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## **John McLean**

by Ricky Rood

Daddy, cousin Micky and I were loading a trailer full of old creosoted bridge pilings to take down to the North Carolina coast to build a new cabin. Really all I could do was to help pass the rope from one side of the trailer to the other. My hands were too small to tie good knots in the stiff three-quarter-inch rope they were using; I couldn't pull it tight around the rough wood.

"You seen John McLean this morning?" Daddy asked.

"John McLean's coming with us?" I asked back. John McLean was one of several men who occasionally worked for Daddy. They'd come and go over the years, not seeming to have a home. John McLean, never John, never Mr. McLean, had the blackest skin of any man I knew. The soft, deep wrinkles on his face so completely absorbed the light that they looked like layered curtains. His teeth were crooked, stained, and rotting; his eyes were red and limp. He always wore a tattered blue suit coat. Right now, he was staying in the house that had been my grandmother's.

"Not yet," Micky yelled across the trailer to answer Daddy. Micky had come across this old train bridge, decaying in a ravine, while walking lines for the phone company. He'd worked for the phone company ever since he'd graduated from high school about ten years ago. Micky was always coming across treasures out in the

woods, and we saw the old bridge as a divine sign to build Daddy's dream of a hurricane-proof cabin over on Core Sound.

"I haven't seen him either," I shouted, since I was on Daddy's deaf side. I watched Micky loop a clove hitch over the end of a log, then around the frame of the trailer. Daddy called Micky a bull because he was so strong - said all that he ate turned straight to muscle. "You think we're going have any trouble getting lunch?" I asked.

I craved eating at Bunky's, and we'd had trouble before on trips when John McLean was along. About four years ago on the way down to Wilmington, the same group of us had had to stop at a place where we'd never been before. Daddy told us to sit in the car while he checked to see if we could eat there.

Micky and I had gotten out of the car and sat on the hood. John McLean sat cooking in the back seat with his window rolled up. The restaurant was a flat-roofed cinder block building with a smaller building off to the side. The tree-bare white gravel parking lot was dotted with dried clumps of grass and ran to the edge of a field full of curled dusty corn. This man came and looked out the front door and shook his head. Daddy came back and said that they wouldn't even let John McLean eat back in the kitchen with the cooks. When he asked for something to go, the man had locked the door to the carry out and turned the sign to "Closed."

Micky then said, "I'll be back in minute, Uncle Ray," and walked towards the kitchen door at the side of the restaurant. The man, who had been in the front door, walked around and stood in front of the kitchen door. The man back stepped; Micky pushed the door open with his left forearm. About five minutes later, Micky came back to the car with a bag of sandwiches, barbeque scooped on soft white buns with a dollop of slaw. We rode down the road, with no appetite, not saying a word. I didn't even tell

Micky that I didn't like slaw on my sandwich. When Daddy finally started to talk again, it was about Johnson and Goldwater, and that if Goldwater was elected President then he thought the country would fall apart. Now it was 1968 and there was another campaign going on, this time, with Humphrey, Nixon, and Governor Wallace.

As we finished tying up the trailer John McLean walked up. "Hello, boy," he said, his words riding on puffs that smelled like the fermenting scuppernongs in late October. "It's going to be a hot trip today. Hot, hot, day." With John McLean present Daddy either forgot about my question about lunch or just didn't want to answer.

"Yeah, John McLean," I said. "It's a hot day."

"How's school? You been reading your Bible?" John McLean asked me these things every time he saw me. We climbed into the back seat; I rolled down the window to ease the smell. "You better go to school boy," he said. "A boy's got to learn." He pulled out a penknife and trimmed a ragged thumbnail out the window.

My friend Franklin said that John McLean was a filthy, dangerous man, who carried a switchblade. Franklin had come over a couple of days ago wearing a big red, white and blue button that said, "If I Was 21, I'd Vote For Wallace." He wanted to fight about Daddy putting up a big Humphrey poster in the downtown office he rented.

While Franklin and I were arguing on the front porch, John McLean had come to the door with his water bottles. When it was hot he carried two Mason jars. We filled them up for him in the morning with mostly ice and some water, and he'd carry them around. He'd run dry. I asked him to come in, but he said that he didn't want to. I brought him the jars with ice and water and gave him some more water in one of Daddy's large tea glasses. "Your daddy's a fool to let a nigger like that live in town with decent folk," he'd said. Then he told me that John McLean got drunk and killed

somebody over at *The Shack*, the colored club out on the edge of town. “You going to use that glass again?” Franklin asked.

We drove down the highway annoying people with our slow long trailer full of dark timber. I read my stack of *MAD* magazines and kept glancing over at John McLean. He was looking out the window. Once we were down the road a bit, he reached into his coat pocket and started searching around. The top of a crumpled brown bag came out of his pocket, and he stuffed it back real fast. He looked over at me and made this little closed-mouth laugh, and turned to look out the window again.

As we rode by this little clump of houses John McLean looked back over to me. Then he arched up and, again, dug into his pants pocket. “Come over here closer,” he said. “I got something to ask you.”

He stopped searching in his pants pocket and reached to the inside pocket of his old suit jacket. Out came a folded tatter of paper and a nubbin of a pencil. “Where are we, boy?” He said.

“Princeton,” I said.

He steadied the piece of paper on back of Daddy’s seat and wrote down the name of the town. “I like to keep a list of all the places I’ve been,” he said. “Where we going next?”

“Well, we’ll be going to Goldsboro, then Lagrange, Kinston, Dover, then New Bern.”

“How you know all of that?”

“I’ve been down here a lot, but it’s all on the map.” I picked up a torn map from the floor of the car and unfolded it. I showed him the red line of US 70 running from Raleigh to New Bern to Morehead. I said, “We’ll take this highway to Havelock, then

take NC 101 down through Harlowe, then go through the country to Smyrna and Marshallberg. I can name all of the creeks and rivers we'll cross, and we'll cross the Neuse River two or three times, depending on which way we go. Here, you want this map? We can get more at the gas station if we need a new one."

John McLean took the map. He studied it. "This blue the ocean?" he asked. "We going to see the ocean?"

"Maybe," I said.

"Thank you, boy," he said. With his finger John McLean smoothed the tears in the map, slowly folded it, and carefully put it in his inside pocket. "Your Daddy took me to see the ocean once," he said. "I like the way it smelled." At every cluster of houses, he'd ask me where we were, and he'd scribble some letters for the name of each community and town. After a couple of hours Daddy said, "We'd better be stopping for some lunch. Let's eat at Bunky's, then take Highway 55 because the traffic's lighter. There's no place to eat over on 55."

We pulled into Bunky's Barbeque. We went around the restaurant, and stopped under an oak tree in a sandy lot behind the main parking area. Daddy was expert at knowing where to go so that he'd never have to back up the trailer.

"This is the best barbeque, John McLean," I said.

"Oh, I don't spect no restaurant make the best barbque."

"Well, it's the best I've ever had."

"No, no. Maybe you can bring me some out, though. I think I'd like to sit under this ole tree, where it's cool. Hard to find a cool place on a day like today."

"It's cooler inside than it is out here. It's air-conditioned."

“I don't like the kind of cool they have inside; it give me a chill. Not good to get so cold on a summer day.”

John McLean went to sit under the tree. Daddy went to the takeout part of the counter and ordered John McLean a half-chicken and barbeque platter. I ran it out to him. A couple of other black men had joined him, and John McLean's brown bag sat on the ground between them. I gave him his lunch, and went back inside with Daddy and Micky. Micky and I ordered tea, and Daddy ordered coffee – “If it's hot,” he said.

“John McLean must be crazy to want to eat out there in that heat,” I said.

“I reckon that's just the way he's used to,” Daddy said. “Bunky, here, has always let coloreds eat inside, but you only occasionally see one down at the end of the counter,” he tilted his head to point at the end of the counter as he talked. There, at the end of the long Formica counter, a lone dark figure sat, and behind him were four other black men sitting quietly at a table. None of the other tables near them were occupied.

Micky leaned back and emptied his big glass of tea in one swallow and started to fill it again from the pitcher on the table. “You remember that SOB in that place on the way down to Wilmington?”

“Micky, what happened in that restaurant? You and Daddy wouldn't ever tell me.”

“It was sort of funny, actually. I was going to punch that kid when he said, ‘You and your car of nigger lovers just get on down the road and there won't be no trouble.’”

Daddy looked at Micky with one of those looks he usually used on me and said, “You know I don't abide by that word.”

“That's the way he said it, and it's not the worst thing he said.”

“You use it too comfortable.”

“Sorry,” Micky said. He sat up straight and pulled his chair to the table. He played with the salt and pepper shakers for a minute. Silent. Then he continued, “So, I was standing in the door with this kid in front of me and all the colored help behind him. Then this big older Negro walked over from the stove and handed me a bag. The owner guy said, ‘Nate, don’t give that so-and-so lover that bag. You git uppity like those Greensboro so-and-so’s and you won’t have no job.’”

While Micky talked, I watched the counter waitress. She walked down the counter putting fresh hushpuppies in baskets of all the people eating there. She didn’t walk down to the end.

“Anyway,” Micky went on after draining another glass of tea, “Nate hands me the bag and turned around and looked at the kid, who wasn’t any older than me, maybe 22. Then he said, ‘Sonny, that’d be aw right by me, but I don’t seem to rememba your daddy teaching you to cook no pig afore he died, and I know old Nate don’t know how to write it down.’ Then the kid turned around and walked out of the kitchen. I gave Nate a whole ten dollar bill.”

“That was mighty fine barbeque,” Daddy said.

“Yeah,” I said, “even with the slaw on it it was good.”

At the end of the counter a black woman came from the kitchen and filled up the few tea glasses and hushpuppy baskets in her back corner of the restaurant. We ate both chicken and pig, and then Daddy had a bowl of peach cobbler with his last cup of coffee.

“Daddy,” I said. “Franklin says everyone thinks you’re a fool to let John McLean stay over at Grandma’s. Says he’s an endangerment.”

“You tell Franklin he doesn’t know enough to know what a fool is.”

“He says John McLean killed a man a couple of weeks ago.”

“Nobody’s been killed anywhere,” Daddy said. He looked over at Micky, then back at me. Then he started talking again, “Franklin’s going around wearing that fool Wallace button, boasting like ...” He stopped in mid-sentence. Then, he just sat, staring past me, across the dining room and the Formica counter. “Let’s go,” he said and snatched up the check. After paying, we went outside, and John McLean was sitting on the back of the trailer waiting.

As we drove on down the road, I tried to hear Daddy and Micky in the front seat, but with the open windows there wasn’t much listening. Mostly, I looked for the creeks. I’d never been down Highway 55. All of the creeks that crossed US 70 made it to 55 on their way to the Neuse. Cove Creek and Bachelor Creek were much wider, with dark still water. There were even some small wooden boats, and on the banks, black men fishing. John McLean slept in his sweet rotten-grape cloud, and I wrote down a list of all the new places we went through.