

Abstract

This is a creative nonfiction narrative about the farm life and military service of a Nash County resident, J.Y. Joyner. This narrative will be a combination of real-life facts, reality-based situations and settings derived from extensive research and will be told from a fictional point-of-view. This style is influenced and inspired by the work of author/historian Stephen Ambrose (*Band of Brothers*, *Citizen Soldiers*), Phillip Gerrard (*Cape Fear Rising*), William Faulkner (*As I Lay Dying*) and the books of Jeff and Michael Shaara (*Killer Angels*, *Gods & Generals*, *The Last Full Measure*). The work of these authors takes carefully researched time periods and settings, factual events and in some cases — particularly with the Shaaras — uses a fictional character/observer/narrator to tell the story, relate the events while adding interest and color. The projected length of this manuscript is approximately 50 pages.

I will present this narrative in this format for several reasons. Joyner was killed in World War II, and I first came across his name on a plaque at the Nash County Courthouse in Nashville, NC, listed along with other natives who died in wars. Years ago, as part of an ongoing series of Memorial Day columns for the local newspaper, I discovered I could find very little information about him. While working on a research project, I discovered a headstone — relatively new — at Oakwood Cemetery in Spring Hope, NC. As part of that project, I was able to find out his unit, where it was in action and where he was most likely killed — just before the Battle of the Bulge. By using first person, I will be able to disjoint time and present a unique approach and perspective to the narrative through the eyes of a detached observer. I want to use the first-person narrative to move Joyner from a name on a plaque to an identity of a young boy who was sent to war on a continent on the other side of the world. By closing the distance between the story and the narrator, I intend to hold the reader's interest and involve them more deeply into the story. The narrative will cover the present, in the form of finding this stone in the

cemetery and seeing Joyner's name on a plaque at the Courthouse in Nashville; the time and place where Joyner was killed in action; and how his farm family back home dealt with the loss and also how it affected daily life on the farm — which was very reliant on labor over machines at that point in history. The first part of the manuscript will be first-person from the point of view of the narrator who finds the marker in the cemetery; the second part of the manuscript will be from the viewpoint of Joyner's younger brother.

The majority of my research will come from newspaper accounts, websites, unit records and books written about the war and the 1940s in America. Additional material will come from personal interviews of people who grew up on farms in southern Nash County era during this time.

My interest in this project is to create a narrative that blends nonfiction and fiction, but is researched based. By blending these genres, filling in blanks where facts cannot be located, I will create a narrative that will hopefully push boundaries and offer uncommon viewpoints and less stereotypical presentation of history — especially with topics that have been written about so much: war, the South and rural farm life.

Remembering Corporal J.Y. Joyner: An Historical Fiction

Creative Writing Thesis
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by Michael Brantley

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“This past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past.”

—William Faulkner

Prologue

It is curious to think there are people in the twenty-first century who remember a time when hardly anyone had a television, when a family had to be middle class just to have an AM radio, and when the biggest providers of news were daily papers and newsreels. How odd it must have been to actually have to handwrite or manually type letters — and use the postal service to deliver them — and have a person from the phone company make a call to connect you with someone else. Maybe that type of delayed gratification, that patience, that reliance on imagination forged the backbone of “Greatest Generation” — Americans who put country ahead of political rhetoric.

Nash County, North Carolina, was the epitome of “rural” in the 1940s. There were 55,000 inhabitants in the last census before the war — by the end of the century, that figure would double and the county would still retain the “rural” label. Most families lived on farms and rarely ventured outside of their communities — there was no need, as there was little time for excursions. The two largest tobacco markets in the world were in Rocky Mount and one county over in Wilson. Most farms still relied on labor provided by men and mules — very few farmers scratching out livings at that time could afford tractors. When World War II started in Europe in 1939, it all might as well have been on the moon as Poland. But when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the country stirred as a whole. Boys who only ventured to the county seat of Nashville once or twice a year lined up at recruiting offices in the

county to join the service and fight alongside their neighbors against men such as Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo.

Few probably realized that it would be the last conflict that America would go into with the whole country behind the concept of us saving the world from evil. And the world was saved — at least for a while — by farm boys, factory workers, truck drivers, shopkeepers, school teachers and the folks they left at home.

24 November 1944

Dear Brother,

Sorry it has been so long since I wrote. I been kind of busy, ha ha. Seems like Old Adolf needs a little more convincing before he gives it up. But it won't be long now. I thought for I might be back by Christmas, but that ain't going to happen now. Maybe after the first of the year. Be sure to tell Daddy to put one of them hams up for when I get back. It ain't been nothing but Army rations here lately and it is going to be tough missing the holidays. I'll be there next year for sure.

I don't know when I'll be back home exactly. You've got to do a good job helping Mama and Daddy get ready for tobacco season. Y'all got to live off that crop all year. You know how Daddy gets. Try not to daydream so much and don't start smoking or nothing. I know it is hard because Bogart does it and he's the tops, but at least wait until you ain't a kid no more. And Lord, don't tell mama.

It is so cold over here, Little Brother, you would not believe it. It takes forever to dig a

foxhole when the ground is hard like this, and you might be in for a day or two or maybe just an hour. I feel like I been all over the world now, and I can tell you this, whenever I get back home, I ain't never leaving again. It just ain't in me. The pictures in them books they showed us at school might look all great and everything, but I'll take our little farm any day.

I met all kinds of folks in the Army from all over the country. Got to be pretty good friends with a couple of boys from Tennessee and a few from Virginia. I reckon my best friend, if you have them over here, is a fella named Tommy Edwards. He's from up around Emporia, just barely into Virginia. Them boys from up North, they ain't nothing like us. You would not believe the things that come out of their mouths. I think Preacher Bass would fall out and die if he was here. But to tell the truth, them boys from Mississippi and Georgia ain't like us neither. You hear how they live and what they think and just know we ain't got it so bad at home. They are fighting this war and the Civil War ain't even over for some of them, and they are dirt poor. We work hard but it is a good life, brother. A couple of these boys think we got the life, like we are rich as city folks. We got town close enough for what we can't grow or make and plenty of pretty girls and Co-Colas pretty regular. I know you think you want to be a ballplayer and who knows maybe you might, but think about a good life on the farm. I ain't ever going to leave it when I get home. We can be partners.

That is the only thing that ever scares me, thinking I might not get home. I mean, I don't think about it all the time, but they is boys that get killed here all the time and that is when I think about it. They all got mamas and daddys somewhere or had them anyway. They thought they'd be home next year, just like me. But I reckon the Krauts do too. Them regular Krauts, they ain't so different than us. I was helping guard some of them one day while we were waiting for a truck

to carry them to the rear. One of them starting speaking English to me. He sounded just like some of the boys in my outfit. Said he grew up in Wisconsin and his folks sent him back to Germany in '40 to join the army. I just don't understand why they listen to a crazy man. They send messages and radio shows all the time telling us to go home and then talk about the Fatherland and how they are going to kill us all. They got shows on the radio with girls that sound real pretty, that sound like our girls, telling us all that stuff. We like the music and we know the talk is crazy.

Well, anyway, you know I can't tell you much in these. I got enough stories to last you a year when I get home. Tell everybody I said 'Merry Christmas' and when you eat them oranges, think about me ha ha. Don't know what they'll give us. I wrote Mama and Daddy too and told them I love them and that you'll work hard enough it will be like both of us are there. Make sure you take good care of Tick, be sure to scratch him right behind the right ear, it makes his leg jump. Maybe I'll be back in time to see you play ball next summer. I miss you, but don't tell nobody I told you that.

Julian

I. The Newspaper Man

I reached over and punched the button on my dashboard to bring up the digital clock in the car. Three o'clock, according to the blue-green LED. We had agreed to meet at half past one, right here in the deep shadow near the main entrance of the old cemetery. So, now my appointment — if you want to call it that — was an hour and a half late. So I reached up under the seat for something to occupy the time, a half empty bottle of brown liquid with a black label.

I looked around, checked the mirrors, made sure no one would see me take a little dram — not much, just enough to stay warm and let me think and consider what I'd ask the old man when, or if, he decided to show up. Not enough for his nephew to smell. Or his son. Whichever one it was. I didn't need people saying anything else about me around town. News travelled fast — I should know after a decade at the newspaper, and repeated failures of getting an agent interested in my novel about a small town newspaper. Too real, I guessed. That last rejection had made me realize I was stuck in this county, like it not.

There was the burn, which was becoming less and less intense these days, and then the warm feeling settled over me. I tucked the bottle under the seat and waited, wiped my mouth with the cuff of my jacket and sat back. I checked the clock once more, and as the dashboard lights of three-fifteen faded, so did my eyelids.

I sat up after a few just a minutes, my head clear. Out the window, I could see rows of markers and crypts and monuments, all cast in the shadow-shade of the cemetery. No sign of the Joyners anywhere. Figures, I thought, the old man has forgotten or his over-protective son has decided I'm up to something. I decided I needed to stretch my legs, get a little air, and maybe get a little air in the car. My wife did not need to catch the scent of anything on me other than

woodsmoke from being outside and maybe the trace of some pine needles. Carly and I had enough problems as it was, and by now, she and the kids had been back from church long enough for them to be ready to raise a little more hell.

It had gotten colder since I'd pulled in a couple of hours before, and it was finally starting to feel like the middle of February, only dry since it had not rained in days. As I walked down the narrow, rutted, dirt lanes that divided the sections of gravestones, lanes designed for the largest horse carriages of the late 19th century and barely wide enough for the smallest cars on the road today, I felt as though I was in one of those places in the artsy movies — dark, but not quite scary; gray, and cold, a scene stripped of color, de-saturated, but still real. The arrangement of the place offered that it might be indifferent to the seasons — while they change, this peculiar corner of property in Nash County yields just a little, and then only grudgingly so. Maybe a shift from the gray-blue of winter to the gray-green of summer, but gray nonetheless.

I'd suppose Oakdale Cemetery is like that all the time because of its unique position, and the fact that it is one of the oldest burial grounds in the county, with many markers carrying dates way back into the nineteenth century. The canopy of old growth oaks and pines shelters the original part of the graveyard, only allowing sunlight to come in under the lowest of the low hanging branches. The grounds are raised a good five feet above the connecting highway on the west side and the long-since retired railroad tracks on the north side, the only two directions to reach the outside world of dollar stores, a Burger King and the liquor store; the thigh-high brick wall shields out the sounds of traffic and passersby. The old men who sit around the woodstove down at Bass Brothers store swear that old coffins shifted into view on the roadside after Hurricane Floyd in 1999, and that the state closed the road for three days once to bring in truck

loads of dirt and turf. No one has ever been able to confirm it — I know, because I tried to write a story about it.

I was the only person in the cemetery, and it was apparent the rounds by the caretaker were casualties of a long, cold winter — branches and leaves were strewn haphazardly around the stones. Not much point, with no one ever coming by — after all, the most recent graves in the one section you can partially see from the road are almost 80 years old, their descendants either passed on themselves or just indifferent. As I got just a little ways down the path, I got an odd sense I couldn't explain. There are of course, the old cemetery jokes about haints and spirits and all the accompanying superstitions at Oakdale. But this is about a trick of the mind or a childhood paranoia. I never bought into those things, even as a child. Don't know if that is a byproduct of a Southern Baptist upbringing or a long lineage of well-noted skeptics. Something — in a place where nothing ever seems to change — seemed different. Certainly the stones had not moved, the residents are still in place and even vandals no longer bothered with old out-of-the-way Oakdale. But something was not quite right. Something I felt. The feeling that someone was watching. I saw no one. I thought about going back to my car. Suddenly, I felt the hair stand on my arms, and I got a chill. I realized that a man was standing next to me. Where did he come from? The growing shadows? I didn't like how close he was to me. He was slightly behind me to the left, and I couldn't get a good look at him; I could only tell that he was wearing olive drab green. The man reached into his pocket and retrieved a small white box with a big red dot on the side, lettered in black, "Lucky Strike." The box didn't look like the ones you see in stores now. I thought maybe it was a vintage-style pack that seems so popular with other products these days. He tapped out a cigarette and lit it. I waited for him to speak.

I assumed he was the son of Daniel Joyner, the man I was supposed to meet. He was going to satisfy a curiosity I'd had for a long time, years, since I first saw the plaque at the county courthouse. This man was younger than I thought, more a boy than a man.

I waited and the man said nothing, just took a puff of the cigarette. I decided to break the awkwardness or at least relieve some tension. "Hey," I said politely. "I'm the guy from the paper. Mitchell." I extended my hand, awkwardly. He seemed to not see it or he was just ignoring my offer of a handshake.

He took a drag from the cigarette. I tried not to stare. How did he slip up on me? How had I let that happen?

"I'm Joyner. I heard you were looking me or some of my folks. What do you want? I don't think I know you," he said. He was so close I thought I could feel the heat from the cigarette. I hate cigarette smoke. Despite the waft of heat, I had a chill, one that felt as though it was just under my skin. I looked down, embarrassed, and for the first time I noticed his feet. He was wearing boots. Army boots, but not like they wear now in those wars in the sand. These were blue-black. They'd been used and were muddy, obviously not from wear around here in this drought.

To the right of his boots I saw a weathered marker, the one I had been looking for last time I was here, one I stood in front of and wondered about. Joyner, Julian Y. Corporal, U.S. Army. June 22, 1922 - December 1, 1944. I had seen this name on one of those historic plaques years ago, the rectangular ones with brass lettering on black backgrounds. It listed the county's dead from all the twentieth century wars. At first I thought Corporal Joyner had died at the Battle of the Bulge, the fight everyone knows about, the famous one made into countless books and

movies, the one that put the end of World War II — at least in Europe — in sight. But Joyner had died two weeks before that started, from wounds received at a smaller engagement, a lesser known fight, one hardly anyone has ever heard of, but where the bullets were just as deadly. It was near a town called Geilenkirchen, and was one of great days in division history — one war correspondent had called it “the perfect operation.”

I’d tried to write a Veteran’s Day piece for the paper about Joyner once, but no one in town seemed to know anything about Corporal Joyner, even though “Joyner” is a common Nash County name. There had been no children; Julian never got a chance to marry. Maybe there had been a girl waiting for him back in Nashville. He was only 22 when he died. There seemed to be no brothers, and all my inquiries had yielded nothing. At the official town Christmas party, which I’d covered for the paper, a town council member mentioned that Daniel, Julian’s brother, was still alive, just not well; his mind wasn’t as sharp as it had been. If I caught him on a good day, he said, maybe I could get those answers I had been looking for, maybe even enough for a good Memorial Day story in a couple of months.

“Well? You gonna answer?” asked the man.

I looked back up. The olive drab was Army issue. The sewn-on tag read JOYNER and there were two stripes on the sleeve. He wore a helmet on his head so I couldn't see his eyes. I felt off guard, defensive. Was he the son one of those reenactors who shop the army surplus story or was he wearing one of his uncle’s old jackets?

“I’ve been wanting to write a story about J.Y. Joyner and what he did in the war,” I said, and nodded towards the marker, a motion that the man seemed to ignore. “I’ve never been able to find out much about Julian Joyner. You know, what happened to him, what he was like. No one

seems to know. He was young. Do you know anything about him?"

"I don't know why it's any of your business," he said, "but I don't guess it much matters now."

I opened my mouth just as the phrasing registered with my brain. I was between thought and word and nothing came out. Was this guy "channeling" Julian? Was he in character or did he have mental problems? I decided to find out, to look him straight in the eyes and see what was there. They were tucked into the shadow under the helmet. I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything for what seemed like twenty minutes, but must have only been an awkward pause.

"Hell, why not. Sit down. Let's talk," he said.

Joyner, Julian Y., Corporal, sat down on the dried, brown dead grass and propped against a stone with the name MAY carved across the top. I thought it seemed a little disrespectful, but I keep that thought to myself. His face was partially covered in stubble, and his hands did not look natural, just gray-blue, like the surrounding cemetery. He did not seem real, but was almost close enough to touch. He put the cigarette to his lips and I thought he looked just like he could have walked right off the set of *Band of Brothers*, as I scanned him up and down. That is, until I got to his chest. There, just below the white government issue t-shirt that was visible behind the button-up shirt, was an ugly, large black stain, larger than a softball.

Neither of us said anything. I could hear his watch ticking, I thought, but watches don't tick anymore, do they? Not willing to push up to a headstone, I sat on a beech tree stump, a perfect seat and reminder of the hurricane, rested my hands on my knees and leaned forward, waiting for the man to speak, while my eyes battled the logic in my brain. He took a couple of

puffs off that cigarette and turned his head to the side. He was dirty.

“It was a week after Thanksgiving,” he said. “I hadn’t never had a Thanksgiving away from Mama and Daddy. And here I was, way the hell over in France, or Germany if you listened to the Krauts' radio — they always said we was in Germany and they was just taking back what was theirs to start with. What did I care about Krauts or Frenchies? I mean, I just wanted somebody to shoot that bastard Adolf and get the whole thing over with. Won't much chance of getting there by Christmas, but maybe Easter. Vickie Hinton told me in a letter she'd kiss me as soon as I's back. She was a fine looking thing, that Vickie, pretty blonde hair, the bluest eyes I ever seen, and shaped just right.”

I didn't say anything. He fumbled with the old black Zippo lighter in his hand, opened and closed the lid, and stared at the ground, as if he had said something he regretted, something inappropriate. As if he had damaged Vickie Hinton’s reputation with his words and thoughts. I noticed his right pants pocket. There was another dark stain there, one that looked like it was smeared on — you could see what looked like hand prints.

“Anyway, old Patton was tearing the damn place up and the Railspiltters were following right behind. Funny thing, a Southern boy in an outfit that started out being named for Lincoln,” Joyner said. “The Krauts couldn't do anything with Patton and we could barely keep up. Those tanks just kept rolling. They say he was a mean son of a bitch. But he knew what he was doing, that's a fact. I never saw the man, but those tank jockeys, they loved him.” He pursed his lips, turned his head and blew some smoke. “Anyway, we're going all around these rivers, the Krauts is running, the tanks is running and we're cleaning out what the officers called “pockets” of resistance. Well, that was a big damn suit that had them pockets. They had these “true believers,”

crazy-assed Heil-Hitlering, mean bastards. They'd stay behind, I don't know, I reckon to make Adolf proud or something, knowing they was going get shot or blowed up, but set and bound to take as many of us with them as possible. Dumbasses, you know. I mean, they could have waited for their officers to get on down the road and tied a pair of white drawers to their rifles and waved 'em out the windows or steeples or doorways. They knew we wouldn't shoot 'em. Hell, we'd have fed them and they'd probably be home before we were. The war would have been over for them.” He stopped and looked down at his feet. Something had come back to him, something bad.

“One of 'em shot Tommy Edwards right through the throat. I'd been all the way through boot with him. Man, we'd been lucky. We thought once we got out of Belgium we was gonna make it home. Then he was dead, just like that. He gets up to take his cards out of his pants pocket, never even stood all the way up, and some Kraut just shot him dead. Right there in front of all us. We got rifles, mortars, BARs, .50-cals, and some Kraut with a rusty Mauser just shoots Tommy dead. For what? It was over. Blood was spurting everywhere. Somebody thought they saw the house it came from. We leveled it, down to gravel and splinters. Never even found a body.”

The wind blew some leaves right across the lane to our right. I'd never felt wind come through Oakdale — it was almost like you were indoors when you came here. This had been my place to get away, to edit my book I was going to write when I was younger. But this day was different. Lots of things were different. Instead of a pen, I brought a bottle most times when I came out now.

“Then we got to Geilenkirchen. Hell, I can't even say it right. It was bad there. The

Germans had everything there, the heavy stuff, 88s and everything. They knew how to use those long guns.” He took a long drag from the cigarette and his thoughts shifted again.

“You know, Mama always made Daddy go get a Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving. I'd go with him. I didn't go last year 'cause I was out of boot and still in the States, in Louisiana on maneuvers. Hey, what's Red Oak like now? I bet there still ain't nothing there but the store and the two churches, is it? You know, I always wondered why in the world the Methodists built their place right in the Baptists' front yard. I mean, you can near about stand on one step and jump from one church to the other. I guess you can get you some real communion wine at the Methodist church, then hop over to the Baptist church and get to feeling guilty and praying hard about it. Feet won't even touch the ground. We was Baptists. I never could figure out the difference, other than they don't dunk you all the way down. The Methodists were just like normal people on Monday at school. Do you know the difference?”

I do know the difference, but I wanted to get back to the story at hand. I didn't have the heart to tell him about how Red Oak is now. Yeah, it is still small, the churches are still there, right on top of each other, and there are two stores, but they're brand new. And where he'd remember farms and more farms, they've planted houses and called them subdivisions. The word didn't exist when he was in school. So, while he was sitting there telling me the truth, I decided to lie to him. It would be better for us both. How could I explain why somebody would build a neighborhood, all at once, give it a name ending in “farm” and build all the houses just alike?

“Red Oak is still the same,” I said. “About like it was when you left, maybe a few more people. But all the same. Lot of cows.”

I think he knew I was lying, but he didn't let on. He pointed his head down towards his

legs, and pushed back his helmet. He was sitting on the ground, with his knees up, leaning forward, resting his arms on his knees. I noticed again how dirty he was — hands, shoes, pants, all dirty. Mud splattered all over. He took another drag off the cigarette.

“Well, anyway, Geilenkirchen is crawling with Krauts. Somebody said that somehow our brass had got the word that the Germans had pulled a lot of their stuff out, that they didn't leave much. We get there and you just know it is going to be a big fight. Somebody at a card game one night said that the Krauts had to get permission from Adolf to surrender. Ain't that about the dumbest thing you've ever heard? I mean, you know, what's he going to do to them after they surrender and they get sent back to England or the States? I mean, we were bombing and shelling the hell out of them since August. Well, the Krauts set up all these forts all over the place and we're supposed to hit 'em one by one. I was in the 335th. The Railsplitters, they called us. We'd already got shot up pretty good in Belgium and France, but by then, we were used to it. We figured it won't going to be much longer now, we just needed to keep our heads down, keep moving, don't do nothing stupid. Then we could go home.” There was another pause, another long drag off the smoke.

“You know, we'd always have ham at Christmas. You see all them pictures in *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post* with turkeys on the table. I never seen a turkey walking, but they say up around Salem the woods is full of 'em. Pigs, pigs we got. Daddy always pulled the biggest, prettiest ham out of the smokehouse for Christmas. Everybody was home. I wanted to be home some kind of bad for Christmas in '44. I told you that Vickie was a looker, right?”

Vickie's 84 now. She still has the clearest blue eyes, with just enough twinkle for you to wonder what she was must have done to the boys, just talking to them, back in the 40s. She still

wears fine clothes. I saw her at the Post Office with one of her grandsons the other day. The lazy one. He is always in a hurry and carts her around town because he doesn't work and thinks she might leave him all her money when she passes. That's what people say anyhow. I considered for a minute that I might tell Joyner how Vickie married money and had a nice house and three nice girls and they all married — one even went to college. And how Vickie's got nine grandchildren, and she's still sharp as a tack and will tell me a dirty joke when her grandson steps far enough away that he can't hear. She's never mentioned Julian Joyner to me. But then, why would she? Does she even remember that kiss she promised? Did she kiss someone else when the boys came home in 1945? Was it Mr. C.V. Bass, the money she married? I decided that none of it mattered.

“She must have been,” I said with a smile, one that wasn't sincere or real. He didn't look at me. He knew I knew something and wasn't telling. I've never been a convincing liar. Joyner ignored my answer and picked his story back up.

“Well, it was bad that Thursday. I guess it was the 30th,” he said. It occurred to me: does he know what happened? In this story he's telling, he has only one day left. If he knew, he didn't let on. “My platoon got pinned behind this stonewall. No mortar rounds that day, but plenty of lead is coming in, and it seems like it is coming from all directions. I swear it was coming from behind us, too, even though it won't nobody back there but our boys with the mortars and the .50 cal's. All of a sudden, one of the young boys starts screaming out, “I'm hit! I'm hit” and Earl, he starts yelling for a medic. He's yelling, the boy is yelling. I'm thinking, “Where the hell is the medic?” Then I remember that I pulled a medic bag off a boy, a replacement we never even bothered to get to know, one who got killed in Belgium, and it's got a couple of sulfa powder

packs, and some morphine and you know, maybe I can do something for this boy.” He lifted the Lucky Strike to his lips and inhaled, raising a bright orange flare on the end. “So, I stay down and crawl towards the boy and he's hit bad. The other boys are yelling at me to get down, but what am I going to do? Just let him die? I start tearing sulfa bags and dumping the stuff all over him. I know it ain't going to stop all that bleeding, but damn, at least he could see me doing something. I look down and I got blood all over me from him. The boy is in bad shape, so I pop him with a morphine shot and tell him the medic is coming. The medic ain't coming. Hell, he might even be dead himself. So, I ain't even thinking about nothing but that poor boy and I get up, stand up straight, and walk back to where I was. Can you believe that? I think I must have surprised even the Krauts. There's bullets everywhere, the boys are going nuts, and I'm just walking across the damn field like I'm home in a pasture. Won't but a few steps, but it seemed like a lot. Tommy didn't even stand all the way up and one shot, he's dead. I walk back to the line like I'm home in the tobacco field in July and don't get a scratch. Damndest thing. And then I sat down and smoked a cigarette. The lieutenant is cussing at me like I ain't been cussed at since boot. I ain't even hearing it. I should have stayed with that boy. I should not have let him die alone. That was wrong.”

I waited for The Moment. When it would end. When he had nothing else to tell. Does he know someone is going to kill him in this story? That he won't go home, that he won't see Mama's Christmas tree, that he won't eat Daddy's ham and that he won't get that kiss from Vickie?

“So, anyway, it gets late, and it starts getting dark and the shooting stops. It's like everybody just got tired of it and went to supper,” he said. “The field guns had been banging

away, the tanks had moved up and we even got some planes covering us. The Germans just pulled back. Everybody was feeling good. Someone came up and told us we could go to the rear for hot mess, which we hadn't had in days. Anyway, me and Grady and Earl went back to eat. They're from east Tennessee. It was quiet on the way back. Real strange. You ever had that feeling like somebody is watching you, but you don't see nobody? So we're walking back, talking about girls, and you know, didn't none of us know about girls except that boy from New Jersey with the big mouth, and we hear this rustle in the woods, right off the path, like a deer or something and then there is a loud crack and I see Grady and Earl just go straight down and I think, 'Damn, somebody just killed 'em,' just like Tommy, and I just stand there and then my chest just starts hurting awful bad all of a sudden and it gets quiet and next thing I know I'm laying on the ground and there's Grady and Earl and they ain't been killed after all. Their mouths is moving, but I don't hear nothing. I see boots running back and forth and see some fire coming out of rifles and some boys pointing and then Grady and Earl and two boys I don't know pick me up and put me in the back of jeep and then I don't know what happened. I didn't see none of them again or any Krauts either."

The cigarette flinched in his hand. It was almost gone, the last half burned quickly while I listened. Distracted by a squirrel running past a pine cone behind me, I looked away for a second and when I looked back, Joyner, Julian Y, Corporal, 335th Infantry, was gone. Not even a cigarette butt is left as evidence he was ever there.

A honking horn startled me. It had gotten colder outside as the time grew later, so I got back in my car. I decided I needed maybe one more swallow to warm me up before heading out.

A tap on the window scared the hell out of me. There was a uniform in my window, but no face, just two stripes on the sleeve and the name tag read JONES. I rolled my window down.

“What are you doing? Somebody's going to think you're some kind of pervert,” the officer said. I looked down at my feet and slid the now empty bottle towards the brake and hopefully out of sight. I've known Victor since both our boys, now 12, had been in kindergarten together. “Carly kick you out of the house or something?” He smiled, but then there was a pause, and the lines tightened around his mouth. “You ain't been drinking have you, Mitchell?”

I decided I wasn't going to say much, but what was there to tell? “Just thinking,” I said. “And I got bored. And cold. Nobody bothers me here, except you. I'm going home.”

Victor didn't hear — he had already started back to his patrol car. I guess he was glad I was still alive. There is a lot of paperwork if you find a guy behind the wheel on a Sunday in the cemetery, dead.

I cranked the car and headed down the narrow lane at Oakdale Cemetery. I got to the end of the lane and as I checked both ways before turning onto the road, I waited for a twenty year old white Buick with a man about my age driving and a hunched-over old man in the passenger seat.

I looked into one of the old shotgun houses across a dirt path from Oakdale. I'd always thought they were long vacant, too small, too decrepit, too isolated ... too near the cemetery for anyone to live there. There were no signs of life, no curtains, no mailbox, no cars, no flickering TVs.

As I pulled into the road, I saw a young man's torso in the front window. He was shirtless, covered in tattoos, and he was watching. Watching the cemetery, watching me.

I couldn't see his face.

II. Brother

The air was still, like it gets in July when the whole of North Carolina becomes a furnace. No breeze, no movement, nothing to keep the gnats off, the sun straight overhead, beating down. I felt as though the fiery ball was drawing the moisture out of me, pulling it up into the sky, or as Mrs. Potter called it in science class, evaporating it up into the clouds. Funny to think my sweat might be tomorrow's rain. But funny in what they call an ironic way, not a ha-ha funny way. We learned the difference from Miss Bass in English class. It ain't nothing funny about pulling sand lugs off the bottom of the tobacco at 12:30 pm when it has got to be 100 degrees, or at least high-eighty-something, in the middle of a field, with no shade and the water jar's done run slap out.

Before the war, this was a three-man job. Me and Daddy and Julian would come on out in the morning, before it got light, and we'd have the whole eight acres done by now. Sometimes, Granddaddy would even come help if his gout would hold off long enough. By God, that man's feet would swell. I hope that don't happen to me when I get old, but Granddaddy, he won't a ballplayer like I am, and when did you ever hear of an old baseball player getting the gout? Julian would always tell me I was so good at pulling sand lugs because I was closer to the ground than everybody else. I was just a little kid then. But now it was 1946, and I was 16 and I had shot up to about six feet and couldn't nobody in Red Oak or Spring Hope or Swift Creek or Nashville or Rocky Mount get a fastball by me, but I could still hold my own. And I could do it by myself. Daddy didn't have much to say anymore, and he usually had things to do around the barn or the house, and Granddaddy he couldn't do anything if he wanted to — all those years of working and standing in the sun, bent over those mules, tore that body all up. So it was just me.

I stopped and took the old blue rag out of my Red Camel overalls and wiped my sweat.

That old bandana was the one I used to use when I was Jesse James or Billy the Kid, running around the barn, trying to get the drop on Julian or one of the colored men that helped us when July came and we had to start barning tobacco. Or harvesting, as the folks who have never worked in tobacco called it. The water was running off me good, but I wouldn't have so much to do after dinner. I would need to get Mama to fix me two big jars of water for the afternoon though, because you can't let yourself fall out from the heat. Mama didn't say much anymore either, but she could still run a kitchen, and it was about that time — matter of fact, it was late.

I heard the clanging from the old bell on top of the fence post in the backyard. Dinner time. I used to take off running when Mama would ring that bell. Daddy would always say we'd have been done by dinner if I'd had that much “pep in my step” when we were working. Mama only made six biscuits for lunch, and if Julian or Daddy started eating before I did, I wouldn't get but one. Julian would always complain that I got as many as the men, but Mama would tell him and Daddy I was growing and that two of them biscuits were mine. I didn't have to run now, but I knew that sopping those biscuits in molasses, with some butter mixed in and a little of the fatback left from breakfast would go a long ways towards making me feel better, and would last me right up until supper.

I got to the backyard and finally within the reach of the old oak and magnolia trees. It had to be a good ten degrees cooler under those outstretched branches, the ones that had shaded my Daddy, Granddaddy, Great-Granddaddy and a whole bunch of Joyners before that. I skipped a step, and jumped onto the porch and shoved the screen door open.

“It is about hot as Hell out there,“ I said. “I need a drink and I'm so hungry I could eat a damn horse.”

There was a time would Mama would have smacked me with a wooden spoon or her hand and threatened to wash my mouth out with soap for using that kind of language, especially in her kitchen. But ever since Julian never came back to the farm, Mama don't care.

After I ate my biscuits and one of Daddy's, I went out on the porch. Mama never would let me go back to the fields right away, no matter how big a hurry Daddy would be in. She always said you had to let that food settle or else you'd get cramps or you might get the monkey on your back. Getting the monkey on your back was as bad as it got on the farm. That meant you got so hot you got to feeling sick, and you were going to throw up. If you were lucky, you might make it to the end of the row and not leave a mess where somebody had to step. It was embarrassing to get the monkey on your back. None of the Joyner men ever had it happen and none of the colored boys either; usually, it would only happen if the tobacco was really good one year and Daddy would have to go looking some help and pick up somebody that had never worked in the field. The first day, you could count on the monkeys swinging on those boys' backs.

I sat down on the corner of the porch next to our old hound dog, Tick. Daddy had brought Tick home one day, said he found him on the road coming back from Pace's and thought that young 'uns ought to have a dog to grow up with. Mama had a fit because that old dog was covered in brown deer ticks from head to tail. Some folks called them blood ticks, the kind that would latch onto a dog and just suck the blood until they got bigger than butter beans. She told me and Julian that if we wanted to keep that dog, we better get to picking them ticks and put that dog in the washtub. We were so excited, we raced to fill it with water and fought over the bar of

soap and who would get to scrub the dog. The hound dog was less enthused. We picked and scrubbed, and the chickens feasted on those ticks, catching them right out of the air before they could hit the ground. Those Dominiquers made a circle around us, like a crowd at the fair watching a snake oil salesman, waiting for us to throw another one. As we made headway, we discovered that the brown dog was actually more blue. We laughed and argued about what to name him. I wanted to name him Spot; Julian said that was stupid, because he didn't have no spots. He wanted to name him Blue. When the dog was clean, we went running to Daddy to settle the argument, each of us expecting him to take our side against the other. Daddy didn't even hesitate. "Dogs' name is Tick," he said. That was the end of the subject and there was no point arguing. We had learned to not even try.

Thinking of that day made me smile, and I flopped down on the porch, sated by mama's cooking. I swung my legs off the edge of the porch and stretched out, putting my head right behind Tick's shoulder and crossing my hands across my chest. Tick grunted, and lifted his head, cut me a glance and laid it back down. He was a good dog that way. I pushed the straw hat back over my forehead and thought about resting my eyes for just a minute. As I settled down, there across the endless green of the field, my big brother walked through the rows, waving at me. I was glad to see him coming, I'd have some help, somebody to talk to, and I'd be done in plenty of time to finish my chores and listen to the Red Sox game on the radio before bedtime. My hero, Ted Williams, had gone 0-for-4 against the Senators on Sunday, but after Monday off, he was sure to be ready for the hated Yankees tonight. Julian and I could spend plenty of time between innings, laying on the living room floor on our stomachs, our heads propped up on our hands, talking about whether the Splendid Splinter would be able to put together another .400 season —

like he did back in '41, and then he took all those years off to fight in the war. That memory was interrupted when I felt Daddy's old brown boot nudge me in the ribcage.

“You gone sleep all day or go finish that tobacco?”

Ted Williams did not get a hit in that game or the next one against the Yankees, and the heat was unrelenting each morning.

We were just days from starting to barn tobacco and Williams had been three games without a hit. I'd have to get the tobacco truck, which really was a trailer, not a truck, out of one of the storage barns and make sure the wheels and axles were in good shape and that the harness fittings won't broke and that they'd be ready for the mules in the morning. Daddy had two mules, Bess and Lou, and he spoiled them, but he'd never admit it. Most people used what they called slides or sleds hooked to the mules to get the tobacco out of the field. Daddy thought that put too much work on the mules, that they got hot and tired, too, and that if you worked them too hard, they'd just give out and what would you have then? So, instead of a sled, Daddy spent hard earned money on a trailer with an axle and sides to hold the leaves. “Take care of your mules and they'll take care of you,” he always said. I felt like if Daddy had that kind of money to spend, then why didn't he just buy a Farmall tractor and save us all some time, trouble and turmoil in the summer. Al Langley's daddy had bought a red '38 Farmall and they'd be home eating supper while we'd still be getting after it in the fields. Mama said Mr. Langley got all that extra money from moonshine, bootlegging on the weekends — after all, what farmer had the money to buy a tractor?

The old Lucky Strike thermometer near the barnyard was already pushing the red line up

into the upper reaches of the 80s and we hadn't even reached the heat of the day. In other parts of the county, they'd be having fireworks, parades. It was the Fourth of July and the town folks in Nashville and Rocky Mount would be sipping ice cold Coca-Colas, maybe even going to see the Rocky Mount Rocks. But out on the farm, it was the first day of barning tobacco. It was a big deal, but not in the same way. It would be a long day. Daddy had made the rounds early on the old '33 Ford truck, the one he used to haul hemp in the summer and bright yellow leaf to market at the end of the summer. When I was little, I'd ride right next to Daddy in the front seat, having to move or slide over when he shifted gears. Daddy would stop by Pace's store and fill up the old washtub with ice and me and Julian would shove a whole crate of Coca-Colas into the tub, one at a time while Daddy bought Nabs and sweets for break time. Then we'd make the rounds on the way home, picking up the colored boys and their daddies who would help us. There were the Richardsons, who had helped for as long as I could remember. They had one boy a year older than Julian and one boy a year younger. They didn't say much, and they always eyed those drinks like they were something special they couldn't have, licking their lips and just staring. At break time, as soon as we'd get ours out, those boys and their daddy would ease up to the tub, use the old bottle opener nailed to one of the barn's timbers and drink those Cokes nice and slow. The Taylors, who lived a few houses down, were the same way. They had a boy my age, Bobby, and I asked him one day why him and the other coloreds acted like they never had no Cokes. Bobby told me they didn't, that his Daddy couldn't even go in Pace's; they had to go to Melville's on the east side of town, the only place his folks could buy a drink. When I was eight, I did not know what he meant by that. I asked my Mama and she said that was the store for Negroes, they had their own store. It was years before I understood why you won't supposed to eat with blacks, or

drink with them, or use the same bathroom. It never seemed to bother anybody in July when we'd drink from the water pump in the yard, out on the farm. I guessed that was just the way you were supposed to act in town. Kinda like having to wear shoes when you went to church.

But I did not ride with Daddy that day. I got the wagon out and ready, and the mules fed and hitched. I checked the looping horses, drove in a few loose nails and unwrapped the tobacco twine. I checked the tobacco sticks for snakes and black widow spiders, because handling them would be Bobby's little brother George's job. George was nine. I remembered doing that job when I was his age. It wasn't much of a job as long as you made sure you had one ready when it was needed; otherwise you could take those sticks and make all kinds of houses, or pretend rifles, or forts, or ramps or traps for rabbits.

That year, the tobacco was filling out early. We already had a lot of good-looking leaves, but the season would be made or lost on rain at the right time. If the rain came, it would be a great year. I'd get some new shoes before Christmas, and Mama might get enough money for Daddy to start on that bathroom in the house, so we could get rid of the outhouse and the help would all have some extra change. We'd be able to get hamburgers at the Central Cafe on Church Street or hot dogs at City Lunch in Rocky Mount after we finished selling the crop at Smith's Warehouse downtown. We might even need more help to get the crop in since we'd been short. Ever since the minute that man drove all the way out to our house with that Western Union.

I won't ever forget that day.

It was just starting to get cold, early December, and while we were still in school, my mind was already out for Christmas. Ever since Thanksgiving, when Mama made Daddy get a

Christmas tree, like she always did, all I could think of was Christmas. There was a war going on and Julian was right in the middle of it. His last letter had been from France, I thought, but the more I read, it seemed like Germany. We knew there was things he couldn't tell us because of spies and such, but it did not look like the war was going to be lasting all that much longer. The Krauts had killed all those people and took over all those countries, but they were taking a whipping. Daddy listened to the news on the RCA every night, mostly WPTF out of Raleigh, but also WEED in Rocky Mount sometime. Julian said to save him some of that good ham, because Daddy would always kill a hog and it was the best eating we had all year — sausage, hams, tenderloin, pork steak — and Mama would make biscuits, and we'd eat from all those vegetables she worked so hard to keep up with in the summer.

It was dark that day as I stared out the classroom window at school, daydreaming. It looked like it might snow, but we knew it wouldn't, it hadn't started freezing regular at night yet and was still in the 50s during the day. I was already thinking about Santa Claus, tasting those oranges he brought every year and the candy canes and bags of candy, just like they had at Gulley's in downtown Nashville, next to the movie theater. I knew 1944 had been a good crop year and I was hoping — knowing it probably wouldn't happen, but hoping anyway — that I would finally get a hunting rifle of my own. They had some right there in Gulley's, and Daddy knew I wanted one and was overdue. Julian had got Granddaddy Frazier's, who was Mama's daddy, when he turned twelve. Daddy felt bad that I didn't get one when I was twelve, but the war was going bad in '42, and Julian had been drafted into the Army and nobody knew what was going to happen. They only had a couple of guns there in Gulley's and weren't likely to get more; Daddy said there was a reason no one had bought those guns — they were sorry. Daddy didn't

spend his money easy, but he would not buy junk. If he couldn't get something good, he would just wait and save his money. No credit, never wanted any, never wanted to be owing anybody money. Later on, I figured out that's why he drove that Ford truck until 1954, farmed with mules until Kennedy was President and took his time on that bathroom for Mama.

I was thinking about that rifle and the bullets and all those toys in the Sears catalog — knowing that I might not get any closer to any of that stuff than those pages, which would soon enough find themselves on the shelf next to the hole in the outhouse. I was still thinking about all that when I got home.

And then we heard a car.

That in itself was unusual on our road — hard packed dirt, plenty of room for horse carts to pass, but barely enough room if two cars were to meet going in opposite directions. The only person on our road who had a vehicle besides a working truck was Mr. Langley. He had a black-as-tar '38 Ford V-8 and that thing would fly. I hardly ever saw it during the day, but you could hear it zip down the road after dark, real late at night, sometimes without the lights on. Mack Johnson had a '29 Chevy truck, but he had nine young 'uns and could hardly keep that thing running. You always knew it was coming because it would backfire and spit all the way down the road, and you could run faster than it could go. So there were never many cars down the road, and you knew who it was. We did not know who owned this car that turned at the road onto the path to the house.

Mama had just been out to the packhouse to get some potatoes to fix for supper. I was supposed to be studying, but I was looking at that Sears catalog and daydreaming instead of doing long division. Daddy was replacing some boards on the barn. He stopped nailing.

A dark green sedan with a white star on the door pulled up in front of the steps, Mama was already to the porch when I heard her say, “No ...” and she started crying. Wailing. Daddy came running. By the time I got to the door, the man was already getting back in the car. Daddy was holding a piece of paper and I've never seen that look on his face before or since. He dropped the paper and put his arms around Mama. I picked it up. It began, “Dear Mr. and Mrs. Joyner, It is with profound regret that I want to inform you ...” I did not read anymore and I could not hear anything else, or see anything else, even though I know my Mama cried all night. I didn't care about oranges, or rifles or toys or candy or Christmas trees. I didn't care about any of that.

I don't remember a thing about our farm in 1945. I know we got a crop in, somehow. But it was a blur — just me and Daddy and Mama walking through the days, in that first year after Julian was killed.

Some people used to say that farmers were ignorant types that couldn't do anything but work in the fields. Those people never raised tobacco. There are a lot of jobs to be done, and everybody has to do his part for the crop to get from plant bed to field to curing barn to warehouse sale. Those same folks probably thought a farmer didn't do any work until it got hot, either. There is always something to do on a farm, or else you are doing something wrong.

We planted our seeds right after New Year's Day. We'd have hog jowls and black eyed peas — for good luck, and because they said you'd make a dollar that year for every pea you ate — and then the next day, we would set the plant beds. You had to turn the soil over with hoes and then rake it clean before planting the seeds. Then we would cover that whole part of the field

with canvas to keep the cold weather from killing the fledgling plants. Those plants would come up and start pushing the cloth and when you got past the last frost, you'd have to start keeping it clean and pulling weeds. That was a bad job, and we would be sore and hurting so bad after stooping and pulling. By the end of April the plants were ready to be set out, taking up most of our eight acres. In June, probably the easiest job – and it was not easy — came along. It was then, just as the days were heating up and school was mercifully coming to an end, we would go sucker or top the tobacco. This meant walking the fields and breaking off the top flowers, or short leaves. I never understood the science of it, but the tobacco plant would somehow release at the point, the leaves would fan out and add weight. Weight meant more money in September and October and better-looking leaves on the sales floor. After that you need a little rain and no hail and then heat. Heat we had and the tobacco looked great in the summer of 1946. Some folks didn't take those sand lugs — the bottom leaves that grew so close to the ground they got covered in sand and mud and you couldn't do much with them. Daddy always said that if you got them off, the plant could send all that food being made by the heat to the good leaves. I don't know if that was right or not, but I do know Daddy was known year in and year out for always having some of the best tobacco around and the buyers looked for him every year.

Around about July 4th, it was usually time to start getting the crop out of the field. In the past, me and Julian and Daddy and the help would take the mule and wagon out to the field. Every four or five rows, we had a wide row left when we planted, one that left enough room to pull the wagon down. We started at the bottom of the plant, and reached in, snapping the stem from the stalk in one twist, sort of like a baseball swing in reverse. Each man was responsible for starting at the bottom and cropping the bottom few leaves and working down the row. You were

expected to keep up with the mule wagon, which moved along ahead, just a little bit. Daddy and the other men would get mad if someone got behind and they had to backtrack to the wagon. Tobacco plants are tough and stringy and sometimes there'd be wasps or spiders or even worms that could sting you. Me and Julian used to throw the horn worms in an old coffee can and give them to the chickens — they would run and fight over those treats. We didn't feel bad at all, because those worms could take money right out of Daddy's pockets, eating up those leaves we worked so hard to get right. Those next-to-the-bottom hanging leaves were the biggest and prettiest and heaviest, but it was tough stooping down that row, in the heat and humidity, sweat rolling down your face, salt running into your mouth and your nose and mouth gasping for the air already polluted by the peculiar smell of those plants. It was a smell that stayed in your nostrils, a pungent, rangy odor unlike anything else in the farming business. I never told anybody, but it made my throat burn. I knew the men would make fun of me if I told. Daddy said it smelled like money to him — Julian had taken to saying the same thing when Daddy wasn't around.

Once you had an arm loaded with tobacco, you took it to the wagon, making sure you turned all the leaves the same way. If you did not mind how you did this, Mama would let you know. It made extra work for the barn crew if you didn't turn the leaves all the same way. If we ever had new help, that was usually the mistake they would make all day the first day, mostly because they were worried about getting the monkey on their back. And it was on days like July 4th that you could get that monkey to swinging. After bending up and down those rows for an hour or so, your clothes soaked first with the dew from the leaves in the morning and then the weight added from your sweat an hour or so after starting and not being used to that smell. Bend, snap leaves, crouch forward, bend, snap leaves, hustle to the wagon, and then back down.

Inhaling that smell. Tobacco leaves mark your hands with this tacky stuff that turns black, working its way into the creases and crevices of your hands and if you had a cut in your skin it would burn some kind of bad. It was called tobacco gum. It did not come off easy, sometimes not at all — it would just stain your hands for the whole summer, a bitter smell that in the first days would make everything you ate taste like the smell of the plant. After a while, your stomach would get queasy and you knew you needed a drink of water and you'd look up and see the end of that row was what looked like the distance from second base to the centerfield wall. You'd feel like you were carrying extra weight, like a monkey was holding onto your collar and swinging around on your back. And then, it would go. It almost got me a couple of times, the first couple of years I worked in the field. I'd see folks vomit, right there in the row. Usually someone would cuss, which Daddy did not mind if we were far enough from the barn for Mama not to hear. Nobody would stop working, but Daddy would usually stop and ask whoever it was if they were okay or needed to go cool off at the barn. Usually once they got it over with, they were too embarrassed to do anything but press on. Sometimes the new help would get the monkey a couple of times the first day and never come back.

Once that wagon was full to the top but not full enough to drop a single leaf, usually me or Julian would have led the mules back to the barn. It was my job now, or sometimes Bobby would do it. We had two barns about fifty feet apart, with a tin-covered shelter connecting the two. This at least made the barn work tolerable if not cool. We would take the tobacco to the barn and lay it out on burlap bags, while the mules got a chance to get water and feed. After we got it off the wagon, we'd all get a cool drink of water. In the middle of the morning, we would get Coca-Colas and Nabs before we went back to the field. While we were breaking and cooling

off, the women and barn crew would take over. Each of them had a looping horse. Daddy and Granddaddy had made the looping horses years ago, long before I was born. A horse was two boards, usually about 1x4 or 1x6 standing vertical at each end, about four feet apart with a base of whatever scrap boards we had at the bottom, making it stand up, sort of like an elongated “U.” A notch was cut at the top of each vertical board, making a holder for the tobacco stick, which was a squared stick about an inch and a half tall by an inch and a half wide and just a tad longer than the looping horse, so that enough stick hung over the end of the horse to fit a large man's hand on each end. The women would take bunches of leaves, hanging some on either side of the stick, with the stems facing up, and tie off them off so they hung securely on both sides of the stick. An experienced “looper” could make this seem like an art form, the rhythms of tying and bunching, always in perfect proportion, the string efficiently stretched and tied and snapped perfectly into place. Once a stick was looped, it was ready to go into the barn.

Depending on how big your barn was, it might take two or three men to hang the tobacco. The barns were made out of wood, and generations old on our farm — not like the barns that would come along later, the ones that looked like freight cars. Ours were about three stories high, with sets of rafters spaced out to the ceiling. At the start of the day, one man would climb to the top rafter, one man to the middle, and the loopers would take their sticks and pass them bucket brigade style and the man up top would hang them as tight as he could. It was dangerous being the top man, even though nobody acted like it was and I never saw or heard about anyone on any nearby farms falling or getting hurt. The barn would be half full by dinner, when Mama would go in and make everybody lunch. She cooked every day and then all the men would rest while the women cleaned up the mess and got to sit for a few minutes before we started back. Usually

the help would find some shade in the yard and sleep right on the ground.

By the end of the day, one barn would be full of tobacco and ready to be cured. We would stop and eat supper and then my workday would be over. After cooking supper, Mama would go work the vegetable garden while we still had light. I'd haul water for her from the well pump until it was time for the Red Sox game on the radio, my favorite time of the day. It would be just me and Julian, listening to the game and talking on the living room floor. Mostly me talking, and Julian just laying there, tired but not ready for bed. He was just as big of a Ted Williams, Johnny Pesky, Bobby Doer and Dom DiMaggio fan as me. We loved DiMaggio and always thought he was at least as good as his brother, who only got more attention because he played for the hated Yankees.

For Daddy, though, the day wasn't over. There was a furnace on the outside of the barn and from it ran metal pipes called flues into the barn. Daddy would fill the box on the furnace with wood and get it blazing hotter than the fireplace in the house in the dead of winter. He and Granddaddy Joyner used to sit out there and talk and play cards until it got dark, then they'd fold out a cot to lay on, sleeping in shifts, to make sure the fire did not go out — or that something would fall in the barn and catch on fire. They would poke the fire and add wood all night to keep it going, because if the barn cooled after the curing started, the tobacco would not be as good, that was a fact. It is hard to explain, but when that tobacco would start curing, as bad as those leaves had smelled that afternoon, and how bitter the remnants of the gum were on your hands, it was the sweetest smell I've ever known. In the heat of the summer, you could go anywhere in Nash County — although we never went very far, except for the time we bought a milk cow from a man in Bailey — and smell that smell. It was sweet and musky, not the smell of

something burning, and certainly not the smell of someone smoking a cigarette or a pipe or one of those stinking cigars that Granddaddy Joyner would light up from time to time when Mama wasn't around. It was the smell of a farm. The smell of home.

July 5th was no different than the 4th. We started the same old cycle, in the same old heat, and filled up the second barn and Daddy and Granddaddy kept the fires going. Both barns being full did give us a break from the fields for a couple of days at least, as it took four days to cure all the tobacco in them. Then we'd empty the first and keep going until the fields were full of completely stripped stalks, and the packhouse was full of beautiful, dry, golden leaf, and the field was full of lonely green stobs sticking out of the ground, waiting for me to come plow them under with the mules. There is one thing I remember about that summer of 1945, after all. When I went out to cut those stalks, it got real cloudy. It wasn't nobody but me and Bess and Lou and when I looked out over all those fields, I saw rows and rows of soldiers, wearing their GI green, like Julian wore, standing ready to go into battle. Or maybe they were more like grave markers, a field full of grave markers. Grave markers stretching all the way back to the woods, laid out in perfect rows, like Arlington or that new cemetery at Normandy they set up right after D-Day. I remember a letter from Julian where he talked about a couple of his buddies dying on the beach there, guys he had gone through boot camp with, slogged in the rain and mud with and learned to shoot M-1 Garand rifles with. He said he was hoping when he came home he'd get a chance to go by that cemetery to see if he could find them, that maybe he'd write their folks and tell them what a nice place it was.

They talked about burying Julian over there, but Mama and Daddy would have none of it.

Some of Mama's family had plots in the Oakdale Cemetery in Spring Hope, about 20 minutes away on the Ford, the haunted place up on the hill near the railroad tracks, and that is where we put Julian, although it took a long time to get him home. Even though I was a grown man by the time we finally laid my brother to rest, I cried like a baby.

Despite missing three seasons, Ted Williams picked up right where he left off that summer of '46, and I had plenty to look forward to every night. The man only struck out eight times the whole month of July. Eight times over almost 30 games. He was hitting .353 going into August. That was a rough month, and I figured out that he was not going to be a threat to hit .400 again, not for the season and probably not again in his career. He gave up too many good years for the war, years right in the prime of his playing days to go be a Marine pilot. (As it turned out, he was only a couple of hours away from our farm in 1942, training and playing baseball in Chapel Hill with Pesky). But he wore everybody out in September, hit .342 for the year with 38 home runs and 123 runs batted in. And that was with nobody pitching to him – he got 156 walks and 176 hits. The Red Sox only played 154 games, so he got more than one walk and more than one hit every game, on average. That is something. He of course got the American League MVP, Boston won the pennant and played St. Louis in the World Series. They should have won, and almost did, losing in seven games and only then because Enos Slaughter scored from first base in the eighth inning on a single by Harry Walker. At least Slaughter was a North Carolina farmboy, but still, I was stomping mad; Red Sox announcer Jim Britt was in worse shape than me.

When the curing season was done and the packhouse was full, our work was almost over

and everybody seemed to sense it at about the same time and the mood became lighter around the farm. All that was left was to get the tobacco in order and tie it up in burlap sheets so it could be loaded on the Ford and taken to Rocky Mount. The best leaves went on the top and around the sides, because the bags would be untied on the warehouse floor. The buyers from the tobacco companies knew farmers did this, but it was all part of the game. All the tobacco that came out of North Carolina in the 1940s was the best in all the world, and everybody was going to make money. People all over the world were smoking, the movie stars were smoking, and they all wanted Lucky Strikes, Camels, Chesterfields, Raleighs, Old Gold or Pall Mall — the cigarettes that came out of Durham, Winston-Salem or Richmond. And those places were full of Nash County tobacco. Daddy would watch the paper carefully and listen to the radio, waiting to decide when to load up the Ford and haul that tobacco to market, to squeeze every last penny he could out of the crop. He had to. A lot of folks grew cotton right behind or with their tobacco, but we didn't mess with cotton. Daddy was worried you would wear out the soil and get it where nothing would grow good. So, we had to make it on the leaf.

It is funny, a bunch of my friends had started smoking but I never had the desire. I was never even curious about it. But during the war, I thought about cigarettes a lot. Especially when I saw a pack of Lucky Strikes, the white box with the red dot in the middle. I knew that was the kind that Julian smoked, and I thought it would be funny if Daddy had cured tobacco that ended up being smoked by his son over in France. I knew Julian smoked, but I don't think Mama and Daddy did. If they knew, they pretended not to. He did not start doing it until he got out of school and only then when he was out with his buddies. He did not want me to know, but I found

the remnants of a pack in the pocket of one of his shirts he had left on the floor of our room. I don't know where he kept them hid. He should have known I wouldn't tell. That would have been like throwing Ted Williams a spitball.

It always bothered me that Julian thought, even for a minute, that I could ever betray him. He should have known better.

We sold the last of our tobacco at Smith's Warehouse in downtown Rocky Mount, on the good side of the tracks, right after the World Series. 1946 was one of the best years Daddy ever had, money-wise. By the end of September, Daddy, who always worried, had already sold the bulk of his crop and gotten good money for it. Market days had almost a kind of county fair atmosphere — it was a time more exciting than Christmas, really. No one said a word if you missed school to go with your Daddy to the tobacco market. Folks would get their checks pressed right there at the warehouse and either stand in line to cash them at the office or if they used a bank, they would go to Planters or Peoples and make a deposit, always holding out some walking-around money. Many would head to the shops in downtown, which were booming during the market days, and you could get anything there. Some would head on down Church Street, past the Pepsi-Cola plant and the Merita Bakery to cut down a sidestreet to the Tar River and eat at Bob Melton's Barbecue. Melton's was legendary for three things: its barbecue; flooding every year when the rains were heavy; and having one day every year when they'd sell barbecue sandwiches for the same price they did the day they opened in the early 1900s. We ate there once, but Daddy was not impressed. He said we could cook a pig better than that, eat off it year round and it wouldn't cost half that. We liked Central Cafe. It was not far from the railroad

station, and Daddy knew I loved to watch the trains. Plus, they had the best hamburgers you could buy and real french fries, the kind with crinkles, not like the potatoes Mama would cut up every once in a while and fry in lard. And they had ketchup.

The last day we sold tobacco that year, Mama was smiling as she climbed in the front of the Ford with me and Daddy, and we took the last few sheets of leaf to market. Mama talked about looking in shop windows and going in the dime store and wanted Daddy to take her by the hardware store to look at commodes. Daddy wanted to see how much televisions were costing and if the new *Farmer's Almanac* was out yet. I had my new shoes already, and it was a good thing because the girls were starting to notice me. The extra work over the summer, along with Mama's biscuits, had filled out some of my frame. It did not hurt that there were rumors that the baseball coach from State College wanted to come see me play baseball in the spring. I did nothing to discourage this rumor, and don't know where it got started, but it did not hurt my feelings one bit. It got the attention of Vickie's little sister, Georgia Hinton. Georgia did not take long to say yes to my invitation to go to the movie house in Nashville to see Humphrey Bogart in his new movie, *The Big Sleep*, and Daddy said I could use the Ford if I cleaned it up and didn't wreck it. It was the first year Daddy ever gave me any money of my own and I have to say, I felt like a man when I had those bills rolled up in my pants pocket. Georgia was worth it, and I figured between Bogart and milkshakes at Ward's Drugstore after would surely get me some handholding and maybe even a kiss on the cheek before the day was over.

Some of the excitement began to wear off in November as school was in full swing. I decided to play basketball to get in shape for baseball season, but when my friends got excited about Thanksgiving, I didn't really care. I never even picked up the Sears catalog that year, I

didn't go with Daddy to cut a tree and I never once thought about those sweet oranges. I had a tough time on Christmas Day, so I just eased back to my room after breakfast. I was lying on my stomach when Mama came to check on me.

“You feeling bad?” she asked. “Is it your stomach?”

“Nah, I’m alright.”

“I know you miss your brother. We all do.”

“I know, Mama,” I said. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Why don’t you write him a letter, like you used to do when he was gone?”

“That don’t make no sense, Mama. He’s gone, he’ll never get it. What’s the point? People will think I’m crazy.”

“The letter is for you, darling,” Mama said. “It is a way to remember your brother. I think of him every day and so does Daddy. Do you think we’re crazy?”

“No, Mama.”

So, I did it, every year, on December 1. It became a way to keep Julian in my life. It helped. Nothing seemed to help Mama or Daddy. I wondered what Ted Williams would hit in 1947.

Epilogue

The Red Sox did not win a World Series until 2004. Ted Williams would have probably been considered the greatest baseball player of all time if he hadn't given up so many seasons — when his skills were at their height — to serve his country. The Joyner farm — the last part of it — was sold a few years ago. Rumor has it a new subdivision is going in.

1 December 2005

Dear Julian,

It's that time again, Brother. Almost sixty years now.

I am an old man, seventy-five, to be exact, and I've had a full life. As many of these as I've written, I still regret that I didn't write you back quick that last time, even though you probably would not have gotten my letter in time. I never thought it would be the last time I'd hear from you.

I'll put this letter in an envelope and put it in the old shoebox I started years ago, the one I put the stuff in about you — with your newspaper obit, your bronze star, your stripes and your dog tags. I guess one day, they'll find it when they go through my things. It won't matter so much. But I'll keep on writing as long as I'm able.

Christmas is still hard without you. Mama and Daddy never got over it. I don't tell you that to make you feel bad; that's just the way it was. They kept farming right to the end, no hospital or old folks home for them. Mama didn't live long after Daddy went. I really needed you then and I know along the way I could have used your advice. You've got five nephews and nieces and they've got so many kids now, I can't keep them straight when we all get together.

I did get my chance to play baseball at State College, but not everybody is meant to go to school. I stuck it out two years, did all right with my grades, but then I heard something pop in my elbow in a game against Wake Forest. It just wasn't the same after that, I just couldn't get around on good fastballs fast enough or make throws like I once could. It would hurt so bad after games, I'd have to set my elbow in a dishpan full of ice for two hours. The Coach said it was a shame, a real shame, because I was a good ballplayer, but he said he could only let me keep my scholarship one more semester. Meaning Mama and Daddy would have to pay for the last year and a half. Coach said I ought to consider it a good deal, since I couldn't do nothing else for the team but would still be getting a fine education for half price. I just went home at the end of the year and called it even. I didn't even tell him, and he didn't so much as send me a letter that fall to see what happened.

And then that mess started in Korea. I don't know what Truman was thinking. I started to ask him years later at the Courthouse when he came to Nashville and was kissing babies and grinning and shaking hands and every Democrat in the state was knocking themselves over to shake his hand. They even poured some cement and got him to press his hands in it, right near the Courthouse steps. They are still there today, with a little marker. But anyway, I started to ask him why we were fighting over there. What in the world did we have to do with a bunch of Koreans? It was one thing in your war — we didn't have a choice. All those boys who came home from Europe and Japan and lived through that mess, a bunch of them got killed for no reason just a few years later, never even knowing why they were there. And then we just left. No surrender, no peace treaty, no nothing, just packed up and left. I did get one more gift from State College. They tried to draft me into the Army, but I couldn't pass the physical because of my

arm. They said I'd be a "liability" in combat, because I couldn't even lift it over my head. I don't want you to think less of me, but I was glad to hear it. It won't like your war, Julian. And I'm going to tell you something else: I think it would have just killed Mama and Daddy right there.

I did get married. I married Vickie Hinton's little sister. I was already sweet on her before you left. You know, because you teased me. But I didn't mind, really. We've been married over 50 years and she is still a beautiful thing to me, she just don't remember things quite as good as she used to. But that's all right, some things you need to forget. We had three boys, and they are all good boys. We named one Julian. Arnold Julian Joyner. He is the baby. When President Bush started bombing the hell out of Iraq back in '91, A.J. was in the National Guard to help pay for college. They sent him over there to that damn sandbox and I did not sleep a single night he was gone, not for six months. I got an ulcer and had to see the doctor. I can't tell you how I felt when he came off that airplane to come home.

We made sure they all the boys knew about you. Mama and Daddy kept a picture — one of those hand-colored ones — out on a lamp table at the house. You were in your uniform, hazel eyes and easy smile staring back. It is at my house now. My grandkids ask me if it is me, and I say no, and I tell them all about you. I tell them about the farm, but they don't believe me. They don't believe anybody could ever live like that around here. They can't imagine life without television, in color, with more channels than the radio had; ovens that can cook a whole meal in just a few minutes; and these little things they put all the music in, like a tiny computer. They carry phones around in their pockets. Can you believe that? They think a "party line" is something I made up.

I've tried to live a good life, Julian. I'm a deacon at church, we raised good young'uns

and we always treated the help at the farm good. I didn't treat the coloreds no different than anybody else, paid them the same money, but we don't have any helping us now. Years ago, my oldest, Vernon, took over the farm and pretty soon after, we didn't have nothing but Mexicans helping. But that's okay, they work good. I just can't understand a damn thing they say, and they eat some funny smelling stuff — tortisomethings, and I don't know what they put in those things.

We made the farm bigger as time went on, buying some land — cash only, like Daddy would have — and renting some. The last couple of years, most of the folks we were renting from started selling off their farms. Nobody wanted to keep going, they all wanted to move to the city or the beach and retire. Most kids don't understand that farming is a life, not a job. They started building houses out this way and then a new school, and these little “neighborhoods” they call subdivisions started popping up faster than the weeds in a plant bed. Then, one day, Vernon came to the house and told me that a developer was willing to pay us over a million dollars for the farm. He'd have to have the old homeplace, but we could keep our place since it was on the very edge of the property anyway. That was too much money to pass on. Georgia and me had saved all our life and didn't need much, but it would let Vernon start over — he's moved to Raleigh now. He got his education at State College, thank goodness. It is hard to believe. I think I found a paper that said Great-Granddady Joyner paid \$300 for the place originally. Now it is going to be called Wheat Farm. But it ain't going to look nothing like a farm.

I almost forgot a newspaper man called one day and wanted to meet me at the cemetery. My youngest was supposed to go with me, but he was late. We never saw the newspaper man and I couldn't remember his name to call him back. He said he'd seen your name at the Courthouse and then the marker, and wanted to do an article or something. He said folks needed to

remember. They need to know the cost of war, that it is not names on a plaque that no one remembers anymore, that everybody was something to somebody at some time. I don't know. I thought he sounded a little tipsy on the phone. Anyway, he was gone by the time we got there.

But I went to your grave.

It had been awhile. It always makes me sad to see your name there, but that day it was strange. Something was different. I could have sworn I smelled those old Lucky Strikes you used to smoke. It was like it was hanging in the air. I guess it was my imagination, there weren't even any cigarette butts on the ground.

Maybe it was the newspaper man.

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