

For Bread and Pottage

a novel by
J. F. Gennings

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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

This book is dedicated to my paternal great-grandparents...pioneers in their own time

To my maternal grandfather...provider of a way out

To my parents...members of the “*Greatest Generation*”

And to my friend Elwin Maxey for his editing, input, counsel, and encouragement on this story.

Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright...Genesis 25: 34

Notes from the Author

Most of the dialogue in this book is written in the natural dialect of the subject region, to wit: a rural, Southwestern slang laced with regional drawl, some of which is archaic, based upon derivatives of Scots-Irish brogue passed down through the generations, e.g., the use of the word “*holp*” for “*help*”. My intent was to draw the reader into the natural cadence of character conversation by presenting the authentic wording and phrasing indigenous to the area. This was not accomplished loosely, or by guesswork, but meticulously drawn from my intimate familiarity with the actual dialect and its nuances, commensurate with my life-long residency in this region.

Any racial references made in the dialogue are strictly intended for historical authenticity, representing a realistic and integral part of the language from the era and locale. These references are neither the common practice nor personal beliefs of the author, and are not intended to offend the reader in any way.

This book is a work of fiction. Any similarities to the characters represented in this book, whether living or dead, is purely coincidental. Although there are some historical facts, general geographical references, and a few actual historical characters mentioned during the course of the story, the specific subject towns, locales, and major characters in the story are all products of the author’s imagination.

Contents

Prologue	1
Chapter 1	2
Chapter 2	27
Chapter 3	37
Chapter 4	48
Chapter 5	58
Chapter 6	68
Chapter 7	79
Chapter 8	85
Chapter 9	89
Chapter 10	94
Chapter 11	100
Chapter 12	108
Chapter 13	112
Chapter 14	119
Chapter 15	125
Chapter 16	135
Chapter 17	139
Chapter 18	147
Chapter 19	154
Chapter 20	157
Chapter 21	160
Chapter 22	166
Chapter 23	172
Chapter 24	177
Chapter 25	187
Chapter 26	192
Chapter 27	195
Chapter 28	203
Chapter 29	210
Chapter 30	213
Chapter 31	217
Chapter 32	221
Chapter 33	227
Chapter 34	235
Chapter 35	238
Chapter 36	241

Chapter 37	245
Chapter 38	249
Chapter 39	253
Chapter 40	256
Chapter 41	262
Chapter 42	268
Chapter 43	271
Chapter 44	276
Chapter 45	291
Chapter 46	299
Chapter 47	305
Chapter 48	310
Chapter 49	320
Chapter 50	324
Chapter 51	328
Chapter 52	336
Chapter 53	341
Chapter 54	344
Chapter 55	353
Chapter 56	357
Chapter 57	365
Chapter 58	373
Chapter 59	377
Chapter 60	380
Chapter 61	393
Chapter 62	397

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Prologue

Her ears rang, and everything darkened to a cavernous black as she crumpled to the ground like a marionette abruptly released from its support strings. Suddenly, light spots began to appear, small at first, but now getting larger and adding a purple tint to the blackness, floating across her field of vision like burning candles.

The blow to her face was devastating, but now her senses seemed to be returning quickly, and she could feel herself being dragged across the cold ground. Although the pain in her nose and mouth was excruciating, she could smell the earthy odors of the camp mingled with foul human stench, and she could taste her own blood.

Her companions were tied with strong ropes, and struggled with their restraints well into the night, but to no avail. Bound separately, and far enough apart so they couldn't speak to one another without being heard by the attackers, they could do nothing now but listen to the woman's cries. But as the night wore on, a deep cumulative rage was developing inside of them. They *must* free themselves to help her. The message was plain to them now...kill or *be* killed.

Chapter 1

Tom Ginty stepped out onto the back porch of the rough-hewn old house that his Papa had built almost a quarter century ago. It was surprisingly cool this morning, and he shivered just a little as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Stretching and yawning for a moment, he took note of the fact that he was wearing only his trousers and suspenders over his long underwear, and that he was about to embark to the outhouse to fulfill his morning duties, a good fifty yards away. He thought for a moment that he should go back in the house and get a shirt, but then decided against it. The air was brisk, but it had a comforting feel to it this early October morning, a freshness, and a welcome respite from the blistering September heat that had broken only a week ago.

He pondered for a moment on the current cooler air, smelling it, taking in the crispness of it, simultaneously savoring the blended culinary aromas streaming from Mama's kitchen stove. He knew that it wouldn't be long now until the throes of winter

would be upon them. Late October weather in this part of the country could become unpredictable, sometimes bringing on the cold air in an untimely manner.

Of course, the outhouse was not a place one wanted to linger any longer than necessary, winter or summer, but Tom really dreaded the trip in the winter. More often than not, the icy, blustery winds would slice through his clothes like a knife on his way there, and even when he was inside the small structure it provided little sanctuary from the cold air, with the wind whistling through the cracks between the thin pine boards, making that cold wooden seat even colder to the naked bottom. However, winter did have its advantages over summer when applied to the outhouse...flies and spiders were fewer, there were no wasp nests, yellow jackets, or snakes to deal with, and its odious nature wasn't as prominent.

The young man's mind now shifted, preoccupied with the disturbing dream he had experienced last night. He was in the process of reading a book that he had borrowed called *Treasure Island*, and his sleep had been filled with ships, treasure maps, and buccaneers. He dreamed that he was the adventurous Jim Hawkins, running for his life from the scheming pirate leader Long John Silver and his menacing accomplices. When Silver caught up with him in the dream and laid his knife at his throat, Silver's face looked just like old Mr. Cobb, a grouchy widower who had once lived in the community, a man that Tom had always been afraid of when he was a small child.

Mr. Jeremiah Cobb always walked to town, and he would pass by the Ginty place on the way. When

Tom was about four or five years old, playing out by the sandy wagon road that ran by their place, he would sometimes encounter the old man walking by. Mr. Cobb's old age infirmities created the need for him to walk with a cane, and he would occasionally stop as though he wanted to talk to Tom, but with his long black duster, stovepipe hat, pointy nose, and dark, bushy eyebrows, as far as the young boy was concerned he might as well have been the devil himself, and that cane his pitchfork. He even wore a goatee and mustache, adding to the image the boy had in his mind of what Lucifer must look like...and Tom was positive the old man had horns under that hat.

Mr. Cobb usually kept to himself, and was considered socially inept by most of the grown-ups in the area, but for some reason he seemed to have a soft spot toward Tom. In actuality he was a harmless old man, only wanting to talk, but he terrified the boy, and Tom would invariably run away from him.

One day when he stopped, Tom jumped up to run and Mr. Cobb happened to be close enough to reach out with his cane and barely catch one of the child's suspender straps with the crook, holding him for a moment. Tom squealed like a pig caught under a gate and managed to wriggle loose, running toward the house as hard as he could, yelling for his mother. The old man just chuckled to himself and walked on, realizing that he had probably only widened the gap between himself and the boy.

Mr. Cobb had been dead for several years now, but Tom remembered being terrified of him for the duration of his small childhood. After the cane incident, whenever he was playing out by the sandy road edge his mind seemed to develop an inner alarm mechanism, alerting him every few minutes during

his play to scan the road in both directions for the old man.

At the dramatic apex of his dream last night, as he stared at imminent death in the form of Long John Silver with old Mr. Cobb's face, Tom started to yell out...and, of course, awoke. The dream still seemed very fresh in his mind this morning, with vivid details, but he loved the book and intended to finish it in spite of his disturbing subconscious escapades. He caught another whiff of breakfast emanating from the kitchen, snapping him temporarily out of his meandering thoughts. Morning was his favorite time of day regardless of the season. Mama was always up early, firing up her wood stove and cooking biscuits, frying salt pork and eggs, and the smell of her coffee at the boil was absolutely tantalizing.

As he looked out from the porch now, he could see that some of the leaves were changing to their fall colors, and would be starting their descent soon in great quantities from the sweetgum, red oak, and blackgum trees in the backyard. On farther out in the fields, he saw that the first rays of the morning sun were reflecting brightly across the cotton plant leaves, with the soft white bounty hanging plentiful in the stalks.

Papa was a little late this year getting started on the picking of the cotton, a grueling task that required everyone in the family to get it harvested and to the gin. He usually planted about five acres of the stuff, which doesn't sound like much until you consider how long those rows are, and the number of them in an acre. Papa always counted on harvesting a bale per acre, which generated a little cash for the family's use each year...some years more than others, depending upon the market price at the time.

Tom's gaze now moved out to the biggest shade tree on the place, an old cottonwood tree, close to the main wagon road that wound into Rothburg, Texas, and the scene brought back more uncomfortable memories.

Several years ago, when he was about ten years old, he had discovered a man's dead body lying by that tree one summer morning. He had heard the dogs barking at something out there, and when he went to investigate he had seen a man lying motionless, flat on his back under the tree. The man lay there very naturally, his clothes appearing very much in order, and at first glance appeared to be simply taking a nap, his hat covering his face, his arms lying by his side. Tom eased up as close as he dared in order to get a good look and detected no movement or sign of breathing, so he ran out to the fields, heart racing, to tell his Papa and two older brothers, Clyde and Willie Boy.

Papa had at first suspected that the man was just passed out drunk, and sent Willie Boy to the house to fetch his old single-barrel shotgun just in case this person was up to mischief. However, after poking him with the shotgun barrel followed by subsequent closer examination, Papa determined that the stranger was in fact dead, and sent Clyde into town to get Marshal Frank White.

There was no identification on the man, and the marshal didn't recognize him either, commenting that the person looked as if he had only been dead for a short while. Frank said that he was probably just a drifter, wandering west on foot from the Red River landing farther east of our place, a fairly common occurrence of the times.

The marshal had the body removed and taken into Rothburg to be examined by Dr. McCauley, and possibly identified by someone. The good doctor confirmed the marshal's comment about the stranger's time of death. He determined that "*rigor mortis*" hadn't set in, and that the man appeared to be fairly young, around thirty-five or so, only dead for a few hours when he was found. The doctor also found no evidence that foul play was involved in the gentleman's demise, and said it appeared that he had just died of natural causes sometime during the early morning hours. No one in town seemed to know who the man was either, so the marshal had him buried in the pauper's graveyard just outside of the town limits.

Tom remembered thinking what a sad and slightly disturbing occurrence it was...a strange man walking up on their place and dying all alone on the ground, a place totally unfamiliar to him, with no family around. "*Was it a bad omen?*" he sometimes thought. He had heard some of the older folks around the community speak about signs and omens, sometimes resulting in bad luck for a person, or a whole family.

Even though the dead man was found on their land, Papa and Mama never voiced their thoughts concerning the likelihood of this being an omen or a sign, and never spoke of it again afterward. Papa didn't believe in luck of any sort, and regarded what people termed "*bad luck*" as foolishness...an excuse that people used to hide their own poor decisions. The Ginty family had already experienced the very real horror and tragedy of losing little Johnny, the baby of the family at the time, about five years earlier in a horrible accident on the place, and Papa and Mama obviously wanted no discussion about the possibility of more heartbreak to come.

If this was a bad omen, it had now been several years since the dead man was found, and nothing particularly bad had happened on the Ginty farm. However, Tom had heard old Miss Evie say that a bad omen could take many forms, and that it could come to fruition quickly, or that it might take many years, depending upon how "*Ol' Satan*" wanted to play his hand. She believed that the devil was the perpetrator of all forms of evil in the world.

Miss Evie was the local healer called upon by many people in the area to apply her unique methods to different illnesses. She would lay her hands upon the ill person's head, reading or quoting certain scriptures from the Bible, and in many cases the affliction would disappear shortly afterward. She would also make healing poultices for bad cuts and bites, concocted from wild herbs and other ingredients that only she knew.

Papa, of course, never put much stock in such things, but Mama had used her poultices before, and she believed that Miss Evie could heal certain things with her bible verses. Once when Seth was about two years old, Mama had taken him to Miss Evie with a case of mouth soreness that everyone called "*thrush*". Miss Evie touched his mouth with her fingers while she read some bible verses over him, and that very day the affliction began to heal, disappearing completely after another day.

A lot of people in this area, both white and black, had turned to Miss Evie for healing through the years. They would bring her food from time to time such as canned goods, fresh vegetables, salted-down meat, flour, cornmeal, and lard, although she never charged anyone for her services.

A small Negro woman with sparkling brown eyes, Miss Evie had snow-white hair with the texture of lamb's wool, shiny black skin, and what seemed to be

a perpetual smile on her face. No one knew exactly how old she was, and she never would say, probably not even knowing for sure herself. She had grown up a slave on one of the big cotton farms in the Red River bottomlands, long before the Civil War. Although not very often, when she did speak of slavery to Tom she related a dark and frightening era.

"It was evil times, child," she had said to him once when he asked about her childhood, and it was the only time Tom had ever seen the smile leave her face. She told him that she had three children in her early slave life, all boys...Jim, Nathan, and Luke. She said they were sold off at a young age and she never saw any of them again. Miss Evie said that the youngest one, Luke, was literally pulled from her breast and sold away by the owner.

She remained on the same farm until after the war, and she told Tom that she had picked cotton until her fingers bled when she was a young girl, and had two slave husbands, both eventually sold off to other owners. She was fortunate enough to become a house servant in the last years of slavery, and was working in the kitchen for the owners when word came of emancipation.

Miss Evie had endured enough heartbreak and despair for ten lifetimes, and her old eyes would always fill with tears when she spoke of her children, revealing wounds that had never healed. Considering the hardships that she had lived through, she was a very pleasant soul, bearing no ill will toward any person, white or black.

She told Tom that right after slavery time, a kind white woman in the area, Mrs. Sara Boles, had taken her in to work for her, and had also taught her to read. Sara was a generous person, widowed during the war, and she had taught her how to read in secret, because teaching a black person to read was

still considered a crime in the South at the time, even after emancipation and the war.

Miss Evie eventually had begun reading and studying one of Sara's bibles, and the woman had given her the one she used as a gift. She cherished it, and it was the only book she had ever owned, ragged and frayed, but still in tact.

She had lived alone in her small cabin in the woods about a mile north of the Ginty place for as long as Tom could remember. He had always been fascinated by Miss Evie, her stories, and her knowledge of the Bible. From the time that he was six or seven years old, he had followed a trail through the woods to her cabin, and he loved the fried potatoes, onions, and cornbread that she always cooked for him when he came to visit her, washed down with a cool glass of buttermilk from a jug she kept in her well. Miss Evie always kept one milk cow when Tom was little, and she churned the milk to make butter whenever she needed it. When he hugged her, she always had a comforting smell, like fresh bread. He loved Miss Evie, as much as a child would love a grandmother.

Even though he was grown now, and didn't visit her as much as he used to, he still loved her, and from time to time he would take her fresh vegetables from their garden, or a jar of home-canned peaches that Mama would send. Mama would now send homemade butter on occasion, along with some buttermilk, because Miss Evie was getting older and more feeble, and wasn't physically able to take care of a milk cow any longer. She would still insist on cooking Tom fried potatoes and onions when he came though, along with fresh cornbread, eagerly telling him many stories from the old days. It seemed to him that the older she became, the more stories from the old days, the slavery days, she would tell...with vivid

detail. But her passion was her bible, and her eyes would always light up when she told him those stories, reading and discussing them with him for as long as he would stay.

Still gazing out at the big cottonwood tree this morning, Tom remembered with a touch of melancholy that he had filled many delightful childhood hours playing around and climbing that old tree prior to finding the dead man there, but had never desired to play there again afterward.

Exacerbating his uncomfortable feelings about the tree, every evening just before sundown a mourning dove would voice its haunting, almost eerie call from that very same cottonwood tree, as if sending a daily warning of some futuristic sad misfortune looming over the family. He had heard the lonely call of the mourning doves many times over the course of his young life, but this one always voiced a nuance of its call, expressing what seemed to him to be a deeper loneliness, a hopelessness in its delivery, as if it were mourning the loss of something irreplaceable.

If the discovery of the dead body had done nothing else, at the very least it had disrupted a portion of his childhood by spoiling one of his favorite spots to play, filling his head with ghosts, along with thoughts of signs and omens.

His thoughts were interrupted when he felt something rub against his knee and saw that Papa's two old red hounds, Rip and June, had climbed up to the top of the steps on the back porch to greet him, nudging him with their wet noses. They were Papa's hunting dogs, and both equally capable when it came to treeing squirrels, coons, or possums. However, they spent most of their time lodged under the house

in their scratched-out dirt beds, warm in the winter and cool in the summer. This morning, they had smelled breakfast and emerged from their warm hideaway to beg food. They wagged their tails and looked longingly at Tom, licking their chops and slobbering a bit, hoping for a biscuit or a piece of salt pork. The hounds usually enjoyed scraps from the supper table, but they didn't see anything wrong with rushing the clock a little when they smelled breakfast.

Tom turned them toward the steps with his foot, and then pushed them toward the bottom.

"Go on now...git from here dogs."

They groaned and whined a little as they reluctantly went back down the steps, but stopped once they reached the ground, turned, and looked hopefully back up at him, wagging their tails once again, as if Tom might somehow miraculously change his mind and allow them back up on the porch.

Mama didn't like dogs or chickens on the porch. She always said that animals are meant to be outside, and she considered the porch *inside*. She would take the broom to them if she caught them there.

Tom looked out across the back yard at the chicken house and pen, and down at the log barn and pole corrals that his Papa had built many years ago. The chickens were contentedly pecking at the shelled corn that Papa and Tom's older brothers had fed them at daybreak this morning.

He saw Papa walking back toward the house from the barn carrying two full buckets of milk, and the family's big yellow tomcat, Bob, was following close behind him, hoping that Papa would slosh out some of the divine liquid from one of those buckets. Bob had probably worked up quite a thirst catching rats in the barn all night. He was a rat-catching wonder,

prolific in his talent, free-roaming and seemingly capable of popping up anywhere. He sometimes created an illusion of omnipresence as he went about the business of ridding the farm of a multitude of those pesky varmints, staying fat on his bountiful rodent diet alone.

The ubiquitous feline, possessing the tendency to occasionally stray from the farm and roam the countryside searching for female companionship, as tomcats do, had once returned from one of his excursions with only a bloody-ended remnant of his formerly elongated tail, and Papa said it looked like a steel trap had “bobbed” it off. Heretofore only known as “*cat*”, he was immediately named “*Bob*” by the boys.

Of course, Mama never allowed Bob in the house, but she had to admit, he caught his share of rats around the place and she always treated him kindly for it. She would save him a piece of salt pork and throw it out to him from time to time.

“*Hog killin’ time’s a comin’*,” Tom thought as he felt the coolness in the air and watched Papa...an unpleasant thought to him, as he detested the business of butchering animals. He had quite frequently seen his mother wring the heads off of two chickens simultaneously, preparing to have a fried chicken dinner. She would usually recruit him and Seth to help her corral and catch them, which usually took much longer than the actual killing because Seth was scared of the chickens, and would usually let them get by him if they ran in his direction. An old brood hen with chicks had charged and pecked him on the hand once when he was about five years old, and he now possessed a psychological aversion to the birds.

The chickens, though dim-witted creatures, somehow seemed to sense this fear in Seth, regularly

using him as their route of escape. He couldn't tolerate the thought of a chicken running directly at him, and would relinquish ground, especially if Ol' Bossy, the big white leghorn rooster, was in the crowd.

Ol' Bossy was a magnificent specimen of a rooster, with a huge crimson comb that flopped over on one side of his head, piercing yellow eyes, and intimidating, one-inch spurs on his orange legs. His snow-white feathers manifested themselves into a stupendous tail that he displayed like the mainsail of a ship, and he exhibited a wing span rivaling that of a buzzard. He knew how to use those spurs too, and was territorial, possessing a disposition similar to a wounded grizzly bear. The big rooster had been known to whip a hound dog and send it scurrying under the house whimpering, and had even gotten the upper hand of old rat-catching Bob on occasion.

He alarmed everyone to the break of day each morning, unleashing a cacophony of deep-throated, resonate crows, each one blasting into the peaceful silence of the dawn and ending with a voluminous crescendo capable of waking the dead.

Ol' Bossy not only claimed the chicken yard as his territory, but apparently any piece of real estate on the farm that he might happen to be gracing with his presence. He strutted about among his harem daily, constantly on guard for any young rooster that might want to challenge him. But the confines of a puny chicken yard couldn't hold such mighty grandeur as that which he possessed, so he traversed about the place as he pleased, no barrier able to hold him, flying in and out of his primary domain at will. Seth was deeply afraid of the rooster, and whenever he spotted him in the near vicinity it was game-over for him, and retreat was imminent.

However, a major portion of Ol' Bossy's pride and grandeur would melt rather quickly whenever he came face to face with Mama. She would take a burlap sack weighted with a few corn cobs and swat him aside if he challenged her, which he of course did periodically. But even Ol' Bossy, who bowed to no other animal on the farm, was smart enough to see that he was dealing with a force to be reckoned with when confronting Mama, so after a couple of good swats with that sack, the proud chanticleer would retreat.

Once Mama had the selected chickens in her hands, she would unmercifully swing them around and around by their heads in a quick, cranking wrist motion with each hand, holding a tight circle until their bodies completely detached themselves from the heads, plopped to the ground, and began their ghoulish death dance. The thought of those birds flopping around on the ground headless, slinging blood everywhere, followed by the subsequent feather picking and cleaning, still gave Tom pause when it came to eating fried chicken.

When he was younger, he had often contemplated upon his mother dispatching those chickens with such ease. Her actions seemed to illuminate a stark contradiction of character within her to him, watching such a gentle, forgiving soul, as he knew her to be, displaying such adeptness at killing. He had always known, from his own personal experience, that Mama could wield a blackgum tree switch with unbridled vigor when provoked, but the skills she possessed at killing chickens, in his childhood understanding, seemed to indicate a darker side.

As he had grown older he had learned that the killing of animals was a necessary and common function on the farm, but he had always experienced

a queasy feeling about it, and still did. The cold weather always signaled the beginning of the hog killing, usually sometime in November or December, cold enough to ensure that no meat would spoil. It was a bloody, arduous task, and one which usually involved the entire family for a few days.

Tom's dallying on the back porch every morning always attracted the attention of his older brothers, Clyde and Willie Boy, who regularly accused him of standing out there praying that he wouldn't have to do any work that day. After all, he *was* a preacher now, at least in practice. He hadn't been officially ordained yet, but he was already presiding over some of the local church services when the regular pastors were out. His brothers contended that he had taken up preaching just to get out of work around the place, and they never missed an opportunity to disparage him for it.

He did have to admit to himself that he loathed the farm work, defining it as pure drudgery, and his Papa as a hard taskmaster. He preferred to read any and all books that he could get his hands on, and go to school, but attending school around here was a luxury that a lot of people couldn't afford, and books were expensive and hard to come by. Most of the ones that he had read, outside of the family bible, were loaners.

His trance was broken once again this morning when he heard his brother Clyde's loud voice from inside the kitchen.

"You kin quit ye prayin' now, Tom!" Clyde yelled. "Papa ain't gonna make ye work much today...he's goin' to town!"

Clyde and Willie Boy had done some early morning chores with Papa, and were now sitting at

the kitchen table drinking coffee, anxiously awaiting their Mama's breakfast before receiving their further assignments from Papa for the day.

He shook his head when he heard Clyde, and walked on toward the outhouse. The two red hounds, still hoping for a morsel of food, trotted along behind him.

"I'll declare, Clyde...*leave* 'at boy alone," Mama said, busy at the wood stove frying eggs. "Thank goodness he's got somp'n on his mind 'sides drinkin', gamblin', an' God knows what else, like you an' Willie Boy."

"Now Mama, you know Papa works me 'an' Willie Boy like niggers on 'is place...we jist like to have a little fun ever once in a whawl," Clyde said. "Tom ain't got nothin' on his mind but dodgin' work."

"He's tryin' to git some education so he won't have to do what we doin' fer the rest o' his life," Mama said. "He's already got'im a nice girl friend, too. Y'all ain't neither one married yet 'cause o' ye heathen ways...ain't no decent gal gonna have ye."

"I'll swan, Mama," Willie Boy said, sounding a little hurt that his mother would say such a thing about them. "They'll be plenty o' time fer marryin'."

Martha Ginty realized that what Willie Boy said was true, and she loved all of her sons, but was disappointed in him and Clyde because of their frequent shiftless ways. They did indeed work hard on the farm, but they neither one seemed to have a clear direction about what they were going to do with their lives. Since they had gotten grown, they spent all of their free time in the local saloons. She blamed herself and Papa for not insisting that they attend school when they were younger. If they had received more education, they might be more secure, moving forward with their own lives by now. She felt a little guilty now about speaking to them so bluntly.

Willie Boy and Clyde both had fair skin, reddish-brown hair, and green eyes, with rugged facial features like their father. Clyde was about Papa's height, and built a lot like him, but that's where the similarities ended. Clyde was usually full of foolishness, and loved to talk, drink, and gamble. He hated the farm work, but managed to do his share under Papa's strong guidance.

Willie Boy was normally a man of few words like his Papa, and soft spoken as compared to Clyde. He didn't really like the farm work either, and *did* like to have his fun, especially with the ladies, but was more subdued about it than Clyde. He was small in stature, smaller than Papa, Clyde, or Tom, but stocky, tough, and as hard as nails. He had endured considerable taunting from other boys during his life because of his size, and had been involved in many fights growing up defending his pride, hardening him, and making him a very formidable foe in any physical disagreement.

The back door squeaked on its hinges as Papa pushed it open with his shoulder and walked into the house with the two wooden buckets of milk. He had already put in almost two hours of work, along with Clyde and Willie Boy, feeding the livestock and milking two cows, mostly by lantern light.

Papa was Scots-Irish, about five-feet eight inches tall, stocky built, and although getting some age on him now at fifty-six, he was still a formidable man, and as strong as a mule. His graying, reddish-brown hair was cropped close, and he kept it that way, although it was hidden under his wide-brimmed hat most of the time. His hands were like leather, and he had a grip like a vice. His face reflected seriousness most of the time, with chiseled, weather-beaten features. His father's family had originally lived in

South Carolina, but migrated to Georgia when he was just a boy in the late 1840's.

To Papa, any talk other than what was necessary to conduct business at hand was a waste of time and energy. He had lived a hard life, and was impatient with rudeness and foolishness. He shared no love of whiskey, gambling, or loose women with his two older sons, but as they had gotten older he tolerated their frequenting the establishments where these things were offered from time to time, as long as they completed their work on the farm. His thinking was that they were grown men now, and if they thought they could keep up their workload on the farm and still visit these places, they were welcome to try it. However, he would *not* tolerate the shirking of their responsibilities at home, and he made that clear to them.

Another thing Papa would not tolerate was anyone being rude or raising their voice to Mama, especially the boys. To him it was disrespect, plain and simple, and his punishment for it would be swift and harsh. He had almost lost his life twice on the trip from Georgia here, and he knew that mistakes, rudeness, and foolishness could cost a person their life on the frontier. His own mistake, in his mind, had cost them little Johnny several years ago. The guilt of his failure had gnawed at him every day since little Johnny's horrible accident, still haunting him most nights. He knew that Mama considered their youngest child, Seth, to be the Lord's gift to them to replace Johnny, so they were both overly protective of Seth.

Papa stopped once he got into the kitchen, turned and glared at Clyde and Willie Boy, then began his reprimand before he even sat the milk buckets down.

“Aye-god, I heered y’all plum outside o’ the house arguin’ wi’ ye mama...oughtta take my razor strop to ye.”

No doubt Papa probably did hear the back and forth between Clyde and Mama from outside of the house, as Clyde’s voice had a natural resonance that sometimes rivaled Ol’ Bossy’s, and usually tended to out-distance the boundaries of his conversation. But he always reprimanded Willie Boy and Clyde both when they were together, although he knew that Clyde was usually the perpetrator. He liked to remind them both regularly that he was still in charge around the place, now that they were grown.

Mama glanced over at Papa but said nothing, quickly returning to her task at hand of cooking breakfast. She knew that he was in a bad mood today because of that plow point he had broken yesterday.

“Yessir,” Clyde and Willie Boy said almost simultaneously, embarrassed that their father would still need to scold them at their age and threaten them with a whipping, but knowing that this was the only warning they would get today on the subject. He hadn’t used his strop on them in many years now, but neither one of them wanted to tempt him. His favorite disciplinary statement to all of his sons was, “*Long as y’all put ye feet under my table, you gonna do what I say.*”

Willie Boy got up from the table to help his father with the milk buckets.

“Papa, we didn’t mean nothin’ by it,” he said.

“We was jist funnin’ Mama ‘bout Tom,” Clyde added, his voice toned down now that his father was in the house.

“Behave yerself then,” Papa said, handing one of the milk buckets to Willie Boy, placing the other one down on the cabinet, and then taking off his hat and hanging it on a spike by the back door as he pushed

it closed. Inside the house was practically the only time he took his hat off, except maybe to wipe his brow every now and then in the hot weather.

They could both readily attest to their father's skills with his razor strop, and sincerely believed that he would still use it on them, even though they were grown men now. It was about two feet long and three inches wide, and it had been a menacing leather monster to them when they were younger.

Papa kept the strop hanging on the wall by his shaving pan within their view every day, using it to keep a keen edge on his straight razor, and on his boys, keeping the sting of it when applied to their backsides fresh upon their minds. Therefore, rarely did he ever have to actually use it on them. Even after they became old enough for Papa to allow them to shave themselves with his straight razor, that razor strop seemed to glare at them while they were shaving, as if it were mocking them, warning them of its power over them.

Papa now occasionally used what Clyde and Willie Boy referred to as "*the step*" on them as they had become older, and, as older boys do at times, entertained the thought that they didn't have to obey him anymore. "*The step*" amounted to him just taking one step toward them in his most menacing fashion, eyes glaring, if they happened to be in the arguing mood.

There was a volume of information communicated by that step, and without their father having to say a word they knew that when he stepped toward them the argument was over, and they would quickly back down. Although they were both formidable scrappers themselves, Clyde and Willie Boy would never push Papa. It always took just the one step...they had never given him cause to extend it to the second.

Tom had always known in his heart that he was not a fighter, and he was pushed around by his older brothers, and some others, because of it. Papa would stop Clyde and Willie Boy if they got too rough with him, but at the same time he would tell Tom, *“You’ll learn to git tough, boy.”*

Mama would always take Tom’s side if she caught them harassing him...he was her favorite. She would intervene sometimes on the chores with Papa so Tom could get in some reading. On most days, she would have him do chores close to the house for her.

Since Clyde and Willie Boy had never liked school, and would never attend enough, she felt compelled to help Tom go to school and educate himself at every opportunity because he loved it so much. Now that he had decided to become a preacher, she would help him all she could with that, too. The resentment seethed from his older brothers...the fact that Tom had secured their Mama’s blessing, along with an escape from the farm work, and they never had.

Suddenly Seth came running through the kitchen fumbling with his pants, and Clyde couldn’t resist, even though the light scolding that he had just gotten from Papa was still hanging fresh in the air. He grabbed one of Seth’s loose overall straps as he ran by, and held him for a moment.

“Whoa...where ye goin’, Seth...what’s ye hurry?” he asked, grinning, and with a firm grip on the strap.

Seth was only ten years old, and a recovering bed-wetter. He was just beginning to attain the level of bladder capacity to hold it all until morning, as Clyde well knew.

“Lemme go, Clyde!” Seth yelled, straining against the overall strap.

Clyde laughed and released the strap just at the right moment, causing Seth to stumble forward some

as he ran out the back door, trying to get the other strap unhooked. He couldn't make it to the outhouse, but did make it to the edge of back porch and began relieving himself there, out into the yard.

Clyde couldn't resist yet another opportunity, and yelled out at Seth.

"Now Seth, you know Mama don't put up with no peein' off o' the back porch!"

Seth ignored Clyde, and so did Mama as she proceeded to announce that breakfast was ready.

Tom appeared in the back door at that very moment, as if he were psychic. The cornucopia of appetizing aromas permeating the air from his Mama's kitchen always put him in a good frame of mind. Seth had also finished his urgent task, and came in directly behind him.

"Tom, you an' Seth warsh ye hands," Mama said.

"We better eat quick, 'fore Tom gits over here an' cleans everthang up," Clyde said, as he and Willie Boy began filling their plates, raking fried eggs and potatoes off of the plate onto their own, and reaching for salt pork and biscuits.

"Yep," Willie Boy said. "Jist like any preacher I ever seen...always hongry."

Tom frowned over at them, but said nothing in response as he finished washing his hands at the water pan, drying them on a dish rag.

He *was* a ravenous eater, and everyone in the family marveled at the fact that, in spite of his extraordinary appetite, he remained thin. Of course, they all certainly realized that this phenomenon was *not* the result of any extra labor performed by him around the place.

By the time Tom and Seth completed their hand washing and got to the table, Clyde and Willie Boy were well into their breakfast, filling their mouths and gulping down more coffee.

"Y'all could wait 'til I said a blessin' over the food," Tom said. "We oughtta thank the Lord fer it."

"I don't recall nobody havin' nothin' to do with it but us," Clyde said, chewing a mouth full of biscuit and cane syrup, seizing a grand opportunity to aggravate Tom with his sarcasm.

"We done all the work a gittin' these vittles, an' Mama done all o' the cookin'. Now, if somebody else is a hangin' around here, we'd be obliged fer 'im to help us wi' some o' this work...might thank 'im then."

"Lord have mercy, Clyde...at's *heathen* talk," Mama said, glancing over at Papa washing his hands. "Let Tom say his blessin'."

"Never mind, Mama," Tom said. "They half-way thu eatin' now...hit's too late to say a blessin'."

"Y'all better eat good," Papa said, sitting down to the table and ignoring all of the banter about dispatching a blessing over the food.

"I'm fixin' to work some o' this talk an' foolishness out of ye. I gotta take 'at plow to town an' git it fixed, so Clyde, I wont you to take my other plow an' turn 'at corn field under. Willie Boy, you start pickin' cotton an' loadin' it in the wagon. Clyde, when you git thu plowin', you go to pickin' cotton, too."

"Yessir," they both said.

As usual, Papa had filled their day with work utilizing a minimum amount of wordage.

"Seth, I reckon you kin go to town wimme this mornin'," Papa said.

Seth's face lit up with a big grin as he sat down to the table.

"Kin I go to town too, Papa?" Tom asked, exposing a hint of jealousy toward Seth, and his favor with Papa.

Now Tom knew that Papa probably wouldn't let him go, but he did enjoy going to town, and he

realized that if he didn't jump in here with his request he wouldn't have a chance.

"Naw, you stay here, Tom," Papa replied. "You need to git thu diggin' them sweet potatoes out o' ye Mama's garden. When ye do, you go to pickin' cotton wi' ye brothers."

Papa's answer, although the one Tom anticipated, was nonetheless disappointing to him. He felt that he might possibly have one more chance at redemption, so he shot a glance over at Mama, half expecting her to intervene on his behalf, possibly relieving him of at least *some* of the assignment Papa had just given him, but this time Mama just busied herself at the stove. That cotton was overdue to be picked, and this was weighing heavily upon her mind as well as Papa's. She noticed Tom's glance at her, but she wouldn't interfere today with any assignment on getting it harvested.

Clyde and Willie Boy could hardly restrain their amusement at Tom's feeble attempt to get Papa to let him go to town, his ensuing assignment of work, and his disappointed look when Mama didn't intervene for him. They had to turn their heads and cover their mouths, holding back their laughter. They realized that Papa's wrath might be re-ignited if he caught them laughing at Tom right now, considering that their earlier reprimand was only minutes old...but they couldn't help themselves.

Tom's face fell. He hated digging potatoes. He had dug sweet potatoes all day yesterday, but hadn't finished the patch, and he was sick of it. He also hated picking cotton...he hated *all* of the farm work, and receiving a whole day's assignment from Papa in just two sentences was deflating to him, to say the least.

He realized that he was too old to be asking to go to town with Papa, but he sometimes still missed the

perks and power associated with the hallowed position of the youngest child, or the “*baby*” of the family, a title and grand status that he had held for a couple of years after little Johnny died, before Seth was born. It was a position to be cherished, and Tom still harbored some resentment toward Seth for coming into the world and removing him from his throne.

“Yessir,” Tom said, glancing harshly over at his brothers, still barely able to restrain their laughter.

Papa suddenly looked hard over at Clyde and Willie Boy, but said nothing, holding his stare on them for a moment. They immediately straightened up and sobered their faces, realizing that Papa’s look was the only warning that they would get on the subject.

“Seth, we’ll go hitch up them mules right after breakfast,” Papa said, preoccupied with his mission to town. “We gotta go to Rothburg an’ git back.”

“Yessir,” Seth said, still grinning, and now entertaining another pleasant thought. He couldn’t resist asking his father.

“Papa, kin I drive the wagon some today?”

“We’ll see, boy.”

Seth loved to go to town with Papa, and he knew that if he could get a “*we’ll see*” out of him, there was an excellent chance that he would get to do whatever he was requesting. He also knew that if it was just him and Papa going to town, he would probably get a stick of candy at the general store. He dove into his breakfast with a renewed passion.