

**Meet-up in town**

His head suddenly began throbbing with pain. Good God, not a seizure. It had been years since the last one, a gift from the enemy that kept giving. Not today. The deck was stacked enough, but he might have to contend with the legacy of that concussion so many years ago. Now, he was running to town on an errand that that damned Beckham had caused.

The railroad gate drops just as Joe Johnson's truck arrives behind another vehicle stopped in front of the tracks.

"Damned train makes only two runs and it has to cross now? I got business!" The other driver must have heard him yelling. His hand is waving.

The message left on his phone was cryptic. "Bring your wallet. Arrested this morning."

Dale Foster married his pregnant daughter. She never looked more beautiful in the pictures on his phone. Expectant Blanca gave the long-suffering family a reason to smile. Esperanza. That was the name they chose for his grand daughter. It means hope.

The engineer leans on the horn as the train continues into town. The clacking rail cars move off the highway and the gate lifts. Johnson passes the car in front of him before the turn. He curses when he makes the turn to find more than the usual amount of vehicles parked in the center of town. What is this? It was the middle of the week and people should be working on their irrigation systems.

The meet-up is at Beckham's Supply & Feed Store near the crossroad with the highway just across from the jail. Johnson pulls up as talk turns ugly.

Their loud voices draw a boy in overalls who knows he should not be there listening to the angry men. Meanwhile, Beckham nervously looks on from the window that still bears the sign: "Fungicide \$199."

One of the men calls out: "Once again, Beckham ran out of the sale item first thing in the morning."

Their harsh tones make young Michael wince. But he moves closer. Unconsciously scratching his neck, the boy is suddenly aware of the sweat dripping on his neck and shoulders. It's hell outside in the parking lot fit only for scorpions and goat head weeds. Wide-brimmed hats are stained with sweat. Some remove hats to dab at their foreheads. Michael, though, feels a chill and it pours into his veins in the same way panic had months ago when life changed for his family. That's when his momma was loaded onto a gurney and into a big vehicle with the loud siren and flashing bright lights.

There is talk that Dale Foster is going to the "big house." Some wonder aloud about the chances for such an occurrence. Johnson is no small figure in the county, one of them declares. His orchards produce a third of what is grown in Beckham and Hill counties.

"Won't matter," says a thin man with a gray mustache. "Foster just walked into a buzz saw. Beckham will make sure the judge gets an earful and Foster will be at the state pen before he knows it."

Foster insisted on paying the sale price. Like the Johnsons, Foster pays cash. In other words, he had no account with Beckham. When Beckham rang up his purchase at the full price, Foster left the store without having paid for the three containers of fungicide. That's what Beckham told the sheriff. Foster complained he paid the sale price. He left cash on the counter. He was halfway down the road when he was pulled over and slapped in handcuffs.

A man wearing a scowl peers from under the shadow of his hat to glance at Michael who wears an expression of the proverbial deer in the headlights. The man turns and he rails about his run of bad luck.

“That fungicide’s not worth spit. Martinez over in Hill County says his trees are ruined and he sprayed hell out of ‘em. Who’s gonna buy a charred field out in the middle of a goddamned disaster area? You fellas know what we got invested out there.”

“Yep. Just about everything,” another man remarks.

“We fight the frost, insects and everything that comes our way. This year’s worse. We got a disaster here. People on the north end got it bad. And here’s Beckham selling out the people who shop his store.”

“We are the reason people in this town put food on the table!” There is general agreement on this last note. The men are more agitated. Michael is in the full grip of fear as they move into the street.

A large man in a plaid green shirt barks: “We gotta do somethin’!”

They spy Johnson, who is walking past the crowd to the sheriff’s office. Johnson is having none of whatever is going on.

“You guys got nothin’ better to do this morning?”

A man in the crowd calls back.

“Bank’s people are over there with the sheriff. They gotta be making plans to foreclose.”

“Yeah. Everyone’s got problems.”

They shake their heads. Some scuff the gravel with work boots. The boots and their pants have black smears, the occupational hazard of conducting controlled burns. Johnson disappears into the sheriff's office. When he returns, his face is red, and he pauses. His boot lands on a scorpion as he stops and considers saying something to the men. But he's had enough. He pulls off his hat and climbs into his pickup without uttering a word. Exasperated, some in the crowd leave for their trucks and depart. Others linger in the lot and watch as Johnson's truck heads down the road.

Just then, the sheriff's door swings open and men wearing suits appear. The remaining men move in their direction.

"Ain't no spray for this disease," they shout after the men in suits.

"Tell the vultures in 'Sanantone' the county has gone to fungus! This land is only worth what someone will pay for charcoal!"

The growers all yell as the men in suits tip their hats.

"Not getting my land!"

"Go on! Get back to Sanatone! Damned Bastards!"

The hectoring continues to rain on the strangers as they walk the short distance to a shiny vehicle with plates that indicate the SUV traveled up from San Antonio. The crowd approaches the vehicle, but it is already pulling away. Tires throw the gravel at the protesters as the vehicle accelerates to the end of the road and turns onto highway.

The men stay and grouse before someone suggests they do something about their thirst. Some wander over to the Sundown saloon.

Not far from the commotion, Beckham appears at the door and calls out.

“He’s walked off again, Turner. You want your son locked up, too?”

Neil Turner is about to catch up with Michael who slipped out the door with a bag of peanuts.

“Horse apples, Beckham. Put it on the account!” He tugs on Michael’s shoulder. “Michael, you can’t be here.” Some in the crowd linger and are suddenly aware they have been grousing in front of a youngster. One of the men apologizes as they, too, move toward the saloon.

Turner glances their way but starts another lecture about wandering off, and ushers Michael to the family car. Turner can be heard delivering a stern lecture as they head off.

“I told you to stay put, didn’t I?”

### **Blackened landscape**

Once bountiful orchards now form a growing black scar across the heart of Texas. Devastation was the talk all spring and now as summer is upon the people of Beckham County. The men who buy everything from cigarettes to heavy equipment at Beckham’s keep their eyes riveted to a TV mounted on the back wall. An endless procession of dark images parades before their eyes - ominous clouds of smoke stacked high in an amber-colored sky, flashing emergency lights and charred trees. The devastation spreads west toward New Mexico and stops as the terrain turns to desert. Weathered barns, abandoned farm equipment and blackened fields are what remain.

The face on the tube recites the falling commodity price as graphics crawl across the screen. Video shows people

moving their belongings and hanging their heads. When the dreaded foreclosure signs began appearing on fence posts and doors across the entire county jaws dropped. Michael's father summed it up succinctly:

"Reality's set in."

Occasionally, a large girthed tree trunk would land on a fire sending an explosion of sparks skyward. The embers from fires danced on the air. The acrid smoke burned their reddened eyes.

Michael watched from the window of his mother's bedroom as she slept fitfully. Embers danced on the air.

The people from the county agent's office surely knew it was the beginning of the end when insects ravaged trees a year before. The absence of blooms in the new season revealed what they feared. Devastation from rot began in Lancaster up by Dallas and spread to neighboring orchards. More and more, Michael's mother wore a look of worry and could be heard crying softly into a pillow after they all retired for the evening.

#### **The dark and the deaths of insects**

The salad days, his father called those first days in the house. Salad made Michael blanch, but he sensed the saying meant something good judging by his father's grin when he talked about buying the farm miles from the city. That first year was a wonderful time for a seven-year-old who liked to explore and catch bullfrogs from the nearby creek. Mom's "brave warrior" ignored the warnings about snakes and spiders in the crawl space under the house. Michael had a plan for pests. He lined the house with horse apples he brought back from the creek a short distance off the property. A borrowed charcoal lighter in hand, he would disappear under the porch and stay there for hours.

Michael would end the tiny lives of black widow spiders. The bigger ones would disappear in a small explosion that made a popping noise. The insect population was devastated. Michael amused himself in the shadow under the house sometimes staying out long past time his dad would call him to get ready for bed. Michael stayed because he knew teenagers were sneaking onto their property at night, and he spied on them when they moved gingerly through the barbed wire fence. Michael watches them this third time they visited. They head for the gazebo that is hidden among trees. Michael tiptoes after them. They are quiet except for the sounds they make when they kiss. He helps her with her T-shirt that she removes. Her bra follows. Michael gasps as her breasts leave her bra. The girl shoots a look in Michael's direction and quickly grabs up her shirt dashing away with the young man in pursuit. Michael giggles as they make their retreat.

They were like him, curious and indifferent to danger. His nocturnal exploring largely went unnoticed. His mother tired before dinner and she would move to her bed. His father stared into his laptop occasionally cursing the arrival of another bill. For Michael, his powerful curiosity would not give him peace. But there was an unspoken code among the nocturnal wanderers. Betrayal was out of the question.

Night adventures, though, increasingly took a toll. Michael would sit up in bed after a disturbing nightmare. Before going to the hospital, his mother had thrown up blood and then fainted. In his dream, he saw hundreds of spiders scurry over her bed and pillow. The ambulance that came and took her away was the end of talk about salad days. There would be no more barbecues, no more outdoors dancing.

### **Deal in Dallas**

It was no coincidence that Beckham, the storeowner, shared the same name as the county. His great, great-grandfather

owned most of the county before the surviving family began selling it off piece by piece. Neil Turner knew Beckham from his days in Dallas and before. He leapt at the chance to buy a place when old man Beckham passed away. Turner thought he was “making a steal.” His wife mentioned her worry. He had no experience as a grower or a real estate investor specialized in agricultural land. The property was too far from Dallas, she said. Neil Turner brought his tie to a makeshift table set up in the kitchen. Arthur Beckham signed over the deed personally as Turner took scissors to fabric with a self-satisfied grin. Michael watched Beckham, another man called Jones and his father shake hands. Soon after, a procession of movers brought their belongings from a large truck. The worst was behind Beckham County, his father would say as the family walked the orchard that first time. He could not have been more wrong.

Beckham only spoke when he reached the threshold of the front door.

“A stake in Country Homes and acreage to go with it. That’s a damned smart investment you made, Turner.” He turned, stooped his head for the doorway and followed his lawyer out.

Smoke from the fires drifted over the new construction at the development. The carpenters and form setters showed up from the Dallas and Fort Worth suburbs. They could be heard tapping their hammers. Suddenly, large cement trucks appeared.

The fires had claimed hundreds of acres of dead or dying trees. Amid all the gloom, the school’s coach had posted a signup sheet. The sheet for baseball bore only the name Mike Turner. Michael stared at it. How would a new kid at school ever make friends if no one else signed on? An older schoolmate broke the bad news.



“No one’s signin’ for ball. More than half the team could be gone in a few months. Go home, kid.”

Michael walked the mile home kicking horse apples from the road and throwing rocks at birds.