

**June, 1962**



## The Town

The town sits atop bluffs that drop to the river in broken ridges of sweet gum and pine. Indian villages once flourished along these banks—Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek—long since erased by the picks and spades of white men—red-faced Scots-Irish farmers; pencil-fingered planners; hard-jawed traffickers in iron and coal; and African slaves. They hacked it, trampled it, tilled it, and mined it until all traces of the ancient life were gone, save the occasional arrowhead, turned by a plow, and native spirits, whispering at nightfall among the river's shoals and eddies.

Now it is an ordinary town. Streets run straight. Buildings are glassed and square. Stoplights change from red to green.

Late Friday afternoon: the angle-iron sign atop the First National Bank building makes its last stand against the thinning sky. Street lights pop on, reflect off the old streetcar tracks. Office blinds draw shut. Shop doors close. Circling swifts funnel toward chimney tops too old to serve the fireplaces that support them. The town is a mausoleum draped in plastic flowers: half of it a monument to the past, the other half tacked on.

In neighborhoods off Main Street, where the old families live in their old, clapboard houses, the long, wide porches dim to shadow. The last screen door slams. Magnolias darken to silhouettes of black and green. Hands flit over florescent-lit stoves and formica counter tops.

A turned head, a call up the stairs: "I need some help down here."

Red-painted toe nails dry on the ledge of a second story window. Cigarette smoke wafts through the screen. "There in a minute."

"O.K., no dance tonight."

"But Mama."

"Now!"

Away from the business district and old neighborhoods, University Avenue winds along the bluff, parallel to the river. It dips past old mansions, beer parlors, and pool halls, then rises toward the vast lawns and blocky buildings of the University. Across from the white-columned President's mansion, the Denny Chimes have bonged the six o'clock hour. Fraternity houses feed KAs, Phi Deltas, and SAE's, bound for dorms and sorority houses for dates with Tri Deltas, K.D.s, and sweethearts from high school. Nearby spread the working class neighborhoods. Plumbers, painters, salesmen, and teachers wash off the week in the bathtubs and shower stalls of shot-gun houses crowding the willow oaks and asphalt grid between the University and the white high school on 15th Street, home of the Tuscaloosa Chieftains. The men folks will help with the dishes, feed the German Shepherd out back, settle in for an evening of penny-anti poker, Crazy Eights, or T.V.: Andy Griffith, Bonanza, Friday night fights at ten. The women will bathe the kids, catch a smoke on the porch, talk to neighbors.

"They're hiring out at Barnhardt Chemical; I'm thinking about applying."

"What?"

"Secretary."

"I'd think twice, honey. I worked out there when Hank was in Korea. The smell gets in your clothes. And the men try to, too."

"Well, I could use a bit of the latter around here."

Then it's off to bed. Some people have to work on Saturdays.

These are the white people. Their lives run as straight as the streets of Tuscaloosa, as regular as the stop lights. It's been this way for years, every Friday night, from the mansions downtown, to the hard-luck houses of working-class neighborhoods, to the vast lawns of the University, to the molded concrete balustrades of the football stadium. Cards shuffle, black and white T.V.s flicker off walls, pool balls kiss and drop into pockets off green felt tables, college kids sway together in front of Negro bands, playing the old sing-along-songs. They are happy; they get what they expect out of life. They do not hear Time's freight train, clacking down the track.

Ten blocks away, across the lumber yard and railroad tracks in Cherrytown, the colored section, the train runs every night. There, too, the streets are quiet except for a couple of liquor houses where men gather in yards to drink and talk in the light of coal oil lanterns. Card games pick up on porches and in rooms around back. There are no magnolias here—mostly elm, privet, and mulberry, scraping the edges of tin roofs, pulling the last ounce of green from swept dirt yards.

In the unpainted houses people finish supper, move onto porches to sit and talk. Women rock slowly, wave hand-held fans. Men bend forward from ladder-back chairs, rest their elbows on their knees, and smoke. The air smells of lard and custard pie. The talk is unhurried. Cigarette smoke hangs under the porches, drifts into the yards.

“Preacher Gryce finally going down to talk to Rosemont.”

A swing creaks and stops. Hand-held fans pause, start again.

“Bout what?”

“Bout shutting down Rosemont's juke-joint, I reckon.”

“Rosemont ain't gon shut that place down. He makes too much money.”

“Police gon shut him down if he don't quit selling liquor to white boys.”

“They ain't gon shut nothing long as he keeps up his payments to Deputy Starnes.”

“Still, Reverend Gryce going to talk.”

“Reverend Gryce’s got the Spirit—no doubt ’bout that. But with Rosemont, talking’s ’bout all he gon do.”

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John Folsom Gryce shuts his screen door, steps onto the front porch, and runs a toothpick through his teeth to remove the last shred of his wife, Ludy’s, baked chicken. Galluses hanging from his broad shoulders, drape loosely about his waist. The night air is so heavy he could lift it in his arms. Sounds of the neighborhood drone through it—folks talking on porches, Aubrey Bryan’s saxophone, next block down. Even the tree frogs sound like they’re underwater. He pulls the toothpick from his teeth, examines it between the thick ends of his thumb and finger. A little blood on the splintery tip. He snaps it in two and flicks it over the rail.

Rosemont Greene’s liquor house is the last place he wants to go on a Friday night. It’ll be full of drinkers, carousers, and fornicators—the very sort of goings-on he spends most Sundays preaching against. Still, he promised Sister Waites he would go talk to Rosemont about her son, Raiford, who’s into some civil rights business out in the county. She’s scared about Raiford. She ought to be. Raiford’s trouble. And Rosemont’s mixed up in it somehow. And not only that but John Gryce promised God a long time ago he’d talk to Rosemont about that liquor house. And God’s waited long enough.

Behind him the clink of silverware falls silent where Ludy has been gathering the supper plates from the table. He knows where she’s standing without looking—right there in the door leading from the kitchen to the front room—with the plates in her hand, watching him through the screen.

“John.”

“Yes.”

“What time you coming back?”

“When I finish.”

“That won’t be long, you counting on help from Rosemont.”

Ludy taps a fork against a plate to get the food off. “He killed that man, you know, went to the penitentiary for it. Say he ’bout cut his head off with a razor.”

“That was over thirty years ago. Besides, I’m not the one who’s gon do the talking. God is.”

“Rosemont listens to God even less than he listens to you.”

“He ain’t heard what God’s got to say.”

Preacher Gryce finds the chain to his gold Elgin watch and flips open the lid: 6:20. He can take his time walking down there—time to think, open his heart to the word of God. He hooks his galluses in his thumbs and pulls them over his shoulders.

“Bye, Ludy.”

“Speak the truth,” she says.

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Acee Waites stands in his usual spot at the Red Elephant Grill, frying burgers for white folks. His thin hands are swollen from the heat, fingertips numb to the first knuckle. Happens every night about this time when the heat and grease get to them. When he was small, coming out of church with his mother, Preacher Gryce knelt before him and took Acee’s hands in his. Huge, black hands, big enough to sit in. Acee’d never thought of skin shades before that, other than brown and white. But next to his, Preacher’s hands were so dark they seemed to come from another age. Acee’s skin looked depleted, leeches of the earth’s richest minerals.

Preacher turned Acee’s hands palm-up. “Artist’s hands,” he said and nodded up at Acee’s mama. “Careful in their work.”

He tilted Acee’s chin up and looked him in the face. “Question-asking eyes,” he said. “Best way to find God.”

When Preacher had examined Raiford the same way a couple of

years before, all he'd said was, "You're a good boy, son. A strong boy. Take care of your mama and family."

"Yessuh," said Raiford.

Raiford tried until their daddy left, and after that he tried even harder. Then one day Acee woke up and Raiford was gone. He was in the neighborhood, he was other places around town, he'd moved to Birmingham and then to Atlanta. When he came back, he told their mama he was old enough to live his own life. "No," she said. "You just into devilish things."

And now this civil rights business he's running out in the county. Jumped the rails altogether. Messing in stuff that's sooner or later going to bring trouble down on everybody.

Acee scrapes the spatula over the surface of the grill, pushing a puddle of grease before it. Behind him Annie and Lugenia's arms and hands work like snakes, cutting onions and tomatoes, tearing lettuce, slicing buns. They hum hymns together, one picking up where the other leaves off, then picking up the words—"across that ri-iver; blessed Lord, blessed Lord." Beyond the screen door next to the stove, dust builds in the restaurant parking lot as carloads of teenagers come wheeling in from the Friday-night streets. The city's slow hum builds toward midnight.

His mama told him before he left for work that Preacher Gryce was headed down to Rosemont Greene's liquor house to talk about Raiford. Preacher Gryce, watches over Sister Waites and her two sons. The crackers have already thrown dead cats and skunks in Raiford's yard and shot into his trailer. And Raiford's only been at it a couple of months. Preacher Gryce don't want Raiford's business bringing trouble down on Cherrytown like they had in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery with whites beating up the Freedom Riders. Preacher Gryce confides these things in Acee. *You got to know the times. You got to know what people can stand. You got to move when God tells you.*

Got to. Preacher has Acee in his beam, sees the makings of a leader in him, model for the community—the "Lord-is-calling-you"

thing. And that's got ahold of Acee, too. That's weighing him down just like his brother is. Preacher, with his hopes and dreams, Raiford with his trouble-making, hang about Acee's shoulders like a dead man's arm.

Acee starts flipping the burgers, pressing them into the grease. Raiford's his own God. Moves when *he* wants to, goes by how much *he* can stand. Raiford knows the times, and far as he's concerned, the time is now. Like that convoy of mule wagons, patched-together cars and pickups he led up the old Montgomery Highway to the County courthouse to register colored voters last week, sheriff's deputies trailing behind, stopping their cars to talk, laugh, and smoke when the caravan halted to change a tire or a radiator boiled over on somebody's twenty-year-old Ford. Or the rallies at one of the red-dirt-stained, country churches to protest the share-cropper system. Or the hand-drawn placard Raiford planted on the courthouse lawn, showing a black man on his knees in chains and a fat, white man with a whip standing over him.

It gets a little worse every time. And it doesn't help that Raiford's companion in all of this is a white woman, come down from somewhere up North—a skinny, middle-aged lady with black hair, wiry as a Brillo pad. Some say they sleep together. Doesn't matter whether it's true. The talk alone will still get you killed.

Acee glances down at the opened buns Annie and Lugenia have laid out on the counter next to the grill for him to slip the burgers on. They lie there, spongy-white with their mouths open, plastered in mustard and mayonnaise, all but smiling up at him. It passes like a shadow through his brain that the cool, white buns are white folks; the burgers popping and curling black around the edges on the grill are colored—the ones feeling the heat, the last traces of red life burning before his eyes to a charred, dead gray.

It's the kind of thought Raiford would scream out loud. *When you gon get out the white man's kitchen and fight for yourself, Acee? Fight for your race? When you gon quit listening to Preacher Gryce and his Jesus talk and think for yourself?*

Acee slips yellow slices of Velveta on the meat patties and taps the edge of spatula on the grill to shake off the dripping cheese and grease. Out the screen door, around the light over the stoop, insects bat the naked bulb. Cars keep pulling into the lot. Kids get out, laughing and yelling—high-schoolers, college kids—all white. The warm wood of the spatula handle feels glued to Acee's sweaty hand. He taps it again, stares through the greasy mesh of the screen door.

Over in Cherrytown his girlfriend, Resa Robinson, sits on her porch, waiting—that oval of amber deep in her eyes; the ends of her hair brushing her neck, framing the harp-like bend of her jaw; hands resting in her softly shifting lap. Resa and Raiford used to go together, couple of years ago before Raiford took up his “cause” and took up with the white woman as well. Somewhere in Resa's eyes, a light still glows for Raiford. And maybe it's that, or maybe it's something else—the Preacher's hopes for Acee, the community's watchful expectations—but where Resa is concerned, something is in the way. It causes Acee to trip over himself, keeps him from getting as close as he wants. Close as he needs. It's like he's always reaching for her, through a screen door, over houses and rooftops, a hand with its fingers spread toward the blank face of the nighttime sky.

The burgers are burning. The plastic-looking cheese runs off the edges and spreads in soapy bubbles on the grill. It doesn't matter. The crowd pouring into the Red Elephant Grill eats so fast they don't taste it anyway.

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Beyond the screen door where Acee works, carloads of white teenagers wheel into the restaurant parking lot, slide to a halt in order-less rows. Dust rises, tires spin, mufflers blare and die. Girls with boyfriends wait for their doors to be opened, step daintily in loafers and flats onto the gravelly dirt. Skirts swish. Bobbed hair and wide, patent leather belts catch the restaurant's fluorescent glare. The boys move in stiff-hinged

angularity. They shift about, fumble at cigarettes, lean against car trunks and fenders, ankles crossed in black loafers and white socks.

In the far corner of the lot Richeboux Branscomb slouches against an old Mercury, long, muscular arms folded across his chest. His head tilts forward. A disobedient swatch of honey-colored hair all but hides his face. Mem Cohane stands facing him. Her hair is the same color as his, but clean and cut short; her face sharp and intelligent. She leans forward on her toes and stretches her neck toward him as she talks, then rocks back onto her heels, throws her arms into the air, kicks the dirt between them.

A black '55 Ford with chrome-lined fender skirts and mud-flaps rumbles to a stop next to them. The driver grins out the window, revs the engine, and gives them a blast of his new, glass-pack mufflers. Mem backs up a step to lean against the car next to Richeboux and puts her hands over her ears. The driver cuts the switch. The engine chugs and dies. A thin boy with pale skin and dirty blond hair, combed into a duck tail, gets out of the passenger side. His face is lit in a permanent grin. A second boy gets out of the back. He, too, is grinning—but it's more of a smirk. His wiry red hair is pasted into a flattop with petroleum jelly. His face is red with bloodshot eyes. A madras shirt drapes his belly. The driver is the last to exit. He shakes his tousled hair as if to get dirt out of it, rests his palm on the car roof, and pops his fingers against the metal in time with a song in his head. He smiles over at the boy and girl.

“Hey, Richeboux. You wanna come with us after the dance? Jamie and Ellis went down to Uncle Rosemont's after school and got some beer.”

The girl whirls and brushes past the loungers around the Ford.

“Hey, Mem,” says the thin one with duck tails hair. He uses his fingers as a comb to sweep a swag of hair from his forehead. “No big deal. You can come, too.” He turns to the others and grins—even wider.

She shoots a glance over her shoulder. “Go jerk off. That's about all any of you are good for.” They watch her ass switch up the restaurant steps and through the swinging glass doors.

“Richeboux, how come you still messing with her?” says the fat one. “Jew girls are too high and mighty.”

Richeboux looks up. “Shut up, Ellis.”

“Anyway,” says the tousle-haired driver, still keeping time on the roof, “You coming with us or not? We’re planning to take a little cruise through Cherrytown.”

At the police station, two blocks from the courthouse downtown, Chief Deputy D. Sugarman Starnes rests his thin legs on his desk, reads the evening paper, eyes squinting through smoke from a cigarette smoldering in his ashtray. The dispatch radio is on the shelf behind him, telephone within reach to his front. The whip handle he carries wherever he goes lies next to it across a worn, leather-bound Bible. His hand automatically rubs his bad leg. It starts hurting this time everyday. He’s got two extra cars on the streets tonight. It’s Friday, nearly a full moon, and you don’t want to get caught short. Besides, there’s a graduation dance at the high school. Bound to be an extra wreck or two.

It’s right there on page three of the paper: that colored boy again—Raiford Waites—out in the county, raising hell with the colored preachers and sharecroppers, telling ’em to “rise up, throw off the white man’s burden.” Got ’em talking about a strike against the stores downtown, threatening to drop their sacks and walk out of the cotton rows. Thinks he’s Moses, leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Hell, in the Navy they’d have had his ass in the brig long time ago. They’d have thrown him to the sharks.

Starnes quits rubbing his leg. The ache starts again.

*Son of a bitch!*

He lets the paper drop across his knees. From atop the row of filing cabinets across the room, the mangy, stuffed wildcat he shot in Sipsey Swamp five years ago, stares at him with its glass eyes and fangy grin. Starnes glances down at the paper. The name, “Raiford Waites,”

pulses up at him. Might be good idea to check in on Mr. Waites and that Yankee white woman he's been hanging around with. Starnes's best deputy, Darryl Culp, is in one of the extra cars. Starnes taught Darryl everything he knows, and Darryl will know how to handle this: pay a visit to the old trailer Waites lives in, soft knock on the door, checking on complaints from the neighbors—the usual excuses. Maybe catch him and that Yankee white woman going at it. Could arrest him for that alone.

He slides his feet to the floor, picks up his whip handle, and taps the butt gently on the desk. Then he turns and flips on the switch to the dispatch unit. It squawks and screeches, settles into static.

“Hey, Darryl—you there? I got a little errand for you.