



Nothings II [Outline and Early Draft]

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NOTHINGS II

Yes, well. What I once thought of as my emotional strength now seems to me a combination of ignorance and denial. A deliberate willingness to look away, to erase the dirt of life and other people and stay in the light. Now it appears there is scenery and writing only for consolation. Everything else is frightening, alarming. Even the good things that happen in my family are overcast by "but suppose?" or "can it last?" The essence of old age. Not fear of dying (though certainly of pain) since afterlife is either interesting or nothing.

A nasty state to be in. Free floating despair; inability to change things--revise and reinterpret them.

On the other hand there is humor. The savior of the mind. For example, I have learned that our family name on my mother's side (Willis) is more invention/surrender than I assumed most former slave families were. It seems that our real ancestor is a man called Juan Gonzales! (Which is doubly questionable if he is from Africa.) He escaped from Cuba. A slave and felon; he murdered the white (I suppose) under boss on the plantation. Got to Alabama and changed his name to John Willis--of which there are some four generations of John Willis's. So far I have no further details. Apparently he went back and forth from Alabama to Cuba under this new name. Must have been early part of the 18 hundreds, since my grandfather Willis was born in 1861. This is one reason, of many, why I despise the current fad for DNA testing to see who "our" ancestors were. People lie. For good reasons and other ones. Also the commerce of all this "testing" is repugnant to me. And how come everybody learns only how wonderful their bloodline is. Where are all the Juan Gonzales's? The raped women who chose not to say whose child they bore? The many, many other enslaved women who took in children not their own for safekeeping and protection? Those "passing" into another 'race.' And why is 'knowing' these anecdotes more thrilling than inventing them? And even if one can 'know', what is it that you do know? What I know about Juan is both interesting and absolutely nothing. I like it like that. The true response of a writer, I suppose. Now I can imagine him without the obstacles of facts. Maybe he was brave (killing and escaping), but maybe he was a coward.

Ycidra. That is her name (pronounced e-sidra). Mexican, Mayan, Spanish. In any case, her mother named her that because once, in a bus station in El Paso, she heard a woman call out that name. A child ran toward the woman and buried her head in her lap. A moment of quiet satisfaction and the name sounded so beautiful among all the bus station noise.

She is the sister of the narrator. As children, five, six years old, they trespass on land forbidden to them.

The horses. We remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men.

Our mother named her third child Ycidra because once, in a bus station in El Paso, she heard a woman call out that name, and a little girl ran toward the caller and buried her face in the woman's lap. Momma said it was the sweetest thing and the sound of the name was like music amidst the groan and heat of the station. And although everybody else calls my sister Cee, Momma never does—she always uses the full name and so do I. At least she thought about it, treasured it. As for me, no such memories. I'm named Frank after my father's brother. Luther is my father's name; Ida, my mother's. The only interesting part is our last name. Money. Of which we had none.

I am strapped down now. But will soon escape. The restraints, cloth not leather like before, are loose because they think the drug is still slipping through my veins into my brain and I am unconscious. If I were awake I'd laugh. Never, not in the deepest sleep at-

"They stood up like men. We saw them. Like men they rose.

"We shouldn't have been there. The property was forbidden to darkies. Close knit wire alternated with wooden stakes. But when we saw a place where some animal had dug under it--a coyote maybe or a labrador--we didn't resist. Just kids we were still the grass was shoulder high and, looking out for snakes, we crawled on our bellies through it. The reward was worth the gnat stings and the damage grass juice did to our eyes. In front of us, about fifty yards off, they stood like men, hooves crashing and striking, their manes tossing back from wild white eyes. They bit each other like dogs, but when they stood, reared up on their hind legs, we held our breath in wonder. One was rust colored, the other deep brown, both sunny with sweat. Their snorts were not as frightening as the silence broken only by the clashing hooves. Nearby horses stood aloof, looking away. It stopped. The rust colored one dropped his head and pawed the ground while the winner loped off in an arc nudging mares before him.

As we elbowed back through the grass looking for the dug out, we lost our way. And when we heard the quiet voices of real men beyond the fencing, I grabbed Ycidra's hand and put my finger to my lips. Never lifting our heads, we saw. We saw them pull a body from the back of a mule and throw it into a hole already waiting for it. One foot, stuck above the edge, quivered. Just a bit. As though it could still get out, that with a little effort it could break through the dirt being shoveled in. We could not see the men doing the burying, but we saw the edge of a spade drive the jerking foot in to join the rest of itself. When she saw that black foot with its mud and cream colored sole being whacked into the grave, Ycidra's whole body began to shake. I hugged her shoulders and tried to pull her trembling into my own bones because as a brother two years older, I thought I could handle it.

The sky was cantaloupe by the time they left but it took a while before we felt safe enough to disturb even one blade of grass and move on our stomachs searching for the scooped out part under the fence.

The horses. We remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men.

Our mother named her third child Ycidra because once, in a bus station in El Paso, she heard a woman call out that name, and a little girl ran toward the caller and buried her face in the woman's lap. Momma said it was the sweetest thing and the sound of the name was like music amidst the groan and heat of the station. And although everybody else calls my sister Cee, Momma never does--she always uses the full name and so do I. At least she thought about it, treasured it. As for me, no such memories. I'm named Frank after my father's brother. Luther is my father's name; Ida, my mother's. The only interesting part is our last name. Money. Of which we had none.

I am strapped down now. But will soon escape. The restraints, cloth not leather like before, are loose because they think the drug is still slipping through my veins into my brain and I am unconscious. If I were able I'd laugh. Never, not in the deepest sleep after lovemaking, not even when Korean bullets were pulled from my leg, my back, nor when a regulation billy club smashed my head--never was I unconscious. The mind thinks whether it is aware of its thinking or not. They don't say 'crazy.' They say I am shell-shocked from x years ago in the army. Well, it's true I am shocked, but not from shells. I just have to get out of here. One more night, one more day of faking quiet and I will be free.

Meantime I stay with the horses, a black man's foot and Ycidra trembling under my arm.

Other than a few opportunity couplings, I've known only four women. Three of them were serious relationships and I liked the small breakable thing inside each one. Whatever their personality, smarts or looks, something soft lay inside each. Like a breast bone, shaped and chosen to wish on. A little V, thinner than bone and barely hinged, that I could break with a forefinger if I wanted to, but never did. Want to, I mean. Knowing it was there, hiding from me was enough.

It was the fourth woman who changed everything. In her company the little wishbone V took up residence in my own chest and made itself at home. It was her forefinger that scared me and if it wasn't for Ycidra I'd still be hanging from her apron strings.

Women are eager to talk to me when they hear my last name. Money? They chuckle and ask the same question. Who named me that or if anybody did. If I made it up to make myself feel important or was I a gambler or thief or some other kind of crook they should watch out for? When I tell them my whole name, first and last, they scream with laughter and say "There's no such ting. All money is false." No end of pleasant talk after that and it's enough to keep our friendship going way after it's dried up just so they can make lame jokes. "Hey Money, how you making it?" "Hey, Money! Got some?" "Money, come over here. You owe me." It's tired, old stuff but it keeps things gentle and welcoming when I get fed up with being by myself and seek out company.

You ever used a quill down here in your whole life?

[I am not suggesting that media try deliberately to subvert and pacify, to excite and dull us(I would have more respect if it were conspiratorial). In fact media may very well believe that the combination of excitement and dullness—which they lucked up on—is what they are made for. Nevertheless we must look elsewhere for reliable information. Lurking beneath the acceptance of the world as thin and ignorant, is the ancient idea that 'knowledge is guilt.']

Frank's return.

Ycidra is living in the small shot gun house they were born in. She is sorting scraps of cloth, not knowing how to be idle even when there is nothing urgent to be done.

Frank enters

Hey, look at you.

Bad?

No. You looking good.

You okay?

Tk

This is a no count meal—just some snap beans-- but I didn't know you was coming. Want me to catch a hen?

Oh, no. Anything'll do.

I know you liked Mama's fry pan bread [Lifts apron to handle hot pan handle]

Want me to slice up these tomatoes?

Yes.

What's all that?

Scraps. For quilting.

You ever need a quilt down here in your whole life?

No.

Then what you make them for?

Visitors buy them.

What visitors?

People over in Mount Haven. Miss Johnson from Good Shepherd buys them from me and sells them in Mount Haven.

Nice.

More than nice. We got electricity now and it costs money. The electric fan is worth it I say.

You could get you a frigerator.

It's just me here. What I need with a cold box to store stuff? I can food every year. Anything else I want I go outside and pick it or kill it.

What happened to that place we used to sneak off to?

Some folks bought it for a overnight place. Called it a bed and breakfast. Then some other folks took over and it was a card-playing house. Then women came. And guess what?

Night.

Frank gathers a half made quilt, picks up a shovel and tells Ycidra, "Come on. I need your help."

"What for?"

"Trust me."

I'd trust a little light more.

Bring the lamp.

Why you carrying my quilt?

They find the spot where the man was thrown into a hole. Body was apparently dropped in shallow pit. Nothing left except a skull, a complete set of intact hand bones and the pelvis. Frank collects them and places them in the quilt. The parcel weighs hardly two pounds.

Later, early morning, Frank walks the streets.

1. Meets people he knows and who remember him.[Man named Cat; a shop-keeper; tenor and some women.]
2. No sidewalks.
3. All houses painted white; each a porch railing of a different color.
4. Gardens are edges of flowers but mainly vegetables.
5. Children: none are alone, all are with other children or overseen by an adult.
6. Singing voice in one yard. Joined by another singer answering.
7. Cars all gleam.
8. Boy and man sitting in truck bed legs hanging over playing harmonicas.
9. Sides of some houses thick with tk bushes, on which sheets, pillow slips and underslips drape.
10. Frank knows what he is feeling is safety of home exaggerated, but the pleasure and comfort are overwhelming.

The end of this walk is to a place to bury the two pound parcel. With a wooden plaque that says: HERE LIES A MAN. [or I know this man—depending on the Korea incident]