

CHAPTER TWELVE

There were four ways out of Nickel.

One: Serve your time. A typical sentence fell between six months and two years, but the administration had the power to confer a legal discharge before then at its discretion. Good behavior was a trigger for a legal discharge, if a careful boy gathered enough merits for promotion to Ace. Whereupon he was released into the bosom of his family, who were very glad to have him back or else winced at the sight of his face bobbing up the walk, the start of another countdown to the next calamity. If you had family. If not, the state of Florida's child-welfare apparatus had assorted custodial remedies, some more pleasant than others.

You could also serve time by aging out. The school showed boys the door on their eighteenth birthday, quick handshake and pocket change. Free to return home or to make their way in the indifferent world, likely shunted down one of life's more difficult trails. Boys arrived banged up in different ways before they got to Nickel and picked up more dents and damage during their term. Often graver missteps and more fierce institutions waited. Nickel boys were fucked before, during, and after their time at the school, if one were to characterize the general trajectory.

Two: The court might intervene. That magic event. A long-lost aunt or older cousin materialized to relieve the state of your wardship. The lawyer retained by dear mom, if she had the means, argued mercy on account of changed circumstance: *Now that his father's gone, we need a breadwinner in the house.* Perhaps the judge in charge—a new one or the same sourpuss—stepped in for his own reasons. Like, money changed hands. But if there had been bribe money, the boy wouldn't have been cast into Nickel in the first place. Still, the law was corrupt and capricious in various measure and sometimes a boy strolled out through what passed for divine intervention.

Three: You could die. Of “natural causes” even, if abetted by unhealthy conditions, malnutrition, and the pitiless constellation of negligence. In the summer of 1945, one young boy died of heart failure while locked in a sweatbox, a popular corrective at that time, and the medical examiner called it natural causes. Imagine baking in one of those iron boxes until your body gave out, wrung. Influenza, tuberculosis, and pneumonia killed their share, as did accidents, drownings, and falls. The fire of 1921 claimed twenty-three lives. Half the dormitory exits were bolted shut and the two boys in the dark third-floor cells were prevented from escaping.

The dead boys were put in the dirt of Boot Hill or released into the care of their family. Some deaths were more nefarious than others. Check the school records, incomplete as they may be. Blunt trauma, shotgun blast. In the first half of the twentieth century, boys who had been leased out to local families wound up dead sometimes. Students were killed while on “unauthorized leave.” Two boys were run over by

trucks. These deaths were never investigated. The archaeologists at the University of South Florida noticed that the death rates of those who attempted multiple escapes were higher than those who did not. One speculates. As for the unmarked graveyard, it kept its secrets close.

Fourth: Finally, you could run. Make a run for it and see what happened.

Some boys escaped into silent futures under different names in different places, living in shadow. Dreading for the rest of their lives the day Nickel caught up with them. Most often runners were captured, taken for a tour of the Ice Cream Factory, and then ushered into a dark cell for a couple of weeks of attitude adjustment. It was crazy to run and crazy not to run. How could a boy look past the school's property line, see that free and living world beyond, and not contemplate a dash to freedom? To write one's own story for once. To forbid the thought of escape, even that slightest butterfly thought of escape, was to murder one's humanity.

One famous Nickel escapee was Clayton Smith. His story wending its way through the years. The supervisors and housemen made sure of its longevity.

It was 1952. Clayton was not the most likely runaway. Not bright or hale, defiant or spirited. He simply lacked the will to endure. Ground down plenty before he stepped on campus, but Nickel magnified and refined the cruelty of the world, opening his eyes to the bleaker wavelengths. If he'd suffered all this in his fifteen years, what more lay in store?

The men in Clayton's family shared a strong family resemblance. Neighborhood folks recognized them immediately from their hawkish profiles, light brown eyes, the

flittering way they moved their hands and mouths when they talked. The similarities persisted beneath the skin, for Smith men were neither lucky nor long-lived. With Clayton there was no mistaking the resemblance.

Clayton's daddy had a heart attack when the boy was four years old. His hand a claw on the bedsheets, mouth wide, eyes wide. At ten, Clayton left school to work in the Manchester orange groves, following his three brothers and two sisters. The baby of the family, pitching in. His mama's health failed after a bout of pneumonia and the state of Florida assumed guardianship. Scattered the children. In Tampa, they still called Nickel the Florida Industrial School for Boys. It had a reputation for improving a young man's character, whether he was a bad seed or simply had no other place to go. His older sisters wrote him letters that his fellow students read to him. His brothers went this way and that, swept up.

Clayton had never learned to fight, not with older siblings around to cow the bullies. At Nickel he fared poorly in the skirmishes. The only time he felt good and level was when he worked in the kitchen, peeling potatoes. It was quiet then and he had a system. The house father of Roosevelt at that time was named Freddie Rich, and his employment history was a map of helpless children. Mark G. Giddins House, the Gardenville School for Young Men, St. Vincent Orphanage over in Clearwater. The Nickel Academy for Boys. Freddie Rich identified candidates by their gait and posture, administration files strengthened the argument, and their treatment by the other boys provided final confirmation. He made quick work of young Clayton, his fingers finding two vertebrae that told the boy, *Now*.

Freddie Rich's quarters were up on Roosevelt's third floor, but he preferred to take his prey to the basement of the white schoolhouse in keeping with Nickel tradition. After that last trip to Lovers' Lane, Clayton was done. The two supervisors who caught him crossing campus that night were accustomed to seeing the boy walking back to the dormitory unescorted. They let him pass. He had a head start.

The boy's plan involved his sister Bell, who'd landed at a home for girls on the outskirts of Gainesville. In contrast with the rest of the family, she enjoyed improved circumstances. The people who ran the home were a kindly sort, enlightened when it came to racial matters. No more corn mash and frayed dresses. She was back in school and only worked on weekends, when she and the other girls took in mending. When she was old enough, she wrote Clayton, she'd come for him and they'd be together again. Bell had dressed and bathed him when he was little and all notions of comfort in his life were an allusion to those early, half-remembered days. The night of his escape he got to the rim of the swamp, where common sense told him to enter the dark water, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Too forbidding, between the phantoms, murk, and animal symphony of sex and aggression. The dark had always terrified Clayton and only Bell knew the songs that soothed him, cradling his head in her lap as he wound her braids in his fingers. He headed east to the edges of the lime fields until he got to Jordan Road.

He crept in the woods along the road through first light and into the afternoon. Every car sent him into the burrs and underbrush. When he couldn't take another step he hid under a lonesome gray house and squatted in the fetid

water of the crawl space. Bugs made supper of him and he caressed the bumps on his skin to see how much he could soothe them without scratching open the bites. The family returned home, a mother and father and teenage girl whom he only saw the feet and knees of. The girl was pregnant, he learned, and this had upturned the order. Or the house had always been a storm and this was the same weather. He slithered forth when the bickering stopped and they slept.

The side of the road was gloomy and fearsome and the boy had no idea about the direction of his travel, but he was unconcerned. Long as he didn't hear hunting dogs, he was okay. As it happened, the Apalachee hounds were deployed elsewhere, attending to the escape of three Piedmont convicts, and Freddie Rich didn't report Clayton's disappearance for twenty-four hours, scared as a trapped rat that his predations would be uncovered. He'd been dismissed from previous jobs and he liked the easy bounty of his latest post.

Had Clayton ever been alone? In the house on that dead-end street in Tampa, his brothers and sisters were ever on top of him, all of them crammed into the three rooms of the rickety shotgun. Then Nickel with its communal debasements. He wasn't accustomed to so much time with the knocking of his thoughts, which rattled around his skull like dice. He hadn't thought of a future beyond a reunion with his family. On the third day, he concocted a scenario—a couple of years as a cook, then saving up for his own restaurant.

Soon after Clayton started picking at the orange groves, Chet's Drive-In opened up on a broken stretch of county road. He looked through the slats of the truck on the way to work, waiting for that red, white, and blue explosion of the

restaurant's facade and steel canopy. They hung the banners, the signs sprouted along the road to tease, and then it opened: Chet's. The young white waiters and waitresses wore smart green-and-white striped jumpsuits and smiled as they ferried burgers and shakes out to the lot. The slick jumpsuits encoded virtues—industry, self-reliance. Those fancy cars and the hands sticking out to receive. It was inspiring.

True, Clayton had never eaten in a restaurant and overestimated the grandeur of the joint. And perhaps his hunger nourished the idea of owning a dining establishment. As he ran, the vision of his restaurant—walking among the customers to ask how they enjoyed the meal, checking the day's receipts in the back office like he'd seen in movies—kept pace with him.

On the fourth day he was far enough that he decided to hitch. His Nickel dungarees and work shirt were a sight. He swiped work clothes from a clothesline after he saw a battered pickup grind away from a big white farmhouse. He cased the house for a spell and snatched overalls and a shirt when he thought it was safe. An old woman on the second floor watched him lope out of the woods and grab them. The work clothes had been her late husband's and repurposed by her grandson. She was glad to watch them go because it pained her to see them on another person, especially her son's boy, who was cruel to animals and a blasphemer.

He didn't care where his ride was headed as long as it took him a couple of hours' distance. Clayton was starving. He'd never gone this long without eating and didn't know how to remedy that, but miles were the most important

thing. Not many cars passed and the white faces scared him, even if he was bold enough to take to the asphalt. There were no Negro drivers; maybe Negroes didn't own cars in this part of the state. He finally forced himself to stick out his thumb when a white Packard with midnight blue trim rounded the bend. He couldn't see the driver but Packards were the first cars he learned to recognize and he had a fondness for them.

The driver was a middle-aged white man in a cream-colored suit. Of course it was a white man, how could it be otherwise in that car? He wore his blond hair parted and had silver squares of hair at the temples. His eyes changed from blue to ice-white behind his wire-frame eyeglasses, depending on the sun.

The man looked Clayton up and down. He beckoned the boy inside. "Where you headed, boy?"

Clayton said the first thing that popped into his head: "Richards." The name of the street he grew up on.

"I don't know it," the white man said. He mentioned a town Clayton had never heard of and said that he'd take him as far as he was going.

Clayton had never been in a Packard before. He rubbed the fabric next to his right thigh, where the man couldn't see: It was rippled and yielding. He wondered after the maze of pistons and valves under the hood, what it'd be like to see how the good men at the plant had put it together.

"You live there, boy?" the man asked. "Richards?" He sounded educated.

"Yes, sir. With my mama and daddy."

"Okay," the man said. "What's your name, boy?"

"Harry," Clayton said.

"You can call me Mr. Simmons." Nodding as if they had an understanding.

They drove for a while. Clayton wasn't going to speak unless spoken to and kept his lips squished to keep something stupid from flying out. Now that it wasn't his two dumb feet moving him, he got agitated and scanned for police cars. Rebuked himself for not staying out of sight longer. He pictured Freddie Rich at the head of the posse, holding a flashlight, the sun gleaming off the big buffalo belt buckle Clayton knew so well—the sight of it, the clatter of it on the concrete floor. The houses got closer together and the Packard eased through a short main street, the boy sinking in his seat but trying not to let the man notice. Then they were on a quiet road once more.

"How old are you?" Mr. Simmons asked. They had just passed a closed-down Esso station, the pumps rusted to scarecrows, and a white church next to a small graveyard. The ground had settled, sending the tombstones off-kilter so that the graveyard was a mouthful of rotten teeth.

"Fifteen," Clayton said. He realized who the man reminded him of—Mr. Lewis, their old landlord. Best pay him on the first of the month or you're out on the street on the second. He got a queasy feeling. The boy made a fist. He knew what he'd do if the man put his hand on his leg or tried to touch his thing. He'd vowed to sock Freddie Rich in the face many times and then stood paralyzed when the time came, but this day he felt he could actually do it. Drawing strength from the free world.

"You in school, boy?"

"Yes, sir." It was a Tuesday, he was pretty sure. He counted back. Freddie Rich liked to look him up Saturday

nights. *Cheaper than a dime-a-dance and you get more for your money.*

"An education is important," Mr. Simmons said. "It opens doors. Especially for your people." The moment passed. Clayton spread his fingers on the upholstery as if palming a basketball.

How many days before he got to Gainesville? He remembered the name of Bell's home—Miss Mary's—but he'd have to ask around. What kind of city was Gainesville? There was a lot of this plan he had to figure out before he set things up for himself. Bell would devise secret signals and places to meet that only she knew about. She was smart that way. It'd be a long time before she tucked him in again and told him the things that made it all fine, but he could wait it out if she was close. "Hush now, Clayton . . ."

That's what he was thinking when the Packard rolled past the stone columns at the foot of the Nickel driveway. Mr. Simmons had just retired as the mayor of Eleanor, but he remained a member of the board and kept abreast of the life of the school. Three white students on the way to the metal shop saw Clayton get out of the car but didn't know that he was the boy who ran away, and at midnight the fan bellowed its news to the half asleep but that didn't tell them who was getting ice cream, and in those days the boys didn't know that cars heading out to the school dump in the middle of the night meant that the secret graveyard had welcomed a new resident. It took Freddie Rich to bring Clayton Smith's story to the student population, when he gave it to his latest boy as an object lesson.

You could run and hope to get away. Some made it. Most didn't.

There was a fifth way out of Nickel, according to Elwood. He cooked it up after his grandmother came on visiting day. It was a warm February afternoon, and the families gathered at the picnic tables outside the dining hall. Some boys were local and their mothers and fathers appeared every weekend with sacks of food, new socks, and news from the neighborhood. But the students came from all over the state, Pensacola to the Keys, and most families had far to travel if they wanted to see their wayward sons. Long trips on stuffy buses, warm juice and sandwich crumbs tumbling from wax paper onto laps. Work intervened, distance made visits impossible, and there were some boys who understood that their families had washed their hands of them. On visiting day, after services, the housemen informed the boys whether or not anyone was coming up the hill, and if no one was coming, the boys busied themselves on the playing fields, or found distraction in the tables of the woodshop or in the swimming pool—white kids in the morning, colored kids in the afternoon—and averted their eyes from the reunions up the hill.

Harriet made the trip to Eleanor twice a month but had missed her last visit because of sickness. She sent a letter telling Elwood it was a chest cold and included some newspaper articles she thought he'd like, an account of a Martin Luther King speech in Newark, New Jersey, and a big color spread on the space race. She looked years older, walking slowly toward him. Her illness had stolen from her already slight frame, her collarbones tracing a line across her green dress. When she spotted Elwood, she halted and let him come close for an embrace. It bought her a moment of rest before the final steps to the picnic table he'd staked out.

Elwood held her longer than usual, nuzzling into her shoulder. Then he remembered the other boys and withdrew. Best not to show too much of himself. It had been a long wait for her return, and not just because she had promised some good news the next time she came from Tallahassee.

His life at Nickel had slowed to an obedient shuffle. The period after New Year's was unremarkable. The Eleanor deliveries cycled through the regulars a few times, and Elwood knew what to expect at each stop, even reminding Harper more than once that this Wednesday was the Top Shop and the restaurant beat, like he'd helped out Mr. Marconi back in the tobacco shop. The dormitories were quieter than they'd been through the fall. Fistfights and scuffles were rare and the White House remained unoccupied. Once it was clear that Earl wasn't going to kick the bucket, Elwood and Turner and Desmond forgave Jaimie. Most afternoons they played Monopoly, their game a conspiracy of house rules, obscure covenants, and revenge. Buttons replaced the lost tokens.

The more routine his days, the more unruly his nights. He woke after midnight, when the dormitory was dead, starting at imagined sounds—footsteps at the threshold, leather slapping the ceiling. He squinted at the darkness—nothing. Then he was up for hours, in a spell, agitated by rickety thoughts and weakened by an ebbing of the spirit. It wasn't Spencer that undid him, or a supervisor or a new antagonist slumbering in room 2, rather it was that he'd stopped fighting. In keeping his head down, in his careful navigation so that he made it to lights-out without mishap, he fooled himself that he had prevailed. That he had out-

witted Nickel because he got along and kept out of trouble. In fact he had been ruined. He was like one of those Negroes Dr. King spoke of in his letter from jail, so complacent and sleepy after years of oppression that they had adjusted to it and learned to sleep in it as their only bed.

In less kind moments, he had counted Harriet among their number. Now she looked the part, diminished as much as he was. A wind easing after blustering for as long as you could remember.

"Can we squeeze in with y'all?"

Burt, another boy from Cleveland, one of the chucks, wanted to share the picnic table. Burt's mother thanked them and smiled. She was young, maybe twenty-five years old, with a round, open face. Harried yet graceful as she juggled Burt's baby sister, who squatted in her lap hooting at the bugs. Their goofing and play distracted Elwood as his grandmother spoke. They were loud and happy—Elwood and his grandmother were church-quiet beside them. Burt was a rambunctious kid but sweet-hearted from what Elwood had seen. He didn't know the boy well, or his troubles, but he might straighten up and fly right when he got out. His mother waited for him in the free world and that was mighty. More than most of the boys had.

Elwood's grandmother might not be there when he got out. This had never occurred to him before. She was rarely sick, and when she was, she refused to stay off her feet. She was a survivor but the world took her in bites. Her husband had died young, her daughter had vanished out West, and now her only grandson had been sentenced to this place. She had swallowed the portion of misery the world had given to her, and now there she was, alone on Brevard Street, her family tugged away one by one. She might not be there.

Elwood knew she had bad news because she kept on longer than usual about the goings-on around their corner of Frenchtown. Clarice Jenkins's daughter got into Spelman, Tyrone James was smoking in bed and burned his house down, a new hat store opened up on Macomb. She threw him a bone about the movement: "Lyndon Johnson's carrying on President Kennedy's civil rights bill. Bringing it to Congress. And if that good old boy is doing right, you know things is changing. Be a whole different thing when you come home, Elwood."

"Your thumb's dirty," Burt said, "take it out of your mouth. Here's mine instead." He stuck it at his sister and she grimaced and giggled.

Elwood reached across the table and grabbed Harriet's hands. He'd never touched her like that before, as if reassuring a child. "Grandma, what is it?"

Most visitors wept on visiting day at some point, at the sight of the Nickel turnoff coming up the road, on departure, with their backs to their sons. Burt's mother handed his grandmother a handkerchief. She turned away to wipe her eyes.

Harriet's fingers trembled; he stilled them.

The lawyer was gone, she said. Mr. Andrews, the nice, polite white lawyer who'd been so optimistic about Elwood's appeal, had picked up stakes to Atlanta without a word. And taken two hundred dollars of their money with him. Mr. Marconi had kicked in another hundred after meeting with him, which was out of character, yes, but Mr. Andrews had been adamant and persuasive. What they had on their hands was a classic miscarriage of justice. The lawyer's office was empty when she took the bus downtown to see him, she said. The landlord was showing the office to a pro-

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