

“The Gift of Prodigality”
Mark D. Johnson

This is an old story. Since it happens again and again, in different parts of the world, it gets told a good bit. We usually only hear part of it and because this time it’s about us, it just seems new. But really, it’s very old, thank God.

Elmer heard the weeping long before he woke. It entered his dream, as an alarming sound will sometimes. But in his dream, as the weeping came in, Elmer found himself in a familiar house, his somehow and yet not the one he slept in. The weeping drove him from room to room in this house in his head. He searched as many rooms as he could get into, and he still couldn’t find where it was coming from. The locked doors that he couldn’t enter bothered him most, making him certain that he’d find the source of the sobbing behind one of them. He really wanted to find the weeper, and he feared it with all of his heart.

Elmer wearied in his searching dream, this mad dash around the house in his head. And the crying tore at him: awful great, racking sobs told him that someone’s heart had broken. They welled up and burst in tremendous groans, rising now and then to moans of despair. Even in his dream, Elmer began to remember that he had heard them, or something like them, a long time before, from the time that—

“El,” Deb’s voice said, close to his ear, “El, it’s your Dad, honey. C’mon get up and come with me. We’ve got to go to him. C’mon, baby.”

“Aright, ‘m up,” Elmer replied, struggling his long, heavy legs, curiously pale beside his brown arms, into his jeans. His short black hair stood up in spikes where the sweat of his dream had matted them on the pillow. Ignoring his heavy shoes that sat at the foot of the bed, he followed Deb out into the hall, his bare feet padding past the room next to theirs where their sons, Randall and Corey, ages five and one, slept. Evidently the sound of weeping hadn’t disturbed their innocent slumbers.

“Is he in his room?” Elmer whispered, “Cause it don’t sound like it.” He saw Deb’s long, blonde ponytail shimmer in the dark as she shook head, ‘no.’ He thought briefly how fine she was, just in the thin shift she wore to bed. Then, she turned her wide blue eyes back toward him and said “No.” Elmer caught the curious rising inflecting in that short, worrying word, and he remembered that he was up to go help his Daddy, though he didn’t know why. Deb had headed down the stairs to the front room, so Elmer lumbered down after her, steps creaking loud in the quiet house under his great weight. He moved as fast as his sleep-stiffened knees and ankles would allow.

When Elmer lumbered into the dark living room at the bottom of the stairs, he saw Deb leaning in the open front doorway, her mouth covered by her hand. Elmer joined her, saying “What is it, babe? Where is he?” He looked out into the dark yard where Deb pointed a shaking finger, toward his father stumbling like a drunk down toward the front gate. A fine mist fell in the cool spring night. Elmer heard the sobs of the old man, his father Amos, as the latter headed toward the gate. Out of the house, the weeping sounded less intense but no less sorrowful. The old man stopped and leaned on the gate, his own great weight making it sag. Amos, nowhere as big as his eldest, Elmer, was a legend in their valley—they both were. Elmer took off out the door calling “Daddy? Daddy?” like he had when he was a child.

The drizzle dampened Elmer's hair and clung to the dark stubble on his bold chin. The cold mud of the yard clung to his feet and worked itself up between his toes. Elmer cursed himself for leaving his boots upstairs. The old man, lost in the storm of his grief, simply sagged on the gate, getting soaked. His lank, white hair plastered to his head and the drops hung on his white beard. His eyes fixed on the long gravel drive that led out to the main road. He did not answer Elmer.

"El, be careful," Deb called after him. "See if you can get him back inside. You'll both catch your death out there." Elmer nodded, giving her a quick glance to see that she was closing the door and heading back inside. He figured that Deb would put on a pot of water for tea. You give people tea in emergencies at night and coffee in the morning. At least, that's what Elmer always figured.

Elmer's thought scanned the list of probable causes for his father's awful grief. He could come up with only one name: David. Seven years before, Elmer's little brother had gotten his share of his inheritance as soon as he graduated from high school and had lit off. He could have made a go of it somewhere if he'd have managed the cash. Even if Davy had just used it to pay rent and buy groceries, he could have lived years on that tidy sum. Davy had blown it in a year and come back home, ruined.

All these thoughts flashed through Elmer's head as he ran to his father's side. Putting his hands around the old man's broad, heaving shoulders he whispered into the old man's ear

"I gotcha, Daddy. I gotcha. We'll make it right, no matter what it is." Elmer said, thinking, this time, Davy won't get such a fine welcome home when he comes back, which he would do, as sure as God made little green apples. "It's okay, poppa. Come back inside, and let's talk about it."

Elmer near lifted the old man's weight off the fence and supported him, then guided the old fellow's weaving steps back toward the house. Amos, half a head shorter than his eldest boy, clung to Elmer's arm, leaning into his son's prodigious strength. Even for an old man, Amos' strength, near legend in these parts, paled beside his elder son's. All the folk around these parts recognized Elmer Johnson as the best farmer they knew, the guy who knew more about crops and livestock, about when to plant, and when to reap, about how to keep your head above water. It was common knowledge that Elmer was the best farmer and the strongest man in the valley, with the possible exception of Amos, his daddy.

Both Amos and his elder son enjoyed that reputation, and they had worked everyday, as hard—and as smart—as they could to earn it. Every step in their life together, Elmer walked in his father's footsteps long enough to make them his own. This night, Amos lacked the ability to manage his own steps, and his son simply walked for both of them. Elmer drew his father's arm around his own shoulder as they got close to the house, for the old man staggered so that he seemed to be unconscious. Deb watched their approach from the kitchen window, pulling her robe tighter about her.

She, too, had figured that the matter with Amos stemmed from David. With that thought in mind, Deb had searched around and found the crumpled note that Amos had dropped as he exited the house. She found it at the bottom of the stairs, took it into the light of the kitchen, and filled the tea kettle while she looked at the awkward cursive.

Dear Pop,

I'm sorry to cut out on you and El just before planting season, but I've got to get out of here. You know how taken I am with Jessie, and she's the same way about me, Pop. We've got something together that makes us special—you know how good we sound together. Well, we talked with a man who runs a bar where we can sing and maybe break into the big time. Between us, we've saved more than a month's wages, which should get us going. It's not like before. This time, with Jessie, I'll hit the big time. I'm sorry that I can't handle life on the farm. That's more like your thing and El's. I just can't hack it. Jessie can't either. We want to see some things, live it up, and we got the talent to do it. I'll come back when I can, but you might hear of me before you hear from me!

Davy.

Deb heard her men come through the door. Elmer called to her, "Baby, he's passed out. Come help me." With the note in her grasp, she hurried into the living room to see Elmer carrying a moaning Amos, sprawling in his son's arms. Elmer held the old man like a child, hefting Amos' three hundred pounds with seeming ease. Deb said, "Oh Lord, Elmer, careful you don't hurt yourself." She always urged Elmer to caution, but he was more than a match for the task, even as big as the old man was.

Elmer draped his father on the couch, while Deb pulled the red and green afghan from hall closet and brought it to spread over her father-in-law.

"Should I call Dr. Stigall, El?" she whispered. Elmer, arranging his father's arms under the blanket, just shook his head, 'no.'

"He'll be alright. We just got to let him get through the worst of it. Pop's just, well, just emotional, about things. He's just plumb worn out, I expect. He'll come through it and be okay, don't you think?" he finished, raising his wide brown eyes to his wife's.

"I don't know, El," she said, "It's David, and you know how Amos dotes on that boy," she said handing Elmer the note. He took it, muttering,

"Could have told you that," Elmer rumbled before he even looked at the paper. Scanning the note, he sat back on his heels, reaching up to stroke his father's damp brow, pushing the wet hair away from his face. The old man continued to sob in his sleep, like a child will. Tears streamed from the old eyes, closed as they were with fatigue and grief.

Deb leaned on the back of the couch, her eyes passing back and forth between the two men. Elmer, her rock, would never shatter like this, she thought. Elmer never seemed to get really mad or upset with anyone, but looking down at the sorrowful countenance of the old man, she wondered if Elmer had the same capacity to care for people as his father did. She trusted Elmer, knowing that he always kept his word, always would. As dependable as the mail, folk said about him. But they also knew that he was harder than his father, a sterner man, a righteous man.

Elmer's indignant thoughts burned with his brother's name. Six years had gone by since Davy came back. He didn't go to college like Elmer did, for his Ag degree. Not Davy; he just got his degree in partying, which Elmer found unconscionable. It just isn't the way a man needs to run his life, Elmer thought again, taking refuge in the position that had gotten him a degree, a successful farm, and a beautiful, loving wife. Sure, there

were other, more fun things that Elmer wanted to do, like play banjo, or play football. He had scouts from pro teams ask him to try out for several teams. Elmer let football pay for school and worked hard to get his degree on time. He did it all for the farm. He would never use his successes to do stupid stuff.

Elmer loved to pick banjo and was reckoned really good at it, despite his huge hands. He'd committed his life to the farm, like his father had done and his grandfather before him. The Johnson's had the finest, most successful farm in five counties. And they had done fine, even better than time when Davy took his share and blew through it. Elmer did begrudge that money, but it was gone. Even after that, he and Amos had made the farm work better than it ever had, up to potential. Elmer always studied on doing things better, taking better care of the land. And the results had paid off. They had more than enough put by to survive if hard times came. They'd even bought out a nearby farmer who had wanted to retire. Elmer ran twice the farm, at twice the efficiency his father had. They'd be fine now, better without Davy around, Elmer concluded.

Amos had paid Davy a bit better than the other hands, and Elmer had known better than to say anything about it. Amos clearly doted on the boy, nine years younger than Elmer and way less mature. Elmer had thought that when he and Deb got married and brought some kids into the house, that Amos would have other youngsters to dote upon, which he did, but he didn't lose his willingness to treat Davy as special. Yet Amos reveled in being Grandpa like few men ever did. Elmer looked at the prostrate figure of his father on the sofa and shook his head. He often wondered what hold that boy had on this old man. True, Davy looked more like their mother, who had died before Davy got old enough to go to school, but that didn't clear up the mystery for Elmer. He was dark like her, had her brown eyes

"Did you make some tea?" Elmer asked raising his eyes to his wife.

"You bet I did," Deb said, "Come have a cup with me." She took Elmer's thick, calloused hand in hers and led him towards the light of the kitchen. She poured the boiling water over the tea bags in the pot and sat it between them on the heavy, scarred table. She put a thick, white mug down for Elmer, whose hands were too big for the small, dainty tea cups from the nice china. Elmer sat opposite her, his head hanging down, the width of his shoulders taking up most of his side of the table. Deb wondered if Elmer would cry too. She had never seen him shed a tear.

"Was he as bad off as this when David took off after high school?" Deb asked, pouring out tea for both of them.

"Well, not quite," Elmer responded, lifting his head and spooning sugar into his mug. "I saw him cry sometimes when he'd go down to the gate of a night and watch for Davy to return, but it was nothing like this. It's almost like something broke in the old man, something pushed just too far, this time. I don't know. I mean, you heard him, right?"

Deb nodded her head, 'yes' and asked, "Did Davy call a lot, I mean to make your daddy go wait for him like that, out by the gate?"

"Nope," Elmer said, "He didn't ever call, 'least ways that I know about. I called twice a week all the time I was away at school, spent every holiday and summer back here, working and studying. Not Davy, though. He never even called to say that he'd be coming back, just showed up one day, looking like something a dog wouldn't sniff, and

Poppa treats him like the President of these United States. Damnation! I just don't get it." Elmer slammed his hand on the table hard enough to make the china in the cabinets rattle.

"Careful, sugar," Deb soothed, "You'll have the boys awake if you're not quiet."

"Sorry, babe," Elmer sighed, "It just frustrates me so much that I think if I had him here, I'd wring his scrawny neck for him!"

"I know, I know," Deb whispered, reaching across the table pat Elmer's hand.

They sat in the quiet a moment, listening for either of the boys to stir in their room above them. They heard nothing, except the tick of the kitchen clock, and the soft patter of the rain on the roof. To Elmer, the quiet just aggravated the mystery of Davy's hold on his father.

He thought back to when the young woman, Jessica, came to the place looking for work. A bedraggled little wreck of a girl, she came with good recommendation from the Tuckers down to road. She was some distant kin of theirs, a third cousin or something, who'd had a bunch of trouble with her step daddy away in Fletcher County and had run off rather than to stay in his house. She'd been near starved to death before she came to the Johnson's place, all skin and bones and curly hair.

She sang, though, had a good voice, in fact, better than average by a fair bit.

Davy and Elmer, both musical, used to play for their dad and the hired hands now and then. Jessie took to singing with Davy, who had a fair voice. His guitar playing wasn't nearly as good as Elmer's banjo picking, and Davy's voice was just middling good. It was true that Davy and Jessie had a pleasant sound when they harmonized, and Amos had loved it, asking them to learn some of his favorites, some of the stuff that Elmer recognized as his mother's favorites, songs that she had sung around the house when Elmer was small.

It started out as a pleasant time on the farm, though, when Davy and Jessie started playing and singing together. Elmer would sit in on the banjo when he could. But Davy and Jessie sang everywhere, in the fields, in the barn, and in the house—like the birds of the field. They just got quiet at night, and Elmer figured he knew why, and he didn't think it was right. Elmer recalled his father beaming with pride, draping his heavy arms around both of them, calling them his songbirds. Amos had talked about them so much that soon neighbors had started to drop by, and soon their help, and folks from in town would come by on Saturday. Davy had even talked the old man into picking up a second hand PA system from the high school, as well as a couple of expensive microphones. They had regular shindigs in the barn last fall.

Elmer recalled, though, that he'd had to remind Davy that work came first and music, as good as it was, came second. Amos had just laughed and said that there was always room and time for music. He didn't see much harm in it, until, that is, Elmer complained that few of the hands were showing up on Sunday morning to go to church, much less David and his girl. Elmer just managed to keep from mentioning that he figured Davy and Jessica were having relations together. He figured that his Dad wouldn't say much about it, so he let it go.

Missing church would have been a telling weakness to Elmer, one he would not admit into his life. He'd gone to church every Sunday for as long as he could remember. It's just part of it, going to church. You work the land as smart as you can, as hard as you can, and you go to church to help make sure. Every farmer worth his salt knew that much. When your life is spent hoping for rain and sun—but just enough and in the right

portions of each at the right time--you begin to recognize that God's a pretty important part of your week, even if it does come with a sermon on Sunday.

So Elmer put his foot down about the shindigs when the hands stopped turning up for church on Sunday morning. That and the fact that his farm yard and barn were littered with cigarette butts and more beer cans than he thought right to see on a Sunday morning had caused him to have stern words with his little brother.

Davy, his handsome face and merry eyes, managed to look sorry enough at Elmer's remonstrance and got things cleaned up. Elmer hadn't seen Jessie involved in that piece of work. Thereafter, especially as cold weather came on, the concerts went off to the town. Amos went to every one of them—or at least to the early part of all of them, before the old fellow needed to get to bed. Amos loved church and would grieve any missed service, especially a communion service, which couldn't happen enough to suit the old fellow. He even loved the preaching, taking time to ramble on about it as he came back home with Elmer, Deb, and the boys.

Elmer couldn't quite figure what had kept Davy so important to the old man. The memory of the old man's weeping, though, would haunt him for days, weeks, even, for he had never heard the sound of a heart break so profound, so soul shaking as the sound of his father weeping over yet another departure of his wastrel son. Elmer figured he cried almost that hard when his mom died, but he was just a boy back then. If Elmer had dared to allow it in himself, he would have thought the old man too stupid for words, taking on so. Elmer would tolerate nothing of the sort from anyone else, least of all himself, and it kept his father a mystery in Elmer's eyes, for he knew better than to think the old man weak. No weak man could work as hard as Amos Johnson.

In the days that followed, Amos took a long time to get his feet under him. He would still play with his grandchildren, but he was quiet with them and as gentle as ever, but he seemed to have lost the ability to laugh. Amos appeared to have lost his appreciation of music. He wouldn't avoid it, but he didn't sing along or tap his feet to it as he had when Davy and Jessica had played and sang. He ate little and would often just sit on the porch swing when the spring rains fell, with that old afghan around his shoulders, looking out past the gate and down the lane.

Looking at him sitting out there one summer evening, Elmer thought that looking at him was like looking at a house that has lost its central support, sagging on old timbers, ready to fall in. Sometimes, on a fine sun down, Amos would shamle down to the gate and lean on it. Elmer, not wanting to see if the old man wept again, would leave him be. Elmer reinforced the gate lumber and hinges so that the gate sagged a little less under Amos' weight.

And Elmer worked on his dad, like he was a plot of ground to be tended. When planting commenced, Elmer cajoled the old fellow back into the barn to work on the machinery. Amos could do wonders with an engine, as could Elmer, but the elder son was needed in far too many other places to spend his time tinkering with mechanical things. Too much rode on the success of this first crop of the season. Farming, for Elmer, had more to do with the planning and the forethought of planting and harvesting than just the payoff of the crop. Through that season, he earned an even greater reputation as a farmer, for everyone saw how he worked to keep his dad growing, as well as the crop. Folks around those parts marveled that Elmer and Davy could actually be brothers, for they were as different as night and day.

Deb noted often Elmer's work on the farm and his massive strength, and her heart would swell with pride when she thought of her husband. Though Amos still led the family in their prayers at meals and came down first on Sunday mornings, ready for church, everyone saw the leader's mantle shift to Elmer's shoulders. Deb, always fair and solicitous of the welfare of everyone, kept the house as her domain and strove to run it with the same kind of wholesome efficiency as her husband did the land. Even from the first days of their marriage, Deb had noted that Elmer acted like a guest in the house, like he was just visiting. His real life lay outside, with the farm, the soil, the animals, and the implements. It made a good partnership, but Deb wondered, from time to time, if Elmer put her first or the farm. He'd sit quiet in the evenings, watching a show with her or listening to the radio with his dad, looking and acting like a dutiful child, awaiting a parent's direction. He washed up on schedule, helped clear up after meals, and played careful games with the boys. On the farm, he had charge and command.

Amos followed suit in this division of life as the days went by. Before Davy and Jessica took off, Amos' attentions went everywhere, as he desired, which mostly gave him cause to talk to everyone on the farm. Amos knew the whole place, back then, knew the moods of the hands, knew the growth in the soil, knew the wind's path through the corn. As summer passed and harvest approached, Amos forgot most of what he knew, seemingly, and Elmer took up where his father had fallen off. Amos' once laughing eyes grew vacant, a day of labor wore him down, rather than giving him vigor as it had once done. And no word came from Davy and Jessica, until late in the Fall, just the weekend before Thanksgiving.

A letter came from him one day, just a note really, asking for money and complaining that, try as they might, he and Jessica just could not hook up with the big gigs. They still worked regularly in the one fellow's bar, but the crowds had turned on them, seemingly, wanting new material, fresh songs. Davy complained that people just expected too much, but that with a little help, they could move to a new city where there were better opportunities. Amos sent the money right away, and Elmer, at the dinner table one night, decided that that was enough.

"No, sir! I won't have it," Elmer claimed, his voice thundering through the house. Everybody stopped what they did, for Elmer had never been known to raise his voice in the house. Amos only raised his eyebrows and asked,

"What, son, will you not have?"

"Throwing good money after bad," he fired back, his voice still too loud. Deb looked at him in wonder. She saw an angry glint in Elmer's eyes. She had never seen her husband ready to fight someone, but she believed that in doing so he would look like he did at that moment. She had heard other football players in college say that Elmer looked like that on the field, and boys feared him. Amos didn't look like he saw it as such, but Deb thought that if she were a man, she'd be putting up her guard right about then—that or getting ready to run. Elmer had the look of a fierce cold front with heavy winds. She wondered if he had somehow swollen, for indeed, his shoulders looked vast as he stood, and his clenched fists looked like they'd each fill a pail.

"I won't have you coddling that boy any more," Elmer said, his voice growing deeper and louder, filling the house with its basso rumble. Deb felt it vibrate in her, like the shock of an explosion. "He's got to learn that his actions have consequences. He's got to learn to take responsibility."

“Well, I expect that he’s doing so now, don’t you think?” Amos returned calmly, like he would speak to one of his grandsons. “Could you not tell from his letter that things are going rather badly for him, son?”

“But he always turns to you to bail him out, to keep him on his feet. You know what he’s like,” Elmer said, letting his enormous weight crash back onto his shaking chair, “That boy will bleed us dry if we let him. I just don’t see it, Pop. I just don’t see how you can go on doting on him like you do. What is it, huh? What keeps him first in your heart?”

“First in my heart?” Amos replied, a frown of concentration replacing his mild expression, “What a curious thing to say. You know, don’t you, that God is first in my heart?”

“You know what I mean, Pop,” Elmer said, rising quickly to his feet again and knocking his chair over, “You’ve always given him everything he wanted. You’ve ruined him, is what you’ve done. How can you not see it? What do you see when you look at Davy?” Elmer’s dark thoughts were full of that handsome face, the lithe athletic shape of the boy, the head of black curls, like their mother, and Elmer’s anger burned all that much hotter thinking about Davy just letting go, running riot, drinking, womanizing, gambling—anything he felt like doing. His anger spilled over into thoughts of Davy with Jessica. They would never marry, Elmer thought, never bring up a family. They would never give Amos such beautiful grandchildren as he and Deb had done. Elmer stood frowning down at his father, and the old man looked up at his glowering son and let his gaze fall to the chair where Davy used to sit.

“When I look at him, I see only his poor heart and his struggle,” Amos sighed, his eyes fixed upon something that no one else in the room saw, “And I grieve that I cannot do more for him. What I can do is send him money from time to time so that he does not starve, him and his young woman, they—“

“Yeah, what about her? What about his little whore?” Elmer’s raised voice had a rasping ugliness to it that caused Deb to flinch.

“Elmer Johnson,” she cried, “You just watch your mouth while you’re at this table.”

“Just shut up Deb. Now!” Elmer ordered. Deb started as though he had smacked her. The safety of their roles disappeared in a rush. They might as well have been out in the field and she an erring or lazy day laborer, put in her place. His hard stare fixed her in her chair, as though she had gotten nailed there. Her tears welled up, but Elmer paid them no mind. He turned his heavy scowl back to his father, whose eyes were closed behind his clasped hands.

“You know, as well as I do, that she’ll drop him like a hot rock when he can’t treat her like she wants. She made eyes at me half the time, but I wouldn’t have anything to do with the little tramp. She’ll take up with another man, and you know it. You can see it in her as plainly as you see how flighty David is. I won’t have it. I won’t let him disrupt this family again. He might get your money, but he’ll never get mine!”

Elmer pushed the table away from him, making Corey cry in his high chair at Deb’s side. Randy sat at the end of the table, his eyes wide with shock at hearing his father’s voice not just raised in anger, but raw and menacing with it. Elmer stalked out of the room, pushing chairs aside as he headed for the front door. Deb watched him, trembling. Elmer looked to have swelled so big that the house couldn’t hold him. Amos’

eyes welled up in tears as had Deb's as his eldest son left them, slamming the front door behind him so hard that the house shook.

Deb trembled as she sat there, and Amos got up and took Corey, weeping, out of his high chair to sooth him. He sat down near Randy and smoothed the boy's hair back. Randy looked up at Amos, asking,

"Grandpa? Is Daddy okay?"

"Yes, my love, he is. He just got mad," Amos explained, "which, really, he hardly ever lets show. He'll be okay. Everybody gets mad, don't they?" Deb looked at the three of them, Amos and her sons, suddenly feeling that she didn't belong in this family. Amos said, turning from Randy to Deb, "He's not mad at you, or Corey, or your mom, or even me."

"He's mad at Uncle Davy, isn't he?" Randy asked.

"Yes, maybe, but he's, well, it's like he's madder at himself than at anybody, but you don't have to worry about it. Your Daddy will never be mean to you or treat you bad, not as bad as he treats himself, anyway, but just don't you fret about it none. It'll be alright."

Randy, satisfied by Amos's kind words, asked for permission to leave the table, and Deb nodded. Corey, after his tears, had dropped off to sleep in his grandfather's arms. Deb sat still for a while trying to recover something of the patterns of her life, which Elmer had shattered with a word and an angry glance. She looked at Amos, seeing that his tears were drying, as he sat cradling Corey.

"Will it really be alright, Pop?"

Amos opened his eyes seeming to come back to the moment from far away.

"Yes, honey, it will. This is just one of those moments that come between brothers. I am sorry that you got caught in the middle of it. It's hard having such a beautiful boy for a brother, almost impossible to deal with, sometimes."

"Is that Elmer's trouble?" Deb asked, "Is he just jealous of David's looks and charms?"

"Jealous of Davy? Oh no, sweetheart," Amos said, his eyes widening in alarm at her mistake, "I was referring to David first. Elmer is far more beautiful than his brother, and I've struggled so to give them each a life, to have them become equals, maybe even friends. It's just so hard for Davy to compare to El. Why, you saw him, how fine and powerful he is, like a thunderstorm coming over the mountain. That boy's as big as the sky, really, and poor little Davy could never, ever hope to match him."

Deb, aware that she had sat gaping at the old man for a full minute before she said anything, recognized the truth of his words. Amos had it right. Elmer had gotten all the gifts. Compared to Davy, Elmer loomed like the figure of a Goliath too big to be felled by a single stone. Sometimes, really most times in this tired old world, little David gets squashed by Goliath and no one remembers the story of his loss. Most of those little "David" figures are quickly forgotten, once trodden under. It is only through God's intervention that a "David" excels and wins that battle.

"I guess you can figure, then, why I turned a blind eye on Davy carrying on with Jessica," Amos said.

"What do you mean?" Deb asked, feeling as though she had just met the real Amos Johnson, a much greater man than she had known before.

“Well, you, my dear,” Amos said. Deb sat up straighter and drew in a sudden breath, unsure what would come next. She asked in a whisper, “What? How? Me?”

“Yes, you darling,” Amos said, roughing up the blonde locks atop her head with his fatherly hand. She had seen him do that to the boys all the time. Randy wouldn’t leave the house without Pop roughing up his hair. Randy said it made him safe. Deb, even in her perplexity, knew what he meant then. Amos, seeing her confused eyes explained, “When Elmer brought home as his wife the most beautiful girl any of us had ever seen, well, that was just one more comparison in which Davy fell short. Jessica is a pert little thing, but she is no match for you, sweetie. Why, you’re like looking at the sun, you’re so splendid, a perfect match for my boy.”

Unable to help herself, Deb wept at the revelation. She considered herself good enough looking, tall and blonde as she was. But she had been raised by farm folks and had never learned how to appreciate the beauty that developed in her over time. Despite having the farm house to run and two sons to raise, Deb still just thought of herself as the gangling girl from down the road. She could see her looks in Randy and Corey, and she knew they were both going to grow into handsome men, but her own beauty, of which she knew or thought little, came to her as a gift just then, one she didn’t deserve, any more than she did these healthy, happy, beautiful boys. She bowed her head and Amos gathered her into his other arm to console her as he had little sleeping Corey.

Deb wondered how she had missed knowing this man. To Deb’s credit, she gave up thoughts of her own unworthiness, and said prayers of gratitude as she had been taught to do. After a while, Amos said,

“I hope you’ll be able to help me with this, Deb. I’ve struggled to give Elmer opportunities to accept himself and see that his brother is struggling to keep up. But folks can’t be told things like that and just learn it. They have to feel it, you know? They have to accept who they are and learn to love themselves. For Elmer, who has never been able to let himself off the hook—because he is so powerful, so accomplished, so beautiful, that he rarely fails. He just doesn’t know what it’s like. Davy, poor soul, had no hope of being anything like as accomplished as El. He’s hardly known anything but defeat. If they don’t learn to love one another, why, I’m afraid that Elmer will break himself to pieces, and Davy will crash against him like a doomed ship on the rocks.”

“What can I do, Father?” Deb asked, sitting up and looking in Amos’ tired blue eyes, so unlike the deep brown of Elmer’s eyes.

“Why, just what you’re doing. Love my boy, pray with him, and talk to him, Deb. Try to help him know how wonderful he is,” Amos explained, “That’s all we can do, is watch for the chances to love people. And pray, of course.”

Elmer came back later that evening, the squall line of his wrath having spent itself in tossing hay bales up into the tall barn loft. It would save the four farm hands having to take all the next morning doing it. He came back like a penitent boy, head hanging, steps shuffling, and was horribly confused by Deb’s warm greeting. She just clung to him while he apologized over and over for telling her to shut up. He grew more disconsolate as Deb hugged him and told him not to worry, that everything would be okay. Elmer almost came to tears. Almost. As it was, he spent much of the night standing in the boy’s room, hoping that if they woke he could comfort them, but they slept sound. Deb finally coaxed Elmer to bed with her kisses, and she and Elmer slept later the next morning,

rising at six a.m. Amos tended to the little ones. Elmer just worked even later in the day to make up for his lie in.

Amos appeared to be heartier of mood for a while after that evening, but Deb thought that he looked more tired, his face showing more lines of care and fatigue. As the weeks past, Amos looked older to her every day. She thought that he was losing weight. Amos' work getting the vehicles ready for another winter stepped up, and he told Deb that such was the reason for his falling off of late. Yet he laughed a bit more, and said he looked forward to Christmas. They received a card from Davy, saying that indeed, Jessie had left him, taken up with a better band, but that they shouldn't worry about him, because he was managing the bar, now, in the place where they had been playing, and that, with any luck he'd open his own place soon, if he could just get a little money ahead. He claimed that he'd try to get free from work to make it back for the holidays, but that he didn't know if he'd be able. Money was tight. So, a week before Christmas Day, Deb took the lead and packed up a several jars of her homemade preserves to send to Davy. Amos put a check in it, and Elmer said nothing about any of it. Before the packet got sealed up, Deb put in a note that said, "Come home. Your Daddy isn't feeling well, and he loves you so and needs to see you."

Amos went down the gate and watched every day through Christmas time. And on Epiphany, the old man died. They found him the next morning, out by the gate. He had dressed up for the cold and had gone out after everyone else was in bed. Evidently, watching for Davy's return had been the last thing on his mind, but they saw no evidence of his having wept. He sat slumped against the gate in the snow, looking as though he were peacefully sleeping. Doctor Stigall came out and examined him. The old doc claimed that Amos' heart just stopped, and from all that he could see, Amos just slipped away to his eternal reward in the same gentle way that he had lived his life.

When they contacted Pastor Grierson, he had said that he would arrange for the burial whenever they liked. Elmer said that, of course it would have to wait for the Spring, since the frozen ground could only be opened now with dynamite. The pastor, though, claimed that such would not be a problem, for Amos had arranged for his plot beside his wife to be excavated, just before Thanksgiving, when they could still get a shovel in the ground. Amos had sworn the pastor to secrecy, which he told Elmer that he had to keep. Elmer accepted it without demure, thinking that it was a grand thing to be able to help folks out with your own burial.

Elmer sent a note, even tried to call David at the bar he had told them he worked at, only to find that the people there had not seen him since Jessie left. They had gotten the notes and the care package and had put them by, hoping that David would stop in again, but he had not. The real bar manager—Davy had never had that job—asked if they wanted to stuff sent back, said he'd be glad to do it. But Elmer just said no. Leave it for him, in the case that Davy found himself in need. Maybe he'd come back to his new friends. So, they buried Amos Johnson, and a fresh fall of snow covered the mound of frozen dirt that they managed to get back over his coffin. All the hands that they had employed over the years, all the neighbors that had come and gone, all showed up again to grieve at the service. They all wept at the loss of this man who had done as much as he could just to love them, to help them, to let them know that, in his book, they were just fine.

Elmer lingered in the church, somehow unwilling to leave, even after the burial. Deb and the boys were waiting in the big car outside, but Elmer had gone back in, through the crowds of neighbors and friends who would come back to the house with their gifts of food. Elmer knew that he had to be there, ought to get home to greet and thank all of them. That was what was right, what he had to do. Amos would have done that, but Elmer, suddenly bereft of his father, couldn't face anyone, so he went back into the church on the pretense of going to the bathroom. It was a twenty minute ride back to the house.

He just sat on a toilet in a stall in the quiet back hall of the church. He knew that he had to force himself to go home and shake people's hands, had to look at their tears and hear their cracking voices as they said how sorry they were. And they would be sorry, for Amos was a lot of person to miss. Then, Elmer heard voices coming down the hall and wondered if he could stay quiet enough to escape notice.

Two men came into the bathroom talking, their shared laughter out of place but somehow welcome in that sad time. They were talking of Amos, of course.

"Yeah, I saw him do it many times," one voice said. Elmer thought that it was a former neighbor, Bill Robertson, but the other voice he didn't recognize.

"What, with a sixteen penny nail?" the unknown voice said.

"Yep, and I heard he could do it with an eighteen penny one too: bend it right over his finger with his thumb, just like that. That man's hands were like machines."

"I had always heard that he was a powerful fellow," the second voice said. Elmer sat still, embarrassed that he listened to them urinate.

"Yeah, he was that, but they say that he was nothing compared to his boy," Bill claimed, flushing the urinal. "Elmer Johnson's like some sort of superman, they say. Strong as an ox and smart, too."

"I guess that he's ever bit the man and farmer that his Daddy was, unlike that poor little scrub, David. That boy'll never amount to anything, from what I hear," the unknown voice said.

"Well, I reckon that is just about the case for poor little Davy," Bill Robertson claimed. Elmer heard the taps come on as Robertson and his friend took turns washing their hands. "Elmer's every bit the best farmer you and I will ever know. But, you know, he might live to be a thousand and buy up every farm in the valley, might feed half the country with the corn he can grow, but he'll never have the heart that his Daddy had. Elmer is the strongest son of the sod in the valley, the smartest farmer I've ever known, and married the prettiest gal I've ever seen, but he'll never be the man that Amos Johnson was. That man was all heart and a yard wide! But you're right about David Johnson. With a brother like that to measure up to, it's a wonder he don't just crawl under a rock and die. Shame, though, he wasn't here to see Amos put in the ground." His friend offered a final "Yep, real shame there," and their voices trailed away as both men left the restroom. They switched out the lights as they left, placing Elmer in the total darkness of that interior toilet, which had no windows.

In the dark, unable to see his hand in front of his face, Elmer's mind and heart expanded and contracted, grew swollen and huge, before it was squeezed down to nothing again as he listened to Bill Robertson talk about him and his father and about his troubled little brother. Elmer had never thought himself the equal to his father in anything, despite the fact that he could straighten out a horseshoe and get crops to grow

on rocks. That was just how things were, he thought. He had studied how to work the land, had learned how to understand its fundamentals. Even at his best, though, Elmer knew he had been fortunate in his crop yields, in his profits off the land, for Amos's farm was rich, rich land. Much of their great success had to come down to good fortune, God's blessing. That's what Amos had always taught him. And the strength in his body that he counted upon every day? Why, that, too, came from God, Amos had taught him, just an accident of birth. Everyone had a share, and some had a greater share because of their need of it, Amos had told him. Elmer typically downplayed his strength, but he recognized on some level that the physical things were easier for him, way easier for him than for his brother. It was just a gift. Seeing his life as such, created a vision of what life would have been without those gifts.

In that darkness, Elmer's inner vision leapt into life, for his eyes saw nothing. Inside, Elmer looked at all of his life from the perspective he'd just been offered. He saw his life, maybe, as old Bill Robertson had seen him and his father and little brother. The pageant of his own family history swept past Elmer's inner eye, and he perceived his little brother for the first time. From where Robertson might stand, Elmer could plainly see that Davy would hardly ever emerge from his shadow. Elmer beheld his own image dominating the scenes, working alongside his father, the other hands, doing so much with such great ease. Davy simply got lost in the press of people whom Amos and Elmer led. There had been the sports accolades in high school and college, the medals for shot and discuss, the state championships, the football scholarship to the state college. Of course, it all took a back seat to the farm. That was the great plan that he shared with his father, that to which he'd committed his life after his mom died. Yet Davy had very little to bring to that enterprise, or any for that matter. Elmer observed him, a small figure, lost in the mighty shadows of his father and brother. Davy's face never showed in clear light, unless Amos held him up. There was Amos, always trying to make things equal, just trying to keep Davy in the light.

What had Amos told him, Elmer strove to remember, when Davy had gone away and come back the first time? Back at that time, Elmer had been so upset and disappointed in his little brother, so jealous of all that Davy had let himself get away with, all the riotous living that Elmer forbade himself in his diligent pursuit of what he knew to be right. What had his father said?

The scene cleared, like ripples in a pond, settling into stillness in the blink of an eye. Davy came back that first time, beaten, starved, sick, his clothes and hair a mess, and his father had treated the boy like royalty. Elmer had thought at the time that Davy had gotten what he deserved, living in such a sinful way, squandering in little more than a year the money that would have paid for four years of college and a little left over. What did Davy have to show for it? Nothing. What had his father said to him? Elmer prayed to hear the words. He could see the old man, wrapping his wasted son in his great embrace, laughing and crying, saying he was dead and is now alive. Elmer knew that wasn't right. Davy had been stupid, wasteful, giving in to all the pleasures Elmer denied to himself. If the wages of sin were death, then Davy had gotten near enough to that. Better let him learn his lesson, Elmer had thought. He remembered hurling accusations toward Amos about making such a big deal out of the boy's return. Elmer saw himself as slighted, taken for granted, all his dedication and his accomplishments negated in that intolerable acceptance that Amos offered to Davy. And what had Amos told Elmer?

In the vision of the moment, Elmer saw his father's round, loving face, creased with laughter and wet with tears, the bushy beard, just then going to white. The eyes that had sought to look with love upon all were brimming with tears as the old man came and placed his hands upon the wide shoulders of his eldest son. "My beautiful mountain of a boy, all I have is yours. We are always together, you and I: everything is yours. But we got Davy back today and have an opportunity to love him and help him be whole."

In the dark of that stall, Elmer reached out to touch the face of his father. His fingers, which he could not see, thumped into the metal wall of the toilet stall, and the vision of Amos faded. Elmer sat in the dark, breathing hard, trying to make room in his understanding for the truth he had beheld about himself, his father, and his little brother. Davy had never been whole, could never keep up, could never hope to do as well as Elmer, and the truth of his vision stunned Elmer

Elmer rose to his feet in the dark of that stall, fumbled blindly with the latch, and made for the patch of dim light coming from beneath the door. The black wool of the suit--the biggest one they could find in this part of the state--bound around his arms and shoulders, the starched white collar of the shirt chafed his neck, and the shiny shoes that Deb had gotten for him pinched him and had slippery soles. Pulling his tie loose and popping the collar button open, Elmer made his way out of the church and back out to the car, a mild buzzing sensation filling his head and making his hands feel heavy. He put the window down as he rode in the front seat beside the funeral director. When Randy complained about the cold air, Elmer put the window back up.

Soon they were back home, the big house seeming too small for all the friends and relations that had come from near and far. Davy still wasn't there. Elmer stayed inside as long as he could, until the press of bodies and solicitous eyes threatened to suffocate him. He saw Bill Robertson in the crowd of neighbors, but he found no one who might have been the man Bill had spoken to at church. Elmer listened to the voices around him but heard none that sounded like the other man. He gave it up. He changed his clothes, got comfortable, and left the house by the back door. Deb had charge of everything inside, making sure everybody got enough to eat and drink. Soon their guests settled into the quiet visitation that sustains most folks for a little while after the passing of a loved one. They would stay for no more than a couple of hours, observe with amazement how late it was getting, and go back to their lives, wondering how things would be for the Johnsons and their neighbors with Amos gone.

When they left, they would see Elmer, down at the gate, looking down the length of the gravel lane in the grey winter dusk, the lane that led out to the main road. Cold, but not bitter, even for January, the outdoors suited Elmer. He even looked warm and comfortable to those who passed through the gate that he held open for them as they drove away. He would stay out there until Deb sent Randy out to get him later, in time to help her get the boys ready for bed.

Not the next night, nor for much of that month, did Elmer dream. Then one night in February, Elmer heard the sounds of weeping again his dream. Once again, the sorrowful moans of a man whose heart and broken had him searching in the house inside his head for the source. This time the dream had people in it, a lot of people, folks he hadn't seen since his mother's funeral, and they milled all around the first floor of the house. A vague recollection of his previous dream of weeping lingered on the edge of his awareness, enough so to drive him to find the source of the weeping. In a hopeful

insight, he thought he'd find his father again, find the old man whom he missed with all of his heart. Another portion of his dream thought said that it would be Davy that he found, Davy come home again, Davy looking for help in his sorrow, seeking solace in the only place that he had ever found it. Elmer forced himself to move faster, to search every room. His heart longed to find either Amos or Davy.

When he came to a locked door, he grew angry and threw his body against it. A couple of doors held through two or more shocks from his enormous shoulder—which would never have withstood him in his waking life. He had trouble getting going, getting his feet under him in the dream. Little things underfoot, things he couldn't quite see in the dark house, tripped him up. His frustration, though, gave him more strength and the doors broke down before him. The rooms beyond them stood empty, except for more doors, which were locked to him. Those he managed to break through as well, finding more strength to do so. It got so that the sound of the sorrowful moans got closer, and no door would stop him. He began to shatter them with his fists, and soon even a touch from his hand would make any barrier fly into splinters. The weeping voice must be behind the door in front of him. It stood almost closed, just barely open and the room dark within. The heart broken voice came from within.

"Elmer!" Deb's insistent voice called, near his ear, "Oh El, what's wrong, baby? Wake up! Tell me, honey, what's wrong?"

"Wh..." Elmer started, waking to find that his eyes were filled with tears, and his voice so thick that forming words was impossible. He tried to get the tears to stop, but they would not. Deb held his head to her bosom as she would Randy or little Corey, wiping away the tears as best she could. They kept flowing, as though the huge man was filled with them from top to bottom and they must all leak out through his eyes. To Elmer, there seemed no end to them. Deb did not try to get him to stop. At most she just kissed him on the head and said, "I know. I know, El. It's okay."

When Elmer's tears had slowed enough, he got up, Deb with him, and went downstairs for a pot of hot tea. It's a good thing to do. As they talked across the scarred table, Elmer told of what he had heard from old Bill Robertson, and Deb, in turn, shared what Amos had told her last year about the struggles that he had seen Davy go through, trying to measure up to anything like his older brother. Elmer just nodded as he shouldered the enormous burden of the truth. He wept some more but not as loudly as before, and Deb held his hand, thinking that she had never before seen Elmer look more like Amos. She offered grateful prayers.

Davy would be a long, long time coming home again, despite all of Elmer's attempts to contact him over the next couple of years. Elmer worked as hard as he always had, and the land gave back in good measure. Hard times came and went. The boys grew like weeds. Elmer and Deb had put enough by to make it through any economic hardship. Elmer sold two tremendous plots of land out along the main highway, one to a supermarket, the other to an apartment developer. The town nearby was beginning to grow.

Those plots were most of his extra acreage, and in giving them up, Elmer retreated into quieter successes on the original farm that Amos had left him. He just worked it himself, with the help of Randy and Corey, his tall, slender boys, who grew to favor Deb's people more than Elmer's, though the younger one, Corey, clearly had Amos' eyes.

Davy did not come back for a very long time—which is another story in itself-- but when he did, he saw his brother watching for him, leaning on the front gate, shading his eyes against the glare of the evening sun. Davy had not told him he was coming back, but there stood his elder brother, Elmer, watching for him as Amos had done. Davy had had to come back on his own terms, but when he did, he found Elmer waiting for him, a smile on his weathered face, the gift of prodigality warming his brother's smile and filling his eyes with generous tears.

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