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# Howardsville Depot and other stories

John Albert Childrey  
*Florida International University*

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HOWARDSVILLE DEPOT AND OTHER STORIES

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

CREATIVE WRITING

by

John Albert Childrey, Jr.

1994

To: Dr. Arthur W. Herriott, Dean  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by John A. Childrey, Jr., and entitled Howardsville Depot and Other Stories, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for your judgement.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

John Dufresne

Lynne Barrett

Richard Sugg

Date of Defense: March 23, 1994

The thesis of John A. Childrey, Jr. is approved.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott  
College of Arts and Sciences

Dr. Richard L. Campbell  
Dean of Graduate Studies

Florida International University, 1994

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother,  
Frances Ashton Trice Childrey,  
a daughter of Howardsville.

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I am indebted to John Dufresne, the thesis supervisor, who has supported this project for a long time and given extra time and energy to encouraging the writer and teacher I aspire to be. I appreciate the patient work of my committee readers, Lynne Barrett and Richard Sugg, whose questions and suggestions focussed the stories for their current editing.

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Without the confidence and patience of my colleagues, students and other friends at Florida Atlantic University this project could not have been completed.

I don't know how Candy, Amy, and Sean, my wife and children, put up with yet one more degree, but I am grateful that they have.

**ABSTRACT OF THESIS**

**HOWARDSVILLE DEPOT AND OTHER STORIES**

by

**John A. Childrey, Jr.**

**Florida International University, 1994**

**Miami, Florida**

**Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor**

The collection of stories recreates an impression of a lost time and place. In "Howardsville Depot," the stories are set in rural Virginia and span the years from 1929 to 1969. While kernel situations are based in identifiable events, the stories explore the subtle dreams and aspirations of characters in the community which has the railroad depot as its hub.

In "Head-on Collisions," protagonists find themselves in inevitable situations provoked by their own limitations. The only choices are forced and evolutionary with no clear solutions.

Howardsville Depot

1.

## The Jar Fly

A jar fly sang a piercing one-note symphony on an August afternoon in 1989. I may have expected the hum of flies, or at least, a flutter of dragonflies's wings over the gentle murmur of ripples as the clear water of the Rockfish River eased into the wash brown of the wider, slower James River, momentarily creating a reflected blue basin before accelerating away again in its broad silent reaches. But the only whisper of sound was the awful silence disjoined by the jar fly whine.

I imagined the town and community that existed here fifty-seven years ago near this same confluence of waters. I might have taken a walk down the one block, down toward the rivers from the train depot through Howardsville. The street is unpaved. Walking or driving, the street leads, in a final right angle, to a high steel one-lane bridge over a muddy James River.

First, across from the depot there is a mule drawn wagon in front of Bragg's Hotel. Dr. Nolting's summer

office is next; the building becomes a library, usually in fall and spring, when she practices medicine at St. Lukes's Hospital in Richmond. Dr. Nolting's Office is the only painted building on the street in Howardsville.

Next on the left is Cobbs's Store. Bessie sweeps the front porch, and she stops and waves. The cold drink box, inside, is filled with chunks of ice floating in very cold water. I imagine reaching into the box to snare a NuGrape and enjoying the thrill of the cold. Outside, but attached, is the Post Office, a six-by-eight-foot room just big enough for Bessie to post today's mail. A nineteenth century frame house is next; it's the last house before the bridge.

The ruin of that house and Cobb's store were overgrown with weeds and saplings as I stood imagining my 1932 walk through Howardsville.

Across the street on the south side, Cobbs's house is closest to the bridge, then Baber's smithy and garage, finally Gibb's Store. Then, back at the depot, on the rising hills west, the Giles's house has an inviting shade tree and a rocking chair on the porch. Other stores and houses are along the road as it meanders to the left, away from the depot; rising slightly, the road extends past the brick church and Masonic Lodge as it climbs towards Mt. Alto. South from the depot are the railroad trestle and the road bridge over the Rockfish River; Mrs. Bircher's house is further along, and finally in an afternoon's blue haze the

road loops up and right towards Mrs. Johns's hill. Finally to the north, the depot is on my left as I look down the tracks; the road flows up and left towards Scottsville. The railroad tracks bend along the old canal bed, skirting the lowgrounds to the right and next to the ball field behind Dr. Nolting's office.

In this new August, rolled hay has been harvested from the lowground and ball field, while the sunlight reflected from the railroad tracks.

Maybe in that far away August, while the raucous call of young jays--I imagined the second hatching of the season--sounds against the giggles of children swimming beneath the bridge, there are a series of measured whoops from a rotund stationmaster serving as watchman. This father-lookout perches, one foot rests on the lowest rail and his summer serge-covered forearms press against the crossbeams of the bridge. He surveys the watery spectacle with an amused countenance, then he hollers, "Stay close," or "Come home for dinner."

But in this present August not even fishermen have parked their boat trailers in the public places, indicating life. The solitary jar fly and I were the only inhabitants.

I knew I needed to be here on the afternoon following my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. Howardsville was where their story began, and indirectly my own, their only child. The town's buildings and depot no longer existed

except in some memories and old pictures. Most of the people were gone, dead or moved away. My mother's memory was gone to Alzheimer's. As I stood there, I wanted to tell some of the town's stories, some of the memories. What I didn't know, I'd have to suggest.

I knew that here in the community of Howardsville my parents met in 1932. I knew mother had been happy in this cross-roads community where her father was stationmaster. There was much I did not know and will not know. I knew that I must write, if not her story, a story, many stories of the quiet heroism of the inhabitants of Howardsville: the daily survival of its people by acquiescence, expectation or habit. I must write about the people, the happenings: quail hunts--where the quail win, and washing mud-caked Fords before church picnics.

In writing some of these stories I have not always discovered my mother, as much as I have discovered my grandfather who died when I was four, and some of the people who knew them. (These individuals are still shadowy.) I wanted to reflect the spirit of my mother's flood ravished community, and perhaps, to re-create for my children and my cousins's children a collective memory of a town that their grandparents, my mother, her sister, and their brothers called home. I wanted that singular note of the jar fly to carry these imagined stories beyond Howardsville.



### The Howardsville Depot

When I was a child, Mother and I often travelled to Howardsville by train. I supposed Mother had a pass from the Chesapeake and Ohio because granddaddy was stationmaster, station agent. I have no recollection of the time on the train itself. I am left with a vague feeling that it was often at night, when I must have slept.

Men were always with granddaddy when the conductor lifted me from the train into granddaddy's burly waiting arms. His shirt sleeves were usually rolled mid-way up his forearms and his greetings were guffaws. Maybe I was too buried in his arms and chest to hear him clearly. Then quickly he'd swing me down.

"I've work to do."

Mother would take me inside the depot's office: the click-rattle of the telegraph key fascinated me and kept me otherwise occupied; the sleepy eye of Chessie, the cat symbol of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad grinned at me;

even the heart of pine swing gate was just tall enough for me to slip my shoes between the slats. I hung on tightly, and waited for someone to swing me. I loved to hear the clack, clack, clack as some patient hand pushed me.

Eventually, granddaddy would come in and sit down to talk to mother. He took the whole chair, but there was always room for me to hop up, slide off, a dozen times or more, as he and Mom talked. (I simply don't remember trains leaving, only arriving.)

Sometimes we walked to Bessie's Store, then after someone held me over the icebox so I could plunge my hand and face into the slush of water, ice and soda bottles, I would drink a bottle of NuGrape, in miniture bottles that fit my tiny hand. Always the tall adults stood and talked and talked. That's when I helped with sorting of the mail, crisp envelopes with all the funny marks. I found my wet hands smudged blue on paper and fingers at the same time. Bessie smiled and sent me outside.

Then, as the adults continued to talk and talk, I sat on the rough pine porch trying to find courage enough to pull a handful of grass for that old mule tied to the porch post. The mule was tied on reins too short to reach the grass, snorting as my hand reached to stroke the soft nose, rolling back a rubbery mouth to jeehaw to the driver, calling to protest my silent reaching stare.

Then, "It's time." Granddaddy piled us into the

humpbacked Ford and drove us up the road to Mema's house. Later that summer, I played in the belly of the humped-back black Ford. I was too small to see beyond a grit thick dashboard. Once, I forced it out of gear, then I tried to stop its rolling across the unseen farm yard, but the Ford stopped on its own, somewhere down the creek's embankment. Granddaddy drove the Ford fast, I think, as he propelled around the switch-back turns of Mt. Alto. One chance swerve opened the back door outward. I slid across the seat, unfettered by seat belts. I felt my hands reaching out over an emptiness outside the car when mother's hand closed on my sunsuit straps.

Frequently, in the heat of an summer Saturday, dust covered the Ford as thick as it covered me, and it was just as red. In the ford at Wolf's creek we washed its redness back to black.

Sundays, after "taking" a nap I usually woke in a sticky, wet clinging sheet frenzy. The rest of the house roared quiet in its slumbering. The sheer curtains contained sunlight; they swapped the outside heat for a shadowy cool. The sun light must have sat on my sheet tickling me to giggles, but across the room mother was asleep. I didn't want to wake her. So, I tiptoed past empty rooms, but in one Mema was asleep, in another Aunt Pete was asleep. Granddaddy sat in his chair, snoring. The newspaper on his chest was rising and falling; there was

some on the floor, I picked up the funny papers and chuckled at Mutt and Jeff.

Outside the dogs barked at someone shuffling up the road. A crow in the apple orchard answered as I creaked open the screen. I could swing, making my own breeze.

"Johnny!" Mom's voice made my sweat freeze. She wiped my face raw, and sunsuited me. She buckled me into Buster Browns. Then I sat in granddaddy's chair, being "a little picture with big ears."

We sang on the way to the depot, "Down at the Station...see the little pufferbellies...." But in the 1960's, when I visited the boarded up depot with pulpwood stacked along the siding, I only remembered trains leaving.

## The Circus Horse

Frances was elated, but impatient to be off to school. She could be a pretend circus bare-back rider as she rode Major down the mountain. Soon enough she'd be a circus rider. "Come on, Major, let's practice that trick we worked on yesterday."

On cue, Major side-stepped eight times right, then eight times left. While she waited for Hal, she could forget her chores at home, and as she rode to school, if Hal would ever get here.

She stood and twisted in her stirrups and stretched as high as she could, but she still didn't see Hal. She waited at the crossroads as she had been told to. Hal was late, again. But not late enough to make her leave him. He'd always left a note on the note-post saying he'd already started the descent to the river on those few mornings when he beat her to the crossroads.

"Well, come on, slow poke. We'll be late for school. Let's be on time again today." She could taste the trip to

the real circus. From where she fidgeted, Frances saw the far side of the valley. The sun which was sliding up and around the Gianinny's house on Mount Alto lit the tips of the trees across the river. She saw the heavy gray clouds of a threatening storm, hanging just above the tree tops. The five mile trip to school, each way, wasn't too bad, except when it rained. And, she hadn't been tardy or missed a day in the six years she'd been attending school in Schyler.

She shivered with impatience, then she took a deep breath. The aroma of wood smoke from breakfast fires, the bite of chill in mid-March, and the fetid reek of wet winter leaves mixed deliciously. These were the smells of home, crisp and earthy.

She turned to look again. Nothing. Leaving the mountain and was joining the circus was planned carefully. She didn't want Hal to upset those plans by making her late for school, even once.

She simply turned back around to watch the trees and bushes become oaks and maples, dogwood and pine. The sunlight on the bright spring green, dogwood white and redbud made her see the circus.

What fun it would be to be a part of the clowns and acrobats, trapeze flyers and bare-back riders. Maybe she'd see Major's brother. She wondered if he jumped into the water pool the same as Major had. She wondered if Major remembered the circus. She wondered if the tricks she and

Major could perform would catch the Ringmaster's eye. Of course they would. She'd be in the circus. If only Hal would come on, she could pretend now, be, later.

"If only you could talk, Major," she leaned forward and whispered into the chestnut's ear. The ear twitched in apparent agreement. He snorted, and Frances laughed out loud, back at him. She turned around to look again.

"Major, I'll bet you'd tell me all about Richmond and the circus. I hope you want to go back and do your tricks."

Presently, she heard the slow dop dlop of Hal's pony behind her. "Come on, pokey."

"We'll get there soon enough, Frances. I don't have a uncle to saddle my horse for me. I've got to do it myself." Hal began.

"I do most of the bridling. But anyway, I've got other things to do before I can leave. You don't." Frances urged Major on.

"Well, you're not my sister. You can't tell me what to do." Hal kicked the sides of his pony, "Why do you boss like a sister? Ah, let's go."

"We've got to hurry. There's a storm coming."

"It's always something we've got to hurry for. What's at school?" Hal wiped his nose on his sleeve.

A disgusting habit, Frances thought as she struggled for her answer. "It's not 'at school.' It's the trip to Richmond."

"So? You've gone to Richmond before. And a circus"

"That's different. We went to see family. We all went. And we did not see a circus." Frances didn't say that trip to Richmond would be her chance to get away from the mountain, escape from the drudgery of chores. Going with Miss Tompkins would be like...like going alone. When she went before, she always had family with her. She always had little brothers to tend to. The trip to Richmond would be just two or three pupils and Miss Tompkins. And the circus.

She had to have her chance at the circus. Perfect attendance, check. At least so far. Good grades, check. No problem there. Hal always rode ahead of her. That's no problem either, especially this morning. She needed to think through her plan again, just to see if there was a way she could get Major to the circus too.

Frances knew she wanted to be one of the pupils chosen to go with Mrs. Tompkins. When she was officially chosen, she would write her uncle, a Richmond policeman, to meet her. Then when she reached the circus, she and her uncle would wander away from Mrs. Tompkins. Mrs. Tompkins would not object since she was with her uncle. Then she would find the tent where the bareback riders stabled their horses. She knew she would recognize Major's brother right away. But it would be a better plan if she could take Major.



"Don't get so far ahead, Hal," Frances called to a disappearing back going around the first of two right hand curves.

"Stop day dreaming and come on," she heard him call back.

Mount Alto was also called Two Mile Mountain, but that was a recent name. The newly built road was almost two miles from top to bottom. Most of it was switchbacks, sharp turns cut into the mountain. From the one long cut across the face of the mountain, almost a full half-mile straight stretch provided an overlook of the river.

"I saw the river through the trees while I waited for you." Frances thought Hal might be interested in the storm clouds as she caught up with him.

"So what? We see it every morning, halfway down. We don't need to take the ford today." Hal grumbled, "It's too cold to get wet, today. We don't need to see Major's diving trick."

"We're likely to get wet, anyway."

"We've had rain before. We've got slicks."

"But we're real close to being late," she was afraid Miss Tompkins wouldn't take her if she were tardy or absent. She wanted to be a bare-back rider in the circus.

Next year she'd be fifteen and be expected to drive the bus to the high school in Scottsville. She didn't want that responsibility, too. They expected too much since her

mother had been sick: her brothers helped, but mostly they teased her about her circus dreams; and most of the night she spent cooking and doing her chores, and theirs, so they could all go to school the next day.

"You're a worrywart. We're doing okay. Can't you think of anything else, but winning that trip to Richmond? Miss Tompkins' not gonna take me. I've already missed three days."

The surface of the mountainside road was soapstone. Rutted by wagons' wheels and infrequent narrow wheeled Fords, the slippery and rocky surface provided uncertain footing for the horses. Frances' chestnut, accustomed to being careful, picked its way easier than Hal's pony. Even though it had shorter legs, the pony seemed more skittish when rocks slid under her hooves, or when she placed a hoof on the ridge of one of the ruts.

Frances held the reins in a comfortable tautness with her right hand and grasped the mane or the edge of the saddle with her left. Hal had a two-hand grip on the reins. While the horses carefully stepped down the mountain, Frances and Hal said nothing. Frances could see they were both reacting to an urgency in the pitch and roll of the horses' movements.

She continued to look at the sky as the clouds became black and boiled behind the trees and hills across the river. The sun vanished when they rounded a turn. The

light and color of the spring trees faded in the rain across the river when they made the next turn.

"Watch Major, girl." Hal spit, "He'll step on Majestic Lady's forelock."

"Now, Hal, you know it was your Lady cut in front." He's in a nasty mood this morning, she thought, without saying anything more to Hal. The road was dangerous enough without Hal's pony tripping Major. She didn't want any horsing around.

Frances' attention was jolted by a sound just above and behind them on the Mount Alto road. The creak and rattle of a brace of mules and a farm wagon seemed about on top of them. The wall sides of the mountain road seem to avalanche sound on them from the mountain switch backs. Also a cascade of stones bounced in front of the horses causing Hal's pony to snort and shy into Major's withers again.

"Hold tight, Hal, wagon's coming," Frances called out to Hal.

Hal hadn't acted like he heard either the wagon or her yell.

"I'm okay. You hold Major. I've got Lady almost stopped."

Both moved to the inside of the switch-back as the wagon swung around the turn behind them. "Mr. Bardsley, be careful." Frances sensed both voices sing out above the din of horses snorting, mules wheezing, harness slapping and

jingling, and the wooden turn of the wheel needing axle grease.

Bardsley, yelling something to them or to the mules, passed in a clatter, and the wagon jumped a little, throwing trash, a black stick, out of the bed of the wagon, as it hit a rut. Frances and Hal were grateful, with the wetness of the night rain still on the mountain road and the roadside bushes, that there was no dust.

"He's going to Rockfish for apples," Frances ventured, trying to get Hal to talk. "To send to West Virginia."

"I don't know how you'd know he'd send apples to West Virginia. Wouldn't Richmond make more sense?" Hal took her bait.

"The Bardsleys are from West Virginia. His brother's wife was visiting just a month ago. Mama made her some fried apples and apple jelly from some apples we had winter stored. Miss Henrietta made a fuss over the apples and jelly, and Mr. Henry promised he'd send her a few bushels. I'd guess today might be the first day he could get away."

"You are just too smarty, aren't you?"

"Not really, but I listen a lot."

"I know, but do you have to show off? You're so bossy, sometimes. Most of the time. I can't stand it. I'm just glad I'm not your brother." Hal just looked at her. Then he looked into the silky palomino of Lady's mane.

The rain pelted in cold quick sheets as they made the

next turn. It was as if they had ridden into the middle of a waterfall. They pulled on their slicks while the rain poured against their faces and down their necks.

The horses snorted as they rounded the next turn. They almost lurched into Mr. Bardsley's wagon. The wagon had slid diagonally across the road. One wheel almost had slipped over the edge.

"I was going too fast. The rain caught me unawares, kids." Mr. Bardsley bent down and continued to look in his wagon and furtively around the wheel marks. "But I seem to've lost my wallet when the wagon skidded."

"I think it fell off your seat when you passed us," Hal whispered.

"What's that you say, Hal Fenwick?"

"I said, I think it fell out when you hit that rut passing us a while back," Hal mumbled, and Frances saw his face turned red.

Talking to Mr. Bardsley would take time they didn't have this morning in the rain. She thought they needed to get on to school.

Frances suspected that Hal had planned to stop and look for it on the way home that afternoon, but now he'd been caught out. "Tell him where it's at, Hal," Frances commanded.

"It's just past white rock turn. In that stretch."

"I'll have to drive to the bottom and then come back up

the mountain to get it," Mr. Bardsley exhaled. "Or walk back."

"I'll ride back for it," Frances heard herself say. "Major is sure footed. He was in the circus and knows lots of tricks. The rain won't bother either of us." She knew what she had to do.

"You ride up here with me and wrap a blanket around yourself," Mr. Bardsley addressed Hal. "Miss Frances, if you could find that wallet, I'd be appreciative. We'll head on down the cut. I'm sure you'll catch up to us before we reach the bottom. Those mules'll go real slow now."

Frances turned Major and urged him back up the road. In the few minutes they had been talking the rain seemed to increase, but she was so soaked, she hardly thought about it. She couldn't see; she wondered how Major could. They stayed on the inside of the road most of the time, but in two places water was running off the mountain in thick yellow and brown colored torrents. She could feel pebbles in the water, and she knew larger rocks must be washing off the mountain too.

"Major, Daddy told how you used to jump off high boards into water when you were in the circus." She felt at ease talking to Major as they climbed the mountain.

"The Circus. Miss Tompkins will hold the bell." She remembered the head teacher held the bell an extra half hour for those who came a distance in bad weather. In the

rain she had lost all sense of time. But she had promised Mr. Bardsley.

Frances turned Major into the stretch just below white rock turn. Slowly, she searched the ground for the wallet as Major stepped carefully along the edge of the road. She had faith in Major. The rain had not let up, and Frances thought she'd have to dismount and walk when a dark oblong object seemed to materialize right under Major's hoof.

"Major, give that to me." She'd heard her daddy say that a hundred times during hunting season, and Major would scoop a shot bird back to her daddy.

Major tucked his head, bent his right foreleg, and eased himself down nuzzling the object. More rapidly, he straightened up to full height and turned his neck with a snort. The slimy wet leather wallet slapped Frances just under her chin. She almost dropped it. It had soapstone mud and pebbles all over it. It had Major's heavy mucus, horse saliva, where the mud wasn't. She slid it into the saddle holster her Daddy used for his shotgun; it wedged in nicely, safely. She turned Major back down the mountain.

The rain lessened slightly. Frances and Major made good time back to the long cut. The rain became heavier when they made the turn where the wagon had been before. Frances reined Major and saw the gouge where the wagon had slid.

Through the gloom and rain she saw the wagon near the

far end of the cut. She didn't see Hal or Lady. Mr. Bardsley stood next to his mules. Frances thought a wagon wheel had slipped over the edge.

Mr. Bardsley looked up. His eyes seemed glazed, "The wheel froze." His voice broke, "While Hal was riding with me, the pony was tied to the wagon. When the wagon slid... She's gone over." Frances was cold. She couldn't believe what she heard. She was responsible for Hal, and he and the pony were... Mrs. Fenwick expected her to watch out for Hal. Where was Hal? She looked under the wagon, then, at Mr. Bardsley.

"Where is Hal?" her voice sounded curious to her. She felt her throat muscles tighten. "Where is Hal?"

"Hal went down the slope after the pony. I couldn't stop him." Mr. Bardsley anguished face turned to Frances. She thought he was pleading for something, forgiveness or help. She turned Major toward the edge of the road.

"Major." The chestnut, ears alert, side-stepped to the edge of the road. Frances could see a hillside devoid of brush or trees. The Rockfish River was as mayonnaise as the water off the mountain, only more of it. She saw that the river must be thirty feet below her. How am I going to get down there?

"Mr. Bardsley, the hill's given way. A rock slide. I can't see Lady, but Hal's slick is hanging on a limb in the middle. It's on that tree sticking up there. See. That



island covered with water, in the middle of the river.

"I think...I think Hal's still in it, but he's not moving. The water's high. Over the banks. I can't see the banks."

"Can we get to Hal, Miss Frances?"

They were both shouting above the braying of the mules, the drumming of the rain, and the roaring in her ears.

"Can you ride a mule to Johnson's at the foot of the mountain? They've got a telephone," she said, feeling her voice hoarse and loud.

"Of course. The Johnsons. What about you?"

"I'll stay here."

"You'll be safe?"

"I guess so. You'd better go as quickly as you can."

Mr. Bardsley had unfastened the mule's traces from the whiffletree. He stepped onto the wagon and threw himself onto the mule's back. He looked more relaxed to Frances as he waved, then held the harness tightly. He and the mule seem to vanish around the turn and into the gloom of the rain in seconds.

Frances had not left her perch high on Major's shoulders. She looked back at the river; Hal seemed to have pulled himself up the limb a little more. He was conscious. What could she do?

"Hal. Can you hear me?" She yelled. She saw him move and try to wave his arm. Then she noticed the other arm

dangled at his side.

"Hold on, Hal."

Major snorted. Frances seem to understand. For the long winter months she had practiced tricks with Major. Now, the one trick everyone had told her was Major's claim to fame scared her to even think about.

"No, Major."

Major shook his head, up and down. Frances grasped the reins more tightly. She didn't know what else to do. She knew she had to do something. Major snorted again and shook his head, trying to pull the reins. He lifted his hoof and counted on the road's berm. She looked again at Hal. She knew she had to try.

"Go, Major."

Major needed no more encouragement. He leaped out from the side of the road. Frances's voice said, "Go." Major's haunches bunched and his other muscles tensed. Before she could think about anything but holding on, Major launched them out twelve feet and down twenty, toward the Rockfish River, churning and boiling in the spring rain and flood. Frances felt the cold water immediately.

Major's bulk kept them from staying under water more than a moment before they were swimming toward Hal. Frances shook the water from her eyes and hair, but she didn't let loose of the reins and mane.

"Hal. Hal, we're coming." She was surprised that she

could yell.

Major swam strongly against the current that wanted to take them away from the overhung tree limb with the patch of yellow. Frances pulled the reins toward the color. She could hardly see with rain and water splashing her. She sensed the great horse slipping away, and she tightened her legs against the saddle.

"Swim, Major, swim. See Hal, don't you see Hal?" She felt a floating tree limb brush past. "Hurry, Major." Her sodden dress was pulling her away from the horse like her brothers did when they swam last summer. "Just there, Major."

Frances freed her right arm long enough to grab Hal's wrist. Hal didn't turn loose and the limb bent and broke. Frances grabbed more of Hal, and Hal grabbed more of her. Major swam to the Nelson County banks. The water was high enough to let Major take a purchase of soggy corn field in the false banks beyond the brush and debris of the river bank.

Hal began walking as soon as his feet touched firm soil in shallow water. He slumped down when they were well away from the river. Major shook all over.

Frances sat erect, high on Major's shoulder. Rain pelted her face, washed the tears burning her eyes. Hal was safe. Maybe he had a broken arm, but he was safe.

"I didn't see Lady. Lady was gone, Hal. I'm sorry."

She and Major had really jumped.

Frances turned to look across the river. Her eyes turned upward, and she could see the single mule and wagon in place in the middle of the mountain. When she turned back, she saw men coming down the farm road.

4.

## The Rockfish River Bridge

### Looking for Boxwood

When I came to Howardsville in the spring of 1932 with Mr. Joshua Waddell, I hadn't been back since my parents's funeral. But Waddell needed to find boxwood plants, and I had to find out why I was the only one to survive the fire.

Waddell had a contract with men in Williamsburg who were reconstructing the formal gardens of the Governor's Palace. Since he knew that my father had farmed several places along the James River between Scottsville and Wingina, the last farm being near Howardsville, he asked me to guide him to out of the way old farms. In fact, he asked if I would guide him to the "hidden hollows and hilltops" where boxwood grew on what once had been colonial farms. He had a poetic sense about him, except when it came to business.

I had been shy of thirteen when the fire killed my

parents. I had been a wiry and tough boy from working the corn rows from planting time to harvest. Momma used to say that I was bright for a boy who didn't much go to school. She read to me every night, and so did Dad when he had time. When I did go to school, usually after the crops were stored or sold in October, I did pretty well with sums and take always. But I excelled in storytelling.

But I had stopped telling stories after the fire when I went to Richmond to live with my Momma's cousin Neva. She sent me to real school. At McGuire's School I learned algebra instead of sums, and Homer instead of storytelling. But I also read mysteries written by that Richmond writer, Poe.

So, I came back to Howardsville with Waddell to solve my personal mystery: why had I survive the fire and Momma and Dad didn't?

For a week Waddell insisted on staying at the Horseshoe Hotel in Scottsville, renting a local car or wagon, and having the owner drive us to farms that he'd hear about at the tavern at night. The local car was a T Model Ford one day, a mule drawn wagon for three days, and we walked one day, Wednesday, when it rained.

We saw boxwood. We saw stump boxwood and tree boxwood in Fork Union. We saw dwarf boxwood and silver boxwood near Charlottesville. And the best boxwood was a velvety leaf variety at a farm on a bluff overlooking the James River,

the site of a colonial smokehouse at Riverview Farm which had been given to the present owners by Teddy Roosevelt after they hunted there. Waddell knew what he wanted, and none of the boxwood we saw was it.

Mr. Waddell was reluctant to go to Howardsville. I suspected his reluctance had to do with his feelings for my father. Maybe he thought I would be afraid of going, and I was. But finally we boarded the morning train on Saturday. Howardsville was only sixteen miles on up the river by rail, but we stopped at Hatton's Ferry and Warren. Maybe the trip lasted forty-fives minutes before the train pulled into the depot at Howardsville.

Compared to Scottsville, Howardsville was simply a cross-roads: a railroad depot, five stores, a blacksmith's-garage combined, Bragg's Hotel, Doctor Nolting's office, six houses, a bridge across the James River east to Buckingham County and a bridge across the Rockfish River south to Nelson County. All this was as I had remembered. When I stood on the dock end of the depot after arriving, I could see that early autumn foliage was nearing its color.

I remembered Cather Jourdan, too, the station master, standing on this same corner of the platform of the depot, looking up the railroad tracks at me, and checking his watch when I waved to him as I was leaving after the deaths of my parents. He had seemed old then, but now almost ten years later, as we arrived he seemed younger than his early

sixties. He was stout, with a shock of curly white hair. He wore clean worsted pants with suspenders, a starched white, long sleeved shirt rolled up to mid-forearm, a red silk tie, and a vest to match his worsted pants. I think he was dressed in just this same way on that other day when he stood on the depot's platform about to send me to Richmond with my Cousin Neva after the funeral. He had told me my dad had had a good eye for birds.

Waddell and the station master seemed to know each other from old times on the railroad in Richmond, so they were guffawing a lot. Old men sat on crates and assorted chairs, settling in to checkers after the hubbub of the train's arrival and departure. We were the only passengers that morning, and nothing much else arrived. A handcar and a flatbedder were rusting on the siding's rails.

The station master clapped me on the shoulder and spun me around. He measured me. I thought he might look at my teeth, he was so thorough in his inspection. He had not seen me for more than eight years, and I had changed from a thirteen-year-old bean pole to a young man of means, or so he said.

"Do you remember any of the old places where boxwood grow?" the station master asked me with a sternness in his look, but a gleam in his eye.

"Yessir. Up at Nolting's place, Monticola. Over at Mr. Watson's in Buckingham. And at maybe half a dozen other



farms from the old canal lock at Warren's Ferry to Wingina," I replied.

I became a little uncomfortable. Mr. Jourdan just stood there, but maybe he thought I talked too much, or maybe he was just thinking of other places to find boxwood.

When he turned to check the other end of the loading dock, his pocket watch chain sparkled for a brief moment in the morning sun. From inside the depot the sound of the telegraph clacked its message, and he smiled.

"Okay, Wingina's section has picked up the train. Now, let's finish talking about boxwood," he moved toward the checker game.

"Cather, we're on our way over to Bragg's and take a room. Maybe get coffee and breakfast. Anyone you know can take us to the farms we need to see?" Waddell seemed impatient.

Mr. Jourdan just smiled. "My daughter Frances, later this afternoon. Wait. I think my son, Catalog, will be along after a little while, maybe he can run you out to Mrs. Johns's place. She has just the boxwood you need without running all over Nelson and Buckingham counties." He paused and stepped a little closer, but I heard anyway. "She could use the money, too. You remember she lost everything in that fire a few years back."

I found myself turning and, instead of looking down the tracks, my gaze tried to see beyond the Rockfish trestle and

Mrs. Bircher's house past the drying, unshocked, corn fields to the first bluff. The cedars and pines were green, but there was another shade amid the evergreen and fall color. A rich, shimmering emerald glow on that hillside.

I had not told Waddell of the boxwood on Mrs. Johns's hill. I refused to think about going to the site of the fire. I didn't want to go. But I wanted to. I wondered how I would feel seeing where the house had been. Maybe, just maybe, there would be more than boxwood on that hill. I didn't believe in ghosts, though I guess that's what I was nervous about.

Frances's name came up in conversation, later, from the men playing checkers. Waddell and I had finished a little breakfast and thrown our bags down at Bragg's. We were waiting for either Frances or her brother to take us out to Mrs. Johns's place.

There were three men in suits and vests sitting in cane chairs on the shaded side of the depot. A checker board was laid out on a crate easily accessible to any of the three. One of the men was tilted back against the side of the depot and he seemed to be asleep. The men seemed to move slowly, whether it was talking or playing checkers.

"Reckon you'll have to git Cather invite you for dinner."

"Or a dance."

The man tilted against the depot never opened his eyes,

I noticed, as the other two directed their comments to me, but he added, "Yep, Frances' a mighty pretty gal. Good cook, too."

"Yeah, he looks like he needs some cooking." They clucked like chickens. "Your move."

Waddell and Catalog, Cather's son, walked up before anyone could tease me anymore. In the car ride to Mrs. Johns's, I thought I could close my eyes as we turned away from the relative smoothness of the ruts of the main road and made our way slowly around the deep grooves of the road up the hillside. Waddell and Catalog were talking, and I couldn't hear them over the sound of the car and the rattling of the rocks against the muffler and underside of the fender. I took a deep breath when the car stopped.

There was no fire gutted house. In fact the lawn seemed like it had been cut recently, and the grass, still fall green, may still have been growing in that Indian summer weather. Only the tall boxwood were still there to give evidence that some building had once adorned the top of the hill. I thought I recognized some lanes where once upon a time I played hide and seek, but I knew it must have been a different boy in a different place.

Mrs. Johns remembered me and was coolly cordial, almost formal, when she offered, "Have a slice of lemon meringue pie and some apple cider?"

Waddell and Mrs. Johns walked around the boxwood and

did some horse trading. Catalog stretched out on the porch swing and seemed to sleep.

I stared. I tried to see Momma and Dad. I thought if I could find something familiar, whatever caused the nightmares might go away. I heard Mrs. Johns say, "I've been through the ashes often enough. Some of my best jewelry was lost in that fire." I looked directly into her face. She was looking at me as if to say it was my fault.

Three weeks, after that, I came back to Howardsville to dig the boxwood with Daffy Coleman for Waddell. Daffy had been a foreman for Waddell ever since I knew him. He was tall and gaunt, but strong. Waddell had paid me well for the other week's work, so when he called me a few days after we arrived home and offered me the job of helping move the boxwood from Mrs. John's hill to the railroad siding at the depot in Howardsville. I'd said, "Yes."

I would get extra money to be the bridge walker. But now I wasn't certain I wanted to go back to Mrs. John's hill. Even though eight years had passed, I wasn't certain I wanted to go daily by the very place where my mother and father had burned to death.

Even after, what seemed to me to be, a thinly veiled accusation, Waddell wanted me to go there, dig the twenty-foot tall boxwood plants, wrap burlap around the roots, load them on the flatbed of the big Dodge truck, and move them to the railroad siding. I'd have to see Mrs. Johns accusing

face, every day.

I could do it. That Saturday three weeks ago showed me I could face the ashes of the Johns's place. After she spoke, I may as well have sleep-walked through the rest of the negotiations with Mrs. Johns. Actually, I had walked to the rectangle of boxwood around what had been the main house. The lawn was shaded by the big oaks and the other giant boxwood, some as high even forty-feet high. The leaves crunched under my feet, but rather than feel sad, I felt a sense of belonging, almost a sense of coming home.

I had been working at this farm until the night before the party, then I had gone to the farm at Wingina the night my parents came to the party at Mrs. Johns's. They had planned to stay overnight at Mrs. Johns's house rather than drive the twenty miles back, late at night. Sometimes they did that, I wished they hadn't that night.

But that was then. Maybe now, I had a chance to recreate history. These boxwood may have been grown from a cutting a royal governor had given Mrs. Johns's great, I don't know how many times great, grandfather. Or maybe, the governor had given the original boxwood to Mr. Howard, the original colonial landowner, when he served as magistrate with Peter Jefferson, after he built at Howardsville. But that was a long time ago, too.

I had agreed to come back to Howardsville to help dig and wrap these sensitive plants. I had agreed to climb the

bridge over the Rockfish River and push down through the top girders and trim the plants as the truck rumbled across the bridge to the depot. Daffy said that if the brittle limbs made contact with the steel girders or cross pieces, the steel and rivets would tear and break them, wasting the plant and our time.

The nights had started to become cold, but when we were digging--during the days--it was hot. Daffy worked along with us: not doing the digging so much as tying the burlap with the metal straps; and not doing the lifting of the plants up to the truck bed, but rather he was hired to do the careful walking of a plant to its assigned place. Then he drove that big-wheeled Dodge down the hill road, trying to avoid ruts. I rode on the running board next to Daffy, opened the gates at the end of the farm road and hopped off just before he began the gentle climb to the bridge.

As a routine, I'd climb the trestle and be there just as Daffy had the cab under me. I'd be on all fours, leap-frogging my way, pushing and pressing the boxwood away from the steel crossbars, across the trestle until the truck was clear on the other side. Daffy'd toot the horn, and I'd relax. Mostly during the next hour I was on top of the bridge as he went to the siding and unloaded, then he went back up the hill for another load. We'd repeat the process again, except when the truck would clear for the last time of the day, I'd swing down and ride to the siding by the

depot. Usually, we unloaded two trucks in the morning and three in the afternoon, if it didn't get too cold too early, or we didn't lose light in the day.

During the first week, I slipped twice on the bridge. I felt my foot lose hold, and I reached out with my arm and held on as my whole body followed through the triangular whole in the trestle. My body weight jerked my arm, as if it had come lose from my shoulder, just as I saw the truck clear the bridge. The truck tooted, and I swung by one aching arm and watched as it chugged on down to the depot with the boxwood doing a little hula sway every time the truck hit ruts.

The second time I slipped, I wasn't as quick, and I hit the side of the truck as it passed. I didn't know anything until I woke up on Mrs. Bircher's porch. Her sons had seen me fall and had taken me to the house about a quarter mile south of the bridge. Then they flagged Daffy when he made his return trip.

"Well, doggone it, Johnny, I feel precious little with that big hog of a truck, and it arattling and chuffing like it do." Daffy was a little embarrassed, "We're sure grateful Missus Bircher for the help your boys give Johnny here."

Mrs. Bircher dabbed a cold compress against my head. My mother did that once when I fell out of the apple tree when I was ten. I hadn't felt a woman's hand that cool and comforting for a long time.

By the time Daffy was back with the next load, my head ached, but I was back up on the bridge, but more careful with my hand and foot holds.

Just then I heard the truck rumble behind me. I turned my back on the depot and gave full attention to the boxwood. I did not want to fall again, today. As Daffy drove the truck upon the bridge I reached to cut a particularly tall top, so it wouldn't split down to the root. I yelled at Daffy to stop. As I sawed the top, I noticed a small box lodged in the woody stems.

The box was satin-like, but weathered. A brass clasp held it shut. Hanging from the cross tie, I waved the box at Daffy as he looked at me from the truck's window. I had no doubt I had found Mrs. Johns's jewels.

I felt myself slipping, and then I turned, catching hold to the tie-rod, and there was a girl walking up to the bridge. My slipping continued. I was trying to hold onto the box and the bridge at the same time. I was really afraid I would fall and the box would fall into the water. Perspiration ran into my eyes and the salt stung, forcing me to clamp my eyes closed.

All of a sudden I felt several arms grabbing my shirt and belt. Daffy's voice was loud next to my ear, "Let go."

I opened my eyes in time to see Daffy and the girl holding onto me, and me holding onto the bridge. "Look what I've found," I tried to show them. Then they had me sitting



on the edge of the truck in the middle of the bridge.

"Hold on to him while I move the truck off the bridge. See if he's hurt. This is the second time today he's fallen." Daffy forced the Dodge in gear and moved everything cautiously toward the depot.

I thought she had been crying, but she seemed to be laughing. I shouted to her, "Hello," and "Be careful of the truck," but she didn't seem to hear me.

Her stern face, but smiling eyes was streaked with something like clown make-up, her resolution not to speak, perhaps, shattered into laughter, "You were like a monkey."

Cather Jourdan and the group of hangers-on from the checkers game were staring at us when we arrived at the siding. I hardly had time to hold out my hands to him.

"What's this? I see you've met Frances. Where did you get this box?" Cather helped his daughter from the truck.

Daffy came up to us, "He yelled something about a box just before he fell." He turned to me, and his face asked if I was okay.

I nodded. "Look, is it some kind of jewelry case. Maybe the jewelry Mrs. Johns lost during her fire," I said as my head ached. I thought maybe I had found something important. I just lay back against the boxwood's burlap. Frances had disappeared.

Cather and Daffy were bent over the box, and Daffy had his knife out, prying the lock. "Wow!" Both men exclaimed

at one time.

Frances was back with a wet towel and a glass of lemonade. I was beginning to calm down, when they hollered again.

"Johnny," they turned to me, "You didn't find Mrs. Johns's jewelry. Come, sit up, on the edge of the truck. Help him, Frances."

When I sat up the excitement came back, disappointment too that I hadn't found Mrs. Johns's lost jewels. I sat up too fast and became dizzy. Frances offered a sip of lemonade. It was wet and icy. Daffy hopped up on the truck alongside of me. The stationmaster handed the box to Daffy.

"I guess we'd all better hold him now," Cather said.

The opened box was held out in Daffy's cupped fingers. There was my mother's picture painted on a brooch. There was her locket. Tears flowed, and I held the locket to my face. I sensed Daffy holding me and Cather, but it was Frances's cool hand holding the towel against my forehead I remembered.

## A Circus Longing

I lived in my family's world of washing clothes, fixing meals, cleaning house. I hardly took notice of anything happening in town, and except for an idea that I'd had for a long time that I might one day run away to join a circus, all I did was unromantic. Then I became practical. I had been nursing my family for a long time, I could become a nurse.

"That fool gal had a circus horse onct. She'd ride it t'school rain er shine. Yessir, she jumped that horse right into the Rockfish River and saved the Fenwick boy's life, she did." My brother said that about me at graduation from high school.

As September passed into October, I finally noticed that the corn was cut down and shocked. The corn shocks started to turn yellow and brown as they dried out. The vines underneath had stayed green until the first light frost, then a heavier frost killed the vines outright, and as they dried, the pumpkins peeked orange from underneath.

The frost had turned the oak and maple leaves into their autumn golds, ambers, rusts, bloods.

It was true, of course. But Hal Fenwick had graduated with me from high school that past spring and moved away to Lynchburg. I was still here at home. Then, one day the men came to take Mrs. Johns's best boxwood to Williamsburg. Hal and the boxwood would get to see the world, but unless something unexpected happened....

I believed in make-believe, my brother explained that I could see what others couldn't see. Things that needed to be done, I did them. If only I could see, for instance, how one day next spring it could happen that I could take the train to Richmond to begin nurses's training, but for now I would stay at home until Mama was completely well.

I missed being in high school. I missed the social life during the time I had to stay at home after my junior year while Mama was in Sheltering Arms Hospital in Richmond. But somehow, when Mama had finally come home, she seemed well enough so I could go back to high school and finish, and so I did.

I even planted a tree on Arbor Day with the Class of '32. Mama had gotten better, and a dogwood tree was growing, partly because of me.

I'd been sweet on Honest Fenwick, Hal's cousin, that summer. Honest was the best hitter that had ever played for the Howardsville Grays. Daddy and I kept score for the team

all summer, mostly for the home games. You know they played right there in the field across from the depot, behind Bragg's Hotel. One or two of my brothers always played as well, and Lawrence was a good ball player. I might have missed some of Lawrence's exploits in the games, but I never missed any of Honest's.

Everyone told me I was a good cook. Lawrence told Honest. I liked games on a Saturday, or Sunday afternoon, then I could make potato salad, slice some ham, and spread some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the young ones-- for a picnic at the ball field. Mama would be home with one of my other brothers while all the rest piled into the car, or maybe they'd hitch up a mule to a wagon, and head for the game. I knew Mama liked the games, but she liked the quiet afternoons too. I was happy that Mama came to all the big games, so she could see Honest.

What I liked about Honest Fenwick was that he had come to see me when I had to stay home. We had been in school together until Mama became sick. He had stopped going to school too once and helped farm his family's place on the Scottsville Road.

Now, when there wasn't a game, he'd walk over Monticola mountain to our farm and pitch with my brothers until it was too dark to see, then he and I'd sit on the front porch swing and watch lightning bugs. He never kissed me, but he held my hands with his big callused ones wrapped round mine.

Catalog rolled his eyes at that.

Daddy liked dances, so that meant everybody else in the family did too, especially me. Sometimes Daddy would pack everyone into the Ford and go to some fish fry and dance in Buckingham. I danced best when Daddy would invite Fiddler Dover for supper. Everyone in Howardsville knew that having Fiddler Dover in for supper meant dancing at our house after supper. They all just seem to show up just after dishes were washed. Honest had a way of knowing the nights when the dances were at our house, and he'd come just about the time the blackberry cobbler was cool enough to serve.

One night in late August, Honest Fenwick took me out to the swing during a lull in the dancing.

"The coach at the University came up to see me this afternoon. He's been at some games. He wants me to play for the University next spring."

"Honest, that's wonderful," I wrapped my arm around his neck and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "What did your daddy say?" I moved my arm and turned on the swing, facing him.

"He said he didn't have the money to pay for a university education. If I wanted to go, I should go to VPI and study ag." Honest wiped his hands on his pants, just like he did before choking up on a bat. If I went to Nursing school, I would be in Richmond, and he would be in Blacksburg, just about as far apart as you can get from one

another in Virginia.

"Well, there's lots of decisions to be made," I finally whispered, hoping, I'm not sure what: that he might ask me to marry him? that he would suggest I go to college? If that was what he was about to say, I never finished that bit of imagination.

"Yep. But there's one other thing. I know I've been coming around a lot this summer, but I guess I won't be anymore."

He paused, then he looked at me, and I sensed a strangeness I had never experienced in him. An awkwardness, I thought. Finally, he stood up and wiped his hands down his pants seams again. "I guess I'll get a sweet feeling for a college girl, Franny, but I'll never forget you."

I sat absolutely still. I really couldn't think of anything to say. I couldn't even think of anything to think. "That's interesting," I answered.

I could feel tears edge at my eyes, and I knew I didn't want Honest to see me cry. I didn't trust myself to say anything more to him, so I stood up, smoothed my own dress, and went inside and up to my room.

I was back inside without Honest with tears at the edge of eyes. Something had happened, but no one knew what. That had been ten weeks ago, and I hadn't said a word about him or what was said since. For my brothers, it was probably the most mysterious I had ever been in my life. My

brothers teased me.

One day as I walked along the curving road from our house to the depot, I pirouetted every so often as if I were acting out some fantasy, a ballerina or a circus performer. A small brother skipped ahead, out of reach, just around the next bend. I'd see him, wave, then lose sight, dance in the road, see him, wave, and go around the next bend in the road, only to dance again.

My actions seem to have been those of a circus clown or ballet dancer. I don't know what made me think that unless I was just pretending that I knew what I was doing. I could see my brother as he made faces at me as I came around the corner, and I pirouetted into place, and then he disappeared again.

The circus, that would have been a good place to hide, if I could. I would have run away to the circus. I'd probably been wanting to run away since the night of the dance. But wanting to run away and doing it were two different actions. I stayed to help Mama, Daddy, and my brothers. I would run away to the circus, only in my dreams, even the ones I imagined, while I was walking.

The day I met Johnny, I was carrying a wicker basket in each hand. They were pie baskets, at least that's what we all called them. As I danced around the last bend of the road between the church and before the depot would have come into view, I looked right toward Mrs. Bircher's house. My



gaze stopped on a man or boy on top of the Rockfish trestle. I knew he couldn't see me, or at least that's what I thought. I wondered what he thought if he saw that there was something, or someone, dancing down the road. The road took a turn, and even when I made my last pirouette, I lost sight of the bridge sitter altogether.

I crossed the Scottsville road to get to the depot. I looked at the bridge again. I thought I'd been mistaken; I couldn't see anyone. I had reacted to some movement. Looking each way when I reached the depot, I went inside. I am not certain whether I spoke to any of the checkers crowd, or whether they were laughing and seem to be pointing at me.

I went inside the depot to see daddy. I was left with trying to piece together the dilemma I had, when daddy asked where my brother was.

"He was in front of me all the way to the church. I thought he came here."

"I haven't seen him," said daddy. He had a funny looking frown which brought his eyebrows together.

I went to the door of the station office. Daddy carried one of the baskets and took a sandwich from it. That scalawag brother had already curled up in the oak chair at the checker's board, and he seemed fast attached to the game.

I turned to daddy and asked, "Who is that on the bridge?"

If daddy had looked closely at me, then he might have smiled, at, I also imagined, the seriousness in my question. I had not taken an opportunity to cross the Rockfish bridge since the boxwood men had arrived in town. Daddy had come home one night and teased me that he had kept me from having to drive his old friend, Waddell, over to Buckingham and down to Wingina. He had said little to me about the men except that they had started moving the boxwood.

I thought he was secretly sad that the boxwood deal had been concluded so rapidly. Daddy liked nothing better than dickering over some old horse, or any kind of trade. So, boxwood and boxwood prices were a new challenge, but Mr. Waddell and his man had apparently made an offer to Mrs. Johns, and instead of dickering, Mrs. Johns had shaken his hand. Now, less that a month later, the men were back here to get the boxwood. I had not seen them, but they were the talk of the village.

I asked, "Is it an acrobat?"

Daddy said, "Waddell's men getting the boxwood."

When I took a deep breath, I smelled the aroma of wood smoke from breakfast fires at Bragg's Hotel, the bite of the chill in late October, and the fetid reek of wet fallen leaves mixed deliciously. The depot had an aroma of tobacco and dust. That pungency seemed sharper in autumn.

"Well, I don't think so. Why? Did you see a missing elephant on your way here? Maybe a tiger in the swamp at

Horseshoe Bend? I think anything might live in there."

"Oh, Daddy. I thought I saw a monkey up on the Rockfish trestle. I didn't want to walk to Mrs. Bircher's if one was up there. He might get me."

"Ho. That's a good one. A monkey on the bridge. I guess there is, right enough. He's got a slicked down city look. Black hair and a cigarette that hangs out of the corner of his mouth. A good sense of the fool about him too, I'm told." Daddy chuckled, again at my expense, and he walked in the office with his sandwich when the telegraph clattered.

I had to smile. I had been too long in a private world soothing my hurt pride over Honest Fenwick. Mrs. Bircher and her boys would enjoy the pie and the joke about the monkey. So I picked up the basket and tucked in the cloth napkin cover securely. I think I whistled a little as I waved at daddy who had come out again and was bent over little brother, watching the checkers.

Then I thought about dancing, but just sauntered down the platform, skipped off the end, and then, fairly danced toward Mrs. Bircher's. I watched the monkey as he sat with his back toward me looking up the road, waiting for something. As I passed the back door of Cobb's Mercantile and Feed, I waved at the Henny and Penny, the twin Cobb girls. I tried pointing at the bridge, but I laughed so hard that they just looked at me and then giggled to each

other. I saw this through the tears of my own laughter.

Turning back toward the bridge, I saw a truck approaching the bridge loaded with boxwood. I was still approaching the bridge. As the truck came up on the bridge, the monkey leaned over and disappeared into the boxwood. As he was dangling, he pushed another boxwood away from the trestle cross ties. Then, he yelled. The monkey turned and seem to stare at me. I wasn't laughing now, but I could feel where my tears of laughter had made little rivulets in the dust, from walking on the road, down each side of my face.

"Hello, monkey. What in the world are you doing up there? " I called to him.

"Just wait and see." Then he tumbled from the cross beam. The man he worked with asked me to hold him, and I did until we were back at the depot. He found his mother's jewelry case that had been lost.

"Boxwood and jewels need to be treated tenderly. So do monkeys," he said when I put a wet compress on his head.

I think he hit his head hard when he fell.

5.

### The Still on the Creek

### Death in the Pig Sty

Catalog, sent to clear away the dead limbs and broken branches caused by the winter storms, joined Hennings Jennings one Friday afternoon in the apple orchard. Hennings started to work for Catalog's father, the stationmaster, Cather Jourdan nearly ten years after the armistice in France. Like many older black men, he did odd jobs as needed at the depot. Sometimes he also worked on the railroad crews that repaired rails and tamped down rail beds. Occasionally, he would help at the Jourdan farm.

Catalog had just turned fifteen. The orchard work was not taxing, but Catalog was getting angry at the number of water breaks Hennings was taking. He enjoyed having Hennings around and enjoyed Hennings's stories, but today Catalog was doing most of the work and Hennings was drinking water.

Hennings Jennings needed another trip to the spring house for a cool drink. Hennings and Catalog were clearing

weeds in the far corner of the orchard when Hennings began complaining about the money that Old Man Postlehaal owed him. He leaned on his rake and turned to Catalog.

"NellyPea Postlehaal took my \$300 bonus for serving during the war. I invested the money in Posthole's still."

Catalog was stunned at this revelation, and watched Hennings as he walked down to the spring house. Penelope and Posthole Postlehaal were fixtures in Howardsville. NellyPea and Posthole had been making whiskey on Wolfe's Creek, parallel to the Rockfish River, for twenty years, maybe longer than that. Certainly before Catalog's father, Cather Jourdan, came to Howardsville as the station agent for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad.

NellyPea and Posthole Postlehaal lived up a hollow, in a board cabin just beyond the corn acreage of Cather Jourdan. He and Cather had been neighbors since Cather bought his farm about 1916. Cather Jourdan was a neighbor, but not a customer, since Cather preferred bonded whiskey and engineers and trainmen kept Cather supplied. If the truth were told, Cather tolerated Posthole's moonshine business only as long as he kept the business moving in the direction of the speakeasies over in Buckingham.

NellyPea looked like a weathered silo stuck in a sack dress and strung up with a sweet pea vine. But where she was rotund and massive, Posthole was gnarled and thin. His skin was like tallow, white-yellow and greasy. His eyes

were slits of pure mean. Hennings worked for them too, hoeing the garden, trimming the fires at the still and, everyone assumed, making deliveries on occasion.

Catalog finishing the stacking of the brush, to burn when it dried sufficiently, heard Hennings coughing as he came up the hill.

"Anybody can cheat an old black man. Anyone can. Mistah Catalog, you come with me; help me gets my money back." Hennings had approached Catalog so close that Catalog realized that it wasn't water Hennings was drinking. "Come on along, now we finished this old hill. We fire it next week, sometime."

Catalog usually told his mother where he would be if he left where he was supposed to be. He looked down the hill; it was closer just to go over to Postlehaal's with Hennings than go down to the house and come back up again.

"O.K.," he said.

Behind the blackberry tangle, Catalog and Hennings walked the path from the orchard to Postlehaal's. Hennings mumbled the entire way, "I only want some return on my investment. Twenty-five dollars a month more'n enough." Hennings turned to Catalog, "It only fair. You know it only fair. Some come back. It only fair."

Catalog could see tears in Hennings eyes. He didn't know what to say so he didn't say anything at all. He saw the blackberries blooming; it would likely be a good summer

for blackberries.

"Hold on there." A voice roared out of the thicket between the path and Posthole's still. "What you doing here?"

"Mr. Posthole, I'se come for some return." Catalog stayed on the path as Hennings cut across the untilled patch before the thicket. "I brought Mr. Jourdan, so'se he count it for me." Catalog stood still as Hennings went into the thicket beyond where he could see Hennings anymore. All of a sudden the thicket erupted as Posthole ran Hennings across the corn field, chasing him with an axe handle. He stopped short of the edge of his land.

"Don't you come back, you rascal," Posthole's face was scarlet. His blood vessels in his neck bulged from his ear down into his shoulder.

Hennings took Catalog's presence as some sort of protection. He stood next to Catalog and asked again, "I don't need much, Mr. Posthole. I'se just asking for some my money back."

"Go on with you," Posthole shook his axe handle again and turned and strode back toward the still.

Hennings and Catalog moved back along the path to the orchard. Hennings said in a very loud voice, "It not fair. You cheating an old black man." Catalog was surprised as Hennings turned and loped back toward the thicket where the still was, but Posthole was waiting for him. This time



Postlehaal slammed a shovel in Hennings's face, knocking Hemmings off his feet.

"I tole you not to come back, and I meant it." Turning to Catalog, he yelled, "Come get this nigger. Help him stay away from me."

Catalog helped Hennings back to the springhouse. There was an old shirt there, and he washed the blood off Hennings face. He gave Hennings some water, but Hennings wanted his own jar. The more "water" he drank, the more he worked himself into another frenzy of threats and stratagems.

Finally, he looked directly at Catalog and vowed, "Sunday I'se see Mr. Posthole and get my money, if'n I don't, I'se put Mr. Posthole into his own post hole."

Catalog could see Hennings thought that was one hilarious idea, but it didn't seem funny to Catalog at all. Everyone knew that Postlehaal was a mean man.

Catalog and Cather sat on the porch early Sunday morning, after chores, when Posthole Postlehaal himself came to the edge of the corn field and yelled to them that if they wanted that nigger that works for them, they should come get him.

Cather sent Catalog to check on Hennings. Catalog came around the Postlehaal cabin to a patch of garden, a hen house, and a pig sty. There was Hennings sitting face up in the sty with a small hole in the chest, in the open space above the pocket in the bib part of the overall. When

Catalog went around to open the gate in the sty, he saw a large wound in Hennings's shirtless back. It seemed to Catalog to be more blood than even when he and his daddy killed hogs.

Catalog looked up to see Postlehaal sitting on his porch with a shotgun across his lap and a rifle leaning against the empty chair next to his. Catalog could see NellyPea Postlehaal staring out of the window.

On his way home Catalog met some of Hennings's family. Hennings's daddy and brothers said something about lynching old man Postlehaal.

When Catalog reported all this to Cather, Cather telegraphed Scottsville and Charlottesville, and in the afternoon Postlehaal was taken away to jail. Eventually he was tried and sent to the state farm in Goochland. NellyPea Postlehaal kept making and selling the whiskey.

## NellyPea's Wedding

"Miss NellyPea wants for you to drive her to her wedding." Hemp Hennings Jennings said as he stood outside the kitchen door. "Miss NellyPea says Mr. Catalog going to drive me, she says and tells me to comes over here for to tell you to." He rolled his hat brim under his long spindly fingers.

Catalog opened the screen and joined Hemp in the yard. "Are your certain that NellyPea Postlehaal said she wanted me to drive her to a wedding?"

"Yessir." Hemp started a grin that opened to a full fledged laugh. "She says nothing makes her happier than a wedding. She says she'd like to get married every week."

"Miss NellyPea is getting married?" The wonder of it startled Catalog. The enormity of Penelope Postlehaal getting married when she was already married made him stare long and silently into the frozen smile on Hemp's face. "I'll have to talk to my daddy."

"Miss NellyPea says that's what you'd have to do. Says come for her soon as you can."

Catalog finished his chores and decided that he should apprise his daddy of the odd request from the other side of the corn field. He could drive to the depot, but he thought he might walk instead. Maybe he could make sense out of a crazy request, before his daddy explained to him.

Sis was still finishing the breakfast dishes, and his brothers were where brothers were, so he set off across the hill through the orchard and down the Monticola road's wagon ruts.

Catalog remembered that early during the war a local man was given the name of Kaiser Bill. Catalog never decided how people came to call him that, whether he looked like The Kaiser on the poster, or whether people just didn't like him much, or both. When Hennings was shot last year, Kaiser Bill was about twenty-two, some six or seven years older than Catalog. Kaiser Bill moved in with NellyPea and helped her make the whiskey. No one gave it much thought. Now she wanted to marry. Could it be Kaiser Bill? He hadn't heard that Posthole was come back from jail? But weren't they married before? The situation was too complex for him.

Catalog found his daddy at the depot and explained to him what Hemp had said.

"Well, I'll be," Cather suddenly swallowed his breath. "So they're up to marrying legal like."

"But Daddy, isn't she married to Posthole Postlehaal?"

"I don't know that's any of our business. Anyhow you drive her where she wants to go."

Catalog knew that was the end of the conversation. In any case his daddy knew what was happening and had approved the use of the car. Now Catalog could drive Miss Penelope to her wedding.

NellyPea Postlehaal and Kaiser Bill Kuchenfeld already were waiting on the porch as Catalog swung down the path by the springhouse. He couldn't see them, but he could hear his younger brothers whooping and hollowing showing off for them. As far as Catalog knew this was the first time that NellyPea had left her cabin since..., and he simply couldn't finish the sentence.

Sure enough, they were there and saw him as soon as he came around the corner of the house.

"Hoo, Catalog. Gee, but it's been a long time since we've seen yer," Kaiser Bill stretched up to his full six feet or more as he greeted Catalog.

"Sit down, Sugar," NellyPea ordered. Kaiser Bill sat down and seemed to go to sleep immediately. "Let's us see if Mr. Jourdan can provide taxi service." Her weathered face crinkled in what should have been a smile, Catalog thought, but was more of a old woman's scowl. She turned to him, and there was a lot of her to turn.

"I don't want to go to Charlottesville, you see. I

think they know me too well there. Leastwise they've arrested me some there. I think I was married there once before."

Catalog was flabbergasted. This was more talk than he'd ever heard from NellyPea Postlehaal.

"Where'd you want me to take you, Miss Penelope?"

Catalog had hardly the least presence to ask.

"Where do you reckon?"

"I believe the closest would be Palmyra."

"Let's us go."

"Well, honey," Kaiser Bill awoke when NellyPea grabbed his arm. "Don't we got to git a license and all?"

"I reckon not, Sugar, alls we got to do is show up and say 'I do.'" She pulled him up from the glider and picked up a basket.

During the drive from Howardsville to Palmyra, Catalog tried to get Penelope to remember that she lived in Scottsville. "Part of Scottsville's in Fluvanna County, Miss Penelope, so no one's going to ask you twice where you live if you say Scottsville, but you can't say Howardsville. If you do they won't marry you there."

"I live in Scottsville."

"That's fine."

"I do too," added a sleepy Kaiser Bill. "I live with NellyPea."

The road was dusty and rutty, but they made good time.

On the main street of Scottsville, Penelope and Kaiser Bill pointed out several houses where they "lived" as they passed by. By mid-morning they arrived at the Fluvanna Court House.

"We're looking for a place to marry this couple," Catalog decided he should help. The clerk didn't answer, but pointed to a door marked, "Licenses."

NellyPea decided she could handle this part, and she said, "I want to marry Kaiser Bill here."

The man behind the desk looked startled, but he came to the counter. "Yes, ma'am. Where are you from?"

"I'm from up home. We came all the way here to get married. I just love weddings, don't you?" NellyPea was smiling toothily at the clerk.

"That's fine. I surely do, ma'am. But where is it you call home?"

But Penelope answered, "Howardsville."

The Justice of the Peace would not marry them.

The wedding party was silent and involved on the back seat as Catalog turned onto the Charlottesville road. There was more traffic and more dust. The ruts seemed deeper, or at least the ride was longer, so everything emerged more distressful. At the Rivanna River Bridge Penelope became alert to her surroundings.

"Catalog, we can't go there." NellyPea seemed aware of where Catalog was going.

"If you live in Howardsville, Miss Penelope, this is where you must come to be married." Catalog kept a civil tongue, but he was still put out that she had forgotten that she "lived" in Scottsville at the court house in Palmyra. "There didn't seem to be any other choices for places where you and Kaiser Bill could be married."

They parked in front of the court house in Charlottesville. A lot of people parked around the courthouse square, and, sitting in cars or sitting under trees, they ate their lunch.

"I suppose you'll have to wait until after lunchtime," Catalog mused mostly to himself. Both of his passengers had their eyes closed, and he thought them to be asleep.

"I don't know I want Sheriff Johns knowing my business. He thinks he got hold on me already. He's the one sent Postie to the State Farm. Onlyest thing Postie did was kill Hennings Jennings."

She leaned over the back seat, and her sour breath made Catalog stop breathing in.

"I wouldn't have give Hennings his money neither, but I'd of made him whiskey. I weren't mean enough to kill him, but Postie was."

"How about I get us some soda pop?" Catalog realized he was mimicking NellyPea. She left the car and sat on the grass under a big oak. A squirrel came down the truck and peered closely at her.



"Would you like cola or orange?" He followed her to the tree.

"I believe they'd let me rot in jail with him." She said to the squirrel. "Orange, please."

Catalog walked away from the car with the keys carefully in his pocket. He knew enough people who worked in Charlottesville to catch a ride back to Howardsville, but that's not what he wanted to do. He wanted to see NellyPea and Kaiser Bill get married.

"We gotta go, Catalog. We gotta. I think the sheriff saw me while you were gone. I opened my basket to spread the chicken and pies for lunch and Henry Johns looked at me," she paused and looked up at Catalog. "We gotta go."

He could see that once she had been a pretty girl. Now the trustfulness in her eyes made her everything that looked young. Wisps of hair were escaping from her bonnet, as gray as Catalog's granny's hair. Her wrinkles were deep chasms down her cheeks and around her jowls. The hair on her upper lip colored a shadow like his daddy's did when he didn't shave first thing in the morning. She was becoming.

This morning she had been simply a woman wanting to be married, wanting to be wanted as she was, large and useful. What had happened to her? Had she become young in the process of driving to Palmyra and Charlottesville? And, was this why Kaiser Bill wanted to get married? It was still a mystery to Catalog.

"Mr. Jourdan, I can't be married here. That's all there is to it." NellyPea looked straightforward to the group of suited men near the door. "Yonder is Henry Johns himself."

Catalog had been about to offer to talk to Sheriff Johns on her behalf. Her face exuded freshness and anxiety at the same time. But her eyes were steady. Catalog had only seen eyes like that once before--hatred. Once at the depot a man cursed a colored porter. The look, from some primitive cavity, he realized the emotion then, and saw it again now as hatred. Hennings Jennings' people had it the morning they set out to lynch Posthole.

"The only place left to go that I can think of is Lovington. You'll have to remember that you live on the Schyler side of the Rockfish River, not Howardsville. If you forget, though, just say you live on the south side of the Rockfish." Catalog heard his voice soften in the reminder. He knew he would have to remind her again and again on the way to Lovington.

Catalog smiled as he thought she couldn't stay in Charlottesville to be married, where she was a legal resident of the county, because she was too well known as a bootlegger. But, she could drive to Lovington, where a Justice of the Peace at the courthouse would accept her word that she lived in Nelson County, and he would marry her illegally to Kaiser Bill, still asleep in the backseat. It

was a crazy world all right. He'd heard his daddy say that often enough. Today he was seeing some of that crazy world.

They had driven west, out past the University and south past Fry's Springs, and just beyond the city limits a sign read, "Lovington 35 Miles." For a time the Ragged Mountains seemed too steep and foreboding to drive through, but even as the road twisted and turned against both the Ragged Mountains on the right and the lower Dudley's Mountains on the left, whiskey snores reached from the back seat and held Catalog aloof from this strange journey. The chicken and soda, eaten in too great a hurry in Charlottesville, sloshed in him, he imagined, as if he drank from the glass jars in NellyPea's basket.

South of North Garden he pulled off the road and vomited. The jostling finally got to me, he thought. Maybe it's what I needed: to get rid of garbage. He understood that he was a accomplice in an illegal act. His daddy knew. He knew. Bending over a small space beyond the bushes, he could see clearly a young doe looking at him wide-eyed as he looked deep into the trees and gulped for air. When he retched again, she turned and flipped her tail, bounding into the scrub.

Catalog slowly turned to the car. NellyPea and Kaiser Bill were still asleep, the heat was still in the day, and he was still on the road to Lovington.

He felt better. A terrible burning buried itself deep

in each swallow until he stopped swallowing air. At the bridge over the Rockfish River on Route 29, he stopped again and drank from the river. Seeing the river quenched the fire even before he swallowed.

The courthouse clock struck four as they drove up. Kaiser Bill was awake and aching from the whiskey sipping and sleeping all day. NellyPea pulled a veil from her basket and covered her face. They answered the clerk's questions, and he issued them a license. There was no Justice of the Peace. The clerk recommended the Methodist preacher, Mr. Early. Mr. Early was agreeable. Mrs. Early took NellyPea into a side room, promising a bowl of warm water. Kaiser Bill was directed to the pump in the back of the church. Catalog went along to wash up himself.

They assembled in front of the altar. Catalog and Mrs. Early were witnesses.

Catalog stood looking at NellyPea Postlehaal. He thought she had changed since noon, even. Her eyes gleamed and her washed face had the look and guiltlessness of a young girl. Her raspy, whiskey throated voice was transformed into a soft rustling as she repeated the vows. Even Kaiser Bill was subdued, quiet.

But Catalog realized he was looking for physical changes only in Penelope. It was Penelope, not NellyPea. From this day on, he would see her as Penelope Postlehaal, not NellyPea Posthole. The name no longer fit. Even if she

became old and leathery again. Even if she was soused and dirty, or mean. Today, she was a bride. Catalog had not noticed this transformation at other weddings he attended. Maybe the change was not this conspicuous. He would ask his daddy how an old woman became young. But he thought he knew: love and newness. She had said she'd like to have a wedding day every day. Newness, that's probably how she became young, even to Catalog. He was happy to think that out before he asked his daddy.

Driving back to Howardsville, Penelope thought it very amusing that she had changed their ages on the marriage license to 46 and 24. She and Kaiser Bill laughed all the way from Rockfish to Schyler. Catalog wanted to appreciate the joke, so he asked what it was. They just giggled as they sipped more whiskey from the glass jars. A few families were at the Jourdan farm when Catalog pulled in. Apparently they had been there for some time waiting for the newlyweds to arrive.

None seem to care whether Penelope had been married before. The fact was, this was her wedding day. The furniture in the Jourdan house was pushed back, and Hemp Hennings strummed a banjo and a cousin of his played a fiddle. All the ladies had brought food, and the kitchen tables and drain boards were filled with potato salads and deviled eggs, watermelon pickles, ham slices and fried chicken, tomato slices and canned peaches. Catalog had left

his house that morning with a hunger for experience; now that experience was matched by his hunger for food. The Rockfish River water had been medicinal, but it was not filling. He had eaten from life's buffet, but it was his mother's kitchen that nourished him.

Catalog saw that his daddy wore a pistol when Posthole came home from the state prison. But Posthole came back and resumed making whiskey. Posthole moved back into his cabin and lived with Penelope and Kaiser Bill. Catalog went off to college and never heard that Penelope ever changed again. But, neither was Catalog asked to drive her to another wedding day.

## Summer Harvest, Spring Plowing

Booker had been sleeping for ten minutes when a horn followed the rending of wood and splintering of glass. The horn bellowed like a bull calf castrated too late. The crash caused him to sit upright, but the horn made him mad.

"What the hell is going on?" he bawled back at the ongoing noise. Swinging his feet to the floor and stepping carefully, so he wouldn't turn over the night jar, he reached for his pants and bent then stood to minimize his effort in pulling his overalls on over long johns and a barrel belly.

The pine planking was cool to his feet, but not so cool as the rush of late-August mountain air that hit him as he opened the bedroom door and stepped into what once, just minutes ago, was his hallway. Where the front door had been, he saw, was open to the night. The new opening was ten to fifteen feet high. He could see lights coming on over at the Wallace's place. Grover Wallace'd be over in a while to see what the commotion was, he thought, numbed

against thinking about his missing door and windows and porch.

"What is it, Booker?" EllaRuth's voice sounded scared. She hadn't said a word as he dressed, and he thought she was asleep. He had wondered how she could sleep through all that noise, but she often seemed to sleep through their sex, so she could sleep through anything. "Is it the Klan?"

He hadn't thought Klan at all.

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In the county seat, forty miles away from Booker's disaster, Catalog also woke in the middle of the night. He didn't like the rooming house sounds. The smells, too, seemed strange to him. He curled his toes against the night's unusual late-August chill as he stepped on bare oak flooring.

He thought it was time to dress and go to work. He turned on a lamp only to find he'd been asleep less than two hours. But turning off the light, he lay awake and tried to see shadows in a dark room. He tried counting sheep. The room was too unfamiliar to ease back into sleep without the soft breathing of his brother, or without the gentle rumble of his Daddy's snoring.

He thought about his two-month venture away from home. Arriving in Charlottesville directly from the high school Class of 1937, he was hired at the hardware store. Now he was making money. He was independent, sort of. But he



missed his home up in the country. He missed walking along the corn rows and hoeing the weeds. He missed loading pulpwood beside black men, like Booker, who had taught him how to work effortlessly.

Mr. McGregor at the hardware store appreciated Catalog's ability to work. Just today, Saturday, Mr. McGregor had given him the keys and the responsibility to open the store Monday morning. Catalog knew he would savor the anticipation of the new chore all day Sunday, if he could just get to sleep so Sunday could come. He turned on his side. Catalog suspected a man like Booker would laugh at the notion that he had taught Catalog, but he would take pride in Catalog's good fortune. He remembered the day that he had walked up the road from Howardsville with Booker. They had chopped weeds among the corn rows in the low grounds all day. At lunch time Catalog's Daddy had sent a young boy from the depot across the Rockfish River trestle and into the bottom corn with sandwiches and cold drinks from Cobb's Store. When the boy left, he and Booker relished the corned beef and mustard sitting under a riverbank maple.

Catalog sat on the edge of his bed. He remembered that at the end of the day of chopping corn, he and Booker discovered that his Daddy had left the depot. He looked down the one block main street and there were no cars or wagons in front of Bragg's Hotel, Doctor Nolting's office,

Cobb's store, nor even in front of Morris's house at the edge of the bridge across the James River to Buckingham. On the other side of the street, Jimmy Cobb's old store had no customers, nor did Baber's garage, nor Gibb's, nor even Daniel's store set back from the rails and street. There was nothing to do but walk the three miles up Blair's Creek Road by the church and school house, past the ice pond, around horseshoe bend, past the roads to Monticola and the old Blair Plantation, to his Daddy's farm. He had stood at his driveway and watched as Booker climbed toward Mount Alto to the house just off the road where Booker lived with Aunt EllaRuth.

Catalog felt again the bone tired feeling of that day's work and that walk. He stretched out under the sheet and found sleep among the familiar sights and roads of Howardsville.

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"Booker. What is it? If not the Klan?" Booker heard fear in her question.

"I don't reckon I know." But he realized his fist was gripping the doorknob, so he took a breath and released slowly, stepping back into the room. He reached for his pistol on the bureau, slipped it into the hammer loop of his overalls. Then he opened the bedroom door and stepped into the hall again.

Slowly he walked the twenty feet toward the opening.

He saw the dented flatbed of Denison's Chevy truck. The truck had cleared the entire front porch away and all that was nailed to it. Just pulled the wall with it as the truck swept by. The truck was covered with splinters. The entire unbroken porch roof lay flat on the bed of the truck. The left front window of the house was hanging from the porch roof and the panes were intact. The right window was gone. Pieces of window pane glistened in the moonlight like tiny rain puddles or ice slivers. Booker stopped in the parlor and slipped into his Sunday shoes, no socks. His boots which he left next to the front door on a burlap sack were gone. He lit the wick on the oil lamp.

"What'd you put a porch in the middle of the road for, Mistah Booker?"

Booker saw that Denison's boy was drunk. His caramel-colored arm was thrust through the driver's door window. Beads of sweat reflected in the light of the truck's headlights and the lamp Booker held. His other arm was holding him in the truck, like a killed Canada goose Booker'd hold by the wings to show flight. As Booker stood and stared at the boy, everything Denison's boy had to eat and drink came back on him.

Booker stepped carefully around the wood and glass and placed the lamp on the bed of the truck. Then he walked to the pump and drew water into a lard can. By the time he walked to the truck the boy had stopped retching.

Booker splashed half the can's contents in the boy's face, then handed him the can, "Wash you mouth."

Instead the boy gulped the water, "More."

"Git it yourself, boy. Where's your daddy working tomorrow?"

The boy pushed past Booker, took a look at the porch and retched again. He pumped more water, drank, and poured some over his head and wiped his face with his bandanna. Before he spoke he retched one last time. On the pump.

"Now look here. You got no call to do that. You made enough mess here for one night. I expect you and your daddy come here right early tomorrow to fix this up."

"I ain't gonna tell my daddy, Mistah Booker. Leastwise it wouldn't do any good anyhow. He done throwed me out the house. I took his truck, so the joke's on the two of you. Ha."

"No, boy, I reckon the joke's on you. Since your truck's still running, we'll go see Deputy Jimmy Cobb over at the jail house." Booker felt the gun against his leg. He had never carried it, much less pulled it on any man. Besides, he was bigger than the boy. Maybe he shouldn't have brought it along.

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In the truck Denison's boy seemed to fall asleep as the miles rumbled under the heavy tires. Booker negotiated the switchback curves of Mount Alto and the narrow river road

past Schuyler, then the paved Route 29, and he began to feel comfortable. His anger subsided a little, and he took a deep breath. He felt perspiration trickle behind his ear, and when he reached into his pocket for a bandanna, he felt the gun still in his hammer loop. As he wiped his head, he sensed a movement from Denison's boy.

The headlights of the on-coming cars hurt his eyes. A raccoon darted in front of the truck and Booker yanked the steering wheel to the right, just enough to make him grab the steering wheel tighter. He felt a hand on his thigh, then the gun barrel thrust against his leg just above the knee.

Denison's boy hit his face with a glancing blow, and as he jerked his head back he pulled the truck back to the centerline of the highway. Booker tried to hold the truck steady and fend off the boy's blows. He lifted his leg to try to keep the boy from pulling the gun from the loop, and as he did the loop ripped away from the overalls.

Booker slowed the truck by lifting his leg from the accelerator and hurt his knee as he hit the gear shift. Awkwardly, he swung his own arm against Denison's boy's shoulder, and somehow found the gun in the boy's hand.

"What are trying to do, boy?" Booker doesn't recognize his own voice, somewhere between a growl and hysteria. He felt calm, but the truck still propelled from side to side on the highway. A car horn blared at them as lights emerged

around a curve.

Denison's boy grabbed the steering wheel; now each of them had a hand on the wheel and the gun. Booker wrenched the wheel away from the boy; he felt his own muscles tighten in the struggle as he endured the blows from the boy's fist and the tugging and twisting of the gun. His feet couldn't find the brake pedal. Instead, his foot slipped and hit the accelerator and the truck lurched off the right edge and down a slope--a blur of green leaves and tree trunks approached in the headlights as if the truck was the stationary object. The truck hit the ditch and bounced Booker's head against the roof and his stomach against the steering wheel.

With a concerted effort he twisted the gun and yelled. The flash of the explosion erupted between them. Denison's boy howled something which surrounded and submerged Booker.

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Catalog heard the squeal of tires and a strange wailing horn. He turned over and pulled the pillow over his head. The horn was insistent. He sat up in bed just as he heard a shot, or backfire. Then the horn was silent. Catalog thought he would try to move to a back room when the summer visitors left. This room was just too noisy. He turned on the light again. The clock read three thirty. Before he

turned off the light, something like gravel hit the window.

"Mistah Junior. Mistah Junior."

Catalog raised the shade and the bedside light was just bright enough to reveal Booker's eyes and mouth. Catalog could see blood on Booker's ear.

"Come to the front door, Booker." He pulled on his pants. Opened the door and then the front door. "Booker, what happened to you?"

"Denison's boy done wrecked my house. Now, he done made me shoot him. Mistah Junior, I'm in a powerful fix."

"Just sit here on the porch. I'll get some towels and water and get you washed off."

"Mister Jourdan, what is going on here?"

Catalog looked to see his landlady standing on the landing of the stairs. Mrs. Bryant probably couldn't see Booker, but he'd better be truthful.

"One of my daddy's workers has hurt himself, Mrs. Bryant. Do you have some old towels or rags to wipe off the blood? I'll go heat some water."

"I'll get the rags and some alcohol."

When Catalog came back from the kitchen, Mrs. Bryant was dabbing Booker's face with alcohol. Under the porch light Catalog saw that Booker's face and ear were still streaked with blood, but he and Mrs. Bryant cleaned Booker quickly, and she left them alone. The night became very still and very quiet.

"He's dead, Mistah Junior. I thought he was asleep," Booker rubbed his cheek. "We were going to see Deputy Jimmy Cobb at the jail. Denison's boy pulled my gun from my pant's loop. He hit me a lick with it. I'd never pull a gun on no man, uh, boy neither."

"Where is he, Booker?"

"He still in the truck. Over there."

Catalog looked up and saw a big old farm truck, dented, splinters of wood on the bed, parked half on and half off the road at an outrageous angle under the trees. He knew he had never seen a dead man before, but he started down the steps anyway.

"Should I call the police, Mister Jourdan?" Mrs. Bryant asked as the screen door opened with a screech.

"Yes, please call Jimmy Cobb. He'll know what to do."

Catalog felt sick, but he kept walking toward the truck. When he looked in he saw Denison's boy, but he looked asleep. Catalog opened the door. He reached for an arm. He saw the hole with a small trickle of blood, and as he lifted the arm he saw the blood spreading over the back of the shirt and down the seat. The arm felt lifeless.

He closed the door. Stood there, fighting down the sickness.

While they waited for Deputy Cobb to arrive, he sat on the front porch with Booker. He remembered stories about Negroes knifing Negroes up home. But Booker wasn't the kind



to shoot someone without cause. And Booker looked pale under the electric light. Catalog and Mrs. Bryant had wiped Booker's face again and stopped the bleeding. Catalog saw him shiver.

"You cold, Booker?"

"Nawsah. I'm just scared. You reckon they'll hang me, Mistah Junior?"

"I don't think they do that when it's self defense or an accident. But I don't know."

"He shouldn't of took my gun. Maybe I shouldn't of brought it. He wasn't much older'n you, Mistah Junior. He's daddy and I are good friends. I don't know what I'll tell him."

"The truth, Booker. The truth. Didn't you say he told you his daddy threw him out of the house."

"Yessah, but that don't mean nothing. That boy was always a pistol. Lord, I didn't mean it. But I killed him."

Catalog saw tears streaming down Booker's long face. The flashing lights of the deputy's car pulled his attention back to the truck. Catalog saw two deputies walk to the truck and open the door. A third deputy, Jimmy Cobb, stopped long enough to speak to the one looking in, then walked up to the porch.

"Hello, Junior. Booker. What's happened here?"

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Catalog put his boots on in the glassed-in entry. A braided throw rug his mother had given his landlady kept the cold of late October off the brick and tile entry porch. Ten weeks had passed since he sat out here with Booker on that terrible night in August. Ten weeks of becoming accustomed to the work in the hardware store. Ten weeks of hearing nothing about what was to happen to Booker today. Today was fall court.

Catalog was opening the store on a daily basis. He had a three mile walk to the hardware store. But he had saved enough money by walking and not taking the bus to send some home. Maybe he would hear from his Daddy, the station master, or Mama today. Maybe they'd even come to Booker's trial.

Catalog did not think that the county seat, in 1937, had changed much since colonial times in one sense: everyone came to town on court days. Even early in the morning, he saw groups of men gathered on every corner shouting and shaking hands. The ladies congregated in front of stores and compared their shopping lists. The fall chill added a festive tone like the coming of a county fair.

The white court cases took place in the morning and the colored cases came in the afternoon. Catalog thought that system was a good idea. Everyone would be more forgiving after a dinner of country ham biscuits, potato salad, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, iced tea or applejack and a big

wedge of pie. Since Booker was up for October court days, the pies Mrs. Bryant baked would be either apple or pumpkin. He'd have to wait until dinner to catch the aroma.

The farm harvests were nearly completed. He saw a lot of people on the streets. He spoke to white and colored alike.

Booker was charged with manslaughter. Denison's boy had been in his grave nine weeks. Booker had been in jail the past six days. Catalog heard EllaRuth had moved home to her mama. Booker had helped Mr. Howard with his harvests and then with tearing down the rest of Booker's house after EllaRuth moved out. Mr. Howard would stand up with him in court, but nobody could tell what happen on that cool night in August. Unless, he, Catalog could tell what Booker told him.

Catalog opened the store early this last Wednesday in October. He knew that farmers and dairymen from all parts of the county, white and colored, would be in the store early before court to pick up odds and ends as they prepared for wintering. The store's big season was fall. Equipment for harvest provided big ticket buys, but sacks and sacks of fertilizers and grain for fall and winter planting were also popular. He heard Mr. Roosevelt say on the radio from Washington that the hard times were over. Maybe that was so, Catalog thought. Maybe he would save enough money to go to the university next fall. But still, he'd have to live

up to his name today, a hardware catalog for every customer. The catalog was something country folks could read all winter, and if they couldn't read, then pictures to look at all year.

He was busy opening the shutters and rolling the awning out when he glimpsed his Daddy, a large man with a big grin, standing on the corner looking at him. Catalog saw that he wore his blue serge suit and vest with a chain that hooked in his right vest pocket, traversed his protuberant stomach and disappeared into a left vest pocket. No doubt his railroad watch caused the round rise in the material. His tousled steel grey hair substantiated his sixty odd years. He looked athletic in spite of his girth. His most remarkable features were his eyes. This morning they were laughing. The grey flecks sparked as though they held the fire from the embers that erupted from the train engines as they left the depot where he was station master. For as long as he could remember, Catalog had watched the trains stop for water in dark pre-dawns or evenings. And like the engineers he watched, he knew when his daddy had put the lever down to start things, like today.

"I guess you're up for Booker's trial?"

"Yes and no. James Bagby's doing lawyering at court today and offered me an early ride over. We went down to the depot for coffee and lies with his brother, Earl."

Catalog's Daddy stretched out a familiar solid hand to

his son. Catalog felt the soft flesh and the hard callouses in a handshake moment between friends, then the handshake became a fatherly hug. The smell of tobacco and homemade bread lingered on his daddy's coat. He had to exhale to keep from being crushed. Home.

"I have something you can do for Booker, Junior."

"His case is on the docket this afternoon, Daddy."

"I know. I want you to go down to the courthouse after the morning trials. I want you to tell Judge Thomas to give Booker five years."

"Daddy, Judge Thomas'll put me in jail if I tell him that."

"No, he knows Booker works for several of us at home. He knows we know Booker well, even if we don't know exactly what happened that night Denison's boy plowed into Booker's place. Bill Howard'll be in court this afternoon, but you tell Judge Thomas what I said."

Catalog was confused. "Daddy, didn't you believe Booker when he said it was self defense?"

"Booker killed a man, Junior. Negras kill Negras." Cather put his hand on his son's shoulder and tightened his grip. "Booker's got to pay."

"But Booker'll think about Denison's boy every day of his life. You know how he'll pay. He blamed himself, even after Denison's boy near broke his cheekbone."

"Son, if Booker don't get time, they'll lynch him."

"Even for killing another colored?"

"Even for that."

Catalog knew his daddy well. His trust was built on doing things his daddy told him to. His daddy never asked him to do things that would ever anticipate anything but good outcomes for Catalog, and everybody. But this request made Catalog quake at the thought of telling a judge what sentence to pronounce, even on Booker. Still, five years seemed a long time for a murder that may have been self-defense.

Catalog finished rolling out the awning before he spoke.

"If you say so. Aren't you going to be in court?"

"No. Your sister's coming over to do some shopping later, but she has to turn right around and go home, so I'll ride with her. I'll be able to meet the 12:34 freight from Clifton Forge." He raised his hand in farewell and shuffled around the corner.

Catalog attended to his chores and customers all morning. He told Mr. McGregor that he needed to take an early lunch. He knew the store would close at one, so he wouldn't be shirking. At twelve he was striding down University Road toward the courthouse. Still, Catalog had an ache about what he was to do to Booker. He couldn't see how his daddy thought it'd be the best thing for Booker. Maybe the others would understand that Booker was a good man.

They shouldn't lynch good men.

Catalog knew Judge Thomas knew his family well. In sparse bird years the judge would come up home late on a Friday and would go out hunting early the next morning on horseback. The judge and Catalog's daddy never failed to bring home their limit of bob-white. Or for that matter, never failed to take some to shut-ins and old folks, especially those who voted. During elections, the judge would stay the night after a speech at the church's meeting hall, or after just sitting at the depot talking to everybody who'd stop by. Catalog had seen the judge shake two hundred hands in one afternoon.

Catalog had never talked to the judge alone. Only his faith in his daddy, and the fact that he had given his word to go, made him knock on the judge's door in the courthouse. In his nervousness, he felt a long way from Howardsville.

At his knock, Catalog heard a familiar bark from inside. He interpreted the sound as roughly a command to come in.

"Well, well, Junior. I'm surprised to see you. I heard you were working at McGregor's."

"Yessir. I've been working there since school was out in June. But during the summer, I've been able to go home some weekends. When I could, I'd go up home Saturday nights and come back Tuesday. Monday used to be my 'day off.'"

Judge Thomas had a clean-shaven severe face. Blue eyes

that Junior's daddy always referred to as steely. His white hair lengthened his face. Junior noticed that his speech was precise today. When he visited up home, the judge spoke with the soft country idiom which allowed him to fit in. But today the judge seemed all courthouse.

"Day off?" The judge asked.

Catalog viewed the judge's smile as a rather noncommittal invitation to state his business, but personal, too. "Well, I chopped corn most Mondays at home."

"Yes, we all have "days off" like that. Have a slice of Mrs. Thomas's apple pie."

"Thank you. My daddy was in town this morning. He asked if I'd come to see you." Catalog paused. He took a deep breath. "He'd like you to sentence Booker to five years." He had said it. Now the judge would send him to jail. He didn't dare swallow the bite of pie on the fork. Catalog knew he would choke.

"Booker was outside your rooming house when the gun fired?"

Catalog was surprised the judge knew that. "Yessir." He didn't understand the silence. Was he supposed to say something else? He watched the judge sitting behind the desk: a thin tall man with a hint of red in the gray of his hair. Someone said he looked like Patrick Henry. Catalog thought the judge capable of sentencing him to death, and Booker too.



Catalog thought the judge seemed to look through him into the picture of Lee and Jackson. The judge didn't say another word. He cut Catalog another piece of pie. Then he spoke.

"Take this to Booker before court begins this afternoon." The judge sent his good wishes to Catalog's family, and after sharing a favorite hunting story about Catalog's daddy, he shook Catalog's hand. The visit was over.

Catalog worried as he walked to the colored side of the jail. Booker did most of the plowing on the places up home. Since the time he could walk, Catalog followed along with a hoe and broke clods of dirt turned over by the plow. Catalog and his brothers and sisters dogged Booker and the harrow and planted whatever needed planting. He had had no use for Denison's boy, so he was sorry that Booker might go to jail for five years on his say so. Somehow the sentence didn't seem right. And he, Catalog, had a part in it. The farmers up home needed good help.

Jimmy Cobb was leading Booker down the hall to the courtroom as Catalog reached the ground floor.

"Hi, Junior. Who's the pie for?" Deputy Cobb asked.

"A slice of Mrs. Thomas's apple pie for Booker, Jimmy. Here."

"Go on, Booker, eat it. They always send the condemned man good food. I guess I'll have to shoot someone to get a

slice. I'm sorry, Junior, but you can't talk to Booker now."

"Thank you, Mistah Jimmy. Thank you, Mistah Junior." Booker sat down on a bench in the corridor, unwrapped the pie, and ate it. A Negro bailiff brought Booker a cup of water.

Catalog saw very few other whites inside the courtroom. When he came in, Mr. Howard sat with Catalog since he lived just up the road from the Jourdan farm.

The courtroom became warm before the trial started. Catalog chilled when Booker's case was announced first. But when both lawyers took turns talking about Booker and Denison's boy, Catalog thought the trial started slowly. The pace slowed further when Mr. Howard talked about what a good worker and good husband Booker was. When Booker took the stand, Catalog thought time slowed to a stop. Both lawyers again took turns asking different versions of the same questions.

"Now Booker, you were mad at Leander Denison, weren't you?"

"Nawsah. I was taking him to the jailhouse."

"Now Booker, the boy had just tore your house down. Weren't you mad at him."

"I was upset about the house, but that could've been rebuilt."

"But you weren't mad at him."

"Nawsah, he was asleep. At least I thought he was asleep."

"Now Booker, you did shoot him?"

"Yassah."

"Well, if you weren't mad at him, why did you shoot him?"

"He took the gun and hit me with it."

"There was no one else there?"

"Nawsah."

"How did you shoot the boy, if he had the gun?"

"He hit me with the gun, and I shot him."

"Now Booker, the facts are: Denison's boy destroyed your cabin. You were mad with him. You pulled the gun. He grabbed your hand knocking the gun against your face. And you shot him."

"Nawsah, I wasn't mad at him. He was a pistol of a boy."

The trial lasted nearly two hours. Finally, Judge Thomas rapped the gavel and sentenced Booker to five years on the state farm. Catalog looked from Judge Thomas to Booker and then at Mr. Howard for a sign of recognition. But there wasn't any. Apparently his daddy had not shared the reason for his early visit to town. Since he hadn't, Catalog wasn't about to.

Catalog reached across the barrier. He and Booker shook hands briefly, and Deputy Jimmy Cobb took Booker away.

Catalog shook Mr. Howard's hand. Mr. Howard was headed up home in the opposite direction, so it was a walk home for Catalog in the late afternoon sun. He wondered about justice. Had the law done right to Booker that afternoon? He was embarrassed by his part; he should never talked to the judge. Nobody seemed to care if Booker had reason for killing Denison's boy. He knew Booker wasn't guilty of anything except protecting himself. He wished his daddy would protect Booker.

Walking in that October chill Catalog felt fear. He crunched the fallen summer leaves, and the thorn vines picked his wool sweater. He knew what he heard and felt would become invisible, but tangible, images in the night. Catalog feared going to bed. Maybe he would wake in the night and hear a screech owl from somewhere in the pines. Maybe the screech would be Booker's silent handshake. Maybe an innocent car's backfire would fire at him like that gun shot outside his window in August.

If he just remembered some of what he knew and didn't speak about it, an owl's call, or a car's backfire, would awaken all the others that heard the sound, but then they would be able to sleep again. Catalog didn't expect to sleep.

Catalog didn't trust his part. He knew his fear lived in his ignorance, but Booker was alive. Somehow Catalog needed to understand his fear, and that understanding would

make Booker free.

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Booker walked back to his cell with Deputy Jimmy Cobb. He felt tired.

"Mistah Jimmy, I appreciate you taking care of me personally."

"All of us from up home take care of each other, Booker."

"What's the state farm like? I've never known anyone who went there."

"Booker, the state farm is just like Mr. Thomas's and Mr. Jourdan's farms. You'll have to milk and feed cows. I think they have chickens, pigs and rabbits too. You'll plow in the spring. Chop weeds all summer. Harvest in the fall. Of course you'll have to cook for yourself. There won't be any women."

Everything was so matter-of-fact with Mistah Jimmy. But he didn't tell something to make it harder. Booker was afraid the deputy had to leave.

"Can I send word to EllaRuth where I'll be? She's with her mother over in Buckingham Court House. She's got a job cleaning at that girl's college in Farmville. I just want to let her know I'm all right."

"I'll get word to her, Booker. Is there anything else?"

"Yessah. Tell Mistah Howard and Mistah Junior that I

appreciate them being in court with me today. It was a heap easier having some friendly faces there. Oh yes, please tell Judge Thomas that Missus Thomas's pie was real good."

When the deputy left, Booker sat on his bunk and stared at the peeling walls and the bars on the windows. Sitting in this small space was like being in a warren when rabbits shiver and hunker down when they hear the hunting owl's sound. Booker had felt that shiver in the court room. But when Judge Thomas said Booker was going to the state farm, he knew he had breathed a sigh and let the shiver go.

Booker crossed the cell and looked into the clear sky.

He had feared they would hang him. Ever since EllaRuth mentioned the Klan on the night of the accident, he had seen himself hanging like a deer just before he's gutted and quartered. His shooting Denison's boy could have caused him to hang. If he been some no-account, he never would have come to trial. Junior's daddy knew he wasn't no no-account.

Mistah Howard and Mistah Jourdan had given him enough work to do to take care of EllaRuth. His other big fear had been what would happen to EllaRuth. Now she'd started that job at the college. Since the shooting he had felt the fear of the hunted. Now that he was going to the state farm, he felt freed. He had escaped the hunter. He would live. Yes. He could live five years at the state farm. Then he could go home.

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The earth was warming in late February. Catalog knew that they would soon be plowing time up home. He had expected a call from his daddy any day telling him to take a long weekend and come home to help. When the phone rang at the store about three o'clock in the afternoon, Catalog half expected to be called to the phone, but he jumped a little when he was called. What his father asked him to do startled him, but finally he understood his part in Booker's story.

"You want me to talk to Judge Thomas again?"

"That's right, Junior. Go down to the courthouse this afternoon, if you can. Tell Judge Thomas that Booker has served enough time." Catalog's daddy cleared his throat.

"We need Booker home for spring plowing. Tell the judge we've found Booker a house to live in. And if he wants to know, we've sent for EllaRuth."

Catalog shuffled his shoes in the sawdust on the floor, "I think I can go this afternoon. We're not too busy. Are you certain you want me to talk to the judge again? Wouldn't he want you to talk to him yourself?"

"Good. Give the judge my regards." There was a slight pause, "Will you be home this weekend? Good. Sister can pick you up after work Friday. Your mother is fixing sweet potatoes for supper."

Finally, Catalog thought he saw some sense in his daddy's requests. Like family, we bind each others hurts.

He saw the practical side of the request as well. His daddy needed two men to help with spring plowing.

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Booker awoke to a pipe clanking against the bars of the barracks door. The prison guard stared right through him, he thought. Booker faced the opened door, held his eyesight toward the lower spaces between bars. He noticed there had been new grass overnight. New grass and a plow moon. Spring was greening the dead grass of winter. The convicts told him the first winter was the worst. He could work another day against the five years.

But he wished himself home. Lowground or pine lot, he wanted either place to follow the mule. EllaRuth, a place to sleep, EllaRuth's corn bread...

Booker was surprised the guard looked directly at him.

"Get moving, you." The guard motioned for Booker to come closer to the door. "You all come see the Boss, now," the guard spat opening the door.

Booker stumbled along, not certain why he was on his way to see the Boss. A twinge of fear crept over him.

"You're on your way out of here. I 'spect those politicians know you a handy one," the guard growled when he made Booker stop outside the supervisor's office.

Booker could only think, "EllaRuth."

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Saturday seemed a glorious spring day. Home. Catalog



had been awake for sometime listening to the rooster crowing in their chicken lot and being answered from several other lots nearby. He had heard an owl schree sometime in the night. He never heard that in town. He had turned over in his sleep.

He still smelled the aroma of last night's sweet potatoes. After swallowing a glass of sweet milk, he grabbed his hoe in one hand and two biscuits in the other. He walked up the driveway, and in the field across the road, he could see his daddy talking to Booker behind the mule. Somehow his daddy's words reached right to that farm prison and plucked Booker back. He had been part of those words. His daddy said they had to take care of their own. Booker was surely one of their own.

Booker turned to him as he walked up, "Where do you want me to start, Booker?" Catalog felt comfortable with his hoe, his daddy and Booker. There was work to do and men to do it.

## The Last Day of Hunting Season

On this last day of hunting season, Johnny sees that the February overcast of the morning has given way to a bright afternoon sun. The sun thaws the soil to a muddy surface and takes the edge off the mid-afternoon chill.

For the first time since the fall of 1942, before he left for the Navy and the war in the Pacific, he cleans guns for hunting. Only yesterday, for the first time in his life, he thought of cleaning guns as a chore. Today, thinking how ridiculous he must seem, he hefts the stationmaster's old Batavia, its barrel feeling cold and clammy from a winter in the closet. He knows this gun, these guns link him to the guns he heard on Iwo. And the Iwo guns link to the guns that mangled his bunk mates. He met them on the hospital ship sailing home. Today's cold links him to that ship; he was always cold aboard ship.

But Johnny has found a corner in his mother-in-law's kitchen where he can watch his wife and her mother in the time between dinner and supper. In contrast to the outside,

the kitchen is very warm. His mother-in-law still keeps a wood stove burning, even though she's had an electric range since before Pearl Harbor. His fingers comb back his black hair. It seems strange to have hair long enough to feel. He cleans two shotguns, broken apart, and spread around and under his chair. He removes the minute particles of spent gun powder and dried packing with the twist of a cleaning rod, and gun oil. He warms near the woodstove.

"Be careful that sparks don't fall in the gun oil, honey," Elizabeth chides her husband with a slight turn of her head from paring potatoes.

"I put a tin on top and under it. I've just a little more to do. It's almost time to leave anyway. Another half hour."

"What time will you be home?"

"When you see us. It'll be dark shortly after six, maybe six fifteen. When your Daddy starts walking we don't stop until he says to."

"Well, don't let him overdo it."

"Not that I'll have much say." He stands to stretch the bum leg, healed now, but stiff from sitting.

"He respects you. He thinks of you like one of his own sons. Don't you agree, Mother?"

Her mother agrees without elaboration, and Johnny clicks the locking mechanisms several times on each of the guns as he fits the pieces back together. The Batavia

slides silently in its movements. He remembers the silent stacks of guns on the beach at Iwo, retrieved from the dead and wounded to prevent the Japanese scavengers. He had seen the guns before he had seen the men. He checks carefully, sighting down the bore, and wiping excess oil from the barrels and stocks.

Johnny can see the two bird dogs, Roughage and Center, through the window as they lounge in the back yard in full sunlight. They wait in vain for scraps, Johnny knows. They prick up their ears when they hear the soft snaps of the gun lockings. He sees Center, the liver spotted pointer, stand as if to flush a bird, much as when Center would hear the snap in the fields.

The dogs are pacing next to the car when Johnny leaves the back door and walks to place the guns on the back seat. They spring in unison when Johnny clucks his tongue and opens the trunk.

Johnny feels the dogs change sides when he accelerates from the drive to the dirt road to town. Again he feels their weight shift as he wings around the hairpin turn at the swamp. The Ford slips, but he holds the car on the berm of the road, whacking dried blackberry brambles with the front hubcap as he passes. With the window down he tastes some of the grit as the dust churns underneath the front tires. Away from the warmth of the woodstove, his knee stiffens.

He thought he had spat the last of the grit from the hospital ship when they transferred him to a Navy hospital in San Diego. But on the long train ride east, grit was grit. His leg in a cast, he endured the trip because of the stories. Since he was stuck in one place, the other storytellers revolved toward him. Because of the guns, he could never tell a hunting story. He liked best the hunting stories when the quarry escaped.

Stopped behind a tractor and truck at the crossroads, Johnny looks across the road and sees his father-in-law, the stationmaster, as he changes his boots in the station door. Johnny watches as he adds an extra layer of socks, probably anticipating that the course of the afternoon will take them over muddy ground; watches him stop as if he were giving the change of socks some thought, but he finishes putting the socks on anyway. Before the traffic, unusual for the crossroads of Howardsville, can move and Johnny can drive across the road, the west bound freight sounds to his left and pulls into the depot.

The train's arrival at 3:47 is on time. Stopped across from the depot, Johnny shakes his head in disbelief that he has arrived just to observe the engine take on water and wood cars and leave at 4:02. Then, like the clipped slow-motion of a hand cranked nickel movie, Johnny sees the stationmaster lock the depot in the flashes between cars. Methodically, the stationmaster draws the wooden slide over

the ticket windows, locks the telegraph key, locks the drawers of the aged, golden oak, flat top desk, pushes the hinged swivel rolling chair under the desk, and finally, locks the station's door. At seventy-six the stationmaster's gray-flecked hair masks the energy in the squat, rotund man. A clean shot, and expert telegrapher, Johnny thinks.

As the stationmaster finishes lacing his boots, Johnny sees him look up and gazes in Johnny's direction, with no movement of recognition. As traffic clears, Johnny eases the round black Ford past Cobb's Store and Giles's house. The stationmaster reaches the bottom step of the depot as the tires crunch the gravel.

"Who's with you, Johnny?" Cather Jourdan, his father-in-law, the stationmaster, always greets Johnny with the same, important question.

"Roughage and Center, in the trunk." Then Johnny grins and thumbs backward across the seat as his father-in-law slides in. "I brought the Batavia and the Remington 12."

"I'll use the Batavia as usual."

"Still want to walk Bite's field?" Johnny knows, but asks anyway. Johnny sees the field they intend to hunt worn down by a mild winter, but many of the corn stalks still stand since Bite left it uncut last November. Bite's misfortune in not getting his corn in allowed the quail to fatten there all winter. Flying from the false banks, across

the low grounds, the quail still roost in the cedars which border Bite's field.

As exercise, Johnny had walked the field early some mornings when he first came back from the Navy and the Pacific, but he brought home only imagined singles, because he was too unstable to walk and carry a gun. Neither Johnny nor Mr. Jourdan had hunted the field this season. Johnny hadn't hunted at all. But he knows they both expect a covey is left for the last day. For Johnny, perhaps today will break the links to the guns at Iwo and the mangled bodies of the hospital ship.

"Eayh." Johnny hears a reluctant assent.

Before they finish they see Clarence Jefferson running from the water tower toward the car. He carries a burlap sack, and a movement at his belt suggests his clasp knife. Johnny remembers or has been told that the stationmaster had given Clarence the knife at Christmas when the message came over the telegraph that Clarence's older brother had been killed in Sicily. His dungarees are well faded, but, Johnny notes, they evidence care in their washing. His shoes, boots probably handed down from father or brothers, seem too big and cause Clarence's clumsy gait as he runs.

"Mistah Jourdan. Mistah Jourdan. I surely could use a rabbit for my momma's dinner tonight, ifn you all are going huntin. I surely appreciate a rabbit, I would."

"Clarence, we're going up to Mr. Bite's farm, but we're

not coming back this way any time soon. Go with us and get a rabbit," he paused and looked at Johnny, smiling. "You'll have to get back the best way you can."

"Have you been working today?" Johnny asks.

"I been working for Mistah Thomas, down near the river. I picked walnuts all day. I tried to hit a rabbit with a rotten walnut, but I missed him." Clarence bends to roll up his pant leg, then straightens, "Mistah Jourdan, ifn I can go with you, you'll get me a rabbit."

"Hop on the running board, then." Cather chuckles. Then he turns to Johnny, "Let's go."

The Ford spins a little gravel as they move toward the Scottsville road. The sun begins to hide behind some of the hills at their backs as they drive silently. The dogs in the trunk don't make a sound after a few yips when Clarence's knife case bumps against the door. The road to the field is rutted from the thaw, freeze, thaw, and Bite's tractor. Johnny slides and bounces as he drives the half a mile into the five-acre corn field. Stops.

The stationmaster swings his boots right and adroitly steps on the driest piece of ground. He holds the Batavia in the crook of his arm, with its breech broken, a long-practiced stance. Johnny thinks the posture almost caresses the gun. From a tan hunter's vest, Johnny watches the stationmaster as he pulls two shells and deliberately, but without seeming to pay attention, eases them into the twin



eyes of the barrel. Johnny hears the merest click at the closing of the breech.

With one movement of arm-gun-eye, the sight and sound of explosion forces Johnny to flinch, involuntarily.

He looks, but he sees only the tufts of rabbit's fur on the edge of the corn row suggesting that the shot had direction or result. And without speaking, he jabs the way for Clarence.

Clarence seems to understand there is to be no additional noise. So, when Clarence reaches the rabbit, Johnny observes that he grasps the soft fur. Clarence unclasps the knife and slits the blood source--draining a life force back into the winter field. Johnny smiles and senses he has witnessed a ritual from some other day. Clarence turns smiling toward Johnny and the stationmaster and dogs, now walking further away, up the field road. Seeing Johnny looking at him, Clarence holds the rabbit high as Johnny motions silently, thumbs-up. Clarence grins at the expected brief response and turns himself to the walk back to town. Johnny turns to follow Cather and the dogs. Having seen the rabbit's blood makes him swallow, but he knows Clarence and Clarence's mama will eat rabbit tonight.

After the reverberations of the single gun shot, the afternoon clouds darkly and becomes quiet. The dogs bounce from the car and prance with a subdued excitement just steps

ahead of the two hunters. Johnny notices the stationmaster as he reaches down and scratches behind the left ear of Roughage, the English Setter. His short stubby fingers tousle the ear, twist it in a familiar way. He pulls his hand back and rests it on the re-broken breech.

The two men move along the road with the barest of chafing of boots and stubble. Neither man breaks sticks as he walks. Those sticks underheel simply ooze into the grass and moist earth.

Johnny stops first and looks back to the river to recalculate his position from the earlier time he had been to that spot. He nods and turns toward the middle of the cornfield, and as he does, looks down his shoulder and arm as in sighting, sees the chimney on the far side of the field, back in the cedar copse, hidden but for the blackened rim just darker against the green of the cedar and pines.

"There. They're usually in the middle of the row there and spread maybe three rows on either side." And even though he could start the dogs, he waits for his father-in-law to make a move.

The stationmaster holds his head tilted just to the left as if he were listening to the birds rustle in the dried corn husks. His gun with the Damascus Twist barrel gleams, well-oiled, clean. The breech had been closed, again with slight sound. Johnny hears the tinny click in the wind that brings both the pointer and the setter to alert. Two

additional almost subvocal clicks urge an electric response and both right front paws hit the edge of the field together. Johnny witnesses with some awe and appreciation the results of the stationmaster's training as each dog lifts its paws with precision. The other paws fall soundlessly. Johnny walks on the right behind Center. His wing shot will have him pivot turning back toward the car. He knows his father-in-law is a little better with the left pivot. Roughage is more settled than the younger Center. Maybe setters are just easier dogs, Johnny had once thought, but today only the briefest of musing on dog training enters into the familiarity of the hunt. It is as if he had hunted just yesterday, instead of five seasons ago.

Except for one patch of corn still six feet high or more, the rest of the field has blown down to three feet or less, hip high. Each dog is hidden from the other hunter, but each of the twosomes, hunter and dog, knows where the other set walks.

Each man spreads forty yards or more from the other. Johnny knows if the quail sense the men or dogs, then the double sensing will confuse the birds, keeping them from running along the ground. The men and dogs tread tractor furrows more and more alert to the sudden roaring explosion of the quail's whirl. They prepare for the sound and the following bark of gun powder expanding in a flash, leaving the blue haze and paper wadding to settle twirling to the

ground.

Center freezes in point. Johnny can hear Roughage still rustling the dried stalks and leaves. Center eases ahead as Johnny walks forward. The rustling on his left stops, and he knows that Roughage has come to point, or the stationmaster has called him off. Johnny's eyes follow Center as his tail becomes rigid. Center's nose twitches lovingly, but holds a straight line. His front leg curls in a pointer's pose.

Johnny clucks to the dog.

Center springs into a mass of corn stalks. A solitary quail bursts skyward, toward the right. Johnny hesitates. The gun feels strange in his hands as he raises it. His eyes follow the bird's line of flight and a space before. It's the space before he targets. The gun nestles against his shoulder. The sight and the space fuse.

He has no clear thought of taking the safety off. He is uncertain whether he squeezes the trigger, or pulls a second squeeze. The action seems natural. The blasts engulf him. The pictures of the stacked guns and the men on the hospital beds burst like broken glass.

The quail whirs beyond the chimney into the woods.

Today, although the men walk other familiar and favorite roosting spots, although they surround the tall corn and the short, where kernels still fall from the cob, although they stalk the edge of the woods and the edge of

the high grass, although they lay siege to the slightly marshy corner where broken glass bottles implicate a forgotten still, they find no other bob-white to tickle the noses or instincts of the dogs. The late afternoon in the hilly region of Albemarle County continues darkening as they walk and follow the dogs.

Finally, breaking the spell, they look at each other and move together. Johnny can tell in the shadows the stationmaster is tired and disappointed. He sees for a brief moment the older man's shoulders slump before straightening. He looks carefully, in the last gleam of sunlight winking through the chill skeletons of the maples, and sees his father-in-law's eyes blink and moisture swells at the eyelid's edge.

Finally, Johnny breaks the silence, "I'll go get the car. Shall I take your gun?"

"No. I'll keep the gun, and the dogs can walk with me. I'll head toward the berry brambles. We haven't been too close there today." To Johnny his voice is undefeated, but knowing.

"Okay. Meet me by the big sugar maple." Johnny quicksteps away, diagonally across the field skirting the high corn, putting more energy into the movement than he feels. Maybe it's getting colder, he thinks. He can hunt again, next year.

At the car he takes a breath, and as he exhales, the

Batavia sounds a single note from that far corner of  
brambles. The sweetness of the explosion, the richness of  
the blast like a deep organ chord gives a solid, yet  
delicate, satisfying ending to the emptiness of the day, the  
war, and the hunting season. A broad smile creases his own  
weary face.

"That's the first gun fire I've heard in so long to  
please me." Said aloud, he realizes the links he thought  
forged, were fears he had finally let fall away. He can  
hear the hunt again.

As the stationmaster shuffles up to the car door, there  
are no birds on a string. The eyes telegraph displeasure to  
Johnny as surely as his fingers usually open the morse  
signals down the line for the railroad. While Johnny thinks  
of next year's hunts, Johnny recognizes that the  
stationmaster's fatigue has returned, not a broken spirit,  
but a sadness.

"Meadowlarks. Damn rabbits and meadowlarks." Johnny  
hears.

## Camille at Howardsville: A Vignette of the Flood

The shout of wind cried out over the rain's tattoo on a tin roof, and Booker Fortune, a farmer, hunkered down under the sheets wishing he had a light blanket too. Sometimes a cold spell like this jaunted over the summer mountains and curled itself through the usually oppressive August heat.

The sun had been late setting over the far mountain range, and Booker had chopped weeds from his corn until he couldn't see the hoe handle. Finally, Booker could only grope to the head of the row by touching the silks of ears on each stalk. Leaving the corn row, he saw his trailer across the pasture and down against the far side of the creek in a flash of summer lightning. A quick, unexpected, freshet chilled him in addition to the sweat already on his back. Only the lonely electric bulb in the small camping trailer's single room allowed him a notion of the distance he had yet to walk, or some warmth possible once he arrived. Booker's wet shirt flapped against his chest and stomach,

and alternated against the width of his back, until both front and back were pressed fast against him.

Booker walked like he worked, hunched against the chop of the hoe's blade, and he walked bent against the rain, deliberate steps and strides when he could. He vaulted a fence in a brief spurt of energy, he tore a cuff on barbed-wire at another fence, and he waded through a shallow Wolfe's Creek before climbing slowly to his frame shack on the high side of the creek. He hung his hoe from a porch joist and pulled off his boots, caked with sticky Albermarle clay, and left them on the porch.

Howardsville was the only home Booker had ever known. The "village at the rivers" his dad would always say. Booker's dad had been away to war, twice. First during WWII, his dad served in Italy and Germany, then he fought in Korea. His dad never talked about those days, but Booker had a German Luger his dad brought home. He taught Booker to shoot snakes with it. After tonight's rain, he expected the snakes would be in the cornfield.

The electric bulb lit in his one room was unshaded, and the pull chain was broken, so he couldn't turn it off. Booker's exhaustion was such that sleep, even in the summer cold and bulb's light, finally caught up with him. His last consciousness before sleep was that the rain was beginning to fall with a tin tinny, like acorns falling in the first winds of fall, but more gentle. Now he tried to twist his



body to sleep against the cold of the rainy night.

Booker woke, later, even more cold and tired. The rain fell insistently, increasing intensity as he eased out of sleep. He was pretty certain he would not be able to get back to the corn rows first thing in the morning. There was a change. The tin roof and wooden side porch echoed each drop, then boomed a volley when a whole sheet of water crashed from some deep reservoir of a cloud clinging to the pine trees topping Mt. Alto. Booker couldn't remember a storm as severe as this one.

Maybe it was midnight, after, and he thought he heard the locomotive from some enormous train. Booker was surprised, because when he was still a boy, such sounds were common, but in recent years the trains did not rumble across the grade or bellow horrific sounds especially not in the middle of pouring rains. He realized it couldn't be a train. Sitting up in bed, Booker was cold and confused. The floor was tilted. He distinguished two separate sounds. The roaring sound churned and rumbled. Thunder broke through the yowl and exploded. The shock and vibrations caused the farmer to catch a side of his bed. The bed broke free and slid toward the great maw of the door, and he saw a bridge revealed in the lightning. A bridge? His house was passing the railroad trestle at Howardsville, under where the bridge had crossed, but now hung sidewise to the river. The train was not perched there, only the remnants of the

bridge.

Booker's trailer, leaning as it was, floated toward the middle of the James River. His bed crossed the door's opening and the bed's width arrested its slide. He looked through the door at tree limbs and water. The roar seem to swallow itself, paused in its loudness. But Booker could not catch his breath. He could not stop his trailer either. Booker tried to yell for help, but he couldn't even speak, and he had no one to yell to. He sat and watched the darkness, fascinated.

A news item appeared afterward in one of the Virginia papers. Dateline--Howardsville, Virginia: One hundred eighty people are still missing following the flash flooding of the Rockfish River. Nelson County is declared a disaster area. Thirty inches of rain poured from the remnants of Hurricane Camille and struck the western edge of the Blue Ridge in the vicinity of the Rockfish Gap. After doing great violence in the gulf states, the hurricane had little but water left. There were few warnings; a light thundershower was sighted on the Richmond weather radar. The community of Howardsville is flooded or washed away, including the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Depot. A Howardsville resident, Mrs. Bab was trapped on the second floor of her house near the James River Bridge. She reported seeing a local farmer sitting on his bed, in his doorway, and waving a pistol, as his camper trailer floated

past her house and into the James River. The flood water and darkness prevented any attempt at rescue. He has not been positively identified, nor has he been seen since the night of the flood.

## Head-On Collisions

## Terminal Recollection

As Boyd Thomas left the shuttle bus that he had ridden from the convention center to the airport, he saw a large-dog shipping container fall from a blue luggage cart inside the terminal. When the container hit the floor, a monstrous black greyhound vaulted from the wire door, suddenly jolted open, and scattered fellow-travellers like a group bar tab. In the midst of the melee caused by the dramatic stage entrance of the greyhound, Boyd saw a small golden hued Pomeranian scurry from the same open door of the carrier. The Pom avoided by-standers's feet and scampered to the end of the window through which Boyd was watching and disappeared into the wings. By the time Boyd gathered his bags and tipped the driver, the baggage handlers had encircled the greyhound, whose arched back was belt high. Boyd wondered if anyone else saw the Pom.

A wall clock read:

12:00:00 Toronto, May 5, 1988
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"I'm sorry, there is not enough time to check your baggage for the one forty-five flight to Ft. Lauderdale."

"Is there room on the plane?" Boyd asked. A week at a convention was more than enough. He was tired.

"Yes, but you must present yourself and your baggage and a ticket two and one-half hours before departure on international flights," the Eastern Airlines representative explained.

"And a hundred and five minutes is not enough time to check baggage?" Boyd considered it long enough. Maybe he could walk on anyway. Boxed in by a system, he usually found a way out.

"That's correct, sir."

"May I speak to a supervisor?" Maybe intimidation, sometimes that worked. He had never found yelling effective. Sweet talk.

"I am a supervisor, sir. Please, there are others waiting."

"May I check in for my scheduled five pm departure?" Deflated, but he could go as scheduled. Maybe it didn't matter.

"Of course. Passport please."

"I was told I needed only a copy of my birth-certificate."

"A passport is preferable, sir." A pause. "Mr. Boyd

Thomas?"

"Yes, that's me. But," he wiped the sweat from behind his glasses, "I didn't bring my passport. It expired after my last trip to Ireland."

"To Ireland? The North, or The Republic?" The ticket agent-supervisor looked up and frowned. "The copy will do, sir."

"I was in Dublin for the IRA meeting in 1982?" He was annoyed.

"TICKET, PLEASE."

"Don't you see, I was there. The Irish Reading Association educators had to change their name in 1976, to the Reading Association of Ireland, RAI. Get it? Anyway, in 1982 the international council had to forego its logo, IRA, and simply call the meeting the World Congress."

"Thank you, SIR."

Boyd wandered away from the ticket counter. In others his story of the IRA had caused a chuckle, at least. Now, sarcasm.

His blue vinyl Tote attache slung over his shoulder. His yellow sweater, which had warmed him during the bus ride from downtown, now was making him too warm even in the cavernous terminal. Lunch time, but he didn't feel hungry. Probably he'd get something later.

He saw himself reflected in a glass partition as a heavysset parenthesis with mustache, strolling. He stared at

glitter glass and exposed beams, and pipes, high in the architectural hangar.

Before he was fully conscious of where he was, he was standing in line at Customs. Nothing To Declare To The Left. Passport checked? No, only the faded copy of the birth certificate.

Then the waiting room.

He had relaxed only a little on the bus ride. Now he took a deep breath and assessed the session. A real success. Today's workshop was a hit. Mary, especially, but he knew Mary would be a hit. It was too bad the two skeptics on her doctoral committee didn't come to hear her. Today, she was together: facts, figures, hypotheses, data, preliminary analysis; premature conclusions, but that's okay. She was good; the study was a sound one. Damnably long to do. Trapped by her dying mother, school teaching, age, but not her self-confidence. She would finish, somehow.

He stretched. If he were a smoker, he'd have something to do with his hands.

Arthur, one of the skeptics, objected to everything Mary had attempted to do, but as a matter of principle, he didn't tell her. If she knew how he'd boxed her in, what he objected to, she might slip out. Then he'd have to object to something else. "Doctoral students have got to learn on their own, not to bother faculty with trivial detail. They've got to learn how real researchers hammer it out



right the first time," Arthur had said. What bullshit.

Boyd stretched his left leg, caught in a corner of the plastic chair. Asleep. He stamped it against the floor. At the edge of his vision, a tawny blur scooted between the baggage near him and doubled into a secret warren of birthday packages and a sleeping infant.

Mary's right to be mad. Anyway, she was good today. And appreciated. Boyd knew that he had been too quiet during the session. Comments he had made were insightful. The role of innovator. Appreciated. He felt good about the fifty teachers there. Enough.

The call for the flight to New York and Ft. Lauderdale made him stand up and pace a little. Finally, when the ticket holders had cleared the line, he approached the counter.

"Any seats available?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've got a ticket for the five o'clock flight. May I fly now just as well?"

"Do you have luggage, sir?"

"Yes, it's checked on the five o'clock flight."

"You and your luggage must leave Canada together, sir."

"It's already checked in, so it'll go. I can pick it up in Ft. Lauderdale." He paused but received no response.

"I've been here since last Friday. I'd really like to go now, if possible."

"I am afraid it is NOT possible, sir. Our regulations require luggage and passengers on the same flight number. The handlers in Customs are very scrupulous about checking baggage numbers and tickets."

He turned and walked away. Back to the hard vinyl seat. Three more hours of just sitting here. He had two books to read: Now and Then, poems by Robert Penn Warren, or The Corpse Only Spoke Once. He opened the corpse.

"Penelope Boyle was dead. Her mouth was opened as if to speak. Glass was protruding from her tongue and a red cherry stem was wedged between her top incisors. She had taken a bite from the glass which held the Old Fashioned with a twist and cherry." Enough.

Food? Well, it's 2:01.

14:01:34.	14:01:35.	14:01:39.
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Enough. Yes, food.

"Double cheeseburger. Potato skins. Large Coke. Fresh Ontario cheese."

"Pepsi, okay?"

"No, if it's not Coke, let me have a beer."

"What kind?"

"Local beer?"

"No. We're inside of customs. You can go back through Customs. They've got them all over."

"I guess not. I'm here now. Any fresh juice?"

"Nope. All in cans."

"Pepsi."

"\$5.85"

The burger, cheeses, potato, and Pepsi made his eyelids droop. When he was next conscious the wall clock read

15:03:47.

Blink.

15:03:49.

Blink.

15:03:51.

Bathroom.

Then he read a poem. A familiar story of Warren's boyhood chum who'd taken off and pitched in the big leagues. Warren revelled in the image of finding the chum at home one afternoon some sixty years later. Both of them older. Both of them one-eyed. No, that was the red-tailed hawk. Anyway, his old chum could still throw a stone. Burst the insulator on the high wire. Boyd had seen old friends here in Toronto and missed some, too. The snafu at breakfast yesterday, unfortunate. But he'd met them at the presentation. That was good. Old friends. Wonder about John Riata. Never hear about Skagit.

That John was a doctor in Seattle. He would doctor well. In Babe Ruth Youth League John had been a pitcher. John struck me out in my last at bat the summer before I

started wearing glasses. Ball inside low. Boyd wondered if John could still break insulators on high voltage power lines.

I'd like to call John one night, cold. Say, "John, let's go up that Skagit River."

"Who's this?" he'd say.

"Boyd Thomas, from Concrete High. You know, the book doctor." Never happen. Funny, Warren's baseball chum should make John come to mind in Canada.

He stopped remembering.

15:30:51.

He slept fitfully. He sensed his head bow and bob.

16:40:07.

"Your attention please. Eastern Flight 5771 Service to New York's Laguardia Airport and continuing service to Ft. Lauderdale has been canceled due to mechanical difficulties. Passengers holding tickets on this flight should return through Customs and contact an agent at the Eastern counter. Your attention, Please....Eastern Flight 5771 has been canceled. Please return to the Eastern ticket counter in the main lobby."

His legs were stiff from sitting, sleeping. Bathroom.

Customs. The lines were already fifteen to twenty passengers long at the Eastern counter. There was Mary in the next line.

"Professor Thomas, what are you going to do?"

"Do you know what the options are, Mary?"

"No."

A book representative he recognized from the exhibits stood one or two people behind and offered, "They were double booked. I saw the manifest. There were 480 passengers on 5771 and only 320 seats. I saw this last night, but I couldn't get out any sooner. What's worse is tomorrow and Saturday. 20,000 conference participants are leaving. They should 've planned better."

"Won't they put on an extra plane tonight?"

"That's too simple," he explained. "They're off the hook now."

"Off the hook, how 'd ya mean?" a bearded passenger growled out of a lumber jacket. "How, off the hook?"

"They've declared a mechanical failure, so they don't have to give you free tickets in addition to a quick ride home."

At that moment an airline employee came among the multitude. The seven lines were forty or more people long. Lines gave way to a herd focussed on the uniformed employee.

"We regret the inconveniences, ladies and gentlemen. We have tried to obtain other equipment, but no equipment is

available. We plan to put you on the very first available flight. Please be patient."

"What about bringing in a plane from Buffalo?"

"This is the equipment from Buffalo. It flew in an hour ago. It originated in Buffalo. All of the Buffalo passengers have deplaned."

"Rent us a bus to Buffalo."

"This is the only equipment from Buffalo tonight."

"Tomorrow's first flight..."

"Will be this equipment, now. If they are able to complete the repair overnight." He walked away, but the people in line had little more information than before he came.

"I'll need to stay over," Arthur, Mary's antagonist in a three-piece suit, said to the book rep. "Shall we get a room together?"

"Are they paying?"

"Dunno."

"I'll find out." He walked to the Eastern employee's door and arrived there just as the short, non-plussed airline representative emerged.

"What about accommodations for those of us who'll need to stay over?"

Boyd Thomas saw Eastern's employee take Arthur and the book representative by their arms and led the four or five who had followed the book rep to a place out of hearing.

The lines reformed, and like tentacles they bent to the left, or bent to the right, or meandered down the center of the terminal. Finally, only five others stood in front of Boyd when he looked up at a round-faced clock. 6:03.

The second hand circled a strong, quick sweep movement around the face of the clock.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Here." He placed the tickets on the counter. He assumed the ticket attendant knew what had happened.

"Yes, monsieur. How may we help you?"

"Canceled. Oh. I was on flight 5771 to Ft. Lauderdale. See? Here are the tickets. How can you get me there?"

"Yes. Monsieur. We have no more flights today. The ones tomorrow are all booked. We have no available seats on Eastern flights scheduled to Ft. Lauderdale until Monday."

"The Eastern spokesman indicated that you would put us on the earliest available flight."

"You do not wish to travel Eastern, monsieur? Are not your tickets on Eastern, monsieur?"

"I've been here since last Friday, so I'd like to get home."

"Let me get someone to help you, monsieur."

"May I help you, sirh." The quiet burr of the lady took him by surprise. There was great kindness in her soft gray eyes.

"Yes, I hope so. I'd like to go home tonight."

"But you have tickets, don't you?"

"I was on flight 5771 which was canceled. Didn't they tell you why so many people are standing here?"

"Of course. We can fly you out Monday at 05:34:00 hours."

"Is there nothing tonight?"

"Let me check." She walked away.

Tears welled at his temples; perspiration ran behind his ears, down his collar; he was breathing heavily.

"Professor," Mary called at Boyd in a stage whisper, "I am going to call my husband. With the flight I'm on, I won't get to Ft. Lauderdale until 2 am. Dominick will come for me."

"Mary, ask him to call Mrs. Thomas. Just have him tell her what the situation is. Tell her I'll call as soon as I have a flight."

"Okay. Anything else? I don't know what else to do."

"It's okay, Mary. Thanks, and thank Dom, too."

18:23:56
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"Sir, you're all set on Air Canada to Miami at 19 hundred 40 hours. Please retrieve your baggage from Customs and proceed to Terminal B. We're in A. You may take a shuttle bus from the front of Terminal A, or you may take the moving sidewalk on the lower level of



Terminal A."

"Thanks."

He walked across the terminal to "Customs Baggage." The bags were spread across and around the room. A first surveillance did not reveal any blue leatherette or brown leatherette. He carefully walked the aisles of bags. Nothing. A handler delivered additional bags. When he was satisfied they were not delivered, Boyd turned.

"Are there any more bags from Flight 5771?"

"What airline?"

"Eastern."

"I only handle United. Eastern's baggage claim is on the lower lobby."

"Thanks."

He took the escalator down, oriented himself, saw the Eastern Baggage room. It appeared closed. He walked to the door. "Eastern Airlines. Baggage Claims. 07:00:00 to 18:00:00. For Assistance, See Agent at Ticket Counter. Thank you for flying Eastern."

He took the escalator up. Some of the lines were shorter. He stood in one.

"Can you answer a question?"

"Of course." The Ticket agent turned and continued counting ticket stubs, "Can't you wait your turn? Twenty-five, twenty-six." There was no smile when he stopped and looked at Boyd.

"I've got my ticket, but my baggage has disappeared. It's not in Customs."

"Of course it is. Please look again. If there is still a problem, the Baggage Claims is on the lower lobby."

"The Claims' office is closed."

"It never closes."

"It's closed now. The sign said it closed at 6."

"Please check Customs Baggage."

Again. Boyd crossed the terminal. Groups of passengers passed him on their way to overnight lodging or other flights, he guessed. He should be on his way too.

18:53:14.

There were no bags. Eastern Claims was still closed after his second descent by escalator.

"My baggage is not in Customs, and Claims is closed. My Air Canada flight leaves in forty minutes." Boyd stood again at the counter.

"Yes? Monsieur?"

"I don't know what to do. Will you send my luggage after me? How do I arrange that?"

"But, monsieur, you cannot leave Canada without your luggage."

"My luggage, my bags, are not in customs. I don't know where they are and neither, apparently, does anyone else."

He tasted the perspiration sliding into the corners of his mouth. The bile rose from the burger and cheeses. He wished he had glass in his tongue and an Old Fashioned to bite into. He needed the cherry stem in his teeth. He felt the wetness under his glasses.

But there was no moisture in his mouth, and his last sentence croaked, "I am ticketed on Air Canada. Will you send my bags?"

"Of course, monsieur. But they must leave with you."

Boyd Thomas lifted his body half onto the counter as he leaned toward the agent. "You WILL send them to Ft. Lauderdale. Here are the numbers from the claim stubs." He had written his name and address, a description of the bags, flight number, and claim numbers. "YOU WILL." He eased back down on his feet as he saw two Canadian Police walk toward the counter.

19:13:57.

He moved toward the outside door and the shuttle. As he passed the escalator, his two previous trips conditioned him to take it. Halfway down, he thought, "Oh shit. How am I to get to the shuttle?"

He took his handkerchief and toweled his head. By the third stride at the bottom, he decided to take the moving walkway. He felt his hair soaked again.

The arrows to Terminal B assured him of the way. He checked the Gate number: 4. There was no moveable walkway. He began to run. He was at least 150 pounds overweight, but he had run cross country races in his teens--thirty years ago. His heart was revving, overworking under his sternum.

Gate 109. This way to Customs. This way to Gate 25. He had slowed to a manageable fast walk. He held his breath. He gasped. But he was past Gate 80, so he was getting closer. An arrow: This Way. A golden smudge paralleled his track.

The tears in his eyes blurred the sign. He ran his fingers through his hair.

Rivulets of perspiration slipped along his nails and down between the first fingers. He wiped his shirt. His glasses fogged. He was not certain what that fuzzy orange mite was or if a wet spot simply covered a corner of his glasses.

At last a hallway with glass walls, no people. He ran again. He ran like he had in the Washington Day Cross Country Race in 1961. Limping.

The amber shadow was still following him as he looked at the far wall. He was certain it was a smear. His thickness hindered the fleet runner he wished himself. He was behind, but he ran to win. Gate 4 was just on the other side of the glass wall next to the door ahead. He had found it. Found it. He had persevered.

The Pom materialized from the blur. It had yapped at him. He wanted to bark back. But he had no air.

19:31:33.

The door was locked. Everything about him was wet. Cascades were running down his neck and collar; rivers were filling his ears; thunder also rumbled in his ears; thunder and earthquake shook his whole body, as he heaved trying to force air down his throat. He couldn't even swallow air.

He leaned against the door. A maintenance worker came down the other side of the glass wall.

The Pom bounced and yapped.

"You can't have a dog without a leash," the worker winked.

The Pom renewed its high pitched chatter. Boyd turned and growled.

He turned back to the maintenance winker.

"How do I get out of here?" he croaked. Boyd knew he looked pathetically ridiculous.

"The same way you got in there. Where are you going?"

"Right there. Gate 4."

"Back to Gate 109. There's where you took the wrong door," the man said over his shoulder as he opened a sliding wall door and disappeared.

Boyd had expected to be right at Customs. He was surprised that he came out at Gate 4. He just had no more

sense of direction.

He stared at the Pom. The escapee was so openly defiant.

Boyd gulped air. He sensed a constriction around his chest. Tears and perspiration mixed. The mixture oozed down the front of his neck.

Only plexiglass separated him from Gate 4. Certainly, he thought, Niagara Falls gushed no more water than every pore he had which pulsed sweat. He was gasping.

He was not able to walk back to Gate 109. He tried holding his breath. Once there, he'd have to turn around and walk back to customs on the other side of the glass. Impossible.

"Instead of barking, why don't you help?" Boyd asked the Pom.

Finally, he had his breathing down to a swallowed hacking. Since no better plan had occurred to him, he'd have to walk back. As he turned to trudge back, the Pom lunged.

Boyd slipped on a wet spot created by his own perspiration as he tried to avoid the attack. He fell solidly against the door. The plexiglass gave minutely against his weight.

He pushed himself off with a forearm and hand thrust. "Ugh."

The jar and thrust into the door produced a response in

the latch. As the door slipped inward, the pressure of the motion pushed back against the lock. The door popped ajar.

He pulled the door open. He heard the alarm.

"Thanks, Pom."

Boyd took two steps toward the Gate. Security officers were coming around the bend in the corridor. Just then the Gate door opened. Boyd didn't look back at the source of prater on the other side of the glass. He raised his leaden arms.

"You'll have to return to Incoming Flights, Sirh."

There were no guns, only an open glass panel for Boyd to pass through. The Pom was gone. Boyd turned, thinking he could see a tawny blur dart into the plane. Boyd Thomas sagged against the wall.

## Tryptych

## A Lingering Hostility

The day belonged to Martha. Philip Randolph thought Martha would have loved this day. The warm April sun floated through the new leaves in a translucent shower of green. This was not the first time he had buried family in Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery. Among these ancient eroded slopes, he had always thought the funereal liturgy became somehow complete. From under the funeral canopy, he could see the colonial era graves of Richmond's elite families. Martha, who had developed an added sense of the romantic, always loved to walk the paths connecting the Byrds and the Randolphs.

He stood next to Pastor Thurston. Through blurring eyes he watched as six of her male friends carried her casket from the hearse to the grave site. Dean Bodger's stout figure led the others from the front left side of the casket. Philip had always begrudged the Dean's ability to



take charge with his physical presence. He felt an edge of ancient resentment narrowing his eyes. Philip bit his tongue to repress the familiar rancor and tasted iron as he swallowed. Bury all of the past, he thought. He might as well bury himself.

Philip focussed on the budding maple tree directly across the road. Martha and he were sitting under that maple on that marble bench when Martha showed Philip her first botanical article, published in Botanical Internationale, identifying seventeen varieties of ivy clinging to the angel-wing statues or the ancient red oaks in the cemetery. He accompanied her during her research observations, and both of them had loved this proximity to the river, especially in mid-winter after a wet snow and freeze when the holly berries blazed in their ice pods. They sat together here when Southern Living asked her to recast the article for their readers. Martha had chill bumps in June, then, sitting there, and she wanted him to hold her.

Philip kicked loose stones off the artificial turf covering into the grave. Both he and Martha had known they would join this landscape of Virginia flora. He wished Martha were here to tell him again the legend of the dogwood. The white dogwood was fading after the rains. She would have said that the pink dogwood bled the redbud for color.

"You're bleeding at the corner of your mouth, Philip," Pastor Thurston whispered. His intonation, caring.

"Yes. Thank you, pastor." He took his handkerchief, he felt his voice quavered in reply, felt the starch in the handkerchief as he rubbed the linen across his lips.

He felt lightheaded, felt as if he were standing outside of the man who answered. In the presence of the spring and Martha's casket, the words touched him like the kindness of Martha.

"Thank you." He was aware his murmured repeat was more to the approaching casket than to the pastor.

Philip looked up and saw a former student standing on the far side of the canopy, next to a large boxwood. Frances Paul stood close to a young woman. Frances probably was in her late thirties, he thought. She had come to visit many times before and during Martha's illness. She was always tailored, and her collar-length roan hair shimmered in the spring sun. Whenever she had visited together with Martha, he thought they talked about him. He had heard his name through the opened door too often to believe otherwise.

Before the casket reached the canopy, Philip tossed a small bouquet of violets into the grave. He wondered who would continue this flower ritual he and Martha had begun at Martha's mother's funeral, violets for love, at his own funeral.

The pallbearers carefully placed the casket on the

catafalque. As he looked up he noticed Bodger had stopped wiping his eyes with his leather gloves and now dabbed them with a handkerchief. He recognized the blue lace he had picked out for Martha's birthday present to Bodger.

"April is the cruelest month," he remembered.

Pastor Thurston, intoning, had almost finished his liturgy. The St. Paul's church chorus sang "St. Martha's Madrigal." The music should have been familiar, but Philip couldn't remember the words. He thought the "ashes to ashes" part of the liturgy finished the service. "Martha," he prayed, "let me come, too."

But the pastor had one more prayer. Then Philip took a small Bible and a bouquet of violets and daffodils from a side table and set them on the casket. He had always wanted to create a bed of flowers for Martha.

Then came the benediction. He knew Martha's body was in the casket. Martha was meticulous. Through each detail, during her two year illness, she forced him to talk out every feeling. The pastor's talk now numbed him from feeling sad. Now he only had memories, not feelings.

His anger toward Bodger was only a memory. His tongue hurt.

Philip Randolph was married to Martha Byrd Trethorne for thirty-eight years before she died. He had never actually been unfaithful to her. He had only once thought her unfaithful to him. But he was probably wrong.

They had completed college and university studies in different places in the south. They met at Riverton Manual Women's College when she was a third year assistant professor in biology and he a first year English professor and married two years later. He knew people thought they were outwardly different. She was effervescent and exuberant. He was morose and reticent and envied her. But, they had been soul mates from the beginning. In her he found the only person to understand his differences; in her he found the leader he sought. She had even tolerated his jealousies. His soul-mate perhaps; he wondered if he had been hers. He felt Bodger presence emerging in his answer. He had her as a friend; she had other friends. They had no children.

Martha's illness had been a shadow surrounding them for ten years before she died. From an operation in 1979, the diagnosis of cancer revealed consequences they were prepared to fight, but she fought for both of them and won a reprieve. During her early, brief therapy, they studied the available literature, as if it were a joint research assignment. But as the expected signals did not reappear in the predicted chronological time-frame, they maintained hope. Eight years to the month from the operation, she became sick again. Then for two years she fought again, an overworked cliché, he thought, but she had taught him every stage. As if she were one of her biological specimens, she

had watched and waited, charting with him each twist and variation. In the end, the biology lesson simply ended.

Thirty-eight years was a long, yet short, time to know and love someone, Philip thought as he stood under the funeral canopy. They had selected this site a long time ago. The cemetery was historic, confederates and federals had shot at each other from behind the marble tombstones. It was peaceful with dogwood, water oak and red maples greening in mid-spring. Philip did not expect the liturgy of the funeral to make the ground any more holy.

As if he were hearing fingernails on a chalkboard, he shuddered as a sense of danger jolted him from his reverie. He stood next to Pastor Thurston as the final words of the benediction slipped him back among the quick.

Philip looked up and the dean and pallbearers congregated on the far side of the canopy, next to a large boxwood. Dean Bodger stood closest to the casket. Philip had felt Bodger too near Martha before.

Bodger probably was in his late sixties, he thought. He had come to visit Martha many times before and during Martha's illness. He was always tailored, and his collar-length, still luxuriant, chestnut hair shimmered like a mane in the spring sun. Whenever Bodger had visited Martha, they talked and laughed about him. He knew it. He heard it.

Finally, anger toward Bodger was not a useful memory.

## Food for Funerals

Later, at home, he was not surprised when Dean Bodger came by the house to pay his respects.

"Phil, would you mind if I retrieved some books and notes from Martha's office tomorrow. Would that be convenient?"

He had not objected.

But when the bell rang the next day Philip had forgotten that Bodger would come by. He felt his defenses down now that all the friends of yesterday had left him in a silent house.

"I hope I am not intruding. Martha was helping me with a research project." Bodger stood in a light wool, pin stripe suit, tailored and suited to the chill in the April morning.

"Come in. I know so little of Martha's office. May I offer you coffee and some cake? I think every neighbor thought cake was the food for funerals."

"Coffee, if it's not too much trouble. I know my way

around Martha's office." Bodger walked to the office door.

"Select what you need." He ambled to the kitchen, a bit perplexed, irritated because he couldn't let go of his resentment. Plugging in the coffee urn, coffee unchanged from yesterday, he hoped that the coffee would not be too strong. His tongue still ached from the pain of the funeral.

He joined Bodger in Martha's office. Bodger was seated on Martha's desk with a notebook, three folders and a picture file in front of him. He was writing.

"Here's your coffee. Are there other files I can find for you?" Philip didn't know what or where, but he felt the need to offer.

"Dr... Phil...." He stopped and looked up at him. "Phil, I want to complete a book. This may not be the best time to ask a favor. I know we have had our differences.

"Last Friday, the publisher's committee met and approved our research prospectus and offered a formal contract."

Bodger was sitting on the desk just like Martha had when she and Philip had talked in her office. Usually her office had been off limits for Philip. Philip had preferred that arrangement.

Philip was certain his confusion showed. He had never been a serious, or good, poker player.

"May I have your permission to complete the project?"

"Why ask me? Was it some botany study? Martha was a genius in ivy and clinging vines. What?"

"You, sir."

"I beg your pardon."

"Your biography, a critical assessment of your work and an analysis of your literary feud with me."

"That seems one-sided to me," Philip listened, but the words made no sense. "No, I can't allow it. This was Martha's idea?"

"Martha signed the papers making me her literary executor. She prepared me in advance. She knew you would not approve, but she thought a debate between principals both interesting and intriguing." Bodger smiled. Philip thought Bodger must think that smile was smiling warmly, but there was a familiar adversarial sternness in its apparent kindness. Martha's look and Martha's logic.

"You're indecent, Bodger," Philip persisted. "We haven't been more than passing acquaintances in years. The day after we bury Martha, you come in here with such a preposterous suggestion. If this were such a great idea, why didn't Martha tell me herself? We have had plenty of time in the past two years. We did a good job of cleaning old closets. I thought so, anyway."

Philip stepped to the door, "Now you. Please, leave."

"Phil, calm down. Martha and I had only first discussed this idea when she became sick. I let the idea



lie fallow. Gave up on it really until eight months ago, I guess.

"Martha called me. We talked about it briefly on the phone, then I came to see her. You remember? Two or three times during the summer. Remember? Just before that protracted hot spell in August."

Philip remembered all too well. He had been glad Martha was able to see someone other than himself. At the time it had galled him that someone was Bodger. Philip knew his jealousy had been irrational, but Philip still had been bothered about events Martha and Bodger shared forty years ago, before Martha even knew him. Looking back, perhaps he had really been bothered that they hadn't included him in the remembering of those events. Now that Martha was gone, Bodger wanted to hash out memories, old quarrels with poet laureates, and publish them. All the while invoking Martha from the grave in this scheme.

"Your silence gives you away, Philip," Bodger had crossed to Philip and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I have something for you, if you're in a mood to hear it. Martha knew it would be difficult for you, as a very private person, to open closed doors. She said, though, it would be easier for you to accept me as a friendly adversary."

"Friendly, hell."

"I want us to do the book, Phil. Here, it's a note from ..."

"Your mother, or from Martha?"

"Martha."

"Well..."

"My dearest Philip. If James is reading this to you, I know you still are having misgivings. Believe me, I have started to talk to you several times. But the burden of me seemed to rest so severely on you that I couldn't bare to bring up anything I thought would upset you.

"James is convinced that by doing the book together, the two of you can become friends again. I wish we had thought of this idea many years ago. I have given him scrapbooks and my dailies--my diary observations. I am afraid my strength will soon be such that I will not be much help.

"You must know that I would not have agreed, except that I love you too much not to try one last time to bring together my two best friends, my champions, to discover my deep respect and affection for one and abiding love for the other.

"Most of all, I hope you will discover, in James, as dear a friend as you are losing."

While Bodger was reading, Philip had walked to the window and stood facing Bodger. In the silence after the sound of Martha's words faded, Philip turned to stare into the side yard. Forsythia had leaved, and the azaleas burned in their crimson hues. The grass had that spring velvet

look. He would need to paint the metal lawn furniture this year. If the earth can thaw at the end of winter, he thought, why can't Philip Randolph? Martha had conveyed these same sentiments over the years, and he had steadfastly chosen to believe it was because she and Bodger were old lovers. Had they simply been friends?

"If we work together, if, how would it proceed?"

"We could tape it. We could have a transcriber. We could write and then compare notes."

"What's it? Question and response. Whose question; whose response? Whose version, anyway?" Philip was gripping the back of Martha's chair. He felt the veins in his neck bulging.

"Easy, Phil. I don't know those answers. I thought we could talk. Out of our talk would come episodes where we disagree, perhaps, but maybe, just maybe, we could find points where we agree."

"I doubt it." Too much has passed to forgive and forget. There is too much pain to sort through. Bodger is asking too much, Philip mused. There was a time when he had admired Bodger. Philip really still admired the manner of his professional cool.

Philip had been an insecure first year assistant professor when he arrived at Riverton. He had taken the position, without an interview, on the Friday before classes started. The fall of late September had begun to color the

campus when he stepped off the bus at Riverview and College. The first person he met at Riverton had been James Bodger.

"Not Badger, Bodd - ger. You married? No. There's a cult of us here, male and female professors. We have to ward off the advances of the faculty wives trying to marry off their friends. Singles club, Fridays at half past six. You'll see. Staying at the Hotel Virginian? Good start. There's a two roomer at my boarding house. On the approved list.

"Look, I'm out after maple weevils. Come with me. No? Oh you're checking in. English department is first floor Plato's Cave. There." With a point and not a moment for Philip to respond to any of it, Bodger was striding across a shady space and down a ravine between the administration building and the classroom building he had pointed to.

Philip had felt exhausted from the rapid fire patter of information. Later he had taken the room in Mrs. Bryant's boarding house. Philip still remembered her words to him that first day, "No women above the landing. Breakfast at seven sharp. Evening meals with twenty-four hours notice."

Philip turned to Bodger, "I was on to you that first time I joined the Friday Supper Singles Club. You and Martha sat at the head of the table and giggled all night. Most of the merriment was directed at me, as I recall." Philip placed his coffee cup on a file cabinet and turned back to encounter Bodger. "For forty years that giggling

collusion between the two of you hasn't ceased."

Philip just stared at an unresponding Bodger. Philip, realized the reality behind his words, slurred, "I am sorry, James. But the two of you, Martha and you, did make life hectic for me when you were together."

Bodger roared with laughter, "You were such an easy target in those days, especially. Yes, we may have gotten off on the wrong foot from the beginning. My relationship with Martha had already developed in the two years of the Fridaysups.

"The other singles had been at the college so long they had never thought of a club. They had been included as extras in faculty wives' dinners, or they had organized dinner parties themselves. You acted so much like them, stuffed shirt, proper etiquette, talking about poetry."

"Martha liked poetry. And you wrote a novel, so you must have had interest in things literary."

"But Phil, we told you then, and I'll say it again, 'There's more to Friday nights beside more school talk.'" Bodger left the room with his coffee cup.

Those Friday nights with Martha were the first time he was infatuated with a girl. Martha smiled, talked to him, brought him books from the library, shown him other kindnesses, even invited him to lunch in the Main Hall dining room, faculty table. He had never known what to say to her. Small talk. Bodger always had something to say,

something to do. Gather this seed. Graft that variety. Chart this occurrence. Note that species. He certainly talked shop. Philip thought his talk just as important.

Philip picked up the folders, closed the office door, and moved into the living room.

Bodger brought the pot of coffee with him and followed. Seated across from Philip, Bodger looked into Philip's eyes and asked, "Tell me why you went to Cambridge, alone, without Martha? Martha was always evasive about that."

"I thought she didn't love me anymore."

"I don't think there was a time she didn't love you, Phil. Before you came, she liked me well enough, but man, she loved you. In that giggling as you'd call it, it was the funny things you did. Things you simply didn't recognize as funny yourself."

"When that student, EvaSue, died, I was at Cambridge. You were implicated. Did you impregnate her?" Philip felt himself in uncertain territory, felt a sense of sweat on his neck.

"What did you think?"

"Martha believed the story that you were taking her home to her parents. She always saw you as the hero of that story, but most of us thought you must have had something more than compassion for EvaSue."

"I did, but I didn't."

EvaSue had been a leggy twenty-year-old. Philip saw

her slouching into his office with her maroon poetry portfolio in the spring of her sophomore year. He had just told his class that he would study in England the following year. He had not told them that he would study alone. EvaSue had asked if she could visit Martha, only she called her Mrs. Randolph, while he was gone. He had not wanted to admit that Martha was not going. Martha could study the clinging vines of Cambridge and all of East Anglia. He had expected his wife of three years to make a decision. He had expected her to move in with Bodger.

But, of course, she had not. Now Bodger was here, as a friend. He felt on the verge of crying, but not in front of Bodger. What harm? Martha wanted him to assist, help.

"Of course," he conceded, "I could never refuse Martha. What can I do to help?"

Philip answered his questions and asked his own until Bodger announced he had to leave, after refusing supper. "But I'll be back after school's out and we'll do this properly. Will you be here in May, or early June? There's a lot of work to do." Bodger reached for the door as he spoke.

Philip sagged against the door jam. "I'll be here when you want to start. Today, I'm exhausted. What a revelation today has been for me. I suspected all along you had seduced the student, but Martha always saw the best in you. Still you wrote a sleazy best seller. I always thought it

was based on your peccadillos. So I have wronged you all these years. What wasted anger."

When Bodger left, Philip sat in Martha's chair and cried.

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Philip picked the mail from the floor under the mail slot. A letter arrived in the mail at ten thirty in the morning on the Saturday following Thanksgiving. He let it lie on the hall stand where Martha always left his mail until he came home for lunch. For thirty-eight years Philip's habit was to read the mail at one o'clock during the time Martha toasted bread for a sandwich.

Today he almost opened the envelope, because it was from Riverton Methodist Women's College. He taught at Riverton Methodist a long time, but not once had his students singled him out as "Outstanding Teacher." Some, long after they left, sent notes or cards remembering him at holidays; he received a few more when he retired.

Later, Philip fingered the brass kaleidoscope Martha had given him for his office furnishings and the images changed again. The piks fell into diamond rainbows. Then they formed strange angles. Just as quickly they changed into scarlet corners; changed again, they danced erect as glass clowns. Philip smelled her hand lotion as he closes



the closet door.

Philip took two steps toward the back door, sensed, maybe heard, sleet, turned and strode back through the dining room into the living room. Tears formed in his eyes as he sat down in Martha's chair. Her chair seems more comfortable than his, since her death.

At lunch, the envelope hung precariously on one arm of the chair, the toast on the other. The opened letter rested on his knee. Tears rim his eyes.

This invitation challenged his isolation from Riverton.

For the very first time since Martha's death, he faced a decision which requires considerable commitment. He was not at all certain that he has made a decision since June, since Bodger began the project. Meeting with him, throughout the summer, he had answered every question, but now that was over.

Philip concluded he had taken each day, one at a time, but maybe each day had taken him. Too often he rode the currents, or spun in the eddies. The vagaries of daily winds and currents changed around him and he with them. He was not certain he could make a decision.

He wanted to say, "I will go alone." But he gripped the arms of Martha's chair as he announced that decision aloud to the energetic flames as they frolicked among the fireplace logs.

"But I don't want to go. I'll have to encounter Bodger, Martha's memory again." I thought Martha and Bodger had talked it out, but even in two years of talk with Martha and three months, off and on, with Bodger, Philip still stood on the edge of the grave, mouth hurting, and wanted to die.

The idea of joining Martha seemed so much easier than making the trip back to Riverton Methodist.

## A Blind Different

The road, mottled by the afternoon sun seeping among the bones of trees and early December leaves, meandered beside Virginia's James River. Hardly two car widths, the road twisted and turned all the way from Scottsville to Wingina. The car's tires on the coarse asphalt made a monotonous hum in Philip Randolph's ears. His thoughts were as circuitous and shadowy as his route along the river.

He was late for the student symposium. He did not like to be late. He did not like driving. Martha had been the driver. He liked Martha's roads. He did not like this road. It seemed wrong.

He turned at the next paved county intersection to the right, up a low range of hills away from the river and the cathedral vaulted course. The curves of the road seemed to him to track his confusions, his uncertainties. Without Martha driving he couldn't see around the next turn. He didn't know this road, but he couldn't slow down.

"I want to be with Martha." Not only was he lost, he

knew it. He had known it since the work with Bodger had been complete. Going back was no solution. Going back to the college could only bring out the pain again. He had hoped the interviews with Bodger would help, but the time, he realized, was only an interlude.

He deliberately accelerated just as the car approached the center of a wide curve and the crown of a hill. He felt the rear tires slide first, then the soft shoulder seemed under the right front tire. He made a conscious effort to brake, but his other self intruded. He felt the back wheels slow in the mud. He saw trees whirl, and buildings and a steeple and a tractor and a cut bank, and trees whirled again.

Then nothing, he sat gripping the wheel. He sat for what seemed a long time.

"Somethin's the matter, mister?"

"Yes." Philip rolled down his window. "My car stalled. Then it slid into this mud and snow. Or maybe it happened the other way." Philip opened the car door, exited, and looked at his, rather, Martha's, Caprice, right tires in the slush in the cut of the ditch.

Something about the face of the man was wrong. In his mid-thirties, the man appeared different, somehow. The eyes amazed Philip. They held a hard, yet inquisitive, stare. The face was wrong, as noteworthy as the uncomfortable fact that the car was so still, and he was still alive.

"You came over'd ridge at a pretty good clip. If'n you don' know the curve's where it is, uh, here you be!" the man observed.

"Is there someone with a tractor nearby that could pull the car from the ditch?" He looked beyond the man, then deep into his eyes, then back up the hill to a small, white, aluminum-sided house.

Then, "Is there....?" as he realized the man's eyes did not follow his. The man was blind.

"Foller me." The man's voice was inviting.

Philip followed awkwardly as the blind man led him up a slippery path, out of the ditch embankment. The man's footsteps did not falter either on the loose dirt or the mud. The two of them did not head toward the house Philip had seen from the road, but rather to an unpainted, two storied Victorian "ginger bread" that emerged as Philip trailed up the hill.

"Pap'll see to it." The man's voice was reassuring.

The front door opened into a small hallway with doors to the left and right and a third door directly ahead. The man kept on a straight ahead path following a single pine plank. He opened a carved oak door to a shorter, but wider, hall. Philip shut both doors behind him. Blue-yellow light filtered through two high, side windows caked with grime. He stopped in the dim hallway and looked at the stained glass. He realized the poverty, but beauty, of the house.

He felt the kindness of the man and the place.

Slowly Philip concentrated on the stained-glass window. The angled sections of glass depicted "The Baptism at the River Jordan." The glass was milk white and yellow slashed, like butter flecks afloat in the cream at the top of a wooden churn. The dedication, faded black enamel, was hand lettered on the pane:

For Horace Rivers  
1743-1779  
He froze with Washington  
at Valley Forge.  
Frozen Rivers can not run.

The grim joke eased Philip's embarrassment and made a smile approach his mouth. He hadn't thought of his wanting death as running away. Perhaps it wasn't too late to just run. He could turn back, go home. He would not go to the college. That was running, too.

He turned and crossed to the other window, moved a high backed chair away. A seven-foot "Christ as Teacher" stood before a multitude. His arms were in pre-crucifix embrace encircling the crowd, except for one prodigal on a far hill.

In a dark streaked rust printing the memorial read,

Elizabeth Journey Falconer  
1805-1862  
Her journey took flight.  
From great gyres life seems brief.

The country saw of death and hope cheered him in the churchness of the stained glass and the spirit of the artisans' epitaphs.

Philip turned and the man stood, motionless on his single plank, in a pool of colors from the two windows. The kaleidoscopic hues painted him with blue shadows for eyes, lavender cheeks, one red and one yellow ear. The man turned and, in changing, stayed the same.

Philip was curious, "What is this place?"

The man seemed to stare into him, "Her be my ma's church what burned. Surprised you?"

Philip gazed speechless at the man. The explanation of the stained glass stunned him. How can a burned church exist in the middle of a house? Who would think to create such a place, and why?

The man moved through the door into a kitchen, and Philip meekly followed after him into the hot air redolent of cooking onions and wood burning.

"Pap. Feller's car hopped the ridge and caught the curve. He's need a tow." He moved through the kitchen to the mud room. Philip stood cold and stunned, in shock from the accident, in shock from the heat of the room working on his coldness.

Pap, stretching up a sinewy forearm from his chair, extended a hand and smile, "Welcome to Church's. Set a spell. Name's Cleve."

"Philip Randolph. Thank you. And your son, too. I am not certain how it happened, but I am stuck." Philip looked carefully at a man his own age. Creases, like erosions, mapped a tanned thin face. Philip thought the father's eyes as penetrating as the son's were vacant.

When the son left by the back door, the father confided to Philip, "He's a different, you know."

"A different?" Philip crossed the room and stared out the window at the man walking to a shed near an orchard.

"He never took to schooling. He was allus different from the others." The father moved to a cast iron stove and lifted a dented coffee pot. "He's gone to harness the horses."

"Harness? I thought he was blind."

"Is. He kin do anythin' I kin. 'Cept drive. Hears everythin'. I got hot coffee; how 'bout some?"

"Thank you. It's getting cold outside."

"Already is. More snow 'for Christmas. Here's coffee."

"Your son says this was once a church that burned?"

"Right as rain. I was away. Yalu River, Pork Chop Hill, Panmunjom. Wife allus liked the Methodist Church. Strong sturdy stuff, she'd say. When I came back, she was dead. The boy livin' with my brother, Tom. Not much left to remind me of her. The young man and the church."

"I know. I've recently lost my wife. Everything reminds me." Philip spoke into his coffee.



"The church was burnt. Doc Weather's dead an his wife moved away. Took down Doc's house, side by side. Brother Tom an I cleaned out the church. Kept the winders. Put old Doc Weather's house surround it an nailed it to the walls of the church. Fixed the roof, an the boy an me was in a new house. Right pretty too, an the boy knows ever' inch of her. I calls it Church's. It looks like a house on the outside, but it's a church in here.

"It's like the boy, he looks whole, but he's a blind different."

Philip stood at the sink, rinsing the coffee cup. He looked out toward the shed and watched the blind man and a brace of chestnut Belgian horses trot past a trough and a pickup, and head down the driveway. He turned to thank the father, but saw that Cleve had wrapped himself in another shirt, a jacket, a stained cap and red scarf. He already waited at the door of the mud-porch.

"Maybe I can help, although I don't know horses." Philip shivered, not from the cold, but from the effort of making sense of the past half hour.

"Sure, we'll have her out in a jiffy. Them's horses made to work hard. Best there is. Better'n an old tractor in mud and cold." Cleve eased the door open and shut for them.

As they passed a stack of wood, the country man picked up a stout uncut hickory pole about six feet long. He

motioned to Philip to bring its slightly longer mate. Philip felt the pole unbalanced across his shoulder and struggled to keep it from swinging into Cleve.

At the car the blind man had linked the harness to chains on the fender, but the Caprice was stuck on the hard berm with the wheels not set for the horses to pull.

"We'll use the poles to purchase the wheels to hard soil." Philip nodded in agreement with Cleve's notion. They placed the poles under the wheel in the ditch, Philip from the side, Cleve the rear.

Philip pushed up heavily against the side-panel. His feet slipped in the muddy slush. As the car shifted, Philip lost his balance and slid under the pole. When the pole pressed across his wind pipe, Philip gasped for breath. His fingers dug into ungiving wood and then eased. As he sensed himself about to lose consciousness, he saw a stained-glass window.

He changed his grip and gave the pole as strong a push as he could. The colors of the window changed in hues; Martha's face glowed in color-filled shards of reds and yellows and blues. His muscles ached in the tension. He tried shifting his hands again, but the pole was too icy, too wet. He forced his body up. The revolving colors changed into a darkening cloud, a thunderhead. He heard the breath leak up his throat. Darkness. Could it have been Martha? Martha was dead. Buried. Martha was dead. A

moment ago he wanted to be dead with her. He only wanted to be with her. Why was he struggling? Let go. Let go.

Sharp streaks of white penetrated the darkness. Red streaks, like shooting stars and burning meteors. He felt himself struggling for air, again. He shifted his weight against the pole. The weight still across his throat, but if he could move it to the shoulder, even turn his head. An explosion of heat rocked his arms and legs. He felt even his eyes squench.

Philip envisioned Martha's grave and coffin behind the tightness of his eyes. The colored flowers erupted into petals of want. He wanted to keep on pushing. Like the talks with Bodger, Martha was giving him another chance. She wasn't here in his sight, it was her death. It's over.

Something eased. He gave another effort, using his hands to push down against the slush and mud. He found hard ground. He arched his back and pushed. Pushed. The pole moved. He moved the weight to part of his shoulder. He pushed again.

He still tried to grasp the Martha in front of him; she faded again. No colors, no images. Even the black faded.

Instead, he wanted to breathe. He heard a cry of exhaling air. He listened to the blind man sing to his horses and his father croon to him.

The car rolled away, and Philip inhaled. Finally, he sat up and watched the son as he guided the horses, pulling

the car up the driveway. Pap aimed by waving his arms, shouting, and singing to his son.

Philip was slathered in mud, but it was all right.

Philip had been confused, but now he only had one thought: Go on. He walked after the car and horses. He would attend the dinner at the college. Make the speech. Take one day. Martha and death would be memory and respect. Maybe there would be another burned church.

Philip caught up and leaned against the car to help, but the horses completed the work. He was silent as the three returned to the kitchen. The other two sat at the kitchen table and faced him.

Philip washed his hands, warming them, then he moved to a room near the door and changed his slacks and shirt. Then he brushed the wet mud from his other slacks and his shoes, mechanically.

Lost in his new resolve, he turned to them. "I am sorry to have put you to trouble."

"Nary a bit. Them Belgies needed a little exercise. The boy enjoys them big beasts. He'll rub them for hours. 'Til bedtime."

Philip pulled his wallet from his pocket, "May I pay you?" He was embarrassed. He knew they didn't want payment. These men were self-sufficient. They did for themselves and others. He could be. He had been blind to possibilities, but he would be different. Cleve and his son

proved that to him.

"Nary a thing. Gives us somethin special do to." Cleve waved Philip off. "You all right?"

"Just being here helped. Thank you. I appreciate what you've done," Philip raised his muddy pants. "I'm late for a meeting at the college in Riverton, but I no longer feel rushed to get there." He shook his head over the pants.

Cleve crossed the kitchen to see Philip out from the mud room, "You be all right?" The men shook firmly.

"Yes. Thank you again." Philip stepped onto the porch. "I liked to visit again?"

"Anytime you're nearby, come ahead. Coffee's almost always on." Cleve stood at the top of the stairs.

The car was pulled to the back door. Philip hosed off the mud. Only a few scratches damaged his car. As he started the car, Philip looked into the kitchen windows where Cleve and his different son faced him. He waved his hand, and Cleve raised his.

Philip saw that the sky had changed in an hour. The colors of sundown had faded completely as he reached the highway. He was away from the confusing river road and back on the direct route. His headlights focussed their white illumination on the highway's center and edge lines. He couldn't see beyond the headlights, but what he could see, he could drive through safely enough.