

## Blackberry Pie

Willie met Lavander Jackson by a blackberry bush one day. They lived in the small, very southern town of Harmon, Louisiana—a peaceful town with historic frame houses, a cultural sensibility, and a very clear racial divide. Blacks and whites were civil enough to one another, but each knew his place. However, old oak trees and quiet neighborhood streets, were not enough to quell the uneasy feelings that brewed just below the surface of every citizen in Harmon. Truthfully, Willie and Lavander never should have crossed paths.

Willie's parents were good, upstanding folks that went to church every Sunday, read the Bible every night, attended PTA meetings, socialized at Harmon society events, and, in their three-story blue and white Victorian saw no reason to disrupt the status quo. As for Willie, he skipped through life, unfettered, as only the privileged can. There were boundaries of course—his father imposed them. There had to be limits, not so much to shape Willie's growth but to diminish his parent's worry that he might infringe upon their busy lives. Willie could do just about anything he wanted as long as he was sure to be home before dark, never tell a lie, and not go beyond Church Drive and Martin Luther King, Jr., because that's where the blacks lived.

Waking to the smell of cinnamon bread filling the house, Willie bounded down the stairs to snatch a piece for his bike ride. Bonnie B., the family's maid and cook, was just pulling the golden brown loaf out of the oven when Willie burst in. She had been with his family since he'd been born; she seemed like family, almost. Bonnie B. was a gem, his parents said when she was in the room. She was light-skinned, his mother always said when she was not, and those were much better than the darker ones.

“I want some!” shouted Willie.

“Nah, you just gotta wait a couple minutes for it to cool a bit,” drawled Bonnie B., who never seemed to be in a rush.

“C’mon. C’mon! I got to go, Bonnie B! Got. To. Go. Goin’ on a blackberry hunt.” Willie went to the drawer, took out a knife, and, proceeded to cut a slice.

Bonnie B. leaned against the counter, shaking her head, tolerating him. Then, she reached for a linen napkin and held it out. Willie grabbed the napkin from her, wrapped his bread, and headed out the door. As the screen door banged shut, he shouted over his shoulder, “See ya, Bonnie B.”

“If you find nuff blackberries, I’ll make you a pie later on,” she hollered.

Willie kept his bike covered with a black plastic tarp in the garage. A Schwinn Scrambler BMX bike. He knew that it cost five hundred dollars because one day, he found the receipt while he was looking in his mother’s purse for change for a cherry cola. He didn’t treasure it because it cost so much, though; at nine years old, he didn’t understand money. No, he loved his BMX because it was truly fine, the finest bike he’d ever seen. Certainly nicer than any his friends had. It was all chrome with a chrome chain and Redline forks, candy-apple red handle bars and seat post, knobby tires, Oakley grips, and Ruppert pedals. On the racing plate was his favorite number, number 4. Completely “tricked out,” his friends had said.

He remembered the day his parents gave him the bike. When he looked outside, the sun was shining on a silver bike, and it was wrapped with a huge red bow. His heart pounded in his chest, and he turned to grab his parents in a quick, tight hug. After ripping the bow off, he jumped on the bike and said he was going for a ride. He didn’t return the entire day, not even for lunch. But as the sun began to set, he knew it was time to head home, birthday or not. Willie had ridden his bike all day and as he tore down his street, the wind blowing his hair, he felt like he

was king of the world. Passing Big Sean's house, he gave a small nod, trying to look cool, and knowing without a doubt that he did. How he wanted that moment to last forever.

Today, though, Willie rode down sidewalks and across streets, hoping something exciting might happen. A small aluminum pail hung from his handlebars for blackberries. He sure would love a blackberry pie.

"Willie! Willllllie!!" He heard his name called and stopped his bike, fanning out the rear tire behind him, and kicking up a dust cloud.

There was Little Shawn running down his front steps, waving his hand. Willie rode over to meet him. "Where ya goin'?" Little Shawn asked.

"Dunno. Just around."

"I got to stay in. Help with my baby brother. He's sick." Little Shawn shrugged his tiny shoulders, aggravated. "Whatcha lookin' for?" he nodded at the pail.

"Blackberries. Bonnie B.'s gonna make me a pie."

"Hey, I got some in my backyard. C'mon!" Shawn took off for the back, figuring that if he stayed in his own yard, that would be the same as staying home and helping with Toby.

Willie grabbed the pail, carefully stood his bike on its kickstand, and followed his friend.

Little Shawn was deemed little because they had another friend with the same name but spelled different—Sean—who was big. Big Sean looked like he was about twelve and was fat. Little Shawn looked like he was about six and was tiny—tiny but fast. And as he ran to the backyard, Willie had to put some kick in his jog to keep up. In the backyard, all the way in the corner, was a measly blackberry bush that looked half dead. Willie stopped running.

"That all? Shoo. I ain't runnin' for that," Willie said.

“Aww, c’mon. There’s some good ones here.” He started picking a few berries and showed them to Willie.

“Alright, then.” Holding out his pail, he heard the *plop plop* of the berries.

“Shawn! Get in this house, young man, right now!” His mother’s voice sounded shrill, and before Willie could say a word, Shawn’s feet started spinning.

“Got to go,” he said as he ran toward the back steps. “I’ll come by later if I can!”

Willie looked down into his pail at the withered blackberries and headed back to his bike. After riding around and seeing none of his friends about, he started looking for berries again. He rode to the edge of town, the edge of his neighborhood, and stopped abruptly. At the end of the asphalt road where it turned to dirt, there was a huge blackberry bush that looked like it had enough berries to feed all of Harmon. Willie looked at the street sign, Martin Luther King, Jr. Ave. He scanned all around the area to see if anyone was watching him, then pedaled cautiously onto the dirt road. His tire sounded like it was rolling over broken glass as it rode over the grit and rocks in the road. Willie waited to see if something would happen to him.

Nothing did.

As he drew near, his eyes widened. Why, this bush had tons of blackberries on it! And they weren’t shriveled up like Shawn’s; they were juicy and every one a deep purple color. He dumped out the ones in his pail and quickly went to gather some.

Plucking a handful off of a sticky branch, he heard a falsetto voice, “Ouch! Who’s pickin’ my berries?”

Willie jumped about three feet back and dropped the pail in front of him.

“Who . . . who’s there?” He trembled.

“It’s me. Mista Blackberry Bush. Dontcha know it hurts when ya pick m’berries?”

Willie froze. His mind wouldn't tell his feet what to do. "Um, I'm sorry?"

Suddenly, loud guffaws issued from behind the bush and a young black boy walked around, holding his side. "Ha ha. You funny! You thought de bush was talkin'. Haw haw." He rolled on the ground laughing.

Willie straightened his shoulders, finally realizing the joke. "I knew, I knew," he said.

"Naw you did not. Ya did not. You said 'sorry'. Sayin' sorry to a bush . . ." He rolled around some more.

"You stop sayin' that. I knew. I was just playin' along. That's all." Willie's face was beginning to redden.

Seeing that look, the boy realized it was enough. He stood up, not even brushing the dust off of his overalls. He held out a hand to Willie.

"I knew that you knew. It was jus' for fun. Name's Lavander. Lavander Jackson the Third." They shook hands.

"I'm Willie Conners," he said. The boys dropped hands and stood.

Then, Lavander nodded toward Willie's pail. "Wanna pick some?"

"Sure."

The two boys began picking berries, sometimes complaining when the stickers drew blood. They didn't talk much, mostly picked. After about an hour, the pail was full. Willie and Lavander sat down, sweat sliding down their faces, and smiled at each other.

Willie reached in his pocket, pulled out the bread. "Want some? It's cinnamon bread." He held the bread toward Lavander.

"Surely." Lavander broke off an edge and popped it into his mouth. "S'good. Ya mama make it?"

“Nope. Bonnie B.”

Lavander nodded.

“Whew. That’s a lot of berries,” Willie said. He didn’t know what to do next. Then, “You want some?”

“Got no pail,” Lavander replied.

They looked at each other, thinking, as if this was a monumental problem.

“You could put some in your pockets,” Willie suggested.

“Nah. They’d get smushed. You jus’ keep ‘em.”

“But you picked ‘em too.”

“Why don’t ya come on to m’house. We could put some in a bowl for Mama. She’d like that. Make blackberry cobbler.” He turned and headed toward his bike, but Willie didn’t move, wasn’t sure whether to go or not. His mom wouldn’t like it one bit, and his dad would whip him for sure if he found out.

“I don’t think I better,” he said, real low. “My father says . . .”

“S’up to you.” Lavander shrugged, looking around. “Ya daddy ain’t here though.”

“What about your dad?” Willie said, trying to find a reason to go or not to go.

“He ain’t ‘round. C’mon.”

Lavander picked up his bike, a rusty old girl’s bike with bright pink paint in some spots and a ripped up white banana seat. Willie noticed that the handle bars were different, too, not the original ones. Lavander nodded toward Willie’s bike.

“There’s a hill where we ride bikes. Monkey hill. A big dirt hill ya can speed down. Let’s go.” He flashed a bright white smile and Willie couldn’t help smiling back.

“Alright,” he said and, forgetting his father, jumped on his bike to follow Lavander.

Together, they rode to The Other Side of the Tracks, that's what his mom called it. Still, he'd found the best berries here and Bonnie B. would make him a great pie. The dirt road felt soft under his tires and he noticed that the houses they passed were all run down with paint peeling off of the wood and junk piled in front yards.

Willie kept pedaling to keep up with Lavander. He was fast. But, Willie thought, he was only going slower because he had all the blackberries. When they rode up to a blue shotgun house with no shutters, Lavander turned and stopped, spun his back tire out behind him with a flourish.

"Here's where I stay," he said and motioned for Willie to follow him inside.

Feeling scared, Willie tried his best not to show it. He'd never been in a house like this in his life, and he began to wonder if he was safe—a fine time to think of that, he realized. It was quiet enough, other than a dog barking a few houses away. The only person around was a man on the porch across the street, rocking in a chair, holding a can wrapped in a brown paper bag. Really, not so scary after all.

"Bring your bike inside," he told Willie.

"What about yours?"

Lavander shrugged and waved him in, showed him where to put his bike.

Still unsure, but anxious to see this Monkey Hill, Willie followed Lavander inside. The house was dark and smelled musty. Footsteps pounded down the hallway and laughter erupted. Two young girls in ripped slippers were chasing each other. When they saw Willie, they screeched to a halt bumping into one another, eyes wide.

"Who you?" asked the braver of the two.

"This here Willie," Lavander said. "Ain't none of your business. Where Mama?"

“Kitchen.” The taller one turned and the other girl, following on her heels, ran back down the hall, screaming, “Maaamma. Lavander brung a white boy home!”

Lavander rolled his eyes at Willie, and Willie chuckled.

“C’mon then. Let’s give her these berries so we can ride,” Lavander said.

Willie followed him, looking at each room as they walked through it. There was no hallway in this house—you just walked through one room to get to the next. The house hardly had anything in it either. No pictures on the walls or books on any shelves—just some beds and a few chairs. The main room had four beds crammed in it, and one was just a mattress on the floor. Everything was clean, though. He was surprised at that.

As they entered the kitchen, Willie slowed down because in front of him stood the biggest black woman he’d ever seen. Maybe the darkest, too. This woman made Bonnie B. almost look white. Her skin was the color of black coffee and her short tight braids were pulled back neatly. She must have weighed three hundred pounds, Willie guessed.

“Well, well,” she said in a rich, deep voice that sounded like thunder—the good kind that you hear from a distance. “What we got here?”

“Mama, this Willie. We got us some blackberries.” Lavander tugged on Willie’s shirt to draw him forward. Willie held out the pail, his hands trembling a little.

“Well, hey there, Willie.” She looked at Lavander. “You jus’ met dis here boy who wanted to give us dem berries, huh?”

“We picked ‘em together, but didn’t know how to split ‘em up. So I says come here. You would make a cobbler, maybe.” Lavander spoke fast, as if he wasn’t sure if Mama would be glad or mad.

She started to chuckle, a low rumble. “A cobbler, huh? You puttin’ in orders for me like I a short order cook, Lavander Marcus?” She reached over and pulled him into a deep hug, so deep he almost disappeared for a second under her big, heavy arms.

“Yeah, I sho love blackberries,” she said. “Thank you boys for bringin’ me some. I might jus’ make that cobbler, Lavander. Tha’s a good idea. Real good.” She walked over to the counter and picked up a chipped ceramic bowl. “Here you go. Willie, why don’t ya put some in there.”

Willie shook some berries out into the bowl, and deciding that it didn’t look like exactly half, poured out a few more.

Mama peered into the bowl. “Ummhmm. Those look nice. Some good dark ones. Means sweet juice. I thank ya both.” She went back to the counter where she was mixing a bowl of what looked like spinach. Lavander’s Mama seemed to not think it odd at all that Willie was there, and he liked that.

“We goin’ out. Ride bikes, ok?” Lavander was leaning on Mama’s hip, smiling up at her. “Gimme some lovin’,” he said as he wrapped his arms as far around her as they’d go. She reached down and hugged him right back. Just like that, thought Willie.

“You boys be careful now. Lavander, watch out for him. Willie, nice meetin’ you.” She included him in her warm smile.

“Bye Mrs. . . .Mama,” he said.

“Ooh, boy. It’s jus’ Mama, tha’s all.” She shook with silent laughter.

Everybody’s laughing at me today, Willie thought. He didn’t get mad about it, though.

On their bikes again, the boys sped through his neighborhood. Up ahead, a big mound of dirt loomed—it looked almost as tall as Lavander’s house. Willie’s stomach turned flips.

“Wow!” he said to Lavander.

“I know. I tole ya, I tole ya!” he shouted. “Let’s go!”

They both stood and pedaled to gain enough momentum to make it up the hill. Lavander led with Willie close behind, but halfway up, Willie lost speed and faltered. Before he could stop himself, he fell and slid awkwardly down the hill, scraping his hands and knee. It was as if gravity was pulling Willie down despite how hard his feet spun beneath him.

“Owww,” he howled.

But, Lavander didn’t hear him because he was inches away from the top, and that was the hardest part. Then, he was up and turned, victorious, to see if Willie was behind him.

“Whoohoo!” he started. Then, he spotted Willie, crumpled at the bottom of the hill, struggling to get up. He dropped his bike where he stood and slid down the hill.

“Hey, you ok? What happened?”

“I couldn’t do it.” He hung his head.

“It was ya’ first time,” Lavander offered.

“Still.”

“Try ag’in.”

Willie did try again. And again. Like a baby trying to take his first steps, he could only go so far and no further. Finally, he sat in a heap, disgusted.

“It’s too high. I quit. I don’t want to mess up my bike, and I’m tired.” Willie whined.

They sat for a moment—Willie, wanting to go home and put bandaids on, Lavander, thinking about how to get him up the hill.

“Wait, I got it,” Lavander said, and ran back up the hill, where he’d left his bike after Willie’s last fall. He grabbed it, hopped on the seat and flew down so fast that Willie thought he

was airborne. Expertly, he stopped a few feet from Willie, hopped off of the bike and held it out to him.

“Here,” he said, “use mines. S’beat up. Don’t matter none if you mess it up. It’s fast, too.”

“My bike’s fast,” murmured Willie.

“Surely, I know it. But, try mines.”

Willie’s chin went out a little and he stood, took the bike from Lavander. It really was beat up, thought Willie. His own bike was so much better. He was almost embarrassed to ride this one. But Lavander was there, smiling at him, waiting for him to do it. So Willie sat on the banana seat, turned the handlebars side to side, and then nodded at Lavander. Then, he was off, going easily up the first half of the hill but faltering at the midway point.

“C’mon, Willie!” shouted Lavander. “Pedal harder!”

Willie did. Hard as he could, his calf muscles straining. And he made it. As he reached the top of the hill, or was it a mountain, his hands shot up in the age-old victory gesture.

Lavander screamed and jumped up and down. “Tha’s it, tha’s it. I knew ya could do it!”

Feeling like a king, Willie surveyed the land around him. However, the smile disappeared from his face when he realized it was dusk, the sun setting behind the row of run-down shacks to his left.

“I better go,” he told Lavander.

“Get on down here. Tha’s the best part.”

Confident now, he rode fast, really fast, down the hill, air whistling in his ears. It was like riding on the wind.

Stopping directly in front of Lavander, he laughed, giddy from his conquest.

“Your bike’s pretty good.”

“I s’ppose,” Lavander shrugged. “It’s fast an’ good goin’ up a hill, but it don’t look fine as yours.”

Willie nodded. Then, “I got to go. I’m supposed to be home before dark.”

“I’ll ride ya to de blackberry bush,” Lavander offered. And Willie was happy—he liked his new friend.

They rode to the end of the road in silence, both boys pleased with themselves. Willie played with the old handlebars, stood up and pedaled, trying to get the feel of Lavander’s bike, figure out what made it do what his could not. Finally, at the blacktop, they stopped.

“Hey,” Willie said. “Wanna trade? Bikes?”

Lavander considered this offer. “Sure,” he finally said. “For what? Say, two, three days?”

“Yeah,” Willie said. “I’ll be back Friday. We’ll swap back.”

“Ok. See ya’ then. Don’t be goin’ too fast now—ya might take off,” he teased, disappearing into the purple evening.

With the bucket clattering against the tire, Willie rode away on Lavander’s bike, reluctantly admitting that it was much faster than his BMX. He pedaled down the street until the spot where he knew the concrete sidewalk buckled; then he swerved, hit the ramp and flew into the air. Ahh, he was on fire!

But then, as he came closer to his house, he slowed down, the implication of what he’d done beginning to sink in. He drew to a stop and began to think, not knowing if he was more worried that he might not get his bike back or that his parents would find out and whip him into next week. What had he done? He loved his bike and he had just handed it over to a stranger. A

black one, at that. Hopping off of Lavander's beat up, old bike, Willie walked it around his house, deciding that it might be best to hide the bike behind the garage.

Quietly, he crept up the back steps, blackberries in hand, hoping to slip into the house unnoticed. When the door creaked open, however, he came face to face with his mother whose eyes were squinted almost shut. Her arms were crossed, fingers tapping.

"Where have you been, William? It is dark outside in case you haven't noticed." Willie's eyes wouldn't go higher than her waist, wouldn't look her in the eye, and focused on the beige pleats of her dress that lay flat against her thin frame.

"I was worried sick about you. You know better." A powerful pause. "Go see your father. He's waiting."

"I picked berries. For Bonnie B.," Willie raised them up like an offering.

His mother took them with her finger tips and pointed down the hall.

Willie reluctantly walked into living room, which was like a museum—so clean and white that Willie was afraid to step foot in there. Walls were lined with books his father would not let Willie touch. Stories he wanted to read desperately when he was smaller, yet over time, had lost interest in. His father stood in the center of the room, an angry slash of white in the dim light.

"William. You know you're not supposed to be out late. Now, where were you?"

Willie hadn't even made up a story to tell, was too euphoric over his hill conquest and bike score. So now, he said nothing. Just stood there.

"Well," his father slapped a belt sharply in the palm of his hand. "I'm waiting."

He couldn't tell his father he was on the other side of the tracks. Not in a million years. He'd get a worse whipping than the one he was about to receive. "I was just riding around. Lost track of time."

"How could you lose track of time when the sky is turnin' black all around you? I don't believe that for a minute. Up to no good, that's what I think."

But Willie stood still, not wavering from his lie.

"Let's go, then."

Willie walked over, dropped his pants and leaned over his father's strong knees. Whack, whack, whack. The belt moved quick and hard, giving Willie no chance to catch his breath. After, Willie grunted and then cried, looking around for his mother. When he saw her, unmoved by his pain, he drew up his pants. He flashed on Lavander's Mama, wishing she could wrap him in a big hug.

"Now you going to tell me?"

Willie hesitated, knowing the whipping wouldn't be the worst of it until they got the story. There'd be no more anything—no going outside, no dessert, no friends over, nothing.

"Somebody stole it—my bike," he blurted out.

His father rose to his feet. "What are you saying? Tell me what happened."

Through teary eyes and a runny nose, Willie stumbled through a story, one he wasn't even sure would hold should his father question him or ask him to repeat it.

When he finished, his father's face had that tight look, and Willie knew he'd done it.

"Alright, alright. You should have just said that from the very first, son. Go on up to your room. I'll handle this."

Scurrying out of the room like a mouse, Willie ran up the stairs, pausing at the landing to listen to his parents. However, they did not speak. His father picked up the telephone and dialed.

“Chalou. Will Conners here, I’ve got a situation . . .” His father’s voice stopped, was interrupted, then, “Fine. I’ll see you in a minute.”

Willie was impressed at how his father could just call the sheriff and he would come right over. Chalou was a fat, red-faced man with a stinky cigar always hanging out of his mouth. Yet, he was nice to Willie whenever he saw him, always asking about his father. Only now, he did not want the sheriff to come over, and realizing what he had done, Willie’s eyes began to fill once more. As he buried his face in his pillow and cried, Willie was aware that Lavander was about to get into a world of trouble for something he didn’t even do.

The line, like a dare, was so clearly drawn in their town. Willie didn’t really understand why—grown ups must have drawn it because the kids surely did not care. If his father knew that he had spoken to, no, made friends with, a black boy, he would skin him alive. He had no choice but to make up that story.

His room seemed suddenly dark and small, and Willie longed to turn on all of the lights but was afraid to move. Nervous, he jumped up to peek out of his window, to make sure that no one could see Lavander’s bike behind the garage. No, he was safe. Now, he had to figure out how to exchange bikes without his parents finding out.

The next day came but, with it, no opportunity to return the bike. Willie stood in the kitchen, staring at the back door, trying to get the nerve to ride over to Lavander’s house, only his feet wouldn’t move for anything.

“What’s matter wit’ you? You got a look on ya face.” Bonnie B. had walked up behind him.

“Bonnie B.! Why are you sneakin’ up on me?”

She stood there in her worn chambray dress and apron, hands on her hips. “You up to somethin’,” she said.

“I am not. I, uh, was lookin’ for some of that blackberry pie, that’s all.”

“I know thas a lie. For you jus’ about ate it up, Willie. Nah you gonna tell me or not?”

Willie stood there for several long seconds, trying to decide if he should tell Bonnie B. about the pickle he’d gotten himself into. She had a mean look on her face, but he knew she liked him, for the most part.

“I ain’t got all day,” she shifted from one foot to the other.

So he told her. All about Lavander and the fast bike. The story spilled out of him quickly, like marbles from a loose bag. Then, he waited. Waited to hear what Bonnie B. might say—would she scold him or help him? When she sat down on the kitchen chair, he could smell her musky hair, but he moved closer anyway, grateful that she hadn’t gone straight out of the room to tell his father.

“Well, well. You got some trouble, I’d say. Why you got to be goin’ where you don’t belong?”

“I told you, I was pickin’ blackberries. For you.” He said this last part like blame and instantly regretted it. “I don’t see what the big deal is anyway. Why’s Lavander so different than Little Shawn?”

Bonnie B. slammed her hand on the kitchen table. “I’d like to know the same thing,” she said. But she hastily recovered, lapsed into the cool attitude Willie was accustomed to. “You got two roads to take. Tell ya dad and take ya medicine.” She clamped her mouth shut.

“Or?”

“Or, keep on out that back door like you was about to do. Go on and switch bikes and don’t tell nobody.”

Willie nodded, not at all surprised that she knew his plan.

“What would you do?”

She rose, smoothed her apron. “Nah that ain’t up to me. You gots to decide.”

“C’mon, help me, Bonnie B.”

He thought he saw the beginning of a sneer, but, no, her lips were drawn as tight as ever. She moved toward the hallway.

“We ain’t never had dis conversation, that’s how I’m helpin’ you.” And, she turned stiffly and walked away.

“Shoot, that ain’t no help,” he said.

Just then, the doorbell rang, and as he stood there, trying to decide what to do, his father’s voice boomed through the house. “Willie! Get in here.”

Had Bonnie B. betrayed him that quickly, even though she said she would not?

“Damn nigger,” Willie said, angrily using the word he heard his father use. He stomped toward the front of the house. He would never tell Bonnie B. a thing—he wouldn’t talk to her at all, not to even ask for more milk or to clean his shoes better.

As he walked down the hall, his anger melted away when he saw his father, Chalou, Lavander, a black man, and his bike, all standing there waiting for him.

“Willie,” Chalou began. “Is this here your bike?”

Ahh, he was caught, caught in the worst way, and he was so scared to be the one in trouble. He could never tell the truth now; it was too late. With no escape, he nodded. Lavander hadn’t looked up yet, seemed to be studying the hardwood floor like he’d lost something. Chalou

hadn't let go of Lavander, and his knuckles were white where he was clutching the boy's faded t-shirt in his fist.

"This boy stole your bike, son?" Chalou asked, his voice gentle and respectful for Willie.

Lavander's head snapped up, but he didn't say a word. The black man straightened his shoulders and stared hard at Willie. But Willie only squirmed, tugging at his shirttail, not wanting to say the word.

"Speak up son," his father urged.

There was no getting out of this, Willie realized, and forcing the word out, he took his first step into becoming a boy his father would be proud of.

"Yes," he whispered.

Willie's father laid his hand on his son's trembling shoulder. "Don't worry, Willie. I realize you didn't want to tell me the other night. I understand now. But, you know you should have just told the truth, don't you? We could've looked for your bike right away. In our family, it's important to do the right thing."

He sounded concerned, not at all mad, and Willie felt relieved, almost happy, as long as he didn't look at Lavander. Instead, he looked at his father's face, his pale sharp face, his silver spectacle glasses, and he knew he was safe and that his father would always take care of him, as long as he did what he said.

Chalou rolled the bike to Willie, who leaned it against the wall. He didn't think he'd ever ride it again.

"Looks like it's alright to me," Chalou said. "Bet ya glad to get it back, eh Willie?"

Willie looked at the bike. It looked perfect, just like the day he got the bike, as though Lavander took care of it like he did.

“Go on, son.” And his father’s hand firmly edged him away.

Willie glanced back, only once, and saw Lavander’s face, lips tight, eyes hurt, ready to face these two big white men who would punish him for something he did not do. Willie looked away, not yet realizing the depth of his betrayal.

As he walked into the kitchen, he saw Bonnie B., knife in hand, standing over the garbage can. She was scraping food off of a plate into the garbage. Maybe she hadn’t heard. “Whatcha doin?” He heard the fake uplift in his own voice.

“Held out a piece a blackberry pie yest’day. Was goin’ to surprise you wid it.” She scraped it deliberately, every last crumb, her eyes never leaving his face.

“Why didn’t you, then?” Oh, she had heard. He knew it. Her expression was so full of hate that it almost incinerated Willie. He could feel it like the summer sun scorching his face. But if Lavander hadn’t looked at him like that, why should she?

“No good,” she said, lips turned down at the corners. She dropped the plate and knife in the sink, letting them clatter. Without saying another word, she walked past Willie, a little too closely, and left him alone in the kitchen.

He sank to the floor, scooting back to the pantry where he leaned, eyes closed, the beginnings of sadness coming over him. Mostly, he wondered what would happen to Lavander—he really didn’t want to know. However, he couldn’t have done anything differently, Willie figured. If he told the truth, he would be the one who would be in trouble right now. That kind of trouble, he didn’t want and couldn’t handle. Now Lavander, he could take it, Willie was sure. That boy was probably in trouble all the time. Willie shook his head, surprised at the tears that flew away.

“Heck with it,” he muttered and stood up. “Screw it.”

Willie wished that everything was fine—that nothing had happened—and he was just eating the last piece of pie he was sure hadn't gone bad.

Then, he heard the front door slam, and his father's voice again rang out, "William!"

Without hesitation, Willie left the kitchen and went to his father. Thoughts of Lavander began to fade, and Willie might have forgotten that the incident had ever occurred. He wasn't afraid to go to his father now because he was not in trouble. He was protected, on the right side of the line; a line he would never cross again. Whatever his father would say to him now, he'd listen to, try to obey every word. Willie would never go by Martin Luther King Jr. Drive and wouldn't talk to black kids—to niggers—again.

His father knew best. And Willie felt a sudden, fierce determination to be just like him one day.