

THE DARE, Grif Stockley

Standing in the doorway behind us, Cootie's daddy, Mr. Tuck Smith, says in that voice of his that sounds like he needs to clear his throat but hasn't in about five years, "Cootie probably doesn't know that after the First World War they killed a bunch of nigras over in Elaine next door in Phillips County."

Cootie and I turn around like we've been caught trying to pee out the back window. It's a close call. Just five minutes earlier Cootie was telling me he's finally found his archery set in the shed behind their house. He had gotten a bow and 7 arrows for Christmas three years ago, but Cootie's daddy had taken them away in the spring after Cootie had accidentally nearly shot their nigra maid Maggie while she was hanging up some clothes to dry in the Smith's backyard. Cootie and I are planning later to walk over to McCullough's Hill and see if they still are any good once Mr. Tuck and Ms Blanche go play bridge later this afternoon.

"I heard something about that once," I lie, knowing I have to say something. I don't know what Mr. Tuck's talking about, but I guess he's just overheard me betting Cootie a quarter that here in Lee County nigras will never be allowed to go to school with us. To hear people talk, you'd think the 3rd world war is about to start over in Little Rock with the President of the United States having the nerve to send American soldiers to Central High School so that nine nigras can go to school with white kids. I say, "The Delta—it's a lot different than Little Rock, isn't it, Mr. Tuck?"

Mr. Tuck draws on his Camel cigarette and lets the smoke out into Cootie's room. He's squinting at me like he is thinking hard about something, but it may be that the smoke hanging in

front of his face is burning his eyes. Just because my grandmother's a historian for the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and Daughters of the Confederacy, Mr. Tuck probably thinks I know a lot of history even though I'm only 13. My grandmother's had some history articles reprinted in our weekly Marianna paper, the Courier Index (people call it "The Curious Insect") under the caption "News of Bygone Days." The truth is I don't care about that stuff and it goes in one ear and out the other. If she told me anything about Elaine, I don't remember it.

Mr. Tuck has trouble breathing, and the smoke doesn't get very far from his face. He starts to say something but begins to cough instead.

"You don't know bull," Cootie says to me," and draws back his hand like he's drawing a bead on me with a bow.

Horrified, I glance at Mr. Tuck, but he is busy wiping his mouth with a handkerchief and studying the contents like he's just coughed up a ruby. If Mr. Tuck is thinking at all straight, he can figure out what's on Cootie's mind. Sometimes, it's not hard. About half the time Cootie acts like he's my age instead of two years older, but I guess that's what makes us best friends.

I like Mr. Tuck a lot, and seeing his haircut stand up so straight makes my hand go to my hair. I push up and back on it, wishing I had brought my brush. Mr. Tuck has the best flattop I've ever seen. Normally, you don't see grown men his age with a flattop, but it looks good on him. I can't imagine my daddy with a flattop anyway. He's already kind of old at 53. And bald and gray. He comes home from his store and sits in his chair at home and reads "Time" Magazine like it's the Bible and Henry Luce is God.

“They got their own schools,” Cootie says, and sits back on the bed facing his daddy. “There’re as good as ours.”

Me and Cootie want nothing more than for him to leave and get out of here so we can get into the shed. But Mr. Tuck sometimes gets suspicious, and we have to act like we haven’t got a thing in the world to do. To make up for my ignorance and to try to impress Mr. Tuck, I tell Cootie, “You know our nigras don’t care about going to school. It’s the Communists behind this stuff. They’re trying to tear down our democracy. They showed this film called “Communism on the Map” in our church about Communist influence and had this map of the United States. Some places on the map they colored pink, but there were some places like Washington, D.C. they colored bright red.”

Mr. Tuck nods vigorously, and an ash from his Camel falls to the floor. He doesn’t even notice it. “They could take over if we’re not careful,” he says. “You know there’re people in Marianna who’d rather be ‘red than dead.’”

“Who?” Cootie demands, his eyes getting big.

At least Cootie has put his dadgum hands down. I laugh, pretty sure Mr. Tuck is teasing. I say more confidently than I feel, “There’s nobody in Lee County in their right mind who’d wish that.”

Mr. Tuck shrugs as if he knows somebody but can’t say. “Are y’all still practicing for an atomic bomb attack by getting down under your desks at school?”

“Every once in a while,” Cootie says. “I’d rather practice for a fire drill. We get to go outside.”

“Why would they drop a bomb on Marianna?” I scoff. “Seems like it would make more sense to drop one on Little Rock or Memphis. They’re a lot bigger and would kill more people.

Marianna’s only got 4,500 people, and half of them are nigras.”

Mr. Tuck grinds his Camel into the bottom of his left boot and drops it into Cootie’s trash can that has tiny major league pennants on it. “I don’t want you going in Katie’s room,” he says to Cootie,” and bothering her while we’re gone. You just can’t barge in there. If you want something, you knock on her door and wait for her to open it.”

Cootie picks up his St. Louis Cardinal baseball cap lying on the bed, knowing he’ll get in trouble if he talks back. “Yes, Sir.”

I can tell by their tone this isn’t the first time today Cootie’s been told to stay out of his sister’s room. Even though Katie is a year younger than Cootie, she looks and acts a lot older. What she is doing in there I can only imagine. Katie won the “Little Miss Marianna” contest when she was five years old. This year she’s co-captain of the junior high cheerleaders. She dates Billy Short who’s supposed to start on the basketball team this year even though he’s just a sophomore. Katie has at least twenty pictures of herself on the wall behind her bed, and her “Little Miss Marianna” crown is hanging off the bed post. When nobody else is at home, Cootie and I go into her room and look at her pictures. My mother is always saying to my older sisters, “Pretty is as pretty does.”

“Let’s go play some catch,” I say to Cootie, before he and his daddy start arguing. If he gets mad enough, Mr. Tuck will send me home and make Cootie stay in his room. Being so pretty and popular, Katie gets most of the attention in the Smith family, and everybody else just kind of revolves around her.

On top of McCullough's Hill thirty minutes later, we're already getting bored and we just got here. Even though it's September, it's still too hot to come over here and have any fun. There're way too many thorns and cockleburs and chiggers up here. It's a lot better in the winter when it snows and we can go sledding. Of course it doesn't snow every year and even when it does, sometimes it's just a little dusting. My grandmother says McCullough's Hill is part of Crowley's Ridge that runs from Missouri all the way to Helena just 30 miles to the south. A big earthquake just ripped up the earth a long time ago. I can't hit a thing with Cootie's bow, and he's not much better. We've already lost one arrow in the brush.

I don't know why I say this, but I do: "Cootie, you count to twenty real slow, and I'll take off running down the hill, and you try to shoot me after you get to twenty."

Picking a tick off his arm, Cootie laughs. "Are you serious?" "Yeah, but if you miss me, you owe me an Orange Slush at the Dairy Queen." Just saying this makes my heart race. "Were you really trying to hit Maggie that day?"

"I was just playing—just trying to scare her." Cootie crushes the tick between his thumb and forefinger and blood spurts out. "It wasn't any different than riding up and down Alabama Street and throwing out some cherry bombs to watch the nigras scatter."

All of a sudden, I begin to run as hard as I can, and I hear Cootie begin to count. He's counting faster than he's supposed to. With all the brush it's harder to run, and he's yelling, "Ten, eleven, twelve. . . ."

I trip over some vines but get up and hear him screaming “fifteen, sixteen. . . .” I begin to zigzag and put my right hand behind my head as I run. I can barely hear him, but I’m afraid if I look back an arrow will hit me in the face. Suddenly, I hear the arrow zip into the ground to my right. I am sweating so hard I can hardly see. My heart is still going ninety to nothing. I look back and see Cootie running down the hill toward me.

When he gets to me, he laughs. “I thought I had gotten you.”

I pull my tee-shirt up and wipe my face. “You were really trying to hit me.”

“You said it was okay,” he says defiantly. “I was just trying to scare you.”