

1938

by Jeff Cowart

The Pullman coach car hummed and clacked in rhythm. The train from Donalsonville was running right on time, outbound from the steamy, sandy pinewoods of Seminole County. Ray slouched in his seat, head tilted toward the window, watching the south Georgia landscape unfold. He was neither happy nor sad, just resigned. He brushed his hand over his heart and reached inside the rough woolen coat to touch the two twenty dollar bills she had safety-pinned there just before pushing him onto the car at the station.

“This is emergency money,” she had instructed. “It must go a long way. Everything else is taken care of. Put this in a good hiding place when you get there in case of emergency.”

Ray nodded. She kissed him lightly on the cheek, put her hand in the small of his back, and urged him from the platform to the steps. “I love you,” she said. “Everything will be okay. You will see.” Ray bobbed his head slightly affirmatively without enthusiasm, but did not look back.

An affable appearing black man in the conductor suit, curls of gray hair wisping from beneath the cap, grayed moustache, gave way slightly for Ray to pass. “Welcome aboard young man.”

In the car Ray surveyed the rows of bench seats, some already populated by the people from Pensacola or Panama City or some other Florida panhandle stop, bound for Albany or Macon or Augusta or points beyond. Three rows from the back he took his place among them, stuffing his canvas valise just under the seat in front so he could keep an eye on it.

Outside she walked along with him as he made his way in the car, then stood outside his window clutching her arms around her waist, wearing what seemed to be a forced smile. He was expressionless, looking at her, looking beyond her to the rows of wagons piled high with peanuts waiting to be loaded onto the next freight train headed to market. His mind returned to the times he and Jasper Twilley favored climbing up to the top of the high piles of peanuts when the passenger trains came in to watch the people in the dining cars, white linen tablecloths and shiny silverware, eating and sipping drinks.

“I’m going to ride me one of them dining cars one day right out of this old, dead town,” Ray said. Now today was the day, but the style and the adventure Ray had imagined on those high piles of peanuts was not the same.

Shortly, the conductor called out all clear to the engineer and the train bumped into gear, slowly building a whine of metal on metal, as his mother walked along with it to catch her last glimpse before he disappeared. Ray saw Jasper Twilley, too, hanging back behind a peanut wagon, and following along as the train inched away. Ray swept his hand against the window to return his mother’s wave. And, then, he was gone, Donalsonville receding behind him as the train built momentum and advanced.

The trip was only two hundred miles, but it would take most of six hours to get there, with all the rolling stops at the little towns between here and there and the occasional white handkerchief being waved as a flag from the countryside where someone had come up to the tracks out of the woods. Ray watched things roll by for a while until the rhythm of the rail lulled him to sleep.

He drifted in and out over the course of the day, alternately bored and anxious, fidgeting, slouching, shifting his weight in the discomfort of the seat, gazing at the passing landscape where things fell away like dominoes in a line collapsing. The conductor passed through the car frequently calling out this town or that, then

finally Ray's town. Sensing the train beginning to slow, he pulled himself upright in the hard seat and began in earnest to survey the arriving scene.

In the near distance, Ray saw what looked like a fairly new metal sign erected beside the track:

Milledgeville, GA
A Bird Sanctuary

Before leaving Donalsonville he had learned something about the school, a little about the town, but nothing in the information said anything about the bird sanctuary. He wondered now what kind of birds he would find here, and how a town in the middle of nowhere might come to be named a bird sanctuary. His Ithaca, 20-gauge double-barreled shotgun had been left behind so he knew he would not be hunting any of the quail or doves or whatever other birds might be here.

Beyond the sign, the definition of the town began to take shape, first some rickety barns and other bleached out buildings here and there, then modest houses with children playing in the broom-swept dirt of the front yards, then a semblance of a small town downtown with the five and dime, the grocery, the cafe, the hardware and a few other places of business lining the heart of the main street. The churches prominent as always and integrated in here and there, the First and Second Baptists, the Methodists, the Presbyterians. Then the larger houses rose up and turned to run down the side streets, with their sweeping front porches, thick columns, and azaleas and tended gardens.

The train screeched as it drew to a halt at the station on the edge of town, wheezing one final blow before coming to a stationary rest. Ray reached inside his coat and unpinned the twenties, stuffing them and the safety pin into his pants pocket. Then he gathered his valise and stepped off onto the platform. The station was much like back home, a mostly covered and open platform with a small administrative and

ticket office in the middle, a few wooden pews where people could sit and wait, and always a place for the produce wagons to roll under and get in out of the rain.

Even in the late afternoon the air had not yet begun to cool and the breeze was slight and unnoticeable. Ray headed south, down the block or so back toward town, meandering like a lazy stream with little urgency.

After passing a few shops he came upon the drugstore, the door propped open in an attempt to attract any breeze that might be whispering along in the street. A couple of fans moved slowly side-to-side, stirring up a little breath of air. Ray walked up to the counter, where an older man sat on a worn wooden stool paging through the latest copy of the Milledgeville Union Recorder.

“What can I do for you, son?” the old man asked, setting the newspaper aside.

“I’ll take me a pack of Lucky Strikes and a box of matches,” Ray said.

The old man sized him up for a moment.

“Are these for your daddy?” he asked.

“No sir.” Ray flashed back momentarily to that time when he was 10 years old and his daddy had fallen ill. They had told him it was just a spell and it would pass, but the next morning she had come in early and woke all of them up. She told Ray, the youngest, and Bessie and Charles and Dorothy and Dennis all at once that their daddy had passed in the night.

“You don’t look old enough to smoke,” the old man said.

Ray was tall and angular, and thin as a reed. His hair was thick and charmingly tousled like that of a younger boy. His face was baby smooth and cream-like and visibly he came off much younger than his age.

“I reckon I am,” Ray said. “I’m 16 and they sent me up here from Donalsonville for the Georgia Military College.”

“Well, that’s fine.” The old man nodded, and put the cigarettes and matches on the counter. Ray pulled one of the twenties from his pants pocket and handed it to the old man. “And, I reckon I’ll get me a Nehi orange as well,” Ray said. The old man nodded and Ray collected his change, stuffed it into his front pants pocket, put the cigarettes and matches in his coat pocket, and grabbed the Nehi from the cooler by the door on his way out, snapping the cap off on the cooler’s opener.

Outside, he took a place in the shade on the sidewalk bench. The heat pushed up well over 90 degrees under the August sun. He gulped two swallows of the ice cold Nehi, feeling the chilled sweet liquid swirl around his tongue and down his throat, tracking refreshingly all the way down and instantly cooling and settling the pit of his stomach.

He turned his head from side to side and back again surveying his new town. From the two or three blocks of the main street he could see immediately that Milledgeville was bigger than Donalsonville, maybe by as much as half or more. About two blocks away he could see the looming facade of the Georgia Military College, which he recognized from the photo they had sent his mother.

Ray sat for a while on the bench just resting, enjoying the Nehi more slowly, as a hedge against the afternoon heat, until he finished it. He removed his coat, which was now smothering in the stillness, and worked it into the handles of the valise, drawing the Lucky Strikes and matches out first. His fingernail slipped under the fold on the top of the pack and he tore a square of paper off up to the tax stamp.

With a snap of the pack against his free hand, several of the Luckies jumped up in the opening of the pack, one of which he extracted and placed between his lips. He snapped a match against the rough side of the box and lit the first cigarette of his new life in Milledgeville. The harshness of the first full draw caught him by surprise and he coughed and sputtered unexpectedly. The next few puffs he measured in smaller and more experimental units until he felt his lungs slowly acclimate to the intensity of the intruding smoke.

Ray rose from the bench, holding the cigarette like a trophy between the index and middle fingers of his right hand. He grabbed the valise in his left hand and began a slow saunter up the street toward the College, occasionally looking at the various window goods in the some of the shop windows along the way.

As he stepped across one of the side streets where the houses began, he saw the two girls, just inside the fence of one of the houses with the sweeping porches, giggling and whispering, and watching him come along. Dramatically, he put the cigarette to his lips and pulled a draw, then coolly and slowly let the smoke drift out of his mouth and into the air.

The girls giggled and whispered.

“What ‘chu doing smoking?” one of the girls said.

Ray half-glanced at her with a smooth detachment. “It ain’t no business of yours,” he said.

“No, I reckon it ain’t,” the girl said, eyeing him up and down. “You just come off the train? I see you packing a suitcase.”

“That ain’t no business of yours neither,” Ray said.

“No, I reckon not,” she said, sizing him up with a casual stare. He had paused now on the sidewalk, across the fence and opposite the girls to take a longer and more considered look. The one doing the talking seemed to be about twelve, slender with a cherubic face, with soft blonde hair falling smartly around the frame of her pleasant facial features. She wore a lightweight cotton dress with small yellow printed dots. She had white ankle socks on feet that looked forced into matronly shoes that Ray figured might have been hand-me-downs like his own laced up boots.

“My name is Caulda,” the girl said. “This here is Mary Flannery.”

The second girl seemed nervous and distracted, and looked as though she might break and run at any moment. She had a curly bowl of brunette hair hanging midway to her shoulders, cateye glasses illuminating a pair of darting eyes, and a falling-away chin that somehow gave her a confident yet slightly frightened presence.

There was an expectation on the girl’s part of a response of some type after the introductions, but Ray was not so inclined. The girl pushed the issue. “You got a name?” she asked.

Ray was unsure of what to do next, or whether to do anything. The day had been long and unsettling and he was here in a new town with no identity and no connections and he was not sure he wanted any. He was drawn toward a position of mysterious anonymity but also felt a little tug of interest in the chance encounter. He was not sure if the girls were friendly or nosy, but out of a narrow sense of civility and training he finally said, “Ray,” which simply hung in the air and launched a few seconds of awkward silence.

“Mary Flannery had a chicken that walked backwards on a leash and the people came down from New York and filmed her and she was on the movie newsreel,” Caulda said.

This caught Ray off guard. He looked from Mary Flannery to Caulda then back to Mary Flannery.

“You really got on the movie news?” Ray asked.

Mary Flannery shuffled uncomfortably, obviously surprised at being thrust into the center of this encounter with a stranger. Almost in an imperceptible whisper Mary Flannery said, “Me and my chicken did, yes.” Ray nodded and more awkward seconds passed.

“Why do they call Milledgeville a bird sanctuary,” he asked, wondering if somehow the notoriety of a backward-walking chicken might figure into things.

“Some of the men say it will bring tourists to the town,” said Caulda. “Is that why you came?”

Ray took a drag on his diminishing cigarette and let the smoke slowly pour from his lips, before dropping the butt to the sidewalk and grinding it out with the toe of his boot. He pondered the question, debating with himself just how much he might want to share with these two who had unexpectedly intruded into his space.

“Naw,” he said. “I got sent up here for the Georgia Military College.”

“Did you get in some kind of trouble or something?” Caulda asked.

Ray was somewhat taken aback by the penetrating inquisition coming from this young girl. The line of questioning was disturbing to him on one side, but caught his interest on another. He had made up his mind when all of this came to pass to be aloof and detached and keep to himself here in Milledgeville. And, it had been a while since anyone had really talked to him about anything that had to do with him.

“Not really,” he said.

Caulda nodded.

“That’s a good school they say,” Mary Flannery said in a slightly more audible voice, somehow feeling the need to break the uncomfortable moment.

Ray shuffled his feet, looking down at the crushed cigarette. “What happened to your chicken?” he asked Mary Flannery.

“Oh, he passed to the great beyond some years back,” Mary Flannery said, a little animated now for the first time since the conversation began. “I believe the fame might have been too much for him.”

For the first time, a slight smile broke through Ray’s lips.

“She’s got more chickens now,” said Caulda.

“One of them walks on a leash, but not backwards though,” Mary Flannery said. “One day I’m going to get me some peacocks.”

Ray nodded. “I like peacocks,” he said.

“Yes, peacocks are glorious alright,” said Mary Flannery.

The conversation seemed stuck again at an awkward impasse, with none of the three really sensing where to go to next, or even if to go on with any of it. Ray shuffled his feet again and the two girls stood there not so much staring as just looking.

“You need to be careful of the misfit around here,” Caulda said.

Ray looked up curiously.

“What’s a misfit?” he asked.

“The misfit killed a whole family not too long ago off in the woods down there and they ain’t never found him,” she said. “They found the car off in a hollow down there off the road and the bodies of the momma and the daddy and the grandma and the two little children was scattered all over in the woods.”

Ray reached in his pocket and put his hand around his Barlow knife. Donalsonville seemed truly far away and Milledgeville not at all what he expected. People hanging about in yards talking to strangers, backward-walking chickens, movie newsreels, a dangerous murdering misfit on the loose. He sensed that he may be in a new game of chance and discovery unlike anything he had known up to this point in his old Seminole County life.

“I reckon I better get on up to the College,” Ray finally said. “I got to find out where to sleep.”

“I heard they got good bunks there,” Mary Flannery said.

Caulda nodded.

“Well, welcome to Milledgeville Mister Ray,” said Caulda. “Hope you have a good time at the College.”

There was nothing about the Georgia Military College that had gone through Ray’s mind that came remotely close to the idea of having a good time. He envisioned it as a prison of sorts, somewhere he may have to bust out of some day. But, life had been

hard for his mother since his daddy died and he knew that. She had five kids to raise and although his daddy had left her pretty well fixed from his success in the turpentine business, she was raising five kids alone now and Ray figured he was just one too many headache to manage. She said it was nothing of the kind. She said he just needed some men to model after so he could grow up to be strong and successful like his daddy. Ray did not fight it. He figured being sent off to military school was one way to get out of Donalsonville and then go on from there. He figured now that he was gone he would never go back.

“I’ll see ya’ll around, I reckon,” Ray said, and he turned to continue on up the street toward the College. After a few steps he stopped, turned, and looked back at Mary Flannery. The girls were whispering and giggling. “I like that story about your chicken,” Ray said.

Mary Flannery raised a flaccid hand to a slight wave and nodded, and Ray walked on.

In a few steps more he reached into his pocket and produced the pack of Lucky Strikes, then struck a match and took a long, slow inhale. The smoke felt good, a little like the air of independence, and he stood about a block away now looking at the approaching Georgia Military College just up the way. He supposed if he really wanted to he could just keep on moving and disappear into the night to wherever, out there in the dark woods maybe with the misfit, or get swallowed up and lost in Atlanta where there are just too many people to get to know anyone. He leaned back against the fence fronting the breakaway Second Baptist and smoked for a while.

Dusk was beginning its light roll over the rural Georgia pines and onto the streets of Milledgeville. Overhead, Ray spotted an uncommon bald eagle, wings far outstretched, circling on the warm updrafts, swirling up and up from the early evening heat. He watched the bird do lazy circles for a while, sailing, swooping down and rising up in in the free flight of the warm late afternoon.

“A bird sanctuary,” Ray said to himself, rolling the three syllables of the last word in distinctive singular parts.

The doors to the Second Baptist Church were propped wide open and in a bit, Ray heard choir singing coming from within. This was not Wednesday, nor Sunday, and Ray figured they must be convened for practice. He himself, along with all his brothers and sisters, were frequently dragged along to the First Baptist in Donalsonville for special things happening at the church outside of the expected Wednesday-Sunday rotation. The practice hymn filling the air of dusk was a standard he knew well:

*Some glad morning with this life is o'er,
I'll fly away;
To a home on God's celestial shore,
I'll fly away.*

He took a long slow drag of the tail end of the Lucky and dropped the butt to the ground, grinding it out with the toe of his boot. Ray cocked his head back, took a deep fresh draw on the warm night air, and moved on toward the now flickering lights warding off the encroaching darkness around the Georgia Military College.

