

Dust Bowl Days

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A Stranger in Town: Chapter 1

Duke, my old half German shepherd, half somethin' else, huntin' dog lay on the wooden porch of the store. "Stay," I told the mongrel. I pushed the double door open and the floor creaked where it always did. The warm air felt good. It was four miles from home in what my Pa calls Hill Oklahoma to this little store in Hackett Arkansas, and it was pretty cold today. I don't know where the state line is, but it is somewhere between here and there.

Mr. Sanders, wearing his stained white apron over a sweater stood leaning on the counter. I leaned the empty shotgun against the doorjamb. I pulled off my ragged knitted gloves and stuffed them in my coat pocket.

"Howdy, Ike," he said.

I returned his "howdy", and then I took off my hat since I needed to ask for credit again. "Can I get five more shotgun shells?" I asked. We couldn't afford a whole box of shells at one time, so I would get them five at a time. Actually, we couldn't afford nothin'. Mr. Sanders had been carrying us all winter. I was the designated hunter since each shell had to provide a rabbit or somethin' bigger.

"Shore. My pleasure. How's your ma and pop?" Mr. Sanders made it seem like the most natural thing in the world for us to beg credit from him. He was carryin' most of the town and most of the farm folk around these parts. He was a nice guy to all of us.

"Mom is poorly, today. It's the cold, I reckon. It's pretty hard on her."

He counted out five shells and I signed my "Isaac Daniels" on his clipboard that says I got 'em. I put the red 12 gauge cartridges into my left coat pocket. I put my hat on my head then tipped the brim to Mr. Sanders as a thank you. I took my shot gun and called for Duke as I left the store.

I had walked with the wind to get here, but it was against the wind goin' home and the wind bit in hard as I pulled on my gloves. Duke kept his head down and his eyes half closed as we walked into the icy wind. I think it is getting' colder. It is a grey day and the clouds were gettin' darker.

It was my plan to go home through the woods down by the creek. I had seen a flock of wild turkeys in there several times. I was plannin' to have one of them for dinner tonight.

I find plannin' don't count for much during this depression. As soon as I jumped the ditch to head for the woods, I saw the body. The man was dead, face down in the ditch. He had no coat. He just had on a shirt and trousers and black shoes and socks. Black suspenders

held the pants up. His shirt was clean white except for the blood stain on the celluloid collar. The blood was frozen and he was frozen. His hair looked to have been cut by a barber. I knew I was goin' to be late when I headed over to the Sheriff to tell him about the body. I was hopin' there would daylight enough to get a shot at somethin' for dinner before I got home. An occasional snowflake came swirling out of the grey. Sheriff Braxton was locking up to go home early. He was not too happy to hear there would be outside work in the evening hours. "Can you go get Donnie for me?" the sheriff asked me. "I will meet you two down there." Donnie was the part time deputy. "Don't touch nothin' 'till I get there," he said as he unlocked the office to go back in.

Donnie Braxton was Sheriff Braxton's nephew. "Keep it in the family" was their philosophy. Donnie lived in an apartment over the Dew Drop Inn and was the bouncer for the saloon in the evening. He pulled on a heavy coat and gloves when I told him about the body. He pinned his six pointed deputy badge on his coat since it was official business.

We got to the ditch on foot as the sheriff pulled up in his model A. Donnie and the sheriff climbed down in the ditch and pulled the body loose from the frozen ground. When they had the stiff man turned on his back and some of the leaves cleaned off his face, I told them I had seen him before.

"He was stealing pecans from our tree by the road." I told them. "That was two days ago. It was warmer and he was drivin' a fancy car. I had my gun and I told him to stop. Pa saw what was goin' on and came down by the road. He looked like he knew the man. Pa said to him, 'I see you are a travelin' man.' The man looked mighty relieved and Pa told me to lower the gun off him."

"Pa told the guy he could have all the pecans that were on his side of the fence. The guy pulled out a pillow case from the back of his car and started loading up on pecans. Pa went back up the hill. I think Pa saw the guy had on a Masonic ring on his hand. Pa is a member of the lodge here in Hackett."

"This guy told me his name was George. He invited me over the fence to look at his car. It was a Packard funeral car. It wasn't a hearse. It was like the family limousine. It had fold down seats in back. The guy, uh, George here, told me he was sleeping in and livin' outa the car. He said he won it in a poker game in Ft Smith. There were little polished metal signs in the windows that said, 'Bowen's Funeral Home.'"

There was no fancy car and no Masonic ring now. Just a frozen guy the sheriff and Donnie were trying to load in the back of the sheriff's car. It was hard for them to get his joints to bend enough to get him to clear the door. Finally, they gave up and stood him up in the rumble seat. Sheriff Braxton had some rope so they tied him in place so he wouldn't fall out. They drove off with George kind of leaning forward over the top of the Model A.

I decided against going into the woods as it was too near sunset. I would do good just to get a shot at a rabbit on the way home. "Come on Duke," I called to the dog. Snow was coming down lightly and the wind had let up a little.

It was almost completely dark when I was crossing the last field of the hill we lived on. I heard a rabbit bolt as I approached. I fired more at the sound than anything I could see. The squeal of the dying rabbit told me I hit a target. Lack of scamper sounds told me it quit moving. "Get it, Duke," I told the old dog. I was temporarily blinded by the flash of the 12 gauge. I daren't move till my sight returned. Like a lightning flash, my vision was frozen with a negative image of what I saw when the gun went off. I could see a shadow of the rabbit about a foot off the ground stretched out trying to run. It was amazing to watch the scene of the jumping rabbit slowly fading away.

Duke took a whole minute of zig-zag to locate the rabbit, (I guess he was temporarily blinded, also.) but he managed to bring it to me. At least we would have supper tonight, and I would have a tale to tell about the dead, frozen stranger on the edge of town.

I had burned more than an hour getting back home at a slow trot. Supper would be very late, but at least there would be supper. I heard Izzy running and calling "Ike, Ike!"

"Mom's dead." Izzy cried. Izzy, my little brother had been waiting for me on the porch since he heard my shot at the rabbit. He had been crying. That was clear from his face. Izzy was nine. I picked up Izzy and started to carry him home. He was by far the youngest of us four boys.

"What? What happened?" I gasped.

Pa came out on the porch as we approached and put his hand on my shoulder. "You know your Mom has been sick for a while," he said. "This recent batch of cold put her to bed. She died of consumption this afternoon. We knew she had it since last spring. It was her idea that we did not tell you boys that she was likely to die. Doc said we should tell you, that all of you were old enough to know." Pa looked at Izzy when he spoke this last bit "You all know now, I guess." Pa kinda patted my shoulder. I followed him and Izzy inside to see Mom.

Izzy and Pete and Sam and Pa had already taken care of Mom. They had cleaned her up and put her into her best dress and her white socks with the little flowers embroidered on the ankles. Izzy had brushed her hair. She liked for him to do that when she didn't feel well. Pa had laid her on a rough sawn plank laid between two chairs. They had tied her hands together so her arms wouldn't fall off the narrow plank. They tied a scarf around her jaws to the top of her head to keep her mouth closed. "We will take her to town tomorrow. Does anyone feel like eating?" Pa asked.

We all agreed food would not be too good right now. I took the rabbit outside and gutted it. I tied the rear legs together with a leather thong, and hung it up on a post on the porch.

It would keep fine in this cold. Washing the rabbit blood off my hands hurt in the frigid water I drew from the pump.

We got ready for bed mostly in silence. Izzy sobbed quietly when he covered Mom with a blanket and tucked it around her chin.

Pa asked when he climbed into bed why I was so late. I gave him the news about the stranger who took our pecans and who was now was frozen stiff headed to the undertakers.

"Jesus, what a day!" Pa said. "They must've killed him for that nice car he was driving."

"They took his Mason's ring, too." I told Pa.

Taking Mom to Town: Chapter 2

Pa woke up first, but his rustling around got the rest of us up. Seeing Mom still on the plank, unmoving all night and not waking up now was a jolt. It really brought home how final this was. Pa came in with a bucket of cold water from the pump. We all took turns washing the sleep from our eyes. Izzy was lucky to be last today. The water was not so brutally cold when he filled his basin. I could see him crying a little as he washed his face. He was the youngest and took care of Mom inside while the rest of us worked the farm. His life would change the most.

Izzy asked, "What about school?"

"School will get along without you until we get your mother buried." Pa explained. "If we get time, Ike or Sam can go by and get assignments. Mostly, you can make up your assignments as you get time."

While Izzy washed, Pa was already dressed and outside hitching Sue, our mule, to the flat wagon. By the time Izzy had crawled into his clothes, Sue was making grumpy morning noises about the unexpected chore in the cold this morning.

Pa came in and spoke to us. "We will take your mother on that plank. Izzy, take that blanket and spread it in the bed of the wagon. Sam and Ike, take the head and foot of the plank. Pete and I will walk on the sides holding on to the plank. The main thing is to keep the wood level so you Mom don't roll off. Getting out the door will be tricky. I will go out first, Pete. Then we will move the plank to the other side of the jamb so Pete can come out. OK, boys, let's be careful with your mother and go slowly so nobody trips."

Mom didn't weigh anything. Any of us but Izzy could have scooped her up like a baby and carried her that way. But this way let each of us help her to the wagon. I remember Pa had to do this with each of his parents. Someday, I might carry Pa the same way. We did it the way he said.

When we reached the back of the wagon, Sam put the head end in and hopped up in. He lifted the plank clear of the blanket on the floor and each of us advanced a little until Pete and Pa had to let go and move to the sides of the wagon where they could regrip the wood and continue the slow movement of Mom into the wagon. When I was finally able to set down the foot, Mom was lying in the middle of the wagon bed. Excess blanket showed on both sides of Mom's plank. Pa flipped one side of the blanket over her. I did the same with the other side.

Pa announced, "Izzy and Sam, ride back here on each side near her head. Pete and Ike, you can ride on each side with your feet hangin' off the end. It'll be a rough ride. We just don't want to lose her." Pa cracked a little smile.

Let me explain about the "town" of Hill Oklahoma. It is just the hill we live on. Mrs. Corrigan, who lives in the next house down the road with her boy Kev, are the only other residents besides us. Pa made a sign that says "Hill Oklahoma, Post Office" and put it in front of Mrs. Corrigan's drive. That is the whole town – two houses with a post office in one of them. Main Street is county road 251. There are no signs to mark the start or stop of this town. The road doesn't even get wider. If it weren't for the post office sign and the \$10 a month Mrs. Corrigan gets as the post master, there would not be any evidence of a town. When there is a letter to be mailed, we just carry it to Hackett unless it is the day the Post Office truck goes by. Then Mrs. Corrigan sets a red flag on the sign that says post office and the truck will stop to pick up a letter. Once in a great while, the truck will stop when there is a letter or package for someone living around here.

There are no close roads that go from here to Hackett. If you wanted to be on a road the whole way, it would be over 15 miles to Hackett. Walking was four miles and was pretty direct. Taking the wagon, it was about five miles along roads then over a rolling meadow, then back onto the bumpy Arkansas road that goes into Hackett. That was Pa's plan to take Mom over the meadow. He clucked at Sue and snapped the reins down on her rump and we began the slow trek to the funeral parlor in Hackett.

At the Hackett Funeral Home, Pa takes off his hat as he goes in. In just a minute, he sticks his head back out the door and says, "Ike, take the wagon around back and the undertakers will take Mom in. Then all of you come back around here. We have some questions to answer."

After pulling the wagon around the building via an alley, I tied up the mule and knocked on the door. Two men in rubber aprons over black vests and trousers come out and take Mom into the back of the funeral parlor. You could tell they were practiced and had no trouble working together to carry an awkward load. They deposited Mom's body onto a work table, plank and all. The lead man then showed all of us to the front office where Pa was already seated. The mortician fetched four more chairs for us.

"Well then," the man started, "what was the deceased name?"

"Letha Daniels," said Pa.

“Very pretty name. What was her maiden name?”

So, Pa and the funeral director went back and forth discussing every aspect of Mom and her family and where all the relatives were and what church and which Masonic guild and what sort of coffin would she want? This last question caused all of us to adjourn to the casket room to look them over. They went from plain wood box to a cloth covered wood box all the way up to solid bronze with silver handles and the water tight guarantee. I couldn't figure out if the guarantee was watertight or the coffin was watertight. I wondered who would check if it was the coffin. The cloth covered wood was the cheapest box and that is what Mom got.

The mortician said we would need to stop at the sheriff's office to fill out a form for an unwitnessed death. “It was witnessed,” Pa said. “Me and the boys were there.”

The mortician smiled and said when a death is unwitnessed by any state-licensed agent like a sheriff or a doctor or a nurse, then a form has to be filed with the sheriff and a doctor has to examine the body to be sure no foul play was the cause. “We can't do a thing until a doc gives us an OK and signs a death certificate. You won't be able to collect any life insurance until that death certificate is filed. It is just a formality.”

“There won't be any life insurance.” Pa told the mortician.

The mortician looked crest fallen. “That's too bad,” he said. “Insurance can help so much with these final bills.”

When everything was settled and planned, Pa asked if a George Nelson was also here. The mortician said “yes” and asked if we knew him.

“Only casually, Pa said. “He came to a couple of Masonic lodge meetings and said he belonged to a lodge in Chicago.”

“Very tragic. It looks like murder. He was hit on the head with a sharp instrument. Maybe a shovel. It was something heavy and something with a sharpened blade. You see in his example what I mean by having a doctor examine the body. Here is one the doctor found to be murder.”

“Can I see him?” Pa asked.

“Oh, I am sorry. We are not quite done with him. However, it should not be too much longer. Chances are, when you are through with the sheriff, the remains will be ready for viewing.” The mortician's voice took on a conspiratorial hush. “The sheriff thinks this is George Baby Face Nelson,” the mortician whispered.

“I wouldn't know anything about that. I saw him exactly three times in six months. All of those had to do with him being a Mason.” Pa told the mortician.

Pa shook hands with the funeral director. "Can we leave the wagon in back," Pa asked.

"Don't worry about it." The undertaker said. "If we get another customer, we will move your wagon for you. That is, if that old Jenny of yours is friendly?"

"She'll move for you. She's not skittish or anything." Pa said.

"Her name is Sue," Izzy added helpfully.

The five of us headed over to the sheriff's office. Everyone was talking about the undertakers and telegrams to the relatives and newspapers near the relatives and what the obituary would say. "Letha (Neighbors) Daniels died Thurs, Nov 7 near Hackett AR. Funl will be Tue 10 AM First Bap Chch in Hackett. Burl will be at Vaenita Cem following serv." Three abbreviated sentences were the obituary that summed up my mother's life. Of course every letter cost a penny and that times the three telegrams to three towns it would go to tell all our relatives about the service.

As we walked, I dropped an arm around Izzy's shoulder and asked him how he was doing. He looked up at me and said he was glad Mom was in a better place and wouldn't feel the cold anymore. "Thanks for being so brave about it." I told him.

I noticed for the first time in a long time how different I looked from my brothers. All of them and Pa have sandy blonde hair. My hair was black. I had to shave my black beard every morning. It was a dark shadow on my face again by supper. Pa and the older boys could go a week before stubble showed fine hair on their faces. My skin was dark, almost Indian looking. All of them were fair. My Pa said Mom had Indian in her. It was the joke in the family that I was the black sheep. I really stood out today walking with four blonde men to the sheriff's office.

"Ike, I certainly am glad to see you." Sheriff Braxton greeted us. He was older muscular man who was thick in the middle. People got out of his way whether he was dressed as a sheriff or not. "I was sure sorry to hear about your ma. Mighty tough on the youngster, I bet." He looked at Izzy when he said the last bit. News travels in a small town. Nothing happens that the sheriff doesn't find out about pretty quick.

"Come in and let's get the paper work done. I will need to borrow Ike to go to Ft. Smith this afternoon or tomorrow. They caught the guy that likely killed our friend, George Nelson. Bowen's his name. He originally owned that fancy car Nelson had and Bowen was back driving it again. I heard Ike say that he saw the car when Nelson had it. We need him to look through it to see if he recognizes anything as Nelson's that can tie Bowen to the murder."

Pa said either day was OK with him, and it was up to me if I felt like going today or tomorrow. I said today was OK to get it over with. Ft. Smith is about 25 miles north of Hackett. It is a dusty ride anytime.

Pa and the sheriff filled out a couple of forms. "To tell you the truth," the sheriff said, "Doc is likely over there looking at Letha now. In small towns things get done when they are needed. You men can go if you want."

"Ike, if you are ready for that trip to Fort Smith, we can be back by dark if we head out now. Zack, I will bring Ike by your place when we are done. No need for him to walk those miles back home." "Zack" is what people called my Pa, though his real name is Isaac Willard Daniels. I am really named Isaac Wesley Daniels. That is why I am "Ike." So, nobody will mix up names of me and Pa. It is a funny thing about bein' named and bein' called.

Ft. Smith: Chapter 3

I got into the sheriff's Model A and he climbed into the driver's seat. The whole car leaned to his side as he entered. I might have mentioned he was a big man. "We will get us something to eat in Ft. Smith and the state can pay for it." He said. He smiled at the thought of a free lunch. "I know a place that has chicken-fried steak. You'll like it," the sheriff promised.

The trip was dusty and bumpy until we got to highway 70. It was paved, mostly, except for bridges and detours. It seems like roads are never finished being built and repaired.

We got to the court house that also served as the city jail. It was once a prison for the whole Indian Territory. A "hangin' judge" famously meted out justice here, executing over 80 people during the 1800's. We only recently slowed down. Twenty-two more people have been dropped off the front of this scaffold since Judge Isaac Parker laid down his gavel and own mortal coil. Two other less famous judges helped feed the gallows after Judge Parker died.

Two iron gates swung open for us. We drove through an arched portal in the thick stone wall. Where we parked, we were in front of a long scaffold of six position gallows. Six people could be executed at one time in this little factory of punishment. The trap door was really the whole front edge of the platform. You could probably put more men up there at once because the six nooses had plenty of room between them and the beam where the nooses were hung was a continuous long piece of wood..

"Those nooses are just for show. We haven't had an execution here since 1896 when the Indian territories were broken up into tribal lands." Sheriff Braxton told me. "The prison at Varner takes care of all the hangings now."

Right next to where the sheriff parked was the infamous Packard funeral car. We ignored the Packard for the moment and went inside the court house.

The sheriff was shaking hands with everybody he met. He asked direction from a pretty secretary and we were shown into a big office. "Ah, yes! Is this the lad that found Baby

Face Nelson dead? Great work son! We really appreciate you doing your civic duty.” It was like he was congratulating me for rubbing out George Nelson, myself.

“All I did was find him.” I told the glad-handing stranger.

“Right you are boy. I am J C Coombs, District Attorney round these parts. Glad to meet you, uh...?”

“Ike Daniels,” I said “Isaac Daniels to be precise.” I said as he pumped my hand.

“Good, good, excellent in fact! Very glad to meet ‘chu” he gushed. I hadn’t heard so many empty words since the church sermon last week.

“Well,” said Sheriff Braxton, “You wanted to ask Ike some questions and show him some evidence?”

The lawyer bit his lip and paused then said, ”Ah yes. We need him to look over these, uh... artifacts and tell us if he recognizes any of them. Right this way my boy.” He guided us over to a table. Spread out were several things I knew to be in the car when George had showed me around.

“Do you recognize any of these items?” the lawyer inquired.

“Yes, that pillow case there.” I looked inside and there were pecans and broken pecan shells. “Yes, these pecans are probably the ones he took from our tree. It definitely looks like the same pillow case he used as a bag. “This pillow and this blanket here were both in the backseat when I was being shown through the car. Some of this clothing was in a pile in the backseat.” I picked up and displayed clothes I had seen in the heap of clothes.

There was a bloody shovel leaned against the table. “Is that the shovel he was killed with?” I asked.

“Did you see the shovel in the car?” the sheriff asked.

“No, no. When we took my Mom to the undertaker’s today, he mentioned that the doctor and you thought George had been killed with a shovel or something like it.”

“You call him George,” the lawyer said “Were you on a first name basis?”

“No. I only spoke to him the one time. George was just the only name he gave me to call him.” I explained.

“He was a cagy one, that Babyface Nelson!” the lawyer exclaimed as if he detected a great crime in the name “George.”

“I AM interested in that code, there.” I said.

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