

LONG WAY FROM HOME
A Selection from *THE BAPTISM OF HOWIE COBB*

by
Kenneth Robbins

(What follows is a brief selection from the novel, The Baptism of Howie Cobb. Howell Madison Cobb is a teenager from the state of Georgia who has joined the Civilian Conservation Corps and has requested assignment to a CCC camp as far from home as possible. His wish is granted as he is placed at Camp Iron Mountain in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Upon arriving in the Hills, Howie finds himself a stranger in a strange land. He understands very little about life around him as he tries to use his means of coping, a means he learned while growing up in the deep South, a means that does not quite work for him in the foreign country of South Dakota.

The Civilian Conservation Corps was dominant in the Black Hills during the thirties and early forties. In fact, when Robert Fechner, director of the Corps, died, a Black Hills camp was named in his honor. During my research into the CCCs history in the Hills, I discovered that many of the projects originally slated for Corps participation, including the building of the Iron Mountain Highway, were taken away from the Cs and given to other WPA operations and opened to civilian participation. Locals in the Hills felt threatened by the Cs, who in their estimation, were stealing work that rightfully belonged to them. This conflict is part of the following selection. It is interesting to note that though Howie Cobb, a product of the Great Depression, comes from a very poor part of the country, namely Douglasville, Georgia, a mill town west of Atlanta, he had not witnessed the kind of poverty being felt in the Black Hills. That the Civilian Conservation Corps was not welcomed by local citizenry is understandable. The Cs were mostly impoverished teenagers from every part of the country, and they were receiving three meals a day, a clothing allowance, comfortable shelter, and a salary, though the bulk of the money was sent home to parents. In the minds of many civilians, the Cs were nothing more than a bunch of juvenile delinquents getting fat off their tax monies. Thus conflict was inevitable and it surfaced, perhaps not unlike what happens in the following selection, as a concern significant enough to re-think the kinds of tasks the Cs were to perform.)

Kenneth Robbins is a member of the faculty in the Department of Theatre at the University of South Dakota, where he teaches playwriting and writing about the arts. He is the author of the award-winning novel, *Buttermilk Bottoms* and numerous plays. In 1996 he received a Japan Foundation Artists Fellowship and a South Dakota Artists Fellowship. The novel *The Baptism of Howie Cobb* has been published by the University of South Dakota Press.

In mid-afternoon, a string of jalopies and beat-up Ford pickups pulled into the work site beside Squaw Creek. The way the men sat like silent crows in their vehicles, not moving, reminded Howie of that time, back home, when the Klan in their cars and trucks and dumpsters drove past his house, car after car, an endless string of empty eyes. Bull crossed his arms and sat on the slab of stone they were honing. He sighed, "Gonna rest a while, you bet."

"What--" Howie started to ask, but Bull rammed his elbow in the newcomer's side.

"Just keep your trap shut, Cracker," he whispered. "This is no joke." Bull lit a cigarette and offered one to Howie. He took it and smoked like it was second nature though the acid taste stung his tongue.

Twenty men, maybe more, came out of the parked vehicles. There were at least twenty more who stayed put. They sauntered through the work site, greeted a couple of the local Cs. There weren't many, most of the teenagers came from East River or Nebraska, and of course Howie, the lone alien from so far away nobody knew where it was.

"What's going--" But Bull's glare stopped Howie in mid-question.

The men, some armed with shot guns, others with rifles or walking sticks, passed the statue-like boys and collected the tools for working the stone. They tossed them into the back of a pickup truck. Sledge hammers, chisels and picks, axes and work gloves, a stray boot or two, first aid kits and empty lunch containers were gathered and pitched into the back of the truck. What the hell, Howie wanted to say but didn't. Strangest sort of help he'd ever seen offered. How were the Cs going to manage the stone if all the cutting tools were stored in a pickup truck?

A red-bearded fella with hollows under his eyes and skin as pale as a Halloween skull stopped in front of Howie and stared, then held his hand toward the sledge hammer Howie had been using to break open the stone.

Howie grinned. "You want this old thing? Shoot. It's the only one I got."

"Give it to him," Bull said.

"How come? Ain't I been using it right?"

Suddenly he was skidding across the rough edged stone, butt first. The local shouldered the hammer and slipped the chisels into his dungarees' pockets, taking Bull's pick axe as well.

Bull held Howie on the ground as the fellow with the red beard moved on down the work site and all the hammers and chisels and picks and tools were collected and stored in the back of the pickup truck.

"Let me up," Howie said much too loud. "I'll skin that old geyser and have his lights for supper."

Another fellow drew near. He held a double-barrel twelve gauge shotgun in the crook of his arm. He stood over the pissed-off Howie, still in the bear hug of Bull, and said, "You got you a problem, son?"

Howie eyed the ends of the shotgun. He caught the mean-looking glint in the fellow's eye. He smelled the liquor that oozed off him like so much pollen off a Georgia pine. And he knew there was nothing but hurt to be gained by messing with this fellow,

no matter how much effort it took to swallow his southern pride. So he said, "None I can't take care of on my own," and smiled.

"Cause," said the fellow, meanness dripping off his lips like saliva from a mad dog's grin, "you got a problem, I got a problem. That right?"

Howie called on his biggest smile. "I'm just tickled pink to be done with work for the day, mister. I thank you for that."

The fellow spat a stream of tobacco juice at Howie's feet, missing his boots by less than an inch, and said, "Shit."

"Back home," Howie said when the fellow was out of hearing, "we'd call that bastard a hillbilly. What you call him out here?"

And Bull answered, "Sir."

Howie could understand that.

Then a smallish fellow, the one with the cane and wearing a black four-in-hand tie hanging down from his once-upon-a-time white collar, stepped upon the fulcrum of the ginny-lift and said with a voice so full it could be heard all across the work site, "Why don't you babies do everybody a favor and go on home. You bear what I'm saying? Just go on home, and ever last one of us'll die happy. That okay by you?"

His question was met with silence.

He stared over the heads of the teenage Cs and said, as soft as the breeze across Center Lake on a hot July day, "Yeah, that's what you do, you bet. Just go on back where you came from and make ever last one of us joyful."

He stepped down, got into the lead jalopy and drove off, followed by other cars and trucks and last by the pickup now loaded so heavy with workers tools it dipped in the rear end, leaving the Cs in a cloud of mica dust hanging thick in the hot afternoon air.

Howie stood up on the rough stone, his rear-end stinging from the treatment it had received. "Well, hell!" he said, but nobody paid him any mind.

Doubleside, the re-upper in charge of the work site, sat like a lump on the slab of granite attached to the hoisting end of the ginny-lift. The Cs sidled his way since it was Doubleside who told them when to work and when to stop, when to eat lunch and when to pile onto the flat bed for the trip back to camp. It was clear to Howie that Doubleside didn't know what to do. He sat and scratched the mosquito bites that red-dotted his ankles and shin.

It was Bull who broke the silence. "We going back to base camp or what?"

Doubleside said, "Suppose so."

"How come?" It was Howie asking the stupid question. It was Howie who took the moans and the pokes and the cold stares from the rest of the Cs.

Doubleside said, "Well, they took all our tools just now or didn't you notice."

Howie didn't know when to leave well enough alone. "How come?" he asked again.

"Don't you know nothing?" one of the Cs said.

"What they feed you back there in Georgia, loco weed?" another said.

Howie grinned. "Fed me grits and string beans. Brain food." And that brought a laugh. Everybody laughed, even Doubleside. It felt good to laugh, so Howie joined in, though he didn't know what was so funny.

When quiet came back to the work site and the Cs relaxed themselves among the quarried stones, Howie said, "I'm just wondering who them people were, what they wanted, you know? Shoot. They didn't seem all that happy to me."

Bull, who had grown up in Spearfish, not so far away from where they stood, said, "Who says they've gotta be happy? All they want is work. And what little work there is, we take it from them." And he spat into the dust, his final commentary on the discussion, if discussion it really was.

"Well, shoot," Howie said. "We got us half a dozen or so rocks ready for the flatbed. Let's get 'em loaded and down to the construction site. what say?"

The Cs looked one to the other. Even their breathing went unnoticed. It was Doubleside who put their fears into words: "They find out we're still working, they come back out here and do more than take our tools."

Bull said, "I know a couple of those guys. They ain't mean. Just hungry and need work."

"Looked mean enough to me," one of the Cs said.

Howie was like a dog after a lone flea; he couldn't leave it alone. "What they gonna do to us, Doubleside, shoot our balls off?"

"You bet," was the reply.

"Well, I don't believe it." Howie's muscles needed something to do. He wasn't used to sitting around and counting the number of bumblebees stumbling over dandelions looking for pollen. He said, "Doubleside, you the boss, but it seems we got us some more work to do." And after a bit of reflectioo, the rest of the Cs agreed.

The flatbed was pulled into place, the stones were dragged to the lift and fastened to the cradle end, and the truck was loaded with two medium-size chunks of unfinished grauite. Howie hopped onto the flatbed and sat with his back against the cab of the truck, legs crossed, and picked his teeth with a sliver he found on the flatbed flooring.

Doubleside yelled at him, "Where do you think you're going?"

"Well," Howie yelled back, "ain't nothing we can do around here till this truck gets unloaded. Might as well go see what it is we're building."

Then the rest of the guys piled on.

The truck with Doubleside at the wheel jerked forward, finding it difficult but not impossible to transport the stones as well as the fifteen Cs down the road, around the curves, through the woods, and over the Hills to the site in Custer State Park, a long ways away.

Riding the open-bed truck was better than the annual Liberty Baptist Young People's hay ride to the Dog River and Sinner's Hole—except there were no girls along. Girls might have helped everybody's mood a little on this trip, but for Howie it didn't matter. It was just as well his girlfriend, Indella Shealy, was safe inside her clapboard and whitewashed house back home in Douglasville and not here, not right now.

After his long and seemingly endless journey out of Georgia and across the wide expanse of this great country, Howie was wide awake for the first time and bejesus if the Hills didn't make up about the most beautiful hunk of landscape he had ever seen. Better than the Blue Ridge back home and he had sworn to his older brother Hev that nothing, not here not nowhere, could possibly match the spectacle of the Blue Ridge. He tried penning his impressions to Indella, practicing writing in his head, but he had too few words up to the task of sharing his impressions of the Hills. But he determined to try when he got back to Kensington Place and sacked out in his bunk with the sunlight pouring through the Northern window. Though better in every way, the Hills still reminded him of the Blue Ridge and filled him with a homesickness unlike any other he had felt so far. He wasn't sick to be home like before, these deep woods that rolled past said to him that he was home. If facts be known, he felt better just then than he had ever felt in his life. It was damn good just being alive. He wanted to hug somebody, but there was nobody there who would understand. So he kicked the nearest stone with the flat of his boot and knew exactly what he meant.

The trip into the Park was too short. The flatbed was waved into a ditch as a local with a double-barrel shotgun blocked the road. The tires of the vehicle sank deep into the loose mud of the ditch, and there it would sit until a tractor came along to help it break free of the muck.

Howie sat atop the cab with Bull; Doubleside climbed on top from behind the steering column to get a better look. They took everything in. A quarter of a mile up the slope in the middle of a lush meadow was the purpose behind the quarried stone: a good-sized building being constructed entirely of rough, unrefined granite and mortar. The building was only a third finished, mostly foundation and a back wall maybe ten feet high. Howie counted twenty-five non-government vehicles parked ahead of them and more than fifty locals standing around, some armed with guns, others with picks, hammers, and an axe or two. Not far from the granite foundation in the middle of the meadow was Captain Clyde Munk, their CO, dressed in his khaki work clothes, listening to a handful of locals who gestured this way and that with an animation that denied the Captain the pride of his rank. Old Clyde pointed repeatedly to the pile of stones beside the building yet to be put into place and at the building itself, saying something of obvious importance to himself if not the others in his easily recognized iron-jaw way. The locals listened to him, or at least some of them did.

Howie poked Bull in the side. "You folks always have this much fun on work crews?"

Bull shrugged and offered cigarettes to those around him. The Cs sat, and listened, and smoked, and listened some more.

Howie pointed to the unfinished building. "What's that supposed to be?" he asked.

Doubleside blew a stream of smoke in the direction of Old Clyde. "This here's a park," he said, "and that there's to be the visitor's center. The rate we're going, we might get the thing done by the winter of 1945."

Howie looked around him. "So this is a park. Never been to a park before." Bull grunted. "What do folks do in parks anyway?"

"Eat picnics." Doubleside said.

Howie nodded. "Sounds . . . nice I guess." He blew a stream of smoke toward the small group of locals who had gathered around the flatbed. "These folks live around here, that right?"

"Can't you keep quiet?" Doubleside whispered.

More locals approached the truck. One of them pulled a C off the back and pushed him toward the road, saying, "Why don't you delinquents go back where you came from!" Another of the locals yelled to the rest of the Cs on the truck, "Get off and none of you'll get hurt."

Bull said as he lifted his bulk from the top of the cab, "Guess we better be getting off."

"How come?" Howie asked.

"Cause they said to, that's how come."

"I ain't heard the CO tell us to do nothing," Howie said with a gaping smile. "Ain't he the one who gives the orders?"

Bull glared at him in disbelief. "What are you, some sort of idiot? Get off the damn truck!" Then Bull, Doubleside, and the rest of them hopped to the ground.

Howie stayed. He had no idea why, but he stayed.

From the edge of the meadow, Doubleside called, "Come on Cracker, for Pete's sake."

Howie grinned, waved, and sprawled his shirtless torso across the warm top of the cab. The sun felt good. It was too nice a day to get all bent out of shape over a make-believe squabble.

One of the locals, the one from before, the one with the red beard but now toting a twelve gauge shotgun, tossed a small chunk of sod at Howie's head. "What's the matter, boy. you deaf of what? We said off the truck."

Howie waved at him and said, "I'm right comfortable, thank you. Nice day, ain't it."

He heard a loud angry shout coming from the construction site: "Get the scabs off the truck, Hubert!"

Howie noticed the rest of the Cs gathering behind the CO, and he wished he'd gone along and done the same. But now, how could he get off and still keep his pride? No way. He was stuck. It was stupid, he realized, but he was stuck. Besides, the way the Cs were dragging themselves along wasn't a pretty sight. Tucking tail was not a desirable thing to do. He realized that something was not right, but he wasn't sure what it was. And he had no desire to be party to anything that wasn't right.

The red beard, looking meaner than before, said, "You gonna get off the truck, sonny, or what? One way or the other, you bet your britches you're coming off that truck."

And Howie said, "You gonna unload all this stone by yourself?"

The man with growing anger said, "Nobody's unloading any more rock today."

It was amazing. The way the man's nose quivered, the way the sun glinted off the blond fibers in his red beard, the way the man's eyes squinted together. Howie couldn't

help it. He said, "You know, mister, if you were missing your front two teeth, you'd be the spitting image of my Uncle Jeb Stuart Cobb. Old Jeb Stuart was known all over Douglas County as the best Saturday night drinker God ever created. One time, he took it on himself to relocate Stone Mountain all by his lonesome, and he would of done it, too, if the mule pulling the wagon hadn't broke its two back legs giving that old wagon one mighty hefty tug."

"Huh?" the red beard said.

"Yeah, you would of liked old Uncle Jeb Stuart Cobb. He had a wisecrack a minute and never met a man he couldn't drink under the table. Played poker, too, but he cheated. I wouldn't recommend you get into a card game with my Uncle Jeb. One time, just about got his nose cut off in a knife fight with a fella from the Hemhree clan—Them Hembrees, meanest sonsabitches you ever laid eyes on—"

Red beard growled, the shot gun coming out of the crook in his arm, "Get off the damn truck, buddy!" There were twenty or more locals by now, circled around the truck, and the other Cs along with Captain Clyde were edging down the hill, curious about what was going on with this newest member to their corps, what this newcomer was thinking as he seemed content marching to his early grave.

Howie, the sun feeling better than it had ever felt before, the breeze as comforting as any breeze could be, said, "You know, this is a pretty damn good truck. Made it over some tough roads with this here load. Oh, man, let me tell you, this granite ain't worth shit, too much sandstone and quartz. You need some good solid Georgia granite for fitting stone work. Hey, hop on up here, one of you and give me a hand. We'll dump this no good rock right here in the ditch and make everybody happy."

Nobody breathed. The red beard cocked the hammers on both barrels of his shotgun and leveled it at Howie's feet. "I said off the truck, you smart aleck juvenile delinquent!"

"Cobb!" The word echoed through the woods, back and forth, back and forth, like it was on a yo-yo with too short a string to do the rock-a-bye-baby. Howie recognized the voice, and turned and caught his Captain's eye. He waved.

The explosion from both barrels of the gun took out most of the window in the back of the cab. Glass and buck-shot splinters splashed as everybody, even Howie, ducked. Howie covered his face and cowered on top of the truck. He clutched his feet, miraculously untouched from the buckshot blast, to his chest and huddled as small as he could make himself on top of the cab. Still, he made no move to crawl down. He figured the fellow with the shotgun either was a lousy shot or missed his feet on purpose. Either way, he was staying put. Safest thing he could think to do.

Red beard breeched his gun, the spent shells flying into the ditch, and reloaded. The sound the gun made as the barrels were clicked back into place was the scariest thing Howie had ever heard. Still, he could not force his body off the truck.

The man with the walking stick, the man who seemed to know what was what and how to get things done, the man with the black four-in-hand tie dangling from what once had been a white collar, came up to the flatbed, placed a hand on one of the granitic slabs and said, "Nobody wants anybody to get hurt, son. So come on down and do like

we're telling you. Work's finished for the day, your captain knows that, so you and your friends can go on back where you came from. That okay by you?"

Howie was amazed. People were just damn people, it didn't matter where they lived. And he couldn't help his smile of recognition as he dangled his legs over the edge of the cab. "You know, mister," he said with a smile, "if you had a dress and had enough hair to pull up in a bun, you'd look just like my Great Granny Roper. She walked with a cane, too, and was so skinny. Lord help her, you turn her sideways and she don't stop the breeze. But could that woman cook pinto beans? Lordee could that woman—"

"Cobb!" It was the iron jaw again, closer than before. "Get your butt off my damn truck! Now!!"

"Yes, sir," Howie said resisting the impulse to salute. He hopped to the ground, turned to the red beard and doffed his hat and said, "Pleasure meeting you fellas. Y'all come back and see us again, ye hear?"

"We will," the red beard hissed.

The locals cleared a path so Howie could make his way to Old Clyde and the rest of the Cs. None of them said a thing. After a silence of stand-off, Captain Clyde cleared his throat and said to the fellow with the cane, "See you."

The fellow said with no emotion in his voice, "You bet."

Old Clyde and his troop of Cs turned toward the woods and said, "Looks like we walk home, boys. Nice day for a hike." They began the long traipse back to camp.

Bull tagged along beside Howie and whispered, "You got balls, Cracker. you know that?"

"Balls is stupid," Howie said. "I just didn't want to walk back to camp. You see how much good it did me."

"Just another stroll in the woods, Cracker, just another stroll in the woods."

Captain Clyde hung back and fell into place beside his new C from far away Georgia. Now what, Howie wondered but didn't ask. It seemed he was attracting an awful lot of attention from the CO for being so new in camp. Bull surged on ahead, putting distance between himself and what he figured to be a major cbeewing out. But Old Clyde simply strolled along, adapting his stride to Howie's, turning the retreat into a casual meander, the rest of the crew pulling ahead and eventually out of sight.

Finally, the army captain broke his silence. "So, tell me, son, what was that all about back there? Uncle Jeb Stuart Cobb?"

"Just having a good time, sir," Howie said, trying to laugh it off, but the Captain's mood was too severe.

"Yeah, having a good time." After a second or two, he said "I guess I'm just not cut out for this kind of work, babysitting a bunch of kids, CO to a bunch of sugar teats. What do you think?"

"Well, shoot, I ain't been around much . . ."

"You know, me and the Missus ain't had us a baby before this. Our first. Gonna be the first army brat born in Camp Iron Mountain. Maybe the last. I don't know. And I wonder, do I want my baby to grow up and do what you just did. Makes me want to

head home, tell my Missus, let's get as far away from all this as we can. You know what I'm talking about?"

Howie didn't know what to say. The Missus Clyde Munk, the only female in camp, was so large she could have her baby any day now and it had the Cs all in a lather about whether there'd be another female in camp or yet another boy. He hadn't thought about this thing of the baby growing up and becoming a man—or a woman—and what sort of man—or woman—he or she—would be. He thought of his brothers and sisters back home, about how he had watched them grow and become people, like Horace the youngest, how he had come into the world hardly big enough to fill a hand, yet when he had left home, how Horace had actually cried, understanding that his older brother might not come back at all. Howie hadn't thought about any of this back there with his feet forming target practice for a stranger with a red beard. Shoot, he wanted to say, let me go back there and redo everything. Let me fix it. But he couldn't find the words, so he stayed silent as he and the CO strolled through the woods.

"Sometimes," Old Clyde was saying, "I can't help but feel something close to pride, though. Watching you fellas come into my camp and start learning about things. Most of the boys from the Dakotas never met a tree before, you know. Hell, they have no idea what a stump is much less a forest like we have here. Then, there're days like this, days when I watch one of my boys almost get his head blown off, and I wonder, yeah, can't help but wonder if it's such a good thing, bringing another kid into this damn world. It makes me feel awful sad, son, how you behaved back there just now."

Howie felt his words slip out his mouth. He didn't want to say them, but he couldn't keep them inside. "That man weren't gonna shoot me, sir."

"That right? Just how do you know that, Cobb? What instinct you got that I don't?"

"Well it wasn't in his eyes."

Old Clyde gruffed under his breath. "It was in his belly, though. And the bellies of his kids back home, going to bed hungry and him not able to do nothing about it. You ever been hungry, son?"

"Couple of times, I guess."

"But not every morning when you wake up and every night when you go to bed. That's these people, Corpsman, and we're taking away work that might rightfully have gone to them if we hadn't come along. So, how can you say for sure that man didn't have the belly to blow your brains out?"

Howie was silent. He couldn't answer. He didn't know the answer.

"Yeah, makes me wonder, the Missus and me, bringing another kid into this damn world . . ."

The two strolled their way back to camp, Howie confused by the chewing out he had just received.

That night, Howie didn't eat dinner with the rest of the Cs. Breakfast the next morning either. He was testing his belly, whether or not what was (or wasn't) in his belly could cause him to pull the trigger, to put a double load of buckshot in another person's chest. Back home, he'd gone to bed without supper lots of times. But had he ever been hungry? It seemed there was always some cornbread or biscuits or homemade

grits or pinto beans somewhere around the house. It hadn't been easy, but then he'd never really been hungry.

Noon next day he downed a couple of ham sandwiches, unable to resist the hunger he was feeling. So he didn't get his answer. Maybe there was no answer. So it seemed. Still, he was a long long way from home and he felt, for the first time in his life, uncommonly vulnerable to things in other people's bellies. You never know, do you. You never know.