

## From Utah to the Promised Land

*Mark Rigney*

I listen to the report despite myself. Cinnamon isn't cinnamon—that's what the radio claims. An interviewer and a chef, both strangers to me, debating what's in *my* kitchen. "Check your cinnamon," says the chef—a man, he sounds very East Coast. "I'm not making this up."

I reach past my rolled-out piecrust, across the counter and into the yellow pine cabinet where I jumble up my spices. No use for a spice rack. No place to put it. You ask anyone, my countertop's a busy place.

Once I find the cinnamon, I turn the little canister in my hand—are all those wrinkles really mine?—and search for ingredients. Damned if it doesn't say one hundred percent cinnamon. Hah.

"You can't trust the bottle," the chef continues, sounding a mite too satisfied for my tastes. "The FDA still doesn't regulate spices the same way as they do other foods. They can claim they're putting in stardust if they want to, but that won't make it so. Unless you've purchased some sort of import specialty brand, I hate to be blunt, but you're not dealing with actual cinnamon."

Chester bangs in the doorway, and with him curls hot summer air, dry like death. He hasn't taken off his boots, and I just swept.

"Hold it," I say. "Not another inch."

"Save it," he says, waving me off. "I just need somethin' from the closet."

I've heard that one before. Fact is, I've heard it enough times that I know the closet is exactly eight steps from the back door and eight back. That's sixteen steps of red dust all over my green slate vinyl floor. His floor too, but I'm the one who cleans it.

On the radio, the interviewer asks, "So, what other fakes have we got hiding in our kitchens?" Frankly, I don't want to know, so I switch the radio off. For my money, ever since they went to

all-streaming stations, radio hasn't been the same. You don't even know where they're broadcasting from. I'm not even sure it's *called* broadcasting anymore.

"Got any clouds?" I ask Chester, the one question that's always on the tip of my tongue.

"Nothin' that'll matter."

"Well, maybe tomorrow."

"Yeah. Maybe." He hoists a box of 200-count tissues out of the closet and cradles it against his filthy plaid work shirt. Why he couldn't have asked me to hand that to him, I'll never know. And why he acts like it's so damn heavy? Hell. Might as well ask why I married the man in the first place. Might as well ask.

"Nose keeps runnin'," he says, and he heads for the door, the bulge of his gut leading the way. "I go through these things so fast nowadays, I damn near need a starting gun."

He almost looks at me then, but not quite. He's working, and if he looks at me while he's working, we'll have to talk about *why* we're working, what we're working toward. It's a conversation neither of us wants to have, so I help him out by looking away, and he escapes through the door like some bulky jackrabbit. The whole room rattles when the door comes to. Hollow walls in this house. You'd think a good western ranch would be better built.

I go back to the pie, thinking about Chester's allergies and my asthma. I need a refill on albuterol, I think I'm out. But I figure that can wait 'til tomorrow, because I don't really need my albuterol. Or, if I do, it's not the kind of thing I like to admit, which is why it can damn well wait.

Mostly, I think about rain. We have got to get some rain.

After supper, I help unload when the truck comes with the supplement. Corn, most of it, but about twenty percent is actual grass. Or so they tell us. "RealGrass," they call it. One hundred percent pure, but musty smelling, like somebody stuffed an old hay barn in each and every sack. The grass part, they grow that indoors in some greenhouse complex back in Indiana. They still get rain there, but too much, now, and at all the wrong times. The radio

says that when it rains in Indiana, it comes down in sheets. Wipes out whole hillsides. Roads. Farms. People's lives.

The delivery truck drives off, honking once at the cattle guard. Chester and the boys throw the supplement sacks on their shoulders and head for the corral. I put mine on the hand truck. They can tease me all they want, but I'm not twenty-five any more, and no matter how much all-American homemade apple pie I eat, I'm never gonna top one hundred fifteen on the scale, so.

"Hey, Ms. Hollis," says Duke, one of the boys. Not my boy, and not Chester's. These are hired hands, Duke and Brady, and not bad, as hired hands go. Better than Lou, anyhow. Lou can rope a cow when he has a mind, but he's a show-off with a horse, and the only time you see him slinging supplement bags is when he's nosing around for his paycheck.

"What's on your mind?" I ask.

"You ever been up to Salt Lake?"

"Sure. Long time ago."

"You like it?"

Fact is, no, I didn't, but Duke's a nice kid, so it's easier to lie. I tell him I guess I liked it well enough, except the whole place smelled like gasoline and hot tarmac. He laughs, not because I'm funny, but because he can't think of what to say next. That's a habit Duke could stand to lose—or maybe not, since there'd be a damn sight less laughter around this ranch if he ever figured out what he ought to be saying. But, tongue-tied or not, he's been a significant help these past five years, especially since David left. I know it's natural for a mother to miss her son, but that don't make David's absence any easier. As for Duke, if he took a notion to head north, I might not miss him all that much, but it would be bad news all 'round for the ranch.

"Don't worry, Ms. Hollis," he says at last. "I'm only thinkin' about a visit. Spread my wings for a week or so maybe. See the world."

Duke slings his supplement bag over the edge of the big metal trough. I wrestle mine off the hand truck until it tips over. The

sack falls like a dead thing, and a puff of dust goes up when it lands. Red Utah dust.

I look up, shading my eyes against the gorgeous golden sunset. The rocks up along the edge of the mesa are turning colors like God himself pulled up a front row seat, but I don't care, not anymore. A cattle ranch don't survive on color. What a cattle ranch needs is four things: wide open space, damn good fencing, steady water, and grass. The first two, any old fool can provide. But water? The whole of last year, it didn't rain once, and this year, we've had a quarter inch total and August is already half over. If it don't come soon, it ain't gonna come at all.

Duke pretends he's got a rock in his boot until Brady and Chester head back on their own for round two. Chester's in the lead, still working. My Chester, he's stumbled onto a crucial secret: if he works hard enough, he won't have to notice all that ground beneath his boots, the ground where we used to have grass—grass and, before that, a cryptobiotic mat, that black crusty stuff the Parks people were always so hung up on. "Don't tread on that!" they'd holler, laying down the law about how it took hundreds of years for each patch to form. Trumped-up alarmists, every one, those Parks people—except now we're trying to manufacture more of that crunchy soil, as fast as we can, in New Jersey, of all places. Synthetic soil for all-natural Utah. I would say it's ludicrous, but it looks like this time the doomsayers were right: if we ever want to have grass again, we need that crust.

Goddamned grass. I could live without it, personally—asthma don't like grass—but not having it leaves our cattle chewing through supplement like nobody's business. Sack after sack after expensive sack.

"Ms. Hollis," says Duke, as he hauls his boot back on, "you've always been straight with me, but I gotta ask. How long do you and Chester figure you can hold out?"

Without rain, he means. Rain to make the grass grow. Rain to keep the faucets flowing and the toilets flushing. Because at this rate, pretty soon we won't even have rabbit brush and Mormon

tea, much less grass. We won't have anything but sand. Sand and red-gold rock that you can't do nothing with except maybe mine uranium, and good luck to you on that.

"Well," I say, after a cough that I can't quite help, "if you stick around, 'stead of suckin' on gas fumes up north, I reckon you'll know the answer about the same time we do."

Duke laughs, and I don't blame him. Sometimes nobody knows what to say next.

Chester's finished work for the day, so now he's ready for other types of distractions. He's got my belt off and the top button of my jeans popped when the telephone rings. That phone's so ancient, it's still got an old twist cord, and you'd think it wouldn't have the energy to ring anymore, but it does. As soon as Chester hears it, his face gets that let-down look, like he's six and some teacher's gone and yelled at him.

"Ignore it," he says, knowing I won't.

"Could be David," I say, but just to give him hope, I pop the second button on my jeans and yank the zipper down. "Hang tight, sweetie. Dessert's comin' right up."

The phone's on its fourth ring by the time I pick up, which is cutting it fine. The computer takes over on the fifth, and I don't know how to get the voice program to let me on once it answers.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mom." It's David, all right. He's gone about as far as he can from ranch life, but one thing he never lost is the knack for rising early. I glance at the clock. Eight-fifteen here. So for him, in Israel, it's just after five in the morning.

I ask him if everything's all right. He says sure, no worries. The combat zone is a hundred k's away, maybe more. The bullets would have been closer, a few years back, but I guess times change, even in the Holy Land.

David says, "You want to hear something that Dad just isn't going to believe?" David stopped saying "ain't" and "gonna" the day he applied to college. Seemed funny at the time. Now I actually miss it.

David says, "We were doing soil samples in some of the burn areas. Trying to figure out where all this sediment came from. Mostly North Africa, we knew that. A little from Spain and Italy, Greece. But get this—about an inch down, there's a layer, a really thin, thin layer, that came straight from Kane County."

I'm not sure I heard right. "Kane County, as in here?"

"Kane County, Utah. Or maybe Garfield. Could even be some of it's from over the border in Colorado, but it's slickrock for sure. The profile's exact." He launches into a tirade about iron and silicates, cyanobacterial whatsits and cryptogamic "presentation"—an awful word, makes me think about doctors, mostly oncologists. My son, the scientist.

David finally runs out of steam. "Isn't that crazy? I spent most of the last two days wading through bits of home. I can actually see it on my boots."

Home. My home ain't in Israel, that's for damn sure, no matter how much of my topsoil the Good Lord's winds blow that way. Not that the Holy Land's home for anyone now, not anymore. That country's gone dry as a bone; no water anywhere. From the time I was knee-high, all the radio ever talked about over there was another round of peace talks. Well, turns out all it took to seal the peace was a five-year drought.

David says he's got to run. His team's got more work today, trying to map out flight patterns for all the world's dirt. When he got this job—an internship, really, he's only nineteen—I told him, I said, "I remember when dirt didn't travel, except maybe downhill." He laughed, but unlike Duke, he had something to say. He said the work he'd be doing might help keep everybody's dirt locked down at home, and he sounded cheerful, downright optimistic, but then David always has been a master at lying to his mother.

"Good night, Mom. Hug Dad, okay? And get outside in the evenings, I bet you're getting some pretty sharp sunsets."

He's right about that. Dust storms in the red rock country do make for some honest-to-God outrageous sunsets.

I cock an ear for Chester, listening for his every-ten-seconds dust-in-his-lungs cough, and sure enough, there he is in the den,

online already, whiskey at his elbow. I don't have to see the screen to know he's checking the latest from the federal cloud-seeding project. Above him on the wall hang the two old portraits, Isaac Behunin on the left, Grandmother Kane on the right. They came into this country like lions, those people. Like lions.

Since Chester's been sidetracked, I button up my jeans and head back to the kitchen. I shove the pie out of the way, pull out the keyboard, and type in "fake cinnamon." Sure enough, that East Coaster had it right. I just made me an apple pie with cassia instead of cinnamon. And the more I read, the more it sounds as if every apple pie I ever made or ate had the same damn stuff.

Have I ever even tasted real cinnamon?

I grab hold of the canister and cross to the sink—it takes two steps, I've counted—and I rip the lid off and dump the whole damn thing down the drain. Except it won't go. This cassia's all powder, and it's so fine, it's everywhere now, brown dust all over the sink, the counter, the floor. I can't help but inhale the stuff, and suddenly I can't catch my breath. I sneeze hard, that helps, but a second later, I gulp in more, and suddenly I'm swatting the air with my hands like some helpless old blue-hair. I need a space, a space for air.

I need my goddamned albuterol.

Chester comes barging into the kitchen demanding to know what's wrong, why am I on my knees and turning purple, but he's moving too fast for the liquor in his blood, not to mention the cassia all over the floor—my precious slate green floor—and next thing you know, he skids and crashes sidelong into the dishwasher. Knocks the wind right out of himself.

He lays there blinking at me, a derailed train, and I cough harder, wheezing, choking, 'cos now there's nothing else to do. Chester's up and reaching for the phone, he's dialing 9-1-1, something I'm proud to say we haven't had to do since toddler David crunched up a handful of Tylenol and had to have his stomach pumped. Funny what you think on when you realize that the air you need isn't coming back, not ever, and that there is no way on God's little red-dust earth that the EMTs will get to you in time.

It occurs to me that maybe what my windpipe needs isn't albuterol, but a tall glass of water. With a last-gasp effort, I try to push myself toward the sink, but no good: my muscles won't cooperate. No rain for the ranch, and now no rain for me—or at least not that I can reach. All my world has left to give is dust.

I don't see a tunnel with a light at the end, which is a pity, 'cos that would be downright comforting. All I see, between dry gasping coughs, is blur, like someone's pulling curtains over my eyes from every direction at once.

The last sure thing I catch sight of, through what's left of my pinhole vision, is Chester. He's got one arm gesticulating like some crazed marionette, and his eyes are pleading, begging hard for something, though I can't quite fix on what. My attention, maybe? Must be that, 'cos he's straining toward me, leaning hard, but it's no use: that surly old phone cord won't give him the rope to come near.

Outside, the cattle shift in the darkness, restless and stupid, and whatever clouds the day gave us shred into vapor and vanish in a bottomless desert of stars. ∞