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Short Story

### Little Nigger

It had been a long hot morning, and the sun was still advancing toward noon.

Ocie rocked back on the heels of the rickety chair and *waited*, ~~paused~~ fondling the mended legs.

"Yessir," he said, tossing his ~~square~~ head back to guffaw, moving up the ranks on his stunned yankee brother-in-law. "They ain't nothing like living in this neck of the woods if you want to have a big time."

The visit hadn't started out in guarded hostility, but it looked as if it would end ~~in~~ that way - if it ever did end. *Still* the energetic ~~discourse~~ <sup>*sparrow wit-sparrow*</sup>, often bordering on ~~ribaldry~~, beat the heck out of listlessly sneaking around, as Ocie had since Their arrival the evening before, trying to improvise quiet in which ~~he~~ <sup>*to*</sup> might read his newspaper and learn what They'd done to cause his piddling stocks to drop.

Hadn't that son-of-a-yankee, John Merritt, been treating them like they were quaint <sup>*EVER*</sup> since he had swaggered through the door? Ocie asked himself - even asked <sup>*ING*</sup> Ida before he had retreated to the <sup>*TEMPORARY*</sup> privacy of the sideyard.

He clasped his hands behind his nappy gray head and cut his eyes toward the ~~old tool shed~~ <sup>*shed of the old cotton house*</sup>, cluttered with ~~random~~ relics

*rearranged*

from the old homeplace. He'd already [defiled one-third of the sacred treasures in the spawning of his deliberate tales. Oh, there was a measure of truth in all of them but more exaggeration.

Let's see, he's used up the glass demi-john jug, webbed with scratches, which Ida planned to turn into a terrarium, first chance she got: one-hundred proof moonshine up to the rim, everybody - even the younguns, when they were home - sampling, staggering back to the still in the pinewoods behind the house for a refill.

His laughter caught in his throat as he recalled his tale, glancing at John Merritt, black hair pruned like a city cedar, on his right. John looked odd correctly seated in the other discarded chair beside Ocie's <sup>*rearranged cotton shed exhibit.*</sup> ~~toolshed.~~ <sup>*Amazighift toolshed.*</sup> Ocie usually entertained only intimate friends there in his little clearing between <sup>*the*</sup> voluptuous grapevine, arbored with stout rustic posts, and the archaic, even naked, practicality <sup>*cotton shed,*</sup> of the toolshed. The woods breathed at his back with locusts and crickets in the requiem of souging pines.

<sup>*beside*</sup> Next to the white modest house on his left, the clearing provided a generous view of the dirt road out front where his <sup>*to the N.*</sup> neighbors passed enroute to work in <sup>*Valdosta Ga, ten miles away from the N.*</sup> ~~town,~~ community and church functions, or to the country store a mile away at the crossing. Most of them farmed, as he had before he had retired. The sounds of each of their tractors he could identify. Hoke Timmer's engine peeped like a killdeer, intermittent, pleading. Ocie'd offered to tamper with it and <sup>*locate*</sup> the problem as soon as Hoke

got the crop in. Cranford Hall had bought a new one with his crop money from last year, a ~~smooth sweet song~~ <sup>sweet smooth hum</sup> on the day. It was a mistake, Ocie had told him. Farming was too unstable for 1988. But he was secretly glad that someone still had the faith to purchase a new red tractor.

No. He'd already taunted John Merritt with the story about the mule he and his Pa had worked to death that summer in 1925, he thought, allowing his eyes to roam from the plow stock ~~hung~~ on the seasoned wall of the ~~toolshed~~ <sup>cotton shed</sup>. He smiled, thinking of John Merritt's ~~response~~ <sup>reaction</sup>. His pupils had dialated with unbridled agitation, and he'd babbled some unintelligible lament. <sup>longing</sup> ~~accents~~

"Yessir," Ocie had said. "I'm here to tell you, a tractor ain't nothing up agin a mule. Twelve ears of corn a day - if you can remember to feed ~~up~~ <sup>him</sup> - and he'll work till he drops. I reckon I must've forgot to feed ~~him~~ <sup>up</sup> the day before. Anyhow, he shore dropped dead in the field. Course, me and Pa had been taking turns walking behind him since first ~~day~~ <sup>LIGHT</sup>. Weren't no water in the branch what run behind the field, cause of the drought.

"Onliest way he'd have got some was if we'd a-toted it and we didn't have time, what with the corn needing laying by like it did. By sundown, he was staggering, us working on till the moon riz. And that's when old Creasy got started ~~to~~ twitching.

"Pa says, 'Boy, what you done to that mule?' Course I says I ain't done nothing. 'What you reckon ails him, then?' Pa says, standing their drinking a glass of canesugar water Ma sent out in a jug to ~~keep us~~ <sup>keep us</sup> pertene ~~us~~ up.

"'I ain't got no notion, Pa,' I says, already trying to figger out if I'd fed him the night before or not. 'Reckon he might need a swig of water?' I asked Pa. And before he could figger study on it, standing there scratching his old head, <sup>red</sup> neck blistered ~~red~~ from the sun, that danged mule just dropped like a rock. Didn't move ary hair, blowflies blowing him, buzzards circling overhead. Know what Pa says?"

"What?" John Merritt said, sitting erectly in his chair, his white shirt glaring in the sun.

"He says for me to go to <sup>the cotton shed,</sup> ~~the toolshed,~~ right <sup>yonder,</sup> ~~there,~~ and get the shovel <sup>so as we can bury</sup> ~~and let's bury~~ him right where he laid," Ocie said, cutting his eyes toward John, waiting.

"That shed?" John Merritt asked, nodding toward it without looking.

"Yeah," said Ocie. "Same old shovel yonder we used when that old nigger Creasy dropped dead down the end of the lane..."

"The mule was named Creasy," John Merritt corrected, kneading his soft white hands.

"Yeah, we named the mule after old Creasy," interjected Ocie. "Anyhow, when old Creasy dropped dead, we aimed to drag him off in the woods, like anybody else would, but we figgered the fitting thing was to bury him where he'd plowed so many furrows in his good days..."

"The mule," John said, bearing down on Ocie with his clear tone.

"Old Creasy," Ocie said. "So, we dug a hole, say, six by two or so - and us plum wore out to the bone - and both of us together tugged at him till we got'em in. Pa says a few words

over him, thanking the Lord-above for good cheap..."

"Labor?" John Merritt said, leaning toward Ocie.

"Equipment," said Ocie, ~~deliberately~~ scowling at John Merritt.

"My Pa was a righteous man, Hard-shell Baptist, salt-of-the-earth," said Ocie, glimpsing an old white tobacco sheet, draped over an inside rafter, through a crack in the <sup>cotton house</sup> ~~wooded~~ wall. "I don't know if you know it or not but he was the one headed up the first Klu Klux Klan in these parts."

"No!" said John, mouth agape.

"Swear to God!" said Ocie, mirroring John Merritt's expression.

He <sup>reared</sup> ~~looked~~ back, <sup>furtively</sup> twisting his neck, <sup>toward the women's</sup> ~~continually~~, as though <sup>check on the exact location of the women,</sup> ~~protect the women,~~ <sup>Stalling for effect, he inhaled the</sup> ~~protect the women,~~ <sup>stalling odor</sup> kitchen clatter and laughter wafted on the ~~can~~ yard, with the raw smell of leftover coffee ~~stalling~~, he inhaled the rich savage earth beneath the grapevine, <sup>scents of the</sup> ~~stalling~~ A mocking bird chirped from within the tangled vines.

"One dark night," Ocie <sup>hissed it</sup> ~~begin~~, heaving madly as he leaned nearer John Merritt. "It was about this time've the year... You ever seen that picture show, TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD?"

"Yes. Why?" John Merritt asked, too loud, <sup>scanning</sup> ~~canvassing~~ the yard, ~~glancing quickly toward the back door,~~ clearing his throat, and crossing his legs punctiliously.

"Well, you know how stuff gets started out've nothing in the south, then," Ocie said, glancing back, ~~one, two,~~ again at John Merritt. "Oh, me! I'm here to tell you!"

"What?" John Merritt hissed. "What?"

"I can't tell it."

"Huh?" John Merritt said. "I wouldn't tell anyone."

"You a Mason?"

"A what?"

"You know, a Mason, a member of the Masonic Order? Yall ain't got no clubs in N.Y.?" Ocie asked, squinting at him, deliberating exposing his top row of teeth until his gold tooth flashed; John winced and Ocie posed.

"We've got the Rotary Club. I'm a member in good standing."

"Naw, that won't do," said Ocie. "Won't do atall."

He <sup>covertly</sup> ~~covertly~~ **OBSERVED** John's disappointed face: ~~by cutting~~  
his ~~eyes~~ his clean dimpled chin twitched.

"You a Shriner?" Ocie asked solemnly.

"No," John Merritt said, eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Well, I be derved if that weren't old Clute Tuten come by and didn't even stop!" Ocie said, <sup>jerking</sup> ~~sitting~~ upright and clasping his hands between his knees, stretching forward to watch the old blue Ford pickup being swallowed by the dust as it pattered past. "That sucker might think he's gonna get my vote without paying for it, but he's gonna get a fooling."

"Paying," said John, squeaking, stretching, inhaling the dust spreading across the sun-grazed yard.

"Yeah, Will Sanders appreciates a man's vote. Gone up to ten dollars, five in the quarters."

John Merritt's breathing <sup>CREW</sup> ~~was~~ labored and even, as though he ~~had to coax~~ each natural function through.

"Ocie, yall come on and eat!" shouted Ida from the back screendoor, her voice striking sharp<sup>y</sup> on the lull.

"We're a-coming, Dear," Ocie called in a natural solicitous tone, going fiendish, malevolent. "Damn aggravating woman! She better have my grits and chttlings this time. I'm gonna have to take the whip to her, first<sup>y</sup>'n last."

John Merritt gazed with Ocie at the aged-leather whip neatly coiled and hung from a nail on a hand-hewed shed post. "Can't get it right without a whipping!" Ocie added, laughing fiendishly. "Yaa, Lordy!" he said, subsiding, wiping tears of glee from his sun-bright cheeks. "That puts me in mind of what our preacher said the other day. He didn't tell this, I want you to know, while he was preaching; it was afterward while a bunch of us men was gathered around outside trying to figger out what to do about <sup>them dern</sup> the Methodists trying to get our members. Anyhow, Brother Levi - that's our Baptist preacher - said his wife, Sister Coretta, she got so used to getting whipped for ~~slu~~ubbering over her house work, got to where she was coming to him for it on mornings when she didn't feel up-to-snuff to get herself going."

Laughter claimed Ocie as he reared back on the bogging chair legs and almost lost his balance, catching on one hand. Recovering, he came eye to eye with his stricken brother-in-law. <sup>aw</sup> (LOCKED EYES)

"You whip Grace, now and then, too, don't you?" he said soberly, one gray-spoked eye twitching.

"No," John Merritt said, wiping his dewy brow.

"Yall don't do that up there?"

"No," John said, showing symptoms of enlightenment in a growing smile.

Grinning wide, he exposed bare pink gums, flecked with brown. His tongue constantly flicked at the gnats swarming around his broad flat nose. The whites of his eyes were flecked with brown, like his gums. His jet black back and chest blinked through slits in his tattered shirt. Thin as a rail, he gyrated, timidly lurching about, rolling his eyes as he continued his aimless salute.

"Who that you got there, Mr. Ocie?" he said, his speech in trilling iambs.

"Oh, that's just my wife's sister's husband from up around New York," Ocie said, still booming, grinning, watching John Merritt's aghast face.

"Miss Ida's brother, you say?" Ichabod said, dancing foot-to-foot. "All the way come from New York?"

"Yeah, he's just down here <sup>to George</sup> for Miss Grace to visit the old homeplace, check up on family and all," said Ocie.

"That good! That good! Gotta check on the family," said Ichabod, purblind, restive, eager to be gone.

"Off a-fishing, huh?" said Ocie.

"Yawsuh, gonna see if I can't catch me some red <sup>FIN</sup> pikes out've the branch, suh."

"Catch many yesterday?" Ocie asked.

"Nawsuh, weren't enough for a mess."

"Don't say," said Ocie. "Well, come on back by and get you a mess of black-eyed peas when you get the chance," said Ocie, toning down.

"Shore will, now," said Ocie. "I be seeing yall, heah."

"Good-day," said Ocie, watching him amble along the ribbon of gray sand, curled at the curves.

"My God!" said John Merritt, <sup>perked</sup>flushed, fanning, watching Ichabod limp off. "Where do you whip your negroes at?" he asked, still hypnotised.

"Huh?" said Ocie.

"You know?" said John Merritt. "Whipping. Where do you people whip them?"

"Little Nigger?" asked Ocie, waspish<sup>ly</sup>, falling into cadence again. "I tell you, my Pa's whipped a many a nigger."

"Ocie, yall come on now!" shouted Ida from the back door.

"Once upon a time..." Ocie started, letting it linger as he stood and carried both chairs to the shed, seeing all the implements and tools from the past so proudly displayed on the wall. He had hung each on existing nails where his grandfather and father had conveniently hung them <sup>over the span of a century</sup> one half and a century <sup>before</sup>. He thought he would choke on his own stammering, smother in John Merritt's <sup>excited</sup> breath on his neck.

As he placed the chairs against the wall, a tarnished confederate saber fell, <sup>striking, bridging the two chairs,</sup> landing across the chairs, seat to seat.

the end