

*Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen

“Who’s got tobacco? I need some tobacco.”

It was a whisper, but loud, cutting from the corner where the new man sat. I had me some tobacco. It was just shredded bottom leaf that I’d been chewing to spit on the roses but I’d kept some back in a wrapped piece of sacking inside my shirtdress, tied round my waist on a piece of string. I didn’t say a word. You come on things, things to keep, and you keep them to trade for other things. Things you need. Like pork fat. Or pennies.

He chuckled, low and rippling. Sounded like a low wind through willows, that small laugh, or maybe water moving over round rocks. Deep and soft.

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“I’ll trade,” he whispered. “I’ll trade something for a lip of tobacco.”

I thought, What you got to trade? You come in naked as the day you was born, come in bad with whip marks all up and down your back, not even a set of clothes or canvas pants and you’re ready to go to trading? I didn’t say it, but I thought it. And he like to read my thoughts.

“What I got to trade, what I got to trade for a lip of tobacco is letters. I knows letters. I’ll trade A, B, and C for a lip of chew.” He laughed again.

And there I was, with the tobacco in my dress and he said that and I didn’t know what letters was, nor what they meant, but I thought it might be something I wanted to know. To learn.

So mammy she was sleeping, her breath moving in and out, and I wiggled out of the pile of young ones and moved to the dark corner and set my ownself next to him. “What’s a letter?”

He smiled. “You sound like you’ve got tobacco.”

“Not until I know what a letter is...”

“Why, it’s reading. You learn the letters first and then when you know them you string them together into words. I’ll trade you three letters for a lipful.”

I knew about reading. It was something that the people in the white house did from paper. They could read words on paper. But we weren’t allowed to be reading. We weren’t allowed to understand or read nothing but once I saw some funny lines on the side of a feed sack. It said: 100 lbs.

I wrote them down in the dirt with a stick and mammy gave me a smack on the back of the head that like to drove me into the ground.

“Don’t you take to that, take to writing,” she said.

“I wasn’t doing it. I was just copying something I saw on a feed sack.”

“Don’t. They catch you doing that and they’ll think you’re learning to read. You learn to read and they’ll whip you till your skin hangs like torn rags. Or cut your thumb off. Stay away from writing and reading.”

So I did. But I remembered how it had looked, the drawings on the sack and in the dirt, and it still puzzled me. I dug in my dress and found the tobacco but held it.

“You saying you can read?”

He nodded.

“I give you something to read, you can read it? Just like that?”

“I can.”

There was some yellow light from the windows of the big house and it came through the doorway and made a light patch on the dirt floor.

“Come on.”

I led him to the light patch and squatted. I used my finger to scratch what I remembered in the dirt. The floor was hard packed and I had to rub hard to make it show right.

“There.”

He squatted and squinted.

“Why, those ain’t letters. Those are numbers.”

“Numbers?”

He nodded. “Sure is. Says one hundred. Then there’s those three letters on the end. They don’t work for me as a word. Just L B S—don’t say a word. It must mean something to somebody.”

“Can you teach me that?”

“To read?”

“To read what I just put there in the dirt—can you teach me?”

He rubbed his chin. “Well, mought be if I had some tobacco...”