

I remember that I walked into Grandma's house reluctantly, driven I suspect only by the midsummer heat which was enough to counterbalance my timidity, or as I knew it then, simply fear. A fear which ran static throughout my body, which seemed so infused and woven in every quivering muscle that I thought it might be easier, certainly less painful, to turn and walk home, bearing forever and within me the doubt which only yesterday had been forced upon me.

But now I was about to ask Grandma a question which I thought would be recorded somewhere as a sin, and so it was that there was not only a fear of Grandma and for myself, but also the inordinate fear of sin. As the screen door closed behind me, I noticed that coolness which permeates all Grandmother's houses and in which they live unbothered by the daily nuances of fate.

Out of the semi-darkness I saw Grandma's small and crooked (I would almost say "phantom") form coming toward me. She was already speaking, "Lawd-dee, it is my precious Quentin. I was just now washin* up my little dinner dishes when I heard somebody at the door, and I thought to myself 'who can that be at this time a day?' And here it's you, done come to spend the afternoon with me."

"Yes ma'am," I said, and she kissed me with lips that were old and stale, no longer familiar with kissing.

"Just come on ahead in the kitchen, and I'll fix you up some good, cool lemonade, and we'll go sit a spell or do whatever you want to," she said. There was a warmth, a very deep understanding, in her voice which caused me to wonder if she did not know already why I had come.

^{Grandma}
 "Possib~~le~~, I'd like for us to go out on the porch and talk about something that I do not, nor for all my effort cannot, understand."

"Well, bless yo' heart, honey, you know there's nothing under the shining sun I hadn't rather do. Why, all mornin' long, I've been workin' my fingers to the bone on that garden, and I am near exhausted. Old Tom, you remember Old Tom who ploughs and helps tend, he fell down dead to the ground back durin' the winter. He was just as fine a nigger as ever walked God's earth, but I reckon he finally just gave out like your Grandpa Jack."

She was sitting now with her hands quietly cupped on her thighs; quietly, for the years of constant work uninterrupted except for sleep and the occasional respite provided by Sunday--the Lord's day--had seemed to still the life there. It is true the blood now ran in those hands, yet there was something black like death about them, and the fattened, protruding veins seemed only as gutters draining the blood from them. She reached to her head to return a strayed shred of hair to its place in the haphazard arrangement, and just as she touched the hair her hand jerked fast as though in afterthought she felt it unnecessary to be bothered with the movement.

Grandma was old, and old seventy-nine, and her movements were slow and deliberate like those of a mule, but her thought was not sterile, not some vacuous rambling---it was the reflection of happiness. It ^{even} seemed that only when one had lived, suffered and inflicted, loved and been loved, only then could one rest placidly in his loneliness, remembering those certain and isolated joys. It was as though life were a great symphony of cacophonous and accidental events paradoxically followed by a prelude of loneliness.

Shifting her weight to one side, Grandma pushed herself free and out of the chair, saying, "Come on Quentin, let's go sit where it's cool. First, let me get your lemonade though."

"Oh yes ma'am, I'd like that," I stuttered for I was still uncertain that I had the courage, or audacity as it then seemed, to ask her. But there was a lazy, free-footed gaiety between us as we walked without speaking to the porch. And, the galss of lemonade had begun to trickle the cooled sweat of the melting ice over my hand, so small and unsure, perhaps trembling.

I skipped to the ~~w~~ swing which, for years, had been ^ssuspended restively but enduringly by the same rusted, foreboding chains. Perhaps part of the attraction of the swing for everyone was in fact the mystery of its endurance and the dare, the inevitability of its falling sometime from under someone. Grandma sat half-facing me, her attention directed mostly to the violently purple crepe myrtle.

"Grandma, what I have to tell you about is something this boy told me yesterday," I said and swallowed hard, wondering if I could come to recognize, much less repeat, what Mike had said.

"You just take your time, and we'll straighten whatever it is out," Grandma assured me as she turned her chair to face me.

I did not know how to look into her eyes. They were grey or perhaps a kind of green that is common but still unrecognized as green, and there was a dullness, an invisibility about them that reminded me of dishwater ~~wh~~ which is almost opaque but through which there is still the evanescent, refracted form of a knife.

But more importantly there was a strangeness in the way Grandma's eyes would not be together when she looked at me. I could not understand this until later when I waved to her from the sidewalk. She did not wave to me; she could not see me.

~~Grandma said~~

"Grandma, anyway, my friend, Mike, and I were playing yesterday like we always do. Only he told me that Daddy was not really my Daddy. He said that my Daddy was tortured and shot by the Germans, and Momma had married this other man, this other man who is my real Daddy. He's got to be my Daddy, Grandma; I know he is. He is my Daddy because last night I prayed for a long time and told God that I knew he was, but still Mike...." There were tears burning my eyes as though the acidic vapor of a long-held and dangerous secret had suddenly risen before and into them, and I could no longer see Grandma. I wanted her sitting beside me so that I could slip my hand into hers for I knew that then I would not cry, not be a sissie.

I felt her arm pulling me against her and smelled what is describable not as clean or fresh like a towel but only as old and still living. Grandma said, "You just go ahead and get it out of your system. And don't you think there's anything wrong with a little cryin', 'cause I've seen big ol' strong, strappin' nigger men cryin' like babies. You rest your head on my shoulder and I'll tell you all about what your friend meant, 'though he didn't mean no harm."

"Grandma, it's true, it's true what he said. I can tell the way you're talking and by how tight you're squeezzing me," I said, thinking immediately that she might loosen the embrace, and knowing

that if she did for even a second, then I would surely die in that infinitude. But Grandma held me tightly as a child does his first puppy when he would hold it vehemently, wishing to crush it within the small arms whose clasp the puppy knew, though, unmistakably as a ruthless and insatiable love, not power.

"Now you just calm down easy, and I'll tell you about him," she said strongly. "His name was John Quincy Mallory. You don't have his name because Celeste married again, married the man who is your Daddy now, just before you were born. John would come over to court your Momma before they got married. I remember he laughed very quiet and polite-like, and didn't say a whole lot, but you always knew he meant whatever it was he was a-talkin' about. And John, he was tall, as tall as that nearest flowerbed is long. If there is one thing that reminds me of yo' Daddy and how he was quiet and strong and tall, it's the ocean. Now I ain't sayin' I'm no expert on the ocean, mind you, because I have seen it only onest, but that is what I think of."

"Grandma, I just don't understand why he had to die, though. If he was a good man and gentle, I just don't see why God decided to take him away from Momma and me."

Her face changed; it was grey and lifeless and lined. I suspected that it was wrong of me to mention God or death, because they were imponderable words, words of sorrow for Grandpa Jack had, himself, died too suddenly, inexplicably. It was then, though, that I saw a brightness in Grandma's good eye. It was like a flicker of light, it seemed to be candlelight, on the water of a deep and black well; like the Negroes' faces which were not black, but almost silver and reflective with an alien radiance, when they would be walking home from church on a Sunday night.

"My little Quentin," she said softly and distantly, "I don't know if you can understand this a-tall because I've lived a lot of years and ~~im~~ain't sure myself that I understand it. Yet, they is things I reckon we ain't exactly inclined to understand. I've come to believe that what Brother Waters preaches about God snatchin' us up whenever He thinks the time is right, and us ascendin' to the throne of the Almighty Himself may not be how it is. It seems to me that God just gives us our one and sole life, and expects us to do with it the best we can and no more. There is no rhyme or reason to the way we die. Why, it just happens in different ways to different people, the same as animals dies different ways. I've always thought myself, I've thought, *Someday I will lay down, lay down at night, and not wake up in the mo'nin'.* So you see I caint tell you why John died in the War, but I do know there ain't an ounce of truth in that torturin' business."

I took her hand, because she had told me all I wanted or needed to hear, and leaned to kiss her on the forehead. It was the first time I had ever really wanted to kiss anyone. "Grandma, I guess I'd better go home now because supper's ready and they're probably worrying about me. I want you to know I appreciate whay you've told me. Grandma, I love you."

"Well, you are the sweetest thing in this world, honey. And you know you're welcomed to stay and I'll fix us up a little bite to eat."

"No ma'am; I'd best be going home."

"Do come back just any afternoon, 'cause I do so enjoy seein' you," Grandma said, and I could sense the loneliness in her voice. "Oh, and you remember to tell Celeste and your Daddy I said hello."

"Yes ma'am, I will," I said and thought as I walked on the now cool sidewalk that this had been a good afternoon. I thought how Momma would have supper waiting for me, and that I loved her, and especially my Daddy, who would be reading the newspaper so that he could tell us what had happened.