Monday afternoon I convinced Grampa to drive out with me to look at the fields. He complained a little, but once we were on Old Money Road, his mood improved. He set his elbow out the truck window, leaned back, took a deep breath, and smiled. "This is where a man should be, Hiram. Working the earth. Planting, cultivating, harvesting. That's what made the South great, and that's what still sustains this country. Hillburn folk have worked the land for generations. Held on to it, expanded it, kept it to pass on to our children." He poked me in the shoulder. "Your daddy should have stayed here, son. He should be out there right now looking after Hillburn land and Hillburn crops."

When we reached the first of Grampa's fields, I steered the truck onto a dirt road and let it roll to a stop alongside the edge of the cotton rows. "Bet it feels good to be out here again, Grampa," I said.

"Yep," he said, but he looked sad again. "Feels real great to see the fruits of my labors. Awful glad you came, son. Awful glad..." He took a deep breath and sighed. "But I do wish Harlan were here too. You remind me of him, Hiram, now more than ever before. I miss my boy."

I knew Grampa wanted me to say that Dad missed him too, that he wanted to come to Greenwood and just couldn't get away from work, that someday we'd all be back here again. But it wasn't true, and Grampa would know it. I didn't want to talk or even think about Dad, so I didn't say anything.

We sat without talking for a while, watching the breeze stir the tops of the cotton plants. Finally, Grampa spoke. "You know, sometimes you wish you could go back and change things with people. I loved Harlan and treated him right, but somewhere he went haywire. Or we went haywire. Seemed to always get along with his mother, but soured on me when he turned twelve. That's when he started acting contrary, and nothing I did could shake it out of him. It got so I didn't even know how to talk to him anymore. Florence, God bless her, tried to help. Harlan'd listen to her. I know he loves the Delta—it's in his blood—but I've never understood why he wouldn't stay."

A tear ran down his cheek, but he ignored it. "It's damn hard being old and alone, Hiram," he said in a voice so soft, I could hardly hear him. "Too damn hard."

I felt a catch in my throat and a sadness that reached clear back to my childhood. I hadn't seen Grampa cry since that day Gramma died. More than anything, I wanted to hug
him, to tell him things would be all right someday. My big old grandfather who had always been strong and loud and cheerful now seemed pitiful, sad, and hopeless. I wished he and Dad could talk, could be together again. I wanted him to be happy, but I didn’t know how to make it happen. The only thing I could think to say was, “I’m sorry, Grampa. Really I am.”

I couldn’t tell if he heard me or not.

Nobody said anything for a while; then Grampa straightened up and cleared his throat. “Let’s head on up through Money,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to find our old fishing hole on the Tallahatchie.”

I started the truck and followed his directions up and down the dirt farm roads until we came to our fishing spot. From there we drove through a lot of Leflore County, not stopping anywhere, but driving past the fields of Grampa’s friends and going through little towns where he’d done some business once or had a great meal or two. Seeing those familiar places brightened him up, and by the time we were headed back to Greenwood, he said, “Let’s not go home just yet. Why don’t we drive over to the county courthouse? I haven’t been there in weeks, and I’ve got some business to tend to.”

I drove us back through town and over the Yazoo on the Fulton Street Bridge and parked in front of the Leflore County Courthouse. Grampa couldn’t wait to get out of the truck. “I wonder if Eddie Crisler is still working. C’mon, Hiram, and we’ll wake the old devil up.”

Mr. Crisler stood and smiled when Grampa and I came in. “Earl, you rascal,” he said, “how’ve you been?”

“Been better,” said Grampa. “You know about my stroke of bad luck.” Both men laughed at his dumb joke, then started talking about fishing and folks in town and who’d died and who hadn’t. When Mr. Crisler mentioned something about the Citizens’ Councils, Grampa cleared his throat and looked my way.

“Hiram, Mr. Crisler and I have some serious business to tend to for the next little while.” Just like old times, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a dime, and flipped it to me. “Why don’t you run down the lobby and say hey to Mr. Paul. Bet he won’t recognize you.”

I strolled down the main lobby of the courthouse toward Mr. Paul’s concessions stand. It had been seven years, almost half my life, since I’d been there, but nothing had changed. My footsteps echoed off the marble floor like they always had. Old Mr. Taylor, the security guard, still stood outside the courtroom door, and there in the middle of the main lobby was Mr. Paul’s little stand, just as I remembered it. Mr. Paul looked the same, except he wasn’t wearing dark glasses now, and as I got closer, I saw that he’d framed his Purple Heart medal from the war and hung it on the wall behind his stand.

When he heard my footsteps, he turned my way and smiled. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“Hey, Mr. Paul, it’s me, Hiram Hillburn, back from Arizona to visit.”
“Well, well, Hiram, how’s the world been treating you? Better than it has your grampa, I hope.”
“I’ve been missing Greenwood something awful,” I said, “but Arizona’s not all that bad. I’ve got two brothers and two sisters now.”
“Isn’t that something? Guess your folks are doing well and your daddy’s happy.”
“Yessir, he likes teaching at the college.”
“Shame he’s too busy to come back once in a while to visit old Earl. It was hard on him when ya’ll moved away.” Mr. Paul stepped back and sat on a stool behind the counter.
“So what brings you in here today? Your grampa doing ‘business’ again?”
“Yessir, and he sent me down here with a dime. Have you got any cold root beer?”
He reached behind him into an ice chest, pulled out a bottle of Frosty Root Beer, opened it, and set it on the counter.
I snapped my dime on the counter top, and he picked it up and dropped it into his change tray. “Pleasure doing business with you, Hiram. You going to be in Greenwood long?”
“A couple of weeks, I guess. Dad says I’ve got to get back in time for school.”
“You don’t sound too happy about that.”
“School’s all right, but Grampa’s been feeling pretty lonely, and I kind of wanted to help him get around as long as I can.” I took a swig of root beer and asked, “So what’s new in Greenwood?”

“Same old small-town things. Babies get born, old folks die. A few young kids run off and get married. Sitting here where I do all day, I hear most of what goes on. Lately, lots of folks have been pretty hot about school integration. Those fellows on the Supreme Court didn’t make many friends down here.”
“You think they’re really going to integrate?”
“Over some folks’ dead bodies, I’d say. Your grampa and his friends in the White Citizens’ Council are pretty worked up over it. They’re dead set on keeping the colored schools separate from the white. It’s the ‘way of the South’ and all that.”
“But don’t Negroes want their own schools just like we do?”
“Ever been to a colored school, Hiram?”
“Nosir.”
“I went to one once, before the war, to fix a plumbing leak they had in the colored elementary school. The building wasn’t much more than a big shack. Kids didn’t have any books that I could see. The school desks were older than I was. The principal told me that she’d been calling the county office about the water leak for four months before I finally showed up, and all that time the school’d been without water.”
“How come you didn’t go sooner?”
“Hiram, I went the day after the county office called me about it. Nobody cared that the colored school didn’t have any water. So, how’d you like to go to a school with outdoor
privies, no books, rickety old desks, and no water most of the time?”

“But how do you know that’s not just one school? Other colored schools might be better.”

“This is Mississippi, Hiram. The South. Most colored schools are lucky to see ten cents of every school tax dollar. The rest goes to the white schools, the kind you went to when you lived here. Jim Crow laws keep things separate not equal, and if those White Citizens’ Councils have anything to say about it, Jim Crow will rule the South until doomsday.”

“And what’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with people keeping to their own kind? Grampa used to say that’s the way God wants it.”

“Hiram”—Mr. Paul’s face turned serious—“maybe God put different kinds of people on earth so we could all learn to get along. Ever think about that?” Mr. Paul turned toward the sound of footsteps coming our way.

“You getting this boy what he needs?” It was Grampa.

“That you, Earl? You’ve been away too long. Guess it took your grandson visiting to pry you out of that big old easy chair.”

Grampa laughed. “That’s just about right. It’s been good having the boy around again; he makes getting out a heck of a lot more fun.”

They talked for a while about Mr. Paul’s children, the weather, and local politics, but nobody said anything about integration or the Citizens’ Councils. Just polite, empty talk.

Pretty soon Mr. Paul said he had to close up shop because his wife would be coming by to take him home. We said good-bye and went home to dinner.

Ruthanne fed us like kings again. Grampa ate well but didn’t say much. All the driving around and visiting we’d done must’ve taken a lot out of him, because as soon as dinner was over, he went straight to bed.

The house was quiet and dark when I went upstairs. I wasn’t all that tired, but that’s not why I had a hard time sleeping. Thinking about how lonely Grampa was made me sad, especially because there wasn’t a thing I could do about it, and because I knew that unless a bolt of lightning struck Dad, there’d be no way he’d offer to patch things up with Grampa.

And I was thinking about what Mr. Paul had said. In Tempe, segregation never seemed to be a big deal; in Greenwood things were different. It wasn’t just the schools; restaurants, movie theaters, stores, even the neighborhoods were divided into white or colored. And the white places were always one hundred times nicer. The Jim Crow laws kept the Negroes pretty much stuck where they were—with no hope of things ever getting better. Their future must have seemed hopeless.

Then I thought about Emmett. He seemed like a regular kid, even though his skin wasn’t the same color as mine. I couldn’t imagine him going to a colored school, and maybe in Chicago he didn’t have to. Maybe there things were different. Maybe like Mr. Paul’d said, God didn’t want to keep
us separate. He wanted us to get along. Maybe—and this was a surprising thought—Dad’s ideas weren’t so crazy after all.

I’d have to think about that for a while. I could see where segregation wasn’t very fair, but it wasn’t the same as something like the Nazis killing all those Jews. It seemed to me that Negroes weren’t really being hurt; it was just the way things were, and I couldn’t see why people like Dad and Mr. Paul got so worked up over it, especially when it had nothing to do with them.

Dad, Grampa, Mr. Paul, and Emmett stayed on my mind for quite a while, but none of them seemed to be suffering. Things couldn’t be as bad as either Grampa or Dad made them out to be.

As it got later, I found something better to think about: Naomi Rydell. When would I see her? Far as I was concerned, the sooner the better.

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R. C. Rydell had gotten bigger. I ran into him Tuesday downtown at the P&S Drugstore, where he was slouched against the front wall looking bored and smoking filterless Viceroy’s. He stood at least six feet tall and had round powerful shoulders and thick forearms. A jagged line ran across his right cheek, and his eyebrows were crisscrossed with thin white scars.

When he saw me, he flicked a smoldering cigarette butt in my direction. “What in hell are you doin’ here? We figured when ya’ll run out to Arizona, we’d never see you again.” He grinned and shoved me back a step. “Shoot, Hiram, you done grown up. How long’s it been?”

“Seven years. We left in ’48.”

“Wasn’t much after that I quit school. Wastin’ my time there, Pa said. He got me a man’s job unloadin’ freight