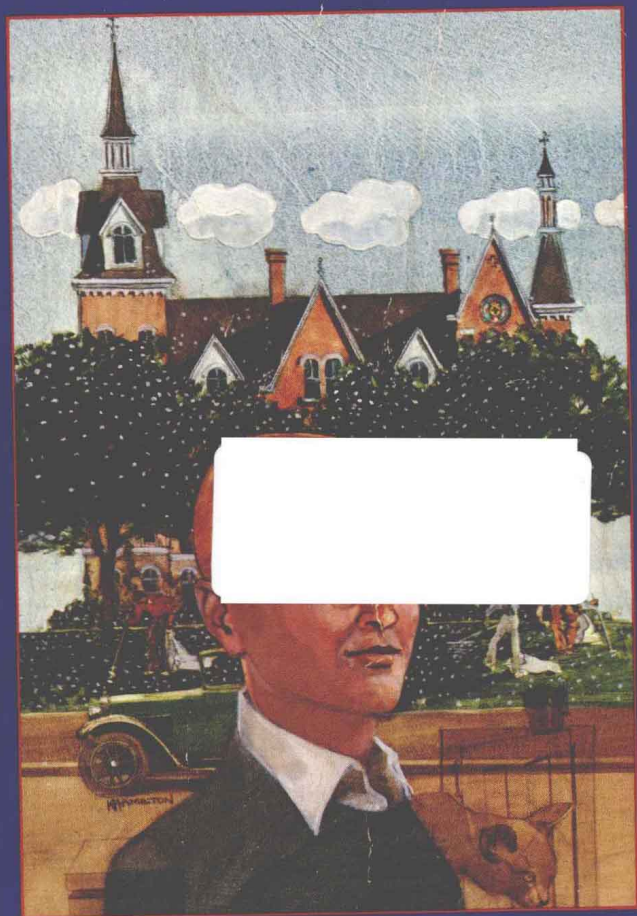


FERROL SAMS



Author of
RUN
WITH
THE
HORSEMEN
and
WHEN ALL
THE
WORLD
WAS
YOUNG

THE WHISPER OF THE RIVER



The River

Ferrol Sams

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it was wood and it was white, and it was balanced like a box on upturned native stones. Its back snuggled close into the brow of a little hill, and the front, because it was level and true, stood several steps above the ground. It had no underpinning; roaming dogs and wind could course freely under the floor and around the supporting pillars. The powdery soil beneath it was pocked with doodle craters, inviting depressions that were inviolate and undisturbed because they were never seen except by children already arrayed in Sunday finery.

The building stood in a grove of red oak and hickory nut trees, and the yard around it was hoed free of weeds and then swept clean with dogwood brooms. Its windows, tall and narrow, were filled with squares of handmade glass. The irregularity of each clear pane gave a slight prism to reflected light and produced a mirrored mosaic that was mismatched and undulating. The steeple had no ornamental frills but was proportioned well to the size of the building, and it housed an ancient iron bell that compensated in clanging volume for its lack of timbre and tone. It was a one-room building, but should anyone think it crude or spartan, let it be quickly known that this was the House of the Living God.

It had been erected before The War as soon as the scattered community of settlers had cleared their lands and built their homes. It was fashioned of offerings from its members — great oaken sills from virgin forests, knot-free boards sawed from the hearts of tall, straight pines, square nails from a merchant so fat he wheezed, and gallons of lead paint from a planter too old to work with his hands. That was in the dim, distant days before people in the area were

prosperous enough to own slaves or hire carpenters. It was erected by the strain and sweat of farmers and their sons who had felled the forests of Brewton County, Georgia, and turned its fields to the face of the sun. Their hands were sure, their hearts were pure, and they built the church as a place of worship. It stood there forever after in witness that the prayer of their hands was good.

The cemetery behind it was a thicket of unmatching tombstones confined by wrought iron spears to prevent their spreading over into Mr. Horace Snead's cotton patch. The gravel walks were mossed over just enough to mute footfalls. Giant cedar trees, older than the church, shaded a corner outside the rusted fence and dropped their needles on mysterious graves that entombed long-forgotten slaves. Those mute mounds were marked with sea shells embedded in concrete but lacked any names. On a hot day, the pungent fragrance of the cedars mingled with the faint cat smell from ancient boxwoods in the MacLean lot and brought visions of dried spinsters who preserved in penury the house of their father and fed fresh warm milk to their pets. The graveyard at Peabody Baptist Church was the quietest place in the whole wide world.

Perusal of its dates and names manifested that God will provide and He will nurture His children. Everyone in Peabody slept there eventually, and folk for miles around knew their histories and their kin. The church had stood through The War, Reconstruction, the World War, and even now gave no sign of being conquered by the Depression. The graveyard was testimony to any sensitive person that farther along we'll know more about it; farther along we'll understand why.

There were probably some people who thought themselves indifferent to that church, but they all wanted it there. It gave a feeling of security and it guaranteed succession. Even the most outspoken cynic would have been uncomfortable and filled with foreboding had it vanished. It was needed right there, where it was, in the quietly supervising grove at the heart of Peabody, Georgia. The church was hope and assurance; it was challenge; it was judgment. It was also comfort and benediction. The area would have been desolate indeed without it.

* * * *

It was imperative that one be Saved. By the end of high school every member of any graduating class would have acclaimed this verity. The boy, of course, had known it forever. In his culture, life eternal was assured. It was a given. The only question was whether it would be spent in the fires of Hell or the blissful security of Heaven. Belief in the Lord Jesus Christ guaranteed one the bucolic freedom of the latter as opposed to the packed and crowded tortures of the former. Everyone believed. No one was fool enough to put any desire ahead of being Saved.

It was just as important to be Raised Right. The child who had been Raised Right was not only Saved but had spent a large part of his formative years in the House of the Lord. Attendance at piano recitals did not count, but everything else did. From Sunbeams through BYPU, from Sunday school to prayer meeting, from Those Attending Preaching to Those With Prepared Lessons, everything was counted. So was everybody. In the midst of all this scorekeeping, the concept of being saved by grace was a nebulous and adult bit of foolishness not to be contemplated with anything approaching the fervor accorded perfect attendance. A pin with added yearly bars swinging like a sandwich sign on an adolescent chest proclaimed indisputably to the world that its wearer had been Raised Right. A place called Nashville was the source of the Sunday school literature, but the more highly anointed preachers of the day came from a mystic place called Louisville. Elders may have thought that the seat of the Southern Baptist Convention was in Nashville, but to any Raised Right child, "Seminary at Louisville" had exactly the same ring as "Temple at Jerusalem." Methodists probably could be Saved, but there was a question whether any of them really had been Raised Right.

The boy from earliest memory had spent every Sunday morning bathed and slicked into his best clothes with the admonition not to get dirty before Sunday school. Raised Right children wore suits and neckties which produced a stiff-legged discomfort that lasted well into adulthood. These children also regarded Sunday afternoons as periods of tedium, since fishing, hunting, and attendance at movies were undeniable violations of the holiness of the Sabbath and consequently were forbidden. There was in addition the subliminal impression that one might go to Hell for failure to wash one's

hands before eating, and one certainly never forgot to say the blessing. Even the simplest of joys were tempered with piety. Guilt was established early as spicy seasoning for pleasure, and the boy's composure was preserved only by the conviction that God could not see under the covers and most likely not through wood.

His mother carried him to more church-related functions than most children dreamed existed, but it was not because he was her favorite child. He had three sisters with whom he furiously fussed and fought at every opportunity, and it was much easier for the mother to transport the solitary stimulus of all that friction than to dress three little girls and carry them. Besides, there was no telling what devilment that boy might get into when left unattended.

"Separate them, Vera," the grandmother pleaded. "For the Lord's sake, and for mine, separate them."

The boy at an early age, wide-eyed and attentive, sat through prayer meetings, missionary meetings, Bible study courses, Flint River district rallies, and county-wide WMU conferences. He listened with analytical attention to everything. He believed most of it. As soon as he could, he read the Bible daily and he prayed a lot. He knew that in the New Testament people were exhorted to pray unceasingly, a requirement he regarded as excessive, perhaps even a little ridiculous. He struggled manfully with it, however, and did the best he could. He prayed a whole lot.

While very young, he became convinced that he was smarter than Adam. He discovered that either he could fool the Lord or else the Lord was not really watching all the time. Otherwise, He would have been compelled to smite the boy both hip and thigh on several occasions. The boy was careful to explain things in little prayerful asides and felt that he was a very favored person in the eyes of the Lord. To get right down to it and tell the truth, the Lord was a little easier to fool than the boy's mother.

John Mortimer Folds probably saved the boy from being a preacher or maturing into "a life of full-time Christian Service," the latter being a confusing condition the boy thought reserved in all likelihood for people not quite good enough to be preachers. John

Mortimer was an older cousin. He lived in Atlanta and was brought every Sunday afternoon to visit the grandparents. Sometimes they came on Saturday and spent the night. Everyone knew that Atlanta was huge and wicked, full of movie theaters and other flesh pots. John Mortimer was regarded, consequently, as something of a parolee from Sodom and Gomorrah, protected only by family connections on his mother's side from the fire and brimstone that were sure to engulf, sooner or later, that sinful city of Atlanta. He swaggered around, spoke aggressively of things undreamt by his country cousins, and was an unsolicited but memorable mentor for the boy.

John Mortimer once herded a gaggle of younger cousins behind a large crepe myrtle bush and persuaded them all to drop their pants. The crowd spent an hilarious interlude skinning back their penises, arranging dried crowder peas around the glans, and then holding them in place with the replaced foreskin. The undisputed champion with the lumpiest result was John Mortimer. The boy tried to look up in the Bible whether or not the group had been sinning. He could find no reference whatever to crowder peas, and research into foreskins led him from Abraham to a long drawn-out dispute between Peter and Paul that was boring.

John Mortimer assured him they had done nothing wrong, and the boy decided there was no scriptural reference to it because it was apparent to anyone who could read that Jews were not equipped to play with crowder peas. His guilt had almost dissipated when he chanced to think at bedtime that just such activity might have precipitated that covenant between God and Abraham in the first place. He leaped in horror from his bed, knelt, and said his prayers for the second time that evening. He promised God that if he might be spared, he would never play with crowder peas again the longest day he lived. As added expiation, he vowed to abandon the Story Book Bible and read the Real Bible from beginning to end.

John Mortimer's aspiration to be the leader in his generation of cousins was impaired by his considerable reputation for mendacity. He was the son of a domineering mother who was overly ambitious for him and covertly contemptuous of her obstinate and phlegmatic mate. She unleashed on John Mortimer a great deal of her frustration as she strove to mold him to her will. Confusingly her will changed often, and her only begotten son was expected one

month to be a scholar, the next a violinist, the next an orator, and so on. He lied to please her and he lied to placate her, and nothing unleashed her fury more than to catch him lying. She would beat him for lying and yell, "John Mortimer Folds, if you don't tell me the truth, I'm going to whip you to within an inch of your life."

When he complied and told her the truth, the whipping he then got would be worse than the one he had originally received for lying. He became inured to whippings, shrugging them off as part of his lot in life, and continued lying. Occasionally his baffled mother hung him by his clothes on the back of the kitchen door for an hour and whipped him if he kicked. Once she tied him in a sack with only his head protruding and suspended him from a hook in the ceiling, but still he needed whipping. It was in the days before old age pensions and the resultant rise to power of the self-perpetuating Welfare Department, and no one had ever heard of child abuse. There were frequent references by John Mortimer's mother to "Bring up a child in the way he should go." It was apparent to the cousins that being Raised Right was a more painful process for some than for others.

John Mortimer had told the boy there was no Santa Claus and unhappily had been proven correct by the passage of time; so he never became completely incredible. When he came down from Atlanta, however, and informed his younger, more innocent cousin in graphic gutter language how babies were made, he went too far. The boy called him a liar and with prim righteousness asserted that his parents would never do a vulgar thing like that. John Mortimer resented being called a liar by a squirt who came barely to his shoulder and persisted in his enlightening stance, even proclaiming that his mother had told him so. The boy defied him by answering, "I don't believe you; I'm going to ask your mother."

John Mortimer weakened his position by quickly retorting, "You come back here! She don't know nothing about it!"

The boy, bolstered by this reneging, proceeded to instruct John Mortimer that babies were sent through God by a process called conceiving, which was a purely feminine function. He went and got the Bible to prove it. "Just listen to this: 'And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived and bare a son, and she called his name Reuben; for,

she said, surely the Lord hath looked upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me. And she conceived again, and bare a son....' You see? The man doesn't have a thing to do with it."

John Mortimer, less precocious than his younger cousin, disliked to read and was intimidated by all books, especially the Bible. In the abandon of anger, however, he yelled, "Read on about all that going in unto and laying with! They don't come out and call it that, but they're talking about fucking right there in the Bible! You so smart, you don't even recognize it when you read about it!"

The boy read on, emphasizing the word *conceive* and stumbling through an attempt to explain the transitive and intransitive differences between *lie* and *lay*. His sure air of virtue goaded John Mortimer into shouting, "I don't care what you say! The only reason your mama and daddy had so many chillun is they're fucking every night! My folks only had me and that's cause they don't fuck as much as yours! Yaa, yaa, yaa!"

This so infuriated the boy that he passed the first lick. Whenever he and John Mortimer were alone, it was certain they would fight, and John Mortimer usually put a drubbing on him. This time it was different. John Mortimer's mother appeared in time to overhear her son's last statement and to be further scandalized by witnessing her puny nephew land a solid right to the jaw. It was the more impressive because the assailant still held an open Bible in his left hand. She snatched John Mortimer up, shook him until he was limber-necked, beat him with a wooden spoon, and washed his mouth out with Octagon soap. Redfaced but unspent, she turkey-trotted him to the smokehouse, sacked him up, and hung him from a rafter between the hams and middlings until, she said, it was time to go back to Atlanta.

The boy was awed by this avenging whirlwind sent from God and felt vindicated by all her explosive wrath. Never one to pass up opportunity, he casually settled himself beneath the holly tree that had been planted before The War on the day the grandmother was born. Taking care that he was in full view through the open smoke house door of the twirling, chagrined John Mortimer, he pretended to read the Bible for another half hour. As he theatrically turned a page in studious display, he thought, He's lying again. That may be the way common folks get babies, like cows and hogs do it. But not

my mother and daddy. They go by the Bible.

There were several cousins present a few months later when the worldly John Mortimer propounded the rudimentary technique and sensual delights of onanism. Open-mouthed, with furtive glances at each other, they listened while the sophisticate from Atlanta blustered and bragged. He assured them that everybody in town was not only familiar with the procedure but habitually indulged in the pleasures thereof. He even described a social event among older boys, to which he had not yet been privy but which he anticipated, called a circle jerk. When one of the quieter cousins timidly demurred that this activity might be wrong, John Mortimer was indignant. "Wrong? What's wrong with it? It's your fist, ain't it? And your pecker! You're just scared, that's all."

Another small boy ventured to question the purpose of such solitary activity and was met with scorn. "Why? Why do you do it? Because it's fun, dammit! And to get the feeling."

When the cousin continued his quest for information, John Mortimer was beside himself. "What's the feeling? I ain't believing you asked that! The feeling grabs you right here and it's the goddamdest giant tickle you ever felt."

At this the boy intervened. He was on sure ground. "John Mortimer! Don't take the Lord's name in vain!"

"Oh, shit," responded John Mortimer in disgust. "Is it all right to say 'shit' in front of Your Majesty? Just grow up ignorant and see if I care. I don't know why I ever bother myself with you little country turds anyhow."

The boy called to the retreating back, "I'll pray for you, John Mortimer." He glanced at his younger cousins and set a good example before the Lord. "We'll all pray for you. Unceasingly."

Smug in the conviction that had John Mortimer's mother witnessed this exchange it probably would have earned for him an overnight sojourn in the smokehouse, the boy dismissed the affair as another example of exaggeration and lying. He had enough of both curiosity and prurience, however, to investigate. He took care to sequester himself for the event within the wooden walls of the privy, securely insulated against the scrutiny of God. It was a short-lived experiment, ludicrous and non-climactic. He was bored. There were better ways than this to spend an idle hour in the afternoon. He

fastened the metal buttons to his overalls and emerged from the privy to toss pebbles in the air and hit them with a broom handle. He knew all along that John Mortimer Folds had been lying. He stood in the sunshine, guiltless before the Lord.

The first time he had an orgasm the boy very nearly tumbled off the top plank of the barnyard fence. He was through with his Saturday chores, it was too early to milk, and he had just finished reading, with virtue and relief, the last chapter of the Book of Ezekiel. It was late March and the sun was shining, but such a wild wind was scouring across the farm that he was obliged to wear his mackinaw and his leather aviation helmet.

When he climbed the fence to check on the baby pigs, he discovered a secluded spot next to the barn wall that was out of the wind and deliciously warmed by the reflected sun. He rested snugly there, content in the idle joy of an undemanding moment. Perched eight feet above the ground, he listened to the rich sougning of the wind roaring over the barn, watched a sun-glinted buzzard scud in lean and stiffened control across the rapid sky, breathed the vaguely spicy, musty smell of dried horse manure, and became aware of an impelling erection.

Idly he unbuttoned his overalls and slowly began the puerile manipulation. He concentrated on interpreting his afternoon reading, assuming that the Lord would be so interested in his thoughts that He would ignore his hand. For long moments he pondered and played. He noted that the buzzard had wheeled in the opposite direction and now hung, much higher and almost stationary, facing the wind. The boy envied the bird. Of a sudden he became absolutely inundated with sensation. His toes curled upward against his shoes, his elbows and upper stomach tingled, and then irresistible force came tearing and shocking in overwhelming pulsations through his loins. His mind was already on Ezekiel, and he saw myriad golden wheels spinning within wheels, covered with eyes and surrounded by coals of fire. He thought he must have a lightning rod in his lap, but the lightning was coming from within him. His hat fell into the barn lot, and he clung dizzily to the plank with both hands

until his body shuddered into immobility and relaxed.

"Good Lord! What in the world was that?" he cried aloud. He suddenly realized that he was out in the open, full under the gaze of Jehovah Himself and indeed in direct communication with Him. There was no way to hide this from the Lord. He was no smarter than Adam after all. His fig leaf had even slipped. He glanced around to be sure there had been no human witness to this sensual cataclysm. Only the buzzard was watching, and it appeared unbelievably disinterested, still intent on balance and glide. He was not surprised to note that the wind had stilled. That seemed fitting.

As he climbed down the fence and retrieved his cap from the attention of a curious pig, he identified again with Adam and his humiliating expulsion from the Garden. He thought of John Mortimer and decided that anyone who could dismiss the experience he had just undergone as a "giant tickle" was either insensate or inarticulate. He flapped his helmet against the fence to dislodge some dirt and bits of straw it had accumulated and hurried to the house. He wanted the protection of a roof over his head. The boy felt so guilty he was frightened.

In the safety of his own room, he decided not to pray. The better course, he thought, would be to ignore this incident and see if the Lord brought it up first. A little extra penance, however, might accumulate some virtue for him and certainly could not hurt anything. He opened his Bible and began trying to read for the second time that day, but he could not concentrate on Daniel. He kept thinking back to Ezekiel and was surrounded by the great, golden, whirling wheels with eyes and coals of fire. He realized that another erection had inflicted itself upon him and that he was contemplating repetition. He dropped in terror to his knees.

"Oh, Lord God of Hosts, look down in Thy infinite wisdom and have mercy on Thy poor humble servant. This is Porter Osborne, Jr., speaking to you, Lord, but I am still a little boy. Really. And if Thou just won't cast me into the Outer Darkness this time, I promise to be good in the future. And I most definitely will finish reading Thy Bible. Forgive me, Lord, and I thank Thee in advance. Amen."

Porter took refuge in the Baptist doctrine of "Once saved, always saved" and an incommensurate degree of comfort in the

admonition to forgive an erring brother seventy times seven. He later quit counting. He decided that he would not go to Hell for an act that immediately prior to its performance was so irresistible and immediately afterward so disgusting. There was no possibility, however, of his ever becoming a preacher or even considering full-time Christian service.

Porter worked hard on the farm, harder in his books, and by the age of fifteen had graduated from high school. As valedictorian, he had climbed to the top rung of the ladder of local opportunity. College was the next step and was taken for granted. He told his father that he would like to go to the University of Georgia. If that gentleman heard him, he gave no sign of it. He informed Porter that he was going to Willingham University. This was a school of four hundred students in a very old and cultured Georgia city. It was Baptist.

Most significant of all, his father had gone there. Although the father no longer attended church, no one ever doubted his devotion to Baptist principles, particularly the one that proclaimed Man to be the head of the house. Porter did not demur at the decree about Willingham, nor did he even feel rebellious. He had read about the Medes and the Persians, the laws of whom could not be changed, and he privately thought that his daddy was descended from both of them.

He spent his last summer at home working on the farm and preparing himself for a major change in his life. As the time actually approached when he could foresee giving up milking, he came to hate that chore and be impatient with it. He was so eager for the adventure of college and his establishment of a new and individual identity that he began to resent his parents and family. On the other hand, he was so timorous about change and so unsure about living all alone in a strange land removed from all things familiar that he clung to the family. It was a confusing and miserable summer.

As September neared and the cotton which he would not have to help pick this year began ripening, Porter gauged his standing. He was small but he was smart. He was not good-looking, but he had whatever it was that girls called personality. He was timid, but he never let anyone know it. He did not have a girlfriend, but he had been on a date. He was a disaster at sports, but boys seemed to like

him anyhow. He was genteel and consequently got along well with his elders. He had never been able to pick a hundred pounds of cotton a day, but the Negroes liked him regardless.

He had the loan of his grandfather's pocket watch and even the chain that went with it. He had new pants, all of them long, and two new pairs of shoes. He knew the Bible better than most of his peers, and there was not the slightest inkling of doubt that he was Saved. He was convinced that there was a special relationship between him and the Lord, manifested by the fact he usually was able to rectify his mistakes and even profit from them.

He believed unquestioningly in God the Creator but just as fervently in God the Manipulator and God the Great Intervener. He knew in his heart that the Lord had placed him on this earth at the opportune time in the ideal place and family to be perfectly instructed and totally enlightened. He was Baptist to the bone and the flower of his civilization. He was Porter Osborne, Jr., and he had been Raised Right.

Despite recurrent faint misgivings about leaving home, he assumed that, all things considered, he was ready for Willingham University. It never entered his consciousness that perhaps Willingham University might not be ready for him.



he family gathered to bid him bon voyage. Impatient to leave home and run his own life, Porter had some last-minute misgivings. The little sisters cried and told him to write, a truly touching tableau since two hours earlier they had been revengefully locked in furious alliance against him because of some cutting word he had uttered. The grandfather adjured him to be a man and to remember that he was an Osborne. Even the aunt, forgivingly forgetful, dabbed at her red-lidded glass eye and told him they would miss him. Her husband was pulling weeds in the garden, an activity he did not interrupt to say farewell. The grandmother held his face between two faintly palsied hands and told him not to forget who he was and that she was counting on him to make them all proud.

He approached his mother with an impersonal kiss and conflicting feelings. Over the summer she had become the focus of his eagerness to leave home. She had found innumerable tasks for him to do around the house and yard, "before," she said, "you leave for good." He began to feel that her sole function that summer was to annoy and irritate him. He felt so nagged and nattered, so constantly suppressed and directed, so badgered and harassed that he often wanted to scream, "Leave me alone!" Such rebelliousness, of course, would have produced upheaval in the secure order of things and was unthinkable. Instead, Porter had responded with exasperated sighs, patient and formal answers through gritted teeth, unwitnessed rolling of his eyes, and extreme feelings of guilt.

She put her hand on his shoulder and looked down into his eyes. Her own eyes were brimming over. "Oh, my son, I'm going to miss you. Walk with God and grow in grace. You're so young." As he

twisted impatiently, she blew her nose and added in a brisker tone, "Don't forget. If you don't smoke before you're twenty-one, I've promised you a solid gold wristwatch."

Porter heard this promise with the long familiarity engendered by frequent repetition and was untouched by it. He had never had any desire to smoke. What moved him of a sudden was a feeling of remorse that he could ever have been ashamed of this lovely person who had done him nothing but good all his life. He hugged her tightly and kissed her, but he remained dry-eyed. "I'll see you Thanksgiving, Mother. Thanks for everything."

Porter Osborne, Jr., was going off to college and he was sophisticated. He could not bear to let anyone see how very precious this woman was to him. Big boys had to outgrow their mothers.

He stuck his head around the kitchen door and spoke to the black woman at the sink. "Good-bye, Matt. I'm gone. Look after everybody."

That personage answered him with exactly the same sentence she had used at some point in every encounter between them for the last ten years. Only the feeling ever changed. This time it was both insouciant and cautious, but at least it was free of wrath. It was not quite affectionate. "Behave yoself, Sambo."

The grandmother was already turning to go to her room for a brushful of snuff. She wheeled so abruptly that her shawl slipped from her shoulders. "Porter, come here!"

The aunt attentively replaced the shawl.

"You're going off to a new town and a new school and a new life. Not a soul down there knows you. Don't you let anyone hear that nickname everybody around here uses. You've got a perfectly good name, and you see to it that people call you 'Porter,' not 'Sambo.' You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am, Memaw." It was unthinkable to respond otherwise. Even the father and the grandfather voiced only affirmation when this tiny tyrant spoke with asperity.

He hopped into the front seat of his father's Buick that Wes had washed and polished only that morning. Despite a flicker of cold fear way deep inside, he felt confident. After all, he was Porter Osborne, Jr. He was the last of his line, the bearer of the name, the hope of the future, and a light on the mountain. He was going off to college.