



**HIGHEST
&
BEST USE**

A LETTER TO MY COUSIN

SETH WIECK



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TO RYAN AND CLINT¹

¹I have 32 first cousins on my dad's side. This letter is addressed to two of my cousins: Clint and Ryan Wieck, the last of four generations still living and farming in Umbarger. Clint is a first cousin, the son of my dad's brother Stan. Ryan is a second cousin, the son of my dad's cousin Randy. Strangely enough, Clint's mother and Ryan's mother are sisters, having been wooed by cousins from nearby Canyon like consenting Sabine women. Attempting to keep all that straight for a non-familiar reader would have been distracting, so I combined the two cousins into one. However, the intricacies of a family with multiple generations in a community being able to understand whose kid is who is part of my point. It's easy if you went to all the weddings, Masses, holidays, harvests, hunts, horseshoes, festivals, and funerals, but impossible to manufacture otherwise.



HIGHEST & BEST USE

"And they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest. - Ruth 1:22"

Dear Clint, *et al*:

The drive from my house to your farm is only thirty minutes, but that's thirty minutes and half my life to travel back to Umbarger. Since Granny and Grandad died, there are fewer and fewer reasons for me to return. Not for lack of affection, of course, but I've been planted elsewhere. As have all your siblings. And all of our cousins.

I fancy sometimes that I've carved a little farm on the outskirts of Amarillo, but in the six years that we've lived in this house, the urban sprawl has swallowed us up. The horizon line that was so clean and stark is now a carpet of uniform and angular rooftops. And mine has become one of them.



I go into these new developments every week as a real estate appraiser in order to determine home values for banks. To escape city codes and taxes, developers are collecting pristine farmland on the cheap and building exorbitant homes against the city limits. However, living beyond the city's sewage and water infrastructure requires each home to use an acre of land; oversized rectangles with a well in one corner for drinking, and a septic tank for shit in the opposite. Other than the concrete for three-car driveways and foundations, the remaining dirt of the 43,560 square feet is covered in non-native, water-guzzling, but nearly evergreen, fescue grass. This is also a requirement to maintain conformity with the neighbors' houses, an important factor in home values.

On each form I send to a bank, the Department of Housing and Urban Development requires me to affirm the following question: *Is the property's current use the highest and best use of the land?* For the bank, the single factor determining the highest and best use is profitability.

Thanks to my wife, and against my despair, we have broken out some of our five acres for a garden. We keep a couple dozen chickens and give the extra eggs to our neighbors. A pair of peach trees produce pretty well in the off year we

miss the late April freeze. As I write this, peach buds are throwing their first pink of spring. Small consolations, but consolations nonetheless.

When we decided to break out the garden, we hired a man named Josh to build a fence. He grew up on a ranch in rural New Mexico, then joined the Army and served two tours in Afghanistan. You may know him. He sells cattle feed over in Friona now. But for a few weeks he was in our backyard fencing the garden. He came in one evening and we had a beer and he saw my copy of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* on the bookshelf.

"Have you read it?" he asked.

"I've bloodied my nose against it," I said. "But I don't think I've really read it." He told me he'd had the same experience but was hoping that I could explain the book to him.

"I don't know," I said. "I had a professor in college who would only read Joyce after two glasses of wine."

"I'd probably need some Wild Turkey," he said.



I'm writing at my dining room table, and I've oriented myself to the southwest facing your place in Umbarger. At my back and in my periphery are developments with names like Highland Springs—where each home must drill a 250-ft well—and Wildflower Village—where dandelions are verboten and walking is suspect. These developments spring and blossom where families like the Podzemny's and the Olson's farmed for at least three generations. Of course, my folks sold out a decade ago and their half-section north of Umbarger has changed hands several times since then. I hear one of Jack Brandt's sons has it now, and the developers will be calling any day. Which means they'll be calling you the following week.

All of this stretch of land between here and Umbarger wasn't, and still isn't, a place. It was merely land. As important as land is, I can understand why those families packed up. There was no name for this stretch; there were no communities with attendant rites and festivals and celebrations; no history and no way to imagine a future. Mere land. And according to the bank who held the mortgages, the highest and best use for the land wasn't farming.

But Umbarger *was and is a place*.

The writer Wallace Stegner said, "No place is a place until it has had a poet." He quickly clarified, "No place, not even a wild place, is a place until it has had that human attention that at its highest reach we call poetry." Of course Stegner was a writer. A writer's writer even. I can imagine a farmer expressing the same sentiment: No place is a place until it has received my plow. But I have left the plow at the end of a row and picked up a pen and I am writing you a letter. That is why I have James Joyce on my bookshelf.

For the sake of the *et al's* in my salutations, let me point to Clint's location. In the middle of the United States of America, one will find Texas. It's hard to miss on account of its size. Dead center in the square at the top of Texas—we call this the Panhandle—is the city of Amarillo. That means *yellow* in Spanish. Take Highway 87 south out of Amarillo toward Canyon, then veer southwest on 60, and one will arrive in Umbarger (population generously estimated at 164), as did our great-grandfather, Ludwig Wieck before the highways. In 1920, he broke ground on the place that Clint farms in 2022.



Umbarger and Ireland bear very little in common. Most people won't have any trouble finding Ireland on a map of the world. But my guess is they'd probably trace their finger through England first before drifting west to the Emerald Isle. There on the eastern edge of Ireland is the capital city Dublin. The River Liffey flows east out of the Wicklow Mountains through the city into Dublin Bay and the Irish Sea, then further east to Wales and England.

The island we call Ireland was settled about ten-thousand years ago. In the whole world, there are no recorded histories that go back that far, no alphabets that old; although, Uncle Larry showed me a spearhead knapped by the prehistoric Clovis tribe that he found close to Grandad's place. Those people passed through here at the same time ancient Ireland was settled. But with no written language, they didn't leave much besides their flint. Likewise, until Vikings established an outpost on the Liffey in 841 called Dubh Linn (black pool), there isn't much known. The settlement changed hands between various Norse tribes—governed in multiple dialects—then the Danes for a couple of centuries. The Roman Catholic church appointed a bishop there in 1028, establishing Latin and Christianity. After the Normans conquered England in 1066, they moved quickly to Ireland, commanding their armies in French. In 1171, King Henry II invaded, declared himself Lord of Ireland, and handed Dublin as a colony to the merchants of England. She remained a colony until 1922.

Born in 1882, James Joyce was formed by the city of Dublin, her schools and churches, priests and parishes, her politics and languages, even by the primordial river when, as Edna O'Brien wrote, his father "decided that the boy needed a formative experience and held him upside down in the Liffey for several minutes." He came of age in the years when Ireland's modern soul was slowly being born breech, in Joyce's words: "a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself."



On the northern coast of Germany—just south of modern day Denmark—there's a lake region called Wieck auf dem Darß. Grandad was under the impres-