

Chapter Four

“Cassie, what’s the matter with you, girl?” Big Ma asked as she thrust three sticks of dried pine into the stove to rekindle the dying morning fire. “You sure are takin’ a sorrowful long time to churn that butter.”

“Nothin’,” I muttered.

“Nothin’?” Big Ma turned and looked directly at me. “You been mopin’ ’round here for the past week like you got the whoopin’ cough, flu, and measles all put together.”

I sighed deeply and continued to churn.

Big Ma reached out and felt my forehead, then my cheeks. Frowning, she pulled her hand away as Mama entered the kitchen. “Mary, feel this child’s face,” she said. “She seem warm to you?”

Mama cupped my face in her thin hands. “You feel sick, Cassie?”

“No’m.”

“How do you feel?”

“All right,” I said, still churning.

Mama studied me with the same disturbed look Big Ma wore and a tiny frown line appeared on her brow. “Cassie,” she said softly, fixing her dark eyes upon me, “is there something you want to tell me?”

I was on the verge of blurting out the awful truth about the bus and the men in the night, but then I remembered the pact Stacey had made us all swear to when I had told him, Christopher-John, and Little Man about the caravan and I said instead, “No, ma’am,” and began to churn again. Abruptly, Mama took hold of the churning stick, her eyes searching mine. As she studied me, she seemed about to ask me something, then the question faded and she pulled away, lifting the lid of the churn. “It looks ready now,” she said with a sigh. “Dip out the butter like I showed you and wash it down. I’ll take care of the milk.”

I scooped the butter from the churning lid onto a plate and went through the curtain to the small pantry off the kitchen to get the molding dish. It had been placed on a high shelf under several other dishes and I had to stand on a

► *Why is Big Ma worried about Cassie?*

► *What does Cassie want to tell her mama? Why doesn’t she say anything?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

verge (vɜrj) *n.*, edge, brink

stool to get it. As I eased it out, Mama and Big Ma spoke softly in worried tones on the other side of the curtain.

“Somethin’ the matter with that child, Mary.”

“She’s not sick, Mama.”

“There’s all sorts of sickness. She ain’t ate right for goin’ on over a week. She ain’t sleepin’ right neither. Restless and murmurin’ in her sleep all night long. And she won’t hardly even go out and play, rather be in here helpin’ us. Now you know that ain’t like that child.”

There was a moment’s pause, then Mama whispered so I could hardly hear her. “You think . . . Mama, you think she could’ve seen—”

“Oh, Lord, no, child,” Big Ma exclaimed hastily. “I checked in there right after they passed and she was sound asleep. She couldn’t’ve seen them ole devils. The boys neither.”

Mama sighed. “The boys, they’re not themselves either. All of them, too quiet. Here it is Saturday morning and they’re quiet as church mice. I don’t like it, and I can’t shake the feeling it’s got something to do with—Cassie!”

Without warning, I had lost my balance and with an absurd topple from the knee-high stool crashed upon the floor with the molding dish. “Cassie, you hurt?” Mama asked, stooping beside me.

“No’m,” I mumbled, feeling very clumsy and close to tears. I knew that if I let the tears fall, Mama’s suspicion that something was wrong would be confirmed for I never cried about such a silly thing as a fall; in fact, I seldom ever cried. So instead of crying, I jumped up quickly and began to pick up the broken pieces of the dish.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” I said.

“That’s all right,” she said, helping me. When we had swept the chips away with the long field-straw broom, she told me, “Leave the butter, Cassie, and go on in with the boys.”

“But, Mama—”

“I’ll do the butter. Now go on, do like I say.”

I stared up at Mama, wondering if she would ever know what we had done, then joined the boys who were sitting listlessly around the fire absently listening to T.J.

“See, fellows, there’s a system to getting out of work,” T.J. was expounding as I sat down. “Jus’ don’t be ’round when it’s

◀ *What are Cassie’s “symptoms”?*

◀ *Why doesn’t Cassie cry?*

◀ *How has T.J. avoided work this morning?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

ex • pound (ik spaund´) vt., explain in elaborate detail

got to be done. Only thing is, you can't let your folks know that's what you're doin'. See, you should do like me. Like this mornin' when Mama wanted to bring back them scissors she borrowed from Miz Logan, I ups and volunteers so she don't have to make this long trip down here, she bein' so busy and all. And naturally when I got here, y'all wanted me to stay awhile and talk to y'all, so what could I do? I couldn't be impo-
lite, could I? And by the time I finally convince y'all I gotta go, all the work'll be done at home." T.J. chuckled with satisfac-
tion. "Yeah, you just have to use the old brain, that's all."

He was quiet a moment, expecting some comment on his discourse, but no one said a word.

T.J.'s eyes roamed the length of the room, then he admon-
ished, "See, if you was smart like me, Stacey, you'd use the
old brain to get the questions on that big test comin' up. Just
think, they probably jus' sittin' right here in this very room
waitin' to be discovered."

Stacey cast T.J. an annoyed look, but did not speak.

"Y'all sure are a sorry lot this mornin'," T.J. observed. "A
fellow's just wastin' his know-how talkin' to y'all."

"Ain't nobody asked you to give it," said Stacey.

"Well, you don't have to get snippety about it," replied T.J.
haughtily. Again, silence prevailed; but that would not do for
T.J. "Say, how 'bout we sneak down to that ole Wallace store
and learn how to do them new dances?"

"Mama told us not to go down there," Stacey said.

"You some mama's boy or somethin' you gotta do every-
thing your mama tells—"

"You go on if you wanna," said Stacey quietly, not rising
to T.J.'s bait, "but we staying here."

Again, silence.

Then T.J. said: "Say, y'all hear the latest 'bout them night
men?" Suddenly, all eyes turned from the fire and riveted
themselves upon him. Our faces were eager question marks;
we were totally in T.J.'s power.

"What 'bout them?" Stacey asked, almost evenly.

T.J., of course, intended to nurse the moment for as long
as he could. "You see when a fellow's as smart as me, he gets
to know things that other folks don't. Now, this kind of
information ain't for the ears of little kids so I really should-
n't even tell y'all—"

► *What is T.J.
hoping to get from
Stacey?*

► *What does T.J. say
that finally gets their
attention?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

chuck • le (chuk´l) *vi.*, laugh quietly
ad • mon • ish (ad mōn´əsh) *vt.*, express
warning or disapproval

pre • vail (pri vāl) *vi.*, triumph, take
control

ri • vet (ri´vət) *vt.*, fasten firmly

“Then don’t!” said Stacey with smooth finality, turning back toward the fire as if he cared not at all about the night men. Taking his cue, I nudged Christopher-John and Christopher-John nudged Little Man, and the three of us forced ourselves to stare into the fire in feigned disinterest.

Without a captive audience, T.J. had to reinterest us by getting to the point. “Well, ’bout a week ago, they rode down to Mr. Sam Tatum’s place—you know, down the Jackson Road toward Strawberry—and you know what they done?”

Stacey, Little Man, and I kept our eyes upon the fire, but Christopher-John piped eagerly, “What?”

I poked Christopher-John and he turned guiltily around, but T.J., triumphant with an assured audience of one, settled back in his chair ready to prolong the suspense. “You know Mama’d kill me if she knowed I was tellin’ this. I heard her and Miz Claire Thompson talkin’ ’bout it. They was real scared. Don’t know why though. Them ole night men sure wouldn’t scare me none. Like I told Claude—”

“Hey, y’all,” Stacey said, standing and motioning us up. “Mama said she wanted us to take some milk and butter down to Miz Jackson before noon. We’d better get started.”

I nodded, and Christopher-John, Little Man, and I got up.

“Tarred and feathered him!” T.J. announced hastily. “Poured the blackest tar they could find all over him, then plastered him with chicken feathers.” T.J. laughed. “Can you imagine that?”

“But why?” asked Little Man, forgetting our ploy.

This time T.J. did not slow down. “I dunno if y’all’s little ears should hear this, but it seems he called Mr. Jim Lee Barnett a liar—he’s the man who runs the Mercantile down in Strawberry. Mr. Tatum’s s’pose to done told him that he ain’t ordered up all them things Mr. Barnett done charged him for. Mr. Barnett said he had all them things Mr. Tatum ordered writ down and when Mr. Tatum asked to see that list of his, Mr. Barnett says, ‘You callin’ me a liar, boy?’ And Mr. Tatum says, ‘Yessuh, I guess I is!’ That done it!”

“Then it wasn’t ’cause of the bus?” Christopher-John blurted out.

“Bus? What’s a bus got to do with it?”

“Nothin’,” said Stacey quickly. “Nothin’ at all.”

“Well, if anybody said them night men was down in here

◀ How does Stacey make T.J. get to his point?

◀ According to T.J., why had the night men ridden? What had they done?

Words
For
Everyday
Use

feigned (fānd) *adj.*, pretended; faked
ploy (ploi) *n.*, tactic or stratagem

► Why is Stacey relieved?

'cause of some stupid bus, they crazy," said T.J. authorita-tively. "'Cause my information come direct from Miz Claire Thompson who seen Mr. Tatum herself."

"You sure?" Stacey asked.

"Sure? Sure, I'm sure. When do I ever say anythin' when I ain't sure?"

Stacey smiled with relief. "Come on, let's get the milk."

All of us went into the kitchen, then to the bedrooms to get our coats. When we got outside, T.J. remembered that he had left his cap by the fire and ran back to retrieve it. As soon as we were alone, Little Man asked, "Stacey, you really think them night men put tar and feathers all over Mr. Tatum?"

"I s'pose so," said Stacey.

Little Man frowned, but it was Christopher-John who spoke, whispering shrilly as if a stray morning ghost might overhear. "If they ever find out 'bout the bus, you think they gonna put tar and feathers all over us?"

Little Man's frown deepened and he observed gravely, "If they did, we'd never get clean again."

"Cassie," said Christopher-John, his eyes wide, "w-was you real s-scared when you seen 'em?"

Little Man shivered with excitement. "I wish I could've seen 'em."

"Well, I don't," declared Christopher-John. "In fact, I wish I'd never heard of no night men or buses or secrets or holes in the road!" And with that outburst, he stuffed his pudgy hands into his thin jacket, pressed his lips firmly together, and refused to say another word.

► What is T.J. doing instead of getting his cap?

After a few moments, Stacey said, "What's keeping T.J.?" The rest of us shrugged, then followed Stacey back up the porch into Mama's room. As we entered, T.J. jumped. He was standing at the desk with Mama's W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Negro* in his hands.

"That don't look like your cap," said Stacey.

"Aw, man, I ain't done nothin'. Jus' lookin' at Miz Logan's history book, that's all. I'm mighty interested in that place called Egypt she been tellin' us 'bout and them black kings that was rulin' back then." Still talking, he casually put down the book and picked up his cap.

All four of us looked accusingly at T.J. and he halted. "Say, what is this? What's the meanin' of sneakin' up on me like

Words
For
Everyday
Use

au • thor • i • ta • tive • ly (ô thâr'ə tã' tiv lē) *adv.*, conclu-sively, with authority

that anyway? Y'all think I was lookin' for them test questions or somethin'? Shoot, a fellow'd think you didn't trust him." Then, thrusting his arm around Stacey's shoulders, he chided, "Friends gotta trust each other, Stacey, 'cause ain't nothin' like a true friend." And with those words of wisdom he left the room, leaving us to wonder how he had managed to slink out of this one.

The Monday after his arrival Mr. Morrison had moved into the deserted tenant shack that stood in the south pasture. It was a sorry mess, that house. Its door hung sadly from a broken hinge; its porch floorboards were rotted; and its one-room interior was densely occupied by rats, spiders, and other field creatures. But Mr. Morrison was a quiet man, almost shy, and although Mama had offered him lodging in our house, he preferred the old shack. Mama sensed that Mr. Morrison was a private person and she did not object to the move, but she did send the boys and me to the house to help clean it.

Little Man, Christopher-John, and I took to Mr. Morrison immediately and had no objections to the cleaning. Anybody who was a friend of Papa's was all right in our book; besides, when he was near, night men and burnings and midnight tarrings faded into a hazy distance. But Stacey remained aloof and had little to do with him.

After the cleaning I asked Mama if Christopher-John, Little Man, and I could go visit Mr. Morrison, but she said no.

"But, Mama, I wanna know more 'bout him," I explained. "I just wanna know how come he's so big."

"You know about as much as you need to know," she decided. "And long as Mr. Morrison stays here, that's his house. If he wants you down there, he'll ask you."

"Don't know how come y'all wanna go down there noway," Stacey said moodily when Mama was out of hearing.

"'Cause we like him, that's why," I answered, tired of his distant attitude toward Mr. Morrison. Then, as discreetly as I could, I said, "What's the matter with you, boy, not liking Mr. Morrison?"

Stacey shrugged. "I like him all right."

"Don't act that way."

◀ *What words of wisdom does T.J. have about friendship?*

◀ *How do Cassie, Christopher-John, and Little Man feel about Mr. Morrison? How does Stacey feel about him?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

slink (slink) *vt.*, move stealthily
dis • creet • ly (di skrēt'lē) *adv.*, in a carefully conducted way

► *Why doesn't Stacey want Mr. Morrison around?*

Stacey looked away from me. "Don't need him here. All that work he doing, I could've done it myself."

"Ah, you couldn't've done no such thing. Besides"—I looked around to be certain that Big Ma and Mama were not near—"besides, Papa didn't just bring him here to do no work. You know how come he really here."

Stacey turned toward me haughtily. "I could've taken care of that too."

I rolled my eyes at him, but held my peace. I didn't feel like a fight, and as long as Mr. Morrison was within hollering distance of the back porch, it made little difference to me what Stacey *thought* he could do.

"I sure wouldn't want that big ole man stayin' at my place," said T.J. on the way to school. "I betcha he get mad one time, he'd take ole Little Man and swing him over that tree yonder like he wasn't nothin' but a twig." He laughed then as Little Man set his lips and stared angrily up. "Course, I could probably 'bout do that myself."

"Couldn't neither!" denied Little Man.

"Hush, Man," said Stacey. "T.J., leave Man alone."

"Aw, I ain't botherin' him. Little Man's my buddy, ain't ya, Man?" Little Man scowled, but didn't reply. T.J. turned back to Stacey. "You ready for that history test?"

"Hope so," said Stacey. "But I keep forgetting them dates."

"Betcha I could help ya, if you be nice."

"How? You worse than I am 'bout dates."

T.J. grinned, then slyly pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to Stacey. Stacey unfolded it, looked at it curiously, then frowned. "You planning on cheating?"

"Well, naw, I ain't plannin' on it," said T.J. seriously. "Jus' if I gotta."

"Well, you ain't gonna," said Stacey, tearing the paper in two.

"Hey, what's the matter with you, man!" cried T.J. grabbing for the paper. But Stacey turned his back to him and tore the paper into bits, then deposited them in the gully. "Man, that sho' ain't right! I wouldn't do you that way!"

"Maybe not," replied Stacey. "But at least this way you won't get into no trouble."

► *How could T.J. help Stacey on the history test?*

► *How does Stacey ruin T.J.'s plan?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

haught • **i** • **ly** (hôt' i lē) *adv.*, proudly and disdainfully
de • **pos** • **it** (di poz' ə t) *vt.*, lay down, place

T.J. mumbled, "If failin' ain't trouble, I don't know what is."

Little Man, Christopher-John, Claude, and I were sitting on the bottom step of the seventh-grade-class building after school waiting for Stacey and T.J. when the front door banged open and T.J. shot out and tore across the yard. "What's the matter with him?" asked Christopher-John. "Ain't he gonna wait for Stacey?"

The rest of the seventh grade, led by Little Willie Wiggins and Moe Turner, spilled from the building. "There he go!" cried Little Willie as T.J. disappeared on the forest road. Moe Turner yelled, "Let's see where he goin'!" Then he and three other boys dashed away in pursuit of T.J. But the others stood restlessly near the steps as if school had not yet ended.

"Hey, what's going on?" I asked Little Willie. "What's everybody waiting 'round for?"

"And where's Stacey?" demanded Little Man.

Little Willie smiled. "Stacey inside with Miz Logan. He got whipped today."

"Whipped!" I cried. "Why, can't nobody whip Stacey. Who done it?"

"Your mama," laughed Little Willie.

"Mama!" Christopher-John, Little Man, and I exclaimed.

Little Willie nodded. "Yep. In front of everybody."

I swallowed hard, feeling very sorry for my older brother. It was bad enough to be whipped in front of thirty others by a teacher, but to get it by one's own mother—now that was downright embarrassing.

"Why'd Mama do that?" asked Christopher-John.

"She caught him with cheat notes during the history examination."

"Mama knows Stacey wouldn't cheat!" I declared.

Little Willie shrugged. "Well, whether she knowed it or not, she sho' 'nough whipped him. . . . Course, now, she give him a chance to get out of it when he said he wasn't cheatin' and she asked him how he got them cheat notes. But Stacey wouldn't tell on ole T.J., and you know good and well ole T.J. wasn't 'bout to say them notes was his."

"Cheat notes! But how'd T.J. get cheat notes? Stacey got rid of them things this morning!"

"Come noontime though," replied Little Willie, "T.J. was in them woods busy writing himself another set. Me and Moe seen him."

"Well, what the devil was Stacey doing with 'em?"

"Well, we was in the middle of the examination and ole T.J. slips out these cheat notes—me and Clarence here was

◀ *What happens when school lets out?*

◀ *Why does Cassie feel sorry for Stacey?*

◀ *Why was Stacey punished? Why doesn't he explain his way out of the punishment?*

sittin' right behind him and T.J. and seen the whole thing. Stacey was sittin' right side of T.J. and when he seen them notes, he motioned T.J. to put 'em away. At first T.J. wouldn't do it, but then he seen Miz Logan startin' toward 'em and he slipped Stacey the notes. Well, Stacey didn't see Miz Logan comin' when he took them notes, and by the time he saw her it was too late to get rid of 'em. Wasn't nothin' Miz Logan could do but whip him. Failed him too."

"And ole T.J. just sat there and ain't said a word," interjected Clarence, laughing.

"But knowin' Stacey, I betcha ole T.J. ain't gonna get away with it," chuckled Little Willie. "And T.J. know it too. That's why he lit outa here like he done, and I betcha—Hey, Stacey!"

Everyone turned as Stacey bounded down the steps. His square face was unsmiling, but there was no anger in his voice when he asked quietly, "Anybody seen T.J.?" All the students answered at once, indicating that T.J. had headed west toward home, then surrounded Stacey as he started across the lawn. Christopher-John, Little Man, Claude, and I followed.

When we reached the crossroads, Moe Turner was waiting. "T.J. went down to the Wallace store," he announced.

Stacey stopped and so did everyone else. Stacey stared past Jefferson Davis, then back down the road toward Great Faith. Looking over his shoulder, he found me and ordered, "Cassie, you and Christopher-John and Man go on home."

"You come too," I said, afraid of where he was going.

"Got something to take care of first," he said, walking away.

"Mama gonna take care of you, too!" I hollered after him. "You know she said we wasn't to go down there, and she find out, she gonna wear you out again! Papa too!" But Stacey did not come back. For a moment, Little Man, Christopher-John, Claude, and I stood watching Stacey and the others heading swiftly northward. Then Little Man said, "I wanna see what he gonna do."

"I don't," declared Christopher-John.

"Come on," I said, starting after Stacey with Little Man and Claude beside me.

"I don't want no whipping!" objected Christopher-John,

► *Why had T.J. left so quickly when school got out?*

► *Where had T.J. gone? Why does Stacey pause before going there?*

► *Why do Cassie, Christopher-John, and Little Man follow Stacey?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

in • ter • ject (in tər jekt') *vt.*, throw between or among other things

standing alone in the crossroads. But when he saw that we were not coming back, he puffed to join us, grumbling all the while.

The Wallace store stood almost a half mile beyond Jefferson Davis, on a triangular lot that faced the Soldiers Bridge crossroads. Once the Granger plantation store, it had been run by the Wallaces for as long as I could remember, and most of the people within the forty-mile stretch between Smellings Creek and Strawberry shopped there. The other three corners of the crossroads were forest land, black and dense. The store consisted of a small building with a gas pump in front and a storage house in back. Beyond the store, against the forest edge, were two gray clapboard houses and a small garden. But there were no fields; the Wallaces did not farm.

Stacey and the other students were standing in the doorway of the store when Little Man, Christopher-John, Claude, and I ran up. We squeezed through so we could see inside. A man we all knew was Kaleb Wallace stood behind the counter. A few other men sat around a stove playing checkers, and Jeremy's older brothers, R.W. and Melvin, who had dropped out of school long ago, leaned sleepy-eyed against the counter staring at us.

"Y'all go on to the back," said Kaleb Wallace, "lessn y'all wanna buy something. Mr. Dewberry got the music goin' already."

As we turned away from the entrance, Melvin Simms said, "Just look at all the little niggers come to dance," and the laughter of the men filled the room.

Christopher-John tugged at my arm. "I don't like this place, Cassie. Let's go on home."

"We can't leave without Stacey," I said.

Music beckoned from the storage room where Dewberry Wallace was placing round brown bottles on a small table as we crowded in. Aside from the table, there was no furniture in the room. Boxes lined the walls and the center floor had been cleared for dancing—several older couples from Great Faith were already engaged in movements I had never seen before.

"What they doing?" asked Little Man.

I shrugged. "I guess that's what they call dancing."

◀ *What does Mr. Wallace tell them to do?*

◀ *How do the men in the store react to Stacey and the others as they move to the back of the store?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

en • gage (in gāj) vt., involve in activity

“There he go!” someone shouted as the back door of the storeroom slammed shut. Stacey turned quickly and sped to the back of the building. T.J. was fleeing straight toward Soldiers Road. Stacey tore across the Wallace yard and, leaping high like a forest fox, fell upon T.J., knocking him down. The two boys rolled toward the road, each trying to keep the other’s back pinned to the ground, but then Stacey, who was stronger, gained the advantage and T.J., finding that he could not budge him, cried, “Hey, wait a minute, man, let me explain—”

Stacey did not let him finish. Jumping up, he pulled T.J. up too and hit him squarely in the face. T.J. staggered back holding his eyes as if he were badly hurt, and Stacey momentarily let down his guard. At that moment, T.J. rammed into Stacey, forcing the fight to the ground again.

Little Man, Christopher-John, and I, with the others, circled the fighters, chanting loudly as they rolled back and forth punching at each other. All of us were so engrossed in the battle that no one saw a mule wagon halt on the road and a giant man step out. It wasn’t until I realized that the shouting had stopped behind us and that the girls and boys beside me were falling back that I looked up.

Mr. Morrison towered above us.

He did not look at me or Christopher-John or Little Man, although I knew he had seen us, but walked straight to the fighters and lifted a still-swinging Stacey off T.J. After a long, tense moment, he said to Stacey, “You and your sister and brothers get on in the wagon.”

We walked through the now-silent crowd. Kaleb and Dewberry Wallace, standing on the front porch of the store with the Simmses, stared at Mr. Morrison as we passed, but Mr. Morrison looked through them as if they were not there. Stacey sat in front of the wagon with Mr. Morrison; the rest of us climbed into the back. “Now we gonna get it,” shuddered Christopher-John. “I told y’all we shoulda gone on home.”

Before Mr. Morrison took the reins, he handed Stacey a handkerchief in which to wrap his bruised right hand, but he did not say a word and it wasn’t until we had passed the crossroads leading to Great Faith that the silence was broken.

“Mr. Morrison . . . you gonna tell Mama?” Stacey asked huskily.

► What stops the fight?

Words
For
Everyday
Use

husk • i • ly (husk’ə lē) *adv.*, hoarsely

Mr. Morrison was very quiet as Jack the mule clopped noisily along the dry road. “Seems I heard your mama tell y’all not to go up to that Wallace store,” he said at last.

“Y-yessir,” said Stacey, glancing nervously at Mr. Morrison. Then he blurted out, “But I had good reason!”

“Ain’t never no reason good enough to go disobey your mama.”

The boys and I looked woefully at each other and my bottom stung from the awful thought of Mama’s leather strap against it. “But Mr. Morrison,” I cried anxiously, “T.J. was hiding there ’cause he thought Stacey wouldn’t never come down there to get him. But Stacey had to go down there cause T.J. was cheating and—”

“Hush, Cassie,” Stacey ordered, turning sharply around.

I faltered for only a moment before deciding that my bottom was more important than Stacey’s code of honor “—and Stacey had to take the blame for it and Mama whipped him right in front of God and everybody!” Once the truth had been disclosed, I waited with dry throat and nauseous stomach for Mr. Morrison to say something. When he did, all of us strained tensely forward.

“I ain’t gonna tell her,” he said quietly.

Christopher-John sighed with relief. “Ain’t going down there no more neither,” he promised. Little Man and I agreed. But Stacey stared long and hard at Mr. Morrison.

“How come, Mr. Morrison?” he asked. “How come you ain’t gonna tell Mama?”

Mr. Morrison slowed Jack as we turned into the road leading home. “’Cause I’m leaving it up to you to tell her.”

“What!” we exclaimed together.

“Sometimes a person’s gotta fight,” he said slowly. “But that store ain’t the place to be doing it. From what I hear, folks like them Wallaces got no respect at all for colored folks and they just think it’s funny when we fight each other. Your mama knowed them Wallaces ain’t good folks, that’s why she don’t want y’all down there, and y’all owe it to her and y’allselfes to tell her. But I’m gonna leave it up to y’all to decide.”

Stacey nodded thoughtfully and wound the handkerchief tighter around his wounded hand. His face was not scarred, so if he could just figure out a way to explain the bruises on

◀ *What explanation does Stacey give Mr. Morrison? What does Cassie add?*

◀ *Why isn’t Mr. Morrison going to tell Mama?*

◀ *What reasons does Mr. Morrison give for not going to the Wallace store?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

fal • ter (fól’tər) *vt.*, hesitate
dis • close (dɪs clōz) *vt.*, reveal

his hand to Mama without lying he was in the clear, for Mr. Morrison had not said that he *had* to tell her. But for some reason I could not understand he said, “All right, Mr. Morrison, I’ll tell her.”

“Boy, you crazy!” I cried as Christopher-John and Little Man speedily came to the same conclusion. If he did not care about his own skin, he could at least consider ours.

But he seemed not to hear us as his eyes met Mr. Morrison’s and the two of them smiled in subtle understanding, the distance between them fading.

As we neared the house, Mr. Granger’s Packard rolled from the dusty driveway. Mr. Morrison directed Jack to the side of the road until the big car had passed, then swung the wagon back into the road’s center and up the drive. Big Ma was standing by the yard gate that led onto the drive, gazing across the road at the forest.

“Big Ma, what was Mr. Granger doing here?” Stacey asked, jumping from the wagon and going to her. Little Man, Christopher-John, and I hopped down and followed him.

“Nothin’,” Big Ma replied absently, her eyes still on the forest. “Just worryin’ me ’bout this land again.”

“Oh,” said Stacey, his tone indicating that he considered the visit of no importance. Mr. Granger had always wanted the land. He turned and went to help Mr. Morrison. Little Man and Christopher-John went with him, but I remained by the gate with Big Ma.

“Big Ma,” I said, “what Mr. Granger need more land for?”

“Don’t need it,” Big Ma said flatly. “Got more land now than he know what to do with.”

“Well, what he want with ours then?”

“Just like to have it, that’s all.”

“Well, seems to me he’s just being greedy. You ain’t gonna sell it to him, are you?”

Big Ma did not answer me. Instead, she pushed open the gate and walked down the drive and across the road into the forest. I ran after her. We walked in silence down the narrow cow path which wound through the old forest to the pond. As we neared the pond, the forest gapped open into a wide, brown glade, man-made by the felling of many trees, some of them still on the ground. They had been cut during the

► *Why had Mr. Granger been at the house?*

► *Why were some of the trees felled?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

sub • tle (sət’l) *adj.*, perceptive

summer after Mr. Andersen came from Strawberry with an offer to buy the trees. The offer was backed with a threat, and Big Ma was afraid. So Andersen's lumbermen came, chopping and sawing, destroying the fine old trees. Papa was away on the railroad then but Mama sent Stacey for him. He returned and stopped the cutting, but not before many of the trees had already fallen.

Big Ma surveyed the clearing without a word, then, stepping around the rotting trees, she made her way to the pond and sat down on one of them. I sat close beside her and waited for her to speak. After a while she shook her head and said: "I'm sho' glad your grandpa never had to see none of this. He dearly loved these here old trees. Him and me, we used to come down here early mornin's or just 'fore the sun was 'bout to set and just sit and talk. He used to call this place his thinkin' spot and he called that old pond there Caroline, after me."

She smiled vaguely, but not at me.

"You know, I . . . I wasn't hardly eighteen when Paul Edward married me and brung me here. He was older than me by 'bout eight years and he was smart. Ow-ow, my Lord, that was one smart man! He had himself a mind like a steel trap. Anything he seen done, he could do it. He had done learned carpentry back up there near Macon, Georgia, where he was born. Born into slavery he was, two years 'fore freedom come, and him and his mama stayed on at that plantation after the fightin' was finished. But then when he got to be fourteen and his mama died, he left that place and worked his way 'cross here up to Vicksburg."

"That's where he met you, ain't it, Big Ma?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Big Ma nodded, smiling. "Sho' was. He was carpenterin' up there and my papa took me in with him to Vicksburg—we was tenant farmin' 'bout thirty miles from there—to see 'bout gettin' a store-bought rocker for my mama, and there was ole Paul Edward workin' in that furniture shop just as big. Had himself a good job, but that ole job wasn't what he wanted. He wanted himself some land. Kept on and kept on talkin' 'bout land, and then this place come up for sell."

"And he bought himself two hundred acres from that Yankee, didn't he?"

◀ *What was Cassie's grandfather like?*

◀ *How had Cassie's grandfather gotten the first two hundred acres of land?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

vague • ly (vāg'lē) *adv.*, vacantly

► How had the Grangers lost the land?

Big Ma chuckled. “That man went right on over to see Mr. Hollenbeck and said, ‘Mr. Hollenbeck, I understand you got land to sell and I’d be interested in buyin’ me ‘bout two hundred acres if yo’ price is right.’ Ole Mr. Hollenbeck questioned him good ‘bout where he was gonna get the money to pay him, but Paul Edward just said, ‘Don’t seem to me it’s your worry ‘bout how I’m gonna get the money just long as you get paid your price.’ Didn’t nothin’ scare that man!” She beamed proudly. “And Mr. Hollenbeck went on and let him have it. Course now, he was just ‘bout as eager to sell this land as Paul Edward was to buy. He’d had it for goin’ on nigh twenty years—bought it during Reconstruction from the Grangers—”

“‘Cause they didn’t have no money to pay their taxes—”

“Not only didn’t have tax money, didn’t have no money at all! That war left them plumb broke. Their ole Confederate money wasn’t worth nothin’ and both Northern and Southern soldiers had done ransacked their place. Them Grangers didn’t have nothin’ but they land left and they had to sell two thousand acres of it to get money to pay them taxes and rebuild the rest of it, and that Yankee bought the whole two thousand—”

“Then he turned ‘round and tried to sell it back to ‘em, huh, Big Ma?”

“Sho’ did . . . but not till eighty-seven, when your grandpa bought himself that two hundred acres. As I hears it, that Yankee offered to sell all two thousand acres back to Harlan Granger’s daddy for less’n the land was worth, but that old Filmore Granger was just ‘bout as tight with a penny as anybody ever lived and he wouldn’t buy it back. So Mr. Hollenbeck just let other folks know he was sellin’, and it didn’t take long ‘fore he sold all of it ‘cause it was some mighty fine land. Besides your grandpa, a bunch of other small farmers bought up eight hundred acres and Mr. Jamison bought the rest.”

“But that wasn’t *our* Mr. Jamison,” I supplied knowingly. “That was his daddy.”

“Charles Jamison was his name,” Big Ma said. “A fine old gentleman, too. He was a good neighbor and he always treated us fair . . . just like his son. The Jamisons was what folks call ‘Old South’ from up in Vicksburg, and as I under-

Words
For
Everyday
Use

plumb (plum) *adv.*, absolutely

stands it, before the war they had as much money as anybody and even after the war they managed better than some other folks 'cause they had made themselves some Northern money. Anyways, old Mr. Jamison got it into his mind that he wanted to farm and he moved his family from Vicksburg down in here. Mr. Wade Jamison wasn't but 'bout eight years old then."

"But he didn't like to farm," I said.

"Oh, he liked it all right. Just wasn't never much hand¹ at it though, and after he went up North to law school and all he just felt he oughta practice his law."

"Is that how come he sold Grandpa them other two hundred acres?"

"Sho' is . . . and it was mighty good of him to do it, too. My Paul Edward had been eyein' that two hundred acres ever since 1910 when he done paid off the bank for them first two hundred, but ole Mr. Jamison didn't wanna sell. 'Bout that same time, Harlan Granger 'come head of the Granger plantation—you know, him and Wade Jamison 'bout the same year's children—and he wanted to buy back every inch of land that used to belong to the Grangers. That man crazy 'bout anythin' that was before that war and he wantin' his land to be every bit like it was then. Already had more'n four thousand acres, but he just itchin' to have back them other two thousand his granddaddy sold. Got back eight hundred of 'em, too, from them other farmers that bought from Mr. Hollenbeck—"

"But Grandpa and old Mr. Jamison wasn't interested in selling, period, was they, Big Ma? They didn't care how much money Mr. Granger offered 'em!" I declared with an emphatic nod.

"That's the truth of it all right," agreed Big Ma. "But when Mr. Jamison died in 1918 and Wade 'come head of the family, he sold them two hundred acres to Paul Edward and the rest of his land to Harlan Granger, and moved his family into Strawberry. He could've just as easy sold the full thousand acres to the Grangers and gotten more money, but he didn't . . . and till this day Harlan Granger still hold it 'gainst him 'cause he didn't. . . ."

The soft swish of falling leaves made Big Ma look up from the pond and at the trees again. Her lips curved into a tender smile as she looked around thoughtfully. "You know," she said, "I can still see my Paul Edward's face the day Mr. Jamison sold him them two hundred acres. He put his arms 'round me and looked out at his new piece of land, then he

◀ *How did Cassie's grandfather get the second two hundred acres?*

◀ *Why did Harlan Granger want the land?*

1. **hand.** Good

said 'zactly the same thing he said when he grabbed himself that first two hundred acres. Said, 'Pretty Caroline, how you like to work this fine piece of earth with me?' Sho' did . . . said the 'zact same thing."

She grew quiet then and rubbed the wrinkles down one hand as if to smooth them away. I gazed at the pond, glassy gray and calm, until she was ready to go on. I had learned that at times like these it was better to just sit and wait than to go asking disrupting questions which might vex her.

"So long ago now," she said eventually, in a voice that was almost a whisper. "We worked real hard gettin' them crops sown, gettin' 'em reaped. We had us a time. . . . But there was good times too. We was young and strong when we started out and we liked to work. Neither one of us, I'm proud to say, never was lazy and we didn't raise us no lazy children neither. Had ourselves six fine children. Lost our girls when they was babies, though. . . . I s'pose that's one of the reasons I love your sweet mama so much. . . . But them boys grew strong and all of 'em loved this place as much as Paul Edward and me. They go away, they always come back to it. Couldn't leave it."

She shook her head and sighed. "Then Mitchell, he got killed in the war and Kevin got drowned. . . ." Her voice faded completely, but when she spoke again it had hardened and there was a determined glint in her eyes. "Now all the boys I got is my baby boys, your papa and your Uncle Hammer, and this they place as much as it is mine. They blood's in this land, and here that Harlan Granger always talkin' 'bout buyin' it. He pestered Paul Edward to death 'bout buyin' it, now he pesterin' me. Humph!" she grumped angrily. "He don't know nothin' 'bout me or this land, he think I'm gonna sell!"

She became silent again.

A cold wind rose, biting through my jacket, and I shivered. Big Ma looked down at me for the first time. "You cold?"

"N-no, ma'am," I stuttered, not ready to leave the forest.

"Don't you be lyin' to me girl!" she snapped, putting out her hand. "It's time we was goin' back to the house anyways. Your mama'll be home soon."

I took her hand, and together we left the Caroline.

► *What kinds of times had Cassie's grandmother had?*

► *Whom does Big Ma say the land belongs to?*

► *What is Stacey's response when Cassie wants to tell Mama what they have done?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

vex (veks) *vt.*, upset

Despite our every effort to persuade Stacey otherwise, when Mama came home he confessed that he had been fighting T.J. at the Wallace store and that Mr. Morrison had stopped it. He stood awkwardly before her, disclosing only those things which he could honorably mention. He said nothing of T.J.'s cheating or that Christopher-John, Little Man, and I had been with him, and when Mama asked him a question he could not answer honestly, he simply looked at his feet and refused to speak. The rest of us sat fidgeting nervously throughout the interview and when Mama looked our way, we swiftly found somewhere else to rest our eyes.

Finally, seeing that she had gotten all the information she was going to get from Stacey, Mama turned to us. "I suppose you three went to the store too, huh?" But before any of us could squeak an answer, she exclaimed, "That does it!" and began to pace the floor, her arms folded, her face cross. Although she scolded us severely, she did not whip us. We were sent to bed early but we didn't consider that a punishment, and we doubted that Mama did either. How we had managed to escape a whipping we couldn't fathom until Saturday, when Mama woke us before dawn and piled us into the wagon. Taking us southwest toward Smellings Creek, she said, "Where we're going the man is very sick and he doesn't look like other people. But I don't want you to be afraid or uncomfortable when you see him. Just be yourselves."

We rode for almost two hours before turning onto a backwoods trail. We were jarred and bounced over the rough road until we entered a clearing where a small weathergrayed house stood and fields stretched barren beyond it. As Mama pulled up on the reins and ordered us down, the front door cracked warily open, but no one appeared. Then Mama said, "Good morning, Mrs. Berry. It's Mary Logan, David's wife."

The door swung wide then and an elderly woman, frail and toothless, stepped out. Her left arm hung crazily at her side as if it had been broken long ago but had not mended properly, and she walked with a limp; yet she smiled widely, throwing her good arm around Mama and hugging her. "Land sakes, child, ain't you somethin'!" she exclaimed. "Comin' to see 'bout these old bones. I jus' sez to Sam, I sez, 'Who you reckon comin' to see old folks like us?' These yo'

◀ *What information does Stacey avoid mentioning when he confesses?*

◀ *Why is Cassie puzzled by Mama's reaction?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

fath • om (fath'əm) *vt.*, understand
jar (jār) *vt.*, bump and bounce
war • i • ly (war'ə lē) *adv.*, cautiously

babies, ain't they? Lord a'mighty, ain't they fine! Sho' is!" She hugged each of us and ushered us into the house.

The interior was dark, lit only by the narrow slat of gray daylight allowed in by the open door. Stacey and I carried cans of milk and butter, and Christopher-John and Little Man each had a jar of beef and a jar of crowder peas which Mama and Big Ma had canned. Mrs. Berry took the food, her thanks intermingled with questions about Big Ma, Papa, and others. When she had put the food away, she pulled stools from the darkness and motioned us to sit down, then she went to the blackest corner and said, "Daddy, who you s'pose done come to see 'bout us?"

There was no recognizable answer, only an inhuman gut-tural wheezing. But Mrs. Berry seemed to accept it and went on. "Miz Logan and her babies. Ain't that somethin'?" She took a sheet from a nearby table. "Gots to cover him," she explained. "He can't hardly stand to have nothin' touch him." When she was visible again, she picked up a candle stump and felt around a table for matches. "He can't speak no more. The fire burned him too bad. But he understands all right." Finding the matches, she lit the candle and turned once more to the corner.

A still form lay there staring at us with glittering eyes. The face had no nose, and the head no hair; the skin was scarred, burned, and the lips were wizened black, like charcoal. As the wheezing sound echoed from the opening that was a mouth, Mama said, "Say good morning to Mrs. Berry's husband, children."

The boys and I stammered a greeting, then sat silently trying not to stare at Mr. Berry during the hour that we remained in the small house. But Mama talked softly to both Mr. and Mrs. Berry, telling them news of the community as if Mr. Berry were as normal as anyone else.

After we were on the main road again, having ridden in thoughtful silence over the wooded trail, Mama said quietly, "The Wallaces did that, children. They poured kerosene over Mr. Berry and his nephews and lit them afire. One of the nephews died, the other one is just like Mr. Berry." She allowed this information to penetrate the silence, then went on. "Everyone knows they did it, and the Wallaces even laugh about it, but nothing was ever done. They're bad people, the

► Whom are they visiting?

► What does Mr. Berry look at?

► Why had Mama taken them to visit the Berrys?

Words
For
Everyday
Use

gut • tur • al (gut'ər əl) *adj.*, unpleasant, inhuman sound produced in the throat

wiz • en • ed (wīz'ənd) *adj.*, shrunken and wrinkled

Wallaces. That's why I don't want you to ever go to their store again—for any reason. You understand?"

We nodded, unable to speak as we thought of the disfigured man lying in the darkness.

On the way home we stopped at the homes of some of Mama's students, where families poured out of tenant shacks to greet us. At each farm Mama spoke of the bad influence of the Wallaces, of the smoking and drinking permitted at their store, and asked that the family's children not be allowed to go there.

The people nodded and said she was right.

She also spoke of finding another store to patronize, one where the proprietors were more concerned about the welfare of the community. But she did not speak directly of what the Wallaces had done to the Berrys for, as she explained later, that was something that wavered between the known and the unknown and to mention it outright to anyone outside of those with whom you were closest was not wise. There were too many ears that listened for others besides themselves, and too many tongues that wagged to those they shouldn't.

The people only nodded, and Mama left.

When we reached the Turner farm, Moe's widowed father rubbed his stubbled chin and squinted across the room at Mama. "Miz Logan," he said, "you know I feels the same way you do 'bout them low-down Wallaces, but it ain't easy to jus' stop shoppin' there. They overcharges me and I has to pay them high interest, but I gots credit there 'cause Mr. Montier signs for me. Now you know most folks 'round here sharecroppin' on Montier, Granger, or Harrison land and most of them jus' 'bout got to shop at that Wallace store or up at the mercantile² in Strawberry, which is jus' 'bout as bad. Can't go no place else."

Mama nodded solemnly, showing she understood, then she said, "For the past year now, our family's been shopping down at Vicksburg. There are a number of stores down there and we've found several that treat us well."

"Vicksburg?" Mr. Turner echoed, shaking his head. "Lord, Miz Logan, you ain't expectin' me to go all the way to

◀ *What does Mama recommend to other families?*

◀ *Why does Mr. Turner shop at the Wallace store?*

◀ *What objections does Mr. Turner have to Mama's suggestion?*

2. mercantile. Store

Words
For
Everyday
Use

pa • tron • ize (pā'trə nīz) *vt.*, act as a patron, use the services

Vicksburg? That's an overnight journey in a wagon down there and back."

Mama thought on that a moment. "What if someone would be willing to make the trip for you? Go all the way to Vicksburg and bring back what you need?"

"Won't do no good," retorted Mr. Turner. "I got no cash money. Mr. Montier signs for me up at that Wallace store so's I can get my tools, my mule, my seed, my fertilizer, my food, and what few clothes I needs to keep my children from runnin' plumb naked. When cotton-pickin' time comes, he sells my cotton, takes half of it, pays my debt up at that store and my interest for they credit, then charges me ten to fifteen percent more as 'risk' money for signin' for me in the first place. This year I earned me near two hundred dollars after Mr. Montier took his half of the crop money, but I ain't seen a penny of it. In fact, if I manages to come out even without owin' that man nothin', I figures I've had a good year. Now, who way down in Vicksburg gonna give a man like me credit?"

Mama was very quiet and did not answer.

"I sho' sorry, Miz Logan. I'm gonna keep my younguns from up at that store, but I gots to live. Y'all got it better'n most the folks 'round here 'cause y'all gots your own place and y'all ain't gotta cowtail³ to a lot of this stuff. But you gotta understand it ain't easy for sharecroppin' folks to do what you askin'."

"Mr. Turner," Mama said in a whisper, "what if someone backed your signature? Would you shop up in Vicksburg then?"

Mr. Turner looked at Mama strangely. "Now, who'd sign for me?"

"If someone would, would you do it?"

Mr. Turner gazed into the fire, burning to a low ash, then got up and put another log on it, taking his time as he watched the fire shoot upward and suck in the log. Without turning around he said, "When I was a wee little boy, I got burnt real bad. It healed over but I ain't never forgot the pain of it. . . . It's an awful way to die." Then, turning, he faced

► *Why is it easier for the Logans than for other people like the Turners?*

3. **cowtail.** Give in to

Words
For
Everyday
Use

re • tort (ri tort') vt., make a reply

Mama. "Miz Logan, you find someone to sign my credit, and I'll consider it deeply."

After we left the Turners', Stacey asked, "Mama, who you gonna get to sign?" But Mama, her brow furrowed, did not reply. I started to repeat the question, but Stacey shook his head and I settled back wondering, then fell asleep.