

THE AUTHORS SHOW – Fiction

Author: Robert Joe Stout

In his shrill, cackly voice Mr. Bayne repeated what he'd told the Alperfs a few days earlier. Then, more slyly, he added that he knew about my "... accident ..." with the five boys and said that didn't matter to him like it might to "... more picky ..." fellows. "She come here on her own!" he insisted, craning his neck toward Daddy, "I didn' do nothing t'tempt her!" He wet his lips and wiped them on the back of his thumb. "Snuck out at night with her suitcase a'ready packed!"

He didn't tell them that he hadn't fucked on me yet. Maybe that would have made a difference, I don't know. Momma snuffled and wiped her eyes and nose on a big homemade handkerchief and looked at Brother Botchlet. "Now, now." Brother Botchlet leaned forward and touched her hand. Then he began to talk to Mr. Bayne. It was about religion and I didn't listen. Instead I watched Daddy. He seemed to be clenching his teeth, restraining his emotions. For a moment, until he moved, he reminded me of Cousin Matty. But Cousin Matty would have lunged out, shouted, struck someone; Daddy sucked it all inside.

"So you see, sir," Brother Botchlet concluded, "purely 'n' simply the child was led astray. I suspect," he touched his small, blue-veined nose, "that in her young years she had around her such a fine, religious atmosphere that she didn't recognize it as the lap of Jesus and like many of us had to stray before she could find her way back to His loving care."

Mr. Bayne's nose twitched and wiggled as he listened. "Well!" he declared when Brother Botchlet was through. "My mommy, she was a Babtist, prayed all the time!" He rubbed his hands together. "Yessir! And Jesus had a hand in bringing Sally Jane here, I c'n tell ya that!" —
From Miss Sally by Robert Joe Stout

In the Wyoming in which I was born I could bike up a gravel road to a plateau overlooking the North Platte, a curiously winding sprawl of river bordered by willows and cottonwoods. Except for an occasional farm truck threading what locals called "the highway" I could detect little movement. A hawk perhaps. A rabbit bursting past thistles. Throughout the summer a fine film of dust coated everything. In winter all was obscured beneath deep snow. It was a land

programmed for isolation, loneliness, thought. A land of lone pronghorns silhouetted against stark bluffs. A land where silence was severed by a single coyote's wail. A land where a boy could do what he pleased, go where he pleased, be who he pleased. A land where he was alone.

Cities breed intimacy; the plains of eastern Wyoming bred imagination. The ruins of the old Fort Laramie were only a few miles away. A freight car abandoned to weeds and sapling willows bore testimony to the Wild Bunch's six-guns. A rock face pitted by weather retained chisel-inscribed pioneer directions. And in the hotel lobby, on the walls of the saloons, above stacked sacks in the feed store, the mounted heads of pronghorn antelope stared glassily from their fecund past towards the sterile future.

Early one summer evening, standing alone on the edge of the plateau, I caught a glimpse of movement, a flash of life against the approaching darkness, then a pronghorn reappeared, the haughty black V marking its chest like a royal medallion a prince might wear. As I spoke to it, imagining that it was answering me, another wisp of movement and above us a hawk appeared, low, circling slowly, tail feathers flickering red in the sunlight. It seemed to be watching both of us, not predatorily but conspiratorially, the three of us being the only life in that vast, gray expanse. And then a fourth, but in voice only; a coyote that seemed to be yodeling, clear notes, musical, and I felt a wonderful connection with everything around me, with the prairie that suddenly seemed to be green and alive and filled with pronghorns, bobcats, wolves, hawks and eagles.

But only for a moment—a moment that now seems longer than it probably was. Then the pronghorn, the hawk, the yodeling vanished and I, abandoned, swung my legs over my bike and slowly pedaled home.

Whether, on the way, I thought about writing or becoming a writer I don't remember. My boyhood adventures, real and imaginary, were intertwined with this environment. Though I don't remember the incident clearly my parents told the story of my disappearance during a small-town rodeo performance. They went looking for me and finally found me comingling with

a group of Sioux dancers who upon relinquishing me to my parents nevertheless made me an honorary member of the tribe.

For many years as I thrashed about trying to succeed in the so-called adult world I pictured my boyhood as more or less idyllic but somewhat unconventional. My parents were considerably older than most of my schoolmates parents, had attended college but lost their careers as radio and movies replaced lecture tours and community concerts. Through his brother my father found employment with a sugar factory in town of Torrington, a place not at all unlike Tom Sawyer's Missouri Valley home.

Exactly how or when I realized that I had two different fathers remains clouded among the bumbles, triumphs and disappointments of growing past childhood into adolescence. The father I saw daily—factory worker, diligent, ethical, committed to routine—was very different from the adventurer who'd romanced dark-eyed beauties in Samoa, hunted leopards in Ceylon, climbed Egyptian pyramids and hobnobbed with such notables as Drew Pearson and Anita Loos. With Carl Miller, a Kentucky "colonel" who later served a term in the U.S. House of Representatives, he'd gone from Australia through Ceylon, the Suez Canal, Greece and Italy and France and Germany. Consciously, semi-consciously or unconsciously I knew which of my two fathers I most wanted to be like. It wasn't the factory worker, as solid and hard-working as that factory worker was.

His death at sixty-two was fundamental to many of my life's choices. I refused to believe in retirement—like him I probably would die young, I thought—and I was determined to live a life that suited my personality and ideals rather than sacrifice the present for the future.

It's been a bumpy journey at times and it's not over yet.