



Uncle Willy, William Faulkner

Uncle Willy

I KNOW WHAT they said. They said I didn't run away from home but that I was tolled away by a crazy man who, if I hadn't killed him first, would have killed me inside another week. But if they had said that the women, the good women in Jefferson had driven Uncle Willy out of town and I followed him and did what I did because I knew that Uncle Willy was on his last go-round and this time when they got him again it would be for good and forever, they would have been right.

Because I wasn't tolled away and Uncle Willy wasn't crazy, not even after all they had done to him. I didn't have to go; I didn't have to go any more than Uncle Willy had to invite me instead of just taking it for granted that I wanted to come.

I went because Uncle Willy was the finest man I ever knew, because even women couldn't beat him, because in spite of them he wound up his life getting fun out of being alive and he died doing the thing that was the most fun of all because I was there to help him. And that's something that most men and even most women too don't get to do, not even the women that call meddling with other folks' lives fun.

He wasn't anybody's uncle, but all of us, and grown people too, called him (or thought of him) as Uncle Willy. He didn't have any kin at all except a sister in Texas married to an oil millionaire.

He lived by himself in a little old neat white house where he had been born on the edge of town, he and an old nigger named Job Wylie that was older than he was even, that cooked and kept the house and was

the porter at the drugstore which Uncle Willy's father had established and which Uncle Willy ran without any other help than old Job; and during the twelve or fourteen years (the life of us as children and then boys), while he just used dope, we saw a lot of him. We liked to go to his store because it was always cool and dim and quiet inside because he never washed the windows; he said the reason was that he never had to bother to dress them because nobody could see in anyway, and so the heat couldn't get in either.

And he never had any customers except country people buying patent medicines that were already in bottles, and niggers buying cards and dice, because nobody had let him fill a prescription in forty years I reckon, and he never had any soda fountain trade because it was old Job who washed the glasses and mixed the syrups and made the ice cream ever since Uncle Willy's father started the business in eighteen-fifty-something and so old Job couldn't see very well now, though papa said he didn't think that old Job took dope too, it was from breathing day and night the air which Uncle Willy had just exhaled.

But the ice cream tasted all right to us, especially when we came in hot from the ball games. We had a league of three teams in town and Uncle Willy would give the prize, a ball or a bat or a mask, for each game though he would never come to see us play, so after the game both teams and maybe all three would go to the store to watch the winner get the prize.

And we would eat the ice cream and then we would all go behind the prescription case and watch Uncle Willy light the little alcohol stove and fill the needle and roll his sleeve up over the little blue myriad punctures starting at his elbow and going right on up into his shirt.

And the next day would be Sunday and we would wait in our yards and fall in with him as he passed from house to house and go on to Sunday school, Uncle Willy with us, in the same class with us, sitting there while we recited. Mr. Barbour from the Sunday school never called on him. Then we would finish the lesson and we would talk about baseball until the bell rang and Uncle Willy still not saying anything, just sitting there all neat and clean, with his clean collar and no tie and weighing about a hundred and ten pounds and his eyes behind his glasses kind of all run together like broken eggs. Then we would all go to the store and eat the ice cream that was left over from Saturday and then go behind the prescription case and watch him again: the little stove and his Sunday shirt rolled up and the needle going slow into his blue arm and somebody would say, "Don't it hurt?" and he would say, "No. I like it."

II

Then they made him quit dope. He had been using it for forty years, he told us once, and now he was sixty and he had about ten years more at the outside, only he didn't tell us that because he didn't need to tell even fourteen-year-old boys that. But they made him quit. It didn't take them long.

It began one Sunday morning and it was finished by the next Friday; we had just sat down in our class and Mr. Barbour had just begun, when all of a sudden Reverend Schultz, the minister, was there, leaning over Uncle Willy and already hauling him out of his seat when we looked around, hauling him up and saying in that tone in which preachers speak to fourteen-year-old boys that I don't believe even pansy boys like: "Now, Brother Christian, I know you will hate to leave Brother Barbour's class, but let's you and I go in and join Brother Miller and the men and hear what he can tell us on this beautiful and heartwarming text," and Uncle Willy still trying to hold back and looking around at us

with his run-together eyes blinking and saying plainer than if he had spoke it: “What’s this? What’s this, fellows? What are they fixing to do to me?”

We didn’t know any more than he did. We just finished the lesson; we didn’t talk any baseball that day; and we passed the alcove where Mr. Miller’s men’s Bible class met, with Reverend Schultz sitting in the middle of them like he did every Sunday, like he was just a plain man like the rest of them yet kind of bulging out from among the others like he didn’t have to move or speak to keep them reminded that he wasn’t a plain man; and I would always think about April Fool’s one year when Miss Callaghan called the roll and then stepped down from her desk and said, “Now I’m going to be a pupil today,” and took a vacant seat and called out a name and made them go to her desk and hold the lesson and it would have been fun if you could have just quit remembering that tomorrow wouldn’t be April Fool’s and the day after that wouldn’t be either.

And Uncle Willy was sitting by Reverend Schultz looking littler than ever, and I thought about one day last summer when they took a country man named Bundren to the asylum at Jackson but he wasn’t too crazy not to know where he was going, sitting there in the coach window handcuffed to a fat deputy sheriff that was smoking a cigar.

Then Sunday school was over and we went out to wait for him, to go to the store and eat the ice cream. And he didn’t come out. He didn’t come out until church was over too, the first time that he had ever stayed for church that any of us knew of — that anybody knew of, papa told me later — coming out with Mrs. Merridew on one side of him and Reverend Schultz on the other still holding him by the arm and he looking around at us again with his eyes saying again only desperate now: “Fellows, what’s this?”

What's this, fellows?" and Reverend Schultz shoving him into Mrs. Merridew's car and Mrs. Merridew saying, loud, like she was in the pulpit: "Now, Mr. Christian, I'm going to take you right out to my house and I'm going to fix you a nice glass of cool lemonade and then we will have a nice chicken dinner and then you are going to take a nice nap in my hammock and then Brother and Sister Schultz are coming out and we will have some nice ice cream," and Uncle Willy saying, "No. Wait, ma'am, wait! Wait! I got to go to the store and fill a prescription I promised this morning—"

So they shoved him into the car and him looking back at us where we stood there; he went out of sight like that, sitting beside Mrs. Merridew in the car like Darl Bundren and the deputy on the train, and I reckon she was holding his wrist and I reckon she never needed any handcuffs and Uncle Willy giving us that single look of amazed and desperate despair.

Because now he was already an hour past the time for his needle and that afternoon when he finally slipped away from Mrs. Merridew he was five hours past it and so he couldn't even get the key into the lock, and so Mrs. Merridew and Reverend Schultz caught him and this time he wasn't talking or looking either: he was trying to get away like a half-wild cat tries to get away.

They took him to his home and Mrs. Merridew telegraphed his sister in Texas and Uncle Willy didn't come to town for three days because Mrs. Merridew and Mrs. Hovis took turn about staying in the house with him day and night until his sister could get there.

That was vacation then and we played the game on Monday and that afternoon the store was still locked and Tuesday it was still locked, and so it was not until Wednesday afternoon and Uncle Willy was running fast.

He didn't have any shirt on and he hadn't shaved and he could not get the key into the lock at all, panting and whimpering and saying, "She went to sleep at last; she went to sleep at last," until one of us took the key and unlocked the door. We had to light the little stove too and fill the needle and this time it didn't go into his arm slow, it looked like he was trying to jab it clean through the bone.

He didn't go back home. He said he wouldn't need anything to sleep on and he gave us the money and let us out the back door and we bought the sandwiches and the bottle of coffee from the café and we left him there.

Then the next day, it was Mrs. Merridew and Reverend Schultz and three more ladies; they had the marshal break in the door and Mrs. Merridew holding Uncle Willy by the back of the neck and shaking him and kind of whispering, "You little wretch! You little wretch! Slip off from me, will you?" and Reverend Schultz saying, "Now, Sister; now, Sister; control yourself," and the other ladies hollering Mr. Christian and Uncle Willy and Willy, according to how old they were or how long they had lived in Jefferson. It didn't take them long.

The sister got there from Texas that night and we would walk past the house and see the ladies on the front porch or going in and out, and now and then Reverend Schultz kind of bulging out from among them like he would out of Mr. Miller's Bible class, and we could crawl up behind the hedge and hear them through the window, hear Uncle Willy

crying and cussing and fighting to get out of the bed and the ladies saying, "Now, Mr. Christian; now, Uncle Willy," and "Now, Bubber," too, since his sister was there; and Uncle Willy crying and praying and cussing.

And then it was Friday, and he gave up. We could hear them holding him in the bed; I reckon this was his last go-round, because none of them had time to talk now; and then we heard him, his voice weak but clear and his breath going in and out.

"Wait," he said. "Wait! I will ask it one more time. Won't you please quit? Won't you please go away? Won't you please go to hell and just let me come on at my own gait?"

"No, Mr. Christian," Mrs. Merridew said. "We are doing this to save you."

For a minute we didn't hear anything. Then we heard Uncle Willy lay back in the bed, kind of flop back.

"All right," he said. "All right."

It was like one of those sheep they would sacrifice back in the Bible. It was like it had climbed up onto the altar itself and flopped onto its back with its throat held up and said: "All right. Come on and get it over with. Cut my damn throat and go away and let me lay quiet in the fire."

III

He was sick for a long time. They took him to Memphis and they said that he was going to die. The store stayed locked all the time now, and

after a few weeks we didn't even keep up the league. It wasn't just the balls and the bats. It wasn't that. We would pass the store and look at the big old lock on it and at the windows you couldn't even see through, couldn't even see inside where we used to eat the ice cream and tell him who beat and who made the good plays and him sitting there on his stool with the little stove burning and the dope boiling and bubbling and the needle waiting in his hand, looking at us with his eyes blinking and all run together behind his glasses so you couldn't even tell where the pupil was like you can in most eyes.

And the niggers and the country folks that used to trade with him coming up and looking at the lock too, and asking us how he was and when he would come home and open up again.

Because even after the store opened again, they would not trade with the clerk that Mrs. Merridew and Reverend Schultz put in the store. Uncle Willy's sister said not to bother about the store, to let it stay shut because she would take care of Uncle Willy if he got well.

But Mrs. Merridew said no, she not only aimed to cure Uncle Willy, she was going to give him a complete rebirth, not only into real Christianity but into the practical world too, with a place in it waiting for him so he could hold up his head not only with honor but pride too among his fellow men; she said that at first her only hope had been to fix it so he would not have to face his Maker slave body and soul to morphine, but now since his constitution was stronger than anybody could have believed, she was going to see that he assumed that position in the world which his family's name entitled him to before he degraded it.

She and Reverend Schultz found the clerk. He had been in Jefferson about six months. He had letters to the church, but nobody except Reverend Schultz and Mrs. Merridew knew anything about him. That is,

they made him the clerk in Uncle Willy's store; nobody else knew anything about him at all.

But Uncle Willy's old customers wouldn't trade with him. And we didn't either. Not that we had much trade to give him and we certainly didn't expect him to give us any ice cream and I don't reckon we would have taken it if he had offered it to us.

Because it was not Uncle Willy, and pretty soon it wasn't even the same ice cream because the first thing the clerk did after he washed the windows was to fire old Job, only old Job refused to quit.

He stayed around the store anyhow, mumbling to himself and the clerk would run him out the front door and old Job would go around to the back and come in and the clerk would find him again and cuss him, whispering, cussing old Job good even if he did have letters to the church; he went and swore out a warrant and the marshal told old Job he would have to stay out of the store. Then old Job moved across the street.

He would sit on the curb all day where he could watch the door and every time the clerk came in sight old Job would holler, "I ghy tell um! I ghy do hit!" So we even quit passing the store.

We would cut across the corner not to pass it, with the windows clean now and the new town trade the clerk had built up — he had a lot of trade now — going in and out, just stopping long enough to ask old Job about Uncle Willy, even though we had already got what news came from Memphis about him every day and we knew that old Job would not know, would not be able to get it straight even if someone told him,

since he never did believe that Uncle Willy was sick, he just believed that Mrs. Merridew had taken him away somewhere by main force and was holding him in another bed somewhere so he couldn't get up and come back home; and old Job sitting on the curb and blinking up at us with his little watery red eyes like Uncle Willy would and saying, "I ghy tell um! Holting him up dar whilst whipper-snappin' trash makin' free wid Marse Hoke Christian's sto. I ghy tell um!"

IV

Uncle Willy didn't die. One day he came home with his skin the color of tallow and weighing about ninety pounds now and with his eyes like broken eggs still but dead eggs, eggs that had been broken so long now that they didn't even smell dead any more — until you looked at them and saw that they were anything in the world except dead. That was after he got to know us again. I don't mean that he had forgotten about us exactly.

It was like he still liked us as boys, only he had never seen us before and so he would have to learn our names and which faces the names belonged to. His sister had gone back to Texas now, because Mrs. Merridew was going to look after him until he was completely recovered, completely cured. Yes. Cured.

I remember that first afternoon when he came to town and we walked into the store and Uncle Willy looked at the clean windows that you could see through now and at the town customers that never had traded with him, and at the clerk and said, "You're my clerk, hey?" and the clerk begun to talk about Mrs. Merridew and Reverend Schultz and Uncle Willy said, "All right, all right," and now he ate some ice cream too, standing at the counter with us like he was a customer too and still

looking around the store while he ate the ice cream, with those eyes that were not dead at all and he said, "Looks like you been getting more work out of my damned old nigger than I could," and the clerk began to say something else about Mrs. Merridew and Uncle Willy said, "All right, all right."

Just get a holt of Job right away and tell him I am going to expect him to be here every day and that I want him to keep this store looking like this from now on." Then we went on behind the prescription case, with Uncle Willy looking around here too, at how the clerk had it neated up, with a big new lock on the cabinet where the drugs and such were kept, with those eyes that wouldn't anybody call dead, I don't care who he was, and said, "Step up there and tell that fellow I want my keys."

But it wasn't the stove and the needle. Mrs. Merridew had busted both of them that day. But it wasn't that anyway, because the clerk came back and begun to talk about Mrs. Merridew and Reverend Schultz, and Uncle Willy listening and saying, "All right, all right," and we never had seen him laugh before and his face didn't change now but we knew that he was laughing behind it.

Then we went out. He turned sharp off the square, down Nigger Row to Sonny Barger's store and I took the money and bought the Jamaica ginger from Sonny and caught up with them and we went home with Uncle Willy and we sat in the pasture while he drank the Jamaica ginger and practiced our names some more.

And that night we met him where he said. He had the wheelbarrow and the crowbar and we broke open the back door and then the cabinet with the new lock on it and got the can of alcohol and carried it to Uncle Willy's and buried it in the barn.

It had almost three gallons in it and he didn't come to town at all for four weeks and he was sick again, and Mrs. Merridew storming into the house, jerking out drawers and flinging things out of closets and Uncle Willy lying in the bed and watching her with those eyes that were a long way from being dead.

But she couldn't find anything because it was all gone now, and besides she didn't know what it was she was looking for because she was looking for a needle. And the night Uncle Willy was up again we took the crowbar and went back to the store and when we went to the cabinet we found that it was already open and Uncle Willy's stool sitting in the door and a quart bottle of alcohol on the stool in plain sight, and that was all. And then I knew that the clerk knew who got the alcohol before but I didn't know why he hadn't told Mrs. Merridew until two years later.

I didn't know that for two years, and Uncle Willy a year now going to Memphis every Saturday in the car his sister had given him. I wrote the letter with Uncle Willy looking over my shoulder and dictating, about how his health was improving but not as fast as the doctor seemed to want and that the doctor said he ought not to walk back and forth to the store and so a car, not an expensive car, just a small car that he could drive himself or maybe find a negro boy to drive for him if his sister thought he ought not to: and she sent the money and he got a burr-headed nigger boy about my size named Secretary to drive it for him.

That is, Secretary said he could drive a car; certainly he and Uncle Willy both learned on the night trips they would make back into the hill country to buy corn whisky and Secretary learned to drive in Memphis

pretty quick, too, because they went every Saturday, returning Monday morning with Uncle Willy insensible on the back seat, with his clothes smelling of that smell whose source I was not to discover at first hand for some years yet, and two or three half-empty bottles and a little notebook full of telephone numbers and names like Lorine and Billie and Jack.

I didn't know it for two years, not until that Monday morning when the sheriff came and padlocked and sealed what was left of Uncle Willy's stock and when they tried to find the clerk they couldn't even find out what train he had left town on; a hot morning in July and Uncle Willy sprawled out on the back seat, and on the front seat with Secretary a woman twice as big as Uncle Willy, in a red hat and a pink dress and a dirty white fur coat over the back of the seat and two straw suitcases on the fenders, with hair the color of a brand new brass hydrant bib and her cheeks streaked with mascara and caked powder where she had sweated.

It was worse than if he had started dope again. You would have thought he had brought smallpox to town. I remember how when Mrs. Merridew telephoned Mamma that afternoon you could hear her from away out at her house, over the wire, clean out to the back door and the kitchen: "Married! Married! Whore! Whore! Whore!" like the clerk used to cuss old Job, and so maybe the church can go just so far and maybe the folks that are in it are the ones that know the best or are entitled to say when to disconnect religion for a minute or two.

And Papa was cussing too, not cussing anybody; I knew he was not cussing Uncle Willy or even Uncle Willy's new wife, just like I knew that I wished Mrs. Merridew could have been there to hear him. Only I reckon if she had been there she couldn't have heard anything because they said she still had on a house dress when she went and snatched

Reverend Schultz into her car and went out to Uncle Willy's, where he was still in bed like always on Monday and Tuesday, and his new wife run Mrs. Merridew and Reverend Schultz out of the house with the wedding license like it was a gun or a knife.

And I remember how all that afternoon — Uncle Willy lived on a little quiet side street where the other houses were all little new ones that country people who had moved to town within the last fifteen years, like mail carriers and little storekeepers, lived — how all that afternoon mad-looking ladies with sun-bonnets on crooked came busting out of that little quiet street dragging the little children and the grown girls with them, heading for the mayor's office and Reverend Schultz's house, and how the young men and the boys that didn't work and some of the men that did would drive back and forth past Uncle Willy's house to look at her sitting on the porch smoking cigarettes and drinking something out of a glass; and how she came down town the next day to shop, in a black hat now and a red-and-white striped dress so that she looked like a great big stick of candy and three times as big as Uncle Willy now, walking along the street with men popping out of the stores when she passed like she was stepping on a line of spring triggers and both sides of her behind kind of pumping up and down inside the dress until somebody hollered, threw back his head and squalled: "YIPPEEE!" like that and she kind of twitched her behind without even stopping and then they hollered sure enough.

And the next day the wire came from his sister, and Papa for the lawyer and Mrs. Merridew for the witness went out there and Uncle Willy's wife showed them the license and told them to laugh that off, that Manuel Street or not she was married as good and tight as any high-nosed bitch in Jefferson or anywhere else and Papa saying, "Now, Mrs. Merridew; now, Mrs. Christian," and he told Uncle Willy's wife how Uncle Willy was bankrupt now and might even lose the house too, and

his wife said how about that sister in Texas, was Papa going to tell her that the oil business was bankrupt too and not to make her laugh.

So they telegraphed the sister again and the thousand dollars came and they had to give Uncle Willy's wife the car too. She went back to Memphis that same afternoon, driving across the square with the straw suitcases, in a black lace dress now and already beginning to sweat again under her new makeup because it was still hot, and stopping where the men were waiting at the post office for the afternoon mail and she said, "Come on up to Manuel Street and see me sometime and I will show you hicks what you and this town can do to yourselves and one another."

And that afternoon Mrs. Merridew moved back into Uncle Willy's house and Papa said the letter she wrote Uncle Willy's sister had eleven pages to it because Papa said she would never forgive Uncle Willy for getting bankrupted. We could hear her from behind the hedge: "You're crazy, Mr. Christian; crazy. I have tried to save you and make something out of you besides a beast but now my patience is exhausted. I am going to give you one more chance.

I am going to take you to Keeley and if that fails, I am going to take you myself to your sister and force her to commit you to an asylum." And the sister sent papers from Texas declaring that Uncle Willy was incompetent and making Mrs. Merridew his guardian and trustee, and Mrs. Merridew took him to the Keeley in Memphis. And that was all.

That is, I reckon they thought that that was all, that this time Uncle Willy would surely die. Because even Papa thought that he was crazy now because even Papa said that if it hadn't been for Uncle Willy I would not have run away, and therefore I didn't run away, I was tolled away by a lunatic; it wasn't Papa, it was Uncle Robert that said that he wasn't crazy because any man who could sell Jefferson real estate for cash while shut up in a Keeley institute wasn't crazy or even drunk.

Because they didn't even know that he was out of Keeley, even Mrs. Merridew didn't know it until he was gone two days and they couldn't find him. They never did find him or find out how he got out and I didn't either until I got the letter from him to take the Memphis bus on a certain day and he would meet me at a stop on the edge of Memphis. I didn't even realize that I had not seen Secretary or old Job either in two weeks.

But he didn't toll me away. I went because I wanted to, because he was the finest man I ever knew, because he had had fun all his life in spite of what they had tried to do to him or with him, and I hoped that maybe if I could stay with him a while I could learn how to, so I could still have fun too when I had to get old.

Or maybe I knew more than that, without knowing it, like I knew that I would do anything he asked me to do, no matter what it was, just like I helped him break into the store for the alcohol when he took it for granted that I would without asking me to at all and then helped him hide it from Mrs. Merridew.

Maybe I even knew what old Job was going to do. Not what he did do, but that he would do it if the occasion arose, and that this would have to be Uncle Willy's last go-round and if I wasn't there it would be just

him against all the old terrified and timid clinging to dull and rule-ridden breathing which Jefferson was to him and which, even though he had escaped Jefferson, old Job still represented.

So I cut some grass that week and I had almost two dollars. I took the bus on the day he said and he was waiting for me at the edge of town, in a Ford now without any top on it and you could still read the chalk letters, \$85 cash on the wind-shield, and a brand new tent folded up in the back of it and Uncle Willy and old Job in the front seat, and Uncle Willy looked fine with a checked cap new except for a big oil stain, with the bill turned round behind and a pair of goggles cocked up on the front of it and his celluloid collar freshly washed and no tie in it and his nose peeling with sunburn and his eyes bright behind his glasses.

I would have gone with him anywhere; I would do it over again right now, knowing what was going to happen. He would not have to ask me now any more than he did then. So I got on top of the tent and we didn't go toward town, we went the other way.

I asked where we were going but he just said wait, rushing the little car along like he couldn't get there quick enough himself, and I could tell from his voice that this was fine, this was the best yet, better than anybody else could have thought about doing, and old Job hunched down in the front seat, holding on with both hands and yelling at Uncle Willy about going so fast. Yes. Maybe I knew from old Job even then that Uncle Willy may have escaped Jefferson but he had just dodged it; he hadn't gotten away.

Then we came to the sign, the arrow that said Airport, and we turned and I said: "What? What is it?" but Uncle Willy just said: "Wait; just wait," like he couldn't hardly wait himself, hunched over the wheel with

his white hair blowing under his cap and his collar riding up behind so you could see his neck between the collar and the shirt; and old Job saying (Oh yes, I could tell even then): “He got hit, all right. He done done hit. But I done tole him. Nemmine. I done warned him.” Then we came to the airport and Uncle Willy stopped quick and pointed up without even getting out and said, “Look.”

It was an airplane flying around and Uncle Willy running up and down the edge of the field waving his handkerchief until it saw him and came down and landed and rolled up to us, a little airplane with a two-cylinder engine. It was Secretary, in another new checked cap and goggles like Uncle Willy’s and they told me how Uncle Willy had bought one for old Job too but old Job wouldn’t wear it.

And that night — we stayed in a little tourist camp about two miles away and he had a cap and goggles all ready for me too; and then I knew why they hadn’t been able to find him — Uncle Willy told me how he had bought the airplane with some of the money he had sold his house for after his sister saved it because she had been born in it too, but that Captain Bean at the airport wouldn’t teach him to run it himself because he would need a permit from a doctor (“By God,” Uncle Willy said, “damn if these Republicans and Democrats and XYZ’s ain’t going to have it soon where a man can’t even flush the toilet in his own bathroom.”) and he couldn’t go to the doctor because the doctor might want to send him back to the Keeley or tell Mrs. Merridew where he was.

So he just let Secretary learn to run it first and now Secretary had been running it for two weeks, which was almost fourteen days longer than he had practiced on the car before they started out with it. So Uncle Willy bought the car and tent and camping outfit yesterday and tomorrow we were going to start.

We would go first to a place named Renfro where nobody knew us and where there was a big pasture that Uncle Willy had found out about and we would stay there a week while Secretary taught Uncle Willy to run the airplane. Then we would head west.

When we ran out of the house money we would stop at a town and take up passengers and make enough to buy gasoline and food to get to the next town, Uncle Willy and Secretary in the airplane and me and old Job in the car; and old Job sitting in a chair against the wall, blinking at Uncle Willy with his little weak red sullen eyes, and Uncle Willy reared up on the cot with his cap and goggles still on and his collar without any tie (it wasn't fastened to his shirt at all: just buttoned around his neck) sometimes sideways and sometimes even backward like an Episcopal minister's, and his eyes bright behind his glasses and his voice bright and fine. "And by Christmas we will be in California!" he said. "Think of that. California!"

VI

So how could they say that I had to be tolled away? How could they? I suppose I knew then that it wouldn't work, couldn't work, that it was too fine to be true. I reckon I even knew how it was going to end just from the glum way Secretary acted whenever Uncle Willy talked about learning to run the airplane himself, just as I knew from the way old Job looked at Uncle Willy, not what he did of course, but what he would do if the occasion arose. Because I was the other white one.

I was white, even if old Job and Secretary were both older than me, so it would be all right; I could do it all right. It was like I knew even then that, no matter what might happen to him, he wouldn't ever die and I

thought that if I could just learn to live like he lived, no matter what might happen to me I wouldn't ever die either.

So we left the next morning, just after daylight because there was another fool rule that Secretary would have to stay in sight of the field until they gave him a license to go away. We filled the airplane with gas and Secretary went up in it just like he was going up to practice.

Then Uncle Willy got us into the car quick because he said the airplane could make sixty miles an hour and so Secretary would be at Renfro a long while before we got there.

But when we got to Renfro Secretary wasn't there and we put the tent up and ate dinner and he still didn't come and Uncle Willy beginning to cuss and we ate supper and dark came but Secretary didn't and Uncle Willy was cussing good now. He didn't come until the next day. We heard him and ran out and watched him fly right over us, coming from the opposite direction of Memphis, going fast and us all hollering and waving.

But he went on, with Uncle Willy jumping up and down and cussing, and we were loading the tent into the car to try to catch him when he came back. We didn't hear him at all now and we could see the propeller because it wasn't running and it looked like Secretary wasn't even going to light in the pasture but he was going to light in some trees on the edge of it.

But he skinned by them and kind of bumped down and we ran up and found him still sitting in the airplane with his eyes closed and his face the color of wood ashes and he said, "Captin, will you please tell me

where to find Ren—" before he even opened his eyes to see who we were.

He said he had landed seven times yesterday and it wouldn't be Renfro and they would tell him how to get to Renfro and he would go there and that wouldn't be Renfro either and he had slept in the airplane last night and he hadn't eaten since we left Memphis because he had spent the three dollars Uncle Willy gave him for gasoline and if he hadn't run out of gas when he did he wouldn't never have found us.

Uncle Willy wanted me to go to town and get some more gas so he could start learning to run it right away but Secretary wouldn't. He just refused. He said the airplane belonged to Uncle Willy and he reckoned he belonged to Uncle Willy too, leastways until he got back home, but that he had flown all he could stand for a while. So Uncle Willy started the next morning.

I thought for a while that I would have to throw old Job down and hold him and him hollering, "Don't you git in dat thing!" and still hollering, "I ghy tell um! I ghy tell um!" while we watched the airplane with Secretary and Uncle Willy in it kind of jump into the air and then duck down like Uncle Willy was trying to take the short cut to China and then duck up again and get to going pretty straight at last and fly around the pasture and then turn down to land, and every day old Job hollering at Uncle Willy and field hands coming up out of the fields and folks in wagons and walking stopping in the road to watch them and the airplane coming down, passing us with Uncle Willy and Secretary side by side and looking exactly alike, I don't mean in the face but exactly alike like two tines of a garden fork look exactly like just before they chop into the ground; we could see Secretary's eyes and his mouth run

out so you could almost hear him saying, “Hoooooooooooo!” and Uncle Willy’s glasses shining and his hair blowing from under his cap and his celluloid collar that he washed every night before he went to bed and no tie in it and they would go by, fast, and old Job hollering, “You git outer dar! You git outer dat thing!” and we could hear Secretary too: “Turn hit loose, Unker Willy! Turn hit loose!” and the airplane would go on, ducking up one second and down the next and with one wing higher than the other one second and lower the next and then it would be traveling sideways and maybe it would hit the ground sideways the first time, with a kind of crashing sound and the dust spurting up and then bounce off again and Secretary hollering, “Unker Willy! Turn loose!” and at night in the tent Uncle Willy’s eyes would still be shining and he would be too excited to stop talking and go to sleep and I don’t believe he even remembered that he had not taken a drink since he first thought about buying the airplane.

Oh yes, I know what they said about me after it was all over, what Papa said when he and Mrs. Merridew got there that morning, about me being the white one, almost a man, and Secretary and old Job just irresponsible niggers, yet it was old Job and Secretary who tried to prevent him. Because that was it; that was what they couldn’t understand.

I remember the last night and Secretary and old Job both working on him, when old Job finally made Secretary tell Uncle Willy that he would never learn to fly, and Uncle Willy stopped talking and stood up and looked at Secretary. “Didn’t you learn to run it in two weeks?” he said. Secretary said yes.

“You, a damn, trifling, worthless, ignorant, burr-headed nigger?” and Secretary said yes. “And me that graduated from a university and ran a fifteen-thousand-dollar business for forty years, yet you tell me I can’t

learn to run a damn little fifteen-hundred-dollar airplane?" Then he looked at me. "Don't you believe I can run it?" he said. And I looked at him and I said, "Yes. I believe you can do anything."

VII

And now I can't tell them. I can't say it. Papa told me once that somebody said that if you know it you can say it. Or maybe the man that said that didn't count fourteen-year-old boys. Because I must have known it was going to happen. And Uncle Willy must have known it too, known that the moment would come.

It was like we both had known it and we didn't even have to compare notes, tell one another that we did: he not needing to say that day in Memphis, "Come with me so you will be there when I will need you," and me not needing to say, "Let me come so I can be there when you will."

Because old Job telephoned Mrs. Merridew. He waited until we were asleep and slipped out and walked all the way to town and telephoned her; he didn't have any money and he probably never telephoned in his life before, yet he telephoned her and the next morning he came up running in the dew (the town, the telephone, was five miles away) just as Secretary was getting the engine started and I knew what he had done even before he got close enough to holler, running and stumbling along slow across the pasture, hollering, "Holt um! Holt um!

Dey'll be here any minute! Jest holt um ten minutes en dey'll be here," and I knew and I ran and met him and now I did hold him and him

fighting and hitting at me and still hollering at Uncle Willy in the airplane. "You telephoned?" I said. "Her? Her? Told her where he is?"

"Yes," Uncle Job hollered. "En she say she gonter git yo pappy and start right away and be here by six o'clock," and me holding him; he felt like a handful of scrawny dried sticks and I could hear his lungs wheezing and I could feel his heart, and Secretary came up running too and old Job begun to holler at Secretary, "Git him outer dar!

Dey comin! Dey be here any minute if you can jest holt um!" and Secretary saying, "Which? Which?" and old Job hollered at him to run and hold the airplane and Secretary turned and I tried to grab his leg but I couldn't and I could see Uncle Willy looking toward us and Secretary running toward the airplane and I got onto my knees and waved and I was hollering too.

I don't reckon Uncle Willy could hear me for the engine. But I tell you he didn't need to, because we knew, we both knew; and so I knelt there and held old Job on the ground and we saw the airplane start, with Secretary still running after it, and jump into the air and duck down and then jump up again and then it looked like it had stopped high in the air above the trees where we thought Secretary was fixing to land that first day before it ducked down beyond them and went out of sight and Secretary was already running and so it was only me and Uncle Job that had to get up and start.

Oh, yes, I know what they said about me; I knew it all that afternoon while we were going home with the hearse in front and Secretary and old Job in the Ford next and Papa and me in our car coming last and Jefferson getting nearer and nearer; and then all of a sudden I began to cry.

Because the dying wasn't anything, it just touched the outside of you that you wore around with you for comfort and convenience like you do your clothes: it was because the old garments, the clothes that were not worth anything had betrayed one of the two of us and the one betrayed was me, and Papa with his other arm around my shoulders now, saying, "Now, now; I didn't mean that. You didn't do it. Nobody blames you."

You see? That was it. I did help Uncle Willy. He knows I did. He knows he couldn't have done it without me. He knows I did; we didn't even have to look at one another when he went. That's it.

And now they will never understand, not even Papa, and there is only me to try to tell them and how can I ever tell them, and make them understand? How can I?

The End