Bitte

George's eldest son didn't understand why his father had to cut down the perfectly good walnut tree at the end of the driveway. George knew that. He probably knew. In those days, children didn't ask their fathers many questions. Fathers didn't have much time to answer the ones that were asked.

George was at the factory at night, working the farm during the day. When the boy was by his side, talk was about the work: the crops, the livestock. *Did you cover the milk cans? How do the peaches look? Did you take in the eggs today? Did you help your mother with the garden?* He tried to ask him about school. *How are your studies?* The boy was smart as a whip, but he didn't take to being inside. There was time yet.

The tree was perfectly good. And it was a bad time to chop it down. Late spring. The black walnuts were months from being ripe. All of that fruit would go to waste. A sin.

But it was too close to the road. The neighbor from the next farm had tried to talk him into chopping it down after he nearly crashed his new sedan into their truck the other Sunday morning. After church, the two men nearly came to blows while their wives visited and the children ran around the maple saplings, playing tag, squealing and laughing, shirttails and skirt hems flying in the breeze, heels and toes kicking up dust.

"George, you're being stubborn."

George rarely used his fists in anger, but he would clench them often, shoving them into the pockets of his overalls or his Sunday suit jacket, where they were harder to hide. The pockets of his overalls were deeper and the cotton stronger. He could plunge his hands full up to his wrists. The suit jacket pockets barely covered the backs of his hands.

"It's a fine tree, Walter."

"It's a menace, George."

"You have—how do they call it?—a lead foot, Walter."

"If we weren't at God's house, you would have *how they call it* a black eye."

George could feel his pocket ripping from the corner. He could hear his wife scolding him. "I'll iron your shirts, but no more mending. I have enough to do." He would ask his daughter this time. She was handy with a needle and thread.

Walter walked past George toward the church steps and his wife. George watched them leave with their daughter, driving down the road toward their larger farm. The girl turned and gave one brief wave from the rear window, a half-salute, almost as if she were trying to make amends for her father.

A few days later, a man from the county came by in a truck, pulled over onto the shoulder and stepped out in his uniform.

"George, how are you today?"

"Fine, thank you. Yourself?"

"Good. How's the family?"

George pulled a handkerchief out of the pocket of his faded overalls. The apple and cherry orchards were just now beginning to show signs of fruit. The strawberries at the back of the farm were not yet ripe, but George felt warm. "Good."

George noticed that the man didn't introduce himself or offer his hand.

"I hate to tell you, but there's a rule about the right of way under the new electric poles they're putting up. This tree has to come down. You can do it, or we can do it. If we do it, we have to charge you."

He understood about the new poles. What he never understood was why the people who had money always wanted more. Surely the county man could see they didn't have much. All he had to do was look at the size of their farm and look at their house: no paint, no porch, no front steps. Let the tree stay until fall. What could it hurt?

George pushed his hands deep in his pockets and nodded, eyeing the ticket pad in the uniform pocket, the name on the nameplate, the shiny watch on his wrist.

"You've got 10 days."

George nodded again. They could use the wood in the furnace come winter. Coal had gotten high.

The next day he and his son stood by the tree, his son ready with a wagon to haul the limbs to stack onto the woodpile. As George sunk his ax into the trunk, he heard his dead parents whispering in the leaves, his father asking his mother to make a pie from the walnuts.