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1946-1947

LONG AFTER MIDNIGHT he arose and looked at the bottles fresh from their cartons, and put his hands up to touch them and strike a match gently to read the white labels, while his folks slept unaware in the next room. Below the hill on which their house stood the sea rolled in and while whispering the magic names of the lotions to himself he could hear the tides washing the rocks and the sand. The names lay easy on his tongue: *MEMPHIS WHITE OIL, Guaranteed, Tennessee Lotion Salve . . . HIGGEN'S BLEACH BONE WHITE SOAP*—the names that were like sunlight burning away dark, like water bleaching linens. He would uncork them and sniff them and pour a little on his hands and rub them together and

hold his hand in match light to see how soon he would have hands like white cotton gloves. When nothing happened, he consoled himself that perhaps tomorrow night, or the next, and back in bed he would lie with his eyes upon the bottles, racked like giant green glass beetles above him, glinting in the faint streetlight.

Why am I doing this? he thought. Why?

"Walter?" That was his mother calling softly, far away.

"Yes'm?"

"You awake, Walter?"

"Yes'm."

"You better go to sleep," she said.



IN THE MORNING he went down for his first view, close up, of the constant sea. It was a wonder to him, for he had never seen one. They came from a little town deep in Alabama, all dust and heat, with dry creeks and mud holes, but no river, no lake nearby, nothing much at all unless you traveled, and this was the first traveling they had done, coming to California in a dented Ford, singing quietly along the way. Just before starting the trip Walter had finished out a year's time saving his money and sent off for the twelve bottles of magical lotion that had arrived only the day before they left. So he had had to pack them into cartons and carry them across the meadows and deserts of the states, secretly trying one or the other of them in shanties and restrooms along the way. He had sat up

front in the car, his head back, his eyes closed, taking the sun, lotion on his face, waiting to be bleached as white as milkstone. "I can see it," he said, each night, to himself. "Just a little bit."

"Walter," said his mother. "What's that smell? What you wearing?"

"Nothing, Mom, nothing."

Nothing? He walked in the sand and stopped by the green waters and pulled one of the flasks from his pocket and let a thin twine of whitish fluid coil upon his palm before he smoothed it over his face and arms. He would lie like a raven by the sea all day today and let the sun burn away his darkness. Maybe he would plow into the waves and let them churn him, as a washing machine churns a dark rag, and let it spit him out on the sand, gasping to dry and bake in the sun until he lay there like the thin skeleton of some old beast, chalk-white and fresh and clean.

GUARANTEED said the red letters on the bottle. The word flamed in his mind. *GUARANTEED!*

"Walter," his mother would say, shocked. "What happened to you? Is that *you*, son? Why, you're like milk, son, you're like snow!"

It was hot. Walter eased himself down against the boardwalk and took off his shoes. Behind him, a hot dog stand sent up shimmers of fried air, the smell of onions and hot rolls and frankfurters. A man with a grained, ropy face looked out at Walter, and Walter nodded shyly, looking away. A moment later a

wicket gate slammed and Walter heard the blunt footsteps approaching. The man stood looking down at Walter, a silver spatula in one hand, a cook's cap on his head, greasy and gray.

"You better get along," he said.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I said the niggers' beach is down there." The man tilted his head in that direction without looking that way, looking only at Walter. "I don't want you standing around in front of my place."

Walter blinked up at the man, surprised. "But this is California," he said.

"You tryin' to get tough with me?" asked the man.

"No, sir, I just said this ain't the South, sir."

"Anywhere where I am is South," said the man and walked back into his hot dog stand to slap some burgers on the grid-dle and stamp them flat with his spatula, glaring out at Walter.

Walter turned his long easy body around and walked north. The wonder and curiosity of this beach-place returned to him in a tide of water and sifting sand. At the very end of the boardwalk he stopped and squinted down.

A white boy lay lazily curled into a quiet posture on the white sands.

A puzzled light shone in Walter's large eyes. All whites were strange, but this one was all the strangeness of them all rolled into one. Walter lapped one brown foot over the other, watching. The white boy seemed to be waiting for something down there on the sand.

The white boy kept scowling at his own arms, stroking them, peering over his shoulder, staring down the incline of his back, peering at his belly and his firm clean legs.

Walter let himself down off the boardwalk, uneasily. Very carefully he pedaled the sand and stood nervously, hopefully over the white boy, licking his lips, throwing a shadow down.

The white boy sprawled like a stringless puppet, relaxed. The long shadow crossed his hands, and he glanced up at Walter, leisurely, then looked away, then back again.

Walter walked closer, smiled, self-consciously, and stared around as if it was someone else the white boy was looking at.

The boy grinned. "Hi."

Walter said, very quietly, "Hello there."

"Swell day."

"It most certainly is," said Walter, smiling.

He did not move. He stood with his long delicate fingers at his sides, and he let the wind run down the dark economical rows of hair on his head, and finally the white boy said, "Flop down!"

"Thanks," said Walter, immediately obeying.

The boy moved his eyes in all directions. "Not many guys down today."

"End of the season," said Walter, carefully.

"Yeah. School started a week ago."

A pause. Walter said, "You graduate?"

"Last June. Been working all summer; didn't have time to get down to the beach."

"Making up for lost time?"

"Yeah. Don't know if I can pick up much tan in two weeks, though. Got to go to Chicago October first."

"Oh," said Walter, nodding. "I saw you here, I did, every day now. I wondered about that."

The boy sighed, lazing his head on crossed arms. "Nothing like the beach. What's your name? Mine's Bill."

"I'm Walter. Hello, Bill."

"Hi, Walt."

A wave came in on the shore, softly, shining.

"You like the beach?" asked Walter.

"Sure, you shoulda seen me summer before last!"

"I bet you got all burnt up," said Walter.

"Heck, I *never* burn. I just get blacker and blacker. I get black as a nig—" The white boy faltered, stopped. Color rose in his face, flushed. "I get plenty dark," he ended lamely, not looking at Walter, embarrassed.

To show he didn't mind, Walter laughed softly, almost sadly, shaking his head.

Bill looked at him, queerly. "What's funny?"

"Nothing," said Walter, looking at the white boy's long pale arms and half-pale legs and stomach. "Nothing whatsoever."

Bill stretched out like a white cat to take in the sun, to let it strike through to every relaxed bone. "Take off your shirt, Walt. Get yourself some sun."

"No, I can't do that," said Walter.

"Why not?"

"I'd get sunburned," said Walter.

"Ho!" cried the white boy. Then he rolled swiftly over to hush himself with one hand cupping his mouth. He lowered his eyes, raised them again. "Sorry. I thought you were joking."

Walter bent his head, blinking his long beautiful lashes.

"That's all right," he said. "I know you thought that."

Bill seemed to see Walt for the first time. Acutely self-conscious, Walter tucked his bare feet under his hams, because it had suddenly struck him how much like tan rain-rubbers they looked. Tan rain-rubbers worn against some storm that never seemed to quite come.

Bill was confused. "I never thought of that. I didn't know."

"Why, we sure do. All I got to do," said Walter, "is peel off my shirt and *boom* I'm all blisters! *Sure*, we sunburn."

"I'll be darned." Bill said, "I'll be gosh-darned. I should *know* these things. I guess we never think much about things like that."

Walter sifted sand in the palm of one hand. "No," he said, slowly, "I don't guess you do." He rose. "Well, I better get on up to the hotel. Got to help my mom in the kitchen."

"See you again, Walt."

"Sure thing. Tomorrow and the next day."

"Okay. So long."

Walter waved and walked swiftly up the hill. At the top he squinted back. Bill still lay on the sand, waiting for something.

Walter bit his lips, shook his fingers at the ground.

"Man," he said aloud, "that boy is *crazy*!"



WHEN WALTER WAS a very little boy he'd tried to reverse things. Teacher at school had pointed to a picture of a fish, and said:

"Notice how colorless and bleached this fish is from swimming deep in Mammoth Cave for generations. It is blind and needs no seeing organs, and—"

That same afternoon, years ago, Walter had rushed home from school and eagerly hid himself upstairs in Mr. Hampden's, the caretaker's, attic. Outside, the hot Alabama sun beat down. In the mothball darkness, Walter crouched, heard his heart drum. A mouse rustled across the dirty plankings.

He had it all figured out. White man working in the sun turned black. Black boy hiding in the dark, turn white. Why, *sure*! It was reasonable, wasn't it? If one thing happened one way, then the other thing would happen its own way, wouldn't it?

He stayed in that attic until hunger brought him down the stairs.

It was night. The stars shone.

He stared at his hands.

They were still brown.

But just wait until morning! This didn't count! You couldn't see the change at night, no, sir! Just wait, just wait! Sucking in

his breath, he ran the rest of the way down the steps of the old house and hurried to his mama's shack down in the grove and sneaked into bed, keeping his hands in his pockets, keeping his eyes shut. Thinking hard as he went to sleep.

In the morning he awoke and a cage of light from the one small widow enclosed him.

His very dark arms and hands lay upon the tattered quilt, unchanged.

He let out a great sigh, and buried his face in his pillow.



WALTER WAS DRAWN back to the boardwalk each afternoon, always careful to give the hot dog proprietor and his grill a wide go-around.

A great thing was happening, thought Walter. A great change, a progression. He would watch the details of this dying summer, and it would give him much to think of. He would try to understand the summer all the way to the end of it. Autumn rose in a tidal wave, poised over him, ready to drop, suspended.

Bill and Walter talked each day, and afternoons passed, and their two arms lying near each other began to resemble one another in an oddly pleasing way to Walter, who watched, fascinated with this thing occurring, this thing Bill had planned and so patiently bided his time for.

Bill traced sand patterns with one pale hand that day by day became a darker hand. Each finger was dyed by the sun.

On Saturday and Sunday, more white boys appeared. Walter walked away, but Bill yelled for him to stay, what the heck, what the heck! And Walter joined them playing volleyball.

Summer had plunged them all into sand-flame and green water-flame until they were rinsed and lacquered with darkness. For the first time in his life, Walter felt a part of people. They'd chosen to cloak themselves in his skin and they danced, growing dark, on each side of the high net, tossing the ball and their laughter back and forth, wrestling with Walter, joking with him, tossing him into the sea.

Finally, one day Bill slapped his hand to Walter's wrist bone and cried, "Look here, Walter!"

Walter looked.

"I'm darker than you are, Walt!" cried Bill, amazed.

"I'll be darned, I'll be gosh-darned," murmured Walter, moving his eyes from wrist to wrist. "Umnh-umnh. Yes, sir, you *are*, Bill. You *sure* are."

Bill left his fingers on Walter's wrist, a sudden stunned expression on his face, half scowling, lower lip loosened, and thoughts starting to shift places in his eyes. He jerked his hand away with a sharp laugh and looked out to sea.

"Tonight I'm wearing my white sport shirt. It sure looks snazzy. The white shirt and my tan—boy-oh-boy!"

"I bet that looks nice," said Walter, looking to see what Bill was gazing at. "Lots of colored folks wear *black* clothes and wine-colored shirts to make their faces seem whiter."

"Is that so, Walt? I didn't know that."

Bill seemed uneasy, as if he'd thought of something he couldn't handle. As if it was a brilliant idea he said to Walter, "Hey, here's some dough. Go buy us a coupla dogs."

Walter smiled appreciatively. "That hot dog man don't like me."

"Take the dough and go, anyhow. To hell with him."

"All right," said Walter, with reluctance. "You want everything on yours?"

"The works!"

Walter loped across the hot sands. Leaping up to the walk he passed into the odorous shadow of the stand where he stood tall and dignified and flute-lipped. "Two hot dogs, with everything on them, to go out, please," he said.

The man behind the counter had his spatula in his hand. He just examined Walter inch by inch, in great detail, with that spatula twitching in his lean fingers. He didn't speak.

When Walter got tired of standing there, he turned and walked out.

Jingling the money on his big palm, Walter walked along, pretending he didn't care. The jingle stopped when Bill caught hold of him.

"What happened, Walt?"

"That man just looked at me and looked at me, that's all."

Bill turned him around. "Come on! We'll get those hot dogs or I'll know why in hell not!"

Walter held off. "I don't want no trouble."

"Okay. Damn it. I'll get the dogs. You wait here."

Bill ran over and leaned against the shadowy counter.

Walter saw and heard plainly all that happened in the next ten seconds.

The hot dog man snapped his head up to glare at Bill. He shouted, "Damn you, blackie. You here again!"

There was a silence.

Bill leaned across the counter, waiting.

The hot dog man laughed hastily. "Well, I'll be damned. Hello, *Bill!* There's a glare from the water—you looked just like—What'll you have?"

Bill seized the man's elbow. "I don't get it? I'm darker than him. Why are you kissing *my* butt?"

The proprietor labored at his answer. "Hey, Bill, you standing there in the glare—"

"God damn you to hell!"

Bill came out into the bright light, pale under his suntan, took Walter's elbow and started walking.

"Come on, Walt. I'm not hungry."

"That's funny," said Walt. "Neither am I."



THE TWO WEEKS ended. Autumn came. There was a cold salt fog for two days, and Walter thought he'd never see Bill again. He walked down along the boardwalk, alone. It was very quiet. No horns honking. The wooden frontings of the final and last hot dog stand had been slammed down and nailed fast, and a great lonely wind ran along the chilling gray beach.

On Tuesday there was a brief bit of sunlight and, sure enough, there was Bill, stretched out, all alone on the empty beach.

"Thought I'd come down just one last time," he said as Walt sat down beside him. "Well, I won't see you again."

"Going to Chicago?"

"Yeah. No more sun here, anyway; at least not the kind of sun I like. Better get along east."

"I suppose you better," said Walter.

"It was a good two weeks," said Bill.

Walter nodded. "It was a very *fine* two weeks."

"I sure got tan."

"You sure did."

"It's starting to come off now, though," said Bill, regretfully. "Wish I'd had time to make it a good permanent one." He peered over his shoulder at his back and made some gestures at it with elbows bent, fingers clutching. "Look, Walt, this damn stuff is peeling off, and it itches. You mind taking off some of the stuff?"

"I don't mind," said Walter. "Turn around."

Bill turned silently, and Walter, reaching out, eyes shining, gently pulled off a strip of skin.

Piece by piece, flake after flake, strip by strip, he peeled the dark skin off of Bill's muscled back, shoulder blades, neck, spine, bringing out the pink naked white underneath.

When he finished, Bill looked nude and lonely and small and Walter realized that he had done something to Bill, but

that Bill was accepting it philosophically, not worried about it, and a great light shone in Walter instantly, out of the whole summer's time!

He had done something to Bill that was right and natural and there was no way of escaping or getting around it, that was the way it was and had to be. Bill had waited the summer through and thought he had something, but it wasn't really there all the time. He just thought it was there.

The wind blew away the flakes of skin.

"You been lying here all July and August for that," said Walter, slowly. He dropped a fragment. "And there it goes. I been waiting all my life and it goes to the same place." He turned his back proudly to Bill and then, half sad, half happy, but at peace he said:

"Now, let's see you peel some offa me!"