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Responsibilities

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The year is 1938, the season is fall, and the place is De Leon, Texas. De Leon is a town of a thousand people, with two blocks of stores and a movie theater on Lower Main Street. Out near the edge of town, on Sipe Springs Road, are Holdridge's Market and the Elms Garage. An old open-doored delivery van is just now backing away from Holdridge's, the best place for barbecue in De Leon. In the van's cab are a young man named Vernon and his even younger wife, Letona. They have been married for nearly a year. They don't use the van for any sort of business; it was cheap, and it moves. Letona is, as folks say around here, in the family way. In a few more weeks she'll give birth to their first child. Vernon glances at her anxiously as he straightens out the van and heads down Sipe Springs Road.

From the corner of his eye, Vernon sees a car turn onto the road from a side street. Vernon knows the road well. It leads due west to the farm he was born and raised on, a few miles from De Leon. But the other driver seems uncertain which way to go, or even which side of the road to drive on. The car is coming directly at the van, so Vernon veers right to get out of the way. But the other driver turns in the same direction, leaving them on a collision course. Vernon turns toward the left. The other driver turns that way too, in mirror image. By now they are too close to avoid colliding. Vernon stomps on the brake, but he knows he won't stop in time. He lets go of the steering wheel and turns to put his arms around Letona, shielding her body and the baby from the crash.

Car and van bang together. Both motors stall. Dust swirls as people run toward the accident from market and garage. Vernon feels a little sheepish as he pokes his head out to check the damage. The vehicles have met head on, bumper to bumper, at a braking speed of five or ten miles per hour. The other driver, who looks to be about fifteen, gets out of his car and shrugs. At worst they have two banged-up bumpers. Vernon glances back at Letona before he gets out. She is wide-eyed, but she and the baby are safe.

Less than a year later, on a warm summer evening in northeastern Arkansas, Vernon and Letona sit in the kitchen of their log cabin. It's also the dining room and the guest room; the other half of the cabin is their bedroom. The baby crawls around the plank floor. Occasionally he glances up at the visitors, who are seated at the kitchen table facing Vernon and Letona. Outside, the woods are alive with a creaking chorus of dry-flies and the bass calls of distant bullfrogs. The visitors have been making music with Vernon, blending their guitars and harmonicas with his mandolin. Now they've leaned the guitars against the wall while they talk eagerly to Vernon. He listens,

occasionally putting a question to them. Letona has already cleaned up the supper dishes. She is not a musician, but she has enjoyed the men's playing. She sits quietly, keeping an eye on the baby, while the men talk.

The more talkative of the two visitors is a man named Wayne. Wayne's home town is Drasco, way up in the mountains. Vernon's Uncle Henry and Uncle Charlie live around Locust Grove, the next town along the road, so Vernon knows some of Wayne's folks in Drasco. A year ago, when Vernon and his cousin Lester auditioned at KARK in Little Rock, they ran across Wayne at the station. He was hardly more than sixteen at the time, but he already had a regular program there. Though Vernon and Lester had been performing on a little station in Texas, KARK would be a real step up for them. They got a tryout for a week, on a five a.m. farm show, and people seemed to like them. Wayne was particularly impressed with Vernon's mandolin playing. But the show's sponsor didn't care to pay them real wages, and they were losing money on their hotel bill, so they quit.

From Little Rock, Vernon went back to Letona's home territory in the Ozark foothills. He cleared the land and cut the logs to build this cabin. The cabin is in the middle of a second-growth pine forest at the edge of Pierce Mitchell's farm. Mr. Mitchell, Letona's father, gave three acres to her and Vernon as a wedding gift. Wayne has never visited the area before, so it took him all afternoon and into the dark of the evening to travel the twenty miles from Drasco. Wayne and his friend had to come over Dean Mountain on foot, cross the White River without benefit of a bridge, and ask people up and down Mitchell Holler where Vernon's new cabin might be found. Wayne is one fine harmonica player, and his friend picks a halfway decent guitar, so Vernon has enjoyed their visit. Now Wayne is leading up to a proposition.

Wayne has had enough of Little Rock, he says. It's small potatoes and he's ready for the big time. Memphis, or the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, or heck, maybe even Hollywood—folks say that would've been Jimmie Rodgers' next stop after New York if he hadn't died first. Country music is starting to get big, Wayne says, and it's going to get a lot bigger. With his harmonica and Vernon's mandolin, plus his friend's guitar and maybe a fiddle or a banjo, they'll have a unique sound. Wayne is writing lots of songs, and even just the three of them could get a recording contract as a vocal and instrumental trio—look what the Carter Family has done. They can hitchhike to California together in no time flat and cash in quick. Then Vernon can come back to Arkansas in style, to pick up the wife and baby. So what about it, Vernon?

Vernon doesn't need a lot of time to think about it. Two or three years ago, he'd have jumped at the chance. He's already put enough of his lifetime into chopping cotton and threshing pecans. And he's already tried several ways to make his music pay off. In addition to the radio appearances, he's played for barn dances, taverns, even Cowboy Doc Hagar's patent medicine show—mandolin, guitar, fiddle, accordion, jew's harp, banjo, you name it. But now he's a family man, with responsibilities. He isn't sure he can survive as a farmer, and he's not sure he wants to farm for the rest of his life even if he could. But there are other ways to earn a living wage and stay settled at the same

time. Going on the road, leaving a young wife behind with a new baby, is no serious way to be a man. Wayne is still hardly more than a gawky kid. Let him have his fun and see where it gets him. The music business is tempting, and Vernon may still be able to pursue it part-time over in Batesville or back in De Leon. But Nashville! Hollywood! Thanks for thinking of me, Wayne, but no thanks. Much obliged, and y'all come back.

That night Wayne and his friend sleep on pallets on the kitchen floor. They leave next morning after biscuits and gravy, headed toward Hollywood.

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Who were these people, and why am I writing about them? Vernon and Letona are my parents. The baby in the womb in that delivery van, the baby crawling on the cabin floor, was me. Wayne's last name was Raney, and his friend's name was Louie Clark. I don't know much more about Louie than that, but he never gets any speaking lines in the story anyway. I first heard the story when I was ten years old, the year Wayne Raney recorded his only Number One hit. Wayne had indeed gone off to Hollywood after his night at our cabin, but Hollywood didn't work out. He persisted as a musician and songwriter in various locations, recording a number of songs that enjoyed modest success at best. In 1949 we began hearing a song of his, "Why Don't You Haul Off and Love Me (One More Time),"on our local country music station. As the song grew more and more popular across the nation, my parents recounted the story of how Wayne had tried to talk my father into going on the road with him.

They told the story with a kind of amused pleasure, in my memory—pleasure that they knew this fellow on the radio, pleasure that he'd finally achieved a degree of success in the music business, pleasure that he'd written such a listenable song. I never heard the story as expressing any sense of regret on the part of either of my parents. There may have been some such feelings below the surface—a feeling on my father's part that if he'd gone with Wayne, he could have been a contender; feelings in both parents that if Vernon had stayed with his music on a professional basis, we'd all have led more interesting and perhaps more comfortable lives. But the unspoken message I got as a child was mostly that the story showed my father's sense of responsibility to family.

That message was strengthened by what we gradually learned of Wayne Raney's later career. He never suffered the sort of tragic fall or abrupt end that country musicians have often confronted. On the other hand, he never reached the heights that he'd hoped for. He did have a few other minor hits after "Why Don't You Haul Off and Love Me," and played with the Delmore Brothers on their most popular records. He continued to get radio jobs as a singer and a disk jockey, including many years on Cincinnati's WCKY, whose powerful transmitter reached a large part of the South and Midwest. His bluesy harmonica playing enabled him to sell several million harmonicas through radio commercials and print advertisements. When I first visited the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville in the early 1980s, there was no exhibit for Wayne Raney, but the museum gift shop was still selling harmonicas embossed with his signature. His later writing and recording career lay mainly in gospel music. In that field his only real hit

was a song that he wrote and performed seriously, but that was later recorded tongue-in-cheek by such artists as the Greenbriar Boys and Linda Ronstadt: “We Need a Whole Lot More of Jesus (and a Lot Less Rock and Roll).”

As a teenager, I came to want a lot more rock and roll, and a lot less Jesus, than either Wayne Raney or my father. The sort of country music my father had played professionally as a young man, the music on which I had grown up, was now painful to my ears. For several years I had a hard time appreciating my father’s viewpoint on just about anything—music, religion, politics, family relationships. It was clear to me that he didn’t much appreciate my viewpoints, either. We had grown up in different times, we held different values, and out of those differences grew a major and mutual lack of understanding. But whenever I heard the story again about Wayne Raney’s visit to our log cabin, or told it to someone else, it reminded me of one important aspect of my father’s character that I could still value: his sense of responsibility. At a time when I needed to find something to value in him, that story spoke clearly of his willingness to sacrifice a major part of his own ambitions for the sake of me and my mother.

In Henry A. Murray’s polemics about what personality psychologists ought to study, he advocated among other things more attention to what he called “serials.” We shouldn’t study just separate bits of behavior if we want to understand a personality, Murray said. We shouldn’t stop even at the next level up, the psychologically meaningful incident, which Murray called a proceeding. Rather, we should examine whole sets of related proceedings in an individual’s life—meaningful incidents that are related to each other, that reveal the development and persistence of certain personality patterns over time. Throughout his life my father has displayed in many ways a persistent sense of responsibility to his wife, to his children, to his extended family, to his friends, often even to total strangers. All those ways of behaving responsibly can be seen as a long-running serial, in Murray’s sense of the word. I could cite many episodes in that serial, mainly ones I’ve seen first-hand. But besides the Wayne Raney visit, the episode most personally salient to me is one I couldn’t have observed directly: the story I started out with here, the collision on a road in De Leon.

In contrast to the Raney visit, which became a frequently told family legend, this story was spontaneously told to me only once. I heard it during my late teens or early twenties, and now I’m not even sure which parent told it to me. When I told the story back to them recently, to check the details, my mother said it must have been my father who told me, and my father quickly changed the subject. The story does involve a topic my parents didn’t usually discuss with us children, pregnancy. It was perhaps an even more awkward topic to discuss with me, since I’d been the fetus in question. It may have been an especially sensitive matter for my father, because it involved his taking his hands off the steering wheel at a crucial moment—a behavior that some people might interpret as showing that he’d been momentarily confused or hadn’t yet fully understood, in 1938, how cars worked. But to me, hearing the story for the first and only time from one parent or the other, it reinforced my feeling (at a point when I needed the reinforcement) that my father had felt his responsibilities toward my mother and me from the very beginning of my existence, and had unhesitatingly carried out those responsibilities in spite of

potential danger to himself. So here I had two distinctive incidents with a common theme, displaying a recurrent pattern in my father's life. It's a pattern I've tried to emulate in my life, not only in my own parenting but in a broad variety of relationships with other people. It's a pattern that has been important for me to feel I share with my father—important because of what it shows me about him, and because of what it shows me about me.

Sometimes, though, I've felt my father was *too* responsible, or expected me to be more responsible than I wanted to be. For over a decade after we lived in that cabin in rural Arkansas, he worked at one kind of job or another without ever settling into something he really liked. He needed to earn enough money to support a growing family—eventually there were seven of us kids—but he couldn't do it by small-scale farming. At the same time, he never quite got his farm-boy background out of his system. He'd soon tire of city life whenever he got a skilled job there, and then we'd move back to the country for a while. Eventually he worked out an arrangement that made him happy. He got a day job at a Western Kentucky uranium processing plant, maintaining the electrical system. (Talk about being responsible!) After hours and on weekends, he farmed a couple of acres to provide fresh vegetables and fruit for the family, as well as to give himself the satisfaction of growing things and working in the fresh air. He expected us older kids to help with the farming—planting and watering and weeding and whatever else needed our attention. At the same time, he expected me as the oldest child to go looking for spare-time jobs, such as weed-whacking or topping tobacco plants or grocery-store clerking. I much preferred to spend my non-school time reading and writing, and I felt much put upon by his expectations that I do "real" labor for at least several hours a week. I also felt that he looked down on me for my irresponsibility, as much as I looked down on him for his unnecessary sternness. Those feelings added to the friction between us during my adolescence.

Then one of my father's older brothers told me a story about him. In his early teens on the family's Texas farm, this brother recalled, Vernon was sometimes nowhere to be seen while the rest of the family was working hard. He didn't come to the fields when he was supposed to, and he didn't respond to calls. Finally he'd be found on the roof of the farmhouse or the barn, or somewhere else out of sight, reading a book. Vernon just loved to read, the older brother said; he'd read anything he could get his hands on. Later in his teens, of course, after his mother died and the survival of the rest of the family became a more difficult proposition, Vernon didn't have time for such frivolities. He pitched in without objection, doing his share of farm labor and more. He was a responsible member of the family.

When I first heard that story, it just seemed funny to me. I took a secret adolescent pleasure in discovering that my father hadn't always been as perfectly responsible as he now appeared. But when I told the story to one of my high school teachers, whom I regarded as a wise mentor, he suggested an interpretation that struck me with its insight. The story showed, my mentor said, that my father was much the same as I, or that I was much the same as he: in the right place at the right time, we'd both rather read books of almost any kind than chop weeds. Maybe Vernon didn't regret letting

Wayne go off to Hollywood without him and his mandolin. But he probably did regret (and even resented, at some level) not having had more time to climb up on the roof in the hot sun and read to his heart's content.

In his long retirement from the job of maintenance electrician, my father has continued to farm with pleasure. At age 86, he still cultivates a very large garden, regularly planting new varieties of fruit and nut trees as well as the latest hybrids of tomatoes and sweet corn. Because of arthritis and partial deafness, he rarely plays his mandolin or any of the other instruments he keeps around the house. But he does a lot of reading now, and some writing as well. In studying personality, Henry Murray searched not only for repeated instances of one broad pattern, but also for the diverse behaviors that display a person's individuality, a given character's true complexity. My father is a very responsible man, and he is much more besides. And so, as my father's son, am I.