

"Mr. T.B."

by

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SHORT Fictional Essay

ESSAY

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" MR. T.B. "

I can see him, T.B. Brown, in my mind's eye, but I do not know if it is an image drawn on my adult imagination or the reckoning of my timid childhood. Either way, it did not matter until now, some thirty years later when well advanced into the scoping of my past. It did not matter until his mark on the world underscored the fragments of my past, drawing them to a whole in an unbroken line.

Now I know him: a black man, a nigger in 1950, in the deep south where Georgia borders Florida. His eyes gleam like black coals, unsmoldering, flickering appropriately in the whiteman's presence, but a secret pride burrows in the squint. He is tall and sinewy, but frail and stooped, carrying his timorousness like a torch on the crown of his bowed head; the hair is clipped close to his egg-shaped head and gives the appearance of burncurled grass on a knoll of flatwoods pasture. The stringy fingers with the purplish

nails seem to be perpetually gathering air and tucking it in the pockets of his gray twill pants where they fidget in knotty fists as he shifts from foot to foot. And the same strutting chest seen walking goes concave, sunken within the black jacket, which is worn in shiney patches of blue. But the arms of the pocketed hands expose an incongruous red lining - not bold red but blanched flannel, nubby with lint.

He seemed taller when I was smaller, when my child-world looked up and out from the school yard scratched out on the fringes of the nigger quarters of Sowell. But everything seemed tall to me then, large as the bread-bursting oak that sheltered me while my classmates scouted for notable mischief - we were fresh school starters then - or lost themselves in innocent play. Little girls in patent shoes huddled along the fence and giggled as the boys in pressed khaki scrambled along the wire mesh, like caged pups.

I, alone, did not comprise my world of snarled hair and sleptin dresses that snaked tattered sashes on the roots of the oak. I think others huddled there at safe intervals

with ~~base~~^{BARE} toes scrunching the gray sand. I know they did, but I cannot remember their faces. They would have been insignificant anyway, because they would have only mirrored my general displeasure with the circumstances that tore me from my safe nook, the front porch swing that overlooked the southern route to and from Sowell. I rarely looked but knew that the similar tall-gabled houses along the way were peopled with those who were vital and blessed, different. And different meant better to the introverted, tow-haired girl in the porch swing whose feet could not reach the floor.

No blacks passed there, in the periphery of my world, except one family - starched and pressed as their clothes - who humbly treked to the black church on the other end of Sowell every Sunday morning and night, as well as Wednesdays. It was not Methodist or Baptist or Church of Christ or God, like the whites, but the nigger church, one denominational and obscure, even insignificant. T.B. Brown probably attended, also. But I didn't think that then, if I thought at all, from where I ducked behind the wall of my mind.

I don't really remember even sorting his shanty from the row of shanties behind the school yard fence. They were just a long front of gray nigger shacks with yards properly littered with debris - not even the pop bottles and paper, tin cans and shoes I can identify ^{now in} ~~now in~~ the same place. They were a mere backdrop for my downcast eyes which watched those vital and blessed children scale the fence and dash to one of the shanties where a four-row plot of mid-ripe tobacco plants burst from fecund soil. The surrounding earth was packed to a charcoal patina by bare feet. But I don't think that I saw them padding across the dewy grass that linked the schoolyard to the sterile soil. I don't think I saw the white-aproned black women on the other porches of the shotgun houses gape at the audacity and amble back inside. I don't think I saw the schoolless black children wide-eyed with wonder, clutching pop bottles to their popbellies, hang back in the eaveshadows of the overcast ^{MORNING} ~~morning~~. I think I heard it all in a thousand pompous, reprimanding recitations over the years before I graduated from high school. And I know I could still hear

it if I ventured to mention the name "T.B." in the right crowd:

"I won't never forget the time J.T. and them took a notion to crop old T.B. Brown's tobaccer for him. They just takes off, right up under old lady Riter's nose - you remember her; that'un we got from Jasper after Miss Effie died, God bless her soul. They just takes right off and jumps that bobwire fence and heads out for old T.B. Brown's tobaccer patch. I'm here to tell you, they cropped every last leaf of hit. Wadn't nothing left astanding but a bunch of stalks when he come in for dinner. And there they was, done back acrost the fence, playing like they was a cooking it off. That lil ole gal of Jeb Saul's was the one they told done the stringing. Her and Dasse and Hat's youngun. J.T. and them was the lead, though. He'd tell you about hit, to this day, if he was here; how I tore the flinder rackets out of him after old T.B. Brown come amoping up to tell on'em. Yessiree Bob! You could tell he was natural mad, but he didn't let on. Come to me cause

I was head of the school board, back then. Didn't have no notion my boy was the ring leader. Let me see. They was Ruth and Bug's youngun had a hand in it. Pretty shore Elec's boy had a hand in it, too. Of course, Judge Weverington's boy done his part. Taft and Dilmer's lil ole gal over yonder went right along with it, too. She might not own up to it now, since she's got off and got so high falutin'. But she went right along with that whole drove of litluns."

And I had never left my perch on the oak root. I cannot pinpoint the day nor the hour, only a general musty morning beneath the oak overlooking the refuse of Sowell. They were all musty morning recesses that fill the blank of my early school memories. Yet, how vivid the old black man in the redlined jacket looms. Tall as the oak, venerable and stately, planted there with long noble legs stretched from end to end of the shanty row, like a story book picture of a giant's stance.

But I would never have even remembered his name if an incident had not later jogged my memory. It was that incident or accident that raised him from his grave in the nigger

graveyard set back behind Troublesome Creek. And it had been painted over, many times, with numerous coats of colors. My hand felt it there, a slight etching on the wall of my great uncles old farm house. I felt it, only ridged indentions in the hand-planed pine. If not for nostalgia and patience, long overdue, I would have missed it. In the dustmotes of evening drifting in the vacant hall, I stopped and peered at the glossy white paint applied by the new tenant. Still, I could not see it. So I pressed through the diffused rays of sun from the window behind me as I traced the ragged etching with my fingers: "T.B."

The only power it held for me was in my mystic musing over the past, over what child's tender hand had carefully etched his name under the spell of a fervent urging to leave his mark on the old house shuffling tenants with time. I brushed it with my entire hand, fanning the surface as a snug image surfaced. It grew to the giant as one of my fingers divined the nail etched "Mr." attached.

From evasive and suspicious answers to my inquiries, I learned that T.B. Brown had worked for my great uncle in his prime. Field work. How did he gain the ^{ACCESS} ~~address~~ or the audacity to scratch his name on the whiteman's wall? How did he dare etch a "Mr." in front of the engraving in the era of the nigger? No one knew, and no one cared. No, except me. The mention of "T.B." brought only various tired renderings of the tobacco gathering ^{ANTIC} ~~scene~~ told in high tones of amusement.

Indifference to his legacy, I never mentioned the proudly etched "Mr."