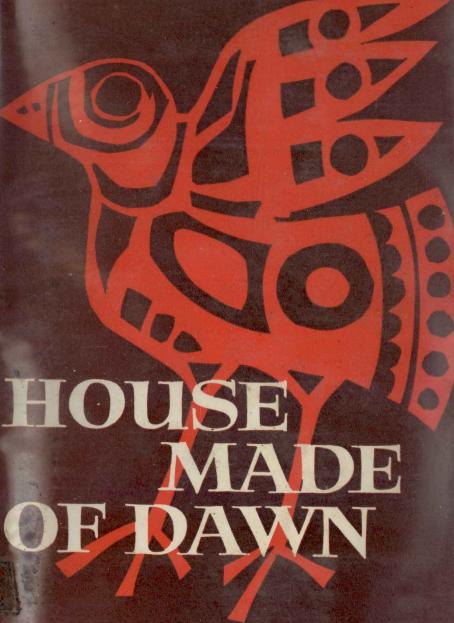
N SCOTT MOMADAY



A NOVEL

HOUSE MADE OF DAWN

BY N. SCOTT MOMADAY

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PROLOGUE

• Dypaloh. There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting. There were many colors on the hills, and the plain was bright with different-colored clays and sands. Red and blue and spotted horses grazed in the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond. The land was still and strong. It was beautiful all around.

Abel was running. He was alone and running, hard at first, heavily, but then easily and well. The road curved out in front of him and rose away in the distance. He could not see the town. The valley was gray with rain, and snow lay out upon the dunes. It was dawn. The first light had been deep and vague in the mist, and then the sun flashed and a great yellow glare fell under the cloud. The road verged upon clusters of juniper and mesquite, and he could see the black angles and twists of wood beneath the hard white crust; there was a shine and glitter on the ice. He was running, running. He could see the horses in the fields and the crooked line of the river below.

For a time the sun was whole beneath the cloud; then it rose into eclipse, and a dark and certain shadow came upon the land. And Abel was running. He was naked to the waist,

and his arms and shoulders had been marked with burnt wood and ashes. The cold rain slanted down upon him and left his skin mottled and streaked. The road curved out and lay into the bank of rain beyond, and Abel was running. Against the winter sky and the long, light landscape of the valley at dawn, he seemed almost to be standing still, very little and alone.

THE LONGHAIR

Walatowa, Cañon de San Diego, 1945

JULY 20

The river lies in a valley of hills and fields. The north end of the valley is narrow, and the river runs down from the mountains through a canyon. The sun strikes the canyon floor only a few hours each day, and in winter the snow remains for a long time in the crevices of the walls. There is a town in the valley, and there are ruins of other towns in the canyon. In three directions from the town there are cultivated fields. Most of them lie to the west, across the river, on the slope of the plain. Now and then in winter, great angles of geese fly through the valley, and then the sky and the geese are the same color and the air is hard and damp and smoke rises from the houses of the town. The seasons lie hard upon the land. In summer the valley is hot, and birds come to the tamarack on the river. The feathers of blue and yellow birds are prized by the townsmen.

The fields are small and irregular, and from the west mesa they seem an intricate patchwork of arbors and gardens, too numerous for the town. The townsmen work all summer in the fields. When the moon is full, they work at night with ancient, handmade plows and hoes, and if the weather is good and the water plentiful they take a good harvest from the fields. They grow the things that can be preserved easily: corn and chilies and alfalfa. On the town side of the river there are a few orchards and patches of melons and grapes and squash. Every six or seven years there is a great harvest of piñones far to the east of the town. That harvest, like the deer in the mountains, is the gift of God.

It is hot in the end of July. The old man Francisco drove a team of roan mares near the place where the river bends around a cottonwood. The sun shone on the sand and the river and the leaves of the tree, and waves of heat shimmered from the stones. The colored stones on the bank of the river were small and smooth, and they rubbed together and cracked under the wagon wheels. Once in a while one of the roan mares tossed its head, and the commotion of its dark mane sent a swarm of flies into the air. Downstream the brush grew thick on a bar in the river, and there the old man saw the reed. He turned the mares into the water and stepped down on the sand. A sparrow hung from the reed. It was upside down and its wings were partly open and the feathers at the back of its head lay spread in a tiny ruff. The eyes were neither open nor closed. Francisco was disappointed, for he had wished for a male mountain bluebird, breast feathers the pale color of April skies or of turquoise, lake water. Or a summer tanager: a prayer plume ought to be beautiful. He drew the reed from the sand and cut loose the horsehair from the sparrow's feet. The bird fell into the water and was carried away in the current. He turned the reed in his hands; it was smooth and nearly translucent, like the spine of an eagle feather, and it was not yet burned and made brittle by the sun and wind. He had cut the hair too short, and he pulled another from the tail of the near roan and set the snare again. When the reed was curved and strung like a bow, he replaced it carefully in the sand. He laid

his forefinger lightly on top of the reed and the reed sprang and the looped end of the hair snapped across his finger and made a white line above the nail. "Si, bien hecho," he said aloud, and without removing the reed from the sand he cocked it again.

The sun rose higher and the old man urged the mares away from the river. Then he was on the old road to San Ysidro. At times he sang and talked to himself above the noise of the wagon: "Yo heyana oh . . . heyana oh . . . heyana oh Abelito . . . tarda mucho en venir. . . ." The mares pulled easily, with their heads low. He held a vague tension on the lines and settled into the ride by force of habit. A lizard ran across the road in front of the mares and crouched on a large flat rock, its tail curved over the edge. Far away a whirlwind moved toward the river, but it soon spun itself out and the air was again perfectly still.

He was alone on the wagon road. The pavement lay on a higher parallel at the base of the hills to the east. The trucks of the town—and those of the lumber camps at Paliza and Vallecitos—made an endless parade on the highway, but the wagon road was used now only by the herdsmen and planters whose fields lay to the south and west. When he came to the place called Seytokwa, Francisco remembered the race for good hunting and harvests. Once he had played a part; he had rubbed himself with soot, and he ran on the wagon road at dawn. He ran so hard that he could feel the sweat fly from his head and arms, though it was winter and the air was filled with snow. He ran until his breath burned in his throat and his fect rose and fell in a strange repetition that seemed apart from all his effort. At last he had overtaken Mariano, who was everywhere supposed to be the best of the long-race runners. For

a long way Mariano kept just beyond his reach; then, as they drew near the corrals on the edge of the town, Francisco picked up the pace. He drew even and saw for an instant Mariano's face, wet and contorted in defeat . . . "Se dió por vencido" . . . and he struck it with the back of his hand, leaving a black smear across the mouth and jaw. And Mariano fell and was exhausted. Francisco held his stride all the way to the Middle, and even then he could have gone on running, for no reason, for only the sake of running on. And that year he killed seven bucks and seven does. Some years afterward, when he was no longer young and his leg had been stiffened by disease, he made a pencil drawing on the first page of a ledger book which he kept with his store of prayer feathers in the rafters of his room. It was the likeness of a straight black man running in the snow. Beneath it was the legend "1889."

He crossed the river below the bridge at San Ysidro. The roan mares strained as they brought the wagon up the embankment and onto the pavement. It was almost noon. The doors of the houses were closed against the heat, and even the usual naked children who sometimes shouted and made fun of him had gone inside. Here and there a dog, content to have found a little shade, raised its head to look but remained outstretched and quiet. Well before he came to the junction, he could hear the slow whine of the tires on the Cuba and Bloomfield road. It was a strange sound; it began at a high and descending pitch, passed, and rose again to become at last inaudible, lost in the near clatter of the rig and hoofs-lost even in the slow, directionless motion of the flies. But it was recurrent: another, and another; and he turned into the intersection and drove on to the trading post. He had come about seven miles.

At a few minutes past one, the bus came over a rise far down in the plain and its windows caught for a moment the light of the sun. It grew in the old man's vision until he looked away and limped around in a vague circle and smoothed the front of his new shirt with his hands. "Abelito, Abelito," he repeated under his breath, and he glanced at the wagon and the mares to be sure that everything was in order. He could feel the beat of his heart, and instinctively he drew himself up in the dignity of his age. He heard the sharp wheeze of the brakes as the big bus rolled to a stop in front of the gas pump, and only then did he give attention to it, as if it had taken him by surprise. The door swung open and Abel stepped heavily to the ground and reeled. He was drunk, and he fell against his grandfather and did not know him. His wet lips hung loose and his eyes were half closed and rolling. Francisco's crippled leg nearly gave way. His good straw hat fell off and he braced himself against the weight of his grandson. Tears came to his eyes, and he knew only that he must laugh and turn away from the faces in the windows of the bus. He held Abel upright and led him to the wagon, listening as the bus moved away at last and its tires began to sing upon the road. On the way back to the town, Abel lay ill in the bed of the wagon and Francisco sat bent to the lines. The mares went a little faster on the way home, and near the bridge a yellow dog came out to challenge them.

JULY 21

Abel slept through the day and night in his grandfather's house. With the first light of dawn he arose and went out. He walked swiftly through the dark streets of the town and all the dogs began to bark. He passed through the maze of corrals and crossed the highway and climbed the steep escarpment of the hill. Then he was high above the town and he could see the whole of the valley growing light and the far mesas and the sunlight on the crest of the mountain. In the early morning the land lay huge and sluggish, discernible only as a whole, with nothing in relief except its own sheer, brilliant margin as far away as the eye could see, and beyond that the nothingness of the sky. Silence lay like water on the land, and even the frenzy of the dogs below was feeble and a long time in finding the ear.

"Yahah!" he had yelled when he was five years old, and he climbed up on the horse behind Vidal and they went out with their grandfather and the others—some in wagons, but most on foot and horseback—across the river to the cacique's field. It was a warm spring morning, and he and Vidal ran ahead of the planters over the cool, dark furrows of earth and threw stones at the birds in the gray cottonwoods and

elms. Vidal took him to the face of the red mesa and into a narrow box canyon which he had never seen before. The bright red walls were deep, deeper than he could have imagined, and they seemed to close over him. When they came to the end, it was dark and cool as a cave. Once he looked up at the crooked line of the sky and saw that a cloud was passing and its motion seemed to be that of the great leaning walls themselves, and he was afraid and cried. When they returned, he went to his grandfather and watched him dig with the hoe. The work was nearly finished, and the men broke open the wall of the ditch, and he stood there watching the foaming brown water creep among the furrows and go into the broken earth.

His mother had come in the wagon with Francisco, and she had made oven bread and rabbit stew and coffee and round blue cornmeal cakes filled with jam, coarse and faintly sweet, like figs. They ate on the ground in groups, according to family and clan, all but the cacique and governor and the other officials of the town, who sat at the place of honor nearest the trees.

He did not know who his father was. His father was a Navajo, they said, or a Sia, or an Isleta, an outsider anyway, which made him and his mother and Vidal somehow foreign and strange. Francisco was the man of the family, but even then he was old and going lame. And even then the boy could sense his grandfather's age, just as he knew somehow that his mother was soon going to die of her illness. It was nothing he was told, but he knew it anyway and without understanding, as he knew already the motion of the sun and the seasons. He was tired then, and he rode home in the wagon beside his mother and listened to his grandfather sing. His mother died

in October, and for a long time afterward he would not go near her grave, and he remembered that she had been beautiful in a way that he as well as others could see and her voice had been as soft as water.

Something frightened him. There was an old woman. They called her Nicolás teah-whau because she had a white mustache and a hunched back and she would beg for whiskey on the side of the road. She was a Bahkyush woman, they said, and a witch. She was old the first time he had seen her, and drunk. She had screamed at him some unintelligible curse, appearing out of a cornfield when as a child he had herded the sheep nearby. And he had run away, hard, until he came to a clump of mesquite on the bank of an arroyo. There he caught his breath and waited for the snake-killer dog to close the flock and follow. Later, when the sheep had filed into the arroyo and from the bank he could see them all, he dropped a little bread for the snake-killer dog, but the dog had quivered and laid back its ears. Slowly it backed away and crouched, not looking at him, not looking at anything, but listening. Then he heard it, the thing itself. He knew even then that it was only the wind, but it was a stranger sound than any he had ever known. And at the same time he saw the hole in the rock where the wind dipped, struck, and rose. It was larger than a rabbit hole and partly concealed by the chokecherry which grew beside it. The moan of the wind grew loud, and it filled him with dread. For the rest of his life it would be for him the particular sound of anguish.

He was older then, but still a child, and all afternoon he waited outside of the house. The old men went in for the last

time, and he heard them pray. He remembered the prayer, and he knew what it meant—not the words, which he had never really heard, but the low sound itself, rising and falling far away in his mind, unmistakable and unbroken. But even then, when he knew what it was that he was waiting for, it seemed a long time before his grandfather called to him. The sun was low, and there was a stillness all around. He went into the room and stood by the side of the bed. His grandfather left him there alone, and he looked at his brother's face. It was terribly thin and colorless, but all the pain was gone from it. Then, under his breath and because he was alone, he spoke his brother's name.

Francisco nudged him awake, and he dressed himself in the bitter cold. He was—how old?—seventeen then, and once he had hunted in clear weather like this and risen as early in order to be near the stream at daybreak. Yes, and the first to come was a mule doe, small and long-haired, unsuspecting but full of latent flight. He brought the rifle up with no sound that he could hear, but the doe's head sprang up and its body stiffened. Then he stood, and the doe exploded away. The crack of the rifle reverberated among the trees, and he ran to the place where the ground was scarcely marked but for the two small tracks against which the doe had driven itself up and out through the branches. But farther on there was blood, and then the doe itself, lying across the trunk of a dead tree with its tongue out and smoking and the wound full of hot blood, welling out.

Francisco had already hitched the team to the wagon, and they set out. That was January 1, 1937. The moon and stars were out, and as yet there was no sign of the dawn. His face

burned with the cold and he huddled over and blew into his hands. And a part of the way he ran beside the horses, swinging his arms high and scaring them to a trot. At Sia they waited in the house of Juliano Medina for the dawn. It was nearly time, and Juliano built a fire and gave them coffee. The deer and antelope had already gone out into the hills, and the crows were dressing in the kiva. When it was gray outside, they went to the Middle and there were already some old people there, Navajos and Domingos in blankets. The singing had begun. Directly the sun shone on the horizon and the deer and the antelope ran down from the hills and the crows and the buffalo and the singers came out and the dance began. There was plenty of excitement; a lot of the men had rifles, and they fired them into the air and shouted. He watched the black half-naked crows hopping about and stooping, and he thought of how cold they must be, with the big, gleaming conchos like ice, pressing into their bellies and backs. But it was all right; it was good, that dance, nearly perfect.

Later, when he had drunk some wine, one of Medina's daughters lay down with him outside of the town, on a dune by the river. She was pretty, and laughing all the while—and he, too, though the wine had made him nearly sullen and his laughter was put on and there was nothing to it. Her body, when at last it shuddered and went limp, had not been enough for him and he wanted her again. But she dressed and ran away from him, and he could not catch her because he was drunk and his legs would not work for him. He tried to get her back, but she stood away and laughed at him.

He had seen a strange thing, an eagle overhead with its