

New Southerner



Dog-Eared

All the King's Men

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Likes 2

By JOHN MANUEL

NONFICTION FINALIST

I entered the land through a long dirt drive which, typical of North Carolina Coastal Plain farms, passed through the fields before ending at a tree-shaded 1930s bungalow. Four people waited on the porch, more than I was expecting. After all, I was just The Freelance Writer. I didn't even have an assignment. At best, I could, at some point in the future, attract the interest of an editor who might, at some further point in the future, place an article that would sing the praises of these 2,000 acres soon-to-be for sale.

The Patriarch was the first one off the porch. White-haired, pink-cheeked, short and stout, he approached with his head thrust forward like a man always ready to shake a hand.

"You must be John," he said. "Pleased to meetcha."

He introduced The Wife, a tall, elegant, bleached blonde 20 years his junior. Second wife, I thought. She shook my hand with casual grace, holding on a beat longer than most.

Next came The Forester. I'd met the likes of him on other assignments—tall, serious. I lowered my voice an octave and squeezed hard to match his grip.

Then came The Conservationist, or more appropriately, The Deal Maker, a Realtor/Lawyer/Conservationist who put big money deals together for a handsome cut. He was the one who'd invited me down here, despite my warning that it would be tough to place an article like the one I'd written on his previous venture.

Now, that was a story. Aging widow, determined to leave a positive legacy, converts state's largest turkey farm into a wildlife preserve. My article in the state wildlife magazine, praising the conversion of this land to a sustainable use, had been good publicity for The Deal Maker. He had helped the widow win a host of state and federal grants, and was hoping another article would entice a conservation-minded person to buy The Patriarch's property.

I, meanwhile, was looking forward to a long walk in the woods, conversation with a silver-tongued landowner, and, just maybe, a fleeting glimpse of a bear to fashion into a winning story. It had been weeks since I'd sold an article, and my sagging ego and empty pocketbook were in need of a boost.

Before we toured the land, The Patriarch ushered us inside the bungalow for lunch. The faded wallpaper and Spartan furnishings suggested that this house was not much lived in. The Wife explained that she and The Patriarch now resided in a golf community in Cary. I was disappointed to hear that. Absentee landlords don't make for conservation heroes, but I surmised that she, with her gold bracelets and fancy wool suit, didn't much care for life on the farm.

After lunch, we waited on the porch while the Deal Maker brought around the Patriarch's shiny, white SUV.

Catty corner to the bungalow was a much older house—a narrow, two-story structure with exterior end chimneys and a red tin roof—a classic 19th century design, in sad disrepair, but certainly worth restoring.

"Is that the original homestead?" I asked The Patriarch.

"Yes, but let's look at that land," he said, holding open the car door. Just before I ducked in, I caught site of a grizzled figure, cigarette dangling from his mouth, watching us from the older house's tattered screen porch.

With The Patriarch in the passenger seat, The Wife and I in the middle, and The Forester folded in the back row, we began our tour of the property. We followed a dirt track past several old fields, remnants of what The Patriarch said was a larger plantation that once supplied vegetables and fruits to the nearby town of New Bern. "All this land was originally a King's grant," he said. "Been in my family since the 1600s."

I marveled at how a gift of land centuries old still conferred privilege on a select group of people. King's grants derived from the colonial era when King Charles II of England, via a group of nobles known as the Lords Proprietors, granted English settlers large tracts of land in the Carolinas. Importation of slaves was part of the deal, 150 acres being granted for every slave the settler was willing to transport to the colonies. I'd seen clusters of African-Americans walking along the road outside the farm. No doubt, some were descendants of the slaves that worked this land. Would they benefit in any way from the new use of the property?

We left the fields and entered a forest of planted loblolly pine. The Forester beamed, "Here's a nice tract."

I'd seen the likes of this all over the South—row after row of identically sized, evenly-spaced trees raised to maximize return-on-investment. It was a commercial forester's dream, but not something I could wax eloquent about in an article devoted to nature.

"We want to keep this all in forest, but managed for wildlife not for timber production," The Deal Maker said.

That was a relief, but I knew from experience it would be decades before one of these pine plantations could support a variety of wildlife. Animals like deer, bear, and wild turkey need mature hardwood trees for dens and mast, hardwoods like those that covered the coastal plain before the timber companies cut them down and replaced them with all these pines.

"I'm really going to miss working this timber," The Forester said.

By that, I understood that The Forester was soon to be out of a job. We rolled on past row upon row of pine. My attention started to flag.

"Is the land all flat?" I said. "Any variation in terrain?"

The Forester brightened. "There's a high spot up ahead."

I imagined a bluff, maybe even a rock outcropping, something that a photographer might use to enliven the pages of my theoretical article. But, no, the "high place" turned out to be an all-but imperceptible rise in the forest floor.

The Patriarch detected my disappointment. "You either like this kind of woods or you don't," he said. "I've been through it so many times I love it."

The Wife stifled a yawn, stared at my hands. "I like your wedding band," she said.

"My what?"

"Your wedding band. Your ring."

"Thanks," I said. "My wife and I had them made by a friend."

What was she thinking? Was she secretly longing for a younger man to spice up her life? Or did she have a daughter somewhere of marrying age? I stared out the window, hoping for that bear.

Our next stop was a small blackwater creek. The Patriarch ushered us out of the car, our footfalls launching a swarm of mosquitos from the muck. "This was a landing named after my great grandfather," he said. "The creek runs into the Neuse River. Way back when, it was crucial for transporting farm goods to New Bern."

With all the trees fallen into the channel, the creek looked barely wide enough to navigate a canoe. "That must have been a long time ago," I said.

The Patriarch smiled. "When I was a little boy, an old nig—"

The Deal Maker winced.

"—an old black lady used to take me fishing here. She'd see a moccasin hanging in a branch and say, 'Lordy, don't you see him?'"

I pictured him as a little pink-cheeked boy, clutching his mammy's hand. Did he know what had become of her? Of her children? What happened to the servants when The Patriarch moved away?

We climbed back in the SUV and drove on to a clearing where the remains of an old trellis tilted beneath a tangle of vines. The Patriarch explained that his family once grew a variety of grapes, one named after his great grandfather. "Nig—I mean, blacks used to come in here and steal grapes," he said. "My uncle, Poppy, would hide with his shotgun. When they'd come into the vineyard, he'd jump up and fire that gun. Lord, you should have seen them run."

The Deal Maker frowned. I hadn't put pen to paper in half-an-hour. The Forester was out of details. The Wife was silent. The Patriarch gabbed on, telling stories of revenuers and traveling carnies.

"One man came by here with a bear who he sent up the oak tree in our front yard. When the bear got to the top of the tree, the man turned to Poppy and said, 'Now, pay me \$10 and I'll get him down.' Poppy turned to my father and said, 'Get me my shotgun.'"

Then we were back at the house. No nature walk, no cypress swamp, no bear—save in the Patriarch's memory. The others went inside to dress for dinner, but I hadn't brought a change of clothes and so waited on the porch. Curious about that old house, I wandered over for a closer look. The man with the cigarette came out to greet me and introduced himself as The Overseer. His face looked like a battlefield, creased with age, pockmarked and burned.

"This is an interesting house," I said. "How old is it?"

He flicked his cigarette onto the lawn. "Built in 1832."

"Do you mind if I look inside?"

"You can come in if you want. It's kind of a mess."

That proved to be an understatement. Old magazines and tools littered the floor. Styrofoam boards covered the windows. Leaning against the recliner chair was a high-caliber rifle.

"Wow, that looks like it could stop an elephant," I said.

"That's a .45-70," The Overseer said. "It keeps the coons away. They're always watching."

His words sent a chill down my spine. This was an angry man with a score to settle. I hoped he didn't end up taking it out on someone stealing grapes.

"Are there any plans to renovate this house?" I asked.

The Overseer scoffed. "He talks like he cares about it, but he hasn't spent a dime," he said of The Patriarch. "The roof is so rusted you can't even run a wire brush over it."

That was unfortunate. Of everything I'd seen on the property, this house was the most intriguing. I went back outside to find the others waiting. The Patriarch frowned at the sight of The Overseer.

"Come on now, John," he said. "We've got dinner reservations in town."

Over a glass of merlot at the five-star restaurant, I asked The Patriarch about his plans for the property. He no longer seemed interested in that subject. Instead, he boasted of his years as a lobbyist for the soft drink industry, where he was apparently a big hit.

"I asked Jim White where the party was, and he said, 'It's wherever you are!'"

Everyone dutifully laughed. My pecan-encrusted mahi-mahi arrived. The Patriarch ordered another bottle of wine.

Then came stories of his time in the state legislature. More fun, more parties. I asked him if he'd faced some tough battles. At this he grew morose, confiding that a certain senator from the mountains belittled him at every opportunity.

"It was hard, John. It was so hard."

I glanced at my watch. Three hour's drive back home, and another \$30 tank of gas. Finally, The Patriarch called for the check.

Out in the parking lot, The Deal Maker cornered me. "Do you think you've got a story?"

I winced. "If not for the wildlife magazine, maybe something else. I need to figure out an angle."





"Good man," he said. "Good man."

As I drove through the night, I struggled to find the words to fashion what I'd seen into a noble conservation story. That land might have some potential as wildlife habitat or a city park, but it was not enough to impress a picky editor.

Somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, as I lay in bed, a story did emerge. It was not the one any of my hosts would want, not the one that would sell. It was about them, about us, and our relationships with that piece of land—meal ticket, hideout, reservoir of childhood memories, and, yes, a place to experience the wild. In time, we imagine, all will be made whole.

John Manuel is author of two nonfiction books, *The Natural Traveler Along North Carolina's Coast* (John Blair) and *The Canoeist* (Jefferson Press), as well as numerous feature articles in popular and institutional magazines. He has taught memoir at the Duke University Center for Documentary Studies and currently teaches private classes for aspiring novelists and creative nonfiction writers.

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 Helen Bryce

 December 27, 2015 at 5:11 pm

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A provocative 21st century take on a familiar riddle with "titled" (entitled) characters concisely drawn. The metaphor is apt for the political, economic, social challenges that seem to always leave us in pieces. Well done, John!

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