



The story begins with the murder of Mr. Grope by two black men. An innocent bystander named Jefferson is charged with and convicted of the murder. He is sentenced to death. In his trial, Jefferson's attorney explains to the jury "What justice would there be to take his life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this."

Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma Glenn, and Aunt Lou, ask Grant Wiggins, the local schoolteacher and Lou's nephew, to turn Jefferson from a "hog" to a "man".

However, they must first get permission from Sheriff Sam Guidry. To accomplish this, they ask Sheriff Guidry's brother-in-law Henri Pichot for assistance. The Sheriff gives Grant permission. When Grant is not there, Miss Emma, Aunt Lou, and Reverend Ambrose also visit Jefferson. At the same time, Grant is dating a schoolteacher from nearby Bayonne named Vivian. Over the course of the novel, Grant and Jefferson form a close friendship. Unusual for the time, Grant also forms a friendship with Deputy Paul Bonin. In early February, it is announced that Jefferson will be executed on April 8. Around this time, Reverend Ambrose becomes concerned that Grant, an agnostic, is not teaching Jefferson about God and thus begins visiting him regularly. This conflict reaches a head when Grant buys Jefferson a radio, which the seniors in the black community, or "quarter", see as sinful. The novel ends with Jefferson's execution, and, much to Grant's surprise, a visit from Paul in which he tells Grant that "Jefferson was the strongest man in that crowded room" when he was executed.