

Daniel

*(Written 2016)*

Some years ago a railroad built a spur over the creek. It went out across the marsh to the beach and right on up to the end of the Iron Pier. I guess it was so tourists just passing through wouldn't need to transfer into carriages in town. The train never got much use and the railroad went broke, but the tracks were still there and they made a shortcut for me to get from Miss Lil's house into town.

I was on the rail bed walking toward the wooden trestle bridge over the creek that'd bring me in just east of town. As I got near it, I was surprised at seeing my brother coming across the other way. From a distance, at least, he looked sober. Daniel hardly ever came to town, and when he did he didn't cover the ten miles there on foot. He looked as surprised as I was at first, but then he waved at me and walked out on the span.

"Hullo, Russell," he called.

I hate that name; it's the one the Carlisle Indian School gave me. I guess they thought it sounded Christian, though I never understood the connection. I was made to answer to it the two years I was in there.

"Hello, Daniel."

His Nanticoke name was Dntalemuns, which ma said means "my little cat" or something like that, and he hated it as much as I hated Russell. Most of his friends just settled for Daniel, which he didn't like much either, being a white name, but he'd let it go for lack of anything better.

I started to ask him how he was, but since it was past noon I thought I'd wait to be sure he wasn't drinking. As he got closer I saw he was fine. He was bare-chested and wasn't wearing shoes; all he had on was a pair of canvas work trousers. But his eyes were clear and he was walking steady.

I pushed my fingers through my hair and tucked it over my shoulders. "How are you, ni'mat?" I asked him. It was one of the other words ma knew; it meant brother.

"What're you doing out here, Russell?" he asked me as he came up, using that name again.

I started to tell him not to, but I knew he was just working on me. My given name is Senihele, which means "sparrow hawk" in Nanticoke, but town whites could only manage "Sonny", which was okay too. After I came back from Carlisle, Daniel never called me by my Nanticoke name, or even Sonny. From then on I was just Russell to him. He said the Indian school had turned me white, so a white name fit me.

"On an errand," I said, trying not to look aggravated, "how about you?"

He was eight years older than me, and about as tall. With his black hair and eyes and his dark skin he looked more like an Indian than I did. He wore his hair long too, longer than mine. He pretended to notice something on the tracks where he was walking and didn't answer me.

"Haven't seen you in weeks," I said, "you hanging around in town today?"

It couldn't be a good thing finding him sneaking across the marsh, but who was I to talk. I wondered where he'd tied up his horse. He stopped in front of me and crossed

his arms.

“I got a job.”

He was sober and working, that was a big change. His feet were dirty from walking barefoot, but otherwise he looked like he'd cleaned up.

“That’s good,” I said before I could catch myself. His face tightened up.

“I guess I’ll keep it then, now that I know it’s okay with you.”

“That’s not what I mean – come on, Daniel, don't be like that.” I felt my voice strain. “We hardly get to talk anymore.”

Now he pretended to be surprised that he’d provoked me. I kept still and looked at him. Finally he unfolded his arms and dropped his hands to his sides. His face lost some of its sour look.

“So we don’t, brother, so let's talk. What's your errand?”

Our questions were going in circles so I decided to answer him. “Miss Lil asked me to have some foodstuffs sent out from a town store.”

"Oh, that's right, you're her house boy, ain't you? Why didn't she go herself? She's got that fancy carriage."

"She's busy," I said and this time I looked away.

"She's in trouble with the police again? Some nosy towner complained, didn't they?"

That's exactly what happened, and they even got a warrant to arrest her. She decided to stay out of town until things blew over, like they always did. I didn't say any

of that.

Daniel laughed. "You think 'cause you went to white school those townies are going to sell you anything? You're just another colored to them, Russell. Lil should have sent one of her girls; they'll talk to a whore any day before they will you."

He was wrong about that part, at least. I decided to talk about something else.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. What about your job? What they got you doing?"

What kind of work had him out walking the tracks instead of in town?

"Can't say much about it."

"Why not? It's work, any job that pays is something, isn't it?" I hoped he wouldn't get mad again. "That's what you used to tell me."

"Pay's fine." He gave me a look. "But part of the job is not talking about it."

"Oh." That couldn't be good either. I shut my mouth, not knowing what else to say and we stared at each other for a bit. Finally he shrugged and clapped me on the shoulder. It was almost a friendly pat.

"I got to be going."

He nodded and with no more fuss he stepped past me and started down the rail bed. I turned around as he went by. "Wait –"

He stopped and looked back.

"How much are you going to be in town? Maybe we can meet somewhere."

He laughed again, sounding almost likable this time. A long curl of his hair worked loose. "Well, you're the one working at the bawdy house, Russell. You know I

ain't welcome there, so I guess you'll have to come out to the cabin."

"I don't get off much, and I don't have use of a horse."

"Then I guess we're stuck, ain't we?"

"But if your job's in town ...?"

"I didn't say it was, and you don't need to keep asking about it."

"Why not? Is it something that'll get you in trouble?"

"You ain't my pa, Russell. That one's long dead." I'd set him on edge again, and I didn't dare come back at him on it. He seemed to think about what to say next. "At least I ain't running some townie's errands, or a whore's either." He grinned at me but now there was spite in it. He gave me a look that meant, figure that one out, and then started off toward the beach.

"Daniel –!"

He didn't turn around this time. I called after him again but he kept on walking – our talk was finished. I watched him go and wondered what to make of it. If he had a job he couldn't talk about, the only thing I could think of was trouble. And after not running into him in so long, all we could do was throw words at each other.

He crossed the salt marsh and disappeared into the woods and I stood there a while longer. Then I turned around and headed for town. It wasn't about Miss Lil's errand any more; I wanted to find out what Daniel had gotten into.

It hadn't always been like that with us. Before I got sent up to Carlisle, Daniel acted better toward me. And later on too, right after he got me out of that place.