

Old Man

Marvin walked slowly. His feet felt like two pancakes. He could no longer feel them except they were so hot. Just like a couple of pancakes. Flabby old hot pancakes. Marvin stopped under a big oak all hung with Spanish moss. It was cool here . . . as cool as it ever was in Louisiana . . . like when he went down into the swamps in the afternoon. Sticky cool like damp rags around his body. Marvin squinted with concentration. There was a broken down shack up the hill a way. Looked like there was a gal on the porch. Marvin laughed way up high. Always was a gal out on the front porch, leaning against an old unpainted railing. A skinny gal in a sweat-streaked calico dress with wiggly hips and a flat bosom. Sometimes a scraggly little old chile or two. Marvin laughed again, way up high.

He rose slowly. Seemed his ole joints creaked just like a rusty front porch swing. Guess he was getting kind of old. But not so old as Mr. Sam could bat him around. Mr. Sam shouldn't have called him like that about working on the northern gentleman's car. He shouldn't have called him that way. He could get work in New Orleans . . . on the docks or even in another gas station. He heard they treated colored folks better in New Orleans . . . he wanted to see New Orleans.

He stopped at the gateway which must have broken down about ten years ago. The gal on the front porch just went on staring out over the dead old tobacco field, so Marvin stood still for a minute, watching the little old children chasing a hound dog under the shack. Then he laughed way up high and the gal turned around slowly.

"What choo want round here, old man?"

"Don't want nothing cept a little to eat, gal."

"Ain't nothing here to eat for you. I'm waitin for my William now to bring some meal from the store."

"Aw, ain't choo got biscuit or grits or nothing for a pore old man travelin the road. Ain't got no money, but except a little bit of gin for you to drink."

"Don't want no drink here. See them chilrun? Ain't gonna be no drink here if I can help it. No, Lord."

"No harm, gal, with a little gin to make you laugh."

"Is too harm. Stop talking old man and get away on you. I'll given you biscuit if you'll get away on you."

Marvin sat down slowly on the broken porch step. The little old children had gone away, but he felt their warm eyes on his face. He knew they were watching him from behind the outhouse. The sun was setting at the corner of the worn-out old tobacco field. Kinda pretty the way it made the steam coming up from the field kinda purple and pink. Kinda pretty . . . with biscuit and gin for supper. Maybe he'd be in New Orleans tomorrow or the next day if he got a ride with a colored boy going into the store. If he could get just 50 miles from there he could walk it in he could.

The gal stood behind him, looking down the road for William.

"If that no-good colored boy of mine spend all my money on drink and wenching tonight, I'll kill him."

She handed him three hard biscuits that were very cold.

"Now get away on you. I give you your supper. Get away on you, old man."

"Thank you, gal. It's been mighty nice stopping for a while. Mah feet feel cooler. Solong gal."