

**TOUGH FEET**

Short Story

Robert Dozier

*Silver Arts*

**Artist's Name:** Robert Dozier

**Title of Entry:** Tough Feet

**Category:** Literary Arts

**Sub-Category:** Short Story

Onslow Senior Games

...Last summer I sat with the sand between my toes and a beer between my legs watching the waves beat footprints into foam as the sun burned painful stripes onto the exposed skin around the edges of my bathing suit. It was a hot July day at the Gulf of Mexico. This was the summer of my 43<sup>rd</sup> year and I was at the beach on the annual vacation about to embark on a journey to the room. This would require a key, a shower, and a painful trek across seashells ground into the blistering asphalt that separated me from the room. This endeavor would remind me of an event that still shapes my life and beliefs because it would also require....

### TOUGH FEET

During my youth, in the hills of Northeast Mississippi, it occurred to me that there were certain necessary keys one needed to master in order to properly navigate this life. The summer of my 8<sup>th</sup> year I decided that the key to all that was good rested in the pursuit of the pleasures and adventures set-aside for young boys and my method of transportation would be on these tough feet. A portion of these travels consisted of walking to the mailbox for my Grandfather and following his hired hand, Buford, as he tilled the soiled , fed the mules, and labored endlessly in that endless summer.

Buford would plow the cotton rows daily without complaint. Walking behind the mules, he would match each beast stride for stride. Bare feet following shod hooves in the weak Mississippi soil, producing sweat, age, and cotton. That soil, these mules, this cotton were no match for Buford's feet. Tough feet, the feet I longed for this the summer of my 8<sup>th</sup> year.

Buford shed his shoes as soon the frost was a memory and did not begin to wear them again until autumn was deep in its cycle. I was amazed at Buford's ability to strike a Red Diamond match on the soles of his feet and light a hand rolled Prince Albert cigarette while holding two mules at bay. He would often pull up his team at lunch and stand bare footed, with rows of cotton silhouetting his black skin, looking over his labor with pride and a certain sadness. Buford kept this sadness checked with adequate amounts of Old Charter Whiskey that he kept

strategically hidden around the farm. To me, Buford, his tough feet, mules, and hard work were awe-inspiring, to my Grandmother the Old Charter overrode his many assets.

Delcey, Buford's wife, cooked lunch each day for Buford and he would hike his tough feet up the harsh gravel road for a needed break. My Grandmother had given me many warnings about eating at Buford and Delcey's but to a hungry 8-year old boy, chicken and dumplings carried more weight than a warning. Delcey cleaned, as much as you could clean a shotgun house filled with red clay dust, spiders, and 16 cats, but clean she did. This was Delcey's life as it was and the cats helped her with sadness much like the Old Charter helped Buford, only with a more moderate flavor.

On this hot, dusty, summer day Buford, having indulged in more Old Charter than usual, had that onerous feeling only Delcey, the cats, and the sun could bring out. He stood longer than usual outside the house finished a cigarette, then stepped onto the porch with his tough feet making a loud dull thump against the planks. This scared 6 cats from a morsel of food and made Delcey turn startled, mad, and not quite ready for Buford. Delcey's eyes drifted from her cooking to Buford, then slowly toward the cats on the table and back to Buford. I stood there barefoot, hungry, and young waiting for lunch and wishing for tough feet. Buford fell into a cane bottom chair knotted with bailing twine and sweat and looked at Delcey without a word. Delcey swatted a fly crawling on the cornbread then poured chicken and dumplings into a tin pie pan for me. Buford stared at her with a look that only time and poverty can conceive and Delcey returned this stare.

I sat there with the chicken, dumplings and lukewarm ice tea, feeding my hungry face and fighting off hordes of cats when suddenly the screen door creaked. There, wearing a sunbonnet like a crown and holding a hoe stood my grandmother. She peered into the room directly at me and while acknowledging Buford and Delcey, she never took her eyes from mine. I looked down at my pie plate full of food, then at 2 cats hovering nearby and meekly slid from the chair onto the floor with weak feet. The grime on the floor now seemed more evident as my grandmother made small talk about the weather and canning tomatoes. I swatted at the 2 cats and walked from the room stopping only to thank Delcey for lunch. She smiled a toothless reply and bid me, my Grandmother, and the heaviness in the air good-bye.

Grandmother's concern about eating at Delcey's had nothing to do with cruelty or being contemptuous but moreover with safety . She worried about germs, and cats, and unkempt rooms that neither had nor would ever be clean. In her most reverend way, learned through years of worship at Antioch Methodist Church, my Grandmother prayed for Buford and Delcey and I'm quite certain for me because I never became sick from the meals nor did Buford or Delcey.

As we followed the thin, winding, dirt path toward home Grandmother said nothing. I strode closely behind while the briars and cockleburrs gnawed at my ankles and the silence gnawed at my heart. My grandmother's silence was like a wall between her love and her anger. I was too young to know which side of that wall I fell on. My grandparents took over the chore of raising my 2 sisters and me after our father had fled responsibility and our mother's ability to cope had been exhausted. That left her parents and they responded as only their generation could, with stability, strength, and love unquestioned. We were raised on a farm in a community where my grandfather was born and had lived his entire 63 years. These years had been spent working, tilling the ground, and praying for better crops. Buford had worked for Grandfather 20 years and was a tenant farmer, which was an updated term for sharecropper. He worked 20 acres as his own and helped my grandfather with his 40. The house was provided and a garden, chickens, and 2 cows helped feed them. It was an existence common to the area and expected. We all worked together and fought the common enemies, weather and pestilence. Our house was above Buford and Delcey's on a small hill and were connected in the front by a gravel road called Evergreen Bottom Road and in the back by the dirt trail we were now on. The one punctuated by Grandmother's silence.

Soon she slowed down, turned to me and took my hand. It was then that I felt a relief only forgiveness could provide. She smiled as we continued down the path toward home when suddenly we both stopped in our tracks our eyes frozen on the trail in front of us. There lay a mass of red hued skin, and fanged presence, a copperhead. It was at least 3 feet long and thick as a child's arm. The snake lay there, still, menacing, and looking directly at us refusing to move. Grandmother became rigid and slowly raised the hoe to chest level then struck with the strength only fear and years of hoeing a garden can provide striking directly behind the neck. The copperhead's body flung from the ground and slapped the hoe handle with a thud forcing us both into retreat. I peeked from behind her dress in frozen fear at the huge body writhing on the ground, but the body was now separated from the head. We celebrated our victory with a hug as she swept the head from the trail and into the



weeds. Flies began to gather at the nub of the snake's neck while the tail continued to move raking back and forth in the dust. According to Grandmother this would continue until sundown. We walked away from the reptile like thieves from a crime scene cautiously and aware of each sound.

When we arrived at the house Grandfather was by the barn working on a mule harness. I ran to him yelling about the snake and he responded with a grateful smile. Looking at him in his Liberty overalls and straw hat he smelled of chewing tobacco, sweat, and Old Spice it was then I felt the contentment reserved for youth. My grandfather was honest and dependable having survived both World Wars and the Great Depression; he believed in hard work and held in contempt anyone who didn't. He prayed before every meal yet would curse a mule shortly after these prayers. He and Grandmother had been married 41 years, raised 3 children and were now raising 3 more. Never did I hear him complain about me, my sisters, his lot in life, or anything for that matter except reruns of Gunsmoke. On Monday nights he would fetch Day's Work, popcorn, and iced tea in front of a black and white Zenith t.v. set to watch Matt Dillon relieve Dodge City of all forms of evil and corruption. I would sit at his feet munching popcorn and relishing in his presence the battles fought. He never understood the reason for reruns but as the evening passed he would watch them with equal zeal. Afterwards he would stroll onto the porch where my grandmother sat shelling peas, sewing, or reading the Bible and talk quietly about 41 years of life.

On this particular day we had planned to go fishing and I was eager to get started. I dug some worms from near the barn and pleaded with him to get the minnows from the seine at the creek. As he patiently continued to work on the harness I drifted down the path to see if the snake was still wiggling. Suddenly in the distance the sound of screams broke the afternoon calm as, running down Evergreen Bottom Road, came Delcey. She was shrieking in terror and fear was etched into the wrinkles on her face. She stopped short of the driveway, as was her custom waiting to be invited, then without hesitation she burst toward the house displaying her own tough feet. She hysterically screamed about Buford and an ax while waving her arms wildly. My grandmother caught her by the dress and helped her onto the edge of the porch as grandfather ran to her side. I raced toward Buford's house, past the snake still moving in the dust, around the long bend, through the briars and cockleburrs, and then alongside the smelly outhouse at the back of Buford's yard.

Buford sat on the porch smoking a Prince Albert cigarette with his feet dangling in the dust. Three chickens pecked at the ground around him and an eerie silence hung in the air. I looked up into the trees surrounding the

house to see all the cats hanging from various branches and each one wearing the same look as Delcey's. Buford looked the same as always and I stopped running just short of him. He looked at me without a word and turned his stare to the house, specifically the kitchen. I stepped onto the porch past Buford, pushed the screen door open and went inside. The chicken and dumplings were still on the stove and the cornbread sat on the table. But there between my pie plate and Buford's lay a furry replica of the copperhead, a cat's tail, most all of it with flies gathered at its nub. Unlike the snake it had ceased to move and I supposed sundown didn't apply to cat tails. Buford walked into the room, reached behind his chair and picked up a hand ax still gleaming with cat hair and blood. He then walked outside as I followed and laid the ax down beside the woodpile. He stepped off the porch, his tough feet scattering dust and chickens while causing each cat to climb one branch higher into the trees.

Buford hiked down the dusty drive into the relentless heat without remorse. I followed closely behind toward Evergreen Bottom Road matching my steps into his and hoping the toughness would seep into my own feet. As we approached the field where Buford's team stood tied and ready I looked upon the hill under the big oak tree and saw grandfather standing there. He was wearing his hat lower than usual and drinking from the water bucket. The water bucket was just that, a five gallon bucket with a handle filled to the brim with well water. Across its berth lay a wet white towel to keep the bugs out and the water cool. From the buckets handle hung a large tin dipper which was used to spade water into the parched throats of men who spent the day plowing. Each day Buford would fill the bucket, change the towel, and carry it to the hill under the big oak.

My grandfather motioned for Buford to come up the hill but just as he reached the road a roar of dust and disaster punctured the heavy air. It was the Clayton brothers, Telby and Trev, drunk at noon and without conscience. The Claytons were notorious for their meanness and their chosen profession, bootlegging. They had a deep dislike for Buford because he refused to buy their moonshine and also because he sold bonded whiskey to the other black sharecroppers in the area. Telby was driving and he swerved at Buford and me forcing us into the ditch. Laughter and foul language filled the air and mixed with the dust and heat as the Claytons disappeared. Buford rose from the ditch, stood me on the side of the road and walked to where Grandfather stood. They talked for about a half an hour with Buford occasionally lowering his head but eventually they shook hands and each took a long drink from the bucket.

After the episode with the cat's tail Buford seemed to confine his drinking to weekends and no other incidences occurred. As the summer progressed my quest for tough feet intensified and one day in late July I felt it was time for the big test. About twice a week Buford would walk to Son Webb's grocery store for tobacco, licorice twists, and Delcey's snuff. I decided that if I could make the hike of one mile each way with Buford my feet would be somewhat tough. Buford and I left my grandfathers at around 4:00 P.M. on a hot Wednesday; I had eighty-five cents in nickels and four dimes. I was going to buy a large Nehi Peach drink and some Sugar Babies plus bring home a Nehi for later. We marched down the edge of Evergreen bottom road like soldiers to the battle, I threw rocks on ahead and Buford would complement my throwing ability. We stood on the side of the Tank Creek Bridge and I counted six snapping turtles on the bank plus two more on the rotting logs floating in the slow moving dark water. The bridge was halfway to Son Webb's store and my feet were doing fine. The remainder of the trip Buford and I said little while longing to quench our thirst with the Nehi drinks waiting at Son Webbs'. A few hundred yards shy of the Pure gasoline sign that stood outside the store Buford put his hand on my shoulder and asked if I was o.k. I assured him I was and he said he was glad we were friends because it helped him what with having lost his boy. It was not until later that I discovered Buford and Delcey had a son who had died when he was 6 years old.

We reached Son Webbs at almost 5: o' clock and Son was sitting in front of the store on the garage side whittling. Behind him in the back of the garage a large fan stirred the smell of grease, dirt, and unrepaired cars with the heavy Mississippi air. Son nodded at Buford and me and we stepped into the store heading straight to the drink cooler. The Nehi Peach drink quenched a thirst in me that day like nothing has or would since because just as I put the bottle down I heard the unmistakable sound of the Clayton brothers car. Buford looked up as Son suddenly walked in and stepped nervously behind the counter. Son was aware of the feud between Buford and the Claytons but didn't appear to have a solution to the impending problem. Buford was paying for his goods as Telby stormed into the store reeking of moonshine and hate. He was wearing nothing but blue jeans and a cap and upon seeing Buford he immediately began to cuss and call out to Trev "look who we got here". Son tried to get Telby to leave but when Trev entered he knew it was too late. Buford calmly put his things in his pocket and stepped aside so I could pay for mine. Trev asked what a white boy like me was doing hanging around someone like Buford and that I should be ashamed. Buford and I said nothing as we walked toward the door but by this time



Telby was blocking the way. Buford pulled me behind him and told the Claytons he wanted no trouble and that it would be best to settle this later. Trev grabbed me by the shoulder and shoved me against the drink cooler while Telby swung at Buford with a wild drunken punch. Buford ducked and threw Telby to the ground as I jumped up and ran toward the door but just before I could go outside Trev drew his fist back to strike Buford and on his backswing hit me in the head knocking me against the metal candy rack. My head struck the corner tearing a gash in my right temple and causing a stream of blood to blur my thoughts and vision. It was then I barely remember seeing a flash of metal in Telby's hand making a vicious slash at Buford. Buford flinched as he tried to draw his mid-section away from the slash. He then hit Telby across the ribs with a wooden Coke crate and kicked Trev in the stomach with one of his tough feet. He pounded Trev's head with the Coke crate and then reached to pick me up. Buford cradled me in his arms and stepped outside onto the concrete apron. The last thing I remember seeing was a large bloody footprint gleaming in the afternoon sun as I passed out thinking the blood was mine.

I awoke some hours later on the couch with my head bandaged and Grandmother, grandfather, Doc Jenkins, and my two sisters standing over me. I asked what time it was and my grandfather said it was 9:30. I could hear the crickets in the night air and see the fireflies flashing with the heat lighting outside. I remembered Buford had once told me that it lightened every night in July and that caused me to ask about him. There was a strange silence in the room and Grandmother said we would talk about this tomorrow. At that time the doctor gave me a shot and I fell fast asleep. The next morning I slept longer than usual and as I awoke on the couch I noticed a large stain of blood on the chair across the room. I called out to my grandmother and she rushed to my side along with the rest of the family. I pointed to the chair and asked if I had lay there when Buford brought me in. Grandfather sat down beside me, took my hand in his and in a solemn sad voice told me that after Buford carried me from Son Webbs he had sat in that chair and bled to death. The flash of metal in Telby's hand had been a hook blade knife that opened a fatal wound in Buford's stomach.

Buford was buried in the back of the Zion MB Church Cemetery next to his son on the following Wednesday. The old folks talked for days about how cold the rain was that fell on that July day. Delcey didn't have the money for a stone so a small plaque was supplied by the funeral home and in time the name was barely recognizable. The Claytons were investigated for their role in Buford's death but in Mississippi in 1962 there was not enough witnesses or evidence and it was declared self-defense. Later that year Delcey moved to Chicago to live with her



sister and I would not see her again until I was 18 years old. She visited on my graduation day with her new husband and 15 year old son. She hugged my neck, showed me her new teeth, and gave me a picture of Buford standing by his mules and holding their son.

In 1965 the Claytons ran off Evergreen Bottom Road into Tank Creek during a flood. Since they were notorious for disappearing, no one looked for them for over a week. When the water finally revealed their car Telby was holding onto Trev apparently fighting over a quart of moonshine. Some say the turtles had eaten their eyes from the sockets.

Buford's bloody footprint so stained the concrete apron that it remained visible until Son Webb's store burned in 1974. Around campfires the tale of Buford's death is still told and it's been said that on the day of the killing the footprint can still be seen on the concrete at the new Exxon Food Market built on the same site. Now in the 43<sup>rd</sup> year of my life I am the same age as Buford was when he died and I have pondered this event for quite some time. Here at the beach on my way to the room it seems so far removed from Son Webb's, the mules, and that long ago summer but it is always just below the surface. The last image I have of Buford was the bloody footprint on the concrete apron and the knowledge that he carried me one mile home as his last deed. When I got to the room I opened another beer and called the Peaceful Garden Monument Company in Tupelo, Mississippi. I ordered a large marble stone to read:

Buford Weeks

1919 - 1962

TOUGH FEET