

The Judge's Son

Around seven o'clock, Oba came down from his room at the tavern and walked out into the blue night air. The windows at the courthouse remained bright that evening long after the staff had departed. He strolled beside the offices and listened, with anonymous pleasure, to the men musing and arguing behind the glass. He had been in the neighboring county when he'd heard of the Judge's death and decided to return to Stoleback, where he was born, to attend the visitation. Nothing tethered him to life in the other city except a lease under a different name and a debt to the bail bondsman for skipping his arraignment on fraud.

The Judge had built his home in the hills outside Stoleback so the town would know he did not belong to them, or anyone. The house looked like a Confederate general's idea of a Greek temple—Corinthian columns and a cane bottom chair on the veranda where Socrates could sip his mint tea. Oba followed the other mourners

through the stately tunnel of maple trees that led from the road to the house. On the steps a frog-necked man with a red bowtie was saying, “You never know when it’ll be your time. Look at FDR last year—he went right after dinner. Middle of the afternoon.” Oba went into the empty hall. To the left was the parlor, where death was nearest but the conversation was loudest. He loitered between the porch and the mourners at the casket, always at the rim of things, a traveler of peripheries and outskirts. A glass cabinet by the stairs carried photographs of Judge Greene’s ancestors, tintypes and albumen prints, including one of the Judge himself next to the propped corpse of his father. A blur of animation clouded the Judge’s features, while his father’s face was caught with the exquisite clarity found only in the dead.

Oba walked up to the casket, where Judge Greene’s son and a knot of visitors were discussing crop yields—the safe, factual kind of conversation that strangers and cousins have. The dead Judge looked unnaturally exposed, a turtle robbed of his shell.

“Where do you come from, sir?” the Judge’s son asked him.

Oba looked up, conscious of the separation between him and the gathering. “From going to and fro on the earth,” he said. His gaze traveled to the rug, where on any other night the Judge’s grandchildren might have played by the cold fireplace.

“Are you a preacher?” the son asked. A white shaving scar gleamed on his chin. “I’ve only seen preachers wear a hat like that.”

“Never indoors, though,” a skinny man said with a tight smirk.

The son put his hand out to Oba. If the Judge had woken alive at that moment,

his first sight would have been their hands meeting over his face. “Name’s Glendell Greene,” the son said. “You are...?”

Oba nodded at the Judge’s remains. “You reckon you’ll run to replace him?”

Glendell paused. He dropped Oba’s hand. “I haven’t given it a thought.”

“You must’ve had the notion. Even before he was gone.”

“Now, see here,” the skinny man started.

“Nobody’s looking at me to run,” Glendell said. “All I do is own a humble eating place downtown. Man like me shouldn’t start thinking he’s somebody.”

Oba tilted his head. “But here you got that law degree and you never used it.”

“How would you know about my little detour down at State?”

Oba told them his name. Glendell smiled and looked away.

“Wouldn’t know you from Adam, son,” he said. “But I thank you for coming.”

Oba looked at the Judge again, the stark texture of bone under his skin. “We all want to be like him, don’t we,” he said, and turned to leave the house. He ignored the curse from one man who sounded ready to come after him, the hushed discouragement from Glendell. A dozen eyes followed him outside, under the trees, until he was gone.