

Mr. Smith's One True Talent

Tape I - Transcript Session 1

Dorsham was shreddin' Bandits with the .50 caliber again; he was doin' the loop somewhere over Iwo Jima - least that's where his brain was, but his body was stuck jest a few feet from me, tethered to one of them shiny poles that sends food (and God knows what else) to you through a needle.

It's a wonder he could be so addled. I mean, even an idiot - no offense intended - could see he weren't in no cockpit, jest some, orange, overstuffed, excuse fer a chair.

And Dorsham didn't look like no fighter pilot, neither - not in that yellar, cotton gown (though he shor as hell sounded like one).

He shouldn't of rattled so much. Them white coats 'peared suddenly, floatin' into the room like angry angels.

"Keep it down," Dorsham, they says.

"Shut up, Dorsham," they says.

"That's enough Dorsham," they says.

But Dorsham couldn't hear over the vengeful whine of his Bomber. And anyways, they didn't wait fer him neither. They jest jammed that awful, black sack over his withered ol' head, and yanked the drawstring way tight... too tight.

In less than a wail, they had him on the gurney.

He started thrashin', then, with pathetic little twists and turns. Reckon he could barely breathe, but he still tried to get through on his radio... I could hear the small, stifled cries.

"I'm hit! Mayday! Mayday! Seven sixty-two, going down"

He was a' goin' down all right, but it weren't where he thought. They had a special place to cure his kind of affliction and even the looniest, here, knew that it worked. Folk that came back (if they came back) was real quiet fer a long spell.

I'd of liked to of he'ped him, but I ain't never been much good at he'pin'. That's why I was there... on account of I ain't never been much good at he'pin'.

Anyways, them white coats was pros; I couldn't of done much. It was over almost afore it started... and they'd of got him through the doors, too, if it weren't fer Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith was new, and I thought I had him figured. He seemed, at first, jest another luneetick... but it was on this very day that I started knowin' Mr. Smith weren't like the rest of us.

He was a'sittin' near the door, next to Mrs. Martha (he always sat with Mrs. Martha). He was a'squeezin' on her hand real tight, like it would somehow make her eyes wake up, and he was a'talkin' to her, low and gentle, jest like he was courtin' her.

Till them damn coats come rollin' in.

He watched Dorsham flail against their powerful, mean grip, and he saw 'em wrench the poor man up so violently that the needle ripped right outta his gnarled ol' vein.

Mr. Smith jest stopped talkin'.

He held onto Mrs. Martha, but he stopped talkin'. I 'member how his eyes turned kinda inside out. Most folk, 'specially the crazy ones, wouldn't of noticed, but I ain't crazy and I seen it. One minute them eyes was placid, and shallow like a two-inch puddle; the next, they was deep enough to drown in.

He stood up, quiet-like, and hobbled 'cross the room. The gurney was already a'movin'...But Mr. Smith somehow got hisself in the way. They tried to scoot around him, but it weren't no use. It was already a tight fit, and Mr. Smith seemed to be havin' such a trouble with that gimp leg of his.

"Out of the way, Smith."

"Move it! Smith!"

Mr. Smith didn't pay 'em no mind. After all, he was a certified luneetick.

That didn't set too well with them fellars. One of 'em swore, and the other one? He jest slammed that rollin' bed hard, a'knockin' Mr. Smith back against the wall.

Big mistake.

I think it was his elbow had done it; all I know is somethin' hit a row of light switches and it went plumb black.

Now it's right poorly bein' stuck in a room with a bunch a stark ravin' idjots - in the daylight, but it's a whole heap worser when things go black.

All at once, they was a'wailin' and a'moanin' and a'screamin'.

I could hear them white coats a'cursin'.

Somebody was fumblin' along the wall fer the switch; somebody squealed like a stuck pig; somebody fell hard to the floor...

And then it was light again, and I gotta say it was one sorry todo.

There was one white coat a'layin' 'side the gurney; there was one coat a'nursin' his hand (somebody'd bit it), and there was Mr. Smith a'leanin' over Dorsham, a'whisperin' in the ol' boy's ear.

That miser'ble sack was gone.

Ever'body else was still a'moanin', but wonder of wonders... Dorsham was as quiet as a pleasant death.

I reckon them orderlies was in a rush to get shut of our room, 'cause they jest scrambled up and left.

Soon as they was gone, Mr. Smith, he'peded Dorsham off them damn wheels.

"It's alright Lieutenant," he said. "SAR spotted your flairs, but you'll need to lay low till we can get a chopper in."

All of a sudden, I know'd how Mr. Smith got Dorhsam so quiet. It was right smart of him to think of that, 'specially fer a crazy man. I never thought of it... and I ain't even crazy.

They was somethin' awful different 'bout that Mr. Smith.

Tape I - Transcript Session 2

I aint never gonna forget that first day I seen Mr. Smith, and I caint never forget the last one. They was both heavy, heavy days, the kind that's hard to get shut of yor thinkin'.

He didn't look like he belonged to this neck of the piney woods, but he shor nuff looked crazy... gentle crazy, but crazy. Them white coats led him in, and he jest shuffled along, a'draggin' that gimp leg and a'mumblin' to hisself.

They pointed to a chair and he kinda settled in. They crammed a happy pill 'tween his withered up lips and then they left.

I watched him fer a while, till I had his measure: older than his age, that's what I says to myself. Maybe he was somethin' once, but he ain't much now; the good parts is all worn out.

I swunee, a man as smart as me should of looked closer, should of noticed more. They was clues.

Fer one thing, soon as them coats was gone, Mr. Smith started a'crawl' outta that chair.

He only moved a few feet... but it were right next to Mrs. Martha.

Mrs. Martha had only been in a week. She was new, too, but nobody noticed her. She didn't talk; she didn't look at nothin', and she didn't eat. They had to pump the groceries in through her veins.

I s'pose she was purtty once, but not no more. She was always a'jitterin'. Her feet never stopped their quick little poundin' and her lips never stopped their a'jerkin' and a'quiverin'.

I think it was a couple of days afore I had Mrs. Martha, figured: She may not be lookin' at nothin', but she shor is a'seein' somethin' (that's what I says to myself) – And I think she was a'seein' it all day long, and I don't think she could stop, and I knew fer damn shor, I didn't NEVER wanna see whatever it was.

But Mr. Smith, he didn't pay that no mind. He jest stayed right close, always a'listenin', always a'watchin', always a'hepin'. You'd a thought they was friends, or somethin'.

She did fer shor need his he'p. Fact is, that very week they was trouble.

It was late at night and we was all sleepin'. I smelt somethin' rank. Then I heard feet a'scurryin' down the hall, and after that a shout.

We ain't s'posed to get up this late, but I ain't a'layin in no bed if'n there's a chance a fire. I seen enough of what fire can do in that hellacious war they made me fight.

Anyways, I could hear the action was in A wing, so I skittered on down. It was a site! They was a blaze in Mrs. Martha's room and Mr. Smith was there... How he got there afore ever'body else, I'll never know, but he was there. Come to find out, Mrs. Martha's bed was afire. Mr. Smith had throwed hisself over the poor gal's body and was a'beatin' the flames off'n the covers.

I reckon he heard me come up 'cause he yelled fer me to get the stinguisher. I seen it on the wall, but I couldn't seem to get my gears in motion. That same ol' sick feelin' come over me and I jest stood there like my feet was growed into the floor.

Mr. Smith yelled again. It shook me. They was somethin' in his voice, they was fear... and it weren't from no fire. I tried to throw myself to the wall, but I couldn't get unstuck.

Then the roarin' come to my head, and I cain't 'member what happened after that, but when I come to, I was knee deep in white coats. They was a'yellin', and a'cursin' and a'tryin' to fix ever'thing, but I didn't pay 'em no mind. It was Mrs. Martha and Mr. Smith what grabbed my attention.

I seen 'em both in the doorway, and it put a queer feelin' in my gut. Mrs. Martha was jest whimperin', still seein' whatever it was that she sees. I couldn't tell if she even knowed what happened. Next to her, was Mr. Smith. He was burned purtty bad; his hands, his neck, and one

side of his face, was all scorched and blisterin'. He had one arm 'round her waist, and he was a'whisperin' somethin' in her ear.

It didn't seem right. It didn't seem right to me a'tall. How'd Mr. Smith get there so fast? And how'd that bed ketch a'fire? I slipped on back to my cell, but I was a'thinkin'.

You know crazy people cain't think like that. But I ain't crazy... 'though, I must admit to bein' jest a might skeered of some things.

Tape I - Transcript Session 3

'Bout three months later they moved Mr. Smith in with me. They was two beds in our cracker jack box. He got the one by the winder. Made me kind of jealous; I liked that winder. You could look out past the yard and into that crowded ol' hardwood hammock. If you looked long enough, you could almost smell the black water, and the peat, and the Magnolia. I like hardwood, but I hate yards. They is too green, too reg'lar, and too demandin'. I like the piney woods and the scrub hammocks and 'specially the edge between the two. You gotta know that's the best place to hunt. Seems like all God's livin' creatures likes to hang out on the edges.

We was on the edge of the Saint Mary's River. They called our place Twelve Oaks Manor. We called it all sorts of names, none of 'em too kind. It was about the furthest you could get from a reg'lar town. I reckon it was the last stretch in Floridy to even get 'lectric lights and such. But they had 'em now, and some folks was real proud.

Mr. Smith was settlin' in. His burns was healin', and ever' now and then he'd talk to me. I reckon that surprised me some. I didn't figure on him ever being tolerable, on account of me not he'pin' him when he asked, but he didn't seem to pay that no mind.

Still, we didn't see each other too much. He was almost always with Mrs. Martha, and when he weren't, he was a' fix'n to be. That fellar was up to somethin'.

'Bout a month after he moved in, I caught him.

It was jest after midnight; ever'body was sleepin'. Mr. Smith had slipped outta bed and I thought he was headed fer the john, but he weren't. Instead, he jest cat-foots over to the winder and takens out a leetle bitty bundle from some'eres in his jammers.

I couldn't tell, at first, what he was a'doin', but I finally seen it. And it were a wonder... Somehow he had fixed that ol' weather-beaten frame so that the whole glass pane could be snatched out and then put back without anyone the wiser.

I seen him carefully take it down, and set it on the floor; and then I seen him start a'climbin out. What in tarnation was he doin'? I waited till he was on the ground afore I slipped over to the wall where I could peek.

Mr. Smith was gone.

Now that purtty well steamed me. I couldn't sleep fer the rest of the night. Mr. Smith had done escaped and I was plumb jealous. I'da give my right arm to sneak back in them woods. Hell! You could float that Sain't Marys right on down to the Okeefanokee.

And here Mr. Smith, a damn Yankee, was gettin' away afore me.

The more I studied on it, the hotter I got. Fact, I was jest about ready to go AWOL, myself, when I heard a faint rustle. Damned if it weren't Mr. Smith a'climbin' right back in.

That didn't make no sense, at first. Then the door opened and I seen the second shift of white coats come in to start their rounds.

I figured that was trouble fer shor, but I looked over and there was Mr. Smith a'snug under the covers, playin' possum. His eyes was closed and he was a'mumblin' somethin'.

It made me sick, him gettin' away with it and all, but it weren't like I could blame him fer leavin' - I reckon I blamed him more fer comin' back.

That's why it surprised me so much... what I done two nights later when he cut out a there again.

He left 'bout the same time, and I laid there a'thinkin', pertendin' I was the one had got away. I thought about slippin' down to the river and coony fishin'. I thought about feelin' that black water fill up my boots till they was soggy and squeaky when I walked. I thought bout a'peelin' back the skin of a swamp cabbage and chawin' on the soft, sour heart. I thought and thought till it jest hurt.

And then I heard steppin' sounds.

Them white coats was changin' shifts early. I could hear 'em swishin' from room to room. Smith weren't back. They was in Dorsham's, probably vexin' him with their damn pills. They came closer and closer. I seen the door handle turnin', and then I seen Smith divin' through the winder. I seen the door crack open, and then I seen Smith snatch up that pane.

Somethin' in me wanted to he'p him. I flung myself out of bed, and I think I meant to lean on that ol' door. I'm a mighty big fellar (6'7" in my stockin' feet); if'n I could a'holt it jest a second, he'd make it. But I couldn't. I couldn't he'p no ways. I couldn't make myself.

They come bustin' in then, and there I was a'standin' in the middle of the room, jest gawkin'. They snapped at me first.

"Get in bed, Cotton. Now!"

I didn't say nothin'. I jest looked to see what Mr. Smith was gonna do. He was caught red-handed, alright, but I reckon, crazy or not, he was a lot smarter'n them orderlies.

Mr. Smith started singin'.

"It had to be you..."

"Smith, What are you doing?" They was annoyed.

He jest kept singin'.

"I wondered around, and finally found somebody who..."

It was plumb comical.

"Smith!!!" They was gettin' more than annoyed.

"...could make me feel glad jest to be sad thinking of you"

"Smith! Shut up!!!

He answered back in his quiet, Yankee voice (I cain't say it quite like him, but it went somethin' like this): "Gentlemen, I'll thank you not to interrupt the performance. These fine people have paid good money for their seats."

He waved toward the winder. The pane was back.

They was dangerous mad now.

"Some others I have seen, might never be mean, might never be cross..."

The grabbed a'holt of him, then - I was afeared they'd really hurt him. He weren't a big man, and they flung him hard on the bed. He seemed awful he'plessless, but he jest kept on singin'.

That's when they broke out the damned needle.

Tape II - Transcript Session 4

The next day seemed reg'lar enough. Breakfast was the same as always: eggs and grits and buttermilk biscuits. Smith was mighty quiet; I reckon them drugs didn't set too well with him.

I noticed him watchin' me some.

Lunch was a bit spare, but I weren't complainin'. The rations at Twelve Oaks didn't exactly beg for theirselves to be eaten.

Come afternoon I was a'sittin' next to the winder, starin' down towards the river, feelin' the sun a'sneakin' into my room, and wishin' I was a'sneakin' out, when Mr. Smith hobbles up.

"Cotton," he says, "that's a beautiful view. Sure would be nice just to get out, just to see the sights, maybe walk the edge of that river."

I didn't look at him. It kinda made me feel shamed lookin' at him. I jest nodded.

He hesitated. "I saw you up last night. Seemed, maybe, like you were headed for the door."

I still didn't say nothin'.

He jest waited. I reckon he was givin' me chance to say somethin'. But I didn't.

"Well, it is a beautiful view".

He left me. I watched him limp away and it got me to thinkin' 'bout last night all over again. Thing is... I don't s'pose Mr. Smith knew what rightly happened. I reckon he figured I mighta been tryin' to he'p. Who knows?

All I know is 'bout 10:00 that night, I seen him slip out of bed. I seen him a'taken out that pane, and then I watched him move over to my bunk. He touched me on the shoulder.

"Cotton? Cotton!" He jostled me some. "Cotton, how about joining me for a walk? We'll be back before anyone notices."

I didn't say nothin'. I jest lay there a'shakin' inside. Oh, how I wanted to go, to get out, to get away.

"Cotton?" He started back across the room.

I was picturin' that lazy black river ticklin' them cypress roots. It'd been a heap of years since I'd stirred them waters.

Then I seen him startin' to climb out and it was jest too much.

"Mr. Smith."

"Yeah?"

"I reckon it ain't too safe fer a Damn Yankee to be out a'walkin' by hisself in these parts. I'll tag along this time."

His eyes reached out through the darkness and took a'holt a mine. He didn't smile, (I'd never seen him smile) but they was somethin' pleasant a'tuggin' at the corner of his lips.

First thing I noticed when I hit the ground was the different smells. Damn, I'd forgotten how much a yellar colored room can stink... all that latex and alcohol, all them bedpans and needles.

We headed 'cross the lawn and towards a stand of Magnolias. I s'pose I was three quarters of the way there when I had me a minor revelation...

Mr. Smith weren't limpin' none.

Now either he'd recently had a run-in with one of them snake handlin', faith healin', poison drinkin', preacher boys, or he'd been foolin' the whole bunch of us all along.

I didn't say nothin'.

We paused at the top of a ravine that sloped off towards the river bank. Mr. Smith had him a small poke with a light, and some other gear. He turned to me.

"So what do you want to do?"

Well now, that was a question. What did I want to do? It took a minute fer ever'thing to sink in. Oh my soul! I weren't lookin' through no winder now. I was free! At least fer a couple of hours, and I knew jest what I wanted to do.

"I wanna go fishin'."

"But we don't have any tackle; we don't have any bait."

I jest shook my head -- Poor, dumb Yankees.

"I wanna go COONY fishin'."

"Yeah?"

He weren't gettin' it. "You don't need no tackle to coony fish." I started pullin' of my slippers. "You're a nice leetle man, Mr. Smith, but you got some larnin' to do. Foller me."

It felt so good sayin' that. Nobody'd follered me in years.

Tape II - Transcript Session 5

We creeped on down towards the shore. I threaded my way 'tween the briars, 'round the palmettors, and down along the gnarly cypress knees. I heard a grunt behind me and turned jest in time to see Mr. Smith a'flailin' at the air. He'd done run into a big ol' web. Them 'nanner spiders was ever'where.

I shined the light and waited fer Smith to get clear. Then I gave him a maple switch.

"Jest wave 'at wand in front of you when you walk. It'll clear the webs afore you get to 'em."

I started workin' my way along the edge towards a bend where the water cut a holler under the bank. Jest ahead I spotted a pair of eyes. I could tell by the distance 'tween 'em he was ten-foot plus.

I figured to worry Mr. Smith some, "Gator!"

His head snapped up, but he didn't miss a beat. Damn, I was lovin' this.

It took a while afore we found jest the right spot. I kicked around to warn off any cotton mouths. Then I stretched out on my belly and reached my big ole paw way down deep into that black water, far back under the roots. Somethin' scurried through my fingers, but it weren't nothin' I was lookin' fer, so I moved up a little farther and did the same thing again.

Smith jest stared at me real funny like... and all of a sudden I knew what he was a'ponderin'.

"Now I reckon you think, I'm a luncetick too, on account of me being in the same place as you, and on account a me a'layin' here on my belly like a dog in heat. But I ain't. I ain't crazy a'tall. And if you'll jest wait a damn minute I'm gonna larn you sumptin'."

He nodded. But I could tell he was doubtful.

I reached down again and this time I felt sumthin'. It were slick and slippery... so I moved my hand around tryin' to make shor I weren't grabbin' a'holt of the wrong critter. Soon as I pricked my finger I knew what I was a'coddlin'. Real keerful like, I slid my thumb under one side and my palm under t'other. I took a deep breath and then I made my move. Quick as an otter, I swished my hand up and turned over on my back.

I had 'em! It was a seven-pound butter cat, the kind my momma used to deep fry.

I'm proud to say Mr. Smith was a bit surprised or maybe even impressed. He jest stood there a'shakin' his head. This time they was a half smile.

"You wanna give it a try?"

"No. You just go ahead. I'll watch.

We moved on down the bank and I found three more. The biggest was better than nine pounds and he put up quite a struggle. I reckon that tuckered me out some.

"Let's rest a spell."

Smith nodded and I sprawled out on the rottin' trunk of a downed water oak. It had seen one too many Flordy storms. Smith turned out the light and we jest sat there in the dark. The night was black as pitch. Them big ol' mangroves was a'strainin' out all the stars.

The sound of my own voice almost startled me.

"I reckon it ain't none of my business, Mr. Smith, but I shor have been a'wonderin' where it is you been a'takin off to."

I could feel him thinkin', measurin' me, figurin' on how much he was gonna say.

He didn't answer.

"So how long you been at Twleve Oaks, Cotton?"

I didn't answer.

"Maybe yo'r leavin' has sumpthin' to do with Mrs. Martha? You two seem awful friendly."

I could feel him stirrin'.

"It's probably time we headed back."

We stood up, but I weren't ready to go.

"Mr. Smith, I'm mighty grateful you takened me along on this here escape, but I ain't ready to go back yet, leastways not till you try yo'r hand at coony fishin'."

"Cotton, I don't know how. I never even heard of such a thing until tonight."

"Well now, you ain't too addled to larn. Jest foller me one more time."

I turned without lookin' back and headed towards a little bend that I knew was jest ripe. That ol' current was a'draggin' plenty of food by. They was bound to be a granddaddy a'lyin' up under that bank waitin' fer his next free meal.

"If'n you'll jest get down on yo'r belly and do like I says, you'll get a chance to make Dixie proud."

He didn't look none too pleased, but he hunkered down.

"Now stretch yo'r arm out and reach up under this here Cyprus root."

I'll give 'em one thing -- He was game. Most Yankees would of been too squeamish. But Smith jest wiggled right in.

"Alright now, real keerful like, jest drag yo'r fingers 'long the bottom till you feel somethin'."

"I don't feel a thing."

"Foller that root real close. If'n there's one here, he'll probably be a'layin' up next to it."

They was a long pause. Smith had a pained look on his face.

"I feel something."

"Is it smooth?"

"Yeah."

"Is it slick?"

"Yeah."

"Keerful now, them cats is got spikes. If you get stuck, you'll be hatin' life fer a while."

He scrunched up closer to the edge till his whole shoulder was in the drink.

"What do I do now?"

"Jest wrap yo'r hand all the way around, but don't squeeze none."

"Ok."

"You ready fer the jerkin'?"

"Not likely."

"Ok. When I give the word, you jest slide up along his gills, clamp down real tight, then roll over and flip 'em up on the bank."

I dropped down so I could see better. Smith's face was drawn tight, but his eyes was a'grinnin.

"OK. Get 'em!"

They was a brief tussle, and then a very quick lunge.

"I missed him."

"Grab 'em again."

"I got him."

"Hold on."

"He's thrashing some."

"Sling 'em up."

"I'm trying! Hold onto my ankles."

I got a firm grip, and damned if that Mr. Smith didn't dunk hisself half way into the drink and take a'holt with both hands. His head went completely under the water. He hung there fer a second thrashin' around, and then he pulled up sudden-like.

Next thing I knew he was on his back a'sputterin' and a'spittin' and a'hangin' on fer dear life to his prize.

Only it WEREN'T NOT PRIZE. No Ma'm ...It was one of the biggest Water Moccasins I ever seed in all my born days.

I think I realized it afore Smith, cause he jest kept on a'squeezin' till I fairly well screamed: "Fling it down, Man! Fling IT DOWN!"

But he was in the grabbin' mood not the flingin' mood and that were a bad thing.

That ol' snake was jest, one long ornery, muscle, and it were thick as a man's bicep. If Smith didn't do somethin' quick he was a goner.

His certain peril musta finally dawned on him cause, all at once, he started a'flingin' like he had a'holt of the devil hisself. He slung it down alright, and then rolled real fast a'tryin' to get outta the way. Only he was a'rollin' in the WRONG direction.

Next thing I knew they was an awful splash.

Tape II - Transcript Session 6

I reckon it was about then, I started gettin' tickled. Here we was...one barefoot Cracker and one mud covered Yankee a'thrashin' around in the dark with a Cotton Mouth, and a stringer full of catfish. I figure most folk would a rather spent the night in a nut house. Not us, leastaways not me. No wonder we was locked up most the time.

Smith had grabbed a'holt of a root and was tryin' to clamber out. I couldn't resist...

"Gator!!"

"Where???" They was desperation in his voice.

"Behind you!"

He purtty well exploded right up outta the water...only there weren't no gator! And He figured it out about halfway up the bank when he seen me a'grinnin'.

"Cotton! If I ever..." He paused, "If I ever..." He started chucklin'. "Where's that miserable snake."

I already had me a piece a lighter wood.

"He's under that blow-down. Jest back off and I'll give 'em a crack."

Smith shook his head. "Let him be."

"Mr. Smith, I know you mean well, but this here's a Cotton Mouth. Cotton Mouths is powerful mean and they can keel you with one leetle ol' bite."

"Fine, but he can't kill me, because I'm leaving. Let's jest let him be."

"I ain't never passed up a chance to bust one of these slipp'ry varmints. They is..."

"Cotton, how about tonight we jest leave off with the killing. It's been a good night, and there's enough dying going on without our help."

Damned, if that leetle man weren't squeamish. Still I reckon I owed him; this had been one hell of a night.

"Alright, let's get hoofin'. Them white coats will be checkin' in soon."

We headed towards the light. When we got to the clearin', Mr. Smith paused. He reached down and scooped up a handful of wildflowers.

"Cotton, do you know what they call these?"

"I dunno the fancy name, but all my people calls 'em Mornin' Glorys"

He nodded and then carefully wrapped a bundle up in the tail of his shirt.

"Your people...you mean family?"

"Yep. I was raised back in the Okee. It ain't too far from here, neither. My ol' man and me, we poached gators fer a livin'."

"So you're an outlaw."

"Kinda. But they never did ketch us. I reckon we could jest about disappear any time we damn well pleased. That's some mean country."

"That where you learned to coony fish?"

"Yep."

"We'll you're clearly a pro, Cotton."

I straightened up some. Them nice words made me feel a mite taller. Nobody ever said nice words to me no more, and I'm jest thankful I had the good sense to say back somethin' 'umble.

"Ever'body's good at somethin', Mr. Smith - even you. Can you tell me what yo'r good at?"

He shrugged. "Nothing worth talking about."

I started to ask more, but I could tell they was other things on his mind.

He stood up, and then looked me square in the eye. I didn't turn away neither, not this time.

"Cotton, sometimes I have to leave at night to take care of a little business for Martha."

"I figured as much."

"Cotton. Martha's been through hell." He seemed almost 'pologetic.

"You talk like you knew her afore you came."

"I did."

"What happened to her?"

"It's a long story... Martha lost her whole family, her husband, even her kids. She never got over it... it was a terrible tragedy."

"What kinda tragedy?"

He didn't answer.

"Was you there?"

"Almost."

He looked away, and then he turned the flashlight off, real quick-like. I figured it was a good time to shut my mouth.

We went on back without another word.

Tape III - Transcript Session 7

I woke up early the next mornin' and I was feelin' uncommonly good. I think it was the catfish stank. That rank odor was as sweet smellin' as honeysuckle to me.

After breakfast, I seen Mr. Smith. He was over to the corner with Mrs. Martha, and he had them Mornin' Glorys. I seen him take one and lay it on her lap, real gentle-like. She didn't smile or nothin', but I swear somethin' changed in her eyes.

Them soft, fragrant petals was as pink as a baby's lips, and their dew covered leaves was shaped jest like tiny, little hearts. I'd never paid no attention till jest then, but all at once, they seemed 'specially purtty.

Martha clawed her treasure up with a gnarled hand, and tried to hold on, but she was a'twitchin' and and a'jerk'in' so much that it jest got crushed. That didn't bother Smith none. I know, 'cause I watched him lay down another, and another, and another.

One by one, she picked 'em up; one by one, she crushed 'em.

It were plain, the poor girl was a'tryin', and it fairly well amazed me. It was the only time I'd ever seen her notice a thing. Mr. Smith was mighty pleased. He was shakin' his head and watchin' with pure deelight.

Things was feelin' purtty good, but I should'a known it wouldn't last...

By suppertime the dying come on us.

We was all eatin' together, even Mr. Smith, but they was somethin' troublin' him. Mrs. Martha was missin'. Come to find out, she had some special Doctors a'visitin'.

'Bout halfway through the meal, I seen Smith get up and head down the hall. Somethin' weren't right. I could jest tell... so I follered him.

Mrs. Martha's door was shut, but Mr. Smith jest waltzed right in. I went to the edge and peeked through the crack.

My, how Mr. Smith started changin'.

"Who's in charge here?" His voice didn't even sound the same.

"Why I am."

"And who are you?"

"I'm Doctor Butrico."

"Right. May I see your credentials?"

He was so slick they didn't even figure out he was one of us. Even I was plumb confused.

"Who are you?" It weren't Doctor Butrico that answered him. It was another one a'standin' over by the winder. I gotta say he didn't look much like the Doctors I knew. He was big, his arms was thick, and he had a broke nose. I could tell he was a damn Yankee.

"Why I'm Smith, but you can call me Mr. Smith."

Somethin' was happenin'. Mr. Smith seemed to be gettin' healthier by the second. Meanwhile, the whole room was feelin' nervous-like. What in the hell was this little man a'hasslin' these Doctors fer?

It didn't make no sense a'tall, till I looked down at poor Mrs. Martha.

She didn't look none too good, and they was a pillar a'layin' right next to her head, and it were plain to me -- somebody had been a'holdin' it to her face.

Smith seen it at the same time. I watched him take a deep breath and the next thing I knew there was ever'body a'movin' ever'where.

All in all, they was three of them so called "Doctors", and afore you could spit they was a'gangin' up on poor little Mr. Smith. It was like a pack a starvin' coyotes on a crippled fawn.

One of 'em was draggin' iron out from under his fancy coat. The other two was brandishin' a pair of black jacks.

They're weren't no time fer me to he'p. I swear, it was like that blasted war all over again.

I knew Smith was a goner. I jest didn't know what to do. I started to scream fer someone...when the strangest damned thing I ever seen in my life happened.

That first Yankee Doctor, or whatever he was, fell straight backwards away from Mr. Smith. He jest collapsed in a heap. Next thing I knew, the fellar with the gun went down. He dropped his piece and started clawin' at his throat.

I was still gapin' at him when I heard a heavy thud. The third fellar was flat on his back.

Mr. Smith? He was fine. He was jest standin' there real quiet-like.

I don't reckon it dawned on me at first what was a'happenin'. I jest didn't figure anybody could do such as that - least of all this little man.

I admit I misjudged him. What he did next still sends chills up my crookedy ol' spine.

Eve'rthing seemed like it was movin' in slow motion. I watched as he walked over to the counter and takened from the medical kit a set of gloves and a pair of scissors. He keerfully put on the gloves, knelt down besides the first man, and checked his pulse. I reckon he was still alive, but only fer an instant.

Smith keeled him.

He drove the point of them scissors clean through the fellar's goozle. The man gurgled and coughed a bit and then lay real still.

Smith went from man to man and finished 'em. I shivered. He was as cold and precise as surgical steel. It were like wintery death come blowin' through the wood, and all it left behind were a few dried leaves.

I'd done found out Mr. Smith's one true talent.

He never looked up, but he motioned fer me to come in and lock the door. I didn't even know he'd seen me.

Mr. Smith went straight to Mrs. Martha. She was lookin' pale, but she was still breathin'. I watched him checkin' on her, he'pin' her, and it got me to thinkin'... Who was this strange little man and what was he a'doin' here?

I didn't have long to figure. He interrupted, his voice low and urgent.

"Cotton, take care not to touch anything." He was wipin' down the inside door handle as he spoke. "I know what just happened is lot for you to take in. I'll explain some, but we have other matters for now."

"What you gonna do?"

He didn't answer. He jest slipped a lighter outta the pocket of one of them dead fellars, climbed up on a chair, and set off the fire alarm.

Tape III - Transcript Session 8

We made it back to the room alright, but being smart as I am, I was a'ponderin' the whole way. That Mr. Smith was ahead of ever'body else. Nobody'd seen us go in. Nobody'd seen us come out. They weren't no fingerprints, and most folks don't 'spect none of us coulda done such an evil deed... I mean even if we went off and started a'butcherin' our kith and kin, we wouldn't be slick enough to hide all the evidence. 'Sides, somebody was bound to find out them doctors weren't doctors a'tall.

Fer a solid week the police was a'snoopin' around. They come to our room, but we was ready.

Smith and me jest sat on our beds a'droolin'g all over ourselves and starin' off at nothin'. I tried hard to think crazy thoughts, but it was tough, me being so reg'lar and all. Still, somehow, I pulled it off. They didn't visit five minutes afore they gave up a'tryin' to talk. They jest started pokin' around the room.

But if they was a'lookin' fer a sharp set a scissors, or a pair of bloody gloves, they was fresh out a luck. 'Cause them capers was a'buried in the black water, stuck in some cypress root, a'lyin' right next to an ornery ol' Cotton Mouth.

After "John Law" gave up and left, Mr. Smith come over, sat down besides me, and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Cotton." He says. "I'm so tired of the killing... if there was any other way." He shook his head. "I've got to tell you about Martha."

In the next thirty minutes, I learned more'n I had in the last six months.

Mrs. Martha was a school teacher from Phillerdelphia. Actually she was born in Kantucky, but she moved to Philly to he'p out with a tough class on the Eastside.

To hear Mr. Smith talk, she was nearly a saint. She was so fresh and so diff'rent.

It was a purtty dangerous place, but she didn't seem to have no trouble. Them ghetto kids looked out for her, and I reckon the first time Smith seen her, he figured that out.

He was in the parkin' lot a'watchin' her through the winder when he decided to get closer. He was jest bout to step in a flower bed, underneath the sill, when a skinny little vagabond, totin' a man-sized blade, oozed outta the shadows.

I don't know what all he said, but 'cordin' to Mr. Smith, he bowed up like a bantam rooster and announced that if any man so much as touched one of them flowers, he was gonna get a new smile carved underneath his chin.

He was only about 13, but he was serious as a heart attack.

Smith said it made him curious. What was so special about a bunch of flowers? He backed outta there and laid low fer a while.

After a spell, he noticed Ms. Martha was comin' ever' few minutes to the glass a lookin' at them posies. Twice during the breaks she come outside and fussed with 'em.

It was Ms. Martha what made them flowers so special.

I reckon she loved 'em a heap. Maybe it was cause they 'minded her of back home (I know that feelin'), or maybe it was cause they was the only purtty thing in sight... But fer whatever reason,

she took a shine to 'em, and I figure it was about then that Mr. Smith took a shine to her, too. Fact is, the more he talked about her the more starry-eyed he got.

Till he got on the subject of her troubles and all.

I reckon ever'thing was perfect fer a while. But it don't never stay that way. Mrs. Martha's world came undone in about three blinks. She was comin' out the schoolhouse one night when she must'a heard somethin' in the alley.

She walked over to check it out. They was three men and they was up to no good -- one of 'em was on his knees. It probably looked like he was prayin' fer a minute, but he weren't.

He was beggin'.

They was a hollow, little poppin' sound, and then they was a dead man a'lyin' on the pavement.

Poor Ms. Martha, it was bad enough she seen it, but then she had to go and testify (I reckon she was more decent than most folk). Problem was, it weren't no two-bit gangster done the killing. It was the only son of that mean SOB, Mr. John Perelli.

Perelli was like the Al Capone of Philly. And he swore he'd get her.

I asked Smith how come she ended up in Twelve Oaks. He answered me, but I don't think he liked talkin' about it none.

They put Martha in the witness protection program, changed her name and all that, kinda ripped her out by the roots and planted her in a different city. After a couple of years, she met a fellar, married him, and had some kids. Ever'thing was goin' 'bout as good as it could...

Then Perelli found 'em again.

I reckon he tried several times to wack her, but somehow his plans always got spoilt. I had a sneakin' suspicion that Mr. Smith had somethin' to do with the spoilin'.

"And jest where was you durin' all this?"

"I was there. I was there before she testified. I was there afterwards. I was at the wedding. I was at the hospital when the twins were born."

"And when them Perelli boys came?"

He nodded, "I was there... every time except one." He looked away. "I tried. I tried so hard, Cotton. But just this once, I had to be away."

"By the time I made it back, it was too late. Perelli's men strapped Martha to a chair and forced her to watch as, one by one, they executed her husband and then her two children. They were just about to pull the trigger on her when I showed up."

"I made them pay for it. God knows I made them pay, but that couldn't undo what was already done. Martha went to pieces, and nobody could do anything to put her back together. Eventually the state put her here."

"So I worked it out for me get put here too."

You ain't no luneetick at all are you, Mr. Smith?

"Cotton, I don't know... I think the only sane thing I really ever did was take care of Martha.

"I still don't get it Mr. Smith. How come it's you doin' all her protectin' and such? I mean... you some kind of lawman or sumpthin'?"

"No."

I was awful confused. "Well then, who the hell are you?"

"I'm the man who was supposed to kill her."

Tape III - Transcript Session 9

Sunup found me and ol' Dorsham a'sittin' in the Flordy room. I reckon his mind was off flyin' some'eres again and I reckon mine was wanderin' some too.

I had a lot to chew on. Smith said more of Perelli's boys'd be comin', and I didn't know how he was gonna keep on protectin' Mrs. Martha. Them bastards could show up anytime, and they was no tellin' how many there'd be. It be easier if'n I could he'p, but that weren't too likely.

Anyways, it was gonna be a sore day. Once ever' six months I was worked over by one of them head doctors. It weren't none too fun, and I had just started thinkin' on a good place to hide, when Sorry Doc Higgins come sidlin' into the room.

"Mr.Sanders?" I hated when he smiled. It 'minded me of a polecat fixin' to gnaw on a bait of garbage.

"Yes, Sir."

"Please jest come with me."

I follered his big ol' behind through a rickety doorway. He sat me down in a spindly leetle chair that was way lower'n his.

"So how have you been?"

"I been fine."

"I hear you've had some excitement round this place."

"If'n you call a stack a dead fellars excitin'."

"Did that bother you, Mr. Sanders. I mean with your condition and all...?"

"Did what bother me?"

"The incident you referred to earlier?" (I wished he'd quit smilin'.)

"What accident?"

"The deaths of those poor men." (Damn, how could he talk with his lips a'pulled back so far?)

"Oh you mean them dead sons of bitches"

"Yes."

"They was Doctors weren't they?"

"Well, they were supposed...yes they were Doctors."

"Nope, didn't bother me none a'tall."

"Mr. Sanders!" His voice was sterner (and his smile was bit more strained). "Why is it that Doctors make you feel so uncomfortable?"

I couldn't think of nothin' smart to say back and I reckon he weren't really talkin' to me anyways, he was talkin' at me. So I jest bit my tongue and waited.

He jest went on a'jawin'.

"Let's review your history."

"1923 - You were born in Savannah"

"1930 - Your Mother died of tuberculosis. Looks like your Father raised you. The both of you made a living somehow back in that God-forsaken-swamp."

"1941 - You volunteered for the armed services. Army. You were a tank gunner."

"1942 - You received a dishonorable discharge from the military. You came home and shortly afterward experienced a nervous breakdown. I suppose that's how you wound up here."

It was real he'pful havin' him tell me what we both already knowed.

"Mr. Sanders, something happened while you were overseas. Something you don't like to talk about...I understand that, but if you're ever gonna get well, we're going to have to discuss it."

I hated this part. I didn't need no worn-out, second string Doc 'mindin' me I was a yellar coward. What good would that do? What good could he do? If Fat Doc Higgins were any good a'tall, he wouldn't be makin' the rounds at Twelve oaks.

"Do you remember what happened that day? May 6, 1942. Try and think about it."

I didn't need to try; a'fore Mr. Smith come it was all I ever thought about.

I lost three of my best friends. I lost all of my self-respect. And I reckon some folks say I lost my mind. The whole thing still don't make no sense.

I mean... I grew up in dang'rous country, huntin' gators, ticklin' cottonmouths, and dodgin' Black Jack Bogs. They was lots a close calls. Still, I always did what I had to do.

But that damn war was different. It weren't quiet like the swamp. It was so loud, so confusin'. When them boys got pinned in that tank, all I could hear was that awful, hellacious roarin'. It got louder and louder till it jest filled me up. It got so loud my brain hurt. And then that damn shell slammed right down next to me. I think it were the sudden blast what done it.

All I knowed is that somethin' got me stuck inside....and I'd been stuck ever since. I couldn't he'p my buddies; I couldn't get the latch open; I couldn't do nothin' but stand there. The army says I stood in that same spot, froze, fer all that night and most of the next day.

How them bullets all missed me, I'll never know. But it weren't no blessin'; it were a curse. The only thing worse than a dead coward is a live one.

Since then, I ain't been worth much to anyone. When I come home, my ol' man was a'waitin'. He only had one thing to say. I 'member it real well. "Boy," he spat: "I didn't figure on raisin' no yellar coward". Then he turned his back and left.

I never seen him again.

Folks said I went crazy, but I weren't crazy... jest stuck inside. And I knowed all along they was nothin' this leftover Doc could do to he'p, and I s'pose he knew it too. So we both jest pertended till he passed enough time and let me go.

I went on back to my room and found me a spot by the winder. I kinda felt, jest then, like bein' alone.

Later that afternoon, Mr. Smith come in. He had him another handful of them wildflowers and he was on his way to Mrs. Martha's room. I seen him lookin' at me keerful-like, and I knew he could tell I weren't feelin' too fine.

"Cotton," he says, "how about coming with me? They've got Martha going to the chapel service today and we need to stay close. I may need your help."

My he'p? How in tarnation could I ever he'p? Mr. Smith had me figured all wrong.

I was still thinkin' heavy on the problem when I caught up with him and Mrs. Martha. They was in the grub room where the chapel service is held.

That spindly little preacher man from Baldwin was there a'leadin' ever'body in a song. I'd seen him once before, when he come fer Easter. Soakin' wet, he couldn't weigh more 'an 110 pounds.

But I liked him.

He didn't strut around like most preachers I knowed. Truth is, he didn't have a lot to strut about. He weren't much to look at, and his voice was jest dry and crackly...

Still, somehow when he started talkin' you forgot all that. They was somethin' about him that seemed real and they was somethin' about what he said that seemed right.

He passed out a stack a Gideon Bibles and said we could keep 'em. Then he started to speak. I could tell Smith weren't payin' him no mind, at first, but gradually he started a'tunin' in.

The preacher man was talkin' about how Jesus come and died on purpose. On purpose? Now I'm a thinkin' man, and that jest didn't figure. I always thought he died cause somethin' went wrong. It jest seemed like murder to me.

But that ain't what the preacher man was sayin'. No Ma'm, he said Jesus died on account of he was tryin' to save us.

I think it was about half way through the whole thang when I seen Smith a'noddin' his head. He takened out a pencil and, very, very keerfully, circled a verse. I watched his lips movin' ever so slightly, and I could tell he was readin' it over and over again.

I wandered what could be so all-fired important, but I didn't say nothin'.

After the service, I seen Smith slip up front and talk some with that preacher. Next thang, I knew they was a'prayin'. I reckon that little fellar from Baldwin had no idea he was a'cavortin' with a man that'd already sent a whole passel of souls to meet with God directly.

No matter. Either way, when Smith come back to the room, they was somethin' changed.

Tape IV - Transcript Session 10

I reckon God knows when you're fixin' to have a turrible, awful spell of days... cause it seems to me like He gives you a specially good one, first. Leastways that's how its worked in my sorry life.

I 'member how it was jest afore I left the swamp fer bootcamp. That Grand Ol' Southern Sun come marchin' through the treetops and fightin' with them long grey shadows. I was perched on a sandy crick bank with a crookedy piece a cane and I jest couldn't keep the fish from a'jumpin' on my hook.

I caught ever kind a brim they is, a fine mess a catfish, and a postively luncker bass (he musta been 10 pounds). It was a good day... a fine day. It was the last time, fer a long time, I ever felt right about myself.

November 28 was one of them special, good days fer Mr. Smith. It turned out to be Mrs. Martha's anniversary. I woke up early and seen him standin' over my bed. He'd been disappearin' almost ever' night now, and he wouldn't say nothin' 'bout where he was a'goin', but I noticed his jaw was swelled up a bit, and I wondered if he'd been smacked or somethin'.

On this mornin' he was almost chipper. "Cotton," he says "how about coming with me to a party?"

Well I didn't reckon on Mr. Smith bein' the party'n type, so I figured they was probably a good reason fer me to tag along.

Lookin' back now, I shoul'da known it was a clue. They was several clues. I jest didn't piece it all together till it was too late.

When we got to the room, Martha was still asleep. We didn't bother her none. We jest sat down by the edge of her bed, and started talkin'.

Smith, he had somethin' to say, and he jest plowed right on into it.

"Cotton, I know it's a little unusual, me celebrating Martha's anniversary. But this truly was a special day... for both of us."

"Both of you?"

I guess I WAS pretty damn confused. "Was you the best man or somethin'?"

"No, she didn't even know I was there. She couldn't..." He took a deep breath. "Oh, but I remember... I remember Martha flowin' down that aisle...."

"But you wasn't even..."

"No, Cotton, from the moment I saw Martha. I knew she was different. She was so different from me... Martha couldn't love me. She couldn't even know who I was."

He looked down and kinda knotted up the corner of Mrs. Martha's covers in one fist.

"Cotton there's only one thing I do well and I'm ashamed of it."

It was the first time I ever seen him this way. Here he was a'talkin all about his feelin's. I shoulda knowed a man like Mr. Smith don't say nothin' less he's got a reason.

He told me 'bout how we was born in Chicago, how he growed up on the streets. His folks were kilt when he was real young - too young. He had a kid sister and they had it pretty tough, but they got by.

It was the war what done it to him. I reckon that's when he figured out what he was so good at. When it was over, he was awful tired of it all. He tried to go to college on his GI bill, but you can't get away from yor one true talent. Mr. Smith jest naturally started poachin' people.

Martha was a target. Perilli payed extry to bring in the best - that was Mr. Smith.

"I couldn't do it, Cotton, and I couldn't let anyone else do it either. On that first day, when I saw her at the schoolhouse, something just snapped inside. I was already so weary of the killing."

"Perelli hated Martha for what she did. That son of his went away for a long time. I knew he'd be relentless. I figured the only chance she had was me."

"If I could somehow shield her, if I could somehow give her back a normal life, maybe, it would...maybe for once, I could do something that mattered, something that didn't leave me feeling sick inside..."

"For eight years I looked after Martha. And Perelli's boys just kept on coming. It was a bloody business, but somehow it didn't seem as bad as what I'd done before, and every day that she got to live normal-like was a little victory for me."

"That wedding was proof. It was proof that there was at least one reason for God to tolerate my pathetic existence. And I did alright; I took care of her, and I kept the dying as far away as I could."

He bunched them covers up even tighter, "Cotton, he was a good man, and, anyway, she deserved better than me."

Martha was stirrin'..

"And then one night it all just...."

Mr. Smith grabbed a holt of my eyes. Fer the first time, ever, I seen the hurtin'. It plumb shivered me. They was somethin' so deep and dark... it minded me of one of them Black Jack Bogs a'lyin' in the heart of the Okee. You come too close, and they'd jest suck you down forever.

I stood up, but he weren't done. He knew they was one more big question in the back of my mind.

"I was gone when they came, Cotton. I was gone to see my kid sister. She was having a baby in Jersey..."

"I should have never left; it didn't do any good. Gina wouldn't even let me in the room. She said she knew what I was now... and she didn't ever want her children near me."

"I don't blame her, Cotton. I just wish I could of..."

I don't know how much more Smith woulda said but he didn't get the chance cause Mrs. Martha woke up. She was a'cryin'.

Smith and me, we he'ped her situp in the bed.

He sat down beside her and started talkin' at her jest like she was reg'lar. I couldn't prove it none, but I think she liked hearin' him. She seemed to calm some at the sound of his voice.

I jest sat there fer a spell and watched 'em together.

I reckon he loved her. I mean they wasn't nothin' she could do fer him, but still he kept on a'doin' fer her, and it weren't jest guilt neither. Smith was too smart to think he'pin' Mrs. Martha was gonna make up fer his sins.

He jest loved her.

I'll never forget what happened next.

Mr. Smith stood up and quietly wheeled Martha's bed up to the winder. He turned her jest right so she could see through the glass.

Fer a while she jest stared at her insides. Then all at once, I seen a flicker of somethin'. Her strange little whinin' sounds stopped, and she started a'rockin' back and forth, not jerkin', mind you, but soft, rhythmic rockin'.

Mrs. Martha was actually a'lookin' at somethin'. And it were plain she was likin' it.

I had to know what it was. Real quiet-like, I eased over to the winder.

I seen 'em, then, hundreds of 'em, purtty as a spring day in Heaven... a whole passel of Morning Glorys. The new sun was a'dancin' all over 'em. They was purple, and pink, and white, and they was bathed in tiny droplets of dew.

Smith had been busy a'plantin'.

I heard him speak softly in the background. "Happy Anniversary Martha."

Tape IV - Transcript Session 11

I reckon they wanted Smith 'bout as bad as they wanted Mrs. Martha cause they didn't keel her outright. They waited till they had 'em both, then they drug 'em out back to the work shack

And I don't think they'd of ever got past Mr. Smith 'cept fer ol' Dorsham. He was havin' another one of his crazy conniptions. It was near 2:00 am; we heared him in the room next to us, and Mr. Smith slipped over to check ever'thing out.

It must of been at the very same time them Damn Yankees come a'stealin' into Mrs. Martha's room. But they couldn't of been there long afore Mr. Smith sensed somethin' - 'cause he left Dorsham, directly, and went to the A wing.

It was too late.

They had Mrs. Martha, and they was jest waitin' fer Mr. Smith. They was six keelers armed to the teeth.

Smith didn't put up no struggle.

He jest nodded quietly and stepped inside. By then I'd cat-footed over to the door, where I could peek through a crack.

They weren't takin' no chances; it was plain they was mighty skeered of Mr. Smith. They was two of 'em a'drowed down on Mrs. Martha, one of 'em totin' a sawed of shotgun, and they was four of 'em a'drowed down on Mr. Smith.

They watched him like they was afeared he was jest gonna blink an fellars would start dyin'. But he didn't; he jest stared quietly at Mrs. Martha.

They was somebody else in the corner of the room. I seem him kinda standing back outta the light. He didn't look like no gangster, neither. His duds was fine and fancy. His silver hair was combed, oh so keerful.

He pointed a long special lookin' pistol at Mr. Smith.

And then he shot him.

They was a muffled pop, and I seen Smith fall on one knee. His foot was gushin' blood.

"Ok, Sully"

That fancy fellar musta been the boss cause Sully jumped right to it. He drug out a long ugly lookin' pair of bolt cutters.

"Gimme your hand." Sully says. Smith obliged

"Naw, your other hand"

Smith lock horns with the fancy fellar. Somebody jammed that shotgun hard up against Mrs. Martha's skull.

Smith didn't scowl none. He didn't threaten none. He jest smiled a sad, weary smile and stuck out his hand.

Sully yanked on Smith's arm and took a holt of his finger - his trigger finger. Ever'body tensed. Ever'body braced. They was jest waitin' on Smith to make a move.

But even I knew he wouldn't, 'cause of Mrs. Martha. You'd a thought by now, they'd a figured out how much she meant to him, but they still wasn't shor what he'd do.

He jest turned his head and took a long breath.

Sully snapped that finger right off.

It was pathetic. I seen it fall. I seen the blood spurt all over Mr. Smith's yellar gown, and I swear it put a pain in me like it was my own.

Ever'body relaxed. They had him. He couldn't shoot and he couldn't hardly walk. It was time fer the fun to begin.

"Let's get them out to the shed."

I jerked back and took a look-see. Fer some reason they wasn't anybody around. Them white coats had done found a convenient reason to be gone.

I lurched into a broom closet and hid till they was outside.

Call the police! That's what I says to myself. That's what a reg'lar person would do. I even started fer a phone. But what fer? They weren't gonna listen to no luneetick from Twelve Oaks.

Do somethin'! You gotta do somethin'! That's what I says next. But what? They was seven professional killers, and I was nothin'.

Still, I sneaked out behind 'em.

I seen where they'd been a'watchin' Mrs. Martha, and they'd trampled all her purtty wildflowers.

I felt somethin' start to ache inside

By the time I got to the shed and found me a winder to peek through, they was hard at it.

The boss man weren't so cool no more. He was fairly seethin'. "I hired you to do a job... and by God, you're gonna do it!"

I seen it, then. It was an evil lookin' rig. They had a scattergun strapped to the handlebars of an ol' push mower, and they had it pointed directly at Mrs. Martha. They had a line run through the trigger set, and they had it wired to a block of wood wedged in Mr. Smith's mouth.

Mr. Smith was roped to a foldin' chair. The slightest twitch would fire that gun

"Pull it!" They says.

"Pull it!!!"

"Pull the damn trigger!!!"

Mr. Smith weren't movin'. He was solid as a hickory stump.

"Sully!"

"Yes. Boss!"

Sully took the bolt cutters and jammed in another one of Mr. Smith's fingers.

Smith drew in a deep breath and braced

The boss man nodded, and Sully snapped them cutters together. That finger melted right off his hand. The whole room flinched.

But not Smith.

He was strainin' so hard, the blood vessels in his eyes jest popped. I seen their red spider trails spreadin' 'cross his whites.

"Damn. He won't flinch!"

"He 'aint human!"

Somebody picked up a pipe wrench.

"He'll flinch this time."

It was the boss man, he reared back with that ugly piece of pot metal, and I seen what he was gonna do. The force of that blow would naturally slam Mr. Smith's head backwards.

Poor, dear Mrs. Martha. She was perched on a rickety bench, and her legs were a'shakin' so fast that her calve muscles was a'gnottin' up in spasms. Her head was a'jerkin' back and forth, and she was ekin' out pathetic, little whimperin' sounds

Them sounds 'peared to be hurtin' Smith more'n his wounds.

It was the awfulest damn thang I ever seen in my sorry life. I jest had to do somethin'. I looked around, desperate. Wasn't there someone to he'p? If only...

Jest about then the roarin' started. I felt my feet turnin' to lead. It was a'happenin' all over again. Here I was gettin' "stuck" jest when I was needed the most. I cursed myself, and started beggin' God fer he'p.

It was the smackin' sound what set me free. It was the ugly sound a pot metal crushin' bone.

The boss man, who I'd figured out by now, was Mr. Perelli hisself, slammed that hellacious wrench into Mr. Smith's face.

I thought it was over.

They weren't no way fer a man to keep steady against all that force. But, Mr. Smith... he seen that wrench a'comin', and he actually tipped his chair forward and leaned into the brunt of the blow.

I still cain't believe it. The man was a rock...

That done it. Somethin' 'bout that whole ugly scene done it. There weren't no way I was gonna stand by now. They was surely gonna keel me, but I didn't give a tinker's damn .

Seventeen years of hidin' from hell was OVER.

I looked around fer a weapon, any weapon; all I could find was rust-ridden shovel.

I snatched it up and blasted directly through that ol' cypress door. Them planks splintered ever'where.

First thang I seen was Mr. Smith's eyes. His face was smashed to a bloody pulp, but his eyes was frightful clear.

Next thing I seen was six very surprised alleigators, seven 'cludin' Mr. Perelli. And I got right to down to the poachin'.

Best place to pop a swamp lizard is right back of the eyes, so that's what I swung fer.

Now, they was a lot'a guns in that room, but it were a small room, an I'm an uncommonly big man. I guess they couldn't shoot me without a'hittin' each other, or maybe they didn't have time to think, but fer whatever reason, they couldn't seem to shut me down.

I hit that first scaper, dead on. I think 'at fairly well bashed his brains out. I hit another and then another.

By this time, that scattergun had swung free of Mrs. Martha and Smith drove his chair backwards where he could slip outta them ropes. He got free, and busted up or not, the man was a menace. You could taste the terror in the room.

He spun that ol' gun around and yanked on the cord. It jest cut a fellar nearly in two. Then he jammed a bloody finger stub in another one's eyeball and ripped it right out of the socket.

One by one we took 'em down. The dyin' had started and neither one of us would quit till it was over. The last one to go was Mr. Perelli. He was on his knees.

He had that look in his eyes. I've seen it afore when I was a'huntin'. It's that pathetic look a wounded critter gives you when he knows they's certain death a'comin'.

Mr. Smith was real deliberate. Honestly, I dunno how the man could still stand. But he did. He moved over to Perelli's side, and then he spoke.

"This is not for me, John. It's for Martha."

Perelli bowed his head, and Smith kilt him.

Tape IV - Transcript Session 12

I 'member how strange it felt, right there at the end. Somethin' was different inside of me. I'd broken free.

But I'd a rather stayed sick then have to live through what happened next.

Mr. Smith was a'standin' there. He was soaked in blood... mostly his own. I seen him start to wobble, and then I seen his knees buckle.

I reached down and swooped him up with one of my big paws.

"Cotton, it's almost over" he says. "We got one more killer to stop, and then I'm done with this business forever."

I was a'cradlin' him in my arms like a child.

"Promise me you'll help, Cotton. This one's bad; we take him out, and Martha'll finally be safe."

Well I couldn't he'p before, but I knew I could now... and I was proud. Damn him! He knew I'd say yes, and he jest trapped me.

I follered his directions, but they didn't make no sense.

First, I got down on all fours and started a'pickin' up teeth. They was HIS teeth; he'd lost four of 'em on account of that pipe wrench, and he wanted ever' one.

Next, I went out back behind the shed. They was a ruck-sack buried under some palmetters. It was mighty heavy, but I drug it on in.

Then I carried Mr. Smith to Mrs. Martha.

He spoke softly to her, and I ain't gonna tell you what he said 'cause it was too personal, but when he was through, he took a'holt of her hand and gently kissed it.

"Cotton" he says, kinda sudden-like, "Come on." When he turned, I seen the tears a'cuttin' little trails through the dried blood on his face. Poor Mr. Smith; he didn't even try to hide 'em.

I made shor Mrs. Martha was real comfortable, then I loaded him and that ruck-sack up on my back and started towards Twelve Oaks.

When we got inside. They was nobody in sight. Mister Perelli must of paid them white coats real good. I set him down in Martha's room jest like he said.

He pointed towards the winder. "Cotton, there's a 16 ft. john boat waiting on the river. It's all rigged, and there's a special seat for Martha. You get on out there and wait for my next move."

I started to interrupt, but he wouldn't have it.

"Go!"

"Whatcha gonna do?"

"I'm gonna ambush the Bastard."

It was all happenin' too fast.

"On your way out, grab Dorsham and anybody else near this room."

"What fer?"

"I don't want any witnesses."

"And pull that fire alarm, too"

He took a long breath.

"Now Go!"

I gathered myself up, then, and started to leave.

"Mr. Smith"

"Yes, Cotton"

"I'm right proud to know you."

He tried to smile.

"Go on, Cotton, Martha needs you."

I left and headed 'cross the clearin'. When I got to the edge of the ol' hammock, I looked back to Twelve Oaks. They was Mr. Smith propped up in Martha's winder, he was watchin' me leave.

The man's eyes was talkin'.

He kinda straightened hissself up, and then he saluted. I jest naturally saluted back. And, after a spell, I turned towards the black water.

I hadn't taken more'n three steps afore it happened. It were sudden and final. A hellacious blast reached right outta Ms. Martha's room and punched me square in the heart. I nearly fell down.

Damn the sound of it all! It was that horrible sound, again.

It was the sound of Nitro a'roarin' at the top of it's lungs, and it was the sound of the best man I ever knew, a'dyin'.

Somehow I could still see him through all the smoke, his whole body was afire, but he were'nt rollin' around none, or screaming.

He was jest keerfully finishin' this one last job.

Tape V - Transcript Session 13

I'd a he'ped him. I'd a damn shor he'ped him. But I seen they was nothin' more I could do fer Mr. Smith 'cept take care of Mrs. Martha. And that's jest what I aimed fer.

When I got to the boat, ever'thin' was all laid out. They was a special waterproof tote. It had maps; it had medicine, and it had instructions.

I follered 'em exactly.

Mrs. Martha and I disappeared. We jest eased up that black water right on into the heart of the Okee. They ain't no Yankee born, could find me in that country.

We got by jest fine. I built a little cracker shack back of Billy's Island, and I took extry good care of Mrs. Martha. I think Mr. Smith woulda been right proud.

Trouble is they was one thing still a'botherin' me.

It was you, Mrs. Gina

I figure you jest had to know the truth. I found yo'r address in Mr. Smiths poke, and I tried to write you a letter, but I cain't write worth a damn, so I got this here RE-corder.

Mrs. Gina, yor Brother weren't the man you think he was. And I reckon if yor younguns knew the whole story they'd surely be proud. And I hope you won't hold nothin' 'gainst him no more, neither.

'Cause yo'r his only kin, and it ain't right, what you done afore when he come to visit.

Mr. Smith was the best man I ever knew. He saved Mrs. Martha's life, and I reckon he saved mine too. It's taken a while fer me to sort it all out... but I think now I'm a'gettin' a handle on how he done it.

It was the teeth and the Bible what gave it away.

I 'membered how important them teeth was to him, and I 'membered how' he started a'leavin' a lot, right there towards the end, so one day I sneaked into Folkston and done me some checkin'.

And damned if Mr. Smith didn't have us all fooled, again.

The official word was that him and me escaped after the explosion. Ever'body thought it was Mrs. Martha what died in that fire! The body was burned so badly they couldn't tell who it was, 'cept fer the dental records, and Mr. Smith had done had his teeth fixed to match hers.

That fellar was a study.

It was the preacher man's Bible what gave me the other clue. When I looked inside I found that verse Mr. Smith had circled. Here's what it said:

"Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend..."

I reckon Mr. Smith done jest that. He couldn't escape from his one true talent. He jest traded killin' fer dyin'. And I reckon it worked, 'cause Mrs. Martha didn't have no more troubles after that.

'Bout three years later, she quietly passed away, but they was peaceful, gentle years, and I gave her a right special funeral.

You won't find no tombstone, but if you ever get to visit the Okee, jest look fer a hardwood hammock a'covered with Mornin' Glorys - soft pink wildflowers, with tiny heart shaped leaves.

They die ever' winter, but they always come back in the spring.