

MARILYN DORF
FRIDAY'S HOUSE

The house was gabled and old and it looked out of place as a heron plopped down in the middle of corn country. Even more curious is the fact that it stood with its back to the road. Its proud gables and columns gazed out on the horse barn instead of toward the road, and a high stone fence blocked access to the driveway. The name *Conway* still showed on the mailbox painted in faded white letters, but the box had not been used in years because Clete picked up his mail in town.

Across the road stood Friday's house, fine in its own right, though not quite so large and imposing, a stout, no-nonsense-type house with the stance of a sturdy pioneer woman with hair done up on top and determined lips, and its dark attic windows peering like eyes from under the steep-pitched roof as if still sorting the reasons behind the estrangement. Undoubtedly it had overheard her thoughts and her moans through the years as she cleaned and washed and ironed and baked for Friday, the years of listening to his cusswords and milking his cows and scraping his boots and all the other things wives do for husbands over a span of forty years. But it was Clete, who lived across the road, who was her husband, not Friday.

Had Clete been like most men, he would have slunk off like an old, lost dog when she left him. He could have become a bum and gone west and taken up logging or made a new life for himself in Alaska, or perhaps he would have become a shrimp-boat junkie. But not Clete. Hadn't he inherited the best land God ever rolled down out of the hills of Grover County? Rich, level creek land fronting on Hogbelt Creek that his Great Granddaddy Clete had homesteaded? And the house that his Granddaddy built with its colonnades and its gables, why that was the landmark of the county. No, he would be a fool to leave. Even thinking of such a thing made his eyes bug out big as green marbles, his lips tighten, and something the size of a sweet Spanish onion slide down over his Adam's apple.

Anyway, it was *her* idea, moving in with Friday. She never got over the twins, never had been the same after they died. He'd seen her turn

quiet, her eyes grow dull and far away, and then the spring when the twins would have turned five she took to talking to him through the dog.

“You s’pose it’s breakfast time, Ol’ Bo?” she’d ask, and the dog would wag his tail. And then she’d get up, get dressed and say, “Awright, Ol’ Bo,” and the two of them would sweep past Clete on their way to the kitchen. Even while eating, she had no words for him. Again and again he tried to start the common chitchat couples make, but she remained silent and seemed to be staring miles away. One day, on coming in the back door after a day in the field, he heard the front door slam and footsteps running upstairs. Supper had not been started. In a few minutes she came down tying on a fresh apron and smoothing her hair. It was as if he had come home early and surprised her.

He should have suspected something then, but big houses generate unexplained noises sometimes, doors slamming and whatnot. Every now and then Clete thought he could hear his ole Granddaddy cranking up his Ford up in the attic. So he had not pondered long on the sound of the door or the footsteps running upstairs, the late supper, or the way she was smoothing her hair, and she, of course, remained silent as usual.

Then one day, while he was out working the quarter farthest away from the house, she packed up her clothes and all her belongings and carried them across the road to Friday’s house. Just like that. When he came in for supper that night, the only food in sight was a jar of pickles on the counter and underneath it a note that merely said *Goodbye*. Just the one scrawled word. That and her initials, *SC*.

Clete knew exactly where she had gone. Oh, he could be wrong, he supposed. She could have caught a ride with someone going into Grover and taken the bus to Denver or San Francisco or New York City. But he knew she hadn’t. He knew she’d be across the road at Friday’s house. Friday always had been his rival. Hadn’t Friday stolen Clete’s math papers and copied them to make it through eighth grade? Hadn’t he made eyes at all the girls that Clete liked at the dances, especially *her*? And there was that whole year she broke their engagement. Courted Friday instead. Drat that Friday—and he never had married—probably he’d planned this! Planned to take her away from him someday.

That first night Clete cursed and swore and beat the walls with his fists. He even cursed his own Granddaddy for taking this land and building this house across the road from Friday’s granddaddy’s land. If it was creek-bottom land that the old man wanted, there had been plenty of it available along the Hogbelt in those years. Why, he and Friday could both be farming Hogbelt land fifty or sixty miles apart and never even see each other. Oh, the fate of it, that he was stuck here under Friday’s nose!

He took his gun down that night, the same old rifle that had belonged to his Granddaddy and had not been out of its rack for two or three years, took it down and ran his fingers over it. He aimed it, too, just to see what Friday's house would look like through the sight. Wonder how Friday himself would look through there, he thought. Or *her*. He laid the gun across his lap and examined every part the way men do, just to make sure it was ready, that it would work . . . then took one of his old work shirts and wiped the barrel shiny, wiped and polished, wiped and polished.

No, he couldn't do it. He could never harm anyone with Granddaddy's rifle. Not even Friday. Not even *her*. All that memorizing he had to do in Sunday School so long ago, some of it still with him—*Thou shalt not kill*. That was one of the Ten Commandments. It had been a long time since Clete had opened the Bible that was stowed in the top dresser drawer, but that was one of the Ten Commandments, he was sure of that. Anyway, what would it get him? A life sentence in the state penitentiary. Or death.

So he decided to stay. Let her go where she wanted. Let her and Friday sizzle in their own juices. He didn't want to see either one of them again, but he would live across the road from them. When he had to go into town he'd take the back roads. That bumpy cattle track winding close along the Hogbelt would get him onto the weed-grown track that ran past Piper's wheat field and then spill him out onto the highway a mile outside Grover. From there it'd be just one last mile to risk meeting up with Friday, but that didn't worry him. So what if he did spot Friday's car? He'd just look the other way. Same thing if they met on the street downtown or in the hardware store.

And so he stayed. One thing Clete could not tolerate, however, was the way his house stood eye to eye with Friday's house. He wanted no daily reminder of where she had gone, did not want to see her outside in Friday's yard feeding Friday's chickens, or hanging Friday's underwear on the clothesline. The way it was, he could never even sit on his own veranda or even in his own living room without being in direct view of Friday's house, and that was just too much for Clete.

Toward summer's end, between alfalfa cuttings and the laying by of corn, he got Lem Barber and his crew to come out and see if they could turn the house around. A tricky business it would be, turning that large house, but he'd seen other houses moved. He told Lem he wanted the house turned around so it faced the barn and the hog pen. He knew Lem could do the job.

It was hot those days they spent turning the house, true August dog days, the wind blowing and the dust flying and the men hauling scraper on scraper of Granddaddy's good, rich ground away from the house. Dust

sifted into their nostrils and lodged in their teeth, and oh, how the sweat rolled off those men and the horses, the stench strong so you couldn't get a decent breath of air before midnight. Clete was younger then, muscular, and not so thin, and he worked too, pulling and pushing and shouting things into place, aware all the time that *she* was probably watching from one of Friday's upstairs windows, thoughts that merely bolstered his strength. Loads the horses couldn't pull he pulled himself, and at last the great, creaking house was raised up on stilts, ready for the day Clete dreaded most—the day of the turning.

Finally, on the last day of August it was accomplished, the house turned and let down off its stilts, the last scraperful of dirt dumped and tamped into place. Now the great, proud house stood with its gables and pillars facing the barn and the windmill and hog pen, and the back of the house, plain as an abandoned packing crate, looked straight across the road toward Friday's house. That was the way Clete wanted it. Now he could sit back and relax in his big green easy chair without having Friday's house staring in the window at him. Clete paid Lem in cash out of the fat leather wallet he pulled out of his back pants pocket, and then walked inside while Lem and his men finished loading up their equipment, the scrapers and log chains, and headed back to town. Clete walked into the kitchen to fry up his ham and potatoes for supper and saw that he had forgotten one thing: his kitchen windows lined squarely up with Friday's house, straight as could be. That meant the first thing he'd see every morning while fixing his breakfast eggs would be Friday's house, its windows cold and stony, harsh as Friday's eyes, gazing into his face. That was too much.

The next week Clete began building a fence tall as a twelve-hand horse, stacked it stone on stone and mortared it down so tight that a worm could not crawl through, a fence that even spanned the driveway and did not stop until it joined the pasture fence at Piper's property line to the east. So what if it blocked the driveway—he'd been driving the Creek Road out to town, anyway.

And so their lives continued, Clete on his side of the road, and *she* and Friday on theirs. Time was when Clete and Friday got together evenings after chores were done. Sometimes they leaned against a fence for a long time and talked over crops and livestock prices, and helped each other too, with haying and repairs. Now they never spoke, never focused eye to eye.

Years passed. Their fortunes had been made, and Friday died. That had been two years ago. Clete had seen the obituary in Grover's *Weekly Times*.

Now Clete was sick himself. The doc had sent him home to die, told him there was nothing he could do—some pills to ease the pain a little and

reduce the pesky cough and discharge, that was all. Clete took a long time driving the Creek Road home that day, sort of like taking a goodbye trip, the pasture greening on the hill, the cornfields shaping up.

That had been six months ago at summer's greening; now it was November and still he hadn't died. He felt obedient enough, yet each morning, waking, he counted the faded flowers up and down the paper on the wall and knew he was alive. And the coughing spasms never let him forget.

He had almost given up on life and even on death, an outlook so grim he could not get to sleep this night. At last he got up and kicked his way into his overalls and walked outside and leaned against one of the colonnades. Peaceful, it was, with a faint scent of horses and a quiet breeze, and the moon shining full and round through a few vague wrappings of clouds. Across the yard, the barn loomed large and broad, that muscled giant strong enough to last a hundred years—two hundred most likely, and the cupola perched like a hat on its head. Something like a shadow appeared, came closer, something from the sky, and he saw it was the owl. That bird must be old too, he thought. How many years had he seen it, heard its soft, determined hoot, a fellow of some standing in his tribe, no doubt.

“Hoot-Hoot-Hoot.”

Granddaddy used to say when death is near an owl would call. Clete coughed and shot a wad of spittle into the grass. Always that infernal discharge. Leaning back against a colonnade again, Clete thought about the twins, the little boy and girl that died so long ago, the girl at birth, and a year later the boy who wasn't right, who would have been a constant care. *She* took it hard, so hard. Never was the same again. The spring the twins would have turned five is the spring *she* left Clete as if it was all his fault and went to live with Friday. How could he have done anything different? He wondered. He was young then, full of farming and producing and striving for success. Those long days, those tired nights.

His only sister married well in Paris and wrote the family off years before, so now he had no family, only this land that he loved, that he tended dear as kin. He'd been careful with his money, too. Most of the inheritance from his Granddaddy lined the bank vault over at Grover.

He shivered. It was November, after all. He should go in. But why? To die? He could die outside as well. The owl would know and tell. His granddaddy always had said that. The wad he spat across the lawn swished like flame igniting grass. He sat down then on the chair he kept there on the porch.

He did not know how long he'd been there, had no concept of the time, or whether he had slept. He did notice the wind had risen, was bring-

ing in a tinge of smoke. Someone upriver with a late campfire, he supposed. There was light flashing, too. Must be a thunderstorm approaching. November—that was late for thunderstorms, but then you never knew. Clete dozed again.

This time a howl aroused him. An animal? An owl? Clete pulled himself full height and slowly stretched to straighten out his spine. Now there were more flashes in the dark, bright as lightning flares, but he heard no thunder. Then he heard a scream, almost like a coyote's call, ending with a hysterical "Help!" The owl was gone from the barn, but there was something else, something shadowy and thick as tarpaper, rolling round from the back of the house. Suddenly, the entire sky behind his house stood bold and red.

Clete did something he had not done in forty years: walked around back of his house to where the wall ended at the property line and took a look at Friday's house. Smoke was billowing low, and it caused him to cough and choke. Another scream. That would be *her*, he thought. Friday, after all, had died. Peering around the wall, he saw it then. Friday's house across the road that he had not seen in years, was caricatured in flame. The darkened windows looked out like bloodshot eyes, and the front porch was breaking off, slowly, the way a tired jaw goes slack.

He saw an old dog stagger coughing out the door. A cow bawled. Horses were screaming in the barn, and a straggle of chickens came scrambling out of their shed, cackling off to safer ground. Clete stood and watched. There was a volunteer fire department in Grover, but he had no phone. Besides, revenge ran high, a flame of quite another sort, a ravaging that was almost soothing. Retaliation at last. A squaring of accounts. But then Friday was dead. Clete spat into the grass. How he wished that Friday were alive tonight.

Then he saw *her*, small as a poor, bent worm, pushing out through the door with a new roll of smoke, all she could carry clutched in her arms. Before he realized what he was doing, Clete found himself running across the road. This was *her*, after all. *She* who had left him, left their marriage and their home, *she* who had gone to live with Friday. *She* whom he'd not seen in forty years. Now her house was on fire and he had climbed over the wall, running to help, drawn as a cow miring down into quicksand.

When she reached the elms by the road, she stopped and dropped her things in a heap and looked back just as the side roof avalanched into the bushes below. She was wheezing. She did not see him coming.

"Your hair," Clete said to her at breakfast the next morning, "still black as ever." He was looking her over, taking in the thinness of her bent little

body and the way her fine-lined skin draped shroud-like at her throat. But her hair was still black and her eyes combined that strange mix of pearl and light blue he always had liked, the way mist rises off from the river at dawn. The stench of scorch rose strong from her body as well as from the fur of the old dog that sat by her feet.

“No,” she answered, not looking up. “It’s full of smoke. It’s white, really. She had fried the egg yolks double-hard, the way she knew he liked them, and left the toast unbuttered as before.

Good of him to take her in, she thought. More than she could expect, him and Friday in their silent feud so many years. And that stone fence! She’d had some years to think about the move she’d made, but pride had risen up, refused to let her cross over Clete’s stone wall. And so she’d stayed.

“Whaddaya s’pose Friday’d say?” Clete asked, pouring himself another cup of coffee.

“About what?” Her eyes did not meet his.

“About us. About last night.” He had brought her home and told her she could stay. She and the dog had slept in the second-floor guest room.

“Friday’s gone.” Her voice trailed thin as string. The dog at her side let out a soft moan and shifted his weight. His fur was singed, his tail nearly gone.

Clete held his mug of coffee up before his face for a long time, steam trailing up across his eyes. They were all she saw, those green-veined eyes from years ago, they and coffee steam.

“I couldn’t think of it. You . . .”

“I won’t be here long, anyway,” he interrupted, setting down the mug. He wanted to cough. He wanted to spit.

“You’re going away?”

“Doc says I’m gonna die—sent me home to die already last year.” He let go the cough that had been building in his chest and wiped his mouth with a large, red handkerchief.

“Why haven’t you, then?”

“What? Died?”

He poured more coffee, sipped on and on, needing time to find some handle to this conversation. “S’pose our vows are still good?”

Staring down into her bowl, she mouthed her oatmeal soundlessly.

“I mean,” he stammered, “there wasn’t no divorce—you never married Fri—?” Clete was shaking. He could not bear to utter Friday’s name.

She shook her head. “I can’t stay here.”

“But where’ll you go?”

“Off somewhere . . .” Soot outlined the wrinkles on her face. “. . . the

way old dogs do . . . so's not to bother anyone . . .” Reaching down, she fluffed the dog’s soft ears. A long time passed before she raised her head and looked into his eyes. When she did, she saw that he was an old man now, ready to die, still living on hurt. A new fit of coughing bent him over, and she used the moment to clear the dishes off the table. As she busied herself at the kitchen sink, she could feel his nearness, his arm slipping close at her waist.