ONE

THE WIDE LAWNS

We shall not cease from exploration.

T. S. Eliot

They came down through the orchard in the last of the light, and the grass was already wet. Nobody spoke about the letter. It had been read aloud twice at lunch and there was nothing further in it that a third reading would find.[1]

The path bent left at the wall and then ran straight for a hundred yards under the limes, which had been planted close and had grown into one another, so that walking beneath them was like

walking along a corridor with a green ceiling. At the end of the limes there was a gate, and beyond the gate the ground fell away sharply to the river, which at that hour was the only bright thing in the valley.

Clare walked ahead, as she always did, and her father came behind with his hands pushed into his pockets and his collar up, though it was not cold. He had not spoken since the gate. It was the particular silence he kept for things he had already decided and did not intend to discuss, and she had learned to walk inside it without asking questions.

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She had come this way every evening that summer, and could have walked it in the dark, and more than once had. A gardener passed below the window with a barrow, and the sound of the wheel on the gravel came up thinly, as if from much further away.

The letter was from the county council and it concerned the orchard. The road was to be widened in the spring; the wall would have to come down; the compensation offered was less than half of what the trees were worth to anybody who had ever picked their fruit. She read it a third time by the kitchen window, and the light was going, and the words stayed exactly as unkind as they had been at noon.

"They can't take the limes," her father said that night, and put his knife down before he had finished eating. "They can take the wall. A wall is only a wall. But the limes were planted by your grandfather, and a tree is not a fence."

She said nothing, because he was right in the way that did not help, and because the council's letter had not asked anyone's opinion of trees. It had asked for a signature, and the signature had a date beside it, and the date was the ninth of March.

TWO

THE NINTH OF MARCH

The surveyor arrived at ten and was gone by half past eleven, which Clare thought was not long enough to decide anything about ninety years of trees. He was perfectly polite. He wore the kind of waterproof coat that has a company name on the breast, and he called the orchard the affected parcel, twice, without appearing to hear himself.[2]

"You'll want to be talking to the office," he said, folding the tripod. "I only take the measurements. I don't decide what happens to them."

It was the sentence she would remember longest out of the whole business — not the letter, not the meeting in the village hall that came after it, but a man in a wet field saying that he only took the measurements. Everybody in the affair only took the measurements. The decision itself lived somewhere further up, in a room none of them had ever been in, and by the time it reached the orchard it had stopped being a decision at all and had become a date.

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Her father did not come out while the surveyor was there. She found him afterwards at the end of the limes with a tape measure of his own, an old cloth one from the workshop drawer, measuring the trunk of the third tree. He wrote the figure on the back of an envelope. Then he measured it again and wrote that down too, and the two numbers were the same, and he stood looking at them for a while.

"Four foot seven," he said. "It was four foot one when I was your age. It puts on an inch every ten years, more or less, and it will be here when the road has been widened twice more and nobody remembers what for."

He put the envelope in his pocket. He did not say anything else about it that day, but she saw the envelope again three weeks later, on the table at the village hall, under his hand, while a man from the council explained with real courtesy why none of it could be helped.

THREE

WHAT THE TREES WERE WORTH

The hall was cold and there were forty-one people in it, which in a village of two hundred is a referendum. Clare counted them while the man from the council set out his folder, his water glass and his phone in a row, the way people do when they expect to be interrupted and want something to look at.

He was, in fairness, very good at it. He explained the traffic modelling. He explained the consultation, which had run for six weeks in the autumn and had been advertised in a newspaper nobody in the room took. He explained that the compensation

was calculated by a formula that had been agreed nationally, and that the formula valued a tree as timber.

That was when her father stood up. He was not a man who stood up in rooms. “You have valued them as timber,” he said. “I want to know what you would pay if you had to plant them.”

There was a silence of about four seconds, which in a village hall is a very long time, and the man from the council looked down at his folder as though the answer might be somewhere in it. Clare understood then that they were going to lose, and also that losing was not going to be the end of it, and she wrote the sentence down on the back of the agenda so that she would have it exactly.

Notes

1. The house was sold the following spring.
2. Highways Act 1980, s.256; the phrase is the statute’s, not his.