Stand by Me

by Wendell Berry / from The Atlantic Monthly

When Jarrat married Lettie in 1921 and bought the little place across the draw from our home place and started to pay for it, in that time that was already hard, years before the Depression, he had a life ahead of him, it seemed like, that was a lot different from the life he in fact was going to live. Jarrat was my brother, four years older than me, and I reckon I knew him as well as anybody did, which is not to say that what I knew was equal to what I didn't know.

But as long as Lettie lived, Jarrat was a happy man. As far as I could see, not that I was trying to see or in those days cared much, he and Lettie made a good couple. They were a pretty couple, I'll say that, before this world and its trouble had marked them. And they laid into the work together, going early and late, scraping and saving, and paying on their debt.

Tom was born the year after they married, Nathan two years later. And it seemed that Tom hadn't hardly begun to walk about on his own until Nathan was coming along in his tracks, just a step or two behind. They had pretty much the run of the world, Lettie and Jarrat being too busy for much in the way of parental supervision, at least between meals.

The hollow between the two places, that most people call Coulter Branch, before long was crisscrossed with boy-paths that went back and forth like shoestrings between the boys' house on one ridge and the old house on the other, where I lived with Mam and Pap. The boys lived at both houses, you might as well say. They'd drop down through the pasture and into the woods on one side, and down through the woods to the branch, and then up through the woods and the pasture on the other side, and they'd be in another place with a different house and kitchen and something different to eat. They had maybe half a dozen paths they'd worn across there, and all of them had names: the Dead Tree Path, I remember, and the Spring Path, and the Rock Fence Path.

And then, right in the midst of things going on the way they ought to have gone on forever, Lettie got sick and began to waste away. It was as serious as it could be, we could see that. And then, instead of belonging just to Jarrat to pay attention to, she began to belong to all of us. Dr. Markman was doing all he could for her, and then Mam and the other women around were cooking things to take to her and helping with her housework, and us others were hoping or praying or whatever we did, trying to help her to live, really just by wishing for her to. And then, without waiting for us to get ready, she died, and the boys all of a sudden, instead of belonging just to her and Jarrat, belonged to us all. Nathan was five years old, and Tom was seven.

And I was one of the ones that they belonged to. They belonged to me because I belonged to them. They thought so, and that made it so. The morning of their mother's funeral, to get them moved and out of the house before more sadness could take place, I put a team to the wagon and drove around the head of the hollow to get them. Mam had packed up their clothes and everything that was theirs. We loaded it all and them too onto the wagon, and I brought them home to the old house.

Jarrat wasn't going to be able to take care of them and farm too, and they didn't need to be over there in that loneliness with him. But Pap and Mam were getting on in years then. Pap, just by the nature of him, wasn't going to be a lot of help. And Mam, I could see, had her doubts.

Finally she just out with it. "Burley, I can be a grandmother, but I don't know if I can be a mother again or not. You're just going to have to help me."

She had her doubts about that, too. But it didn't prove too hard to bring about. I belonged to them because they needed me. From the time I brought them home with me, they stuck to me like burrs. A lot of the time we were a regular procession—me in front, and then Tom in my tracks just as close as he could get, and then Nathan in Tom's the same way. The year Lettie died I was thirty-four years old, still a young man in my thoughts and all, and I had places I needed to go by myself. But for a long time, getting away from those boys was a job. I'd have to hide and slip away or bribe them to let me go or wait till they were asleep. When I wanted to hunt or fish, the best way to be free of them was just to take them with me. By the time they got big enough to go on their own, we had traveled a many a mile together, day and night, after the hounds, and had spent a many an hour on the river.

The grass and weeds overgrew the paths across the hollow. The boys somehow knew better than to go over there where their mother was gone and their daddy was living by himself. It took them a while to go back there, even with me.

Jarrat did a fair job of batching. He kept the house clean, and he didn't change anything. He sort of religiously kept everything the way Lettie had fixed it. But as time went on, things changed in spite of him. He got busy and forgot to water the potted plants, and they died. And then gradually the other little things that had made it a woman's house wore out, or got lost, or broke. Finally it took on the bare, accidental look of the house of a man who would rather be outdoors, and then only Jarrat's thoughts and memories were there to remind him of Lettie.

Or so I guess. As I say, there was a lot about Jarrat that nobody in this world was ever going to know. I was worrying about him, which I hadn't ever done before, and I was going to worry about him for the rest of his life. I began to feel a little guilty about him, too. I had a lady friend, and by and by we began to come to an understanding. When I wanted company, I had friends. When I didn't want company, I had the woods and the creeks and the river. I had a good john-boat for fishing, and always a good hound or two or three.

Jarrat didn't have any of those things, not that he wanted them. In his dealings with other people he was strictly honest, I was always proud of him for that, and he was friendly enough. But he didn't deal with other people except when he had to. He was freer than you might have thought with acts of kindness when he knew somebody needed help. But he didn't want kindness for himself, though of course he needed it. He didn't want to be caught needing it.

After Lettie died, he wasn't the man he was before. He got like an old terrapin. He might come out of his shell now and again to say something beyond what the day's work required: "Hello," maybe, or he would complement the weather. But if you got too close, he'd draw in again. Only sometimes, when he thought he was by himself, you'd catch him standing still, gazing nowhere.

What I know for sure he had in his life were sorrow, stubbornness, silence, and work. Work was his consolation, surely, just because it was always there to do and because he was so good at it. He had, I reckon, a gift for it. He loved the problems and the difficulties. He never hesitated about what to do. He never mislaid a lick. And half of his gift, if that was what it was, was endurance. He was swift and tough. When you tied in with him for a day's work, you had better have your ass in gear. Work was a fever with him. Anybody who loved it as much as he did didn't need to fish.

So when Tom and Nathan needed him the most, their daddy didn't have much to offer. He wanted them around, he would watch over them when they were with us at work, he would correct and caution them when they needed it, but how could he console them when he couldn't console himself?

They were just little old boys. They needed their mother, was who they needed. But they didn't have her, and so they needed me. Sometimes I'd find one or the other of them off somewhere by himself, all sorrowful and little and lost, and there'd be nothing to do but try to mother him, just pick him up and hold him tight and carry him around awhile. Their daddy couldn't do it, and it was up to me.

I would make them laugh. It usually wasn't too hard. Nathan thought I was the funniest thing on record anyhow, and sometimes he would laugh at me even when I was serious.

But I would sing,

Turkey in the straw settin on a log
All pooched out like a big bullfrog
Poked him in the ass with a number nine wire
And down he went like an old flat tire.

I would sing,

Stuck my toe in a woodpecker holey
In a woodpecker hole, in a woodpecker hole.
Woodpecker, he said, "Damn your soul.
Take it out, take it out, take it out!"

I would sing one of them or some other one, and dance a few steps, raising a dust, and Nathan would get so tickled he couldn't stand up. Tom would try to hold his dignity, like an older brother, but he would be ready to bust; all you had to do was poke him in the short ribs, and down he would go, too. What raising they got, they got mainly from their grandma and me. It was ours to do if anybody was going to do it, and somehow we got them raised.

To spare Grandma, and when they were out of school, we kept the boys at work with us. That way they learned to work. They played at it, and while they were playing at it they were doing it. And they were helping, too. We generally had a use for them, and so from that time on they knew we needed them, and they were proud to be helping us make a living.

Jarrat nor Pap wouldn't have paid them anything. Jarrat said they were working for themselves, if they worked. And Pap, poking them in the ribs to see if they would argue, and they did, said they ate more than they were worth. But I paid them ten cents a day, adjusted to the time they actually worked. Sometimes they'd get three cents, sometimes seven. I'd figure up and pay off every Saturday. One time when I paid him all in pennies, Nathan said, "Haven't you got any of them big white ones?"

They worked us, too. They didn't have minds for nothing. Sometimes, if the notion hit them, they'd fartle around and pick at each other and get in the way until their daddy or grandpa would run them off. " Get the hell out of here! Go to the house!"

But they wouldn't go to the house. They'd slip away into the woods, or go to Port William, or down to the river. And since they were careful to get back to the house by dinnertime or suppertime, nobody would ask where they'd been. Unless they got in trouble, which they sometimes did.

I worried about them. I'd say, "Boys, go to the river if you have to, but don't go in it." Or I'd say, "Stay out of that damned river, now. We ain't got time to go to your funeral."

But of course they did go in the river. They were swimming, I think, from frost to frost, just like I would have at their age. Just like I in fact did at their age.

When they were little, you could always see right through Nathan. He didn't have any more false faces than a glass of water. Tom you couldn't always tell about. Maybe because Nathan was coming along so close behind him, Tom needed to keep some things to himself. It did him good to think he knew some things you didn't know. He wanted to call his life his own. He wasn't dishonest. If you could get him to look straight at you, then you had him.

As long as they were little, there would be times when they would be needing their mother, and who would be in the gap but only me? One or the other or both of them would be sitting close to me in the evening while it was getting dark, snuggled up like a chicken to the old hen, and I would be doing all I could, and falling short. They changed me. Before, I was often just on the loose, carefree as a dog fox, head as empty as a gourd. Afterwards, it seemed like my heart was bigger inside than outside.

We got them grown up to where they weren't needy little boys anymore. They were still boys. They were going to be boys awhile yet, but they were feeling their strength. They were beginning to find in their selves what before they had needed from us. Tom was maybe a little slower at it than he might have been, Nathan a little faster; Nathan was coming behind and was in a hurry.

It was a wonderful thing to watch that Tom grow up. For a while there, after he was getting to be really useful, he was still an awkward, kind of weedy, mind-wandery boy who still needed some watching. To him, young as he was, it must have seemed he stayed that way a long time. But before long, as it seemed to me, he had gathered his forces together, body and mind. He got to be some account on his own. He could see what needed to be done and go ahead and do it. He got graceful, and he was a good-looking boy, too.

And then, the year he was sixteen, a little edge crept up between him and his daddy. It wasn't very much in the open at first, wasn't admitted really, but there it was. I thought, Uh-oh, for I hated to see it, and I knew there wasn't much to be done about it. Tom was feeling his strength, he was coming into his own, and Jarrat that year was forty-seven years old. When he looked at Tom he got the message— from where he was, the only way was down—and he didn't like it.

Well, one afternoon when we were well along in the tobacco cutting, Tom took it in his head he was going to try the old man. Jarrat was cutting in the lead, as he was used to doing, and Tom got into the next row and lit out after him. He stayed with him, too, for a while. He put the pressure on. He made his dad quiet down and lay into his work.

But Tom had misestimated. The job was still above his breakfast. Jarrat wasn't young anymore, but he was hard and long-practiced. He kept his head and rattled Tom, and he beat him clean. And then he couldn't stop himself from drawing the fact to Tom's attention.

Tom went for him then, making fight. They were off a little way from the rest of us, and both of them were thoroughly mad. Before we could get there and get them apart, Jarrat had just purely whipped the hell out of Tom. He ought to've quit before he did, but once he was mad he didn't have it in him to give an inch. It was awful. Ten minutes after it was over, even Jarrat knew it was awful, but then it was too late.

It was a day, one of several, I'm glad I won't have to live again. Tom was too much a boy yet to get in front where he wanted to be but too much a man to stay and be licked. He had to get out from under his daddy's feet and onto his own. And so he made a bundle of his clothes and went away. Afterwards, because the old ones were so grieved, me too, Nathan too, the house was like a house where somebody had died.

Because he didn't need much and asked little, Tom found a place right away with an old couple by the name of Whitlow over on the other side of the county, far enough away to make him separate from us. I knew he would do all right, and he did. He knew how to work; and the use of his head, that was already coming to him, came fast once he got out on his own. He began to make a name for himself: a good boy, a good hand.

When we had found out where he was, Nathan and I would catch a ride on a rainy day or a Sunday and go over to see him, or we'd see him occasionally in town. After he got his feet under him and was feeling sure of himself, he would come over on a Sunday afternoon now and again to see his grandma and grandpa. In all our minds, he had come into a life of his own that wasn't any longer part of ours. To the old ones, who had given up their ownership of him by then, and their right to expect things from him, every one of those visits was a lovely gift, and they made over him and honored him as a guest.

He stayed at the Whitlows' through the crop year of 1940. Mr. Whitlow died that summer. After the place was sold and Mrs. Whitlow settled in town, Tom struck a deal with Ernest Russet from up about Sycamore. Ernest and Naomi Russet were good people, we had known them a long time, and they had a good farm. Going there was a step up in the world for Tom. He soon found

favor with the Russets, which not everybody could have done, and before long, having no children of their own, they'd made practically a son of him.

After Tom had been with them awhile, the Russets invited us to come for Sunday dinner. Jarrat wouldn't go, of course, but Nathan and I did. The Russets' preacher, Brother Milby, and his wife were there too, a spunky couple. I took a great liking to Mrs. Milby. It was a good dinner and we had a good time. Ernest Russet was the right man for Tom, no mistake about that. He was a fine farmer. The right young man could learn plenty from him.

By the time he went to the Russets, Tom was probably as near to the right young man as the country had in it. He had got his growth and filled out, and confidence had come into his eyes. He was a joy to look at.

One Sunday afternoon after the weather was warm and the spring work well started, he paid us a visit. Grandpa had died the summer before, so now it was just Grandma and Nathan and me still at home, and it was a sadder place. But we were glad to see Tom and to be together; we sat out on the porch and talked a long time.

Tom got up finally as if to start his hitchhike back to the Russets, and so I wasn't quite ready when he said he thought he'd go over to see his dad.

That fell into me with sort of a jolt. I hadn't been invited, but I said, "Well, I'll go with you."

So we went. We crossed the hollow, and clattered up onto the back porch, and Tom knocked on the kitchen door. Jarrat must have been in the kitchen, for it wasn't but seconds until there he was, his left hand still on the doorknob, and with a surprised look on his face. Myself, I wasn't surprised yet, but I was expecting to be. I could feel my hair trying to rise up under my hat. I took a glance at Tom's face, and he was grinning at Jarrat. My hair relaxed and laid down peacefully again when Tom stuck out his hand. It was a big hand he stuck out, bigger than mine, bigger than Jarrat's. Jarrat looked down at that hand like it was an unusual thing to see on the end of a man's arm. He looked up at Tom again and grinned back. And then he reached out and took Tom's hand and shook it.

So they made it all right. And so when the war broke out and Tom was called to the army and had to go, he could come and say freely a proper good-bye to his dad.

It wasn't long after Tom got drafted until Nathan turned eighteen, and damned if he didn't go volunteer. I was surprised, but I ought not to've been. Nathan probably could have got deferred, since his brother was already gone and farmers were needed at home, and I reckon I was counting on that. But he had reasons to go, too, that were plain enough.

Nathan and Jarrat never came to an actual fight. Nathan, I think, had Tom's example in mind, and he didn't want to follow it. He was quieter turned than Tom, less apt to give offense. But Jarrat was hard for his boys to get along with. He just naturally took up too much of the room they needed to grow in. He was the man in the lead, the man going away while everybody else was still coming. His way was the right way, which in fact it pret' near always was, but he didn't have the patience of a yearling mule.

"Let's go!" he'd say. If you were at it with him and you hesitated a minute: "Let's go! Let's go!"

When we were young and he would say that, I'd say back to him,

Les Go's dead and his wife's a widder.

You hear right good and you might get her.

But nobody was going to say that back to him anymore, not me, much less Nathan.

After Jarrat's fight with Tom, I would now and again try to put in a word for Nathan. "Why don't you let him alone? Give him a little headroom. Give him time to be ready."

And Jarrat would say, "Be ready,' hell! Let him be started."

It didn't take much of that, I knew, to be a plenty. When Nathan came back from the war his own man, Jarrat did get out of his way, and they could work together, but for the time being, Nathan needed to be gone. Of course, he got a bellyful of bossing in the army, but it at least didn't come from his dad. He also had a brotherly feeling that he ought to go where Tom had gone. Grandma was dead by then. There was nothing holding him. I reckon he went because he thought he had to, but I didn't want him to. For one thing, we'd be left shorthanded. For another, I would miss him. For another, I was afraid.

As it turned out, Nathan never saw Tom again. They kept Nathan on this side till nearly the end of the war, but they gave Tom some training and taught him to drive a bulldozer and shipped him straight on across the waters into the fight. He was killed the next year. I know a few little details of how it happened, but they don't matter.

It came about, anyhow, that in just a couple of years the old house was emptied of everybody but me. It took me a while to get used to being there by myself. When I would go in to fix my dinner, or at night, there wouldn't be a sound. I could hear the quiet. And however quiet I tried to be, it seemed to me I rattled. I didn't like the quiet, for it made me sad, and so did the little noises I made in it. For a while I couldn't bring myself to trap the mice, I so needed to have something living there besides me. All my life I've hunted and fished alone, even worked alone. I never minded being by myself outdoors. But to be alone in the house, a place you might say is used to talk and the sounds of somebody stirring about in it all day, that was lonesome. As I reckon Jarrat must have found out a long time ago and, like himself, just left himself alone to get used to it. I've been, all in all, a lucky man, for the time would be again when the old house would be full of people, but that was long a-coming. For a while there it was just Jarrat and me living alone together, it seemed to me, he in his house on one side of the hollow, me in mine on the other. I could see his house from my house, and he could see mine from his. But we didn't meet in either house, his or mine. We met in a barn or in a field wherever the day's work was going to start. When quitting time came we went our ways separately home. Of course, by living apart we were keeping two houses more or less alive, and maybe there was some good in that.

The difference between us was that I wasn't at home all the time. When the work would let up, or on Saturday evenings and Sundays, for I just flat refused to work late on Saturday or much at all on Sunday, I'd be off to what passed with me for social life, or to the woods or the river. But Jarrat was at home every day. Every day. He never went as far as Port William except to buy something he needed.

If you work about every day with somebody you've worked with all your life, you'd be surprised how little you need to talk. Oh, we swapped work with, various ones—Big Ellis, the Rowanberrys, and others—and that made for some sociable times along, and there would be good talk then. But when it was just Jarrat and me, we would sometimes work without talking a whole day, or maybe two. And so when he got the government's letter about Tom, he didn't say but two words. We were working here at my place. After dinner, when he walked into the barn, carrying the letter in his hand, he said, "Sit down." I sat down. He handed me the letter, and it felt heavy in my hands as a stone. After I read it—"killed in action"—and handed it back, the whole damned English language just flew away in the air like a flock of blackbirds.

For a long time neither one of us moved. The daily sounds of the world went on, sparrows in the barn lot, somebody's bull way off, the wind in the eaves, but around us was this awful, awful silence that didn't have one word in it.

I looked at Jarrat finally. He was standing there blind as a statue. He had Tom's life all inside him now, as once it had been all inside Lettie. Now it was complete. Now it was finished.

And then, for the first and last time, I said to Jarrat, "Lets go." The days work was only half finished. Having nothing else we could do, we finished it.

What gets you is the knowledge, that sometimes can fall on you in a clap, that the dead are gone absolutely from this world. As has been said around here over and over again, you are not going to see them here anymore, ever. Whatever was done or said before is done or said for good. Any questions you think you ought to've asked while you had a chance are never going to be answered. The dead know, and you don't.

And yet their absence puts them with you in a way they never were before. You even maybe know them better than you did before. They stay with you, and in a way you go with them. They don't live on in your heart, but your heart knows them. As your heart gets bigger on the inside, the world gets bigger on the outside. If the dead were alive only in this world, you would forget them, looks like, as soon as they die. But you remember them, because they always were living in the other, bigger world while they lived in this little one, and this one and the other one are the same. You can't see this with your eyes looking straight ahead. It's with your side vision, so to speak, that you see it. The longer I live, and the better acquainted I am among the dead, the better I see it. I am telling what I know.

It's our separatedness and our grief that break the world in two. Back when Tom got killed, and the word came, I had never thought of such things. That time would have been hard enough, even if I had thought of them. Because I hadn't, it was harder.

That night after supper I lit the lantern and walked over to Jarrat's and sat with him in the kitchen until bedtime. I wasn't invited. I was a volunteer, I reckon, like Nathan. If it had been just me and I needed company, which I did, I could have walked to town and sat with the talkers in the poolroom or the barbershop. But except that I would go to sit with him, Jarrat would have sat there in his sorrow entirely by himself and stared at the wall or the floor. I anyhow denied him that.

I went back every night for a long time. There was nothing else to do. There wasn't a body to be spoken over and buried to bring people together, and to give Tom's life a proper conclusion in Port William. His body was never going to be in Port William again. It was buried in some passed-over battlefield in Italy, somewhere none of us had ever been and would never go. The word was passed around, of course. People were sorry, and they told us. The neighbor women brought food, as they do. But mainly there was just the grieving, and mainly nobody here to do it but Jarrat and me.

There was a woman lived here, just out the road, a good many years ago. She married a man quite a bit older—well, he was an old man, you just as well say—and things went along and they had a little boy. In four or five years the old man died. After that, you can imagine, the little boy was all in all to his mother. He was her little man of the house, as she called him, and in fact he was the world to her. And then, when he wasn't but nine or ten years old, the boy took awfully sick one winter, and he died, and we buried him out there on the hill at Port William beside his old daddy.

We knew that the woman was grieved to death, as we say, and everybody did for her as they could. What we didn't know was that she really was grieving herself to death. It's maybe a little hard to believe that people can die of grief, but they do.

After she died, the place had to be sold. I went out there with Big Ellis and several others to set the place to rights and get the tools and the household stuff set out for the auction. When we got to the room that had been the little boys, it was like opening a grave. It had been kept just the way it was when he died, except she had gathered up and put there everything she'd found that reminded her of him: all his play pretties, every broom handle he'd ridden for a stick horse, every rock or feather or string she knew he had played with. I still remember the dread we felt just going into that room, let alone moving the things, or throwing them away. Some of them we had to throw away.

I understood her then. I understood her better after Tom was dead. When a young man your heart knows and loves is all of a sudden gone, never to come back, the whole place reminds you of him everywhere you look. You dread to touch anything for fear of changing it. You fear the time you know is bound to come, when the look of the place will be changed entirely, and if the dead came back they would hardly know it, or not recognize it at all.

Even so, this place is not a keepsake just to look at and remember. You can't stop just because you're carrying a load of grief and would like to stop, or don't care if you go on or not. Jarrat nor I either didn't stop. This world was still asking things of us that we had to give.

It was maybe the animals most of all that kept us going, the good animals we depended on, that depended on us: our work mules, the cattle, the sheep, the hogs, even the chickens. They were a help to us because they didn't know our grief but just quietly lived on, suffering what they suffered, enjoying what they enjoyed, day by day. We took care of them, we did what had to be done, we went on.