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2020

### The Renter's Sons

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#### Recommended Citation

Bryner, Jeanne RN (2020) "The Renter's Sons," *SANA: Self-Achievement through Nursing Art*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/sana/vol1/iss1/4>

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Bryner, Jeanne  
"The Renter's Sons"

*The Renter's Sons*

Sometimes, having a son is the only security deposit a man like Broom Harris hands the world. What a man owns, what he can never have get sifted out when he knows a part of him will go forward.

Broom Harris digs coal and farms twenty acres and sleeps naked with his wife. Lots of promises on paper about debt and liability. He can name all the temporary centers of his life: this craggy land full of hidden hollows dotted with buttercups, nettle and people's faces. His soft gray village of stables and barn, the peeps and kittens his children tend to while the evening sun gets rolled up like a map in God's hands. Where does He sit till morning? What plans does He make for the next day? Which of the twin calves will live? Which will be crippled? *We are nothing but blueberries in God's bucket.* After Korea, he gave up swearing smoking and drink. Painting fences, tilling fields, spreading manure made sense, and here, every day goes fast enough.

In Broom's sky, stars built a thousand city bridges every night. Not one car. Not one horn. No sudden booms. Not one. No *No Vacancy* signs. Boys in Brier County learn three things early: how to hunt, work and listen for the mine whistle. Broom has two sons: Donnie Lou and Tommy. Broom rents the Duncan farm, six years; so long church folks have started to call it the Harris place, not because it's his, because they've almost forgotten old Mr. Duncan stuck away, slobbering on himself, snoring in the Curry Home.

Donnie Lou Harris fixes metal kickers on the cow's legs and sets his stool by her wide backside. He wakes up at five a.m. because there are chores to do before school. He carries fresh hay to the stalls for the cows and begins to milk. Barn lights dot rough sawn timber and winter's chill softens the smell of manure. The family tom cat yawns and rolls over on his back like he expects someone to scratch his belly and love him. The steel pail catches the warm foam of blue-white milk and Donnie Lou can hear Mamaw Ross saying, "Milking is like playing a harp, son, get your hands right and the sound is heavenly."

This morning, Donnie Lou isn't studying on harps and heaven. No. He's stewing about his meeting with Coach Tyler and all that mess in the locker room fight last Friday. How four of those boys had held Ted Miller down in the shower and pissed on him after the fight. Worst thing Donnie had ever seen, even worse than a pair of crows pecking the eyes of a dead fawn. Yes, even worse than that.

Donnie Lou plays for the Bobcat's ninth grade basketball team, varsity's next year. He can hardly wait. The Bobcat's colors are blood red and white. Donnie Lou's number is five; he considers five his lucky number. It's the first time he's been good at any sport. It's the first time he's really been part of a team. You can't count relay races at Bible school or family reunion baseball where even his dad plays. That stuff doesn't count. Basketball is the real deal.

The ball fits his palms easy as cow tits. His legs and arms shift and lunge and leap when he plays. He holds the record for practice foul shots: forty-two out of fifty. He lives for the long shots, far from the crowd, the three pointers. No elbows jamming a guy up, no big feet trying to trip. A forward, he starts every game. He has powerful legs, legs that do not tangle like most boys his age. He has the arms of a sledge, maybe it's all the lifting he does on the farm: hay bales, feed sacks, pulling calves, and his paralyzed brother, Tommy.

Born with a turned left foot, Donnie Lou's father never played ball, and it nearly kept Broom from the Army. Blue-eyed and lanky as a hoe, Broom's limp is just enough to notice, still, he never misses work or one of Donnie Lou's games. Donnie Lou's mother, Lily, teaches Sunday school at Sandy Hill Methodist Church, which means she teaches June Bible school and bowls with other women when winter comes. The Harris farm curves like a horseshoe around Dunkard Creek. Come spring, the apple orchard blooms a spray of lacey arms. In August, on one high flat acre, the cornfield's a hamlet of yellow-haired boys. The family milks four Guernsey cows, feeds two pigs and an aging collie dog, Tory.

A farm is a lot like a woman who must stay in one place changing her dress and aprons with the seasons, twirling, clogging to the gray music of branches. Alive with birdsong, the woods here wind and twist and hold on to secrets. Boys hunt when they are able to hold a gun steady and their daddy says *yes* to all the begging. Broom said *Yes*. And he remembers how a man's tongue cannot go back on its word. That's how Tommy ended up in his wheelchair: a hunting accident. Donnie Lou's gun. Tommy was ten. Donnie Lou, twelve.

Mamaw Ross says Jesus was twelve when he turned over the temple tables and gave everybody what for. You have to believe, she says, even when it's hard. Donnie Lou wears a navy parka coat, and when he pours fresh milk into the double-handled can, it splashes some on his coat. He hauls the can into the milk house and sets it inside the huge vats of cold spring water. The metal clanks make him remember the locker room's banging doors, sweaty bodies, hiss of shower steam. Everybody snapping towels and catcalls, horseplay, until last Friday.

It was just practice, not even a game, just an hour of practice, then shower, catch a ride home with his neighbor, Ted Miller. Ted is new to Brier County. His father got mashed in a cave in, lost his right arm, so they moved here last August to be closer to Ted's mama's family. Ted Miller stays quiet as a winter hive. He does his math and science and can answer all the questions about *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* in English class, but somewhere deep inside him is a bee, something small with its hateful stinger.

Sonny Armstrong can hear a buzz ten miles away. He's a pot stirrer, loves to throw river rocks, hear glass crash at Carnie's Bar and point to another guy when the constable arrives. Breaking windows, stealing smokes and weekend fist fights, they're Sonny's pocket change. Sonny don't go anywhere without them, and he's never lost a fight, not once. Whatever Ted Miller has itching him, Sonny Armstrong wants to help him scratch.

\*

Donnie Lou hurries into his house, washes up, heads for Tommy's bedroom carrying a pan of sudsy water. It's nearly daylight, and Tory whines to go outdoors.

“Be right back, Tommy,” Donnie Lou calls over his shoulder.

“How cold is it?”

“Twenty-five above.”

“Chores done?”

“Yep.”

“That’s good.”

“Yep.”

Above Tommy’s bed, there’s a Joe Namath poster, signed. When Tommy was shot and stuck in a circle bed at the Shriner’s hospital, Joe Namath came through the wards carrying a football and signed posters. He shook hands with burned kids and dying kids and gave posters to kids like Tommy who would never fully recover. That was before he did those panty hose commercials, before he had bad knees.

Tommy’s bath soap melts down some, makes the basin water appear bluish white like milk. *Darned if everything don’t look the same on the farm*, Donnie thinks. Tommy’s pale legs stiffen in a spasm; goose flesh rises up on his thighs. Donnie Lou hurries to cover him. Tommy’s toes are dusky and point down like a dancer’s. It makes it tough to put on his tennis shoes, but he won’t wear the black shoes with hard soles and braces. Nope. Tommy hates the laces, hates how they look like papaw’s shoes. Tommy is nearly thirteen; thirteen-year-olds wear sneakers. And he doesn’t let mama wash him anymore. In the dark, when Tommy was twelve and Lily had left the room, he whispered to Donnie, “I don’t want her washing me no more. I’m getting hair, Donnie, it, it ain’t right. I tell you it ain’t right.”

A moon of quiet came between the boys each in his own bunk bed and body. Donnie Lou thought Tommy choked back a sob, not for sure, not for long, but just the same, its flare cut the air between them. In the field of days, a morning comes when a boy will not race to his mama’s kitchen, thumb pinched from the tractor gears. He will see how his skin rises to the bite of metal jaws, how his flesh blooms its throbbing purple flower. He will light a match over his pocketknife and bore his nail. He will suck the blood and shout *God damn it* like his father. Yes, the apple pie still cools on its right table, but there’s no window left to beg a kiss or Band-Aid.

“Will you do it? I mean, will you help me to bathe? I can do a lot, a lot more than Mama lets me. If you can, if you will . . .”

“Tomorrow, Tommy. I’ll have Mama show me, to do it the right way, so I won’t hurt you. Tomorrow.”

“It don’t hurt to get washed up, Donnie. Nothing hurts, really.”

“Well, okay.”

The next morning Donnie Lou stood in his pajamas. Monopoly, Chinese checkers odd toys on a shelf behind him. “Mama, will you show me how to bathe Tommy?”

Lily sat her wash pan on the chair and straightened her back. The steam rose between what had been asked and what should come of it. Lily thought of Broom, her husband, Tommy’s father, how he could not bathe his broken son, could not wash Tommy. That week she’d had the flu, Broom tried, tried his best, but came to her shaking, hands covering his face, crying, sobbing so hard she made herself get up and do it. A woman ought not see a man so blinded

by a curtain pulled back just a crack.

“Keep your brother warm,” Lily’s voice was a wooden spoon snapping a counter, “he can’t stay warm, not like us, so promise me, you’ll have blankets ’round him, every part of his body you’re not washing.”

“I will. I promise. I swear.”

Donnie Lou stood taller than Lily’s shoulder, straight as her mother’s bureau in the corner of the room. How many days had his hands finished morning chores? Or was it months? Years? Could she even think when last she’d called him from warm quilts to his boots and overalls? Without fail, Donnie Lou carried his yoke. His new voice was a mix of her long dead father’s and Broom’s. When and how did some witch come and steal her freckled sons?

“Use the thin blankets and sheets to roll him, like this,” she continued. “Take care not to hurt your own back.” Hadn’t the therapists said that to Lily over and over? ‘Don’t hurt you back, Lily. There’s a right way, that’s the only way, that’s the safe way for you. Where will Tommy be if your back is broken?’

Like medicine poured into a spoon, their words went out into the room. “Let me help you today, until you get on to it. Will that be all right, Tommy?”

“Sure. I want it to be safe for Donnie, for all of us.”

“Around his catheter, you have to clean it every day. It’s easy for him to get infections, people with catheters are at risk. But, we’ve done real good that way. Haven’t we, Tommy? Only one infection. Pneumonia. And Dr. Spencer said, well, he said, Tommy turned around fairly fast with his antibiotics.” Lily’s was proud and relieved at once, and her voice carried its thimble of pride.

“Mama, you can go now,” Tommy spoke up, “Donnie Lou knows the dressing part and how to get me into my chair.”

“Well, all right then. I’ll start breakfast.”

“Are you mad?” Tommy asks.

“Nope.” Donnie stretches Tommy’s underpants up, careful of the hose.

“Chores all done?”

“Yep.” The jean zipper catches. Donnie works it loose.

“That’s good.”

“Yep.” Donnie helps smooth Tommy’s sweatshirt down his back.

“Hey, your breath smells like the barn.”

“Yep, and you cut your hair with a hammer.” Donnie pulls Tommy’s second sock over Tommy’s long toes.

“Are my feet too big?”

“Yep, and you got toe jam.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.” Donnie Lou threads a belt through Tommy’s jeans, helps him to a sitting position, straddles Tommy’s knees, circles his waist in a bear hug, holds on to his trousers and pivot-lifts him into the chair like he don’t weigh enough to break a daisy. Tory barks and licks Tommy’s hand. Since the accident, Tory is Tommy’s dog, rarely leaves his side, sleeps with him in bed and whines whenever he’s sick.

“I think you gave me a wedgy.” Tommy winks.

“Comb your hair, bucket head.”

Donnie Lou carries the wash pan into the bathroom and faces himself in the mirror. He's started to shave and hates having pimples. Mamaw Ross says it seems like Tommy will not get pimples. *That's fair. That's good.* Donnie rinses the pan and dries it. *Tommy, he's got enough. He don't need red pimples busting out on his forehead and nose like me.*

Lily is still in her blue sponge curlers and flannel robe. She works at the pancake batter and turns the bacon. "Don't you both look fine? Two of the best lookers in Brier County, and I know a looker when I see one. Didn't I pick your Daddy?"

Donnie Lou doesn't taste the pancake's golden faces or the bacon. He thinks about Sonny Armstrong and his temper, how he tripped girls in kindergarten, splattered their dresses with mud balls, smashed Billy Catchpole's Valentine box in second grade. Sonny brags about doing it with Alice Stanley in the woods and her getting poison ivy. Every Friday, Sonny counts his rubbers saying how many he'll need over the weekend. Sonny. His teeth already yellow from Camels and Mail Pouch, his breath smells like a dirty ashtray.

Tommy's glass tips and most of his milk spills. Sometimes, his hands spasm. He can't help it. He can't make them do what he wants them to do.

"Not to worry. The floor needs to be scrubbed anyhow." Lily sops up a table splash with her tea towel.

Donnie Lou pours Tommy a new glass of milk. Tory licks the floor's puddle. It might be weeks before another spill or it might be two minutes. Sometimes, it's every meal. The family is used to it. There's no need to be sorry for something that cannot be helped, something that's an accident.

On the bus, Ted Miller sits three seats in front of Donnie Lou. Ted's quiet, always quiet. His right eye's swollen purple from the fight, and six stitches close his brow. He looks the way a colt does once it's broke. Donnie Lou wants to say something to Ted, but he's three seats away, people will hear. He sits near Ted in English class, maybe then, maybe then.

Donnie Lou hands Tommy his books from the locker. The brothers head separate ways down the hall. Donnie Lou watches Tommy's hands on the black tires, pushing forward, pushing and letting go, a sort of rhythm, like milking, like rolling pie dough, like bouncing a basketball. Over and over Tommy's hands do what they can: push the pencil, brush the teeth, comb the hair, pet Tory and empty the urine pouch.

*That's what it is when your legs are frozen and you can't run. You cannot run from any of it.* Donnie Lou remembers how it was in the woods when he shot Tommy, how his own legs wouldn't work, wouldn't run. It was a terrible movie he carried in his head. A movie that might start up any time night or day. The sun and his gun and Tommy racing ahead with Tory. September leaves and the creek washing stones flat. A perfect day for squirrel hunting. A Saturday. Then, Donnie Lou's foot caught in a hole, just like that, he fell, the gun fired and Tommy slumped beside Tory. The tear in Tommy's skin was no bigger than a dime, and there wasn't much blood, not like gutting a deer or butchering a hog, nothing like that, but Tommy turned pale as a bed sheet, then gray, an awful gray.

Donnie Lou felt it rise up in him again: the taste of vomit. He saw Tommy's legs pinned against the meadow, the way they'd always be. He saw Tory look up at him with those whimpering doggy eyes. *What'd you do boy? What'd you go and do?*

The gun dropped from his hand and he kicked the barrel, ran screaming for the barn where Broom was pulling a tractor motor. It all begins to spin here, the phone calls, red lights

and sirens, questions, questions, Lily shaking in the back of the ambulance, patting Tommy and Broom, his father crying, swearing, chopping Donnie's gun with an axe.

\*

Donnie Lou staggers to homeroom.

Third period he must talk with Coach Tyler. One-on-one. Each boy on the team will come in and say what he knows about the fight last Friday. Sonny Armstrong is off the team. Ted Miller is off the team. Anytime there's a fight in the locker room and somebody's hurt, they're burnt toast. That's the rules. Once, Doc Mason's boy was thrown off the team. "You must have rules," Coach Tyler said, "that's the way it is. Get ready for rough water, because you only get one canoe."

Coach has tired eyes and his temples are graying, for over twenty years, he's been teaching history and coaching. He's had some dandy seasons, but never gone farther than regionals. Pine Ridge High has never made it to state championship. Coach glances up from a pile of papers. "Come on in, Donnie, close the door, please, sit down." He says it like a man talking to his boy over an evening newspaper after supper. His voice makes Donnie feel like there's nothing to worry about in this room.

The folding chair under Donnie Lou's buttocks is cold and hard. *Shit, the red spot under Tommy's left hip. I forgot to tell Mama.* Donnie Lou studies Coach's office. It's the first time he's been in here for more than a couple minutes. There are framed certificates and plaques, awards for coaching, pictures of Coach in his black and white college uniform and his number is five. His son's face in a Marine uniform, the American flag behind him.

"I guess you know why you're here." Coach rubs his eyes under his glasses.

"The fight. It's about Sonny and Ted, the locker room, last Friday."

"Yep. Just tell me what happened, son, nobody'll know what's said in this room. This is just you and me." Coach tips back his chair, sighs.

Inside a man there's a nest of everything he's heard and seen and felt, sometimes, a big wind comes, branches scrape a window. *You pay attention to your brother's skin. Any red marks on Tommy, any pressure areas got to be rubbed and tended to. They showed us pictures, bedsores big as cantaloupes, pus and raw meat down to the bone. You cannot let it go.* Lily's voice clear as a sunrise teaching Donnie what he had to know. Maybe he should call home right now and tell her. Then, for no good reason, he sees Ted Miller's father laughing at the Esso station, some noontime joke he's told after pumping gas and sloshing off windshield bugs. He sees how Mr. Miller always has a sucker for Tommy, a treat for Tory and makes a point to shake Tommy's hand. Every day, Mr. Miller waves bye with his good arm after telling the second-shift miners, "Boys, be sure and keep your cutter bars up."

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Coach laces his fingers, puts them behind his head and worries his lips.

Some drum skins are shapeless, and a person don't mean to put his palm to them, but a gate opens and Donnie Lou gushes like a goddamn Holy Roller speaking in tongues. The words come in a rush, like the cows losing their birthing water. "I was showering. Sonny started on Ted. He don't like Ted 'cause Ted is faster on the court, quick with the ball. Sonny don't like anybody who beats him at anything. And then, he was saying how Ted had to move here 'cause



his daddy was crippled, you know, on account of his one arm. Then, he said Ted's daddy screwed up bolting in the mines and caused the cave in at Number 9. Ted told him to take it back. Nobody's ever told Sonny to take it back. Ted thought it was over. He turned to go when Sonny hauled off and smacked Ted square in the eye with his boot. Ted's eye was so full of blood. I thought his eye was gone. Coach, I thought Ted's eye went clear through his brain."

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Across autumn's darkness, Lily hands Broom his lunch bucket, kisses him good-bye. Midnight turns. The only shift that lets him see Donnie Lou's basketball games. Tommy keeps score. His jersey's number is two. Lily and Broom hate sleeping alone, but every day has a wound, something gaping, needing to be licked and needing to make its circle in high grass and bed down. Fence line to tree line birds that sing at night start their songs like apartment people in August, pouring themselves into alleys. Lily tightens her sweater, leans against the aging porch post. Tory and Donnie Lou and Tommy are asleep, maybe dreaming by now.

Because of Ted Miller, the Bobcats won county regionals last Saturday. The Itch sisters, Coach Tyler, Brother Hayward and nearly the whole town went wild in the bleachers. The band's off key music and then, those beautiful young men hoisted Ted and Tommy high upon their shoulders to cut the hoop's net. Broom squeezed Lily to his chest so tight she saw his heart, heard his breath as soft wind carrying hurt away. In the chair of old age, she knew they would return to this bonfire and their sons breaking shackles from the ankles of night.

