

I Dreamt I Was in Heaven
The Rampage of The Rufus Buck Gang



Maoma July, Sam Sampson, Rufus Buck, Luckey Davis, Lewis Davis

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LEONCE GAITER

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For James

“Even strongly-marked differences occasionally appear in the young of the same litter, and in seedlings from the same seed-capsule. At long intervals of time, out of millions of individuals reared in the same country and fed on nearly the same food, deviations of structure so strongly pronounced as to deserve to be called monstrosities arise;”

- Charles Darwin
“The Origin of Species”



I can't go back to Paradise no more.
I killed a man back there.

- Bob Dylan

The crowd murmured. Hushed. Expectation sucked the air right out of it. Torches flickered uselessly; their meager light only showcased the dread. Shadows writhed on the crowd's long, drawn faces. Men, women, Indian, Negro, but mostly white men's faces. Fear and rage skittered across each as if in competition. Rage wanted it all. Each man sought to bathe in revenge for the wrongs done, real and imagined, by those who by dint of color hadn't any right—any right at all. But fear checked it. A fear that each fought to deny to himself, and more importantly, to hide from the man standing next to him,

“I can see ‘em!”

Murmurs rose to whispers. The whole crowd shuffled cautiously forward and stopped, as if frightened to move any further. Then silence. Even the murmurs stopped. Above their own breathing they heard the creaking of a laden wagon, the horse hooves clomping on the dry dirt road. Each in the crowd craned his neck, but none moved closer. They waited. The horse's heads appeared on the edge of the town. Two Marshals rode on either side of the drawn wagon. Each carried a shotgun. A torch sat next to the wagon's driver. And then the

wagon itself appeared. The crowd saw the seated figures in the back. It was them: The Rufus Buck Gang. The murderers. The rapists of white women. The nigger injuns who had terrorized them; the ones who'd sworn to drive white men from this land.

"It's them!"

Low, determined taunts swept through the crowd like mumbled prayers.

"Kill 'em all."

"Hang 'em." Spoken softly, loud enough for some to hear, but none too bold in case that human terror got free and came hunting vengeance—again—because that's what they did—hunt vengeance—for crimes not even criminal. Crimes that any white man just called living. That gang would hunt you and kill you just for living.

As the wagon neared, the crowd saw the shackles. With the sight of that constraining metal their courage exploded. Shouts echoed off the buildings. Faces instantly deformed with rage and hatred. Spittle flew and dripped on chins with each more violent oath. With the prisoners bound, the tables were turned and the Buck Gang were their victims now.

Then they saw the young faces. A fleeting lull descended. These were not the hardened men, the dime novel villains they all expected. These were boys, none of them out of his teens. They had been terrorized—made to question their rights as men—by children. The crowd exploded.

"Drag 'em off that cart."

"Hang 'em up!"

"Damn you to hell, Rufus Buck!"

A single gunshot cracked the air and then shots banged like firecrackers. The spitting, cursing crowd rushed the wagon.

“Filthy niggers!”

“We’ll wipe you injuns outta here!”

The husband of Rosetta Hasson appeared. He walked and hopped alongside the wagon. He searched the four young faces, eyes lingering on one and then the other, all the while almost comically scurrying to keep abreast. Rufus Buck. He remembered him. The nigger; he remembered him too. He couldn’t remember which one of them had done what to him—which bit of humiliation and degradation each had inflicted on him and his wife.

“Give him justice!” a woman screamed with tears in her eyes as she lay her hands on John Hasson’s shoulders, a gesture he did not acknowledge, so enthralled was he with the men—the boys—who had so debased and brutalized him—who had made him watch.

Others took up the cry. “Give him justice!”

Grasping hands reached for the Bucks. The wagon tipped with the crowd’s pressure and the horses bobbed their heads and swished their tails in irritation. The Marshals danced their horses to stand between the cart and the crowd. They sat remarkably unperturbed in their saddles, rifle barrels pointed in the air.

“What kind of men are you?” the crowd sneered at them.

“What if it was your wife?!”

The Marshals stared straight ahead as if surrounded by nothing more than grasping children. It was their job to see these prisoners safely to Ft. Smith, Arkansas to stand trial. Seeing it done right was a point of pride.

~ ~ ~

The procession passed him by. His daughter was not with them. The noise and blood lust continued down the street without him. He stood in the increasing quiet, screaming inside. He wondered if the news had been wrong. That idea buoyed him for a moment. Maybe she hadn't. Maybe it hadn't come down to this and he had not fallen so much farther and deeper than even he—who had fallen so far and so deep—could imagine. Clutching that ounce of hope, he walked to the Sheriff's office and asked if there were more.

The deputy said there was a girl; there would be no reprieve.

He waited in the office, dread like ants all over him, ignoring the stares and occasional titters of the two men inside.

Twenty minutes later, few noticed the single horse that followed the cart into town. Another Marshal rode it. A young girl about 13 years shared the Marshal's saddle. She was dirty, her blonde hair uncombed, dress torn, face smudged but even so, even filthy and tattered, one's first thought seized on her beauty. She gazed down the now-empty streets toward the invisible noise and commotion on the other side of town. She wondered if they were dead already.

The moment he heard the clop of horse's hooves, her father's heart beat wildly. He ran outside. He strained his eyes to see her and when he did, she looked neither scared nor sad. She just sat there, like nothing had happened, vacantly bedraggled and magnificent. Her nonchalance was purposeful, he thought,

to provoke him. He swore not to give her the satisfaction.

The horse stopped. As she threw her leg over the saddle, all restraint abandoned him and he lunged at her as if she were prey. He grabbed her arm and yanked her to the ground. He slapped her viciously. He swung his outstretched arm like a two-by-four and slammed his open hand into her head and then swung it back to hit her with the back of it. He beat her with every ounce of strength as if he didn't care if it killed or cleansed them both. The girl lowered her head and raised her arm like a shield. She didn't make a sound.

The smacks echoed in the dark, empty Okmulgee street. Her father's loud, effortful grunts accompanied each. The satisfaction of hand meeting flesh was like food. He beat her until he could barely lift his arm. Then, exhausted, he fell to his knees. Even so he took another look at the girl and found the strength to raise his arm and land a final stinging blow to her now-bloodied head as if determined to destroy the last vestiges of beauty and grace that bespoke her resplendent beginnings. Panting through his teeth, on his knees, he did what he had not done in years—decades. Through his clenched toothed gasps for breath, he mumbled a prayer: "Dear God, give me the strength to kill her dead."

And then something extraordinary happened. He'd later say that since God had stopped listening a long time ago, the Devil got his prayer. In a haze he saw his wife's semblance beneath the girl's dirt and blood and half-matted hair. Momentarily startled, he stopped, and he glimpsed the past. He saw it bleed slowly into the present. He saw it all. He saw what had become of what should have been—several lifetimes worth of certainties, inevitabilities, pre-ordainments, all shriveled like

carcasses and soiling his road from there to here. In Mississippi a lifetime ago, his 17 year-old self and teenage bride had lovingly envisaged the glories awaiting them and their children—the sons of plantation owners the girls would marry; the girls from good family the boys would court. There was no doubt about the world their children would inherit: columnar grandeur, ease and delegation, serviced by darkies happy to do it because it was their lot. And then the war—and his world became a process of ruthlessly picking the psychic scab of his status as a civilized man. At first it had been unbearable—watching his birthright retreat. But then his wife, the one through whose eyes he saw it fade, she died. Soon after, he stopped chasing it. He stopped striving for what was lost, and embraced what was at hand. Like a child, he learned to enjoy the methodical pain of revealing the raw skin - the true self - beneath the flimsy scab of civility. Standing in the street, whipping his daughter with all his might was the final rip. It was all gone. His beard unkempt, clothes filthy, a foul-smelling body with nothing to its name, the wound of raw living showed bright and pink for all the world to see and the girl he hit was its child. Standing in the street beating his girl for running off with that nigger renegade sealed his deliverance. They had won. The niggers had cost him his home, and now they befouled his daughter. It was the last barrier, the violation of the last shred of dignity he had, the last vestige of the past that he could possibly have held onto. And with that realization, his arm ridiculously aloft, he stopped. He staggered back.

She didn't move. She huddled, awaiting the next blow. She listened: a soundless 30 seconds save her father's heavy breathing before she dared sneak a look in his direction.

When she did, she saw him standing, arms akimbo, body tilted backwards as if he reveled in a windstorm. And then he laughed. He laughed and slapped his hands to his sides. He stomped the ground in lead-footed triumph and kicked a little dust in the air. After he settled down a moment, he looked hard at his daughter, and reeling like a drunk, he turned to walk away. Theodosia looked around. Two men smilingly stared from the doorway of the Sheriff's office like they had watched a medicine show, as if her blood and pain were funny. She realized that she still held her arms up to shield her face from nonexistent blows, so she quickly threw them to her sides and stood up straight. She stared at the two men. One of them put his hand on his privates and thrust his middle at her. The other doubled up laughing. She haughtily flicked her blonde hair back and stuck her tongue out at them before she turned to follow her father's fading figure into the darkness.

"Oh no you don't little girl," one of the men yelled as he tore off after her. Seeing him run, she bolted. She ran as fast as she could when a yank on her hair wrenched her head back and swept her bare feet from under her.

The man smiled down at her, panting. "You get to spend the night with us," he said as he pulled her up by her hair and dragged her back toward the jail.

~ ~ ~

As he did so often these days, Judge Parker sat awake in the middle of the night. The soft, pre-dawn knock at his door

had not disturbed him. It would be, he knew, his young clerk, Virgil Purefoy. Anyone else would have raised holy hell to get him out of bed at this hour. There would have been pounding, soft shouts... Only Virgil would know, though Parker had never actually told him, that illness gave him sleepless nights; therefore mild taps would do. As he opened the door, Virgil spoke in a considerate whisper so as not to awaken the Judge's sleeping wife.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir, but an urgent telegram."

Parker noted that Virgil was fully dressed, right down to his cravat. His full dress probably took no more time than a less idolatrous being's throwing on a dressing gown. Parker gestured him inside and tore the envelope. He scanned the note, then handed it to the almost-slaving boy, who read it hungrily.

"Excellent, sir," Virgil beamed. "Bringing them to justice will be a crowning glory for you."

Old and sick, Isaac Parker had reigned as judge, the mind of the jury, and the will of executioner throughout 74,000 miles of Indian Territory for nearly 20 years. By all appearances, he had triumphed. From the window of his upstairs office at the Ft. Smith, Arkansas courthouse, he now saw a bona fide city where there had been only badlands: Thriving stores, bustling liveries, electric streetcars and hotels—a city, yes... but still imbued with the taint of the wild. When he'd arrived here, 36 years old, the youngest Federal judge in the west, it had barely been a camp. Back then, you wouldn't move without a gun. There was no railroad; streets were mere muddied piles of horse dung reeking of the carelessly tossed pisspot. Lawlessness infected every transaction. Fist fight and gunfight erupted like wind

gusts and just as unpredictably. Wild dogs bore themselves with more dignity than men in Indian Territory. Then God and the United States laid the burden of changing all of that on his young shoulders. He had accepted, and as a result, lawlessness had been restrained enough to allow commerce to flourish and opportunity to beckon hordes of white men and women to settle—illegally—the Territory. As his reward, in less than one year a new Courts Act would finish the job of stripping him of jurisdiction over the last remaining parts of his once vast domain. His court would end, his power would die with it.

Now, when he stared out of his courthouse window, all he surveyed, of which he could claim ownership as much as any man, filled him with ambivalence. He had yearned to turn the Indian Territory into something... more... something indefinably, unspecifiably superior... Yes, it was partly a young man's hubris—superior to everything that had come before. But he had never known exactly what he'd hoped to turn it into. Should it be the frontier's edge, like the Ohio of his birth, trembling with anticipation of civilization's embrace? Or should it be the frontier's essence, perpetually outside civility's sometimes-cold grasp? A city like St. Louis, or something entirely new? Young, he was a creature of duty and certainty, not imagination. So he did not think much on it. He never planned; he set no goals. He knew that God's hand had brought him here, and believed God's grace would guide him.

Over time he had lost his way. He believed in heaven; and when he arrived, he'd seen it in these lands—what God intended, the true Eden with which He'd entrusted mankind. Endless lands, limitless bounty, wild. The white men sprinkled

amongst the Indians had adopted ways just as wild, but with dollops of malice and viciousness that reversion from civilization inevitably brought. But Parker knew that the return to civilization could put them to rights—his task. The Indians, less burdened with white men’s civilities, having no aspiration toward them, no grounding in them and no guilt on bypassing them, seemed more at peace with the land they lived on and the lives they led. An elementalism. There was no striving in them. No desire to take this world from here to some indeterminate other place—to some heretofore undiscovered “there.” Parker sometimes envied them their self-possession, but did not admit a gnawing sense that it might be more. They showed placidity amidst the hardships of death and illness, birth and survival, while he and his brethren warred ceaselessly with each. Eventually, with age, he learned to see strength in them (there was something downright Christian in their relentless acceptance, he decided—the quiet acceptance of God’s will) and believed they would adapt to white men’s strivings. Perhaps a civilized people on wild lands was his vision—the almost impossible contradiction settled in heavenly harmony and turning this place into some sort of blessed American Kingdom. Maybe that was what he’d wanted all along—to better God’s work. Perhaps pride was his sin. He was doing God’s will, he knew, but had he expected Divine result? What he saw in his courtroom and on the street beneath his office was not Divine. It was merely human. For him, toward the end of a life, that was not enough.

Awaiting atonement for his many sins against this place, he’d half-expected Rufus Buck. At first, he thought that Cherokee Bill had been the Judgment he dreaded, but Bill was

a thief and a murderer—a sinfully charming and effective one, but nothing more. Parker believed in retribution; he did not believe in unpunished lies or unrequited obfuscations. He believed that deception and injustice literally bred—that they spawned and reproduced themselves to even worse effect. And in egregious cases, God in his wisdom made their bitter fruits manifest in flesh, and sinners suffered at the hands of their own misdeeds. When he heard of Buck’s first warning, and when he suffered the torturous details of the rape of Rosetta Hasson, he knew that Buck was such a plague, more conjured than born.

“Congratulations, sir,” Virgil called out as he opened the door to leave. “Their capture will be quite the feather in your cap.”

“Quite a crowning glory,” Parker replied obligatorily as he turned toward the stairs. “The final act,” he said as he slowly ascended.

~ ~ ~

Rufus glared at his still-shackled hands and feet. Three others sat identically bound in the small, bare room. An occasional gunshot smacked outside. Above the muffled din of the growing, restless crowd, the odd curse or hollered threat flew through the second story window. Rufus looked at each of his men. Maoma angrily jerked at the chains as if sheer rage would break them. Sam worriedly watched Maoma, seeking clues on how to act to inoculate himself against accusations

of cowardice—he had yet to explain his disappearance at the height of the battle. Short, black Luckey Davis sat dismally. His best friend, Lewis Davis, his brother in all but birth, had gone missing—probably dead, probably shot. Rufus smacked his fist against his thigh again and again until the sting turned to burning. They all should have died back there, he thought. Not to have done so was the coward's way. He berated himself for the same sins for which he had so recently reviled Cherokee Bill—another once-great man whom he loathed for crumbling in the end. The infamous Ned Christie had died with a gun in his hand, but the Rufus Buck Gang would be ripped apart by white dirt farmers and their women. At least their arrival in Okmulgee was something this town would never forget. The Marshals had to chase away the crowds at gunpoint. Those white farmers would have marched 100 miles—all the way to Muskogee—just to get their hands on him. From their screaming and spitting, from the outrage on their faces, Rufus knew he had hurt them, taken something precious—their inviolability—from them. He had given them a fleeting twinge of deadening wounds that people like his Creek Indian father and his Negro mother carried. They knew trembling fear because of him. They had, probably for the first time in their white lives, considered their own defeat because of him. While considering this small triumph, he drifted into sleep.

A few hours later, he woke to daylight and sounds of mayhem. He listened. He rolled to his feet and shuffled to the large window, his leg irons clanking raggedly. Down below, despite the hot August sun, came a river of horses and wagons as far as he could see, a swarm of people flowing toward the courthouse. More shots sounded. The screams and curses

grew louder. It was a lynching mob. Sam, Luckey and Maoma watched Rufus. They felt his fear. They felt him fighting it.

“Let ‘em come,” Rufus said out loud to no one.

Maoma wrestled his chains even more desperately.

Panicked, Sam rose and shuffled furiously to the window. It was like something from a storybook. There were hundreds down there. The street was thick with them, all focused on the courthouse doors. Armed men stood before the building repeatedly pushing them back with their rifle barrels.

“They gonna let ‘em have us!” the terrified Sam hollered. “They gonna let ‘em lynch us!” He fell as he rushed from the window to the door, half crawling, chains clanging, to bang and scream for salvation. Looking over his shoulder, Rufus saw a tear against Luckey Davis’ cheek, quickly wiped away. He knew what they were thinking. They all thought it was the end—that they would die now. Rufus watched his men like they were players on a stage, and wondered if they screamed and cried over death itself, or over the rough, bloody kind of dying that lynching meant. He wondered if he would see her again before he died. As the volume rose outside—as loud as running horses but dripping rage—he wondered if she would cry at his lynching for the love of him. Silent, stoic tears fell down Luckey’s face. Sam continued pleading at the heavy wooden door. Maoma’s body jerked and shuddered, rattling his chains in intermittent spasms of frustration and ineffectuality.

A key turned in the lock and the door swung open. On all fours, Sam skittered away.

Rufus pointed and laughed. “You look jus’ like a monkey,” he said to Sam.

Rifle aloft, barrel to the ceiling, Deputy N.B. Irwin stepped

inside. Behind him stood Marshal Samuel Haynes, his rifle pointed at the Bucks.

“Nice to see you boys havin’ a good time,” Irwin said, noting the laugh. Before he could say another word, Maoma shouted amidst a cacophony of his own rattling chains.

“You gonna drag us out there for ‘em ain’t ya’? You gonna let ‘em lynch us, you damned cowards!”

Irwin barely glanced at him and continued as if Maoma had not spoken. “Doubtless you boys seen the crowd outside. They got guns, clubs, torches and anything else they can carry. Hell, I saw some woman down there wavin’ a skillet. An’ we hear tell of folks headin’ this way from all over.”

He paused and glanced at them. He had their attention.

“Now our job is to get you all safe to Ft. Smith, to stand trial for what you done to them people. To do that, we gotta get you outta here. We talked it over, and best to do it after dark.”

“You settin’ us free?” Luckey Davis asked?

Irwin looked at him with something close to pity. “No son. We’re gonna get you outta town after dark and on a train to Ft. Smith for trial. But we gotta do it without the folks out front hearin’—or the folks camped out all along the town. If they get to you, they gonna kill, and won’t be much we can do about it. You’re gonna have to be quiet, and carry your chains, real tight up against yourselves.” He made a fist before his chest as if pulling up the chains attached to leg irons. “If you don’t make no noise, we should be able to get you outta here safe.”

All eyes stayed on him and he seemed satisfied. “We’ll get y’all somethin’ to eat before we go.” He backed out of the room and closed the door. They all heard the key turn in the lock.

2



Since hearing of their capture, Parker had thought of little but the Bucks. The connections and coincidences seemed too numerous to ignore. In them, he sensed an historic pageant, a series of pre-destined events, momentous in their outcome, to which he was somehow central. He was desperate to understand his part.

His search led him to the Ft. Smith jail where he informed the surprised jailers that he wished to confer with Cherokee Bill. Just 20 years old, half-Negro like Buck, he and the judge had danced an exhausting legal waltz that wasn't yet finished. While awaiting the Supreme Court review of his richly deserved death sentence, Bill had attempted escape and murdered one of Parker's jailers. Parker had considered the Supreme Court decision to question his sentence a personal affront. He blamed its deadly aftermath more on the Court's incompetent and unjustifiable interference than on the man who pulled the trigger. In the wake of the Supreme Court's inexcusable meddling, Parker had made intemperate remarks and brandished the open insubordination that led, over time, to the dissolution of his court. He'd memorized what the Fort Smith Elevator had written because it justified his outrage:

“For the benefit of those who may not understand why Cherokee Bill was not hanged (why he was allowed to remain alive long enough to commit another brutal murder), we will say that his case was appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States upon what is known in the law as technicalities—little instruments sometimes used by lawyers to protect the rights of litigants but oftener used to defeat the ends of justice. It will remain there until the bald-headed and big-bellied respectables who compose that body get ready to look into its merits.”

The judges of the Supreme Court reviewed Parker’s sentence as if something less than justice had been dispensed—as if that same justice had not almost miraculously dragged 74,000 square miles of Indian Territory towards civilization. Everyone knew Bill was a killer. He was just a different kind of one. Parker understood white violence: Rage, greed, sheer viciousness... any one could explain it. He understood Indian violence: A heathen people, their land threatened, uncivilized... he understood. But despite the innocent lives that myriad violence had taken, he preferred it to Negro docility. That was inhuman. It left one waiting, dreading the inevitably violent reaction to their state. He had turned Republican at the first secession and supported Lincoln throughout the war, but he understood why Southerners had scuttled Reconstruction. Handing black men the power to exact revenge for such treatment would have led to slaughter. Whenever a Negro outlaw faced his court, he

wondered, 'Is this the one? Is this their violent Moses come to lead them from the desert?' He had to admit that he took particular interest in locking these up or sending them straight to hell by way of the hangman. It was his Christian duty to spare the civilized world the havoc they might wreak. Looking at the crimes behind Bill's shockingly young eyes, he saw that revenge. A half-breed: A white man's pride with a black man's history stoking the flames—a dangerous mix.

~ ~ ~

As Crawford Goldsby (aka Cherokee Bill) sat in his cell, Judge Parker, who had recently sentenced him to die, was the last person he expected to see. Bill noticed that the first floor prison noise had fallen from a holler to a hush. He wondered what had caused it, but he wasn't interested enough to get off of his cot to find out. He figured that if it concerned him, he'd know soon enough. And here it was. During their last meeting, Judge Parker had sat on his courtroom throne, solemnly stroking his long, white beard as he, almost absently, in a hail of verbose grandiosity, wished mercy on his soul and sentenced him to die. He was supposed to have hanged on June 25th. It was August.

He wasn't dead yet.

Cherokee Bill did not stand when the judge entered his cell. He saw no reason. He and the Judge had danced a dance, but for him, it was over. He would no more have risen for a discarded girl who sashayed past to flatter herself with more of

his attentions.

“Get up you murderin’ nigger!” the jailer yelled as he furiously raised his club and struck Goldsby. Always on guard, Bill twisted to let his back take the blow. The jailer raised his club for another lash when the Judge rushed forward.

“No. It’s alright,” Parker said as he raised a steadying hand. But the jailer tried to push past him, struggling with the frail Judge. The man’s wild eyes frightened Parker, who wondered if Goldsby, the man he had twice sentenced to die, would bother to save him.

“He killed Larry Keating,” the guard pleaded, as if begging Parker to let him continue beating the man who killed his fellow jailer. There might have been tears in his eyes. Embarrassed, Parker briefly looked away.

“It’s alright. It’s alright,” Parker soothed as the man mastered himself and lowered his weapon. “Could you bring me a chair?” Parker asked, and the jailer gratefully disappeared to fetch one.

As the dangerous episode ended, Goldsby lay back on his cot and barely looked at Parker; he stared intently at the bottom of the bunk above his. Parker stooped a bit to see what was so interesting at that particular spot but couldn’t see a thing without twisting himself into an undignified position. Annoyed, he straightened up. Whether Goldsby was purposefully behaving oddly or just doing what came naturally, Parker couldn’t tell.

The jailer brought the chair; Parker sat. He had not been to the jail in some time, and while Bill stared in silence, he sat in awe of the copious splotches of fresh and dried tobacco-laden spittle dripping down and stuck to the walls. The smell

was nowhere near as offensive as the old jail had been, but it remained stunning. A veritable tornado of flies hovered over the barely-covered waste bucket. How long and hard he had fought to get this jail built to replace the travesty that was the old one, and like so much resulting from long, hard fights, the result seemed commendable, but just shy of being worth all of that effort.

When he tore his eyes from the laden walls, he found Cherokee Bill looking straight at him.

“What can I do for you, Judge? Or you just come to let the jailer get a crack in?”

“You’ve heard about Buck?” Parker asked.

“Don’t hear much here.”

That was a lie. Buck had been imprisoned here a mere month ago and had befriended Bill. Some suspected Buck of helping to plan the attempted escape during which Bill had murdered the jailer. Parker wondered if Buck had played a part in that critical episode, the one that precipitated his fight with his judicial “betters,” which accelerated his diminution in the eyes of what he reviled as “the legal community.” Parker to Bill to Buck... the connections were too tight. He felt them tighten, cold like shackles.

And then the Judge surprised Bill.

“What did he want?” Parker asked.

This question had no subtext. In the months of courtrooms, lawyers and even the Supreme Court, Bill was unused to that. He read Judge Parker’s face and saw nothing of subterfuge, only earnest inquiry. He rewarded forthrightness in kind.

“To be me,” he said. “I think he wanted to be me.”

“You’ve thought about him, too...” Parker said.

“To make things like they was before,” Bill continued.

“What things?”

“For the Indians.”

“He’s almost still a boy. What does he know about how things were?”

“What he knows don’t matter. What he thinks he knows... what he wants to know... What he dreams... That matters.”

Parker closed his eyes and let his body slump with heaviness and guilt. “Had it not been for me, he never would have met you,” he said. “I’d known his father, you see. I felt for his father, and trying to save the son, started all of this.” The silence lingered. Parker sat, eyes closed, remembering... Bill watched him indulge the melodramatic pose for a while, and then lost interest.

“Don’t get choked up about it,” Bill replied, lying back and returning his gaze to the bunk above. “I’m sure he’d o’ managed to kill someone without you.”

~

One year prior, Parker’s clerk had knocked. “John Buck and Samuel W. Brown,” young Virgil Purefoy had announced.

Predictably, Purefoy dawdled, gawking for a moment before he closed the door. Equally predictably, Parker both embraced and resented the look on the young, glowing face—a look that said he eyed a commemorative statue brought miraculously to life. The son of a prominent Virginia landowner, he’d come all this way to clerk for the famous judge and see the last of both him, and the notorious Territories he ruled. He’d been here eight months and after all that time still regarded the Judge

with a longing and tenderness, as if forever acknowledging the spectacle of vaporous history made magically and momentarily visible. Yes, the boy's making an historical romance of him amused the Judge. But it hurt. His end was on him. He didn't need reminding.

Virgil ushered into Parker's office Sam Brown, the mixed-blood Chief of the Euchee Indians and John Buck, a rancher and member of the Creek Council. Sam Brown's face wore a practiced, official's smile; John Buck's an emptiness that bespoke some level of inward devastation.

The Judge offered them refreshment. Each refused.

"We've come," Sam Brown began, as he lowered himself to his seat, "to ask for your help."

The judge interrupted to avoid acknowledging the gross diminution of his power and influence. "I know," he said. But I also know you've dispatched emissaries to Washington directly. How have they fared?"

Brown tilted his head, a man couching his words. "We've had respectful hearings wherever we've been welcomed, but nothing's changed. As you know, white intruders continue to flout the laws of land ownership, and the Dawes Commission plans are moving forward. What happened to the Cherokee can happen to us."

John Buck stared at a fixed point slightly ahead of him as if confounded. Parker doubted he had heard a word. Brown, on the other hand, understood everything; and it was at him that Parker grew angry. Why was Brown dragging him through this play-act that made his waning hurt like a disease of the bones? Brown knew good and well that Indian Territory was a Washington scrim elaborately hung to assuage its own

conscience and mollify the Civilized Tribes. It was sheer as lace to everyone there. Parker dealt daily with the friction of the lie versus the reality, trying to make brown people like this silent John Buck understand that nobody meant what they said on the level of nations, that it was all a dumb-show, an elaborate theatrical staged to distract from the real goings-on backstage. The Indian Territory was attached, sold, divided and spoken for. There was already more than \$1,000,000 worth of railroad property in it. As far as the Indians were concerned, it was gone. And Brown knew it. He was, after all, half white. He understood. He was prosperous, on his way to substantial fortune. He owned the trading post and post office at the Wealaka Mission, both of which relied on white trade. He understood: Bureaucracy, politics, coercion. It was in his blood. Brown took all the proper and necessary steps to protect his people, just as he took steps to protect himself. He had been instrumental in recruiting H.P. Callahan, a Bible-worshiping white man, to teach Indian children white men's ways at the Wealaka Mission School. He handled a meeting such as this, the bureaucratic dance and wrangle of it, like a white man—a mechanical matter of course. His job, he understood, was to be seen taking the appropriate steps—taking action, regardless of outcome. Results, in this case preordained, were neither here nor there. Through acts like installing Callahan at the school, perhaps he was trying to prepare his people for the inevitable. Parker wondered if men like Brown, to their own people, were heroes or traitors.

John Buck listened mute and seemingly unawares. Occasionally he'd shift his eyes to Parker. Parker always "felt" when he did so and turned. Each time, Buck held his gaze.

Full-blooded Indian, he had the face of a totem and Parker feared accusation in his expressionless placidity. The half-white Brown was not really Indian to him. Brown was a white man with a tinge. A part of Brown was like Parker. But Buck was different. He looked different. Parker assumed he thought different. He would not understand why white men relentlessly hounded his people across the land, wanting more and more and more of it. He simply would not understand such egregious taking. To him, it would be akin to some animal acquisitiveness that you would beat out of a dog but was, for some reason, allowed to run rampant in white men. Brown understood, as did Parker: They both understood that there was never enough, no such thing as too much. One could always have more. Wants, to them, were like breaths. Parker sympathized with the Indians, and could sometimes see their treatment as unjust, but he understood why they were treated as they were, and part of him saw no fault in it; yes, part of him saw destiny—not justice—but destiny in the dying, the loss, the winning and the godawful losing—it was the way of things. It was God's will.

Residing in Indian Territory, presiding over the criminals small and large who passed through his court every day, Parker had seen that there were different kinds of men and different ways of being. Buck was, through and through, an Indian. He was a kind who did not understand.

"We ask that you write to some of your friends in Washington," said Brown, "in the Congress, in the higher courts..." Parker cringed at that term, "higher courts" and hurried to interrupt again.

"I can certainly do that," he said. "However, my entreaties

may be less than influential. I can't tell you how many times I've made suggestions and requests of Washington only to be told by some functionary that they—not I—know best what is right for this Territory, despite the fact that I, alone, have borne the burden of justice here for over 20 years and singly brought the seeds and trappings of civilization..." He checked himself before he spoke recklessly. He did not need to further douse the embers of his career through public intemperance—regardless of how well deserved.

"What can we do?" The voice was so unexpected and matter-of-fact, Parker jumped. It was the heretofore-silent Buck, challenging Parker's self-involvement as well as his evasions. Again, Buck's eyes held him.

"Well," Parker hemmed and hesitated, "I suppose... continue to do what you've been doing. Appeal to all of the Indian authorities in Washington who will give you a hearing. Of course," he smiled, "I will appeal to any who will still listen to an old man."

"And what will that do?" Buck asked, unamused.

'Nothing,' would have been the only honest answer and the one Parker longed for the courage to give.

"We can hope for the best," Parker replied.

As furiously as Buck's eyes had seized him, they abandoned him and returned to their middle distance.

Subtly acknowledging that decorum had been punctured, Chief Brown rose and thanked the Judge for his time and the actions he would take on their behalf. The Judge extended his hand and Chief Brown shook it. As the Judge reached to shake Buck's hand, he balked at feeling young and needful, like a boy seeking an elder's approval.

“It may not be what we want,” Parker said as he earnestly pumped Buck’s hand, “but perhaps we can mold the changes more to our liking.”

“In our own time, perhaps we could,” Buck replied. “But the United States is in a rush.”

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To mitigate that rush, to ease his own relegation to the past, John Buck kept mementos. He would call his young son Rufus to him as he pulled the objects from the wall, ready to do his duty to pass the memories along; and every time he intended to speak from his heart, telling his boy what his history, his people’s stories, and the relics on his wall had meant to him. Not just stories, not just the ‘who’ and the ‘when’ but conveying the soul and the feeling, the sense of why their losses meant so much.

John Buck would sit in a chair and eye the prizes, rubbing his rough hand gently on the bowl, and the necklace, and the piece of wood with small holes in it. He was surprised that Rufus liked this one the most. John Buck would blow through it and make tuneful whistles.

“It was part of a musical instrument,” Buck explained to his son. “It belonged to a half-white man my father knew who fought in the Creek wars. He’d play this huge thing—these ‘bagpipes’ he called ‘em—as warriors headed into battle. My father said they wailed like a ghost, like screaming and war cries.”

Each time, he wanted to go on. He wanted to tell the story of his people with all of the passion, love and fury that he felt

deep down inside him. But he could not. He could not speak the words. They choked him. The words he had to use, they acted like bile and he grew physically ill; and one word, with its infinite permutations (“lost” “loss” “gone”), sounded like bells clanging deafeningly in his head.

“Lost.”

So John Buck told brief, disjointed stories, and then put the mysteriously sacred objects of triumph and memory back on their hangers, back on their shelves, and simply walked away.

Rufus would sit and ogle them long after. His father said they would one day be his. The memories would be his. He longed to invest them with the same near mystical import he gleaned from his father’s face and silence, the profound melancholy and ancient hurt that they obviously held, the key to which his father—for lack of desire or will, or due to Rufus’ own lack of worthiness—the key to which his father never shared. As the boy grew older, his father no longer called him for these sessions. But Rufus occasionally found him communing with his relics. Rufus would sit near his father, unacknowledged, and silently watch.

Years later, in 1894, John Buck took 16 year-old Rufus to Tahlequah to see the government pay out money to the neighboring Cherokee. The tribe had sold their land to the United States, but instead of the tribe getting the money, each Cherokee man and woman would get \$265.70. His father couldn’t believe it. The tribe would get nothing. He told Rufus he expected the same to happen to the Creeks. Rufus figured his father wanted to see what it was like.

Rufus looked forward to the trip. He imagined solitude and the road working wonders between him and his father.

There would be nothing to do but talk. He imagined finally learning about his father's life and his father's father's. He imagined becoming a proud son and a source of pride.

Though the trip began in silence, he kept high hopes.

"Cherokee Bill's a Cherokee," Rufus said, priming the pump. "I bet he'll come to get the money. I been readin' about him."

His father did not respond. Eyes fixed on the road, he paid no mind to the hot sun, to the blanched grass that stretched to the foothills or to the oak trees that dotted them. A wake of buzzards circled nearby; something big was dead. Rufus scrambled for topics that might engage his father.

"How come Ma didn't come?" he asked, though he hadn't wanted her to. His father did not answer.

Before the trip, Rufus had asked his mother, "How come Pa don't talk no more?" She'd chastised him with, "You lucky you got him. I didn't have a Daddy. What are you complainin' about?"

"If you didn't have a Daddy," Rufus replied, "does that mean I'm like Jesus?" She slapped him and never told him why. He never asked her about Jesus again.

Over time, in bits and pieces, he learned more about his mother's past than he knew about his father's: that her mother had been a Negro slave of the Lower Creeks back in Georgia, before the Creeks were forced to relocate to the Indian Territories. These Creeks did not treat black slaves the way white folks did. He learned that the Lower Creeks treated slaves like regular people. Didn't beat them; sometimes even married them. But when the Creeks got marched to the Territories, a white man bought his grandma. After that, it was all blood and screaming as a white man's slave. As such,

she heard crying and moaning for days on end to the point she thought she'd lose her mind. She could have killed the grieving mothers and widows, the whipped and the maimed, just to silence the inescapable, audible proof that she lived amidst such bottomless pain.

When she found a suitable man, she took months convincing him to run away with her, knowing full well that they would probably die, or wind up whipped or mutilated, but she didn't care. It shocked her, but she didn't care. It had never occurred to her that she would laughingly die and consider her own death vengeance against her killer. That's because she had never been owned like this.

So they ran. They ran toward Indian Territory where Negroes lived free. Her man got caught so that she could go on. She never knew what happened to him. She refused to think about it. She made it to the Indian Territory, and there she died giving birth to a girl six months later—giving birth to Rufus Buck's mother. So his mother had no parents. The Creeks raised her. Eventually, she married one. The Creeks told her what had happened to her mother and hers before. Their peoples' wounds were linked and the Creeks considered it their duty tell her about them. They explained how her mother had lived among them and the distinctions between being a Lower Creek slave and a white man's. But despite their protestations, the slaveries were not distinct to Iona Buck. If her mother had never been a Creek slave—if the Creeks had not owned her and sold her, the whites never would have gotten their hands on her. Rufus' mother had been conceived within a crime and raised among, and grateful to a people that some part of her still considered criminals—a conundrum like a tumor inside

her, large enough to cause discomfort, but small enough to grow accustomed to—not worth the pain and risk of removal.

“There ain’t nothin’ you can do,” she told Rufus when he asked about his father. “These Creeks keep tryin’, but your father knows better.” She paused a moment, watching the chickens meander and peck as she scattered feed. “White folks want what they want,” she said to no one in particular. “They get what they get.”

“Ain’t you gonna say nothin’?” Rufus finally blurted at his father on the road to Tahlequah.

“I’m done talkin’,” his father said.

They rode for eight more hours in silence. The wagon’s creak, the snorting horses, the summer stillness, that’s all Rufus heard.

They camped that night and he dreamed that angels came in song and sound and gently took him up to heaven. It looked a lot like home, but felt more beautiful than the home he knew, or any he’d ever imagined.

When his father woke him, it was already hot. The night had never cooled. They climbed on the wagon and in the span of a couple of hours, saw more people than they had seen during the whole trip. By the middle of the morning, they were just two among a moving crowd larger and more epic than any Rufus had ever seen. All these men and women, all these horses and wagons with one single purpose, with one destination... how sweet the goal must be to lure so many... Surely a promised land... Sweat blackened men’s collars and shirts while many slid increasingly filthy sleeves and handkerchiefs across their faces. Dust thrown up everywhere by all the wagons and horses slogging slowly forward. Every kind of person, mule, buggy

and conveyance crammed up together and eagerly crawling their way into Tahlequah.

John Buck had imagined what he would see there—a funereal scene in which the Cherokee took slips of paper in exchange for their future and their past. On faces he thought he'd see a sadness bone deep, something that touched him to his soul and thus let him truly understand whatever it was that had silenced him, and understanding, let him articulate and pass to his son what had been lost instead of suffering this mute rot of anger and want and fear inside him. He imagined an eerie silence, none daring refuse such money but all acknowledging the death of tribal ways that its taking represented. Maybe he just wanted permission to stop hoping. He imagined tear-stained dollars as the Cherokee marched back to their homes, both richer and less than they had been when they arrived.

At first it was a trickle. John and Rufus Buck came upon and passed a few wagons, some Indians on foot, a few on horseback, and then more, and then still more. Soon, the road was like a cattle drive of people. Most looked Cherokee, but some looked like white men; you didn't have to be all Cherokee to get the money. Badge-wearing white, colored, and Indian Marshals rode swiftly through the crowds, their rifles aloft, hustling people out of their way. Closer to Tahlequah, occasional white men in suits stood on the sides of the road in groups of two or three, commenting on the living diorama that passed before them as if it were a grand parade. Must have been Indian bureau men, John thought, surveying the tangible results of their work. Wheels broke and people labored in the road to fix them as the crowds coursed around them like water around a rock. Pissing men dotted the roadsides like statuary.

Medicine wagons hollered about a cure for this or that and others screamed that they had whiskey—all kinds of whiskey. Whiskey was illegal in Indian Territory, but nobody cared that day. One wagon passed by full of jugglers with painted faces and acrobats in tights. Another passed dripping with whores all dolled up and beckoning every man who looked. It was like the carnival had come to town. This is what John Buck had come to see—how it was done; how yet another piece of you falls away in exchange for handfuls of nothing.

He had wanted Rufus to see it. He didn't know why, not specifically. There was no lesson he could articulate that he wanted the boy to learn. There wasn't any practical reason why he should have come. But the boy had to... absorb. He had to befriend what was dying for the Cherokee, hold its hand and listen to its deathbed ramblings, and then learn to exist in the void of what was left when it happened to the Creeks, as John Buck knew it would. John had no idea what that meant or how to do it, but he had seen and thought too much of one way of living to change now, and it was killing him. Maybe it wasn't too late for his son.

Buck remembered the day back in 1893—the precursor to this spectacle, another of his pointless treks of witness: 100,000 white men stood, sat on horseback and rode in wagons, sweating in the heat and epic dust of the Cherokee Strip to race for 42,000 plots of land. The land belonged to the Cherokee, and the United States first used it to settle friendly Indians; and then the cattlemen wanted it for grazing, so eventually the government bought it to feed its voracious appetite for the earth itself. In exchange for this land, the government would pay money—not to the Cherokee tribe as a whole, as traditional

and right dictated, but to each individual member—every man and every woman. To Buck, that was like buying a house and splitting the money evenly between the man, his wife, and each child and telling them all to go their separate ways. It was the end of the tribe as their collective soul. It was one of many endings. So in '93, John Buck watched as they shot off a gun and the unimaginable throng of white men, women, and children all scrambled for their piece of Cherokee heaven, for which each Cherokee man, woman and child would later be paid \$265.70. There were more would-be white settlers than there were potential homesteads. Most got nothing. At the end of the day, John Buck rode among them as they lay exhausted with the dust stuck to their sunburnt, sweaty white faces. He watched as they wept in the dirt at not being fast enough, hungry enough, maybe just not white enough to get a piece of Cherokee land.

And here, today, one year later, each Cherokee lined up to receive his little bit of the payment for the tribe's land so valiantly raced for one year earlier. Each one. \$265.70. If you could prove you had some Cherokee in you, you got the money, but you had to go to Tahlequah in Cherokee country to collect it. John Buck went to see it happen to the Cherokee, knowing that a similar day would come for the Creeks.

Off in the distance, rifle stocks stuck up in the air like trees. A little forest of them, all protecting the millions getting handed out, \$265.70 at a time. There were lines and lines of people waiting for it. Others lined up to take it from them. Whiskey peddlers swarmed like flies. Gamblers set up tables right out in the open. Men and women no sooner got the money in hand than they went off to drink it and lose it at cards. John

Buck stopped the wagon and watched from the back of the crowd. Some emerged from the thick of it, counting their bills when waiting debt collectors swooped in to take it from them. One woman fought like hell. “This is Cherokee money!” she yelled, kicking and swinging at the two men who pried her fingers open to take the crushed cash. A fiddler played while some white folks danced in the middle of the crowd. One man and woman walked free of the throng looking so sad, like they had just buried something—looking like John had expected all of them look. But most didn’t. The whole plain was like a funeral hidden behind a festival, something cheerless hiding in a saloon. John never once looked at his son sitting beside him. He was so amazed and appalled at what he saw himself that he barely thought of Rufus.

Buck lifted the reins and clicked his tongue. The horse woke up and pulled the wagon, this time against all the people still streaming into Tahlequah for their \$265.70.

John Buck swore that it was the last lacerating piece of State theater he would force himself to witness. Rufus never uttered a sound. They rode home in silence. What happened was never mentioned between them.