

Mary Louise

Brother rolled up his sleeves and started digging down in the tub. He was taking the bottles out the big tup, putting 'em in the foot tub by the door. Jackson was standing by the safe, and he was watching Brother take the bottles out the tub. When Brother got all the bottles out, he said, "whew", 'cause his hand had got cold; and he had to shake the life back in it. He wiped his hand on the dish rag, and they took the tub out in the yard and dumped the water on the grass. I wiped a plate and took it over to the safe to put it up and I could see him and Brother out there talking. I wondered what they was talking 'bout. I was too far to hear, and I went back to the window and got another plate. Miss Charlotte was washing and I was ringin' 'em in a pan of ~~kk~~ hot water. Miss Charlotte sung to herself while she was washing the dishes. I carried another plate to the safe, and when I was coming back where Miss Charlotte ^{WAS} I ^{SAW} ~~was~~ 'em coming from out in the yard.

"Don't y'all stop in here," Miss Charlotte said. "Y'all go out ~~on~~ the gallery in the cool."

Brother got another beer, but Jackson didn't want one. He waited till Brother opened it, and they went outside. I wished Miss Charlotte hadn't sent him out on the gallery, 'cause I wanted to be with him. I felt good when I was anywhere 'round him. I ringed and wiped faster so I could hurry up and get through. I knowed it was way after mid-night, and I hoped Dad was sleep. I knowed if he wasn't he was going to start a fuss soon as I walked in that door.

We hurried up and got through with the dishes, and I swept the kitchen for Miss Charlotte. Miss Charlotte wanted ~~kkk~~ to pay me, but I wouldn't hear it. No, I said. Miss Charlotte, I never took no money from you, and I ain't going to start now. I said that to her. She was a nice person and God knows she done gived me a many things when I needed. The Lord'd frown on me if I took money from her.

We put everything up, and then we went out on the gallery where it was cool. Him and Brother was sitting in the swing. Miss Charlotte sat down in her big rocker and I stood next to the door. I was ready to go home, but I wanted him to walk with me. It didn't look right for a girl just to walk up to a boy and ask him something like that, but I sure wanted him to walk with me. I liked the way he had his sleeves rolled up a little, and the way he had his shirt collar opened. And I liked the way he sat way back in the swing with one foot up in it. He had one arm on the ~~kkk~~ back of the swing, and he was looking out there in the yard, like he was looking at ^{all} the flowers Miss Charlotte had planted out there.

"Sit down," Miss Charlotte said.

"Nome," I said. "I better be going."

"Going?" Miss Charlotte said.

"Yes, Ma'am," I said. "It's getting pretty late."

"It is at that," Miss Charlotte said. "Brother, you er Jackson, why don't one of y'all walk Mary Louise home."

Brother didn't say nothing.

"I'll walk her home," Jackson ~~kkkkk~~ said.

I was glad Brother didn't open his mouth. I guess he knowed I wanted to be with Jackson, and not with him.

"Well, good night," I said.

"Good night, child," Miss Charlotte said.

"I'll come over when I get my work done tomorrow," I said.

"I can get by with Jackson 'round the place," Miss Charlotte said.

"I can help you finish cleaning up," I said.

"Suit yourself," Miss Charlotte said. "I'll be more ~~kkkk~~ 'an glad to have you over. But don't leave your own work."

"I won't," I said. "Good night."

"Good night," Miss Charlotte said.

"Sleep tight," Brother said. "Don't let the mosquitoes bite."

I reckond I would've said something to Brother if he wasn't there, but since he was, I just/^{let}it go right on by.

Out in the road I tried to think of something to say to him, but I couldn't think of nothing. I could've asked him how long it took him to get here, but somebody else had asked him that already, and I didn't want him to have to tell it to me again. I could've asked him when he was going to Bayonne to see 'bout the school-teaching job. I could've asked him that. Nobody had asked him that,yet. Least I hadn't heard nobody asking him that. I ought to ask him something, I kept on telling myself. Something--if it wasn't very much. But something.

"I appreciate what you've been doing for Aunt Charlotte," he said.

"It wasn't nothing."

That was all he had to say, and I couldn't think of any more to say, either. I looked up and I saw the gate, and it looked like every step we took the gate made two toward us--just to make us get there quicker. It was way after mid-night--closer to two than anything--but God knows I wasn't ready to go in that house yet. I wanted to talk to him if it was just for a minute. I had so much to talk about, I didn't know where to start. But just where do you start? You done waited and waited--where do you start? Maybe if we went walking somewhere, I was thinking, I could think of somewhere to start. I knowed I would think of something.

He moved in front of me and pushed the gate open, and I couldn't do nothing but go in the yard. He followed me up the walk, but he stopped at the steps. I thought we was going to sit in the swing a while, but he stopped. I had done already gone up one step, and I turned and looked at him. He looked up at me, and I could see little beads of sweat over his lip where he had shaved his mustache. I wanted to lean over and kiss him on the mouth, or just put my lips on his; but I knowed it was his place to do this, and not me.

"Good night," he said.

I tried to say it, but what came out I don't know. But I'm sure it wasn't good night.

"And thanks again," he said.

I still couldn't say nōthing, and he felt it and ^{he} looked down ~~kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk~~ at the ground. When he raised his head he smiled and bowed and said good night again, and then he turned and left. I stood there on the steps and watched him till I couldn't see him no more, and then I went in the house.

Dad turned up the lamp and it scared me a little, but I didn't say nothing. I went to my room and sat on the bed and took off my ~~shoes~~ shoes. Dad came to the door and pushed it open.

"I want to go to bed, Dad," I said.

"You sure you ain't been to bed already?" he said.

"I was just helping Miss Charlotte with the dishes."

"She paid you this time?" he asked.

"I didn't want anything."

"That's right," he said. "You never want anything from other people. But want from me."

"I ain't going to argue with you, Dad."

"You don't want nothing to do with me no more," he said. "It's nobody but Miss Charlotte and Mr. Jackson. Me, I'm just here."

"I want to take off my clothes so I can go to bed," I said.

"You going to listen to me long's you stay in my house and eat my food."

"I do my part. I cook; I wash; I work the garden. What else you want me to do, go out in the field and do day-work?"

"You hollering at me?" he said. "You hollering at me?"

"I'm not hollering at you," I said.

"Yeah, you hollering at me," he said.

"I wasn't hollering at you," I said. I moved back on the bed till my back was touching the wall. He looked like he was coming all the way to the bed, but he stopped just before he got there. I tried to move ~~kkk~~ farther back, but I was already against the wall. All I could do now was look at him and hope he didn't hit me.

"You must think you running this house," he said. "Hollering at me like that."

I didn't answer him. I just looked at him.

"You hear me talking to you?" he said.

"I'm not running it," I said.

"You thinking it, though."

"No, Sir," I said. "No, Sir, I don't think I'm running it."

"You bet ^{it} you ain't running it," he said. "You better bet you ain't running."

He stood there ~~kkkk~~ a while looking at me; then he started to leave. He stopped again just 'fore he got to the door.

"I'm warning you," he said. "I'm warning you. He's here, now. I don't care what y'all do. But I'm getting tired of all this shit. And I'm damn sure getting tired feeding you. Now y'all can do just what you want. But just remember that."

He went out and slammed the door. I heard him opening his door and going out on the gallery. He stood out on the gallery a while, and then he went down the steps. I didn't know where he was going, and I didn't care. I laid down on the bed.

II

I don't know how long I slept on the bed in my clothes. I heard Dad come back and get in his bed in the other room. I got up and started taking off my clothes. I wanted to go to the back, but I was scared to make any more noise ~~kk~~ 'an I had to. I knowed he was just waiting to start fussing again.

I got my gown and slipped it on, and then I came back to the bed. I got down on my knees and said my prayers. Soon's I started thinking 'bout Jackson I felt good again. I thank God for bringing him home safely. I thank Him for going with me all these years. I asked Him to go with me and help me to understand and forgive. Then I couldn't think of ~~hkhkhkh~~ nothing else to ask Him for, or thank Him for, and I got up off my knees and got in the bed.

III

They say the first love is the true love and I believe it; 'cause I still love him, and he--I believe deep down in my heart--still love me. He stopped writing, but that's no sign he don't love me. School-work caused it. You know how books is. They get your mind all on them--and I reckon if you want to do something with your life you ought to study hard. It don't mean he done stop loving me; but books make you act like that no matter who you is. You can read 'bout any famous people, and you see them acting just like that. But they still loved. Books do it to you. Even when he was little it was his books all the time. And even to Madame Bayonne house reading hers. But she never let us read 'em. Just him. Like she knowed he was going to be different from us. And that professor, too, taking all the pain with him, and walking down the road with him after school. I used to be so mad I felt like running up to him and telling him I wanted to walk with Jackson, and he better let me and him walk together. But I never said that--scared that professor might whip

me when we went back to school. That's when he used to wear them little short blue pants and he used to have that little booksack. I didn't have one and he used to let me put my book in there, and had to carry his lunch for him. And people liked him 'cause he was smarter 'an all of us and he used to write letters for 'em. And we used to sit on the stesp and they'd be sitting there and not knowing what to say on the letters, and he'd have to say it for 'em. "The weather is good today...The garden is coming 'long just fine...I saw Mary last week...She said hello...When you coming to see me?" He had to make it all up out his head. Then when he read it back to 'em, they liked it and said that's what they wanted to say, but couldn't--but didn't know how to say it. And they would give him nickels and dimes, and he would give the money to Miss Charlotte to keep for him. . . . But that was a long, long time ago. ^{MANY} ~~Many~~ of 'em dead now, and many of the children done growed up and married and gone to the city and up North, and places like that. That was a long time back, way back yonder. Way back 'fore Aunt Margaret died. Remember how I cried at her funeral. I ~~kk~~ cried and cried. He was gone then, had been gone. Remember how I cried when they said he was going to California. It was more 'an a year 'fore he was going to leave, but I couldn't help it. I didn't know what I was going to do after he was gone.

The night 'fore he left, we left the party early--me and him. A pretty night--it sure was a pretty night. Moon shining, the stars bright as ever. It sure was pretty. We came over here and sat in the swing, and after a little while, (just like him though) he started

saying, what about your promise? I remember we came inside(right here) and I didn't want to ~~lk~~ light the lamp 'cause I didn't want to do that; 'cause we was Christians then. But I had promised him, and we did it.

You think you going to have a baby? he said.

No, I said, 'cause you ain't old enough

You? he said.

Yes.

You going to, when I leave? he asked.

No, I said.

Then he kissed me--but he ~~kkkkkk~~ didn't kiss me tonight. He just stood there tonight. But he kissed me and I let him kiss me some more. Then we didn't get up and we went to sleep. Then I woke up, and I woke him up.

You better go 'fore Dad come home, I said.

Daylight already? he asked.

No, still night, I said. Hurry.

He got up and put on his shoes. I laid there under the sheet and I ~~kkkk~~ watched him tie 'em up. Then he left.

I laid in the bed a long time, and then I got up and put on my gown and said my prayers. Remember how I begged God to forgive us for what we had done, 'cause ~~kkkkkk~~ we was Christians then and that wasn't right. I got back in the bed and I wished he was there again, and I got back out again and said my prayers again, and asked God to forgive me for thinking such. Then I got back in the bed and tried to think about anything in the world but him.

The next day Brother drove him out to the road in the wagon, and Me and Miss Charlotte went out there with him. While he was waiting for the bus, him, Brother and Miss Charlotte had a big conversati. But I couldn't talk. I was too full to say a word.

I done suffered for you, Jackson. Nobody but me know how much I done suffered. I been beat and fussed at many times, 'cause I couldn't show him more letters from you. Just like tonight--he wanted to beat me again. He want me to get out the house so he can bring her here. I don't care if he bring her here; just keep her out my way. I keep up this house, and by right it's as much mine as it his. I go up to the big house and work. He don't have to give me money or anything. That's what happen when your mama die. You got to take this, you got to take that. And you better not ever talk back if you know what's good for you.

I can't marry nobody else. I love him. And I know he love me. The letters, I still got 'em. They right there in that top drawer ~~kkkk~~ under that old picture frame. I seen ~~them~~ there last week. The/ right there. I still got ~~kk~~ 'em, and I'm going to show 'em to him, too. I bet you he going to laugh and laugh. Remember when I got the first one. I tried to answer it all that day, but I couldn't; and I went down and told Dora to answer it for me. She read it and teased me, 'cause he had said something on it that nobody beside us was k suppose to know about. But she answered it for me. I read it over and I liked it and mailed it, and 'fore I knowed it here come another one. She teased me again, and answered that one, too; and I got another one. But I didn't get another one.

And she wrote again, but I still didn't get no more. And I wrote, but it didn't sound good and I tore it up, and she wrote. But he didn't answer; and I prayed and asked God to make him write to me, but he didn't write. I begged Miss Charlotte to make him write to me. And he did--a long, long time after. But the letter wasn't 'bout love at all. Nothing but books. Just books.

Dora answered it for me, but he didn't write back. I kept on telling Dad I was getting letters from him, but he knowed I wasn't telling the truth 'cause I couldn't show him any. Then he brought that old man here, and soon's he turned his back that old man came there pulling on me and trying to push me down. I hit him one good lick and made his nose bleed, and I had to sleep out in the field all night, scared Dad was going to beat me.

I could've been married long time ago, 'cause he wasn't ~~kek~~ the only one. There been plenty. Charlie Smity, Eddie Paul, Luther Bouie, Young Jean Pierre--and there was that old man. I knowed what he wanted. I knowed exactly what he wanted. Well, he just wanted, 'cause he wasn't getting--neither touching. I didn't let none of 'em touch me. Kiss and hold hands, but they didn't do that. I knowed if I waited he was going to come back...But I didn't like the way he looked at me today, or tonight. That wasn't no love or suffering for love way ^{of} or looking. That was a friendship way ^{of} or looking, and I don't want him to look at me in no friendship way. And I don't want him to speak to me in no friendship way, neither. That was a friendship way he spoke, and that was a friendship way he said good night. But I liked the way he smiled when he

came back from walking Madame Bayonne home. Them two dimples still come in his jaws. I used to stick my finger in 'em when we was k little. He used to slap it away, but I used to do it. He didn't like for me to do it, 'cause he didn't like his dimples.

I got to go to sleep, but I I'm not even sleepy. But I got to go to sleep. I'll get up early tomorrow morning and get my work done, and then go up there. If Brother ain't up there kk we might talk about something. But I bet you anything he's going to be up there. I bet you he don't even go to the front for water tomorrow. That's all he's been talking about since he heard Jackson was coming back. Jackson, Jackson, Jackson, Jackson. Rkkkkhk Sometimes I think he love Jackson.

And had his nerve to come there pinching me on my behind. What I ought to been did was pick up a brick or something and bashed his head in. You just let him try that again and you see if I don't do it, too. Do it or my name ain't Mary Louise Johnson. That's all he think about. If it ain't that car, it's jumping in bed with some woman. That's why he can't grow now.

I got to get some sleep. Got to get up early tomorrow. I can't go to church Sunday. Shucks. I hate that. Darn them old white people. I don't mind going up there on week-days, but not Sundays. Sunday's for church, not working at no party. But what they care. They never go, and kkkkk they can't see why you want to go.

I wonder if Jackson still love me. I believe he do, but I got to find out for sure. Dad's tired of me here, and I'm tired of

taking all that mess from him. I got to do something. I don't know, but I got to do something. I'll find out if he love me. I don't know how or when, but I'll find out.