

Isaac Yancey



This is what my father wrote about him:

My dad was Isaac Yancey. He was called IY or Big Isaac by most all people who knew him, so I will call him Big Isaac. He was six feet two inches tall, weighed about 210 pounds and was in his mid-forties. He had big broad shoulders, a rather small waist and hands about the size of a small country ham. He had steely blue eyes that could cut you to pieces, iron gray hair and a mustache, a ready smile or a very pronounced frown. He was a master at eating you out, or “lecturing you” as he called it, although he never hit below the belt. He had one weakness. Just before he finished talking to you and was about ready to tease or kid you, if you could look long enough into those hard blue eyes, you could maybe see a very small quiver or teasing little smile and a very small twitch in each corner of his mouth. You knew you were just about off the hook before he told you that was all for now. Once he brought up a subject he never brought it up again.

A story about a recurrent subject...

“Dad?”

It was after breakfast and the man was sitting at the big scarred kitchen table drinking another cup of coffee before going back out in the field. His wife was at the other end of the table working on biscuits for the noon meal. The colored man known as Big Jim, who ate with them at the little table in the corner of the room, had gone outside. The man wore high back overalls and rough un-tanned boots. His wife wore a faded blue dress. Her black hair, tinged with gray, was pulled into a bun although a few stray wisps clung to her neck which was already sweaty. Everybody, the man, the woman, the boy sitting with his head down at the next place, all the family, had a slightly sour smell because it was Wednesday and the big tin bathing tub would not be pulled out until Saturday night.

“What do you want boy?”

“Well, sir, I wanted to ask you a question.”

The man loudly sipped his coffee, and put the cup down on the table. “The woman said, “Do you want any more?”

He said, “No thanks. I’m going back out in a minute. Just after I finish some business here.”

The woman glanced at the two of them; her gaze lingering on the boy, then went back to the biscuit dough she was kneading in the large wooden bowl.

The man said to the boy, “All right. But look at me when you talk. I’ve told you that before.”

The boy sat up so that his entire spine was in contact with the back of the cane chair, which squeaked a little with his movement. He lifted his head and looked at the man. “Yes sir.”

“Well?”

“It’s about Big Jim.”

“What about him?” The man’s voice took on a different tone.

The boy’s voice shook, but his gaze did not waver. “How come he eats at the little table and we eat over here at the big table? There’s room for him over here.”

The woman, both hands wrapped around a big ball of dough, stopped to listen.

The man said, “Ah, that. You’ve been asking me about that for the past year and I’ve told you that’s just the way it is. Niggers just don’t sit at the same table as white people.” He paused. “Anyway, if I did ask Jim to come over and sit with us it would embarrass him.”

The boy stuck his chin out, holding the man’s gaze. “I know. That’s what you told me. But I eat with Jim and Hattie and Gus at their table at their house.”

The man looked down briefly then looked back. “That’s different. They don’t mind. Anyway, you’re still a boy.”

The boy said, “Well, I don’t see....”

The man slid his chair back, which scraped across the floor. “All right. It’s time for work. You go help Jim.”

The boy, still holding the man’s gaze said, “Yes sir.”

* * * * *

Twenty five years later, returning home from his first leave in the Navy, the boy, now a man, walked up from the edge of the gravel road where the cab had let him out. He carried a duffle bag lightly over his shoulder. There was no one outside but he could smell cooking from the kitchen at the back of the house. He pulled open the screen door and saw a group sitting at the long table. At first he wasn't sure who they were because the room was dark after coming in from the light and some of the people appeared dark. He thought he might be in the wrong house. Then the large man at the end of the table, said, "Well just don't stand there boy, come on in."

The other large man got up from his place, which has been the boy's place, walked past Hattie and Gus, the two other black people at the big table, grabbed the boy's bicep with one large hand and said, "Well look at you Tom. Just look at you."

Copyright © 2007 Tom Weathers