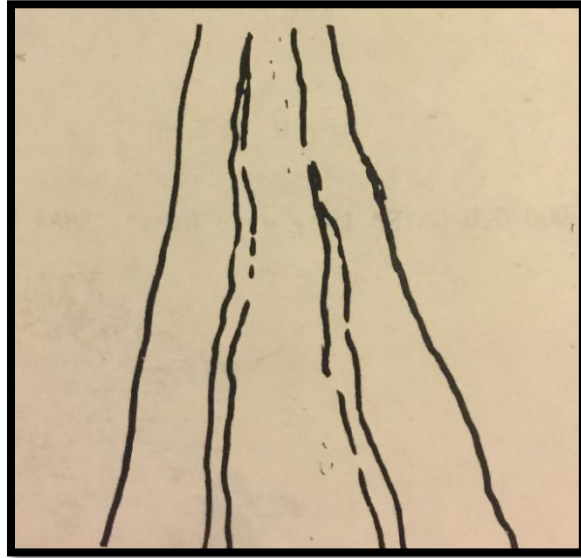


DUST

GOSPEL GREASE



In the 1930's and early 1940's there was an elderly black Baptist preacher who walked or hitchhiked his weekly circuit from Geary Oklahoma to Watonga, Thomas, Clinton, and Weatherford. Then East down the highway U.S. 66, and across the South Canadian River again to home and family at Geary.

Because it was sixty miles from Watonga's black community to the Clinton black community, where he always wanted to preach from the street corner on Sunday afternoons, he would travel halfway to Thomas where he would preach from the street corner each Saturday afternoon.

During those years, Thomas was an all white town, with a tribe of Southern Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians, who lived on Indian lands around town either in single houses or in tribal groups. Southeast of town was an Amish farming community, and Southwest of Town was a farming community of German Mennonites.

In Thomas, a black man was not allowed to be on the streets after sundown or before sunrise, and no black man would be caught out in the open country after dark, because the suspicion of some of the people would soon be a problem for him, so on Saturday afternoon the old black preacher would preach his message of "Hell's fire and brimstone" to the people on the streets of Thomas. When the Preacher had reached exhaustion, from the high exaltation, he would remove his black felt hat, turn it upside down, and ask, "Would you kind folk have a little 'Gospel Grease' to smooth the way for a poor Old Negro Preacher to go forth preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ?"

With that as a cue, a few people would step forward to drop a nickel, dime, or quarter into the hat. Then quickly go their separate ways.

"The Lord bless you kind folk all the day long."

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When the sun was down to about the tree tops in the western sky, the Old Preacher would walk down a dusty alley to the back door of the barber shop and pool hall, quietly step inside and wait for the pool hall attendant to ask what he wanted, then he would hand the attendant a quarter for one small bar of soap, and the rental of a towel, and go into the corner room to take a shower and change into his walking clothes. Afterwards he would step out into the pool hall again sparkling like a chunk of newly broken coal, while smelling loudly of lilac water and lucky tiger hair oil, with a smile on his face, as if he had found new youth in the corner of a dingy pool hall.

With his hambone tired body feeling refreshed again, he would take up his well traveled grip (suit case) in hand and walk back up the alley, North to the back door of the Hooper & Potter Oil Company where Dad worked for his Uncles, Sam and Brian, and a cousin Hank Potter. Once there the Preacher would walk into the battery room in back of the service station and stick his head into the office asking, "Would Mr. Frank be here?"

If not he would be told, "No, Frank's out on delivery, but he left word that if you came by we were to tell you that you may go on up to the house and Frank will be along later, but Marvell is expecting you to be there before sundown."

The Preacher would politely say "Thank you" take his grip in hand again and quietly leave through the back door to walk the five blocks to our house on North 6th Street.

I was setting on the floor trying to understand a complicated game of jacks that my older brother (R.E.) and his friend Wesley were playing, when Dad's coonhound "Ole Bob" started barking with excitement, then came a light knock on the back door.

"It's Gospel Grease!" I shouted, running through the kitchen. Mother came out on the sun porch to unlatch the screen door.

Good afternoon Mrs. Hooper.

"Good afternoon Preacher, won't you come in? We've been expecting you." A fact that was evident because of the neatly spread cot on the sun porch with an apple crate stood on end for a lamp and the Preacher's well used Bible.

Would you care for a cup of coffee, or tea?

No thank you Ma'am. I would be holding for a glass of water.

Mother went into the kitchen to draw a glass of water while Gospel Grease stood on the sun porch at the kitchen door, careful to not step over the threshold when Dad wasn't at home.

Mother returned with a glass filled with water and ice. As he took the glass, the Preacher nodded a thank you.

"Bless your soul Mrs. Hooper." Then took a small drink and placed the glass atop the apple crate and sat his weary body down on the edge of the cot. Sliding his grip under the hem of a blanket which hung over the side of his cot until I could see only the bailing wire handle sticking out.

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Gary, come in and play with the boys. Don't be out there bothering the Preacher while he is studying his sermon for tomorrow.

Mrs. Hooper, this child is no bother for me.

Preacher, he hasn't been out there very long either.

Gospel Grease chuckled quietly as I went back into the house to watch the game of jacks, however I quickly became bored with watching a game where the rules constantly changed, depending on who had the ball, so I moved over to the front door to look out of my prison.

With the familiar sound of an old pickup truck pulling up to a squeaky stop in the driveway, Bob howled a friendly welcome to remind Dad that it was about time for him to be fed.

As Dad stepped up onto the front porch, Mother said, "Gary, get out of the door so your Daddy can come in."

(Boy! A guy can't even look out of this prison without getting into trouble with "The Big People".)

Dad opened the door and stepped in careful to latch it again.

With an affectionate kiss on the cheek, Mother quietly whispered, "The Preacher's here."

Dad nodded and walked through to the kitchen door. "Hi! Gospel Grease. Won't you come on in this house?"

"Well Thank you Mr. Hooper." the Preacher replied, laying his Bible on top of the apple crate night stand and dropping his dime store glasses into the side pocket of his dark blue striped vest. Pulling himself up from the cot he picked up the drinking glass and came into the house.

After a good supper of meat, potatoes, and beans, followed by a little fussing from Mother about how hard it was to get mashed potatoes out from around the edge of my high chair tray, Dad and Gospel Grease went out into the back yard to feed Bob where the Preacher admired Dad's Coonhound, saying, "That sure is a good looking hound Mr. Hooper."

"Thank you Gospel, and he runs true-to-the-blood, only tracks on coon and bob cat." Dad replied, as they walked back toward the house with the slurp, slurp, slurp, sound of Bob cleaning up the supper scraps behind them.

Mother was in the kitchen washing the supper dishes while Dad and the Preacher sat in the living room listening to news reports from the radio.

After the news Dad turned the radio off to save on the battery, then leaning back in his chair he addressed the Preacher who was just finishing his after dinner cup of coffee.

Preacher, do you remember when we first met back in 1932?

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Yes Sir, I sure do. In fact, that is one day I will never forget, if the Good Lord allows me to live for 100 years. I will never forget that terrible long bridge either. Truth is I never was as frightened in my whole life, not before and not since.

What was you doing on the railroad bridge that day?

"Trying to outrun that freight train!" the Preacher replied.

With a slight smile on his face Dad looked at R.E. and I (a look that we knew meant, listen to this story).

"Well Sir," Gospel Grease began as he thought back over the events of ten years before. "I was on my way from Watonga to Clinton, Oklahoma to preach the Gospel. Not knowing there had been a big flood up stream in Northwest Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle. But when I came to the highway bridge that crosses the South Canadian river, just East of Thomas, that flood water had washed the fill dirt away from the North end of the bridge and the river was running full with red muddy water from bank to bank. So the only chance I had of crossing the river was by walking up stream to the railroad bridge hoping it would still be intact. When I saw that the railroad bridge was still there, I thought to myself, "What luck, the Good Lord must be watching over me today, because He knows that I'm already running late." I never thought about going back to the Nobscot Switching Station to ask if a train might be due to come by that way any time soon."

He paused, and looked straight at Dad.

Mr. Hooper. Do you know, that bridge is a mile long?

"Yes I know that. In fact it's just thirty two foot short of a mile long. I've helped to rebuild that bridge twice after it was washed out by spring floods." Dad replied with a chuckle.

"Well Sir, it seemed to me that it was ten mile long that day." Gospel Grease said, as he continued.

I had just walked out on the bridge about three hundred foot when I felt that something was wrong and looked back. Well there sure was something wrong! Coming around the curve behind me was the biggest Special Freight Train I have ever seen in my whole life. That steam engine was puffing black smoke high into the air, straining its way up the tracks as if it's boiler was going to burst if it didn't catch me. Not more than one second before that I thought I was too tired to walk, then all of a sudden, I never felt more like running in all my life! But running as hard as I could, I was no match for that engine with a full head of steam.

Soon the whole bridge was shaking as though it wanted to shake me right off into that Wild Muddy River, so I threw my grip away to let me run faster, but that didn't seem to help either. The Train just kept gaining on me. Just as I had decided I wouldn't be preaching in Clinton come Sunday, I looked up to see how far it was to the end of the bridge, "The Lord be Praised!" there was a young white man running straight at me. What a predicament! A high-speed freight train behind me, a raging river on both sides of me, and a crazy white man in front of me waving his arms and running right straight at the World's Fastest Freight Train.

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Dad laughed heartily, while the preacher continued.

About that time the crazy young white man jumped out on one of the piling caps and scooted out as far as he could waving for me to do the same. It didn't look like something I wanted to do, but it seemed like the smart thing to do at the time considering that I was only one inch from "that beckoning Jesus Door".

Just as I had scooted out to the end of the piling cap, while holding onto my Bible with one hand and my life with the other, that Freight Train came roaring by while I sent up about a year's supply of prayers in less than five minutes.

By the time I had scooted back to the tie ends, there was this blue eyed young man squatting in the middle of the bridge holding onto one track rail and offering his other hand to me.

Back on the bridge again he introduced himself while still holding to my hand.

Hi, I'm Frank Hooper. Are you OK?

Yes, I believe so, THANK YOU. They call me Gospel Grease, that's because I preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and I do hope that you are as saved by Him, as I have been by you this Good Day of GRACE.

Yes, I sure am Preacher, I surely am.

Walking South down the still trembling railroad bridge I couldn't help myself. I just had to keep looking back to see if something might be slipping up on us again. Frank kept telling me "They wouldn't run another train behind that Special in less than an hour."

But I reminded him that there might be a faster train behind That Special.

"Preacher, what would you be doing on the bridge today?" he inquired, with both amusement and concern.

I told him of my pilgrimage and why I had come up stream to cross the railroad bridge, while we walked together. When we reached the end of the bridge, he stopped to say, "I'm afraid the river has carried your suit case away."

That's OK., if it hadn't been for the Good Lord putting you at this end of the bridge at just the right time, that Old River would've carried more than just my grip away.

Standing in the middle of the tracks, at the end of the bridge, Frank invited me to stay the night.

Preacher, I think this late in the day you should stay with my Uncle Jake Pike and me at our place tonight, because just in front of you is the Old Crow Indian camp, and not far beyond that is an all white town.

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So we turned aside together and walked down through the rich upper river bottom land where we came to the prettiest field of tomatoes the Good Lord has ever caused to grow up out of the sin cursed ground.

Gospel Grease paused to look across the room at Dad, and said, "Those were the best tomatoes I ever ate with fried eggs, salt-pork, and beans."

Dad smiled, as he too remembered the events of that day years ago. Then he spoke to the Preacher.

I'm sure you never had worse accommodations, than those which Jake and I gave you that night, with nothing more to offer than a one room tin shack, a blanket on the dirt floor, Coonhounds baying at the moon on one side, and horses blowing and stomping at flies on the other side.

It sure seemed like a castle to me that night, and many nights after that, following a long days walk from Watonga to the River Crossing. Thank you.

Dad and the preacher set in silence now, each thinking about the many good years of friendship and respect they had enjoyed with each other.

I climbed down from my high chair and walked over to where Gospel Grease set in silence. He reached out and lifted me up onto his knee from where I looked at him for a long time, then with caution, I reached up and touched the leathery black skin of his face. When he looked down and smiled a wide white toothy smile I thought it would be all right to ask the question, "Mr. Gospel Grease, why are you black?"

CRASH! went a dish in the kitchen.

"Gary!" Mother shouted from the kitchen in a voice that I knew meant I was in trouble again, for something!

The preacher jumped to his feet swinging me around onto his side with his other hand in the air.

Dad looked up with a sharp look in his eyes that confirmed my thought. I was in trouble again, but the preacher was pleased.

Mrs. Hooper. Mrs. Hooper. Please, this child didn't offend me.

Dad looked at Mother. Mother glared at me, and I looked scared, not that I knew what I had done. I just knew THAT look on Mother's face, then to my relief she went back into the kitchen, from where I could hear a broken dish being thrown into the trash can.

The Preacher sat down and swung me back onto his knee. I suddenly understood what that old tin shack had meant to him so many long years before. It was a safe and comfortable place in a time of real trouble.

Gospel Grease turned his attention to me only, saying in a very mellow, and kind voice, "Gary, the Bible tells me, that many years ago there was a man who was righteous in the sight of God,

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because he believed God was the creator of all things. Now God loved all men so that He would make a way for men to be saved from their own sins if they would only seek God's righteousness, but God hated the sin of man and would destroy the unbelieving man with his sin. Now this righteous man, because of his faith, was the only one among men that was blameless in the sight of God. That man's name was Noah. So God saved him alone from among all men, and Noah's three sons with him. Also their wives, because the sons and wives were one with Noah. Now Noah's sons were each different. Ham was Black, Shem was Yellow, and Japheth was White, and each of the sons had a wife who was equal with him. It was somewhat like that old cat outside which has all of those kittens that are all different colors, anyway, ever since that time some men have been Black, and some Yellow, and some White. Now that is why I am Black, and you are White."

The next morning I ran out onto the sun porch, but Gospel Grease was gone having left as always at first light to continue on his pilgrimage of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the street corners of towns, both large and small, to the people, Black, White, or Yellow, young and old, for just a few pennies "A LITTLE GOSPEL GREASE", so he could continue to walk those dusty roads where he once stepped quietly into a small boy's heart, and his many memories in the dust.

To Gospel Grease.

With Eternal Love.

Gary.

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