

" Water man. Don' you smell it. You standin' by a whole river of it stupid. "

Eugene sniffed the air. " Yeah, Yeah, I think I can smell it. "

" See, we didn't have to ~~xxx~~ no runnin back der, but I figure dat you wants to get to dat river fast as you can, so I figure runnin is de best way to get der, if you want to git der fast. "

" I guess you is right, but boy is I tired. "

" Jus' on de other side of them trees, dat's where it is. We have to kinda climb down a cliff, but dat ain't hard. Den once we get down der we'll swim out to a island dat I know of dat ain't nothin' but sand, where der ain't no mocaasins o' any other snakes. "

" Der snakes down here? "

" Ders snakes everywhere in Alabama, I 'spect. Dis river's got it share of'm. But der ain't none out der at dat island. We'll go out der an get out close off an take a good swim an cool off. I can get dis shoat clegned up and get dis blood off me. We can even sleep down here if you got a mind to, o' if you got a mind to, we go up to dat ol' house jus' up de river from here. "

" Well, if dat island's what you say it is, we nies well stay der — dat is if der ain't no snakes. "

The cliff was just on the other side of the trees. Eugene stopped behind Harold and waited for him to choose the best possible descent. Eugene followed him as he walked twenty yards along the edge of the cliff.

" Here, " Harold said.

" Here? " Eugene said. " Why, man, your crazy. Dat's a hunerd feet down der. "

" Hell, it ain't even fifty feet. Besides, we got vines here, just like havin' ropes. What more could you ask for. Here, you hold de shoat an' I'll go first. Den you can drop de shoat down where I can see it. "

Harold did not wait for an answer. He put the dead pig on the ground and disappeared into the tangles of grape vines. Harold was on the ground when the vines stopped shaking.

" OK, throw de shoat. "

Eugene leaned over the edge. He could see nothing. Infact he couldn't even see the river. He could see the tops of trees which rose from the river bank below but that was all.

" Where do you want it? I can't even see you. "

" Jus' drop it straight down. I'll get it. "

" Eugene picked up the bloody carcass and heaved it over the side. It was quite heavy and it must have been a terrific burden to Harold. There was a new feeling of admiration for that boy, inspite of this evening's blunders. Hell, they weren't caught were they. Things could still be worse.

" Hey up der! Is you comin' o' is I got to come up der an carry you down. "

" Sit still! I'm comin'."

They had stopped under another pecan grove. They had run nearly a mile. It was dark where they were, for the gigantic trees rose over them like a huge blanket blotting out the moonlight and leaving only patches of stars. Hidden up in the trees Katydid's made soft yet clear, crystalline chirping noises from behind the leaves and below, in the weeds the crickets answered slowly, methodically.

"I got blood all over myself," said Harold, disgusted.

"We can't do nothin' 'bout dat now."

"Der's a river not mo'n a mile from here an' der's an old house dat's kinda fallen down. We could stay der and sleep till past daylight."

"What about de shoat?"

"We'll cook it's head an' sell de rest."

"Sell it?"

"Hell yes," Harold said. "You ain't dumb 'nough to think we's gonna eat it? Dis close to de Fourth?"

"Why not. If'n we stole it, we's got to eat it. It ain't right to sell it. Dat makes us no better'n"

"It makes us dumb shits."

We left that night because we knew we wouldn't get permission to go. It must a been past midnight when I met Harold at the road. He had two covers for us to sleep on, a couple of cans of food with some bread wrapped up and he had a lantern too. I asked him why he had a lantern when it was so moonbright on the road.

" It was down by de ol' Tomaston station an' I jus' took it, " he said. " We got to have some light to frighten away dem bears. "

I guess I felt the same way when Harold mentioned the bears. In the last couple of years a bunch of them had been seen around in these parts. Harold was almost jumped on by one of them one day a few months back when he was chopping wood.

" Here, " Harold said. He handed me one of the blankets that he had wrapped up and tied with a rope which made a strap so dat de blanket fit over my shoulders like a pack. " Here, " he said again and he handed me the lantern. " You take dis, cause I go de food, an' watch dat no Kerosene spill out. It took me nearly an hour to get some. "

We walked down the road for about a mile. Harold was ahead of me by a hundred feet or so. Suddenly he stopped and stood looking at the woods till I go to where he was standing. He was quiet for nearly a minute, just having a good time bein' mysterious. I jus' stood der an' watched 'em waitin' fo' him t' say somthin'. Harold was younger dan me by almost a year but he was jus' about half a foot taller dan me. He was over six foot tall an' he was jus' fifteen. He was too skinny.

" In here, " Harold said.

" In der? " I said. " Why dat's nothing but trees an' woods, full of rattlers an' stuff. "

Harold didn't seem to hear me. He jus' ^{hurry} charged right into dem woods with me followin' him. It wasn't no time befo' we was out of de woods, standin in a peanut field. Harold was black but he was shinnin' in the moonlight. Harold pointed across the field.

" Ovah der, " he said. We save five, maybe six miles if we go dat way. Der ain't too many houses with dogs either. "

" How do you know all dis stuff? " I said.

" I been here before, " he said, then started walkin' accross the field an' me followin' him.

I can't tell you how long it took Harold an me to walk dem five o' six miles. Walkin across new plowed dirt can make on mile seem like two. And dem dogs. We had to watch out fo' dem an' sneak by 'em when we got near a house o' we might get bit an' shot at de same time fo' shoat stealers. Harold said dat we had only less dan a mile to go before we~~g~~ got to a place where he knew was a spot tp hole up till mornin. We were walking along a fence line now, an I was tryin' my best to keep up with Harold. My feet were sure sore. Suddenly Harold stopped again.

" Dis place bad," he said. Ders 'bout five o six dogs here. "

" Hell, man, lets not put our tails in de' fire. I don't mind walkin around dis field to get by dem dogs. "

" Shut up, " he said. He was lookin' over de fence. I

Harold turned and grabbed my shoulder an looked me right in de eyes. Der was sweat all over his face and his eyes was shinin' in de moonlight. He was kinda shakin' and breathin' hard at de same time.

" Don't make no more sounds. Too riskey, " he said. " Too close to de fourth of July. "

" What? " I said, but I already understood 'em.

I followed 'em over de fence and we both crawled across de groun' until we reached another fence. I could smell de pigs den. I didn't say nothin'.

" Now don' make no noise. Could be dat farmer's sittin up der in dat barn waitin fo' us with a gun. "

It was den dat I noticed de barn. Don't know why I didn't see it before but der it was an old place, half fallin down. You could see de moonlight shinin' through de was and glitterin off of de roof. I didnt follow Harold. His hand held me back when I tried to cross with him.

" Wait, " he said. Then I saw his knife blade flash and he was down over de other side of de fence.

De weather was with us even if de moon was out. Der wasn't no wind and de stink of de pig~~s~~ would cover up our smell so de dogs would catch on to us — mabe. I stayed on de groun' and watched from de other side of de fence. I could see harold kickin up dust in de moonlight. Der was silence fo' a long time and Harold disappeared in de shadows by de barn. Den I heard a screech and den silence and den de dogs were barkin'.

Harold come jumpin' over de fence; he got de shoat under his arm. "Run!" he says. An' I run as fast as I can, but I can't keep up with Harold. Then I hear the dogs barkin' slow at first and then fast, an' furious. Harold jumped the fence again and ran across a pecan tree orchard behind the barn. I climbed o'er the fence and went runnin' after him. There was another fence an' I was climin' over it when I hears dis noise up in de barn, den I hears dis man yellin'!

"You Goddamned Niggers!"

I was runnin down the hill a few yards behind Harold when I heard the shot. I got hit before I could git outta de way. I felt a sting in my ear. It musta hit Harold harder dan me. He jumped straight up in de air but landed on his feet an still kept runnin'. He wern't slowed none. I was runnin up de hill when de second shot came. It hit our legs but jus' kind o' stung. Harold musta seen dat fence couse I didn't it hit my legs and flipped me over on de other side where I hit my head on something. It was a tombstone. I think I screamed as I got up but I hit another stone and dis time I knock it o'er which really scares me. I am runnin even harder now tryin to watch the tombstones an' I hit de fence on de other side of the grave yard and flip over it too.

"Over here," yelled Harold.

We were under trees now and it was all dark. I ran towards Harold's voice watchin the pine trees as I run. I see Harold and we both take out down the hill until we hit a pond where ders a million frogs singin' and makin' things real scarry, but were still runnin. We put dem trees behind us and came to a crick which we swum accross. We kept runnin til we couldn't run no more.

Harold come jumpin' over de fence. " Run, " he said

They had stopped in a pecan grove to catch their breath, to examine their wounds, after nearly a mile of hard running. It was dark where they were. The ancient ~~xxxx~~ trees rose over them like a huge blanket blotting out the moonlight, leaving only patches of stars. Katydid's, hidden up in the dark foliage made soft, yet clear crystalline chirping noises and below in the dry weeds crickets answered slowly, methodically.

" Ya git it bad, Harold? "

" No, don't think so. It hurts though. "

" I think I'm bleedin' ". "

" Where? "

" It's my ear. I think I gots a beebee in it. "

" We'll fix it at de river. "

" Oh no. How far do we gots to go to git der? "

" Don' worry hit only a mile, maybe not even dat far. . . . "

" Why you whisperin'? You bleedin' too harold? "

" Don't get all worried an' nervous. De only blood's I got on m e is shoat blood, an' I'll get dat off at de river. It's not mor'n a mile o' two from here an' ders an old house dat's kinda fallen down. We can stay der an' sleep even till past daylight if we gots a mind too. But we better get a movin if we gonna reach der in time to get a good sleep. "

" Dat ain't why you want's to get der quick, is it harold? Is dat farmer gonna be chasin' us? "

" Hell no, man. Don't get all worried I daid. Come on let git. "

Harold seemed to know the way perfectly. He led his companion through the grove out across a peanut field to a dirt road. They followed the road to where it turned off ~~at~~ a gravel pit, then they walked around the perimeter of the pit, entered a patch of woods and came out on a dirt crossroads. They were standing by a small school house. Across the road was a white washed negro church.

" We could bed down der at de church, but dat might be kinda riskey an anyways we almost at de river now so it don't make no diffunce. "

" Jus' how far is we from dat river? "

" If you listen good you can almost hear it. "

" You can't hear no river at dis time of de year. "

" Dis is a mighty big river, anyways don't get nervous. Man you is de most nervous person dat I ever seen. "

" Well 'scuse me if I happen t'be a little shook about gettin' shot up. I jus' ain't used to gettin' a shotgun turned on me. "

" Jus' don't worry, man. Everything's all right now. "

The two boys took the road that turned to the left and followed it through a hilly stand of timber, then out to level, treeless ground, a cotton field.

" It's jus' on de other side of dis field, " Harold said, " We ain't got far to go now. "

But Eugene was not consoled. He couldn't even see the other side of the field.

" Jus' how far does dis feild go? "

" Not far, " said Harold, " Bot hardly far at all. "

The two were half way across the field when a dog just off the side of the road began barking loudly. Eugene looked to Harold.

" Dis way, " Harold said. Both of them turned off the side of the road and started running out across the rows ^{and} of cotton. The moon must have set for it was darker out in the field. There were moments when Eugene thought he was lost. He had to stop and listen for the sound of Harold's legs rasping through the high cotton plants, then he ran for the sound. Harold was not far ahead. Behind them the two boys could see a light, but as they covered more ground the light seemed to get smaller and smaller, then disappear altogether. Harold was the first to notice this. He stopped running and waited for Eugene to catch up. Eugene was running so hard that he almost ran past, but Harold reached out, grabbed his shirt and yanked him back.

" It's Ok, It's OK, " Harold said.

" Eugene just looked at him with frightened, uncomprehending eyes.

" Don' worry. He ain't after us. It's an ol' nigger dat lives in a cabin right off de side of de road where dat dog was barkin'. Dat sumbitch is mean as hell. Shoot any man at night — white or black, don' make no diffunce to dat sumbitch. But he too old to chase out across no cotton field. " Harold laughed.

Eugene hjust stpod there breathing hard, too tired or too mad to say anything. Then Harold looked up and sniffed the air.

" Smell it? " he said.

" Smell what? "