THE WAR OF MOODIE'S ARM

by

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THE LEOPARD - Viking

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THE WAR OF MOODIE'S ARM

Pa is not a big man, neither broad in the shoulders nor up and down tall. But he is built hickory [redacted] tough. He is a mountain man from the west section of Malagoosha County with lungs strong as leather. His hands were so broad, they could snug a watermelon so the fingers met. I've seen him follow a plow through clay land and the handles hardly jolted but mostly ran on silk on the power in his forearm. He was soft spoken too.

It was the time of the war in Cuba. Not the big one you read about in the history books but the one they wrastled on the radio and television. It was in the Fall of 'Sixty-two.

We were working the Willow Ten that October. It was hard work for only Pa and me. We never but now and then get a snowfall in that part of Malagoosha County, its that mild. So mostly we plow through the Fall and rest out the frost, ready to seed again early in the year for the ground never stayed hard long. We would be hurling dirt in the eye of day long before that lazy Fall sun showed up. We'd break for coffee and lunch, quit only when the light faded. Pa used to squint up at the last of the sun and say with a [redacted] grin lopsided by the sweat running down into it,

"Skedaddle, you old bum."

Then he would bend again to the handles and by nightfall we'd have the new mule teams in a lather. We never plowed with horses.

"This country was built on mules, son," Pa would say when he felt like. "Horses get more talked about because they're

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prettier. But it took the stubborn, ornery old mule to build it." Then he might add, "Maybe we got some of the mule in us too for it took a stubborn people to build it."

Spoken so softly that when the wind was blowing, you had to lean into him to hear it. For Pa hardly ever told of his folks. They were from the western section of the county.

Malagoosha County is some over a hundred miles long but narrow no wider than a coon's walk when the hound dogs are sounding in the 'simmons. The County is almost all mountains. Malagoosha City is on the eastern line. We lived near the east line, a few miles from [redacted] Malagoosha City. Around here, the land is not as lean as in the west, rolls more. Not that there is much rolling, because of the knobs. The knobs thicken into real mountains, the more west you go. The farms about our way are wedged between the knobs but there is enough loam to carry our burley, oats, rye, corn for likker and hogs, sorghum and some stands of poplar, walnut, chestnut, hickory, oak and other timber. We also grow some peaches and strawberries. But for a cash crop, guess you could say a lot of folks, especially on Massacre Day, rely on corn whisky.

Before Willi Mae went away when I was no higher than anything's hind leg, Pa used to look up the powdery dust road to the mountains and say,

"Least uns, your folks are up there a ways, eighty-hundred miles or so. Your uncles Shad, Meshach and Abednego and a parcel of cousins. One of these days we'll go looking for them."

They were real mountain folk, back there in the insides of the County. Once or twice, some of Pa's closest friends, such as Uncle Matt and Sep Logan, used to josh him about the "feudin'

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Hammonds."

But Pa never spoke to us about any feuds. When I pressed him, he would fort up after saying gently,

"Folks got no cause to go killing each other. Killing comes only where there's no sense."

The only time he talked much I believe was when he met the fellows in Jeb Coombes' grocery store over in Malagoosha City. Mostly on courthouse days, on Saturdays, and of course on Massacre Day.

Malagoosha City is southeast of us. Pa's closest friends, the ones he talked [redacted] to in Jeb Coombes', are farming folk from right around here. They go to town to meet and talk.

Our house is on a knoll. The road to Malagoosha City runs straight pass our house for half a mile before deep bending. Across our fence line is a thick wood, sweet smelling in the summer with cucumber trees burdened in white blooms, yellow poplars bearing green and orange cups dainty as ladies' shoes. It is a lovely wood. The foot of tall trees knee deep in fern, bloodroot, stonecrop and columbine.

It wasnt the kind of wood you would think a fellow would look at over his shoulder one day and feel fear tickle-footing the back of his neck.

But I reckoned it happened.

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Pa was a sudden man too. Dug into his character were postholes for good and bad. A talk with Pa was likely to come to a sudden halt when he planted his foot in a posthole. I recall an evening one summer when we were fooling around in Jeb Coombes' grocery store in town and the talk turned on the ruckus some colored kids were making all over the State to get served in restaurants and the like.

"There aint nothing them Nigras want that cant be given them with a rawhide whip," said Uncle Matt, one of the nicest old guys in Malagoosha County.

Everybody was chuckling a little when Pa said so softly that it took time to hit us, "You're wrong, Matt."

In another man, you'd figure that maybe he was coming up with something smarter than Uncle Matt's. But in Pa you knew this one was straight down the gullet. Not smart, just straight

"What'd you say, Abner?" said Uncle Matt, his face going stiff.

"I said you're wrong," Pa said. "What I mean is you oughtnt to whip folk for wanting to be human beings."

Now I'm not saying that Pa was wrong, but a lot of folk like Uncle Matt say things they wouldnt kiss the Book for; and what a man says on a barrel in the grocery store aint what he thinks walking home. Pa had fouled that one but nobody rode him. We Hammonds had been in the county since it was Indian land and everybody knew that Abner Hammond was no nigger-lover. He was only a man with ideas.

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We were working the Willow Tree Ten that October, Pa and

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and me. Since I can remember, it has only been Pa and me —— except for when Willi Mae had been with us and that had made no difference. Willi Mae, six or seven years older than me, had done little but moon around the house and gone off to the Saturday night dances in town. She had been I guess what you'd call pretty. We'd called her Red until she asked us to stop. Pa had looked a little hurt but since then we called her by her given name. Only it hadnt made her hair less red; but maybe Pa's hurt made her more restless for a year or two afterwards, she left us for the outside. So we were two men in the house since my mother died when I was born. I suppose I loved Willi Mae for I bawled when she left and was for calling her names. But Pa, in one of the few times he was mad at me, told me to shut up. Willi Mae, it turned out, had looked after me good as any mother.

It was dark this October evening by the time we got to the house. We washed and made supper, then sat around listening to the radio. I had finished high school and Pa was thinking of the agricultural college. Only a few kids from Malagoosha county had ever gone to college and this was one of Pa's ideas they considered funny down at Jeb Coombes'. We listened to Lulu Belle on the radio. The other stuff wasnt anything much after Lulu Belle so I picked up the newspaper. After awhile, Pa said, "Things are looking bad down there."

You know how it is, reading. It took a little time reaching me.

"Huh? Looking bad?"

"Down in the Caribbean. Cuba," Pa said.

"What's doing?"

"One of these newspaper fellows was just on the radio. He said we've moved a bunch of battleships down there."

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"I guess that ought to hold Castro for awhile," I said, going back to the post mortem on the baseball season.

"Them Spanish fellows could go all crazy quickly. It could touch off something," Pa said.

When I heard the chair creak, I knew he was leaning forward to turn the dial to the police news. Pa was regular as a clock. Each night since the two years Willi Mae's letters stopped coming, he turns to the police news.

Listening.

The murders. The runovers. The asphyxiations in winter. Listening not with buzzard hope but with the mildly worried hunch to his shoulders rabbits get when a twig snaps in the brush. The old maple rocker creaked again as he turned off the radio and sat back. I could hear the tree toads fluting outside and the rattle of a pine bough on an upstair window pane.

"Anything in the paper?" he said.

I made to seperate the sections to give him the newsy half. The Malá goosha Trumpet comes in two sections, the front half for news and the smaller back piece for the sports and the ads. Pa never takes it but I always make to give him.

"No, you read, son. Guess I'll just think awhile," he drawled. Truth was, Pa wasnt much of a reader. Where he came from, nobody read. I knew he wanted to talk so I let the paper fall to the floor and stretched my legs out. In the highbacked rocker with the carved armrests, he looked small but Pa had presence. You were aware of the powerful head and hands and the iron-grey eyes that had coped with plowdirt and heat and sunlight all the forty years he had farmed.

"We ought to hear from the Dean soon," I said.

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"You dont need to rush him so hard, son," Pa said.

"I'd like to get in a couple of years before they call me."

"They wont be calling you. There's gonna be no war."

"About [redacted] time we shaved Fidel's beard. He's getting too uppity."

"Wont take/the whole United States army to do that," Pa said dryly. "Them battleships got good razors. Long, noisy ones."

Now that Willi Mae hadnt turned up on the police news, he was lively and full of sass again. He was sending me mail and I liked to see him licking stamps, his eyes shining and rimmed with fun crinkles.

"How far are we from Cuba?" I asked, knowing he would have picked that up from the radio fellow.

"Oh," he said, pursing his lips and looking up at the ceiling as if he could read the answer in the stains and cracks. "Guess - about ninety or so miles from down in that place they call Key West."

"Wouldnt take much more than a burp gun to reach down there," I said.

"Heck, we could send airplanes down there that could sit up on top like a bald eagle for four-five hours laying eggs, son. Better'n any what-you-call-it gun."

"Yeah, guess so. You think we'll do it?"

"Hard to tell what that young fellow in Washington will do. He's fast as a catamount when he gets mad. Look what he did to those folk over in Oxford."

I'd read about the nigger student at Ole Miss, but as I said, Pa was licking stamps.

"Dont [redacted] rightly remember."

"What [redacted] you read in the newspapers anyway besides the

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ball games x? Didnt you hear about the Nigra fellow who wanted to get into the college?"

"He's got a nerve," I said.

"Sure he's got a nerve and he made it."

"You mean —— they took him in?"

"Sure, after President Kennedy had sent in the National Guard and marshals and a whole bunch o' shooters."

"Now he's got a nerve."

"That's right. They both got nerve. Does this country a lot of good," Pa said.

"What good can one nigger do ——"

"The fellow is a Nigra," Pa snapped. "Dont you go calling him nigger."

"What difference does that make?"

"Its just bad."

Maybe he was right. I didnt know. I turned the talk to crops and after shoving it here and there, he yawned and said maybe we should be turning in. Next day being Saturday, we were going to town.

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CHAPTER TWO

When God Almighty made these United States, He did it slow and proud so it came out grander than any land. But He took so much time over it and there were other folks waiting too; so by the time he came down here, He was slapping Malagoosha County together like He was in a hurry. He tied the hills with hogbacks and gouged out the valleys with a blow of His fist. Thunder and lightning must have jolted His elbow when he drew the Malagoosha River so His finger jumped, zigzagging it through the hogbacks until it crossed the county line. Snug in one of the bends was the town of Malagoosha.

Back long ago, when the government made a fellow's homebrew illegal, the old Godfearing folk of Malagoosha went right on making mash because they reckoned it would be a sin to allow all His good corn and water go to waste. The revenue people mostly stayed out, figuring that what we made was for home consumption and not worth getting shot for. Suppose we didnt look too good anyway. For Malagoosha County is dirt farm country; beat-up automobiles and bib front blue denim country; sorghum and molasses and hanging-tree country; where when a fellow shaved was because he wanted to spruce, like say the first couple of days in his courting.

Pa and me were in the old car rattling down the washboard road before the day was fetlock to a pony. We made it crawling around the switchbacks and over the humps which the chassis straddled like a seesaw, carburettor whistling and waterpump wheezing, the loose pistons lief to tear the guts out at every stroke.

I dropped off Pa at Jeb Coombes' grocery story and took

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the car down to Pete's. He runs a gas pump down near the county courthouse, a big guy about a shrug shorter than me. We used to hunt and fish together when we were kids with not many chores. Now he was hustling it with this gas pump, since the year he quit school with [redacted] his time nowhere up.

"Hi, kid," he grinned at me as he hooked up the nozzle of the hose. "You want the new or the old?"

That was a joke between us. If I said the new, that would mean we had come in for gas. But when I shook my head Pete knew I was loading up on the heavy old lubricant that [redacted] had been [redacted] which came in for an oil change. Almost unplugged from the trucks/[redacted] thick as [redacted] grease, Pete and me swore it prevented the engine from knocking.

When Pete was through in front, he came back to where I was pouring in the stuff with a quart can I was using for a ladle.

"How's your Pa? Up at Jeb's I reckon?"

"Yeah. Ruling the world from a cracker barrel," I said.

"Cracker barrel's good as a throne. Depends on who's sitting up there," said Pete. He is a very thoughtful fellow but you wouldnt know it the first time, the [redacted] way he grins frantic hurling the words at you.

"Dont give me that, Pete. More good guys go after [redacted] thrones than go after [redacted] cracker barrels"

"Yeah? Yeah? So you guess there're more thrones than cracker barrels in this whole wide world? At this time in this age, day and year, more fellows are climbing up on thrones than on a good old dirty white cracker barrel? Think, son, think."

You couldnt rile up or anything at Pete. The way he says it with that grin. The oil brimmed up, black and stiff as cardboard.

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"That ought to hold it to next Saturday," I said. "Got a five-eigths spanner?"

"And a jack and a couple of lugs and whatever the hell else you want. Only I cant give you anything out of merchandise," Pete said.

"When we get our new car I'm gonna give you this one. Nobody more deserves it."

Pete went around with me, tightening nuts and wheel lugs, even grinning when he had returned from serving a customer out front and caught me sneaking a few bursts from the grease gun.

"That's what I say, we gotta help one another in this county," he said.

"I'm good for business. Folks see me come in here [redacted] for a service will reckon that what's good enough for Abner Hammond's Abner is good enough for them."

"Rather have that redhead sister of yours helping me out. Heard anything?"

Pete was a bit like Pa about Willi Mae. A few years older than me, he had known her before she went away. Always asking after her.

"No. Reckon as one of these days we'll have to go outside and look her up. At least, Pa will, one of these days."

"Talking about going outside. Going downstate tomorrow, down to Gulf City," Pete said.

I looked at him, my eyes big. A fellow doesnt go outside of Magaloosha County every day. To tell the truth, I'd never been to Gulf City [redacted]; and I dont believe Pete had been more than once before.

"No kidding? What's this for?"

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"Got a letter this week from the fellows who supply me with gas. Seems as if they're holding some sort of meeting down there of all the guys who sell their gas. Says they had a good year and want me to be their guest. Airplane ticket and all. Only, I dont know as if I can make it. Means I'd have to stay down there three or four days. Cant have the business shut up so long."

"Yeah?" I said, watching him.

"Yeah," he said, watching me.

"Why in hell dont you ask me?" I said.

"'Tend to. Was waiting," Pete grinned.

"Pa can do without me for a few days. I can get home every night."

"Sure. I'll pay you."

"Sure, then I can pay you for all the stuff I've stolen."

We had it all fixed by the time I left him and drove back to Jeb Coombes'. I parked under a shade tree in front of the store and went into the big cool room lit by skylights. Jeb put up no partitions but the way he had the goods placed you knew what side of the store you'd go for groceries and where the ladies would buy their wants and where Jeb's friends would sit.

Pa and the rest were in the angle of the store formed by the east and the street side, a little shut off by the cartons Jeb had set their for that purpose. It was no secret that behind the picture of General Lee hanging so low a man could sit and touch it, was the hollow where Jeb kept the bottle. They were all shaking hands with General Lee when I got there. Most of them nodded to me as I went to sit by Pa. Years ago, after Willi Mae left, they

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had accepted that I'd have to come in with Pa since he had no woman with whom to leave me. I had grown up with them and had never abused the privilege by pushing into their talk. I had learnt more good manners in Jeb Coombes' grocery store than what fellows with a ma and a pa both, did.

Uncle Matt Connant, one of the nicest old fellows in the county, tossed off his whisky and wiped his gray mustache with his knuckles.

"Abner," he said,"it will be your privilege soon to introduce Young Abner to the General."

Pa looked over at me in the quiet way he has. "A year or two yet, Matt."

"Along about his age, a year or two younger, we were looking ol' Lee in the eye back of the barn," said Sep Logan, our neighbor on the river end, a tall, beaknosed man with one eye flaring bigger than the other. He had seven sons and a couple of daughters, all scared tail tuckered of him. He was normal as a mountain lion. In the act of breathing he was violent and when he moved his hands, they swept. He was the one who on the edge of town had put up a sign saying:

> We shoot at sight Communists, Revenoo Runners and uppity Niggers. Also Jews, Catholics and anybody else who aint with us.

You could see strangers driving into town pausing to look at the peculiar welcome and some grinned but others werent so happy. Some newspaper boys had picked it up and poked fun at Magaloosha in their papers. A few of the folk around had showed it to Sep and were for gently persuading him to take down the sign. But when Sep took it badly, they left him alone for a fellow must do what he wants with his property.

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But he never painted over the sign after that as he used to do every year before Massacre Day and it was fading now so you had to look good and close to read the words.

Sep's family had been in the [redacted] county long as anybody's except ours and a few others, a hardworking man with a plow or a jug. He was a good neighbor, never leaning on your fence and would come running if you hollered. Once before we got our automobile, Pa had been riding the blaze face chestnut he kept for saddling. A snake or something must have scared the animal just where the road edged a ravine at the place [redacted] that's called Hogg's Hollow. It threw Pa and he fell thirty feet down into the ravine, snapping a leg bone. Pa lay in there most part of a day and a full night before Sep came walking by on his way to town. When he heard Pa crying out, [redacted] Sep soon had it figured out and he climbed down into that ravine, climbed back out with Pa over his shoulders and toted him the nine-ten miles into Magaloosha to the doctor. He was that kind of a man.

"He's got his eye on college. A man should do what he wants," Pa said to Sep.

"Reckon," said Uncle Matt. "But it seems a waste going to school for three-four years learning what you could learn on the farm anyway. Now if he had been going to learn something like being a doctor, or a lawyer, or preachin' even;though I guess a man can learn to preach riding circuit better than any college."

Uncle Matt Connant was big shouldered with short, powerful legs. He bulked when he sat, the long silver hair reaching almost to his shoulder. His eyes were deepset and bluer than ordinary. He was the oldest [redacted] of the group [redacted] in Jeb's grocery store. [redacted] Uncle Matt liked to talk and he didnt like a fellow who questioned him. He was the kingpin on [redacted] crops, women, weather, automobiles, horses,

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likker, [redacted] the United States, the Confederacy, and everything else. Except for Pa, he had the best money crops and his burley was even better than ours. He and Sep were the only two who had ever lived putside. They had run off and joined up with the soldiers during the first world war and had lived on the level land for upwards of a year before it was over. Uncle Matt seldom ever talked about it but Sep [redacted] will remember anytime you want him to, how he and Uncle Matt nearly crossed the ocean to France. Only because they neither could read or write a lick the man wouldnt allow them to go on the boat. But Sep had the army bug in his britches and often a time you could hear him laying into his sons because they had no learning to get them into the army. Sep would yell that if they had any gumption they would [redacted] creep under the wire into the United States Army.

Uncle Matt Connant never gave way to anybody except to Jeb Wishaw, younger than him by mostly near ten years. Uncle Matt had no family left since his maiden sister Miss Angie died a few years back and folks thought that maybe why Matt was so beholden to Jeb was because he needed [redacted] kin. A man may be hard surfacedas flint but his flesh-and-blood part needs something softer to lean on. Jeb Wishaw had a log house a couple of dozen miles over in the north corner of the county. He grew five or six acres of sugarcane for his sorghum and he kept hogs and chickens. He was married to a lady from Louisa County named Mis' Charlotte Wishaw, a good woman even if she was a foreigner and they had a couple of daughters. Talk around was that I was courting the youngest, [redacted] a black haired, long legged painter cub named Olivinia. But she was as shy as a warbler and a fellow had as much chance getting close as hooking a jack salmon with burlap twine.

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"What's this going on about Cuba?" Sep Logan said.

"Cuba? Who in hell is Cuba?" Jilson Swift asked.

Sep looked at Jilson like he had two heads. "You do considerable spell of living down in Coon Hollow," Sep said. "You ought to come visiting more often."

Jilson it was true only came to town once or maybe twice each month. He has a good crop of pumpkins and apples, bluegill and drumfish abound in the break at the bottom of Coon Hollow and Jilson used to say it was unlikely he would come hopping out the morning Gabriel blew his horn. He had everything but trouble in Coon Hollow.

"Cuba? Some place down country," Uncle Matt said.

"Cuba is where the United States army fought more'n once," Sep said. "Fellow down there named Castor, he's bucking for trouble with the United States army."

"Castro," Pa said.

"Sound like castor oil to me," Jilson said, grinning.

Jilson was thin and tattery as a river birch in his denims and he didnt give a hoot who knew his ignorance. He could grin more than any man I knew, easy and lazy like he never yet had a stomach ache. Last time he came out, nobody much had been talking about Cuba except the fellows on the radio. Jilson didnt own a radio.

"You reckon it will come to a fight?" Sep asked.

Uncle Matt shook his head and held up his hand to halt Jilson. "Cuba aint so big. There wouldnt be any cause to fight them. This Castro, he wears a beard and carries a gun on his hip just as folks down here do on Massacre Day. He's just play acting."

"It says on the radio he's getting bigger guns from the Reds," Sep said.

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"Missiles," Pa said and I looked at him proud, for in his quiet way he knew more than them all.

"Missiles? Rocks?" Jilson said, looking astonished.

"That's the new name for the big guns in the United States army," Sep said. "You shoot high and over and drop a ball in the next county. Wish we had some of them when I was in."

"Then they wouldnt want you," Jilson said.

Sep looked slow at him and worked his hands, saying, "Why?"

"Soldiers is for fighting hand to hand, like [redacted] catamounts," Jilson said. "Now they got the big guns I reckon they wont need soldiers anymore."

"The United States army will always need a Logan," Sep said slow and heavy, the/trouble brewing. "I got seven boys fit for the army anytime."

Jeb Wishaw who had been silent for some time looked at Jilson and said, "Jilson, you ought to visit more often, as Sep just said. You know that?"

It was the kind of remark Jeb would use even on Uncle Matt, as if a fellow had been talking too much and he wanted to tuck in your mouth. Uncle Matt guffawed and sneezed and reached for General Lee and everybody held out their mugs and you could feel the air clearing like a storm just blew out.

"I hear Micajah Hoe fixing on going out to the flatland," Uncle Matt said.

"He's been meaning to go outside since before Abner was born," Pa said. "Martha worsing?"

"Fellow [redacted] passing my place told me yesterday. Seems he's asking money for his cattle."

"Martha Hoe's got more unforgiving in her head than a

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parcel of skunks."

They went on poking it this way and that in the way Magaloosha County folk do of a Saturday in Jeb Coombes', all coming back to the fact that Martha Hoe had come into the county from the flatlands somewhere up in the North and had never forgiven Micajah these twenty-five years, but talked constantly about going back outside. It seems now that Micajah had weakened and was for giving up his cattle and hogs in the name of peace. While they talked I thought about Pete Sawyer and his going down to the city for a few days. I had never run a gas station before but what the hell. I could count dollars and cents and I could read the pump and the prices Pete marked on the merchandise with a stump of black chalk and I could keep the place clean.

The truth is I looked forward to the few days being in town with electric lights and flush toilets and going over to the restaurant for food and seeing the girls going by, their behinds bouncing. I hadnt broken it to Pa yet, reckon I would wait until we were on our way home and he was mellow as a red-haw berry. He had never been alone without me since our womenfolk went. He wouldnt be jumping for joy when I told him but since I would be going out anyway if I got taken in college then it wouldnt harm Pa to see less of me in little pieces.

At brown dusk everybody said goodbye and headed out. The car ran good and Pa nodded his head in sleepy approval at the way I had oiled her and tightened her and generally stroked her so she purred like an old contented cat. We slowed [redacted] to ease around Lookout Rock where the road curves sharply. Everytime there is an election, somebody talks about blasting the limestone rock and straightening out the road before it took our lives. The [redacted]

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rock marked an old Indian camping site, a square, massive chunk of chalk almost as tough as granite. The road bowled straight towards it and then swung away to the right bearing for Hopemount. But what bothered folks was the way of a nightfall how Lookout Rock took on. It was there big and white during the day waiting for you to nod at when you were coming into town and say, "There's Lookout Rock, now." That's all. Just, "There's Lookout Rock, now," and it was accepted inside your head without saying it, that Magaloosha City was just around the bend and you began wiping off road dust from your neck and forehead, and maybe whistled a little. Last winter we had a snowfall and the Rock was a sight to behold. It got so cold your eyelashes froze and old Lookout had his coat of snow for days, shining in the sun. But come nightfall, and old Lookout turns murderous.

Standing squarely astraddle of where the road should be if folks hadnt put a bend in it, Old Lookout turns killer because you cannot distinguish it from the road if you arent cold sober or if you didnt know it was there. Strangers going through town at nights would be told by Pete Sawyer down at the filling station, or by anybody else they stopped by, to watch out for Old Lookout. It wouldnt be hard to barrel straight into it because you mistook it for the continuation of the road.

Pa held the door handle and leaned into me as I brought over the steering wheel, letting up on the gas a little. I held down her nose dead on and juiced her enough to pick up what I had eased off for the bend. "Next election we must do something about Old Lookout," he said as always and then he went to sleep.

I drove on thinking about school and Pete Sawyers and Willi Mae and even about the long legged Wishaw foal named Olivinia everybody thought I was courting. Pa had been good about school,

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unlike most of the older folks around who didnt think enough about high school to allow a fellow off the farm [redacted] past the wet pants stage. Pa [redacted] took the [redacted] Trumpet every Friday it came out. He had seen to it that I hadnt dropped out of high school as most everybody around this part of the country did and had even talked about college over in Jeb Coombes'. We didnt have much acreage on the homestead. We grew some burley and a little Dark-fired but the tobacco market wasnt whooping with health. We had some corn, [redacted] some hogs, and there was a deal of fishing in the waters around. We did tolerably, since Pa and I both worked damned hard. There were folks around with more help than we who didnt do half as good. If Willi Mae had stayed with us, we would have done even better since a man works closer to the ground when he knows that somebody's warming the house until he gets done. Its hard to define, but out there in the sweet smell of dirt and shrubbery and the new damp earth coming up like birth behind the plow, a fellow thinks of womenfolk in the kitchen and lamplight behind the curtains when you top the rise, and you feel lonesome. Perhaps I get it from Pa, for I can see/the [redacted] loneliness climbing further [redacted] on his shoulders season after season and now and again it comes out in his eyes.

I am tied to the earth, and particularly Magaloosha County earth. Other fellows feel tied to clerking, or preaching, or healing, or some like Pete to engines. I need dirt smell like breathing, so I reckon that as long as I live, I will be around a farm. The difference it seems is that I want to farm so big I can have tractors and a good automobile and a good house. Pa, I know, senses this; and while he does all he can to keep me fired up about the State agricultural college, he also pokes me in the rib to remind me that the country was built on mules.

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There was a lot else Pa sensed too, as I was to find out tonight. For while in the reflection of the headlamps I had seen his eyes closed and thought him asleep, suddenly his voice came to me clear and gentle and alive, the special qualities it had.

"Son, you serious on Olivinia Wishaw?" he said.

We had never talked about the girl before. As far as I knew, Pa had never heard the gossip but now he busted me with it.

"I dont know what you mean, Pa. How does a fellow knows he's serious? When he doesnt hit the road, snow or shine, every night to go mooning at her window?"

Pa chuckled decently. He had a way of doing it, you also wanted to, no matter how mad you had been ready to be.

"Maybe a fellow knows when he gets sharp with his Pa because of a simple question."

"I hardly ever see her," I said. He had me regulated now, speaking as gently as he, which had been what he was after. He had that gift.

"You havent got to see her more than once or twice. What is more important with a fellow and a girl is whether the girl has <u>seen</u> him. A fellow knows right off; a girl, it takes some time."

"How come you know so much about it? "

"I wasnt always hitched to a plow. Did a little courting myself."

"I aint courting," I said flatly.

We drove a short distance in silence and then he said, "The Wishaws are good family. Old blood."

"You can see it in Jeb."

"Yes," I said./[redacted]

"Sounds as if Miss Olivinia turned you down. You asked her yet?"

"Sure. She said only if you didnt want her, then I could

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have her."

"Told you she had good blood. It put a good head on her. Reckon she figures that since she wants a Hammond and you so slow you'd walk faster backwards, she'll take the old man."

"Pa, that creature's so shy a Carolina parrakeet's fierce as a bald eagle."

Pa sighed. "Son, a bold woman's no good for marrying," he said.

I thought of Willi Mae and I knew he was thinking of her too. He had that set to his head, like he was thinking of running. I thought of Pete Sawyers and what a fellow had told me long ago, how Pete had been sweet on Willi Mae before she ran away.

"I'm going to be in town for a few days. Pete Sawyers asked me to mind the station for him," I said.

Pa took his time answering. "Gets lonely out at Willow Tree, sometimes," he said.

"Heck, it isnt that," I said. "Pete's got some kind of dealers' convention he wants to go to."

"Wont do you any harm," Pa said. "Me neither. Might as well get used to the idea of being alone since you'll soon be going."

I didnt say, Shucks, Pa, dont talk like that, or anything. He and I knew it was true and we never ran from the truth, except things like not talking about Willi Mae much, and that wasnt running; just looking at it and saying, no.

"When are you going?"

"Monday," I said.

"We'd be coming to town anyway for Massacre Day, so I guess we can go in together and I'll bring back the car."

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CHAPTER TWO THREE

Massacre Day got its name from an incident that happened during the march of George Rogers Clark through the State in 1778. While he was busy with the British and the Indians, a party of hostiles evaded his columns and headed south. Stumbling upon the little settlement at Malagoosha, they wiped it out clean as a whistle. Of course some other folks went after them and did it back to them, but that is how we got Massacre Day, a Fall day of goldenrod and purple ironweed and Indian pinks.

Pa and me headed for town early but early as we were, things were livening up already. A lot of folks had brought in their long guns and some were dressed in buckskin fringe but mostly we all wore denims. Those who had the hair had let it grow long for months and some fellows wore beards. I dropped Pa off at Jeb Coombes' and went on to Pete's. He was sitting in the office, dressed in his city clothes and looking real sharp.

I said, "Pete, you looking real sharp, you know that? A real city fellow."

Pete smiled and said, "Aw, go on home," but I knew he was pleased. He had a buttonhole and everything.

"Bus aint here yet, any minute now," he said and showed me the books and wrote up an order form in case I ran out and the tanker showed up.

"You have a good time, Pete," I said as the bus slid in.

He had been looking sort of funny at me and I wondered whether he thought I couldnt take care of the gas station. But as we shook hands, he looked away and said, "You know what? I'm going to look for

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Willi Mae."

Then he gave my shoulder a little shove and climbed aboard. I guess I musthave been standing with my jaw dropped for behind the glass he dumb showed me to close my mouth, grinning at me. Then the bus rolled out. I didnt think of it much for awhile, doing chores around the/place. Pete kept the station very clean but I was so excited at handling it on my own for a few days that I found places to tidy up which didnt exist. I rubbed and dusted and moved until I was stiff-armed. A couple of flatlanders dressed in well pressed cowboy clothes and brandnew big hats drove up in a big, black Buick. There would be many folks like these as the day went on for Massacre Day was well known throughout the State and beyond. Lots of outsiders came in to drink whiskey and shoot off pistols, to re-enact Massacre Day. Two men and their/ladies, maybe their wives, were in the Buick. They were laughing fit to be thrown and saying something in molasses accents and I knew they were/cooking a joke about Malagoosha.

"Say, Dan'l Boone, who put up that sign on the edge o' town? The City Council?" the fellow in the back asked.

One of the ladies snickered. I guessed they meant Sep Logan's signboard. From the front apron of the gas station you can see the board at the end of Saltlick Street. Malagoosha City is built around Saltlick Street. Its the main street cutting right across town to Lookout Rock. A couple of stores, the Baptish chapel, the courthouse, Pete Sawyers gas station and I guess that does for Saltlick Street.

I grinned a little. That darned old sign. I reckoned that by nightfall this Massacre Day I'd have answered that question if not once a couple score of times.

"Maybe it just growed out o' the ground, mister," I said.

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"Aw, come on, they say 'most anything you stick into the soil around these parts will grow but a sign's too much to expect," he said, his face untidy with the laughter he was holding in. "You folks gonna come gunning for me?"

"Which one are you?" I said, thinking I might as well push it around too, the ladies were so happy.

"You could call me a nigger revenue runner wearing red underwear. The ladies are Catholics and my friend's name is Levy, Abe Levy," the fellow said.

"Then turn around and beat it outa town, mister," I told him. "You're dead three-four times already."

They all laughed and I hooked my thumbs in my pants waist looking pleased and rocking on my heels and toes like a darn clown. Pete always said that one of the best things about his job was standing before the station and looking up and down Saltlick Street knowing you were a proprietor. For awhile as the folks laughed I knew the good feeling. They took on a load of gas and the fellow topped up with oil even though the Buick didnt need it, but I believed he was so pleased. I wiped his windshield and windows and he included a half dollar tip in the bill.

"Whereabouts they celebrate the Massacre, pardner?" he asked.

I pointed him over by the courthouse lawn where tradition said the first killings were done. About ten a.m., Coleman Roberts the druggist who was also mayor of Malagoosha would walk from his office to the lawn and run up the State flag on the pole. Then from behind the log fence built across one end of the lawn would pop up folks from among the oldest families, wearing beards and the ladies in ginghams, the men with old muzzle loaders, shooting off

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gunpowder and yelling like the whole Sioux nation was on them. Kids from the county school would play the part of Indians and although the flatlanders didnt know it, Jeb Coombes and Lincoln Meade who kept the other tavern, and the merchants in the Chamber of Commerce would all/be forking out to keep the kids happy, re-enacting the Massacre as often as new folk drove in. But the ones who should have paid were the whisky toters. If Jeb Coombes and Lincoln Meade did well across the counter, the real millionaires were those who stayed back in the hills and waited for the strangers to come prospecting. Every stranger seemed bent on going home with a real mountain jug under his arm.

I was being kept busy. Before Mayor Roberts crossed the lawn in his buckskin and moccasin and the three cornered hat on his head, I had changed a/radiator hose, put in a set of spark plugs and set the points on three or four automobiles; meanwhile gas and oil had gone briskly. I knew now how Pete Sawyer must have believed in me to/have left a rush business/in my hands. But the blood heated my face when the stray thought hit that maybe Pete was figuring that already we were family. Pete hadnt said much. Nothing to get upset about. Most folks going outside who knew you had kin on the flatlands would offer to visit and say howdy. It was just that nobody had ever talked about Willi Mae, she/being so long gone and everybody knowing she hadnt been writing to us. And the way Pete had looked, and the grin, sort of squeezing the corners of his mouth so he was knowing, it made me leery as a woodchuck. The more I thought of it the more I was for closing the place and going over to Jeb Coombes for a talk with Pa. I was for asking him outright whether there had been anything between Pete and Willi Mae. Reckon a fellow my age and all had a right to know. But business was picking up faster now

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and it wouldnt be right to lose trade Pete was believing I would collect because I had been a cottontail rabbit in a world no larger than a cabbage patch.

Massacre Day was right mild, with [redacted] a sheepfold of clouds scattered on the blue Fall sky and a norther blowing enough to stiffen the state flag on the courthouse. The town was filling up, [redacted] but not too lively yet. The crowd was mostly gathered at the courthouse lawn and when the burst of cheering came, I looked over to where Mayor Coleman Roberts was standing on his office steps, waving his three-cornered hat. A few [redacted] Malagoosha folk fired their guns/[redacted] in the air and somebody began working the bell[redacted] over at the Baptist chapel. This first re-enactment was [redacted] hardly ever the whole kit and boiling. A parcel of kids dressed up like Indians with feathers and everything would come whooping into town from the direction of Lookout Rock while from behind the stockade, the menfolk/[redacted] in beards and buckskins popped off their blanks, yelling fit to scare a tax collector. But as the day wore on and the whisky flowed, the hullabaloo grew fiercer. By gloaming, the kids had been shoved out of the scene and townsfolk and outsiders took over. Tired as hell with all this play acting they had been put through by the older folk, the young uns gladly withdrew to the schoolyard where they had a feasting and a romp of shoot-the-buffalo or over-the-river-to-Charley.

By gloaming nobody was feeling any pain. The stockade had been rushed half a dozen times and the last two times hand fighting had broken out. A few drunks were propped on the sidewalk and a couple of flatlanders were in jail for trying to set fire to the courthouse when they took the part of Indians. Even over in Jeb Coombes', [redacted] they were rolling a song and I reckoned it was about time to close the station and walk over to see that Pa was alright. He has

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got a good head, but General Lee could have got right down mad at all this handshaking today by Uncle Matt and the others who had got above their raisin. None of the level land folk would be loading up on anything but likker for the rest of what was left of Massacre Day so I was closing the station when I saw this automobile coming into town. It had on upcountry plates and I supposed him to be a Tommy-late-again. The car stopped by Sep Logan's sign. It was getting dark the driver and switched on a spotlight and played it on the sign. Just about then, they were making the last attack on the stockade and putting it down for keeps. If the Indians had got hold of so many guns the time they came busting down, they would have cleaned out the white man all the way to Florida. But then it happened.

The driver had finished reading the sign and was going quietly through town, passing the courthouse, when the guns began going off. He must have been scared at the yelling and the shooting; I thought at the time that he was a stranger passing through Malagoosha and knew nothing about Massacre Day. However it was, that automobile leaped away as if it had been kicked by the devil. It roared down Saltlick Street, scattering folk right and left, rocketing over the ruts, the cutout booming with power. Past Jeb Coombes' and past the chapel, racing through the dark with no headlights and good God Almighty, I knew.

I knew that the poor bastard barrelling down the goddam road would never see that goddam Lookout Rock for what it was.

And he slammed into it.

He hit like a cannon and the flame sheeted up. Everybody turned and stood still.

But I think because I had known it was coming, I was running

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before anyone else. I was bawling like a baby, blind to all but the need to holler. It was burning when I got there and it seemed to me as if each crackle was a crunching of metal and leather and cloth and flesh and bone. Outside of the burning, there was a circle of silence in which I stood, cold and alone, until afterwards there came the running feet.

Any outsider coming into Malagoosha County may see a dirty, unshaven, tobacco chawing, patched overall breed of men sitting under the shade trees or swapping sorghum for hogs. Newspaper folk poke fun at us for a shiftless, whisky-swilling lot choked to our collarless neck with superstitions and prejudices and ignorance. A deal of truth, maybe, but they have never seen us with our troubles. Like the day Sep Logan packed in Pa and collapsed outside the doctor's office, the blood running out of his nose.

Most of those who got to the wreck first, were folk from outside, city folk on whom arson and homicide act like carcass on a buzzard. Our own people came slowly and deliberately, knowing the task ahead and going to meet it, taking the decision inside, the way they had tamed the country. They stood for as long as a spit into the flames, and then Uncle Matt Connant wiped his mustache and said, "Let's get 'em out."

It was only a body in there but they wanted it for burial. It was unlawful for calamities to win. "Let's get 'em out," said Uncle Matt and since there was nothing else to use, they went for it with bare hands. When the story is told outside, they will say it was the corn likker that did it but we who knew ourselves wrenched at the hot metal and beat the flames with brush and took out what was left. Somebody brought a lantern.

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"A man," Uncle Matt Connant said, looking down.

I was standing by Pa, my hands hooked under my armpits quieting the sears and blisters.

"One arm's gone, burnt off," said an outsider satisfactorily.

Pa stiffened beside me. He had been slapping out places in his clothing where he smouldered.

"Why dont you go on out," he said softly to the stranger. "Massacre Day's over."

The man, his face uplit and strange in the light of the lantern, showed his teeth and said, "Take it easy, oldtimer."

Pa could have knotted him in half easy, hands raw from the flames as they were. Jeb Wishaw said at the stranger's back, "Mister, you ought to go on out like Abner just said. We aint partial to you."

The stranger peered up at Pa and at Jeb Wishaw and he gave a funny little sort of grunt and turned and pushed his way out of the crowd, muttering to himself. We didnt do anything to the flames once we had the body out, waiting for it to eat its way through the inflammables. I felt a touch on my shoulder and turned to face Olivinia Wishaw. Her dark hair was shining in the firelight, brushed smooth and falling to her shoulders.

"I've got some ointment for your hands, Abner," she said.

I had my hands hugged under my arms but I didnt recall, struck dumb with the prettiness of her mouth and hair and she coming that way to me as if we were bespoken.

"Give them to me," she said.

"I'm alright. 'Taint anything," I said.

"Give them to me, Abner Hammond. The night's turned chilly

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and the air will blister you bad."

There wasnt any need arguing with her and all the folks around. It is a fact [redacted] that the women in Malagoosha County will go through fire and snow and drouth and not once let go of a whimper but will yowl like a puma in a trap let a thorn pierce man or child. She took the left hand and annointed my wrist and fingers, rubbing gently, quieting the heat in them. Then she did it to the right too, her head bowed and her breath warm on my fingers. When she straightened I turned back the scarf so I could see her face.

"I am thankful to you, Olivinia Wishaw," I said.

"Your pa has no woman," she said.

"Then come back to me when you're through," I said. "We'll walk back together."

She stood thinking on it for a moment and nodded grave as a preacher. "That I'll do," she said.

And it was funny that a girl you couldnt/hardly see [redacted] more than a ruffed grouse in wintertime was telling me easily that we would walk back to town together. I saw her go to Pa and his head jerked around like a bird, looking for me before he caught himself and stood still for her to put on the ointment.

/Some [redacted] of the outsiders had brought their bottles with them when they [redacted] ran to the wreck and there was being as much yelling and whooping as when they were in town, not hardly [redacted] recalling now why we were out here at Lookout Rock. One of them a few feet away from where I was standing, let out a screech.

"I stepped on something soft --- <u>a snake!</u>" he hollered, his eyes fit to pop from his head.

Now I dont take to snakes at all but anybody could have told that city fellow no copperhead nor cottonmouth would be within a mile

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of that mob. Snakes dont like our company any better than we like theirs, moreso tromping and shouting and carrying on enough to scare the wild creatures for miles around. But no sooner than he had cried snake, all his friends cut loose with yells and leaped out of there like they were bitten. What stopped the panic was Uncle Matt Connant's shout:

"You go leapin' around and maybe you step on his mate!"

Uncle Matt Connant has one of the best voices in the country. For hog calling or at a breakdown, Uncle Matt can whip us all. So when he bellowed the warning, not a one failed to hear it — and every city fellow and his girl froze as if someone had poured ice water on them.

"Quiet — an' listen. Maybe its a mountain rattler," Uncle Matt said.

And so besides being frozen, all of them were struck dumb. We were hard put to hold back our laughter but you wouldnt know it from the stonyfaced front we showed. One of the flatland women moaned suddenly and dropped where she stood and none of their men moved to help her. We could see the eyes of our own womenfolk throw a swift glance at us and then they returned hardfaced again. We had them fooled, the flatlanders, shaken with dread and not daring to move until Uncle Matt Connant released them.

Uncle Matt got a flashlight off one of them and played it on the open ground which they had deserted, looking for the piece of pulp wood or whatever the fellow had stepped on. The light went among the leaves and scattered stones and bits of automobile which had been flung out by the explosion. Then it settled on something. Uncle Matt had meant his voice to be contemptuous but how it came out was a croak.

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"There's your snake," he said, pointing the light to the man's arm lying on the ground.

It lay discarded as a fallen branch, the fingers clutching the ground. It was sleeved in some dark material and we could see a watch still strapped to the wrist. The hand itself was dark, as if the fire had scorched it. It was flexed at the elbow and wrist like in agony, as if it had tried to crawl away from the fire. A little blood flecked the sleeve where the cloth had been torn from the shoulder. Some of the city women shrieked with fear, but most of them with laughter.

Then they descended on the arm as if they would devour it. They were for tearing it apart for making them ashamed. One tall fellow grabbed it quickest and whirled it above his head, blood spattering from it on to their upturned faces. They yowled and danced as he spun it and what with the liquor and it being Massacre Day, it was no effort for them to believe they were Indians, hopping on one leg and bending double and shaking their fists as if they held tomahawks.

Uncle Matt had been following the arm with the flashlight as they twirled it around, catching glimpses of it and when his voice tromped down on us, even us, his own folk, were surprised at the hard anger in it.

"Mister," he said savagely. "Mister, let go of that dam' hand!"

Everybody heard him, for he had put a twang in his voice like a boastful bull fiddler at a breakdown trying to get past the lighter fellows.

"Let go of that dam' nigger arm!" Uncle Matt Connant said.

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"You're danged right," I said.

Somebody turned up the lantern as the flames from the petered out and we went closer
wreck/[redacted] to it. There was just us folk by
tightly shut
now, the/[redacted] mountain faces we all knew, white above the [redacted]
hard [redacted] wrung
torn, patched, weathered clothing, faces/[redacted] by the code
coffin.
that rode us from [redacted] crib to/[redacted] We circled the wreck looking down at the smoking bundle we had applied the code for. We hadnt known many of them. Those who passed through did [redacted] so quickly, the daylights scared out of them by Sep's signboard. I recalled how this fellow in the automobile had pulled up by the signboard and then barrelled out at the first crack of the scatter-guns.

"Somebody fetch a couple of axes and a can of coal oil," Sep Logan said.

He hadnt turned his head; he just stood looking down and said it, but we all knew what he meant to do. Pa surprised me though.

"What you reckon on doing, Sep?" he asked.

him
"Burn/[redacted] some more," Sep said.

"No," Pa said.

I looked up at that. I guess we all did, Sep last of all. Perhaps he hadnt really heard the meaning, Pa had laid it out so flatly.

"What's that you say, Abner?"

"Its all done and gone," Pa said. "Let's bury the fellow."

Uncle Matt Connant looked quizzically at Pa. "On whose land, Abner?"

"Why, I reckon in the public lot," Pa said.

There was a sound you scarcely heard. It was the sigh of their clothing as everyone moved.

"You out of your mind, Abner?" Jeb Wishaw said softly.

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And then Sep did what he oughtnt to have done. He ignored Pa. He turned his head away from Pa and said wearily,

"Get the women out of here and go bring the axes."

All this while, Olivinia had been at my side close as a sheathe, not saying anything, her fingers laying along mine. When the ladies began going, she just crumpled my hand in hers and held it there loosely balled. I disengaged it gently and said, "I'll meet you at the filling station."

"Guess not," she said.

"Then I'll be out tomorrow evening to say a word to your pa," I said, thinking she was turning shy again.

"I didnt mean that, Abner," she said. "I'm not going into town. I'm staying here with you."

"You heard what Sep said. He doesnt want the ladies to see what he's going to do."

"He's told us already. Better for us to see it than to think it," she said.

But I knew it was something else. She had heard Pa starting out to buck the other men and had seen Sep's clumsiness that would turn Pa stubborn. She reasoned I would side with Pa, no matter if I thought he was wrong, and she was staying out to be with me.

The top of her head was shining an inch or two below my chin but as I touched her shoulder and felt the hardening under the soft flesh, in dismay I knew that short of lifting her bodily from the scene of the wreck, I couldnt budge her. A necklace of red haw berries was coiled in her hair. There was a fragrance on her.

"I want to go to State," I said.

"Yes. I heard Pa telling Ma about it."

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"He against it too?"

"Pa aint against anything. He sees a right in everything anybody [redacted] does."

"He's not a serious man, it looks."

"He's the most serious fellow in the county," Olivinia said. "He [redacted] says if a fellow feels right, he wont make trouble and the world will be better off. Folk who make trouble are those who feel wrong, Pa says."

"Maybe I should wait until I get back from college."

"Abner Hammond, you aint even sure yet if they'll have you. No cause to get conceited with me."

"You afraid I wont come back?"

"I've got more suitors than I can fend off," she said.

We heard/some [redacted] kids running [redacted] out from town, the ones who had gone for the axes and the coal oil and I looked at Pa. He hadnt moved since Sep spoke. The kids came into the light and the men began taking the axes. [redacted] Jeb Wishaw took an extra ax and handed it towards Pa. But Pa shook his head.

"Sep," Pa said.

Everybody stopped and turned to him.

"I'm here, Abner," Sep said.

"There aint brushwood enough in the county to burn all this stuff to ash. What's left, I'm going to bury."

"On whose land?"

"If they wont have him in the public lot, then I'll bury him on my land."

Stunned with disbelief and, I guess, anger, I heard myself saying, "Pa, you crazy? You cant do that!"

Pa twisted his head at me and for one of the first times

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since I grew up, he was angry with me in public.

"You stay out of this," he snapped.

Sep wiped his face with his hand and held it over his mouth. After awhile, he said behind his hand, "Let's cut wood."

So the men went went to the side of the road and began cutting brush for the fire. They piled it on the wreck and when it was high enough, the time came to place the corpse on the pile. The funny thing was that nobody wanted to touch it. Somebody said they should cut some poles and lever the body onto the brushwood. But Pa cut in and stopped them.

And then in silence we watched him remove his stained old windbreaker and wrap it around where the stump of head was. He stooped to get his hands under the body and half sobbing, I stumbled forward and went to the feet. Pa looked up and saw me and he moved towards the head and got his hands under the shoulders. We lifted the soggy, burnt out mass and placed it on top of the firewood. Pa took up the can of coal oil and threw it over everything and struck a match. He touched it in several places and the wood flared up, crackling and eating swiftly. He signalled for more wood and the axes rang out again on the crisp night air as the Malagoosha men cut more fuel.

Pa got a pole with which he poked at the fire so it would burn evenly. He kept signalling for more wood and the men cut until they were exhausted. Our eyes were all red rimmed and hair smoky by the time Pa held up his hand to stop the wood cutting. But nobody went away. We sat down on the cold ground waiting for the flames to die and the only thing I was clearly conscious of was Pa, still on his feet at the head of the bier, and Olivinia massaging my shoulder. It was near daybreak when we

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staggered into [redacted] town. Jeb Coombes' was open. That morning I shook hands with General Lee and by forenoon I was blind drunk.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mayor Coleman Roberts said the city ordinance did not allow the cemetery toaccept a Negro. Pa dropped in at the gas station to tell me. He had washed up but the soot and ash were still [redacted] sort of on the edges of him. It was late the [redacted] afternoon after Massacre Day and I had slept off most of the effects of the introduction to General Lee. A shower in the restroom and a cup of coffee from a restaurant across the street had put back my stomach in some order.

"What'll you do now, Pa?"

We were both sitting at Pete Sawyer's desk in the tiny office. His eyes took a couple of licks at me and then settled steadily on my face.

"You did say something last night, didnt you?" he asked.

"No, Pa, nothing," I lied.

"Its alright, son. You're no leastun. You're grown now and have a right to say your mind. What I figure is we ought to talk this over."

"Pa, there's nothing to talk over. You'll do what's right."

"I know what <u>seems</u> right to me, son. But I aint ought to hit you over the head with my right. Then again, even if a man is

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right, the way he goes about staking his claim to it may make him end up wrong as wrong can be."

"Sure. Sure."

"You see, when I said I'd bury that poor Nigra on my place, I was talking without thinking of you. I was selfish, mad I believe at that stiffnecked mule, Sep Logan."

"We've got plenty of places. The bottom of Willow Tree Ten, near that sink ——" I stopped, for it occurred to me then.

Malagoosha County is riddled with sinkholes more than a porcupine has prickles. We could drop the whole wreck, corpse and all into one of these sinkholes and the county would be clean again.

"I know what you're thinking," Pa said gently. "I dont blame you but that's wrong. That's sneaky wrong."

So I burst out at him. "But, Pa, you know this county and you know folks around. We aint bad people but we've got our customs and habits and upbringing. We like it here, what we do, how we live. You yourself said one time that those newspaper fellows who poke fun at us dont know how fine we really are with our sorghum and court-day and our hardtimes. Like rock pillars standing in a swamp, you said. Outsiders were soft and soggy, you said. Now why do you want to bust it up?"

Pa hadnt rested at all last night and had been in Jeb Coombes' most of the day, drinking and talking with the rest. But except for the dirt on him, he was full of energy as a squirrel. He slapped Pete's desk with his hand.

"Dont tell me what I said when I talked wrong! Maybe I talked like that in the drouth, or maybe when I had a gut sickness, or thinking about Wil ——" he caught himself and struck his fist into his palm.

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"You staying in town tonight?" he asked.

"Yes, I promised Pete I'd be around for the night trade."

"Alright. I'll take the car."

He went and I watched his hickory tough figure going down the street to where the car was parked under the trees before the courthouse. He got in and the first flip of the key turned the engine over. I grinned and felt better for it. Whatever good was still in that battered old automobile, I had either put it in there or was holding it to rights.

Olivinia came over to tell me her pa was leaving town. I hadnt seen her all day. I was leaning on the grease trolley, looking at the free stride and feeling hot as I thought of her thighs brushing each other and the sweet bobbing of her breasts. She must have seen the desire in my eyes for she blushed and looked confused.

"Oh, Abner, I - I - "

"We got to get married — we got to get married right quick, Olivinia," I said softly but feeling to prance.

And then she got real angry. Guess I sort of rushed her. Guess my nostrils must have flared as desire walloped me hard, I must have looked like a stallion snorting and raking under restraint, eyeing a hoof, the mare they were backing up.

"So you looked last night, all of you, like - like - evil, like vultures," she said.

Now I wasnt feeling the least like a vulture and Olivinia was alive, a delicious live bundle for a fellow's arms and her mouth so kissable I could feel the insides of my own tingling.

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"Nobody was evil, not a one of them. We just burnt a dead nigger, is all," I told her grinning.

"You - you sat around like vultures, smelling the flesh burning and grinning at each other. You - were all filthy. All of you, except your pa. If the womenfolk hadnt left when they did they'd have been sick at the sight of you."

Pa had refused to take the ax from Jeb Wishaw last night and I had taken it instead. When Pa shook his head, I held out my hand to Jeb Wishaw and he slapped the ax handle into it, not looking at me at all and we went into the brush. I had been ashamed of what Pa had done and had laid into the brush in blind anger, cutting more than my portion and feeling no fatigue whatever. We had been no pretty picture, sitting around on the ground afterwards and waiting for the fire to burn out. Uncle Matt, big on the ground, his shoulders hulked with weariness and the beard smoke stained, chest heaving. Jilson Swift, thin as a lathe, his hands lank between his knees brushing the ground, head thrust forward and breathing out of his mouth. Micajah Hoe in his Sunday suit because he was fixing on going outside/ and he wanted the feel of it. But he had to cut wood when Sep said so because generations of the code had buried it deep inside of us, apart yet [redacted] closer than a pod of peas.

"You got no call to say that, Olivinia. We did what we had to do."

Some of the scorn left her face and her eyes were earnest as she spoke.

"Abner, your pa showed everybody last night that a man only has to do what's right. I know you were ahsamed of him last night, but I was more ashamed of my pa, Jeb Wishaw, than you could be of yours."

When I remembered what Pa had said about right and wrong,

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I could have grinned but I was careful not to make it show [redacted] in her present mood.

"You know how we feel about niggers around here, Olivinia. None of us [redacted] bother them if they stay [redacted] outside. Sep Logan's signboard says it all."

"This was a dead human being, Abner."

I shrugged. "So it couldnt have made any difference what we did to him."

"Not to him, to us," Olivinia said.

"I dont feel any [redacted] different."

"Your pa would notice."

"What's there to notice?"

"The way you changed last night. The way you ran for cover."

Now its one thing slamming into a fellow for looking and saying the thing he feels and its another saying he [redacted] hid out when his folks/needed [redacted] help. What I had done was to make up for Pa. It hadnt hurt Pa for he had showed them where he stood. And by cutting wood and sticking with the folks, the Hammonds were still ash tall in the county. I stood off from the grease trolley, [redacted] feeling tightened up.

"You go on home now," I said.

"You're vexed. Ma said never to talk to a man whe he's vexed. Leave him to lose it like the flux."

She had a tongue like a timber rattler. I wasnt the one to argue with her on the public highway with everybody capable of looking on but I told myself then and there that I wouldnt marry her if she was the last girl left in Malagoosha County. A fellow can just take so much. I looked at her coldly for a couple of seconds while she wore a half grin. Then without a word she rose on her toes

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and in view of the entire street, kissed me on the mouth.

Raging, I headed back inside quickly. Some fellows across the street whom I hadnt seen before, were yowling and making cracks so I didnt wait to see her go. I was also furious with myself for having been nutty enough to believe her shy. Once she thought she had me treed, she had shown her true colors. I locked the street door of the filling station, turned out all the lights except one above the pumps and went back to the cot in the room which Pete used for sleeping. After a while of tossing, I was suddenly laughing out aloud at the way Olivinia had made me into a chucklehead.

CHAPTER SIX

What took me to Lookout Rock next morning? It had to do with Olivinia. And what she had said about Pa and me.

Five generations of Hammonds had growed up and died in west Malagoosha until along came Pa. He was the first really lonesome one among them, a bull who elected for his own field. Pa one time said a man ought to be able to haul on his boots without having to elbow a cousin. So when he came of age, one court day he borrowed a car and drove over to here with his land deeds in his pocket. After swapping around a spell, he ended up owning forty acres of sandstone and loam. He had an eye for crops and land so we did pretty well with white burley and raised some hogs and a couple head of cattle. We were planning to put in a tractor but Pa figured it could wait until I had gone through the State agricultural college. Pa was a good man, and it hurt more than I cared to show when Olivinia said I had backed off.

So early next morning I drove Pete Sawyer's pick-up out to Lookout Rock with no purpose in my head but thinking of Pa.

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Nobody was up but a titmouse hurtling from tree to tree on a whirr of wings. I shied a stone at his tuft and he left me alone. The hard top ended right outside town and the rest of the road was crushed and rolled limestone. They kept it well steamrolled this near town but further out it would be pocked and gutted especially in the spring. There was some ground mist, thin and watery like rain. I thought of Pa and guiltily hoped Willi Mae would show up by a miracle before it was time for me to go. It hung heavily in me. I swore if that fellow crashed his car on Lookout Rock this instant and Pa and everyone were back in position as they were last night, I would stand by Pa close up as skin to bone, and hurl that ax right back at Jeb Wishaw.

The Rock loomed ahead, white and ghostly with the darker heap at the base. Everything was charred and twisted but the smell of burning flesh was gone. There was something funny about the wreck that took me some time to figure and even then, for awhile it didnt make sense. Last night when we had pulled off, everything had been in a mess. But between then and now, somebody had tidied up. The pieces of broken brush had been swept aside. But what surprised me were the rocks. Somebody had piled a border of rocks around the wreck as you would mark off a cabbage patch. The wall was a good foot high, not too neat but thick at the base as if it was meant to go higher. I went closer and peered inside the automobile. The body was still there but even that had been tidied up, laid out long and neat enough for a coffin. It took me a while to think it out; and then I reasoned it was Pa. He must have stopped on the way home after Mayor Coleman Roberts had told him about the city ordinance. Pa is a determined cuss and he must have resolved on his own burial. It would be a hell of a note

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building a tombstone slap on the edge of the road for a nigger whom we didnt want in our cemetery. It tickled all through from breakfast to grunt and I rocked with laughter. The wall wasnt high for in the dark, and weary, he couldnt have done much. But the beginning was there and Pa and me had always worked together. I turned to.

If we're short of anything in Malagoosha County, it/aint stones. They were there all around in sizes from potatoes to pumpkins and I worked at that dry-packing faster than if I was being paid. In a sense, I was being paid. For by the time my the muscles in my legs and arms had gone ragged, and my palms tender from last night had turned to bleeding again, I was feeling washed out clean inside. The guilt about Pa was gone. This time when he had made his play I had gone all the way. I had the wall my chest high before weariness battered down my arms and I turned and stumbled back to town. After I had rested I would come back again.

A few folk out early and looking rotten as I felt with all that likker they had taken yesterday, turned their heads curiously to follow me as I shambled to Pete's gas station. There wouldnt be much business this early in the morning so I reckoned I hadnt let Pete down by not being on hand. I took a shower and went across the street for breakfast. I had hardly got back when Sep Logan's old Chevvy came clanking in and pulled up at the station. Sep rolled down a window and poked his head out. He was unshaven as usual but his eyes looked funny, dazed. I guessed he had seen my wall. He looked at my taped hands.

"Where's your Pa?" he asked.

"Ought to be on the farm now. He left last night."

"Well I dont think he's on the farm. Where's he?"

I dont know what he thought he was doing. He ought to have gone to the Mayor. He ought to know that Pa wouldnt get mad at me for a thing like that. What bothered me was how did he know about me and

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the wall so soon. He kept on staring at my hands.

"What's the matter with your hands?"

"The wreck."

Sep Logan is one of the finest fellows in the county but he's suspicious as a fox. He has eyes bulging under a heavy fall of brow.

"Yep, it figures. You've been helping him." He stared hard at me.

"Helping him in what?"

"You know dang well!"

"You tell me."

"Building that dang wall!"

He was fit to be tied but he looked baffled all the same.

"Where is he?"

"Back on the farm."

He snorted and let in the clutch so the old Chevvy jumped like a whip had been cracked at its behind. He rammed past Jeb Coombes' and scroched out of town.

He was a smart man. He was [redacted] running double harnessed to Pa even of he was on the offside. He knew the wall had Pa's hand on it. He was reasoning so closely becasue he knew Pa. I was proud for the respect he [redacted] showed of my pa Abner Hammond. He knew Abner Hammond wasnt the man to give up. But then again, it wasnt beyond Sep, that angry, violent man, to put his seven foolish sons to destroying the wall. He hated Nigras and Jews that bad.

I shut Pete's door and hustled down Saltlick Street. I didnt know rightly what I'd do if I ran into the Logan clan, but at least I was still siding Pa. Those seven idiots of his would ram that wall down my throat if he told them to. But the wall was alright when I got there. Going back to town, Mayor Roberts hailed me.

"You looking shaggy this morning, Abner. Worked too hard at the likker or the wreck?" he said. A tidy grin on him like it was

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furrowed in by a machine. He was bony and tall, with long arms bent at the wrists where his hands sloped in as if reporting for work. He wasnt personally a popular man but he had got to be mayor one year when nobody had much hankering for it with hog sickness hitting the county from one end to another. He worked so hard at being mayor, keeping the grass around the courthouse lawn cut and watered, marking the traffic lines in white paint himself so it wouldnt cost the county a cent, smiling at all the women and asking after their leastuns, nobody had the heart to go after him at the next election.

"Guess everybody's shaggy this morning, Mayor," I said.

"Heard from your pa about what he asked me?"

"Sure."

"The law, you know, Abner. Got to uphold the law. The statute says nothing about burying Nigras in the cemetery."

I thought a little. "Does it say anything against?"

He looked at me as if I had stepped on his corn pads.

"What you asking, son?"

"Same thing as Pa."

He stared at me and then he shook his head. "Dont know what has come over you and your pa. 'Tisn't as if you're one of those Yankee fellows with the knot in the head which makes them have niggers sitting in their living rooms. You and your pa are Hammonds. I know your folks over on the other side. What's this you're riding?"

I was ashamed for Pa and me but I wasnt quitting on him again.

"Then what're we going to do with the corpse?"

"Drop it in a sinkhole," Mayor Roberts said, his eyes angry.

We had been thinking the same thing. I felt lousy, likely to curl off in some corner and go to sleep. Only Pa had been decent.

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Mayor Roberts grinned but his eyes studied me coldly.

"Then it will be just like a county burying, if we collect a couple of boys and pay them to dump it in," he said.

I went away without telling him that the job would be a mite harder than he reckoned. There was a heap of rocks his boys would have to dispose of first. Then it occurred to me that it wouldnt be too hard getting through the rocks. They had been dry-packed, without cement. A couple of sledges could rip through. I shrugged. Maybe that was a way out. I had packed in with Pa, done my portion. If Mayor Roberts took it away now, it wouldnt be skin off my elbow.

It was a fair day at Pete's. I sold gas, tightened a couple of shackle bolts on a pickup, found a gas choke, sold a set of spark plugs to an [redacted] who jolted into the station firing on [redacted] three. I earned fifty cents fitting them in because he didnt want to dirty his city [redacted] fingers. Meanwhile I kept an eye good as I could on the road out to Lookout Rock but nobody used it all day. Folks out my way didnt have many people coming to see them. Most of the traffic would be one way, into town. And after Massacre Day everybody would be laying up until their heads quit aching. Nothing happened until evening. In the evening I got a call from Pete.

Jeb Coombes sent a kid to tell me I was wanted on the phone. I was sure as hell he must have been mistaken but then I thought about the fellows down at State Agricultural College and I hustled over. Maybe they wanted to tell me everything was fixed up [redacted] to come in. But after I had waved thanks to Jeb and got the darned thing to my ear, it turned out it was Pete.

"This is me, Abner Hammond," I said into it.

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"Abner?" he almosttore my ear off. "A bner? How the hell are you?"

"I'm fine. Who's this? Pete? Pete! Well, boy!"

"Sure its me. How have things been? How was Massacre Day?"

I could hear music behind him and I wondered where he could be. Maybe in some swank hotel. He was lucky.

"Massacre Day was fine. Say, where are you?"

"How was the station?"

"Fine. Where are you? In a swank hotel?"

"How's your pa?"

"He's fine. How was the airplane?"

"How did Mayor Roberts go?"

"Fine. Listen. Listen, Pete, you staying in a swank hotel?"

"Anybody got into a fight with the outsiders?"

"No. No --- except we got a nigger."

"What'd he do? Uppity?"

"No. He busted into Lookout Rock. A real wreck."

"Car too big for him, I guess."

Then for the first time while Pete was laughing, I realised how scared the Nigra in the car musthave been. I remembered how he had stopped by Sep Logan's signboard and read. He had driven away slowly, taking it easy, making sure he wasnt stopped for speeding. Then the guns had gone off and he had busted right off. Taken off like a raccoon with the dogs after him. He couldnt have known this was all part of Massacre Day. It could be he had even thought the guns were shooting at him.

"I guess," I said to Pete. It wasnt as before. I was knowing something more. I kept talking. "Where are you?"

Pete laughed some more. "Hell, you really want to know, dont you? I'm in a town they call Key West."

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That was the place the fellows on the radio were all talking about. The army and the navy and the airforce were all down there waiting to see what the Cubans were up to.

"Key West? You joined the army?" I joked.

He chuckled. "No, but I got another kind of surprise for you."

A woman's voice was saying something and Pete laughed out real loud. He had never been a sorehead but he had never cackled like a hen before either. The woman's voice was up higher now, saying something like no no.

"You there, Abner?"

I had a sudden memory. "Hey, Pete, you seen ——"

But he was already in. "Abner, you tell your pa I got Willi Mae right here. You tell him that."

My heart jumped. I was sweating all over. A curious idea was that I wasnt sure whether I wanted to hear her voice. It had been years, before I rightly remember. All I really knew of her was that she put Pa into a chair and he [redacted] rabbit-humped everytime he waited to hear whether she was dead or maimed. I held on tightly to the phone, my elbows pressed closely to my ribs, hiding inside from what Pete was saying. He laughed again.

"Hey, Abner, listen, she's going to talk to you."

But it wasnt me she spoke to. She let loose something in a shrill voice that declared Pete was a rotten no-good. He laughed like she had stuck pins in him and then the line went dead. I shook the hook.

"Pete? Pete?"

I didnt like the sound of my own voice and hung up gently. I walked out of Jeb Coombes', considering.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Pa drove into town next morning and tooted his horn at the service station before I was up. I got out to him. I said, Morning, Pa, looking at him. Pa was aging. He had the lines beside his nose and the/weariness. He needed folks. He looked at you a little unsure, as if he wanted to find out whether he was right. His strength was still capable, he wasnt shambling or anything like that, but his eyes were too willing to negotiate.

"You got a minute to spare, son?" he said.

"Sure, Pa. What do you want done? I thought I had her all fixed up last week."

"It isnt the car. Let's go out to Lookout Rock."

I climbed in.

We didnt talk while we drove out of town. A frost was on the ground, the chill rose into the car. We didnt have a heater in the car. Pa drove hunched up at the wheel, peering through the wipers. It was a bleak morning. He pulled up at the Rock and I only looked at it when I got out of the car. I tasted the bile in my throat.

It was an anger not at what/they had done to my work but what they had done to Pa. I had dry-packed those rocks until my hands were raw and sore, raising the wall chest high and meaning to come out and do some more. I knew that when Pa went by the Rock coming into town, he would see that somebody had understood. But the wall had been smashed. The/rocks were all over the wreckage, strewn by the sledge that had battered them in.

"Sep Logan, that son of a bitch."

"Stop it, boy!" Pa said sternly. He rubbed his jaw and

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said lessharshly, "Why Sep? Why would he go to all that trouble?"

"Because he came out to the station and wanted to know whether I had helped you with the wall."

Pa turned to look at me. "Helped me with the wall? What wall?"

"Yesterday morning when I came out here, I saw that somebody had been working. A rock border was around the wreckage."

Pa nodded. "That was me. I reckoned that putting the rocks there would sort of keep it from strewing all over the road."

"I thought it was you but I thought you were putting up a wall since Coleman Roberts had said the body couldnt be buried in the cemetery. So I put in a lick."

"You mean you took it higher."

"Yes. High as your chest maybe. Now somebody has knockedit down. Sep Logan."

"Why do you say it was Sep?"

I told him how Sep had been in to town and jumped me. Pa nodded.

"Then it would be Sep. He hates long."

"We're going to put it up again."

"They would only knock it down again."

"So we keep putting it up back."

"That would be a fool thing to do, son. Think straight," Pa said.

We thought all the way back to the service station, Pa sitting straight as a ramrod at the wheel. I was mad in a rough way at Sep for tearing down my monument. Just as I had squared my conscience with Pa. He could have let well alone seeing we werent trespassing the Nigra on any man's land. But Sep was a born violent

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man, unable to bottle up his feelings.

"What will do now?" I asked Pa when we got back to the gas station.

"Got to think it over. Maybe I'd better have a talk with Sep. He hates long, but he can be a reasonable man."

"You going out to his place?"

"I reckon. Time we had a talk."

"But Pa, you did all you could. Why not leave it to the county? Let Mayor Roberts look after it."

Pa nodded. "Perhaps I will but Sep oughtnt to have knocked down your wall. Fool thing to do." He was eyeing the station. "That Pete Sawyer got a water closet in the place?"

I showed him the way, grinning a little about how whenever he came to town, he hankered to use all the fixtures we didnt have back on the farm. But he was a stubborn man too. He held that a battery radio was more powerful than the ones run off the town electricity. While he was holed up in the back of the station, I thought of Pete's telephone call. It hadnt really gone out of my mind but something held me back from mentioning it to Pa. There had been a bad moment when Pete had left me holding the dead hook with nothing coming out of the phone but cracklings until Miss Amanda the telephone operator butted in to say the party had hung up. While I was gassing up a couple of fellows out front, I decided to leave it for awhile. Pete would ring again, I felt sure. Something had turned sour when he wanted to talk with me, but he would ring again.

Pa came out and said he was heading for Sep Logan's place.

"You tell him morning from me. He forgot to tell me when he came out," I joked at Pa.

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Folks who had gone ~~xxx~~ to look at the wreck must have reported the funny business out there to Mayor Roberts for about mid-morning he drove over to the station.

"Abner," he said, "I just been out to the wreck and I hear some talk about you and your Pa putting all them rocks over it. What's going on?"

Nobody had thought much of Coleman Roberts and if the year he ran we had been normal, he would not have gotten in at all. He is liable to up and bluster like a turkey gobbler for no reason at all but that he reckons he is not beholden to you. Before the election, he would come sidling into Jeb Coombes', a place he never used to visit, begging for votes. But after we shooed him in for want of other candidates, he took to wearing a collar and tie all the while. I had heard talk in Jeb's that he [redacted] was as popular as a hot water faucet in hell.

"Well, Mayor, Pa and me thought we would save the county money but we hadnt got around to telling you yet," I said. "How come you heard so quickly?"

"Mis' Amanda ——" he began and then he stopped, his little eyes tight on me. Of course I knew the gossip that he had been courting the town telephone operator for a long time. Folks grinned behind their hands and said they would be worthy of each other. She was a bony, mouse faced woman whom nobody hardly liked. It was said she listened in on telephone conversations and relayed them to Coleman Roberts. If so, he must have had a hide like an alligator's to run again for election after the things folks said about him on the phone. I guessed Pa must have stopped in at Jeb's and mentioned the business at Lookout Rock and somebody may have telephoned from there.

"Didnt I tell you we would be putting that Nigra in a

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sinkhole. What's come over you and your pa?"

"The body's been lying there two days now and nobody's done much about it. Leave it like that and it soon will be stinking up the county."

"There's nothing there to stink up the county. It was all burnt to cinders and you know it," he said angrily.

"What we did wouldnt do any harm," I said.

"Except that you're taking the law into your hands. That's all. No harm at all."

"What law? Is there any law against cleaning up the public highway? America was built on folks lending a hand, mister," I said. That was how Pa would have put it.

"I dont want anyone to lend a hand in my town," he snapped.

He was beating me over the head and I didnt like it one bit. If it comes to that, I didnt like him either. He had no cause to lay into me.

"Your town? Who gave it to you, mister? Maybe we loaned it to you but we can take it back again."

"You? You havent even got a vote," Mayor Roberts sneered. "You're just a big country boy. I hear you want to go to college? What for? So's you can spell Pete Sawyer at his gas station?"

I didnt like what was trying to bust out of me. I swallowed down on it and then managed to grin at him. The more I looked at his high collar and the twitch at his cheek which had been put there by his fury, the more I grinned until it came out in big, fat gusts of laughter swamping all over him. It drove him back to his car and he climbed in and slammed the gears. I prayed he stripped them.

By afternoon I heard he was getting a crew to go out

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next morning. Talk was that they would dump the whole mess in a sinkhole. Mayor Roberts being coroner, he would sign the papers. It would have gone by but I took to thinking of Pa and how he had looked when he came out this morning. He wasnt a man of words or pretences; he could hold in pain better than a mule for I had never heard him whimper when the Lord knows there had been cause, what with Ma going and Willi Mae. I knew why he had looked so broken up this morning. Pa was/a breed of man who truly believed/upon what they acted. He had gone to cheat the flames of a human being and the fact that it turned out to be a Nigra hadnt changed his reasons. It was entrenched in/him that nothing should change his reasons. He had seen his friends break their reasons on their knees and throw them into the/fire around the automobile and he had been hurt deep. He was my pa, all I had and he had been hurt deep.

Around noon I locked up the station and got out Pete's Ford pickup and drove out to Pa's. He wasnt home when I got there and he wasnt in the field either so I waited. I sat in his old rocker with the frayed cushions. When I put out a hand the knob/of the radio was exactly within reach. Just like Pa, I gave a twitch of the wrist and heard the tubes hum as the power surged in from the battery. He had only begun keeping in touch with the outside since Willi Mae left. This was his life. He was attached to the plow all day and at evening he would wash up, have supper and go seek news of Willi Mae through a worn wooden knob.

He drove in shortly and left the car in the front yard beside the pickup. He came in and blinked the light out of his eyes looking around for me. I rose from his chair and he came over. Pa was real dragged.

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"What brings you out here, son?"

"Came for a talk," I said. "How was it at Sep Logan's?"

He sat down before he talked. "Sep's bad. Dont know why that fellow hates so much. Its got into all of them, his sons too."

I knew Sep's sons, five of them big hulking fellows and the last two were twins my age. They hadnt gone long to school and Sep kept them leashed to the farm so they hardly came into town even, we never saw much of them. They talked slow and little but there hardly was anybody better in the county at fishing or farming or shooting guns.

"Dont want to stir up trouble. Enough trouble around as it is," Pa said to himself.

I looked at him hunched on the chair, staring at the floor. He had sounded funny.

"What kind of trouble?" I asked him quietly.

"Folk trouble. Bad kind. But Sep wasnt reasonable."

I sat forward and peered at him. "Pa, what happened out at Sep's today?"

"He couldnt understand, that's all. He couldnt understand me taking on so about a nigger, he said. A dead one too. One of his sons laughed and said maybe because the dead ones were the only good ones. That way. That way was how the talk went. Them laughing and me trying to talk to them."

I could see the seven pairs of mouths laughing, eight if you counted Sep, although I didnt figure he would do much laughing. Pa trying to tell them how he felt about things and they laughing the hollow-log ho ho ho of the ignorant Logans.

"Pa, Mayor Roberts is going to dump the body in a sink-hole tomorrow," I said coldly.

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For awhile, he said nothing. Then he rose and went to the door. He looked up at the fire blackened logs thick as hams from which he had gouged the rafters for the house. He had axed the oak after firing them at the stump and handsawn them for the rafters. The floor was of yellow poplar, rough adzed chiselled but firm as stone. Pa used to tell me how he had started on the house himself with only Ma to help but after a week he had looked up the trace one morning and seen our kin from the other side of the county coming in. They had walked behind the waggon carrying their guns and tools the eighty-ninety miles to come help him build his house. In a week we had three rooms up and a gallery and then they went away as quietly as they had come. Pa added another couple of rooms and he was prouder of it than Mayor Roberts of his courthouse.

"No, he wont do that," he said.

"He's getting a crew for tomorrow morning," I said. "He's going to do it. He's mad clear through."

"So am I," Pa said so softly I almost never heard him.

He was a sudden man. Like a hound dog sitting under a tree all night waiting for a coon to come down, Pa could look at a problem for hours and then solve it with a decision. Then he proceeded to work, the thing he had decided to do like a main bone in him, supporting him against whatever outcome. It never afterwards mattered to Pa that his decision had been no solution at all.

"I'm going to put him on my land," he said, looking out at it, the open fields and the rocky hillsides of which his hands and knees knew every inch.

You can say I was a little nervous. I cleared my throat. "Pa, we'll be bucking a lot of folks. They wont cotton to it."

"A man doesnt do what's right without bucking folks, Abner."

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"Mayor Roberts might use the law against you. I hear tell he's a vindictive man."

"I wont be breaking any law. He could only bring the law against me if I broke one of them. I'm digging a hole in the ground, on my land, and shovel in some —— muck. That's how they figure it. Aint hurting anyone, except maybe myself. And maybe, you?"

He looked quickly at me. I didnt duck from it although I wanted to. I thought of going away to college, found myself thinking it and didnt make any effort getting off the comfort of it. I would be away out of Malagoosha County, away from the frozen faces and the spit over the shoulder and the grudging grunts that would follow us Hammond afterwards.

"You hurting bad, son?" Pa asked.

But I wasnt hurting bad. I knew him and loved him and wherever the hell he wanted to go I would go along with him. I loved the lines on his face and the simple, capable, proud hands which had been kind to me as a kid and had taught me much, and the good man that he was. I wasnt hurting once I had torn my mind from the squalid corner it had [redacted] retreated into and faced back to my pa.

"Not so much I cant swing a shovel with you," I said. "When you plan on doing it?"

"Later today. But we could start in on that hole. How about the gas station?"

"The hell with it," I said suddenly angry recalling Pete Sawyers. "It can wait. Come along."

We got picks and shovels and Pa picked a place among some rocks a good distance from the house. We shucked our windbreakers and went to work. It was close enough to the road so that when the Logans passed, we could hear the shout and looked up to see what they were

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getting at. The Logan boys were piled all over Sep's old Chevvy, hanging out of the windows and one of the twins was draped on the bonnet. It was being driven slowly past and I could make out Sep at the wheel grinning. And all of them were yelling like a chorus, "Nigger-lovin' Hammond! Nigger-lovin' Hammond!"

They had passed the house and were going slowly along, looking back at it and never saw us until they were on us. One of the twins was first to see us. His eyes flew open and he yelled, "Hey, there they are!"

Then Sep saw us too and the grin was swept from his face. With a frown he stared at the road and dug into the gas so the old automobile jumped scared. The boys shut up quickly and ducked back into the car. Pa stood there looking down on the loam our tools had turned back.

"Now how do you like those filthy, ignorant, poor trash Logans!" I yelled at him. "How do you like that! Calling us names!"

Pa shook his head. "I never knew Sep would be like that. Something has come over him."

"I'd like to put this shovel all over him!" I bawled at Pa, barely seeing him through a mist of anger.

Pa looked at me and said quietly, "Let's dig."

I dug that hole so furiously he had to stop me or I'd have ended up the other side of the world. We shaped it rightly, widening the shoulders and tapering the head and foot. Most of the men around our part of the country knew how to make graves since we did all our own burying. We went to the tool shed and went to work on a coffin. We worked all afternoon knocking together the rough box and were through before dark. We put it in the pickup and drove to Lookout Rock.

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The wreckage was as we had left it. We shifted the rocks and the charred wood until we got down to the corpse. In the light of the torch I saw the poor, burnt out thing our fire had made of the colored man and I was sick. Pa waited until I had finished retching. Then he made me help him wrap the body in some sacks we had brought and we put it in the coffin and nailed down the lid. We turned the pickup and headed back home.

"Cant get a preacher to do it so I guess we'll have to say a prayer ourselves over him," Pa said.

I could hear the coffin bouncing in the back of the pick-up and I thought of the man slamming around in there. Nobody had known his name or even what he looked like. He had been a poor, scared jack-rabbit, scared by Sep Logan's signboard and by our guns. And I believe the time I was angriest at Sep was when I recognized that even in death, he was hounding the stranger.

"He wont know the difference," I said.

"We will," Pa said as I thought he would have said. "But it cant be helped."

I slowed for the turn into the roadway to our farm and just saw enough of them to hit the brakes in time.

"Who the hell's out there? What you think you're doing?" I hollered at them through the window, but I knew sure enough. Standing shoulder to shoulder across the road was Sep and his boys. Their faces were grim in the headlights. Under some sycamores left of the roadway I could see their car. Pa put his hand on my knee, a sign for me to shut up and we sat in the cab of the pickup watching them. Sep shaded his eyes against the glare of the lights.

"Abner," he called, "you want to light and talk?"

Pa put his head out of the window. "Get out of my road,

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Sep Logan," Pa said.

"We aint moving out, Abner. Not until you tell us what's in the back of the pickup."

"Since you've asked [redacted] then you know. Get out of my road."

"We aint allowing you to do it, Abner. Its not Christian."

"You got as much Christianity in you as a copperhead. Get out of my way."

"We aint moving, Abner. No nigger's going to be buried up here."

Now there was one of three things I could do, run the truck through them, back out of there or dump the coffin./[redacted] The first was the one that almost killed me with wanting but I knew it would be plumb foolish. Sep Logan had seven sons and we couldnt kill them all with the pickup. But to do either of the last two would be in a sense, running away. But it was then I saw a side of Pa's he hadnt shown me before. [redacted] I heard him grunt and reach down under the seat and when his hand lifted, in it was the double barrelled shotgun he used for squirrels. Pa leaned his head and shoulder out of the cab and aimed the scattergun.[redacted]

"Sep," he said quietly, "this here is a scattergun. Guess you know about us Hammonds over the other side of the county, wont be the first time we've had to put a gun on fool folks. Now you take yourself and your cubs out of the way or I'm going to blast you down for trespassing on my land."

I dont know what it was that went into Pa's voice. On and off in some unguarded moments, he would mention a little about some vague feud his folks had fought for years when he was a kid. And once Uncle Matt had jokingly asked whether Pa's folks didnt hold their own Massacre Day. He could handle a gun like a limb off his arm but

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this was not unusual in a land where every man could shoot as well as he could walk. It was something more, a sort of furriness in his voice that crawled along the nape of your neck. Pa was going to kill.

"Pa," I said gently but it was as if he hadnt heard me.

"Move, Sep," he said softly, "now."

And Sep Logan moved. He went sideways walking on the edge of his feet, his eyes big with fear on where he knew Pa was in the dark behind the light.

"Take your young 'uns too, Sep, take them off my land," Pa said.

They snaked off, the two older ones, Hiram and Japheth babbling abuse at us but going all the same for no man there that night hadnt heard the kill in Pa's voice. They piled into the automobile. Sep let in the clutch so fast the motor stalled. When he was rolling, one of the boys yelled, "Nigger-lovin' Hammonds!"

But it wasnt worrying me for I was too busy letting the tightness out of my gut. Pa sat rigid as wood, a carved man with the back of his head glued to the headrest. A sudden man; he had me scared too but loving him so fiercely it fair shook me.

We drove around to where we had dug the grave and between us we hefted out the coffin and placed it on the lip of the hole. What was in it wasnt half as heavy as you would expect, being/ shrivelled by the flames. We got the coffin on to a couple of ropes and let it down easy. Pa and me stripped down in the chill night air and went to work. We didnt figure that Sep would give up that early and we were in a hurry to finish. After we had patted down the top soil, Pa took off his hat and motioned me to do the same. He said a few words.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Pa used to say that next to mule knowledge, what made this country great was when they buttoned teats to the auto. He claimed that after these United States were midwifed on mules, we suckled on the automobile. It produced a generation that grew to like the idea of going farther faster. So if there had been another gas pump in town, Pete would have lost some customers by the time I got back from the farm. I had to stretch the truth a mite to pacify some irate ones; told them we went to a burying — one of Pa's kin the other side of the county. Squirting gas with one hand and making change with the other, I hustled the line and sent them rolling not too mad once they heard of the burying. After they were through, I hosed down the apron and cleaned up before going across the street for supper. I had just about finished when Jeb Coombed hailed me to say I was wanted on the phone.

I got over there fast, excited that it could be Willi Mae. Slamming through the door, I skidded up to the booth, banged my shins a couple of times as I squeezed in and shut out the astonished faces in Jeb's.

"Hullo!" I yelled into it. "That you, Wil — I mean Pete?"

There was a lot of noise and somebody was singing mountain songs but not good as Lulu Belle. The phone gave a few clonks as if somebody had dropped it and then I heard Pete's voice.

"Hullo! Hullo!"

It went again and there was a confused noise of voices.

"Pete — Pete — what's going on?" I yelled.

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He came back but a lot crazier than before.

"Listen, Abner, that sis —— you know what that fool sister of yours doing? I tell you, she's ——!"

The phone went dead, but not before I had made out Willi Mae's voice yelling something at him. I stood there helplessly looking at it before I hung up. I had my hands in my pockets and my shoulders rabbit-hunched like Pa's when I shambled out of the booth. Folks in the store stared at me and Jeb said, "Anything the matter, Abner?"

I shook my head and went out. I couldnt make head or tail of it but there was a lot of worry in it. Pete had sounded angrier than a scalded cat and I was sure that was Willi Mae who had screeched something before the phone was hung up. I didnt know what was going on. If that goddam Pete would only ring when he could talk. I went into the station and locked up and went to lay down on Pete's bed. I rolled a pillow under my head, turned on his radio and got Lulu Belle singing 'Ree, raw, my Dinah gal. Her voice was clean as a piney wood.

I couldnt tell Pa anything now until I was sure. He would only worry, and he had enough on his mind right now for we were both waiting to see what Sep Logan would do. I would have stayed the night at Pa's but he threw me out. He said I had promised Pete to stay with the gas station and that was it. But with one of his grins made richer by their infrequency, he showed me the shotgun and said Sep would be the worse off if he showed up. I hadnt quite dozed off when a rapping came at the window. I figured it was somebody coming in late for gas so I called "Coming," and threw a coat on. Then I heard my name called in a whisper and recognized Olivinia's voice.

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"Abner, dont turn on the light," was what she whispered.

There had been a catch in her voice that made you think she was liable to bust out bawling anytime. I eased quickly outside and met her under the overhang by the washroom. In the glow of the streetlight, her eyes shone at me out of the shawl covering her hair. I wondered how she had got here from Jeb Wishaw's. I could smell the night scent on her, the warm, sweet, sleep sweat, the bed sweat that made me almost die to put my arm around her and say, Kitten, Kitten, but not knowing if she recalled the kiss she had taken or whether she was really my girl.

"You kiss me now, Abner," she whispered.

Bold as a puppy she was but I wasnt going to have her believe me a darn cottontail so I kissed her. She came into my arms easy as water and I smelt her hair and neck and felt the flow of her along me and reckoned there was nobody I would rather marry after all.

"How did you get here?"

"I borrowed Pa's car. He's gone with Sep Logan," she said.

Well, I knew something would be up but I didnt reckon on Sep calling a gathering so quickly. But in a sense it was a good thing, for all of the others were Pa's friends and they would stop Sep doing anything foolish.

"What's doing? What's Sep doing?"

"They've gone on to Uncle Matt. Sep is calling them together to see Mayor Roberts. They're going to ask the mayor to have your pa give up the body."

"Pa aint going to give it up," I said. "Aint going to give it up at all."

Not Pa, who this night with the dirt on his hands had bowed his head and prayed over the grave, I dont know whether I'm

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right or wrong, whether [redacted] You made them different on purpose, but this one's finished and he needs to rest. [redacted]

"Oh, Abner, [redacted] he'll have to. He'll have all the county against him."

"Not all the county. Not me."

"Yes, you were great. Sep told Pa you were there with your pa holding a scattergun on him."

"ON him? He alone?"

"He said his sons were there too but he had to hold them back when they wanted to jump you. Says he didnt want no killing[redacted] and they would have taken you easy."

"Yeah, easy," I said, recalling with a grin how they had sloped off careful as 'possums in a meadow. "When they coming in to see the mayor?"

"Soon's they've been around to/[redacted] the rest."

"Where's your pa's car?"

"I left it down the street. Didnt want anybody to see me coming here."

"Okay, you go on back now. I'll take over."

"Abner, I'm on your side."

"Sep called us nigger-lover. Its bad to be called that."

She was smiling at me now. "So what do I care[redacted] what they call you? I'm on your side. I'm your girl."

It was nice. She felt good along me although I was a little scared holding her but I guess girls do that to all the men. You hold them and you know they're strong as hickory yet you wonder if they'll break. I took her back to the car and she headed out of town. Then I went back to the gas station for Pete's pickup.

I kept the headlamps [redacted] on until [redacted] I was at the front

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somebody
door, didnt want him to think/ was sneaking up on him. I switched off and climbed down facing the door and called, "Pa, its me."

His voice came from behind me. "Sure, son, go on in."

I spun startled. He was bulked up in a heavy wind cheater, the shotgun cradled in his arm. By God, I thought, Pa's like them old Indian fighters you read about.

"Pa, Sep's gone to the Mayor."

He chuckled. "Then I guess I can get in out of the chill. Wasn't sure whether he wouldnt have doubled back hoping to catch me. But if he's gone to the Mayor then he's going to be legal."

"He's getting Uncle Matt and the others to go with him."

"They'll go," Pa said flatly.

"I figured they mightnt."

"They will. They wont come to me first when Sep tells them the trouble I went to. They'll be madder than a catamount that I havent given up."

"Suppose the Mayor gets a court order against us?"

"Cant get an order against me for something on my own land."

"Remember, he's the coroner, Pa. Maybe he has the power."

We were sitting in the dark. Pa got up and lit the lamp. He went back to the rocker and rocked a little.

"That's true. Hadnt thought of that. He can call for an autopsy, but nobody ever called for an autopsy on a Nigra before."

"We never had them dying in the county," I pointed out.

"Then he can cut open what's left, right here, and afterwards, we'll bury it."

Pa spoke so coolly, I didnt want to ask him but I had to know.

"Suppose the Mayor wont let us? What do we do then?"

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He took a time answering. He spoke softly, looking down.

"A man must be able to do what he wants with his own property. I aint much on learning, but that's how this State and this nation grew. Nobody's going to make it any different, not if we dont let them. Our business, yours and mine and everybody else, our business is not to let them."

I knew what he meant. He had raised me and taught me more than I had got from books. He had taught me not by talking, but by doing. He had taught me how to get up in the early morning without a grumble, to gulp the hot sorghum and coffee and go out to harness the mules and commence the work and sweat only by which we could own this land. He had taught me the respect due our neighbors' by keeping his own fences tight.

"I think I'll stay the rest of the night," I said.

"No need to," he said.

"I think."

He didnt argue and we sat up talking now and then, dozing a little until dawn. At dawn, Sep and the rest of them hit us.

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CHAPTER NINE

A fog hung over the ground and they came to us out of it. I had dozed off and woke when Pa shook me. Light was playing all over the walls and streaming around the floor.

"A bunch of automobiles coming. Guess its them," Pa said.

I jumped up and ran to a window. I counted four cars. The lead one was just turning into our road. Pa took up the shotgun and motioned me to follow him. He opened the door and leaned the gun by the jamb then stopped in the doorway as the first of the lights touched us. The cars halted. First out was Mayor Roberts and the others followed into the light.

Pa said, "Hold up, Mayor."

"Abner," Mayor Roberts said, "this is a friendly visit."

"Funny hour for a friendly call, Mayor, leastways as I see Sep with you. Last time he was here, he wasnt friendly."

I could make out Uncle Matt and Jeb Wishaw and Jilson Swift and Micajah Hoe and all of Sep's seven sons. The fog swirled in the lights from the automobiles, washing ghostly around them. Mayor Roberts cleared his throat and nodded.

"I heard about that, Abner. The report wasnt good."

Uncle Matt said, "Abner, what the hell's come over you?"

"Nothing that wasnt there before, Matt," Pa said.

"Why're you making trouble over a dead nigger?"

"Never made any trouble over a live one, Matt. Didnt like the stink this one raised in all of us, that's all."

Mayor Roberts held up his hand. "Wait a minute, Abner. You havent got the law on your side. The law's on our side."

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"Now how'd you make that out, Mayor?" Pa asked mildly.

"You know we never had a Nigra in the public cemetery before. Not in the city of Malagoosha 'tany rate."

"Perhaps they just never died here," Pa said. "How does that make it the law?"

"Maybe they do it over where you come from, but not on this side of the county!" Sep Logan shouted.

"We had a few over there but they never did wrong, [redacted] least not before I came away."

"Nigger-lover!" Hiram Logan said low and bitter.

Jeb Wishaw turned on him swiftly. "You stop that now, you hear?"

Mayor Roberts turned his head. "That's slander, boy," he said sternly. "Make him shut up, Sep."

"Alright, he aint talking anymore," Sep said with a backhand blow to Hiram's mouth that jerked his head sideways. "You go ahead and do your duty."

Mayor Roberts faced Pa again. "Abner, we want you to get rid of it."

"So I did," Pa said bland as cream.

"Dig it up. We going to dump it in a sinkhole."

"I went to a lot of trouble, Coleman. Now I got it right proper put away."

Japheth Logan twisted his head and spat. "Jeezam, in a coffin too. A white man making a coffin for a nigger."

The way he said it, we, Pa and me, didnt look so good. But it would be hard to explain to Japheth and the rest that we hadnt made a coffin for a nigger at all, but just a burnt out husk of a man who didnt have no color or anything.

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Sep Logan leaned forward, his eyes jumping and said, "Where's the young 'un? I see he brought Pete Sawyers pickup but we aint seen him since we came. He holed up inside?"

They hadnt seen me slip from the porch before the cars halted but while they had been talking to Pa, I had done what he told me to do. Pa told me to look in the automobiles if they brought guns; they had all come light.

"Dont know exactly where he is right now, Sep but I reckon he aint far off," Pa said, throwing his hand at the dark.

Pa was showing me he had more corners than a deer in a cornfield. The Logan boys looked uneasily around and Hiram was making to slide off. I moved back off the cars into the deep dark, watching him.

"Now dont you go sliding off into the dark at all, Hiram," Pa said mildly. "We Hammonds dont like folk trespassing on our land, especially in the dark."

Uncle Matt shook his head and said, "Abner, you getting right down to war."

"Not so, Matt. Just keeping my fences repaired. Some people around seem to have forgot a man has fences."

"Abner," Mayor Roberts said, "we aint here to make trouble. Sep and the boys gave me a report. My duty to the county is to rectify the wrong. You're wrong. You think a little and you know you're wrong. Sometimes a man is for one thing but most people around him is for another. Way how we run this country as I see it, a man goes with the majority. The best in us comes from the majority."

Out in the deep dark, the fog dripping off my nose, I listened and Mayor Roberts was making a lot of sense. The law says drive on the right side of the road. A fellow who drives on the left is going to hurt himself and some other fellow. But, hell, I could

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see what Pa meant. He was in off the road, where a man goes private. Sep and the others could have left him alone there. As Pa had pointed out, it wasnt even a live Nigra. I passed my hand over my face wiping off the moisture.

"Coleman," Pa said, "if we ran this country that way, we'd be no better off than a flock of sheep."

Hiram Logan had been hulking his shoulders impatiently for some time and finally he spoke.

"Pa, we know where they put the nigger. Lets get him out."

Sep nodded. "Guess that's the way we ought to do it, Coleman. Me and my boys here will dig it up."

Pa stiffened in the doorway. "You got a warrant that says so, Mayor?"

"I had that warrant the day they elected me, Abner."

Pa leaned forward. The lines in his face deepened.

"You better go, Coleman. All of you better go."

"Abner," Jeb Wishaw said, "we're your friends. You forgetting that?"

"Yes, I am," Pa said. "That way when I see you again I wont remember what happened this night."

"There wont be a single one in the county with you, Abner. You going to be alone," Micajah said, "except for your cub."

"That so," Pa snapped.

"Aint going to help the boy nohow, either," said Jilson Swift. "You remembering that, Abner? Going to college, aint he? They'll talk about it there."

"Pa," Japheth Logan bawled like he was hurt, "let's dig it up."

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"Mayor, you ready?" Sep Logan said roughly.

In the doorway, Pa's hand went aside and I knew he had the scattergun.

"Mayor," he said, "you better know, I'm armed. My son's out there. We got you treed."

Mayor Roberts seemed to tremble all over. "Abner Hammond, you threatening me?" he said hoarsely.

"Saying I aim to protect my property, that's all, Coleman. That's in the law."

"You standing for it, Mayor?" Sep said.

Pa's hand came out with the gun but he held it cradled so it held offense for nobody.

"You going to lead the trespass on my land, Mayor?" he asked. "You tell Sep."

Mayor Roberts stood there breathing angrily but it was plain as cornpone he knew he couldnt go with Sep.

"I aint dropping this, Abner. I'm warning you," Mayor Robert said. "I'm coming back."

"Come back with a warrant," Pa said.

"You aint going, Mayor!" Sep said angrily.

"He's got to," Uncle Matt snapped. "Abner aint listening to reason tonight."

They headed back for the cars and I backed behind a poplar so the lights wouldnt hit me. In the glow of the light, I could see Sep's sons with their heads out of the windows searching the dark for me. Then they said it like a chant, humming with hate, over and over:

"<u>Nigger-lover</u>, <u>nigger-lover</u>, <u>nigger-lover</u>."

Like bees in a gourd, chanting it so it filled my skull and I felt unclean. The engines rattled and raced. And low and dis-

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tinct came the Logan hate-call, already the hump on my back.

CHAPTER TEN

Next morning I drove into town and went over to Miss Amanda's. She sat at the switchboard in a front room by a [redacted] street window. She was a browney, mousey little woman until you saw her eyes. They snapped and crackled like a bobcat's. They were black as buttons. They jabbed and probed at you, putting in the barb and watching with shiny interest for the pain to [redacted]pop.

"'Morning, Miss Amanda. Know if Pete Sawyer phoned/again [redacted] last night?" I asked.

She made a great show of [redacted] recalling, her head on one side. But she would no more have disremembered than I would skin a live polecat.

"Now let me see. Did Pete Sawyer telephone Abner Hammond? Come to think of it, I think he did," she said after awhile.

"He say anything? He left any message?"

"I rang over to Jeb Coombes but they [redacted] said you had locked up and gone."

"You told Pete that?" I said in dismay for I didnt want Pete to think I wasnt caring his business.

"Not in my place, I'm sure, Abner," she said, her eyes careful on me. "Just told him the party wasnt answering."

"And Pete, he didnt say anything?"

"Not that I could hear. There was all this noise."

"What noise, Miss Amanda?"

"You know, the usual. The music going and folks singing. You get to wondering what kind of house this Pete's staying at."

Bobcat eyes raking and clawing the coat of a furry little animal he making a meal of.

"The usual, Miss Amanda? What usual?" I asked all silk

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and cream.

But she was sharp clear through, Miss Amanda. She wouldnt fall into the trap by letting on she listened to every phone call in town. The unconcern on her face was as false as a revenue fellow's handshake.

"In a manner of speaking, Abner. Now you must excuse me," she said, fingering the metal contraptions she poked the board with.

I wondered what story she would spread around town. No doubt it would go to Coleman Roberts first since she was sweet on him and he not being a man opposed to gossip. But Miss Amanda was like drouth or poison ivy; you put up with her or avoided her.

I opened up the gas station and unlocked the pumps and got out the hose to wash down the apron. Oil and gas stains collect real fast on concrete and a fellow needs to work hard to stay ahead. I got a good head on the power hose and sent it gouging and tearing at the stuff, washed the foot of the pumps and followed up with the scrub broom. A couple of fellows were real considerate, waving to me and saying they would be back for gas rather than busting into my cleanup job with their dirty tyres. As I worked, I kept an eye on Mayor Roberts office, to see who went in and out. And plenty did, more than I would figure needed the druggist this early. It wasnt necessary to wonder, when they came out, what the mayor and they had talked about. They would all pause on the steps and look over at me, most of them scowling but a few just looked puzzled. One of them, Adam Shelby, came over for gas. I was tooling in three dollars worth when he got out and came to stand beside me.

"Hear tell you and Jeb Wishaw's daughter Olivinia will soon be called out in meeting," he said.

He was a nice fellow and his son and me had been out together couple of times geese shooting. He didnt mean anything bad, you

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can always tell by the eyes. Pa used to say that after a little practice you could always tell when the black bear would charge. That mean old fellow couldnt keep it out of his eyes nohow.

"Folks talk, Mister Shelby," I said. "Talk so much they get ahead of themselves."

"One of the loveliest girls in the territory, Abner. You couldnt do better. Your pa ought to be right pleased."

I squirted in the gas, waiting for it. Didnt take long either.

"Heard he wasnt too pleased last night though," Adam Shelby said.

"Folks talk," I said.

"Lots of us think a man ought to be able to latch his door on what company he wants."

The hose jumped in my hands. This was the first time anybody had said that maybe Pa had a few rights. I put on the tank cap, locked it and gave him the keys.

"I'll tell him for you, Mister Shelby," I said.

"Sure," he said. He looked a mite uneasy. "You tell him that. Tell him Mayor Roberts aint a bad fellow. Maybe they should have another talk."

I took the five from him and gave him two. No use talking to him any longer. His eyes had changed.

"Hunting this year, Abner? When you coming out with me and my boy?"

"I'll give you a holler," I said.

He drove off huffily and I knew I had done it wrong. Ought to have played him longer and maybe find out what Mayor Roberts was up to phoning all these men to come in for a talk. I hadnt seen Jeb Coombes cross the street yet. When that happened I would know that Mayor Roberts had got the pack with him.

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Jeb Coombes was a man who understood power like an ax. A quiet man behind the counter of his grocery store, he moved the length of it soft as a cat for all his bulk, serving flour or cloth goods with equal quickness, talking in the low rumble that used few words to say a load of meaning. And now and then he would look over at the fellows shaking hands with General Lee and would hold authority over them for the time it took him to give a nod and a wink. And the talk would lag, as if it was scratching its ears, while the men looked up at Jeb, nodding back until he turned again to the folks he was serving. He was tender as pap with women, but I've seen him use his fists like cleavers on a couple of city fellows one Massacre Day inside his store. He had more influence than any one man in that part of the county but he was not lightly bought. He didnt have much use for Mayor Roberts and Mayor Roberts knew it. If he was getting the town up against Pa, he would line most everybody behind him before tackling Jeb Coombes.

Sep came into town in the afternoon and went straight to the mayor's office. Then Uncle Matt too and afterwards Jeb Wishaw drove in and Olivinia was with him. I had known she was coming in; a preaching man from some foreign place upcountry was at the meeting house tonight. The town was filling up pretty fast. I was jumpy with wondering what Coleman Roberts was planning. So long as they all stayed in town, Pa was alright alone out there. It would take a smart fellow to sneak up on Pa with him on the warpath. I had made up my mind that if there was any movement out of town, I would be on their heels. My own bird gun was lying on Pete's bunk and I had brought out a pocketful of shells from the house.

At dark, Olivinia slipped away and we met in the shadow

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behind the station. She came close to me and touched my face with her fingers. She traced my jaw and said, "You'll be shaving after a year in college."

"Could be there wont be any college," I said.

Her girl body was along me now, hard at the knees and soft and hard again, her face close to mine.

"That aint no way to talk. You go to college. Neither you nor your pa nor me would like it otherwise, regardless."

"Regardless of what?" I asked. Maybe Jeb Wishaw had spoken in front of her.

She pulled down my head and kissed me and I had never been tongued before so it was like something exploding in me, busting loose every way. My arms were iron around her. She didnt move except for the ripples that ran over her and I guess we were both moaning.

She moved her head away and whispered, "There could be folks around."

She was that cool, where a second before she had been in the boil with me. There was a lot to learn about women. She was out of my arms with a movement that was almost a dance. I felt anger.

"How could you kiss like that? You've been kissing fellows?"

"No other fellow but you, Abner Hammond."

"You put some truth into that now. I never taught you that."

She stiffened angrily. "You couldnt teach a deer how to run," she snapped.

It wouldnt be sense angering her further. I had lost out on Adam Shelby and there were things I needed to know. There was a lot I didnt know about girls. Perhaps they came to things like kissing as how a partridge came to flying. They never had much to do anyhow and could spend their time thinking up how to flurry a fellow.

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"Spoke out of turn," I said. "Dont be mad."

But I think I must have turned humble too quickly for she paused in fixing her hair to peer at me.

She said, "That you did. I have to go now."

"Where you going?"

"To the meeting-house. Pa and Ma came in for the meeting."

"Thought he came in to see Coleman Roberts."

"That was part of it." She paused and then said, "You come on to the meeting house. We'll sit near the back and I can talk to you."

"About Pa?"

She hesitated. "Yes, about your pa."

She waited while I pencilled a card saying where I was and we walked to the big clapboard meeting-house down on Boone Street. It was pretty nearly filled but we found an empty bench near the back and sat down. The preacher hadnt come to the platform yet and folks were singing hymns while they waited. Jeb Wishaw was near up front and when he looked around for Olivinia, he saw us sitting together. He frowned and made as if to rise, then he sat again and whispered to his wife. She shook her head and looked back at us. Olivinia and she smiled at each other.

"About Pa?" I said.

"That was a bad thing to happen last night," she said. "Everybody's saying Mister Hammond shouldnt have acted so."

"Not everybody," I said, remembering Adam Shelby. "At least, not altogether."

"At any rate, mostly. Way they see it is now that your pa has done what he wanted to do, he ought to back down to folks' wishes."

"If folks had come in a better mood, Pa might have listened to them. Who does Sep Logan think he is, coming with his [redacted] kin?"

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"Trouble is its no longer Sep Logan but all the others too."

"Yeah, your pa and Uncle Matt and the others. That's not the whole section."

"Jeb Coombes' with Mayor Roberts too."

I stared at her. "Who says so?"

"Pa was there when he had a long talk on the phone with Jeb. Jeb Coombes is gone over."

I covered up the shock, and yes, the hurt. Jeb Coombes had been pretty close to Pa. He had stayed with us once when he was resting up from his operation for appendicitis and he often came out for Sunday dinner.

"Jeb Coombes aint got anything we need," I said.

"Abner Hammond, dont turn porcupine on me," she said.

Folks were clapping their hands and singing and presently the preacher came out on the platform. He was short and thin, with a large head and dressed in black alpaca. You expected he would have a thin squeak of a voice but what came out was so booming you looked around to see if there was someone else.

He had walked out to the front of the platform, his short legs chopping down like a thresher machine and stood stiffly, head thrown back and eyes closed. Everyone sang louder as he prayed holding the bible like a weight before him. Then he opened his eyes and held up his hands and the singing reared up mule fashion before it jammed down its foreleg and halted so quickly fit to throw you. I had heard he was a mighty knowing preacher and we all settled a little broader on the haunches to hear him talk.

He came at us fast. "How'd you like to see Jesus Christ kick that Castro out of office, huh? And Kchruschev, take that Kchruschev, how'd you like to see Jesus Christ standing beside him that day he

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banged his shoe on the table and saying, 'Put on thy shoe," saying, 'Kchrushhev, put on thy shoe.' Huh? That's all. Just saying, 'Kchrus-chev, put on thy shoe, man, put on thy shoe!' How'd you like to see that, huh?"

He was a rousing man and folks just sat there deeper and deeper saying over and over again Amen and Alleluia the way they do when the preacher's running straight on the trace.

"Olivinia, you tell me about Coleman Roberts," I whispered to her.

"Listen to the preacher, Abner."

A preacher's good as this one was good for hours with me any evening except the one where Pa was being treed.

"Got to know. Its my pa."

She turned and looked at me steady, the hazel in her eyes flecking the lights like gold. "The preacher's got something to tell you," she said.

Didnt know Olivinia was getting religion nohow which aint bad when a fellow has the time for it. But this was what I didnt have and I would have pulled stumps and walked out of there if I hadnt wanted to know about Coleman Roberts pretty badly. I reckoned there wasnt anyone else I could learn from so I sat and waited. After the preaching was over, she might be in a fitter mood.

"And take that NAACP, the nigger communist group up in that den of iniquity called Jew York," cried the preacher. "How'd you like to see Jesus Christ climbing aboard one of them busses they all want to ride on, holding his lily white robes around him and climbing aboard and pointing a finger at them and saying, 'Niggers, you get out and walk. That's how I made you to be and that's how its gonna be!' How'd you like that, huh? And talking about that nigger communist

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bunch, let me tell you, you aint safe from the devil no matter where you be. No, brothers and sisters, nobody's safe from the devil.

"Not even in this sovereign state which the good Lord done over into paradise for you, His chosen children. No, sir. For I hear them nigger communists have done moved into the county."

Pa and me had been plumb fools. We could have had our heads blown off. That dead nigger had been one of them. What had been busting Sep and the others apart was knowing that the communists had moved in while Pa and me had been stopping up the wrong hole. We had been a couple of dopes.

"Whyn't you tell me? We'd have left that corpse alone."

She shook her head and looked at me kind of mournful. Guess the fool part was peeping out. But she could have told me rather than giving me a riddle-me-ree about listening to the preacher.

"You gonna have to clean up if you want to go to heaven!" the preacher was yelling. He got a storm of amens and alleluias, he was that good.

"Its like you're at the casting ground one of them frosty mornings. When the master calls the roll and you answer to your number, you got to cinch your saddle and be ready to move out for that old fox is bad.

"That old fox communism is smart and bad.

"And the nigger communists are double bad because they hate the Lord.

"He hates the Lord for making him black and he hates the Lord because he's a communist."

Olivinia looked at me solemn and said, "It aint what you're thinking, Abner. Coleman Roberts' loaded the preacher like a gun."

Gosh, I thought. By golly.

"Yes, sir. Them nigger communists so smart I hear they throwing sand in the eyes of one of the most respected folk around here. I hear that after the Lord met one of them nigger communists

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coming into town on the devil's work and struck him dead, you good people of Malagoosha figured on dumping the anti-Christ into a sinkhole. But what happened?"

His voice fell down so low you had to pull your ears to hear him.

"Along comes the devil and takes the spirit of that double hater of the Lord and breathes it into one of your most respected folk. And this poor benighted fellow who has become the devil's tool takes that nigger corpse and/hides it in the/Lord's earth of this county. And now all of you are accursed."

It wasnt good nohow. You could feel the hate coming.

"How'd you like one morning to see Jesus Christ climbing up the steps/to the gallery at the courthouse, his lily white robes held up off the ground so as not to be dirtied by the accursed land, and point a finger at you and say, 'Cursed be ye, for ye have denied me and taken in the anti-Christ! Eternal damnation be yours!' Huh? How'd you like you and your children to be eternally damned!"

I dont know who started it first but a lot of faces began turning towards me, Jeb Wishaw among them. He beckoned with his head at Olivinia, telling her to get up from beside me but she just sat there her eyes straight in front.

"Its Mayor Roberts," she said low. "I heard Pa telling Ma Mayor Roberts had got hold of the preacher. That's why I wanted you to listen."

I went out of the meeting-house after they had started stomping and singing a revival hymn and went back to the station. The noise was still going over at the meeting-house when I got out Pete's pickup and headed for Pa's. He was sitting in the

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rocker by the radio listening to Lulu Belle singing My Gal Is Billy-be-Damned. Whether a song called for sour mash or molasses in her voice, Lulu Belle could serve it up better than anyone else. She was famous all over the state but I guess because we were two lonely men, Pa and me had adopted her for our own.

"Pa, the town's coming for it," I said.

His face in the lamplight was all bones and hollows. He looked almost sickly, a kind of trouble he had never had before, being hard as oak.

"There's been a talking?"

"No, Pa. They didnt talk on it but the preacher did."

"What preacher?"

"The one we heard about last week. He was at the meeting-house tonight."

"He's a foreigner, aint he?"

"Yes, but Coleman Roberts got to him."

"And the townfolk? He stirred them up?"

"Yeah, and your friends too. Jeb Wishaw and Uncle Matt were at the meeting-house."

Pa thought and said, "You spoke with Jeb Coombes?"

I swallowed. This wasnt good for Pa at all. "Jeb Coombes' going along with Mayor Roberts."

He looked concerned and said, "Could be you're wrong, son?"

I shook my head, staring into the little softwood fire he had kindled to take the chill off. It was down to coals and would burn out quickly but we never used our winter cutting this early.

"When do they reckon to come?"

Olivinia had told me about the talking she had heard from her pa. "They're calling a meeting tomorrow noon at the courthouse. Mayor Roberts will take a vote but he wont have any trouble since

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the preacher has done threatened them with hell fire for taking in a communist."

Pa looked hard at me and I told him what the preacher had said.

"Coleman Roberts is a bad man," Pa said. "We've never had any trouble with Nigras in this county. Got quite a few over where our family are at, sharecropping and running their own little farms but I dont reckon this Nigra communist bunch he's talking about ever got in there at all."

"That preacher looked wicked as a hellbender when he spoke. Olivinia tells me Mayor Roberts wanted them worked up so he could raise a real posse among them."

Pa stopped rocking. "Posse? What's he doing with a posse? What about the police? He's got Joe and Shorty."

I couldnt help a grin. "Coleman Roberts aint forgetting you're a Hammond, Pa. He remembers you met him with a gun. Maybe he doesnt think his [redacted] police force much good with you on the warpath." Joe and Shorty is the size of his police force."

He was looking off but it was hard to tell what he was thinking. He had this way of going off by himself and sometimes when he came back, he was a sudden man. Pa came to grips with trouble like a muskallonge/to [redacted] a bait. He stood off, looking at it cautiously but when he lunged,/his jaw closed and locked. [redacted]

"Coleman aint doing the right thing," he said.

"What you going to do?"

"Wait here for them."

I had an idea. "Suppose we/took [redacted] it up and/buried [redacted] it someplace [redacted] else, they wouldnt know where to dig."

He said softly, "They aint going to dig, son. Not on my land."

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"But, Pa, they got guns!" I cried. "You and me alone, we cant stop them!"

A little shine of laughter was in his eyes when he looked at me. "That truck of yours outside. Reckon it can do a hundred miles and back before morning?"

"Pete's? Pete's truck? Pete's got it going like faster'n a preacher out of hell. What for?"

I didnt figure he was set on running away but it crossed my mind he was thinking of toting the corpse to some hiding place where they couldnt find it. Maybe that was what he meant when he said they wouldnt dig on his land. He could be playing it smarter than they. Pa had corners.

"Got a chore to do. Got a couple to do before morning."

"But why take it a hundred miles? Lots of woods around. We could find a place."

"Aint taking it anywhere son," he said. "That poor Nigra needs the rest like I told the Lord."

I stood up before him. "Pa, you didnt hear me. Them folks are going to come with guns. We aint set to shoot it out with all of them. You got to do something before they get here."

But I was being mad at old stone face. He sat there rocking, waiting for me to crawl back inside the woodwork. After awhile he said, "Going to send a wire and see some folks." He rose. "You take the car and leave the truck. Go on back to town."

"I'm staying here tonight."

He got the look that I hadnt yet tried to buck since once long time I said Willi Mae wasnt worth hog tripe to go on mooning about. He could move swift as a painter and the day he turned on me I had thought he was going to pop me, but he had stopped in time.

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"You go into town. Dont come back till I send for you," he said.

I drove back to town and parked near the gas pumps. It was later than ten. Usually, by this time, most folks are at home but tonight there were lots of people at all the corners with the biggest group on the courthouse lawn across from Mayor Roberts. I sat in the car, the window halfway down, listening around for talk about us.

Fellows who go scratching their ears around in the dirt will, like hens, pick up dirt. Reckon I had it coming to me but that didnt lessen the blow.

They all seemed to be talking about us. That was allowable since twice now Pa had put the gun on folk doing no more than going to dig up a Nigra corpse. But then my hardworking ear scraped up this piece of dirt, and, brother, I was done for.

"... no good white trash," the fellow was saying. "I aint surprised that girl of his, Willi Mae's [illegible] whoring down in Florida."

I whispered the denial but had little hope that I was believing it enough to be calm. I thought of fists, rocks, jack handle, anything to kill a fellow with, wallowing in the luxury while knowing that a wrong word could have them coming down on me and messing me around proper.

It was too close in the car for the heat in me so I got out into Saltlick. With the collar of my coat turned up, the flaps on my cap down, I could be any of the young fellows walking about. I moved around a little but soon I was being glad to bolt into an alley. I leaned my head against a wall, some tears mingling with the vomit. Somebody had found out that Willi Mae was living in a Key West sporthouse and they were all talking about it.

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With me it wasnt a question whether Willi Mae was in a whorehouse. I didnt know her enough to tell whether she would turn bad. All I thought of was Pa and what this would do to him. I believed he loved Willi Mae more than me but it didnt craw me. I had never lacked affection from him. Folks said he spoilt me. They pointed to the college talk in proof. Only a man who spoilt kids would encourage them in this talk about college. While they knew that Willi Mae had gone, they didnt know about his nightly agony at the radio or the rabbit hunched on his shoulder.

Who could have found out about Willi Mae? I thought of all the folk who may have recently left Malagoosha for the outside. And then, so sure was I that I never argued it, I thought of Miss Amanda. She had as fairly told me when she said, "You get to wondering what kind of house Pete's staying at."

I stood away from the wall and cleaned up the dirt on me. With no plan, but in a lather to queer her somehow, I returned to Saltlick and went over to Miss Amanda's. She was still at the switchboard. Folks who didnt have a phone at home would go to her window and giving the number they wanted, use the public instrument in the booth outside her window. Pete had only called me in Jeb Coombes because he knew how friendly me and Pa were with Jeb.

Halfway down, I was in shadow but my legs were lit up in the light streaming out of her window. She was talking into the mouthpiece, pumping out scandal, you could tell, by the way her lips warped over like a crossbill bird busting pine cones. I thought of her spreading the news through town, whispering it, chuckling it and maybe to Coleman Roberts thaying it with a lithp and my fingers yelped to wring her scrawny neck.

Miss Amanda had looked up a couple of times since I stood there, wondering to whom the legs belonged. The lit up legs

and the face in shadwo. She had a goddam guilty conscience, plain as pone.

There was no slackening in her unease. She was shooting swift side glances to see if I had moved. I stayed, savagely enjoying her discomfort. I thought of a way of giving the nasty minded old crow a real fright. So one time when her eyes were off me, I stepped forward, putting my face in the light. And when she shot that worried look again, it hit her. Lord, it hit her.

Fear laced her eyes. Her mouth dropped open. She jerked back to the switchboard, her hands shaking and jolting as the plungers skittered all over the slots. She pawed at the board with fingers desperately spread as a rabbit's hindlegs bolting down a hole. I was still giggling to myself when a lightless automobile slipped down the street.

The two patrolmen who stepped out were the whole Malagoosha City force. The tall one was Joe and the short one was Shorty. I knew them well as they bought gas at Pete's. We werent friends. Joe was a burly, hardfaced fellow who had been on a big city police force before he came to Malagoosha. Shorty was mostly always grinning, no matter how angry he got. I've seen him on a Massacre Day beating a drunken outsider with his fists until he passed out. And he grinned all the while.

They came at me, one on either side, flashlights blinding me.

"Why you scaring Miss Amanda to death?" Joe asked.

"Looks like we caught a Peeping Tom. First time we ever caught a Peeping Tom," Shorty said, the grin in his voice.

"Why're you standing outside Miss Amanda's window?" Joe said.

Seems I'd been stupid. While I'd been standing out here laughing at her, she had phoned the Mayor who had sicked the police on me. It could mean a load of trouble for me, things being what they were in the town.

"I was just passing," I said.

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Shorty laughed out loud. "Passing? Then mister you must have been going real slow for according to Miss Amanda, it took you all of twenty minutes to get by her window."

I shrugged. "I'll go now, I guess," I said, easy as I could.

But with a blow from his forearm, Joe nearly tore my head from my shoulders.

"You dont until we say so. Mayor Roberts wants to talk to you."

"There're two of you and the law makes three," I said angrily. "Go ahead, beat me up."

"Sure, anything you say, Lip," said Shorty as he dug his fist into my belly. I went over, feeling as if I had no knees. A boot kicked me in the ribs and I rolled over on my side.

"Okay, lay off. The Mayor only wanted us to dust him a little before we took him in."

"On your feet. Get going before we really ball you," said Shorty.

I worked my way to my feet and staggered over to the car, holding my gut while my legs threatened to march off sideways on their own. Shorty drove, backing and filling and heading up Saltlick Street. He rode the car right up against the sidewalk before Mayor Roberts' office.

As I limped out with Joe's hand on my arm, one of the men in the knot on the courthouse lawn called out, "Joe, who you got there?"

"A Peeping Tom," Shorty called to him, grinning.

"Peeping Tom? Who's he?" the man asked.

"Name of Abner. Abner Hammond," said Shorty.

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My name exploded all over Saltlick Street.

"Abner Hammond! A goddam Peeping Tom!"

Up and down the street and the knots at the corners started in fast until a crowd was formed before the office door. And they were calling other things too.

"Abner Hammond! White trash! Nigger-loving Peeping Tom!"

Shorty was grinning all over his face as he took a long time walking me up the steps to Coleman Roberts' office.

"Give him to us a little before you take him in, Shorty!" begged one of the men.

"Let him go, boys!" yelled a woman. "Let him run for it!"

They were closing in on us. Shorty peered into my face.

"Now dont you think that's a right dandy idea, Abner? Want to make a run for it?"

A woman knocked my cap from my head and one of the men struck me between the shoulder blades.

"He and his old man suck up to niggers! His sister's a whore in one of them big cities! The boy's a Peeping Tom! Jeezam! What a family!"

It brought a big, ugly laugh from the crowd and hands flailed at me before Joe grunted and said, "Alright, back up, now. Let us through."

He had his gun out, brandishing it and they fell back so we could enter Mayor Roberts office. We went through a hall and into his room where he sat behind a desk. The preacher I had seen earlier was with him. Close up, the preacher was worse than in the meeting hall. His face was the color of chitterlings after the salt water soak.

Mayor Roberts looked at me so long, my face twitched.

"You're as rotten as your pa," he said.

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"I wasnt doing what they said," I told him.

Shorty gave me a hefty swipe across my wounded mouth.

"Calling the Mayor and all of us stinking liars?" he snarled. "Didnt we catch you peeping at Miss Amanda's window?"

The preacher shrugged inside his alpaca jacket and drummed, "Is this the sinner, Mayor?"

"He's the one. Abner Hammonds brat," Coleman Roberts said.

The preacher rose, no taller than my collar stud. He pointed a thin finger at me. "Boy, you want to be eternally damned? You want to go to hell with your pa? To feel the flames licking at your boot soles, and then creeping up your legs, feeling the blood popping and boiling, burning your organs and wrapping around your belly? To feel your eyeballs shrivelling in the heat?"

"Alright, Preacher. Cool down," Mayor Roberts said. He was a pompous man and somewhat foolish but you had to mind his office. Since he had been elected he was whining less and folks were getting to think he was looking more like a mayor.

"Tell me, boy, your pa still aiming to keep that nigger on his land?" he asked.

I had been whipped enough to be cautious. "He aint been talking to me. He told me I shouldnt come back to the farm until he sent for me."

"You were at the meeting-house tonight. Afterwards you were seen heading out of town for the farm."

"Yes sir. I figured on staying the nightbut he sent me back in."

"Joe here tells me you went out with Pete Sawyers' pickup and came back in your pa's car. Where's the pickup?"

I could see Joe and Shorty out of the corners of my eyes

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how their hands hooked in a little at the question and I knew they would be swinging at me if I didnt watch my step.

"Left it with Pa. He said he wanted to borrow it. Said I should use the car."

"Why did he want to borrow it?" Mayor Roberts asked softly.

Already my face felt as if a mule had stepped on it. I felt a shrinking at my gut, waiting for the blow.

"He wouldnt tell me. He almost hit me when I asked," I said.

But I was so scared, they must have heard the honesty in my voice for nobody struck me. Coleman Roberts looked over at Joe and Shorty, seeking to confirm what he was thinking. Hell, it had been plain even to me. Pa was going to move the body.

Mayor Roberts said,"Alright, Abner. We're going to let you off this time but dont you go peeping at any more windows in this town or we'll ride you out on a rail."

I didnt bother to tell them again that I hadnt been molesting Miss Amanda, at least not that way. They wouldnt have been convinced anyhow. I was bad all through.

Suddenly the preacher's eyes blazed at me. "Where is your scarlet sister?" he boomed out.

And all the caution I had held on to so carefully, left me. I wanted to kick my foot through that hog tripe face, to break his pipestem arms and legs.

"You filthy, dirty, hog swill eating son of a bitch!" I yelled, leaping at him. I only got in one lick before Joe and Shorty were on me, but I felt his nose go under my fist. Joe and Shorty dragged me off and I reckoned if another whipping was due, I wouldnt just stand and take it as I had done before. But the surprise was that nothing happened. They just held on to an arm each and cakewalked me

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out of the room. They let me out [redacted] the back way, laughing softly all the while although [redacted] Shorty couldnt help planting a foot to help me out. I didnt know whether the crowd would be waiting for me so I made it through alleys to the station. [redacted] I laid down on Pete's cot until some of the soreness had gone. I stripped and went to the shower. Where the boot had made contact with my ribs was red and swollen and my mouth still bled. Otherwise, I guessed I/[redacted] was fit enough [redacted] to market. I had a warm shower and a glass of warm milk and slept. By the time I woke, I was almost as/[redacted] good as before Joe and Shorty had met me.

Pa! I thought when I was fully conscious. It was [redacted] nearing six o'clock. I went out of there fast as I could and burnt the road for the farm. Pa was not back when I got there, so I sat in the car, hunched in my jacket against the cold. We had never had a heater in the car.

Day was creaking up out of bed, the Fall chill in its bones when I heard the pickup. A [redacted] redstart flew by on a nervous tangle of wings. The trees in the yard dripped. The pickup turned into the gate and stopped as its headlights touched the car. It came on again slowly and I opened the door and stepped out. Pa pulled up and switched off the lights. He stood a few feet off, staring at me. His face was filmy with sweat and I knew he must have driven all night. He wasnt pleased, but he wasnt as angry as I thought he would be at me for coming out. He put his hand in his pocket and handed me the [redacted] key to the house.

"Go inside and light the lamps," he said.

It was a funny order to give but I took the key and turned for the house. Just then, he said something in a low voice. I looked around and my hair stood on end.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Out of the covered back of Pete Sawyer's truck came three pairs of the longest legs I've even seen in my born days. The legs were wrapped in blue overalls and even in the low light I could see the patches. Then followed the other portions of the bodies and the three rangy old fellows stood in the yard studying me. They were carrying rifle guns, long almost to their shoulders and they held them like they grew out of their hands. They wore old felt hats, squashed down on their heads. They had a hound dog stillness, pointing for grouse in the wet. They had Pa's face too, the hook to the chin he used to say was all you needed to know a Hammond. They were tall with a slight stoop at the shoulders, hollow chests and flat bellies.

The one in the middle spoke, "This the boy, Abner?"

Pa said, "Abner, come and meet your uncle Shad, your uncle Meshach and your uncle Abednego."

I had always known Pa was a last child but coming so far back of these three, it was no wonder he had left home. They could nearly make a half again as tall as Pa and they were old. But you didnt see it how they stood, light and ready like bobcats, or how they sent the rifle guns into the other hands with a little toss as they held out for a shake. Uncle Shadrach, the eldest had snow white hair straggling out from under his hat. Uncle Meshach and Uncle Abednego had darker hair. All three had eyes blue faded as their denims. They had sturdy, quick grips as if they didnt want to occupy those hands too long before tossing back the guns into them.

"He's growed," Uncle Shad said. "He's going to be tall,

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like his uncle Abednego."

Uncle Abednego was no [redacted] shorter than Uncle Shad that I could see, maybe half an inch but they were folks who reckoned closely, I would come to find out.

"Reckon we can call the boys," Uncle Meshach said.

Uncle Shad gave a swift little whistle you hardly heard and my hair stood an end again. For this time another three came out of the back that were the spitting image of the uncles, except that they were younger. They were burlier too, bareheaded and they looked at me from under their brows. They carried guns in the crooks of their elbows and one was biting chaw.

"Abner, meet your cousin Abraham, your cousin Isaac and your cousin Jacob," Pa said.

We nodded at each other. Uncle Shad whistled again and they began trotting back to the truck. Pa said something sharply and Uncle Shad whistled again. They stopped, turned and came back.

Pa said, "Go on and open the house, Abner."

Pa was a sudden man. He could make up his mind and move then/ quicker than any man I know. Coleman Roberts and the other fellows had pushed him to the wall and Pa hadnt dragged his foot. He wasnt a man to knuckle under and since he couldnt fight all of Malagoosha town, he had just upped and [redacted] fetched his kinfolk. And you only had to look at the six of them to smell gunpowder. Pa never hardly/ talked about the feuds back in the mountain country where he came from, but now and again something would drop and you could snatch a [redacted] look.

I got the door opened and went in and lit the lamps. The uncles and cousins came in. They stood in a crowd at the door of the living room, looking around and I could have sworn they sniffed.

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They were wild in a way, how they prowled forward into the room, looking at things and turning softly on the balls of their feet.

"Abner, its [redacted] big. What you want with so big a house?" Uncle Shad said. "Time we were out we put up three rooms. Aint that enough?"

"Hell to fort up a big house, Abner," Uncle Meshach said.

"Should knock out them glass windows and put in loopholes, Abner," Uncle Abednego said. "Fellows rush you, you got a caution keeping them from slapping you with a bullet."

The three cousins looked at me from under their brows. One of them shrugged as if he couldnt figure how we had been so foolish. Then he shot a quick look at the uncles and I found out that the big, husky bears were scared of the three lean old wolves.

"Never been anything but a peaceful country, Shad," Pa said. "Folk over at this side hardly ever fight over anything."

Uncle Shad squirted tobacco juice into the open stove.

"Peace aint a thing that stays around, Abner," he said. "You ought to know that. Aint never had a war, there'd never be a peace. You want to war now and then to get a peace. Just like summertime and wintertime."

The three cousins had found the radio and were touching it and looking at each other. Uncle Shad whistled sharply and they straightened quickly.

"Ought to leave them in the truck," Uncle Abednego said. "Cant abide them in the house."

"Heard you had a girl," Uncle Meshach said. "Where's she at?"

"Not here," Pa said.

"Aint never ought to send away your women when there's going to be a war," Uncle Shad said. "Need them to load guns, fetch water

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things like that."

"Guess Abner left home too early, never learnt how to fight a war."

Nothing showed on Pa's face as he looked over to me. "Son, want to start the coffee?"

We fixed a whole mess of bacon and greens and coffee and the uncles and cousins did mighty well with it. Pa and me went out to put the pickup and car in the shed and I told him about Mayor Roberts. I didnt know how to talk about Willi Mae so I left that part out. Pa didnt say anything, just stood there thinking.

"Even if we can keep them off with Uncle Shad and the rest, we aint going to have the uncles and cousins here forever. How is it going to end?" I said.

"But why'd you go to at Miss Amanda's window?" Pa said.

This was the weak bit but I couldnt tell him the real reason.

"Guess I was just plumb stupid," I said harshly. "Wanted to watch her operate the telephone. She's real good to watch."

"You werent to know Coleman Roberts had gone bad," Pa said. "Aint blaming you too much."

It was time to change the subject and I said, "You think Uncle Shad and the rest will shoot?"

"If I give the word," Pa said.

"Why you?"

"Its my war. I bring them in."

"But, Pa, if they do, if they killed anybody, they could be tried for murder."

"Hoping they wont. But if folk trespass on my land after they be warned, then its their fault. Coleman Roberts will have to show me a law warrant to dig up my land and I dont reckon he can get it."

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"He's [redacted] coroner. He can get a warrant to dig up the body."

"Coleman Roberts' never been anything but a two-bit druggist," Pa said. "He turned mayor when we werent looking. He wont put anything on record that can throw him out of office, such as [redacted] digging up a corpse dump it in a sinkhole."

What Pa meant was that Mayor Roberts, working as coroner, would have to record what he had done with the body and as he had said, there wasnt any law in the state saying a man couldnt bury whom he wanted on his land. But what lay ahead could be real trouble. Once they started firing off their guns, folks could be killed. What with Willi Mae gone bad, and now this, it could finish Pa.

"The dead nigger aint worth it!" I said savagely.

Pa breathed heavily in anger before he said, "You go back to town. You go back now."

"I aint leaving," I said. [redacted]

I stalked back to the house seething all the way. Inside, I came upon one of the cousins with my watch at his ear. It was a watch Pa had given me when I graduated from high school. This cousin (I think it was Isaac but I never did really know them different) was shaking it in his big fist as likely he would scatter it on the floor, then putting it to his ear to hear if it still ticked. I rushed across the room and got up to him.

"You put that down before I rip you open, you big mountain clown!" I yelled at him.

He backed off from me, the watch in his hand. He was puzzled but not angry. The others had turned at my shout. Uncle Shad moved so swiftly, I only had the impression of a blur before he was between

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us. He snatched the watch out of the cousin's hand and cuffed him. He turned and faced me, his eyes cold. He handed me the watch.

"Here's your timepiece," he said softly. "Wasnt doing [redacted] no harm, only liked to listen to it. When this is over, you can fight him but not before."

"I'll fight him any damn time," I said. [redacted] I looked over at the cousin who was by now looking as if he would like to jump me. "I'll flatten your big hulk and throw you in on top of the nigger," I said, chucking all my fears and frustrations on him.

Uncle Shad said, "What nigger?"

"The one we got in the hole out in the yard. The one all this fuss is about," I said.

Pa had come in and was standing by the door. Uncle Shad looked at him.

"You got a nigger in a hole in the yard, Abner?"

"A dead one," Pa said.

"Hell of a thing they should want to fight you for," Uncle Sahd said.

And he went back across the room to where he and the other two uncles had been sitting, doing nothing but chewing and now and then pulling back the bolts on their rifle guns. But me? I stood there with my jaw hanging, looking at Pa and looking back at them trying to figure out these people that would come a hundred miles for a fight without knowing the cause, just because a kinfolk beckoned.

The sun had scattered the mists when [redacted] Uncle Shad rose.

"Guess we ought to look at the land. Got places we can hole up in case, Abner?"

The others rose too and they went outside with Pa. I followed to the door, watched them going through the high grass in the yard. The blades hardly moved as they [redacted] went, they being that lightfooted.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Along about early afternoon, Uncle Meshach at the window looked out and said, "Automobile a-coming."

Uncle Shad looked up from the radio and nodded at the cousins. They had been sitting knees up, on the floor, listening to the music, snapping their fingers and slapping their legs to the tune but they lumbered quickly to their feet and were through the door before you knew it. Uncle Shad and Uncle Abednego stayed where they were, their ears nearly touching the set.

This fellow at the radio station had got hold of one of Lulu Belle's newest album and he was riding it barebacked. He had gone through Barbara Allen and The Hangman's Song and Sourwood Mountain a couple of times already. Far as the uncles were concerned, he could go through it a couple more times. Pa had gone out to see after the mules.

I went over to Uncle Meshach's window which held a view clean down the mountain road. The dust was spinning out behind the car which was a good distance away yet, but Uncle Meshach squinted his eyes and grunted and said, "Coming fast enough to bust a britches but I cant tell if its a filly or a mare."

Pa's kinfolk sure talk funny, I thought, dividing motor cars into sexes. However, I got it when he said, "She sure sends that automobile a-flying anyway."

I've got as good eyes as anybody I had met before but here I was, only about seeing the outline of the driver at the wheel, yet Uncle Meshach could tell it was a woman driving; was even worried because he wasnt sure whether she was young or old.

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Suddenly Uncle Meshach snorted disgustedly.

"That darn fool Abner went out without his rifle gun," he said.

"Aint got a rifle gun. Got one of these here bird guns," Uncle Shad at the radio said.

"You reckon he wants to get his head blowed off? Going out without his rifle gun with a feud on."

Pa was coming from the barn, looking down the road as he walked. He had been feeding and watering the mules.

"Abner left home too young," Uncle Abednego said. "He aint never been in a real war."

I said, "Listen, you, Pa held off the Mayor and a whole bunch of men here the other night with just a bird gun and guts."

They all three looked at me and if they had been smiling men, what flit on their faces could have been pleasure.

"Well, now, I reckon," Uncle Shad said.

Uncle Abednego said softly, "We aint talking about guts, son. Your Pa is a Hammond. We just talking about having knowledge about war."

Uncle Meshach beside me said, "Filly."

Jeb Wishaw's car was turning into the road. Olivinia was alone in it. I ran for the door and got to her as she was braking. The car almost rolled over my foot and I had to hop out of the way and lope alongside it calling to her, "Hey, stop!"

When it finally halted, she was still hunched over the wheel staring open mouthed at the three cousins shambling over from behind the barn, the long rifles trailing on the ground, shaggily bareheaded and looking at her from under their brows. I waved a hand at them and said, "Git! You're scaring the lady!"

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But they kept coming and when they reached the car, they just stood there staring at her.

One of them, maybe Abe, said, "She's pretty, cousin. Yours?"

Olivinia said weakly, "Who are they?"

"My cousins. From over the mountain."

"Oh."

I waved a hand at them again and the low whistle came from the house. They faded softly, still looking back at Olivinia.

"Visiting?" Olivinia said.

"Kind of," I said. "What about you? Visiting?"

She was small and neat and clean in Jeb Wishaw's [redacted] dusty old auto. She had a bow in her hair and the frock was bright as if she was going to town for [redacted] court day.

"I heard about [redacted] last night," she said.

"That was a joke."

"Joke?" she asked angrily. "They most tear you down. Look at your face."

"Aint so bad. I got a nose. Preacher maybe aint got one today."

"That did no good, Abner. He preached again this morning. Folks coming out to dig up the Nigra --- even if it means shooting."

I grinned. "Yeah, that's why Pa's got visitors."

She stared at the house. "Them? Nothing much."

I was still grinning. "You aint seen the others."

She drew her eyebrows together. It was true as the sod cousins had said, she was pretty.

"What others?"

"The uncles. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego."

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Pa was coming from the house.

She asked, "You mean your pa brought in his kin?"

"Kind of," I said.

"Why your pa did that?"

Guess I stared. Hell, she knew what they had done to me last night and what they were aiming to do today. She had told me herself. Uncle Shad came out and whistled at Pa. Olivinia hadnt seen them yet. Pa stopped, waiting for Uncle Shad.

"Pa figured I got enough beating," I said.

"They're his fighting kin. His feuding kin I've heard my pappy talking about," she said.

"Maybe."

"There'll be fighting. They'll kill."

"Townfolk coming out here today bringing guns too," I said.

She said roughly, "But we got folks there —— we got kin among the townies!"

Pa was shaking his head at Uncle Shad. My uncles Meshach and Abednego stepped from the house and went over to Uncle Shad and Pa. Uncle Shad looked at them and they nodded. Pa shook his head and said something. They didnt like it and all three spat on the ground.

It was true about the Wishaws having folk in town. All of Pa's friends had kissing kin in town because if you looked far back enough, everybody that end of Malagoosha were related. But not Joe and Shorty who had come in to do the police job, and not Coleman Roberts, I hoped.

"Your pa will be out there too, carrying a gun," I said. "We aint to blame if he gets trouble."

"Pa wont be there, neither will Uncle Matt or the others,"

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she said. "Pa talked Uncle Matt out of it and Uncle Matt went after Micajah Hoe and Jilson and the others — all your pa's friends. They reckoned it had gone far enough. Said they'd leave it to the town folk."

"Whyn't they say they'd talk the town folk out of it?"

"Abner, you know the townies got their danders up. You heard the preacher working on them."

"So you think we ought to make them dig up the Nigra," I said.

"Didnt say that." But she looked away.

"You scared of what they might do?"

She jerked her head to me. "Yes, I'm good and scared," she said between her teeth. "Its turned bad and you dont have to be a goldurned fool ."

The uncles and Pa came up so quietly, Olivinia hadnt heard them until Pa spoke.

"Visiting, Olivinia?" Pa said.

She turned at his voice. She gasped and covered her mouth with her hands as she took in the uncles. They were no angels to behold, standing tall, grim and shaggy in their patched overalls, forearms dangling down from the rifle guns they had slung deerwise across their shoulders. You could smell violence and blood on them if you went thinking things, but even if you hadnt known of the feuding Hammonds, they <u>looked</u> dangerous in their long, flat stillness, standing hip jointed, chawing burley and the forearms hooked on the rifles.

"Right fine girl your girl, Abner," Uncle Shad said. "She come to load our guns?"

Olivinia, her eyes popping, shook her head. Uncle Shad spat on the ground and said, "Pshaw. Reckon you did. You want

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to light and visit, then?"

She shook her head. Then her mouth went stubborn as she fought down the flutters. "No-o. N-no. I aint staying."

Pa said gently, "Then you go on home, Olivinia. Go straight home."

Uncle Shad shook his head. "Reckon we cant, Abner. Girl goes out of here and says we holing up here, we lose the surprise."

"I dont want a surprise, Shad. Just want folks to know we aint weak and that way, they wont try anything," Pa said.

"They will try. Anyway. They vexed enough with you, they'll try, no matter."

"You turn around and hightail back home, Olivinia," Pa said.

"We cut her down before she hit the gate, Abner," Uncle Sahd said. "We blow off her tyres."

Pa just got smaller and meaner and looked Uncle Shad in the eye.

"You do it, Shad and I shoot you in the middle, close up, with my squirrel gun," Pa whispered.

I knew now how he had coped with his brothers when he lived over the mountain. Pa could mad up until a bobcat looked gentle as a rabbit. I opened the door of the car and rammed into the seat beside Olivinia.

"Turn, girl, turn," I said low.

She fumbled a little but got the motor started, backed up and made the turn and rolled for the gate. I waited for the boom and the lurch, but nothing happened and we got out to the public highway. I reached over and cut the switch. The car rolled a few feet and stopped. Olivinia crumpled to the steering wheel. She

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was weeping allover herself, the way girls cry.

"They wouldnt have done a thing," I said. "Pa wouldnt make them."

Seemed like I said the right thing for she came up fast off the steering wheel and knuckled the tears out of her eyes. But when she turned to me, well, I knew I had guessed wrong. She looked as ferocious as Pa.

"You fool! You and your pa and the three scarecrows back there —— and - and - the - the other three lumps of - of ——!"

"We aint done nothing wrong!" I protested. "Didnt you hear Pa say back there he didnt aim to surprise the townies? All he wants is for them to stay off his land!"

"You shove a gun at folks and tell them stay off your land?" she blazed. "You think they just going to back off and [redacted] run?"

"They better!" I raged back at her.

"Your folks are going to shoot at them! Going to shoot at Pa's kin and Uncle Matt's kin and the rest!"

"Then tell your pa and Uncle Matt to go stop the townies from coming! Tell [redacted] Sep Logan to take his seven chunkies and stop them! And while [redacted] you doing all that talking, tell Miss Amanda stop spreading lies about Willi Mae —— tell 'em all just leave us Hammonds alone! There aint none of you in Malagoosha good as my sister Willi Mae!"

That didnt ought to come out but by this time I was real red-eye mad. She just looked at me as if didnt see me and said, "Get out."

Well, I git. Maybe it oughtnt to have come out but they had no right thinking up them things about Willi Mae. She almost knocked me catercorner as she tore off. I walked back to the house. They were all back inside by then, the uncles and the cousins sitting on

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the floor around the [redacted] walls. Their knees were up to their chins, the guns between their knees held tighter than a woman. Uncle Shad looked up and cocked his head from side to side.

"Aint heard no rooster crow, Abner," he said. "How you tell the time?"

They were kin but that didnt make them less stupid. Saying they would shoot off guns at Olivinia.

"Pa bought a clock when he escaped. A stinking clock. Pa went soft," I said.

Pa said sharply, "Abner, you [redacted] keep quiet now."

"Bu - but, what's this? What's he talking about shooting at Olivinia? Suppose he missed and hit her with a bullet?"

Uncle Meshach looking at his boots said without looking up, "Your Uncle Shad never miss[redacted], boy. [redacted] He added, "We dont, either."

"All us Hammonds shoot good, boy. Your pa, too," Uncle Abednego said.

"You're wrong, Uncle Abednego," I said. "Guess I could hit the barn, close up."

One of the cousins spat sideways on the floor and I started for him.

"Wipe it up, you filthy son of a bitch!" I shouted, standing over him.

Before I could do much more than blink, Pa was on me. He grabbed an arm and spun me around.

"You go outside and walk it off. Go look on the mules in the barn," he said.

"But look at them!" I shouted. "So they call us white trash in town and say things of Willi Mae! See these and they'll <u>know</u> we're poor white trash!"

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It got to Pa like I'd wallop him with a piece of two by four. He staggered back a pace and his face turned ashen. His eyes widened and remained so, staring at me. He looked like he was about to have a stroke. Or kill me.

"What did they say about Willi Mae?"

I knew better than to hump around now. I had been a fool to go wailing off because Olivinia had got mad but the dirt was already kicked up. Pa wouldnt wait. His face turned rock hard.

"Saying things, saying she's turned bad," I said, feeling as if all my teeth were being pulled.

"Who been saying things?"

"Dont know for sure, Pa, but I guess could be Miss Amanda."

"That connect with you at her window?"

"Wanted to scare her, to see if she'd jump. Guess it was she alright."

"You need more'n that," Pa said.

I told him about Pete Sawyers' telephone call.

"Why didnt you tell me about this before?"

"I didnt know for sure, Pa. I didnt know."

He said, "Guess I got to go to this Key West."

It came to me slowly that this could be the break. Get Pa's dander up to go to Key West and maybe he'd forget the nigger in the ground and take off. He loved Willi Mae more than his right arm.

"We could get the telephone company to tell us where he phoned from," I said. "We could run him down in no time."

"Whereabouts the country is Key West?" Uncle Shad asked.

"Way down in Florida."

"Think our old car could make it?" Pa asked.

"We could use Pete's pickup," I said.

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He looked over at the uncles.

"Got to get to Key West," he said.

Uncle Shad nodded. "You go, Abner. We can clean up here."

"Dont need to to that," I said. "We could take you back and detour down to Key West."

He ignored me like I hadnt said a word. "Less'n you want to wait then we could go to Key West with you, Abner," he said.

"Maybe you got to do some fighting down there, Abner," Uncle Meshach said.

"Shucks, maybe the boys could stay here, take care of them townies and we could go with Abner," Uncle Abednego said.

Pa came out of where he had been. "No, we'll straighten out this and then we'll take you back, Shad. Got to go to Key West alone."

"Pa," I said, "we ought to go now. Willi Mae —— "

He said to me softly, "You shut up now, boy."

He said it sort of furry, it pimpled my back. I didnt talk anymore.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Along about three o'clock, they came at us. Coleman Roberts' car was in the lead and we counted a dozen or so behind him. The cousins had been out in the yard piling wood. They shouted something that sounded like, "Folks a-coming!" and the three uncles got to their feet and went out without a word. By the time I got to the door, they had disappeared. They just seemed to have been swallowed by the land.

I turned around and said, "Pa, where're they?"

Pa was pulling on his jacket. "You wont see them, Abner," he said.

They were blowing the horns in the cars and yelling things now as they neared our gate. I could hear what they were yelling and Pa turned so pale, the stubble on his face stood out. I took down my gun and put in two shells. Pa heard the click as I closed the breech and he turned and looked at me for awhile.

"Guess you should stay out of this, Abner," he said.

"You kidding?"

"Wont do you no good when the time for State comes. Fighting for Nigras aint so popular."

"I aint fighting for Nigras. I'm on my pa's side."

He smiled a little. "Dont take a man's side, son, or you wont be any better off than Shad and the rest out there — and you dont think much of them. Take the side of what's right, you think."

"Wish we had invented something that could turn niggers — hell, Nigras white. That would end strife."

"Why you think they want to be white?"

"They ought to. Save their asses some."

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"Maybe you're right. Though I aint sure. Folks are funny. Take that bunch out there. If I were a Nigra, I wouldnt want to be one of them."

They were beating the sides of the cars and yelling like kids on Massacre Day. I pulled aside the curtain and looked out. Mayor Roberts had stepped from his car and was standing beside it, looking towards the house. I looked for any of Pa's friends. Not a one was there. there. Not even Sep. I looked for Joe and Shorty, but they werent there either. These were all folk the preacher had worked on, town folk. Mayor Roberts was smoking a cigar and seemed to be grinning around it as the people in the other cars kept banging the sides and shouting the names.

Pa said, "You stay in, Abner. If I need you I'll holler."

He opened the door and went outside. The shouts rolled down on him.

"Nigger-loving Hammond — white trash Hammond!"

Mayor Roberts allowed it to go on enough, he figured, to scare Pa before he held up his hand. He called in the stillness,

"Told you I'd be back, Abner. Told you, didnt I?"

Pa said. "I believed you. You bring the warrant?"

Mayor Roberts held up his hand to stop the shouting.

"I brought it," he said grinning, "several of them."

He waved his hand at the crowd behind him and everybody burst out cheering and laughing. It was good, I reckoned. Coleman Roberts has turned smarter since he was elected. And by the looks of it, he'd be elected again.

"They aint legal, Coleman," Pa said.

Everybody laughed again, including Mayor Roberts who took out his cigar to do it properly, from the belly.

"Naw, but they're mighty powerful, Abner. Want to see them

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tear out your fences so as to [redacted] show you their warrant?"

Pa waited for the laugh to die out and said, "Why dont you leave him in peace, Coleman? He aint troubling anybody anymore?"

Mayor Roberts held up his hand.[redacted] He stabbed the cigar towards Pa.

"Get this, once and for all, Hammond. Folks around here a int hating niggers. You got mules in the barn? We love them as you lome them mules. You'd shoot to protect them mules. But I dont see them sleeping in the house with you."

"Maybe they do!" yelled a voice from in the crowd.

"Nigger-lover!"

"Let's go get him and his [redacted] nigger!"

They left the cars and were coming on foot towards the gate. I eased the gun to the window sill and waited. I hadnt heard a sound from the uncles, but I wasnt worried. To tell the truth, as I looked [redacted] at the crowd, some carrying shotgunds and others pieces of lumber or old chains or whatever, I felt glad about Uncle Shad and the others some place out there. I had been playing a guessing game about where they were, whether behind the haystack, or the barn, or our automobile. But when they showed, I was [redacted] wrong.

Pa held up his hand and called, [redacted] "Mayor Roberts?"

Coleman Roberts stepped out in front and held up both hands and the crowd backed up behind him.

"Wait a minute, boys, let's hear what Abner's saying."

"Mayor Roberts, you come on my land without a warrant, reckon you know you'll be trespassing."

"Is that all, Abner? You had your say?"

"Had my say, Mayor," Pa said.

"Alright. Alright. Now hear this. [redacted] I'm going to count

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to ten. If the gate aint opened at ten, I wont be able to control these fellows. They'll just have to come in and take out the nigger themselves. One. Two. Three."

He counted by poking the cigar towards the sky. Dont know whether it was that Uncle Shad couldnt count beyond three or he just got plain impatient, but before Coleman Roberts could say four, Uncle Shad shot his cigar in half.

For awhile, after the crack of the rifle gun, there was a dead silence. I looked for the smoke and saw it curling out of the yard grass. Then I knew I'd been wrong all along. Uncle Shad and the rest could go to earth like animals. They were part of the earth. They could use the folds and the knobs, the rocks and the valleys and the ridges. In the right places, you wouldnt know they were there until you stepped on them. And then, I reckon you'd wished that you had stepped on a [redacted] cottonmouth.

Mayor Roberts' hand was still in the air as if the shot had frozen it there. He looked up at the shagged end of his cigar, his mouth open. And then before he could say anything, another piece of the cigar disappeared as Uncle Meshach showed me how well the Hammonds could shoot.

Up to now, none of them had shown themselves. I learnt afterwards about who had fired. We only knew then that the shots had come from two widely seperated places. Then I heard Uncle Shad's peculiar whistle and the yard exploded. From every direction, rifle-guns spoke and the hats of the townies went flying. Uncle Shad and the rest just fired like lightning and folk out there lost their hats. I think the first of them to break were those who found their hats and clapped them on again, only in the instant to lose them. They ran for their cars, leaving the hats on the ground. Mayor

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Roberts was last to go and I was strangely glad that/even he walkdd quickly, he didnt run to his car like the others. [redacted]

[redacted] Although [redacted] I was proud of the uncles, I didnt want them to think that all/East Malagoosha [redacted] folk were cowards.

As the last of the cars pulled away, Uncle Shad rose, knocking straw from his denims. One by one the others came from earth. They were as expressionless as if they had just/got up out of [redacted] bed, shaking bits of grass and pebbles from their overalls and taking the old felt hats from their shirt fronts where they had stuck them when they took cover.

Uncle Meshach was checking his sights, pointing the gun into the sky and squeezing off.

"Gun acting up?" Uncle Abednego said.

"Darn if I dont think I nicked [redacted] an ear," Uncle Meshach said.

"Maybe a speck of dust flew in your eye," Uncle Abednego said.

"Maybe," Uncle Meshach said.

Nobody said anything to Pa. They came walking back to the house. The cousins went to the gate and began picking up [redacted] hats which had been left on the ground when the townies bolted. They set them on the fence posts [redacted] and began popping at them.

Pa said, "Abner, want to heat some coffee?"

Uncle Shad whistled and the cousins gave up target practice and came in. They all sat on the floor, cleaning their guns. Watching their hands on the rifles, I remember Pa telling me that the gun had been the earliest plow used in the United States. It had

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turned it into something of value.
conquered the land,/[redacted] Pa used to say that us
Americans were well served in tools to build and/to destroy. One time
he heard a fellow on the radio say we made the most powerful guns,
built the biggest churches and grew the hugest [redacted] grain of
there was. tallest
wheat/ All we needed was to make the/[redacted] man, Pa said, and that was
up to all of us. What we had to do first was to learn how tall was tall.

I knew they came no taller than Pa. I knew his guts were
wrenching to go after Willi Mae but he had put in the hoe and he would
[redacted] go to the end of the row. But what [redacted] would be the end? [redacted] He
foolish
wasnt a/[redacted] man. We could whop the fellows a couple of times
but in the end, Coleman Roberts would find a way to bring the law
Calling
down on us. If it was even for disturbing the peace./[redacted] in the
uncles had socked them —— but only for awhile.

While they were cleaning their guns, I took Pa aside.

"Pa," I said, "what's going to happen now? They'll come
back."

a day or two
"We hold off/[redacted] and we'll be alright," he said.

"Two [redacted] days? Something going on here I dont know about?"

"Maybe," he said calmly.

"But —— how long can this - this army hold out?" I asked,
waving a hand at the uncles. "And while we're at that, how long will
they stay?"

"Long as we want them to."

"What about their own homes?"

"This is their home, Abner, where their kin is."

"And what about Willi Mae?" I said brutally. "Aint you
going to look for her?"

He closed his eyes and I sort of wished he'd belt me. But
I guess he had seen through me. They come no taller than Pa.

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He said, "You got a chore to do."

That angered me. "Chore? You talking about chores at a time like this?" I shouted.

I heard a snigger and one of the cousins said, [redacted] "Boy's gone soft."

I whirled for him but then I heard plash and he was clawing oily wool out of his eyes. Uncle Shad had [redacted] almost without aim flung a cleaning rag straight in his face.

"Abe, you shut up, you hear me?" Uncle Shad said.

Pa said, "You must go into town."

I stared at him.

"You go into town and see Jeb Coombes. Tell him to talk to Miss Amanda. If Pete Sawyer phones again, he's to take the call. Want to find out where Pete's staying."

"Go into town? You crazy?" I whispered.

I walked over to the window and looked out. It was darkening. There was no sign of life on the road. It made sense that we should find out where Pete was. This Key West could be a big place with a heap of streets and houses. It was a place where they always seemed to be playing some kind of music. God Almighty, maybe it was as Miss Amanda had said. I didnt have any way of telling. If it was true, it would break him for sure. But I needed to know. If this thing held out, I'd be going back to Jeb Coombes to find out. Then I'd take off for Key West myself before Pa knew it. I'd bring her back before he found out, if I had to drag her.

I went back to him and nodded.

"How will you do it?" he asked.

"I'll take the pickup and hide it in the brush before I get into town. I think I can get to the back door at Jeb's without being seen."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jeb Coombes' store was built of stone and brick. The walls were a foot and a half thick, the windows small and high so the Indians couldnt see in, even if they prowled right up, back in the time two hundred years ago when it was built. The rafters were of split ash, the walls panelled in cherry. Jeb was proud of the place and kept it clean as a hound's tooth. It is said it had been built for a blockhouse and later turned into the first courthouse. There was a big main entrance on Saltlick Street and a smaller door in the alley near the filling station. It took me a time to make it to this door for Malagoosha town was jumpy tonight. Most of the crowding was around Coleman Robert's place. Automobiles were packed tightly on the courthouse lawn. I had my collar up and my cap pulled down and had put a limp in my walk. Yet I was cat nervous, walking past the knots of folk and hearing our name mentioned at every turn.

I knew I could get to Jeb Coombes' but what scared me was talking to Jeb. I'd reminded Pa about Jeb and he said, "Tell Jeb its Willi Mae," that was all.

When we came to town I used to hang out with Pete Sawyer most of the day while Pa and the others sat in Jeb's shaking hands with old General Lee. I hadnt been with them every minute of the day. There were things about their friendships I didnt know. What I knew was that one burnt out husk of a nigger had blown those friendships apart. And what had happened out at the farm today wouldnt begin to patch it up again. Yet Pa had seemed to believe he could count on Jeb Coombes. I didnt relish the idea of Jeb

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grabbing me for Joe and Shorty.

The alley door was closed but not locked. It opened on a passage that ran past a couple of rooms making up Jeb's living quarters and ended in the space behind the bar. There was a [redacted] cutoff door between the passage and the [redacted] bar. One light bulb was burning in the passage. I turned off the light and crept up to the door. It wasnt so thick I couldnt [redacted] hear the noise in the store. [redacted] I tried it and got a crack. Joe was somewhere down at the other end, out of line with my sight. To the left I could see the grocery portion of the store, darkened and empty. I eased the door a little more and got one fat edge of the stove and then as I looked past it, just a piece of Sep Logan's face. I pulled it shut quickly.

The floor under my foot and the wall at my back felt solid and sure. I wanted to stay there in the dark[redacted], safe and warm, just drop the whole stupid business. Pa had been crazy believing this would work.

I cracked the door again and picked up Sep Logan[redacted] talking "... goldurned army, the way Coleman Roberts tell it."

"Dont know how come Jeb Wishaw didnt know about this," Jilson Swift said. "That girl of his ought to have seen something when she was out there earlier."

"If I had a daughter and she was snucking up to that brat of his I'd take leather to her," Sep Logan said.

"We didnt any of us know Abner would turn out how he did," Jilson Swift said.

"He ought to stop her before she turns bad," Sep said.

Uncle Matt Connant cleared his throat and said, "Cant believe everything you hear when you know where you heard it from. Knew her ma before she died. Knew her pa before he turned crazy.

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Willi Mae wasnt born bad none at all. Maybe she saw her pa turning contrarious and lit out before it touched her too."

I listened but didnt hear Olivinia's pa. Jeb Coombes came along the bar and I put my lips to the crack and said, "Jeb, Jeb Coombes," in a hoarse voice but he went right on by so I reckoned it hadnt been loud enough. Grinning nervously at myself, I waited for him to come by again and I called louder this time. His footsteps halted and I thought he must be looking around seeking to locate the call for who in hell would expect a voice to come out of a crack?

I said hoarsely, "The door, Jeb. Want to talk with you."

Then I flattened to the wall. Jeb was a brawling man who couldnt move easy if he tried. Sure enough he flung the door open and peered into the half dark of the passage. Standing further out, he'd have brained me.

"Behind the door, Jeb. Dont want to show myself to folks outside. You wait there, going to turn the light on."

I hoped to God Jeb hadnt forgotten that he and Pa had been close. I could feel Joe and Shorty rattling my teeth in their fists.

I worked the switch and stared into Jeb Coombes' popping eyes.

"Wouldnt have come but Pa sent me," I said flatly. "He figured you wouldnt turn me in but I figured different."

The door to the alley was open and even if he was stronger than me, he couldnt catch me to the alley with one of my legs in a ball and chain.

"Why you figured different?" Jeb said.

"You're with Coleman Roberts," I said.

He said slowly, "I run a business in this town, boy. Mayor Roberts aint the soft mayor we all thought he'd be."

Even if he had been just going along on the pull, I wasnt

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going to trust him too close. Just likely he might be thinking that grabbing me might help him with Mayor Roberts.

"Pa sent a message."

"What message?"

I told him about the phone call. He looked sick and shook his head.

"The town's turned rotten," he said. "Tell your pa I dont believe it."

"Sure," I said.

He said, "What's this crazy story I hear from the fellows who were out at your place? Who's your pa got out there?"

I shook my head.

"You can tell me. Your pa knows different about me. You can talk to me, boy."

But I'd done Pa's chore and was backing out of Jeb's place.

"How'll your pa know when I hear from Pete?"

That needed some thought. If Jeb Coombes wanted to trap me, that would be the time to do it, when I returned for the answer. Then I had an idea and grinned.

"You write it down on Sep Logan's signboard. Just write down the address. I'll come along some time to look at it."

He chuckled and it looked square as shooting, but Malagoosha had turned sour and I wasnt for swallowing how a fellow looked.

"Beat it, boy. Close the door behind you," he said.

I went out quick and lost myself on Saltlick. Folks didnt seem to be bedding down tonight. I took a look at the gas station. It was all dark but I knew better than going in there. I walked out of town, past the wreck at Lookout Rock and

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found Pete's truck.

Pa came up alongside as I stopped in the yard. He leaned on the cab/while I told him everything that had happened at Jeb's.

"Jab aint lying. You could have trusted him, son."

"Better this way, Pa," I said shortly.

No lights showed in the house but when we went in, I saw that they had covered the/windows with stuff. A lamp was turned down low. I screwed up the wick and they were on the floor. There were only four mounds covered with blankets. I looked at Pa and he motioned outside. The others were out there, padding around on guard.

Pa gave me coffee. We sat there talking together in low voices. I wondered whether he had listened to the radio tonight.

Sometime later I woke, stiff with cold. Uncle Shad was sitting up in his blankets. His eyes caught the light as he turned them on me. A grimace creased his/leathery face.

"Just listen to them coming," he said, "noisy as beavers."

He scared me saying it so easy. Though I listened hard, there wasnt anything out there/bar the whistling frogs and silence. Uncle Shad didnt seem to have done anything but the others sat up too. Uncle Abednego and one of the cousins were missing. They rose with their rifles in hand, shedding the blankets like/dogs coming out of a stream. Pa wasnt in the room either so I guessed he was outisde on guard with the other two. Uncle Meshach chopped his hand towards the lamp and I blew it out. The light outside was soft and ghostly, the moonshine lost in the mist. As they had done before, Uncle Shad and the others just disappeared. I still hadnt heard anything out there but I had no doubt at all. Pa's kin were witchy, the way they could see and hear and shoot. They spat on floors and

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didnt care to sleep in beds but they knew more about staying ahead of defeat than anybody I knew. I kept thinking that this was how they had whoppedthe Indians and tamed the land. I kept thinking that destructive as it was to the life we had known, this nigger-trouble had brought out some of the best, as it had the worse, in folks.

Heard the fellows then. Heard them like a rustle in the brush, a chink of metal on stone but it was a [redacted] marvel how, long ago, Uncle Shad had I picked them up. An instinct warned me to lay down flat on the gallery. [redacted] My guess was that Coleman Roberts wasnt coming cherry-picking today. From the talk I'd heard in town, Joe and Shorty would be in that crowd out there, shooting law-style with County authority behind them. When the firing started, sure enough it all seemed to be directed towards the house. Bullets plunked and whined all around. I dug my face into the lumber and prayed. As I worked out the direction of the firing, it appeared that all that stood between me and all that lead they were throwing, was Pa's/ solid floor planking. The gallery was some distance off the ground and since the dip of the land placed the attackers below me, the bullets either came under the house or flew well above me.

Nobody yet had fired from our side and I was cursing crazy at Pa and the rest for not shooting back. When they did, I laughed loony wild for minutes.

Yesterday/ afternoon, the cousins had been working out in the yard for a long spell, working at the wood pile. I hadnt been out to see what they were doing, for I reckoned Uncle Shad had set them to work so as to keep us apart. But now, I knew. From three places along our fence line, three huge [redacted] bonfires roared up, fed [redacted] by coal oil. And in the brilliant flare of light was caught Mayor Roberts' force. And Uncle Shad and the rest went to [redacted]

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shooting. I knew there were only seven of them out there counting Pa but it looked like an army. The guns cracked from all sides, plowing up dirt in the frightened faces of the fellows. They had been coming forward at a crouch, believing to rush the house and suddenly they were pinned in the light, hung up like dolls, all crooked arms and open mouths, a skein of fools.

We herded them back, sheep dog fashion, curling up the flank and beating back those in front with shooting that was magic. A few got winged, but except for a howl and a bandage, they would be the same as new by morning./Uncle Shad and the others just shot at feet and hats. They kept moving from place to place. One time, I think it was Uncle Meshach was right below me and I could hear him chuckling as he fired his gun and rolled over, moving to some place else. Before they were out of earshot, Pa called to his kinfolk to stop shooting. Then he shouted so they could hear.

"Coleman Roberts, , I'm giving you notice! Next time we shoot to kill, you trespass on my place!"

But all the reply was a wild shot and a yell. They had left their cars away off. Long after, we heard the sounds of the motors as they headed back to town.

"Aint had so much fun since hog-calling day," Uncle Meshach said, coming in.

"But they was shooting at us," one of the cousin's said, his eyes clouding with anger. "When you reckon you going to let us shoot back, Uncle Shad?"

Pa said, coming in, "Aint going to be no hard shooting, son. We just keeping them away."

"That aint what you told them out there, Uncle Abner."

"Hope they believed me. That's to keep them off."

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"They get the idea you're doing that, Pa, what's to prevent them coming right in?" I said.

"Not when they come like that, son. The time to watch is when two or three of them drift in to talk peace. They dont know who we got out here, or how many of us there is."

Not even Jeb Coombes knows, you remember that, I said to myself looking at Pa. He looked back at me as if he knew I was thinking about holding out on Jeb.

"They aint never going to count heads, Abner," Uncle Shad said softly.

We sat out the dawning and then the kinfolk went to sleep. I went out to the barn after Pa. He was feeding and watering the animals.

"You get some sleep, Abner," he said, "you got to see Jeb Coombes tonight."

I stood right there and said, "There're things I ought to know."

He was rubbing down a mule. He said mildly, "What things?"

"Things like how long you figure we're all going to be risking our necks, and why."

He looked at me but his eyes held nothing I could read.

"You getting tired of this foolishness, son?"

"You ought to give me something, Pa. You ought to say what we're waiting for. I know you're waiting for something. You cant hope to keep them off forever. You ought to tell me what you're waiting for."

"Your Uncle Shad and the rest aint asking, Abner."

Anger jumped in me. "They dont care, Pa, dont you see?" I shouted. "They dont care so long as they can shoot and chaw and spit! You think it matters to them that you moved over here and

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raised your family and folks respect you? They're still in the one room log cabin sleeping with the hogs?"

He looked plumb worn out with warring and worrying. But if he couldnt end the worrying he hadnt needed to go warring. And even if his pride was to blame for prodding him into it, we had dusted them enough to retire with our tails up.

"Folks respect a lot of people who dont respect themselves at all, Abner," he said. "Shad and the others respect themselves for they aint asking anything out of this more than folks leave me to raise my own hell with myself. I didnt aim to bring you into this, son. You came back."

"And maybe I should pull out?"

"Maybe." He went back to rubbing the animal.

He had that quiet way of making you look inside.

"Pa," I said, "What makes you think those others dont believe in what they're doing?"

"Sheep," he said, slapping the word at me. "They feed along as other folk herd them. They dont raise their heads to look where they going."

"Just like the mules you say built this country."

He gave a sure enough laugh and patted the mule on the rump. "A lot to learn about mules, boy, if you figure that way. Nobody pushes a mule. He'll lay back his ears."

"But - but, Pa, just supposing they really believe?"

"They'd crawl under the bullets and dig out that corpse even if they had to use their fingers."

"Except maybe they dont think a nigger's worth all that trouble."

Pa dropped the brush and turned to me. His eyes

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turned
flat with a quiet kind of fury.

"His name is Moodie," he said. "Dwight L. Moodie."

I could have fallen down. "Pa," I whispered, "how'd you know?"

He bent a look at the floor and back to me. "Listen, boy, I'll promise you this. If by nightfall, what I expect aint happened, then I'll tell you everything and we go on from there."

"But why not tell me now? What is it? How'd you know about this - this fellow out there?"

He said slowly, "Lots of times, Abner, people aint what they ought to be to each other. Lots of times in this very county, hog sickness hits a fellow and our only concern is how to prevent his dust blowing across our fences. Aint blaming anybody about that. But now and again, somebody ought to take the risk and walk over and say/hello. Something happens when we do it. Dont rightly know if I can put the words to it, but a fellow straightens his shoulders a little more, keeps fighting that sickness a little harder. Aint going to happen every day, but somebody ought to walk over now and again especially when a fellow's in trouble. That war them Russians might be fixing to fight in Cuba, we could be in some trouble. Dont rightly figure we'd lose, but war is trouble even if you win. I reckon nows the time to take that special walk over, son. Folks aint angels, they cant go acting like angels everytime, but even if we only remember when we're in trouble, that's something, Abner. That's something."

He had that way of going inside you. He hadnt said why he wouldnt tell me more about Dwight L. Moodie now. But nightfall wasnt long to wait.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

We got Lulu Belle on the radio about midmorning and it was a sight to see the uncles and the cousins as she did King Henry Followed With His Mourning On. She would be shooting skitters along your spine with a sinewy note wrapped around the twang of a guitar and then, of a sudden, she'd whiplash her voice enough to smoke out your eyes. Everytime this happened, the shaggy heads of our kin broke off from nodding the timing and turned to each other, grinning out of powder blackened faces.

Uncle Shad hit his fist in his palm and said, "Gosh, aint never heard it sung so before."

"Like she was washing down peaches with corn likker," Uncle Abednego said.

"Wish we could take her back with us. Folks would sure come to hear her sing," Uncle Meshach said.

"Aint you got radios over at your end of the county?" I asked.

Uncle Shad looked at me. "Couple of folks have but we never did bother with none of them new notions. Reckon if we'd heard this girl before, we'd likely storebought one long ago."

"Automobile coming," one of the cousins at the window said.

Pa got up quickly and went to the window. He said without turning around, "Police. Trouble."

Joe and Shorty, I thought. I wanted to beat in their heads so much, I was shaking. Shouldnt hold a grudge so long, but nobody had ever pounded me before.

"Uncle Shad and me will meet them. Rest of you, stay inside," Pa said.

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"I'm coming out, [redacted]" I said.

He nodded. Wasnt much use hiding me when they knew I was here. We stepped down into the yard and waited for the police car. I looked back at the house and nothing stirred but knowing what was inside, I had a tingle at the back of my neck. They were uncanny, the quick, soft way they moved and the lightning in their hands/[redacted] the rifles became when needed.

The police car was boiling in. Joe and Shorty must have been expensive to the county, the way they drove that car. They rammed it to a halt feet from us, leaped out either side and walked towards us, their hands on their guns. Pa was facing them squarely but just before the car stopped, I had noticed how Uncle Shad turned slightly so that one shoulder was near pointing at them. The butt of his rifle-gun rested on the ground and his hand extended downward, grasped the stock. By this time, everything Pa's kin did was being noticed by me.

Joe and Shorty stalked towards us, toes pointing outward, strutting like roosters. Their eyes were all over the yard, stabbing quickly at the house and the barn. Shorty looked at me and grinned broadly.

"Well, [redacted] Joe, if it aint our friend, the Peeping Tom," he said.

His eyes were all crinkly at the edges, amused at me. He took a look at Uncle Shad, saw nothing but a queer looking old fellow and swung back to me.

"Well, well, you looking fit again. We didnt muss you much now, did we?"

Uncle Shad quirted tobacco juice and said, "This the fellow what took the lick at you in town, Abner?"

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"That's right. Both of them," I said.

They both looked at Uncle Shad, their eyes cold.

"Aint your size at all," Uncle Shad said and spat at his feet.

Joe said, "You taking it on, old timer?"

Uncle Shad just leaned on his rifle and looked vaguely out. Maybe Joe and Shorty thought they had faded him. Shorty was grinning real broad again.

"What do you fellows want?" Pa said.

Joe pulled at the peak of his cap. They were still sending those hard, puzzled looks around the place. Joe reached in his hip pocket.

"Got a warrant from town to search your place," he said. "Heard you had bad characters holed up here. That a fact?"

"Werent you here last night with the others? Didnt you tuck and run with them?" I blurted out.

"The Peeping Tom's got his voice back, Joe," Shorty said. "We didnt work him over enough last time."

Joe was slapping the warrant in his hand. "Matter of fact, we didnt make it. But we heard you had an army."

Shorty pointed his chin at Uncle Shad and said, "This the army?"

Uncle Shad jerked his head at Pa. "I'm Abner's kin. Come a-visiting."

Shorty was watching him with his mouth wide open. He grinned and said admiringly, "Well, I never. A real mountain man. A regular hick. You know, since me and Joe came out to police the town, we thought we'd seen all the hicks there were. But here's a regular one. Mister, where's your buckskin?"

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Uncle Shad was sniffing like he smelled a storm. "Abner," he said, "this polecat country?"

Joe and Shorty stiffened. Pa said, "Aint never had a army. Where you want to do your searching?"

The way how Pa said it must have convinced them he had nothing to hide but they were puzzled all the same.

"Way we heard it, there was considerable shooting here the last two times Mayor Roberts came out. They say it sounded like a gang of soldiers," Joe said.

"Was anybody hurt?" Pa asked.

"No, nobody we heard about except one fellow says he had a nick on his ear but even he wasnt sure it was a bullet."

"Now, aint it funny that all this shooting going on and nobody get shot?"

"Yeah," Shorty said. "That's what I was thinking. But so many folk ca nt be wrong."

Pa's eyes were level. "Could be me and Shad here, not seeing each other so long, were celebrating the Fourth of July a mite late," he said.

"Or early," Uncle Shad said distantly.

Shorty was chuckling, his fat belly jiggling.

"Now wouldnt that be fun. Sending a whole pack of folks scooting with squibs. That what it was, mister?"

Pa shrugged. He said, "Go ahead and search."

Joe said, "Maybe we will." He looked curiously around. "What we'd like to know is, where did you plant the nigger?"

Pa said softly, "Get off my land."

Joe said through his teeth, "You want me to slug you and

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take you in?"

"I told you it was polecat country, Abner," Uncle Shad said. "The stink's coming through."

Shorty snarled out something and clawed for the gun holstered on his hip. And in my born days, I havent seen anything like what Uncle Shad did. Only his wrists seemed to move but the long, heavy rifle was swinging through the air and Shorty went down as if he had been axed.

By that time, I was moving too. For as Uncle Shad began his swing, Joe went for his gun. His eyes were on Uncle Shad and he didnt see me as I crouched and drove my right fist into his gut. He gasped and I came up and smashed a left at his chin and repeated with the right. I was strong for my age and hate was in me. Down Joe went to the ground, floundering beside Shorty. Shorty was out, but I showed Joe my foot and watched the fear come into his eyes before I stomped his face. I lifted my foot again and was flung backwards to the ground. I was quickly up, facing Pa.

"Why'd you do that?" I yelled at him. "Dont you know what they did to me?"

"Because you aint going to grow up to be like them," Pa said. "You did enough."

Beside us, Uncle Shad said softly, "You reach that hip gun, son, and I'm going to tear off an arm with a bullet."

Joe had been trying to get at his gun but he looked up into Uncle Shad's rifle and his hand fell away. I went over and took the gun out of its holster. I slapped him not too gently on the side of his head with it. Pa didnt say anything.

Shorty was coming out of his sleep. He was up on one elbow, blinking around when I took away his gun and slapped him harder.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Joe was in better shape so he took the wheel and drove Shorty [redacted] to town. They went easy enough for Pa pumped the shells out of their guns and handed it to them empty. Pa told them to git and they went into the car, not a grin on Shorty. I did all the grinning and he killed me a couple of times with his eyes. They went easy enough, but Lord, they'd be back. We all knew they'd be back. Even Uncle Shad and the others seemed to think they'd be back for they took those rifle-guns apart and cleaned and oiled them proper. One of the cousins went to the pickup for another gunny sack of bullets. When I'd taken a look in there earlier, it was plain they hadnt thought travelling worth much more than toting extra ammunition. They went about lighter than a coon with a hound dog on its tail.

Pa and Uncle Shad were over in a corner of the room talking. Afterwards Uncle Shad called the cousins and they went over to the tool shed. Pa told me to turn the pickup so it faced the gate.

"Reckon on making a run?" I asked him.

"Come nightfall, we'll know."

I turned the pickup and went over to the tool shed. Nobody was there. I came outside, wondering what was up, and then I heard the thud, thud. I got it quickly. When I reached the grave, the cousins were already down past their knees.

We got the coffin out, closed the grave again and handled it over to the pickup. It was that light, a couple of the cousins carried it with no trouble. Pa was by the truck waiting. He took off his hat and so did Uncle Shad and the rest. The wood had mold clinging to it. Pa cleaned it up with a few sweeps of his hand. Dwight L. Moodie. I wondered what he looked like. For the first time

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making trouble over the corpse,
since folk had started/[redacted], I wondered what he/had looked like. I could guess he had been taller than Pa, but not tall as me. All/Moodie's folk [redacted] sort of look alike, so it was a task putting features on him. He may have been an ordinary fellow. He had been driving an ordinary car although the throaty way the engine had sung, showed care.

"He was caught alone in the middle of hostiles," Pa said beside me. "He ran but he didnt make it."

"You believe he knew anything?"

"Couldnt have seen Lookout Rock until he was on it. [redacted] Maybe a whiff of a second before he died, his brain/saw [redacted] the [redacted] wall. But that was all."

Uncle Shad came up and looked in at the coffin. He didnt take off his hat or anything/again. He reached in and touched the wood.

"Mighty fine box you fixed up, Abner," he said and went away.

"Must have been scared stiff, taking off like that."

Pa shrugged. "Scared? Cant tell. Man doesnt have to be scared to run. Man has something big enough to live for, sometimes he might run," Pa said.

"We wont ever know."

"Aint got to know," Pa said sharply. "Just think it."

We sent the cousins for hay and strew over the coffin. We didnt figure on a disguise or any of that stuff. It was just that things didnt look so raw with the hay over it. Uncle Shad whistled and the cousins trotted off. He was over by the fence along the gate. They talked awhile and then walked a little way either side of the gate.

"Let's quit and eat now, Abner," Uncle Shad said as he came back. Only one of the cousins was with him. I looked

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around for the other two but they had vanished.

After they had eaten, Uncle Meshach got up and nodded to the other cousin. They went out and presently the other two came in. They ate also and went over to sit by the radio, looking at me. I sighed, got up and switched on the darn thing. If I lived long enough I'd buy them a radio, I promised silently.

When the whistle came, everybody got up and looked at each other. Uncle Shad grunted and we all went outside. It was a dark afternoon, the sun was behind heavy clouds. The woods beyond our fence was dark in oak and sycamore, softly slashed in sections with a bold river birch. Near the ground, goldenrod and the purple ironweed splashed among the roots. The road to town ran through the wood and we could see a distance along it. It was empty, but things had got so, I was trusting the uncles more than my own eyes. I believed there were enemies in the wood.

Pa said, "You go back inside, Abner."

I shook my head and showed him the shotgun in my hand. "Not this time, Pa. This time there wont be any picnic shoot-the-pig."

He looked down and said, "Want me to call it off, dont you?"

"Not if you got strong reasons."

"I got strong reasons."

"Then I'm just like Uncle Shad and the other kinfolk. I aint asking questions."

"We pull out at nightfall, whatever."

I smiled and shook my head. "Pull out? How? Think those out there going to allow us to pull out?"

"We'll just start the truck going and keep our heads down."

"If we're still alive by nightfall."

"We will be. You watch your Uncle Shad and the rest," Pa said, nearly grinning that time.

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There was no harm watching them. Come next feud, I'd know what to do. I could hold night classes at State on how to fight feuds the Hammond way. Could help the fees. I twisted my head and practised a spit.

But I watched them and when they went to earth, I found cover too, watching the wood. Nothing moved in the dark tangle. It was uncanny. You knew folks were out there marking you, enemy folk maybe trying at this moment to bring down the foresight in line with some portion of your vulnerable body, yet nobody showed. I twitched nervously and looked back to see if my legs were showing around the knob of earth I was lying behind. Uncle Abednego and two were of the cousins to the right; on my left, had a few yards forward of me, Uncle Shad and another of the cousins. Somewhere back of my position, Uncle Meshach and Pa were forted.

Nothing happened for awhile. Uncle Shad's grey head was switching from side to side. Sometimes for minutes he would lay perfectly still then he would jerk in another direction as something else caught his eye.

Once he turned over on his back and spoke to Uncle Abednego. They could have been sitting on the front porch swopping gossip.

"I counted to forty," Uncle Shad said.

"Maybe more. I stopped after thirty or so."

"Nearly poked one awhile ago."

"Me too. Got hair the color of red."

"Same one. Restless as a bird," said Uncle Shad, rolling over on his belly again.

My eyes were bugging but it didnt do any good. I couldnt see anything but trees.

More time passed and Uncle Shad called softly, "Abner, you set on waiting?"

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"Will be dark in a couple of hours," Pa said behind me. "Then we take the truck and go."

Uncle Shad grunted. He said, "Reckon you ought to know though. If they come out of the wood we'll have to drop a couple to chase them back in. Figure if we nailed them down now, they'll stay in there until dark. That way, nobody gets killed."

"Pa dont want anybody killed," I said nervously.

"Aint killing anybody," Uncle Shad said. "We wing a couple, the others will know we mean business. Best do it now."

And Pa shocked me by saying calmly, "Shoot, Shad."

Uncle Shad had been lying full out but now his body seemed to lengthen along the ground. The rifle slid forward and his long, tapering fingers closed around the metal plates at the trigger. His cheek snuggled to the stock, elbows rubbing out places in the grass, the grey head motionless. I sneaked a look sideways at Uncle Abednego, at the iron profile buried against the weapon, mouth opened and his lips working over his teeth. Behind me, lethal as a rattler, his hands enclosing the death in his gun, Uncle Meshach was doing the same. On their bellies and chewing blades of grass, my cousins didnt do anything but watch the wood.

Uncle Shad squeezed off first and the others fired instantly. I guessed they all scored, from the bawls of pain some folks loosened over there, but I didnt bother to look. I was too busy trying to burrow into the earth. The lead came whining and humming but there wasnt anybody over on the other side who could shoot like the uncles. They belted us like a hailstorm. Yet they kept inside the wood for no sooner than one more foolish than the rest shoved out of the trees, one of the uncles would nail him. But I was jumping everytime the uncles fired. Fighting was one thing; kil-

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ling was another. Somebody would swing and he wouldnt be from the other side. Mayor Roberts was sure to sooner or later have the law sitting on his side.

"Dont worry, son," Uncle Abednego said beside me. "This aint a blood fight. We aint aiming to kill anybody. This is just a disagreement between folks."

Disagreement, he called it. He must have seen my nervousness for he had rolled over beside me. He was lying on his side, loading his gun.

"Uncle Abednego," I said, "You know what this is about?"

"Sure," he said, busy at the magazine. "Your pa and some folk had a falling out. They too many for him so he's got to show them he's got kin."

"Wha - what about the nigger?"

"Sure. Him too."

"Him too, what? Doesnt it bother you getting shot at over a nigger?"

He stared surprised. "Son, he's dead."

"But that's what the fight is about! Its because of him!"

"Hell, no, 'taint that," Uncle Abednego said. "Its because of them over there — and maybe us, too."

He rolled like a log going downhill back to his position and instantly his gun was hammering again.

A new high sound between a whine and a whistle rose above the noise of firing. Presently a voice hailed us. I recognized Coleman Roberts' voice and I figured he was using the hailer on the patrol car.

"Abner! Abner Hammond! Can you hear me?"

Everybody stopped firing.

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"The Mayor's going to talk to you," said the voice from the hailer. It sounded like Joe. Wished I'd done more to him.

The hailer spluttered and coughed and the new voice spoke.

"Hammond!"

Our name has that pistol sound and in Coleman Roberts' mouth it exploded over the meadow.

"Hammond, you'd better surrender. I got hundreds of men out here."

"Crook," Uncle Abednego grinned into the ground, "he aint got more'n fifty."

Uncle Abednego's cheek was pressed on the ground, one eye roving the sky and over me and along his rifle as he listened.

"Joe and Shorty are here —— I've got a warrant. You shoot now and you're fighting the United States."

That was too big to hit us with. He had no cause to do that. Pa and me had no reason to fight the United States. My pa approved the United States more than any folk I knew, except maybe the way Sep Logan approves the armed forces.

"Shooting him aint shooting the United States, son," Uncle Abednego said. "He's talking a mountain to hide that he aint got a anthill."

The whining we had heard had settled into a steady clatter which I found out to be a tractor. It broke out of the trees, high and yellow, rocked forward and halted. When it bobbed forward again, we could glimpse enough heads behind it to know what they were up to. I'd seen it often enough at the movies in Malagoosha City, only in those, the soldiers went in behind a tank.

Uncle Meshach said softly behind me, "Shad, that driver, he's

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biggerin a moose in a cabbage patch."

Uncle Meshach was on slightly rising ground and he could see the driver crouched at the levers.

"You take off some fur, Meshach," Uncle Shad said.

I waited, my eyes glued on the tractor but thinking of Uncle Meshach behind me, a glittering eye raking along the barrel as he put the bead on the tractor driver. His gun went off, whap and the driver yelped, spun backward out of his seat as the tractor slewed and halted. Exposed, as the tractor slewed, were a dozen Malagoosha men including Sep. The uncles and cousins opened fire and scampered them back into the wood.

They were howling and swearing loudly in the wood but they kept well back from the edge and all you saw was the dark green wall of trees. Then there was a lot of low talk and a cry of pain.

"Hammond!" Mayor Roberts voice flung at us again. "Listen. Some innocent boys are walking out of here. You shoot them and it will just be plain murder. You hear me?"

I looked back at Pa. He was puzzled. Then his eyes widened in shock. I turned back to the wood and I got it worse than Pa. For shambling out of the safety of the trees, were Sep Logan's seven sons. They came out yelping and looking back over their shoulders, walking with their bodies bent over, holding hands in a tortured chain as Sep's voice drove them from the rear. I guess all of us were just too open mouthed to do much else than stare. On they came in the broken walk, knees up and tumbling sideways in terror but not daring to halt for Sep was right behind them, barking at them to git over to the empty tractor. Sep worked them right up to the tractor and then he climbed aboard while the boys, still

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bawling scared but mad too, dragged themselves to the front and formed a fence between us and the tractor. Sep got the motor started and turned in front howling at their pa to lay off. for us, the boys Out shot men again from the wood and forted up behind the tractor making its way us. Sep's boys were carrying on real bad. towards

"Abner," Uncle Shad called, "who's the fellow driving?"

"Sep Logan," Pa said in disgust."Those boys are his sons."

Uncle Shad chewed some more and said, "Reckon I'm going to kill him, Abner."

"No," Pa said flatly. "No killing, Shad."

Uncle Shad chewed some more. He knew Pa. And Pa had got behind him. You can be sure he was sorry Pa had got behind him.

"Meshach," Uncle Shad said.

"Hell, he's got a gun on me too," Uncle Meshach said.

I looked around and sure Pa had slipped backward and had Uncle Meshach also before him. Uncle Abednego chuckled.

"Abner, you aint forgotten a thing," Uncle Abednego said.

"Should have dusted him some more when he was small," Uncle Shad said.

All six of them began rippling their shots, laying down a line at which Sep's sons halted when the dirt began kicking into their faces. Sep gunned the tractor, roaring it behind them. He crept up and nosed them with it and a couple almost fell into the bullets. We were all looking for Sep but couldnt see him, he was crouched so low on the floorplates.

We didnt want to shoot through the machinery; a wild bullet could render him lifeless although Sep had it coming to him.

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Uncle Abednego had stopped firing [redacted] and when I looked to see what had happened, darned if Uncle Abednego wasnt bouncing around like he had the St Vitus Dance. I most shouted at him until I saw he was real collected, just juggling his sights around for a mark on Sep Logan.

"Abner," Uncle Abednego said, "reckon if I took an arm off that Sep Logan you wouldnt have any cause to shoot me?"

"Mark him, is all," Pa warned.

Uncle Abednego showed his teeth and snapped the trigger. Sure, he got Sep Logan. Got him in the shoulder and Sep tumbled off that tractor and hightailed it back into the wood only a shake ahead of his sons and the others who had been walking behind it.

There was silence in the wood and we all stretched out and let go some of the tension. Although maybe, that was only in me for I never saw any signs of tension in the uncles or the cousins. They just lay loose on the ground, the uncles chewing slower and the cousins tickling their noses with blades of grass.

"Hammond," Coleman Roberts slammed from the hailer, "I've wired for state police and phoned the governor for the national guard. This place will be swarming by nightfall."

The national guard. We didnt have a chance. And bringing in the state police would mean road blocks. The hailer squawked and/Uncle Matt's voice came from it.

"Abner, you bullheaded fool, aint this gone far enough?"

Guessed they were all out there. All of Pa's friends, turned against him because he quit the herd. For some time, one of the cousins had been peering about, mostly overhead, trying to locate where the booming talk was coming from. He seemed to have spotted it for he birddogged a little to the left of where Sep

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had entered the trees. Stealthily he put his rifle into firing position. Slyly he worked the rifle onto the target and with a look of deep cunning on his face, he pulled the trigger./ Mayor Roberts was cut off in mid squawk as a bullet crashed into the hailer.

We were all laughing and slapping the earth to which renewed gunfire soon pinned us. But the cousin who had shot laughed doubled, his knees at his chin, crazed with it and it caused him to jump up straight into a bullet. It caught him with a slap, spun him and downed him. Uncle Shad was over there faster than a greased rattler. He turned him over and ripped away the shirt, looked at the wound and spat tobacco juice into it.

"He bad?" Pa called.

"Naw, ripped the skin some and went by," Uncle Shad said.

I turned my head and spoke to Uncle Abednego.

"We wont have a chance when the guard comes," I said.

"Aint worse than revenue runners," Uncle Abednego said. "Aint worse than pneumonia or snakebite. A man's always got a chance."

"How we going to cut out of here with the national guard and state police out there?"

Uncle Abednego had a way of talking in short, rapid sentences, his head twitching in a new direction with each sentence but his eyes never off my face.

"Who's the guard? Who's the state police? Just folks."

"We cant even take off and leave the pickup. We could get away on foot but Pa aint leaving the coffin."

"Son, he leave that coffin and he leaves himself. Wouldnt be a man no more. We aint aiming to leave the coffin."

"Uncle Abednego, you think anybody's going to care next week after we're all shot to pieces? Take the niggers now. You think any

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nigger in the whole world will care that we got shot up over one of his dead people? Leastways they'll laugh like hell."

"Aint the people who dont care that matters. Its the people who care. Aint the pepole who dont care what changes things. Its the folk who care."

"Who wants to change anyway?" I said. "People dont want to change, they only want to live."

Uncle Abednego rested his palms on the rifle barrel and his cheek on the back of his hands. He was as comfortable on the ground as somebody lying in a soft bed. The firing had lulled and likely if he hadnt been talking to me, I got the idea that he could have gone to sleep right there and woke the instant something moved. He jerked his head at me as if the thought had just settled.

"There aint no change. What we call change is just righting. Say we set out to make a trace. From here to the other side of the county. But we got to climb mountains, ford rivers, go through ravines. Cut into woods. Only time we see where we headed is at certain places. We get to those certain places, then we straighten the trace which had got all twisted when we couldnt see. We just righting the trace. Folks call it change."

We were quiet for awhile. I said, "Uncle Abednego, you really think we can get pass the national guard and the state police?"

"Maybe not," he said. "They got these fast shooters."

"Why dont you talk Pa into leaving the coffin? We can get away on foot. Through the back lands."

He didnt answer. He didnt have to. He looked it. I felt lower than a gopher.

The plane came over a few minutes afterwards. It was a small plane. It had military markings. It flew low and we could see the pilot looking down at us. A big cheer went up from

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the men in the wood. They fired at us. Guess they felt good.

I looked back at Pa. He was calm faced, talking to Uncle Meshach and watching the plane out of sight. It flew in again and just floated lazily around like a hawk looking over a chicken run. Uncle Meshach rolled to his back and pointed his rifle. Pa spoke sharp to him and he looked disgusted and rolled to his belly. Soon after the sirens were wailing.

The white top state police cars rocked into sight far down the road and a man came out of the wood and waved them to a halt. I counted four of them. They just sat on the road, clean and neat, having brought doom on us. Uncle Shad looked up at the piece of daylight left and he didnt like the size of it. The officers trotted into the wood after the man who halted them. Now the state policemen would be on their way through the wood to us, working through the blueberry and the honeysuckle, walking soft over the pine needles carrying the machine guns and the sawed offs for us. A squawk and splutter back in the trees signified another hailer had been brought. The two unwounded cousins looked excited, peering eagerly about to locate it. Figured they wanted to even the score.

"Hammond!"

A new voice of stronger authority than Coleman Roberts' rushed down.

"Hammond, this is the state police talking to you. We're giving you five minutes to drop your guns and stand up with your hands in the air."

There was a dreamy expression on Uncle Abednego's face as he lay on the ground listening to the words. The cousins were edgy, hunting the source of the voice. The light wind blowing down with evening, was shaking Uncle Shad's mop of white hair. They were all bare headed, having crumpled the battered old

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felt hats down the front of their shirts. Five minutes didnt amount to much when a fellow was near dying. The sun was out but not warming anymore as the day ended. The night would be chilly. But none of us would be alive to know it. For I knew, knew hard as a stone for certain, that none of Pa's kin would surrender. The picture wouldnt appear, look as I could, of them tall and tattered, hair stiffening in the breeze, holding up empty hands in token. Maybe if Pa said so, but thinking of him back there, I groaned. Not Pa who was the/stubbornest man I knew. What had gone wrong was that Pa was back there lying in tha coffin. He had taken out Dwight L. Moodie and crawled in himself./God Almighty, I thought, Pa's playing Jesus Christ.

Pa's taking away the sins of the world.

Uncle Shad gave his peculiar whistle and all the kin started crawling, changing their positions. Pa slid down to me. He drew alongside, our faces close. He had the down drawn lines of weariness on his cheeks and his eyes were troubled. But I soon found out he was troubled not for himself, but about me.

"Got a chore for you, Abner," he said.

I didnt do anything except watch him.

"Want you to go to town. You go through the marsh."

North of our farm was a marsh where in summer we used to hunt muskrats. The skins were a good money crop while we saved for college. Pa and me knew it like the back of our hands.

"Got to have more news before we light out. You go talk to Jeb Coombes," he said.

I rubbed my knuckles on my forehead and shook my head. I spoke softly to him. "Pa, I know. I know. Know how you feel. But Moodie's dead. You hear me? Dead. Willi Mae's alive. You ought to be looking out for her yourself than committing suicide over a nigger!"

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But I tell you, he's hickory. Sure, the pain of hearing Willi Mae's name, struck at him. She was the wound that hadnt healed. His eyes darkened and lightened instantly.

"You climb out of here and keep running," he said. "Anything goes wrong, see Jeb Coombes. He knws everything about the farm."

"There aint anything going wrong," I said, staring at him.

"Those fellows out there, they aint like the first lot, not like Joe and Shorty. They aim to come in and get us."

"Why dont you tell Uncle Shad and the others to pack up?" I said. "Tell them its all over. You did what you could."

He said, "Wouldnt be true. Aint yet done all I can. You go now, son. Got to talk to that fellow before the five minutes are up."

"You said we wouldnt be in any trouble before nightfall. I'll wait for nightfall."

The hailer made more noises and the voice called again, "Hammond, we're coming in for you."

Pa stood straight up, a calm figure, not too tall, not short, just an everyday man in washed and patched denims. A foolish aging man to most of us there, in a way, to me too for I didnt understand it all. He had been worked over by storm and drouth and hardship. A bone in his shoulder was higher than the other. The floppy old hat was snugged down on his head, covering the back of his neck as he had always worn it in all seasons.

"Mister," he called, "want to have a word with you."

He faced to a silence in the wood. Uncle Shad away over on my right was cursing softly. We didnt know how many guns across the way were sneaking up on Pa. Maybe the state trooper on the hailer was struck dumb as me. We just hadnt expected it. The voice from

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the hailer was quieter.

"You Hammond?" it asked.

"That's him alright! That's the nigger-lover!" yelled a man from the wood.

"Shut up!" the trooper barked. "Nobody asked you!"

"Let's drill him!"

A gun went off and Pa fell. He fell at the knees as if he was praying and then toppled over on his side. Hell broke loose in the yard as all our kin began firing. I wasnt aware how I reached him. He was lying on his back, his face twisted with pain. I ripped his shirt open and saw the wound high on his chest. His eyes were opened, shiny with the pain.

"Pa!" I was crying with the tears running into my mouth, crying with his head in my lap, crying ragged.

He said, "Te - tell - tell them to stop shooting."

I shook my head violently. "No! Let Uncle Shad kill them a ll! Let him kill all the sons of bitches!"

Uncle Meshach was beside me. He was swearing and breathing heavy with his run. He tore away Pa's shirt and stripped it down and between us we got the bandage around his back tight on his chest. Not until this was finished did we become aware of the silence. The firing had stopped. There was a sound of a heavy motor grinding into second to slow it down. I twisted a look over my shoulder and saw them. There were two big military transports rolling along the road between us and the wood. They brakes finally held and a whole parcel of soldiers jumped from the rear of the vehicles and stamped on the road.

Sure, I thought bitterly, Mayor Roberts got his army.

From my lap, Pa said, "What's that? Who's out there?"

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"Soldiers. Coleman Roberts got his national guard," I said.

And darn if Pa wasnt trying to grin. Not only trying, he made it. Uncle Meshach who had been watching him closely said, "He aint going to die. Fellow is going to die, he wouldnt be grinning."

"Would be too darn scared at what the devil will do to him," Uncle Abednego said behind me.

"Reckon you're wrong, son," Pa said. "Governor wouldnt be sending out no national guard for a little war as this one."

"They're soldiers alright, Pa," I said gently. "Lots of them."

Pa tried to sit up and the pain knocked him back.

"Aint going to die unless you kill yourself," Uncle Abednego warned him.

Pa said, "You call them over here, Abner."

But there wasnt any need for me to, because they were already coming. They were coming like they didnt fear Uncle Shad and his kin at all. Like they didnt fear what anybody on God's green earth could do to them. There were the uncles and the cousins on their feet now, the rifles cradled but you only had to look at them to know they could be swung up for shooting before you could much as blink. But they came on ramrodding behind the king ramrod of them all, a young fellow with a pistol strapped at his hip, walking across a plowed piece like it was level land. I looked good again, and then it walloped me.

"God Almighty," I croaked at Pa, "Coleman Roberts brought out the Marines!"

It was them alright; I had seen them on manouevres going through Malagoosha City and read enough about them to know the tall pride they carried.

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Their boots were hitting the cadence, a dull thump I felt in the earth under my hip. Behind them streamed the state troopers and the other fellows, trotting and stumbling to keep up. I forgot to look for Sep and Joe and Shorty and all the old enemies, in watching the godlike young marines charge that slope up to us, like they owned Malagoosha and the rest of the world, like they carried all the pride there was in the world in their white gloved hands, coming as a rush of water, and at the end becoming a crunch of boots that halted before us. The kin closed in about Pa and me on the ground. All the Magaloosha fellows were straining to see them, the magic shooters who had made them eat crow. Uncle Shad and the rest must have looked wild to them, tall, tattered men with white, wind tossed hair, spittle stained beard carrying leaves and gravel and whatever stuff picked up as they lay on the ground.

The officer had a slim, tanned face, young but assured under the helmet. He gestured a hand and Uncle Meshach shifted so he could see us on the ground.

"Which of you is Mr Hammond?" he said.

Uncle Meshach nodded at us. Our eyes met and I directed his gaze to Pa. "What happened?" he asked.

"I told you, they shot us up over a damn nigger!" snapped Mayor Roberts somewhere in the rear.

The officer said without turning around, "Sergeant Batta, clear the area, please."

A wiry marine sergeant who moved with something of spring blades in his legs, gave orders. And holding their guns high on their chests, the men just seemed to flow around us until a circle was completed, then pressed outward, and we had plenty of free room.

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"Mr Hammond, I'm Captain Roman." He was signalling with his hand as he talked. Another young fellow came over and dropped down by us. He had a kit with him and he did things to Pa's wound, taking off the bandage we had put on, sprinkling a sort of powder and other stuff on it and putting on a clean bandage.

"How's he?" Captain Roman asked the young fellow.

"Bullet went in high, sir. Didnt do much damage except tore a few muscles. He'll be alright when we take it out."

Roman nodded and turned again to Pa. "Got your wire, Mr Hammond, but it took us a little while to get organised. Had to wait until the situation in Cuba cooled sufficiently. If we'd known what was happening we'd have gotten here earlier. Think you can tell me now?"

Pa talked. Pa told him how after he'd gone back to the wreckage at Lookout Rock that morning, he'd found the metal disc around the neck of the corpse and had made out that it had been Dwight L. Moodie, and had wired the unit.

Captain Roman looked over at the pickup. His anger was worse because he had it held under.

"Mayor!" he yelled.

Coleman Roberts stepped forward. He was followed by Sep Logan with his arm in a sling. Sep came and stood over Pa.

"I wasnt with shooting you down, Abner," he said.

Roman said, "Who's this man?"

"Said he was a friend of the family, sir. He followed the mayor over," a marine guard said.

Pa said, "Leave him, Captain Roman. We're old friends."

The captain looked puzzledly at Sep's arm but he didnt say anything about it. He talked to Coleman Roberts.

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"Is there a law which says Negroes arent permitted to be buried in the county?"

Mayor Roberts didnt like the tone. He figured the signs were that the marines had for some reason left him for our side. But he was a man who had won the vote and he had learnt his pride.

"I dont have to answer you that, young fellow," he said. "I'm the law around these parts."

"A fine law you've got," the captain said angrily. "Bringing a mob down on Hammond."

"The governor will hear about this," Mayor Roberts said.

"Mister, this is the U.S. Marine Corps," Roman said softly.

Sep Logan was shaking his head hard at Coleman Roberts.

"Coleman, this is the U.S. armed forces," Sep Logan said with a burst of awe in his voice.

"I dont care who in hell they are," snapped Coleman Roberts. "Nobody's coming into my territory and push me around."

Pa was trying to say something. I tugged at the captain.

Pa said, "Tell them everything."

"Dont want to hear anything. Just have him take your nigger and the rest of you and get out of Malagoosha," Coleman Roberts said.

"Mister, you need a lesson," Roman said. "I dont know if I'm the one to give it to you but you need it, badly."

He had his head down and presently he turned again to Pa. "Mr Hammond, you object to having the lieutenant buried on your property?"

I guess we all got it except Coleman. Pa's Nigra had come a far way from nothing to someone with a name to even having a place with the proud marines. We all got it, except Coleman Roberts.

"Plant that nigger here? You crazy, young fellow? What do

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you think this shooting's been all about?"

Sep Logan was looking at Mayor Roberts as if he spoke a foreign language.

"Nigger!" Sep exclaimed. "You aint heard the man, Coleman! This here dead man was a lieutenant in the marines!"

"Aint he a nigger?" demanded Coleman Roberts. "Aint he the nigger we agreed should be tossed into a sinkhole?"

Sep shook his head. "Naw, Coleman. He aint a nigger any longer."

I knew Sep Logan was a little crazy about the army since the time he and Uncle Matt had gone outside and joined up in the big war, but I hadnt figured he was <u>that</u> crazy.

Mayor Roberts said something under his breath and looked around at the men standing outside the circle of marines. The state troopers were smoking and saying nothing. Joe and Shorty were looking a little dazed. Mayor Roberts waved at Joe.

"Joe," he called, "you come over here and take in Abner. Mister," he turned to Captain Roman, "I demand you give us protection against these - these - " he gestured at Uncle Shad and the rest of our kinfolk.

Uncle Shad fingered his rifle and looked at Coleman as if he was figuring on where to dump the body when he was through with him.

Of course, neither Joe nor Shorty made a move. Captain Roman turned a cold eye on Coleman. He said quietly, "I'm no lawyer, Mayor, but I'm pretty sure no judge or jury in this country would convict a man for protecting government property."

He stalked off and the crowd opened to let him through. He went over to the pickup and looked inside. Then he snapped a salute

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and turned back to us. If he wasnt such a tough one, I'd say his eyes were wet.

"Did the best we could," Pa said when he came back. "Me and my son made it out of some old lumber we got."

"Its a fine coffin," Captain Roman said.

He called over his sergeant and spoke to him. The sergeant strode up a knoll, took out a whistle and blew it. He made hand signals and the trucks rolled forward. The trucks stopped inside our gate.

"Ask Miss Lulu Belle to come over, please," Roman said to his sergeant.

And everyone of us who heard him turned towards the trucks. For there was nobody there who had never heard Lulu Belle sing the mountain songs the way folks ought to sing them, with a hoot and a throat catch for the laughter and the tears folks lives aint ever free from.

Out of the truck stepped one of the prettiest girls I've ever laid eyes on, except for maybe ~~Miss~~ Olivinia. A lot of fellows sighed. She was that beautiful and with a smile that warmed you. But even the sighs were nothing to the sounds that went up from some of the older fellows who had known Willi Mae.

"God Almighty," said Sep Logan, "Willi Mae."

I spoke hoarsely. "Pa, that she?"

Of course it could be Willi Mae. Her hair was red. She had a singing mouth, nice at the corners. She walked even prouder than the marines.

"That she, Pa?"

Pa twisted his head as she came beside us. He looked a long time and said, "Living image. But it aint."

Yet I dont recollect ever seeing so much peace on a man's

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face. I was glad Miss Lulu looked so much like Willi Mae. It gave Pa peace, that she favored Willi Mae. There couldnt be anything wrong with Willi Mae when she was the living image of a great lady like ~~Xikk~~ Miss Lulu Belle.

"You take me to Key West when you go back, mister?" he said to Captain Roman.

"We can arrange it," the marine said.

"Key West," Pa said to Miss Lulu. "Got a daughter there, the name of Willi Mae. Looks spitting to you. Going to Key West to find her. Havent heard from her in a long time."

When Pa latches into things, he's ~~Xi~~ holds it close to his chest as a ~~X~~ squirrel a nut.

"We'll find her," Miss Lulu Belle said.

Everybody leaned forward to hear her. It was the same voice on the radio. Uncle Abednego nodded.

~~XWe~~ "Got to store buy us a radio," he said.

"Miss Lulu, how you come so far for a Ni —— for a fellow you dont know?" Sep Logan asked.

"He was a soldier. And when I read the story in the papers, guess I couldnt do no better," Miss Lulu saidin her singing voice.

"Miss Lulu was in Key West on an armed forces programme," Captain Roman said. "The papers picked up your wire."

Pa was sitting up by that time.

"This Moodie. Aint he got any folks himself?" Pa asked.

Captain Roman looked around. We thought he was going to speak to us but he spoke to his sergeant instead.

"Sergeant Batta," he said, "get a detail for the

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burial, please."

Suddenly Sep shouted, "Mister, there was an arm!"

The captain jerked. "An arm —— arm?"

"Sure," Sep said. "The nig —— the lieutenant lost it in the accident. Got it torn off."

"So?"

"We - we flung it in the brush. Aint it right we find it and bury it with him?"

Uncle Matt had come forward. And there were Jilson Swift and Olivinia's pa Jeb Wishaw and Micajah Hoe, all Pa's friends who had turned against us. Or was it we who had turned against them? Pa had confused me a little.

"Going to take forever to find an arm in that brush," Uncle Matt said.

"But we should look for it, shouldnt we?" Captain Roman asked.

"Reckon we should," Sep said. "Fellow in the United States army oughtnt to be buried without his arm."

"Not in peace time anyway," the marine said. "Will you look for it?"

"Sure," Sep said. His eyes searched for his sons. They were creeping off but he nailed them. "Go find the arm," he said.

"But, Pa, it aint going to be easy —— something may have got it!"

"You find that arm if it takes a week or I larrup the pants off you," Sep said.

They shambled off down the plowed land. The lieutenant said, "When you find it, you'll let me know, eh?"

"Sure," Sep said. "Wire you, like Abner did."

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"You have land around here?"

"I'm a Malagoosha man."

"Then perhaps you could even find a place to bury that arm, couldnt you?"

"Guess," Sep said, looking flustered.

Captain Roman nodded. He beckoned and spoke to a couple of marines. Seems they travel with everything, not like Uncle Shad and our folks who came only with cartridges. They returned with a litter and placed Pa on it.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Pa and me had knocked it together out of whatever timber we could find but when the flag was wrapped around it, no other coffin ever looked more noble. And, sure, nobody in the county had ever had such bearers. In their white gloves and gaiters, the peaks of their caps down their foreheads almost to their eyes so they looked stern even if they were young, the marines bore Dwight L. Moodie on their shoulders to the grave Pa and me had dug once before. Captain Roman walked ahead, his bugler beside him. Then came Pa on his litter and Lulu Belle and me. Uncle Shad, Uncle Meshach and Uncle Abednego, their jaws moving on fresh chaws, followed with the cousins behind them. Then came Sep Logan and the rest of the Malagoosha fellows. The marines marched on either side of the coffin.

They rested the coffin on a trestle they had made over the hole and there were a couple of white ropes to let it down with. Lulu Belle and me stood on either side of Pa. Sep Logan pushed his way in until he was right behind Pa's head. Nobody said anything to him.

The captain said prayers and then he cleared his throat and looked around. His face was cold and angry, but as he spoke, we all seemed to loosen up and so did he.

"Before I pay tribute to this dead marine, I want to answer a question put by Mr Hammond. He asked whether Lieutenant Dwight Moodie had any folks. I didnt know the deceased personally, but I enquired before we came out here. Sure, he had folks. Had, I said. His father died when Moodie was a boy, killed in a race riot. His mother moved north and Moodie was schooled

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there. He was commissioned in the marines two years ago. His mother died last year. Now the only folks he has are the people in this uniform."

The day was gloaming out in a chilly gray light. It was so still we could hear the lumps of earth breaking and settling everytime the captain moved on the edge of the grave.

"Lieutenant Moodie has had no battle record, he was too young to have been in any of our fights. Yet, in another sense, he had a good battle record. He had fought the odds he was born with, and from the reports we have had from his unit which is still stationed in a northern state, he had been doing well. So well, he was detached for special services with the forces which moved into Key West recently. He was on his way there when it seems as if he took the wrong route. I think that travelling through these parts, er, disconcerted him a little. There's a signboard in town, It isnt exactly a welcome sign to all Americans."

I couldnt help it. I looked around at Sep Logan. He fiddled with the band on the hat he held.

"One of your well known fellow townsmen, Jeb Coombes, has promised to do what he can to have it removed," Roman said.

"Sure, sure," Sep Logan said in a low voice.

Pa turned his head at the voice. "Sep," he said.

"Abner," Sep said.

Captain Roman looked over at Coleman Roberts. "Mr Mayor, you may have got the impression that I was censuring you awhile ago. You're right. I was. But that was because I was angry. Forgive me. What I should have done was to congratulate you on your fellow citizens. You see, if Lieutenant Dwight Moodie was the man

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I think he was, we all think he was, he would've been proud at what took place here these past few days. For what you, and even at this late stage, I, have seen is democracy at work. Haywire as hell, but struggling to right itself. On one hand were the good folk who, in sticking close to their upbringing, were being human. On the other hand, there was this lone man, Abner Hammond, doing what he thought should be done.

"Another of the handful of great American dreams, obeying what we believe in."

In a way, that was what Uncle Abednego had said. I looked at him. He had his hat forward over his eyes and maybe he was asleep leaning on his rifle. But you knew if somebody moved wrongly, he would come awake. Softly. Opening his eyes in the shadow of his hat. And

"But were there wrong guys and right guys in this?" Roman was saying. "War is often started because of something we lost. Something out of ourselves. Like forgetting how to be resolute. Something we lost and must sweat to regain. We have to go looking for it. Or send our sons after it."

"Like looking for Moodie's arm," I said so Sep could hear me. He glared but didnt make anything of it.

"Who started the Malagoosha war?" Roman asked. "Who lost something? My answer could be wrong, but one way to find out is to ask ourselves, who were the real Americans in these issues. Just for a moment, think of your great country, for great it is. Think of your great country, its great achievements, its great people whose contributions in every field of human endeavour, in science, the arts, to the society, have become guide posts for much of the world. And while we think of these, let us remember that these contributions have come from every kind of American.

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Of every race, color and creed.

"The something you [redacted] lost, you can find again by asking, which was right? The wishes of the community? Or of Abner Hammond. Of course, the question is only allowable if you agree that Lieutenant Dwight Lawrence Moodie, United States Marine Corps, was an American."

He looked at the flag covered coffin and then at us.

"Was he?" he asked softly.

It was plumb scary, the feeling you had to bawl.

Captain Roman stepped back and lifted his hand. Two marines began paying out the ropes and the coffin descended. Miss Lulu sang one of the songs from Moodie's people. The marines fired their rifles. The bugler blew taps.

While they were shovelling in the dirt, I caught up Pa and Sep in a whispered conversation.

"If he's a soldier, he aint a nigger. He just crossed over," Sep said absently, wolf eyes shiny blank with pride looking at the marines.

"Just now?" Pa asked, meek as a lamb.

"Right this minute," Sep said, not turning a hair.

"Well now," Pa said in wonder.

Behind me were Micajah Hoe and Uncle Matt, two of the nieest men in the county.

"Martha's that bent on going outside, guess I'll just have to give away the durn farm," [redacted] Micajah Hoe was telling Uncle Matt while he watched him closely.

"It aint as if I wanted it, Micajah," Uncle Matt Connant began, knowing Micajah would spring the price at the first hint of eagerness.

I wondered if Olivinia would come with me when I was taking

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"Micajah," Sep said, leaning backwards and over to get at Micajah, "what you thinking about this business?"

Micajah looked funny. "What business?"

"About this Nigra fellow."

"Pshaw," Micajah said.

He went back to talking to Uncle Matt. They manouevred a bit around farm prices and then let it rest. Uncle Matt kissed his teeth and said to Sep,

"Sep, reckon this dont change a thing."

Sep nodded. "Reckon," he said softly.

"I dont see any niggers in that outfit anyway," Micajah said, looking at the Marines. "If that officer fellow so full of buldust about prejudice, why'n hell didnt he have a nigger riding in the same truck with Miss Lulu?"

"Dont change a thing. Look at our fellows," Sep said.

And while Captain Roman was finishing up his talk with all those nice-nosed down words and phrases the orator fellows use to close off, you could see that the Malagoosha folks had just about filled their eyes enough of Marines in white stocks and gloves and the brass shining. Everybody was shifting around, looking off towards the farms and towards town. But nobody actually moved away, us Malagoosha people being so polite and all.

"None of us aint never seen them so close before," Micajah said, looking at the marines.

Uncle Matt Conant rumbled his throat to clear it. A flush of anger ran across his forehead.

"What about the signboard, Sep?" Uncle Matt asked.

They looked at each other. At Micajah too. Folks were getting angry right around here.

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"Guess Jeb thinks he's god almighty," Sep said. "Goes around talking about what he'll do with other folks property."

"Lets paint the dam' Rock!" blurted Uncle Matt. "Why the hell didnt he think of that? Telling this marine fellow he's gonna move the sign!"

More Malagoosha men, hearing the angry voices, were coming around.

"Sometimes that Jeb's too big for his boots," said Jilson.

"He wants we should chase him out of town, siding with strangers," another fellow said.

"Lets paint zebra marks on the dam' Rock," Uncle Matt said. "Nobody's gonna crash into it when it has zebra marks on."

"Then we wouldnt have to move your sign at all, Sep. A man's got a right to do what he wants with his property," Pa put in quietly.

"Pa!" I shouted softly, incredulously. Pa nodded serene as hell.

"That's how we reckon it around here," Sep said savagely.

Folks were restlessly drifting about, wanting to go off on their business. The hole was near filled in. Micajah went back to talking to Uncle Matt about Martha and the farm. Pa was talking to Miss Lulu. I was thinking of Olivinia and wondering whether her pa would kill me if I suggested she go with me when I took back the uncles.

"Lets wait to see the strangers go," Micajah said, looking at the marines.

Coleman Roberts strode across to Pa. He was that put out, funny in the face as if his collar was too tight.

"Got something to say to you, Abner," he said to Pa.

Pa didnt say anything. He just watched the Mayor.

"No need for you to go to Key West," Coleman said. He

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was fumbling with his voice like fingers in a pocket. "Mi - Miss Amanda sorta checked - sorta checked it out for you. You know - those girls talk to each other all along the line. Willi Mae's alright. Those calls came from the restaurant where she waits table. Pete --- he's been at her. Wants to bring her back home."

Well, now.

We didnt say anything, Pa or I. We just looked at each other. Everybody around knew that Miss Amanda hadnt been working for Pa and me at all. She had been after digging up more dirt but it had flung up in her face. Pa and me grinned. Anyway, she had saved us a trip to Key West.

Uncle Matt said, "Abner, sorry you cant come with us to go talk to that bastard, Jeb."

"A fellow should be able to do what he likes with his property, Sep. You tell Jeb that," Pa said.

Maybe, I thought, Pa and the rest, they were just kids. Playing at Massacre Day. They would be alright when they were tired.

END

ABOUT 53,000 WORDS.

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HOSANNA!

(V S Reid)

Paw is not a big man, neither broad in the shoulders nor up and down tall. But he is hickory tough. He is from mountain people.

Our folks are from the west section of Malagoosha County. Paw says he is sun-licked like them, face brown and strong as leather. His hands are so broad, they could snug a melon so the fingers met. I've seen him follow a plow through clay land and the handles hardly jolted but mostly ran on silk on the power in his forearm. He is soft spoken too. Paw was so soft spoken when he wanted to, which was mostly, he fooled folks into thinking he was easy to shove. But that was usually before they met Paw's eyes.

What I'm going to tell you of Paw and me happened at the time of the war in Cuba. Not the big war you read about in the history books, but the one they fought on the radio and television during the Fall of 'Sixty-Two.

We were working the Willow Ten that October. It was hard work for only Paw and me. We never but now and then get a snowfall in this part of Malagoosha County, its that mild. So mostly we plow through the Fall and rest out the frost, ready to seed again early in the year for the ground never stayed hard long. We would be hurling dirt in the eye of the day long before that lazy Fall sun showed up. We would break for coffee and lunch, quit only when the light faded. Paw used to squint up at the last of the sinlight and with a grin, pulled lopsided by the sweat running down into it, say, "Skedaddle, you old bum."

Then he would bend again to the handles and by nightfall we would have the new mule team in a lather. We never plowed with horses.

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"This country was built on mules, son," he would say when he felt like talking about it. "Horses get more talked about than mules, because they're prettier. But it took the stubborn, ornery old mule to build it." Then he might add, "Maybe we got some ofthe mule in us too, for it [redacted] took a stubborn people to go in with the mules."

Spoken so softly that when the wind was blowing you had to lean into him to hear it. For Paw hardly ever spoke about his folks. They lived "up inside" the mountain section of the county.

Sometimes he spoke of his three brothers, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Paw had been the youngest of four. He spoke about them in a funny way, as if he was not proud that he had busted loose from the tarpaper shack and varmint stew country "up inside" the Malagoosha mountain. But he gave He conveyed a feeling that something sturdy sturdier in the people had [redacted] outlived survived the blackstrap molasses and sowbelly, and he wasnt going to lose it now ~~that he had left them~~ even Rough was out of it. Whatever it was, I would poke around trying to locate it, but Paw had more ways of not opening his mouth than a bobolink [redacted] on a skillet. He sort of told you with his eyes ~~gave the unspoken impression~~ that Uncle Shad and the rest were best left alone except if they were needed. It never occurred to me that Uncle Shad and the others were otherwise ~~less~~ than eternal, the way Paw would wave his hand and say they were there, "back eighty-hundred miles up inside." The way he spoke, he made them [redacted] immovable.

Meanwhile, we were to farm and save our money & farm and I was to be educated, to be better, I was convinced, only in a kind of way than our folks back in those moonshine and blackjack hills.

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[redacted]

Malagoosha County is some over a hundred miles long but narrow no wider than a coon's walk when the hound dogs are sounding in the 'simmons. The County is almost all mountain. Malagoosha City is on the eastern line. Our farm was a few miles back from the city. Around our way, the land is not as lean as in the west, rolls more. But still there is not much rolling, because of the Knobs. The Knobs are a scattering of knobbly hills. The Knobs thicken into real mountains the more west you go. The farms around here are wedged between the Knobs but there is enough loam to carry our barley, oats, rye, corn for likker and hogs, sorghum and some stands of poplar, walnut, chestnut, hickory, oak and other timber. Paw and we also grow some peaches and strawberries but for a cash crop, a lot of folks rely on corn whisky, especially come Massacre Day. Take in Page Ave.

Before Willi Mae went away, when I was no higher than anything's hind leg, Paw used to look up the dust road to the mountain and say to us,

"Least 'uns, your folks are up there a ways, eighty hundred miles or so. Your uncles Shad, Meshach and Abednego and a parcel of cousins. If ever you needs to, just go up into them mountains [redacted] and start hollering, 'Hammond!' and a flock of them will come running." Paw chuckled a little at the time and his eyes twinkled. "But maybe you ought to find a rock to crawl under until you are sure they know who you are. They likely to shoot first before they make out that/you favour the family."

They were real mountain folk, back there in the insides of the County. Once or twice some of Paw's closest friends, such as Uncle Matt and Sep Logan used to josh him about the feudin' Hammonds. But Paw never spoke to Willi Mae and me about any feuds. When I pressed him, he would fort up after gently saying,

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"Folks got no cause to go killing each other. God wanted us to, [redacted] He would have given us fangs and claws."

But bony and sunsoaked so his skin was as rubbed maple, folks only needed to look into Paw's eyes to know that he would be up on his hind legs when the time came.

Paw talked little, except when he was with the fellows in Jeb Coombes' grocery store in Malagoosha City, mostly on courthouse days. The whisky was kept out of sight because Jeb's was the respectable store where the wives bought their store goods. Paw and the fellows would reach behind the big picture of General Lee propped on it, doing what they called "shaking hands with General Lee." The fellows were farm folk, from right around here. They usually met in town. They visited seldom, like the time when Paw fell in the sinkhole and Olivinia's Maw stayed the night. Olivinia and her Maw set great store by nursing.

Lulu Belle had made it lively for us when Willi Mae was home. Lulu Belle was the Nigra girl who came to live with us around the time Willi Mae was born; Maw after that being unable to do all the chores around the house. Lulu Belle was always singing and working. She was about four or five years older than Willi Mae and always took care of her. And when Willi Mae upped and left Paw and me, it seemed natural that Lulu Belle should have gone too. We since had heard nothing from Willi Mae. It was Lulu Belle who wrote the letter from some place outisde, just four or five lines in a big scrawl. She sent it to Jeb Coombes' grocery store with one of those commercial travellers. It had read, <u>I'm gonna take good care of Willi Mae and one day I bring her back. Doan you worry none. Lulu Belle.</u>

Paw never mentioned Willi Mae's name after that, but now and again he would wonder aloud how Lulu Belle was. He was sure grateful to that Nigra girl.

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Our house is on a knoll. The road to Malagoosha City runs straight past our house for half a mile before it deep bending. Across our fence line is a thick wood, sweet smelling in the summer with cucumber trees in white blooms, yellow poplars heavy with green and orange cups dainty as a lady's shoe. It is a lovely wood. The ~~foot of the~~ trees standing tall, are knee-deep in fern, bloodroot, stonecrop and columbine. It wasnt the kind of wood you would think a fellow would look at over his shoulder one day and feel fear tickle-footing the back of his neck. But I reckon it happened. All of a sudden.

Paw was a sudden man too. He had postholes dug into him and you couldnt ever tell when he would put a foot in and balk. A talk with Paw was then likely to come to a halt. Like the summer evening we were fooling around in Jeb's store and the talk turned on the ruckus some colored kids were making all over the State to get served in restaurants.

"There aint nothing them Nigras want that can't be served up ~~given~~ to them with a rawhide whip," said Uncle Matt, one of the nicest men in Malagoosha County.

Everybody was chuckling a little. Then Paw said so softly, it took time to hit us, "You're wrong, Matt."

In somebody else, you would figure he was coming up with something smarter than what Uncle Matt had said. But in Paw, you knew this one was straight down the gullet. Not smart. Just straight.

"What's that, Abner?" Uncle Matt said, his face going stiff.

"I said you're wrong. Folks oughtnt to be whipped for wanting to be human beings," Paw said.

Now I'm not saying that Paw was wrong. But a lot of folk like Uncle Matt will, in fun company, just up and say

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things they would not kiss the book for; and what a man says on a cracker barrel in a grocery store aint necessarily what he thinks walking home. Paw had fouled that one, but nobody rode him. We Hammonds had been in the county since it was Indian land and everybody knew that Abner Hammond was no nigger-lover. He was only a man with ideas.

We were working the Willow Tree Ten that October, Paw and me. Since I can really remember, it has only been Paw and me —— except for when Willi Mae had been with us and that had made no difference. Willi Mae, six or seven years older than me, had done little but moon around the house or go off to the Saturday night shindigs in town. She had been I guess what you would call pretty. Paw and me had called her Red until she [redacted] asked us to stop. Paw [redacted] looked a little hurt but after that we called her by her given name. Only, it hadnt made her hair less red but maybe Paw's hurt made her more restless; for a year or two afterwards, she left us for the outside. Maw had died when I was born so now we were two lone men in the house. I supposed I must have loved Willi Mae for I bawled when [redacted] she went and was for calling her names; but Paw, in one of the few times he has ever been mad at me, told me to shut up.

It was dark this October evening by the time we left the Willow Tree Ten and got to the house. We washed and made supper, then sat around listening to the radio. Hosanna Bell [redacted] was on and when she was singing, I guess

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Paw and me just sit. You never heard a girl that could put into her voice what Hosanna did. You knew you were living in the best country in the world when Hosanna sang of folks and mountains and laughing and crying. Paw and me just sat there grining at each other and wriggling our toes in our socks. I swear to God there wasnt another like Hosanna. She hadnt been singing long on the radio, maybe two or three years, but you would haveto shift hard to find any folks in Magaloosha Country who hadnt heard and loved Hosanna.

I thought a little about myself while Hosanna was singing. I had finished high school and Paw was thinking of the Agricultural college. Most of the kids around here dropped out of high school before they could graduate. We didnt know of any around here who had gone off to college at all. So this was one of Paw's ideas they considered funny over in Jeb Coombes store in Magaloosha City. But Paw just shrugged and went right on thinking of college. Paw was a stubborn man as he was sudden.

We listened to Hosanna on the radio until she went off. The other stuff wasnt anything much after Hosanna so I picked up a newspaper. After awhile, Paw said,

"Things are looking bad down there, son?"

You know how it is when you're reading. It took a little time reaching me.

"Huh? Looking bad?"

"Down in the Caribbean Island of Cuba," Paw said.

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"What's doing?"

"One of these newspaper fellows was just on the radio. He said we've moved a bunch of battleships down there."

"I guess that ought to hold Castro for awhile," I said, going back to the newspaper piece on the end of the baseball season.

"Them Spanish fellows go all crazy quickly. It could touch off something," Paw said.

When I heard the chair creak, I knew he was leaning forward to turn the radio dial to the police news. Paw was regular as a clock. Each night since the two years Willi Mae's letters stopped coming, he turns to the police news.

Listening.

To the murders. The runovers. The asphyxiations in winter. [redacted]

Listening [redacted] with the mildly worried hunch to his shoulders that rabbits get when a twig breaks in the brush. The old maple rocker creaked again as he turned off the radio and sat back. I could hear the tree toads fluting outside and the rattle of a pine bough on a [redacted] window pane.

"Anything in the paper?" he said.

I made to separate the sections to give him the newsy half. The Malagoosha Trumpet comes in two sections, the front half for news and the smaller back piece for the sports and the ads. Paw never takes it but I always make to give him.

"No, you read, Son. Guess I'll just think awhile," he drawled. Truth was, he was'nt much of a reader. Where he came from, nobody read. I knew he wanted to talk so I let the paper fall to the floor and stretched my legs out. In the highbacked rocker with the carved armrests, he looked small but Paw had presence. You were aware of the powerful head and hands and the iron-grey eyes that had coped with plowdirt and heat and sunlight all the forty years he had farmed.

"We ought to hear from the Dean soon," I said.

"You don't need to rush him so hard, Son," Paw said.

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"I'd like to get in a couple of years before they call me."

"They won't be calling you. There aint going to be no war."

"About time we shaved Fidel's beard. He's getting too uppity."

"Wont take the whole United States army to do that," Paw said dryly. "Them battleships got good razors. Long, noisy ones."

Now that Willi Mae had'nt turned up on the police news, he was lively and full of sass again. He was sending me mail and I liked to see him licking stamps, his eyes shining and rimmed with fun crinkles.

"How far are we from Cuba?" I asked, knowing he would have picked that up from the radio fellow.

"Oh," he said, pursing his lips and looking up at the ceiling as if he could read the answer in the stains and cracks. "Guess - about ninety or so miles from down in that place they call Key West."

"Would'nt take much more than a burp gun to reach down there," I said.

"Heck, we could send airplanes down there that could sit up on top like a bald eagle for four-five hours laying eggs, Son. Better'n any what-you-call-it gun."

"Yeah, guess so. You think we'll do it?"

"Hard to tell what that young fellow in Washington will do. He's fast as a catamount when he gets mad. Look what he did to those folk over in Oxford."

I'd read about the colored student at Ole Miss, but as I said, Paw was licking stamps and I was'nt stopping him.

"Don't rightly remember."

"What you read in the newspapers anyway besides the ball games? Did'nt you hear about the Nigra fellow who wanted to get into the college?"

"He's got a nerve," I said.

"Sure he's got a nerve and he made it."

"You mean --- they took him in?"

"Sure, after President Kennedy had sent in the National Guard and marshals

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and a whole bunch of shooters."

"Now he's got a nerve. Sending in the army over one nigger."

"Sure, they both got nerve. Does this country a lot of good," Paw said.

"What good can one nigger do ---"

"The fellow is a Nigra," Paw snapped. "Dont you go calling him anything else."

"What difference does it make?"

"Its just bad for him and bad for us."

Maybe he was right. I didnt know. I wondered vaguely whether folks over in Paw's born-section of the [redacted] County were different from those on this side. Paw's section was deep country. Once I read where a writing fellow [redacted] wrote that back there was the Real America. If that was so, then the real America was 'possum stew and rifle-toting feuders. So maybe the fellow had meant something else. Paw had never spoken much about his kin but he wasnt slow with words about the land. He said it had love and strength as a turn of the hoe would show.

I turned the talk to crops and after shoving it here and there, he yawned and said maybe we should turn in. Next day being Saturday, we were going to town.

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CHAPTER TWO

When God Almighty made these United States, He did it slow and proud so it came out grander than any land. But He took [redacted] much time over it and there were other folks waiting too; so by the time He came down here, He was slapping Malagoosha County together like He was in a hurry. He tied the hills with hogbacks and gouged out the valleys with a blow of His fist. Thunder and lightning must have jolted His elbow when He drew the Malagoosha River so His finger jumped, zigzagging it through the hogbacks until it crossed the county line. Snug in one of the bends was the town of Malagoosha.

Back long ago, when the government made a fellow's homebrew illegal, the old Godfearing folk of Malagoosha went right on making mash because they reckoned it would be a sin to allow all that good corn and branch water go to waste. The revenue people mostly stayed out, figuring that what we made was for home consumption and not worth getting shot for. Suppose we did'nt look too good anyway. For Malagoosha County is dirt farm country; beat-up automobiles and bib front blue denim country; sorghum and molasses and hanging-tree country; where when a fellow shaved was because he wanted to spruce, like say the first couple of days he was a-courting.

Paw and me were in the old car rattling down the washboard road before the day was fetlock to a pony. We made it crawling around the switchbacks and over the humps which the chassis straddled like a seesaw, carburettor whistling and waterpump wheezing, the loose pistons lief to tear the guts out at every stroke.

I dropped off Paw at Jeb Coombes' grocery store and took the car down to Pete's. He runs a gas pump down near the county courthouse, a big guy about a shrug shorter than me. We used to hunt and fish together when we were kids with not many chores. Now he was hustling it with this gas pump, since the year he quit school with his time nowhere up.

"Hi, kid," he grinned at me as he hooked up the nozzle of the hose. "You

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want the new or the old?"

That was a joke between us. If I said the new, that would mean we had come in for gas. But when I shook my head Pete knew I was loading up on the heavy old lubricant that had been unplugged from the trucks which came in for an oil change. Almost thick as grease, Pete and me swore it prevented my old engine from knocking.

When Pete was through in front, he came back to where I was pouring in the stuff with a quart can I was using for a ladle.

"How's your Paw? Up at Jeb's I reckon?"

"Yeah. Ruling the world from a cracker barrel," I said.

"Cracker barrel's good as a throne. Depends on who's sitting up there," said Pete. He is a very thoughtful fellow but you would'nt know it the first time, the way he grins frantic hurling the words at you.

"Don't give me that, Pete. More [redacted] guys go after thrones than go after cracker barrels"

"Yeah? Yeah? So you guess there're more thrones than cracker barrels in this whole wide world? At this time in this age, day and year, you think more fellows are climbing up on thrones than on a good old dirty white cracker barrel ? Think, son, think."

You could'nt rile up or anything at Pete. The way he says it with that grin. The oil brimmed up, black and stiff as cardboard.

"That ought to hold it to next Saturday," I said. "Got a five-eighths spanner?"

"And a jack and a couple of lugs and whatever the hell else you want. Only I can't give you anything out of merchandise," Pete said.

"When we get our new car I'm gonna give you this one. Nobody more deserves it."

Pete went around with me, tightening nuts and wheel lugs, even grinning when he had returned from serving a customer out front and caught me sneaking a few bursts from the grease gun.

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"That's what I say, we gotta help one another in this county," he said.

"I'm good for business. Folks see me come in here for a service will reckon that what's good enough for Abner Hammond's Abner is good enough for them."

"Rather have that redhead sister of yours helping me out. Heard anything?"

Pete was a bit like Paw about Willi Mae. A few years older than me, he had known her before she went away. Always asking after her. Maybe he had been her fellow. But that Pete is so cagey, you would have to get up earlier than a horned owl to find out.

"No. Reckon as one of these days we'll have to go outside and look her up. At least, Paw will, one of these days."

"Talking about going outside. Like to go downstate tomorrow, down to Gulf City," Pete said.

I looked at him, my eyes big. A fellow doesn't go outside of Malagoosha County every day. To tell the truth, I'd never been to Gulf City and I don't believe Pete had been more than once before.

"No kidding? What's this for?"

"Got a letter this week from the fellows who supply me with gas. Seems as if they're holding some sort of meeting down there of all the guys who sell their gas. Says they had a good year and want me to be their guest. Airplane ticket and all. Only, I don't know as if I can make it. Means I'd have to stay down there three or four days. Can't have the business shut up so long."

"Yeah?" I said, watching him.

"Yeah," he said, watching me.

"Why in hell don't you ask me?" I said.

"'Tend to. Was waiting," Pete grinned.

"Paw can do without me for a few days. I can get home every night."

"Sure. I'll pay you."

"Sure, then I can pay you for all the stuff I've stolen."

We had it all fixed by the time I left him and drove back to Jeb Coombes'. I parked under a shade tree in front of the store and went into the big cool room lit by skylights. Jeb put up no partitions but the way he had the goods placed you knew

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what side of the store you'd go for groceries and where the ladies would buy their wants and where Jeb's friends would sit.

Paw and the rest were in the angle of the store formed by an alley on one side and Saltlick Street on the other. They were closed off from the rest of the store by the barrels and boxes Jeb had set there for that purpose. It was no secret that behind the picture of General Lee hanging so low a man could sit and touch it, was the hollow where Jeb kept the bottle. They were all shaking hands with General Lee when I got there. Most of them nodded to me as I went to sit by Paw. Years ago, after Willi Mae left, they had accepted that I'd have to come in with Paw since he had no woman with whom to leave me. I had grown up with them and had never abused the privilege by pushing into their talk. I had learnt more good manners in Jeb Coombes' grocery store than what fellows with a maw and a paw both, did.

Uncle Matt Connant, one of the nicest old fellows in the county, tossed off his whisky and wiped his gray mustache with his knuckles.

"Abner" he said, "it will be your privilege soon to introduce Young Abner to the General."

Paw looked over at me in the quiet way he has. "A year or two yet, Matt."

"Along about his age, a year or two younger, we were looking ol' Lee in the eye, back of the barn," said Sep Logan, our neighbor on the river end, a tall beaknosed man with one eye flaring bigger than the other. He had seven sons and a couple of daughters, all scared tail/tuckered of him. He was normal as a mountain lion. In the act of breathing he was violent and when he moved his hands, they swept. He was the one who on the edge of town had put up the sign saying:

We shoot at sight Communists, Revenoo
Runners and uppity Niggers. Also Jews,
Catholics and anybody else who aint like us.

You could see strangers driving into town pausing to look at the peculiar welcome and some grinned but others were'nt so happy. Some newspaper boys had picked

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it up and poked fun at Malagoosha in their papers. A few of the folk around had showed it to Sep and were for gently persuading him to take down the sign. But when Sep took it badly, they left him alone for a fellow must do what he wants with his property.

But he never painted over the sign after that as he used to do every year before Massacre Day and it was fading now so you had to look good and close to read the words.

Sep's family had been in the county long as anybody's except ours and a few others, a hardworking man with a plow or a jug. He was a good neighbor, never leaning on your fence and would come running if you hollered. Once before we got our automobile, Paw had been riding the blaze face chestnut he kept for saddling. A snake or something must have scared the animal just where the road edged a ravine at the place that's called Hogg's Hollow. It threw Paw and he fell thirty feet down into the ravine, snapping a leg bone. Paw lay in there most part of a day and a full night before Sep came walking by on his way to town. When he heard Paw crying out, Sep soon had it figured and he climbed down into that ravine, climbed back out with Paw over his shoulders and toted him the nine-ten miles into Malagoosha to the doctor. He was that kind of a man.

"Abner's got his eye on college. A man should do what he wants," Paw said to Sep.

"Reckon," said Uncle Matt. "But it seems a waste going to school for three-four years learning what you could learn on the farm anyway. Now if he had been going to learn something like being a doctor, or a lawyer, or preachin' even; though I guess a man can learn to preach riding circuit better than any college."

Uncle Matt Connant was big shouldered with short, powerful legs. He bulked when he sat, the long silver hair reaching almost to his shoulder. His eyes were deepset and bluer than ordinary. He was the oldest of the group in Jeb's grocery store. Uncle Matt liked to talk and he did'nt like a fellow who questioned him. He was the big expert on crops, women, weather, automobiles, horses, likker, the United States, the Confederacy, and everything else. Except for Paw he had the best money crops and his barley was even

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better than ours. He and Sep were the only two who had ever lived outside. They had run off and joined up with the soldiers during the first world war and had lived on the level land for upwards of a year before it was over. Uncle Matt seldom ever talked about it but Sep will remember anytime you want him to, how he and Uncle Matt nearly crossed the ocean to France. Only because they neither could read or write a lick, the man would'nt allow them to go on the boat. But Sep had the army bug in his britches and often a time you could hear him laying into his sons because they had no learning to get them into the army. Sep would yell that if they had any gumption they would creep under the wire into the United States Army.

Uncle Matt Connant never gave way to anybody except to Jeb Wishaw, younger than him by mostly near ten years. Uncle Matt had no family left since his maiden sister Miss Angie died a few years back and folks thought that maybe why Matt was so beholden to Jeb Wishaw was because he needed kin. A man may be hard surfaced as flint but his flesh-and-blood part needs something softer to lean on. Jeb Wishaw had a log house a couple of dozen miles over in the north corner of the county. He grew five or six acres of sugarcane for his sorghum and he kept hogs and chickens. He was married to a lady from Louisa County named Mis' Charlotte Wishaw, a good woman even if she was a foreigner and they had a couple of daughters. Talk around was that I was courting the youngest, a black haired, long legged painter cub named Olivinia. But she was as shy as a warbler and a fellow had as much chance getting close as hooking a jack salmon with burlap twine.

"What's this going on about Cuba?" Sep Logan said.

Jilson Swift looked at him in astonishment.

"Cuba? Who in hell is Cuba?" Jilson Swift asked.

Sep looked at Jilson like he had two heads. "You do considerable spell of living down in Coon Hollow," Sep said. "You ought to come visiting more often."

Jilson it was true only came to town once or maybe twice each month. He has a good crop of pumpkins and apples; bluegill and drumfish abound in the break at the bottom of Coon Hollow and Jilson used to say it was unlikely he would come hopping out

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the morning Gabriel blew his horn. He had everything but trouble in Coon Hollow.

"Cuba? Some place down country," Uncle Matt said.

"Cuba is where the United States army fought more'n once," Sep said. "Fellow down there named Caster, he's bucking for trouble with the United States army."

"Castro," Paw said.

"Sound like castor oil to me," Jilson said, ha hawing.

Jilson was thin and tattery as a river birch in his denims and he did'nt give a hoot who knew his ignorance. He could grin more than any man I knew, easy and lazy like he never yet had a stomach ache. Last time he came out, nobody much had been talking about Cuba except the fellows on the radio. Jilson did'nt own a radio.

"You reckon it will come to a fight?" Sep asked.

Uncle Matt shook his head and held up his hand to halt Jilson, "Cuba aint so big. There would'nt be any cause to fight them. This Castro, he wears a beard and carries a gun on his hip just as folks down here do on Massacre Day. He's just play actin

"It says on the radio he's getting bigger guns from the Reds," Sep said.

"Bigger'n you can carry on your hip."

"Missiles," Paw said, and I looked at him proud, for in his quiet way he knew more than them all.

"Missiles? Rocks?" Jilson said, looking astonished.

"That's the new name for the big guns in the United States army," Sep said. "You shoot high and over and drop a ball in the next county. Wish we had some of them when I was in."

"Then they would'nt want you," Jilson said.

Sep looked slow at him and worked his hands, saying, "Why?"

"Soldiers is for fighting hand to hand, like catamounts," Jilson said. "Now they got the big guns I reckon they won't need soldiers any more."

"The United States army will always need a Logan," Sep said slow and heavy, the trouble brewing. "I got seven boys fit for the army anytime."

Jeb Wishaw who had been silent for some time looked at Jilson and said, "Jilson,

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you ought to visit in town more often, as Sep just said. You know that?"

It was the kind of remark Jeb would use even on Uncle Matt, as if a fellow had been talking too much and he wanted to tuck in your mouth. Uncle Matt guffawed and sneezed and reached for General Lee and everybody held out their mugs and you could feel the air clearing like a storm just blew out.

"I hear Micajah Hoe fixing on going out side," Uncle Matt said.

"He's been meaning to go outside since before Abner was born," Paw said. "Martha worsing?"

"Fellow passing my place told me yesterday. Seems he's asking money for his cattle."

"Martha Hoe's got more unforgiving in her head than a parcel of skunks."

They went on poking it this way and that in the way Malagoosha County folk do of a Saturday in Jeb Coombes', all coming back to the fact that Martha Hoe had come into the county from the outside somewhere up in the North and had never forgiven Micajah these twenty-five years, but talked constantly about going back outside. It seems now that Micajah had weakened and was for giving up his cattle and hogs in the name of peace. While they talked I thought about Pete Sawyer and his going down to the city for a few days. I had never run a gas station before but what the hell. I could count dollars and cents and I could read the pump and the prices Pete marked on the merchandise with a stump of black chalk and I could keep the place clean.

The truth is I looked forward to the few days being in town with electric lights and flush toilets and going over to the restaurant for food and seeing the girls going by, their buns bouncing. I had'nt broken it to Paw yet, reckon I would wait until we were on our way home and he was mellow as a red-haw berry. He had never been alone without me since our womenfolk went. He would'nt be jumping for joy when I told him but since I would be going out anyway if I got taken into college then it would'nt harm Paw to see less of me in little pieces.

At brown dusk everybody said goodbye and headed out. The car ran good and

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Paw nodded his head in sleepy approval at the way I had oiled her and tightened her and generally stroked her so she purred like an old contented cat. We slowed to ease around Lookout Rock where the road curves sharply. Everytime there is an election, somebody talks about blasting the limestone rock and straightening out the road before it took our lives. The rock marked an old Indian camping site, a square, massive chunk of chalk almost as tough as granite. The road bowled straight towards it and then swung away to the right bearing for Hopemount. But what bothered folks was the way of a nightfall how Lookout Rock took on. It was there big and white during the day, waiting for you to nod at when you were coming into town and say, "There's Lookout Rock, now." That's all. Just, "There's Lookout Rock, Now," and it was accepted inside your head without saying it, that Malagoosha City was just around the bend and you began wiping off road dust from your neck and forehead, and maybe whistle a little. Last winter we had a snowfall and the Rock was a sight to behold. It got so cold your eyelashes froze and old Lookout had his coat of snow for days, shining in the sun. But come nightfall, and old Lookout turns murderous.

Standing squarely astraddle of where the road should be if folks had'nt put a bend in it, Old Lookout turns killer because you cannot distinguish it from the road if you are'nt cold sober or if you did'nt know it was there. Strangers going through town at nights would be told by Pete Sawyer down at the filling station, or by anybody else they stopped by, to watch out for Old Lookout. It would'nt be hard to barrel straight into it because you mistook it for the continuation of the road.

Paw held the door handle and leaned into me as I brought over the steering wheel, letting up on the gas a little. I held down her nose dead on and juiced her enough to pick up what I had eased off for the bend. "Next election we must do something about Old Lookout," he said as always and then he went to sleep.

I drove on thinking about school and Pete Sawyers and Willi Mae and even about the long legged Wishaw foal named Olivinia everybody thought I was courting. Paw had been good about school, unlike most of the older folks around who did'nt think enough

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about high school to allow a fellow off the farm past the wet pants stage. Paw took the Trumpet every Friday it came out. He had seen to it that I had'nt dropped out of high school as most everybody around this part of the country did and had even talked about college over in Jeb Coombes'. We did'nt have much acreage on the homestead. We grew some burley and a little Dark-fired but the tobacco market was'nt whooping with health. We had some corn, some hogs, and there was a deal of fishing in the waters around. We did tolerably, since Paw and I both worked durn hard. There were folks around with more help than we who did'nt do half as good. If Willi Mae had stayed with us we would have done even better since a man works closer to the ground when he knows that somebody's warming the house until he gets done. Its hard to define, but out there in the sweet smell of dirt and shrubbery and the new damp earth coming up like birth behind the plow, a fellow thinks of womenfolk in the kitchen and lamplight behind the curtains when you top the rise, and you feel lonesome. Perhaps I get it from Paw, for I can see the loneliness climbing further on his shoulders season after season and now and again it comes out in his eyes.

I am tied to the earth, and particularly Malagoosha County earth. Other fellows feel tied to clerking, or preaching, or healing, or some like Pete to engines. I need dirt smell like breathing, so I reckon that as long as I live, I will be around a farm. The difference is that I want to farm so big it will bring tractors and a new automobile and a good house. Paw has figured this in me and while he does all he can to keep me fired up about the State agricultural college, he also pokes me in the rib to remind me that the country was built on mules.

There was a lot else Paw sensed too, as I was to find out tonight. For while in the reflection of the headlamps I had seen his eyes close and thought him asleep, suddenly his voice came to me clear and gentle and alive, the special qualities it had.

"Son, you serious on Olivinia Wishaw?" he said.

We had never talked about the girl before. As far as I knew, Paw had never

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heard the gossip but now he busted me with it.

"I don't know what you mean, Paw. How does a fellow know he's serious when he does'nt hit the road, snow or shine, every night, to go mooning at her window?"

Paw chuckled decently. He had a way of doing it that made you also want to, no matter how mad you had been ready to be.

"Maybe a fellow knows when he gets sharp with his Paw because of a simple question."

"I hardly ever see her," I said. He had me regulated now, speaking as gently as he, which had been what he was after. He had that gift.

"You aint got to see her more than once or twice. What is more important with a fellow and a girl is whether the girl has seen him. A fellow knows right off; a girl, it takes some time."

"How come you know so much about it?"

"I was'nt always hitched to a plow. Did a little courting myself."

"I aint courting," I said flatly.

We drove a short distance in silence and then he said, "The Wishaws are good family. Old blood."

"Yes," I said. "You can see it in Jeb."

"Sounds as if Miss Olivinia turned you down. You asked her yet?"

"Sure. She said only if you did'nt want her, then I could have her."

"Told you she had good blood. It put a good head on her. Reckon she figures that since she wants a Hammond and you so slow you'd walk faster backwards, she'll take the old man."

"Paw, that creature's so shy a Carolina parrakeet's fierce as a bald eagle."

Paw sighed. "Son, a bold woman's no good for marrying." he said.

I thought of Willi Mae and I knew he was thinking of her too. He had that set to his head, like he was thinking of running. I thought of Pete Sawyers and what a fellow had told me long ago, how Pete had been sweet on Willi Mae before she ran away.

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"I'm going to be in town for a few days. Pete Sawyers asked me to mind the station for him," I said.

Paw took his time answering. "Gets lonely out at Willow Tree, sometimes," he said.

"Heck, it is'nt that," I said. "Pete's got some kind of dealers' convention he wants to go to."

"Won't do you any harm," Paw said. "Me neither. Might as well get used to the idea of being alone since you'll soon be going."

I didn't say, Shucks, Paw, don't talk like that, or anything. He and I knew it was true and we never ran from the truth, except things like not talking about Willi Mae much, and that wasn't running; just looking at it and saying no.

"When are you going?"

"Monday," I said.

"We'd be coming to town anyway for Massacre Day, so I guess we can go in together and I'll bring back the car."

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CHAPTER THREE

Massacre Day got its name from what happened during the march of George Rogers Clark through the State in 1778. While Clark was busy up front, a party of hostiles slipped behind his columns and headed south. Stumbling upon the little settlement at Malagoosha, they wiped it out clean as a whistle. Of course some other folks went after them and did it back to them, but that is how we got Massacre Day, a Fall day of goldenrod and purple ironweed and Indian pinks.

Paw and me headed for town early but early as we were, things were livening up already. A lot of folks had brought in their long guns and some were dressed in buckskin fringe but mostly we all wore denims. Those who had the hair had let it grow long for months and some fellows wore beards. I dropped Paw off at Jeb Coombes' and went on to Pete's. He was sitting in the office, dressed in his city clothes and looking real sharp.

I said, "Pete, you looking real sharp, you know that? A real city fellow."

Pete smiled and said, "Aw, go on home," but I knew he was pleased. He had a buttonhole and everything.

"Bus aint here yet, any minute now," he said and showed me the books and wrote up an order form in case I ran out and the gas tanker showed up.

"You have a good time, Pete," I said as the bus slid in.

He had been looking sort of funny at me and I wondered whether he thought I couldnt take care of the gas station, but as we shook hands, he looked away and said, "You know what? I'm going to look for Willi Mae. Won't do no harm to go down to Key West."

Then he gave my shoulder a little shove and climbed aboard. I guess I must have been standing with my jaw dropped, for behind the glass he dumb-showed me to close my mouth, grinning at me. Then the bus rolled out. I did'nt think of it much for awhile, doing chores around the place. Pete kept the station very clean but I was

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so excited at handling it on my own for a few days that I found places to tidy up which didnt exist. I rubbed and dusted and moved until I was stiff-armed. A couple of flatlanders dressed in well pressed cowboy clothes and brand new big hats drove up in a big, black Buick. There would be many folks like these as the day went on for Massacre Day was well known throughout the State and beyond. Lots of outsiders came in to drink whisky and shoot off pistols, to re-enact Massacre Day. Two men and their ladies, maybe their wives, were in the Buick. They were laughing fit to be thrown and saying something in molasses accents and I knew they were cooking a joke about Malagoosha.

"Say, Dan'l Boone, who put up that sign on the edge o' town? The City Council?" the fellow in the back asked.

One of the ladies snickered. I guessed they meant Sep Logan's signboard. From the front apron of the gas station you can see the board at the end of Saltlick Street. Malagoosha City is built around Saltlick Street. It is the main street cutting right across town to Lookout Rock. A couple of stores, the Baptist chapel, the courthouse, Pete Sawyers' gas station and I guess that does for Saltlick Street.

I grinned a little. That darned old sign. I reckoned that by nightfall this Massacre Day I'd have answered that question if not once a couple score of times.

"Maybe it just growed out o' the ground, mister," I said.

"Aw, come on, they say 'most anything you stick into the soil around these parts will grow but a sign's too much to expect," he said, his face untidy with the laughter he was holding in. "You folks gonna come gunning for me?"

"Which one are you?" I said, thinking I might as well push it around too, the ladies were so happy.

"You could call me a nigger revenue runner wearing red underwear. The ladies are Catholics and my friend's name is Levy, Abe Levy," the fellow said.

"Then turn around and beat it outa town, mister," I told him. "You're dead three-four times already."

They all laughed and I hooked my thumbs in my pants waist looking pleased and

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rocking on my heels and toes like a darn clown. Pete always said that one of the best things about his job was standing before the station and looking up and down Saltlick Street knowing you were a proprietor. For awhile as the folks laughed I knew the good feeling. They took on a load of gas and the fellow topped up with oil even though the Buick didnt need it, but I believed he was so pleased. I wiped his windshield and windows and he included a half dollar tip in the bill.

"Whereabouts they celebrate the Massacre, pardner?" he asked.

I pointed him over by the courthouse lawn where tradition said the first killings were done. About ten a.m., Coleman Roberts the druggist who was also mayor of Malagoosha would walk from his office to the lawn and run up the State flag on the pole. Then from behind the log fence built across one end of the lawn would pop up folks from among the oldest families, wearing beards and the ladies in ginghams, the men with old muzzle loaders, shooting off gunpowder and yelling like the whole Sioux nation was on them. Kids from the county school would play the part of Indians and although the flatlanders didnt know it, Jeb Coombes and Lincoln Meade who kept the other tavern, and the merchants in the Chamber of Commerce would all be forking out to keep the kids happy, re-enacting the Massacre as often as new folk drove in. But the ones who should have paid were the whisky toters. If Jeb Coombes and Lincoln Meade did well across the counter, the real millionaires were those who stayed back in the hills and waited for the strangers to come prospecting. Every stranger seemed bent on going home with a real mountain jug under his arm.

I was being kept busy. Before Mayor Roberts crossed the lawn in his buckskin and moccasin and the three cornered hat on his head, I had changed a radiator hose, put in a set of spark plugs and set the points on three or four automobiles; meanwhile gas and oil had gone briskly. I knew now how Pete Sawyer must have believed in me to have left a rush business in my hands. But the blood heated my face when the stray thought hit that maybe Pete was figuring that already we were family. Pete hadnt said much. Nothing to get upset about. Most folks going outside who knew you had kin on the

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flatlands would offer to visit and say howdy. It was just that nobody had ever talked about Willi Mae, she being so long gone and everybody knowing she hadnt been writing to us. And the way Pete had looked, and the grin, sort of squeezing the corners of his mouth so he was knowing, it made me leery as a woodchuck. The more I thought of it the more I was for closing the place and going over to Jeb Coombes for a talk with Paw. I was for asking him outright whether there had been anything between Pete and Willi Mae. Reckon a fellow my age and all had a right to know. But business was picking up faster now and it wouldnt be right to lose trade Pete was believing I would collect because I had been a cottontail rabbit in a world no larger than my cabbage patch.

Massacre Day was right mild, with a sheepfold of clouds scattered on the blue Fall sky and a norther blowing enough to stiffen the state flag on the courthouse. The town was filling up, but not too lively yet. The crowd was mostly gathered at the courthouse lawn and when the burst of cheering came, I looked over to where Mayor Coleman Roberts was standing on his office steps, waving his three cornered hat. A few Malagoosha folk fired their guns in the air and somebody began working the bell over at the Baptist chapel. This first re-enactment was hardly over the whole kit and boiling. A parcel of kids dressed up like Indians with feathers and everything would come whooping into town from the direction of Lookout Rock while from behind the stockade, the menfolk in beards and buckskins popped off their blanks, yelling fit to scare a tax collector. But as the day wore on and the whisky flowed, the hullabaloo grew fiercer. By gloaming, the kids had been shoved out of the scene and townsfolk and outsiders took over. Tired as hell with all this play acting they had been put through by the older folk, the young uns gladly withdrew to the schoolyard where they had a feasting and a romp of shoot-the-buffalo or over-the-river-to-Charley.

By gloaming nobody was feeling any pain. The stockade had been rushed half a dozen times and the last two times hand fighting had broken out. A few drunks were propped on the sidewalk and a couple of flatlanders were in jail for trying to set fire to the courthouse when they took the part of Indians. Even over in Jeb Coombes', they

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were rolling a song and I reckoned it was about time to close the station and walk over to see that Paw was alright. He has a good head, but General Lee could have got right down mad at all this handshaking today by Uncle Matt and the others who had got above their raisin. None of the level land folk would be loading up on anything but likker for the rest of what was left of Massacre Day so I reckoned I could close the station for awhile. I was doing so when I saw this automobile coming into town. It had on upcountry plates and I supposed him to be a Tommy-late-again. The car stopped by Sep Logan's sign. It was getting dark and the driver switched on a spotlight and played it on the sign. Just about then, they were making the last attack on the stockade and putting it down for keeps. If the Indians had got hold of so many guns the time they came busting down, they would have cleaned out the white man all the way to Florida. But then it happened.

The driver had finished reading the sign and was going quietly through town, passing the courthouse, when the guns began going off. He must have been scared at the yelling and the shooting; I thought at the time that he was a stranger passing through Malagoosha and knew nothing about Massacre Day. However it was, that automobile leaped away as if it had been kicked by the devil. It roared down Saltlick Street, scattering folk right and left, rocketing over the ruts, the cutout booming with power. Past Jeb Coombes' and past the chapel, racing through the dark with no headlights. And good God Almighty, I knew.

I knew that the poor bastard barrelling down the goddam road would never see that goddam Lookout Rock for what it was.

And he slammed into it.

He hit like a cannon. [redacted] Everybody turned and stood still.

But I think because I had known it was coming, I was running before anyone else. I was bawling like a baby, blind to all but the need to holler. By the time the folks got there behind me, it had begun to burn. We listened to the [redacted]

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crackle of metal and leather and cloth, pondering over what we had to do, long as you could blink once or maybe twice. Then Uncle Matt Connelly wiped his mustache and said, "Let's get 'em out."

An outsider coming into Malagoosha County may see a dirty, unshaven, tobacco chewing, patched overall breed of men sitting under the shade trees or swapping sorghum for hogs. Newspaper folk poke fun at us for a shiftless, whisky-swilling lot, choked to our collarstuds with superstitions and prejudices and ignorance. They are right for a fact. But they have never seen us with our troubles. Like the day when Sep Logan toted in Paw and collapsed outside Doc Lewis' office, the blood running from his nose.

Most of those who first got to the wreck were folk from outside. City folk on whom I guess arson and homicide act like carcasses on buzzards. Our own folk came slowly. Deliberately. Chawing, because they knew what lay ahead and were going to meet it. Taking the decision inside, the way they had tamed the country. They stood for as long as a spit in the flames until Uncle Matt Connelly spoke.

Maybe it was only a body in there, but we wanted it out for it was unlawful for calamities to win. The corn likker helped, but we got him out. Somebody showed a lantern and he wasnt burnt as badly as we had expected. But he had smoked up blacker than a tarpot. We wrapped a couple of blankets quickly around him from the night air.

"He's breathing," Uncle Matt said, proud as if he had poured in the breath himself. But maybe, he had.

Sep Logan came from the auto and said, "Nobody left in there."

I had my hands hooked under my armpits, quieting the

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sears. They would be blisters before morning.

"Let's get him to Doc Lewis," Mr Wishaw said.

"Doc aint there. He had to go out to Hopemount. Abigail's poorly," Sep said.

I felt a touch on my shoulder and turned to face Olivinia Wishaw. Her hair was shining in the flame light, brushed smooth and falling to her shoulders.

"Ive got some ointment for your hands, Abner," she said.

I had my hands hugged under my armpits but I didnt remember where they were for I was watching the prettiness of her mouth and wondering at she coming to me as if we were bespoken.

"Give them to me," she said.

"I'm alright. 'Taint anything."

"Give them to me, Abner Hammond. The night's turned chilly and the air will blister you bad."

There wasnt any sense arguing with her and all the folks around. It is a fact that the women of Malagoosha County will go through fire and snow and drouth without a whimper, but will yowl like a puma in a trap, let a thorn pierce a man or a child. She took my left hand and annointed my wrist and fingers and the palm, rubbing gently, quieting the heat in them. She did it to the right also, her head bowed and her breath warm on my fingers.When she straightened, I turned back the scarf at her collar so I could see her face more plainly.

"I'm thankful to you, Olivinia Wishaw," I said.

"Your Paw has no woman," she said.

"You come back now. We'll walk back together," I said.

She stood thinking on it, grave as a preacher. "That I'll do," she said.

And it was funny. Real funny. A girl you couldnt hardly get to see more often than a ruffed grouse in winter, [redacted] saying

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cool as a cantaloupe that we would walk back to town together.

She went over to Paw and his head jerked around like a bird, looking for me before he caught himself and stood still for her to doctor him.

"Somebody go fetch an automobile so we can take him to town," Uncle Matt said.

Paw came over and said, "No use taking him to town if Doc Lewis aint there, Matt. Better we take him to my place. That way, we will likely meet Doc on his way in from Hopemount. In any case, we can watch for him and stop him when he's passing my place if we get home first."

"We'll come out with you and do what we can until the doctor comes, Abner," Mrs Wishaw said.

A city fellow took us in his automobile to our farm since our car was back in town. We piled in front, Olivinia and her paw and me. We put the poor burnt fellow in the back. Paw held him across his knees and rested the fellow's head in Mrs Wishaw's lap. Paw felt around and said he thought the legs were broken. The fellow was breathing. That was about all.

The second car we met and halted by blinking our lights turned out to be DocLewis. We were almost out to the farm already so he turned back with us. We took the man into Paw's room. Gently, Doc Lewis peeled back the blankets.

"Holy cow," whispered the city fellow over my shoulder.

The poor devil's skull had been scorched clean of hair. His face was black as cola. The eyebrows were singed off.

"We'll go to the main business on the agenda before we begin cleaning him up," Doc Lewis said.

Doc was a quick, cheerful redhead. He smoked a pipe and wore double cuffs on his shirt sleeves but he was earthy as horse chestnuts.

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"Got some corn oil, Abner?" he asked Paw while he examined the fellow. "And some wood for splints."

"How's he, Doc?" the city fellow asked.

Doc Lewis looked around at us.

"What the hell's this? A convention? You gents get out of here. Leave Mrs Wishaw and Olivinia. [redacted] They can help to clean up the poor devil."

The city fellow and I went outside. We sat around. The fellow getting more fidgety. He snapped on the radio and got [redacted] Hosanna Bell.

"That danged ol' nigger gal. Boy, she's sure mountain corn. She from these parts?"

He was grinning. Maybe he was kidding me. The way he said it, high and nasal as if he was clowning around with the way folks about here talked. Reckon Hosanna [redacted] does sound as if she could have been suckled on hominy pap made from branch water and grits. But I had never heard that Hosanna [redacted] was a Nigra gal.

"You sure she a colored gal, mister?" I asked him.

"Isnt she? Got an idea I read it in some paper once."

He was so restless, he was standing on his heels.

"If you want to go back, somebody will be out soon. Wont be any trouble getting back to town for our car," I said.

He shook his head and sat down.

"Guess I had that coming to me. Fact is, son, I dont mind getting back. Too far out in the woods when it gets dark. No offence, son, but I'm a city man. The country makes me scared. Too many trees and funny noises and wide spaces."

"Could be at that, too. She sure sings them feisty," I said.

"What's that?"

"Hosanna Bell.

[redacted] Guess she could be colored."

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He laughed and got to his feet.

"Never heard it put quite like that," he said.

We went out to the gallery. The toads were fluting. I thought of the poor guy in Paw's room. The pain would hit him later. It would hit him [redacted] deep inside, rolling outward like wind in a wheatfield. He would bawl and couldnt do a thing about it. He would lay there, feeling the crunching inside, the big soft blows of pain that would stun him into short oblivions. He would wake again and again, waiting for the first blow, his body sleep-fed and taut for more. Refreshed to receive the brutality. I was feeling it too. Paw always said I had too much imagination.

"Thinking of the poor bastard in there?"

"Yes. I wonder who he is?" I said.

A door banged inside. I heard Olivinia call. Something was wrong with her voice. We rushed past the screen door and saw her in the living room. She looked terrible.

I guessed the fellow was dead.

"Olivinia, what happened?" I cried.

She just stared at us as if she was scared.

I caught her hands. "Olivinia, honey, what is it?"

Gradually, her lips parted and then she spoke.

"It wont come off," she said.

I didnt know what she meant, but I commenced to feel creepy all over. Her head was twitching. She was real frightened.

"What - what wont come off?" I asked her.

The whites of her eyes showed and I grabbed her. She came back slowly and began talking again.

"We scrubbed and washed and scrubbed, but it wont. It wont come off, no matter what we do."

The city fellow said, "Wait. Let me try. What wont come

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off, little lady?"

Olivinia shuddered. Cant recall ever seeing her scared before.

"We scrubbed, but it wont come off."

"Why wont it come off?" the city fellow asked.

"Because - it cant!" Olivinia cried, looking up at him.

"What cant come off, little lady?"

"The black on him. He's - he's ---" she looked down on her hands, still damp with the oil or whatever it was they had been rubbing the fellow with. She stared at her hands and whispered, "He's a Nigra."

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CHAPTER FOUR

The back of the hand outside the sheet was molasses brown. A gold ring shone on the little finger. There was some sort of bracelet or chain around his neck. His hand was turned so you saw the light-dark palm with the darker lines crossing it. The hair was whorled down on the skin and the white halfmoons on the fingernails were unsmudged. He wasnt fire damaged out here at all. The eyes in the molasses brown face were closed.

I looked around at the faces of folks in the room. Sep Logan had come out to see what he could do. Now he just stood there, his face above the torn and patched clothing tight shut as tomorrow. Uncle Sep was facing the hard wrung code that rode folks around these parts from crib to coffin.

Doc Lewis had brought Olivinia's mother out of her hysterics. Jeb Wishaw had already taken her and Olivinia home. Sep had come by with one of his sons driving our automobile. Paw had led him into the bedroom and showed him the colored fellow.

"He cant stay here, Abner," Sep said.

"Where can I take him?"

"Dump him somewhere. Put him out in the shed. Anywhere. Maybe in the hospital, I dont know. There may be some sort of a shed at the hospital. Ask Coleman. He's mayor. There's got to be someplace besides a white man's house."

"Lulu Belle slept under our roof for fourteen years," Paw said. "She was the Nigra gal doing your chores. She was looking after Willi Mae. She belonged in here. But the buck, he's different. He cant stay in here."

Paw looked thoughtfully down on the colored man's face. The fellow was breathing loudly, almost a snore. Doc Lewis had said he ought to come around before morning but that he would be a really

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ill man.

"I'll talk to Coleman in the morning," Paw said.

"You dont forget now," Sep said, turning from the bedroom. "Just get rid of him, is all."

Doc and the city fellow had already left. Doc was a fine man but about quiet as a squirrel. By noon, everybody in town would know that the fellow in the wreck had turned out to be a Nigra.

I took a last look at the Nigra man. He would be a tall one, standing. There was no way of being sure about their ages. Except for the white haired ones, I had never been able to guess their ages. He had been driving a big car, newer than most of the cars around here. He must have been one of the rich ones from New York. Probably a singer, Or a boxer. Or a ball player. I didnt think I had seen his face in any of the magazines in the public library. His face hadnt been burnt at all. The only bad burns were at his back and chest. If he had been a ballplayer, he was in for a rough time. The legs were bad, the right one broken in two places. Doc Lewis had said it would be spme time before he could move about on his own.

"I dont care what John Lewis says. You got to get him out of the house quick, Abner," Sep said. "By God, man, he's lying in your bed!"

The look I had noticed before came back in Paw's eyes, I hoped that stupid, violent Sep would go, I wished it strongly.

"I'm talking to Coleman in the morning," Paw said.

Sep said goodbye and stomped out. The big, flappy old limousine took off with a rattling roar, his sons sprawled all over the insides.

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Paw stood listening to the sounds of Sep's auto. The back of his neck was red, rumpled and sunbaked. He had pulled in trouble most of his life, first [redacted] Maw, then Willi Mae. Now there was a black fellow lying on his bed, his head on Paw's pillow. The roar of Sep's car was already lost in the night. It could be I was mistaken, but I could have [redacted] sworn that just before they drove off, I had heard one of Sep's sons [redacted] mutter nigger lover.

The colored folk of Malagoosha County lived [redacted] over in Swamp Hollows. They grew burley and fished and made corn likker like the rest of us. But they kept to themselves. They came to town quietly during the week and bought their store goods from the back windows of the stores. They never showed up at such affairs as Massacre Day. There hadnt been a lynching in the County for years since Uncle Sep and his boys had been extra fretted by the fellow who had been moonshining their muskrat traps.

What the hell did they want us to do anyway? Paw hadnt brought the colored man into the house by choice. He had just turned out to be, and Paw would be rid of him in no time. Paw knew like anybody else that the fellow could not stay in the house. And when you thought of it, getting him out of the house would be doing him a favor, for I had a shrewd idea that Doc John Lewis wasnt inclined to give him much doctoring. I [redacted] knew how Doc Lewis felt about them, and I had seen his face last night when we had found out.

"They had never been put out with Lulu Belle," I said.

Paw looked at me. His face was sad. "We been always more partial with their women, son. We aint ever been as mad at them."

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CHAPTER FIVE

Mayor Coleman Roberts said the city ordnance did not allow the hospital to accept Nigras. Paw came to Pete's gas station and told me. He had washed up but the soot and ash were still sort of on the edges of him. It was the afternoon after Massacre Day. I had gone back to Pete's gas station and slept. A shower in the rest room and a cup of coffee from the restautant across the street had fixed me as new after having sat up all night with Paw.

"In any case, I cant move him yet," Paw said.

I must have stared funnily at him. He sat down. I cleared my throat. I fiddled around with Pete's ledger to steady my voice.

"What will you do now, Paw?"

"You seen Doc Lewis?" he asked.

"Saw him going into the Mayor's office some time ago. You coming straight from Coleman's?"

"Benn there best part of an hour."

"Funny you missed him. I seen him go into Coleman's and come out the back way. At least I think so, for he came out of that alley behind Coleman's. Must have been about the time you were going in, as I can reckon."

"Aint in his office either. Maybe he's gone out to Hope-mount. Abigail's pretty poorly, I hear."

I hadnt seen Doc Lewis leaving town. He hadnt been in for gas either. He drove a two year old Buick with automatic gears. One of the finest cars in town.

"You look out for him on the way home," I told Paw.

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We were sitting at the desk in Pete Sawyer's little office. Paw's eyes took a couple of licks at me.

"You are no least 'un. You're grown up now and have a right to say your mind. Let us talk it over."

"Nothing to talk over, Paw. You do what is right."

"I know what seems right to me, Abner, but I aint hitting you over the head with it. You must know that."

"Sure, sure," I said. I was still uncomfortable about last night. I had been a real live one after everybody had left. I had carried on at Paw for not shoving the Nigra into the woodshed.

"The fellow hasnt come around yet," he said.

He was sitting there talking as calmly as if the dam wasnt creaking.

"Paw, okay. Let's talk it over. You know this County and you know the people around. They aint bad people but we've got our customs and our habits and our upbringings. We like it here, what we do, the way we live. You said one time that those newspaper fellows who poke fun at us dont know how fine some of these folks are, even with our hardtimes. Like rock pillars in a swamp, was the way you described the folk around. Now what? What? What? Why dont you do like the rest of these fine people around would do?"

Paw hadnt rested last night nor today but he was full of energy as a beaver. He slapped down on Pete's desk and got up.

"You staying in town tonight?" he asked.

That was it. He wasnt going to answer. You didnt push Paw any further when he wasnt ready to answer.

"Then I'll be going out. Only came in to see Coleman. Cant leave Olivinia too long alone, in case the fellow comes to and she needs some help."

He had hit me with a rock hammer. I bugged my eyes at him.

"Olivinia! What's she doing out there? Who told you you

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could have her out there nursing a nig ——!"

He looked at him like I was a whisky-jack in the muskegs. He sure wasnt [redacted] seeing much in me.

"REckon I recall you were nursed for a long time by a Nigra woman," he said drily.

"Paw, quit acting like its a joke. Why did Olivinia come back?"

"Because maybe she thought I could do with some help."

"Jeb and her maw know?"

"Olivinia knows more ways of nursing the sick than DOc Lewis. Her maw taught her real good."

"Nur - [redacted] nursing that colored man?"

"That man is sick. Dont know how near dying he is."

But I was seeing Olivinia in the house and that buck lying on the bed, watching her. The rustle of her frock and the sweet bob of her breasts. I choked and swallowed.

"Paw, Paw, folks hear about this, there'll be trouble. You get him out, you hear. And send home Olivinia real quick."

He was quiet. He waited, standing quietly. I shook my head. He nodded.

"Guess its time to get home, son," he said.

He went and I watched his hickory figure going down the street to where the automobile was parked under the cottonwood before the courthouse. He got in and the first flip of the key caught the engine. I grinned, feeling better for it. Whatever good was in that battered old car, I had put it in there and was holding it in.

Paw was a good man. He had got more trouble than some folks. He had lost Maw and Willi Mae. Lulu Belle too. And I, in a sense, was already gone. He was a lonely man. I remembered

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how he had looked last night after he had fought the gasolene fire. To pull out a stranger. How they had all looked afterwards. Scorched and blackened. Uncle Matt, big on the ground, his shoulders hulked with weariness and his beard smokestained. Jilson Swift, thin as a lathe, his hands lank between his knees brushing the ground, head thrust forward and breathing out of his mouth. Micajah Hoe in his Sunday suit because he was fixing to go live outside and he was getting used to the feeling of being suited. But Micajah had gone into the firebecause generations of the code had buried it inside him. All apart, yet closer than peas in a pod.

This was how they were and Paw didnt have any right to change them. Paw wasnt any act of Congress to change the law they had enacted for themselves.

"Paw," I called, "hold up."

He idled the engine as I crossed to him.

"I'm coming out with you."

"What about the gas pump?"

"I'll be back. Just want to see how things are."

Somebody had tidied up the wreck at old Lookout. Must have been Coleman Roberts. He was good at tidying up. I bet he would be elected again next year.

We rolled into the yard and Olivinia met us at the door. She shook her head.

"Olivinia, you okay?"

She gave me a quick glance and a nod. She didnt seem to want to to meet me with a full look. I shrugged. I was learning about women. They could change direction quicker than a duckhawk. She had been sick and scared last night, now she had calmly taken over from Paw while he was in town.

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"Doc Lewis been out?" Paw asked.

"Aint seen tuft or talon," Olivinia said. She was that cool, ice would have frozen on her. I reckoned she was notifying me that she had grown up big since last night when she had bawled like a baby.

"He must have gone out to Abigail Hope again," Paw said.

"Wouldnt have gone by here without stopping," Olivinia said, looking at me.

"CAnt rightly tell. Maybe he knows the fellow aint so badly sick after all," I said.

"Oh, he's sick alright. I took a look at his bandages. They not too tight or anything."

I pulled up short.

"Dont you go doing any doctoring on the Nigra fellow. All Paw needs you to do is to holler out when he wakes up," I said.

"And what would I do if he had waked up while your paw was in town? Holler all the way to Malagoosha?"

I wasnt out to do a meeting with her. I followed Paw inside. We crossed the hall and stood at the door into Paw's room. The man was still on the bed.

"We could make up a bed for him in the woodshed. You and I can move him out there. He aint too heavy for us," I urged at his shoulder.

"Oughtnt to move him now. When he comes to, we'll see."

"Suppose it takes a year? There're stories about fellows being unconscious for a year. You ever thought about it, Paw? You ever reckoned on this Nigra fellow being in your bed for a year?"

Paw looked sharply around at me. "No need for you to pick the heaviest bale of hay. Nobody's welcoming you to it."

He had that way of saying a heap then turning you loose

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to wander about looking at yourself.

Olivinia said, "Abner, lets go outdoors. I need to walk."

She had come back to help take the weight off Paw. I had headed for town to look after Pete's gas station. But it wasnt that I had been running away. I had promised Pete. If it had been anyone else/in the house, I would have gone back to town just the same. Paw must know that. Olivinia too.

"You just leave your Paw to decide, Abner," Olivinia said.

"To decide what? Which way he should jump to break his neck?"

"Your Paw showed all of us last night. He did what was right."

"You know how it has always been for colored people in the County. Nobody bothers them much, so long as they keep to them selves."

"What about Lulu Belle?"

"She was different. She was a hired hand."

"She was more than that. She took care of Willi Mae and you from you were babies. All the folk around here knew [redacted] Lulu Belle and loved her. You know that."

"She was different, Olivinia. But you read Sep's signboard. That says it all."

"I aint a-riding you, Abner, but you leave it to your Paw for now. Wont do him any [redacted] good, thinking you're scared and running for cover."

Now, its one thing slamming into a fellow for talking out what he thinks, but its another saying he is a coward. She knew more ways of riling a man than a mosquito on a summer night.

"You go home now, you hear? You go home," I said.

"You're vexed. Maw says never to talk to a man when he's vexed. Leave him to lose it, like the flux."

She had a tongue like a timber rattler.

"I'm going to get that nigger out."

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Her eyes faraway, she said, "He aint much older than you, did you know? Almost burnt to death in a strange town and he aint much older than you. I keep thinking what can happen when you leave the County. This could be Abner, lying there all broken up and far from his folks. Maybe that's how your Paw thought last night too."

Boy, that sure put my tail up.

"Dont compare me with no nigger!" I yelled.

"Wasnt comparing you. Only said I thought this because he aint much older than you."

"How the hell do you know his age?"

"A woman can tell."

I was all tightened up. I stood off.

"Dont you touch him. Dont you ever touch him," I whispered.

"Abner!"

"Get the hell out of here. Go on home."

She grew tall and turned into fury. She cut me to ribbons with her tongue. I only got out alive by yelling, [redacted] "Alright, alright. You stay and be nurse to this coon if you want to. I'm heading back for town."

I started to walk back but a mile down the road, I hitched a ride with Doc Lewis. I was glad Doc didnt seem inclined to talk. As we neared town, to be polite, I said, "How's the fellow now, Doc?"

"Didnt stop to see," he said shortly. It wasnt until much later it occurred to me that I hadnt been suprised by Doc's failure to look in on Paw.

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CHAPTER SIX

The Hammonds had been in the mountains of west Malagoosha for three or four generations before Paw came along. He must have been the first really lonesome one among them. A bull wanting his own field. Paw one time said a man ought to be able to haul on his boots without elbowing a cousin. He said that when he came of age and got his land deeds, he was ready to pull out. One court day he mounted his horse and rode down the mountain to Malagoosha City. After swapping around a spell, he ended up owning forty acres of sandstone and loam. He had an eye for crops so he did right well with white burley and raised some hogs and a few head of cattle.

After he had built his house, he returned up the mountain for his girl. They were married and had Willi Mae and me.

I was thinking of Paw and Willi Mae and everything when I rolled out of bed in the room at Pete's service station. It was early but I was used to waking early on the farm. I put on a wind cheater and went outside. I walked down the road, towards Lookout. Nobody was up but a titmouse hurtling from tree to tree. He was on a whirr of wings. I shied a stone at his tuft and he left me alone.

The hardtop ended right outside town and the rest of the road was crushed and rolled limestone. It was kept well steamrolled this near town, but further it it would be pocked and gutted, especially in the Spring. There was some ground mist, thin and watery like rain. I thought of Paw and hoped that Willi Mae, by some miracle, would show up before it was time for me to leave for college.

Back at the station, I had a shower and crossed the street for breakfast. Soon as I was back, Sep Logan's old Chevvy clanked

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in and pulled up at the station. Sep rolled down a window and poked out his head. He was unshaven as usual.

"Where's your Paw?" he called.

"Out on the farm, I guess."

"Has he got rid of the nigger yet?"

I shrugged. I had an idea that Sep would hhave known whether the colored fellow was on the farm.

"What sort of man is your paw turning out to be? You in on this business with him?"

"In on what?"

"He's got Jeb's girl out there helping to nurse that nigger. What sort of fellow are you? You allowing your girl to nurse a jigaboo?"

Sep Logan's one of the finest fellows in the County but he's rough tongued and violent. His extra big eye flared at me.

"You go out and tell Paw that, Mr Logan," I said.

"Aim to do that. Aim to do that right well."

His hands clenched the steering wheel, showing white. He braced his chest until it cracked. He was a violent man.

"You go out and tell him, Abner. Tell your Paw we're coming out there tonight. He's to get that fellow off his place by then."

He let in the clutch and the old Chevvy jumped like a whip had been cracked. He rammed past Jeb Coombes' place and screeched out of town.

About mid morning, Mayor ROberts hailed me down the street. I went over to his office. The two town policemen, Joe and Shorty, were climbing into the town squad car.I nodded at them. Perhaps they grunted. They were two hard cases.

"You looking shaggy this morning, Abner. Working too hard?" Mayor Roberts said.

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A tidy grin on his face like it had been put there by a furrow machine. He is bony and tall, with long arms bent at the wrists where his hands slope in, as if reporting for work. He was not a personally popular man but he had got to be mayor one year when nobody had much hankering for it, what with hog sickness hitting the County from one end to another. Then he worked so hard at being mayor, keeping the grass around the courthouse lawn cut and watered, marking the traffic lines in white paint himself so it wouldnt cost the County a cent, smiling at all the women and asking after their least 'uns, nobody had the heart to go after him at the next elections.

"Most folks are shaggy this morning, Mayor. Too close to Massacre Day," I said.

"Heard from your paw about what he asked me?"

"Sure. He told me."

"The law and custom, Abner. Got to uphold the law and custom. One aint no good without the other."

I thought a little. No matter what I wished, Paw needed help. "Law doesnt say anything about not allowing a coloured man in the hospital," I said.

He looked at me as if I had stepped on his corns.

"What the law dont pick up, <u>custom</u> do," he said.

"You could help my paw."

His eyes cold-licked me.

"What you asking, boy?"

"Same thing as Paw."

Mayor Roberts shook his head.

"Dont know what has come over your paw and you. Aint as if you're one of these Yankee fellows with the knot in their heads which makes them have a nigger in their living rooms. You and your paw are Hammonds. You <u>belong</u> here. What's wrong with you?

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Somebody put a hex on you? You tell your paw to get that black fellow out of his house."

He walked stiff legged back to his office. Boy, had I made him mad? But I had this right good feeling of having backed up Paw.

It was a fair day at Pete's. I sold gas, tightened a couple of shackle bolts, /cleared a fuel choke, sold a set of spark plugs to an outsider who jogged into the station firing on three, earned fifty cents fitting them because he wouldnt dirty his city fingers.Meanwhile I kept an eye good on the road to Lookout and our farm, but nobody much used it. I thought of how foolish Sep and Coleman and folks like them were. Pushing Paw was only pushing up that look in his eye. The harder you squeezed him, the tougher he became. At least Sep ought to have known that, he had been friendly with Paw for such a long time.

A 'dozer bulled and shouldered up the road past the station. Mayor Roberts stepped out on his porch, grinned and waved at the driver. Coleman Roberts had sure turned into politician since we had shooed him in, waving at any passing tractor driver like every day was election day.

Nothing happened until in the evening. In the evening, I had a call from Pete.

Jeb Coombes sent a kid to tell me I was wanted on the phone. I was sure he must have been mistaken; until I thought of the dean up at State Agricultural College. I hustled over. I hoped to hear that everything had been fixed up fine and that I should be in for registration.

But after I had waved thanks to Jeb and got the durn thing to my ear, it turned out to be Pete.

"This is me, Abner Hammond," I said into the phone.

"Abner!" He almost tore my ear off. "Abner, how the hell are you, boy?"

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Sure it was Pete. I would know his voice anywhere. He sounded real excited. I hadnt ever used a phone before but I would know Pete's voice anywhere.

"I'm fine, who's this? Pete? Pete! Well, boy!"

"Sure its me. How've things been? How was Massacre Day?"

I could hear music over the phone. I wondered if they played music on the durn thing while folks talked. Maybe he was in some swank hotel.

"Massacre Day was fine. Say, where are you?"

"How's the station? Getting business?"

"Station's fine. Where are you? In a swank hotel?"

"How's your paw?"

"He's fine. Did you fly down in an airplane like you said?"

"Sure. Boy, you must try it some time. How was Massacre Day?"

"Fine. Listen, Pete, you staying in a swank hotel? What's that music?"

He laughed. "You wait till I tell you. How was Mayor Roberts' speech? Anybody got into a fight with an outsider?"

"No. No fights. Except we got a nigger."

"What did he do? Get uppity?"

"No. He busted into Lookout Rock. A real wreck. Paw's got him at the house."

"Car too big for him, I guess," Pete said laughing.

Then while Pete was laughing, I realised for the first time how scared the colored man must have been. I remembered how the car had stopped by Sep Logan's signboard. He had driven off again slowly, taking it real easy, making sure he wasnt stopped for speeding. Then the guns had gone off and he had busted away. Taken off like a racoon with the dogs on his tail. He couldnt have known that this was all part of Massacre Day. He must have thought that the guns were shooting

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at him.

"I guess," I said to Pete.

It wasnt like before. I was knowing something more. The poor bastard. I kept talking to Pete.

"Where are you? In a swank hotel?"

Pete laughed some more. "Hell, you really want to know, dont you? I'm in Key West."

That was the place the fellows on the radio were always talking about. The army and the navy and the airforce were all down there waiting to see what the Cubans were up to. We had moved in some heavy stuff, [redacted] ready to [redacted] clobber Castro and his Russian friends.

"Key West? What the hell you doing down there? You joined the army?"

"No. But I got another surprise for you. You remember Lulu Belle?"

Now what the hell was this? What did that boy set my heart all ajumping for? For where Lulu Belle was, I reckon Willi Mae would be.

A woman's voice was saying something and Pete laughed. He had never been a sorehead, but he was cackling like a hen now. Laughing and real loon happy.

"Abner? You tell your paw I seen Willi Mae," he said. "And you know what that fool gal is up to?"

I held on tight to the phone. My heart was pounding. It had been years since she left. She had put Paw into a chair and he rabbit-humped everytime he waited to hear whether she was dead or maimed. Nothing about her except the single note Lulu Belle had painfully scrawled for Paw.

The phone went dead in my hand. Just went dead, that's all No sound. I called to Jeb. He came over and took it from my hand.

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He put it to his ear.

"The party's hung up," he said.

Sure. Me too.

"It was Pete," I said.

"He'll call you back if he wants to," Jeb said.

"He said he had seen Willi Mae and Lulu Belle," I said.

Jeb Coombes stared at me. He was Paw's friend and he knew how much her going had shaken him.

"Well, I'll be salted down and barrelled," he said slowly.

Then something else occurred to me. It would be better to wait to hear from Pete before I told Paw. I would wait to hear from Pete about what Willi Mae was doing, before I told Paw.

"Dont you say anything to Paw about this, Mr Coombes," I said. "Dont you say anything to anybody until I hear from Pete again. He's got enough to worry about. Dont want to give him any more unfinished business right now."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Later in the afternoon, I went out to the farm in Pete's pickup. Olivinia was in the toolshed. She was washing sheets, Paw said. Between them, they were running a regular hospital. I looked in at Paw's bedroom. The colored man was still there, his eyes closed, breathing roughly.

"How's he?"

"Dont like his looks," Paw said.

"They're tough," I said.

"No tougher'n anybody else," Paw said sharply.

"Has Doc Lewis been out?"

"Aint turned up since the night."

We went back to the front room and I told him what Sep and Coleman had said. As I had expected, his eyes hardened. But I had to tell him. There was no telling what that fool Sep Logan would do and I didnt want anybody to jump Paw.

I sat down in his chair, the old rocker with the frayed cushions that had been my maw's. I put out a hand and the knobs of the radio were exactly in reach. Just like Paw, I gave a twitch of the wrist and heard the tubes hum as power surged in from the battery. He would work all day in the field and after his wash and supper in the evening, he would sit in the old rocker and seek news of Willi Mae through a worn wooden knob.

Paw rose and went to the door. He turned back and looked up at the fire blackened logs thick as hams from which he had gouged the rafters of the house. He had axed the oak after firing them at the stump and handsawn them for the rafters. The floor was of yellow poplar, rough chiselled but firm as stone. Paw used to tell me how he had started [redacted] the house himself, [redacted]. But after a week, he had looked up the trace one morning and seen our kin from the other

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side of the [redacted] County coming in. They walked in behind the waggon carrying their guns and tools to help him build his house. It was the first time he had seen them since he had [redacted] left home.

"We reckoned it was due time for you to commence a-building your house so we come in to give you a hand," my uncle Shadrach said.

In a week they had three rooms and a gallery standing. Then they went away as quietly as they had come. Paw added another room, and then another.

"That Coleman made me mad all through," I said.

"So am I," Paw said so softly, I almost didnt hear him.

Paw was a sudden man. But he could be like a hound dog sitting under a tree all night waiting for a coon to come down. He would look at a problem for hours, then he would solve it with a swift decision. And when he went to work, the course he had planned would be like a main bone in him. It had never mattered to Paw afterwards that the decision had brought no solution at all.

"The fellow is sick, in my house," he said. He turned at the door and looked out at the open fields and the rocky risings. His hands and knees knew every inch of the land. He was out there in snow and sun, coaxing his needs out of it.

"And on my land," he said. "Aint nobody going to tell me how to plow my furrow."

Like I said, Sep Logan.

Paw turned again and looked at me. "I know those folks out there, because I know how they walk and spit. But I dont reckon it goes much further than that. Maybe it shouldnt go any further than that. It wouldnt work out fine at all for us to know what goes on inside each other. But what in the name of God do they want? That I should take up this sick man and throw him outside? Just throw him

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out? No. I wont do it."

"Its folks' ways, Paw. Folks have always thought that colored people ought to stay by themselves."

He shook his head.

"We dont know who he is. He could be a good Nigra. Lots of colored people are as good as real folks. Like Lulu Belle. It aint sensible for Coleman and the rest to just up and say no Nigras are good. They all knew Lulu Belle. They all liked her. Why, I reckon Lulu Belle could go a-visiting from one end of the County to another and folks would be partial to her."

Of course he was right about Lulu Belle, but she was different. By golly, Paw was born around here. He knew what he was doing wasnt right. The trouble was, his tail was up.

"I know how you feel, Paw. But dont let dont let us hand them the hammer to nail our hides to the wall. Coleman and Sep will have the whole durn County behind them."

He whipped around full face to me. His eyes cut me to ribbons.

"You shut your mouth, you hear? You be quiet if you aint any better than a jay in a cane brake. What's got to be done must be done, is all."

I waited for him to cool.

"Paw, I reckon you're proving something and there're things I should learn. I'll hold up."

His eyes were clear when he answered after awhile. "I reckon so. I handt thought it out but I think now that maybe I'm proving something. Maybe proving we are people and not just [redacted] grunt and bacon. Or maybe just proving."

I loved him. He stood there, just saying it. He had a way of making you feel clean again.

"We'll be bucking a lot of folks. They wont cotton to it."

"Fellow can [redacted] hardly do what he thinks is right without

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bucking a lot of folks."

"Mayor Roberts is going xx rough and tumble against us. He can bring some powerful law down on us."

"Aint breaking any laws. Aint hurting anybody except myself. And maybe you."

He looked quickly at me and I didnt duck from his eyes —— although I wanted to. Sure, I was relieved to remember that soon I would be going away to college. It was a comfortable thought from which this Hammond made no effort to escape. I would be leaving Malagoosha County, away from the frozen faces and the spit over the shoulder and the grudging grunts that would follow us Hammond afterwards.

"You hurting, Abner?" Paw said quietly.

He had lines on his face;and simple, capable hands, proud hands which had always been kind to me and taught me much. He was my Paw.

"Not hurting so much I cant wait to meet Sep when he comes."

"How about Pete's station?"

"The hell with Pete. The station can wait."

Paw and me went out to close the split rail gate just at darkening. We told Olivinia we were going to see after the animals. Paw moved carefully around, showing me where to stand and it was then I had an inkling of the sort of man he was. But I should have remembered that he was from rough mountain country where they didnt think it amiss to pop off at each other.

Sep and his seven sons came in their old automobile. They came without lights, but they saw the split rail fence whitish in the dark. When the car stopped, Paw stepped from the shadows of some sycamores and said, "Sep?"

You could almost hear them jump.

Sep said angrily, "Abner, what's this? You barring folks

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from your land?"

"Got a sick man in there, Sep. He needs the quiet."

Now Sep knew that Paw was bucksawing him and it didnt make him pleased. But Sep was a nice fellow, one of the nicest men in the County and he wasnt against getting Paw to see reason.

"I sent a message with Lil' Abner today," he said.

"Got your message, Sep, but I reckon the fellow's too sick to move," Paw said, reasonable as anything.

The silence got like pelt. You could feel it.

Then Sep said, "We'll take him off you, Abner."

"Gently, Sep?"

"Right gentle, Abner."

"Where will you take him?"

But the soft talk suddenly got too much for Sep's brood. They had been shifting around in the car and now one of them yelled, "We'll shove him in hell, that's where!"

We could hear when Sep backhanded him. It cracked like a pistol.

Paw said quietly, "Now you take them home, Sep. Go home."

"That aint Christian, Abner. We come to take the sick fellow off your hands."

"You got as mush Christianity as a copperhead. Go home."

Sep stepped out of the automobile, followed by his hulking sons. They came out in the night, big shouldered and menacing.

"We aint leaving without the nigger," Sep said.

Paw moved beside me and I felt the brush of his scattergun.

"Sep, I've got the scattergun with me. It wont be the first time a Hammond has had to put a gun on fool folks, guess you know that. Now you take yourself and your cubs from my premises."

Something went into Paw's voice. On and off, in some of his moments, he would talk a little about the feud his folks had

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fought for years before he was born and during his boyhood. Once Uncle Matt had jokingly asked whether Paw's folks didnt hold their own Massacre Day. Paw could handle a gun like a limb off his arm but this was not unusual in a land where most men could shoot better than fairly. A kind of furriness had crept into Paw's voice and was crawling along the nape of my neck. I knew what it was. Paw's voice was telling me that he was ready to kill.

"Paw," I said softly, but I dont believe he heard me.

"Move, Sep," Paw said flatly. "Now."

And Sep moved. He went sideways, walking on the edge of his feet. His eyes must have been flaring with fear. He knew that standing in the dark, Paw could have cut them down like a mower in a field of corn.

They snaked off, the two older ones, Hiram and Japheth babbling abuse at us but going just the same. For no man there that evening but had heard the kill in Paw's voice. They piled into the automobile. Sep let in the clutch so fast, the motor stalled. When he was rolling, one of the boys took leave of us with,

"Nigger-lovin' Hammonds!"

It didnt craw me none. I was too busy letting the tightness out of my gut. Paw stood rigid as wood. A carved man with the back of his head glued to the sycamore. A sudden man too. He had me scared. But loving him so fiercely, I wanted to yell it.

We were almost at the gallery when we heard Olivinia call. Paw and me went in fast through the door and met her in the hall. Her shoulders were up like the night had turned colder than it was.

"That - colored man. He's waking."

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We hustled into Paw's room. There had been a change alright. His breathing had changed. His head was jerking on Paw's pillow. He groaned often and his body twitched under Paw's sheet. His black face glistened with sweat. He looked like a heathen [redacted] idol which had somehow strayed into Paw's bed.

Olivinia stood back to the wall. Her knuckles were pressed to her mouth. She was staring at the man, deep black and shining with sweat. His hands were outside the sheet, long fingered and cut finely. I wondered if he had got those hands picking cotton. I wondered whom he was.

Paw went to the washstand and took a towel from the rack. He crossed back to the bed and wiped the fellow's face. He wiped it gently. The parts he wiped were ash colored afterwards. I hadnt ever seen a black man turn ash colored. It must be the sickness. Paw pulled down the sheet. The shoulders were naked [redacted] down to where the bandages began at the chest. The shoulders were beautifully muscled. Sometimes they had a ripple, like a cats. Paw tested the bandages. He looked up at us. I didnt know what showed on my face but he motioned us with his head to leave the room. I shook my head back. Olivinia didnt seem to have noticed.

Paw hitched a chair to the bed and sat. The night had warmed up. Insects slapped against the mosquito wiring at the open window. Paw rose and pulled the curtain over the window. He went back to the chair. He drew the sheet down to the Nigra's waist. I looked at Olivinia and I said, "Paw."

He looked up angrily at me. Nobody talked. We only looked. The waist was slender as a girl's but widened at the rib cage. The biceps/lay big and black against Paw's sheet. I wanted to puke. No matter that I was backing Paw, it couldnt keep the sickness out of my gut. Sep and the others were right. The sambo should have been in the [redacted] toolshed.

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The Nigra tossed suddenly and mumbled something. We didnt catch the words.

"Fetch a glass of whisky," Paw said to Olivinia.

She didnt seem able to move at all. She was looking at the big Nigra man like he would leap at her if she moved. I went for the glass of whisky. Paw used it to wet the fellow's forehead and his nostrils. He came awake.

He came awake quietly and immediately. Like an animal. The eyes opened and fixed on Paw. They locked on Paw's face and then I could see them trying to loosen their hold as they took in the white man's features. He tried to twist his head but only managed a few jerky movements. The eyeballs twitched from Paw's face and hunted the ceiling and slid down the walls. They met Olivinia and hung for awhile. They wandered from her and found me.

We seemed to look at each other for a long crazy time without any feeling between us. His eyes were big in his face. The pupils a deep black. Our glances met and clashed around like glass taws and then we both looked away.

Paw said, "Can you hear me? Do you understand?"

He didnt answer. He closed his eyes. The fingers twitched on the sheet.

""Open your eyes and look at me," Paw said quietly.

We thought the fellow maybe hadnt heard but his eyes opened and he looked at Paw.

"Your automobile crashed. We are taking care of you. Aint no cause for you to worry. You hear, boy?"

I didnt reckon Paw was hopeful that he could stop the fellow from worrying. Maybe he was just hoping to shake the worry a little so it wouldnt lodge too snug. But I would bet a dollar to doughnuts the fellow wasnt feeling not-to-worry, waking up to a circle of white folks faces around him.

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I thought Paw would feed him some ofthe whisky. Smarten up his tongue so he would talk. Tell us who his people were so we could fetch him there. Take this lousy load off the backs of the Hammonds so we could go about our rightful business. But Paw wasnt doing that at all. Paw was going real good, making like a hospital.

"You heat some of that soup, Olivinia. Let's get something inside him."

Paw sure was doctoring tonight. But his nurse seemed to have run down her batteries. She didnt seem to have heard. She was bracing the wall with her back and staring at the Nigra.

"I'll get it, Paw," I said disgustedly. "She's deader'n that fellow."

That got her off the wall.

"No no no, I'll get the soup," she mumbled, brushing past me to the kitchen.

It was Paw who fed him the soup. He steadied the fellow's head in the crook of his arm while he spooned in the soup from the bowl held by Olivinia. I hadnt asked to help and Paw didnt ask me either. He was really putting in time. I wondered who would be taking out the Nigra's slops. Had Paw thought of that? Had old Doc Paw Hammond thought of that?

The soup didnt go down smoothly. The muscles of his throat hadnt yet come out of shock. Some of the soup bubbled back in the spoon and ran down the sides of his mouth in two streams.

"He's a pig. That's how they eat," I said. I hadnt meant for it to come out aloud.

Paw stormed around on me, spilling soup as he did so.

"The boy's sick, you hear? You wouldnt have been any better if you were sick as he is!"

"Okay. Okay, Paw," I said. "I'm sorry. Okay?"

He glared at me before he went back to doctoring I went

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back to wondering/why the hell did it so matter if I ribbed the Nigra a bit.

"You get some sleep now, boy. You rest good. You'll be alright here," Paw said.

The colored man had been pushing glances at us in turn while he ate. I had caught his eyes once or twice and I had the feeling he wasnt so scared, as curious about us. I wondered if he had been visiting around here. Perhaps he was related to one of the colored families in Malagoosha. I didnt think so. He would have known about Massacre Day and not taken off like the Klan was after him when he heard the guns. I hoped he would remember who he was. That one would be a humdinger. For sure. I had read someplace that accidents could do that to people. That would be just fine and dandy for us, to be stuck with a Nigra guest.

"Let's try getting something out of him. Like his name, who he is, where's he from, who are his folks," I said.

Paw shook his head. Nosirreebob. Paw wasnt going to discommode his patient. Bet your Sunday britches on that.

"We got to notify his folks, Paw. So they can come for him. This guy's got folks just like anybody else. They'll be anxious about him."

The snake oil didnt do much to Paw. He finished tucking in the sheet. He motioned us out of the room as he turned down the wick of the lamp.

He said out in the hall, "No good talking to that fellow now, son. He's too sick."

But sick or not, he had understood me. Our eyes had met just before Paw turned down the light and he had understood me alright. He hadnt been too sick for that.

Olivinia and I went out to the gallery. We watched the fireflies and slapped mosquitoes.

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"We'll get you out of here in the morning. Dont want you to be a nurse to a Nigra. Like Paw."

"Wasnt much help to him in there," Olivinia said. "I must be more helpful to poor Mr Hammond."

So I bulled in on her.

"What do you mean, helpful? What do you want to do? Hold that Nigra's hand? Youleave that to Paw. You're getting out of here tonight."

"For all the good I was to your paw, I ought to be out of here already."

"What came over you? You stared at him like he had put a hex on you. The colored man, I mean."

"It was him coming awake. Laying in your paw's bed and all. When he was asleep, I got along right smart. But then he woke and began looking around, looking at us, like he was part and parcel with us folks, and - and something happened. It wasnt the same again. He had come into us. Dont know if I put it rightly, but I know I wanted to get out and run harder than a [redacted] possum on Hound Dog Day."

"You dont be scared of him," I said, feeling to hug her for her voice was so young and scared, making me [redacted] stand [redacted] taller than timber. "He cant get to you. He's flat on his back anyway. But he try anything, we show him what we do to uppity niggers in Malagoosha County."

Olivinia fanned herself with her apron. The night was sure prickly, but it would turn cool later.

"'Taint that, Abner. Not scared or anything. But it was just like I was seeing something I didnt have any right seeing. Fellow like that, you see him toting a sack of potatoes, or breaking rocks for the railroad track, it aint a thing to turn your head to look at. Reckon when you come down to it, you dont

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see him at all. But lying in the house, on a clean sheet, his shoes off and we fussing around him, it was like I was looking through a door I aint ever seen opened. I mean it - it - it was like nobody should have gone and opened it. "

It made some sense to me but I couldnt rightly put my finger on it. I understood Olivinia, what she was saying, but I couldnt have said it any different. It wouldnt have come out any better. We were talking to each other on the inside, the way you untied a knot, your head learning the twists and loops long before your fingers were ready.

"We'll move him some place. Folks are going to fret with Paw if we keep him here. They're going to get lumpier, the longer we keep him in the house."

Olivinia was leaning on a gallery post, looking up into the night sky. The sky was sure speckled tonight. It was warm for October. It promised a cool winter. Maybe we would get frosts early. Olivinia looked pretty enough to eat.

"Once when I was little, I remember my paw had a mule," she said. "Broke his leg one morning feeding too far up the high rock. Fell on account of thh rock was slippery. I was no more than big 'un to a toadstool but I followed Paw up the high rock and saw the mule lying there. That old mule didnt look right, lying there. He was strong and pulled powerfully on Paw's plow. His hooves were big. His legs were big and dirty and strong. He was used to toting and pulling. Now he was lying there, with Paw and the other men fussing around him. But suddenly our eyes met, me and that old mule. And then I saw in his eyes that he could feel. He could - hurt."

"What did your paw do?"

"Had to shoot him."

"Sure," I said.

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She looked sick at me. I didnt ought to have said it so bold. Could have soaped it up a little. Because I didnt really mean we should shoot the Nigra man like that old mule. Just rid ourselves of the trouble, was all. I had been only funning, but she sure looked sick at me. Hell, folks dont lynch a quarter's worth of what it had been in Paw's time. Uncle Matt had [redacted] said once in Jeb Coombes' that it was a good thing they didnt too. He had been [redacted] on a few when he was younger, and he didnt think it did white folks any better than it did to black folks. It took a lot of corn likker to drown it out of your system for weeks afterwards, he said. Uncle Matt was one ofthe nicest fellows in the County.

"They kept that old mule from suffering, you ever thought of that?" I asked.

She turned her face away, lokking out at the night.

"He used to be a good mule. He hauled a plow better than any we ever had."

A Nigra man wasnt a mule, no matter if Sep Logan held that it wasnt a sin hunting them like coons. Sep was a nice fellow too, except for hating black folks and Jews and Catholics more than was good for a man.

"Come [redacted], I'll take you home," I said. "You leave the doctoring to Paw now that the Nigra is awake."

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IN ITALICS

He woke wideawake out of the deep shock coma. He was immediately aware of strangeness. He laid stock still because he had been trained to carefully check out all the facts of sound and contact before betraying his cover of sleep. Barty Lowe had taught him well, the basic principles of staying alive. The Brooklyn Irish had been cheerful about the milk waggon guys who came awake with a clatter. Grunting and scratching like a boarder in a rooming house basement. Somebody usually soon made a mess of them, Barty said. See it dont happen to you, Barty said. Barty, the big white killer who could love a buddy with the same rapacity with which he would slit a throat. In this dark and fearful place that was the South, Sam Dodge awoke to the instant knowledge that he was in enemy territory.

The light slid into the slit he made at his eyes. When the focus became clearer, he saw the white man's face bending close to him. The sowbelly white with the incongruous blue eyes and the cruel Simian thin mouth of a Caucasian man. Sam Dodge smelled cracker in the room. There was a screaming inside his skull. A screaming to run and run and run. He tried to get up and run but his body would not answer the pull of his brain. He knew he was tossing and groaning, but that was all he could manage.

Sam Dodge opened his eyes into the white man's. His eyes jumped about in confusion and fear, up to the ceiling and along the walls. He saw the girl. She was very young, and she was scared. She was straight hick, homespun from the loom, but clean and pretty looking. His eyes found the boy.

Yeah, Sam Dodge said. There he was. One of them. The young guy standing near the door. He was one of them alright. You always

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knew. The boy had the sneer and the fear-hate on his face. The kill-safe that made them do it to you like a holy deed. [redacted]

A shadow interposed between him and the light and Sam Dodge saw the older man bending over him. The older guy seemed okay, but you learnt not to trust their looks. Sometimes the kindest looking ones turned out to be asking whether your wife was to home, or whether you could lend them your sister.

The older guy was talking to him. He [redacted]heard every word. His head was being washed clean with pain. He was taut as a piano key. The pain was mainly rooted at his back and chest. He couldnt for the life of him tell whether he had legs under the sheet. He seemed to have lost contact down there. He wondered with an awful sick feeling whether he was paralysed. He knew he could talk. He could feel his tongue in his mouth and the water at its roots. His tongue was coiled, ready to explode into speech, but Irish Barty always said a guy should hold something up his sleeve. Whether a knife or a gun or just a piece of knowledge the other mob [redacted] didnt know about.

So he played it along with the older guy, opening his eyes and blinking for his soup. Maybe the old guy was okay. He had turned real sharp on the punk for calling him a black pig. They left after the old man had turned down the lamp. The kid seemed to be his son but [redacted] Sam Dodge didnt get the girl's relationship.

Sam Dodge came cautiously alive. He explored the bandage around his chest. He groped about his face and felt the unlikely bald skull. He found his legs, in splints. Brother, he was a wreck. You could say it again. A wreck. Poor Sam Dodge a wreck and cast up on Mister Charlie's doorway.

He went back over what had happened. He had seen the huge

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son of a bitch looming over him just before the car hit. He had seen the big white dirty son of a bitching rock disputing his way just before he socked it. Before it had crunched him and spat him out with a couple of broken legs and God knows what else torn inside him.

It appeared that he hadnt been badly burnt, except perhaps under the bandages. Somebody must have dragged him out fast. He knew a good deal about combustion engines. He knew roughly what would have gone on when the damn car hit. Only luck, or somebody, could have saved him from being charred alive. Luck and a lot of help.

The thought brought him up but pain crashed in from all sides and pushed him back on the bed again.

Godammit, they must have pulled him out. They must have busted into the blazing auto and pulled him out. A goddam Whitey, a couple of lousy crackers must have done it. But of course it didnt add up. Why in hell would white people have gone into a fire to pull him free? To save his loused up black life?

He breathed through his mouth while the pain subsided and thought about it. He was on Whitey's bed. He could smell white man on the bed. The acrid, hateful white smell. He had to get out before they put any ideas they had to work. He wanted first of all to know how badly hurt he was.

Sam Dodge knew his body. He knew its capabilities. He had always been curious about it. He had brought it to a peak of perfection and taught himself to trust it. But he was ready also to [redacted] disavow it for he had seen too may guys like himself whimper and beg a dirty broken body to be capable a while longer. Just to hold out a little longer. Enough to reach where a man could grapple with the last issues. A rare

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encounter. But the body was mindless; it had no integrity by itself. It had no goddam inner grace, that was for sure. It could go on the white man's side. It was at ease on the white man's bed, satisfaction in every sinew. His flesh was hungry for reassurance while his mind was tearing itself apart to depart [redacted] Mister Charlie's hospitality.

Sam Dodge probed in his head to find out about the state of his body. He ran his mind down the back of his head and over the arch at his neck and searched between his shoulder blades. He knew his back was not broken for he had sat up almost, until the pain had thrust him flat again. The thick pectorals were sore but that was about all. His gut was good. No damage there that he could feel but a sawbones would know more. Only the stupid legs. Those two were broken alright. And that was another thing. Why hadnt they taken him to a hospital? Most of the hospitals would have a wing for colored folk. Filled, and not very clean, but still their very own. Instead he was [redacted] put in the danger area. Amidst the bitter, harsh, hate smells. It was a smell you tasted. All his life had been cut and drawn to know and identify the smell. From the time he was born.

Sam Dodge was born in 1932. In a slats-and-shingle three-room cabin on the edge of the property. His parents share-cropped for the cabin and a couple of acres of dry, sandy soil upcountry from the watershed. His mother sang in the choir of the colored Southern Baptist across the creek. The town was called Nazareth, Ky., and Hoover was waiting in the White House for FDR to come riding down Pennsylvania Avenue, the big electioneering grin turned grim by accession to office.

Sam Dodge would have stayed in the South. But what shaped Sam's future was the store credit which had hooked his folk

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so they dangled from crop to crop like catfish on a line. With no place to go but the skillet. One day his father got sore and clipped the white storekeeper so badly, they had to wire his jaw. His father would have got away with ten years on the roadgang, but he fought the deputies who took him to jail. They sent the body to Sam's mother.

What shaped Sam's future was the weather-blackened church down the creek where his mother sang contralto solos. Folks told her there was money up north for good hymn singing voices. So one day they rode in the colored compartment on a railroad train, going clickety clackety to freedom sitting upright on a wooden bench, through Louisville and Lexington and Charleston, up through Pittsburg and Scranton and New York State, and south again down Seventh Avenue, the Kentucky red dust still blowing in their ears.

They had been lucky, Sam thought. Singing in the choir of the AME church in the basement, his mother was given a clean, large room and a small one for him on the third floor back of the brownstone house at East 125th Street near Mount Morris park. In 1942, she was working good. It was wartime and the Mister Charlie's downtown werent disposed to check your hair for kinks when they needed personnel. Sam and his mother moved to a better place on St Nicholas Avenue. Sam was happy for a long time just being in the house. A nice stone house with just three apartments. Their apartment had a chipped but clean marble wash tub, flush toilets that never failed to work, and a square of garden at the back. With his mother working every day, there was always food in the icebox. His first tentative exposure to Harlem was when he was enrolled in the public school on Eighth Avenue three blocks over from St Nicholas. It didnt take him long to lose the downhome accent and escape the teasings. The fact that,

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among his peers, he was big and strong, helped considerably.

Sam Dodge had never been so free in his life as he was in Harlem. The comfort of all those black faces around him, the feel of money in his pocket, the richness of life in the street. Sam grew up unafraid. True he had a brush now and then with the white cops on the beat, but if there were minorities in Harlem, they didnt look like Sam Dodge. A guy could stand at 145th and Lenox Avenue and piss off a yell fit to rip the cornice from the roof of the Hotel Theresa twenty blocks away, and all the faces that turned to look at him would be fleshed in that warm cocoa brown color with which the good Lord had enriched His Chosen Folk.

Harlem was the place for freedom. The rooftops and the river. Mount Morris Park and the pushcarts on Seventh Avenue where the green vegetables were kept cool by a sprinkler can so they smelled like downhome on a rainsoaked Spring day. The only glimpses Sam Dodge had of white faces was when he played down in the subway station and the express trains flashed by with their loads for downtown and the Bronx. Or in the automobiles that stopped for the lights, the pale, trapped faces looking through the windows at all that noisy black freedom outside. The sweet black freedom they had thought was imprisoned in the ghetto. Sam liked it in Harlem.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Paw used to say that next to mule knowledge, what made this country great was when they buttoned teats to the auto. He claimed that after these United States were midwifed on mules, we suckled on the automobile. It produced a generation that grew to like the idea of going farther faster. So if there had been another gas pump in town, Pete would have lost some customers by the time I got back from the farm. I had to stretch the truth a mite to pacify some irate ones; told them we went to a burying. Squirting gas with one hand and making change with the other, I hustled the line and sent them rolling not too mad once they heard of the burying. After they were through, I hosed down the apron and cleaned up before going across the street for supper. I had just about finished when Jeb Coombes hailed me to say I was wanted on the phone.

I got over there fast, excited that it could be Willi Mae. Slamming through the door, I skidded up to the booth, banged my shins a couple of times as I squeezed in and shut out the astonished faces in Jeb's.

"Hullo!" I yelled into it. "That you, Wil --- I mean Pete?"

There was a lot of noise and somebody was singing mountain songs but not good as Hosanna. The phone gave a few clonks as if somebody had dropped it and then I heard Pete's voice.

"Hullo! Hullo!"

It went again and there was a confused noise of voices.

"Pete ---- Pete ---- what's going on?" I yelled.

He came back but a lot crazier than before.

"Listen, Abner, that sis ---- you know what that fool sister of yours doing? I tell you, she's ----!"

The phone went dead, but not before I had made out Willi Mae's

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voice yelling something at him. I stood there helplessly looking at it before I hung up. I had my hands in my pockets and my shoulders rabbit-hunched like Paw's when I shambled out of the booth. Folks in the store stared at me and Jeb said, "Anything the matter, Abner?"

I shook my head and went out. I couldnt make head or tail of it but there was a lot of worry in it. Pete had sounded angrier than a scalded cat and I was sure that was Willi Mae who had screeched something before the phone was hung up. I didnt know what was going on. If that goddam Pete would only ring when he could talk. I went into the station and locked up and went to lay down on Pete's bed. I rolled a pillow under my head, turned on his radio and got Hosanna singing 'Ree, raw, my Dinah gal. Her voice was clean as a piney wood.

I couldnt tell Paw anything until I was sure. He would only worry, and he had enough on his mind right now for we were both waiting to see what Sep Logan would do. I would have stayed the night at Paw's but he threw me out. He said I had promised Pete to stay with the gas station and that was it. But with one of his grins made richer by their infrequency, he showed me the shotgun and said Sep would be the worse off if he showed up. I hadnt quite dozed off when a rapping came at the window. I figured it was somebody coming in late for gas so I called "Coming," and threw a coat on. Then I heard my name called in a whisper and recognized Olivinia's voice.

"Dont turn on the light," was what she whispered.

There had been a catch in her voice that made you think she was liable to bust out bawling anytime. I eased quickly outside and met her under the overhang by the washroom. In the glow of the street light, her eyes shone at me out of the shawl covering her hair. I wondered how she had got here from Jeb Wishaw's. I could smell the night scent on her, the

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warm, sweet sleep sweat, the bed sweat that was flogging me to put my arm on her and say Kitten, Kitten, but not knowing if she would claw my head off.

"Kiss me, Abner," she whispered.

Bold as a puppy she was. But I wasnt going to have her believe I was a darn cottontail, so I kissed her. She came into me, easy as water, and I smelled her hair and felt the flow of her along me and reckoned there was nobody I would rather marry after all.

"How did you get to town?"

"I borrowed your paw's car. My paw's gone with Sep Logan," she said. But that didnt make sense. I had taken her home myself.

"How did you get back to my paw's?" I asked.

"Walked. Walked some. I went back. If you mean to be mad, then get it over with. There are other things, such as my Paw going over to see Sep Logan. Sep's calling a gathering."

I had known something would be up, but I hadnt reckoned on Sep calling a gathering so quickly. But in a way, it was a good thing. They were all Paw's friends. They would stop Sep from doing anything foolish. That was how it looked.

"What's Sep doing? He going in the lead?"

"They've gone to see Uncle Matt. Sep is gathering them in to go with him to Mayor Roberts. They're going to ask the mayor to put the law on your paw so he'll give up the colored man."

"Paw aint going to."

Not Paw who had taken up his gun already. They should have coaxed the stubborn old mule instead of pushing him. Now he was sitting down in the trace. It would take some skinning.

"He may have to," Olivinia said. "The whole County will go against him for taking the Nigra's side against Sep. You know that. Sep told my paw that you were there with your

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Paw holding a scattergun on him."

"On him? He alone?"

"He said his sons were there too but he had to hold them back when they wanted to jump you. Says he didnt want no killing and they would have taken you easy."

"Yeah, easy," I said, recalling with a grin how they had sloped off careful as 'possums in a meadow. "When they coming in to see the mayor?"

"Soon's they've been around to the rest."

"Where's the car?"

"I left it down the street. Didnt want anybody to see me coming here."

"Okay, you go on back now. I'll use Pete's pickup."

"Abner, I'm on your side."

"Sep called us nigger-lover. Its bad to be called that."

She was smiling at me now. "So what do I care what they call you? I'm your girl."

It was nice. She felt good along me although I was a little scared holding her but I guess girls do that to all the men. You hold them and you know they're strong as hickory yet you wonder if they'll break. I took her back to the car and she headed out of town. Then I went back to the gas station for Pete's pickup.

I kept the headlamps on until I was at the front of the house; didnt want him to think somebody was sneaking up on him. I switched off and climbed down facing the door and called, "Paw, its me."

His voice came from behind me. "Sure, son, go on in."

I spun startled. He was bulked up in a heavy wind cheater, the shotgun cradled in his arm. By God, I thought, Paw's like them

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old Indian fighters you read about. The car was in the front yard where Olivinia had left it.She was inside the house.

"Paw, you hear Sep's gone to see the Mayor?"

He chuckled. "Sure. So I was just going in out of the chill. Wasnt sure whether he wouldnt have doubled back hoping to catch me. But if he's gone to the Mayor, then he's going to be legal."

"He's getting Uncle Matt and the others to go with him."

"They'll go."

"I figured maybe they wouldnt."

"They will. When Sep tells them the trouble I went to getting him and his sons off my land, they will be madder than a catamount that I havent given up as they wanted. They will reckon its time they knuckled my head." He chuckled again.

"Suppose the Mayor gets a court order against us?"

"For keeping folks off my land? Shucks."

"He's mayor. Maybe he has the power."

We were sitting in the dark. Paw got up and lit a lamp in the living room. Olivinia had gone into the colored man's room.

"How's he?" I said, nodding at the room.

He sat down in the rocker and rocked a little.

"Good as we can expect. That aint my worry. My worry is, how are we?"

I didnt have any answer for that. I had never had much success answering Paw's [redacted] heavier mail. He was doing what he called think-talk and he didnt expect much of a reply from me anyway. He took a time answering. He spoke softly, looking down.

"A man must be able to do what he wants in his own house, short of real bad crimes. I aint much on learning, but that's how this State and this nation was brought up. Nobody's going to make it any different, not if we dont let them. And I guess our business, all folks' business, is not to let 'em."

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I knew what he meant. He had raised me and taught me more than I had got from books. He had taught me not by talking, but by doing. He had taught me how to get up early in the morning and to gulp the hot sorghum and coffee and go out to harness the mules and commence the working and the sweating by which we kept owning this land. We owned it and we kept the fences tight.He had taught ~~XMA~~ me that the way to respect our neighbors was by keeping our own fences tight.

"I think I'd better stay on here."

"No need to."

"Olivinia oughtnt to have come back from her paw's."

He didnt argue. We sat talking and then dozing. It had been a heavy night, driving Olivinia home , then back to town and hustling Pete's gas station.

One time I woke and heard a mumble of voices in Paw's room. Olivinia was lying on a couch, a rug over her. Paw wasnt in the living room so I guessed the Nigra fellow must have woke and Paw was in there talking with him. I hoped he found out where the boy was from, so we could get him off our backs. I was too sleepy to go see what he and the fellow were talking about. Near dawn, Sep and the rest of them hit ut.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

A fug hung close to the ground and they came to us out of it. I woke when Paw shook me. Light was playing all over the walls and streaming about on the floow.

"A bunch of automobiles coming. Guess its them," Paw said.

I jumped up and ran to the window. I counted four cars. The lead one was ~~jsm~~ just halting before the house. Paw took up the shotgun and motioned for me to follow. He opened the door and leaned the gun against the jamb. He stepped beyond the door and the headlights picked him up. The cars stopped. Groups of silent men came out and stood off. We could make them out in the lights' reflection.

"Hold up, Mayor," Paw said.

"Abner," Mayor Roberts said, "This is a friendly visit."

"Right friendly, at this hour," Paw said drily. "Especially that Sep's with you. Last time out, he wasnt so friendly."

There were Uncle Matt, Jeb Wishaw, Jilson Swift, Micajah Hoe and all of Sep's seven sons and a couple of others I didnt make out. The fog washed ghostily about them.

"I heard about Sep's visit, Abner. The report wasnt good."

"Abner, what the hell's come over you?" Uncle Matt asked.

"Nothing that wasnt there before, Matt," Paw said.

"Why you making all this trouble over a Nigra?"

Paw took a little while to answer. He said, "Now that you ask it, I reckon that's because part of it is our own fault."

"Dont give me that!" Uncle Matt barked angrily.

"I mean, maybe its our fault why Old Lookout has stood there so long waiting for somebody to come along and bust himself over it."

Mayor Roberts held up his hand. "Wait a minute, Abner. We always figured on changing the road around it. You know that. It was only a matter of time before we detoured the road around it."

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"But time ran out for that Nigra, Coleman. SOmebody had to pick up things now and I guess you fellows put it on me," Paw said.

"That's damn fool talk, Abner!" Uncle Matt roared. "What has Old Lookout got to do with it?"

"You're making trouble with your neighbors over a nigger," Sep said.

"That boy in there's hurt bad, Sep. He broke himself in our town. I'm just giving him a chance to be well before he goes on his way. Soon as he can move, we'll move him."

"Maybe they pamper niggers over on your side of the County, but [redacted] not on this side," Sep Logan said. "We say, he can move now."

"Not today. Or even tomorrow. Maybe the day after," Paw said.

"Nigger lover," Hiram Logan said, low and bitter.

Jeh Wishaw turned swiftly on him. "You stop that now, you hear?"

Mayor Roberts turned his head. "That's slander, boy," he said sternly. "Make him shut up, Sep."

Sep gave his son a backhand blow on his mouth. Hiram's head jerked sideways.

"Alright, Coleman, he aint talking anymore. You go ahead now and do what's got to be done," Sep said.

Mayor Roberts faced Paw again. "Abner, we want you to get rid of that colored fellow right now."

"In a day or two," Paw said, bland as cream.

"Where's he?" Sep shouted.

"Same place you saw him last," Paw said.

Japheth Logan, Sep's son, twisted his head and spat.

"Jeezam, in his own bedroom," Japhhth said disgustedly.

Paw and me didnt look so good, the way Japheth said it. Yet they must/have all Known [redacted] that [redacted] we hadnt found out [redacted] the [redacted]

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man was colored until it wouldnt rub off. [redacted]

Sep Logan leaned forward, his eyes jumping and said, "Where's the young 'un? I see he brought Pete Sawyers pickup but we aint seen him since we came. He holed up inside?"

They hadnt seen me slip from the porch before the cars halted but while they had been talking to Paw, I had done what he told me to do. Paw told me to look in the automobiles if they brought guns; they had all come light. Guess Mayor Roberts and the rest had talked Sep Logan out of coming armed.

"Dont know exactly where he is right now, Sep, but I reckon he aint far off," Paw said, throwing his hand at the dark.

Paw was showing me he had more corners than a running deer in a cornfield. The Logan boys looked uneasily around and Hiram was making to slide off. I moved back off the cars into the deep dark, watching him.

"Now dont you go sliding off into the dark at all, Hiram," Paw said mildly. "We Hammonds dont like folk trespassing on our land, especially in the dark."

Uncle Matt shook his head and said, "Abner, you getting right down to war."

"Not so, Matt. Just keeping my fences repaired. Some people around seem to have forgot a man has fences."

"Abner," Mayor Roberts said, "We aint here to make trouble. Sep and the boys gave me a report. My duty to the county is to rectify the wrong. You're wrong. You think a little and you know you're wrong. Sometimes a man is for one thing but most people around him is for

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another. Way how we run this country as I see it, a man goes with the majority. The best in us comes from the majority."

Out in the deep dark, the fog dripping off my nose, I listened and Mayor Roberts was making a lot of sense. The law says drive on the right side of the road. A fellow who drives on the left is going to hurt himself and some other fellow. But, hell, I could see what Paw meant. He was in off the road, where a man goes private. Sep and the others could have left him alone there. [redacted] I passed my hand over my face wiping off the moisture.

"Coleman," Paw said, "if we ran this country that way, we'd be no better off than a flock of sheep."

Hiram Logan had been hulking his shoulders impatiently for some time and finally he spoke.

"Paw, we know where they put the nigger. Lets get him out."

[redacted]

Sep nodded. "Guess that's the way we ought to do it, Coleman. Me and my boys here will dig [redacted] him out."

Paw stiffened in the doorway. "You got a warrant that says so, Mayor?"

"I had that warrant the day they elected me, Abner."

Paw leaned forward. The lines in his face deepened.

"You better go, Coleman. All of you better go."

"Abner," Jeb Wishaw said, "we're your friends. You forgetting that?"

"Yes, I am," Paw said. "That way, when I see you again I wont remember what happened this night."

"There wont be a single one in the County with you, Abner.

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You going to be alone," Micajah said, "except for your cub."

"That so," Paw snapped.

"Aint going to help the boy nohow, either," said Jilson Swift. "You remembering that, Abner? Going to college, aint he? They'll talk about it there."

"Paw," Japheth Logan bawled like he was hurt, "let's dig [redacted] him out."

"Mayor, you ready?" Sep Logan said roughly.

In the doorway, Paw's hand went aside and I knew he had the scattergun.

"Mayor," he said, "you better know, I'm armed. My son's out there. We got you treed."

Mayor Roberts seemed to tremble all over. "Abner Hammond, you threatening me?" he said hoarsely.

"Saying I aim to protect my property, that's all, Coleman. That's in the law."

"You standing for it, Mayor?" Sep said.

Paw's hand came out with the gun but he held it cradled so it held offence for nobody.

"You going to lead the trespass on my land, Mayor?" he asked. "You tell Sep."

"I aint dropping this, Abner. I'm warning you," Mayor Roberts said. "I'm coming back."

"Come back with a warrant," Paw said.

"You aint going, Mayor!" Sep said angrily.

"He's got to," Uncle Matt snapped. "Abner aint listening to reason tonight."

They headed back for the cars and I backed behind a poplar so

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the lights wouldnt hit me. In the glow of the light, I could see Sep's sons with their heads out of the windows searching the dark for me. Then they said it like a chant, humming with hate, over and over:

"Nigger-lover, nigger-lover, nigger-lover."

Like bees in a gourd, chanting it so it filled my skull and I felt unclean. The engines rattled and raced. And low and distinct came the Logan hate-call, already the hump on my back.

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CHAPTER TEN

Next morning I drove into town and went over to Miss Amanda's. She sat at the switchboard in a front room by a street window. She was a browney, mousey little woman until you saw her eyes. They snapped and crackled like a bobcat's. They were black as buttons. They jabbed and probed at you, putting in the barb and watching with shiny interest for the pain to pop.

"Morning, Miss Amanda. Know if Pete Sawyer phoned again since last night?" I asked.

She made a great show of recalling, her head on one side. But she would no more have disremembered than I would skin a live polecat.

"Now let me see. Did Pete Sawyer telephone Abner Hammond? Come to think of it, I think he did," she said after awhile.

"He say anything? He left any message?"

"I rang over to Jeb Coombes but they said you had locked up and gone."

"You told Pete that?" I said in dismay for I didnt want Pete to think I wasnt caring his business.

"Not in my place, I'm sure, Abner," she said, her eyes careful on me. "Just told him the party wasnt answering."

"And Pete, he didnt say anthing?"

"Not that I could hear. There was all this noise."

"What noise, Miss Amanda?"

"You know, the usual. The music going and folks singing. You get to wondering what kind of house this Pete's staying at."

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Bobcat eyes raking and clawing the coat of a furry little animal he making a meal of.

"The usual, Miss Amanda? What usual?" I asked all silk and cream.

But she was sharp clear through, Miss Amanda. She wouldnt fall into the trap by letting on she listened to every phone call in town. Her face was as false as a revenue fellow's handshake.

"In a manner of speaking, Abner. Now you must excuse me," she said, fingering the metal contraptions she poked the board with.

I wondered what story she would spread around town. No doubt it would go to Coleman Roberts first since she was sweet on him and he not being a man opposed to gossip. But Miss Amanda was like drouth or poison ivy; you put up with her or avoided her.

I opened up the gas station and unlocked the pumps and got out the hose to wash down the apron. Oil and gas stains collect real fast on concrete and a fellow needs to work hard to stay ahead. I got a good head on the power hose and sent it gouging and tearing at the stuff, washed the foot of the pumps and followed up with the scrub broom. A couple of fellows were real considerate, waving to me and saying they would be back for gas rather than busting into my cleanup job with their dirty tyres. I kept an eye on Mayor Roberts office as I worked, to see who went in and out. And plenty did, more than I would figure needed the druggist this early. But it wasnt necessary to wonder when they came out, what the mayor and they had talked about. Each of those folks would pause on the steps and look over at me, most of them scowling but a few just looked puzzled. One of them, Adam Shelby, came over for gas. I was tooling in three dollars

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worth when he got out of his car and came to stand beside me.

"Hear tell you and Jeb Wishaw's daughter Olivinia will soon be called out in meeting," he said.

He was a nice fellow and his son and me had been out together couple of times shooting geese. He didnt mean anything bad, you can always tell by the eyes. Paw used to say that after a little practice you could always tell when the black bear would charge. That mean old fellow couldnt keep it out of his eyes nohow.

"Folks talk, Mister Shelby," I said. "Talk so much they get ahead of themselves."

"One of the loveliest girls in the territory, Abner. You couldnt do better. Your Paw ought to be right pleased."

I squirted gas into his car waiting for it. Didnt take long either.

"Heard he wasnt too pleased last night though," Adam Shelby said.

"Folks talk," I said.

"Lots of us think a man ought to be able to choose the company he wants," he said. "Still a free country, I hope to God."

The hose jumped in my hands. This was the first time anybody had said that maybe Paw had a few rights. I put on the tank cap, locked it and gave him the keys.

"I'll tell Paw, Mister Shelby," I said. "Maybe you could go out and tell him too. Can get real lonely out on the farm."

"Sure," he said. He looked a mite uneasy. "You tell him that. Tell him Mayor Roberts aint a bad fellow. Maybe they should

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have another talk."

I took the five from him and gave him two. No use talking to him any longer. His eyes had changed. I guessed he wouldnt be out to tell Paw himself.

"Hunting season soon, Abner. When you coming out with me and my boy?"

"I'll give you a holler," I said.

He drove off huffily and I knew I had done it wrong. Ought to have played him longer and maybe find out why Mayor Roberts was phoning all these men to come in for a talk. I hadnt seen Jeb Coombes cross the street yet. When that happened I would know that Mayor Roberts had got the pack with him.

Jeb Coombes was a man who understood power like an axe. A quiet man behind the counter of his grocery store, he moved the length of it soft as a cat for all his bulk, serving flour or cloth goods with equal quickness, talking in the low rumble that used few words to say a load of meaning. And now and then he would look over at the fellows shaking hands with General Lee and would hold authority over them for the time it took him to give a nod and a wink. And the talk would lag, as if it was scratching its ears, while the men looked up at Jeb, nodding back until he turned again to the folks he was serving. He was tender as pap with women, but I've seen him use his fists like cleavers on a couple of city fellows one Massacre Day inside his store. He had more influence than any one man in that part of the county but he was not lightly bought. He didnt have much use for Mayor Roberts and Mayor Roberts knew it. If he was getting the town up against Paw, he would line most everybody behind him before tackling Jeb Coombes.

Sep came into town in the afternoon and went straight to the

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mayor's office. Then Uncle Matt too and afterwards Jeb Wishaw drove in and Olivinia was with him. I had known she was coming in, for a preaching man from some foreign place upcountry was at the meeting house tonight. The town was filling up pretty fast. I was jumpy with wondering what Coleman Roberts was planning. So long as they all stayed in town, Paw was alright along out there. It would take a smart fellow to sneak up on Paw with him on the warpath. I had made up my mind that if there was any movement out of town, I would be on their heels. My own bird gun was lying on Pete's bunk and I had brought out a pocketful of shells from the house.

At dark, Olivinia slipped away and we met in the shadow behind the gas station. She came close to me and touched my face with her fingers. She traced my jaw and said, "You'll be shaving after a year in college."

"Could be there wont be any college," I said.

Her girl body was along me now, hard at the knees and soft and hard again, her face close to mine.

"That aint no way to talk. You go to college. Neither you nor your Paw nor me would like it otherwise, regardless."

"Regardless of what?" I asked. Maybe Jeb Wishaw had spoken in front of her.

She pulled down my head and kissed me and I had never been tongued before so it was like something exploding in me, busting loose every way. My arms were iron around her. She didnt move except for the ripples that ran over her and I guess we were both moaning.

She moved her head away and whispered, "There could be folks around."

She was that cool, where a second before she had been in the

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boil with me. There was a lot to learn about women. She was out of my arms with a movement that was almost a dance. I got mad.

"How come you kiss like that? You've been kissing fellows?"

"No other fellow but you, Abner Hammond."

"You talk the truth now. I never taught you that."

She stiffened angrily. "You couldnt teach a deer how to run," she snapped.

It wouldnt be any sense getting her dander up further. I had lost out on Adam Shelby and there were things I needed to know. There was a lot I didnt know about girls. Perhaps they came to [redacted] kissing as how a partridge came to flying. They never had much to do anyhow and could spend their time thinking up how to flurry a fellow.

"Spoke out of turn," I said. "Dont be mad."

But I think I must have turned humble too quickly for she paused in fixing her hair to peer at me.

She said, "That you did. I have to go now."

"Where you going?"

"To the meeting-house. Paw and Maw came in for the meeting."

"Thought he came in to see Coleman Roberts."

"That was part of it." She paused and then said, "You come on to the meeting house. We'll sit near the back and I can talk to you."

"About Paw?"

She hesitated. "Yes, about your Paw."

She waited while I wrote on a card saying where I was and stuck it on the pump. We walked to the big clapboard meeting-house down on Boone Street. It was pretty nearly filled but we found an empty bench near the back and sat down. The preacher hadnt come to the platform yet

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and folks were singing hymns while they waited. Jeb Wishaw was up front and when he looked around for Olivinia, he saw us sitting together. He frowned and made as if to rise, then he sat again and wispered to his wife. She shook her head and looked back at us. Olivinia and she smiled at each other.

"About Paw?" I said.

"That was a bad thing to happen last night," she said. "Everybody's saying Mister Hammond shouldnt have acted so."

"Not everybody," I said, remembering Adam Shelby. "At least, not altogether."

"At any rate, mostly. Way they see it now is that your Paw has done what he wanted to do, he ought to back down to folks' wishes."

"If folks had come in a better mood, Paw might have listened to them. Who does Sep Logan think he is, coming with his kin."

"Trouble is its no longer Sep Logan but all the others too."

"Yeah, your Paw and Uncle Matt and the others. That's not the whole section."

"Jeb Coombes' with Mayor Roberts too."

I stared at her. "Who says so?"

"Paw was there when he had a long talk on the phone with Jeb. Jeb Coombes is gone over."

I covered up the shock, and yes, the hurt. Jeb Coombes had been pretty close to Paw. He had stayed with us once when he was resting up from his operation for appendicitis and he often came out for Sunday dinner.

"Jeb Coombes aint got anything we need," I snapped.

"Abner Hammond, dont turn porcupine on me," she said.

Folks were clapping their hands and singing and presently the

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preacher came out on the platform. He was short and thin, with a large head and dressed in alpaca. You expected he would have a thin squeak of a voice but what came out was so booming you looked around to see if there was someone else.

He walked out to the front of the platform, his short legs chopping down like a thresher machine and stood stiffly, head thrown back and eyes closed. Everyone sang louder as he prayed holding the Bible like a weight before him. Then he opened his eyes and held up his hands and the singing reared up mule fashion before it jammed down its foreleg and halted so quickly fit to throw you. I had heard he was a mighty knowing preacher and we all settled a little broader on the haunches to hear him talk.

He came at us fast.

"How'd you like to see Jesus Christ kick that Castro out of office, huh? And Khrushchev, take that Khrushchev, how'd you like to see Jesus Christ standing beside him that day up at the United Nations when he banged his shoe on the table, and saying, 'Put on thy shoe,' saying, 'Khrushchev, put on thy shoe.' Huh? That's all. Just saying, 'Khrushchev, put on thy shoe, man, put on thy shoe!' How'd you like to see that, huh?"

He was a rousing man and folks just sat there deeper and deeper saying over and over again Amen and Alleluia the way they do when the preacher's running straight on the trace.

"Olivinia, you tell me about Coleman Roberts," I whispered to her.

"Listen to the preacher, Abner."

A preacher as good as this one was good for hours with me any evening except the one where Paw was being treed.

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"Got to know. Its my Paw."

She turned and looked at me steady, the hazel in her eyes flecking in the lights like gold.

"The preacher's got something to tell you," she said.

Didnt know Olivinia was getting religion nohow which aint bad when a fellow has the time for it. But this was what I didnt have and I would have hauled my stump and walked out of there if I hadnt wanted to know about Coleman Roberts pretty badly. I reckoned there wasnt anyone else I could learn from so I sat and waited. After the preaching was over, she might be in a fitter mood.

"And take that NAACP, the nigger communist group up in that den of iniquity named New York," cried the preacher. "How'd you like to see Jesus Christ climbing aboard one of them busses they all want to ride on, holding his lily white robes around him and climbing aboard and pointing a finger at them and saying, 'Niggers, you get out and walk. That's how I made you to be and that's how its gonna be!' How'd you like that, huh? And talking about that nigger communist bunch, let me tell you, you aint safe from the devil no matter where you be. No, brothers and sisters, nobody's safe from the devil.

"Not even in this sovereign state which the good Lord done over into paradise for you, His chosen children. No, sir. For I hear them nigger communists have done moved into the county."

So Paw and me had been plumb fools. We could have had our heads blown off. That [redacted] nigger had been one of them. What had been busting Sep and the others apart was knowing that the communists had moved in while Paw and me had been stopping up the wrong hole.

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We had been a couple of dopes.

"Whyn't you tell me? We'd have given the Nigra to Sep," I whispered to Olivinia.

She shook her head and looked at me kind of mournful. Guess the fool part was peeping out. But she could have told me rather than giving me a riddle-me-ree about listening to the preacher.

"You gonna have to clean up if you want to go to heaven!" the preacher was yelling. He got a storm of amens and alleluias, he was that good.

"Its like you're at the casting ground one of them frosty mornings. When the Master calls the roll and you answer to your number, you got to cinch your saddle and be ready to move out for that old fox is bad.

"That old fox communism is smart and bad.

"And the nigger communists are double bad because they hate the Lord.

"He hates the Lord for making him black and he hates the Lord because he's a communist."

Olivinia looked at me solemn and said, "It aint what you're thinking, Abner. Coleman Roberts' loaded the preacher like a gun."

Gosh, I thought.

By golly.

"Yes, sir. Them nigger communists so smart I hear they throwing sand in the eyes of some of the most respected folks around here. I hear that after the Lord met one of them nigger communists coming into town on the devil's work and struck him [redacted], you good

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people of Malagoosha figured on dumping theanti-Christ [redacted]. But what happened?"

He dropped his voice so low that you had to pull your ears to hear him.

"Along comes the devil and takes the spirit of that double hater of the Lord and breathes it into one of your most respected fellow citizens. And this poor benighted fellow who has become the devil's tool, takes that Nigra and hides him in his own home in this fair county. And so now, all of you are accursed."

He was such a liar that before I knew it, I was on my feet and calling to him.

"Preacher, it aint like that! My Paw's a good man. Moreover there wasnt anybody knew this fellow was a nigger until it was late.

Folks looked around at me but it didnt do any good for the preacher was now full out and you had to hand it to him, he sure knew his business. I sat down feeling the shame burning. The preacher really knew his business. You could feel the hate coming out all through the meeting-house.

He was standing straight up now. His hands came out at us and folks were holding their breaths.

"How would you like one morning to see the Lord Jesus Christ climbing up the steps to the gallery at the courthouse, His lily white robes held off the ground so as not to be dirtied by the accursed land, and point a finger at you all and say,

"'Cursed be ye, for ye have denied me and taken in the anti-Christ.

"'Cursed be ye, ye nigger-lovin' Communists.

"'Eternal damnation be yours, ye betrayers of my holy land.'

"Huh? How would you like you and your children to be eternally damned for keeping a nigger in this holy County?"

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He was real good, that preacher. He had me at the end of a rope. All I could do was bawl as he put the hot iron on my hide.

"'Taint true, Preacher! 'Taint true!"

A lot of faces were turning to look at me. Jeb Wishaw among them. He beckoned to Olivinia but she just looked straight in front.

"Coleman Roberts did it," she was saying in a whisper to me. "I heard Paw telling mother that Mayor Roberts had got hold of the preacher and that he was going to read out on your paw tonight. That's why I wanted you to hear it."

I was plain axed, just staring loopy at the preacher. His big voice folded over me once more.

"We will sing Brother William Walker's Southern Harmony, Though Satan may," he said, his eyes drilling at me, contempt and a joke in them.

Folks opened their Zion Songsters on their [redacted] laps and beat time with their heads to the tune for hexing my paw.

Though Satan may his power employ
Our peace and comfort to destroy
O never fear, we'll gain the day
And triumph in the good old way.

I went out of the meeting-house after they had started stomping and singing the O Hal-le, Hallelujah. Olivinia came out too. The preacher had me numb with a helpless [redacted] anger. I walked fast. She trotted to keep up with me.

"Take me back out to your place in the pickup," Olivinia said.

I turned angrily on her. "You crazy? You want your paw to take a birch rod to you? You keep away from us."

"Paw wont do anything to me. He knows I'm more help to him around the house and the least 'uns than Maw. She's ailing real decline."

That girl was as chock full of suprises as a jackdaw. Butter wouldnt melt in her mouth - until you knew her. The

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noise was still going over at the meeting-house when I got out Pete's pickup and headed for Paw's with Olivinia.

He was sitting in the rocker by the radio listening to Hosanna singing My Gal Is Billy-be-Damned. Whether a song called for sour mash or molasses in her voice, Hosanna could serve it up better than anyone else. She was famous all over the state but I guess because we were two lonely men, Paw and me had adopted her for our own.

"Paw, the town's coming for him," I said.

His face in the lamplight was all bones and hollows. He looked almost sickly, a kind of trouble he had never had before, being hard as oak. He looked at Olivinia and she went into the Nigra's room.

"There's been a talking?"

"No, Paw. They didnt talk on it but the preacher did."

"What preacher?"

"The one we heard about last week. He was at the meeting-house tonight. They're going to fetch out the Nigra. Preacher's got them hooked like a trout in the alder."

"He's a foreigner, aint he?"

"Yes, but Coleman Roberts got to him."

"And the townfolk? He stirred them up?"

"Yeah, and your friends too. Jeb Wishaw and Uncle Matt were at the meeting-house."

Paw thought and said, "You spoke with Jeb Coombes?"

I swallowed. This wasnt good for Paw at all. "Jeb Coombes' going along with Mayor Roberts."

He looked concerned and said, "Could be you're wrong, son?"

I shook my head, staring into the little softwood fire he had

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kindled to take the chill off. It was down to coals and would burn out quickly but we never used our winter cutting this early.

"When do they reckon to come?"

Olivinia had told me about the talking she had heard from her Paw. "They're calling a meeting tomorrow noon at the courthouse. Mayor Roberts will take a vote but he wont have any trouble since the preacher has done threatened them with hell fire for taking in a communist."

Paw looked hard at me and I told him what the preacher had said.

"Coleman Roberts is a bad man," Paw said. "We've never had any trouble with Nigras in this county. Got quite a few over where our family are at, sharecropping and running their own little farms but I dont reckon this Nigra communist bunch he's talking about ever got in there at all."

"That preacher looked wicked as a hellbender when he spoke. Olivinia tells me Mayor Roberts wanted them worked up so he could raise a real posse among them."

Paw stopped rocking. "Posse? What's he doing with a posse? What about the police? He's got Joe and Shorty."

I couldnt help a grin. "Coleman Roberts aint forgetting you're a Hammond, Paw. He remembers you met him with a gun. Maybe he doesnt think his police force is much good with you on the warpath. And anyway, Joe and Shorty is the size of his police force."

He was looking off but it was hard to tell what he was thinking. He had this way of going off by himself and sometimes

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when he came back, he was a sudden man. Paw came to grips with trouble like a muskallonge to a bait. He stood off, looking cautiously at it; but when he lunged, his jaw closed and locked.

"Coleman aint doing the right thing," he said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait for them, here."

I had an idea. "Suppose we took/ that fellow out of here. Clean out of the County. Take him in Pete's pickup with me driving real quiet so he wouldnt hurt any. How about it, Paw?"

He said softly, "Aint going to do that, son. He couldnt stand it. I guess he and I will be hhre when they come."

"But Paw, they got guns," I explained patiently. "You and me alone, they will take a heap of stopping."

He didnt do much but looked hardbacked as a China hog. Like he was selecting the fence he would back up to but there wasnt a peck he could do against Mayor Roberts and a posse. His mouth had turned fool stubborn, the upper lip pulled in and blowing out jets of air as he figured how to meet Coleman ROberts. Paw's respect for the law/ wasnt due to the law's power to punish/ him. He respected it out of a bone-deep understanding of its functions as a frontier. Paw walked surefooted because he considered that even the animals who got inside this frontier would be tamed when they saw that nobody was putting out traps or loading guns. Paw liked the way he thought things were, and that was why, now and again, he was more rebel than most. For he thought that most folks were more like him than were not, and when he found out that it was not so, it made him mad in a quiet way and just brought him up stubborn. That colored

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man now: for a fact if they had let Paw have his way, he would be out, quickly and quietly, as soon as he could be moved. Paw wouldnt make a hoot and hurrah about winning his point. But what now, most shook me was that Paw was aiming to fight the whole County if needs must. It was one thing getting a drop on Sep and his sons, or Mayor Roberts and those others who had been our friends, and still were, I felt; but when Coleman Roberts got mad enough to swear in some of the toughs around Malagoosha, then it was bigger than Paw. Maybe not bigger, but meaner. Mayor Roberts could sure find some mean deputies.

A little shine of concern was at the corners of his eyes as he looked at me. The rabbit had mounted to his shoulders as it did for Willi Mae. They were doing too much to him. He couldnt lick them all. They would tromp him for his damn fool notions which nobody else held around these parts. He was a loner. A loser. Maw and then Willi Mae and me even. He hadnt fought to hold any of us, just taken it and hunched some more. He was making more holler over a sick Nigra than he had made over us.

"You go back and tend Pete's gas station. I can handle this alone," he said.

"How?"

He didnt fumble any. He winked and said, "I'm going to talk to Coleman ROberts. By golly, he'll listen and by the time I'm through, he will be laughing at himself."

Boy, did he make me mad.

"What you going to say? How America was built on folks being decent to sick Nigras?" I shouted.

It looked for awhile as if he would backhand me but he just reddened and paled.

"Git," he said softly.

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"I'm sorry, Paw. I didnt mean for it to come out like that," I said.

"I know. Its alright, son. You go back to town."

I stood up and said, "Paw, those folks are going to come with guns.We cant handle them all. We're both going to be killed because of a [redacted] Nigra[redacted]."

"No, it isnt because of him. Its because of [redacted] what I got inside," Paw said slowly. "What I got inside is now the bullseye in the turkey shoot."

"Dont go talking any parables, old man!" I yelled. "You stay out of the brush where I can see you."

But I was being mad at old stone face. He sat there rocking, waiting for me to crawl back inside.

After awhile, he said, "Sent me a wire yesterday. Ought to do us some good. If not, well."

I couldnt figure what he was talking about. But I didnt see a wire doing us any good unless he had wired for the army.

"I'm staying the night," I said.

He got the look I hadnt tried to buck since one time long ago when I had said Willi Mae wasnt worth hog tripe to go on mooning about. He could move swifter than a painter and the day he turned on me, I had thought he was going to pop me one. But he had stopped his hand in time. I hadnt been fool enough after that to try downgrading Willi Mae.

"You go into town. Dont come back until I send for you."

I drove back into town and parked near the gas pumps. It was pretty late. Usually, by this time, most folks were at home but tonight there were lots of people standing around the corners. The largest group was on

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the courthouse lawn across from Mayor Roberts. I sat in the car, the window halfway down, listening round for talk about us.

Fellows who go scratching their ears around in the dirt, will, like hens, pick up dirt. Reckon I had it coming to me but that didnt lessen the blow.

They all seemed to be talking about us. That was allowable since twice now Paw had put the gun on folks doing no more than going to dig out a Nigra [redacted]. But then my hardworking ears scraped up this piece of dirt, and, brother, I was done for.

"... no good white trash," the fellow was saying. "I aint surprised that girl of his, Willi Mae's whoring down in Florida."

[redacted]

I wanted but I was thinking
[redacted] to be calm, [redacted] of fists, rocks, jack handle, anything to kill a fellow with, wallowing in the hot, lashing hate heat. But I knew they would herd down on me and mess me around proper if I gave them a chance. They were getting close to a mob. You could feel them working to it.

It was suddenly too close in the car. I got out into Saltlick Street. With the collar of my coat turned up, the flaps on my cap down, I could be any of the young fellows walking about. I moved around a little but soon I was glad to bolt into an alley. I leaned my head against a wall, some tears mingling with the vomit. Somebody had found out that Willi Mae was living in a Key West sporthouse and they were all talking about it.

With me it wasnt a question whether Willi Mae was in a whorehouse. I didnt know her enough to tell whether she would turn bad. All I thought of was Paw and what this would do to him. I believed he loved Willi Mae

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more than me but it didnt craw me. I had never lacked affection from him. Folks said he spoilt me. They pointed to the college talk in proof. Only a man who spoilt kids would encourage them in this talk about college. While they knew that Willi Mae had gone, they didnt know about his nightly agony at the radio or the rabbit hunch on his shoulder.

Who could have found out about Willi Mae? I thought of all the folk who may have recently left Malagoosha for the outside. And then, so sure was I that I never argued it, I thought of Pete and through him to Miss Amanda. She had as fairly told me when she said, "You get to wondering what kind of house Pete's staying at."

I stood away from the wall and cleaned up the dirt on me. With no plan, but in a lather I slunk over to Miss Amanda's. She was still at the switchboard. Folks who didnt have a phone at home would go to her window and giving the number they wanted, use the public instrument in the box outside her window. Pete had only called me in Jeb Coombes because he knew how friendly me and Paw were with Jeb.

Standing out in the street, halfway of me down to my waist was in shadow but my legs were lit up in the light streaming out of the window. She was talking into the mouthpiece, pumping out scandal, you could tell, by the way her lips warped over like a crossbill bird busting pine cones. I thought of her spreading the news through town, whispering it, chuckling it and maybe to Coleman Roberts thaying it with a lithp and my fingers bawled to wring her broomweed neck.

She had looked through the window a couple of times, maybe wondering to whom the legs belonged. She couldnt see my face which was in the shadow. She had a guilty conscience, it was plain as

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pone. She was uneasy, wriggling around on the stool. She was shooting looks sideways to see if I had moved. I stayed. I was savagely enjoying it. I thought of a way of giving the nasty minded old crow a real fright. So one time when her eyes were off me, I stepped forward, putting my face in the light. And when she shot that worried look again, it hit her. Lord, it hit her.

Fear laced her eyes. Her mouth dropped open. She was frozen for a moment before she jerked back to the switchboard, her hands shaking and jolting as the plungers skittered all over the slots. She pawed at the board, her fingers spread like a cottontail's hindlegs bolting down a hole. I was still giggling to myself when an automobile without lights slipped down the street.

The two patrolmen who stepped out were the whole Malagoosha City force. The tall one was Joe and the short one was Shorty. I knew them well as they bought gas at Pete's. We werent friends. Joe was a burly, hardfaced fellow who had been on a big city police force before he came to Malagoosha. Shorty was mostly always grinning, no matter how angry he got. I've seen him on a Massacre Day beat a drunken outsider with his fists and boots until the fellow passed out. And Shorty was grinning all the while.

They came at me, one on either side, flashlights blinding me.

"Looks like we caught a Peeping Tom. First time we ever caught a Peeping Tom," Shorty said, the grin in his voice.

"Why're you standing outside Miss Amanda's window scaring her to death?" Joe said.

Seems I'd been stupid. While I'd been standing out here

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laughing at her, she had phoned the Mayor who had sicked the police on me. It could mean a load of trouble for me, things being what they were in the town.

"I was just passing," I said.

Shorty laughed out loud. "Passing? Then mister you must have been going real slow for according to Miss Amanda, it took you all of twenty minutes to get by her window."

I shrugged. "I'll go now," I said, easy as I could.

But a blow from Joe's forearm nearly tore my head off.

"You dont until we say so. Mayor Roberts wants to talk to you."

"There're two of you and the law makes three," I said angrily. "Go ahead, beat me up."

"Sure, anything you say, Lip," said Shorty as he dug his fist into my belly. I went over, feeling as if I had no knees. A boot kicked me in the ribs and I rolled over on my side.

"Okay, lay off. The Mayor only wanted us to dust him a little before we took him in."

"On your feet. Get going before we really ball you," said Shorty.

I worked my way to my feet and staggered over to the car, holding my gut while my legs threatened to march off sideways on their own. Shorty drove, backing and filling and heading up Saltlick Street. He rode the car right up against the sidewalk before Mayor Roberts' office.

As I limped out with Joe's hand on my arm, one of the men in the knot on the courthouse lawn called out, "Joe, who you got there?"

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"A Peeping Tom," Shorty called to him, grinning.

"Peeping Tom? Who's he?" the man asked.

"Name of Abner. Abner Hammond," said Shorty.

My name exploded all over Saltlick Street.

"Abner Hammond! A goddam Peeping Tom!"

Up and down the street. And the knots at the corners started in fast and a crowd formed before the office door. And they were calling other things too.

"Abner Hammond! White trash! Nigger-loving Peeping Tom!"

Shorty was grinning all over his face as he took a long time walking me up the steps to Coleman Roberts' office.

"Give him to us a piece before you take him in, Shorty!" begged one of the men.

"Let him go, boys!" yelled a woman. "Let him run for it!"

They were closing in on us. Shorty peered into my face.

"Now dont you think that's a right dandy idea, Abner? Want to make a run for it?"

A woman knocked my cap from my head and one of the men struck me between the shoulder blades.

"He and his old man suck up to niggers! His sister's a whore in one of them big cities! The boy's a Peeping Tom! Jeezam! What a family!" a man said disgustedly.

It brought a big, ugly laugh from the crowd and hands flailed at me before Joe grunted and said, "Alright, back up, now. Let us through."

He had his gun out, brandishing it and they fell back so we could enter Mayor Roberts office. We went through a hall and into his room where he sat behind a desk. The preacher I had seen earlier

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was with him. Close up, the preacher was worse than in the meeting hall. His face was the color of chitterlings after the salt water soak.

Mayor Roberts looked at me so long, my face twitched.

"You're as rotten as your Paw," he said finally.

"I wasnt doing what they said," I told him.

Shorty gave me a hefty swipe across my wounded mouth.

"Calling the Mayor a stinking liar?" he snarled. "Didnt we catch you peeping at Miss Amanda's window?"

The preacher shrugged inside his alpaca jacket and drummed, "Is this the sinner, Mayor?"

"He's the one. Abner Hammond's brat," Coleman Roberts said.

The preacher rose, no taller than my collar stud. He pointed a thin finger at me. "Boy, you want to be eternally damned? You want to go to hell with your Paw? To feel the flames licking at your boot soles, and then creeping up your legs, feeling the blood popping and boiling, burning your organs and wrapping around your belly? To feel your eyeballs shrivelling in the heat?"

"Alright, Preacher. Cool down," Mayor Roberts said. He was a pompous man and somewhat foolish but you had to mind his office. Since he had been elected he was whining less, and folks were getting to think he was looking more like a mayor.

"Tell me, boy, your Paw still aiming to keep that nigger on his [redacted] place?" he asked.

I had been whipped enough to be cautious. "He aint been talking to me. He told me I shouldnt come back to the farm until he sent for me."

"You were at the meeting-house tonight. Afterwards you were

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seen heading out of town for the farm."

"Yes, sir. I figured on staying the night but he sent me back in."

My face felt as if a mule had stepped on it. I felt a shrinking at my gut as I waited for the blow. But I was so scared, they must have heard my knees knocking in applause for the truth. Nobody bothered to sock me.

"Alright, Abner," Mayor Roberts said. Boy, it sure sounded musical to hear him say it. But I reckoned I would be remembering Joe and Shorty when God rolled around His world and one Abner Hammond stood on top. I would be remembering Joe and Shorty.

"Alright, Abner. I'm letting you off this time, but you go peeping at any more windows and we ride you out of town on a rail, Abner's son or no Abner's son," Mayor Roberts said.

I nodded at him. I nodded at the preacher too. Joe and Shorty had taught me my manners real good.

"Boy," the preacher said, "you remember that God made them niggers different so they wouldnt mingle with us. Dont you go flying in the face of [redacted] God."

Maybe he was right, but looking at him, I didnt see how anybody would want to mingle with him. I shrugged.

He didnt like that shrug. Suddenly his eyes blazed at me.

"Where is your scarlet sister?" he boomed out.

And all the caution left me.

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I wanted to kick in his face, to break the pipestem arms and legs.

"You dirty, filthy ---"

I only got in one lick before Joe and Shorty were on me but I felt his nose go under my fist. Joe and Shorty dragged me off and I reckoned that if another whipping was due, I wouldnt just stand and take it as before. But the surprise was that nothing happened. They just held each an arm and cakewalked me out of the room. They let me out the back way, laughing softly all the while although Shorty could not help planting a foot to help me out. I didnt know whether the crowd would be waiting for me so I made through alleys to Pete's.

Pete's truck turned over at the first twist of the key. It was crazy. I didnt know the way or anything. Just guessed it from the things Paw had said. I remembered what he had said to Willi Mae and me. "If ever the time come and you need to, just go up the mountain for eighty-hundred miles and start a-hollering for, 'Hammond!' and a flock of them will come running." Paw had chuckled as he added, "But you find a rock and fort up behind it before you start hollering, you hear? Your uncles Shad, Meshach and Abednego liable to start shooting before they make out that you favour the family."

I drove as fast as I could through the knobs, knowing the climb would slow me. I wanted to be back at Paw's before sunup. The road was gravelly but firm surfaced enough to give fine traction on the level, but when the climb began, the gravel loosened up and spun the wheels. The mountain road twisted in switchbacks so crazy quilt that it even pulled switches inside the [redacted] elbows of the loops. The headlamps lit the woods on either side, a tangle of timber in which shadows sprang alive. Short stretches of the road

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road had light splashed on them like bright yellow paint then were lost among the dark woods. This land was virgin as a day-old foal. Folk hadnt ever lived around here, just walked in and out again. The road pinched through stretches of pine barren land and then ran into oak and hickory land again. The pick-up ran sweetly in second gear, purring deep down in the guts, soft and strong. No tappets clattered; there was no whine in the differential as would have been walloping the insides of our old jalopy.

I kept thinking of Paw's kin and what I would say to them. Paw had never talked much of a lick about his relations. All I knew was that they were deep-country folk, close to the earth as a bur-oak root. He wasnt a man to gopher out of trouble, but he had known that comes a snow blow, a fellow can use a stand of juniper. Telling Willi Mae about the land back here had been a way of saying he would go inside too, if ever the top dirt got too loose to sod. So I didnt doubt that what I was doing, was right. Paw's mountain folk were maybe rough and he didnt take to feuding nor jugging, for a fact, but he reckoned that there could come a time when a fellow needed going back inside for help. In a way, I had barrelled off into the wilderness in search of some of Paw's truth, groping inside the back country for help to beat off Coleman and the others. Paw was an old wolf on the rimrock bawling for the right to breathe. He had the Nigra fellow with him too, but I didnt know if that counted.

The right front wheel whupped into a hole and shook me out of my college thinking. I fought up the wheel, grinning as I wondered what Uncle Matt Connelly would say if he could have seen what was going on in my head. It would be better not to be so durn noble. All I was doing was going after help to save the necks of a couple of soft Hammonds who had fallen into an ambush with their eyes wide open.

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Sure. Ambush. (My lights caught up a big piece of limestone that had broken off from the high rock on my right, maybe since the last rain-wash, and nobody had been by to roll it aside. I steered around it, cursing as it rubbed the tyres and pounded a crackling rhythm on the hubcap.)

The ambush had been set up from the time Paw had been born with whatever was inside his head. All his life he had moved at a fair pace towards it. It wasnt [redacted] whether he was right or wrong, but he had happened by, at the time and the place. He was [redacted] ready for the trap to be sprung.

The question clicked in my head: Who was I to pull out Paw if the time had come for him to kick the tongue and snap the jaws of the trap? I wasnt clear on that one. In fact, I wasnt clear on a goddam thing but that I was aiming the pick-up into the mountains to find Paw's kin. If anybody could understand him and fight for him, it would be those clowns up here [redacted] someplace.

Finding them would not be easy. I was reaching into the old wild heart of the land. Even the road had a wild strength that sent it tearing through [redacted] rocks, making slow cleaves around the elbows and then plunging straight up until the pick-up [redacted] seemed to stand on its tail. The road had turned sketchy now. [redacted] I had seen no signs of a homestead but Paw had once told Willi Mae and me that folk[redacted] up here never hankered to show their yard corn to the public highway. A hostile neighbor in wartime may bullet-slap you from the road before you could say
[redacted] Skin-the-cat.

A mile or [redacted] so afterwards, I had reached the end of the road. There had been no warning. It just went up to a big gray boulder and sort of rested its head wearily on it. Well, then,

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that's the way the dough rises, as Willi Mae used to say. I saw a place in which the pick-up could be turned and I shunted into it. At least, it had looked that way until the back wheels spun and switched off and dug deeper into the clay. I/climbed out and went back to look at the shoulder. It was real clay. The silence ate at my ears. The night had a bite in it so I put up the collar of my cheater. A couple of whistling frogs came in for company. Drops of water plopped from the trees on the carpet of early Fall. The engine smelled hot, but it was the nice oil-heat of a fine-running engine and not the rough heat-smells from a leaky radiator. The clock on the dash showed almost five in the morning. It would be daylight soon. I hoped to God they hadnt hit Paw during the night. I hoped to God I would find his kin, my uncles Shad, Meshach and Abednego and get back there before they hit him. Paw hadnt spoken much about them, but he always said that if we were in trouble, we should go find his folks in the mountain. Sometimes, the way he looked when he said it, you would think they had answers in there. Special answers you had to go back in there, to find. Paw was funny about it. He sort of had religion about it.

I got out the flashlight and went back. Goddam clay alright. It was way up on the tyres. It gave me a flutter in/the gut. Nothing less than a tractor, or a crew, would move this baby. You have to be down to the rims in gumbo in the middle of nobody's mountain, with your Paw only inches from a tar bucket and a rail, if he was lucky, to know how lousy I was feeling.

Further back down the road, the gravel surface had been thick. I made up my mind to walk back down there and get some fillings of gravel for the holes the wheels had dug. Pete had a tarp in the back of the pick-up but it would be too heavy toting with fills for the holes. The only thing to do would be to make several trips, using my cheater to carfy the gravel. There were

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plenty of trees around but I would need a hatchet to get sufficient lumber for the fills. There wasnt anything else to do so I started walking.

The stuff kept coming. I was doing alright. Not sitting down on the job at all. But it was dark and rough work. The batteries in the flashlight being weak, I saved them as much as possible. But try shifting a roadbed of gravel in the dark dark on a mountain roadwith only your old hat for a scoop, and what you can carry in a leather wind-cheater for a load. I was sweating stink by the time I had enough gravel in front of the wheels to try a shunt with clutch and accelerator.

It was paling on the rim of the hills when I climbed back into the cab. A redstart flew down the road on a nervous tangle of wings. The trees dripped and dripped in a hopeless weeping. Figures seemed to move in a swirl of mist past the windshield. It was eerie. You had the feeling to get out of there quickly.

I left the nearside door open while I turned over the starter. The engine caught smoothly. I released the handbrake and switched on the headlights. And my hair stood on end.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The headlights sprung to the edge of the woods and lit up two of the longest pair of legs I have ever seen. The legs were wrapped in denims. I could see the patches from here. There was a hand spot on the door of the cab. I switched on the spotlight and moved it up the bodies of the two. They were tall and lanky. They stood absolutely still as the light moved up on their hands, past their shoulders to their faces. Two rangy old fellows with beaten up old felt hats pulled down hard around their ears. They were carrying rifles, long almost to their shoulders. They held the rifles like they grew out of their hands. They had a hound dog stillness as it points for grouse in the wet. And I was scared.

They were too still to be friendly. They must have been standing in the dark within touching distance of me as I fetched all those trips with a cheater full of gravel. They hadnt offered to help, or anything. I didnt know who they were and I wasnt aiming to find out. Mountain folk, I had heard, made a habit of shooting strangers whom they suspected of snooping. I was alone in a pick-up on this clay top road early in the morning. A fellow wouldnt bet loose change that folks would figure me for a revenue man poking his nose where it didnt belong.

All these thoughts were grabbing through my head while I eased in the clutch. I already had the gear shift snucked into first when a voice at the open cab door sent me into a gibbering wreck.

"You take it right quiet now," he said. He had a

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rifle too with the snout a couple of inches from my ribs.

Things must have been knocked loose in my head. For I am sure that I hadnt planned what happened next. But Paw had said, "Start hollering Hammond and a flock of them will come running."

What I did was to bawl, "Hammond! Hammond! Uncle Shad Hammond!"

It didnt come out with a roar. It came out like a tobacco auctioneer, hoarse at the end of his row.

I didnt hear any flock of Hammonds racing to rescue me, which was better than shooting off his gun. but the fellow at the door gave a grunt/ Then after a pause, too long it was because they were really sweating me, he said, "You reckon we got kin driving one of them automobile trucks, Abed?"

There was another longish pause. Then one of the fellows on the edge of the wood said, "Got to have a light to look at his face, Shad. Smart fellow like him driving an automobile truck might have heard your name and reckon to hornswoggle you."

"Dont ever guess what stew's in the pot until you take a lick," the other scarecrow said.

I grabbed the spotlight and swung it on my face. That bright white light hit me a blow. I squeezed my eyes tight and didnt wince. I could almost feel them roaming over the Hammond portions of my face. It took them too damn long.

"I am Abner Hammond's youngest. Paw told me I would find our kin up here. One of you is Uncle Shad and the other is Uncle Meshach and Uncle Abednego. I came up here to find you and got stuck."

A year or so later, the one who was Uncle Shad said, "He's got the chin."

It roughened me for real.

"And I got the wart behind my ear to show I'm a

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Hammond," I snarled, swinging the spot from my face.

And then Uncle Meshach chuckled and said, "You got the sass too, boy," and I knew I was in.

Uncle Shad had stepped away from the cab door and said, "Do what you were going to do, boy."

I went into first and felt the pick-up claw like a mule plunging up a clay bank. The wheels screamed briefly, and bit. The twin carbs Pete had fitted to the engine fed the rich mixture into it and it pulled eagerly, sinewy with power. Inch by inch/the tyres gained traction. I felt more than saw the uncles close in on the truck. I heard them above the roar of the motor, yelling, Hup, Hup, and felt the surge/as they threw their strength into helping the engine. Suddenly, the pick-up sprang free and whipped across the road. I locked the wheel hard and hit the brake. We stopped on solid road.

I opened the cab door and stepped out. The three of them stood in front of me, leaning on the long rifles. I didnt wait. It was getting late for Paw.

"My Paw's got folk trouble. They're crowding him. He needs kin," I said.

It took as long as a duck to blink.

They sort of drifted into the pick-up, their weapons made no sound on the metal floor. The one who got into the cab beside me, said, "I'm your Uncle Shad. Tallest one's Uncle Meshach and the other's Uncle Abednego."

We drove downhill. A mile or so further, Uncle Shad said, "Pull up, Abner."

It was a comfort that they hadnt forgotten my name.

[redacted]. I pulled up.

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"Gone to get/our gear," Uncle Shad said.

When I looked back into the pick-up, it was empty. I hadnt heard them climbing out.

"House is back there a piece. Cant see it from the road. Your Paw was born back there, same like the rest of us."

A red shitepoke flapped heavily across the clearing of the road. I wondered what he was doing up here. Maybe he was calling out his kin too. But hell, he was too big and strong to need help. Maybe it was for his Paw.

"Git now, boy," Uncle Shad said.

Sure, they were back there when I looked. They were uncanny. You never heard them.

We didnt talk at all on the way down. The two in the back must have been knocked about, the way I cut down that mountain. But nobody said [redacted] anything.

It was still white dawn when I drove into the yard. Everything was quiet. There was no light in [redacted] the house. I knew that Paw would have to stay alert and quiet, but I didnt like the silence at all. I slammed down the brake just a paint from the gallery. I jumped out and yelled, "Paw!"

I was tearing up the steps when his voice stopped me. He was in the yard, off to one side. The uncles were out of the pick-up and they were looking across at him. What he said was,

"Mist's lifting."

He hadnt seen them in fifteen-sixteen years and that was his greeting.

"Got starlings, Abner," Uncle Shad said, "in there."

A morning flight rose out of the trees.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

They stood in a small crowd at the door, looking inside and I could have sworn they sniffed. They were wild in a way, how they prowled about the living room, looking at things and turning softly on the balls of their feet.

"Last time we came down here, we helped you put up two-three rooms. Aint that enough? What you want with such a big house, Abner?" Uncle Shad said.

"Hell to fort up such a big house, Abner," Uncle Abednego said.

"Ought to knock out them glass windows and put in loopholes," Uncle Abednego said. "Fellows rush you at them windows, you got a caution getting out of the way of a bullet."

Paw stared thoughtfully at them. He hadnt looked at me since I returned.

"Never been anything but peaceful around here," he said.

Uncle Meshach squirted tobacco juice into the open stove.

"Peace aint a thing that stays around," he said. "Aint never had a war, there'd never be a peace. Folks must war now and then so they can have a peace. Just like summertime and wintertime."

Uncle Meshach walked over to the radio on the table beside Paw's chair. He touched the knobs. He didnt know what it was. Uncle Shad whistled sharply and he straightened from it.

"You had a girl," Uncle Abednego said, "and a Nigra gal."

"Not here now," Paw said.

"Ought never to send away your women when there's going to be a war. Need them to load guns, fetch water, tend the wounded, things like that," Uncle Meshach said.

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He was still eyeing the radio. I went across and switched it on. It hummed and they became alert. It played and they started a little. Hosanna [redacted] was on the morning show and she was singing King George wore a pink waistcoat. They all stood serious for awhile. Then Uncle Meshach broke into a broad grin and commenced stomping his feet. Boy, I had gone back real far.

"Your girl's coming back, Abner?" Uncle Abednego said.

He was the watchful one, like Uncle Shad.

"Guess Abner left home too early. Never learnt how to fight a war," Uncle Shad said.

Nothing showed on Paw's face as he looked at me.

He nodded towards the kitchen.

We fixed a whole mess of bacon and greens and coffee. Paw hadnt answered Uncle Abednego and Uncle Abednego hadnt asked again. After they began to eat, Paw said to me, "Let us go put away the truck." We went outside and backed up the pick-up in the shed. Paw waited for me to close the door before he spoke.

"A man ought to fight his own battles, Abner," he said.

I began to tell him about last night with Mayor Roberts and the constables. I left out the part about Willi Mae. He listened, nodding sometimes.

"Still," he said when I was finished.

"Still?"

"Still, a man fights [redacted] his own way."

I didnt explode or anything. After all, he had been milder than I had a right to expect.

"Paw, when a man's starving, money's no use in the bank. You got to draw and spend."

There was a thinking [redacted] inside my head that [redacted]

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it didnt matter who he was or what he had become, a man had valuables somewhere. A fellow might sort of lose them but if he looked hard enough, he would find them. Especially if he could recall how his Paw had spoke about them. And it was always true and fine to dig for them and spend them when they were needed. It was true and fine and I was glad that I had gone in and dug for three lean, stained, rifle-toting, tobacco-chawing old moonshiners who [redacted] hadnt asked what it was about becausd they hadnt doubted their values but had climbed aboard.[redacted] They were simple, because they only knew right and wrong and none of the in-betweens.

"How did you reckon, boy?"

"They're our kin."

"That's so."

"You would have needed them but you wouldnt have gone for them. You're proud, Paw. I didnt have any right to be proud with Coleman and the others reaching for their hog-choppers."

He was thinking about it. He nodded.

"Wouldnt have gone for them so quickly, that's all," he said.

Funny how your love is. Mostly, it is there, quiet and steady and sure. But sometimes it is there in a hot rush. And that is the best of times. I reckon. The Fall sun climbed softly over the roof of the shed and lit up one side of his face.

"Thanks, Paw," I said.

He rubbed a hand down his cheek, feeling the stubble.

"But they're hard, son. Real hard. Before the day's done you might start feeling sorry you brought them in. Once they're here, you lief as not got a war on your hands."

"We already have it."

"Not so much that we couldnt pull out."

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"We got help and you're not mad at me. I dont give a hoot elsewhere."

"You learn to give a hoot anytime you get committed. Like now," Paw said softly.

We walked back towards the house. Hosanna [redacted] was singing Hal Was A Merry Monarch and the uncles were sure making the most of it. You could hear their heels stomping. They hadnt yet seen the sick Nigra.

"Why did you go to Miss Amanda's?" Paw asked out of the blue.

This was the weak bit. I couldnt give him the real reason. He had trouble enough.

"I act so stupid sometimes, you wouldnt know. I wanted to watch her operate the telephone. But she's real good to watch with her plugs and things."

"You werent to know that Coleman Roberts had turned bad. Aint blaming you," Paw said.

It was time to change the subject. I said, "You think Uncle Shad and the rest will shoot?"

"If I give the word."

"Not otherwise?"

He said slowly, "Its my war. They'll wait."

Well, Jeezam. It was just as Paw had said. Nothing had started yet and here I was getting jumpy. I had changed the subject alright but I didnt like what I was bringing up.

"If folks get hurt, Coleman Roberts will hogtie us. He's mayor and justice of the peace, coroner and whatever else."

"The law's a lot on your side if folks trespass on your land. Coleman will have to show me a law warrant to enter my land."

"He's coroner. He can make out a warrant. [redacted]"

"Coleman only turned mayor because we werent looking. He wont put anything on his record that may throw him out of office next election. He will be careful."

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[redacted] If Uncle Shad and the others began shooting their guns, folks could be killed. What with Willi Mae gone bad, and now this, it would finish Paw. I had been a fool to bring [redacted] them in. Better to have taken our chances as we had been.

"A [redacted] nigger aint worth it," I said savagely.

Paw breathed heavily in anger.

"You go back to town. You go back now," he said.

I rushed back to the house, mad all through. Inside, I came upon Uncle Meshach with my watch at his ear. It was one Paw had given me when I graduated from high school. Uncle Meshach saw me. He grinned and shook it and listened again. I rushed across to him.

"You put that down, you old clown!"

He backed off. He was grinning but there was some hawk in his eyes. Uncle Shad moved so swiftly, he was a blur getting between us. He snatched the watch from Uncle Meshach's hand. He turned and faced me, His eyes were cold.

"Here's your timepiece. Wasnt doing any harm. Your Uncle Meshach is a joker."

"Didnt hear no rooster crowing so I couldnt tell the time, boy," Uncle Meshach said.

He was funning but nobody had to tell me that Uncle Meshach was also taking my measure. [redacted]

"Shucks, Paw got soft after he moved down here. He went and bought himself a watch," I said.

They all watched me. I hoped I had made it back.

"Sure, boy. Sure," Uncle Abednego said.

It was all because of that fellow in the [redacted] room back there. [redacted] The more you thought of it, the plain fact came [redacted] right back at you. Things were really coming apart over him. Not even a

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whole one of them, but a busted one only. It had made folks like Uncle Matt, one of the nicest men in the County, turn mean and sour. It had put a knot in Coleman Roberts' head so he was ready to turn loose a mob on us. It had warped my own reasoning and judgment that I had driven a hundred miles into the mountains to set our fighting kin on neighbors we had known most of our lives.

"I was wrong, real wrong to come and fetch you. Hear me say it. I made a mistake. Why dont you all just climb aboard the pickup and I'll take you back up the mountain. You could even take the nigger with you so we could have some peace in Malagoosha," I cried.

They just looked puzzledly at me like I had been talking pure lunacy. But then I remembered that these wild men hadnt even known. They hadnt heard about the colored man nor why folks were gunning for Paw.

"What Nigra he talking about?" Uncle Shad finally asked.

Boy, did that burn me up.

"The one Paw's got back there on his bed! The one all this hoot and holler is about!" I yelled.

Paw came out of the room and stood by the door. Uncle Shad looked past me at Paw.

"We got a Nigra fellow back there, Abner?" Uncle Shad asked.

"Guess so," Paw said.

"Here? In the house?"

"Sure, [redacted] Shad."

"Funny a fellow keeping so quiet, Abner," Uncle Shad said.

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"Fellow's hurt bad," Paw said.

"Folks did it to him?" Uncle Shad asked.

"No. An automobile," Paw said.

"Never did like them automobiles. Give me a mule anytime," Uncle Meshach said.

The three went back to sitting on the floor, their backs to the wall. I stood there and stared. They chawed and cleaned their guns. There wasnt anything more they wanted to learn from Paw.

The sun had broken out all over when Uncle Shad rose.

"Guess we ought to look over the land. Abner, you got some places we can hole up, in case?"

They went outside. I followed to the door and watched them going through the high grass. The blades hardly moved as they went, they were that lightfooted. I went in to look at the colored man. His eyes were closed but he breathed easily, like he was sleeping. He didnt have a shirt on. The bandages came up high on his chest. Big black muscles glistened. His throat looked powerful. Olivinia didnt ought to have to be nursing this big buck. Paw and me were doing bad things to her. Suddenly, I was as mad as a wet hen. I whirled for the door.

"Olivinia, where's Olivinia?" I bawled at Paw.

"She's gone. She borrowed the car," Paw said slowly, his eyes on me.

If she had borrowed the car, she would be back. I didnt like it.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I sure hadnt figured on Paw going to town meeting. But later that morning, he shucked on his jacket and said he reckoned he would. We were in the front yard, hunkered down with our eyes on the road, talking now and then. The uncles mostly cleaned their guns. They were wheels on cleaning those guns.

I looked at Paw like he was acting crazy.

"Going into town? That's a crazy notion."

He was on his feet looking down at me.

"Thought you said there was a town meeting today."

"Sure. But ---"

"Then if there's one, I ought to be there. Aint never missed one as far as I can remember."

"There never was a time like this as far as you can remember either," I said.

He wasnt joking at all. He was craggy as a sheriff on County Court Day.

Uncle Meshach said, "Abner, you reckon there could be trouble in town? One of us could kind of keep you company."

"Wont be necessary, Meshach. Everything on our side been legal so far. Seems to me I ought to go into town and talk to the fellows, calm and quiet. That's what a town meeting is for. To talk calm and quiet and talk out both sides of the matter. It would be wrong for me not to go. Maybe the fellows expect me to. Anyway I ought to think so."

"If they wanted you to come, they'd have sent somebody to tell you," I said.

"They aint exactly friendly right now. Cant expect them to go to much trouble on my part. Wouldnt be natural."

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But what Sep said when they saw Paw at the door of the courthouse, was,

"What the hell you doing here?"

And all the slack-jawed, open-eyed stares turned on Paw were asking the same question. Paw said afterwards that the silence which followed was so thick, you felt like wiping it from your face.

However, he just strode straight through the door and down the center aisle of/[redacted] benches they had set up for the meeting. He found a seat near the front. Mayor Roberts glared at him and then gavelled the meeting to order. Mayor Roberts was in the judge's chair. The preacher sat beside him, restless as a coyote in a hen[redacted] house. He was jerking and staring at Paw as Coleman Roberts whispered to him. The meeting was brimful with folks from all over come to hear about Paw and the Nigra [redacted].

"Neighbors," Coleman Roberts said after he had finished with his gavelling, "you all know why we are here. Dont know whether its rightly for me to speak first since I'm the one to uphold the only law I know, the law of this County. Dont know as if rightly I should even be in the chair. But its up to somebody to pull on the rope and I reckon if you folks dont mind, I'm as good a joker as the next fellow."

He gave the vote catching grin which was so full of sugar and [redacted] teeth, he ought to be in a cage. Nobody laughed much, except Miss Amanda. And she did it so long and loud, she drew a glare from the Mayor. Miss Amanda clamped down tighter than a gopher on greens and wasnt heard from again.

"I reckon we all got [redacted] plenty to say," Coleman said as he paused to look around, "and maybe plenty to do after that. But before we begin real proper, I want to say that the chair recognises Abner Hammond."

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Paw said that for awhile Coleman Roberts had lost him until he figured it out. It was just that Coleman was making out that he was a Senator or something up in Washington and was carrying on to impress his friend the preacher. But nobody can poor mouth Paw, so he sang out right back at Coleman,

"I reckon I recognise you too, Mayor."

Paw knew that there was nothing Coleman could do to him in there, since he hadnt resisted a warrant or anything like that. Of course he didnt put it past Coleman to sic Joe or Shorty on him, so he had made sure to park the car legally back of Coleman's white traffic line. Neither did he spit chaw juice anywhere on Saltlick Street. Or even slip inside Jeb Coombes' for a shot of illegal Lee. Nobody obeyed the law more than Paw that day.

It was Sep who spoke next. Sep was hating quicker and longer these days. It surprised Paw.

Sep was on his feet asking across the floor,

"What you want here, Abner? We figured you didnt want any truck with folks like us."

Paw turned stubborn right away and said to Coleman,

"Mayor, if anybody here's addressing me, reckon you ought to tell them to address me through the chair."

There wasnt anybody better at house rules and such than Paw, when he had a mind. Coleman was as furious as Sep, but he had to obey the rules.

"You question him through the chair, Sep, now," Coleman said.

So Sep asked again, redfaced and stuttering with anger.

"I aint pulling up stakes. I still pay rates in Malagoosha County."

"Then you ought to pay heed to County ways," Uncle

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Matt rumbled from the seats.

Mayor Roberts used the gavel and called the meeting to order. His eyes settled on Sep.

"We will speak one at a time. Sep, you want to lead off?"

Sep nodded and cleared his throat as he rose. His big eye was flaring twice the size of the other as he flung a glance among the faces in the courthouse. He was beaknosed and violent as a hawk on a plummet. His voice rasped when he spoke.

"I aint the one for holding it against a fellow for building his own fences, but there are certain things which when a man does, he's entering upon public domain. Keeping niggers out of white men's ways, is one of them. We all growed up with that in our minds. I figure we were all born with it. By golly, we were. Nobody taught us that niggers werent like us. We just knew it."

"God put it inside us!" cried the preacher, twitchy as a dogleg on a pavement.

"Sure. We aint against them. They just aint right for us," Sep said.

Paw said he was hankering to ask whether Nigras mightnt think that white people werent for them either, but he held back because some folks would be more than willing to say he was backing black folks against whites. It sure like hell would have looked so and I was glad he didnt. Paw said that there were grunts agreeing with Sep all around the courthouse, and if there had been any Nigras in sight, this was the time when Sep would be calling for rope.

Uncle Matt rose and waved Sep into his seat. Uncle Matt's big shaggy head and rumbling voice was fine for a key-noter, so Coleman gavelled until he had all their attention

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fixed on Matt. Coleman nodded at Matt.

Matt clasped his hands behind him and looked at as many faces as he could reach.

"What we here for anyway?" Uncle Matt said. "What's this town meeting about? Its to see whether we got one, even one neighbor around here who dont agree that niggers shouldnt be holed up in a white man's house. That's all. And that's what Abner ought to answer to, if he wants to."

Matt sat down and Coleman looked at Paw.

Paw got up slowly. Paw was fooling around in his head, looking for something to hit them with. Paw is a lawman. He believes in the law for he says the law never quits. Folks quit, then blame it on the law, says Paw, but to him, the law has all the answers if folks look for them in the right frame of mind.

"A lot of years ago, when families first began to move into these parts, each family was its own conscience. Things aint changed radically since," Paw said. "How we worked out things, became the law in time. I'm as legal as the next man and will always go along with the law, but there aint no law which says I should turn a sick man away because he happens to be a Nigra."

Matt got up and said, "Mayor?"

Coleman said, "I recognize you, Matt."

"Mayor, you go ahead and tell Abner what the total of our thoughts on this is. You tell him that is the law we recognize."

Matt sat down and Coleman rose.

"Abner, its as Matt told you, the total of our thoughts. You know as well as I do that the Founding Fathers of this country expected us to have some sense. They gave us a Constitution and arranged for us to elect men who would protect it. We reckon that we here in Malagoosha County are a little United States. We make

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laws and rules for us to live by and anybody break those laws, they are accountable to us. We have the power to punish them. We make certain laws for our protection, laws such as a speed limit to protect our people on the streets."

Paw didnt know what Coleman was leading up to, but he knew something was coming.

"Now I know I speak for all of us here when I say we aint against anybody for his race, his color or his creed, but we are against people who break our laws. Just as Friend Abner here says he is. Now, that nig --- that colored man back at your place, Abner. He broke our laws. Yes sir. He broke our laws real bad, I reckon."

That puzzled Paw alright. He hadnt known the fellow had broken the law.So he asked Mayor Coleman Roberts.

"Coleman," Paw said, "what did this fellow do wrong?"

"Speeding," Coleman snapped out. "That nigger drove so fast down Saltlick Street, he slammed into Old Lookout because he couldnt stop in time."

"He was driving so goldurned fast, he could have killed our kids," Matt said.

"That nigger's automobile was a block long," Sep Logan said bitterly.

"He's not law abiding, Abner," Coleman Roberts said. "I reckon you got to agree he ought to leave town."

"All that saved our kids was that they were eating ice-cream back of the courthouse," Sep said.

They seemed to have boxed Paw. They had held a gathering and fixed on how to trap him. What was worse was that what they said could really make sense. If it didnt to Paw, it was because he had turned ornery. Paw wasnt one to be pushed or cornered like a coon in a hollow.

"Thank you," said Matt who was still on his feet,

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"Coleman. Neighbors, if any in Malagoosha had told us a couple of days ago that we would have to call a Town Meeting on this, we would have laughed him down for a durn fool. But we would have been wrong and we all know who made us wrong. We have the fellow here who made us wrong, our neighbor, Abner Hammond. I cant think why Abner would have come here today, if it aint to tell us that he is sorry and that now he wants to do what's right. So I say, Coleman, that we ought to give Abner the floor."

Matt sat down, wiping his face during the applause. Paw said that what threw him was realising that Matt was playing it straight. Matt had really taken fences for Paw. He had buttoned up Sep, so Sep/or the preacher wouldnt take anymore out of Paw, needling him and maybe riling him into saying the wrong things. Then, now, he was quickly giving Paw the floor so that Paw could clear himself. Uncle Matt thought he was doing [redacted] Paw a favor.

Folks shushed as Paw rose. You could hear the fat whup of automobile tyres over the floodwater drains on Saltlick Street. People shifted to train their sights on him.

"Hope I'm doing what's right, Friend Matt," Paw began. "If I aint,/[redacted] then all I can ask is that you believe I'm trying to do what's right. Fellow cant do much more than that."

Paw got a nod here and there, he was that easy and mild. But Sep and Coleman didnt nod or anything. He didnt blame them because he wasnt about to back off at all as Uncle Matt must have thought. Paw wasnt made that way. Fact is that Paw was too reasonable to listen to reason. What I mean is that it took him awhile, but once he bit into what he thought was right, nothing could pry him loose.

"I dont think its right to risk busting up all we got here in Malagoosha over one disagreement. I like my friends, my neighbors, folk I've known for a long time. So I came to Town Meeting today

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to ask you all, what I should do. That's what friends and neighbors are for, I reckon."

He looked at Coleman and Coleman nodded and said, "Go on, Abner."

Paw looked back at the crowd. Mostly numbly polite, weather-whipped faces. Folks in faded denims and washed-out prints. And his special friends sitting together. Uncle Matt and Sep, Jilson and Micajah Hoe and Jeb Wishaw.

"Well, now, we all remember Massacre Day, because of what happened especially," Paw said. "Its what brought us here today. But/its a quart to a noggin that none of us doubted that one day we would be holding a gathering because of Old Lookout. Nosirree. We all knew this would happen, come a day. All our folks around here knew that one of these days, some stranger would slam into Old Lookout and we would have a burying on our hands. Only after that would we have sense enough to either put some dynamite to it, or detour the road away from it. So I dont reckon its much sense pointing a finger at that poor Nigra. We are the guilty ones."

Paw was good up there. He just stood there giving them whatfor from his eyes until the hubbub calmed down enough for him to talk.

"By golly, it aint no use putting up your tails. Many's the time when you, Matt, or Sep there, or Jilson, or any one of us would have busted into Old Lookout a Saturday evening when we drove home, if we didnt know how to keep an eye opened for Old Lookout."

Everybody there knew what Paw was talking about. High-stepping out of town on a Saturday evening with a load of corn under their belts. But you wouldnt know it, to watch their faces. They looked back at Paw out of shallow faces, of hard, flat

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planes and cold eyes. Paw dropped his voice, wanting them to lean into him to hear it. Paw was a natural born acting man when he wanted to put on.

"We aint forgetting that gasolene fire ever. Nor what we smelled in there. And the feet running up Saltlick Street to where this stranger was burning. And none of us going to forget the fool folk from outside who thought all this crashing and burning was just another piece of hootenany from Massacre Day. But we knew it was different because we live in here. We knew Old Lookout had laid hands on somebody at last. And we knew we couldnt leave whoever it was to burn in that gasolene fire. I recall it was Uncle Matt who said, 'Let's get 'em out.' And nobody cried any quarter but just dug in there. I recollect we just dug into that there gasolene fire with our bare hands. I still got some blisters. There aint many menfolk around here who havent got blisters to show for it."

Paw felt he was getting closer to them, the way they looked away, thinking. Uncle Matt picked at a blister.

""Friends and neighbors, it seems right that after we took that stranger out of the fire, we ought to finish the job proper. That's how I was brought up. That's how we all were brought up. We aint the kind to give our word and break it," Paw said, and sat down.

Sep jumped to his feet.

"Abner, you telling us that we gave our word to the nigger? That what you saying? You saying we knew who was in that goddam gasolene fire when we got to the goddam wreck?"

"Aint saying that. Saying we started something

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and the least we can do is finish it. Finish it good. That's the way we were before this and that's the way we ought to be. Once the job is done, its done. We'll never have to do it again."

"And what you say this job is now, Abner?" Micajah Hoe asked.

"To look after this colored fellow until he can be moved, and to detour the road away from Lookout."

He could see it making sense to them. Mouths were slackening as fellows searched their jaws for their wads. The women were losing their locked-in look and a few even looked at Paw and nodded.

But everybody had forgotten the preacher, until they heard the boom of his voice, cutting down on Paw.

He was on his feet, a finger levelled at Paw.

"Brother Hammond, you saying we should treat that anti-Christ like a Christian? That we should let him rest among us like a white Christian?"

It hit Paw with a shock, the man suddenly coming up with all that venom in him.

"Most Nigras are Christians, just as white men, Preacher," Paw said.

The preacher looked coldly at him.

"You're a simple man, Brother Hammond. If you're not an evil man, you're a very simple man."

"Never reckoned there was closeness between the two," Paw said drily.

"Listen, I aint saying there aint Christian blacks. We did get to a few in time. But a Nigra that comes down here from outside, aint Christian. He's down here to make trouble because he he knows he ought not to be here. And that makes him, to me,

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a Communist. That's what this fellow was, a Communist. A Christian Jew or a Christian Catholic or a Christian Nigra wouldnt come down here at all, because they know we got no truck with them. They can stay where they belong and we stay where we belong. That way, there would be no trouble. But any Nigra or Catholic or Jew that comes down here is a Communist. Its plain as a pikestaff."

Paw went suddenly stubborn. He had been ramrodded enough. He looked the preacher hard and straight and said, "Judge not that ye be not judged, Preacher."

But he should have known that he wasnt up to the preacher for stem-winding. He said the preacher looked at him so long, he thought he might have forgotten he was there. Even before the preacher spoke again, he had Paw feeling prickly ashamed.

"Belzeebub," the preacher said softly. "Satan, Bearer of the mark of the beast. Tempter of the children of righteousness. You would tempt the children of Malagoosha to follow you in your evil ways. Seduce them in the most evil way known, through the words of the Good Book which you twist for your own purpose, as it is written, The Devil may quote the scriptures."

He spoke terribly soft. Folks were looking now dead eyed on Paw.

"Deliver up the body of that accursed son of Ham. Depart from your wicked ways and obey the laws of your people."

Paw knew he had allowed the Preacher to outfox him. He could hear the old hardshell laws rattling around in the heads of the crowd. He had been outfoxed.

Paw said, "A man's got to think for himself, too, even before he obeys the law. The only time a man oughtnt to act on his lonesome is when what he does molests other folk."

"Keeping Communist in the County is that the worse molesting there is," spoke up Jilson Swift of Coon Hollow.

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Now, for a fact, Jilson's property isnt one I would care to be found on. And I reckon no decent Nigra either. Its a tangle of weeds and old auto bodies which Jilson collects to patch his old busted Chevvy. That old Chevvy has got more assortment to it than all the cans in Heinz.

"Its my property, Jilson," Paw said. "It aint ever needful for you to visit if you dont want to. Nobody ought to be molested by what I do there."

Paw had spoken sharply. Preacher had pushed him past the mood to soft soap anyone.

But then shiftless Jilson Swift, the most ignorant man in Malagoosha, who lived on pumpkin and drumfish and wore government issue allotments, slapped his chest and said to Paw,

"Abner, you molest us inside here," slapping his chest. "It aint right. You molest every white man inside here."

That town meeting was with Jilson right off. Grunting and stomping and carrying on like my Paw hadnt spoken at all.

"Did they try to stop you leaving town?" Uncle Shadrach asked Paw.

Paw said no. Uncle Abednego growled in his throat like a mountain cat. He rubbed the stock of his rifle-gun.

"They were too busy whooping and laughing. I just got up and walked out," Paw said.

"Then they'll be by, soon," Uncle Abednego said, clicking the bolt on his rifle-gun.

Uncle Meshach cocked his head at Paw's door and the uncles became motionless.

"Somebody stirring in there, Abner." We all closed in on the door.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Paw stopped us at the door but we peered past him at the colored man on the bed. He was restless, tossing around but his eyes were closed.

"He aint awake," Paw said. "Leave him until he's awake."

"He spoken to you yet, Paw?"

"A couple of words. He's still a sick boy. Reckon I ought to try and find Doc Lewis myself."

Uncle Shad looked in and backed away, followed by Uncle Meshach and Uncle Abednego.

"He's a big 'un," Uncle Shad said.

"I've seen bigger," Uncle Abednego said.

"They come in all sizes," I said, "like us."

Uncle Meshach chuckled. "Abner must sure have fed you on sass soup," he said.

Paw went outside and called me. He fanned his hand past my face.

"Let's go wait on the road. Doc Lewis should be passing on his way to Hopemount," he said.

"I aint too hot, Paw, really. Just wished it hadnt happened, is all."

"Lots of things we wished didnt happen, son."

"He should have stayed where he belonged."

"The Nigra? He belongs anywhere in America. Dont argue it, son. Lets wait for Doc Lewis to come by."

We got Doc Lewis in a cloud of dust. Paw stepped out and waved him down. Doc blew his horn and passed us as if he wasnt going to stop but he pulled up a holler away. We slogged down the road to him, Paw not mad at all.

"John, I think you ought to stop by for that fellow. Sometimes when he doesnt know I'm looking, I seen him go up on

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the back of his head and heels. He needs some painkiller."

Doc John Lewis was so furious with Paw, he just sat still in the car, looking straight ahead. Usually he would be hopping about on the seat like a squirrel. Paw leaned inside the window, his face close to Doc's.

"You thinking what you'll give him, John?"

Doc Lewis jerked around on the seat and faced Paw.

"Abner, we've been friends for many years now. I dont want to hate you. Dont make me."

Paw rubbed his hand on the side of the automobile, making a shiny mark in the road dust. He looked at his hand, straightened off the car and dusted his hands together.

"John, I aint trained for doctoring like you. You're making me do your job and that aint fair. If I put that Nigra out of my house, I'd be committing murder and you know it."

"I know just one thing, Abner. Every hour that you keep that Nigra in the house, you're doing more than murder. You're stoking the flames of hatred under the guise of boing a Good Samaritan. You see, Abner, I know your kind. You manufacture more hurt and pain with your do-gooding than a hundred hatchetmen. Your deceit is worse, because it is self deceit. You're making over the world, Abner Hammond, without thought for who gets lost in the process. Committing murder? What you're doing is committing mass murder!"

I was scared. Scared because of what Doc Lewis was showing Paw to be. Doc hadnt shut off the Mercury. It purred softly, ready to go. I wanted to get inside and just keep going, far away from Malagoosha.

"Dont reckon I can argue a nice argument with you, John," Paw said slowly. "I sure would lose, you being educated and all. But it seems to me that in all you've been saying, you been talking about a crowd and not about the fellow who makes up the crowd. It

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dont seem right you should be worrying about healing a crowd when there's a fellow here who needs you right now."

Doc Lewis said, "Abner, if you're so concerned about that Nigra man, you bring him out here where I can see him. You turn him over to me and I will see he gets looked after."

"Couldnt do that, John."

Doc Lewis looked angry. "Sure, you couldnt. You're thinking that folks would say you backed down. You're fretting over Abner Hammond, not ovef the sick Nigra."

Paw looked thoughtful, like he was seeing some truth in what Doc Lewis was saying. But then he shook his head as if he was sure that wasnt all. He shook his head harder as if he knew it wasnt even most.

"He's too sick to move. You said it before."

"Is that all, John? Is that the real reason?"

"No," Paw said. His voice had changed. "No, John. That isnt the real reason. The real reason is that if I throw out the Nigra, I'm throwing out the only chance we have."

Doc jammed down the clutch. "Its up to you, Abner. You can save him."

"Wasnt thinking of saving him now, John. More with saving ourselves."

We went back to the house without a word. Paw went in and began cleaning his gun thorough as the uncles. He looked down the barrel and snapped the trigger. He filled his pocket with shells and went out to take over watching from Uncle Shad. He looked downright happy, like the time he had won the sewing machine for Willi Mae at the Fourth of July turkey shoot.

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CHAPTER ~~FOURTEEN~~ FIFTEEN

Along about early afternoon, Uncle Meshach at the window looked out and said, "Automobile a-coming."

Uncle Shad looked up from the radio. He nodded at Uncle Abed. They had all been listening to Hosanna [redacted], snapping their fingers and slapping their legs to the tune. Uncle Abed got up quickly and was through the door like he had vanished before your eyes.

This fellow at the radio station had got hold of one of Hosanna's [redacted]s albums and was riding it sorebacked. He had gone through Barbara Allen and The Hangman's Song and Sourwood Mountain a couple of times already. But far as the uncles were concerned, he could have hit them a couple of times more.

Paw had gone outside to see after the mules. I went over to Uncle Meshach's window. It held a view clean down the Malagoosha road. The dust was spinning out behidn the car but it was a distance away yet. Uncle Meshach squinted his eyes and said,

"Coming fast enough to bust a britches . Cant yet tell if its a filly or a mare."

Paw's kin sure talked funny, thinking of automobiles as a filly or a mare.

"She sure sends that automobile a-flying, anyway," Uncle Meshach said.

He got to me. My jaws hung slack as I stared at him. With eyes as good as any linthead in the territory, I had only about been seeing the outline of the driver of the auto. Yet Uncle Meshach could tell that the driver was a woman. And was even a little worried because he wasnt sure whether she was a filly or a mare.

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Suddenly Uncle Meshach snorted disgustedly.

"That darn fool Abner went out without his rifle gun," he said.

"Aint got a rifle gun. Got one of these here bird guns," Uncle Shad at the radio said.

"You reckon he wants to get his head blowed off? Going out without his rifle gun with a feud on."

Paw was coming from the barn, looking down the road as he walked. He had been feeding and watering the mules.

"Abner left home too young," Uncle Shad said. "He aint never been in a real war."

I said, "Listen, you, Paw held off the Mayor and a whole bunch of men here the other night with just a bird gun and guts."

They looked at me and if they had been smiling men, what flitted across their faces could have been pleasure.

"Well, now, I reckon," Uncle Shad said.

Uncle Meshach said softly, "We aint talking about guts, son. Your Paw is a Hammond. We just talking about having knowledge about war."

Uncle Meshach beside me said, "Filly."

Jeb Wishaw's car was turning into the road. Olivinia was alone in it. I ran for the door and got to her as she was braking. The car almost rolled over my foot and I had to hop out of the way and lope alongside it calling to her, "Hey, stop!"

When it finally halted, she was still hunched over the wheel staring open mouthed at Uncle Meshach shambling over from the house, the long rifle trailing on the ground. His shaggy head

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was bare. He was looking at Olivinia from under his brow. I waved a hand at him and said, "hey, Uncle Meshach, you're scaring the filly."

Olivinia gave a small gasp. I'll bet she was ready to scalp me. Uncle Meshach kept coming. When he reached the car, he said,

"She's sure pretty, Abner. She yours? She's sure worth roping."

Olivinia asked weakly, "Who's he?"

"My uncle from over the mountain." I hid the grin.

"Oh."

A low whistle came from the house. Uncle Meshach faded. Olivinia looked startled. "They Visiting?" she asked.

"Kind of. What about you? Visiting or come nursing?" I was skunky for real.

She was small and neat and clean in Jeb Wishaw's dusty auto. She had a bow in her hair and the frock was bright as if she was going to town on court day. "I heard about the police and you last night,"she said.

"Sure. A joke Shorty and Joe played on me."

"Joke? They most tear you down. Look on your face," she said angrily.

"I still got a nose. Preacher maybe more damaged than me."

"It did no good, Abner. He preached again this morning. Folks are coming out to get the Nigra. Even if it means shooting."

I grinned. "So maybe that's why Paw's got folks visiting."

"One old man. What can he do."

"You aint seen the others," I said.

"Others?"

"Boy. You wait."

"You're not making much sense."

"That one was Uncle Meshach. He's the joker in the pack."

She drew her eyebrows together. It was true as Uncle Meshach had said. Shhe was pretty.

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"What others?"

"The uncles. Shadrach, [redacted] and Abednego. That was Meshach."

Paw was coming from the house.

She asked, "You mean your Paw brought in his kin?"

"Kind of," I said.

"Why your Paw did that?"

Guess I stared. Hell, she knew what they had done to me last night and what they were aiming to do today. She had told me herself. Uncle Shad came out and whistled at Paw. Olivinia hadnt seen them yet. Paw stopped, waiting for Uncle Shad.

"Paw figured I got enough beating," I said.

"They're his fighting kin. His feuding kin I've heard my pappy talking about," she said.

"Maybe."

"There'll be fighting. They'll kill."

"Folk coming out here today bringing guns too," I said.

"But we belong here, Abner! Folks didnt bring us in to do their fighting." Sure. We belong here. That's why she was nursing the Nigra. A joke.

Paw was shaking his head at Uncle Shad. My uncles Meshach and Abednego stepped from the house and went over to Uncle Shad and Paw. Uncle Shad looked at them and they nodded. Paw shook his head and said something. They didnt like it and all three uncles spat on the ground.

"Your Paw will be out there too, [redacted] carrying a gun," I said. "We aint to blame if he gets trouble."

"Paw wont be there, neither will Uncle Matt or the others," she said.

"How so?"

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"Paw talked Uncle Matt out of it and Uncle Matt went after Micajah Hoe and Jilson and the others ---- all your Paw's friends, except Sep Logan. They reckoned it had gone far enough. Said they'd leave it to the town folk."

"Whyn't they say they'd talk the townies out of it?"

"Abner, you know the townies got their danders up. You heard the preacher working on them."

"So you think we ought to make them dig out the Nigra," I said.

"Didnt say that." But she looked away.

"You scared of what they might do?"

She jerked her head to me. "Yes, I'm good and scared," she said between her teeth. "Its turned bad and you dont have to be a goldurned fool."

The uncles and Paw came up so quietly, Olivinia hadnt heard them until Paw spoke.

"Fellow's resting, Olivinia," Paw said.

She turned at his voice. And she took in all three of the uncles for the first time together. They stood tall, grim and shaggy in their patched overalls, forearms dangling down from the rifle guns they had slung deerwise across their shoulders. You could smell violence and blood on them if you went thinking things, but even if you hadnt known of the feuding Hammonds, they looked dangerous in their long, flat stillness, standing hip jointed, chawing burley and the forearms hooked on the rifles.

"Right fine girl your girl, Abner," Uncle Shad said. "She come to load guns for us?"

Olivinia, her eyes popping, shook her head. Uncle Shad spat on the ground and said, "Pshaw. Reckon you did. You want to light and visit, then?"

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She shook her head. Then her mouth went stubborn as she fought down the flutters. "No-o. I aint staying."

Paw said gently, "Then you go on home, Olivinia. Go straight home."

Uncle Shad shook his head. "Reckon we cant, Abner. Girl goes out of here and says we holing up here, we lose the surprise."

"I dont want a surprise, Shad. Just want folks to know we aint weak and that way, they wont try anything," Paw said.

"They will try. Anyway. They vexed enough with you, they'll try, no matter."

"You turn around and hightail back home, Olivinia," Paw said.

"We cut her down before she hit the gate, Abner," Uncle [redacted] Meshach said. "We blow off her tyres."

Paw just got smaller and meaner and looked Uncle Meshach [redacted] in the eye.

"You do it, [redacted] and I shoot you in the middle, close up, with my squirrel gun," Paw whispered.

I knew now how he had coped with his brothers when he lived over the mountain. Paw could mad up until a bobcat looked gentle as a rabbit. I opened the door of the car and rammed into the seat beside Olivinia.

"Turn, girl, turn," I said low.

She fumbled a little but got the motor started, backed up and made the turn and rolled for the gate. I waited for the boom and the lurch, but nothing happened and we got out to the public highway. I reached over and cut the switch. The car rolled a few feet and stopped. Olivinia's head fell slowly to the steering wheel. She was weeping all over herself, the way girls cry.

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"They wouldnt have done a thing," I said. "Paw wouldnt have made them."

Seemed like I said the right thing for she came up fast off the steering wheel and knuckled the tears out of her eyes. But when she turned to me, well, I knew I had guessed wrong. She looked as ferocious as Paw.

"You fool! You and your Paw and the three scarecrows back there ----" [redacted]

"We aint done nothing wrong!" I protested. "Didnt you hear Paw say back there he didnt aim to surprise the townies? All he wants is for them to stay off his land!"

"You shove a gun at folks and tell them stay off your land?" she blazed. "You think they just going to back off and run?"

"They better!" I raged right back at her. "Or we shoot their brushes off!"

"Your folks are going to shoot at them! Going to shoot at our own folks!"

"Then tell your Paw and uncle Matt to go stop the townies from coming! Tell Sep Logan to take his seven chunkies out of the line. And while you doing all that talking, tell Miss Amanda stop spreading lies about Willi Mae --- tell 'em all just leave us Hammonds alone! There aint none of you in Malagoosha good as my sister Willi Mae!"

That didnt ought to come out but by this time I was real red-eye mad. She just looked at me as if didnt see me and said, "Get out of this car."

Well, I git. Maybe it oughtnt to have come out but they had no right thinking up them things about Willi Mae. She almost knocked me catercorner as she tore off. I walked back to the house. They were

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all back inside by then, the uncles sitting on the floor with their backs to the wall. Uncle Meshach looked up and cocked his head from side to side. They listened for sounds nobody else ever heard. They saw quicker than a squirrel. I mean, they were primitives.

I stood there getting madder. At last it busted out.

"What the hell talk is that anyway? Saying you'd shoot at Olivinia?" I shouted.

Uncle Abednego kept looking at the floor. He was the grave one. The graven image. They all thought like gods. Shaggy mountain gods making pronouncements about who could leave the farm and who would stay.

"Son, when you brung us here, you let yourself in for the good and the bad in us. Depending on how you look at it," Uncle Abednego said.

So maybe I had brought in trouble. Everybody makes mistakes.

"Then I'll take you right back. Get your gear."

Paw said sharply, "You shut up now, Abner."

"We dont go back, boy. Not once we're in. We like a burr on you until its over. We go back now, you dont sleep nights. You begin to hear the things we listening for," Uncle Meshach said.

"That's no way to talk, Abner. You quit," Paw rapped.

"Suppose they had shot and hit Olivinia instead!"

"We dont miss, boy. All us Hammonds shoot good. Your Paw too," Uncle Meshach said. "We learnt early."

They sat on the floor with their knees [redacted] up to their chins. They had the rifles between their knees. They didnt seem to wash, or remove their clothes at nights. Maybe it was the war. But you looked at their hands on the guns and you were secure. Uncle Shad spat sideways on the floor.

"Go see after the mules in the shed," Paw said sharply to me.

"But look at them!" I shouted. "So they call us white trash

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in town and say things of Willi Mae! See these guys and they'll know we're poor white trash!"

It got to Paw like I'd wallop ed him with a piece of two by four. He staggered back a pace and his face turned ashen. His eyes widened and remained so, staring at me. He looked like he was about to have a stroke. Or kill me.

"What did they say about Willi Mae?"

I knew better than to hump around now. I had been a fool to go wailing off because Olivinia had got mad but the dirt was already kicked up. Paw wouldnt wait. His face turned rock hard.

"Saying things, saying she's turned bad," I said, feeling as if all my teeth were being pulled.

"Who been saying things?"

"Dont know for sure, but I guess could be Miss Amanda."

"That connect with you at her window?"

"Wanted to scare her, to see if she'd jump. Guess it was she alright."

"You need more'n that," Paw said.

I told him about Pete Sawyers' telephone call.

"Why didnt you tell me about this before?"

"I didnt know for sure, Paw. I didnt know."

He said, "Guess I got to go to this Key West."

It came to me slowly then that this could be the break. Get Paw's dander up to go to Key West and maybe he'd forget the nigger in the house and take off. He loved Willi Mae more than his right arm.

"We could get the telephone company to tell us where Pete phoned from," I said. "We could run him down in no time."

"Whereabouts the country is Key West?" Uncle Shad asked.

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"Way down in Florida."

"Think our old car could make it?" Paw asked.

"We could use Pete's pickup," I said.

He looked over at the uncles.

"Got to go to Key West," he said.

Uncle Shad nodded. "You go, Abner. We can clean up here."

"Dont need to do that," I said. "We could take you back and detour down to Key West."

He ignored me like I hadnt said a word.

"Less'n you want to wait then we could go to Key West with you, Abner," he said.

"Maybe you got to do some fighting down there, Abner," Uncle Meshach said.

"Shucks, yes. We could [redacted] take care of them townies and then [redacted] go with Abner," Uncle Abednego said.

Paw came out of where he had been.

"No, we'll straighten out this and then we'll take you back, Shad. Got to go to Key West alone," he said. "Soon as this is over."

"Paw," I said, "we ought to go now. Willi Mae ---- "

He said to me softly, "You shut up now, boy."

He said it sort of furry, it pimpled my back. I didnt talk anymore.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They came at us later. [redacted] Coleman Roberts' Uncle Meshach car was in the lead and we counted a four or so behind him. / [redacted] had been out in the yard piling wood. He shouted something that sounded like, "Folks a-coming!" and Shad and Abednego got to their feet and went out without a word. By the time I got to the door, they had disappeared. They just seemed to have been swallowed by the land.

I turned around and said, "Paw, where're they?"

Paw was pulling on his jacket. "You wont see them, Abner," he said.

They were blowing the horns of the cars and yelling things [redacted] as they neared our gate. I could hear what they were yelling and Paw turned so pale, the stubble on his face stood out. I took down my gun and put in two shells. Paw heard the click as I closed the breech and he turned and looked at me for awhile.

"Guess you should stay out of this, Abner," he said.

"You kidding?"

"Wont do you no good when the time for State comes. Fighting for Nigras aint so popular."

"I aint fighting for Nigras. I'm on my Paw's side."

He smiled a little. "Dont take a man's side, son, or you wont be any better off than Shad and the rest out there ---- and you dont think much of them. Take the side what you think is right."

"Wish we had invented something that could turn niggers ---- hell, Nigras white. That would end strife."

"Why you think they want to be white?"

"They ought to. Save their asses some."

"Maybe you're right. Though I aint sure. Folks are funny. Take

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that bunch out there. If I were a Nigra, I wouldnt want to be one of them."

They were beating the sides of the cars and yelling like kids on Massacre Day. I pulled aside the curtain and looked out. Mayor Roberts had stepped from his car and was standing beside it, looking towards the house. I looked for any of Paw's friends. Not a one was there. Not even Sep. I looked for Joe and Shorty, but they werent there either. These were all folk the preacher had worked on, town folk. Mayor Roberts was smoking a cigar and seemed to be grinning around it. The people in the other cars kept banging the sides and shouting the names.

Paw said, "You stay in, Abner. If I need you I'll holler."

He opened the door and went outside. The shouts rolled down on him.

"Nigger-loving Hammond ---- white trash Hammond!"

Mayor Roberts allowed it to go on enough, he figured, to scare Paw, before he held up his hand. He called out,

"Told you I'd be out, Abner. Told you, didnt I?"

Paw said, "I believed you. You bring the warrant?"

Mayor Roberts held up his hand to stop the shouting.

"I brought it," he said grinning, "several of them."

He waved his hand at the crowd behind him and everybody burst out cheering and laughing. It was good, I reckoned. Coleman Roberts has turned smarter since he was elected. And by the looks of it, he'd be elected again.

"They aint legal, Coleman," Paw said.

Everybody laughed again, including Mayor Roberts who took out his cigar to do it properly, from the belly.

"Naw, but they're mighty powerful, Abner. Want to see them tear out your fences so as to show you their warrant?"

Paw waited for the laugh to die out and said, "Why dont you leave him

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in peace, Coleman? He aint troubling anybody [redacted]?"

Mayor Roberts held up his hand. He stabbed the cigar towards Paw.

"Get this,once and for all, Hammond. Folks around here aint hating niggers. You got mules in the barn? We love them as you love them mules. You'd shoot to protect them mules. But I dont see them sleeping in the house with you."

"Maybe they do!" yelled a voice from in the crowd.

"Nigger-lover!"

"Let's go get him and his nigger!"

They left the cars and were coming on foot towards the gate. I eased the gun to the window sill and waited. I hadnt heard a sound from the uncles, but I wasnt worried. To tell the truth, as I looked at the crowd, some carrying shotguns and others pieces of lumber or old chains or whatever, I felt glad about Uncle Shad and the others some place out there. I had been playing a guessing game about where they were, whether behind the haystack, or the barn, or our automobile. But when they showed, I was wrong.

Paw held up his hand and called, "Mayor Roberts?"

Coleman Roberts stepped out in front and held up both hands and the crowd backed up behind him.

"Wait a minute, boys, let's hear what Abner's saying."

"Mayor Roberts, you come on my land without a warrant, reckon you know you'll be trespassing."

"Is that all, Abner? You had your say?"

"Had my say, Mayor," Paw said.

"Alright. Now hear this. I'm going to count to ten. If the gate aint opened at ten, I wont be able to control these fellows. They'll just have to come in and take out the nigger themselves. One. Two. Three."

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He counted by poking the cigar towards the sky. Dont know whether it was that Uncle Shad couldnt count beyond three or he just got plain impatient, but before Coleman Roberts could say four, Uncle Shad shot his cigar in half.

For awhile, after the crack of the rifle gun, there was a dead silence. I looked for the smoke and saw it curling out of the yard grass. Then I knew I'd been wrong all along. Uncle Shad and the rest could go to earth like animals. They were part of the earth. They could use the folds and the knobs, the rocks and the valleys and the ridges. In the right places, you wouldnt know they were there until you stepped on them. And then, I reckon you'd wished that you had stepped on a cottonmouth.

Mayor Roberts' hand was still in the air like the shot had frozen it there. He was looking up at the torn end of his cigar, his mouth open. And then before he could say anything, another piece of the cigar disappeared as Uncle Meshach showed me how well the Hammonds could shoot.

Up to now, none of them had shown themselves. I learnt afterwards about who had fired. We only knew then that the shots had come from two widely separated places. Then I heard Uncle Shad's peculiar whistle and the yard exploded. From every direction, rifleguns spoke and the hats of the townies went flying. Uncle Shad and the rest just fired like lightning and folk out there lost their hats. I think the first of them to break were those who found their hats and clapped them on again, only in the instant to lose them. Yelling, they ran for their cars. Mayor Roberts was last to go and I was glad in a funny way that although he walked quickly, he didnt run like the others. For although I was proud of the uncles, I didnt want them to think that all the folks in this section of the county were as easily scared.

The last of the cars pulled away and Uncle Shad rose, knocking

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burr from his denims. One by one the others came from cover. Nobody looked flustered as if they had just fought a war. They just got to their feet, knocking off burrs and shaking bits of grass and pebbles from their overalls and taking the old felt hats from their shirt fronts where they had stuck them when they took cover.

Uncle Meshach was checking his sights, pointing the gun into the sky and squeezing off.

"Gun acting up?" Uncle Abednego said.

"Darn if I dont think I nearly nicked an ear," Uncle Meshach said.

"Maybe a speck of dust flew in your eye," Uncle Shad said.

"Maybe," Uncle Meshach said.

Nobody said anything to Paw. They walked back for the house. [redacted]

Paw said, "Abner, want to heat some coffee?"

[redacted] They sat on the floor, cleaning their guns. Watching their hands on the rifles, I remember Paw telling me that the gun had been the earliest plow used in the United States. He said it had conquered the land, turned it into something of value. Paw would say that we Americans were well served in tools, tools to build and to destroy. One time he heard a fellow on the radio say we made the most powerful guns, built the biggest churches and grew the hugest grain of wheat there was. All we needed was to make the tallest man, Paw said, and that was up to all of us. What we had to do first was to learn how tall was tall.

I knew they came no taller than Paw. I knew his guts were wrenching

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to go after Willi Mae but he had put in the hoe and he would go to the end of the row. But what would be the end? He wasnt a foolish man. We could whop the fellows a couple of times but in the end, Coleman Roberts would find a way to bring the law down on us./ Even if it was [redacted]for disturbing the peace. Calling in the uncles had fooled them ---- but only for awhile.

While they were cleaning their guns, I took Paw aside.

"Paw," I said, "what's going to happen now? They'll come back."

"We hold off a day or two and we'll be alright," he said.

"A day or two? Something going on here I dont know about?"

"Maybe," he said.

Said it so goldurned calm, I was getting mad.

"But ---- how long can this -- this army hold out?" I asked, waving a hand at the uncles. "And while we're at it, how long will they stay?"

"Long as we want them to."

"What about their own homes?"

"This is their home, Abner, where their kin needs them."

"And what about Willi Mae?" I said brutally. "Aint you going out to look for her?"

He closed his eyes and I sort of wished he'd belt me. But I guess he had seen through me. They come no taller than Paw.

He said, "You got a chore to do."

That angered me. "Chore? You talking about chores at a time like this?"

[redacted]

Paw said, "You must go into town."

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I stared at him.

"You go into town and see Jeb Coombes. Tell him to talk to Miss Amanda. If Pete Sawyer phones again, Jeb's to take the call. Want to find out where Pete's staying."

"Go into town? You crazy?" I whispered.

I walked over to the window and looked out. It was darkening. There was no sign of life on the road. It made sense that we should find out where Pete was. This Key West could be a big place with a heap of streets and houses. Lots of sailors and soldiers were going down there since this business with Cuba. God Almighty, maybe it was as Miss Amanda was saying. I didnt have any way of telling. If it was true, it would break him for sure. But I needed to know. When this matter was over with, I'd be taking off for Key West myself before Paw knew it. I'd bring her back before he found out anything for sure. Even if I had to drag her. But I'd want to know where in Key West Willi Mae was shacking it.

I went back to him and nodded.

"How will you do it?" he asked.

"I'll hide the pickup in the brush and sneak into town. I think I can made it to the back of Jeb's place without folks seeing me."

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CHAPTER ~~FOURTEEN~~ SEVENTEEN

Jeb Coombes' store was built of stone and brick. The walls were a foot and a half thick, the windows small and high so the Indians couldnt see in, even if they prowled right up, back in the time over a hundred years ago when it was built. The rafters were split ash, the walls panelled in cherry. Jeb was proud of the place and kept it clean as a hound's tooth. The way people tell it, it had been built for a blockhouse and later turned into the first courthouse. There was a big main entrance on Saltlick Street and a smaller door in the alley near the filling station. It took me a time to make it to this door for Malagoosha [redacted] was jumpy tonight. Most of the crowding was around Coleman Robert s' place. Automobiles were packed tightly on the courthouse lawn. I had my collar up and my cap pulled down and had put a limp in my walk. Yet I was bobcat nervous, walking past the knots of folk and hearing our name mentioned at every turn.

I knew I could get to Jeb Coombes' but what scared me was talking to Jeb. I'd reminded Paw about Jeb and he said, "Tell Jeb its Willi Mae," That was all.

When we came to town I used to hang out with Pete Sawyers most of the day while Paw and the others sat in Jeb's shaking hands with old General Lee. I hadnt been with them every minute of the day. There were things about their friendships I didnt know. What I knew was that [redacted] were coming those friendships apart. And what had happened out at the farm today wouldnt begin to patch it up again. Yet Paw had seemed to believe he could count on Jeb Coombes. I didnt relish the idea of Jeb grabbing me for Joe and Shorty.

The alley door was closed but it wasnt locked. It opened on a

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passage that ran past the rooms which made up Jeb's sleeping quarters. The passage ended in the space behind the bar. There was a cutoff door between the passage and the bar. One light bulb was burning in the passage. I turned off the light and crept up to the door. It wasnt so thick I couldnt hear the noise in the store. I tried it and got a crack. Joe was somewhere down at the other end, out of line with my sight. To the left I could see the grocery portion of the store, darkened and empty. I eased the door a little more and got one fat round corner of the stove in my eyes and then as I looked past it, just a piece of Sep Logan's face. I pulled the door shut quickly.

The floor under my foot and the wall at my back felt solid and sure. I wanted to stay there in the dark, safe and warm, away from Sep and Joe and Shorty, just drop the whole stupid business. Paw had been crazy believing this would work.

I cracked the door again and picked up Sep Logan talking,

"... Goldurned army, the way Coleman Roberts tell it."

"Dont know how come Jeb Wishaw didnt know about this," Jilson Swift said. "That girl of his ought to have seen something when she was out there earlier. Ought to have seen Abner's army and told her Paw about it."

"If I had a daughter and she was snucking up to that brat of his I'd take leather to her," Sep Logan said. "With a nigger in the house too."

"We didnt any of us know Abner would turn out how he did," Jilson Swift said.

"He ought to stop her before she turns bad," Sep said.

Uncle Matt Connant cleared his throat and said, "Cant believe everything you hear, specially when you know where you heard it from," thinking of Miss Amanda and Mayor Roberts no doubt. "Knew her Maw before

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she died. Knew her Paw before he turned crazy. Willi Mae wasnt born bad none at all. Maybe she saw her Paw turning contrarious and lit out before it touched her too."

I listened but didnt hear Olivinia's Paw. Jeb Coombes came along the bar and I put my lips to the crack and said, "Jeb, Jeb Coombes," in a hoarse voice but he went right on by so I reckoned it hadnt been loud enough. I stood there grinning nervously and waiting for him to come by again. This time I called louder. Jeb stopped walking. I pictured him looking around to locate the call. For who would expect a voice to come out of a crack?

I said hoarsely, "The door, Jeb. Want to talk with you."

Then I flattened to the wall. Jeb was a brawling man who would know how to fix anybody who might be laying for him. Sure enough he flung the door open and peered into the half dark of the passage. Standing further out, he'd have brained me with the door.

"Behind the door, Jeb. Dont want to show myself to folks outside. You wait there, going to turn the light on."

I hoped to God Jeb hadnt forgotten that he and Paw had been close. I could feel Joe and Shorty rattling my teeth in their fists.

I worked the switch and stared into Jeb Coombes' eyes.

"Wouldnt have come but Paw sent me," I said flatly to the tough look in his eyes. "He figured you wouldnt turn me in but I figured different."

The door to the alley was open and even if he was stronger than me, he couldnt catch me to the alley with one of my legs in a ball and chain. I was set to run if he turned ornery.

"Why you figured different?" Jeb said.

"You're with Coleman Roberts," I said.

He stared at me. He said slowly, "I run a business in this town,

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boy. Mayor Roberts aint the soft mayor we all thought he'd be."

Even if he had been just going along on the pull, I wasnt going to trust him too close. Just likely he might be thinking that grabbing me might help him with Mayor Roberts.

Paw sent a message."

"What message?"

I told him about the phone call. I called Willi Mae's name. He looked sick and shook his head.

"The town's turned rotten," he said. "Tell your Paw I dont believe it."

"Sure," I said.

He said, "What's this crazy story I hear from the fellows who were out at your place? Who's your Paw got out there?"

I shook my head.

"You can tell me. Your Paw knows different about me. You can talk to me, boy."

But I'd done Paw's chore and was backing out of Jeb's place.

"How'll your Paw know when I hear from Pete?"

That needed some thought. If Jeb Coombes wanted to trap me, that would be the time to do it, when I returned for the answer. Then I had an idea and grinned.

"You write it down on Sep Logan's signboard. Just write down the address. I'll come along some time to look at it."

He chuckled and he looked square as shooting, but Malagoosha had turned sour and I wasnt [redacted] swallowing how a fellow looked.

"Beat it, boy. Close the door behind you," he said.

I went out quick and lost myself on Saltlick. Folks didnt seem to be bedding down tonight. I took a look at the gas station. It was all dark but I knew better than going in there. I walked out of town, past the

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wreck at Lookout Rock and found Pete's truck.

Paw came up alongside as I stopped in the yard. He leaned on the cab while I told him everything that had happened at Jeb's.

"Jeb aint lying. You could have trusted him, son."

"Better this way, Paw," I said shortly.

No lights showed in the house but when we went in, I saw that they had covered the windows with stuff. A lamp was turned down low. I screwed up the wick and they were on the floor. There were only two mounds under the blankets. I looked at Paw and he motioned outside. The other was out there, I guessed padding around on guard.

Paw gave me coffee and some food they had prepared while I was gone. We sat there talking together in low voices. I wondered whether he had listened to the radio tonight. A song from Hosanna would make us both feel better. It was a caution the way that gal could soothe Paw and me. Like she was singing to us special.

Sometime later I woke, stiff with cold. Uncle Shad was sitting up in his blankets. His eyes caught the light as he looked at me. A grimace creased his leathery face.

"Just listen to them coming," he said, "noisy as beavers."

He scared me, saying it so easy. Though I listened hard, there wasnt anything out there bar the whistling frogs and silence. Uncle Shad didnt seem to have said anything but the others sat up too. They rose with their rifles in hand, shedding the blankets like a dog coming out of a stream.

Uncle Meshach chopped his hand towards the lamp and I blew it out. The light outside was soft and ghostly, the moonshine lost in the mist. As they had done before, the uncles just went out the door and disappeared. I still hadnt heard anything out there but I had no doubt at all. Paw's

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kin were witchy, the way they could see and hear and shoot. They spat on floors and didnt care to sleep in beds but they knew more about staying ahead of defeat than anybody I knew. I kept thinking that this was how they had whopped the Indians and tamed the land. I kept thinking that destructive as it was to the life we had known, this nigger-trouble had brought out some of the best, as it had the worst, in folks.

Heard the fellows then. Heard them like a rustle in the brush, a chink of metal on stone but it was a marvel how, long ago, Uncle Shad had picked them up. An instinct warned me to lay down flat on the gallery. My guess was that Coleman Roberts wasnt coming cherry-picking today. From the talk I'd heard in town, Joe and Shorty would be in that crowd out there, shooting law-style with County authority behind them.

When the firing started, sure enough it all seemed to be directed towards the house. Bullets plunked and whined all around. I dug my face into the lumber and prayed. As I worked out the direction of the firing, it appeared that all that stood between me and that lead they were throwing, was Paw's solid floor planking. The gallery was some distance off the ground and since the dip of the land placed the attackers below me, the bullets either came under the house or flew well above me.

Nobody yet had fired from our side and I was cursing crazy at Paw and the rest for not shooting back. When they did, I laughed loony wild for minutes.

Yesterday afternoon, Uncle Meshach had been working out in the yard for a long spell, working at the wood pile. Now I knew why. [redacted] From three places along our fence line, great fires roared up, fed by coal oil. Mayor Roberts' posse was caught in the light. And Uncle Shad and the rest went to shooting. I

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knew there were only four of them out there counting Paw but it sounded like an army. The guns cracked from all sides. The bullets plowed dirt in the faces of the fellows. They had been coming forward at a crouch, believing to rush the house and suddenly they were pinned in the light, hung up like dolls, all crooked arms and open mouths.

The kin herded them back, sheep dog fashion, curling up the flank and beating back those in front with shooting that was magic. A few got winged, but except for a howl and a bandage, they would be the same as new by morning. Uncle Shad and the others just shot at feet and hats. They kept moving from place to place. One time, I think it was Uncle Meshach who was right below me and I could hear him chuckling as he fired his gun and rolled over, moving to some place else. Before the posse was out of earshot, Paw called to his kinsfolk to stop shooting. Then he shouted so Mayor Roberts could hear.

"Coleman Roberts, I'm giving you notice! Next time we shoot hard, you trespass on my place!"

But all the reply was a wild shot and a yell. The uncles blasted them again and they ran for their cars away off. Long after, we heard the sounds of the motors as they headed back to town. I rose and stretched. I was real proud. I grinned at nothing.

"Aint had so much fun since hog-calling day," Uncle Meshach said, coming into the house.

"But they was shooting at us," Uncle Meshach said, his eyes dead flat. "When you reckon you going to let us shoot back, Abner? We aint shot back yet for real."

"Shot back? You mean --- kill?" I said.

Paw said, coming in, "Aint going to be no hard shooting, son. We just keeping them away."

"That aint what you told them out there, Abner," Uncle Meshach

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said.

"Hope they believed me. That's to keep them off. Dont want nobody hurt bad," Paw said.

"They get the idea you're doing that, what's to prevent them coming right in?" I said.

"Not when they come like that, son. The time to watch is when two or three of them drift in to talk peace. They dont know who we got out here, or how many of us there is. They'll want to count heads."

"Not even Jeb Coombes knows, you remember that," I said to myself looking at Paw. He looked back at me as if he knew I was thinking about holding out on Jeb.

"They aint never going to count heads, Abner," Uncle Shad said softly.

We sat out the dawning and then the kinsfolk went to sleep. I went out to the barn after Paw. He was feeding and watering the animals.

"You get some sleep, Abner," he said, "you got to see Jeb Coombes tonight."

I stood right there and said, "There're things I ought to know."

He was rubbing down a mule. He said mildly, "What things?"

"Things like how long you figure we're all going to be risking our necks around here and why. We could get away now."

He looked at me but his eyes held nothing I could read.

"You getting tired of it, son?"

"You ought to give me something, Paw. You ought to say what we're waiting for. I know you're waiting for something. You cant hope to keep them off forever. You ought to tell me what you're waiting for."

"Your Uncle Shad and the rest aint asking, Abner."

Anger jumped in me. "They dont care, Paw, dont you see?" I shouted. "They dont care so long as they can shoot and chaw and spit! You

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think it matters to them that you moved over here and raised your family and folks respect you? They're still in the one room log cabin sleeping with the hogs!"

He looked plumb worn out with warring and worrying. But if he couldnt end the worrying, he hadnt needed to go warring. And even if his pride was to blame for prodding him into it, we had dusted them enough to retire with our tails up. He didnt have any cause to keep at it until they had his hide.

"Folks respect a lot of people whom hogs aint got no respect for even," he said. "Shad and the others respect themselves for they aint asking anything out of this more than folks leave me to raise my own hell with myself."

"I aint asking anything but that we get out of here and go hunt up Pete and Willi Mae," I said.

"I didnt aim to bring you into this, son. You came back," he said.

"And maybe I should pull out?"

"Maybe." He went back to rubbing the animal.

He had that quiet way of making you look inside.

"Paw," I said, "What makes you think those others dont believe in what they're doing?"

"Sheep," he said, slapping the word at me. "They feed along as other folk herd them. They dont raise their heads to look where they are going. Sheep."

"Just like the mules you say built this country."

He gave a sure enough laugh and patted the mule on the rump. "A lot to learn about mules, boy, if you figure that way. Nobody pushes a mule. He'll lay back his ears."

"But - but, Paw, just supposing they really believe?"

He looked at his hands resting on the mule skin. It was quiet in the barn.

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"Then they would crawl under the bullets and dig out the colored man ."

"Perhaps they dont think a nigger is worth all that trouble," I said.

Paw dropped the brush and turned on me. His eyes went flat with a quiet kind of fury.

"His name's Dodge. Sam Dodge. Call him by his name. That's the least we can do."

Day was lighting up. We could see clear across to the road where the big oaks humped against the sky. Paw looked as if he would talk some more but then he seemed to pull back. He breathed out powerfullyand went back to rubbing down the mule.

I shouldnt have been surprised that he knew the fellow's name. He had talked with him often enough. He and Olivinia. I had heard them mumbling inside the room sometimes but I was too redeyed angry at those times to go in. Mostly it sounded as if Sam Dodge was doing the talking. You would hear his voice, deep and quick. He never spoke to me those times I poked in and he was awake. He would look at me long enough to focus and then his eyes would slide away. It could be that he was uppity. Or maybe scared.

"Glad to hear somebody named him."

"He's mending good. Olivinia fed him some broth last night."

That floored me right off. I must have been slackjawed.

"Olivinia? But she aint here!"

"She came back while you were gone to see Jeb."

"Where's she?"

"In my room. In with the sick fellow. Safest room in the house when it comes to shooting."

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"You mean - she's been in there all night with him?"

"We put your maw's old rocker in there for her. She's alright."

"You should have sent her home!"

"She walked over. Aint right sending her back on foot and I couldnt leave the house."

"Then I'll take her back right now!"

He shook his head and chuckled. "She wont go."

I guessed she wouldnt. She had come back to show me how tough she was. That the Wishaws didnt tuck their tails because of a handful of unshaven Hammonds. Well, she could stay in Paw's room with that fellow until she turned nigger herself for all I cared.

"You hold up and listen," Paw said. "If come nightfall and what I expect dont happen, we light out from here. We take the ~~X~~ pickup and make a run for it."

"Sure. But lets leave Sam Dodge and Olivinia. They'll only slow us up."

My nose was wetter than a pup's. I ought to be ashamed of myself. When Paw spoke, he spoke away from me, saying the words like he hoped they would slide around his head and somehow find me.

"Lots of times, people aint what they ought to be to each other. Lots of times in this County, hog sickness hits a fellow and our only concern then is how to prevent his dust blowing across our fences. Aint blaming nobody about that. But now and again, I reckon that somebody ought to take the risk and walk over to the fellow and say hello. Something happens when we do it. Dont rightly know if I can put the words to it, but a fellow straightens his shoulders a little more, keeps fighting that hog sickness a little harder. Aint going to happen everyday, but somebody ought to walk

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over, especially in flood time, or tornado time.

"It seems to me that now's the time to take that special walk. Folks aint angels, they cant go acting like angels [redacted] everytime. But even if we only remember to act like decent folk when there's trouble, then that's something, Abner, that's something. It aint a lot, but its something. And it gets easier to do everytime."

I didnt know what Paw expected to happen by nightfall but it wasnt too long to wait. I was going to pin him to that one, bet your boots.

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IN ITALICS

He was used to ordeals. They had come so thick and fast, galloping in lockstep, he had never been able to jump clear. But he had never really wanted to run from them either; he was kind of friendly to them. For after the first few shocks, they had turned into paving stones in the muddy yard of his Negro existence. They kept him from being submerged. He was grateful to them, richly so. Grateful, in a quiet, sardonic way, to them for keeping him alive. He felt quickened by the bombings. He was important because somebody wished him dead. It made him aware that he was in a society that would [redacted] enthusiastically have banished him but for his revolution. Sam Dodge was glad for confrontations. Sam Dodge had shared many a confrontation.

"Go on down and demonstrate, kid," Irish Barty had said. "Take time off and show the bastards. But dont carry no gun. Just demonstrate."

Sam Dodge had gone down and sought repudiation. In restaurants, beaches, swimming pools, churches. He had integrated roadside cafes and public parks. He had picketted suburban housing projects and seamen's hiring halls. He had been bludgeoned and abused, hosed and teargassed. He was prouder for it, and curiously strenghtened.

Sam Dodge opened his eyes, turned his head on the pillow and saw the [redacted] girl. The old guy was there too. The old guy was named Abner Hammond. The girl had a vial and some bandages.

"Neat's Foot Oil. Right good for burns," Abner Hammond said.

The girl held up the vial so he could see the label. She smiled at him. She was kid stuff. Her hair was haystack

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blonde. The bun she wore at the back of her neck hadnt been styled in a salon. No make-up either. Straight hick.

Sam closed his eyes wearily. He watched them both through his eyelashes.

"You reckon you can manage, Olivinia? Them burns above the chest aint bad. Just dab some of the oil on them Wont have to trouble the bandages at all," Abner Hammond said.

"Reckon I can, Mr Hammond."

"Fellows and me got some talking to do. And anyway, he's asleep. Holler if you want me."

"Fine and dandy, Mr Hammond. I can manage. Been nursing since I learnt to tuck in a safety-pin and that was evef since I can remember being around," the girl said.

"Holler if you want me.X" He shook his head. "Grown men in town acting like wet eared colts and you, a least 'un, mending fences with more burr wire in you than an ironmongery store."

She had a real good smile. Lips tight and flattened on her teeth. Mouth puckered at the corners as if there were lots more humor she was saving up. Maybe for some cracker boy.

"Dont you go flattering me now. I'm doing it cause you and Lil' Abner aint got no women folk around."

"Dont matter why you doing it, girl, dont matter at all," the old man said.

Sam Dodge feigned sleep and listened to the dialogue. He had talked a spell with the old [redacted] guy. He hadnt made up his mind about the old guy but he had talked with him more than with any cracker he had ever met. But he had spent most of his time dozing or sleeping since he regained consciousness. He hadnt seen much of the girl during those times he was awake. She had helped the old man to fed him a couple of times. Sam couldnt do

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much for himself for awhile. That big old rock and the fire had sure made a mess of him.

Sam Dodge must have dozed off. He opened his eyes and stared straight into the girl's face. She had been bending over him, staring down at him.She jumped back, clear to the wall. Sam Dodge grinned. Women of the white race often took a close peek at you when they thought nobody was watching. Guess my big black self fascinates her.

"Scared?" Sam Dodge asked.

He had a rich baritone voice. Irish Barty had listened to him one day and said, "Kid, you could make an easier buck on stage than soldiering with this mob. Nobody would be liable to blow off your head either."

Sam Dodge grinned at the girl real wide and handsome.

"Dont be scared. I aint biting this season," he said.

But you didnt ought to grin with no Southern Belle because they could call it eye-rape or something. He gathered back the grin and looked at her Old Uncle. He wished he could have bobbed his head for her, real Old Uncle style, but the crappy pain was there waiting. This Old Uncle wasnt going to bob no head for now.

"Yes, ma'am," Sam Dodge said.

"I aint afraid of you," snapped the girl.

"Didnt figure you were, ma'am. I'm just sick and mean."

"I want to look at the bandages."

"They just fine. No need to."

"The doctor aint coming back. I've got to do what I can."

Sam Dodge was surprised. "Doctor? Didnt know one had been around."

"He was here after they pulled you out of the fire and brought you to the house."

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"Who pulled me out, ma'am? Sure would like to pray real hard and loud for the white folks who got me out."

Sam Dodge had been waiting. He hadnt wanted to pump the old guy. He was a cracker and you had to be careful. But the girl would be easier and a better weathercock too from which to tell how the wind blew. Sam Dodge wasnt sure that the old guy would act against him. But you couldnt be sure about any of them, no matter how liberal they looked. You couldnt really tell with no Mister Charley. Sometimes they brothered you so much, they stained you with their damn guilt. But sometimes they stomped you as you grovelled. It was the same guilt of course, but why the hell that was, Sam was at a loss. He didnt know anything about white people, except Barty. Barty and most of Barty's Mob.

Sam grinned wryly at himself. He must have been nuts, or delirious at least, talking so hot and loving to a cracker about Barty's Mob.

"They all helped. Everybody ran to the car and began digging for you. We thought ---"

She didnt seem to know he was kidding her along. Yeah, she was only a kid. Kids were good. They spoke their minds.

"Thought, what, ma'am? Thought I was dead?"

"That's right," the girl said eagerly. "We all thought you were dead."

Like hell. You all thought Old Sam was white. Heh heh heh. Sam Dodge fooled you, baby. But kids were okay. Even when they lied a little, they did it painfully.

"I'm sure grateful, ma'am. Back where I come from, a white man gets in a wreck, my folks would just walk away and leave him. My folks wouldnt pull him out at all."

She look startled. "That aint Christian," she said.

"That's right, ma'am. Where I come from, folks aint much for Christianity."

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"Where's your home?"

"Harlem, ma'am. Place in New York City. They watch white folks burn all the time."

(Who are you kidding? Black [redacted] folks too. In that goddam ghetto, folks just stop being folks.)

Sam Dodge was saved from burning when he joined up with Barty's Mob. That was a laugh. A bunch of guys whose business was guns and knives, saving him from burning. A couple of Jew-boys, four foulmouthed Irishmen including Barty, a squarehead, a wop, a wog, some more nondescript ofays and a nigger. That was the squad he soldiered with. They had saved him from burning.

He had talked about it one day to Barty. It hadnt been clear to him but sometimes it seemed it had come out clear to the ¾X Barty. For [redacted] that Irish killer had sat still through it, a light at the back of his eyes and had only become foulmouthed a minute or two after Sam quit talking.

"Maybe its something running through us. I dont know. Its like the flat Delta roads coming up out of Mississippi, tieing the continent together. All the way to the New England states where the land turns green with them quiet, silver-grey stone walls. Its all of a piece. Or crossing country to California. Crossing the Rocky Mountains. You ought to see the Rocky Mountains, Barty. They call it the Great Divide. But there aint anything big enough to really divide this country. Big as the Great Divide is, we threw roads across it. There's nothing in the United States big enough to divide this country."

"Except being Jew or IrishX or Negro," Barty said. Slapping his own face the way he did when he was stirred. It was funny watching Barty slapping his own face when he was drunk or sad or happy. Sometimes the boys talked about how Barty had that habit of slapping his own face. Hard, stinging slaps like he was mad

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at himself. His big white Irish face was always showing the red marks.

"Not even that, Barty. We made it, didnt we? "

"Crap off. We're just unusual."

"One of these days, I'm going back to the railroad. There aint no way better to see this country than on the railroad. You ought to see Chicago, Barty, see it coming in on the Flyer early in the morning. The wheels ~~had~~ have been clickety clackety-ing all night, slowing now. Rattling the breakfast ~~xi~~ dishes in the sink. You looking through the window of the diner at day breaking behind the river. You can smell the river. The lake too. And suddenly, for ten seconds or so, I guess you love America." Okay. Okay, Knock it off Sam. Uncle Sam.

They hKad been sitting out. Cleaning guns. Barty liked clean guns. Barty watched the sun going down behind the tamaracks. It was frost time. The tamaracks had turned [redacted] to yellow. The dogwood thickets were pale pink.

"Crap," Barty said. "Pure shit crap."

It wasnt anything bad he meant. That was how Barty was. Sometimes he [redacted] got tired of slapping his own face and just cussed the living daylight out of things.

"I guess the bandages are okay, ma'am. Maybe we should leave them be for awhile," Sam Dodge said toMX Olivinia.

"Ought to keep them oiled so you wont peel, my Maw said."

He grinned. "Dont mind losing some of this skin, ma'am. Has a way of getting me into trouble."

"Stop bleeding on me. You eat at yourself more'n a rabbit gobbling a wahoo," she said.[redacted]

Goddam smart kid. Real wise hick, Miss Ann. Who did she think was bleeding?

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He reared up but the pain tinkled like broken glass inside him. He gasped and went back slowly.

"You ever touched a black man before? You ever looked at a half naked black man before? You got any black brothers or cousins? You got any black friends? I dont want you touching me."

The girl didnt know for a fact where the shock had started. But it had cracked the piecrust before the dough had a chance to harden. She had hoped to do tolerable well nursing the Nigra. But Lord God, he had curled back like a water moccasin in a cypress swamp and gone for her the moment she poked in. He didnt have any call to do that. He was black and strange but she had done alright. She had come to help, and she would help Abner and his paw even if the dam broke. The Nigra man had spoilt it, though.

Olivinia stared at the angry man. She had taken a close look at him while he was unconscious. It had been strangely like trying to remember a dream at sunup. He had kept slipping out of her mind. Now that he was breathing easier, his skin had a firm, brown sugary look without the dusting of greying ash that had been there before. His skin was finer textured than most of the menfolk she knew. His eyes were fierce and black as a bald eagle's. She would bet he was stronger than a bull. She would look up in a book at the Malagoosha public library why it was they were called Nigras.

"You hate me because you hate my folks," Sam Dodge said.

Sam Dodge really believed it. He wasnt kidding. He was sharp with it. He could always know when they hated him because it made him feel hateful of himself. Only Irish Barty and the others had got past that to a relationship they could handle. Sam Dodge wondered where was Barty's Mob.

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"We dont hate you," the girl said.

"You spit on us. You deppise us. You screw us with ax handles."

"Folks dont hate you. Not all of us."

"Sure you do. You've got to. Now I gotta learn to hate you more than you hate me."

"Most folks dont like uppity niggers. They show up too much."

"Somebody's gotta show up," he said. "You like to be on top. That's why you hate us. Because you figure on staying on top. I must learn to hate you good then I'll get on top."

He was talking enough to rile you into a snapping turtle, Olivinia thought. He needed whopping, good and plenty. He needed chewing up, glaring up at her like he was going to spring on her.

"But we are more'n you," she said cool as a pitcher by the creek, "so we got more reasons than you. Everything we got in the country, we made ourselves. And even the other good things are white too, like sunlight and snow and angels' robes."

Hick. White Miss Ann was a hick for sure. But knowing it didnt stop his rage. They were all like that in varying degrees.

"Then there's lice and leprosy, they all white too, ma'am."

It was hick talk alright but it wasnt any good trying to tell a backwoods kid about the deeds of his people. None of the names he would pop out at her would mean anything. She was just a country kid. She and her folks had helped him. Goddammit, she was a liberal, wasnt she? Grassroots liberal. And liberals were a lot of help right now, wherever you found them, in Washington or in Malagoosha County.

Liberals made you angry because they showed up your dependence. They made you see how lousy weak and afraid and desperate you were. They messed you up. You had this hate for them even while you wanted to crawl inside of them and hide.

"You're bad."

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"So. I aint hoping for equality. I know somebody's got to be on top and I want that somebody to be me. Black me. So I aim to stay bad."

Olivinia wasnt afraid of him now. She was just red-eyed mad.

"Reckon you dont need any nursing. You dont need any help at all. We ought to leave you to Uncle Sep and the rest."

He looked alert.

"Who are Uncle Sep and the rest?"

"You ask them when they come and drag you out," she said furiously. "They'll tell you. Oh, they'll tell you, you ask them."

Sam Dodge wasnt scared any more. He had known they would be somewhere around. They always turned up. They were getting ready to mess him about. He wasnt afraid. He had the shockingly sweet truth-feeling that appeared in him at these times. He hadnt been wrong and nothing had been changed. He would be cheating them though for he was only half a man. There were the legs and the burns and God knows what else broken inside.

"There wont be much of me left for them to enjoy, ma'am," Sam Dodge said. "Maybe you better tell your friends that to hustle them up."

"You nogood black devil, aint none of your worth it," Olivinia said. Her voice was young and high with indignation. "Do you know what you have done? You have got Mr Hammond shooting at his friends to save your nogood hide!"

She yelled the words at him. Sam Dodge heard footsteps pounding across the hall. The boy charged into the room. He halted his rush at the bed, looking from Sam Dodge to the girl.

"What's he been doing, Olivinia? What the nigger's been doing?"

Sam Dodge looked at the boy and waited. Maybe he would be slapped. He was inured to them. He had been slapped lots.

The boy hit him alongside his mouth. Sam Dodge worked his

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lips and swallowed.

"White boy," he said. He moved under the sheet. In a day or two, he said to whatever hurt inside. They leave him for a day or two to mend a little and he would break something on the white boy before they came for him.

The girl ran out of the room. The boy raised his hand again but he only showed a fist to Sam Dodge.

"You son of a bitch," the boy said.

"Aint done nothing, white boy," Sam Dodge said. "You ask her. You go ahead and ask your girl what I done."

He's only a couple of years younger than me, Sam Dodge thought in surprise. Only a couple of filthy, dirty, redneck cracker years.

"You got to leave. You just got to leave," the boy said.

"Okay. But its powerful hard going out on two busted legs, white boy."

"I catch you fooling about, they take you out in a box."

"Aint forgetting I'm in the south now."

"Troublemaking son of a bitch."

"I wasnt stirring up anything when I slammed into that Rock."

"Why didnt you stay up north [redacted] then? Why come down here?"

"I aint for segregation. Aint segregating myself from the south. I was born down here too."

"But it aint good for you."

Sam Dodge felt a twist of pain at the boy's words. The kid wasnt bad. He was young and unhardened but already he had the power of pain. He could hurt Sam Dodge simply by wishing the best for him. Sam Dodge held under his anger and spoke softly.

"What makes you think only you and your folks should be entitled to this land? What makes you think you got more swamp water in your blood than me? Or more cockleburrs in your head than me? I been trapping muskrats and racoons and 'possums same as you. My folks

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fished them streams for red horse and perch and bass and jackfish same as yours. We love them summer woods when they fill up with bloodroot and firepink same as youWe got the same tooth for strawberries and papaw as you. What give you any God-right to tell me to quit it because you dont like seeing me around?"

Sam Dodge hadnt raised his voice. Only his eyes seemed to grow bigger in his head.

"White boy, I aint the one that's hating. You are the ones who kill and maim and send blood flowing in the dust of back roads and down the streams. If anyone should quit, its your folks. I didnt bring any blood and hate down here. All I and my folks asking for is a share in the things we helped build. Some of the life my folks gave their lives for. We aint aiming to come into your fine house and marry your sisters. We just want to be left alone to build our fine houses and for you to leave our sisters alone."

Sam Dodge laid back. He had been burning up for sure. He had been uppity alright. He had been bad alright. He sure had fretted the white boy. He could see the red in his face.

"Ought to lay a timber to your skull, talking to me like that," Abner said.

Sam Dodge's anger flared all of a sudden. "That's the only answer to your problem you stubborn/ cotton-picking morons ever come up with. Firehoses and shotguns and hounddogs and clubs."

"Shut up!" yelled Abner, starting for him. "You keep talking that way and you end up bad, you hear?"

Sam Dodge shook his head. "CAnt end up any worse. I'm past frightening by you suckers." He had been looking out of the window at the oaks but now he turned his head back to the boy. "You guess why I call you suckers? Because all you white people down here, except for a couple, are just plain dumb suckers. Except for a couple like your father. I guess."

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Abner was just plain diddled by the Nigra. Abner said he hadnt ever seen them this way before, set on their feet with their chins out, ready to get them knocked off. Abner thought this Sam Dodge must be a nut of some kind.

"Sure, you're suckers. You could stay on top and remain Number One. But you aint gonna. You're going to be foolish and make history do it the way history wants. And, white cousin, it aint gonna be the way you want. Its going to be like last time. You wouldnt free my folks. No sir. You preferred to wait until history came along and whupped you good into freeing them. Its going to happen again. Every redneck one of you gonna fall under the hatchet. Folks are gonna crackle crackers. For America's too big for you runny-nosed bastards to foul up. No bunch of stone-age hoodlums going to run things. America's going to roll over on bad white men. And on bad white boys, too."

Abner just wasnt sure whether the Nigra man was loco. He hadnt ever come across this kind before. He thought of course of knocking him down but you couldnt knock down a fellow who was already flat on his back. And then Sam Dodge began to sing. He didnt roll a song along. Sam Dodge bent his voice like a piece of hickory around some notes. They came out in an odd, broken rhythm, like he was thinking in between the breaks. He stopped looking at the white boy and closed his eyes. The song came out bigger with his eyes closed.

Abner went out of the room to find Olivinia. He stood just inside the living room thinking about Sam Dodge. He caught Uncle Meshach's eye. Uncle Meshach was sitting bolt upright, looking at him. Uncle Meshach nodded his head at Willi Mae's room. Abner guessed that Olivinia had gone in there to sleep. He went back to his room.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was morning when something prodded me awake. The house held a stillness at first. A couple of tree frogs fluted outside. A morning mist must have come up. They flute a lot when the mist is up. The whistling had that cottony sound it gets when the mist is up.

Uncle Meshach was on the floor, his long legs stretched out and his back to the wall. He had pulled a rug about his shoulders. He wasnt asleep. The light from Paw's room shone in one eye. I knew what had wakened me when I heard Olivinia's voice. She must have got up to nurse the Nigra. That Wishart colt was sure stall-crazy. It would take a lot to keep her out of there. Maybe I should get her home so Jeb could put a stirrup-strop to her.

I listened to her.

"We would be better off without you in the country," she said. "I dont recall ever hearing about your folks putting anything into the country."

Sam Dodge took his time answering. That black boy didnt mind keeping white folks waiting.

"I dont reckon that anything in this country would have been what it is if my folks werent here, ma'am. None of those cities and highways and space programs and movie theatres or anything would be what they were if your and my folks hadnt been in this country together. You ever thought it out?"

"Nor jails," Olivinia snapped at him. I grinned and winked at Uncle Meshach.

"Nor jails," Sam Dodge said. "Even while you were starving us and then jailing us for being hungry, we were giving lots back to the country. My folks died in all the wars. We invented and

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discovered more than they ever told you in school. Ma'am, I reckon I've got a lot of skin kin in every big project going for this country. Trouble is that nobody bothers much to write down the color of the guy who developed blood plasma. But when his brother cuts a guy, 'Negro" gets splashed all over the newspapers."

"But why should his brother cut a fellow? Two shots for one bullseye aint good shooting in this County."

The one eye of Uncle Meshach which I could see, glittered as he listened. With Uncle Meshach never sleeping deeper than a cat, I didnt think anything bad could have gone on before I had wakened. Even so, it didnt make me feel any better with Olivinia and the Nigra getting on finer than a bucket of molasses. It didnt help any that Olivinia was doing better than I could hope against the smooth talking city Nigra.

"Like I told you before, you gave my folks wet powder and then jail us for misfiring. "

"Your folks aint any more special than white people. We done more for you than you ever did for yourself," Olivinia said.

"I could say the same. The biggest thing we ever did for you was to take away your sins. Look at me. I'm the guy who took away the sins of the American world. I'm the sacrificial lamb. I'm all the slaughter there is, or needs to be. With me around, America can get away with murder. You know why? Because when the rest of the world questions her motives, all she's gotta do is point to me and say, 'There's the only big one we fumbled in this country. But we're doing all we can to cancel out the error.' Folks have got to believe you all around when you're frank and honest about one big sin. America points at me as the only big pimple on her conscience and that's all the foreign policy she'll ever need. Ma'am, Citizen Sambo is the best investment Uncle Sam ever made."

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I moved nearer the door. Uncle Meshach hadnt seemed to, but he was beside me when I stopped. Paw and the other uncles must have been prowling about in the yard. We saw Sam Dodge.

"And its about time some dividends were collected by Citizen Sambo," Sam Dodge said.

He had spoken in low tones but they held the intensity of power lines on a still day humming between the hills.

"Would [redacted] the United States of America have been better off without me and my people? I cant answer with a plain yes or no. You say you dont remember anything my people have put into this country. Okay. Okay. But just lets see. Lets see what we took out of it. We took away her fat. We took away her ease. We took away her peace of mind. We took away so much of her ease, she grew big and lean and vigorous. If it wasnt for me, she would be flabby because she would have nothing to worry about. Her enemies would move in. With me around, she aint got time to be smug. We took all these away, and because of we did, we gave her something else. WE gave her conflict. WE gave her color. No kidding, [redacted] girl. Although we gave you conflict, we also gave you joy and laughter. Joy. Like in jazz."

He snapped his fingers and wriggled his shoulders and opened his mouth at the pain. Serves [redacted] him right, I said. Olivinia put out her hand but she didnt have to touch him. He said gruffly that he was okay. I wanted to go in there and belt him. Olivinia had her yellow hair up, shining in the sunlight that was piercing the mists and coming in at the window.

"You ever stopped to think where America would be if there was no jazz? No non stop love of life that make folks go go go. Think of these United States without jazz."

"What's jazz?" Olivinia asked.

"Jazz?" The Nigra nearly stood up in bed if it wasnt for

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the pain. He was that excited, I thought his eyes would pop out. "Mean to say you never heard of jazz? Music? Folks projecting all that good and bad so you can look at it and see what makes the streetcar run?"

"We got Hosanna to do that down here."

"Sure, but that's old stuff. Good, but old. That Hosanna baby can sure make the old cornmill go. But - jazz? Honey chile Miss Ann, jazz made folks go! [redacted] In schools, in ball parks, in factories. Jazz made folks move so fast we had to build more and better automobiles, airplanes, rockets. Jazz made these United States move. Hustle. Nobody goes fast on Debussy. But the Duke, and old Satchmo, dead old Leadbelly. They had the rhythm that made America go. If this century belongs to America, it also belongs to jazz."

Uncle Meshach and I stood in the hall watching the Nigra on the bed. His eyes flashed and his fingers made motions as he spoke. By the window, Olivinia's [redacted] eyes seemed attached to the man's face. His teeth shone strongly in the light.

"He aint bad looking at all," Uncle Meshach said beside me. "And he's a good talker. Aint heard a fellow talk so fast since way back when some of your cousins caught [redacted] that revenue man hiding back of the old quarry."

That goddam Uncle Meshach.

"He's ugly. He's a nigger and so he's ugly," I said.

Uncle Meshach shook his head. "Boy, you got some kin back in the hills that would make a moose beautiful as a lady doe. We aint got much to boast of in the way of looks."

Olivinia said, "The way you talk, this jazz must be good as Massacre Day. Aint got much of it down these parts."

"My folks came from the south too. Same like yours."

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A fellow can take so much. I started in. Uncle Meshach's hand on my arm held me back.

"What you aim to do, boy?"

"Going to get Olivinia away from that coon," I said.

"You dont tree a smart coon without hound dogs. You listen to what the fellow's saying. That will be your hound dog. He's a smart coon, that fellow."

But the way Uncle Meshach said coon wasnt like me. Uncle Mesach made it sound as if he was partial to the word. Like he wouldnt mind being called coon himself if he was smart as the Nigra.

"What did they do down here?" Olivinia asked.

"We sharecropped. Maw got mad enough in time to head north with me."

"What happened to your paw?"

"He hit a white man."

"Oh. He oughtnt to have done that."

"No ma'am," the Nigra said after awhile.

"Then why did you come back?"

"Guess I love the south."

"Why? I mean, folks treat you bad down here."

"Why? You ask why? Because they hit me with baseball bats and jail me for attempting to buy a glass of milk in some white greasy spoon? You mean because they lynch me now and again? Well, now, even that aint as often as it used to be. You ask why I love the south? Why does a fellow dance, ma'am? Or sing? Or whistle in the woods on a Fall day? Its because he needs to or he'll bust. If I couldnt love the south, I'd bust open."

He began to laugh, a soft laughter without any fun to it. Uncle Meshach tightened a hold on my arm.

"No, ma'am. Guess I wasnt speaking the truth. There is another reason. I love the south, I love the south because your folks

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wwould like to stop me loving it. They would like to stop me loving the south, but they cant. And that's the big laugh. That's one thing I get away with right under their noses. They would like to stop me loving any part of this country, north or south, and they cant. I get my kicks loving it right under their noses. Ha ha."

"You would be better off in the north."

"You would too. But you wont go," he said.

"Nobody hurts me down here."

"They do. They hurt you bad but you dont know it. They twist something inside you, so that you're afraid of me. When I'm awake, you stand on the far side of the room. When I'm asleep, you come over and look at the bandages. The time I caught you, I woke suddenly and there you were. When I'm hungry, you ask the old man to feed me. You wont touch me if you can help it. I'm flat on my back and yet you're afraid of me. Do you wear gloves when you're doing the bandages?"

His face was high boned and ebony hard. [redacted] Who the hell did he think he was, talking to my girl like that, talking to a white girl.

I jumped away from Uncle Meshach.

"Coon, you want a white nurse? You want a white woman's hands on you?" I cried as I rushed into the room. "You niggers always dream of that, dont you?"

I was right up by him. I had to hold tight not to slug him, sick or not. Olivinia called out to me.

"Abner, its alright," she said.

I whirled. "Alright? Dont you know that this Nigra was making a pass at you?"

Her face reddened but her eyes got sort of steely. She didnt look girl at all right then. She wanted to talk but the mad

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words wouldnt pass her throat. I heard a groan from Paw's bed. When I looked at him, Sam Dodge seemed in a fit. He was straining to get up. His eyes bulged while his hands scratched and tore at the sheet. He was trying to get up, but Paw had tied his broken legs to the bed so he wouldnt hurt them while he slept.

"You filthy white trash!" he got out at me.

I gave him the back of my hand on his mouth. I hadnt meant to hit him, on his back as he was, but he was pushing me against the wall and I had to break out. I was sorry as soon as I did. He was a big guy. If he was white and well, he would break me in two. I slapped him again.

Olivinia came between us and pushed me away. Uncle Meshach grabbed hold and pulled. I couldnt do much against Uncle Meshach. As I left the room, I saw Olivinia wiping the Nigra's face with a towel. Okay. She was giving him what he had complained about not getting. Regular hotel service. White maid service for Sambo. I hated the black son of a bitch.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

We got Hosanna on the radio about midmorning and it was a sight to see the uncles as she did King Henry Followed With His On. She would be shooting skitters along your spine with a sinewy note wrapped around her guitar, and then, all of a sudden, she would whiplash her voice enough to smoke out your eyes. Everytime this happened, the shaggy heads of our kin broke off from nodding the timing and turned to each other, grinning out of powder blackened faces. Uncle Shad hit his fist in his palm and said, "Gosh, aint never heard it sung so before."

"Like she was washing down peaches with corn likker," Uncle Abednego said. I felt like taking him to the pump and washing his face clean. I didnt get it. Where were they from anyway?

"Wish we could take her back with us. Folks would sure come to hear her sing," Uncle Meshach said.

"Aint you got radios over at your end of the County?" I asked.

"Couple of folks had but we never did bother with none of them new notions. Reckon if we'd heard this gal before, we'd likely storebought one long ago," Uncle Shad said.

"Automobile coming," Uncle Abednego said. He and Paw got up and went to the window.

"Trouble," Paw said without turning his head. "Police."

Joe and Shorty, I thought. I was shaking., I wanted to beat in their heads so much. Shouldnt hold a grudge so long but nobody had ever pounded me before. I had nearly taken it out on the Nigra this morning. He was lucky Uncle Meshach had dragged me away.

"Uncle Shad and me will meet them," Paw said, stepping back from the window. "Rest of you stay in the house."

"I'm coming out," I said.

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He nodded. Wasnt much point hiding me when they knew I was here. We stepped down into the yard and waited for the police car. I looked back at the house and nothing stirred; but knowing what was inside, I had a tingle at the back of my neck. They were uncanny, the quick, soft way they moved and the lightning in their hands the rifles became when needed.

The police car was boiling in. Joe and Shorty must have been expensive to the County, the way they drove that car. They rammed it to a halt feet from us, leaped out either side and walked towards us, their hands on their guns. Paw was facing them squarely but just before the car stopped, I had noticed how Uncle Shad turned slightly so that one shoulder was near pointing at them. The butt of his rifle-gun rested on the ground and his hand extended downward, grasped the stock. By this time, everything Paw's kin did was being noticed by me.

Joe and Shorty stalked towards us, toes pointing outward, strutting like roosters. Their eyes were all over the yard, stabbing quickly at the house and the barn. Shorty looked at me and grinned broadly.

"Well, Joe, if it aint our friend, the Peeping Tom," he said.

His eyes were all crinkly at the edges, amused at me. He took a look at Uncle Shad, saw nothing but a queer looking old geezer and swung back to me.

"Well, well, you looking fit again. We didnt muss you much now, did we?"

Uncle Shad quirted tobacco juice and said, "This the fellow what took the lick at you in town, Abner?"

"That's right. Both of them," I said.

They both looked at Uncle Shad, their eyes cold.

"Aint your size at all," Uncle Shad said and spat at his feet.

Joe said, "You taking it on, old timer?"

Uncle Shad just leaned on his rifle and looked vaguely out. Maybe Joe and Shorty thought they had him faded [redacted]. Shorty was grinning real broad again.

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"What do you fellows want?" Paw said.

Joe pulled at the peak of his cap. They were still sending those hard, puzzled looks around the place. Joe reached in his hip pocket.

"Got a warrant from town to search your place," he said. "Heard you had bad characters holed up here. That a fact?"

"You were here last night with the others? You tuck and run with them?" I shot at him.

"The Peeping Tom's got his voice back, Joe," Shorty said. "We didnt work him over enough last time."

Joe was slapping the warrant in his hand. "Matter of fact, we didnt make it. But we heard you had an army."

Shorty pointed his chin at Uncle Shad and said, "This the army?"

Uncle Shad jerked his head at Paw. "I'm Abner's kin. Come a-visiting."

Shorty was watching him with his mouth wide open. He grinned and said admiringly, "Well, I never. A real mountain man. A regular hick. You know, since me and Joe came out to police the town, we thought we'd seen all the hicks there were. But here's a regular one. Mister, where's your buckskin?"

Uncle Shad was sniffing like he smelled a storm. "Abner," he said, "This polecat country?"

Joe and Shorty stiffened. Paw said, "Aint never had a army. Where you want to do your searching?"

The way how Paw said it must have convinced them he had nothing to hide but they were puzzled all the same.

"Way we heard it, there was considerable shooting here the last two times Mayor Roberts came out. They say it sounded like a gang of soldiers," Joe said.

"Was anybody hurt?" Paw asked.

"No, nobody we heard about except one fellow says he had a nick on his ear but even he wasnt sure it was a bullet."

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"Now, aint it funny that all this shooting going on and nobody get shot?"

"Yeah," Shorty said. "That's what I was thinking. But so many folk cant be wrong."

Paw's eyes were level. "Could be me and Shad here, not seeing each other so long. Maybe we were celebrating the Fourth of July a mite late," he said.

"Or early," Uncle Shad said distantly.

Shorty was chuckling, his fat belly jiggling.

"Now wouldnt that be fun. Sending a whole pack of folks scooting with squibs. That what it was, mister?"

Paw shrugged. He said, "Go ahead and search."

Joe said, "Maybe we will." He looked curiously around. "What we'd like to know is, where did you hide the nigger? In your bed as they say?"

Paw said softly, "Get off my land."

Uncle Shad said, "Abner, I still smell polecat. You got some around here."

Joe said through his teeth, "You want me to slug you and take you in?"

"I told you it was polecat country, Abner," Uncle Shad said. "The stink's coming through."

Shorty snarled out something and clawed for the gun holstered on his hip. And in my born days, I havent seen anything like what Uncle Shad did. Only his wrists seemed to move but the long, heavy rifle was swinging through the air and Shorty went down as if he had been axed.

By that time, I was moving too. For as Uncle Shad began his swing, Joe went for his gun. His eyes were on Uncle Shad and he didnt see me as I crouched and drove my right fist into his gut. That old mule plow I wrastle with Paw had put lots of beef in me. Joe gasped and I came up and smashed a left at his chin and buried the right in his gut again. I was strong for my age and hate was in me. Down Joe went, floundering beside Shorty. Shorty was out, but I showed Joe my foot and watched the fear come into his eyes before I stomped his face. I lifted my foot again and was flung backwards to the ground. I was quickly up,

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facing Paw.

"Why'd you do that?" I yelled at him. "Dont you know what they did to me?"

"Because you aint going to grow up to be like them," Paw said. "You did enough."

Beside us, Uncle Shad said softly, "You reach that hip gun, son, and I'm going to rear off an arm with a bullet."

Joe had been trying to get at his gun but he looked up into Uncle Shad's rifle and his hand fell away. I went over and took the gun out of its holster. I slapped him not too gently on the side of his head with it. Paw didnt say anything.

Shorty was coming out of his sleep. He was up on one elbow, blinking around when I took away his gun and slapped him harder.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Joe was in better shape so he took the wheel and drove Shorty to town. They went easy enough, for Paw pumped the shells out of their guns and handed them back empty. Paw told them to git and they went into the car, not a grin on Shorty. I did all the grinning and they killed me a couple of times with their eyes. They went easy enough, but they would be back. Lordy, they'd be back. We all knew they would be back.

So the uncles took their rifle guns apart and cleaned them real proper. Uncle Shad opened up another gunny sack of bullets. The uncles didnt travel with much gear, going about lighter than a coon with a hound dog on its tail, but they had enough gunny sacks of bullets to shoot down an army.

Paw had an extra couple of rifles in the house. He kept them in his room. But I thought I would hold on to the shotgun. If Coleman and the fellows came too close, the shotgun would scare them off easier.

We stayed out in the yard most of the time, keeping an eye up the road. We prowled around, with Uncle Shad and the rest mostly looking for the best cover. They looked often over at the woods.

"Guess it ought to come from over there," Uncle Meshach finally said, nodding at the woods.

"Guess so," Uncle Shad said.

I wandered into the house now and then, looking in on Olivinia. She hadnt spoken to me for hours. We all went inside for the meal she had fixed, leaving Uncle Meshach out to watch. When Uncle Abednego had eaten, he went out to relieve Uncle Meshach. They came and went softly, not talking.

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When the whistle came, everybody got up and looked at each other. Uncle Shad grunted and we all went outside. It was a dark afternoon, the sun was behind heavy clouds. The woods beyond our fence was dark in oak and sycamore, softly slashed in sections with a bold river birch. Near the ground, goldenrod and purple ironweed splashed among the roots. The road to town ran through the wood and we could see a distance along it. It was empty, but things had got so, I was trusting the uncles more than my own eyes. I believed there were enemies in the wood.

Paw said, "You go back inside, Abner."

I shook my head and showed him the shotgun in my hand. "Not this time, Paw. This time there wont be any picnic shoot-the-pig."

He looked down and said, "Want me to call it off, dont you?"

"Not if you got strong reasons."

"I got strong reasons."

"Then I'm just like Uncle Shad and the other kinfolk. I aint asking questions."

"We pull out at nightfall, whatever."

I smiled and shook my head. "Pull out? How? Think those people there going to allow us to pull out?"

"We'll just start the truck going and keep our heads down."

"If we're still alive by nightfall."

"We will be. You watch your Uncle Shad and the rest, "Paw said, nearly grinning that time.

There was no harm watching them. Come next feud, I'd know what to do. I could hold night classes at State on how to fight feuds the Hammond way. Could help the fees. I twisted my head and practised a spit.

But I watched them and when they went to earth, I found cover too, watching the wood. Nothing moved in the dark tangle. It was uncanny.

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You knew folks were out there marking you. Enemy folk maybe aiming at this moment to bring down the foresight in line with some section of your vulnerable body. Yet nobody showed. I twitched nervously and looked back to see if my legs were exposed around the knob of land behind which I hunkered. Uncle Abednego was [redacted] to the right; on my left, a few yards forward of me, was Uncle Shad. [redacted] Somewhere back of my position, Uncle Meshach and Paw were forted.

Nothing happened for awhile. Uncle Shad's grey head was switching from side to side. Sometimes for minutes he would lay perfectly still then he would jerk in another direction as something also caught his eye.

Once he turned over on his back and spoke to Uncle Abednego. They could have been sitting on the front porch swopping gossip.

"I counted to ten-eleven," Uncle Shad said.

"Maybe more," [redacted] Uncle Abednego said.

"Nearly poked one awhile ago."

"Me too. Got hair the color of red."

"Same one. Restless as a bird," said Uncle Shad, rolling over on his belly again.

My eyes were bugging but it didnt do any good. I couldnt see anything but trees.

More time passed and Uncle Shad called softly, "Abner, you set on waiting?"

"Will be dark in a couple of hours," Paw said behind me. "Then we take the truck and go."

Uncle Shad grunted. He said, "Reckon you ought to know though. If they come out of the wood we'll have to drop a couple to chase them back in. Figure if we nailed them down now, they'll stay in there until

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dark. That way, nobody gets killed."

"Paw dont want anybody killed," I said nervously.

"Aint killing nobody," Uncle Shad said. "We wing a couple, the others will know we mean business. Best do it now."

And Paw shocked me by saying calmly, "Shoot, Shad."

Uncle Shad had been lying full out but now his body seemed to lengthen along the ground. The rifle slid forward and his long, tapering fingers closed around the metal plates at the trigger. His cheek snuggled to the stock, elbows rubbing out places in the grass, the grey head motionless. I sneaked a look sideways at Uncle Abednego, at the iron profile buried against the weapon, mouth opened and his lips working over his teeth. Behind me, lethal as a rattler, his hands enclosing the death in his gun, Uncle Meshach was doing the same. [redacted]

Uncle Shad squeezed off first and the others fired instantly. I guessed they all scored, from the bawls of pain some folks loosened over there, but I didnt bother to look. I was too busy trying to burrow into the earth. The lead came whining and humming but there wasnt anybody over on the other side who could shoot like the uncles. They belted us like a hailstorm. Yet they kept inside the wood for no sooner than one more foolish than the rest shoved out of the trees, one of the uncles would nail him. But I was jumping everytime the uncles fired.

Fighting was one thing; killing was another. Somebody would go to the electric chair and he wouldnt be from the other side. Mayor Roberts was sure to sooner or later have the law sitting on his side.

"Dont worry, son," Uncle Abednego said beside me. "This aint

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a blood fight. We aint aiming to kill anybody. This is just a disagreement between folks."

Disagreement, he called it. He must have seen my nervousness for he had rolled over beside me. He was lying on his side, loading his gun.

"Uncle Abednego," I said, "You know what this is about?"

"Sure," he said, busy at the magazine. "Your Paw and some folk had a falling out. They too many for him so he's got to show them he's got kin."

"Wha - what about the nigger?"

"Sure. Him too."

"Him too, what? Dont it bother you none getting shot at over a nigger?"

He stared surprised. "Son, he[redacted] dont count now."

"But that's what the fight is about! Its because of him!"

"Hell, no, 'taint that," Uncle Abednego said. "Its because of them over there ---- and maybe us, too."

He rolled like a log going downhill back to his position and instantly his gun was hammering again.

A sound between a whine and a whistle rose above the noise of firing. Presently a voice hailed us. I recognized Coleman Roberts' voice and I figured he was using the hailer on the patrol car.

"Abner! Abner Hammond! Can you hear me?"

Everybody stopped firing.

"The Mayor's going to talk to you," said the voice from the hailer. It sounded like Joe. Wished I'd done more to him.

The hailer spluttered and coughed and the new voice spoke.

"Hammond!"

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Our name has that pistol sound and in Coleman Roberts' mouth it exploded over the meadow.

"Hammond, you'd better surrender. I got dozens of fellows out here."

"Crook," Uncle Abednego grinned into the ground, "he aint got more'n twenty."

Uncle Abednego's cheek was pressed on the ground, one eye roving the sky and over me and along his rifle as he listened.

"What's that?" he said.

I heard it too after a while.

"Tractor coming. Somebody's driving a tractor," I said.

Coleman Roberts cleared his throat over the hailer and yelled again,

"Joe and Shorty are here --- I've got a warrant. You shoot now and you're fighting the United States."

That was too big to hit us with. He had no cause to do that. Paw and me had no reason to fight the United States. My Paw approved the United States more than any folk I knew, except maybe the way Sep Logan approves the armed forces.

"Shooting him aint shooting the United States, son," Uncle Abednego said. "He's talking a mountain to hide that he aint got a anthill. That's a fact."

The clatter of the tractor was louder. It broke out of the trees, high and yellow, rocked forward and halted. When it bobbed forward again, we could glimpse enough heads behind it to know what they were up to. I'd seen it often enough in the movies in Malagoosha, except that, in those, the soldiers came behind a tank.

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Uncle Meshach said softly behind me, "Shad, the fellow driving that contraption, he's bigger than a moose in a cabbage patch."

Uncle Meshach was on slightly higher ground and he could see the driver crouched at the levers. **It was Sep Logan.**

"You take off some fur, Meshach," Uncle Shad said.

One glittering eye [redacted] raked along the barrel as he put the bead on the driver. His gun whapped off, and the driver yelped. He spun backward out of his seat as the tractor **slewed** [redacted] and halted. And caught exposed as the tractor **turned** [redacted] off course were a dozen Malagoosha men. [redacted] The uncles [redacted] opened fire and scampered them back into the wood.

We could hear them howling and swearing back in the wood but they kept well away from the edge and all you saw was the dark green wall of trees. Then there was a lot of low talk and one time a cry of pain.

"Hammond!" Mayor Roberts' voice slapped at us again. "Listen. Listen good, you hear me, Hammond? Some innocent boys are stepping out of here. You shoot them and it will be plain murder. You hear me?"

I looked back at Paw. He was puzzled. Then his eyes widened in shock.

I turned back to the wood and I got it worse than Paw. For shambling out of the safety of the trees, were Sep Logan's seven sons. They came out yelping and looking back over their shoulders, walking with their bodies bent over, holding hands in a tortured chain as Sep's voice drove them from the rear. I guess all of us were just too open mouthed to do much else than stare. On they came in the broken walk, knees tumbling sideways in terror but not daring to halt for their Paw was right behind them, barking at them to git over to the empty tractor. Sep worked them right up to the tractor as he would a mule team and climbed aboard while the boys, still bawling scared but mad too, dragged themselves to the front and formed a line between us and the tractor. Sep got the motor

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started and turned for us, the boys in front of the machine bawling at their Paw to lay off but shambling towards us just the same because they were too scared of their pappy to stop. Out shot men again from the wood and forted up behind the tractor as Sep sent it clanking and rolling towards us. Sep's boys were carrying on real bad. They yelled and bawled real tears but Sep just kept gunning the tractor behind them. Nobody would ever forget the sight.

"Abner," Uncle Shad called, "who's the fellow driving?"

"Sep Logan," Paw said in disgust. "Those boys are his sons."

Uncle Shad chewed some more and said, "Reckon I'm going to kill him, Abner."

"No," Paw said flatly. "No killing, Shad."

Uncle Shad chewed some more. He knew Paw. And Paw had got behind him. You can be sure he was sorry he had made Paw get behind him. Uncle Shad wanted badly to kill Sep Logan but Paw had said no killing. And Paw had got behind him.

"Meshach," Uncle Shad said, not turning his head.

"Hell, he's got a gun on me too," Uncle Meshach said.

I looked around and sure Paw had slipped backward and had Uncle Meshach also before him. Uncle Abedndgo chuckled.

"Abner, you aint forgotten a thing," Uncle Abednego said.

"Should have dusted him some more when he was a kid," Uncle Shad said. "Alright, Abner, if we aint going to kill them, least we can do is make them sorry they came.

"Shoot," Paw said. "Send them back."

All of them began rippling their shots, laying down the bullets in a line at which Sep's sons halted when the dirt began kicking into their faces. Sep gunned the tractor, roaring it behind them. He crept up and nosed them with it and a couple almost fell into the bullets. We were all looking for Sep but couldnt see him, he was crouched so low on the floorplates. We didnt want to shoot through the machinery; a wild bullet could render him lifeless although Sep had it coming to him.

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Uncle Abednego had stopped and when I looked to see what had happened, darned if Uncle Abednego wasnt bouncing around like he had the St Vitus dance. I most shouted at him until I saw he was real collected, just juggling his sights around for a mark on Sep Logan.

"Abner," Uncle Abednego said, "reckon if I took an arm off that Sep Logan you woulnt have any cause to shoot me?"

"An arm is all," Paw warned.

Uncle Abednego showed his teeth and snapped the trigger. Sure, he got Sep Logan. Got him in the shoulder and Sep tumbled off that tractor and hightailed it back into the wood only a shake ahead of his sons and the others who had been walking behind it.

There was silence in the wood and we all stretched out and let go some of the tension. Although maybe, the tension was only in me. For I never saw any signs of tightening in the mountain kin. They just lay loose on the ground, [redacted] tickling their noses with blades of grass.

"Hammond," Coleman Roberts slammed from the hailer, "I've wired for state police and phoned the governor for the national guard. This place will be swarming by nightfall."

The national guard. We didnt have a chance. And bringing in the state police would mean road blocks. The hailer squawked and Uncle Matt's voice came from it.

"Abner, you bullheaded fool, aint this gone far enough?"

Guessed they were all out there. All of Paw's friends, turned against him because he quit the herd.

Uncle Meshach

For some time, [redacted] had been peering about, mostly overhead, trying to locate where the booming talk was coming from. He seemed to have spotted it for he birddogged a little to the left of where Sep had entered the trees. Stealthily he put his rifle into firing position, and slyly [redacted] worked the rifle onto

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the target and with a look of deep cunning on his face, he pulled the trigger. Mayor Roberts was cut off in mid squawk as a bullet crashed into the hailer.

We were all laughing and slapping the earth to which new gunfire soon pinned us. But Uncle Meshach laughed doubled, his knees at his chin, crazed with it and it caused him to jump up straight into a bullet. It caught him with a slap, spun him and downed him. Uncle Shad was over there faster than a greased rattler. He turned him over and ripped away the shirt, looked at the wound and spat tobacco juice into it.

"He bad?" Paw called.

"Naw, ripped the skin some and went by," Uncle Shad said.

I turned my head and spoke to Uncle Abednego.

"We wont have a chance when the guard comes," I said.

"Aint worse than revenue runners," Uncle Abednego said. "Aint worse then pneumonia or snakebite. A man's always got a chance."

"How we going to cut out of here with the national guard and state police out there?"

Uncle Abednego had a way of talking in short, rapid sentences, his head twitching in a new direction with each sentence, but his eyes never off my face.

"Who's the guard? Who's the state police? Just folks."

"We cant even take off and leave the pickup. We could get away on foot but Paw aint leaving his Nigra man."

"Son, he leave that Nigra man, he leaves himself. Wouldnt be a man no more. We aint aiming to leave him."

"Uncle Abednego, you think anybody's going to care next week after we're all shot to pieces? Take Sam Dodge now. You think any Nigra in the whole wide world will care that we got shot up over one of his people? Leastways they'll laugh like hell."

"Aint the people who dont care that matters. Its the people who care. Aint the people who dont care what changes things. Its the folk who care."

"Who wants to change anyway?" I said. "People dont want to change, they only

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want to live."

Uncle Abednego rested his palms on the barrel of his rifle and his cheek on the back of his hand. He was as comfortable on the ground as other folk lying in a soft bed. The firing had lulled. He was so quiet, he could have gone to sleep. After awhile he jerked his head as if a thought had just settled in it.

"There aint no change, boy. What we call change, is just things righting. You look here now. Say you and me set out to make a trace, from here to the other side of the County. We got to climb hills, ford rivers, go through ravines, cut into the woods. The only time we see where our trace is headed, is when we come to places where we can look back and see how crooked or straight we were going. Then at that time, we figure how to straighten out the crooked parts. We just righting the trace, is all. But folks call that change."

Uncle Shad looked up at the piece of daylight left and he didnt like the size of it. He spoke low to Paw.

"They will wait for dark and rush us. Reckon we ought to fort up in the house," Uncle Shad said.

But they would get us anyway. We were pinned down by a sick Nigra who had put a hex on Paw's conscience.

"Paw, you said we would go when it was dark," I said.

Uncle Meshach was busy as a railbird in a cattail swamp, twisting this and that way for a better look.

"They will work all through that blueberry and honeysuckle and crawl out on us. Guess we should have brushed it out," Uncle Meshach said.

Walking soft over the pine needles to burn us down with

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their guns. Scared, me. I think what I can be angry about and I think of Sam Dodge. I would like to hand him to Sep Logan. Sam Dodge could open our road. I thought of him lying safe and sound in the house.

"Abner, listen good," Mayor Roberts called. "You aint going to be able to hold out for five minutes after we rush you. You know that."

I was real edgy. But not our kin. They were searching the country with their eyes. Sometimes they shifted about. They seemed to be specially interested in the back of the house.

"That corner over there, Bednego. They can circle and come in behind the house," Uncle Shad said. "Ought to be somebody there."

"Ground's too open," Uncle Abednego said, "to cross."

Sure. He was right. They would be cut down easy as wheat if they tried it. Paw had not built his house to be any goddam fort. His land was for farming, not feuding.

Uncle Meshach was staring at the right edge of the wood.

"Somebody cutting around. I seen some movement," Uncle Meshach said.

"Guess we had better hole up in the house. We cover them from fetlock to forehead that way," Uncle Abednego said.

"You crazy gun-shooting old man!" I yelled. "Olivinia is in there! They'll shoot up the house!"

"Stop fretting yourself," Uncle Shad said sharply. "The girl will be under cover."

But before anybody could say anything, the shock hit us. It came in a quiet voice from Uncle Meshach.

"Shad, reckon a couple of them fellows outsmarted us. Some of them have got behind the house already."

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The light wind blowing down was shaking Uncle Shad's mop of white hair. He looked around at his brothers and nodded. They crumpled the battered old felt hats and thrust them into the bosoms of their shirts. I knew what they were going to do. They were going to make for the house. But they wouldnt reach it. The open ground between us and the house would be raked by fire.

"Meshach? Abednego?" Uncle Shad said quietly.

"We'll do it fast," Uncle Meshach said.

The gun blast from the house was so unexpected, everybody jumped. Somebody in there was shooting a rifle. The shots were being ripped off slick as a grease slide. Men yelled in the pasture behind the house. Paw stared at the house.

"Who's in there?" he bawled at the house.

Uncle Meshach chuckled. "Take my poke on it, Abner. Whoever's in there is on our side and he can shoot."

That brought me out of my trance. I wasnt being brave or anything like that. I was just plain scared for Olivinia. I just found myself leaping up and running. A couple of bullets hummed past me from the woodbut the kin began working again and soon corked that up. I made the porch and busted through the door, yelling for Olivinia. I crossed the hall and made Paw's room. I halted like I had run into a wall. It was the Nigra man. Sam Dodge.

He was propped against the bed, facing the half opened window. One of Paw's extra rifles was in his hand. Olivinia was reloading the other. The Nigra was sending bullets through the window fast as he could pull the trigger. He was a pro alright. He handled Paw's shooter good as Uncle Shad. Oh, he was a real nigger pro alright. He didnt seem to care whether the white girl got killed loading his lousy gun. He was propped against the bed, his broken legs,big and powerful in the splints, resting on the

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floor. It was some kind of miracle how he had managed to slip off the bed and brace himself to shoot. His face shone with sweat. His lips were pulled back from his teeth. His eyes glittered like an animal's. He must have felt good, shooting at white men. I went for him.

I dived at him and crashed straight into the rifle. Oh, he was good alright. He brought up that rifle like a fence rail. It caught me under the chin and flung me back, but I was up and going in again so fast, I almost had him. But this time he dropped the gun and brought up both hands. My face felt as if it had crunched into iron.

Olivinia was yelling at me as I picked myself up off the floor. He had downed me twice but I was so mad, I was howling at him and going in again. I grabbed the rifle and swung it as I got up. He couldnt move fast on the broken legs. He tried to sway out of reach but it caught him a lick. It split his cheek and I crashed into him. That was a mistake for he grabbed a handful of my short and held me off. His legs might have been useless but he was strong as a bull higher up. We were glaring into each other's face. His skin was finegrained, darker now with the sweat and blook streaking it. His eyes held all the hate I felt for him.

With his free hand, Sam Dodge slapped my face. He slapped me again and again. They were rough hands, calloused and hard. He wasnt using his fist, only his open hand, slapping my head back and forth and talking as he did it.

"White boy, you think its up to you alone? White boy, you think I cant fight my own battles? I aint afraid to die any longer, white boy. Just want to take my quota along, that's all. Only want to take my quota of America with me when I got to go."

He was talking to me but it was as if he didnt care

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whether I listened or not. It felt as if my jaws were breaking under his KXX hand; I tasted blood on my lips.

"Got to show my white brothers that I'm an American too," Sam Dodge said. "That I aint afraid to kill and die for what I believe in. So you get off my back, white boy. Get off my back so I can show my white brothers what America is about."

My face felt big and leaden. I was ready to bawl.

"Sam!"

Olivinia's voice cracked like a whip over our heads. Sam Dodge looked past me. His eyes held and didnt move.

"Let him go or I'll kill you," Olivinia said.

"I guess you would, ma'am," Sam Dodge said. "Sure you'd pull the trigger on me even though I got two bum legs and your boy friend is sound as a whistle."

"Let him go, Sam," Olivinia said. Her voice was high and quavery.

He shoved me away. Olivinia was standing off to one side. The rifle she had been loading was pointed at the Nigra. Her finger was pressing on the trigger. At this range, she could tear him in too.

"He jumped me. You saw he jumped me," Sam Dodge said.

"You hit a white man. You know you shouldnt hit a white man," Olivinia said.

"I had to hit him. Had to hit him because he's my white brother. If I dont hit him, he'll never know what America is abpuix about. "

He was a crazy black man.

"Give me the gun let me cut him down!" I yelled at Olivinia.

"No, Abner, no."

"Give me the gun!" I yelled, jumping for it.

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I got the gun away and heard the click of the rifle behind me.

"Put it down slowly, white boy. Real slow," Sam Dodge said behind me.

He had me in a snap and I had seen his shooting. I put it down.

"You turn around now."

We hackled and breathed through our mouths, tail out like a couple of strange dogs. He looked at Olivinia and gestured with his head.

"I dont get it. His paw and uncles are out there shooting at them fellows for my sake. You told me. I see a bunch of them trying to outflank your folks, so what should I do? Sit tight and let your folks get it in the back?"

"Dont you know better than interfering in white men's business?" I said to [redacted] this crazy fellow.

His eyes turned wild on me.

"White boy, the [redacted] war's about Sam Dodge!" he whispered.

"That dont give you leave to butt in [redacted]," I said in a hard voice. "If you werent a bad Nigra, you would know that."

He nodded from me to Olivinia and back. He said, "I'm de-knowing myself of a lot of that stuff, white boy. You'd better de-know yourself too. The country aint gonna wait for us to catch up."

"You cant de-know yourself out of being a nigger."

The gun on me shook. I thought maybe I had riled him too much. He had a glazed look in his eyes. His lips went taut against his teeth.

"You're gonna help me, white brother. I'm gonna help you too. [redacted] Some day soon, you're gonna put away your notions about m

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about me. You're gonna say Sam Dodge dont go around slashing folks with razors. That Sam Dodge aint a dope addict. That Sam Dodge dont go around raping white women. I guess you've [redacted] been thinking I was after your girl. I could see it in your eyes, couple of times you've been in here. If it makes you feel any better, the thought did cross my mind that a guy could fall in love with your girl because she's got good hands and a good heart."

The gun jerked on me and I didnt rush him. He had a crazy light in his eyes.

"Sure, white boy. That aint a crime in my book. She's a pretty [redacted] girl, with a kind of goodness in herX eyes. You cant understand that, I guess. That I could love her without wanting to rape her."

I looked at Olivinia. She was looking at the guy like he had her on the hook. Her eyes were shining.

"Olivinia, get out of the room!" I said.

"Dont worry, white boy, she's in love with you. But she's a woman and they got more sense than a houseful of professors. She knows what I'm [redacted] saying is true."

He was [redacted] really opening me up and he had a gun on me. I wanted badly to kill him.

"You shut up, you goddam nigger," I said.

"Cracker. You're gonna be a real [redacted] redneck [redacted] like any other cracker. You're going to be filthy and cruel and foulmouthed like them if you dont get out to college like your girl says you will."

"Those men [redacted] out there fighting for you are crackers, you son of a bitch!"

"Your Paw's a man in a million, but he's fighting for himself too, white boy. Fighting for himself and the South and the

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north and everybody in America. My neck aint the only one being saved out there."

"Sam, that's enough," Olivinia said.

Sam Dodge looked sober faced at her. He nodded.

"I guess that's so," he said. "Talking any more aint gonna help him now if he aint helped already."

A bullet crashed through the window. Sam Dodge took a quick glance [redacted] outside and his gun cracked twice.

"They're up close. They're gonna rush us," he said.

He was [redacted] painfully trying to slide his hips along the bed for a better position. I could see his lips tugging off his teeth as the pain [redacted] clamoured at him. He was sweating.

"You get out of here," he said to Olivinia. "I'm gonna be shooting to kill when they come in."

I measured the distance to the gun on the floor. It was a chance. Olivinia was back by the wall.

"Dont go for it, white boy."

[redacted] "I'm going for it."

I wanted that gun. I didnt think he would shoot me in front of Olivinia. If he did, he was only likely to drop me. He was good; he could call his shots. Whatever happened, I didnt want him shooting Uncle [redacted] Matt or Sep or whoever was out there.

Olivinia left the wall and walked across the room. She bent and picked up the rifle. Calmly she turned and handed it to me.

"Here it is. I dont reckon you're going to use it on Sam," she said. "The folks shooting at us are out there."

We were both stumped. We each held a gun in our hands and stared at Olivinia.

"The shooting's stopped," Olivinia said.

It was true. It had for a fact. Neither the uncles nor

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Coleman Roberts men had fired for [redacted] some time. We couldnt tell what had happened. But I remembered I should be mad at Olivinia. She had saved me from a beating by a Nigra, then she had taken his side against our folks.

"What do you mean the folks shooting at us? You're nuts or something, loading his guns for him? You a squaw woman?"

"She wasnt helping me. She was helping your paw and his folks," Sam Dodge said.

"You keep out of this!" I shouted.

"Should have taken more time beating the cracker crap out of you. Do you some good," he said.

I started to answer and then stopped. The guy was looking through the window --- and grinning. Showing his big white teeth with real enthusiasm. He was a big happy buck.

"Well, what do you know?" he said softly to himself.

Somebody yelled outside. Then I heard [redacted] Hosanna singing. A far off singing. Clean as a riffle in the Spring. It bold up as it came closer. She was singing strongly, hauling it along like it was due for a showing. She/[redacted] rode it right in past us, stroking [redacted] the withers of this powerful singing so it pranced by us and our ears turned to follow it. The singing wasnt coming from the radio in our house. It must [redacted] have been one of those newfangled transistors owned by a fellow from town. They must have got Paw and the others. They must have been sure they had won, to be living it up like that.

"My God --- Paw!" I yelled.

Didnt hear anybody hollering back, so I rushed for the door. It was too quiet out there. Only [redacted] Hosanna singing. Something must have happened to Paw while I was tangling with the Nigra.

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I yelled Paw's name again as I reached the gallery. Then I saw him. Heard him too. He was standing straight up looking towards the road. Paw standing straight up out of cover like there haont been any shooting in these parts since Massacre Lay. He was talking to himself, saying over and over,

"Willi Mae, Willi Mae."

I was going to yell him down for a loon when I saw that the uncles had broken cover too. And in plain sight over at the wood, the fellows were showing up, cool as buttons to the presence of my sharpshooting kin. I watched them coming out of the wood, Sep and Jilson and Mayor Roberts and a dozen others. I could still hear the voice of Lulu Belle coming in strongly. The fellow with the radio must have turned it up.

"Paw, Willi Mae aint here, you know that."

An angle of the house was between me and where he was staring, so I got down to him. I took a look. Boy, was I wrong. Willi Mae was home. So was Hosanna. And so, grinning like a chipmunk behind them, was Pete Sawyer. Willi Mae was coming home in strange company. For walking over the plowed field with her was a bunch of fellows wearing soldiers' uniforms.

But goldurn it, what socked me was that Hosanna. Coal black Hosanna, handsome as a yearling in her storebought getup, giving Nancy The Belle Of Natchez what for. I mean, Hosanna was Lulu Belle. I tell you it was Lulu Belle coming, but with her head thrown back and a-belting out Nancy in the same voice Paw and me had been hearkening to for a year. I recalled the city fellow telling me that Hosanna was colored but he didnt say it was Lulu Belle.

"Hosanna!" I sent it out like a gunshot.

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Reckon it broke the dam. For from the fellows over at wood came a howl to shake down the cherries,

"Hosanna!"

Some of the fellows cried Lulu Belle but mostly it was Hosanna, too proud for a fact that [redacted] Hosanna was Malagoosha folk.

The lead fellow with the soldiers was a sergeant. He was stout, hard and armed. His eyes singled out Paw.

"I'm looking for Abner Hammond," he said.

Paw nodded.

"You the fellow what sent the wire?"

"Reckon I did."

"I'm Barty Lowe, sergeant, U.S. Army. Where's he, friend?"

"Back there in the house," Paw said.

Barty Lowe looked around at the fellows from the wood.

"Heard some firing. Anything to do with me?" he asked Paw.

Paw looked at Coleman and Sep and Uncle Matt and the rest. Some of the nicest fellows in the County.

"Reckon not, mister. You can take [redacted] him and go home," Paw said.

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IN ITALICS

Barty came in and looked him over. Barty said, "Boy, you're a mess. Bald as a coot, too. Wouldnt know you from a bald African monkey."

"Irish bastard," Sam Dodge said. "Whitey."

"They really bunged you up. Who did you mess with?"

"A bitch of a wall."

"Heard firing as we came in. What goes on?"

Sam Dodge looked over at the corner where the girl had stood. He looked back at Barty. He didnt think he knew what went on either. He couldnt help Barty at all. It was just one of those strange things in this strange land of the South.

"Ignorant Yankee, folks down here call it family feudin'," he said.

Barty slapped his own face hard, a sign that he was angry.

"Got you leave from the Company to picket a little. Not to start a war or get yourself bunged up."

"It was a wall. I crashed into it."

"Regardless. Use your head."

"Sure. Who is the sepia thrush?"

"Calls herself Hosanna. By the name of Lulu Belle. Comes from these parts. She and the white girl, the old man's daughter. She was singing in Key West, when the old man's wire came. Papers picked up the story and they asked to come along."

"Must be big shots to travel with the army."

"Hosanna's a big shot. You werent with us when we moved down to Key West last month. She's been singing her collards and green stuff for the military. The old guy's daughter is her manager. By

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the way, some of your feudin' friends out there might have been hurt if Lulu Belle hadnt been around. We came in on the firing. Fellows figured folks might have been trying to make a good nigger out of you. They wanted to shoot up a little, but Lulu Belle stopped them. She just stepped out of the truck and loosened up a little with one of them cornball tunes. Everybody came out of their foxholes to look."

Sam Dodge felt the old fear of the unreasoning. You couldnt cope with the unthinking.

"But she's —— "

"Coal black as they come."

Sam Dodge listened to the soft talk outside. He heard a laugh that could only have come from Hosanna. Folks down here were turned so far inward they must crap through their navels, he thought savagely.

"Lets pick you up and go home," Barty said.

Sam Dodge blinked.

"Home? Sure. Lets go home."

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HOSANNA! (V S Reid)

Paw is not a big man, neither broad in the shoulders nor up and down tall. But he is hickory tough. He is from mountain people.

Our folks are from the west section of Malagoosha County. Paw says he is sun-licked like them, face brown and strong as leather. His hands are so broad, they could snug a melon so the fingers met. I've seen him follow a plow through clay land and the handles hardly jolted but mostly ran on silk on the power in his forearm. He is soft spoken too. Paw was so soft spoken when he wanted to, which was mostly, he fooled folks into thinking he was easy to shove. But that was usually before they met Paw's eyes.

What I'm going to tell you of Paw and me happened at the time of the war in Cuba. Not the big war you read about in the history books, but the one they fought on the radio and television during the Fall of 'Sixty-Two.

We were working the Willow Ten that October. It was hard work for only Paw and me. We never but now and then get a snowfall in this part of Malagoosha County, its that mild. So mostly we plow through the Fall and rest out the frost, ready to seed again early in the year for the ground never stayed hard long. We would be hurling dirt in the eye of the day long before that lazy Fall sun showed up. We would break for coffee and lunch, quit only when the light faded. Paw used to squint up at the last of the sinlight and with a grin, pulled lopsided by the sweat running down into it, say, "Skedaddle, you old bum."

Then he would bend again to the handles and by nightfall we would have the new mule team in a lather. We never plowed with horses.

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