WOMEN MUST WEEP

When the phone rang, Dr. Arnold Adams took up the receiver quickly because his wife Emily (who had slept as lightly as a butterfly since their son Dave's death) was snatching a nap on the portico chaise.

"Dr. Adams speaking," he said softly. He drew a couple of swift, concentric rings on the phone pad and waited.

The voice was that of Price Benson, the young man from the sheriff's office at the county seat. "Doctor?" Benson said. His voice held a triumphant inflection. "We've got the boy here."

"Boy?" Arnold said, knowing well enough. He glanced uneasily across at Emily's budgerigar, swinging on its perch, its yellow and green feathers flashing in and out of a sun patch.

"We've got Chessie Jenkins!" Benson said, so loudly that Arnold started.

Arnold watched Emily's head rise up outside the window and turned in his swivel chair so that he faced away with the mouthpiece. He said, "I see." He kept his voice low and tried to sound clinical.

"Your wife's listening," Benson guessed.

"Yes."

"How soon could you come over, Doc?"

Arnold said slowly, "Well I don't see that anything would be gained especially." The thing he did see was that Emily stood in the doorway, her pale hair awry, the mark of the chaise cushion on her left cheek. "If you think it's necessary, I suppose." He added, "I'm expecting another call, rather."

"He was wearing your boy's watch I believe. It's got D.A. inside. We've got to keep the watch for the time being, naturally. But we'd like you to identify it."

"I see," Arnold said again.

"We picked the kid up in Phoenix. He was washing cars. I went <u>with</u> Marsh. All the way back here, the kid's not talked, except to ask for rest stops. I'd say he's got a nervous kidney. If you don't <u>mind</u> coming, Doc. It's just routine." He sounded disappointed over Arnold's obvious lack of approbation.

Arnold said, "All right. I'll come," and hung up with a dry taste in his mouth.

Emily faced him, her eyes as blue as day flowers. The mark on her face was like a scar. "Who was calling Arnold?" He must have betrayed himself somehow.

Arnold hesitated. "Price Benson," he said as casually as he could manage. He tore the sheet from the phone

pad and stuffed it into his pocket.

The name didn't register, or else she hadn't heard. She turned away and began to straighten the books on the table. "Whenever the phone rings..." She didn't finish whatever she was about to say.

Arnold arose and opened the closet door and took out his jacket. "Have a nap?" he asked.

"I may have dropped off. Are you going out, Arnold?"

"The call," he said. He gestured toward the telephone. "I should be back shortly."

"Arnold!" Emily remembered. "Price Benson's the man from the sheriff's office!"

"They've got Chessie Jenkins." No need to tell her, now, about the watch. Arnold knew a sudden nauseous revulsion, followed at once by a sense of loss so deep that he felt drained and empty. He and Emily had given Dave the watch six months ago for his 18th birthday.

Emily looked beyond him, through the window. "I don't know whether to be glad or sorry. What good is it now?"

"Benson asked me to come to Albion."

"Why, Arnold?"

"It's just routine, he says. "Will you be all right?"

"I'm o.k.," she said. "Take care of yourself,

Arnold."

Arnold moved toward her, but she moved away, around the table, fighting for control, and he let her go. She picked up a pair of gloves and smoothed the fingers. "I'm sorry, Arnold. It won't do any good to punish Chessie. That won't bring Dave back."

Arnold thought of Chessie Jenkins, hauled back in handcuffs, speaking only to ask for rest stops. Chessie had always had weak kidneys. The boy had wet the bed consistently, his father, Luke, had told Arnold. Arnold had given Luke instructions and medicaments. But they hadn't helped much. He knew a moment of wondering how they managed bed wettings in jail cells.

And then he wondered whether they had notified Luke that they had Chessie. There wasn't any telephone at Luke's place... When Arnold had his coat on, he kissed Emily lightly, and tasted salt.

Seeing the worn place in the lawn where Dave and Dave's friends had practiced tackling, as he backed out along the curving drive, Arnold thought mechanically that he'd better seed or sod before the Spring rains stopped and put up some kind of barricade until the grass took hold. But then it occurred to him that there would be no need for a barricade. Dave's friends had all called once, and then stopped coming, except for Brian Benton, who brought the evening paper.

As Arnold nosed down the hill in his old Chevrolet,

avoiding the gullies in the sun-baked road, he saw that his sister Maude was making her way along the path up the hill to Arnold's house, and thought, nettled, Maude's not good for Emily. Maude cried. Emily didn't need someone to cry with. He raised a hand in greeting, stopped for the sign that marked the arterial, and drove onto the asphalt and turned toward Albion, keeping his foot easy on the gas.

As he drove, with the window down, he could smell the April fragrance of the blossoming wild plum trees that marched in drifts, interspersed with redbud, along the meandering lines of the pasture draws. A meadowlark whistled, as sharp as a razor, from a fence post. He caught the yellow flicker as the lark flew. Striped Spring beauties, as pink and white as candy sticks, and Johnny-Jump-Ups, as blue as babies' eyes bloomed among the grass blades.

A tractor appeared in the road ahead, and Arnold slowed. He recognized the driver as John York, a patient. John oughtn't to be riding that hard, iron seat, with his hemorrhoids. But farming was John's work. He looked around and pulled off onto the wide shoulder to let Arnold pass. Arnold raised his hand in thanks and greeting, and leveled out.

Luke Jenkins, he thought with a sudden surge of helpless anger... what had Luke Jenkins ever done wrong? Married simple Essie Summers, after he had got her pregnant. Was that wrong? Luke and Arnold had gone to school together there in Picket Rock, all through the grades. Luke hadn't gone beyond

the Tenth, the last the small, two-year high school had afforded.

Luke could have gone on, Arnold reflected, he was bright enough. But Luke's father, honest Ezra Jenkins, had died suddenly, struck by lightning and knocked off his hay-rack, his team killed, too. Luke was left to look out for his ailing mother and to farm the run-down Jenkins place. That was Luke's inheritance, his work cut out at sixteen, a sickly mother and a stony, worn-out farm with taxes two-years delinquent.

In high school and then away at college, Arnold remembered Luke, if, indeed, he thought of Luke much, as the tallest boy in school and the most conscientious. Already a little bent at sixteen, partly from being too tall for the desks and partly from hard work, Luke had stopped school to work the Jenkins farm. Arnold remembered Luke on the baseball diamond, winding up for the pitch. Luke had been uncommonly skilled on the pitcher's box and had won many a game for Picket Rock.

Finished with his internship, Arnold had returned to Picket Rock to practice. Then, he began to see Luke often again. Save for looking older, Luke hadn't changed much. His face, at thirty, had commenced to line some and his stoop was a bit more pronounced, maybe. His teeth were getting bad. He had clasped Arnold's hand warmly at that first meeting. "I'm glad you're back, Arnold." Luke still farmed the Jenkins place, which he'd improved the best he could, and looked after his mother, did the washing and the ironing and the cooking

and all the other chores about the place.

When he could no longer leave his mother, to go to the field, he hired Essie Summers, a young, ignorant thing. God knew how or what Luke paid her. Maybe Essie came because it was a home Luke offered, something she had really never had. Essie had come in from further south, cotton country, where she was probably considered "white trash." "Dirt poor," she'd been. For all there might be poor in Picket Rock, they didn't live in tents and shanties.

Well, there they were, cooped up all winter on the backwoods Jenkins place with a sick old woman. Luke couldn't get away of evenings, his mother was afraid of her shadow without Luke there, and so was Essie. They both leaned hard on Luke. Essie was kind to Sadie Jenkins. She tended Sadie like a baby. "Essie's a Godsend," Sadie told callers. There were those coarse enough to say after a while that Essie must have been a "Godsend" to Luke, too.

Well, Luke married Essie. He did what was right, Arnold reckoned. Essie would have had to go on the county, likely. It was doubtful whether Luke minded much. He was used to Essie's cooking, he had taught her all she knew. If Luke did mind, he wasn't the kind to say. He did what he felt he ought to do. He always had. Sadie died, meanwhile.

The night Chessie was born, Luke came for Arnold on his old tractor. No one could have taken a car up the Jenkins road that night. The road was deep in snow, with drifts piling

and shifting between the hedgerows, the worst blizzard of the winter. When the knocker sounded the night of Chessie's birth, Arnold aroused himself out of warm sleep and went downstairs grumbling to himself.

Luke stood on the snowy step, his earloppers turned down, his coat collar up, and his lean face red with cold. "I hate like hell to roust you out, Arnold. It's Essie. She's come to her time, I guess."

"Come in, Luke," Arnold told him. "I'll get a hustle on."

But Luke declined to come farther than the front entry. He stood on the matting, with his run-over boots dripping, and dragged off his cap. "I hate to fetch you out on a night like this, Arnold."

"That's why I have my shingle out," Arnold said, and put the coffee on to heat and set a chair for Luke. "How close are Essie's pains now?"

"I timed the last few at 15 minutes."

As Arnold dressed, hastily, he worried. He hadn't seen Essie. Luke hadn't called him in, or come. Pre-natal care wasn't a common practice, then. Arnold was young and not so very experienced at going it alone, and Essie was a little, narrow-looking thing.

Luke and Arnold talked a bit on the way, bent to the stinging, wind-driven sleet and facing north on the open tractor. It had been a bad winter on the stock, Luke said.

But he had put up hay "a-plenty."

"Hard on old folks, too," Arnold told him.

Luke agreed. "Their sap goes down," he said. "Take Mama now. Each winter she'd relapse. The last one was the worst for her. She couldn't make it."

Arnold guessed that it had been a bad summer for Luke, too. He had seen Luke hauling water. The corn had burned up. No rain to amount to much had fallen from June until October.

As they turned in through the Jenkins gateway, the tractor lights caught the small, unpainted house. A kerosene lamp burned feebly in a window. Luke's dog barked. "Look, Arnold," Luke said. "About the pay. I've not got it now. But I'll have a hog to sell next month."

"Next month is fine," Arnold said. "Or any month. Don't think about it."

"I'm much obliged to you for coming, Arnold."

Big with child, Essie arose awkwardly from a kitchen chair and bobbed her head at Arnold. She had coffee on, a plate of cookies out. You'd have thought he came to pay a social visit.

That was Arnold's first really close call, he remembered. He had to use forceps. The baby didn't make a sound, nor look as though he'd ever breathe. Arnold held the child up and spanked him hard and blew his own breath into the baby's mouth. He massaged and worked that lump of dough, aware

of seconds passing. Arnold wasn't by and large a devout man, but he said a prayer to himself that night.

When the baby gasped and started squalling, finally, Luke yelled, "By God, you've got him, Arnold!"

When the infant was crying good, Arnold handed him to Luke and went to see to Essie, who hadn't said a word all through or made a sound often.

After it was over, Essie sleeping and the baby bathed and dressed by the two men and put to bed in Essie's clothes basket before the open oven door, Luke and Arnold sat down and drank a bottle of Luke's elderberry wine, while the wind howled and the snow piled up outside. They drank and reminisced about ball gamess won and ball games lost, and laughed, relaxed, about Hallowe'en pranks played, Hank Rainey's wagon dismembered and reassembled on the schoolhouse roof, privies turned over and the school bell clapper wrapped and muffled.

"If I'd had to work that hard at home," Arnold said, "I'd have felt maltreated."

Luke wore a happier expression that night than Arnold ever remembered having seen on that chiseled-looking face. He got up once to stand beside the basket, and then refilled Arnold's glass. "Maybe I'll call him Chester for my grandpa," he said. "I've always liked the name." They lifted and touched glasses and Arnold was happy, too. He felt creative.

In a fine warm glow, the two rode the tractor home at daybreak. The snow had stopped and the earth was like

a fantasy world, trees and roads and fences glistening, the first streak of sunrays discovering diamonds.

"I'm much obliged to you for coming, Arnold," Luke said again at Arnold's gate. "Until you're better paid, and after."

Now, Arnold slowed the car and stopped for a herd of cows in the road. The lead cow turned broadside, the way cows will, to look back and bawl at her white-faced offspring. The bell around her neck swung as the herd boy prodded her with a stick to clear the way. One of Adam Tinker's boys, Arnold recognized, the one with the missing finger. Arnold couldn't recall his name. Bert? Or Andy? The boy had caught his hand in a corn cutter. Adam, who boasted ten now, had named one of the younger ones for Arnold and one for Emily. It was the only pay Arnold had received for helping to deliver either.

He proceeded slowly until he had cleared the herd and then increased his speed a little.

Essie Jenkins didn't give birth again after Chessie, as they called him. She had a couple of miscarriages. She wasn't built for child bearing. Arnold was called in rarely. The boy had whooping cough hard. Red measles left his eyes weakened. Arnold saw Luke often on his tractor in the field, or hauling hay or straw, or bringing water from the town well of summers. The boy was always with him.

Chessie hadn't a strong face, and he was slow

in school. He lisped. His chin receded. Even as a child, his pale blue eyes had a vague and shifty look. But he was fair-skinned and had blonde curls. The boy was all Luke owned to idolize. Arnold met Luke in town sometimes, in Alden's store buying groceries, or dress goods for Essie, who rarely came to town. They always shook hands warmly.

"How's it going, Luke?"

"I can't complain."

Chessie clung to Luke's coat tails and peered out at Arnold. "Buy me some gum dropth, Papa."

Luke laid a nickel on the counter.

"It beats me how they live," Nate Alden said to Arnold. "All Luke buys to eat is flour and beans and coffee and a few other staples. I'd gladly give him credit. But he never asks."

When a Red Cross relief office opened in Picket Rock during the farm depression of the Twenties, Luke didn't apply for commodities, though he might have qualified. He hunted and trapped and fished. "The Jenkins eat like Indians," people said. "Possums and coons, even jacksnipes." Luke did roadwork when he could get it, dragging and grading for man and team wages. Arnold heard that Luke was hard-pressed to make the taxes. But Luke's wasn't the only farm in risk of delinquency.

When Chessie drank Essie's washing lye one Sunday evening, Luke wrapped the boy in a quilt and brought him to Arnold. Luke stood on Arnold's doorstep, his face as white

as chalk, and held the boy in his long arms. If Luke had been ten minutes later...

Arnold veered away from thinking that, seeing Chessie Jenkins dead at six, a moss-grown stone to mark his brief existence.

That day, Luke watched and waited, quiet, filled with trust in Arnold. When Arnold declined the proffered pay, Luke's eyes shot fire. Arnold was obliged, finally, to accept two dollars.

Luke began to bring Arnold gifts, a catfish he had "noodled" from underneath a ledge in the muddy Verdigris River, a young, dressed squirrel, half-a-dozen bobwhite quail, a brace of fat Mallards. Once in the dead of winter, Luke and Chessie came with a bucket of wild honey. Early in the spring a basket of pink-ribbed meadow mushrooms was left on Arnold's doorstep.

Luke had a way of proffering a gift. "We had extra," he would say, offhand. "I just thought you folks could use these."

Arnold thanked him. "How's it going, Luke?"

"I can't complain."

In early adolescence, Chessie began to steal small items. The news, brought home from school by Arnold's son Dave, troubled Arnold not a little. Dinner pails were rifled. A jackknife disappeared. A teacher's fountain pen vanished.

The cash box of the gum machine at the Santa Fe depot was broken open, after which Chessie purchased a cap pistol. "I don't dare turn my back when that kid's in the store," Nate Alden said to Arnold.

"Have you told Luke?"

"I told him once. Luke paid for what he took. The kid's as clever as a packrat, for all he's not very savvy."

A line of boxcars blocked the roadway at the railroad crossing, and Arnold stopped, his engine idling. His memory, painfully sharp, dwelt on an incident on the Verdigris River when Chessie was ten or so. But for the happenstance of Arnold's having decided suddenly to show up at the July Fourth community picnic, Dave might be alive, still. In the raw shock of first grief, Emily had mentioned this. She had apologized to Arnold later.

That day, Arnold had dropped Emily and Dave off at the picnic grounds and had gone on to make his calls. An epidemic of summer flu was going the rounds and Arnold was going day and night almost. "Summer complaint," the oldsters called it, or "cholera morbus." Arnold had said to Emily that morning that it might be well to call off the picnic. But Emily had said the women were extra careful with the food and that it would be difficult to get in touch with everyone

Finding himself in late afternoon in the vicinity, Arnold turned in. He was feeling extraordinarily cheerful.

His patients were all on the mend, and little Josie Tinker, about whom he had worried a good deal all Spring, had given birth to twins, successfully and without complications.

A ball game was on, the men against the boys. Luke was pitching for the men's side. Arnold's son Dave was playing, his cap on backward, his britches rolled. Arnold was able suddenly, now, as he was not often able, to see the boy's face clearly. Lying awake beside Emily, Arnold tried in vain some nights to call up Dave's face. Even looking at a photograph didn't help much.

Recall was hard for Emily, too. Last week, lying beside Arnold, she had asked, "Are you awake, Arnold?"

"Yes," said Arnold.

"Tell me how Dave looked."

Arnold said, "I can't."

But now, remembering, Arnold saw Dave plainly, as though a lantern slide had been thrown on a blank wall. He saw Dave, plain, heard the crack of the bat, the smack of the ball on leather, the slow, liquid murmur of the river over the riffle, as the crowd waited, silent.

That day, Luke had been in his element. Luke was one among the men who had kept lean. Luke took up the bat and lined out a fast grounder in the first inning. In the second, he caught three flies in a row to retire the other side. He came straight to Arnold when Arnold drove up, to shake Arnold's hand.

"Horry, Arnold."

"How's it going, Luke?"

Luke grinned. "I can't complain."

Emily came with a plate of food, and Arnold sat down to enjoy the rest of the game. Essie Jenkins sat a little apart, as always, her hands wrapped in her apron. Her hair, prematurely graying, was combed into a neat bun. Her nose looked pinched. Her skin glistened. She bobbed her head at Arnold.

Arnold didn't see Chessie, nor think of him until a cry went up. Chessie Jenkins had vanished in the deep hole and had been hauled out, unconscious!

The boy lay on the bank, his eyes closed, his blonde curls streaked with muck. Rolls of fat were exposed where his trunks had slipped. A cry went up for Arnold.

Kneeling, Arnold found, was sure he found, a feeble thread of pulse and turned Chessie over.

Luke asked, white, "Is he gone, Arnold?"

"I don't think so, Luke."

Arnold began resuscitation, aware of Luke's watching, trusting. Surrounded by sympathetic women, Essie whimpered. The crowd stood silent, waiting. Ten minutes passed. Twenty.

Chessie gasped suddenly, like a stranded fish, and belched green water.

"He's coming 'round, Doc!"

Chessie blubbered, "Papa!"

"Here, Son," Luke said. "Here."

Arnold called for blankets that had wrapped the ice cream freezers and dried in the sun. Once Chessie was bundled to go, Luke wrung Arnold's hand. "I'm much obliged, Arnold. I reckon I'll never get done saying that."

The girl who was with Dave the night of his death identified Chessie, the Summers girl, Loretta. Dave and the girl were parked on the river road. "Just talking," Loretta said. Arnold was obliged to give her a hypodermic, finally, to get a straight story. Chessie had appeared with Luke's shotgun, a bandanna tied around his lower face, and demanded Dave's watch and wallet.

"Dave just laughed," she sobbed. "He thought Chessie was playing some kind of game, like cops and robbers. I thought so, too. He jerked the mask off Chessie's face and grabbed for the gun. The gun went off and Dave slumped over. I don't know if Chessie lost his head and pulled the trigger or if the gun went off when Dave grabbed for it."

Dave lived throughout the night, but Arnold never hoped. Luke came to the hospital, but Arnold didn't see him. "Tell him I've got my hands full," he told the nurse. "Tell him we don't need <u>blood</u>."

Chessie Jenkins disappeared that night, flipped a freight out, or hitched a ride. No one knew.

Arnold hadn't seen Luke since, save from a

distance.

Arnold ran a stop light and heard the squeal of brakes, a horn, an angry shout. "Sorry," he murmured, but went unheard of course. He approached the city limits. The scattered small houses of the cement workers lined the caliche-coated streets. He slowed for a group of white and black boys who played together with a football. The boys stood to one side and waited for the car to pass.

On the sidewalk, a group of girls sat cross-legged at a game of jackstones. No blade of grass grew in the bleak yards of the nearly-identical company houses and the few stunted trees were sparsely leafed. A woman with her back to Arnold was hanging clothes. He turned into a quiet, tree-lined street and presently drew up in front of the county courthouse, a red brick building, turreted and domed, with the jail in back.

Leaving the car, he knew again the strong revulsion that had plagued him earlier. He could well have declined to come. A doctor always had excuses, a needful patient, a timely call. He thought with dread of a preliminary hearing, a trial dragged on perhaps, a decision as to whether Chessie were competent to stand jurisdiction. What end could possibly be served by sending Chessie to the grim state pen for life, or even to a mental institution?

Arnold deplored brittle trial exchange, the battle of verbal thrusts between public defender and state prosecution,

two attorneys whose lives the outcome would not alter, the eloquent arguments overshadowing the tragedies, making of them contests between two paid contenders.

He wished that they had not caught up with Chessie Jenkins. He had no desire, certainly, to see Dave's death avenged for vengeance's sake.

The wide stone steps up which he walked were hand-hewn and old, each step a platter worn by walking feet. In the yard, an aged black pushed his broom ahead of him as a child would propel a hoop. Arnold raised his eyes to the statue of blind Justice with her balance and caught the revolving door, which turned with a heavy, lumbering sound to deposit him inside the entrance to the lobby of the building.

At the end of the long corridor, that smelled of disinfectant, a sign read SHERIFF'S OFFICE. An index finger on a sketched hand pointed up the staircase. Arnold climbed slowly.

Inside the sheriff's reception room, he saw, too late to turn back, that Luke and Essie Jenkins sat side by side on a wall bench. Essie wore the same coat she had worn for as long as Arnold could remember, a rusty black with a dab of brown fur at the collar, like a mangy kitten clasped about her neck.

Luke, it occurred to Arnold, must have come directly from the field when he received the news. A frayed, gray suitcoat had been buttoned closely over his bib overalls.

What have I ever done for Luke, Arnold asked himself, thinking that Luke's sorrow (of course it was) was greater than was Arnold's own. What had he ever done for Luke except to help to give Luke's son life? Arnold remembered his own father, an old-school practitioner and surgeon, saying, "There comes a time when it's better not to try to play God, Arnold." But how, Arnold asked himself in anguish, was one to know? You did what you had to do, start the breath of life in the newborn, prolong it if possible at the end, and in between.

What if he were to state in court (if he were called) that Chessie Jenkins was incapable, in Arnold's opinion, of knowing right from wrong? Would it profit Luke to give him back his son once more, if it lay in Arnold's power to give again?

Luke had seen Arnold. He arose. Luke held his black felt hat against his chest as though it were a shield, or stomacher. His eyes, on Arnold's face, held a weariness, it occurred to Arnold, that nothing could ever serve to diminish or to eliminate. Arnold read no hope or trust in Luke's eyes now, only a haggard suffering, the stamp of grief too deep for time's erasure.

Essie had seen Arnold, too. Behind Luke, she began to cry like a hurt child, her mouth open and her face exposed.

Aware that Luke had taken a single step forward, as though uncertain, Arnold advanced until the two men faced

each other, close. Filled all at once with love, Arnold said, "Hello, Luke," and met, after a moment's hesitation on Luke's part, the eloquence of Luke's warm, compassionate handclasp.

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