

**The First Two Pages: “A Tear in His Hand” by James D.F. Hannah**  
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An Essay by James D.F. Hannah

Like the beach?

Of course you do. Everyone likes the beach. Because somehow, it’s both the beginning and the end. The end of land, yes, but also the beginning of escape. To see the ocean is to dream of second chances. The world is full of unfortunate landlocked souls like myself who find themselves at one point or another staring at an endless expanse of azure and picturing a life where this is the first thing we see every day for the rest of our days. That’s what brings so many people to the coast, looking for an opportunity to start over.

The original call for “A Tear in His Hand” had a geographic requirement to it, and as I worked out its details, I realized it was a story about the escape the ocean offers. But I also found myself considering the things which tie or tether us to our pasts. Things like family heirlooms, or cast-iron skillets.

Alright, now let’s talk about cookware.

(We’ll circle back to the ocean, I swear.)

Few things are a greater source of Appalachian pride than a well-seasoned cast-iron skillet. Few things will also start a bigger fight than the discussion of how

to care for it. (Just FYI: In the words of Jason Isbell, don't wash the cast-iron skillet.)

Good cast iron will last forever. It'll last your children for forever. I know folks with cast iron going on to a third or fourth generation. It is a very definite, solid way of remaining connected to the past.

Erin was hardly out the door, headed to her Thursday hot yoga class, when Dan took the cast-iron skillet from the back of the cabinet.

When they'd moved into the house last winter—during whatever counted as a Southern California winter—she'd bought new cookware to celebrate. Non-stick coating, enamel shiny as new pennies, branded with the name of a chef on some cooking show she watched.

Dan hated it. Refused to use it. He preferred the heft and balance of the cast iron, with its tear-shaped handle and deep black luster. The skillet had belonged to Dan's mother, and it was the last thing he still had from Kentucky. He used it every morning to cook bacon and eggs before starting the day.

He'd just set it on the stove and turned on the heat when the doorbell rang.

You've got a few things established fairly fast, and chief among them is the contrast between Dan's Kentucky heritage and the shine and sparkle of California, represented in hot yoga and fancy copper cookware. "A Tear in His Hand" is set in California, but it is an Appalachian story through and through, and its concerns are those that trademark Southern fiction.

As I mentioned in a [previous opportunity](#) when Art let me ramble a bit, Southern and Appalachian fiction is preoccupied with the past, and it often goes one of three ways:

1. reclaiming and reveling in its imagined glories:
2. attempting to bury and ignore its terrible secrets; or
3. dealing with a collision at the intersection of Yesterday and Now.

As a writer, I'm most interested in what's behind Door #3, and because this is a short story and time's a-wastin', I wanted to drop that particular ten-car pileup in as soon as possible.

The junker in the driveway reminded him of cars back in Lick Bottom, Kentucky, sitting on blocks in front yards, This one a Crown Vic, mismatched doors and the telltale shadow of a retired state-police patrol-car emblem.

Vaguely familiar eyes watched Dan from the other side of the doorway. A smile deepened lines etched into the man's face like trenches.

Fourteen years. That was what it had been since Dan last saw Jerry. There had to be twice as much time on Jerry's face.

Dan wasn't sure what to do next. He felt his heart catch in his throat, his airways close, the struggle to breathe seizing his lungs.

Jerry said, "Jesus, man," came through the doorway and hugged Dan. Wrapped him in arms laced with sinewy muscles. Brought him in close and tight.

Jerry smelled like the road. Sweat and dust and cigaret smoke and miles driven in the dark. It took Dan a heartbeat before he put his arms around Jerry and embraced him.

"Missed you, little brother," Jerry said as he unwound himself from Dan, but held onto his shoulders. Dan winced at the pressure of Jerry's fingers into his muscles, feeling like he was reaching for bone. There'd be bruises.

Dan pulled himself free from the grip. "Good to see you, too," he said. He hoped his smile was sincere.

The men stared at one another as the sound of waves smashing into the beach and the squawk of gulls drifted into the house.

Dan realizes his past and present are collapsing onto one another, right there at his front door. A brother he perhaps never imagined seeing again, showing up after fourteen years. Miles traveled to get there. Lives diverged down different paths, the roads reconnecting unexpectedly.

Also, the first real hint of the ocean. Of escape.

(For what it's worth, I'm the eldest of three siblings, with two younger sisters, but the dynamic between brothers—those particular and peculiar power struggles—fascinates me. There was never a doubt that the person on the other side of Dan's door would be his brother—because there's also no Appalachian knot tied tighter than the bond of blood.)

Jerry said, "You gonna invite a man in or what?"

"Yeah. Sorry," Dan said as he motioned Jerry inside and closed the door. "Coffee?"

"Sounds great," Jerry said.

In the kitchen, Dan filled two cups from a steel carafe and set one cup on the kitchen island, close to a butcher block of Japanese steel cooking knives with a different chef's name ingrained on the rosewood handles.

"Cream? Sugar?" he said.

"No thanks. Been drinking it black since Little Sandy." He sipped the coffee and sighed with satisfaction. "I will tell you, little brother, that the worst gas station coffee is better than anything they pour in prison."

"You hungry?" Dan said. "I'm getting ready to make breakfast."

"Sure. I could eat."

Dan took free-range eggs and a pound of uncured bacon wrapped in paper from the refrigerator. Both were Erin purchases, concessions that there were things he couldn't let go of, no matter what the doctor told him. You can go more than two thousand miles

and still never get away from where you grew up, he thought. Never totally.

Jerry standing there in his kitchen was living proof of that.

Cormac McCarthy said, “Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real. The events that cause them can never be forgotten, can they?” Dan and Jerry wear their scars to varying degrees, and it’s most noticeable in the tension existing when they first see one another, and in their individual states of being. Dan’s doing well, with a beachfront home and his expensive kitchenware and free-range eggs, whereas Jerry’s out of prison and wearing time like a wound. Jerry seems more excited about seeing Dan than the other way around.

You can guess this is not a happy family reunion.

Jerry slipped off the stool and to the patio doors. He leaned against the doorframe and sucked in the breeze as it blew into the room. Inhaled it like it was breath from God’s mouth.

Erin had talked about getting a place with an ocean view for years. Dan acted like it was all her idea, but it wasn’t. He enjoyed watching the early band of surfers—“the dawn patrol”—work the first waves, when the sun was nothing but a slit in the horizon, a waking eye slowly opening, and he thought there had to be magic in how they tamed the water. Something that he’d never understand.

“It like this every day?” Jerry said.

Dan laid strips of bacon across the skillet surface. “What do you mean?”

“Is it perfect here every day?”

“Most days.”

“You get used to it?”

“As much as you can.”

Dan maybe had a point where he looked at the ocean as an escape, but he seems to have accepted it as not the beginning discussed earlier, but rather as an

endpoint. He's Appalachian, and he's settled his roots not in soil, but in sand. Jerry, on the other hand, is an ex-con, and this is a noir, so you can bet what's he's looking for is, if not escape, then an opportunity, there at the foot of the Pacific Ocean.

(I told you we'd get back to the ocean. Thanks for believing.)

What happens next? Well, if I've done my job, you'll want to read more and find out, and I hope you do.

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