

Cross

A short story by TONY EARLEY



JIM HSIEH

WELL, TO START with, I'm dead old. Maybe more dead than old, that's what my wife tells me, I don't know, but who is she to talk? She's dead old, too. To be honest, neither one of us has a tooth left in our head, and I don't like looking at hers any more than she likes looking at mine.

It's springtime, that big dogwood out in the yard is blooming like a teenage girl, the hostas are coming up finally, and the grass needs cutting. Only this time of year it ain't so much the grass that needs cutting, but that purple stuff, the deadnettle or the chickweed, I can't ever remember what it's called. I don't mind it so much, I think it's kind of pretty, but my wife is all over me about it. *Why don't you do something about that? Why don't you do something about that? It looks disgraceful.* She sounds like a rusty hinge when she gets going on about something. What I want to say is, "Old woman, why don't *you* do something about it if it bothers you so much," but you don't stay married coming up on 60 years going around saying whatever it is that happens to swim up inside your head. So I tell her, "I'm retired. Emphasis on tired." Well, that always makes her snort, and she goes off in the kitchen and bangs things around and makes a racket. It's a wonder we got a pot left in this house. Anyway, after while I'll go on out to the shed and see if the lawn mower will crank, and if it does I'll cut the grass. Until then, I guess I'll just watch the war on television.

It's a nice day, and with any luck at all, Wilma won't show up. That's a terrible thing

to say, but it's true. Wilma's our oldest girl, 54 years old, and she's on drugs, if you can believe that, somebody that age. She never comes by the house unless she wants money or she's already high. One way she cusses at us because we won't give her any money, and the other way she just cusses at us and says all her problems are our fault. (And who knows, maybe they are.) Wilma is crazy as a bat, and she broke our hearts years ago. We don't open the door anymore. That's what a drug counselor told us to do. Don't open the door, he said. So we don't. And she's been messed up for so long, and cussed at us so much, that we've hardened up like a couple of scabs. Wilma can be going on out in the yard, calling us every vile name she can think of, and us in here watching television, and we won't think no more about it than if it was a dog barking.

The deadnettle out in the yard is a new thing, just the last five or six years, however long it's been since the tornado came through. That tornado blew it in here, I'll swear by it, and it's taking over the place. I'll take the deadnettle, though. Like I said, I think it's kind of pretty, and things could've been a whole lot worse. The funnel came through here less than a hundred yards away and tore down several houses and ripped the roofs off a whole bunch of others, but we didn't lose a shingle. Not a shingle. Not a bush. Not a bloom off that dogwood. I'd always heard

that a tornado sounded like a freight train, but that's not how this one sounded. This one just came through here with a great big WHOOSH and then it was gone. The old lady and me were laying in the bed taking a nap, or trying to. It'd been bad all day, warnings and the TV getting interrupted, bad wind and thunder and lightning and what not, but you can only watch that for so long and we decided to take our nap anyway. Right before it hit, the wind didn't seem no worse or better than it had been all day, and it never got that dead still like you always hear it does. (You hear all kinds of things about tornadoes, all of them wrong, near as I can figure.) Anyway, I don't know how I knew it was coming, but I did. Maybe the light changed. Or maybe I knew the way a dog knows about an earthquake. But I *knew*. And when I knew, I just rolled over on top of the old woman and she looked up at me and said, "Lord God. What in the world are you doing?"

And I said, "We ain't got a basement."

And she looked at me like I was crazy and

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name the HCA Foundation the Frist Foundation. “When Tommy stepped back in as CEO, there was a collective sigh of relief,” says Peter Bird, the foundation’s CEO.

He brought his friend Jack Bovender out of retirement to help him right the sinking Columbia/HCA battleship and called upon other friends from the HCA glory days whom he knew he could trust. The company quickly reorganized, spinning off small hospitals into a separate company, rewriting an ethics policy, and halting the practice of corporate branding for its hospitals. HCA also paid more than \$1 billion in fines to settle the claims by the federal government. During this period, Frist drew a salary of one dollar a year.

Bovender comments, “My admiration for Tommy, which was always high, grew significantly during that time because of the way he conducted himself through extremely difficult situations. He never lost his confidence or commitment to see this thing through.”

Last year, certain that his HCA wild-child was back on track, Frist again stepped aside into the role of chairman and officially retired in January 2002. Reflecting on the experience, he says, “The problem wasn’t that Columbia/HCA had gotten too big; the problem was that it had been thrown together too quickly by Mr. Scott. He was a deal man. He didn’t understand the humanistic aspect of a service company. The people are your greatest asset, and you have to treat them fairly. It was a culture issue.

“Now I can look back on it all and say that it was a fabulous four or five years. Now I think, gosh, what would I have done with my life from August 1997 up to this point if I hadn’t had that stimulating challenge?”

He smiles slightly and adds, “So I’m saying thank you to the government for giving me this opportunity.”

The ultimate testament that HCA has reached the far side of the scandal may be in its recent agreement to purchase Health Midwest’s 14-hospital system. The deal would never have been approved had HCA not proven itself a worthy, responsible player in the market. “The Health Midwest deal is symbolic that our company’s focus and reputation have recovered,” Bovender says.

Even when his company was in its darkest

hours, Frist and his wife continued their pursuit of major philanthropic projects. All three of their adult children moved back to Nashville and their sons, in particular, had taken an interest in the arts. The second- and third-generation Frists recognized the city’s need for a downtown art center. In April 2001, after years of planning and negotiations, the \$45 million Frist Center for the Visual Arts opened in what had been the city’s historic main post-office building, an Art-Deco structure completed in 1934. The Frist Foundation and the family of Tommy Frist Jr. provided \$25 million of the funding.

If anything, the birth of the Frist Center exemplifies Tommy Frist’s approach to both business and philanthropy, and his distaste for failure. “I have almost a chess mentality,” he says. “If something doesn’t work, I figure out what my fallbacks are and how I can re-vamp it and make it work.” This philosophy has served Frist well, and in some measure helped earn him recognition at Vanderbilt with the Alumni Association’s 2002 Distinguished Alumnus Award.

He originally pledged a few million towards the creation of the arts center, then \$11 million, and finally donated more than half its cost. “The whole premise behind that was Tommy’s feeling that we didn’t need another art museum in Nashville—we needed an educational center, because he believes the arts are a strong deciding factor in a child’s education,” says Frist Center President Ken Roberts. “He really impressed me. The costs kept going up, and Tommy kept backing it.”

Now that those obstacles have been overcome and the downtown Frist Center for the Visual Arts is in full swing (you may visit its Web site at www.fristcenter.org), Frist has no desire to rest on his laurels. Although he’s pleased about his contributions to the art museum, the recovery of HCA, his resurrection of the local United Way, and his myriad achievements and good deeds, those are in the past and he’d rather talk about other things. After all, he’s a grandfather now and his passions are changing. Each day presents a new risk worth taking, a new goal worth reaching.

“What I’m *really* excited about is the Nashville Zoo,” he says, a familiar light in his eye. “I just think a zoo is an important part of any community.” ▼

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said, “We ain’t never had a basement.” For some reason that got her tickled, and she started laughing. Just shook all over. And then I started laughing because she was laughing and neither one of us had our teeth in and we must’ve been a sight and then the tornado went WHOOSH! and I thought, well, this is it, here we go, but that was the end of it. Then the old woman said, “All right, you can get off of me now.”

And I said, “I don’t think I can,” which got her going all over again. Of course, the old woman is bad to get tickled. She got tickled at her own mama’s funeral, and people thought she was crying.

After it stopped raining, we went out and had a look around the neighborhood, trees down everywhere, trees on top of houses, houses gone, roofs laying in people’s yards, power lines hanging everywhere, some of them still hot and sparking. It was a sight. Of course, most of those trees were hackberries, trash trees, and their being gone is a good thing. People were walking around saying, *It looks like a war zone. It looks like a war zone*, like they knew what they were talking about. Let me tell you, what it looked like was a place a tornado had hit. And that’s all. I’ve *been* in a war zone. I was in Germany in 1945. I know what a war zone looks like. There toward the end, we were killing Germans by the hundreds who weren’t even Germans, just boys from Czechoslovakia or Poland or wherever, boys who shouldn’t have had a dog in that fight, and for damn sure didn’t want to be in that fight, but they had the SS behind them, killing them if they didn’t fight us or if they tried to run away. They caught it going and coming. It was pitiful, the way we chewed up those boys, and them not wanting to fight, but they were shooting at us, so what could we do? And I did my share, I won’t lie to you. I did some things I ain’t proud of. So. I’m sorry some people around here lost their houses or got their roofs blew off, but I ain’t going to call a bunch of blowed-over hackberry trees and a few smashed-up houses no war zone. Ain’t no way. Then a year later the deadnettle came up.

And this war I’ve been watching on television? I’ll tell you what, I just don’t know. I ain’t been able to work up much enthusi-

asm. I just ain’t got nothing against those people. I’ve heard people around here say we ought to round up all the Arabs and send them back to where they came from, but it’s the same bunch of numbnuts that used to say that about the blacks, and that ought to tell you something right there. Shoot, I see Arabs around here all the time, in the grocery store usually, women wearing long robes with their hair all covered up, or whatever, speaking Arab or whatever to the little kids they got in the buggy, and you know what it looks like to me they’re doing? Buying groceries. That’s the God’s truth.

Nobody on the street has cut their grass yet, either, and I’m afraid it’s because none of them have lawn mowers left. I don’t have any proof, I ain’t never caught her, but I think Wilma steals from people in the neighborhood. I think she steals what she can out of people’s garages and sheds and uses the money to buy drugs. Her and her “friends.” Whatever man she’s with that week. I see her sometimes, walking up and down the alleys, and I know she ain’t doing it for the exercise. If you were just out for a stroll, wouldn’t you walk on the street where at least there’s something to look at? Dogwoods blooming or flowers? No, she’s looking in the fences to see what she can see. Wilma buys her drugs from a guy who drives a silver Camaro convertible. I see him around the neighborhood all the time. Sometimes he pulls up right in front of the house, and Wilma goes right up to the window and pulls her money out of her pants pocket plain as day. Sometimes she gets in the car with him and drives off. I hate to think about where they go. What she must do to get a hold of money. I’ll tell you what. You want to go somewhere and fight some evil? There’s enough of that right here to go around. You want to drop a bomb and fly it through somebody’s car window? How about that silver Camaro? Give me one one of them planes. Smart bombs. I’d push the button in a heartbeat. You sell drugs? I’d drop the bomb. That’s how I’d like to spend my “golden years.” Flying over Nashville in a big old bomber, keeping an eye on things.

Wilma has got a path worn through the deadnettle and the grass, all the way down to the dirt. Whenever we won’t let her in the house, which is every time she comes now,

she paces from one side of the yard to the other, wearing us out the whole time. Wilma apparently can’t stand still and cuss. You ought to hear her. She goes from the gate all the way across the yard and circles around the dogwood tree and heads back the way she came. Back and forth. Back and forth. Like she’s in a dogtrot or a zoo. Just wearing us out. Language you wouldn’t believe. We used to call the police, but they won’t come anymore, they got so tired of it. Sometimes we see the neighbors come out in the yard to listen. We can see them laugh and shake their heads. They try not to look at her, though, because if she ever catches them looking at her, boy, she’ll wear them out, too. The other day the old woman and I were sitting in the kitchen, not really paying attention to Wilma, when somebody down the street must’ve caught her eye. We heard her yell, *Why don’t you go on out to Clarksville and eat some of Dooley’s wife’s baloney which is what you’ve been craving anyway, you bastard*. Wilma’s crazy as a bat and I doubt she even knows what she’s saying half the time, but something about that struck me as funny, I don’t know why, and when I looked at the old woman, I saw she was trying not to laugh. Well, when I said, “Who’s Dooley?” the old woman spit coffee out all over the table. She felt bad about it later, but I told her we might as well have a good laugh. What else are we going to do?

It’s my opinion that the dogwood in the yard has got to be the biggest one in Nashville, although, obviously, I ain’t got no way to prove that. I’m just sure of it. You ought to see it. When the kids were little, every Easter we used to stand them in front of that tree and take their picture. And it was a big tree then. I remember this one Easter when Wilma couldn’t have been more than 3 or 4 years old. I don’t even know if any of the others had been born yet. Anyway, Wilma’s mama had her dressed up in this pretty little dress and these shiny patent leather shoes. All our girls wound up wearing those shoes, but they were new then. She told Wilma to go stand in front of the tree so I could take her picture, but Wilma didn’t want to walk through the grass because the dew would get her shoes wet. She always was the prissiest thing. Well, we didn’t want her to cry and get her face all red before I took the picture, so I went in the

house and got a towel and put it down on the grass in front of the tree, and then I carried Wilma across the yard and set her down on the towel so she wouldn’t get her shoes wet. The old woman squatted down beside her, and they smiled at me and I took their picture. Now, maybe it’s just an old man thinking, with too much time on his hands and too many regrets, but I wonder now, looking back, if that might have been the moment when my life was as good as it was ever going to be. I was young then and strong and had just got promoted, I loved my wife, and I had a beautiful little daughter in patent leather shoes who thought I was the greatest thing there had ever been. And at that moment, who knows, maybe I was.

Looking at that old tree now makes me wonder. It’s possible that from the second I snapped that picture everything went downhill, even if it was so slow I never noticed until just now. The reason I happen to remember that particular day is because the picture turned out nice and we kept it on top of the TV for a long time, and because later that day I spanked Wilma for getting ice cream down the front of that dress after I had warned her not to. Now I wonder why I did that. To tell the truth, I don’t have any idea. Back then you just whipped your kids and never thought anything about it. But you can’t tell a little girl not to get ice cream down the front of her dress any more than you can tell her not to fall down. I don’t know.

Every Easter our preacher tells the story about how ever since Christ was crucified, God has made sure that the dogwood never grew big enough to make a cross. Well, let me tell you, the one in my yard is big enough to make a cross out of, I’m sure of it. And every Easter, when I listen to that sermon, I want to bring the preacher out here and show him that blooming dogwood and say, “Now look here, preacher. Look at that tree. Don’t tell me it ain’t big enough to make a cross out of. You can tell me a lot of things, and I’ll even believe some of them. But don’t you dare ever tell me that again.” ▼

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