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.

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 cigarettes. 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
barges that come down the Yazoo. Didn't need no schoolin' for that. So, whatcha doin' nowadays?"

"Still in high school back in Arizona. I'll be in eleventh grade next month."

"Figures," R.C. said with a snort. "You always was a sick baby. I'll bet school suits you just fine. So, how come you're in Greenwood? You runnin' from the law?"

"Naw, just visiting Grampa. He's been sick, you know, and none of us have been back to see him since we moved."

"Yeah, I heard he was a cripple or somethin' now. Too bad, 'cause he's always had things squared away pretty good, if you ask me."

I really didn't feel like asking R.C. anything, so I stepped around him and reached for the drugstore door. "Good seeing you, R.C., but I've got to be getting Grampa's medicine."

R.C. moved aside to let me pass but put a hand on my shoulder to stop me. "Tell you what, Hiram, we ain't got no barges comin' down for another couple days, so why don't we go fishin' tomorrow? I can see if you learned anythin' since you been in Arizona. It'll be like old times."

Old times with R.C. hadn't always been fun, but maybe fishing wouldn't be so bad; he was eighteen and probably had mellowed some since we were kids. And maybe he'd let me know what Naomi was doing, and if there was some way I could see her. "Yeah, okay. If he hasn't already loaned it out to one of his friends, we can probably use Grampa's truck and drive out to the Tallahatchie instead of walking down the Yazoo. Last week he showed me how to get to his favorite fishing hole out there."

R.C. leaned back against the storefront and lit another Viceroy. "I'll come by in the mornin', and maybe I'll be able to steal a little of Pa's beer to keep us from dyin' of thirst while we's fishin'."

"No need for any beer, especially in the morning." I knew R.C. and beer would be a bad combination. "Lemonade'll do me fine. I'll bring a thermos of it."

"I shoulda figured you'd be a sick baby who don't smoke or drink. Don't matter. I'll bring my beer, you bring your lemonade. We'll have us some fun." He took a long drag on his cigarette and let the smoke drift out his nostrils. "See you round, Hiram."

That night Grampa said we could use his pickup truck. "From what I hear lately, it'll do R.C. some good going fishing with a nice boy like you. If nothing else, it'll keep him out of mischief. Won't hurt you any either, Hiram; you need to get out with some boys your own age. Hanging around with an old man like me all the time can't be much fun. Just make sure you bring us back some catfish. Ruthanne can put together some hush puppies and fry up those fish, and we'll have us a meal you won't forget."

Ruthanne insisted on fixing me a lunch to take along with my lemonade, and when I picked up the canvas bag on my way out the next morning, it felt as jam-packed as anything Gramma had ever made. She didn't have to do that, I knew, but that's how Ruthanne was. It felt good to leave the
house on a fishing trip with enough lunch for me and R.C. Just like old times.

By the time I had my fishing gear in the back of the truck and my lunch sack on the front seat, R.C. showed up, looking ragged and red-eyed. "You okay?" I asked when he climbed into the truck.

"Had a long night," he said. "Stuff a sisbaby like you wouldn't know nothin' about. I'll be fine by the time we're out at the river."

"Hey, R.C., how's Naomi doing? I haven't had a chance to talk to her since I got back."

He looked surprised; then his eyebrows arched up and he grinned. "Oh, yeah, I forgot 'bout you two. Regular little lovebirds when you was here before. I shoul'da told her you was back in Greenwood, but I got in kinda late and Pa was on a bender. She's smart enough to make herself scarce when Pa's rippin'."

"But she's doing all right; I mean, she's okay?"

"Look it here, sisbaby, I take care of my little sister; not that she needs it much anymore, but long as I'm around, don't nobody hurt her. Course, I keep the Romeos away too, but in your case, old buddy, I'll make an exception. Naomi always was sweet on you." He leaned back and looked me over. "But I don't know what she's gonna think of the grewed up and ugly version of you."

"When you get home, tell her I said hey, will you? Let her know I'm in town, and maybe sometime we can—"

R.C. held up a hand to stop me. "Hold on a minute. I said I'd let you see my sister, but I didn't say I'd make all your damn appointments. You work out your own matchmaking, Hiram Hillburn. If Naomi wants to see you, she'll see you. She don't, she won't. And if that happens to be the case, you'd dadgum better not be botherin' her about it."

"Enough about your love life; let's get out of here." He held up a brown paper sack. "Got us—sorry, I got me six bottles of Pa's beer to help get through the day. Good thing you don't drink, Hiram boy, 'cause these six will be barely enough for me." He set the beer alongside the bulging lunch sack on the seat between us. "Whatcha got here?"

"Ruthanne packed us a lunch. Looks like we'll have plenty."

R.C. didn't grab the sack like I'd expected him to. "Ruthanne that nigger girl your granddaddy got workin' for him?"

"Ever since Gramma died, and she's a great cook. Just as good as Gramma ever was."

He pushed the bag away. "Be a cold day in hell 'fore I eat nigger food. Don't matter how good it is. Never did understand your granddaddy on that. He's right-thinkin' in most ways, but he lets a nigger in and out of his house like she's family." He smirked and raised an eyebrow. "But who knows? Maybe she's been doin' a whole lot more than just cookin' and cleanin'."

"You're nuts, R.C." Right then I wanted to pop him in the jaw. "Grampa's not like that, and neither is Ruthanne. Just can it for a while, will you?"
He looked surprised, then he grinned and reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a cigarette. "Looks like Arizona's turned you into a nigger-lover." He lit the cigarette and tossed the match out the window. "Fine. Just fine. I don't like talkin' about coloreds anyway. You're drivin'. Let's go get us some fish."

I backed out the driveway and turned onto Cotton Street just as Ronnie Remington was crossing in front of us on his way to the courthouse. He moved slowly, his head down, oblivious to us. R.C. reached over and pounded the truck horn.

Ronnie's head snapped up, his eyes huge, and he stopped dead in the road in front of us like an old cow caught in the glare of a car's headlights. R.C. honked the horn twice more, then leaned out his window, pounded the side of the door with his arm, and yelled, "Move your fat ass, you old queer!" Ronnie looked terrified when he recognized R.C., and he wobbled as quickly as he could to the sidewalk while R.C. whooped and catcalled. Ronnie stood frozen and pale as we drove past, and R.C. laughed like a crazy man.

I couldn't help laughing too. "Geez, R.C., you almost gave him a heart attack. I thought he was going to jump out of his shoes."

"Yeah, them old Remingtons is always good for a laugh. A couple years ago, every time I'd catch me a carp, I'd slice its gut open and leave it in their mailbox."

"No kidding? I bet they hated getting mail."

"That's nothing. Last year I got so fed up seein' them two fairies walkin' around town that I offered Ralph a ride one day when I had Pa's truck, and instead of takin' him home, I headed out of town. We drove ten minutes before he even said anything."

"What'd he do?"

"What could the old weirdo do? I could bust him in half if I wanted. Anyways, I stop the truck and tell him I like him so much, I want all his clothes. He stared at me with his mouth hangin' open like some stupid fish. 'Get out and gimme your clothes,' I told him. He just sat there like an idiot, so I slapped him around a little. He started moanin' and cryin' and finally got out. Made him strip naked. Boy, was that a sorry sight. If I had a body like his, I'd shoot myself. Felt so sorry for him, I tossed his shoes back before I drove off."

This didn't sound funny anymore. "You left him there? Naked?"

"Didn't hurt him none. I saw him around town again a couple days later. Some sappy old farmer probably picked him up and give him a feedbag or something to cover up with. You know how people around here put up with them Remingtons."

R.C. hadn't changed, and I would have turned around and gone back home if I could have thought up a good excuse. I didn't say anything more to R.C., and after a few minutes, he leaned his head against the door and fell asleep.

I felt lousy the rest of the way to the Tallahatchie. R.C. Rydell was one screwed up kid, and for the life of me, I couldn't
understand why he—or anyone—would enjoy making other people miserable. Maybe R.C. was so miserable himself that he was always looking for somebody or something he could make worse off than he was. But he always took it too far; it's one thing to have a little fun with someone, teasing and stuff like that, but R.C. was just plain mean.

And to tell you the truth, he scared the crap out of me.

When I finally parked the truck at the clearing not far from Grampa's fishing hole, I was feeling better. The lush green of the Delta and the heavy damp smell from the fields helped me get my mind on something other than R.C.'s bullying.

R.C. woke up when I opened my door. "Where are we?"
He looked around, confused.

"Don't know for sure. A few miles from Money. Grampa and I used to come here all the time when I was a kid. It's a good spot. Anyway, you can sleep some more if you want. I'm heading to the river to get settled."

"Good idea." R.C. leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and waved me away. "I'll come down after I get me some more beauty rest."

I grabbed the lunch sack, picked up my fishing gear, and worked my way down to the river's edge. I was glad to be alone. The morning sky was clear blue, the grass damp and dew streaked. The sound of the wind in the trees and the flow of the Tallahatchie made me want to hurry up and find a shady spot to take a nap. I followed the narrow path parallel to the river for a few minutes until I recognized a place under an old cypress tree. I tucked the lunch bag up against the tree trunk, baited my hook, and cast out into the middle of the river. Then I sat down against the tree and watched the water.

It felt great to be fishing again, but it didn't seem right without Grampa. He needed to be there, because even though I loved the Delta countryside, that wasn't what I'd been missing. What I really wanted was to relive some of my favorite experiences, experiences that always included Grampa. When I was little, he'd taught me to fish somewhere around here; I'd never had a bad day with Grampa while we were fishing, never saw him lose his temper, never had him get mad when I snagged my line or lost a fish. You know, he probably didn't care at all about catching fish back then: He took me fishing because he enjoyed spending time with me.

I wondered about Dad and Grampa. Had Dad ever stood here with Grampa's arms around him helping him cast a line? Had they ever told stories, joked, and splashed together on the riverbank while they cleaned the day's catch?

Suddenly, it mattered a lot that they had. As much as I loved my good times with Grampa, I didn't want them to be a substitute for what he should have done with Dad when he was a boy. My childhood memories with Grampa might be something, maybe one of the only things, Dad and I had in common, and I made up my mind that when I got back to Tempe, I'd ask Dad about it.

All my serious thinking ended when a rock ricocheted
off the tree just above my head. "Woo-ee, Hiram boy! You in a trance or what? I coulda snuck up on you, slit your throat, swiped your lunch, and drove away in your truck without you even knowin' it." R.C. tramped down to the riverbank. "You been drinkin', boy?"

"Just thinking. That's one of the things I like about being here."

"No wonder you never catch no fish." R.C. set his pole down to bait his hook. "There's got to be somebody payin' attention at your end of that pole, or those fish'll strip your hook clean." He pulled a bottle of beer from his bag. "Let me show you how this is supposed to be done, boy. First, you got to wet your whistle. The faster, the better." He popped the cap off the bottle with his pocketknife, then chugged the entire beer without hardly taking a breath. "Ahh, that's better." He tossed the empty bottle into the river. "Now, fish, look out. I'm a-comin' for you."

R.C. walked a few yards downstream and cast his line into the river. Minutes later I heard him whoop. "Got me one! Hoo-boy, this is gonna be a good day!" He pulled his stringer from his pocket and strung the fish on it. "Tell you one thing, Hiram, your granddaddy sure knows where the fish are." The rest of the morning went like that, R.C. guzzling beer and pulling in fish. By noon he had a stringer full of fish and a belly full of beer; he was red-faced and a little unsteady when he trudged over and dropped down alongside me. "All that fishin's made me hungry, Hiram boy. Whatcha got for lunch?"

I almost reminded him of what he'd said about Ruthanne's food, but figured I didn't want him to knock my teeth down my throat. "Help yourself to whatever's in there. We got plenty."

He pulled out two sandwiches, tore the wax paper off one, and tossed the other to me. "Eat up, boy. Can't work on no empty stomach." He set the lunch sack between us, and we dug in. I hadn't realized how hungry I was, and, of course, Ruthanne had packed us a sack lunch better than most people's suppers. We had lots more than we could eat.

While we ate, R.C. talked about how many fish he'd caught, his work down on the docks, and some raunchy stuff about girls he'd known. I knew most of his stories were a bunch of baloney, but it was mostly harmless stuff, so I didn't sweat it.

I hadn't slept much the night before, and Ruthanne's lunch combined with the heavy afternoon air hit me like a sleeping drug. R.C. was yawning too, so I said, "No place better in the Delta for a quiet nap than right in the shade of one of these willow trees. After we wake up, we can decide if we want to fish some more or head back into town."

R.C. settled into a shady spot a few yards downstream and was snoring in minutes. I didn't last much longer.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep when I jerked awake. It took a moment for my head to clear, but when it did, I heard splashing and laughter from upstream.

Thirty or forty yards from us where the bank sloped gradually into shallow water, four Negro boys were hors-
coming, he turned to his friends and said, "See? Told you we
was friends."

"Hey, Emmett," I said, "what you all up to?"

"Just goofing around with some of my cousins. Too hot to
be anywhere b-b-but in the water. What’re you d-d-doing,
fishing or sleeping?"

"Little of both, I guess. Ruthanne's lunch and this old
Mississippi sun pretty much wiped me out."

"Lunch?" Emmett's face lit up. "We're starving; got any-
thing left?"

Emmett's friends had stayed behind him a ways in the
water, close enough to hear, but far enough away to escape if
they had to. "Aw, geez, Emmett," said one, "let's just get on
home. No need to be hanging round here."

Emmett waved a hand behind his back and said without
even turning around, "You all go on if you want to. I'm
gonna get me something to eat."

The boys didn't move. "Told you," said one. "He's crazy."
They all laughed and splashed water at him.

"Wait here," I told Emmett. "I'll go grab my lunch sack
and you all can have whatever's left in it."

I started back to the tree where I'd left my stuff, but Em-
mett followed me. "Shoot," he said, "I d-don't want to stand
out there with that old sun b-beating down on me eating
my lunch. No snakes up around that tree, is there?"

When they saw him follow me up on the shore, Emmett's
friends whooped and laughed. "Go, Bobo!" one yelled. "Go,
you crazy boy!"
I turned around and faced him. "Look, it'd be better if you stayed down there. My friend's sleeping over there, and he probably doesn't want to get woke up."

"Hey, any friend of yours is a friend of mine," Emmett said with a grin. "Now let's see what Ruthanne p-p-packed us for lunch." He wasn't going to listen, so I figured the best thing to do was to give him my lunch and get him out of there. I handed him the sack as his cousins kept laughing and yelling at him. He ignored them.

Unfortunately, R.C. didn't.

He came up from behind and shoved me out of the way so he was facing Emmett himself. "What the hell's goin' on here?" he said slowly. R.C.'s face was red and he smelled like stale beer. "Looks like you caught yourself one helluva colored fish, Hiram." He snorted through his nose, cleared his throat, and spit at Emmett's feet. "Too bad it's a trash fish. You'll have to throw him back."

I had a feeling something real ugly was about to happen. For some reason, maybe because he didn't know R.C., Emmett didn't seem worried at all, even though his cousins had backed away without making a sound.

"Let's not have any trouble, R.C.," I said. "I was just giving Emmett our leftovers."

"Givin' our lunch to a nigger? You must be as crazy as your pa was. I'd just as soon throw our food to the fish as see it go to waste on this trash." He snatched the sack out of Emmett's hand. "You leave this be, Hiram, or I'll fix you, your grampa, and your whole family real good, I swear to God."

R.C. glared at me with pure hatred, and I backed off, afraid to do anything more.

"Hey," Emmett chuckled nervously. Finally, he must have gotten some good sense, "I d-d-didn't mean nothing. My friend here was sharing his lunch, and—"

R.C. shoved him in the chest. "White folk don't share nothin' with colored, boy. Nothin'."

Emmett staggered back a step but didn't shut up. "Look, I didn't mean anything by it, b-b-but he did say we could have that sack. Why d-don't you just let me have it, and we'll get out of here."

"Don't you hear, boy, or are you just tired of breathing?" R.C. threw the lunch sack down and kicked it out of the way. "I've had enough of your uppityness." He lunged forward and grabbed Emmett in a headlock. "You so hungry, I'll feed you lunch." R.C. dragged him over to where'd he'd been fishing. Emmett struggled and complained at first, but R.C. tightened his grip around Emmett's neck, and he quieted down, half scrambling, half being dragged behind R.C.

When they got to the riverbank, R.C. threw Emmett on the ground and held him there with one knee on his chest. He reached over and pulled his fish line out of the river and flipped the fish across Emmett's bare stomach. When a fish twitched, Emmett flexed upward and tried to twist away, but R.C.'s knee kept him pinned. "Lemme go!" Emmett yelled. "Get off me."

"Lunchtime, boy," R.C. said as he pulled his pocketknife from his pants. He opened the blade and held it over Emmett.
Emmett froze.

"C'mon, R.C.," I yelled, "cut it out."

He waved his knife at me. "I warned you once, Hiram. Ain't gonna do it again." Then he smiled. "'Sides, I ain't doin' nothin' but givin' this uppity black boy his lunch. You hold still, boy," he said to Emmett, "I'd hate to see you get hurt by accident."

R.C. swung his leg over and sat on Emmett's stomach, then he slid the fish up to Emmett's neck. His knife blade flashed in the sun.

"Come on, get off," Emmett yelled as he bucked upward, trying to throw R.C. off, but R.C. was too big for him.

"Hang on, boy, you don't want me to drop this knife on some vital part, do you? Just set still while I get you some lunch." He pulled the largest fish off the stringer and held it in one hand with its white belly facing up. "Carp. You coloreds love carp." He stuck his blade into the tail end of the fish and cut up to its head, letting the blood drip onto Emmett's chest and face. He gagged and yelled for help, but R.C. held him.

R.C. threw his knife into the ground just inches from Emmett's face. Emmett didn't move, didn't yell. His eyes looked huge. Then R.C. scraped the guts out of the fish and shoved them in Emmett's face.

Emmett thrashed and twisted his head from side to side, and R.C. threw the fish carcass into the river so he could use one hand to hold Emmett's head still and the other to hold the guts over Emmett's mouth and nose.

"R.C., he can't breathe," I yelled. "You're going to kill him!"

He ignored me, and when Emmett finally opened his mouth for air, R.C. shoved the guts in and rolled off Emmett, laughing. "You wasn't as hungry as you thought, boy," he said as Emmett retched and rolled on the ground. R.C. shook the blood from his hands onto Emmett. "Guess fresh carp don't much agree with you after all. That be the case, you best learn not to be so uppity around white folks, and you'd damn well better not be comin' around here askin' for any food again. Seems to me you don't like what we got to offer."

Emmett knelt on all fours, coughing and spitting. When he caught his breath, he turned and glared at R.C., and then at me before sliding into the shallow edge of the river and wading back to his cousins. They hadn't moved since R.C. woke up.

R.C. picked up his pocketknife, wiped the blade on his pants leg, folded it closed, and shoved it into his pocket. "Let's get out of here, Hiram. I'm done fishin'."

He picked up his stuff and headed back up the path to the truck. I stayed behind, sick to my stomach, embarrassed, and scared. Emmett and his cousins waded upstream with Emmett walking between two of them, leaning heavily on their shoulders. I wanted to say something, to yell that I was sorry, that I thought R.C. was evil and messed up, but they were too far to hear by then. Besides, I'd had my chance to do something, but all I'd done was watch R.C. humiliate that boy.

I felt dirty and weak.

And ashamed.