

SAMUEL & SON

The triumphal 4:00 o'clock whistle blew, and the men of the day shift began to emerge in small clusters through the great iron doors of the engine room at Western Natural Gas and Pipeline Co. Awaiting them were a dozen or more ten-year-old Fords and Chevys huddled like cattle against the plant's perimeter fence.

Samuel "Tiny" Morton pulled a heavy mackinaw together over his bib overalls. Then he pulled the brim of his sweat-stained LBJ Stetson low over his eyes against the brightness of the afternoon sun. He chatted with Clint Prichard as their steps chattered on the thin layer of frozen snow that covered the gravel driveway.

Carl Peterson was just coming out of the building. "Hey, Tiny! When's the college boy gettin' home?" he hollered.

"May be here already!" Morton, grinning broadly, yelled back. "We're goin' out in the morning to get our Christmas mallard!"

"You off this weekend?" asked Prichard.

"Yeah, I traded with Woods. This way, he gets off Christmas weekend and I get to go huntin' with ol' Travis."

“You know y’all are gonna freeze your butts off, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but it’ll be worth it,” laughed Morton. “Me and Travis haven’t been huntin’ in a couple of years, and he really likes it. Has ever since he was just a sprout.” Tiny Morton’s face was locked in a dimpled grin, as his heart swelled with anticipation.

“It’s your butts! Be careful. ...You startin’ graveyards Monday?”

“Yep.”

“See you then,” said Prichard as he got into his car.

Morton squeezed into the only Renault Dauphin on the parking lot and jerked the door shut. “Sounds like my lunch box lid,” he thought. He started the engine. He could not bear to wait for it warm up as long as usual, and the little engine seemed to struggle more than usual down the one-mile stretch into town – a stretch that seemed much longer than usual on this particular Friday afternoon. Everything seemed more than usual on this day.

Sinclair, Texas lay wide-open, sunny, cold, and clean. Numbered streets, neatly curbed and guttered, ran east-west and intersected equally trimmed and lettered avenues that ran north-south. Not even the enormous grain storage elevator of Sinclair Co-op violated this grid motif. It formed a straight, high wall across a portion of the northern edge of town, proudly representing the largest grain storage in Texas north of the Canadian River. The high school and its grounds, including the gymnasium and especially the football stadium formed the largest blocks on the grid. Then there was City Hall, a modest, one-story, flat-topped building with a spacious lawn in front. After that, it would be the

churches: two for the Baptists, one for the Methodists, one for the Church of Christ, one for the Assembly of God, and one for the Pentecostals. Catholics had to go to Avon or Alexander. The unsaved stayed home or sat around at Sinclair Drug on Sunday mornings.

The town's name came from a nearby refinery that employed many of its residents. Yet, in spite of its proximity to the refinery, two pipeline stations, and a scattered handful of pump jacks, Sinclair had little of the industrial atmosphere of, say, Borger or Skellytown. Whiffs of petroleum and sulfur rarely drifted into Sinclair. An International Harvester implement store and the huge grain elevator spoke more of a farming community than of the oil patch.

The whole town sat on one square section of land in the middle of the "Golden Spread," a term coined for that part of the Panhandle by an Amarillo newscaster. The fields in all directions were perfect 640-acre sections of various grain crops in various stages of development and, therefore, of various colors. "From heaven, it must look like a huge patchwork quilt," Elaine Morton, Samuel's wife, would say.

As Morton turned right at the first street on the south side of Sinclair, he could see all the way to his house: red brick with white trim and a perfect Christmas tree growing in front. But the smile he had been holding impatiently since leaving the plant began to wane as it became clear that his son's car was not there.

"Must have got a late start from school," he told himself.

Mrs. Morton, who was cutting up fryers, turned and, wiping her hands on her apron, stepped across the little kitchen to get and give a kiss to her husband as he came in from the carport and set his lunchbox on the floor.

“Travis is here,” she said as Tiny wrestled out of the Mackinaw. “He dropped off his laundry and had to run right back out to go see somebody. One of the guys, I think.”

Tiny noted the bulging bag on the floor in front of the washing machine as he hung his coat and hat by the door.

“He’ll be back in time for supper. Heather and the kids are coming over, too. Jack is working evenings.”

“Good. Did he say anything about hunting tomorrow?”

“No. He seemed pretty rushed.”

“Well, I’ll get washed up and come in and help you set the table or something.”

“No, no. I mean, you can get washed up, all right, but just get off your feet a while. Heather can help me when she gets here.”

Rolling his sleeves up, Tiny headed toward the bathroom. He scrubbed with soap and water halfway to his elbows, then splashed cold water on his face before drying vigorously with a towel and combing his tangerine hair. Looking into the mirror, he told himself almost aloud, “Naw. I can’t go looking for him all over town.” He remembered having to do just that once during the high school days.

As he stepped back into the living room, there was a familiar racket at the kitchen door and in came the twins with their mother right behind them.

“Grampa! Grampa!” They ran for him with outstretched arms, each hugging a leg as he bent down to touch their heads. Then, grabbing his hand, Patty Lynn, yelled, “Pick us up Grampa!”

“Hang on,” he said. As he hoisted her by her hands, her brother grabbed the other arm and, planting a foot against his grandfather’s leg as if scaling a tree, said, “All the way to the ceiling, Grampa!”

Tiny chuckled as he situated each child on a shoulder and they steadied themselves by hanging on to his hair. “Grandma, look!” said Mark, wide-eyed. “I can touch the ceiling,” and he stretched upward. “Make me touch the ceiling, Grampa!”

“Give your grampa a break, kids,” said their mother. “He’s tired. He’s been working all day.”

“I am not letting anybody down until I get some kisses,” Tiny demanded as he lowered them to his chest, holding one in each arm like a sack of groceries.

“Okay, okay,” consented Patty Lynn with a giggle. “Just don’t whisker us!” With arms wrapped around his neck, they each pecked his sandpaper face, touching their cheeks to his and shrieking as he accused them of being the ones doing the whiskering.

“All right. Down you go.” Finally he and his daughter had a moment to greet one another with a kiss.

“Jack’s working evenings,” said Heather, explaining her husband’s absence.

“Too bad. More fried chicken for me, though,” said Tiny.

“Tsk. Daddy.”

Tiny made his way to the sofa and sank into it. The children had turned on the TV and were twisting the dial, looking for cartoons. Trying all three channels at least twice and finding no Bullwinkle or Mighty Mouse, Mark was about to turn it off when Tiny said, “No, no. Just leave it right there. I want to watch that.” Loosening his laces, he said, “Why don’t each of you take a foot and help me get these boots off.”

After quickly negotiating the wages for this service – a nickel apiece – the twins straddled his ankles and began to tug.

Tiny had turned his attention to a special TV news report. “Now there’s a negro who could be president,” he commented to anyone who may be listening. Apparently the twins were listening more than one might expect.

“What’re they doing, Grampa?”

“They’re demonstrating.”

“Oh,” said the twins almost in unison as if they knew exactly what he meant. “Grampa have you ever seen a real black person?”

“Sure.”

“Where?”

“Well, I’ve worked with Negroes on cotton farms and in the navy, and there’s a lot of Negroes down in Amarillo.”

“What about yellow people?”

“Yep. In the navy.”

“What about red people?” asked Patty Lynn.

“I, I know,” Mark chimed in eagerly. “Indians. Indians are, are red.”

“Yep. I’ve seen them all: red and yellow, black and white.”

“We, we’ve seen some, some brown people a, a lot of times at town. I, I mean at a church over there where we live,” Mark continued excitedly.

“Grampa, why did God make some people black and some people white?”

“Same reason He made flowers different colors, I imagine. God must like different colors. So we shouldn’t be mean to anybody just because they are a different color.”

Patty Lynn looked at the back of her hand, turned it, and wondered if it were really white. She wondered also why Grampa had answered a question she hadn’t asked.

“There he is!” Tiny called, looking out the front window.

“It’s your brother,” Mrs. Morton guessed from her husband’s tone. She and Heather went into the living room to greet him.

“Hi, Dad. Hi, Heather. I’m in kind of a hurry. Mom, have you put my clothes on to wash yet?”

“No, we just...”

“Okay, okay. I got a clean shirt, and I can wear these Levi’s again. Heather could you control your kids? I gotta get in the shower.”

With that, the Long-awaited One disappeared into the bathroom.

“What’s with him?” asked Heather as she and her parents looked at each other.

“We can talk about it over supper,” Elaine suggested with forced reassurance.

Minutes later, steam was seeping around the bathroom door, and soon, Travis emerged in a white cloud, wearing one towel and rubbing his hair with another as he disappeared once more; this time, into a bedroom.

In the kitchen, the table was set with ice tea, mashed potatoes, cream gravy, cole slaw, light bread, oleo, and a large platter of fried chicken. Soon Travis emerged from the bedroom, contributing the aroma of Jai Karate to that of the hot supper.

“Hey, Dad. Can I borrow five dollars? Mike’s in from Tech, and we are gonna hang out downtown and see who else we might run into.”

“Sure, but sit down and have some supper first. Your mother fixed fried chicken.”

“Nah, that’s okay. I’m not hungry now. Might grab a hamburger later.”

“What? Turning down fried chicken! You always ate your mom’s chicken like it was gonna be your last supper!”

“Yeah. I was a kid, then, Dad.”

“Well, okay. If that’s the way you’re gonna be,” Tiny kidded. “Just more for me and your sister.”

“I gotta go, Dad,” the boy insisted, holding out his hand.

“Here. Here’s ten. Bert’s open till 7:00. You can get a haircut while you’re at it.”

“A haircut? I swear, that’s all your generation can think about,” he said as he took the bill. “How people are dressed and how long their hair is. No wonder we are in a screwed up war in Viet Nam. Y’all are still trying to relive the glories of World War II.”

“Well, you don’t *have* to get a haircut,” Tiny chuckled. “I just... I didn’t mean to have a falling-out with you.”

Trying to smile, the father searched his son’s face for forgiveness and acceptance. The boy punched his billfold the last quarter inch into his hip pocket, said he might be in late, don’t wait up, and was out the door.

Samuel Morton stood a moment in silence, staring at the door. He didn’t know what was happening. He didn’t know his own son anymore. He didn’t know how that came to be, and he didn’t know what to do about it. But he knew he would not be kneeling beside his son in the stubble by a playa lake in the cold, early hours tomorrow morning. He wiped a rough finger under his eyelid and continued staring.

“That door facing isn’t square,” he noted to himself. “There’s liable to be a crack running from the corner by summer.”

“Sam. It’s on the table.”

“I’m coming, honey. Let me wash up,” he rasped.

