

White in the Moon

ESTON E. ROBERTS

Chapter One

Jebediah Brooks sat in his thatch-bottomed rocker napping. A dry breeze—still hot from the lips of Gulf water a hundred miles southwest of him—lifted the frazzled straws in the ruptured roof of his field hat.

Business was slow at the White Oak Gin and Grocery.

The squealing of tires and the scrunching of gravel woke him, and he rocked forward into a cloud of dust, peering blearily at the red convertible parked but still bobbing beside the two blue gas pumps.

There's a saying in these parts about folks being so lazy dead lice won't fall off them, and Jebediah was notorious for being a mossy rock.

Though a matter of little consequence, he acquired an additional layer of good Georgia alkali.

Removing his hat and using it as a flail, he approached the car.

“Yes, sir. Kin I help you to anythin’?,” he asked, curiosity and the prospect of a customer tempering temperament.

“I reckon I dozed off there and didn't hear you comin’,” he continued.

“Howsoever, from the looks of things, you might've left your sound a-hint you—like them jet planes do from Albinny!” He chuckled at his own humor, spat beside his boot, and rubbed the moisture into the ground.

“It's turned into a hot'un,” he grimaced, squaring his hat back on his head and flapping the blunted, pink-ended stub of his right arm to air the armpit.

His visitor spoke: “Sorry about the dust,” unwinding his body from the car,

“I almost passed you by. It always this hot down here?”

“Gits a mite nippy come winter, but summers in Alamance will draw sweat from a citron. And it always seems we're expectin' rain and seldom gittin' it.

Will you be wantin' gas?"

Tom Johnson examined the pumps and nodded.

"Fill it up with Ethyl, if you would. All right if I go inside out of this heat? I've been on the road since sunup."

"Go on in and make yoreself to home. If you need to use the john, you ull have to roust my sister, Ruthie, from the back."

Ruthie needed no rousting, having been alerted already by the squealing tires. Even now—neck craned and head tilted like an attentive chicken—she stood just inside the door to their living quarters in the back of the store, pecking up tidbits of information filtering inside from the exterior conversation. In her early sixties, a tall, gawky woman slightly slumped around the shoulders with hip-bones that stuck out like elbows, she wore a long, framedraping dress patterned in bleached out green and orange flowers. Stem-like legs grew out of fluffy, pink bedroom slippers. Before exiting the room, she primped her hair briefly before the mirror and ran her hands up and down inside the front pleats of her dress.

"If you want to use the bathroom, there's one fer customers in the shed ahint the store," she announced, her greeting as she approached punctuated by the rasping of slippers on the oily, brown-planked floor. "You want anythin' in here?"

"I could use a soda," he said, glancing around the dim interior.

"The drink box is over there," pointing behind him, "by that there window."

Her eyes graded him overtly, from his dust-flecked loafers to his sunblanched, shoulder-length hair. "And there's a ten-cent dee-posit, if yore gonna take the bottle."

"I'll drink it here," he promised. "May I buy you one?"

"I've got work to do, in the back," she responded, clawing the quarters from his hand and sliding flatfooted to the cash register. "You on yore way to Blakely?" she asked bluntly, ringing up the sale and handing him his change.

"No Ma'am," he responded. "I'm visiting a place called Niche-a-way Plantation. Maybe you could give directions."

Ruth Brook's eyes glittered with electricity, and the slump in her shoulders disappeared with an elastic snap. "What business you got there? You one of them insurance agents bin pryin' they'ze noses into everbody's business?"

"I'm with a newspaper in Atlanta and have come down to check on the trouble they've been having there."

"If 'n it's trouble," she huffed, "it's trouble they brung on themselves—that bunch of niggers and communists!"

"Hey, Jeb!" hailing her brother as he entered the store, wiping his one hand on the left leg of his overalls, "This here yankee's on his way to Niche-a-way. Say she works fer a newspaper up there in At-lanta."

"Lord have mercy on us all! Sue Ellen's shore stirred up a mess with all her shenanigans," Jeb replied, grinning at the visitor.

"And if all them furiners barging in wasn't a-nough, she's got that big white house all filled up with nigras.

"Why it could turn a fellow's stomach, five-hundert acres of the best bottomland in this county, gave to them blacks fer no reason a'tall. I reckon, though, we'ze ought not be complainin'. It's shore bin good fer business!"

"I checked yore oil, and you didn't need much gas, neither. The damage comes to \$6.30."

His customer handed him a ten-dollar bill, which Jebediah promptly handed to Ruthie.

"My name's Brooks, young fellow, Jebediah, and this is my sister, Ruthie. We'ze cross-the-pond neighbors of the Stewarts and friends with them fer jest about forever—leastwise, that usta be the case," wiping his mouth with his shirt sleeve.

"So youze come down here to give 'em more free publicity? Not that I'm complainin', mind you. It brings in more quarters than tourists does."

"My name's Johnson, Mr. Brooks. Tom Johnson. I stopped by your store because of your name showing up in this clipping," the young man replied, removing a rumpled clipping from his shirt pocket.

“You mind telling me what’s been going on?”

“I ull be more than glad to give t’other side from what you’ ull be gitting at Niche-a-way. Bring yore drink out to the porch, and we’ll jaw ‘bout it. Ruthie, give the man his change.”

“He didn’t pay no dee-posit on that bottle, Jeb,” Ruth advised, handing her brother the change and fixing the visitor with one final stare before spinning away abruptly and padding toward the nether parts of the store. The oily sawdust on the floor seemed to snarl under her slippers even after the door slammed behind her.

Tom took a deep slug of his drink as both men watched without comment her stalk away and then left for the porch, the slamming of an angry door echoing behind them.

Pointing to a sagging, thatched-bottomed rocker for Tom and settling down in his own, Jeb said, “Ruthie and Sue Ellen Stewart growed up together and was friends as young’uns—’fore Sue Ellen went and stirred up all this crazy mess deedin’ her farm to niggers. It’s got Ruthie riled up like some mother hen with fresh-hatched biddies.”

He chewed off a chunk of tobacco, pulled down some of the wrapper, and tendered the plug to Tom.

“You born and raised in At-lanta, boy?”

Tom declined the tobacco with a thank you, raising his half-finished drink to Jeb:

“No, sir, Mr. Brooks. I was born in West Point, Georgia, a little place just west of Atlanta. You reckon that qualifies me for ‘yankee’?”

“Don’t take it personal, Mr. Johnson, anybody new is a yankee to Ruthie. But she don’t mean no harm. And, shore ’nough, I’ze heered tell of West Point.

“Fer ten years running now, I’ze been ’lected delegate to the democrat convention in At-lanta. One time or t’other, I’ze met folks from all over the state.

“You ever cover any politics fer that newspaper of yorn? You might’ve seen me and never knowed it.”

“I’m afraid I’m a bit green for covering politics, Mr. Brooks, and I’m not sure I’d care much for it anyway. Things can get pretty seedy from what I’ve heard and seen.

“I’d rather get out from behind a desk and see the world. I’d appreciate, though, your read on events in Southwest Georgia. Also, would you mind telling me what happened to your arm? You lost it in the war?”

“There ain’t no harm talking ’bout things that can’t be changed, but I wasn’t never in the Army. I lost my arm in a different kind of war—fighting the damndest hunk of gator flesh these parts has ever seen.

“It’s a story I’d be pleased to tell you, but it ain’t got nothin’ to do with them goin’s on at Niche-a-way. ’Cept some folks say—most of ’em is niggers—that that there gator’s at the root of everthin’ that’s happened.”

“Then, maybe it does have a connection after all. I’ve got time, Mr. Brooks, and I’d like to hear your story.”

“Well, boy, it happened late one ev’nin’, the summer of ’42, and I’d been alookin’ fer that gator since ’fore daylight. (I still fault him fer that heifer took missin’ on me that same year.)

“Seems I’d been a-settin’ the Gator Hole in Mossy Pond fer ’bout a hour when I seen that ugly snout easin’, slow as a yeller terrapin, past a black gum log usta lay there.

“First off, he didn’t notice me, but then he must’a smelled me, ’cause he sunk like a hunk of lead into that water, leavin’ nothing a-hint ’im but bubbles—gulup, gulup, gulup! Like grits bilin’ on the stove.

“I tuk my time, though, calmed down my nerves, and slid my gator pole into the water, the way you’d slip yore tool inside a virgin, and he never s’pected a thing. And then I felt his bump—he must’ve jest barely breshed ’gainst that pole—but it was all the notice that I needed.

“I jerked that pole up so hard it dry-blistered both my hands, and the next minute I felt like I’d hooked into ole Butthead, that train usta stop in Alta-Vista.

“And I kin tell you, boy, right up front, I pure tee wish I hadn’t ever tangled with that buckin’ bronco! He jerked me out’n that boat like it was ’im had done the hookin’. And he was on me in a minute, likes a yard dog on a biscuit!

“A’fore I knew which side of me was up, he had what us’ta be this arm in his stinkin’ jaws, and took me sideways to the bottom, like a slab of salted bacon. They say yore whole life flashes ’fore yore eyes at a time like that, but the only thin’s I seen was sparks and black water.

“I reckon the water must’ve stopped up both my ears, ’cause all I could hear was silence and a far-off kind’a buzzin’.

“The pain must’ve been somethin’ awful, but I don’t recollect feelin’ a thin’. I was in a kind of haze fer days. If I hadn’t got a good gulp of air a’fore he tuk me under, I reckon that would’a been the end of me.

“They likes to swing you ’round under the water, you know—to drown you—but I reckon my arm giving way is what saved me. I ’spect I ought to thank them healthy lungs I got from my Daddy, fer bein’ ’round to muddy dif’runt waters.

“Now I wouldn’t want you to take me wrong—I go to church quite regular—but when the preacherman starts sayin’ there’s reasons fer all things under the sun he’s sayin’ somethin’ I ain’t able to nod to. Nobody made me go lookin’ fer that gator.

“But bein’ gator-got shore has give me time fer thinkin’. And, to tell the truth, boy, losin’ that arm has been ’bout the biggest thing ever to happen to me.

“Fer one thing, it kept me out’ve the Army and off them beaches at Normandy where Buddy Killebrew got his ticket punched. And it’s cut short the kind of work I kin do.

“ ‘Sides that, I ’spect, it’s ’fected how I gits along with the womenfolks—though I’d hate to think a good woman would put me down fer the lackin’ of an arm.

“Maybe, now that I think on it, it’s had somethin’ to do with my choice in women folks. Seems like what you pay fer don’t ’mbarrass you.

“And I tell you, boy, they’s Black women in Alamance that ull twist your tassel off! And Claude Screws’ ole woman . . . I better not git into that . . . though to tell the truth, I has.

“You shore you won’t have a chaw of Bull Durham?” he asked, spitting a brown spume in the direction of the can beside his chair. “It ull put hair on yore

chest and starch in yore implement.

“Anyways,” he continued, “I believe the good Lord had other thin’s in mind for me ‘sides makin’ babies.

“Sometime, though, it don’t seem right He’d let the line die out with me and Junior, the way my Daddy prophesied it would.

“Not, mind you, that my Daddy was any kind a prophet! Lord knows he fell short on that! He believed in bringin’ up a man-son hard, readyin’ him fer the hardness of the world. And if ’n I ever got me a son I’d prob’ly do the same.

“Still a man has to think ’bout what his Daddy says and does. Don’cha agree?”

“I never knew my Daddy, Mr. Brooks. He ran off when I was a baby.”

“I’m shore sorry to hear that, boy. A boy needs a pa, so’s he kin learn how to be a man. But you turned out o.k., being a newspaper man ’n all that. Bet’cha even went to college.

“And sometimes, boy, the bad turns out to mean somethin’ good—like maybe losin’ my arm is part of some higher plan. I’d like to think it ’tributed to me gittin’ into politics.

“Howsoever, it’s hard gittin’ people primed up to vote down here, what with dry spells killin’ off the crops, three springs runnin’ now.

“Now this Nich-a-way fracas . . .” his thoughts causing his voice to trail off, “might be jest the ticket.

“But I didn’t mean to get off on no tangent—like some Free Will Baptist preacher. Whatever the good Lord’s reason was, you leave a fieldhand like me missin’ his hammerin’ arm, and he ain’t fit fer much of nothin’.

“Lucky thing my daddy left this store and cotton gin to me ’stead of to my brother! You never know which kind of grist the wheel will grind.

“But you ain’t here fer me to ramble on ’bout politics, ’ligion and women folks—things, I’ze sad to tell you, goes together in these parts like branch water and white likker.

“I ull ’member ’til my dyin’ day the sight of that gator, black as Ole Nick hisself, bustin’ out of that water, head and hankers belly high, knotted like a log

plastered with muddy mussels, hissinn' like he had a mess of rattlesnakes inside his mouth.

“He threwed my arm up in the air—like he was catchin' peanuts—and swallowed it down in one clean gulp, not even takin' time fer chewin'. Jest like it was any other hunk of meat.

“A man don't fergit seein' a part of hisself disappear like that, and you dream about it, come a summer night. Sometimes, still, I reach to grab a-holt of somethin', find myself fetchin' air, and I get that same ole feelin'.

“I'ze learned my lesson, though, 'bout muckin' 'round with monsters. Any gator that wants the rest of me will have to come to this here porch to git it. It ull be a cold day in hell 'fore I go back in that Mossy Pond!”

“Given what happened, I can't say I blame you, Mr. Brooks. That's a story could've come right out of *Field And Stream*! It's a wonder you didn't bleed to death, that you got back to dry land before your arm bled out!”

“Fer the life of me, boy, I can't tell you how I ever pulled that off. All I 'member is bellyin' myself up on that gum tree log us'ta lay there and floppin' off it into the boat.

“I must-a come to long a-nough to pole myself to the Stewart's dock, cause that's where Annie Mae's boy, Abner, fount me.”

“Those names appear in the article.”

“I'm not surprised. Niggers is always lookin' fer publicity. That Abner they'ze talk-in' 'bout is Annie Mae's bastard mongrel—half-White, half-Black, and now—Lord pity us!—part owner of Niche-a-way Plantation.

“He's married hisself to a high-yellar Cajun gal from way down in Louisiana. She's a-nough, I'ze here to tell you, to make a White man, jest about, lay aside his prejudices!

“As to Annie Mae (she was looker a-nough to snag herself some white meat from the rooster), she was the Stewarts' house nigger back when Niche-a-way was still a plantation, not a bed of stinkin' communists!

“Take me back a minute, Mr. Brooks. Did I hear you right? That Abner fellow may've saved your life—and him a Black?”

“There’s likely more’n a grain of truth in that, and if ’n it’s so, I reckon I’ze owe him one. Maybe that’s why I us’ta let him work ’round the store, fer free drinks and candy.

“Back then I ’member thinkin’ he was more White than Black. Seemed like he’d do anythin’ to please. Times change, though, and people does.”

“Knowing small communities, I imagine there was talk about who that ‘white-meat rooster’ was? You might even have known him?”

“I know you don’t mean me,” Jeb said, lifting his hat and looking hard at Tom, “and it weren’t. But that’s a subject you won’t hear much talkin’ on ’round here. Whites and Blacks does mingle that way, mind you, but not to brag about. It’s the southern code, might say.

“You, boy, ever get you a piece of chocolate pie?”

Gettin no response, he continued: “There’s rumors his daddy was Big Jim Stewart, but I never put no stock in it.”

“Big Jim? The owner of Niche-a-way, right? But it is possible he could be the one, don’t you think? I imagine they were thrown together a lot, her being in the house and all? And I do recall your saying she was pretty.”

“Annie Mae was, black as she was, a sure ’nough looker, but I never hankered none in her direction—though you kin’t stop yoreself from lookin’. Back then you stayed off a White man’s reservation, know what I mean?”

“Tell me, Mr. Brooks, more about that big alligator. What made him so special anyway?”

“Fur as that gator is concerned, Abner can tell you ’bout as much on that subject as anybody in these parts. Back then, though—you did say your name was Tom?—everbody wanted that gator. The man what captured him could’ve run fer governor, and prob’ly got hisself ’lected, too.

“Old Ben was fifteen feet long, if ’n he was an inch, and nothin’ was safe what went near that pond.

“Niggers ’round here ull tell how he jerked a pickaninny right off the dock in broad open daylight—not that that was any loss—they have them apes in litters!” he chuckled, turning his head to judge his customer’s reaction.

“I reckon you don’t have much trouble with the coloreds where yore from?”

“Cotton, Mr. Brooks, was never king in West Point, and I went to school with Blacks. To tell the truth, I didn’t find them all that different. All that time you were hunting Ben, you didn’t have to worry about breaking trespassing laws?”

“Lord no, Tom Johnson. The Stewarts and me was near ’bout as close as kin. In them days—it’s been ’bout three years now Sue Ellen let ’em put that chain link fence ’round the propurty—the ponds was open water.

“That’s one of the thin’s bothers me ’bout them goin’s on. Why I left part of me in that there pond, and now they wants to make it into some kind of refuge or somethin’.

“I tell you, mister, it’s got a lots of folks strung up somethin’ awful.”

“How about the boycott mentioned in this article?” Tom asked, taking the clipping from his pocket and unwrinkling it over the knee of his slacks.

“Says here Mrs. Stewart deeded her farm to Blacks who work for her, and that Alamance County citizens have organized a boycott of Niche-a-way farm products in protest.”

“There ain’t no laws I know of ’quires me to gin they’ze cotton. ‘Sides, hey’ze free to truck their stuff the twenty miles to Blakely. It’s Alamance that’s bein’ hurt by they’ze doin’s and all this publicity. Nobody in this county is goin’ to bite the hand that feeds ’em.”

“Who’s hand is being bitten, Mr. Brooks? Seems to me it’s the people at Niche-a-way who’re being hurt. Are you saying the whole county’s supporting the boycott?”

“Well, Fred Jones won’t process they’ze cucumbers; Izz Joiner won’t buy they’ze winter pe-cans; and Simmie Tolliver won’t ’cept they’ze Herefords fer auction.

“Some spec’late by the time peanuts is ripe and their cotton’s ready fer pickin’, this whole thing ull be blowed over.

“Meantime, they’ze money’s welcome here and in any store in Alamance. We’ze not talkin’ prejudice; we’ze talkin’ free enterprise.”

“That kind of enterprise doesn’t sound free to me.”

“It’s free to them as has it. Anyways, Sue Ellen knows ’zactly what to do, if ’n her brains ain’t gone ’pletely frazzled. All she’s gotta do is put that farm on the open market.

“That there thing called boycott would blow away ’fore yore spit could dry. Why pore as I is, I’ze made her a good-faith offer. Farms can’t sell what they’ze grow won’t be hangin’ ’round fer long, I reckon.”

“One more thing before I have to leave, Mr. Brooks. The article said some cows had been poisoned. You know anything about that?”

“True enough, they’ze lost a few head of Herefords.

“Most folks ’round here think they poisoned them theirselves—fer the insurance.

“But I know you has to go. I’m right glad you chose my place fer gassin’ up, and I’m glad fer the chance to tell the White side of the story.

“You strike me as friendly a-nough, and I wouldn’t want that you should take this wrong, but we don’t need no outsiders stirrin’ up more trouble than we has already.

“Family troubles in the family, I always say.”

“Thank you, Mr. Brooks, for talking with me. You think your sister would want to add anything?”

“Bet’cha bottom dollar she would! Ruthie would like to add a lot, but most of it wouldn’t be fittin’ to print,” he chuckled.

“Anyways, in these here parts, it’s the men folks does the talkin’—’specially where newspapers is concerned. It’s the men folks as got to tote the load, if you know what I mean.”

“Again, Mr. Brooks. Thanks. You’ve helped me out a lot. How much farther to Niche-a-way?”

“I’ze told you all you need to know to git that story right, but I know how you journalists is. Just keep on the way you was goin’. ’Bout four miles that way

you ull come to John Hilburn Pond. Just past it you ull see they'ze sign on yore left.

“Be shore and stop by on yore way back to At-lanta. I ull buy you another coke a' cola. Tell Sue Ellen I said howdy.”

Back on the highway, Tom Johnson breathed deeply. On his return trip he'd stop and take some pictures. Maybe Jeb and Ruthie would be willing to stand, arms folded, in front of that old store. *American Gothic still survives!* he thought.

The store itself was a fossilized specimen of a past time and a past mentality. Dusty, dark and musty—its exposed rafters, cross-stitched with cobwebs, unlathed shelves stocked with dusty cans, brown nail kegs shaped like tom toms and positioned near the door, tilting sacks of fertilizer, links of trace chain, posthole diggers, pitch-forks, and tusk-toothed rakes.

Suspended from rafters or hung on ten-penny nails near the ceiling were horse hames and highly varnished shafts of wood, slightly curved with black iron rings embedded at either end—their function completely mysterious to him.

Though he had seen tractors on his way down, he had seen nothing in the store relevant to a day of tractors and combines. It was as though he'd been displaced in time.

And that smell? He couldn't quite place it, but it was something other than fertilizer and oil-soaked sawdust. A long-closed room shut off from air and sunlight, maybe? Museum smell? Funeral home?

He quit worrying it and set about, instead, resurrecting some of what he'd learned in those two useless art courses he'd taken in college. First, he drew the windows—half-shuttered eyes protected by cast iron bars flecked with rust and dust and cobwebs and peering out from either side of the doublewide doorway. Then he limned in the sagging porch running the length of the storefront.

At either end of the porch, untended chinaberry trees had buckled and spavined its planks. The floor around the rockers and rusty syrup buckets, positioned for spittoons, had been misfire-darkened, and sticky, with the residue of sixty years of tobacco juice.

He could draw it, but photography would do it better!

Retracing his departure, he stepped from the porch onto the oneboard step, eyes ranging past the blue gas pumps to the iron-gray, sandy yard where tufts of scraggly grass with dusty, mustard-colored blossoms peering bleakly from deep inside grew close to the ground in random circumstance.

The outer walls were unpainted clapboard, splintered and blistered by an unremitting sun.

Neglect and sun and time, he thought, *sap strength from everything*.

That thought evoked the image of Ruthie Brooks—an example of freeze-dried virginity if he had ever seen it!

And the hotness of her anger—it was as though she saw herself as jilted by a suitor she called life: abused and used, promised eternal happiness and left with arid nothings.

And she'd made her mistrust of strangers all too evident. It was going to be a problem, writing that pair down objectively.

Not many folks in Atlanta would believe in the existence of a Jebediah Brooks, a one-armed Simon Legree with an alligator story right out of *Moby Dick*! And something about that story had grabbed him, he admitted, almost like he was a participant.

And there were feelings in it, feelings that raised inklings of something more—maybe even an insinuation of unsuspected depth in Jebediah. He wondered if that feeling of confusion had anything to do with his sudden urge to leave.

And he would've been smart to stay longer, to explore Jeb's concept of higher mission, to visit the cotton gin, perhaps, or to have wrangled more out of Sister Ruthie. Except for quotes, he had almost nothing he could use in a straight news story. Maybe Seldy would go for a feature.

He shook his head, feeling conflicted again, and then became aware of a need to pee. Somehow he felt he had drunk more than Coca-Cola from that bottle at the White Oak Gin and Grocery.

He drove on between flat brown fields, patches of scrub oak and scraggly loblolly pines, past occasional lakes of soft-nodding, light-green peanut fields, and, for a time, alongside rows of young cornstalks, springing up like fountains

spewing turquoise water.

Heat bubbles bounced like beads of perspiration in the hollows of the road, and the white-hot sun blared from a cloudless sky.

Except for him the road was empty.

He pulled the convertible off the road. Just ahead the highway narrowed and disappeared into shadow that was swamp.

Afraid of the sudden appearance of one of the logging trucks he had jockeyed with all the way down, he stood inside the opened car door and urinated hastily onto the roadside gravel.

Feeling relieved of more than urine, he got back into the car and drove along the graveled roadside to the edge of the swamp.

It's like a world where old men go to die, he thought, looking at the bleached white gums and cypresses bearded with their tangled, crudely braided strands of Spanish moss.

The silence was somehow enervating, and there wasn't a breath of wind.

Pale figures flitted in the corners of his eyes.

He exited the car and walked down to the edge of the swamp. Below, water chuckled softly from a sewer pipe running under the pavement, connecting one side of the swamp to the other.

Others had stood where he stood, as the crinkled and crumpled edges of the sewer pipe attested. He stood for a while, looking at the watch on his wrist, and then gingerly lowered himself onto a clump of pond grass growing out of a rusty rent in the sewer pipe.

Below, almost in reach of his scuffed brown loafers, lay swamp water, shaggy with moss and dormant, still and moody, crowding the edge of the road.

Immediately under the sewer pipe, the water was clear enough to show a sandy bottom, and he watched small minnows spin their tails like diminutive windmills. Crayfish scuttled in self-created sandstorms, reaching frustrated claws toward speedy minnows.

Farther out, where the sand gave way to mud, he envisioned larger fish, blunt nosed and brown, circumspectly patrolling the boundary between sunlight and shadow.

Tom's eyes wandered farther into the swamp, past the matted water lilies, past the bone-white skeletons of bark-peeled, splintered cypresses, out beyond the moss-hung gums and locusts, and into the stupefying brush.

The dark mood possessed him, and he thought how out of phase with living he really was. Fresh out of college, degreed and pedigreed, he swam—like the brown-nosed fish—between sunshine and shadow, a not-quite-anything waiting place between survival and the mysteries of self.

He had accepted the job with the newspaper because it was what he was supposed to do, what his instructors and his mother expected he would do.

And yet he knew he lacked ambition. He sought no Pulitzers, no frontpage bylines. No stalker of forbidden secrets he.

What he wanted, really wanted, was to do nothing. To let life creep up on him like grass around pine saplings; to feel the crunch of sand between his toes; to make unfettered love to brown-skinned Tahitian maidens; and to allow the sun to rise and set, unquestioned, on the impetus of its own motion.

He wanted to be free, but he didn't even know what freedom was.

His friend Paulie had set out to find it on the road, dropping out of college—a bundle of clothes and pot fixings stuffed in a sack—bound for California and a life of *carte blanche*, hippie freedom. He could've gone with him—but for cowardice and a sense of loyalty to his mother.

He didn't have it in him. Besides, he owed his mother some degree of leisure in her life-time—after twenty years of clerking in that hokey little post office in that hokey little town—and doing it primarily for him, so he could have some education, so he could get a decent job, and so he would not have to spend his life selling magazines as his abandoning daddy had.

“So maybe that degree and some work experience would be good for him. Maybe he'd discover something he could be passionate about; maybe the planet was not populated solely by Jebediahs, Ruthies, and Seldon Woodruffs,” he muttered aloud, pushing himself to his feet and swiping at

the sand on the ball of his hand and at the blades of grass clinging to his backside.

Blunt-nosed fish swam myopically between the outer fringes of light and darkness, and adolescent minnows spun their tails like propeller-driven viruses. A frog croaked from inside a log like an organ in a chapel.

Back driving on the highway, he noted a perceptible rise in the road, and soon the swamp was behind him.

On his left, fields appeared, fenced in by chain link cobwebs seven feet high. Nearing the crest of a red sand hill, he observed a tall, cast iron gate and the word, *Niche-a-way*, burned in rune-like letters on a sign shaped like a shield. He turned into the drive, noticed the lock on the gate, and honked his horn.

Minutes later, the gates were unlocked and opened by a grinning boy whose blackness was intensified by the whiteness of his eyes and teeth.

He turned down Tom's offer of a ride, saying, "I'd better not. You can't miss it, though. The lane leads smack-dab to it. I'd best get back to the schoolhouse. Miss Rachel told me not to waste."

Walking alongside the car for a minute, the boy waved a paint-smearred hand and turned off onto a path through the shrubbery on the left side of the road. Giant, longleaf pines, scaly brown boles towering skyward, promenaded the roadside, and shafts of wafting sunlight stirred the thickly plaited pine needles carpeting the shoulders of the road.

A gray squirrel, his tail flattened warningly along his back, chattered from a limb, preaching a discordant sermon in a hushed, cathedraled world.