

## NOTE TO THE READER

The author tried to stay as true to Rufus's voice as possible without confusing the reader. Although, at times that became challenging. In order to prepare the reader for the immersive experience in this novel, the author offers some examples words the reader will encounter.

Bout = About  
Round = Around  
Ole = Old  
Tuther = The Other  
Ona = One of  
Somma = Some of  
Lotta = Lot of

The author hopes the reader will fall into the rhythm of Rufus's speech and not become hampered as they get to know him.

# ONE

Back in them days I didn't knowed the first thing bout whiskey. How the mountain dew got you feeling so good everybody your best friend. How the corn squeezings turned your gut sour like the mash it distilled from. What the white lightning made you do to other folks. What the likker tricked you into doing to yourself.

I ain't nothing but a ole bootlegger what never so much as pissed off a fly in a outhouse. But cause I the only other living soul what knowed the truth bout that fire, reckoned I the best one to spin this here tale. I gonna do my darnedest to give it justice. If Jolene did the telling, the story'd come out like a overturned basket a eggs, all cracked and splattered.

Not that I didn't take the O'Hara side in any fight. Way I see things, the truth go way beyond the fate of that Harvey fella.

Last turnoff offered a carved sign on a post pointing one way, a hand-painted one sitting on a withered ole branch pointed tuther. I picked the branch cause I feel sorry for it. That way first passed a store not friendly enough to stop at then nother of them sticks with something stuck to the bark. Didn't knowed what the sign said. The words seemed to tease me like a worm wiggling at a fish.

The trees and creek whistled to me like a boy searching for a lost pup. At a wide spot in the road wood planks lay scattered like a wild storm blow through. What happened here? Something made a peculiar noise behind me.

Tsch, tsch, tsch. Tiptoed round the hole where the sound come from. Maybe a coon fall in there, trapped hisself. Tsch, tsch, tsch. I near the hole quiet as baking bread, careful not to scare him. Half a arms-length from the hole, I stopped. Didn't smell like no coon.

"Boo."

Jumped a barrel high, landed on my behind.

A boy climbed out, rolled on the ground, laughed hisself daft. Law, if he ain't scrawny. My blood sizzled like bacon fat. Watching him hold his sides, I give in to the fun, chuckled a bit too.

He caught his breath. "Got'cha good, sure enough."

"Sure did. What'cha doin in that there hole to begin with?"

He looked me in the eye. "Playin outhouse inspector. Reckon this hole where they aim to build the privy." He winked. "Name's Joe. I oughta be cleanin chicken coops, not playin child games. But Jole get mad, push over them boards then go off somewhere. I stay here in case a girl happen by. Beat all scarin you, even if you ain't a gal. What bring you to Cedar Springs?"

Nobody ever showed that much interest to ask me nothing like that before.

"Roamin round close on a month."

"Your kin must miss you."

"Ma got too many in the roost to keep track. Knowed Pa ain't missed me. If'n he shout out for a Rufus, onea my three cousins name Rufus likely pipe up. Pa don't knowed one from tuther. Most times he don't use no name, he grab the one standin handy."

"Don't sound like a nice fella."

"Learn me to stay outta reach."

Little Joe tell me to follow him way from the road, down a path lined with thick pine trees, to a homestead what looked over the creek. When we got in the yard, a hound-dog trotted up to sniff me, the sack in my hand too. "That there Tickle." Little Joe patted the dog on the back. "That there my brother Jack."

Some older boy set on the front porch, scraping taters and carrots. He tossed them in a pot with water. He ain't no giant but he looked like a oak tree next to Little Joe.

What in that pot do my empty belly some good. "How bout I throw this here quail I snare in with them taters. We share?" I offered the bag with my good luck of the day inside.

"Be nice to eat somethin besides chicken or fish this one time." Little Joe said. "Rufus ain't good as a female, but he company. How bout he stay for supper?"

"Best ask Jole."

"Jole get in one a them moods. Not gonna come back soon, sure enough."

"There plenty then."

To help I fetched water, stuck kindling in the stove. Little Joe keep up our spirits by running his mouth bout the gals he knowed, lotta them. Big Jack put in a nod now and again. Little Joe didn't seem to care if he hear or not. Them two seemed easy with each other like brothers oughta.

Glad to work in that kitchen. Never recollected spending time like that with nona my own kin. Then again ain't much I do remember bout my life as a young'un, least ways till I bout ten.

"You say you got lotta brothers, sisters, cousins. Sounds like a bushel fulla fun," Little Joe said.

"Things ain't always what folks think."

"Lotta aunts and uncles too, I reckon."

Ain't gonna bring to mind nona them.

"Smell like time to take the stew off the stove," I said.

The porch creaked. Door boomed open. Little Joe and Big Jack looked at one nother, Little Joe said, "Jole's back."

Jole stomped in the kitchen, snatched a cup off the sideboard. He pouring coffee before he laid eyes on me. Little Joe musta seen the chicken hawk stare cause he jumped to the quick. "Hey, Jole, meet Rufus. He visitin a spell."

"All I need, nother mouth to feed." Jole banged the coffeepot down on the stove. He a bit older than Big Jack, maybe a little stronger, more smooth-faced.

Big Jack and Little Joe like to melt into the wall. This place ain't atall like where I come from.

"I fend for myself. That there quail cookin what I put in."

Jole slammed down the cup, coffee splashed out. "I don't give a damn bout some quail. You not welcome here."

"Little Joe say I welcome." Used the name I called Joe in my head.

"Little Joe?" Jole planted fists on his hips. Muscles get tight under his union suit. He kicked a chair out from the table, plopped down. "That all I need after my trouble today. First them no-tail-bears try to take over O'Hara land. Then I go up to the Grady place for some lonesome time, find some Clyde."

"What's a Clyde?" Little Joe said.

"Who knows? Claim he kin. Say his name O'Hara, but I never hear of a O'Haras cept us three." Jole rub his face with both hands. "I gotta set out for town tomorrow, stop them negres from building on my land."

I meet a Cherokee one time but only seen colored folk in pictures. Hoped I get to spy some in the flesh soon. Hoped I get to learn from somebody important like Jole.

"I snare nother critter for supper tomorrow, if'n you want."

"You let Rufus stay, Jole? That quail stew smell right nice, sure enough."

Jole pulled a what-I-gonna-do face. He slumped to one of the two rooms on tuther side of the house. Whapped the door shut behind him.

My mouth hang open so I said, "Your brother one prickly fella."

Big Jack nudged me, shaked his head.

Little Joe said, "Jolene ain't our brother. She our sister"

## TWO

Big Jack fetched me a real chicken feather pillow. Sleep better than ever before, waked up before sun-up, slipped to the kitchen door. Jolene jawed at Little Joe.

"What you thinkin, boy? Bringin home some little lost boll weevil. Like me catchin you with that one girl. Claim you don't know her ma a Harvey. What bout this one? If I find a Harvey on my land...."

"But Rufus ain't no boll weevil," Little Joe said. "And he not a Harvey neither."

"One and the same, boy, one and the same. When you gonna learn that?"

"Yes'm. But, Jole, Rufus not no Harvey."

"I don't give a damn. I want that varmint outta my house. Now."

Last word she snapped out like a hickory switch she gonna whip me with. I stepped in the kitchen. "Reckon I go outside then."

Stayed round the pump for a spell while Jolene hollered at Little Joe some more. After a bit, she come out on the porch with a straw hat over her short black not quite curly hair. She carried a shotgun.

"How many times I gotta tell you to git?"

"Oh, I gittin," I fall in behind her. She pulled some chicory from a bush, headed up the path. When she get to the planks scattered by the road, she spit, turned the way I come the day before. She carried that shotgun like she might stop short, take down a buck at a hundred yards. After a fair piece, reckoned to try swapping words with her. "Where we goin, Jolene?"

She spin round, jabbed the shotgun butt in the dirt like she breaking ground. My heart halted for a second. "Stop your followin me."

Shrugged. Go ahead, walking backward so as to look at her. "What the shotgun for, Jolene?"

"Boy, if you any greener, I stick you in my garden, see if you grow."

Stumbled on a rock, fall on my backside. She walked right on by. I crossed the road, run up ahead for a time. A peach tree stand behind a long turn. I climbed a fence under a low hanging branch, picked me a special treat. Spied her coming. "Hey, Jolene. Want a peach? This one nice'n sweet, just right."

She watched me bite a big juicy hunk. She take a piece a chicory from her pocket, stick that in her mouth, turned back on her way. We travelled long on different sides of the road. The sun get higher, the heat settle in round me. Didn't feel like doing nothing else, so reckoned to try her again.

Crossed the road, matched her stride. "Hey, Jolene, why don't you walk on the road? Or tuther side?"

"Grrrrr." She sounded like a mad dog when she growled. "Don't you know nothin?"

"Reckon plenty I don't knowed." Sure the truth. "But I knowed this road shadier on tuther side."

This get her to stop. She heaved a sigh like a man giving up on a mule. "From the Cedar Springs bridge to the Mill Creek turnoff, Harveys stay to that side of the road, O'Haras stick to this side." Her finger sliced the air like a knife chopping onions. "And if I catch a Harvey on this side, I gonna shoot him dead." She spit like what she said tasted bad.

How she gonna shoot a Harvey? That shotgun ain't loaded cause of no shell blast when she bang the butt.

"Well," I said. "Us Hollowberrys never run to feudin. But if'n I see me a Harvey, will sure say so. Will wrassle him down, sit on him while you shoot him, if'n you want me to."

"Now there's a boy with some ambition."

Long bout the time the sun hang highest in the sky we come on a honest-to-goodness town. The air hotter with all them brick buildings staring at me. Before we get to the middle I seen more folks than my ma got young'uns. One fancy lady strolled long with a pink parasol.

Law, if they ain't got automobiles too. Never seen more than one in a given place. This town got at least three.

I get so busy watching everything, I bout lose Jolene when she turned in at what I knowed the jail from the bars on the windows.

A sheriff with door handle ears said, "Leave that shotgun by the door. You know I ain't gonna let no Harveys in here."

"I got negres fixin to squat on my land. I wanna stop them."

"Fraida that. I come in the county clerk's office when this fella there, he talk funny, say he from France and he wanna invest in some land. Turns out that narrow parcel next to the road ain't O'Hara land."

Jolene let her mouth fall open. "Nah. That not true."

"He don't say nothin bout negres."

"You gonna let them get way with that?"

"That fella a lawyer. He ain't gonna do nothing gainst the law."

"That my land."

"For now. Seen your name in the County Clerk's notebook what list them that owe back taxes."

Look on Jolene's face turn so fiery I think her hat might start to smoke. Didn't wanna stay round when she blow. I run outta the door almost into nother lady with nother parasol. How I gonna help Jolene outta that there mess

## THREE

Wandered round taking in so many new sights my eyes set to swimming. Some folks called the town Swift River. The name fit cause the place set next to a river what run faster than a spooked pup. Bread and pickles ripe for the stealing out front of the mercantile. Eat a nice dinner while leaning back on a shaded post.

My fingers rubbed the smooth boards on the worned-out walkway, caught on something. I moved over, leaned in close. Law, if a coin didn't stick tween the planks. Take out my pocketknife, worked that coin like digging in a coal mine. Payed off. Got me a whole nickel to my name. Feel like a real man with honest to goodness money in my pocket. Waltzed round trying to figure out what to do with my find. Never got so much as a penny to my name before.

That coin gonna make Jolene like me more. Spotted her. Reckoned I try somma the new words I learned me on her. "Hey, Jolene. What'cha sittin on a sidewalk with your feet in the street for?"

If I a fly buzzing round her head, she might pay me more mind. Her chin rested in her hands. Her eyes never leave a store cross the way. A wooden Injun stand by the door, reckoned to get folks to stop in. Seemed to me that there Injun not too friendly, maybe a mite-a paint cheer him up. Didn't Injuns like to draw colors right on their hides? Jolene didn't blink the whole time she watched that store. A whole heap of folks passed by before she stand, ambled off with her gun, probably still empty of shot.

In the store the sweet smell of tobacco made me wish the stuff for eating. So many different kinds mixed in the air, one whiff get me dizzy. I plunked down my nickel.

Stayed under a chestnut tree on the edge a town to keep way from the thick afternoon heat till the sun ducked hisself behind a mountaintop. On my way back toward the Mill Creek turnoff, strike me that I on the wrong side of the road. Recollected Jolene watched that side like a bear might charge out from behind some trees. She got a eye out for Harveys, I reckoned. Harveys must be pretty dern ugly. I knowed in my bones if I met one, I hate him. With only one day and a night, I feel faithful to the O'Haras.

My wondering what a Harvey looked like got my brain to itching so bad I wandered into the woods near the turnoff. A path lead me up a hill while dark blanketed the sky, inviting the stars to come out to dance. Somewhere a creek crashed over rocks then I seen the cliff. Moonlight shine on the water. Reckoned I find me a piece a ground to curl up on for the night. Climb down at first light with the wad a line in my pocket, catch me a fish for breakfast.

In my dream I painted that wooden Injun, white feathers with red tips, yellow and blue stripes on his face, eyes so brown they twinkled like Jolene's.

"Wake up you lazy, good-for-nothing worm." That her yelling at me? My eyes cracked open. "Wake up, you worthless fool." Law, if that voice meaner than Jolene's. Come from behind a clump a rocks yonder. Dawn covered the mountains like a shawl. Pretended me a leaf on the bush I bedded under. Didn't move a stitch.

"Sorry, Pa. Just a quick nap." Sounded like a boy.

"Oh, poor Snake gotta get him a nap. Someone come long, pour out our mash, bust up our still. But Snake get him some beauty sleep."

"They busted our still?"

"Yep, come down the hill shoot your brothers and me. Killed us all dead."

"But you standin right..."

A scuffle stopped the boy's words. The fella said, "Now git to haulin up water and chop more wood, before I take off somma your toes."

What if that evil fella find me? Got a idea from the name he called the boy. Slithered like a snake out from under the bush. Made my feet soft like the dirt path. A twig snapped behind me. My blood stopped running, sure they after me. A deer dashed by, bout knocked me over.

Swear to never let my wondering trick me up that hill again. I knowed better than to get near a spooky ole still and a crazy moonshiner. On the road, I stayed on the right side, not crossing for a peach to fill my empty gut.

Back to the O'Haras' Jolene hoeing in the garden. "What'cha doin back here? Reckon I scrape you off my shoe in town."

Why she say that? She didn't wear no shoes.

She raised her hoe. "Now git, before I plow you under."

"Hey, Jolene. I bring you somethin."

She screwed up her face, looked round like she heard someone else talk. Them beans said nothing. "Somethin for me? What the hell for?"

Stepped over a watermelon, come closer so she didn't gotta yell so loud. "Hope you like it." Pulled the cigar outta my chest pocket.

The hoe clunked to the ground. Her eyes sparked.

"It name Stogie."

She carried my gift careful as a baby bird, cross the yard, up the steps, into the house.

Picked up the hoe cause I knowed what getting left in the dirt feel like.

Find Little Joe in the barn sucking a egg, his hound, Tickle, chewed a stick. "Hey, Rufus." Leastwise someone on this place friendly. "Where you get off to?"

"Me and Jolene go to Swift River." Seen a mule in a stall. Why Jolene not ride him to town? "She come back here, I get myself in a mess a trouble."

Little Joe said for me to wait so they all hear my yarn.

Jolene give me a plate at supper. After we eat, she take a lamp out on the porch to read to us from a newspaper. "Since Prohibition started on January 1st of this year, there has been a sharp rise in the making of moonshine whiskey in the inner mountain area. One North Carolina county alone, where the sheriff cut up forty-two stills in one year, had fifty stills cut up in ten days." She peered at them words like she didn't wanna miss one tiny thing. "Experts claim that a bushel of corn, which under normal conditions would bring only a dollar or two at the market, could be distilled into two gallons of whiskey priced at upwards of forty dollars a gallon..."

My mouth boiled over. "That what my story bout too."

"Rufus, Jole readin. And this news fun, sure enough."

Jolene cut her eyes at me. "Hush up, Joe. I wanna hear this."

Spilled the story bout hearing the crazy fella and boy, throwed in a tall tale bout my getaway for good measure.

"What them folks look like?"

"Didn't draw no bead on em. But the fella call the boy Snake."

"Snake." Jolene jumped outta her chair. Me, Little Joe, and Big Jack scattered. Tickle scurried under the porch.

"Harveys." Her feet slapped from one end of the porch to tuther faster than a ax through a chicken's neck. "So the Harveys got them a still runnin up there."