



WILLIAM CARTER

## THE APOLOGY

*a short story by* J.R. HELTON

**W**hen I was a boy, I lived in the country about fifty miles outside of San Antonio, Texas. Our house was a trailer my father had set up on large cedar posts, three feet in the air. He covered the space below with aluminum siding and added a front porch to give the trailer a more houselike appearance. We had an above-ground pool, too. My sister and I could swim in the pool only when our parents gave us permission. Our family had a solid rule: always vacuum the pool after

you swim. We had many solid rules: Don't keep your hands in your pockets. Don't shut your bedroom door. Don't speak unless spoken to. Don't forget your chores. Don't talk back. Don't, don't, don't. If my sister and I slipped up, we received a spanking. It was all very simple and direct. Our father used his belt; our mother, her hairbrush.

My father was a mechanic. He had a large shop made of steel girders and corrugated tin next to our house. There were

pulleys in there, welding machines, rusty chains, tanks, jacks, compressors, and every hand tool you could imagine. During the week he worked for a large tractor company in San Antonio. Many of the farmers and ranchers who lived near us would bring their tractors and pickups to his shop, and he would fix them after work or on the weekends. They all liked my father and gave him tools for Christmas. My father drove a Ford pickup and hated foreign cars because he didn't know their engines. He always said, "If you can't work on it, don't drive it."

We lived on a dirt road that was colored rust red by the iron ore in the ground. It was called Good Luck Road. We had a stock tank, maybe twenty yards across, full of brown water, snakes, frogs, and small perch. We had seven cows, one bull, and two horses. My sister and I fed the cows and horses hay in the winter, and they grazed the rest of the year in the green pasture between our trailer and our neighbor's. We also fed the horses sweet feed every day. They'd come running whenever I banged on the red bucket filled with feed.

On our side of the road there were three trailers, all sited on land that had been cleared, bulldozed, and root-plowed of mesquite. On the other side were five houses scattered over several square miles of hay pastures, pecan trees, oak trees, and mesquite brush. Those houses were the remains of Jake's Colony, a community of ex-slaves established in the 1890s. My father called it the "nigger colony." When our preacher came over on Sunday night, he and my mother and father referred to it as the "black side of the road" or "where the blacks live," and to its residents as the "black family there," or the "other black family with the barn," or the "blacks with the red truck." For a time I thought everyone on that side of the road was related, all of them members of a large family named Black.

I eventually learned the name of the closest black family, who lived only a mile from our trailer. They were the Cunninghams. I saw Mr. Cunningham occasionally on Sunday afternoons, when I went walking on the road. His first name was Sherman, and he'd wave to me as he drove past in his red pickup. I remember he would slow down so his truck didn't throw a cloud of dust on me, and I'd wave back.

My father drank lots of Lone Star beer on the weekends. One Saturday night he got drunk on it and told my Uncle Calvin a story about Mr. Cunningham:

"That old Sherman Cunningham is a crazy son of a bitch. He shot his own brother once. They lived with their father, and when the old man died, the two boys, Sherman and Chamberlain, had to divide up the cows, and Chamberlain — he was a real hot-headed nigger; he had big yellow eyes. You know how some of them niggers got yellow eyes? Apparently Sherman's wife picked out a cow that Chamberlain wanted, and they started fussing with each other, and before you know it, old Chamberlain's hitting Sherman's wife with a stick. Well, Sherman just gets off his horse, goes in the house, and comes back with a pistol, and he shoots his brother three times. Didn't kill him, but he never had trouble with him again. . . . Just crazy. You should've seen his father when the old man was alive. He was almost as white as you and me, with long white hair. Looked

like Albert Einstein. When I first came out here, I was going to go talk with him, with the old man, at their house about something. I can't remember what. And the old man is something like eighty, and he makes his sixty-year-old son leave the room. He says, 'Go on, Sherman. I need to have some words with Mr. Dietz here.' Now that was something. That old man was a gentleman. Real light-skinned nigger."

The color of a person's skin was very important to my father. People with light brown skin were "Mexicans" or "wets," and people with dark brown skin were "niggers" or "coloreds" or "blacks." We had pink skin and considered ourselves white people.

**I**t was around the time I heard the story of the shooting that Mr. Cunningham's pigs started popping up all along Good Luck Road. Every day, as my mother brought my sister and me home from school, we'd see ten to twenty pigs wandering in the ditches looking for food. My mother said it was becoming a problem; she was afraid she was going to run over one of them. "Can't the Cunninghams keep their pigs on their property?" she'd say. My sister and I thought the pigs were funny, all the little piglets running around, squealing. When our father saw them, he said, "Those goddamn pigs." One day, on our way home from church, we pulled up to our gate, and when I got out to open it, my father jumped out with me. "I'm going to grab one of these goddamn pigs," he said. "This ain't no way to keep pigs, out in the goddamn road." He put the squealing piglet in the car, and my sister hung on to it while I shut the gate.

My father and I built a pen for the pig, which I named Arnold, after a pig on TV. It was my job to feed and care for Arnold, and I eventually grew quite fond of him. He was intelligent and preferred me over my sister and everyone else. When I let him out of the pen, he followed me around and played with my dog Libby.

I never had much free time; my father kept me busy. All I had was my Sunday-afternoon walk with Libby. I'd take along my pellet gun and shoot at any snakes I could find in the ditches along the road. One Sunday, not long after we'd taken his piglet, I saw Mr. Cunningham out repairing his fence where it had fallen over. He stopped working and said hello to me, and I said hello back. I was a little afraid of him, remembering the story of how he'd shot his brother. He was a small man, and thin, with short white hair. He wore an old jean jacket, and black pants tucked into his dirty boots. He held a posthole digger in his hand.

"Where you going with that gun, boy?"

"I'm going to shoot some snakes."

"Why?"

"'Cause they're bad."

"Tell me something," he said. "What did a snake ever do to you?"

"Nothing." I thought about it. "One could bite me though."

"Yeah, I guess it could. Well . . . don't worry, my pigs will eat the ones you miss."

I watched him plant a new cedar post into the hole he'd just dug. "What happened to your fence?"

"The rain washed the old rotten post away. All my pigs got out."

"I know. I saw them."

I watched him work. He tamped the dirt down around the post and then re-nailed several strands of wire to it. When he'd finished, he threw all of his tools into the back of his red pickup, turned to me, and said, "I'm sorry, I can't sit out here talking to you all day. I got things to do." I was confused, because we hadn't said anything for ten minutes, and he laughed and said, "How old are you now, Freddy?"

I told him I was nine.

He said, "I remember when you were born. Your daddy was all excited. My daddy was one of the first people he called. He came over to our house that night and brought my daddy a cigar. Our yard was flooded with water from the rains, and your daddy had on a pair of brand-new boots, must've cost a hundred dollars, and he just walked right on up into the yard, right through the water, with all the dogs barking at him and everything. . . . You tell him to come by and see me. I'm seventy years old now. I'm not going to be around forever."

Then he drove away, and I continued my walk. I didn't shoot any snakes that day. Nor did I tell my father I'd talked to Mr. Cunningham.

**A**rnold the pig grew quickly, and before I knew it my mother and father wanted to kill him. My father said it was important that my sister and I knew the source of the ham and bacon we ate. My father really loved bacon. He was a big man, and he'd eat more than a dozen strips every morning. I liked bacon, too, and so did my sister. My mother couldn't even stop to eat breakfast herself, she was so busy frying bacon.

My father woke my sister and me early one morning and said it was time to slaughter Arnold. We walked outside, and my father got a sledgehammer out of his shop and told me to give Arnold some feed. After sniffing me, Arnold bent his head down to eat, and my father sank the sledgehammer into the front of his skull. The pig fell over and kicked a little, and my father smashed his head one more time for good measure. We hung him up with a rope and pulley about four feet above the ground. My mother took a large butcher knife and slit the pig's throat. The blood spurted forcefully at first, then slowed to a steady red drip. After he'd drained, we poured boiling water on him and scraped the bristles off his skin. My mother and father then cut him into pieces and put him in the freezer. We ate that pig for a long time.

When winter came that year, Mr. Cunningham's pigs started filling the road again. He had about twenty new piglets who ran around squealing and bothering their big, fat mothers. There were a couple of giant male hogs walking up and down the road too. My mother and father complained: "What the hell is wrong with that man?"

Mother suggested we pick up a new piglet.

"No," my father said, "that piglet cost us a lot to feed. I got

a better idea."

That afternoon, I rode with my father in his pickup a quarter mile down the road, dodging pigs in the dirt. He stopped at a sharp curve, stepped out of the truck, pulled out his pistol, and shot one of Mr. Cunningham's big hogs. The hog wobbled and fell and got shot again. Since my father worked with heavy machinery, he had a hydraulic lift on the back of his truck. We rolled the hog onto the platform, and I watched him rise up, one black fly already lighting on the brains that seeped from his head. I looked away and saw Mr. Cunningham walking around the curve in the road toward our truck.

He had on thick canvas coveralls buttoned all the way up and a cowboy hat so wrinkled and stained it looked as if it might fall apart. My father, who hadn't seen him, said to me, "Now, son, this ain't no way to take care of livestock. If he's going to let them wander around in the road, then anything can happen. They're fair game, as far as I'm concerned." He jumped a little when he saw Mr. Cunningham standing beside our truck.

"Mr. Dietz," Mr. Cunningham said.

My father's face grew firm. "Sherman."

"Mr. Dietz, just what is it you think you're doing?"

"I found this wild pig in the road."

"You found it, huh?"

"Yep, just wandering wild in the road. Nobody taking care of it."

"Well, sir, that's my pig."

My father shook his head. "Didn't look like one of your pigs to me."

Mr. Cunningham laughed. "Oh, it didn't?"

"Look here," my father said, "if you can't keep these hogs on your land —"

"Then what? You going to shoot them?"

"I just might."

Mr. Cunningham took off his hat and ran his hand over his white hair. "I've had some trouble, Mr. Dietz. My wife is sick. And I'm getting old, of course, and now I got the flu. The doctor says it could go into pneumonia. And I don't want that to happen. It's been cold, so it ain't real easy for me to get out here and fix my fences when they fall. I was working on it today, 'cause it's a nice, sunny day."

"They're just out in the goddamn road every day, Sherman. It's a wonder somebody hasn't run over one and wrecked their car or something."

Mr. Cunningham put his hat back on and climbed into the bed of our pickup. "I tell you what," he said. "I'm going to ride with you back to my house, and we're going to put this hog off into my yard."

Mr. Cunningham slowly climbed up and sat down on his hog. My father stared at the ground for what seemed like a long time, then told me to get in the truck.

We turned around and drove Mr. Cunningham back to his house, where he climbed out and went inside. We sat in the truck, the engine running. "What the hell is he doing?" my father said. After several minutes Mr. Cunningham returned, and my father cut off the engine and stepped out. *(end of excerpt)*