Confederates

by Charles Dodd White

I knew I spoke out of turn when I asked my father's old friend Charlie Jobe what he thought would come of moving to the veterans' camp, or "Village of the Deranged", as the newspaper has since taken to calling it. That was their description after all the trouble with the State Police. At the time, though, it seemed to me nothing more than a gathering of old drunks and madmen living out of tents and plyboard hovels. For Charlie, though, it was something else.

"It takes guts," he said, thumbing his middle. "Guts and a three thousand dollar community lien."

"Community lien?" I asked, not hiding my suspicion.

He swatted at my words like they were a cloud of no-see-ums.

"That's what they call it. I'm not particular about their legal doings. It's over there in Seneca, in South Carolina. They had it on the evening news just last night."

Charlie leaned back in his metal folding chair, balancing his weight with the one good foot pressed flat against the pine slatted floor, the same floor I helped him cobble together from shipping pallets we stole one midnight a couple of falls back from the loading dock behind Lowe's.

"Listen to me," he tipped his head with intent, his skull harrowing from crown to brow.

"I'm listening."

"Your daddy would understand what I'm saying."

Thereby he conjured up the old ghost, and I knew I was in for one hell of a long afternoon if I didn't keep the conversation moving.

"Where are you going to get three thousand dollars?" I asked, knowing I would surely cringe at the answer.

He cleared his throat and looked off at the side yard, a little graveyard of rusted engine blocks and mechanical doodads. He once made a living swapping automobile parts for groceries or booze with the local hillfolk.

"I was hoping you could give me a ride down to Cherokee," he

said, lifting his chin a little and squinting at the sun, wearing his cracked mask of wounded pride.

"Cherokee?" I asked. "What's in Cherokee that has anything to do with three thousand dollars?"

As soon as the question was out of my mouth, I knew what he had in mind.

The casino.

"I got my VA disability check just yesterday," he said, patting his prosthesis, as if he could sound out the value of his lost limb with that hollow little whack. It was the same leg he used to remove at night and then dangle above my head on late mornings when I'd overslept at the deer camp. You can believe it worked. There are few things in this world more effective at getting you out of the bed than a levitating limb sporting a jungle boot.

There was no reasoning with him now. His mind was committed, and I realized I had no earthly choice but to help my father's dear friend.

We left early Friday afternoon because my painting job cut loose sooner than I'd been led to believe. I had a change of clothes in a black duffel in the back of the cab, but Charlie stumped out and rattled his stick against the Chevy's door while the engine was still running, the valves rattling.

"Come on, we can still beat the rush. They's plenty truckstops where you can change and clean up."

I considered explaining stopping now or later amounted to the same thing, but he toppled in and beat the dash with the flat of his palm, urging the pick up on like it was a slow mule. I hauled the transmission down to Drive and eased out onto the road to the white hot sounds of popping gravel. Charlie's grin was as wide as greed itself.

Once we were on the highway, he rifled through the glove box, filing through my uncased cassettes, kissing his teeth when he came across something he considered worthwhile. He lingered over my Woody Guthrie, my Kris Kristopherson, my Cash. One radio speaker was out so he had to wrench the silver knob all the way around until

the guitar and breath rasped and squawked from the perforations in the passenger side door. He hummed along, shaping his mouth to the words he strained to recall.

For some reason, his singing reminded me of the old times with Dad and him, spitting rocks and dust on dirtbikes, scrabbling all over Kingdom Come looking for signs of game--tracks or scat. Charlie and my Dad a pair to behold, crippled up Vietnam geezers roaring through the woods motocross style with me suckered against one of their backs like some tumor realized full with hair and eyeballs. The motors huffing and screaming over my pleas and each of them laughing like redneck devils on holiday from hell.

Things started to go wrong just outside of Sylva. The tape deck choked. "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" wrung up bad, stretching out Robbie Robertson's voice like some runaway child put to the rack. Charlie nearly went through the windshield with rage.

"Goddamn outdated..."

Once he managed to recover, he removed the tape, fiddled and frowned.

"You need to upgrade to CDs. This is trash."

He cradled the slack amber tape on the tips of his index and middle fingers while carefully winding the plastic spool with the soft motor of his pinky. The tangle refused to budge and he flung it back in the glove compartment, drawing out an old Skynyrd instead. "Free Bird" soared.

It wasn't long before he had to pee. There was nothing along the way but river guide services advertising that the indoor restrooms were for paying customers only. Normally, Charlie'd drop trou on the side of the road, but the traffic was picking up and he worried about piss blowback from the vehicles whipping by.

Down the way, we found a place. I parked and followed Charlie inside a tourist shop with my small duffel slung over my shoulder. The on duty clerk eyed me intently as I walked back, figuring me a threat to his vast collection of flamingos, Lincoln Logs, water pistols, books on tape and imitation headdresses. I gave him the finger for no reason in particular.

The restroom was a small partionless square with a single working toilet. Anonymous stains and biological splatters. The smell was like the inside of a hospice. While Charlie leaned over the commode, I turned to the wall and stripped out of my working coveralls, changing into jeans and a tee shirt. I sealed my dirty work clothes with a single sharp zip.

The toilet flushed and Charlie came out to run water over his hands.

"You sure about this, Charlie?" I asked. "Your whole check, I mean, that's a lot of fucking money..."

His eyes met mine in the mirror, suddenly making me ten years old again. That was that.

Once back on the highway, Charlie decided to forsake the tape deck for a shitkicker station out of Knoxville. The signal was too weak, though, and he soon shut it off.

"You're a stupid sonofabitch, you know that?" he said. "Ticking off that clerk for no good reason."

He shook his head and let his hand slip outside the window, catching air. Heat and humidity batted at us like a pair of slow children.

"How long are you gonna go on living like this?"

I had known this was coming, dammit, but here it was.

"Like what, Charlie?"

"Like every other hardhead in that family of yours. I swear to God. I'll never understand it. More wasted brains than the devil would ever need. You painting houses for a living, with the education you got. Goddamn waste. Boy like you living like he was born in a cage."

He reared up on one cheek and drew a glass maple syrup bottle from his cargo pocket. I smelled the whiskey as soon as he unscrewed the black cap and took a nip.

"What happened to that flask I got you at Christmastime?" I asked, trying to turn him aside from the road he meant to take.

He shrugged, not giving in.

"Now you know I loved your Daddy, boy. More than if he were my own brother. But he'd be a sorry sight to behold if he were here to

see you following down that same way that took him."

I wrapped my fingers tight to the heavy dial of the steering wheel, thinking before I said anything. I knew the story Charlie had planned for me already. It was family history, well-known and overworn. My father, Thomas Hilliard, the best of his kin, come back from Vietnam and gone to Emory on the GI Bill. A self-made man, the whole world spread before him like a Technicolor dream. Before drink and pills set him up in a motel room where he painted his brains on the bathroom tile with a 12 gage Mossberg pump gun.

"It's not an easy thing to live with, Charlie."

He sipped.

"Hell, boy, I know that."

Charlie knew I'd been out of Copestone asylum for nearly six months. Sanity by pills and needles was by now a distant, nostalgic memory. For so long it had been only the serrated edge of getting by from one day to the next. Not because Daddy was gone, but because I was the one left behind to deal with his going. That and those feelings were still as attached to me as my own complexion.

"Eye color ain't the only thing he passed on, you know?"

Charlie nodded but said nothing.

After a while he waved the whiskey bottle over at me and I took it, drinking a little but letting most run back down from my tongue in backwash. I'd spent one night in jail with a DUI and knew better than to hazard another run-in with state troopers.

I let my hands lose themselves in the steering wheel, riding the deep curves of the drive. For the moment, I was happy in the simple mechanics of eating up road, guiding the big truck through the boundaries of the lane, and only a little afraid. The green wash of passing scenery stung my eyes and my conscience, but I managed to let go of as much of that as I could.

It was Charlie that saw them first; I was still lost somewhere in the fog of my thoughts. He leaned forward beside me, his seatbelt clicking in its retractor as he strained against the harness, tapping his stick against the windshield.

"Lord awmighty."

I registered the words and was aware of humped shapes on the highway's shoulder, but I did not slow down. Memory was weighting the accelerator. I did not slow until one of the soldiers, waving his foraging cap from the jagging bayonet of his musket, ripped me back to the moment.

Dust and rocks flew up, ticking off the undercarriage from a swerve made too fast, the rear wheels mired for a split second as we fishtailed into a halt. We sat rocking without saying anything, then I swiped the lever up a notch to Reverse and pulled back to the slumped Mercedes.

The Rebels had blown their right rear tire. They stood there, fists on hips and grey woolen tunics splayed from their pale breastbones like dressed bream. They smiled through their whiskers while the single bald faced one among them, the one that flagged us down, hopped in his calvary boots, coming up along the edge of the macadam.

"I should stick that damn thing through your guts," I said, pointing to the covered tip of the bayonet. He looked up at the point where his cap dangled and smiled, mistaking me for someone in a good mood. Charlie smacked me on the chest, a warning to shut up.

"Where you boys headed?" Charlie called good naturedly, trying on the easy conversationalism of country people like a Goodwill suit.

They told us they belonged to a group of reenactors that went by the name "Lee's Miserables" and that they were headed up a little above the reservation to shoot empty powder charges across the Oconaluftee River at their Yankee brethren. Provided they found a way to change their flat on time, of course.

A spare lay in the ditch while one of the confederates wound the thin lever on the jack. The problem was with the jack itself. It was black with a housing as slim as a bullet. As the Mercedes gently rose, the angle of the roadside worked at the base so that it lost its grip and rolled forward, settling the car back on the dirt. Their jack, simply put, was feeble.

I went back to the truck to drag out my gear while Charlie asked one of them for a cigarette and started talking and smoking with the

rest. When I came back with the truck jack and my tire iron, I slung everything down there next to a roadkill crushed copperhead that was a flat imprint on the asphalt. The snake looked like something you'd see in a cartoon for the road runner to come and scoop up with a spatula. The soldier with the ballistic jack sidled off.

While I positioned the big spoon of the truck jack and put the tire iron on the nuts to break the torque, part of me listened to what Charlie and the confederates were talking about. He said how he admired men that would take time out of their lives to preserve the rites of history, how that meant something given the madness of the contemporary world. He asked if any of them had been veterans themselves. Only one said that he had, but it had been back in the eighties and he'd spent his enlistment sitting in a barracks in Düsseldorf, waiting for weekend liberty when he could spend his pay on "whatever dirty German bitch would blow me." I could see that he felt bad after he said this. His face was pinched and a little bloodless. The others were all college graduates. Professional men. I think one of them even worked at a bank.

They looked on while I laid the iron down and pumped the lever so that the Mercedes rose. The car alarm screamed. All of them went crazy patting their britches to see who had the keys. It was the flagman who'd left them on the hood. He tapped the little deactivate button so that I could get on and get this business done for them.

Once the tire was changed and I'd put my tools back in the Chevy's paint splattered bed, one of the confederates held out a fifty dollar bill to me.

I said he didn't need to bother.

"Come on, now. Take it. Don't make me feel bad."

Grant's foggy portrait riffled in the wind.

"How about a cold beer instead."

The confederate shrugged and went back to the trunk of his car. We all popped cans of Heineken, sucked them down and tossed the dead soldiers in the ditch.

Charlie said it was time to saddle up and leave these boys to their warfighting. I had nothing there keeping me, so I was as ready to go

as any man alive. We sat and watched them ease onto the highway and take off with a high hard toot of their horn, the sunlight a strange halo on their tinted sunroof.

I pulled on the highway and gunned it. We were to the casino in another ten minutes.

Charlie struck it on loose slots that night. A silver river of money poured out onto the puke green carpet. The casino had to bring the security guards out to make sure nobody ran in and started stuffing it into their purses and fanny packs.

Once Charlie moved down to Seneca, he had me bolt together some particle board around a used camper he'd set next to a muddy hole in the ground he called a fishing pond. He claimed he was happy there with all the old coots, plinking at squirrels and living a free life, a life "without legal attachments" he called it. When the government came in about the camp's taxes, Charlie was one of the ones most loyal to the leader of the whole thing. He wouldn't give up his spot no matter what. I swear I can't remember the old bastard's name who ran the place, who started the trouble. Regardless, when the rifles started cracking, Charlie was somewhere in the midst of it all, holed up in one of the outbuildings, answering police snipers with his lever action .22. He may have been one of the ones that killed that trooper out of Greenville, but there's no telling, not with the crossfire the newspapers described. But what I keep wanting to know is what Charlie was thinking while he was pinned there in that shack, the rounds ticking off the aluminum sides. What dream of freedom made him and those like him so different from all the rest of us?