

The Promise of the Territory · Robert Taylor, Jr.

GUTHRIE. MULHALL. ORLANDO, Perry, Ceres, Three Sands, and Tonkawa. Blackwell. He liked the flat land in between, the gray farmhouses, the long straight road lined with dark telephone poles, the wires rising and falling in sweet regular curves from pole to pole like moving arcs that would make circles if they could, a lot of perfect circles all across the dull sky. The boy slept, his head pressed against the window glass. It was a straight smooth road once you crossed the Cimarron. All you heard was the wind rushing around the car. The engine, a big Firedome-8 with plenty of reserve power, ran quiet, and warm air from under the dash came silently out onto your legs and into the rest of the car.

Softly to himself he sang: *Oh, them golden slippers*—started whistling, half-hoping that the boy would wake up. He could use a little talk. He wanted to teach his son how to look at this land, how to *see* it, didn't want the boy to grow up like his mother, not knowing, not caring about all that made this soil precious. Not the wheat. It was what came before the wheat. What happened here. The courage. The endurance, the strength of people such as his grandmother, Mary Susan Haynes, walking the breadth of this state when it was Indian Territory, from Missouri to Texas, walking alongside a wagon that held all her family's earthly belongings, everything they—her mother and her sisters—could load into it before the Federals set fire to their home. That was a story for you!

At last the grain elevators appeared, clean white columns against the gray sky, and he nudged the boy. Hey, wake up, he said, we're there.

Where?

Blackwell. Where we've been headed ever since we left. Where'd you think?

I forgot.

You missed the scenery.

Main Street was pretty bleak, too cold for shoppers, he supposed, everybody snug in their little frame houses that didn't have to be outside somewhere, wives keeping themselves warm, their hair rolled tight, one of them his pioneer lady, readying herself for his visit. It wouldn't be the same, of course, with the boy along, but it would be all right. He would call her from the Conoco station, like always.

Where, the boy asked, is the school?

We're coming to it. It's not on the main drag. Got to get gas first. You have a good sleep?

Yeah, I guess so.

You slept through it all, all the towns and scenery between.

Did we go through Guthrie?

Yep. Sure did.

I wanted to see Guthrie.

Well, you'll just have to stay awake on the way back.

I told Mrs. Unger I'd see Guthrie. It grew into a city overnight.

It'll still be there tomorrow.

The clock inside the Conoco station read eleven twenty-five. They had made good time. It felt all right, though, to get out and stretch. The wind hit him hard, a bracing chill, and he stepped briskly into the station, the boy behind him. The attendant, a skinny fellow he didn't recognize, stood by the rear fender watching the rapidly revolving numbers in the pump as if fascinated by the sight. The boy went straight to the rack of maps beside the telephone.

Need to go to the restroom?

He wanted to himself, but thought he'd make his call first.

Just a minute, the boy said.

You open up one of those maps, you'll never get it folded back right.

Yes, I will.

The restroom hadn't been cleaned in no telling how long. It smelled bad, the heat didn't work, the toilet was clogged. The condom machine, stuck onto the wall right above the toilet, had a little piece of paper taped to it that read, Out of Order. Beneath the message somebody had printed in big schoolboy letters, *Good Luck Cowboy*.

It's dirty, he told the boy. Can you wait a while longer?

The boy was sitting at the gray desk, a map open before him.

I found where we are, he said. Blackwell. We're almost to Kansas.

The attendant looked as though he were polishing the windshield.

I have to make a quick phone call.

Can we go to Kansas?

Not this trip.

I wonder what it's like in Kansas.

He used the phone on the desk. The boy wouldn't listen. But there wasn't an answer. Where in hell could she be? Hadn't she got his letter?

I wish we could go to Kansas, the boy said.

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He had to get his mind on his business, but first had to show the boy where the restroom was. Eleven years old and still you had to lead him around by the hand. It's right there, right at the end of the hall. Do I have to go in with you too? He guessed the boy was afraid of those gangly fellows in letter jackets that leaned against the lockers and stared. Beyond them the open door to the cafeteria let out a muted flurry of voices. At the other end the dark hallway

turned, led to the offices where he was awaited. This would be a hard one. McMann had had this order for years, rings, diplomas, band uniforms, yearbooks, the works. It was politics. McMann knew how to politic a superintendent, court a principal. He'd not been so good at that himself. Some of these schoolmen—educators, they liked to be called—seemed to him as gray and regular as the buildings they sat ensconced in, gray right through to the bone. You didn't dislike them; they were more like landmarks than people.

It smells like smoke in there, the boy said. Can I go downtown now?

In just a minute. I want you to come meet someone.

The principal?

Yeah. You're going to help me get this order.

How?

Just by being yourself.

In the office a woman sat rigid before a typewriter, her hair, the color of mahogany, shining under the buzzing fluorescent light as though it were plugged in beneath the desk. He didn't know her. There was another, he thought, a shorter, thinner woman with gray hair and wire-rimmed glasses. A Lucille or Pauline. Usually he could remember their names, and almost always their faces, but this one he had no recollection of. She didn't look up. Wasn't she a plump one though!

Hi, he said, leaning on the counter, drumming his fingers on it. Keeping busy these days, I see.

It could have been a new hairdo, gussied up and hennaed, that was throwing him off.

Oh, she said. Hello. I didn't hear you come in.

Well, you're just working up a storm there. Living in your own world—that paper there, my—and I'm quiet as a cat. Don't like to interrupt concentration like that.

Well, now. And did you have an appointment?

Yes, Ma'am, I did. I'm even a few minutes early.

You must be Mr. McMann.

No. Jim Haynes. Sooner Enterprises. And this is my boy.

Oh, and what's your name, honey?

Jimmy Haynes.

She leaned over the counter, extending her hand to Jimmy. She was glad to know him. Her name was Stella Harvey and she liked to be called just Stella. She had a son she'd bet was the same age as he was—nine, wasn't he? Eleven! Well, she guessed her Donny was big for his age. Took after his mama, she supposed, laughing. She should reduce, she knew, but she never could resist temptations, not the slightest bit of will power.

She invited them to step around the counter.

He's probably expecting you.

He thanked her. He thought he'd made an appointment weeks ago, but he could have been mistaken. His territory was large. He called on a lot of people.

She was sure he did. Right this way.

All these offices were laid out the same, with the laminated counter, the gray clock against the wall, the windows with venetian blinds, radiators beneath them hissing and clanking, the secretary's desk in the very center as formidable as a pulpit.

Mr. Marvin, she said. A Mr. Lane to see you.

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Okay, he told the boy. You sure you know where you're going?

Yeah. Downtown. Two blocks that way.

Don't get lost.

He watched the boy walk away, across the baseball diamond towards the squat frame houses, and then he lifted the heavy sample case from the trunk and lugged it inside. Stella smiled, opening the door for him.

Right over here, Jim, Marvin said. Just set it here on top of the desk.

Stella gone, it was quiet in Marvin's office. They always had them sound-proofed, liked their offices snug, like bomb shelters, he imagined, the desk drawers filled with tins of preserved fruits and vegetables and processed meats. He thought of the cellar in the old house, the house he always remembered as his father's house even though his mother no doubt chose it and saw that it was well maintained, the clapboard siding kept fresh-painted, gutters clean as her china and silver. When he was Jimmy's age he went down to the storm cellar, this in the summertime, and it was cool and dark, the air sweet, the smell of rich clay and, faintly, of cucumbers, melons. I'm hiding out, he told himself, from the Federals. They are setting fire to the house, but I will build it again when they are gone.

He snapped open the dark leather case. The rings, of highly polished gold, some with ruby stones deep red like beets, were pressed into soft slotted stretches of white silk in five V-shaped, parallel ranks on a field of black velvet. He set the display carefully in the center of the desk and then pulled from the case another, with the rings in arched rows that turned upwards gracefully, the background scarlet. This one he handed directly to the principal, who was standing behind the desk, his face, Jim now saw, red, the skin loose around the jawbone, the stiff white collar of his shirt rising into the flesh of his neck as though showing off its greater strength, the neck itself almost nothing at all, a few folds of skin which, if you could touch it, would feel like nubby linen. Marvin glanced briefly at the rings, laid the display next to the other on the desk. There was nothing else on the desktop, save the plaque that read MR. MARVIN and two white envelopes, unaddressed, side by side in a wire

basket marked OUT. Back of the desk, straight and flush against the mint-green wall, hung a dark-framed color photo-portrait of Eisenhower, his cheeks made rosy like a woman's and his grin, Jim thought, like that of a small boy given a book for Christmas instead of a cap pistol. He'd voted for Stevenson, always voted the Democratic ticket straight down the line, just like his father, and proud of it. Republicans were no good, Eisenhower too ignorant to know better. Principals were almost always Republicans, you could count on it, their bread buttered by a school board of bankers and doctors.

That's some boy you've got, Marvin said.

Oh, yeah. He likes to travel. I'll have him in the territory with me one of these days.

They grow up fast.

Yes, indeed. You have children too, I suppose.

Marvin smiled, his lips pressed close together.

A daughter, he said. At O. U. Majoring in Public Relations.

A good field.

We think so. It's not education.

Oh, no. But it's useful. Those big companies, they go for Public Relations. Dallas, Houston, Oklahoma City too. It's opening up. A wide-open field.

There's no money in education. Have a seat—it's Haynes, isn't it? Not Lane.

Right. Jim Haynes.

She never gets anything right.

Well—

She's Bill Harvey's wife. Replaced the best secretary I ever had.

Marvin sat stiffly in the swivel chair behind the desk, quickly clasping his hands in front of him so that they just brushed the edge of the display cases. He looked as though he sat for his photograph. The caption in the yearbook would read: *Mr. Marvin at work*. His tie was pulled tight around his collar into a tiny hard knot and hung straight, held in place a third of the way down by a thin silver bar with a circled black *M* like a brand near the tip.

Sit down, Jim.

He sat. He hadn't realized that he had continued standing. He must have been staring. Time to get down to business.

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What do we do next?

The boy had a handful of postcards, black and white photos of oil fields and Main Streets, one of the Pioneer Woman statue in Ponca City, one of the skyline of Tulsa.

I've got someone I want you to meet. Have a good time?

Yeah. There's a T-G & Y. They had a fountain. I ate lunch there.

He drove to the end of Main Street, past the last store-front and the motor court to the Conoco station. The skinny attendant came out, made a joke about gas-guzzlers, then strolled back toward the pit, leaning into the wind. Just local calls now, he said, then pulled the overhanging door shut.

This time she was there.

Well, he told her. Don't you run off anywhere.

Well, he told the boy. We're all set.

Where we going?

It's an old friend I want you to meet.

Did you get the order?

Don't know. They don't let you know until later.

He turned off Main Street as though going again to the high school, but took a right before coming to the ball field, the DeSoto warm as toast even though he could hear the wind. You got more wind up here, fewer trees to block it. It blew straight down from Canada across the Dakotas, across Nebraska and Kansas, gathering speed, not losing any of its sharp bite, fierce as the devil by the time it cut across Oklahoma. At the end of the street the flat, empty land began, the short yellow grass whipping back and forth so that in the distance it took on an undulant texture like a big piece of velvet. Her house was in the middle of the block, a small frame house with a screened-in front porch, a low-slung asbestos roof, and a yard with a tree, a young mimosa he'd planted for her last spring. Seeing the tree, he shivered. It was bending every which way, its branches blowing about like so many pieces of string. Well, but it would survive. They had them all over Oklahoma City now. He had put one in his own front yard two years ago. They were tough little trees, and pretty when they blossomed.

Who lives here?

I told you. An old friend.

They've got a tree like ours.

On the porch were two metal lawn chairs painted dark green. She had the door open for them before he could knock.

Come in here! Get out of the cold. My goodness, isn't that wind terrible!

He nudged the boy in ahead of him. He wanted to kiss her, just a little peck on the cheek before the boy turned around, but she shot him a quick look that said don't you dare. Her auburn hair shone, the red in it glinting like all get-out. That's where she'd been—sure—at the beauty shop. The curls, so round and perfect you could stick two fingers through them, just touched her shoulders, and another, tighter cluster of them rose from the top of her forehead like a dark fistful of little flowers. She had turned from him fast, going after the boy, but he smelled the mint mouthwash on her breath, so strong that he knew she must have been drinking. That was all right. Probably she'd just taken a sip to fortify herself. It was only natural that she would be

a little nervous, meeting his son for the first time. He wasn't about to let a thing like that upset him—it was great seeing her again! It had only been three weeks, sure, but it seemed much longer than that.

This must be Jimmy, she said.

Yep. This is number one son.

The boy grinned, looked at the floor.

This is Mrs. Parker, son.

Let me take your coats. It's steaming in here. Doesn't it seem hot to you? Oh, it must. I know I keep it too warm in here, but when I get home I'm always *so* cold. As soon as the days get shorter, I start shivering.

It *was* warm. She knew how to make a nest, all right. She was one of those women like his grandmother who could make the shabbiest dwelling—a tent, a shanty, a sod house if she had lived in the days of the run like his grandmother had—into a comfortable, homey place. We slept in the wagon, his grandmother had told him, all the way across the territory. This was our home and we did not complain. We made it a home until better quarters were available. I would have slept out under the stars if Mama had permitted it. Wouldn't that have been a fine bedroom though? Oh, yes, he agreed. That would be best of all. Those days were gone now. You couldn't go back. His wife was right as far as that went. But was there anything wrong with remembering, with keeping the memories alive?

Tell me, boys. What are you all going to want for supper?

We can't stay, Aline. Just wanted to stop by and say hello.

Can't stay! What kind of talk is that I'm hearing from you, Jim Haynes. I can have supper on the table before you can blink an eye. I bought steaks from the IGA, and I have greens and a ton of potatoes and just about anything else you'd care to name.

She looked at Jimmy, smiling. Even ice cream, she said. Chocolate. You'll have to help on the ice cream because I can't eat it. It'll just sit there in my freezer, hard as a rock, taking up space.

He guessed they'd stay a little while, but she wasn't to go to any special trouble for them.

No trouble, she said. A pleasure. She seldom had company and it got pretty old eating alone.

You boys just make yourself at home, she said, while I go out here and see what I can throw together. It'll be better than you'll get in any restaurant around here, I guarantee you that.

It's not Thanksgiving yet, but we'll have ourselves a feast.

There's magazines on the coffee table, she called to them from the kitchen. *Look* and *Life* and the *Post*.

I was supposed to see Guthrie, the boy said. Now it's dark.

We had to eat somewhere, didn't we?

Mrs. Unger said you could see the capitol of the territory, where it was before they made Oklahoma a state.

There'll be another time.

She said it was made out of sandstone the same color as the dirt.

Bet she said *soil*, not *dirt*.

Yeah. Red soil.

Better not tell your mother we didn't see it. We'll see it next time. I wouldn't say anything about our dinner either. Let's keep it between you and me.

He didn't like night driving and wouldn't be doing it now if he hadn't brought the boy along. Of course there was school tomorrow, and you couldn't miss two days in a row. Anyway, the stars were bright. That was the thing about a November sky: you had bright stars. He had to keep his eyes on the road though, on that lighted portion in front of him, the center line white and straight.

You like history, don't you?

Yeah. I like the pioneer part. We're doing the pioneers now.

That right?

The Oklahoma pioneers.

Good. That's fine.

That's why I was supposed to see Guthrie.

They've got a sod house over in Alfalfa County. You know what a sod house is, don't you?

Sure. It's made of dirt and weeds.

Someday we'll go see it. Next time I have to go up to Fairview. We'll make a real trip of it. Stay overnight. Come back through Enid.

I'd like to go to California. They don't have winter there.

I'm glad you like history. It's important to know your heritage.

Okay if I turn the radio on?

There was a lot of static, the local stations all off the air at sunset and the signals from the Oklahoma City stations not quite strong enough.

Sometimes at night, Jimmy said, I can pick up New Orleans. Once I heard Chicago. Nothing tonight though.

He turned it off. This section of the highway wasn't laid right. The seams in the concrete made a rapid clicking as you drove over them. That meant Perry was next. Then Mulhall. Little towns with consolidated school districts. He called on them now and then, but they'd have to wait until the next time. If Marvin came through, at least on the diplomas, then he'd have his foot in

the door in Blackwell, and if he got Blackwell, why, Medford was bound to hear of it. It might just open up this territory for him.

He wasn't going to think about business tonight though. Aline had been just fine. What a spread she had laid out for them. She was enjoying playing hostess, you could tell, and he liked watching her do it, the way she had of letting you know it was a pleasure for her to have your company. You felt right at home, and he thought Jimmy had liked her too, even though he'd said precious little the entire time they were there. Still, he smiled and listened and ate a lot. The boy had good manners. He'd give his wife credit for that. She was always pulling at Jimmy though, taking him to church with her and making him feel that his own father was some kind of criminal for not going. What he wanted Jimmy to understand was that you didn't have to go to church to be religious. And that you could love your father as well as your mother. You didn't have to make a choice. You had to have a feeling for family. Her daddy was all she ever cared about. Her mother might go to hell, and her sisters, well, they weren't churchgoers and would go to hell whatever.

Take care of the future, she said, and the present will take care of itself. But how were you going to get along, he wondered, if you didn't know where you'd been? According to her way of thinking you'd been nowhere, not since the birth of Jesus Christ. Well, at least she believed in *something*. He wished Aline had something besides himself to depend on. He worried about her. She liked a good time, and so did he, but you couldn't be partying all the time, not in Blackwell, and he wasn't going to encourage her to move to Oklahoma City. That would just make for *more* problems, Bill Parker to deal with and plenty else besides.

What was a fellow to do? When he was Jimmy's age, he'd wanted to be a pilot. He kept a scrapbook filled with pictures of airplanes. Wouldn't it be fine if you could become what you wanted to be as a kid? Instead you just had to take what you could get and be thankful for that much.

The boy was asleep. Too bad. He wanted to talk. He wanted to tell Jimmy the story of Grandmother Haynes, how she and her mother and sisters had been burned out of their home in Missouri. That was a long time ago. The War Between the States. Your great-grandfather, like most of the men of that region, was fighting for the Confederacy.

He'd told Jimmy the story before, sure, but he never seemed to tell it right, and anyway what harm did it do to hear such a story more than once. Grandmother Haynes, her dark little eyes shining, had told it to him, after all, many times. Let them burn it, she'd said, let them burn house and barn and everything in it. We'll wait. We'll hide and when it's safe we'll come out and build it all back up again, just like it was before. But my mother said no, we'd leave this country and never come back. It would be ruined and never as good again. We'll go to Texas, she said. We'll cross the territory into Texas. What

about Daddy, I said, how will he know where we've gone to? He'll come back here and find ashes where the house used to be, and us nowhere in sight. How will he ever find us again?

There she paused. She reached down to pet the dog, always at her feet. Then she looked at him, her grandson James, and smiled, asked did he know what happened next. No, he said, though he knew the story by heart. No, tell me what happened next. Please, Nanaw.

We took to loading that wagon, that's what. We are not going into hiding, my mother said. We won't be hard to find for them that wants to look for us. It will be possible to write letters. That at least will not change.

She told of the strange birds circling above, the swift snakes crossing the dusty road, the terrible storms, the abiding hunger, the frail horses, the eternal squeak of the wagon wheels, the river crossings, the ferry across to Texas, how her mother raised up her hands, looked skyward, praised the Lord and not even a minute later the axle broke, snapped clean in two. No matter. They were in Texas!

They were coming into Guthrie. Here was the Cimarron in its sandy bed, a dark winding ribbon down there somewhere—there it was, the moon flashing on its surface, not much of a river, more of a creek really, but such a wide bed, as though once it held much more. Quicksand, Nanaw said. You always had to watch for quicksand—that was the hard part getting across, the water of course no trouble, scarce knee deep and barely moving, seeping down into the sand as much as flowing ahead.

Guthrie wasn't much anymore. Lost out to Oklahoma City. Never grew, developed, after statehood. It was a good little town for all that, with its wide Main Street and its red sandstone buildings. The old territorial capitol was now a Masonic Lodge, he believed. If buildings could talk, why, wouldn't there be some stories to tell? You better believe it.

He took a left onto Oklahoma Avenue at the stoplight, thinking that the capitol was in this direction.

Jimmy, he said. Wake up. Here's Guthrie. It's a clear night and the moon's full. You'll be able to see it fine. It's just as bright as day.

Jimmy woke, looked around as though disbelieving what lay so plainly, stark and beautiful in the moonlight, all around them. *Guthrie*, his father kept saying. *It's Guthrie. Where it all began.*