

Justice

Wood
(class)

Robbing Honey

Climbing the quick rise of the river bank behind Jack, to meet the sun creeping up the other side, Lige watches the rays fan around his new brother-in-law like the glory off Jesus in the picture at church.

Everything is different now, and Lige wishes with all his wild beating heart that he hadn't come fishing this time. He wishes Jack hadn't gone and messed up and married his sister Mayre yesterday. Even Lige's generally keen sense of direction in the woods is off this morning. His sense of smell too. And he's been here a thousand and one times, teetering above the creek-width black water of the Alapaha in Jack's tracks. And he's always liked it. He breathes deep, untangling the line on one of the cane poles in his left hand while trying not to slosh the bucket full of minnows in the other. Hoping to get back the feeling, he sniffs the bay blooms, but they smell thick and musky, like pear blossoms in a hot room.

Jack tramps along the bank, bamboos tearing at his green twill britches legs. He pays the thorny vines about as much mind as he does Lige, which is none.

Lige knows he's thinking about Mayre; he can smell that too, like cold in his head. He's only eleven years old, farm dumb, but smart enough to know Jack and Mayre slept in the same bed the night before. And it feels all wrong. Jack's like a brother; Mayre, Lige's sister. His favorite sister who used to call out his spelling words when he got off the school bus each evening. Close enough in the porch swing that Lige could smell her girl grownness, her easing away.

Jack sidles behind a tupelo that juts out over the deep part of the river, goes on, and Lige comes in behind him, with the minnow bucket and cane poles, placing a foot in Jack's big boot print. At the bowing tupelo, Lige is left to hang--poles, bucket and body--over the water, while Jack stops and listens, his scrubbed shiny face at attention. Jack cups his ear the way he does when they're deer hunting. Lige stops breathing and listens too, but not because he gives a dang if it's a deer or not, or if they never, ever fish that black water flowing below. The sun mirrors like white hot fire off the surface. Then he hears buzzing in the woods on the right and follows Jack's clear blue gaze to the thicket of bamboos and scrub oaks a few yards off the bank.

"Bees." Jack steps easy, his thick square body making a round heaped shadow on the vines. "Come on." He doesn't look back.

Lige lets go of the tupelo and tiptoes behind Jack, trying to imagine what Jack's doing following a swarm of bees. The sound comes louder as they step off into the spotted shade of gums and palmettoes.

Jack is smiling, his short clear teeth showing through his thin luminous lips--his teeth have never before shown when he smiled. Lige doesn't know what Jack's up to, but whatever it is Mayre's at the center of it.

No 91 Then Lige smells honey, a sticky sweet he can feel on his winter-white arms, and he thinks he does know what Jack's up to.

The swarm of yellow striped bees buzz and hover around the brittle dead trunk of a sweet gum like prisms cast by a mirror.

No 91 Jack's more Indian than Jesus now, as he tips toward the tree with his heavy freckled arms cocked. "Come up easy," he whispers.

Lige wonders if Jack's talking to the bees or to him. It sounds like he's gentling Lige's mama's milk cow. And somehow he feels Jack's making light of him, of his youth and what youth does and doesn't know--can't know. And he's glad that Mayre has such a temper, that she'll be mad as usual when they get home and make Jack scratch his dumb square head the way he does when she flies off the handle. That's what Lige's mama says about Mayre, the prettiest girl in the family, the youngest, the sweetest, the one all the boys came calling on, and her laughing, little squeaks making up in her long soft throat like notes from a harmonica. She's really too leggy and short-waisted, her fine blond hair too thin, to be the beauty she is--a real mystery--but her eyes are clear aqua and wide. Sassy eyes that hold you.

Jack starts striking matches, grinning, and tries to set fire to his holey white handkerchief. The cloth catches, scorches, curls and flares up in a black half circle toward his thumb and finger. He holds it away like it's nasty. When the white scrap smokes good, Jack tilts away and fans it, smoke arching to the arch of scattering

bees. He laughs [?] low, a sissy laugh, high-pitched and evil. His reddish beard looks like thorns along his square jaw.

Lige feels weak--weak-stomached--watching Jack, and feels as if he's never seen this man before. Some stranger in their old fishing place. Some stranger Lige wishes he could leave there fanning the handkerchief and laughing, more devil now than Indian or Jesus.

"Come on." Jack makes a rolling motion with his other hand for Lige, while ducking beneath the scatter of bees and smoke. He crosses the purple-rust bed of leaves to the brittle, topped sweet gum with the hull trunk. Then he starts tearing dry splintered wood from the tree, while fanning the handkerchief behind him.

The bees gather and hover in the cluster of scrub oaks near the river bank like they're grouping to charge.

Lige, ducking low, tips across the dead leaves toward Jack.

"Look at that, will you?" Jack pokes his head in the hollow of the tree, his right hand raised, waving the handkerchief. His body's stiff, and the waving hand looks like it doesn't belong.

Lige couldn't look inside the hollow if he wanted to--Jack's covering the hollow--and the scorched smell really messes up his sense of smell and direction in the woods. He doesn't know why, but he doesn't want Jack to know he's messed up or that he gives a hoot whether Mayre married him and moved out.

Jack says, "Umm, that's good," licking two thick honey-coated fingers, and then he looks back at Lige like he's got something on him. "Dump them minnows and bring the bucket here."

Lige stands there a minute, looking from Jack to the dull metal minnow bucket, then out at the hovering bees between him and the river bank. He drops the poles, fearing he might set the bees off again if he leans them on the weeping willow between him and the river. He starts back along the trail to keep from walking through the bees, to dump the minnows in the river.

"Where you going, Little Bit?" Jack hisses, waving the smoking, dwindling kerchief.

"To dump the minnows in the river."

"Dang, boy! Dump 'em right there." Jack holds the kerchief still, and the little ringed flame goes out.

Lige looks at the bucket, then at Jack.

"What ails you this morning?" Jack strikes more matches, holding a tiny flame to the ragged black end of the kerchief. He has to strike two matches before the handkerchief lights and he curses twice. He always curses when he's off with Lige because men curse, are supposed to curse, to take a drink and a dip. But always before Jack's been Lige's big-brother teacher.

Lige flips the half lid of the bucket, pricked with holes, and dumps the tiny silver fish to the dirt. They flip and curl in the puddle, and as it runs off and soaks into the loamy dirt, they flop to their sides and lay like hoof shavings.

"Now get that bucket over here," Jack says, not mean now, but eager, full of fun. He dips his finger back into the hollow of the trunk and tastes the honey. "Umm." He shakes his head and twitches head to toe, his crewed scalp picking up spatters of light as the sun rises over the tops of the tall pines. He's even forgotten to wave the kerchief, and the swarm of bees hover nearer.

Lige circles wide to avoid the bees and slips behind a patch of cat claw briars, watching the swarm. He should holler out for Jack to wave the handkerchief, which now burns closer to his finger and thumb. He should.

As though he senses the bees, Jack flaps the handkerchief, still tasting the honey, and the bees swarm toward Lige. He crashes through the palmettoes and gallberries, his rubber boots rubbing his heels raw, and watches the bees as he nears Jack. "Here." Lige bumps Jack's shoulder with the bucket.

"We gone fill it up, Little Bit," Jack says, his finger making a popping noise as he yanks it from his mouth and looks back. "Mayre's gone love this on biscuits."

She can't cook, Lige thinks, remembering how his mama, who was old when he was born, had done her dead-level best to teach Mayre to cook.

I don't care two cents about cooking, Mama." Mayre'd laughed and poked a stick of fire wood into the wood stove which sat in the corner, devouring the wood Lige brought in. (They called him Little Splinter Boy.) I'm gone have a maid to wait on me, she'd said.

"Yeah," Jack, still sampling the honey, turns and his face glistens with honey smears. He looks ugly and Lige wonders why he used to want to look like him.

Lige's six brothers are older, all war veterans. Four fought in the Korean War and two in World War 11. And when they came back they told war stories on the front porch at night and talked down to Lige because he'd had to stay home on the farm with his old Mama and Daddy. He never told them that he'd spent long hours of every day and night checking the sky over Howell with Mr. Dave Wright for bombers. His Mama knew, even said she was proud. But she didn't tell them, and Lige wondered if maybe she was ashamed of him or was protecting him when "the boys", as she called his brothers, reared back on the porch rockers and smoked and tried to out war-story each other.

Till this day, Jack had never belittled Lige.

"Hold the bucket, Lige," Jack says. "Right here, up against the trunk." He drops the handkerchief and stomps it out.

^{LIGE}
~~Jack~~ holds the bucket, watching Jack scoop out handfuls of cone and honey to the can.

The smell is so strong it reminds Lige of the taste, drawing- sweet and strangling. Makes him want a drink of water.

"What you think?" Jack isn't really asking; he has a way-off look as he plunks the honey in the bucket, a pile of oozing liquid and waxy cone like fresh-dipped resin. "Your sister's gone like this?"

"Yessir." Lige watches the bees as they swarm back to the clearing.

"Yessir?" Unblinking, Jack stares Lige square in the eyes. He laughs, his hands dripping honey. "Since when did you go to saying yessir to me?"

Lige looks down, can see the tip of his white nose, the toes of his boots.

"How bout if you come over to our house and eat some biscuits and honey for supper tonight?"

"Can't." Lige watches the bees make figure eights, nearing, their buzzing clear and strong and growing. The striped muscles in his lanky arms and legs tighten.

"Bet your mama won't mind." Jack plunks another double handful of honey into the bucket, glancing back at the bees. "One more." The bucket's nearly bout full.

"She can't cook," Lige says through his teeth.

The bees are swarming nearer, swarming without pattern, with a fierce buzz.

Jack laughs. "I know she can't cook. I'm liable to starve." He looks back quick at the bees, licks one dripping sticky finger and slings his hands. The bees settle and swarm above them, dropping lower. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Lige stands there as Jack darts through the sweet gums, slinging long teardrops of honey on the palmettoes and bamboos. Lige feels cold and stiff, like it's raining with the sun shining, dripping through his yellow curly hair to his scalp.

A bee lights on the thick gum of honey in the bucket and sticks, then another and another and another, till when Lige does step forward with the bucket bumping his knees, he's carrying the whole swarm. He doesn't know whether to drop the bucket and run or carry

the swarm with the honey. He walks on anyway, watching the bees, then Jack, who has stopped to look back, and stands framed against the light casting from the sun shot water. Rays all around him.

"Leave the bucket," Jack says, his eyes wide and still and sad soft.

"No, it's our honey." Lige walks on with the bucket bumping his knees, as one by one the bees tear free and swarm back to the hive.