

WILDCAT

Texas was a foreign country then—more distantly remote in time from now as that far time was distant and remote from the days when only Indian brave nomads and their remudas of ponies and squaws traipsed among the groves of red oak, bois d'arc, pecan thickets dappling the endlessly-flung grasslands, setting scattered camp beside the solitary streams that idled sun-dazed, as dusty tan as deer hide. It spoke, in all distant times, a quieter and firmer language: unflinching, honed on stony rural whet, idly laconic as sprawled hounds. Wind would carouse. Rain could thunder. Drought might erode; fire laugh; insects pillage. Still, there was evident uppermost the hard crust of the land, uncapturably wide in its rambling, a vast and galloping territory, yet brazenly engulfed by an immense dome of billowing Indian blanket eternity of turquoise sky, soaring, torrid, sultry, which

from those gone days remained arced overhead as ever, waving from one unreachable horizon across to the other. That quicksilver sky remained, the map of nature, colouring each aspect of the lives that depended on the hard land—day by day lives dependent on clouds and wind direction and whether gentle rain might fall. Those wandering tribes amidst the dense thickets, the tribal campfires and fishing banks—now lost—had gradually but ever relentlessly been replaced by other hearth-fires, given way to lonely homesteads and open furrowed fields, to fenced pastures, and later still to a prospect of scattered villages along the sparse railroads. Year upon year upon year most of those other-day villages remained intimate, constrained, timid, rurally quiet, covered by a drowsy spider web of fine transparent dust. Such a place was Itt, Texas—very long ago christened by some broken down wagoner proclaiming his last unheralded stop as this must be "it" somewhere on a plain between the

Trinity River and the Rio Brazos. Afterward from the hunter's log cabin, from a chunky stew of Europeans fleeing war-blasted homelands, from the far-away trumpeted War between the States and its overflow of sad veterans, through the cattle barons' unfettered grazing and the railroads juncture at cotton and beef, these aloof villages grew, even prospered or struggled, past the First Great War and the Depression. They survived the Second World War's siphon of manpower, barely, and then settled into a prolonged, peaceful, but terminal, coma. Then, only on Saturdays did deserted streets fill with the bustle of provisioning another long week, a-rumble with communal activity, abroad with cotton starched-collar freshness, awash with the tingly treat of soda-waters, with the sound of Fords and farmers' spitting voices and coughing, raspy as prickly pear cacti.

On Monday the sun rose. Its appointed time was steadier than a clockwork. On all those very ordinary days most citizens inclined to follow their own unalterably set routines, while others abandoned in a whim such labors for fresher activities as dictated by whatever the seasonable possibilities permitted or whatever could no longer be procrastinated. Oscar Cobb, for one, mercifully never varied from attending his three remaining milk cows at six o'clock every dawning just as surely as the clock came round. The Jones' wash, without doubt, could unfailingly be found drying on the line, as could most others' tubfuls on every Monday afternoon. Miss Nance's kitchen always filled with the warm aroma of her weekly bread-bakings at precisely three o'clock Friday and Tuesday well after the scrubbed and rinsed noon dishes had been drained and stacked away. Such routines, predictably, multiplied, marched across backyards, up and down raked and weeded lanes, stood at back doors like a

deliveryman, patient as a rainbarrel, alongside the ice bucket and drying dishtowels and damp mop. As for others, they indulged a tiny luxury of doing at any chosen moment whatever prompted them toward a favorite chore—or whatever had been put aside for so long that it could not be ignored further. The dependable and rusty remnant of aged brick schoolhouse corralled the few children from September to May, but summer allowed them a freedom of long liquid days to spend exploring sun-cracked crop-laden straight-rowed fields, grassy prairie, or shady wallowing creeks. Days, if not even interminable weeks, could pass with hardly a ripple of an event deemed out-of-ordinary.

Out in the larger world—the world that had scattered wide like a field of sunny flowers scudded apart—people were moving, building, engorging a bright and shiny new city. They stayed up late, craved store-bought entertainment, ate in restaurants or newer burger drive-

ins, did not with patience endure a twenty-mile drive to see a moving-picture show. They were the older and responsible children who could find no reason to walk away from the new and citified airplane factories, or service stations, or civil offices, or department stores, or motor shops; so when they returned occasionally to the windswept countryside it was a holiday-like visit to an idyll they would now refer to as the homeplace.

Here,—in Itt, Texas—change, if referenced, was referred to simply as witnessing one windblown season contrasted to another; otherwise grown-ups' remarks were allotted to the weather, the football/baseball standings, the neighbors' health, and the weather. Justin Templand Rawling, eight and one-half years old, this ordinary day trudged slowly through the hot limp June afternoon, an afternoon identical to the others. The white dust rose in puffed clouds from the graveled street. Swarms of gnats floated in the warm air. The leaves of

the trees above the old cracked sidewalks hung wilted and dusty. The ogreish sun had driven all—but children and those others just as determined—to the shady confines of an after-lunch siesta. Justin's short legs, open to the baked air beneath short pants, were pushing with his utmost anticipation, for it was rather a long walk for someone his age and size to the center of as much business such as could be roused on such a melting afternoon. On the eastern fringe of town before it gave over to long stretches of cotton field and horse pasture, he had left his grandmother's house and headed, against her scuttled protestations about "later", toward the main center crossroad carrying forty cents tied into the corner of a handkerchief and a cardboard-carton collection of returnable-for-deposit empty Coca-Cola green bottles, along with the admonition to go there and come right back. It was positively unthinkable to Just, as addicted to the sugary carbonated water as to the carefully timed

habit, for a day to pass where absolutely all the Coca-Cola bottles around the house stood empty, and a trek, Just believed, to the store could enliven a creeping afternoon. The discarded possibility of another nap on a quilt pallet spread on the floor in front of the screen door to the wide shady porch, a possibility so favored for midday by grownups, was for a boy a poor choice that, unless truly sleepy and sweltering, offered only an opportunity to gaze out at what could be seen of the outside world. Instead Just walked on, swinging the box of empties until his arm grew heavy, his shoes growing white with the dust from the rocky edge of the dry gravelly street. He scanned the edges of the grass-cluttered drainage ditch for possible treasure, a lost marble or at least an interestingly coloured pebble, perhaps a lizard, a still-occupied crayfish hole, or the best of all, an empty tin from Prince Albert tobacco. June was often not yet too late for a gulley-washing thunderstorm,

which might fill the ditches with wading pools of tadpoles on which to sail folded-paper boats. Today there seemed to be nothing more than the usual snapped twigs, vanquished bugs and cellophane papers. Back among the leafy recesses of the lawns tucked sedately behind the iron or picket fences, there was only the occasional slow creaking of a porch swing or the whapping slam of a screen door. Once past the looming gray many-gabled angularity of the ancient and deserted house on the corner shrouded in its wildly overgrown tangle of spookish vinery, Just's dry and daredevilish journey, down a few more strides where the cross street gently curved round past the sunnier gardens of the imposing brick house that marked the exact center of the village, neared its hard-sought destination: the cluster of one-or-two-storey red brick structures that had through the years endured as marking the business district. A one-block row stood intact, the others coupled or solitary,

interspersed with shuttered facades or the many grassy vacant lots that indicated where other business buildings, ceased, had once stood. At the crossroads was the complex of the larger service station, a collection of trim little white and red stucco structures and patient waiting gasoline pumps with an adjacent grease rack and a high lighted sign of Pegasus—this the lingering farmers' general meeting place, source of fuel and machinery parts, of daily news and such civic activities that could occur outside the established churches. On the opposite corner the row began with the bank and post office, further with a market and small cafe, still further with the centerpiece of the Bardon's drugstore, and way on past several of those vacant lots was the icehouse, a favorite of Just—a wantonly cool place which was the beginning point of many tubs of summer evening hand-cranked sweet ice cream. Diagonally opposite was Mr. Sonnenberg's pharmacy, now mostly a confectionary,

with its marble-topped walnut soda fountain, who had the largest selection of paperback westerns and comic-books in the village. Coming back past the grocery and around the corner at the meeting hall were a dry goods store, Hoffmeier's grocery and hardware, several empty spaces opposite the Sinclair service station and the lumberyard, a blacksmith's and garage, and finally the telephone office, and backed set away from the street by the modern electrical power transformer. Off to one side across the railroad tracks and their abandoned depot were laid the sprawling wagon yards and cotton gin, and further north across the county road was Nate's little store that served with some small but conspicuous privacy, denoted as separate but equal, as a meeting place in what was referred to as "coloured-town". Just sauntered directly to Bardon's unguent-accrued drugstore, temporary resting place of every patent medicine imagined, where he knew he would find the

double-lidded with chrome handles giant zinc-lined red Coca-Cola case packed with chipped ice and chocked full of every kind of wet cold bottles. Often Just would pore over the scant alleyway between buildings where Mr. Bardon emptied the bottle opener to collect the colourful cork-lined bottle caps from all the many varieties sold there: Nehi, Grapette, Crush, Pepsi, Chocolate Soldier, Coca-Cola, Dr. Pepper, R C, Big Red, 7-up, Triple X, and more. The beginning event today after the trek was to rest on the wooden weatherworn benches provided out front; and to slowly wrap sliding tongue around one of the initially roundly generous but then as appraised by Mr. Bardon a judiciously pared down nickel-a-dip ice cream cones that snow-haired Mr. Bardon scooped up from the chill caverns of the many-lidded compartmented freezer box positioned inside his awning-shaded windows to the left of the ancient speckled mirror-adorned bar now benignly ensconced as a soda fountain. It was Just's

relieved pleasure to take as long as possible in arranging the licking of the cone just so, his tongue wetly atremble at the liquid-icy shock of the creamy coolness, before it rapidly began dripping in the outside heat. No passer-by disturbed the wide street, where a dog slept dreamily unperturbed on the patch of grass at the curb.

After treating himself to a paradise of rejuvenation, the cool refreshing splendor of the creamy enticement, his little fingers rivuleted where precious cream had leaked from the crumbling cone—with necessary aid from proprietary Mr. Bardon who had found him a thin paper napkin—and after, under the scrutinizing ledger-columned eyes of the watchful old Mr. Bardon, the business necessity of accounting for the empties as they were deposited into a partitioned wooden crate by the cooler, came the decisive task of choosing the appropriately filled replacements from the stocked crates—orangeade for grandfather, a 7-up for Aunt Philly,

something piquantly esoteric—likely a rootbeer, or a Dr. Pepper to fill with salted peanuts—for himself, and three Coca-Colas, always share-able, for his grandmother. Just started out on his journey back to home. He stepped along, tilted awkwardly to one side to balance the new-found weight of the full bottles. After a few or so yards he would shift the weight to his other side, re-tilted anew. For a while this worked well enough. Occasionally, when he began to feel it most beneficial, he would stop to rest, the first time where the corner of the deer park came obliquely near the curving roadway. The deer were hiding further afield in shadier aspects. He moved on. Eventually he tried to devise a way to hold the carton with both hands at once. This, too, proved to be a very more awkward matter; and a blotch of sweating wetness rolled down his hunched sides and another down the back of his warm leg and into the top of his sock. There was nothing else to do but go on, pull himself along,

slowly but surely handling the burden of movement and weight. Of course, there was no choice. He must return “right back” to grandmother's. The path leading straight to the sought flowery garden seemed not so much to diminish in distance ahead. And he was determined now to see the job accomplished—though certainly if or when he decided to do this again he would think ahead to bring a handy wagon for carting. The gnats began to quiver about the heat he was generating, a swamp of perspiration running down his back under the close sticky shirt. Burning sun was still high overhead; but the swirling heat from the yellow atmosphere above the treetops had now settled into a calm steaming pool, bathing everything in the drooping air. Just's grandmother's house, white and serene and lacy with old-time woodwork, as whitely fluffed and ornate as a six-layer coconut cake (and as sweet), glowed like a mirage island in its grove of emerald trees at the corner of the

street, now less than a, perhaps, quarter-mile away. Nearer, slowly nearer, it would be if Just, however encumbered, persevered, as he determined to do; and a reward would be waiting, as usually there was, there in the soft breeze-dappled shade of grandmother's quaint house.

It was near the narrow dirt lane that ran perpendicular northward to old Ada's cabin in the far pasture of outbuildings beyond the ragged wooded ends of the deep town lots that Just sensed, outside his reverie of persistence and triumph, that he heard an evasive stifled noise. Even the birds seemed to be napping, though occasionally only a whistle from a mockingbird who might be acting as a watcher. The entrance to the little lane was almost overgrown, trees arched overhead above it. There was no precise accountable noise to which attracted attention traced, only a sense of whispering and a soft sputtering laughter, perhaps a

rustling squirrel. The sun was too bright for a phantom, too hot for a coyote, too ordinary for an outlaw. When Just, now intently cautious of a misstep on the gravel street, was under the last tree of the hedgerow, in one sudden explosive instant his alertness shattered under a startling hail, a plunk landed in the road gravel and one stung his back shoulder. More followed, a sneak attack, sharp and crushing, directed by shouts of "Fire!" and whoops now of cackling laughter. From where they had climbed to the middle overhead limbs of the quivering tree the older boys, snickering now uproariously, raucously rained down a hailstorm of the hard green pellet seedcases of the chinaberry tree. War, or games of war, seemed to be in their nature; and brooked no peace. Just, despite lugging his cumbersome precious bounty, now—one dark and dire thought of escape—ran, yet once again retreating from repetitive attacks. The older boys laughed gloriously from their perch, swaying

and pointing and braying. Just, with a new-found vigor, like a runaway wild-eyed burro jostling under his pack, did not stop in even this last stretch of final distance, breathing hard, spindly legs clumsily pumping, past the sheltering magnolia tree and the redbuds and even clomping across the rose-bordered side yard that was normally set aside especially for croquet.

Afterward, securely inside the back door, he, now submerged in a dripping puddle of perspiration, took to measuring deep breaths, washed his face with cool water; and spent the rest of the deflated afternoon reading about RinTinTin until four o'clock when it was time to open the Coca-Colas.

That evening, after Just's mother and father had picked him up and they had gone home to the farm, he said nothing of his afternoon; nor was asked, beyond the usual perfunctory: what had been done today. Nothing much was the answer. Always with awkward ablush

shyness, Just reserved a tendency always toward reticence, habituated by probing. Thankfully, they ate their light supper. The sun lowered in the sky, but the heat would linger, though shadows lengthened in the green lawn and across the meadow. It was another melting evening like so many others, the gentle crackly tapping of the water sprinkler against the leaves of the thirsty little patchwork of vegetable garden. But Just's father, prone always to search for an entertaining time within the ordinary, broke the thickening minutes with a surprise announcement. He crimped his mouth into one of his almost smiles. They—if they wanted, he smiled—would take a little ride this evening. Just's mother tiredly put away the dishes; but freshened her lipstick and gathered up the dozing little brother in his diaper from the crib as Just's father reclaimed his hat from the rack where it stood by the door of the back sleeping-porch. They clambered into the car, Just bouncing with the

elation of an unexpected adventure, begging to be told their destination. They drove back to town to pick up Just's grandparents plus Aunt Philly, then turned once again southeast. They drove past the still-warm growing fields, striving cotton, tasseling corn,—everyone as a back-seat rider evaluating a comment on their greenish development—past quiet farms lying in the shadows, down country lanes, around fields, finally crossing over the wooden bridge at the creek and taking a dirt track through the wide flat bottom land. It seems that the day's most enticing news in Itt, gone round and round like the whirr of the ceiling fan over the dining room table, was how some eagerly scrambling strangers from an upstart company somewhere in south Texas had decided to come in and set up a rig in the Harding pasture. Old man Harding had been happy and bug-eyed as a fox in a full henhouse to let them try it. This gossip, however precisely true as distinct from the more common

variety of whispering, had spread burning with flickering flame like a wildfire leapt over every back fence in the community. Oil. Hadn't only last year there been a well dug some twenty-two miles south along a sandy streak in the scrub around Hibbid City, an already cotton-rich ranch town inside the county line? It hadn't been a gushing field, but it did bring in two wells on some old couple's back acres with one still pumping, endowing them with a meagre but anticipated royalty check. Farmland might be one thing to really consider, but an oil well sure wouldn't hurt a pasture any. And who couldn't use one? Pumping a stream of black gold? At the edge of the loamy bottom fields, the car bounced over a hump, rose along the sloping dirt lane, and ascended a rise that stretched through a barbed-wire gate and beyond—there it was—across the sand-streaked slight mesa of the Harding's mesquite-studded pasture. A solitary scaffold tower rose from the plain. At least a half-dozen or more dusty

automobiles crowded by excitable and babbling town folk had already parked, a semi-circle of ready headlights facing the wide center of all their attention. It might not have been more fun at a carnival, certainly at a tent revival-meeting. There were several large trucks for hauling equipment, a water tanker, pick-up trucks for workers, tools, and shouting workmen wandering or running in every direction. Already they had worn down an ever-widening arena of grass to the hard dirt and manure underneath, and they went about their business mostly heedless of the curious audience they had unwittingly drawn. Each late new arrival was greeted by the clotted townspeople with a wave and a muffled "howdy" shouting, the men sitting on bumpers, leaning on haunches or fenders, joking and empathizing with neighbors, the women, fanning, sitting in the opened doors of the automobiles, all drinking iced tea from mason jars. Just clung close to the knot of drawling

talkers, and peered ever-curiously into the circle where the frantic rig-work unfolded. The older boys were somewhere yelling, off among the mesquite brush, for the moment engaged in some shoving game, while the girls gathered in a group for hide-and-seek. All the grown-ups for a moment turned as if one, an expectant crinkled face, to watch as a crew put the last touches of girding at the platform atop the fresh wooden derrick. It was done. A shout was sent up. The languished sun had finally disappeared, leaving streaked a radiant aqua turquoise and watermelon-red cumulus sky to thicken into a pale pearly twilight. Just listened. Those older boys were still off in their game. He busied himself for a while with scouting the last of the June fireflies.

One of the tobacco-faced workmen, a lank pole of man in creased white western-yoked shirt and a bolo tie, possibly an engineer, took out a flashlight to decipher some sheets of large paper. Quickly now another

crewman scuffled to the top of the derrick, carrying a coil of heavy wires. At the top they were tossed over the sides at the four corners, caught and secured at the deck, each a row of lightbulbs down each corner post of the derrick, a man lumbering down each bracket of bracing to secure the lights against the sides. To the watchers it seemed as if they raced like workhorses, hammers pounding out hoofbeats, each jockey favorite cheered on as a champion by his exhilarated and joshing comrades, waving their hardhat helmets while in leisurely stance they savored like a cool gulp of water the momentary but grateful break as the horizons turned opalescent. When each corner man hit the ground more shouts rang out, and the roughnecks scattered explosive as buckshot. Wires were entwined and strung, cables attached, connections re-checked, a motor fired up, the generator truck tapped over. A switch was flipped and the derrick tower blazed alight, pulsing to life in a halo of clear

vibrant light, shaming the fireflies. Everyone let out a shouted cry anew as if a baptismal meeting had given them an ecstatic jolt. Some of the watching farmers applauded, appreciative. Just took a step back from the curve of a chrome bumper as if pushed by the instantly commanding power of the burst of light as it sped swelling from the warm circle center and reached out to dissipate in the shadows beyond.

Now the real work of setting up the actual drilling equipment would begin. They would work in shifts intently into the oil-black night, racing against the possibility of any coming storms, long after the curiosity-seeking bystanders had sidled with speculations back to their farmhouse beds. Just, unaware now of anything but the giant glowing tower of wood and wiring, gazed at its brilliance dominating the epicenter of such anticipation. The light shimmered into the heavy darkness. Roughnecks, old-hands intently assured,

tensed there at the ready to swarm at their assigned tasks. With the flick of a tired flimsy bandana across the back of his dusty freckled neck—though himself a sturdy-built young man, though despite a sandy short stubble across his lower face, surely not more than nearing thirty, not looking possibly more than in his earlier twenties — one agile maverick stepped from out of the momentary hush to speak with an aside group including the tobacco-faced chart-shuffler, all gesturing and shifting and pointing. This younger was not the tallest of the gang of workmen, but stood as if he could be—if necessitated—and to all those looking on appeared to be the head roughneck, though dressed in a threadbare form-taut grease-smearred athletic undershirt sculpted against the hard planes of musculature, the roughest of faded jeans, and a straw Stetson hat rolled and creased into prismatic angles. He lifted this artful hat to run a forearm across his eyebrows as he spoke, an eye-winning grin alight on

his moving mouth, once again a pantomime under the shadow of the replaced worn Stetson, as he stretched himself, a singular and atingle talisman emblazoned among the clatter of the humming generator, the small talk of the on-looking admirers, the shouts of the bustling roughnecks as they organized new workspaces or clunkingly hauled about their equipment. Just, apparently transfixed near the shadowy perimeter of the illumined arena, could not remove his unblinking eyes from this laughing man, a magnetic force of fascination struck with the barely containable energy, as pent as the possible oil underground, in the raw stranger's securely akimbo stance and the bare square-ness of his shoulders. Bursts of this lightning-crackled energy shot, quick-sure in eruption, to his buffed sleek surface in shifts of weight or the point of hands, amazingly complemented by definite and graceful precision in every movement, so awesomely graceful in a youthful but potent strength that many a

mortal in the puddles of onlookers recognized its young unfettered animal power, so stallion muscled and robust, and offered a nodding respect to a pure and electric vitality, sweating grime-flecked brawn, freed and flashing spirit. After digging a pointy boot toe into the dust, in the flash of a momentary bound this burnished youthful man, stranger unknown by name but welcomed by mere sight, wanderer of the prairies, straddler of the chalky-walled creeks, subduer of the rocky ground, seducer of the oil pool, cleft himself apart from the others and into the open, and swung wide in a long arc, inspecting from afar angle to successive angle, the derrick beacon. Glinting coppery like a fresh-minted coin, shiny and warm as spit, he was full of vinegar. Struck motionless, Just watched, only his eyes trailing with that moving gust of figure. A mesmerized Just watched him saunter easily on the sloped western heels of his dust-covered riding boots, a cat circling his prey, a thoroughbred primed. In passing,

tugging on his leather gloves as his only protection from the barbing splinters of a rough-edged new challenge, a gleam reflected from the glowing dozens of lights flickered in his blue eyes, lingered scantily for a moment on a young woman posed against the fender of a Plymouth before they offered—so he believed—little Just a wink. When the roughneck reached the tower's base he sprang cat-like easily upward, a man so energized, he climbed the laddered rungs, stalwartly, gliding up, the tensing muscles of his thick arms and taut back contracting and rippling, his movement all speed and angles and energy, not climbing as the others like a bear, but sleek as a roaming panther, robust, glowing with a sheen of golden sweat, surrounded by a heat halo, gleaming. Now and then tautly slowing to near motionless while poised like the hunting panther, he would swing to and fro, testing the construction's frame tension, its sturdiness in the wind. On upward, high off

the hard rocky ground below, one ascending hand and foot above the other, still coiling with the springing rhythm of the golden panther, when he reached the platform at the top, he turned, looked down, strode about in the lighted pinnacle, raised his arms wide and pronounced it good—letting out a low throaty howl. Just stared, head taken aback, up at the derrick into the yellow lamps lining the tower's sides. He stared. He stared into the light until his eyes were completely filled by their incandescence.

--J. F. Lowe

