

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

say." Like the rest of the class, Elwood went slow at first. They looked at the textbooks and then at the teacher. Then they dug in with their markers. Elwood got giddy. His heart sped: this escapade. Why hadn't anyone told them to do this before?

"Make sure you don't miss anything," Mr. Hill said. "You know those white kids are wily." While the students struck out the curses and cusses, he told them about himself. He was new to Tallahassee, having just finished his studies at a teaching college in Montgomery. He'd first visited Florida the previous summer, when he stepped off a bus from Washington, DC, in Tallahassee as a freedom rider. He had marched. Installed himself at forbidden lunch counters and waited for service. "I got a lot of course work done," he said, "sitting there waiting for my cup of coffee." Sheriffs threw him in jail for breach of peace. He was almost bored as he shared these stories, as if what he had done was the most natural thing in the world. Elwood wondered if he'd seen him in the pages of *Life* or the *Defender*, arm in arm with the great movement leaders, or in the background with the anonymous ones, standing tall and proud.

Mr. Hill maintained a broad collection of bow ties: polka dot, bright red, banana yellow. His wide, kind face was somehow made kinder by the crescent scar over his right eye where a white man had slugged him with a tire iron. "Nashville," he said when someone asked one afternoon, and he bit into his pear. The class focused on US history since the Civil War, but at every opportunity Mr. Hill guided them to the present, linking what had happened a hundred years ago to their current lives. They'd set off down one road at the beginning of class and it always led back to their doorsteps.

Mr. Hill caught on that Elwood had a fascination with the rights struggle and gave the boy a wry smile when he chimed in. The rest of the faculty of Lincoln High School had long held the boy in high esteem, grateful for his cool temperament. Those who'd taught his parents years ago had a hard time squaring him—he may have carried his father's name but there was nothing in the boy of Percy's feral charm, or of Evelyn's unnerving gloom. Grateful was the teacher rescued by Elwood's contributions when the classroom fell drowsy with the afternoon heat and he offered up *Archimedes* or *Amsterdam* at the key moment. The boy had one usable volume of *Fisher's Universal Encyclopedia*, so he used it, what else could he do? Better than nothing. Skipping around, wearing it down, revisiting his favorite parts as if it were one of his adventure tales. As a story, the encyclopedia was disjointed and incomplete, but still exciting in its own right. Elwood filled his notebook with the good parts, definitions and etymology. Later he'd find this scrap-rummaging pathetic.

He had been the natural choice at the end of his freshman year when they needed a new lead for the annual Emancipation Day play. Playing Thomas Jackson, the man who informs the Tallahassee slaves that they are free, was training for the version of himself who lived up the road. Elwood invested the character with the same earnestness he brought to all his responsibilities. In the play, Thomas Jackson was a cutter on a sugar plantation who ran away to join the Union Army at the start of the war, returning home a statesman. Every year Elwood concocted new inflections and gestures, the speeches losing their stiffness as his own convictions enlivened the portrait. "It is my pleasure to inform you fine gentlemen and ladies that the time has

come to throw off the yoke of slavery and take our places as true Americans—at long last!” The play’s author, a teacher of biology, had attempted to summon the magic of her one trip to Broadway years before.

In the three years Elwood played the role, the one constant was his nervousness at the climax, when Jackson had to kiss his best girl on the cheek. They were to be married and, it was implied, live a happy and fertile life in the new Tallahassee. Whether Marie-Jean was played by Anne, with her freckles and sweet moon face, or by Beatrice, whose buck teeth hooked into her lower lip, or in his final performance by Gloria Taylor, a foot taller and sending him to the tips of his toes, a knot of anxiety tautened in his chest and he got dizzy. All the hours in Marconi’s library had rehearsed him for heavy speeches but left him ill-prepared for performances with the brown beauties of Lincoln High, on the stage and off.

The movement he read and fantasized about was far off—then it crept closer. Frenchtown had its protests, but Elwood was too young to join in. He was ten years old when the two girls from Florida A&M University proposed the bus boycott. His grandmother initially didn’t understand why they wanted to bring all that fuss to their city, but after a few days she was carpooling to the hotel like everyone else. “Everybody in Leon County has gone crazy,” she said, “including me!” That winter the city finally integrated the buses and she got on and saw a colored driver behind the wheel. Sat where she wanted.

Four years later, when the students got it in their mind to sit down at the lunch counter at Woolworths, Elwood remembered his grandmother cackling with approval. She

even gave fifty cents to support their legal defense after the sheriff jailed them. When the demonstrations trailed off, she continued to boycott downtown stores, although it was not clear how much of that was solidarity or her own protest against high prices. In the spring of ’63, word spread that the college kids were going to picket the Florida Theatre to open its seats to Negroes. Elwood had good reason to think that Harriet would be proud of him for stepping up.

He was incorrect. Harriet Johnson was a slight hummingbird of a woman who conducted herself in everything with furious purpose. If something was worth doing—working, eating, talking to another person—it was worth doing seriously or not at all. She kept a sugarcane machete under her pillow for intruders, and it was difficult for Elwood to think that the old woman was afraid of anything. But fear was her fuel.

Yes, Harriet had joined the bus boycott. She had to—she couldn’t be the only woman in Frenchtown to take public transportation. But she trembled each time Slim Harrison pulled up in his ’57 Cadillac and she squeezed into the back with the other downtown-bound ladies. When the sit-ins started, she was grateful that no one expected a public gesture on her part. Sit-ins were a young person’s game and she didn’t have the heart. Act above your station, and you will pay. Whether it was God angry at her for taking more than her portion or the white man teaching her not to ask for more crumbs than he wanted to give, Harriet would pay. Her father had paid for not stepping out of the way of a white lady on Tennessee Avenue. Her husband, Monty, paid when he stepped up. Elwood’s father, Percy, got too many ideas when he joined the army so that when he came back

there was no room in Tallahassee for everything in his head. Now, Elwood. She'd bought that Martin Luther King record from a salesman outside the Richmond for a dime and it was the damndest ten cents she'd ever handed over. That record was nothing but ideas.

Hard work was a fundamental virtue, for hard work didn't allow time for marches or sit-ins. Elwood would not make a commotion of himself by messing with that movie-theater nonsense, she said. "You have made an agreement with Mr. Marconi to work in his store after school. If your boss can't depend on you, you won't be able to keep a job." Duty might protect him, as it had protected her.

A cricket under the house made a racket. Should've been paying rent, it had been flopping with them for so long. Elwood looked up from his science book and said, "Okay." The next afternoon he asked Mr. Marconi for a day off. Elwood had been out sick two days, but apart from that and some visits to see family, he hadn't missed work in those three years at the store.

Mr. Marconi said sure. Didn't even look up from his racing form.

Elwood dressed in the dark slacks from last year's Emancipation Day play. He'd grown a few inches, so he let them out and they showed the barest sliver of his white socks. A new emerald tie clip held his black tie in place and the knot only took six attempts. His shoes glinted with polish. He looked the part, even if he still worried for his glasses if the police brought out nightsticks. If the whites carried iron pipes and baseball bats. He waved off the bloody images from newspapers and magazines and tucked in his shirt.

Elwood heard the chants when he reached the Esso sta-

tion on Monroe. "What do we want? Freedom! When do we want it? Now!" The A&M students marched in snaky loops in front of the Florida, hoisting signs and rotating slogans under the marquee. The theater was showing *The Ugly American*—if you had seventy-five cents and the right skin color, you could see Marlon Brando. The sheriff and his deputies had installed themselves on the sidewalk in dark sunglasses, arms crossed. A group of whites jeered and taunted behind the policemen, and more white men trotted down the street to join them. Elwood kept his eyes down as he walked around the mob and slipped into the protest line behind an older girl in a striped sweater. She grinned at him and nodded as if she had been waiting for him.

He calmed once he joined the human chain and mouthed the words with the others. EQUAL TREATMENT UNDER THE LAW. Where was his sign? In his concentration on looking the part, he'd forgotten his props. He couldn't have matched the older kids' perfect stencil work. They'd had practice. NONVIOLENCE IS OUR WATCHWORD. WE SHALL WIN BY LOVE. A short boy with a shaved head waved one that said, ARE YOU THE UGLY AMERICAN in a sea of cartoony question marks. Someone grabbed Elwood's shoulder. He thought he'd see a monkey wrench bearing down, but it was Mr. Hill. His history teacher invited him into a group of Lincoln seniors. Bill Tuddy and Alvin Tate, two guys from varsity basketball, shook his hand. They'd never acknowledged him before. He'd kept his movement dreams so close that it never occurred to him that others in his school shared his need to stand up.

The next month the sheriff arrested more than two hundred protestors and charged them with contempt, snatch-

ing collars in a roil of tear gas, but this first march went off without incident. By then the FAMU students would be joined by those from Melvin Griggs Technical. White kids from the University of Florida and Florida State. Skilled hands from the Congress of Racial Equality. This day, old and young white men shouted at them, but it was nothing Elwood hadn't heard shouted from cars when biking down the street. One of the red-faced white boys looked like Cameron Parker, the son of the Richmond's manager, and the next circuit confirmed it. They'd traded comic books a few years ago in the alley behind the hotel. Cameron didn't recognize him. A flashbulb exploded in his face and Elwood started, but the photographer was from the *Register*, which his grandmother refused to read because their race coverage was so slanted. A college girl in a tight blue sweater handed him a sign that said I AM A MAN and when the protest moved to the State Theatre, he held it over his head and lent his voice to the proud chorus. The State was playing *The Day Mars Invaded Earth* and that night he thought he'd traveled a hundred thousand miles in one day.

Three days later Harriet confronted him—one of her circle had seen him and that's how long it took for the news to get back to her. It had been years since she spanked him with a belt and now he was much too big, so she resorted to an old Johnson family recipe for the silent treatment, one that dated back to Reconstruction and achieved a complete sense of erasure in its target. She instituted a ban on the record player and, recognizing the resiliency of this younger generation of colored youth, moved it into her bedroom and weighed it down with bricks. They both suffered in the quiet.

After a week, things in the house were back to their routine, but Elwood was changed. *Closer*. At the demonstration, he had felt somehow *closer* to himself. For a moment. Out there in the sun. It was enough to feed his dreams. Once he got to college and out of their little shotgun house on Brevard, he'd start his life. Take girls to the movies—he was done stymieing himself on that front—and figure out a course of study. Find his place in the busy line of young dreamers who dedicated themselves to Negro uplift.

That last summer in Tallahassee passed quickly. Mr. Hill gave him a copy of James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* on the last day of school, and his mind churned. *Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny*. He hadn't marched on the Florida Theatre in defense of his rights or those of the black race of which he was a part; he had marched for everyone's rights, even those who shouted him down. My struggle is your struggle, your burden is my burden. But how to tell people? He stayed up late writing letters on the racial question to the *Tallahassee Register*, which did not run them, and *The Chicago Defender*, which printed one. "We ask of the older generation, Will you pick up our challenge?" Bashful, he didn't tell anyone and wrote under a pseudonym: Archer Montgomery. It sounded stuffy and smart, and he didn't realize he'd used his grandfather's name until he saw it in black-and-white newspaper.

In June Mr. Marconi became a grandfather, a milestone that exposed new facets in the Italian. He turned the shop into a showcase for avuncular enthusiasm. The long silences gave way to lessons from his immigrant struggles and eccentric business advice. He took to closing the shop an hour early to visit his granddaughter and paid Elwood

for a full shift. When this happened, Elwood strolled over to the basketball courts to see if anyone was playing. He only ever watched, but his excursion to the protests had made him less shy and he made a few friends on the sidelines, dudes from two streets over whom he'd seen for years but never talked to. Other times he might go downtown with Peter Coombs, a neighborhood boy Harriet approved of on account that he played violin and shared a bookish bent with her grandson. If Peter didn't have practice, they wandered the record stores and furtively checked out the covers of LPs they were forbidden to buy.

"What's 'Dynosound'?" Peter asked.

A new style of music? A different way of hearing? They were confounded.

Once in a while on hot afternoons girls from FAMU stopped in the store for a soda, someone from the Florida demonstration. Elwood asked for news on the protests, and they'd brighten at the connection and pretend to recognize him. More than one told him that they assumed he was in college. He took their observations as compliments, ornaments on his daydreams about leaving home. Optimism made Elwood as malleable as the cheap taffy below the register. He was primed when Mr. Hill appeared in the store that July and made his suggestion.

Elwood didn't recognize him at first. No colorful bow tie, an orange plaid shirt open to show his undershirt, hip sunglasses—Mr. Hill looked like someone who hadn't thought about work for months, not weeks. He greeted his former student with the lazy ease of someone who had the whole summer off. For the first summer in a while he wasn't traveling, he told Elwood. "There's plenty here to keep me occupied," he said, nodding toward the sidewalk. A young

woman in a floppy straw hat waited for him, her thin hand shading her eyes from the sunlight.

Elwood asked Mr. Hill if he needed anything.

"I came here to see you, Elwood," he said. "A friend of mine told me about an opportunity and I thought of you right off the bat."

Mr. Hill had a comrade from the freedom riders, a college professor who'd landed a job at Melvin Griggs Technical, the colored college just south of Tallahassee. Teaching English and American literature, just finished his third year. The school had been poorly managed for some time; the new president of the college was turning things around. The courses at Melvin Griggs had been open to high-achieving high-school students for some time, but none of the local families knew about it. The president put Mr. Hill's friend on it, and he reached out: Perhaps there were a few exceptional kids at Lincoln who might be interested?

Elwood tightened his hands on the broom. "That sounds great, but I don't know if we have the money for classes like that." Later, he'd shake his head: College classes were exactly what he'd been saving up for, what did it matter if he took them while still at Lincoln?

"That's the thing, Elwood—they're free. This fall at least, so they can get the word out in the community."

"I'll have to ask my grandmother."

"You do that, Elwood," Mr. Hill said. "And I can talk to her, too." He put his hand on Elwood's shoulder. "The main thing is, it'd be perfect for a young man like you. You're the type of student they came up with this for."

Later that afternoon as he chased a fat, buzzing fly around the store, Elwood thought there probably weren't a lot of white kids in Tallahassee who studied at the college level.

He who gets behind in a race must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front.

Harriet expressed no misgivings over Mr. Hill's offer—the word *free* was a master switch. After that, Elwood's summer moved as slow as a mud turtle. Because Mr. Hill's friend taught English, he thought he had to sign up for a literature course, but even when he found out he could take anything he wanted, he stuck with it. The survey course on British writers wasn't practical, as his grandmother pointed out, but that was its charm, the more he thought about it. He had been exceedingly practical for a long time.

Perhaps the textbooks at the college might be new. Unscarred. Nothing to cross out. It was possible.

The day before Elwood's first college class, Mr. Marconi summoned him to the cash register. Elwood had to miss his Thursday shifts in order to attend; he assumed his boss wanted to make sure things were in order for his absence. The Italian cleared his throat and pushed a velvet case to him. "For your education," he said.

It was a midnight-blue fountain pen with brass trim. A nice gift, even if Mr. Marconi got a discount because the stationers were a steady client. They shook hands in a manly fashion.

Harriet wished him good luck. She checked his school outfit every morning to make sure he was presentable, but apart from plucking the occasional piece of lint never made any corrections. This day was no different. "You look smart, El," she said. She kissed him on the cheek before heading to the bus stop, hunching her shoulders in the way she did when she was trying not to cry in front of him.

Elwood had plenty of time after school to get to the college, but he was so eager to see Melvin Griggs for the first

time that he set out early. Two rivets in his bike chain broke the night he got that black eye, and ever since it tended to snap when he took it out for long rides. He'd stick out his thumb or walk the seven miles. Step through the gates and explore the campus, get lost in all those buildings, or just sit on a bench off the quadrangle and breathe it in.

He waited at the corner of Old Bainbridge for a colored driver who headed for the state road. Two pickups passed him by and then a brilliant-green '61 Plymouth Fury slowed, low and finned like a giant catfish. The driver leaned over and opened the passenger door. "Going south," he said. The green-and-white vinyl seats squeaked when Elwood slid inside.

"Rodney," the man said. Rodney had a sprawling but solid physique, like a Negro version of Edward G. Robinson. His gray-and-purple pinstripe suit completed the costume. When Rodney shook his hand, the rings on his fingers bit and made Elwood wince.

"Elwood." He put his satchel between his legs and looked over the space-age dashboard of the Plymouth, all the push buttons sticking out of the silver detailing.

They headed south toward County Road 636. Rodney tapped vainly at the radio. "This always gives me trouble. You try it." Elwood stabbed the buttons and found an R&B station. He almost turned the channel, but Harriet wasn't here to cluck over the double meanings in the lyrics, her explanations of which always left him mystified and dubious. He let the station sit, it was a doo-wop group. Rodney wore the same hair tonic as Mr. Marconi. The air in the car was acrid and heavy with the stuff. Even on his day off, he couldn't rid himself of it.

Rodney was on his way back from seeing his mother, who

lived in Valdosta. He said he hadn't heard of Melvin Griggs before, putting a dent in Elwood's pride over his big day. "College," Rodney said. He whistled through his teeth. "I started working in a chair factory when I was fourteen," he added.

"I have a job in a tobacco store," Elwood said.

"I'm sure you do," Rodney said.

The disc jockey rattled off the information for the Sunday swap meet. A commercial for Fun Town came on and Elwood hummed along.

"What's this?" Rodney said. He exhaled loudly and cursed. Ran his hand over his conk.

The red light of the prowler car spun in the rearview mirror.

They were in the country and there were no other cars. Rodney muttered and pulled over. Elwood put his satchel in his lap and Rodney told him to keep cool.

The white deputy parked a few yards behind them. He put his left hand on his holster and walked up. He took off his sunglasses and put them in his chest pocket.

Rodney said, "You don't know me, do you?"

"No," Elwood said.

"I'll tell him that."

The deputy had his gun out now. "First thing I thought when they said to keep an eye out for a Plymouth," he said. "Only a nigger'd steal that."

PART

Two