

The shrieking and screeching sounds of metal grinding against rock assaulted his ears and Tom Bolivar cursed silently. It was not yet eleven o'clock in the morning and he'd already plowed into more rocks than he could keep track of. The field he was attempting to furrow had lain fallow for years and the ground had been generous in pushing rocks up from its dark depths like thorns ejected from under the skin. Tom wanted to get it plowed and planted before the spring rains made it a bog, impassable for anything but hooves and boots. But the earth held tight to its tangle of weeds and rocks, making his progress slow and his temper quicken.

Tom dropped the reins to his plow horse with more than a little frustration and went to look at his plow. It wasn't the rocks themselves that frustrated him. He could use those for borders. It was the damage they did to his plow that irked him. In trying to save what cash he had for other necessities, he'd gone cheap on the plow. It worked well for the other fields; their soft, recently plowed dirt gave way easily as his horse pulled it through. This field, though, was proving to be more difficult.

He pulled the plow up out of the soil and inspected the leading edge. The metal that had easily sliced through the softer fields had become jagged and worn in this patch. At some point in colliding with the last several rocks, it had developed a tear and was bent backward nearly an inch with the continuing pushing through the rocky soil. He felt the lip of it, warm to the touch from friction and motion. Tom ran his fingers, still smooth and un-calloused as a man unaccustomed to manual labor, over the blade, feeling the minute tears that would become worse over time. The metal was thin and fatigued. He dropped it back onto the dirt with another silent curse. To continue more of this punishment would only make things worse, he reasoned. It was either repair it, replace it or make do without the remainder of this field adding to his farm's bounty.

Tom unhitched the horse from the plow. He unlatched the metal blade from the plow frame and laid it gently on the horse's back, the wide angle forming an A frame. He steadied the blade as he led the horse back to the barn while he contemplated how best to continue.

This was Tom's second year to live on the farm, although he had owned it for nearly a dozen years prior. At first, it was what some called a hobby farm. Tom came to be alone with his thoughts and find space away from the burgeoning city while the fresh meats and vegetables he could bring back were simply a bonus. He reveled in the still, wide open spaces of northern Texas. He took pride in the fields he'd planted and livestock he'd raised. Back then, his land was hours away from Dallas. These days, it wasn't nearly as far, but it either took longer or cost more and the roads were fraught with hazards.

Tom led his horse into the barn and gave it fresh water and oats. He took the plow blade, now cold, off the horse. Its metal edges, scraped and torn by the rocks in the new field he'd attempted to plow, looked less fragile and worn in the dim light of the barn. He thought repairing it might be best, certainly cheaper. Perhaps he could get the blacksmith to strengthen it with another piece of steel behind the blade. He walked out of the barn and up toward the house, a fine Victorian-style home with a wrap-around porch and expansive lawn. He admired the irises along the side of the house, just now pushing their way up through the soil. In a couple of months, they'd stand tall with bright yellow flowers atop. Tom passed them by on his way to the side entrance to the house. He kicked off one of his boots on the steps and laid the plow blade down against it. Out here, in the spring sun, the blade again looked tired and ragged. Reversing himself, he thought

perhaps buying new would be best. Tom pulled off the other boot with the edge of the step. As he opened the door leading into the kitchen, he resolved to ask the blacksmith's advice rather than decide himself what to do. Metal working wasn't his bailiwick.

Tom stepped into the kitchen where his wife, Jill, stood staring at a flotilla of jars filled with fruits and vegetables. From behind he admired her shapely figure, still slim despite her nearly 40 years. Her long brown hair, splendidly thick and soft, bounced sprightly over her shoulder as she turned on hearing him enter.

"I thought you were going to plow until after noon, Tom?" she asked with some surprise. "Did you get it done early?"

"No, I had wanted to, but the plow is getting damaged from all the rocks in that field. I have to get it fixed before I can finish," he said, moving up close to kiss her smooth forehead. "What's with all the jars here on the counter? Are you prepping for a feast?"

She frowned. "No, I just can't decide which of all these old things I want to open for lunch. I've had my fill of most of them."

Tom scanned the fleet of jars she'd pulled from the pantry. Okra and green beans seemed to be in the majority, but a few jars of tomatoes brightened the otherwise dull look to most of them. He, too, had gotten tired of the canned goods she'd prepared last fall and longed for the fresh foods spring and summer would bring.

The lack of interest showed on his face. Jill saw an opportunity pounced on it like a lioness on an unsuspecting gazelle. "Well, if you're going to run into town to fix your plow, maybe you could pick up something else."

Tom looked at her and sighed. She was right; they were both tired of eating the canned goods, and it seemed as if they'd saved the worst for last. The prospect of eating another meal of okra, beans and pork didn't much appeal to him. But her idea of just running into town was still a part of the old ways. She had yet to adopt the attitude he knew would be required of them if they were to survive. Only a few years ago, Tom would have thought nothing of making the trip into town. It was 20 miles to the nearest store. He could have been back by lunch time if he didn't dawdle. But times had changed. A trip to town was not only expensive, but required some planning. If he was going to use what precious gasohol he had for his truck, he wanted to be as efficient as possible and get anything else they might require for the next few weeks. Gone were the days of forgetting something needed and making a quick return trip. Gone, too, were the days of going daily. Even weekly had become too expensive. Unless it was absolutely necessary, Tom didn't want to drive. And not just because of the money. There were people out there who didn't have a car or truck, and they didn't have a pantry full of food, either.