

Way Too Wyrd published by The Writing Disorder

March 1969, at track practice Devyn was failing at learning how to triple jump when his older sister skidded her car into the high school parking lot. Normally as calm as a feral cat, Gaylin ran out to the track with a frantic, wind-swept look, ready to scratch her brother's face like in the old times. "You've got to come! Daddy's been run over by the tractor."

"What?" He walked quickly with her to the parking lot. "What are you talking about?"

"Daddy and my husband were pruning the apple trees. He fell off the tractor and it crushed him. Thank God, he's still alive."

"Where is he now?"

"They took him to the Delta hospital but he's beyond their help so the ambulance is taking him to the Veteran's hospital in Grand Junction. It will be a miracle if he makes it because he's got broken bones and his insides were smashed."

"Where's Mom?"

"She rode in the ambulance with him. Get in the car; he may die before he gets to the hospital."

The fact that Dad wasn't decorating the orchard as fertilizer after this accident was somewhat irregular. He felt guilty for feeling disappointed, which is the worst kind of guilt, being seasoned with hypocrisy, weirdness, and a dash of hope.

Dev grabbed his street clothes from the locker room and jumped into the car with his sister. As they drove, he immediately started thinking about the many times he had wished he could smash the old man like one of those summer stink bugs on the sidewalk. During the next forty miles to the hospital, guilt, anger, and the hope for freedom wrestled vigorously. He suppressed a slight smile. If his father died, he wouldn't be subjected to the constant bullying. No matter what, the old man criticized the hell out of him. "What you got a head for, nothing but a hat rack?!?"

Dad's favorite, good for all sins, was, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Like last summer, he was herding way too much irrigation water with a mind of its own down the ditches, trying to get it into a field of apple trees. The devilish liquid had overwhelmed the banks. In desperation, Devyn had tossed every rock he could find to slow the flood and, hopefully, get it going the right direction. The old man would be pissed if he saw rocks in his precious ditches.

Damn, there's just too much water! It's gonna take a miracle for me to get this under control.

He thought about running the quarter mile back to the head gate to shut the water off, but while he was doing that, a tidal wave of dirt and mud would ruin his father's perfect ditches.

If Dad sees this mess...

At that moment, he saw the red and white International pickup come to a dusty stop in their driveway two hundred yards south. Dad slammed the driver's door so hard that it echoed like a shotgun blast across the fields.

Devyn sprinted, trying to get the water corralled as Pa stomped up the field at him. Steam was blowing from his father's ears, his blazing blue eyes cast evil spells, and every blood-pumping muscle was preparing to beat the holy hell out of him.

Dad yelled, "What the hell are you doing?!? Damn-it, you know better than to use rocks to herd water."

Dev didn't slow down shoveling. "I'm trying to get it moving in the right direction and then I'll go back and do it with sod like you told me."

The flat of the old man's shovel hit him square in the lower back and he was face down in the middle of the muddy furrows, his spine scorched like a Roman candle. He

tried to get up but couldn't. It hurt too much. He flopped back into the mud, his front cold and wet, his back, burning with rage. He lay there for a long moment, catching his breath. He was so pissed at being pounded by Dad for the thousandth time for no good reason that the energy helped him override the excruciating pain that pulsated above his hips.

He did a pushup. arms shaking, Devyn got to his knees and stumbled upright, using his shovel as a crutch. He stood there a moment. Looking at Dad, he threw the shovel down. "I ain't working for you no more!"

He slowly limped toward the house.

For refusing to work, he lost driving privileges and had to ride the bus to school. His history teacher asked, "What's wrong, Devyn? Why are you standing up by your desk?" "I'm sorry, Mr. Axel, my behind is too bruised to sit."

The kids laughed.

At the Veteran's Hospital in Grand Junction, the receptionist had the warmth of a cartel boss. "Calum McDowell is in surgery. You need to wait over there under the drafty windows so you can catch colds."

The two kids sat on hard benches in the unheated area for three slow hours.

Mom came down. "Your father is in intensive care. They won't let me in his room."

She explained that his dad did not sit down on the tractor seat to move it to the next tree. Instead, in the effort to save time and energy, he stood on the side of the tractor, stepped on the clutch, put it into low gear, and moved the tractor to the next tree. This time, as if it were a spurred red bull, the Massey-Ferguson had jumped into gear and bucked him off the machine. The big rear wheel had climbed up his legs and crushed his pelvis and chest. At the last minute, Dad had thrown his head back or it would have besotted his brains like a tossed out Halloween pumpkin.

Mom was in shock, afraid, and depressed.

Devyn was surprised. You'd think the way they fight all the time; she'd be relieved that he might bite the dust.

He wasn't allowed to see his father for several days and when he did, the old Marine wasn't the same. Dad was pale, weak, and humble. They said he may not make it.

Calum apologized. "Son, I know you think I'm mean. I love you, but because my dad died when I was nine, I wanted you to be tough and independent."

Well aren't I lucky to be so loved? He thought.

"Mom needs you to get well."

"Call a reverend. Tell him to come pray for me. I don't know if I'm going to live."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, call the one at the church where you used to play the guitar."

He had stopped playing for them because his prayers of deliverance from getting beaten and humiliated at home had gone unanswered, so what was the point in believing in the so-called Biblical miracles?

Listening to his mother's wretched crying on the way back home from the VA hospital, Devyn thought about what would happen if Dad died. A part of him had inhaled the fresh air of relief from escaping a brutal prison guard, but he knew his mother would not only miss their nightly yelling matches, but she might be a touch sad. Faith was the last bad habit to die. He'd call the pastor for Mom's sake.

A few days after they laid hands on him in the Veteran's Hospital, Calum McDowell slowly started getting better. He said, "I'm not a religious man, but the moment those two preachers laid their hands on my head and my hips, I knew I was gonna live."

It seemed ironic: Dev had been praying to be delivered from his father's fists and God had been too busy to answer. But when the old bully needed a miracle, the Almighty cleared his schedule. Devyn told his friend, "This is too weird."

Art laughed. "The Scottish said Wyrd because they couldn't say, 'Word' correctly. They meant that when something mysterious or strange happened, it was the result of the Word of God."

Devyn started taking three days off a week from school to work on the apple farm. There was pruning, plowing, disking, and harrowing – otherwise, they'd be in deep shit come summer and the fruit wouldn't develop because he couldn't get irrigation water to the trees. He probably wouldn't graduate from high school and therefore, wouldn't be able to go to the university next fall, which, in turn, meant he'd get drafted to fight in Vietnam.

Had to be the Wyrd of God.

Two weeks passed with Dev working twelve to fourteen hours a day, then out of the clear blue sky on a Saturday, the good people of the Valley descended upon their farm like locusts equipped with surveyor's equipment. The farmers brought their tractors and went to work – pruning, plowing, disking, harrowing, and marking the rows for water. Their wives cooked and served the men breakfast and lunch. They helped his mother prepare her vegetable and flower gardens.

On Sunday, his girlfriend arrived ostensibly to help prepare food but primarily to provide him an opportunity to demonstrate poor judgment. After lunch, he took it upon himself to show her the migrant worker's bunkhouse—purely for educational purposes. They were conducting a thorough inspection of a mattress when his mother's voice cut through the front door like a cavalry bugle.

"Devyn, what are you doing? The men need you to tell them what to do next."

Men old enough to be his father or grandfather were waiting on the opinion of a seventeen-year-old boy whose primary qualification was that he hadn't been crushed by a tractor. It was a weird state of affairs, made moreso by the fact that he had just spent thirty minutes demonstrating why he couldn't be trusted without supervision.

Tragedy has a way of bringing out the best in people—and also bringing out the people who want to know exactly how much your tragedy might be worth. Even more farmers showed up the next weekend. During one of the lunches, Dev learned that the town's board and a local consortium of developers had filed a lawsuit to take possession of the generous mountain spring that provided irrigation water to their farm. The developers measured his father's misfortune with the same sympathy a pawn shop owner gave owners of engagement rings, confirming that the Valley ran on gossip, casseroles, and the occasional land grab—in roughly that order.

The other thing he found out was that his dad was behind on the mortgage payments. One man told the mortgage holder that Calum wasn't running the farm so it would make money and he should take it over. If he got the place, not only would he make the payments on time, he'd also ensure the water consortium and town would get the bountiful spring.

When Dev saw his father in the hospital, he asked about the town's lawsuit.

Dad said, "They're probably going to get the spring. I can't afford to keep fighting them, especially now. The water consortium partners will make a fortune."

Changing the subject, Calum said, "You tell your buddies who are fighting in Vietnam that you got to fight through the pain. The gooks aren't your enemy, your fear of pain is. Once you overcome that fear, you'll survive." He took Devyn's hand for the first time he could remember. "Son, we'll survive. Ain't no point in being afraid."

Stunned, the teen walked out of the hospital room and took the stairs down to the parking lot to give himself time to think before riding home with Mom. Had his father, who enjoyed belittling him about everything, actually changed?

Maybe a man pinned under a tractor wheel discovers humility faster than a preacher can detect sin in a saloon. His father had survived being crushed by a tractor, found religion, and even held his son's hand. It was way too wyrd. If Dad started

complimenting his flood irrigating techniques, he'd know the injuries were far worse than the doctors had surmised.