

Answer Summary

# The Reaping Years

We waken to a simultaneous clap of thunder and bloom of <sup>perpetual</sup> flight, and then darkness -- is it night? -- and wind sweeping cold drops of rain -- is it winter? -- onto the front porch. "Hallie!" he calls.

Above the river swamp, racks of navy clouds scowl east over the pasture where his red cow ~~trotts~~ <sup>trotts</sup> toward the <sup>south border</sup> fence line of tall pines. "Hallie."

Dead feet planted on the damp porch floor, he turns toward the double windows and thru the sheer white crisscross curtains, he spots <sup>the hired woman</sup> ~~her~~ in <sup>stand in</sup> the kitchen at the back of the house. Tall & stout with <sup>her gray hair done up in a bun</sup> ~~her~~ <sup>dumped</sup> More thunder; more lightning, and the sound of pots scraping across the stove. Smell of pork chops frying and the green scent of rain.

His <sup>total</sup> walker is in the living, between the open kitchen & the front porch. Next flash of lightning flashes on the metal.

"Hallie? Hey; Hallie." He knocks on a windowpane behind him. Watches her.

~~She~~ crosses from the stove to the kitchen table and starts <sup>white plates</sup> ~~arranging~~ <sup>like</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>stack</sup> of mail (Bible) She picks up a <sup>pepper</sup> ~~pat~~ <sup>pat</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>pepper</sup> ~~chicken~~ <sup>chicken</sup> & heads for the stove again.

Rain, maybe hail, pounds <sup>straight down</sup> on the roof and thrashes the pink petunias in the beds along the brick walk. Rainwater puddles in the mulch and the flower tender flowers look sucked under.

He knows he has been out there a long time because he is thirsty, his thighs are numb, his backside aches. He kneels <sup>at the window</sup> and curses, stands and toddles, whistling like he does only when he tries to walk since ~~his~~ his legs have worn out. \$

By the time he reaches the front door the collar of his blue checked shirt and khaki pants are soaked. He opens the door and starts to then watches the papers fly and the towel on his chair flaps up and fold over.

Then Hattie looks up from the stove, into a wooden spoon in one hand.

"You couldn't hear me?" he says weakly, thinking he is saying it louder.

"Close the door," she says, ~~she doesn't answer~~ just stirs <sup>the food</sup> in the pots on the stove.

He ~~clozes the door~~ <sup>cannot the wind</sup> ~~toddles~~ creeps to his walker and latches onto the top rung and keeps creeping toward the kitchen. A long walk, now that he is lame.

"I say, you couldn't hear me?" he says, at Hattie's back now, so close he can

see her creased brown neck. Not a pretty sight, the woman, but cheap. A good cook, even if he isn't supposed to have porkchops.

"I heard you," she said in that phlegmy voice and ~~turns to~~ <sup>points to</sup> porkchops.

He sits at the ~~table~~ <sup>table</sup> and rests his arm on her black ~~studies~~ bible, moves his arm and slides the bible to one side. "What time's it getting to be?" he says.

"I'm cooking fast as I can," she says.

"~~Supper~~ <sup>Supper</sup> ~~time~~ <sup>time</sup>, huh?" he says and begins studying <sup>frantically</sup> the brown vinye vials of <sup>little</sup> medicine on the table, the type print of her own name! Hudson Burnette.

"Just a minute of I'll give you your ~~medicine~~ <sup>medicine</sup>," she says, leaving a browned pork chop from the platter of grease. He sets the bottle <sup>in the middle</sup> down he's been <sup>re-</sup> <sup>"take on."</sup>

one into the tiny white pills for anxiety, and the rain thru the window over the sink by the stove to keep from looking at her padded back side in the brown print skirt. She is bare foot. Has long black hair on her legs. Her <sup>rough, yellow</sup> ~~doe~~ nails are caked with dirt.

"Wang," <sup>he says,</sup> "it's coming down, ain't it?"

She looks left, <sup>to the</sup> <sup>body</sup> posing with a porkchop mid-air,

And he is drawn to stare at her liver-spiced  
face, ~~that he can't decide whether he hates or~~  
~~loves~~, which is as fascinating as a diamond back rattlesnake.  
She is all he has like a snake.

"Has Mandy called today?" he says.

Hallie snorts. "You asked me that already. And nobody called. Ain't nobody cares about you but me."

"And I prechate it," he says. "You know that."

"You got a fine way of showing it," she says.

"What did it do this time?"

"Tried to knock the underpane out, for one."

"It was trying to make ya hear me," he says.

"Well, I just remember," she says, <sup>(back, still turned on him)</sup> "I don't have to put up with your orders. I got church friends I can stay so long with anytime."

He lifts a vial of pills from the circle he has made & sets it down hard. She sidesteps to the sink, draws down on the faucet & fills <sup>his</sup> the glass she keeps on the side, turns & starts opening & shaking out pills & <sup>placing</sup> ~~depositing~~ them on the blue sprayed table cloth before him, then turns back to the stove to fork the final pork chop from the grease.

He begins placing the pills, one at a time, on his tongue & passing them into water. All except the <sup>tiny</sup> white pill for anxiety which he has kept his eye on from the center bottle, ~~and that one~~. Quickly he drops it into his left shirt pocket.

# # #

After she gets done begging God's blessing on the speckled butterbeans & washed potatoes & pork chops, he picks up his fork and begins peeling under the rim of her plate for a knife-habit from the old days when his wife Ellen would set the table. No napkin either, though a roll of white paper towels stands on the end of the table along the white <sup>to go some</sup> wall.

It is still raining, though the sky is now an even <sup>lighter</sup> gray that he could <sup>meanwhile</sup> dash on after storm.

"Say Mundy hasn't called huh?" he says.

Hallie, across from him, holds the pork chops still in both hands and eyes him as if he has cursed.

"Well," he says, <sup>she</sup> she generally calls in the <sup>morning</sup> <sup>morning</sup>. <sup>Hallie will give up her secret of whether it is night or day.</sup>

She eats.

"Seen Lola Spiny at the post office <sup>today</sup> ~~this morning~~," she says and surges from her tea glass.

"What'd she have to say?" Post office: Hallie  
always goes to the post office in Cornville every morning.  
Which means this is afternoon.

"Said she seen Thurdy & <sup>Little</sup> Nathan at the Holiday  
Market <sup>about midnight</sup> last night."

"Last night?" he nibbles at two large pork chops.

"Said her & Wilson had a big blow up."

"~~He was~~ Who said that, Thurdy or Pola?"

"What did it sound like?"

He forks mashed potatoes to his mouth. Seltzer.  
"Well I'll call her up after ~~dark~~ afternoon."  
He eyes Hallie to see if she will correct him. He  
fakes her not correcting him as a sign that  
this is dumb, and checks the Gray sky  
the window for signs from the  
rainy. "Will call her after my nap," he says.  
"Not like Thurdy at all  
cavorting at midnight."

"She's a grown woman."

"Not like her & Wilson to be fighting."

"That is what you think."

"What I know," he says and slams  
his fork on his plate.

She sits up Hallie flushes, sits up high.

"Your blood pressure's gone shoot up if you get  
riled."

"The pork's not helping it," he says

~~"Since when did you stop eating pork."~~

"If you don't like what I cook, you know what you can do."

"Hire another woman to come in & wait on me, I know."

~~"Well,~~ ain't you be that easy, I can tell you."

"You've been telling me, now tell me something new."

She watches him. She gets up and begins raking the scraps from her plate to the scrap pot on the stove which keeps the house smelling like hog slop.

He stands, holding to the table: "Tell me why you hate me."

She drops her plate into the sink of <sup>roxy water</sup> <sup>head</sup> <sup>cuds</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>bottle</sup> <sup>white</sup> <sup>pill</sup> <sup>&</sup> <sup>phak</sup> <sup>them</sup>. She turns, <sup>the</sup> <sup>me</sup> <sup>why</sup> <sup>the</sup> <sup>been</sup> <sup>you</sup> <sup>we</sup> <sup>been</sup> <sup>giving</sup> <sup>me</sup> <sup>this</sup> <sup>medicine</sup> <sup>3</sup> <sup>times</sup> <sup>a</sup> <sup>day</sup>.

She grabs it, reads it, sets it down on the table. "I don't give that one but a night."

He reaches into his pocket and fishes out the tiny white pill. Holds it out to her with his shaky right hand.

"Now," he says, "how come you <sup>forget</sup> left me out on the porch & leave me and it stoviny."

"That's enough," she shouted. "I'm  
getting my stuff & leaving."

She pounds barefoot ~~through~~ down the  
dentr hallway to her bedroom & starts slinging <sup>pulling</sup> ~~pulling~~  
~~out~~ <sup>drawers</sup> drawers & slanging them shut.

~~He says he walks & follows her,  
stopping in the doorway to her bedroom, "I  
just want to know why. What have I done to  
make a Christian woman like you make me  
miserable."~~

~~She is slinging clothes from drawer to the  
bed and sniffing.  
"Why I hurt you somehow," he said,  
"I want you to tell me."~~

"How come you to hate me?" he says  
low and places the tiny white pill on his  
tongue and swallow it down with water  
sweet tea.

With his walker he hobbles to the living room  
& drops into his chair and stares out the  
front window at his red cars spraying in the  
slow rain <sup>and waits for the snow to drop</sup> ~~till he's dry~~. And  
behind the veil drops over her eyes the picture  
Halter Younger at the Post-Walter store in  
Covington, thinner <sup>than</sup> ~~but~~ <sup>all this & your bone</sup> not prettier ~~than~~ she



She was carrying herself in that way that only tall women can carry themselves, even ugly women; ~~and~~ she had said something he couldn't recall, but ~~looking~~ looking back, two signal bodies that she was flirting, and he had missed her cue, then, had spoken & walked out.

Walking the time, he is staring ~~at~~ <sup>at total</sup> blackness, with his house black & still. But at least he <sup>now</sup> knows that it is night.