

# Chosen

by Brian Smalley

This book is dedicated to Zora Neale Hurston,  
who was with me as I wrote this story,  
and at times she would push the pencil for me.

*Come, let Us go down and there confuse  
their language that they may not  
understand one another's speech.*

## CALEB GREER

His house was easy to find. It was right where the map said it would be. Straight up Interstate Ninety Five. Exit number ninety seven put me on Ninety Eight in West Palm. Not even a half mile east. A left. Another left.

He stepped out of the door before I'd had the chance to ring the doorbell. I'm not sure he even looked at me at first. He just started walking, and I followed. The pack of Benson Hedges appeared and the cigarette he had smoked down to the filter was flung away and replaced by the next one, long and freshly lit, pinched in the V of his middle- and fore-fingers, and he would gesticulate with the cigarette, like it was a pointer. "See? (cough) Not so different from Belle Glade." He pointed the cigarette at the houses that were squeezed together on El Vedado. I took my first real close look at him. His black hair with flecks of gray, neatly coifed. His toque white skin. He was taller than me, but paunchy. His low gravelly voice seemed to fit him, and his standard way of putting an idea out there was to say the words 'fun fact,' then he'd cough, and then he would say what he was going to say. "Fun fact, (cough) there are more palm trees in Belle Glade than in West Palm. It's true, but honey, get real. Seriously? It's like comparing apples and oranges. No, wait. Strike that. Apples and dog turds." He laughed. "Am I right?"

A mockingbird darted by. I watched it perch itself in a red star mayhaw tree. As we passed, the bird rehearsed his litany of plagiarized songs way up over our heads. It was still early and the sea breeze had not yet kicked in. It was hot. There was some awkward silence. He exhaled smoke and said, "Um ... no, no, that was the year when it would not stop raining." I thought he had finally come around to answering some of my questions. But he said just that one sentence, then he shut up again.

On the phone he had been friendly enough. “No, I’m in south West Palm.” I think the emphasis on ‘south’ was supposed to be some kind of a joke. When I’d knocked on his door, he hadn’t invited me in. Instead, we walked the few short blocks to the City Diner on US1. We sat on the back patio because he thought he could smoke there, or that’s what I thought at first anyway, though there were no ashtrays anywhere, and we were getting ugly stares from the other tables. It was then that I first started to realize that he just didn’t give a damn. “Um ... no, (cough) no, what I remember, what I remember most was the buzzards.” He reached over to an un-busked table and grabbed a half empty plastic cup of soda and extinguished his cigarette in it. The waiter brought our coffee. People around us settled down a little, but it was premature relief. He pulled out the zippo lighter, which I had seen twice already, and he lit another. He was a true chainsmoker, and I think that’s what made his voice so jagged and cracked. He spoke low, though not deep, and it should have hurt, I mean it should have pained his throat to talk like that, and he would cough all the time, and he would often stop himself as he began to speak, maybe rethinking or reconsidering his choice of words, and he would say ‘um’ as he placed his finger onto his closed lips, almost tick-a-lock, as if the finger put a lid on his mouth, then he’d cough and start talking again. “Um ... (cough) what I remember, my god, the buzzards, the crows, they were everywhere. My god. Hundreds. Crows and buzzards and (cough) and yuck. Just yuck. Buzzards swooping over the yard, landing on the roof, and a dozen of them were sitting on that old boat, my god, that stupid old boat, and flying, circling over top of the canefields, they were everywhere ...” He gave me a look like he didn’t think I knew what a canefield was. He took a long drag and exhaled. “That was not ... the thing ...that was ... unusual. This is Belle Glade you’re asking about,

right? And the stink. My ... god, the stink ...” He took another puff, held it in as he spoke. “The stink? (cough) No, no, that was pretty standard, too. Smell Glade. Ha!” I did not look around, but I knew a lot of anger was being directed toward us. The smoke poured out his nose. “No, no, and there was a big mound of muck piled up in the front yard of my dead grand-father’s old house in Pahokee where the septic tank was dug up ... but even that was not unusual, because, no, because it would not ... stop ... raining (cough) and all the septic tanks were failing, and everyone, almost everyone had their tanks dug up. Every other yard had a mound of muck and a big hole where the septic tank had failed, no, no, what was odd, the thing that was different was that old rotten boat set on top of the hole, and my father and Deputy Gid shouting, shouting at each other, with the rain coming down in sheets. Buckets. And Deputy Gid shouting, and my father shouting, and Gid, Gid shouted ‘So what, Amos?!’ (cough) no, wait, that’s not it, no. ‘So what?’ no, um, hmm, no. ‘So whut!’ That’s it. ‘So whut, Amos? Everbuddy’s tank is brokedown-n-duggup cuzza thuh rain!’ No, no, my father wasn’t listening. No, no, he was busy pushing against the old hull of that boat with his shoulder.”

He had smoked it down to the filter, just that fast, and he tossed it in the soda glass with the other. He patted himself down, felt all his pockets for the lighter. I looked at the lighter on the table, but didn’t say anything. “No, no, but when Gid finally gave up shouting and also put his weight behind the boat along with my father, it lifted clear, then rolled over ... My God! It was shit and mothballs!” Good lord, he talked loud. “No. Shit ... and mothballs!” He patted the hair on the back of his head, blissfully unaware of the stares he was getting from the other tables, or maybe he was aware, I don’t know. Like I said, he just didn’t give a damn. About anything. Not one damn. “And the smell!

The stink knocked me to my knees! And Gid said 'Mercy Amos! Whut the hail?!' no, no 'Whyn't the hail?!' That's it, whyn't the hail. Ha." He spoke the last bit absently, with a slight smirk on his face, and it was like he was remembering the man, recalling the deputy, his father's partner, contemplative. But the face evaporated. "No, no, Gid was bent over, looking, no, looking down into that hole, and, and, and my father (cough) my father, he jumps into it! No, no, seriously, jumped ... down ... into the hole, and, no, he's sloshing around in the bottom, feeling around, down on his hands and knees ..." He had been feeling all his pockets while he spoke, but now he saw the zippo beside his coffeecup and grabbed for it.

A quick flick of the wrist and the base lid swung open on the hinge, and his thumb struck the flint wheel, and up leapt an unnecessarily tall flame which he touched to the tip of his Benson Hedges cigarette.

There really is no smell quite like that of a cigarette first lit by a zippo.

"... and the buzzards were swooping overhead, and the crows were screaming, and the sun was just coming up, but you really couldn't tell, it was, um ..." He pressed the index finger of his left hand to his closed lips, then the hand twisted out with a flip of the wrist, palm up and open, as if he was saying 'wait,' with the cigarette in the other hand down to his side below his seat, those fingers angled out, with the smoke traveling up his arm. "... it was cloud-dark, and then, no, then the rain came down even harder and, (cough) and Gid was shouting, and the wind was blowing ... and I remember, I remember my father, in one heave ... in one heave my father lifted the dead man out of that hole."

The waiter walked by us balancing a heavy tray upon his shoulder and he said something to the effect of 'I'm sorry sir, but there is no smoking.'

He rolled his eyes. "But I am getting ... I'm getting ahead of myself. A whole lot of other stuff, other ... 'things' happened first." He put a peculiar emphasis on the word 'things,' and I thought he was about to launch into it, from the beginning this time, maybe, but his phone ding-ed and he looked at the screen. He frowned. "I, um ... I, I have to go." He left. He just got up and left. So I paid for the coffee and walked back to the house on El Vedado, and his TR7 was in the driveway, but he was nowhere to be seen, so I sat in my Woodie, cranked the engine and rolled down the two front windows. From the glove compartment, I took out my list, and I guess it was my turn to frown. On the paper I had scribbled the name Farah, and below the name was an address, and in parenthesis was the word 'seance,' and I thought 'Seance? Good lord, what have I gotten myself into?'

## LOURDY MONFISTON

i drive from west palm to belle glade. it's like falling off the edge of the world. a straight ruined road, with a brown canal hugging close to the road for all of forty miles. the land is flat as the road is straight. canefield canefield canefield canefield. the approach of belle glade is abrupt. the sugar mill. the tall palms. implements of agriculture. strewn garbage. poverty. the street sign says dr martin luther king jr blvd. i get out and walk and i hold out the copied photo from the newspaper archive on the internet. the photograph of lourdy monfiston. i hold it out in front of me. in my mind, the grainy photo is my permission to be there. it is a hall-pass. brown eyes look at me sideways. i climb some concrete stairs and i knock. the door opens.

i try to hand the woman the picture, but she does not take it from me. she gives it a contemptuous glance. she closes the door behind me. she secures the deadbolt, and the chain too.



the stained cement block walls. unfamiliar smells. strange. soured. palmetto bugs and silverfish. the still air. mildew. cat piss. rat sign. tobacco colored lamplight. three other women are there. to my eyes, they all look like her. they do not stir until she claps her hands. once. clap. unhurried. four bodies milling about the table. some items going away. disappearing: ashtray. paper cup. steel wool. other items appearing upon the red bedsheet which masquerades as a tablecloth: nine flickering black candles. six black stones. four thieves of vinegar. two nickels. five dingy pennies. a planchette. a dry chicken bone. a pint bottle of clairin rum. a cracked coffee- cup. a book of job. the book of job from the bible, lonely, by itself. she opens the old book with the broken binding, turns a few of its pages, sets it face down, open upon the table.

*"wi. lord-dee was twouble. all she famiwee was gwief-fing and twouble-ling all they days."* dark black circles around her eyes. her skin punctate. marred and terrible. an ancient scar whitish and jagged across the back of her hand. all else mulberry black brown. one enormous melanoma in a dark room with the other dark women. terrible eyes. brittle hands. shapeless dresses. plastic earrings. ashen arm fat marked with tattoos, jailhouse blue in latin letters of a foreign tongue. the marks worn and faded. eroded.

*"la saline. la saline, ayiti."* the woman says the words angrily into the face of the woman to her left. *"curse on the name !"* she spits into her hand. *"gah !"*

i look at the bitter face and have to assume the anger is directed at the dead girl in the photocopied picture, lourdy monfiston, the long dead girl found burned to death in the canefield in nineteen seventy six. found with the other man, dead too, the man's name printed as sloppy monfiston. i am bracing myself. she is going to balk. this so-called 'seance' isn't going to happen. any knowledge she has of the dead girl awakens within her revulsion. scorn. i have come all this way for

nothing. another cold trail. add it to the long list of dead clues. i turn to leave.

"twenty five." she stares blankly.

twenty five?

not irritated. just tired. "white folks, de pwice is twenty five."

pwice? oh, price. nervousness. awkwardness. fear of the unknown. no. fear of the unknowable. i fumble with the bills, place them on the table. the money disappears.

i have come with preconceptions. i am thinking that we will now all hold hands. we do not hold hands. one white man, no. one sunburned man. four black women. seated upon pressed-wood chairs. one of the women not near, not even near to the table, but slouching in her chair which faces the far corner. she shakes with palsy.

"mah name is farah!" the words come easy but the voice is weak, unequal to the demand. "mah name is farah! keepah uv snakebones and gunpowdah!"

all is stillness. darkness. only the voice.

"we offah clairin to de loa." her words have faded. only a whisper. "loa. loa. loa." the two women at the table say it with her. in tandem whispers. "loa. loa. loa." she lifts the bottle of haitian rum and pours it into the cracked coffeecup. she raises it to the ceiling. the women repeat the whispers. "loa. loa. loa. loa. loa." she does not drink. she sets the cup on the dirty red sheet.

"sah von."

all is still.

again. "sah von."

not impatient. only tired.

"sah von."

one of the women at the table rises. leaves. returns. she has a block of yellow green in her fist. she sets it on the table. faint but discernible letters 'lifebuoy'

carved into the unclean block of soap. from nowhere: a knife. farah is whittling tiny yellow green shavings into the candle's flame. the smell of detergent. in lieu of incense? the smell of burnt hair. no. burnt flesh. she clasps her one hand with the other, snatches it back from the flame. in pain. one of the women lifts the pint bottle of clairin, the image of citadelle laferrière printed upon the label. the fortress. the blood. hands unsteady, pouring the liquor onto the burnt hand. farah rubs her hands together. she rubs her face. breathing out. sharp. eyes rolling back. a marked change in her voice now. more force. yet, more sad.

*"mah name is lord-dee ! lord-dee monnn-fisss-ton !"*

a high frequency pitch rises from the hush. pulsating. ringing dim and sick.

*"lord-dee monfiston. mah name is curs-ed!"* she shouts the word 'cursed' with two syllables. teeth clenched. she begins to cry. *"it was always so!"* she is wailing. *"no! no! zoo-lee! zoo-lee! listen tuh what ah'm sayin' to yah gurl!"* no one moves. no one is looking at her except for me. composing herself. she calms. *"zoo-lee was me most beautifah seestah."* she gestures with her right hand. *"look at her."* she speaks to no one, pointing with a trembling finger at nothing. *"look at she beautifah face. look at she beautifah bawd-dee. look...she is stand-ding at de head uv de dead bawd-dee. de bawd-dee uv de man dat was laid out on de wooden tay-bull, and slopp-pee..."*

hissing. loathing the name of sloppy, the women choke at the mention of it. expel it. shoo it away. a frightful image is forced into the mind. a snake? yes, in some ways a snake, yes, venom, hissing, yes, but something else. a dragon? yes, but no. not exactly that. something else. gila. yes. a gila monster. the dreadful snake which is not cast down upon his belly, rather, four clawed ugly feet with which to skulk low the earth for to chase its prey. venom. hissing. slithering. spitting. the tongue darting, in and out.

searching. the forked tongue searching. tasting. and teeth.

in reflex, i ball my hand into a fist. the photocopied article crumples. under the table, hidden from view, i smooth it out on my knee. it is dog-eared. the school yearbook picture of the teenaged girl with black braided hair and the big smile. the headline 'two migrant workers found dead in a glades canefield.' only lourdy's picture. no photo of sloppy. the story only a few short sentences. not a real story. just a blurb. 'investigation ongoing.' but that was never true.

up the ugly tenement building stairs and into the sad dark apartment all because of rumors. no, rumor. one rumor. one, only one. a single rumor that there is a woman who speaks for the dead. good lord, i've lost my damn mind.

farah's face looks sick. "slopp-pee was hold-ding de twocar bee-tween he legs, and he was stwuggle-ling to slide de metal caps into de eye sockets..." her head bobbles. her voice feeble and thick with the bastard dialect of ghetto-creole, yet her words set a gruesome scene: the cadaver on a wooden table. a teenage zulee standing at the body's head. sloppy is in the room too, the cruel proprietor. unspeakable fluids dripping from the cast-iron trocar onto the dirty floor, the motherlode of fluids draining from the body through dirty blood-browned rubber tubes, emptying into filthy buckets. teenage lourdy standing at the feet of the dead man. witness. abettor.

"...me and zoo-lee, we had knowed de man ver-ree well, yes. we had togethah run fwom de slums uv la saline, run fwom powt-ah-pwince, yah know?" her palms are flat on the old red bed sheet. smiling sad. "tings all-ways end de way dey bee-ghen. we was slaves in ayiti, and we still wear dese chains. and when we bee-ghen, we was run-ning. run-ning fwom papa doc, run-ning fwom guns. run-ning fwom violence..." she ends the word 'violence' with a

very long 's.' snake like. a long hiss. "and we was on de boat. on de boat fah many days. den we come to de rivah my-yam-mee. and dere on de rivah my-yam-mee we stay, and we work! gah! yes! work. own-lee work and work at de fish-ah-ree. and de fish-ah-ree was a big ug-lee build-ding full uv de ug-lee peep-pul, and we was no bettah off dan we was back in la saline. but we work and work, until won day, won day we no stay-ying at de fish-ah-ree no mah, no, but we was walk-king. walk-king and walk-king on de rivah road until the rivah become stwaight. gah! yes. stwaight! stwaight as a roo-lah, and deep! deep as de oh-shun! and we was walk-king and walk-king until de twuck stop and take us to beLLLL-glllllaaayyy-dahhh..." the women are looking at her now. not rapt. not mournful. only patient. "...belle glade on de big lake and de hot heavy bweath uv de devil was blow-wing and bend-ding de tops uv de sugah-cane just lak he do in ayiti. and we was cut-ting de shugah-cane, gah! yes! and clean-ning de houses and do-wing de laundwee, work-king and working...until... until sloppy pay de rent money fah de build-ding where me and zoo-lee and sloppy was mummifying de man's bawd-dee." she struggles to catch her breath. she puts all her weight on her flattened palms. straining.

farah forms the english words inside her haitian mouth: 'begin. river. miami. fishery. follow. sugar. ocean. laundry.' but they become neither creole nor english. rather, they stretch a fraying rope-bridge between two cultures. two worlds. the two worlds straining to reach and touch one another, yet, immuring, till finally i understand. mercifully merging, something clicks, and the words translate. no. not translate. transcend. soupy and hypnotic, the dialect slides, morphs, yes, the words still in the thick haitian syntax, but the comprehension drifting in, drifting out, "de dead man just dat morn-ning was hear-ning de row pwices, just that morning, he walk down to the loading dock and he listen to the mens shouting out the row prices; six dollars! six dollar fifty! six

dollar seventy five! and he was walking in the trash and the broken glass and rusty nails and bones. walking on the hot pavement of the loading dock, until he hears the seven dollar row-price, and he get on the tap-tap, and the driver close the door of the tap-tap, and the driver, he drive and drive, and the devil sun is rising.”

her palms are lifted to the ceiling now. the ceiling is water stained and drooping. holes. cobwebs. corroded pipes.

“then the driver opened the door of the tap-tap, and the man, he get off of the tap-tap with the other mens too, and they standing in the lines, the long lines in the canefield.”

farah is feeling herself. rubbing her arms. her legs. as if she were cold, shivering, though it is impossibly hot.

“and on that morning, the man, he had dressed himself in long shirt sleeves, and long dungarees, and there was a hood on he head, and the devil sun, the devil sun was rising. and the machetes, the sharp machetes in the hands of the mens, they was rising, falling, rising, falling, rising, falling, rising, falling...”

the words hum and throb. the other women bob their heads. noiseless singing. the words are a hymn? a negro spiritual? no. not. it is something other. there are palmetto bugs peeking out from under pictures upon walls. curled up portraits on thick coarse pulpy paper. depictions of catholic saints taped to the concrete walls. saint patrick. saint john. the virgin mary holding the haloed christ child. the roaches appear then disappear through the cracks and holes in the mildewed cinderblocks. the blocks dusty with decrepit paint, the paint peeled, as peeled as the linoleum floor that exposes dirt and lint. filth set crystalline in fossilized glue.

slave ship.

“rising, falling, rising, falling, rising, falling, and the man, he was making good time on he row of sugarcane in the morning, he machete lifting and dropping, lifting, dropping, gah! yes. but this man...he old man.” the other women nod their heads in agreement and say ‘wi.’ rocking. trembling. nodding. “he old man. fifty six. fifty seven. fifty eight. but the other mens, they was young mens. twenty four. twenty five. twenty six. and he machete was lifting and dropping same as all the mens machetes, and he push he self. he push he self hard. harder and harder still. and all the time the devil sun rising higher and higher, hotter and hotter, and the machetes lifting and dropping, rising and falling. hotter and hotter in he long sleeves and dungarees with he hood on he hoary head, but even so the prickly hairs of the sugarcane stick and stab into he skin, and he become careless, and he machete, he blade bounce from the cane and cut he ankle, he cut he ankle deep. gah! deep. but even so he push he self. harder and harder in the hot devil sun until he heart...” farah clutches her breast. “...the heart in he chest, it exploded.”

stillness. quiet. dust.

“and that heart. the heart that exploded in he chest. that heart was in a box on the table.” she points to the kitchen counter where, indeed, there are boxes. simple small brown boxes. boxes of cornmeal and carbolic soap and rice, and bags of dry beans and bottles of calf-foot jelly and castor oil. but farah is lourdy. and lourdy is pointing at a brown paper box with a human heart inside it. “and sloppy, he stand up. and when he stand up, he leg sweep against the rubber tube dangling from the dead man’s body, and the tube was pulled out of the bucket of blood *on de flah.*”

de flah? on de flah? ...the floor. on the floor. she is saying ‘floor’ and the translation flickers. a hiccup. what? she is saying that there were tubes dangling from the dead man’s body? the body stretched out on

a table. a wooden table? and there was a bucket of blood? a bucket of blood on the floor? the transmutation is failing because what i am hearing is too hard to believe.

"and de man's blood was pool-ling, pool-ling on de flah. gah!" and i can see the bucket now. and i can see the blood pooling on a drain-less floor in a room obviously never intended to be used by a mortician. and i can see the door open because the translation coalesces. "and the door, it open. and baron and bocar step into the room." the other women shrink in fear at the mention of the names. baron. bocar. the women hiding their hands in their laps. cowering. and farah is shrinking, too. "and zulee never once look at baron or bocar. zulee, she only stare at the blood pooling on the floor. and sssssloppy, sloppy, he only look at baron. he only look at baron the one time, then he eyessss..." hissing. "...sloppy's eyes look over at the box. and baron walk over to the box, and baron, he take it. he take the box that hold the dead man's heart. and baron look at me."

tears are running down her spotty cheeks. a flood of tears dropping, welling atop her bulging swollen lips. a dam is breaking. washing out.

assimilation fails. the translation fails utterly. all is foreign once again. fading. her palms flat on the red bedsheet. "den...den...baron was looking at zoo-lee. he was looking at zoo-lee fah a long time. but zoo-lee nevah once look at baron. and dis did no make baron happ-pee. no! baron scowl. he scowl ang-wah-lee, den baron and bocar step out uv de room. and ah can see out de window, i can see dem walk-king in de stweet. no. in de al-lee. and dere is de dep-poo-tee. and zoo-lee is stare-ring out de window too. stare-ring at de dep-poo-tee. stare-ring at de dep-poo-tee real hard." and one last flash of transmission, a blip of transmutation, the stream of nonsensical words allows one last single gasp of apperception. 'zulee was staring at the deputy.' but all thought is collapsing.



sliding, falling away. "and sloppy, sloppy, he was staring at zoo-lee. and slopp-pee was get-ting angwy."

something breaks. there is a snap. almost audible. a jolt.

exhale.

she slumps in her chair. suspiration. release. the other women moving now. quickly to her side. wiping her brow. whisperings. supplications. prayers. sing-song humming. it must be routine. a practiced show. rehearsed. they lead farah into a back hallway.

i am shown the door

## JABEZ BROWN

You yourself know someone exactly like Jabe. You don't like him, but you know him. You recognize the type. You can tolerate him for a period. Even laugh at his jokes. You abhor him in principle. Yet, when keeping his company and he is speaking at you, not with you, at you, you have to like him. He charms you. Not precisely the Southern Gentleman. More the gentle southerner. And he'll ask you a question, but he'll make no pause wherewith to listen at your reply; all his questions are rhetorical, he doesn't give a shit what you think. "Now, guess what happened?" You'll know the answer. He will have pulled you along in the undertow of his personal force. He has propelled you toward it, and even if, really, you did not guess the answer, you'll laugh and nod, ridiculous and agreeable. 'Yes, yes, you're right.' Like the fool.

Ninety two degrees and he was in bluejeans, boots and a white button up long sleeve shirt. His downy white hair uncombed under his tall cowboy hat. The sepia skin of his face and neck and hands pocked here and there with little red dots and blotches of coumadin necrosis. He stood up very straight for an eighty two year old man.

Jabe's body language said 'I am late for work, but I can chat with you for a little while longer.' Never mind that he retired in Nineteen Ninety Seven. He smiled and held out a can of Skoal Bandits. "Cowboy Killer? ... No? heh heh, the wife don't ayy-prove neither." The slightest turn of his head instructed me to follow him to a shallow porch where we sat on rod iron chairs. Seated, I looked around and saw the ever-present palm trees and the humongous strangler fig and the green street-name signs 'SE 2 ST' criss-crossing 'SE Ave K' atop the metal pole at the corner of the yard. Those two unassuming streets which I had found on the map, with all the while that word 'map' clogging all thought and breath and dreams, and I looked around at the long wide lots, sparse and flat, digesting the landscape, taking it all in. Across the gutterless road was a pump station encircled by chainlink fence, and close off on the horizon, not unlike an Aztec adobe city, were the brown and tan ruins of the old hospital. His house was on the abbutals of the neighborhood, and all else to the south and east was sugarcane fields. Canefields as far as the eye could possibly see over the impossibly flat earth. A visitor could mistake sugarcane fields for midwest cornfields. Dense swaths of tall tropical grass, dull green and greenish-brown, with the stalks resembling bamboo. But not quite. The occasional flowerhead from derelict seed-cane sprouted atop in rare thatches, but mostly a panorama of endless rows and rows and rows and rows of neat tidy tractable sugarcane.

"I cayn't say I'm proud of all of it, but I have no apologies." The round canister gripped betwixt thumb and forefinger. The bullet expertly placed under the lower lip. "That was Seventy Six. It rained and rained all that Summer, and Fall too. No let up. Stormin' ever-day n-all the time. And the dike round Lake Okeychobee strainin' and bulgin' at the belt ...now, guess what happened? Ever-n-all the cess pools in this town

shut down. Jest quit workin' ... then comes Hurry-cane Dottie, n-all the cess pools overflowed, and the streets-n-yards was all full of sh..."

From inside the house, through the screen door, I could hear Jabe's wife, McKenna, yell for to cut him off quick mid-sentence. 'Jabez!' Jabe pulled his head down into his collar, turtle-like, and pretended to peek over his shoulder at the door. He grinned and winked at me. A little quieter. "You see, the wife don't ayy-prove of me usin' that word, but you kin 'magine. Yep, n-Belle Glade don't smell too powerful good to begin with, heh heh, with the sugarmill runnin' ever-n-all the time ..." I nodded agreement, because, yes, that town had a very peculiar odor, at best. Sometimes it was down right unbearable. That day, as I recall, Belle Glade smelled pretty bad. He leaned easy over the arm of his chair and spit into a flowerpot. "... n-the-heat-n-hewwww-mid-ity, n-ever-other house had they tanks dug up. Believe you me, in them days, if'n you had a good back hoe with a flat bed tuh haul it on, you could make good money diggin' up septic tanks. Gooood money. High demand that summer fer sure. Half ... more than half the yards awl dug up, and cess pools cracked open ... Whew-wee! You kin 'magine ... n-think about it, jest cuzz the sea wall's busted, that don't stop the tide from rollin' in, if'n you catch my meanin', heh heh. Folks wuz pissin'-n-shittin' in paint cans and milk cartons, n-leavin' em by the roadside fer the trashman, heh heh."

From inside the house I heard McKenna Brown slam pots and pans and cabinet doors. I heard a television turn on. The 700 Club. The volume was turned up. Way up.

Jabe tucked his head again and feigned shame. "Well, you kin 'magine ..." But he dropped the grin. His face suddenly hardened. His eyes cold dead. "... n-them what lived on Avenue E, I warned em. I warned em that they better watch their steps. Warned em plain

that I wuzn't gonna tolerate foolishness. But, whew, the heat n-the smells ...(spit)... the natives wuz restless."

He leaned back and stared off in the distance. Maybe he was staring at the old ruined hospital. Maybe not. "What's that? The mill? Did I work at the mill? Oh, sure, I wuz in sugar fer awhile, but I mostly worked in ... well, ya might say I work in real estate, buyin' n-sellin' n-managin' buildins n-properties." He was saying 'buildings and properties' and I had lived in the south all my life, so I did not need a translator, though maybe a northerner would have been clueless. His accent was Florida cracker mixed with a sprinkling of Georgia redneck, but it always seemed to me that the drawl was a put-on. A little fake. "First buildin' I bought fully on my own wuz on Avenue E. It wuz a little six room unit between Sixth and Eighth. Hardly worth the trouble. No sir, to make the real money, you hafta rope in the numbers, so's after I sold that one, I got hold of a three-story thirty-two unit cross the street, and that one paid. Yes sir, you jest gotta keep em full, you know? And you cayn't be afraid to go down there and cōllect rent ... er knock some heads together when need be. It's easy-peezy, so long as yer not dealin' with cadavers or H2s actin' like they wuz African witchdoctors." Jabe turned his head to me and gave me a little wink.

On the phone, he had struck me as cold and stiff. Procured by dint of dubious means, to say the least, his name and number was scrawled on the back of an old crumpled up Florida Bay tide chart. I myself had scrawled it there, and I must have taken that chart from my pocket and looked at his name a dozen times while I'd prepared and rehearsed what I would say, got all the loose ends of my 'story' tucked and nipped, practiced saying it all out loud until even I believed it. At last, I had plunked several quarters into the slot of the ridiculously-hard-to-find payphone and punched in

the numbers. Honestly, I anticipated my every utterance to be scrutinized, however, he didn't let on that he was suspicious at all, only indifferent and annoyed. Incapable of following, or even picking up on, subtext or nuance. The conversation was so halted and cumbersome, I just knew he'd written me off as some stammering idiot who was wasting his time. When I broached gently the subject of the mysterious deaths back in Nineteen Seventy Six, I was sure he'd cuss me out and slam the phone down, but I guess it must have piqued his interest because he turned downright enthusiastic. I was astonished to be sitting there with him in person. He looked exactly the way he sounded on the phone, and he took pleasure in saying things that made me squirm uneasily.

"You got a dawg? ... No? Hmmm. I used-tuh have this dobe. Name was Gator ... oh, Gator." He mused. I could see on his face that he was conjuring the image of the dog in his mind. "Bee-yew-tiful dawg, n-believe-you-me, if'n I had her with me in the truck, there was no problem gettin' the rent, heh heh. Make no mistake, dawg or no dawg, I wuz never 'fraid to be down there." Jabe eyeballed the notepad that I held on my lap, then he looked out at the flat wide earth and fell silent. I had not written a single thing on the pad, and the ink pen rolled absently between my thumb and forefinger. From close by somewhere, a lawnmower droned.

"A show of force. (spit) That's all it wuz. That's usually all you need. A show of force. That's why we had Deputy Amos n-Deputy Gid out there on Avenue E in the first place. Show of force. To reduce the bloodshed and property damage." The hard face and cold dead eyes returned. "No good-a-tall, no good-a-tall." With his thumb, he smoothed his close trimmed white whiskers. "No. Maybe Amos weren't the right pick fer the job." I could see the tongue inside his mouth reposition the bullet of tobacco. "When Amos first married my niece back in Fifty Nine, I recollect

thinkin' he wuz uh unstable body. But he wuz a Greer. And Greers has been here longer than Browns, n-my brother the preacher didn't have no problem with him, n-Shurf Goodelitt didn't have no problem with him, so who am I? Now, I ask you, who ... am ... I?... n-I warned Amos. I did. I warned him. Told him to take care uh business n-let that be that. And I warned Amos bout that ... that mortician's concubine, or whatever she wuz." He leaned in closer to me, spoke just above a whisper. "My wife would always complain about that funeral home n-say they did un-mentionable things down there, n-I'd say 'Then don't mention em!' heh heh. Sure, the sign out front said 'Funeral Home,' but that weren't yer ever-day run-uh-the-mill mor-chew-air-ree. No sir." He had a habit of assuming I knew these people and places beforehand, and, yes, I had done my homework, so I had to pretend ignorance, so as to seem believable, but I couldn't get him to pin down addresses or exact locations, no, he would just point aimlessly to the west and say the funeral home was 'out there' across the street from some other landmark for which he gave no specific detail. "No sir, and besides, it weren't really none of my business. As the sayin' goes, if I cayn't see it from my house. Am I right? And they wuz regular with the rent, so I kept my nose out of it. What I shoulda paid more attention to wuz Amos. He wuz uh unstable body, n-when you give uh unstable body a badge? Well, guess what happened? But I warned him 'bout that woman. I warned him 'bout that whole sit-chew-way-shun."

Jabe leaned forward and put his forearms on his knees and faced the old hospital. The hospital was vacant, dormant. Repurposed once, maybe twice, then abandoned. I was told, in such a way as to believe it, that in the years when the hospital was up and running, and one of the citizenry had some medical emergency, it was the practice of the ... well, I really hate to use this word, but you know ... it was the

practice of the, the 'whites' to sidestep the local Belle Glade hospital altogether and make the long trip to Good Samaritan or some other ER in West Palm. To admit yourself locally would have been deemed worse than any injury that had precipitated the hospital visit in the first place. Evidently, there were countless last minute road trips that sped out to the east at eighty miles per hour with the passenger doubled over with a bursting appendix, or with a towel wrapped tight around some gashed arm or leg, or the not-unheard-of bullet wound. The hour delay would be justified as 'worth the wait.' So, when the hospital finally shuttered its doors in Ninety One, the closure was hardly noticed by the, the ... sheesh, I really hate to say it, it was hardly noticed by the whites or the well-to-do Arabs.

and there, there was my sister's thin, irritating voice in my ear, in my head, "you see it now, don't you? you see it plain as day." and me: hush. not now. i'm busy. and she was gone.

Jabe looked long and hard down at his boots. "But Amos wuz down there ever-n-all-the-time, thinkin' no buddy's wise to him, thinkin' he's bein' slick. But you tell me, if a sheriff's vehicle is parked out front of a so-called funeral parlor, or, hell, what did them Haitians call it? uh mezon finery ..." He pronounced it 'may-zon finn-ur-ree,' putting as much 'hick' into it as he possibly could. "... you tell me uh sheriff's car is parked out front, but no buddy's dragged outside of it in hand-cuffs, or they aint no crime scene tape strung up somewheres, don't you think them boys down at the Blue Bell Bar's gonna talk about it? Don't you figger the women-folk round the corner at the hair-say-lon is gonna gossip they heads off about it?" He was really pouring on the drawl. "I have two ears on my head! And they still worked purty good back in Nineteen Seventy Six! And Amos was workin' purty good too, up all day, then up all night, crossin'-the-

tracks, so to speak, when he shoulda been at home. But instead he's hound-dawgin' lookin' fer ..."

Sharp and loud, the female voice from inside. "Jabez Brown!"

He pretended to duck, like it was a gunshot, then he smiled wide and friendly. "Misses Brown did not ayy-prove neither, heh heh." He gave a quick look at the screen door. "She's a good egg. Though ..." He stretched the word 'though' out long, pondering. "Thooooough ... she don't think the way I do. The way uh sensible man does." He stood, hiked up his jeans and opened the screen door. His body language told me to stay put. He was gone a minute. Two. He reappeared. The screen door slamming behind him. "Sure. I'll take you out there. Come back tomorrow. But you'll drive and I'll do the navigatin'."