

Fleda Jackson

CHICKEN WILLIE

On Sweetwater Road, honeysuckle eats everything, swims dark up the pines and down red clay ditches. It moves on where the gravel turns to dirt, chewed and gullied. A mile down, what used to be The Juke buckles under the jaws of the honeysuckle. A dozen years ago, you couldn't find a spot in the yard to park on Saturday night, all the white men coming to dance with nigger gals. Evildest place in two counties, it was said.

The last years Chicken Willie Brit ran The Juke, he kept Siller, his nigger woman, in back. He'd sit on the porch in his squat whiteness, issuing his stores of Lincoln County's bootleg with grunts and nods. The stuff rolled in from Tallulah, over the Vicksburg bridge and down to the woods, where he kept it on the move, buried, exhumed, buried. His two niggers brought the bottles up clammy from the dark. You could say one pint or two, and Willie's snap would call it up, a glint beneath the fist.

If you let the honeysuckle take you down to the end of Sweetwater Road, you found Chicken Willie's pond, a black brew draped with willow trees, dripping bugs and larvae into the gray mouths of Willie's catfish, burbling up fat among the cottonmouths.

The left fork reached blacktop, then a couple of miles to Willie's mamma's. Since the killing, if you want to fish in Willie's pond, you have to hear her story first. She rolls it out like psalms, her eyes glazed, her fingers snapping beans:

"Willie's daddy was a smart man, built The Juke on the county line. When the Lincoln County sheriff come, Daddy shoved

his chair across to Kopian County, so all they ever got him for was stealin' chickens. Y'know he died at Parchman Prison, fifth time up for chickens. Then my sons was all I had.

"Pat, my middle son, was walkin' Highway 20 on a spring drunk, when a log truck run him down in the dark. But Leonard, my youngest, always looked after his momma and his cows. He stuttered some, but Leonard was a comfort.

"At election time, the Kopian County constable got nervous, since he'd promised to shut The Juke down. He gathered up his men. Leonard was takin' Willie some catfish I just fried, and saw 'em all waitin' at the fork. So Willie and Leonard took the pickup, to run 'em off. I been down to the courthouse, the law they never get the story true. They say Willie asked the constable what he was doin', smellin' round his property. Constable said he jus' wanted to talk. Say Willie went for a gun under the seat. All I know is the constable's men was in the honeysuckle, and gunned both my boys in the back, Willie and my Leonard. Blood stayed on the ground till it rained.

"Well, that's all my menfolk, y'know. That sonabitchin' constable killed 'em. Say they gonna investigate! You think anything come of that? Nothin' come of that. Leonard never had nothin' to do with that whisky. And Willie never had no gun under his seat. You can talk to Siller. She's back over to her old place. 'Git me a pistol and I'll blow their brains out,' she always tells me.

"—Honey, you can fish in Willie's pond, but it's been eat up by honeysuckle, and you'll have to fight your way in."

By the pond, The Juke leans into the trees.
Tendrils writhe through the dance floor; vines
flatten their suckers on the windowframes,
wearing the edges to sweet green. Lizards
green as leaves fly in and out the door.



Elayne Sidley

THE OLIVE TREE

My tenants have an olive tree
Living in their kneepatch front yard.
This tree knows how to grow.
Big, long branches for such a little look-old young tree.
When the fruit comes it drops and drops,
And every passing soul squishes purple-black dye
On shoes and walks and carpets.

I hired a man.

I said, (in pidgin Spanish) "Cut that mother.
Way back." Back to the twisted, weather-beaten
trunk that's borne neither storm, nor wind,
nor temperatures extreme. "Cut that mother."
So the man cut that mother back.
Now it's small and, holding in on itself,
bends back its mutilated little arms,
Ashamed and sorrowing,
Its little arms bend back.

There will be no olives this year,
No mess, no fuss, no bother,
And the tenants and the man got what they wanted,
And I got what I requested.