So Long Old Buddy

dirty dute—who taught him to drown cats, masturbate and steal—was he still alive after all these years?

He used to take Dute to the bathroom with him and they'd have long conversations behind the locked door—conversations his mother sometimes overheard and reprimanded him for because she thought he was talking to himself. Sometimes he would take Dute to school, but not very often, because it was too risky. The other kids would have got the wrong impression, just as his mother always did, if they'd happened to overhear his side of the conversation, and would have made fun of him. No, mist of the time he left Dute home and walked to school with only his sister, Jane, for company, except, of course, for the times that Dute talked him into playing hooky, and those days didn't count, because he and Dute spent them as far away from the schoolhouse as they could get.

Invariably, when he went to school without Dute, Dute would be waiting for him in the front yard when he came home, and they would go into the house together, silent till they reached his room. The Dute would say "How was school today?" And he'd answer, "Rotten." Summer days they spent halcyon afternoons together in the hayloft of the old barn that stood some distance behind the dilapidated house. First Dute would swing from a rafter and drop into the hay, then he would. Other afternoons they went swimming together in the creek that wound this way and that in the fields where his father raised corn and tomatoes and string beans. Sometimes on the way back to the house Dute would say "Come on, let's jack off," and they'd hide behind the old corncrib his grandfather had stored field corn in years ago and masturbate.

They'd been the best of buddies, he and Dute. Inseperable in both a figurative and a literal sense. But eventually they'd fallen out. He could no longer remember what they had quarreled about. Maybe there hadn't been a quarrel—maybe they'd just come to a parting of the ways. In any case, he decided one day that he'd had enough of Dute, and after luring him into the fruit closet in the cellar on some pretext or another, he had locked him in. A week or so later, his father had got a job in town and the family had moved out. A small farm provided a precarious living at best, and things had been getting worse right along; even so it must have been a difficult decision for his father to make, because Grandfather Sharpe had owned the farm and they'd been living on it scot-free.

Was Dute still down there in the fruit closet? "young" Sharpe wondered with wry amusement, standing in the wretched little kitchen with its high narrow cupboards and its pitiful little sink. Had he been languishing there all these dark years, waiting for someone to show up and remove the improvised bolt and open the closet door?

The farm was Sharpe's now. Grandfather Sharpe had left it to him, and Sharpe had driven out from the city on this gray November afternoon to appraise the property. He was in real estate now. Formerly, he had been in insurance. Before that he had sold cars. Or tried to. He hadn't remembered Dute till he came over the hill that led down into the valley and saw the collapsed barn and the forlorn frame house, and he hadn't really remembered him till a moment ago, when, after entering the house by the back door, he looked into the bathroom off the kitchen. The bathroom was unchanged, though it seemed vastly smaller than he remembered its being: a high ceilinged little hallway of a room containing a toilet, a hot-water tank and a tub. There was no lavatory. If you wanted to wash up, you had to use the kitchen sink. Probably, if Grandfather Sharpe had fixed the place up after they had moved out, or at least made a few essential repairs, someone else would have moved in. But he hadn't. He'd kept saying he was going to, kept talking about aluminum siding for the house and a new roof for the barn. But talk was all it had amounted to.

In all these years, Dute had been the only tenant.

A trap door in the kitchen floor provided access to the cellar. On an impulse, Sharpe knelt beside it and raised the recessed handle. He tugged and the door creaked open, revealing bleak blackness. A miasma born of damp, mold and mildew engulfed but failed to daunt him. "You still down there, Dute?"

he called into the darkness.

Silence.

He let the door drop back into place, laughing at the absurd impulse that had prompted him to open it. The laughter sounded hollow in the empty house. Leaving the kitchen, he passed through the narrow dining room into the living room. In the way of furniture, the living room contained a moldy sofa with coil springs protruding from its faded cushions. The rocks the local kids had thrown through the windows shared the floor space with splinters of glass and chunks of plaster that had fallen from the ceiling. He remembered the wall paper as having been light blue with little white flowers "growing" on it. It was brown now and in many places it had peeled away from the walls and ceiling and hung there like dirty laundry.

Just off the room, a narrow flight of stairs led up to the second story. He began mounting them, testing each step before putting his entire weight on it. He knew he was being foolhardy, that there was no real need for him to inspect the upstairs, that all he would find would be more dust, more duesetude. More memories. But nostalgia had taken root in his mind and he knew it would nag his mind all the way back to the city unless he explored the house completely.

The steps creaked beneath him, but they were solid.. The house was well built. Old houses usually were. This one dated from the days when "square" nails were used; when joists were spaces six inches apart; when two-by-fours measured two inches by four inches. He knew all these things from his "Dute days"; there was no nook or cranny of the house they had left unexplored.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, he remembered the time he and Dute had thrown his sister's cat into the old abandoned well across the road. Jane had looked for it everywhere, and for weeks she had cried herself to sleep. She'd loved that poor raggedy-tag cat—loved it in the way only a lonely little girl could. "Lolly" she had called it. Climbing the stairs, Sharpe experienced a deep shame, a vast regret. After they'd moved out of the house, he'd wanted lots of times to tell her what Dute had done. Yes, Dute. For it had been Dute's idea. But Sharpe could never bring himself to. Jane would never have understood about Dute anyway, about how he was always making him do mean things. Yes, and steal, too. By himself, he would never have thought of picking his father's corn nights, and taking it into town Sundays and selling it from door to door at cute-rate prices. How clever they had been, never taking more than one ear from a single stalk! His father had never caught on.

The upstairs was even more depressing than the downstairs had been. The second story existed only over the living room and consisted solely of three rooms and a narrow hall. The largest room—the front room—ran the width of the house and had been his mother and father's. The two other rooms faced each other across the hall. One had been Jane's, the other his. He stepped into his. How tiny it was! The bed where he and Dute had slept had occupied the entire length of the wall beneath the single window (broken now). It was a small window, far too high to allow what little summer air got through it to reach the bed. He must have smothered nights, he and Dute. He couldn't remember smothering, though. All he could remember was Dute saying "Come on, let's jack off."

He withdrew from the room. He didn't look into Jane's room. He remembered it as being exactly like his, and seeing his had been bad enough. He didn't look into the front room either. The room of mystery. Of strange creakings and gaspings in the night. Once, Dute had said, "Come on. Let's take a peek and find out what's going on," but he had demurred. He hadn't wanted to see, and it would have been too dark anyway.

He went back downstairs. Standing in the living room, he gazed again at the strips of brown wallpaper hanging from the walls and ceiling, at the paneless windows, at the debris littered floor. In his mind, he pictured the house as he had seen it when he pulled into the drive, visualized its crumbling chimney, its sagging front porch, its bare, weather-beaten clapboards, its wormholed cornices; its aura of decay. Well built it may have been, but it was too far gone now to justify remodeling; and, as it stood, it was a detriment to the rest of the property. The barn, in its collapsed state, was an eyesore too, but it blended in somehow with the fields and the trees, while the house stood out like a sore thumb. The mere sight of it would drive potential buyers away. Perhaps he should put a torch to it and save himself the expense of having it razed. But he knew he wouldn't. True, it wasn't insured, but burning it would still be

unethical.

Besides, there was Dute to think of. Dute locked in the fruit closet, with no way to escape the flames—

The unexpected derailment of his logical train of thought staggered Sharpe. *Dute!* Why, Dute was nothing but a figment. A *remembered* figment. And the fruit closet, if he remembered right, contained nothing at all except shelves and a few broken jars.

Recovering his senses, he walked across the room, unlocked and opened the front door and stood in the doorway, looking out into the front yard. Grandfather Sharpe had planted two apple trees there long, long ago, and the ground was covered with rotten apples. McIntoshes. The trees, unpruned for decades, were thick with suckers and some of the limbs had rotted through and were ready to fall. All Sharpe could smell was apples—those rotting on the ground and those still stubbornly clinging to the branches. The house faced east and its gray shadow lay across the brown grass. The sun, which had been low in the west when he drove down into the valley, was setting. Soon the ebon queen night would descend from the hills and the old ghost of the house would vanish beneath her vast black skirts.

He should be on his way back into the city.

His wife, Stasia, would ask when he came in the door, "Well, did the old goat leave you anything worth driving all that way to see?"

And he would answer, "He was a kind old man. He had his eccentricities, and maybe the farm was one of them. It meant a great deal to him. He was born there. I hate to sell it."

"If you ask me, you hate to sell anything. Which is probably why you so seldom do. Always honest, always the soul of integrity. You have to con people into buying, not sit back and let them make up your own minds the way you do."

"I don't like robbing Peter to pay Paul. Not even if I happen to be Paul."

"You're not with it—something's missing from your make-up. Peter, indeed! Nobody cares about Peter anymore."

"No, I guess they don't," he would say, and then he would walk past her into his little office off the living room and pour himself a whiskey and soda, light a cigar and sit there quietly till dinner.

The gray shadow of the house had darkened and now extended all the way to the road, and he realized that he had been standing in the doorway for a long time. Loitering there; postponing for as long as he could, going down into the cellar to check on Dute.

Yes. He had to open the fruit closet door and look inside. If he didn't, he knew he would lie awake all night.

But what good would looking do? How could he tell whether Dute was still there or not? When they were playmates, he had undoubtedly "seen" him; but how could he possibly "see" him now, when he no longer even remembered what he looked like?

I must be insane, he thought.

A car passed on the road and he stared unseeingly at its fiery red taillights till they diminished from view; then. Woodenly, he descended the porch steps, crossed the unkempt yard to the drive and got a flashlight out of the glove compartment of his car. In that brief span of time, the skirts of night billowed out over the valley and he had to use the flashlight to light his way back to the house.

A pervasive clamminess accompanied the dark. He shivered, turned up the collar of his coat.

Shining the light before him, he advanced through the living room and the dining room and into the kitchen. Angrily, he raised the trap door leading to the cellar. Damn Dute! The flashlight's beam revealed a remembered rickety flight of steps. The dank miasma that had greeted him before almost overwhelmed him. Suddenly, a currying of tiny claws came from below and his eyes caught a brief blur of movement along the periphery of the light. He shuddered. He had always been terrified of rats.

Dute had been, too.

He forced himself to start down. He almost screamed when the second step sagged beneath him and he nearly dropped the flashlight. But the step held and he cautiously tried the one below. And the one below that. He could feel the wood's soft rottenness through the soles of his shoes, but somehow the

steps managed to sustain his weight.

The cellar was not nearly so deep as it had seemed once. He could barely stand upright beneath the cobweb-festooned joists. The fruit closet was little more than a cubbyhole; his father had partitioned it off when they had first moved in. His mother, in those days, had done a great deal of canning. Then she had become ill and had given it up. She used to put up pickles too—dills—and presently the beam of Sharpe's flashlight illumed the old crock she had used for soaking them. It was broken into three pieces and lay in the corner formed by the juncture of the fruit-closet partition and one of the cellar walls.

He moved the light to the left till it illuminated the base of the door, raised it till it bathed the short length of gas pipe he had fixed in place by means of two bent over spikes. The "lock".

Some lock!

Nevertheless, the fact that it was still in place proved that Dute hadn't broken out of his cell.

Perhaps though, he had found another avenue of escape. Maybe he'd managed to squeeze through a crevice in the foundation.

Impossible. The house was old, but its foundation was as solid as the day it was put in.

No, Dute was still in the closet. Dirty Dute, who drowned cats and masturbated and stole corn.

Sharpe knew that his thinking had got out of hand. But he couldn't help himself. And he knew that he had to open the fruit closet door and look inside; that if he didn't, Dute would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Holding the flashlight in his left hand, he worked the length of pipe up and down with his right till the rusted spikes gave sufficiently for him to slide the pipe free. It slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor, riving the silence with a hollow ring. He kicked it aside and opened the door.

The flashlight's beam showed empty shelves, myriad cobwebs, a floor grown green with mold. Presently, it fell upon a small dark object lying at the base of the far wall. Repressing a gasp, he stepped inside for a closer look. He laughed aloud when the object turned out to be a length of rotted two-by-four. It was his last laugh. An instant later the door slammed shut behind him and he heard the length of pipe being shoved back into place.

Sharpe ascended the cellar stairs in the wake of the flashlight beam, closed the trap door and made his way through the dining room and the living room and out onto the front porch. He waded through the overgrown grass to his car, rejoicing in the rotten-apple smell. He'd filled the gas tank just before leaving the city, which meant it should be at least two-thirds full now, but he checked the gauge to make sure. He found a rusted milk can just inside the awry doorway of the collapsed barn, brought it back, raised the hood of the car and detached the windshield wash hose. He slammed the hood shut; then, kneeling behind the car, he removed the gas cap and inserted one end of the hose into the tank. He put the other end into his mouth, sucked, spat, plunged it into the milk can. When the can was almost full, he removed the hose, rolled it up and slipped it into his coat pocket. He replaced the gas cap. A second glance at the gauge revealed that more than enough fuel remained to get him back into the city. Carrying the milk can in one hand and shining the flashlight ahead of him with the other, he made his way back across the yard and re-entered the house. He began in the kitchen, sloshing gasoline all over the floor, being careful not to spill any on his shoes or trousers. Backing through the dining room and the living room, he repeated the process. He saved enough to run a narrow trail across the front porch and down the steps and a dozen feet into the yard. Then he threw the empty can through the doorway, moved back several paces, got a folder of matches out of his coat pocket, struck one and tossed it onto the "fuse". A fence of flame sprang out of the ground, flashed up the steps, across the porch and into the house. The entire downstairs seemed to ignite at once. Gouts of flame erupted from the downstairs windows, belched through the front door. The stairway leading to the second story provided an ideal draft. Soon smoke began roiling from the paneless windows of the front room. Sharpe grinned, backing through the brown grass to his car, not once taking his eyes from the holocaust. He got behind the wheel and started the motor.

He grinned again. Evilly. "So long, old buddy," he called as he backed out of the drive. "It's my turn now."