

LIE VERY STILL

a story

By C. J. Godwin

Part 1

CHAPTER 1: COWGIRLS AND INDIANS

One day, we will all be famous. Starting at the left, that's Robert, my father, then Eddie, then Barbara Davenport. That's me, Willa, the kid in front next to Mitch, the other kid, the Indian kid with the ice cream. We didn't know each other very well then. I had just arrived in Pachobee.

I traveled there in summer when nobody goes to South Florida. I took the Silver Meteor train from the station in Palatka, my first time to ride a train, and I had an insatiable desire to look out the window. The man beside me took the aisle so I could see better. At first the trees were packed close to the track, but in places, parks or lakes opened up the view, or the underbrush was cleared so I could see beneath the lifted arms of oaks. Florida is not flat, not all of it. Sometimes the land eases down into a lake or runs in sharp ridges, serrated by ancient currents. I saw churches, *small* churches, and old houses that stood grand, undoubtedly planted before the tracks. There were trailers and derelict cars, warehouses and very often piles of junk as if the railroad drew the line on where it was safe to stash old things and poor people.

Six tracks splayed next to the Orlando platform. A lot of people waited to get on there. I was glad I had a good view because the man next to me was asleep and I couldn't climb over him. Finally we started moving again. A woman behind me had a chatty conversation, talking

about TV and public transportation. She teased the person she was talking to, and I think it must have been a friend she really liked.

The man beside me woke up and I went to the dining car. It wasn't a real dining car like in the movies with the linen tablecloths. It was a snack bar where you could buy pre-wrapped sandwiches or cold pizza that the cashier would heat in the microwave. I ordered a turkey sandwich. It was pretty good, I guess. It was kind of chewy and tasteless really. Mostly I remember the mustard. I ate it back in my seat instead of the snack car with its yellow, plastic tables.

A woman several rows in front of me with a straw hat and Bahamian accent turned around to talk to the person sitting behind her. I couldn't see the listener. They talked about early holiday shopping and what to do about big families. The straw-hat woman said, "Family is a gift to you and you have no choice." It seemed nice what she said and the way she smiled about it, but we were a long way from Christmas and besides, it was just Dad and me in my family.

I quit listening and watched out the window again. The terrain flattened into the basin of South Florida. The pines and oaks no longer crowded the track after Kissimmee. I saw the wide open space where the sky rambled. We passed by orange trees rowed and trimmed like hedges, their green fruit barely visible in the luster of leaves. Far-off clouds grazed over cane fields and later there were saw palmetto flats that were really wetlands with cattle wading among occasional cabbage palms. A fat rainbow hung just over the southeast horizon and the Silver Meteor dashed into rain, hard splats on the east side. We moved at a pretty good clip after Winter Haven and hardly stopped at Sebring. I knew we were almost there from the map the Conductor gave me.

The bottom of Florida is like a ladle, with the Keys spilling off like crumbs of land. The Everglades is a big spoon, which often dips a large helping of salty soup from the Gulf of Mexico to make its unique concoction of brackish stew, heavily seasoned with mosquito larvae. That's why we were there. Dad had been sent to the research outpost in Pachobee to collect bugs for the labs in Gainesville. He was late to meet me at the station. I felt I'd arrived in the middle of precisely nowhere. But then he showed up, in a school bus with Eddie driving, and Mrs. Davenport and Mitch were with him. Dad bought Mitch and me ice creams; only I finished mine before Mitch; that's why he still has his in the photograph.

Once the picture was taken, Mrs. Davenport said she and Mitch had to go home. Eddie dropped them off and they walked away together. Mitch's brown shadow followed him up his driveway like an extension of his skin. He wasn't taller than his mother, but he seemed longer. I had to watch him closely; otherwise, he'd disappear altogether into night.

From then on, when I played cowboys and Indians, I played with a *real* Indian, Mitch. He had descended from the Cherokee in the Carolinas, who mixed with the Creek and eventually became the Seminole Tribe of the Florida Everglades. He was a full blood Native American, entitled to the welfare of his birthright. That's what his papers said. I read them to him once because he didn't have a grandfather or a great aunt to tell him. His mother, Barbara Davenport, was a white woman. I'm white too, but not pale like her. She worked inside a nursing home and had skin the color of sugar sand. She had adopted Mitch when he was a baby and named him after her long-dead father. Mr. Davenport, her husband, had divorced and gone by the time I met Mitch when we were both nine. Mitch's real parents, his Indian parents, he never knew. Their names were blacked out on his papers. When we grew up a little bit, Mitch asked me to keep his papers for him. I did.



As for my family, my father was a Texan and my Grandmother too. When my Grandmother was a little girl, she had a horse named Baby. She and her horse liked to drink Coca Cola; Baby could drink it right from the bottle. Grandmother had also taught Baby to lie down on command. When the kids played hide and seek, she'd go lie down in the tall grass with Baby where no one would think to look for a horse and they'd share a Coke.

I had a set of six-gun cap pistols. They had plastic chrome details and plastic bone handles and the hammers almost never came down hard enough to smash the caps on cue with the trigger, but that didn't matter. With my boots and my hat, I was a real cowgirl, just like my Grandmother. Mitch was the Indian. We'd ride our bikes like they were horses fast as we could go, past the bait and tackle store toward the Spoonbill Lodge.

The Spoonbill was a big, old wood frame hotel built on the canal a little ways from the marina. Its stark white boards leaned into the sky with black-screened windows that looked out from beneath yellow and white awnings. A Queen Ann porch wrapped around the canal side. A brass plate above the lobby door read "Established 1864," which was even before my Grandmother was born. The place was a hunting and fishing resort, open only in the winter. In the meantime, they let the grass grow.

Mitch could be anywhere. He was so dark, he could hide in the skin of a shadow. I climbed the lemon tree on the northeast corner to get a look out. Nothing moved for a long time, even the wind was hidden. I thought at first I'd made too much noise climbing because my boot had slipped and I'd kicked the gutter, but I guess Mitch must have been on the other side of the building. I got situated, drew my guns and waited. Then I saw him come slithering through the grass.

“Click-click-click-click,” I fired at him, then finally: “bang!”

Mitch had a long stick with a broken “Y” at one end and he used it like a rifle. He rolled over and made a firing sound and mimicked a kickback.

“You’re already dead,” I told him as he stood up from the grass.

He made another shooting sound. “I shot you,” he said. “You’re dead.”

“No, I saw you first and I already shot you!” I had him this time. I’d sighted him and shot him square between the shoulder blades while his eyes were still in the grass.

“No you didn’t,” he said with this big irritating grin. Anyone who thinks Indians have a sullen face didn’t take Mitch for a stereotype.

“Yes I did! I know you heard the clicks because that’s when you looked up at me.”

“You missed me,” he replied, “because how could I see you if you’d already killed me?”

“Mitch, you know you’re dead. I just wish you’d play fair sometimes,” I said and I got down out of the tree. I started walking to my bicycle, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good.

It was easy to forget I had ever lived before I met Mitch. His favorite food was ice cream. “Godzilla” was his favorite TV show and Battleship his favorite game, though he cheated all the time by moving his ships. He never wore shoes unless his mother made him and he had a rope swing in his backyard.

Mitch and I were in the part of summer everyone else forgot—late, late into the heat and before school started. We had it to ourselves, and new adventure threatened all the time. He should’ve stayed dead and I really didn’t like it when he cheated, but I couldn’t help wanting to know what would happen next. I’d come home nights dirty, cut, sunburned, tired and ready to do it all again the next day.

This was the height of mosquito season too and sometimes Dad took us with him into Everglades Park. The land was level with the sea, and water and earth worked together to scrape out bogs and sand bars. Mitch and I would follow Dad to his traps, ducking and climbing through islands of mangroves wearing clothes down to our shoes and long sleeves and gloves and pith helmets with netting.

Dad tested mosquito repellents. He baited traps with cow's blood that he got from the butcher's vat and put the chemical test strip into the cage as well, then come back the next day to see how many had died in twenty-four hours. People came down from the S. C. Johnson Wax Company or the Bayer Corporation and sometimes men in uniform from the government. He tested their products in places where you could keep wiping your bare skin and come up with nothing but hands black with dead bugs and I guess they loved him for it. They'd take him out to drinks and go to dinner at nice restaurants on Marco Island or the Isle of Capri. The government had him testing compounds illegal to use in the United States. They wanted to prevent malaria in their troops in other countries, like Viet Nam. My father said we were making good money at it, but he was the one to go on all the fancy dinners. "Willa, you'd be bored," he told me. Sometimes he came back with lipstick on his collar.

Most of my meals I took at the Supper Club. When my father didn't come, I'd bring Mitch. We'd walk in the long evenings before sunset to the house off the boulevard in the old section of town, the house which was the Supper Club. The sisters, Isabella and Louise Pearse, prepared the meals, just the two of them. They themselves were old and fit well into the neighborhood.

In season, the sisters worked in the kitchen of the Spoonbill Lodge where their mother had been chef for many years, and so they had become accustomed to the ways of a kitchen and

cooking in each other's company. Neither had ever married and they still lived upstairs in the Pearse home.

When their parents died some years ago and well before my time, the sisters had converted their family home to take in diners, whom they called "guests." The dining room was in the middle of the house and they rolled back the doors on the north side to a sitting room and put a table there and did the same with a little bedroom on the south side.

The front porch ran the length of the house. Many fine evenings before dinner I sat in the glider bench at one end looking down the row of white wicker rockers which angled into the blush of sunset.

Colonel Payne was one of the other guests and he teased the old ladies while we waited by trying to figure out their ages. They were all within a few wrinkles of him and he would say to one: "Now Gladys, when I was five, that's when you cut my toe with that watermelon knife. Let's see, you'd been in school for a couple of years then so you'd be two or three years older than I am...and I'm seventy-three now, so that would make you—"

"Oh hush up!" the woman would reply. "You know that was my older sister, Eunice."

He'd move on to the next wicker rocker. "Winfred, I know you were nine years old when I was fourteen and I dipped your curls in the inkwell in Miss Hannigan's class. That would have been in nineteen twenty-two, and you'd be now—"

Swat! She'd slap him with her purse and Mitch would laugh. He got a big kick out of Colonel Payne.

Colonel Payne paid four dollars and seventy-nine cents for his meal. He'd paid that much for his dinner ever since his first summer at the Supper Club and his cost had never gone up. He paid with exact change and left the money in a neat stack of cash and coins on the

mantelpiece in the dining room where guests paid their bills. The sisters didn't keep books; they didn't send out bills. Whatever amount was agreed upon when you started dining remained the same for as long as you were a guest at their Supper Club. You could pay by the week or the month or the meal, as Colonel Payne did, and there was no need to leave your name with your payment. The sisters trusted their guests. They said they wouldn't have someone in their house they couldn't trust.

Dad owed seven dollars and fifty cents per plate, but he paid ten each for a good tip. Miss Louise always saved me an extra dessert when it was chocolate cake and she gave Mitch ice cream with his dessert, even if we were having pudding.

"Hey Willa, look what I got," Mitch said to me as we walked home from the Supper Club one evening. He held out his palm to show me four one-dollar bills, three quarters and four pennies.

I stopped walking. "Mitch, go put it back," I told him.

He smiled with a giggle. "It's the old Colonel's."

"No it's not! You have to go put it back. That belongs to Miss Bella and Miss Louise."

"Nah." He waved me off and put the money in his pocket. He started walking again.

"Mitch, I'm serious," I said. "You have to go put that back. The sisters need the money to buy the food."

"Four dollars and seventy-nine cents?" He frowned at me. "You can't buy anything with that."

I shook my head. "It's not me that you're cheating, this time. You're stealing from Miss Bella and Miss Louise!"

He wouldn't stop and he wouldn't listen. Later he told me he slipped it into Bella's handbag when she wasn't looking, but I never believed that. I put five dollars from my own allowance on the mantle one night at the Supper Club. After that I watched Mitch closely every time we ate there together.