

Appendix IV: God, Please Help Us

(This story was written in the late 50s while I was stationed on Okinawa.)

God, Please Help Us

"Jess, are we going to school together next fall?" asked the brown skinned boy.

"What in the world are you talking about Deak Dobbins?" answered his white playmate, Jess Boclaire, as the two youngsters shuffled through the thick alder bushes which hid their secret swimming hole.

"That's what I heard a stranger say at the meeting house last night."

"I ain't never seen so many horse flies and sweat bees in all my life. And it seems like that August is the worse month of the whole summer for the buzzing little devils," muttered Jess, while slapping at the empty space above his head.

The alder bushes had thinned out some now and the cool refreshing waters of Turtle Creek could be seen slowly winding its course around Hanging Bend.

"Last one in is a rotten egg," shouted Jess, as they stepped out of the dense summer growth and onto the sandy beach.

Many years before, the sharp curve in Turtle Creek had been the scene of brutal violence. It was there that ole man Jim Bawlings flogged and hung scores of his darkies. Some said ole Jim owned the biggest plantation in the South and the most slaves in the world. Others disagreed. But they all agreed that he was the cruelest of all times.

Today, most of the whites avoided Hanging Bend, probably out of shame and remorse. The darkies avoided the Bend out of fear and superstition. But both still recounted the violence of ole Jim at Hanging Bend.

For the past two summers, it had been Deak's and Jess' secret swimming hole, their retreat from the simmering Carolina cotton and tobacco fields.

A crane abandoned his search for a mid-afternoon snack and sailed gracefully upstream as Jess and Deak splashed through the shallow water and then pulled their

naked bodies up the sloping bank.

There they sat, resting and dreaming aloud to each other their fantastic plans for manhood adventure. Confiding in each other their aspirations for the future. All in a life-time, they would become baseball stars and would fly off into outer space in rocket ships to defend the earth from celestial monsters, and they pledged their undying friendship to each other.

Their allegiance they swore to each other, not knowing that death would claim their comradeship before they became rookies of the year and before they would blast off into the heavens as pilot and co-pilot.

"Deak, what's that you said about us going to school together? Did Carson School burn down or something?"

"Shucks, no, but sometime I wish it would. I sure do hate the thought of going back to school."

"Well, I know Turtle Creek School is still standing, so what's this talk about us going to school together?"

"All I know is that some stranger was talking about it at the meeting house last night. He said that next fall, all the colored children would be going to the white school like they was supposed to in the first place."

"Sounds okay to me, then you can be our catcher. That Billy James couldn't catch a ball if someone dropped it smack in his mitt. Tell you what, Deak, I'll ask Dad tonight, he'll know for sure. By the way, we had better be getting back home, Dad and Uncle Spinks are probably hollering their heads off by now for us to come and do the milking."

"All right, Jess. Race you back across."

Mrs. Boclaire, Jess' mother, had just finished saying grace at the supper table and Jess' father was slicing the sugar cured ham, when Jess blurted out...

"Dad, is it true that Deak and I will be going to school together this year?"

Banging the big kitchen knife so hard on the table that it caused Jess' empty plate to bounce, Mr. Boclaire shouted back, "Hell, no, you aren't going to

school with no damn niggers. Where did you get such a foolish idea? Speak up, son, who's been putting such nonsense in your head?"

"Jessie Boclaire, you shut up using such foul language in front of Jess. At the supper table of all places and especially after I've just finished saying the blessing," stormed Mrs. Boclaire.

Jess, surprised at his father's anger over the question, sat watching his parents, gripping his glass of fresh milk as if it represented an anchor which kept him seated at the table.

"I'm sorry, Daisy," Jessie muttered to his wife and turned to Jess and told him they would discuss the matter after supper.

The meal was eaten in silence except for an occasional "Eat your supper, Jess" from Mrs. Boclaire.

Jess couldn't help but wonder why his father had exploded the way he did. He sure hadn't expected it. Great day in the morning, hadn't he and Deak been buddies for a long time, they had worked together in the fields, same as his father and Uncle Spinks had done. Ever since he could remember they spent their afternoons and week-ends together. His dad had never objected to that. But now all of a sudden, he got mad because going to school together had been mentioned.

Jessie Boclaire was sitting on the steps of the front porch chewing tobacco and petting his two rabbit hounds when Jess heard him call...

"Come here, boy. I want to talk to you a minute."

Jess was down near the road firing small pebbles with his slingshot at the bats, which had come out at twilight in search of an evening meal of insects, when his father called him.

Pocketing his slingshot that he and Deak had made together, he walked slowly back to the house, wondering if his father was still angry.

"Sit down, Jess. Now tell me who said you were going to have to go to school with niggers."

"Didn't anyone tell me, Dad."

"Tell the truth, son. That ain't what you said at the supper table."

"Gee, Dad, didn't anyone say we were going to school together. Deak just asked me if we were, that's all."

"How come Deak to ask you that? I know Spinks didn't put any such ideas in his head. Spinks' family been with my family too long to start stirring up trouble like some of those other tenants. Why, I've always treated Spinks right. He and I grew up together, same as you and Deak. My father and Spinks' got along alright too, never had any trouble. Son, Deak's family has been farming our land here since before they were set free by your great-great-grandfather. It's as sure as flies in a cow barn that Spinks ain't behind this. Speak up son, who is?"

"I didn't know anybody was trying to make trouble, Dad. Deak just told me that some stranger over at the colored meeting house last night said that the colored and whites would be going to the same school this fall."

"I knew it. I told the boys at Nate Fuller's store that this would happen. Before you know it, they will be wanting to marry our daughters too. Come on, Jess, we're going down to Nate's store. I want you to tell the boys the same thing you told me."

"But, Dad..."

"No back talk, Jess, you come on here with me. By grannies, I told them so..."

All the way to Nate Fuller's store, where most of the farmers within five miles gathered almost every evening, Jessie Boclaire kept muttering to himself about how he had warned the boys and if they had taken his advice and run the stranger out, they would have been a lot better off. Now they'd pay heed to his advice.

Jess still couldn't understand why his father was making such a fuss over the whole thing but he had begun to realize that his father didn't approve of him and Deak going to school together. Maybe now he wouldn't let them go fishing together on Saturday afternoons, or go romping in the woods together, or share

their rabbit guns next winter when the water at their secret swimming hole would begin to freeze along the banks.

But Uncle Spinks and Deak hadn't had anything to do with whatever his dad thought would bring trouble. His father had said so himself. And if they hadn't anything to do with it, then he and Deak could still be friends.

Even though darkness and a gentle breeze had cooled the evening some, it was still a hot August night and the men at Nate's store were sitting outside, some on empty cartons, some in chairs and Mister Nate in a hammock he had strung between two red oaks.

As Jess and his father joined the gathering, the group was roaring with laughter over a story made up by Nate about someone getting saved at the church up the road, and how they got down on the floor and rolled all over the place and was jabbering "monkey talk."

Nate always laughed the loudest and longest, especially at his own tales. After everyone had quieted down some and Jessie had exchanged greeting with Nate and the rest, he excitedly explained...

"I told you so, didn't I? I told you that nigger from up North would bring nothing but trouble. Well, now it's happened."

Nate was the first to speak. "What's happened, Jess? I haven't heard of him doing anything."

"Yeah," chimed in the others, "What's up, Jess?"

"He's stirring up our colored folk around here, that's what," replied Jess.

"You tell them about it, son. Tell them about what he said at their meeting house last night, how he was egging them on."

"I don't know, Dad, I..."

"Never mind, boy, never mind, I'll tell it myself."

"Last night at the meeting house," continued Jessie, "while we were all home minding our own business, like he should have done, the stranger was telling our colored folks how they should be sending their children to the white schools. And,

how we weren't treating them right and..."

"But, Dad, they weren't..." interrupted Jess.

"Be quiet, son, don't interrupt me."

"Haven't we always treated them fair and square? Sure we have. Give them credit every year so they can get by."

"That's right, Jessie," added Nate Fuller, "I guess just about every one of them owes me over a hundred dollars right now, some of them on toward five hundred, I treat them right as rain, every one of them."

"You're darn right we do," added the other men in the group, "and this is the thanks we get. Why, they've got a school same as ours. Next thing you know, they will be wanting to go to church together, and marry our youngsters."

"Exactly what I told Jess here just a few minutes ago," said Jessie Boclaire.

Jess was sorry his father had brought him here now. Before, he always liked to come to Nate's store with him. And even more so, he was sorry he had asked his father about going to school with Deak. He realized now that he had made a mistake. They would have found out about it anyway but he wished he hadn't mentioned it. Tomorrow he would go to Deak and ask him to ask Uncle Spinks to persuade the stranger to leave and then everything would be okay again.

But tomorrow would be too late. One of the group suggested that they go out tonight and take the stranger down to Hanging Bend and scare him into thinking he would be hanged like Jim Bawlings used to do it. Surely he had heard the stories about Hanging Bend, thought the men at Nate's store. Although some of them didn't agree to the plan at first, the other farmers soon convinced them that this was the only way to nip the stranger's plans before they really got under way.

Jessie promised Nate he would be back just as soon as he took Jess home. Then they would find the stranger and take him to Hanging Bend, and scare "the black right off him."

Mrs. Boclaire knelt beside Jess in his room as they said the Lord's Prayer

together. She put Jess to bed assuring him that everything would be all right in the morning. The stranger would be gone and he and Deak could play together as they had today.

It was only 7:30 and Jess knew that Deak would still be playing out in the yard with his three sisters, or that Uncle Spinks would be telling them stories about the wild animals. Uncle Spinks could tell the best stories of anybody in the world, thought Jess, as he lay in his bed. He had sat with Deak and his sisters countless evenings listening to them.

Maybe Deak was sitting by himself thinking about catching ball for Turtle Creek, he had told him he might if they attended the same school this fall. He sure would be awful disappointed, thought Jess, when he hears they won't be going to the same school after all.

Jess decided he would sneak out of the house and over to Deak's and tell him how his father and the other men didn't want them to go to school together. He had better be there before it was later than eight o'clock, so Uncle Spink wouldn't suspect he had slipped over to see Deak.

He could hear the television set going full blast. While his mother was watching TV, he was sure he could get out of the house without her knowing it. Jess pulled on his overalls, grabbed his cap and walked quietly out of the house past his mother.

Deak and his sisters were playing hide and seek when Jess strolled into their yard. Off in the distance, he could hear a Whippoorwill. For some reason, the faint call of a Whippoorwill had always sent goose pimples rambling over his neck and back, and tonight was no exception. They even lingered longer as he thought of his father and the crowd at Nate's store, and what they planned to do tonight.

The goose pimples faded when he heard Deak greet him.

"Hi, Jess, sure glad Mister Boclaire let you come over tonight. I was getting tired of playing with these sissies."

"Let's go around to the back of the house, Deak, I've got something I want to

tell you in secret."

"Gee, what happened, did your father whip you for not getting home in time to do the milking?"

"Nope, it's nothing like that, Deak. Do you remember asking me if we were going to school together?"

"Sure, that'll be fun, huh? I can't wait until next spring to try out for catcher."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Deak. I don't think we will be going together."

"But the man at the meeting house said..."

"I know what he said, Deak, but I asked Dad about it and he got all riled up. And then he went down to Nate Fuller's and told everyone what the stranger had said and they got mad too."

"Gosh, why did they do that?"

"I don't know," said Jess glancing away from his friend, "but they're going to scare the stranger away tonight, then everything will be just like it always was."

"How're they going to scare him, Jess?"

"You've heard the stories about our secret swimming hole and how it got its name long ago."

"You know I have, but what's that got to do with it?"

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you. But you are my best buddy, right?"

"Right."

"I guess it's okay then. Deak, they plan to take the stranger down to Hanging Bend and make like they are going to hang him. They figure that will scare him into leaving the country, and then there will be no more talk about colored and white folks going to school together."

"You really mean that, Jess, all this fuss over us going to the same school?"

"I guess so. Doesn't seem like it would hurt anything to me, but you know how grownups are sometimes."

"Yeah, they sure do act awful funny once in awhile. Say, Jess, let's go down and watch it. We can be back by nine o'clock, Dad will think we are down at the fish pond catching frogs like we do sometimes."

"I shouldn't really. Mom doesn't know I am over here now."

"Oh, come on, Jess, we'll be back before she misses you."

"I would like to see what they do to the stranger. Alright, come on, let's go."

A few minutes later, Jess and Deak had quietly disappeared into the tall pines behind Uncle Spinks' house. All the way to Hanging Bend, neither boy spoke until they stood peering from behind a clump of alders that had grown almost to the water's edge.

"There they are," whispered Jess.

"Doesn't look like they've been here too long," breathed Deak.

"Hey, look, Deak. Is that the stranger?" questioned Jess as he pointed to the one Negro, surrounded by the crowd from Nate Fuller's.

As if in answer to Jess' question, he heard Nate's voice drift across the silent waters of Turtle Creek.

"...and charged with disturbing the peace of this community, and poisoning the minds of our colored friends against us. For this, we the members of this court, have sentenced you to hang by the neck until death does claim your foul soul."

"God, no. Please, don't," cried the stranger, "I was only doing a job. I'll leave tonight and never come back. Believe me. Have mercy. Please."

Jess and Deak almost screamed aloud as they heard a last gurgling cry slip from the stranger's throat and saw the story of Hanging Bend tragically unfold in the flickering glare of a bond fire.

The thick alder brush and blackberry briars lashed at the two scared boys as if to punish them for what had happened as they ran, stumbling through the darkness, for home.

Jess didn't ever slow down to say goodnight to his friend but raced through Uncle Spinks' yard as though he himself were being chased by the murderers.

Mrs. Boclaire was still watching television and didn't hear Jess sneak hurriedly up the stairs and fall sobbing across his bed.

Jess couldn't sleep but lay there in the ghostly glow of a summer moon that had begun to creep into the sky. Why had they hanged the stranger? Had it been a mistake, a joke that was carried too far? Or, did his dad and the rest change their mind after his father brought him home? These questions danced throughout young Jess' mind searching for answers.

He heard a car stop in front of the house, a door slam, and an exchange of farewells. The clock downstairs had just struck twice a few minutes before. Jess had been home almost five hours now, his mother had turned off the TV shortly after eleven and come by his room on her way to bed. Jess hadn't answered her when she had called to him, "Jess, dear, are you asleep?" and then moved on down the hall.

Now he waited for his father, listening for the moment he would awaken his mother and explain the horrible mistake that had taken place the evening before.

He heard his father stumble onto the porch, the screen door banged and then sprung back twice more, each time making less noise.

The shattering of a vase awakened Mrs. Boclaire as it dropped to the hall floor in the wake of her drunk husband.

"Jessie Boclaire, you know better than to go and get drunk in the middle of the week," scolded Jess' mother.

"Bet you and Nate Fuller got drunk and didn't even bother to run off that fellow that's stirring up the trouble."

Without answering, Jessie Boclaire undressed and passed out as he lay back on the feather tick bed.

Finally, Jess, too, dropped off into a fitful sleep.

When he awakened that morning, Jess prayed that he had only dreamed a horrible nightmare, that what he knew to be the truth, wasn't really true at all.

He lay in bed for several minutes, dreading to face his father who would by now be at the table, supping his coffee, and waiting impatiently for his mother to

finish cooking breakfast.

He could hear his father occasionally raise his voice and from the few words he caught, realized they were discussing what had happened the night before.

Quietly, Jess dressed and slipped downstairs in time to catch most of his father's story.

When Jessie had returned to Nate's store, Nate had already uncorked a jug of corn whiskey and several of the group had downed more than one or two swigs. He thought of warning them against drinking before they finished scaring the stranger off, but before he voiced his objections, the corn was passed to him and he decided that one or two couldn't possibly do any harm.

By the time they found the stranger, some of group were already drunk. Maybe if the stranger had been frightened right away, instead of cursing them, he would still be alive. But he damned the whites to hell and allowed how he would have his revenge, until some of the group decided that they should go ahead and hang him instead of trying to scare him out of the country. Jessie Boclaire, like some of the others, didn't really take the remark seriously when it was first made, but before they reached Hanging Bend, it was plain to see that the stranger wasn't going to scare very easily. Perhaps, they would even have to put a rope around his neck to dampen his fiery spirit. The first jar of corn was emptied on the way to Turtle Creek and Nate Fuller produced another, swearing it was the best first run to be brewed around there in many years.

Nate and the rest had finally succeeded in frightening the poor stranger. Now, he no longer damned their black souls housed in white filth, but begged for their mercy, that they would spare his life. He promised to tell their colored folk that he had been wrong. He offered to do anything if they wouldn't hang him. He would even be a servant to pay any or all of the group.

The boys from Nate Fuller's store should have been satisfied now, the Negro had repented, he was willing to leave, or do anything they asked. But they weren't. The white lightning had whetted their appetite for violence. Now they would hang the black

bastard, for that's what he really deserved in the first place, they reasoned.

And they hung him at Hanging Bend where, once many years ago, other Negroes were hung in the same fashion and from the same tree. They, too, had been cut from the tree and had dropped into the watery grave of Turtle Creek.

Mrs. Boclaire didn't speak when Jess walked into the kitchen, she turned to the stove and pretended not to see him.

His father started to speak, but Jess interrupted him.

"I heard it all, Dad."

"We really didn't mean to do it but now that it's done, we all have to stick together. Really, we can put it to good use. When our colored folk hear of what happened to the stranger, they won't dare try to send their children to the white schools. I guess there will be a trial at the county seat, but I don't see how they can do very much with us. Nobody will tell who actually did the hanging, and they can't charge the whole damn bunch for murder. Yup, I guess things didn't turn out so badly after all."

For the first time in his life, Jess felt ashamed of his father. In less than one day, he was a changed man. He was no longer the same person who had taken Jess and Deak to Nate's on hot afternoons for a soda pop, nor was he the same who had patiently taught the two boys how to swim one spring long ago. He was a murderer now. A man who would murder again to keep his son and a Negro friend from attending school together.

Jess abruptly jumped up from the table and ran crying out of the house, his father called for him to "come back."

Jess didn't stop running until he reached the fish pond which lay halfway between his house and Deak's. He dropped to the damp grass under the shaded pond bank and began to pick at an ant hill while wiping his tear stained cheeks with his shirt sleeve.

Suddenly he jumped to his feet and crushed the ant hill with his bare foot.

"That's it," he said aloud, "if something were to happen to both schools,

they couldn't make us go to either one, because there wouldn't be a school to go to."

Carefully, Jess worked out his plan to destroy both schools. He was sure it would solve everything. With Deak's help, it shouldn't be too hard. He had seen his father and Uncle Spinks use dynamite to blast stumps from the new grounds. All he and Deak would have to do was use more dynamite. Neither school was much bigger than his own home. He was sure they could do it.

Before noon, he had told Deak of his plan and he had agreed to it.

That night, he and Deak would swipe the dynamite his father had bought a few weeks before and take it to Turtle Creek School, their first target. If everything went off alright, they would steal some dynamite from Nate's store in a week or so and blow up the colored school.

It was dark and the moon was hidden behind a storm. Jess figured his mother and father must be asleep now, anyway, it was after twelve o'clock and he was supposed to meet Deak at midnight. Deak might get scared and go back home if he didn't get there right away. His folks had stayed up later than usual, and Jess had wanted to wait until he was sure they were asleep before he tried to sneak out. But he was late now and he would have no chance getting out without them hearing him, even if they were still awake. He made it. Deak was waiting outside with the dynamite already loaded in a wagon that Jess had received two years before for Christmas.

"Come on," whispered Deak, "I've got the caps and fuse in my pocket. I thought you were never going to get out here."

"Are you scared, Deak?"

"Nah, not much, how about you?"

"A little, I guess. Hey, let's make believe we're soldiers on our way to blow up a bridge or an important headquarters of a Russian General," urged Jess.

"Suits me."

It was two miles from Jess' house to the school and he and Deak had grown

tired of playing soldier by the time they reached Turtle Creek School, shortly after one thirty.

Neither boy had said much for the last twenty minutes.

"Do you really think we should do it, Jess?" questioned Deak.

"I don't see any other way of settling things, do you?"

"No, I guess not."

"Okay. I think the best place to put the dynamite would be under the center of the building. What do you think, Deak?"

"Sounds like that would be as good a place as any."

"We'll have to carry the dynamite under the building. I don't want to have to worry about getting the wagon out after we light the fuse," said Jess.

"Looks like we've got enough here to blow up both schools, Jess. We could hide half of it until we get ready to use it again. That way, we wouldn't have to steal any."

"Nope, let's use all of it, just to make sure we do a good job," answered Jess, as he crawled toward the center of the school floor with Deak following him.

The storm was getting closer and the thunder was no longer a distant rumble, but was bursting over their heads with each violent flash of lightening.

Mrs. Boclaire had been awakened by the storm, and now was closing the windows. She walked into Jess' room, closed the windows and as she turned to leave, her son's empty bed was lighted by the storm's fury. Not believing he was out of bed at this hour, she called to him as her trembling fingers flipped the light switch on.

Jessie Boclaire was now awake and was grouping his way through the hall to his son's lighted room.

"Where's Jess?" screamed Mrs. Boclaire, throwing herself into her husband's arms.

"Now, dear, don't get upset. He's probably downstairs in the bathroom. Probably asleep on the stool," said Jessie, doubting his own words.

Meanwhile, Deak and Jess had neatly attached their last stick of dynamite against the base of the school's chimney which stood almost in the center of the building.

Deak held the flashlight while Jess placed a cap in one end of a stick of dynamite. He then placed a piece of fuse in the cap and split the opposite end, some of the black fuse powder spilled onto his fingers. This was the third fuse Jess had rigged to make sure the dynamite was set off. He couldn't see letting a bad piece of fuse foil his plans now. It began to rain now and the boys had to raise their voices to understand each other.

"Looks like you've got everything all set, Jess."

"Yeah, you ready to scam out of here, Deak?"

"You bet'cha, anytime you give the word, I'm ready."

"Okay, you light that fuse and I'll light these two, and as soon as they're lit, get out of here."

Jess had one of the fuses lit before Deak could light his one. The wind kept blowing out his matches. In a second though, all three fuses were spewing flame and Jess and Deak had turned to crawl away.

Suddenly Jess screamed, "Something bit me! Let me have the light quick."

Turning the flashlight in Jess' direction, Deak saw what had bitten his friend.

"It's a cottonmouth," cried Deak, "quick, let's get out of here."

But the snake had moved in front of their path. For a few seconds, both boys lay under the school house, without saying a word, watching the snake coil into a tense spring.

Tears streaked Deak's face as he blurted out, "The dynamite, Jess, we've got to get out of here, snake or no snake."

"Here, let me help you," said Deak, as he put his arm around his friend.

By this time, Jessie has made a thorough search of the house for Jess and was standing on Uncle Spinks' front porch after learning that Deak was also missing,

when he heard what sounded like another clap of thunder. The two men, rain blowing in their faces, turned toward the explosion just in time to see a dirty yellow flash off in the distance.

It was dawn now and the storm had passed. Uncle Spinks was sitting with Jessie at his table, stirring a cold cup of coffee, when Nate Fuller knocked at the front door.

They and the neighbors had spent the night searching for Jess and Deak. Now Mrs. Boclaire and Uncle Spinks' family were in bed. Jessie and Uncle Spinks sat looking far away without hearing Nate knock.

Nate had come on in and was standing, head bowed, with one hand on Uncle Spinks' shoulder and the other resting on Jessie's. He told them that their sons had been found in the burnt wreckage of Turtle Creek School.

Slowly, Jessie and Uncle Spinks got up from the table and walked to the back porch. There they looked out across the cotton fields that had just begun to whiten and saw two young boys walking side by side, one black, the other white. Was it Jess and Deak they saw or was it themselves many years ago, or was it their fathers before them?

Jessie Boclaire turned and looked into the misty eyes of his childhood friend and with tears now flowing freely down his weather beaten face cried,

"Oh, God, please help us."