

# The Coin Collector

by David Fowler

Mbetha sat on the dirt floor of the shack with the rusty metal box open on his lap. He reached in, pulled out a half dollar and, like communion, pressed it into the open mouth of a young man in a yellowed cotton shroud. The man walked from the shack toward the line of low spots just outside. Mbetha put a half-dime onto the tongue of a trembling girl, draped in a coarse white dress. She followed the young man out of the shack. Mbetha put a silver dollar in the mouth of an old man, bent and shaky, wearing a heavy canvas sheet, who followed the others. Mbetha continued placing a coin into the mouths of all those gathered around him, their ragged cotton shrouds fluttering as they stepped outside into the breeze. When all the coins were gone except one, he reached in and retrieved a red-tipped kitchen match.

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Despite scant rain, the cool, spring-fed pond was full, and that's where Roby and Lane waded, fishing in the last days of summer before college.

Long ago, Mbetha, who had been called Charles, was found face down in the cool pond, still formal in his starched linen waistcoat and britches. He had been a good and loyal houseman, up until the day he sassed the lady. She banished him from the house and sent him to the fields. He ran.

He was forced into the water by the onslaught of pursuing dogs and found floating when the sun came up the next morning. They wrapped him in a white cotton sheet and buried him beside the shack, where the rest of them lay, all in a row, all facing east. He remained there for one hundred fifty-five years. When his coin was

taken from him, he did not rise and wander in the woods like the others, restless and unsettled. He went into the pond and waited for his moment.

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Ten feet beneath the water's surface, Mbetha knelt in the mud, the sheet wrapped around his midsection. He looked up through the bottle-green water. He held the rusted metal box. He watched the red plastic worm float down from above then raised his hand to snatch the bait like a frog's tongue hitting a bug. He hooked the worm on the handle of the box and felt the line tug.

Roby, tan and shirtless, standing in water up to his waist, tugged again on the line. Mbetha opened his arms and released the box toward the muted sunlight. Roby lived in the fine house up the hill. The pale, smaller boy, Lane, came in from town. All summer, Mbetha had watched and listened. He knew they would be gone in a matter of days.

Six feet away from Roby, a sharp edge broke the surface. "Sumbitch way down in the mud," he said.

"Get 'im," Lane said, nearby in waist-deep water, reeling in his line to watch. His nose and pale shoulders were covered in white zinc, as his mother had ordered.

"What the hell?" Roby said. He pushed his heavy glasses up and squinted, then backed toward the shore, careful not to break the line. On the bank beneath the loblolly tree, they examined the box.

"Could be a bomb," Lane said.

"Boom!" Roby yelled, grabbing Lane's

slender forearms.

Lane jumped. "Stop it," he said.

Roby flipped the latch, pulled the wire handle and the lid creaked open. He reached into the tea-colored water inside and pulled out a wooden, red-tipped kitchen match.

"What's the match for?" Lane said.

"I have no clue." Roby poured out the rusty water, then dropped the wet match back in and closed the lid.

"It looks like a coin box at a rummage sale," Lane said.

"Come on, I'll show you some coins." Roby shoved the box against the base of the loblolly tree and put a heavy rock on top.

"You think that box is going somewhere?" Lane said.

"Yard man gets into stuff," Roby said.

Standing ankle-deep in the water behind them, Mbetha shaded his eyes, the sheet draped over his shoulders, extending to his knees. His lips moved like he was speaking to someone.

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Roby and Lane stood barefoot on a gold Oushak rug, towels wrapped around their waists.

"Do not drip, for fuck's sake," Roby said.

"Where's your dad?" Lane said.

"Golf course."

"Half my house could go in here," Lane said, taking in the room.

At the center of the paneled office, a carved mahogany desk faced a stone fireplace with a large-screen TV above. Crimson drapes framed bay windows which overlooked the pond. Roby slid open a side drawer on the desk and pulled out a blue felt bag. "Hold out your hands." He poured out a dozen silver coins into Lane's cupped palms.

"Wow," Lane said.

"Pure silver," Roby said.

"They all got holes," Lane said.

"They hung them around their necks to keep from getting conjured."

"They?"

"Slaves. There were at least a hundred on this place."

"Whoa."

"They took the lanyard off and put the coins in their mouths."

"What for?"

"Money for the afterlife," Roby said. He held the felt bag open.

"These are from dead people's mouths? Lane poured the coins back into the bag.

Roby dropped the bag back into the drawer. "Well, they didn't walk in here and hand them to us."

"I don't even want to know how you got these."

"Yes, you do. Come on. Let's get a bump for your college fund."

\* \* \*

On the ruins of the original antebellum house, Roby's father had built a fine brick house overlooking the pond. Roby and his father poked around in the woods, digging old trash piles where the servant quarters had been, finding pottery shards, buttons and nails. Then they discovered the low spots.

Lane had grown up in Oklahoma, where his mother cleaned people's teeth and patiently plotted her escape from his father. In the middle of his senior year, she chose Mississippi because it was cheap and within driving distance. Arriving at mid-term, Lane had struggled to fit in. The popular boys laughed at his small stature and mop of blond hair, which he tied up in a ponytail. They called him a sissy. He drove a weary VW beetle, a hand-me-down from his mother.

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Long-legged Roby raced down the narrow deer path then ducked off into the shadows of live oaks and dry scrub. Lane struggled to keep up.

"Over here," Roby said, squatting in a clear-

ing beside a row of ten rectangular low spots in the forest floor, each two feet wide by five feet long, all sunken about six inches. He dug with a small camp shovel, in a hurry.

“What is this?” Lane said, out of breath.

“This is where the coins are. At least some of them.” Roby was sweating, swatting mosquitoes, throwing red dirt up like dusty smoke.

“This is a trash pile?” Lane said.

“No, trash piles are mounds. There’s one behind the shack.”

Lane turned but saw no shack.

“Slave quarters. Right there.” Roby nodded to a cluster of thick vines and brush encircling a stand of rotting gray boards, the remains of a cabin.

Inside the leaning structure, Mbetha stood on the dirt floor, dappled light filtering down through pecan branches where the roof had been.

“Slaves lived there?” Lane said.

“Lived there.” Roby patted the brown leaves on the ground with his free hand. “Buried here.”

“You’re digging in a grave?” Lane said.

Roby’s shovel bottomed out, with a clunk. “There we are.”

“There we are what?” Lane said.

“You want to pull a coin?”

“No way.”

In the ruins of the shack, Mbetha raised a corner of his cloak and buried his face in the dusty cotton. His wide shoulders shuddered, then shook again, and he dropped to his knees.

“Help me get this dirt out. I ain’t staying here long,” Roby said.

Lane dropped to his knees and pulled dirt back from the hole.

Roby slung dirt like a badger, clawing up rotted wood. “We’re inside.”

“Inside?”

Roby reamed the shovel around to widen the hole.

In the dim shack, Mbetha gripped a vine and shook it hard, scattering doves high above, send-

ing dust and dry leaves floating down. He moved his lips in silent conversation.

The hair on Lane’s neck bristled. “What was that?”

Roby never broke stride. “Squirrel. Reach down in there and root around and see what you feel.”

Lane stared at the hole, mouth wide.

“Forget it.” Roby ran a muscled arm into the hole up to his shoulder.

“Are you in a coffin?” Lane felt cold, even though shirtless in the humid woods.

“Naw. It all feels like sawdust. I know we’re at the head because they buried them facing east. My dad showed me.”

Lane stood and backed up a step. He spread his fingers wide and looked at his hands, stained red with clay.

Roby pulled his arm out of the hole. “Nothing. Next!” He pointed the camp shovel down the row of low spots.

“We have to go,” Lane said.

“Fuck me. You do scare easy.”

“Let’s go.”

“There’s a ton of these coins. Real silver, all over this place.”

“You’re grave robbing.”

“They’re not graves. It’s just sawdust.” Roby laughed and slapped Lane on the back. “You can keep whatever you find. My dad won’t even know.”

“No.”

He put his arm around Lane’s shoulder. He smoothed the boy’s blond hair and teasingly tugged on his ponytail. “Your mother is flossing teeth to send you to junior college, and you don’t want some of this? I’m trying to help you, brother.”

For Lane, it was always like this with Roby, having to respond, or defend or explain. “I’m not coming back out here,” he said, shaking free then moving down the deer path in the direction of the house.

Roby quick-stepped onto the path beside

him. "Okay, look. No more about the coins. I told you; this is my dad's deal."

"It's wrong, man," Lane said, not stopping.

Roby grabbed Lane's shoulders and spun him around. "Come on. We got one more good week to fish, then it's all over. Let's reset the whole thing. Forget the coins." He held up his hands in a high five to Lane.

Lane high-fived, weakly.

They passed within inches of Mbetha, standing beneath an ancient live oak. He stepped onto the path behind them. His lips moved, praying Lane would come back tomorrow.

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Lane came back. The rusty box with the rock on top was still beneath the loblolly tree.

"Let's do the deep end," Roby said, pointing to the far side of the pond.

They waded out thirty yards from the bank. Roby cast a blue worm. Lane threw a glittery black worm in the other direction.

"What the hell?" Roby said.

"What?" Lane said.

Roby was tilting to his left, lower on one side than the other, staring down into the water. "Something on my foot." Roby strained to free his left leg, his rod dipping underwater.

"Shit," Roby said.

"You good there?" Lane said.

Roby didn't look good, sinking lower, the water over his bare stomach. He was tilting from the pressure on his left leg. "Something's pulling me." Roby's jaw was set, his eyes big behind his glasses.

Lane waded toward him.

"It's taking me under." Roby was lower now, the water at his sternum, just his shoulders and head above water, his rod gone.

"Roby!" Lane said, wading faster. He dropped his rod, letting it sink. "Hold out your hands." Lane gripped Roby's forearms and leaned straight back, pulling hard.

Roby was still sinking, his neck at the water-

line, eyes wide, glasses crooked. "Pull!"

"I'm pulling!"

"Fuck!" Roby's chin was now at the waterline. He spluttered and shook his head from side to side. His glasses tilted off into the water.

Lane dove down, grabbed Roby's torso and pulled. Nothing. He pulled again. Desperate for air, he let go and surfaced.

"Roby!" he screamed, bursting above the waterline. Roby was gone, the water gently rippling, silent. Lane dove down again, fanning his hands across the muddy bottom, feeling only silt. He opened his eyes and saw green-glass sunlight high above. He surfaced. The pond was smooth.

A bubble, then more bubbles. Roby exploded from beneath the water as if shot from a cannon, gasping, spluttering, his face white, grabbing for his throat.

Lane lunged, wrapping Roby in a bear hug, barely able to get his arms around him. He dug his toes into the muddy bottom, guiding the flailing Roby onto the shore. Roby lay on his back, gripping his throat, hacking, coughing, hair wild, chest straining to find a breath. Lane rolled him onto his stomach and up on all fours.

"Holy shit. What happened to you?"

"I got no idea," Roby croaked, gulping air. "It was all black. A swirling noise, like being pulled into a drain. Then I was in a hole looking up and a hand was reaching down and sticking fingers in my mouth. I thought I was going to die." He lay face down on his forearms.

Lane leaned back on his elbows on the pine needles. He shaded his eyes from the late afternoon sun and saw, thirty yards in front of him, a broad-shouldered Black man standing chest deep in the pond. The man cupped a handful of water, letting it drip through his large fingers. He pressed his palms together, as if in prayer. He moved his lips, speaking without sound.

"Who is that?" Lane said.

Roby raised up. "I can't see without my glasses. Who's who?"

"He's gone."

"Who's gone?"

"There was a Black guy standing in the water."

"The yard man can't swim," Roby said, laying back down.

Lane walked to the water's edge and stared out at the placid green surface. Mbetha, draped in his shroud, now stood on the far bank in a spot of light beneath a towering sycamore. His hands were outstretched with his palms up.

"You have to put the coins back," Lane said.

Roby raised up and sat on his haunches, barefoot, muscled, tan.

"Why?"

"He told me."

"Who?"

"The guy."

"The Black guy you saw who wasn't there?"

"Put them back."

"What the fuck are you talking about? My dad would go batshit."

"Tell your dad to stop digging."

"We're not going to stop. It's money just lying on the ground."

"It's money people need."

"Dead people don't need money, dude."

"Stay here," Lane said. He bolted up the hill, across the dry lawn then into the back door of the house. Leaving muddy tracks, he raced down the hall to the study. He yanked open the desk drawer and grabbed the sack of coins. Lane returned, breathless, and dropped the sack of coins on the pine needles in front of Roby, who sat with his back against the tree, smoking a cigarette.

"Okay, you want to take a couple, go for it." Roby said. "There's tons more low spots we can dig."

Lane dropped to his knees in front of Roby. He gripped the front of Roby's throat with his small hand and squeezed. He pushed his face into Roby's face.

"You don't get it. These are like magic or something."

Roby ripped Lane's hand away. "You are a superstitious little shit, aren't you?"

Lane opened the box. He examined the red-tipped match, then dropped it back in. He opened the string tie on the bag and poured the coins into the box, the clanking silver echoing across the serene pond. He latched the lid.

"You are such a baby," Roby said.

"I'm giving them back."

"They're not yours to give."

"You stole them from dead people."

Roby slapped Lane, knocking him over, sending the box rattling down the bank toward the water.

Lane gathered himself, muddy on his pale chest, bleeding from his lip. He picked up the box then waded into the water, ankle deep.

"What is this?" Roby said. "You're the one acting conjured. You are so weird. They were right about you."

Lane walked further into the dark green pool. When the water reached his waist, he dipped the metal box under. He walked forward holding the box out in front like an offering, until the water covered his chest.

"I'm not helping you, dumbass. If you fall in that hole you're on your own," Roby called, reclining against the tree.

Lane felt rough hands cover his hands. He closed his eyes and exhaled, then pulled his hands away. He moved backwards, into water up to his waist, then his thighs, then his ankles, until he stepped onto the muddy bank.

"Hope you're happy now," Roby said. He tilted his head back and exhaled a long string of smoke. "I'll send the yard man in there to get them tomorrow."

"No, you won't."

"Well, I'm not leaving them there, and I'm sure as hell not getting in that water anytime soon."

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Mbetha scraped the red-tipped head of the

match against the rough board wall of the shack. The smoke spiraled upwards as the match flared. He moved through the doorway and dropped the match into a pile of brown leaves. They smoldered, then snapped into an eager flame which licked on the dry wood and spread outward into pine needles and twigs.

He leaned down and blew on the flame, guiding it toward the deer path. The fire obeyed, bolting up with a whirl of wind, gathering speed, stretching out wider into the willing tinder of late summer. The flames caught brittle brush on both sides of the path then, like two lines of troops, began marching in the direction of the wide lawn, the rose garden, the hedges, and the wood-shingled roof of the fine brick house overlooking the cool pond.

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“Go to the house and bring my extra glasses. I’m blind,” Roby said.

“Where are they?”

“Nightstand.”

Lane stared toward the pond. “Sure,” he said.

“Hurry the fuck up.” Roby leaned against the loblolly tree and lit another cigarette. “Moron,” he whispered, as Lane took off up the hill.

When Lane reached the porch, he smelled smoke. He walked to the side of the house and saw flames coming toward him, up the path from the shack.

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Roby heard the VW crank in the driveway. He squinted to make out the shape as it moved toward the main road.

“Hey!” he called, waving his arms. “Hey!” He smelled wood smoke and saw a blurry orange glow in the tall pines behind the house. “Hey, Lane! Lane!” he yelled, frantically swinging his arms, feeling the heated wind in his face.

Driving into town, Lane passed Roby’s father coming the other way, heading for the house. He

pulled his cap down over his eyes and angled his face away as the sleek BMW passed.

At the water’s edge, Roby heard a horn honk. Then again. And again. His father shouted from the driveway.

“Roby! Roby!”

The horizon behind the house was swirling red, a wall of fire rocketing into the twilight sky. Orange flames engulfed the wood roof, the winds pushing shards of burning cedar shingles onto the dry lawn. Flames spread across the grass, then began marching down the hill toward the pond, pinning Roby at the water’s edge.

“Daddy!” Roby called, covering his mouth from the heavy gray smoke. “I can’t see you. I got no glasses. I can’t get up the hill.” He took a step backwards, his feet sinking into the green water. He backed up another step, to his ankles. He bit his lip.

“Daddy!” he cried, the heat pushing him further. He sat down, the cool water covering his waist. He pushed off from the muddy bank, floated out on his back, then began to sink like he was weighted, like something was pulling him from below.

“Daddy!” he called.

The ripples settled. The still pond reflected a cloudless sky above and swirling flames on the bank.

In the shack, Mbetha reached into the box and retrieved the last coin, the silver dime from long ago. He kissed the coin then placed it on his tongue, like a wafer. He followed the others toward the row of low spots and disappeared into the smoke. ▲▼▲