By Will Weaver (1982)

A Gravestone Made of Wheat

"You can't bury your wife here on the farm," the sheriff said. "That's the law."

Olaf Torvik looked up from his chair by the coffin; he did not understand what the sheriff was saying. And why was the sheriff still here, anyway? The funeral was over. They were ready for the burial—a family burial. There should be only Torviks in the living room.

"Do you understand what he's saying, Dad?" Einar said.

Olaf frowned. He looked to his son, to the rest of the family.

"He's saying we can't bury Mom here on the farm," Einar said slowly and deliberately. "He's saying she'll have to be buried in town at Greenacre Cemetery."

Olaf shook his head to clear the gray fuzz of loss, of grief, and Einar's words began to settle into sense. But suddenly a fly buzzed like a chainsaw—near the coffin—inside—there, walking the fine white hair on Inge's right temple. Olaf lurched forward, snatching at the fly in the air but missing. Then he bent over her and licked his thumb and smoothed the hair along her temple. Looking down at Inge, Olaf's mind drew itself together, cleared; he remembered the sheriff.

"Dad?" Einar said.

Olaf nodded. "I'm okay." He turned to the sheriff, John Carlsen, whom he had known for years and who had been at the funeral.

"A law?" Olaf said. "What do you mean, John?"

"It's a public health ordinance, Olaf," the sheriff said. "The state legislature passed it two years ago. It's statewide. I don't have it with me 'cause I had no idea. . . . The law prohibits home burials."

"The boys and me got her grave already dug," Olaf said.

"I know," the sheriff said. "I saw it at the funeral. That's why I had to stay behind like this. I mean I hate like hell to be standing here. You should have told me that's the way you wanted to bury her, me or the county commissioners or the judge. Somebody, anyway. Maybe we could have gotten you a permit or something."

"Nothing to tell," Olaf said, looking across to Einar and Sarah, to

their son Harald and his wife, to Harald's children. "This is a family affair."

The sheriff took off his wide-brimmed hat and mopped his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "The times are changing, Olaf. There's more and more people now, so there's more and more laws, laws like this one."

Olaf was silent.

"I mean," the sheriff continued, "I suppose I'd like to be buried in town right in my own backyard under that red maple we got. But what if everybody did that? First thing you know, people would move away, the graves would go untended and forgotten, and in a few years you wouldn't dare dig a basement or set a post for fear of turning up somebody's coffin."

"There's eighteen hundred acres to this farm," Olaf said softly. "That's plenty of room for Inge—and me, too. And nobody in this room is likely to forget where she's buried. None of us Torviks, anyway."

The sheriff shook his head side to side. "We're talking about a law here, Olaf. And I'm responsible for the law in this county. I don't make the laws, you understand, but still I got to enforce them. That's my job."

Olaf turned and slowly walked across the living room; he stood at the window with his back to the sheriff and the others. He looked out across his farm—the white granaries, the yellow wheat stubble rolling west, and far away, the grove of Norway pine where Inge liked to pick wildflowers in the spring.

"She belongs here on the farm," Olaf said softly.

"I know what you mean," the sheriff said, and began again to say how sorry . . .

Olaf listened but the room came loose, began to drift, compressing itself into one side of his mind, as memories, pictures of Inge pushed in from the past. Olaf remembered one summer evening when the boys were still small and the creek was high and they all went there at sundown after chores and sat on the warm rocks and dangled their white legs in the cold water.

"Dad?" Einar said.

The sheriff was standing close now, as if to get Olaf's attention. "You been farming here in Hubbard County how long, fifty years?"

Olaf blinked. "Fifty-three years."

"And I've been sheriff over half that time. I know you, I know the boys. None of you has ever broken a law that I can think of, not even the boys. The townsfolk respect that . . ."

Olaf's vision cleared and something in him hardened at the mention of town folk. He had never spent much time in town, did not like it there very much. And he believed that, though farmers and townspeople did a lot of business together, it was business of necessity; that in the end they had very little in common. He also had never forgotten how the townsfolk treated Inge when she first came to Hubbard County.

"What I mean is," the sheriff continued, "you don't want to start breaking the law now when you're seventy-five years old."

"Seventy-eight," Olaf said.

"Seventy-eight," the sheriff repeated.

They were all silent. The sheriff mopped his forehead again. The silence went on for a long time.

Einar spoke. "Say we went ahead with the burial. Here, like we planned."

The sheriff answered to Olaf. "Be just like any other law that was broken. I'd have to arrest you, take you to town. You'd appear before Judge Kruft and plead guilty or not guilty. If you pled guilty, there would be a small fine and you could go home, most likely. Then your wife would be disinterred and brought into town to Greenacre."

"What if he was to plead not guilty?" Einar said.

The sheriff spoke again to Olaf. "The judge would hold a hearing and review the evidence and pass sentence. Or, you could have a trial by jury."

"What do you mean by evidence?" Olaf asked, looking up. That word again after all these years.

The sheriff nodded toward the coffin. "Your wife," he said. "She'd be the evidence."

Evidence . . . evidence; Olaf's mind began to loop back through time, to when Inge first came from Germany and that word meant everything to them. But by force of will Olaf halted his slide into memory, forced his attention to the present. He turned away from the window.

"She told me at the end she should be buried here on the farm," Olaf said softly.

They were all silent. The sheriff removed his hat and ran his fingers

through his hair. "Olaf," he said. "I've been here long enough today. You do what you think is best. That's all I'll say today."

The sheriff's car receded south down the gravel road. His dust hung over the road like a tunnel and Olaf squinted after the car until the sharp July sunlight forced his gaze back into the living room, to his family.

"What are we going to do, Dad?" Einar said.

Olaf was silent. "I . . . need some more time to think," he said. He managed part of a smile. "Maybe alone here with Inge?"

The others quietly filed through the doorway, but Einar paused, his hand on the doorknob.

"We can't wait too long, Dad," he said quietly.

Olaf nodded. He knew what Einar meant. Inge had died on Wednesday. It was now Friday afternoon, and the scent of the wilting chrysanthemums had been joined by a heavier, sweeter smell.

"I've sent Harald down to Penske's for some ice," Einar said.

Olaf nodded gratefully. He managed part of a smile, and then Einar closed the door to the living room.

Olf sat alone by Inge. He tried to order his thoughts, to think through the burial, to make a decision; instead, his mind turned back to the first time he set eyes upon Inge, the day she arrived in Fargo on the Northern Pacific. His mind lingered there and then traveled further back, to his parents in Norway, who had arranged the marriage of Olaf and Inge.

His parents, who had remained and died in Norway, wrote at the end of a letter in June of 1918 about a young German girl who worked for the family on the next farm. They wrote how she wished to come to America; that her family in Germany had been lost in the war; that she was dependable and could get up in the morning; that she would make someone a good wife. They did not say what she looked like.

Olaf carried his parents' letter with him for days, stopping now and again in the fields, in the barn, to unfold the damp and wrinkled pages and read the last part again—about the young German girl. He wondered what she looked like. But then again, he was not in a position to be too picky about that sort of thing. It was hard to meet young, unmarried women on the prairie because the farms were so far apart, sev-

eral miles usually, and at day's end Olaf was too tired to go anywhere, least of all courting. He had heard there were lots of young women in Detroit Lakes and Fargo, but he was not sure how to go about finding one in such large cities. Olaf wrote back to his parents and asked more about the German girl. His parents replied that she would be glad to marry Olaf, if he would have her. He wrote back that he would. His parents never did say what she looked like.

Because of the war, it was nearly two years later, April of 1920, before Olaf hitched up the big gray Belgian to his best wheat wagon, which he had swept as clean as his bedroom floor, and set off to Fargo to meet Inge's train.

It was a long day's ride and there was lots to see—long strings of geese rode the warm winds north, and beyond Detroit Lakes the swells of wheat fields rose up from the snow into black crowns of bare earth. But Olaf kept his eyes to the west, waiting for the first glimpse of Fargo. There were more wagons and cars on the road now, and Olaf stopped nodding to every one as there were far too many. Soon his wagon clattered on paved streets past houses built no more than a fork's handle apart. The Belgian grew skittish and Olaf stopped and put on his blinders before asking the way to the Northern Pacific Railroad station.

Inge's train was to arrive at 3:55 PM at the main platform. Olaf checked his watch against the station clock—2:28 PM—and then reached under the wagon seat. He brought out the smooth cedar shingle with his name, Olaf Leif Torvik, printed on it in large black letters. He placed it back under the seat, then on second thought, after glancing around the station, slipped the shingle inside his wool shirt. Then he grained and watered the Belgian and sat down to wait.

At 3:58 her train rumbled into the station and slowly drew to a stop, its iron wheels crackling as they cooled. People streamed off the train. Olaf held up his shingle, exchanging a shy grin with another man—John William Olsen—who also held a name-sign.

But there seemed to be few young women on the train, none alone.

A short Dutch-looking woman, small-eyed and thick, came toward Olaf—but at the last second passed him by. Olaf did not know whether to give thanks or be disappointed. But if the Dutch-looking woman passed him by, so did all the others. Soon Olaf was nearly alone on the

platform. No one else descended from the Pullman cars. Sadly, Olaf lowered his shingle. She had not come. He looked at his shingle again, then let it drop to the platform.

He turned back to his wagon. If he was honest with himself, he thought, it all seemed so unlikely anyway; after all, there were lots of men looking for wives, men with more land and money, men certainly better-looking than Olaf.

"Maybe my folks made the mistake of showing her my picture," Olaf said to the Belgian, managing a smile as the horse shook his head and showed his big yellow teeth. Olaf wondered if he would ever take a wife. It seemed unlikely.

Before he unhitched the Belgian, he turned back to the platform for one last look. There, beside the train, staring straight at him, stood a tall, slim girl of about twenty. Her red hair lit the sky. In one hand she clutched a canvas suitcase, and in the other, Olaf's cedar shingle.

Inge Altenburg sat straight in Olaf's wagon seat, her eyes scared and straight ahead; she nodded as Olaf explained, in Norwegian, that there was still time today to see about the marriage. She spoke Norwegian with a heavy German accent, said yes, that is what she had come for.

They tried to get married in Fargo, in the courthouse, but a clerk there said that since Olaf was from Minnesota, they should cross the river and try at the courthouse in Moorhead. Olaf explained this to Inge, who nodded. Olaf opened his watch.

"What time do they close in Minnesota?" he asked the clerk.

"Same as here, five o'clock."

It was 4:36; they could still make it today. Olaf kept the Belgian trotting all the way across the Red River Bridge to the Moorhead Courthouse.

Inside, with eight minutes to spare, Olaf found the office of the Justice of the Peace; he explained to the secretary their wish to be married, today, if possible.

The secretary, a white-haired woman with gold-rimmed glasses, frowned.

"It's a bit late today," she said, "but I'll see what I can do. You do have all your papers in order?" she asked of Inge.

"Papers?" Olaf said.

"Her birth certificate and citizenship papers."

Olaf's heart fell. He had not thought of all this. He turned to Inge, who already was reaching under her sweater for the papers. Olaf's hopes soared as quickly as they had fallen.

"All right," the secretary said, examining the birth certificate, "now the citizenship papers."

Inge frowned and looked questioningly at Olaf. Olaf explained the term. Inge held up her hands in despair.

"She just arrived here," Olaf said, "she doesn't have them yet."

"I'm so sorry," the secretary said, and began tidying up her desk.

Olaf and Inge walked out. Inge's eyes began to fill with tears.

"We'll go home to Park Rapids," Olaf told her, "where they know me. There won't be any problem, any waiting, when we get home."

Inge nodded, looking down as she wiped her eyes. Olaf reached out and brushed away a teardrop, the first time he had touched her. She flinched, then burst into real tears.

Olaf drew back his hand, halfway, but then held her at her shoulders with both his hands.

"*Ich verstehe,*" he said softly, "I understand."

They stayed that night in a hotel in Detroit Lakes. Olaf paid cash for two single rooms, and they got an early start in the morning. Their first stop was not Olaf's farm, but the Hubbard County Courthouse in Park Rapids. At the same counter Olaf and Inge applied for both her citizenship and their marriage license. When Inge listed her nationality as German, however, the clerk raised an eyebrow in question. He took her papers back to another, larger office; the office had a cloudy waved-glass door and Olaf could see inside, as if underwater, several dark-suited men passing Inge's papers among themselves and murmuring. After a long time—thirty-eight minutes—the clerk returned to the counter.

"I'm afraid we have some problems with this citizenship application," he said to Inge.

When Inge did not reply, the clerk turned to Olaf. "She speak English?"

"I don't believe so, not much anyway."

"Well, as I said, there are some problems here."

"I can't think of any," Olaf said, "we just want to get married."

"But your wife—er, companion—lists that she's a German national."

"That's right," Olaf answered, "but she's in America now and she wants to become an American."

The clerk frowned. "That's the problem—it might not be so easy. We've got orders to be careful about this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"German nationals."

"Germans? Like Inge? But why?"

"You do realize we've been at war with Germany recently?" the clerk said, pursing his lips. "You read the papers?"

Olaf did not bother to answer.

"I mean the war's over, of course," the clerk said, "but we haven't received any change orders regarding German nationals,"

Olaf laughed. "You think she's a spy or something? This girl?"

The clerk folded his arms across his chest. Olaf saw that he should not have laughed, that there was nothing at all to laugh about.

"We've got our rules," the clerk said.

"What shall we do?" Olaf asked. "What would you recommend?"

The clerk consulted some papers. "For a successful citizenship application she'll need references in the form of letters, letters from people who knew her in Germany and Norway, people who can verify where she was born, where she has worked. We especially need to prove that she was never involved in any capacity in German military or German government work."

"But that might take weeks," Olaf said.

The clerk shrugged. Behind him one of the county commissioners, Sig Hansen, had stopped to listen.

"There's nothing else we can do?" Olaf asked, directing his question beyond the clerk to the commissioner. But Sig Hansen shook his head negatively.

"Sorry, Olaf, that's out of my control. That's one area I can't help you in." The commissioner continued down the hall.

"Sorry," the clerk said, turning to some other papers.

With drawn lips Olaf said, "Thanks for your time."

They waited for Inge's letters to arrive from Europe. They waited one week, two weeks, five weeks. During this time Olaf slept in the hayloft and Inge took Olaf's bed in the house. She was always up and dressed and had breakfast ready by the time Olaf came in from the barn. Olaf

always stopped at the pumphouse, took off his shirt, and washed up before breakfast. He usually stepped outside and toweled off his bare chest in the sunlight; once he noticed Inge watching him from the kitchen window.

At breakfast Olaf used his best table manners, making sure to sit straight and hold his spoon correctly. And though they usually ate in silence, the silence was not uncomfortable. He liked to watch her cook. He liked it when she stood at the wood range with her back to him, flipping pancakes or shaking the skillet of potatoes; he liked the way her body moved, the way strands of hair came loose and curled down her neck. Once she caught him staring. They both looked quickly away, but not before Olaf saw the beginnings of a smile on Inge's face. And it was not long after that, in the evening when it was time for Olaf to retire to the hayloft, that they began to grin foolishly at each other and stay up later and later. Though Olaf was not a religious man, he began to pray for the letters' speedy return.

Then it was July. Olaf was in the field hilling up his corn plants when Inge came running, calling out to him as she came, holding up her skirts for speed, waving a package in her free hand. It was from Norway. They knelt in the hot dirt and tore open the wrapping. The letters! Three of them. They had hoped for more, just to make sure, but certainly three would be enough.

Olaf and Inge did not even take time to hitch up the wagon, but rode together bareback on the Belgian to Park Rapids. They ran laughing up the courthouse steps, Olaf catching Inge's hand on the way. Once inside, however, they made themselves serious and formal, and carefully presented the letters to the clerk. The clerk examined them without comment.

"I'll have to have the judge look at these," he said, "he's the last word on something like this." The clerk then retreated with their letters down the hall and out of sight.

The judge took a long time with the letters. Twenty minutes. Thirty-nine minutes. Olaf and Inge waited at the clerk's window, holding hands below the cool granite counter. As they waited, Inge began to squeeze Olaf's hand with increasing strength until her fingers dug into his palm and hurt him; he did not tell her, however. Finally the clerk returned. He handed back the letters.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but the judge feels these letters are not sufficient."

Olaf caught the clerk's wrist. The clerk's eyes jumped wide and round and scared; he tried to pull back his arm but Olaf had him.

"We want to get married, that's all," he said hoarsely.

"Wait—" the clerk stammered, his voice higher now. "Maybe you should see the judge yourselves."

"That's a damned good idea," Olaf said. He let go of the clerk's arm. The clerk rubbed his wrist and pointed down the hall.

Olaf and Inge entered the judge's chambers, and Olaf's hopes plummeted. All the old books, the seals under glass on the walls, the papers, the white hair and expressionless face of the judge himself: they all added up to power, to right-of-way. The judge would have it his way.

Olaf explained their predicament. The judge nodded impatiently and flipped through the letters again.

"Perhaps what we should do for you," the judge said, "is to have you wait on this application for a period of, say, one calendar year. If, during that time, it is determined that Inge Altenburg is loyal and patriotic, then we can consider her for citizenship. And, of course, marriage."

"One year!" Olaf exclaimed.

The judge drew back and raised his eyebrows. Sig Hansen, the commissioner, had paused in the doorway. He shook his head at the judge.

"Christ, Herb," he said, "you ought to run it through, let 'em get married. They're harmless. They're just farmers."

Inge rose up from her chair. There was iron in her face. "Come—" she commanded Olaf, in English, "it is time we go to home."

They rode home slowly, silently. The Belgian sensed their sorrow and kept turning his wide brown eyes back to Olaf. But Olaf had no words for the big animal. Inge held Olaf around his waist. As they came in sight of their buildings she leaned her head on his shoulder and he could feel her crying. They ate their dinner in silence, and then Olaf returned to his cornfield. At supper they were silent again.

Come sundown, Olaf climbed the ladder to the hayloft and unrolled his bedroll in the hay. He wished he could have found some good thing to say at supper, but it was not in him. Not tonight. Olaf felt old, tired beyond his thirty-three years. He lay back on the loose prairie hay and watched the sun set in the knotholes of the west barn wall, red, then violet, then purple, then blue shrinking to gray. He hardly remembered going to sleep. But then he knew he must be dreaming. For standing

above him, framed in the faint moonlight of the loft, stood Inge. She lay down beside him in the hay and when her hair fell across his face and neck he knew he could not be dreaming. He also knew that few dreams could ever be better than this. And in his long life with Inge, none were.

Olaf rose from his chair by her casket. That night when she came to him in the loft was forty-five years past. That night was Olaf's last in the hayloft, for they considered themselves married, come morning—married by body, by heart, and by common law.

And Inge never forgot her treatment at the Hubbard County Courthouse in Park Rapids; she rarely shopped in the town, preferring instead Detroit Lakes, which was twelve miles farther but contained no unpleasant memories.

Nor did she become a citizen; she remained instead without file or number, nonexistent to federal, state, or local records. She was real, Olaf thought, only to those who knew her, who loved her. And that, Olaf suddenly understood, was the way she should remain. As in her life, her death.

Before Olaf called the family back into the room, he thought he should try to pray. He got down on his knees on the wood floor by the coffin and folded his hands. He waited, but no words came. He wondered if he had forgotten how to pray. Olaf knew that he believed in a great God of some kind. He had trouble with Jesus, but with God there was no question. He ran into God many times during the year: felt of him in the warm field-dirt of May; saw his face in the shiny harvest grain; heard his voice among the tops of the Norway pines. But he was not used to searching him out, to calling for him.

Nor could he now. Olaf found he could only cry. Long, heaving sobs and salty tears that dripped down his wrists to the floor. He realized, with surprise, that this was the first time he had cried since Inge's death, that his tears in their free flowing were a kind of prayer. He realized, too, that God was with him these moments. Right here in this living room.

When the family reassembled, Olaf told them his decision. He spoke clearly, resolutely.

"We will bury Inge here on the farm as we planned," he said, "but in a little different fashion."

He outlined what they would do, asked if anyone disagreed, if there were any worries. There were none. "All right then, that's settled," Olaf said. He looked around the room at his family—Einar, Sarah, the children, the others.

"And do you know what else we should do?" Olaf said.

No one said anything.

"Eat!" Olaf said. "I'm mighty hungry."

The others laughed, and the women turned to the kitchen. Soon they all sat down to roast beef, boiled potatoes with butter, dill pickles, wheat bread, strong black coffee, and pie. During lunch Harald returned with the ice. Einar excused himself from the table and went to help Harald.

Once he returned and took from a cupboard some large black plastic garbage bags. Olaf could hear them working in the living room, and once Einar said, "Don't let it get down along her side, there."

Olaf did not go into the living room while they worked. He poured himself another cup of coffee, which, strangely, made him very tired. He tried to remember when he had slept last.

Sarah said to him, "Perhaps you should rest a little bit before we . . ."

Olaf nodded. "You're right," he said, "I'll go upstairs and lie down a few minutes. Just a few minutes."

Olaf started awake at the pumping thuds of the John Deere starting. He sat up quickly—too quickly, nearly pitching over—and pushed aside the curtain. It was late—nearly dark. How could he have slept so long? It was time.

He hurriedly laced his boots and pulled on a heavy wool jacket over his black suit-coat. Downstairs, the women and children were sitting in the kitchen, dressed and waiting for him.

"We would have wakened you," Sarah said.

Olaf shook his head to clear it. "I thought for a minute there . . ." Then he buttoned his coat and put on a woolen cap. He paused at the door. "One of the boys will come for you when everything is ready," he said to Sarah.

"We know," she said.

Outside, the sky was bluish purple and Harald was running the little John Deere tractor in the cow lot. The tractor carried a front-end loader and Harald was filling the scoop with fresh manure. Beyond the

tractor some of the black Angus stretched stiffly and snorted at the disturbance. Harald drove out of the lot when the scoop was rounded up and dripping. He stopped by the machine shed, went inside, and returned with two bags of commercial nitrogen fertilizer.

"Just to make sure, Grandpa," he said. His smile glinted white in the growing dark.

"Won't hurt," Olaf said. Then he tried to think of other things they would need.

"Rope," Olaf said. "And a shovel." Then he saw both on the tractor.

"Everything's ready," Harald said, pointing to the little John Deere. "She's all yours. We'll follow."

Olaf climbed up to the tractor's seat and then backed away from the big machine-shed doors. Einar and Harald rolled open the mouth of the shed and went inside.

The noise of their two big tractors still startled Olaf, even in daylight, and he backed up farther as the huge, dual-tandem John Deeres rumbled out of their barn. A single tire on them, he realized, was far bigger than the old Belgian he used to have. And maybe that's why he never drove the big tractors. Actually, he'd never learned, hadn't wished to. He left them to the boys, who drove them as easily as Olaf drove the little tractor. Though they always frightened him a little, Olaf's long wheat fields called for them—especially tonight. Behind each of the big tractors, like an iron spine with twelve shining ribs, rode a plow.

Olaf led the caravan of tractors. They drove without lights into the eighty-acre field directly west from the yellow-lit living-room window of the house. At what he sensed was the middle of the field, Olaf halted. He lowered the manure and fertilizer onto the ground. Then, with the front-end digger, he began to unearth Inge's grave.

Einar and Harald finished the sides of the grave with shovels. Standing out of sight in the hole, their showers of dirt pumped rhythmically up and over the side. Finished, they climbed up and brushed themselves off, and then walked back to the house for the others.

Olaf waited alone by the black hole. He stared down into its darkness and realized that he probably would not live long after Inge, and yet felt no worry or fear. For he realized there was, after all, a certain order to the events and times of his life: all the things he had worked for and loved were now nearly present.

Behind, he heard the faint rattle of the pickup. He turned to watch

it come across the field toward the grave. Its bumper glinted in the moonlight, and behind, slowly walking, came the dark shapes of his family. In the bed of the pickup was Inge's coffin.

The truck stopped alongside the grave. Einar turned off the engine and then he and Harald lifted the coffin out and onto the ground. The family gathered around. Sarah softly sang "Rock of Ages," and then they said together the Twenty-third Psalm. Olaf could not speak past "The Lord is my . . ."

Then it was over. Einar climbed onto the tractor and raised the loader over the coffin. Harald tied ropes to the loader's arms and looped them underneath and around the coffin. Einar raised the loader until the ropes tightened and lifted the long dark box off the ground. Harald steadied the coffin, kept it from swinging, as Einar drove forward until the coffin was over the dark hole. Olaf stepped forward toward it as if to—to what?

Einar turned questioningly toward Olaf. "Now, Dad?" he said.

Olaf nodded.

Swaying slightly in the moonlight, the coffin slowly sank into the grave. There was a scraping sound as it touched bottom. Harald untied the ropes and then Einar began to push forward the mound of earth; the sound of dirt thumping on the coffin seemed to fill the field. When the grave was half filled, Einar backed the tractor to the pile of manure and pushed it forward into the hole. Harald carried the two bags of nitrogen fertilizer to the grave, slit their tops, and poured them in after the manure. Then Einar filled in the earth and scattered what was left over until the grave was level with the surrounding field.

Olaf tried to turn away, but could not walk. For with each step he felt the earth rising up to meet his boots as if he were moving into some strange room, an enormous room, one that went on endlessly. He thought of his horses, his old team. He heard himself murmur some word that only they would understand.

"Come, Dad," Sarah said, taking Olaf by the arm. "It's over."

Olaf let himself be led into the pickup. Sarah drove him and the children to the field's edge by the house where Einar had parked the little John Deere.

"You coming inside now?" Sarah asked as she started the children toward the house.

"No, I'll wait here until the boys are finished," Olaf said, "you go on ahead."

Even as he spoke the big tractors rumbled alive. Their running lights flared on and swung around as Einar and Harald drove to the field's end near Olaf. They paused there a moment, side by side, as their plows settled onto the ground. Then their engine RPMs came up and the tractors, as one, leaned into their work and headed straight downfield toward Inge's grave.

The furrows rolled up shining in the night light. Olaf knew this earth. It was heavy soil, had never failed him. He knew also that next year, and nearly forever after, there would be one spot in the middle of the field where the wheat grew greener, taller, and more golden than all the rest. It would be the gravestone made of wheat.

Olaf sat on the little tractor in the darkness until the boys had plowed the field black from side to side. Then they put away the tractors and fed the Angus. After that they ate breakfast, and went to bed at dawn.