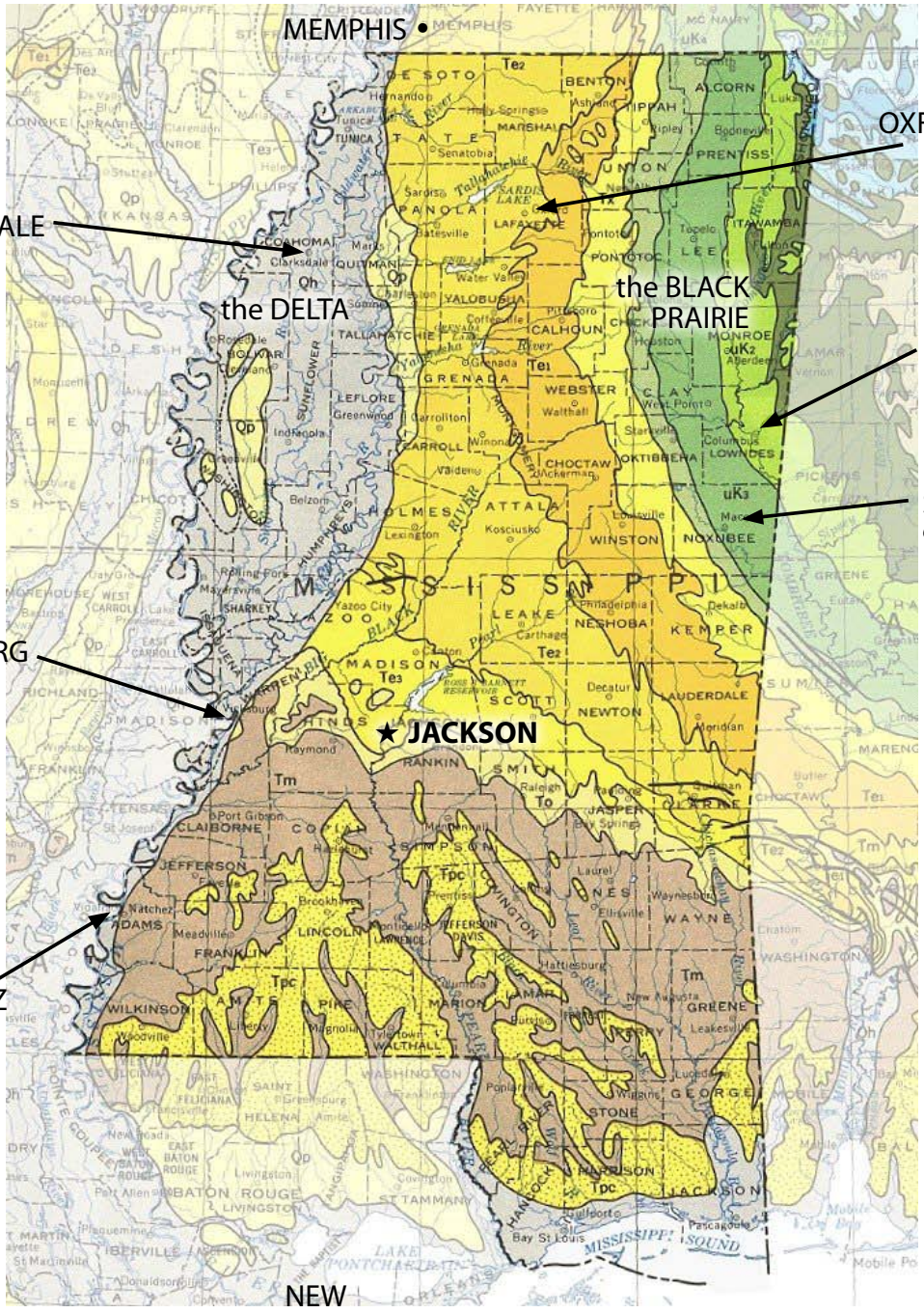
Mississippi Guide



This is just a taste of Mississippi readings specifically designed to orient you to upcoming visit to Mississippi and Jackson! Don't feel like you have to read all of it of course, some articles, while very good, are lengthier than necessary here.

MAP

Important places to know in Mississippi (not all the important ones obviously, but many). Noted on a geological map so you get an idea of the regions of the state as well.

FOOD

When you talk food in Mississippi there's okra, cornbread (no sugar), and greens, fried catfish, fried chicken, and pimiento cheese, jambalaya and Hoppin' John but for something truly Mississippi there may be nothing that says Jackson more than Comeback Sauce and Tamales which hail from the Mississippi Delta. Find herein a few very important notes on these traditions.

WRITERS

Mississippi is the home state of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Willie Morris *(My Dog Skip*), Tennessee Williams, Richard Wright, Richard Ford, Shelby Foote, Barry Hannah, Walker Percy, and many others.

Of course, in Jackson, Eudora Welty is who you ought to know. One of our greatest American writers, she was an amazing storyteller, capturing the essence of people and particularly the hilarity of life in a very unique voice. I was inundated with Eudora Welty early on, reading her books and short stories since I was old enough to read. I've included what is probably my favorite funny short story she wrote, it's a little long, but thoroughly entertaining especially if you can hear Eudora read it from the audiobook *Essential Welty.*

A LITTLE HISTORY

Most of Mississippi was frontier land and largely unsettled by Europeans until the early 1800s and not officially open for settlement until a treaty was signed with the Choctaws in 1820. Jackson, in the center of the state, was originally a trading post on the Natchez Trace, a trade route between Natchez, south on the Mississippi River, and Nashville, Tennessee. Jackson was first settled by French Canadian trader, Louis LeFleur and was known as LeFleur's Bluff. Today, LeFleur's Bluff State Park near Belhaven retains that name and the site along the river, the Natchez Trace today skirts along the west side of the city. The state of Mississippi came into existence in 1811 and in 1821 the legislature voted to move the capital from Natchez to this central location. The capitol was named for Andrew Jackson, honoring his victory in the Battle of New Orleans:

In 1814 took a little trip
'long with Colonel Jackson
down the mighty Mississip'
Took a little bacon
and we took a little beans
and we fought the bloody British
in the town of New Orleans

Well.. we…
Fired our guns but the British kep' acomin'
Fired once more and they began a runnin'
Down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico.

Anyhow, despite its history as the capital city in the first half of the 19th century, Jackson does not have many antebellum ("before the war," meaning pre-Civil War) buildings remaining because the city was burned during the Civil War, earning the name "Chimneyville." Today the Governor's Mansion, the Old Capitol, the City Hall and one or two homes on State Street (the Peachtree Street of Jackson) are all that remain from "before the war."

The beginning of the 20th century saw significant growth for Jackson and other Southern cities. Eudora Welty's memoir *One Writer's Beginnings* as well as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* discuss widely different experiences growing up in Jackson of the 1910s and 20s. Downtown boomed in this period. Across from Union Station, the King Edward Hotel opened in 1923 and was the center for prestigious political and society events until it closed in 1967. Nearby the Standard Life Building was the largest reinforced concrete structure in the world upon its completion in 1929.

WPA photographers including Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and others tell the story of the rural south during the Great Depression. Eudora Welty also photographed both the countryside and her native city during the 1930s. Meanwhile, the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) worked to build infrastructure for state parks and work began on converting the old Natchez Trace into the Natchez Trace Parkway. Today the parkway is one of the pleasantest travel routes through the state, great for biking, picnic and hiking stops, and, of course, historic sites.

As you probably know, Mississippi was at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. The end of the Civil War saw the beginning of a mandatory penance for the South, "Reconstruction" during which time, African-Americans had the right to vote, run for office, and many other giant steps forward. This progress was all reversed by the late 1800s however. As the Southern states regained autonomy, laws (Jim Crow laws) were put in place for mandatory segregation and essential denial of any gains in civil rights African-Americans had had in the previously decade or so. Race relations were pretty much terrible in the Jim Crow South. This went on, with varying degrees of hostility over the decades, until the the culmination in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. It wasn't pretty.

Freedom Summer in 1963 brought activists from all over the US to Mississippi where boycotts of white-owned businesses and a Woolworth sit-in in downtown Jackson were some of the major events. Protestors included Anne Moody who wrote of those times in her autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. On a hot June night that summer Civil Rights worker Medgar Evers was shot and killed outside his home in Jackson. He had worked to organize NAACP chapters since 1952 and played a key role in desegregation at the University of Mississippi and in the Jackson Movement.

Which brings us to the recent decades: the decline of downtown Jackson, suburbanization, and eventually the recent revitilization of the inner city, the story of so many cities.

Notes From the Field:

Comeback Sauce

By Amy Cameron Evans

Comeback sauce.

It's a dip found throughout Jackson, Mississippi's many Greek-rooted restaurants (though it's decidedly un-Greek). A pinkish-orange-tinted condiment that earned its name for being so good that it keeps eaters coming back for more. And a dressing with a history as thick and gloppy as the stuff itself.

Jerry Kountouris, owner of the Mayflower Café, likely the oldest existing (since 1935) eatery in town, quotes another source in calling Comeback a "bastard Thousand Island sauce." After decades running the family business, he's still amazed at what his customers put it on: salads, crackers, fried foods, baked potatoes, rolls, and broiled Gulf fish and shrimp (the Mayflower's specialty). Their version, mirroring most others around town, is a garlicky, pickle-y, chili-spiced version that pairs with, and peps up, just about anything. Down the street at the Elite Restaurant — opened in 1947, where they spike their sauce with over fifty different ingredients — Chuck Odom says his patrons wean their year-old children on Comeback-slathered crackers.

Most area Comeback connoisseurs credit the Dennery family with crafting the first batch of sauce, simply called "house dressing," at their now-shuttered Rotisserie Restaurant, Jackson's original Greek eatery, dating back to the late-1920s. But Bob Crechale, the third generation-owner of Crechale's, says his recipe originated around the same time at his great-great-uncle's restaurant in Clarksdale. And at Bill's Greek Tavern, Bill Matheos, the "God Bless America"-crooning cook-owner, says he cribbed his Comeback recipe from the Louis Pappas Riverside Cafe outside Tampa Bay, Florida.

Photograph of Comeback Sauce on a Captain's Wafer, taken at the Mayflower Café in Jackson.

After a week documenting Jackson's food scene for the SFA's upcoming Summer Symposium in Jackson, I've discovered my favorite rendition of Comeback Sauce: at Crechale's the sauce hits with a more pungent pucker of pickle than others. I'm no clearer on what exactly the dressing is, where it comes from, or why I even like it, but I'll keep coming back for more. ♦

An Introduction:

Hot Tamales & The Mississippi Delta

by Amy C. Evans, SFA Historian

Better known for its association with cotton and catfish, the Mississippi Delta has a fascinating relationship with tamales. The history of the hot tamale in this area reaches back to at least the early part of the twentieth century. Reference to the Delta delicacy appears in the song "They're Red Hot," which was recorded by legendary bluesman Robert Johnson in 1936. But there is an even earlier reference in the song "Molly Man," which was recorded by the Reverend Moses Mason under the name Red Hot Ole Mose in 1928. But how and when were hot tamales introduced to what has been called "the most southern place on earth"? More importantly, why have they stayed? There are as many answers to that question as there are tamale recipes. In restaurants, on street corners, and in kitchens throughout the Delta, this very old and time-consuming culinary tradition has remained, while so much of the Delta – and the South as a whole – has changed.

The Mississippi Delta is the flat alluvial plain that flanks the western part of the state. This leaf-shaped area is often referred to as the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, for these two powerful rivers define its borders. David L. Cohn, author of *God Shakes Creation* (1935) and a Greenville native, devised a geo-cultural definition of the region. In his memoir, *Where I was Born and Raised* (1948), he wrote, "the Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg." Within these boundaries, hot tamales flourish. Many hypothesize that tamales made their way to the Mississippi Delta in the early twentieth century when migrant laborers were brought in from Mexico to work the cotton harvest. The African Americans who shared the fields easily recognized the basic tamale ingredients: corn meal and pork. Others maintain that the Delta's history with tamales goes back to the

U.S.-Mexican War one hundred years earlier, when U.S. soldiers from Mississippi traveled to Mexico and brought tamale recipes home with them. Others argue that tamales have simply always been in the Delta. The Mississippian culture of mound-building Native Americans in the area reaches back thousands of years, with an agriculture based in maize. Tamales have been a portable food of war parties and field workers for millennia. Today, African Americans in the Delta are the primary keepers of the tamale-making tradition. It makes sense, then, that the interaction of African Americans with Mexican migrant laborers explains part of this culinary confluence. Through slavery and sharecropping, tamales have proved to be a viable support system – financially and nutritionally – to rural communities throughout the area. Oral history interviews with tamale makers and vendors in the Delta today reveal the various ways in which tamale recipes have been acquired, how they have changed, and they underscore the endurance of this particular foodway in this part of the American South.

* * *

Tamale recipes vary from place to place, person to person. In the Mississippi Delta, no two people make hot tamales exactly the same. Pork is traditional. Some folks use beef, while others prefer turkey. Some boil their meat, while others simply brown it. Some people use masa, while most prefer the rough texture of corn meal. Most wrap in corn shucks, while a few have turned to the less expensive parchment paper. Some season the tamale in just one way, while many will season the meat and the meal, as well as the water used to simmer the rolled bundles. Some eat theirs straight out of the shuck, while others smother them in chili and cheese. As it turns out, there are as many stories about how Deltans acquired tamale recipes as there are ways of making them. Still, a Delta-style tamale is quite a specific thing. Connoisseurs know that a tamale from the Mississippi Delta is smaller than Latin-style tamales, is simmered instead of steamed, has a gritty texture from the use of corn meal instead of *masa harina* or corn flour, has considerably more spice, and is usually served with juice that is the byproduct of simmering. Today, some even fry their hot tamales. (Incidentally, in the Delta vernacular, the singular is, indeed, *tamale*, not the Spanish *tamal*.)

Within the Delta, the city of Greenville is a hotbed of hot tamales. Situated along the Mississippi River, traffic along this legendary waterway certainly has something to do with the persistence of the vibrant tamale tradition in this particular town. In the early part of the twentieth century, the prospects that river commerce brought to Greenville also brought many Sicilians to the area. Some hypothesize that the migrant Mexican laborers who came through the Delta might have shared their tamale tradition with these Italian immigrants. Here, a certain comfort in communication was allowed simply because of the linguistic similarities. Others believe that Delta tamales developed from the generations-old African American dish called *cush*. Lumumba Ajanaku, a tamale vendor in Yazoo City, talks about *cush* in his interview: "Some say [hot tamales] come from an old word that we use called *cush*, you know. A lot of the Africans would just take meal and season the meal…because a lot of them didn't have enough money to buy meat like they wanted, so they would take the meal and season the meal. And the meal would taste so good it tasted like meat was in it." Again, it is possible that the recognizable ingredients of meat and meal, which were familiar to African American slaves and sharecroppers throughout the South, was elevated to the more complicated tamale with the result being a more portable food with extraordinary heat retention qualities. Whatever their origin, the hot tamale has been a staple of Delta communities for generations. Tamales have persisted in the Delta because of family tradition, public demand, and out of simple necessity. African Americans discovered a warm and hearty food that could be easily transported to a chilly cotton field during the fall picking season. They also discovered the economic opportunity of selling tamales between harvests when the cold weather kept them out of the fields. To this day, many Delta residents claim that the best time to eat a hot tamale in the Delta is during the winter months. But a good craving is hard to deny, and people sell and eat tamales year round. Read our oral history interviews with tamale makers and vendors to learn more about this iconic food of the Mississippi Delta. ♦

Southern Foodways Alliance Wants to Complicate Your Meal

Story by Chuck Reece
Photography and video by Tamara Reynolds

The remains of a whole hog bargecue, The Lamar Lounge, Oxford, Miss.

"I'm Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table One of These Days"

John T. Edge is talking to me about rice.

Rice, I'm thinking. How much do I need to know? Add one cup of the stuff to two cups cold water, throw in a little butter or olive oil and a little salt, bring it to a boil, stir it, crank it down to a simmer, cover it, leave it for 12 minutes and voila! A pile of little starchy cereal grains. Goes well under just about anything. Rice soaks up gravy real good.

That's about it, right?

No. It's not. I've watched thousands of hours of cooking shows, and I've never heard anyone speak with such conviction about rice. John T. Edge is on the edge of his chair because, by God, I will know more about rice before he's through with me.

This is happening in Oxford, Miss., in Edge's office in the Barnard Observatory on the campus of the University of Mississippi. The small headquarters of the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA), the organization Edge has headed since its founding in 1999, sits in the tip-top of the old observatory, where the telescope was supposed to be but never was, which is a story unto itself.

Frederick A.P. Barnard, a Massachusetts native who later became the president of Columbia University in Manhattan, had come to the University of Mississippi in 1854 as a professor of chemistry and natural history. He believed Ole Miss needed a strong program of study in astronomy. So Ole Miss commissioned the world's largest telescope and started construction on the building to house it.

The telescope never arrived. It was still under construction when the building was completed in 1859, but with the Civil War looming, a problem arose. Seems the Ole Miss benefactors who'd agreed to finance the observatory had pledged their slave holdings as collateral to cover the investment in the great telescope. Human

capital, as it were. Capital that lost its value rapidly when war broke out.

The telescope ended up at Northwestern University in Chicago. Barnard got the hell out of Oxford and went to New York.

The Barnard Observatory and the steps that lead to where its telescope was supposed to go.

Before John T. Edge found his way to Oxford, he'd spent his 20s working at a consulting firm in Atlanta that helped companies (permit us a little corporatespeak here) *optimize their human capital.* Funny, then, that he wound up here, in an observatory that never got its telescope because of bankers who would have understood the phrase "human capital" to mean something entirely different.

Funnier still that this space now houses the SFA, an organization whose stated mission is diametrically opposed to the values of the slave holders who financed it by using human beings as collateral.

Here's the mission statement:

"The Southern Foodways Alliance documents, studies and celebrates the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. We set a common table where black and white, rich and poor — all who gather — may consider our history and our future in a spirit of reconciliation."

The mission hangs me up. It requires an intellectual leap I'm not sure I'm ready to make. So I interrupt John T. (that's what everybody calls him), and I tell him I'm having a hard time getting from rice to race.

"It's still a little much for me, honestly, to think that by talking about growing, creating, harvesting and cooking food that we get to reconciliation among the races," I say.

John T. looks me in the eye and tells me, "And I think you're too focused on the food. You're too literal-minded."

OK, big boy. Explain it to me.

"You know, food is just the way we get there," he says. "Food on the table is a catalytic converter: reaching for the country ham and talking about the Appalachian roots of your grandfather, or reaching for the okra and talking about the African roots of this whole place. Those foods are facilitators of dialogue and touchstones of culture. They're just a way to get you into the conversation."

He's rolling now.

"I had a real want to understand my region because I love this place and I'm genuinely, viscerally, every damn day of my life pissed off at this place, too."

"We're not just talking about what we grow and what we serve," he says. "To talk about food in the South is to talk about labor, who cooks it, who raises the crops. You talk about the expertise of the enslaved Africans brought into the lowcountry of South Carolina, who were valued

for their knowledge of rice culture. They were higher valued slaves because they knew how to raise rice. That's why they were brought in from western Africa. So you serve rice, and you talk about the labor of Africans who made the wealth of the rice culture of the 18th and 19th century in South Carolina possible. You can also talk about 21st century issues around the immigrant labor that picks our vegetables. So I don't think it's the food. It's the possibility that the table offers us to tell stories about and come to terms with our past and our present. That's different than saying, 'Let's just talk about food.'"

I'm beginning to get it. I think back on my own experiences and it's pretty clear: What happens at the table is different from what happens everywhere else. Talk about race and class in a lot of places, and somebody'll wind up calling somebody else an asshole, and the whole thing will go sideways.

But when you put people at the table, things get different. Maybe put some country ham, the product of Southern Appalachian folks trying to figure out a way to preserve pork over the winter by salting and smoking it, on that table. Put some fried okra, a vegetable brought to these shores by enslaved Africans, on there, too. And of course some rice, which John T. has already told you about, with some Hoppin' John on it. Over that food, across that table, we are less likely to accuse and more likely to talk. More likely to understand each other. More likely to reconcile our differences.

And the more we know about the meaning bound up in the food, the better the conversation will go.

"My job is to complicate your understanding of rice. It's to complicate your Hoppin' John," John T. says. "That's my job."

He does it very, very well. ♦

Briefly about Southern Foodways Alliance and John T. Edge:

It's not the Food, it's the Stories

SFA events draw foodies in locations all over America. Edge's writing appears regularly in The New York Times, Oxford American and Garden & Gun. He turns up regularly on NPR's "All Things Considered" and countless television news shows. He's even been a judge on "Iron Chef." He's written, co-written and edited scads of books about Southern food. In 2012 he won the MFK Fisher Distinguished Writing Award from the James Beard Foundation.

It seems that no one writes a word about Southern food these days without calling John T. for a comment. He's become Southern food's Designated Spokesperson. He is the public face of the SFA. A lot of people think John T. Edge is the Southern Foodways Alliance.

He isn't. The SFA staff also includes seven women, a couple of grad students and about half of a guy named Joe (more on him next week). And every single one of them will tell you the same thing: that their work isn't about food. It is, instead, about capturing the stories of the people who grow, harvest, cook and serve the food we eat in the South.

Why I Live at the P.O.

a funny short story by Eudora Welty

I WAS GETTING ALONG FINE with Mama, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again. Mr. Whitaker! Of course I went with Mr. Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in China Grove, taking "Pose Yourself" photos, and Stella-Rondo broke us up. Told him I was one-sided. Bigger on one side than the other, which is a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the same. Stella-Rondo is exactly twelve months to the day younger than I am and for that reason she's spoiled.

She's always had anything in the world she wanted and then she'd throw it away. Papa-Daddy gave her this gorgeous Add-a-Pearl necklace when she was eight years old and she threw it away playing baseball when she was nine, with only two pearls.

So as soon as she got married and moved away from home the first thing she did was separate! From Mr. Whitaker! This photographer with the popeyes she said she trusted. Came home from one of those towns up in Illinois and to our complete surprise brought this child of two.

Mama said she like to made her drop dead for a second. "Here you had this marvelous blonde child and never so much as wrote your mother a word about it," says Mama. "I'm thoroughly ashamed of you." But of course she wasn't.

Stella-Rondo just calmly takes off this hat, I wish you could see it. She says, "Why, Mama, Shirley-T.'s adopted, I can prove it."

"How?" says Mama, but all I says was, "H'm!" There I was over the hot stove, trying to stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unexpected child into the bargain, without one moment's notice.

"What do you mean - 'H'm!'?" says Stella-Rondo, and Mama says, "I heard that, Sister."

I said that oh, I didn't mean a thing, only that whoever Shirley-T. was, she was the spit-image of Papa-Daddy if he'd cut off his beard, which of course he'd never do in the world. Papa-Daddy's Mama's papa and sulks.

Stella-Rondo got furious! She said, "Sister, I don't need to tell you you got a lot of nerve and always did have and I'll thank you to make no future reference to my adopted child whatsoever."

"Very well," I said. "Very well, very well. Of course I noticed at once she looks like Mr. Whitaker's side too. That frown. She looks like a cross between Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy."

"Well, all I can say is she isn't."

"She looks exactly like Shirley Temple to me," says Mama, but Shirley-T. just ran away from her.

So the first thing Stella-Rondo did at the table was turn Papa-Daddy against me.

"Papa-Daddy," she says. He was trying to cut up his meat. "Papa-Daddy!" I was taken completely by surprise. Papa-Daddy is about a million years old and's got this long-long beard. "Papa-Daddy, Sister says she fails to understand why you don't cut off your beard."

So Papa-Daddy l-a-y-s down his knife and fork! He's real rich. Mama says he is, he says he isn't. So he says, "Have I heard correctly? You don't understand why I don't cut off my beard?"

"Why," I says, "Papa-Daddy, of course I understand, I did not say any such of a thing, the idea!"

He says, "Hussy!"

I says, "Papa-Daddy, you know I wouldn't any more want you to cut off your beard than the man in the moon. It was the farthest thing from my mind! Stella-Rondo sat there and made that up while she was eating breast of chicken."

But he says, "So the postmistress fails to understand why I don't cut off my beard. Which job I got you through my influence with the government. 'Bird's nest' - is that what you call

it?"

Not that it isn't the next to smallest P.O. in the entire state of Mississippi.

I says, "Oh, Papa-Daddy," I says, "I didn't say any such of a thing, I never dreamed it was a bird's nest, I have always been grateful though this is the next to smallest P.O. in the state of Mississippi, and I do not enjoy being referred to as a hussy by my own grandfather."

But Stella-Rondo says, "Yes, you did say it too. Anybody in the world could of heard you, that had ears."

"Stop right there," says Mama, looking at me.

So I pulled my napkin straight back through the napkin ring and left the table.

As soon as I was out of the room Mama says, "Call her back, or she'll starve to death," but Papa-Daddy says, "This is the beard I started growing on the Coast when I was fifteen years old." He would of gone on till nightfall if Shirley-T. hadn't lost the Milky Way she ate in Cairo.

So Papa-Daddy says, "I am going out and lie in the hammock, and you can all sit here and remember my words: I'll never cut off my beard as long as I live, even one inch, and I don't appreciate it in you at all." Passed right by me in the hall and went straight out and got in the hammock.

It would be a holiday. It wasn't five minutes before Uncle Rondo suddenly appeared in the hall in one of Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimonos, all cut on the bias, like something Mr. Whitaker probably thought was gorgeous.

"Uncle Rondo!" I says. "I didn't know who that was! Where are you going?"

"Sister," he says, "get out of my way, I'm poisoned."

"If you're poisoned stay away from Papa-Daddy," I says. "Keep out of the hammock. Papa-Daddy will certainly beat you on the head if you come within forty miles of him. He thinks I deliberately said he ought to cut off his beard after he got me the P.O., and I've told him and told him and told him, and he acts like he just don't hear me. Papa-Daddy must of gone stone deaf.'

"He picked a fine day to do it then," says Uncle Rondo, and before you could say "Jack Robinson" flew out in the yard.

What he'd really done, he'd drunk another bottle of that prescription. He does it every single Fourth of July as sure as shooting, and it's horribly expensive. Then he falls over in the hammock and snores. So he insisted on zigzagging right on out to the hammock, looking like a half-wit.

Papa-Daddy woke up with this horrible yell and right there without moving an inch he tried to turn Uncle Rondo against me. I heard every word he said. Oh, he told Uncle Rondo I didn't learn to read till I was eight years old and he didn't see how in the world I ever got the mail put up at the P.O., much less read it all, and he said if Uncle Rondo could only fathom the lengths he had gone to to get me that job! And he said on the other hand he thought Stella-Rondo had a brilliant mind and deserved credit for getting out of town. All the time he was just lying there swinging as pretty as you please and looping out his beard, and poor Uncle Rondo was pleading with him to slow down the hammock, it was making him as dizzy as a witch to watch it. But that's what Papa-Daddy likes about a hammock. So Uncle Rondo was too dizzy to get turned against me for the time being. He's Mama's only brother and is a good case of a one-track mind. Ask anybody. A certified pharmacist.

Just then I heard Stella-Rondo raising the upstairs window. While she was married she got this peculiar idea that it's cooler with the windows shut and locked. So she has to raise the window before she can make a soul hear her outdoors.

So she raises the window and says, "Oh!" You would have thought she was mortally wounded.

Uncle Rondo and Papa-Daddy didn't even look up, but kept right on with what they were doing. I had to laugh.

I flew up the stairs and threw the door open! I says, "What in the wide world's the matter, Stella-Rondo? You mortally wounded?"

"No," she says, "I am not mortally wounded

but I wish you would do me the favor of looking out that window there and telling me what you see."

So I shade my eyes and look out the window.

"I see the front yard," I says.

"Don't you see any human beings?" she says.

"I see Uncle Rondo trying to run Papa-Daddy out of the hammock," I says. "Nothing more. Naturally, it's so suffocating-hot in the house, with all the windows shut and locked, everybody who cares to stay in their right mind will have to go out and get in the hammock before the Fourth of July is over."

"Don't you notice anything different about Uncle Rondo?" asks Stella-Rondo.

"Why, no, except he's got on some terrible-looking flesh-colored contraption I wouldn't be found dead in, is all I can see," I says.

"Never mind, you won't be found dead in it, because it happens to be part of my trousseau, and Mr. Whitaker took several dozen photographs of me in it," says Stella-Rondo. "What on earth could Uncle Rondo mean by wearing part of my trousseau out in the broad open daylight without saying so much as 'Kiss my foot,' knowing I only got home this morning after my separation and hung my negligee up on the bathroom door, just as nervous as I could be?"

"I'm sure I don't know, and what do you expect me to do about it?" I says. "Jump out the window?"

"No, I expect nothing of the kind. I simply declare that Uncle Rondo looks like a fool in it, that's all," she says. "It makes me sick to my stomach."

"Well, he looks as good as he can," I says. "As good as anybody in reason could." I stood up for Uncle Rondo, please remember. And I said to Stella-Rondo, "I think I would do well not to criticize so freely if I were you and came home with a two-year-old child I had never said a word about, and no explanation whatever about my separation."

"I asked you the instant I entered this house not to refer one more time to my adopted child, and you gave me your word of honor you would not," was all Stella-Rondo would say, and started pulling out every one of her eyebrows with some cheap Kress tweezers.

So I merely slammed the door behind me and went down and made some green-tomato pickle. Somebody had to do it. Of course Mama had turned both the Negroes loose; she always said no earthly power could hold one anyway on the Fourth of July, so she wouldn't even try. It turned out that Jaypan fell in the lake and came within a very narrow limit of drowning.

So Mama trots in. Lifts up the lid and says, "H'm! Not very good for your Uncle Rondo in his precarious condition, I must say. Or poor little adopted Shirley-T. Shame on you!"

That made me tired. I says, "Well, Stella-Rondo had better thank her lucky stars it was her instead of me came trotting in with that very peculiar-looking child. Now if it had been me that trotted in from Illinois and brought a peculiar-looking child of two, I shudder to think of the reception I'd of got, much less controlled the diet of an entire family."

"But you must remember, Sister, that you were never married to Mr. Whitaker in the first place and didn't go up to Illinois to live," says Mama, shaking a spoon in my face. "If you had I would of been just as overjoyed to see you and your little adopted girl as I was to see Stella-Rondo, when you wound up with your separation and came on back home."

"You would not," I says.

"Don't contradict me, I would," says Mama.

But I said she couldn't convince me though she talked till she was blue in the face. Then I said, "Besides, you know as well as I do that that child is not adopted."

"She most certainly is adopted," says Mama, stiff as a poker.

I says, "Why, Mama, Stella-Rondo had her just as sure as anything in this world, and just too stuck up to admit it."

"Why, Sister," said Mama. "Here I thought we were going to have a pleasant Fourth of July, and you start right out not believing a word your own baby sister tells you!"

"Just like Cousin Annie Flo. Went to her grave denying the facts of life," I remind Mama.

"I told you if you ever mentioned Annie

Flo's name I'd slap your face," says Mama, and slaps my face.

"All right, you wait and see," I says.

"I," says Mama, "I prefer to take my children's word for anything when it's humanly possible." You ought to see Mama, she weighs two hundred pounds and has real tiny feet.

Just then something perfectly horrible occurred to me.

"Mama," I says, "can that child talk?" I simply had to whisper! "Mama, I wonder if that child can be - you know - in any way? Do you realize," I says, "that she hasn't spoken one single, solitary word to a human being up to this minute? This is the way she looks," I says, and I looked like this.

Well, Mama and I just stood there and stared at each other. It was horrible!

"I remember well that Joe Whitaker frequently drank like a fish," says Mama. "I believed to my soul he drank chemicals." And without another word she marches to the foot of the stairs and calls Stella-Rondo.

"Stella-Rondo? O-o-o-o-o! Stella-Rondo!"

"What?" says Stella-Rondo from upstairs. Not even the grace to get up off the bed.

"Can that child of yours talk?" asks Mama.

Stella-Rondo says, "Can she what?"

"Talk! Talk!" says Mama. "Burdyburdyburdyburdy!"

So Stella-Rondo yells back, "Who says she can't talk?"

"Sister says so," says Mama.

"You didn't have to tell me, I know whose word of honor don't mean a thing in this house," says Stella-Rondo.

And in a minute the loudest Yankee voice I ever heard in my life yells out, "OE'm Pop-OE the Sailor-r-r-r Ma-a-an!" and then somebody jumps up and down in the upstairs hall. In another second the house would of fallen down.

"Not only talks, she can tap-dance!" calls Stella-Rondo. "Which is more than some people I won't name can do."

"Why, the little precious darling thing!" Mama says, so surprised. "Just as smart as she can be!" Starts talking baby talk right there. Then she turns on me. "Sister, you ought to be thoroughly ashamed! Run upstairs this instant and apologize to Stella-Rondo and Shirley-T."

"Apologize for what?" I says. "I merely wondered if the child was normal, that's all. Now that she's proved she is, why, I have nothing further to say."

But Mama just turned on her heel and flew out, furious. She ran right upstairs and hugged the baby. She believed it was adopted. Stella-Rondo hadn't done a thing but turn her against me from upstairs while I stood there helpless over the hot stove. So that made Mama, Papa-Daddy and the baby all on Stella-Rondo's side.

Next, Uncle Rondo.

I must say that Uncle Rondo has been marvelous to me at various times in the past and I was completely unprepared to be made to jump out of my skin, the way it turned out. Once Stella-Rondo did something perfectly horrible to him - broke a chain letter from Flanders Field - and he took the radio back he had given her and gave it to me. Stella-Rondo was furious! For six months we all had to call her Stella instead of Stella-Rondo, or she wouldn't answer. I always thought Uncle Rondo had all the brains of the entire family. Another time he sent me to Mammoth Cave, with all expenses paid.

But this would be the day he was drinking that prescription, the Fourth of July.

So at supper Stella-Rondo speaks up and says she thinks Uncle Rondo ought to try to eat a little something. So finally Uncle Rondo said he would try a little cold biscuits and ketchup, but that was all. So she brought it to him.

"Do you think it wise to disport with ketchup in Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimono?" I says. Trying to be considerate! If Stella-Rondo couldn't watch out for her trousseau, somebody had to.

"Any objections?" asks Uncle Rondo, just about to pour out all the ketchup.

"Don't mind what she says, Uncle Rondo," says Stella-Rondo. "Sister has been devoting this solid afternoon to sneering out my bedroom window at the way you look."

"What's that?" says Unde Rondo. Uncle Rondo has got the most terrible temper in the world. Anything is liable to make him tear the house down if it comes at the wrong time.

So Stella-Rondo says, "Sister says, 'Uncle Rondo certainly does look like a fool in that pink kimono!' "

Do you remember who it was really said that?

Unde Rondo spills out all the ketchup and jumps out of his chair and tears off the kimono and throws it down on the dirty floor and puts his foot on it. It had to be sent all the way to Jackson to the cleaners and re-pleated.

"So that's your opinion of your Uncle Rondo, is it?" he says. "I look like a fool, do I? Well, that's the last straw. A whole day in this house with nothing to do, and then to hear you come out with a remark like that behind my back!"

"I didn't say any such of a thing, Uncle Rondo," I says, "and I'm not saying who did, either. Why, I think you look all right. Just try to take care of yourself and not talk and eat at the same time," I says. "I think you better go lie down."

"Lie down my foot," says Uncle Rondo. I ought to of known by that he was fixing to do something perfectly horrible.

So he didn't do anything that night in the precarious state he was in - just played Casino with Mama and Stella-Rondo and Shirley-T. and gave Shirley-T. a nickel with a head on both sides. It tickled her nearly to death, and she called him "Papa." But at 6:30 A.M. the next morning, he threw a whole five-cent package of some unsold one-inch firecrackers from the store as hard as he could into my bedroom and they every one went off. Not one bad one in the string. Anybody else, there'd be one that wouldn't go off.

Well, I'm just terribly susceptible to noise of any kind, the doctor has always told me I was the most sensitive person he had ever seen in his whole life, and I was simply prostrated. I couldn't eat! People tell me they heard it as far as the cemetery, and old Aunt Jep Patterson, that had been holding her own so good, thought it was Judgment Day and she was going to meet her whole family. It's usually so quiet here.

And I'll tell you it didn't take me any longer than a minute to make up my mind what to do. There I was with the whole entire house on Stella-Rondo's side and turned against me. If I have anything at all I have pride.

So I just decided I'd go straight down to the P.O. There's plenty of room there in the back, I says to myself.

Well! I made no bones about letting the family catch on to what I was up to. I didn't try to conceal it.

The first thing they knew, I marched in where they were all playing Old Maid and pulled the electric oscillating fan out by the plug, and everything got real hot. Next I snatched the pillow I'd done the needlepoint on right off the davenport from behind Papa-Daddy. He went "Ugh!" I beat Stella-Rondo up the stairs and finally found my charm bracelet in her bureau drawer under a picture of Nelson Eddy.

"So that's the way the land lies," says Uncle Rondo. There he was, piecing on the ham. "Well, Sister, I'll be glad to donate my army cot if you got any place to set it up, providing you'll leave right this minute and let me get some peace." Uncle Rondo was in France.

"Thank you kindly for the cot and 'peace' is hardly the word I would select if I had to resort to firecrackers at 6:30 A.M. in a young girl's bedroom," I says back to him. "And as to where I intend to go, you seem to forget my position as postmistress of China Grove, Mississippi," I says. "I've always got the P.O."

Well, that made them all sit up and take notice.

I went out front and started digging up some four-o'clocks to plant around the P.O.

"Ah-ah-ah!" says Mama, raising the window. "Those happen to be my four-o'clocks. Everything planted in that star is mine. I've never known you to make anything grow in your life."

"Very well," I says. "But I take the fern. Even you, Mama, can't stand there and deny that I'm the one watered that fern. And I happen to know where I can send in a box top and get a packet of one thousand mixed seeds, no two the same kind, free."

"Oh, where?" Mama wants to know.

But I says, "Too late. You 'tend to your house, and I'll 'tend to mine. You hear things like that all the time if you know how to listen to the

radio. Perfectly marvelous offers. Get anything you want free."

So I hope to tell you I marched in and got that radio, and they could of all bit a nail in two, especially Stella-Rondo, that it used to belong to, and she well knew she couldn't get it back, I'd sue for it like a shot. And I very politely took the sewing-machine motor I helped pay the most on to give Mama for Christmas back in 1929, and a good big calendar, with the first-aid remedies on it. The thermometer and the Hawaiian ukulele certainly were rightfully mine, and I stood on the step-ladder and got all my watermelon-rind preserves and every fruit and vegetable I'd put up, every jar. Then I began to pull the tacks out of the bluebird wall vases on the archway to the dining room.

"Who told you you could have those, Miss Priss?" says Mama, fanning as hard as she could.

"I bought 'em and I'll keep track of 'em," I says. "I'll tack 'em up one on each side the post-office window, and you can see 'em when you come to ask me for your mail, if you're so dead to see 'em."

"Not I! I'll never darken the door to that post office again if I live to be a hundred," Mama says. "Ungrateful child! After all the money we spent on you at the Normal."

"Me either," says Stella-Rondo. "You can just let my mail lie there and rot, for all I care. I'll never come and relieve you of a single, solitary piece."

"I should worry," I says. "And who you think's going to sit down and write you all those big fat letters and postcards, by the way? Mr. Whitaker? Just because he was the only man ever dropped down in China Grove and you got him - unfairly - is he going to sit down and write you a lengthy correspondence after you come home giving no rhyme nor reason whatsoever for your separation and no explanation for the presence of that child? I may not have your brilliant mind, but I fail to see it."

So Mama says, "Sister, I've told you a thousand times that Stella-Rondo simply got homesick, and this child is far too big to be hers," and she says, "Now, why don't you all just sit down and play Casino?"

Then Shirley-T. sticks out her tongue at me in this perfectly horrible way. She has no more manners than the man in the moon. I told her she was going to cross her eyes like that some day and they'd stick.

"It's too late to stop me now," I says. "You should have tried that yesterday. I'm going to the P.O. and the only way you can possibly see me is to visit me there."

So Papa-Daddy says, "You'll never catch me setting foot in that post office, even if I should take a notion into my head to write a letter some place." He says, "I won't have you reachin' out of that little old window with a pair of shears and cuttin' off any beard of mine. I'm too smart for you!"

"We all are," says Stella-Rondo.

But I said, "If you're so smart, where's Mr. Whitaker?"

So then Uncle Rondo says, "I'll thank you from now on to stop reading all the orders I get on postcards and telling everybody in China Grove what you think is the matter with them," but I says, "I draw my own conclusions and will continue in the future to draw them." I says, "If people want to write their inmost secrets on penny postcards, there's nothing in the wide world you can do about it, Uncle Rondo."

"And if you think we'll ever write another postcard you're sadly mistaken," says Mama.

"Cutting off your nose to spite your face then," I says. "But if you're all determined to have no more to do with the U.S. mail, think of this: What will Stella-Rondo do now, if she wants to tell Mr. Whitaker to come after her?"

"Wah!" says Stella-Rondo. I knew she'd cry. She had a conniption fit right there in the kitchen.

"It will be interesting to see how long she holds out," I says. "And

now - I am leaving."

"Good-bye," says Uncle Rondo.

"Oh, I declare," says Mama, "to think that a family of mine should quarrel on the Fourth of July, or the day after, over Stella-Rondo leaving old Mr. Whitaker and having the sweetest little adopted child! It looks like we'd all be glad!"

"Wah!" says Stella-Rondo, and has a fresh conniption fit.

"He left her - you mark my words," I says. "That's Mr. Whitaker. I know Mr. Whitaker. After all, I knew him first. I said from the beginning he'd up and leave her. I foretold every single thing that's happened."

"Where did he go?" asks Mama.

"Probably to the North Pole, if he knows what's good for him," I says.

But Stella-Rondo just bawled and wouldn't say another word. She flew to her room and slammed the door.

"Now look what you've gone and done, Sister," says Mama. "You go apologize."

"I haven't got time, I'm leaving," I says.

"Well, what are you waiting around for?" asks Uncle Rondo.

So I just picked up the kitchen clock and marched off, without saying "Kiss my foot" or anything, and never did tell Stella-Rondo good-bye.

There was a girl going along on a little wagon right in front.

"Girl," I says, "come help me haul these things down the hill, I'm going to live in the post office."

Took her nine trips in her express wagon. Uncle Rondo came out on the porch and threw her a nickel.

And that's the last I've laid eyes on any of my family or my family laid eyes on me for five solid days and nights. Stella-Rondo may be telling the most horrible tales in the world about Mr. Whitaker, but I haven't heard them. As I tell everybody, I draw my own conclusions.

But oh, I like it here. It's ideal, as I've been saying. You see, I've got everything cater-cornered, the way I like it. Hear the radio? All the war news. Radio, sewing machine, book ends, ironing board and that great big piano lamp - peace, that's what I like. Butter-bean vines planted all along the front where the strings are.

Of course, there's not much mail. My family are naturally the main people in China Grove, and if they prefer to vanish from the face of the earth, for all the mail they get or the mail they write, why, I'm not going to open my mouth. Some of the folks here in town are taking up for me and some turned against me. I know which is which. There are always people who will quit buying stamps just to get on the right side of Papa-Daddy.

But here I am, and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy.

And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and attempt to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen. ♦

JULY 18, 2013

A MURDER IN DEEP SUMMER

POSTED BY CASEY N. CEP

Although she was in the thick of her novel "Losing Battles," Eudora Welty paused from that long work to write a short story. "I don't write out of anger," Welty later said, but rage was distracting her. "There was one story that anger certainly lit the fuse of."

Welty's fuse was lit early one morning in June, 1963, when the civil-rights activist Medgar Evers was shot and killed in Jackson, Mississippi, the town where she lived for nearly her entire life. "I wrote a story that same night about the murderer," Welty described in her autobiography "One Writer's Beginnings."

"Where Is the Voice Coming From?" was published in The New Yorker less than a month later. Welty drafted the story before Evers's murderer, Byron De La Beckwith, had been identified or arrested. Two trials of De La Beckwith ended with hung juries, but he was finally convicted of first-degree murder thirty years later.

The story is one of Welty's least known, but I've been thinking about it again this July. Fifty years later, the fear and prejudice that caused Evers's murder still lives. The racism that Welty fixed on the page still lingers.

The original title of the story was "From the Unknown," yet much of its power comes from Welty's willingness to acknowledge how much she did know. In an interview with William F. Buckley, she later said: "What I was writing about really was that world of hate I felt I had grown up with and I felt I could speak as someone who knew it." Welty's story was so accurate, her characterization of the murderer so precise, that The New Yorker changed several important details: Medgar Evers became Roland Summers, the time of the shooting shifted to a few hours after midnight, and Jackson became the nonexistent Thermopylae.

The widow of Medgar Evers comforting her grieving son Darrell during her husband's funeral. Photograph by John Loengard/Life/Time & Life Pictures/Getty.

Racial hatred was as familiar to Welty as the stifling Southern heat that seems to rise from the story's pages. Although she rarely wrote fiction in the first person, the narrator of this story—who is never named—speaks for himself: "I says to my wife," it begins. He tells her to turn off the television: "You don't have to set and look at a black nigger face no longer than you want to, or listen to what you don't want to hear."

"It's still a free country," he shouts at his wife in

the story's opening. That thought, that deformed notion of freedom, drives the narrator to do something about the black face on the television: "I reckon that's how I give myself the idea."

The brief story—it's only two pages—encompasses the hours before and after the assassination. After telling his wife to turn off the television, the narrator borrows his brother-in-law's delivery truck, heads west, and waits for Roland Summers to return home.

Though the story's details are scarce, "Thermopylae" suggests that the hot gates of Hell had opened in the racial strife of mid-century America. "Nathan B. Forrest Road," on which the narrator drives to reach Summers's house, is named for a Confederate General who became the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

The narrator drives past Thermopylae's Branch Bank, whose "sign tells you in lights, all night long even, what time it is and how hot." "It was quarter to four, and 92" on the way to Summers's house: "It was so hot, all I did was hope and pray one or the other of us wouldn't melt before it was over."

The murder takes place in less than an hour. The narrator waits for Summers to arrive home, then shoots him with a rifle. Standing over the dead man's body, he taunts the corpse: "Now I'm alive and you ain't. We ain't never now, never going to be equals and you know why? One of us is dead. What about that, Roland?"

He stays only long enough to see Roland Summers's wife run from the house. "Going home," he thinks smugly, "I seen what little time it takes after all to get a thing done like you really want it. It was 4:34, and while I was looking it moved to 35."

The bank's sign shows that the temperature held steady at ninety-two, and the sticky, rotten heat of summer punctuates the story. The narrator's rifle becomes so hot that he drops it after the murder. Later, he says that the "pavement in the middle of Main Street was so hot to my feet I might've been walking the barrel of my gun."

The narrator returns home and is greeted by his wife, who unlike Summers's wife has not left the light on for him. Coldly, her first question is: "Didn't the skeeters bite you?"

Together they debate his reasons for the murder. She deflates her husband's sense of originality by telling him that a newspaper columnist already proposed assassinating civil-rights activists. While she encourages him to consider the murder as an act of patriotism or southern pride, he rejects those ideas and says: "I done it for my own pure-D satisfaction."

She continues demeaning his motives and the significance of his crime, telling him "The N. double A. C. P. is fixing to send somebody to Thermopylae. Why couldn't you waited? You might could have got you somebody better."

Welty's narrator is hateful and ignorant, self-pitying and self-aggrandizing at the same time. He denies the possibility that he committed the murder for political gain, but yearns for the approval of the segregationist governor of his state. He desires to avoid prosecution for his crime, but envies the media attention posthumously given to Roland Summers. He laments race riots, but resents the "thousand cops crowding ever'where you go, half of 'em too young to start shaving."

He is poor and uneducated, but he is also frustrated. He is a white man frustrated that a black man appears on his television. He is a white man frustrated that a black man has a house with a garage. He is a white man frustrated that a black man has a new car. He is a white man frustrated that a black man can afford to irrigate his grass and leave a light burning through the night. He is a frustrated, poor, and uneducated white man who murders a black man for his "own pure-D satisfaction."

In her 1972 interview with Buckley, Welty said that when she wrote the story: "I thought to myself, 'I've lived here all my life. I know the kind of mind that did this.'" She knew the kind of resentment boiling in so many white hearts, and the kind of hatred that could lead a killer to think that his act was not criminal, but instead reasonable and just. She recognized the kind

of perverse logic that leads a murderer to think any prosecution would be the state "try[ing] to railroad [him] into the electric chair."

One of the most upsetting exchanges in the story is when the wife asks her husband about the murder weapon. "Where's the gun, then?" she asks after he has returned home. "What did you do with our protection?"

How prescient, how pathetic are those questions? Weapons used for murderous acts are still construed as instruments of self-defense; gun violence is still accepted as a consequence of the right to protect one's self.

Prescient, too, is the false anticipation of riots by the narrator in Welty's story—something we have been warned against again and again this summer. "I won't be sorry to see them brickbats hail down on us for a change. Pop bottles too, they can come flying whenever they want to. Hundreds, all to smash, like Birmingham. I'm waiting on 'em to bring out them switchblade knives, like Harlem and Chicago."

"Watch TV long enough," he says, "and you'll see it all to happen on Deacon Street in Thermopylae. What's holding it back, that's all?—Because it's in 'em."

That fear-stoking language is terrifyingly familiar: the audacity to forecast violence after acting as an agent of violence yourself. "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" is one of Welty's best stories because it dares to take these views seriously without ever explicitly condemning them. Only hate has a voice in this story; morality is silent. The burden of judgment is imposed on the reader. The story is haunting because that burden is still ours; these views still haunt our country.

Two years after she published the story, Welty wrote an essay called "Must the Novelist Crusade?" The essay attempts to distinguish the novel from the editorial, the novelist from the journalist. Its titular question comes from the experience of having "a stranger over long distance in one of the midnight calls that [she] suppose[s] have waked most writers in the South from time to time": "All right, Eudora Welty, what are you going to do about it?"

The it, one presumes, is racism, though Welty never names it directly. That question—what are you going to do about it?—is one that many artists have asked themselves in the days since Saturday's verdict in the Trayvon Martin case.

Welty's answer is initially infuriating, especially when one's first impulse is to crusade against injustice. But crusading, she argued, produces bad fiction; novelists must produce plot, not argument. "A plot," she wrote, "is a thousand times more unsettling than an argument, which may be answered."

For Welty, a novel is neither manifesto nor polemic; it differs from the editorial. "The novelist works neither to correct nor to condone, not at all to comfort, but to make what's told alive." Yet, for Welty, the novel is not an apolitical or morally neutral genre: "Indeed, we are more aware of [the novelist's] moral convictions through a novel than any flat statement of belief from him could make us." The novelist contributes to social change in ways that the journalist cannot.

"Great fiction," Welty wrote, "shows us not how to conduct our behavior but how to feel. Eventually, it may show us how to face our feelings and face our actions and to have new inklings about what they mean."

Editorials must continue to address community policing, gun violence, and racial profiling. But fiction must follow. To remember Eudora Welty's words once more: "To write honestly and with all our powers is the least we can do, and the most." ♦

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WHERE IS THE VOICE COMING FROM?

I SAYS to my wife, "You can reach and turn it off. You don't have to set and look at a black nigger face no longer than you want to, or listen to what you don't want to hear. It's still a free country."

I reckon that's how I give myself the idea.

I says, I could find right exactly where in Thermopylae that nigger's living that's asking for equal time. And without a bit of trouble to me.

And I ain't saying it might not be because that's pretty close to where *I* live. The other hand, there could be reasons you might have yourself for knowing how to get there in the dark. It's where you all go for the thing you want when you want it the most. Ain't that right?

The Branch Bank sign tells you in lights, all night long even, what time it is and how hot. When it was quarter to four, and 92, that was me going by in my brother-in-law's truck. He don't deliver nothing at that hour of the morning.

So you leave Four Corners and head west on Nathan B. Forrest Road, past the Surplus & Salvage, not much beyond the Kum Back Drive-In and Trailer Camp, not as far as where the signs starts saying "Live Bait," "Used Parts," "Fireworks," "Peaches," and "Sister Peebles Reader and Adviser." Turn before you hit the city limits and duck back towards the I.C. tracks. And his street's been paved.

And there was his light on, waiting for me. In his garage, if you please. His car's gone. He's out planning still some other ways to do what we tell 'em they can't. I *thought* I'd beat him home. All I had to do was pick my tree and walk in close behind it.

I didn't come expecting not to wait. But it was so hot, all I did was hope and pray one or the other of us wouldn't melt before it was over.

Now, it wasn't no bargain I'd struck.

I've heard what you've heard about Goat Dykeman, in Mississippi. Sure, everybody knows about Goat Dykeman. Goat he got word to the Governor's Mansion he'd go up yonder and shoot that nigger Meredith clean out of school, if he's let out of the pen to do it. Old Ross turned *that* over in his mind before saying him nay, it stands to reason.

I ain't no Goat Dykeman, I ain't in no pen, and I ain't ask no Governor Barnett to give me one thing. Unless he wants to give me a pat on the back for the trouble I took this morning. But he don't have to if he don't want to. I done what I done for my own pure-D satisfaction.

As soon as I heard wheels, I knowed who was coming. That was him and bound to be him. It was the right nigger heading in a new white car up his driveway towards his garage with the light shining, but stopping before he got there, maybe not to wake 'em. That was him. I knowed it when he cut off the car lights and put his foot out and I knowed him standing dark against the light. I knowed him then like I know me now. I knowed him even by his still, listening back.

Never seen him before, never seen him since, never seen anything of his black face but his picture, never seen his face alive, any time at all, or anywheres, and didn't want to, need to, never hope to see that face and never will. As long as there was no question in my mind.

He had to be the one. He stood right still and waited against the light, his back was fixed, fixed on me like a preacher's eyeballs when he's yelling "Are you saved?" He's the one.

I'd already brought up my rifle, I'd already taken my sights. And I'd already got him, because it was too late then for him or me to turn by one hair.

Something darker than him, like the wings of a bird, spread on his back and pulled him down. He climbed up once, like a man under bad claws, and like just blood could weigh a ton he walked with it on his back to better light. Didn't get no further than his door. And fell to stay.

He was down. He was down, and a ton load of bricks on his back wouldn't have laid any heavier. There on his paved driveway, yes sir.

And it wasn't till the minute before, that the mockingbird had quit singing. He'd been singing up my sassafras tree. Either he was up early, or he hadn't never gone to bed, he was like me. And the mocker he'd stayed right with me, filling the air till come the crack, till I turned loose of my load. I was like him. I was on top of the world myself. For once.

I stepped to the edge of his light there, where he's laying flat. I says, "Roland? There was one way left, for me to be ahead of you and stay ahead of you, by Dad, and I just taken it. Now I'm alive and you ain't. We ain't never now, never going to be equals and you know why? One of us is dead. What about that, Roland?" I said. "Well, you seen to it, didn't you?"

I stood a minute—just to see would somebody inside come out long enough to pick him up. And there she comes, the woman. I doubt she'd been to sleep. Because it seemed to me she'd been in there keeping awake all along.

It was mighty green where I skint over the yard getting back. That nigger wife of his, she wanted nice grass! I bet my wife would hate to pay her water bill. And for burning her electricity. And there's my brother-in-law's truck, still waiting with the door open. "No Riders"—that didn't mean me.

There wasn't a thing I been able to think of since would have made it to go any nicer. Except a chair to my back while I was putting in my waiting. But going home, I seen what little time it takes after all to get a thing done like you really want it. It was 4:34, and while I was looking it moved to 35. And the temperature stuck where it was. All that night I guarantee you it had stood without dropping, a good 92.

My wife says, "What? Didn't the skeeters bite you?" She said, "Well, they been asking that—why somebody didn't trouble to load a rifle and get some of these agitators

out of Thermopylae. Didn't the fella keep drumming it in, what a good idea? The one that writes a column ever' day?"

I says to my wife, "Find *some* way I don't get the credit."

"He says do it for Thermopylae," she says. "Don't you ever skim the paper?"

I says, "Thermopylae never done nothing for me. And I don't owe nothing to Thermopylae. Didn't do it for you. Hell, any more'n I'd do something or other for them Kennedys! I done it for my own pure-D satisfaction."

"It's going to get him right back on TV," says my wife. "You watch for the funeral."

I says, "You didn't even leave a light burning when you went to bed. So how was I supposed to even get me home or pull Buddy's truck up safe in our front yard?"

"Well, hear another good joke on you," my wife says next. "Didn't you hear the news? The N. double A. C. P. is fixing to send somebody to Thermopylae. Why couldn't you waited? You might could have got you somebody better. Listen and hear 'em say so."

I ain't but one. I reckon you have to tell *somebody*.

"Where's the gun, then?" my wife says. "What did you do with our protection?"

I says, "It was scorching! It was scorching!" I told her, "It's laying out on the ground in rank weeds, trying to cool off, that's what it's doing now."

"You dropped it," she says. "Back there."

And I told her, "Because I'm so tired of ever'thing in the world being just that hot to the touch! The keys to the truck, the doorknob, the bedsheet, ever'thing, it's all like a stove lid. There just ain't much going that's worth holding onto it no more," I says, "when it's a hundred and two in the shade by day and by night not too much difference. I wish *you'd* laid *your* finger to that gun."

"Trust you to come off and leave it," my wife says.

"Is that how no-'count I am?" she makes me ask. "*You* want to go back and get it?"

"You're the one they'll catch. I say it's so hot that even if you get to sleep you wake up feeling like you cried all night!" says my wife. "Cheer up, here's one more joke before time to get up. Heard what *Caroline* said? Caroline said, 'Daddy, I just can't wait to grow up big, so I can marry *James Meredith*.' I heard that where I work. One rich-bitch to another one, to make her cackle."

"At least I kept some dern teen-ager from North Thermopylae getting there and doing it first," I says. "Driving his own car."

ON TV and in the paper, they don't know but half of it. They know who Roland Summers was without knowing who I am. His face was in front of the public before I got rid of him, and after I got rid of him there it is again—the same picture. And none of me. I ain't ever had one made. Not ever! The best that newspaper could do for me was offer a five-hundred-dollar reward for finding out who I am. For as long as they don't know who that is, whoever shot Roland is worth a good deal more right now than Roland is.

But by the time I was moving around uptown, it was hotter still. That pavement in the middle of Main Street was so hot to my feet I might've been walking the barrel of my gun. If the whole world could've just felt Main Street this morning through the soles of my shoes, maybe it would've helped some.

Then the first thing I heard 'em say was the N. double A. C. P. done it themselves, killed Roland Summers, and proved it by saying the shooting was done by a expert (I hope to tell you it was!) and at just the right hour and minute to get the whites in trouble.

You can't win.

"They'll never find him," the old man trying to sell roasted peanuts tells me to my face.

And it's so hot.

It looks like the town's on fire already, whichever ways you turn, ever' street you strike, because there's those trees hanging them pones of bloom like split watermelon. And a thousand cops crowding ever'where you go, half of 'em too young to start shaving, but all streaming sweat alike. I'm getting tired of 'em.

I was already tired of seeing a hundred cops getting us white people nowheres. Back at the beginning, I stood on the corner and I watched them new babyface cops loading nothing but nigger children into the paddy wagon and they come marching out of a little parade and into the paddy wagon singing. And they got in and sat down without providing a speck of trouble, and their hands held little new American flags, and all the cops could do was knock them flagsticks a-loose from their hands, and not let 'em pick 'em up, that was all, and give 'em a free ride. And children can just get 'em more flags.

Everybody: It don't get you nowhere to take nothing from nobody unless you make sure it's for keeps, for good and all, for ever and amen.

I won't be sorry to see them brickbats hail down on us for a change. Pop bottles too, they can come flying whenever they want to. Hundreds, all to smash, like Birmingham. I'm waiting on 'em to bring out them switchblade knives, like Harlem and Chicago. Watch TV long enough and you'll see it all to happen on Deacon Street in Thermopylae. What's holding it back, that's all?—Because it's *in* 'em.

I'm ready myself for that funeral.

Oh, they may find me. May catch me one day in spite of 'emselves. (But I grew up in the country.) May try to railroad me into the electric chair, and what that amounts to is something hotter than yesterday and today put together.

But I advise 'em to go careful. Ain't it about time us taxpayers starts to calling the moves? Starts to telling the teachers *and* the preachers *and* the judges of our so-called courts how far they can go?

Even the President so far, he can't walk in my house without being invited, like he's my daddy, just to say whoa. Not yet!

Once, I run away from my home. And there was a ad for me, come to be printed in our county weekly. My mother paid for it. It was from her. It says: "SON: You are not being hunted for anything but to find you." That time, I come on back home.

But people are dead now.

And it's so hot. Without it even being August yet.

Anyways, I seen him fall. I was evermore the one.

So I reach me down my old guitar off the nail in the wall. 'Cause I've got my guitar, what I've held onto from way back when, and I never dropped that, never lost or forgot it, never hocked it but to get it again, never give it away, and I set in my chair, with nobody home but me, and I start to play, and sing a-Down. And sing a-down, down, down, down. Sing a-down, down, down, down. Down.

—EUDORA WELTY