

spective renter, a dentist. They looked at her like she was nothing.

"I let you down, El," she said.

"I'm okay," he said. "I just made Explorer." He kept his head down and was rewarded. Just like they wanted.

There were four ways out. In the throes of his next mid-night spell Elwood decided there was a fifth way.

Get rid of Nickel.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He never missed a marathon. He didn't care for the winners, those Superman types hunting world records, slapping down that New York asphalt over bridges and up the extra-wide borough avenues. Camera crews in cars trailed them, zooming in on every drop of sweat and veins jumping in their necks, and white cops on motorcycles, too, to keep nuts from running out from the sidelines and messing with them. Those guys got enough applause, what did they need him for? The winner last year was this African brother, dude was from Kenya. This year it was a white guy from Britain. Built the same, skin color aside—look at those legs and you know they're going to be in the paper. Pros, training all year, jetting all over the globe to compete. It was easy to root for the winners.

No, he liked the punch-drunk ones, half walking at mile twenty-three, tongues flapping like Labradors. Tumbling across the finish line by hook or by crook, feet pounded to bloody meat in their Nikes. The laggards and limpers who weren't running the course but running deep into their character—down into the cave to return to the light with what they found. By the time they got to Columbus Circle, the TV crews have split, the cone cups of water and

Gatorade litter the course like daisies in a pasture, and the silver space blankets twist in the wind. Maybe they had someone waiting for them and maybe they didn't. Who wouldn't celebrate that?

The winners ran alone at the front, then the race course filled up with the pack, the normal joes crammed together. He came out for the runners bringing up the rear and for the crowds on the sidewalks and street corners, those New York mobs so oddball and lovely that they summoned him from his uptown apartment by a force he could only call kinship. Every November the race pitted his skepticism about human beings against the fact that they were all in this dirty city together, unlikely cousins.

The spectators stood on tippy-toes, bellies rubbing on the blue wooden police barriers that get rolled out for races, riots, and presidents, jostling for sight lines, on the shoulders of daddies and boyfriends. Amid the noise of air horns, wolf whistles, and ghetto blasters shouting out old calypso tunes. "Go!" and "You can do it!" and "You got it!" Depending on the breeze the air smelled of Sabrett hot-dog carts or the hairy armpit of that tank-topped chick adjacent. To think of those Nickel nights where the only sounds were tears and insects, how you could sleep in a room crammed with sixty boys and still understand that you were the only person on earth. Everybody around and nobody around at the same time. Here everybody was around and by some miracle you didn't want to wring their neck but give them a hug. The whole city, poor people and Park Avenue types, black and white, Puerto Ricans, on the curb, holding signs and national flags and cheering the people who had been their opponents the day before in front of them at the A&P

checkout, grabbing the last seat on the subway, walking like a walrus too slow on the sidewalk. Competitors for apartments, for schools, for the very air—all those hard-won and cherished animosities fell away for a few hours as they celebrated a rite of endurance and vicarious suffering. *You can do it.*

Tomorrow it was back to the front but this afternoon the truce held until the last runner's last cheer.

The sun was gone. November decided to remind everybody they lived in its kingdom now, ordering up gusts. He exited the park at Sixty-Sixth, darted between two cops on horses, reflected in the cops' sunglasses as a black minnow. The dispersing spectators thinned when he got off Central Park West.

"Hey, man! Hey, hold up a minute!"

Like many New Yorkers he had a crackhead alert system and turned, steeling himself.

The man grinned. "You know me, man—Chickie! Chickie Pete!"

So it was. Chickie Pete from Cleveland, a man now.

He didn't run into a lot of people from the old days. One of the advantages of living up north. He saw Maxwell one time at a wrestling match at the Garden, Jimmy "Superfly" Snucka in a steel match swooping through the air like a giant bat. Maxwell was in line at one of the concessions, close enough to see the six-inch scar on his forehead that leapt over his eye socket and gouged into his jaw. And he thought he saw pigeon-toed Birdy once outside Gristedes, had that same curly golden hair, but the guy looked straight through him. As if he were in disguise, crossing the border under false documents.

"How you doing, man?" His old Nickel comrade wore a green Jets sweatshirt and red track pants that were a size too big, borrowed.

"Hanging in there. You look good." He'd pegged the energy correctly—Chickie wasn't a crackhead but he'd been around the block a few times, with that too-raw thing druggies have when they just get out of jail or a clinic. Here he was, slapping him five, grabbing his shoulder, and talking too loud in a performance of gregariousness. A walking flinch.

"My man!"

"Chickie Pete."

"Where you headed?" Chickie Pete proposed a beer, drinks on him. He begged off, but Chickie Pete wouldn't hear of it, and after the marathon perhaps a test of goodwill for his fellow man was in order. Even when the fellow man hailed from dark days.

He knew Chipp's from his Eighty-Second Street days, before he moved uptown. Columbus was a sleepy stretch when he came to the city—everything closed by eight, tops—and then neighborhood joints opened up on the avenue, singles bars and restaurants that took reservations. Like everywhere in the city: It's a dump and then presto, it's the in-thing. Chipp's was a proper saloon—bartenders who tracked your usual, decent burgers, conversation if you want it and a nod if you don't. The only time he remembered something racial happening, this cracker in a Red Sox cap started going *nigger this* and *nigger that* and got kicked out in a hot minute.

Horizon guys liked to duck in on Mondays and Thursdays, Annie's shifts, on account of her buy-back policy and

her bosom, both generous. After he got Ace up and running, he sometimes took his employees out and brought them here, until he learned that if he drank with the guys they took liberties. Show up late or no-show with lame excuses. Or scruffy, their uniforms rumpled. He paid good money for those uniforms. Designed the logo himself.

The game was on, sound low. He and Chickie sat at the bar and the bartender placed their pints on coasters advertising Smiles, a fern bar that used to be a few blocks up the street. The bartender was new, a white guy. A redhead with a bumpkin manner. He liked to pump iron, his T-shirt sleeves as tight as a rubber on his biceps. The kind of gorilla you hire for Saturday nights if you get a crowd.

He put down a twenty even though Chickie said drinks were on him. "You used to play trumpet," he said. Chickie was in the colored band and made a splash in the New Year's talent show with a jazzy version of "Greensleeves," if he recalled, a rendition that verged on bebop.

Chickie smiled at the reminder of his talent. "That was a long time ago. My hands." He held up two fingers that curled like crab legs. He said he'd just spent thirty days drying out.

Mentioning that they sat in a bar seemed impolite.

But Chickie had always made accommodations with his shortcomings. The boy had been a reedy little runt when he got to Nickel and regularly punked out his first year until he learned to fight, and then he preyed on the smaller kids, taking them into closets and supply rooms—you teach what you're taught. That, and the trumpet thing was all he remembered about the Nickel Boy, before Chickie started into his life after graduation. It was a familiar tune, one

he'd heard over the years—not from Nickel Boys but from dudes who spent time in similar places. A stint in the army, the routine and discipline appealed to him. "A lot of guys went from juvie into the armed forces. It's like a natural option, especially if you got no home to go back to. Or want to go back to." Chickie was in the military for twelve years, and then he had a crack-up and they drummed him out. Married a couple of times. Any job he could get. The best was selling stereos in Baltimore. He could go on forever about hi-fis.

"I always drank," Chickie said. "Then it was like the more I tried to settle down, the more I got fucked up every night."

Last May he beat up a guy in a bar. The judge said it was either jail or a program, no choice at all. He was in town visiting his sister, who lived in Harlem. "She letting me stay while I figure out my next move. I've always liked it up here."

Chickie asked him what he was up to, and Elwood felt bad telling him about his company so he cut the number of trucks and employees by half and didn't mention the new office on Lenox, which he was quite proud of. Ten-year lease. The longest thing he'd ever committed to, and it was weird because the only thing that bothered him about it was that he wasn't bothered about it.

"My man," Chickie said. "Moving on up! Got a lady?"

"Never settled down, I guess. I go out, when work ain't so bad."

"I hear you, I hear you."

The light from the street dropped a shade as the taller buildings ushered a premature evening. It was the cue for a

dose of the Sunday-night back-to-work blues, and he wasn't the only one afflicted—there was a rush at the bar. The muscle-bound bartender served the two blond coeds first, underage probably and testing alcohol enforcement south of their Columbia University stomping grounds. Chickie ordered another beer, outpacing him.

They started in on the old days, quickly sliding to the dark stuff, the worst of the housemen and supervisors. Didn't say Spencer's name, as if it might conjure him on Columbus Avenue like a peckerwood specter, that childhood fear still kept close. Chickie mentioned the Nickel Boys he ran into over the years—Sammy, Nelson, Lonnie. This one was a crook, that one lost an arm in Vietnam, another one was strung out. Chickie said the names of guys he hadn't thought of in forever, it was like a picture of the Last Supper, twelve losers with Chickie in the middle. That's what the school did to a boy. It didn't stop when you got out. Bend you all kind of ways until you were unfit for straight life, good and twisted by the time you left.

Where did that leave him. How bent was he?

"You got out in '64?" Chickie asked.

"You don't remember?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Time served"—a lie told many times, when he slipped up and mentioned reform school—"and they kicked me out. Went up to Atlanta and then kept going north. You know. I've been here since '68. Twenty years." All this time he'd taken it as a given that his escape was a Nickel legend. The students passing his story around as if he were a folk hero, a Stagger Lee figure scaled down to teenage size. But it hadn't happened. Chickie Pete didn't

even recall how he got out. If he wanted to be remembered, he should have carved his name into a pew like everyone else. He lit another cigarette.

Chickie Pete squinted. "Hey, hey, what happened to that kid you used to hang around with all the time?"

"Which guy?"

"The guy with that thing. I'm trying to remember."

"Hmm."

"It'll come back to me," he said, and split to the bathroom. He made a remark to a table of gals celebrating a birthday. They laughed at him when he went into the men's room.

Chickie Pete and his trumpet. He might have played professionally, why not? A session man in a funk band, or an orchestra. If things had been different. The boys could have been many things had they not been ruined by that place. Doctors who cure diseases or perform brain surgery, inventing shit that saves lives. Run for president. All those lost geniuses—sure not all of them were geniuses, Chickie Pete for example was not solving special relativity—but they had been denied even the simple pleasure of being ordinary. Hobbled and handicapped before the race even began, never figuring out how to be normal.

The tablecloths were new since the last time he was here—red-and-white checkered vinyl. Denise used to complain about the sticky tables, in those days. Denise—that was one thing he'd messed up. Around him the civilians ate their cheeseburgers and drank their pints, in their free-world cheer. An ambulance sped by outside and in the dark mirror behind the liquor he had a vision of himself outlined a bright red, a shimmering aura that marked him as

an outsider. Everybody saw it, just like he knew Chickie's story in two notes. They'd always be on the lam, no matter how they got out of that school.

No one in his life stayed long.

Chickie Pete slapped him on the back on his return. He got mad suddenly, thinking about how knuckleheads like Chickie were still breathing and his friend wasn't. He stood. "I got to go, man."

"No, no, I hear you. Me, too," Chickie said, with the surety of those who have nothing to do. "I don't want to ask," Chickie said.

Here it comes.

"But if you're looking for a hand, I could use the job. I'm sleeping on a couch."

"Right."

"You have a card?"

He started for his wallet and his ACE MOVING business cards—"Mr. Elwood Curtis, President"—but thought better of it. "Not on me."

"I can handle the work, is what I'm putting out there." Chickie wrote his sister's number on a red bar napkin. "You ring me up—for the old days."

"I will."

Once he made sure Chickie Pete was good and gone, he headed for Broadway. He had the uncharacteristic urge to take the bus, the 104 up Broadway. Take the scenic route and absorb the life of the city. He nixed it: The marathon was over, and his feeling of bonhomie was as well. In Brooklyn and Queens and the Bronx and Manhattan, the cars and trucks had resumed ownership of the blocked-off streets, the marathon route disappeared mile by mile. Blue paint

on asphalt marked the course—every year it flaked away before you knew it. The white plastic bags skittering down the block and the overflowing trash cans were back, the McDonald's wrappers and red-top crack vials crunching underfoot. He grabbed a cab and thought about dinner.

It was funny, how much he had liked the idea of his Great Escape making the rounds of the school. Pissing off the staff when they heard the boys talking about it. He thought this city was a good place for him because nobody knew him—and he liked the contradiction that the one place that *did* know him was the one place he didn't want to be. It tied him to all those other people who come to New York, running away from hometowns and worse. But even Nickel had forgotten his story.

Knocking Chickie for being a fuckup when he was going home to his empty apartment.

He ripped up Chickie Pete's red napkin and tossed it out the window. *No One Likes a Litterbug* popped into his head, courtesy of the city's new quality-of-life drive. A successful campaign, judging from the way it stayed with him. "So give me a ticket," he said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Director Hardee suspended two days of classes to get the facility in shape for the state inspection. It was a surprise inspection, but his fraternity brother ran child welfare down in Tallahassee and made a phone call. Plenty of long-standing cosmetic items required attention despite the students' work details. The sun-cracked basketball court called for a new surface and hoops, and rust afflicted the tractors and harrows on the farms. An alien light radiated when the boys wiped generations of grime from the skylights in the printing plant. Most of the buildings, from the hospital to the schoolhouses to the garages, badly needed a new coat of paint, the dormitories—especially those for colored students—most of all. It was quite a sight, all the boys, big and small, hustling in unified purpose, paint on their chins, the chucks wobbling as they ferried the cans of Dixie across campus.

At Cleveland, Carter the houseman drew upon his construction days and demonstrated how to tuck-point the cracks between those good Nickel bricks. Crowbars wrenched the rotten floorboards; new ones were cut and set. Hardee called in outsiders for the specialty work. The new boiler, delivered two years earlier, was finally installed.