



Photo courtesy of Harley McIlRath

*J. Harley McIlrath's work has appeared in the [North American Review](#), the [Seneca Review](#), the [Wapsipinicon Almanac](#) and elsewhere. His story collection, *Possum Trot*, is available from the [Ice Cube Press](#). A second collection, *The Child*, is forthcoming from the Ice Cube Press in 2016.*

Such A Clean, Tidy Man

J. HARLEY MCILRATH

I don't know what's got me thinking about Shorty Tinkle. I suppose it's this hip. It gets to hurting me if I sleep on it too long. It wakes me, and then I have to lie on my back. I prop myself up on pillows because the stomach acid bothers me, too, and between this hip and the stomach acid, I can't get back to sleep. So I lie there thinking about things, running them over in my mind. Some people count sheep. I work on things in my mind. Like Shorty Tinkle. I couldn't come up with his name, so I was lying there on my back working my way through the alphabet. I take a consonant, you know, and then start running vowels after it, seeing what jars loose. But nothing was coming. It's because it's a "sh," you know. It starts with a "sh" so it's not a proper consonant sound.

I never did come up with it. Not lying there in bed anyway.

But that wasn't what got me started. Where it came from, maybe, was sitting here waiting. I'm sitting here the other day, and this . . . what my dad would have called a grease monkey... is talking about all the cars he's ever owned.

He's saying, "Bought a 66 Mustang 289 off a guy up to New Hampton. Floors rusted out. Rear quarters rusted out. Sat for 20 years in the windbreak behind his old man's barn."

He says, "Only five thousand miles on the engine and tranny, though. Car's all there like the day it come off the line. Nothing missing."

He says, "I got it for seven hundred. Two grand later, I got all the parts I need and a new black interior. Then the rocker studs pull out of my heads. Press in non-adjustable."

He says, "Now I have to do the top end of the engine," and he's looking at me like he's expecting a comment, like I should be saying something. I'm trying to think when he started talking. I don't know. I think he was already talking when I sat down.

So this grease monkey's putting me to sleep, and the bell goes off at the door, and in walks this guy in bib overalls and no shirt. You don't think about it at first because he's very clean, like he's just got out of the shower. Hair all combed. Straight part on the side. Bibs look like they're pressed. Brand new running shoes, you know, not work boots or anything like that. He's clean and all done up for town, except he's not wearing a shirt. That's just one of those things you just know, right? You grow up with it: No shirt, no shoes, no service.

But in he walks, proud as can be, and he steps up to the window there where the gal sits.

The grease monkey's saying, "Went over to Wisconsin. Kid wants twenty-eight hundred. Twenty-eight hundred is way too much for a Wisconsin car."

Here's the thing. He's so clean. The guy in bibs. Like I say, like he just got out of the shower. But it's not just that. His skin. It's soft. Looks soft, anyway. I don't know. He's tan, but it's not a regular tan. It's not a tan like a guy in bibs would have. You know. Real bibs. Overalls. He looks like a guy maybe that holds the stop sign on road construction. Maybe a guy drives a lawn mower at the college. But his tan is like he works on it. Like he lays at every angle to the sun so no wrinkle or crevice gets missed.

Looks like the inside of his belly button might be as tan as his shoulder blades.

You know, maybe you don't think about it because his tan looks just as store bought as a shirt. Maybe it is. I don't know.

The grease monkey is saying, "Picked up a cherry 81 Z for twenty-five hundred in Montana. No rust. Newly rebuilt engine. Great-running car."

And the guy in bibs, he goes straight to the window there where the gal sits, but before he's halfway there he reaches at the pocket in the front of his bibs, and he pulls out a folded paper. Holds it out in front of him as he walks. The gal there at the window is talking into that

headset she always wears for the phone.

She's saying, "I have a 3:15 on the twelfth . . . of August . . . that's a Tuesday. Does that work for you? How about a 4:30 on the fourteenth? That's a Thursday . . . is a Thursday better? . . . August."

She's setting up an appointment, and the guy in bibs walks up to the window with the paper held out in front of him, and the gal takes it without ever looking up. She doesn't look at him. The fellow stands there a minute, looking through the window. Then he steps to the side. You can see he's a little rattled. He's not looking at me, but he's looking through the door I'm sitting by.

The grease monkey's saying, "Just picked up a 67 RS Camaro for twenty-two hundred. It's just a shell, but it's pretty solid for a vinyl top."

The guy in bibs must be looking at his own reflection in the glass from the framed diplomas the therapists have hanging there in that hallway. Anyway, he takes a comb out of the back pocket of his bibs, and he combs his hair. It doesn't need combed, but he combs it anyway. I'm thinking that's his way of reassuring himself. He combs with his right hand and kind of pats the hair with his left hand.

The gal at the window is saying, "Well, what works for you? Why don't you tell me what works for you, and I'll see if I can make it work for us."

You know, she's in the middle of saying that, and the guy in bibs puts the comb back in his pocket and steps up to the window. He stands there a second, and she keeps on talking into her headset.

And he says, "I guess you could give me a receipt."

That's all he says, and he stands there looking at the gal at the window.

And I hear her say, "Just a minute . . . Just a minute."

I don't know whether she's talking to him or to whoever she's got on the phone. But she must be talking to the person on the phone because she hands a bit of paper through the window, and the guy in the bibs takes it from her hand and heads for the door. But he's not done because he stops halfway to the door, and he turns.

He says, "I guess I could have paid for this tomorrow when I come in."

The gal there at the window doesn't say anything.

She's talking on the headset, and the fellow in the bibs stands there. That's it. That's all there is to it.

The grease monkey, he's saying, "I bought a Wisconsin truck once. Never again. Twenty-eight hundred is way too much for a Wisconsin car."

But that's it. I don't know. That might be what got me thinking of Shorty Tinkle.

Shorty wasn't his given name, of course. People just called him that.

My dad did, anyway.

I couldn't tell you his real name. I don't know that I ever heard it. People just called him Shorty. Shorty Tinkle. And he really wasn't short, you know. He was thin, but he wasn't short. It was his wife. She was a big woman. Not fat, you know but big. Big boned . . . and tall. She was a manly woman, very unpleasant, not in her looks so much, but in who she was. People hated to see her coming, and Shorty was always following along in her shadow. I don't recall her name. Don't know as I ever knew it.

People just said, "Shorty was in with the missus, yesterday," which was a joke because it made it sound like Shorty was in charge, but he wasn't. It was Shorty's missus had him in tow everywhere she went.

I don't know as Shorty even carried his own checkbook.

I was in line with my mom at McNally's one time. Just a kid. This is forty, forty-five years ago. Shorty and the missus were in line ahead of us. Missus Shorty was digging in her bag and pulling out coupons and arguing with the checkout girl about whether they were good or not.

"This one is for the Hy-Vee," the girl was saying.

And Missus Shorty says, "Oh, pooh. It's good there, it's good here."

"No," the girl says. "It's put out by the Hy-Vee. You'll have to use it at the Hy-Vee."

The girl says, "It's only good for twenty cents anyway."

And Missus Shorty slaps the coupon back down on the counter with a big thwack sound and says, "Well, if it's only good for twenty cents then it won't bankrupt you to give me those twenty cents here."

Coupon after coupon she bullied that poor check-out girl, and when they were gone, Shorty and the missus, I thought the girl would say something about the missus. But you know what she says?

She says, "He's such a clean, tidy man."

She says that in a sad voice.

"He's such a clean, tidy man."

I heard my dad say one time, "If Shorty Tinkle could plant a corn row as straight as he parts his hair, he'd be a hell of a farmer."

He was saying that to the boys loafing at the elevator, and he got a good laugh out of them. My dad ran the elevator in Newburg. Grain elevator I suppose I should say. People anymore get the idea he worked in a hotel or something. He ran the grain elevator, and he delivered feed to the farmers all around. Sometimes I'd ride with him, delivering feed to their farms. Sometimes it was in bags. Sometimes we'd take ground corn in the auger truck, put it right in the feeders. Most guys would come talk to us while my dad unloaded the feed. Some didn't, but most did.

Almost everybody.

I can think of being at Shorty Tinkle's twice. Once he was out pulling weeds in his beanfield. The other time, he stepped out the house door and stood there watching us without coming down to say hello. I remember sitting there looking at him from the truck. I didn't wave at him, and he didn't wave at me. Shorty looked like he was ready for town, except his pants were denim. New looking. Pressed even. But in town he wore dress pants.

Denim or not, Shorty could have walked straight out of his beanfield and taken a pew at church and been just fine.

"Shorty's beans'd be a lot cleaner if he didn't stop for a bath after every weed he pulled."

That's another of my dad's lines. He was full of them.

That second time I was at Shorty Tinkle's, the time he stepped out of the house, was after Missus Shorty died. I don't remember when Missus Shorty died. There must have been a notice in the paper. They must have run her picture maybe. I'm sure there wasn't much grieving. As

I say, people hated to see her coming. But that second time I was at Shorty's was after Missus Shorty had died, and there were clothes on the line. I remember because it was odd to me. I remember thinking if Shorty's missus was dead, then how'd those clothes get on the line.

And who was going to pull them back in?

That's what I was running through my mind sitting there in the truck. I don't know why I was thinking about that. What did I know? I was a kid.

That was a long time ago, and it wasn't quite fair what my dad said about Shorty's corn rows. His rows were as straight as anyone else's.

My dad was just going for the laugh. He did that.

What's got me thinking about Shorty Tinkle? I don't know. Maybe I was already thinking about him. Maybe I've been thinking of him all along. Maybe I'd just lost his name.

Truth was, Shorty Tinkle's corn rows were as straight as anyone's. Straighter. And his beanfields were cleaner than most. Shorty's building site was kept up, too. White house. Red outbuildings with white trim. Yard all mowed. Clean and tidy, just like Shorty.

Shorty Tinkle's building site was on the cover of the Wallace's Farmer once. They ran a contest where they'd put a picture of a nice looking building site on the cover, and then people could win a prize calling in and correctly saying whose it was. I don't remember what the prize was. I don't imagine it was much. But there was Shorty's building site on the cover.

I was in line behind Shorty one other time at McNally's. This was twenty years or so ago. After my mother had passed. Dad, too.

I think so. Yes.

I didn't speak to him, but I was behind Shorty in line. I don't think he said a word to anyone, not even the checkout girl, but he was buying the stuff people buy, milk, eggs. I remember noticing him buying eggs because that first time I was at his place they had chickens.

Maybe they were Missus Shorty's chickens. I don't

know.

Anyway, that had been a long time before. Shorty must have been late in his eighties, but he still looked real nice, like his mom had just got him ready for school. I was ready for the checkout girl to say something when I stepped up, make some remark, but she didn't.

Shorty Tinkle was nothing to her.

Maybe that isn't it at all. What's got me thinking about Shorty Tinkle? I don't know. Maybe I was already thinking about him. Maybe I've been thinking of him all along. Maybe I'd just lost his name.

It was the mailman found Shorty. Shorty hadn't been getting his mail, and when the mailman went to stuff the third Pennysaver in his box, he decided he'd better check things out. He looked in the garage and saw the car was in there, so he went up and knocked on the

house door. No answer, but the door wasn't locked. So the mailman went on in.

He was upstairs, lying there in bed, Shorty was, but the bedroom was dark. The shades were pulled, and the mailman almost missed him. Shorty'd been there awhile, and he blended right in with the bedding.

The mailman says, "Jesus, Shorty. You scared the hell out of me."

He says, "You ain't been bringing your mail in."

He says, "You want me to bring your mail in, Shorty?"

The mailman said he figured Shorty was dead from the get go, but he couldn't stop himself from talking. Nerves. This is all second hand from the Post Office. They say the mailman, it was Ed Kirby if you know him, went to switch on the light on the nightstand, but it was already switched on. The bulb was burned out. Shorty'd been lying there with the light on.

Seems like Shorty was just lying there like he was waiting for something, running things over in his mind, couple pillows under his head.

So Ed finishes his route and then calls the sheriff from the Post Office.

Shorty Tinkle.

Now here's the rest of it. The neighbors go in to get Shorty's stuff ready for the estate sale, you know, he and the missus didn't have family, so the neighbors go in to get things arranged, pull out the machinery and all, and I guess you should have seen the insides of those buildings. That's what they say. They were all painted up on the outside, you know, but on the inside, they were held together with baling twine and wire. All of them. The wood was all splintered inside. The beams and rafters were all split and cracked, and Shorty had them wrapped with twine and electric fence wire. Barbed wire. Copper wire. All wrapped around the broken wood. Holding things together. The joists were all cobbled up with scrap wood.

But the real thing was the garbage. Shorty Tinkle's buildings were piled full of garbage. Hundreds of bags of it, what was in bags. Maybe thousands. Machine shed. Corn crib. Barn. Not a bale of hay in the hay mow. Floor to roof stacked with garbage. From what they say, Shorty'd never been to the landfill in his life. Never put a match to a newspaper or envelope. It was all piled up there in those buildings. Decades of it, just feeding the rats.

It just goes to show you.

And then, I don't know, I step up to the window here today, and that gal's talking into her headset, and she doesn't look up or nothing, and she's got the window there pulled half shut, and there's my reflection on the window. I'm looking through my own reflection, and that's when it comes to me.

And I look at the gal there, and I say it.

I say, "Shorty Tinkle."

I'm looking at her, and I say it as if we've been trying to come up with it together, the two of us. Maybe over a cup of coffee. I say it like I'm pretty proud of myself, and maybe I'm expecting her to say, "That's it! You got it!"

You know. "Good for you!"

And the gal at the window there, she doesn't look up, but she keeps talking, and I see her running her finger up and down the list while she's talking. She's running her finger up and down the list. She's looking for

Shorty Tinkle's name.

She doesn't even look at me.

She just keeps looking for Shorty Tinkle's name as if she doesn't see me in here twice a week for the past two months.

So I step away from the window, and I come over here, and I sit down here in this chair by the door where I always sit, and we'll see. I guess we'll see. And here's what you can tell me, maybe you know, I want to know what it is about Shorty Tinkle. 