

SYMBOLS AND ART

ARTISTS make great use of symbols. In painting, in sculpture, and in literature the artist uses symbols to stand for ideas and feelings he wishes to communicate to others.

Often an author uses symbols to communicate ideas that are not easily understood. He starts with something he wants to say, and he looks for a way of making his idea clear to readers. Sometimes he finds that a symbol is the easiest way to communicate with his audience.

The whole message of the following short story hangs on a symbol. What is the symbol? What does it stand for? You can check your answer on p. 31.

Somebody's Son

by Richard Pindell

HE SAT, washed up on the side of the highway, a slim, sunbaten driftwood of a youth. He was hunched on his strapped-together suitcase, chin on hands, elbows on knees, staring down the road. Not a car was in sight. Except for him, the dead, still Dakota plains were empty.

Now he was eager to write that letter he had kept putting off. Somehow, writing it would be almost like having company.

He unstrapped his suitcase and fished out a small, unopened package of stationery from the pocket on the underside of the lid. Sitting down in the gravel of the roadside, he closed the suitcase and used it as a desk. *Dear Mom,*

If Dad will permit it, I would like to come home. I know there's little chance he will. I'm not going to kid myself. I remember he said once if I ever ran off I might as well keep on going.

All I can say is that I felt leaving home was something I had to do. Before even considering college, I wanted to find out more about life and about me and the best way for us (life and me) to live with each other. Please tell Dad—and I guess this'll make him sore all over again—I'm still not certain that college is the answer for me. I think I'd like to work for a time and think it over.

You won't be able to reach me by mail, because I'm not sure where I'll be next. But in a few days I hope to be passing by our place. If there's any chance Dad will have me back, please ask him to tie a white cloth to the apple tree in the south pasture—you know the one, the Grimes Golden beside the tracks. I'll be going by on the train. If there's no cloth on the tree I'll just quietly, and without any hard feelings toward Dad—I mean that—keep on going.

Love, David

The sunset that evening was a violent one. Jagged clouds, trapped in crosscurrents, rammed each other like primitive men-of-war, and burst into flames, burning one by one into deep purple ash.

It made the boy sad to see the sun go down. He had learned that at the moment when darkness prevails, loneliness always draws closer.

A series of headlights made a domino of the highway.

High beams flickered over him curiously. He put out his thumb almost hesitantly, wishing he didn't have to emerge so suddenly, so menacingly. One by one, the cars passed him, their back draft slapping him softly, insultingly, on the cheek.

Much later, turning woodenly to gaze after a car, he saw the glow of taillights intensify. Brakes squealed. The car careened wildly to a stop, and he was running down the road to capture it, his breath rushing against his upturned collar, and the taillights glowing nearer as if in a dream.

A door was flung open like a friendly arm reaching out to a tired swimmer. "Hop in, boy."

It was a gruff, outdoors voice. "I pret' near missed you. You ain't easy to see out there."

"Thanks, mister."

"Forget it. Used the thumb a lot myself."

"How far are you going?" asked David.

The man named a small place in Iowa about two hundred miles away. David settled back in anticipation of a good ride.

"Where you headin'?" the man asked him.

David glanced at him. His nose was big and jutting; his mouth, wide and gentle. His was a face formed without beauty—and without hesitation. He had a tough-friendly way of accepting David as a man, something which David was still young enough to appreciate as a fine luxury.

The boy looked out on the highway with affection. It would be a good ride with a good companion. "Home," he said with a grin. "I'm heading home."

The man heard the smile in the boy's voice and chuckled. "That's a good feelin', ain't it? Where 'bout's?"

"Maryland. We have a farm about thirty miles outside of Baltimore."

"Where you been?"

"West Coast, Canada, a little of Mexico."

"And now you're hightailin' for home, huh?" There was a note in the man's voice as if this were a pattern he understood intimately.

"Yes, sir."

DAVID smiled wryly to himself, remembering another day. It was in the San Joaquin Valley. He was picking grapes. As usual, the sun ruled mercilessly. Grape leaves drooped. Pickers were humped in varying attitudes of defense, some with bandannas covering the backs of their necks. Even the dirt had sagged beneath the blazing heat, crumbling into limp, heavy powder.

David looked down at his feet plowing through the grayish stuff. For four hours now it seemed he had not raised his eyes from his feet. He stopped abruptly and looked back down the row, measuring his progress. He had gone maybe fifty yards.

The faint clink of scissors landing in his half-filled basket came to him, and then the foreman was bawling at him. "Hey! Where do you think you're going? It ain't lunchtime yet!" David stared at his feet and the dust, and his feet were stretching out as far as they could reach, his fist was tight around the handle of his

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