

Fade To Green (A Story In Cotton)

By Jason D. Johnson

14 clicks past 6, his watch stopped. The skin of leather surrounding the tips of his fingers brushed against the armrest. His fingernails, like they were digging for roots, peeled back tiny flecks of green paint exposing the natural wood underneath. His eyes strained against the evening sun, as he stared out into the front yard and then back to his watch. Two reflecting bands from the metal on the watch casing shined against his cheeks. He studied the watch for a moment, then turned his gaze back to the front yard. In the stillness of the afternoon, he could hear a bobwhite calling down in the bottom and he closed his eyes for a moment to concentrate on the sound. In three whispers of the breeze, he was asleep...his heart steady rumbling to the nature around him. His nap lasted for only five minutes as the spring door snapping back into place shook him from his dreams. As the last piece of them slipped away, he looked up into the face of Jolie. She was a flower of a girl, a compact ball of energy and selflessness that feasted off the opportunity to help others. She offered him a bottle of Coke. It was a glass bottle no less, the way God intended, and the old man appreciated the gesture. He uncurled his hand and reached out for the bottle, taking it gingerly as to not let the goodness inside spill out. With a little shake, a shake that only eighty-three years of living can conjure up, he brought the bottle back to his chest. He held it there for a few seconds, looked out at the trees and then swung the bottle up to his lips. The sigh that followed the swig let the day know that all had been made good by the taste of the beverage. He let the bottle come to rest again on his chest. The condensation began to form in the warm summer sun and little droplets of water trickled down onto his linen shirt. The light brown linen became dark brown linen as the water settled into the cloth and then onto the skin underneath. Soon, a nice circle had formed with a small tail running down on to his belly. The old man looked up at his caregiver and put his voice in the breeze, "Jolie, are you with me today?" "I'm with you every day, Mac. You know that." "Yeah, Jolie, but are you with me today?" he replied again. The



young lady turned her feet inward and looked down at the rotten boards on the far end of the porch. She took two steps away as she pondered the question at hand. Sometimes the old man fooled her with his questions and she didn't like anyone to have a leg up on her, not even an eightythree year old. So she waited patiently for the answer to come, for some divine inspiration to fall so that she could follow the old man's logic, but the air brought nothing. The old man rolled his eyes over towards her, "I had a guy with me overseas that time. Said he was with me, but he wasn't. His mind kept falling other places. In the end, he paid for it. His wife paid for it. His children paid for it. I paid for it. Two heads can always be better than one. Are you with me today?" Jolie looked at him, smiled and said, "I'm with you, Mac." "G o o d . That's good." And with that, he fell back against the chair and let his fingernails go to work on the armrest again. Four minutes past and in between it passed the silence of two people who didn't want to ruin a good day with useless speech. Then finally, as the bobwhite called again from the woods, the old man turned back to her and asked, "You ever seen the sun set over fourteen acres of cotton?" "No, I haven't," she replied. "Well," he smiled, "It's time we changed that." He sent her out to the shed behind the house for two old folding chairs. Upon finding them, she rambled back to the front porch. He'd already finished his Coke, gotten up out of his chair

and eased down the steps to the front yard. He was standing there, leaning on his cane waiting for her when she turned the corner. "We'll head right through that break in those trees and follow that little path down past those sweet gums. Just on the other side of that branch is a cotton field. My nephew's cotton fields, several of them stretching out to the creek bottom." The path through the trees and over the branch took about five minutes for the two of them. Clearing the pines she waded through some tall grass and stepped out into the edge of the cotton field, the two folding chairs and a jug of water in tow. Dust rolled up over the toes of her shoes camouflaging them with the soil. She looked up at the blue sky and then back at the old man. He had his cane in front of him, pushing aside the tall grass before each step. The late evening sun made him look fifteen years younger. From the distance, the only thing that told the true tale was the cane and the slight shake of his left hand. She burst out with, "C'mon slow poke!" He looked up from under the brim of his ball cap and hollered back, "I stepped on a rattlesnake here once. I ain't a aimin' to do it again." She smiled, "Well then, I'm gonna go ahead and sit down." "You do whatever makes you happy. I can't help you're getting old," he chuckled back. Jolie slid the two chairs open and settled them into the dirt. Looking back one last time, she slumped onto the wooden seat. Before her was fourteen acres of cotton. Beyond that was a row of trees that swung down the fence row to the left. Due west there was a creek somewhere, but its location was hidden by a field of corn and four or five clusters of trees. Soon the old man made it to her and plopped down in the chair beside her. His chest rose and fell heavily at first and then tapered out to a degree of normalcy. When he looked like he'd caught his breath, she handed him the water. He took two big swigs, letting water trickle down the edge of his lips, and then handed her the jug back. He shuffled

his feet in the dirt and let a little cloud of dust build up and swirl in between the bolls on the plant in front of him. "Reminds me of the prairies," he said, "where dust used to just blow and blow all summer long. It looked like the driest place on earth sometimes." He paused for a moment before he started in again. "You know, this used to be my field here. This one and all that land over there to the left and all of that you see in front of you. Eighty-four acres total. Wasn't any roads over there like there is now. Just fields and woods. I planted tobacco and cotton here for forty-three years and then I sold it to my nephew. It wasn't much, but it kept me going. But days like today, when I could finish and then come here and sit, drink some tea or something and watch the sun fall down out of the sky. This was my reward. Watching the sun head down to the trees, the tobacco plants, to the earth and fade into the green. Watch it turn the sky into fire and the land into gray, then umber, then black. Beautiful. My reward. You take care of anything, there's always a reward. Trust eightythree years on that one." Jolie grinned and turned her head away. Her eyes watered slightly as the thought of her last six months with this man reeled through her mind. She took this job thinking that her reward would be a paycheck every Friday. She didn't know that a far greater reward would be found in the simple act of care and giving itself. But as she looked out at that cotton and the sun spraying its light across the white and green, she found her reward. She looked down at her watch. It had stopped at 14 clicks past 6.

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