

Part I

Chapter One



I can still see him as he looked when I was a kid, moving slowly down a hot, dusty street, big as a mule and black as a man can be, lumbering along in faded overalls on wide bare feet, his thick body leaning to one side as he rounded a corner with his wagon, three or four dogs following along behind him.

Not only was he considered simpleminded, he lived much of his life with a disfigurement that caused people to stare, and because we humans can manage to be so unkind to each other at times, he gained a rude nickname that threatened to replace his own.

I knew Jubal nearly all of my seventy-five years, ever since I was a boy growing up in the Mississippi Delta, and I've missed him every day since he passed on. I'm the only one who knows the entire story, and now that I can sense my own sunset drawing near, I feel it's time to tell it.

I owe my existence to Jubal—an unlikely turn of events to say the least, that in that time and that place a simple black man would make my life possible.

It was the 1930s, and for awhile it seemed we were the two luckiest kids in the world, Sarah and I. And, compared to most children in that little Mississippi town, we probably were. The Depression dominated the economy, and most people's lives, but we were fortunate. Although our family didn't have any of that "old money" as Mama called it, our father, Reid Dunaway, was top salesman at Hardiman's Mercantile, the biggest store in town.

Daddy could sell anything, and everybody in Linville and all of Crowden County loved him. He's the one who named me Lucas.

Daddy grew up in the cotton fields, a "hayseed kid" as he liked to put it, though he'd hardly ever seen a bale of hay. He delighted in referring to himself as a "ridge runner" too, which was also ridiculous, because not many people in that flat Delta country had ever even seen a ridge. He thought it was funny, though, and he grinned every time he said it. I can hardly remember him when he wasn't grinning.

However Daddy chose to describe himself, he was a country boy all the way, and he surely looked the part. He stood six-foot-two, and though he filled out some after he became an adult he never did lose that gangly, boyish look.

He had a wealth of freckles and a shock of sandy hair that went wherever it wanted—flying around his head and settling first one way and then the other according to the direction the wind was blowing and which way he happened to be pointed at the time. And ears—Daddy had those ears that only country folk seem to get, the kind that look like somebody left the doors standing open on a car.

Daddy walked with a long, loose-legged stride, stretching out as far as his legs could reach with every step—a gawky gait that one could recognize a quarter of a mile away. He ran the same way, and whenever someone kidded him about it he just laughed and said it got him where he wanted to go, and saved him a few steps in the process.

As a boy Daddy had been an accomplished athlete. Although Sarah and I could hardly imagine him as a baseball player, he was better coordinated than he appeared, and that long-legged run of his was deceptive; it carried him faster than it looked like he was going. Folks said when he ran the bases in high school he looked like a bounding ostrich, but the team of frustrated guys trying to take him out failed to see the humor in the spectacle.

Daddy may have been a poor country boy, but he was a winner. Being a baseball star who happened to possess an irresistible personality, he managed to land one of the prettiest girls in town: Jessica Tolliver, our mother.

When it came to looks, Mama was Daddy's opposite. She was tall herself, about five-foot-ten, with a striking figure that never lost its youth. And my mother's face was something to behold—skin light and silky smooth, cheekbones high and sculptured, eyes the palest blue with long dark lashes, and shoulder-length auburn hair that glistened in the sunlight. She sat and brushed it every day.

No one ever failed to treat Mama with respect—she being a mannered southern lady and beautiful besides—but no matter what front they put on I always knew they loved Daddy more. Daddy was smart enough to know that

too, but it didn't matter to him; he loved Mama enough for everybody.

Most black people—men, women, young, and old—worked on cotton plantations when we were growing up, but Jubal never did. At an anxious age when young Negro men worked the cotton fields like feverish colts from daylight to dusk and chased black girls when the sun went down, Jubal spent his days helping his mama and his nights sitting at home with her in their little shack on the far side of the railroad tracks.

My first memory of him goes back to when I was about five years old, which would have made Sarah just two or three. Sometimes we question the accuracy of our earliest memories, but I have no doubts about the first time I saw Jubal. He was a young man at the time, around eighteen, and his stature was not something a kid my size would easily forget.

He stood six-foot-one, not really as tall as he appeared to me at the time, but he had a bulky frame and a thick waist—one of those big-bodied people who appear obese at first glance but prove to be strong, and sometimes surprisingly agile.

Mama, Sarah, and I were in Stern's Department Store, which happened to be one of the few downtown shops that catered to black people as well as white. Even though the blacks had to stand back and wait their turn until all the whites had been waited on, Mama avoided such stores as much as possible.

Mama was waiting in line at the cash register with Sarah and me standing on either side of her. Sarah, being little and naturally shy, had a fistful of Mama's dress and a thumb in her mouth. I, feeling smug about being several inches taller than my little sister and therefore quite independent, had backed away and was standing a few feet behind Mama and Sarah.

I don't know if I brushed against him or just sensed something large behind me, but when I turned around I found myself staring at a thigh thicker than my waist. My eyes followed his body upward until I found myself looking straight up the side of a blue denim mountain.

He looked as wide as I was tall. His fencepost arms hung loosely at his sides, and way up above the bib of his overalls his broad face turned down toward mine. Any fear I might have felt faded when our eyes met. His eyes were deep pools of softness, and he smiled the faintest smile I'd ever seen. Sarah stared up at him too, but he avoided looking in her face, and he kept his eyes totally averted from Mama.

Mama grabbed me by the collar, spun me around, and pulled me to her side. Then she jerked Sarah around so that she faced away from him too. Jubal kept a proper distance behind us until we checked out. Sarah tried to turn around and look at him a couple of times before we left, but Mama wouldn't allow it.

"Who was that big man, Mama?" I asked as we left the store. "He looked like a giant."

“That wasn’t a man, Lucas,” Mama said. “That was a nigger, and you stay away from him. People call him Dummy, and most folks think he’s crazy.”

Then Mama jerked Sarah by the arm again and said harshly, “You listen to what I’m saying too, little girl.”

That night I told Daddy about seeing a black man called Dummy and described how big he had looked to me. He grinned and nodded. “Yeah, he’s a pretty big fella. And something else you ought to know; his real name is Jubal, Jubal Jefferson.”

“Mama says folks call him Dummy.”

“Yes, some people do,” Daddy said. “They have ever since he was a kid, but I never thought it was a very nice name to call anybody.”

I began to notice Jubal more after we saw him in the department store. His mama took in washing and ironing from white people, as many Negro women did. Her customers paid her a dollar a week, and Jubal made pickups and deliveries for her all over town. He hauled the clothes in a faded red wagon he pulled behind him, a rusty relic he had altered specifically to suit his purpose.

Because the original wagon bed was too short and narrow to hold many clothes, Jubal built a wooden platform on top of it about three feet wide by four feet long. To this flat surface he fastened sideboards three feet high. With the old wagon bed and narrow wheels barely visible beneath the large rectangular basket, the carriage looked top-heavy,

and unusual to say the least, but Jubal could stack a great load of clothes in it.

He also lengthened the tongue of the child's wagon to allow someone as tall as him to pull it. This he accomplished by sawing the tongue in two and inserting a three-foot length of hoe handle, which he wired solidly in place.

Jubal made quite a sight pulling that wagon. Leaning forward with both hands behind him holding onto the handle, he'd stare at the ground in front of him and trudge down the street as if he were pulling a thousand pounds. And though the wagon might be heaped four or five feet high with clothes, his big, slow-moving body dwarfed the load.

He worked all year round, and dressed according to the season. In spring and summer he wore a light chambray shirt under his overalls and went barefooted. In fall and winter he wore a long-sleeved shirt, a faded black coat, and heavy Brogan shoes that looked like they'd been chipped from a solid block of leather.

Because Jubal picked up and delivered clothes to a different set of customers each day, he took circuitous routes that carried him all over town. I was sure he couldn't read street signs or the numbers on the houses, so I decided he must have all of Linville mapped out by heart.

Knowing that black people were not allowed to walk through white neighborhoods except for work-related purposes, I was curious to see how he conducted his business. My curiosity got the best of me one day, and I followed him around town so I could spy on him. I probably wasn't as

stealthy as I thought, but if he was aware of my presence he never let me know.

Jubal would pull his wagon just through the front gate of a customer's house so as to leave the sidewalk clear, then walk around to the back door and knock, softly. Normally a Negro maid came to the door, and normally Jubal said nothing as he handed her an armload of finished clothes or picked up a stack to be washed and ironed. A few of the black women were friendlier, though; at the sight of one of them a smile would light up his face and he'd nod his head and say, "Sure is a pretty day, ain't it, Ma'am?"

And the black maid would answer with something like: "Yes, Jubal. It is a pretty day. I hope you's enjoyin' it." After such an exchange he'd turn and strut back to his wagon as if he had just spoken with royalty.

If the lady of the house—the white lady—happened to come to the door, Jubal would turn his eyes away and say nothing while they exchanged the clothes. Once, as I watched from behind a tree, a haughty white woman dropped a number of coins into his hand and abruptly shut the door in his face. Walking back to his wagon, Jubal opened his hand, glanced at the coins, and stopped. He picked out one of them, returned to the back door, and knocked again.

"Yes?" the woman said impatiently.

Looking steadily at his feet, Jubal held out the coin and said, "You gived me a nickel too much, Ma'am."

Every dog in town knew him, and according to which

neighborhood he happened to be passing through as many as five or six could be seen following along behind him. Whenever he stopped and sat down to rest, one of the dogs would lay his head on Jubal's knee while he patted it and whispered something that only he and the dog could hear.

We happened to see Jubal downtown one afternoon when Sarah was five, and she made a big mistake. Mama, Sarah, and I were standing on the sidewalk when he came down the street toward us with his head down, pulling his wagon behind him as usual. Just before he passed, Sarah waved at him. It was just a little wave—she didn't even raise her arm—but Jubal saw it and smiled at her, a smile as small as her wave.

Mama noticed the slight exchange. She grabbed Sarah by the arm and practically jerked her off her feet.

"What do you think you're doing, girl, waving at him?"

Holding her bruised arm with the opposite hand, Sarah tried to explain. "He smiled at me, Mama. He likes me."

The fury in Mama's face scared Sarah, and it scared me. She bent over at the waist and scolded Sarah in a voice that turned heads half a block away.

"Of course he likes you!" Mama said. "You're white, and he's a blue-gum nigger, the blackest kind there is. No telling what he might do to a little white girl like you if he could. No white girl waves at the likes of him, Sarah—no white girl. You understand me?"

Sarah nodded, but I knew she didn't understand a thing Mama said.

Linville was an old town even when we were kids. Spreading oaks draped the sidewalks and streets while tall cottonwoods, elms, locusts, and magnolias shaded a variety of homes that reflected a great disparity between the haves and have nots—a condition that had persisted since the land was settled forty years before the Civil War.

Several mansions on Robert E. Lee Street boasted tall columns and second- and third-story verandas reminiscent of the antebellum period, proud symbols of an Old South that refused to die. Along the same street stood stately Victorians with sculptured turrets rounding their corners, thin spires reaching for the sky, and wide porches draped in gingerbread trim—trophies of high-living planters who had cleared an impenetrable swamp and sown a million acres of cotton in its place.

The trees were just as tall on other streets such as Stonewall Jackson and Nathan Bedford Forrest (they had all been named after Confederate generals), but many of those streets weren't paved and some neighborhoods lacked sidewalks. There the trees dwarfed modest cottages, frame houses, and an occasional Victorian of lesser size and majesty than those on Robert E. Lee.

The Tollivers lived on Jeb Stuart Street. It wasn't Robert E. Lee, but when Mama was growing up their two-story Victorian with its white picket fence and neatly trimmed hedges dominated every house in sight.

Grandpa Tolliver had descended from overseers, a coarse,

hard-driving class of whites who worked the slaves in the fields and sometimes ran entire plantations for absentee owners. He owned two businesses, both strategically located near the edge of town: a small grocery store that attracted both townspeople and farmers and a machinery and harness repair shop that sat next door.

Burriss Tolliver was one of those men who had so much mechanical ability that normal folk just stood back and watched in awe as he performed his magic. His shop was too small for his business, but that didn't matter; most of the repair work took place in the yard anyway. A high mesh fence enclosed the yard, and he always had more wagons, plows, buggies, and automobiles waiting to be repaired than he had hours in the day.

Although Burriss Tolliver seldom drank, his father had been an alcoholic, and his father's father before him. He was a short, stocky man, balding when I knew him, and conspicuously missing several teeth. His wide forehead and narrow eyes seemed to reflect his uncompromising views on nearly everything. A rough, ambitious man who lived life in a hurry, Grandpa Tolliver charged around his shop with a mouth full of chewing tobacco, a rag in his hand, and grease streaks covering his overalls and chambray shirt, shouting orders and voicing his opinion on every political issue of the day, particularly anything concerning race.

A middle-aged white man tended Tolliver's Grocery, and although black repairmen were common in those days, all who worked in Grandpa's shop were white.

“I’d never work a colored in my place, Lucas,” I remember him telling me when I was too young to be concerned about such things or even attempt to understand them. “Niggers is lazy, and some of them are beginnin’ to get uppity, which I damn sure won’t stand for. And even them that knows how to keep their place and act like they’re supposed to can’t be trusted. Niggers is just niggers, Lucas—always was, always will be.”

Mama grew up an only child, a pampered girl known as Jessie when she was little—a name that became history as soon as she reached her teens. At the insistence of both Mama and her mother, she became Jessica. Even her daddy, the one who had first begun calling his little girl Jessie, succumbed to their wishes.

Grandma Tolliver, an attractive woman with a perpetually anxious look, had been christened Teresa, a name she felt befitted her proper station. At an early age, however, Grandma became Tessie, and to her silent chagrin she remained Tessie forever.

A kind person by nature and more down to earth than she cared to admit, Tessie Tolliver might have spent her life helping people in some way had she not been possessed by the trappings of society. Endlessly involved in church socials, afternoon teas, and the like, she looked for any excuse to invite ladies to her home, especially those she considered members of Linville’s upper class.

Although Grandma had several regular members of her little “club,” as she called it, and every now and then succeeded in snaring Mayor Hasting’s wife and the wives of

other civic leaders as well, her ultimate dream was to hobnob with the wealthy.

Every Sunday after church Grandma did something that should have embarrassed her, but it never seemed to. She would accost Kathleen Hardiman, an aloof woman whose husband's family owned not only the Mercantile but four plantations that encompassed more than ten thousand acres of cotton land. They lived in the biggest house on Robert E. Lee Street.

"Some of the ladies are planning to get together at my home this afternoon, Kathleen," Grandma would say. "Jessica is going to do a piano recital, and we'll be playing bridge afterwards. You're more than welcome to join us."

Mrs. Hardiman spoke with the finest Southern accent imaginable, and every Sunday she would answer Grandma as if it were the first time the exchange had ever occurred.

"Why, thank you, Tessie," she'd say with practiced sincerity. "I can't promise anything, but I'll surely try to make it. It's terribly nice of you to think of including us."

Kathleen Hardiman never once set foot in Grandma Tolliver's house.

Tessie Tolliver remained as tireless in her quest for acceptance as the rich were in rebuffing her, and when Mama was growing up her mother strove to finagle invitations for her to every social event in town.

Every upper class family and most middle class as well employed black maids, or "domestics," in their homes. Every morning by 6 a.m. a great number of black women

could be seen walking to work from the far side of the railroad tracks, a rundown section of town that consisted of rows of tarpaper shacks, dilapidated shotgun houses with swaybacked roofs, and narrow streets where scraggy dogs lay and Negro children played in the dirt—a sprawling place of poverty known by a nondescript name that seemed to deny its very existence: across the tracks.

Many white men in Linville knew their way across the tracks well. Some of the town's leading and wealthiest citizens could easily navigate its dark streets at night, the only time they went. Black prostitutes were readily available across the tracks, and some white men even kept mistresses there. No one, white or black, ever mentioned this practice—a holdover from the days of slavery—but everyone in town was aware of it.

While the wealthy often employed several black maids in their homes, most middle class families could afford only one. Grandma and Grandpa Tolliver had two.

The Tolliver's older maid, Pernella, did the cooking, served the meals, and scrubbed the kitchen. Grandma Tolliver had known and trusted Pernella for years, and treated her with obvious affection. The younger maid, Estella, a slender mulatto whose ivory skin revealed an excess of white blood, cleaned the rest of the house, changed the beds, and waited at night in her own bed across the tracks for Burris Tolliver's visits.

Grandma Tolliver seldom found occasion to talk to Estella; Mama grew up hating the sight of her.