

Marlin Barton

Errands

During the summers as a boy, I liked to play out on the high front porch of the old wooden store my father owned in Riverfield. I'd watch while people pumped gas or went in to buy or just to socialize. Everybody knew Conrad Anderson's store. When the weather turned cold I'd play inside, ducking between the aisles or behind counters, pretending to hide from one or another enemy, and if I grew tired of games, there were always the grownups to sit and listen to. Their conversation didn't always make sense to me, but I still liked to listen. When I think about it, it seems as if I spent more time around adults than around other children.

Whenever Dr. Hannah came in I'd always stop playing. I loved to listen to him talk. His voice had a musical quality to it and his words came out as though they were climbing up and down a scale, but the scale's pattern was always changing, so you never knew quite how he would sound. Whenever he spotted me, he'd come up grinning and say, "Hello, little Conrad," his voice rising, hesitating, "been slaying any dragons today?" Then, somewhat lower, "Is all well in the kingdom? Or can you say?" Again, higher in pitch, the voice sustained, "I'll have you know I was talking to the walrus this morning. He said the time has come," lower now, "to speak of many things, of shoes and ships and sealing wax, and cabbages and kings."

I would smile and think how funny he was, and then his voice would fall very low and he'd turn towards the adults if there were any around, snapping his fingers and moving in the same manner as his voice sounded, orchestrating the two. When he was like that, in one of what everybody called his *funny moods*, I'd watch him, spellbound, the way a four-year-old would watch a clown in the circus, or a magician on the stage.

But I remember other times too, such as one November morning when the doctor stood by the pot-bellied stove in the middle of the store, talking to some men about the new sheriff who had just been elected. Dr. Hannah had begun to walk back and forth as he talked, and when he said something important he'd snap the thumb and middle

finger on both of his hands to add emphasis, and then gracefully turn and look towards the ceiling, as if he might float upward at any time.

As he walked back and forth like that, Rufus, the young black clerk my father had hired five or six months earlier, had gotten behind him with a feather from his duster and had begun to tickle him on the back of his neck. Dr. Hannah didn't seem to notice it at first, but then he began to shake his head each time the feather touched him. Finally, he turned around. He moved like a dancer, searching for whatever it was that was causing his irritation. But Rufus had quickly hidden the feather, and he wore the most serious expression he could muster. Dr. Hannah slowly turned back around. "Now where was I?" he said. Someone told him, and he snapped his fingers and started in again. Then Rufus got the feather back out.

A few of the men in the group smiled secretly at Rufus, and I managed to smile a little too, at first. But there was something that wasn't right about their smiles, and as Rufus started again with the feather, I began to frown. I wasn't sure why, but I felt angry at the way the men looked, and finally I went outside to the porch and sat down on a bench so I wouldn't have to watch any more.

When Dr. Hannah wasn't in the store or in his office he was usually out on call. If we saw him driving down the road, we knew enough to give him a little extra room. Of course, there wasn't much traffic back then on those dirt roads, so he wasn't in danger like he would be now, and everybody knew about his early morning departures. There was a steep bank directly across from his house, where the church is now, and he'd jump into his old brown Model T Ford and slam it into reverse, rev the engine, shoot across the road going ninety to nothing, and—three times out of four—crash into the bank. That seemed to be his way of finding out when it was time to go forward. He'd knock it into low gear as he bounced up in his seat, then give it the gas.

Since everybody knew how he left his house in the morning and kept an eye out, it wasn't so bad, but he could be dangerous in the curves. He'd lean in the direction he was turning the wheel, as if it took his

whole body to steer, and the sharper the curve, the more the lean. Sometimes his head would hang halfway out the window, and he'd have a look on his face like he'd been working on a difficult case, and lost. Whenever he'd go by we'd laugh, and somebody would say that he was in one of *his funny moods*.

In the winter it was worse. The dirt roads would often be almost impossible to drive. He'd get stuck in the mud or slide back and forth across the road as he drove. Sometimes the houses he had to travel to were so far from the road he would have to trudge through half a mile of woods, or wade the swamps along the Tannahpush or Black Fork rivers. He told the story once of going way back into the swamp to a shack where a black family lived. He said that when he walked into the yard several little black children began crying and running from him, and when the mother came out she said, "That's all right. They ain't never seen no white folks before." He said he'd had to set a broken leg for one of the children and that the child had screamed with fright and had scratched wildly at him the whole time.

He came into the store almost every day, so when there was a day or two, or three, that he didn't make it, and when Mrs. Hannah came instead, we'd all ask about him. Mrs. Hannah would simply say, "The doctor isn't feeling well today," and that was all. She referred to him as "the doctor," never by his name. And it was always that he wasn't "feeling well." We'd all nod and say how sorry we were that he was under the weather. I used to think it was strange that he was under the weather so much. It seemed to me that a doctor shouldn't let himself get sick.

Then one summer afternoon, after I'd gotten big enough to be trusted with small chores and errands—I was about eleven—my mother sent me over to the Hannah's to pick up some medicine. Her feet had been swelling and the doctor had something for her, she said.

It was a hot afternoon and the sweet, sick smell of Mrs. Hannah's flower garden hung thick in the humid air. The bees buzzed through the tall grass in the yard and around the marigolds, zinnias, and dahlias near the walk. The house hadn't seen a coat of paint in years and the wood

around the windows was just beginning to rot. Bushes and creeping vines had made a real effort to cover the clapboard house, as though its lack of paint had made it naked. I walked up to the end of the porch and stared through his office window, the old glass full of imperfections, but the doctor wasn't in. Then I made my way down the porch and knocked on the front door. There was no answer. After waiting for a minute, I decided I'd try the back door.

When I came around the corner to the back of the house I didn't see the doctor, only a long porch that ran the width of the building. There were a few buckets full of water sitting on the edge of the porch, one with a gourd dipper. Beside the buckets sat a garbage can filled with empty medicine bottles, and its smell, when it hit me, reminded me of the inside of his office. Halfway down the porch there was a neatly stacked pile of firewood left over from winter. It was piled high and I couldn't see what was at the far end of the porch, so after a little hesitation, I slowly walked toward the woodpile, trying to see over it. I was startled when I spotted the doctor. He stood just beyond the woodpile, without seeing me, his face with that same expression, as if he'd been working on a difficult case. All his features were tightened and his arm was extended, his hand balled into a fist. In his other hand he held a syringe, its clear glass reflecting the white heat from the sun.

Instead of leaving him alone, as something inside me told me I should, I called out. He turned abruptly toward me, his expression shocked, angry, seeming to emanate from another man.

"Get away from here! What do you think you're doing?" he yelled. Then he stepped off the porch. "Don't ever come sneaking around here again. If . . ."

That was all I heard. I ran past where the church is now, then even faster down across the railroad tracks, and I didn't stop until I reached the creek where it ran under the trestle. I spent the afternoon there with my feet stuck in the water, down into the sand where the mussels burrowed deeper and stirred the silt into dirty clouds with their shells. I watched, wishing I could be like them instead of wondering how I could suddenly feel the way I did about Dr. Hannah. At that moment I hated him.

Afterward, whenever he came into the store, I'd either disappear into the back room where the extra stock was kept or slip outside, anything to keep from being around him. When I saw him driving down the road on those days when he'd be leaning into the curves, I wouldn't smile, or wave, and his voice didn't sound much like music anymore.

Over the next few years he saw fewer and fewer patients. He began to send them to the doctors in Demarville. He said he was retiring. Mrs. Hannah would come into the store by herself, saying even more often, "The doctor isn't feeling well."

I stopped playing in my father's store, and began working in it instead. I pumped gas, boxed groceries, and waited on customers. Rufus worked the mornings; I worked the afternoons. On Saturdays we both stayed until late, barely able to move through the throng of blacks who came there to socialize.

Then one Saturday night about ten o'clock—a little past the time I usually went home—a black girl named Johnnie Mae came bursting into the store. She ran to Rufus who was filling a jug with kerosene and said, in a high-pitched, frightened voice, that Rufus' mother had sent her to tell him that his brother T.J. had been cut, and that Rufus had to fetch Dr. Hannah and not come home without him.

"Help me get the doctor," Rufus said. "I know if I'm by myself, Dr. Hannah won't come."

I didn't want to go but finally said all right, and we walked down to the doctor's house and Rufus beat on the door while we both called from the porch. There was no answer for a long time. Then Mrs. Hannah finally opened the door. "The doctor's sick," she said. "Too sick to come out." She stood blocking the doorway, but she was so small that Rufus slipped past her and I followed into the dark house.

Rufus made his way to the bedroom door and stood there, saying again and again how sorry he was to be coming in and disturbing them. "But my brother's been cut," he said, "and Mama said she didn't want nobody but Dr. Hannah."

Mrs. Hannah pushed past Rufus and went into the bedroom while I stood in the dimly lit living room and watched through the door. Dr. Hannah sat on the side of his bed, half dressed, about to put on a shirt.

He was shaking and moving slowly. He kept mumbling, "I'll go, but wait. Wait, let me. . ." But Rufus wouldn't wait, and Dr. Hannah pulled on a long coat and walked unsteadily out of the bedroom, carrying his bag.

We got him to Rufus' place, Rufus doing the driving. The doctor had tried to talk to me in a weak voice on the way, asking how I'd been, how my family was. The incident behind his house had happened years before, but I could not forget it. I either mumbled answers or wouldn't reply at all, and I wouldn't look at him.

"I'll wait in the car," I said when we came to a stop, but the pleading look on Rufus' face made me finally go inside.

We got Dr. Hannah into the crowded room where Rufus' brother lay on the bed. Towels were stretched across him, soaking up the blood, and he moaned softly. The doctor began to clean T. J. up, but his hands shook terribly and sweat popped out on his suddenly colorless face. "I've got to step outside a minute," he said. "I'm feeling ill." Without looking towards any of us, or waiting for any response, he picked up his bag and left the room with one of the kerosene lamps. I couldn't believe what he was doing. I wondered if he would go just to the back porch or all the way to the outhouse where he knew no one would see him.

After some time he walked back into the room with his bag in one hand and the lamp held up near his face. In its light I could see his eyes clearly, and I'm sure that he must have seen mine, seen the anger and the disappointment in them, because he turned quickly away from my gaze and his expression looked somehow like the one that T. J. wore.

He began to work again. His hands moved slowly and skillfully as he pulled each stitch tight. "Just hold still. Not much longer now, son," he said, his voice rising. I realized I was suddenly watching the same man who had paced back and forth in the store, snapping his fingers and speaking in his rhythmical voice, yet I made myself turn away, and just as I did so, I saw Hannah glance at me and frown.

He finished and told T. J. to come in when the cuts were healed and he'd remove the stitches. A few weeks later, he did, and there was hardly a scar.



He soon stopped coming out altogether. Then maybe two years passed. People said he was in bad health and that he spent most of his time in a wheelchair, one of those heavy wooden ones with the high back and the wooden spokes and rims. Mrs. Hannah came into the store, always alone. People still asked about the doctor. They were concerned, they said, and wanted Mrs. Hannah to know that he was thought about.

It still made me wince sometimes when I walked past his house on my way home, remembering the look on his face that long ago day, the anger in his voice.

And then, on an afternoon in late January, when I had just made it past the old house and was hurrying toward home with a bag of groceries for my mother, the sound of Mrs. Hannah's voice came from behind me. "Conrad!" she shouted. "Conrad! Come here, quick. I need you." I turned toward her and watched as she beckoned me with a hurried motion of her arm.

I hadn't been inside the house since the night with Rufus; I had only glanced in now and then through the cloudy windowpanes as I passed, so when I entered the dark living room, I felt as though I were in a place that was somehow forbidden, not to be violated.

My eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. The room looked the same as it had years before—there was a sideboard, a few large chairs, a table. Then Mrs. Hannah shouted something, and I looked toward where she stood at the fireplace. Dr. Hannah lay there, sprawled across the hearth, part of his arm and shoulder in the coals of the fire, his wheelchair overturned beside him.

"He tried to get out of it," Mrs. Hannah said in a bewildered voice.

His face, when I got to him, showed pain and utter helplessness. His eyes were wide, dilated. He was heavier than he'd been when I'd last seen him, but as I reached down to lift him away from the coals, I never considered not being able to.

He felt light as I slowly swung him around. I got a tight grip, then walked carefully with him in my arms toward the bedroom. Mrs. Hannah followed me.

The bedroom door stood only slightly ajar. I kicked it open and turned sideways to move him through the threshold. His foot caught on the doorknob and he began to weigh heavier.

Then his body slowly started to slip out of my hold, and I staggered to the bed and laid him across the yellowing white spread. He sunk deep into the mattress and lay silent, looking broken down.

Mrs. Hannah said then that she was going to get something for his burns and walked quickly out of the bedroom.

He lay quiet and motionless, his eyes shut. I sat beside him on the bed and looked at him, at his frailness, his helplessness. I wanted to do something for him but didn't know what. Finally he stirred and opened his eyes, and after a moment when he seemed to be studying my features, he lifted his hand toward me, called me by name, and gently touched the side of my face. I understood then that he had forgiven me.