

VAGABOND BOY: *Memoir of a Youth's Journey Through a Heartland of Chaos*

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 10

Without warning Dick swerved the car onto the gravel of the road shoulder, yanked on the brake, leaned over the seat, and said in an angry tone, “Open the door and both of you get out of the car.”

Michael and I just looked at him and then at Bea, not sure what to do.

“Go on, get out!” he barked.

I pushed the door open, swung my legs around, and hopped out. Then Michael scooted over, rolled on his stomach, and tried to push himself out legs first. I grabbed him around the waist with both arms to ease the longer drop for him from the seat to the ground. Once there I pulled him beside me next to the car and we both waited silently.

“Shut the door,” Dick growled and I did. A moment later the engine revved, spinning tires crunched gravel, and tiny road cinders spewed against my legs as the car lurched back onto the road. The two of us watched it speed away as though it was pulling out of a gas station before the bill was paid.

Wide-open prairie country surrounded us and the empty two-lane highway where we stood. The road stretched far ahead of us before curving off to the right a half a mile away. Though I was [six years old and] a foot taller than my brother, I could not see what was beyond the curve where our parents had just disappeared with the family car. We remained as motionless as two prairie dogs raised in captivity when the cage door is opened and they find themselves outside the bars for the first time in their lives—confused and unsure what to do.

Another minute passed. I looked down and saw, among the roadside litter, the shredded remains of a Dixie cup poster next to my foot. It showed some kids with expressions of joyful anticipation about to be served juice-filled Dixie cups and cookies by a pair of slender feminine hands with polished nails. They belonged to their smiling mother, no doubt. It was a portrait of the perfect American family. I kicked hard at the wad of paper and then took my little brother’s hand as we started walking in the same direction as our vanished parents.

The sun was low on the horizon and I knew we had perhaps an hour before darkness. I started wondering where we would spend the night and who would get us supper. Then it occurred to me that with Dick and Bea gone it would be my role to take care of both of us from now on. But when I searched my mind on what to do next it was suddenly as empty as the landscape ahead of us.

Every few minutes vehicles whooshed past us but none of them stopped. I don't know how any of their occupants failed to notice us with the waning sunlight flashing off our blond heads like distress beacons. The day was pleasantly warm but the inside of my head burned with a familiar, searing heat as the scene of the family car speeding away replayed in my mind. Neither of us spoke a word as we walked alone along an unfamiliar highway in an unknown land with darkness fast approaching, abandoned by our mother and father.

After a while Michael started to get tired. The sun was noticeably lower on the horizon by then and I walked with my other hand shielding the hard glare. I started thinking about where the road we were on might be going, and if we should go the other way. Maybe we should head to Chicago, but I would have to figure out where it was, I thought. The first thing I knew I had to do was find us a bush or old shack nearby to spend the night. I wasn't very confident about suddenly surviving on our own, but at least thinking about what I might do unknowingly pushed aside fears concerning the hazardous position we confronted.

When they left us to fend for ourselves, Dick and Bea certainly did not consider that in leaving us behind, even for a short time, we might come to see ourselves as less valuable than the tarnished pots and pans, chipped plates, and dirty laundry that stayed in the car. As we stood among the roadside trash we watched everything familiar disappear around a bend in the highway, unsure if our parents and their more cherished belongings would ever return.

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