

## GRAVEN IMAGES

Steven stepped out the front door, onto the porch and raised his arm against the glaring sunlight. It was just nine in the morning but the air was already too warm, too still, carrying too much moisture. It would be hellacious by midday, he decided, sweat already collecting at the collar of his shirt, downright suffocating by this afternoon.

The sinister, grinding noise of the cultivator came at him from off to the left, but the low, harsh sun and the curve of the land were hiding it from view. He could see it in his mind's eye though: wheels rolling slowly forward on the dry, withered earth, the blades inhaling underdeveloped crops that would hardly bring enough at market to pay for reseeding... the faceless figure in the cramped, air-conditioned cab, a cigarette in hand, head bobbing slightly to the sounds of Hank Williams. It was an oppressive image not because he hated his father (though he usually did) or because he hated being poor (which he always did) or even because he loathed this place and everything about it - the bleak expanse of starving land stretching from horizon to horizon and back again without alteration, except for the occasional, wholly impotent gain or loss of a few short feet; the stench of manure and tractor oil and pesticides and livestock and human sweat; the weather, the damnable, smothering, omnipresent heat of summer; the sounds of cocks crowing and machinery ripping furrows in the ground and cars passing on the highway at speeds that spoke of escape and leaving and an

almost panicked desperation to get away from “nowhere” and back to “somewhere.”

That was the killer: the horrible idea of staying here, of being stranded and strangled and suffocated on the damnable farm for the rest of his life. It was more than he could bear.

As he trotted down the steps, he felt perspiration fixing his shirt to the skin of his back. If there was a God, he told himself - making a conscious effort not to run to the mailbox, and, if today proved to be the same as all the rest (and why wouldn't it?), to keep on running and running until he was so far away that he couldn't find his way back even if he wanted to - surely He would see fit to deliver him from this purgatory.

He was halfway to the road when the cultivator came over the rise, the whirling blades gobbling up malnourished corn. It slowed, the electric window came down and an arm waved from the cab. Steven waved back without enthusiasm. Then he saw a hand tapping the wrist of the extended arm, an exaggerated message: look at the time. He nodded, waved again, silently told his father to go to hell, and turned his back to cut across the yard.

His father called farming, “good honest work,” whatever that meant. He had yet to figure out what was *good* about wearing overalls and baseball caps and chewing Red Man and smoking Marlboros and letting the sun burn the back of your neck until the skin was leather-tough and resembled left over fried chicken. What was so *honest* about pouring out your lifeblood, sacrificing it to and for a land that was cruel and hard-hearted and would return only a slender

fragment, if any at all, of that which was invested in it; putting on your only coat and tie - your Sunday best - to plead with the bankers not to foreclose and take that for which you lived and breathed and existed? What was good or honest about growing a gut from eating bacon and eggs for breakfast every day and steak and potatoes for dinner and developing strong arms from slaughtering cows and slinging hay and being down in your back once a month and looking forward to tractor shows and potluck dinners and meetings at the Masonic Temple where men who shared in the hideous struggle known as farming could nod at your misery and add their own list of pitiful woes in voices raspy and hoarse from smoking and inhaling fertilizer fumes and breathing the dust of a wind that was constant and merciless and unrelenting?

His mother had suggested an alternative to this hell, something his father had begrudgingly agreed to. If he didn't want to work on and eventually take over the farm, then he could become a minister. If he forsook the land and the tradition of his family, something that stretched back for generations, the very least he could do was to attend seminary (not just any seminary, of course: the seminary in Oxville where his Great Uncle Clemmons had gone in preparation for founding a church in Oklahoma that prevailed to this day, boasting a membership in the thousands) and pastor a church (not just any church, mind you: a Baptist church. And not just Baptist: a congregation approved of by the Conservative Baptist Union of West Texas, a group that had broken away from the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1940s over the issue of tobacco - both denominations had strict rules prohibiting cussing, carousing, alcohol, dancing and going to

movies, but the Union, as it was commonly referred to, allowed for the use of chewing tobacco and cigarettes). These were his only options. He could farm or he could preach.

Hopping the split rail fence, he glanced down the highway in both directions. It was empty, as it often was. People seldom came out here unless they were visiting someone, taking the cut through to San Antonio (the non-scenic route), or were simply lost. It was not a destination, just a long stretch of bleak nothingness that had to be endured in order to get to somewhere else - somewhere alive and vital and real.

By the time he reached the mailbox, any expectation he had been harboring - however secret and ill-fated - had drained away completely. There would be nothing inside that metal box to change his future. He was shipwrecked here and always would be.

He pulled the box open, reached in and retrieved a handful of envelopes. Wandering back to the driveway, he slowly picked through them: bill, ad for a sale at the Ford truck dealership, another bill, a letter from his mother's sister, a seed catalog, an ad for the local John Deere outlet, an L.L. Bean catalog (something his mother enjoyed looking at but never ordered from on account of the prices), yet another bill, another seed catalog...

Despair weighed upon him and without conscious effort, his steps became heavy and angry, as though he blamed his shadow for his plight and was attempting to tread it into the dirt.

Continuing up the drive, he saw the cultivator turn and squinted as sunlight reflected off the cab. Having received no reprieve, he would be forced to suck it up for yet another day, to don his work clothes, those damnable work boots, the grubby gloves, that awful green Skoal hat and look as well as act the part of a West Texas farmer.

As if terrified of this, his fingers instinctively rifled through the mail again, searching, hoping, demanding, begging God to lift his little finger and bring about a miracle.

He had reached the house and was mounting the steps before he realized what his fingers had found, what his eyes had seized upon, and what his spirit and soul were forcing him to recognize. He froze, breathlessly blinking at the return address: NYU. He read the address, examined and admired the insignia, stared at the letters again.

“Oh, shit..”

He sank to the steps, hands trembling now. It was only a letter and yet he could feel the power emanating from it. Inside that simple envelope was his destiny. His fate.

Setting the rest of the mail aside, he placed the letter on his knees and studied it. The plain white paper glowed luminously, almost magically, in the morning light. It had to be... could be... or what if...?

He sat for several minutes, afraid to open it, terrified that it might contain a death sentence. Suddenly, he lifted it from his knees and tore it open. He pulled

the letter out, unfolded it. The creases were crisp, he noticed, the paper as blindingly white as the envelope. He read the first sentence.

*Thank you for applying to New York University.*

He stopped there, reluctant to go on. The next sentence would seal his fate. It would begin with “We are sorry, but...” or “We regret to inform you...” - something like that. Or it would begin with “Congratulations” or “We are happy to say that...”

“Shit...” he sighed.

He held the sheet of paper up to the light and as the sun fought to burn through it, his eyes found: “Congratulations! You have been accepted for the fall term.”

He stood and for a long moment, didn’t know whether to whoop or cry. “Oh, God...” he panted. “Oh, God!”

Turning, he ran up the stairs and into the house, clutching the letter in his hand. “Mom! Mom!”

He went to the kitchen, found it empty, went up to the bedrooms. “Mom?!” She wasn’t there so he went down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time until he reached the basement. And there she was, bent over a basket of laundry.

“Mom!” he shouted.

His mother, a slightly timid woman of fifty-six, flinched as though a gun had been fired next to her ear.

“Mom!” He rushed toward her, the letter outstretched. “I made it! I’m in!”

“You’re what?”

“They accepted me!”

“What? Who? Who accepted you?”

“NYU. I’m going to film school.”

His mother’s shoulders drooped and her face sagged. “I thought you said you weren’t going to apply.”

“I... I know, but... well... I did. And they accepted me!”

“But Steven...”

“Can you believe it? Can you?”

“What about your father?”

“What about him?” He knew what she meant but didn’t want to sully this occasion with the issue of his father’s demented wishes.

“You promised him...”

“No. I did not promise.”

“You said you would either stay here or...”

“No, Mom. I never ever said I’d stay here.”

“But you said you’d consider seminary.”

“Yeah. Consider it. I did consider it.” He waved the letter at her. “I’m done considering it now. I’m going to NYU.”

She glared at him, but he could tell that she was channeling his father's anger not her own.

"Mom, listen to me. I want to make movies."

She shook her head at him. "Movies are the devil's tool for corruptions."

"That's Pop talking. And the Pastor Joe."

"It's true."

"Bullshit!"

"Steven!" she admonished. "Why, I've never..."

"Sorry, Mom, I just... I feel strong about this. I think this is what I'm supposed to do. I'm supposed to make movies. I want to make movies. I'll be good at making movies."

Sighing, she shook her head again. "Your father will never..."

"Let me worry about him."

"But he won't..."

"I know. He won't approve. That's the way it goes. He'll either get over it or..."

They were silent for several seconds.

"Do you know how hard it is to get into NYU, Mom? Do you?" He didn't wait for an answer. "This is a dream come true. Can't you be happy for me?"

"I wish I could, Steven, but..."

He embraced her. "It'll be okay. You'll see. Pop will get used to having a filmmaker for a son. Eventually."

"I hope you're right," she sighed into his shoulder.



“Just park it next to the barn,” his father’s shadow instructed from the darkened interior of the pickup. The green dash lights were turning his face into something monstrous and alien. “It’s getting late. We can adjust the carburetor tomorrow, before we start on the other field.”

Steven nodded and put the cultivator into gear. The engine rumbled as he gave it gas and smoke wafted past the windshield, glowing blue in the dim orange afterglow of the sun’s passing. The machine bumped and rocked as he steered it toward the barn, thinking not about the carburetor or the field still to be cultivated or even of dinner, but only that there would be no tomorrow. Not in the way his father envisioned it.

Tomorrow his abbreviated career as a farmer would come to an end. He would take the bags that he had already packed, go to the Greyhound station in Hartland, and, from a window in a seat near the back of the bus, bid goodbye to the awfulness that was West Texas. He had arranged for housing in New York, had paid for his books and for the first semester tuition. Everything was ready. Except... He still hadn’t told his father.

He’d meant to tell him the very day he’d received the acceptance letter. But the old man had been in a pissy mood and spent most of supper bitching and moaning about the hardships facing them that season. So he had decided to postpone telling him to the next morning. And then the next morning they had been too busy for a sit-down, serious talk. Something had come up again and

again and each time the putting off had become a little easier until here he sat, less than twelve hours away from leaving, without having so much as mentioned a single word to his father. Short of “running away” to school, he would have to tell him tonight.

Steven parked the cultivator as he'd been told and switched off the engine. He sat there for several minutes, dreading what he was about to do. He stared at the fading sunset and at the stars that were beginning to stand out like tiny pearls off to the north. Though night was falling quickly, darkness stealing across the flat expanse, transforming the fields into what appeared to be waves in a portrait of the ocean, it was still hotter than bejesus. Somehow, the miserable heat always managed to survive the departure of light.

He wouldn't miss this, he told himself, eyes straining to detect the final hurrah in the west. He wouldn't miss the work or the scenery or the days or the nights or the weather. He wouldn't miss going to church or town - if you could call Eunod a town (including all the surrounding farmlands, it still boasted only a few hundred residents and mostly functioned as a trading post to buy feed and farming supplies). He wouldn't miss anything about this place: the old farmhouse, the leaky pickup, the stinking barn. Most of all, he wouldn't miss his father. He would barely miss his mother.

If tonight went badly and he never returned, he would not mourn.

“Steven!” his mother called. “Supper!”

“I'm coming,” he answered, too quiet for her to hear.

As he climbed down from the cab, he realized that he was trembling. This

perturbed him. "Be a man!" he scolded himself. That's what this was all about. Behind it all, this was his time to prove that he was a man and not a servant or a gopher or a slave or whatever the hell it was his father thought of him as. It was his time to exert himself and go his own way. It was his coming of age. He had reached manhood now and there was no room for wavering or backing down or weaseling out.

He could smell supper before he reached the house: chip beef on toast. It had once been his favorite and was still his father's. When he was a boy, they had shared many interests. In fact, he had wanted to grow up and be just like his father, to be a farmer, to occupy the farm until his dying day. But all that had changed somewhere along the line until now he could hardly wait to leave it and *him* in his wake.

Going up the steps, he overheard his father's voice: "What do you mean, he's got something to tell me?"

"I mean just what I said, Tom."

He paused at the door, listening.

"What is it?" his father asked.

"He'll tell you."

"You tell me," his father demanded. When she didn't, he said, "What is it? Did he go and get some girl in trouble?"

"No, Tom."

"You sure?"

"It's not that."

“Don’t tell me he’s on that new truck kick again. The Ford is in fine running condition. Sure, it’s got nearly 200,000 miles but, hell...”

“You stop that cussing now, Tom.”

“I will not buy a new truck just so that he can look good in town.”

Steven opened the screen door, went in, and let it slap shut behind him.

“Shh... here he comes,” his mother said.

Entering the kitchen, he saw his mother loading plates with toast, pouring her concoction of gravy and chip beef over them.

“Well, speak of the devil...” his father said.

He turned and saw his father at the dinner table, chair tipped back a little, hands behind his head.

“I need to go wash my hands,” Steven said.

“You need to come here and tell me what the hell is going on.”

“Tom...” his mother admonish.

Steven knew that his mother was on his side and would take up for him, but also knew that she was weak and would eventually back down if push came to shove.

“Get in here!” his father ordered.

Steven stood there, defiantly, for a moment, then walked into the dining room.

“What’s this I hear about you needing to talk to me.”

Steven looked down at him, not so much loathing the man as feeling pity for him. He was fat and bald and poor. He seemed suddenly small and unimportant, doomed to a life of heavy labor and negligible returns.

Steven took a breath.

“Well...?”

“I got accepted.”

“You what?”

“I got accepted to college. In New York.”

His father swore and from the kitchen came, “Tom... you watch your mouth.”

“I’ll watch what I want to watch,” his father said. He gave Steven a look that could only be interpreted as disdain.

“Now just what in the world would you do in New York.” He said the name of the city as though it was an abomination.

“I’m going to study film.”

His father’s face curdled. “You’re what?”

“I want to be a filmmaker. I want to make movies.”

“Movies?!” his father bellowed. In the next instant, he was grinning.

“You’re pulling my leg. This is a joke. I get it.”

“It’s no joke, Pop. I’m going to NYU.”

The grin disappeared.

“Tomorrow,” Steven added. “On the bus.”

“The hell you are,” his father said, putting all four legs of his chair back on the floor.

“Tom...” his mother said.

“Shut up, woman!” he yelled. He rose slowly, regarding his son like a man might regard his opponent in a wrestling match. “You’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir.”

“To make movies?”

“To *learn* to make movies.”

“In New York?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ah... I see.” He nodded. “Have you lost your mind??”

“No.”

“Then what in the hell...?”

“Tom...”

“I’m going to NYU to learn to make movies, Pop. It’s not something I’m asking your permission for. I’m leaving tomorrow morning on the bus. And you can’t stop me.”

“The hell I can’t.”

“Tom...”

“The hell you can,” Steven countered, staring the old man down.

“Steven...”

“You will not leave this house without my permission,” his father said.

“Wanna bet? I’m nineteen. I can make my own decisions now. And my mind is made up about this. I’m going.”

There was a long, tense pause.

“Are you finished?” his father asked.

Steven looked at him. “I suppose I am.”

“You ain’t got nothing else to tell me?”

Steven sighed. “No, sir.”

His father nodded again and relaxed slightly. Then, without warning, he swung his fist and struck Steven in the side of the head, knocking him against the wall. Steven sagged, but before he could collapse, his father leapt upon him, arm around his head. They fell to the floor and his father remained on top, choking him.

“Tom...!” Steven could see his mother in the doorway, holding two plates of steaming chip beef on toast. “What on earth...?!”

“Now you listen here to me, boy,” his father growled into his ear. “You ain’t going nowhere - you no-good little shit - you understand me?”

Steven struggled, gagging. The room was beginning to swim, the yellow light over the dining table fading.

“This is your home,” his father continued, speaking passionately, sweat running down his cheeks. “You have a responsibility to it, you hear?”

Steven could see only stars now. He felt as though he were falling backwards, from a severe height.

“Now, I might understand you leaving to be a preacher. Might, mind you. Preaching is a good thing. But farming, is in our blood, son. It’s good, clean, honest work.”

Steven heard his mother cry, “Stop it! Stop it, Tom!” Her voice was far away, across a canyon, echoing, and though it was panicked, he felt calm: no fear or anxiety, just a sense of movement, as though he were traveling, leaving, watching the farming fields flee from the window of a speeding bus.

“As for making movies... Good God in heaven, Steven, haven’t you learned a thing from church? Don’t you know movies are a sin? They’re a wicked, wicked thing - Satan’s tool for the corruption and damnation of mankind.”

Low mountains appeared on the horizon - forests and light and then the sun rising, the forest becoming a dense gathering of glass towers, buildings that seemed to touch the hem of heaven.

“They are graven images!” he heard someone shouting. “Movies are graven images that mock God and go against his commandments!”

Steven disembarked from the bus and began walking through the buildings, toward the gleaming light beyond. It felt good to be off the farm.