

# WILSON REMUS,

1958



“ LIKE THE OTHER one,” she said.

“But it’s so heavy,” Remmy said.

“I know. I like a sturdy table,” she said.

“There’s kitchen tables and then there’s butcher’s blocks. I don’t plan on slaughtering a hog in my dining room.”

“I might,” she said. “I’m the cook, don’t forget.”

Remmy sighed. “Do you think it’s pretty?”

“I do.”

“Do you think anyone else will?”

“What do I care for what anyone else thinks?”

“I’m not going to answer that question, you’ll get me into trouble no matter which way I go.”

“Wilson Remus Broganer, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Wilson Remus Broganer said nothing to his pregnant wife.

“Well in any case,” she said, “I like it and I think it matches everything else so this is what we’re getting.”

“All right now, I didn’t mean to make you mad.”

“I’m not mad. I’m decisive.”

“And you won yourself a decisive victory. Okay now, let’s get it to the bag checker.”

“They don’t make bags big enough for this, honey.”

“You know what I mean.” He hefted the massive slab of wood. “You know what I mean,” he muttered as he grunted and hefted it over to one of the counters with one of them Sears and Roebuck signs and they bought it and, with much struggle, took it home.

“Five dollars a month,” he kept mumbling as he drove. “Five dollars a month. I could buy a share of Texarco at the end of the year.”

“Well then, let’s take it back.”

“You were listening to me?”

“You weren’t whispering, really, now were you?”

“I meant to be.”

“You didn’t mean very well.”

He harrumphed. “Well, I’m glad you have your table.”

“Are you?”

“It’s just so big.”

“I think it’s pretty.”

And so they went until they got home. He set up the table, and it filled that room as does the king’s table in a great hall. Except this was no castle. Not quite yet. But once he saw it in place, he was pleased enough with it.

“You’re smiling,” she said.

“It’s a pretty table set up like that.”

“That’s why I made you buy it.”

“I just did a good job setting it up.”

She did not return the affirmation.

Two weeks later, the biggest and baddest tornado any of them carpenters could remember hit. It snapped hundred-year-old trees in two. It leveled some houses and frayed some power lines.

When it hit, Remmy was at home with Beth.

“It’s a semi-hurricane!” Beth screamed.

“Tornado.”

“We’re going to die!”

“We might,” Remmy said.

“Why would you say such a thing?”

“I mean I’m sure we’ll be fine honey. Let’s go to the storm shelter.”

Well they went outside and that wind blew everything. Tore at the trees. Tore at the roof he’d just fixed up. There were boards and water thrown every which way. Beth waddled a bit with her swollen body and the baby inside. They got to the storm shelter door that Remmy had just dug and they opened it up and damned if there wasn’t two feet of water down there.

“That’s not a storm shelter,” Beth said.

“Sure it is, get inside!”

“That’s a pool! That’s an underground lake like in the movies where the monsters hide, I’m not going down in there!”

They were shouting over the wind, mind you. Stuff still blowing all around them.

“You get in there or I’ll get you in there,” he said. “We’re not going back in that house! I know how it’s made, remember!”

“You do whatever you want,” she said, “but me and the baby are going back inside.”

He watched her go, holding that sheet metal door like he was. Then he groaned and let it slam and he barely heard it over the cry of the trainrumbling in the sky. He started following her inside and then he shouted to no one in particular, “Where the hell did my brand new lawn chairs go?” They’d been metal chairs, heavy chairs, sturdy chairs, and not a one of them was in the backyard.

Back in the house, Beth was pacing, slowly, off-kilter. “What do we do?”

“You vetoed my plan!”

“What do we do? What do we do?”

The house had been built just on concrete blocks. Well the wind got under there like two stock boys will get under a box and it lifted the whole house up about six inches and slammed it back down again.

Beth screamed.

Remmy, for once, had nothing to say.

“What do we do?” She was begging, now.

The house was lifted higher and slammed down on those concrete blocks again. Some plaster fell off the ceiling in the other room.

The table.

Remmy went into action. “You get under there. It’s new but it’s the strongest thing we’ve got.”

She got under there, moving like a station wagon with two missized wheels, like a wheel with a ten pound weight on one wall. Then she sat still and some plaster fell off the ceiling and onto that five-dollar a month Sears and Roebuck kitchen table.

Remmy didn’t bother to duck under anything but one of the open doorframes, leaning against it like some cowboy watching his horse from the porch of a saloon. “Five dollars a month. Decent insurance policy, I guess, I don’t know.”

More plaster fell.

The house bounced once or twice more. Then the wind died down.

And then a sound like what you’d expect if Chicken Little’d been right and the sky really did fall. Something like the crashing of the Tower of Babel. Something like the fall of Troy or the breaching of Atlantis’s levy.

Finally, all went calm.

“The hell was that?” Remmy said.

“Oh, Remmy, do you have to cuss?”

“I only cuss at cursed things and whatever just happened wasn’t no blessing.”

“Is that why you’ve been cursing at me?”

He didn’t answer that. He walked outside instead.

There stretched out in his yard, discarded as if some god of greed had found no more fun in a playtoy, sat a massive tower. As if

the angels had gotten bored with their scaffolding for building the pearly gates and had kicked it over the edge of heaven.

“Bethy come look! Come look, it’s awful! It’s an awesome thing to look at.”

The neighbor carpenters and their families were outside too on their front porches, looking at the mangled black thing spread across the yards, the rain still coming down and none of them caring, not even the prettier ones in their nightgowns a bit too early—maybe his neighbor Joe’d been weathering the storm with a little bit of marital duty. How people do cling to one another in hard times, even if it ends up with your neighbor Joe’s wife standing half naked on her porch.

Beth came out and looked with Remmy. They all looked at one another.

Then they all stared at the massive steel oil derrick, as long as a water tower is tall. His father’d told him about these things, about how they drilled with big old bits. And about the salt water tank at the top. He looked at the top. It had cracked on impact, and the great salt water tower was bleeding out over all of their yards. That, along with the rain, was turning the ditches and divots to estuaries. Some of the neighbor kids ran out and played in it.

But all Remmy could think about was that salt. All of that salt. Right on top of their wells. He stared at it, his eyes staring at the eye in the tower where the... well it might as well have been where the poison came out.

Beth cried out behind him. He turned and found her clutching her belly and leaking some water of her own, the cramps of early labor scared into her from the crashing and banging about.

He swore.

“Don’t swear!” she yelled. “This is a blessing!”

“Not in the rain and the wet!”

She screamed. Oh, how she cried out from the pain.

The neighbor ladies came. Beth went inside with them. Remmy

fretted and occupied himself with the boys. They went over to the tower to try to stop the bleeding, but the crack widened, rimmed with white, and the water kept on coming. Some of the younger men actually tried to put their hands on the thing, which was about like trying to stop Niagara with your shoulder or some such stupidity.

While they were working over in Joe's yard, they found Remmy's white metal table and chairs in a hedgerow, now dirty from all the mud and sewage that'd slung about in the wind.

"New chairs!" said Joe.

"Like hell!"

"Oh come on, Remmy, finders keepers. Those are nice lawn chairs."

"Well in that case," Remmy said, "I just found this house sitting out here after the storm." He pointed to Joe's house.

"Oh, I was only joking."

"Well joke these over into my yard with me, will ya?"

They hauled them.

"You know," Joe said as they walked back into Remmy's yard, "I heard they got the name *derrick* from a hangman in England."

"Come on, now."

"That's what I heard. Cause they call cranes derricks too. Big towers to hang things from, you know, like a hangman and his noose. Sticking out over to stick something down into a hole like that."

"I'll be damned. Derrick the hangman. It makes sense, I guess."

They never did get the hole plugged. Not with wood. Not with clay or plaster or the pig carcass one of the boys tried. Where he got it, nobody asked because some things just were. After several hours of this, the women came back out and told him he had a son. He ran in to find Beth there, tired and smiling, in the middle of more blood than he was comfortable seeing. The blood there reminded him of a full bottle of ketchup he'd watched get accidentally shattered while he was flirting with some girl at a diner as a teenager,

tomato blood scattering all over. But he smiled all the same because he had a son. He named him Tobias—Toby.

Three weeks later, Toby died of pneumonia. It must have been the rain and the wet.

That was the year the Army Corps of Engineers started damming the Kaskaskia River to make Carlyle Lake. Through eminent domain, the government bought out house after house of the townships in the river valley. They capped sixty-nine oil wells.

They exhumed some six hundred graves, some of them undoubtedly holding the remains of ancestors of Native Americans as well as the remains of babies.

# WILSON REMUS,

1959



**H**AD THAT BOY who tried to stuff the pig carcass into the hole in that fallen oil derrick succeeded, had the neighbor men succeeded in plugging it with that clay or their shoulders the day heaven spat out that great black tower in the tornado, it would have saved Remmy a good stroke of trouble.

The first thing that oily recycled saltwater from its top tank did was get into the fishing lake nearby—the end point of all the ditches and culverts. Water seeks the lower place, you see, and this explains all rivers and ditches and salt water runoffs from oil derricks that fall from heaven. The fish in the lake died within the week. Then the turtles and snakes followed — the ones that didn't leave, the ones that stuck around. The men who ate the fish got sick. The merry men took to calling the lake The Dead Sea.

Remmy didn't eat the fish. Wouldn't let Beth eat the fish. In the year that followed the whole tornado event, Beth got pregnant again and had what everyone called their first child — a daughter named Marionette who was born in the oil fields when Beth went to bring John David a lunchbox. Remmy didn't curse his dad but he did curse: he was afraid of another incident like Toby's pneumonia.



He didn't want his second child to die a week into life and every time he heard anyone call Marionette his first child, he'd get somber and say, "I had a son. His name was Toby," and he'd go off in the corner and drink or go outside and look up at the night sky and pray for a shooting star. He did even when he got old, and it was a sad thing to see.

But he couldn't have that rest right now, looking as he was at the land and the indented spot where the oil derrick had sat on their front yards. Not that Texarco had hauled it off. Texarco didn't settle on the damage done and didn't even seem to want their derrick back. No, what had happened after it had drained out all of its nastiness and no one had come to claim it was this:

Remmy'd rallied all them carpenters together and he'd gotten ahold of Pete Taylor and some others too and they all sat around waiting for him to speak. Pete Taylor nodded at Rem once Ryan and Sinclair and Bullhorn and all of them'd shown up. Remmy told them that if no one was going to claim it then they were gonna claim all that metal for themselves, and to get their wrenches and flatbeds and whatnot and they'd work all night if they had too.

Well they did, they worked all of them — all experts in hand-made demolition — tearing that oil derrick down into the braces and bolts and things all night long. And Remmy worked up a deal where they'd all buy a shed out west of Bellhammer, closer to Carlyle where he had half a mind to move. Well it wasn't really a shed, it was a warehouse, but they put all of those parts of that tower in there and built up the nicest shelves any warehouse had, repainted them a darker shade of black, and stored all their building supplies and tools in there for a good long while until they'd figure out something better to do with it.

After the shed and that crummy old house, Remmy'd spent his whole savings fund, but that's what they'd done with the derrick anyways and all the men and all their families swore themselves to a solemn oath of secrecy, and since all of them paid for the

warehouse, all of them had red on their hands, so to speak. That's how it worked in those days: there were some things you didn't keep no record of because it wasn't worth telling the whole world what you knew more than it was worth watching over the few who were in on it. For instance if you knew the hiding place for the bones of The Great Black Tower.

Remmy thought on this as they hauled it off, sitting drinking a Miller from the comfort of the white metal lawn chair he'd retrieved from Joe's hedgerow after the storm. He'd cleaned it off with the hosepipe.

He couldn't rest from his labors in the company of those he loved. Not yet. He'd have to settle for working in the company of those he loved. And they needed a well, badly. He'd been hauling water from Carlyle every week after the derrick, but it was getting old, so he decided to go to Jim Johnstone, the main boss for that region of Texarco's oil fields.

Remmy walked into this guy's office. It was one of those cheap standing buildings men like that have erected out in the middle of a big project rather than some fancy office building. His fancy office building was back at Texarco's HQ. This was his war tent for the battlefield. It would be left behind like bones of his fallen foes. They had one of those chest-high receiving counters made of speckled white particle board. And also faux-wood panel walls, just to give it a touch of class, Remmy guessed.

"Good morning James," he said. He had decided not to call him 'Jim.'

"Good morning Remmy. How's your father?"

"Working the fields for all I know."

"Mmm." Jim didn't bother to look up at Remmy, just smoked his corncob pipe. Had probably forty of them, one for every pipe tobacco he smoked, treating them like they'd been hewn and whittled by Sacajawea herself, even though they were nothing but stupid old smelly corncob pipes.

Remmy said, "James..."

James snapped awake and looked up at Wilson Remus Broganer.

"That oil derrick landed on my yard."

"Oh do not tell me it's still there," James said. "I told those niggers weeks ago—"

"No no." He thought about lying about it, but the Good Lord told him, "Don't you lie to him, Remmy, or you'll be as bad as him."

So Remmy didn't say anything more than, "No, the derrick's gone."

"Oh," Jim said. "Well then what's the problem?"

"There was a hole busted into it in the storm."

"As it's our property, you need not be worrying about any damage done to the derrick."

Remmy laughed. "That's sweet of you, James Johnstone. You realize that derrick leaked that oily saltwater all over our lands?"

"You lived off that pond?"

"It's a lake."

"You live off of the fish in it?"

"Well, no."

"What's the problem?" The man leaned back in his chair. "I hate fishing anyways. You like to fish?"

"Once in awhile, not all that often."

"Well then here's something we can hate together from the comfort of our chairs. Have a smoke with me, Remmy."

"James, I don't care about fish and lakes, though I suppose I should. I care right now about the truth of the matter which is this: your oil derrick ruined and contaminated and adulterated and... and befouled our water supply. All our wells." Remmy was proud of the words he'd come up with. He'd always read more than Daddy John and tried his best to write down new words in the back of all them books.

James was still nodding.

"Well?"

“I don’t know what to tell you, Remmy, I’m sorry for your loss, I guess.”

“Jim, I want you to pay to put in another well at my house.”

“Now Remmy, that’s just crazy. That’s just crazy asking us to pay for the aftermath of an act of God.”

“The Good Lord didn’t have nothing to do with the loss of my son, and he did not have anything to do with building no black tower that sticks out its rod to rape the earth.”

“Now Remmy, that’s not a very nice way to talk about the company that gives your daddy a pension and gives you a chance to build houses for people who keep flocking to Southern Illinois, is it?”

“It’s pronounced Illinois.”

“Well however it’s sounded out, is that a nice way to talk to your employer?”

“Maybe it is and maybe it ain’t.”

“I think a little bit of gratitude is in order.”

“All right then, thank you for giving me, in a roundabout way, a chance to work about a year’s worth of income. But I just bought a house from you that’s several years worth of income, and without a well, that means you took more than you gave.”

James didn’t like that. “Terry?”

His secretary perked up.

“Call Brooks and throw this man out. I am not paying to dig him a well.”

“I’ll show myself out,” Remmy said, and he did, and went home.

By that point, everything around The Dead Sea had died — the trees, the grass, and every once in awhile a small rodent like a brown squirrel or a chipmunk. Some of the neighbor kids found a dead badger at one point and carved out its claws and turned them into weaponry.

Remmy asked his father how to drill a well and found out some. He asked some of the boys how to do it, and found out more. He asked this hermit widower farmer out on the edges of the county

— guy the kids called a wizard and storyweaver and wombrover who witched wells – and found some stuff he wasn't sure he trusted, but you never know. He read up in the big city library in town. He even called the University of Illinois and they sent him some papers on how to lay bricks up to keep ground water from spilling over, how to make a concrete lid for it, how to protect his own water asset. Their term.

He did it all. Used every last bit of sense he'd found. He witched it and then he borrowed an auger from Kipsy, the guy that normally did these things for people. Kipsy had a couple and said it was okay for Remmy to use it as long as he didn't break it. After that, Remmy rounded up some nice redbrick — a big old pile of it that he stacked neatly next to the house when the time came to put the finishing touches on his — Remmy Broganer's — well.

With that auger, you know, you couldn't start out with a twenty-foot-tall drill bit, you know, else how would you get the leverage to put it in the ground? No, you started with one extension rod, and you could drill down two feet deep. Remmy had a long black power cord stretching from the house like a blacksnake come to watch him, and he leaned over and drilled that two feet. And when he got the two feet and wanted to go deeper, he had to pull it out, pick up a piece of pipe, and add it to extend the drill bit and then drill again a little deeper. Then you'd pull it out again, add another two-foot extender and drill a little deeper. And he did this all into the evening after work, down and down, adding extensions and extensions. And when he hit water it came right up the hole. He tasted it.

Salt water.

“Awwww shit,” he said. “Aw shitty shit shit.” He pulled out the extensions one at a time, wrapped up the auger, recoiled the blacksnake powercord and went in to bed.

“How did it go honey?”

“I hit saltwater,” he said.

“Shucks,” she said.

“Yeah, that too.”

The next day, after wearing out his arm hammering studs together, he went back to the auger at the opposite end of the yard. He dug down two, four, eight, sixteen, almost thirty feet and hit water again that night and he smiled. He tasted it and tasted its brackishness and swore some more and would have thrown the auger if it wasn't Kipsy's tool. Taking it apart had a soothing effect on him, or at least created a little buffer where he could calm down before going in to Beth. He stacked it up and coiled the cord and went inside.

“Did you get it?” she asked. Marionette cooed over in the corner somewhere.

“I got a hole, if that's what you mean.”

“No water?”

“Oh I found water too.”

“Oh good!”

“Saltwater.”

“Oh Remmy, I'm sorry.”

“Love you,” he said and kissed her forehead. He walked over and tickled Marionette, who giggled and giggled. As far as I know, that's the last time he tickled her — got too busy to think about it.

He hauled water in the morning and a couple of days later he tried again for a third well, which turned out to be salt. And a fourth. And a fifth.

After six wells, Remmy gave up on the auger and spent a day giving it back to Kipsy.

“Go well?” Kipsy asked him.

He laughed a dark laugh. “Funny old turn of phrase, that.”

“Did it?”

“No, but I thank you all the same.”

“Need help with it? I can show you how to use it.”

Remmy was not insulted because Kipsy didn't mean offense,

but it still hurt a little bit, the truth of it. "I worked it okay, thanks Kipsy. Just hit saltwater every time."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Wish that I was."

"In that whole big yard of yours?"

"So far," he said. "So far."

"What are you going to do, Remmy?"

"I'm gonna try a dug well next week."

Putting in a dug well with a short-handled shovel was not the best way to go about it, but it was the only way he had at the time and all he had energy for, which was a fine joke on him since the short-handled shovel ended up taking more energy from him than had he gone hunting for the other kind. But anyways he went to digging and had himself a hole six foot across and he was pulling up the dirt and the mud and slinging it up and up and went through a softer and softer soil, which he did not expect, but he kept going deeper, digging down into the soul of the place to find if it too had been corrupted.

At around fourteen foot deep, he drove his shovel down and got into the sand. He got excited then, as if he'd dug through from Illinois and ended up on the riverbanks of Korea.

He went into the sand all the way, laying up shovelful after shovelful until it piled up outside the hole. He threw that shovel one more time into the sand and the earth swallowed it clear up to the handle. He'd hit good water, he felt sure of it.

Boy, did he ever hit it.

It came up quicker than oil, quicker than anything his father John David had ever seen working in the fields and the derricks. Gushing.

He speared that short-handled shovel up and out of the well he'd dug and he started scrambling up the wall of the well and ran over to the pile of bricks and he loaded them up in that old wheelbarrow and brought them over and dumped them out and mixed him

up some mortar as quick as he could and started laying the brick and laying the brick in a great big old circle, the well from every storybook, its cup runneth over. And no matter how fast he laid the brick to line the well, he couldn't beat the flow of the water, the water line beating the height of the liner over and again, so he called up one of Texarco's tank trucks to put its hose in there, which they were happy to do, taking free water, and that tank truck pumped it out as he laid in brick.

But still he couldn't lay brick fast enough. He laid about as best as he could in the water there until he had it laid up six feet off the ground just like the University of Illinois said to. He did it just so and knew he would not get surface water in there. He had ten feet of well, he did. And he set some boards down in there. He poured a concrete top and fitted it to the top. Then he put a stepping box next to it. He bought a pipe big enough to get the stuff out, you know, to get the pump out of the ground so he could get to the water when he wanted.

He got it really nice. And after he'd done all of that, he took a glass and scooped some out and tasted it and it quenched his thirst. Then he scooped himself another glass and took it on into the sanitation department.

"Morning Remmy."

Remmy was smiling. "Morning Tom."

"What you got for me, another test?"

"I do, Tom. I did a dug well this time, built it up really nice."

"Oh that's good, Remmy, that's so good. I was worried about you." He took the glass and ran the tester. "How's your daughter?"

"Getting big. Getting pretty. I'll be beating off the boys with a four-by-four soon enough."

"Well good luck with that." Tom looked down at the test and tsked. "That's got enough salt in it, you could float an egg."

"HORSESHIT AND APPLEBUTTER!" Remmy loaded what he had with the test up into his car, and he drove back out to the



oil fields. He smelled that smell of a sewage or sulfur line filling up the land. Silt and sod. Good soil is really just good shit that's had enough time to mellow out, and in a land covered in rivers and held up by oil wells, the smell of sulfuric shit's high and low and near and far and wide in an oil field. Remmy walked right up to that makeshift Texarco office and opened the door so fast — it was an outward-swinging door — that it hit off the outside and bounced back to slam shut behind him. He cleared that chest-high counter-top and jumped over the desk, too, and had that lazy asshole Jim Johnstone up by the collar before the man could finish his shout.

“Leave him alone. Don't be starting a fight,” The Good Lord said to him.

“I want a well,” he said to The Good Lord.

Jim answered something tepid, but Remmy wasn't listening to that stupid sonofabitch. He was listening to The Good Lord.

“I will give you Water,” The Good Lord said to him.

“Okay, then,” Remmy said.

Jim Johnstone thought Remmy had said Okay to him, had agreed to whatever pissedpants deal he'd struck up in the moment. Remmy left. But he must have scared Jim anyways, which was not a bad thing on general principles.

Remmy went into town and filled out paperwork to start building a house in Carlyle on the lake, near water. And in the woods. Like Robin Hood. Perfect place to finally rest in the company of those he loved. He came back to his house that night and talked to some of the boys about his plan and they liked it and got finally why he'd wanted The Shed where he'd wanted it. But they didn't like his tone about The Woods. The plan got back to Jim by the next day, and then Jim's reaction got back to Remmy:

“Well that's a good thing,” Jim had said to his troops and his boss, “because I think I was just about ready to settle with him. That man had blood in his eyes. I would have given him anything. I'm glad he's out of here — sooner the better.”

When he heard this, Remmy said to his neighbors, “Well I probably should have gotten an attorney, but it’s over and done with now, and we’ll have a lakehouse and all the living water we want.”

Beth couldn’t be happier, of course. She could buy more tables.

That wasn’t before he washed the car twice with that salt water, though. Twice was all it took to corrode that chrome bumper to rust. Imagine had they drunk it.