

A Lesson Before Dying

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Ernest J. Gaines

Chapter 1, pgs. 3-4

I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be. Still, I was there. I was there as much as anyone else was there. Either I sat behind my aunt and his godmother or I sat beside them. Both are large women, but his godmother is larger. She is of average height, five four, five five, but weighs nearly two hundred pounds.

Once she and my aunt had found their places—two rows behind the table where he sat with his court-appointed attorney—his godmother became as immobile as a great stone or as one of our oak or cypress stumps. She never got up once to get water or go to the bathroom down in the basement. She just sat there staring at the boy's clean-cropped head where he sat at the front table with his lawyer.

Even after he had gone to await the jurors' verdict, her eyes remained in that one direction. She heard nothing said in the courtroom. Not by the prosecutor, not by the defense attorney, not by my aunt. (Oh. Yes, she did hear one word—one word, for sure: "hog.") It was my aunt whose eyes followed the prosecutor as he moved from one side of the courtroom to the other, pounding his fist into the palm of his hand, pounding the table where his papers lay, pounding the rail that separated the jurors from the rest of the courtroom. It was my aunt who followed this every move, not his godmother. She was not even listening. She had gotten tired of listening. She knew, as we all knew, what the outcome would be. A white man had been killed during a robbery, and though two of the robbers had been killed on the spot, one had been captured, and he, too, would have to die. Though he told them no, he had nothing to do with it,...

Chapter 1, pgs. 7-8

"Gentlemen of the jury, look at this—this—this boy. I almost said man, but I can't say man. Oh, sure, he has reached the air of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this—this—this a man? No, not I. I would call it a boy and a fool. A fool is not aware of right and wrong. A fool does what others tell him to do. A fool got into that automobile. A man with a modicum of intelligence would have seen that those racketeers mean no good. But not a fool. A fool got into that automobile. A fool rode to the grocery store. A fool stood by and watched this happen not having the sense to run.

"Gentlemen of the jury, look at him—look at him—look at this. Do you see a man sitting here? Do you see a man sitting here? I ask you, I implore, look carefully—do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of his skull, this face is flat as the palm of my hand—look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan—can plan—can plan anything? A cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan? To plan, gentlemen of the jury? No, gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans. What you see here is a thing that acts



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on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn. This is what you see here, but you do not see anything capable of planning a robbery or a murder. He does not even know the size of his clothes or his shoes. Ask him to name the months of the year. Ask him does Christmas come before or after the Fourth of July? Mention the names of Keats, Byron, Scott, and see whether the eyes will show one moment of recognition. Ask him to describe a rose, to quote one passage from the Constitution or the Bill of Rights. Gentleman of the jury, this man planned a robbery? Oh, pardon me, pardon me, I surely did not mean to insult your intelligence by saying ‘man’—would you please forgive me for committing such an error?

“Gentlemen of the jury, who would be hurt if you took this life? Look back to that second row. Please look. I want all twelve of you honorable men to turn your heads and look back to that second row. What you see there has been everything to him—mama, grandmother, godmother—everything. Look at her, gentlemen of the jury, look at her well. Take this away from her, and she has no reason to go on living. We may see him as not much, but he’s her reason for existence. Think on that, gentleman, think on it.

“Gentlemen of the jury, be merciful. For God’s sake, be merciful. He is innocent of all charges brought against him.

“But let us say he was not. Let us for a moment say he was not. What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.

“I thank you, gentlemen, from the bottom of my heart, for your kind patience. I have no more to say, except this: We must live with our conscience. Each and every one of us must live with his own conscience.”

Chapter 7, pg., 56

For the next half hour it continued. Dr. Joseph would call on someone who looked half bright, then he would call on someone whom he felt was just the opposite. In the upper grades—fourth, fifth, and sixth—he asked grammatical, mathematical and geographical questions. And besides looking at hands, now he began inspecting teeth. Open wide, say “Ahhh”—and he would have the poor children spreading out their lips far as they could while he peered into their mouths. At the university I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves, and I had read of cattlemen doing it when purchasing horses and cattle. At least Dr. Joseph had graduated to the level where he let the children spread out their own lips, rather than using some kind of crude metal instrument. I appreciated his humanitarianism.

Finally, when he felt that he had inspected enough mouths and hands, he gave the school a ten- minute lecture on nutrition. Beans were good, he said. Not only just good, but very, very good. Beans, beans, beans—he must have said beans a hundred times. Then he said fish and greens were good. And exercise was good. In other words, hard work was good for the young body. Picking cotton, gathering potatoes, pulling onions, working in the garden—all of that was good exercise for a growing boy or girl.

Chapter 11, pg. 83-84

“Your nannan can sure cook,” I said. “That’s for youmans,” he said.

“You’re a human being, Jefferson,” I said.

“I’m a old hog,” he said. “Youmans don’t stay in no stall like this. I’m an old hog they

fattening up to kill.”

“That would hurt your nannan if she heard you say that. You want me to tell her you said that?” “Old hog don’t care what people say.”

“She cares,” I said. “And I do too, Jefferson.” “Y’all youmans,” he said.

“You’re a human being too, Jefferson.”

“I’m a old hog,” he said, more to himself than to me. “Just a old hog they fattening up to kill for Christmas.”

“You’re a human being, Jefferson. You’re a man.”

He knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands. He even sounded like a hog.

I stood back watching him, while I continued to eat the biscuit and piece of chicken. “That’s how a old hog eat,” he said, raising his head and grinning at me. He got up from his knees and went back to his bunk. “That’s how a old hog eat.”

“All right,” I said. “But when I go back, I’m going to tell her that you and I sat on the bunk and ate, and you said how good the food was. I won’t tell her what you did. She is already sick, and that would kill her. So I’m going to lie. I’m going to tell her how much you liked the food. Especially the pralines.”

Chapter 21, pgs. 166-167

“Let me explain it to you, let me see if I can explain it to you,” I said. The brandy was really working well now. “We black men have failed to protect our women since the time of slavery. We stay here in the South and are broken, or we run away and leave them alone to look after the children and themselves. So each time a male child is born, they hope he will be the one to change this vicious cycle—which he never does. Because even though he wants to change it, and maybe even tries to change it, it is too heavy a burden because of all the others who have run away and left their burdens behind. So he, too, must run away if he is to hold on to his sanity and have a life of his own. I can see by your face that you don’t agree, so I’ll try again. What she wants is for him, Jefferson, and me to change everything that has been going on for three hundred years. She wants it to happen so in case she ever gets out of her bed again, she can go to that little church there in the quarter and say proudly, ‘You see, I told you—I told you he was a man.’ And if she dies an hour after that, all right; but what she wants to hear first is that he did not crawl to that white man, that he stood up that last moment and walked.

Because if he does not, she knows that she will never get another chance to see a black man stand for her.”

Chapter 22, pg. 174

...Thelma watched me all the time. When I was finished, she put a wrinkled ten-dollar bill on the counter by my plate.

“Here.”

It was the kind of “here” your mother or your big sister or your great-aunt or your grandmother would have said. It was the kind of “here” that let you know this was hard-earned money but, also, that you needed it more than she did, and the kind of “here” that said she wished you had it and didn’t have to borrow it from her, but since you did not have it, and she did, then “here” it was, with a kind of love. It was the kind of “here” that asked the question, When will all this end? When will a man not have to struggle to have money to get what he needs “here”? When will a man be able to live without having to kill another man “here”?

Chapter 24, pg. 191-192

“Jefferson,” I said. We had started walking. “Do you know what a hero is, Jefferson? A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don’t and can’t do. He is different from other men. He is above other men. No matter who those other men are, the hero, no matter who he is, is above them.” I lowered my voice again until we had passed the table. “I could never be a hero. I teach, but I don’t like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today. I don’t like it; I hate it. I don’t even like living here. I want to runaway. I want to live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else.

“That is not a hero. A hero does for others. He would do anything for people he love, because he knows it would make their lives better. I am not that kind of person, but I want you to be. You could give something to her, to me, to those children in the quarter. You could give them something that I never could. They expect it from me, but not from you. The while people out there are saying that you don’t have it—that you’re a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potentials. We all have, not matter who we are.

“Those out there are not better than we are, Jefferson. They are worse. That’s why they are always looking for a scapegoat, someone else to blame. I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you’re nothing but another nigger—no dignity, no heart, no love for your people. You can prove them wrong. You can do more than I can ever do. I have always done what they wanted me to do, teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Nothing else—nothing about dignity, nothing about identity, nothing about loving and caring. They never thought we were capable of learning these things. ‘Teach those niggers how to print their names and how to figure on their finger.’ And I went along, but hating myself all the time for doing so.”

Chapter 31, pg. 253

“He was the strongest man in the crowded room, Grant Wiggins,” Paul said. Staring at me and speaking louder than was necessary. “He was, he was. I’m not saying this to make you feel good, I’m not saying this to ease your pain. Ask that preacher, ask Harry Williams. He was the strongest man there. We all stood jammed together, no more than six, eight feet from that chair. When Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, ‘Tell Nannan I walked.’ And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I’m a witness. Straight he walked.”

Paul stopped talking. He was breathing heavily. He was looking at me but seeing Jefferson in that chair. We started walking again. We were passing by Miss Emma’s house, but Paul didn’t know this. He had never been in the quarter before.

“After they put the death cloth over his face, I couldn’t watch anymore. I looked down at the floor,” Paul was saying. His voice was quieter, less intense now. “I heard two jolts, but I wouldn’t look up. I’ll never forget the sound of that generator as long as I live on this earth.”