

TREATMENT for *Sketches of a Small Town...circa 1940*

TITLE: Sketches of a Small Town...circa 1940

AUTHOR: Clifton K. Meador, M.D.

FORMAT: Non-fiction Book

GENRE: Memoir

SETTING: Greenville, Alabama in the 1930s-40s

LOGLINE: "Sketches..." is a memoir of growing up in a small town in the South in the 1930s and '40s, but rather than washed with the warm patina of remembrance it is cast in the sharper light of age and hindsight...

Treatment (for a limited streaming series)

Prologue...Looking Back

We open in a small church, packed to capacity for the funeral of an elderly black man; his picture sits beside the casket. When the rear door opens and an equally elderly white man enters, all heads turn. But room is made as he quietly takes his seat. After the service concludes, CLIFTON introduces himself as the deceased's childhood friend; in fact, he says that Billy was his best friend when he first moved to Greenville, Alabama. "A white boy and a black boy best friends in the deep South?" That seems a tall tale. Clifton replies that children aren't born with hate in their hearts, they don't know that race means anything other than going fast, or that the color of your skin means any more than the color of your hair...they don't know and they don't care. He's often wondered what the world would be like if they'd been left to think that way...

The Town

A train whistle blows as the L&N pulls into the station in Greenville. Our narrator, Clifton, is a young boy, disembarking with his older brother Dan and their parents, his eyes wide as he takes in what is to be his new home. A representative from the railroad meets the family; Doc Meador's new job is as 'agricultural development agent' for the L&N. A veterinarian who saw his wages fall to unsustainable during the height of the depression, he will now work with county agents, farms, 4-H clubs and the like to promote growth; after all, the more agriculture and livestock produced, the more freight for the railroad. The family and their luggage is loaded into a car; Clifton takes in the sights as they drive through Greenville and to their house. Of course, it seems big to him as a child. But in the world of landmarks, it is what would be called a three traffic light town. He says he'd later in life refer to it also as a two prostitute town. But mostly things went in threes. Because segregation by race wasn't the only form of separation back then. There were three main religious affiliations, three men's clubs and three gasoline stations and what you were said who you were. Doc Meador is a Baptist and soon becomes Rotarian and Shell – he dabbles as a Gulf but quickly realizes the error of his ways. "You were who you were, people took comfort in that, which perhaps made change of any kind that much harder, looking back."

The family is quickly ensconced at the Baptist Church. Momma takes religion seriously, being Baptist by marriage but strict Presbyterian by upbringing. She sits between the boys in an effort to curb their whispering and antsy-ness, itchy and sweaty wearing their Sunday best in the summer heat. Out the window Clifton can see the Methodists exiting their Church at the stroke

of noon, while Reverend Perry still drones on. When he finally calls for those new to come down front to profess, the children follow their parents to the altar. But Clifton's stomach starts to growl at the smell of the Methodists now frying chicken. "I smell cornbread too," Dan whispers "If I were a dog I'd be drooling." There is nothing they can do but wait as the congregation votes them into the fellowship. Free at last, their afternoon features a roast and a Sabbath observed, which means no playing outside. Clifton stands at the window and watches other boys riding by on their bikes.

There were further separations too, between the poor whites and those better off in town, to say nothing of the divide between the town folk and those in the country, most of whom scraped by with farms or as sharecroppers. Clifton rides with his father out to visit the farmers, his dad the worst driver in the world, the car lurching and stopping and, more than once, being backed up into a post. Greenville is a cotton town and summer is picking season. The air is thick as they go from farm to farm, Doc Meador introducing himself and talking up business, offering advice and insights on the newest agriculture trends. Clifton sees no difference between the sharecropper kids - white or black, he chases chickens with them all and cannonballs off the rise into the river. The timing just right, one day he and Dan and some of the other kids ride back into town in a wagon piled high with picked cotton, making a bed to bounce on as the load heads for one of the two cotton gins. The white lint fills the air like snow.

Clifton runs home covered in lint to the sight of a boy outside his house shooting the most amazing rubber band gun he's ever seen. Momma comes out followed by a black woman and says, "Clifton, meet Mamie and her son, Billy."

Billy and the Army Boys

"I know I stood there and stared and, looking back, I guess he thought it was because he was black. It wasn't till I told him that his rubber band gun was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen that he smiled." Billy offers to make Clifton a gun. They go together to the junkyard and salvage an old truck inner tube; Billy says the rubber is thicker and stronger than from a car tire. The stock he makes from a busted wooden crate he finds behind the grocery store. The rubber band stretches from the tip of the gun all the way back to a notch he cuts in the handle. He ties a string underneath and when Clifton pulls up on it, it releases the rubber band like a bullet. He cuts extra notches so the rifle can release four bands at once, like a machine gun. No one's ever done anything like that. They go to test it out - it shoots over 20 yards, easily knocking down the tin cans they set up. Clifton waits every morning for Mamie to arrive, Billy in tow. The two become fast friends, best friends. The summer days are long and they form an army with two other boys, John and Charles, playing cowboys and Indians and taking on other small-boy armies in the neighborhood. Armed with Billy's guns, they ride their bikes as if horses and win every battle. Billy can ride with no hands, steering the handle bars with his knees, leaving himself free to aim and shoot. Clifton idolizes Billy, but it doesn't register to him that Billy always disappears when they go to the other boys' houses. John comes from an old Greenville

family, he is looked after by not only his mother but his grandmother, an old maid great aunt and a black 'nursemaid'. The women pamper the boy who is expected to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, "Old Doctor John," who was a town legend. John bridles under the expectations; he is loud and a cut-up. The house is grand and imposing and Billy disappears when it's time to drop John off after a day at 'war.' Charles, the other boy in the group, is quiet and observant; he sees the things Clifton doesn't, like Billy's caution around white folks, and the hard stares from white men when the boys ride into town.

One Saturday, the four come in to see a matinee at the movie theater – a western, of course. Billy has to use a separate, outside staircase and sit in the balcony – for Coloreds Only – just like the separate water fountain in the square, and the back door at the drugstore. Once inside, Clifton cranes his neck, trying to spot his friend in the balcony. Charles shakes his head. "Don't be a dummy. Billy doesn't have money for a movie." Clifton had no idea. As the movie starts, he lights out, grabbing his bike and riding hard till he catches sight of his friend, waving him down and saying he'd seen that movie anyway, he'd rather go finish their fort. They're building it in Clifton's backyard, a shack really but in a boy's mind a secret hideout. And the perfect place to have a sleepover. It's when Clifton wakes up and goes to get a glass of water he hears his parents talking. His father telling her the neighbors have started to talk about the boys playing so much. That it's not going to end well. That if something bad happens, it'll be Billy it happens to, and he knows she doesn't want that. It sounds like she's crying as Clifton slips away. The next morning it's Mamie crying and the next morning she arrives without Billy. His mother tries to explain it to him, telling Clifton that Billy is a good boy but that black people live with black people and white people live with white people and that's the way it is. It's the law. Besides, school is starting and it's not as if they'd be together anyway. He knows not to argue; he knows there is no point. But the next day, he slips out and rides his bike out to Baptist Hill, one of the black sections of town. When his tires hit mud, he realizes that this part of town isn't paved; last night's rain has made the dirt streets impossible to ride on, and messy to walk through. He pushes his bike for a while, but then leaves it as he tries to figure out where Billy lives. An older black man, actually half Indian and standing six foot four or more, watches him for a bit before approaching. When Clifton explains he's trying to find his friend, the man we will come to know as Tootsie, nods understandingly. He says that Billy's gone to visit his aunt in Selma for a bit, and Clifton would be best to go on home. When the boy says 'you don't understand, he's my friend', Tootsie replies if he is his friend, he will do what Tootsie says and go on home. In tears, Clifton gets his bike and rides away. When he gets home, he runs into the fort, upset and angry. And there he finds two new rubber band guns Billy has left for him.

Boys Will be Boys

"We didn't play cowboys and Indians much after that. An army of three felt pretty small. Every once in a while, I'd catch sight of Billy, riding his bike, steering with his knees, but he never seemed to see me when I waved and after a while I stopped. I still wish I'd kept trying." The boys move on to other pursuits; they are joined by Clifton's new dog Frisky, who follows him

everywhere. The railroad dominates the town, the tracks running down a deep gully that went through the middle of town. Two wooden bridges spanned the gully. After spending hours spitting off the bridge at the train passing below, John ups the game suggesting they pee in order and see if they can hit the train from engine to caboose. At his house they drink pitcher after pitcher of lemonade, bemusing his legion of female caretakers who nonetheless happily supply it. By the time they get to the bridge they are about bursting, jumping up and down, begging to train to come already. Finally, the whistle as it approaches. They line up and unzip. Timing it just right, John is the first to pee, and as he feels almost done he signals Charles who does the same and Clifton is the finisher. But as the caboose passes, the brakeman leans out and shakes his fist at them – he must've gotten sprayed! Scared, the boys run off, their bits dangling. Safe in the woods, they collapse in laughter. Still, when they ride back through town, they freeze in terror seeing Mister Gus, the chief of police. With his black army-style cap and .45 caliber on his hip, he looked ready for action and his stare as they pass is enough to convince them he knows what they've done. They hold their breath till out of his sight, then burst into laughter again.

At night, Clifton sits with his dad and brother on the porch, listening to the train whistles go by. His father can identify each train by the sound – the freight, the local, the express, the bullet. His father tells him all the places the trains go, telling him all about the sights of the big cities. He and Dan plan the route they will take next summer, when his railroad job gives him free passes to travel with the boys. Clifton falls asleep on the porch swing dreaming of a world bigger than Greenville.

The fort in the backyard is now just a tumble of boards. The trio decides to build a proper bunker in an empty field covered in tall sage brush. They dig a trench some ten feet long by four feet wide, down to nearly five feet. The brush keeps their activity hidden from the houses on either side, and then they cover the top with corrugated metal, shoveling dirt over that, completing hiding it. The boys use kerosene lanterns to light the inside and smoke hand-rolled cigarettes made from rabbit tobacco they pick and dry. They spent hours reading comics and telling stories. Then one day, they are roused by the calls of a late arriving John – “FIRE!” Clifton and Charles scramble out of the tunnel to see the field all around them burning. One of them must of dropped a lit match or discarded butt. The sage is fast burning fuel and they run at full speed to outpace the engulfing flames. A crowd is gathering as the fire department arrives. They drag heavy hoses from the hydrant and spray the perimeter, saving the houses on both sides. Eventually the fire burns itself out, the brush gone and their bunker revealed. The fire chief calls out, “Looks like some boys were in here up to no good. Got some sort of cave.” Things go from bad to worse as Mister Gus pulls up and pushes through the crowd. “A bunch of boys you say? Any sign of who?” Clifton, Charles and John quietly back away, getting their bikes to ride off to safety but too late. Charles' mother has walked up. “What are you boys doing here?” She sees their dirty, smoky and guilty faces. “You set that fire, didn't you?” There is no point denying it. By the time Clifton gets home, his mother knows; her religious ire is up, after all, it started because the boys were smoking! They are taken down to confess to Mister Gus,

who shows them the inside of a jail cell and warns they'll be spending more time there if they don't change their ways. Then it's off to apologize to the folks in all of the neighboring houses that were threatened by the blaze – they truly are lucky none burned down. On the other hand, a trip to the barber shop later that week finds Clifton the focus of attention. Many of the men seem to laugh it off, saying boys will be boys. Looking back, Clifton says he wondered what would have happened if Billy had been with them. These were the same men giving hard stares to the group when Billy was among them. Would it have been 'boys will be boys' if a black boy was part of the incident? Or would 'justice' have been needed? Clifton says it was this that made him realize there was a double standard and no such thing as separate but equal. On that day, he was happy that Billy was no longer his friend, and spared what might have happened to him...

The Real Enemy

"Looking back, about the time I realized white people had somehow decided to make black people the enemy, to keep them as the lowest caste in order to make themselves feel higher and more privileged, even if their education and economic standing really wasn't very different at all... about then World War II started and, suddenly, the country had a real enemy to hate."

Clifton is walking home from Sunday school when he starts seeing people come out on their front porches to yell that the "Japs" had bombed Pearl Harbor! Clifton runs home to find his family huddled around the radio, listening to the news. Of course, they'd known about the fighting in Europe but now this is personal – now it's war. The next day, the school assembles in the auditorium, listening to President Roosevelt's 'day of infamy' speech. Before long, all the men and boys of age line up at the new recruiting station. Clifton tags along with Dan, now 18, but to his disappointment he fails the eye test and comes up 4F. But others enlist and get onboard the supply trains that roll through town. Clifton, John and Charles station themselves on the bridge, waving to the soldiers as they head off to war, well, boot camp. They head to the movie theater where they watch the newsreel footage suggesting possible future sneak attacks by the Japanese. They do their part to protect Alabama, collecting the government printed cards showing the silhouettes of enemy aircraft and take to the hills, using binoculars to eyeball every passing plane, hoping to spot an enemy overhead. It's just a version of their younger war play but they take it seriously, packing lunch and spending every free hour on lookout. Air raid drills become the norm, ducking under desks at school but at night it is more exciting. Doc Meador is the air raid warden for the neighborhood, with a helmet and armband; Dan gets to be his assistant warden and gets the same; Clifton feels woefully left out. When the siren sounds he sits with Momma in the darkened living room, watching as Daddy and Dan go from house to house, getting people to turn off their lights or draw their shades.

Then the war comes closer in a couple of ways. First, the Army Air Force puts on a mock battle at a local airfield. Clifton and crew are among the thousands who show up to watch planes fly low overhead, dropping dozens of parachuting soldiers. As their chutes open, they land right in

front of the crowd as the band strikes up marching music. They unsling their rifles and start firing blanks as they race across the field toward an imaginary enemy. The boys cheer them on. The flood of patriotism sends dozen to the Army recruiters waiting there to sign up the next batch of boys turning eighteen. Dan is ready this time, Clifton having helped him memorize the eye chart. But he fools no one, he's already listed 4-F on the rolls.

Next, the government builds a German POW camp just outside of town. Pick-up trucks carrying the prisoners come through town, taking them to their work detail clearing brush and cutting timber. The boys stand at attention and mimic their "Heil Hitler" salutes. The POWs laugh and take to throwing them German magazines. From the war movies and newsreels, they all work on their German accents and practice goose-stepping. Dan takes it the farthest, driving out to the camp with a bunch of buddies one night and announcing to a guard that he is there to see "Herr Frederick fon Junger-mann" and demands that they "Vill bring Herr fon Junder-mann to zee gate at vonce!" Searchlights flood the car and sirens sound as the guards swarm them, suspecting them to be German spies. When it's realized they are just teenagers up to no good, the dreaded Mister Gus is called to take them home to very angry parents. Clifton is for once glad his pleas to come along went unanswered, listening to his Daddy give Dan hell. "Looking back, we didn't know about the Holocaust, we didn't know that the Nazis killed millions of Jewish people till later; the newsreels showed us the battles with the Japanese including the death march from the Bataan Peninsula where hundreds of Americans died, including two native sons of Greenville. Maybe that's why we hated the Japanese and considered the Germans, especially the ones up the road, less vile. But I wonder, looking back, if maybe it was just easier to hate someone who looked more foreign, rather than the ones who looked little different than our neighbors. Maybe, once again, it had to do with skin color and not with realizing that an enemy is defined by what they do, not how they look..." The newsreel footage shows the end of the war, the signing of the documents of surrender, and the entire town takes to the streets in celebration. "But maybe that's a lesson we still haven't really learned."

Sex Education

Leon is several years older than the other kids in Clifton's sixth grade class; he's failed several grades because he had to work on his father's farm, planting and picking cotton. It's a not uncommon occurrence for the country kids, the ones who get bussed to school. Then Leon lies about his age and enlists in the Army. When his true age is finally found out and he's sent home from training camp in South Carolina, he is quickly a hero to the other boys. Leon wears his Army shirt to school every day and rolls up the sleeves to show off the tattoo he got while enlisted – a large black dagger dripping red blood. During recess, he displays his amazing ability to hand-roll cigarettes with just one hand. He can also strike a wooden match between his thumb and forefinger, also with one hand. The boys figure if he gets to re-enlist he can lose an arm in battle and still be just fine. During their recess smokes (most of the country boys smoked out of sight of the teachers), he tells Army stories, most of them about sex. Because Leon actually visited a whorehouse in Charleston - twice. The stories aren't without caution; there is

the danger of syphilis, after all. At the time, mandatory testing is being done and if one is positive you are taken for a month's stay at the Army Air Force Base in Montgomery. Every Saturday, a yellow school bus pulls up behind the post office and all of the positive men, their hats down to hide their faces, climbed onboard. Leon tells them the Army uses square needles to give you 21 shots in your belly to cure it. The boys live in dread of getting it, and of course of getting a girl pregnant. But when one gets to a certain age, it seems sex – or talk of it – is everywhere. Clifton's dog Frisky has become just that, roaming off to find every dog in heat in town. It's not long afterward that familiar looking puppies start showing up. The boys can't help but observe although they doubt they should take pointers from a canine. Even Clifton's father, very out of character, has some advice. Quail season is underway and hunting trips are always a big deal. This year Dan can't go so Clifton brings John. First, Daddy checks out both on gun safety - they may or may not hit any quail but he won't be responsible for them shooting each other. The supplies and dogs get loaded into the trunk, a rope tied to keep it partway open, and they head off on the bumpy country roads. Doc Meador is an expert on an amazing array of subjects related to plants and animal and will fill the time with discourse and stories on everything from how to build traps to catch buzzard to grafting camellias to WWI stories having been a veterinary surgeon for thousands of mules in an ordinance division. It is usually entertaining and distracts from his abysmal driving skills. This trip he discusses the native grasses they pass and which are the best to plant to attract quail. He is in the middle of explaining a new, experimental hybrid when he turns to John and Clifton in the back seat and suddenly says, "Better be careful. Don't go getting those girls pregnant." A non sequitur for sure. Both boys turn bright red and, perhaps surprised at the reaction or even himself at what he has said, Doc Meador doesn't turn back to the road quite quick enough and BOOM, they car drives off into a gully. It takes all three of them to push it back on. As they finish, Clifton sidles up next to him, his voice low: "We won't, Daddy." And now the subject is closed. The rest of the day is spent in the glorious sport of watching the dogs quarter the field, hunting out the flock and then standing stock still, pointing. The boys take their positions, it already determined who would shoot right and who would take left. The silence then is broken by the covey flushing, the 'rrrrrrooommmmm' sound fills the air as they take flight in all directions and the shooting begins. The day ends with a supper of fricasseed quail, thick brown gravy, grits and biscuits.

The other inhibitor to sex is the fear of eternal hellfire and damnation. While most ministers gave equal time to all sins, there is one who focused only on fornication. The Reverend Ralph Morgan is the John Brown of fornication and while the minister of a small church outside of town, being part of the rotation of preachers who do the morning devotional at the school brings him to the fore. His voice booms over the newly installed loudspeaker and tells the captive students that fornicators and adulterers are going straight to hell. Fair enough. But as his tone becomes edgier and his volume louder he spins into lurid detail. "When you see those majorettes and cheerleaders twirling and bouncing their breasts, don't you look!" Don't you let them show you those tight little underpants. Turn your head away from sin and lust! Look away from evil! Just...look...AWAY!" Clifton and his friends listen rapt, faces reddening at the graphic

descriptions. The voice of the principal cuts in, urging the Reverend to “tone it down, please!” But when he launches into ‘plump thighs’ the PA system cuts off. The boys convene at recess with Leon holding court and assuring them the human body isn’t evil, especially not the females. It’s just natural he says. They know that, right? One by one they admit they’ve never seen any portion of a girl’s body so Leon decides to further their education. He enlists the help of Pearl who, for a penny, is happy to drop her drawers and give the fellas a peek, albeit a quick one.

The cloak room is a narrow space at the back of the classroom, with an open doorway on each end. It’s where they hang their coats and leave their stuff. Their teacher, Miss Ethel, is an old maid, strict, mean and somewhat hard of hearing. It’s a calculated risk they are taking, but her habit is to divide the class into three groups, one working on math, another geography and the third reading. The reading group rotates to the front, where they recite aloud to Miss Ethel. With that as cover, one by one the boys enter the cloakroom, give Leon a penny and get a peak of Pearl’s naked nether region. John and Charles go; now it’s Clifton’s turn. He’s nervous, the penny slipping from his hand. He starts to apologize; Leon shushes him and waves him toward Pearl. She turns, exposing herself. His eyes go wide. Then the boy ahead of him, exiting, bangs into the old pipe organ, hitting the pedal. A loud moaning sound resounds. Miss Ethel’s hears and heads toward the cloakroom. Clifton skedaddles out the exit as she comes in the entrance and sees what’s going on. In moments she emerges, holding both Leon and Pearl by an ear, escorting them to the principal’s office. Clifton is slunk down in his seat, have barely escaped the same fate. Sex education class is recessed.

A Death in the Family and a New Friend

“Momma got sick before the end of the war. I barely noticed at first. After all, to a child parents are a given, a constant. Children don’t think about their parents’ lives beyond themselves. They are inherently self-centered, not out of selfishness but simply because they lack the awareness to be otherwise.” The house becomes a quiet place, with Momma needing her rest. The curtains stay drawn in the parlor, the light hurts her eyes. Old Dr. Tine, the family physician, makes house calls, driving up in his green 1936 Chevrolet. His nurse, Miss Francie, accompanies him. He checks Momma’s vitals, smiles and makes reassuring sounds. But when he steps into the hall to talk to Daddy, his tones are hushed and Daddy looks stricken. Clifton doesn’t understand what’s happening, but no one pays much attention to him or tries to explain. Certainly the phrase ‘colon cancer’ means nothing to him. Still, he avoids his mother, who falls in and out of consciousness, passing by without going into her room.

One night, Clifton sits at the dining table doing his homework when a bloodcurdling scream rings out. He runs into the living room to see Ruby, the cook/maid who replaced Mamie, fallen on the floor. She points to the screen door. “It’s the death moth! Lord God...Sweet Jesus sent it!” He runs to the door to find a huge, iridescent green moth unlike any he’s ever seen. Both the body and wings span more than six inches in length and its color seems to pulse as if lit from within. Clifton’s hair stands on end, his breathing halts. Ruby continues to sob, “Jesus

done sent the death moth. Clifton, sweet boy, your poor Momma, she gonna die.” Eyes wide, Clifton places his palm against the screen, the moth on the other side. He can feel it pulsing. “Ruby had scared me before, with stories of ghosts and boogers that had me skirting cemeteries and bridges at night, had me sure I was being chased and running full tilt for my life. Yet part of me knew it was just foolish superstition. But this was different. It was an omen and I believed it. My mother was going to die.”

Clifton stands in the doorway to his mother’s room. This time he enters, sitting beside her. She is half conscious, but takes his hand, saying his name, asking how he is. He tells her about his day at school...she smiles.

Clifton sits at her bedside, reading her favorite Bible passages. The verses blend as the days multiply... a boy on deathwatch, spending his last hours with his mother.

“I’d think back later that the Death Moth came for me, so that I would use the time left to be with her. And I did. She died one week from the night it appeared.”

The funeral service is at the Baptist Church, Clifton, Dan and Doc in their Sunday suits, surrounded by family and friends. Afterwards, the congregation spills into the street. People clasp Daddy’s hand, clap his shoulder; the women will be bringing casseroles to the house shortly. Clifton kicks at rocks in the dirt, alone and waiting. A man passing by stops and tips his hat. “I’m sorry for your loss, young man.” Clifton looks up to see the six-foot four figure he’d met when looking for Billy. An imposing figure, Tootsie is part black, part Indian, and sports a long handlebar moustache; he resembles the character Punjab in the Little Orphan Annie comic strip or a character right out of a Rudyard Kipling story. As Clifton stares, Tootsie continues on his way. Clifton hesitates, looks back at his otherwise engaged father, then starts after him. He can’t keep up to the man’s long stride but Tootsie isn’t going far.

He heads into Planter’s Mercantile, one of the two general stores in town. Tootsie and his assistant Roosevelt run the backend of the store. That’s where Clifton catches up and asks about Billy, he never sees him riding through town anymore. Tootsie tells him that’s because Billy’s family moved up north to Detroit to build cars. Clifton stands silent, trying not to cry; it’s another loss on a day of loss. Tootsie sits down, bringing him closer to face to face and asks Clifton if he might like to make some money, that Mr. Heygood is looking for a boy to help out on weekends. Might be a good fit. Clifton nods, says he can ask his dad. Tootsie nods, lighting his corncob pipe and explaining how the store works... how the farmers come in and buy their supplies...everything from food, clothes, seed, fertilizer, plows, mules and wagons...on credit. Mr. Jim Heygood writes it all down in his little black book. Then, after the cotton is picked and ginned and the price determined, the accounts are settled. Because the Heygoods also own one of the two cotton gins. If prices are high, the farmers might take away a little cash. If prices are low, well, it makes for a long cold winter. Once Mr. Jim writes down what the farmer needs, Roosevelt – and soon Clifton on Saturdays – loads it onto the mule-drawn wagons the farmers

pull up to the side door. “Looking back, I’m sure they needed the extra help, but Tootsie also saw a grieving young boy who likely needed some distraction, and maybe a bit of a father figure.”

Dan is now off to college and Doc still has to travel for work. Clifton is on his own quite a bit and hours spent listening to Roosevelt’s romantic adventures and Tootsie’s hunting tales help pass the time. Tootsie has a kind and wise word for everyone who comes into the store. Of course, anyone white is called Mister, even the ‘retarded’ man known simply as Frog, given his short stature and unusual features. So Tootsie calls him “Mister Frog” and always waves to him when he pedals up on his bicycle selling bags of boiled peanuts. “Mister Frog, got any of yo peanuts today?” Frog being just over five feet is dwarfed beside the black man. His language is garbled, but Tootsie speaks to him earnestly, “Mister Frog, can’t none us tell what you tryin’ to say. We know it must be real hard to talk and not be understood by nobody sometimes.” Tootsie counts out pennies from a small leather purse, placing them into Frog’s hand. “Let’s see...one, two, three, four, five...they still a nickel, ain’t they?” Frog grins and takes the coins, handing Tootsie the peanuts. Tootsie calls after him, “You come back Mister Frog, anytime, hear?” Tootsie sits and opens the bag, sharing with Roosevelt and Clifton. “Po man,” he comments. Roosevelt nods in agreement, “Po man.”

“Looking back, I realized that in the social order of things, many a white person might’ve ranked even Frog higher than Tootsie or Roosevelt. But I realized how little they truly knew about a Tootsie or a Roosevelt. And again, how one ought be defined by who they are, not how they look. It would seem so obvious, and yet...”

The Big Season

At fifteen, Clifton and his best friend John have made the Greenville High basketball team and spend hours working on their shooting at the hoop Tootsie has put up for them out back of the store. On Saturdays John comes by and between loading wagons, they shoot baskets, with Roosevelt commenting from the sidelines. The boys need to up their game because there are older boys on the team -- Army vets back in school, hoping to get their diplomas. Some are a couple of years older, some even more since they’d previously failed a grade – or two. The season is going well, meaning they’ve only lost a few more than they’ve won. The school hasn’t won a state tournament since 1933, when Frog was the assistant team manager and hopes are high for this 1947 team.

Clifton soon realizes that being on a sports team has unexpected advantages and girls who’d never noticed him before now smile. He sets his sights on Isabel Woolby and upon their first kiss, on a bench in her backyard, he discovers the meaning of ‘head over heels in love.’ Isabel lives across the street from his buddy Charles, making it easy to see her. They become a ‘thing’ until her mother finds out. She is a religious fundamentalist and considers Baptists to be

nonbeliever, so he is banned. Clifton is heartbroken but Roosevelt tells him not to worry. There's lots of fish in the sea; he tells him all he has to do is 'dangle his worm', at which Tootsie cuffs him in the hand, all the while chortling with laughter.

The season progresses with road trips. Playing in other small towns in southern Alabama has its challenges though; most schools don't have gymnasiums and a court is rigged up in the auditorium – if they're lucky. Playing in another team's small space puts them at a disadvantage as the only home team knows its fobiles. Leon, a substitute on the team, has an old pick-up truck now and takes to scouting for them. He reports back on Luvern, where the goal hangs down in front of the auditorium stage. The boys practice going in for a layup, then pulling their feet up like a bird to land on the stage. In Ozark, the goals are on the brick walls, so they learn to shoot with one hand and hold the other straight out to push themselves off the wall – versus going into it face first. Highland Home is the poorest of the schools. Clifton and friends change into their uniforms and run onto the court to see the home team wearing plain white undershirts with their numbers hand-drawn in black ink on the front and back. The court is so small that the center dividing line is also the foul line. As they watch their opponents zigzagging across the floor they realize the boards are so uneven that unless you know where to avoid, a dribble can send the ball careening in any direction. The game is a blowout. But somehow, Greenville's record still gets them to the Southeast Alabama State Tournament in Andalusia, 50 miles south of Greenville. It's a big deal for the boys. Coach Eddins and one of the dads loads up the cars with equipment and everyone piles in, including Frog, who wears his black and gold jacket with the letter "G" on the front. For some of the boys it's the farthest from home they've been. It's a much bigger town and their chance to play on a regulation court. When they arrive and see their opponent, all of whom are vets and fully grown, it's clear they're outmatched. Still, it's a thrill to be there and the boys play with all their heart, soaring through the air, and cheering each other on even when the shot misses. It's so much that one of the opposing players turns to Clifton and says, "Y'all know you're getting' trounced, right?" Clifton smiles, "That doesn't mean we can't do it in style." By the time the tired team returns to Greenville late that night, climbing out of the cars half asleep, much of the town is assembled to cheer their return, as if conquering heroes. "I guess victory isn't measure by how far you go, but rather how far you've come. And for us, that night we were victorious."

Where the Sidewalk Ends

"Another highlight of my youth was playing trombone in the high school Black and Gold marching Band. At some point, a reporter dubbed the University of Alabama the "Million Dollar Marching Band" and someone local decided that the Greenville High band was at least a 'quarter million dollar marching band' and from then on, that is what it was called. In 1947 the governor invited our band to come to Montgomery and march in the Blue and Grey parade. The parade preceded the Blue and Grey Football Classic, an annual all-star game featuring seniors from colleges throughout the North and South. A sports re-creation of the civil war, if you will.

This event would be the capstone to my high school time, and for those of us too young to have enlisted, this was the closest we came to the patriotic glory we naively viewed war to be.”

Clifton and the band arrive in the capital, one of several dozen bands that will play. It’s a cold December day and he and the others fill their stomachs at the one and only Chris’s hot dog stand. A dog loaded with special mustard, ketchup, onions, relish and sauerkraut, washed down with a Royal Crown Cola is just the ticket. Now they take their place, marching through the capital with the majorettes leading the way. The trombone line has a clear vantage of their twirling and bouncing, legs lifting, hair blowing and the occasional waft of perfume drifting back towards them. It is intoxicating. The cold mist from the fountain is needed to make him focus as they round the corner and approach the capital building. As the band launches into *Dixie*, a squadron of B17 bombers flies low over the capitol dome, the very spot where Jefferson Davis stood as he took the oath of office to become the first and only president of the Confederacy. Clifton swells with pride. “As a Southern boy, who’d only known one Yankee in my entire life, I felt pride in my heritage and ancestors. I felt I was representing the glory of the Confederacy. Somehow in my youth, the notions of honor and glory were easy to separate from the hatred and evil that I knew to be racism. It wasn’t till I was older that I came to understand that the two couldn’t exist together. And that’s probably why my most important memory isn’t the basketball tournament or the parade in Montgomery but my time with Mrs. Geraldine Henry.”

Clifton is working for Riley Construction now over the summer. In addition to building things, Riley sells all sort of supplies and tools for home repair and improvements. Clifton drives a pick-up truck from the yard hauling sand and gravel to the various construction sites. But one day Mr. Riley waves him down and tells him to go to the Henry’s and measure for venetian blinds. He explains that Nathan Henry runs the black funeral home and is the richest man in the black community, then he adds under his breath that some say one of the richest men in town, period. Clifton knows the funeral business is profitable, in fact his friend Charles’ father is one of the two insurance salesmen in town who go door to door and collect a dime a week as payment on burial policies. He and Charles would sometimes go with him and Mr. Lum would let them drive the car when they were learning. Anyway, Henry has remarried after his wife died and his new, younger wife is redecorating the house.

Clifton knows the Bishop Hill neighborhood. It’s where he went to look for Billy all those years before. The streets are still dirt and treacherous to drive on. He’s watching for ruts and checking addresses with one eye. He passes a line of ramshackle cottages and is more than surprised to see a white clapboard house with elaborate metal awnings over the front windows and beautiful landscaping. Even more surprising is the pristine concrete sidewalk that runs in front of the house, connecting to its brick walkway – surprising because there are no other sidewalks in Bishop Hill, just dirt paths. The Henry’s have installed it in front of their house themselves and this is where it both starts and stops.

The front door is opened by Geraldine Henry. She wears a pretty white blouse, pearls and a soft blue cashmere sweater. She also wears stockings and high heels. She is like no black woman Clifton has ever seen, most of whom have been cooks and maids. She invites him in, her enunciation crisp and clear, with an accent that sounds polished and what he imagines Northerners might sound like. She takes him from room to room so that he can measure the windows and explains what colors she wants, telling him how the room will be changing. He writes it all down in a notebook while taking it all in – the house is so tasteful and well appointed. There are French Doors at the back, leading to a patio with wrought iron furniture and yard filled with flowering bushes. As he finishes up, she comes back with a tray holding a pitcher of lemonade and a plate of cookies. He thinks it would be rude to say no, and it is awfully hot. So they sit together and she tells him about herself, that she graduated from Tuskegee Institute with a major in history and a minor in English, and she's just started teaching at the new black junior college south of town. She asks Clifton about himself – does he like school and what are his plans? He tells her that he has skipped a grade and will be graduating this year, that he plans to go to college and, he hopes, continue with his studies to become a doctor, that he loves science. It's been a while since he's had anyone to talk to like this, and he finds himself calling her Mrs. Henry instead of "Auntie" or by her first name. He finds he is talking to her with the comfort and respect he'd feel with any of his friends' moms. And it makes his head spin.

She walks him out as he explains the ordering process and when he'll be back to install the blinds. As she thanks him, saying it was a pleasure to meet such a fine young man as himself, she notices him looking at the sidewalk, still so perplexed. "What's wrong, Clifton?" "I guess it's confusing. You have a brick walkway to keep your feet clean when you come to the door. But what's the point of the sidewalk? There aren't any elsewhere out here." He shrugs. "It just starts and then -- ends." She smiles slightly. "Is that what you see? She walks him onto it and turns him, and herself, to face where it 'ends.' She looks out into the rest of the black neighborhood, the muddy streets, the ramshackle houses. "I don't see an end, Clifton, I see a beginning. All beginnings have to start somewhere and our beginning starts here. I'm looking forward into the future, and you know what I see? I see hope and the beginning of better days." She smiles and squeezes his shoulder. "Maybe someday you'll see that too."

Then she turns and walks up the pathway, back into the house. He stands there as the door closes, still looking out.

"I'd like to say that moment changed me...but it didn't, at least not right then. But it always stayed with me, and I'd think of it, again and again, when the civil rights movement began, when Martin Luther King preached for equality in a church I'd marched right past playing the trombone that day in Montgomery, when the schools became integrated. As time passed, more and more I could see the future Mrs. Henry saw, and more and more I wanted to be a part of it."

“I grew up to become a doctor, just as I’d told her I wanted to be. I think I helped people over the years. But most of all, I think, and hope, I saw them for who they were, not how they looked, and treated them each with respect. In the end, if we can all do that – which really isn’t so very much – well, just think what a difference that could make.”

Epilogue

We return to the beginning, to the funeral, now ended. The elderly Clifton is shaking hands, meeting the multi-generations of Billy’s family. They get younger and younger as he is passed on, till he winds up with a young father and two young children – they are likely Billy’s great grandchildren. They three follow Clifton as he heads to his car and from the trunk takes out a box. He opens it and packed carefully within are the two rubber band guns Billy left for him in the fort. The father smiles – it’s clear he’s heard about his grandfather’s skills. The kids are excited, each taking one and running off. Their dad reaches out his hand; he and Clifton shake.

FADE OUT