

R H A P S O D Y

THE 1992 CLACKAMAS COLLECTION

Second Place
Fiction

ONIONS

By Montford

The day was Sunday, last Friday was the last day of school - free for the summer. Thad had seven cents, and if he could wheedle eight more pennies from his mother he could see the matinee at the Egyptian, and get a bag of popcorn, too. Beau Geuste was playing. Had to think up a good reason for need - couldn't use the tablet and pencil excuse 'cuz school was out - gotta be smart about this one. This was going to be a great summer, Big Eddie was going to teach Thad the finer points of shooting pool.

Thad could hear his mother in the kitchen, probably making mush again, but how come this early? Couldn't even be eight o'clock, and she came in late last night. She planning to go to church this morning? She did some Sunday mornings when she came in late the Saturday night before.

"Thaddeus! Get up, let's get started. You've got a lot of things to do this morning."

Thad's plans crumbled and faded away with new thoughts: "Damn, she's on the peck this morning; I forgot to take the garbage out yesterday, and didn't get home early enough to suit her for supper last night." Thad rolled off the cot, swung his feet down just right to fit into his pants, sox, and tennishoes that had been arranged the night before for a fireman's quick "pull-up" over his slept in one-piece BVD's. Thad found a clean pull-over shirt.

Yes, it was mush for breakfast, sister Teener didn't like it much either. Breakfast didn't take long.

Thad swallowed fast to avoid the taste of oat-

meal, then he jerked a thumb toward the rumble seat indicating Thad's demeaned position. Through Springfield, Thad grinned at anyone who would look his way. Fresh, clean air whipped his clothing and hair for the next hour as they drove south and east on State Highway 20. An unexpected turn off the highway and onto a farm lane jostled a new alertness.

A tall man, wearing loose fitting blue gal-lused overalls and a blue denim shirt stepped off the porch and strode to the middle of the drive to confront the Buick as it slowed to a stop under a huge shade oak. Looking into the open doorway he called out, "Ona, come on out here!" The farmer had a great mop of white hair, like a halo, all over his head. His brown bushy eyebrows made a good sunvisor. Wife, Ona, stood on the front porch with hands clasped and lips moving as if saying a prayer. Mother got out of the Buick and motioned for Thad to do the same, with the suit case. The first twinges of fear began with a dry mouth and little shards of pain around an undeveloped adam's apple.

The farmer and Mother talked. Dipping two fingers into the bib pocket of his overalls, he wiggled out two ten dollar bills. As Thad watched, the farmer give the bills to Mother. Thad's mind seemed to explode with the realization of a cold and startling fact, "She sold me!"

As Mother returned to the car, she patted Thad on the cheek and murmured, "See you later."

The M. i. drove around the shade oak, down the dirt lane and turned right. Thad knew they had come in from the other direction and took two, short, hesitant steps as if to follow. Eyes burning with hot and salty tears, Thad saw the farmer take one step

and fold himself into the position of a sprinter's crouch. "It's no use" muttered Thad, as he picked up the suitcase and placed it on the porch.

"You'll want to look the place over," Farmer said and began walking around the house, fully expecting to be followed. Pointing with a wide sweep of his arm, Farmer continued, "I drilled corn in that back lower acre last week." Thad aimlessly wondered why in hell a person would want to drill holes in kernels of corn. "Finished harrowing and tining those two upper acres between us and the highway just yesterday." Farmer spoke, not with an air of a slave-buyer but with quiet pride and pleasure about growing stuff, and the privileges of being chosen to be a farmer.

"No yard dog. Don't need one, Old Mule takes care of varmints or chicken thieves." Thad was

introduced to Mule, like it was a person. All over brown except for a grey tuft of hair on the end of the tail, and a face graying like very old dog. Mule moved close and began sniffing from Thad's knees right to his nose. With a steady stare from huge dark brown eyes, Mule raised his upper lip to show yellow plates of front teeth and snorted into Thad's face. Farmer said, "Mule's saying 'howdy' to you."

Howdy, hell. Thad could hear what that damn beast thought, and Mule knew it too, "Another one not worth the effort of a kick in the butt!" The three walked back toward the house, Mule keeping pace behind Thad to make sure he got there.

Ona proudly showed Thad the "place of his own" in the lean-to next to the back porch. The room was just large enough to walk around a well used squeek-spring cot that could be folded up. A striped covered pillow, with browned head-shadows in the middles of both sides, lay on the lumpy mattress. There were no sheets, only a washable feather-tick blanket. Everything smelled of Pinesol. Borax had been sprinkled on the floor along the walls to discourage crawly things. Next to the cot, centered on an up-ended and divided orange crate was a sparkling clean, clear glass, coal-oil lamp and a box of lucifers. At the foot of the cot, three large new nails had been driven into the wall to hang clothes on. Below, on the floor, sat the suitcase and a pair of near-new lace up ankle-high leather boots.

Sitting on the back porch, waiting for supper, Farmer began to give clues for Thad's hiring-on. "Crew my own onion sets from seed of last year's crop. Call 'em Bermuda Sweets 'cuz the 'riginals come from the Bermuda Islands, and you can eat 'em like an apple. Did the starts in a lot of flat boxes filled with cow manure inside that long shed with the window-glass roof built onto the side of the barn. Started 'em last March and now the're four inches of greened up shoots from the bulb. Tomorrow morning I'll show you how to plant."

Supper at sun-down and breakfast at sun-up was eaten at the oil-cloth covered kitchen table. A guy could near starve during the long blessings that came before each meal. Ona didn't say the Thee's and Thou's like grandma in Oregon said; instead, she thanked the spirits of the corn and other growing things. Sneaking a peek, Thad thought Farmer might be catching a little nap until the Aaamen. There was a hand pump at the sink. Thad wondered if the well had been dug first, and then the house built over it. The privy was out past the back porch lean-to, almost to the barn.

Thad drifted off to sleep wondering if Teener was going to spend the night, or longer, alone, too. At sunup, Mule made soft ruffled throat-noises outside Farmer's bedroom window, then did the same beside the lean-to. Ona served a real working man's breakfast. No mush.

Each morning Mule dragged a stone-boat to the acre next to the lane, loaded with eight flats of onion starts and sixteen five gallon cans of water. The harrowed earth was flat with straight lines of ditches three inches deep, three inches wide, and two feet between. Each ditch stretched out toward the highway for 190 feet, and each flat contained at least

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meal, then dunked the empty bowl in the dish pan. Mother appeared in the doorway dressed in her "new" Sunday cream colored silk day dress. Thad was told to get the small black suitcase and pack his two pairs of overalls (the ones with the galluses and bib), two sets of BVDs, his two blue shirts, and three pairs of sox that didn't have holes in them. There was a slow realization that these were the farm clothes from last year. He could take his book, *The Black Rose*, if he wanted to. It was about pirates and knights and sailing ships. Thad liked the dress better before Mother made it over; liked to not have those short sleeves. And now the three rows of long tassels around the waist had been shortened to about three inches. Mother, once, a long time ago, liked to call the dress her shimmi-shirt, and she could really make those tassels spin when dancing the Charleston. Mother spoke, "Thaddeus, get your bag, we have a ride waiting for us." Teener looked at Thad apprehensively, then went into the other room. Thad followed Mother from the apartment and down the stairs to a man waiting on the sidewalk.

The Man wore a fine cotton seersucker summer suit, and a cream colored shirt with an almost matching tie. His cream colored, wide brimmed, straw hat with a blue band was raked slightly to the right side of his head suggesting a cocky personality. And then, there were the polished tan shoes with light blue laces. When Thad was introduced to this one all he could think of was, "La-de-damn-da", so he didn't even say, "Howdo." "Dapper Dan's" black and shining Buick-8 roadster, with a canvas top and a rumble seat, was parked at the curb.

The man's courtly bow invited mother into

