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Jan Cox Speas

THE GROWING SEASON

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Growing Season is the story of a place, the people who lived there, and the things that happened to them during a certain week in August.

As a writer, I have always been interested in that large segment of our Southern population which is neither decadent nor decaying but very much alive and growing. It has been said that all towns in the Southern piedmont could once be divided (usually by the railroad tracks) into two sections: on one side the tree-shaded big houses where the aristocrats and the 'shabby genteel' lived, and on the other the forlorn shacks belonging to the 'poor white' mill workers and the Negroes. This picture has been changing, except for the Negro percentage of society, for the past thirty years, and like other parts of the country we now have a large and expanding group of people belonging somewhere between the two extremes of the social order. These people know little about the aristocrats, care nothing for the shabby genteel, and are too confident in their improved financial status to worry about dropping back into the class of poor whites. They have their roots in a rural South rapidly becoming industrialized; some of them grew up on tenant farms, but many came from families owning enough

land, if only a few acres, to retain some measure of independence. The number of factory workers has grown since World War II, but the old days when the textile mills controlled a man's life from birth to death are gone, and now if a man works in a factory he does so because the wages are good. If he doesn't like his job he moves on to another -- there are many such jobs available in the South of today. Often he farms on the side -- a money crop, perhaps tobacco -- and whatever his job he prefers to live on the outskirts of town where he can have enough space around him for a garden, the old cars he refuses to discard until he finds a use for the tires and spare parts, and plenty of children. When he isn't a factory worker he is likely to be a truck driver, a mechanic, a fireman, a milkman, a plumber, a telephone lineman; his wife is often a clerk in a department store, a waitress, a beauty parlor operator, or a factory worker like himself. He and his kind may sometimes be found in the courtroom, they commit their share of the crimes, and they are not unacquainted with social workers; but most of them buy new appliances for their wives, drive new cars and own their own homes, see that their children finish high school, and raise large families to be law-abiding citizens.

In short, this new kind of Southerner outnumbers the aristocrats, the white-collar class, and the poor whites.

I think he has been neglected by Southern writers for too long, perhaps because there are so many like him all over the country. Writers are drawn to the exception rather than the rule; readers are drawn to the sensational elements of the South, however rare, and are reluctant to abandon their notions of decadent aristocratic families and a dying culture for anything so commonplace as a society of mechanics and truck drivers. Moreover, it is still the fashion, particularly in novels, to glorify the neurotic; our modern fiction seems to be overcrowded with those pathetic, twisted, confused and sensitive souls who are always being brutally crushed by the coarse, vulgar and insensitive Stanley Kowalskis with much hair on their chests and no souls at all.

At the risk of being highly unfashionable, I confess that I find the Geneva Hacketts and Gurney Dowds and Tay Brannons far more interesting. They are not pathetic and are seldom twisted, but they are not insensitive; if they are sometimes brutal it is because they have accepted the inescapable truth that they live in a world far more brutal than the 'pretty one on the fan'; and their coarseness and vulgarity is more often bred from vitality than from decadence. They wouldn't recognize a neurosis if they met one face to face; if the term were explained to Mrs. Hackett she would say, with some impatience, that everybody living

has a problem to solve or to bear with unsolved. In the world of the Hill one survives by learning, sometimes at great cost, to cope with life instead of running away from it; this urgent drive to make some kind of practical compromise with life may be considered brutal and coarse by some, but on the Hill it is a basic necessity. And on the Hill, as elsewhere, some individuals never learn to cope and some don't survive. On any of the streets there one may find a Mrs. Hackett and an Addie, a Tay and a Marv, a Jody and a Ruthie -- all caught up in the struggle for existence, each trying to find some sort of strength to meet the daily pressures of life. And like people anywhere, some of them find it with ease, some with difficulty, and some not at all.

I don't pretend to know why it is this way, that people can be divided into those who seem to have a tough core of resistance and those who do not. I do know, however, that they cannot be divided into the sensitive and the insensitive. Someone once wrote that our society has lost its shape, that civilization has been reduced to barbarism, and that therefore anyone considered to be 'adjusted' or 'normal' today is necessarily a crude and unfeeling barbarian. As Tennessee Williams said about the significance of A Streetcar Named Desire, "It means that if you do not watch out the apes will take over." But life is not one thing or another, pure black

or pure white, and the individual who is neither a pathetic misfit clinging to the past nor a perverted and decaying aristocrat is not automatically one of the apes. Our society has its tragic dilemma -- as do all societies -- but dilemmas can't be resolved or even endured by the childish process of retreating from reality because we don't like it. Those who face life as it is, here and now, and then get on with living it as best they can are the very ones who, in any century and any society, keep civilization from reverting to the apes. As Mrs. Hackett would say: you take what comes and make do with it, you grow new skin like tough scar tissue, you carry your burdens as best you can.

Not everyone can be a Mrs. Hackett. Most of us, like some of those on the Hill, try our best to cope and don't always succeed. But to me, as a writer, the struggle is endlessly fascinating. I don't have any answers or solutions or pet theories; I simply wanted to write a story about these people, to say this is how it was with them that weekend in August during the last hot spell of summer.