

Ghosts

One

A young man squatted stiffly in the damp grass in front of a small, canvas tent, the flap of the tent tied back and the just-rising sun flashing against the exposed corner of a small wooden cot, and a pair of roughed, brown workboots underneath the cot. There was a strange stillness about the camp this morning, a waiting kind of silence which filled the air like wind-blown ash, making it difficult to breathe, and which suggested, among other things, the unblinking vigilance of God.

The young man's name was Thaddeus Jacobs, and he was thinking about the past few days and a girl he'd only just come to know, only now he was wishing he hadn't, and all the while he was thinking his grayish-blue eyes were flashing about, impatiently, aggressively, like fish flashing about in the cool of a river. What the hell had he been thinking. It was one thing to head off down by the river. Maybe go for a swim. But to go back to her tent in the middle of the night. Then again it was only supposed to be the two of them. How the hell was he supposed to know. Then he thought of a few other things he should've done or should've thought and he became angry and his mouth filled with a bitter, coppery taste, and then a few minutes later the taste was gone. He did not see the older man approach, stand to one side of the small, canvas tent, elbows hanging at odd angles, and a prayerful uncertainty etched in a thin, weather-worn, oblong face. He did not hear the words angling down, quiet words, almost subdued in the morning blue, lingering.

"Thaddeus, hey Thaddeus, you okay? They're ready for you. They're up in the Reverend's tent. Come on Thaddeus, you know aint nothing else you can do, come on."

The young man said nothing. And the older man, having delivered his message, smacked his lips together, a look now of almost prayerful anticipation spreading across this thin, oblong face,

Ghosts

then stuffed a wad of tobacco into his mouth and chewed, chewed, looked to the young man and chewed some more, and then headed back across the field through the wet, wet grass, the young Thaddeus watching, thinking, watching, remembering,

the revival meeting a couple of nights before and the sheriff and the main tent collapsing and him and her ignoring the commotion and heading down to the river for a while but not to swim the two of them talking softly a lazy kind of talking the commotion of the camp a distant echo her moving closer asking him if he really loved her and when did he know and him not knowing what to say at first but then the words rolling out his mouth of course he loved her he had loved her since the moment she and her father had joined the Reverend, since that very first day they rolled in and her saw her there sitting up in the front of the wagon with a red-letter bible plopped in her lap and her father on the one side and the good Reverend Jacobs on the other, but he never thought they'd get to talking, she troubled him too much for that, every time he got near her he couldn't seem to get his mouth to work right, her giggling at that and telling him his mouth was just fine , then the two of them not talking, and then the commotion of the camp had quieted and they headed off to her tent, the soft, hazy light of a single lantern on a hook, the girl slipping inside, slipping out of her dress, her soft lace girdle, the pink of her skin budding up and the arc of her hips flashing in the lamp light, and then she was stretched out on the cot, her clothes scattered about the ground, motioning for him to join her, which he had done, losing himself in the emotion of the moment and the nakedness of both of them, like losing his entire soul, he had thought, which was all right by him, but then the flap of the tent had blown open suddenly, or been thrust open, and the two of them had looked up to see what it was, the warm dark shell of the night exposed, a warm wind then blowing through the opening, and there they saw the Reverend Jacobs himself in the dark of the opening, a large black hat on his perspiring, balding head, an oil lamp in his hand, the yellowish, oily light mixing with the light of the other oil lamp, the light too much now, the girl and the young man blinking in the sudden glare, but as the good Rev-

The Conjure Man

erend stepped into the tent he was unaware of the two on the cot, or so it seemed, the canvas flap still flap flap flapping with the wind of his presence and the Reverend trying to grab hold and pull it shut but unable to and then setting his lantern on the ground and getting a firmer grip and then tying the flap securely, and still unaware, for he wasn't looking directly at the cot even then but past it to the heap of the girl's clothing on the ground, the girl herself only half-recognized in her nakedness, and the young man seeming a part of the girl, the Reverend flinging his own coat onto the pile, then loosening his tie, his shirt, his pants, and all the while the Reverend's mouth was flap flap flapping also, how he knew it was late, he'd have been there sooner but the tent was down on account of that blithering, bumbling fool of a young sheriff, still down as it turned out, but he'd given up on it for the night,

Then the memory faded and Thaddeus put on his boots and followed the other, older man across the sunny, dew-grassy, tent-dotted field towards the waiting reverends, towards a long, black table and a narrow white tent. He could almost see them. The Reverend Jacobs and two other ministers of the camp walking slowly towards the long white tent, the day just breaking, the good Reverend mumbling to himself about wagging tongues, the other two a step or so behind, their tongues wagging in agreement, and then they were through the white canvas flap and inside, the interior strangely dark with the sudden morning blue breaking full across the field outside, and within the dark dark tent the smell of brushed leather and Castile soap, and then the Reverend Jacobs sitting down behind a long, black table, the other two following, still a step or so behind, lighting the lanterns on either side of the table and then sitting down also, and the darkness inside somehow darkening in the lamp light, deepening, the three talking amongst themselves for a moment then stopping, looking up at the open flap, the brightening triangle of morning blue outside but not entering this place of the long long table, the three waiting reverends, each rigid in his silence, each burning with the self-righteous infallibility of men who see with the eyes of God.

Ghosts

Thaddeus walked into the tent and was instructed to kneel, which he did, his body swaying slightly on the uneven earth, and then he looked up at the waiting reverends, at the light of infallibility shining from the shadows. He asked the good Reverend and the others what it was he had done that they wanted to see him. The others looked to the Reverend, and the Reverend said he knew the moment he'd laid eyes on the boy, from the moment Thaddeus first came into his care, he'd known the boy was no good, but he had turned a blind eye, so to speak, in the fragile hope he could mold the boy, tear him loose from the rigid, inexorable grip of the devil, but to no avail, he could see that clearly now, there is no excuse for your behavior, such a wild and utter disregard for the sanctity of the laws we live by, I will not tolerate it any more, I will not tolerate such moral turpitude, what did you think you were doing with this girl, good Lord, son, to shame her so beneath the umbrella of my care, the umbrella of this ministry, my ministry, and her father, the good Reverend Fillmore, a witness to this shame, what you have done Thaddeus, I took you in and gave you my name and in return you have committed an unspeakable, an unpardonable sin, and I am sorry for you, I truly am, but I suspected all along this day would come, and here it is, I have no choice now but to see that you never set foot in this camp again.

On and on he went, his words flickering in the tentshadow like the yellowish, gloomy light of the oil lamps, and every now and then the other two would nod in instinctive, tacit, simultaneous agreement, particularly the girl's father, the good Reverend Martin Fillmore. And the young man heard the words, or so it seemed, but they had little effect. He was beyond the angry incoherence of this man who was not his father. Him thinking again, remembering again,

how the good Reverend had moved towards the cot and then stopped, a black shadow against the light of two lanterns, the blackness deepening with rage, and then a moment of inarticulate, gurgling sounds, as of someone being strangled, and then a rush of anger, you harlot, you harlot, the words rushing also, the girl squirming out from beneath the young man and then up from

The Conjure Man

the cot, screaming, then running past the shadow, past the words, struggling with the flap then into the night, and the young man after the girl, but the shadow grappling with him, grip of the devil it seemed, then the young man breaking the grip, the rage, you harlot, you harlot, then the shadow stumbling into the side of the tent and the tent falling and the lanterns falling also and the fire scattering upon the ground, spreading, the canvas beginning to smoke, and the young man looked to the fire and then to the shadow of the Reverend, which was not moving, then to the fire again, the fire speaking, leave him be he belongs to me his bone his flesh his soul are mine they are not yours you do not need him alive you do not want him alive to save him would be a mistake you know that you must know that he will not thank you so go and leave him to me go and the girl is yours no one will ever know, then the fire burst into laughter, a taunting, eviscerating laughter, the flames becoming brighter and brighter, but in spite of the warning, the young man grabbed hold of the Reverend's arms and pulled him free of the burning tent, the glint of the fire showing itself on the dry dry grass and the two of them there and no one else, not even the girl, and him thinking why, why had he done it, why had he pulled him out, maybe he could put him back, but the moment had already passed and the next thing he knew a crowd of men and women stood in a ragged half-circle behind him, behind the Reverend, the tent fire burning just a few yards away and the cinders showing themselves orange against the sky, and then the men and women moved closer, wondering at the young man's nakedness, wondering at the heavy, unmoving heap of the Reverend, also naked but seeming clothed, the impenetrable shadow of righteousness blurring the line between faith and reality, or so it seemed, and then slowly, even painfully, with an almost theatrical flourish, the Reverend opened his eyes and looked at the wondering men and women, some of the men shaking their heads and slipping off into the crowd, but the rest crowding closer and offering the Reverend a chew of tobacco or a snort from a jug, and the women crowded around too, pushing the men aside and sneering at their offerings and wiping the Reverend's brow with aprons or scarves and their voices piping up

Ghosts

with awe and indignation, what happened, was he all right, how did the fire start, was it Thaddeus, what's the matter with that boy, no wonder you was in shock Reverend, here let me get you something, Lord a mercy, what got into that boy's head do you think, and as the voices merged with the cinder-filled dark, the Reverend turned his eyes from the crowd to the young man, the eyes of the crowd following, then falling upon his naked young skin, and Thaddeus looked first at the grim-standing crowd assembled there, the yellowish glow of the fire showing itself on their faces, and then he looked into the face of the silent, raging, recuperating Reverend, the fire showing itself there also, but only in the eyes, for the Reverend's face was strangely obscured by shadow, and in that instant, the young man knew that the fire had spoken the truth,

Again the memory faded, the Reverend still speaking, the others still nodding, have you nothing to say, your actions alone are reprehensible, but that you have nothing to say is surely cause for concern, the devil himself could boast no greater apathy for good than you, Thaddeus, are showing now by your silence, well I am done with you, I've done my best, but it is no use. Then he stopped speaking, sat back in his chair, arms folded across his chest, and he stared at the young man from the glinting shadows, the young man nodding now, but indifferently.

Then the other two leaned forward, a head on either side of the good Reverend Jacobs. They looked to the young man and then spoke, quietly, almost inaudibly, first one, the good Reverend Fillmore, having returned from Jasper county the evening before and only then finding out about his daughter, first the Reverend Fillmore, and then the other filling in.

"Thaddeus, I'm not blaming you for what you did, only God knows I've a right. She is, after all, my only daughter. But I am not a vengeful man. What's done is done. All I ask is that you repent of your sinful ways."

"Yes, Thaddeus. Repent."

"It is not too late. Though you may no longer remain here, and I agree with your father, the Reverend, on this, it is not too late to save your immortal soul."

The Conjure Man

“Yes, Thaddeus. We are all concerned with your salvation. Your father most of all. But listen now to what the good Reverend Fillmore has to say. Who better to instruct you than the father of the very girl you have tried to corrupt?”

Then the voices stopped a moment, waited for the young man to respond, and the young man looked up at the men who were speaking to him, the dim, dark, heavy light of the lamps burning on either side of the table, but now the light was not shining beyond even the glass, or so it seemed, the waiting reverend faces obscured by the darkening darkness of the tent, and all the young man could think was he is not my father, this one, he was never my father, I have no father, you have mixed it up, and so he said nothing.

Then the voices continued.

“Do you think he understands what is happening here?”

“Yes, Martin. I think he does.”

“Then there is nothing more we can do,”

So the voices stopped again, and the two men sat back in their chairs and folded their arms and stared out from the shadows. Still Thaddeus said nothing. There was nothing to say. Always he has been against this one who was not his father, but up until the last few days it had been an unexpressed, groping sort of opposition, something felt but not known, as a small child feels, but now he was no longer a child, he understood his opposition, but he did not understand the others, what the hell was the matter with them, couldn't they see, they were all of them there after the fire, how could they not see, he was not the only one naked, but no, of course they couldn't see, you couldn't say anything against this man, not so anyone would believe you, so why would they believe their own eyes, and then the young man looked up at the unblinking face of this one who was not his father, could not really see the face in the oily gleaming obscurity of the lamp light, then the young man was filled with a rage and a longing and an emptiness and fear all at once, but still he said nothing.

Then the meeting was over, and Thaddeus walked from the tent of his banishment and he was thinking of nothing in particular, not even where he might like to go. The strange, watchful

Ghosts

silence from before had given way to the shock of a morning already there, the men and women now stumbling from their tents, the grumble of put-upon voices, a “where’s the wood” and a “hurry up with that there water there’s coffee needs making,” and the cookfires smoking with the smell of side meat and bread. But Thaddeus was not hungry. And he had nothing to pack.

So he left.

The Conjure Man

Two

For a time after he left the camp he walked the back country roads of Barclay county, a couple of cars dusting past, an old black woman in bib overalls and a mule and a cart and the mule with an ear lopped off, a prison chain-gang working up ahead and then the trucks and wagons moving on. But these country roads offered young Thaddeus no comfort from the suddenness of his banishment, and no escape into the future either. He suddenly wondered where he was going and what he was going to do, and then it occurred to him that the only life he knew was back among those Saturday night penitents and the small, canvas tents and eating soup in a ditch by the side of the road and then moving on to the next town, maybe he'd have to go back, maybe there wasn't anywhere else to be, and this thought left him with a burning sensation in his stomach and again the bitter taste of copper in his mouth. But he did not turn around, and then in the heat of his bewilderment he heard a wagon coming up the dry dry road, coming up behind him, the steady clop clop clopping of two horses, the wagon slowing, and then a man spoke out.

"You need a lift, son?" He was a skinny man, unshaven, his face twisted into a kind of perpetual snarl, but he seemed unaware of his disfigurement. When he spoke the words seemed to roll out of the side of his mouth. "You're more than welcome. I've plenty of room. Besides, I could use the company."

For the longest time neither man spoke. The brownish green of the fields on either side soaking up the heat of the day, the black line of uncut woods shimmering in the distance, always in the distance, it seemed. Every now and then the skinny man would lean forward, soberly, earnestly, give the reins a jerk and yell at the two browns to giddyap there and get a move on, but

Ghosts

the two browns ignored him, clop clop clopping steadily, unimpatiently, as if the only time were now, the only place here. So the wagon moved on, past the fields on either side, past the unattainable woods, the skinny man not quite in control. Then a disfigured face turning towards Thaddeus.

“Just like women they are.”

The young man nodded, looked to the horses.

“Worsen being married.”

The young man nodded again. He had never been married.

“I knowd this fellow once, wasnt much older than you is now, and this fellow had hissself a wife just wouldnt stop talking, jabbing like a jaybird about what she done that day what she hadnt done what she shouldve done when was they going to visit her mother when was he going to buy her that silk scarf from out the catalogue her mother had told her about marrying a fellow like him and on and on and on.

“Of course it come to this fellow that if he stayed around much longer his ears was going to be hanging down to his knees, so one night, had to been around midnight cause that women she wouldnt shut up till most everyone was asleep, so one night this young fellow packs up heading he dont know where he dont care, and by and by he come on some railroad tracks, so he figures to wait on a train. He didnt wait more an twenty thirty minutes fore one swing into sight, and then this young fellow he was running long side it, and then he hopped on board. He stayed on that train for three whole nights and three whole days before he even thought to get off. He figured he wunt the marrying kind.”

The skinny man stopped speaking a moment, his wrists jerking the reins, a giddyap here and a get a move on, the two browns ignoring his efforts, then a shrug of his shoulders and a settling back into his seat.

Then he continued.

“Well, wunt but a month went by and he found hissself with a quiet boarding house room. Found hissself with a job hauling bricks. And then he found hissself with another wife. He didnt remember how it happened, but it did just the same, and this second one was worse than the first. She’d talk and talk until her

The Conjure Man

head would just sort of pop off and fall to the floor, and then she'd pick her head up, wipe it clean with a damp towel, set it back on her shoulders, and then she'd start talking all over again. Wasnt long before this young fellow he figures it is time to go, so early one morning, had to been just after dawn this time cause that second one she liked to watch the sun come up, he packs up, leaves his room and his job hauling bricks and his matrimonial bliss, and heads out into the woods, and by and by he come on some more railroad tracks, and before he even think on a train one come swinging into sight, and this young fellow he was running not a thought in his head, and then he hopped on board."

Again the skinny man stopped speaking. He jerked the reins a little bit harder and cursed the browns under his breath. Then he winked at Thaddeus and went on with the rest of his story.

"Well that fellow he stayed on that second train for seven nights and seven days. Wanted to leave his second wife even further behind than the first one. Which he did. Found hisself another room like before, only it wunt as quiet. Found hisself another job too, only it wunt bricks. And then he found hisself another wife. Or just about. There they was standing at the altar, and this one was worse than the first and the second tied together. Took her ten minutes just to say "I do." She'd just about talked his ears off before they even got out of the church, so he left her on the steps. She didn't even see him go she was so busy talking about how hot it was in her wedding dress she was soaked clean through hoped he didnt mind none but she was going to peel it off soon as she could hang it up to dry, and then she was laughing and talking and talking some more. By the time she seen she was talking to herself, he was already down the road to the train yard, and the next thing he found hisself an empty boxcar on a train heading south. Folks they say his ghost is riding that train to this day. Only way he ever found some peace and quiet."

And with that the skinny man stopped speaking altogether and his disfigured face twisted itself into a smile. The young man returned the smile. He wondered what life in an empty boxcar might be like. A life of unending freedom, he thought, a life

Ghosts

where who you were and where you were going was never a question, a life of going and going and never returning. It wouldn't matter then his parents had left him in the tent of a traveling preacher show the day he was born. The Reverend Jacobs used to tell him how lucky he was not to been thrown in a ditch. But it wouldn't matter any more. He'd be out on his own and no one to say a word, and then the Reverend Jacobs and what he used to say, and everything that had happened with the girl in the tent, none of it would matter.

"We almost there."

"Where?"

"Up ahead there."

A skinny arm hung in the air, wavering, pointing, a couple of side-rail trucks in the heat-shimmering distance, and also some wagons, and Thaddeus could see a group of men, some squatting along the side of the road, looked to be black, looked to be eating from tin plates and drinking from tin cups, then some standing in the ditch, some on the road by the trucks, some in back of the wagons a ways down from the squatters, looked to be white, well-fed, finished with their own plates, looked to be holding shotguns, arms cocked, ready, vigilant, watching the squatters eat. The skinny man pulled in his arm, and Thaddeus caught the glint of a deputies badge on his shirt, which he had not noticed before.

"Hey, Hurly. What been keeping you?"

The voice came from a burly sort, reddish beard, belly lapped over his belt, a shotgun dangling from his hand. The man stepped to the side as the wagon slowed, stopped. Hurly nodded. The young man name of Thaddeus looked to the shotgun.

"Hey Bill."

"Hurly, you sure the slowest sombitch I ever know. Them browns still giving you trouble?"

Hurly smacked his lips together and grinned.

"Worsen being married."

"Who you brung along?"

"He didn't say. Just some fellow I give a ride to."

"Where's he going?"

"He didn't say about that neither."

The Conjure Man

Then the men drew closer and spoke in low, guttural voices and looking over to Thaddeus and then a burst of gruff laughter. And beyond the laughter of these two Thaddeus could hear the guarded almost inaudible murmurings of the blacks, like the sound of a river at night, and there was laughter there too, but softer, almost like sighing. Then the heads drew apart and the one named Bill motioned to Thaddeus with his gun.

“Say, boy. You hungry?”

Thaddeus smiled weakly, nodded, his eyes on the seemingly poised shotgun. Then the gun pulled back and another burst of gruff laughter.

“Hell, boy, I wasn’t gonna shoot you. Just wanted to know if you really was hungry, that’s all. Go on, get something to eat if you’ve a mind. It wont kill you. Long as you dont mind eating after all them niggers.”

So Thaddeus climbed down from the wagon and made his way past the squatting blacks to the back of the dinner wagon and a plate of beans and some cornbread and a tin cup of water. He was mostly thinking how hungry he was, but he was also aware of the black squatters watching him, silent now, uneasy, wary, waiting until he had moved on with his plate before they continued eating and drinking and talking and laughing, as if he alone were responsible for putting the chains on their feet. He sat down in the dry dry grass and began to eat, far enough away, and again there was the quiet murmur of black voices. Then one voice swelled above the rest and began to tell a story.

This was the story.

“Seems dere was dis convic wokin on dis here chain gang some years pas only he wunt so happy like we all is about all de tasks dem bosses had fuh him to do an de whippins dey done give out when dem tasks wunt done de way dey wanted. One time he come in and dey axed him how much cottin he done picked and when he tole em dey said dat wunt good enough so dey laid him flat across a table whip him bloody wid a strop. Dere was so much blood seem like Noah an his ark be coming long any minute, an dem bosses dey was lookin roun fuh ol Noah like maybe dat nigger he was gonna climb on board get away.”

Ghosts

The other blacks started laughing to themselves with that, but Thaddeus wasn't sure what they were laughing about. The whites with the shotguns weren't listening.

“Anyhows dis here nigger he wunt so happy about all dat like i said an he started talkin to hisself bout what he was gonna do. First one side of his mouth open up like so, an den de other side, an de first side sayin was about time he done scape from dis here prison farm an de second sayin how he gonna do dat and de first sayin de nex time dey wokin out de swamp he gonna take off an de second sayin what he gonna do bout dem chains round his feet and de first sayin dat once he done reach dat swamp de bosses and de hounds dey wunt never gonna fine his trail so he take his time about dem chains and de second sayin how if he done met up wid some hungry ol gator and de first sayin he be better off dead in de belly of some gator den wokin de res of dis here life wid dem chains on his feet an de second he sayin he dont know about all dat but he willin give it a try, an den dey was both grin-nin at each other cause dats what dey decided to do.”

And the voice stopped a moment, the blacks nodding, some looking to the long grass of the field like they were trying to gauge the distance to the nearest swamp, not at all bothered by the possibility of meeting up with an alligator, or so it seemed. Then the voice continued.

“Well de nex time dat chain gang was wokin out de swamp dis here nigger he was ready to go. Come time fuh dinner dem niggers gather roun de kettle den eatin an all de bosses dey standin roun an hardly watchin what goes so dis here nigger he done slip away easy as pie an den he was runnin fuh de swamp. Wunt long he done foun hisself smack in de middle some black water an dere wunt much to see cept some black green trees risin from de muck an some moss hang down from de branches. Well wid dat dis here nigger he done set hisself down on a big ol log and he start a talkin to hisself again about what he was gonna do nex.

“First voice sayin he tired of runnin so he jus gonna rest up a spell on dis here log an de second voice sayin de middle of a swamp aint no place to be restin and de first sayin dere aint

The Conjure Man

nothin he can do he feel de need to shut his eyes dey gonna shut jus like dat an de second he was about to answer somethin smart when a blackgreen gator come bustin up trough de grass its mouth wide open its teeth sparkle in de black black of dat niggers eyes, an he give one look an he shut dem eyes he hopin dat gator wunt after him, only it was, an de nex thing happen dat gator come chomp down wid dem teeth.

“It was sure some lucky day fuh dat nigger cause all dat gator done was bite trough dem chains. But when dat nigger he open his eyes, he wunt thinkin bout chains or no chains, no sir, wunt no time fuh thinkin at all cause when he open his eyes, all he see was dat gator open up his mouth take a second bite, and wid dat de nigger he was gone running fas as he could go, so fas he done lef a trail of fire burn trough de grass, and it wunt long fuh de whole swamp was burnin, an dat gator he wunt able to see from all de smoke, so he let dat nigger go, but dat nigger he aint know dat, so he runnin an runnin an runnin, an fuh he know what what he done run all de way back to de chain gang. De rest of de niggers dey was done eatin by den, an de bosses dey was roundin em up send em back to wok. Poor ol nigger. He foun hissself wokin right along wid de rest. Had to wok on a empty stomach too. Dem bosses never did fine out he done run off. An he never tole em neither. But dey did see how his chains was broke, an by de by dey done slap some new ones on his feet fuh he took another step. Aint nothin like a new set of chains on a niggers feet keep him in one place. And dat de truth.”

And with that the one voice stopped, the hum of the words suspended in the air, and some of the blacks were nodding their heads some more, and some were laughing to themselves or maybe talking softly, and some were rubbing where their own chains cut into their ankles.

The story was over.

“Thats enough of that now. You niggers back to work.”

“Yes boss.”

“Get them kettles and them plates and all back on the wagons.”

Ghosts

“Yes boss.”

“You niggers get a move on.”

“Yes boss.”

“We gonna work a field down the road a piece.”

“Yes boss.”

And the young man name of Thaddeus looked to the road, to the two trucks moving out, to the wagons moving slowly from the ditch, kettles bouncing about in the back, to the blacks moving along, slowly also, steadily, moving but unmoved, a thin black line wavering in the heat of the day, chains dragging in the dust, and then to the whites, some walking alongside the blacks, shotguns lowered, waiting for one or two to make a break for it, perhaps, and some walking a step or so to the rear, not so eager, laughing softly, and some not laughing, and then the trucks and the wagons and the blacks and the whites were gone.