

Chapter 5

The Great Kettle Riot of 1947

Summertime in Kettle drifted along at the pace of an old tree limb floating down the Sour Apple River. I would never have dreamed of a riot in our town, but it happened.

In late July, nineteen and forty-seven, Kettle had entered the third week of a heat wave with no rain. Each day the temperature neared eighty degrees shortly after sunrise and climbed into the high nineties by early afternoon. More than once the temperature had hit a hundred degrees. The Sour Apple River that snaked along the south side of Kettle, its water normally a rich shade of coffee with cream, in the three previous weeks had received so little runoff from the surrounding hills that it looked like a trickle of old thick coffee with only a little cream. Just six weeks earlier William White Wallace and I had taken a swim in the river, then got on inner tubes and let the current float us downstream.

That evening after I went to bed, I imagined I took a trip on the river. Below the covered bridge I put Daddy's old green Johnboat, full of supplies, into the Sour Apple and floated ten miles downstream to the Watoga River. I held my course another eight miles to the Ohio River, then hugged its downstream banks for days, until I reached Cairo, Illinois and the Mississippi. Then I floated down that great river to the Gulf of Mexico, like a modern-day Huck Finn. I kept going, right into the Atlantic Ocean. Then through the Panama Canal and on to points east. One day I stepped ashore in Hong Kong.

The *Kettle News Leader* reported that the last time our town had a heat wave this long, the summer of nineteen and thirty-one, there had been an outbreak of spinal meningitis. After three boys had died the mayor had ordered the town's public gathering

places – our churches and the theatre – closed. Now the paper said that Mayor Raymond T. Baumgartner had prepared a similar order and discussed it with town council. After the article appeared Momma told me I couldn't go to the movies until we had some rain and the weather cooled.

William White and I had our lawn-mowing business going full blast that summer. We had our eyes on a twenty-nine Chevy coupe and hoped to save enough to buy it at the end of the summer, in time for our senior year at Kettle High School. Until the drought got bad, we got up at dawn each morning and worked at a good clip in order to wrap up our day's work by the time the heavy heat settled in, early afternoon. When we cut the last blade of grass, we'd bike over to the river and take a swim. With the river dried up, we hunted for cool shady places, sat and rested.

Late one morning, about the time we sweated through mowing the Dickensheets' lawn, one of the few that had grown enough that week to be cut, the temperature hit ninety degrees. And the humidity hung on us like a steamy old blanket. As we finished the last, hillside, portion of the yard, heavy blue-black clouds rolled in from the west and a thunderstorm storm dropped a large amount of rain. We ducked into the Dickensheets' garage until the storm passed. William White speculated that the storm might signal an end to the dry spell and the heat. No such luck. When the sun came out after the storm, ninety-two degrees came with it, now even more humid than before. Small pools of water stood in the low spots in the yards up and down the street. I said, "William White, let's call it a day. If it cools off, maybe we can get some of the guys together and play softball."

I went home and had just finished taking a shower down in the basement, washing off the sweat and grass, when Shufflehead Meadows, who hung around with William White and me that summer, poked his long face and unruly mop of blond hair through the door at the top of the steps and yelled, “Freddy, Freddy! A man pulled a gun on Miss Hattie McClintock. Tried to rob her. William White was there and saw it happen. He’s down at Bertha’s Place.”

We ran the three blocks to Main Street then over to Bertha’s Place. Along the way, Buster Bragg, one of the guys who played softball, joined us. We walked in the front door of Bertha’s Place. A small group, their backs to us, faced William White, perched on a stool at the counter, like he used to do when Lorna C ran the restaurant as Miss Kettle’s Place. Since Bertha bought the restaurant, little had changed other than a new sign above the front door. The RC Cola clock still hung behind the counter beside the doorway to the kitchen. Each of the red Formica tables had four chrome-plated chairs around them. Bertha had the same booths too, with their red Formica table tops and cracked black leather seats. Five round red stools sat in front of a long red counter top at the back of the large rectangular room. Bertha had scooted the Wurlitzer juke box, with its arched brown acrylic top and red and yellow front panels lit from behind, from beside the front door to a spot near the first booth. Tunes cost a nickel apiece, although Bertha had fixed the juke box so we could play six songs for a quarter.

Words flowed out of William White’s mouth like the fast-moving water on Main Street’s gutters during our storm. A small gathering of folks listened to him. Whit Saunders stood at the rear of the group wearing his wide-brimmed hat and, even in a heat wave, his khaki trousers tucked into his lace up boots. William White had his back

against the counter, the elbow of his left arm on the counter top and an RC Cola in his right hand. When he spoke he gestured and the RC went up and down in front of him.

“You should have heard her scream. Yes sir, it was piercing,” he said.

“William White, what happened?” I asked.

“You folks don’t mind, do you? Let me tell these boys the story from the beginning.”

People nodded their heads and Whit, a steady fixture at Bertha’s Place, said, “OK.” Everybody, even us kids, called him Whit, just like a member of the family. He inspected gas lines for Coal Valley Gas and did most of his work early morning. The remainder of most days he could be found at Bertha’s Place, “Acting in my capacity,” he said, “as a community resource to folks who have questions about the cost and *value*,” he always emphasized the word value, “of converting their home heating to gas.” Since most people in Kettle already heated their homes with gas, Whit got few questions. This provided him, as he described it, “more time to relax and consider other important questions about our Kettle community.”

“Boys,” William White said as if he had just met us for the first time, “here’s what happened. I had my softball glove on the handlebar of my bike, riding over to the ball field, hoping we’d play a game or two.” He paused, and then as if he’d just recognized us, and with a serious expression on his face, he spoke slowly, with concern. “I’m sorry I never made it to the field. You know how much I like softball. But when something like this happens, well...” His voice trailed off and he stared at us for a few seconds. William White’s comment reminded me of a scene in the Western movie he and I had seen last Saturday night. After a cattle rustler shot a friend of Randolph Scott’s,

Randolph, who had the responsibility to drive a herd of cattle to Dodge City, knelt beside his wounded friend and said, “but when something like this happens...” then looked off into the distance.

Buster Bragg pushed his Cincinnati Reds cap back on his head and slammed a softball into his first baseman’s mitt with a pop. William White flinched. “Come on, William White, tell what happened.”

“Well,” William White said, “I was riding my bike along the sidewalk on Maple Street, enjoying the shade of the overhanging tree branches. I approached Miss Hattie McClintock’s place. About the time I passed the upper side her front yard there was a scream from her front porch – a most piercing scream. Another scream. Then,” he made his voice high pitched, “‘Help. Help! Robber!’

“I hit my brakes. In front of me a white man carrying a pistol leaped down the front porch steps and ran to the parked car. A Ford was parked on the street to my left – he paused and lowered his voice – with a colored man behind the wheel. He started up the car, revved the engine and before you could say ‘gimme an RC’ the white fellow jumped in the car, slammed the door and the car peeled rubber down Maple Street.”

William White paused and took a long swallow of his RC Cola. His eyes watered. “Boys, this stuff is good. Sometimes I worry, you know, that I drink too much of it.” Before he got shot, Randolph Scott’s friend, standing at the bar in a saloon, had said the same thing and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. William White wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Shufflehead, who would enter the tenth grade for the second time in September, listened to William White with his eyes wide and his mouth in a fixed open position.

Shufflehead blinked his eyes and asked, “And? And? Is that it?”

“Easy, Shuff, it’s comin’,” Whit said.

“I knew I had to make a command decision. I don’t know how else to put it. A command decision. I could either go help Miss Hattie, or I could head downtown and find Chief Tackett. A split second, that’s all I had.” William White paused and looked from left to right across the faces of the group in front of him. “What would you have done?” he asked us.

Just as Shufflehead answered, “I would’ve...” William White said, “I could see Miss Hattie wasn’t hurt. And out of the corner of my eye I saw Bernadine Blackwood, who lives next door, running across her yard towards Miss Hattie’s porch. I had never before seen a colored man in Kettle. I got to admit that weighed more on me than Miss Hattie, who at least was healthy enough to scream. So I hightailed it downtown to find the chief and report the crime.”

He took another sip of the RC. “Oh, and here’s a little detail that may prove to be important – the kind of detail that leads to convictions. That car was a two-door black nineteen and forty Ford coupe. I got the license number. Ohio plates, CC 742. Yes sir, CC 742. Nineteen and forty black two-door Ford coupe.

“I found Chief Tackett sitting on the front steps of the bank, drinking coffee and talking to some folks. I yelled – William White cupped his hands around his mouth – “
“Chief, Miss Hattie McClintock has been robbed at gunpoint. Terrorized by a nigger and

a white man.’ Chief Tackett sprung into action so fast he spilled coffee down the front of his shirt, though he didn’t pay a bit of attention to the spill.

“‘What happened, William White?’ the Chief asked.

“I told him about riding my bike along Maple Street, hearing Miss Hattie’s screams, seeing the man with the gun and the car with the colored driver. ‘Describe the man with the gun,’ he asked me. ‘White, about six feet tall, wearing a gray suit, white shirt and necktie. And, I’m not sure about this, has black hair. Maybe brown. The driver was a colored man. I couldn’t see him very well. But he was a nigger all right, I’ll guarantee that.’ I described the car and the Ohio plates, CC 742.

“About then the telephone bell on the outside of the police station rang. It was Bernadine Blackwood calling to report the crime I’d just told the chief about. If he had any doubts about what I said, her call removed them. The chief called the Sheriff’s office in Huntington, then the State Police. He told them what had happened, including the details of my description of the offenders and their car. Offenders is police talk for the crooks. You know, them who does the deed.

“‘Which way was they headed, William White?’ the Chief asked me. I told him they took off down Maple Street at a fast clip and they turned right when they got to Main Street.”

Shufflehead brushed his blond hair out of his eyes and spoke in a surprised voice, “William White, you cain’t see Main Street from Miss Hattie’s house.”

William White rolled his eyes. “Don’t need to, Shufflehead. I got a sense, I don’t know how, but I got a sense about things like that.” He turned and looked at me.

“Remember last week, Freddy, when you said, ‘Let’s bet a nickel on which direction the

next train will be heading' and I said, 'West.' By golly it was west and I was five cents richer." He looked at Shufflehead, "There you are."

Shufflehead shook his head sidewise and muttered, "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle."

A siren sounded in the distance and got louder. We looked out the plate glass windows towards Main Street. Chief Tackett's nineteen and thirty-eight, two-tone blue Oldsmobile came barreling past, the red lights mounted on the front bumper and the single red light mounted on top of the car a-blazing. People sat in the back seat of the car – looked like two of them.

William White got excited and said, "Maybe the chief got 'em. Maybe the offenders have been apprehended. Come on, let's go find out." He jumped off his perch, pushed through our small group, and ran out the front door. We followed William White's lead and headed down Main Street, then the two blocks up Benson Street to the jail.

The chief had parked his car in the shade of the big elm tree just beyond the small porch-like roof on the front of the old white frame Town Hall. The building had two floors and a peaked roof, but the second floor got no use other than the storage of town records. The front door and a tall double window opened on to Benson Street. The large room inside the front door served mainly as a place for the town clerk to receive folks' payments for water, electricity, and taxes, though the office opened only on Mondays and Fridays. Town Council held meetings there the first Wednesday night of each month. The back part of the building housed the jail, a cell with two cots, a washbasin, and a toilet.

The jail didn't get much use except for an occasional Saturday night when some fellow drank too much beer and Chief Tackett put him in the lock-up for a few hours.

Half our little crowd from Bertha's Place stood in the shade of the elm tree and the other half under Town Hall's front porch roof. In about five minutes Chief Tackett came out, shut the door and locked it.

When the chief turned towards us, William White approached him and said, "Chief, we were over at Bertha's Place. I had no sooner told these folks what happened, and how I gave you information about the offenders, when you drove by with your siren blowing and your red lights on. Did you catch 'em?"

The chief hitched up his gun belt, sucked in his belly and looked across our group. "Boys, I've apprehended the two men who terrorized and attempted to rob Miss Hattie McClintock." He paused then said, "Keep your eyes peeled for strangers in town. For all we know these two fellers may be part of a theft ring. They may have accomplices who've spread out through town." The chief took off his hat and rubbed a red bandanna across his bald head. "And one of 'em a nigger. Here in Kettle. Can you imagine that?"

"How'd you catch 'em, Chief?" Shufflehead asked.

"Well, first thing every police officer has to recognize is the help of alert citizens. William White here provided the details I needed to identify the men."

Shufflehead leaned forward, "Where was they, Chief?"

"William White said they turned right on Main Street, so I got in my car and did the same thing. I figured I'd just keep goin', the same way they probably did. But I only had to drive about a mile, to Buster's A&W Drive Inn. The building looked good as new after the fresh coat of orange paint Buster give it. The big gravel parking lot was empty

except for one car. A black Ford coupe bearing an Ohio license plate, CC 742.” William White’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. He beamed a smile so big his mouth nearly connected his ears.

“I was eager to close in on the criminals, but I first studied the situation. Good practice in law enforcement. The building looked deserted, though Buster must have been in there. A tray was attached to the driver’s side window of the Ford. I parked sideways behind the car – that way they couldn’t back up and make a get-away.”

The chief paused and surveyed our group. “Now, boys, this here is the strange part of the story. They was sittin’ there with a couple of root beers just like nothin’ had happened. Ain’t that somethin’? A nigger and a white man try to rob an old lady, and then they go to Buster’s to drink root beer and eat hot dogs. I’ll be honest with you, at first that puzzled me. Then I asked myself, what would criminals do to throw you off their trail?” Without breaking stride the chief answered his question. “Well, I’ll tell you what they’d do. Act normal, that’s what. Just set there like nothin’ happened. Though I must admit I was surprised about Buster servin’ a colored feller. Then, I suppose as long as he stayed in the car it would be all right. The Ohio plates may have swayed Buster a little. You know, his showing courtesy to out-of-state folks, even the colored. Buster had no way of knowin’ they was criminals.”

The chief paused and made eye contact with each of us. Then he spoke slowly, “I walked around to the Ford’s passenger side, not the driver’s side. I didn’t want the colored boy, the driver, throwin’ his door open and slammin’ the tray into me and my gun. Boys, prior plannin’ always pays off in law enforcement.”

The chief squared his shoulders and hooked his thumbs into his gun belt. “I knew the element of surprise was with me. The passenger side window was down, so I eased around there and pulled ol’ Roscoe out of my holster and poked him through the window – right next to the temple of the white man. I said, ‘Now if you fellers will please open this door real slow like and quietly step out here, we won’t have any trouble.’

“I took a couple of steps back from the door and the white man stepped out. Just like you said, William White, he was wearin’ a white shirt and necktie. I could see his suit coat in the back seat. It was gray, as you reported. The nigger started to open the driver’s door with the tray attached to it and get out on the other side of the car. I said, ‘Whoa, boy, whoa. You just slide over here, real easy like, and step out on this side,’ and that’s what he done.

“I had ’em put their hands on the roof of the car and hold steady. With my right hand I kept my thirty-eight aimed at ’em, and with my left hand I frisked them. That’ part of police training. I knew they had at least one pistol, but neither of ’em was carryin’ it. I lifted their wallets and told ’em to get in the back seat of my Olds. After I locked the doors, I checked their wallets. They both had driver’s licenses, so we got positive ID’s on ’em.

“While they was gettin’ into my car the white fellow said, ‘Officer, we’re salesmen. There’s some kind of mistake.’

“I said, ‘Yes sir, you’re right.’ I figured I could afford a little laugh and I gave ’em one. Then I said, ‘There’s been a mistake, all right, a big one. You thought you could come into a sleepy little town on a hot summer day and rob an old lady. I agree with you, sure enough there’s been a mistake.’

“Then the colored feller started to say somethin’. He got out, ‘But ossifer,’ and I poked ol’ Roscoe right up to the end of his nose. I said, ‘Boy, I’d think twice before I said anything I might regret.’ That nigger’s eyes got as big as saucers. That was the end of that.”

William White stepped forward and extended his hand. As he and Chief Tackett shook hands, William White said, “Chief, I’m proud to know you.” Chief Tackett sucked in his belly, smiled and nodded his head.

Whit Saunders walked up and shook the chief’s hand. “Good work, Chief.” Then Buster Bragg did the same thing. Everybody followed suit and we had a long process of hand-shaking and congratulating Chief Tackett. By the time the chief shook Shufflehead’s hand the whole thing seemed overdone, but once the hand-shaking and congratulations got rolling it seemed like we had to continue until everybody had a chance to do it. When Shufflehead said, “Chief, I’m proud to know you,” Chief Tackett looked past Shufflehead and muttered, “OK, OK.”

The crowd broke up and William White insisted we go back to Bertha’s Place. He said he wanted to be near the Police Station in case the chief needed him. Shufflehead and I, along with Whit Saunders, walked back to Bertha’s with him. Half way there we had ourselves drenched in sweat. As we turned the corner on to Main Street, Whit said, “Boys, she’s going to top a hundred again this afternoon. May’ve already hit it. And it feels like the humidity’s as high as the temperature.”

Shufflehead asked, “Whit, somebody told me a chicken will sweat on a day like this. Do you think that’s true?”

“With all them feathers, Shufflehead, a chicken’s heat has got to be dang near unbearable on a day like this. I’d say they sweat, though as a matter of fact I have never looked into it.” A few steps later Whit added, “But you know, when it comes to sweatin’ on a hot day, boys, the colored folks has got it all over us. They do it by the bucket. That ol’ boy over in the jail is likely to drown his buddy before the afternoon is over.”

When we got to Bertha’s Place, there Bertha stood on the sidewalk in the hot sun outside the front door of her restaurant. She held a coffee can and a paint brush. Her curly black-and-gray hair had wilted down over her forehead. Bertha’s blue skirt and blouse hung a little loose, for she’d been on a diet, and in places stuck to her sweaty body. Whit once told us that Bertha had a big-boned frame and a diet wouldn’t make much difference in her size.

Bertha handed Shufflehead the can, about half-full of liquid bacon grease. “Shufflehead, hold this please.” Then she dipped the brush into the can and painted a small square of bacon drippings, about one foot on each side, on the sidewalk.

“Why don’t I just pour the stuff on the sidewalk, Bertha?” Shufflehead asked.

“Honey, you don’t understand. This is a publicity event. Everything has to be done artfully.”

Even though the sun was blistering hot, a few people passing by had stopped and gathered around to watch the goings on. I could see the tall frame of the *Kettle News Leader’s* owner and editor, James Garfield Worthington, coming down the street. He carried his press camera and wore a white straw hat. James Garfield’s white shirt was so wet it stuck to him.

Bertha put down her paint brush and ducked into the restaurant. In no time at all she came back with a tray full of ice-cold bottles of RC Cola. Everybody took one and smiled, except for James Garfield. He needed his hands for his large press camera, though he smiled and thanked Bertha.

Bertha cleared her throat and spoke to everybody in a loud voice, “Folks, you’ve heard people say it’s so hot you could fry an egg on the sidewalk, right? Well, we’re going to try to do that. And by golly, today it’s so hot that I believe this egg will fry.”

“Shufflehead, step over here. Let’s get one last dab of bacon grease on the sidewalk.”

After a final pass with the brush, Bertha pulled a large brown egg out of her apron pocket, knelt down, cracked the egg on the concrete and poured its innards over the area she’d painted with Shufflehead’s bacon grease. Then she stood up. Along with Bertha, we watched and waited to see what would happen. Even with the heat, everybody crowded in close, though we opened up one side of the group so James Garfield could take pictures.

At first nothing happened. That yellow yolk just laid there like one eye looking up at us. Then Shufflehead poked me in the side and yelled, “Look, Freddy. It’s cookin’.” I never I thought I’d see this, but the egg white had begun to turn from clear to white. Everybody gave a little cheer and some folks applauded. Bertha beamed proudly at the egg. Shufflehead stared at it, his mouth hanging open.

James Garfield took a picture of Bertha and Shufflehead squatted down smiling at the egg. Bertha held a spatula next to the egg like she would flip it over, though she

didn't do that. Shufflehead grinned proudly and held his can of bacon grease in front of him.

I said, "Shufflehead, by this time next week you'll be famous."

His face got red. "I ain't eatin' that thing, I'll tell you that."

Everybody laughed.

After James Garfield took his pictures the crowd broke up. A few of us went into Bertha's Place. Bertha had three large electric fans going at top speed. The temperature inside the restaurant matched the heat on the street outside, but the breeze set up by the fans felt good. Outdoors not a sliver of air moved. Inside or outside, though, the air seemed to stick to you.

Bertha walked over to her old wooden Emerson radio sitting at the far end of the counter near the pop cooler. She tuned it to the Cincinnati Reds baseball game and then picked up her Reds baseball cap that she kept on top of the radio and put it on her head. Bertha had long been a big fan of the Reds. Each season she took a couple of trips to Crosley Field in Cincinnati to see the team play. The previous year William White and I had joined her and a group of folks from Kettle on a baseball excursion train from Huntington to Cincinnati. We bought Reds baseball caps at Crosley Field.

Bertha said, "Boys, we've been so caught up in the excitement around town, we doggone near missed the game. It's already the third inning. The Brooklyn Dodgers are in Cincinnati."

While we watched the egg cook on the sidewalk, OK Carlson had taken a seat at the counter. Bertha poured him a cup of hot coffee and he sipped it. I wondered how OK could drink hot coffee on a day like this, but he had a reputation as a different sort of

fellow. OK's farm work gave his body the lean look of a younger man, though someone told me he had turned fifty. The muscles of his chest and shoulders bulged underneath his white t-shirt. OK's dark blue ball cap was pushed back on his head. His face and neck had a deep reddish-brown color, but his forehead remained white. OK looked up from his cup of coffee and said, "Maybe hit don't matter if we listen to the game."

Bertha smiled and said, "Maybe not to you, OK, but it does to me."

"They say Branch Rickey is goin' to be run out of baseball," OK replied.

Shufflehead stared at the pack of cigarettes OK had rolled up in the left sleeve of his t-shirt. "Who's Branch Rickey?"

"Get to know that name, Shufflehead. Branch Rickey owns the Brooklyn Dodgers. The nigras has got him in their hip pocket. He's the man what brought in Jackie Robinson to play baseball with white folks. Robinson's over there in Cincinnati today, at Crosley Field, playin' for the Dodgers. Just like he's a white man who belongs there."

"Well if he plays for the Dodgers, don't he belong there?" Shufflehead asked.

"You don't get it, Shufflehead. He's a nigra. The Cincinnati Reds and the Brooklyn Dodgers and all the other teams in baseball is white. He *don't* belong there."

Shufflehead's mouth inched itself open then hung in a near-gaped position, which usually meant he had to think hard about something. One time William White saw Shufflehead with his mouth gaped open and said "Shufflehead's setting a trap for flies."

Bertha jumped in, "OK, there ain't much we can do about it. Anyway, if Robinson can hit and field and hold his own in the game, I don't see why him or anybody else, even you, can't play ball."

“There is something can be done about it,” OK replied. “And the Saint Louis players are threatenin’ to do it.”

“Whut?” Shufflehead asked.

“Very simple. When the Dodgers come to town, just don’t play. Stay home. Don’t take the field. A couple of times of a-doin’ that and Mr. Branch Rickey’ll think twice before he puts Robinson on the field.”

Whit Saunders pushed his chair back from the table. “I read about that in the newspaper, OK,” he said. “The Saint Louis players made a stink and talked about pullin’ those shenanigans when Brooklyn came to play a series a couple of weeks ago.”

“That’s right.”

“And,” Whit continued in a matter-of-fact voice, “Branch Rickey said, ‘Fine, don’t play. We’ll accept the forfeit and a score of nine to nothing.’ Them’s the rules, OK, like it or not. As soon as Mr. Rickey said that, the Saint Louis players shut up and the games was played.”

“Well, I don’t read no newspapers like you, Whit. But I know this. It’s wrong for a nigger to be out there on the field with white players. The nigras have their own leagues. Robinson used to play for the Kansas City Monarchs.”

Whit said, “Well, you got a point. They’ve had their own leagues for twenty years. Robinson played there. But even if he is a nigger, I don’t fault him or anybody else for trying to get ahead and join a National League team.”

“Well he is a nigger, and he ought to go back,” OK said. “If’n I had my way we’d send him back. But first we’d deal teach him a lesson, real private-like, and set an

example. One that'd cause Robinson and others like him to stay away from the Dodgers and all them other major league teams."

Bertha refilled OK's cup with hot coffee. "You don't mean that, OK."

"I never been more serious in my life, Bertha. You don't realize what's goin' on. I been there. I seen it happen. Baseball is just a small part of the nigras' plan. The next thing you know they'll be movin' into Kettle. Niggers takin' up with white women. I watched it happen in Tulsa when I was growin' up."

My Daddy and one of his friends had talked about OK one day at our house. Daddy said there'd been a rumor that years ago that OK had killed a man out in Tulsa. In nineteen and thirty-five OK moved to Kettle from Tulsa. He bought a farm and grew tobacco and corn up on Burnt Church Road.

OK had been widowed the spring his boy Carl finished first grade. Most Sundays OK brought Carl to our Kettle Methodist Church Sunday school. Then he and Carl would attend the Sunday worship service together. They always sat by themselves in a side pew, but sang and joined in the services. Carl had coal black hair and stood about my height. Momma said he was nice-looking. He took classes with me at Kettle High, and had a hard time in most every subject. OK came to our school a lot and worked with Carl's teachers on his homework assignments. William White took a liking to Carl and helped him when he could. At the end of our eighth-grade year, OK brought William White a spiral notebook. "A little thank you gift," he said, "for helping Carl in math."

I'd never thought about the things OK described – Jackie Robinson playing baseball. Negroes taking up with white women. No Negroes lived in Kettle and as far as I knew none ever had. In our problems of democracy class at Kettle High we agreed that separate but equal had been a fair way to treat colored people. At the C&O Passenger Station in Huntington they had their own entrance and drinking fountains, just like white folks. Their fountains had the same water ours had. And their benches in the terminal had the same hard oak wood that folks sat on in the white section.

William White said he read that Negroes didn't have the intelligence of whites. From what I had seen among the colored folks in Huntington, mostly janitors and street sweepers, he had that right. In the movies, Steppin' Fetchit and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson added a lot of fun, but I wouldn't want one of them to take Joan Crawford or Barbara Stanwick on a date.

Bertha gave a thin smile to OK. "Oh, you and Tulsa," she said. "That was a long time ago. Ancient history. These is modern times."

"Not so long ago, Bertha. Only twenty-six years. I was there." OK talked towards his coffee cup even though he'd directed his words to Bertha. "By nineteen and twenty-one the nigras in Tulsa had got it into their heads that they was as good as white folks. One of 'em helped his self to a white woman. Just had his way with her, people said. We got ourselves deputized by the law, and armed. Then we rolled through Greenwood, better known as Niggertown, fixin' things. First we took care of the men who might take a shine to our women. Then, just to drive it home, we tended to some of their women."

OK paused. He gazed at his cup of coffee. Everybody looked at him but nobody spoke a word. I didn't know which made the most noise, a horsefly beating its wings against the inside of the front window or the pounding of my heart.

OK looked up at Bertha and grinned. "Thirty-five city blocks. All of Niggertown, burned to the ground. Yessir, burned to the ground. Businesses. Homes. Hit didn't matter. Three hundred dead, they said later. I don't know, it could've been more. I'll tell you this, I did my part. Even got myself a little trophy, a ear off'n a dead nigger." He gave a little laugh. "After that night everybody in Niggertown was rounded up and put in tent camps behind tall wire fences till things settled down. After they was let out, all the nigras was required by law to carry ID tags the city issued to 'em. Anybody without one got arrested and locked up. Still seems like a good idea to me. Maybe Mr. Jackie Robinson should carry a nigra ID tag."

Willam White and I looked at each other. Shufflehead gaped and stared at OK. On the radio, the baritone voice of the Cincinnati Reds broadcaster, Waite Hoyt, described the Reds-Dodgers game. Whit and Bertha turned and stared at the radio, like it had a life of its own. Me too. So did Shufflehead and William White. OK stared at his coffee. Waite Hoyt's words had to take a back seat to the killing and burning OK talked about. My stomach had a sinking feeling. A trophy – a human ear? Waite Hoyt said the game had no score, but his words just bounced around in my brain – a human ear?

The screen door opened and Chief Tackett walked in. Whit Saunders greeted him. "Hi Chief, anything new on the crooks?"

"A little." Chief Tackett eased himself into his favorite seat, the kitchen side of the back booth, the one nearest the counter. Nobody ever sat in the chief's seat except

Bertha, and she rarely ever sat down, so most of the time the seat stayed open for him. The chief's big belly pressed smack up against the table, even with his back flat against the booth. He took off his police cap with its shiny black bill and khaki top, and placed it on the table. Then with his red bandanna he wiped sweat off his face and the top of his head. The chief picked up last week's issue of the *Kettle News Leader* lying in the booth and looked at the front page just like it had fresh news.

Bertha handed the chief a cold bottle of RC Cola. "On me, Chief."

"Don't keep us in suspense, Chief," Whit said. "What's happenin'?"

The Chief looked up from his paper. "Well, the white feller is Edward Ralph Young. Driver's license says he's from Ironton, Ohio. He pronounced Ohio, "Uh-hi-uh." The colored boy is George Washington Walker. He's from Huntington. They're both twenty-seven years old. I impounded the car. It's over at Buckingham's Gulf Station."

OK jumped in. "Colored boy? Impounded car? What's goin' on, Chief?"

"We got us a couple of crooks, OK. May be part of a theft ring, though I don't as yet know for sure. Thought they could pull a fast one and rob Miss Hattie McClintock at gunpoint. But William White here," he nodded at William White, "was too quick for 'em. He reported the crime and gave me a description of the offenders and their car, includin' the license plates." The chief nodded again towards William White, who broke into a big grin. "I arrested 'em down at Buster's A&W Drive Inn and locked 'em up. Case closed."

OK rotated his counter stool until he faced the chief. "Gunpoint? Chief, them boys robbed Miss Hattie at gunpoint?"

"Well, they tried to rob her. But the joinin' of her screams with William White's passin' by caused them to take off. But they didn't get far. No sir, not far a-tall."

Everybody looked at the chief, then at each other, smiled and nodded their heads.

The loud smack of OK's hand against the counter caused everybody to jump.

Bertha looked wide-eyed at OK.

OK's voice rose and his face turned a dark crimson, "By God, it ain't right. One nigra's playin' baseball at Crosley Field, and another one's is right here in Kettle, a one hundred percent all-white Christian town, aimin' to take a old lady's money."

"Easy, OK," the Chief said. "Hit's near a hundred degrees this afternoon. You're goin' to drive the temperature to one hundred and one."

Shufflehead laughed. "That's a good'n, Chief."

OK turned and stared at Shufflehead, who got red in the face, looked down at his shoes then muttered, "Sorry."

"Chief," OK said, "do you mean to tell me that them boys tried to rob Miss Hattie and now they're over in the hoosegow? Just a-sittin' there?"

"That's right, OK. We'll have a hearin' later today or maybe tomorrow. Anderson Burns went with his wife up to her sister's place in Hamlin. Soon as he gets back."

"Who's Anderson Burns? What's he got to do with it?"

"OK, Anderson Burns is the town's Justice of the Peace. He's deputized by Circuit Court Judge Orley Higgenbotham and under the judge's order to hear any local cases and settle 'em if possible before bringin' 'em down to the County Courthouse. The judge says they's been too many nuisance cases comin' in from Kettle and other little towns around the county. Cases that ain't needed to come into Circuit Court. They clog up the system, Judge Higgenbotham said. Them was his words. Clog up the system. And he's the judge."

A slight grin eased across OK's face, but not the kind of grin that comes after a joke. More like a grin that happens in a baseball game after you hit a fast curve ball thrown by a good pitcher. "Well, chief, I think you got the right idee," he said big and loud. "We should settle this case right here in Kettle. No need to drag them boys down to the courthouse in Huntington. No sir, no need a-tall." He sat erect on his counter stool. "Yes sir, settle things right here in Kettle." His voice rose, "The sooner the better. I think I know how we can do it, and do the judge a favor at the same time."

"Easy, OK. This is a matter for the law."

OK's grin widened and showed his pearly white teeth. "That's right, chief. And you're the law. You deputize me and I'll be the law too. If you have to take them fellers over to Anderson Burns's place for a hearin', they're likely to be more'n a match for you." He paused and his grin gave way to a most serious look. "I'm strong and I know how to handle a gun, if you git my drift."

"I'll study on it, OK. But I think I'll do just fine. Anyway, most likely Anderson Burns will come to Town Hall. We'll have our hearin' in the front office."

"You and that Burns is no match for them crooks."

The chief gave a big sigh, "It's a hearin', OK, not a prize fight. Now just let it be."

"Call it what you want, Chief." His voice rose and his face reddened. "But I call it a skirmish in a war over who's gonna control the U. S. of A. We fought a battle in Tulsa. Won that one."

OK jumped up from his counter stool. He looked at everybody and yelled, “Looks like we’re goin’ to fight another one right here in Kettle. What do you folks think? Will it be us or the niggers?”

Nobody said a word. OK walked to the front door. Then he turned and looked squarely at Chief Tackett. “I wonder about you, Chief. Just which side are you on?” He turned and pounded the heel of his right hand into the screen door so hard the door sprung open, went all the way around and banged against the front of the building. OK stepped out on to the street, then turned and gave one last look into Bertha’s Place before pulling the bill of his ball cap low over his eyes. At a fast pace he headed down the street.

We all stared at the front door, like OK still stood there. The only sound was Waite Hoyt’s voice on the radio. One by one we all turned and looked towards the radio, as if Waite himself stood at the end of the counter. He said the Dodgers had the bases loaded, and Jackie Robinson had come to bat. He faced Johnny Vander Meer, who had pitched two consecutive no-hit games for the Reds in nineteen and thirty-eight, but hadn’t had a winning season since forty-two. Robinson worked the count to three balls and two strikes – then we heard the crack of the bat hitting the ball. Waite Hoyt could hardly raise his voice above the noise of the fans at Crosley Field. On a close play, Robinson slid into second base. Safe. His two-base hit had cleared the bases. Three runs had scored. The Dodgers led, four to one.

Chief Tackett took a long pull on his RC Cola, then stood up and placed the bottle on the counter. “Well, that hit by Robinson ain’t goin’ to help OK’s attitude any. Thanks, for the RC, Bertha. Sure hit the spot. Nice to see you folks. Though, now that I think about it, I’ve had better conversation.”

“Chief, is OK a-goin’ to come after them crooks?” Shufflehead asked.

“Nothin’ is goin’ to happen, Shufflehead. You and everybody else, just go on about your business. And I’ll go on about mine.” He walked towards the front door, then turned and said, “William White, stay close. If’n we can hold the hearin’ this evenin’, I’ll need you to testify.” Then, talking more to himself than any of us, he said, “I better call Miss Hattie as well.”

The chief put on his cap and pulled the shiny bill down until it was about even with his eyes. “I’ll git over to the jail and check on them boys. Hit’s hotter’n blue blazes in there. There ain’t no windows in that cell. Maybe I could git a fan set it up in the doorway. I think Thelma Jean has one that we ain’t usin’ over at the house.”

Bertha wiped a damp rag across the counter top where OK’s cup had been, then paused. “Something ain’t right. Just ain’t right. I don’t trust OK Carlson any further than I can see him. And right now I can’t see him at all.”

The clock in front of the Bank of Kettle struck three as we left Bertha’s Place. William White and I each went home. I stretched out on the cool grass in the shade just behind our back porch. Momma said we’d have cold sandwiches for dinner and eat on the porch. Suited me fine.

Lying there I thought about all that had happened in the short space of this day. Mowing, a thunderstorm, robbery, William White, arrests. OK Carlson. Some days it seemed like nothing at all happened in Kettle. Then we’d have a day like this, when more things happened than occurred in a month.

I must have drifted off to sleep, for the next thing I knew Momma nudged my shoulder. “Freddy, William White is on the phone.”

“I’m calling you from Bertha’s Place. Get down here. OK Carlson is up on the platform at the railroad station giving a speech. And there’s a crowd on the street, some of ’em people I’ve never seen before. They’re getting all riled up.”

I started towards the front door and Momma said, “Your Daddy will be home soon, then we’ll eat. Don’t go far or stay long.”

Dark clouds gathered beyond the hills west of town. This time of year we sometimes got an early evening thunderstorm. With this heat wave and dry spell, we could use another rain like we had earlier today, only longer, wetter. Daddy once told me an evening thunderstorm cleansed the air of all the foul words of the day. When I thought of what OK said down at Bertha’s, I figured today’s air could use some cleansing.

OK stood on the loading platform at the railroad station. His voice carried up the street. He waved his arms and paced from one side of the platform to the other as he yelled his words. A crowd of maybe fifty or more men stood in the gravel parking lot between the platform and Main Street. I joined a small group that included William White and Shufflehead, standing across the street in front of Bertha’s Place.

William White said, “Freddy, OK’s been giving quite a speech. He said robbing old ladies at gunpoint is nothing compared to what those boys in jail have in mind. He talked about baseball teams filled with Jackie Robinsons, whole teams of colored players. That’s just a start,” he said, “and then he started naming names of women around town and some girls in high school, real slow like. He described each of them and asked the

men to imagine those women and girls with colored men. Nigras who'd have their way with them."

"That ain't true, is it Freddy?" Shufflehead asked. "A colored man ain't goin' to take up with a girl like Beverly Shade, is he?"

"No, Shufflehead. That's just OK talking crazy. Beverly isn't going to take up with anybody she doesn't want to take up with."

Lots of what OK said troubled me, but I had to admit he made a good point. Negroes had their place, but not here in Kettle. And not with Beverly. Separate but equal.

In the hot and sweaty crowd standing below OK, one fellow held a long wooden axe handle. A short fat man had a shotgun. Some faces began to fall into place, men I sometimes saw in town on Saturday afternoons.

All of a sudden OK became silent. He wiped his forehead with a green rag and looked at the crowd. Then he yelled out, with an emphasis on each word, his voice rising, "Answer me this. Are we goin' to take it? Are we?"

Right away the crowd of men answered him, just like one person standing there, "No!"

OK yelled, "Are we gonna do somethin' about it?"

"Yes!"

"Are we gonna do it tomorrow?"

A tall man wearing a railroad cap and neckerchief yelled, "Hell no," then lots of men joined in with a chorus of "Hell no."

"Well, when are we gonna do it?"

"Now!" the voices said.

“Let’s go.” OK leaped off the platform and ran up Main Street. The crowd ran behind him.

We figured OK had headed for Town Hall, so we took a route through alleys to avoid the crowd. The light of late afternoon had shrunk noticeably as the clouds gathered. Thunder sounded off in the distance.

When we got to Town Hall, OK stood in front of the porch of the old white frame, two-story building. The gray slate on the roof had a few missing tiles, and the paint on the west side of the building needed a new coat. He faced the crowd gathering around him on the street. Behind him, Chief Tackett stood in the screen door of the front entrance to Town Hall. He had his thumbs hooked over the top of his leather gun belt. His light khaki shirt had turned dark brown with sweat.

OK yelled, “The chief here,” he turned and pointed towards the screen door, “says those boys are gonna have a hearin’. Well, I say let’s do it, let’s have a hearin’, right here and now. Are you ready?”

“Yes” the crowd yelled. One man said, “Let’s hear the evidence, Chief.” In the sky a long and deep rumble sounded. “Bring out the nigger. We ain’t got all night. Looks like it’s gonna rain.” Some of the men laughed.

OK turned his back to the crowd and faced the chief. “How about it, Chief? We’re a law-abiding group of assembled citizens, ain’t we? Let’s have a hearin’.”

The Chief Tackett opened the screen door and said, “OK, we’ll have a lawful hearin’ inside when Anderson Burns arrives.”

A car approached with its horn lightly beeping. The crowd made way for a dust covered dark blue thirty-six Chevy sedan that pulled up to Town Hall. Mrs. Myrtle Mae

Burns drove, though her head of blonde hair barely rose above the steering wheel. The car stopped and Justice of the Peace Anderson Burns opened the door on the passenger's side. He put his cane on the ground and steadied himself as he stepped out of the car.

Mr. Burns stood beside the car and looked at the crowd. OK and the men grew quiet as they turned and looked at Anderson Burns. Most folks knew Mr. Burns, though we looked at him like a new arrival to Kettle. He stood a good six inches above the height of the car. A few weeks earlier the *Kettle News Leader* had carried an article about a party to celebrate his fiftieth birthday. Mr. Burns wore a metal brace on his left leg. He'd had polio as a child. His thick red hair blew in the light breeze, the first air moved by nature that I'd felt all day.

Mr. Burns nodded his head towards the crowd then said in his deep but soft voice, "How'd do gentlemen." Then he turned and walked at a slow pace towards the Chief and the front door. Mrs. Burns drove away.

The chief held the screen door open and Mr. Burns walked into the front room of Town Hall. The double front window had been fully opened, and Shufflehead, William White, and I positioned ourselves on the other side of the window's screen. The crowd milled around the front door.

Anderson Burns removed his suit coat. "Hot outside, Chief. Worse in here." He walked over to the dark wooden desk at the rear of the room. The desk had been positioned to face the chairs in the room much like a teacher's desk in a classroom. He eased himself into the large oak swivel chair behind the desk.

"Are all the witnesses here, Chief?"

“Almost here, your honor. I called Miss Hattie McClintock and she's on her way. It's only a few blocks. She should be here direnkly.” The chief said the word “directly” the way my Grandpa Lemley said it and inside myself I smiled. “The other witness, William White Wallace, is here, your honor. He's yonder, just outside the winder.”

Mr. Burns looked over our way and said, “Which one of you boys is William White Wallace?”

William White identified himself and Mr. Burns asked him to come in and sit near the desk. About then I heard a woman's voice say in a brisk manner, “Out, out of my way.” The crowd parted and Miss Hattie McClintock walked by Shufflehead and me. The chief opened the screen door for her. Miss Hattie wore a black skirt and blouse. A small black hat with a small veil sat atop her gray hair and the veil came down in front of her eyes. The chief motioned for her to sit beside William White. Miss Hattie carefully lined up the front legs of her chair so their position matched those of the front legs of William White's chair on a crack separating two oiled oak boards of the floor.

Mr. Burns said, “Thank you for coming to the hearing, Miss Hattie.”

She replied, “Anderson, I'm always ready to see that justice is done.”

Mr. Burns studied some papers on the desk, and then looked up. “As you folks may know, I am Justice of the Peace Anderson Burns. This JP court is now officially in session, acting under the direction of the Cabell County Circuit Court, Judge Orley Higgenbotham presiding.”

Shufflehead and I put our faces against the window screen so we could see and hear everything that happened.

Mr. Burns no sooner got the word “presiding” out of his mouth when OK banged open the screen door and yelled across the room, “Mr. Justice of the Peace, how long's this hearing a-gonna take?”

“I don't believe I know you, mister....”

“My name's OK Carlson, Mister Justice of the Peace Anderson Burns. Me and those men outside are here for the thing that's in your title, justice, Mr. Justice of the Peace. Yessir, and we mean to have it.”

Chief Tackett's back stiffened.

“Mr. OK Carlson,” Mr. Burns said quietly. He looked down at his note pad, took a fountain pen from his pocket, removed its cap and wrote something, then looked up. “Mr. OK Carlson I will politely ask you to remove yourself from this room. I'd advise you to do that now.”

The chief's right hand moved to his holster and gripped the butt of his pistol.

The men in the crowd outside started yelling, “Bring 'em out Chief,” and “Let's see the nigger, it's him we want. We done had our hearin', let's have some action.”

OK took a couple of steps towards Mr. Burns's desk. Chief Tackett chief drew his pistol, held it by his side pointing at the floor and stepped in front of OK. Hardly a breath of air separated them.

OK glared at the chief. The screen door burst open and men spilled into the room. They yelled and pushed each other forward. One man fell into OK's backside, pushing him into the Chief's frontside.

Chief Tackett took one step backwards as OK lurched forwards, off balance. The chief slammed his left forearm against the side of OK's head, knocking him to the floor.

The chief raised his pistol, pointed it at the ceiling. The sound of the pistol's firing exploded in the small room.

Miss Hattie screamed and covered her eyes. Along with everybody else, Mr. Burns and William White flinched, and then stared at the chief. William White sat ramrod straight in his chair, his face drained of color. The noise of the gunshot in the room stunned everybody. Like me, they must've had a ringing in their ears. Bits of plaster fell and a cloud of dust drifted from the ceiling. OK lay still on the floor and the men who had crowded into the room stood motionless. The men in the street backed away from the front door.

In a firm voice the chief said, "OK, you git up. Now you boys move out of here. Real quiet-like." He waved his pistol towards OK and the men in the room. OK picked himself up. He and the ten or fifteen men who had crowded into the room eased themselves backwards through the door, their eyes fixed on the barrel of the chief's pistol.

The chief followed the men into the street. Once outside, the men started to grouse among themselves. Chief Tackett yelled, "I said, out of here." He pointed his pistol in the air and fired another shot. The men ran down the street, rounded the corner and disappeared.

Shufflehead whispered to me, "Freddy, now he's only got four rounds in his gun."

The chief holstered his pistol and walked back into the room. "I don't believe we'll have any more trouble from them fellers, Your Honor."

"Thank you, Chief Tackett. Now, let's all settle down and get on with our business. Please take a seat, Chief." Mr. Burns gestured to the empty chair beside

William White. "Tell this magistrate's court what happened. Then we'll examine the evidence."

The chief sat down and described William White's report of the crime, Bernadine Blackwood's phone call with a similar report, and William White's descriptions of the offenders and the license plate. He ended with an account of the arrest of the two men at Buster's A&W Drive Inn.

When Mr. Burns asked, "Miss Hattie, has the Chief correctly described the events of this morning, in so far as they involved you?" she immediately stood up. "You may remain seated," Mr. Burns said.

She sat down. "Oh yes, exactly correct." Miss Hattie spoke quickly and in a matter-of-fact and snippy manner. "A white man and a colored man in the same car. And now they're in there," she pointed towards the closed door behind Mr. Burns, "mixed races in the same cell. Can you imagine? Up to no good, I say." Miss Hattie had a way of pursing her lips when she spoke that Shufflehead once tried to imitate. But he couldn't purse his lips and speak clearly the same time. Miss Hattie continued, "Though in his account of the robbery attempt, the chief omitted the terror I felt when the white man placed his gun right in front of my nose. But then the Chief would have no way of knowing that directly, would he? Nor would he know the even greater terror I felt when I saw a nigger waiting in the car to do God knows what to me. Makes me shudder to think about it. Those big strong men and tiny little me, an old lady. Terror was what I felt, all right. I screamed. Screamed again. Later I thanked God for the power of an old lady's scream."

“Thank you, Miss Hattie. I’m sure it’s been difficult for you. And I don’t like the lockup situation any better than you do. But, as you know, we have only one jail cell in Kettle.”

Mr. Burns nodded at William White and said, “William White, this is an informal hearing about what happened today. Please stay seated and I’ll ask you to answer a few questions truthfully and to the best of your ability. Will you do that?”

William White sat straight in his chair, his hands on his knees. “Yes sir, Mr. Justice. I mean Mr. Anderson...uh... Mr. Burns.”

“William White, you heard the chief’s description of this afternoon’s events. Did the chief describe the events correctly, in so far as they involved you?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Very correctly.”

“I understand that you heard Miss Hattie scream as you rode by on your bicycle. And you saw a man leap off the porch, get into a car, a black Ford coupe, and speed away. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you see a gun? Was the white man carrying a pistol?”

“Oh, yes, sir. He had a pistol in his hand, left hand, when he jumped off the porch. No question about that.”

“Thank you, William White.”

The sky had grown darker while Miss Hattie and William White testified. The lights in the room and the darkness outside made it seem like a hearing in the dead of night, not six o’clock in the evening.

Mr. Burns made some notes, and then leaned back in his chair. He drew a pressed white handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his brow, then passed the handkerchief around his neck.

“Chief, do you have the pistol the man carried?”

“No sir, I don’t.”

“Well, where is it?”

“Mr. Burns, I impounded the car and searched it. Searched it real good. The car’s trunk was loaded with Bibles. Different sizes and types. Some of ’em looked pretty expensive. Lots of Bibles, but no gun. Door to door Bible sales – a good cover for what they was up to, if you ask me.

“After I searched the car, I drove along the highway down to Buster’s A&W, real slow-like, and peered along the shoulder of the road as best I could, bein’ alone and searchin’ and drivin’ at the same time. Then I give Buster’s parking lot a good goin’ over. Nothin’ there. I thought, it’s possible they threw the gun out the window at some spot well away from the highway, or even drove over to the covered bridge and dropped the gun into the Sour Apple River. I don’t know. All I know is I don’t have their pistol.”

Anderson Burns curled the corners of his mouth downward as he listened to the chief’s news. He looked at his notepad and remained silent for a minute.

“Mr. Burns,” the chief said, “if you feel it is worth doin’, tomorrow mornin’ I could swear in a search party and have ’em walk along the highway down to Buster’s place. It would take a little time and cost the town some money, but, yes sir, we could do it.”

About the time Chief Tackett said, “Yes sir, we could do it,” a bolt of lightening cracked. Bright blue light surrounded us and directly overhead a deafening boom of thunder exploded. Shufflehead jumped and banged his head against the windowsill. The lights dangling from the ceiling in town hall dimmed.

The lights came back to normal and Mr. Burns said, “Chief, would you bring the prisoners into the room?”

The chief opened the door to the back room. Miss Hattie unsnapped her purse, pulled out a handkerchief and placed it over her nose and mouth. The sweet smell of the perfume reached our window along with the sweaty stench.

Shufflehead whispered, “Pee-yew, Freddy. That stinks.”

The chief followed the prisoners into the room. “Now you boys walk right slow-like and sit down in the two open chairs in front of Justice of the Peace Burns’s desk. I’m puttin’ you on notice that this here is an extension of the Cabell County Circuit Court. No funny business. You understand?”

“Uh-huh. We understand.”

The two men walked, or you might say stumbled, into the room, handcuffed together. The white man had a short and muscular build, not six feet tall as William White had described him. The colored man stood tall and thin. They wore white shirts rumped and wet with sweat, and blue gabardine trousers. The chief guided them to the two chairs and they sat down facing Anderson Burns.

Miss Hattie pointed at the white man and said, “That’s him, the one with the nigger. He’s the one that tried to rob me.”

No sooner had the men sat down than the screen door opened and in walked Editor James Garfield Worthington, carrying his large press camera, and another man. Mr. Burns turned to them and James Garfield introduced the man with him, Nick Blasingame, a reporter for the *Huntington Herald Dispatch*. Mr. Blasingame stood about the chief's height, maybe five foot ten, and had a heavy five o'clock shadow beard and dark curly hair. He wore a white shirt and had his necktie loosened.

James Garfield approached Mr. Burns's desk and said, "Sorry we're late, Your Honor. May I interrupt to take a couple of photographs?"

Mr. Burns nodded and said, "We'll pause a moment for the gentlemen of the press." Then he smiled and said to James Garfield, "There may be a little bit of history here. It's not every day you get to photograph a colored man in Kettle's Town Hall."

James Garfield walked behind Mr. Burns's chair. When he took a photo of the two men seated in front of the desk, the flash bulb in his camera crackled and for an instant the room filled with white light. After he replaced the flashbulb and pointed the camera at the two witnesses, William White lit into a big grin. Miss Hattie straightened her veil, placed her purse on her lap, and clutched its top with both hands, grim-faced.

Mr. Blasingame walked to the back of the room, stood in front of the window, opened his notebook, and started writing. Shufflehead said in a loud whisper through the screen, "Hey, down in front." I poked Shufflehead in the ribs with my elbow. Mr. Blasingame moved to his right, towards the door.

For a moment Mr. Burns gazed at the two accused men seated in front of him. The colored fellow kept crossing and uncrossing his legs and twisting his head around to

look towards the back of the room. The white man kept a steady look straight ahead at Mr. Burns.

“I am the local Justice of the Peace, Anderson Burns. This is a brief hearing to determine if you’ll be sent to the Court House and charged with the crime of attempted robbery. Attempted armed robbery. Do you understand that?”

The white fellow answered, “Yes sir, we understand.”

Mr. Burns looked at the two men and said, “I should add, in my years as this town’s Justice of the Peace, we’ve never had an armed robbery in Kettle. Neither have we had any colored. Or trouble with them.” He paused and looked at his note pad, then turned towards the white man. “You are Edward Ralph Young?”

“I am.”

The colored fellow had turned again towards the back of the room when Mr. Burns said, “Boy, look at me. You are George Washington Walker?”

The darkie snapped his head around and said, “Yas-suh, your honor, I am.” His raspy voice reminded me of Rochester on the Jack Benny radio show.

“Edward Ralph Young, you are accused of the attempted armed robbery of Miss Hattie McClintock. And you, George Washington Walker, are accused of being an accomplice to the crime. Do either of you wish to say anything?”

Edward Ralph Young sat to the left of his buddy, his right wrist handcuffed to George Washington Walker’s left wrist. When Young began to speak, he raised his left arm and hand to gesture, emphasize his words, the way normal folks do. Miss Hattie let out a scream that like to burst my eardrums, followed by, “Don’t shoot. Don’t shoot!”

Although his long-sleeved shirt covered his arm, at the end of it instead of a hand he had a shiny steel thing that looked like a pincer. As he spoke his left hand, held about chest high, moved back and forth.

William White's chair fell with a bang as he dove to the floor and covered his head with his arms. Chief Tackett pulled his pistol, stood and looked around but didn't seem to know where to point it.

Anderson Burns spoke calmly, "Miss Hattie, there's no weapon and no cause for alarm." He paused then added in the tone of voice a parent uses with a child, "Chief, you can put your gun away. William White, please pick up your chair and sit down."

After everybody got themselves resettled, Mr. Burns continued. "Now, Mr. Young, you were saying?"

"Your honor, we was discharged from the Army about a year ago. We come home and had a hard time finding work. I might as well tell you, you'll find out anyway, we was arrested in Huntington a few months ago for drunk and disorderly. We'd been hired to do day work at Tri-State Tobacco Warehouse, you may know the place, down by the Ohio River. The first morning, when we showed up for work the supervisor took one look at George and said, 'No colored is working for me,' and fired him. I quit right on the spot. That day we drank too much beer and went back to the warehouse. After the supervisor got off work, we raised a ruckus with him, had a fight. That's when we got arrested.

"In spite of drinking beer, which we admit to, we're Christians, which led us to get jobs selling Bibles door to door. For the most part, we been selling 'em in Huntington, where George grew up. While we was working there, George's uncle told us

we ought to try selling Bibles in Kettle. He said folks in Kettle was God-fearing Christians. Today was our first day in town.”

Mr. Burns looked at the white fellow real serious like and asked him, “Did you and your colored friend attempt to rob Miss Hattie McClintock at gunpoint.”

“No, sir.”

“Then tell me, why did Miss Hattie McClintock believe you were attempting to rob her?”

“Well, Your Honor, you seen what just happened. I’d say it was this device, my metal hand, what made her think that.” He extended his arm and moved his artificial hand towards Mr. Burns. “My metal hand, a prosthetic they call it, sometimes startles people. Scares ’em. It’s made of steel and it’s shiny. I can understand why at first somebody might think it’s a pistol.”

Young glanced to his right, towards Miss Hattie, and said, “At her front door, when the lady started to scream I tried to show her what it was. Held up my hand in front of her. But that just made things worse. She screamed louder. Yelled for help. Said I was a robber.”

“That’s right,” Miss Hattie said. “I screamed all right. You’d scream too if you had one of those things pointed at you. And a colored boy sitting in a car in front of your house. I watched them drive up and park. I knew they were up to no good. What’s the world coming to?”

Young continued, “I got scared and run off her porch. Jumped in the car and told George to hit the gas. We hightailed it out of there.”

No one spoke for a moment. A strong gust of wind blew dust and leaves around Shufflehead and me. Mr. Burns made some notes, and then asked, "I'm curious, Mr. Young, would you tell me how you came to have an artificial hand?"

"It happened overseas, Your Honor." Young said he had been in the Army, a sergeant in an infantry division that landed at Normandy. A couple of days later his unit got into a firefight and a German soldier threw a grenade that got him. Took off his right hand and killed his buddy. The Army sent him to the USA and a hospital where they attach artificial hands and teach wounded veterans how to use them. While he talked, another strong, this time longer-lasting, blast of wind hit us. The wind had a slight chill to it and carried the moist smell of rain.

Young looked at the floor, then at Mr. Burns. "My steel hand can do most things a regular hand does, Your Honor, though it's not much good for petting a dog or nothin' like that. Once I danced with a girl at a canteen, but soon after we started dancin' she walked back to her chair and set down."

Mr. Burns turned to the colored man. "Did you see combat, Walker?"

"Yes suh." Walker said he belonged to a Negro tank battalion in Europe and got shot up pretty bad in both his legs. He met Young when they were in a rehab unit. Walker pointed at Young, "He helped me learn to walk again."

"Do you men have any proof of your service in the Army?"

The two men looked at each other, and then Young spoke. "Yes, sir. Maybe you'd call it proof. We both got our old dog tags. Still wear 'em. They got our names and serial numbers. You could check the serial numbers with Army records. Wearing the dog tags is a habit, I suppose. Until now I thought they brought me good luck. Now that I think

about it, we got wounded wearing those tags and we been arrested twice wearing them. Maybe we ought to quit.”

Each man reached under his shirt and pulled a chain with Army dog tags on it over his head and handed the tags to Mr. Burns. Young did this using his artificial hand, which got everybody’s attention. Shufflehead elbowed me, “Look at that, Freddy.”

Anderson Burns inspected the tags, made some notes, and handed them back to the men. He studied the notes on the pad in front of him, and then looked up.

“Kettle has never been the kind of town that cottoned to coloreds. I see no reason for us to start now. Under the law, separate but equal means what it says.” He paused and then said, “Separate. And in Kettle we obey the law. Nothing personal, Walker, that’s just the way things are. You boys shouldn’t have been riding around town together.”

Mr. Burns pushed his chair back from the desk and sat erect. “But the law also says equal, and in my court that means an impartial application of the evidence. Miss Hattie and William White had reasonable cause to be frightened. To believe there was a robbery in progress. But the absence of a pistol and the presence of what could easily be mistaken for a pistol, Mr. Young’s artificial steel hand, tells me there was no robbery attempt. Just understandable mistakes in judgment by Miss Hattie and William White. Of course, you, Mr. Young, made your own mistake in judgment, coming to Kettle with a colored. But that’s all we have here. Understandable mistakes in judgment.”

Miss Hattie interrupted, “But Anderson, that man...”

In the gentle tone of voice a teacher might use in explaining something to a child in school, Mr. Burns said, “Miss Hattie, please. I appreciate your concern. But based on the evidence, I believe this hearing has gone about as far as it needs to go. I thank you

and William White for your time and your testimony. Do either of you have anything to add?”

William White shook his head sidewise. Miss Hattie pursed her lips and said, “A colored man in Kettle. I wonder what the world’s coming to.”

“Chief Tackett – anything to add?”

The chief looked at the floor and shook his head, no.

Then in an official-sounding voice, Mr. Burns said, “I have heard the testimony of everyone involved in this incident. As Justice of the Peace I see no reason to remand these men to the Circuit Court. I hereby release these men, and ask you, Chief Tackett, to take them to their automobile at Buckingham’s Gulf Station.”

Everybody stood up. Edward Ralph Young and George Washington Walker both grinned and said, “Thank you, Your Honor.”

The chief’s mouth turned down at the corners as he said, “Now you fellers has suffered some inconvenience, I know. We’re real sorry about that, but I’ll get you to your car, and...”

Suddenly the room filled with OK’s voice, loud and strong. He stood on the street side of the screen door. “Hey Judge, we’ll get ’em out of town for you.” Behind OK stood a large crowd of men. With the wind kicking up and everybody so intent on the proceedings, nobody had heard them sneak back. The short fat man bearing a shotgun stood beside OK.

“Me and the boys, we had our own hearin’, Mr. Justice of the Peace, but we didn’t come to the same conclusion as you. We ain’t exactly a bunch of nigger lovers.”

A second later lightning struck not far from Town Hall. Right on its heels, thunder exploded.

Chief Tackett turned and handcuffed himself to Young, and then Young to Walker. They walked single file to the screen door. The chief had his pistol in his right hand. The wire spring on the old wooden screen door stretched and squeaked as the door opened wide and the three men passed into the dark street and the wind, the chief's pistol in front of them. The crowd moved towards them and then backed away from the pistol, opening a path in front of Chief Tackett. To the side, behind the chief and the two men, the crowd closed in, moving along at the chief's pace, like the water of a stream curling behind a log as it floated in the current.

OK and the short fat man with the shotgun planted themselves in the chief's path, and everything came to a halt. Chief Tackett and OK stared at each other. The man with the shotgun raised his gun and pointed it towards Walker's head. Nobody moved.

A sudden burst of light and then an ear-bursting crack and blast of an explosion hit us. The light nearly blinded me. The ground shook. In an instant the tall elm tree beside Town Hall split down the middle and most of the old tree's canopy fell in two large chunks. One section fell across the roof of Town Hall. The other deposited itself directly on the crowd in Benson Street, burying us in its branches. Buckets of rain mixed with hail began to fall. A gale force wind kicked in and whipped the hail and rain around the fallen tree and the crowd. The few men who remained standing ran for shelter under the porch of Town Hall.

Chief Tackett and the two former prisoners, along with most everybody else not under the porch, fell to the street. Later the chief said he dove, pulling Young and Walker

to the street with him. He said he thought the man had fired his shotgun, “Maybe blowed Walker’s head off.”

Above the roar of the wind and rain, OK Carlson yelled, “Harley, git your damn shotgun. Them boys is goin’ to escape.”

“Git it yoursef. And git this tree off’n me.”

I pulled myself up and pushed my way through the wet leaves and branches. Shufflehead grabbed my shirttail and followed me. I could see Chief Tackett and the two men, the three of them still handcuffed to each other, making their way out of the thicket of branches and leaves.

Beep beep beep – the car’s horn penetrated the wind and rain. Mrs. Myrtle Mae Burns slowed her Chevy to a stop in the center of Benson Street alongside the wide swath of the fallen tree. Mr. Burns walked through the door of the white frame building and paused under its hand-lettered sign, Town Hall, Kettle, W.Va. Then he walked forward into the rain. His left leg, the one with a metal brace on it, dragged behind him like it could barely keep up with the pace of his right leg. The wind first tousled his long red hair, then the driving rain plastered his hair to his head. With his wooden cane in his left hand, Mr. Burns steadied his chunky body against the wind. He made his way to Chief Tackett and put his right hand on the chief’s arm. He walked with the chief and the two former prisoners, the three of them handcuffed links in a human chain, around the tree’s wet branches to the Chevy. Mr. Burns opened the car’s rear door. The chief and the men trailing him climbed into the car’s back seat.

Mr. Burns turned towards the car’s front, passenger side, door. OK Carlson had planted himself squarely in his path, his white t-shirt soaking wet against his muscular

body. One of OK's hands supported the barrel of the twelve-gauge shotgun and the other tightly gripped the lower gun stock, his finger against the gun's trigger, knuckles white.

"That nigra is comin' with me." OK pushed the business end of the barrel against Anderson Burns's chest, his voice deep and raspy. "Mr. Justice of the Peace, out in my barn I got me a ear that I took off'n a dead nigra. Leastways they said he was dead, I don't know. Step aside or I might soon have one of yourn."

Mr. Burns's deep voice penetrated the wind. It was no longer the soft voice I had heard inside Town Hall. "Mr. Carlson, we will now leave. Peacefully. If there's any trouble, I'll order the chief to arrest you."

"Dead men don't prosecute nobody." OK pointed the gun at Mr. Burns's chest.

The two men stared at each other. Water streamed down their faces. OK's face reddened. Anderson Burns' face paled, his cane trembled.

Mr. Burns spoke in a quiet voice, barely loud enough to rise above the wind.

"Kettle is not like Tulsa, Mr. Carlson. We're not your kind of town."

OK glared at Mr. Burns, poked the business end of the shotgun barrel into Mr. Burns' shirt buttons.

William White gripped one of my arms, Shufflehead had both hands around the other one. We edged closer to Mr. Burns and OK.

"Pull the trigger, Mr. Carlson," Mr. Burns said in an earnest tone of voice, much like a parent instructing a child to do a chore.

OK stood motionless, glaring at Mr. Burns.

"Pull the trigger!" Mr. Burns' deep voice commanded.

I started to speak to William White, but at the last second I turned to OK, “Too bad Carl’s not here, Mr. Carlson.”

OK’s glance grazed my face. A second later he backed one small step away from Mr. Burns.

Mr. Burns slowly raised his cane, placed it against the shotgun and nudged the barrel aside, then downwards towards the street’s wet bricks.

With its last passenger on board, the Chevy drove away at a speed so slow it seemed uncertain of itself. The short fat man grabbed the shotgun from OK and pointed it at the rear end of the Chevy. “Want me to shoot?” He yelled. “Whut you want me to do, OK?”

“Take that shotgun and stick it up yore ass, Harley.”

The rain ended as suddenly as it began. The crowd broke up. We looked like old dishrags, soaking wet, waiting to be wrung out.

William White said to Shufflehead and me, “Boys, let’s head down to Bertha’s Place. We need a cool drink.”

When we walked in Bertha smiled and said, “Set down, boys. RCs comin’ up. Good storm. Dampened the heat of the day. Cooled off some hot tempers.”

“It’ll take more than a storm to do that, Bertha,” I said.

Beverly and Mary Sue sat at the counter drinking iced tea. Beverly wore an armless light blue cotton dress, Mary Sue a yellow skirt and blouse. They smiled at us.

“What’s been going on?” Beverly asked.

William White jumped in. “You girls should’ve been there. Nearly had a riot over at Town Hall.” He described all that happened and wrapped it up with OK holding the shotgun on Mr. Burns. “White knuckles, his finger on the trigger – the end of the barrel against Mr. Burns’ chest. Mr. Burns dared him to pull the trigger, ‘Pull it!’ he yelled.” William White paused and looked at me. “Then our boy here stood up to OK and said, ‘Too bad Carl’s not here.’ OK took a step back, and then lowered his gun. That’s all she wrote.”

Beverly’s blue eyes flashed at me, a smile spread over her face. Heat flushed across my face, probably turned red too.

We had each drunk about half of our RC Colas when Chief Tackett and Whit Saunders walked in. The chief’s khaki shirt and trousers had turned dark brown, soaked with rain. Whit looked as he always did, dry as a bone.

“Well, Chief,” Whit said, “Them boys and their Ohio plates CC 742 is on the road.”

“Good idea you had, Whit, takin’ up a little collection for gas. Never occurred to me. I expected Anderson Burns to give a little money, but when Miss Hattie took fifty cents from her purse, I got to admit I was surprised,” the Chief said. “The money from James Garfield helped too. I don’t know why that Nick Blasingame feller wouldn’t donate anything. I heard him say something to James Garfield about reporters not gettin’ involved in their stories. Strange if you ask me.”

“Uh-oh,” I said. “Momma asked me not to be late for supper.” I jumped up and ran home, hoping my news about what had happened would offset Momma’s upset about my tardiness.

Two days later, Thursday, the weekly edition of the *Kettle News Leader* carried an item in the section titled “Kettle Stirrings,” the editor’s personal column about small items of interest to folks in Kettle.

On Tuesday Edward Ralph Young of Ironton, Ohio, and George Washington Walker of Huntington visited Kettle on business. Mr. Young and Mr. Walker are decorated veterans who served in Europe with the US Army’s 90th Infantry Division and 761st Tank Battalion, respectively. While in town they spent time with Chief Arthur R. Tackett, Miss Hattie McClintock, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson Burns and yours truly, Editor J.G. Worthington.

The morning after the wild evening at Town Hall the *Huntington Herald Dispatch* had carried an article in the lower right corner of its front-page. The article, written by Nick Blasingame, bore the title, “Riot in Kettle.”

Momma read the article at our breakfast table, put down the paper and said, “This article speaks of Kettle in what I’d call unflattering terms. And there is no mention of the voluntary offering to help those men buy gasoline.”

Daddy nodded, then added, “Maybe Mr. Blasingame’s professional ethics prevented him from including it.”

For months folks speculated about the causes of what everybody had started to call the Great Kettle Riot of nineteen and forty-seven.

At the dinner table one evening in September, Daddy said, “A riot doesn’t occur in a vacuum. Folks have got to look at Kettle, and the kind of town we are. And where we fall short. We all bear responsibility for it.”

Not long afterwards, from the pulpit of the Kettle Methodist Church, Reverend Y. Younts Yoder spoke to the congregation about the causes of the riot, “The devil did it,” he said.

And late one evening at Bertha’s Place, William White and I talked about the riot. He stared into the tiny dark brown bubbles of his RC Cola and said, “Freddy, I think I did it.”