

A Clean Feeling

The land and the people were what made me remember so well. Situations in my dreams were usually vague and unreal. But this dream had reality. The land was country I knew well: my father's ranch. But it had a background of haze, and the country was composed of sections of the ranch twisted and turned into what was, for me, a confusing landscape. Oddly enough, the action of the dream took place just off the ranch.

There were four people in the dream: myself and three others. All of these figures had clear and defined shapes but only one had a clear and defined identity. I knew who he was at all times. The others I just didn't know. They were like people in a town I'd never been to before. They walked and talked but I didn't know them.

We were going to a river where no one else had ever been. At least we thought no one else had ever been there. As we went down a dry hill, one person said, "Remember the map we studied? The river should be around the next hill."

"Wonder how much timber and grass there'll be? I'd like to go over it good before I decide what to pay for it," said the other person I didn't know.

The smaller person I knew asked me, "Do you like to fish?" and I said that I did. "It's worth walking just to see a river that isn't ruined or fished out." Everyone agreed, and we began to walk faster in the hot sun.

The "river" appeared as a hollow, mud bottomed creek, and there weren't even any crawdads. "Just ahead," one of the others said. "Just ahead. It'll clear and there'll be trout in every hole." We went on, and in the sun I thought of deep holes with water running into them and salmonberry bushes shading the water. There were old, decaying logs along the edge of the pools, and the trout were deep in the clear water. But that was not the muddy creek we found in the hot sun.

We went on, and soon I noticed bulldozer tracks in the mud along the opposite bank of the creek. But I didn't mention the tracks. I just didn't want to disappoint my companions. We went on and on, and the very last thing I could remember in my dream was the muddy dozer tracks.

It was a remarkable dream, and I was still thinking about it and remembering it when I got home from school that night. I laid my books down, changed my clothes, and took my gun. During deer season I could leave my chores until after dark if I wanted to hunt. Usually I hunted. Deer come into orchards at dusk to eat fallen apples, and I started for an orchard about two miles away.

The road to the orchard was grassy, and a few leaves fell. A few rabbits were in the road, and my heart beat faster when they jumped. In one place I noticed that a myrtle tree, seared by a fire, was sending up new shoots and was growing a few sickly leaves on its nearby decayed branches. Then I crossed a dry gravel bed that becomes a full stream during winter storms and started up the brushy trail to the orchard.

Slowly walking into the lower orchard, I heard a limb shake, and a small boy, like a squirrel, came down an apple tree. He poured a paper sack full of apples into a cardboard box. I remember thinking that his father must be hunting. As I came closer, the boy saw me but didn't act concerned or even interested. He had on a cap with very large ear muffs tied together on the top. The cap was too big for him--so big it almost covered his ears and eyes. He had on a denim coat with an insignia on the shoulder; the coat was a lot like a very faded army fatigue jacket.

The boy went back up the tree and, as I came underneath, he was slowly picking apples and placing them in his sack. He was very selective about the apples. "Where's your dad?" I asked in an elderly tone. He just surveyed me between the picking and the placing of an apple and then ignored me. I didn't know what to do. I knew that I should send him away and thus protect my father's apples from further plundering, but somehow I couldn't say anything more. So I just stood there for a long time. The apples smelled good and the north wind felt cool at the end of a hot day.

When I finally left, I went down the line fence toward the creek. At a point I climbed the fence and walked through a group of young red fir, their greenness fresh against the trunks of their heavier elders. Then I came to the creek, and the clear water surrounded by moss and bottomed by solid and contoured sandstone relieved me.

But still I thought about the boy and the apples. I had not fulfilled a duty, an important duty. But I somehow knew that the boy needed the apples more than the cows or even more than the shy deer. In our lit book there was a passage saying that a man walking through a farmer's land and not even taking an apple could be enjoying the most valuable product of the land; this could not be applied to a small plundering of fruit, but it caused me to wonder if land could be owned at all. After all, did the cattle really belong to dad? But he could control them and sell them to their death! Perhaps control was not ownership either. The thought was not ended with a yes or no, and I tried to put it out of my mind. Perhaps I had been wrong, and the boy lived with his grandfather in a hut further back in the hills. You could never tell. But it still bothered me. I became very depressed and was almost ready to cry when I saw the fish.

The trout was in a sandy pool, just lying in the still water. He was a fairly large one, and I could see him plainly. I lay full length on the moss covered rock and watched him. I tried to concentrate on him and into him and put myself inside of him. It was a wonderful, clean feeling as the fish lay there.