
THE TORCH
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# NOBODY KNOWS WHAT SORROW

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(written age 25)

HE WAS NINETEEN and headed north that summer. With nothing going to stop him: he was sure of that. Atlanta had dropped behind him that morning like pages off some old calendar. But he hadn't much looked back. He kind of feared something might soften in the going if he did.

There wasn't going to be none of that. He had made the step. Sure enough, he was a man now. His hands fingering the smooth under-ripples of the steering wheel told him so. Smile, man, smile. This car is *yours*. You on your way, boy! He laughed when he recalled the salesman at the lot. Thought they saw one coming that time. What a surprise *they* got!

He figured he bargained shrewdly for the '52 Kaiser. The money from the filling station had been too long scraping to waste on a junker. There'd been all those nights he spent counting it in secret. If the guys at Willie's had known he was planning an escape—man, how they'd of rid him. That's why he didn't tell anyone. Just got up this morning and left.

He stopped off a little before noon for some gas and a Coke. He knew he should've used the toilet back there, but he'd said that morning he'd never go into them "COLORED" rooms again. Now the car ate up the asphalt; sped him on through the heat.

DETOUR. He pulled off the highway and rattled down the road puffing the noon dust into clouds that coated the lank green shoulder weeds. Once a sleek honey jag passed, kicked the dirt up around him. He didn't care. He was kissing the Georgia dust for the very last time.

The car was running hot. He pulled over and got out. He sprung the hood and slowly released the pressure. The last of the water gushed through the neck of the radiator. And he wasn't so sure anymore about that salesman in Atlanta.

Far back from the road where the trees piled into a grove, a cropper's house leaned against the

crack-dry ground. It looked deserted; but he started toward it: there was a well to the side.

"Hey," he shouted. The old paint clung desperately to the splintered porch. "Hey in there. You singin'."

The humming just went on.

"Hey you. Anybody home?" He banged on the jamb. He figured the old screening must of got tore away a long time before. And the door had just fallen off and got kicked into the yard. "Jus' want some water, lady."

"Who there? That you, Ketty?" the voice was startled.

He started to explain. He yelled into the house.

"You ain't from the insurance, are you, mister?"

"No, ma'm."

"Well, jus' you come on in so's I can hear you." He went in and woke a swarm of flies. "You all come closer." She was ancient. And she sat on the linoleum in a red print dress. "What you want?" The room didn't just stink and he suddenly felt dirty all over. "I say what you want?"

He told her. He told her rolling eyes covered with gray film. He told the side of her nose distorted with an enormous growth as big as a half dollar and twice as thick. He told the white liver-spotted hand that dragged its fingers through her hair.

The room was foul with living. In the corner a ruined mattress straddled the bedstead; the sheet draped down the side from where she had slid to the floor. In the center of the room stood a broken wheel chair.

He'd seen plenty before.

"Lady, you in trouble," he stated flatly.

"Boy, I got more trouble in eighty-four years 'n mos' any ten folks put together. Las' spring I like to near kill myself. Broke one leg 'n' sprained the other. Ain't had overmuch bed sickness in this here family, but guess I sure enough stepped in a hole." She motioned. "Sonny, be a good boy 'n' put me back to bed. I been tryin' the livelong mornin' to open that window 'n' jus' been sittin' here ever since askin' the sweet Virgin Mary to send some 'un to get me off the floor."

"Let me change the sheets."

"Don't know where there are any."

"On that cabinet top."

He'd seen plenty before; but on this first day of his new life he could no longer ignore things. He'd ignored long enough when there was no hope; and now hope was all he had.

At the foot of the bed his stomach began to revolve. Not even the folks he knew went and lived like this. Running sure had been easier. He was going to be sick, but he resolved the movement in action. He spread the sheet, walked around the bed, tucking, and lost his footing in a grease slick.

"You must of worked in a hospital."

"No."

"My daughter went off to town. Done left me here alone. Said I'd like as not be all right. That girl....'

While she talked, he tried to open the window. The string on the straw shade broke when he yanked it and he had to roll it up by hand. The window was warped closed. He coaxed it up aways.

Like the sick, like the lonely, her mind rambled and her voice followed. He put his wrists under her arms and half-lifted, half-dragged her to the bed. She whimpered. He set her on the edge of the bed and lifted her legs in.

"You okay?"

She nodded.

"All right if I use your pump?"

“I had a son like you. Good.” Her blind eyes moved almost as if they could see, searching the blank of the ceiling. “They drafted him into the Army. And the Mau Maus—he called ‘um Mau Maus—used to steal their food. They’re nigras, ain’t they?”

“Yes.”

“They used to take their food and my son said that they just had to sit there and not say anything. They shouldn’t let nigras in the same army as the white boys.”

“I don’t figure they was in any army. They’re natives. They live there.”

“Well, I don’t suppose they can drive them away. We can’t get rid of ‘um down here even.”

“No, ma’m. We live right along with you. But then some of us is leavin’.”

She was silent. Her mouth quivered. But her opaque eyes, hard with disease, masked the turmoil raging in her ancient and dusty heart. Tearful humiliation vented itself. She started quietly, slowly: “No. I said No. I thought maybe so at first. But I said No. He couldn’t; not when he was so nice. But you are!” she hissed. “Get out. Never a nigra in my house. Get out! Get out!” And the repeated cry rose to a volley.

He backed slowly from the room, tripping across the litter on the floor. He had thought she knew and didn’t care any at all: he had thought she knew. On the porch he stopped and listened to the thin sobbing of her hatred. Then his hand pounded the porch in angry answer. He snatched a bucket and ran through the dust to the pump. He gripped and forced the handle with new hardness and the pump choked and hemorrhaged gulps of rusty water.

The radiator gurgled as he hurriedly forced the water into its mouth. Just to be gone. He flung the bucket into the ditch and drove away. Down the dirty road hope was getting harder.

The dust of his passing settled on the discarded bucket and made mud with the fresh drops of water running down the sides. In a few hours the heat hardened the mud to scarred and pitted clay.