

Prologue

21st century, October
Rusk County, TX

“What in tarnation! Is that a Jewish wedding over there in the graveyard?” Mr. Tatum’s mouth gaped, but not far enough to dislodge his chewing tobacco.

He and his wife rode south on State Highway 43 from the town that bore his family’s name to County Road 2183 and home. Ten 50-pound bags of sweet feed—Jones Feed & Seed shorted him on his last load—plus his wife’s little John Deere lawn tractor fresh out of the fix-it shop took all the room in the pickup’s bed. Six sacks—he preferred paper, not plastic—of groceries, stacked behind the straight-backed bench seat, pushed Mr. Tatum to the speed limit as they galloped on rough-riding shocks over smooth road, sitting stiffly on the withers of their 1989 Dodge Ram.

He glanced at its gleaming hood ornament, the leaping ram posed on the prow of the pickup. The stout ram leaped into his thoughts, evoking images of buxom maids leaning over ship’s prows, ships rolling on the waves, images of his Navy days, boxing in tournaments aboard the cruiser, rolling with the punches, as he bounded down the highway toward Harmony Hill.

Mrs. Tatum fixated on a patch of sunshine, bouncing off the pickup’s scrupulously polished red hood, reflecting the colors of autumn. She reflected on the patchwork colors of last week’s county fair—patchwork quilts and crazy quilts, jars of scarlet ripe persimmons and maroon plum jam, velvet orange pumpkin pies and golden brown pecan. Through the windshield, she devoured generous servings of autumn leaves in cranberry blackgum, cherry dogwood, and banana pepper sassafras, packed between sweet pickle green loblolly pines. Her own bread-and-butter pickles and pepper-pear relish had rested on blond pine shelves at the county fair.

Green and yellow bruises, black eyes of opponents in the ring, green waves rolling, rolling past Black Angus grazing—Mr. Tatum watched for his turn. Passing trees thick as cotton locks in the boll and houses, modest frame and brick, planted too near the road, Mr. Tatum slowed. The left blinker ticked time, passing what used to be Harmony Hill, once-upon-a-time thriving community of merchants, professionals, farmers, and ranchers until time and the railroad passed it by. Harmony Hill had slipped into oblivion, unremembered and unremembering, its remnant silent as the grave ... or so it seemed.

Situated at a respectable distance from the centuries-old gravestones of the Harmony Hill Cemetery, a group of folks huddled around a fancy-bordered white canopy. Overtaken with curiosity, Mr. Tatum rolled to a stop behind a black sedan, parked on the opposite side of the road. He rolled his window down. Crisp clean air tickled the hairs of his bald spot.

Mrs. Tatum craned her neck to see around her husband’s ample form. She scolded, “That’s just a graveside service. You’re always pullin’ my leg.”

“I tell you, it’s a Jewish wedding. At Ryan’s wedding in Dallas year before last, they had a little tent like that and men wearing beanies and fringed shawls.”

“I don’t remember that.” Mrs. Tatum shut her eyes and knit her brow. “Was that the time I had the flu and your sister told you I could take care of myself for one day? You know, she had no call to say that. That hurt my feelings.”

“Hush! Listen.”

“Harei et mekudeshet li, betaba’at o, kedat Moshe v’Yisrael.” Clear baritone notes rose in antiphony to screeching bluejays and scolding squirrels. The syllables ascended, rising like a slender flame from a candle of a man, white-robed, with trimmed wick-black hair and beard, a white tallit gadol dripping from his shoulders. He repeated the covenant of marriage in English. “Behold, you are consecrated to me by this ring, according to the ritual of Moses and Israel.” He placed a ring on the finger of the woman to his right. She was gowned in cream satin and lace, veiled in white.

Facing them stood a rectangular man, legs straddled, brown beard spilling onto his white shirt like milk chocolate dripping onto vanilla. He alternately read from a small scroll and gazed down over its edge at the couple, giving them a sweet-toothed smile. His short tallit clung to his long shoulders like a napkin, fastened by a clip, its chain stretched taut across his chest.

The breeze was crisp, tinged with the scent of burning leaves. The chuppa ruffled its wings like a white hen hovering over them. The young woman’s veil billowed, revealing a blaze of curls. Clustered around the chuppah stood a modest crowd—men clad in cowboy boots and jeans with white and blue tzit-tziot dangling from belt loops, and women wearing long skirts fringed with children. A small boy turned and pointed at the truck.

Mrs. Tatum whispered, “You think they live around here? They look like foreigners. Let’s go before they notice us. We can’t be too careful these days.”

The hair on Mr. Tatum’s arms stood at attention. Reminded the nation was at yellow alert, he spewed brown venom out the window and repositioned his chaw. Last month, some crazy—the grandkids called him a splodeydope, a term that tasted about right in Mr. Tatum’s mouth—blew himself up in a metal building between Tatum and Henderson, killing a group of Saturday churchgoers. Since then, his coffee-drinking cronies at Settlers Café hadn’t poked fun at his opinion that Texas should’ve stayed independent back in 1836.

Glancing at his rearview mirror, he saw a smiling youngster waving them good-bye. Reflexively, he smiled back as he eased away from the grassy shoulder onto the black and silver asphalt and glided around the black sedan.

Mrs. Tatum muttered, “Just look at those dark windows on that car. Like gangsters.” She turned to get a look at the black sedan’s front windshield and gasped. “Delbert,” she said, “their faces are covered. I thought I saw a gun.”

“The children,” he whispered. Feeling like a bit player in a B movie, he rounded the bend in the road and made a U-turn. He saw the driver’s side window of the black sedan slide down and the barrel of an assault rifle slither out. Seized by impulses

dormant since his Navy days, he leaned on his horn to sound an alarm. The nose of the rifle turned.

“Ethel, get down!”

Bullets penetrated the pickup’s fuel tank. The families under the chuppa clung to each other at the clap and the boom. Metal flashed in the afternoon sun. Red striped the cumulous clouds in the deep blue sky. The sky rained alfalfa pellets. The black sedan smoldered while pieces of the pickup hung like tinsel in the tops of trees.

April, 1936

Rusk County, TX

John Baker Hendrick clasped eleven-year-old Seaborn Hand Hendrick on the shoulder, using him like a walking cane. They weaved a path around prickly pine saplings and over branches, fallen, broken, rotting. They sidestepped tentacles of thorn-studded vines. An undergrowth of living things and dead clutched at their feet.

The elderly man and his grandson were already a half mile or so from the Studebaker, parked back alongside the road. They continued to hike, uphill, through hardwoods and loblolly pines—mostly 50 to 90 feet tall—thick as standing corn. Sunlight filtered through boughs of oak, sassafras, and blackgum onto owl droppings and deer tracks. From the earth, rose the leather-and-velvet odor of wet dirt and decaying leaves. Pines dripped their heavy, pungent scent. Wrist-thick vines of wisteria wrapped around hardwood hosts, their clusters of tiny purple blossoms dangling like flattened grapes, the heat squeezing from them a tipsy-sweet smell.

The boy raised his arm to wipe his brow on his short-sleeved shirt. His nose twitched from the salty scent of his sweat.

The old man lifted his straw hat—not his square one with its black ribbon band that stayed in its box in the closet except Sundays, his large round wispy one—and wiped his forehead with his red bandana.

Up ahead, a mockingbird flooded the air with rapid repetitions of redbird chirrups, dove coos, bluejay screeches, and melodies of his own invention. The state bird blended other birdsongs into his own as effortlessly as Texans claimed six flags of culture, mixed them with a peculiar brand of friendly pride, and made themselves a heritage of their own, a heritage of independence and hospitality, the language of the Lone Star.

Seaborn carelessly stepped on a dry twig. Crack! The bird’s gray and white feathers flashed among the foliage, leaving them only the distant cawing of a crow. The weight of his grandfather’s hand rested heavier on Seaborn’s shoulder as they trudged through denser brush, the ground uneven, ever-sloping. He looked up and saw his grandpa wince. A squirrel, somewhere high overhead, barked angrily. Seaborn asked, “Papaw, are we trespassin’?”

“Nope. Owner of this land’s a friend o’ mine.”

“Papaw, how come you want to show me an old cemetery?”

The man paused, wiped his face and neck, then folded his bandana and stuffed it into the hip pocket of his coveralls. “A hundred years ago this month, Texas won her

independence. Your great-great-grandma Dodson was there to see it. I figure it's worth commemoratin' and besides, it's high time you learned your family history."

The copse gave way to shrubs surrounding an area the size of Seaborn's one-room schoolhouse. He and his grandpa gingerly avoided tripping over large iron ore rocks, bearing crudely-etched inscriptions, and sandstone markers, engraved with names, dates, and epitaphs. Some were all but buried among the bull nettle, occasional clumps of prickly pear cactus, and tall purple-flowered weeds.

"Papaw, who do we know that's buried here?"

"You'll see, my boy, you'll see."

The old man studied the tall grass. He took the boy's hand and led him to a spot where two gravestones lay flat, hidden under layers of pine needles and grass roots. John Baker Hendrick kicked aside most of the vegetation and then stepped back. "Seaborn, clear them rocks so's you can read what's written on 'em."

The boy ripped roots and brushed away sand and dark moist earth to read:

REV. OBADIAH DODSON

1785 – 1855

... your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

He read the epitaph on the second:

MARTHA ANN BAKER

HENDRICK MALONE VINCE DODSON

1789 – 1869

Forgive and ye shall be forgiven.

He looked up at his grandfather.

"There's one more." His grandfather pointed at a wooden cross, leaning forward over the grave adjacent to Ann Dodson's as if its pocket-knife-scratched inscription was meant to be read by the dead, not the living.

Seaborn straightened it and knelt, studying to make out the writing:

ARLIE

1785 – 1867

*If the Son, therefore, shall make you free,
you shall be free indeed.*

When Seaborn stood, he asked, "Who's Arlie?"

"She was Grandma Dodson's lifelong friend."

"Why are they buried here instead of Harmony Hill Cemetery with the rest of the family?"

"Grandma Dodson wanted to be buried betwixt the two people she'd learned to love most, the ones who taught her about true love. The reverend died and then Arlie.

Ann insisted on Arlie bein' buried here with a space for herself 'twixt Arlie and Obadiah for when her time came. That caused quite a scandal, lemme tell you. There weren't no way the rest of the family was gonna be buried here after that. Your great-aunt Fannie, Dr. Seaborn Hendrick's wife—the Seaborn you're named after—she wouldn't hear of it.”

“Why, Papaw?”

“Arlie was colored.”

The boy remained silent.

“I never knowed Arlie, but Grandma Dodson told me all about her. She was a fine woman.” The elderly man removed his hat and twisted it in his hands. “Seaborn honored his ma's wishes, but Fannie made him promise the rest of the family would all be laid to rest in Nip 'n' Tuck—that's what we old timers call Harmony Hill. They had Nip 'n' Tuck declared white only.”

“What about these other graves here in this little cemetery, Papaw?”

“White—so far's I know. Not even my friend what owns this property know'd a colored's buried here. It's a family secret. Can I trust you to keep it?”

The boy nodded and squeezed the gnarled fingers that engulfed his smooth hand. “What was she like, Papaw—Grandma Dodson?”

Between the white whiskers of the old man's beard and moustache, a smile peeped. A glint of sunlight filtering through the leafy canopy brightened his denim-blue eyes. “Grandma Dodson and me—we spent a heap o' time together just afore she died. She told me her life's story, boy, and I'll never forget it. Let's get on back to the house, and I'll tell it to you. You won't be forgettin' it neither.”