

Dismemberment

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It was the still-living membership of his friends who, with Flora and their children and their place, pieced Andy together and made him finally well again after he lost his right hand to a harvesting machine in the fall of 1974. He would be obliged to think that he had given his hand, or abandoned it, for he had attempted to unclog the corn picker without stopping it, as he had known better than to do. But finally it would seem to him also that the machine had taken his hand, or accepted it, as the price of admission into the rapidly mechanizing world that as a child he had not foreseen and as a man did not like, but which he would have to live in, understanding it and resisting it the best he could, for the rest of his life.

He was forty then, too old to make easily a new start, though his life could be continued only by a new start. He had no other choice. Having no other choice finally was a sort of help, but he was slow in choosing. Between him and any possibility of choice lay his suffering and the selfishness of it: self-pity, aimless anger, aimless blaming, that made him dangerous to himself, cruel to others, and useless or a burden to everybody.

He would not get over the loss of his hand, as of course he was plentifully advised to do, simply because he was advised to do it, or simply even because he wanted and longed to do it. His life had been deformed. His hand was gone, his right hand that had been his principal connection to the world, and the absence of it could not be repaired. The only remedy was to re-form his life around his loss, as a tree grows live wood over its scars. From the memory and a sort of foreknowledge of wholeness, after he had grown sick enough finally of his grieving over himself, he chose to heal.

To replace his lost hand he had acquired what he named contemptuously to himself his "prosthetic device," his "hook," or his "claw," and of which he never spoke aloud to anybody for a long time. He began in a sort of dusk of self-sorrow and fury to force his left hand to learn to do the tasks that his right hand once had done. He forced it by refusing to desist from doing, or to wait to do, anything that he had always done. He watched the left hand with pity and contempt as it fumbled at the buttons of his clothes, and as it wrote, printing, at first just his name, in letters that with all his will it could not contain between the lines of a child's tablet. With two fingers of his pathetic left hand he would hold the head of a nail against the poll of a hammer, and strike the nail into the wood, and then, attempting to drive the nail, would miss it or bend it, and he would repeat this until he cursed and wept, crying out with cries that seemed too big for his throat so that they hurt him and became themselves an affliction. He was so plagued and shamed by this that he would work alone only where he was sure he could not be overheard.

To drive a stake or a steel post, he would one-handedly swing the sledgehammer back and forth like a pendulum to gain loft and force, and then strike. At first, more often than not, he

missed. This was made harder by the necessity of standing so that, missing, he did not hit his leg. For propping, steadying, and other crude uses, he could call upon the stump of his right forearm. To avoid impossible awkwardnesses, he shortened the handles of a broom, a rake, and a hoe. From the first there were some uses he could make of the prosthetic device. So long as he regarded it as merely a tool, as merely a hook or a claw or weak pliers, he used it readily and quietly enough. But when some need forced him to think of it as a substitute for his right hand, which now in its absence seemed to have been miraculous, he would be infuriated by the stiffness and numbness of it. Sooner or later-still, in his caution and shame, he would be working alone-he would be likely to snatch it off and fling it away, having then to suffer the humiliation of searching for it in tall grass or, once, in a pond. One day he beat it on the top of a fence post as if to force sentience and intelligence into it. And by that, for the first time since his injury, he finally was required to laugh at himself. He laughed until he wept, and laughed again. After that, he got better.

Soon enough, because spring had begun and need was upon him, he put his horses back to work. By wonderful good fortune, for often until then he would have been starting a young pair, he had a team that was work-wise and dependable. They were six-year-olds, Prince and Dan. Andy's son, Marcie, who loved the horses and was adept at using them, was in his twelfth year then and could have helped. But Andy could not ask for help. His disease at that time, exactly, was that he could not ask for help, not from either of his children, not from Flora, not from his friends, not from anybody. His mode then was force. He forced himself to do what he required of himself. He thus forced himself upon the world, and thus required of the world a right-of-way that the world of course declined to grant. He was forever trying to piece himself whole by mechanical contrivances and devices thought up in the night, which by day more often than not would fail, because of some unforeseen complication or some impossibility obvious in daylight. He worked at and with the stump of his arm as if it were inanimate, tying tools to it with cords, leather straps, rubber straps, or using it forthrightly as a blunt instrument.

In the unrelenting comedy of his predicament he had no patience, and yet patience was exacted from him. He became patient then with a forced resignation that was the very flesh and blood of impatience. To put the harness on the horses was the first obstacle, and it was immense. Until it is on the horse, a set of work harness is heavy and it has no form. It can be hung up in fair order, but to take it from its pegs and carry it to the horses back involves a considerable risk of disorder. Andy went about it, from long habit, as a two-handed job, only to discover immediately, and in the midst of a tangle of straps, that he had to invent, from nothing at all that he knew, the usefulness of the prosthetic device, which was at best a tool, with an aptitude for entangling itself in the tangle of straps.

When, in his seemingly endless fumbling, he had got the horses harnessed and hitched, he became at once their dependent. He could ask help from no human, but he had to have the help of his horses, and he asked them for it. Their great, their fundamental, virtue was that they would stop when he said, "Whoa." When he dropped a line or had too many thoughts

to think at once, he called out, "Whoa!" and they stopped. And they would stand in their exemplary patience and wait while he put his thoughts and himself in order, sometimes in the presence of an imminent danger that he had not seen in time. Or they would wait while he wound and rewound, tied and retied, the right-hand line to what was left of his right forearm. A profound collaboration grew between him and the horses, like nothing he had known before. He thought finally that they sensed his need and helped him understandingly. One day he was surprised by the onset of a vast tenderness toward them, and he wept, praising and thanking them. After that, again, he knew he was better.

His neighbors too, knowing his need, came when they could be of use and helped him. They were the survivors, so far, of the crew of friends who had from the beginning come there to help: Art and Mart Rowanberry, Pascal Sowers and his son Tommy, Nathan Coulter, whose boys by then had grown up and left home, and Danny Branch, usually with one or two of his boys, none of the five of whom ever would stray far or long from the Port William neighborhood.

The first time they came, to help him with his first cutting of hay, their arrival afflicted Andy with an extreme embarrassment. He had not dared so far as to ask himself how he would save the hay after he had cut it. He cut it because the time had come to cut it. If he could not save it, he told himself in his self-pity and despair, he would let it rot where it lay.

He did not, he could not, ask his friends to help him. But they came. Before he could have asked, if he had been going to ask, they knew when he needed them, and they came. He asked himself accusingly if he had not after all depended on them to come, and he wavered upon the answer as on a cliff's edge.

They came bringing the tractor equipment they needed to rake and bale his hay. When they appeared, driving in after dinnertime on the right day, he was so abashed because of his debility and his dependence, because he had not asked them to come, because he now was different and the world was new and strange, he hardly knew how to greet them or where to stand.

But his friends were not embarrassed. There was work to do, and they merely set about doing it. When Andy hesitated or blundered, Nathan or Danny told him where to get and what to do as if the place and the hay were theirs. It was work. It was only work. In doing it, in requiring his help in doing it, they moved him to the margin of his difficulty and his self-absorption. They made him one with them, by no acknowledgment at all, by not crediting at all his own sense that he had ever not been one with them.

When the hay was baled and in the loft and they had come to rest finally at the shady end of the barn, Andy said, "I don't know how to thank you. I don't know how I can ever repay you." He sounded to himself as if he were rehearsing the speech to give later.

And then Nathan, who never wasted words, reached out and took hold of Andy's right forearm, that remnant of his own flesh that Andy himself could hardly bear to touch. Nathan gripped the hurt, the estranged, arm of his friend and kinsman as if it were the commonest,

most familiar object around. He looked straight at Andy and gave a little laugh. He said, "Help us."

After that Andy again was one of them. He was better.

The great obstacle that remained was his estrangement of himself from Flora and their children. He knew that in relation to those who were dearest to him he had become crazy. He had become intricately, painfully, perhaps hopelessly crazy. He saw this clearly, he despised himself for it, and yet he could not prevail upon himself to become sane. He looked at Flora and Betty and Marcie as across a great distance. He saw them looking at him, worried about him, suffering his removal from them. He understood, he felt, their preciousness to him, and yet he could not right himself. He could not become or recover or resume himself, who had once so easily reached out and held them to himself. He could not endure the thought of their possible acceptance of him as he had become. It was as if their acceptance, their love for him, as a one-handed man, if he allowed it, would foreclose forever some remaining chance that his lost hand would return or grow back, or that he might awaken from himself as he had become to find himself as he had been. He was lost to himself, within himself.

And so in his craziness he drove them away, defending the hardened carapace of his self, for fear that they would break in and find him there, hurt and terribly, terribly in need-of them.

For a while, for too long, selfishness made him large. He became so large in his own mind in his selfish suffering that he could not see the world or his place in it. He saw only himself, all else as secondary to himself. In his suffering he isolated himself, and then he suffered his loneliness, and then he blamed chiefly Flora for his loneliness and her inability to reach him through it, and then he lashed out at her in his anger at her failure, and then he pitied her for his anger and suffered the guilt of it, and then he was more than ever estranged from her by his guilt. Eventually, inevitably, he saw how his selfishness had belittled him, and he was ashamed, and was more than ever alone in his shame. But in his shame and his loneliness, though he could not yet know it, he was better.

At that time his writings on agriculture had begun to make him known in other places. He had begun to accept invitations to speak at meetings that he had to travel to. On one of those wanderings far from home, and almost suddenly, he became able again to see past himself, beyond and around himself.

Memories of times and places he had forgotten came back to him, reached him at last as if they had been on their way for a long time. He realized how fully and permanently mere glances, touches, passing words, from all his life far back into childhood, had taken place in his heart. Memories gathered to him then, memories of his own, memories of memories told and retold by his elders. The wealth of an intimate history, belonging equally to him and to his ancestral place, welled up in him as from a deep spring, as if from some knowledge the dead had spoken to him in his sleep.

A darkness fell upon him. He saw a vision in a dream. It was much the same as Hannah Coulter's vision of Heaven, as she would come to tell him of it in her old age: "Port William

with all its loved ones come home alive." In his dream he saw the past and the future of Port William, of what Burley Coulter had called its membership, struggling through time to belong together, all gathered into a presence of itself that was greater than itself. And he saw that this-in its utterly surprising greatness, utterly familiar-he had been given as a life. Within the abundance of the gift of it, he saw that he was small, almost nothing, almost lost, invisible to himself except as he had been visible to the others who have been with him. He had come into being out of the history and inheritance of love, love faltering and wayward and yet love, granted to him at birth, undeserved, but then called out of him by the membership of his life, apart from which he was nothing. His life was not his self. It was not his own.

He had become small enough at last to enter, to ask to enter, into Floras and his children's forgiveness, which had been long prepared for him, as he knew, as he had known, if only he could ask. He came into their forgiveness as into the air and weather of life itself. Life-sized again, and welcome, he came back into his marriage to Flora and to their place, with relief amounting to joy.

He came back into the ordinariness of the workaday world and his workaday life, answering to needs that were lowly, unrelenting, and familiar. He came into patience such as he had never suspected that he was capable of. As he went about his daily work, his left hand slowly learned to serve as a right hand, the growth of its dexterity surprising him. His displeasure, at times his enmity, against his stump and his left hand slowly receded from him. They rejoined his body and his life. He became, containing his losses, healed, though never again would he be whole.

His left hand learned at first to print in the fashion maybe of a first-grade boy. And then, with much practice, it mastered a longhand script that was legible enough and swift enough, and that he came to recognize as his own. His left hand learned, as his right hand once had known, to offer itself first to whatever his work required. It became agile and subtle and strong. He became proud of it. In his thoughts he praised its accomplishments, as he might have praised an exceptionally biddable horse or dog.

The prosthetic device also he learned to use as undeliberately almost as if it were flesh of his flesh. But he maintained a discomfort, at once reflexive and principled, with this mechanical extension of himself, as he maintained much the same discomfort with the increasing and equally inescapable dependence of the life of the country and his neighborhood upon mechanical devices.

And so the absence of his right hand has remained with him as a reminder. His most real hand, in a way, is the missing one, signifying to him not only his continuing need for ways and devices to splice out his right arm, but also his and his country's dependence upon the structure of industrial commodities and technologies that imposed itself upon, and contradicted in every way, the sustaining structures of the natural world and its human memberships. And so he is continually reminded of his incompleteness within himself, within the terms and demands of his time and its history, but also within the constraints and

limits of his kind, his native imperfection as a human being, his failure to be as attentive, responsible, grateful, loving, and happy as he ought to be.

He has spent most of his life in opposing violence, waste, and destruction-or trying to, his opposition always fragmented and made painful by his complicity in what he opposes. He seems to himself to be "true," most authentically himself, only when he is sitting still, in one of the places in the woods or on a height of ground that invites him to come to rest, where he goes to sit, wait, and do nothing, oppose nothing, put words to no argument. He permits no commotion then by making none. By keeping still, by doing nothing, he allows the given world to be a gift.

Andy Catlett and Danny Branch are old now. They belong to the dwindling remnant who remember what the two of them have begun to call "Old Port William," the town as it was in the time before V-J Day, 1945, after which it has belonged ever less to itself, ever more to the machines and fortunes of the Industrial World. Now of an age when Old Port William might have taken up the propriety of naming them "Uncle Andrew" and "Uncle Dan," they fear that they may be in fact the only two whose memories of that old time remain more vivid and influential than yesterday evening's television shows. They remember the company of Feltners, Coulters, Rowanberrys, Sowerses, Penns, Branches, and Catletts as they gathered in mutual need into their "membership" during the war years and the years following.

Andy and Danny are the last of a time gone. Perhaps, as they each secretly pray, they may be among the first of a time yet to come, when Port William will be renewed, again settled and flourishing. They anyhow are links between history and possibility, as they keep the old stories alive by telling them to their children.

Sometimes, glad to have their help needed, they go to work with their children. Sometimes their children come to work with them, and they are glad to have help when they need it, as they increasingly do. But sometimes only the two old men work together, asking and needing no help but each other's, and this is their luxury and their leisure. When just the two of them are at work they are unbothered by any youthful need to hurry, or any younger persons idea of a better way. Their work is free then to be as slow, as finical, as perfectionistical as they want it to be.

And after so many years they know how to work together, the one-handed old man and the two-handed. They know as one what the next move needs to be. They are not swift, but they don't fumble. They don't waste time assling around, trying to make up their minds. They never make a mislick.

"Between us," says Danny Branch, "we've got three hands. Everybody needs at least three. Nobody ever needed more."