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# WHEN THE HEARTBEAT'S LONESOME

*Keith Long*

The Montague Highway was not so busy in those years; sometimes it would lie silent for hours during the longest stretch of night. At those times, with both windows of the back bedroom raised high, urging a summer draft, the countryside could close in on a kid lying in bed and looking through the screen at the brilliant stars.

It was an impressive silence beyond the window. Heavier. The darkness was not broken by corner street lamps, the silence remained intact from the city sounds of squealing tires and barking dogs. Night flies might thump against the screen; a lone bird might call out beyond the chicken coop; the wind might find enough breath to rattle the resting leaves of the oak tree in the yard.

There was, however, one prevailing sound during those quiet, summer nights of my youth: in the distance, from a direction I was never able to pinpoint, the muffled popping sound of a pumping unit. It came through my window riding the random currents of the night breeze. Sometimes the wind shifted or died altogether and the steady pop-popthumpthumpthump from the pump engine pulled back, out of sound. But then the Texas air curled back and the familiar heartbeat pressed itself again onto the consciousness of the night. It was the only constant of those long nights when I could sense more than hear the rest of the household sleeping away.

The thumping would come strongly into my ears and I would hold my breath to count the puff-

ing strokes of the engine, imagine the vulnerable belts running around flywheels, pushing the horse's head up into the sky and then pulling it back down. The sound was synonymous with the image of the rocking units which dotted the countryside between our house and my grandparents'.

And yet, even then, the sound held more than that.

The image of the pumping unit would dissolve into the whispers outside my window and my imagination would take hold, and suddenly the steady heartbeat no longer belonged to something iron and mechanical; it became a living heartbeat, as if the sound itself held the promise of the country's sunrise. In the morning, I could not hear the heartbeat, could not make contact with it. The trucks whined along the highway, bacon sizzled in the kitchen, roosters, liberated from the coop, crowed the daybreak.

The heartbeat was out of earshot, but I felt its steadiness.

At the breakfast table, Papa Bart looked out the south window at a garden full of sweet corn, tomatoes, potatoes, blackeyed peas, green onions. Papa took his time in the morning, thinking. He spent a life working long and hard into summer dusk. He was too tired evenings to think.

I wish I would've had the sense to keep my ears open over the eggs, bacon, and biscuits. I was busy thinking about crawdads and squirrel's nests and hummingbird eggs and scaring mice in the barn with my BB gun.

Even at that, I heard some things.

"You can make people laugh with a good joke," Papa Bart once said while his coffee cooled. "You can make them cry with a good story. But you can't make them think. Make them, you can't."

He reached up, pushed his painter's cap back, scratched his forehead.

Then the day began.

The 10 acres set askew against the highway seemed a carnival to a 12 year old. There were dirtclod fights in the garden, ripening plums and grapes in the orchard. There were bluegill to be caught in the spring, pigeons to chase in the barn eaves, lizards to chase, seldom to catch. There were strange, mosscovered rocks on the hill above the chicken yard, an old trash dump full of blue and brown bottles in the back pasture. There were ducks and chickens and cows and ponies. There were locust shells by the hundreds; spiders, huge ones, hung from the webs on the back of the well-house. There were squirrels to tease, quail to whistle up.

There was the front porch swing, where Granny Pollard and I sat for hours, drinking ice cold pop and playing a game in which we guessed the color of the next car to come along the highway. There was Skeeter, a small, black dog of Border Collie origin, always good for a game of fetch, always several steps ahead of me on my excursions over the farm. There was an old red Farmall tractor and a rickety green wagon that Papa would hitch up in a spare moment for a bumpy trip around the grounds.

In the evenings there were domino tournaments in the spacious kitchen, cousins in kneetorn blue jeans, a myriad of lightning bugs to chase through the corn fields, and Cowboy Danny Hodge on championship wrestling, live from the Fort Worth stockyards. And later, after the last Pontiac had pulled out of the circle drive, Danny Hodge had unmasked some fat stranger, the lights had been

snapped off, and the traffic along the highway had fallen to nothing in the longest hours of night, there was the heartbeat, still pumping, over some hillside I never discovered.

So these days I wonder.

I wonder if, after the embargo of the 1970's that threatened to end our weekend trips to Texas, after the oil boom of the 1980's that pulled the outskirts of Bowine out to the frontporch steps of my grandparents, after the widening of the Montague Highway so that it could handle all that energy traffic...I wonder if that heartbeat still pumps, still rides the night's quieter breezes.

It calls me, I admit. It invites me back down, to lie again in the back room. But I resist, for I fear those tiny 10 acres may not live up to the magical quality that my childhood painted upon it.

It wouldn't, and it shouldn't.

Papa Bart was right the morning I had my ears open. I can tear back into those days so easily. I can laugh along with my Papa Bart as we pitch house files into a spider's web and watch nature come center stage. I can laugh with my Granny Pollard when a red Corvaire (the color I always chose) sputters into view from behind the white picket fence.

Or, I can go back and cry about things. Over that simple love that exists in a warm kitchen, on a cool porch sing, in the happy dust of a jostling tractor ride. Some people don't know what I mean. I'm sorry.

As for the rest, Papa was right about that, too. I'd rather not think about it.

