

The Yield

By Suzanne LaGrande

The neighbors found him lying in a field of blackened rice stubble, crying. That summer it had unseasonably cool for Northern California, and with all the rain that year, my uncle had a bumper rice crop. It was mid October before he'd had a chance burn off what remained in his fields after the harvest. Rocking back and forth, hugging his arm to his chest, his face streaked with soot and tears, they thought he'd broken his arm, or burnt his hand. The embers from a burn off can fester in pockets of earth, for days sometimes, after the main fire has been put out. But the black on his hands turned out to be soot and as far as they could tell, nothing was broken. They asked him several times what was wrong, but either he couldn't or he wouldn't say. All he could do was cry.

The small town cafe in Northern California where my uncle lives was abuzz with theories:

A grown man going on like that. You'd think someone died.

You know how he is.

The spring before had been a cold one. One day while my uncle was out plowing, the wheel of his tractor caught on a frozen mud rut, and threw him onto the ground hardened by the long winter's frost. He broke his arm in two places.

Drove himself to the hospital, with the other arm. I don't think he said two words about it to anyone.

So what the heck was he crying about?

You driven by his ranch lately? Now there's something to cry about.

Last week he came back from the farm auction in Marysville with get this -- a yacht. Got it propped up on cement blocks, right next to the John Deere junk combine from 1967, and God knows how many rusted out harvesters, biplanes with half a wing, threshers, tractors -- you name it, he's got at least two spread out across the field as far as the eye can see.

For what?

Spare parts. You just never know when you're gonna need a spare rudder.

That's nuts.

You're telling me.

He could start his own junkyard, if only he had something someone wanted to buy.

What burns me is that's at least three, maybe five acres of good, usable farmland, with soil from the slough, just sitting there covered in junk.

Later my father tells me that my uncle had had some kind of a nervous breakdown. And that's the end of the story.

My father, grandfather and great-grandfather were tight-lipped French Catholics who made decisions behind locked doors and treated their wives, emotions, and anything else they couldn't control with banishing silence.

My grandmother had also once had a nervous breakdown. My father and his siblings lived with my great aunt for several months, so as to give my grandmother a chance to rest. She came back home and everything went back to normal and all the disquieting questions as to why she might have been so very tired, were smothered in a blanket of silence, mentioned only in whispers, and only amongst women when they were alone.

When my grandparents started getting up in years, he moved back home to take care of them. Everyone else had a family and a job, in a city or town far away from the small farm where they'd grown up.

Like my grandfather, my uncle was mechanically inclined. Every kind of farm equipment he and my grandfather built from spare parts: cultivator-fertilizer-seed drills, combine harvesters, and small Cessna airplane. They cleared a strip on one of the back fields and despite my grandmother's alarmed protests, taught themselves how to fly.. At one point my uncle went to college to become an airplane mechanic, though, like my grandfather, he had poor eyesight. He wore thick coke bottle glasses that magnified his wandering left eye. When he looked at you, it seemed part of him was watching something in the distance, just beyond the horizon. It made sense he would be the one to move back home, the one to take over the family farm. He was the youngest and unmarried.

Later, my mother told me the rest of the story, the part my father didn't mention.

That spring, after my uncle broke his arm, he had to go back to the hospital for six weeks of physical therapy. Twice a week, he worked with a physical therapist, a young woman. Soft hands, radiating kindness. Hair of sunlit wheat. Plump in the hips. Married with two kids, but nice about it. He fell in love with her.

Apparently, she was the only one, in all those years, who actually touched him.