

THE  
SON

A NOVEL

PHILIPP  
MEYER

AUTHOR OF AMERICAN RUST





# THE SON

PHILIPP MEYER

**ecco**

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

# Dedication

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*For my family*

# Epigraph

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In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilised portion of mankind . . .

. . . its genius was humbled in the dust; and armies of unknown Barbarians, issuing from the frozen regions of the North, had established their victorious reign over the fairest provinces of Europe and Africa.

. . . the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works . . . buries empires and cities in a common grave.

—EDWARD GIBBON

# Acknowledgments

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RIP Dan McCall.

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THE McCULLOUGHS

ARMSTRONG McCULLOUGH (B. 1811)

+

NATALIA DIAZ



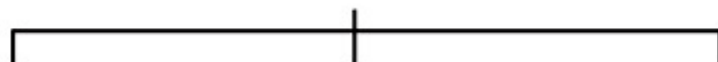
MARTIN (B. 1834)

ELI (B. 1836)

ELIZABETH (B. 1832)

+

MADELINE BLACK



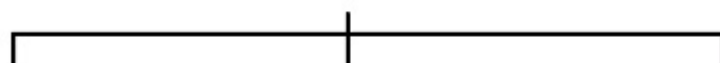
EVERETT (B. 1863)

PETER (B. 1870)

PHINEAS (B. 1867)

+

SALLY GASTON



GLENN (B. 1901)

CHARLES (B. 1899)

PETER JR. (B. 1900)

+

ELLEN SHUFF



JONAS (B. 1920)

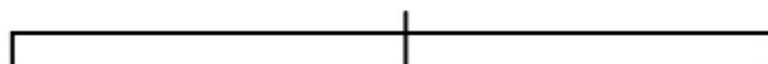
PAUL (B. 1923)

JEANNE ANNE (B. 1926)

CLINT (B. 1921)

+

HANK BOUDREAUX



THOMAS (B. 1950)

SUSAN (B. 1952)

BENJAMIN (B. 1953)



DELL (B. 1977)

ASH (B. 1979)





# Chapter One

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## Colonel Eli McCullough

*Taken from a 1936 WPA Recording*

It was prophesied I would live to see one hundred and having achieved that age I see no reason to doubt it. I am not dying a Christian though my scalp is intact and if there is an eternal hunting ground that is where I am headed. That or the river Styx. My opinion at this moment is my life has been far too short: the good I could do if given another year on my feet. Instead I am strapped to this bed fouling myself like an infant.

Should the Creator see fit to give me strength I will make my way to the waters that run through the pasture. The Nueces River at its eastern bend. I have always preferred the Devil's. In my dreams I have reached it three times and it is known that Alexander the Great, on his last night of mortal life, crawled from his palace and tried to slip into the Euphrates, knowing that if his body disappeared, his people would assume he had ascended to heaven as a god. His wife stopped him at the water's edge. She dragged him home to die mortal. And people ask why I did not remarry.

Should my son appear, I would prefer not to suffer his smile of victory. Seed of my destruction. I know what he did and I suspect he has long graced the banks of the river Jordan, as Quanah Parker, last chief of the Comanches, gave the boy scant chance to reach fifty. In return for this information I gave to Quanah and his warriors a young bull buffalo, a prime animal to be slain the old way with lances, on my pastures that had once been their hunting grounds. One of Quanah's companions was a venerable Arapahoe chief and as we sat partaking of the bull's warm liver in the ancient manner, he dipped in the animal's own bile, he gave me a silver band he had personally removed from the finger of George Armstrong Custer. The ring is marked "7th Cav." It bears a deep scar from a lance, and having no suitable heir, I will take it to the river with me.

Most will be familiar with the date of my birth. The Declaration of Independence that bore the Republic of Texas out of Mexican tyranny was ratified March 2, 1836, in a humble shack at the edge of the Brazos. Half the signatories were malarial; the other half had come to Texas to escape the hangman's noose. I was the first male child of this new republic.

The Spanish had been in Texas hundreds of years but nothing had come of it. Since Columbus they had been conquering all the natives that stood in their way and while I have never met an Aztec, they must have been a pack of mincing choirboys. The Lipan Apaches stopped the old conquistadores on their tracks. Then came the Comanche. The earth had seen nothing like them since the Mongols; they drove the Apaches into the sea, destroyed the Spanish Army, turned Mexico into a slave market. I once saw Comanches herding villagers along the Pecos, hundreds at a time, no different from the way you'd drive cattle.

Having been trounced by the aboriginals, the Mexican government devised a desperate plan to settle Texas. Any man, of any nation, willing to move west of the Sabine River would receive four thousand acres of free land. The fine print was written in blood. The Comanche philosophy toward outsiders was nearly papal in its thoroughness: torture and kill the men, rape and kill the women, take the children for slaves or adoption. Few from the ancient countries of Europe took the Mexicans up on

their offer. In fact, no one came at all. Except the Americans. They flooded in. They had women and children to spare and to him that overcometh, I giveth to eat of the tree of life.

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IN 1832 MY father arrived in Matagorda, common in those days if you viewed the risk of death by firing squad or a scalping by the Comanches as God's way of telling you there were great rewards to be had. By then the Mexican government, nervous about the growing Anglo horde within its borders, had banned American immigration into Texas.

And still it was better than the Old States, where unless you were son of a plantation owner, there was nothing to be had but the gleanings. Let the records show that the better classes, the Austins and the Houstons, were all content to remain citizens of Mexico so long as they could keep their land. The descendants have waged wars of propaganda to clear their names and have them declared Founders of Texas. In truth it was only the men like my father, who had nothing, who pushed Texas into war.

Like every able-bodied Scotsman, he did his part in the rout at San Jacinto and after the war he worked as a blacksmith, gunsmith, and surveyor. He was tall and easy to talk to. He had a straight back and hard hands and people felt safe around him, which proved, for most of them, to be an illusion.

MY FATHER WAS not religious and I attribute my heathen ways to him. Still, he was the sort of man who felt the breath of the pale rider close on his neck. He did not believe in time to waste. We first lived in Bastrop, raising corn, sorghum, and hogs, clearing land until the new settlers came in, those who waited until the Indian dangers had passed, then arrived with their lawyers to challenge the deeds and titles of those who had civilized the country and vanquished the red man. These first Texans had purchased their holdings with the original human currency and most could neither read nor write. By the age of ten I had dug four graves. The faintest sound of galloping hooves would wake the entire family, and by the time the news arrived—some neighbor cut up like a Thanksgiving shoat—my father had checked his loads and then he and the messenger would disappear into the night. The brave die young: that is the Comanche saying, but it was true of the first Anglos as well.

During the ten years Texas stood alone as a nation, the government was desperate for settlers, especially those with money. And through some invisible telegraph the message went back to the Old States—this area is safe now. In 1844 the first stranger arrived at our gate: a barbershop shingle, store-bought clothes, a lady-broke sorrel. He asked for grain as his horse would founder on grass. A horse that could not eat grass—I had never heard of such a thing.

Two months later, the Smithwicks' title was challenged and then the Hornsbys and MacLeods were bought out at a pittance. By then there were more lawyers in Texas, per capita, than any other place on the continent and within a few years all the original settlers had lost their land and been driven west again, back into Indian country. The gentler classes who had stolen the land were already plotting war to protect their blacks; the South would be cursed but Texas, a child of the West, would emerge unscathed.

In the meantime a campaign was launched against my mother, a Castilian of the old line, dark-skinned but finely featured, it was claimed by the new settlers that she was octoroon. The plantation gentleman took pride in his eye for such things.

By 1846 we had moved past the line of settlement, to my father's headright on the Pedernales. It was Comanche hunting grounds. The trees had never heard an ax, and the land and all the animals who lived upon it were fat and slick. Grass up to the chest, the soil deep and black in the bottoms, and even the steepest hillsides overrun with wildflowers. It was not the dry rocky place it is today.

Wild Spanish cattle were easily acquired with a rope—within a year we had a hundred head. Horses and mustang horses were also for the taking. There were deer, turkey, bear, squirrel, the occasional buffalo, turtles and fish from the river, ducks, plums and mustang grapes, bee trees and persimmons—the country was rich with life the way it is rotten with people today. The only problem was keeping your scalp attached.

## Chapter Two

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### Jeanne Anne McCullough

March 3, 2012

There were murmurs and quiet voices, not enough light. She was in a large room that she first mistook for a church or courthouse and though she was awake, she couldn't feel anything. It was like floating in a warm bath. There were dim chandeliers, logs smoking in a fireplace, Jacobean chairs and tables and busts of old Greeks. There was a rug that had been a gift from the Shah. She wondered who would find her.

It was a big white house in the Spanish style; nineteen bedrooms, a library, a great room and a ballroom. She and her brothers had all been born here but now it was nothing more than a weekend house, a place for family reunions. The maids wouldn't be back until morning. Her mind was perfectly awake but the rest of her seemed to have been left unplugged and she was fairly certain that someone else was responsible for her condition. She was eighty-six years old, but even if she liked telling others that she couldn't wait to cross over to the Land of Mañana, it was not exactly true.

*The most important thing is a man who does what I tell him.* She had said that to a reporter from *Time* magazine and they'd put her on the cover, forty-one and still sultry, standing on her Cadillac in front of a field of pumpjacks. She was a small, slender woman, though people forgot this soon after meeting her. Her voice carried and her eyes were gray like an old pistol or blue northern; she was striking, though not exactly beautiful. Which the Yankee photographer must have noticed. He had heeled open her blouse another notch and did her hair like she'd stepped out of an open car. It was not the height of her power—that had come decades later—but it was an important moment. They had begun to take her seriously. Now the man who'd taken the photograph was dead. *No one is going to find you*, she thought.

Of course it was going to happen this way; even as a child she'd been mostly alone. Her family had owned the town. People made no sense to her. Men, with whom she had everything in common, did not want her around. Women, with whom she had nothing in common, smiled too much, laughed too loud, and mostly reminded her of small dogs, their lives lost in interior decorating and other people's outfits. There had never been a place for a person like her.

SHE WAS YOUNG, eight or ten, sitting on the porch. It was a cool day in spring and the green hills were on as far as she could see, McCullough land, as far as she could see. But something was wrong: the car was her Cadillac, parked in the grass, and the old stables, which her brother had not yet burned, were already gone. *I am going to wake up now*, she thought. But then the Colonel—her great-grandfather—was speaking. Her father was there as well. She'd once had a grandfather, Peter McCullough, but he had disappeared and no one had anything good to say about him and she knew she would not have liked him either.

"I was thinking you might make a showing at the church this Sunday," her father said.

The Colonel thought those things were best left to the Negroes and Mexicans. He was a hundred years old and did not mind telling people they were wrong. His arms were like gunsticks and his face

was splotchy as an old rawhide and they said the next time he fell, it would be right into his own grave.

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“The thing about preachers,” he was saying, “is if they ain’t sparkin’ your daughters, or eatin’ all the fried chicken and pie in your icebox, they’re cheatin’ your sons on horses.”

Her father was twice the size of the Colonel, but, as the Colonel was always pointing out, he had a strong back and a weak mind. Her brother Clint had bought a horse and saddle off that pastor and the horse had been a setfast under the blanket nearly the size of a griddle cake.

HER FATHER MADE her go to church anyway, waking up early to make the trip to Carrizo, where the pastor had a Sunday school. She was hungry and could barely keep her eyes open. When she asked the teacher what would happen to the Colonel, who was sitting home that very minute, likely drinking rum and punch, the teacher said he was going to hell, where he would be tortured by Satan himself. *In that case, I am going with him*, Jeannie said. She was a disgraceful little scamp. She would have been whipped if she were Mexican.

On the ride home, she could not understand why her father sided with the teacher, who had a beard like an eagle and smelled like something inside her had died. The woman was ugly as a tar bucket. *During the war*, her father was saying, *I promised God that if I survived, I would go to church every Sunday. But just before you were born, I stopped going because I was busy. And do you know what happened?* She did—she had always known. But he reminded her anyway: *Your mother died.*

Jonas, her oldest brother, said something about not scaring her. Her father told Jonas to be quiet and Clint pinched her arm and whispered, *When you go to hell, the first thing they do is shove a pitchfork up your ass.*

She opened her eyes. Clint had been dead sixty years. Nothing in the dim room had moved. *The papers*, she thought. She had saved them from the fire once and had not gotten around to destroying them. Now they would be found.

## Chapter Three

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### Diaries of Peter McCullough

AUGUST 10, 1915

My birthday. Today, without the help of any whiskey, I have reached the conclusion: I am no one. Looking back on my forty-five years I see nothing worthwhile—what I had mistaken for a success appears more like a black abyss—I have allowed others to shape me as they pleased. To ask the Colonel I am the worst son he has ever had—he has always preferred Phineas and even poor Everett.

This journal will be the only true record of this family. In Austin they are planning a celebration for the Colonel's eightieth birthday, and what will be honestly said about a man who is lionized in capitols, I don't know. Meanwhile, our bloody summer continues. The telephone lines to Brownsville cannot be kept open—every time they are repaired, the insurgents blow them up. The King Ranch was attacked by forty *sediciosos* last night, there was a three-hour gun battle at Los Tultitos, and the president of the Cameron Law and Order League was shot to death, though whether the latter is a gain or loss, I can't say.

As for the Mexicans, to see the number of them shot in bar ditches or hung from trees, you would think them as ill a scourge as the panther or wolf. The *San Antonio Express* no longer mentions the deaths—it would take up too much paper—and so the Tejanos die unrecorded and are buried, if at all, in shallow graves, or roped and dragged off where they will not bother anyone.

After Longino and Estaban Morales were killed last month (by whom we don't know, though I suspect Niles Gilbert) the Colonel devised a note for all our vaqueros: *This man is a good Mexican. Please leave him alone. When I am done with him I will kill him myself.* Our men display these notes like badges of honor; they worship the Colonel (along with everyone else), *nuestro patrón*.

Unfortunately for the Tejanos, the area cattlemen continue to lose stock. In the west pastures last week Sullivan and I found a section where the wire was cut and by nightfall we'd found only 263 cows and calves, versus the 478 counted during the spring roundup. A twenty-thousand-dollar loss and a lack of evidence, circumstantially at least, pointing to our neighbors, the Garcias. I myself would rather lose the kingdom than lay blood libel against the wrong person. But that is a rare sentiment.

I HAVE ALWAYS thought I ought to have been born in the Old States, where, though their soil is even more blood soaked than ours, they no longer need their guns. But of course it is against my disposition. Even Austin I find overwhelming, as if each of its sixty thousand inhabitants were shouting at me at once. I have always found it difficult to clear my head—images and sounds lingering with me for years—and so here I remain, in the one place that is truly mine, whether it wants me or not.

As we examined the cut fences, Sullivan pointed out, quite unnecessarily, that the tracks led right into the Garcia lands, which border the river, which, as it has been so dry, can be crossed nearly anywhere.

"I do not mind old Pedro," he said, "but his sons-in-law are as vile a pack of niggers as I have ever seen."

"You've been spending too much time with the Colonel," I told him.

“He does *sabe* his Mexicans.”

“I have found just the opposite.”

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“In that case, boss, I am hoping you will learn me the various honest explanations for a cut fence leading to Pedro Garcia’s pastures while we are short two hundred head. Time was we would cross and take them back but that is a bit above our bend these days.”

“Old Pedro can’t watch every inch of his land any more than we can watch every inch of ours.”

“You’re a big man,” he said, “and I don’t see why you act like such a small one.”

After that he had no further comment. He considers it a personal affront that a Mexican might own so much land in our day and age. Of course the vaqueros do not help: because of his weight and high voice they call him Don Castrado behind his back.

As for Pedro Garcia, trouble seems to follow him like a lonely dog. Two of his sons-in-law are being pursued by the Mexican authorities for cattle theft, a notable accomplishment given the country’s views on such matters. I attempted to visit him last week, only to be turned back by José and Chico. *Don Pedro no feel good*, they told me, and pretended not to understand my Spanish. I have known Pedro my entire life, knew he would accept me as a visitor, but of course I turned my horse around and said nothing.

Pedro has been shorthanded so long that the brush is overrunning his land, and for the past two years he has only managed to brand half his calves. Each year he makes less money, each year he cannot hire as many men, and thus each year his income decreases yet again.

Still he has retained his good nature. I have always preferred his household to our own. We both enjoyed the old days, when it was a gentler land, with white caliche roads and adobe villages, not a thornbush to be seen and the grass up to your stirrups. Now the brush is relentless and the old stone villages are abandoned. The only houses built are crooked wood-frame monstrosities that grow like mushrooms but begin rotting just as quickly.

In many ways Pedro has been a truer father to me than the Colonel; if he has ever had a harsh word for me, I have not heard it. He had always hoped I might take an interest in one of his daughters, and for a time I was quite infatuated with María, the eldest, but I could sense the Colonel was strong against it, and, like a coward, I allowed the feeling to pass. María went to Mexico City to pursue her studies; her sisters married Mexicans, all of whom have their eyes on Pedro’s land.

My greatest fear is that Sullivan is right and that Pedro’s sons-in-law are involved with the theft of our stock; they may not understand what the consequences will be; they may not understand that Don Pedro cannot protect them.

AUGUST 11, 1915

Sally and Dr. Pilkington are driving Glenn, our youngest, to San Antonio. He was shot tonight when we came across some riders in the dark. The wound is high in the shoulder and is certainly not life-threatening and had it not been for the Colonel I would have gone to San Antonio with my son.

The Colonel has decided that the shooters were our neighbors. When I protested that it was too dangerous for any of us to have seen the guilty parties, it was implied that I was a traitor.

“If you’d learned anything I taught you,” he said. “That was Chico and José on those horses.”

“Well, you must have eyes like a catamount to be able to see in the dark past a furlong.”

“As you well know,” he told me, “my vision has always carried farther than that of other men.”

About a quarter of the town (the white quarter) is downstairs. Along with the Rangers, all of our vaqueros, and the Midkiff vaqueros as well. In a few minutes we will ride on the Garcias.

# Chapter Four

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## Eli McCullough

Spring 1849, the last full moon. We'd been two years on our Pedernales acreocracy, not far from Fredericksburg, when our neighbor had two horses stolen in broad daylight. Syphilis Poe, as my father called him, had come down from the Appalachian Mountains, imagining Texas a lazy man's paradise where the firewood split itself, the persimmons fell into your lap, and your pipe was always stuffed with jimsonweed. He was the commonest type on the frontier, though there were plenty like my father—intent on getting rich if they could stay alive long enough—and there were the Germans.

Before the Germans came, it was thought impossible to make butter in a southern climate. It was also thought impossible to grow wheat. A slave economy does that to the human mind, but the Germans, who had not been told otherwise, arrived and began churning first-rate butter and raising heavy crops of the noble cereal, which they sold to their dumbfounded neighbors at a high profit.

Your German had no allergy to work, which was conspicuous when you looked at his possession. If, upon passing some field, you noticed the soil was level and the rows straight, the land belonged to a German. If the field was full of rocks, if the rows appeared to have been laid by a blind Indian, if it was December and the cotton had not been picked, you knew the land was owned by one of the local whites, who had drifted over from Tennessee and hoped that the bounties of Dame Nature would, by some witchery, yield him up a slave.

But I am ahead of myself. The problem facing my father that morning was the theft of two scrawny horses and a conspicuous trail of unshod pony tracks leading into the hills. Common sense suggested the perpetrators might still be about—no self-respecting horse thief would have been satisfied with Poe's mangy swaybacked mares—but the law of the frontier demanded pursuit, and so my father and the other men rode off, leaving my brother and me with a rifle apiece and two silver-mounted pistols taken off a general at San Jacinto. This was considered plenty to defend a sturdy house, as the army had come to the frontier and the big Indian raids of the early '40s were thought to be over.

The men rode out just before noon, and my brother and I, both between hay and grass but feeling full grown, were not worried. We had no fear of the aborigine; there were dozens of Tonkawas and other strays living nearby, waiting for the government to open a reservation. They might rob lone Yankees, but they knew better than to molest the locals: we all wanted an Indian pelt and would have collected one at the slightest excuse.

BY THE TIME I was twelve, I had killed the biggest panther ever seen in Blanco County. I could trail deer across hard ground and my sense of direction was as good as our father's. Even my brother, though he had a weakness for books and poetry, could outshoot any man from the Old States.

As for my brother, I was embarrassed for him. I would point out tracks he could not see, telling him which way the buck's head had been turned and whether its belly had been full or empty and what had made it nervous. I saw farther, ran faster, heard things he thought I imagined.

But my brother did not mind. He thought himself superior for reasons I could not fathom. Where I hated every fresh wagon track, every sign of a new settler, my brother had always known that he would head east. He talked incessantly about the superiority of cities and it would not be long until I



got his wish—our crops were heavy, our herds increasing—our parents would be able to hire a man to replace him.

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Thanks to the Germans in Fredericksburg, where more books were stockpiled than in the rest of Texas combined, people like my brother were considered normal. He understood German because of his neighbors spoke it, French because it was superior, and Spanish because you could not live in Texas without it. He had finished *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in the original language and claimed to be working on his own superior version, though he would not let anyone read it.

Outside of Goethe and Byron, my sister was the object of most of my brother's thoughts. She was a beautiful girl who played the piano nearly as well as my brother read and wrote, and it was widely considered a shame that they were related. For my part, I had a bit of a hatchet face. The Germans thought I looked French.

As for my brother and sister, if there was anything improper I never knew it, though when she spoke to him her words were made of cotton, or a sweet that dissolves on your tongue, whereas I was addressed as a cur dog. My brother was always writing plays for her to act in, the two of them playing a doomed couple while I was cast as the Indian or badman who caused their ruination. My father pretended interest while shooting me knowing looks. So far as he was concerned, my brother was only acceptable because I'd turned out so close to perfect. But my mother was proud. She had high hopes for my siblings.

THE CABIN WAS two rooms linked by a covered dogtrot. It sat on a bluff where a spring came out of the rock and flowed over a ledge to the Pedernales. The woods were thick as first creation and my father said if we ever got to where the trees didn't rub the house, we would move. Of course my mother felt different.

We fenced and gated a yard and stock pen, built a smokehouse, a corncrib, and a stable where my father did blacksmithing. We had a wood floor and glass windows with shutters and a German-built stove that would burn all night on just a few sticks. The furniture had the look of store-bought; it was whitewashed and turned by the Mormons at Burnet.

In the main room my mother and father kept a canopy bed to themselves and my sister had a cot. My brother and I shared a bed in the unheated room on the other side of the dogtrot, though I often slept outside in a rawhide I'd slung thirty feet or so in the air, in the branches of an old oak. My brother often lit a candle to read (a luxury my mother indulged), which disturbed my sleep.

The centerpiece of the main room was a Spanish square piano, my mother's sole inheritance. It was a rarity, and the Germans came over on Sundays to sing and visit and be subjected to my brother's plays. My mother was formulating plans to move into Fredericksburg, which would allow my brother and sister to resume their schooling. Me she considered a lost cause and had she not witnessed my issuance she would have denied responsibility in my creation. As soon as I was old enough I planned to join a Ranging company and ride against the Indians, Mexicans, or whomever else I could.

THINKING BACK, IT is plain my mother knew what would happen. The human mind was open in those days, we felt every disturbance and ripple; even those like my brother were in tune with the natural laws. Man today lives in a coffin of flesh. Hearing and seeing nothing. The Land and Law are perverted. The Good Book says I will gather you to Jerusalem to the furnace of my wrath. It says that art the land that is not cleansed. I concur. We need a great fire that will sweep from ocean to ocean and I offer my oath that I will soak myself in kerosene if promised the fire would be allowed to burn.

But I digress. That afternoon I was making myself useful, as children did in those days, carving a

ox yoke out of dogwood. My sister came out of the house and said, "Eli, go out to the springhouse and bring Mother all the butter and grape preserves."

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At first I did not reply, for in no way did I find her superior, and as for her supposed charms, they had long since worn off. Though I will admit I was often murderous jealous of my brother, the way they sat together smiling about private matters. I was not exactly on her good side, either, having recently stolen the horse of her preferred suitor, an Alsatian named Hiebert. Despite the fact that I had returned the horse better than I found it, having taught it the pleasures of a good rider, Hiebert had not returned to call on her.

"Eli!" She had a voice like a hog caller. I decided I was sorry for whatever unfortunate wretch got roped to her.

"We're near out of butter," I shouted back. "And Daddy will be mad if he comes home and finds it gone." I went back to my whittling. It was nice in the shade with nothing but the green hills and a forty-mile view. Right below me the river made a series of little waterfalls.

In addition to the yoke, I had a new handle to make for my felling ax. It was a bo'dark sapling I had found in my travels. The handle would be springier than what my father liked, with a doe foot on the end for slippage.

"Get up," said my sister. She was standing over me. "Get the butter, Eli. I mean it."

I looked up at her standing there in her best blue homespun and made note of a fresh boil that she was attempting to hide with paint. When I finally brought the butter and preserves, my mother had stoked the stove and opened all the windows to keep the house cool.

"Eli," my mother said, "go down and catch us a few fish, will you? And maybe a pheasant if you can see one."

"What about the Indians?" I said.

"Well, if you catch one, don't bring him back. There's no sense kissing the Devil till you've met him."

"Where's Saint Martin?"

"He's out fetching blackberries."

I picked my way down the limestone bluff to the river, taking my fishing pole, war bag, and my father's Jaegerbuchse. The Jaegerbuchse fired a one-ounce ball, had double-set triggers, and was one of the best rifles on the frontier, but my father found it cumbersome to reload from horseback. My brother had first claim on it, but he found its kick too ferocious for his poetical constitution. It got meat on both ends but I did not mind that. It would drive its ball through even the oldest of the tribe of Ephraim, or, if you preferred, bark a squirrel at nearly any distance. I was happy to carry it.

The Pedernales was narrow and cut deep into the rock, and there was not much water most times, maybe a hundred yards across and a few feet deep. Along the banks were old cypresses and sycamores and the river itself was full of swimming holes and waterfalls and shaded pools brimming with eels. Like most Texas rivers it was useless to boatmen, though I considered this an advantage, as it kept the boatmen out.

I dug some grubs from the bank, collected a few oak galls for floats, and found a shady pool under a cypress. Just above me on the hill was an enormous mulberry, so heavy with fruit that even the ringtails had not been able to eat it all. I took off my shirt and picked as many as I could, intending to bring them to my mother.

I began to fish, though it was hard relaxing because I couldn't see the house, it being high above me on the bluff. The Indians liked to travel in the riverbeds and my father had taken the only repeating firearms. But that was not bad in its way because it made me watch everything, the water glassing

over the stone, skunk tracks in the mud, a heron in a far pool. There was a bobcat ghosting through the willows, thinking no one saw him.

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Farther up the bank was a stand of pecans where a cat squirrel was taking bites of green nuts and dropping them to the ground to rot. I wondered why they did that: a squirrel will waste half the nuts on a tree before they are ripe. I thought about teaching him a lesson. Squirrel liver is top bait; if the Creator was a fisherman it is all he would use. But it was hard to reckon a one-ounce ball against a bushytail. I wished I'd brought my brother's .36 Kentucky. I began to graze on the mulberries and soon they were all gone. Mother preferred blackberries anyway. She viewed mulberries the same as sassafras tea, low class.

After another hour of fishing I saw a flock of turkeys on the opposite bank and shot one of the poult. It was seventy yards but the head came clean off. I was allowed to aim at the head, my brother was not—the poult flapped its wings crazily, trying to fly while the blood fountained up. A shot for the record books.

I braced my fishing pole under a rock, swabbed the barrel clean, measured out a careful charge, seated a ball and capped the nipple. Then I waded across the river to retrieve my prize.

Near where the poult lay in a fan of blood there was a purple spear point sticking out of the sand. It was four inches long and I sat examining it for a long time; it had two flutes at the base that modern man has yet to figure how to replicate. The local flint was all cream to brown, which told me something else about that spear point: it had traveled a long way.

When I got back to my fishing pole it was floating downriver and I saw a big catfish had stuck itself on my bait, another one-in-a-million chance. I set the hook, thinking I'd lose the fish, but it pulled out of the water with no trouble. I decided to think about it. While I was sitting there I saw something in the sky and when I looked through my fist I realized it was Venus, that I was seeing during the daytime. A bad sign if there ever was one. I took the turkey and catfish and my mulberry-stained shirt and hightailed it back to the house.

"That was quick," said my mother. "Only one fish?"

I held up the turkey.

"We were worried when we heard the shot," said my sister.

"I don't think it's good being so far from the house."

"The Indians won't bother you," my mother said. "The army is everywhere."

"I'm worried about you and Lizzie, not me," I said.

"Oh, Eli," said my mother. "My little hero." She appeared not to notice my ruined shirt and she smelled of the brandy that we saved for important guests. My sister smelled of brandy as well. It had gone to her head and she pinched my cheek sweetly. I was annoyed at her. I considered reminding her that Miles Wallace had been kidnapped not a month earlier. But unlike the Wallace boy, who had been taken by the Comanches only to be scalped a few miles later, I was not a walleyed cripple. I knew I would probably enjoy being kidnapped, as all they did was ride and shoot.

After double-checking our supply of patch and ball I went outside and climbed the tree into my rawhide hammock, where I could see out over the riverbed, the road, and the surrounding country. I hung the Jaegerbuchse from a nail. I had been meaning to shoot something while swinging in the hammock—that would be proper living—but had not yet been successful. Through the dogwoods near the spring I could see my brother gathering blackberries. The wind was calm and it was pleasant lying there with the smell of my mother's cooking. My brother had his rifle with him but wandered far from it, a sloppy habit. My father was strict about those things—if a gun is worth carrying it is worth keeping within arm's reach.

But that afternoon my brother was in luck, as we saw no Indians. Near sundown I spotted something moving in the rocks above the flood line, sneaking in and out of the cedar, which turned out to be a wolf. It was so far away it might have been a coyote, but wolves run with their tails straight and proud while coyotes tuck them under like scolded dogs. The tail was straight on this one and his fur was a pale gray, nearly white. The branches were in my way so I climbed down out of the tree, snuck to the edge of the bluff, and got into a good brace with the sights high over the wolf's back. He had stopped with his nose in the air, picking up the smell of our dinner. I set the first trigger, which made the second trigger only a twelve-ounce pull, then squeezed off the shot. The wolf jumped straight up and fell over dead. My father had us patch our bullets with greased buckskin, and our balls carried farther and straighter than if we'd used cotton patches, like most everyone else on the frontier.

"Eli, was that you shooting?" It was my sister.

"It was just a wolf," I shouted back. I thought about going down to get the skin—a white wolf, I had never seen one of those before—but decided against it, as it was getting dark.

Because of all the food being made, we did not sit down for supper until late. Seven or eight tall oil candles were lit around the house, another luxury. My mother and sister had been cooking all day and they brought out dish after dish. We all knew it was to punish my father for leaving us alone, for being guilted into a wild-goose chase, but no one said anything.

My brother and I drank cool buttermilk, my mother and sister drank a bottle of white wine we had gotten from the Germans. My father had been saving the wine for a special occasion. Supper began with wheat bread and butter and the last of the cherry preserves, then ham, sweet potatoes, roasted turkey, fish stuffed with wild garlic and fried in tallow, steaks rubbed with salt and chili pepper and cooked directly on the coals, the last of the spring morels, also cooked in butter, and a warm salad of pigweed and Indian spinach, cooked in more butter and with garlic. I had never eaten so much butter in my life. For dessert we had two pies: blackberry and plum, fruit my brother had picked that day. There was nothing left in the larder but hardtack and salt pork. If he wants to run with Syphilis Poe, my mother said, then he can eat like Syphilis Poe.

I felt guilty but that did not stop me from eating my share. My mother did not feel guilty at all. She wished for more wine. Everyone was falling asleep.

I carried the ham bone out to the springhouse, then sat watching the stars. I had my own names for them—the buck, the rattler, the running man—but my brother convinced me to use Ptolemy's, which did not make any sense. Draco looks like a snake, not a dragon. Ursa Major looks like a man running, there is not a bear anywhere in it. But my brother could not abide anything so tainted with common sense and thus my effort to name the heavens was aborted.

I put the horses in the stable, barred the door from the inside, and climbed out through the gap under the eaves. It would take any Indians a while to get at them. The horses seemed calm, which was a good sign, as they could smell Indians better than the dogs.

By the time I got back inside, my mother and sister had retired to my parents' canopy bed and my brother was lying in my sister's cot. Usually my brother and I slept in the room across the dogtrot, but I let him be. After gathering my rifle, war bag, and boots to the foot of the bed, I spit into the lantern candle and climbed under the covers with my brother.

AROUND MIDNIGHT I heard our dogs rucking up a chorus. I had not been sleeping well anyway so I got up to check the porthole, worried my mother or sister would see what was sticking up under my nightshirt.

Which I forgot about. There were a dozen men near our fence and more in the shadows near the

road and still more in our side yard. I heard a dog yelp and then our smallest, a fyce named Perdido went running off into the brush. She was hunched like a gut-shot deer.

“Everyone get the hell up,” I said. “Get up, Momma. Get everyone up.”

The moon was high and it might as well have been daylight. The Indians led our three horses out the yard and down the hill. I wondered how they’d figured their way into the stable. Our bulldog was following a tall brave around like they were best friends.

“Move over,” said my brother.

He and my mother and sister had gotten out of bed and were both standing behind me.

“There’s a lot of Indians.”

“It’s probably Rooster Joe and the other Tonks,” said my brother.

I let him push me out of the way, then went to the fire and poked it so we would have light. Since statehood we’d had good Indian years; most of the U.S. Army had been stationed in Texas to watch the frontier. I wondered where they were. I knew I should load all the guns, then remembered I had already done it. A rhyme came into my head, *buffalo grip, barlow blade, best damn knife that was ever made*. I knew what would happen—the Indians would knock on the door, we would not let them in and they would try to break in until they got bored. Then they would set fire to the house and shoot at us as we came out.

“Martin?” said my mother.

“He’s right. There are at least two dozen.”

“Then it’s whites,” said my sister. “It’s some gang of horse thieves.”

“No, it’s definitely Indians.”

I got my rifle and sat down in a corner facing the door. It was shadows and dim red light. I wondered if I would go to hell. My brother was pacing and my mother and sister had sat down on the bed. My mother was brushing my sister’s hair saying, *Shush now, Lizzie, everything will be fine*. In the dimness their eyes were empty sockets like the buzzards had already found them. I looked the other way.

“Your rifle has a nipple on it,” I told my brother, “and so do the pistols.”

He shook his head.

“If we put up a fight, they might just be happy with the horses.”

I could tell he didn’t agree but he went to the corner and took up his squirrel gun, feeling the nipple for a percussion cap.

“I already capped it,” I repeated.

“Maybe they’ll think we’re not home,” said my sister. She looked to my brother but he said, “They can see we have a fire going, Lizzie.”

We could hear the Indians clanging things around in my father’s metal shop, talking in low voices. My mother got up and put a chair in front of the door and stood on it. There was another gun port up high and she removed the board and put her face to it: “I only see seven.”

“There are at least thirty,” I told her.

“Daddy will be following them,” said my sister. “He’ll know they’re here.”

“Maybe when he sees the flames,” said my brother.

“They’re coming.”

“Get down from there, Mammy.”

“Not so loud,” said my sister.

Someone kicked the door and my mother nearly fell off her perch. *Salir, salir*. There was pounding. Spanish was the language most of the wild tribes spoke, if they spoke anything but Indian. I thought

the door might stop a few shots at best and I motioned again for my mother to get down.

*Tenemos hambre. Nos dan los alimentos.*

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“That is ridiculous,” said my brother. “Who would believe that?”

There was a long quiet time and then Mother looked at us and said, in her schoolteacher voice: “E and Martin, please put your guns on the floor.” She began to remove the bar from the door and realized that everything they ever said about women was true—they had no common sense and you could not trust them.

“Do not open that door, Momma.

“Grab her,” I told Martin. But he didn’t move. I saw the bar lift and propped the rifle on my knee. The moonlight was coming through the cracks like a white fire but my mother didn’t notice; she slid the bar aside like she was welcoming an old friend, like she’d been expecting this from the day we were born.

IT WAS SAID in the newspapers that mothers on the frontier saved their last bullets for their own children, so they would not be taken by the heathens, but you did not hear of anyone doing it. In fact it was the opposite. We all knew I was of prime age—the Indians would want me alive. My brother and sister might have been slightly old, but my sister was pretty and my brother looked younger than he really was. Meanwhile my mother was almost forty. She knew exactly what they would do to her.

The door flung open and two men tackled her. A third man stood behind them in the doorway, squinting into the darkness of the house.

When my shot hit, he windmilled an arm and fell backward. The other Indians sprinted out and yelled for my brother to shut the door but he didn’t move. I ran over to shut it myself but the dead Indian was lying across the sill. I was grabbing for his feet, intending to pull him in and clear the doorway, when he kicked me under the jaw.

When I came to there were trees waving in the moonlight and one loud noise after another. Indians were standing on either side of the doorway, leaning to shoot into the room, then ducking back around the corner. My sister said, *Martin, I think they’ve shot me*. My brother was just sitting there. I thought he’d taken a ball. The Indians took a break for the powder smoke to thin so I jerked the rifle from his hand, checked that the hammer was cocked, and was swinging it toward the Indians when my mother stopped me.

Then I was on my stomach; at first I thought the house had fallen, but it was a man. I grabbed at his neck but my head kept chunking against the floor. Then I was outside under the trees.

I tried to stand but was kicked and tried again and was kicked again. Now a man’s feet, now the ground next to them. Now a pair of legs, covered in buckskin. I bit his foot and was kicked a third time and then my hair was being pulled like it would come out at the roots. I waited for the cutting.

When I opened my eyes there was a big red face; he smelled like onions and a dirty outhouse and he showed me with the knife that I would behave or he would cut my head off. Then he lashed my hands with a piggin string.

When he walked away, he did not look like any Indian I’d ever seen. The aborigines living among the whites were thin, light bodied, and hard wintered. This one was tall and stocky, with a square head and fat nose; he looked more like a Negro than a lathy starving Indian and he walked with his chest out, as if taking everything we owned was his natural right.

There were fifteen or twenty horses outside the gate and as many Indians against our fence laughing and making jokes. There was no sign of my mother or brother or sister. The Indians were stripped to the waist and covered with paint and designs like they’d escaped from a traveling show.

one had painted his face like a skull, another had the same design on his chest.

Some of the Indians were rummaging the house and others rummaging the stables or outbuilding, but most were leaning on the fence watching their friends work. All the white men I'd ever seen after a fight were nervous for hours, pacing and talking so fast you couldn't understand them, but the Indians were bored and yawning like they'd just come back from an evening constitutional, except for the man I'd shot, who was sitting against the house. There was blood on his chest and his mouth was frothing. Maybe he'd jumped sideways when the cap popped—they said the aboriginals had reflexes like deer. His friends saw me staring and one came over and said *taibo nu wukupatu?i*, then knocked me in the head.

I had a long dream where I was brought before a man to judge me for my sins. It was Saint Peter only in the form of the teacher of our school in Bastrop, who had disliked me over all the other students, and I knew I was going to hell.

Then most of the Indians were standing looking at something on the ground. There was a white leg crooked in the air and a man's bare ass and buckskin leggings on top. I realized it was my mother and by the way the man was moving and the bells on his legs were jingling I knew what he was doing to her. After a while he stood up and retied his breechcloth. Another jumped right into place. I had just gotten to my feet when my ears started ringing and the ground came up and I thought I was dead for certain.

A while later I heard noises again. I could see the second group of Indians a little farther down the fence but now I could hear my sister's voice whimpering. The Indians were doing the same to her as to my mother.

FINALLY I REALIZED I was in bed. I was having a dream. It was nice until I woke up all the way and heard war whoops and saw I was still in the yard. My mother was naked and crawling away from the Indians; she had reached the porch and was trying to make it to the door. Inside the house, someone was pounding on the piano and there was something waving out from my mother's back that I realized was an arrow.

The Indians must have decided they did not want her in the house because they began shooting more arrows into her. She kept crawling. Finally one of them walked up to her, put his foot between her shoulders and pressed her to the ground. He gathered up her long hair as if he was fixing to wash it, then pulled it tight with one hand and drew his butcher knife. My mother had not made a sound since I woke up, even with the arrows sticking out of her, but she began to scream then, and I saw another Indian walking up to her with my father's broadax.

I had been puddling and moaning but that is when I dried up for good. I did not look at my mother and I might have heard a sound or I might not have. I tried to find Martin and Lizzie. Where Lizzie had been I made out a small white patch and then another and I realized it was her and that she was lying where they had left her. Later, when they led us out, I saw a body with its breasts cut off and its bowels draped around. I knew it was my sister but she no longer looked like herself.

I was dragged over to the fence next to my brother. He was crying and going quiet and crying again. Meanwhile nothing was coming out of me. I gathered myself up to look over at my mother; she was on her belly with the arrows sticking out of her. The Indians were going in and out of the house. My brother was sitting there looking at things. I began to choke and air my paunch and when I was done he said: "I thought you were dead. I was watching you for a long time."

It felt like a wedge had been stuck between my eyes.

"I was thinking Daddy might come home, but now I think we'll be miles away before anyone

knows what happened.”

A young Indian saw us talking and threatened us with his knife to shut up, but after he walked off Martin said: “Lizzie was hit in the stomach.”

I knew what he was getting at and I thought about how he’d sat there while our mother unbarred the door, sat there when I tried to get the Indian out of the doorway, sat with a loaded rifle while Indians were shooting into the house. But my head hurt too much to say any of it. I saw spots again.

“Did you see what they did to her and Momma?”

“A little,” I said.

The Comanches went in and out of the house, taking what they wanted and throwing the rest into a pile in the yard. Someone was attacking our piano with an ax. I was hoping the Indians would kill me or that I would pass out again. My brother was staring at my sister. The Indians were carrying off stacks of books that I thought were meant for the fire but instead they put them into their bolsas. Later they would use the pages to stuff their shields, which were two layers of buffalo neckhide. When stuffed with paper the shields would stop almost any bullet.

The mattresses were dragged out and cut open and the wind caught the feathers and spread them over the yard like snow. My mother was in the way. The feathers were falling over her. The ants had found us but we barely noticed; my brother kept staring at my sister.

“You shouldn’t look at her anymore.”

“I want to,” he said.

WHEN I WOKE up it was hot. The pile of everything the Indians didn’t want, mostly smashed furniture had been lit. An agarito was cutting into me. The fire got bigger and I could see into the shadows where our dogs were lying dead and I wondered if the Indians meant to throw us into the fire. They were known for strapping people to wagon wheels and lighting them. Then I was looking down on myself as you would a lead soldier. Interested in what I might do but not really caring.

“I can already shimmy my hands,” I told my brother.

“For what?” he said.

“We should stay ready.”

He was quiet. We watched the fire.

“Are you thirsty?”

“Of course I’m thirsty,” he said.

The fire was getting bigger and the moss in the branches above us was flaring and smoke was coming off the bark. The embers of our own burned things were singeing our faces and hair; I watched the sparks climb up. When I looked over at my brother he was covered in ash like a person who had been dead a long time and I thought of how my mother and sister had looked when they sat together on the bed.

The Indians brought all my father’s tools to be examined by firelight and I decided to remember everything they were taking: horseshoes, hammers, nails, barrel hoops, the bucksaw, the broadax and felling ax, the barking iron, an adze and froe; all the bits, bridles, saddles and stirrups, other tack; my brother’s Kentucky rifle. My Jaegerbuchse they decided was too heavy and smashed against the side of the house. They took our knives, files, picks and awls, bits for drilling, lead bullets, bullet molds, powder kegs, percussion caps, a horsehair rope hanging in the dogtrot. Our three milch cows heard the commotion and wandered up to the house for a feed. The Indians shot them with arrows. They were on high spirits. Burning logs were pulled from the fire and carried inside the house; people were tying their bundles, checking their cinches, making ready to leave. Smoke was coming from the doors and



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