

Handbook for Boys

When I was ten he was twenty years older, but we saw the world in the same simplistic way. He was a chunky man, all round and soft with a giant's feet. When he grinned his face twisted into contortions, showing big yellow crooked teeth, and I laughed with delight at his antics. When his big fat face turned sad, full lips pouting, I wanted to reach out and hug him and make him know that I cared. His name was Dee, and he was my cousin.

He lived with his family down on the delta of the rivers that flowed into Mobile Bay in the wilderness of south Alabama. The three two-story frame houses of the family compound had wrap-around screened porches and several out-buildings for boats and other no-longer-used vehicles. The whole place was covered with huge broad-limbed live oaks, spooky looking, but great for climbing. Dee's mama and daddy, Aunt Lucille and Uncle Harry, lived in the middle house that was larger than the other two, where Cousin Sybil and her husband, John, and Cousin Ruth and her husband, Kendall lived.

In the summertime, Dee and I sat on the screened porch of his parents' home and listened to the thousands of frogs and insects chirping in the woods. They made a wall of noise, and yet it was eerily quiet. Now and then the call of a lone bird drifted in from somewhere across the water, and Dee would shift his large, off-centered head sideways, scrunch his face, and say "Whip-er-will," and I'd say, "Whippoorwill," and he'd nod and say, "Whip-er-will, ol' Mockin'bird." At last light, we'd sit on the end of the pier with our poles and drop hooks draped with worms or crickets into the dark water alive with fish. By full darkness we had a mess of perch that the colored boy Cater helped us clean. When Dee and I grabbed the fish, they flopped out of our grasp. Cater clamped their wiggly, slimey bodies down on the boards next to the outdoor sink and held them steady and cut around the gills and down the side. He took the backside of a spoon between thumb and forefinger and raked against the sides to scrap away the scales. Aunt Lucille floured and fried the fish, fixed French-fried potatoes and cole slaw. Sometimes she made hush-

puppies as big around as my fists. We'd sit on the back stoop where Cater helped with the feast, eating off of yesterday's *Mobile Register*. None of the grown-ups ever ate fish, although they went fishing out in the river, the bay, or the Gulf of Mexico every week or so. Sometimes they'd dig up oysters and bring them back in croaker sacks, and Cater would pry them open with his knife. I slurped them down without sauce, but Dee like his swimming in catsup. He'd get red stuff around his mouth and squirt a half-eaten oyster through his teeth and Cater would frown and shake his head and I would think if he kept doing it I was going to get sick.

Once I asked why we couldn't eat with the grown-ups in the dining room the way Dee and I did at dinner on Sundays. Dee scrunched his face into a heavy frown and said, "Cater can't eat in there with us." And I said, "Oh," disappointed and unsure. Later, after he'd thought about it for a while, Dee said, "Whites don't eat with coloreds." When I got back home, I asked Mama about it and she said, "Well, that's true in the South. In the North, however, people don't discriminate." When I asked what "discriminate" was, she said, "Up there, folks just look at one another as folks," and I said that sounded like a good way to be. She smiled and kissed my cheek and said I was thinking right to think that way, but don't say it out loud too often, or I'd get into trouble. She always had a sweet way of explaining things.

The next summer Dee and I and Cater, who was twelve, built a canoe out of an old log from a tree that had blown down in a bad storm the past winter. "Ol' black bear lived in that tree," Cater said as we began chopping.

"Really?" I asked. The tree was located less than a half-mile up the red clay road from Aunt Lucille and Uncle Harry's place. I had never heard them talking about bears in these woods.

"There's bears all around," Dee agreed.

"Sure is," Cater said.

We cut through the sycamore log at two places fourteen feet apart. Dee, who was strong as a young ox, lifted one end and heaved it to his shoulder. It took me and Cater to pick up the other end and balance it.

Then the three of us toted it to a pair of sawhorses we had fixed in front of an out-building.

Then we started hewing out the inside, just like it showed in my *Handbook for Boys* I got as a Boy Scout. "This is the way the Indians did it," I explained to Dee, who couldn't read.

"I heard Mr. Harry say you was the runt of the family," Cater said one hot afternoon while we were working. I glanced toward Dee, who was looking to see my reaction. "Well," I said, "I am the littlest one here," and both Cater and Dee chuckled and nodded. I'd never thought of myself as a "runt," although I was shorter than most. I figured, somewhere along the line, I'd have to prove just how big I was.

Cater was big for his age but not half as big as Dee.

We worked in the shade of the live oaks. From the long gracefully bowed limbs Spanish moss hung like decorations from long ago. When a breeze blew every afternoon before twilight, when the tides began to change in the Gulf to the south, the moss swayed gently. The loose gray strands rubbed together in the day's last breath, whispering undertones and warnings of night.

Cater rolled his eyes and gazed up through the trees into the gray sky. "Ol' ghosts talkin'," he said.

"Ain't no ghosts," Dee said. "Sybil and Ruth say they ain't no ghosts. John jokes. Kendall gonna spank him."

"There are no ghosts," I reassured him, but I looked around through the long shadows.

"Y'all don't know nothing," Cater said. "I been in ol' Nazareth Church when the ghosts of the dead come calling. They sing 'Amazing Grace' just like a long time ago. No music, no nothing, jus' voices."

"Oh, bullshit," I said.

"Don't cuss, Thomas Morgan," Dee said.

"I'm sorry," I said. I had promised his mother I would never curse in front of him. She said she didn't want him learning bad habits. If he didn't hear me say it, she said, he would never say such things. "Dee's pure of mind," she said.

"You cuss, and I'll tell Mama."

"I won't," I promised.

"I tell you true," Cater said, his eyes big as half-dollars. "I was sittin' with Mama when a host of ghosts come down out of the heavens and sang the spiritual song."

"How do you know that?" Dee asked.

"I was sittin' right there on the pew," he said. "It made me want to hide my head in Mama's apron. I was so scared. Mama patted my knee and said for me to act like a big boy and not be scared, that it wasn't nothing but the heavenly hosts come callin'." Cater shook his head. "I didn't hide, but I was scared slap down to my bones. I tell you that."

We kept to our work, but now and then we looked around to see if we saw something unusual. After the clouds swept over and the oaks whispered louder, we gave up and went to the porch, where Aunt Lucille said we could have a little piece of peach cobbler after supper.

She dug out a portion and gave it to Mae, Cater's mother, who worked as a maid for the households. She moved from house to house during the week, cleaning and washing and ironing, always humming some song, always keeping a look-out for us, always there, within reach.

At night I woke in the darkness of the room where Dee and I slept, and I gazed through the shadows outside the window and wondered.

It took us three weeks to carve out the inside of the log. Then Uncle Harry said we needed to waterproof it with a solution he found in one of the out-buildings. We brushed it on like paint and let it sit for twenty-four hours "to cure," as Uncle Harry had advised.

That night we sat out on the back stoop and ate our fish with greasy hands. Sitting in a triangle in straight-back chairs at the small square table covered with newspapers, we stared out toward the water between bites.

"We gonna float down the river and find us a bed of oysters, dig 'em up and sell 'em to Leek Smalley at his store," Cater said. "Make us a dollar or two and have some good cats besides."

"That's a great idea," I said.

Dee grinned and nodded. He showed his big crooked teeth.

Cousin Ruth's husband, Kendall, had found two old canoe paddles. We washed off the dust that had gathered over years of storage. Kendall remembered how he and Uncle Harry had built a canoe long before any

of us were born. They had paddled it up into bear country and found the remains of an old Indian camp from a time when the Creeks and Choctaw lived in this wilderness. "There were some small mounds where the Indians buried warriors who died in battle," Kendall said. "There are worlds of Indian artifacts just laying on the ground up there."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"It's told in Indian legend," he said.

"Besides, we were there," Kendall said.

I studied on that idea, which Dee said was "true as the Bible," but it still made me wonder. Cater said there were some Indians still living up in the swamp to the north. "It's desolate country up there," he said with an air of knowledge.

"I'd like to see an Indian," I said. Once, at a museum along U.S. 90 near Destin, Florida, when Daddy and Mama took us on vacation. I saw an Indian. He was a "Redskin Renegade," according to the sign. He wore artificial leather pants and a shirt with frayed tassels along the sleeves and down the outer sides of the pants. He looked sad and undernourished, on display with two lazy alligators that lay in the shade near a mud puddle. All three looked like they needed a good supper.

"I wouldn't," Dee said. His eyes were as large as Cater's. "I don't want to see a Indian or a ghost," he said.

"We might could learn something from an Indian," I said.

"Like how to build a dugout canoe?" Cater asked.

"We know how to do that," Dee said.

"Maybe he'd teach us a better way to do it," I offered. "I doubt it," Cater said. He motioned. "We got the book, *Handbook for Boys*, and I'd say that's all we need."

After we finished eating and wiped off our faces, we sat on the front steps while Uncle Harry and Kendall and John rocked behind the screen. Aunt Lucille came to the front door and said, "You boys don't stay out and get eaten up by the mosquitoes."

"Can we catch lightning bugs?" Dee asked.

"Go ask your mama, Cater, if she'll give y'all a fruit jar."

Cater scampered off to the back of the house to find his mother in the kitchen.

"What kind of Indians live around here?" I asked.

Aunt Lucille chuckled before she ducked back into the house.

"Aren't many Indians anymore," Uncle Harry said. "Used to be a bunch of Creeks up the river a piece."

"They were a bad bunch," John said. "They killed every last soul at Fort Mims," he added. He said it like it happened week before last.

"Fort Mims?" I asked.

"Where's Fort Mims?" Dee asked, inching a little closer to me.

"Up the river a few miles."

"Could we paddle up there?" I asked.

"I don't think I'd go that far, if I was y'all," Uncle Harry said. "It's probably fifteen, twenty miles, maybe farther."

"We went one time years ago," Kendall said.

"When you had the canoe?" I asked, remembering his tale.

He nodded. "It was beyond the remains of the old Indian village.

"Where artifacts are laying around on the ground?" I asked.

"Hush, Thomas," Dee said. "Let Daddy tell about Fort Mims.

"It's a very dark place, surrounded by thorny bushes and man-traps still set to this day. And it was nearly two hundred years ago that those poor people were trapped inside that fort and massacred by the mad Indians. Killed five hundred and some odd, all told," Kendall said, his voice coloring the history with mystery.

Cater returned with the jar, saying, "Let's catch us some lightning bugs," but I said, "I want to hear about Fort Mims and the massacre."

Dee rose and followed Cater. Ten feet away, Dee slapped his hands together and announced, "I got one."

I stayed seated on the steps. "How'd the Indians kill so many?" I inquired.

"The settlers were sleeping in the middle of the day. It was hot, like these days, and there were thousands of mosquitoes, big ones like out tonight, and many of the little children had come down with the fever," Kendall explained. "Their parents were tending to 'em."

"And some damn fool had let sand blow up against the gate where it wouldn't close," put in John. "They didn't have the sense or the energy to sweep the sand aside."

"So when the Indians came, they walked right in and started killing, and nobody could get away. They had 'em hemmed up in there," Kendall said authoritatively. "The Indians were mad as hornets because white soldiers had killed a half-dozen peaceful Muskogee Creeks who'd been on a trading mission down to Pensacola. There'd been a few skirmishes here and there, up Burnt Corn Creek, down this way. By the time they got to Fort Mims, they swarmed in there like a bunch of banshees and cornered men, women, and children, taking 'em by surprise, and before sundown they had killed everything white inside the log walls.

"It was the news of that tragedy, carried up to Tennessee by horseback, that angered old Andy Jackson so much he took it on himself to raise an army of volunteers and march south into Alabama and kill every Indian he could find. That's what happened up at Horseshoe Bend on the Tallapoosa River. Old Hickory they called Jackson. He slaughtered every redskin that wouldn't join up with him."

"And those who joined him he later made slaves of and sent 'em packing off to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears," Uncle Harry added. "That's how Alabama got free of renegade Indians. Or most of 'em."

"Except for those who got away and live up the river a piece," I said. I was mesmerized, taking in every word, every fact, every message. Four hours later I awakened in our dark room. I lay in the bed across from Dee, listening to his heavy snoring, gazing across the mound of his rising and falling belly, wondering whether the ghosts of all those people who were killed at Fort Mims were still wandering around in the wilderness up there just a few miles north of us.

The next morning, when we prepared to launch our dugout, I asked Dee and Cater if they wouldn't rather paddle north into the old Indian territory.

They looked at each other. They had not given it a thought. The idea all along was that we were making the dugout to go fishing, and everybody knew the best fishing was to the south. But I had been thrilled and captivated by the words of the men last night as they talked about the Fort Mims massacre, the Indian wars, and General Andrew Jackson. Within moments, using the powers of persuasion I had learned from my father, a traveling salesman, I convinced both Dee and Cater

that we should paddle north and take a look at the historical sites. "It's kind of like Lewis and Clark," I said.

They stared at me like I was crazy. They had not the first idea who Lewis and Clark were. And when I said, "If they hadn't taken off across the country to find the Northwest Passage, we wouldn't know where the Pacific Ocean was to this day," they just shook their heads.

We looked over our work one last time, savoring that moment before we discovered whether it would work or not. After a slight hesitation, we slid the dugout into the dark river water. We stood back and watched anxiously as it dipped once then came up, floating. It rocked to the side, took in some water, then rolled back upright.

Cater and I steadied the boat for Dee, who climbed in awkwardly and was almost thrown over the opposite side. He grabbed the post across the middle and held himself balanced as he bent his knees and lowered himself to a sitting position. I handed over a small pail he used to dip out the water from the flat bottom.

Cater lowered himself from the pier into the front, settling on his knees, sitting back on his heels, and I did likewise in the rear, where I could paddle and guide, trying to make myself into an Indian.

Cater and I lowered our paddles into the water and started out against the current, the bow pointing northward. I maneuvered into the middle of the hundred-foot-wide water, out of the reach of the low-hanging branches of the thick brush.

Within a mile, after an hour of steady paddling, the river narrowed and the banks became more visible with large trees taking the place of the thick undergrowth. Several camp houses dotted the shoreline, set back into shadowy coves. We passed a simple plywood square with a three-by-six porch with a deer's carcass stretched between a triangle of timbers. A stench drifted to us, and Dee remarked, "Don't go no closer," and scrunched up his face.

"I wonder why..." Cater started, gazing toward the place.

I wondered who and why, and where the people were. I shivered, then lowered my arms and paddled harder and deeper, pushing on up the river.

By mid-morning, as the sun beat down, we slowed to a crawl. We were drenched with sweat. Even Dee, who paddled occasionally, when one of us grew tired, was sweating. He knotted a handkerchief at each corner and dipped it into the water and capped it on his head to cool his scalp.

"I don't know whether we ought to keep going," Cater said, looking around at the dense woods and the bright blue sky.

But I kept pushing onward.

Dee looked from shore to shore, and in a short while pointed northwest and said, "What's that?"

The bank on the far side of a long bend was cut high and white. Above the cliff were live oaks similar to the ones at the family compound. Beyond the first growth of trees was another embankment that rose about twenty feet without trees.

"Looks interesting," I said, aiming.

"I don't know," Dee said.

"Looks kind-a spooky to me," Cater said.

"Nothing but an old Indian mound," I said. "Just like what John and Kendall were talking about last night. I bet there are worlds of Indian artifacts up there, just laying on the ground."

I guided us toward the high bank. The dugout stayed on course, exactly the way I maneuvered the paddle at the stern, the front pointing toward a sliver of white sand that shone brightly in the noonday sun.

As Cater prepared to jump into the shallows and pull us onto land, Dee said, "There ain't no Indian ghosts."

As Cater tugged the flat-bottom log toward the sand, Dee scooped up our lunch and thermos before stepping out. Cater reached to grab his meaty arm.

"I'm awright," Dee said, jerking away, avoiding assistance, stumbling and falling as if in slow motion, like Mo in *The Three Stooges*, reaching out with hands clawing and grasping at air.

Our lunch tumbled from his grip as his wide back splashed into the water.

"He can't swim," I uttered.

I shoved my paddle onto the bottom of the boat, stood and jumped into the river after him.

I immediately sank, the water just off the sandbar dropping to a depth over my head. I slapped out, my open palms pushing against the water, lifting myself up with the thought of grabbing Dee and pulling him to safety. But when I grabbed for him, he fought against me. His arms and shoulders were strong. They shoved against me, but I didn't give up. I swung around through the water and came up on his opposite side to surprise him and throw my arm over his shoulder. I would cup him under the chin just like the illustration in the *Handbook for Boys*. I would lift his head up out of the water and drag him to safety, throw his limp body onto the sandbar and straddle his body and push into his lungs and pull up on his butterflyed elbows like the drawing of the two boys.

But when I came up on his left side he was so surprised, he swung around and caught me on the jaw, knocking me back into the deep water.

As I went down, falling back, Cater shouted, "Snake!"

I heard his warning as my head ducked beneath the water. Somewhere nearby I heard splashing. My mind held a conglomerate of ideas: Dee's drowning, Cater's being bitten by a snake, I'm...

My feet slid against an embankment of sand on the bottom of the river. The sand moved with me, giving beneath my feet, rolling, like a wave down on Dauphin Island, rolling and sliding away from me, carrying me down with it, like an undertow.

I fought. I slapped my hands against the current. I kicked. I held my lips clinched, daring not to gasp for breath, praying against any thought of drowning.

Suddenly my chest gripped hard and tight, wrenching my insides, and I was forced to open my mouth and gulp. Water poured down my throat, strangling, filling my throat and my chest, heavy, pushing against me with the weight of a heavy anvil.

Just as I thought my head was about to clear the water's edge, something big and bulky surrounded my body and jerked me free of the shifting sand.

My shoulders came up first, then my head was thrown back. I gasped and choked and coughed and spat up a knot of water lodged in my throat.

Dee threw me onto the sandbar, my shoulders hitting against the hot sand, and he lifted my arms and pushed his weight against my shoulder blades. Another blockage in my chest clamped my throat tight, like someone had their fingers wrapped around my windpipe. Dee grunted as he came down onto my back again, and again the constriction in my chest released, and water flowed from my mouth involuntarily as Dee raised my elbows and pulled them up into the air again.

"God!" I exclaimed after the water rushed from my throat. "God!" I said again.

"Dee saved your life," Cater said as he dropped to his knees next to my face. From his hand hung a limp six-foot water moccasin, his black head split down the middle.

Later, while all three of us sat naked in the sunlight with our clothes drying nearby, Cater said, "I don't know how he did it. I swear I don't." His face glistened like a wet black rock. "When you came out of the boat, that snake headed for you with his head up out of the water and his tail swishing from side to side. Dee moved so fast, he caught the snake by its tail and popped him in the air like a whip or something. That ol' snake's head burst wide open. Next thing I knew, Dee had a-hold of you and was pulling you up out of the deep. You'd done slipped into that current over yonder and it was pulling you out like it had a drag-line around your ankle. But ol' Dee wouldn't let go, he had you in his hands and dragged you up onto land, you fightin' him every inch."

"But..." I started. I wanted to tell them how it was I who was going to save Dee. It was I, the Scout who was on his way toward becoming an Eagle who planned to be the hero. Instead, I hushed. After a while, I gazed toward the high bank that held the promise of Indian mounds and artifacts. For an instant in the afternoon haze of the bright sun I thought I saw a figure standing there, tall and superior, lording over this land from which he had once been chased. But when I wiped my eyes and looked again, I saw nothing there.

Cater had pulled our boat onto the sand. Like our clothes, it had dried. The paddles lay on each side.

We lay on the sand in the heat, resting, our bodies drying like our clothes and our boat.

Our lunch was lost, along with the thermos. We cupped river water in our hands and sipped. It soothed our throats but made our stomachs growl with hunger.

Cater stared at the high embankment. "You don't want to see some ol' Indian mounds, do you?" he asked.

"Naw," I said. "Not today."

As we climbed into the dugout, Dee said, "I can taste me some of Mama's peach cobbler."

"And a big ol' spoon of ice cream on top," Cater said.

"And a giant glass of iced tea," I said as I lowered my paddle into the water and we started moving into the middle of the river where we would catch the strong downstream current to take us home.

Next summer I took up other activities: Little League baseball and going to Scout camp, where I learned arts and crafts but was never very good at any. I did earn an Eagle badge, which made me wonder about the accomplishment. After high school I went off to college. When I returned home on holiday vacations Mama would tell me about visiting Aunt Lucille and Uncle Harry and Dee. Dee always asked about me, she said, and she would tell him about my studies, and he would grin and nod and say he would like to see me.

I was out west in graduate school one August when Mama called and reported, "Dee died last night." I felt a little catch in the back of my throat as I uttered, "Oh no." I couldn't leave to come home for the funeral. I was busy preparing some paper for my fall classes. I waited until Christmas, when I returned to our house in Tuscaloosa to sit with Mama and talk about family. One morning we rose early and I drove south to visit Aunt Lucille. Uncle Harry had died several years before and I hadn't made it home for his funeral either. Cousin Ruth and Kendall had moved away, leaving their place empty. He had gotten a high-paying job

ERRATA

ALR regrets the omission of the following conclusion from Wayne Greenhaw's "Handbook for Boys":

with NASA over in Mississippi. Cousin Sybil still lived next door. She came over every morning and cared for her mother. Her husband, John, still worked in town, leaving every morning and returning just before twilight. When he arrived, we all sat on the porch. To the slow tune of Aunt Lucille's rocking chair moving against the old boards, they talked. Sybil told how Mae and Cater had moved away years ago. They'd heard Mae died of cancer some time back. Cater, she said, had gone up north and had never been heard from since. When she said the words I hurt a little, ached inside with a longing for that afternoon when we lay naked on the sandbar and listened to the river roll by, breathing deep the clean fresh air.

In the last light, Aunt Lucille said, "I wish you could of seen Dee. He was right handsome laying on the white silk in the coffin. He looked so peaceful. Like he was asleep. You know, he found the Lord in his last days. He found the Lord and gave his soul to Jesus Christ."

For a moment I started to protest. *Dee couldn't reason. He knew little or nothing about history. He had no idea how to contemplate any religion, much less Christianity.*

Cousin Sybil looked toward me and nodded almost imperceptibly. Then she reached over and patted her mother on the knee. "He's in heaven, Mama."

After Aunt Lucille rocked forward and back again, a whippoorwill called from somewhere across the water. An instant later, a mockingbird answered. I hugged my arms close to my body, feeling yesterday's chill bumps as the moss began to whisper.

