

Pasco Only:

Buffalo Soldier

by

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“Pasco Conly: Buffalo Soldier,” by John B. Williams.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Katrina, Trasy, and Bridget.

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PROLOGUE

IT IS SAID THAT THEODORE ROOSEVELT and his Rough Riders led the charge up San Juan Hill. This is one thing about the Spanish-American War of which Americans are certain. But if we accept the word of one Pasco Tallifierro Conly, it is all untrue.

The story that follows evolved from the notes and journals of this Pasco Conly – a black man who claims to have fought in that famous battle. More than a dozen regiments fought side-by-side to bring that campaign to a tidy resolution. Songwriters and balladeers tell about the most famous of these regiments. Conly tells about others—others that he claims fought with gallantry and heroism.

There is reason to believe that Mister Conly's journals may not have been accurate in every historical detail, but the veracity of passionate folk songs and patriotic ballads is doubtful as well. Even the newspapers of that day operated under poor standards of journalistic integrity. This brings all of these accounts – songwriters, Conly, and journalists – into question.

Believe what you will, and judge Conly's story with due skepticism. This snapshot of that period in history is filtered through the mind of this one man, an African, one generation out of slavery. From the time that I acquired his journals, I have questioned his credibility, but in the end I cannot understand why Pasco Conly would fashion such a lie—such an elaborate lie to boot. The existence of this book proves that, despite its flaws, I consider his story to be worth telling. So, herein, I present to you Conly's story in Conly's voice.

CHAPTER ONE

THE INFANT COMMUNITY OF BLUFORD had not seen the passing of its first generation of settlers when talk of war began in 1898. Our pastoral hamlet, secluded upon the southern plains of Kansas below the Solomon River, consisted of none but Negro freedmen seeking refuge from their former slave masters, fleeing the failed reconstruction of the South. Two decades of friendly associations and peaceful exchanges in our township convinced me that, given a choice, these sons of Ham would sooner embrace their brothers than oppose them. I cannot speak for the depraved class of vermin at the Crossroads, but the class of people known to me, the saints of the church, take to violence slowly when left unmolested. This suspicion was confirmed by the fury our pastor's bold announcement stirred up at Wednesday Class Night. With pews near overflowing, the imposing Reverend Pinckney sat the congregation agog with "oohs" and "ahs" and uneasy shifting in their seats when he approached the rostrum for benediction, wiped his brow with his red bandana, and announced with a severe countenance: "I want the brothers of the church to know that I'm gonna urge the able-bodied men of Bluford to muster up for this war with Spain when it comes."

Despite the general aversion to violence in our little town, the good reverend insisted that, "As Negroes we should, indeed we *must*, enlist and go to war when America fights the Spanish. I will make a sermon about it on Sunday." Then he added, with a turn of his head and a cut of his eye that

suggested resolute finality, "What better way to secure our rights as citizens."

True to his word, make a sermon he did. On communion Sunday, with eloquence and daring, the Reverend Pinckney devoted his entire exhortation to beseeching the young men of Bluford to go into battle to fight for the social and economic salvation of the black race.

"There is great dignity in carrying a musket," he said, "quite as much as trimming a man's beard, serving his tables, or blacking his shoes, praise the Lord! You who fell trees can serve the race by felling the enemies of freedom. You who erect fine barns and shelters can serve the race by erecting great armies."

I did not often speak out against our spiritual leader—precious few of us did. An accomplished song-bird of the church had once accused the preacher of meddling when he chided her about snuff dipping, but except for such good-natured censure, the quick-witted reverend skillfully evaded serious rebuke from the congregation, and he did so by walking softly when he strayed from the strict teachings of the Good Book. He had a good heart—we knew that he did—so we generally let him be when we came into disagreement with minor digressions from the Word.

My darling Martha had bundled our son Andrew warmly in his blanket and was ready to depart for our cabin when I revealed my intentions. "You take Andrew on home, Martha," I said to her. "I have to talk to Reverend Pinckney."

"Wait a minute, Pasco," she said. "You can't go talking to the pastor looking like this."

Martha put Andrew into my arms then straightened my collar and my tie. Stepping back to examine her handiwork, she retrieved Andrew then took leave and made her way toward Pee Dee Hollow and home.

I caught up to the pastor at the side door of Little Bethel as he started toward the newly built parsonage that sat

behind the church to the south of a small lake.

"Reverend Pinckney," I said, "I need just a moment of your time if I may have it, sir." I steered the pastor away from the parsonage toward a big sycamore tree with protruding roots. Mother Pinckney, his stout wife, excused herself when she saw that there would be conversation between us men, and she walked briskly on toward the duties awaiting her at home.

"Why, certainly, Brother Conly," said the pastor. "Certainly. But make it quick. You know Mama Pinckney is about to put out the Sunday feast, and your pastor has been fasting since yesterday."

The pastor's deep black skin was still slick and wet, and he removed his red bandanna, already crumbled and stained with moisture, from a pocket and blotted his cheeks and his brow. I found the air to be refreshingly cool, and although the sun was brightly shining and although I was attired in my woolen waistcoat, there was no perspiration on my brow or anywhere else on me to equal that on the pastor.

When we reached the sycamore tree with its gnarly branches, the pastor asked, "Just what is it that's got you so troubled, Brother Conly?"

I turned to face the pastor. "I hope you will accept my comments in the spirit of charity in which they are given, Reverend Pinckney, but I for one see no sense in fighting somebody else's war."

"I see," the pastor said in a calm voice. He laid his hand on my shoulder and continued patronizingly, "Some see it differently, Brother Conly. Some brothers here at Little Bethel are ready to go to Cuba to liberate them from Spain. The colored race will be exalted mightily if black men serve in this war with honor."

"Serve whom?" I asked. "Serve a nation that fails to serve us?"

"That's exactly my point, brother," the pastor said dryly.

“That’s exactly what we have to remedy.” The pastor’s saintly calmness stood in sharp contrast with my hot dissension. “Our situation is delicate, Brother Conly. That’s why we need to earn our laurel crown – why we need to put on a grand performance to show our race in a better light. There is no better way – I say *no other way* to do it – than by serving the nation as patriots and brave fighting men.”

“That might be agreeable if I thought our race would be treated fairly in war.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” the pastor asked with hints of an arrogant chuckle in his voice. “Any soldier can get tangled up with the grim reaper. He has no better claim on us than on any other man.”

“Let me remind you of Fort Wagner, reverend,” I said to him. “Going to fight in Cuba could very well be certain death for black men just as it was at Fort Wagner. Then what about Jacksonville? Our people were sent to fight the fiercest battle while the whites retreated to the rear. Why should I take part in such folly?”

“I know about that, and from all accounts the black regiments fought with honor. They tell me that all would have been lost without them.”

“Perhaps so, but I doubt if that was foremost in the minds of the officers who sent members of our race to their deaths.”

CHAPTER TWO

"MISTER CONLY, IF I WAS A CHINAMAN, the Bible says I would be going to hell, wouldn't I?" So spoke the juvenile but diabolic Perry Gaines, a miniature offspring of Lucifer, hiding behind a mischievous grin early on Thursday morning.

"I assure you, Perry," I said, convinced the impish student was about some game, "there is no such Biblical commandment."

"But it says," he proceeded to explain, "to honor your mother and father. In China, my folks would be heathens, wouldn't they? If I honor heathens, how can I go see God? Now, that's the way I see it, Mister Conly. If I was a Chinaman I would have to honor my parents and be a heathen. Whatever I do, I reckon hell would be my eternal home." Perry let out a little sigh that seemed to signify his confidence that his point had been established soundly.

Looking down on this rogue as we walked toward the schoolhouse in the coolness of a spring morning, I thought with unshakable conviction, *How odd! For hell will be Perry's eternal home, be he Chinese or not.* "Pray for salvation, Perry," I urged as I moved ahead toward the unpainted, one-room structure where this youthful rogue and his ruffian friends would soon be assembled. "Pray for *salvation.*"

Perry lingered outside and awaited the arrival of his companion, Willis Tanner. Willis, in my judgment was an ignorant boy and nothing more; he was simply misguided in his stanch association with Perry. There was hope that if

Willis could be separated from his demonic friend he might be susceptible to reform. I held out no such hope for Perry, who to my mind was an instrument of Satan; of this I was becoming as certain as the brimstone was hot, and I was equally certain that the evil in Perry was eternal.

Penny Riker was the third member of this trio that caused me to question my dedication to my profession. She was a thirteen-year-old daughter of Jezebel who had the mature features and wanton cravings of a seasoned woman while restrained by the intellect and innocence of adolescence. She would be eagerly awaiting my arrival inside the dreary schoolhouse. Thus it had been for many weeks past. It came as no surprise, therefore, to see her poised at her workbench smiling coyly as I entered. I propped the door open wide to let the cool air trapped within the shuttered building disperse into the sun-filled air of spring and to remove any sense of privacy Penny Riker might have hoped to enjoy, then I slung my bundled books onto the table, my rampart at the head of the classroom.

"Good morning, Penny," I said, removing from my tone any hint of warmth or encouragement. "Please open the shutters for me, won't you?"

She went about the task with an uncertain gait that displayed the awkwardness of adolescence but that revealed hints of a budding confidence and grace.

"What do we have here?" I asked upon seeing a small plate on the table.

"It's some sweetbread I made for you," said Penny with an excess of enthusiasm as she continued the task she undertook. "I can make lots more if you want, and I can make up a real good picnic basket too."

"You will have time for picnics, Penny," I reminded her. Her simple-minded quest to lure me into a private outing had rendered her, like Perry Gaines and his cohort Willis Tanner, nearly unteachable. "I think you will find yourself a husband soon," I continued, "and he will remove you

from this storehouse of knowledge. That renders each lost day more precious, Penny. Exploit this carefree time while you can to improve your reading and writing skills. You will have the better portion of a lifetime to romp in the wilderness.”

However much I tried, I could invent no plan to restrain the passionate Penny, the aggressive Willis, or the demonic Perry or to harness their energies toward the productive. It was once universally accepted among the freedmen of Bluford that the book of learning was to be coveted. The astounding exception seen in my trio of rebels was baffling, and there were signs that such apathy was spreading among our youth like a crippling contagion. I still cherished the exhilaration that gripped me when the light of knowledge glowed in a triumphant scholar. Such are the true wages of the profession: to transform ignorance into enlightenment, to set the course for discovery, to orchestrate the bumbling transition from adolescence to maturity. This was ecstasy. It was the rearing more than the teaching that brought grief.

The walk to my cabin along Tribble Creek at the end of a day in the classroom was an elixir that brought serenity to my weary spirit. Happily, the narrow footpath bordering the creek was mine that April day; not a soul had passed to interrupt my journey since I had given leave to my students. The sun hung low in the clear sky reflecting gold-tinted rays off new cottonwood leaves and bouncing glittering spikes off the quietly gurgling creek swollen from the melting snows of winter. The turmoil of the day had passed in sharp contrast with the gentle flow of the creek and the reassuring solitude of the rustic trail. I pulled pure, cool air deeply into my lungs and expelled it laboriously as if to expel the daily distress my profession brought.

At a bend in Tribble Creek near a sprawling tenant farm,

the creek widened and deepened into a quiet pool large enough for a child to swim or an adult to splash. I stopped to observe the minnows darting about playfully. The waters of the creek ran pure and clear, but they ran a little cold this time of year, not quite ready for wading. In a month or two, however, this pool would become the perfect respite from the coming heat of the Kansas sun.

Before I reached the bridge spanning Pee Dee Hollow where the footpath rejoins the dirt road, thoughts of Bluford School had been put out of my mind. Earlier that morning, Martha had hinted at a surprise that I should enjoy upon my return from my daily drudgeries. She was curiously fond of surprises and could convert the most trivial matter into an occasion of great import. A special treat at a meal, the visit of a dear friend, a forgotten trinket from the past—all acquired memorable and splendid meaning when Martha subjected them to her unique ritual that rendered them a special surprise.

Nearing home, I walked briskly, in quiet thought, through pastoral scenes that still inspired in me the wonder of our divine creator. Then I detected a faint, sad howl that had the voice of my coon dog Jason. But Martha would never let Jason persist in this vexatious fuss during Andrew's naptime; she would have chased the coon dog off into the woods after the first whimper from our infant son. I quickened my pace as I drew nearer to the cabin and as the hoarse howl grew louder. It was indeed Jason. As I navigated the eastward sweep of the path near Pee Dee Hollow, I could see him on the pine-board porch of my cabin crouched near the door.

I left the footpath near the big willow tree where Tribble Creek made its southerly turn to follow the road, then instead of following the path to the bridge I made use of a large boulder to cross the hollow straight away. I nearly fell wading through a slippery layer of decomposing leaves, but I came up the slope in a trot. From the dirt road I saw that the door to my cabin was askew and broken at the hinges. I

yelled out to my wife as I neared the cabin, "Martha. Martha, honey," but I heard no answer. I strained to hear Andrew's tiny voice, a giggle or a whimper, but all was silent except the coon dog's hoarse howl and the clucking of hens in the chicken coop. Andrew had been choleric that morning, as infants often are, and I suspected that his ailment might have caused their absence. I quickly dismissed this conjecture because it did not account for the broken door hinge.

As I rushed into the cabin, still calling for my sweet Martha, I was horrified by evidence of a fierce struggle. Chairs and the oak table had been overturned, clothes were strewn across the floor, pots and pans were scattered about, but Martha and Andrew were nowhere to be seen. I turned toward the door with an impulse to run after them, then slowed my pace to rationalize my thought. The wooden slide bolt on the door dangled feebly from a single nail. It had been latched from inside. Evidently, Martha had made her way into the cabin, and the bolt and hinges had been broken by a brute who had forced his way from without.

Could my family have been kidnapped? Puzzled and confounded, I stepped outside onto the pine-board porch to look for signs of Martha's struggle or for signs of wagon wheels in the bare, dusty patches of earth beyond the porch. There was neither. The discernible prints had been made by a pair of exceptionally large boots, worn evidently by a single intruder; from the style of the prints, they belonged to a man. The story told by the dust made little sense. Except for the prints of the big-footed man departing toward the road and Jason's paws, all else was wind blown and blurred. There was no sign that Martha had been dragged by the big-footed man or that she had walked beside him. Off to the side of the cabin, clothes lay soaking in the iron wash pot, but the fire had died out and the ashes had faded to dusty gray. From the half-empty clothesline, it was clear that Martha had been disturbed early in the day as she did the wash.

I leaned against the cabin collecting my thoughts while Jason pawed at me playfully. A moment later Jason moved near the entrance to my cabin to continue his pitiful howl. My heart filled with trepidation. In my preliminary survey of the cabin I had satisfied myself that there had been no sign of life. Now the remaining appalling prospect struck me. I rushed inside and examined more closely the piles of rubble strewn about. Then I saw the puddle of blood that had issued from my beloved Martha who was concealed behind the overturned table. I pushed the oak table aside, and there she lay.

The sight of my darling Martha lying in a pool of blood nearly destroyed me. A gaping wound to the temple had been the death of her. I barely recognized my beautiful wife. One of her eyes was puffed and discolored, and blood had oozed and dried around the corners of her mouth. Her dress had been ripped apart. I pulled the scraps of cloth together to cover her bruised legs then lifted her from the bloody floor. Believing it somehow appropriate, perhaps even necessary, I wrapped her body from head to foot in the blanket from our bed and moved her silent remains to the comfort of the duck-feather mattress where we had slept.

On closer examination, I found my infant son, who would never celebrate the anniversary of his birth. Andrew's body lay beneath a duck-feather pillow by which he had apparently been suffocated. He was frightfully cold to the touch, and the once cottony softness of his flesh had given way to the firmness that death brings. His spirit had long since ascended. I wept with bitterness and rage as I clutched his tiny body, then I wrapped him securely in his blanket, as if to bring warmth to his spiritless remains, and laid him next to his mother on the duck-feather mattress.

I was reduced to tears and nearly paralyzed into inaction while struggling with conflicting impulses. I wanted to follow the wind-blown tracks of the gargantuan assailant and bring him to justice, else I would have no peace. I wanted

to remove that caked blood from the floor, or the sight of it would drive me to hysterics. Almost as an afterthought, it came to me that I would have to attend to the internment of my family. That was a terrible matter to contemplate, but it was not a matter that I needed to contemplate that very moment.

My anguish led me to conclude that I must go after the killer, and soon. Looking up for my rifle, I saw in an instant that it had been removed from its mount on the wall; a quick survey of the cabin suggested that the culprit had absconded with it. Though unarmed, still I rushed out into the fading light of sunset and followed the big-footed tracks. Only minutes of daylight remained, yet the passion of the moment pushed me to determine his path that very instant.

The footprints advanced away from my cabin toward the dirt road then up the road toward town. The tracks were discernible as far as the wooden bridge at Pee Dee Hollow, then faded but led onward into town instead of downward into the cavernous hollow. Before reaching Little Bethel, I lost the light and could no longer follow the fading, trampled tracks. What good would it have done to go on unarmed and on foot against what might have been a brute of a man with a lead of many hours? It would be wiser to set out mounted and in daylight, so I turned about and retreated to the cabin, to the painful company of my departed family.

I thought it strange that I met no one on the road that day and that the fields were deserted. This peculiar circumstance struck me as a reminder from the Creator that I was now alone on this earth.

The clattering sound of a horse and wagon on Friday morning woke me from a restless sleep. It was Reverend Thornton Pinckney in his open-top buggy with blue

wheels. The sun was midway up the sky. I was attired in the crumpled clothes of the day before, having sat all night in my rocking chair.

"Why, Brother Conly," the pastor said with a puzzled gaze as I staggered half consciously out the broken door to greet him. "Sweet Jesus, you look awful! Have you been taken with the fever?"

"It's worse, Reverend Pinckney," I responded ruefully. "Much worse! It's Martha and Andrew. They've been brutally murdered."

"Blessed be Jesus!" exclaimed the Reverend Pinckney. "Sweet Martha, and little Andrew too! What on earth happened, Brother Conly?"

I related to the pastor what I had discovered and how I had followed the tracks toward town.

"My God," the Reverend Pinckney said. "When I didn't find you in school, I knew the devil was at work."

I heard the pastor's voice—I made out what he was saying—but the words seemed intended for other ears as if I were only a bystander. My gaze extended beyond the pastor down the dirt road into the distance.

"Brother Conly, are you listening to me?"

"Oh, yes, pastor," I said, "I hear you. I'm afraid my mind is far from school."

"Don't you fret school for now. I've got Brother Pleas looking after it for you."

The pastor stepped down from his buggy and came into the cabin, which was in as much disarray as the intruder had left it. Martha lay on the feather mattress bundled in the blanket, and Andrew lay bundled beside her. The pool of blood on the floor had dried; I had pulled the oak table over the bloody spot so that I would not have to look constantly upon it.

"My word, what a mess," the pastor said. "And Martha and Andrew gone to the bosom of Jesus! We can't just leave them laying here, Brother Conly. We need to move them

to Uncle Tyler's parlor. And you look like you could use a bite to eat. We'll stop by Uncle Tyler's first and get him to bring his buckboard out, then I'll take you over to the parsonage and let Mama Pinckney fix you up some biscuits and eggs."

I didn't argue with the pastor even though I knew that Uncle Tyler was the gentleman who would put my family into the ground. I knew in a hazy kind of way that the time would come when I would have to attend to such business, and I would not be able to avoid it. But on that day, so soon after their departure for heaven, the idea of dumping their precious bodies into a hole in the cold earth disturbed me, seeming callous and insensitive, and I could hardly bring myself to understand the necessity of doing it.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RECENTLY WIDOWED DELORES RAWLINGS, known to the community of Bluford as Aunt Dee, appeared at the door of my cabin on Saturday, two days after the brutal death of the love of my heart and of my infant son. Aunt Hester Foster Drayton and Aunt Roxy Tanner, also widows, accompanied her. These stately matrons of Little Bethel Baptist Church were an imposing and handsome trio, pillars of Bluford society, and bulwarks within the church. They were terrestrial angels some might say—devoted deeply to the word of God, gregarious lambs of goodwill, and ambassadors of hope to the desolate and despaired.

I opened the pine-board door slowly, and I guided it carefully so as to preserve the one remaining hinge. My shuttered cabin was cold and dreary, but outside, a sunny day had begun. I saw the matrons through squinted and watery eyes, somberly.

Aunt Dee seemed particularly disposed to calm my careworn mind. “Good day, Brother Conly,” she said with a blithesome smile. “We brought you a bite to eat.” Her wicker basket in one hand and a flowery fragrance wafting from her breast, Aunt Dee clasped me to her bosom in a sympathetic embrace. “We’re going to take care of you, Brother Conly,” she whispered in a delicate voice. “We’re going to be your family now.”

“You’d better have a good appetite,” Aunt Hester said with haughty indifference.

“I hear you haven’t been eating right,” said Aunt Roxy.

"We're going to take care of that."

The impatient Aunt Hester pushed through the doorway forcing Aunt Dee to step into the cabin and release me. Aunt Roxy followed us inside.

"Sweet Jesus," cried Aunt Hester as she entered the shuttered cabin. "Open up these shutters and let some sun in here. What you doing all shut up like this?"

The three ladies sat their baskets on the oak table, then Aunt Hester and Aunt Roxy went from window to window opening shutters, letting the warm air and radiant light bring life to my cabin. I had taken time on Friday, after Reverend Pinckney and Uncle Tyler had gathered Martha and Andrew, to remove the blood from the floor and to put things away, not neatly in their proper places, just out of the way to make space to move about.

"You come on in here," Aunt Hester commanded of me as the ladies invaded the small cabin, "and sit down while we set the table." Aunt Dee escorted me to my rocking chair and helped me to sit in a manner one might help an invalid.

Aunt Hester continued to bark orders: "Look for some plates, Aunt Dee, and you take that stuff out of the baskets, Aunt Roxy."

"Where you want me to put all this food?" asked Aunt Roxy.

"Why don't you just put it on the table where we are going to eat," shouted Aunt Hester with an exasperated tilt of her head. "God made you a pretty woman, Aunt Roxy, but you don't have the sense you were born with, do you, Honey?"

"Well, I don't know what you want," replied Aunt Roxy, placing both her hands on her hips, "you might want to warm it up on the stove. You have to tell somebody what you want."

"You don't have to worry about any of this, Aunt Roxy, with your sweet self," said Aunt Hester. "You just go ahead

and do what I said."

"How do you expect somebody to know what you want when you don't tell them?" protested Aunt Roxy, and she began to remove bowls and pots from the baskets while casting a menacing glare toward her overbearing companion.

With me unwilling, perhaps unable, to impede them, these spirited matrons took control of my cabin as I sat stunned and overwhelmed. Aunt Dee rummaged the cupboards removing plates, bowls, and cutlery as she found them, seeking neither my permission nor my assistance. I had done no more than put things where they would fit, tucking plates and bowls away inside pots and in other unlikely places, but she found what she needed with the skill of a soothsayer. Aunt Hester came over to help Aunt Roxy unpack the wicker baskets and spread their contents onto the table; robust aromas filled the cabin.

"When are you letting Uncle Tyler put your family away?" asked Aunt Hester glancing above spectacles that sat low on her nose. There was no hint of cordiality in her tone. "It ain't natural to let the dead linger too long in the land of the living."

I cleared my throat before I spoke. "Yes, Aunt Hester, I know," I responded, clutching both arms of the rocker.

"Well," Aunt Hester responded in the same dry tone, "we had to come over and check on you. Did you sleep at Uncle Tyler's last night?" Her eyes met mine with unflinching firmness.

"I did not," I said. "I was there but I managed to get back home."

"Some folks ain't too anxious to linger near the messenger of death, case he ain't gone yet," she said.

"Oh, Aunt Hester," cried Aunt Roxy in a melodic voice, "you know nobody is going anywhere until their time comes. But Aunt Hester is right, Brother Conly, you got to get them put away. They shouldn't be left here too long. It

ain't right."

"Come bless the food, Brother Conly," Aunt Dee called out in her soft voice after the table had been laid out, mercifully interrupting the inquisition. She rushed over to the rocking chair as she said it, pulled herself close to me in her manner as a nurse, smiled pleasantly as I arose, and led me to the table as if I might have been one of her patients. "After we eat, I'll help you fix up her burying dress," Aunt Dee said. We then sat, Aunt Dee in the chair next to mine.

It proved to be a strain on me trying to mutter a few words of grace. The words that settled in my mind would not proceed to my lips. Aunt Hester ran out of patience and sent up words of praise in my stead, then Aunt Hester and Aunt Roxy leaped without delay into the business at hand as if their last meal had been consumed in the distant past.

"I saw that rascal, Brother Pope," Aunt Roxy announced as bowls were passed around the table and all began to fill their plates. "He told me he wants you to speak for him, Brother Conly, when his case comes up."

"Lord, have mercy!" cried Aunt Hester in a malicious, bitter tone. "What are you doing mingling with that no good African? And don't call him brother! He's just another no-account scoundrel like those sinners he's messed up with at the Crossroads."

"Oh, I just crossed his path," Aunt Roxy barked in a tone to match Aunt Hester's. "I guess he got the right to use the road, don't he?"

"Well, he got no right mingling with decent folks," declared Aunt Hester. "Him cavorting down at the Crossroads, and here he's got a faithful wife and two little boys to take care of."

"I hear he's trying to get himself right," Aunt Dee interjected with merriment that contrasted harshly with the sharp tongues of Aunt Hester and Aunt Roxy. "I hear he wants to get right with the Lord and come back into the fold."

"That's why he wants Brother Conly to speak for him," said Aunt Roxy, more pleasantly than before. "He wants to come back to Little Bethel. You think he ought to be let back in, Brother Conly?"

"The church will have to decide," I whispered coarsely, feeling ambushed and put upon. I was not yet prepared for visitors and their unseemly concerns. My thoughts had been so far removed from the events of Bluford that I could not quickly form an opinion. I rambled. "I know he is at home with his family. I know he reads his Bible every chance he gets. I know he wants to come back into the community of saints. Oh well, the church will have to decide; not I."

"Why don't you go on and eat," Aunt Dee said to me, pouting sympathetically. "You don't need to burden yourself with this mess while you're grieving."

The meal was well prepared, and though I had given little thought to food in two days, I had little appetite. Neither had I the appetite for the constant banter. I endured it graciously so as not to seem uncharitable, but it was discomforting to have these imposing women take charge of my affairs before I had completely acknowledged that Martha and Andrew were never to return to me.

"What in the world happened Thursday?" asked Aunt Roxy as she prepared to bite into a chicken leg held gingerly in her fingers.

"I can only speculate," I said, and I set my fork on my plate after having eaten only a few bites. I cleared my throat again, and the words came slowly. "There had been a struggle in the cabin. It had been ransacked, the table overturned, clothing everywhere, pots and pans here and there. Then, I saw Martha behind the table. A pool of blood near her head had already dried to a brownish crust. Her clothes had been torn from her, I suspect by a large brute of a man whom she had vainly struggled to resist. There was no doubt when I saw her that she was beyond hope of reviving."

Aunt Hester peered at me compassionately above the rim of her spectacles and said, "I knew there was trouble coming Thursday when I saw a chair rocking and there wasn't nobody in it."

"I saw a bird fly through the window," said Aunt Roxy, "and you know what that means." Aunt Roxy had come with a healthy appetite that day and had started in on her third piece of chicken.

Reflecting upon the gruesome image of Martha, which drained my spirit each time I envisioned it, I sank farther into depression. Aunt Dee must have sensed it from my vacant expression.

"You shouldn't be talking about this now, Brother Conly," she said as she reached out and squeezed my arm gently.

"Maybe it helps to discuss it, Aunt Dee," I replied. "It saddens me, but I suppose I need to let the grief pour out of me." I sighed deeply and continued: "The image of my dead wife lying in her own blood overpowered me. I remember but one image beyond that: my son lying in his crib asphyxiated." My words came with difficulty as I recalled the lifeless face of my son. "He was hidden beneath the duck-feather pillow, perhaps the instrument of his death, that Martha herself had made and had slept upon. His tiny mouth gaped open, his last brave attempt to suck in the substance of life."

"How awful," said Aunt Hester.

"I am so sorry for you, Brother Conly," said Aunt Dee. "Sister Martha was such a good woman, and I know what it means to lose somebody so dear."

"Martha had rebelled against moving this far from the center of Bluford," I continued. "In my pursuit of isolation for my studies, I insisted on living beyond the township where our closest neighbor is beyond the hollow. The villain put our seclusion to good use and escaped undetected because of it. I wonder how well he would have succeeded

if we lived near the school where many neighbors would have been in ear shot, and which as Martha had pointed out, was the more practical course. Her struggles would not likely have gone unnoticed had she been surrounded by the goodly folk of Bluford."

"That's something you shouldn't fret about," said Aunt Dee. "If it was Sister Martha's time, there's nothing you can do about it. You can't blame yourself, and you will never know what would have been if you had done something different."

"Who would do something so cruel?" Aunt Roxy mused.

"Someone passing through," I said. "I saw strange footprints outside. He must have been a Goliath of a man to have feet so big."

"It couldn't be anybody from Bluford," Aunt Dee said. "It couldn't be anybody from here. It had to be a vagrant."

"I am certain he was," I added.

Of that, I was most confident; it had to be an itinerant. In its two-decade history, Bluford had been so peaceful that it never had even a sheriff nor need for a formal constabulary. Petty transgressions among the congregation were resolved around the altar of Little Bethel Baptist Church, the center of social and spiritual life in Bluford, and were adjudicated upon the Good Book, our principal source of spiritual and civil law. The town's central earthly authority was Pastor Thornton Pinckney, spiritual leader of Little Bethel. A white lawman policed the town of Sterlingburg five miles to the southeast, but the affairs of Bluford were not his concern, and he was never invited by us to arbitrate our disputes. Federal law in the territory was upheld by the United States Army, of which the nearest unit was Troop M of the Tenth Cavalry at Fort Riley, a unit of black soldiers commanded by white officers.

"I tracked the big footprints for a distance," I continued explaining to the ladies, "but they disappeared beyond the

hollow. The villain was making his way into town, maybe *en route* to the Crossroads. He might have come from Sterlingburg. I know one thing, he had to be of African birth because somebody would have noticed a giant white man walking through Bluford in broad daylight."

"Sweet Jesus," said Aunt Roxy. "I think I saw him."

"Lord, have mercy," remarked Aunt Dee with the exasperation shown earlier by Aunt Hester. "Why didn't you say something, Aunt Roxy?"

"I just didn't think much about it when I saw him," replied Aunt Roxy.

"What did this man look like?" I asked.

"He was big all right," said Aunt Roxy. "Strolled pass my place just as easy as you please, down the middle of the road. I looked out because all of Elmo's dogs were barking. It was right after that bird flew through the window...."

"Try to concentrate, girl!" cried Aunt Hester, interrupting. "We asked you what the man looked like, and here you go talking about Elmo's dogs."

"I know," snapped Aunt Roxy. She glared furiously in Aunt Hester's direction during a punitive pause, then turned away from Aunt Hester as she continued. "I'm trying to tell y'all. He was a giant. He had a small carpetbag and was wearing overalls with both straps loose. His overalls just hung from his big stomach. He was bigger than Black Laws and just as black. And he was heading for the Crossroads just like Brother Conly said."

This news brought me a measure of comfort. Simply knowing some small detail about the killer brought hope that I would soon find him, that I would soon settle accounts. I retrieved my fork and savored Aunt Dee's lima beans. The delicately spiced and flavorful dish combined with her crumbly corn bread revived my appetite, so I began again to partake of the delightful meal the ladies had prepared. Aunt Hester had prepared an okra and tomato dish that I found tasteful, and toward the end, I sampled some of Aunt

Roxy's peach cobbler.

"Somebody's got to go after him," Aunt Hester said.

Aunt Dee spoke out: "You don't expect Brother Conly to go looking for some no-account African while he's grieving, do you, Aunt Hester?"

It came as a surprise that Aunt Dee would go up against someone as important as Aunt Hester on my behalf. Until this day I had seen no one other than the sweet Aunt Roxy challenge Aunt Hester—not even the deacons of Little Bethel or Pastor Pinckney. But then, I had never seen Aunt Hester in private like this and in the presence of her close friends, Aunt Roxy, who cared little how important Aunt Hester might be, and Aunt Dee, who held to her principles without regard to the opponent.

"It doesn't have to be Brother Conly," Aunt Hester said. "I don't care who it is. We know what the man looks like; we know where he went. Somebody ought to go after him before the trail gets cold."

"We surely don't want him coming back through Bluford," Aunt Roxy added.

"I intend to go," I said. "I am compelled to go. I started after him on Thursday, but he was too far gone, and I had no horse and no gun. By the way, Aunt Roxy, was this man carrying a rifle?"

"Why, I do believe he was," Aunt Roxy said.

Aunt Hester scowled at Aunt Roxy with disgust: "Is there anything else you forgot to tell us, child?"

"Oh, Aunt Hester, you hush," said Aunt Roxy with a little embarrassment.

"I must find a horse and a gun," I said, "then, as soon as I put Martha and Andrew away, I will go after the killer."

"That's what I just said," Aunt Hester spoke out in her regal tone. "When are you going to lay them to rest? You act like you're trying to hold on to the dead."

"Aunt Hester!" cried Aunt Dee, again coming to my defense.

"No, no, Aunt Hester's right," I said. "She's absolutely right. Maybe I am trying to hold on. I so very much hate to see them go."

"Brother Conly," said Aunt Dee, pulling her chair closer to mine and taking hold of my arm, "why don't you just let us help you? I know the pain you're feeling. I've felt it too many times myself. Let me talk to Uncle Tyler and Pastor Pinckney and we'll take care of the arrangements. Will you let us do that for you?"

"Oh, yes, Aunt Dee," I said, "I do appreciate that. Since Martha died, I feel like a feather drifting in the wind. I can't think. I can't concentrate."

"It's the grief, brother," said Aunt Dee as she gently pressed my arm with the palm of her hand. "We have to bury Sister Martha so you can move away from it."

Aunt Hester excused herself from the table and took her plate to the wash pan. Her forlorn look caught my attention, but I thought it improper to inquire into her state of mind. I did observe that Aunt Hester, whose thick black hair had begun to gray slightly, was a comely lady. She had the appearance of one in her forties, but from what I knew of her, I suspected she might be in her sixties. Aunt Hester and Aunt Roxy were full-figured ladies of medium height; Aunt Dee was more petite but showed subtle signs of that fullness and maturity of body that characterizes an esteemed matron of Little Bethel. Each lady was attired in a hand-tailored, cotton dress, Aunt Hester's being so well stitched and elegantly adorned that it must have been fashioned by Sister Jennifer Pope, Bluford's most competent seamstress. Except for that distinction, the ankle-length dresses were equally modest and displayed nothing of their owner's feminine form except what was appropriate to be seen. Aunt Hester shifted restlessly near the wash pan as if she had tarried too long and should be moving on.

"I sure do appreciate you all coming over," I said. "I haven't eaten too regularly since Thursday. This is the best

feast I've had in a few days."

"That's why we're here, Brother Conly," said Aunt Dee. "We are family, joined by the blood of Christ."

"I enjoy cooking up a good meal," Aunt Roxy said with a song in her voice, having recovered from Aunt Hester's rebukes. Aunt Roxy had the appearance of someone who loved to cook being somewhat fuller in body than Aunt Hester was. Some of the men of the church described Aunt Roxy as pleasantly plump. She was near in age to Aunt Hester, perhaps a decade or so younger. Her pale complexion, what many called "high yellow," a heavily creamed coffee hue, was unblemished, clean, and clear. Considering that her grandchildren were now enrolled in my school, she was a well-kept, healthy woman. Of course, she possessed none of the affluence of Aunt Hester. Her only means of support was her token income from Little Bethel for her services as church attendant: she organized church records and did the dusting and light cleaning. For heavy cleaning, she called upon Bluford's handyman, Uncle June. Her wages were meager, but Aunt Roxy always said her needs were simple.

"I think we've disturbed Brother Conly's peace long enough," said Aunt Hester.

Aunt Roxy agreed with a nod of her head, for in most matters she followed Aunt Hester blindly. Aunt Dee seemed undecided.

"I think I'll stay a while and help straighten things out," Aunt Dee said as she sandwiched my hand tenderly between hers.

"I thank you for your kindness, Aunt Dee," I said, "but I think I'll just spend a few moments in prayer if you don't mind."

"That's just fine, Brother Conly," said Aunt Dee, then added to my surprise, "I'd love to pray with you for a spell. Oh yes, and I've got to help you fix up a burying dress. Aunt Hester, you just take my basket with you and Aunt Roxy in

the wagon; I'll get it this evening."

"I'll come pick up the dishes Monday," Aunt Hester said to me. "There's food enough for a fine dinner this evening and a hearty breakfast in the morning. You make sure you wash up good tonight and take the time to shave, Brother Conly. I want to see you in church early tomorrow and I want you looking decent."

"I suppose I'll be there, Aunt Hester," I said.

"I don't want you *supposing*," she commanded with an emphatic inflection, "I want you *coming*. I don't want you sleeping at Uncle Tyler's place; I don't want you holding on to the dead; I don't want you letting yourself go. Maybe nobody else will say it, Brother Conly, but I will. You look like one of those bums from the Crossroads. I want you to clean yourself up and I want you at Little Bethel early or I'm going to send Uncle June out here to dress you and haul you in. I hope you get my meaning, Brother Conly."

Indeed I did, and I so responded. I was ultimately grateful to Aunt Hester, because by forcing me to examine my degeneration and by compelling this simple commitment, she caused me to acknowledge the existence of time and to reflect upon the future. Tomorrow, which for several days had existed as a dense fog, a formless, remote epoch, suddenly became an attainable and approaching appointment. It was as if an arrested clock had begun to tick, and as it did, I moved slowly beyond the moment at which my mental paralysis had begun. The shocking string of events that had been compressed into a single brief instant began to stretch behind me moving the overpowering events of Thursday evening slowly but resolutely into the past.