

box and put it in his basement, next to the boiler and the neglected fishing gear. With the rest of the stuff from the old days. He stopped embroidering that fantasy long ago. Not because he had someone in his life. But because that someone was Millie. She chipped off the bad parts. He hoped he did the same.

He got a feeling—he wanted to buy her flowers, like when he started taking her out. Eight years since he saw her at the Hale House fund-raiser, filling out her raffle tickets in her careful script. Is that what normal husbands do—buy flowers for no reason? All these years out of that school and he still spent a segment of his days trying to decipher the customs of normal people. The ones who had been raised happily, three meals a day and a kiss goodnight, the ones who had no notion of White Houses, Lovers' Lanes, and white county judges who sentenced you to hell.

She was late. If he hurried he could make it to Broadway and buy a cheap bouquet at a Korean deli before she got there.

"What's this for?" she'll ask.

For being the whole free world.

He should have thought of the flowers sooner, at the deli outside the office or when he stepped out of the subway, because right then she said, "There's my handsome husband," and it was date night.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Their daddies taught them how to keep a slave in line, passed down this brutal heirloom. Take him away from his family, whip him until all he remembers is the whip, chain him up so all he knows is chains. A term in an iron sweatbox, cooking his brains in the sun, had a way of bringing a buck around, and so did a dark cell, a room aloft in darkness, outside time.

After the Civil War, when a five-dollar fine for a Jim Crow charge—vagrancy, changing employers without permission, "bumptious contact," what have you—swept black men and women up into the maw of debt labor, the white sons remembered the family lore. Dug pits, forged bars, forbid the nourishing face of the sun. The Florida Industrial School for Boys wasn't in operation six months before they converted the third-floor storage closets into solitary confinement. One of the handymen went dorm by dorm, screwing in bolts: there. The dark cells remained in use even after two locked-up boys died in the fire of '21. The sons held the old ways close.

The state outlawed dark cells and sweatboxes in juvenile facilities after World War II. It was a time of high-minded reform all over, even at Nickel. But the rooms waited, blank

and still and airless. They waited for wayward boys in need of an attitude adjustment. They wait still, as long as the sons—and the sons of those sons—remember.

Elwood's second White House beating was not as severe as the first. Spencer didn't know what damage the boy's letter had caused—who else had read it, who cared, what sort of repercussions roiled down in the capitol. "Smart nigger," he said. "I don't know where they get these smart niggers." The superintendent was not his usual jolly self. He gave the boy twenty licks then, distracted, handed Black Beauty to Hennepin for the first time. Spencer had hired Hennepin as Earl's replacement, unaware of how perfectly he had chosen. But like seeks like. Hennepin maintained an expression of dull-witted malice most of the time, lumbering across the grounds, but he brightened at opportunities for cruelty, with a leer and gap-toothed grin. Hennepin beat the boy briefly before Spencer stayed his hand. There was no telling what was happening in Tallahassee. They took the boy to the dark cell.

Blakeley's room was to the right at the top of the stairs. Behind the other door lay the small hallway and the three rooms. The rooms had been repainted for the inspection and piles of bedding and surplus mattresses moved inside. The paint hid the initials of the cells' previous inhabitants, the scratches in the darkness over the years. Initials, names, and also a range of cuss words and entreaties. When the doors opened and the scratches were revealed to the boys who had written them, the hieroglyphics did not resemble what they remembered putting into the walls. It was all demonology.

Spencer and Hennepin hauled the sheets and mattresses to the rooms on either side. The room was empty when they

shoved Elwood in. The next afternoon a houseman on the day shift gave the boy a bucket for a toilet, but no more. Light strained through the mesh opening at the top of the door, a gray light his eyes eventually became accustomed to. They gave him food when the other boys left for breakfast, one meal a day.

The last three inhabitants of that particular room had come to bad ends. The place was worse luck on top of bad luck, cursed. Rich Baxter was sentenced to the dark cell for fighting back—a white supervisor boxed his ears, and Rich knocked out three of his teeth. He had a solid right hand. Rich spent a month in the room, thinking of the glorious violence he would deliver to the white world when he got out. Mayhem and murder and assault. Wiping his bloody knuckles on his dungarees. Instead he enlisted in the army and died—it was a closed casket—two days before the end of the Korean War. Five years later, Claude Sheppard got sent upstairs for stealing peaches. He was never the same after those weeks in the dark—a boy went in and a man hobbled out. He renounced misbehavior and sought out cures for his pervasive worthlessness, a kind of sad-sack seeker. Claude overdosed on smack in a Chicago flophouse three years later; potter's field keeps him now.

Jack Coker, Elwood Curtis's immediate predecessor, was discovered engaged in homosexual activity with another student, Terry Bonnie. Jack spent his dark time in Cleveland, Terry on the third floor of Roosevelt. Binary stars in cold space. The first thing Jack did when he got out was to smack Terry in the face with a chair. Well, not the first thing. He had to wait until dinnertime. The other boy was a mirror that granted a ruinous glimpse of himself. Jack died

on the floor of a juke-joint floor one month before Elwood arrived at Nickel. He misheard a stranger's remark and lashed out. The stranger had a knife.

After a week and a half, Spencer got tired of being afraid—in truth he was afraid much of the time but was unaccustomed to one of his black boys instigating that fear—and paid Elwood a visit. Things were quieting down at the statehouse, Hardee was less distressed. The worst was over. The government had too much power to interfere, was the problem in general. Way he saw it. It got worse every year. Spencer's daddy had been a supervisor on the south campus and got demoted after one of his charges ended up choked to death. Some roughhousing that got out of hand and he was the scapegoat. Money was tight before; it got tighter. Spencer remembered those days still, the pot of canned corn beef and broth stinking up that little kitchen and him and his brothers and sisters lined up with their chipped bowls. His grandfather had worked for the T. M. Madison Coal Company in Spadra, Arkansas, mind-ing nigger convicts. No one from the county, no one from the main office, dared to interfere with the execution of his office—his grandfather was a craftsman and enjoyed the respect of his achievements. It was demeaning, one of Spencer's boys writing a letter on him.

Spencer took Hennepin with him to the third floor. The rest of the dormitory was at breakfast. "You're probably wondering how long we're going to keep you in here," he said. They kicked Elwood a while and Spencer felt better, like a bubble of worry in his chest up and popped.

The worst thing that ever happened to Elwood happened every day: He woke in that room. He would never tell anyone about those days of darkness. Who would come for him?

He had never considered himself an orphan. He had to stay behind so that his mother and father could find what they needed in California. No point having sad feelings about it—one thing had to happen for the other thing to happen. He had an idea that one day he'd tell his father about his letter, how it was just like the letter his father gave to his commanding officer about the treatment of colored troops, the one that got him a commendation in the war. But he was as much an orphan as many of the boys in Nickel. No one was coming.

He thought long on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from the Birmingham jail, and the powerful appeal the man composed from inside. One thing gave birth to the other—without the cell, no magnificent call to action. Elwood had no paper, no pen, just walls, and he was all out of fine thoughts, let alone the wisdom and the way with words. The world had whispered its rules to him for his whole life and he refused to listen, hearing instead a higher order. The world continued to instruct: Do not love for they will disappear, do not trust for you will be betrayed, do not stand up for you will be swatted down. Still he heard those higher imperatives: Love and that love will be returned, trust in the righteous path and it will lead you to deliverance, fight and things will change. He never listened, never saw what was plainly in front of him, and now he had been plucked from the world altogether. The only voices were those of the boys below, the shouts and laughter and fearful cries, as if he floated in a bitter heaven.

A jail within a jail. In those long hours, he struggled over Reverend King's equation. *Throw us in jail and we will still love you . . . But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom.*

We will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory. No, he could not make that leap to love. He understood neither the impulse of the proposition nor the will to execute it.

When he was little, he kept lookout on the dining room of the Richmond Hotel. It had been closed to his race and one day it would open. He waited and waited. In the dark cell, he reconsidered his vigil. The recognition he sought went beyond brown skin—he was looking for someone who looked like him, for someone to claim as kin. For others to claim him as kin, those who saw the same future approaching, slow as it may be and overfond of back roads and secret hardscrabble paths, attuned to the deeper music in the speeches and hand-painted signs of protest. Those ready to commit their weight to the great lever and move the world. They never appeared. In the dining room or anywhere else.

The door to the stairwell opened, scraping against the floor. Footsteps outside the dark cell. Elwood braced himself for another beating. After three weeks they had finally decided what to do with him. He was sure that was the only reason he hadn't been taken out back to the iron rings and then disappeared—uncertainty. Now that things had quieted down, Nickel returned to proper discipline and the customs that had been handed down from generation to generation.

The bolt slid. There was one slim silhouette in the doorway. Turner shushed him and helped Elwood to his feet.

"They're going to take you out back tomorrow," Turner whispered.

"Yeah," Elwood said. Like Turner was talking about someone else. He was dizzy.

"We got to get, man."

Elwood puzzled over the *we*. "Blakeley."

"That nigger's passed out, man. Shhh!" He handed Elwood his glasses and clothes and shoes. They came from Elwood's locker, the ones he wore on his first day of school. Turner was also dressed in regular clothes, black trousers and a dark blue work shirt. *We*.

The Cleveland boys had replaced the creaky floorboards for the inspection; they missed a few. Elwood tilted his head to listen for noise from the house father's quarters. The couch was near the door. Many a boy had made the journey up the steps to rouse him from that couch when he slept through reveille. Blakeley did not stir. Elwood was stiff from his confinement and from the two beatings. Turner let him lean on him. He carried a bulging knapsack on his back.

There was a chance they might happen on one of the boys from room 1 or room 2 heading out for a piss. They hurried, as quietly as they could, down and around the next flight of stairs. "We going to walk straight past," Turner said, and Elwood knew he meant past the rec room to the back entrance of Cleveland. The lights were on all night on the first floor. Elwood didn't know what time it was—one in the morning? two—but it was late enough for the night supervisors to be deep in some illicit shut-eye.

"They're playing poker down at the motor pool tonight," Turner said. "We'll see."

Once they got out of the light cast from the windows, they made a hobbled sprint for the main road. They were out.

Elwood didn't ask where they were headed. He asked Turner, "Why?"

"Shit—they were running around like bugs the last two

days, all those motherfuckers. Spencer. Hardee. Then Freddie told me that Sam heard from Lester that he heard them talking about taking you out back." Lester was a Cleveland kid who swept up at the supervisor's office and had the line on all the big stuff going down, a regular Walter Cronkite. "That was it," Turner said. "Tonight or not at all."

"But why are you coming with me?" He could have pointed Elwood in the right direction and wished him luck.

"They snatch you up in a hot minute, dumb as you are."

"You said don't take anyone with you," Elwood said. "On the run."

"You're dumb, and I'm stupid," Turner said.

Turner was taking him toward town, running along the road and then diving when a car appeared. As the houses got closer together, they crouched and took it slowly, which suited Elwood fine. His back hurt, and his legs where Spencer and Hennepin had sliced at him with Black Beauty. The immediacy of their flight reduced the pain. Three times somebody's damned dogs started up loud barking when they passed their houses and the boys sprinted. They never saw the dogs but the noise got their blood flowing.

"He's in Atlanta all month," Turner said. He'd led them to Mr. Charles Grayson's house, the banker they'd sung "Happy Birthday" to the night of the big fight. For Community Service they had cleaned out and painted his garage. It was a big house, and lonely. His twin sons had gone off to college. Elwood and Turner had thrown out a lot of the old toys from when the Grayson boys were little. They had matching red bicycles, Elwood remembered. The bikes were still where they'd left them, next to the gardening tools. The moonlight was enough to make them out.

Turner pumped up the tires. He didn't have to search for the pump. How long had he been planning this? Turner kept his own kind of records—this house provided one sort of aid, that house another—the same way Elwood maintained his.

There was no outfoxing the dogs once they were on the trail, Turner told him. "Most you can do is get as far away as you can. Put some miles between you and them." He tested the tires with his thumb and forefinger. "I think Tallahassee is good," he said. "It's big. I'd say north but I don't know up there. In Tallahassee we can get a ride somewhere and then those dogs going to need wings to catch us."

"They were going to kill me and bury me out there," Elwood said.

"Sure as shit."

"You got me out," Elwood said.

"Yup," Turner said. He started to say something else, but stopped. "Can you ride it?"

"I can do it."

It was an hour and a half to Tallahassee in a car. On a bike? Who knew how far they'd get before sunup, taking the roundabout way. The first time a car came up behind them and it was too late to veer off, they biked on and kept their faces blank. The red pickup overtook them without incident. After that, they remained on the road to make as many miles as Elwood's pace allowed.

The sun came up. Elwood was heading home. He knew he couldn't stay but it would calm him to be in his city again after these white streets. He'd go wherever Turner instructed and when it was safe, put it all down on paper again. Try the *Defender* again, and *The New York Times*.

They were the paper of record, which meant they were in the business of protecting the system, but they had come a long way in their coverage of the rights struggle. He could reach out to Mr. Hill again. Elwood hadn't tried to contact his former teacher after he got to Nickel—his lawyer had promised to track him down—but the man knew people. People in SNCC and those in the Reverend King's circle. Elwood had failed, but he had no choice but to take up the challenge again. If he wanted things to change, what else was there to do but stand up?

Turner, for his part, thought of the train they'd jump, he thought of the north. It wasn't as bad as down here—a Negro could make something of himself. Be his own man. Be his own boss. And if there was no train, he'd crawl on his hands and knees.

The morning got on and the traffic picked up. Turner had deliberated over this road or the other country road and picked this one. On the map it looked less populated and the same, distance-wise. He was sure the drivers were checking them out. Looking straight ahead was best. Elwood kept pace, to his surprise. Around the curve, the road lifted to a slope. If Turner had been locked up and had his ass kicked a few times, he'd be laid out going up this hill, little as it was. Sturdy—that was Elwood.

Turner drove his knee down with his hand. He'd stopped looking back when he heard a car behind them but he got a tingle and turned his head. It was a Nickel van. Then he saw the bloom of rust on the front fender. It was the Community Service van.

On one side of the road was farmland—dirt mounds in furrows—and on the other open pasture. No woods beyond

them as far as he saw. The pasture was closer, surrounded by a white wooden fence. Turner shouted to his partner. They were going to have to run.

They steered to the bumpy side of the road and leapt off the bikes. Elwood made it over the fence before Turner did. One of the cuts on his back had bled through his shirt and dried. Turner caught up in a second and the boys were side by side. They ran through the tall swaying wild grass and weeds. The doors of the van opened and Harper and Hennepin climbed over the fence, quick. They each carried a shotgun.

Turner took a peek. "Faster!"

Down the slope lay another fence, and then trees.

"We got it!" Turner said.

Elwood panted, his mouth agape.

The first shotgun blast missed. Turner checked again. It was Hennepin. Harper stopped next. He held the shotgun like his daddy showed him when he was a boy. His daddy wasn't around much but had taught him this thing.

Turner zagged and put his head down as if he could duck buckshot. *Can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man*. He looked back again as Harper pulled the trigger. Elwood's arms went wide, hands out, as if testing the solidity of the walls of a long corridor, one he had traveled through for a long time and which possessed no visible terminus. He stumbled forward two steps and fell into the grass. Turner kept running. He asked himself later if he heard Elwood cry out or make any kind of sound but never did figure it out. He was running and there was only the rush and roil of blood in his head.