

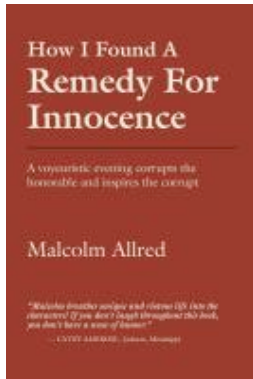
How I Found A Remedy For Innocence

A voyeuristic evening corrupts the honorable and inspires the corrupt

Malcolm Allred

“Malcolm breathes unique and riotous life into the characters! If you don't laugh throughout this book, you don't have a sense of humor.”

— CATHY AMBROSE, Jackson, Mississippi



Unique characters guide an intricate plot brimming with rowdy humor in this fun read with a bit of a dark side. Humiliated by his “toxic” virginity, young Jack seeks liberation, first in the arms of his true love, who happens to be girlfriend to the jealous captain of the football team, then with a married woman whose mate is a known brute. Adding to his woes is the plausible rumor that his mother murdered his father!

How I Found a Remedy for Innocence

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6399.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Your Free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

**HOW I FOUND A
REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE**

Malcolm Allred

Copyright © 2012 Malcolm Allred

ISBN 978-1-62141-738-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2012

First Edition

To find out more about the author
and browse additional books written by him, visit

<http://malcolmallred.blogspot.com/> or <http://www.malcolmallred.com/>

Chapter 14

Willie received an extra helping for breakfast next morning. "Good boy," I told him as I sat in the backyard and scratched his ears. "Sorry I was so late feeding you last night. I'll go by Mr. Kosser's store and get you a soup bone to make up for it. Okay?"

Of course, that was fine with Willie. He and I lounged in the warm morning sun for nearly an hour, he with his thoughts of squirrels and bitches, me with mine of doom and humiliation. A few of the trees that were scattered across the grounds of Cherokee Rose had begun to sprinkle the yard with leaves, dotting the grassy lawn that had sprouted little since its trimming by Moses Slay last week. Winter was on its way, I thought absently. Another year, another universal milestone, another scene in life's relentless march toward death.

Josephine had saddled me with despondency. Those angry words of hers had peeled away the artificial layers of self-defense -- the self-serving vindication and denials -- that I had used to disregard my own corruption. Her words - those cursed blades of contempt! - had exposed me. Now I was repugnant and cheap in my own eyes. A low-life Peeping Tom. A liar. I even puked on people. I prayed Uncle Jim never learned the truth.

Sprawled there in the warm grass, trying hard to justify behavior that was unforgivable, I found myself hungering once again for the comfort I'd found in the arms of Linda Murray. There, in that dark bedroom, when our breathing had slowed, I had found something for which I had been unconsciously searching: A peacefulness, a contentment I had never known and, I suspected, only two people who love each other could know. A warm, wet, delirious hideaway where fears and cares are suspended in time. An exclusive province secure from alcoholics and bullies. A snug domain where concern for the

future did not exist. Josephine's opinion of me would be of little consequence if I were in bed with Linda this morning. Neither would the pending entry of my name into the "Gastronomical Curiosities" section of the Guinness Book of World Records. The physical act of making love was insulation from the real world, a private respite from mere existence. But, I was dismally aware, the spell was cast only from the moment you slipped beneath the covers until the moment you were forced to leave them.

The telephone rang, and I ran back inside to answer. My friend Archie returned my hello and asked what I had planned for the day. I had planned a brief trip to Paris for dinner and drinks this evening, I told him, but decided to cancel so that I could hang around and play a round of eight ball with my buddy. No, Archie said, he'd just called to tell me he had "things I gotta do around here. Come on over if you want to. It's safer over here."

"Barbara around?" I asked without thought to honor. "Does she bathe in the mornings, too?"

He said no, Barbara was visiting a girlfriend. So I declined the invitation. "Call me back if she comes in early," I told him. "Maybe I'll spend the night."

"Sure thing. I got some things to talk over with you anyway. Some plans."

"Like what? A plan to get Jerry's dad's money back?"

"I don't want to talk about it over the phone. Remember, this phone has ears. It can wait. By the way, I'm sorry about running off like that last night. It was Jerry's idea."

"Forget it," I said.

"Josephine was hell. What a bitch!"

"Yep."

"That was something, wasn't it?"

"Yep."

"Sabrina, I mean. Woman sure has a mean curve ball."

He'd already talked to Jerry, who also had some very important yard work planned. Yeah, sure, I thought as I hung up, any excuse to stay home where you're safe. I may be chicken, but I'm not by myself.

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

So I was faced with a lonesome Sunday. Maybe...

If Coach Murray's car was not in their driveway, maybe...

No, I shivered. I ain't brave enough to even call her, much less visit her at home. There was that invitation to cut the lawn, though...

Maybe later in the week...

Breakfast, then. Fried eggs and crisp salt pork, grits, and eight or ten of Mama Mary's huge brown biscuits, all coated with a thick layer of fresh country butter. Maybe a pancake or two drowned in a big puddle of black sorghum molasses. And some French toast. Doggone! I thought. I must be hungry! And what if Coach Murray happens by the cafe? I'd just shoot him, I decided, and finish my breakfast.

I saddled up in jock strap, pistol, and pants, pulled on a warm shirt, socks, and shoes, locked the front door behind me, and shouted for Willie. "Come on, old buddy," I told him when he rounded the corner of the house in his trademark three-legged gallop, "you can tarry outside the door and covet what you smell on my plate inside the cafe. If there's any left over, which I doubt, I'll bring it out for you. Ain't I good to you, boy?"

Willie, of course, once again agreed, and we strolled together toward the cafe. The breeze of yesterday had died down, the clouds had disappeared, and already the sun had warmed the sidewalks of Smith Station to a temperature approaching an invigorating comfortableness. Must be nearly sixty-five degrees already, I thought happily, and it'll get to seventy-five or eighty by mid-afternoon. Maybe I'll spend the afternoon lounging along the shore of Davis Lake. Maybe some of the girls will be water-skiing in short shorts or skimpy bathing suits. Willie would like an afternoon at the lake, too. Maybe there'll be a squirrel to make the afternoon interesting for him, or a bitch to make him crazy.

The cafe was nearly empty. Only one reprobate, a rascal no doubt miserable at his loss in a poker game of last evening, sat in a far corner loudly gulping his coffee. For, despite the wicked appeal of Mama Mary's gay music and the maddening aroma of her seasoned fried sausage, most of the people of Smith Station were sufficiently pious that Sunday mornings were generally reserved for family, Sunday School, and church. Only those of us of selfish and immoral persuasion

ignored the Call of the Baptist Ladies and engaged in less demanding and more enjoyable entertainment on these reverent occasions. I, like my uncle, was aware of my eccentricity via my colorful ancestry, and of the accepted indulgence by the citizens of Smith Station of our heathen mania. The same irreligious behavior in those of lesser name was often viewed in an entirely different vein.

Willie took a seat outside, and Mama Mary waved me to a stool and took my order with an unusually serene and cheerful tranquility. Her mellow euphoria was reflected in the soft sound of the jukebox. Instead of Elvis pounding the walls with rock, Johnny Mathis and Pat Boone hummed tender love songs. "Nice," I said as I watched her cook and thought irresistibly of last Friday night. "Some mornings are made for love songs."

She wiped her lips with her all-purpose rag, smearing and then removing the powdery evidence of a taste-test from her prim mustache. "Suppose so," she drawled in her gravel voice, wisps of gray hair flying. "If I was sixteen again, I'd know damn well so."

Her spatula clicked and scraped about the hot grill in a metallic ceremony I knew by heart. "Shoot!" she said once. Her wrinkled yellow cigarette drooped with ash as she turned to me and placed her elbows on the counter opposite me. She said, "You're looking more like your dad every day, Jack." A bare smile lit her face. "Hope you ain't the cut-up he was."

Aha! I thought. An opportunity to learn a little history. "What did he do that was so bad, Mama Mary?"

She thought for a minute. "Well, there was the time some fool passing through bet your dad he could grab the spokes on the rear wheels of your dad's A-model so's he couldn't go anywhere. Your dad got the bet up to fifty dollars. That fool did twelve flips before he landed on the roof of the post office. Wonder it didn't kill the poor bastard."

"That wasn't too wild," I said. "What else? Something really juicy." She grinned wickedly. "Wouldn't do to tell."

"I wish he hadn't died so young. Tell me about that, Mama Mary."

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

She tapped her cheek with the butt of her smoke and glanced about the cafe. "It was a shame," she said, pushing away from the counter. "A real shame."

"He got sick right here in the café, didn't he?" I said before she could get away. "Uncle Jim told me that. He died at home, though."

Without turning to me she said, "I really don't want to talk about it."

"He ate something that didn't agree with him."

"Toe-main," she mumbled. "Died. At home."

"They never did find out what he ate that caused the ptomaine, did they?"

Mama Mary's cheeks had reddened as she wheeled about. Her mellow euphoria had disappeared. "No, they didn't, Jack. Didn't Jim explain that to you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Some."

"Whatever it was spoiled he ate, Jack," she said frostily, "he didn't eat it here. I can tell you that. He had them hot tamales, with lots of peppers the way I fix 'em. He always liked them hot tamales, the hotter the better. But that ain't what killed him. Twenty other folks had them tamales that day, and none of them got sick. You ask Doctor Blake. He tended your dad. He'll tell you. Ask him."

"I didn't mean..." I began. But Mary had stalked away.

A frigid silence ensued as she opened her freezer and removed several packages of frozen meat and vegetables. I squirmed, angry with myself that I had been so insensitive. "Sorry, Mama Mary," I said as she walked past. "I didn't mean anything."

A sigh indicated she had forgiven me as she paused to lean again on the counter opposite me. "I believe you. But didn't Jim tell you about it?"

"Sure. But he doesn't like to talk about it much, either."

"Good. It's better left alone."

Mary pulled the bent butt of her cigarette from between her lips so that she could speak more plainly. She must have wondered if I still had doubts about her innocence, for she continued, "Doctor Blake said Cherokee Jack could have ate something bad the day before."

"I know, Mama Mary. I'm sorry if you got the wrong idea."

"Your mama had some of them same tamales, but not so hot. She didn't get sick."

"Did she go home, too, when they helped my father get back to Cherokee Rose?"

"I think so."

"She didn't make it to the funeral."

Mary shook her head. "Nobody saw her after that day. Nobody knows what happened to her."

Which made me wonder again just how my mother got away without anybody noticing. "Were any of their cars missing next day?" I asked.

Mary shook her head "no," then, "How would I know? I never heard if there was."

"Then she must have met somebody else," I said, "and they left town together."

Mary tossed her head and almost lost her stub of roll-your-own. She grabbed it before it flew across the grill, then fumbled clumsily before clamping the stub between her teeth. She grunted, "There wasn't anybody else, Jack. Your mother was a good person. It's the men that are usually the skunks." She pulled at the remnant of butt, then held the dead scrap upright between two fingers. Tiny smears of white paper clung to her wrinkled upper and lower lips where the disintegrating wrapper had resisted her efforts.

I said, "I know you're right, Mama Mary."

A triumphant glow lit her face as she backed away and smashed the distorted fragment of cigarette on the concrete floor. "Ready for them eggs?"

As additional customers arrived, I ate breakfast in the muted clamor of a clicking spatula, cracking eggs, and conversation subdued by the Sabbath. I couldn't help but wonder where my mother might be. The Caribbean? Hollywood? Graveyard? Or murdered, quartered, and flung into an old cistern? Maybe Jim did it. Maybe he murdered her when he figured she poisoned his brother.

"Toe-main poisoning," I thought. Our "Encyclopedia Britannia" indicated the illness was caused not by "ptomaine," but by "botulism

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

microorganisms." They could have lived in a can of spoiled beans. What an unromantic way to die.

This was Willie's lucky day. My conversation with Mary, premonitions of disaster and scandal, and possibly the subtle fear that Coach Murray might suddenly appear, all combined to repress my appetite. A breakfast fit for Lassie was Willie's reward for guarding the door.

How best to tuck a thirty-eight into swim trunks? That was the question of the moment after Willie and I were home preparing for our trip to the lake. The prospect of being labeled "Muledick Smith" was not an unpleasant thought, though it soon became obvious after the gun was in that critical position that swim trunks had not the support of jeans. The barrel, the whole thing, jock strap and all, would tumble into view alongside other valuables at any immoderate stride. Experiments at various positions and angles failed to satisfy the need for both protection and confidentiality, and I finally decided to leave the pistol in the station wagon and trust that I could reach it quickly if I needed it. Surely the coach wouldn't visit Lake Davis today. But what about Linda and the kids? The prospect was stimulating.

The Grandfather clock was striking eleven when Willie and I left the driveway of Cherokee Rose and headed south toward Lake Davis. Willie road the suicide seat with his head hung from his window, barking at every movement along the streets and highway of our route. I made no effort to curb his rowdy behavior; this was to be a day strictly for our relaxation and enjoyment. How better to cheer an old dog than to put the wind in his face and consent to his howls of pleasure?

There was one stop I wanted to make before going on to the lake, one I had put off for some time, and Sunday was the right day for it. When we neared the arched wrought-iron gate that led into the Smith Station Cemetery, I slowed and turned into the gravel road that wound its way up and down the shallow slopes of the graveyard. Our family plot occupied a prominent position near the center of the grounds, its vaults and stones rising above the enclosing iron fence. Several generations of my ancestors resided here, and there was room for more. The Smiths planned for the future.

MALCOLM ALLRED

While Willie bounded from stone to stone engaged in a frenzied whirlwind of awkward territorial marking that would have horrified the Baptist Ladies, I approached the gravestone that marked the spot where my father's remains were lain to rest. Cherokee Jack's stone was identified not by his alias, but by the name given him at birth: Jefferson Jackson Smith. Beneath were the dates of his life: 1919 - 1942. The rest of the large headstone contained the usual hopeful rhetoric, a verse from the scriptures, and a worn "Gone-But-Not-Forgotten." Tiny angels haloed the perimeter. I stood before the marker and suffered the usual depression that comes with the regret and the silent wishes for what might have been. I was alone. Alone now, alone, it seemed, despite my uncle, for all my life. The bright morning sun was no cheer. I was alone. After a few minutes reflection, I spoke to my father.

"You son of a bitch," I said.

There was nothing to indicate that my words had stirred him to response. No sudden breeze. No cloud to hide the sun. The ground didn't shake.

"Don't you know I needed you?" I said. "For homework. For advice. To tell me how best to find and screw girls. Just to be there? You deserted me."

I waited for a reply and got none.

"You went and died on me. I'll never forgive you for that, dad. You son of a bitch."

Graveyards are most always quiet. They can be located near a highway or a steel yard or an apartment complex, but they always have a special stillness about them that commands at least some respect, even from the least devout among us. The psychological chill that comes with entrapment within a cemetery's iron boundaries gripped me now, and with a shiver that was fear and remorse, but not true repentance, I continued, "Sorry, dad. I know this was not the way you intended things." I turned to go to the wagon. "Have a good day," I called over my shoulder. "See you next trip."

Lake Davis was a manmade lake of approximately one-hundred-fifty acres, an algae-laden, stump-filled, drab pool of green water trapped by tree-covered hills on three sides, and a dirt levee on the other. A gravel road traversed about one half its perimeter, its

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

course intersected often by gravel turnouts to the waterline. The remaining shoreline was frequented only by those willing to hoof it, a complication that increased its appeal to the younger crowd. Generally, they could walk a hundred yards, more or less, along a tree-studded trail that began at the end of the access road, and find sanctuary from parents, adults, and peers.

I visited here often; the spot I usually chose for lounging and napping in the sun was frequently selected by others as well. "Bare Butt Cove," as some youthful bard had christened it, was something of a teenagers' watering hole. Several hundred yards from road's end, pines, oaks, dogwoods, magnolias, sweet gums, sycamores, and a variety of smaller species of trees shielded the small hollow from anyone traversing the walking trail. Yet it was quite visible from the lake, and the hooked-arm channel that permitted access to the main body of water was a favorite of those of us who spent much of each summer fishing, skiing, and swimming its murky depths. After sunset, because of its unique advantages, Bare Butt Cove was often exploited in the name of love. Archie's ideas regarding the endurance of the average pair of panties were possibly inspired by his perceptive observations in this hollow, for a torn pair drooping from a tree branch was not an unusual sight.

After shoving my pistol under the front seat of the station wagon, I grabbed my towel and called Willie. Together we followed the worn path through the woods until we reached the less obvious trail that meandered farther and ended finally on a slight ridge overlooking BBC. As most of Smith's Station's residents were either still in Sunday School or church, or were otherwise observing the holy day, the hollow was deserted when Willie and I reached it, and I was able to select an advantageous knoll near the center to place my towel, remove my jeans and T-shirt, and stretch contentedly in the cool air and warm sunlight. Across the lake at the boat landing, another sacrilegious soul was launching his boat, and soon the buzz of an outboard added to the numbing influence of sunshine. A breeze whispered among the pine needles overhead. Nearby a squirrel barked. Birds chirped noisily. My watchdog lay at my feet. The most delicious sense of relaxation I'd felt in a week dazed me, mind and body, and, as per plan, Willie and I were

soon engrossed in that most pleasant of adventures, dozing and dreaming.

Trials and tribulations were forgotten. Reminiscences of wet kisses and damp skin were summoned. In a wandering coma I dreamed good dreams. I pined for Linda, and supposed she loved me, that she would leave her husband and come to live with me. We would stay awake together for hours every night, our bed trembling from the onslaught of our passion. I would eventually take Tommy and Barbara Ann for my own. Uncle Jim would approve. Coach would approve. Then both would conveniently disappear.

An hour passed. Two. The rattle of the solitary outboard motor was replaced by the churning of several. On more than one occasion, laughter and Willie's reliable barking marked the approach of newcomers to Bare Butt Cove. I was not so disturbed that I was completely revived, but each time I raised my body just enough to assure the harmlessness of the new arrivals, waved halfheartedly if I knew them, then returned to the drowsy rapture of sunlight and fantasy. This was ecstasy. And since home meant only loneliness and fear I would, I decided, stay here in BBC all afternoon. And I might have done just that, contentedly snoozing and dreaming the day away, if Saxon Browne had not awakened me.

The persistent efforts as I lay dozing to recollect every detail of the night with Linda Murray must have addled my brain and stimulated the creation of dozens of curious mental images, each of which had two themes in common: nudity, and sex. The fantasy being played inside my head at the moment Saxon bent to nudge my shoulder was centered between the comfortable thighs of Sabrina of the Sultan's Harem, and the difficulty she was experiencing with an encumbered Ping-Pong ball. Of course, I was always one to help a lady when she had trouble with her Ping-Pong balls, and had stooped to examine the difficulty when Saxon first spoke. Through a haze I imagined Sabrina's voice, and with sure finesse attempted to tweak the ball from its lodging. My fingers surrounded it, and gently squeezed. Sabrina sighed. Saxon bumped my shoulder and spoke more firmly. "Jack! Wake up!"

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

I tugged gently at the ball and whispered my undying gratitude to Sabrina for allowing me to help with her problem. Sabrina groaned and responded by squeezing my free hand.

"Jack!"

Sunlight blinded me as I tried to open my eyes. For a moment I stared disbelievingly as a face moved to block it out. Saxon Browne's long hair tickled my cheeks. Her beautiful white teeth shone in a smile. Her hand was on mine. My other hand, I realized with a jolt of horror, was in my swim trunks. And that was no Ping-Pong ball I had grabbed!

Saxon Browne was a lady. If I had not known before, I recognized this now when she turned aloofly to examine pine trees and squirrels' nests and allowed me time to discreetly withdraw the scandalous hand from my trunks. I quickly pushed myself to my knees as she seated herself carefully upon a corner of my towel and pulled her darling legs beneath her. Willie stretched beside her and watched her movements. So I sat, too shocked to speak, and stared, the dagger piercing my belly with familiar fierceness.

She wore a dark blue bathing suit of the kind meant to cleverly cover all the right places, yet be cunning enough to expose tempting fringes of protrusions, as well as to divulge the body's delicate impressions to even a barely imaginative observer. I examined her every bulge, every crevice, intently, covetously, until the moment she turned to speak.

"We were skiing," she said demurely. "I saw you lying here, and decided to stop and say hello."

"I'm glad," I said.

With a jolt I recognized an internal uneasiness. I even sounded nervous! And where were the words I wanted to say to the woman to whom I had mutely given my eternal love when she was ten and I was nine? "I'M GLAD?" Lousy! Not only lousy, but now, nothing better came to mind! I was a blank. A speechless blockhead. A simpleton. We sat in awkward silence while I desperately struggled for verse.

"Daddy will be back to pick me up in just a minute," she said finally. She turned to gaze at the boats circling the lake, their tethered escorts in close pursuit. "I just wanted to say hello."

Her skin was naturally pale, and the sun had begun to color it. She would have a light sunburn. I wondered if her skin would have a warm taste from the sunburn. Her lips were a wonderful pink without the need for sun or makeup. I wanted to see her tongue, too. Did it match her lips? I wanted to lick her teeth. Were they as slick and clean as they looked? Maybe bite her neck and nibble her ears.

"Let's start over," I said. "I'm awake now. Hello."

"Been here long?" she asked as she turned back to me. "You're getting burned."

Eyeing her legs, which were somewhat reddened from exposure, I said, "So are you. Your beautiful knees will ache tonight."

"Oh?" She snickered delicately. "You think my knees are beautiful?"

"God, yes! I really like you, Saxon," I blurted with sudden audacity. "Every since I was in the fourth grade."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I don't remember you in fourth grade."

My face must have become a crimson beacon of embarrassment. I turned away and coughed. I wished, as I turned back to her after that uneasy moment, that she would say something, maybe ask a question with an easy answer. But she only watched with seeming indifference as I struggled. I finally managed, "I could never forget you!"

"I was kidding." She grinned. "I remember you well in fourth grade."

Suddenly everything was okay. "You were just playing with me, weren't you?" I giggled. The moment the words were out I pictured myself with a straw hat and a weed between my teeth, making yuk-yuk-yuk noises.

"Maybe I wanted to see you squirm."

I giggled stupidly. Yuk-yuk-yuk.

"Did you really sneak up on those people out at the gravel pit? What did you expect to see?"

Damn Melba and her big mouth! Was there anyone left in the county except Coach who hadn't heard? "I have no idea how my name was associated with such a crude and disgusting affair as that," I said.

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

"I was home reading at the time. Moby Dick. Herman Melville." Melville? I thought. Now why did I come up with "Melville?"

"And you're a liar, too."

"I swear. Kinda."

She raised her eyebrow and shook her head. Why couldn't I be a good liar? She said, "Okay. I won't pry. For now. But sometime, I want to know the truth. I want to know what you saw." Her eyes cut villainously. "In detail. Blow by blow. Or should I say, stroke by stroke?"

"I can't very well describe something I didn't see, can I?" I said. "I'm innocent. And how come you know such vile words? Stroke by stroke! I don't believe you said that."

"I get around, babe."

"Talk. Talk is all. Everybody knows you're as naive as you look. Anybody who looks at you can tell you're pure as spring rain."

She nodded and looked away, her smile gone. "Sure I am. That's the way men want their women, don't they? Pure. Virgin. That's what I am, Jack." She stared out at the lake. "Wholesome Saxon Browne. Never been kissed. Not even on the forehead."

I had the urge to kneel and kiss her toes one by one. I said, "How about on your..." I thought better of it. I was already sounding like something of a nut. "You sound like you're fed up with purity."

"Perry and I aren't seeing each other tonight." She eyed a nearby group who lounged on their beach towels as she leaned to scratch Willie's ears. She studied my buddy intently and said, "We're going through one of our difficult spells. We may even stop seeing each other."

"Yeah?" I said happily. "That's terrible. Horrible. A real shame."

"It's not a pleasant time for me."

"I'll bet," I said. "But just think about Perry! I bet he can't keep his mind on football for worrying about losing you! Hell, he might even lose a game because of mental incapacitation!"

I watched her teeth as they smiled and she said, "You're sweet."

"You can bet I'd never give you up without a helluva fight!"

"I know you wouldn't. You're a real gentleman. When you're not sneaking around looking in parked cars."

"I told you..."

"Never mind. Where were we?"

"I was a gentleman. And I was about to predict that Perry will come whimpering back to you, begging forgiveness. You'll probably take him back, too. Doggone it."

I trembled as she smiled and leaned forward to cradle my chin in the palms of her hands. "Sweet little boy," she cooed. "Thank you for saying that. It makes me feel better."

Good god! I thought. Romeo, move over! Here comes Jack!

"Your hands are so soft," I said. "Little rose petals."

"It won't be long until you have to start shaving." She withdrew her fingers from my cheeks in a prolonged, faint caress.

"I shave all the time," I said. "Beard's so rough I wear out a razor blade every time, too."

"Such an innocent boy, too. Such a sweet baby. I don't mind your little beard."

No doubt, Saxon was a goddess. An archangel! She adored my frailties! I felt humble, for with little effort, really only a smile or two, I, Jack Smith, had brought this angel to earth. "God, Saxon," I breathed heavily, "I've always loved you!"

"Since fourth grade," she said. "I could tell. In study hall the other day."

"Every since I first saw you! It started back in 1944, when I first laid eyes on you. I remember it well. I'd just got back from the big fight on Guam. The Japs, the blood and all. You've read about it. I came home. And there you were. You were... You still are... the most beautiful girl in the world!"

"Liar! You never went to Guam!"

"I'd lie every word if it would impress you, Saxon."

She faked a gasp. "Such a flatterer! Why, I didn't know you were such a rogue, Jack! Where have you been all my life?"

"Listen," I said eagerly, "if you're not seeing Perry tonight, maybe you and I..."

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

"Yes!" she said, as though she had already thought of it, "we could, couldn't we? Maybe we could ride up to Ginny's and have a Coke."

"That would be fun. Where's old Perry tonight? Guam, I hope."

"Oh, don't worry about that wimp." Her hair swished as she tossed her head and took my breath away. "I can be ready, oh, sixish. Will that be all right?"

"Perfect!" I said. A date with Saxon Browne? Fantastic! Impossible!

"You'll pick me up?" she said, her eyes sparkling. "Six o'clock?"

"I'll be there."

In an old Plymouth station wagon. Maybe she won't notice. Wonder if Jerry will loan me his Chevy? Maybe I'll just steal a car.

"Oh, we'll have such fun, Jack," she was saying as I prepared myself mentally. She squeezed my hands playfully. "Actually, I've wanted you to ask me for a date for a long, long time. Really."

"I've been a fool, Saxon," I said. "I thought since you and Perry..."

"Don't even mention that name, Jack." With a frown she pulled her hands from mine. "I get mad when I hear it."

"Great!" I said.

"There's my dad."

The sound of the outboard motor had been lost on me, so heated had been my attention to my idol and her words. She jumped to her feet, wiggled her fingers at me in parting, and pattered away toward where her father waited in his small cruiser. Mr. Browne was a dairy farmer, and had profited quite well by his trade.

"Bye, Saxon," I shouted after her. It was her father who turned to wave to me as he gunned the engine. Then Saxon's hand fluttered briefly above the windshield as the boat backed away. I watched until they reached the ramp on the opposite shore, and there began to pack their skis and vests and to prepare their boat for winching onto its trailer. Six o'clock, I thought with a start. And it must be after three now. Gotta go!

With the passing of mid-afternoon, and on top of a mild sunburn, the October chill seeped into my body. By the time Willie and I reached Cherokee Rose, we were both shivering, despite closing all the windows and huddling side-by-side on the wagon's leather seat.

"Southern dogs we are, Willie," I confided to him. "Not used to this damn Yankee cold."

As we pulled into the driveway of Cherokee Rose, there was a thoroughly intimidating loneliness in the dull windows and lifeless porticos that belonged to the old house. Where in its past splendor there had been gaiety and frivolity, there now was peeling paint and mildew, wind-blown leaves, a stark desolateness that would sadden any compassionate observer. The forbidding spirit was further amplified when I pushed open the side door and fell back in the face of a humid breeze escaping the chilled rooms of the interior. There was a dank smell of bare earth, and I feared for a moment that a floor had disintegrated and fallen into the sodden basement. Paranoia, I thought then. Meatloaf Murray Malady. Football Fever. I kept a firm grip on the pistol and pointed inside. "Willie," I said, "you go first."

My trusted cripple accepted the offer and was soon sniffing about for crumbs under the kitchen table. Willie's nose detected no breach of security, and, his nonchalance having eased my fears, I proceeded to check in every room and under every bed to be certain we were alone. I wanted no visitors while I soaked in my tub. "Keep a close lookout, Willie," I told the noble guard dog, "and there'll be extra dog biscuits tonight." I took time to straighten Jim's bed covers, which lay where Jerry and Archie had tossed them. My own bed was made.

Jerry refused me the loan of his Chevy. After I had completed my bath and dressed, I dialed his number, and when his mother got him to the phone, asked the favor. "I don't loan out my Chevy to nobody," he said. "Much a buddy as you are, Jack, I just can't do it."

"But I got a date with Saxon Browne, Jerry!" I shouted. "I can't take her out in a trash-can-on-wheels!"

"YOU got a date with Saxon Browne? You finally asked her?"

"She practically begged me. It's something she's wanted for a long time, and I finally consented. The woman adores me."

"I can't believe it!" There was a long pause. "Hell," he said then, "I know I ain't gonna loan you my car now. One thing I don't tolerate is bullet holes in my car." He snickered. "You're nuts, Jack. Saxon is Perry Norman's private stock. When he finds out about this, he'll tie you to a tree and use your body for blocking practice."

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

"Saxon told me she and Perry might be breaking up."

"Hell, she's using you! She's just trying to make Perry jealous. She'll run right back to him once he's pulverized your ass. Women are like that."

"Not Saxon."

"You'll see."

There was nothing to do but attempt to diminish the abhorrent state of our station wagon. The old rattletrap was reliable, and not really so old. But covered with dirt and grime, one headlight broken completely out, the antenna bent where Archie had once "adjusted" it so that the Nashville rock station could be received more clearly, a cracked windshield, and the rear cargo space littered with empty Early Times pints, the vehicle would have, in my opinion, been better suited for Morgan's Auto Salvage than squatted in the driveway of an antebellum home. It even had black-wall tires.

I filled a trashcan with liquor bottles, empty cigarette packages, half-filled oilcans, and an assortment of other debris, then swept the seats and floor with a whisk broom. A wet rag removed from the body and windows whatever portion of grime had not become a permanent part of the facade, but that left dry smears in wide circles that had to be cleansed with yet another damp cloth. The spots of body rust and mildew would not budge, but the antenna miraculously straightened without breaking. With the approaching grayness of nightfall, I was surprised at the improvement. There was actually paint under all the grime! No jewel, I thought, but it's all I've got.

I considered leaving my weapon at home, thought better of it as I recalled the comfort it had given me minutes before as I approached the lonely house, and took time to strap it above my privates. Then I grabbed a jacket, warned Willie once again to keep a lookout, and dashed out to my pumpkin carriage. Six o'clock was minutes away, and the Browne farmhouse at least five miles out. I had to move!

Chapter 15

And move it did! The station wagon's six-cylinder stick-shift was no pumpkin-pulling six mice; the vigorous little power train yanked us out of town and along Davis County's gravel roads toward the Browne estate with unbelievable swiftness, leaving behind billows of dust that settled thickly on the trees and houses along the way. I did not intend to be late on my first date with Saxon. And I wasn't. There were seconds to spare when the Plymouth skidded to a halt before the massive home of my darling. Relax! I told myself as I got out and stumbled toward the front door. She's only a girl! A goddess, sure, but still, only a girl.

Saxon's mother answered the door and stood for a moment staring at me along her lanky nose. Does she know me? I wondered as we eyed each other. Or does she think I'm a vacuum cleaner salesman? "Hi, Mrs. Browne," I said. "I'm Jack Smith. We've met before."

She was a thin, plain woman, once a noble, honest country girl, now, since her husband's ascension to wealth, a powerful city woman who cherished her prestigious position in the Smith Station Garden Club. Her opinion was even regularly consulted in matters of religion and scuttlebutt by the Baptist Ladies. Apparently, however, she remained a country girl at heart, for her dress was without waist -- one long, uninterrupted flow of wrinkled plaid gingham -- the type of dress worn by the bony or the fat or the ignorant, women who would probably flaunt it if they had it, but since they didn't, wore dresses without waists.

A painful squint withered the skin about her eyes. "You're Jack Smith," she said accusingly.

"This is true," I answered, "and it's a pleasure to see you once again, Madam Browne. May I come in?"

"You're here for Saxon!"

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well!" Her eyes narrowed. "From what I hear about you, I'm not sure I want Saxon going out with you! What's wrong with you boys? Didn't you have any upbringing? I suppose not. With your background..."

"I heard about that nasty rumor, Mrs. Browne," I interrupted, "and I can assure you, it's all bull... it's all a lie. That Archie Jones! He's the culprit, and somehow my name got dragged into it. Darn gossipy people! Believe me, I'm innocent as a lamb."

"Well, that's not the way I heard it!"

"It's a shame, the way people talk, Mrs. Browne." I shook my head wearily. "So many righteous people get hurt that way."

Her sideways glare and wrinkly squint implied skepticism. "You're just telling me that, aren't you? If that had been me in that car, I'd have showed you a thing or two! You little deviates!"

If that had been you in that car, I thought, I wouldn't have even wanted to watch, no matter what you showed me. But I said, "Those boys should be horse whipped, Mrs. Browne. I'd help with it, too, because they've blackened the name of Smith."

"Well..."

"I hope they prosecute the bastards!"

Perhaps my language was a bit strong, for she appeared aghast for a moment. After blocking the door for another few seconds, she turned and stepped rapidly down a hallway toward the center of the mansion. "George," she barked as I followed, "George, the Smith boy is here for Saxon. You hear me? It's Jack Smith."

George relaxed in socked feet sprawled within a recliner placed near a huge brick fireplace that contained a huge fire. He dropped his newspaper in his lap as Mrs. Browne and I entered from the hallway and regarded me with eyes whose lids sagged in anticipation of an early bedtime. Mr. Browne was short and round with the rosy nose and face of either a cherub or a newborn dairy calf, and the body of Santa Claus. Except that he was bald. "Hello, Mr. Browne," I said. I took the limp hand he offered from his sitting position. "Good to see you, sir."

Mrs. Browne remained just long enough to give her husband a frown and a shake of one finger, then retreated without a word toward

what must have been the kitchen. "Sit down, Jack," Mr. Browne said pleasantly, "I want to talk to you."

I sat in a stuffed chair near his and tried to anticipate his words. "Nice place, Mr. Browne," I said as I eyed the tiny wooden animals with lace bow ties that hung on every wall. "Decorated well, too." The room smelled of wood smoke.

"Thank you, Jack. Listen." He paused to leisurely spit into a can that he lifted from the floor beside his chair. He has, I noted, become one of his dairy cows. Years of association did it. Complacent. Slow. Chewing tobacco because he doesn't have cud. At least, I hope he doesn't have cud. Heedless of all but his own world.

His bare legs shined where his khaki pants had pulled above thin black nylon socks. "About Saxon," he drawled. "She'll be down in a minute. Have her home by nine o'clock. It's Sunday, and she has school tomorrow. I let her stay out only until nine o'clock on Sundays."

"Yes, sir."

"Drive the speed limit."

"Yes, sir."

With a finger pointed at my middle he eyed me and said, "Frankly, I don't give a damn about this escapade you were involved in. At your age, I probably would have done the same thing. Just didn't think of it." With a knowing look he continued, "Just hope you don't get in too much trouble over it."

"It's nothing, sir. A misunderstanding. I intend to file suit."

My denial passed without comment. "What are you planning for tonight?" he asked.

I suddenly felt guilty. He knew what I was planning. He'd had similar plans when he was my age. "Saxon wants to drive to Milldale and get a Coke at Ginny's," I said. "That's all. It's Sunday. We may even drop by church for a minute."

"Good." His face brightened and he relaxed as he relieved himself of fatherly duty with his warnings and my submission. "Think the team will win the rest of the games this year, Jack?"

"The team?"

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

"The football team. Think we'll be Little Dixie champs again this year? You should know. You don't play, do you, but you know the team."

"No, I don't play, Mr. Browne," I said. "I'm not much on softball."

"Softball? Football!"

"Oh. Well, Coach Murray will come through again," I said quickly. "We'll win the Dixie State Championship again for sure."

"It's the Little Dixie Championship," he said with a frown. "You know, Perry... Saxon's steady boyfriend... is Captain of the team. His father and mother... We're all members of the Country Club. Together. We all love Perry. Great kid. Great quarterback."

"Perry? Perry." I scratched my head and put on a puzzled frown. "I think I've heard of a Perry..."

Mr. Browne's body lifted in the recliner as his hands gripped the arms. I panicked for an instant, thinking he was about to beat hell out of me. "Damn, boy!"

I raised a discerning finger. "Yeah," I said frantically, "yeah, I do believe I've seen him somewhere. Perry, you say? Perry who?"

"Perry Norman! Everybody's heard of Perry Norman, boy! Saxon's his girl!"

"Well." I leaned back into my chair. "I don't think we got the team we had last year, Mr. Browne. Weak in the backfield. I think we'll have a good basketball team, though."

"Hate basketball."

"How's the dairy herd?"

His face brightened. "Banner year this year. You like farming, Jack? Dairy farming?"

Finally! I thought. "Sure do. I've thought about having my own herd one of these days."

"Damn fool," he said, shaking his head. "Anybody'd be a damn fool to go into the dairy business this day and age. Can't make it without the government. And a lot of luck. Too much competition."

"Maybe," I said weakly, "maybe I'll just go on to Mississippi State, be a Cow-College Engineer. Bulldog backer."

"I'm an Ole Miss Rebel myself," he grunted. He picked up his newspaper and resumed reading.

Having done nothing to alleviate the malice with which Mrs. Browne viewed me because of my date with Saxon and the possible consequences of same upon her relationship with the football star should the football star learn of it, I had now alienated Saxon's father as well. I didn't really give a damn. Saxon was what counted, and she liked me the way I was. I sat quietly and through a window studied the soaring fins of the Cadillacs parked outside. New Cadillacs. Flip side: Aged Plymouth station wagon. New, virile money. Flip again: Old, bygone money. Fine, new mansion. Antebellum hovel. New name. Old name.

Maybe Mrs. Browne would be the one. Maybe she would have Smith Station renamed "Brownesville" one day.

My eyes lifted to the sound of Saxon's light tripping on the stair treads. My heart stood still. As she skipped toward us, I thought that she was the most exquisitely lovely thing I'd ever seen. Her thick brown hair was fascinating, the way it always bounced about her cheeks and neck, framing an angelic smile that captivated any who saw it. Her white teeth gleamed from between lips parted in a deceptively timid smile that invited affection. She wore a pink sweater tonight, over blue jeans, brown penny loafers and pink socks, and a small silver barrette above her left ear. Her cheeks were pink to match. "Ready?" she called breathlessly at the foot of the stairs.

"Ready!" I said with a bound from my chair to stand beside her. "Bye, Mr. Browne," I said while steering his daughter toward the front door. "I enjoyed talking to you. I'll remember your advice, too. Tell Mrs. Browne adieu for me."

"Nine o'clock," he advised without lifting his eyes from his paper.

Would Saxon run screaming back inside when she caught sight of the Plymouth? I closed the front door of the mansion behind us. "Jim's old Plymouth was all I had," I said as we walked together toward the heap, "and it's not much of a car."

"I think it's cute." She stood back and examined it. I opened the door and helped her inside. "It kind of reminds me of a little lost puppy. It suits you, Jack. I love it!"

"Lost puppy?" I said. "It suits me?"

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

"I couldn't picture you in a new Lincoln or Cadillac. This car is perfect for you."

Pondering the implications of Saxon's words, and discouraged by my initial assessment, I got inside and got the Plymouth rolling toward Milldale. "I'm ready for a milk shake at Ginny's," I said. "Maybe a hamburger, too. How's that sound?"

"Oh, I don't care," she answered, twirling small curls of hair with her fingers as she studied the countryside. "Let's drive around town for a little while first. Drive by the cafe and see who's there."

"You sure?" I said. "I thought we planned on going to Milldale. Where did you say Perry was tonight?"

"Oh, Jack!" She wagged her finger at me and shook her head. In mock anger, she was more gorgeous than ever, and I was overjoyed again that she was here in the same car with me. "Don't worry about him! Don't even mention his name. We're through!"

"You are?"

"Yes. Do you think I'd be out with you if he and I were still going steady?"

"Who knows about women?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, then, we'll drive by the cafe. We'll drive every street in town if you want. We'll keep on until we run out of gas. Then I'll carry you on my back."

"You are SO sweet."

"Maybe we'll see Perry, and he'll start something. I'd like that. That way, I can lay down my life for you. You'll have beautiful memories of me lying there in a pool of blood."

She mewed contentedly and moved closer, a sudden bounce that pushed her knee against my leg. I froze for fear the contact was unintentional, but she seemed comfortable with that intimate maneuver. Her hand left my shoulder and squeezed my neck, then her fingers traced along my ear and up until finally her hand rested atop my head. As we neared Mary's Cafe, she began to absentmindedly stroke my scalp with the tips of her fingers, while at the same time she slouched into the seat so that only that portion of her head above her eyes could be glimpsed by a casual observer. I wondered what people would think

about me driving around in a ragged Plymouth station wagon with a strange hand perched on my head. We turned onto Main Street.

"You don't see Perry's Corvette, do you?" I said.

"No."

"And Coach Murray's Fury? I don't see it. Do you?"

"No."

"Well, maybe we can sneak past without fear of injury."

"Of course we can," she said. "I'm not afraid of Perry. And I didn't slip up on Coach Murray while he was doing it in the gravel pit, either. It'll be you he'll kill, not me." She giggled as though it were funny.

"You're with me," I said. "They'll jump us both."

"They wouldn't hurt a girl."

"You know Perry. He gets mad and loses his head. And Coach Murray just likes to kill things. Anything that breathes. Male or female."

"Well, Perry's probably in Milldale tonight. With that blonde tramp. Coach Murray, I don't know about."

"You know about the girl Perry dated?"

"Dated? Dated?" she said a bit shrilly. "He's still dating her. And yes, I know."

"I saw her once. At the cafe."

"Thrill."

"I hope I see her again."

"Why?"

"I want to thank her."

"Jack. You're such a love." She bumped my shoulder with the palm of her hand. We were buddies. "And we're finally having a date, Jack! After all this time!"

"The first of thousands," I said.

We cruised silently past the cafe. "Just the same old people," Saxon said with a sigh as she ducked and bobbed and inspected the vehicles parked along Main Street. "Nobody interesting. Smith Station is dullsville."

"We could go inside," I said in jest. "Maybe everybody's on foot tonight."

"I guess so."

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

"I was kidding!" I said. "I don't want to go in."

"Chicken."

"Let's go to Milldale."

"Circle the block one more time. Maybe we missed somebody."

"Who're we looking for? Anybody I know?"

The soothing massage ended for a moment as Saxon was lost in her thoughts. Does she massage Perry's head while they're driving? I wondered. She's so good at it. Nobody can stroke head like this without a lot of practice. Perry's hair is ruffled all the time. I bet she does! And I always assumed it was his football headgear that made him look like he'd just fallen out of bed and forgot to shower.

Saxon straightened and nodded as though she had made a decision, and her fingers went to work again. I twisted my neck and head and groaned with pleasure. "Let's park and go inside," she said. "We'll have a Coke."

"You're kidding!"

"No." Her fingers softly patted the top of my head. She sighed, "If it comes to it, I'll protect you."

I turned the wagon into a parking space half a block from the cafe and killed the engine. Saxon sat with her hands clasped in her lap. Her eyelids fluttered expectantly.

"Me Tarzan. You Jane," I said after a few seconds. "Tarzan takes care of himself."

She patted my shoulder, a bit protectively, I thought. "You swing on vines and talk to elephants," she said. "You protect natives. I suppose I stay home in our tree house and cook."

"It's the American way."

"And at night, after you've had a hard day in the jungle, you expect me to cuddle you in bed."

"Yeah! We don't need to go inside. Let's go to my place and get started!"

"Chicken. Let's go to the cafe."

"You like to live dangerously?"

"I like to live."

I exited the wagon intent upon pleasing Saxon, patted my weapon to be sure it still hung in place, and opened her door. "You ever go out

for track?" I asked when we were on the sidewalk. "What's your time in the hundred?"

"Sometimes I race Perry."

"I thought we weren't going to mention that name."

She grabbed my hand and pulled me after her. How many times had I imagined walking the streets of my town with Saxon Browne? I wouldn't have traded places with Elvis Presley tonight. I patted my hair in place and strutted.

The pool hall was nearly empty. Sunday night. I had forgotten. Sunday night was the slowest night of the week. We pushed inside, and at the door's eye-opening howl endured the prolonged glances of Mama Mary, the Boy, three or four of our classmates who were not close friends, and three drunks who sat at different tables. I winced as I recognized Josephine, seated in a low chair behind the counter where she was having a private conversation with Mama Mary. I avoided her eyes as I whispered a suggestion to Saxon, a table hidden from view of patrons or passersby "We can have some privacy," I whispered.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," she whispered.

"But I always enjoy sitting at the counter, too."

"That will be fine. If you really want to."

There was no ducking Josephine now, and as Saxon and I sat, I greeted her with a hello, then saluted Mama Mary. Saxon likewise spoke to them, and, much to my relief, after Mama Mary had given us an eyebrow-raised but cheery welcome and had ambled away toward her cooler to fetch our soft drinks, Josephine smiled and returned our greeting. "You look so pretty tonight, Saxon," Josephine said from her chair. "You could be a movie star."

"Not me, Josephine," Saxon said. "You're the one. I've seen the way men look at you. You could have your pick."

"No," Josephine said with a sigh, "I'd have to do what my namesake did to do that. My uncle loved Josephine Baker. He told me so. He said he saw her once in Paris. That's why he asked my grandfather to name me Josephine."

Saxon and I looked at each other. "Who's Josephine Baker?" I said.

Saxon shrugged. We both turned back to Josephine. "A famous dancer," Josephine responded after a moment. "A famous NEGRO

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

dancer." She stared at us for a few seconds, then pushed from her chair, said "Good night," and waved goodbye to Mama Mary. "Bye, Josephine," Saxon and I called to her as she left through the back door.

"I've never heard of Josephine Baker," I said after Josephine had disappeared.

"Maybe you're not the brain you think you are."

"And maybe Josephine has more brains than any of us."

"Let's finish these Cokes and get out of here."

"Ginny's?"

"How about the gravel pit?"

For a moment I feared that my just-swallowed sip of Coke was going to join the flyspecks and grease spots that embellished Mary's walls and ceiling. "The gravel pit?" I managed to choke out. "You want to go to the gravel pit?"

"Everybody goes to the gravel pit, dummy." She studied my face as if she were numbering every zit and freckle. "It's no big deal. You of all people..." I felt my cheeks redden. "You know the place, Jack?" she continued. "The big hole? In the mountain of rock? The place that's perfect for making out?"

"But you? You don't go there. You're the nicest girl I know!"

"And nice girls don't go to the gravel pit?"

"Hell, I don't know," I said warily, though that was what I was thinking. "I'm not exactly Sigmund Freud. I just thought that nice girls went to the movies, and the rest went to the gravel pit."

"Damn, Jack, I wasn't born yesterday!"

"But..."

I had hit a nerve, I thought with regret. I listened, afraid to speak, as she raised her voice. "What's a 'nice girl' anyway? A virgin? Is that the definition of a nice girl?" Air whistled from her lips, a cool gust of anger. "Sometimes I get positively angry at what men think about women. They're so unfair. So immature. Hell, I AM a nice girl. But I know about things like the gravel pit and what goes on there. Girls talk, just like boys do. Boys just can't accept the fact that girls have the same rights they do."

"You're positively correct," I said. "I am a lost puppy."

"Just can't believe it, can you? So what if I go out to the gravel pit and mess around?"

"What?" I said, "You don't mess around, too!"

Her scowl meant my rating had taken another nosedive. She said softly, "Suppose I told you I was no virgin, Jack. What would you think? Would you want to take me home? Or would you want to go on to the gravel pit and try to get what someone else, maybe Perry, has had before you?"

Was my image of purity so distorted? I wondered. Had my opinions and values been misshapen by sixteen years of an uncle who spoke of honor and virtue and the merits of Southern manhood, yet cursed like a sailor, drank like a fish, and refused to admit that no one was fooled? Or was it the classics? Had that library of antiquated fantasy and treasured Southern rationalizations given me a warped perspective of what constituted propriety? Were virgins to be worshipped, non-virgins merely condoned? Were men above it all? Were men such fools? Was Saxon a tramp? How about Linda Murray? What exactly was a tramp anyway?

My spirits tumbled even further when Saxon whispered, "Take me home, Jack."

I said, "Saxon, I'm sorry."

Her eyes trembled as she stared a hole through me. She whispered, "I'm so sad. There was something special between us. I felt it. For a while."

"There still is." Her hand was resting on her knee, where I found it and squeezed it tightly. "You're just not like I expected, that's all. I don't know you!"

"That makes me madder! You expected a kitty and you found a tiger!" She squirmed away, pulling her hand from mine. "What's the matter, Jack? Do I frighten you? Or are you afraid of growing up?"

"No," I said, though I was far from being truthful. In a way, she scared me to death. However, more importantly, despite the delicacy of the moment, I recognized that all my years of yearning for her were guided not by mere lust, but by a kind of inner perception that there existed between Saxon Browne and myself an enduring fascination that was far too rare to allow it to be lost without a fight. I leaned as closely

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

to her as the stools would allow. "When I look at you, Saxon," I breathed in her ear, "I know why Romeo couldn't live without Juliet. I know why Antony fought for Cleopatra. I love your name. Your face. Your body. So much you make my stomach hurt. I haven't figured out why just looking at you gives me a stomach ache, but I will, and when I do, I'll love that, too."

"I give you a stomach ache?" she said as she backed further away. "Jack, you're ending this thing before it gets started."

"It's more like a knife stuck in my belly. And I love it."

"Cleopatra?"

"Juliet, too," I reminded her. "Saxon Browne. A name that will join that of Aphrodite as a vision to mankind of all that is desirable."

"Do you use that line a lot?"

"Seldom," I said. "I'm jealous, too. Jealous of Perry, jealous of anyone who's touched you. I've had you on a pedestal all my life. You're a goddess to me. A queen. I should have tried to date you years ago. Then maybe..."

"Maybe you could have gotten there first?"

"Damn, Saxon" I said, looking away. "That hurts."

With a sigh she answered: "Now, I'm sorry."

We sat for several seconds without speaking while I bemoaned the fact that my angel had been robbed of her virginity by a meathead. Was there no fairness in this world? Just as importantly, how good was Perry Norman in the sack? Could my performance compare to that of the lean, mean, handsome, bastard? Probably not. Damn it all! The thought of my angel in bed with Perry was enough to cause important parts to shrivel.

"A goddess?" she asked.

"My idol," I answered as I turned back to her.

Long live depravity and wickedness. And wanton, wild, deliberate sex. Surely Saxon wouldn't tell anybody if Perry was a lot better where it really counted. "Let's go to the gravel pit," I said.

"No."

"I thought you said..."

"I don't do it with just anybody."

"Just for a few minutes. We can't stay long anyway. Your dad will kill me if you're not in by nine."

After hesitating for a second or two she said, "Don't count on anything. This is a first date."

What are the odds, I wondered, of a virgin making love to two different women in the same week? Slim, I'd guess. But I was on a roll.

Once back in the Plymouth, I pulled Saxon close for the drive to the pit. The radio was tuned to the Nashville station that played the latest rock-and-roll. The music faded in and out as, Jerry and I had speculated time and again, the mountains of clouds between Nashville and Smith Station rolled and churned and in the process disturbed the signal and hindered its long journey to our antennas. Saxon sat huddled next to me, one hand kneading the top of my head in the strange caress to which I was becoming addicted, the other loosely nestled in her lap. She did not speak as we drove, either lost in her own thoughts or else having decided that the lyrics sung by the Platters were preferable to conversation with me. "YOU'VE got the magic touch," I said once. She squeezed my scalp in silence.

As we approached the entrance to the gravel pit I began to ponder the possibility that Coach Murray might be there. That was doubtful, however, since Josephine had just been at the café. Later, perhaps. Perry? Perry, hopefully, was in Milldale with his slinky blonde friend. The possibility of a confrontation with either of the two, however, brought to mind a vision of tomorrow's headlines: ALLEGED PEEPING TOM MURDERED; TORN AND MANGLED BODY LEFT AT SCENE OF LOATHSOME CRIME. Followed by: MUTILATED REMAINS TENTATIVELY IDENTIFIED AS THOSE OF ONE JACK "CHEROKEE JACK JUNIOR" SMITH. SHERIFF SAYS JUSTICE SERVED; KILLING JUSTIFIABLE.

"Isn't there a better place to park?" I said. "The pit may be full."

My idol was stirred from her silent reflections to say absently, "Not on Sunday night. Anyway, the pit's safe. Nobody bothers you. Not even the police."

"I'm glad you're familiar with the routine," I said dryly.

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

She pushed away for a moment. "Don't be snide. You've made quite a study of the routine yourself. Just how many times have you been up here, Mr. Snoop?"

I pretended I was too busy looking for the turnoff to pay her any attention. Halfway up the gravel trail that led into the pit, I turned off the Plymouth's headlights and continued with only the faint light of the moon to guide us. The crunch of the Plymouth's tires in the gravel was the only sound. I thought, the owls and crickets are scared, too. When we reached the crest, the darkness of the crater and the narrowness of the road forced me to turn the headlights on once again. "I don't see anybody," I whispered as we slowly descended toward an oasis brightened by the glare of our lights. "We'll park under that patch of trees ahead."

"Fine," Saxon whispered. "Why are you whispering?"

I doused the lights and circled the patch of scrub trees, then slowed to a halt beneath them. The Plymouth's nose was pointed toward the entrance road, the route to escape. "Is this the one you and Perry use?" I whispered.

"Perry and I have used them all at one time or another."

"Thanks. I needed that."

As far as I could see, there were no other cars in the pit. Only a million crickets. Now that silence reigned once more, the tiny revelers resumed their monotonous symphony. Late in the year for them, I thought. They'll all die soon. Too cool. Such is life. And death.

I cranked open my window to allow cool air inside, expecting Saxon would be forced to cling to me for warmth. She continued to silently fondle my scalp. Our knees touched as I turned to put an arm around her, and she shivered and moved nearer.

Linda Murray, I reflected as I held Saxon for the first time. She and Saxon were so different. Or to put it better, the two of them affected ME differently. Linda was earthy desire, carnal fulfillment. The thought of her half-moon eyes and perfect breasts was enough to paralyze the muscles in my belly. I wanted her for sex. I couldn't live without her for sex. But I couldn't bear the thought of forsaking Saxon for her, despite the revelations of this evening. Before tonight, before the baring of her notoriety, Saxon had been a perception of my future.

Purity. Fidelity. Quiet evenings at home with the children and the Baptist Ladies. Supper promptly at seven. PTA. In more apt term, WIFE material. So much for ignorance. But a burning love is hard to smother.

She jarred my private thoughts by asking, "Have you been dating anyone?"

"No one in particular. Actually, I've never taken anybody out in Jim's Plymouth. I avoid dating in this old trap."

"I like this old car," she answered. "Fancy cars don't mean anything. Perry's so proud of his Corvette. He's silly."

"He sure is," I agreed. "The childish bastard." Just because he was tall, handsome, rich, a gifted athlete, and drove the best-looking car in Mississippi, he thought he was special.

"You don't need a car to be a man, Jack."

"Good thing," I said. "How about tall, handsome, rich, and athletic?"

"Mandatory."

"Well, maybe they'll have me at some monastery."

"I was only kidding." Her hand curled around my shoulder and patted my scalp with a patronizing stroke. "You have a lot to offer any woman, Jack."

"I know I do." I raised a hand behind her and counted on my fingers. "Let's see. I don't have a car, but I can borrow a sure-enough prehistoric station wagon. I can afford to eat, but not much else. Egg sandwiches are my specialty. You gotta try one. My only relative is a drunk. Maybe I will be, too. Runs in the family. I have a dog, but he only has three legs. But, hell, he loves me, and I love him. We're very close. Next, I'm about to be the center of a major scandal involving a voyeuristic outing with two other dimwits. I'll be lucky if I don't have to move away forever. And don't forget the Smith name. A hundred years ago it really meant something. Nowadays, people point and laugh. Let's see, did I leave out anything?"

The sympathy ploy worked. Saxon pulled my head down by the hair she had been kneading and planted me with a juicy kiss. "I want to lick your teeth, Saxon," I said after a few juicy moments, "and I want to munch your tiny little ear lobes."

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

"Why the devil would you want to lick my teeth?"

"I've always wanted to lick your teeth. It's your smile. Your teeth are beautiful when you smile. And your ears. Small sweet grapes. Nibble size."

"Jack, you are weird."

"Only when I'm this close to you. Your body against mine provokes irrational thought."

In a while I decided we were the perfect pair because Saxon, I discovered, was every bit as weird as I. It was mainly her kisses. I only had one woman to compare her to, of course, but the contrast was astounding! When she wasn't vigorously pleasing herself, Linda Murray favored tender, dream-inspiring contact, a prolonged visit to a placid mountain stream in which we floated deliriously in a never-never land of bliss. Saxon chose instead to embrace furiously for a few seconds, a short, wild, white-water river jaunt that left me wild-eyed and aroused, gasping and grasping. We would collide, then she would pull away for a few gulps of air, peer into the darkness around us to be sure no one had witnessed her impetuosity, gather her strength, and make another charge. As she retreated across the seat following the first skirmish I wondered what was wrong. Then, as the scene was repeated and I realized this was the norm for her, I awaited her return each time in something of a daze. Every three or four minutes, I was ravished by a tornado. Before I could recover from one big blow, here came another. It was actually frustrating. A starving child might have felt the same if its dinner were snatched away after a bite here and there.

During one of these fierce encounters, she discovered the gun. If I had thought of it beforehand, I would have removed the pistol and stuck it under the front seat. But I didn't. And as jock strap and weapon had become quite at home on my pelvis, I hardly noticed the inconvenience anymore. Excitement got the better of me now, however. The state of my lower regions had reached a point of discomfort about the time Saxon bumped the gun with an elbow. "What in the..." she began.

"It's just a gun," I said. I pushed her away. "A pistol. Don't worry. I need to take it out. It's hurting me."

She bounded to the opposite corner of the seat with a suddenness that surprised me. "You men all think alike," she cried disdainfully. "So proud of your toys! Don't you DARE take it out!"

"But it's hurting me," I said.

"I don't care if it explodes! If you take that thing out, I'll never speak to you again!"

It struck me then that we had embarked on divergent conversations. "The barrel's so LONG," I said, "I have to get it out. It's really hurting."

"Braggart! Don't you dare!"

"But Saxon. You know all about these things. One more rod shouldn't shock you too much. You're a woman of the world, aren't you?"

"I'll get out of the car and run!" she cried. "Leave that thing in there!"

I pushed my door open and got out. In a moment I had the pistol out of my pants. I got back inside and tossed it onto the back seat. "There," I said. "I feel a lot better now."

"It really WAS a gun," she said wonderingly.

"Personal protection," I said. "Normally I depend on my Judo – what they taught us before we invaded Guam – to defend myself. My hands are registered weapons. But lately, I've taken to packing a firearm. Don't want to take a chance on damaging my weapons."

"My god!" she said, shaking her head. "I never know what to expect from you! I know you're the biggest liar I ever met. But Guam?" She sighed. "Heck, maybe you were on Guam."

"Third Marines. Nineteen forty-four."

The look on her face made me laugh. "Let's just get back to the necking," she said with a shake of her head.

In a little while I figured my lips were bleeding from the mauling. I imagined I tasted blood. Fractured my lips. Docile Saxon Browne. The woman with the instincts of a hungry shark. How did Perry hold up to her? Bloody lips and a battered scalp. Perry was sure to recognize the damage she had done to me. I would have to avoid him until I healed.

HOW I FOUND A REMEDY FOR INNOCENCE

And next time I saw him, I planned to examine his head for signs of similar treatment.

Another vehicle joined us in the pit. When its headlights flashed past us, I strained to make it out. "Ain't no Fury, is it?" I whispered to Saxon. "Or a Corvette?"

"No," she said, straining to see. "It's just Muledick's old car. He and Teeny."

I couldn't hide my surprise. "You know about Richard?"

Instead of answering she attacked. When she paused for air, I said, "You sure did get scared a little while ago. When I was talking about pulling out my gun."

"Not really, puppy."

"Yep. You acted like you'd never seen a gun before."

"Who would be afraid of one of those little things?" she said. "You just wish."

"Woman-of-the-world," I said

"That's me."

"You're as big a liar as I am."

"Not so. I'm no war hero, either."

"You're as virgin as Archie's Aunt Ethel," I said, "only you got a lot better chance of losing yours than she has. You're not a hunchback like she is."

"I'm not telling you anything. Except that Perry can kiss a lot better than you."

"I think I love you, Saxon. No, I know I do."

"Every since the fourth grade."

It was getting late, and in a while I drove her home. "I've had a good time," she said at her door.

"Let's do it again."

"I thought that was settled." She pecked my forehead. "Puppy."

I licked her teeth. "See you at school tomorrow, Miss Chastity."

"Probably."

"That'll be me, floating down the hallway at break. Just reach up and pull me down."

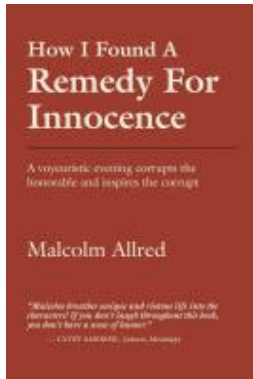
"By your gun?"

MALCOLM ALLRED

I braved the dark doorway of Cherokee Rose without the protection of the courageous watchdog, who was probably out doing what I had been recently only contemplating. After I had the lights on, I went back out to the Plymouth and strained to lift the front bumper. That'll cure the ache every time. I was lucky to have such a knowledgeable uncle. He knew about things like this.

And I wondered about Saxon Browne. A man really never knows for sure whether his love has loved and been loved before, does he? Virginity. Would it really matter if Saxon were no virgin? Damn. Maybe I did need to grow up.

When I got back inside, the telephone was ringing. Nine-thirty. Late. Wrong number? Nope. Not a wrong number. Linda Murray was alone and lonely.



Unique characters guide an intricate plot brimming with rowdy humor in this fun read with a bit of a dark side. Humiliated by his “toxic” virginity, young Jack seeks liberation, first in the arms of his true love, who happens to be girlfriend to the jealous captain of the football team, then with a married woman whose mate is a known brute. Adding to his woes is the plausible rumor that his mother murdered his father!

How I Found a Remedy for Innocence

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6399.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**