

THE GHOST OF JOHNSON'S CREEK



I was eight years old when it happened. I didn't understand the real truth of the matter until I was much older. That's when I gathered all the bits and pieces, conversations with aunts, uncles, and my grandmother, Minnie Bell, and put them together. This is what remained.

It was late September 1963. Texas was still in the middle of a hot, muggy Indian summer. And with temperatures still in the 90s, the small fan in the corner of the room was useless, doing nothing more than offering a loud humming sound. Bob Evans' office was drab and ordinary. The only defining features were the numerous wildlife he had mounted. The giant elk, moose, and bear heads lined the olive-green walls in a garish display of his accuracy. Balding and unshaven, Bob sat hunched over behind a second-hand, compost wood desk riddled with miscellaneous folders, papers, rubber bands, and spilled Coke stains. Uncle Jack thought it was in much need of a good dusting and cleaning, as he sat on the small wooden chair opposite him. He had no idea why he had been summoned into his boss' office after hours, but he'd worked overtime for two months straight and had not been compensated. Perhaps he might even get a raise, he thought, something he had fantasized about for many years but never held out hopes of it ever coming true. As Bob chewed gum and prattled on the phone with his wife, Uncle Jack waited patiently. He adjusted and readjusted the small badge pinned to his overalls that bore his picture, name, and title, 'Jack Poole, Assistant Cook, Peabody Elementary School'. He wore it often. The fact that he was part of the education system—even a small part made him walk a few inches taller. He reasoned this was why the colored people in town gave him extra space at social gatherings and seated him near the front at special events.

When Bob finally hung up, he took the wad of gum out of his mouth and tossed it into the overburdened waste basket. It stuck to the wax paper that contained a half-eaten burger from Lorinda's Drive-In Burger joint. With the door closed and no windows for ventilation, the air reeked of body odor and rotting food. Uncle Jack noticed that the heat from the September sun had not managed to tan his pale white skin, making the numerous age spots on his arms much more visible. As the smell

intensified, he wondered how much longer he'd be held captive.

“Did you remember to put up all the dry goods delivered today?” Bob asked.

“Yessum,” Uncle Jack answered.

“And did you wash down the cutting boards?”

“Yessum.”

“And what about the floorboards underneath the glass counters?”

“Yes suh, did dem too.”

“I seem to recall Mrs. Percell sayin' them floorboards looked mighty dirty last time she checked.”

“Well suh, I checked dem myself fo' I left today, and dey was clean enough to eat off of wit a knife and fork . . . iff'n I do say so, Mr. Bob.”

“You ain't callin' Mrs. Percell a liar, are you, boy?” He sat up straighter in his brown, cracked and peeling, leather chair.

Uncle Jack chuckled nervously and wondered why he would make such a serious accusation. “Why no suh! I's never do such a thing as dat. Mrs. Percell 'bout the most honest, kind person I done ever met at dis school.”

“Then, you won't disagree when she says you been takin' foodstuffs from the cafeteria pantry with not so much as a thank you please.”

“Takin' food?”

“You ain't gone hard of hearin' is you boy? She say you been stealin' food for months.”

Uncle Jack placed his right hand on his knee as he tried to stop it from shaking. Tiny beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead slowly began to make it's way down the side of his face. “W-w-what kinds of food? If you don't mind me askin'.”

Bob took a wrinkled piece of paper from his front shirt pocket and put on his glasses. “Lemme see here. Says this month alone we was missin' two ten pound slabs of bacon, six whole chickens, thirteen cans of assorted beans, sardines and tomato puree . . . and a four-gallon can of powdered milk. You got any notion of where all that meat, poultry, and dry goods disappeared to? I mean, it all just ain't walked away by itself, ain't that right?”

“Well suh, Mr. Bob, you is sho' right about dat,” he answered. “Yes, suh.”

As he took his glasses off, Bob trained his steel gray eyes on him as if inspecting an insect under a microscope. “Don't we pay you a decent wage here, Uncle Jack?”

“'T's ain't got nothin' to hold no complaint about dat's fo' sho'. No, suh . . . nothin'.”

“Then why is you stealin' us blind boy? Why bite the hand feedin' you?”

“Beggin' yo' pardon suh, but I ain't never stole not so much as a slice of bread from anybody in my life. Every thang I done taken from the cafeteria was gave to me. Iffin I was to have anything extra in my backpack when I's leavin', it be given to me by Mrs. Percell. You kin check my backpack right now and see—” He grabbed his backpack and poured the contents out on the floor in front of an uninterested Bob Evans.

“You think I give a rat's ass what you come in here with? I need you to tell me two things. Why in the world would Mrs. Percell be givin' YOU anythang? And if she did, what she be givin' you?”

“Well . . . jus' a few odds and ends left over after lunches been served . . . you know. It was all gonna be thrown in the trash anyhow and—”

“Twenty pounds of bacon and six whole chickens ain't considered leftovers! And not to mention that's a hell of a lot to fit into a backpack. What you take me fo' . . . stupid? Number one, I knows that Mrs. Percell ain't took 'em. Two, she say you is the last person to be in there after hours . . . say you been workin' late for months, and she give you the keys to lock up. Ain't dat right?

“Yes, suh, but—”

“But? You know, we ain't never trusted a niggrah around here the way we trusted you Uncle Jack . . . lettin' you hold a key and everythang. And to have that trust destroyed and our kindness misused . . .”

Now, both of Uncle Jack's knees had begun to shake uncontrollably. His head spun as he tried to think of what he could say in his defense that didn't sound ridiculous. Instead, he clasped both hands together. “Beggin' yo' pardon agin, but I ain't took none of dem items you done mentioned. Wait! I do remember that Mrs. Percell, done give me a pound slab of bacon last week without me even askin'—” Bob's lips formed into a cross between a smile and a cruel snarl that stopped Uncle Jack in mid-sentence. “Jus' goes to show, you don't know when to shut yo' mouth whilst you ahead,” he said. “You first say she give you a few odds and ends, now you done *remembered* and added a pound of bacon to the list—” The door suddenly burst open, and Mrs. Percell appeared in the doorway.

“Oh, I'm sorry, Bob. I thought you was done. I'll jus'—” Uncle Jack jumped up from the chair. He was about to grab Mrs. Percell by the arm, but hesitated, and drew his hand back.

“Mrs. Percell, my lawd, am I glad to see you! See, Mr. Bob thinks I done took things I ought not to. See. You gots to vouch fo' me. Tell Mr. Bob every thang I took home, you give it to me. Tell him 'bout the bacon and—”

Mrs. Percell ignored his pleas and fixed her gaze firmly on Bob. “I'll be headin' home now. My boys . . . dey be waitin' on me to make dinner and . . . I jus' came in to let you know . . . well, I'll git on home.” She turned to leave, but Uncle Jack blocked her way. His tall, imposing frame stood in front of the door, overshadowing her. Bob rose from his chair in indignation.

“Mrs. Percell, please . . . now, go on and tell Mr. Bob I ain't no thief. Tell him I ain't never took nothin' but what you give me. Tell him—”

Her round, puffy face became red hot with anger. “Now, I don't know if you a thief or not. I ain't got nothin' to do with all that. I just done tole Bob everything I knows 'bout this matter, and I ain't got nothin' else to add,” she said, raising her voice. “Now iffim you please . . .” She tried to get around Uncle Jack without having to touch him, but he wouldn't move. “Listen, I jus' hope you confess so's you kin keep yo' job,” she said as she tried in vain to elbow Uncle Jack away from the door.

“Confess? Confess to what? I— You know me, Mrs. Percell, you know me—” Uncle Jack's voice began to crack as it trailed off, and he could no longer finish his sentence. For a brief moment there was complete silence.

“If you just tell the truth, all dey gonna do is take the cost outta yo' check . . . a little bit every month. Ain't dat right, Bob?” She turned to him for support.

“This niggrah say you give 'em a pound of bacon this week. Is that right?”

“I declare Bob, dat's a bald-face lie!” She avoided looking at Jack's face directly as she gave him a final push shoving him away from the door. “Now let me out! I gotta git on home to my boys.” She rushed out, as the door slammed shut behind her.

The air in the room had become even more vile, mixed with the smell of the decayed food and putrid lies. Bob slowly regained his composure. “You know what the penalty is for a black slandering a white person in the State of Texas?”

“Huh?” Uncle Jack mumbled as he tried in vain to digest what had just occurred. It was as if his guts had been torn out. Then, out of nowhere, a serene calmness began to wash over him. His knees had stopped shaking, and his heart started to beat at regular intervals again. Carefully, he knelt down and began to put his belongings back into his backpack. Then he stood up to face his accuser.

“I said, do you know the penalty—. You know, I could put in a call right now to Rodney Blankenship, the deputy of police, and have yo' ass hauled off to prison so fast, your mama would need a compass to find you. But see, there's something you don't know about me. I'm a Christian and a strong believer in that there commandment that says we oughta turn the other cheek.” He sat back down in his seat. “So, what I'm gonna do is this here. I'm jus' gonna give you a dismissal letter and keep yo' last check as a partial payment on what you done stole.” He sat down and began to write out the dismissal letter. “And you kin jus' work off the rest of what you owe by cleaning the bathrooms and the grounds outside . . . with supervision, of course.”

Uncle Jack looked closely at Bob for what seemed like the first time. He realized that all the fear and disappointment he had felt moments earlier morphed into an anger he had never experienced before. Like lava boiling inside a volcano, it began to well up inside him as he closed and opened his massive hands and clenched his teeth. Unaware of Uncle Jack's rage, Bob kept writing.

“You know, I sees your kind on the TV every night, all over the news, causing trouble for the good nigras in this town, Bob said. “And it's a damn shame too. But this here is proof y'all cain't be trusted worth a damn without strict supervision.”

Trembling now, Uncle Jack felt he was losing the war of keeping the lava from erupting. “Iffin' you done got a mind to fire me, well you jus' go on ahead. But, like I done said, I ain't never stole so much as a piece of bread from dis here school. And iffing you believe I did, den so be it. But I done tole you the God's truth and dat's all I's got to say.” His voice sounded harsh and had a coldness to it that even he didn't recognize.

Bob rose from his seat, his face streaked red with anger. “Now you listen up, boy. You better think twice 'bout what you say to me. You understand?”

“Maybe it's *you* who don't understand, Uncle Jack said, with surprisingly restrained hatred. As he looked down, he realized he was pointing his finger in a white man's face. It was a blatant act of aggression, but he knew he'd gone too far now even to care.

“I think you better git outta' my office right now, befo' I forgits I'm a Christian . . . You heah me!” Bob yelled.

“Oh, I hears you. Uncle Jack said as he looked him straight in the eyes.” I speck I'll be goin' now befo' I remembers I'm a man.” He turned and walked towards the door.

“Is that some kinda' threat, boy?! . . . I said, is you makin' a threat?! Nigga, you is outta line. You betta walk lightly, you heah me?!” Uncle Jack walked out, not bothering to close the door. “I say you betta' walk lightly!” he yelled as Uncle Jack left Peabody School for the last time. He snatched his badge off and threw it in the nearby trash can. As he breathed in the clean, fresh air, he unclenched his fists and said a silent prayer to quench the fire still blazing throughout his body.

That evening, as Uncle Jack walked down highway 83 towards Hooks, tears streamed unashamedly down his dark, weather-worn face. The tears ran deep into the grooves that outlined his cheeks. He cried, not because of the idle threats yelled out by Bob Evans but because of the sense of betrayal he'd felt by a woman he had considered a friend. For over nine years, he and Mrs. Percell had worked side by side. They'd laughed at the same jokes, scrubbed the same pots and pans . . . even complained together about the low pay, saying how they were both going to go over Bob Evan's head and speak directly to the superintendent of the school districts. She'd even shown him the high school graduation pictures of her three boys, bragging about what good grades they had gotten. And he'd shown her school pictures taken of his two granddaughters. He'd explained to her that although he'd never bore children of his own, his special lady, Minnie Bell, had two granddaughters who were just like his very own. But now this woman, Mrs. Percell, whom he so highly regarded, had betrayed him just like that, with no hesitation at all. It was more than he could comprehend. He took the yellow handkerchief from his back pocket and dabbed his face. Then removed his farmer's cap and wiped the sweat from his bald head. He put the handkerchief back into his pocket and walked on. The empty, silver lunch pail he carried seemed heavier than usual. The rattle of his coffee mug inside his backpack began to irritate him. Suddenly, a blue 1960 Chevy pulled over on the side of the road and slowed down next to him.

“Hey, Uncle Jack! Wanna ride back to Hooks?” It was Joe and Lenny Lomax. They worked at the big Texarkana hotel downtown. Joe was an elevator attendant, while Lenny was a bellhop. Like so many other young people who tried to get out of Hooks, they were both saving up money to go to the

new Prairie View A&M college in Hemstead.

“ No thanks,” Uncle Jack said.

“You sure?” Lenny said.

“ Hey, we gots plenty of room and we don't mind droppin' you off at your house,” added Joe.

“I feels lak walkin' . . . but thanks boys anyway,” Uncle Jack said, waving them off. He knew there were a lot of things he needed to sort out in his head before he got to Minnie Bell's house, and a quick 15-minute ride wouldn't be long enough. As they waved and drove off, they both wondered why he would turn down a perfectly good ride.

Keeping up a steady pace, Uncle Jack pondered if he should stop off in Red Bank, at Pennywell's honky-tonk for a few beers, or keep going on to Minnie Bell's house. The honky-tonk had just opened up several months ago and he'd heard that it was a nice place for colored people to hang out. He'd never gone because only last month, he'd been appointed deacon of Cedar Springs Baptist Church. But right now, being a deacon was the furthest thing from his mind. He would have stopped at Mel's tavern in town, but it was for whites only. If a colored man wanted a drink, he'd have to wait in the alley while the waitress handed it to him in a paper cup from the back door. It seemed a hell of a lot of trouble on either side of the door for just one drink, so most black folks got a keg at the liquor store and took it home. *Then again, he reasoned, a few cold beers might be just what I need.*

This would give him time to think about what his next move should be. Like what kind of work could he get in a small town, with a fifth-grade education, especially if his past employers didn't give him a good reference—which would surely be the case now that all chances of going back to Peabody Elementary had been taken away. But he had something no man could take away from him. He had been blessed with a strong back, steady legs, and hands twice the width of any man. He'd worked hard from the time he could grab and hold onto a hoe, chopping cotton in the fields alongside his father for two dollars a day, from sun up to sun down. He went to school when it was convenient, which amounted to about three months out of the year. And after 20 years, he'd been promoted to 'Straw Boss.' But he had to quit. There was no way he could live with himself making other black men work for slave wages while he still smiled in the boss' face.

But there were a few good-paying jobs to be had for a black man. One was working for the government

at the Army Depot in Red River. Entire families, including Minnie Bell's sons held jobs there. But you had to pass a written qualification test, and he knew that hurdle might prove too high to jump over. And if he did pass, being well over sixty years old, the prospect as trainee for the US government just wouldn't sit right from Minnie Bell's perspective. "Maybe I could hire myself out at that new sawmill in Nash," he thought aloud. He remembered overhearing some men talking in front of the grocery store in town about how they were gonna go and apply since the company was hiring colored. Holding on to this hope, he eventually turned off the highway onto the dirt road leading to Pennywell's honky-tonk in Red Bank. That's when a cherry-red pick-up truck turned, too, slowing down behind him. Then it sped up beside him in the road, blocking his way.

"Git in!" Inside were two white men. One he recognized as the deputy Rodney Blankenship, who wasn't wearing his usual sheriff uniform. The other appeared to be the guy who pumped gas at the Standard station in town.

"What fer?" asked Uncle Jack. His body tensed up. His eyes darted back and forth as he braced himself to start running into the nearby woods. He instinctively put his hand inside his pants pocket, where he kept his folding pocket knife.

"Git in, or we'll shoot yo' ass on the spot!" Another white man stood up from a prone position in the back of the open bed of the pick-up, holding a shotgun. He pointed it directly at Uncle Jack. He knew that if ever there was a time he should think quickly on his feet, it was now. *Maybe*, he reasoned, *they was just gonna haul him into jail, and he'd have to explain again to the sheriff about the bacon.* He might even have to spend a few years in the State prison for something he didn't do. But if he ran, he was certain it would mean a bullet in his back. After weighing his options, his flight or fight responses eased down, and he took a chance as he climbed into the back of the truck. The truck sped away, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

After Uncle Jack went missing for two days, My grandmother, Minnie Bell, got Uncle Bud and Uncle Lloyd to contact the sheriff's department in town. That same evening, it had been reported by someone who'd seen the tail end of a cherry-red pick-up truck floating half submerged in the murky waters of Johnson's Creek. As it came to be, there were three white men inside. One was deputy sheriff Rodney

Blankenship. This caused a major upset in Hooks and neighboring towns, not to mention the suspicion it aroused when the coroner discovered that all their necks had been broken. They also found a broken shotgun lying in the mud nearby. But it was all put to rest by Sheriff Martin when he and his brother, Dr. Martin, declared it was just a freak accident of nature. They said when the truck crashed across the guardrail into the water, they were all thrown together inside, hitting the top of the cab, which could have resulted in broken necks. But the suspicion returned when Mrs. Blankenship married Sheriff Martin soon after collecting on her late husband's accidental life insurance policy.

A few months later, Grandma received a letter from Uncle Jack postmarked Chicago, Illinois. He'd gotten a job up north, working at the steel mill, and was doing very well. He even sent money for Grandma to get a train ticket and come visit him for a spell. But he warned her never to tell anyone of his whereabouts. And since he'd went missing the same day as when the accident occurred, black folks could only assume it was somehow connected to the three dead white men and that maybe Uncle Jack's body was still buried deep in the mud somewhere in Johnson's Creek. So that's when we children figured out how to keep him alive. He would now be just another offering, a ghost story added to the legend of Johnson's Creek. He'd resurface every now and then, haunting our dreams when one of us would imagine we'd seen him as a ghost-like figure walking along the road near Johnson's Creek. But now that I know the real story, it makes me wonder not only about the strength it took to subdue those hoodlums but the mental resolve he must have had in that era just to be a Man.

UP NORTH

Ticket agent, ticket agent

let a po' MAN ride yo' train

I hears it's de' train dat takes folks up north

to a city built wit faith where Jesus is de' king

Gittin' away from dis here place,

back bent down low

from mornin' till dark,

*a MAN sho' cain't finish
what he didn't start.
Here come dat ol' train now
Hear dem tracks hummin'
Hallelujah song?
Got my bags packed wit joy and promise
Gonna stake my claim
to dis here freedom train
Gonna ride and ride,
ain't never gonna stop,
till I reaches dat place
I hears talk about
Streets shinin' lak gold,
food waitin' on de stove,
a MAN never gits too old
to ride.*