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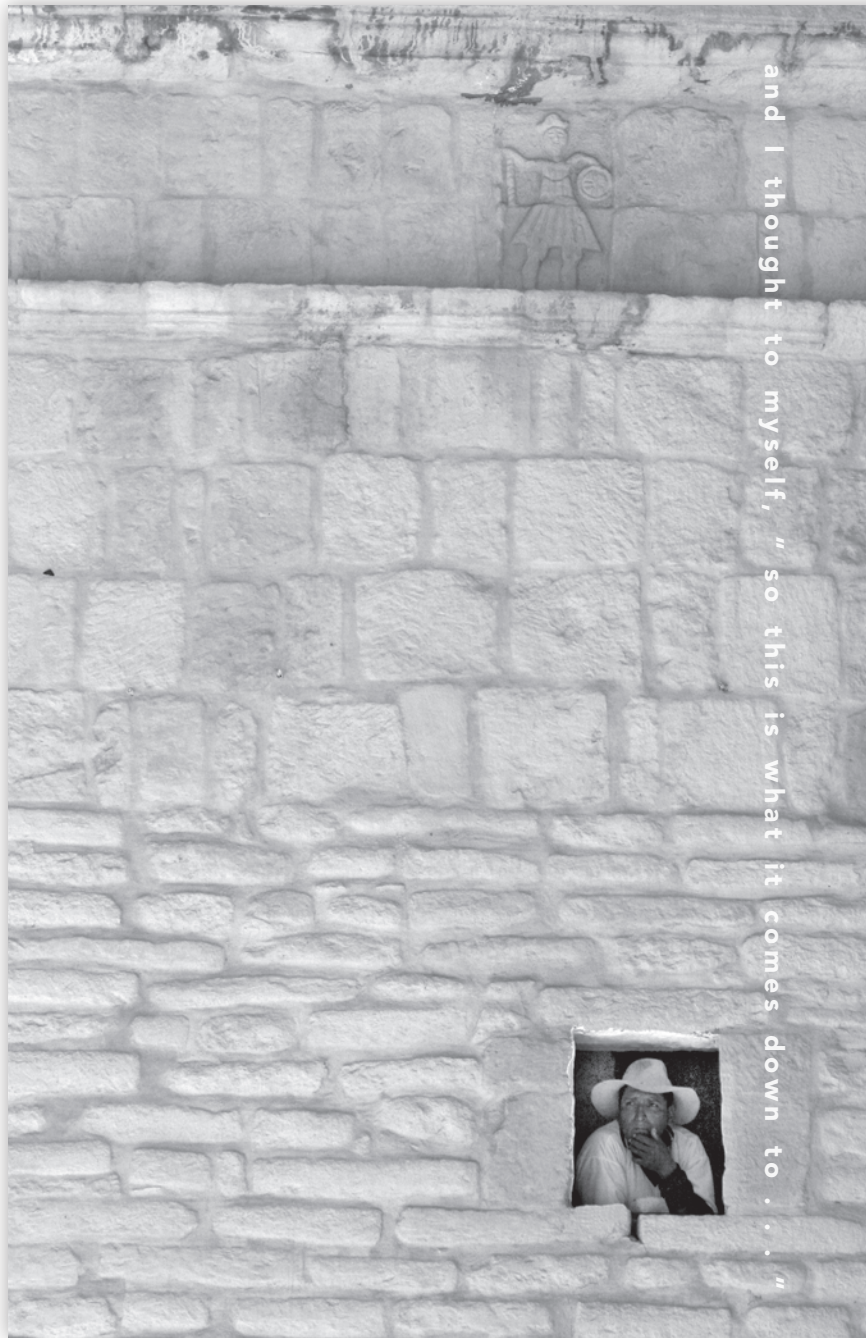
BURYING JOHN'S LEG

Rudy McCallister

"THIS IS HOW IT STARTED. WE WAS SITTING HOME on Friday night. I remember it was Friday 'cause the fights was on the TV. And the phone rang. In those days, you didn't get a lot of phone calls like you do now. If somebody called, it was for somethin' important. Somebody had took sick, or died, or somethin'. We used to get calls for all kinds of people back then 'cause we had the only phone in that part of town. Sometimes, you'd get a call from way off somewhere, Chicago or Iowa or somewheres else, and they'd be askin' for somebody in the Torrez or Martinez family or somebody. Well, you just hadta leave 'em there holdin' on the phone while you got in the car and traipsed off to try to find somebody that they needed to talk to. It'd sometimes take twenty minutes to find someone. Course, it was always bad news, else they wouldn't have called long distance like that. Then you had to drive the poor ol' padron or little Mexican gal back home. It was always somethin' that was bad, but that you had to do. Course, today if the phone rings, it's as apt to be a damned insurance salesman or somebody who wants to know if you still live in that house on Elm Street so that he can try to sell you some insurance or siding or somethin'. Last one that called, I told him that I was on Social Security and didn't have no money, and, if I did, I sure as hell wouldn't give it to him and why the hell didn't he get an honest job someplace. It's always been that way. Back when I was farmin', the insurance salesman would drive out to the farm, and if it looked like a good crop, he would try to get you to buy some type of insurance. They'd pressure and try to get you to let them come to our house so they could get your wife and family in on the deal. Then, if you didn't act like you was goin' buy any, they'd try to get you to feel bad on yourself by sayin' you must not care about your poor family cause if you died, there they'd be without nothin'. It just made me sick. Well anyway, the phone rang on Friday night, and it was Sarah. She was cryin' and hollerin' tryin' to tell us about the wreck. John and ol' Will Bass was goin' fishin' and had run head-on into somebody down around Brownwood. It was a bad accident, and both had been hurt purty bad. Will was unconscious, and John had just about had his leg cut off. Blanche comforted her best she could, and we was off toward Brownwood. We had us a thermos full of coffee and was in that '55 Buick. That was the best car we ever had. Never had an ounce of trouble with it. We had to stop three times, twice to let Blanche go to the bathroom, you know how once she got in a car her bladder got full. Then we had to stop in Lamesa 'cause the danged fan belt broke. I had just taken the car down to the Buick house a week before to have the oil changed and all the belts tightened and all I can figure is the kid that worked there tightened 'em all too tight and the one gave way. You just can't get anybody to do anything for you without him tryin' to get to you in some way. We had that man in here last week to try to fix the dishwasher and a 'course he didn't do it but charged us \$20 anyway. I tried to tell Blanche that it wouldn't do no good to try and hire anybody, but she wouldn't listen. So I just sit back and try not to say anything. It's better that way. It just makes her mad when I try to talk to her and if I offer any advice. She just

blows up and then, well, it just ain't any good. Well, we got to Brownwood in early in the mornin', more like the middle of the night. First, we went to the hospital and woke up Sarah in the waitin' room. When she saw us, and come to, she started to bawlin' again. She told us what she knew. We walked down the hall which was pretty much quiet except for a couple of fat nurses who was gigglin' and smokin' cigarettes. We looked in on John who was all hooked up to tubes and such and we couldn't tell much about it. We left to try to find a room. There weren't no name brand hotels back then so when you went into a town, you were always on your own to try to find a place to sleep that was fit. We drove around the main highway for awhile lookin' for a place and finally found this rooming house that didn't look too bad. We rang the buzzer and finally woke the lady that ran the place. She didn't look to happy to see us and when Blanche asked for a key so that we could look at the room, I thought there was goin' be a fight. But, we stayed the night. You don't know what you're gettin' into when you stay in a hotel. Mostly, they're tolerable, but, you just don't know when you might get into a dirty place where you don't know what kind of people might of been there before. You just don't know whether to use the towels or whether the sheets are clean or what. Well, we slept what we could. Next day, we go back to the hospital. Sarah and the kids was there and the surgeon come in later and tells us that the leg can't be saved. Well, it just tears 'em all up and nobody knows what to do. In those days, they didn't know much about puttin' arms and legs back on a man. Later, a fella, I don't know what he was, somethin' less than a doctor but better than an orderly, comes down and tries to explain how the wooden leg business has gotten better since the war and how he can get around without nobody knowin' he has a wooden leg. Course, everybody starts to bawlin' again and I just have to get up and leave. It just don't do no good to try to explain the truth to people when they're upset. You just might as well drop it until a month later so they can deal with it. When Blanche starts gettin' upset about work or family, you just can't talk to her. If I try to make a suggestion to her, she just cries, or gets up and goes down to the store or calls one of her family up and talks about me. Well, after a while, this nurse comes down to the waitin' room and asks for the family. I'm the only one left so she asks me what we want to do about the limb. I don't know what she's talkin' about at first, but then she asks what we want to do with John's leg. I tell her I don't know and that I'm only a friend of the family. She says that they got to know now 'cause the leg has already been off long enough and if they don't do something with it soon, they're going to have to put it in the incinerator. So, I go and look for Blanche and Sarah but they aren't in the coffee shop. By now, it's around 8:00 in the morning, so I figure they've gone to the hotel to rest. Well, the nurse finds me in the coffee-shop and asks me again what they're supposed to do with the leg. By now, I know it's somethin' that I have to do. You know how I had to take off that poodle we had before Gigi? I told her, "Bring it to me", and after a while, she comes back down with a brown paper bag. I don't want to hold it to tight cause I don't want to feel it. It was a Piggly Wiggly bag, I remember that. And there was a stray Green Stamp hangin' out the top of the bag. I took it outside and opened the turtle of the car and dropped it in. And I was sayin' to myself, "What in the world am I gonna do with this?" I got me a cigar and sat for about thirty minutes and thought about it and finally decided that the only thing was to bury it and that the only place was at the cemetery. So, I drive off and stop at the first gas station and asked the boy there for directions to the cemetery. When I drove up to it, I got out and walked around. The west side wasn't kept up too good and had little markers with names like Washington and Jackson so I figured this was

the colored section and I went back to the car and drove to the other side. I knew it wouldn't be right to bury it inside next to any grave so I drove down a turn-row that was between the graveyard and a cotton field. I took the shovel out of the trunk of the car - I always carried one in case I got stuck at the farm. It used to really make Blanche mad when I drove that new Buick to the farm. One time, I came back home with twelve cottontailed rabbits that I had shot with a twenty-two. I don't know whether she was madder for me bringin' them home in the car or for me thinking she might cook 'em. Well, anyway, I take the shovel out and start diggin' a hole between the turn-row and the rock fence around the cemetery. When you do somethin' like that, you work hard and fast and don't do much thinkin'. But, after a few spadefulls of dirt, my mind did start to wander. I remembered digging graves with my uncle at that little city cemetery north of Lubbock back during the Depression. When I dug graves back then, I didn't think about why I was doing it or about the people who'd be planted there. I didn't know them anyway and when you're young, you don't think about death or dying because it seems so far off. I just thought about the dollar I was makin'. But, when you get to be about fifty, you do start to think about it. And every spade of dirt I turned reminded me of John and a fishin' trip or a domino game or a dirty joke he'd told. And I thought to myself, "So this is what it comes down to. If you're healthy or lucky and live long enough you are rewarded with the sorrowful job of burying your friends and loved ones." And then I thanked the Lord that I had lived that long and had only lost a part of a friend."



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