

ONE BIG SOUL

I think the Great American Novel may be John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It's a tale worth remembering at this season as we approach Passover and Easter, those old epics of escape from slavery and victory over death. The Bible, after all, is a work of fiction, too. But sometimes it's great literature that comes as close as we get to expressing the heart of the human condition. For while the characters of the Joad family are fabricated, their struggles and hopes are real. And while the story concerns people caught in powerlessness and poverty, it is also an saga of faith and redemption, about those who lose everything but for whom something eternal remains.

As the story opens, Tom Joad is on his way home from the McCallister pen where he has spent the past four years for killing a man who had slashed him with a knife. On the road, he meets a fellow that he recognizes. "Why you're the preacher," Joad looked at him and laughed. "I was a preacher," the man counters. "Reverend Jim Casy--was a Burning Busher. Used to howl out the name of Jesus to glory. And used to get an irrigation ditch so squirmen' full of repented sinners half of 'em like to drowned. But not more," he sighed.

"I been thinkin'," Casy explains. "I been in the hills, thinkin', almost you might say like Jesus went into the wilderness to think His way out of mess of troubles ... I ain't sayin' I'm like Jesus," the preacher went on. "But I got tired like Him, an' I got mixed up like Him, an' I went into the wilderness like Him, without no campin' stuff. Nighttime I'd lay on my back an' look up at the stars; morning I'd set an' watch the sun come up; midday I'd look out from a hill at the rollin' dry country; evenin' I'd foller the sun down. Sometimes I'd pray like I always done. On'y I couldn' figure what I was prayin' to or for. There was the hills, an' there was me, an' we wasn't separate no more. We was one thing. An' that one thing was holy."

"You're bound to get idears if you go thinkin' about stuff," Tom agrees. "Sure I remember you. You use ta give a good meetin'. I recollect one time you give a whole sermon walkin' around on your hands, yellin' your head off. Ma favored you more than anybody. An' Granma says you was just lousy with the spirit."

Casy took a drink from Joad's bottle and regarded it thoughtfully. "I ain't preachin' no more much. The sperit ain't in the people much no more; and

worse'n that, the sperit ain't in me no more ... Tell you what--I use ta get the people jumpin' an' talkin' in tongues, an' glory-shoutin' till they just fell down an' passed out. An' some I'd baptize to bring'em to. An' then--you know what I'd do? I'd take one of them girls out in the grass, an' I'd lay with her. Done it ever' time. Then I'd feel bad, an' I'd pray, but it didn't do no good. Come the nex' time, them an' me was full of the sperit, I'd do it again. I figgered there just wasn't no hope for me, an' I was a damned ol' hypocrite. But I didn't mean to be."

Joad smiled and licked his lips. "There ain't nothing like a good hot meetin' for pushin' 'em over," he said.

Casy spoke again, and his voice rang with pain and confusion. "I says, 'What's this call, this sperit?' An' I says, 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes. An' I says, 'Don't you love Jesus?' Well, I thought an' thought, an' finally I says, 'No, I don't know nobody name' Jesus. I know a bunch of stories, but I only love people ... I figgered about the Holy Sperit and the Jesus road, I figgered, 'Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,' I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' all women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit--the human sperit--the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.' Now I sat there thinkin' it, an' all of a sudden--I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it."

By the end of the novel, the reader knows it, too. For the preacher goes home with Tom, only to find that the whole family has been shoved off their land by the banks, not by men of flesh and blood, but by faceless corporations that know nothing of tears or travail, driven by investor returns and margins of profit. Oh, it's a story of the Depression and long ago. John Steinbeck published his novel eighty years ago, in 1939. But it could have been written for the nightly news about all the people today living in their cars, or eating out of dumpsters, or families crossing the desert at the mercy of the coyotes and crowded into chain link cities at the border. It might have been the story of Tommy Williamson, the army vet who froze to death outside the Starbucks in downtown Santa Fe this winter. It's a story about places we know, places like Espanola, or the Rust Belt towns that Bruce Springsteen sang about:

Now Main Street's whitewashed windows and vacant stores
Seems like there ain't nobody wants to come down here no more
They're closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks
Foreman says these jobs are going boys and they ain't coming back

To your hometown
Your hometown

So the Joads say farewell to their hometown, their dustbowl shanty, the home they built with their own hands, where their children were born, where their memories lie buried. They buy a used Buick with sawdust in the gears, and like thousands of other dirt farmers, they hit the road for California, the promised land of milk and honey. But the promise there is an empty one: chopping cotton for thirty cents a day, with other migrant workers at the mercy of the landlord, and unemployed once the harvest was in. The Joads and Preacher Casy are like so many other helpless refugees huddled in leaking tents, with hungry, crying children, whose lives are ruled by decisions made in faraway places, beaten down by forces they can't control.

The novel ends with the Joads broke and busted in a wet boxcar, where their pregnant daughter Rose of Sharon goes into labor and delivers a stillborn child. Unless they can reach quarters that are warm and dry, the weakened girl may die, too. Out into the downpour they wearily march, until at last they see a haven.

They came panting up to the rain soaked barn and staggered into the open end. There was no door in this end. A few rusty farm tools lay about, a disk plow and a broken cultivator, an iron wheel. The rain hammered on the roof and urtained the entrance. Pa gently set Rose of Sharon down on an oily box. "God Awmighty!" he said.

Ma said, "Maybe they's hay inside. Look, there's a door." She swung the door on its rusty hinges. "They is hay here," she cried. "Come on in, you."

It was dark inside. A little light came in through the cracks between the boards.

"Lay down, Rosasharn," Ma said. "Lay down an' res'. I'll try to figger some way to dry you off."

Winfield (their son) said, "Ma!" and the rain roaring on the roof drowned his voice. "Ma!"

"What is it? What you want?"

"Look! In the corner."

Ma looked. There were two figures in the gloom; a man who lay on his back, and a boy sitting beside him, his eyes wide, staring at the newcomers. As she looked, the boy got slowly up to his feet and came toward her. His voice croaked. "You own this here?"

"No," Ma said. "Jus' come in outa the wet. We got a sick girl. You got a dry blanket we could use an' get her wet clothes off?"

The boy went back to the corner and brought a dirty comfort and held it out to Ma.

"Thank ya," she said. "What's the matter'th that fella?"

The boy spoke in a croaking monoton. "Fust he was sick--but now he's starvin'."

"What?"

"Starvin'. Got sick in the cotton. He ain't et for six days."

Ma walked to the corner and looked down at the man. He was about fifty, his whiskery face gaunt, and his open eyes were vague and staring. The boy stood beside her. "Your pa?" Ma asked.

"Yeah! Says he wasn' hungry, or he jus' et. Give me the food. Now he's too weak. Can't hardly move."

The pounding of the rain decreased to a soothing swish on the roof. The gaunt man moved his lips. Ma knelt beside him and put her ear close. His lips moved again.

"Sure," Ma said. "You jus' be easy. He'll be awright. You jus' wait'll I get them wet clo'es off'n my girl."

Ma went back to the girl. "Now slip 'em off," she said. She held the comfort up to screen her from view. And when she was naked, Ma folded the comfort about her.

The boy was at her side again explaining. "I didn' know. He said he et, or he wasn' hungry. Las' night I went an' bust a winda an' stole some bread. Made 'im chew 'er down. But he puked it all up, an' then he was weaker. Got to have soup or milk. You folks got money to git milk?"

Ma said, "Hush. Don' worry. We'll figger somepin out."

Suddenly the boy cried, "He's dyin', I tell you! He's starvin' to death, I tell you."

"Hush," said Ma. She looked at Pa and Uncle John standing helplessly gazing at the sick man. She looked at Rose of Sharon huddled in the comfort. Ma's eyes passed Rose of Sharon's eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other. The girl's breath came short and gasping.

She said, "Yes."

Ma smiled. "I knowed you would. I knowed!" She looked down at her hands, tight-locked in her lap.

Rose of Sharon whispered, "Will--will you all--go out?" The rain whisked lightly on the roof.

Ma leaned forward and with her palm she brushed the tousled hair back from her daughter's forehead, and she kissed her on the forehead. Ma got up quickly. "Come on, you fellas," she called. "You come out in the tool shed."

Ruthie (their youngest) opened her mouth to speak. "Hush," Ma said. "Hush and git." She herded them through the door, drew the boy with her; and she closed the squeaking door.

For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There." Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.

In this broken and weary world, the milk of human kindness still flows. In this sick and starving world, hope is as real and present as a father's love and a mother's breast. In this world of mass suffering and anonymous assaults on our autonomy, dignity still lives whenever we recognize the face of the stranger, any stranger, as a reflection of our own.

There's a spirit that's in each of us that's bigger than any of us--a spirit that was in Jesus and Moses and Preacher Casy, but that was also in Rose of Sharon, and in Ma and Pa, and in you and me. Call it the Holy Spirit if you want, or if you prefer the spirit of humanity, for it means the same. That spirit was in Tom Joad when he finally decided the time had come to fight back and stand up to the bosses. "It don't matter if I die," he told his mother. "I'll be all around in the dark. I'll be everywhere--wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an--I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready. An when our folks eat the stuff they raise an live in the houses they build--why I'll be there." Do you see, Ma, he asks? Do you see?

I don't always see it, but sometimes I do. When the naked are clothed, the hungry are fed, the homeless sheltered, the sick healed, when the prisoners are visited and the captives are set free, I see something like a ray of goodness

shining through the sorrow of human affairs. And I do believe that Preacher Casy was right: we are all just part of one big soul.