

Tom Noyes

THE
SUBSTANCE
OF THINGS
HOPED FOR

a novel



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A Novel



TOM NOYES

 SLANT

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Prologue

MOSQUITOES AND SWEAT BEES SWARMED their beards, and cottonwood seed drifted down around them like snow.

The older man sat on a damp log, his hand on his throat, and regarded the younger man hovering over him. "You startled me, Son," he said. "What do you need?"

"Not sure," the younger man answered. "Not sure I'm the one in need."

The older man watched a cloud-colored moth rise from the log and disappear over the younger man's shoulder. "Most folks understand I come out here alone in the morning," he said. "Alone on purpose. This time is precious to me. I try to guard it."

"And yet this morning you beckoned me," the younger man said.

"I did not beckon you," the older man said. "It would seem there's been a misunderstanding."

"And yet we are of one mind," the younger man said.

"I'm not sure that's the case," the older man said.

"As I am unsure," the younger man said.

The older man rose slowly from the log, cracking his knees. "I'm headed to the turtle pond. You may walk with me, I suppose. If there's nothing pressing to address, though, let's make it a contemplative walk. Let's not speak. We'll be walking together in one sense, but in another sense we'll each be alone. Can we agree to that?"

"Your words at breakfast this morning I heard as a beckoning."

"My homily," the older man said. "You could have said so straight-away. You have a question?"

"Bear ye one another's burdens," the younger man said.

“That was my theme, yes. From Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Chapter six, verse two. Neither you nor I nor the rest of the family would be here in Oneida if not for these words. As I said at breakfast. We are all here to fulfill these words.”

The younger man rubbed his beard roughly with both hands and smashed a mosquito above his eyebrow, leaving a spot of blood. “Verse five says, ‘For every man shall bear his own burden,’” the younger man said. “You skirted that verse.”

“I see,” the older man said. “Paul saying on the one hand that we should share our burdens and on the other hand saying that each is responsible for his own burden. You’re concerned by the apparent contradiction.”

“The contradiction as well as the skirting,” the younger man said. “You presented as clear and straightforward that which is not clear and straightforward. Not in context. You offered it out of context to make it sound clear and straightforward, but it is not. Not in context it’s not.”

“You followed me into the woods to correct me,” the older man said. He tilted his head back and studied the bright canopy. The branches shimmered silently, bird-less. “You’re here to set me straight.”

“I heard your words as a beckoning,” the younger man said.

“I regard these two verses as more complementary than contradictory,” the older man said. He turned and proceeded down the path a few steps, but the younger man remained anchored in place. “Come,” the older man said, gesturing to the younger man to follow. “The turtle pond.”

“I thought you might be walking away to leave me behind as opposed to walking away with the intention that I should make to accompany you, so I did not make to accompany you,” the younger man said.

“Another misunderstanding,” the older man said, and he gestured once again to the younger man, who with his first step stumbled and sunk his foot ankle-deep in a mud puddle. The older man had not previously noticed the puddle. It were as if the puddle had sprung into being precisely so the younger man, who now winced and yelped and limped in a tight circle, would stumble into it.

“Are you hurt?” the older man said.

The younger man bent over to squeeze his wet ankle with both hands, and then straightened slowly and breathed deeply. “I thought at first I’d twisted it badly, but now I don’t believe I twisted it badly,” he said. He hopped on one foot and then the other as if to compare. “No. It would

appear I didn't twist it badly despite thinking at first I'd twisted it badly," the younger man said. "It would appear I merely dampened it."

"Good," the older man said, and the two men started together down the path. "So, once again, about your concerns with this morning's homily. . ."

"The contradiction as well as the skirting," the younger man said.

"Yes. As I was saying, I think both concepts are part of the same truth," the older man said. "As a family rooted in the spirit of love, we become one body, and as one body we bear our collective burden. In that sense we bear each other's burdens. But as each family member is unto himself a part of that body, a component of that body, the collective burden necessarily becomes each member's own individual burden. In that sense, then, each of us bears his own burden, but the burden each of us bears individually is the collective burden of the united body. Do you understand now how both verses are true even though they might seem incompatible upon first hearing?"

The older man paused to allow a reply, but he heard only the squeak of the younger man's wet shoe.

"There are other possibilities, of course. Other interpretations of this passage," the older man continued. "Paul is not a simplistic writer. Perhaps he was trying to communicate to the Galatians how some burdens lend themselves to sharing while other burdens are more individual in nature. I can say I myself have borne both kinds. I imagine many folks have. Another consideration is that there might be those among us who are required to bear more than their fair share. Perhaps the sharing of burdens is not always perfectly equal."

The younger man wiped his nose on his sleeve, regarded his sleeve, and then wiped his sleeve on a tree. "Why didn't you speak to all this at breakfast?" he said.

"Most folks think slowly early in the day," the older man said. "Best to keep things simple."

When the pond came into sight, the younger man quickened his pace. The older man watched him forge ahead, pry loose a small stone from the muddy bank, and hurl it into the water. The younger man's exaggerated effort and loud grunt did not match the result. The older man had seen children throw farther.

"Why do you suppose we're led to do this?" the older man said. He bent to pry loose his own stone and lob it underhand into the pond. "Not

just you and I. Everyone. It seems well-nigh instinctual. What is it about rocks and water that leads us to want to throw the former into the latter?"

"The sight and sound of the splash," the younger man said. "Then, if there are geese on the water, the scattering of the geese. Then the rippling out. Then the pronounced quiet, which is quieter than the quiet before the splash and the scattering of the geese if there are geese. Then the thinking about the rock settling newly on the bottom. The thinking about the cloud of sediment rising and the rock settling newly on the bottom forever."

The older man nodded. "I won't forget that answer," he said.

"It shall come to pass," the younger man said.

"What shall come to pass?" the older man said. When he leaned back on his heels and put his hands in his pockets, he felt the pencil and two letters he had forgotten about. One letter to read and one to finish writing. The letter to be read was the most recent in a series from the younger man's anxious father. The older man already knew what it would say, what it would ask and what it would offer. As for the letter to be written, the older man knew from experience that no matter what he wrote, she would not reply. He did not know if she would even read it. This knowing and not knowing made writing the letter simple in one sense and arduous in another.

"Did you hear me?" the older man said. "What shall come to pass? Finish your thought, Son."

"It is finished," the younger man said, and he flung another stone.

PART I
1823–59

John Humphrey Noyes Encounters a Fox

BY THE TIME WE WERE AWARE of its presence, the fox was already heading for us, splashing through the reeds and mud of the swamp in full trot. My younger brother George shouted at it and shouted at me to shout at it, but the animal was not intimidated. It lowered its shoulders and head, flattened its ears, and picked up speed, putting me in mind of an arrow. The sounds emanating from its grinning, panting mouth, though, could have been human. The loud, insistent squawking of a discontented baby.

George picked up the large, muddy stick lying at his feet and held it out to me. When I accepted it, he turned and ran. His sudden bolting enticed the fox, who tried to dart around me to pursue George. As the animal rushed by, I surprised myself by swinging the stick down like an axe across its back. It yelped and spun, gnashing wetly at the air between us. When I swung again, this time landing the stick on the fox's neck, its front legs collapsed, and its head slammed, muzzle-first, into the mud. On the third blow, the stick broke across the top of the fox's head. Black blood seeped out of a gash on its crown, and its foamy gagging turned to strained wheezing.

At a distance I had thought the fox to be large, but now, as it lay still at my feet, I was struck by its taut scrawniness and grew afraid that if I stared long enough one of its blade-like ribs would poke through its skin.

When I looked up in George's direction, he was still running across the swamp towards home. "George! Come back here!" I called, but he gave no heed. I watched him trip over the roots of a black gum tree, pull himself back to his feet, and continue running without so much as a backward glance.

When I caught up with my brother at home, I first made sure to shame him for his cowardice, and then I proudly rendered him the tale of how I had extinguished the fox. On the first point, he did not seem at all chagrined. In fact, he told me I had demonstrated stupidity for not running away like he had, and he asserted that even though he was the younger and I the older, it was now proven fact that he possessed more common sense. How had I, he wondered, nearly reached the age of twelve without knowing enough to run from rabid animals? Of what other basics of survival was I unaware?

On the second point, George did not believe me about killing the fox. He even denied remembering arming me with the stick—this especially confounded and infuriated me—and he told me that, even if he had equipped me with such a weapon, he doubted I possessed the physical strength necessary to swing it hard enough to slay a squirrel or field mouse, let alone a fox.

We argued bitterly for a while before I suggested it was an easy enough matter to settle. I would hit George with a stick on the top of his head, and then he could tell me whether or not I had swung it hard enough to kill a fox. When he balked at this suggestion, I offered another. We would simply go back to the swamp. Either we would find a dead fox, or we would not find a dead fox. George was initially reluctant to accept this course of action. He said he was worried to return to the spot because he imagined the fox would likely be there waiting for us, still very much alive and game for bloodshed. When I told George that I suspected the real reason he did not want to go was because he did not want to be proven wrong, he had little choice but to solemnly acquiesce.

There was no dead fox at the swamp. There was a swatch of matted fur and a mess of tracks where the animal and I had tangled, but there was no carcass. The stick, now two sticks, was there, but George told me that proved nothing. “There are sticks everywhere,” he said. “Wherever there are trees.” When I dropped to my hands and knees in the muck to scour the area for blood, George snickered above me, shaking his head. “You are putting on quite a show, John,” he said. “This is a farce. Would it not be simpler for you to own up to your fib? We could then be done with this foolishness, and you would have a clear conscience.”

I stood to face him, told him to recant, and when he would not, I shoved him in the chest, sending him stumbling back onto his hind end. “There is your farce and your fib,” I said.

"Beating me will not make your lie true," he said as he pulled himself up and wiped his hands on his trousers, "nor will it make me believe you."

"Your belief or unbelief does not determine what is true, George," I answered. "Nor does what you think in your muddled brain matter a whit to me. Now go do what you always do and tattle to Mother like the petulant brat you are."

George studied me silently for a moment before his eyebrows rose and his finger pierced the air between us. "I know what happened to the fox!" he said.

"I told you what happened," I said.

"I mean I think I may know, if it indeed were killed by you like you say, why and how its body has disappeared."

"Go on," I said.

"I believe the varmint must have been resurrected from the dead!" George said, and then he folded his soiled hands at the top of his chest, and his voice quieted to a reverent tone as he bowed his head. "To save us from our sins."

Before I could grab him to give him a pummeling, he was off running across the swamp towards home again, this time cursing me bitterly over his shoulder. I considered giving chase, but I knew he was a fast runner—I was rarely able to catch him even though my legs were longer—and when I watched him stumble over the same set of tree roots he had met with earlier, I thought it sufficient comeuppance, at least for the time being. I took care to cackle loudly enough at his clumsiness to ensure his hearing.

A few months later, just after his tenth birthday, George was dead, cut down by a vicious fever. He was bed-ridden the last few weeks of his life, and on several occasions, against my mother's orders, I entered his room to attempt to persuade him to believe me about the fox before it was too late. With each passing day, my obsession grew more fervent. I could not help but suspect that George's affliction had something to do with his rejection of the truth of my story, and I was persuaded that if I could convince him to believe, he might be healed or, at least, be better prepared to face final judgment.

As George's death appeared to grow more inevitable and loom more closely, desperate measures were taken. During the final stages of his illness, my mother gave birth to her fourth son, her ninth and final child, and she named the new baby after George. She and my father thought this might make the dying George happy, give him a glimpse of his family's

affection for him before his departure, but their well-meant gesture did not have its desired effect. George did not say much about the situation, at least nothing I heard, but I sensed that there being a new George in the household—a fresh, innocent version, who demanded more than his fair share of our mother’s diligent and tender care—greatly injured him and made his last days even more miserable than they would have been. In some sense, the birth of his namesake seemed to depress George more thoroughly than his own imminent death. Or perhaps the birth of his brother made his own impending death more concrete and immediate. If he had been harboring hopes of a recovery, he now understood those hopes were empty. He knew there was not enough room in one family for two boys named George. He would have to go.

Is there anything more tragic and mysterious than an action born out of grace and selflessness that instead functions to harm and destroy the soul meant to benefit from it?

Infant George could not have been more than a week old when I sneaked into my dying brother’s room early one morning and gently awakened him by cupping his hot, damp head in my hands and pressing my lips against his ear. I told him I would always miss him greatly—even in my old age I would never forget his brief life—and I assured him he had nearly always been, for the most part, a good and capable brother. Moreover, I confided in him that he was my favorite brother, what with little Horatio and the new baby George being entirely useless as companions, and I told him I had decided to forgive him for wrongfully accusing me of lying about the fox, whether he would repent of his disbelief or not. My final gift to him.

As I spoke to George, I remember liking the way he smelled, pungent like cold coffee, and being cognizant of how deeply and desperately sad this scent made me. I had not at that time in my life felt such sadness.

My gift of forgiveness enraged George. When I drew back from him, I saw his dim eyes had widened, and his teeth had clenched. He was able somehow to summon the strength to lift his head and tell me clearly and slowly that he rejected my grace. He said so twice to ensure my understanding, and as he spoke, tiny drops of hot spittle landed on my face. He then eased his head back onto his pillow, reached over to his nightstand, and rang his bell.

Since my mother was still asleep with infant George, it was my father who answered my dying brother’s beckoning. He did not even hear

George's complaint before grabbing my elbow and ushering me out of the room and then out of the house and into the rain. He looked up at the dark sky and seemed to doubt himself for a moment, but when he looked back at me, he regained his resolve and informed me matter-of-factly that I would not be welcome back inside until supper. If I protested or tried to sneak home any earlier, I would not be welcome back until tomorrow morning's breakfast. When he asked if all was clear, I did not answer, and I tried to look as hurt and as pitiful as possible, but he shut the door anyway.

As I tramped through the soggy woods that morning, I spent the first couple of hours pouting, wallowing in self-pity and indulging in self-righteousness. I staged an imaginary exchange with my father at the end of which he saw the error of his ways and, as part of his apology, confided in me that of all the wonderful things he had done and experienced in his life, nothing had brought him more pleasure and pride than to be able to claim me as his son. If it sometimes seemed the opposite, he told me, if sometimes his temper seemed to flame most quickly with me compared to his other children, whom he also loved, albeit with a more traditional paternal fondness, this was only because he strove to not let on to them how he truly felt about me. To spare their feelings.

This fantasy satisfied me enough to allow me to turn my thoughts to my brother, and after much deliberation, I decided the best course would be to reverse strategy. Instead of forgiving George, I would ask George's forgiveness for lying about killing the fox even though I had not lied. I thought affording him the opportunity to exercise the grace of forgiveness, even unnecessary, misdirected forgiveness, might be something that could bring him some final moments of peace. It struck me then that dying might not be so bad if one were blessed to enter into it free and clear of concern, if one were not distracted by the loose ends and nagging troubles that informed the life being left behind.

Having settled on this new tack, I directed myself out of the woods to our neighbor's farm and into his horse barn to escape the rain. I nested in a clean, dark corner behind some empty bushel baskets and scraps of lumber and wrapped myself in a horse blanket I found draped over one of the stalls.

I napped in fits and starts until dusk. On several occasions I was awakened by Mr. Sharpe wandering into the barn. He talked sweetly to his horses, asking one named Archer when the weather was going to clear,

and assuring another named Patty that when it came time for her colt to be born, he would take good care of the both of them. I wondered what I would say to Sharpe if confronted—I hoped he would be as kind to me as he was to his animals—but that situation never came to pass. If he did catch sight of me that day, he graciously decided that the best thing to be done was leave me be.

By the time I returned home that evening, I was thoroughly convinced that my plan for George was a perfect one, and I was eager to enact it. But I was too late. He was gone. I knew this before anyone told me. I knew the moment I opened the door to find my mother shivering in grief at the kitchen table, weeping over the sweetly sighing infant nursing at her breast.