Grampa often got mad like that: lightning quick, fast and without warning. His voice changed completely, mean: mad and mean at the same time. It scared me. "Hiram, boy, you come here right now."

I trotted to his side but stayed clear of his arm that tried to rest on my shoulders.

"Son, let me tell you something." He patted me on the head. "God made Negroes to work the land. They don’t feel the heat like we do; they can work all day long in the most hellish weather. They’re strong people, good with their hands."

"I’m good with my hands too, Grampa. Gramma lets me help in the garden."

"Well, sure, you’re good with your hands, Hiram, but there’s lots more that you can do. These folks, they’re doing what the good Lord intended them to do; that don’t mean you can’t do it too, but you got more in you, boy. You’re meant to be the boss, not the worker."

I looked out over the field at the black men, the backs of their shirts stained with sweat, bent over their hoes chopping weeds among the cotton plants. They worked methodically, quickly, almost like machines. I could do that, I thought, but I wouldn’t want to do it all day.

I followed Grampa to the truck and climbed into the cab. He handed me a thermos cup of Gramma’s cold lemonade. Hot from the time I’d spent in the sun, I gulped it down, no longer thinking about the black men and their backbreaking work out in Grampa’s fields.

Coffee. When I was at Gramma and Grampa’s house, I woke up every morning to the smell of coffee. The nutty aroma floated up the back stairs and into my room through the transom window above my door. Once I was awake, I tried to separate the other aromas of my grandparents’ house: some mornings the meaty, spicy scent of sausage came up the stairs; other days the sweet fragrance of fresh muffins. Behind those morning smells lingered the mellow scent of mildew, wood, and Ivory soap. To this day, if you dropped me blindfolded at my grandparents’ home, I’d know I was there as soon as you opened the door.

Gramma and Grampa lived in a big white two-story house on Market Street, just a block from the Yazoo River and four blocks from the courthouse. Their house looks like a smaller version of the White House in Washington,
D.C., without so many pillars in front and not nearly so tall and wide.

It's the most comfortable place in the world. Gramma had a few wicker chairs out on the front porch and a porch swing to one side. When it was cool enough, we'd sit out there after dinner, but usually Grampa liked sitting in the living room in his big wing-back chair napping or reading the paper. I liked the kitchen best. It's behind the dining room, and you can find your way there by following your nose. Gramma always seemed to have something baking: biscuits, corn bread, cookies, cake, pies. If I wandered in, she'd tell me to sit at the kitchen table while she found me "something suitably sweet to tide you over till supper," and after she set a slice of pie or plate of cookies in front of me, she'd open the icebox and get me a cold drink of milk or lemonade.

The kitchen was a small room with a large window over the sink that looks out onto the Remingtons' backyard. Gramma had a wooden table in the middle of the kitchen where she did most of her "cutting, kneading, and rolling." When it was just Gramma, Grampa, and me for supper, we ate in the kitchen. When Mom or anyone else was there, Gramma insisted we "eat proper in the dining room."

My bedroom, Dad's old room, was directly above the kitchen. It had a squeaky old bed with four high corner posts and a wooden floor that creaked when I walked on it. If I lay quietly on the bed, I could usually hear the muffled clatter of stirring spoons, pots, and pans down in the kitchen. And of course I could always smell what Gramma was cooking.

Evenings Grampa would sit in the wide living room in the front of the house and read The Greenwood Commonwealth. He relied on the paper to keep up on the news of his old friends in the South and especially in Greenwood, Mississippi.

"Don't care much for the rest of the world," he told me once. "Didn't like Harlan going off to the Navy. American boys have no business fighting other people's wars. We've got our own problems to take care of, so it's no kettle of ours if commies or Nazis or anybody else wants to go killing each other. They can rot in Hades for all I care."

I was used to Grampa ranting about things in the paper and I just kept quiet. I'd sit on the floor, looking over the last few days of The Greenwood Commonwealth, rereading Li'l Abner and other comics I liked. From the kitchen came the sounds and smells of Gramma cooking. I could hear the sizzle of meat frying on the stove and the open-and-close of the oven as she checked the biscuits or corn bread or pie or whatever she was baking for supper.

One evening, Grampa had been reading the paper for a while. Then he swore and snapped it down on the footstool in front of him. "Hiram, boy, I don't know what this country is coming to. Now the war's over, these damn Yankees are trying to tell us how to run the South. You're still little, but you remember this, son. Our way of life is precious. It's the
way I live, the way my daddy lived, my granddaddy, and his
daddy before him. It's going to be the way you live too, if I
have anything to say about it.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I didn't say
anything because he had that mad look in his eye that he
usually had when he argued with Dad. He went on about
the South until Gramma called us in for supper.

Gramma could tell Grampa was stirred up about some-
thing when she sat down to eat, so before he could even
start, she said, "Now, Earl, you remember our rule: No talk-
ing politics at the supper table."

"Fine, Florence. I'll just hold all this frustration and non-
sense in until tomorrow morning, but don't you go blaming
me if I pop open and spray you all like a hot can of beer."
His face flushed, and he frowned. Then he looked at me
and sighed. "I guess there's no need getting little Hiram all
upset. Say the blessing, son, and let's plow into Gramma's
supper. And Hiram, ask God Almighty if he might shed a
little wisdom on them harebrained Yankees and their Mr.
Harry Truman."

After we finished supper, Grampa went back to his paper
in the living room, and Gramma started cleaning up. I
helped carry the plates and things to the sink, but she
shooed me out of the kitchen. "I do appreciate your help,
Hiram, but I can manage just fine now. Why don't you go on
outside and see if you can find R.C. somewhere."

R.C. Rydell lived way down River Road, along the Yazoo,
in a dilapidated old house that he claimed had been in

Greenwood since before the Civil War. At nine, he was two
years older than me, but he was one of the few boys my age
who always seemed to be outside the same time I was. That
night, I swung open the back door and hopped down the
steps into the yard. A faint breeze rustled the magnolia tree
and azaleas in the backyard, and even though the sun had
not yet set, outside was cooler than Gramma's kitchen. I
pitched a rock at a stray cat prowling through our bushes.
I missed it, but when the rock rustled through the branches,
the gray cat dropped low to the ground, arched its back,
and hissed. I launched another rock its way.

"Hey, watch what you're doin'!" R.C. stepped through the
bushes and into our yard. He had on the same torn and
oversized black high-top Keds he always wore. His shirt and
jeans were rumpled and dirty, his red hair a tangled mess.
He scowled at me like the cat had. "You 'bout put my eye out,
Hiram. Ain't your granddaddy taught you 'bout throwin'
rocks round people?"

"Sorry, R.C., I was trying to chase that old tomcat out of
our yard; he gets into Gramma's garbage cans."

"Ya'll want to be getting rid of a cat, you need a good BB
gun, not a rock. A hot BB in the butt'll help that old cat re-
member to stay out of your yard. I'd borrow you mine, but
you're too little to be handlin' a gun."

I'd never seen R.C. with a BB gun, but I didn't question
him. He always told more than he had. "So what were you
doing up in those bushes?" I asked. "You find a nest or
something?"
“Don’t you know nothin’, Hiram Hillburn? No bird with half a brain would build a nest in a ‘zalea bush. Naw, I was just in there so I could get a good look at the Remingtons. They’s dancing again.”

Ralph and Ronnie Remington lived behind our house. A couple of brothers who had never married, they lived alone in a Southern mansion that probably used to be fancy but was now rundown and surrounded by weeds. R.C. said they were crazy. Grampa said they were addle-brained but harmless. Gramma said they were two lonely old bachelors who drank too much. I’d never spoken to Ralph or Ronnie even though I saw one or the other almost every day. Ralph looked older, his hair had streaks of gray, and he always had a worried look on his face when I’d see him hustling down the sidewalk from downtown with a narrow brown paper bag under his arm. He’d walk down River Road to his house. Then instead of going up the front steps and in the front door, he’d follow a path he’d worn in the grass around the side of the house to the back door.

Ronnie was heavier than Ralph, and his dark hair covered only the sides of his head; Grampa said he looked like a fat monk. He usually wore a baggy Army uniform with no insignias. “Likely he got that uniform from the Salvation Army shop,” said Grampa, “because even the U.S. Army knows better than to let a knucklehead like Ronnie anywhere close to their business. If Ronnie Remington’d been in the war, we’d all be speaking German and Japanese right now.”

Sometimes I’d see Ronnie down at the courthouse carrying mail and papers from one office to another. Charity work, Grampa called it. Neither of the Remingtons was allowed to drive, so Ronnie walked everywhere in town. He was slow and sort of ambled from one place to another, usually looking for people he knew so he could ask to borrow a nickel. Gramma said he spent all his money on ice cream and cookies, and I guess she was right, because when I saw him strolling home some afternoons, he usually had a small grocery sack clutched to his chest. When Ronnie got near the Remington house, he never walked up the front sidewalk. He had his own path worn through the grass and weeds. It angled from the corner of their yard to the front steps. Funny thing about the Remingtons: Ronnie would only use his path and enter through the front door; Ralph would only use his path and enter through the back.

“Shhh,” hissed R.C. “They’s dancing. Look.” He pointed through an opening in the azaleas that gave us a clear view through one of their back windows. Stripped down to their boxer shorts and tank top undershirts, Ronnie and Ralph waltzed by the window. Before R.C. started giggling, I could hear the faint strains of waltz music from their record player. They passed by again and did a slow, awkward turn in front of the window. While Ralph planted both feet, braced himself, and strained to keep his balance, Ronnie leaned back in a deep dip, letting his thick left arm swing wide and high, his pinky finger extended. Shaking with effort, Ralph managed to pull Ronnie out of the dip and
continue their 1-2-3 around the room, and I swear I could hear their floor creaking and sagging. When they came by the window again, I could see Ronnie's sweating face framed in concentration, counting out the waltz steps while Ralph struggled to lead his fat younger brother around the room. They moved like two old cows up on their hind legs.

R.C. could stand it no longer and fell to the ground, snorting and choking, trying to stifle his laughter. "Oh my gawd," he sputtered, "can you believe those two hippos dancing? They oughta put them in the county fair!" He laughed and snorted louder.

"Quiet, R.C.! Dang it, if they hear us, I'm gonna be in big trouble with Gramma. You know she thinks we ought not bother Ralph and Ronnie."

"Quit being a sissybaby. We ain't doing nothing wrong. They's the weirdos dancing around in their underwear."

"Gramma says it's not our business what they do long as they don't bother us. She told me I had to be neighborly and polite and stay out of their way."

R.C. picked up a rock and moved through the azalea bushes toward their house.

"R.C., no!" I hissed as loud as I dared. "We're gonna be in big trouble if you do."

Crouched low and partially hidden by the evening's shadows, R.C. wound up and chucked his rock. It cracked against the house just above their window when they waltzed by again. Ralph stumbled and disappeared from view while Ronnie looked pale and stunned for a moment before coming to the window. "What's that? Who's there? You scat now and leave us be. Who's there?"

R.C., still hidden by shadows, let out a loud, low, "Mooaah, mooaah, mooaah, you old cows..." and sprinted around their house and down River Road, laughing and mooing all the way.

"Who's there? Who's there?" called out Ronnie nervously. "You just go on and leave us be. Just you scat you and leave us be!"

I ducked back through the bushes and into our yard. Sometimes I didn't like how R.C. played, even if he was older than me. It didn't seem funny at all when Ralph had looked hurtful surprised and Ronnie looked scared.

I trudged up the back steps to the kitchen, hoping Gramma would offer me another slice of apple pie when I got inside.

Maybe that'd get rid of the bad taste in my mouth.

August, a month after my eighth birthday. Grampa and I had been following our summer routine pretty faithfully. Some days, though, I'd stay home and go fishing with R.C. down on the Yazoo. He was a good fisherman even though he always used a cane pole. "I got a nice rod and reel down home, but my daddy don't want me using it without him around. 'Sides, I do just fine with this old cane pole. I bet those fish get scared just knowing I'm coming."

I'd walk the one or two miles out to the edge of town to R.C.'s house, and from there we'd walk a couple miles far-
ther down River Road where the trees and brush cleared away from the riverbanks. Gramma would pack me up a lunch, food enough for two men.

“Gramma,” I told her the first time she made the lunch, “you know I don’t get that hungry; I don’t think I can eat all of this.”

“Darling, you never know how hungry fishing might make you; I don’t want to be worrying about my only grandson starving down there on the Yazoo. Believe me, it’ll all get eaten.” She wrapped six gingersnap cookies in wax paper and tucked them into the top of my lunch sack. “When you get to the Rydells’ house, you find that little girl Naomi and give these to her. Poor thing probably hasn’t had a treat since Christmas.”

R.C.’s little sister, Naomi, was my age but I never saw her in town except during the school year; and even then she only came once in a while. She always seemed skittish, kind of like a cat that’s been kicked around too many times. I’d liked her from the first time I met her, and Gramma knew it. Gramma used to ask about her, if I’d seen her or how she looked, and when I’d hear her talking to Grampa about Naomi, she always called her a “poor little thing” and would tell Grampa, “It’s a crime what’s going on out there, Earl. A crime. Since that little girl’s mother died, I don’t think one nice thing has happened to her; and now’s she being mother and daughter in that house.”

R.C. was waiting for me on his rickety front porch, and the first thing he noticed was the canvas lunch bag I had slung over my shoulder:

“Whatcha got there, Hiram?”

“Gramma made me a lunch.”

“Granny made you a lunch? What a sisbaby! We ain’t going camping, we’re going fishing, and nobody takes no lunch on a little fishing trip. That big old bag’s gonna be in our way all day long.” He reached for it. “Let me see what your granny packed.”

“These are for Naomi,” I said as I pulled out the cookies and handed the bag to R.C. “She around?”

“Naomi!” R.C. yelled. “Hey, Naomi, get yourself out here!” He snatched the cookies out of my hand. “Your boyfriend brung you something.”

My face turned red. “I’m not her boyfriend, R.C.,” I said, even though I wished I was, “Gramma sent those for her.” R.C. ignored me and waited for Naomi to open the front door.

When she came out on the porch, she looked mad. “R.C., would you just shush up? Pa’s still sleeping.” She had her hair in pigtails, as always, and wore the same faded flour-sack dress I’d seen her in at school. “Hey, Hiram.” She smiled when she saw me, and I felt my face turn red again.

“Hey, Naomi. My gramma sent something for you.” I pointed to the wax paper bundle R.C. held in one hand.

“Sweets from your sweetie,” R.C. teased. “Ain’t Hiram a regular old Romeo? Your other boyfriends gonna be jealous they find out about this, Naomi.”

Naomi walked down the front steps to R.C. and held out her hand. With anybody else, R.C. would’ve eaten the cookies himself, or crumbled them up, or tossed them
on the roof. With Naomi, he handed them to her with a smile.

Naomi unwrapped the cookies. “Gosh, Hiram, your granny sure is nice.” She took a big bite of one and said with her mouth full, “Wish I could go fishing with ya’ll, but I got chores to do, and then I got to fix lunch for Pa when he wakes up.” She wrapped the cookies in the wax paper and trotted up the porch steps. “Tell your granny thanks, Hiram,” she said before she went back inside the house. “And good luck fishing. I hope R.C. brings back some fish for supper.”

I watched the door close behind her and wished I could have thought of something nice or clever to say to her. Instead, I just stood there like a post until R.C. punched me in the shoulder. “C’mon, Rome-ee-o. We don’t got all day for you to stand here gawkin’ at my little sister.”

We were barely back on the road in front of the Rydells’ house before R.C. was rummaging through my lunch bag.

“I told Gramma I didn’t need that much lunch, but she made me take it all.”

“Biscuits. Mm, still warm.” R.C. pulled out two, shoved one into his mouth, and slung the bag over his shoulder. “Let me haul this bundle for you, Hiram. We’s walkin’ a ways to get to the good fishin’ hole, and you’re so little, you’d get wore out carryin’ this load the whole way.” He ate the other biscuit and fished around inside the bag. “Sausage.” He pulled out a handful of dark brown sausage links. “This is good stuff, Hiram boy.” R.C. ate as we walked, stuffing himself with the loot Gramma had packed. When we were still a ways from our fishing hole, he belched and handed the half-empty bag back to me. “Your granny does know how to cook, Hiram, that’s one sure thing. You carry this for a while.”

By noon we were both hungry, and we filled up on Gramma’s sandwiches, thick slices of homemade bread with a slab of honey ham between them. The bottom of the sack held a dozen gingersnaps, which we finished off after the sandwiches were gone. We saved the two apples to eat on the way home.

Though I loved spending time at the river, I never got any good at fishing. Most of the time, I’d pull up my line to see a bare hook stripped of its bait by a sneaky catfish. R.C. tried to show me how to tell if a fish was nibbling at my bait, but I never caught on. That old cane pole didn’t slow R.C. down at all; he seemed to snag fish at will. Every time he hooked one, he’d laugh and jerk it out of the river onto the shore where he’d let it flap and flail on the ground. If it was too small, he’d snap it in the head with his finger to stun it, take it off his hook, and toss it back into the water. “Ain’t worth my time, little fish,” he’d say, “You eat some more of Hiram’s bait and work on growing. Maybe next year I’ll come back and catch you for Naomi’s frying pan.”

The keepers he put on a stringer; a woven cord with a three-inch nail tied to its end, anchored with a rock on the riverside. To add a fish to the stringer, R.C. would work the nail up through the fish’s gills and pull it out of its mouth,
then hammer the nail back in the ground with a rock and toss the fish into the water to keep them fresh until we went home.

After lunch, R.C. got restless. He had a few keepers and didn't pay much attention to his fishing line after he cast it into the river. I enjoyed sitting there, full of Gramma's lunch, watching the thick green water flow past, hearing the locusts buzz in the brush around us, feeling the hot Mississippi sun on my back. R.C. didn't like silence; he wanted to talk, mostly about things I had no interest in.

"Hiram, ain't them Remington brothers strange? Dancing round in their underwear. Dang, but that is stuh-range."

"Maybe they were too hot."

"Hot! Maybe they's fairies!"

"Huh?"

"Fairies. You know, queer. Pa thinks so."

I had no idea what R.C. was talking about, so I shut up and concentrated on my line in the water. Sometimes he could be pretty hard to take.

R.C. turned back to his own pole and for a few minutes was quiet. But only for a few minutes. "Tried me some chewin' tobacco last week. Pa said it'd make me sick, but it didn't. I chawed on that like a man, Pa said. You ever tried it?"

"Naw, my dad would kill me if he heard I'd been trying chew."

"Sheesh, your daddy is the stickenist pa I ever heard of. Seems like you can't do nothin' fun, Hiram, 'cept fish and go out to work on your grandaddy's fields. You're just plain no fun at all."

"I have plenty of fun, R.C., you just don't—"

"Haw, you're the boringest kid I know. Bet you don't even have a girlfriend."

My face turned red. Except for Naomi, I never even talked to girls.

"I got me one: Becca McRay. Last year she liked me to walk her home from school. I seen her underwear, Hiram."

Who cares? I thought. R.C.'s stories were making me tired, and fortunately a tug on his line distracted him for a moment. He jerked a smallish catfish onto the shore; it flopped and glistened in the sun, snapping its head and pointed stingers from side to side.

"Hoo-boy, this one's a little fighter!" R.C. stood out of the fish's way as it thrashed on the ground. When it quit flipp- ing around, he stunned it and held it up.

"Hey, Hiram, watch this." R.C. held the catfish tight in his left hand and had the nail of his fish line in the other.

"Whatcha think's in his eyes?" He pressed the nail gently against the fish's eye. The fish jerked when the nail touched it, but R.C. held it firm. Gradually he pressed harder and harder with the nail until it punctured the eye and clear fluid trickled out. "Shoot, no blood." He took less time with its other eye, jabbing it with the nail, then working the point deep into the socket. "Hey, this little old catfish is just like Mr. Paul. 'Look at me, I can't see!'" I felt like I was going to throw up, but I did nothing to stop R.C. He kept poking
that fish until it flinched and snapped its stingers into R.C.'s hand. "Ow! Hell dammit, this thing stung me!" He threw the fish to the ground and grabbed his hand. "Ow, ow, ow, that burns." He sucked the wound, then spit. "I hate catfish! Them stingers hurt worse than Pa's belt."

And he wasn't finished.

He picked up the fish line nail, bent over the fish, and jabbed the nail into its side. Blood oozed out. R.C. jabbed it again and again until it was pockmarked with bloody holes. Then he threw the nail down and rested one ragged sneaker on the fish. "Lookit, Hiram, I'm gonna squash its guts out." He stood on one leg, letting his full weight come down on it for a second before he slipped and fell.

I couldn't stand it anymore, so I grabbed a stick and knocked the fish into the water. "Geez, R.C., what's the matter with you? Are you sick or something?"

"What's a matter with you? It's only a stupid fish; it don't feel nothing. Dang, Hiram, you are one big sisbaby gettin' all cry-ey over a dumb old fish."

"It's no good hurting a fish, R.C. It didn't do anything wrong."

"Stung me, didn't it?" He held up his hand. "I had to teach it a lesson."

"Fish don't learn lessons. They got no brains, R.C. They're just fish."

R.C. shook his head, looked over at the river, and grinned. "Maybe so, but that dead catfish learned it sure won't sting me no more."