

Hawk

An excerpt from the 1986 novel

by William Wallis

Chapter 48 (Part 2), pp. 81-83.

The gravel road ran out away from his eye, its darker surface stained with pale brown dust, its two rises rippling in the retreating afternoon light as if the earth were a vast rusty blanket. On either side of the road ran the deep red of clay ditches. *Blood of the earth*, Will said to himself. It was hot, but hot so hot as the day before—an August day before school started and the Sunday off before harvesting of corn and sorghum, a space of time before evening chores. Fall was not yet a clear scent in the air, yet its presence could be felt in small things like the hint of cooling earth.

Beneath him, Lady stirred her back and flicked a deerfly from her shoulder. She tore off the tops of the tall dry grass at the road's edge and chewed them uncomfortably through the bridle's steel bit. Will studied her restive motions, imagined himself chewing with a thick wire across his tongue, and he grimaced. What had his father said? The Indians rode with a single rawhide rein, or sometimes they just guided the horse with their

knees. His father had used only his knees when he was a boy. After all, they had Cherokee blood.

When Lady next turned her head to brush away a fly, Will leaned forward, slipped off the heavy bridle, and put it over his head, letting the wet bit dangle beside his left thigh. The reins he lodged between his own teeth, enjoying the pungent taste of the leather. He felt Lady's broad sides through his overalls; he felt every bit of her sixteen hands alive underneath him as she began to move down the road toward home. He grasped a coarse handful of her mane, as she moved from a steady walk through a rough trot to a canter. Will concentrated on feeling the rhythms of the great engine of flesh beneath him. His thighs, knees, calves, even feet clung to the billowing sides he straddled. She broke into an easy gallop, her hooves pounding the gravel in a deep rhythm that echoed in his arching body; and they tore down the road, throwing rocks out behind them like ancient fears.

The red-laced road blurred against the greenish-yellow background they thundered on. They topped the first rise, and Will released Lady's mane, raised his arms and cried out sharply over Mrs. Stubblefield's east field, his voice echoing back to him amidst the pounding of his heart now joined with Lady's hooves on the flooding earth beneath them.

At the gently graded left turn where their property began, Will leaned to the left and watched with rapt

attention as Lady pulled to the extreme left of the bending road without lessening her speed one bit. It a car should round the turn against them now! He hunkered down and clung to her back and neck. It was now a hundred yards to their house on the right. She floated under him, began to drift across the road, left to right. As they approached the entrance to the driveway, Will saw Mr. Chambers' old truck moving up the gentle hill from his place toward theirs. As Lady entered the yard full gallop, Will glimpsed Mr. Chambers' surprised grimace above the perfect curve of the rough black steering wheel of the '47 Ford. Then Will felt Lady suddenly slowing, and he held on for his life. To fall from a full gallop would be too much. He would tumble.

Mr. Chambers carefully parked his green truck beside the road in front of the Falke place, and then approached the heaving horse, now beginning to graze in the front yard. The boy hung from Lady's neck like limp canvas. Mr. Chambers first patted the horse's sweaty shoulder, then gently slipped Will, bridle still hung over his head and reins in his teeth, into his lean old arms.

Wow, murmured the boy into the sun-scented, green work shirt.

Yep, laughed the old man softly. *Yep, that's it.*