

Truck Sounds

There is a road down here, a two-lane blacktop pointing north toward Oklahoma, passing through irrigated cotton and alfalfa fields, and beneath flashing yellow lights that hang above desperate little main streets. There is a bridge along this road, spanning a riverbed that is always nearly dry – the Clear Fork of the Brazos, a sign says. In the shadow of the bridge, above the ancient high-water mark of the Clear Fork, a thicket of wild plums has spread itself across a few sandy acres bordered by the road, and people stop here to fill shopping bags or their caps all summer long. North of the bridge, the land rises and falls in folds of grass and gully, like a bunched carpet, for hundreds of miles to the base of the Caprock. The road is pinched between lines of faded cedar posts and their strands of rusty barbed wire. At intervals along the blacktop, gravel roads wind into the distant sprawl of cattle ranches, behind gates that show their brands.

A half-dozen miles north of the bridge another light swings in the wind above the center line, not yellow but red. North and south must stop here for trucks moving east and west, on their way to more important places, like Dallas and Amarillo. The trucks pass through at all hours of the day and night, braking and switching gears, exhaust stacks bellowing disapproval. The brakes on the big rigs screech and squeal, then release with explosive bursts of hissing, bitchy noise. Beyond the intersection, engines whine as the trucks climb quickly through their gears, impatient to be on their way. They have somewhere to go, and this is not somewhere.

Except for the roads at this intersection, there are no paved roads here. There are a few gravel roads that soon dwindle into rutted dirt two-tracks not much wider than a car. Every so often, but not very often, a county crew comes with a few graders to smooth the ruts. Their big yellow machines fill the air with the raw and rich scents of diesel and opened earth, and they grade the roads a little lower.

My father's parents live in a little house along one of these dirt roads. Just past their place, their road ends abruptly in a wheat field. At one time, the field was an abandoned pasture, overgrown with pricklypear cactus and mesquite brush, a playground for my father and his sisters and brother. My brothers and I come for a visit, and we spend a long week following our grandfather's truck through the bulldozed pasture, lobbing roots and stumps into the truck bed. Our grandfather drives the truck, idling along slowly, smoking his Camels. Now and then he will switch on the radio and move the dial through the static. He pauses briefly at tinny sounds, hoping for the sad type of country ballad he likes. But he rarely finds anything that suits him, and he switches the radio off. Cigarette smoke curls, bluish and heavy, from the driver's window as the truck lumbers on.

Our grandmother walks along behind the truck with my brothers and me, yanking mesquite out of the ground and hurrying us to keep up. She is a hard worker, in her men's shoes and old shirt and pants. And she enjoys the labor. She is a woman of few words. When she speaks, it is often of the simple truths like "It ain't what you want, it's what you can get," or "What's done is done." She makes long tosses toward the truck with the smaller chunks of wood, and is happy when she finds the odd fist-sized rock to throw.

She tells me, "There's somethin' about the throwin'," another simple truth. I know she is right about this, and I feel connected to her. I have learned from my father and grandmother that there is joy in working, making things better. I think of this rough woman raising my father here, and I know

that he is much like her. My father reveres my grandfather, but my mother tells him, "Your mother is the one."

Between the road and the house, skinny runners of Bermuda grass fight with goathead to control a patch of rocky soil, and for the winner there will be little reward. Most of the time, there is barely enough water for living things, and the grass and the weeds that persevere are as tough as the people here. The little house has seen better days. Window frames that were once red crack and peel under the meanness of the Texas sun, and from a ceaseless wind.

Behind the house, on the edge of the plowed ground, a derelict school bus squats low in the Johnson grass on rotting tires, filled with the accumulated detritus of the years. My brothers and I have pushed and pulled hard on the rusty bus doors and have opened them just enough to squeeze inside. Stale air carries the odor of moldering cloth and of old cardboard. There is the faint presence of a damp decaying something which we can't quite identify, but which is vaguely familiar and unsettling. Hanging from the ceiling of the bus is an empty yellowjacket nest nearly as big as a dinner plate. We knock it down and examine it. None of us has escaped the stings of yellowjackets.

Next to the bus sits a one-room wooden structure, which my brothers and I are warned to stay clear of.

"You step on a rusty nail or a piece of glass and we'll have to cut your foot off," my grandfather tells us with one of his winks.

Once it was painted green, but most of its paint is gone now. It has windows that might have once contained glass, but which now are open to the air and the elements. Birds have nested in the open rafters, and their droppings cover the buckled floorboards. It stands at a tilt, waiting for a strong wind to blow it down.

In the dark, in a tiny bedroom, I lie under old quilts and listen to the distant trucks through an open window. I hear them gear down and bellow and squeal and hiss, then whine and fade away. Very late at night, when there are no other sounds, I listen for the trucks, and they make me want to go places I've never been. I think of how big the world might be. I dream of growing up and doing many things.

Very early in the morning, before it is light, I hear my grandfather in the kitchen. He coughs and spits wetly into the sink. I hear him shuffling about and opening cupboard doors and running the water from the tap. I hear the distinctive clink when he opens his Zippo lighter, and I smell the fluid. And then I smell coffee and his Camels. He sits at the table in his usual chair, next to the percolator, and I sit across from him. He sips black coffee and smokes. I watch the ash on his cigarette grow longer and longer, and I wonder if he has forgotten about it and if I should say something. But then he taps the ash into his ashtray and takes another long drag. He does this over and over, sip, drag, drag, tap, drag.

My grandfather doesn't say anything to me. He just sips his coffee and smokes, rubbing a rough hand over his face and coughing hard from time to time. He has long fingernails stained yellow and brown by the many years, which he drums on the table to some internal rhythm. Behind him, hanging on the wall, there is a photograph from his days in the army. He is wearing a garrison cap and khaki shirt and tie. He is smiling and handsome and sure of himself. Though back from the army for more than twenty years, he wears khakis every day, but not in the crisp and starched way of

his army days. He is a softer, more rumpled version of a time when his future might have been anything. My eyes move from my grandfather to the photograph. I keep looking, back and forth.

My grandfather has left his teeth in the bedroom, in a glass of water with my grandmother's teeth, and his mouth collapses mushily around his cigarette and the lip of his coffee cup. He looks impossibly old.

I want to go outside to where the road ends. I want to run down the dirt road, all the way to the gravel road. I want to run down the gravel road all the way to the paved road, toward the growing truck sounds. I want to run down the paved road all the way to the flashing light. I want to get on one of those trucks and go with it to somewhere.

My grandfather looks at me. "Here you go," he tosses me his Zippo lighter. I turn the lighter in my hand, its surface worn smooth by years of rough hands and soft khaki.

"That there is older than your daddy," my grandfather says. He watches me turning the lighter in my hand. I feel connected. I think of my father as a boy, sitting here holding this lighter. I expect my grandfather might be thinking the same thing. But we don't say anything about it.

"Put some more fluid in my lighter, like I showed you, you remember?" my grandfather says.

I look across the table toward him. "Yes, I remember."