys. The whole thing wouldn’t even have come to my mind if Dad hadn’t said that about Whit being spoiled. Trust him to look down on a house where there wasn’t a man to run things.

Even with all the hurrying we did, it was close to dark before we left the house. The wind was up for sure now, and the leaves belted past us so thick I realized what a waste it was to have raked them up Sunday. Everybody’s yard was going to be covered by everybody else’s leaves, unless the gale blew them clean out of town.

We walked three abreast, and I watched our shadows growing long on the sidewalk ahead of us as we passed the streetlights. Mom walked in the middle. She was talking to the old man about how she felt about me, how he should try putting himself in a mother’s place for once, that he ought to be feeling nothing but pity for Ellen Whitby now, let bygones be bygones. She carried on a lot about pity and mother’s feelings—treading on ground the old man hated, I was surprised she couldn’t see it. First thing you know, I was thinking, she’ll get him so hot mad he’ll end up blustering it out to Ellen Whitby himself, maybe shaking his fist into the bargain. Even I could see this was no business of his, it’s the one thing needs what you might call a woman’s touch. But she kept on and she kept on, and he never said a word, just plowed along. I couldn’t tell her. And I couldn’t walk behind them, either, because of what I was scared to think about.

I never did exactly see Whit in my mind, on that walk over. I kept having this picture of a guy sitting—well, in the death house, say, with his arms folded and his knees crossed, some guy in a dirty white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, looking down on the stone floor. I couldn’t see Whit there, but there was this guy.

She kept the lawn very tidy, you could see that even with the leaves blowing around. There were two round beds of orange geraniums on either side of the front walk, set in circles of white painted...
cobblestones. The nearby lamppost threw enough light so we could see how they stood up sturdy, not drooping like the flowers at home, and my mother stopped and leaned over them and said “Look, her geraniums are still budding.” Then she straightened and we went on up the walk until we reached the steps, and this time she went first.

We stood still on the porch after she rang the bell, then I turned to look at that neat lawn. Maybe she mowed it herself, or one of the Nearing boys across the street came over. I turned and faced the door when I figured she’d have got time to reach it.

“She don’t appear to be home,” my father said, and there was rich relief in his voice. “Could be she’s heard, and’s gone over to the country jail.”

Mom reached out again and carefully put her finger to the black button and held it there.

The door stayed closed. It was only then that I saw that none of the windows facing front showed a light. Mom turned, finally, and looked at the lawn herself. In the half-dark her face looked puzzled. “Let’s go on out back,” she said, and without waiting for us she began to go down the wooden steps. We followed, walking behind her along the narrow cement walk and around to the side and back of the house.

The light from the kitchen window spread out over the back lawn, and we saw Mrs. Whitby on her knees in the middle of the yard. It was crazy, in the dark like that. At first I thought she was praying, and then the light picked her out better. I even saw the dirt flying up like oil from a geyser and she stopped her digging, seeing us, and sat back and rested the trowel on the grass beside her.

“Well, hello there!” she called to us. Her voice, rising high above the sound of the blowing leaves, was full and cheery. “Come right on back, folks. I been wanting to get one of these little evergreens planted all day, before the frost sets in.” She was squinting at us, leaning her body forward from the waist. I don’t think she knew who we were, those first minutes.

We came up slowly and she sat back and smiled up at us like a perky bird there on the lawn. Smiling and welcoming, just as I remembered her always looking when I’d used to come back home with Whit.

“Evening, Mrs. Whitby.” My old man spoke first, and his voice took me because it was so gentle. Mom went over to her quickly and leaned down close. “Ellen,” she said. I stayed where I was.
Mrs. Whitby got to her knees as though it was painful, and then she jumped to her feet. "Hello, Tod," she said, turning her pleasant face my way.

She didn't know, I saw. She didn't know.

"Mrs. Whitby is speaking to you, Tod." Mom's voice had a little edge to it, but I could see it was from nervousness, it was still her sickroom voice, like the way she'd said "Ellen." I went over and held out my hand. Whit's mother didn't shake it, just stood there holding it between her own two, and I could feel the rough canvas gloves across my skin, and the smell of the fresh black dirt on them.

"You're working down to the lumber place now, aren't you?" She said to me. "It must feel good to get a nice job so soon, right after high school." My face was stiff with the cold, but I tried to push my cheeks back and smile at her, and I remembered that feeling I'd had when I reached home about jobs, jobs forever. Now it didn't seem half bad.

"Yes," my mother said, "I went down and spoke to Mr. Shelton myself, right after Tod graduated. He's got himself a good job there, nice and settled." I thought she was going to say more, her voice sounded that proud, but there was already more in her voice than the words said. A godawful feeling came over me, that she should say that to Whit's old lady right then.

There was a little silence, but I saw Mrs. Whitby still smiling up at me from her tilted face. "You'll be coming over again once Whit's back, I hope," she said, "we've both missed you the past year. It's a shame, the way folks let themselves grow away from one another, a shame." She turned her head towards Mom, and I saw now that she was grayer than she used to be. I moved a little bit, my hand still held tight in hers. Then she let go to wipe her wrist across her forehead. The movement left a black smear of dirt above her eyebrow.

My old man cleared his throat. "Why'n't you two women go in the house," he said, "leave me and Tod here to plant this little tree, Mrs. Whitby?" He stared out over the top of the black hedge at the end of the yard. "C'mon Tod, we can finish it up easy." I leaned down and picked up the burlap-covered root ball and stood holding it.

Whit's mother shook her head, laughing. "No, no, I won't have you doing that. It's too dark now anyway. Let's go in and I'll make some coffee." She looked at us, bright and pert, waiting to shoo us to the back stoop. "I might even leave it for next week, Whit will

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surely be back by then. I figure a boy ought to attend to things around the house.”

That same silence came again, and she folded her hands, still wearing the gloves, and looked down on them. “Things will be a little different around here, I figure. Whit’s a good boy, I maybe haven’t been firm enough with him. Might even be I’ll go down and speak to Mr. Shelton myself, get him settled in a nice job.”

My mother drew air, sharp, into her nose. “Come, Tod,” she said, “don’t force Mrs. Whitby. It’s cold out here. We’ll go in the house, like she said.” I guessed she didn’t want to do it alone, there with Ellen Whitby. I’d have felt the same way. But I sure hated going into that house with them.

I clumped up the steps and followed them into the kitchen. Whit’s mother let Dad help her out of the heavy blue sweater I remembered seeing Whit wearing lots of times.

“Have the water boiling in a minute.” She was quick at the sink and then at the stove. “Whit always likes a cup of coffee in the middle of the evening like this, and I figure he’s grown already, and if it don’t keep him awake which it don’t, it certainly don’t, it can’t do him any harm.” She looked over at me again, a little shyly, and my stomach about turned over. “That go for you too, Tod boy?”

I nodded. Mom was looking at her, grave and watchful, but she didn’t say anything. It’s funny, but only my old man looked right, the way someone should look at a time like this, hunched up over near the window. I thought now would be the time to do it, there wasn’t any sense to all this claptrap. It was like a person being dead, only somebody close doesn’t know it yet, and the person couldn’t be completely dead until everybody knew it. Mom should be telling her right away, that very minute. To hell with the coffee.

“I know you come over to cheer me up.” Whit’s mother leaned against the table with her hands, bending forward. “It’s real good of you, but now the trial’s about done, and I know how the jury will find, and the worst will be over soon. It was a dreadful accident, an awful accident,” she said. “I’m sorry as can be about the Hovey boy. I called Mrs. Hovey a couple weeks ago. She hung up on me, but I understand her feelings. I guess I’d do the same, in her shoes.”

The streak of dirt across her forehead gave her a queer merry lopsided look. My mother reached out and touched me on the arm, as if I’d said something.
"I know, Ellen," she said, her voice real soft, "it takes a mother to feel these things. It takes a mother," my mother said, looking at Ellen Whitby, "to really know what it feels like for her child to be hurt." Then she said, "That coffee's perking. Let me fill the cups."

I could hear the wind roaring, and kept thinking of the good black outside, and the lawn with the leaves boiling over it, and the little evergreen tree. I'd have given my arm to be out there right then. The old man too, I'll bet. He was still standing at the window.

We came to the table, and the two of them started talking about the old days when Whit and I were kids, and every now and then they'd take turns smiling at me with fuzzy looks, as if they weren't quite there, or Mom would reach out and touch me on the arm or on the shoulder. I didn't think it was the right time for such thoughts as I knew she was having, like that here I was, her boy, her safe boy, and all that. She couldn't seem to get enough of me, I slid a look over to my Dad once, but he spent the whole time bent over looking into his coffee cup.

They carried the dishes over to the sink, washing and drying and still talking a mile a minute, all the time laughing their secret mother laughs. Dad and I just sat. I let my thoughts stay outside with the wind.

Then my father hit the table, one heavy fist smash. I could almost see the words ready to come out, blue, but he never loosed a tone, because Mom suddenly laughed high up, a tinkling girl's laugh, and she threw her arm around Ellen Whitby's waist. "Why don't I come over in the morning, Ellen? There's such a lot we have to talk about, and it's getting late. The men have to work tomorrow and all. Why don't I do that, Ellen?"

Whit's mother dried her hands, busy and happy, and her eyes had a moist look, as though she was thinking of throwing her arms around all of us and hugging us tight to her. She was happier than she'd been in years, you could read it on her face.

"That will be grand," Mrs. Whitby said, "just grand."

Dad got up. "Come along, Tod," he said quietly.

I thought of the howling night ahead and her in her bed, happy, like this, and then I thought of the morning, and the price she'd have to pay. I looked at my mother, and I wondered for the first time who was going to tell Ellen Whitby.

"Look," I said, "look," but this time it was Dad who reached out
and put his hand on my arm. "Come along, Tod," he said again. He sounded almighty tired.

We got back outside. First, nobody said a word after we told Mrs. Whitby good night. I shoved my hands in my pockets and moved along next to Dad, listening to the sharp clicks of my mother's heels behind us. They sounded like her voice had early in the evening. Satisfied. We walked like that for two blocks, and then Dad stopped cold under the street light and turned to wait for Mom to reach up with us. She came on without slacking her steps. Her eyes were bright and hard, tearing a little from the wind.

I guess it was because I was watching her eyes all the time she came towards us, but it hit me, then, quite sudden, when she stopped. She was smiling.

"Well," my Dad said, "I seen your pity. I seen all this pity and these mother's feelings you was talking' about." He stuck his arm out, pointing up. "May the God Almighty forgive you," he said.

There wasn't a ripple in the skin of her face. "I aim to tell her in the morning," my mother said. "I don't trust to the God Almighty to always set things straight. It come on me all of a sudden, there's some things you have to take into your own hands. Maybe it's time she got a little of her own back. I figure morning's time enough."

Dad turned, and I went on with him. I wasn't thinking of anything much, not of Whit or his mother, and after a little time I didn't even hear the sharp heel clicks behind us any more. Dad and I walked like that the rest of the way home.

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