

Jasper



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Painting of the day:

Breaking Home Ties

by Norman Rockwell

Nobody in America was ever better at painting a story than was Norman Rockwell.

How can you paint a story? A story goes from one day to the next, while a painting can show you only one moment. You'd need hundreds of pictures to tell a story, wouldn't you? But some painters do it – you can see the past and the present and the future, all in one painting. That is what Norman Rockwell has done in the painting you are looking at now. He is painting the passage of time – human time, which is a lot different from the motion of the hands on a clock. The hands on a clock don't have wrinkles on them. There isn't a wedding ring on one of the fingers. There aren't the scars of years of hard work. They don't have a personality. They don't go from being baby hands to an old man's hands. They don't really even tell time. We do.

Rockwell said he painted this picture because the last of his three boys was going off to college, and he missed the boys badly. That's what is going

on in the painting. A boy and his father are sitting on the running board of their farm truck. He's clearly his father's son, as you can see in the faces. If you age him thirty years, grow his nose a little, fill out his legs and chest, he will be the old man, and some other boy will be the son.

The boy's got on his best suit, a light tan color, with a loud red and white tie and red and white socks, the colors of the "State U" he's going to, as we can see from the pennant pasted to his suitcase. His hands are thick and callused, as we'd expect from a ranch boy, though he still has a fresh young face. He looks into the distance with a bit of a calm and carefree smile. He is looking out into the future.

The old man next to him, sitting knee to knee, is slumped over. His hands are gnarled. He's holding two hats. One is a beat up old thing which has seen a lot of use on the ranch. The other is the boy's new hat, with a black band around it and a smart ribbon. The boy is holding a package in his lap, also with a ribbon around it. Probably it is his lunch for the bus ride, prepared by his mother. He's got books resting on the suitcase between his legs, and they seem to be favorites of his, because they too are worn, and you



can see papers, maybe letters, tucked inside a couple of them. The book in the middle has a red cover and gold coloring for the edging of the pages. That is probably his Bible. A yellow bus ticket sticks out of his jacket pocket. The father has something too in the pocket of his blue work shirt. It appears to be a watch. Maybe he means to give it to his son when he says goodbye. A watch, for the time; and time flies.

The father isn't looking in the same direction as the son. He's looking down and to his left. What is he thinking of? Perhaps the son sees in the distance all the visions of future success, and love, and a new life. He sees new friends, interesting classes, football games, dances, and maybe a girl he's going to marry. The father can't see any of that. He sees the past. He sees what he was like when he was his son's age, what dreams he had that were never fulfilled, what foolish and merry things he did that he will do no more, what people he knew that are gone, and then what his life with this same boy used to be. For there was a time when the boy was no more than a little child who could neither walk nor say a word, he who is now so tall and strong and confident.

But I haven't mentioned the part of the painting that a lot of people said they loved the best. There are not two dramatic figures here, but three. The third figure never knew the father when he was a young man and the boy was a baby, and he won't be

around to know the boy when he reaches his father's age now. It's the family dog, a handsome collie, who is sitting on the other side of the boy, right up against the suitcase, as he lays his chin across the boy's knee. He has that melting look in the eye that dog-lovers can hardly bear. It is a look of sadness without words to tell it. The dog is intelligent. He knows what suitcases mean. He knows that the boy is leaving. He doesn't know why, or for how long. All he knows is that he loves the boy, and the boy is

going away, and that is sad. So he shows his sadness by his quiet plea.

"Don't go away," says the dog, without saying a word. "Stay here, stay with us."

But time won't oblige. It flows, and we are carried along with it. The father knows it, and for him too it's a sadness without words. He is

not going to get sentimental about it and spoil the boy's big day. He won't shed a tear. He keeps his sadness to himself. The boy pays no attention to either the dog or his father, but we forgive him for that. We guess that he's been a good son to his father and a good playmate and master to the dog. The future beckons, the bus will arrive, and life goes on, until the end that comes to everyone, and as Job in the Bible says, our place knows us no more.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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