

Property Values

Nothing moves in the summer, in Fresno. Nothing but the dust, and that only when a breeze blows. Sarah sat on the front porch steps of her house and stared across the broad field. She didn't move. Her lower back was damp where she leaned against the old wood, her long hair limp and wet against her neck. She didn't bother wiping the sweat from her forehead.

Far to the right, from the direction of the highway, Sarah caught sight of a small dust whirl. She watched it grow, then saw that it followed the beige Chevy pick-up truck of her neighbors, the Gibsons. Without turning her head, she followed the path of the truck as it wound its way through the fences and over the small wood bridges towards her.

The truck stopped and the powdery whirlwind blew past it, lifting Sarah's hair from her forehead and fluttering the hem of her dress.

Becky Gibson jumped out of the high cab and bounced over to Sarah.

"Have you heard?" she squealed.

"Heard what?"

"About Mr. Conroy, from KBM Industries!" The chubby woman hopped from one foot to the other like a child, her bare feet kicking up dirt, the hem of her blue jeans brown with dust.

"For Christ's sake, Becky, stop bouncing around, you make me dizzy." Sarah motioned for Becky to sit down on the steps, but Becky didn't notice and kept on prancing while she talked.

"Sarah, KBM bought the Myerson's land last week. And KBM wants more land. . . that's why this guy Conroy is here."

"So?"

"So? We could make a killing! Jimmy says KBM will pay full market price. And you know we can't get that from nobody."

Sarah stretched her slender arms and legs, yawned and looked away, past Becky to her own unplowed fields.

"Sarah!" Becky knelt down to face Sarah's gaze. She pushed her damp, black hair behind her ears and the smile disappeared from her round face. She said, "You know the way our land pokes into yours, no one, not even KBM, will want me and Jimmy's property, not without buying yours, too."

"When your great-grandfather bought the land from mine, Becky, that's the way they carved it up."

"Yeah, well it makes our land worthless. If you don't sell to KBM, they won't buy ours."

Sarah patted her small, round stomach, looked at Becky and wondered if she should tell her about the baby.

"Answer me!" Becky stood up. "Jimmy'll have a fit if I go home and tell him you don't want to sell."

"I didn't say no, Becky, I just have to think about it."

"What's there to think about?"

Becky resumed her pacing. "You ain't doing much better than we are, and you live here all alone. You ain't turned a profit in six years, ever since Garth died."

"I haven't tried very hard."

"I know. It must seem impossible without your husband. So, what's the point of staying? You can't run this place by yourself."

"I have Wes."

"That drifter? Sarah, he sleeps in the barn and he talks to the horses more'n he talks to people. And he could drift off one day and then what?"

Sarah sat forward suddenly and pointed to the barn, glaring at Becky. "He's no drifter! Wes has been here three years!"

Becky stamped her foot. "So what'll I do? Go back home and tell Jimmy that you might not want to sell? That you think you and Wes can keep this farm going? Shit, Sarah, there ain't no hope for you to make it work."

Sarah leaned back again and said coolly, "I'll think about it. Tell that to Jimmy. I'm not making a decision on the spur of the moment."

Becky dug her toe in the dirt, opened her mouth to say something, then just turned, got in her Chevy and drove back to the highway.

The Church of the Disciples of Christ's recreation room was filled with people, and smelled faintly of barns and dust. Sarah looked around for the Gibsons, the only neighbors she felt comfortable with. Like her, Becky and Jimmy, in their mid-thirties, were the youngest landowners in this part of the valley. She finally spotted their identically dark, curly hair in the front of the room and headed toward them.

Sarah came up behind the Gibsons and saw that they stared intently at a placard that faced the gathering. Next to the placard stood a small, weasel-faced man in a brown suit, his white hands fidgeting with his tie, with the hankie in his breast pocket, with his hair. Coming closer, Sarah saw that the placard was actually a

map, a big, blown-up map of the Central Valley area they lived in. It was laminated and had numbers written all over it in red grease pencil.

Jimmy turned, the legs of his metal chair creaking under his weight. "So, Sarah, did you think about it? You gonna sell?"

"I don't know. . . that's why I came here tonight, to find out what this is all about." Sarah avoided looking at Jimmy's red, pockmarked face. Since junior high school she had avoided looking at it. Turning away, she pointed to the map and asked what it was.

Becky whispered, "It's got all our properties on it and the dollar amounts KBM will pay for them."

Sarah stood up to take a closer look at the map, but the little man in front cleared his throat loudly and raised his hands over his head like a TV preacher. Everyone quieted and sat down.

The man gave a dull, droning speech about financial equities, escrows, stockholdings and annual grosses and nets. Sarah thought everyone would surely go to sleep, but she glanced around and realized that all eyes were on the laminated map with its illegible red numbers.

The man stopped droning. "Any questions," he asked, "before we proceed to the actual cash value of the land in question?"

The room was hushed. Sarah raised her hand and the man nodded at her.

"Who or what is KBM?"

"I'm not sure exactly what you want to know."

"Well, is there a Mister. . . uh, Mister K, or B, or M? What kind of business does he do?"

The man chuckled. "KBM is a large conglomerate, ma'am. That means a collection of different types of businesses. As far as an owner, if you mean a Howard Hughes-type, no, there is no one man in charge. KBM did start out as a small oil drilling exploration in Texas, in the early 1900's. Run by a family, right on their ranch, not too different from you folks." He smiled, bared little, sharp teeth, then went on. "They were quite successful, went public, and over the years the company has expanded internationally. It now encompasses not only oil, but dairy, paper products, broadcasting in Texas, agriculture, and a new development in military hardware."

"Why do they want this land?" asked Sarah.

"He already told us that," said Jimmy, turning to glare at her.

Sarah ignored him, and said to the speaker, "You said you wanted it for development. . . development of what?"

"Well, ma'am, certain things must remain confidential in the realm of big business. Can't have our competitors know what we're up to all the time. Now look, we can offer excellent prices and if there are no more questions, please come on up and take a

look at this map.”

Sarah had more questions but the rest of the crowd was interested only in the map. She sat still for half an hour, lacing her fingers together, waiting to get near it herself.

Looking at the map, she easily found her land. The dog-leg of the Gibson's property, the part that thrust into hers, pointed directly at the red number that represented her property value. She checked the Gibsons and saw in parentheses below their number, in tiny writing, the word "contingent." Jimmy's beefy red hand suddenly appeared and motioned to the map.

"The prices are really good," Sarah mumbled.

"Damn right. We could make a killing."

"So Becky said yesterday."

"What's it gonna be, Sarah?" The sweaty face poked closer to hers.

"Jimmy, we've got time. I want to think about it."

"What the hell is there to think about?" Jimmy threw his arms out, knocking over the map and its stand. "It's a good deal, damn good. You'd be crazy not to take it."

"I'd like to know what they're going to use it for."

"Who cares? All I know is, they give us cash, and we clear out."

"I don't want our valley turned into some kind of, I don't know, military complex, with jets and tanks."

"Christ, what an imagination. He didn't say nothin' about tanks. And anyway, Sarah, do like us. We're gonna buy a big, fancy house up in Sacramento. Live a life of ease. Just move far enough away and you'll never know."

"It's my land, Jimmy, my parents' land. I grew up here. It's important to me what happens to it."

"Jesus!"

Jimmy turned to his wife who had picked up the stand and was trying to get the map to balance on it. "Becky, are you hearin' this? Sarah's getting sappy on us."

"I just haven't decided, okay?" Sarah repeated.

Jimmy punched his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "Goddamn it!"

Becky caught his arm, hushed him and said quietly to Sarah, "You could ruin us, Sarah. Just think about that," and she pulled her husband into the dwindling crowd.

Sarah pulled her Jeep out of the parking lot aiming it toward the indistinct, dark Sierra Nevadas on the horizon. The thirty-five miles between the church and her home were shadowy and flat. The small, high moon, though piercingly bright in the sky, did

little to light up the road. The black sky and the inert, silver-grey expanse of land absorbed the moonlight and nothing was reflected back for human use. But the sky, so huge and dark, seemed to cup her in, cradle her to the earth.

Mile after mile, bumping over ruts, over wooden bridges that spanned only sand washes, driving deeper into the valley, Sarah considered the offer. The money was good, fantastic. The temptation to cash in her land, to take the money and run, was indeed enticing. And Becky's last sentence rang in her ears like a litany recited in unison at church. . . "You could ruin us, you could ruin us."

Why did she feel any compulsion to stay? Why was there any doubt about such a great cash offer? Ever since Garth died, she'd lost interest in making a profit. She let her fields go empty, didn't plant anything. So, why was there some small force holding her back, keeping her on the land? She smiled and thought of her baby. She pictured it as the small force, the tiny hand in her womb, pulling back on her, keeping her from making a decision to sell.

Sarah turned right through a break in the fence. She was on her property now, and had only four miles to go. She relaxed, feeling safe inside the charmed circle of barbed wire and wood that enclosed her property. She decided to talk to Wes in the morning. If she could get him to talk.

To wake up at 4 a.m. was the only chance of feeling cool in the summer. Sarah got out of bed and put on one of Garth's Pendleton robes, as much for comfort as for warmth. Unbidden, the thought of KBM burst into her mind. She hugged the robe tighter and wondered what Garth would have done. He had been easy-going, had grown up in the area and everybody liked him. Garth was a prosperous farmer, skilled and hard-working. It seemed crazy to everyone that he died the way he did, thrown from a horse, right outside his barn.

Garth loved the land as she did, but he had also been Jimmy's friend. When she and Garth married, Jimmy was the best man. But also, when they married, they combined half of Garth's family's property with all of hers. How could she sell it, the product of two families . . . four generations each.

By 4:30 the coffee was ready and Sarah began scrambling eggs. Wes came and sat at the pink formica table. It always amazed Sarah that such a big man, with heavy cowboy boots, could move so silently, like a ghost. She finished making breakfast and sat down to eat with him. While they ate, she told him about the offer.

"Why would the Gibsons want to leave?" he asked.

"I think that to them it's some kind of ticket out of here, some kind of ticket to heaven."

"Humph."

Sarah looked at Wes as he slowly wound his fingers in the curls of his pale, blonde beard, waiting for him to say more.

"Well," she finally asked, "what do you think about selling?"

"It's your land."

"I know, but it will be your child's land. I could sell, buy a big house, with air conditioning, wall to wall carpets, a house that won't get full of dust in the summer. That could be your child's house."

"Could grow up in town, huh?"

"Yes. Walk to school, see other kids after school. Have easy chores, like washing dishes or mowing the lawn."

"No horses. Or cows." Wes got up and went to the screen door and looked at the slowly brightening, beige fields. "Sarah, it's good to be raised up with animals. You know pain and death, you know carin'. Makes you a different kind of human."

Sarah came to Wes and nestled against him as he put his arm around her shoulders.

"I like it here, Sarah." He patted her stomach and smiled. "But it's not my land, so I don't have much say. If I was the kid, I guess I'd like this better than town."

Sarah stared at her fields. Off in the distance she could see the thin line that was the fence where it snaked around the Gibson's property. She closed one eye, held her finger up and traced the line against the dusty land.

"Wes," she said suddenly, "that's good land out there, isn't it?"

"Damn good."

"And we could make it work, couldn't we?"

"Could try. Harder than we been tryin'."

Sarah kissed his cheek and turned to clean up the kitchen.

Under the high noon sun, Wes threw hay bales off the back of the pick-up and Sarah was raking them out for the cows when Becky and Jimmy drove up to the barn. Jimmy stormed across the yard to Sarah. "Did you decide?" he yelled. "Conroy's gonna leave tomorrow. He says whoever waits might get less for their land."

"I thought about it, Jimmy. I'm not going to sell."

Jimmy grabbed the rake from Sarah's hand and tossed it away. He pushed his sweltering face into hers. Wes stopped his work and stood at the edge of the tailgate, watching every move Jimmy made.

"Just for you, I asked Conroy what they were gonna do here." Jimmy sneered. "He said it'll be some kinda high-tech dairy farm. Grow all the feed indoors or somethin'. So now you don't have to

worry about no tanks or planes on your precious land.”

“Good.” said Sarah, “Cows make good neighbors. I’m staying, Jimmy. That’s final.”

“What the hell’s here for you? You keep a worn-out bum as a foreman. You ain’t tried to grow crops. You got nothin’ and you want us to have nothin’ too.”

“We don’t have nothing. . . we have the land.”

“You and your precious land. It’s worthless.”

“Land isn’t worthless, Jimmy. It belonged to our parents and their parents. . .”

“Yeah and they farmed the shit out of it and left it for us. . . useless.”

“This land isn’t useless. I want to stay, to make it work.”

“I knew it. Didn’t I tell you Becky?” Jimmy turned to his wife and shook his hand in her face. He looked again at Sarah. “I knew one day the rich bitch would come out in you. One day you’d throw your money up in my face, in the face of every farmer hereabouts who wasn’t quite so lucky as you, not quite as smart as Garth. You two with your stocks and bonds and shit. I never liked you, Sarah, you always thought you were better than us. You don’t need to sell and you’re gonna let us suffer, let us die, just so you can hold on to some godforsaken piece of dirt.”

Sarah turned from Jimmy’s accusing face, and looked at her fields. It wasn’t just a piece of dirt. She and Wes could grow something here, and she longed to see her land be productive again.

She looked Jimmy in the eye, took a deep breath and said, “I’ll buy those forty acres. Not for what KBM would have paid, but for what they’re worth to me. That leaves you 90 acres to sell to KBM. You should still come out fine.”

“Oh, thank you Miss High-and-mighty. Becky, bow down and thank the queen here for her generous offer.”

“I think we better take it, Jimmy.”

“She’s gonna steal half our land and allow us to try and make money on what’s left? You wanna take that?”

“Jimmy, let’s take it,” Becky repeated, pulling on his elbow.

Jimmy turned back to Sarah. “Why’s this such a big deal to you anyway. Why all of a sudden does this land mean so goddam much to you?”

“I’m pregnant,” said Sarah, defiantly. “My baby is due in December. I want it to grow up here like I did.”

“Pr-p-pregnant?” Jimmy stuttered.

Becky looked at Sarah, then at Wes. “Him!” she said pointing to Wes. “Sarah, you’re downright crazy.”

“Damn right she is.” Jimmy grabbed his wife’s arm and headed back to the pick-up. “You keep your land if you’re idiot enough to

get knocked up by some drifter. But you just better buy our 40 acres. Me and Becky are gonna move as far away from you as we can."

Wes went back to work, while Sarah watched the beige pick-up disappear into the dust that whirled around it. She stood still, putting her hand on her stomach. Soon, she'd feel the baby move. By the time it was born, she hoped to have young, green crops started in her fields. Sarah picked up the rake, getting back to work. As she pulled at the dry, dusty day, she imagined herself sitting on the front porch steps to watch her baby run, exploring the wide, flourishing, beautiful land.