

Storylandia

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Marchers' Season

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GRAY ALSOBROOK heard muffled voices outside his bedroom window. Car doors slammed and a boy yelled out “Fucker!” and he was awake. Tires screeched and the voices faded away. Gray sat up at the edge of his bed. Doreen snored behind him.

Gray’s knees popped and creaked as he stood. He shuffled across the carpet to the window, a draft of cold January air coming in through a crack. Familiar pain shot up his leg. In the shifting shadows of his front yard, long white tails of toilet paper hung from limbs of pine and oak. When their two daughters had been in high school, there’d been half-hearted attempts to roll the trees in the yard, followed by sheepish boys with their “yes, sir” and “sorry, sir.” His daughters were gone now—Lilah newly married in Birmingham and Ruthie on an extended path through the university in Tuscaloosa—so this time it was probably aimed at their youngest, Joe.

Gray admired the scope of the job. There was real commitment in it, not a single tree ignored.

The hinges on the front door squeaked. Gray made his way down the hall to find the door ajar. Joe sat on the front steps, looking out at the yard, chin cupped in one hand, his other hand drooped in front of him.

Joe would leave for college in the fall, but lately whenever Gray looked at him, he saw Joe as he looked

at ten, only barely still a child. Gray still understood Joe at ten, but now he was a stranger to him. He was tall and scrawny and had let his hair go long. Too long, thought Gray. Joe only seemed to come to life when a friend was over playing basketball at the backyard hoop Gray had set into a plug of concrete when Joe was twelve, or sometimes when Joe was running out the door on a Friday or Saturday night to go to the game or hang out with friends. He made good grades, though, and never came home smelling of cheap alcohol or cigarettes the way Gray had when he was a teenager. Gray figured he shouldn't complain, except for the feeling he'd missed his chance somewhere along the way.

"Joe," Gray said, almost in a grumble

Joe didn't startle or flinch. "Daddy," he said.

"Know who did this? One of your friends?"

"No, sir. None of my friends would do it. Don't matter. I'll clean it up in the morning." He still didn't look back at Gray.

"All right," Gray said. "Use the ladder from round back if you need it."

Joe turned. "Want to help me with it?" he asked.

Gray wanted to tell Joe he would. Wanted to be out in the brisk morning cold with him, doing something together, even if it was just fishing toilet paper out of trees. "I can't, Joe. Going in to the mill in the morning. You'll have it cleaned up before I get home."

Joe looked for a second like he would question Gray about going in on a Saturday. Gray would tell him about the three log skidders and the busted up pickup that were in the equipment and machine shop he supervised, that they had to be back in the woods or on the road by Monday, about how he had men

relying on him to be there and a company relying on them to get things fixed. But Joe dropped his eyes and didn't ask.

Instead, Joe stood and slipped in the door, keeping a hand behind him. He brushed past Gray and into the kitchen. He dropped something into the trash can before he turned and said, "Night, Daddy." As Joe passed, he gave Gray a little slap on his arm, what went for a hug anymore, then walked down the hall toward his bedroom.

"G'night, son," Gray said. When Joe's door clicked shut, Gray walked into the kitchen and pulled a crumpled sheet of paper off the top of the trash. He turned it over. Scrawled in red was a hangman drawing like the kids used to make when playing word games on family car trips. On eleven dashed lines under the drawing were the all-capped letters, N I G G E R L O V E R.

Gray could feel his pulse pound in his temples. This kind of thing, still, in 1990. He felt dizzy as he walked to Joe's door. He wanted to find out who did this, ask Joe what it was for or why he hadn't shown it to him. But when he raised his fist to knock on Joe's door, he stopped. He dropped his hand to the doorknob, but paused again without turning it. He would talk to Doreen about it in the morning. Together they could figure it out.

He folded the paper neatly and walked back into his room.

WHEN GRAY finished breakfast, Joe was still asleep. Gray pulled on his steel-toed boots and went out the front door to his company truck, all white except for the red corporate logo of the Canadian paper company that had bought the mill fifteen years before. Toilet

paper fluttered in the fragile light.

It was early yet, only six, but the mill was an hour's drive away over Alabama back-country roads. He turned on the radio as he pulled out of the driveway. The fishing and hunting report would come on soon. Maybe the next weekend things would have calmed down enough in the shop so he could head out in the woods before deer season was over.

A news reporter launched into a story. "In the wake of Wednesday's school board vote to not renew the contract of the school system's first African-American superintendent, Russell Livaudais, approximately fifty students gathered on the front steps of Meadowview High School yesterday afternoon. They blocked the line of cars waiting to pick up children after school. Many held signs, saying 'No Justice, No Peace,' and 'Keep Racism Out of Our Schools.'"

Gray snorted. The board's six white members had voted against renewing Livaudais's contract, and the five black ones had voted for the renewal. There'd been a community meeting the next night—something about "Save Our Schools"—and the stories in the paper quoted the usual agitators talking about racism in the government, but Gray always figured there was more to the story.

A woman's voice came on in the report. "Is this what they're teaching our kids? Instigate trouble and block innocent children from getting to their parents?"

The news reporter came back in. "Those were parent Linda Maples' questions, as she was caught up in the protest outside the school. One of the few white students standing in the blockade, senior Joe Alsobrook, had this to say in response..."

Gray looked at the radio, as if he would see

his son's face there. He turned up the volume. Joe's voice, older than he ever imagined, came through the speakers. "We all grew up together. If we've learned something, it's that color doesn't- shouldn't- matter. Doctor Livaudais is a good superintendent. He comes around our classes. He knows all of us, by name. He cares about us. It's the Board, now, that's taught us a different kind of lesson. Our town needs to do better, to be better. We, the students, need to be heard."

When the story was over, Gray grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the console and lit one, then cranked down his window a crack. Cold wind roared in his ear. Joe sometimes brought black friends to the house to shoot baskets or study, but none of them ever seemed the angry, protesting kind. The two-lane in front of Gray was empty of cars, and Gray looked off the roadside at the sunlight cutting through the trees. He tried to picture Joe standing at the head of a pack of students, talking to reporters, facing down angry mothers, but he couldn't. Joe wasn't so serious as that. He was just a kid.

Three deer, a large buck with an eight-point rack and two does, stepped out from the roadside brush and froze on the shoulder, staring down his truck. Gray swerved, said a small prayer they wouldn't jump out at him. They didn't.

The pickup truck waiting for him in the equipment shop had a caved-in grill and smashed radiator from one of the dumb beasts. The deer had flipped up over the hood and crashed through the windshield. The pickup driver had been taken by ambulance to the little hospital in Grove Hill. He'd come back with a bandage covering one eye and a stitched gash down his cheek from a deer hoof, a splint taped to his nose, and his arm in a sling. He'd

said the deer had mauled him in its scramble to get out of the cab, then shook its head after it was out, jumped a guardrail by the side of the road, and tore off into the trees. Gray had heard similar stories a handful of times, as deer looking for easy forage along roadsides would smash up cars, almost always giving worse than they got.

Gray watched in his rearview as the three deer slowly walked across the road. He rounded a curve and they were gone.

WHEN GRAY was little, all the grown-ups around their small Arkansas town called him “Little Joe.” His dad, Joseph Gray Alsobrook, Jr., was “Big Joe.” Big Joe had a red face, big arms, and flat gray eyes. Gray remembered the sound of a big laugh, but only through a wall or from down a hall. With Gray, Big Joe was almost wordless, grim, a belt-wielder when Gray brought home a bad note from the teacher, a dooler out of Saturday chores before he headed into town “for supplies.”

The most Big Joe ever said to Gray at one time was the morning after Gray’s tenth birthday. It was a Monday morning in October.

Gray was in the front yard, pushing his new bike through the yard to ride to school. It had been a birthday present the day before. It was a 1952 Schwinn Hornet, bright metallic green, with the rack on the back and a fender light on the front. Gray had been eyeing it for months, and couldn’t believe his luck.

Big Joe hustled out the front door. “Hold up, Little Joe,” he said. Gray stopped and looked at his dad, not sure what he’d done.

“Yessir?” he asked.

“Let me take that,” Big Joe said, grabbing the

top bar of the bike and wheeling it toward his pickup. "Come on," he said, "I'll drive you to school." Big Joe never drove Gray to school. Gray rarely ever saw him on weekday mornings at all, with Big Joe usually up and gone to his construction job before Gray ever woke up, and that was on the mornings when Big Joe wasn't sleeping over in whatever little town he was working in.

Big Joe lifted the bike over the tailgate. Gray hoisted himself up into the cab and slammed the door behind him.

"Whatcha' think, boy, 'bout being ten?" Big Joe asked as they bounced over the dirt ruts of the lane they lived on.

"It's all right, sir," Gray said. "I like it good enough."

Big Joe glanced at Gray, then stared back in front of him. "Good enough," he repeated after a moment. "Good enough. Yeah, well I guess that's about the song of it," he said.

The two of them rode in silence for a couple minutes, until Big Joe reached the end of the lane and turned out onto the black top of the county road. From there it was another mile into town.

"Where you working at this week, Daddy?" Gray asked.

Big Joe looked over at Gray. "Huh," he said. "I don't know. Maybe Montana, I'm thinking. Or California."

"How's that?" Gray asked. "They're a long way from Arkansas." Big Joe was usually working all over the little hill towns of northern Arkansas, sometimes even as far away as Little Rock or occasionally up into Missouri. One time he had a job in Memphis and was gone from home for three months.

“Don’t question me, boy,” Big Joe said softly, not harsh like he usually said those words. He pulled the truck over into the weeds beside the road. In the distance, Gray could see the brick school buildings at the edge of town.

“Why we stopping?” Gray asked.

Big Joe turned and faced him. “It’s time you stopped being called Little Joe,” he said. “You’re just Joe now.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Gray asked.

“You need to be a man now, son.” Big Joe wrenched the door handle and got out of the cab, but didn’t close the door behind him.

“Come on, Joe,” he said, “climb across.” Gray slid across the bench seat and climbed down. Big Joe put a foot up on the running board and leaned down eye level with Gray. “Joe,” he said, “I’ve got to leave.”

“What, Daddy?” Gray said. “Why? How long’ll you be gone?” He had to squint at Big Joe, because the morning sun was shining down over Big Joe’s shoulder and straight into Gray’s face.

“Look, I’ve given my time to you, and we ain’t going to pussyfoot around this. My daddy only stuck around till I was three,” Big Joe said.

“What’re you talking about?” Gray asked.

Big Joe straightened up, throwing Gray’s face back in shadow. “You’ll understand when you’re growed up, Joe. Alsobrook men, we don’t root down. We ain’t trees. We’re rivers. My daddy went off. His daddy, the first Big Joe, hell, he didn’t even stick to see my daddy get born.” Big Joe leaned back against the seat, and the sun shined back down into Gray’s eyes.

“You ain’t leaving,” he yelled at Big Joe. “You ain’t leaving!”

Big Joe balled a hand into a fist and looked down at his boots. Then he slid backward onto his seat, loosened his fist and reached out to put his hand on Gray's head. "You'll run, too, one day, Joe. Then you'll understand. We're like rivers." His hand fell from Gray's head and reached out to the door handle. "Now, get on to school. And when you get home, you be strong for your Mama. You're the Joe in the house now." And then Big Joe slammed the door shut.

The red pickup started to roll up onto the pavement, its rounded fenders smooth like a greased pig. Gray yelled out, "Hey!" The pickup stopped, half up onto the roadway. "Hey," Gray yelled again. Big Joe rolled his window down, scowled out at Gray.

"What is it, boy?" he asked.

"I ain't your Joe," Gray said. "I ain't no one's Joe. Not Little Joe, not Big Joe, not no kind of Joe. I ain't taking your damn name. I'm Gray," he said. "Gray Alsobrook."

Big Joe's scowl turned into momentary puzzlement, then he looked away, through the windshield in front of him. Gray saw him pump his neck, like he was cussing. Then the pickup rolled onto the pavement and took off down the road. Gray Alsobrook stood on the roadside, alone, angry, without his bike. He kicked a pebble, then walked the rest of the way into town.

GRAY PULLED the company truck into the front gravel lot closest to the mill administration building. A couple other company trucks, belonging to other managers, were in the lot. The back gravel lot farthest from the building was dotted with the pickup trucks of the weekend crews. In the administration building, the receptionist's wood paneled alcove was empty.

Gray passed by the time clock used by the hourly employees and out the back door, where he cut left behind the main boiler building and toward the equipment yard and shop.

As he walked through the large open garage door into the shop, he called out, “Yo,” to Cyrus, his foreman, who stretched over the engine of the deer-damaged pickup truck. The crinkled hood lay on the concrete floor. A new one leaned on a pallet against a wall. Cyrus was the first black foreman in the shop, the first promotion Gray had made when he was elevated from foreman to supervisor. Cyrus had been in the shop longer than anyone in the time that Gray had been there, so when Lon, the old supervisor, retired and Gray was promoted, it just made sense. He heard a year later, during the renewal negotiations with the union, that the white union leadership were raising a stink over black folks starting to get promoted over the whites. He was called into one of the VP’s offices in the admin building and asked whether he’d create a new position above foreman, an assistant supervisor, to put one of the young white union bucks into.

“Don’t need an ‘assistant supervisor,’ Harold,” Gray had told the earnest-faced Canadian executive.

“I know you don’t, Gray. It’s what I told them, that you don’t need one and you wouldn’t go for it. But the union’s holding it over us,” Harold had said.

“Cause I got a damn black foreman in my shop? Hell, Cyrus has been at this mill thirty damn years. Best mechanic in the place.”

Harold had held both hands up to Gray. “Don’t go getting agitated now. I know it isn’t right, and I’m not going to make you do it. Heck, Gray.”

“Well?” Gray had said.

“OK, then,” Harold had replied. “Leave it be.”

Not long after that, every white employee in the shop had transferred out to other parts of the mill. Gray was fine with that.

“Good Saturday, Mr. Gray,” Cyrus called back to Gray as he made his way to his little office walled off in one corner of the shop. Willie and Tom, two other mechanics, were under one of the skidders. All three of them were getting time and a half, as well as a day off from their wives. Gray smiled at the nude Miss January on the calendar on the wall outside his office door, before squeezing through the door and around his metal desk and into the creaking green leather of the second-hand desk chair. Even three years after Lon’s retirement, the office still smelled of the old man’s cheap cigars. It was familiar. Sometimes he thought that maybe old Big Joe must’ve smoked cigars in addition to his pipes. Cheap cigars and pipe smoke equals fathers. Stove-burned milk equals mothers.

As Gray looked over the stack of invoices on his desk, wondering where he should start, Cyrus poked his head through the door.

“Hey, boss, just the three on top are new. Sign those and I’ll stick ‘em back in the mill post,” Cyrus said.

Gray picked up a pen from the desk, and straightened the stack of invoices. “Thanks. Then I’ll give you a hand with that truck?”

“If you want to, but I got it. You salaried folks ain’t getting no extra pay on a Saturday.” Cyrus grinned. This was an old pact. Cyrus knew he’d never shake Gray on an off-day when there were heavy machines in the shop that needed to be out in the woods. Gray knew every man in there would rather be sitting by a stream somewhere, or in a deer stand, or flushing turkeys out into a field. Or visiting the sex woman

the next town over, around the next bend, on the way out “for a pack of cigarettes, be right back.” The mill generally let Gray and his shop run on its own, no interference from the higher corporate dictates, but in exchange Gray took care of his men, and made sure the mill’s equipment was never out of commission for long.

When Gray got back over to the pickup Cyrus was working on, Cyrus had the grill off and had lowered the new radiator into place. While Cyrus was tightening the nuts on the radiator bracket, Gray leaned down to look at the grill.

“Didn’t see an invoice for a new grill,” he said. “Think we can bang this thing back straight?”

“Sure,” Cyrus said between grunts as he torqued the last nut into place. “Just bent one way. Got a mallet that’ll take care of that.”

“Yeah,” Gray said. He picked up the grill and carried it over to a large table under a window at the front of the shop. He picked out a heavy rubber-headed mallet and began to steadily beat the grill back into shape. It wasn’t going to be showroom ready, but nobody in the woods or on the backroads would care much about that. It would do the job, let air through and keep the brush and rocks out.

As he walked it back over to the truck, Cyrus was standing back to look at the radiator, wiping the grease off his hands with a shop rag he always kept stuffed into his back pocket. Willie and Tom leaned against the side of the truck.

“This do?” Gray asked as he handed the grill back to Cyrus. He knew it would more than do, but he liked his guys to see him work, and work well.

“Yeah, boss. That’s all right,” Cyrus said, looking at the grill before leaning it against the front

of the truck. "Break for some coffee?"

They walked over to the folding table outside Gray's office, where a coffeemaker sat, guarded over by the nudie calendar. They sat on some folding chairs by the table, steaming styrofoam cups of coffee in hand.

Tom looked up at the calendar. "She pretty enough," he said, "but ain't no March."

"Ain't nobody gonna be like March," Willie said, and they all laughed, even Gray. After Lon had retired and the next year turned over, he hadn't put up the new calendar from the engine supplier, not right away. But the men had complained enough times that Gray put it up and didn't blink about it again.

"But June sure was nice, too," Gray said. The other men smiled at him, then looked back at January.

"You don't got to say that, you know," Willie said.

"What? I mean it."

"Now, you a white man who likes his chocolate, then, that's all right," Tom said, and laughed again. June had been the only black calendar girl that year. There was always one.

"Just women, Tom. Ain't no problems with that," Gray said. He wished he'd just kept his mouth shut. Sometimes it wasn't worth trying to talk.

"That's right," Cyrus said. "That's right." He'd been quiet, laughing a little softer and a little less, sipping his coffee, concentrating on the floor. Then he said, "Tell me something, Mr. Gray, your son still in school?"

"Sure. Though not for long. Graduating this spring." The pictures in his office were ten years old, the kids young and looking like angels in wide lapels.

"His name Joe?" Cyrus asked.

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Gray felt uneasy. “You heard that radio news this morning?”

Cyrus nodded. Willie and Tom looked up at Miss January some more, pretending they weren’t listening.

“Yeah,” Gray said, “well I don’t really know much about what’s going on up there, you know, at the school.”

“Well he sounded real grown up, Mr. Gray. You doing good,” Cyrus said.

Gray sipped more at his coffee cup, though there was nothing else in it, then looked up at Cyrus. He nodded his head, grunted. Then the four men stood and walked over to look at the skidders.

ON GRAY’S thirteenth birthday, he was determined to become a man.

A couple months before, Gray had been crawling in the cool dark under the raised house, waiting to ambush the lead battalion of the Chinese Red Army in the DMZ, when behind a brick pier he’d found Big Joe’s left-behind stash of tobacco pipes, a metal flask of something that made Gray’s eyes sting when he unscrewed the lid to sniff it, and a blue tin of Kentucky Club. *The thoroughbred of pipe tobaccos*, read the faded label.

On his birthday, after the birthday cake candles had been blown out, the cake eaten, and all his friends but Tim had gotten back on their bikes and pedaled back down the driveway toward their homes, Gray kissed his mom on her cheek, said “thank you, ma’am,” and headed with Tim out the back screen door and into the woods that closed up on the backyard.

“So what’s back in here,” Tim asked as the two boys whacked at vines and branches with a couple

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