

The Good Morrow

Richard G. Patterson

Royal Garden Press
Los Angeles

Cover photograph courtesy of
Jim Wegryn
www.jimwegryn.com

© 2007 Richard G. Patterson
135 S Medio Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90049
richard@rgpost.com

ISBN-13: 978-2475006305
ISBN-10: 2475006307

*To
Judith
The Love of My Life*

Chapter 1

April 1978

It was a beautiful day for a funeral. The puffy white clouds on the horizon only served to intensify the blue of the sky above, and a gentle breeze filled the air with smell of honeysuckle. The earth from the grave seemed moist and rich as though it was yearning to have something planted in it. The plastic grass had been rolled up and put away to one side.

If it had been legal, Bubba would have had them bury The Old Man without a coffin. He knew The Old Man would have liked that. At least he was able to get rid of the plastic grass. One of the benefits of being bereaved is that people don't hassle you too much. They might try to sell you a bill of goods going in, but if you have specific instructions they're not about to create a stink.

The sun was raising beads of sweat on the gleaming forehead of The Reverend Mr. Wilcox, and he saw no reason to mince words.

“In the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother Winston; and we commit his body to the ground...”

Bubba had to smile. If there was any sure and certain hope shared by this gathering, it was probably the contrary. The image of Old Man Abernathy rising from his grave to resume his place among them was more than anyone would care to contemplate. Even he himself had to acknowledge that every shovelful of dirt was going to lighten the burden he had carried for some sixty-odd years.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious unto him, the Lord lift up his countenance upon him and give him peace. Amen.”

Amen. The Old Man had probably never felt an ounce of peace or contentment during the whole 103 years he had walked the earth. Bubba was sure he had come out kicking and screaming; and judging from the look on his face when Bubba had pulled the sheet up over him, it was clear that he never intended to let go. He had a strangle hold on whatever demon he had been wrestling all his life, and he was taking him down with him.

Bubba felt it surging up inside him again like it had that night. Maybe if he knew how to cry, he could flush a lot of garbage out of his soul; but he knew it would subside. Even that night he hadn't actually shed tears. He

had been overwhelmed, and his insides had dissolved; but none of it had leaked out. You don't cry real tears in a dream - even at your father's deathbed.

Sister Sarah had been sitting on the other side of the bed reading aloud from the Bible as though the cryptic hallucinations of St. John would somehow ease the pain with which The Old Man passed from senility to oblivion. Bubba got up to see what the racket was in the hall and almost lost his temper when he discovered it was Lydia with her kerosene lamp.

"For Godssake, Lydia, put that thing away. It's bad enough without your trying to burn the place down."

Bubba turned on the hall lights and went back into the bedroom leaving Lydia frozen by the glare of modern civilization. She maintained her regal bearing and held her lamp aloft while her mind did battle with Chaos. Gradually her eyes adjusted well enough to block out all the irrelevant details, and she was able to recall who she was and to resume her vigil.

Under any other circumstances Bubba would never have turned on the light. He would have just let her be or perhaps even guided her down the stairs to make sure she didn't hurt herself. But the prospect of his father's death had gotten the best of him.

"And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters. With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth

have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns."

The preposterousness of this litany was more than he could bear, and Bubba would have said something rude to Sister Sarah had not he noticed the look on The Old Man's face. He was dead. He had been dying for twenty years, but now he was dead. Between the time when he had gotten up to go out into the hall and now The Old Man had changed from a person to a corpse without altering his appearance in the least. Bubba couldn't even have said how he knew, but he knew.

Sister Sarah kept right on reading as Bubba pulled the sheet over The Old Man's face. There was no indication that she had received any data whatsoever from the external world, but Bubba knew that somewhere in her heart she had once again assimilated the most unacceptable fact of life.

II

Ruthie arrived at Bellevue Plantation just in time for the funeral. The place was even more of a mess that she had remembered it. The grounds were totally overgrown. What had once been a formal garden now looked like a jungle, and the vines pawing at all sides of the house made it seem as though the swamp would swallow the

whole place in another couple of years. How anyone could live in a place like this was beyond her.

She tripped on a loose step as Bubba came out onto the porch to greet her, and she was glad she didn't have time before the funeral to sit around with all her crazy relatives pretending she was sorry The Old Man had died. It had been a long drive, and she hated funerals; so it was going to be a real test of her endurance to see just how much she could take of these lunatics today. They all seemed to have crawled out of the woodwork for the occasion. Lydia was there with that look in her eyes. At least someone had put a relatively clean dress on her today. And Sister Sarah with that creepy smile that comes from being too intimate with Jesus, fanning herself and looking as though she couldn't wait for Sunday school to start. And Hiram, or The Colonel as he preferred, who'd never seen a sober day since he washed out of boot camp in 1925, reeking as usual of corn whisky and unearned perspiration. And Jack, whose sole contribution to Western civilization was the refurbishing of the still which the servants used to keep The Colonel and themselves well oiled. Even Little Lee had shown up with that thing from Brooklyn with the hairy armpits who was supposed to be his girlfriend. And of course there was the ringmaster, Bubba, who at least gave the appearance of being capable of rational thought; although even the most casual perusal of his behavior since he retired from the bench would easily serve to dispel any such illusions.

It didn't help matters that her husband, William, professed to find all her relatives such entertaining company. She knew for a fact that he could spend hours talking to the gorillas when he took the children to the zoo - which was probably why he was good at selling insurance, but it didn't help in dealing with her family.

III

At lunch after the funeral Ruthie found herself sandwiched in between Jack and Sister Sarah while William continued his "conversation" with Lee and Kathleen across the table. She decided the only thing to do was to eat up - Jesse did know how to fry chicken - and jabber away just like everybody else.

"I really can't tell y'all how relieved I am to know that our Graham will be going to Castle Heights next year. Pass the butter, will you, Lee. I just couldn't bear the thought of his being subjected to public school."

"Hogwash."

She chose to ignore the Colonel's comment on the assumption that it was addressed more to the world in general than to her in particular. Lee laughed and choked on his biscuit while Bubba started the rice around again.

Ruthie realized that she was immune to her relatives now that The Old Man was buried. The whole charade of being an Abernathy could cease. No more hideous Thanksgiving dinners, no more impossible Christmas shopping, no more forcing her children to play up to grotesque old women, no more summer vacations wasted

in this sweltering compost heap. Her plans no longer hinged on the whimsy of a capricious and senile old patriarch. All she would have to do from now on was deal with Bubba. While he might be out to lunch in a lot of ways, at least he was not willful and autocratic the way The Old Man was. If anything Bubba's biggest problem was his lack of determination and his amenability - traits which Ruthie could easily steer in her direction. All she had to do was to take things gradually one step at a time, and she was sure she would be able to persuade Bubba that the land ought to be put to some good use. He would never bother to do it on his own, so she knew she would be instrumental in it; and everyone would benefit. The figures that she came up with after her talks with the people at Syncom or C.D.C. staggered her imagination. Her children would have the best of everything; and, if she handled the whole thing properly, she would become a major player in the South, someone to be reckoned with rather than just the wife of another member of the Beneficial Mutual Million Dollar Club.

IV

After lunch everyone adjourned to the living room for the reading of the will. Bubba took his place behind the card table which had been set up at one end of the room in an effort to give him some air of authority. Lee and Kathleen settled into the sofa next to Aunt Lydia as Lee began filling a corncob pipe with pot from a plastic baggie. Ruthie made a quick pass at freshening up her

make-up and brushed some cornbread crumbs off William's coat sleeve.

Bubba removed two rumpled pages of illegible scrawl from a manila envelope and began reading in his best courtroom voice.

"I, Winston Weatherford Abernathy, being of sound mind and ..."

Lee coughed in the middle of a long toke on his pipe - a reaction probably to The Old Man's claim more than the quality of the stuff he was smoking. Bubba glanced up over the top of his reading glasses and abandoned his attempt to decipher every word in the will.

"Etcetera, etcetera ... do hereby make my last will and testament. To my eldest son, Hiram, I leave six barrels of sour mash hidden in the basement."

The bequest may or may not have penetrated The Colonel's haze. Ruthie was relieved, although she was not surprised. The Old Man had never succumbed to any doubts about the worthlessness of his first offspring.

"To my youngest son, Wilbur, I leave my gold pocket watch."

Bubba looked up from the papers with what seemed to be a look of genuine pride and delight. Lee jumped on the bandwagon and flashed him a big thumbs up. Ruthie seemed to feel the deck creaking a little.

She usually assumed that the bulk of the estate would be left to Bubba since he was the only one who had survived childhood at Bellevue well enough to function effectively in the real world.

To my daughter, Sarah, I leave the family Bible; and to my daughter, Lydia, I leave my mother's rocking chair."

Ruthie couldn't believe that The Old Man was sophisticated enough to set up a trust with his will, but it had occurred to her that he might be so absent minded that he would just forget to leave the real estate to anyone in particular.

"To my nephew, Jack, I leave the steam tractor."

"Hot damn!" Jack's eyes lit up as he squirmed around in his seat smiling from ear to ear. Lee and Kathleen could appreciate the form of his enthusiasm if not the content, and Lee raised his corncob pipe in a salute to his good fortune.

"To my grand nephew, Lee, I leave all my clothes; except for my underwear, which is to be burned."

"Far out." Lee put his arm around Kathleen and leaned back proudly as though the acquisition of The Old Man's wardrobe bestowed upon him the irrevocable status of Southern Gentleman with all the rights and privileges attendant thereto.

"To my faithful servant, Jesse, I leave one rifle and one shotgun of his choosing in the hope that he will put them to good use. And to my grandniece, Ruth ..."

Bubba seemed to be having trouble with The Old Man's handwriting again. He held the pages up close to his glasses and turned them sideways a bit.

Ruthie thought she saw him glancing at her over the edge of the papers and suspected that the real reason he held the paper up closer to his face was to hide a smile

as he deliberately taunted her. He knew perfectly well that she had hopes about the disposition of the estate, although only in her wildest fantasies did she think that The Old Man could have known that she was the only relative capable of taking charge of the property. Sometimes she had sensed from a look in his eye that The Old Man recognized in her the same strength of will with which he had ruled Bellevue Plantation for over 85 years, but she had never let herself really believe that he might actually turn the place over to her directly.

“I leave twenty-five jars of blackberry preserves.”

This felt like a slap in the face which Bubba administered gleefully on behalf of The Old Man, but Ruthie just smiled sweetly as though she thought it was cute and waited anxiously to hear the rest. There couldn't be much more since Bubba seemed to be at the bottom of the second page. The Old Man had probably just forgotten about the plantation, which meant there might have to be some legal proceedings, but at least she was mentioned in the will on a par with all the other relatives so it shouldn't be too hard.

“The rest of my possessions including Bellevue Plantation and whatever revenue it yields I leave to my long lost grand-nephew, Stephen Foster Abernathy ...”

A gasp escaped from Ruthie's mouth before she could stop it.

“On the condition that he not sell the plantation and that its doors shall always be open to as many of my relatives as the house can physically accommodate.”

William laughed out loud, but he was quickly silenced by a glare from Ruthie.

Bubba put the pages down on the table with a gesture of finality as though that was all there was to it and he was quite satisfied with the will. Sister Sarah felt moved by the Spirit.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.”

Sister Sarah’s ministrations enabled Ruthie to regain her composure. She spoke to Bubba as though her only concern were the welfare of the family.

“Do you think there’ll be any problems probating the will?”

Bubba took her question at face value, but Ruthie felt sure he was laughing at her.

“No. Everything seems to be in order.”

He turned the pages over and examined them as though the physical condition of the paper on which the will was written had some bearing on its legality.

Ruthie tried to appear pleased, and she checked her desire to get up and walk out of the room. She settled back in her chair and whispered to William.

“We’re spending Easter vacation here.”

“I thought we were going to Disney World.”

“The children will have more fun here.”

Chapter 2

I

Stephen Foster Abernathy was the only child of Josiah and Maude Gallagher Abernathy. Joe had been killed in action in Korea in 1952 when Foster was just a baby, and by all accounts Maude was ill suited to motherhood, not to mention the strain of being widowed so early in life. Most of the time she deposited Foster with Joe's relatives at Bellevue Plantation while she gallivanted all over the South burning up her health along with her inheritance. The little time she spent with Foster was devoted to filling his head with impossibly romantic ideas about The South. Once or twice before she really began to go downhill, she took him with her to garden parties in Charleston or Savannah, but the idea he had of her life, just like the image he had of his father as a dashing officer, was purely a fantasy derived from his mother's desperate attempts to shield both of them from reality. During his freshman year at Woodbury Forest prep school Foster happened to see some old newsreels of the Korean War.

The images of soldiers trudging through the snow in a pathetic retreat while medics administered transfusions to hopelessly maimed men being loaded onto helicopters haunted him for months and created the first real tear in the paper castle his mother had constructed for him to live in. The fact that she had already been admitted to a sanitarium by that time and refused to let him visit her had somehow been incorporated into his understanding of the world, but the frontal assault represented by these newsreels was more than he could deal with, especially when they were followed shortly by an unending barrage of images from Vietnam. Foster retreated further into the realms of mythology and mysticism, casting himself in the role of Southern Writer with some encouragement from his English teachers and a great deal of help from every possible form of hallucinogenic drug, which he ingested in large quantities during his senior year. News of his mother's death caused him to do an about face, and he managed to get himself accepted at Virginia Military Institute where, of course, he lasted about three weeks; and that was the last that anyone had seen or heard of him.

II

The sun was barely up, and the ground glistened with dew as Uncle Jack made his way across the grounds behind the mansion at Bellevue towards a large dilapidated shed. He dragged open the door, which had probably been closed for at least twenty years; and the morning

light streamed into the shed. An animal of some sort scurried away into the shadows, and the frantic flapping of birds' wings filled the rafters. Dust rose into the air giving palpable shape to the light pouring through the door.

Jack stood at the doorway like a priest preparing to enter the sanctuary. Inside a massive iron wheel stood revealed in the light, emblematic of a time when machinery was an heroic achievement forged by fire and muscle rather than an alien and insidious mutant spawned by a host of other machines. In the shadows beyond the wheel loomed the awe-inspiring shape of a gigantic steam powered tractor.

Jack entered the shed and approached the machine with all due reverence. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw that it was covered with all manner of dirt and dust and cobwebs and leaves and bird nests and rust. Gradually the rapturous awe with which he gazed upon this newfound object of devotion gave way to the excitement of planning his attack. He circled the tractor, gingerly removing a twig here or a leaf there and visually assessing the damage done by time and neglect to the brass or iron or wooden surfaces. A lifetime of tinkering with junk from countless garages and tool sheds had perfectly prepared him for this moment. He pulled out his pocketknife and scraped away the dirt and rust from one spot on the side of the boiler in order to check the condition of the metal. Satisfied with his preliminary inspection, he folded up the knife and stepped back to contemplate

the overall picture once again before embarking on his methodical and unhurried restoration of the tractor to its former glory.

A car horn startled him, and he turned to see Bubba's car in the driveway.

"It'll never get off the ground."

"I'll have her plowing fields long before you find Foster in Charleston."

III

Bubba laughed and waved as he drove off towards the road. Jack was probably right. He didn't have the foggiest notion where Foster was, but there was something about the idea of playing private investigator that he couldn't resist. Part of it was The Old Man's hold on him even from beyond the grave. They will be done. Part of it too was his suspicion that Ruthie was cooking up some scheme by which she could get her hands on the property, and he wanted to cut her off at the pass. And part of it was his feelings for Foster. He remembered him mostly as a lonely child with a vivid imagination and lots of energy who was always running around the place leading a cavalry charge or slaying dragons. Bubba's work had kept him away from Bellevue much of the time in those days, and he felt a lingering sense of loss associated with Foster. Maybe if Bubba had been able to play a more active role in his upbringing, Foster could have been spared some of the problems he had at school. Foster was the son Bubba had never had, but even more than that Fos-

ter was the enthusiasm of youth which Bubba had never really felt.

He started with the selective service records. Bubba had always assumed that the main reason no one ever heard from Foster after he dropped out of V.M.I. was that Foster was too busy dodging the draft. He was surprised to learn that Foster had registered and had been declared 4F a couple of months after he left school. They no longer had any records indicating the nature of Foster's particular disability, but it wasn't hard for Bubba to conjure up a scene in which Foster had put the fear of God into the members of his local draft board by preaching the gospel according to Ho Chi Minh and LSD.

He had less luck with the Department of Motor Vehicles. Foster had never bothered to renew his first driver's license and had never had a car registered in his name. His record was clean with the Charleston police - unless, of course, he was one of the protestors booked for vagrancy under the name of Mahatma Gandhi, Napoleon Bonaparte or Gustav Mahler after a demonstration in 1971. A visit to the central branch of the Charleston public library produced, along with a lesson in the mass production of red tape, the fact that one Stephen F. Abernathy had two books which were seven years overdue. They were *Earth and Gods* by Vincent Vycinas, and *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross. Bubba paid for the books in Foster's behalf and jotted all the information down on his legal pad - although he felt that

any self-respecting private eye would have used the back of a laundry ticket instead.

The newspaper morgue had nothing on any Abernathy since Maude's death except a clipping about his own retirement. It was obvious that public records were not going to lead him to Foster. He was going to have to go around talking to people until he stumbled upon someone who had known Foster. The only photo he had of Foster was from a prep school yearbook, which Bubba found in a box of things Foster had left at Bellevue the summer before he entered V.M.I. He doubted he would recognize Foster if he bumped into him on the street, but at the same time he suspected there was something about the look in Foster's eyes in the photo that someone might recognize.

Bubba had browsed through the box of souvenirs and odd and ends in hope of getting some kind of lead, but most of it refused to tell him anything. The yearbook gave Bubba the impression that Foster was a bit out of it, and it wasn't hard for him to imagine Foster deliberately cultivating an image of himself as an eccentric loner as a way of dealing with the fact that he was awkward socially. There was one note from a girl in the box, which Bubba could hardly bring himself to read. Her name was Jane, and there was no envelope or return address. She seemed to be saying goodbye forever as only a teenager can, and Bubba just hoped she wasn't pregnant.

So armed only with his legal pad and a twelve year old photo, Bubba began making daily treks into Charles-

ton and Savannah in search of the heir to the throne. The less progress he made, the more obsessed he became. He left behind all the shyness which had characterized his own dealings with society for sixty years and found himself accosting perfect strangers on the street or in the midst of their work. He listened to more irrelevant discourses and hard luck stories than in all his years as a circuit judge, and he wore out the transmission in his car. But he kept on looking.

Something told Bubba that Foster had to be in Charleston or Savannah. Or perhaps it was just that he knew there would be no retrieving him from anywhere else. If the search for transcendental wisdom had led Foster as far astray as New York or California, there would be no hope of rehabilitating him even if he could find him. But Bubba felt certain that Foster's roots were too firmly embedded in the South for him to live anywhere else. Maude had seen to that - and her map of The South encompassed only a relatively small area surrounding Charleston and Savannah, though at times she bestowed begrudging recognition on enclaves in Virginia and Louisiana.

Sergeant Ellis of the Salvation Army in Charleston was the first person to respond to Foster's photo. He recalled someone who used to attend their Sunday night suppers and sing hymns with an unusually robust voice, but he could not recall his name; and he feared that he had long since abandoned the straight and narrow path. Bubba assured him that the problem was congenital and

ought in no way to be viewed as a reflection on the effectiveness of his mission.

The rabbi at a synagogue had an even more vivid recollection of Foster's participation in High Holy Day services for several years running. He felt that under different circumstances Foster could have had the makings of a fine cantor. Even though Foster admittedly had his own distinct style of Hebrew pronunciation, it was clear that he sang from the heart and that the litany had some very special, albeit personal, meaning for him.

The shoe shine man at the Greyhound bus terminal displayed an extraordinary memory for details about every derelict who had passed the time with him, and he apparently knew Foster at one time; but years of service to his fellow man had so warped his mind that he no longer had any conception of time whatsoever. His memories of Foster could have been ten days or ten years old, and nothing that Bubba could extract from him was of any real use.

Bubba stumbled onto a pawnshop where Foster had pawned a typewriter and a guitar five years ago. The pawnbroker remembered Foster because he used to come visit his things, but he hadn't seen him for years and could only suggest inquiring at a coffee shop where he knew Foster used to hang out. The coffee shop referred Bubba to a bar across the street from a junk yard where Foster had worked for a time. The bartender there seemed suspicious of Bubba when he showed him the picture.

"You with the F.B.I. or something?"

“No, he’s my first cousin once removed. I’m looking for him because he has inherited the family plantation.”

“Is that a fact.”

“Yessir. It’s a place down the coast about half way between here and Savannah. I’d like to find him so I can tell him about it.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“Can’t you tell me anything?”

“He wasn’t a bad kid. He never really harmed anybody, but I was just losing too many customers. I had to kick him out.”

“What was he doing?”

“Oh, you know, just ranting and raving. Carrying on all the time. I never understood what he was talking about.”

“Do you have any idea where he was living at the time?”

“I think he was living at the junk yard - at least until Harry found out about it and fired him.”

“Where do you think I should look for him?”

“I don’t know. You might try the Salvation Army mission downtown.”

Once again Bubba had reached a dead end.

He really was a little old for this kind of stuff. His back and legs ached, and he couldn’t bear the thought of climbing another flight of stairs. He had begun to wonder sometimes whether he really wanted to find Foster - judging from the impression he was getting of his lifestyle. But at the same time he couldn’t bear to quit. He

would call it a day, go home and rest up and then hit the trail again.

IV

Kathleen was trying to dry the dishes as Jesse more or less washed them at the sink. He had trouble holding the dishes and dropped about one out of three as he put them in the drying rack. Kathleen managed to rescue most of them, but several fell on the floor and broke. Jesse did not even seem to notice.

“You been working here a long time, hunh, Jesse?”

“Jes about as long as I kin remember. I was mowin’ the grass when the Judge was born.”

She turned back towards the sink just in time to catch a bowl on its way to oblivion. Little Lee and Kathleen had decided to stay on at Bellevue Plantation indefinitely. During the years they had spent roaming around the country in their van, she had gradually come to terms with the fact that Lee was untainted by even the slightest suggestion of ambition. She knew deep down that was precisely why she loved him so. He knew the meaning of life resided not in chasing phantoms but in the enjoyment of the present moment; and the chief means by which he enjoyed life, aside from eating and smoking dope, was by loving her - adoring her, worshipping her, caring for her, needing her and balling the holy bejesus out of her as only a man undistracted by worldly concerns can do. Of course it had its drawbacks too, like living in a van and never having any money and having to

use an IUD; but The Old Man's will may have solved all that. According to Bubba they were entitled to live at Bellevue as long as they liked. There always seemed to be plenty of food here, and they could grow their own stuff out behind the barn, and Kathleen felt that she could be useful here. They wouldn't just be freeloading relatives. She could work around the place and help take care of everybody; and who knows, if it worked out all right she might be able to take the plug out of her womb. In the meantime she liked having a family even if they were a bit odd.

She was particularly fond of Jesse. Being a Northerner she was able to perceive and appreciate qualities about him that a native Southerner might have taken for granted or simply overlooked because he was black. Like the way he moved, which was a function of his cultural heritage as well as his rheumatism. Or the completely unintelligible Gullah dialect he lapsed into at night when he was tired. To Kathleen he was the genuine article, an authentic Afro-American; whereas to most Southerners he would be just another old colored man. But beyond all that Kathleen responded to something in Jesse which transcended all cultural traits. Inside his weather-beaten frame, behind the conditioning of years of servitude there glowed the embers of a dignity and integrity and innate goodness of heart which Kathleen knew to be the most precious of gems.

She waited to catch the next plate before turning to put a bowl in the cupboard.

“Why do you think The Old Man left the place to Foster?”

“Lawd, honey, der weren’t much use speculatin’ why he done one thing or the other. I reckon he just did things the way he did ‘em and tha’s all the’ was to it.”

A plate slid off the edge of the counter and shattered on the floor before Kathleen could get to it, but she took it in her stride and just kept on trucking.

V

Lee and the Colonel were sitting on the front porch rocking, each in his own way stoned out of his gourd. Lee had on a white linen suite which was several sizes too large and a wide-brimmed Panama hat. The Colonel had a pitcher full of whisky beside him which he used to refill his glass, while Lee was getting his help from his corncob pipe. They had been contemplating Reality for quite a while together before the Colonel spoke.

“You may be a damn hippy bum, but I can see you got Abernathy blood in your veins.”

“Yessir?” Lee was flattered but a little puzzled.

“I like the way you handle that woman of yours.”

As the Colonel’s remark ricocheted around his mind, Lee gazed over and saw for the first time the goat horns growing under the old geezer’s hat. He also noticed that the Colonel’s eyes might be able to focus after all if the scene on the other side of a keyhole were of sufficient interest. He made a mental note to tighten security procedures in and around his bedroom, and then part of

his head persisted in ringing changes on the notion of a threesome with the Colonel while the rest of him enjoyed smoother sailing by digging the inspired acrobatics of a squadron of gnats hovering three inches in front of his face. Eventually everything coalesced in a beatific vision as Kathleen emerged onto the porch bearing a plate full of brownies.

Lee pulled Kathleen into his lap and felt her up while she fed him a brownie.

“You’ve been testing these in the kitchen; I can tell.”

Kathleen only giggled and stuffed another bite into Lee’s mouth. Lee offered the plate to his comrade in arms.

“Colonel, my man, have a hash brownie. Beats a key-hole any day.”

The Colonel had switched to a different channel where he was absorbed in a rerun of the Spanish American War.

Kathleen put another brownie in Lee’s mouth and then began munching on the other end of it until they were kissing and chewing and devouring each other as well as the brownie.

A station wagon overflowing with luggage pulled up to the porch. Cousin Ruthie, her William and their kids, Graham age 6 and Susan age 4, disembarked. Ruthie made a beeline for the front door, leaving William to cope with the children and the baggage. She paused on the porch only long enough to feast her eyes on the spec-

tacle of two hippies smooching in a rocking chair while being chaperoned by a drunken old nincompoop.

“I suppose Bubba is still off playing Sam Spade.”

Her greeting elicited even less of a response than she expected.

Graham and Susan wandered off in opposite directions as William struggled with the baggage.

“Hey, ya’ll wait up. Graham don’t you wanna help Daddy carry in the bags?”

Susan came up to stare at Lee and Kathleen, and she helped herself to a brownie.

VI

Bubba’s car pulled up in back of the house at 4:00 AM. He had taken to working nights in order to talk with a portion of the Charleston population which was, to put it mildly, incommunicado during the day. Tonight’s outing had been particularly nightmarish as he had wandered through a labyrinth inhabited by hookers, hustlers, winos, con men, drug addicts and blues musicians.

The light was on in the kitchen, and as Bubba came trudging up the back steps he beheld Kathleen sitting on top of the kitchen table in a lotus position. To Bubba this was just another routine way in which the Lord performed his wonders, and he closed the door quietly behind him so as not to disturb her if she were at one with the All.

Kathleen opened her eyes and smiled. “Hi.”

“Sorry in disturbed you.”

“Did you have any luck today?”

“No, and I think I’ve just about reached the end of the line.”

Bubba sat down in a chair next to the table.

He was glad to have an excuse to postpone climbing the stairs up to his bedroom. He also like being with Kathleen. Simple conversation with her was somehow refreshing. Whenever she said “Hi” it was like she had offered to help carry in the groceries. The questions she asked were soothing instead of aggravating and even when she said nothing at all her eyes seemed to be dispensing reassurance.

“You want some tea?”

“No thanks.” Bubba rubbed his eyes. “I feel like I’ve seen more of the seamy side of life in the last month than I saw during the whole time I was in the army.”

“What happens if you don’t find him?”

“Oh I’ll find him. I’ll find him or I’ll go to my grave trying. It’s too good a joke not to see it through. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to let Ruthie turn Bellevue into some kind of plastic paradise for stockbrokers.”

“Is that what she wants to do?”

“Probably. She’d sell the whole place for land fill if it brought the best price.”

“It would be sad to see this place change. I like it so much, I think Lee has decided to settle down here.”

Before Bubba could express the genuine pleasure he felt at this prospect, the door to the hallway opened and Lydia appeared carrying her kerosene lamp. She held it

above her head in front of her and stood frozen, listening for sounds in the distance and apparently oblivious to the presence of Bubba and Kathleen before her very eyes. They looked at her without saying anything, and eventually she lowered her lamp and turned to go back through the door.

Kathleen glanced at Bubba as though to let him know she shared his feelings for Lydia. He knew Kathleen accepted Lydia just as she seemed to embrace everything else at Bellevue, but he wanted to explain Lydia to her to make it a little easier.

“She thinks the Yankees are coming.”

“I know. Who is Captain James, though?”

Bubba smiled. It had been a long time since he really thought about how an outsider might perceive Lydia. She was still an imposing figure, cruising through the house like the ironclad Merrimac. In her day she could be downright intimidating with her majestic stride and the haughty voice which dismissed all consideration of anything except the urgent preparations for the End of the World as represented by the invasion of crass commercialism from the North. There had even been a time when her discourses on the worshippers of Mammon had carried the added weight of rationality, but over the years she had gradually refined her vision to the point where she now moved in an hermetically sealed world of dread and hope. Dread that every nightfall would bring the Yankee hordes, that every sound from beyond the house signaled the imminent devastation of everything

refined and beautiful. And hope that every dawn would usher home her beloved - if not triumphant at least fit enough to take her away and protect her.

“Lydia’s never gotten over her first imaginary love affair. I think Captain James rode with Jeb Stuart, but it’s always been a bit unclear to me.”

Kathleen nodded as though she understood. Who knows maybe she did. If Bubba learned anything from all his years on the bench, it was never to assume anything about another human being and never to pass judgment on the ability of the human mind to enter realms way beyond the mundane pathways of his own.

Bubba took his leave of Kathleen and began his long slow journey up the stairs to bed. In the hallway at the top of the stairs he was greeted by Ruthie, who emerged from a bedroom wearing her bathrobe.

“Have you found him yet?”

“Hello, Ruthie. What a pleasant surprise. Are William and the children with you?”

“Have you found Foster?”

“Not yet.”

Bubba said this as though he was sure Ruthie shared his determination to find Foster. There was still enough Southern lawyer left in his blood for him to enjoy a round of verbal tennis even at four in the morning - especially when his opponent was as spirited a player as Ruthie. Relieved that the ball was still in play, she returned his volley with a long, high, solicitous lob.

“Bubba, honey, just look at how exhausted you are. There’s no point wearing yourself to a frazzle looking for him just because of crazy notion The Old Man had when he scribbled that will. How much longer do you intend to go on?”

“Til I find him.”

She walked with him as he continued towards his room.

“Don’t you think we should start thinking about what to do with the estate?”

“Nope.”

Ruthie could no longer contain her impulse to rush the net.

“Well, I’ll tell you something, Bubba. If you think I am going to sit by and let this estate go down the drain while you go traipsing all over the South looking for some no-count beatnik, you are sadly mistaken.”

Now it was Bubba’s turn to lob. He opened the door to his room and then turned as though he had just remembered a piece of news Ruthie would be glad to hear.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you about our latest hot lead. That trumpet player in the penitentiary replied to my letter. Said he knows for a fact Foster was in Charleston last November and gave me the phone number of a lady in New Orleans...”

Ruthie turned away muttering a half-audible departing shot as she retreated.

“Even if you do find him, we’re contesting the will.”

Chapter 3

I

The Flamingo Club was a hole in wall whose neon sign worked about as well as its toilet, neither of which was essential to its mission of ministering to the spiritual needs of the dregs of Charleston society with nothing but the cheapest and certifiably toxic liquor. Bubba removed his hat as he entered the establishment and immediately regretted the gesture since it only made more apparent the fact that he had no business being there at this or any other hour. He looked around for a booth or table in a dark corner, but they all seemed occupied by shapes which gave no sign of wanting company, especially if it came from the wrong part of town. In fact the only vacant table was right beneath a spotlight that refused to stay pointed at the center attraction.

On a platform that was just high enough to be a problem if one were too drunk to stay within its bounds, two bleary-eyed musicians were plugging into the amps and preparing for their next set. Each had hopefully seen

better days, and they moved with all due deliberation. A menacing buzz shook the glassware as the guitar player put a jack in one amp. He shook his guitar and then hit the strings generating a piercing screech followed by howling feedback. Kicking the amplifier seemed to cure the feedback, and he hit another lick on the strings that might have qualified as a musical riff had it been reduced by 40 decibels. As he leaned over to turn up the volume on the amp, the bass player began what could only be described as an artillery assault on the entire district. The guitar player took one more swig from the bottle in his hip pocket and then launched a rocket attack designed to cauterize the soul and scrape off any remaining nerve endings not just in the ears but in the inner reaches of the heart.

When Bubba had adjusted to the glare of the spotlight and stuffed the remains of a paper napkin in his ears, he became aware of a third figure on the stage, a kid who would have looked out of place even if he had not been wearing a Confederate officer's tunic. He was hunched over with his back to the audience and a microphone in one hand. He appeared to cup the microphone to his mouth with both hands and all of a sudden the most godawful wailing began competing with the noise of the guitar. Bubba realized that this third wave of the attack was somehow related to a phenomenon in a parallel universe caused by blowing air into an harmonica.

As the harmonica player began to get into the groove, he turned slowly and moved around the stage without

opening his eyes. When the electrical system seemed on the verge of a complete meltdown, he yanked the harmonica away from his mouth and produced a small, leather-bound volume from his coat pocket. Holding the book open to shield his face from view, he began screaming into the microphone:

*“And oft in the hills of Habersham,
And oft in the valleys of Hall,
The white quartz shone, and the smooth brook-stone
Did bar me of passage with friendly brawl,
And many a luminous jewel lone
– Crystals clear or a-cloud with mist,
Ruby, garnet and amethyst –
Made lures with the lights of streaming stone
In the cliffs of the hills of Habersham,
In the beds of the valleys of Hall.”*

Bubba’s face, which had been contorted in pain as he cupped his hands over his ears in self-defense, began to melt. His eyes widened with a combination of disbelief and delight, and the smile with which he had always acknowledged the great incongruities of the world reclaimed its birthright. He had found his quarry.

The book Foster used to shield himself from the glare was a first edition copy of the poems of Sidney Lanier. It might well have come from Bellevue. The sword strapped around his waist was obviously stolen from V.M.I.; the t-shirt and jeans he was wearing underneath the officer’s tunic could have come from any dumpster.

*“But oh, not the hills of Habersham,
 And oh, not the valleys of Hall
 Avail: I am fain for to water the plain.
 Downward the voices of Duty call—
 Downward, to toil and be mixed with the main,
 The dry fields burn, and the mills are to turn,
 And a myriad flowers mortally yearn,
 And the lordly main from beyond the plain
 Calls o’er the hills of Habersham,
 Calls through the valleys of Hall.”*

II

Foster’s mind had long since abandoned the illusion that life had any continuity or coherence except in those rare and fleeting states induced by poetry and music. So far as he could tell experiences bubbled up from the depths in discreet moments which burst and disappeared as soon as they hit the surface. What bubbled up next was just as likely to be a scene from his childhood or a vision of Light-Horse Harry Lee as it was a clear and distinct perception of the saltshaker on the kitchen counter. The figure who now appeared smiling before him could very well be the Archangel Michael, but there was something about him that pulled Foster out of his trance.

“Bubba?”

Bubba acknowledged the greeting with a gentle nod, fully aware of the delicacy of the situation despite the ear-splitting cacophony engulfing them. He could see Foster starting to lose his balance as a flood of self-con-

sciousness swept away the debris of his ecstasy and left him spinning in a whirlpool of mundane thoughts.

III

Foster and Bubba staggered out the backdoor of The Flamingo Club into the alley. Foster walked a few steps supporting himself with one hand against the wall and then sank to a crouch. Bubba stood above him for a moment and then realized the only polite thing to do was to crouch next to him in a spot normally reserved for a garbage can.

“The Old Man died last month.”

Bubba said it gently but directly as though he knew he had better cash in on Foster’s attention while he had it.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He left the place to you.”

This didn’t make it through before the gate closed. Foster was running through the weeds barefoot trying to forget about the Old Man standing at the top of the stairs shaking his walking stick.

“Actually what the will said was that the plantation was yours on the condition that you let all the relatives live there.”

Once he was safely hidden in the bushes, and The Old Man retreated to do battle on another front; Foster turned to look again at his comrade in arms.

“He left the place to me?”

“Yes.”

Foster was afraid he might start bleeding internally. He wasn't sure what Bubba wanted from him.

"Why on earth?"

"Far be it from me..."

Bubba's laugh was familiar enough to be reassuring, and Foster began to feel it was not Bubba he had to fear.

"I don't want it."

"Give it some thought."

Foster responded as though he were surrounded by a chorus of grammar school teachers telling him how to behave. He was determined to stand up to them.

"No. I need to be free. I can't be tied down to material possessions and mundane concerns. I have a calling."

Bubba knew better than to argue this point.

"I went duck hunting the other day with Sam Magill - or at least I pretended I was hunting ducks. I never could stand to shoot the poor things, but I love being out in the marshes at sunrise."

Foster realized he was still holding the book of poetry.

"You should read Sidney Lanier's poem 'Sunrise'."

"I probably have, and I'd much rather look at the real thing than read a poem about it. You should see the lilies and the azalea out by Taylor's point. I think we're in for a spectacular summer."

Foster wandered through the swamps around Bellevue. The sound of frogs and katydids and whippoorwills and the gentle lapping of water seeped through the crack

caused by the image of bright pink azalea. He grabbed the first bucket he could find to bail them out.

“It can’t be any better than the one after I graduated from Woodbury.”

“I don’t know.”

Bubba knew for once in his life he had chosen the right lure to cast into the pre-dawn murkiness.

Foster felt himself drifting into a cathedral of cypress trees and Spanish moss where time revolved slowly without any interference from mankind.

“Course it can’t compare to this place.”

Foster was starting to feel lost in the swamp. He wished he could find some ground to stand on.

“You don’t understand.”

“I guess not. I would think that a poet would want to surround himself with natural beauty.”

“Not all life is beautiful.”

“Judging from the places I’ve been trying to track you down, I’d say you were expertly qualified to make that judgment.”

As Foster handed Bubba the book of poetry.

“Here.”

Their eyes met, and Foster became the five-year-old boy who loved to fetch things for the kind soul who listened to his prayers every night and never uttered a harsh word. He longed for Bubba to pat him on the back or rub his hand around in his hair.

“I guess I could use a change of scene.”

IV

The Dixie Diner had been a truck stop before they built the Interstate five miles away. Believing that tradition was more important than profit margin, it continued to stay open 24 hours a day. On this particular night at 4:00 AM, it was filled only with the smell of burnt lard and the good gospel sounds of the Stanley Brothers giving their all in a classic rendition of “A Voice From On High”:

*“I hear a voice callin’,
It must be our Lord.
It’s coming from Heaven on high.
I hear a voice callin’,
I’ve gained the reward
For the land where we never shall die...”*

As Foster and Bubba entered from the parking lot, Foster perked up, rubbed his hands together, licked his lips and took a good whiff.

“Damn that smells good!”

“To each his own...”

The Dixie Diner was not exactly Bubba’s idea of a culinary treat, but he could well imagine that Foster might feel a need to fortify himself with grits and grease before arriving at Bellevue. They sat down in a booth, and the cook came from behind the counter to take their order. She was a ripe young lady by the name of Alma, whose ancestors might have been genteel planters but whose

relatives now were mostly tenant farmers or gas station attendants.

“How y’all doin’?”

Foster was too absorbed in the menu to look up, but he couldn’t restrain his enthusiasm.

“Real good, real good. A whole new day is about to dawn.”

Bubba was somewhat less optimistic about the prospects for the morrow.

“I’ll just have a cup of coffee, please.”

“And I’ll have three eggs over easy, a double order of bacon, hash browns, a stack of buckwheat cakes, a glass of milk, a half a grapefruit, and a bowl of Cheerios.”

Foster finally looked up to behold the lady who was preparing to minister to his needs, and his systems immediately crossed over from the nutritional to the aesthetic mode. The impact of this was not totally lost on Alma, even though she did not look up from the pad where she was recording his order with an esoteric form of hieroglyphics.

“Where’re y’all headed?”

“Just a little further up the road.”

Alma was delighted to be able to have a friendly chat with Bubba in the name of public relations while bathing in Foster’s appreciative gaze.

“You’re looking at the new owner of Bellevue Plantation.”

Bubba gesture grandly towards Foster, and Alma let her eyes connect with Foster's only long enough to encourage him.

"Is that the Abernathy place? I wondered what was going to become of it."

"So do some other folks I know."

"Can you bring me some biscuits, too?"

Alma turned to smile down at Foster as though to let him know that she could do a lot more than serve biscuits.

"Comin' right up."

As she walked back towards the grill, Foster was particularly fascinated by the manner in which the shapelessness of her white polyester uniform in no way corresponded to the reality underneath. Only the faint outline of a pair of bikini panties beckoned like the distant echo of a call to worship.

Foster turned abruptly and slapped the tabletop.

"Yessir, the South is gonna rise again."

Bubba hadn't the foggiest notion what might be going on inside Foster's head, but he couldn't really say that the comment was any less appropriate than anything else one might say at four in the morning at the Dixie Diner.

"Can it wait until I've gone to Glory?"

"The trouble with you, Bubba, is you never believed in anything."

A part of Bubba's mind which was exposed because of fatigue feared there was some truth in this even coming from Foster.

“What would you have me believe in?”

“Miracles. Life is an unending series of miracles.”

Bubba smiled in admiration of Foster’s unbridled enthusiasm.

“Just look at me. I was teetering on the brink and you come to me from the Old Man with the keys to the Kingdom.”

“There’s no need to go overboard about it.”

“But there is; that’s just it. When life calls, you can’t hold back. You’ve got to jump overboard.”

“Well, don’t let me dampen your enthusiasm. I’m delighted to have you back; and if you can believe in miracles, more power to you.”

Maybe Foster did have to be afraid of Bubba. Reasonableness – especially when reinforced by a sense of humor – was the deadliest of all enemies of the Spirit. Far easier to face the mechanized warfare of business and technology than to resist the infiltration of reasonableness or the gentle, seductive smile with which Despair worms its way into the heart offering human comforts. Maybe that was why the Old Man had chosen him. Somehow he must have come to understand that the fulfillment of Bellevue lay in Foster’s calling, that only by bringing Foster home again could Bellevue be redeemed.

Alma placed a bowl of Cheerios in front of Foster. As she leaned across the table to pour Bubba’s coffee, the powder or perfume with which she pampered her body sang to Foster like a heavenly choir.

V

When Bubba's car pulled up behind Bellevue, Foster stepped forth into the pre-dawn light like a bird emerging from his cracked eggshell. All around the house he could make out the outlines of a mysterious and amorphous world, gently swaying graygreen shapes yearning to be delineated by the light and beckoning to him like a sea of love and death.

Bubba let the car door slam behind him as he pulled Foster's duffel bag from the back seat.

"Do you want me to take this stuff up to ..."

"Ssshhhhhhhh!"

Foster turned quickly with one finger to his lips and made a sweeping gesture with his other hand admonishing Bubba to consider his surroundings. Bubba could not help but react to Foster's command. He could smile to himself and pretend that he was just amused by the absurdity of Foster's manner, but he had nevertheless shut up in the midst of a perfectly reasonable inquiry as though someone had just reprimanded him for hawking peanuts in St. Peter's. Why he should be intimidated by the notion that trees and grass and crickets in the backyard were a repository for the Holy Ghost was more than he cared to tackle at the moment. He was content simply to defer to Foster and try to contain his amusement at the hushed tones with which Foster finally addressed him.

“I’m gonna sit on the porch for a while. Will you join me?”

“If you don’t mind, I believe I’ll turn in. I’ve had a long day.”

Bubba was whispering too – partially for the sake of a private joke and partially because he instinctively respected the desires of others. It made no difference to him what the content of the desire was – so long as it wasn’t injurious to anyone, it was worthy of respect. At some point very early in his life Bubba had concluded unconsciously that human need was more real than anything else around, and he had never been able to discriminate between legitimate and spurious needs.

“You can have the master bedroom or the guest room at the far end of the hall – whichever you prefer. See you tomorrow.”

Bubba lugged Foster’s duffel bag towards the back door and watched him tiptoe around the corner of the house half expecting him to lift his arms and float off the ground.

A doe came out of the bushes bordering the front lawn and walked through the pre-dawn light almost up to the porch where Foster stood enraptured.

VI

The next morning was one of those early summer days when the sky is filled with billowy white clouds, and the air is thick with the buzzing of insects and the smell of weeds. Bubba was puttering around in the garden try-

ing to find enough string beans to have for lunch. He had on a rumpled suit and a tie and was sweating fairly heavily, but he didn't mind. It felt right to him – just like the dirt on his shoes and the way some of the leaves and stalks irritated the skin on the back of his hands. If you work in a garden, you get sweaty and dirty and prickly. To try to have it any other way was silly. Not that he was doing all that much work. It was hard to find beans among all the weeds and vines, but it didn't require a great deal of physical effort.

He heard the door slam, and he knew that his confrontation with Ruthie could no longer be avoided. He worked his way into the thickest part of the garden so that she would have to contend with the vines if she wanted to talk to him. He saw her coming around the corner of the house like a diesel locomotive, so he buried his head in the vines.

“Where is he?”

Bubba kept his head down and pretended that he wasn't sure someone was speaking to him.

“Wha's'at?”

“Stop trying to hide like a little boy. Why did you tell everyone that you'd found Foster?”

“Cuz I did.”

“Then where is he?”

“I imagine he's still sleeping. We got in pretty late.”

Bubba stood up so that he could watch what the truth would do to someone like Ruthie.

“I checked all the bedrooms.”

“You did what?”

“I don’t believe you found him.”

“Oh, I found him all right.”

“Well, he’s not here now and according to our attorney ... “

“Ruthie, he’s here. I found him in Charleston. It’s all over.”

“What makes you so sure it’s him.”

“It’s him. Couldn’t be anybody else.”

Bubba can see that Ruthie did not appreciate the implications of this private joke.

“I know my own nephew.”

Ruthie turned to leave.

“You don’t know your own mind, much less a nephew you haven’t seen for eight years.”

A shrill whistling sound from the shed signaled the end of the round. Jack had succeeded in firing up the boiler on the steam tractor. Lee came running out of the house.

Jack tugged on the chain of the steam whistle on top of the tractor and beamed with pride as the whistle let out its deafening screech.

A pipe burst, spraying water all over the shed, and the whistle petered out just as Lee came running up. Jack was undaunted. He talked to the tractor as he shut down the main valve.

“It’s okay, darlin’. Don’t you worry one bit. You just relax for a while and let ol’ Jack take care of you.”

He patted the side of the boiler as he went around to examine the leaking pipe.

“I’ll bet that felt good after all these years. Nothing like getting all fired up and blowin’ off a little steam to cleanse the soul.”

He gave a tug at the whistle, and it made a last desperate effort to sound off as the boiler pressure dropped to zero.

VII

The steam whistle had roused Foster from his sleep underneath a large oak tree in the woods surrounding the Bellevue mansion. He lay still and gazed at the dense forest above and around him. His hand instinctively dug through some dead leaves to find the earth beneath in an attempt to get his bearings. A dream of smiling faces lingered on the movie screen in his head - a gentle old man, a luscious peach of a woman - both reassuring him he could rise to the occasion and go forth to meet the day even if he had no idea who or where he was. It mattered not who he was. Wherever he had been placed, he was surely there for a reason, and he could only discover that reason and who he was if he stood up. The ground seemed firm enough. The sound that woke him was probably coming from his destination.

Foster started to get up, and his back reprimanded him for sleeping on the ground. He managed to straighten himself and brushed some dirt from his coat as a gesture of respect for whatever destiny awaited him.

VIII

Lydia was keeping her vigil by the parlor window when she saw Foster come limping out of the bushes and start across the lawn towards the house. She gasped and stared in utter amazement for a moment. Then she went completely to pieces and began acting like a ten-year-old girl.

“It’s Captain James! Captain James! He’s come back!”

She ran to the front door and paused a moment for dramatic effect before flinging it open and bursting out onto the porch with her arms spread.

Foster saw Lydia almost fall on her face as she came running down the porch steps and across the lawn. She was screaming hysterically as she ran, and the entire household has been alerted.

“Captain James! Captain James!”

Bubba shook his head with amused despair as he watched from the garden. Ruthie muttered under her breath as she watched the drama unfold for a moment before turning to go back into the house via the back door.

“I have never in all my born days seen such a ridiculous spectacle.”

Foster threw open his arms to receive Lydia.

She collapsed into his arms in a dead faint, and he picked her up to carry her towards the house. Bubba came bustling over to help, when he saw Lydia collapse.

LX

Jack entered the dining room where the rest of the clan had gathered for dinner. He was covered with grease and soaking wet.

He stopped in his tracks when he realized that Sister Sarah is saying grace.

“Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for these and all Thy many, many wonderful blessings and most especially O Lord, do we thank Thee for the return of our beloved Foster after lo these many years of separation. As I was saying at breakfast, God, you just don’t know how much it means to us to have him back...”

Bubba felt the urge to reach for his gavel when Sarah took a breath and a moment to compose the rest of her thoughts.

“Amen. Thank you, Sarah.”

Sarah was a little startled to be so rudely interrupted, but any attempt to resume her conversation with the Lord was rendered impossible by the noise of dishes and silverware and idle chatter as everyone started to dig in. All she could manage was a quiet aside.

“We’ll talk about this more, later, Dear Lord. It’s OK.”

Jack took his seat, wiping his hands on his shirt before helping himself to some biscuits.

William was sitting next to Foster, and he decided to make an effort to be friendly as they ate.

“Bubba tells me you’re a writer.”

“I think I’m more of a midwife to the Divine Spirit.”

Foster said this matter-of-factly, with a full mouth and without any trace of pomposity or affectation. He seemed to have recovered some fragments of the ancient text explaining why he was seated around a table with all these folks enjoying a Sunday dinner.

Ruthie tried to exercise some crowd control simply by speaking louder than anyone else.

“I think now that Foster’s back, we should begin thinking about what to do with the estate.”

Lee responded in a way most at the table would have agreed was absolutely on target.

“Pass the biscuits, please.”

Ruthie alone attempted to stick to the agenda.

“There’s a lot of different ways we can go, and I know some people who might be able to advise us.”

“Hogwash.”

As usual it was a bit unclear whether The Colonel’s remark was directed towards Ruthie or the world in general, but Ruthie wisely concluded that lunchtime might not be the best occasion for rational discourse.

William was in the zone of obliviousness which had served him so well in his married life.

“Have you ever published any of your stuff?”

“Not yet.”

“I ask because I’m on the editorial board of the Southern Life Insurance Monthly, and we occasionally publish poems and stories when we can’t sell all the advertising space.”

Foster saw no irony in this gesture. He was more interested in his own status as a poet.

“I haven’t actually written anything down yet.”

“I see ... Will you be staying on here, or do you plan to go back to Charleston?”

Chapter 4

I

Gary Winters, a large man with a manner carefully tailored to match his blue suit, introduced Ruthie to the team from Coastal Development Corporation. The conference room was all decked out with displays mounted on easels. There was a surveyor's map of Bellevue plantation, a proposed street map of a real estate development called Southern Shores, and several watercolor renderings of homes, a resort hotel, a marina, tennis courts, a golf course, a restaurant, and a mall of high-end boutiques.

"This is Bill Schaffer and Hugh McCall from our Atlanta office, and Tommy Phillips who drew up the actual proposal.

Ruthie had on her best Southern Belle behavior as she smiled and shook each man's hand.

"How sweet of y'all to come all the way up here just to talk about this."

As they all began to find a seat at the conference table, Ruthie discreetly whispered to Gary.

“I need to talk to you after the meeting. We’ve got a slight complication.”

He nodded just enough to let her know he was accustomed to dealing with complications.

“Gentlemen, the Abernathy family, as you know, holds a large area of undeveloped land on the coast. They have been approached by Syncom Industries with an offer to develop part of the land as a site for a large plastics plant, but they are looking for alternatives.”

Ruthie felt compelled to emphasize the integrity of her motives.

“We just couldn’t stand the thought of all those chemicals and stuff polluting the environment.”

“Tommy has a proposal which could provide even more income to the family, both long and short term, while at the same time preserving the natural beauty of the area and even enhancing the wildlife with a game management program.”

He passed around copies of a bound proposal.

“We’ve got some figures here we can discuss, but first I thought Tommy should give us an overview of the proposal. Tommy.”

Ruthie pretended she was more interested in what Tommy had to say than how the numbers compared to the astronomical amount she had squeezed out of those scumbags at Syncom.

“There’re two proposals actually, and we can get into the pros and cons for each in a minute. Basically they are the same except the second includes condominiums as well as single family units, and is designed to attract a wider spectrum of income groups.

II

Lee and Kathleen were sharing Lee’s corn cob pipe as they strolled through the woods towards the swamp. Their appreciation for the delicacy of the insects and the intricacies of the Spanish moss brushing through their hair was clearly enhanced by the quality of their weed. Sometimes one would see some aspect of the design of the bark on a tree that totally escaped the other but always the wonder itself was contagious even if one just wondered about the wonder.

Lee’s ears perked up.

“Wha’s’at?”

“What, honeypie?”

“That voice.”

“Wha?”

“Sshhh. Listen.”

He stopped and held his hand up.

A distant but booming voice came wafting through the forest on a breeze.

“For I have learned

To look on nature, not as in the hour

Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes

*The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.”*

Lee ran ahead a bit and signaled to Kathleen to come look.

In the distance Kathleen spotted a figure standing in a boat. It was Foster, poling a flat-bottomed boat through the shallow waters of the swamp. He stood erect and propelled himself with long, slow strokes of his pole as though he were crossing the River Jordan to meet his Maker. He recited in a loud sing-song voice.

*“And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts,
And rolls through all things.”*

Beyond him a lone white egret took flight, rising to soar into the open sky.

III

The fog rolled in and began to enshroud the swamp. Foster reclined against a tree near where Lee lay flat on his back, and Kathleen had her head on Lee’s stomach.

Lee's pipe was still going strong, and he had one hand on Kathleen's breast. Foster had no need of artificial stimulants to propel him through the chasms of human consciousness. He caught Lee's eye for a moment, smiled and launched into another recitation, this time with a hushed tone and measured pace.

"Slowly, but with no doubt or hesitation whatever, and in something of a solemn expectancy, the two animals passed through the broken, tumultuous water and moored their boat at the flowery margin of the island. In silence they landed, and pushed through the blossom and scented herbage and undergrowth that led up to the level ground, till they stood on a little lawn of a marvelous green, set round with Nature's own orchard trees – crab apple, wild cherry, and sloe.

"This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,' whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. 'Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!"

"Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror – indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy – but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side, cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew."

Foster let his voice trail off.

Lee could not contain himself

“Wow... This is without a doubt the best damn grass I have ever had.”

IV

A full moon broke through the moving clouds to cast a magical soft light on the mansion and the garden beside it. The house was completely dark, except for a very faint glimmer of light in a window overlooking the garden. A gentle breeze stirred the Spanish moss in the trees.

Inside everyone had long since gone to bed, and there was only the movement of the faint shadows from the moonlight in the parlor. The second floor was equally still, except for a very faint flicker of light coming from behind a closed door at the end of the hallway.

Foster sat at a desk facing an open window.

There was a small candle flickering on the desk, and the curtains moved gently with the breeze. He held a large feather quill pen, and there were several sheets of paper on the desk, but his gaze was directed at the moon. He seemed to be in a trance.

Foster's hand moved mechanically to an inkwell, and he dipped the quill pen slowly into the ink. He placed the pen on the paper, but there was a long pause before he started to write. Only his hand moved.

There was no indication in his face that he was even aware that he was writing. The pen moved with slow, careful strokes.

V

Foster was slumped over his writing table, sleeping soundly, as the morning light crept in through the window. The candle on the table had gone out, but the table was covered with pages of Foster's writing.

Birds singing in the garden below the open window roused Foster from his sleep. He sat up slowly, listening to the birds and admiring the overgrown garden below.

Then he noticed the pages of scribbling spread out beneath his hands. A look of incredulous excitement swept over his face, and he scooped the pages up, hurriedly glancing at the contents of each.

VI

Foster burst into Bubba's room where Bubba was fast asleep.

"Bubba! Bubba!"

Bubba jumped up in the bed and started looking around frantically to see if the house was on fire.

"What? What? What is it? What's happened?"

"I've started writing!"

"What?"

"I've started writing!"

Foster was pacing around the room waving the sheets of paper in the air and trying to catch his breath as though he had just won the gold medal in the hundred meter hurdles.

“Last night I wrote fifteen pages of poetry. This place is holy.”

Bubba had lost all hope of being able to go back to sleep, and he let himself enjoy being caught up on Foster’s excitement.

“Well, that’s just grand, Foster.”

“The Old Man knew. He understood.”

Bubba smiled at the thought of The Old Man finally getting some pleasure out of life by winning a hand without even knowing what cards he held.

Foster calmed down and stood at the foot of the bed shaking his head.

“I’m an oracle.”

“Let’s see what you’ve got there.”

Foster straightened the pages with all due reverence and handed them to him as Bubba turned on the reading light beside the bed and put on his glasses.

“It’s probably the first canto of an epic.”

Bubba strained to find something he can read. Foster’s “writing” appeared to be a combination of Sanskrit, Chinese, hieroglyphics and chicken scratches. It was impossible even to tell which end was up.

“Your handwriting is worse than The Old Man’s.”

“It’ll have to be translated before you can read it.”

“I’ll say. What language is this?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s a completely new language. It has some letters from our alphabet, but most of it is completely different.”

Bubba glanced at Foster skeptically over the top of his reading glasses.

“I wouldn’t tell anybody else about this just yet.”

“No, I don’t think the world is ready for it either.”

VII

Foster tapped on his water glass with his knife and rose out of his chair at the dining room table.

“I have an announcement.”

Everyone stopped eating except The Colonel, who simply raised his tumbler full of bourbon in a toast and then returned to his efforts to spear a piece of meat with his fork.

Bubba seemed a bit apprehensive.

“The call to return to Bellevue has heralded an auspicious beginning to a new period in my work. I have decided to stay here permanently and to declare the entire plantation a wildlife sanctuary.”

As usual Lee is the first to perceive the significance of Foster’s gesture.

“Far out.”

Ruthie threw an icy stare at Bubba from the far end of the table. His expression seemed to indicate that Foster’s decision was news to him. Everyone else just smiled politely and returned to the business at hand as Foster sat back down.

Ruthie excused herself from the table and made a beeline for the nearest telephone. She dialed a number and dispensed with any pretense of formality speaking

with a hushed urgency as soon as someone responded on the other end.

“Who do you know at the Fish and Game Commission? Foster now says he’s going to declare the whole place a wildlife sanctuary and if I know Bubba, he’ll pull every string he can grab to help Foster... I don’t know. I don’t think they’ve done anything yet, but we can’t stall the probate forever.”

Chapter 5

I

Foster sat at his table, gazing at the moon in a trance, and “writing”. A gust of wind blew out the candle, and Foster was shaken out of his trance. It took him a moment to re-orient himself.

As he began looking over what he had written, he caught sight of something in the garden below him.

At the far end of the garden, the figure of a woman dressed in white moved through the shadows and disappeared behind some shrubbery. She was barely discernable, but she seemed to be young and wearing a full, long white dress.

Foster stood up and leaned over the desk to get a better look out the window. He saw no sign of her anymore, and he was a bit puzzled.

He sat back down, relit the candle, and resumed gazing at the moon. He was making a determined effort to lift off into his trance again when something distracted him.

The woman walked through another part of the garden in clear view. She was a beautiful girl in her twenties, wearing what appeared to be an ante-bellum evening gown. She carried a fan, and she was strolling in the garden as though she had just left a ball inside for a breath of fresh air.

As Foster watched with rapturous awe, the lady paused and looked up at Foster. She smiled raising her fan to cover her face a little coquettishly and then turned to continue walking. She disappeared into the shadows.

Foster attempted to focus his attention on the moon again, but he could not refrain from leaning forward out the window to see if he could spot the lady in the garden. Finally he dropped his pen, and knocked the chair over as he headed for the door.

Foster slid down the banister on the main stairs and bounded out the door like a five-year-old fireman responding to an alarm.

As he rounded the corner of the house heading into the garden Foster collected himself and switched from fireman to genteel planter overseeing his domain. The garden had once been a formal garden with geometrical patterns of shrubbery. The fact that it was now completely overgrown only made it a perfect labyrinth for playing hide and seek.

Foster snuck around the garden, peering in and around the shrubs. He saw no sign of the girl. He stopped for a moment to listen, and heard nothing.

Finally he gave up and started back towards the house, only to hear the sound of footsteps in another part of the garden. He froze for a moment to listen, and then ran around to a path between two rows of shrubbery. As he rounded the corner, he caught a glimpse of the white skirt disappearing behind another row of shrubs. He ran after her, only to discover that she had disappeared again and there was no apparent place for her to be hiding.

Foster stood for a moment thinking. Then he smiled and walked back to the house.

II

Bubba and the Colonel were enjoying mint juleps on the porch when Ruthie had ambushed them in an attempt to initiate a rational conversation.

“Do you have any idea of what this property is worth?”

Needless to say Bubba’s idea of rational discourse differed somewhat from Ruthie’s.

“Everybody has his own idea about what something is worth.”

“I’m talking about the real value of this property.”

It was still early enough in the day for The Colonel to participate in parlor games.

“You’re talking about how much money you want to make off it.”

“We’d all benefit.”

Bubba’s good nature got the better of him, and he let himself believe that Ruthie might be susceptible to persuasion.

“Would we? How would Sarah and Lydia benefit?”

“Everybody would get their share.”

“But we don’t need the money.”

Ruthie was too committed to her own grasp on reality to acknowledge any truth that failed to conform to it.

“You’re just being obstinate. You know Foster is not competent to manage this estate.”

“I know this place is his, and he’s free to do with it as he pleases so long as he lets the rest of us live here.”

“My lawyer seems to think there is more to it than that.”

“Your lawyer knows as well as I do that Foster is entitled to let the place be a wildlife sanctuary if he wants to.”

“Lunatic asylum is more like it.”

The Colonel had had enough of evasive maneuvering and pussyfooting around.

“Listen, woman, stop sniveling. If you want this territory, take it by force. Vicksburg, San Juan Hill, The Battle of the Bulge.”

He raised his glass in a toast to the glory of war.

Ruthie retreated back inside to regroup.

“I’d like to see you take something by force, you old coot. It’s about all you can do to open a jug.”

Ruthie parting shot was completely wasted on a fortress as impenetrable as The Colonel. She stormed through the hallway on her way upstairs.

Sarah sat at the piano in the living room, accompanying herself haltingly as she sang.

“Yes He walks with me

*And He talks with me
And He tells me I am his own...*

III

Foster crouched behind a shrub in the middle of the night. He spotted the lady in her long white evening gown coming towards him at the far end of a path. He gazed at her without moving from his hiding place as she approached. She was indeed a beautiful creature. She had long dark hair, a pale complexion, and a sensitive, melancholy air.

When she reached the shrub where Foster was hiding, he sprang out into the pathway to confront her.

She walked on past him as though she did not see him at all.

Foster was stunned, but he quickly gathered his wits about him and hurried after her. He stepped in front of her and did a deep, chivalrous bow as he introduced himself.

“Good evening, m’am. May I join you?”

She seemed startled by his voice, and amazed that he would speak to her.

“I’m sorry if I startled you. I’m Foster Abernathy. I saw you the other night from the window of my room. I hope you don’t think I’m too forward.”

She has relaxed and seems quite flattered.

“Why no.”

“May I walk with you?”

“Yes, please do.”

Foster offered her his arm as they start to walk, but she shied away from the physical contact. Foster tried to pretend he was doing something else with his arm.

“Have you been here long?”

“It seems like forever.”

“I didn’t know you were here until the other night. I don’t really keep track of what is going on in the house.”

She seemed to be listening, but not inclined to respond.

“It’s not that I don’t like the other people here. It’s just that my calling demands that I keep to myself and work nights.”

For some reason Foster wanted to pour his heart out to her.

“I’m a poet. Or at least I think I am. Ever since I was little, I felt I was supposed to be a poet, but for the longest time, I never had anything to say. I did all the things a poet is supposed to do, but the words just didn’t come to me. I even tried to write about the fact that I had nothing to say.”

They sat on a bench. Foster wanted so badly for her to be interested in what he was saying that he dared not stop talking long enough to find out if she was.

“It was only after I came here that I actually started writing. I woke up one morning and discovered I had written fifteen pages the night before. I didn’t understand it, so I knew it was inspired. I think I’m writing an epic.”

Foster turned discovered that his companion had disappeared.

He jumped up and looked around the end of a row of shrubbery to see where she had gone. There was no sign of her.

He gave up looking and started back towards the house with a puzzled look on his face.

IV

Foster was “writing” again – gazing at the moon in a trance while the feather pen scratches across the paper – when the lady emerged from the shadows in the garden directly below his window. She stood twirling a parasol over her shoulder and looking up at him coquettishly.

Foster continued writing, oblivious to her presence below him.

The coquettishness faded from her expression.

She looked at Foster skeptically for a moment and then turned to continue walking.

Foster came to just in time to see her disappear amidst the shrubbery.

He jumped up, scooped up his papers, grabbed a bouquet of flowers sitting on his bed, and darted out of the room.

Foster ran around the garden, dodging in and out of the shrubs, looking for her. There was no sign of her anywhere.

Eventually Foster sat down on the bench, out of breath and a bit despondent.

The lady appeared behind him and was almost seated beside him before he saw her.

He jumped up and then bowed to her, offering her the flowers.

“I was afraid I would never see you again.”

She accepted the flowers with a modest smile, and he sat beside her.

“I’m sorry about last night. Sometimes I guess I just get all wrapped up in myself.”

“Yes.”

“Please don’t be hurt. Tell me your name. I want to know all about you.”

“My name is Annabelle.”

She did not seem to want to volunteer anything else about herself.

“Annabelle. How nice. Are you an Abernathy?”

“My fiancé was an Abernathy. He died though.”

“How tragic. You are certainly welcome to stay here as long as you like.”

“That’s very gracious of you. I love it here. So much of the world these days seems so sterile, but this place is like an island of beauty and wonder.”

“Yes, I know what you mean.”

“I love to walk in the moonlight. Don’t you think it’s romantic?”

“I think you’re the most beautiful lady I’ve ever met.”

“Why thank you, sir.”

“I mean it. And I can think of nothing I should like more than to escort you on your moonlight walks.”

“Nothing?”

She looked at him a little sadly. He was puzzled and wanted to assure her of his devotion.

“I shall wait for you here every night.”

“What is that you have?”

She gestured towards the sheaf of papers Foster was holding.

“Oh, it’s my poetry.”

She inclined her head expectantly, but he did not offer to show it to her.

“Will you read some of it to me?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

She spoke gently and a little seductively as though she knew he just needed a little encouragement.

Foster handed her the pages a little sheepishly.

Annabelle smiled sweetly as she took it and began reading the top sheet. Foster was surprised that she seemed to be reading and understanding the writing. He was amazed as he watched her face and tears welled up in her eyes.

She looked away for a moment to collect herself and then turned to Foster, smiling through her tears.

“It’s beautiful.”

Foster was speechless. He could see that she was not joking with him, but he could not really believe she had understood it.

“Is it?”

Annabelle just nodded and handed the pages back to him.

“Can you read it to me?”

Annabelle nodded and took the pages back.

She concentrated as though she was aware of the difficulty of doing justice to the poetry. She read in a strange, almost melodic, chanting voice.

*“Erehw yreve na, emoor eltil eno sekam dna,
 Seluortnoc sthgis rehto fo evol lla, evol for;
 Ereafo tuo rehtona eno ton hctaw hcibw,
 Seluos gnika w ruo ot worrom doog won dna.
 Eeht fo emaerd a tub sawt, tog dna,
 d’rised i hcibw,
 Ees did i ytuaeb yna reve fi.
 Eeb seicnaf serusaelp lla, siht tub; os sawt’.
 Ned srepeels nevaes eht ni ew detrons ro?
 Ylhsidlihc, serusaelp yertnuoc no d’kcus tub?
 Neht llit d’naew ton ew erew? D’vol ew llit, did
 I dna, uoht tabw, htort ym yb rednow i?”*

Foster concentrated intensely as she reads, but in the end, he could pretend to have understood any of it. He was impressed, however, with the way she read it and convinced that it was indeed profound and beautiful. He let it all soak in for a moment, and then in an eruption of passion, he fell onto one knee, grabbed her hand and kissed it passionately.

She looked at him in stunned amazement at first and then her face melted into a smile.

Foster’s consciousness caught up with him, and he rose from the ground to resume his place beside her

on the bench. He let go of her hand in the process and seemed embarrassed.

Annabelle faltered for an instant and then spoke.

“Would you hold my hand for a while?”

Foster was more than happy to oblige. Annabelle closed her eyes as if to savor the moment. Foster was touched that it seemed to mean so much to her and was still reeling from the fact that she understood his writing.

“I’m going to dedicate my work to you. Will you meet me here every night so that I can show you what I’ve written?”

She opened her eyes and smiled at him.

“I’d be honored.”

Chapter 6

I

Bubba knocked on the door to Foster's room one evening after dinner. He had a file folder with some correspondence in it in his hand.

"Foster?"

"Come in."

Bubba entered to find Foster combing his hair and straightening his coat in front of a mirror.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I've got some letters for you to sign. We seem to have hit a snag of some sort with the Fish and Game Commission, and I'm going to try a different tack. I didn't want to mention it at dinner."

Foster came over to sign the letters on the dresser without really looking at them. Bubba could see he was preoccupied.

"You going out?"

"Not really. I'm going to work for a bit and then meet Annabelle in the garden."

"Annabelle?"

“Yes, I met her in the garden the other night. I think she’s the most magnificent creature imaginable.”

Bubba was curious, but he was more concerned to make sure Foster signed all the letters properly.

“She understands my poetry.”

“She does? I’d like to meet her.”

“You haven’t met her?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“She’s very shy and sensitive, I think. I’ve never met anyone so beautiful. Do you think I should ask her to marry me?”

“Aren’t you rushing things a bit? How long have you known her?”

“I loved her from the moment I first saw her.”

II

Ruthie seemed a bit nervous as Thaxton Weatherby of Weatherby, Comstock, Carter and Johnston reviewed a file. Eventually he addressed Ruthie with polite formality.

“Just what exactly is it that you are concerned about, Mrs. Coleman?”

“Sir, doesn’t it strike you as a bit odd that someone would try to turn a thousand acres of prime real estate into a wildlife sanctuary?”

“I confess I hadn’t really given it much thought. We lawyers learn not to pass judgment on the whims and fancies of our fellow men.”

“So long as it fits within the letter of the law, it doesn’t matter what harm or good it does, I suppose.”

“Mrs. Coleman, I’ll be more than happy to review any of the provisions of the estate with you, if you’ll just tell me what it is that bothers you.”

“Foster has no business administering the estate.”

“Why do you say that?”

“He’s crazy as a loon.”

“That’s a rather serious allegation, Mrs. Coleman. Do you really believe he is mentally incompetent?”

“He’s completely and utterly insane.”

Thaxton started to peruse the file again.

“Surely Judge Abernathy wouldn’t...”

“How long has it been since you last saw Bubba ... Judge Abernathy?”

Thaxton shrugged, and Ruthie gave him a look which indicated that they can dismiss all consideration of Bubba’s evaluation of the situation. Thaxton went back to the file.

“What evidence do you have of his insanity?”

“Everything he’s done since he came to Bellevue. All you’d have to do is talk to him for five minutes and you’d see.”

Thaxton did not look up from the papers in the file.

“How much did you say C.D.C. offered you?”

Ruthie felt she was easing back into her element.

“There’s a sliding scale, depending on whether we want cash up front or a percentage of the gross revenues.

They also said they would cover any unusual legal fees I might incur.”

“You understand that we would need definite medical proof of his insanity. I can recommend an excellent psychiatrist who might be able to help evaluate the young man’s condition. His name is Wilhelm Van Merkle. My secretary can give you his phone number.”

III

Foster coaxed Annabelle along the garden path, towards the front of the house. He was dressed in his uniform. She was wearing her old-fashioned gown, and seemed even more beautiful in the full light of day than she had seemed by moonlight.

“Annabelle, my love, please don’t change your mind again.”

She was resisting him.

“I can’t. I just can’t do it.”

“Why not? They’re all perfectly harmless. All I want you to do is meet them and have dinner with everyone.”

“Please don’t make me do it.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid they won’t... I’m afraid they will ignore me and try to turn you against me.”

“Ignore you?”

“Please. Let’s just leave things the way they are. I’m so happy to have you. Don’t spoil it.”

“Nothing could turn me against you, Annabelle. I love you.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can, and you will. I won’t let you be intimidated by my relatives. After all, I’m the owner of this place.”

He offered Annabelle his arm, and she acquiesced. They walked towards the front porch.

Bubba, Sister Sarah, Aunt Lydia, Kathleen and Lee were sitting on the front porch drinking lemonade. Sister Sarah was rocking and fanning herself with a cardboard fan depicting Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.

A quizzical look came over Bubba’s face as he saw Foster approaching.

Foster and Annabelle came up the stairs onto the porch.

“I have the honor of presenting my fiancée, Miss Annabelle Jordan.”

Kathleen looked at Lee with a weird look on her face. He gestured discreetly to her with his hand, admonishing her not to jump to any conclusions; but then he himself began staring intently at Foster.

Annabelle smiled shyly and nodded her head. Bubba seemed temporarily at a loss, but then collects himself enough to rise from his chair.

Annabelle extended her hand to Bubba so that he could either shake it or kiss it, depending upon his degree of gentility.

Bubba ignored Annabelle’s hand completely. In fact he did not even look at her.

Foster did not seem to notice Bubba's rudeness. He proceeded with the introductions.

"Annabelle, this is Little Lee, Kathleen, Bubba, Sister Sarah and Aunt Lydia."

Sister Sarah seemed a bit puzzled by the proceedings and leaned over to Aunt Lydia as though she might be a reliable source of information.

"What is he talking about?"

Bubba tries to put things back on track.

"Would you care for some lemonade?"

Annabelle was obviously hurt by Bubba's refusal to take her hand, and she was getting uneasy about the way Lee was staring at Foster. Foster was oblivious to everything and simply glad that Bubba was making a polite gesture.

"Yes thank you."

Bubba poured a glass of lemonade and handed it to Foster.

Annabelle quickly realized that Bubba was not going to offer her a glass. It was beneath her to say anything, but she began tugging gently at Foster's arm.

"We want to say hello to Jack. We'll see you at dinner."

Foster bowed to them and began escorting Annabelle across the lawn towards the backyard. He was too happy and proud to notice that she was upset.

Lee watched Foster walk away. The look on Lee's face indicated he might be worried about the quality of the

last batch of grass he scored. He sniffed at his pipe and leaned over to whisper to Kathleen.

“Did you see another person with him?”

“I don’t think so.”

Bubba’s face reflected his own special mixture of resignation, compassion and delight.

“I think Foster has finally found a lady who can understand him.”

IV

As Foster and Annabelle approached the shed where Jack was working, the steam whistle screamed above the clattering and sputtering of the engine as Jack stoked the burner and threw the throttle wide open.

“Stand clear! Make way for the Abernathy Special!”

Foster stepped back as the steam tractor gave a lurch towards the door and then shuddered and burst a valve under the strain. Hot water sprayed everywhere and clouds of steam came billowing out of the shed.

Eventually Jack emerged from the shed to find Foster unfazed by the explosion, even though he and Annabelle were being enveloped by clouds of steam.

“Jack, I’d like to present my fiancée, Annabelle Jordan.”

The steam was so thick Jack couldn’t see his own hands, much less Foster or Annabelle.

“Pleased to meet you, I’m sure.”

V

An extra place had been set and the rest of the clan was seated as Foster came in, escorting Annabelle. He pulled a chair out for her, helped her up to the table, and then sat down next to her.

Ruthie watched with malicious satisfaction and then smiled graciously.

“What a pleasure to have Annabelle with us.”

Bubba stares at Ruthie as they bow their heads for grace.

“Heavenly Father, I’m just so happy I don’t know how to thank you for all the blessings you’re bestowing on us. I’ve got a couple of things I want to discuss with you, but we’ll do it later before I go to bed. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Lee wasted no time helping himself to a share of the day’s blessings.

“Amen!”

Jack was as usual still dripping with sweat and covered with grime.

“Don’t forget to put in a word about that main valve, Sarah. I could certainly use a little help out there, I tell you.”

Everyone started to eat with their usual enthusiasm, and all thought of conversation was buried in biscuits and collard greens.

Foster tapped his glass with a knife and rose to his feet with his glass of iced tea raised for a toast.

“I’d like to propose a toast to an angel, the most beautiful of all God’s creations, Miss Annabelle Jordan.”

The Colonel automatically raised a crock from the floor beside his chair and took a healthy swig. Bubba hesitated, and then raises his iced tea to toast halfheartedly. Little Lee nudges Kathleen, and they take a sip of tea. Sister Sarah begins to sing as she raises her glass.

*«For the beauty of the earth,
For the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth,
Over and around us lies.»*

Ruthie toasts with gusto.

“To Annabelle. May she always be with you.”

Jack was to be too hungry to pay attention to such civilities, and Lydia’s mind seemed to be elsewhere.

Foster sits back down, smiling at Annabelle, whose head is lowered modestly. He speaks softly to her as he sits.

“Soon to be Mrs. Stephen Foster Abernathy.”

Sister Sarah is still singing to herself as everyone continues eating.

*«Lord of all to Thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.»*

Kathleen shrieked and everyone dropped their forks. Annabelle dropped her water glass, and it spilled all over the table.

Kathleen was staring at the glass and her face was beginning to quiver. Lee took hold of her.

“What is it, baby?”

Lydia imposed her own interpretation on the events at hand.

“My God. They would come during dinner.”

Kathleen managed to whisper to Lee.

“That glass was levitating.”

“It’s okay, baby. Just ride it out.”

Annabelle was cringing in her chair and had started to cry. Foster put his arm around her solicitously and wiped her tears with his napkin.

“Are you all right, darling?”

Bubba picked up the glass and was mopping the water up with his napkin. Jesse shuffled in from the kitchen to help. Bubba tried to reassure everyone.

“It’s all right. No harm done.”

Annabelle gradually composed herself and spoke softly to Foster.

“I don’t think I’m hungry.”

“You don’t have to eat if you don’t want to. Would you like to go to your room or will you sit with us?”

“No, I’ll stay. I’ll be all right.”

Things settled down again and everyone resumed eating.

Ruthie’s face lit up as though she had just had the inspiration of the decade.

“Foster, you know what I think we should do? I think we should have a big party to announce your engagement and to introduce Annabelle to all our friends.”

Bubba glared at Ruthie. Lee rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath. Annabelle raised her head and smiled first at Ruthie, then at each of the other members of the family.

Bubba started to say something, but Foster beat him to it.

“I think that’s a grand idea.”

No one was looking at Annabelle. Ruthie seemed to be gloating.

VI

The driveway was filled with cars as guests arrived for a gala affair at the mansion. It was a motley crowd, from all walks of life, dressed in all manner of garments.

A combo consisting of piano, violin, electric bass, banjo, accordion and French horn filled the house with music. A slightly out of tune piano and the lack of expertise among some of the musicians did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm with which they played.

Bubba could be seen in the hall, greeting guests as they arrive. Foster stood stiffly on one side of the room, obviously waiting anxiously for the moment when Annabelle would make her entrance.

Jesse entered, carrying an enormous punch bowl, which looked as though it would slip from his grasp any second. Kathleen and Lee hastened to help him carry it across the room to the table.

Once the punch bowl was safe, Jesse turned to start back towards the kitchen. When he reached the middle of the room, he straightened up and broke into a dance.

Jesse couldn't cut the pigeon wing like he could when he was seventeen, but he still had a style of his own. When he reached the far side of the room, he resumed walking in his normal manner; and no one except Lee and Kathleen seemed to have picked up on his performance.

Lydia was fluttering about the room with a fan, too excited to do anything except blush and smile at the guests.

Sarah was chatting with the Reverend Mr. Wilcox.

"I was glad when they said unto me let's have a party. Jesus likes to hear a joyful noise."

VII

After most of the guests had arrived, Bubba was circulating through the crowd, speaking confidentially to the ones who seemed to be capable of rational thought. One of these was Mrs. Dawson, the third grade teacher at the school.

"Mrs. Dawson, I feel I really must explain something to you and ask you to be understanding. Our Ruthie has a problem. I don't think it is serious, but she has this obsession with getting Foster married, and we tried to humor her; but it's gotten all out of proportion. She's started seeing things, and she wanted us to have this party so we could all meet this girl. Foster has agreed to play along,

and I'd appreciate it if you refrain from saying anything that would rock the boat. In fact, if you could just pretend..."

"I understand, Judge. I'll do what I can."

"Thank you. I knew you'd understand."

He then took Sam Magill aside.

"Sam, you gotta do me a favor. We're playing a big joke on Ruthie. When we introduce Annabelle, pretend that you see her and that you think she's the loveliest girl you've ever seen. We want Ruthie to feel that she's the only one who doesn't see her."

Sam smiled as though this kind of thing was old hat to him.

"Gotcha."

Bubba turned to see Ruthie enter with Thaxton Weatherby.

Before he could do anything, the orchestra sounded a fanfare; and Foster stepped forward to make an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to present my fiancée and the love of my life, Miss Annabelle Jordan."

He gestured towards the hall where Annabelle descended the stairs and walked gracefully towards the living room.

About half the guests broke into applause, and the murmuring among the rest might well have been a reaction to her glowing beauty.

Foster walked over to greet her, offering her his arm and escorting her out into the middle of the dance floor.

Mrs. Dawson had edged her way over to Ruthie.

“What a lovely girl. I think she’s the perfect match for him.”

Ruthie was caught off guard by the woman’s remark, but responds with instinctive irony.

“I’m sure she is.”

The orchestra bridged into an approximation of a waltz, and Foster and Annabelle began dancing.

Ruthie watches smugly and glances around to see how the others are responding. No one else seems to notice anything peculiar.

Sam Magill steps up and bows to Ruthie. “May I have this dance?”

Ruthie was on her guard, but at the same time she felt triumphant enough to go ahead and dance.

“Yes, thank you.”

As they began to waltz, she caught a glimpse of Bubba leading Thaxton Weatherby off to the library for a chat.

“Isn’t she beautiful?”

Ruthie was too distracted to catch Sam’s comment.

“What?”

“Forgive me. I should know better than to remark on another woman’s beauty.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Annabelle, of course.”

He whirled her around in an exaggerated waltz step. She held on for dear life and glanced at Bubba and Thaxton as the door to the library closed.

Some of the other people followed Sam's cue, and the dance floor began to fill up. William danced with Susan, who had stayed up late for the party. Jack and Kathleen made a handsome couple, as did Lee and Sarah.

Ruthie was beginning to be puzzled by the way things are going.

As they danced past Foster and Annabelle, Sam nodded and smiled in Annabelle's direction and spoke to Foster.

"You're a mighty lucky young man."

Ruthie had had enough. She stopped dancing in the middle of the dance floor.

"Okay, Funny boy, you can call off the charade."

"What's the matter?"

She started to walk away from him towards the library.

"Wait."

He caught up with her and took her hand.

"You ought not to just leave your partner in the middle of the floor."

Ruthie turned on him.

"Listen, creep. I've had enough of your little practical joke."

She was creating enough of a scene to attract a fair amount of attention. Foster and Annabelle stopped dancing and stood nearby.

“Some of these humanoids may be seeing things, but I know there’s no Annabelle, and I know you know there’s no Annabelle. If Bubba thinks he can fool Mr. Weatherby with this kind of cheap stunt, he’s got another think coming.”

Annabelle heard all of this and appeared to be deeply hurt. She burst out crying and started running upstairs.

Foster ran after her. “Annabelle! “

Foster and Annabelle disappeared upstairs, leaving Ruthie standing in the middle of the dance floor with everyone staring at her.

Bubba and Thaxton emerged from the library, looking as though they had had a very cordial conversation.

VIII

Annabelle threw herself onto the four poster bed weeping. Foster knelt beside her.

“It’s no use. I can’t marry you.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Your family will never accept me.”

“My family loves you.”

“They think I’m a joke. Oh Foster, I wanted so much to have them accept me.”

“I’ll make them accept you.”

His determination evoked a smile through her tears.

“Dear sweet Foster. You can’t make people believe in something if they don’t want to.”

Foster rose to his feet.

“I’ll make them want to.”

“Darling, you don’t know what you are saying.”

Foster sits beside her to comfort her.

“I don’t know what I write either, but I believe in it.”

“Oh Foster, didn’t you hear what Ruthie said?”

“Ruthie’s always flying off the handle. Don’t pay any attention to her.”

“Your family will never take me seriously because they don’t think I’m real. I don’t exist for them.”

“What do you mean?”

“They don’t even see me.”

“That’s crazy. I know they’re a little weird. They may be rude, but they’re not blind.”

“Foster, they don’t see me.”

Annabelle tried to be gentle with Foster even though she was deeply hurt.

“Kathleen screamed at lunch that day because she saw my glass move without being able to see me.”

“No, she was just on a bumper or something.”

“Even Bubba doesn’t see me. I hoped at first he was just being rude, but it’s clear to me now. None of them can see me.”

The ground seemed to be giving way under Foster.

“But how can they not see you?”

“I’m not real.”

She started to cry again.

“Don’t be silly.”

He put his arm around her and began to kiss her arms and shoulders.

“You’re more real than anything else in the world.”

“You never treat me as though I were real.”

Tears began pouring out as she lost all self-control.

“What are you talking about? I worship you.”

“You don’t act as though I had a body.”

Foster was momentarily stunned but then he took her face in his hands.

“Annabelle. Oh Annabelle. If I seem uninterested in your body, it’s only because I...You seem so reserved and modest. I was afraid of... I didn’t want to offend you.”

He started smothering her with kisses.

“Hold me. Hold me, Foster.”

They were both swimming in tears as they embraced passionately on the bed.

Chapter 7

I

A damselfly darted from one leaf to another. Drops of water sparkled like diamonds on a spider's web. Leaves fluttered in the breeze. The sun poured through the branches overhead like golden rain. An iridescent green beetle scampered through the grass. The air was charged with the buzzing of hidden grasshoppers. The entire swamp was a symphony of midsummer splendor.

Foster woke up in bed next to Annabelle. He raised his head off the pillow to look at her. She was sleeping peacefully with a slight smile on her lips.

Foster admired her for a moment and then reached over to gently brush her hair away from her eyes. She stirred slightly and rolled over towards him, putting her head against his shoulder. She spoke without opening her eyes.

“Do you love me?”

“I adore you.”

He kissed her gently on the forehead.

“We don’t need my family. We don’t need anything but each other.”

“Promise me you’ll never leave me.”

“I promise.”

“No matter what your family says about me?”

“Forget about my family. You don’t ever have to see them again. So far as I’m concerned we can just stay right here for the rest of our lives.”

They snuggled for a moment. Then she lifted the sheet up to look at her body.

“Do you like my body?”

“You have the most beautiful body in all creation.”

They embrace.

II

Kathleen came out of her room in her bathrobe and encountered Foster. He was bounding up the stairs, headed for his room and carrying a tray. On the tray was a meal for two complete with silverware, crystal, linen napkins, and a lily in a bud vase.

He practically bowled Kathleen over with his exuberance.

“H’you today, Kathleen?”

“I’m okay. What hit you?”

Foster paused and winked to Kathleen before opening the door to his room.

“Love.”

He disappeared into his room, and Kathleen went down stairs.

Ruthie came out of her room, glanced around nonchalantly, and then quickly slipped a note under Foster's door.

III

Bubba was getting a glass of ice water from the refrigerator, while Kathleen fixed a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

"Do you worry about him spending so much of his time locked in his room?"

"He's probably better off there than he would be anywhere else in the world."

"He certainly seems happy enough whenever I see him."

Foster entered, wearing a bathrobe and looking as though he had just woken up.

"Speak of the devil. How are you, Foster?"

"Marvelous. Just marvelous."

Kathleen instinctively wanted to nurture him.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, I just want to get a snack before I meet the people Ruthie's got."

Needless to say Bubba was suspicious.

"Ruthie?"

"Yes. She has some people who are interested in my work."

"But I thought..."

Ruthie came bustling into the kitchen.

“Oh, there you are, Foster. They’re all here waiting to meet you.”

Ruthie whisked Foster out of the kitchen before Bubba can do anything.

Bubba turned to Kathleen.

“How the hell did she manage that?”

IV

Ruthie introduced Foster to three rather peculiar looking gentlemen.

“Foster, this is Mr. Van Merkle, Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Hofstadter. If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have some things to do.”

She beat a hasty retreat, leaving a somewhat puzzled Foster standing in front of the three men who had not risen from their seats, but sat gazing intensely at Foster. Van Merkle gestured to a chair in the middle of the floor and spoke with a thick European accent.

“Please, sit down.”

Foster sat down apprehensively.

“Tell us about your work, Foster.”

Foster sensed something was not quite right, but this morning he was willing to believe anything.

“There’s nothing much to tell really. I’m an oracle.”

“A what?”

“An oracle, a mouthpiece for the Divine.”

“I see. And how did you become an oracle?”

“It just happened to me. I was trying to be a poet, but I never had anything to say. Then one day I became inspired.”

“How did you know you were inspired?”

“I discovered I had written something I didn’t understand. I knew I couldn’t have written it by myself, so I realized that it must be the Divine Spirit speaking through me.

All three men made notes and nodded significantly.

“Could we see some of your writing?”

“I don’t think you’d understand it.”

There was a pause while Foster debated whether to elaborate.

Van Merkle pushed things along a little.

“Is there anyone who does understand what you write, Foster?”

“Yes.”

“Who is that?”

“My fiancée.”

The men looked at each other and made more notes.

“Would you be so kind as to introduce us to your fiancée.”

“She doesn’t like strangers.”

“Has she met the rest of your family?”

“I introduced her to everyone, but they were so rude she decided not to associate with them anymore. Now she sees no one.”

They made more notes and conferred with each other in whispers. Pedersen decides to take a different tack.

“Foster, can you explain to me what is meant by the expression, ‘A rolling stone gathers no moss?’”

Foster looked at Pedersen as though he must be a bit crazy. Hofstadter leapt in with another question before Foster could get too suspicious about Pedersen.

“What is your fiancée’s name?”

“Annabelle Jordan.”

“And how did you meet?”

“We met in the garden.”

“In the garden?”

“She used to walk in the garden at night... although I’ve often suspected that she was walking there because she knew I was working and would see her.”

“What makes you say that?”

Foster just smiled.

“Does Annabelle remind you of your mother at all?”

“No.”

“What sort of woman was your mother?”

“She was a Gallagher.”

“A what?”

“A Gallagher from Moulton County. Her maternal grandfather was Colonel Harrison Bodley of the Sixth Cavalry.”

“I see.”

Hofstadter made copious notes as Foster and the other two men stared blankly at each other.

V

Foster was seated at his writing desk overlooking the garden. Annabelle was sitting on the bed and appeared to be sulking.

“If you were so eager to talk about your work, why didn’t you show them some of it?”

Foster replied half-heartedly without turning around.

“I would have if they had really been interested.”

“So they weren’t really interested in your work after all. Why did they want to talk to you?”

He turned around to face her, exasperated that his concentration had been spoiled and afraid of the answer to her question.

“Annabelle, how am I supposed to be able to write if you keep on asking me questions?”

“You’re not supposed to.”

“Sometimes I think that you don’t want me to write at all, that you don’t care whether I have a calling or not.”

“I’m your calling. You don’t need to write love poems if you have me.”

“They’re not just love poems. They’re metaphors for something else.”

“How do you know?”

That was a low blow, and it hurt.

“I don’t.”

Annabelle saw how much she had hurt him and got up to go over to him.

“Let’s go for a walk. I need to get out of this room.”

VI

Annabelle leaned her head on Foster's shoulder as they walked in the garden.

"It's just that I miss you - even when you're writing or just going downstairs to get the food. And this afternoon it seemed like forever when you were down there talking to those men."

"I understand."

"I want to be in your arms all the time."

He stopped and turned to embrace her. Tears welled up in her eyes as they kissed.

"I love you, Annabelle. I'd throw all my writing out the window if you really wanted me to."

She hugged him with her head against his chest so that he could not see the expression on her face.

"Don't you think a baby would be more fun than a poem?"

Foster laughed affectionately, and they resumed walking.

A figure stepped out of the shadows in front of them. There was a blinding flash, and Ruthie ducked back into the bushes with her camera.

VII

Bubba gave a prescription to the pharmacist.

He glanced at it and then chatted with Bubba as he filled it.

"I hope this isn't anything serious, Judge Abernathy."

“No. Doctor Gresham just wants me to have them in case life gets too exciting out at Bellevue. He gave my heart some kind of lie detector test and discovered I was getting old.”

Bubba turned and noticed Ruthie at the photo counter on the other side of the store. She had picked up some snapshots and a roll of home movies and was hurriedly looking through the snapshots. She did not see Bubba approach.

“New pictures of the kids?”

Ruthie was a little startled, but she kept on looking through the snapshots.

“As a matter of fact, I have a photo of Annabelle.”

She found the snapshot she was looking for and held it up triumphantly for Bubba.

It was a photo of Foster walking in the garden at night. He was alone and held one arm out as though offering it to a lady. There was no lady in the photo, but there were some smudges or chemical stains on the area of the picture next to Foster. The entire photo was crooked and a little blurred.

Bubba scrutinized it.

“Oh, no, that’s Foster. Annabelle is much prettier than that.”

Ruthie jerked the photo back and glared at Bubba.

“Aren’t you witty.”

Bubba turned to go back to the prescription counter.

“The only thing that photo proves is how good a photographer you are.”

VIII

The drapes in the lawyer's office were closed so that home movies could be projected onto one wall. Ruthie was running the projector for Thaxton Weatherby and Burton Comstock.

On the screen was little Susan Coleman dressed in a ballet costume, dancing on the lawn. The record she was dancing to played on the sound track. This was followed by several shots of Graham obstinately refusing to perform whatever feats were being demanded of him. Bits and pieces of William's off-camera attempts to persuade him to start could be heard. Ruthie is obviously embarrassed.

"It's on the end of the reel. I asked my husband to splice it onto a separate reel, but he ... Here we go."

The image went dark as the home movies cut to an under-exposed sequence, apparently shot in the garden at Bellevue at sunrise.

Thaxton strained to interpret the image.

"Is that him on the left?"

There was a brief shot of Foster in the garden, some distance from the camera and partially obscured by foliage as the camera panned to follow him. No one else was visible in the shot, but it was clearly the moment when Foster was walking with Annabelle in the garden.

"Yes. Watch now and you will see him turn. He's talking to her and putting his arm around her."

Thaxton glanced over at Burton who seemed to be a bit skeptical.

Foster turned around and appeared to be hugging an invisible lady. The sound track was mostly crickets, but Foster could be heard laughing as he started walking again right before the film ran out in the middle of the shot.

They sat silently in the darkness for a moment, and then Thaxton reached for a switch on a lamp beside him. Burton was discreetly shaking his head.

“By itself it wouldn’t carry much weight. It’s conceivable, I suppose, that the film could be used along with some Xeroxes of his writing to corroborate the doctors’ testimony.”

“How soon can you get the papers?”

Burton was feeling a little uncomfortable. “

You must understand, Mrs. Coleman, this is not a simple matter.”

“C.D.C. has agreed to pay any additional legal fees necessary to insure positive results by the end of the month.”

Thaxton wanted to reassure her.

“We’re moving as fast as we can, Mrs. Coleman. Let me put together something with the material we have, and I’ll call you in a few days.”

Chapter 8

I

The summer afternoon heat saturated the plantation like molasses poured from Above. Everyone in his right mind had retreated to the nearest chair and vowed not to exert himself for the duration. Jack was in the barn, stoking the boiler on his tractor.

Two cars pulled up in front of the mansion. The first was a state police car with Ruthie in the backseat. The second was an ambulance with two paramedics in white outfits.

A state trouper got out of the patrol car and went up onto the porch where Lee and The Colonel were sitting in a stupor.

“Can you tell me where I can find Stephen Foster Abernathy?”

Neither Lee nor The Colonel reacted in any noticeable way to the Trooper’s presence or the sound of his voice.

“Excuse me.”

The Colonel raised his drinking hand almost imperceptibly and gestured with his little finger. It could have been a toast or a magical gesture banishing the intruder to Eternal Darkness.

The trooper decided to take more direct action. He stepped boldly forward to knock on the door.

There was no answer for the longest time, but the Trooper held his ground.

The door opened. Lydia took one look at the Trooper and slammed the door in his face, screaming hysterically.

The Trooper tried to open the door again, only to discover that she had locked it. He banged on the door with his fist.

“Open this door, in the name of the law!”

Lee and The Colonel remained unperturbed.

The Trooper glanced back at the car to see if anyone could advise him, and then turned to resume banging on the door.

A shotgun went off inside, and a few buckshot shattered the small window above the door. The Trooper immediately dropped to the floor and rolled away from the door drawing his revolver.

Bubba could be heard screaming inside.

“Lydia!”

The second trooper leaped out of the car drawing his gun and assumed a position near the porch steps.

The shotgun went off again. This time the gun was apparently pointed more towards the hall ceiling than the front door.

The noise of the gunshots penetrated Lee's fog, and he turned squinting to behold the two Troopers with guns drawn ready for action.

Inside Bubba wrestled with Lydia, trying to wrench the smoking gun from her hands. She struggled for all she was worth trying to fight off her assailant.

"Let go of me, you filthy Yankee! I'll die before I let you defile me."

"It's me, Lydia. Calm down."

Kathleen came running into the hall from the back of the house.

"What the hell's going on?"

Sister Sarah was in the living room where she knelt on the floor in prayer.

The state trooper shouted from the porch again.

"Open up in there, we have a warrant for Stephen Foster Abernathy."

Kathleen gasped and bolted up the stairs.

"Oh my God."

Lydia collapsed into a swoon relinquishing control of the gun, and Bubba eased her into a chair.

"Open that door and come out with your hands up."

Bubba opened the front door with no intention of raising his hands. The Troopers braced themselves for a showdown.

"Put those guns away and get off this property at once."

The calm authority of Bubba's reprimand punctured the troopers' confidence and cast the whole situation in a new light. They were too well trained however to back off

"I'm sorry, Sir, but we've got orders to take Stephen Foster Abernathy to Sunnyside State Hospital."

Upstairs Kathleen was banging on the locked door to Foster's room.

"Foster! Foster! Ruthie's brought the cops!"

Bubba held his ground.

"I don't care what kind of papers you have, you're not coming inside this house."

"Our orders are to escort Mr. Abernathy to Sunnyside. If we have to use force to take him, we will."

Foster emerged from a second story window onto the roof of the porch. As he began running towards the end of the roof, he was spotted by Ruthie. She jumped from the car pointing wildly at Foster.

"There he is! Get him!"

Foster reached the end of the porch and leaped onto a limb of a large tree by the driveway.

Just as the Troopers arrived at the trunk of the tree, there was an ear-piercing screech as Jack and his steam tractor came rumbling around the house. The boiler had a full head of steam, and Jack was yelling almost as loud as the steam whistle.

Foster jumped down onto the tractor as it almost ran over the troopers.

The paramedics sprang out of the ambulance to join the Troopers in the chase.

Ruthie went up onto the porch to lord it over Bubba.

“Your little practical joke is over, Bubba. He’s going to the looney bin where he belongs, and we’re going to turn this pigsty into the most exclusive community in the South.”

“I won’t stand for this, Ruthie. By God, I’ll make you eat everyone of the contracts you’ve signed.”

“It’s not just me, Bubba. You’re up against one of the biggest conglomerates in the world.”

The Colonel had shuffled over towards Ruthie while taking a swig from his jug.

The Colonel stood a little too close to Ruthie, and stared at her as he swayed back and forth. When she finally turned to glare at him, The Colonel spewed out a mouthful of whiskey into her face.

Uncle Jack’s tractor came barreling across the front lawn with Foster on board, and the Troopers and Paramedics in hot pursuit.

One of the Troopers jumped back into the car and drove it up onto the lawn and into a position to block the tractor.

The tractor plowed into the car as Jack gave her full throttle and blew the whistle for all it was worth.

The car rolled onto its side; but something gave, and the tractor let out an enormous hiss, filling the air with a cloud of vapor.

The troopers and paramedics chased Foster around the lawn through the steam cloud. When they finally

grabbed him, one of the paramedics whipped out a syringe and gave Foster a quick injection in the hip.

Everything had happened too fast for Bubba to intervene. The steam cloud enveloped Foster whose eyes went bleary as he collapsed into the paramedics' arms. The two paramedics began dragging him towards the ambulance.

“What about those other guys?”

“This is the only one we have papers on. Get him in the ambulance and let's get out of here.”

II

Hundreds of wounded and dying Confederate soldiers lay on blankets and cots in the remains of a warehouse being used for an army hospital. Somewhere in the night outside cannon volleys battered down the last remains of Civilization, and the sky flickered with the light of burning cities.

Two doctors and a handful of volunteer nurses moved through the soldiers trying to act as though there was some hope of restoring these men to normal productive lives.

Foster lay on the floor under a blanket. He appeared to be unconscious.

A woman knelt beside him and wiped his face with a rag. Foster opened his eyes to behold Annabelle. She wore a nurse's cap, and her elegant gown was soiled with dirt and blood. She seemed exhausted and ill, but her eyes glowed with a sense of purpose.

“I can’t move my arms or legs.”

“Just rest now. You’ll need your energy later.”

She kissed his hand and touched his forehead before moving away to another soldier.

III

Foster woke up wrapped in a blanket in a wagon being pulled by a mule along a rough dirt road. Refugees and stragglers from the retreating Confederate Army walked in the dark beside the wagon.

Cannons still echoed in the distance, and the horizon glowed with flames.

Foster tried to raise his head up to see where he was. He could not free his arms underneath the blanket, but he managed to pull himself up for a brief moment.

The wagon lurched, throwing Foster back down. The road descended sharply to a riverbank where there was a ford. A rope had been strung across the river to help people on foot make it across. The horses seemed barely able to keep their footing in the current.

As Foster’s wagon started across the river, it began to float, and its wheels rose off the bottom. It was caught in the current and swung out beside the mule.

As the driver struggled with the mule, the wagon began leaking in several places. Foster struggled to get free from the blanket as water poured into the wagon.

The wagon capsized, and Foster was swept away by the current. Still bound by the blanket and barely able to

keep his head above water Foster disappeared into the night.

IV

The Voice of God thundered in the darkness just as it did in days of old for Cecil B. DeMille.

“Stephen Foster Abernathy!”

Foster tries to respond to the call.

“*Here am I.*”

“Stephen Foster Abernathy!”

“*Speak, for thy servant heareth.*”

For some reason it was Annabelle who replied.

“You have a visitor.”

Foster gradually regained his sight and discovered he was in a small white room with nothing in it but a cot. Sunlight streamed through a small window above him.

He caught a glimpse of Annabelle in a clean white nurse’s uniform as she left the room closing the door behind her.

Jesse stood in front of Foster with his hat in his hand.

“De Judge sent me to give you de Word.”

“Yes?”

“*De Tar Baby she ain’t saying nothin’ en Br’er Fox, he lay low.*”

Jesse vanished into thin air. Foster began to lose consciousness.

Chapter 9

I

During his stay at Sunnyside Foster was subjected to every conceivable kind of psychiatric treatment. He was given pills, injections, hot baths, massages, electroshock therapy, you name it. There were tests which resembled nursery school activities, psycho-dramas and group discussions with other inmates, exercises in which he was encouraged to vent all his anger on large cushions with a plastic baseball bat. All to the accompaniment of endless questions from a variety of voices about everything from how he felt about his bowel movement to why he wanted to be a poet. References to Annabelle or “this girl you see” punctuated the jabbering voices like a leitmotiv.

II

The moon shone through the bars on the windows filling the ward with soft shadows. A patient sang in his sleep while Foster slept quietly at one end of the ward.

A nurse entered at the opposite end and glided through the ward like an angel of mercy, checking briefly to see that each patient was resting comfortably. It was Annabelle.

When she reached Foster's bed, she leaned over to give him a kiss on the forehead. Foster's eyes opened and a sleepy smile spread across his face. He reached to take her arm.

"Stay for a minute and let me look at you."

She smiled and sat on the edge of his bed.

"They keep me so drugged here I can't even think. And I have no sense of time at all. I don't have any idea how long I've been here."

Foster hesitated before broaching the next topic.

"I think I've figured out how to get out of here though."

Annabelle stiffened apprehensively.

"I think all I have to do is pretend you don't exist. It's crazy, I know, but that seems to be what it boils down to. Every time the doctor talks to me he always..."

Foster noticed that Annabelle was crying.

"Annabelle, don't. Oh Angel, you have to understand. I've got to get out of here so we can go back to Bellevue."

"I don't want to lose you."

"You're not going to lose me. Think of it as a joke we're playing on them."

"It's not very funny to me."

"It'll only be temporary. We'll be out of here in a month or two. I guarantee it."

“No. If you want me, it’s here and now or never.”

“Don’t be like that. We can’t stay here. Look, when we go back to Bellevue, I promise I’ll be yours completely. I’ll forget about my writing. I’ll even get Kathleen to bring our meals up to the room so I never have to leave you.”

“I’m not interested in promises.”

“I have to get out of here. I’m doing it for us. It won’t be so bad. You’ll see. We’ll be out of here in no time, and then we can be together forever.”

III

Foster was busily making a clay pot while Annabelle sat opposite him looking hurt. He ignored her totally as he worked. She made a face at him, but he paid no attention. She tried again, with an even more ridiculous face. He still did not respond.

She poked her finger into his pot, but he just kept working the clay as though nothing had happened.

Miss Simpson, the nurse in charge of the craft shop, paused to watch Foster work. Annabelle put her hand under the table onto Foster’s thigh and began tickling her way up towards his crotch.

Foster jerked his legs away from Annabelle as Miss Simpson commented on his work.

“Why, Foster, I just think that’s marvelous. I’m so proud of you.”

Foster responded with excessive enthusiasm and deference.

“Why thank you, Miss Simpson.”

As the nurse moved away to observe another patient, Foster noticed that Annabelle had started to cry. He broke down and spoke to her in an aggravated whisper.

“For Christ’s sake, give me a break. I’ve almost got this thing licked and you’re gonna blow the whole thing.”

Miss Simpson turned back towards Foster.

“Did you say something, Foster.”

“No, m’am. I’m just trying to get this clay to cooperate.”

IV

Foster was in his pajamas and had just finished brushing his teeth when the night nurse offered him a sleeping pill.

“How ‘bout it, Foster? Need a pill tonight?”

“No thanks. I’m sleeping fine without them these days.”

“Good.”

The nurse moved on to the other patients, and Foster walked over towards his bunk.

Annabelle was asleep under the covers in his bunk - or at least she was pretending to be asleep. She opened one eye and peeped at him as Foster sighed impatiently and crowded into bed next to her.

Annabelle snuggled up to Foster and tickled his ear with her tongue.

Foster just grit his teeth, closed his eyes and lay perfectly rigid.

Annabelle slid on top of Foster and began kissing his face playfully.

Foster whispered through clenched teeth without opening his eyes or moving at all.

“Please, Annabelle. I’m scheduled to go home a week from Thursday. Don’t make me do anything we’d regret.”

Annabelle just kept on kissing him.

“All you have to do is hang in there for another week and then ride back to Bellevue with me.”

When Annabelle began caressing Foster under the covers, it was more than he could take.

“Come on, goddammit!”

He pushed her off of him and stood up out of bed. The nurse saw him stand up.

“Is anything wrong, Foster?”

“No m’am. I’m just excited about going home next week. Maybe I will take a pill tonight.”

The nurse came over to give him a pill.

“Okay. It’s not a bad idea.”

Annabelle caught Foster’s eye as he started to take the pill. He hesitated as he saw the anger and pain in her face.

He turned his back on her and gulped down the pill.

V

Foster was dressed in Montgomery Ward’s most stylish casual outfit, as he said goodbye all around. Lee stood nearby holding Foster’s suitcase and looking more uncomfortable every second.

“Hey man, whadyasay we split?”

“Right. I just want to say farewell to everyone.”

Foster shook every hand in the room, but he still did not seem ready to go.

“You ready?”

Foster glanced around rapidly as though he was looking for someone.

“Right.”

He finally started to leave.

“I don’t mean to tear you away. I just don’t want anyone to start asking me any questions. They might think I should stay for a visit.”

Foster pretended to savor the fresh air and sunshine of freedom as Lee threw the suitcase into the trunk of Bubba’s car and got into the driver’s seat. Foster looks around anxiously.

“You comin’?”

Foster opened the door, but didn’t get in. Lee gave up and took advantage of the moment to light up his corncob pipe.

Foster finally climbed in. He had a puzzled look on his face.

Lee offers the pipe to him.

“Here. Try a little of this.”

“No thanks.”

As the car pulled out of the drive onto the highway, Foster turned in his seat to look back anxiously.

Lee breathed a long sigh of relief and settled down for a nice mellow trip.

Foster caught a glimpse of a figure walking through the trees just inside the wall surrounding the hospital grounds.

“Wait! Stop!”

Lee screeched to a stop, as Foster jumped out of the car to run towards the trees.

There was no one in sight, and Foster became very aware of the way Lee and the security guard at the gate were looking at him.

He spoke in a desperate whisper.

“Annabelle?”

He glanced around quickly and then recomposed himself as he walked back towards the car.

“Sorry. I thought I saw one of the guys I hadn’t said goodbye to.”

He waved goodbye to the security guard and climbed into the car as Lee laid rubber.

Chapter 10

I

Lee and Foster turned onto the road to the Bellevue mansion. Winter had stripped the leaves from the trees and trampled much of the underbrush. There was an enormous billboard near the drive, celebrating plans for “Southern Shores,” a resort community to be brought to you by Coastal Development Corporation. There was also a small historical marker declaring Bellevue Plantation Mansion to be an historical monument.

Lee and Foster pulled up in front of the mansion. Much of the side yard had been covered with asphalt, and there were eight or ten cars parked there. The house itself was clearly in the process of being restored.

Lee stopped near the front porch to let Foster out.

“I’ll park the car and bring your suitcase up later.”

Foster was too distracted by the sight of the house to question Lee’s suggestion. He stepped out of the car without even speaking and looked around the grounds as Lee drove through the parking lot.

The garden where Foster first met Annabelle had been completely cleaned up, pruned and replanted. Where there had once been a riot of vines and flowers, there were now orderly rows of scraggly young hedges and stumps of rose bushes.

The impact of this was heightened by the partially repainted house. Even though the new porch furniture was very tasteful and completely in keeping with the style of the house, there was something too clean and fresh about it.

A brass plaque on the front door discreetly announced the presence of offices of the Coastal Development Corporation.

The change which greeted Foster as he entered the house was even more radical than the exterior renovation. Again every detail was tasteful in the extreme but sterile in comparison to the house's former dilapidated glory.

There was a receptionist's desk in the parlor, and the adjoining room had apparently been converted into a suite of offices. The living room had been preserved, and some of the original furniture had been kept on display.

One new item which caught Foster's eye was a large antique oil painting above the fireplace in the living room. He gazed in amazement as he realized it was a portrait of Annabelle.

Foster was walking slowly towards the portrait when a group of tourists led by a Girl Scout descended the stairway into the hall behind him.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t answer all of your questions, but I hope y’all enjoyed our little tour. Y’all can walk around the grounds for a while if you want, and the model home I told you about is open ‘til nine. And y’all help yourself to any of the brochures on the hall table. Thank you.”

She graciously declined a few tips and exchanged pleasantries as the group milled about the hall and started to leave. Then she noticed Foster in the living room and came up behind him.

“I’m sorry, sir, but the house closes in fifteen minutes. Did you want to take the tour?”

“Where did this portrait come from?”

“They found it in the attic. That’s Amanda Johnston. She was the fiancée of Captain Joseph Abernathy.”

“He died in the war?”

“Yessir and so did she. Some say she died of malaria, but others say she died of a broken heart.”

Foster sank slowly into an easy chair as he sorted through this information.

“I’m sorry, sir, but you’re not supposed to sit on the furniture.”

Foster does not respond.

“Sir?”

Foster remained lost in thought. Lee entered the hall carrying Foster’s suitcase. The Girl Scout hurried over to speak to him in hushed tones.

“Lee, there’s a man in here sitting on the furniture, and I can’t get him to stand up.”

Lee glances into the living room and spots Foster.

“It’s okay, sugar. I’ll handle it.”

“Oh thanks, Lee. You’re a doll. I’ll go let Lydia out.”

She went into the parlor, and Lee walked into the living room. He sat down on the couch near Foster.

“You all right, my man?”

Foster finally surfaced.

“Sure, I’m fine.”

He glances around the room.

“It’s just a little difficult to adjust.”

“Yeah. Things have changed a bit since you left.”

“Where’s Bubba?”

“In his room probably.”

II

Foster knocked on the door to Bubba’s room. “Who is it?”

“Stephen Foster Abernathy, recently returned from the war.”

“Come in. Come in.”

Foster entered the room to see Bubba coming towards him in a motorized wheelchair.

“How are you? Damn, it’s good to see you.”

“What happened to you?”

“What? You mean this thing? I just got this so I wouldn’t have to waste any energy on the mundane things in life. Watch this.”

He executed a tight figure eight in reverse, almost knocking over a lamp.

“Sit down. Sit down.”

Foster settled into a chair as Bubba came to a halt.

“Nobody told me.”

“I reckon they didn’t tell you a whole lot about anything in that place. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“I had a stroke, but you’re looking fit.”

“How’s Lydia ... and Sarah?”

Bubba can’t maintain his bouyant spirits.

“They’re okay, I guess. Ruthie keeps Lydia in her room all day, but she lets her roam around at night. And Sarah spends most of her time praying, of course.”

“The place looks really awful.”

“Yeah. Since she had it declared an historical monument, all the “improvements” are deductible. I stay up here most of the time.”

“What about Jack and The Colonel?”

Bubba smiles nostalgically.

“The Colonel’s run out of home brew, but I think he’s getting used to the store-bought stuff. Jack’s having the time of his life. With all the clearing they’ve done, he’s got a three hundred acre sand pile for his tractor.”

Foster smiled with Bubba.

“One of the last things I remember before the hospital was Jack coming around the corner of the house full steam ahead.”

Bubba laughed, but it faded quickly.

“I’m sorry I let them take you away.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I tried everything I could to stop her – even after she had you put away. The doctor thinks maybe I even tried too hard.”

“Well, I got out. It took me a while, but I figured out how to get out. And I’ll pay her back somehow.”

“I’d like to see you do that.”

“Is she living here now?”

“No, she just moved into one of her fancy new houses. She has her office in the library though. What are your plans? Will you try to write?”

“No.”

Bubba expected Foster to elaborate on this, but he did not press him.

“That portrait over the fireplace in the living room... When did... Was that ever hanging in the house when I was a kid?”

“No, I don’t think I ever saw it before. You wouldn’t believe the stuff they cleared out of the attic. Why do you ask?”

“It’s a... I was just curious. She looks just like a girl I know.”

“You know, I had a feeling the face was familiar, but I could never place it.”

Chapter 11

I

Foster sat gazing at the portrait of Annabelle, when he was startled by the voice of the receptionist, who had entered the room behind him.

“Mr. Abernathy, Mrs. Coleman will see you now.”

“Ah.”

He followed her through the hall towards the library.

Ruthie looked up from her desk as Foster enters her office.

“Come in. Sit down, Foster.”

He sits opposite her.

“Welcome back. You’re looking well.”

“Why thank you, Ruthie. You’re looking well situated yourself.”

“I was delighted to hear how effective the treatment was at Sunnyside.”

“Yes, I’ve been meaning to thank you for everything you did for me... making the arrangements and all.”

“Well I’m glad to hear that. I was afraid you might harbor some sort of resentment.

“Not at all. You did what you thought was best. How’s business?”

“Things are going quite well. You’ll be getting a quarterly statement in a few weeks. We’ve already sold thirteen lots, and the shops in the hotel arcade are all leased – except one. The eyeglass boutique has backed out.

“That’s just grand.”

“I’m quite pleased.”

“What can I do?”

“How do you mean?”

“Now that I’m back, I want to make myself useful.”

“Well that’s real thoughtful of you, Foster. And I’m sure it would be good for you to have something to do.”

Her mind was scrambling to come up with some way to keep Foster out of her hair.

“I’m not sure what would be the best position for you, but I’ll just have to put on my thinking cap and see what we can come up with.”

“I thought perhaps I could manage the hotel or the restaurant.”

“Yes, well, I believe the people for those positions are already set.”

The intercom buzzed, and Ruthie picked up the phone.

“Yes?. . Thank you.”

She punched another line on the phone and spun around in her chair turning her back on Foster.

“Gerald, I was just going to call you. It must be E.S.P. I’ve talked to Sam Halloway about Marvin, and he says it’s all a lot of hooley. Marvin can’t possibly move without Kline, and there is no way Kline is going to let go of the Charleston deal.”

Foster picked up the stack of correspondence on Ruthie’s desk and began perusing the letters.

“I know... That’s exactly what Sam said... Yes...”

She began to turn slowly back around towards Foster, who was totally absorbed in his reading. Ruthie realized what he was doing and rose out of her chair to retrieve the letters while she continued to talk. She just pulled them gently out of Foster’s hands without even really looking at him.

She laughed.

“No and neither can Manufacturers Bank... Well, I wouldn’t go that far... Right... Okay. I’ll see you Tuesday. Do you want me to call Tom? ... Okay ... Good ... Bye.”

She hung up and smiled sweetly at Foster.

“Now, where were we? You know I think the best thing for me to do is to get you together with Brad Townsend, who’s supervising our personnel operation. I’m sure he can find just the place for you.”

II

A small private plane touched down on the runway of an airfield located in the middle of the marshes. The airport consisted simply of a small hangar, the runway and a Coke machine.

A limousine pulled out onto the runway as the airplane taxis to a stop. As three businessmen climbed out of the airplane, Foster emerged from the limousine to greet them. He is dressed in a full Confederate uniform complete with brass buttons, gold epaulets and a wide-brimmed cavalry hat.

“H’y’all today? Have we got everybody?”

He opened the door of the limousine for the businessmen and then scurried back around to the driver’s seat.

As Foster drove the limousine through the construction sites which would soon be Southern Shores, he regaled his passengers with a running commentary on the site.

“As we drive to the office y’all can see a lot of the work that’s been done already. This section up here is a residential area, that’s gonna be Kingfisher Drive and all that part over there used to be the worst swamp you ever saw. There’s still some question as to whether the ground can really hold houses, but they tell me everything is just hunkydory and even if it does give way, it’ll be fifteen or twenty years for sure.

“Now that over there is going to be the golf course. They killed three coral snakes in there last week. I guess you don’t have them up North. They’re the kind that hold on to you and gnaw at your nerves rather than putting poison in your blood. The tennis courts and the pool will be over yonder where they’re fixing to build the clubhouse – if they can ever get their act together. I may be

out of line, but if I was you I'd sure take everything Miz Coleman says with a grain of salt. She tends to be a little unstable, if you know what I mean. Now that right there is going to be a lake for another part of the golf course..."

Foster's limousine drove past an area where several bulldozers were clearing a large expanse of countryside. On a hill overlooking the area stood The Colonel. His posture seemed to imply that he was supervising the operation, and he held a pint of Four Roses the way General Patton might have held his binoculars. He checked his watch and turned to stride off down the hill towards the road.

Jack came roaring over the hill on his tractor and began to execute a series of maneuvers totally disrupting the work of the bulldozers.

Bulldozers, tractor loaders, graders, dump trucks and virtually every other species of earth moving equipment known to man were busy devastating the wilderness. Chain saws bit into trees and shredders chewed up branches of shrubs. A chipmunk ran for his life.

III

Foster sat on a garden bench in the dark hunched over in an effort to keep warm.

He had his coat wrapped tightly around him and he occasionally shuffled his feet or rubbed himself with his hands. He took a drink of coffee from a thermos.

He started to doze off, then forced himself to sit up and open his eyes. He stood up to pace around a bit and then sat back down.

He was beginning to doze off again when he was startled by the sound of footsteps behind him. He jumped up and turned expectantly to greet the person coming around the corner.

It was Lee.

“Hey, my man.”

Foster cannot conceal his disappointment.

“H’you.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m all right.”

“Cold enough for you?”

“I guess.”

Lee headed off towards the house.

“You haven’t seen Kathleen tonight, have you?”

“No, but I’ll tell her you’re looking for her if I see her.

IV

Kathleen, Lee and Foster were preparing to tee off. They had three or four clubs between them which they were carrying without a bag. Lee was dressed in vintage knickers, a moth-eaten argyle sweater and a wool golf cap.

Kathleen teed off first with a three iron. She connected reasonably well, and the ball landed in the fairway.

Lee was excited.

“Far out.”

He stepped up to bat using a wood. He adjusted the ball on the tee and then took a mighty swing which missed entirely. He checked out the situation and then swung again. This time he connected, and the ball went soaring off into the rough in a terrific slice.

Foster hesitated.

“Y’all go on without me.”

Lee wouldn’t hear of it.

“C’mon, man! Git up here and slap the shit outa that little ball. It’ll do your heart good.”

Lee pulled him up to the tee and teed his ball up for him.

“Now forget about everything except the ball.”

Foster swung. At some point in his youth he must have played golf, because he hit the ball solidly and sent it flying down the fairway.

“God damn! Tell me that didn’t feel good.”

Foster seemed unmoved. He picked up his tee, and they started walking down the fairway as Lee lit up his pipe.

“The problem with you is you get too hung up. You gotta learn to just roll with it, boy.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

Lee takes this question, like everything else in life, at face value.

“Can’t say I ever saw one.”

“Did you ever see Annabelle, or do you think I was just imagining her?”

“Half the time I don’t know what I’m seeing. What difference does it make? If you loved her, man, she was real.”

“I still love her.”

They arrived at Lee’s ball. Kathleen was touched by Foster’s sadness and put her arm around him as they waited for Lee to hit the ball. Lee took a vicious swing which puts his ball back into the fairway along with a large clod of dirt and grass.

“I had to pretend she didn’t exist in order to get out of the hospital, and she felt it was a betrayal. I guess I was unfaithful to her.”

Kathleen wanted to understand.

“Do you think she’s a ghost?”

“I don’t know. She looks just like the lady in the portrait above the fireplace.”

Lee was impressed.

“Oh wow.”

“So far as I could tell she was flesh and blood, but I guess the rest of you couldn’t even see her. I thought she would come back here to be with me after I got out of the hospital, but I was afraid to talk about her. Maybe I was still being unfaithful to her.”

Kathleen tried to reassure him.

“You mustn’t blame yourself for what you had to do. If she loves you, she’ll forgive you.”

“She probably doesn’t love me anymore. I think I’ve lost her for good.”

Kathleen kept her arm around Foster as they walked off down the fairway towards Lee's ball.

Chapter 12

I

Viola Jackson and the predominantly black congregation shook the foundations of a small church with a soulful rendition of “Jesus Is Real To Me.”

In an open casket before the altar lay the body of Jesse. Foster, Lee and Kathleen were standing respectfully with Bubba in his wheelchair at the back of the church.

*“Real, real, you know
Jesus is real to me.
Oh, oh, yes
The Lord God gives me victory.
Oh, well, well,
So many people doubt Him;
You know
I can't live without Him;
And that is why I love Him so.
Jesus is real to me.”*

Bubba watched the faces of the black congregation with a mixture of admiration and melancholy. Foster

stood behind him – his eyes closed and his head swaying to the irresistible beat of the music. A tear ran down one cheek.

After the service they drove back home through the most exclusive resort community in the South. Yachts and sailboats filled the marina. Cadillacs and Mercedes glided past security guards towards the hotel, restaurant, clubhouse, swimming pools, tennis courts and custom homes. Shoppers ambled through the arcade, and the sun sparkled on the bay.

II

An air conditioner hummed monotonously in the window overlooking the garden in what used to be Foster's room. It had been converted into the accounting office, complete with metal filing cabinets, ledgers, adding machines and stacks of invoices.

Foster sat at a desk, making entries into a ledger. Another accountant sat nearby working out on a calculator. She finished tallying up a long column of figures and then pushed back from her desk with a long sigh.

"Well, I'm going to break for lunch. Will you join me?"

Foster did not even look up from his work.

"No thanks."

"Can I bring you anything?"

"No thanks."

The accountant started out of the room, pausing to look at Foster bent over his books.

“You really should eat more. You’re gonna waste away.”

The sound of the door shutting behind her as she left seemed to break Foster’s spell. He looked up and stared first at the air conditioner in the window and then at the clock on the wall. He looked back down at his work and started to enter another figure in the ledger.

Suddenly he exploded. With an anguished scream he rose to his feet grabbing the front edge of his desk and turning it over, scattering his work all over the floor. He seized his chair, swung it around and threw it through the plate glass window above the air conditioner.

He grabbed the adding machine and a typewriter from the accountant’s desk and threw them through the window. He swept up all of the papers from her desk and threw them out the window. Then he attacked the filing cabinet, throwing armfuls of papers out the window.

Invoices and check stubs fluttered through the air like a flock of starlings descending on the garden.

The accountant came out the back door with a half-eaten sandwich in her hand looking up to see what is going on.

III

Foster paced up and down in front of the fireplace talking to the portrait of Annabelle.

“Listen to me, woman. I’ve been waiting around here taking shit from Ruthie hoping you would show up, and you’re still off sulking somewhere just because of what we

had to do at the hospital. Maybe you found somebody else there who was crazy enough to play by your rules and stay there with you forever. Well, you know what: I don't care anymore if you come back. You've been playing your games with me long enough. In fact I don't even think you're real. Look at me standing here talking to a goddam picture. Maybe I do belong in the looney bin. I'm through with you though; that's for sure. You hear that? You know, I could be living a damn nice life here if it weren't for you. I used to be the owner of this place, you know, until you came along. You think I like working for Ruthie? The only reason I put up with her is so that I could be here for you, and you're so high and mighty you can't condescend to come back here..."

He was interrupted by a grating voice from the hallway.

"Foster!"

Ruthie came storming into the living room, and Foster turned to greet her with a big smile.

"H'you."

"Don't you 'h'you' me. You're fired, and I swear to God if you step so much as one inch out of line around this place, I'll have you locked up so tight you'll never see the light of day. I've had it with your foolishness and smart-ass pranks."

Foster looked at her with a weary directness and spoke calmly.

"I feel sorry for you, Ruthie."

"I ought to press charges against you."

Foster laughed.

“I think maybe the time has come for the South to Rise Again.”

Foster smiled broadly, and Ruthie tried not to look worried about what he might do next.

IV

Foster burst into Bubba's room and paced around as Bubba rotated his wheelchair in a futile effort to follow him.

“I'm ready!”

“For what?”

“To take her to court.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“Ruthie. I want you to file a suit against her.

“I'd love to, but what for?”

“For having me illegally committed and stealing my inheritance.”

“Believe me, I tried all that. You'd have to prove you didn't need psychiatric care.”

“I'll prove it. Can you get us a jury trial in this county?”

“Stand still, goddamit. I'm getting dizzy.”

Foster stopped circling Bubba and faced him.

“Can you get me a jury trial in this county?”

“Yes. And I could get Sam Magill to be the judge. But you'd still have to persuade them you were sane.”

“No problem. I can do it.”

“Why didn’t you do it earlier when she first put you away or right after you got out?”

“Because of Annabelle.”

Bubba knew he must tread lightly.

“And now?”

“I’m ready to do it now. I don’t have anything to lose.”

Bubba was still skeptical, but he was more than game to mount the show. His only concern was whether it might be too much of a strain on Foster.

V

Van Merkle was on the witness stand. Sam Magill was presiding, and Bubba was scooting around the courtroom in his wheelchair as he questioned Van Merkle.

The jury box was filled with people who attended Foster’s engagement party, including the musicians and Mrs. Dawson, who appeared to be the foreman.

Ruthie sat on the defendant’s side flanked by Thaxton Weatherby and a staff of young, overdressed hotshot lawyers.

The back of the courtroom was packed with spectators representing just about every species of humanity to be found in the area.

“Dr. Van Merkle, how long have you known Foster Abernathy?”

“I first met him in August of last year.”

“And how often have you seen him since that time?”

“I only saw him that one day.”

“I see. And how much time did you spend with him on that day?”

“An hour or two.”

“An hour or two. How well would you say you got to know Foster during that hour – or two?”

“The purpose of my visit with him was to diagnose his mental condition, and I was able to do that.”

“To your satisfaction.”

“To my complete satisfaction.”

“Dr. Van Merkle, was there anything about Foster when you saw him, for an hour – or two, that made you fear he might become violent or dangerous in any way?”

“No.”

“Do you think that someone without your medical training who met Foster as you did that day, for an hour – or two, would have come away thinking Foster was miserably unhappy?”

“Probably not. On the surface he gave the impression of being quite happy. He was compulsively buoyant.”

Bubba turned towards the jury.

“I see. Then what you are telling us, Dr. Van Merkle, is that after spending one hour – or two, with a person who seemed happy and quite harmless, you felt obliged to recommend that he be forcibly taken to a hospital and given drugs.”

There was a murmur among the spectators, and even some of the jurors were visibly suspicious of Van Merkle.

“You are greatly oversimplifying. The young man was suffering from delusions which indicated a severe emo-

tional disturbance. When I say he appeared happy on the surface, I am not saying that he was healthy or functioning effectively in the real world.

“Dr. Van Merkle, were you paid for the time you spent with Foster?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Thank you. No further questions.”

VI

Ruthie was on the stand smiling condescendingly at Bubba.

“Now Miss Coleman, after you had arranged for Foster to be admitted to Sunnyside hospital and assumed the responsibility for administering the estate on his behalf, would you please tell the jury what you did?”

Thaxton objected to Bubba’s question even though he knows the objection is futile.

“Objection.”

“Overruled.”

“Well I... after considering all the possibilities, I chose the course which seemed to provide the greatest benefit to all members of the family.”

“Which was?”

“I had the house fixed up, first of all. We put over \$200,000 into renovating the house.”

“Yes?”

“And then I arranged to have part of the property which was totally unusable swampland developed into a beautiful community.”

“Who handled the development?”

“The Coastal Development Corporation.”

“The Coastal Development Corporation is a subsidiary of the New York International Finance Corporation. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And the actual financing for Southern Shores came largely from foreign investments. Is that correct?”

“Objection.”

“Overruled.”

“I think so. I’m not really sure.”

“Do you know what percentage of the money was German as opposed to Iranian?”

Sam had to bang his gavel to quiet the spectators.

“Objection.”

“Overruled.”

“I really have no idea where the money came from.”

Some spectators hissed, and Sam banged his gavel again.

“Mrs. Coleman, are you currently employed?”

“Of course I am.”

“For whom to you work?”

“I work for Southern Shores.”

“You are managing director for Southern Shores. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And your salary is \$75,000 per annum plus fringe benefits and bonuses?”

“Objection.”

“Overruled.”

“I don’t see what my salary has to do with any of this.”

Someone in the audience laughed out loud.

“Mrs. Coleman, would you be so kind as to tell us what you did prior to your employment with Southern Shores?”

“I was a wife and mother.”

“Is it correct that your last job was as a jewelry salesperson?”

“That was before I was married.”

“One final question: When did you first discuss with C.D.C. the possibility of developing Bellevue plantation?”

“I don’t recall the exact date. Sometime in the summer of last year.”

“Before Winston Abernathy’s will was out of probate?”

“I don’t recall.”

“But it was definitely before Foster entered the hospital. Is that correct?”

“I was contacted by some people I knew at C.D.C. because they knew the land might become available.”

“So you knew if you got Foster out of the way, you would be able to make a very lucrative deal.”

“Objection.”

“Overruled”

“No further questions.”

VII

Foster sat comfortably in the witness stand and smiled. He seemed relaxed, good humored and totally sane. Thaxton approached the stand.

“Mr. Abernathy, do you know a Miss Annabelle Jordan?”

Foster corrects his pronunciation.

“Jordan.”

“Jordan.”

“I suppose you could say I know her.”

Ruthie glanced at the other lawyers sitting with her.

“How would you characterize your relationship with Miss Jordan?”

“I’m her creator.”

Thaxton was a little baffled by this, but he felt confident they were headed in the right direction.

“Could you elaborate on that for us please, Mr. Abernathy? Exactly what do you mean?”

“I made her up.”

Foster turns to play to the jury in his best, folksy, down-home style.

“You see, Annabelle was an imaginary fiancée I invented as a practical joke on Cousin Ruthie. Only I guess she doesn’t have much of a sense of humor, and she started telling folks I was crazy.”

Ruthie was starting to get a little worried.

“Thank you. Mr. Abernathy would you...”

“The thing was, it was all in good fun until she got the troopers to come and take me to a hospital where they filled me so full of drugs I didn’t know what was happening.”

Sam Magill covered his mouth with his hand in order to suppress a smile. Thaxton sensed that things were getting out of control.

“Mr. Abernathy, are you a poet?”

“You can’t imagine. One day we’re having some fun on Ruthie and the next I’m being shot full of drugs and treated like a three year old. You know it took me months to get out of that place.”

“Mr. Abernathy...”

“I guess some folks just can’t take a joke.”

“Do you recognize this?”

Thaxton handed Foster a Xerox copy of some of his writings. Foster glances at them and smiles.

“Sure.”

“Did you write this?”

“Yeah, now this is a perfect example of where Ruthie was coming from. Anybody in their right mind looking at this would know it had to be a joke. But Ruthie went sneaking around and Xeroxed this stuff and got a bunch of weirdo doctors to say it was proof I was crazy.”

“That will be all, Mr. Abernathy. Thank you.”

“You know, I wouldn’t have minded being locked up for a few months; but Ruthie used it as an excuse to destroy the wilderness around Bellevue.”

VIII

Sam Magill banged his gavel to restore order in the courtroom as the jury filed back into the box.

“Has the jury reached a verdict?”

“We have, your honor. We find in favor of the plaintiff.”

Pandemonium broke loose. Somebody in the back of the courtroom struck up Dixie on his harmonica, and all manner of paper airplanes and spitballs rained down upon Ruthie and her lawyers.

Ruthie looked as though she didn't know what hit her. Her lawyers were putting on a good show of being disgusted by the whole charade, but Ruthie was too stunned and too humiliated to do anything other than let her lips twitch. Something in her eyes indicated that her mind might be toying with the idea of taking refuge in insanity along with the rest of the world.

Chapter 13

I

Lee was perched on top of the Southern Shores billboard beside the driveway to the mansion. He attached a rope to the very top of the billboard, the other end of which was hooked up to Jack's tractor on the highway.

Lee gave Jack the high sign and scampered down off the billboard as Jack opened up the throttle.

A crowd of townspeople had gotten out of their cars to watch.

Jack's tractor strained and then surged ahead as the billboard came crashing down.

II

The whole town had turned out for a barbecue on the lawn at Bellevue.

Lee's voice rang out over a loudspeaker as the guests milled around helping themselves to chicken and potato salad and lemonade and brownies.

“There’s plenty more chicken for any of you folks who haven’t had seconds yet, and The Colonel’s got a barrel in the barn for those of you who don’t like lemonade. Okay now, I’ve just been told we’ve got six pick axes left over here at the judges’ stand. That’s room for six more contestants in the parking lot demolition contest due to start here in about 15 minutes...”

Foster came out of the house with a knapsack slung over his shoulder. He walked across the lawn to a tree where Bubba was finishing off a piece of chicken and stooped down beside Bubba’s wheelchair.

“I’ll be saying goodbye now.”

“Goodbye? Where are you going?”

“Into the swamp.”

“You going camping?”

“I guess.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know.”

“You are coming back, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really want to live here without Annabelle.”

“I’m afraid I never did understand about her.”

“Neither did I. She was either a ghost that only I could see or a figment of my imagination.”

“She made you happy though?”

“I never dreamed I could love someone the way I loved her.”

“I envy you that.”

“If you see her, tell her to come out in the woods so we can make babies together.”

“If I see her, I may just keep her to myself.”

They smiled.

Foster patted Bubba’s arm and stood up.

“I better be going if I want to get to Taylor’s Point before dark.”

“Take care, Foster.”

“Bye, Bubba.”

III

Foster hiked deeper and deeper into the woods as the sun beat down on him. The path he was following dissolved into a maze of underbrush and vines.

As he walked, he confirmed his identity by reciting the mission statement:

“When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter the swamp as a sacred place - a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow of Nature.”

Gnats and mosquitoes buzzed around his face, getting into his mouth and nose and eyes. Sweat ran down his cheeks and saturated his shirt. His boots sank deeper and deeper in the mire until he finally missed a step and sank knee deep into the water.

“Shit!”

A snake glided ominously through the shadows under a log.

A carnivorous plant closed its leaves over a struggling fly.

The sun disappeared behind dark clouds. Foster hacked his way through some vines, and sat down on a log to eat a peach from his knapsack. He looked around him as he rested. The sun was setting and the entire horizon blazed like an apocalyptic fire. He was surrounded by vegetation so thick that it was difficult to see more than thirty feet in any direction.

Foster resumed his pilgrimage and once again stepped into a bog up to his knees. He realized he was in something uncomfortably like quicksand.

There was a roll of distant thunder, and it began to rain. At first the rain did not penetrate the trees and vines overhead; but eventually it began pouring through drenching Foster completely.

He broke through to a clearing and discovered he was back at the log where he ate the peach earlier in the day. He could even see the peach stone now crawling with ants under the log.

He struck out again – not at all sure he was going in a new direction.

The storm passed, and a calm settled over the darkening woods.

Foster tried to kindle a fire using a scrap of paper from his knapsack and the driest sticks he can find. He used up half of his matches without any success. When it looked as though he might be having some luck, he blew frantically on the glowing twigs, but they refused to burn.

Somewhere an alligator slipped into the stagnant water.

Darkness descended on the swamp.

Foster curled up next to a large tree and shut his eyes in a desperate effort to go to sleep.

Strange birdcalls and the croaking of frogs echoed in the darkness.

IV

The sun rose into a clear sky. A gentle breeze blew through the tall marsh grass. Birds and frogs began to stir. A fish jumped.

Golden sunlight flooded the woods.

Foster stirred and rose slowly to his feet. His clothes were soaking wet on one side, and his arms were caked with mud. He brushed himself off and stretched. Then he stopped and listened. He could hear something that sounded like the ocean.

He grabbed his knapsack and began to run towards what appears to be a clearing not far away.

Foster emerged onto a beautiful small beach on a cove opening out onto the ocean. He threw his knapsack into the sand and immediately began undressing.

He fell back into the sand as he tried to pull off his boots and then scrambled to his feet as he stripped off his T-shirt and underpants. He sprinted toward the surf.

Just as he hit the water, he caught sight of someone swimming in the surf further out.

It was a girl. She also appeared to be swimming in the nude.

Foster stood frozen with amazement. When the girl noticed Foster, she started swimming towards him. As she started to stand up and walk through the water towards him, Foster could not believe his eyes.

It was Annabelle.

The energy with which she splashed through the surf and the total lack of any shyness or self-consciousness make her seem like a totally different person. She spoke when she got close enough for him to hear her easily. Her voice and accent were also much more down to earth.

“H’you. I didn’t know anybody knew about my secret beach.”

Foster just stared at her as she approached. “Annabelle?”

“It’s Alma.”

She smiled sweetly at his bafflement.

“The cook at the Dixie Diner. When I’m on the graveyard shift, I come down here for a swim after work. The old road over there comes out on route seventy-six about three miles south of the diner.”

Their eyes locked in an eruption of irrepressible desire.

“You comin’ in?”

• • •

Sources

- “The Order for the Burial of the Dead” *The Book of Common Prayer*
The Revelation of St John The Divine 17: 1-3
The Gospel According to St Matthew 5: 3-5
Song of the Chattahoochee by Sidney Lanier
A Voice From On High by Bill Monroe
Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey by William Wordsworth
The Wind In The Willows by Kenneth Grahame
In The Garden by Charles Austin Miles
For The Beauty Of The Earth by Folliot S. Pierpoint
The Good-morrow by John Donne
The First Book of Samuel 3: 4, 9
The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus by Joel Chandler Harris
Jesus Is Real To Me as adapted by Mary Lee
Walking by Henry David Thoreau

The Good Morrow

The Good-morrow

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then?
But suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the seaven sleepers den?
Twas so; But this, all pleasures fancies bee.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desir'd, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee.

And now good morrow to our waking soules,
Which watch not one another out of feare;
For love, all love of other sights controules,
And makes one little roome, an every where.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let Maps to other, worlds on worlds have showne,
Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest,
Where can we finde two better hemispheares
Without sharpe North, without declining West?
What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.

John Donne (1572 - 1631)