

The Vain Conversation: A Novel

By Anthony Grooms

Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers.

The First Epistle of Peter, 1:18

Part 1: River of Joy

Chapter 1

Blackberries. Blackberries. The boy's head was filling up with blackberries. He had moved slowly, deeper and deeper, into the bramble, until he was surrounded by it. The tangle of vines arched above and around him so that it seemed he had entered a cave of brambles. A gift from God, the boy thought. Light dappled through the vines. The bramble swayed gently in the breeze and the fine thorns scratched against him. He didn't care. He was in the world of blackberries.

He knew how to step through the bramble to avoid a serious scratching, and how to share the bramble with a black snake or a ringed king snake. Thrashes and chickadees and sometimes a more brilliant bird like a yellow finch

might land on a vine, bowing it and then springing to another. Only the ticks bothered him. They hid in the brittlegrass and broomsedge that edged the bramble. He rolled his pants to his knees, and let them crawl up his naked calves until he could see them and pick them off.

He left his pail at the edge of the patch and with his cup in front of him he balanced on one leg and leaned over the briars to the nests of plump berries. They were so fat that three of them filled his palm--and the season was just beginning! In spite of his eating one for every three he kept, the pail was filling, nearly gallon, and he had only been picking half an hour.

A shadow passed over and he looked up to see a turkey vulture. He liked them. They were like kites, the way they sailed on a breeze. Once, not far away, on Christmas Hill, he had followed a vulture back to its nest in the abandoned house on the adjacent ridge. It was an old settler's house, his father had told him. It was a two-story wooden house with a rusty weather vane in the shape of an eagle on top. The vulture had flown into one of the upstairs windows, so the boy went into the house, and climbed the dry rotted stairs to the second floor. Loose plaster crumbled under his feet and he thought the creaking floors must be paper-thin. In the second room, of four, he came upon the nest. The stench stupefied him, and before he got his bearings in the guano splattered room, a bald, red-faced and completely white-feathered chick, the size of a small chicken, rushed at him. It spewed vomit at him, so unnerving him that he took three steps at a time, tumbling more than running down the stairs. The chick was the ugliest thing he had ever seen, and yet it would grow into such a graceful and beautiful bird to look at in the air.

At the end of the memory, he heard a rambling and puffing coming up the hill on the wooded side of the bramble. Once before he had heard this sound and a small black bear had run out of the woods. But there was something else, some popping and snapping of twigs. He heard a ripping of leaves and saw leaves floating down from high in the trees. Somebody was shooting. He squatted down in the bramble. It got quiet for a moment, then he heard men's voices and another shot, a snap from a little gun. It remained quiet for a few moments, and the boy crawled out of the briar patch and sneaked along the crest. Then he saw who the men were and he felt relieved. They were Sheriff Cook and some other men. Two of the men were dragging something. He stood up, thinking maybe they had shot a bear. But it would have been a bear with a flowered dress on.

The seasons went through a cycle and the boy just stood, getting a year older in a few minutes. He realized that his heart was knocking against his ribs. It was a colored woman they were dragging and she was dead.

He sneaked from tree to tree, staying just below the ridgeline. Soon he could see cars on the road, where the road dipped down to the old iron bridge and crossed the Appalachian River. They dragged the woman below the road, down the slope, to the shoal. It was hard for the boy to see from where he was, so he climbed down the hill to the level of the road and went along the bushes until he saw where the men had dragged the woman.

A gris mill had been there, just at the little cataract that spilled to the east of the bridge, but the mill had long since burned and where it stood was now a sandy beach with a scattering of tufts of cord grass and saplings. The water was

not deep here, as it gurgled around rust colored boulders and pooled just before it made its leap over the falls.

From his position on the hill above the bridge, the boy recognized several of the dozen or so cars parked along the side of the road. There were Sheriff Cook's battered police car—an old Ford, Mr. Venable's black Nash Ambassador, and Mr. Jack's new Buick wagon with its wooden doors and its hood the color of dried blood. The men rolled the woman's body down the embankment, and it came to rest in the weeds just out of the boy's sight. At the bottom the embankment, partly blocked by the roadbed, he saw the movement of more men, and he realized that there was a crowd. Then he saw the barrel of a gun, and his heart thumped. There was killing going on, he thought, and he had better go home. But his legs would not carry him away. He watched while Mr. Jacks and Sherriff Cook slid down the embankment where they had rolled the body. Above the rush of the falls, he could hear shouting and then, he was shocked to hear another gun shot, a heavy gun, a shot gun. Now he moved closer, sliding on his rump down the hill to the level of the roadbed. Cautiously, he surveyed the road, and tried watching and listening for an approaching car. Except for the sound of the falls, all was quiet. Taking in a deep breath, he leapt into the road, kicking up loose gravel as he ran with his head down, crossed the road and hid in the bush just at the top of the embankment.

Then he saw clearly the crowd of people, about 40 people, he thought. And as his racing mind settled, he saw who they were, though he did not know them all by name. They were men he had seen in Venable's feed store, local farm people. There was the clerk from Mason's Five and Ten, located on Main Street

in the town of Bethany. He recognized the heavy-set deacon from First Baptist Church, a man his mother said was a cousin of his father's. Indeed, the man had come to their house several times just after his father died. Three women stood in a group slightly apart from the men, they seemed to have been chatting and laughing, as if they were on the church yard. Two young men dragged the body of the woman by her feet. The flowered dress had come up over her head and her fat thighs and underpants were exposed. The boy knew one of the young men as a carpenter's apprentice, a baseball player who had just graduated from the high school that spring and one whose athletic body the boy admired. Seeing the young man, put the boy at ease and he thought he might reveal himself, walk down to the shoal and see what the killing was about. It was clear that a colored woman had been killed, and he wondered if she were a gangster of some kind. He had heard that gangsters still roamed the back roads, robbing banks in small towns like Bethany. But he had never heard of any colored gangsters, and the dead woman *was* colored. He moved closer to the crowd, crouching, still not ready to reveal himself. About halfway down, he was near enough to get the attention of the young man, who had stepped to the rear of the crowd as the other men gathered around the body. But before the young man's name could form on the boy's lips, he saw, lying beside the woman's body, the bodies of other people. He swallowed air. Peering through the legs of the men, he counted four bodies on the ground, but he saw that only one of them was dead.

At first he thought that one of the living ones was a white man, and then, with a sudden recognition, he let out a shout. He knew them. He knew what was happening to them. He knew them all.

It seemed to him that he might have blanked out and slowly, with tingling in his face, his senses came back to him. He remembered to breath and then he hyperventilated. One by one he looked at the people on the ground, trying to look carefully at their faces, hoping not to be able to identify each one. But there they were unmistakably. The man he thought was white was Jimmy Lee, who had come by his house not a week ago to buy his sister's old baby crib. The woman next to him, her belly big with child, was Jimmy's girlfriend. Next to the girlfriend, was Bertrand. He looked again, squinting his eyes as if doing so would sharpen his vision. It was not Bertrand, he told himself, and looked away from the squat, thick man attempting to rise to his knees only to be kicked down by a booted foot. The boy's attention drifted. He looked across the river, sparkling with the afternoon sunlight. Shadows seemed to swim in the ripples. On the other shore was a stand of sycamores with massive trunks. The deep woods behind the trees was getting dark and the white bark of the sycamores shone brightly. When the boy looked again at the bodies, he saw first the dead woman, her dress still pulled over her torso. It was Luellen, he said to himself, Bertrand's uppity wife.

In the super hero comic books the boy was fond of reading, a muscled man in costume would throw himself into the crowd, karate chopping and kicking at the villains until they ran. Then, with no more than a nod to the victims, he would sprint away, leaving them stunned and grateful. The boy was not conscious that he thought of rescuing the colored people, rather he blanked in and out, always seeing sharply what was happening as the white men kicked and spat on the colored people, and as the colored people, except the dead woman, tried to stand or gesture. Sometimes it was rather as if he were dreaming with his

eyes open, and thinking to himself that it was a bad dream and he would soon again be awake. At other times, he was aware that he was not breathing. He heard moaning and realized it was himself and told himself to stop lest he be discovered. Then he was aware of being exposed and it felt as if he had no clothes on. When one of the women in the group looked in his direction, he could see the crow's feet crinkle and her eyes dart around like beads. He suddenly felt empty as if the wind blew right through him. When the woman turned away, he felt his pants grow warm and he realized he was pissing on himself.

Suddenly there was a shot, different it seemed, from the other shots. He looked back to where the crowd was and saw the light skinned man fall. It was as if he were falling from the sky. The boy hadn't seen the man get to his feet, but only fall. The white men tussled above the body, pushing one another in and out of the circle in order to kick or club at the body. Then someone cleared them way. It was Sheriff Cook. He pushed the men back, making a circle around the dead man, as if to give him a venerated space. It was silent for a moment and then there was a cacophony of firing and the body seemed to wallow across the ground. One of the women threw up her hands and turned away, the other two, laughing, held on to her.

More people arrived, sliding down the bank which had become slick from their tramping. Two men brought down a chest of beers, and when they were noticed, people left the circle around the body to buy beer. Someone shot again followed by a volley. The boy did not look. He was trying now to find a way to climb the bank without being seen. Darkness was settling in the woods, and he could see the patches of the sky over the crown of the hill. He started on his

hands and knees, crawling and then scrambling through the leaf litter with the musk of the humus filling his nose and mouth. He slipped and lay flat until he had regained his sense. He could hear hooting and shouting from the crowd below and he sensed that no one was looking at him. Quickly he found a tree trunk wide enough to hide him. He was only halfway up to the road. He could see the crowd still, a tight circle of men next to the river, the three women still standing to one side. There were children, too, at least two boys. He thought he might know them. Probably he went to school with them, but then he focused on the top of the hill where the sky was a pale blue, almost white in contrast with the gloom of the woods.

When he reached the top of the hill, he squatted again. It seemed quiet; the crowd was out of sight, behind him. Before him, and a little below him lay the road. On one side, it went up, cutting through the hill and curving out of view, the gravel looking nearly white against the color of the sky. On the other side, it went down to the bridge, the top of which he gazed at for a moment, while calculating what would be the shortest and safest path home. He would continue uphill, he knew, crossing the roadbed, and going back to bramble where he would find the old spring path. Then, there was another volley of gunfire, guns that made little pops and ones that boomed. He knew that it was Bertrand, and a scene flashed through his mind as clearly as if he were witnessing it. "Bertrand," he said. He was unaware that he quivered until he saw his hands out in front of him and clasped them in his armpits. Tighter and tighter he drew into a ball, trying to control the shaking. When he could stop shaking, he thought, he could run. He would run up the hill and cross the road just where it curved. He released a

heavy breath and stood, started to run, and stopped again, nearly throwing himself to the ground. A yellow dog stood in the middle of the road. It was mud-spattered and lean, and it crouched with its tail between its legs when it saw him. "Toby," he said aloud. Then he ran toward the dog, forgetting for the moment about the killings. It was Toby, his dog from long ago, he thought. The dog cowered, flattened itself into the road as he approached, and then with a growl, it shot past him running up the hill the way that he should have been running. He staggered a few steps, not sure now which direction to go. Then he heard the coarse sound a car coming down the gravel road on the other side of the bridge. It would have been someone coming from the direction of Bethany, he thought, and he was tempted to look to see if it would be someone who could rescue Bertrand. But soon there was hooting and gunfire, and the boy clenched his fist and swallowed hard. He took several steady breaths and began to climb the embankment toward the field where he had left the buckets of blackberries. The sun was gone now and the light of the sky was swooning towards blue-black. Bright points of stars were beginning to flicker in the open sky above the road. From higher ground, he could see the bridge and in the dimming light he could make out people, boys mostly, watching from the bridge. They climbed the diagonals or sat on the road bed and swung their legs over the side of the bridge. Two boys had climbed high into the truss and swung like monkeys from the struts. He knew some of the boys from school and he had a feeling now that it would be okay if he joined them. That way, he told himself, he could see what was going on and he would be with a group and no one would bother him.

He started down the embankment, losing sight of the boys. As he landed beside the roadbed, the lights of a car shone on him. His muscles tensed and he went up on his toes, ready to dive for the brush along the side of the road. But he didn't move. Though poised to spring, flexed so tightly they ached, his muscles failed him. The car approached, slowed as it went by. It was Mr. Jacks' Buick wagon, now appearing purple in the dim light. Mr. Jacks was alone in the car, and as he drove by he peered out at the boy. Their eyes meet momentarily, and the vacant, black look in Jacks' face—nearly the look of a snake, the boy thought—sent a shiver through him. After the car passed, he ran.

When he was at the top of the hill, he thought he was far enough away that he no longer had to run. Now, the gurgling of the river, echoing up the ravine, and the quiet rustling the breeze through the woods predominated, though when he listened hard enough he could hear occasional shouting and laughing from the bridge. He walked blindly at first, until he realized he was following the path through the leaf litter where the woman's body had been dragged. He followed it until he came to place where she had been shot. He did not recognize the place, until his foot slipped in the bloody leaves and stirred up a swarm of flies. Now, he began to run, crazily, not caring the direction. Branches cut across his face. He stumped his toes on stones. He tripped, got up, kept on running. He was running down hill, and he thought he was running toward the road. He thought he heard the groan of a car, and he knew to be safe he had to get away from the road.

Suddenly, he ran into a wall of vines. Though he struggled, he couldn't run his way out of it. His legs tangled in the vines and when he tried to draw them back, they tangled even more. He tore at the strands of vines with his hands, but

they seemed alive, wrangling and writhing and entrapping his body the more the fought to get through them. Finally, he gave up and let his body fall forward. He was caught in the leafy jungle of the vines. He breathed heavy , he slowly became aware of a faint floral odor, like a sour lilac. Kudzu. He was trapped in a drapery of kudzu vines that hung from trees over the road. Once again, he struggled to free himself, but now exhausted he resigned himself to hang, like an insect trapped in web. “Oh Bertrand!” he said over and over. “Why Bertrand?”

Chapter 2

In the spring of the year before, last year of the war, 1945, Lonnie’s great Aunty had come from Savannah to live with him and his mother. His father had been in the army for nearly three years, first at Fort McClellan, Alabama and then in Africa, Italy and Germany. The war had consumed everything—meat, milk, sugar—and his imagination, at eight-years old. He saw the war pictures in the news papers and the newsreels when they went to the movie house, but in his mind he saw gigantic dirigibles shooting laser beams down on people fleeing through crowded city streets and robotic goons in hand to hand combat with

muscular GIs and comic book supermen. "You too young to worry about war," his mother would tell him, but he wasn't worried, except he wanted to know where his Daddy was and when his Daddy was coming home. "He'll be back right soon, right soon indeed, but I can't say when, though. He's got to kill some bad men," his mother said. "Like Tom Mix and Superman."

Great Aunty wasn't so hopeful. "Only the good Lord knows what's true," she would said. She chewed tobacco and used an enameled pot for a spittoon. She gave Lonnie the job of emptying it, as it was his job to empty all of the chamber pots, to bring in wood for the stoves and to take care of Toby, his daddy's dog. "War," Aunty said, "is a 'bomination in the eyes of the Lord. Lord said 'Love your enemies, as yourself.'"

"But what you go' do, Aunty, if they attack you? Whole country can't turn the other cheek. We turn the other cheek, you go' be learning to speak German, if they don't kill you ..." Lonnie's mother said. She turned to him. "God on our side, so don't fret none about your Daddy. He'll be home, come next year. Lord willing."

These arguments happened frequently and Aunty never pushed, always letting the boy's mother have the last say, for soon, his mother left also. She went to Marietta, just outside of Atlanta, to work in an airplane factory. It was only two hours away by train, and she came home once every month or so, and during the time she was away the old woman reigned, even though some days her arthritic hips prevented her from getting out of bed.

One Sunday at suppertime, they sat at the kitchen table eating cabbage and bread and a rare serving of pork. Toby sat just outside the screen door on the

stoop with his bowl of scraps. He was a yellow mutt, as old as Methuselah, but still trim and able to trample through the woods.

"I tell you this now because you're going to have to learn it," Aunty declared, her finger pointing toward the ceiling, "and your Mama ain't about to tell you. God's truth is a hard truth, little boy. Hard, but you learn it and you learn to live with it."

He didn't understand her talk, coming as it did in her wheezy, phlegmy voice, and seemingly directed at the air around him as much as at him. She told him that she had been born during a war, the War Between the States. She, of course, could remember none of it, but she did remember the limbless men in her family who had survived it, and their stories of carnage. She said they talked of battlefields where for as far as they could see, from one horizon to the next, lay bodies and parts of bodies, and a man couldn't take two steps without stepping on a body. "And I had always wondered why men would do such a thing to one another and why God would allow it? Does God care that a man puts a bullet through another man and widows his wife and orphans his children? Don't think that He does?"

Lonnie picked the pork out of his cabbage. He liked both cabbage and meat, but he didn't like them together. He found a piece of boiled bacon and slipped it into his mouth. The fat was smooth on his tongue but the cabbage flavor made it sweet and he found it hard to chew.

"But war still didn't have much of a meaning to me. Of course, now, I have never been a soldier and thank God I didn't live when there was war in this country, and praise God it won't come here today. But in '82 I lost my beau to

war with the Indians out in Dakota. Ralph Hughes was his name. Handsomest boy there ever was, at least was to me. Straight, thick black hair and black eyes; and, tall and as lean as a stick. A black Irishman." She closed her eyes and Lonnie stopped chewing the bacon and looked at the old woman's quivering wrinkled cheeks. When she opened her eyes, she seemed not to see him. "I always did like a man with pretty hands—and we had plans." Now, she regarded Lonnie. Her finger wagged. "Plans. You would've grown up in the West, young man, if I'd had my druthers. We both would have been Westerners! Pioneers! There was nothing for us poor folks here in Georgia." She paused and looked down to her lap and wrung her hands. "That was long ago." Slowly, she got up from the table and removed the dishes to a wash pan on the stove. After she had cleaned the kitchen, they sat on the back stoop, Toby beside them and, as if the cleaning had been just a moment's interruption in her story, she began it again. "I should have made a family for myself, and a good one. But I always bore a hard feeling for the Indians. Luckily you don't see too many of them around in Georgia anymore, but when I see one, it makes ice come up on my skin and I go cold to the bone, too, just thinking about Ralph and thinking about what all, not just Ralph, but everything—the life that was taken from me. Somebody should pay for it. I still think that. The Bible does say, 'Love your enemies,' and funny thing about is, I don't even think of Indians as my enemy. I mean, I don't feel at war with them. I just get cold and I want them to pay for what they did to Ralph."

"What did they do to him?" Lonnie interrupted. She looked up at him, as if surprised that he was there. "Oh, why child, they *killed* him! Just 23-years old, but they killed him."

“He was a cowboy.”

“He was a soldier. In the cavalry. A horseman.” Toby yawned wide and wagged his tail against the boy’s leg. “I ought to forgive. Lord knows the Indians have suffered in this country ‘til you hardly see one. Even if you go out West, you’d hardly see one. I need to forgive, for the Bible tells me this.” She stroked the boy’s shoulders. He felt her wrinkled hand against his neck and he wondered about how old she must be. “But son, how can we redeem ourselves so that He might redeem us? He makes it so hard.”

“Maybe it’s supposed to be hard.”

“Live long enough,” the old woman said and snorted, “you’ll know for sure.” Her words might have seemed prophetic to the boy, had he understood them.

The next morning, while bringing water up from the spring hole, the boy heard a car braking and sliding in the loose gravel on the road. He put down the bucket and ran to the front of the house, and there he saw a tall man standing over Toby and wiping his brow. Toby lay in the road, breathing heavily, but otherwise still. Even from the distance of a few yards, Lonnie saw what the dog must have known. Toby’s yellow pupils were fully opened, and their expression was moving beyond fear.

“Why did you kill my dog, Mister?” Lonnie asked. Suddenly, then, he was overwhelmed with what was about to happen. Toby was leaving. His Daddy had left; his ma, too. And, now, Toby. He didn’t know what to say, so he repeated himself. Then the words became garbled and he whined.

“Fuck,” The man said and wiped his palm across his mouth. He looked at the boy and back to the dog and then to the weathered house.

Toby whimpered, and began to drag himself into the ditch. His hind legs had been crushed, but also blood came from his chest. He lay still in the ditch, except for an occasional wag of his tail in response to Lonnie’s voice.

"Why did you hit my dog, Mister? Why did you?"

"It was an accident, son."

"Why did you, Mister? Why did you hit Toby?" Lonnie squatted next to the dog, reached out for him but did not touch him. He wanted to hold him, to draw him into his lap as he had done many times, but he felt that to touch the animal would break him.

“I hate to see an animal suffer,” Lonnie heard the man say. “God, I hate to see it. But accidents happen.” The man was quiet for a moment, and then he called to Lonnie, “Look.”

Lonnie looked to see the man fingering through his wallet. “Look I’ll bring you some money. Now, just hush up, and I’ll make it right for you.”

Until then, Lonnie hadn’t realized that he was crying, then he shook involuntarily and stood and stamped his feet. “You didn’t have to hit him. You didn’t have to kill him.” Behind the man, Lonnie saw Aunty coming across the yard, hobbling on a cane. Her long dress and apron brushed against the white heads of plantain and set them bobbing on their stalks in a trail behind her. She carried a shotgun in her free hand. When Lonnie saw the gun, he stamped again and ran to Aunty, pulling at her dress. “No, Aunty please. No.”

“Shut up,” Aunty said. But he bellowed and she propped the gun against her hip, and with her free hand slapped him in the face. “Children ain't got no obedience, these days,” she said to the man, who seemed surprised by the suddenness of her violence.

“Well,” the man said, “ He...He lost his dog.”

“Every old dog has got to go sometime, Mister,” the woman said and held out the gun to the man. “Least you can do, is to let him not suffer so.”

“I hate to see an animal suffer,” the man said, but did not move until Aunty pushed him with the stock of the gun.

Lonnie turned his face into Aunty’s apron, but smelling its sourness, he turned again to look at the man and Toby. Aunty held him by the shoulder. “You run along back inside,” she said, but did not loosen her grip. “Ok, then. Watch. It won’t hurt you to see. He’s a poor dog, but in a minute, he will be at peace. That’s is what a life is, just a roiling and a scuffling until at last God sees fit to bring you to your rest.”

The man lifted the shotgun to his shoulder and sighted down the barrel. He swayed a bit. Lonnie looked at Toby, now lying quietly in the ditch, his rib cage rising and falling rapidly. He looked at Aunty, her lips set firmly in a web of wrinkles, her eyes, black and glossy. He pulled away from her, and came to where the man stood. He breathed through his mouth. Snot ran down his nose. The man lowered the gun. “I'll buy you another one,” he told the boy. I'll buy you any kind you want. I got a boy about your age. I'll buy you whatever you want.”

The boy fought for control of his face. "Do it then. Kill him then, won't you?"

Again the man lifted and lowered the gun. "You reckon the boy ought to see this?"

Aunty snorted. "Boy will see worse if he lucky enough to live long." Then she directed Lonnie to go back to the house and when Lonnie didn't move, she said, "You can throw him over there in the woods. Let him feed the buzzards." She pointed across the road to a drapery of dust-covered kudzu and poison ivy. "And leave my gun on the front porch." She turned and began to hobble back to the house.

Once again the man put the gun to his shoulder. "God," he said, "why doesn't he just hurry up and die?" The dog's chest kept swelling and falling rapidly. "I hate to see the thing suffer. I'll make it up to you, son. Nothing like a boy and his dog. It's American like apple pie. "

One blast from the gun and Toby's breathing stopped. In spite of his swaying and trembling, the man's aim had been true and the shot had torn into the dog's head. Of what Lonnie could see of the dog's eyes, they seemed dull, and he imagined that Toby's soul had stepped outside of his body and was floating up into the air towards heaven.

Then he turned to the man who was handing him the gun. "Well, now, that's better." The man said and looked around. "Look here." He breathed heavily, "I'll bring you some money. How about that? I got to get down to the bank, but I'll bring you some money." The man lit a cigarette and threw the still

flaming match to the roadbed. “Who lives here, anyway? Who is your daddy, boy?”

Lonnie told him.

“Wayne Henson?” The man looked at the boy. “I reckon I can see that. This where he lives. Your daddy’s a good man. Good worker. I reckon he’ll be home soon.”

“He’s in the war.”

“Like I said, he’ll be home soon.”

The boy was puzzled, and then he lost his breath in anticipation.

The man took a long drag on his cigarette. “Like I said boy, the war is over.”

“Over...?”

“You goddamn hillbillies got a radio? The war’s been over—three, four weeks. Your daddy probably half way home by now. But listen, I’m going to make it up to you about this dog, you hear. I’m going to bring you some money.”

Lonnie didn’t care about money, but he shook his head in agreement. Then the man got into the car and drove away, leaving the boy standing beside the road.

Auntie didn’t believe the war had ended and when the boy insisted on the veracity of the stranger, she moved a chair to the stoop to await the arrival of the mailman. Toby’s corpse still lay in the ditch and the faint smell of the fresh kill came to them in whiffs. The old woman cursed the stranger for not following her

instructions, and anticipating a rank smell she instructed the boy to pull the dog out of the ditch and further into the woods across the road from the house.

The dog was not heavy and the corpse slid along easily on the leaf mulch. The boy gripped the dog's front paws, and let the claws dig into his palms, but he could not look at the dog. When he was out of sight of the house, he let go, started to walk away, but turned back. His stomach tightened and he opened his mouth to bellow, but only a crackle came out of his throat. Then he thought he had to bury the dog and looked around for something to dig with. Finding nothing, he raked leaves over the body with his hands, until Toby was buried under a knee-deep mound of leaves and twigs. He had no sooner finished, when he heard the approach of a car, and ran to the road to see the mailman's car, already stopped at the mailbox and Aunty speaking to the man. By the time, he got across the road the car was pulling away. He tried to read Aunty's face, but her stern look gave him no clue.

"Is it true?" he whispered.

She looked down at him, and without a sign of pleasure in the news, said, "Yes."

Lonnie sighed. It was a long sigh that came up from behind his navel.

"Aunty, it is over?"

"Yes, it is over." Slowly, she started back to the house. "Don't mean your daddy will be back, though. Don't mean nothing until you see him in the front door. Many a men go off and you don't hear from them ever again. Don't know if they're dead or alive."

"He'll be back."

The old woman looked at the boy and grunted. “Go wash your hands.”

Three days passed and with each the boy’s anticipation grew. He busied himself, as he could. He straightened the parlor, dusted in his parent’s room, swept the front stoop, and fiddled around in the kitchen until the old woman threw him out. Then three days passed with failing anticipation, and growing anxiety, so much so, that he flagged down the mailman to ask again if the war had indeed ended. Securing the answer, he asked if soldiers had returned. The man knew of some soldiers who had returned, but knew nothing of Wayne.

Then one afternoon, when the heavy humidity and high temperature sent them to find shade in the back yard, Lonnie thought he heard a car pull off the road and into the driveway on the other side of the house. Lethargy held him fast to the grass on which he lay. He raised his head and saw the old woman, slumped down into her chair, her head lolling across her shoulder. A car door slammed, and then, he sat up. Slowly he realized that someone was in the yard, and he walked around to the front of the house. He saw a man with his back to him, bent over talking to the driver of the car. A duffel bag sat beside the man’s leg. He wore a uniform. He stood, still with his back to Lonnie, and Lonnie, knowing the man was his father, started walking toward him, saying nothing, his arms open, tears in his eyes and a smile so wide it cracked the skin on his lips. He reached the man just as the man turned. “Daddy,” he said softly, and embraced his father.