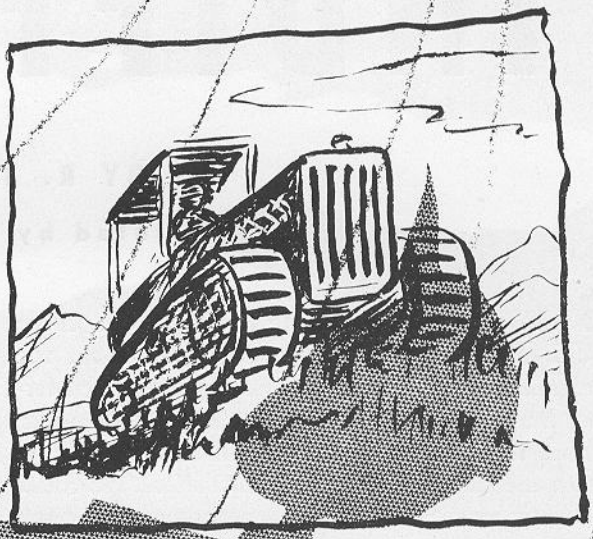
Pino



cchio

by
GENE ENGLAND

Illustrated by Martha Clapp

HE wasn't thinking about anything, coming out past the black-webbed refineries and the musty-gray gravel pits opening under the hills, not remembering or hoping, just being hollow-sick and alone in the back seat of the car and trying to do something with his legs so he could go to sleep.

His father had been up talking while the windows were still standing out gray on black over his bed. At first there had been the smothered talk through the bathroom wall. With his brain cold and his eyes clear he'd lain there on his back, helpless like a turtle. Then the light had smashed in his face, and with the getting up talk he had started to understand. He'd pulled his head back under the shell of his covers and waited. When his father had changed to the dangerous hurrying talk he'd crawled over the edge of the bed and moved his hands until his clothes were on. He'd waited without thinking while his father had talked in the bedroom with his mother, and then when his father had walked fast into the kitchen, he had listened automatically.

"Your mother thinks it's too early for you again. It isn't my fault you keep that girl out all night. Don't plan any more of this Sunday night business. I told her we'd be home early Saturday to keep peace in the family, but we'll go back Sunday. That crop's our whole year's work, so let's get going north. We'll eat breakfast at the ranch."

The cold had kept him awake walking out to the garage and waiting for the motor to warm and driving out through the quiet city, and his father had started the cheering up talk.

The car whapped over the spurs that crossed the highway to the gravel-pits, and the voice crowded back from the front seat. "Three weeks won't be long. We've really got to move, though. If we don't break down maybe we can get home in time for you to go out Saturday. Your mother was . . . "

He woke up with his leg tingling below the edge of the seat and looked up at the blue, light-finned mountain staring down at its own shadow across the highway. They would come now in almost measured succession, tipping the crescents of the hills to the east, and he would wake for each one. He tried to wiggle the toes in his left shoe, but they only moved slowly up and down until he bounced them on the floor.

"Better try to get some sleep. You and your old man have got to make wheat while the sun shines and afterwards too. You'd better keep that coat around you. We can't have you sick now. That sky looks good. If this keeps up another three weeks it can rain for a month. We can always fish in the rain. You've already had too much vacation with that woman of . . . "

They had passed the second point when he looked again. He looked back at it and then north to the next one growing toward him. As he closed his eyes he remembered fishing at the end of the summer before school. The hum of the wheels faded to a one-cylinder pop, and he could see the long arm of the lake that led to the wharf and the V of the wash from the boat going out past the point and along the edge of the lake. He saw the tall pine-covered cones, topped with blunt whales-head cliffs, that guarded each inlet and counted the shadow over the boat as he turned to look at each next one. He always rode backwards in the boat so when they passed the last point he could look without warning over the side and down into the middle of the black crater that his father always said was as deep as hell and no one had ever found the bottom of. He always liked it best when they fished along the side of the crater where he could see the moss-green bottom as it broke off into black. There they always caught the small silver-sides that flashed and skipped along the surface and didn't need a net. Out farther they dropped bait deep into the crater, and there was only the dangerous weighted pull and one rainbow flash as the net turned the heavy-jawed trout into the boat. Going back he sat on the prow of the boat and watched the smooth bank across the lake. They never went over there, but maybe this year he'd take the girl in the boat, and they'd go alone.

Oh yes. The girl. Yes. Where would she be? On the sun porch looking down at the wet, green-filmed city. No. Not this early. Maybe washing her hair. She always washed her hair on Monday. It took that long to look good for Saturday or even Sunday. He remembered when it had rained, and they had left the wheat soft in the heads and come home Friday. He'd held his breath while the phone was ringing and then asked her to go to a show. They'd gone to a drive-in, and he'd sat there watching the screen in the way he read when he was thinking about something. He'd thought of her sitting in her place on the other

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side of the car with her head straight and hair falling like a painted swimmer's. Once he'd looked and asked if it was all right, asking her so late. She'd smiled with her lips and nodded without turning. She hadn't said anything then or driving home fast through the flashing city or anytime. Oh yes, she'd said thanks she had a wonderful time. She always said thanks she had a wonderful time. That was like grace or goodbye. She always said that. Her girl friends said she was always talking, but she never said very much to him. They always had fun, though, not talking. Maybe that was where, talking with her girl friends. No, it was too early. She wouldn't even be washing her hair. She always slept late on Monday.

"We won't be there till eight the way we're going. We might have finished the piece we cut up around Saturday tonight if you could ever forget that woman. If you don't stop taking advantage of these week-ends . . ."

He stopped trying and let the miles and mountains blur past, waking only to catch the smear of the mountain-shadows and the staccato sun-flash of the tree-lined towns. He went to sleep, knowing it was the last time, as they went up over the divide and started down through the maze of turns and dips that led to the valley and the ranch. The highway dropped into the valley and crossed over the mile-wide scar left by some prehistoric river, and he woke up just as they went down into the slough-covered bottom with its smooth, dark stream. He lay there letting the cotton froth in his stomach and then sat up and looked as they came up the other side and the town burst out with the ranches sloped on the hills behind it. He looked calmly at the gold fields sliced with yellow.

"How do you feel, Skeeter? We'll have that two-eighty looking pretty sick by Saturday if we move."

The car plunged headlong into the town and out to the edge where the house was. The house had cost six hundred dollars and lots of talk about fixing it up. It was sway-backed and scabby with weathered paint, and inside it was only clean. He carried the washed socks and shorts into the dresser in the bedroom-frontroom, looking to see that the book was there under the bed. Then he took off his clothes, hanging them over the chair, and went into the bathroom. He dressed, putting on the clean underwear and socks and dust-sifting blue shirt and suntans, while his father fixed the corn flakes and bread and jam. The getting ready talk stopped, and he slipped on his boots and went into the kitchen. They ate fast and quietly, and when he'd put away the dishes his father was ready and had the truck warmed up. He grabbed the book and his hat and jumped on the running board as the truck started moving.

His father took the book and motioned with it toward the open window. "If you'd quit reading this trash and tend to business we might get this crop in. You're old enough to think of something useful to do when you're not busy. You haven't looked at the oil or water or checked the tires this year. The truck's your responsibility. I haven't got time to take care of it and the harvester too. This farm'll be yours someday, and you've got to learn to take a little interest in things so you'll be able to . . . "

He looked out at the alfalfa fields and wondered about the pheasants along the ditch-banks. There wouldn't be as many in the fall for hunting. He remembered the squeal of brakes and drifting feathers and the other huddled shapes left by speeding grain trucks.

They went off the gravel and up the dirt road, boiling dust. He jumped out before the truck stopped, jerked up on the wire ring, and swung the gate open, turning to step on as the truck came through. They bounced in second across the stubble, and he was off looking for anything wrong with the machinery while his father started the harvester and oiled the chains, dripping the old motor oil from the funnel-topped can. Then he pulled at the weeds that wound around the shaft of the reel, shutting out the symphony of discord and hurting in his want to be alone in the truck with the book. His father yelled to leave the truck where it was, and he jumped back as the machine came around, swirling straw and chaff. He watched for a minute, listening for the softening of sound as the cutter-bar reel swung flashing into the wheat. Then he settled back in the truck with the book and let the waiting for the load of wheat and driving fast in to the elevator and greasing the darkening harvester and sitting cold in the dawn and the work talk merge into the week.

But Saturday it rained. The clouds came without warning down over the hills back of them. He sat there with the rain drumming on the cab of the truck and watched the shadow slink out over the valley. His father turned and came back up the edge of the piece, cutting half of a bin before the stalks toughened. Then they covered the emptied bin with a tarpaulin from the wagon and waited for the burst to stop. But the clouds kept coming and the rain settled to a fine spray that his father always said could last a month.

"We can't waste time like this. You wind up the old cat and get going on the diggers, and I'll take this wet wheat in and spread it out in one of the empty bins at the elevator."

They followed the contour of the ravines over to where they'd left the caterpillar and the prong-toothed diggers that pulled narrow foot-deep furrows in the stubble to hold the winter moisture.

"Put on that coat under the seat, and don't get wet. If the rain gets worse, stop and get under the tractor. I'll get everything ready and come for you at four. Drive over to the gate when you see me coming."

He got out and watched the truck start back across the field, feeling the old loneliness a moment. Then he jerked away and got upon the cowl and took the cans off the exhaust pipes. Opening his mouth, he cranked

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the starting motor and, without waiting for it to warm up, softly clutched in the big diesel with its softer roar. He looked back at the diggers, guessing they were set in far enough for the ground still hard under the rain, and moved off in second gear, waiting for the temperature needle to move up to "Operating Range."

So this was the way it was — rain until they'd be harvesting after school started. Maybe she couldn't have gone fishing, anyway. Her parents were always doing things. She'd probably forgotten about tonight, and they'd all be doing something. She always looked like she'd forgotten something when he asked her. She had, Sunday, when he'd asked about tonight, just looked that way and said all right and—. He jerked angrily at the left steering gear, hitting the left brake at the same time and turning to look at the smear of yellow on streaked gray where he'd angled slowly from the fallow. He automatically straightened out the tractor and then relaxed into the one-armed position where he could guide mechanically, watching the angle of the cowl and the fallow line.

The rain kept coming, and the truck came back at five. His father guessed they might as well go home, and he took off the coat, walking back to the tractor, and capped the exhausts. The water was cold, and he showered and dressed fast, stopping only for the book that went back to the library.

Going out of town, he sat watching in the front seat until they dipped into the slough. He watched the crooked stream, gray under the clouds, and remembered fishing there before he moved to the city. He had always fished from the side nearest town where the bank rose high and sharp. On the other side were the bogs and pools where the chubs and suckers were.

As they climbed the other side he opened the book and flipped the pages, looking for "Camera Eye" and "Newsreel" and letting the great-dreaming

"But Ma, Pecos Pete don't take no bath."

and soft-smashing words crowd around him.

"Why don't you get something worthwhile this time, if you have to read? All I can find in that thing is bedroom scenes. *U. S. A.* If there's that much filth in America, we'd better . . . "

His father let him drive the last twenty miles, and waking slowly, he watched the smooth bank of clouded mountains where they rose out of sight in the west. His father always said there wasn't anything out there, just an island in the Great Salt Lake. He looked at the clouds. There wouldn't be time to go out there, either. She'd better be able to go tonight, though.

He got ready fast and drove up through the shining wet avenues, climbing with the city almost to the crest of the long, low hills that came out into the valley in the north, and then along the boulevard that paralleled the blunt cliffs at the top. The rain spotted the windshield and blurred the light-tinkling city as he turned off the boulevard and down to the next street and the girl's house.

She said, "It's raining again," and ran, grabbing his hand, to the car. She opened the door on his side, and her legs flashed as she went halfway across the seat on her knees. He drove quietly, mechanically down the street-terraced hill, feeling the long touch of her body next to him. When he turned on to the bright-washed street that led downtown he caught the brush of her permanent. He looked, and her eyes smiled.

"I saw that show."

"Which one?" He waited to smile.

"Pinocchio. The one you wanted me to."

He laughed. "Oh."

"Let's talk about it," she said.

SUN-TREADER . . .

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floated on to the pool's surface.

She reached the pool, and looked down into it. The short grasses which framed it grew from a knife-edged bank that cut straight down into the water. A shadow crossed the water, and she looked up. The huge bird had left the side of the pool and was gliding over to the middle. She felt that she was intruding on their vast privacy. She looked away from them to the water, deep and dark and unmoving. Kneeling on the bank, she untied her shoes, and pulled them off with her stockings. Then standing, she quietly took off her clothes and put them in a folded heap on her shoes.

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