

Don Simonton

Explorers

We set out early that summer day in 1966, not because we were early risers, but because on the farm everybody got up early. Pickupdaddy rose before dawn to start a fire (even in summer), Pickupmama to start a skillet of biscuit. We would dress in front of that fire, even though we knew the morning chill would soon give way to the painful heat of a southern sun. Once dressed, we went out to the shelf on the back porch where were kept a bucket of water, a dip cup, and a tin bowl to wash up. Then, we had our biscuit, grabbed the lunch fixed for us — another biscuit with meat clamped inside — and headed out.

“Y’all be careful, that quicksand in that creek will swallow you whole,” Pickupdaddy warned us in his gruff, unsympathetic voice. “And don’t go no farther that the bridge.” When we were past him and he couldn’t see our faces, we smirked at one another.

We denizens of the fields headed down the wide back steps full of knotholes, around the back of the carhouse, across the patch where the jenny eyed us with suspicion (she must have known that soon she would again be hitched to a plow and Chess would shout “gee!” and “haw!” to guide that plow mule across the patch where peanuts and melons would grow, one for the blackbird one for the crow one for the nigger to chop and grow), grabbing apples off the June apple tree, out through the fence gap in the corner where the wire had pulled a little loose (so skinny we could shimmy through anything). Jimbo carried that stick worn smooth by water he had picked up the last time we were at the creek, Hank had the pocket knife he clicked open and closed, and Jack his BB gun. I, youngest and smaller and in awe of older brother and cousins who claimed to, seemed to, know everything, carried our meal bucket.

We headed across Mr. Priester’s field, sometimes planted in cotton (we spent one afternoon once picking it until our hands were bloody and the old gyp only paid us two dollars), now in bahiagrass for his old cattle which always seemed to be skanky with the scours, towards the distant row of trees which marked the meanderings of the branch, that dry bed that had eaten a deep, narrow path through the fields, its row of lining trees a

telltale. It made its way across that back pasture down to where it met Sandy Creek (you shouldn't say "it flowed into," since it was more often dry than wet), the big creek that divided the western high-tone part of the county from the country folk and farmers to the east. We slid down its bank to the cool dark tunnel the overhanging trees made, like a secret highway leading beneath the few houses and shacks in that little crossroads community, under sagging creosote bridges and off to a mysterious world down the creek and across the countryside, as far away from adults and chores as pirates or spacemen, away from the sprawling old farmhouse and the forest of outbuildings of my grandfather's homeplace. We went out, we claimed, in search of a swimming hole.

The branch cut a world of its own — frogs, minnows, sometimes a snake, or the sharp little three-toed tracks of a coon in the sand, or the blunt two of deer. Puddles survived the dry summer heat behind root systems under the banks. We would pass evidence of human habitation up above, betrayed by the old Double Cola bottles and chicory coffee cans thrown down the banks overgrown with briars, the detritus of the vices of folks whose public lives were all we knew of. The branch had no source of water other than rain; in rainy season it was full and flowing, but in dry parts of the year, only pockets survived. We would sometimes follow a set of tracks until they disappeared up the bank or into the briars, then resume our trek down towards heavier water. Other times, we'd hear echoes of the world we were escaping — distant voices, the roar of a pickup on the gravel, people living out their lives, unaware of our mission below. As we came to the main creek, we passed the little house where the two old black ladies, Miz Kittering and Miz Letty (*Why do they live alone like that? Where are their men?*) Which sat on a shelf right at the water, and just past them and up on the bank proper the small house that Chess built on the place of Mr. Carter, the man he worked for cowboying, marked by evidence of his one bad habit, the discarded Four Roses bottles, just this side of the new concrete bridge and the remains of the old iron one now rusting away. He and the other black folk thereabouts, what was left of the slave families that had stayed behind after the War, had lived there longer than anybody. We were looking around for what we could disturb. We believed we were Davy Crocketts; we sought secret places undisturbed by adults in the upper world. We went exploring.

Sandy Creek had permanent water. In summer, it was a series of thin rivulets almost buried between the mounds of sand it was named after. Its base was gravel, from pea size up to large chunks of broken rock. We sought out the legendary quicksand, jumping to mire ourselves in the semi-liquid mixtures of soft sand, fine gravel, water. When we'd sunk deep enough, we'd holler, and pull one another out. Sometimes we'd find an Indian ball, big as a softball, made of gravel and inside wet clay. They used them, we were told, to make paints. When a rainstorm moved through upstream, it would turn into a proper torrent, strong enough to knock you off your feet. We always hoped to be lucky that such a storm would move through while we were there and that we would be drowned, or at least one of us, and it would be a tragedy. Or at least gouge out a good swimmin hole, one deep enough and broad enough that we could pretend we were like the city kids with their cement pools. Sometimes, it did. Not that summer. Game was more evident here — dog tracks we knew must be wolves, the scurry holes of the large flat turtles which were good eating (though in recent years they had been scarcer), larger, more plentiful deer tracks, all sizes from fawns up, even where a small herd must have come down to drink, and possum, birds, all kinds of creatures. Some tracks we had no earthly idea what it was. One said, *A bear. They ain't no bear here no more stupid*, said another. We shared with the varmints, below and beneath the human world, these secret highways. We hoped for, always expected to find, something worth exploring for.

That June day, we went farther down the Creek than ever before, than we were supposed to. We had already passed the legendary and mysterious community of Chinkypin, where a whole community of black folk lived where no road reached, where now only fallen down shacks and the remains of a massive plantation house, which been last owned by a black lady, was reputed to remain covered by kudzu and poison ivy. *Pickupdaddy gone kill us. Not if you keep your mouth shut*. Our disobedience thrilled. Where we usually got out, at the old iron bridge on the main road, today we kept on, we defied the warnings (“I want you boys to know,” Pickupdaddy said, “past that bridge is nothing but quicksand”) and kept on going. That lower part of the Creek, from the bridge down to where it emptied into the River, led through what almost seemed like wilderness, the peopleless expanse of the National Forest and around its borders the large tracts of those lands which decorated the backsides of

the riverine plantations. That had been that Spanish governor's lands that he took from the Indians before he slaughtered them. The blood turned that part of the creek red, we'd been told. The terrain descended gradually from rolling farmland and woods to swampier lands. Nobody lived out there. Any evidence we found of humans came in the form of artifacts dug up out of the sand, washed down in stormwaters — an old Dr. Tichenor bottle, a hubcap from a Terraplane, once a brass coin worn so smooth we couldn't read engraved on it what surely had once been the name of a Spanish king, or an Indian arrowhead half finished, still half sharp.

"Throw that old thing away," Jim said, "don't nobody want no ol' hubcap." I ignored him, washed it out and stowed it down in the lunch bucket.

We walked on, around unfamiliar bends and into unexplored terrain, and came around a bend and look! A high bank loomed above us, and atop it, hanging 60 feet in the air over the precipice, was the end of another old iron bridge, wrenched off and left perched, pending ominously above. We'd never heard of a road way out there big enough to warrant such a structure. Where could it have gone? There were no towns, no houses, out that way, unless it had gone to the now disappeared hamlet of Palestine, was that out that way? And who had lived there? And where had they gone? And even more mysterious — the other side of the creek was 60 feet below, at our level. What could that leftover end of a bridge have connected to? What kind of catastrophe, how hard a storm must have raged to have carried away the bridge and half the countryside with it? This cliff face of sand begged a climb, and so we obliged, making holes for our feet and hands, the oldest of us, cousin Jack, out in front, me at the bottom, swallowing grit. Hot, sweaty, sandy work. We attacked the cliff face as if it were Everest, reaching for the top of the world.

"C'mon! Get your sorry asses up here!" I'd never heard anybody close to my age use that kind of cuss language. I had begun to understand more lately— one mark of growing up was that you were allowed to, and knew how to, cuss. I stored that one away to try out later.

At the top, I came over the lip last to see the others — Jimbo, Hank, Jack — exploring the remains of an old gas station, tall pumps towering over us, glass tanks on top, pump handles at their sides like the rifles of soldiers in formation. At first we had

no earthly idea what they were, but Jack said “Yea, I seen one of them before. That’s a fillin station.” There was little evidence of the road that must have once led past the station and over the bridge. Maybe Palestine was one of the places that had been swallowed by and abandoned to the National Forest a long time ago. The lands that greatgranddaddy Dougle had surveyed for the Federal government. The lands he had bought from the farmers for twenty-five cents an acre. And made enemies of his friends. Now, a track through the woods and these rusted towers gave sole testimony to a once busy road, to the lives of people now dispersed. We explored the ruins of that place of respite looking for lost coins among hulks of ancient automobiles, for some kind of treasure. We rested in the shade, eating our biscuit and meat and talking about what kind of people had once lived along and travelled that remaindered road.

Later, we roused up and then descended, down to the Creek’s level flow, relieved to wash away the sand and sweat. We had made note from above that the water had scoured out a spot where the stream changed direction, just before it turned at the cliff. Too shallow for a swimming hole, but a good place to make one. In dry summer, the creek needed a little help. So, once down, we set out to engineer a dam, choosing the bigger rocks in the creekbed, piling them up across the narrowed channel there. There we were, all four of us, cutoffs and tennis shoes, way out in the country with no entertainment but what we made, determined to make a hole to swim in, down in the muddy sandy water hauling rocks. Our plan was in the doing. We scooped them up in our t-shirts, we pushed them downstream from the bed above, we used mud, which washed away as we worked, for mortar. I laid my Hudson hubcap out beside me, saving in it any odd colored rocks, or those worn smooth in strange shapes, one with a hole through it, and one Indian ball. Excited, arguing about construction methods and work loads (*You’re as lazy as a nigger chap on Sunday, move it or lose it!*), working mightily to resist the casual irresistibility of the creek’s flow (*Should we put some sticks in it? Get some more clay from that bank over yonder!*) We challenged fiercely the casual inexorability of its flow and built our own respite from the heat. And, slowly, we made progress.

Until.

We heard no voices in the distance approaching, had no warning of oncoming trouble. And yet look there! around the

Creek's bend, striding purposefully forward, came three, from our perspective down in the mud looking up, giants. Three tall black boys, almost naked, two larger and older than us, strongly muscled, one smaller and younger, dancing as he walked. They kept on towards us without hesitation or uncertainty, predetermined, but unless they had been spying on us, *could they have been?*, they couldn't have known they would find us there. Though we must have been a surprise to them they came on purposefully. Not only did our creation, spanning the stream down which they were wading, not deter them, they seemed to speed up a little, bearing down. The thick summer air around us was suddenly stiff with intention, now as tense as before it had been tranquil.

All the ugly things going on out in the world of the South in the 1960s came back to us, came on us down the creek. *What did they want?* The older and bigger boys that carried me also reassured me. They had always put on such a show of being tough, of knowing the world, of being able to handle things, that I was confident, ignorant. Besides, we hadn't done nothing to make them mad at us, had we? Yes, we had heard about all the civil rights, and we went to still segregated schools, and yes, we used the word nigger sometimes but not in front of them, at least we had that much sense, and yes, we too had hated Yankees and Kennedy and all the changes he promised to make to our lives and even, yes, we had cheered when he got shot. We'd seen men from our families going out late at night, but *they were probably just goin' jukin*, right? We'd overheard whispers of cousins, of neighbors, in trouble for something they'd done. But we were kids. We hadn't done anything to these particular boys, we didn't even know them, although in that small country community everybody was known. *They'll pass us by*, I thought. *After all, we're white.*

But they didn't. No detour was evident, they kept coming, concertedly. Enraptured, we paused in our work to see their coming, even big brother Jimbo, his hands in the water nervously twitching the large rock he had been moving (*was he planning something? was he gettin' ready to throw?*), Jack still, expectant, glowering. When the boys got to the dam they kicked out! and the biggest one, the one in front, looked right straight at us and leered. The destruction was careful, intentional. I looked around, expecting our side to react violently, to let fear wreak return havoc — but all eyes were down, even Jack's and Jim's. No one moved. The two big boys had begun the kicking, the smaller one more hesitant, then joining in joyfully, systematically dismantling

our work so carefully constructed. The small reservoir that had gathered above our half-dam rushed over us so that we lost our seats, the gravel giving way beneath us, spinning the terraplane and its load of strange stones down into the stream, turning me half around, our footing unsure, difficult if we were to dare to stand up or stand up to them. Had anyone been so inclined. No one was. We watched as all our reward for all that hot, hard work washed away, along with our only chance to cool off. For the first time in my life, I saw the older boys I had known each summer when I visited from the new suburb where my family lived, those killers of possums and snakes, the horse riders, the braggarts about girls and titties, the lovers of guns and pickups and fighting, lose their swagger, stay down, look down. Cowed. And to a bunch of niggers. No one stood against the onslaught, we all just took it, I saw my brother, Jimbo, his head bowed, could that be fear? but also in shame that he wasn't standing up to them, wasn't defending our project, our territory, was just taking it. Once our dam was a shambles those boys kept right on walking, not looking back, confident in their triumph, clearly no longer afraid of retaliation from white boys. We sat quietly for a bit. Silence hung around our necks like shackles. We couldn't make head nor tail. We were of one mind, of one kind. Finally, we all got up, brushed off, wordlessly headed home, our adventure cut short even though the day was far from over, saying nothing all the way home.

"Well, what kinda trouble did you boys get into out there? Did y'all find any treasure?" As we filed into the yard, my young uncle snickered from his seat where he hammered on one of the porch steps that Pickupmama had said that morning she had near about fell on. Our hangdog expressions betrayed trouble. "Now what went and give y'all the sours?" he asked.

Because I hadn't yet understood that right now in such a moment the need for silence was desperate, I blurted, "We saw a buncha nigger boys in the Creek."

"Yea? I reckon y'all gone down there to that quicksand?" He frowned. "Don't know who that would be way down there." He slammed the hammer down again and cogitated. "Less it was Chess' boys. I think they was visitin' at their mama's house cause of the news. What'd they say?"

"Nothin, didn say nothin," Jack shrugged. "Just some niggers is all."

"Well, it's a wonder, with all this commotion over Chess." He

vestigated us over some more. “Just as well they didn’t, I reckon.”

I had no earthly idea what commotion. Word of Chess’ mysterious death in the Forest, of his mutilated body found in Pretty Creek by chaps gone there to wade in its icy, springfed waters, was just getting out. “What happened to Chess?” That was me, the little dummy. I seemed to be the only one too young or too simple to ask any old thing.

“Oh, you ain’t heard? Chess is dead. They found him this mornin up in the woods.”

“What happened to him?” Again, missing all the signals to shut, I pressed, missing all the cues of sharp looks and silences.

His voice hardened. “Never mind, he just died, that’s all.” He looked down and again the hammer slammed. “And y’all probably shouldn’t be askin no stupid questions.”

I saw Jack’s startled look. “Why?”

“You know why.” He gestured up the steps. “You chaps better go get cleaned up for supper. Y’all look like y’all washed up from a flood.” As we circled him and headed up the steps, I suddenly realized that we had left the creek in such a daze that I had left my hubcap and my grandfather’s tin bucket behind. *Not going back there*, I thought. *Never going back.*

No one spoke about this again, ever — not Jack, not Jimbo, not Hank, nor me. Our protection was our silence, a silence that would last for another thirty years before it would be broken. We had in that moment become painfully aware of new strains among us, of a separation into two communities, a poisonous divide that would seep into the life of that little crossroads and crack it wide, of tensions long suppressed emerging into the open between my kin-folk and the white and the black folk there, a cancer of distrust and dislike that would spread and later change how we felt about one another, one that would involve resentment and shame and a fear that would beget — no, had beget already! — violence. Feelings which would become actions too terrible even for explorers.