

The Mulatto Problem  
in

America:

Father and Son

by

James Langston Hughes

## FATHER AND SON

Colonel Thomas Norwood stood in his doorway at the Big House, looking down the dusty plantation road. Today his youngest son was coming home. A heavy Georgia spring filled the morning air with sunshine and earth-perfumes. It made the old man feel strangely young again. Bert was coming home.

Twenty years ago he had begotten him. This boy, however, was not his real son, for Colonel Thomas Norwood had no real son, no white and legal heir to carry on the Norwood name; this boy was a son by his Negro mistress, Coralee Lewis, who kept his house and had borne him all his children.

Colonel Norwood never would have admitted, even to himself, that he was standing in his doorway waiting for this half-Negro son to come home. But in truth that is what he was doing. He was curious about this boy. How would he look after all these years away at school? Six or seven surely, for not once in that long time had he been allowed to come back to Big House Plantation. The Colonel had said then that never did he want to see the boy. But in truth he did—for this boy had been, after all, the most beautiful of the lot, the brightest and the baddest of the Colonel's five children, lording it over the other children, and sassing not only his colored mother, but his white father, as well. Handsome and mischievous, favoring too much the Colonel in looks and ways, this boy Bert, at fourteen, had got himself sent off to school to stay. Now a student in college (or what they call a college in Negro terms in Georgia), he was coming home for the summer vacation.

Today his brother, Willie, had been sent to the station to meet him in the new Ford. The ten o'clock train must have reached the Junction by now, thought the Colonel, standing in the door. Soon the Ford would be shooting back down the road in a cloud of dust, curving past the tall white pillars of the front porch, and around to the kitchen stoop where Cora would greet her child.

Thinking thus, Colonel Norwood came inside the house, closed the screen, and pulled at a bellcord hanging from the wall of the great dark living room with its dignified but shabby horsehair furniture of the nineties. By and by an old Negro servant, whose name was Sam and who wore a kind of old-fashioned butler's coat, came and brought the Colonel a drink.

"I'm going in my library where I don't want to be disturbed."

"Yes, suh," said the Negro servant.

"You hear me?"

"Yes, suh," said the servant, knowing that when Colonel Norwood said "library," he meant he did not want to be disturbed.

The Colonel entered the small room where he kept his books and papers of both a literary and a business nature. He closed the door. He did this deliberately, intending to let all the Negroes in the house know that he had no interest whatsoever in the homecoming about to take place. He intended to remain peering at accounts his storekeeper had brought him, his head kept turning toward the window that gave on the yard and the road, kept looking to see if a car were coming in a cloud of dust.

An hour or so later, when shouts of welcome, loud warm Negro-cries, laughter, and the blowing of an auto horn filled the Georgia sunlight outside, the Colonel bent more closely over his ledgers—but he did turn his eyes a little to catch the dust sifting in the sunny air above the road where the car had passed. And his mind went back to that little olive-colored kid he had beaten one day in the stables years ago—the kid grown up now, and just come home.

He had always been a little ashamed of that particular beating he had given the boy. But his temper had got the best of him. That child, Bert, looking almost like a white child (a hell of a lot favoring the Colonel), had come running out to the stables one afternoon when he was showing his horses to some guests from the town. The boy had come up to him crying, "Papa!" (He knew better, right in front of company.) "Papa, Ma says she's got dinner ready."

The Colonel had knocked him down under the feet of the horses right there in front of the guests. And afterwards he had locked him in the stable and beaten him severely. The boy had to learn not to call him Papa, and certainly not in front of white people from the town.

But it had been hard to teach Bert anything, the Colonel ruminated. Trouble was, the boy was too smart. There were other unpleasant memories of that same saucy ivory-skinned youngster paying about the front yard, even running through the Big House, in spite of orders that Coralee's children and all other pickaninnies keep to the back of the house, or down in the Quarters. But as a child, Bert had never learned his place.

"He's too damn much like me," the Colonel thought. "Quick as hell. Cora's been telling me he's leading his class at the Institute, and a football captain. ... H-m-m-m, so they waste their time paying football at these darkie colleges. ... Well, anyway, he must be a smart darter. Got my blood in him."

The Colonel had Sam bring some food into the library. He pretended to be extremely busy, and did not give the old Negro, bursting with news, a chance to speak. The Colonel acted as though he were unaware of the presence of the newly arrived boy on the plantation; or if he were aware, completely uninterested and completely occupied.

But in the late afternoon the Colonel got up from his desk, went out into the parlor, picked up an old straw hat, and strolled through the front door, across the wide-porched porch with its white pillars, and down the road toward

the South Field. The Colonel saw the brown backs of his Negroes in the green cotton. He smelt the earth-scent of a day that had been long and hot. He turned off by the edge of a field, went down to the creek, and back toward the house along a path that took him through a grove of pecan trees skirting the old slave quarters, to the back door of the Big House.

Long before he approached the Big House, he could hear Negroes voices, musical and laughing. Then he could see a small group of dark bare arms and washing fruit for jelly. Livonia, the fat old cook, was on the porch shelling peas for dinner. Seated on the stoop, and on the ground, and standing around, were colored persons the Colonel knew had no good reason to be there at that time of day. Some of them, when they saw the Colonel coming, began to move away, back toward the barns, or whatever work they were doing.

He was aware, too, standing in the midst of this group, of a tall young man in sporty white trousers, black-and-white oxfords, and a blue shirt. He looked very clean and well dressed, like a white man. The Colonel took this to be his son, and a certain vibration shook him from head to foot. Across the wide dusty yard, their eyes met. The Colonel's brows came together, his shoulders lifted up. And he began to think, on the way toward them, how he would walk through this group like a white man. The Negroes, of course, would be respectful and afraid, as usual. He would say merely, "Good evening, Bert," to this boy, his son, then wait a moment, perhaps, and see what the boy said before passing on into the house.

Laughter died and dripped and trickled away, and talk quieted, and silence fell degree by degree, each step the white man approached. A strange sort of stiffness like steel nearing steel grew and straightened between the colored boy in the black-and-white shoes and the old Colonel who had just come from looking at his fields and his Negroes working.

"Good evening, Bert," the Colonel said.

"Good evening, Colonel Tom," the boy replied quickly, politely, almost eagerly. And then, like a puppet pulled by some perverse string, the boy offered his hand.

The Colonel looked at the strong young near-white hand held out toward him, and made no effort to take it. His eyes lifted to the eyes of the boy, his son, in front of him. The boy's eyes did not fall. But a slow flush reddened the olive of his skin as the old man turned without a word toward the stoop and into the house. The boy's hand went to his side again. A hum of dark voices broke the silence.

This happened between father and son. The mother, sitting there washing plums in a pail, did not understand what had happened. But the water from which she took the plums felt cool to her hands that were suddenly burning hot.

Coralee Lewis, sitting washing plums, had been Colonel Norwood's mistress for thirty years. She had lived in the Big House, supervised his life, given

him children, and loved him. In his turn, he felt something very like love for her. Now, in his sixties, without Cora he would have been lost, but of course he did not realize that—consciously.

The history of their liaison, like that of so many between Negro women and white men in the South, began without love, at least on his part. For a long while its motif was lust—whose sweeter name, perhaps, is passion.

The Colonel had really known Cora all her life. As a half-grown boy, she rolled in the dust with the other pickaninnies born to the black servants and and shy, brown face shining, bringing milk to the Big House night and morning, for her father took care of the cows. Her mother worked sometimes in the house but mostly in the fields. And Cora knew early how to pick cotton, too.

Then there came years when young Norwood had no contact with Cora: years when he had been away at military school; those first few years when he had come back from Macon with his new bride; those years of love and married life the Colonel could not truthfully remember ever having laid eyes on Cora, although she was about the place surely.

But Cora remembered often seeing the Colonel. Young and handsome, tall and straight, he drove over the plantation roads with the wisp of a pretty little lady he had married. She remembered him particularly well the day of his father's funeral, when he came back from the burial—he and his wife, master and mistress of the Big House now. How sad and worried young Colonel Norwood looked that day, descending from the carriage.

And as the months went by, he began to look more and more worried and weary. Servants gossip from the Big House, drifting down to the humbler Negroes in the cabins, said that a wall had grown up between the young Colonel and his little wife, who seemed to be wasting away day by day. A wall like a mist. And the Negroes began to laugh that there were never no children born to Mister and Missus. Then gossip began to say that the young Colonel had taken up with the cook's daughter, black but comely Livonia, who worked in the pantry. Then the Quarters laughed all the more—for Livonia had four or five Negro lovers, too. And she wasn't faithful to anybody—just liked to love.

Cora heard all this, and in her mind a certain envy sprang up. Livonia! Cora began to look more carefully into the cracked mirror in her mother's cabin. She combed her hair and oiled it better than before. She was seventeen then.

"Time you was takin' some pride about yo' self," said her mother, noting the change.

"Yes'm," said Cora. And when she took milk to the Big House now, she tried to look her best.

One night, there was a party there. Z great many people came from the Junction, and even seventy miles off from in town, by horse and by carriage, by train, and even some by that new-fangled autobuggy that most of the plantation hands had never seen before. The Negroes were all excited at having so many white folks around. It was the Missus' birthday. There were great doings at Big House Plantation.

The first evening, the party went on until late in the night. Some people left at dawn. Others slept awhile and left in the afternoon. Some were house guests, and on the second night there was a party again. But that night everybody was pretty tired. And got pretty drunk, too, mostly. The Colonel was very gay and very drunk; but his tittle wife cried, and went to bed. She was mighty touchy, all the Negroes knew. Always poutin' and spattin' and actin' funny with the Colonel.

Wonder why? Wonder why?

There was a party in the Quarters among the Negroes, too, that second night. Livonia was there, dancing fit to kill. And the music was wild. In the heat of the night, Cora went out of the barn where the party was, out into the moonlight, and looked up at the lights of the Big House on the rise. She stretched, and breathed in the warm, night air, and walked through the trees toward the road that ran to town. She made a big circle about the Big-House, wondering down on the edge of the cotton fields. But in the Big House, where it should have been gay, too, it was mighty quiet. Sometimes a loud and quarrelsome voice could be heard. Probably the men were gambling, and the ladies gone to bed.

The trees cast great shadows across the road in the warm light of the moon. Cora stretched, breathed deeply again, and got up to go, when she saw very near her a figure walking in the silvery dusk, a tall thin young white man walking in the cotton. Suddenly he called her.

"Who're you?" It was young Norwood speaking.

"It's Coralee Lewis, Aunt Tobie Lewis' daughter."

The white man came up to her, took her brown face in his hands and lifted it at the moon. "You're out mighty late," he said.

Cora's body trembled. Her mouth opened. In the shadow of the live oak tree there by the road, thirty years ago, in a night of moon. ...

When the first child, Willie, was in her, she told her mother all about it. The old woman was glad. "It's better'n in the cotton fields," she said. "It's known colored women what's wore silk dresses and lived like queens on plantations right here in Georgy. ..."

Even before the young Mrs. Norwood died (she did die—and childless), Cora was working in the Big House. And after Mrs. Norwood's death, Cora came there to sleep.

Now the water where the plums were felt cool to her hands this spring afternoon many years later as the Colonel went into the house, leaving their youngest boy dazed in front of her; and the nigger-voices all around her humming and chattering into loudness and laughter.

"Listen hyar," brother Willie said to Bert on the way from the Junction don't expect to go around all dressed up like you is now after you gets out to de place, 'cause de Colonel won't 'low it. He made Sis put away all them fine clothes she brought hyar last year—till she left."

"Tell him to kiss my behind," Bert said.

Willie bucked his eyes, stuttered, then kept quiet. His brother was the same Bert as he had been as a child, Crazy! Trouble coming. William made years older, he had always been afraid of Bert, with a fear worse than physical, afraid of the things thad happened around Bert.

From the new Ford, Bert looked out at the straggling streets of the village of the Junction, at the Negroes lounging in front of stores, at the red-necked crackers, at the unkempt women. He heard the departing train whistle as it went deeper into Georgia, into Alabama. As they rode, he looked at the wide fields of young cotton stretching on either side, at the cabins of the sharecroppers; at the occasional house of a white owner or overseer. Then he saw the gradual rise of the Norwood plantation, the famous Big House, surrounded by its live oaks and magnolias and maples, and its many acres of cotton. And he knew he was nearing home.

Six years away. Kid of fourteen when he left, wearing his first long trousers bought in the commissary store, feeling funny out of overalls, feeling very proud going away to school. Only the Lewis niggers (old man Norwood's kids by Cora) went away to school in these parts. And with the going of Sallie, the youngest, the little county school at Norwood's Crossroads closed up, and didn't open any more. Sallie was the Colonel's last child—no other niggers needed a school.

Old Aunt Tobie, the grandma, before she died, used to keep on saying that the Lewis young 'uns ought to appreciate what the Colonel was doing for 'em. No white man she ever heard of cared anything 'bout education' his tar-brush chillun. But the Colonel did. Somehow 'nother Cora was able to put it in the Colonel's mind and keep it there until the last child, Sallie, got sent off to Atlanta.

In Atlanta, Bert had entered the same Negro boarding school, the Institute, that brother Willie and his oldest sister, Bertha, had attended. But Willie, several years before, hadn't stayed there long, being a dumb boy who liked the plantation better. Bertha had gone up North once with the Spiritual Jubilee Singers, and liked it so well that she remained to work in Chicago. Now, little sister Sallie, seventeen, went to the Institute also, but had come home this spring ahead of Bert, who fooled around Atlanta a week or so before leaving, not wanting to come home really.

"Home, hell!"

Bert didn't want to come home. He felt he had no home. A brown mother, and a white father; bed for him in a nigger cabin down on the edge of the cotton fields. Soon as Cora's kids stopped nursing, they went to live outside the Big House. Aunt Tobie, the grandmother, had really raised them, until she died. Then a cousin of Cora's brought up Sallie.

"Hell of a way to live," Bert thought, the night before his arrival, sitting in the Jim Crow car bound for south Georgia. During the long ride he had turned over in his mind incidents of his childhood on the Big House Plantation. Sitting in the smoky half-coach allotted to Negroes (the other half being a baggage car), he thought of what it meant growing up as one of Colonel Norwood's yard-niggers (a term used by field hands for the mulatto children of a white planter).

"It's hell," Bert thought.

Not that Cora's other kids had found it hell. Only he had found it so, strangely enough. "The rest of 'em are too dumb, except little Sallie, and she don't say nothing—but it's hell to her, too, I reckon," the boy thought to himself as the train rocked and rumbled over the road. "Willie don't give a damn so long as his belly's full. And Bertha's got up North away from it all. I don't know what she really thought ... But I wish it hadn't happened to me."

With the self-pity of bewildered youth, he began to think about himself. Always, he had known the Colonel was his father, from the earliest he could remember. For one thing, Bert had been lighter than any of the other colored children on the plantation—a sort of ivory white. And as a small child, his hair had been straight and brown, his eyes gray, like Norwood's. His grandma, old Aunt Tobie, used to refer to them all, Willie and Bertha and Bert and Sallie, not without pride, as Colonel Tom's children. (There had been another who died.) Bert noticed early in life that all the other kids in the Quarters were named after their fathers, whereas he and his brother and sisters bore the mother's name, Lewis. He was Bert Lewis—not Bert Norwood. His mother slept in the Big House—but the children lived outside with Aunt Tobie or Cousin Betty. Those things puzzled little Bert.

As he grew up, he used to hear folks remarking on how much he looked like Colonel Tom, and little like Cora. Nearly light enough to pass for white, folks said, spittin' image of his father, too. Bert had a temper and ways like white folks, too. Indeed, "You needn't act so much like quality with me," was one of Aune Tobie's favorite ways of reprimanding him when she wanted to take him down a peg or two.

He was always getting into mischief, playing pranks and worrying his mother at the back door of the Big House. There was a time once when the Colonel seemed to get pleasure out of letting little Bert trail around at his heels, but that period didn't last very long, for young Bert sassed the Colonel, too, just as though he were colored. And somehow, he had acquired that way of referring to Norwood as Papa. The Colonel told him, sternly and seriously,

"Boy, don't you use that word to me." But still, forgetful little devil that he was, he had come running up to the Colonel that day in the stables yelling, "Papa, dinner's ready."

The slap that he received made him see stars and darkness, Bert remembered. As though he were brushing a fly out of the way, the Colonel had knocked the guests had gone, he switched Bert mercilessly.

"Can't nobody teach you nothin' but a switch, nohow," said old Aunt Tobie afterwards. "I tole you 'bout gittin' familiar wid that white man."

"But he didn't need to scar him all up," Bert remembered Cora's saying when she saw the black and blue marks on his back. "I ain't bearin' him children for to beat 'em to death. ... You stay way from him, son, you hear?"

From that time on, between Bert and the Colonel, there had been a barrier of fear—a fear that held a certain mysterious fascination for Bert's sense of defiance, a fear that Bert from afar was continually taunting and baiting. For instance, the Colonel had a complex, Bert recalled, that all the Negroes knew, about the front door of the Big House. His orders were that no Negroes go in and out of that door, or cross his front porch. When the old houseman, Sam, wanted to sweep off the porch, he would have to go out the back and the Big House visiting or helping Cora, would often dart out the front way when he thought the Colonel was in town or down in the South Field, or asleep in his library. Cora used to spank him for it, but it was a habit he kept up until he went away, a big boy to Atlanta.

Bert, home bound now, smiled to himself in the stuffy Jim Crow car, and wondered if the Colonel were still as tall and stern and stiff-fronted as he used to be. No wonder his young white wife had died years ago—having to live with him—although, according to Aunt Tobie's version, the Colonel had humored her in every way. He really loved her, folks said, and had sworn after her death that he would never marry again. He hadn't—he had taken Cora.

And here Bert's mind balked and veered away from speculating about the intimate life of this old man and his mother. Bert knew that in a sense the white man had been kind to her. He remembered as a child the extra little delicacies that came down to Aunt Tobie and Cousin Betty and Cora's other relatives in the Quarters, especially at Christmas. He remembered how he had always known that the little colored school had not been there before Cora's children were born, and that it was no longer at the crossroads now. (For the children and Mr. Higgins, being political powers in the county, were in charge of education, and their policy was to let Negroes remain unlettered. They had worked better.) Bert knew, too, that it was his mother's influence that had got her children sent off to the Institute in Atlanta. But it was the Colonel's dislike of Bert that kept him there, summer and winter, until now. Not that Bert minded. Summer school was fun, too. And tennis. And the pleasures

of the town. And he was never homesick for the plantation—but he did wish sometimes that he had a home, and that the Colonel would treat him like a son.

Tall and light and good-looking, as Bert was now at twenty, he could have a very good time in Atlanta. Colored society had taken him up. He went around with the sons and daughters of Negro doctors and dentists and insurance brokers and professors. He had his hands full of pretty girls. Lots of cream-colored girls, chocolate brown girls, velvet-soft night-shade girls all liked Bert. And already he had been involved in a scandal with a doctor's wife.

To add to his good looks, Bert was an excellent athlete. He had been as far north as Washington with Institute teams, and had seen colored people at the Capitol riding in street cars where there had been no Jim Crow signs, and getting on trains that had no coaches especially for Negroes. Bert made up his mind to come North to live as soon as he finished school. He had one more year. And this last summer Cora wanted him to spend with her—because she sensed he might never come back to the plantation again.

Sallie, his sister, three classes behind him at the Institute, was frankly worried about his going home. She was afraid. "Colonel Tom's getting old. He ain't nice a-tall like he kinder used to be. He's getting more and more touchy," Sallie said to her brother. And I know he ain't gonna like the looks of you. You don't look a bit like a Georgia boy any more."

"To hell with him," said Bert.

"I wouldn't even know you and Willie were brothers," Sallie said. For Sallie went home every summer and worked in the Big House with her mother, and saw Willie, and knew how things were on the plantation. Willie and the Colonel got along fine, because Willie was docile and good-natured, bowing and scraping and treating white folks like they expected to be treated. "But Bert, you ain't a bit like that."

"Why should I be?" Bert asked. "I'm the old man's son, ain't I? Got white blood in me too."

"Yes, but ..."

"But what?" Bert said. "Let Willie go on being a white-folks' nigger if he wants to, I won't!"

And that's the way it was when he came home.

There are people (you've probably noted it also) who have the unconscious faculty of making the world spin around themselves, throb and expand, contract and go dizzy. Then, when they are gone away, you feel sick and lonesome and meaningless.

In the chemistry lab at school, did you ever hold a test tube, pouring in liquids and powders and seeing nothing happen until a certain liquid or a certain powder is poured in, and then everything begins to smoke and fume,

bubble and boil, hiss to foam, and sometimes even explode! The tube is suddenly full of action and movement and life. Well, there are people like those certain liquids or powders; at a given moment they come into a room, bubble, boil, change. Sometimes the whole world is changed. Alexander came. Christ. Gandhi. A Russian named Lenin.

Not that there is any comparing Bert to Christ or Lenin. But after he returned to the Big House Plantation that summer, life was never the same. From Bert's very first day on the place something was broken, something went dizzy. The world began to spin, to ferment, and move into a new action.

Not to be a *white-folks' nigger*—Bert had come home with that idea in his head.

The Colonel sensed it in his outstretched hand and his tall young body—and had turned his back and walked into the house. Cora, with her hands in the cool water where the plums were, suddenly knew in her innermost soul a period of time had closed for her. That first night she prayed, cried in her room, asked the Lord why she had ever let her son come home. In his cabin Willie prayed, too, humble, Lord, humble. The Colonel rocked alone on his front porch, sucking a black cigar and cussing bitterly at he knew not what. The hum and laughter of the Negro voices went on as usual on the vast plantation, down to the last share-cropper's cabin, but not quite, not quite the same as they had been in the morning. And never to be the same again.

"Is you heard about Bert?"

Not to be a *white-folks' nigger!*

Bow down and pray in fear and trembling, go way back in the dark afraid; or work harder and harder; or stumble and learn; or raise up your fist and strike—but once the idea comes into your head, you'll never be the same again. Oh, test tube of life! Crucible of the South, find the right powder and you'll never be the same again—the cotton will blaze and the cabins will burn and the chains will be broken and men, all of a sudden, will shake hands, black men and white men, like steel meeting steel!

"The bastard," Bert said. "Why couldn't he shake hands with me? I'm a Norwood, too."

"Hush, son," said Cora, with the cool water from the plums on her hands.

And the hum of the black voices that afternoon spread to the cabins, to the cotton fields, to the dark streets of the Junction, what Bert had said—Bert with the ivory-yellow skin and the all proud young body, Bert come home not to be a *white-folks' nigger*.

"Lawd, chile, Bert's come home ..."

"Lawd, chile, and he said ..."

"Lawd, chile, he said ..."

"Lawd, chile ..."

"Lawd ..."

July passed, and August. The hot summer sun marched across the skies. The Colonel ordered Bert to work in the fields. Bert had not done so. Talbot, the white foreman, washed his hands of it, saying that if he had his way, "that nigger would be run off the place."

For the Colonel, the summer was hectic enough, what with cotton prices dropping on the market; share-croppers restless and moving; one black field-hand beaten half to death by Talbot and the storekeeper because he "talked high" to a neighboring white planter; news of the *Scottsboro* trials and the Camp Hill shootings exciting black labor.

Colonel Norwood ordered the colored rural Baptist minister to start a revival and keep it going until he said stop. Let the Negroes sing and shout their troubles away, as in the past. White folks had always found revivals a useful outlet for sullen overworked darkies. As long as they were singing and praying, they forgot about the troubles of this world. In a frenzy of rhythm and religion, they laid their cross at the feet of Jesus.

Poor overworked Jesus! Somehow since the war, he hadn't borne that cross so well. Too heavy, it's too heavy! Lately, Negroes seem to sense that it's not Jesus' cross, anyhow, it's their own. Only old people praise King Jesus any more. On the Norwood plantation Bert's done told the young people to stop being white-folks' niggers. More and more, the Colonel felt it was Bert who brought trouble into the Georgia summer. The revival was a failure.

One day he met the boy coming back from the river where he had been swimming. The Colonel lit into him with all the cuss words at his command. He told him in no uncertain language to get down in the South Field to work. He told him there would be no more school at Atlanta for him; that he would show him that just because Cora happened to be his mother, he was no more than any other nigger on the place. God damn him!

Bert stood silent and red in front of his father, looking as the Colonel must have looked forty years ago—except that he was a shade darker. He did not go down to the South Field to work. And all Cora's pleadings could not make him go. Yet nothing happened. That was the strange thing about it. The Colonel did nothing—to Bert. But he lit into Cora, nagged and scolded her for days, told her she'd better get some sense into her boy's head if she wanted any skin left on his body.

So the summer passed. Sallie, having worked faithfully in the house throughout the hottest months, went away to school again. Bert remained sullenly behind.

The day that ends our story began like this:  
The sun rose burning and blazing, flooding the earth with the heat of early autumn, making even the morning oppressive. Folks got out of bed feeling like overripe fruit. The air of the morning shimmered with heat and ill humor. The night before, Colonel Norwood had been drinking. He got up

trembling and shaky, yelling for Cora to bring him something clean to put on. He went downstairs cussing.

The Colonel did not want to eat. He drank black coffee, and walked out on the tall-pillared porch to get a breath of air. He was standing there looking through the trees at his cotton when the Ford swept by in a cloud of dust, past the front of the house and down the highway to town. Bert was driving.

The Colonel cussed out loud, bit his cigar, turned and went into the house, slamming the door, storming to Cora, calling up the stairs where she was working. "What the hell does he think he is, driving off to town in the middle of the morning? Didn't I tell Bert not to touch that Ford, to stay down yonder in the fields and work?"

"Yes, suh, Colonel Tom," Cora said. "You sure did."

"Tell him I want to see him soon as he comes back here. Send him in here. And tell him I'll skin his yellow hide for him." The Colonel spoke of Bert as though he were still a child.

"Yes, suh, Colonel Tom."

The day grew hotter and hotter. Heat waves rose from the fields. Sweat dampened the Colonel's body. Sweat dampened the black bodies of the Negroes in the cotton fields, too, the hard black bodies that had built the Colonel's fortune out of earth and sun and barehanded labor. Yet the Colonel, in spite of the fact that he lived on this labor, sat in his shaded house fanning that morning and wondering what made niggers so contrary—he was thinking of Bert—as the telephone rang. The fat and testy voice of his old friend Mr. Higgins trembled at the other end of the wire. He was calling from the Junction.

Accustomed as he was to his friend's voice on the phone, at first the Colonel could not make out what he was saying. When he did understand, his neck bulged and the palms of the hands that held the phone were wet with sweat. Anger and shame made his tall body stoop and bend like an animal about to spring. Mr. Higgins was talking about Bert.

"That yellow nigger ..." Mr. Higgins said. "One of your yard-niggers sassed ..." Mr. Higgins said. "I thought I'd better tell you ..." Mr. Higgins said. "Everybody ..." Mr. Higgins said.

The whole town was excited about Bert. In the heat of this overwarm autumn day, the hotheads of the white citizens of the town had suddenly become inflamed about Bert. Mr. Higgins, county politician and postmaster at the Junction, was well qualified to know. His office had been the center of the news.

It seemed that Bert had insulted the young white woman who sold stamps and made out money orders at the Post Office. And Mr. Higgins was telling the Colonel about it on the phone, warning him to get rid of Bert, that people around the Junction were getting sick and tired of seeing him.

At the post office this is what happened: a simple argument over change. But the young woman who sold the stamps was not used to arguing with Negroes, or being corrected by them when she made a mistake. Bert said, "I gave you a dollar," holding out the incorrect change. "You gave me back only sixty-four cents."

The young woman said, counting the change, "Yes, but you have eight three-cent stamps. Move on now, there're others waiting." Several white people were in line.

Bert said, "Yes, but eight times three is not thirty-six. You owe me twelve cents more."

The girl looked at the change and realized she was wrong. She looked at Bert—light near-white nigger with gray-blue eyes. You gotta be harder on those kind than you have on the black ones. An educated nigger, too! Besides it was hot and she wasn't feeling well. A light near-white nigger with gray eyes! Instead of correcting the change, she screamed, and let her head fall forward in front of the window.

Two or three white men waiting to buy stamps seized Bert and attempted to throw him out of the post office. Bert remembered he'd been a football player—and Colonel Norwood's son—so he fought back. One of the white men got a bloody mouth. Women screamed. Bert walked out of the post office, got in the Ford and drove away. By that time, the girl who sold stamps had recovered. She was telling everyone how Bert had insulted her.

"Oh, my God! It was terrible," she said.

"That's one nigger don't know his place, Tom," Mr. Higgins roared over the phone. "And it's your fault he don't—sendin' 'em off to school to be educated." The Colonel listened to his friend at the other end of the wire. "Why that yellow buck comes to my store, and if he ain't waited on quick as the white folks are, he walks out. He said last week, standin' out on my corner, he wasn't all nigger no how; said his name was Norwood—not Lewis, like the rest of Cora's family; said your plantation would be his when you passed out—and all that kind o' stuff, boasting to the niggers listening about you being his father." The Colonel almost dropped the phone. "Now, Tom, you know that stuff don't go 'round these parts o' Georgia. Ruinous to other niggers hearing that sort of talk, too. There ain't been no race trouble in our county for three years—since the Deekins lynching—but I'm telling you, Norwood, folks ain't gonna stand for this. I'm speaking on the quiet, but I see ahead. What happened this morning in the post office ain't none too good."

"When I get through with him," said the Colonel hoarsely, "you won't need to worry. Good-by."

The white man came out of the library, yelled for Sam, shouted for Cora, ordered whisky. Drank and screamed.

"God damn that son of yours! I'm gonna kill him," he said to Cora, "Get out of here," he shouted at Sam, who came back with cigars.

Cora wept. The Colonel raved. A car shot down the road. The Colonel rushed out, brandishing a cane to stop it. It was Bert. He paid no attention to the old man standing on the steps of the pillared porch. The Colonel Ashen with fury, the Colonel came back into the house and fumbled with his keys at an old chest. Finally, a drawer opened and he fumbled with his suddenly strengthless and limp. Shaking, the old man sank into a chair holding the gun. He would not speak to Cora.

Late in the afternoon, Colonel Norwood sent Cora for their son. The gun had been put away. At least Cora did not see it.

"I want to talk to that boy," the Colonel said. "Fetch him here." Damned young fool ... bastard ... of a nigger ...

"What's he gonna do to my boy?" Cora thought. "Son, be careful," as she went across the yard and down toward Willie's cabin to find Bert. "Son, you be careful. I didn't bear you for no white man to kill. Son, you be careful. You ain't white, don't you know that? You be careful. O Lord God Jesus in heaven! Son, be careful!" Cora was crying when she reached Willie's door, crying all the way back to the Big House with her son.

"To hell with the old man," Bert said. "He ain't no trouble! Old as he is, what can he do to me?"

"Lord have mercy, son, is you crazy? Why don't you be like Willie? He ain't never had no fuses with de Colonel."

"White-folks' nigger," Bert said.

"Why don't you talk sense?" Cora begged.

"Why didn't he keep his promise, then, and let me go back to school in Atlanta, like my sister? You said if I came home this summer, he'd lemme go back to the Institute, didn't you? Then why didn't he?"

"Why didn't you act right, son? Oh-o-o!" Cora moaned. "You can't get nothin' from white folks if you don't act right."

"Act like Willie, you mean, and the rest of these cotton pickers? Then I don't want anything."

They had reached the back door now. It was nearly dark in the kitchen where Livonia was making biscuits.

"Don't rile him, Bert, child," Cora said as she took him through the house. "I don't know what he might do to you. He's got a gun."

"Don't worry 'bout me," Bert answered.

The setting sun made long paths of golden light across the parlor floor through the tall windows opening on the west. The air was thick and sultry

with autumn heat. The Colonel sat, bent and old, near a table where there were whisky and cigars and a half-open drawer. When Bert entered he suddenly wore straightened up, and the old commanding look came into his eyes. He told Cora to go upstairs to her room.

Of course, he never asked Bert to sit down.

The tall mulatto boy stood before his father, the Colonel. The old white man felt the steel of him standing there, like the steel of himself forty years ago. Steel of the Norwoods darkened now by Africa, yet shared in common. The old man got up, straight and tall, too, and suddenly shook his fist in the face of the boy. "You listen to me," he said, trembling with quiet. "I don't have to have to whip you again like I did when you were a child." He was almost hissing. "The next time I might kill you. I been running this plantation thirty-five years and never had to beat a nigger old as you are. Never had any trouble out of none of Cora's children before either, but you." The old man sat down. "I don't have trouble with my colored folks. They do what I say or what Talbot says, and that's all there is to it. If they turn in crops, they get a living. If they work for wages, they get paid. If they spend their money on licker, or old cars, or fixing up their cabins—they can do what they choose, long as they know their places and it don't hinder their work. To Cora's young ones—you hear me, boy?—I gave all the chances any nigger ever had in these parts. More'n many a white child's had, too. I sent you off to school. I gave your brother, Willie, that house he's living in when he got married, pay him for his work, help him out if he needs it. None of my darkies suffer. You went off to school. Could have kept on, would have sent you back this fall, but I don't intend to pay for no nigger, or white boy, either, if I had one, that acts the way you been acting." Colonel Norwood got up again, angrily. "And certainly not for no black fool! I'm talking to you like this only because you're Cora's child—but you know damn well it's my habit to tell people what to do, not discuss it with them. I just want to know what's the matter with you, though—whether you're crazy or not? And if you're not, you'd better change your ways a damn sight or it won't be safe for you here, and you know it—venting your impudence on white women, ruining my niggers, driving like mad through the Junction, carrying on just as you please. I'm warning you, boy, God damn it! ... Now I want you to answer me, and talk right." The old man sat down in his chair again by the whisky bottle and the partly opened drawer. He took a drink.

"What do you mean, talk right?" Bert said.

"I mean talk like a nigger should to a white man," the Colonel snapped.

"Oh, but I'm not a nigger, Colonel Norwood," Bert said, "I'm your son."

The old man frowned at the boy in front of him. "Cora's son," he said.

"Fatherless?" Bert asked.

"Bastard," the old man said.

Bert's hands closed into fists, so the Colonel opened the drawer where the pistol was. He took it out and laid it on the table.

"You black bastard," he said.

"I've heard that before." Bert just stood there. "You're talking about my mother."

"Well," the Colonel answered, his fingers playing over the surface of the gun, "what can you do about it?"

The boy felt his whole body suddenly tighten and pull. The muscles of his forearms rippled.

"Niggers like you are hung to trees," the old man went on. "I'm not a nigger," Bert said, "Ain't you my father? And a hell of a father you are, too, holding a gun on me."

"I'll break your black neck for you," the Colonel shouted. "Don't talk to me like that!" He jumped up.

"You'll break my neck?" The boy stood his ground as the father came toward him.

"Get out of here!" The Colonel shook with rage. Get out! Or I'll do more than that if I ever lay eyes on you again." The old man picked up the pistol from the table, yet the boy did not move. "I'll fill you full of bullets if you come back here. Get off this place! Get to hell out of this county! Now, tonight. Go on!" The Colonel motioned with his pistol toward the door that led to the kitchen and the back of the house.

"Not that way," Bert said. "I'm not your servant. You must think I'm scared. Well, you can't drive me out the back way like a dog. You're not going to run me off, like a field hand you can't use any more. I'll go," the boy said, starting toward the front door, "but not out the back—from my own father's house."

"You nigger bastard!" Norwood screamed, springing between his son and the door, but the boy kept calmly on. The steel of the gun was between them, but that didn't matter. Rather, it seemed to pull them together like a magnet.

"Don't you ..." Norwood began, for suddenly Bert's hand grasped the Colonel's arm, "dare put your ..." and his old bones began to crack, "black hands on ..."

"Why don't you shoot?" Bert interrupted him, slowly turning his wrist.

"... me!"

"Why don't you shoot, then?"

The old man twisted and bent in fury and pain, but the gun fell to the floor.

"Why don't you shoot?" Bert said again as his hands sought his father's throat. With furious sureness they took the old white neck in their strong young fingers. "Why don't you shoot then, Papa?"

Colonel Norwood clawed the air, breathing hoarsely and loud, his tongue growing stiff and dry, his eyes beginning to burn.

"Shoot—why don't you, then? Huh? Why?"  
The chemicals of their two lives exploded. Everything was very black around them. The white man's hands stopped clawing the air. His heart stood still. His blood no longer flowed. He wasn't breathing.

"Why don't you shoot?" Bert said, but there was no answer.  
When the boy's eyes cleared, he saw his mother standing at the foot of the stairs, so he let the body drop. It fell with a thud, old and white in a path of red from the setting sun.

"Why didn't he shoot, Mama? He didn't want me to live. He was white. Why didn't he shoot then?"

"Tom!" Cora cried, falling across his body. "Colonel Tom! Tom! Tom!"

"He's dead," Bert said. "I'm living, though."

"Tom!" Cora screamed, pulling at the dead man. "Colonel Tom!"

Bert bent down and picked up the pistol. "This is what my father wanted to use on me," he said. "He's dead. But I can use it on all the white men in Georgia—they'll be coming to get me now. They never wanted me before, but I know they'll want me now." He stuffed the pistol in his shirt. Cora saw what her son had done.

"Run," she said, rising and going to him. "Run, child! Out the front way quick, so's they won't see you in the kitchen. Make fo' de swamp, honey. Cross de fields fo' de swamp. Co de crick way. In runnin' water, dogs can't smell no tracks. Hurry, son!"

"Yes, Mama," Bert said slowly. "But if I see they gonna get me before I reach the swamp, then I'm coming back here. Let them take me out of my father's house—if they can." He patted the gun inside his shirt, and smiled. "They'll never string me up to some roadside tree for the crackers to laugh at. Not me!"

"Hurry, child." Cora opened the door and the sunset streamed in like a river of blood. "Hurry, child."

Bert went out across the wide pillared porch and down the road. He saw Talbot and the storekeeper coming, so he turned off through the trees. And then, because he wanted to live, he began to run. The whole sky was a blaze of color as he ran. Then it began to get dark, and the glow went away.

In the house, Cora started to talk to the dead man on the floor, just as though he were not dead. She pushed and pulled at the body, trying to get him to get up himself. Then she heard the footsteps of Talbot and the storekeeper on the porch. She rose and stood as if petrified in the middle of the dusky room. Then Talbot opened the door.

"Hello, Cora," he said. "What's the matter with you, why didn't you let us in? Where's that damn fool boy's your'n goin', comin' out the front you talk? Where's Colonel Norwood?"

"Let's have some light in here," said the storekeeper, turning a button beside the door.

"Great God!" Talbot cried. "Jim, look at this!" The Colonel's body lay huddled on the floor, old and purple-white, at Cora's feet.

"Why, he's blue in the face," the storekeeper said bending over the body. "Oh! Get that nigger we saw walking out the door! That nigger bastard of Cora's. Get that nigger! ... Why, the Colonel's dead!"

Talbot rushed toward the door. "That nigger," he cried. He must be running toward the swamps now... We'll get him. Telephone town, Jim, there in the library. Telephone the sheriff. Telephone the Beale family down by the swamp. Get men, white men, after that nigger."

The storekeeper ran into the library and began to call on the phone. Talbot looked at Cora, standing in the center of the room. "Where's Norwood's car? In the barn? Talk, you black wench, talk!"

But Cora didn't say a word. She watched the two white men rush out of the house into the yard. In a few minutes, she heard the roar of a motor hurtling down the road. It was dark outside. Night had come.

Cora turned toward the body on the floor. "My boy," she said, "he can't get to swamp now. They telephoned the white folks down that way to head him off. He'll come back home." She called aloud, "Colonel Tom, why don't you get up from there and help me? You know they're after our boy. You know they got him out there runnin' from de white folks in de night. Runnin' from de hounds and de guns and de ropes and all what they uses to kill poor niggers with. ... Ma boy's out there runnin'. Why don't you help him?" Cora bent over the body. "Colonel Tom, you hear me? You said he was ma boy, ma bastard boy. I heard you. But he's your'n too—out yonder in de dark runnin'—from your people. Why don't you get up and stop 'em? You know you could. You's a power in Polk County. You's a big man, and yet our son's out there runnin'—runnin' from po' white trash what ain't worth de little finger o' nobody's got your blood in 'em, Tom." Cora shook the dead body fiercely. "Get up from there and stop 'em, Colonel Tom." But the white man did not move.



"ago, is I gonna be burnt by de crackers? Lawd, is I sinned? Lawd, what has I done?" He looked at Cora. "I sho ain't gonna stay heah tonight. I's gwine."

"Go on," she said. "The Colonel can get his own drinks when he comes back."

"Lawd God Jesus!" Sam, his eyes bucking from their sockets, bolted from the room fast as his old legs could carry him. Cora heard him running blindly through the house, moaning.

She went to the kitchen post where still boilings on the stove, but Livonia had fled, the biscuits burnt in the oven. She looked out the back door, but no lights were visible anywhere. The cabins were quiet.

"I reckon they all gone," she said to herself. "Even ma boy, Willie. I reckon he gone, too. You see, Colonel Tom, everybody's scared o' you. They know you done gone with de mob again, like you did that time they hung Luke Jordan and you went to help 'em. Now you's out chasin' ma boy, too. I hears you hollerin'."

And sure enough, all around the Big House in the dark, in a wide far-off circle, men and dog cries and auto horns sounded in the night. Nearer they came, even as Cora stood at the back door, listening. She closed the door, bolted it, put out the light, and went back to the parlor. "He'll come in by de front," she said. "Back from de swamp way. He won't let 'em stop him from gettin' home to me agin, just once. Po' little boy, he ain't got no place to go, no how. Po' boy, what growed up with such pride in his heart. Just like you. Colonel Tom. Spirtin' image o' you. ... Proud! ... And got no place to go."

Nearer and nearer the manhunt came, the cries and the horns and the dog. Headlights began to flash in the dark down the road. Off through the trees, Cora heard men screaming. And suddenly feet running, running, running. Nearer, nearer. She knew it was him. She knew they had seen him, too.

Then there were voices shouting very near the house.

"Don't shoot, men. We want to get him alive."

"Close in on him!"

"He must be in them bushes there by the porch."

"Look!"

And suddenly shots rang out. The door opened. Cora saw flashes of fire spitting into the blackness, and Bert's tall body in the doorway. He was shooting at the voices outside in the dark. The door closed.

"Hello, Ma," he said. "One or two of 'em won't follow me no further."

Cora locked the door as bullets splintered through the wood, shattered the windowpanes. Then a great volley of shots struck the house, blinding headlights focused on the porch. Shouts and cries of, "Nigger! Nigger! Get the nigger!" filled the night.

"I was waitin' for you, honey," Cora said. "Quick! Your hidin' place's ready for you, upstairs in de attic. I saved out a place under de floor. Maybe they won't find you, chile. Hurry, 'fore your father comes."

"No time to hide, Ma," Bert panted. "They're at the door now. They'll be coming in the back way, too. They'll be coming in the windows. They'll be coming in everywhere. I got one bullet left, Ma, it's mine."

"Yes, son, it's your'n. Go upstairs in Mama's room and lay down on ma bed and rest. It won't let 'em come up till you're gone. God bless you, chile."

Quickly, they embraced. A moment his head rested on her shoulder. "I'm awful tired running, Ma. I couldn't get to the swamp. Seems like they been chasing me for hours. Crawling through the cotton a long time; I got to rest now."

Cora pushed him toward the stairs. "Go on, son," she said gently.

At the top, Bert turned and looked back at this little brown woman standing there, waiting for the mob. Outside the noise was terrific. Men shouted and screamed, massing for action. All at once they seemed to rush in a great wave for the house. They broke the doors and windows in, and poured into the room—a savage crowd of white men, red and wild-eyed, with guns and knives, sticks and ropes, lanterns and flashlights. They paused at the foot of the stairs where Cora stood looking down at them silently.

"Keep still, man," one of the leaders said. "He's armed. ... Say where's that yellow bastard of yours, Cora—upstairs?"

"Yes," Cora said. "Wait."

"Wait, hell!" the men cried. Come on, boys, let's go!"

A shot rang out upstairs, then Cora knew it was all right.

"Go on," she said, stepping aside for the mob.

The next morning when people saw a bloody and unrecognizable body hanging in the public square at the Junction, some said with a certain pleasure, "That's what we do to niggers down here," not realizing Bert had been taken dead, and that all the fun for the mob had been sort of stale at the end.

But others, aware of what had happened, thought, "It'd be as hell of a lot better lynching a live nigger. Say, ain't there nobody else mixed up in this here Norwood murder? Where's that boy's brother, Willie? Heh!"

So the evening papers carried this item in the late editions:

#### DOUBLE LYNCHING IN GEORGIA

*A large mob late this afternoon wrecked vengeance on the second of two Negro field hands, the murderers of Colonel Thomas Norwood, wealthy planter found dead at Big House Plantation. Bert Lewis was lynched last night, and his brother, Willie Lewis, today. The sheriff of the county is unable to identify any members of the mob. Colonel Norwood's funeral has not yet been held. The dead man left no heirs.*

**This article is Copyright and Distributed under the following license**



**Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike  
CC BY-NC-SA**

This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon your work non-commercially, as long as they credit you and license their new creations under the identical terms.

[View License Deed](#) | [View Legal Code](#)

**Cet article est protégé par le droit  
d'auteur et distribué sous la licence  
suivante**



**Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation  
Commerciale - Partage dans les Mêmes  
Conditions CC BY-NC-SA**

Cette licence permet aux autres de remixier, arranger, et adapter votre œuvre à des fins non commerciales tant qu'on vous crédite en citant votre nom et que les nouvelles œuvres sont diffusées selon les mêmes conditions.

[Voir le Résumé Explicatif](#) | [Voir le Code Juridique](#)

### **Copyright and Take Down notice**

The digitized version of Abbia seeks to honour the original intentions of the paper publication. We continue to publish under the patronage of the Ministry of Arts and Culture: permission for this was given by the minister of Arts and Culture on 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/.. It has not proved possible to track down the surviving authors so we are making the material available under a more restrictive noncommercial CC license. We have setup a takedown policy to accommodate this. More details are available from [here](#).

La version numérisée d'Abbia vise à honorer les intentions originales de la publication sur papier. Nous continuons à publier sous le patronage du Ministère des Arts et de la Culture: permission a été donné par le ministre le 9 August 2019 Ref 1752/L/MINAC/SG/DLL/. Il n'a pas été possible de retrouver les auteurs survivants, c'est pourquoi nous rendons le matériel disponible sous une licence CC non commerciale plus restrictive. Nous avons mis en place une politique de démantèlement pour y faire face. Plus de détails sont disponibles [ici](#).