THE REVENGE OF OLD MEN*

by Ernest J. Gaines

1.

When I come back from dinner, Toby says Candi wants me cross the river quick as I can get there. Don’t call. Just get there.

“Was she upset?” I ask him.

“More like hysterical,” he says.


“She said don’t call, Lou. Just get there,” Toby says.

“That’s a thirty minute drive,” I say. “I’d go crazy wondering what happened.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Toby says.

I sit on the desk, with my feet in the chair, and dial St. Rafael Parish. Their servant, Janey, answers on the second ring.

“The Marshall house.”

“Janey, let me speak to Candi.”

“Mr. Lou, that’s you?” she asks. “Where you calling from? Why ain’t you here?”

“I’m not there because I’m still in Baton Rouge, Janey,” I say.

“Now let me speak to Candi.”

“She ain’t here. She in the quarters,” Janey says.

“Well, what is she doing down there?”

“Lord, Mr. Lou.” She starts crying. “Lord, have mercy, Mr. Lou.”

“What happened?” I ask her. “Something happened down there?”

I hear her sniffing two, three times. “They had a killing,” she says. “Bernard mixed in it.”

“What?” I say, pressing the phone harder to my ear to keep out all the other noises in the room. “Say that again. What? Who got killed?”

“One of the Boutans.”

“What?”

“Mr. Beau Boutan,” she says.

“Holy hell. Bernard?” I asked her.

“Mr. Lou, hurry up and get here,” Janey says. “Please. She need you. We all need you. Please hurry up and get here.”

*An excerpt from a novel in progress. Ed.

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"The Major?" I asked.
"In the swing, on the gallery."
"Well?"
"Drunk," she says.
"Miss Bea?" I ask.
"In the yard. By the Palms of Christians. Drunk too."
"Okay, I'm on my way," I say, and slam the phone down.
"What happened?" Toby asks.
"Killing cross the river," I say. "Our friend Bernard's mixed in it."
"You want me to go with you?" he asks.
"No. Too much work here," I say. "If Mitch asks about me, tell him I'm at Marshall."
"He's going to want more than that," Toby says.
"Tell him there's been a killing at Marshall. Black and white. The white man's dead. I'll get the story, but let me handle this my way if he don't mind."
"You sure you don't want me to go along?" Toby asks again.
"No. Stay here," I say. "I'll call you soon as I can."
"With that boy involved this can be something big," Toby says, following me out of the office and down the hall.
"Stick by that phone," I say. "I'll probably call you 'n the hour."

My sixty-two Porsche convertible is just across the street from the paper. I pop open the dash drawer to check on my tickets. I have about a dozen for the LSU/Texas game; half that many for Southern/Alcorn; and three or four for the Saints/Atlanta game. I tell myself I'm in pretty good shape, and I pull away from the curb like a bat out of hell. I slow up at the stop signs, at the signal lights (only if they're red) but the wheels on that Porsche don't stop moving. I'm a block from the bridge when I spot a patrol car to my left. He sees me too, but he knows he will not catch me before I get into the next parish. So he doesn't even bother. He knows the car, and he knows I must come back, and he'll get his tickets then. During the seven years I've been on the paper I've bribed more cops with football tickets than any politician has bribed voters with whiskey.

It's a good thirty miles to Marshall, and most of the highway is straight and good, but there are some tricky curves, and you'd better watch yourself. Especially in the fall when those damned tractors are hauling that sugar cane to the mills. They will never travel more than a snail's pace, and will not pull to the side to let you by even if you're escorting the governor himself to his mansion. Sugar is king, and you wait or take your chance. And I've
done enough two-inch stories about those who took that chance and lost. So I stay back until I see a couple hundred yards of daylight, then I swing out. I get by the tractor well and good, but now I’m in the curve, and face to face with a pick-up travelling twice my speed. We miss each other by less than twenty feet, but neither the driver in his khaki and straw hat nor that little seven year old replica of his sitting beside him show any sign that I even exist. That side of the road belongs to them, just as this side belongs to the tractor driver, and me, I’m only some anomaly invader. I ease up on the accelerator, telling myself that they are both right, that whatever I can do at two o’clock I can also do at two-ten or two-fifteen, and probably much better if I show up in one piece.

But it was bound to happen—it was bound to happen. Just as the sun will rise and the sun will set it was bound to happen. No, not this, not this. I didn’t have this in mind—killing a Boutan. No black man has ever killed a white man in this parish and not pay for it with his life. And no man, black or white, has ever killed a Boutan when somebody didn’t pay with his life, whether he was the guilty party or not. So I was not thinking Boutan. I was thinking that he might try walking the St. Charles River. Something like that. Or maybe wrapping his arms round one of those three hundred year old live oaks and pulling it up tap root and all. Or maybe diving off the Mississippi River bridge, but changing his mind just before hitting the water, then arching his back, with his arms out like Superman, to come back up and land on the bridge again. Yes, if she had called me and said that he was flying all over the parish with nothing except the benefit of a cape, I would have believed her without a moment’s doubt.

Because I warned her about him. Last Saturday when she had me drive her into Baton Rouge to find him I told her then about him.

“What is all this about?” I asked her.

“Oh Lou, if you had only heard him last night. What a speaker. Stood up there over an hour, and did not use one piece of paper. I was so proud, so proud. You should have heard him, Lou.’’

“No kidding?”

“And the people, how proud they were—the ones from Marshall. There they were—all twelve, fifteen—sitting in their little section that he had paid for. He took his own money, over a hundred dollars that Southern had paid him; he took that and chartered a bus and had the bus driver go down into the quarters and get all the people and bring them to the University. He did all that out of his own pocket, chartered the bus and bought the tickets and all.’’
"How did he ever get them to go?"

"That's what I asked myself. Exactly what I asked myself. But he surely did. He had all of them there. All cleaned and washed, in their best clothes. All of them there to hear him talk. Lou, I've never seen anything so beautiful—all these old people sitting in their little section of the auditorium listening to him up there. When you think of it, isn't it beautiful? They had never been to that University before. Some of them had hardly gone to any school at all except the little schooling they got at the church in the quarters. But there they were sitting in their little section at the University. You could see they were a little ill at ease—and I did not particularly like the snobbish way those Southern University people treated them. They knew they were simple, uneducated plantation folks, and you should have seen the way they snubbed them. It made me so furious I wanted to tell them that though the people from Marshall were not as educated as they, they were still better people than they could ever hope to be. But I didn't have to say it, he did it himself. When he got through talking they all knew who were the good people and who were not. Poor old people. Sitting there quietly in their little section of the auditorium. And I sat right there with them, and I could see how proud they were, and I could feel how proud they were, because I was proud myself. And after the talk we went up to congratulate him, and you should have seen how the old women kissed him and patted his shoulders. It really almost brought tears to my eyes. I was so proud. After it was over I drove some of them back home with me. When I drove down into the quarters I saw how dark it was, how empty it was (because they had all gone to hear him, you see) and I realized then what our lives would be if our people were all gone for good. Oh Lou, do you know the emptiness that would be there? You cannot imagine the emptiness that would be there. Oh Lou."

"So you want him over for supper tonight?"

"I thought it would be a wonderful gesture, to show him how different things are than what they were when he left from here."

"That's your only reason?"

"I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"That's the only reason you want him at the house?"

"What other possible reason could I have for wanting him there? Lou, please don't tell me you are—oh Lou."

"I'm what?"

"Jealous of Bernard. He's black, Lou. He's a black boy. Man."

"So?"

"Oh Lou, Lou. Lou, I've known his people all my life. My peo-
ple have known his people for four generations back, if not five. They’ve lived on Marshall all that time. They’re all gone now. Buried in that graveyard back in the fields. All gone except him. Lou, that’s why I’d like him to come. That’s the only reason why. To show him how proud we are of him. Look what he comes from, Lou. Look what he comes from. The place, the people.”

“Seems that you’ve known his people longer than you’ve known mine—by at least four generations. Is that why we’re not married yet, Candi? You haven’t known me long enough?”

“Oh, Lou, Lou, don’t you know that I’m yours forever, and no matter what you do you’ll never be rid of me?”

“I suppose not.”

“Have you tried to be rid of me?”

“Not very hard.”

“Oh, you’re so silly.”

“What does the Major think of all this?”

“He doesn’t like it. He’ll go out while Bernard’s at the house. Aunt Bea’ll stay in her room. There’ll only be half dozen of us. I’ll ask Bernard to bring a girl. I’m sure he can find one of those cute little Southern University girls. I saw how they were watching him last night. Then you and me. And maybe another couple or two. One more white couple. And maybe you can invite one of your black friends and his wife, or his girl friend.”

“I only know those Southern University snobs.”

“Oh, cut it out, you silly. You know everybody, and you know it. And you love everybody, and you know it. Oh, cut it out, you silly.” And she slapped me on the wrist.

Then we were before the house where he was living with friends. She jumped out of the car and ran up the walk as if she had been doing this all her life. When I caught up with her she had already knocked, and a tall, very black young man was at the door inviting us in. Bernard and another boy, a teenager, played chess at the dining room table. The dining room table sat in the living room, but in a corner of its own.

“Oh, hello,” she said. “Just come to invite you to supper to-night.” As if she had been saying that the past twenty years.

He didn’t look up. His elbow on the table, his chin resting in his hand, he was concentrating on his next move. He studied the board another ten or fifteen seconds, then he moved a knight, challenging his opponent’s queen.

“Queen en gard.”

He looked up, recognized her, smiled and nodded. Then he nodded to me. “How are you?”

I nodded back.
“You people like to sit down a second?” he asked. “Like a beer?”

“No, thanks,” I said.

But she had already pulled out a chair, and sat down at the table with them. So I moved back and sat down on the white naugahyde couch against the wall. With her at the table with them, and me sitting on the couch alone, I felt I was the only stranger in the room.

“How’s Supper?” he said, as if he were some matinee idol, and one of his fans had dared to invite him out. He was handsome enough, all right. Light brown skin, green eyes, thick curly auburn hair, nice shoulders. I judged him to be about six feet tall, hundred sixty, hundred sixty-five pounds.

“Supper,” she said, nodding to her favorite of all matinee idols. Oh, if he would only condescend to give her one of his sweaty handkerchiefs, that she could cherish for the rest of her days.

Then I saw it. I saw it as clearly as if I had sprung open a locket and looked at their separate pictures facing each other. I saw what neither one of them saw, and maybe what neither one of them ever would see. I saw that both their great-grandfathers was the same man. Or that her great-grandfather and his were brothers. And I knew then why she wanted him at the house. No, no, no, she never would have invited him there if she knew he was Marshall. No black Marshall, as Marshall, could ever come through that front door. Black men did come there now. Politicians, doctors, school teachers. We had reached the stage the last few years where we allowed it. But no one bearing the name Marshall, or admitting that he could have Marshall blood, would ever have entered the door. Yet, at the same time, it was for this exact reason (no other) that she wanted him there. Because he was a Marshall. She did not look at him as a Marshall. He did not think of himself being a Marshall. Yet, it was because he was a Marshall that she looked at him the way she did. And because he was a Marshall he could offer her a seat, a beer, and ignore her at the same time. He would not dare have done this to another white woman in the South, if she were not his kin.

The other young man was still concentrating on the queen that was in check. The tall black fellow who had admitted us into the room was concentrating on the board just as hard as Bernard’s opponent. Bernard was nonchalant about it all. It was quite obvious that he was the superior player.

“I can’t hurt my people,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Coming there for dinner.”
"Supper," she corrected him.
"Supper," he said.
"I'm still don't understand what you mean."
"I'm only going to be here for a little while. I can't do anything they might be ashamed of."
"They won't be ashamed of you having supper at Marshall."
"I would," he said.

Then I saw the Marshall blood flare up in her neck. It was there about thirty seconds, then she was calm again. She could not afford to show anger in the presence of her matinee idol. Or was it because he was the great-grandson of her own great-grandfather?
"I didn't know you'd mind."
"I'm only here for a while. I'll probably have dinner with one of them tonight."
"Which one?"
"I don't know yet," he said.
"You're saying that you'd rather not come?" she said.
"No. That's not what I'm saying," he said.

They looked at each other, and I looked at both of them, and I knew, and both knew exactly, what he was saying.
"We don't have room for that many," she said.
"I can understand," he said.

His opponent finally made a move. Bernard scanned the board about two seconds, and put his opponent in the same jeopardy as before. The young man frowned and began biting his thumb nail of his left hand. The tall black fellow standing at the end of the table frowned also, then scratched the side of his face about five times in quick succession.
"Buffet?" she asked.
"That would be nice," he told her.

They were looking at each other again. Yes, I told myself; yes. It's not the matinee idol. Not at all. Both their great-grandfathers were the same man, or their great-grandfathers were brothers. Look at them—mouths, eyes, noses. His lips thicker—yes; those few drops of African blood make it so. But still she looks more like him than she does that pure English blood that she left at Marshall House.

She got up from the table and nodded for me to follow her out onto the porch.
"What do you think?"
"You're asking me?"
"Who else is standing out here with me, Lou Dimes?"
I looked over both shoulders and looked back at her.
"I'm the only one. At least visible," I said.
“Then it must be you I’m talking to.”
“Forget it,” I said.
“I didn’t come all the way into Baton Rouge just to forget it,” she said.
“What do you want me to say? Yes? Isn’t that up to you and the Major?”
“I’m asking you,” she said.
“I’ve already given you my answer. He doesn’t seem interested, and I wouldn’t force it.”
“Why don’t you see it for what it is?” she said.
“He didn’t say he wasn’t interested. He said he wouldn’t come unless they came.”
About then two three hundred-pound black women, their massive hips bouncing under their print dresses, spoke as they went by the house. Candi waved back, returning their greeting as if she had been speaking to them from this porch all her life. Then she was looking at me again.
“Well?” she said.
“Leave me out of it,” I said. “Never did like to get into family matters.”
“What is that supposed to mean?” The Marshall blood flared up again. This time I could see it by her eyes.
“Do you think that’s it?”
“What other reason?”
“Do you think that’s it?”
“I don’t know what to think,” I said. “I just know you’re acting like some silly school girl from a matinee show.”
“I just thought I could depend on you,” she said.
“Haven’t you always? I’m standing here now, aren’t I? You asked my opinion, and I gave it. But what good is my opinion?”
Water came into Candi’s eyes. When she was sure I had seen it, she wiped first one eye then the other with the same finger. I pretended I was not moved by it at all.
“How do you know the others would want to come there?” I asked her.
“They went to that university last night.”
“Southern University and Marshall House are two different places.”
“They’re more afraid of Southern University.”
“You sure of that?”
“I saw their faces.”
“Or maybe that’s what you want to think.”
“I saw their faces. They’re closer to us than they are to those
people. They’re our people.”
“Especially one,” I said. “That’s for sure.”
“Well, it’s settled,” she said. “They’re coming. Eight o’clock.”
“What about my football game?” I said. “Beep Beep Johnson is playing tonight. He’s worth five million.”
“You can see a silly old football game anytime,” she said. “But not Beep Beep Johnson,” I said.
She started back inside, then stopped, and looked up at me. “Don’t you know how much I need you?”
“Don’t you know yet, you old silly thing?”
She’s five-three, I’m six-two, and she has to get up on her tip-toes to kiss me. I follow her back inside.

Bernard had gotten himself a beer and was sitting at the table drinking. His opponent and their one spectator also had a can of beer each, but they were not drinking, afraid, I supposed, that they might lose a moment of concentration on the board.
“Is eight all right?” she asked him.
He nodded. “Sure. You’ll go into the quarters and let them know?”
“I’ll send Janey.”
He looked at her. Not Janey. You, his eyes said.
She understood. “I’ll make sure they know about it. Janey probably has work to do at the house. I’d like that beer now,” she said.

He smiled at her. She smiled back. Cousinly smiles. Then he looked at me.
“Sure, I’ll take a Bud,” I said, seeing that all they were drinking was Budweiser.

2.

She sits away from me, her elbow on the arm rest of the door, her chin in the palm of her hand. She has been quiet ever since we left Baton Rouge. I haven’t said anything either, other than cursing quietly to myself whenever I get caught up behind a cane trailer for a mile or two. Other than that I’ve been thinking about the football game I’ll miss tonight. And I had high hopes of seeing that game—because it’s not often that you’ll see a player worth five million. Yep, five million is what Mr. Beep Beep Johnson’s agent is asking for him when he graduates next June. How would you like to be worth five million, Dimes?

Why, that’s a damned good one, I say to myself. I hadn’t thought about that before. I think I’ll spring it on the boys at the paper. But would they get the humor? No, I don’t think so. Five million dollars for Dimes. That’s funny as hell. Damn right it is.
"You really think so?" she says. She does not raise her hand from her chin.
"You don't think I'm worth that much?" I say to her.
"What?" she says, without raising her chin or looking in my direction.
"Just thinking about old Beep Beep Johnson," I say.
"He's getting five million."
She doesn't say anything, her chin still resting in the palm of her hand. She's staring absently out at the trees which are flying by in the opposite direction.
"That he can be one of us?" she says.
"I was only kidding back there."
"He definitely has white blood in him."
"There're lot of white round here, and it's been said there's been some miscegenation," I tell her.
"It's no proof."
"Oh, I think it can be proven," I say.
"That he's a Marshall?"
"Oh, that? Of course not," I say.
She peels her chin away from her hand to look at me. "But you still believe so, don't you?"
"Of course not. How could that have happened?"
"They were wild and crazy back then," she says.
"Yes, I've heard that."
She lays her chin in the palm of her hand again, and stares out of the window. Maybe she's thinking about how wild and crazy her ancestors were a hundred years ago. Maybe she's comparing them to the tame ones at home now, Aunt Bea and the Major. Or maybe even to herself—who knows? She's as much in the past as she's in the present. She knows that if anything is to be continued of that wild and crazy bunch it is left up to her to do it. There's no one left but herself, Aunt Bea, and the Major, and their time is long past to leave the world any little new Marshalls. Maybe a Dimes or two, but no Marshalls.
"You want to stop by the house?" I asked her.
"No, let's go into the quarters."
"Don't you think you ought to talk to the Major before you talk to them?"
"It's already settled."
"You sure now?"
She doesn't answer, so I go by the white, four-column, antebellum house, and turn down the road next to it. There are eight or ten old weathered gray houses down here, but you can't see any of them for the over-growth. The weeds and shrubs and trees
grow so thick along the ditch bank on both sides of the road that it makes the road look no wider than a bed sheet. The first house on the left is Janey’s, so we go on by because we can talk to her later at Marshall’s house. We go another fifty yards, and Candi nods to the right. The house is almost completely hidden by shrubs and weeds.

“Wait here,” she tells me.

“Can’t they at least come out to the road? Or does he not allow that either?”

She does not answer again. She’s already out of the car and going up the walk. Walk? There’s no walk there. A place where a walk once was. Twenty years ago, twenty-five, maybe, there was a walk. When many people went from the road to the house, there was a walk. Today, probably only one. So what need of a walk? A goat trail more appropriate. The thin blades of grass brushes against her legs as she goes toward the house, but she pays them no mind. This is as much her natural habitat as the house at the front is. Just before she reaches the steps, a woman appears in the door. A gray sack dress hangs on the bones of the woman. The woman is somewhere between fifty and eighty. She, the house, the walk, the steps, the warped porch, this place, this earth, seem part of the same. And so does Candi.

“Corrine, how you feel?” she asks from the ground.

“Just fine, and you, Candi?”

Because seven, eight years ago she told them to never say “Miss Candi” again.

“I’m just fine,” she says. “How did you like that nice program last night? Wasn’t it the nicest thing?”

“Wasn’t it,” Corrine agrees.

“Listen, Corrine.”

Corrine listens. But she doesn’t say “‘Yes ma’am,’” as she would say to Aunt Bea. She doesn’t even have the pitcher of ice water and the clean still-wet-glass that she would have had for Aunt Bea. No, if it was Aunt Bea, Corrine would be standing out there by the car with the pitcher and glass.

“How would you like to put on that pretty green satin dress you wore last night and come up to the house for supper?”

“Ma’am?”

It slips out of Corrine’s mouth before she realizes what she’s saying—because she’s not supposed to say “Ma’am” any more either.

“Round eight?”

“Ma’am?”
Ooops. Slips again. But that’s habit, you know. Habit. Habit’s not changed in a day.

“Don’t be late now, hear?”

“Yes’m.”

Candi starts back down the white hard goat trail, but the gray sack dress that hangs on Corrine lingers in the door. I can see that her face is strained with confusion, as if there was some profound question she wanted to ask, but just did not get the chance to do so.

Candi does not get back into the car, and I drive slowly along side her. With a sweep of her hand she snatches up a weed from the ditch, bites off a small piece of it, and throws the rest away. I drive another twenty feet, maybe thirty, then make an abrupt halt. I shut my eyes tight for a second and shake my head. I even bang the side of my head with the heel of my right hand. Is this happening? Is this really happening? Wake up, I say. Wake up . . . You’re dreaming. You’re at the paper, your feet propped up on your desk, you’re dreaming all this. Either you’re dreaming all this, or you’re crazier than she is. I opened my eyes slowly to sneak a look. But instead of seeing Chet, Art, and Jack sitting at their desks in front of me, I see Candi jumping the ditch to go into the Reverend Michael’s yard. So I drive up.

The Reverend Michael, wearing steel rim glasses, has been sitting out on the porch reading from his Bible. But when he sees Candi he gets up, lays his Bible in his chair, and comes down the steps into the yard. The Reverend Michael’s yard is the neatest in the quarters. The Reverend Michael spends much time in the yard in the late evening swinging the yo-yo blade. I suppose Reverend Michael wishes his parishioners would do the same, but none seems to be following his example. The sun flashes off the bald pate of the Reverend Michael while he and Candi talk. He is listening intensively a moment, then suddenly his head darts round her shoulder to look at me. She goes on talking, but the Reverend Michael won’t take his eyes off me. I shrug my shoulders and shake my head, I’m as puzzled about it as he is. But he won’t accept that. I’m her fiancé, I spend more time with her than anyone else does, so I must know what’s going on in this woman’s mind. I don’t know a thing, I tell him with my eyes. Then my eyes leave him and Candi and go up the steps to the door which is suddenly filled by his wife, Lucille. Lucille tells the Reverend that he and Candi ought not be standing out there in that hot sun, that it could cook their brains. The Reverend doesn’t answer. Candi tells Lucille that she’s perfectly all right, and that she expects to see both of them at the house at eight o’clock sharp. She comes out of
the yard, but she does not get back into the car this time either. As I start to follow her, I take one last look at the Reverend. The poor man still does not know what’s going on. First, the University, and now supper at the big house. What next? Dinner with the governor? What happened to those wonderful days, seemed like just yesterday, when all he had to do was read his Bible, preach a little bit on Sundays, and swing his yo-yo blade in the evenings?

She has already gone into the yard when I stop before the next house. The yard is not nearly as clean as Reverend Michael’s, but the walk is much wider than the one at Corrine’s. A large woman is sitting out on the porch in a rocker, her massive bottom pressing out under the arms of the chair. A younger, slimmer woman in a shapeless dress is standing in the door. Two children, a boy wearing cut-off overalls, a smaller girl in short red pants and no top, are sitting on the edge of the porch, their feet dangling a couple of feet from the ground. They all watch Candi come into the yard, but no one moves or speaks until she does.

The greeting starts, then the reason.

“A buffet. Do you know what a buffet is?”

The ponderous woman in the rocker does not know what a buffet is, but she’s sure that the little girl sitting does.

“Tell Candi what a—what’s that word again, Candi?”

“Buffet.”

“Tell Candi what that word means, Sally.”

“I don’t know,” the girl says.

“Sure, you know,” the big woman says. “You go’n let Candi think you not smart. She smart as a whip, Candi. Tell Candi what that word means, Sally.”

“How you spell it?” Sally asks.

“It’s a French word,” Candi says. “They spell things different over there.”

“I don’t know no French,” Sally says.

“Well, it means you take things off the table and put it on your plate and you go back to your seat and sit down,” Candi says. “I expect everybody at eight now. Eight on the dot.”

She does not want them to call her “Miss.” She does not want them to say “Ma’am” or “Yes’m” any more either. Yet she expects them to show up for supper en masse at a house where until this day they came up there one at a time, and could enter only through the back door. She’s so confident that they’ll be there that she doesn’t even wait for an answer. Watching them watching her leave the yard, my mind cannot help but go back to the day/days when her great-grandfather must have given that same order to one of his black female workers to meet him over in
the ditch. The woman must have looked at his back just as these
now are looking at hers, accepting fate, without daring to ask
why.

Just before following her farther down into the quarters I wave
at the people on the porch. The big woman pressing through the
rocker nods her head, but no one else does anything. Yes, the boy
in the cut-off overalls glances back at her. The boy working be-
side his mother in the field must have looked at her that same
way when three generations ago the old man ordered her to meet
him at the ditch.

The next house is that of the African. He’s squatting on the
porch with his back against the wall. He’s extremely black, one of
the blackest men I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen some black ones in
my twenty-seven years. He’s about ninety, his head snow white.
He is the oldest one on the place now. The son of slaves, he was
born and raised and has lived here all his life. He knows it all,
there’s no question about that. He’s done it all, there’s no question
about that either. There’s been a dozen women in his life (that we
know of); about twenty-five children (that we know of); and about
a hundred grandchildren (that we know of). He has been a fighter
all his life—a hard worker, a hard drinker, excellent fisherman,
damaged good hunter, and a competent farmer. Few men bothered
him in the past; no one bothers him today. He’s an excellent story
teller. He does not tell by year, he tells by seasons. “The year of
the high water.” “The year of the frost that killed all the trees along the river.” “The year the last bear was killed at Morgan.” “The year Evarice killed the twelve-foot-long moccasin.” Like all the other blacks on the plantation, he worked
for the Marshalls until the Second World War; then, with so
many of the young men going into service, the Marshalls turned
the place over to sharecropping. The African, like the rest of the
men, Cajuns and blacks, got mules, plows, seeds, food, clothing
from the plantation store and paid back when the crop was har-
vested. But like all the other blacks, the African got the worse
land, the Cajuns got the best, and as a result the Cajuns grew bet-
ter crop. Growing better crop, they demanded more land, and
more land they received. This meant that the land had to come
from the blacks. Eventually the Cajuns would have it all, and the
blacks who remained on the plantation would have to work for
them now. Some of the younger men did, others went to town,
places like Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Old men like the Afri-
can sat out on the porch in summer, at the fireplace in winter and
told stories about the high waters, and hunting bears, and killing
big snakes and alligators.
A half dozen men are standing or sitting on the porch when Candi comes into the yard. The ones sitting stand, and so does the African from his squatting position. They take off their hats, and so does the African. But unlike the others who call her Candi, the African calls her Miss Marshall. She has tried to break him of that habit, but he will not change. Not from a feeling of servitude, but superiority, I’m sure. For he calls everyone mister and misses, white and black alike. Some man, this African. More stories have been told about him than anyone else I know. There was once a white overseer who rode the fields with a whip. Whenever anyone fell too far behind in his plowing, his hoeing, or his cane cutting, the overseer would ride up on him and start swinging. One day, according to the story, he decided to give everyone in the field a lick or two. Then he rode up to the African who was far ahead of everyone else. When he raised the whip, the African raised his cane knife. “Don’t let it fall, Mr. Lejeane,” the African said. According to the story, the whip stayed poised and after a while the African turned his back and went on with his work. According to the story. But there were others—many others. Some man, this African.

“How you feeling, Mathu?” Candi asks loudly.

“Fine, and yourself, Miss Marshall? Would you care for some water? I have a melon on ice.”

“No. Thank you, Mathu. I’m giving a little supper at the house tonight for Bernard, Mathu. I want you to come.”

He looks at her. He does not answer.

“Did you hear me, Mathu?” she asks louder.

He nods his head. I don’t know whether he hears her or not. He does not see well any more, or hear well, and arthritis pains his entire body. Yet, when he squats or stands he does it with great dignity. He’s in great pain most of the time, but he will not mention it unless you insist on how he’s feeling. When he complains he does it quietly. I’m under the impression that he will know when it’s his hour to die, and he will move away, find himself an old oak somewhere in the swamps, squat there against it, and die alone.

“Did you hear me, Mathu?”

He nods again.

“Did he hear me?” she asks one of the other men.

“Did you hear Candi, Mathu?” one of the men asks him.

He nods again. But he’s looking out in the road at me now. I cannot read his face from this distance, his face is too black. But I have the feeling that he’s thinking about something other than what she’s saying to him.
“That goes for the rest of y’all too,” she says.
“Oh, no, no, no, ma’am, ma’am, ma’am,” one of the men stutters.
“Oh, yeah, yeah, sir, sir, sir,” she stutters back at him.
“This is not for me, it’s for Bernard. And I expect everybody up there eight o’clock sharp. Mathu, you hear that?”
He nods again. He does not look at her when he nods.
“If Mathu come,” one of the others says, “I come.”
“Mathu, you hear that?” she says. “You’re responsible for the rest showing up. You hear me, Mathu? It’s for Bernard. Lelia’s boy.”
He turns to her now. “Lelia?” He emphasizes both syllables. From his voice it seems he’s thinking about past, not present.
“Lelia?” he says, as if trying to bring her from the grave.
“Now, don’t tell me you’ve forgot Lelia, now?”
“No,” he says, shaking his head, as he looks down at the floor.
“No.”
“Good. Then I expect you at eight. Eight, Mathu,” she says loud. She turns to the others. “Remind him. Eight. For Bernard. Lelia’s boy. I expect you all looking nice and sharp. All cleaned up and fresh. At eight. Don’t disappoint Bernard.”
She turns to leave. The men put on their hats. Some take their seats. But Mathu continues to stand, with his head down. Is he still thinking about Lelia? I remind myself to ask her about Lelia when she gets back into the car. I nod to the men on the porch and follow her farther into the quarters.
There are three more houses. Nobody’s at the first two, but two women sit on the porch of the last. One sits on the floor holding a baby, her straw hat on the floor beside her. The other woman sits in a rocker near the door fanning with a piece of white cloth, probably a baby’s diaper. Both women watch Candi come into the yard. Since I have a good idea what the scenario will be, and because this is the last house, I decide to turn the car around so that when she leaves the house we’ll already be headed back toward the front. The last house is near the railroad tracks, so I cross the tracks and make my turn on the headlane of the cane field. Over to my right is the blacks’ cemetery. You cannot see any headstones from this distance, only trees, pecans and oaks. And coming from the other side of those trees like a bat from hell is one of the Boutans on a tractor with two trailers of cane. I decide to let him go by. The road in the quarters is very narrow, and it’s almost impossible for two vehicles to go by each other unless one moves into the ditch. Since he has a load I think it’s only fair to give him the right of way. It’s Beau Boutan. Khakis, cowboy
boots, his strawhat shaped as a cowboy’s hat would be shaped. He nods to the car, not necessarily to me, and covers it with a cloud of dust. His speed does not decrease when he goes into the quarters where the people are, and when I pick up Candi she’s cussing like a sailor.

“That sonofabitch, he saw me,” she says. “Throwing that dust all over the place like some kind of—” She stops for a second. “When Uncle Jack dies they’ll find out a thing or two.” “Be careful,” I say. “He’s a distant cousin of mine—according to rumor.”

“The sonofabitch,” she says. “He should know better than drive like that with those people sitting out there on the porches.”

“Cane is king,” I say. “We need sugar in a hurry, Honey.”

“That sonofabitch,” she says. “One day somebody’s going to . . . .”

“One day none of this will be here,” I say. “Neither he, nor Mathu, nor you, nor I—only the dust.”

“I’ll be here long after he’s gone,” she says. “I can assure you of that. The sonofabitch.”

“Now, now,” I say, and put my hand on her knee. “A good gin and tonic and you’ll forget all about it.”

“I won’t forget about it. It’s not the first time it’s happened. Crazy Cajun bastard.”

“And the ones we’ll have?” I say.

“What?” she says, and looks at me.

“The ones we’ll have,” I repeat.

“That has nothing to do with it,” she says. “I’m talking about them crazy Boutans. They’re all alike. Every damned one of them. I won’t forget it.”

“One can be your next governor,” I say. “He’s working hard enough at it.”

“Like hell if he will,” she says.

“They say he has an outside chance.”

“Like hell,” she says. “Not if I can have anything to do with it.”

I look at her and smile, and I pull her closer and kiss her as we leave the quarters.