

## Salt

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*Barry Bradford*

I remember a hundred biscuits in the oven and hungry niggers on the ground outside with a fire and some sausage; raw-boned niggers that worked for food. Before daylight they hauled themselves onto the wagon and rode down into the woods with daddy, facing a hard day of work already paid for.

I remember the day the drummer came. I was in the yard. It was noon when he stood on the road and looked at me and the house and said his name which I forgot. He had a bag on his shoulder that was dark with shiny greases and paint and made a noise when he walked. Momma came out to the porch. She asked him who he was, I think, and he said he was a seller of things. He hauled two pans out of his bag saying they were cheap, then a Bible and offered to read to us for a meal. Momma said it was okay and went in.

It was cold and rain began. He bent down and asked me how old I was. Five, I said. He asked something about daddy and looked at the clouds which were black. I told him about the storm pit daddy and the niggers built in the bank behind the house. He asked me to show him.

It had a wooden door at an angle that led to nothing more than a hole in the earth with some supporting timbers. I watched the drummer go into the dark. He turned and all I could see was his face in what little light there was in there. He stretched out his hand to take mine. I looked at the house and back at him.

He said there were wonders in there, things that I should see, that I could only see as a child. I told him I was afraid of the pit, that it had caved in on a nigger when they were digging it. He said darkness and fear were brothers and they were his friends. He had seen their faces and I could see them, too. Take his hand, he said. I stepped to the mouth of the pit.

Momma called and told me to get in out of the rain.

He dropped his bag by the door and took up the large Bible. He told me he had others, smaller ones that were new for fifty cents. Where he came from he was known for his readings, he said, and could stop bleedings by pronouncing certain words of scripture. He had gotten this gift from his father, an evangelist, a man who could take up serpents without being hurt, who once stopped a flooding river, drying up the water with a verse and a scattering of salt.

I asked him if his father still read the Bible. He said he did not know. His father had gone into the woods to baptize a young woman and they had not come back. The town searched for them but all they found was his Bible, on a stump beside the creek. This very Bible, he said. On the book lay a moccasin he himself removed, the drummer said, without being bitten. Upon reading the passage which lay open before him he was in a moment given eyes to see his work. It was this work which he now performed, he said. He began to read.

The smell of pork mixed with words from the Law. The drummer moved in great strides across the front of the house, becoming louder and gesturing often with his hand. His voice was deep and rich. He chuckled, glancing at me with a smirk before moving to the other end of the room, then back and stopping in front of me. He squatted and squinted, holding the Bible out and I looked carefully at the cover of bluish, pitted leather. I opened it and turned through the pages. In some places great red marks were drawn across passages. In others words were written in the margin or over the print.

His father never read another book in his life, he said. The old man's only work had been his study of the Bible and these notes. No one had seen those notes before but his father and himself. Now he had shown them to me.

The storm beat down on the tin roof. I sat down while Momma moved around the kitchen pulling together our meal of biscuits, salt pork and turnips. Then she went into the back of the house. The drummer came in and laid the Bible beside his plate.

The drummer'd followed the creek for three days after finding the Bible. There had been no other sign of his father. But after the third day he came upon a black man deep in the woods. The nigger was half-naked, crouched near the cold waters. He gripped a cross made of pan handles and said the Beast was in the creek. But God had sent the Prophet to chain the Beast. The Prophet gave the nigger watch over the Beast until he returned with the hosts of heaven. Before he left, the Prophet gave him a box and said a certain young man would come for it. He was to say to the young man, With this do God's work.

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The drummer reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his hand in a fist. He reached across the table and opened his hand slightly, letting something fine and white fall into the turnips. He then went to relieve himself in the yard. Momma came back and began to salt the turnips. I told her she didn't need to because the drummer had already salted them. She looked at me until the drummer came in and sat down. He asked to say a prayer, raised his hands and gave loud thanks for God's gift to him of this meal. He then went to work bringing biscuits and pork to his plate.

Momma asked him if he would have some turnips. He thanked her but said he could not eat greens as the juices made him bilious. Momma then produced my daddy's old navy revolver from her apron. She held it steady in the drummer's face and said he would have some greens.

He didn't move until she cocked it, then spooned a small helping onto his plate. He looked at the turnips, then stood and said he would be going. Momma stood. He would eat the greens or be shot. He ate them and died on the kitchen floor.

## 3

We tried to drag him out to the yard but he was too heavy. Momma sent me to her room and closed the doors to the kitchen. Daddy didn't come home that night and I slept with Momma behind a locked door. The rain went on. I thought I could hear the drummer walking through the house and the pans clanking in his bag. I dreamed the drummer was knocking on the door and reading scriptures to bring the waters to a flood. I woke Momma and we crept with a candle to the front room. Momma felt in the dark for his bag. I took the pans back to bed and slept with the handles crossed on my chest.

The rain went on through the next day. The wind grew stronger. In the afternoon Momma looked out the front door. The rain had stopped and it was quiet. She picked me up and ran through the house, out the back door and to the pit. We went in and sat in the blackness listening to the roar of a tornado.

The rain returned. The yard was already a great pond. We sat in Momma's room and chewed stale biscuits. Toward dark Momma said she had to go back to the kitchen. I followed her and looked in. She took down a large bag of salt and carefully poured it over the drummer beginning with his feet. His face was twisted on one side and his eyes were open. She covered it with a great mound of salt.

## 4

Daddy and the niggers got home the next day. The sun was out. The swollen Alabama had kept them away. They loaded the body onto the wagon and started back into the woods. One of the niggers climbed on with the bag and began to hand around the new Bibles. Another took up the large one and read aloud until the wagon disappeared into the trees. ♦