

## Inheritance

by Barry R. Taylor

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Oscar sat down on an old stump. He surveyed the land spread out before him. His inheritance.

The clearing behind him, already closing in with roses and meadow-sweet, had once been the site of a small house. Oscar's battered Ford pick-up was sitting in the abandoned driveway. A newer Subaru hatchback sat beside it. Mud spattered the shiny finish. On Oscar's truck it blended in.

Oscar batted black flies away from his eyes. He was a heavy-set man running to fat if he wasn't careful, dressed in a loose T-shirt, brown work pants and rubber boots. A shapeless hat on his head kept the June sun off his bald spot. His black moustache, neatly trimmed, at least gave his jowly face a bit of character.

"It isn't much after all, is it," said the man behind him. He was wearing a tie, and carrying a leather clipboard. He didn't seem bothered by the flies.

Oscar looked up at him. "Not much? It's nothing. It's worthless. It's more tax to pay." He gestured widely to take in the ruined landscape around them. He tried, and failed, to keep the crushing disappointment out of his voice.

When the lawyer had first called him to say his uncle had left him some land in his will, Oscar had been excited. He never expected a relative to leave him much of anything, certainly not his shifty, shiftless Uncle Vincent. There wasn't a lot of wealth in Oscar's family. His father had worked in a wood mill, long since closed. Oscar supported himself doing what he could: electrician's assistant, delivery-truck driver, labourer, tree feller, usually two or three of these at once. He lived in a two-unit modular house on an acre of land about a half hour from town. It was the house he had grown up in, and the only thing of value that his hard-working, hard-drinking father had left him when he passed on.

Uncle Vince was Oscar's father's younger brother. He was a con man, a grifter, a shady dealer, a petty thief. He had more education than his brother, but never seemed to use it for anything but scheming. He held regular jobs sometimes, but never for long and only to provide income while he cooked up his next project.

Oscar's mother despised him; his father tolerated him. "He's family," he said, more than once.

"He's your family," Oscar's mother replied.

To his credit, Vince never tried to take advantage of his older brother, beyond dropping by for dinner now and again. He must have sensed that poisoning his safe refuge would be disastrously unwise. He had regular run-ins with the law, though he usually got off with a fine or a weekend in jail. Eventually, the fates caught up with him. He fell in with some seriously bad people who convinced him that one big job – robbing a jewellery store with inadequate security – would allow him to live in comfort and put his days on the street behind him. It all went sour, of course: the cops were called, Vince got caught, his new friends deserted him (with the jewels, which were never recovered) and Vince found himself facing an extended stay in the Springhill Institution.

Oscar was pretty much Vincent's only visitor during his incarceration. His father came by once or twice a year out of familial obligation. Oscar visited every month. He had time, during his too-frequent periods of unemployment, and he had adsorbed his father's stance that one should not desert family, even when that family was a numbskull who couldn't disable an alarm without setting it off. Besides, despite his faults, Uncle Vince was pleasant company. Oscar had always gotten along with his rascal uncle, even when he was a kid. He told jokes. He related stories about his past, obviously fictionalized but highly entertaining. He passed on dubious bits of life advice.

Oscar was a trifle surprised to learn that his incorrigible Uncle Vince had made plans for his post-prison life. He had decided to give up being a rascal. He was tired of it. He wanted to settle. He referred several times to a "little piece of land" he had acquired somewhere. "It's gonna take care o' me," he declared. Maybe he would even build a house there.

He had plenty of time to rationalize his crimes, too. "The thing about jewels is, they're basically worthless," he told Oscar once. "They're bits of bling, aren't they. They don't provide food, make cars, treat cancer, whatever. They're not useful for anything. They're trinkets for husbands to give their wives so they can have a bit of sparkle. Nobody was ever hurt because they lost their diamonds."

When Oscar mentioned that the jeweller did suffer a real loss, his uncle merely grunted, "Insurance." Oscar did not pursue the matter; Uncle Vince had a point.

Prison did not agree with Vincent, or he was ill-suited for prison. He served his whole term, never requesting parole. In his last years his health declined steeply. He began to ramble, and forget. He became fixated on the “little piece of land” and how it was his key to a new life. He would whisper secrets to Oscar, and make him promise never to tell. The secrets were generally not worth telling. Or they were outright lies about other crimes he had committed, people he had met, dangerous things he knew.

“You’ve a good memory, Oscar,” he said once, which was true. “So make sure you remember this.” Then he leaned across the big table in the visitors’ room and whispered something to Oscar, a bunch of numbers and letters.

“What was that first word? Oscar asked. “A veetry? What’s a veetry?”

“Don’t forget,” his uncle said. “In case I don’t make it. It’ll take care of you.”

When he was finally released from prison, debt to society fully paid, Vince was too frail to pursue his dream of a new life. He moved into a bachelor apartment in Halifax and died there less than a year later. Shortly thereafter a probate lawyer had called Oscar to tell him that Vince’s “little piece of land” had been passed on to him.

It wasn’t what he expected. Instead of a vast swath of mature forest or a building plot near town he got eleven acres of cut-over, cattails, and alder swamp. The clearing where the house had been sat atop a small rise, which provided a vantage point to survey the desolation. The stump Oscar was sitting on was evidence of the ruthless clearcut to which the land had been subjected some years earlier. A new generation of spruce trees was pushing its way through the brambles and roses and hawthorns. A few older trees, too rotten or misshapen to interest the fellers, still hung on here and there as if mourning the slaughter of their fellows. The land was a long way from anywhere, up a long, over-grown trail from a gravel road.

The lawyer handed Oscar a clipboard and a pen. “We just need a couple of signatures to complete the conveyance,” he said. “Here. And here. Don’t forge the date.”

Oscar signed without much attention. “I won’t even be able to sell it,” he complained. “Who would want this?”

The lawyer nodded. “Yes, it is more a burden than a gift,” he agreed. “Maybe some day you can harvest some trees off it.” He returned to his car. Oscar watched the lawyer’s Subaru roll very slowly down the overgrown laneway, avoiding rocks and holes. It turned onto the gravel road and disappeared.

Oscar was left sitting on his stump with only his dismay to keep him company. Gradually, that dismay turned to resentment. A con man to the end, his crooked uncle had even deceived his own nephew, family ties be hanged. All that talk about a little piece of land that would take care of him was hype and lies. To Vincent, his gullible nephew was just another mark. And to what end? The only point to this whole scam was a cruel joke.

“I guess you get the last laugh, Uncle Vince,” Oscar said to the air. “I gave you kindness you didn’t deserve for years, with no hidden agenda, and in return you leave me this worthless speck of land that wouldn’t support a chipmunk.”

He looked out over the barrens and swamp. The few surviving trees, gangly and broken, made it look even more desperate. Off in the distance a pair of half-dead larch trees leaned away from each other, as if they couldn’t agree on which direction to fall down.

Wait a minute.

Oscar studied the pair of leaning tamaracks. Together, they described a giant letter V. Uncle Vince said look for the Veetry. Maybe the V-tree?

He had an idea. He got to his feet, returned to his truck and retrieved a rusty shovel from the back. Then he headed off across the old clearcut, through the brambles and the alders and the steeple-bush, toward the V-tree. The walk was neither short nor easy. By the time he got there, Oscar was sweating. He was scratched a dozen places by thorns and twigs. He stood close beside the nearly joined bases of the two trees.

Uncle Vince was right, he had a good memory. Oscar looked toward the sun to get his bearings, walked fifteen measured paces due East, then twenty-five paces North. He poked at the earth here and there with the shovel until it struck something hard beneath the litter. A bit of digging revealed an old plank. The ground beneath it was disturbed, easy to dig. Within minutes he had unearthed a black plastic garbage bag, and within it a stout metal box.

He sat down on another stump. The box was unlocked. He flipped the latch and opened the lid. The box was filled nearly to the lid with a random mix of jewellery of every kind: rings and bracelets and earrings and watches and necklaces and whatever else filled the well-lit display cases of a jewellery store. The stones sparkled and glowed in a dozen colours in the bright June sun. Nothing was boxed or labelled. Price tags had been removed. Everything was pressed together in a tight jumble, presumably to jam as much into the box as possible.

As he held up diamonds and rubies and sapphires and precious stones he didn't even know the names of, Oscar's resentment of his Uncle Vince turned to grudging admiration. No wonder his criminal friends had deserted him: he had swindled them out of the haul. In the two days between the fumbled heist and his arrest, Vincent had absconded with the jewels and buried them here, and then convinced the cops that the empty-handed members of the gang had made off with them. Were it not for the toxic effect of imprisonment on his health, his little piece of land would have taken care of him well indeed.

Now the land, and its stolen jewels, belonged to Oscar. He could sell them as Uncle Vince had planned and live comfortably on the profits. He would have to move them a few at a time to avoid arousing suspicion. There was enough bling in the box to provide a small, steady income for many years.

He shook his head, offending the black flies. No, that was not the way to go. He was Vincent's nephew; he was not Vincent. He had never fully accepted his uncle's deft rationalization that stealing jewels was victimless because insurance compensated the shop owner. But that same insurance company did offer a substantial, standing reward for the return of the lost jewels, something on the order of ten per cent of their value.

Smiling, Oscar closed the lid. He started back toward his truck with the heavy metal box beneath one arm. His uncle was right. This little piece of land would take care of him.

