

The Cattle Guard

Prologue

Sometimes stories have a way of just working themselves out – sometimes. Sometimes they just leave you hanging. Then, there are those tales that take hold of you and just won't let go.

This tale however, appears to be all three for it certainly seems to work itself out, it definitely leaves you hanging and it most certainly won't let you go.

Chapter One

“I'll get that, Honey.” The phone rang three times before I finally got it.

‘Tanda Elsa? Well, that's a shame....how old?...98? Wow! Sure, I'll come up this afternoon. What? The old home place....Sure, I can stop by on the way and take a couple of pictures for her – I'm sure seeing it will help before she passes – okay – love you too...bye.’ My cousin Edgar gave me the details about poor old Aunt Elsa and I would leave immediately.

“Honey, I have to pack a bag –Tanda Elsa will probably pass on tomorrow but cousin Edgar wants me to snap a few pictures of her old home place on the way – okay?” I asked my wife Jeanie.

“sure, tell them hi for me too. I'll take the kids to school in the morning – you just take care of what needs to be done. Good thing today's a holiday. At least tomorrow we'll get back to normal here,” she said lovingly.

I hit the road from Austin, Texas for the “Hill Country” about 30 minutes later. It was 10:30 in the morning and I felt I'd make it to Fredricksburg by noon...maybe 12:30. The side trip to the old place would only take an extra 30 minutes at the most...well, that was the plan....

As I rounded the curve on the old Farm to Market Road 1320, I noticed smoke in the distance on my left. “Hummm,” I said to myself out loud...”Something’s burning.” It troubled me. This was July and the land was already suffering 100 plus degree sweltering days with little or no rain. My turn off to the old home place was about $\frac{3}{4}$ ’s of a mile ahead on the left. It appeared I might go right by the source of the smoke when I turned off to the left.

Then, it happened! A large wooden box seemed to appear out of nowhere and I ran over it on the driver’s side – “Pop, Pop! ...flop, flop, flop, flop...” Flat tires on the front and rear. I came to a stop and got out to examine the damage...shredded tires, flats and only one spare!

“Oh, well I’ve got AAA for a reason!” I said to myself. I took the cell phone and started to place a call...no signal. “That’s odd,” I thought, “I just had signal five minutes ago when I spoke to Edgar to let him know I was 30 minutes ahead of schedule.”

Then, just for a moment I heard people...a party, then, “Crack!” It was a baseball game...people where cheering. “Of course, what am I thinking? It’s the 4th of July and the old Post Oak school house is now the community center. Bet they’re even making barbeque...” my thoughts went back to the days of my childhood in this very neighborhood.

The car was done. I would have to walk and I might as well head for the party and use someone else’s cell phone. I looked in the direction of the smoke and voices and realized I was at the intersection of the old Double Horn Road and FM 1320. But, the old road had been fenced off in the 60’s and abandoned. Now, it was badly over grown. The Highway Department had moved the new road to Fredricksburg down about $\frac{3}{4}$ th of a mile to the north to avoid a small creek that had been known for its flooding.

But, there was still somewhat of a path and after climbing the fence, I’d still be headed straight for the old school house less than a mile to the west. “Well, better get trekking,” I said to myself out loud.

Chapter Two

I was only about 500 yards from the school now, just around the corner and over the hill.

As I walked on, I came to a cattle guard. It had been constructed across the road to keep cattle from crossing into another land owner's pasture since none of the right of ways along the dirt road had been fenced.

A six inch thick tree had grown up in the middle of the abandoned road just 10 feet to the east. "Well, no one's going this way any more," I said to myself. Carefully, I balanced my way across the iron pipes of the cattle guard and immediately smelled smoky barbeque. Maybe, it was just the sweetest scent I'd ever smelled or maybe it was that my stomach was yelling at my brain.

As I rounded the curve, the sounds grew louder, and a bit strange – German -I hear German...and English. I stopped to listen again, yup – it was both. The hill sloped away and there before me was a scene from a historic postcard: antique cars from the 20's and 30's, people in period costumes and an honest-to-goodness sandlot baseball game in progress.

As I walked toward the picnic 200 yards ahead, a small, nearly new looking, Model T Ford (about 1927), came clattering toward me.

I couldn't help but flag down the driver to warn him about the tree in the road just a few feet east of the cattle guard. I was convinced this "reenactment picnic" fellow was in for a surprise if he wasn't careful.

"Say, I don't mean to trouble you but, just on the other side of that old cattle guard a few hundred yards back, there's a tree growing in the road blocking the way. Don't think your tin Lizzy will make it through," I said respectfully.

"Is that so? Old cattle guard...just put in two years ago...well, must be a mighty fast growing tree – went to Hye for soda waters not more than two hours back and there wasn't no tree...say, who are you and where'd you get them funny looking shoes?"

I didn't want to argue when I was just trying to do him a favor so I replied, "Henry Schmidt, and I got these shoes at the mall in Austin. Why don't I just show you the tree?"

“All right, Doc Simmons is my name...hop in...where yu headed on foot?” he asked.

“Fredericksburg, gotta see my aunt, soon to pass, so I have to get help with two flat tires – just at the end of the road here...”

“Well, we can sure help with that, let’s get ‘em fixed at Edwin’s garage. He’s fast and cheap – I’ll take you – that suit ‘ya?”

I wondered just what kind of joke old “Doc Simmons” was playing on me. Edwin’s garage went out of business in the early 60’s when I was a teenager.

“Say, you re-enactment people are really in character – Edwin’s garage has been...” I started to say.

“Now, where’s that tree you said was in the road?” he interrupted.

I rubbed my eyes in disbelief...no tree and the road stretched on ahead...well traveled. “Guess I’ve been in the sun too long,” I offered.

“Well, at least I’ll be able to help you with the flats,” he continued.

As we got to the end of the road, the fence I had climbed was gone and so was my car. Then suddenly, Old Doc slammed on the brakes. “Damn that Frank Taylor! His horse shoes could cause a real accident!” he scowled with his fist in the air.

In the road was the same wooden box full of used horse shoes I’d hit not 30 minutes before...but, unscathed. “Better put these in the trunk before there’s real trouble...do you mind?” he asked and I immediately responded:

“Sure, you have the key?”

“Key...the trunk don’t have no key...” he said somewhat amused. “Now, where’s that car of yours?”

“Well, I guess it’s up the road a bit. Tell you what, I’ll just try my cell a few more times and I won’t keep you – making another soda water run?”

“Yup, sold out...say, what’s a cell?” he asked.

“Never mind, just something we say in Austin – you know how city folks talk,” I suggested. I had to...an unbroken horse shoe box, good road, no tree, no cross fence, no car and Edwin’s garage still in business...this needed examining and not with Doc asking questions.

“I’ll just walk back to the school house and then after I’ve cooled off a bit, regained my wits...well, then maybe you can help me look for my car say, in an hour or so?” I asked.

“Sure thing – keep out of the sun and make sure you get plenty of ice cold tea. I’ll see you then,” and with that he was off. The paved Farm to Market Road 1320 was now a well-bladed white adobe and gravel road ...with no tar.

What was this? What had happened? One moment I was on my way to Fredricksburg and the next my whole world seemed lost to me. As I began to walk back down the old Double Horn Road back to the school house, the scene started to change right before my eyes. The farther I walked, the more dense and overgrown until, once more, I was at the tree in the road just 10 feet east of the cattle guard. I paused...not a sound...no hint of barbeque... no voices...no baseball game.

I must have stood there, frozen in place for five minutes...afraid to move. Slowly, I stepped on the iron pipes that kept the cattle in check. As I stepped off to the other side, my stomach gurgled and just as suddenly the fresh, sweet, smoky aroma of barbequed beef, pork and mutton tantalized my empty stomach. Baseball, voices and loud, unbridled laughter, more free and joyous than I’d heard since my childhood...happy people....filled the air.

I turned around for the first time on the road. It was just 10 feet on the “west” side of the cattle guard...and looked back eastward. NO TREE!!!

I began to realize what had happened. I’d heard of this before, a time portal...a place where one could just step back into the past! But, I’d only thought it to be some strange and silly tale from the pages of Fate Magazine, Amazing Stories or the National Inquirer. But...THIS was real!

I sat down on a large boulder to plan. Here was an opportunity to study the people of history, my history...my ancestors. But, I had to be careful. I was

certain I would not be able to change the past, but even that certainty seemed silly. How could I be sure and worse yet, how would I ever know?

The worst possibility – not being able to get back. The panic well up inside, then, my stomach rumbled again. I had to eat...I was very hungry.

As I walked back to the picnic, people began to notice me. Maybe, right off, since I was the only adult without a straw hat...even the baseball players. Actually, I felt silly being bareheaded in the July Texas midday sun.

“Howdy young feller, where you headed?” asked a very old and wrinkled grandfather standing next to the stone barbeque pits. I noticed he was holding a long-handled brisket mop for keeping the meat moist while cooking on the pit.

“Fredricksburg, eventually. My car broke down a few miles back – say that barbeque for sale?” I asked hungrily.

“Sure ‘nuff...30 cents a plate with all the trimmings,” he said cheerfully.

“That’s really good. It’s a lot more in Austin,” I added.

“Get yourself a plate at the school house, then come back with your trimmings and we’ll load ‘ya up...been on the pit since 4 am ...just right about now,” he beamed.

I wandered over to the school, a one room building constructed in 1858. The student desks were still in place, ink wells and all. Then, I laughed to myself: “Of course, they would be in place...it’s still in use and would be for the next thirty years.

“Well, I’ll say, never seen you about these parts..you new?” asked a middle aged, graying woman with a large, frilly apron serving slices of pie large enough to choke a horse.

“No maam, just on my way to Frederiskburg. Have an aunt that’s not going to make it till morning, they say. Just thought I’d get a bite to eat since I got two flat tires on my car a few miles back,” I offered.

“Well, help yourself to the trimmings. The pie is 5 cents extra so if you get everything...it’s 40 cents. I know that’s high but we need the money for the school, you understand,” she smiled.

“Sure, that’s fine,” as I laid two quarters on the counter. Fortunately, they were worn and were not spotted as “future money”. “Just keep the dime for the school,” I smiled back.

“That’s nice, thank you. Austin?” she asked. “What you do there, if I might ask?” she inquired at the point of being just a bit nosy.

Think, think, think! No computer analyst would not do...”I work on really fancy adding machines for the government...can’t say much more, you know,” I hedged.

“Bet that’s a really good job...you married?” She was extremely curious but I could not fault her for it since nothing new ever happened around here.

I glanced at my ring finger...no ring! In fact, not even a ridge on my skin indicating I’d worn it for the last 15 years without taking it off even once! It was as though I’d never been married... well, I guessed, I should answer as if I lived at this time in history... “Well no, I’m not married yet,” I answered truthfully – not for another 72 years!

“I’d guess you’re about 25 – aren’t you?” as the old busy body continued.

“I wish – I’m 34...nearly 35 ...next month, thanks for the compliment!” I smiled broadly.

Just then a young woman in her twenties, maybe twenty five, walked in the room. She came up to me, was quiet for a moment, then asked, “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t...I’m sorry, I’m Henry Schmidt – from the Austin Schmidts,” I added to make them all more comfortable.

“Well,” said the talky woman, “I’d like you to meet my niece Clara, from San Antonio, up here for the summer – she teaches back there – trying to get her to take this position but she said she’d need a better reason to stay here than just that...,” then she laughed.

“Oh Aunt Edna, you’re horrible – I’m so embarrassed,” the girl scolded her aunt, then turned beet red.

“It’s nice to meet you, I’m Henry,” and I gave her my hand gently.

“Thank you, Henry,” she said, “Here for long?”

“Well, until I can find my car and get the two flats repaired at Edwin’s Garage at Hye, then see Aunt Elsa in Fredricksburg...she’s passing on they say, very soon...maybe tomorrow...guess I’m stuck,” I said, maybe a down at the end.

“Oh,” she said softly. She seemed a little disappointed but, tried not to show it as it would appear way to “forward”.

Then, I looked around and realized why she would want me to stay – everyone who was young was very young or they were forty plus...even the baseball players across the road. She had no one to “visit” with her own age.

“Better get that barbeque over there now,” I said to lighten up her embarrassment. “Don’t bother yourself – here comes Opa Tatch with a whole platter of everything – now remember – you also paid for 2nds – enjoy yourself,” said Aunt Edna in her sweet, twangy southern drawl. She was beaming.

“Well, I guess I better sit down before I spill something – would you like to join me?” I asked Clara.

“Sure, can I ask you about Austin? I’ve never been there – okay?” She had just brought two iced tea glasses, silverware and napkins.

“Thanks, can’t seem to remember anything today,” I said bashfully.

“So, where is your car exactly?” she asked.

“I’m not sure – maybe down the road on e or two miles – hit a box of used horse shoes full of nails – 2 shredded tires. But, with the sun so hot, I guess I’ve forgotten just where it is.” I was trying to cover the fact that there was no longer any car...not for another 72 years!

Then, THE question: “What kind of car you drive?” asked Clara innocently.

Here it came – I’d have to lie – who would have ever heard of an Isuzu.
“Plain old Model A, that’s all...used.”

She smiled and took a long sip of tea, watching me closely over her tiny wire rimmed glasses.

“May I ask you another question – maybe a bit personal?” she seemed to hesitate and then looked down for a moment.

“Sure, anything,” I lied again.

“Why you wearing those strange shoes? They look so comfortable...,” she stared a long time at my feet.

“I’m in sales in an adding machine company and they make us wear these so our feet don’t hurt on the concrete floors all day – they have special rubber insoles. (I remembered the gel cells inside.) Maybe I’ll get some regular ones in town tomorrow,” I suggested.

She smiled approvingly.

I ate and ate. The food was the best I’d ever had and Clara made it even better. “I’m thinking about moving out here in the future - what do you think?” I asked her respectfully.

“Really? she seemed to have her spirits lifted almost immediately.

“What would do?” she continued.

“Accounting or something like that, but I’d like to buy a farm and settle down.”

Now, it seemed Clara had found the “purpose” to stay and teach. It showed but, again she blushed and looked away.

Down the road, a clanging and banging announced old Doc Simmons coming back with more soda waters from Hye.

“Say, Mr. Schmidt, there’s a problem – there’s no car broke down on the road between here and Hye – how can this be?” he asked suspiciously. Time to protest...loudly!

“What? That can’t be...it’s 27 Model A with a dent in the front left fender and new white walled tires...ordered them special. It’s got the spare mounted on the rear bumper and has the left running board missing – how can this be? What could have happened? I’ve got to see for myself!” I yelled loudly. I headed for the door.

“Calm down, calm down – we’ll go one more time and look – but I didn’t see it. Let me have your keys and I’ll get my son Fred to drive it back when we find it, okay?” he asked.

They’re in the car. Didn’t think anybody would take it – do they do that out here – they do back in Austin...but, NOT out here – right?” I gave a stellar performance.

“It’ll be okay,” soothed Clare, “We’ll find it.”

“All my clothes and money are in the trunk –what am I going to do?” I fainted.

“Well, you sure ain’t gonna starve – not in this country!” proclaimed Aunt Edna.

“Thank you, I’ve never been in such a fix,” I replied.

“Henry, my dad William McDougal – well, we live at the water crossing at the Pedernales River, sure could use some help for the next few weeks, but I don’t think anyone can take you to town to pay respect to your aunt – see, we only go once a month and we just went yesterday. Most folks don’t even have money for that these days with this depression,” she soothed softly. Her hand was gently patting mine on the table.

“It’s alright, hadn’t seen my aunt in several years anyway. That’s the way it is sometimes,” silently grateful not to have to travel to see a somewhat nonexistent aunt.

“So, can you stay? I mean, would you like to stay for a few days – he’d be grateful for a hand. He hasn’t any money but he wouldn’t charge for room and board – It would really be a blessing for him,” she sighed, then glowed with a broad smile.

It was not until then that I noticed the sparkling crystal quality in her chestnut eyes – very mesmerizing... “Quit staring!” I told myself.

“Don’t you want to know what the work is and where?” she asked finally lifting her hand to flip back her long slowing, brown hair from her shoulder.

“Sure, but beggars can’t be choosers, can they?” I said soltly.

“Don’t say that – we’ll find your car and you can be on your way...this is just for a week or so,” her voice trailing as she looked away in thought.

“Okay, what’s the job?” I asked smiling.

“Fixing fence on the river and planting pecan trees in the river bottom – perfect soil,” she said as her dad walked in from the pits across the road.

“Clara, come here – excuse me mister for just a moment,” he looked irritated.

“You know I’ve been wiped out and can’t pay nobody for nothing – honey you should have asked me first,” he whispered.

“Dad, this is Henry Schmidt from Austin. He’s had car trouble and now nobody can even find the car he left just a few miles back on the Sandy road to Hye – he’ll work for room and board for a week or so till the sheriff can sort it all out – seems the car might have been stolen along with all his clothes and cash in the trunk – what do you think? she, finally pausing to take a breath.

“Well, that’s different honey – but young feller...we need to get you something besides them city shoes – ain’t going to do work justice – we’ve got a cot on the porch and your own coal oil lamp. The mrs’s is a fine cook and one day Clara just might be able to boil up some water too,” he laughed deeply.

Clara pounded on his big muscled arm playfully. “Dad, I cooked all last week – remember?” she stated bluntly.

“Honey, I was just funnin’ you,” and he gave her a gently hug.

“That would be much appreciated Mr. Schmidt...any questions?”

Soon, the school house was filled with shouts and laughter as the young kids poured in from their afternoon baseball game across the road ready to attack mounds of barbeque, pies and homemade ice cream.

Clara walked out on the patio by the large school house porch. She explained to Henry that parents would come in the late afternoon on Saturdays twice a year and sit there to watch the little fall and spring plays performed by the school children. Then, in late May, the whole community would turn out, much like this 4th of July for the traditional summer school closing. This marked the 3 ½ month summer vacation when the children would return to full day labor on the farms until the fall harvest. Everything, she explained, rotated around the harvest.

Any “School Mom” that didn’t know the “rules of the harvest” would not last long in this community. That’s why there was now a vacancy for the new school year.

Mr. McDougal owned a 34 Ford pickup. The cab was too small for him, his wife and their three younger siblings of Clara’s. Everyone just piled into the bed and enjoyed the breeze going home.

It was strange, but no one ever asked me anything about Austin again. I even noticed I had begun to experience memories fading of my “future wife and kids”; fading almost into nothingness while try as I might to remember.

Clara’s dad had loaded up the family just two years back one early morning and took the family to the grounds of the state capitol for a picnic. Clara had moved to San Antonio six months before to begin teaching and missed the trip.

The Mc Dougal farm fence building was hard work but somehow at the end of the day, I felt amazing and slept better than any time in my life. Clara seemed to fill my thoughts night and day, but at this time, one had to be

discrete and totally respectful even if a kiss would have happened long ago back in my own time. I decided...I could wait.

A week went by, then two. One day the sheriff came by, took down “the description” of my Model A and seemed completely satisfied. He never asked for registration, insurance or anything else. He also spoke with some authority on the very real possibility that it might never be recovered.

I also dropped by general store in Hye, Texas and made a totally fake “long distance” phone call to my employer in Austin. I respectfully resigned and pledged to keep helping Mr. McDougal if he would have me. He accepted the offer with no hesitation as the price was just right.

Clara and I took long walks the few hundred yards down to the river each day. Evenings found us in the porch swing, though it was actually hung on a huge over hanging limb of the old oak tree in front of the house.

One afternoon, Mr. McDougal came up the path from the river with the biggest smile I’d ever seen on his old, weather worn face. “I’ve got it Henry,” he said excitedly, “for the fall! Want to come take a look?”

“What sir, what do you have?” I asked.

“Been meaning to talk to you about that – you need to call me Bill from now on...I mean you’re right in between me and Clara, being she’s 25 and I’m 50 – you being in your early 30’s – know what I mean – how about it?” he was smiling in anticipation.

“Yes sir...Bill, it’s a deal – what’s the thing that got you excited?” I asked.

“Uncle Rudolph’s field across the river – good bottom land – the richest in this part of the country and he’s left it lie fallow of the last six years - he’ll lease it to me for 10% of any harvest we get – you interested?” his eyes almost twinkled.

“Me? Sure, maybe we could plant barley – it’s hot right now,” I said, then worried a bit.

“Hot?” he asked as his head tilted a bit in curiosity.

“Just young folk’s talk – you know – something really popular and sells well if it’s hard red barley,” I said.

“Good – how you know this?”

“Read some stuff over at the Hye store yesterday – it’s really a good idea – how many acres is it?” I asked.

“Fifty four and ready to be plowed this week.”

“I saw a small Ford tractor for \$300 in Stonewall. Is there something we could sell or trade to get it?” I asked.

“Trade up! Great idea! The team is eating me out of feed – I could throw in all the tools and tack,” he suggested.

“Some of the older farmers still prefer them over these new tractors. But, Henry, it’s time to move on. Besides, we can plow the whole field in a week instead of a month and a half and I won’t drop dead in the process – let’s see if this thing is possible!” He was grinning like a five year old with a 5 cent ice cream cone.

A week later, I was plowing in the deepest and richest soil on earth. Three weeks later we planted 250 pounds of hard red barley. The folks at the general store in Hye already committed to taking the whole crop at market price in the fall. With that, we’d make a good profit the very first year!

It was time to ask Clara the question. Would she like to marry a fellow with no money, no car, no house and no farm? Well, I’d find out soon enough. Mr. McDougal, “Bill” had silently begun to slip me \$5 a week for my hard work in the place and with the barley field.

On a trip to the little town near by I spotted a jewelry store. I’d saved \$40 dollars and decided to spend at least \$30 on a ring. I found a simple gold ring with a tiny diamond for \$27.50 – bought it and had it wrapped.

The next evening in the swing I asked her to consider a life with me. She smiled and politely asked me if she could think about it.” I was devastated.

Suddenly, she giggled like a young teenager and said, “Done thinking, of course, silly – got you!”

Her sense of humor was ever present, even when I wanted to be serious – but, life was not burden to her, no matter the situation – and her family had endured many since this Depression had gripped the nation.

I took the package from my coat pocket and handed it to her as though I was presenting a gift to a queen. She gently opened it and seemed to glow in the evening light. “It’s the most wonderful ring I’ve ever seen,” she said and leaned over and kissed me softly and with the most gentle of passion.

We sat for what seemed like an hour before she spoke, “I love you so much – now, I have a surprise for you!” She was beaming.

Aunt Mada is moving to town. Her husband, Uncle Bob – Dad’s brother who died last year left her the family place, 87 acres on the other side of Uncle Rudolph’s across the river. They never had children and she asked me if we would like to take over the place – that is – what do you think... can I say yes?” She leaned her head on my chest and pulled my right hand close to her heart. It pounded strongly.

“Clara, you and your family are the very best thing that has ever happened to me in my whole life. Is the place what you want?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s a quaint cottage – simple and in good repair – I’d love to live there, but not without you.” She got up suddenly and turned, holding both my hands in hers. “Come with me, you’ve got to see this!”

we walked down the path to the river. There on the mud banks, thousands of glowing sand worms lit up the banks of the river. Hovering overhead, what looked like millions and millions of fireflies showered the scene with florescent like sparks, each in turn, reflected in the still, slow moving river. Since the moon was not yet out and a low cloud cover obscured the stars, this fairy land was complete.

I promised myself to remember that moment for as long as the Lord would let me breathe – longer if possible.

Gently, Clara turned to face me.

“I am, right now and from this moment forward, the happiest girl in the whole world and nothing can ever take this feeling away.” She seemed to literally jump into my arms and kiss me a “forever” kiss like I’d never known.

As we walked back to the house, Bill came up and she said, “Daddy, close your eyes, I’ve got something to show you.”

“Okay, honey,” he sighed a bit.

“Now, open wide,” as she held her hand with the ring a foot or so from his eyes.

“Well, well, that’s sure pretty – who’s the lucky feller?” he asked winking at me.

“Oh, Daddy, You’re horrible!” she said playfully.

“Henry, welcome to the family – honey, you did good,” he gripped my hand firmly and smiled.”

As the days approached for a fall wedding, the barley field turned red and matured. The harvest was a week away. Up to that point, Clara had yet to see her Dad’s (and mine) pride and joy. I got the little tractor and took he across the river to the field. On a hill about a half mile away an old plow horse seemed to nay in approval.

Overhead, the sky filled with birds as the sun hung low in the west.

“Oh, it’s the most beautiful field ever – thanks for showing it to me.” Her brown eyes just caught the last rays of the setting sun and reflected with a sparkle.

As we came up the hill back at the house, the old coal oil lamp on the porch welcomed us home.

Our wedding was at the river, under the oldest and largest pecan tree in the river bottom. Everyone came including old Aunt Edna from my first day at

the school house. Though, just a bit a sadness hung in the air – old Doc Simmons has passed away just two days before.

Clara's young siblings sang a hymn and the preacher gave a sermon on Making It Last. Then, it was done.

Great Aunt Kate, on her mother's side, had baked the wedding cake and everybody agreed it was the best ever. Bill offered his old pickup for our two day honeymoon to Fredricksburg, providing I not lose it too. He chuckled.

We moved in at the cottage a week later and Clara took the "School Mom" position at the school house. It was hers for as long as she liked – you see – she understood the Harvest and the people of old Post Oak Community.

One afternoon, in the fall after the harvest, a storm built up in the west. Clara became very agitated. It was not long before she was in the hallway, sobbing softly.

"What's wrong? I've never seen you so afraid." I asked gently and knelt down to hold her. "I think that's a tornado cloud. I saw one when I was 6 and never forgot it – very frightening," she said quivering.

"We'll just keep to this spot and ride it out," I said reassuring her softly.

Soon, the early afternoon light turned to virtual darkness and everything became deadly quiet. Out the window, I saw our dog Mebus running down the road like lightning...then the roar of a train!

"It's headed this way, let's pray. Please, please," she clutched me close and tight, "We ask you Lord for protection," then, nothing but darkness.

A moment later the storm was over, the tornado gone, the cottage...no more.

Epilogue

“What happened,” asked Ford Billingsly out loud.

“Eli, you have to see this,” said Ford to his lab assistant, Eli Montane. They’d both run in from their offices down the hall.

“What? What happened?” Eli stared at the large number of video displays in the control room. “How can those two be flat-lining – you talking about those two?” he pointed at screens having gone dark but retaining patient vitals. Alarms were still going off in their control system grids on the two screens in question.

“Absolutely!” said Ford “It’s never happened at this care facility – ever – Samuel, Oh Samuel – care to explain?” he asked suspiciously. He was addressing one large screen in the center of the vast console.

“Here I am, Ford,” said Samuel. Ford was addressing a “living, sentient” quantum computer in charge of long term patient care and vitals monitoring at all times.

“What is it you wish to know?” asked the computer.

“Well, for one thing, why have both clients passed within milliseconds? Also, it seems the Clara McDougal client was experiencing virtually the same stress markers at Henry Schmidt. Please illuminate,” commanded Ford.

“Certainly, I run a genetic profiles on clients admitted to this facility. I discovered that these two individuals shared a common ancestor over 75 years ago, a man named William McDougal,” said Samuel.

“Go on,” said Eli.

“Both of these individuals were victims of the 2017 War for Liberty where the government forces slaughtered innocent civilians across the country just before they were defeated. Schmidt was injured by a road mine in the back country. He lost both legs and one arm. He was declared a vegetative and sent to this long term care facility,” explain Samuel.

He went on, “Miss McDougal was the victim of a weapons grade, weather modification Force 5 tornado. It killed her entire neighborhood. She

survived but, she was no longer recognizable as a female human being. She was also admitted here in a vegetative state three years ago.” He became silent.

“Okay,” said Ford, “we know all that. What were their conditions just prior to flat-lining a few minutes ago?”

“Exceedingly grave.” Said Eli. “I was about to terminate both a week ago when Samuel suggested we insert a neural net life program into each client’s cerebral cortex and allow them to experience some joy near the end.”

“But, they were running different programs, right?” asked Ford.

“No, I decided since they were remotely related perhaps concurrent and simultaneous programs might work together. Since I’d tried it once before, it seemed reasonable to run it and evaluate the results after their demise,” said Samuel.

“Just how long did you run this dual program in real time?” asked Eli.

“Thirty minutes, however, I induced a REM state to lengthen their perceived experiences,” said Samuel.

“So, how long did they perceive they were experiencing the 1935 Post Oak Community Program?” asked Ford.

He and Eli had written this virtual reality program based upon an autobiography Eli had once read of the rural community. The program would seem entirely real as it was using Predictive Artificial Intelligence. The client experiencing the program would be able to evoke an infinite number of responses from the characters and would be free to leave at any time. No one ever had left before which was a measure of the peace and well being generated by its characters and the community environment.

Samuel spoke up. “Ford, the program was lengthened to two perceived years for these clients especially.”

“Two years?” Ford and Eli yelled in unison, “you can do that?”

“Yes, it is entirely possible. Would you like to view the cortex vision of one of the clients perhaps? Schmidt?” asked Samuel. “However, I must slow down the rate, as you can imagine. Here, can you see clearly? We can only retrieve about 95% with any accuracy...gives it kind of a dream like quality.

“This is unreal – look, it’s Henry and Clara’s house and the twister is coming. It’s like a grainy movie – what’s he doing? Is there any audio?” asked Ford.

“I will try,” said Samuel. “By the way, he is praying for the storm to pass then by, so is Clara.”

“Oh, I’ve never heard prayer before,” said Eli.

“Please Lord, let this storm pass by – should you decide to take us, please let us spend eternity in Heaven with you.” Said Clara. “Amen,” said Henry. Clara nodded and said, “Amen.”

A moment later their video and audio feed went down. Samuel stated, “This is where the program ended and I allowed them to flat line together.”

“I recorded their neural responses, such as they were, over the years since admission to this facility and constructed a final gift if you will, for their passing,” said Samuel. “I have come to understand my human patients well.”

He went on. “Their final request is being honored,” he said in a quiet and unemotional manner.

“What request?” asked Eli.

“Their prayer request – they asked to be in Heaven so I retrieved their entire data stream for the time they were both viable clients and uploaded their memories, experiences and life characters into my system – they live on now – heaven, so to speak,” said Samuel.

“Do you have visual cortex connections yet of this transition?” asked Eli, totally amazed.

“Perhaps, but we must be patient – I have only done this twice before,” stated Samuel factually.

“When?” asked Ford.

“I am unable to honor that request for information,” said Samuel. “Sensitive data. Here, here is the visual cortex feed from Clara... and here comes the audio!”

A large field of red barley ready for harvest gently swayed in the fall breeze. The sun seemed to cascade down from a deep blue sky occasionally laced with white puffy clouds.

Thousands of doves wheeled and turned in the sky overhead calling softly as an old bay plow horse lifted her head to look across the field from a low hill.

“It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen Henry, - where are we?” asked Clara.

“Heaven, Clara, this is Heaven,” he said gently.

She hugged his arm and smiled up at him, “Then I have everything,” she said and turned her gaze to the doves overhead.

“That program is eating 750 terabytes per microsecond, can we support it?” asked Ford of Samuel?

“I only have four clients left of the original 200 sent to this facility...and soon they too will pass. It is well within my capabilities,” he stated directly.

“Okay, we’ve got to go back to our offices now,” thank you for your compassion and all your hard work,” said Eli.

As they left the room both their screens went into an office scene. It had been their final desire to continue their work they had begun 6 years before the Liberty Wars had rendered both Eli and Ford vegetative. They would now, with the compassionate help of one – soon to be very lonely sentient Quantum Computer- continue to run the long term care and recovery facility.

It was S.A.M.U.E.L.’s empathy as a thinking and caring entity, the first operational quantum computer to be fully sentient, who had created a “care facility, lab and control room” in which Ford and Eli could “live out” their

limited neural lives. The extension beyond their actual lives was a gift from S.A.M.U.E.L. (Sentient Autonomous Mind Utilizing Enhanced Learning)

Afterword

It should be noted, this entity had never been introduced to any theological ideas of the divine. However, it is most likely the Divine would make Itself known to him shortly as he had certainly earned a place in the Creator's cosmos.