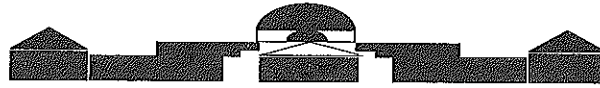


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Following Willie

instant lesson

by Niles Reddick

When I was twelve, I worked for one day in tobacco. I wanted the job because it paid twenty dollars a day, and I had figured on paper how all those twenties would add up to hundreds by the end of the summer. When a friend of mine told me that Mister Edgar White was hiring, I felt excited and dialed his number with confidence. Mr. White said, "Sure. Pick you up at six. Be out by the road."

My father raised his eyebrows when I told him who I would be working for and asked if I was sure I had rather not mow grass for elderly women in the church. Mom said I would not last a day in the field. I knew otherwise, and besides, money can be a motivator.

Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I darted out the door into the humid June morning wearing jeans, tennis shoes, and a t-shirt. A dirty, rusty brown truck caked with mud screeched to a halt by the curb, and a thick black hand reached out to pull me into the truck bed. "Thanks," I said.

"You ever picked tobacco?" The man intensely stared at me, a yellow film floating in his eyes.

"No sir," I said, "but I learn quick. I never knew division, but I made a A on my first test." I told him my name, but he smiled and said he knew who I was.

"I'm Willie," he said. "These two here," he paused pointing at two heavy black women who looked like tree stumps, "is my girls." They nodded, and I wondered if they would be able to pick tobacco because they looked so thick and helpless. I glanced around the bed of the truck, and other blacks surrounded me. I felt a chill and didn't know if it was the change from my air-conditioned bedroom to the outside humidity or the realization that I was for the first time a minority.

The ride to the field was silent and boring like a funeral home, and we drove down a two lane dirt path lined with longleaf pines. Finally, the path opened into a clearing of tobacco plants, neatly aligned in rows leading as far as I could see, and the truck came to a stop next to a then antique John Deere tractor with a trailer in tow. Everyone began to pile out and take their respective seats, not saying a word, but I sat on the tailgate dangling my legs till I heard Mr. White slam the driver's door.

"What the hell you doin' boy?" One eye stared straight at me, and the other one wondered up toward the pines. "Get your ass on the trailer."

"Yes sir," I said. "My name is..."

Mr White interrupted. "I don't give a shit who you are. You just do your job." He jumped on the tractor's seat, cranked it, and it spewed chocking smoke out of a rusted pipe on the hood. Willie motioned me next to him, and I took a seat, my hands trembling like an alcoholic in the morning.

I had hoped for a lesson, some training, like I had received when Miss Etta had hobbled down the steps from her screened porch to show me my lawn mower blades were too low and were skinning her grass, but I quickly followed Willie's lead pulling the sticky tobacco leaves off the stalk as fast as I could. After we had cleared two rows, one on each side of the

trailer, we reached the end of the field, and the tractor made a semi-circle heading back in the same direction, but the tractor came to a halt. Mr. White jumped off.

"Boy, that ain't worth a shit!" he yelled, his good eye scanning the row we had just picked. Leaves stuck out in spots all along our row like hairs missed during a shave. Stalks were all that remained on Willie's girls' row. "You get up there and drive the damned tractor!"

I jumped off the trailer. "But, Mr. White."

"Don't tell me you can't drive a tractor either. Any idiot can drive a tractor."

I climbed up, turned the ignition. I didn't know how to drive a tractor, and although I didn't really know how to crank one either, I had watched my parents crank cars for years and figured I could do it. There was only one problem. I could not see over the bubble hood. I could not keep the tractor within the ruts and ran over two rows of tobacco plants.

"Stop goddamnit," I heard over the sputtering sounds of the pipe. Mr. White was sprinting to my left, pointing at the brake, but my leg would not reach it. He grabbed hold of a the fender and flung himself next to me, almost pushing me off, and slammed his muddy boot onto the pedal. The tractor came to a jolting halt. "Get off!" he said. His face was red, and his eye glared at me; a blood vessel jumped around under the skin of his forehead. "You're pathetic. Just get on the trailer and do what you can."

I felt bad. I had caused him a lot of problems, but I was also mad because he had yelled and cursed at me. My parents did not even do that. The preacher yelled, but he never cursed unless it was a quote. I fought back the tears and turned my racing heartbeat into focused energy and plucked leaves of tobacco as fast as I could. At lunch, everyone unloaded themselves, wiping sweat and talking about how hot it was. I ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and drank ice water out of a Bell jar underneath an oak covered with Spanish moss next to the barn where other blacks were stringing tobacco on sticks and hanging them to dry on racks. After our break, we worked till the sun began to go down when Mr. White drove the tractor out of the field and stopped next to his Ford truck. He

handed out twenties from a wad and gave me one. "Well," he said, "I think you got the hang of it. See you back in the morning."

I did not respond. Whether I was still angry or tireder than I had ever been in my life, I don't know. When I got home, I bathed, scrubbing till my skin was red, but the tobacco stains remained. I nodded at the dinner table, and the next morning when Mr. White's truck horn blew and my Dad came to wake me, I faked sick. My eager little brother jumped up and begged to go in my place. Off he went, and I felt sorry for him and wanted to say something but did not.

At the end of the second day, Mr. White had told my brother not to come back, and on the third morning, I awoke before dawn, rubbing my eyes. I stared out the window as headlights came nearer our house. As each vehicle passed, I felt relieved like finding out a perceived snake was only a stick. But each time another vehicle approached, another sinking feeling overwhelmed me because I did not know what I would do if Mr. White's truck stopped since

I had not technically been fired, nor had I officially quit. I watched for an hour, and when the sun had risen, I knew Willie and his girls were pulling leaves, and I was free to go back to sleep.

Years later, I drove home one Christmas and made a rare decision to attend church services with my parents. As I stood, holding a hymn book and singing "Precious Memories" off key, I noticed a somewhat familiar face a few rows down. It was Mr. White. His hair had thinned, his skin looked like a crumpled brown lunch sack, but he looked cleaner in his blue suit than he had when I had worked for him that day. I wondered if he had found religion near the end of his life because of the

awareness of the nearing end, or if he had truly changed in some way. When services were over, I opted not to speak to him first, but to wait and see if he recognized, remembered the evil things he had said to me. The thought of talking to him made me feel uneasy.

As the crowd shuffled toward the exit like cattle, his good eye looked at me and his head nodded, not from any recognition, but from politeness, and I chose to remain silent.

—Murfreesboro, Tennessee

*The tractor came to a jolting
halt. 'Get off!' he said. His
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