

A WALK ACROSS TOWN

Michael looked through the dirty pane glass of Robinson's Used Appliance and Repair Shop. His mouth was dry. On the brick wall beside the window, several "Goldwater For President" bumper stickers had been slapped on the building, probably not by the owner.

His brown eyes squinted in the hot glare of the Mississippi late afternoon sun. Inside, shadows of shapes stayed still. Michael had just convinced himself the shop was empty, that he could leave, when something moved inside across his view of vision.

"Petey," he said to himself. He straightened up but did not move. He looked up Third Street but Travis and T.J. were nowhere to be seen.

It had been right after school, as the three boys walked across the playground blacktop when Travis became very insistent about what Michael should do to Petey.

"If it'd been me, I'd a popped him one, right then and there," Travis had said.

T.J. had laughed his high-pitched giggle as he nudged Michael in the shoulder. "C'mon, Michael, now," T.J. said. "You don't want the whole class say'n you're yellow, does ya?"

Michael had replied no, of course not, in a low voice that T.J. had found very funny. He giggled again. Travis flapped his arms and made chicken sounds. They had made Michael's mind up, less than two driveways from his home.

Michael stood alone in front of the store. He wiped sweaty hands on his newly-laundered overalls. Not many people were on the street. The Indian summer heat drove most everyone else

indoors. The few people on the block sat on shabby wicker chairs or on the curb. They waved folded newspapers in front of their faces as they drank from brown paper bags, lighter than their skin. Insects buzzed incessantly. All stared at Michael. A few pointed and muttered soft comments. The same rhythm and blues song played from several storefronts, the radio station being very popular on this side of town.

For several blocks, from Forrest Avenue to Jackson Road, the three schoolboys had swaggered, relating to themselves tales of future bravado. They threw peach pits at squirrels and jumped to touch low overhanging willow branches. They imagined fighting for Michael's honor together, like the gladiators from *Spartacus* or the soldiers on *Combat*. Once, Travis had picked up a long stick and waved it in long circles. When he shook it at Michael like a Musketeer's sword, T.J. had giggled.

It was when the boys had to wait for the 3:55 train from Hattiesburg to pass that Travis remembered his piano lesson.

"Mama'll swipe me good if'n I'm late," Travis had said in a rush.

"What?" Michael's jaw had dropped.

Travis had flushed but said nothing further. They watched wordlessly as the caboose clanked past. The conductor leaned over the railing and waved a red and black checkered handkerchief up to the engineer. Michael noticed his left hand had three fingers. The conductor frowned down at the boys. He yelled something harsh but said nothing they could hear.

As the train passed, Michael watched the guardrails as they slowly rose, to point up to the cloudless sky, as clear blue as his mom's hydrangeas in their garden, back on Cold Harbor Lane.

"I should be a'going, too," T.J. said to his shoes.

Across the tracks, there were no sidewalks. Two liquor stores flanked the beginnings of a street gone dusty. The train whistle had faded for some time before just one boy moved across the iron rails.

Outside the storefront, Michael found he had trouble taking a deep breath. He shuffled his feet, and then reached down to pick off some mud from his Keds.

A car's backfire jerked him upright. He looked up the street, then down the other way. A battered Chevy rumbled on the unswept street. Hazy dust clouds glinted and swirled in the muggy sunlight like tiny tornadoes. The driver, his dark sleeveless arm resting on red corroded metal, regarded Michael as if an exhibit in a museum.

Michael gulped. White smoke gushed from the exhaust, leaving behind a rusty stink. The car turned right, down Magnolia Boulevard, the same city-long street that had once taken Michael's family to Highway 49, toward last summer's vacation on the Gulf.

Michael turned back to the Appliance shop. Its bright brown threshold contrasted sharply with the faded beige color of most stores; whose paint peeled like tired worms. He wished he had Superman's x-ray vision to see who was on the other side; even though he was certain it was Petey inside. The storefront radios blared a commercial for Kool cigarettes. Michael put his hand on the doorknob and gave it a sharp twist. As the door moved, so did his heartbeats.

A bell tinkled above as he entered the shop. Strangeness and dread became physical things. The bell tinkled again as he closed the door. Its friendly tone was dissimilar to the insistent clanging of the end of school bell, less than two hours ago. As that bell rang, the whole class gasped at Petey's quiet correction of Michael's answer to Miss Perkins' question. Miss Perkins had gasped, too.

His eyes adjusted slowly to the shop's shaded interior. Despite the heat outside, the temperature inside was moderate. Petey was at the counter, wiping its glass with a clean, white towel. He didn't look up. No one else was in the compact shop, barely the size of Michael's living room.

On white wooden shelves behind the counter, small appliances and household goods were displayed in neat rows. At eye level, Michael saw polished toasters and shiny curling irons, arranged according to size. His attention fixed on a silver-gray four-slice toaster. He always thought a four-slice toaster would be very cool but his mother thought it a silly thing to buy.

"Petey." Michael said the two syllables much too fast. Somewhere, a mantel clock chimed the quarter-hour.

"Petey." Michael repeated, a little more loudly and a little more forcefully. Petey answered him this time.

"Yes?" He stopped wiping, his ebony hands resting on the smooth glass counter.

"We need us to talk," Michael said.

Walking down Manassas Terrace, Travis had insisted Michael should say, with a theatrical swagger, "Let's you and me step on outside." Both Michael and T.J. had thought that terribly clever. They repeated the swaggering the challenge several times, from Wilderness Drive all the way down to the Piggly Wiggly.

Petey straightened up. He looked at Michael with a calm expression. The boys were the same age, had lived in the same town all their lives, had known of each other for some time, but Petey was new at Michael's school. Petey rubbed his hands on his apron, hooked his thumbs

under the string, and said nothing.

Shuffling his feet but standing his ground, Michael said, "Petey. I'm, I'm here for to, to call you out." He forced himself to raise his head to look Petey in the eye.

Petey regarded Michael for a few seconds before saying, "Why?" The question carried no connotations of fear, amusement, or puzzlement.

Michael swallowed saliva. "You, you know why. On account, on account a' you makin' fun of me. Today. In class, I mean."

"I didn't make fun of you, Michael."

"Yeah, you did. The whole class, they laughed at me because of you."

"Miss Perkins asked all of us what was wrong with your answer. I was just the first one to say that the capital of Montana was Helena, not Boise."

While true, it wasn't all. "You showed me up," Michael said. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "You nigger."

The word did not have the desired effect on Petey. He looked down on the back of his right hand, as black as Zorro's mask. Michael noticed Petey didn't make it into a fist. He also noticed the bigger boy didn't look frightened. That confused Michael, knowing as he did that everyone he knew who lived on the north side of the tracks would have been on his side.

"You hear me, Petey?"

When the boys had been about eight, two years ago last August, they had met by chance on a muddy bank of a tributary of the Chickasawhay River. Without words, Michael had given Petey a long red licorice whip. Petey gave him a fishing lure. Michael had used that same lure, to good effect, just three weeks ago.

They stared at each other now, while angry flies enraged the shadows. The heat of the afternoon crept inside the room. Michael felt a bead of sweat roll down his forehead and balance on his nose. Petey regarded Michael with an expression Michael remembered seeing on the face of a TV judge on *Perry Mason*. .

“Everybody knows I gotta. Everybody.”

“Everybody’s not here.”

Michael wasn’t sure what he meant by those words. Had Travis and T.J. been there, this talk wouldn’t have gone this far. The four of them would be out on the sidewalk. He was sure of that much.

If his granddad was here, he’d tell Michael what to say, what to do. His granddad gave him a silver dollar every year on Robert E. Lee’s birthday. He told Michael stories of avenged wrongs after the War Between the States, ever since Michael had been old enough to listen.

His palm itched but he didn’t want to scratch it. Petey hadn’t moved from the counter, silently regarding with a posture that wasn’t hostile.

All of Granddad’s villains were men with wicked grins and simple minds.

It suddenly occurred to Michael none of them would have known the capital of Montana.

The door’s bell rang behind Michael. A woman wearing a pink print dress walked into the store. She carried a large red purse. She was smiling until she saw Michael.

“Oh. Excus’ me.” She clutched her purse close to her body. “Peter. I’m sorry. I didn’t know you was busy.”

“Oh, we’re all finished now, Mrs. Clark,” Petey said. Looking at Michael, he said, “We just had some schoolwork to go over. But we’re done, now. Aren’t we?”

Michael thought of Travis and T.J., of school, of honor, all in a long split second.

“I guess so.” He felt ashamed and light at the same time. “See ya at school.”

“See ya at school, Michael.” Petey’s smile was not a boast. To Mrs. Clark, he said, “Dad repaired your vacuum cleaner; it’s here in the back. Do you want me to put it on your bill?”

Michael closed the door behind him. Immersion into the sunlight caused him to blink rapidly but the heat of the day filled him with a warmth lasting long past Cold Harbor Lane.