

There is a River

By Wilmot B. Irvin

CHAPTER ONE

It was a dreary January day. His wife and daughters and dogs had just left for a three days' stay at the beach house. His son was duck hunting with a friend. He was alone at home. His name was Gordon Clement.

They lived in the country. They were not from the country, though. One night Gordon's wife, Frances, suggested they move there. The children were then eight, ten and twelve. Gordon and Frances discussed the idea into the wee hours, resolved to do it, and commenced to sell their home in town and build a new one on the seventy-acre tract Gordon had purchased a couple of years earlier. The property included a large spring-fed pond, some pastureland and the rest woodlands. There was also a small cottage facing west across the pond.

The new home was built overlooking the pond opposite the cottage, oriented to the east so that the blazing afternoon sun of late spring and summer would be at their backs. Frances raised a barn and fenced the pasture, which now contained three gentle horses - two mares and a gelding - suitable for trail-riding, and the family settled into country life.

Gordon was a writer. His first novel had been quite a success. He chucked the insurance agency he had inherited from his father after clearing a half million dollars from the publication of the book, and decided to make writing his full-time occupation. From the proceeds of the sale of the business he had purchased the seventy-acre tract, and then wisely invested the book revenues.

Although his second novel had not lived up to the expectations of Gordon's publisher, it did land briefly onto a few respectable bestseller lists and managed to turn a modest profit for all concerned. Gordon's editor, DeLay Franklin, very diplomatically explained to him the importance of his third work

hitting a home run. Otherwise, his career would inevitably settle into the wider and deeper stratum occupied by second-rate novelists.

And so Frances and the girls, now twelve and fourteen, decided to spend their winter break at the coast and leave Gordon to his keyboard and imagination. As he had done with his earlier books, Gordon first sketched an outline of the story he intended to write. Then, methodically, he set about putting the literary meat on the bones, so to speak, and over Christmas and New Year's things went quite nicely as far as the writing was concerned. He was well into the first part of the novel, and the words tumbled freely and easily onto the page. But now, at a crucial transition point of the story, Gordon's creative juices seemed to be blocked, at least temporarily. And so he decided to take a walk.

He bundled up to face the nasty weather outside. The steely-gray overcast sky revealed no sun, and a fine mist that amounted to almost a drizzle had been blowing about in the winter breeze since morning. As he went out the kitchen door and onto the porch at the rear of the house, Gordon reached for his walking stick - a stout branch of a hickory tree, actually - which stood in the yellow umbrella stand at the head of the steps leading down into the backyard. It was nearly four in the afternoon.

It felt odd to Gordon being alone on the property. He and Frances were normally inseparable, and even on occasions of her brief absence one of the kids, or at least the dogs, would usually be there to keep him company. While Gordon preferred the habit of solitude a writer kept compared to the gregarious working life of an insurance agent, he did not like living alone. Essential to Gordon's well-being were the comfort and security of knowing someone he loved was there in the house with him, even as he toiled away at the computer crafting sentences in his solitary office above the garage. And so as he stepped into the woods behind his home a disconcerting sense of aloneness overcame him.

He decided to walk to the barn. Knowing that the wood frame structure exuded Frances from its every pore, Gordon hoped he

might find her transubstantiated there, or at least see enough evidence of her to help him shake the feeling of despair that accompanied his loneliness. But his visit to the barn just made matters worse. The little chalkboard next to the feed room door, full of instructions in her inimitable handwriting, reminded him that he was responsible for feeding the horses while she was gone. And inside the tack room were the glistening saddles and bridles she so lovingly cared for. Frances was everywhere but nowhere. Gordon quickly scooped a cup of sweet grain into each animal's feed bucket and headed out the door.

The chilly air tasted clean and fresh as Gordon inhaled it. He maintained a brisk pace along the road that led from the barn, ringed the pasture and eventually trailed north behind the pond to the cottage. Gordon was a walk enthusiast. He loved the continually changing scenery along this dirt road. Now the trees were bare, except for the loblolly pines and cedars that dotted the landscape. The grass in the pasture had turned a dirty winter yellow, and the usual thickets and brambles along the roadside were now naked vines and branches bunched together like spaghetti.

As he reached the head of the pasture Gordon could see lights through the dense, darkening woods and the outline of an old farmhouse on an adjacent tract of land that had lain unoccupied since the Clements had bought their property. On a recent visit to the country store nearby Gordon had learned that the parcel had been purchased by a couple from the Midwest who intended to restore the house. He had meant to call on his new neighbors, but the holidays and his third novel had gotten in the way of those plans. Gordon resolved to pay them a visit now.

The diffuse gray light of the earlier part of the afternoon was now almost gone, and as he entered the shadowy woods Gordon felt as though he were stepping from day into night. There was no path to follow. He moved slowly and deliberately through the trees, glad that he had brought along his hickory stick, and targeted the flickering lights of the farmhouse some three or four hundred feet ahead. His heart stopped when he accidentally flushed a covey of quail that took to the air without warning, their wingbeats loud and rapid-fire like muffled shots from a pistol as they flew low between the trunks of pines and white oaks.

Eventually he came out the woods' other side to a clearing. There, thirty yards ahead, stood the clapboard house. Smoke rose in a thick gray column from the brick chimney. The windows were bare, and inside the lighted front room Gordon could make out the shapes of persons milling about as he approached the house. A station wagon was parked near the home's rear entrance. Gordon hesitated. Perhaps he should have called rather than appearing unannounced and unknown to the occupants, he thought. But he brushed aside his reservations, having come this far already, and made his way to the front door.

As he mounted the porch steps Gordon observed that the house gave the appearance of having just been occupied. Empty cardboard boxes were strewn across the porch, and several pieces of furniture in various states of disrepair had made it as far as the shelter of the porch, but no further. He rang the bell. In a moment the door swung open and its frame was nearly filled with the hulking form of a man.

The occupant of the entranceway was in his late sixties. His hair was thick and cotton white, covering the top of a rather large head, his face rough-complexioned like that of a farmer or sailor. Over his robust physique he was wearing a thick plaid shirt and overalls, faded from washes too numerous to count. All in all, the contrast of his appearance to that of Gordon was stark and complete. Obviously surprised by the interruption, the man stared in astonishment at his unexpected visitor.

Gordon quickly sought to explain his purpose. "I'm Gordon Clement, your neighbor through the woods, there. I just wanted to stop by and welcome you to the area." He extended his soft, slender hand to the man in the door frame.

With some noticeable reticence, the man, whose name was Welborn Ricketts, took the whole of Gordon's palm and fingers into his rough and fleshy mitt of a hand, and introduced himself only as Ricketts. His voice was as coarse as his veneer. There followed an uncomfortable silence for Gordon as Ricketts continued to stand in the doorway without offering the slightest indication of hospitality.

“Well, Mr. Ricketts, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Gordon volunteered. “My wife, Frances, and I and our three children live on the property there through the woods to the east - no, southeast, I guess,” Gordon corrected, indicating the proper compass with several cycles of extension and flexion of his right arm. “Just let us know if we can be of any help to you getting settled.”

Welborn Ricketts gazed in amazement at this presentation by Gordon, as though he lacked any familiarity with this preposterous concept of neighborliness, then remarked abruptly, “We’re settled already.” His tone imparted equal shares of hostility and practicality.

Just then a woman’s voice could be heard coming from one of the rooms within the house. “Welborn! Who is it?”

The man issued a grunt-like sound, then an order to Gordon - “Wait.” Turning in the direction of the voice, Welborn Ricketts left Gordon standing at the threshold thoroughly nonplused by the whole encounter. Through the open doorway Gordon could see another man idling about in the front room Ricketts had entered in search of the woman’s voice. He was close to Gordon in age, a huge tree trunk of a man, tall and thick, his oval and puffy face shadowed by some dismal, disharmonious thought.

In a moment Ricketts returned with the woman. She was of slight build, homely in appearance, but her eyes sparkled with a gaiety that neither of her male cohabitants seemed to possess. She was dressed plainly and comfortably. Her long, graying hair was twirled around into a sort of pile on top of her head, where it was secured with pins and a brown plastic comb.

“Hello, neighbor. I’m Hazel Ricketts.” The little woman studied Gordon as they shook hands. He was just over six feet tall and lean, with neatly brushed straight, dark hair that fell over his forehead and covered his ears. His eyes were dark as well, and his skin smooth and pale. Gordon was dressed in what he considered his casual outdoor attire, mostly a catalogue-ordered collection of clothing from one of the fashionable and expensive outfitters of New England. He gave the appearance of being quite

a dandy to Welborn and Hazel Ricketts.

“Won’t ya come in, Mr. Clement?” the little woman asked. A vain attempt by her bear-like husband to countermand the invitation was blocked by Hazel as she spread her arms wide, ushering Gordon into her foyer, and stepped backwards into the oncoming Welborn, who conceded defeat and led the way toward the front room. Gordon followed meekly along, like a lamb on its way to the slaughter.

The room was toasty-warm from the heat of a roaring fire in the hearth. Over the mantel was a framed but unmatted copy of the famous unfinished portrait of George Washington. There were several reupholstered and overstuffed armchairs scattered about the room in no particular arrangement, and a coffee table placed in front of one of them, covered with newspapers. The younger man was now seated in a chair near the fireplace, fidgeting, his eyes diverted to the bare pine floor.

“This here’s our son, Mangel. He’s retarded.” The woman uttered this declaration without the least bit of hesitance, shame or care. She might just as easily have pronounced him a boy scout.

Gordon glanced at the younger man, who continued to stare at the floor, then said, “Hello, Mangel. I’m Gordon Clement.” Remembering to stand in the gap created by her husband’s abysmal lack of social graces, Hazel offered her guest a chair and took the one closest to it. Welborn uttered another grunt-like sound and slipped into the armchair behind the coffee table.

Fighting back a strong visceral urge to bolt for home, Gordon started off the conversation. “Uh, as I was telling your husband, ma’am, we live on the property next to you, back that way through the woods,” gesturing again with his arm, “and I’ve been meaning to come over and welcome you to the area. I hope I didn’t pick a bad time.”

“Well, no, ya didn’t. We’ve been busy moving into this here place for the last week. We’re jus’ now settlin’ down.” She glanced over at Welborn, who had picked up one of the newspapers and buried his nose in its sports section.

“I understand you folks come from the Midwest,” Gordon said.

Welborn lowered the paper and turned his head in the direction of his wife, who responded, “In a roundabout way, you might say. My husband has some kinfolk out there. My people are all from this part of the earth, though, and we’ve been lookin’ fer a place like this so’s we could be close to ‘em.” She glanced over at Welborn, as if for his approval of her explanation. As far as Gordon could tell, she received none.

“Well,” Gordon said, “please feel free to call on us if you need anything. My wife and children are out of town, but they’ll be back next week. It’s been my pleasure to meet you all.” As he rose to leave, Welborn returned to his newspaper. Gordon noticed Mangel steal a glimpse in his direction as he headed for the door.

Just then Welborn interjected, as if he had forgotten to ask earlier, “What kinda work d’ya do, Mr. Clement?”

Gordon hesitated. “I, I’m a, a writer,” he said, with an inflection at the end that made his answer more a question.

“Well, sir! What d’ya know. And what d’ya write, Mr. Clement?” the old man persisted.

Gordon could feel the blood vessels in his neck and face expanding, producing a flush of embarrassment that he had never experienced from having been asked this question before.

“Uh, fiction - novels, I mean. I’ve had two books published.”

“Well, sir! What d’ya know,” Welborn repeated, and he picked up his newspaper once again.

Mrs. Ricketts saw her guest to the door and bade him good night, as it was now past six o’clock and pitch dark outside.

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