

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.

Plumbers replaced two broken urinals on the second floor, and burly roofers took care of blisters and punctures up top. No more early-morning leaks waking the boys of room 2.

The White House got a new coat. No one saw who did it. One day it was its dingy self, the next it made the sun vibrate on eyeballs.

Judging from Hardee's face as he toured the progress, the boys were on track for a good showing. Every few decades a newspaper report about embezzlement or physical abuse at the school initiated an investigation by the state. In their wake came prohibitions against "spanking," and the use of dark cells and sweatboxes. The administration instituted a stricter accounting of school supplies, which had a tendency to disappear, as well as the profits from the various student businesses, which also liked to disappear. The parole of students to local families and businesses was terminated and the medical staff increased. They fired the longtime dentist and found one who didn't charge by the extraction.

It had been years since there were any allegations against Nickel. On this occasion the school was merely another item on a long list of government facilities due a once-over.

Work assignments—farming, printing, brick-making, and the like—continued as usual, because they promoted responsibility, built character, etc., and were an important source of revenue. Two days before the inspection, Harper dropped off Elwood and Turner at the house of Mr. Edward Childs, a former county supervisor and longtime booster of the Nickel Academy for Boys. The school and the family went back a ways. Edward Childs and the Kiwanis Club had gone fifty-fifty on the football uniforms five years earlier. It was hoped that he'd repeat his generosity, given an incentive.

Mr. Childs's father, Bertram, had served in local government and had also sat on the school board. He was an avid proponent of peonage, back when it was allowed, and often leased paroled students. They tended the horses when there had been a stable out back, and the chickens. The basement that Elwood and Turner cleaned out that afternoon had been where the indentured boys slept. When the moon was full, the boys had stood on the cot and gazed upon its milky eye through the single cracked window.

Elwood and Turner were unaware of the basement's history. They were charged with removing sixty years of junk so that it could be converted into a rec room, with checkerboard floor tile and wood paneling. The Childs's teenagers had been lobbying and Edward Childs was not without his own ideas for the space, as his wife and kids visited her family for two weeks every August and he was left to his own devices. Wet bar over there, install some modern lighting, things they'd seen in magazines. Before those dreams were realized, old bicycles, ancient steamer trunks, broken-down spinning wheels, and a multitude of other dusty relics waited for their final reward. The boys opened the heavy cellar doors and got to work. Harper sat in the van, smoking and listening to the baseball game.

"Junkman's going to love us," Turner said.

Elwood carried a stack of dusty *Saturday Evening Posts* up the stairs and added it to the pile of *Imperial Nighthawks* by the curb. The *Imperial* was a Klan paper; the issue on top featured a black-robed night rider carrying a burning cross. Had Elwood cut the twine, he would have discovered that this was a popular cover theme. He turned over the bundle to hide the image and revealed an ad for Clementine Shaving Cream.

While Turner made jokes under his breath and whistled Martha and the Vandellas, Elwood's thoughts traced a groove. Different newspapers for different countries. He remembered looking up *agape* in his encyclopedia volume after he read Dr. King's speech in the *Defender*. The newspaper ran the address in full after the reverend's appearance at Cornell College. If Elwood had come across the word before, through all those years of skipping around the book, it hadn't stuck in his head. King described *agape* as a divine love operating in the heart of man. A selfless love, an incandescent love, the highest there is. He called upon his Negro audience to cultivate that pure love for their oppressors, that it might carry them to the other side of the struggle.

Elwood tried to get his head around it, now that it was no longer the abstraction floating in his head last spring. It was real now.

Throw us in jail, and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities after midnight hours, and drag us out onto some wayside road, and beat us and leave us half-dead, and we will still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom.

The capacity to suffer. Elwood—all the Nickel boys—existed in the capacity. Breathed in it, ate in it, dreamed in it. That was their lives now. Otherwise they would have perished. The beatings, the rapes, the unrelenting winnowing of themselves. They endured. But to love those who would have destroyed them? To make that leap? *We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you.*

Elwood shook his head. What a thing to ask. What an impossible thing.

"You hear me?" Turner asked. Wiggling his fingers in Elwood's blank face.

"What?"

Turner needed a hand inside. They'd made good progress, even with Turner's standard delaying technique, unearthing a stash of old steamer trunks beneath the stairs. Silverfish and centipedes made a break for it as the boys dragged the trunks to the center of the basement. The stamps decorating the scruffy black canvas commemorated trips to Dublin, Niagara Falls, San Francisco, and other distant ports of call. A story of exotic travel in bygone days, places these boys would never see in their lives.

Turner huffed. "What's in these things?"

"I've been writing everything down," Elwood said.

"Everything what?"

"The deliveries. The yard work and chores. The names of everybody and the dates. All our Community Service."

"Nigger, why would you do a thing like that?" Knowing why but curious as to how his friend would phrase it.

"You told me. No one else can get me out of here, just me."

"Nobody ever listens to me—why you got to start?"

"I didn't know why I did it at first. That first day with Harper, I wrote down what I saw. And I kept doing it. In one of the school notebooks. It made me feel better. I suppose it was to tell someone someday, and now I'm going to do it. I'm going to give it to the inspectors when they come."

"What do you think they going to do? Put your picture on the cover of *Time* magazine?"

"I did it to stop it."

"Another one of these dummies." Feet thumped over their heads—they never did see the Childs family that entire day—and Turner busied himself like they had X-ray vision. "You're getting along. Ain't had trouble since that one time. They going to take you out back, bury your ass, then they take me out back, too. The fuck is wrong with you?"

"You're wrong, Turner." Elwood tugged on the handle of a weathered brown trunk. It broke in half. "It's not an obstacle course," he said. "You can't go around it—you have to go through it. Walk with your head up no matter what they throw at you."

"I vouched for you," Turner said, wiping his hands on his trousers. "You got ticked off and need to get it off your chest, that's cool." Marking the end of the conversation.

When they were done hauling, the boys had performed surgery—cut the rotten tissue from the house and plopped it on the tray of the curb. Turner banged on the van door to wake Harper. The radio relayed a sizzle of static.

"What's wrong with him?" Harper asked Elwood. Turner was mum, a conspicuous turn.

Elwood shook his head and looked out the window.

His thoughts prowled and roved after midnight. Turner's angry question joined his host of worry. It wasn't, what did he think the white men were going to do but did he trust them to do it?

He was alone in this particular protest. He wrote *The Chicago Defender* twice, but hadn't heard back, even when he mentioned the editorial he'd written under another name. It had been two weeks. More distressing than the notion that the newspaper didn't care about what was going

on at Nickel was that they received so many letters like it, so many appeals, that they couldn't address them all. The country was big, and its appetite for prejudice and depredation limitless, how could they keep up with the host of injustices, big and small. This was just one place. A lunch counter in New Orleans, a public pool in Baltimore that they filled with concrete rather than allow black kids to dip a toe in it. This was one place, but if there was one, there were hundreds, hundreds of Nickels and White Houses scattered across the land like pain factories.

If he asked his grandmother to send the letter, avoiding the matter of whether his mail made it out, she'd open it lickety-split and throw it in the trash. Fearful of what would happen to him—and she didn't even know what they'd done to him so far. He had to trust a stranger to do the right thing. It was impossible, like loving the one who wanted to destroy you, but that was the message of the movement: to trust in the ultimate decency that lived in every human heart.

This or this. This world whose injustices have sent you meek and shuffling, or this truer, biding world waiting for you to catch up?

At breakfast the morning of the state visit, Blakeley and the other house fathers of the north campus made clear their message of the day: "You boys mess up, it's your ass." Blakeley, Terrance Crowe from Lincoln, and Freddie Rich, who looked after the boys in Roosevelt. Every day he wore the same buffalo belt buckle, nestled above his crotch and under his potbelly like an animal wending between hills.

Blakeley gave the boys the schedule of the inspection. He was alert and awake, having forsworn his nightcaps. The

black boys weren't on display until the afternoon, he said. The inspection commenced with the white campus, the schoolhouse and dormitories, and the big facilities like the hospital and the gymnasium. Hardee wanted to show off the athletic fields and the new basketball court, so that was next before the men from Tallahassee went over the hill to the farms, the printing press, and the renowned Nickel brick plant. Last came the colored campus. "You know Mr. Spencer will have a word for you if he catches you with your shirt untucked or your dirty drawers hanging out of your footlocker," Blakeley said. "And it will not be kind."

The three house fathers stood before the serving trays, which that day were filled with the food the students were supposed to get every morning: scrambled eggs, ham, fresh juice, and pears.

"When they getting here, sir?" one of the chucks asked Terrance. Terrance was a big strapping man with a scraggly white beard and watery eyes. He'd worked at Nickel for more than twenty years, which meant he'd seen different kinds of meanness. Which made him one of the bigger accomplices, in Elwood's estimation.

"Any minute," Terrance said.

When the house fathers took their seats, the boys were permitted to eat.

Desmond looked up from his plate. "I haven't eaten this good since . . ." He couldn't think of it. "They should inspect this place all the time."

"Nobody talking now," Jaimie said. "Eat."

The students dug in happily, scraping plates. The bribe did its job, despite the stern words. The boys were in a pleasant mood, between the grub, the new clothes, the repainted

dining hall. Those ragged at the cuff or knee had been given new trousers. Their shoes gleamed. The line outside the barber's had wrapped around the building twice. The students looked smart. Even the ringworm kids.

Elwood searched for Turner. He sat with some Roosevelt boys he bunked with during his first term. From his fake smile, he knew Elwood was looking at him. Turner had barely spoken to Elwood since the day in the basement. He still hung out with Jaimie and Desmond, slinking off when Elwood appeared. He'd been scarce in the rec room and Elwood assumed he was hanging out in his loft. The boy was almost as good as Harriet at the silent treatment, especially given the years of practice his grandmother had on him. This silence's lesson? Keep your mouth shut.

Ordinarily, Wednesdays were Community Service, but for obvious reasons Elwood and Turner were reassigned. Harper grabbed them after breakfast and told them to join the bleacher team. The football bleachers were a splintery mess, wobbly, unsound. Hardee saved their refurbishment for the day of the inspection, as if such large undertakings were just another day at the school. Ten boys were dispatched to sand, replace, and paint the planks on one side of the field, and another ten took care of the bleachers opposite. By the time the inspectors finished with the white campus, the teams would have a nice performance under way. Elwood and Turner were on different teams.

Elwood took to reconnoitering spent or rotten planks. Tiny gray bugs boiled forth and slinked from the daylight. He'd gotten into a nice rhythm when the signal went up—the inspectors had departed the gymnasium and were headed toward the football field. He tried to think of how

Turner would have nicknamed them. The portly one was a ringer for Jackie Gleason, the one with the buzz cut looked like a refugee from Mayberry, and the tall one was JFK. He had the angular WASP features of the dead president and the same splendid white teeth, and had chosen the haircut to heighten the resemblance. Out in the sun, the inspectors took off their suit jackets—it was going to be a humid day—under which they wore the short-sleeve shirts and clipped black ties that made Elwood think of Cape Canaveral and those smart men with impossible trajectories crammed into their skulls.

He lugged his words like an anvil in his Nickel-issued pockets. *Darkness cannot drive out darkness*, the reverend said, *only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.* He'd copied over his list of four months of deliveries and recipients, the names and dates and goods exchanged, the bags of rice and tins of peaches, the sides of beef and Christmas hams. He added three lines about the White House and Black Beauty, and that one of the students, Griff, had gone missing after the boxing championship. All in his finest penmanship. He didn't put his name down, to kid himself that they wouldn't know the author's identity. They'd know he was the snitch, of course, but they'd be in jail.

Is this what it felt like? To walk arm in arm in the middle of the street, a link in a living chain, knowing that around the next corner the white mob stood with their baseball bats and fire hoses and curses. But it was just him, as Turner told him that day in the hospital.

The boys had been trained to wait until spoken to before talking to a white man. Learned this in their earliest days, in school, on the streets and roads of their dusty towns. Had it

reinforced at Nickel: You are a colored boy in a white man's world. He'd considered different theaters for his delivery: the schoolhouse, outside the dining hall, the parking lot by the administration building. He never pulled off this particular emancipation play without interruption—Hardee and Spencer, usually Spencer, inevitably bounded out on the boards, ruining the scene. He'd expected the director and superintendent to take the inspectors around, but the state men roamed unescorted. Moseying on the concrete paths, pointing at this or that, conferring. They stopped people for little talks, calling over a white boy who was running to the library, collaring Miss Baker and another female teacher for a chat.

Maybe it was possible.

JFK, Jackie Gleason, and Mayberry dawdled by the new basketball courts—that had been a shrewd maneuver on Hardee's part—and approached the football fields. Harper muttered, "You boys look busy," and waved at the inspectors. He walked the fifty-yard line to the opposite bleachers to give the illusion of noninterference. Elwood descended the bleachers, stepping around Lonnie and Black Mike, who were awkwardly setting a plank of pine into the scaffold. He had the angle right for interception. A quick hand-off—and if Harper saw and asks what's in that envelope, he says it's an essay on how civil rights has changed things for the younger generation of colored folks, he'd been working on it for weeks. It sounded like some corny shit Turner would accuse him of.

Elwood was two yards away from the white men. His heart caught. No budging that anvil any farther. He veered over to the lumber pile and put his hands on his knees.

The inspectors proceeded up the hill. Jackie Gleason

made a joke and the other two laughed. They walked past the White House without a glance.

The other students made so much noise when they saw what the kitchen had cooked up for lunch—hamburgers and mashed potatoes and ice cream that would never see the inside of Fisher's Drugs—that Blakeley told them to keep it down. "You want them to think this is some kind of circus we running here?" Elwood's stomach refused the food. He'd fucked it up. Try again in Cleveland, he decided. The rec room, a quick "excuse me sir" in the hallway. Instead of out in the open, in the middle of the green. He'd have cover. Give it to JFK. But what if the inspector opened it right there? Or read it on the walk down the hill, as Hardee and Spencer caught up with them to escort them off the property?

They had whipped Elwood. But he took the whipping and he was still here. There was nothing they could do that white people hadn't done to black people before, were not doing at this moment somewhere in Montgomery and Baton Rouge, in broad daylight on a city street outside Woolworths. Or some anonymous country road with no one to tell the tale. They would whip him, whip him bad, but they couldn't kill him, not if the government knew what was going on here. His mind strayed—and he saw the National Guard drive through the Nickel gate in a convoy of dark green vans, and soldiers jumping out into formation. Maybe the soldiers didn't agree with what they were sent to do, their sympathies lay with the old order instead of what was right, but they had to abide by the laws of the land. Same way they lined up in Little Rock to let the nine Negro children into Central High School, a human wall between the angry whites and the children, between the

past and the future. Governor Faubus couldn't do anything about it because it was bigger than Arkansas and its backward wickedness, it was America. A mechanism of justice set in movement by a woman sitting down on a bus where she was told not to sit, a man ordering ham on rye at a forbidden counter. Or a letter of proof.

We must believe in our souls that we are somebody, that we are significant, that we are worthful, and we must walk the streets of life every day with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebody-ness. If he didn't have that, what did he have? Next time, he would not falter.

The bleacher team headed back after lunch. Harper caught his arm. "Hold on a minute, Elwood."

The other boys cut down the slope. "What is it, Mr. Harper?"

"I need you to head up to the farms and find Mr. Gladwell," he said. Mr. Gladwell and his two assistants oversaw all the planting and harvesting at Nickel. Elwood had never talked to him, but everyone knew him from his straw hat and his farmer's tan, which made him look like he swam across the Rio Grande to get here. "Those men from the state aren't going to head up there today," Harper said, "they're going to send some other experts to check out the farms, special. You find him and tell him he can relax."

Elwood turned to where Harper pointed, down the main road where the three inspectors mounted the steps to Cleveland. They went inside. Mr. Gladwell was God knows where up north, with the lime or potato fields, it was acres and acres. The inspectors would be gone by the time he got back.

"I'm liking the painting, Harper—can one of the little kids go?"

"Mr. Harper, *sir*." On campus they had to go by the rules.

"Sir, I'd rather work on the bleachers."

Harper frowned. "Acting crazy today, all of you. You do what I asked you and on Friday it's back to the usual." Harper left Elwood on the dining-hall steps. Last Christmas, he'd stood in the same spot when Desmond told him and Turner about Earl's stomach trouble.

"I'll do it."

It was Turner.

"What's that?"

"That letter you got in your pocket," Turner said. "I'll get it to them, fuck it. Look at you—you look sick."

Elwood searched for a tell. But Turner stood with the con men of the world and the con men never betray the game.

"I said I'll do it, I'll do it. You got someone else?"

Elwood gave it to him and ran north without a word.

It took Elwood an hour to find Mr. Gladwell, who sat in a big rattan chair at the edge of the sweet potato fields. The man stood and squinted at Elwood.

"Say what now? Guess I can smoke," he said, and relit his cigar. He barked at his charges, who had stalled their labor at the sight of the messenger. "That doesn't mean you can quit, now. Get to it!"

Elwood took the long way back, around the trails that circumnavigated Boot Hill and took him past the stables and laundry. He was slow with his steps. He didn't want to know if Turner had been intercepted, or if the boy had ratted on him or simply taken his letter up to his hideout and put a match to it. Whatever waited for him on the other side would still be waiting for him whenever he got there, so he whistled a tune he remembered from when he was little, a blues tune. He didn't recall the words or whether it

had been his father or mother who sang it, but he felt good whenever the song snuck up on him, a kind of coolness like the shadow of a cloud out of nowhere, something that broke off something bigger. Yours briefly before it sailed on its way.

Turner brought him to his warehouse loft before supper. Turner had a license to roam, but Elwood didn't, and he shook off a wave of fear. But if he wrote that letter, he was bold enough to enter the warehouse without permission. The hideout was smaller than in his imagination, a cramped recess Turner had chipped out of the Nickel cave—walls made of crates, a dingy army blanket, and a cushion from the rec-room couch. It was not the hideout of a canny operator but the slim refuge of a runaway who had stepped into a doorway to get out of the rain, collar hugged tight.

Turner sat against a box of machine oil and cradled his knees. "I did it," he said. "I put it in a copy of *The Gator*. In the newspaper, like at the bowling alley when Mr. Garfield slipped a payoff to the fucking cops. Ran up to the man's car and said, 'I thought you'd like a copy.'"

"Which one did you give it to?"

"JFK, who else?" In disdain. "You think I gave it to that dude from *The Honeymooners*?"

"Thanks," Elwood said.

"I didn't do shit, El. I delivered the mail, is all." He put out his hand and the boys shook on it.

The kitchen staff brought out the ice cream again that night. The house fathers, and presumably Hardee, were satisfied with how the inspection had gone. At school the next day, and on Community Service that Friday, Elwood waited for the reaction, like he was back at Lincoln High School

and waiting for the volcano to bubble and smoke in science class. The National Guard didn't screech into the parking lot, Spencer didn't put his cold hand on his neck and say, "Boy, we have a problem." It didn't happen like that.

It happened as it ever happened. At night, in the dormitories, flashlights crawling over his face when they took him to the White House.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

He read about the restaurant in the *Daily News* and left the clipping by his side of the bed so he wouldn't miss it. It had been a while since they'd had a night out together. Three months on, his secretary Yvette still left the office early to care for her mother, which had him playing catch-up at the end of every day. Her mother was senile, but they called it dementia now. As for Millie, it was almost March so the annual madness had descended, April 15 coming up and everybody scrambling. "They have a level of denial that is positively insane," his wife said. She usually got home in time for the eleven o'clock news. He'd canceled date night twice already—*date night* was some women's magazine thing now embedded in his vocabulary like a splinter—so Millie was not going to let him miss this one. "Dorothy has been twice and says it's amazing," Millie said.

Dorothy thought a lot of things were amazing, like gospel brunch, *American Idol*, and organizing a petition against that new mosque opening up. He held his tongue.

He left at seven, after taking a crack at decoding the new health plan Yvette had dug up for Ace. It was cheaper but was he getting ripped off in the long run with the co-pay bullshit? This species of paperwork had always confounded