

CHAPTER TWO

Saying goodbye to the kitchen meant saying goodbye to his separate game, the one he kept private: Whenever the dining-room door swung open, he bet on whether there were Negro patrons out there. According to *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools had to desegregate—it was only a matter of time before all the invisible walls came down. The night the radio announced the Supreme Court's ruling, his grandmother shrieked as if someone had tossed hot soup in her lap. She caught herself and straightened her dress. "Jim Crow ain't going to just slink off," she said. "His wicked self."

The morning after the decision, the sun rose and everything looked the same. Elwood asked his grandmother when Negroes were going to start staying at the Richmond, and she said it's one thing to tell someone to do what's right and another thing for them to do it. She listed some of his behavior as proof and Elwood nodded: Maybe so. Sooner or later, though, the door would swing wide to reveal a brown face—a dapper businessman in Tallahassee for business or a fancy lady in town to see the sights—enjoying the fine-smelling fare the cooks put out. He was sure of it. The game began when he was nine, and three years later the

only colored people he saw in the dining room carried plates or drinks or a mop. He never stopped playing, up until his afternoons at the Richmond ended. Whether his opponent in this game was his own foolishness or the mulish constancy of the world was unclear.

Mr. Parker was not the only one who saw a worthy employee in Elwood. White men were always extending offers of work to Elwood, recognizing his industrious nature and steady character, or at least recognizing that he carried himself differently than other colored boys his age and taking this for industry. Mr. Marconi, the proprietor of the tobacco shop on Macomb Street, had watched Elwood since he was a baby, squealing in a noisy carriage that was half rust. Elwood's mother was a slim woman with dark, tired eyes who never moved to quiet her child. She'd buy armfuls of movie magazines and vanish into the street, Elwood howling all the way.

Mr. Marconi left his perch by the register as seldom as possible. Squat and perspiring, with a low pompadour and a thin black mustache, he was inevitably disheveled by evening. The atmosphere at the front of the store was stringent with his hair tonic and he left an aromatic trail on hot afternoons. From his chair, Mr. Marconi observed Elwood grow older and lean toward his own sun, veering away from the neighborhood boys, who carried on and roughhoused in the aisles and slipped Red Hots into their dungarees when they thought Mr. Marconi wasn't looking. He saw everything, said nothing.

Elwood belonged to the second generation of his French-town customers. Mr. Marconi hung out his shingle a few months after the army base opened in '42. Negro soldiers

took the bus up from Camp Gordon Johnston or from Dale Mabry Army Air Field, raised hell in Frenchtown all weekend, then slumped back to train for war. He had relatives who opened businesses downtown and thrived, but a white man savvy to the economics of segregation could turn a real buck. Marconi's was a few doors down from the Bluebell Hotel. The Tip Top Bar and Marybelle's Pool Hall were around the corner. He did a reliable trade in various tobaccos and tins of Romeos prophylactics.

Once the war ended, he moved the cigars to the back of the store, repainted the walls white, and added magazine racks, penny candy, and a soda cooler, which did much to improve the place's reputation. He hired help. He didn't need an employee, but his wife liked telling people that he had an employee, and he imagined it made the store more approachable to a genteel segment of black Frenchtown.

Elwood was thirteen when Vincent, the tobacco shop's longtime stock boy, signed up for the army. Vincent hadn't been the most attentive employee, but he was prompt and well-groomed, two qualities that Mr. Marconi valued in others if not in himself. On Vincent's last day, Elwood dawdled at the comics rack, as he did most afternoons. He had a curious habit where he read every comic front to back before he bought it, and he bought every one he touched. Mr. Marconi asked why go through all that if he was going to buy them whether they were good or not, and Elwood said, "Just making sure." The shopkeeper asked him if he needed a job. Elwood closed the copy of *Journey into Mystery* and said he'd have to ask his grandmother.

Harriet had a long list of rules for what was acceptable and what was not, and sometimes the only way for Elwood

to know how it all worked was to make a mistake. He waited until after dinner, once they'd finished the fried catfish and the sour greens and his grandmother rose to clear. In this case, she held no hidden reservations, despite the fact that her uncle Abe had smoked cigars and look what happened to him, despite Macomb Street's history as a laboratory of vice, and despite the fact she'd turned her mistreatment by an Italian salesclerk decades ago into a cherished grudge. "They're probably not related," she said, wiping her hands. "Or if they are, distant cousins."

She let Elwood work at the store after school and on weekends, taking half his paycheck at the end of the week for the household and half for college. He'd mentioned going to college the summer prior, casually, with no inkling of the momentousness of his words. *Brown v. Board of Education* was an unlikely turn, but one of Harriet's family aspiring to higher education was an actual miracle. Any misgivings over the tobacco shop collapsed before such a notion.

Elwood tidied the newspapers and comic books in the wire racks, wiped dust off the less popular sweets, and made sure that the cigar boxes were arranged according to Marconi's theories about packaging and how it excited "the happy part of the human brain." He still hung around the comics, reading them gingerly as if handling dynamite, but the news magazines exerted a gravity. He fell under the luxurious sway of *Life* magazine. A big white truck dropped off a stack of *Life* every Thursday—Elwood came to learn the sound of its brakes. Once he sorted the returns and displayed the new arrivals, he hunkered on the stepladder to follow the magazine's latest excursions into unreckoned corners of America.

He knew Frenchtown's piece of the Negro's struggle, where his neighborhood ended and white law took over. *Life's* photo essays conveyed him to the front lines, to bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, to counter sit-ins in Greensboro, where young people not much older than him took up the movement. They were beaten with metal bars, blasted by fire hoses, spat on by white housewives with angry faces, and frozen by the camera in tableaux of noble resistance. The tiny details were a wonder: how the young men's ties remained straight black arrows in the whirl of violence, how the curves of the young women's perfect hairdos floated against the squares of their protest signs. Glamorous somehow, even when the blood flowed down their faces. Young knights taking the fight to dragons. Elwood was slight-shouldered, skinny as a pigeon, and he worried about the safety of his glasses, which were expensive and in his dreams broken in two by nightsticks, tire irons, or baseball bats, but he wanted to enlist. He had no choice.

Flipping pages during lulls. Elwood's shifts at Marconi's provided models for the man he wished to become and separated him from the type of Frenchtown boy he was not. His grandmother had long steered him from hanging out with the local kids, whom she regarded as shiftless, clambering into rambuncion. The tobacco shop, like the hotel kitchen, was a safe preserve. Harriet raised him strict, everyone knew, and the other parents on their stretch of Brevard Street helped keep Elwood apart by holding him up as an example. When the boys he used to play cowboys and Indians with chased him down the street every once in a while or threw rocks at him, it was less out of mischief than resentment.

People from his block stopped in Marconi's all the time,

and his worlds overlapped. One afternoon, the bell above the door jangled and Mrs. Thomas walked in.

"Hello, Mrs. Thomas," Elwood said. "There's some cold orange in there."

"I think I just might, El," she said. A connoisseur of the latest styles, Mrs. Thomas was dressed this afternoon in a homemade yellow polka-dot dress she'd copied from a magazine profile of Audrey Hepburn. She was quite aware that few women in the neighborhood could have worn it with such confidence, and when she stood still it was hard to escape the suspicion that she was posing, waiting for the pop of flashbulbs.

Mrs. Thomas had been Evelyn Curtis's best friend growing up. One of Elwood's earliest memories was of sitting on his mother's lap on a hot day while they played gin. He squirmed to see his mother's cards and she told him not to fuss, it was too hot out. When she got up to visit the outhouse, Mrs. Thomas snuck him sips of her orange soda. His orange tongue gave them away and Evelyn half-heartedly scolded them while they giggled. Elwood kept that day close.

Mrs. Thomas opened her purse to pay for her two sodas and this week's *Jet*. "You keeping up with that schoolwork?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I don't work the boy too hard," Mr. Marconi said.

"Mmm," Mrs. Thomas said. Her tone was suspect. Frenchtown ladies remembered the tobacco store from its disreputable days and considered the Italian an accomplice to domestic miseries. "You keep doing what you're supposed to, El." She took her change and Elwood watched her leave. His mother had left both of them; it was possible she sent her friend postcards from this or that place, even if she for-

got to write him. One day Mrs. Thomas might share some news.

Mr. Marconi carried *Jet*, of course, and *Ebony*. Elwood got him to pick up *The Crisis* and *The Chicago Defender*, and other black newspapers. His grandmother and her friends subscribed, and he thought it strange that the store didn't sell them.

"You're right," Mr. Marconi said. He pinched his lip. "I think we used to carry it. I don't know what happened."

"Great," Elwood said.

Long after Mr. Marconi had stopped minding his regulars' buying habits, Elwood remembered what brought each person into the store. His predecessor, Vincent, had occasionally livened up the place with a dirty joke, but it couldn't be said that he had initiative. Elwood possessed it in spades, reminding Mr. Marconi which tobacco vendor had shorted them on the last delivery and which candy to quit restocking. Mr. Marconi struggled to tell the colored ladies of Frenchtown apart—all of them wore a scowl when they saw him—and Elwood made a competent ambassador. He'd stare at the boy when he was lost in his magazines and try to figure what made him tick. His grandmother was firm, that was clear. The boy was intelligent and hardworking and a credit to his race. But Elwood could be thick-witted when it came to the simplest things. He didn't know when to stand back and let things be. Like the business with the black eye.

Kids swiped candy, it didn't matter what color their skin was. Mr. Marconi himself, in his untethered youth, had engineered all sorts of foolishness. You lose a percentage here and there, but that was in the overhead—kids steal a candy bar today but they and their friends spend their

money in the store for years. Them and their parents. Chase them out into the street over some little thing, word gets around, especially in a neighborhood like this where everybody's in everybody's business, and then the parents stop coming in because they're embarrassed. Letting the kids steal was almost an investment, the way he looked at it.

Elwood drifted to a different perspective during his time in the store. Before he worked at Marconi's, his friends gloated over their candy heists, cackling and blowing insolent pink bubbles of Bazooka once they got a good distance from the store. Elwood didn't join in but he'd never had feelings on it. When Mr. Marconi hired him, his boss explained his attitude toward sticky fingers, along with where they kept the mop and what days to expect the big deliveries. Over the months, Elwood saw sweets disappear into boys' pockets. Boys he knew. Maybe with a wink to Elwood if they caught his eye. For a year, Elwood said nothing. But the day Larry and Willie grabbed the lemon candies when Mr. Marconi bent behind the counter, he couldn't restrain himself.

"Put it back."

The boys stiffened. Larry and Willie had known Elwood their whole lives. Played marbles and tag with him when they were small, although that ended when Larry started a fire in the vacant lot on Dade Street and Willie got left back twice. Harriet struck them from the list of allowable companions. Their three families went back in Frenchtown for generations. Larry's grandmother was in a church group with Harriet, and Willie's father had been a childhood buddy of Elwood's father, Percy. They shipped off to the army together. Willie's father spent every day on his porch

in his wheelchair, smoking a pipe, and he waved whenever Elwood passed.

"Put it back," Elwood said.

Mr. Marconi tilted his head: That's enough. The boys returned the candy and left the store, smoldering.

They knew Elwood's route. Sometimes jeered at him for being a goody-two-shoes when he biked past Larry's window on his way home. That night they jumped him. It was just getting dark and the smell of magnolias mingled with the tang of fried pork. They slammed him and his bike into the new asphalt the county had laid down that winter. The boys tore his sweater, threw his glasses into the street. As they beat him, Larry asked Elwood if he had any damned sense; Willie declared that he needed to be taught a lesson, and proceeded to do so. Elwood got a few licks in here and there, not much to talk about. He didn't cry. When he came upon two little kids fighting on his block, Elwood was the kind to intervene and cool things down. Now he was getting his. An old man from across the street broke it up and asked Elwood if he wanted to clean himself or have a glass of water. Elwood declined.

The chain on his bike was popped and he walked it home. Harriet didn't press him when she asked about his eye. He shook his head. By morning the livid bump underneath was a bubble of blood.

Larry had a point, Elwood had to admit: From time to time it appeared that he had no goddamned sense. He couldn't explain it, even to himself, until *At Zion Hill* gave him a language. *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. The record went around and around, like an argument that always returned to its unassailable premise, and Dr. King's words filled the front room of the shotgun house. Elwood bent to a code—Dr. King gave that code shape, articulation, and meaning. There are big forces that want to keep the Negro down, like Jim Crow, and there are small forces that want to keep you down, like other people, and in the face of all those things, the big ones and the smaller ones, you have to stand up straight and maintain your sense of who you are. The encyclopedias are empty. There are people who trick you and deliver emptiness with a smile, while others rob you of your self-respect. You need to remember who you are.

This sense of dignity. The way the man said it, crackle and all: an inalienable strength. Even when consequences lay in wait on dark street corners on your way home. They beat him up and tore his clothes and didn't understand why he wanted to protect a white man. How to tell them that their transgressions against Mr. Marconi were insults to Elwood himself, whether it was a sucker candy or a comic book? Not because any attack on his brother was an attack on himself, like they said in church, but because for him to do nothing was to undermine his own dignity. No matter that Mr. Marconi had told him he didn't care, no matter that Elwood had never said a word to his friends when they stole in his presence. It didn't make no sense until it made the only sense.

That was Elwood—as good as anyone. On the day he was arrested, just before the deputy appeared, an advertisement for Fun Town came on the radio. He hummed along. He

remembered that Yolanda King was six years old when her father told her the truth about the amusement park and the white order that kept her outside the fence looking in. Always looking into that other world. Elwood was six when his parents took off and he thought, that's another thing tying him to her, because that's when he woke to the world.

CHAPTER THREE

On the first day of the school year, the students of Lincoln High School received their new secondhand textbooks from the white high school across the way. Knowing where the textbooks were headed, the white students left inscriptions for the next owners: *Choke, Nigger! You Smell. Eat Shit.* September was a tutorial in the latest epithets of Tallahassee's white youth, which, like hemlines and haircuts, varied year to year. It was humiliating to open a biology book, turn to the page on the digestive system, and be confronted with *Drop dead NIGGER*, but as the school year went on, the students of Lincoln High School stopped noticing the curses and impolite suggestions. How to get through the day if every indignity capsized you in a ditch? One learned to focus one's attention.

Mr. Hill started working at the high school when Elwood entered his junior year. He greeted Elwood and the rest of the history class and wrote his name on the blackboard. Then Mr. Hill handed out black markers and told his students that the first order of business was to strike out all the bad words in the textbooks. "That always burned me up," he said, "seeing that stuff. You all are trying to get an education—no need to get caught up with what those fools