



"Dovey, at the town's treatment of her father..."

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Dovey, at the town's treatment of her father. Although Billie-Delia was not at the meeting, her attitude was. Even as a little girl she pushed out her lips at everything-- everything but gardening. Dovey missed her and wondered what Billie-Delia thought of changing the Oven's message.

"Beware the Furrow of His Brow"? "Be the Furrow of His Brow"? Her own opinion was that "Furrow of His Brow " alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross. Wasn't that so? She'd ask her Friend. And then tell Soane. Meantime, the scratching sound was gone and on the cusp of sleep she knew canned peas would do just fine.

[TK] Steward driving home, house, dogs, changing clothes going to stable.]

His preference was to mount around 4:00 and ride Night till sunrise. Rediscovering the pleasure he took in knowing that on one's own land you could never be lost. Not the way Big Papa and Big Daddy and all seventy-nine were after leaving Fairly, Oklohoma. On foot

they were. And angry. But not afraid of anything except the condition of the children's feet. By and large they were healthy. But the pregnant women needed more and more rest. Drum Blackhorse's wife, Celeste; his grandmother, Miss Mindy; and Beck, his own mother, were all with child. It was the shame of seeing one's pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones.

Steward remembered every detail of the story his father and grandfather told, and had no trouble imagining the shame for himself. Dovey, for instance, before each miscarriage, her hand resting on the small of her back, her eyes narrowed looking inward, always inward at the baby inside her. How would he have felt if some high falutin men in collars and good shoes had told her "Get away from here," and he, Steward, couldn't do a thing about it? Even now, in 1973, riding his own land with free wind blowing Night's mane, the thought of that level of helplessness made him tremble and want to shoot somebody.

Seventy-nine. All their belongings strapped to their backs or riding on their heads. Young ones time-sharing shoes. Stopping only to relieve themselves, sleep and eat trash. Trash and boiled meal,

trash and meal cake, trash and game, trash and dandelion greens. Dreaming of a roof, fish, rice, syrup. Raggedy as sauerkraut they dreamt of clean clothes with buttons, shirts with both sleeves. They walked in a line: Drum and Thomas Blackhorse at the head, Big Papa, lame now, carried sitting up on a plank at the tail. After Fairly they didn't know which way to go and didn't want to meet anybody who might tell them or might have something else in mind. They kept away from wagon trails, tried to stay closer to pine woods and stream beds but heading northwest for no particular reason other than it seemed farthest away from Fairly.

The third night Big Papa woke his son and motioned for him to get up, Leaning heavily on two sticks, he moved a ways off from the camp site and whispered, "Us in need. Follow me, you."

Rector, his son, went back for his hat and followed his father's slow painful steps. He thought, with alarm, ^{that} the the old man was going to try to get to a town in the middle of the night, or apply to one of the farms where dark sod houses nestled up against a hillock. But Big Papa took him deeper into the piney wood where the odor of resin, lovely at first, soon gave him a headache. The sky brilliant with stars dwarfed the crescent moon, turning it into a shed feather. Big

Papa stopped and with groaning effort knelt down. "My Father," he said. "Zechariah here." Then, after a few seconds of total silence, he began to hum the sweetest, saddest sounds Rector ever heard. He joined Big Papa on his knees and stayed that way all night. He dared not touch the old man or interfere with his humming prayer, but he couldn't keep up and sat back on his haunches to relieve the pain in his knees. After a while he sat down holding his hat in his hand, his head bowed, trying to listen, stay awake, understand. Finally, he lay on his back and watched the star trail above the trees. The heart-breaking music swallowed him and he felt himself floating inches above ground. He swore later that he did not fall asleep. That during the whole night he listened and watched. Surrounded by thin pine, he felt rather than saw the sky fading at ground line. It was then he heard the footsteps--loud like a giant's tread. Big Papa, who had not moved a muscle or paused in his song, paused. Rector sat up and looked around. The footsteps were thundering, but he couldn't tell from which direction. As the hem of skylight widened, he could make out the silhouettes of tree trunks. Both saw him at the same time. A small man, seemlike, too small for the sound of his steps. He was walking away from them.

Dressed in a black suit the jacket held over his shoulder with the forefinger of his right hand. His shirt glistening white between broad suspenders. Without help of stick and nary a groan, Big Papa stood up. Together they watched the man walking away from the palest part of the sky. Once he lingered to turn around and look at them, but they could not see the features of his face. When he began walking again they noticed he had a stachel in his left hand.

"Run," said Big Papa. "Gather the people."

"You can't stay here by yourself," said Rector.

"Run!" the old man hissed.

And Rector did.

When everyone was roused, Rector led them to where he and Big Papa had spent the night. They found him right there standing straighter than the pines, his sticks tossed away, his back to the rising sun. No walking man was in sight, but the peace that washed Zechariah's face spread to their own spirits calming them.

"He ^{is} be with us," said Zechariah. "He leading the way."

From then on, the journey was purposeful, free of the slightest complaints. Every now and then the walking man re-appeared: along a river bed, at the crest of a hill, leaning against a rock formation.

Some one gathered courage to ask Big Papa how long might it take.

"This God's time," he answered. "You can't start it and you can't stop it. And another thing: He not going to do your work for you so step lively."

If the loud footsteps continued, they did not hear them. Nobody saw the walking man but Zechariah and sometimes a child. Rector never saw him again--until the end. Until twenty-nine days later. After being warned away by gunshot; offered food by some black women in a field; robbed of their rifles by two cowboys--none of which disturbed their determined peace--Rector and his father saw him together.

I was September by then. Any other travelers would be cautious going into tk country with no destination and winter on the way. But if they were uneasy, it didn't show. Rector was lying in tall grass waiting for a crude trap to spring--rabbit, he hoped, gound hog, gopher, even. When just ahead, through a parting in the grass he saw the walking man standing, looking around. Then the man squatted, opened his satchel and began rummaging in it. Rector watched for a while, then crawled backwards through the grass before jumping up and running back to the campsite where Big Papa was finishing his

breakfast. Rector described what he had seen and the two headed toward the place where the trap had been set. The walking man was still there, removing items from his satchel and putting others back.

^{Even} As they watched, the man began to fade. ^{Like a} When he was completely dissolved, they heard the footsteps again, pounding in a direction they could not determine: in back, to the left, now to the right. Or was it overhead? Then, suddenly, it was quiet. Rector crept forward. Big Papa too. To see what the walker had left behind. Before they had gone three feet they heard a thrashing in the grass. There in the trap, unaided by the pull string or any hand was a guinea fowl. Male. With plumage to beat the band. Exchanging looks, they left it there and moved to the spot where they believed the walker had spread the items from his satchel. Not a thing in sight. Only a depression in the grass. Big Papa leaned down to touch it. Pressing his hand into the flattened grass, he closed his eyes

"Here," he said. "This our place."

Well, it wasn't of course. Not yet anyway. It belonged to a family of State Indians and it took a year and four months of negotiation, of labor for land, to finally have it free and clear.

Maybe Zechariah never wanted to eat another stick--roasted