

Lay of the Old Settler

by Keppiehed

Winner of week #2 at Brigit's Flame! A story about a man's renewed faith in life as he deals with loss.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Word Count: 936

Prompts: "Happy as a Clam."

A/N: This was the winning entry at Brigit's Flame for the week #2 contest. The title and the idea for the story was based loosely on "Old Settler's Song (Acres of Clams)", an old folk song from 1874 and sung to the tune of "Old Rosin, the Beau". I would like to acknowledge the editing help given by both Azuire and Thorarosebird. Thank you both, ladies. Your comments are always much appreciated!

The crack of the axe rang out in the stillness. Nothing else moved in the fog of the morning air but the swing of the log-splitter, wielded by one of the best lumberjacks in the North. The rhythm of his strokes was unceasing; the sweat of his brow flowed unchecked. It wasn't until he had a respectable pile of timber that Henry paused to take stock.

He pulled a kerchief from his back pocket to mop his streaming face and the back of his neck. It wasn't hot out yet, but cutting wood could break a man, and he wasn't young anymore. He was glad to be in good shape from all these years of hard labor, but still, he thought he could feel a twinge in his back. Henry squinted up at the sky. It wasn't easy to guess the time through the mist, but he figured on mid-morning.

The thought disgusted him. Here the kinks were slowing him and it wasn't even noon yet! Henry stretched and tried to work the knot out of his muscle. He was getting old. Lorna had tried to tell him that this would happen ...

Henry shook his head, as if by doing so he could dislodge the memory. Would there ever be a day when he didn't think of her? So long now, and the answer was still no. She crept in sooner or later, sometimes first thing in the morning—sometimes he managed to push off thoughts of her until just as he was drifting off to sleep. Yet she was always there, always just waiting for him to remember her. *Would he ever be free of her? Did he want to be?*

Henry sighed and sat down, his back against a stump. He knew from experience that if he pushed it further right now he would just injure himself. He took a swig from the canteen. Maybe he could spend the rest of the day at home; there was always work there waiting for him.

His plans decided, Henry collected his gear. He enjoyed the walk home through the woods. It was just as gorgeous now as it was when they had first settled the land. There was no prettier place on the earth to be found than the shores of Puget Sound. He and Lorna hadn't thought that when they had arrived, of course—they had been unprepared for the climate after his years of prospecting and mining.

Now *that* had been a hard life, and make no mistake. Henry pressed his lips together at the memory of nearly freezing to death, all the times he had narrowly escaped with

his own mortality still intact. Lorna had been frantic with worry that last time, and he'd agreed to roll up his tools and come to what he'd thought was the ends of the earth.

He hadn't been afraid of hard work, though, not him. In short order they'd had their homestead and little plot of Heaven carved out right here. The house wasn't big, but it didn't need to be. Lorna had even made real curtains for the window. It was home, all right. They had been as happy as two people could ever be.

It was when the baby came too early that things unraveled. There were no doctors to be had out here in the wilds—not that they had any money for such anyway. Who could have guessed that with all of the dynamite and hazards that Henry had faced it would be Lorna who faced the greatest danger of all? And then he knew his house wasn't joy, this life wasn't Heaven on Earth after all. How could it be, if she was gone? Everything he had worked so hard for was just ashes left standing in the shape of what used to be his dreams.

Henry stepped through the door, and he remembered to duck. Lorna used to call out to him, because he always forgot and bumped his head. After she passed he couldn't seem to stop from giving himself a lump. Now it was second nature to hear her voice reminding him to dip his head. He smiled. She was everywhere, and it no longer stung.

He sat at the table and stared out the window. He could just make out the beach from where he sat. It was clamming season, and they were everywhere. Maybe he would go collect some. This was a land of plenty; they were so rich in every bounty up here. Every one but the one that mattered.

The tattered edge of gingham fluttered in the breeze, reminding him that it wasn't time to be dreaming. Or grieving.

He went to see what he would find waiting for him on the beach. The fog had lifted, and Henry could feel the salty spray on his cheeks. For the first time in a long time he knew it wasn't his tears, but merely the wind on the water. He lifted his face to the sun and enjoyed the feel of the wetness drying on his face. He could feel her all around him just now, and he knew that he would never be free, never wanted to be free of her. She would always be waiting for him when his work was done.

But he wasn't done yet. There was still work to be done here. Always work to be done in this life, and he had a long life ahead. He belonged here in this wild place. Henry took a deep breath, felt the twinge ease, and knew he was alive again. At last.