

# 1 A LIGHT IN THE NIGHT

Three boys sprawled around the campfire, tracing constellations with their fingertips and listening to the lapping waters of Lake Inclement. Late July stars wheeled overhead, shining down through the thick, summertime air. A half-full bag of marshmallows lay discarded with a cluttered pile of roasting sticks, while the empty hotdog wrapper was in the custody of a snoozing dog. Except for the stars and the fire, it was deep dark, no moon and no lights out here. If you looked hard, you could barely discern the horizon separating earth from sky, but only because there were no fierce stars below it.

"Draco. See that one there? Draco." The dark-skinned boy spoke, drawing the outline in the air. Paxton made constellation finding look easy.

"Where?" This from the light haired kid with the camera by his side and the dog at his feet. "All's I can find is the Big Dipper. If that IS the Big Dipper." Zack sounded doubtful and exasperated.

The other boy wasn't looking up at all, but rather gazed into the fire with twinkling green eyes, his head cocked, seeming to listen. The lake had lots of night sounds--frogs blurping, cicadas ratcheting up and down, water rolling softly over the rocks, and, every so often, a soft splash as something like a turtle or even a fish disturbed the surface. It was a rhythm Carpenter knew as thoroughly as his own heartbeat. He had been living here on the shores of Lake Inclement since he was four. He turned and faced the water, just darkness in more darkness, but he knew it was there, biding, and he regarded it with something like love. Then, with no warning, there was a light.

It was up in the trees, away to the southwest. Far away. Maybe 5 miles or more. Carp sat up and clasped his knees to his chest, cold for a moment even though the humid air had to be 80 degrees. It wasn't like a pinpoint star of brightness, like a streetlight. It was down in the trees for one, like it was something on the ground shining up. The trees closest to Carp were thrown into sharp silhouette, while the ones behind the glow were lit up with daylight color. It looked as if there were some sort of magic playing out over there.

Neither Zack nor Paxton noticed. Flash, the dog, sat up, his nose pointed right at it, however.

"Guys. Guys! Hey, guys!" Carp couldn't tear his eyes away. "Guys, what IS that?!?"

Zack looked away from the stars and where Carp was pointing. His eyes widened, and he whacked Paxton on the shoulder. "What?" asked Paxton, and then he saw, and his eyebrows came together in puzzlement.

"What is that, Carp? I've never seen lights out there before."

"I don't know. I've never seen it either." Carp stood up, and the other two did as well, drawing together without thinking till they were shoulder to shoulder, barefoot on the sand. The fire muttered and popped behind them.

"That's weird. Just weird. I don't think there's anything out there that could be making that light. Just forest and more forest. Doesn't make sense." Paxton spoke nervously.

Zack said nothing. He was new to town, only having lived in Inclement a few months. He felt lucky to have friends like Carp and Paxton. Friends had always seemed hard to come by in the places he had lived before. He didn't feel qualified to comment on strange lights in the woods any more than he would have about the current geopolitical situation. One thing was for sure--he knew enough about the situation to know he really didn't know anything.

"Buck's Point." A gravelly voice croaked behind them. Paxton and Zack jumped. Carp didn't. He knew the owner of that voice well enough, all right. He didn't even turn around when he spoke.

"Is that where it is, Grampa? Buck's Point? I didn't think it was so far away. Looks closer."

The old man sat in the darkness to their left in a worn bucket seat from a long-junked GMC Jimmy. He had been there all evening, sipping suntea, but so quiet, so much a part of the environment that the boys had forgotten completely about him. "Yeah, that's where it is. You've heard of Buck's Point before, haven't ya, boy?"

"That's where old man Buck fell," Paxton replied quickly.

"Ha. Yah. Fell." Ben Clondyke's voice betrayed bitter cynicism. "Well, we'll leave the truth of that for later. Have ya heard 'bout the lights that shine out there once in a while? Carpenter, surely you've heard tell of such."

"Well, yeah, I mean, you've said something about it before."

"So, those are they. The lights. You're seein' 'em now. I've seen 'em myself a few times. Most folks who have lived on the lake for long enough have seen 'em, though most won't talk about it."

"Why not?" This from Zack. Always wondering why was Zack.

"Mostly 'cause its ugly. It's a story that shows the truth of people better than they are comfortable with. Most folks like to tie history up in pretty paper and satin bows so it's nicer to look at. But that don't mean it's true. Oh, parts of it are nice. Parts are close to beautiful. But not all. Every community, every town in this whole wide world has history it ain't so proud of. Those lights glimmering in the trees over there, well, that's a part of Inclement just the same as Poe's Pizza and the Western Radio Hub and even Inky. Just isn't as palatable, is all. But it's true just the same."

"What's true, Mr. Clondyke?" Zack really wanted to know. The more he knew about his town, the more he felt he might fit in. And fitting in was not something Zack was accustomed to, though he would love to feel like he was such a part of the comings and goings of the people here that he took it for granted, just as they did.

The old man stood up then, making that old truck seat creak. He walked smoothly over to the boys, more smoothly than most 70 year olds, and stood beside them staring at the magical glow in the trees. He was just a shape in the night, but they could tell he was thinking, considering....maybe even pondering. Finally he said "You wanna know? All of ya? You want to know what that light is, and the story around it?"

"Heck yeah!" Carpenter broke out of his dreamy demeanor and answered with his normal go-getter enthusiasm.

"Yeah, I think I want to know. Especially if its a good story." Paxton's eyes were wide and intelligent.

"I do too," spoke Zack seriously. Flash looked up at the old man with his soft, brown eyes. No answer there. Being a dog, he was along for the ride, so to speak.

"Then head back over to the fire. Stories are best told around fires at night, boys, never forget that. Magic happens when you're sitting around a fire and the darkness lays like velvet across the land. Hmmmph." They went. Ben Clondyke waded through the tall grass into the night. When he returned, he was dragging his carseat over the weeds, grating over the sand, and positioned it so he was facing Buck's Point and the strange play of lights in the grove of trees. He flumped down and immediately his scrawny one eared cat lept into his lap, its eyes glaring balefully at the crackling fire. The boys spread their sleeping bags out on the sand and fell upon them, looking forward to this story as if they were 5 year olds, waiting for momma to read them their favorite fairy tale. Grampa Clondyke always gave good value with his stories, true or not.

He scratched his cat distractedly, staring off into the darkness for what seemed to be a long while before he spoke in his gravelly voice. And this is what he said...

"I'm gonna start this with those old, powerful words that we've all heard a thousand times. They're good words, even if they have been overused." He paused for a moment to let that sink in, then started his story in earnest.

"Once upon a time, in a town named Inclement, things were different. The time I'm talking about is the 1930's, back when no one had any money to speak of, but there wasn't too much to buy anyway. Not like today, with televisions and video games and dvd's and ipods. As long as folks had a radio, well, they felt rich. Oh, there were a few folks in town that didn't have to worry much, like the Steeles and the Clappers. They're still around, you've heard of 'em, probably have a few of their great-grandchildren in school with ya. But there was no one real rich, independently rich in this town till the arrival of Orland Buck and his pretty little daughter, Delilah."

"They drove into town in a perfect 1930 Lincoln, white and shinin' fierce in the sun. That car *was* perfect, mind you. And old Orland kept it that way always. Washed it twice a week, waxed it once a month. It was so new, so sparkling in all the dirt-poor tiredness that was Inclement that it took your breath away to look at it. Most of the rolling iron around here was old, rusty, and dusty, not new and not that gorgeous vanilla white. Anyway....." Old Ben trailed off for a moment, obviously thinking about the glory of that automobile, seeing it in his mind.

"I was eight when they drove down Main Street the first time. A'course, everyone in town knew what everyone else drove, so anytime there was a car pulled through that no one knew, well, the word *stranger* was thrown about. I remember watching them hum past the drug store, down towards the lake. And I remember how amazed I was at their appearance. Inclement hadn't really seen folks like them much before."

"See boys, the Buck's were what we called "colored" back then, but now, well, we know better. If your'e gonna call one person "colored" well, you gotta call all of us the same thing, for the pure and simple fact is that we all HAVE A COLOR. Whether we be the hue of milk, the tint of black coffee, or something in the middle, we are all colored people. Orland Buck was a black man. African American. And his daughter, the beautiful Delilah, was a little black eight year old. Just like me. 'Cept I was white. Funny how that shouldn't even be a difference worth mentioning, the shade of someone's skin. But its also funny how, even now, its such a matter of discussion."

Both Carp and Zack looked over at Paxton, who was in turn looking deep into the fire absentmindedly scratching Flash with his right hand. Paxton wore his hair in shoulder length braids and his skin was the color of warm milk chocolate. He sensed their gaze and looked up. "What?" he said with a puzzled brow. He then glanced down at his hand massaging the dog's ears and seemed to realize

something. "Oh, you all must be lookin' at my tan," was what he said with a little laugh. He was obviously joking, and the other two giggled relievedly. Ben Clondyke watched this exchange silently, approving of their solution to the age old dilemma of how to handle differences. There was a time, and not long ago, when even kids the age of these boys would spew hate at each other, and their parents would solve such issues with shotguns and nooses. He turned back to his tale, because in many ways, that's what it was about.

"So, they pulled into town. I saw 'em, and so did a whole slew of townfolk, and most of 'em nearly broke there necks tryin' to see the strange black people in the fine white Chevy. Orland was driving of course, and next to him, in the front seat sat bright eyed little Delilah, with her hair all done up in about a dozen pig tails and each of those topped with a snow white ribbon. They drove by real slow, the motor just purring along, and Delilah waved and waved her little hand out the window at all the people staring at her. Some of them, my momma including, smiled and waved back at her, she was that irresistable. Others turned their noses to the sky and just plain snubbed 'em. I remember how she waved anyway, at the smilers and the snubbers just the same, and I remember how her pearly teeth shone against that gorgeous dark skin. I was only five, yes, but I think I fell in love a little bit right then. A lot of people fell in love with Delilah."

The fire crackled merrily away, feasting upon oxygen and wood. Carp couldn't keep his eyes off the glow in the forest. Ben Clondyke seemed to shake himself awake.

"They moved here. No one knows why, exactly, but they did. Bought and paid for that spit of land you're lookin' at up there with cash money. Orland brought it to Jacobsen, the owner, in a brown paper bag, and counted it out to him. They built a house up there, quick as you please, and there they were, the Bucks. Father and Daughter. Inclementines. Just like the rest of us." He paused for a moment.

"Then, they built the Rodeo."

"They built a what?" Paxton asked. "Did you say they built a *rodeo*?" He said the word as if it was from a foreign language.

"Why?" asked Paxton. "I mean, why would you want to build a rodeo?"

"Well," replied old Clondyke, "that was the question. When it became known around town that Orland was putting up grandstands for a western show, people just about didn't believe it. He hired out of town laborers, many of them black like he was, or Chinese, or Irish. Folks who couldn't get jobs because of what they looked like or where they were from, just like him. He couldn't hire any local men anyway, 'cause none of em would work for a black man."

"But the reason "why", well, that was simple. Delilah wanted a rodeo." he stroked the cat on his lap with his old hands. "And whatever Delilah wanted, well, she pretty much got."

"Were there lots of rodeos around then?" said Zack. "I mean, was it like, common?"

"Not so much. Most of em were in the Southwest and Western states, a long way from here. But see, Delilah and her Daddy had traveled a bit before they came here. And out in Arizona, well, there was a rodeo. A great big one, with trick riders and barrel riding and roping. And Delilah fell in love. She told her Daddy she wanted one of her very own. And Orland couldn't refuse that little girl anything. So, after they settled here, Orland busied himself with the construction of grandstands and the arena. And after THAT was built, he put out the word that Buck's Rodeo was opening, opening on the fourth of July in 1933. Delilah was nearly 8 by then, still as prim and pretty as you please, though she had taken to wearing dungarees and button up checkered shirts just like a cowboy. I'm sure you boys can't imagine this, but back then, girls just didn't wear things like that--boy things. Dresses was all there was for little girls. And that gave the meddling mouths a few more morsels to chew about the Bucks."

"Like what?" Asked Carp dreamily, his eyes reflecting back the glow in the forest.

"Oh, you know how people are Carp, you know. Some people just have to have something or someone to say mean things about. Makes them feel better about themselves if they can set themselves above someone else, even if it is only in their minds. In that day, they could talk for hours about how the Bucks were fine people, obviously, with their money, but still they were colored. Colored meant less than white, in every way, and there were no bones about it. Delilah could have been the cutest, most winningest child, which she was, and still people wouldn't let their own kids play over at her house, even though it was the nicest house in town. So, her jeans and handmade cowboy boots gave people just one more reason to say Orland was kinda trashy, even though he might be rich and polite and shopped local."

"Oh," was all Carp said, even though he furrowed his brow a bit.

"Basically, Carp, it wouldn't have mattered a damn what that little girl wore-- cowboy clothes or silk and pearls. She was always gonna be a colored girl, and that meant she just wasn't good enough. There it is."

Paxton's eyes were fixed unseeing on the stars, listening. Zack poked at the fire with his marshmallow stick, and the dog slept, snoring softly. Clondyke watched them all for a moment, and then changed his course a bit."

"I remember that first night of Buck's Rodeo. We went. In my dad's old rattling truck, all eight of us piled in, Willard practically hanging off the right rear fender. And hot! Hotter than anything I remember, anything I have done since. A road had been cleared from town, winding round through the hills, between the trees, curling up and around, back on itself. The rodeo had been advertised in the local paper, on flyers, and even on the radio---and back then, that was a wonder!"

The scraggly cat leapt down off the old man's knee into the tall grass. It folded down upon itself, green eyes wide, preparing to stalk some critter no doubt smaller than itself and torture it evilly. Nearly immediately, it was replaced by another cat, this one a sleek black almost impossible to see except as a midnight shadow. Old man Clondyke resumed his petting and his story smoothly.

"It was bumper to bumper traffic all the way up there. One car after another, and some folk with horse drawn wagons, some on horseback, and others on shank's mare."

"Huh?" grunted Paxton.

"Walking, son. On their own two feet."

"Oh."

"It had been a brutal dry summer, full of hard blue skies with nary a cloud. So, it was a dusty ride. And slow. The road itself was a marvel, following the curves of the rocky land, betwixt trees and boulders, climbing and climbing, turning back and forth. Orland had to have it built himself, just so he could have the wooden planks for the grandstands hauled up there. He had blasted some of it, cut right through that limestone. And one lane only, so's you had to keep going once you started. There were no U turns on that baby."

"Everyone went. I mean everyone. Whether you liked Orland or hated him, liked black folk or hated them. That Rodeo was the biggest thing to hit this town since forever, and there was no way people would miss it. Oh, I'm sure lots just went hoping to see it fail, to see the cowboys AND Orland Buck fall flat on their asses. There are lots of people like that in the world, boys. Those that get more joy out of other's bad fortune rather than the golden things in the world. But there were others who went to enjoy it. This was a bad time in the world, back in the 30's you remember. Entertainment was in extremely short supply, and distraction from the dreary, dusty days wasn't being given away either. But the Rodeo, well, Orland WAS giving that away. At least that opening night."

"It was marketing genius, plain and simple. See, Orland Buck may have had more money than he knew what to do with, oh yes, and he may have certainly been a dreamer, *certainly that*, but he was no dummy. He got up every morning and looked at his reflection in the mirror--he knew the color of his skin and he knew the score. He knew lots of people wouldn't come to his Rodeo simply because they would be damned before they unloaded any of their scarce silver to a black man. And definightly not to a black man that had more money in his bank account than practically the whole town. So, he made that opening night free. To everyone."

Nightsounds surrounded the group clustered in the firelight, and Paxton warmed another marshmallow above the flames. Carpenter's eyes fixed upon the glow in the forest as he stood and walked to the water's edge, hypnotized. Zack and Flash

both sprawled on their backs listening to the gravelly cadence of the old man's voice.

"Can you see it?" elder Clondyke spoke up. "Can you see it in your heads, the way it was that day? All of us, and I mean the whole town, rich and poor, old and young and everyone else too, babies just newborn and women with bellies full of babies yet to be. We all snaked up that road, one after the other in whatever rolling machines we had in our dooryards, baking in the heat, the shadows of the trees lyin' acrost the path as the sun sank lower and lower. Dust from the wheels in front of us collecting on our skins till we were all the same tan color by the time we got to the top, the top of the Drop, though wasn't called that then. Can you see the way it was, all these white people, driving and walking to a show put on by a black man, a man that was strange and different and to us ignorant folk, probably a bit scary? it was surely something. It felt like, when we were making the trip, that it could be a bit magical. Something was in the air, potential was in the air. Potential for what, none of us knew."

"Here, wait a minute. Got something to show ya." The old man stood up smoothly, with no hitch or hurt in his movements. His features were invisible, but his form a clear, flat, unmarked black against the star-shot sky. He moved off through the tall grass, mounted the crooked porch, slammed the screendoor behind him as he went inside. Golden light snicked on, spilling out the square of the kitchen window, competing with the witch-light in the woods above. The boys watched all this with no comment, for a few moments at least.

Then:

"What's he gonna show us, Carp?" from Zack, who had sat up on his rumpled sleeping bag. The dog, however, remained sprawled on his back.

Carp had stepped into the softly surging water, wading up to his scabbed calves. "Don't know. But whatever it is, it'll be good. All Grampa's stuff is good. Probably something he's saved all his life."

"He tells a good story, that's for sure," mumbled Paxton around a mouthful of marshmallow. "I don't quite see how it fits with yonder light, but it's like watching a movie or something. It's like I can really see it in my mind, like he said."

"Yeah, he's always been able to do that." Carp kicked out, sending a spray of water into the night. "It's like he's magic or something. He's...." Carp struggled a moment for words to fit the concept. Finally, "He paints with his words or, well....I don't know." He finished, obviously dissatisfied. The sound of the screendoor slamming, then footsteps whisking through the grass, and the crinkle of paper came to their sharp boys-ears.

"Here it is" growled Ben through the darkness, "right in the oldest file of the Inky Papers." All the boys could here the capitalization of this last in the old man's voice, although only Carpenter really understood it. Zack and Paxton both knew



Old Clondyke had a "thing" with a supposed monster dwelling malignantly under the surface of Lake Inclement, but they had no idea of the extent of the "thing". When Ben entered the flickering circle of orange firelight, they saw an old paper in his pawlike hands. When kneeled down beside the flat rock and spread out that paper, well, they saw exactly how old it was. "*Buck's Rodeo!*" blared across the dry wrinkled surface in a curvy western type, faded and worn. Beneath, "*8 O'Clock In The Evening, On Independence Day, July 4th. Roping, Riding, Chills, Thrills, and, Featuring the First Performance of Delilah Buck!*" There was a scratchy drawing of a little girl racing by on a horse. "Finest Barbeque this side of the Mississippi". And finally, definightly most importantly: "Free Admission!!!"

"Whoa, this is from THAT NIGHT?" The astonishment played clear in Paxton's voice.

"Yessir, young man, it is from that very night, that very performance."

"You saved this? Since then?"

Ben pondered for a moment. "Well, son, no, I didn't. See, when this was going on, I was just a boy, around nine years old, and I had no idea of the historical importance of this Rodeo. These posters were plastered about town, from the smoke shop to the cafe to the library to the school. Delilah put some up her own self, walking about town in her jeans and boots with her bowtopped pigtails clutching a stack of these to her chest. Her dad trailed behind her in his fine summerweight wool suit holding a hammer and a box of teeny nails to tack them up with, allowing her to feel important about the whole thing. They must have put up a hundred of them, and people noticed. One of the places they hung one was my daddy's vet office, on the west edge of town. And Daddy must have understood that Rodeos in Inclement, especially rodeos owned and run by a black man in 1933 were something out of the ordinary--maybe something like the Olympics, or a volcanic eruption, or Halley's Comet. Once in a lifetime."

"So, your Daddy saved it." stated Paxton.

"And when he died, I found it amongst his files and papers." finished Ben. "Back 21 years ago it was."

"What did your daddy do, Doctor Clondyke?" Paxton asked. There was a silence then, where all that could be heard was the nightbugs and frogs, fire snapping and crackling, and the ever-present rhythmic hush of the water over the rocks.

"Oh, Daddy, he was a collector of things. There are folks who'll tell you he was an animal doc like me, and I won't tell 'em different, but really, in his heart, he collected."

"Collected?" Carpenter had known his great-grandpa was a vet just like grandpa, but this was the first time he had heard about this.

"You know, Carp. He picked up bits and pieces of the world--things others would discard as the flotsam and crud. He gathered and filed and boxed all those bits and pieces of history and non-history all together, left it in corners and closets marinating for years, till he moved on, and left it to me to sort and decipher. He left me the beginnings of the Inky Papers, which I have added to over the years with my own collecting. The house and sheds are full of it." Ben gestured and the warren of buildings behind him, leaning this way and that, built with no real reason to it, just added to as the mood would strike. And yes, it was one full house. Boxes of papers and curiosities formed misshapen maze walls through the garage, following the walls of the hallway, and then blossoming into the living room, holding wrinkled papers and creased memories.

Carpenter had invited them inside when Zack and Paxton had first pedalled up on their bikes, Flash pattering behind. "Wow," they had both breathed in unison when they saw the stacks of cardboard with bits of paper and oddities poking out here and there. "Oh, that's just Grampa's stuff," Carpenter said off-handedly, a twinkie in one hand and a fishing pole in the other. They had followed him through the winding warren, their eyes roaming over all the pictures and photographs hung over every bit of wallspace, some with just a fraction of wallpaper showing between their frames. A taxidermied trout leapt through imaginary water decked out in a technicolor paint job just beneath a sprawling framed map of Lake Inclement that had been dotted heavily with map pins. Boxes lined the walls interspersed with narrow tables stacked with books. Carpenter passed quickly through this amazing, overstuffed wonderland of lamps and exotic figurines and obscure books that were just begging to be touched by inquisitive boys, and Zack and Paxton traveled behind, till they got to the backdoor through a small white kitchen that was miraculously free of clutter. The afternoon light sparkling on the lake before them blinded them all for a moment.

"Carp, what WAS that stuff?" Paxton asked.

"Toldja, just Grampa's stuff. Lots more in the garage and in the sheds."

"Oh." Paxton said meekly. Then they broke into a run, stripping their shirts off and hitting the water in a diamond spray. Flash sniffed along the edge of the water all afternoon until they tired of handstands and splashfights and emerged ravenous. And that had been this afternoon.

"Look at this flyer closely, boys." Grampa's voice sounded as rough as the rock they were leaning on. He poked a large, worn fingertip at the drawing of the horse and the girl on its back. Her hat was clamped down on her head, but it seemed as if her hair, what could be seen of it, was in little pigtails topped by ribbons. Many little pigtails.

"That's supposed to be Delilah, isn't it?" stated Zack. But it was more than that, he saw, as he peered closer. Beneath the scratchy pencil strokes was a signature. The signature of the artist, maybe? He thought so. *D. Buck* it read.

"She drew this, didn't she?!" Paxton and Carpenter leaned in for a closer look. "Wow, she was good!" And so she had been.

"Must have been no more than 8 or 9 when she did that drawing, and what you're seeing now is on old wrinkled paper duplicated by an ancient press. But Delilah could draw. Oh yes. She was a real, true artist." He was silent for a moment, regarding the drawing under his finger. "Wasn't great shakes at Rodeo, but a hell of an artist."

"Whadya mean, she wasn't great shakes at Rodeo?" Zack questioned.

"She just wasn't good at it. Something about her rubbed horses the wrong way. She had no....instinct about her for it."

"You're kidding!" Carp said flatly. "Her dad went and built her a whole RODEO AND SHE WASN'T ANY GOOD AT IT?"

"Oh, well, she was fine at it, as much as most people would be at it, I suppose, but well, it wasn't her natural born skill, you know. Babies are born, every day, all of em different, all of em with talents and skills and things they are good at stored away in their brains and souls and whatnot. You all have skills too, just like every other one of us that walks the earth, and you probably have some inkling as to what they are. Its a feeling, like something clicks for you, a switch has been turned on in your head that you can't turn off when you find that talent. And it will forever be there, that feeling, like an itch that you have to scratch and it doesn't matter what other things you have to do, like mow the lawn or go to school or eat your supper---that itch remains and sometimes you have to stop and just scratch it."

"Like my photography." Zack murmured. His omnipresent camera bag lay zipped up on the end of his sleeping bag.

"Or my kites." added Payton, who had built many and flown even more in the skies above Inclement.

"Or your curiosity, Carp." He nudged his grandson.

"What?"

"Yep, curiosity is a talent as well, maybe one of the most valuable. Curiosity drives discovery, you know, and what is life but the quest for knowledge." Carp looked up at his grandpa with open love on his face.

"Yeah, I guess so." Grampa had seen him and what he was good at, and that warmed Carp right through the middle.

"So, she's an artist at heart, not a cowgirl. But she has her own rodeo. That just doesn't compute. You would have thought Orland would have built her an art museum or something." Payton understood the thing, yes, he did.

"Well, son, have you ever wanted to be good at something, but it just wasn't going to happen for you?" The old man watched Paxton's face carefully in the firelight. "Something you really, truly wanted to do or achieve, like shooting free throws or roller skating or painting a picture or writing a song or playing the piano-

"Or throwing a baseball." Paxton looked glum. He wanted to pitch in the big leagues more than about anything ever since he watched the World Series with his dad last fall. Those pitchers, man, they were slick! They just wound up, lunged and BAM! STRIKE! Faster than lightning. He had been playing catch with whomever would submit for the past 9 months, and it wasn't pretty. He had broken the neighbor's kitchen window, dented the back fender of his mom's old truck, and made his shoulder so sore he couldn't hardly feed himself. And so far, nuts.

"Or throwing a baseball," repeated Ben. "Well, Delilah was like that. She wanted to be a horsewoman as much as she wanted to breathe, just about, but it wasn't in her nature. Orland knew it. He had to hire folk to work her ponies, train em, make em about bombproof just so's she could ride em and not spook em herself. I remember one day, Mama and me were in Henneman's General picking out some curtain fabric for Daddy's office and Orland Buck was standing at the counter talking with Henneman himself about horse trainers. Said he needed someone now, and he would pay the right person well, that his lil girl was all about ridin and ropin', but her hands were like iron and she got thrown every other day. Henneman was a fine, fairminded man and recommended the Driever family, as he should. They had handled the best of the county's hoofstock since forever, and my mother agreed. "Mr. Buck," she said in her soft, musical voice which had caused feuds between the Women's Sweet Adeline's singing group and the Inclement Town Choir since she only had time to perform with one of them. He turned to her, and even at nine I was struck by his presence. He was tall, dressed in a cream colored suit with a yellow silk tie and matching handkerchief poking out of his pocket. His skin was dark velvet against his shirt collar, and his shoes gleamed. He looked.....otherworldly.

"Why, yes Mrs. Clondyke, and how are you today? And this is your son?" He bent formally at the waist and held out his manicured hand to me, fingernails perfect and shining. Of course, I was well versed in the proper polite responses to adults, so my hand came up in that gesture so automatic to Americans, and we shook firmly.

'This is Benjamin, Mr. Buck,' my mother spoke.

'Good to meet you, Benjamin. You are how old?'

'I'm almost nine, sir.' More training.

'Ah, just my Delilah's age! Just her age!' His movie star smile grew wide and he seemed a bit tickled. 'You must come out and play with Delilah sometime. Yes, you must! We will arrange it, won't we, Mrs. Clondyke!'

I felt myself smile shyly at him, but inside my head I remember willing my mother to say yes, because, just as you would have been, Carp, my curiosity about the Buck's and their reportedly plush home was just about bursting my poor little brain.

'Why, that would be lovely,' smiled my mother.

'Good, good! I will speak to Dr. Clondyke about it when I meet him later about Delilah's newest pony, little Platypus. I need to head out to his office this afternoon.'

'Very good, Mr. Buck. About the Driever's, you will find no finer trainers on the Lake or off it in my opinion. I am sure my husband will concur.'

'Well, I shall have to make a call on them as well, yes I shall. I only hope they can do it, well, on the sly.' He seemed a bit discomfited by his own last words.

'On the sly?' my mother repeated.

'Yes, well, you see, I don't want Delilah to know, really. I just want the pony to be gentle and easy and well-behaved and do exactly what she wants it to do on the first go. AND I don't want her to be thrown. Again.'

'Oh, well, I would think if you explained it to them, something could be arranged.' Mama was smooth and warm with her words, understanding in her brown eyes. Mr. Buck saw it and you could tell he was touched by it.

'Yes, I'm sure it could. Well, I must be charging on to my other errands.' He looked up into Mr. Henneman's eyes. 'Thank you, sir, for your information. Let me know when my order arrives and I will arrange for pick up.' He stuck out his dark and perfect hand again and Mr. Henneman shook it enthusiastically.

'No, thank YOU, sir!' answered Henneman.

'And good day to you, young Benjamin Clondyke. We will get you out to Buck's Place soon to ride ponies and eat too much ice cream with my Delilah.'

'Yes, sir!' I said smartly, hoping it might happen as soon as that very afternoon.

'Mrs. Clondyke, have a glorious day!' he said, touching the brim of his perfect white fedora.

'And to you, Mr. Buck,' she responded.

And in a moment, he had gone in a swish of white wool and a jingle from the bell above the door. The engine purred to life in that gorgeous car of his, and off he drove. I was 8 then boys, and I didn't realize that I had seen something historical happen right before my eyes, just as memorable as the Rodeo that was yet to be. In 1930's America, a white shopkeeper had shaken the hand of a black customer, equal men in a simple business transaction. It didn't mean anything to me at the time, not one single thing. The only thought running through my mind was that I had been asked out to the Buck Place. Now that I'm a grown man, and an old man at that, I can appreciate how far ahead of our time we were that day."

The old man who had been that little boy dazzled by the mythical Orland Buck rubbed the side of his shadow of a silver beard with a rasping sound. "At least, in THAT store, on THAT day, we were ahead of our time. Not everyone in Inclement was as open-minded." He looked at each of the boys in turn, leaning on the rock around the old rodeo flyer. They appeared to be dreaming awake, eyes seeing far into the beyond.

"Whoa, what time is it, boys?" Doc looked at his battered Timex. Zack, Paxton and Carp shook themselves back to reality. "It's gone 11:30 and then some. You boys better bed down for the night." He grasped the old flyer reverentially and turned his back to the fire. "Light's gone out on yonder ridge," he added conversationally.

Three sets of boy-eyes and one set of canine peepers searched the distant darkness and saw nothing where seemingly moments before, there had been bright night-magic in the trees.

"Where did it go? Doctor Clondyke?" Zack's voice.

"It comes and goes. May be back later tonight, or it may come back in a year. Hard to tell." He turned toward his front door twenty yards away and started towards it.

Carp looked wildly at the other boys, saw his own emotion reflected in theirs and whined "But Grampa, what happened next? You can't just leave it like that! What happened at the Rodeo? Did you go to Buck's Place? Did you ride ponies with Delilah?"

"Go to bed. We have a whole 6 weeks or so til summer is over. We'll get the tale told. Don't worry." He whisked through the grass, old but not appearing so. The boys could see his silhouette mounting the steps and they could hear the creaking of the screendoor. For a moment, Doc Clondyke was framed in the golden light of the lamp that resided by the front door. They couldn't see his face at all, but they caught his words, carried by the thick summer darkness. "I did get to go out to Buck's Place. We'll talk about that next time. Night, boys."

He shut out the light, and that was all the boys saw of the old man til the next morning.

They crossed over to their sleeping bags, tired but wired from the story.

"Did all that really happen, do you think, Carp?" Paxton threw a log on the fire and watched the sparks spiral up and then fade out of existence.

"Yeah, I think it probably did. Grampa tells good stories, and I really think this one is true." He didn't explain why he thought that, but Paxton understood exactly. It wasn't that Carp *thought* the story was true. It was that the story *felt* true. The distinction between the two might be fine, but also stood miles apart. Carp waded out into the lake again and just stood there, breathing its scent.

Zack said nothing. His brain was just simply too roiled and boiled for words. He lay down on his open sleeping bag and was silent, searching for Draco unsuccessfully. Flash positioned himself at his boy's feet, curled into a horseshoe shape and faked dogsleep for a while. Pretty soon, the other boys settled as well, and there was nothing left to watch or hear except the dragonfire coals at the heart of the fire and the blurping frogs and the constant wash of the water. When Flash sensed they had all swum into their own lake of sleep, he allowed himself to sleep as well.