

**WE PLEDGED ALLEGIANCE** to the flag. The flag hung limp from a ten-foot bamboo pole in the corner of the white picket fence that surrounded the church. Beyond the flag I could see smoke rising from the chimneys in the quarter, and beyond the houses and chimneys I could hear the tractors harvesting sugarcane in the fields. The sky was ashy gray, and the air chilly enough for a sweater. I told the children to go inside and begin their Bible verses.

After listening to one or two of the verses, I tuned out the rest of them. I had heard them all many times. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” “Let not your heart be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me.” “In my Father’s house there are many mansions.” “Jesus wept.” And on and on and on. I had listened to them almost six years, and I knew who would say what, just as I knew what each child would wear to school, and who would or would not know his or her lesson. I knew, too, which of them would do something for themselves and which of them never would, regardless of what I did. So each day I listened for a moment, then turned it off and planned the rest of the day.

My classroom was the church. My classes ranged from primer to sixth grade, my pupils from six years old to thirteen and fourteen. My desk was a table, used as a collection table by the church on Sundays, and also used for the service of the Holy Sacrament on the fourth Sunday of each month. My students’ desks were the benches upon which their parents and grandparents sat during church meeting. The students either got down on their knees and used the benches as desks to write upon, or used the backs of their books upon their laps to write out their assignments. Ventilation into the church was by way of the four windows on either side, and from the front and back doors. Our heat came from a wood-burning stove in the center of the church. There was a blackboard on the back wall, and another on the right side wall. Behind my desk was the pulpit and the altar. There were three pictures on the wall behind the altar. One was a head-and-chest black-and-white photo of the minister in a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie; the other two pictures were color prints of Jesus: *The Last Supper* and Christ knocking on a door.

This was my school. I was supposed to teach six months out of the year, but actually I taught only five and a half months, from late October to the middle of April, when the children were not needed in the field.

I assigned three of my sixth-grade students to teach the primer, first, and second grades, while I taught third and fourth. Only by assigning the upper-grade students to teach the lower grades was it possible to reach all the students every day. I devoted the last two hours in the afternoon to the fifth and sixth grades.

While the classes separated and moved to their respective areas, I asked my third and fourth graders to go to the back of the church to work on the blackboards. The third-grade class would do arithmetic on the board on the back wall, and the fourth graders would write sentences on the board on the right side wall. I moved from one blackboard to the other with my yard-long Westcott ruler.

I still felt bad about the problem I was having at home with my aunt. The night before, when I returned from Bayonne, I had gone to her room to say good night, but she pretended to be asleep, just to avoid speaking to me. And this morning, when I passed her on my way into the kitchen, she said over her shoulder, "Food there if you want it. Or you can go back where you had supper last night."

Breakfast was two fried eggs, grits, a piece of salt pork, and a biscuit. I ate at the kitchen table, looking across the yard. The crabgrass was wet from the night's heavy dew. I looked back over my shoulder a couple of times, but I couldn't hear my aunt anywhere in the house. After I finished eating, I washed my plate in the pan of soap water that she had left on the shelf in the kitchen window. I tried once more to speak to her before leaving for school, but to avoid me this time she pretended to make up her bed, which I knew she had already done two hours earlier. At a quarter to nine I left the house. She had gone out into the garden.

Every little thing was irritating me. I caught one of the students trying to figure out a simple multiplication problem on his fingers, and I slashed him hard across the butt with the Westcott ruler. He jerked around too fast and looked at me too angrily for my liking.

"Your hand," I said.

He held out his right hand, palm up. He still held the piece of chalk.

"Put that chalk down. I can't afford to break it."

He passed the piece of chalk to his left hand and held out the right hand to me again. I brought the Westcott down into his palm.

"You figure things out with your brains, not with your fingers," I told him.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Wiggins."

He turned back to the board and stared at the problem at least half a minute. It was cold in the back of the church, but standing two feet away from the boy, I could see that he was sweating. He raised his left hand up to his eyes to wipe away tears, then he stared at the problem again.

"Well, others have to work too, you know."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Wiggins."

The back of his neck shone with sweat. He wiped his eyes again. Then he wrote down an answer, large, awkward—and, of course, incorrect.

“You used enough chalk for five times that many problems,” I told him. “Where do you think we’re going to get more chalk when this runs out?”

He didn’t answer.

“Well?” I said.

“I don’t know, Mr. Wiggins,” he said, staring at the board, not daring to look at me.

“I’d have to buy it,” I said. “The school board doesn’t give it away. They already gave me what they said was enough for the year. They’re not giving us any more. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Wiggins.”

I jerked the piece of chalk out of his hand, corrected the problem, passed the piece of chalk on to another student, and walked away.

On the side board, one of the girls, wearing a gray dress and a black sweater, unpolished brown loafers and unmatching brown stockings, her head a forest of half a dozen two-inch plaits, had written a sentence of six words with a downward slant of nearly a foot.

“And what is that supposed to be?” I asked her.

She was so terrified by my voice that she jerked around to face me, then staggered back against the board.

“This-this-this,” she stuttered, while gesturing toward the board with the piece of chalk. “That’s a—that’s a—a simple sentence, Mr. Wiggins.”

“That’s not a simple sentence,” I told her. “That’s a slanted sentence. A simple sentence is written on a straight line.”

I reached for the piece of chalk, but in her fear of me she continued to hold on to it, and I had to pry it out of her hand. I drew three straight lines from one end of the board to the other.

“Those are straight lines,” I said. “Do you notice the difference?”

She nodded her head while looking at me, not at the board.

I erased the three lines, as well as her slanted sentence.

“I want you to write me six simple sentences in straight lines,” I said, and handed her the chalk. “You have until the end of the period to do it. The rest of the class, take your seats.”

I left her standing there, trying to figure out where to begin. At the door, I turned back to look at the

other classes. They all knew I was in a pretty rotten mood today, and they kept their heads down.

I went out into the yard, slapping the Westcott ruler against my leg hard enough to sting it. The cool air felt good on my face, and after standing in the yard awhile, I walked to the road. But there was nothing to see out there but a couple of automobiles—my gray Ford parked down the quarter in front of my aunt's house, and a car parked alongside the ditch farther up the quarter. Other than that, all there was to see were old gray weather-beaten houses, with smoke rising out of the chimneys and drifting across the corrugated tin roofs. Living and teaching on a plantation, you got to know the occupants of every house, and you knew who was home and who was not. I knew that the parents and the older brothers and sisters of the boy I had slashed on the butt with my ruler were out in the field, and that the old grandma, Aunt June, was at home cooking dinner for them to eat when they came in at noon. I could see the smoke rising from the kitchen chimney of the girl who stuttered, and I knew that she came from a family of twelve, and that she had a pregnant older sister, who was not allowed to come back to school but had to work in the field with all the others, and that she had an idiot brother and a tyrant father, and that the father beat the pregnant girl and any other member of the family, including the mother, but would never touch the idiot, whom he showered with love. I could look at the smoke rising from each chimney or I could look at the rusted tin roof of each house, and I could tell the lives that went on in each one of them.

I went all the way to the back of the yard, where I used the boys' toilet. Then I returned to my classes, but instead of coming in through the front door, as I had left, I entered through the back. Most of the students remembered the mood I was in and had their heads in their books. But one first grader had forgotten or didn't care, and he found time to play with a bug on the sleeve of his sweater. As I watched from the back door, he let the insect crawl an inch or two from his elbow toward his hand, then he picked it up and returned it up his arm to let it start all over again.

I looked at Irene Cole, my student teacher, to let her know not to warn him, and when I got in good striking distance of his nearly shaved head, I brought the Westcott down on his skull, loud enough to send a sound throughout the church. He jumped, hollered, grabbed at the already swelling knot. One or two of the students near him giggled nervously, but most remembered the mood I was in and seemed petrified. The boy, with his hand cupped over the welt, was crying now.

“Take that thing outside, get rid of it, and get back in here,” I told him.

He left, crying quietly, the little red bug sitting on top of his extended arm.

“So it's bug-playing time, huh?” I asked the rest of the class. “You think that's why I'm here, so that you can play with bugs, huh?”

The boy came back and sat down. His hand was still cupped over his scalp, and he was still crying.

“The rest of you, back to your seats,” I ordered.

They moved hurriedly, quietly, careful not to utter a word.

“Do you all know what is going on in Bayonne?” I asked them, back at my desk. “Do you all know what is going to happen to someone just like you who sat right where you’re sitting only a few years ago? All right, I’ll tell you. They’re going to kill him in Bayonne. They’re going to sit him in a chair, they’re going to tie him down with straps, they’re going to connect wires to his head, to his wrists, to his legs, and they’re going to shoot electricity through the wires into his body until he’s dead.” I looked across the room at them. Some stared back at me, others down at the floor. But they were all listening. They knew Jefferson was supposed to die in the electric chair, but they hadn’t known how this would happen. It had not been explained to them so vividly before, and maybe not at all. I could see how painful it was for most of them to hear this, but I did not stop. “Do you know what his nannan wants me to do before they kill him? The public defender called him a hog, and she wants me to make him a man. Within the next few weeks, maybe a month, whatever the law allows—make him a man. Exactly what I’m trying to do here with you now: to make you responsible young men and young ladies. But you, you prefer to play with bugs. You refuse to study your arithmetic, and you prefer writing slanted sentences instead of straight ones. Does that make any sense? Well, does it?”

No one answered. Most averted their eyes. I noticed that the girl whom I had criticized at the blackboard had lowered her head and was crying.

“Estelle, leave the class if you can’t control yourself,” I ordered her.

She shook her head, but she did not get up, or look at me.

“I’m-I’m-aw-aw right, Mr.-Mr. Wiggins. Bu-but-that’s my cousin.”

I knew that Jefferson was her cousin, but I didn’t apologize for what I had said, nor did I show any sympathy for her crying.

“Either leave the class or stop crying,” I told her again.

She wiped her eyes, but she did not look up.

“All right, the rest of the morning for studying,” I told them. “And you’d better study, because I’m testing everybody this afternoon.”

At two o’clock, I was at the blackboard with my fifth graders when we heard a knocking on the front door. I told the boy nearest the door to see who it was and ask him to come in. The boy went to the door and came back alone. He said that it was Mr. Farrell Jarreau, but Mr. Farrell didn’t want to come in. I told the class to go on with their work, and I went to the door to see what he wanted. Farrell Jarreau was a small, light-brown man in his late fifties. He wore an old felt hat, a khaki suit, and worn work shoes. He was the yardman and all-round handyman for Henri Pichot. He fixed and sharpened tools for the big house, and he served as carpenter for the people in the quarter. He had made more benches, fixed more chairs and steps, than you could number.

He took off his hat as I approached him. He had known me all my life, and he knew my aunt and all my people before me, but since I had gone off to the university and returned as a teacher, he treated

me with great respect. I went down the steps and into the yard.

“Professor.”

“Mr. Farrell.”

“He say it be all right if you come up by five this evening.”

“Is this about Jefferson?” I asked.

“Didn’t tell me. Just say it be all right if you come up there ’bout five.”

“Thank you, Mr. Farrell.”

“My pleasure, Professor,” he said.

He put on his hat, and I noticed his eyes. He knew why Henri Pichot wanted me up there, all right. But Henri Pichot had not thought it was necessary to tell him. At his age, he was still only a messenger to run errands. To learn anything, he had to attain it by stealth or through an innate sense of things around him. He nodded to me, knowing that I knew he knew why Henri Pichot wanted to see me, and he walked away, head down.

*A Lesson Before Dying*  
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