

That Will Be Fine, William Faulkner

That Will Be Fine

WE COULD HEAR the water running into the tub. We looked at the presents scattered over the bed where mamma had wrapped them in the colored paper, with our names on them so Grandpa could tell who they belonged to easy when he would take them off the tree. There was a present for everybody except Grandpa because mamma said that Grandpa is too old to get presents any more.

“This one is yours,” I said.

“Sho now,” Rosie said. “You come on and get in that tub like your mamma tell you.”

“I know what’s in it,” I said. “I could tell you if I wanted to.”

Rosie looked at her present. “I reckon I kin wait twell hit be handed to me at the right time,” she said.

“I’ll tell you what’s in it for a nickel,” I said.

Rosie looked at her present. “I ain’t got no nickel,” she said. “But I will have Christmas morning when Mr. Rodney give me that dime.”

“You’ll know what’s in it anyway then and you won’t pay me,” I said. “Go and ask mamma to lend you a nickel.”

Then Rosie grabbed me by the arm. “You come on and get in that tub,” she said. “You and money! If you ain’t rich time you twenty-one, hit will be because the law done abolished money or done abolished you.”

So I went and bathed and came back, with the presents all scattered out across mamma’s and papa’s bed and you could almost smell it and tomorrow night they would begin to shoot the fireworks and then you could hear it too.

It would be just tonight and then tomorrow we would get on the train, except papa, because he would have to stay at the livery stable until after Christmas Eve, and go to Grandpa’s, and then tomorrow night and then it would be Christmas and Grandpa would take the presents off the tree and call out our names, and the one from me to Uncle Rodney that I bought with my own dime and so after a while Uncle Rodney would prize open Grandpa’s desk and take a dose of Grandpa’s tonic and maybe he would give me another quarter for helping him, like he did last Christmas, instead of just a nickel, like he would do last summer while he was visiting mamma and us and we were doing business with Mrs. Tucker before Uncle Rodney went home and began to work for the Compress Association, and it would be fine. Or maybe even a half a dollar and it seemed to me like I just couldn’t wait.

“Jesus, I can’t hardly wait,” I said.

“You which?” Rosie hollered. “Jesus?” she hollered. “Jesus? You let your mamma hear you cussing and I bound you’ll wait. You talk to me about a nickel! For a nickel I’d tell her just what you said.”

“If you’ll pay me a nickel I’ll tell her myself,” I said.

“Get into that bed!” Rosie hollered. “A seven-year-old boy, cussing!”

“If you will promise not to tell her, I’ll tell you what’s in your present and you can pay me the nickel Christmas morning,” I said.

“Get in that bed!” Rosie hollered. “You and your nickel! I bound if I thought any of you all was fixing to buy even a dime present for your grandpa, I’d put in a nickel of hit myself.”

“Grandpa don’t want presents,” I said. “He’s too old.”

“Hah,” Rosie said. “Too old, is he? Suppose everybody decided you was too young to have nickels: what would you think about that? Hah?”

So Rosie turned out the light and went out. But I could still see the presents by the firelight: the ones for Uncle Rodney and Grandma and Aunt Louisa and Aunt Louisa’s husband Uncle Fred, and Cousin Louisa and Cousin Fred and the baby and Grandpa’s cook and our cook, that was Rosie, and maybe somebody ought to give Grandpa a present only maybe it ought to be Aunt Louisa because she and Uncle Fred lived with Grandpa, or maybe Uncle Rodney ought to because he lived with Grandpa too.

Uncle Rodney always gave mamma and papa a present but maybe it would be just a waste of his time and Grandpa’s time both for Uncle Rodney to give Grandpa a present, because one time I asked mamma why Grandpa always looked at the present Uncle Rodney gave her and papa and got so mad, and papa began to laugh and mamma said papa ought to be ashamed, that it wasn’t Uncle Rodney’s fault if his generosity was longer than his pocket book, and papa said Yes, it certainly wasn’t Uncle Rodney’s fault, he never knew a man to try harder to get money than Uncle Rodney did, that Uncle Rodney had tried every known plan to get it except work, and that if mamma would just think back about two years she would remember one time when Uncle Rodney could have thanked his stars that there was one man in the connection whose generosity, or whatever mamma wanted to call it, was at least five hundred dollars shorter than his pocket book, and mamma said she defied papa to say that Uncle Rodney stole the money, that it had been malicious persecution and papa knew it, and that papa and most other men were prejudiced against Uncle Rodney, why she didn’t know, and that if papa begrudged having lent Uncle Rodney the five hundred dollars when the family’s good name was at stake to say so and Grandpa would raise it somehow and pay papa back, and then she began to cry and papa said All right, all right, and mamma cried and said how Uncle Rodney was the baby and that must be why papa hated him and papa said All right, all right; for God’s sake, all right.

Because mamma and papa didn’t know that Uncle Rodney had been handling his business all the time he was visiting us last summer, any more than the people in Mottstown knew that he was doing business last Christmas when I worked for him the first time and he paid me the quarter.

Because he said that if he preferred to do business with ladies instead of men it wasn’t anybody’s business except his, not even Mr. Tucker’s. He said how I never went around telling people about papa’s business and I said how everybody knew papa was in the livery-stable business and so I didn’t have to tell them, and Uncle Rodney said Well, that was what half of the nickel was for and did I want to keep on making the nickels or did I want him to hire somebody else?

So I would go on ahead and watch through Mr. Tucker’s fence until he came out to go to town and I would go along behind the fence to the corner and watch until Mr. Tucker was out of sight and then I would put my hat on top of the fence post and leave it there until I saw Mr. Tucker coming back. Only he never came back while I was there because Uncle Rodney would always be through before then, and he would come up and we would walk back home and he would tell mamma how far we had walked that day and mamma would say how good that was for Uncle Rodney’s health.

So he just paid me a nickel at home. It wasn’t as much as the quarter when he was in business with the other lady in Mottstown Christmas, but that was just one time and he visited us all summer and so by that time I had a lot more than a quarter. And besides the other time was Christmas and he took a dose of Grandpa’s tonic before he paid me the quarter and so maybe this time it might be even a half a dollar. I couldn’t hardly wait.

II

But it got to be daylight at last and I put on my Sunday suit, and I would go to the front door and watch for the hack and then I would go to the kitchen and ask Rosie if it wasn’t almost time and she would tell me the train wasn’t even due for two hours yet. Only while she was telling me we heard the hack, and so I thought it was time for us to go and get on the train and it would be fine, and then we would go to Grandpa’s and then it would be tonight and then tomorrow and maybe it would be a half a dollar this time and Jesus it would be fine.

Then mamma came running out without even her hat on and she said how it was two hours yet and she wasn’t even dressed and John Paul said Yessum but papa sent him and papa said for John Paul to tell mamma that Aunt Louisa was here and for mamma to hurry.

So we put the basket of presents into the hack and I rode on the box with John Paul and mamma hollering from inside the hack about Aunt Louisa, and John Paul said that Aunt Louisa had come in a hired buggy and papa took her to the hotel to eat breakfast because she left Mottstown before daylight even. And so maybe Aunt Louisa had come to Jefferson to help mamma and papa get a present for Grandpa.

“Because we have one for everybody else,” I said, “I bought one for Uncle Rodney with my own money.”

Then John Paul began to laugh and I said Why? and he said it was at the notion of me giving Uncle Rodney anything that he would want to use, and I said Why? and John Paul said because I was shaped like a man, and I said Why? and John Paul said he bet papa would like to give Uncle Rodney a present without even waiting for Christmas, and I said What? and John Paul said A job of work.

And I told John Paul how Uncle Rodney had been working all the time he was visiting us last summer, and John Paul quit laughing and said Sho, he reckoned anything a man kept at all the time, night and day both, he would call it work no matter how much fun it started out to be, and I said Anyway Uncle Rodney works now, he works in the office of the Compress Association, and John Paul laughed good then and said it would sholy take a whole association to compress Uncle Rodney.

And then mamma began to holler to go straight to the hotel, and John Paul said Nome, papa said to come straight to the livery stable and wait for him. And so we went to the hotel and Aunt Louisa and papa came out and papa helped Aunt Louisa into the hack and Aunt Louisa began to cry and mamma hollering Louisa! Louisa! What is it? What has happened? and papa saying Wait now. Wait. Remember the nigger, and that meant John Paul, and so it must have been a present for Grandpa and it didn’t come.

And then we didn’t go on the train after all. We went to the stable and they already had the light road hack hitched up and waiting, and mamma was crying now and saying how papa never even had his Sunday clothes and papa cussing now and saying Damn the clothes; if we didn’t get to Uncle Rodney before the others caught him, papa would just wear the clothes Uncle Rodney had on now. So we got into the road hack fast and papa closed the curtains and then mamma and Aunt Louisa could cry all right and papa hollered to John Paul to go home and tell Rosie to pack his Sunday suit and take her to the train; anyway that would be fine for Rosie.

So we didn’t go on the train but we went fast, with papa driving and saying Didn’t anybody know where he was? and Aunt Louisa quit crying a while and said how Uncle Rodney didn’t come to supper last night, but right after supper he came in and how Aunt Louisa had a terrible feeling as soon as she heard his step in the hall and how Uncle Rodney wouldn’t tell her until they were in his room and the door closed and then he said he must have two thousand dollars and Aunt Louisa said where in the world could she get two thousand dollars? and Uncle Rodney said Ask Fred, that was Aunt Louisa’s husband, and George, that was papa; tell them they would have to dig it up, and Aunt Louisa said she had that terrible feeling and she said Rodney! Rodney!

What — and Uncle Rodney begun to cuss and say Dammit, don’t start sniveling and crying now, and Aunt Louisa said Rodney, what have you done now? and then they both heard the knocking at the door and how Aunt Louisa looked at Uncle Rodney and she knew the truth before she even laid eyes on Mr. Pruitt and the sheriff, and how she said Don’t tell pa! Keep it from pa! It will kill him. . . .

“Who?” papa said. “Mister who?”

“Mr. Pruitt,” Aunt Louisa said, crying again. “The president of the Compress Association. They moved to Mottstown last spring. You don’t know him.”

So she went down to the door and it was Mr. Pruitt and the sheriff. And how Aunt Louisa begged Mr. Pruitt for Grandpa’s sake and how she gave Mr. Pruitt her oath that Uncle Rodney would stay right there in the house until papa could get there, and Mr. Pruitt said how he hated it to happen at Christmas too and so for Grandpa’s and Aunt Louisa’s sake he would give them until the day after Christmas if Aunt Louisa would promise him that Uncle Rodney would not try to leave Mottstown. And how Mr. Pruitt showed her with her own eyes the check with Grandpa’s name signed to it and how even Aunt Louisa could see that Grandpa’s name had been — and then mamma said Louisa! Louisa!

Remember Georgie! and that was me, and papa cussed too, hollering How in damnation do you expect to keep it from him? By hiding the newspapers? and Aunt Louisa cried again and said how everybody was bound to know it, that she didn’t expect or hope that any of us could ever hold our heads up again, that all she hoped for was to keep it from Grandpa because it would kill him.

She cried hard then and papa had to stop at a branch and get down and soak his handkerchief for mamma to wipe Aunt Louisa’s face with it and then papa took the bottle of tonic out of the dash pocket and put a few drops on the handkerchief, and Aunt Louisa smelled it and then papa took a dose of the tonic out of the bottle and mamma said George! and papa drank some more of the tonic and then made like he was handing the bottle back for mamma and Aunt Louisa to take a dose too and said, “I don’t blame you.

If I was a woman in this family I’d take to drink too. Now let me get this bond business straight.”

“It was those road bonds of ma’s,” Aunt Louisa said.

We were going fast again now because the horses had rested while papa was wetting the handkerchief and taking the dose of tonic, and papa was saying All right, what about the bonds? when all of a sudden he jerked around in the seat and said, “Road bonds? Do you mean he took that damn screw driver and prized open your mother’s desk too?”

Then mamma said George! how can you? only Aunt Louisa was talking now, quick now, not crying now, not yet, and papa with his head turned over his shoulder and saying Did Aunt Louisa mean that that five hundred papa had to pay out two years ago wasn’t all of it?

And Aunt Louisa said it was twenty-five hundred, only they didn’t want Grandpa to find it out, and so Grandma put up her road bonds for security on the note, and how they said now that Uncle Rodney had redeemed Grandma’s note and the road bonds from the bank with some of the Compress Association’s bonds out of the safe in the Compress Association office, because when Mr. Pruitt found the Compress Association’s bonds were missing he looked for them and found them in the bank and when he looked in the Compress Association’s safe all he found was the check for two thousand dollars with Grandpa’s name signed to it, and how Mr. Pruitt hadn’t lived in Mottstown but a year but even he knew that Grandpa never signed that check and besides he looked in the bank again and Grandpa never had two thousand dollars in it, and how Mr. Pruitt said how he would wait until the day after Christmas if Aunt Louisa would give him her sworn oath that Uncle Rodney would not go away, and Aunt Louisa did it and then she went back upstairs to plead with Uncle Rodney to give Mr. Pruitt the bonds and she went into Uncle Rodney’s room where she had left him, and the window was open and Uncle Rodney was gone.

“Damn Rodney!” papa said. “The bonds! You mean, nobody knows where the bonds are?”

Now we were going fast because we were coming down the last hill and into the valley where Mottstown was. Soon we would begin to smell it again; it would be just today and then tonight and then it would be Christmas, and Aunt Louisa sitting there with her face white like a whitewashed fence that has been rained on and papa said Who in hell ever gave him such a job anyway, and Aunt Louisa said Mr. Pruitt, and papa said how even if Mr. Pruitt had only lived in Mottstown a few months, and then Aunt Louisa began to cry without even putting her handkerchief to her face this time and mamma looked at Aunt Louisa and she began to cry too and papa took out the whip and hit the team a belt with it even if they were going fast and he cussed. “Damnation to hell,” papa said. “I see. Pruitt’s married.”

Then we could see it too. There were holly wreaths in the windows like at home in Jefferson, and I said, “They shoot fireworks in Mottstown too like they do in Jefferson.”

Aunt Louisa and mamma were crying good now, and now it was papa saying Here, here; remember Georgie, and that was me, and Aunt Louisa said, “Yes, yes! Painted common thing, traipsing up and down the streets all afternoon alone in a buggy, and the one and only time Mrs. Church called on her, and that was because of Mr. Pruitt’s position alone, Mrs. Church found her without corsets on and Mrs. Church told me she smelled liquor on her breath.”

And papa saying Here, here, and Aunt Louisa crying good and saying how it was Mrs. Pruitt that did it because Uncle Rodney was young and easy led because he never had had opportunities to meet a nice girl and marry her, and papa was driving fast toward Grandpa’s house and he said, “Marry?

Rodney marry? What in hell pleasure would he get out of slipping out of his own house and waiting until after dark and slipping around to the back and climbing up the gutter and into a room where there wasn’t anybody in it but his own wife.”

And so mamma and Aunt Louisa were crying good when we got to Grandpa’s.

III

And Uncle Rodney wasn’t there. We came in, and Grandma said how Mandy, that was Grandpa’s cook, hadn’t come to cook breakfast and when Grandma sent Emmeline, that was Aunt Louisa’s baby’s nurse, down to Mandy’s cabin in the back yard, the door was locked on the inside but Mandy wouldn’t answer and then Grandma went down there herself and Mandy wouldn’t answer and so Cousin Fred climbed in the window and Mandy was gone and Uncle Fred had just got back from town then and he and papa both hollered, “Locked? on the inside? and nobody in it?”

And then Uncle Fred told papa to go in and keep Grandpa entertained and he would go and then Aunt Louisa grabbed papa and Uncle Fred both and said she would keep Grandpa quiet and for both of them to go and find him, find him, and papa said if only the fool hasn’t tried to sell them to somebody, and Uncle Fred said Good God, man, don’t you know that check was dated ten days ago?

And so we went in where Grandpa was reared back in his chair and saying how he hadn’t expected papa until tomorrow but by God he was glad to see somebody at last because he waked up this morning and his cook had quit and Louisa had chased off somewhere before daylight and now he couldn’t even find Uncle Rodney to go down and bring his mail and a cigar or two back, and so thank God Christmas never came but once a year and so be damned if he wouldn’t be glad when it was over, only he was laughing now because when he said that about Christmas before Christmas he always laughed, it wasn’t until after Christmas that he didn’t laugh when he said that about Christmas.

Then Aunt Louisa got Grandpa’s keys out of his pocket herself and opened the desk where Uncle Rodney would prize it open with a screw driver, and took out Grandpa’s tonic and then mamma said for me to go and find Cousin Fred and Cousin Louisa.

So Uncle Rodney wasn’t there. Only at first I thought maybe it wouldn’t be a quarter even, it wouldn’t be nothing this time, so at first all I had to think about was that anyway it would be Christmas and that would be something anyway. Because I went on around the house, and so after a while papa and Uncle Fred came out, and I could see them through the bushes knocking at Mandy’s door and calling, “Rodney, Rodney,” like that.

Then I had to get back in the bushes because Uncle Fred had to pass right by me to go to the woodshed to get the axe to open Mandy’s door. But they couldn’t fool Uncle Rodney. If Mr. Tucker couldn’t fool Uncle Rodney in Mr. Tucker’s own house, Uncle Fred and papa ought to known they couldn’t fool him right in his own papa’s back yard. So I didn’t even need to hear them.

I just waited until after a while Uncle Fred came back out the broken door and came to the woodshed and took the axe and pulled the lock and hasp and steeple off the woodhouse door and went back and then papa came out of Mandy’s house and they nailed the woodhouse lock onto Mandy’s door and locked it and they went around behind Mandy’s house, and I could hear Uncle Fred nailing the windows up. Then they went back to the house.

But it didn’t matter if Mandy was in the house too and couldn’t get out, because the train came from Jefferson with Rosie and papa’s Sunday clothes on it and so Rosie was there to cook for Grandpa and us and so that was all right too.

But they couldn’t fool Uncle Rodney. I could have told them that. I could have told them that sometimes Uncle Rodney even wanted to wait until after dark to even begin to do business. And so it was all right even if it was late in the afternoon before I could get away from Cousin Fred and Cousin Louisa.

It was late; soon they would begin to shoot the fireworks downtown, and then we would be hearing it too, so I could just see his face a little between the slats where papa and Uncle Fred had nailed up the back window; I could see his face where he hadn’t shaved, and he was asking me why in hell it took me so long because he had heard the Jefferson train come before dinner, before eleven o’clock, and laughing about how papa and Uncle Fred had nailed him up in the house to keep him when that was exactly what he wanted, and that I would have to slip out right after supper somehow and did I reckon I could manage it?

And I said how last Christmas it had been a quarter, but I didn’t have to slip out of the house that time, and he laughed, saying Quarter? Quarter? did I ever see ten quarters all at once? and I never did, and he said for me to be there with the screw driver right after supper and I would see ten quarters, and to remember that even God didn’t know where he is and so for me to get the hell away and stay away until I came back after dark with the screw driver.

And they couldn’t fool me either. Because I had been watching the man all afternoon, even when he thought I was just playing and maybe because I was from Jefferson instead of Mottstown and so I wouldn’t know who he was. But I did, because once when he was walking past the back fence and he stopped and lit his cigar again and I saw the badge under his coat when he struck the match and so I knew he was like Mr. Watts at Jefferson that catches the niggers. So I was playing by the fence and I could hear him stopping and looking at me and I played and he said, “Howdy, son. Santy Claus coming to see you tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“You’re Miss Sarah’s boy, from up at Jefferson, ain’t you?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Come to spend Christmas with your grandpa, eh?” he said. “I wonder if your Uncle Rodney’s at home this afternoon.”

“No, sir,” I said.

“Well, well, that’s too bad,” he said. “I wanted to see him a minute. He’s downtown, I reckon?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“Well, well,” he said. “You mean he’s gone away on a visit, maybe?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Well, well,” he said. “That’s too bad. I wanted to see him on a little business. But I reckon it can wait.” Then he looked at me and then he said, “You’re sure he’s out of town, then?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Well, that was all I wanted to know,” he said. “If you happen to mention this to your Aunt Louisa or your Uncle Fred you can tell them that was all I wanted to know.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. So he went away. And he didn’t pass the house any more. I watched for him, but he didn’t come back. So he couldn’t fool me either.

IV

Then it began to get dark and they started to shoot the fireworks downtown. I could hear them, and soon we would be seeing the Roman candles and skyrockets and I would have the ten quarters then and I thought about the basket full of presents and I thought how maybe I could go on downtown when I got through working for Uncle Rodney and buy a present for Grandpa with a dime out of the ten quarters and give it to him tomorrow and maybe, because nobody else had given him a present, Grandpa might give me a quarter too instead of the dime tomorrow, and that would be twenty-one quarters, except for the dime, and that would be fine sure enough.

But I didn’t have time to do that. We ate supper, and Rosie had to cook that too, and mamma and Aunt Louisa with powder on their faces where they had been crying, and Grandpa; it was papa helping him take a dose of tonic every now and then all afternoon while Uncle Fred was downtown, and Uncle Fred came back and papa came out in the hall and Uncle Fred said he had looked everywhere, in the bank and in the Compress, and how Mr. Pruitt had helped him but they couldn’t find a sign either of them or of the money, because Uncle Fred was afraid because one night last week Uncle Rodney hired a rig and went somewhere and Uncle Fred found out Uncle Rodney drove over to the main line at Kingston and caught the fast train to Memphis, and papa said Damnation, and Uncle Fred said By God we will go down there after supper and sweat it out of him, because at least we have got him. I told Pruitt that and he said that if we hold to him, he will hold off and give us a chance.

So Uncle Fred and papa and Grandpa came in to supper together, with Grandpa between them saying Christmas don’t come but once a year, thank God, so hooray for it, and papa and Uncle Fred saying Now you are all right, pa; straight ahead now, pa, and Grandpa would go straight ahead awhile and then begin to holler Where in hell is that damn boy? and that meant Uncle Rodney, and that Grandpa was a good mind to go downtown himself and haul Uncle Rodney out of that damn pool hall and make him come home and see his kinfolks.

And so we ate supper and mamma said she would take the children upstairs and Aunt Louisa said No, Emmeline could put us to bed, and so we went up the back stairs, and Emmeline said how she had done already had to cook breakfast extra today and if folks thought she was going to waste all her Christmas doing extra work they never had the sense she give them credit for and that this looked like to her it was a good house to be away from nohow, and so we went into the room and then after a while I went back down the back stairs and I remembered where to find the screw driver too. Then I could hear the firecrackers plain from downtown, and the moon was shining now but I could still see the Roman candles and the skyrockets running up the sky.

Then Uncle Rodney’s hand came out of the crack in the shutter and took the screw driver. I couldn’t see his face now and it wasn’t laughing exactly, it didn’t sound exactly like laughing, it was just the way he breathed behind the shutter. Because they couldn’t fool him. “All right,” he said. “Now that’s ten quarters. But wait. Are you sure nobody knows where I am?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “I waited by the fence until he come and asked me.”

“Which one?” Uncle Rodney said.

“The one that wears the badge,” I said.

Then Uncle Rodney cussed. But it wasn’t mad cussing. It sounded just like it sounded when he was laughing except the words.

“He said if you were out of town on a visit, and I said Yes, sir,” I said.

“Good,” Uncle Rodney said. “By God, some day you will be as good a business man as I am. And I won’t make you a liar much longer, either. So now you have got ten quarters, haven’t you?”

“No,” I said. “I haven’t got them yet.”

Then he cussed again, and I said, “I will hold my cap up and you can drop them in it and they won’t spill then.”

Then he cussed hard, only it wasn’t loud. “Only I’m not going to give you ten quarters,” he said, and I begun to say You said — and Uncle Rodney said, “Because I am going to give you twenty.”

And I said Yes, sir, and he told me how to find the right house, and what to do when I found it. Only there wasn’t any paper to carry this time because Uncle Rodney said how this was a twenty-quarter job, and so it was too important to put on paper and besides I wouldn’t need a paper because I would not know them anyhow, and his voice coming hissing down from behind the shutter where I couldn’t see him and still sounding like when he cussed while he was saying how papa and Uncle Fred had done him a favor by nailing up the door and window and they didn’t even have sense enough to know it.

“Start at the corner of the house and count three windows. Then throw the handful of gravel against the window. Then when the window opens — never mind who it will be, you won’t know anyway — just say who you are and then say ‘He will be at the corner with the buggy in ten minutes. Bring the jewelry.’ Now you say it,” Uncle Rodney said.

“He will be at the corner with the buggy in ten minutes. Bring the jewelry,” I said.

“Say ‘Bring all the jewelry,’” Uncle Rodney said.

“Bring all the jewelry,” I said.

“Good,” Uncle Rodney said. Then he said, “Well? What are you waiting on?”

“For the twenty quarters,” I said.

Uncle Rodney cussed again. “Do you expect me to pay you before you have done the work?” he said.

“You said about a buggy,” I said. “Maybe you will forget to pay me before you go and you might not get back until after we go back home. And besides, that day last summer when we couldn’t do any business with Mrs. Tucker because she was sick and you wouldn’t pay me the nickel because you said it wasn’t your fault Mrs. Tucker was sick.”

Then Uncle Rodney cussed hard and quiet behind the crack and then he said, “Listen. I haven’t got the twenty quarters now. I haven’t even got one quarter now. And the only way I can get any is to get out of here and finish this business. And I can’t finish this business tonight unless you do your work. See? I’ll be right behind you. I’ll be waiting right there at the corner in the buggy when you come back. Now, go on. Hurry.”

V

So I went on across the yard, only the moon was bright now and I walked behind the fence until I got to the street. And I could hear the firecrackers and I could see the Roman candles and skyrockets sliding up the sky, but the fireworks were all downtown, and so all I could see along the street was the candles and wreaths in the windows.

So I came to the lane, went up the lane to the stable, and I could hear the horse in the stable, but I didn’t know whether it was the right stable or not; but pretty soon Uncle Rodney kind of jumped around the corner of the stable and said Here you are, and he showed me where to stand and listen toward the house and he went back into the stable.

But I couldn’t hear anything but Uncle Rodney harnessing the horse, and then he whistled and I went back and he had the horse already hitched to the buggy and I said Whose horse and buggy is this; it’s a lot skinnier than Grandpa’s horse? And Uncle Rodney said It’s my horse now, only damn this moonlight to hell.

Then I went back down the lane to the street and there wasn’t anybody coming so I waved my arm in the moonlight, and the buggy came up and I got in and we went fast. The side curtains were up and so I couldn’t see the skyrockets and Roman candles from town, but I could hear the firecrackers and I thought maybe we were going through town and maybe Uncle Rodney would stop and give me some of the twenty quarters and I could buy Grandpa a present for tomorrow, but we didn’t; Uncle Rodney just raised the side curtain without stopping and then I could see the house, the two magnolia trees, but we didn’t stop until we came to the corner.

“Now,” Uncle Rodney said, “when the window opens, say ‘He will be at the corner in ten minutes. Bring all the jewelry.’ Never mind who it will be. You don’t want to know who it is. You want to even forget what house it is. See?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “And then you will pay me the—”

“Yes!” he said, cussing. “Yes! Get out of here quick!”

So I got out and the buggy went on and I went back up the street. And the house was dark all right except for one light, so it was the right one, besides the two trees. So I went across the yard and counted the three windows and I was just about to throw the gravel when a lady ran out from behind a bush and grabbed me. She kept on trying to say something, only I couldn’t tell what it was, and besides she never had time to say very much anyhow because a man ran out from behind another bush and grabbed us both. Only he grabbed her by the mouth, because I could tell that from the kind of slobbering noise she made while she was fighting to get loose.

“Well, boy?” he said. “What is it? Are you the one?”

“I work for Uncle Rodney,” I said.

“Then you’re the one,” he said. Now the lady was fighting and slobbering sure enough, but he held her by the mouth. “All right. What is it?”

Only I didn’t know Uncle Rodney ever did business with men. But maybe after he began to work in the Compress Association he had to. And then he had told me I would not know them anyway, so maybe that was what he meant.

“He says to be at the corner in ten minutes,” I said. “And to bring all the jewelry. He said for me to say that twice. Bring all the jewelry.”

The lady was slobbering and fighting worse than ever now, so maybe he had to turn me loose so he could hold her with both hands.

“Bring all the jewelry,” he said, holding the lady with both hands now. “That’s a good idea. That’s fine. I don’t blame him for telling you to say that twice. All right. Now you go back to the corner and wait and when he comes, tell him this: ‘She says to come and help carry it.’ Say that to him twice, too. Understand?”

“Then I’ll get my twenty quarters,” I said.

“Twenty quarters, hah?” the man said, holding the lady. “That’s what you are to get, is it? That’s not enough. You tell him this, too: ‘She says to give you a piece of the jewelry.’ Understand?”

“I just want my twenty quarters,” I said.

Then he and the lady went back behind the bushes again and I went on, too, back toward the corner, and I could see the Roman candles and skyrockets again from toward town and I could hear the firecrackers, and then the buggy came back and Uncle Rodney was hissing again behind the curtain like when he was behind the slats on Mandy’s window.

“Well?” he said.

“She said for you to come and help carry it,” I said.

“What?” Uncle Rodney said. “She said he’s not there?”

“No, sir. She said for you to come and help carry it. For me to say that twice.” Then I said, “Where’s my twenty quarters?” because he had already jumped out of the buggy and jumped across the walk into the shadow of some bushes. So I went into the bushes too and said, “You said you would give—”

“All right; all right!” Uncle Rodney said. He was kind of squatting along the bushes; I could hear him breathing. “I’ll give them to you tomorrow. I’ll give you thirty quarters tomorrow. Now you get to hell on home. And if they have been down to Mandy’s house, you don’t know anything. Run, now. Hurry.”

“I’d rather have the twenty quarters tonight,” I said.

He was squatting fast along in the shadow of the bushes, and I was right behind him, because when he whirled around he almost touched me, but I jumped back out of the bushes in time and he stood there cussing at me and then he stooped down and I saw it was a stick in his hand and I turned and ran.

Then he went on, squatting along in the shadow, and then I went back to the buggy, because the day after Christmas we would go back to Jefferson, and so if Uncle Rodney didn’t get back before then I would not see him again until next summer and then maybe he would be in business with another lady and my twenty quarters would be like my nickel that time when Mrs. Tucker was sick.

So I waited by the buggy and I could watch the skyrockets and the Roman candles and I could hear the firecrackers from town, only it was late now and so maybe all the stores would be closed and so I couldn’t buy Grandpa a present, even when Uncle Rodney came back and gave me my twenty quarters. So I was listening to the firecrackers and thinking about how maybe I could tell Grandpa that I had wanted to buy him a present and so maybe he might give me fifteen cents instead of a dime anyway, when all of a sudden they started shooting firecrackers back at the house where Uncle Rodney had gone.

Only they just shot five of them fast, and when they didn’t shoot any more I thought that maybe in a minute they would shoot the skyrockets and Roman candles too. But they didn’t. They just shot the five firecrackers right quick and then stopped, and I stood by the buggy and then folks began to come out of the houses and holler at one another and then I began to see men running toward the house where Uncle Rodney had gone, and then a man came out of the yard fast and went up the street toward Grandpa’s and I thought at first it was Uncle Rodney and that he had forgotten the buggy, until I saw that it wasn’t.

But Uncle Rodney never came back and so I went on toward the yard to where the men were, because I could still watch the buggy too and see Uncle Rodney if he came back out of the bushes, and I came to the yard and I saw six men carrying something long and then two other men ran up and stopped me and one of them said Hell-fire, it’s one of those kids, the one from Jefferson.

And I could see then that what the men were carrying was a window blind with something wrapped in a quilt on it and so I thought at first that they had come to help Uncle Rodney carry the jewelry, only I didn’t see Uncle Rodney anywhere, and then one of the men said, “Who? One of the kids? Hell-fire, somebody take him on home.”

So the man picked me up, but I said I had to wait on Uncle Rodney, and the man said that Uncle Rodney would be all right, and I said But I wanted to wait for him here, and then one of the men behind us said Damn it, get him on out of here, and we went on. I was riding on the man’s back and then I could look back and see the six men in the moonlight carrying the blind with the bundle on it, and I said Did it belong to Uncle Rodney? and the man said No, if it belonged to anybody now it belonged to Grandpa. And so then I knew what it was.

“It’s a side of beef,” I said. “You are going to take it to Grandpa.” Then the other man made a funny sound and the one I was riding on said Yes, you might call it a side of beef, and I said, “It’s a Christmas present for Grandpa. Who is it going to be from? Is it from Uncle Rodney?”

“No,” the man said. “Not from him. Call it from the men of Mottstown. From all the husbands in Mottstown.”

VI

Then we came in sight of Grandpa’s house. And now the lights were all on, even on the porch, and I could see folks in the hall, I could see ladies with shawls over their heads, and some more of them going up the walk toward the porch, and then I could hear somebody in the house that sounded like singing and then papa came out of the house and came down the walk to the gate and we came up and the man put me down and I saw Rosie waiting at the gate too. Only it didn’t sound like singing now because there wasn’t any music with it, and so maybe it was Aunt Louisa again and so maybe she didn’t like Christmas now any better than Grandpa said he didn’t like it.

“It’s a present for Grandpa,” I said.

“Yes,” papa said. “You go on with Rosie and go to bed. Mamma will be there soon. But you be a good boy until she comes. You mind Rosie. All right, Rosie. Take him on. Hurry.”

“You don’t need to tell me that,” Rosie said. She took my hand. “Come on.”

Only we didn’t go back into the yard, because Rosie came out the gate and we went up the street. And then I thought maybe we were going around the back to dodge the people and we didn’t do that, either. We just went on up the street, and I said, “Where are we going?”

And Rosie said, “We gonter sleep at a lady’s house name Mrs. Jordon.”

So we went on. I didn’t say anything. Because papa had forgotten to say anything about my slipping out of the house yet and so maybe if I went on to bed and stayed quiet he would forget about it until tomorrow too. And besides, the main thing was to get a holt of Uncle Rodney and get my twenty quarters before we went back home, and so maybe that would be all right tomorrow too. So we went on and Rosie said Yonder’s the house, and we went in the yard and then all of a sudden Rosie saw the possum. It was in a persimmon tree in Mrs. Jordon’s yard and I could see it against the moonlight too, and I hollered, “Run! Run and get Mrs. Jordon’s ladder!”

And Rosie said, “Ladder my foot! You going to bed!”

But I didn’t wait. I began to run toward the house, with Rosie running behind me and hollering You, Georgie! You come back here! But I didn’t stop. We could get the ladder and get the possum and give it to Grandpa along with the side of meat and it wouldn’t cost even a dime and then maybe Grandpa might even give me a quarter too, and then when I got the twenty quarters from Uncle Rodney I would have twenty-one quarters and that will be fine.

The End