Geoffrey Craig

The Snake

I woke up before dawn. I hadn't expected to sleep at all I was so excited, and it seemed like forever that I lay awake listening to my folks breathing and rustling in their bed against the opposite wall. I guess I finally got tired of turning this way and that and fell asleep.

I pushed back the ragged cloth that covered the window and peered out. It was still dark, and a cool breeze struck my face. I heard crickets. I wasn't going back to sleep so I got up to use the privy. James was coming home today; the train would arrive in a couple of hours. The families of the three returning soldiers would take the one truck in Pine and drive down to Marcy's Mill to meet them. I couldn't imagine anybody sleeping.

My brother had volunteered two years ago and gone off to someplace called France to fight a war. It had taken me awhile to get used to all that space in the bed. Three of us once shared the bed, but my sister Rebecca died of the influenza the year before James left.

Pine isn't really a town: just a collection of cabins and shacks near a muddy stream that winds through bottomland until it collides with the Taloowa River across the valley. That's where the fine, big plantations are: along the Taloowa. Cherokee Hill Plantation stretches from Pine to just past the church; but it's a sorry, rundown affair. The church occupies a sandy clearing carved out of the plantation's pine forests.

I've lived all my sixteen years in Pine. I've never been out of the valley and only gone to Marcy's Mill, the county seat, a few times to help Poppa and Uncle Watt load seed onto the truck. The valley is broad and flat with Pine almost at one end and Marcy's Mill at the other. A line of steep hills runs along one side of the valley with gently rolling hills on the other.

I envy James; he's going to have some stories to tell.

The sky was just getting light as I came back from the privy. I washed my hands and face at the pump. I shivered; that water was cold. The pale light crept across the valley floor. The chickens started scurrying and pecking around our cabin, and Mr. Boyd's rooster flapped his wings and craned his skinny neck. I climbed softly up the porch steps; Bess and Red barely stirred. Some watch dogs: a fox could get the whole flock while they snored.

"Alexander?" my Mother asked as I opened the door. She was lighting a fire to heat some coffee. She had put a plate of cold yams and corn bread on the table.

"Yes 'am."

"Hurry up and eat. There's chores to be done, and we got to get going before long. Want to be there when the train pulls in."

Wouldn't you know it, of all days, the truck picked this one not to start. It took what seemed forever for Poppa and Uncle Watt to get it going. People stood around getting nervous and offering advice, which the two of them ignored until Poppa finally hollered for everyone to go back home and do something useful.

"Sand," muttered Uncle Watt as he cleaned out the carburetor.

The sun was getting up there, and it was hot by the time the old engine sputtered to life. Four men squeezed into the cab; and the back of the truck was so jammed with chattering people I thought the slatted sides would crack, tumbling half of us into the dirt. Everyone knew we had missed the train; but we still headed down the county road in a party mood, churning up a dust cloud since it hadn't rained in a week. I figured we'd meet the three soldiers on the road, walking home and disappointed at the lack of a reception committee. We neared the weathered church with the sun and wind in our faces. Poppa said it was built fifty years ago — just four years after the Civil War.

"And it's not been painted since," Mary Boyd laughed when I told her.

Will Barkley's mule was tied to the hitching post in front of the church. We were just passing when he started ringing the bell. That clear music spoke for the excitement we all felt. We rumbled past long stretches of pine woods broken up by big fields of cotton and corn. The road bent south about halfway to town. I knew somewhere way beyond Marcy's Mill was the ocean, and I was hoping to see it someday. We were still a mile or so from town when the truck slowed down. I leaned over the slats and saw a car stopped in the road. A man was standing by the hood, looking at two oak trees sitting all by themselves at the edge of a field.

Now what is he doing, just stopped like that, I thought. We'll have to go around him. As we got closer, the man jumped into his car; and I heard the engine grind. The car spewed a cloud of dust our way. As the truck pulled to a stop, I glanced at the trees. Three men in uniform, ropes around their necks, dangled from the lower limbs of an oak tree. One of them was James. A sign was pinned to his shirt. I learned later that it said: Uppity Niggers, How Do You Like Them Uniforms Now?

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It took me two years to save the twenty dollars for the plot of land up in the hills. I worked six days a week on a plantation called Spanish Moss a few miles from Pine and not far from the Taloowa. I weeded the vegetable garden, mucked out the stalls, polished the saddles and bridles and cut the lawns. A Northern family, the Prices, owned Spanish Moss; it was a deal fancier than Cherokee Hill where my Poppa sharecropped cotton with his brothers and where every year I helped with the picking. A faint trail — possibly from Indian times or made by the early settlers for hunting — was the only way up to the plot, and the white farmer that sold it considered me a fool.

"That dumb nigger will starve up there. It's too damn steep for farming," I heard him mutter to his wife — as if I weren't standing right there.

Mary and I got married just after I bought the land.

"It will be hard going," I told her, "but no one will bother us. It will be a safe place to raise a family. It's far enough from them evil-smelling whites."

Our land formed one side of a hump, like a camel's. The back of the hump dropped steeply to a bog. Beyond the bog, the woods rose sharply

to a ridge. A fast stream tumbled through the woods, then slowed as it crossed the trail leading up from the valley and finally took a nosedive down the hill. Eventually, it must have connected to the Taloowa after joining up with Scotsman's Creek, which runs right through Marcy's Mill.

We carted our clothes and a few tools up the hill on the old mule I got for two dollars from the folks at Spanish Moss who always tried to treat me decent. We slept in a shanty made of logs, brush and some planks my cousin Willie brought up and the whole covered with a tarpaulin. I dug a privy, and we walked down the trail to the stream to wash and get our drinking and cooking water. I cleared a couple of acres for corn. It was steep and hard as the devil to plow, but there's nothing you can't do if you got a reason for it.

Mary started a vegetable garden and rode the mule down the hill two, sometimes three, days a week to do laundry at Cherokee Hill and Spanish Moss. The Prices paid her a living wage, but the distinguished Carolina family at Cherokee Hill paid her hardly enough to bother with except that we needed every possible dollar for rice, lard, tobacco, oats for the mule, some flour and new tools. Whatever else we ate, either Mary grew or I caught in the stream. If I'd had a gun, we could've had meat.

I cut down the trees for the corn field with an old axe that Poppa gave me for a wedding present. I burned the stumps and had the mule drag the logs to the spot where I planned on building our cabin. Jesse was born after we'd been up the hill for a year. Mary had me fetch Molly Pritchard, who knew about such things. It was 1922, and Mary was seventeen.

I got my first corn crop the following year. I sold a good part of the corn to two moon shiners Willie told me about. They had a still back in the hills south of me. Willie showed me how to get there or I wouldn't have found the place. You turn off the road into scrub with not even a sign of a track for a hundred yards. Once you've found the track, you cross a black swamp on a grass dike. Finally, the track winds up a rise and quick as a wink drops into a valley with a fresh stream running down the middle.

For whites, Burt and Smitty are decent people, maybe because, being twins, they're simple-minded. They give me a fair price for my corn, and they don't think my name is "boy". They are the only decent whites around – I don't count the Prices over at Spanish Moss — although one day, when I delivered tomatoes to Mr. Barnes at his store over at Hopewell, he says to me in a low voice that only I could hear:

"Damn shame about your brother. Been meaning to say something for some time."

Some time was four years. I wondered if it slipped his mind or simply took that long to get up the courage.

Cousins Willie and Shep helped saw the logs into planks for the cabin walls, roof and floor. We used thick logs for corner posts and a long thin one as a roof beam. Pine pitch sealed everything tight, and only a few drips of rain ever got in. Mary had insisted that the cabin have two rooms.

"Alexander Yates," she began. When she used both my names, I was either in trouble or facing a hard day's work. "I'm not sleeping in the same room as my children. Just because it was good enough for my mother and

yours does not make it good enough for me." We were sitting on a stump at twilight, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, and admiring the sight of our corn field. She put a hand on my thigh. "Furthermore, they don't need to learn too young about the few pleasures life has to offer."

By the time Adam came along in 1925, I had a nice trade going with Burt and Smitty — selling occasionally to other moon shiners if the twins couldn't take up my entire crop. Mary quit doing laundry. She got some chicks so she had plenty to do with the children, her garden, raising chickens and of course the housework. We sold increasing amounts of vegetables – and our leftover eggs - to Spanish Moss, Cherokee Hill and old man Barnes. It wasn't much but we had enough cash money for necessities – like tobacco, our one sin according to Mary — and some left over. I bought an old 410 shotgun and oiled it up good.

The cabin was a far cry from the shanty. In the big front room, we had a wood-burning stove – our only store-bought piece of furniture. I built a cupboard for the dishes and pots, also store-bought, and a pine table which we used for meals and a work bench. On the far side of the room was the wide bed I had made for the children. I laid slats across the frame, and Mary sewed up a corn husk mattress. I made a dresser for the children and nailed a couple of shelves to the wall. On one, I put some old books that I had bought in Marcy's Mill. Reverend Jacob Garvin a year or two back had taught me a little reading and figuring, and I intended to pass it on to the children. I could struggle through a small book, but Mary couldn't read a lick. She was smart enough without it. We had our small bedroom behind the stove. It was cozy enough with the bed, a dresser and a few shelves.

Mary and I were almost as proud of our cabin and farm as we were of the four children. Esther had been born in 1927 and Ruth four years later. We had another son, David, who came in between the girls; but he died of the influenza when he was only one. It was a day of sadness when we buried him by the edge of the woods, but most families in Pine had lost more than one so we felt lucky in spite of our grief. Most important, living up in the hills, I felt my family was safe — that is, as much as any black family could be in South Carolina. Long as I sold corn and produce and didn't try making any liquor myself, no one was going to bother coming up the hill to mess with us.

Because safe is a relative thing — even for whites. Not so long ago, a white woman from the other side of Marcy's Mill took up with a black man. They must have been crazy and not just for each other. They beat her pretty bad; and when they finished with him, there was not much left to bury. As a matter of fact, the Klan is quite active down in the valley although I've heard it's worse in some other parts. They burn crosses — to keep up their spirits, I guess — and they're fond of beating up some black man from time to time. That's to keep us in line. I swear some of the white trash must think uppity and nigger are just two halves of one word.

Back in 1927, that would be seven years ago, Joe and Sally Horton tacked a hut onto the side of their cabin, nailed a hand-lettered sign reading: STORE over the entrance and stocked a few shelves with canned goods and bread.

I thought they were being foolish and was surprised the store lasted the two weeks that it did. Four hooded bastards dragged Joe out of the cabin in the middle of the night and beat him so badly he couldn't walk for three days. Sally watched in terror from the cabin door having pushed their two children under the bed. One of the bastards approached the cabin and grabbed her by the arm. No telling what he would have done except another said:

"Leave her be – this time."

He was tall and his pointed hood made him taller. His robe flowed around him as he walked up to her. Sally said he was close enough she smelt the whiskey and onions on his breath.

"Missy," he said, in what otherwise might have been taken for a considerate voice, "you got exactly one minute to get your youngsters out of that cabin."

I saw the blackened ruin a couple of days later.

"They can't stand for any of us to get ahead," said Willie

"Just like James," I said.

Willie put a hand on my shoulder.

"It's never far from your mind."

I shook my head.

"What are Joe and Sally going to do?" I asked.

Willie chuckled.

"Sally says they're going to New York City if they have to walk there carrying the children on their shoulders."

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Every Sunday, I brought the family down to church. I had bought a wagon, second or maybe third hand, eight years back and widened the trail so I could drive up and down the hill. A rutted, dirt road winds along the base of the hills past our track and further south past the turnoff to Burt and Smitty's still. For a while, it runs somewhat parallel to the county road; but then it veers sharply south. Leaving our track, I would turn left, that is north, and then left again onto the county road. The church is about a mile up the road. Turning right at the county road, I would get to Marcy's Mill in about five miles. The county road is hard-packed clay until it gets to within a mile or so of town where it turns asphalt.

We're on our third mule. First one was ancient and all I could afford. Died on me after all of two years. Second one was somewhat younger when I bought him and did almost ten years worth of work. This one's young and strong. The white farmer who sold it looked at me hard and said: "Yore business must be prospering, boy, if you can pay cash."

Jesse named him Henry.

The church was still unpainted. As a deacon, I would have liked to bring up the subject; but times had gotten tough with business doing what white folks called "poorly" and what black folks called "disastrous"

meaning laborers were getting laid off — us first of course — and farmers got less and less for their crops but paid just about the same for seed and implements. Your black tenant farmer has no margin for hard times. Now I still made out with the corn — people want even more cheap liquor during such times, but Mary's vegetables, jars of stewed tomatoes and eggs went for a song. She talked about going back to laundering; but in 1934, who was hiring? Naturally, we had the worst of it. What do you expect?

Hobbled mules hitched to wagons stirred up dust in the dry churchyard. The floor boards groaned as we walked to our bench directly behind Willie and his family. My Mother sang in the choir, and Poppa was already seated across the aisle, talking to my aunt. Poppa's hair was flecked with gray. I wondered when mine would start. I'm proud of the Yates hair. Mary's fond of it as well; that is, she likes to pull on it when she hits her stride.

Speaking of pulling on hair, Jesse — my wild one — always tugged at his second cousin Minnie's braids whenever he thought that all our heads were bowed in prayer. On one particularly broiling late summer morning, Mary happened to be searching in her dress pocket for a handkerchief when she saw Jesse's hand snaking stealthily towards Minnie's neat braids. Stifling a chuckle, I watched out of the corner of my eye. Mary's hand shot out and caught Jesse by the wrist. He looked at her in shock.

"I'll deal with you later," Mary hissed softly.

"Yes 'am," Jesse replied, bowing his head with studied piety. A second later, he poked Adam in the ribs with his elbow,

"Cut it out," Adam whispered. "Can't you see I'm talking to God?"

I reached around Mary and touched Jesse lightly on the shoulder. He looked at me, and I gave him a meaning business look. He bowed his head in earnest this time. Our church was as bare inside as out. The plastered walls showed cracks that wandered like the tribes of Israel, and the small windowpanes were streaked with the dust of ages. The nearest to decoration was the plain cross that hung over Reverend Jacob Garvin's pulpit. His wife played the upright piano – which had a pleasing sound considering no one living could remember when it was new. The choir occupied two benches to one side of the pulpit.

Reverend Garvin recited the Lord's Prayer and then led us in:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee...

As Amen's echoed through the hot, still air, the choir began – without missing a beat:

Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere...

Their singing rose and swelled and seemed ready to push out the weathered walls of that old church. We clapped in time and joined our voices in harmony with the choir but at all times with dignity. The First Baptist of Pine is not — underlining the not — a United Methodist. Wom-

en have been known to faint over at Hopewell United Methodist. We don't hold with that nonsense. A "yes brother" or "amen" during a sermon is about as far as we go.

The final notes hung in the air like motes of dust; ladies took out their fans; men wiped their brows; and children made faces at each other. Reverend Garvin opened the Bible and read from scripture:

> *And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any; that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.*

"Who does Jesus mean by any," the Reverend began his sermon, "when he says: 'forgive, if ye have aught against any'? Who does Jesus mean? Is he talking about your brother, your sister, your neighbor or your friend? Does he mean your loved ones? Is that who Jesus is talking about?"

"Tell us brother."

His voice a trumpet, Reverend Garvin continued:

"No: I say to you that this is not who Jesus meant. Brothers and sisters: Jesus did not mention loved ones. He did not mention friends or neighbors. Recall ... recall what were his words. In his infinite and glorious wisdom, Jesus said: 'if you have aught against any...'"

The Reverend paused for the briefest instant and then, raising a forefinger towards the heavens, repeated in a voice that reverberated throughout the church:

"'... aught against any...'".

The Reverend let us think about that before continuing:

"Jesus meant forgive anyone who has sinned against you that your Father in Heaven may forgive you your sins. For who amongst us has not sinned, and sinned most grievously? Forgiveness is the duty of every Christian. My friends, the black man and the black woman have been sinned against in this nation from generation unto generation and yet we must find the strength to forgive."

I listened, my face a mask. It was not the first time that Reverend Garvin had preached on this subject – and I assumed it would not be the last. I've kept my anger below the surface these past fifteen years, but I'm never going to forgive. My brother's body dangled from that limb like a side of beef in a butcher's shop. No, I'm never, ever going to forgive.

I had jumped from the truck that morning and run crazily up the road towards Pine. I had no idea but to run or to get Poppa's ageing twelve-gauge and shoot someone or something. My father caught up with me and held me in his arms as I beat my fists against his chest.

I had to blink as I stepped from the church into the blinding sunshine. I looked up to the hills and thought how I loved my family and our farm. It was back-breaking work, but who ever did any other kind. At least, I didn't take orders from a white man. If only James and I could have

farmed together. Mary was talking to her sisters and the children were playing tag so I walked, as was my custom, towards the graveyard at the edge of the woods. The rickety gate squeaked on rusty hinges. A live oak shaded a portion of the graves; acorns and moss lay on the ground. Some of the stones were starting to wear. I went directly to James's grave. The stone read:

James Lincoln Yates

1898 – 1919

He served us all.

It had taken a lot of corn to pay for that stone. I didn't hear Mary approach; she laid a hand gently on my arm.

"Time to go," she said.

Jesse had led the mule to the rain-filled, wooden trough alongside the church. Henry drank noisily and snorted at the water. I hoisted Esther and Ruth into the wagon. We called our good-byes and headed home. Turning onto our track, we first climbed gradually and then steeply. The track crossed the stream, passed our sloping corn field and ended in a dirt yard in front of our cabin. At the far end of the yard stood a chicken coop and a shed for the mule. Abe, our tan hound, was sleeping on the porch; he lifted his head as the wagon rolled into the yard, yawned and went back to sleep.

I gave the reins to Jesse and went into the cabin to change out of my Sunday clothes before collecting two baskets from the shed and heading for the corn field. Jesse and Adam unhitched Henry and, with the girls trailing behind, led him to a small paddock by the shed. Jesse swatted the mule on the rump and laughed as Henry trotted to the center of the paddock to lie down and roll in the red dust. Carrying a package of salt pork that she had traded with Emmy Jenkins for a half dozen tomatoes, Mary climbed the steps to the porch and, turning before entering the cabin, called to the children:

"You devils can play until dinner is on the table and then it's weeding time. But you best change out of those Sunday clothes first."

Jesse always organized the games. He felt it his due being – at twelve – three years older than Adam and five years senior to Esther. Three-year-old Ruth simply attached herself to Esther. Jesse gathered them in the center of the yard and explained that they were going to play Hide 'n Seek. Ruth jumped up and down. He would be it first, and they could hide anywhere inside or outside the cabin except under the porch. Early in the summer, I had seen a rattler headed towards the porch. To the enormous excitement of the children, I had sliced its head off.

"Don't ever go under the porch," I sternly ordered them as they stared at the still writhing body, "or into the woods without Jesse. And always watch where you're walking."

Jesse began counting. Esther grabbed Ruth's hand and raced to the corn field. I stopped picking corn and, laughing, hoisted Ruth into the air. She squealed as I lowered her gently into a basket and covered her loosely with ears of corn.

"Hush up," I said and motioned for Esther, whose stick-like arms and legs protruded from a tattered dress, to climb into the second basket on top of a layer of corn. I took off my shirt and spread it over her. I watched Jesse searching around the shed and wondered where Adam had hid. Mary told me later that he had snuck into the cabin and crouched behind the big wood box near the stove. She was frying yams and salt pork and had a loaf of corn bread in the oven. She winked at Adam and paid no attention when Jesse burst into the cabin. She hummed while he peered under the bed where all four children slept. She hummed louder when he lifted one corner of the corn husk mattress. He was about to pull off the whole thing when she said:

"That's enough tearing that bed apart. What makes you think anyone except me is in here anyway?"

"Momma, you're trying to confound me 'cause Adam's your favorite. I'm too smart for that trick."

"Jesse, you as smart as that fox that keeps trying to get at my chickens; and right now you've had about as much success. And speaking of favorites, I have none. All of you make a saint out of the devil."

Crossing the room with a laugh, she enfolded him in a bear hug.

"Leave me, Momma. I got work to do."

He cautiously entered his parents' room and looked around.

"Now don't you go tearing up that bed neither. Your Poppa likes a well-made bed."

At this moment, Adam jumped up, kissed his Mother on the cheek and scurried out of the cabin. Jesse heard the door close and ran into the front room, shouting:

"There you go again: hiding behind Momma's skirts."

I used the privy and washed at the well pump before coming up for dinner. Sunday dinners were noisy affairs. Mary and I liked to ask the children about the readings and sermons. I didn't have the heart for it today. The sermon had set me to thinking about James and I couldn't let go. Mary watched me as she filled the plates. The children shoveled their food.

"Mind your manners," Mary cautioned, and they tried to slow down.

"Poppa," Adam asked while chewing. "Aren't you going to ask us about the sermon? Am I supposed to forgive Floyd Anderson for stealing my whistle?"

"You don't know for sure he stole it," snapped Jesse. "You might have lost it so don't go accusing people."

"He did too steal it."

"I want a whistle," said Ruth through a mouthful of yams.

"Hush up," said Esther. "You got a doll."

Losing the whistle had gnawed at Adam for weeks even though I had promised to buy him a new one at the Five and Dime. He had sworn that he felt the whistle bounce out of his pocket during a game of tag after church. By the time he turned around to get it, Floyd was standing near the spot with a queer look on his face. Adam had searched all over without any luck. He didn't confront Floyd who was Jesse's age and big at that. I didn't have enough evidence to cause a ruckus by talking to Floyd's father.

I told Adam once again that I would buy him a new one next time I went to town.

"But Poppa, what about the forgiveness part?"

"Sometimes Son," I said, "forgiveness is out of our hands."

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The next morning was even hotter than the day before; the sun beat down on the yard and the slightest breeze stirred up a funnel of red dust. After helping me pick and shuck corn, Jesse asked if he and Adam could go fishing. I needed to fix a hole in the wagon floor and fried trout sounded good so I told 'em to feed Henry and be off. Jesse half-filled a bucket with corn and oats, added a broken-up carrot and left it for the mule while Adam ran for their fishing poles and a rusted can. I watched them disappear behind the cabin with their poles slung over their shoulders. Adam later told me what happened.

He never liked the smell that rose from the bog, which comes from the skunk cabbage and decaying plants, so he stayed a little away while Jesse put mud in the can. Then the two of them collected worms from under rocks and logs. Adam said he liked to watch them wriggle. They angled up the hill towards the stream. Jesse pulled a dark green leaf from a beech to chew on, and Adam did the same. They were hot and panting when they reached the stream so they washed their faces in the icy water.

They continued climbing until they reached a small plateau where the stream ran more slowly. A large boulder with a flat top perched at the edge of the stream. Sitting on the boulder, Jesse cut a worm in half with a hunting knife that had once belonged to my great grandfather. Adam looked away; he didn't like seeing the knife slice through the worms. Jesse baited both hooks, and the boys dropped their lines into the water.

They took off their shirts and let their feet dangle over the rounded edge of the boulder. The tall pines crowding the stream provided shade. A hint of a breeze blew off the water and dried their sweat. The woods were completely quiet. They sat very still — only occasionally moving their poles. After awhile,

Adam spoke:

"What did Poppa mean about forgiveness being out of our hands?"

"Maybe he was talking about Uncle James. Poppa can't bring himself to forgive them."

"Who is Uncle James?"

Jesse stared at Adam as if he were talking to the mule.

"You don't know?"

Adam shook his head. Jesse slapped at a whining mosquito that had hovered around his head and finally landed on the back of his neck.

"Uncle James was Poppa's brother."

"How do you know about him?"

"I heard – from the other kids."

"What happened that Poppa can't forgive them?"

"He got lynched."

"What's lynched?"

Jesse raised his hand above his head, jerked it hard and let his head drop to one side. His mouth went droopy and he gagged: "aagh". Then he punched Adam's shoulder and laughed:

"That's lynching, but you don't have to worry none. No white trash is gonna bother lynching someone small as you or take the time to come all the way up our hill to do it."

"Poppa wouldn't let white trash near our farm," protested Adam.

"I reckon not," said Jesse although he didn't sound as sure of it as Adam would have liked.

When they had caught three trout, the boys leaned their poles against the boulder and waded in the stream. Soon they were splashing each other and laughing like the dickens.

"Let's take the shortcut back," said Jesse.

Adam wanted to say no. The shortcut involved scrambling down a very steep grade. Jesse always laughed when they did it, but Adam felt like screaming. But he knew Jesse would make fun of him so he said nothing. When they came to the top of the grade, Jesse grabbed Adam's hand and, hollering: "Hang on!" careened down the hill, weaving in and out of the pines. At the bottom, Adam looked back up, gasping.

"Fun, wasn't it?" asked Jesse. He put an arm around Adam's shoulder and added:

"You did just fine."

After the grade, they had to cross a clearing with tall grass and follow an easy slope to a point below the corn field. They could then climb through the rows of corn to the cabin. Just above the clearing, they saw a doe burst from the grass and disappear into the woods. She was followed by a spotted fawn.

"If I had the shotgun," said Jesse, "we'd have meat for a month."

He started across the clearing with Adam a step behind. There was no breeze, and Jesse trampled the still grass in front of him. After a few feet, something dark shot out towards Jesse's leg. To Adam, it was a blur at

first; but then he glimpsed a dark form slithering through the grass. Jesse screamed in pain and Adam froze.

"I been bit," Jesse cried out, dropping his pole and the fish and grabbing at his leg. The next minute he started running through the grass. Crossing the clearing, he pummeled down the slope. Adam tried to keep up. His heart was pounding, and his breath came in short gasps. When Adam reached the corn field, he saw me carrying Jesse across the yard hollering for Mary.

I laid Jesse on the porch just as Mary opened the door. I noticed Esther and Ruth peering out from behind Mary with shock on their faces. "Snake" was all I said. Mary pushed the girls aside and ran towards the kitchen. I stroked Jesse's forehead.

"You going to be okay, son. You going to be okay."

Mary handed me a small, sharp knife. I pulled up his trousers and made cuts where I saw the two red punctures. I sucked at the cuts and spit out the blood, almost hitting Adam who was panting at the bottom of the steps. Jesse was babbling something about a doe and the shotgun. I couldn't follow him I was so busy getting out the poison. Mary went back inside and returned with a white strip of cloth. In a voice full of terror, she said:

"You've got to take him to that new clinic in town. Right now!"

"Harness Henry," I ordered Adam. I tied the cloth around Jesse's leg. Adam brought the mule around and I set Jesse behind the withers. Mary steadied Jesse while I jumped up behind him. Holding Jesse tight, I beat my heels against Henry's sides and slapped him with a stick that Adam had picked up off the ground and reached up to me. We trotted fast down the hill. At the end of our track, I hit him hard and the mule broke into a gallop. He had never moved this fast in his life. I let him have his head but kept at him with the stick. With my other hand, I gripped Jesse around the stomach. His head lolled back against my chest. He was conscious but getting delirious. He kept repeating:

"I should of shot the doe."

The mule was panting hard and his sides were heaving when we turned onto the county road. I kept pressing him. We hurtled past fields, shacks, woods and the stone-columned entrance to a plantation. I hardly noticed. I just kept mumbling:

"Please stay alive, Jesse. Please hold on."

Farmers stopped work to watch. Two trucks passed us raising dust clouds that stung my eyes. A car sped by in the opposite direction. I waved frantically at them all, hoping for a ride, but no one even slowed down. It must have taken a half hour to get to town. We crossed Scotsman's Creek and then the train tracks a block down from the depot. Traffic was light. Although the road here was paved, there were plenty of potholes; and Henry barely missed a big one. We were in Nigger Town all right. Like lightening, we passed Lulu's — a black folks cafe where white hell-raisers would go when the music was hot.

The houses got bigger — although still needing a coat of paint — and the potholes fewer as we entered the poor white section of town. The gentry lived on the far side of the square, which we rounded shortly — lather coating the mule's forequarters like shaving cream. I spotted the two cannon and the statue of General Lee in front of the columned courthouse. A Confederate flag drooped in the dead air. I hollered at pedestrians; several jumped back, shock and rage exploding in their faces. A police officer leaving the courthouse shouted something and started to run in our direction.

A block past the square, I jerked Henry right onto Hampton Street. The pavement was now smooth as glass. Three blocks down we came to a low concrete building. I had heard that the government had given the county money to help build it. I praised Mr. Roosevelt as I tied the mule to a tree and carried Jesse through the double glass doors. He was still mumbling, but low now, and I couldn't catch a word.

I was in an open space with light-colored walls. Two fans whirled overhead. Three steps led to a polished counter. A nurse with a white cap sat behind the counter reading a magazine. I saw two photographs on the walls as I climbed the steps. I recognized one, Mr. Roosevelt, but not the other. When I reached the counter, I saw several people sitting in a glass-walled room. The nurse looked up; she seemed surprised.

"My boy needs a doctor quick, Ma'am. He's been snake bit."

She said nothing but simply glanced to one side as if that were answer enough. Frantic, I followed her look with my eyes and saw the sign propped on the counter.

WHITES ONLY

"Perhaps you cannot read," she said in a voice as starched as her uniform. "The colored wing is still under construction. It will be located in the rear of the building with its own entrance. In the meantime, you will have to go elsewhere. I believe a colored doctor has set up in town - over in the Negro section."

"But Ma'am," I pleaded, struggling to keep the desperation from my voice. "My boy is like to die if he doesn't see a doctor quick. It was a rattler. You can see for..."

"Boy," a voice behind me commanded. I turned around and saw the officer from the square. He had lean red cheeks and a sharp nose; he had on dark glasses that hid his eyes. Sweat stains spread out from his armpits, and his holster rode low on his hips. "Boy," he repeated. His tone sounded like he should not have to explain such simple matters to a grown man: "Is there something in what Miss Snyder just told you that wasn't perfectly clear?"

"Sheriff, a rattler bit my boy. He needs..."

"Deputy Sheriff, boy, and now get a move on."

My arms were hurting, and I hefted Jesse a little higher. I took one step down towards the deputy and stumbled. He backed up and put his hand on his revolver. I caught myself on the second step. Maybe if he looked at Jesse.

"Deputy, Sir, if you would just..."

"Don't make me take you in, boy."

"No sir," I said. "That won't be necessary."

I moved down the steps. The deputy stepped back to let me pass, his hand still resting on his revolver handle. As I pushed open the glass door with my shoulder, the deputy said:

"That colored doctor: his name is Stevens and he lives across the tracks, a few blocks from the station. Ask anyone over there."

I steadied Jesse against the mule. I climbed onto Henry's back and hoisted Jesse up, the limp weight straining my arms. The deputy watched from behind the glass door.

I had to ask two people. Jesse had stopped mumbling, and I could no longer feel him breathing when I pulled up at the doctor's one-storey house. I slid off the mule and eased Jesse into my arms. The house was as rundown as every other one on the block; but like the others, a trim flower garden had been planted in front of the porch. The steps creaked, and the screen door hung loosely on its hinges. Propping Jesse against my chest, I banged at the door panel. Shortly, a young man in a white shirt and black tie opened the door.

"Are you the doctor?" I cried.

"Right now."

He looked at Jesse, and a shadow crossed his face.

"What happened?"

"He got bit by a rattler. You've got to help him."

"Lay him down."

The doctor knelt by Jesse and lifted his limp wrist. He waved a hand in front of Jesse's eyes and then, without a word, slipped into the house. He returned with an instrument, the name of which I am ignorant. Placing the ends of the tubes in his ears, he pressed the cup against Jesse's chest. After a few seconds, he straightened up.

"I'm sorry, but the boy is dead."

I looked down at Jesse. His eyes were staring at me. If his eyes are open, I foolishly thought, he must be alive. The doctor knelt down and closed Jesse's eyes. Then a picture came to me of James's body dangling from the tree.

"That will be twenty-five cents, please."

I stared at the doctor.

"It isn't easy," said the young man, "for a colored doctor to make a living in this town."

Suddenly I was beating on the doctor's chest and sobbing like a madman.

"There's no place to hide," I gasped, "No place at all."