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Antebellum

by
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Past the pavement of Shreveport, deep down the sandy dirt and red clay roads, between pecans and cottonwood, maples, magnolias, cypress, and pines, down in the depths of the forgotten, in the center of the unforgiven, in the fields once so bountiful, now so silent, where the magnolias have grown wild, are gardens and buildings and fields and people all overgrown and encircled by a billion stones cleared from a million fields by thousands of coal black men and women. Past all this, buried in the summer sunlight is a house.

Oh -- it's an old house, covered with a faint swathe of mildew, touched by age. Its paint is peeling and harsh, falling to pieces in wrinkles and deep creases like Grandma Benjamin's face. Time lies on it like an anti-Atlas, bearing down rather than lifting up. Lives by the thousands lay heavy in its every timber, and breathe their life through death into its existence. But, the house is also dying.

The house stands at the edge of a now fallow cotton field. It sits right on the threshold, not quite hidden by the trees, still a part of the field, and not normally visible from the clay road, the closest road to it. It's own carriage drive once joined with this dusty strip, but now it can't be delineated from the rest of the undergrowth.

The only obvious approach to the house is through this field. But, the field itself, like the house, is difficult to find. These fallow acres are an unmarked grave. They stand as a horrible tribute to the blue and gray clothed men who clasped in battle, died there. The spirit mist of an adjoining swamp usually thickly shrouds this route. Still, in spite of the obstacles, the wanderer may discover the house. It may reveal itself.

When it is to be found, the house gently wavers in the mid afternoon heat and exhales an essence of freshness, the breath of coolness that inhabits it. Shadows, inviting, sing through shining windowpanes, and press the sun's fury outward. The thick cool oak that lightly trims the checkerboard kitchen floor calls to aching feet. The coolbox creaks with its load of late winter ice.

The house invites, coaxes, cajoles. It calls the unwary and seeks the fearless, for locked within its walls are tales without number. As the April earth soaks up the rain, the house absorbed all the life and living that went on inside and around it. Now, there is nothing alive inside it, and it plays back these scenes, loosing them like arrows from the past to sink fast in the hearts and minds of the living.

But usually -- the house cannot be found.

The clouds sifted in brilliant soft puffs across the warming morning. As Heather walked slowly across the grass, moisture grappled the hem of her dress and anointed it as though for worship. The morning sun flashed brightly, lifted by the trees, and the air was clear -- clear and intoxicating. The voices of songbirds floated quietly in it, and spiced the already flavored day with cinnamon sharpness. Heather hugged herself and trembled with the early morning chill and the fineness of the day.

She hummed caressingly to herself and found no reason to hurry along this new 'shortcut,' but every reason to linger. The morning was sibilant and beautiful, filled with every conceivable joy that her young heart could imagine. The air was chill but full of clean scents — then yes — she was puzzled. Yes, even the mustiness of the bayou came furtively to her on the almost still air.

The trees thinned as she approached an old cotton field, and she walked a little more quickly, goaded by the anticipation that she would see the full light of the sun that blazed already flittingly between the trees.

As the path entered the overgrown field, Heather took in a deep singing breath, then astonished, failed to let it out. A deep fog covered the wild stalks of old cotton. Thick and white, the mist sat on the tops of the plants like a late summer crop ready for the mill. But, the fog was tattered and dirty, it mimicked the harvest by barely covering nearly one half of the clearing and thickly masking the other. Short wisps, like castoff boles writhed between the stalks.

A mixture of wonder and awe filled Heather's eyes, and she stopped not quite short of the

field. The birds and early morning insects became instantly still. She drew in another breath, a taste of a deep and musty chill that was impossible to place.

She'd come out wrong. That was the problem entirely. The shortcut ran from the blacktop back of her house through the Benjamin's woods and up the back of Pine Hill through Mr. Lee's old cotton field. This wasn't Mr. Lee's field.

Heather looked back into the woods; she was sure she'd followed the path exactly, but then, as Grandma Benjamin would have said, Heather was pretty high spirited today. She rubbed her hands nervously on her dress. The fog lay deep and solid on the other half of the field. She could barely make out the cypress with their thick shrouds of hanging moss -- witches' hair.

Cypress? That meant she'd come out further down by the old road, near the bayou. But, she had no idea how that could have happened, the bayou was nearly a half mile deeper into the Benjamin's land than she had intended to travel.

She looked down at her feet and noticed, happily the trail continued. Unfortunately, the footpath led deeper into the field and directly into the fog.

Well, she thought, the path must lead back up into the Lee's lands, there, or up along the edge of the Bayou, either way she'd be sure to get to Jane's early.

Chilled by the moist air that blocked the early sun, Heather took first one step then another along the nearly overgrown footpath. The thick cotton plants grabbed furtively at her. The fog billowed gently around her, and for a moment she nearly turned back. But, as she moved forward, the fog seemed to lift and the cotton seemed to fall back in more orderly rows. The path widened slightly, and the sun burned on the tops of the cotton and dispelled the gloom she felt when she initially entered the field.

Suddenly the fresh smell of baking biscuits and sizzling fatback was tossed to her on the faint morning breeze. Like an acrid breath, the fragrance of fresh coffee touched her nose and drew her forward.

Immediately, rising out of the vestiges of the mist she could see a building. As she walked forward, the atmosphere became clearer and clearer; the mist lifted appreciably with every step.

Like a scene suddenly coming into focus, like the snap of a wiper across rain drenched glass, the mist disappeared and she found herself near the opposite edge of the field looking at an old house. And, as if the soul of nature had been loosed, the birds began to sing again, the insects called, but it wasn't the same as before, Heather knew something was different.

She stared ahead at the house. It was the kind of place that snuggled up against the cotton and livid green cypress trees. The plants around it dripped with summer growth and warm musty new rain. Heather turned around, it hadn't rained that morning.

A red dirt road, wet and rocky, approached the front porch of the house and divided the vibrant field in a straight, straight line. Heather jumped; she stood on that road.

But the house, oh Lord, thought Heather, the house, misty and cool and looking like it would stay that way even on the hottest day. It looked inviting, especially now, enshrouded by the soft and glorious morning.

The morning sun burned behind the house and fed each window until it screamed out an angry luminescence that shattered its panes. The sun fed them, and Heather could tell the blaze struck inward as well as outward; they illuminated the deep dark calm of the house.

The house lifted a full two stories and an attic into the morning sky. At its top, a balustrade encircled the center of the nearly square crackerbox roof. Two gables sprouted from the roof in front of Heather, and below them, four windows matched on the first floor, glowed as if they were lit from behind by the rising sun.

On both the front and back, a two story porch rose to the eaves. Four square columns supported it, and a wide set of plank steps led to the front and rear doors. The windows, set behind the front porch were the ones that reflected the sunlight. They blazed with it and seemed to give a light to the house itself. Like the brilliant glance out of an intelligent face.

Heather was conscious that the smell of breakfast was growing stronger, and she half expected to see smoke billowing from one of the chimneys that marked the four corners of the balustrade. But there was no smoke.

Heather followed her nose and the road. She took a step closer to the house, then another.

She placed one foot on the steps half expecting them to crumble, but they were solid, seemingly more solid with each moment. Her footsteps echoed hollowly on the wood. Heather stopped only a moment on the large porch, then without thinking, she grasped the doorknob, and the large oak portal opened to her.

It swung inward on nearly silent hinges. The quiet whisper of its motion was the only sound she could catch.

Heather froze in the entrance, immovable, not daring to look into the building. A chill struck her. A coolness like a fresh, deep well or Grandma Benjamin's dark root cellar. She caught a fine whiff of raw spaded earth, but the smell of bacon grease and fresh biscuits overbore the mustiness and the brightness of the sun dispelled the chill, and she was able to force her eyes into the house.

It was empty.

Heather could look into the greatroom and the parlor, and a dining room opened out from the greatroom; the scent of breakfast came from there. There was no furniture, no trash, not anything. No, there was one thing, an evidence of time -- dust. A fine layer covered the floors and sills. She could feel it dampen her steps as she cautiously entered the doorway. She walked quietly. She let her feet fall gently on the raw plank flooring and searched for the sounds she knew must accompany the tastes she savored with her nose.

Between the parlor and the greatroom, a stairway reached upward into the still secret upper floors. And rushing down this throat, Heather again caught a chilly scent, bitter and cold, but it was once more overborne by the fresh clean smells of the frying pan and woodstove.

Her careful steps took her through the greatroom, and with only a slight glance to either side, she entered the dining room. A closed door separated her from the kitchen. In the darkened dining room, she could observe a line of light that slid under the kitchen door. A fine tracery of very old wall paper covered the walls, but she barely noticed this as she stepped to the kitchen door. The dust, she observed for the first time sprang up at her every step. A reminder of her visit was recorded behind her with each footfall, but she didn't care about that now.

Heather tiptoed closer to the kitchen door. She barely touched it, not yet letting it swing open on its spring hinges. She lowered her hand, all at once afraid of what she might find. Afraid, at first, that she would find nothing behind the door except more dust, and then again, fearful of what might reside in the abandoned house.

The silence of the place was unsettling. Heather longed suddenly for the open air and sunshine, but she knew she must open the door. A feeling of expectation had been with her since she first saw the house; she knew something was about to happen. She felt deep within her soul, the house, the time, the place beckoned her. She stood swaying on her heels, a blast of fear chilled her, and she caught even more strongly the cold mossy scent, this time, with it lingered a hard metallic bitterness, like rot.

Her heart caught in her throat as she pushed the door wide. With a long creak, it swung fully open, held there by its long rusted hinges.

The smell of breakfast and wood smoke, of coffee and fatback rolled over her, and she stepped back blinking, but her eyes grew wide; the room was empty.

With each moment she stood in the opening, she could feel the tension grow. She was to enter. She was to enter and know. Know what? her mind grasped at the thought.

Heather reeled, the chill struck her from behind. It sent a shiver up her spine and prickled the hairs on the back of her neck. She was afraid suddenly to turn, afraid to go forward, caught in the darkness of the dining room by a cold horror on one side and an unseen terror on the other. With a gasp, she stepped forward, and the kitchen door swung shut with a bang.

Like shadows, as if pieces of the mist congealed around Heather, forms burst out of the sunlit brilliance of the kitchen. She backed in surprise and caught herself against a table. It had not been there a moment before. Her mouth opened in a silent cry of amazement; there was no time to be afraid.

Out of the fireplace flue grew an old iron stove. It flowed with molten ease, black and massive from the bricks to the floor hardening like an icicle in a storm. In it, a fire billowed that Heather could feel that drove any hint of chill from the room. Chairs popped like mushrooms around the table, and Heather, too amazed to break her fall, felt herself sit heavily in one.

Bright curtains flashed across the windows. And as if unstuck from ages of disuse, they opened with a bang, rattled the panes, and let the fresh morning in. Heather's eyes widened with the view through the glistening clear window glass. The fields were cultivated, and the trees were pruned into orchard-like uniformity. A covey of small buildings and a privy dotted the clearings and traced the gentle line of the woods. Out in those fields, four or five coal black - midnight black men and women worked. Heather almost thought she could hear their voices, toiling with their hands, in song.

A blast of steam and a sizzle of grease brought her attention back into the room.

A whisper -- yes a word, she cocked her head and strained to hear.

On the woodstove a kettle burst into song. The bacon popped, and a wisp of smoke curled up from under a loose iron cover. She could hear a low buzz, a gentle hum like an electrical wire singing with power. The kettle lifted off the stove top, and Heather's vision was blocked.

The buzz became louder. It murmured with resonance. It shattered across the kitchen like the daylight plunging through the panes. It became a dark singsong voice...

"My, oh my, Miss Sibyl, the harvest haint barely started and those men gots a go runn'n off. They jus' don' know what they's miss'n."

Heather could see someone. A large black woman held the heavy kettle's handle with a towel. She clutched it with both hands and walked to a coarse server. Her gait was full and matched her girth, which was large and rotund, yet her steps demonstrated a grace that belied her size. She wore a plain and patched long dress, but it was made fine by a white, stained apron that covered most of its length. The woman's face was round like the rest of her, and a smile played continually across her features.

With a deft hand, she poured the kettle's contents into a china pot, there emanated the smell of fresh coffee. The figure was solid to Heather, so solid, that she felt she could have reached out and touched her, but even so, the edges were fuzzy, the boundaries ill defined, and Heather caught a mote of sunshine beaming through her.

With a sudden gasp of fear at this realization, Heather jumped out of the hard wooden chair and rushed to the back door. This opened to her as easily as the front. And, when she had it wide, the chill of the morning drove the fear out of her. The field before her was fallow and empty. No buildings or workers, no harvest or orchard, the sun even seemed bleak. Certainly less bright than the brilliance that seemed to flow into the kitchen.

When she turned around, the living kitchen burst again on her senses. The black woman walked heavily toward Heather and reached for the door.

Heather felt a cool chill as the woman's body touched and then flowed through her own! Then with a grunt the door was closed.

"Well, Miss Sibyl, do you think he'll say the words?" the black woman continued.

The ring of an iron pan on iron attracted Heather's attention. By the stove, a young white woman, a girl with cloth protected hands, clutched a Dutch oven. Her figure was brighter than

the other, and more ethereal. She likewise wore a long dress and stained apron, but her clothing was of a better quality and not patched at all. Lengthening strips trailed the long hem of the dress, however, it marked the age of the clothing, and the youth of the girl.

Heather stared in wonder. They seemed to not be able to see her. She walked quietly back to the table and touched its surface. It was hard and solid, but the surface was, in a way, as badly delineated as the figures. Some proper touch of reality was missing, and if she looked straight at things they shifted and were like mist before her gaze. Yet, when she looked at them out of the corner of her eye, they were completely real. But, most marvelous of all, in spite of the lack of visual definition, they were tangible -- she could feel them.

Heather walked over to the server, a faint warmth flooded from the coffee pot, but nothing like the heat it should have properly given off. She stepped to the stove. The heat of it didn't seem to increase much as she approached, and when she placed her hand quite near, there was not so much heat as the warmth of a beam of sunlight on her palm. She put her hand into the flames, and they darkened for a moment, billowing away from her fingers, but she felt no more heat, and yet, she could sense the warmth of the fire throughout the room.

As she removed her hand, she noticed the young woman stick a poker into the flames and coax it into its previous brightness. The girl ignored Heather completely. As if she didn't exist at all.

"I don't know and I don't care, Majorie. These men will just be bringing us to war. You know they won't let us be. The Yankees have got to get their federalist money from somewhere, and it's going to be us," the young woman punctuated her words with the poker.

"Now, Missy, Don' get riled up. You know Mr. Lee is sweet on you, and it don' matter what these men are goin' to cook up, they always got court'n on their mind."

"Oh, but Majorie you don't understand. If war breaks out, Columbus will go -- oh, they'll all go. I've heard them speaking about it. Even father will want to take off with them. He'll say the people expect it of him."

"Well, Miss Sibyl, he can't leave the harvest and that's a fact. Your brother isn't old enough to run this 'tation, hisself, and the boys," she gestured over her shoulder abruptly toward the other slaves in the field, "since my man died, they ain't a one that can take over runn'n the house much less the fields."

"Majorie," Sibyl said softly, "even John'll go."

"Nah, not our little Johnny," she frowned expansively and turned her head, her hands outstretched as if pushing the thought physically away from her.

"Even John."

Majorie's face became pensive, "Then that'll leave the place for us to run. Well...," she groaned largely, "God never planned for it, but I guess us women can keep a plantation on an even track even if those men go gallivant'n around the New Nited States."

"We wouldn't be the United States any longer. We'd be something different. Even something more than Louisiana. I don't know all what it's about, only that the Northern States are taxing us to death. Why," she turned the biscuits out of the Dutch oven with an angry thump, "we could barely keep up with the overhead last year and that was the best cotton crop we'd ever had."

"Yes ma'am, the children didn't miss noth'n, they even said how you didn't get a new fancy dress for the holidays, and even Easter. Miss Sibyl, how they missed that. They said you're the prettiest angel in Louisiana, and you ought to dress it."

Sibyl laughed, "Now the little colored children complain about my wardrobe. I guess I'll just have to shame them a little while longer, until we get rid of those awful tariffs." She grew sober, "Majorie, a war will wipe us out. You'll see our land growing just enough food to feed us. No more cotton, and without a cash crop, we'll be not much more than a sharecropper."

"No ma'am, don' you bother your head, those boys'll keep the place runn'n, see if they don'. An' she'll be putt'n out cotton long after whatever folderol the Legislature has worked out."

"My man was always too easy on 'em. I'll whup up them boys," she jerked her thumb out the window again, "I'll get 'em move'n, an' you'll have a new dress come Christmas. Your slaves

expects it."

They loaded the food on the server.

"Now that breakfast is made, who is going to finish it off?" Sibyl exclaimed with a shrug.

"We'll just save it for lunch. The Master's got to get back before noon, 'cause your Mr. Lee said he'd be by. And, if that don't finish it, I knows some empty pits out in the fields who'll lick the platter clean."

Sibyl took a biscuit and some bacon, "If Columbus is coming then I need to straighten the parlor and the greatroom. Would you send Martha up to clean and put the bedrooms straight."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now, Majorie, You know everything that I want fixed for dinner. Make sure it's done extra special, if Mr. Columbus Lee's to set to table with us."

"Yes, ma'am."

Sibyl turned to the back of the kitchen. And though Heather tried to squeeze out her line of sight, Sibyl seemed to stare directly at her. The girl was very pretty, her face thin but not hard. A wisp of golden hair curled appealingly across her forehead. Her mouth worked for a moment and a frown crossed her features. Sibyl cocked her head still looking directly at Heather and blinked, then she looked over her shoulder at Majorie, turned and pressed through the dining room door out of the kitchen.

Heather gave an inarticulate cry and rushed after Sibyl. Around her, the kitchen disappeared. It melted into old boards and musty paint. The dining room was empty and dark, and all Heather noticed was a dark chill streaming across the blackness that pressed her away.

Heather's heart raced. She released the door as if it burned her hand. She took a stumbling step backward. The kitchen was silent and closed. The air harsh with decay and bleak with age. Heather looked from side to side with latent terror. She sought the former comfort of the place, and found it cold, cold as death. Without realizing it, she discovered herself against the back door, and without a second look behind her, she threw open the door and rushed out into the

daylight.

In a fear filled run, Heather stumbled down the old plantation house's back steps. The opiate of the kitchen had worn off and given way to a more rational terror. She was immediately struck with the implication of her experience. For some reason, while she was in the phantom kitchen the word ghosts hadn't come to mind. Even now, Heather could barely make herself believe what she had experienced. She shied away from any hint of the supernatural, but nothing else could explain away the events of the last few moments.

She had been in a kitchen, an old kitchen in a very old house, and there two women, one black and one white who talked about a war coming. In the field, she had seen blacks working; they had to be slaves.

Digging in her heels, Heather turned to gaze back at the old house. The mist still lay on the field, and she stood at the far edge of it, right up next to the woods, not much further than the buildings she had seen from the kitchen windows. The house had been swallowed up in the mist, nothing was there -- now. Yes, now — all those things must have existed at some time. She pshawed the notion of ghosts. Well, then perhaps they were ghosts, but how could they hurt her; they'd been dead at least a hundred years.

Heather laughed, but the house had disappeared inside its mantle of mist and cypress trees. Heather wrinkled her brow. Maybe it had all been her imagination. She scrubbed the dirt with

the toe of her shoe. A weather beaten foundation was partly buried in the soil. Her mouth made an Oh. This was too small to belong to the plantation house, but it was in exactly the same place she had marked one of the outbuildings from the kitchen window.

She nearly took a step back toward the old house, but she remembered her fright, the quick end of the kitchen, the strange look on the girl, Sibyl's, face. Heather turned and made her way thoughtfully into the cypress woods.

Heather found the edge of the bayou after walking less than a hundred yards. She followed this around until it approached the old Mansfield road then finally came out at Jane's.

Jane Lee was sitting out on the porch waiting for her. She glanced up at Heather with a look of annoyance mixed with worry, "What took you so long, slow poke? How do you expect us to get anything done if you're not here on time."

"I got lost along the bayou," Heather's mouth formed a sly smile.

Jane shivered. Her fear of the backwoods was renown. She was a pretty blond haired girl. She wore a big ribbon in it that almost matched the attractive home made dress she had on. Her dress was clean and fresh and only a little faded. She was an only child who was pampered unapologetically by her parents. Her family wasn't rich, but they owned property, and they had plenty of enough to live on.

"Your father's not been opened for long, anyway," Heather wrinkled her nose. Let's get to work and maybe we can spend the rest of the day in town."

Heather and Jane had both just graduated from the same high school, the class of 1965, and they had wheedled this job from Jane's father.

Mr. Lee ran a small bait shop and country grocery. His store was far enough from Pleasant Hill that the big stores hadn't taken away his livelihood. He didn't think much of the girls

stocking and inventorying his place. He'd pay them enough to make it worth their while, and the job needed to be done, but he wasn't sure he could stand two girls in his store that long — all day, every day of the summer. He didn't think he could stand it even if one of them was his daughter.

Now, then, Heather Roberts, there was a girl he might not mind too much in the place. She came from a poor family. Her clothes were a little shabby, but she was a hard worker and usually quiet. Strange girl though, she'd won nearly all the scholarships available in their small township, but she still probably couldn't afford to go to college.

Funny thing was her family was once the richest in the Parish. Yes, he could probably stand Heather, at least the job would get done and done right.

Lee's Bait and Supply sat at the crossroads of the old Mansfield road and the Pleasant Hill highway. It was an old store, some parts of the building nearly a hundred years old, and the foundation had been put down, in stone, before the Civil War. The yard was grass and sand, an undelineated parking area, while a few ancient oaks stood right up next to the building.

The store had an old and weather-beaten sign above it that blocked off the top floor's front windows. It said simply 'Lee's Bait and Supply' and spread square wings above each side of the roof. The roof was a gabled gullwing that rose with a much more distinguished line than the lower floor deserved, but it had prevented the place from dying in obscurity. The building itself was a tourist draw, then there were the crickets.

Howard Lee had the fattest bait crickets in the Parish and maybe even in the State. He fed them his special feed mix and raised them himself. They were the first choice among the parish fishermen.

Inside the store, two long, wooden, mesh covered cricket boxes contained the thousands upon

thousands of fat insects that made Lee's so famous. Nearly as popular, a third long metal vat filled with fresh running water contained a million bright silver motes — minnows. The little fish were beautiful and nearly as tasty as the crickets to the bass, cats, and croppie, that is, if the local fishermen weren't just telling tales.

The inside of Lee's Bait and Supply was flavored with the scents of rotting timber, fresh paint, and the musty taste of half a million crickets. These smells vied for preeminence with one another in the store's dark airconditioned edifice. That's not to say they were overpowering, only a taste, an underlying taste, and not strong enough to wash out the other colorful smells of the place. Each of the cramped rows of goods and the coolerbox's corner had its own essence.

The store was really not all that dark, but entering from the outside in the depth of summer was like plunging into a cool black cave. In the wake of the blazing heat and light of outside, when you finally could see, you expected your breath to be expelled in icy plumes. The air was refreshing, invigorating, and all the more so, when you grasped a frost trimmed bottle of Coke-a-Cola from the coolbox and drank nearly all of it down in one long cool swallow. While you slaked your Louisiana summer induced thirst, Mr. Howard Lee would fill you a wire mesh tube full of his prize crickets and cork the funnel top tight. He'd tell you the best fishing spots in the Parish while he rang up your coke and crickets, and you'd be surprised at how little your escape from the sun outside cost. You might even go fishing after all.

Jane and Heather chatted while they entered the store. They knew just what they had to accomplish, and they settled down to work; Heather had done the same job in four other stores in the area since she was in the Middle School. She had been saving since then for college. Mr. Lee never asked her how many stores she still worked for, he knew she was thankful for any money she got. He knew, she probably put in part time hours at all of them. Jane was Heather's

ticket into his place, and her hope for a decent wage. Mr. Lee was almost sad that he had to share the salary between the girls. He could afford to send his daughter to college, but then, she probably wouldn't go.

The Lee's home sat at an angle behind the store. Its yard was full of bramble and old oaks. Mr. Lee had gotten rid of the cottonwoods long ago, so a few old stumps sprouted gentle green fronds that Mrs. Lee cut back every year. The yard's grass was always carefully trimmed, but like all Louisiana soil, it was knurly and hard, filled with ancient roots that poked unexpectedly out of the grass. They looked like gray arms just cresting the green sea of grass.

At variance with the color of the grass, three newly painted, green, metal lawn chairs graced the yard. They lingered under the yard's large central oak, and though fresh with paint, they were well worn. The chips of a thousand seasons of paint cascaded off their bent pipe legs. Their scalloped backs and drilled seats made them an icon common to every southern yard, announcing by their number the members of the family they represented. Mr. Lee dreamed of sitting in one this evening, watching the summer glow drain from the skies, eating his own peanuts and washing them down with supper's leftover sweet iced tea.

The house was old. Not nearly as old as the store, but vying closely. It was fresh with paint too, as if to say, though aged, it was still well and alive, and so, it was. Mr. Lee, like his father, and his father's father, who built the house, took a great pride in its age and well-being.

Even Mrs. Lee in her pretty frocks and printed dresses, all of which she made herself, except two, and those had come from the Penney's catalog. Even Mrs. Lee loved the house. It was small, but its three cramped bedrooms, its little living room, and quiet kitchen fit her. It had become her. She would die before she would live anywhere else. It was her house, and it had been paid for many times over by the care she had given it.

To the Lees their house was their life. It was the centerpiece of their lives binding each to the other. The house gave reality and worth to each. It represented the family. It was the family. And, if that made it like a living thing, then within it, the furnace was its life force.

A short unlighted hallway connected the bedrooms, bathroom, living room, kitchen and dining area. Its floor was the furnace grate. From those depths there always arose the faint sweet fragrance of gas. And, in the winter, when the furnace filled the house with a warm and living energy, that energy welled up from those black depths. If you looked very closely, in the dark, when the burners were unlit, you could see the faint blue glow of the pilot light. In the cool of a Louisiana winter the house felt frosty, in contrast to the burning summer. While you waited on the grate, the cold was excruciating. Then when you least expected it, with a fitful flash, an angry hiss of combustion, the gas would light sending its sweet scent and flooding warmth throughout the building.

If you lay there on the grate, you could imagine yourself caught in a flood of sunlight, or washed up on a tropical isle. The warm breeze whistled past your ears until the blazing points of flame slowly went out again. All that was left was the small blue reminder of the conflagration that waited to wake up the summer fires again.

In the summer, a rug covered the grate, but you could feel it, hard and metal-sharp under your bare feet even through the covering. Over the years, the smell of gas had slowly worked its way into the walls. When you first entered the house, the scent vied with a crisp taste of mildew, and the bacon grease odor of Mrs. Lee's cooking, but eventually you lost it except in the hallway.

Like all old southern houses, a faint tinge of mildew characterized its presence. It was the exhalation of the building like a taste of liquor on a man's breath. It spoke of the pervasive nature of the land and bayou. It was as if the buildings, with age, drank up the essence of the

land, and exhaled the mossy scent of the bayou with a sweet clarity.

Like the land, like the parish, like their family customs. The house had become the essence of the life of the Lees. Few could have told it, but their clothes, and their lives exuded the same scent as their house. Their customs and habits were intertwined with it as if they had become law. A law laid down in the wood and masonry of their dwelling. A law that fettered them to the land and to their existence.

Yet, they were pleased with it.

Jane and Heather talked all morning. Only through Heather's perseverance and experience did they get anything done at all. Heather didn't mention anything about the circumstances of that morning's shortcut, however. The incident was so unbelievable, so inconceivable, she didn't trust anyone with the knowledge.

In Heather's mind, the fear, the terror she had experienced in the house had been replaced with only curiosity. Heather's memories were not dreamlike, they were tinged with an essence of reality and a strength of purpose; Heather felt the house had more to tell her. Why she thought that, she didn't know, but something seemed to tug at her thoughts and involuntarily draw her attention toward the place.

But, where was the house? She couldn't remember ever seeing or hearing about an old plantation house out there near the bayou. As a child she had covered nearly every square inch of the land around her home, but she had never seen any old house, plenty of old cotton fields and burned out and buried foundations, but never had she heard of such a house.

While she and Jane counted cereal boxes in the back, Heather caught the unmistakable voice of Caleb Maily as it echoed through the store. Without a word of explanation to Jane, she rushed to catch the old black man as he walked to his beat-up ancient pickup truck.

"Mr. Caleb, Mr. Caleb," she called.

He turned around with a wrinkled and snaggletoothed grin, and in a voice deepened by age returned, "Little Heather Roberts, you are just more growed up every time I sees you. You haint come to visit me an' Mrs. Maily in a long time."

"I know Mr. Caleb. I promise to come by sometime this summer. Mom will be putting up some figs and plums."

The old man's face took on a look of ecstasy, "Oh, child, if you'd bring some of your mother's fig preserves..."

Heather smiled broadly, "You know I'd never forget your figs Mr. Caleb, but what I need now is a story. Have you ever heard of an old ruined plantation house down near the bayou fork."

Mr. Caleb was always a favorite with the children. He always had a story ready, especially about the old times.

"Well, child," he answered evasively, as if the words had suddenly dried up in him, "there were a few plantation houses back before the war between the states. The Lees, the Benjamins, and the Roberts each family had a plantation with slaves in these parts."

Heather blushed and looked down.

"There's no need to feel ashamed, Miss Heather," Caleb looked at her with old and wise eyes, "That time is gone. Those folks thought they were do'n right. And if it weren't for them, where would Mrs. Maily and Caleb be. Some place in the wilds of Africa. No Missy, I'd much rather be here. My grandmother worked on the Robert's plantation, and she said they was always treated like people."

Heather looked up at Caleb with expectant eyes.

"Now, concern'n plantation houses still standing. I'm not sure I know of a one," his eyes

slitted mysteriously, "except the Benjamin's."

"That's up north. What about down by the bayou?" blurted out Heather.

"Now... the Roberts' place was down there. That was your family 'bout the time of the Civil War, your great great grandmother and father's time."

"Is the house still there?" returned Heather breathlessly.

"Child, I don't rightly know. There's old tales told about the bayou - about the house..."

"Yes?"

Jane wandered up behind Heather and Mr. Caleb, "Hi, Mr. Caleb," she interjected.

"Hello, Miss Jane," the old man seemed relieved by the interruption. Mr. Caleb pulled out the battered pocket watch he'd carried almost 30 years, "I've got to go ladies." He pulled open the door of his old pickup. "Mrs. Maily will be expect'n me back. I gots to clean the chicken coop and slop them hogs or they won't be done."

Heather twitched her lips into a solemn line, "Good-by, Mr. Caleb."

As if discerning the girl's unhappy thoughts, Mr. Caleb said quietly, "I'll tell ye later, Miss Heather. I'll tell ye later."

She smiled a little, "Good-by."

The old black man climbed stiffly into his beat-up pickup truck and backed out of the parking lot.

"Come on, Heather," pronounced Jane as she turned around, "We'll never get finished at this rate."

Heather turned reluctantly. She would make that visit soon, maybe tonight, if she had time. She wondered if her mother had put up any figs early this year.