

Things Under Things

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The next time I have to burn a dead man's shoes, I will try to remember how hard it was this time, burning these big old shoes with the leather all hilled up at the ankle and hard as a bone from sitting in the middle of the stove every night to dry and worn way down on the one side from where the dead man must have favored the one leg so they was not even the same size together anymore, how burning these shoes was about the hardest thing I had to do until I tried the kerosene, about a can and a half. I poured it over the tops and down the tongues, then let it set awhile before I threw the shoes both together into a pile of last-minute things to burn. I set the whole thing off with a lighter the dead man had that said Kansas City. I was out of matches by then. I had been burning all day.

I saw the fire started off pretty slow—there was some shirts in there—but then it took off with a big *whoomph* when the kerosene caught, and there for just a second I could see everything real clear right in the flames, real clear like an X-ray, even the things way down in the pile I could see real clear for just a second. If I had thought about it I would have tied the shoes together by the shoelaces, the way they ask you to do when you take pairs to the church, I would have tied them both together before I set the whole thing off, but then I figured gone is gone, especially when you're talking about a dead man's burned-up shoes, and anyway, I found his toes his steel toes pretty close together in the ashes after and hot as hell. It looked to me like the damnedest thing. They was not any use to anybody anymore but I had never seen the inside, the steel-toe part, of a pair of steel-toe shoes before and it looked to me like the damnedest thing.

Here's how I burned the rest of the stuff. Some of the other neighbors on the road said right from the start I should wait for the daughter, but the daughter had not been in the dead man's house in such a long time, I did not think it would be right for

her to come in and see the dead man's things, his overalls over the chairs and his dishes in the sink and all these *TV Guides*, and for her to touch them. So I did all the burning a day early. Right away I did it, I burned it all. I went upstairs and threw everything I thought would burn out the back window onto the dirt until I had a pretty good pile going. This was stuff like the mattress and drawers from the chiffonier and cushions from this big old La-Z-Boy lounge chair and the Monkey Ward's catalogues from under the bed and towels and a box with paperwork from the bank and the dead wife's things and a good pile of *Missouri Farmers* to make it burn. Then I took boxes from the grocery store up and filled them up with small things. This was stuff like soap and boxes with safety pins and fly strips and a list somebody must have wrote and dirty underwear in a wad. Hats. I dropped the grocery boxes whole out the window. I figured about six grocery boxes to a wheelbarrow load, which was what I used to round up all the grocery boxes on the ground and all the loose stuff that fell out of the grocery boxes onto the ground, to put it all into this first big pile that when it burned reached way up over the house.

I watched it burn for quite a while. I could hardly move for watching it and I thought to myself, I am weary to the bone, it is mostly in my back. I watched paper stuff lift and turn black and then go. I watched mattress chunks fall off the springs and then go, and I thought to myself, I am weary to the bone. I took a stick then and poked at the fire with that, circling around depending on the smoke, and poking into the fire to make it burn even, poking in where I could see and in where I could not see only feel stuff, some I could tell what it was and some I could not, and poking the stick into something once to where the stick would not come back out, so I just left it and took another good green stick.

There was more stuff. Here's what there was that was more. There was straight-back chairs. There was all this stuff from the bottom cabinet. Coffee cans full of nails and rope and bags of seed corn and these peat-moss things for starting tomatoes and bolts and pieces of tractor parts there was not nobody now would ever figure out how they went. Warranties. I just kept throwing stuff on the fire and poking it with my stick. On the side of the fire where I saw the wind blew down out away from the house, on the side of the fire where most of the soft things were, the bed things, the things that mostly smoke, I had to crouch way down to get out of the way of the smoke dirt, I had to bunch my skirt way up between my legs and crouch way down out of the way of the smoke to get my stick way down in there to poke at the soft things with my stick to make the fire burn hot. Then I thought I felt the wind shift. I felt it on my legs. I felt the wind shift, coming straight over the field with not a row of trees, not a thing, not a barn to break it, and just for a second I thought, *brushfire*, like someone had hollered it. Brushfire, it will take the barn, the dead man's barn that is still full of last year's hay, that good crop of orchard grass and trefoil, it will jump across the road and into dry grass and clear out over there, over there where my barn is, and me here with no water and no way to stop it and the pump turned off in the well and the phone in the house gone dead. I had not figured on the wind shifting, not like this, and me here with my stick in my hand and me here with no water and no way to stop it. And I thought, if I stand right here it will catch my dress on fire, it will catch it for sure. If I stand right here real still and don't move. And there for just a second I saw the fire moving to me, moving to me and to the barn that was behind me, me there between the fire and the barn, and I thought, I did not mean for any of this to happen, the shift, the shift in the wind, I had not figured on it, I had not figured on the fire getting so out of hand, and me here with no water and no way to stop it and way past any use from what I had in my hand, just a stick. So I thought of the shovel, the dead man's shovel in the barn, this big old squared-

off shovel with tape around its neck like a sprain and worn way down there at the handle from where the dead man's hands must have worried the wood and almost white there at the edge of the blade from where the dead man must have just honed it, and I took the shovel in my hand and I dug it into the ground there by the house. I threw the dirt over the fire. I got some in my shoes and pretty soon I saw the fire settled down, settled down just enough to where I could go back to just my stick. And then I went back to just watching for a while until I saw that everything was pretty much gone. I raked a little through the coals, through what was left, not much save some cans and wire and pieces of tractor parts, and then I found the shoes, the dead man's shoes, and damned if they weren't still whole. I saw they was burned but not burned up and I thought, Good Lord, I have been burning all day. So then I took the kerosene like I said I did. I did everything like I said I did to burn up the dead man's shoes, and when it was finished, when it was just the toes the steel toes, I shoveled some of the dirt over the coals and then I just went on home. Just went on home. I figured by morning there would be nothing left save the things under things. I figured by morning it would all be cold and safe enough.