

The Passing

By Durango Mendoza

Ever since Mama married Edmund we had lived in the country. He had built a tall, single-walled, two-room house on the land of his family above the big bend of Fish Creek, and it stood there, lean and unpainted among the trees back from the road. Even after Mama and I came to live there it remained unpainted. It was built of unfinished sawmill planks and had two stovepipe chimneys sticking through its green roof. Right across the road was the Indian church.

The house stood above the steep, boulder-littered and heavily wooded slope and the creek that ran below. I had developed a swimming hole there, and across the creek on the wooded slopes I played at hunting. It had been almost five years since we had settled there, and I had already explored the surrounding countryside for miles in winter and summer so that I now usually stayed close to the house. Summer had grown old, and I was becoming restless.

One evening as I played cars with pieces of wood in the dust beside the house, Mama saw the boy coming along the road. She stopped gathering the clothes from the line and took the clothespins from her mouth. I looked after her gaze and beyond. Through the shadows and trees I saw how the road curved and disappeared quickly into the dusk and woods, I looked back to her when she spoke.

"Sonny, there goes Joe Willow," she said. Then she paused and put the shirt she was holding into the basket at her

feet. "He sure does work hard. I hope old Jimmy Bear and Fannie appreciate it, those two." She shook her head and began to gather the rest of the clothes. I sat back on my heels and wondered at the tone of her voice. I had never really noticed Joe Willow before, but I knew the rest of the family from church meetings. And once I had seen where they lived.

It was about a mile beyond the curve, far back from the road and reached by a rutted drive that skirted the Indian graveyard. I knew the graveyard because near it were some pecan trees from which I gathered the nuts each fall. Their house was very old and unpainted. It sat low and gray under a group of large blackjack oaks and within a grassless yard that was pressed closely by the thick, surrounding woods.

Joe Willow's mother, Fannie, was a short, round woman with mottled brown skin and a high shiny forehead that wrinkled when she laughed. Jimmy Bear was her second husband, and they used to pass our house often on their way to town. They had once driven an old Dodge, but it no longer ran, and it now sat lopsided and windowless among the weeds beside their lane. Jimmy Bear was a skinny man, but he had a round, protruding belly and wore his belt under it so it looked as if he carried a basketball inside. He had gaps in his teeth and a rough, guttural laugh and walked with a shuffle. Mama told me that Fannie had once had money, but that they had long since used it up.

The next evening when Joe Willow passed the gate, I got up and ran to hang on it as I watched him pass on up the road. The sun, being low and to his back, sent a long finger of shadow ahead of him. I could hear the crunch and whisper of

his footsteps between the squeaks of the bucket he carried until they began to fade with the coming of the breeze through the tall grass alongside the road. The bucket creaked faintly and the breeze dropped for a moment.

I called to him.

"Hello, Joe Willow," I said.

In the stillness my voice carried, and he turned, his shadow pointing into the woods, and he lifted his hand. He squinted into the sun and smiled. I waved, and he turned back up the road and soon faded against the shadow and trees.

I sat on the gate for a while until a deeper darkness crept from the woods and began to fuse with the trees. I heard the trees begin to sigh and settle down for the night, the lonely cooing of a dove, and from somewhere across the creek the hoot of an owl. Then I hurried back to the house in the new coolness and stood near my mom for a while as she moved about the warm iron cookstove preparing supper.

Almost every evening of August that summer, the young Indian passed along the road in front of our gate. I saw him several times a week as he came up from the bridge, always carrying a small, empty lard bucket whose handle squeaked faintly as he passed by and out of sight. He walked slowly, without spirit, but with the strength seen in a young workhorse.

Many evenings I swung back and forth on the gate and waited for him to come by. I had no brothers or sisters as yet, but Mama was expecting Edmund's first child before spring. Edmund was my stepfather, and since he said very little to me and because I couldn't be around Mama all the time, I waited

for Joe Willow to pass by, although I seldom spoke except to reply to his greetings. Often I didn't even show myself at all and only sat among the grapevines next to the gate until the darkness sent me home.

I remember one of the last times I saw him. It was early in September, and I was sitting on the gate watching the sun caught on the treetops, noticing how the leaves looked like embers across its face as it settled into them, when Joe Willow appeared like a moving post upon the road. I had just gotten down from the gate and sat on the large rock that propped up our mailbox when Edmund called for me to eat supper. Instead, I began to sift sand into little conical piles as I waited. I looked down the road past the young worker to where the sun had fallen behind the trees. It looked trapped. The wind was very soft and smelled of smoke and dust. A few birds chuckled above me in the trees and the insects of the evening buzzed in the weeds below.

Edmund called again and I looked up.

"Howdy, Joe Willow," I said. "You coming home from work?"

He stopped and grinned.

"That's right," he said. He leaned on the mailbox, and we said nothing for a few moments until he spoke again. "You're Edmund's boy, aren't you?"

"Huh-uh. I belong to Rosa."

"Oh." He squatted down. "You know what? I'm the same way. Everybody calls me Jimmy Bear's boy, but I'm not. He's not my daddy."

We both shifted around and watched where the sun had gone down.

"You see what happens when the sun goes down?" He pointed to the evening star and motioned toward the other stars that had appeared in the east. "When the daddy goes to bed, all the little children come out." His teeth gleamed in the gathering darkness, and I smiled, too.

We had watched the stars for only a moment when Edmund called again.

"You better get on home," Joe Willow said. "That's your daddy calling you."

"I'm Rosa's boy," I said.

"I know," he said. "but you better get on back." He looked up again at the deepening sky and laughed softly. "I'll see you some other time – 'Rosa's boy.'"

After September came, I started school and no longer saw Joe Willow pass our gate. One day I asked Mama about him, and she said that he had gone to the free Indian boarding school in the northern part of the state, just south of the Kansas line. It was when winter was just melting into spring, a few weeks after mama had returned from the hospital with my baby brother, that I remembered him again.

Just before supper Edmund came into the kitchen, stamping the bits of dirty snow from his overshoes.

"Jimmy Bear's boy's been killed by the Santa Fe train at Chillocco," he said. "But they say they ain't sure how it happened." He warmed his hands over the stove and sat down.

I looked at Mama. She said nothing and rocked the baby. On the stove the beans bubbled softly, and their smell filled the

room. I watched the lid on the pot jiggle as the steam escaped and I heard the wind rattle gently at the window. Edmund struggled with his overshoes and continued.

"Fannie tol' me a railroad man was down the first thing and said they was willin' to pay." He grunted and shoved the overshoes near the stove. "The funeral's Tuesday," he said.

Mama nodded and handed me the baby and got up to put the food on the table. She touched my head, and we sat down to supper.

At the funeral Joe Willow's family cried, and old Fannie even fainted at the grave site when they started to cover him. Jimmy Bear had to struggle to keep her from falling. The dirt sounded on the wooden vault, and the little houses over the older graves looked gray and damp with the people standing among them. I went over to the pecan trees and kicked among the damp mulch looking for good nuts, but I couldn't find any.

That evening after supper I stepped out onto the back stoop, and the yellow lamplight behind me threw my shadow onto the patches of snow and earth, enclosing it in the rectangle that the doorway formed. I looked up. The spotty clouds looked like bits of melting snow pressed into the darkness, and the stars were out, sprinkled into the stillness beyond. The black trees swayed and the cold wind was familiar.

Behind me Mama moved around the kitchen, and I heard the chink and gentle clatter of the plates and pans as she put those things away. I shivered. And I knew that soon, as it did every spring, the clouds would come and it would begin to rain, a cold, heavy drizzle, and the land would turn to mud.

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