

squirmed free and traversed the ring to where Spencer sat. Now Turner heard his words: "I thought it was the second! I thought it was the second!" He was still screaming as the black boys led him back to Roosevelt, cheering and whooping for their champion. They had never seen Griff cry before and took his tears for those of triumph.

Getting hit in the head can rattle your brains. Getting hit in the head like that can make you addle-minded and confused. Turner never thought it'd make you forget two plus one. But Griff had never been good at arithmetic, he supposed.

He was all of them in one black body that night in the ring, and all of them when the white men took him out back to those two iron rings. They came for Griff that night and he never returned. The story spread that he was too proud to take a dive. That he refused to kneel. And if it made the boys feel better to believe that Griff escaped, broke away and ran off into the free world, no one told them otherwise, although some noted that it was odd the school never sounded the alarm or sent out the dogs. When the state of Florida dug him up fifty years later, the forensic examiner noted the fractures in the wrists and speculated that he'd been restrained before he died, in addition to the other violence attested by the broken bones.

Most of those who know the story of the rings in the trees are dead by now. The iron is still there. Rusty. Deep in the heartwood. Testifying to anyone who cares to listen.

CHAPTER TEN

Misceants had bashed in the reindeers' heads. They expected a certain amount of wear and tear after the holiday, when the boys gathered to pack the delicate Christmas displays. Bent antlers, a leg twisting from shreds at the joint. What lay before them was malicious vandalism.

"Look at this," Miss Baker said. She sucked her teeth. Miss Baker was on the young side for a Nickel teacher, with a predilection for simmering outrage. At Nickel, her dependable ire stemmed from the regrettable condition of the colored art room, the haphazard supplies, and what could only be interpreted as institutional resistance to her various improvements. The young teachers never lasted long before they moved on. "All this hard work."

Turner pulled out the balled-up newspaper from the reindeer skull and unwrinkled it. The headline rendered a verdict on the first Nixon and Kennedy debate: ROUT. "This one's a goner," he said.

Elwood raised his hand. "Do you want us to make all new ones or just new heads, Miss Baker?"

"I think the bodies we can salvage," she said. She grimaced and twisted her curly red hair into a bun. "Just do the heads. Touch up the fur on the bodies and next year we'll start from scratch."

Visitors from all over the panhandle, families from Georgia and Alabama caravanned every year to take in the annual Christmas Fair. It was the pride of the administration, a fund-raising bounty that proved reform was no mere lofty notion but a workable proposition. A bit of an operation, gears and gears. Five miles of colored lights dangled from the cedars and traced the roofs of the south campus. The thirty-foot Santa at the foot of the drive required a crane to fit it together. The assembly instructions for the miniature steam train that looped around the football field were passed through the decades like the scrolls of a solemn sect.

Last year's display attracted more than a hundred thousand guests to the property. There was no reason, Director Hardee insisted, that the good boys of the Nickel Academy couldn't improve on that number.

The white students handled construction and the reassembly of the large displays—the gigantic sleigh, the Nativity diorama, the train tracks—and the black students did most of the painting. Touch-ups, new additions. Correcting the artistic errors of previous, less meticulous boys and refurbishing the old workhorses. Three-foot-high candy canes lined each dormitory walkway, and they invariably required new dabs of red and white paint. The monstrous poster-size Christmas cards featured North Pole shenanigans, fairy-tale favorites like Hansel and Gretel and the Three Little Pigs, and biblical re-creations. The cards tilted on stands along the school roads as if adorning the lobby of a grand theater.

The students loved this time of year, whether it reminded them of Christmases back home, miserable as they were, or it was the first real holiday of their whole lives. Everyone

got gifts—Jackson County was generous that way—white and black alike, not just sweaters and underwear but baseball gloves and boxes of tin army men. For one morning they were like boys from nice houses in nice neighborhoods where it was quiet at night and nightmareless.

Even Turner had cause to smile, as he touched up the Gingerbread Man card and remembered the folk hero's rallying cry: "You can't catch me, you can't catch me." A good way to be. He didn't remember how the story ended.

Miss Baker signed off on his work and he joined Jaimie, Elwood, and Desmond over by the papier-mâché station.

Desmond whispered, "Jaimie says Earl."

Desmond found the stuff but Jaimie came up with the scheme. It was an unlikely proposition from a student who had just made it to Pioneer. Almost out. Jaimie grew up in Tallahassee like Elwood, but they couldn't name two places they had in common. Different neighborhoods, different cities. His father, he'd been told, was a full-time flimflam man and the part-time regional salesman for a vacuum cleaner company, driving his circuit around the panhandle and knocking on doors. It wasn't clear how he met Jaimie's mother, but Jaimie was one proof of their acquaintance and the vacuum cleaner that they lugged from short-term residence to short-term residence was another.

Jaimie's mother, Ellie, swept up at the Coca-Cola bottling plant on South Monroe, in All Saints. Jaimie and his gang used to kick around the railroad yard nearby. Playing craps, passing around a harrowed copy of *Playboy*. He was a good kid, not the most diligent about school attendance, but never would've seen the inside of Nickel if not for the depot. An old rummy who haunted the yards stuck his hand down the

pants of one of the gang and they beat him senseless. Jaimie was the only one who didn't outrun the deputies.

During his term at Nickel, the Mexican boy sidestepped the squabbles that embroiled the rest of them, the uncounted disputes over psychological turf and endless encroachments. His constant dorm reassignments notwithstanding, Jaimie kept a quiet profile and conducted himself in accordance with the Nickel handbook's rules of conduct—a miracle, since no one had ever seen the handbook despite its constant invocations by the staff. Like justice, it existed in theory.

Spiking a supervisor's drink lay outside his personality.

Nonetheless: Earl.

Desmond worked in the sweet potato fields. No complaints. He liked the way the potatoes smelled at the cusp of picking time, that warm, peaty scent. Like his father's sweat when he came home from work and made sure Desmond was tucked in proper.

The previous week Desmond was part of a team ordered to rearrange a work shed, the big gray one where they kept the tractors. Half the lights were burned out and critters had made a home in various spots. Spiderwebs canopied one corner and Desmond stabbed a broom at the white blossoms, wary of what might burst forth. He recognized some of the loose cans stacked there and found a place for them, but there was one green relic too faded to read. He shook it: solid throughout. He asked one of the older boys what to do with it, and the kid said that it shouldn't be in there. "That's horse medicine, to make them puke when they eat something they shouldn't." The old stables were nearby—perhaps that junk had ended up here when they closed them down. At Nickel, things tended to end up where they

were supposed to, but a lazy or mischievous soul occasionally subverted the order.

Desmond hid the medicine in his windbreaker and took it to Cleveland.

One of them—no one remembered who, when it was all over—suggested putting it in a staffer's drink. Why else had Desmond taken it? But it was Jaimie who made the scheme real in his calm rebuttals to the counterarguments. "Who would you give it to?" Jaimie asked his friends in turn, with a rhetorical air. Jaimie had a stutter that slunk out when he asked questions—he had an uncle with a quick hand—but the stutter disappeared during the can discussions.

Desmond fingered Patrick, a houseman who'd beat him for wetting his bed and made him drag his soiled mattress to the laundry in the middle of the night. "That fucking peckerwood—I'd like to see him puke up his guts."

They were in the Cleveland rec room, after school let out. No one else around. Occasionally cheers from one of the sports fields wafted over. *Who would you give it to?* Elwood suggested Duggin. No one knew that he and Duggin had had a dustup. Duggin was a stout-backed white man who stomped around with a sleepy, cow-eyed look. He had a way of suddenly appearing in front of you, like a puddle or a pothole, and you learned that his big meaty hands were faster than you'd think, pincering shoulder blades, noosing a skinny neck. The supervisor, Elwood told them, had socked him in the stomach for talking to a white student, a kid he'd met in the hospital. Fraternization between the students of the two campuses was discouraged. The boys nodded—"makes sense"—but they all knew he really wanted to give it to Spencer. For his legs. No one dared men-

tion Spencer's name anywhere near this daydream or else they'd never have wasted a breath on it.

"I'd give it to Wainwright," Turner said. He told them how Wainwright had caught him smoking cigarettes, back during his first term at Nickel. Knocked him upside the head so hard it left a lump on his cheek. Wainwright was pale-skinned, but all the black boys knew from his hair and nose that he had some Negro blood. He beat the black boys for knowing what he pretended not to know about himself. "I was greener than you, El, back then." No one had caught him smoking since.

It was Jaimie's turn. He said simply, "Earl," and did not elaborate.

Why?

"He knows."

The days passed and they picked up the prank between checkers and Ping-Pong. Different targets emerged when they saw another student mistreated or suddenly remembered some personal encounter, a reprimand, a box on the ear. One name remained constant: Earl. Elwood dropped Duggin from his rotation and threw in Earl one day. Earl hadn't beat Elwood the night they took him to the White House, but he was not-Spencer, Spencer once removed. Close enough.

It's possible Elwood already knew the answer when he asked, "What's the Holiday Luncheon?"

The Holiday Luncheon was marked on the big calendar in the dorm's entrance hall. Desmond said it wasn't for them, it was for the staff. A nice meal in the dining hall to celebrate another year of hard work on the north campus.

"And they get to raid the meat lockers for some prime

beef to give themselves," Turner said. Boys volunteered for the opportunity to rack up merits by serving as waiters.

Desmond said, "That would be a good time to do it." Saying it and not saying it.

Jaimie, as ever, said, "Earl."

Earl sometimes worked the south campus, sometimes the north. Under most circumstances, they'd have heard about the bad blood between Jaimie and the supervisor but both of them spent time on the white half and who knew what had passed between them down there. It could have been Lovers' Lane, some back talk, a frame-up by one of the white boys. Earl was a regular at the drinking sessions at the motor pool. When the motor-pool light was on at night and you heard them carrying on, you prayed you didn't have a beating hanging over your head or that you'd been picked for a date on Lovers' Lane. It would end up bad.

Strange medicine in an old green can. The boys gathered the words and intonations of a justice spell. Justice or revenge. No one wanted to admit it was a real plan they cooked up all along. They kept returning to it as Christmas approached, passing the idea between them so each considered its heft and cast. As the prank evolved from abstraction to something more solid, full of hows and whens and what-ifs, Desmond, Turner, and Jaimie stopped including Elwood without realizing it. The prank was against his moral conscience. Hard to picture the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. dosing Governor Orval Faubus with a couple of ounces of lye. And Elwood's beating at the White House had him scarred all over, not just his legs. It had weeviled deep into his personality. The way his shoulders sank when Spencer appeared, the flinch and shrink. He could only stand so

much talk of revenge before the reality grabbed ahold of him.

Then it popped and the boys talked about it no more. "They'd put us in the ground," Desmond said, when Jaimie sparked up another round of "who do we get."

"We have to be careful," Jaimie said.

"I'm going to play some basketball," Desmond said, and he was out.

Turner sighed. He had to admit that the game had gotten boring. It was nice for a time to picture one of their tormentors puking all over their yummy spread at the Holiday Luncheon, spraying all those peckerwoods with his mess. Shitting his pants, face gone strawberry-red from pain, heaving until what came out wasn't food but his own dark blood. A pleasant vision, a different kind of medicine. But they weren't going to do it, and that fact spoiled it. Turner stood, and Jaimie shook his head and joined them for basketball.

Friday, the day of the Holiday Luncheon, the Community Service crew was out on rounds. Harper, Turner, and Elwood had just finished up with the five-and-ten when the supervisor said he had something he had to do. "I'll be back in a hot minute," he told them. "Y'all can wait here."

The van disappeared. Turner and Elwood walked up the scrabbly alley to the street. Harper had left them alone before, when they were working on a board member's house. Never on Main Street. Even after two months of back-alley exchanges, Elwood was incredulous. "We can walk around?" he asked Turner.

"We don't got to make a commotion, but yeah," Turner said, pretending it had happened before plenty of times.

Sightings of Nickel students on Main Street were not uncommon. The students shuffled off the gray school buses in their state-issued denim for community service—real community service, not the special services of Turner and Elwood's assignments—cleaning up rubbish in the park after July Fourth fireworks or the Founders Day parade. Once a season the choir visited the Baptist church to show off their beautiful voices as Director Hardee's secretaries handed out envelopes for donations. A boy might be found in the company of a supervisor darting into town for business. Two unescorted colored boys was a sight, however. It was lunch hour. The white people of Eleanor tried to account for them. The boys didn't look shifty or scared. Their supervisor was probably inside the hardware store—Mr. Bontemps hated niggers and had made them wait outside. The white folks walked on. It wasn't their business.

Christmas toys—windup robots and air guns and painted trains—filled the front window of the five-and-ten. The boys knew to hide their enthusiasm over little-kid things that still had an allure. They walked quickly past the bank. It seemed like a place where board members might appear, or at least white men with power who signed official documents, like reform school orders.

"It's weird being out here," Elwood said.

"It's okay," Turner said.

"No one watching," Elwood said.

The sidewalk was empty, a break in the noon traffic. Turner looked around and smiled. He knew what Elwood was thinking. "Most of them talk about running into the swamp," Turner said. "Wash their scent off so the dogs

can't get them, then hide in there until the coast is clear and hitch somewhere. West or north. That's how they get you, though, because that's where everybody runs to. And you can't wash no scent off, that's only in movies."

"How would you do it?"

Turner had turned it over in his head many times but had never shared it with anyone. "You head out here into the free world, not the swamp. Snatch clothes from a clothesline. Head south, not north, because they ain't expecting it. Those empty houses we pass on our deliveries? Mr. Tolliver's house—he's always down at the capital for business. His house is empty. You raid them for supplies and then put as many miles between you and the dogs as you can, tire them out. The trick is not doing what they know you going to do." Then he remembered the most important part. "And don't take no one with you. Not one of those dummies. They'll take you down with them."

They had ambled to the front of the pharmacy. Behind the window, a blond woman crouched over a carriage and spooned ice cream into her baby's mouth. The little boy was a mess, smeared with chocolate and bawling with happiness.

"You got any money?" Turner said.

"More than you got," Elwood said.

No money at all. They laughed because they knew the drugstore didn't serve colored patrons, and sometimes laughter knocked out a few bricks from the barricade of segregation, so tall and so wide. And they laughed because ice cream was the last thing they wanted.

Elwood's aversion was understandable; the visit to the Ice Cream Factory had left its marks. Turner hated the stuff on account of his aunt's boyfriend, who moved in with them when Turner was eleven years old. Mavis was his mother's

sister and his only family. The state of Florida didn't know about her, thus the blank space on their forms where her name should have been written, but he had lived with her for a time. His father, Clarence, was a bit of a "rambler," not that he had to be told because he had the same affliction. Turner remembered him as two big brown hands and a raspy chuckle. When he heard autumn leaves scuttling in the wind, he remembered that chuckle. The same way Nickel boys remembered White House visits when they heard the smart snap of leather, decades later.

Turner last saw his father when he was three years old. After that, the man was the wind. His mother, Dorothy, hung around longer, long enough for her to choke on her own vomit. She had that taste—rotgut, the rougher the better. The stuff she drank the night she died left her twisted and blue and cold on the front-room sofa. He knew where she was now—six feet under in St. Sebastian Cemetery—which was one thing he had on his upstanding friend Elwood. Elwood's mother and father had lit out West and didn't even send a postcard. What kind of mother leaves her kid in the middle of the night? One that doesn't give a shit. He made a note to save that as a low blow if he and Elwood ever got into a real fight. Turner knew his mother loved him. She just loved liquor more.

His aunt Mavis took him in and made sure Turner had nice clothes for school and three meals. The last Saturday of every month she wore her good red dress and sprayed perfume into her neck and went out with her girlfriends, but apart from that her life was the hospital, where she worked as a nurse, and Turner. No one had ever called her pretty. She had tiny black eyes, an afterthought for a chin, and when Ishmael started courting her, she fell quick. He

called her pretty and a lot of other things she'd never heard before. Ishmael was a maintenance man at the Houston airport and when he came by with flowers they almost hid the industrial odor that permeated his skin no matter how much he washed.

Ishmael was a man of secret menace who stored up violence like a battery; Turner learned to recognize these men from then on. How Mavis brightened at the thought of him, singing ditties from the movie musicals she loved, locking herself in the hall bathroom with a hot comb while the transistor crackled. In and out of tune. It never occurred to Turner why she wore sunglasses two weeks straight that one time, why she stayed in her room some mornings and didn't emerge until past noon, limping with soft moans.

The day after Turner put himself between Mavis and Ishmael's fists, Ishmael took him out for ice cream. A. J. Smith's, over on Market Street. "Bring this young man the biggest sundae you got." Every bite like a sock in the mouth. He ate every miserable spoonful and ever since it struck him that adults are always trying to buy off children to make them forget their bad actions. Had the flavor of that fact in his mouth when he ran from his aunt's house that last time.

Nickel served the students vanilla ice cream once a month, and it made them so squealingly happy, like a bunch of dumb piglets in a sty, that Turner wanted to knock everyone flat. Third Wednesday of the month, Turner and Elwood carried most of the north campus's ice-cream allotment through the back door of the Eleanor pharmacy. Turner felt he was performing a service for his fellow students, sparing them.

The blond lady pushed the carriage toward the door and Elwood held the door open for her. She didn't say a word.

Harper pulled up and waved them to the front seat. "You boys up to no good?"

"Yes, sir," Turner said. He whispered to Elwood, "Don't go stealing my plan, now, El. That shit's pure gold." They got in the van.

When they drove past the administration building toward the colored campus, the students stood in worried huddles on the green. Harper slowed and called over one of the white boys. "What's happening?"

"They took Mr. Earl to the hospital. Something's wrong with him."

Harper parked the van by the warehouse and ran to the hospital. Elwood and Turner hustled to Cleveland. Elwood scanning every which way like a squirrel and Turner trying to maintain a front, which made him move like a space robot. They needed a report. Despite the segregated campuses, the black boys and white boys passed on news for safety's sake. Sometimes Nickel was like being back home, where the older brother or sister that you hated warned you about a parent's black mood or daylong drinking jag so you could make preparations.

They found Desmond outside the colored dining hall. Turner looked inside. The staff table was still set in the aftermath. Half set—the overturned chairs pointed to a fuss, and the smear of blood showed where they'd dragged out Earl.

"I don't think it was medicine," Desmond said. His deep voice added a baleful tone.

Turner punched him in the shoulder. "You're going to get us killed!"

"It wasn't me! It wasn't me!" Desmond said. He looked over Turner's shoulder toward the White House.

Elwood's hand covered his mouth. There was a half of a work-shoe footprint in the blood. He snapped to and turned downhill. To see if they were coming for them. "Where's Jaimie?"

"That nigger," Desmond said.

They strategized on the dining-hall steps. Turner suggested that they hang out and gather information on Earl's condition from the other students. He didn't say he wanted to stay there because it was a straight shot to the road bordering the east side of campus. If Spencer came up with a posse, he'd be out lickety-split. *Can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man.*

Jaimie showed up an hour later, looking rumpled and a bit dazed, like he'd just had a turn on a Tilt-A-Whirl. He completed the story they'd got from the other boys. The Holiday Luncheon commenced as it always did. The special tablecloth that only got aired out once a year covered the staff table, the nice dishes were wiped of dust. The supervisors took their places and drank beer, sharing rowdy stories and off-color speculation about the bustier secretaries and teachers. It was loud and they enjoyed themselves. A few minutes into the meal, Earl bolted up and grabbed his stomach. They thought he was choking. Then he commenced to disperse his insides in a spray. When the blood appeared they carried him down the hill to the hospital.

Jaimie told them that he waited among the boys outside the ward until the ambulance took him away.

"You're crazy," Elwood said.

"I didn't do it," Jaimie said. His face was blank. "I was playing football. Everybody saw me."

"The can is gone from my locker," Desmond said.

"I told you I didn't take it," Jaimie said. "Maybe someone robbed your shit and they did it." He knocked Desmond's shoulder. "You said it was horse medicine!"

"That's what he told me," Desmond said. "You saw it—it had a horse on it."

"Could have been a goat," Turner said.

"Maybe it was horse poison," Elwood said.

"Or goat poison," Turner added.

"They ain't rats, dummy," Desmond said. "You shoot horses, not poison them."

"He's lucky he ain't dead then," Jaimie said. Elwood and Desmond continued to press him, but his version did not change.

It was hard to miss the smile that tugged at Jaimie's mouth from time to time. Turner wasn't angry that Jaimie lied to their faces. He admired liars who kept on lying even though their lies were obvious, but there was nothing anyone could do about it. Another proof of one's powerlessness before other people. Jaimie wasn't going to admit it, so Turner just watched the boys and the activity down the hill.

Earl didn't die. He didn't come back to work, either. Doctor's orders. They'd hear about that in the coming days. And a few weeks after that, they'd discover that Earl's replacement, a tall man named Hennepin, was made of meaner stuff, and he'd subject many a boy to his cruel whims. But they made it through that first evening without being strung up, and when word came that Dr. Cooke blamed

Earl's fit on his constitution—he had a family history, it seemed—Turner stopped strategizing his escape.

Just before lights-out, he and Elwood were hanging out by the big oak in front of the dormitory. The campus had quieted. Turner wanted a cigarette, but his pack was back in the warehouse loft. He whistled instead, that Elvis song Harper kept singing on their runs.

The night bugs started up in a wave. "Earl," Turner said. "That's some shit."

"Wish I'd been there to see it, though," Elwood said.

"Ha."

"I wish it had been Spencer," Elwood said. "That would have been nice." His palm went to the back of his thigh, to the spot he rubbed when he remembered.

They heard a whoop. Down the hill, the supervisors had turned on the Christmas lights and the boys got a look at the results of all the hard work of the last few weeks. Green, red, and white bulbs sketched a route of holiday cheer along the trees and the south-campus buildings. Far off in the dark, the big Santa at the entrance glowed from the inside with a demonic fire.

"Those are some lights," Turner said.

Past the White House, blinking lights outlined the old water tower—one of the white kids had fallen from the ladder while nailing them up and had broken his collarbone. The lights floated on the X's of the wooden struts, circled the huge tank, sketched the triangular peak. Like a spaceship taking off. It reminded Turner of something, then it came to him—that amusement park, Fun Town, from the TV commercials. That dumb, happy music, the bumper cars and the roller coaster, and the Atomic Rocket. The

other boys talked about the place from time to time, they'd go there when they were out in the free world again. Turner thought that was stupid. They didn't let colored people in those nice places. But there it was before him, pointed at the stars, decked in a hundred flickering lights, waiting for takeoff: a rocket. Launched in darkness toward another dark planet they couldn't see.

"It looks nice," Turner said.

"We did a good job," Elwood said.