

Fifteenth Birthday

When I was around fourteen, we'd worked off our debt to Mr. Johnson and moved off his farm to Mr. Tompkins's farm, where we rented a house. Mr. Tompkins was a black guy who had inherited his land from his father or somebody. It wasn't a huge farm, like the Johnson farm with acres and acres and acres. I think he had something like twenty-five or thirty acres, but in those days for a black man that was amazing.

We didn't sharecrop on Mr. Tompkins's

farm, it wasn't large enough. We just worked for him on his farm and he paid us. After a while my father decided that we should go back to Johnson's farm, that we would do better there, but just before we moved, my father was killed.

It was my fifteenth birthday. My father and mother left the house to go to Fuquay to get me a little gift, as they usually did. Some white boys came past our house in a car and they were screaming and hollering, all drunk up, and we kids could see my father and mother walking. I remember before the car got to my father. I remember seeing my father and mother take off and start running. They were trying to make it to the next house, and they took off running. I remember seeing my father as the car was coming at him. I remember seeing my father shove my mother down a deep embankment. I saw it clearly. By that time the car hit him and knocked him

down. Us kids, we saw all this happen. And the car went to the next driveway and turned around.

I watched my father trying to get up, but evidently his hip or his leg was broken, one of the two or both was broken, because they'd hit him on the side and he couldn't stand up. The car came back and pulled over to where my father was and the driver ran completely over him, as though he was running over a dog or something. And my father got caught underneath the car and they drug him almost back up to the house where we were living. My brothers and sisters, we were all looking at this. And the boys in the car jumped out and looked underneath and saw that my father was stuck underneath it. They pulled him out. Then they jumped in the car and took off. We came out our front door and they yelled at us and threw beer cans at us. We ran down there.

I was the first one to my father, but he was dead. He was all busted up, big hole in his head. He was dead. I looked to where my mother was laying down in the embankment. She was knocked out. She didn't even know what happened.

The next morning, this boy, the driver, and his father came up to our house. We knew who they were. They had a big farm and they were a very prominent family. They also ran a car place, they were what we used to call parking lot dealers. They were wealthy people. This boy and his father went to see my mother, who was in bed because she was hurt bad and she was upset. The man said to my mother, "Well, I'm sorry what happened. But you know how it is, boys will be boys. My wife told me to give you a hundred dollars. I don't know. A hundred dollars is a lot of money, but she told me to give it to you and this will help with the funeral bill." And then he turned

around to his son and said, "Say you're sorry. Tell her you're sorry you ran over her husband." But the boy wouldn't open his mouth. He just turned around and walked out of the house. So the father said, "Well, I apologize for him. I'm sorry, but I hope you can get along without your husband, and you'll just have to face the facts that these things happen."

And that was all that was done about it. A sheriff never came to the house, nobody investigated it, nothing. They didn't do anything, and we didn't hear any more about it. But that wasn't the first time things like that happened. I mean, people had gotten run over and people had got hit by cars and crippled by cars, and there was never nothing done.

My mother finally did later on go to court, in Raleigh, but they never did anything about it, they just threw it right out of court. She had an appointed lawyer because she didn't have any money to pay for a lawyer, but I

can't remember really if he did anything. They just wanted to be able to say, later on down the road, that we did get our day in court. Now it would be different, but in those days it didn't matter what you felt about the crime, because what could you do about it? It's not that we accepted my father's death, we cared, but we just minded our own business and stayed out of the spotlight because nothing was going to be done about it anyway.

Mr. Johnson was very good to us when my father was killed. He'd known my father all his life, and my father's father worked with him. He went to the funeral and he bought us all suits to wear to the funeral. I think, quite frankly, these were our first suits.

And so we moved back to Mr. Johnson's farm. It wasn't the old farm. Mr. Johnson had bought another farm, a modern farm. So the house where we went back to when we left Tompkins's farm, it still didn't have a bathroom in it, we had well water on the outside,

but it had electric lights and it was a nice, tight house. We liked the place and we lived and worked there until Mr. Johnson got sick and died. After that, we didn't get along with his sons, the younger ones, because they started fighting over the farm and everything, so we moved to another farm—the Deans'.

Anyway, it was a different relationship when we returned to Mr. Johnson's because the times were a little different. I mean, you didn't make a lot of money, but you would make more then than before because kids were now educated some. Like when my mother would go to Mr. Johnson to get money, I'd write down what he wrote down. Or, for instance, when we needed fertilizer or something like that, I would go with him to get fertilizer, and I'd write down the price of fertilizer, and he would write it down, too, and this way we kept the same books. But years before then you couldn't do that, it was considered an insult.

