

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rarely did Harriet make proper goodbyes to her loved ones. Her father died in jail after a white lady downtown accused him of not getting out of her way on the sidewalk. *Bump-tious contact*, as Jim Crow defined it. That's how it went in the old days. He was waiting for his appointment with the judge when they found him hung in his cell. No one believed the police's story. "Niggers and jail," her uncle said, "niggers and jail." Two days prior, Harriet had waved to him across the street on her way home from school. That was her last image of him: Her big, cheerful daddy walking to his second job.

Harriet's husband, Monty, got hit in the head with a chair while breaking up a scuffle at Miss Simone's. Some colored GIs from Camp Gordon Johnston in a rumble with a bunch of Tallahassee crackers over who had next on the pool table. Two people ended up dead. One of them was her Monty, who'd stepped up to protect one of Simone's dishwashers from three white men. The boy still wrote Harriet letters every Christmas. He drove a taxicab in Orlando and had three kids.

She said goodbye to her daughter, Evelyn, and her son-in-law, Percy, the night they took off. Percy's was one leave-taking in the works for years, although she hadn't foreseen

that he'd take Evelyn. Percy had been too big for the town since he got back from the war. He served in the Pacific theater, behind the lines keeping up the supply chain.

He came back evil. Not because of what happened overseas but from what he saw on his return. He loved the army, and even received a commendation for a letter he wrote to his captain about inequities in the treatment of colored soldiers. Perhaps his life might have veered elsewhere if the US government had opened the country to colored advancement like they opened the army. But it was one thing to allow someone to kill for you and another to let him live next door. The GI Bill fixed things pretty good for the white boys he served with, but the uniform meant different things depending who wore it. What was the point of a no-interest loan when a white bank won't let you step inside? Percy drove up to Milledgeville to visit a buddy from his unit and some crackers started something. He'd stopped for gas in one of those little towns. Cracker town, crack-your-head town. He barely got out—everybody knew white boys were lynching black men in uniform, but he never believed he'd be a target. Not him. Bunch of white boys jealous that they didn't have a uniform and afraid of a world that let a nigger wear one in the first place.

Evelyn married him. She was always going to, since they were small. Elwood's arrival did nothing to still Percy's wildness: the corn whiskey and roadhouse nights, the roguish element he brought into their house on Brevard Street. Evelyn had never been very strong; when Percy was around she shrank to an appendage of his, an extra arm or a leg. A mouth: He had Evelyn tell Harriet that they were leaving for California to try their luck.

"What kind of people leave for California in the middle of the night?" Harriet asked.

"I got to meet someone about an opportunity," Percy said.

Harriet thought they should wake the boy. "Let him sleep," Evelyn said, and that was the last she heard from them. If her daughter had ever been suited for motherhood, she never demonstrated it. The look on her face when little Elwood suckled on her breast—her joyless, empty eyes seeing through the walls of the house and into pure nothing—chilled Harriet to the bone whenever she remembered it.

The day the court officer came for Elwood was the worst goodbye. It had been the two of them for so long. She and Mr. Marconi would make sure the lawyer kept on fixing his case, she said. Mr. Andrews was from Atlanta, a brand of young white crusader who went north to get his law degree and came back changed. Harriet never let him go without a bite to eat. He was extravagant with his praise for her cobbler and in his optimism over Elwood's prospects.

They'd find a way out of this mess of thorns, she told her grandson, and promised to visit his first Sunday at Nickel. But when she showed up, they told her that he was sick and couldn't have visitors.

She asked what was wrong with him. The Nickel man said, "How the hell should I know, lady?"

There was a new pair of denim pants on the chair next to Elwood's hospital bed. The beating had embedded bits of the first into his skin and it took two hours for the doctor to remove the fibers. It was a duty the doctor had to perform from time to time. Tweezers did the trick. The boy would be in the hospital until he walked without pain.

Dr. Cooke had an office next to the examination rooms,

where he smoked cigars and harangued his wife on the telephone all day, bickering over money or her no-account relatives. The potato-y cigar smoke permeated the ward, covering the smell of sweat and vomit and gamey skin, and dissipated by dawn, when he'd show up and perfume the place again. There was a glass case full of bottles and boxes of medicine that he unlocked with great seriousness, but he only ever reached for the big bucket of aspirin.

Elwood spent his stay on his stomach. For obvious reasons. The hospital inducted him into its rhythms. Nurse Wilma grunted around most days, hale and brusque, slamming drawers and cabinets. She kept her hair in a licorice-red bouffant and dotted her cheeks with rouge so that she reminded Elwood of a haunted doll come to hideous life, something out of horror comics. *The Crypt of Terror*, *The Vault of Horror*, read by window light in his cousin's attic. Horror comics, he'd noticed, delivered two kinds of punishment—completely undeserved, and sinister justice for the wicked. He placed his current misfortune in the former category and waited to turn the page.

Nurse Wilma was almost sweet to the white boys who came in with their abrasions and ailments, a second mother. Nary a kind word for the black boys. Elwood's bedpan was a particular affront—she looked as if he'd pissed in her outstretched palms. More than once in his protest dreams, hers was the face of the waitress behind the counter who refused to serve him, the housewife with the spit-flecked mouth cursing like a sailor. That he dreamed of a time when he was outside and marching kept his spirits up each morning when he woke in the hospital. His mind still capable of travel.

That first day there was only one other boy in the hospi-

tal, his bed hidden behind a folding curtain at the far end of the ward. When Nurse Wilma or Dr. Cooke tended to him, they closed it behind them, the wheels of the curtain squeaking across the white tile. The patient never spoke when the staff addressed him, but their voices had a cheerful quality that was absent when they talked to the other boys: The kid was a terminal case, or royalty. None of the students who stayed on the ward knew who he was or what landed him there.

The cast of boys came in and out. Elwood got to know some white kids he wouldn't have met otherwise. Wards of the state, orphans, runaways who'd lit out to get away from mothers who entertained men for money or to escape rummy fathers who came into their rooms in the middle of the night. Some of them were rough characters. They stole money, cussed at their teachers, damaged public property, had stories about bloody pool-hall fights and uncles who sold moonshine. They were sent to Nickel for offenses Elwood had never heard of: malingering, moper, incorrigibility. Words the boys didn't understand either, but what was the point when their meaning was clear enough: Nickel. *I got busted for sleeping in a garage to keep warm, I stole five dollars from my teacher, I drank a bottle of cough syrup and went wild one night. I was on my own trying to get by.*

"Wow, they got you good," Dr. Cooke said whenever he changed Elwood's dressings. Elwood didn't want to look but he had to. He got a glimpse of his inner thighs, where the raw slashes on the backs of his legs crept up like gruesome fingers. Dr. Cooke gave him an aspirin and retreated to his office. Five minutes later he was arguing with his wife over a shiftless cousin who needed a loan for a scheme.

Some snuffling dude woke Elwood in the middle of the night and he was up for hours, his skin burning and wriggling under the bandages.

A week into his hospital stay, he opened his eyes and Turner lay in the bed opposite. Whistling the theme to *The Andy Griffith Show*, cheerful and fluttering. He was a good whistler and for the remainder of their friendship his performances provided a score, capturing the mood of the escape or fluting a countervailing commentary.

Turner waited until Nurse Wilma went outside for a cigarette and explained his visit. "Thought I'd take me a vacation," he said. He'd eaten some soap powder to make himself sick, an hour of stomachache for a whole day off. Or two—he knew how to sell it. "Got some more powder hidden in my sock, too," he said. Elwood turned away to brood.

"How you like that witch doctor?" Turner asked later. Dr. Cooke had just taken the temperature of a white boy down the row who was puffed up and moaning like a cow. The phone rang, the doctor dropped two aspirin into the white kid's palm and hoofed it to his office.

Turner rolled up to Elwood. He was clackety-clacking around the ward in one of the old polio wheelchairs. He said, "Come in here with your damn head cut off and he'd give you aspirin."

Elwood didn't want to chuckle, like it would be cheating on his pain, but he couldn't help it. His testicles were swole up from where the strap landed between his legs, and his laughter tugged something inside and made them hurt again.

"Nigger come in here," Turner said, "head cut off, both legs, both arms cut off, and that fucking witch doctor would

be like, 'You want one tablet, or two?'" He coaxed the stuck wheels of the wheelchair and huffed away.

There was nothing to read apart from *The Gator*, the school newspaper, and a pamphlet commemorating the school's fiftieth anniversary, both printed on the other side of campus by Nickel students. Every boy in every picture was smiling, but even after Elwood's short stay he recognized a kind of Nickel deadness in their eyes. He suspected he had it, too, now that he had fully enrolled. Turning slowly on his side, propped on an elbow, he went through the pamphlet a few times.

The state opened the school in 1899 as the Florida Industrial School for Boys. "A reform school where the young offender of law, separated from vicious associates, may receive physical, intellectual, and moral training, be reformed and restored to the community with purpose and character fitting for a good citizen, an honorable and an honest man with a trade or skilled occupation fitting such person for self-maintenance." The boys were called students, rather than inmates, to distinguish them from the violent offenders that populated prisons. All the violent offenders, Elwood added, were on staff.

When it opened, the school admitted children as young as five, a fact that swept up Elwood in a lament when he tried to sleep: all those helpless kids. The first thousand acres were granted by the state; over the years locals generously donated another four hundred. Nickel earned its keep. The construction of the printing plant was a bona fide success by any measure. "In 1926 alone, publishing created a profit of \$250,000, in addition to introducing the students to a useful trade in which to apply themselves after graduation." The brick-making machine produced twenty thousand bricks a

day; its issue propped up buildings all over Jackson County, big and small. The school's annual Christmas-light display, designed and executed by the students, drew visitors from miles around. Every year the newspaper sent out a reporter.

In 1949, the year of the pamphlet's publication, the school was renamed in honor of Trevor Nickel, a reformer who'd taken over a few years earlier. The boys used to say it was because their lives weren't worth five cents, but it was not the case. Occasionally you passed Trevor Nickel's portrait in the hallway and he frowned like he knew what you were thinking. No, that wasn't it: Like he knew you knew what he was thinking.

The next time one of the ringworm boys came in from Cleveland, Elwood asked the kid to bring back some books for him to read, and he did. Plopped down a stack of battered natural-science books that by accident provided a course in ancient forces: tectonic collisions, mountain ranges thrown up to the sky, volcanic bombast. All the violence roiling beneath that makes the world above. They were big books with exuberant pictures, red and orange, in contrast with the cloudy, white-gone-gray of the ward.

Turner's second day in the hospital, Elwood caught him pulling a piece of folded cardboard out of his sock. Turner swallowed the contents and an hour later he was hollering. Dr. Cooke came out and he threw up on the man's shoes.

"I told you not to eat the food," Dr. Cooke said. "It's going to make you sick, what they serve here."

"What else am I supposed to eat, Mr. Cooke?"

The doctor blinked.

When Turner finished mopping up the vomit, Elwood said, "Doesn't that hurt your stomach?"

"Sure it does, man," Turner said. "But I don't feel like

going to work today. These beds are lumpy as hell, but you can get some good shut-eye, you figure out how to lay on them."

The secret boy behind the folded curtain made a heavy sigh, and Elwood and Turner jumped. He didn't make much noise as a rule and you forgot he was around.

"Hey!" Elwood said. "You over there!"

"Shhh!" went Turner.

There was no sound, not even the shifting of a blanket.

"You go look," Elwood said. Something had settled—he felt better today. "See who it is. Ask what's wrong with him."

Turner looked at him like he was nuts. "I ain't asking nobody shit."

"Scared?" Elwood said, like one of the boys from his street, how buddies taunted each other back home.

"Damn," Turner said, "you don't know. Pop back there for a look, maybe you have to trade places with him. Like in a ghost story."

That night Nurse Wilma stayed late, reading to the kid behind the curtain. The Bible, a hymn, it sounded how people sound when they have God in their mouth.

The beds were occupied and then they weren't. A bad batch of canned peaches filled the ward. There weren't enough beds so they slept head to toe, gassy and gurgling. The beds turned over. Grubs, Explorers, and the industrious Pioneers. Injured, infected, faking it, and afflicted. Spider bite, busted ankle, lost a fingertip in a loading machine. A visit to the White House. Knowing that he'd gone down, the other boys no longer kept him at a distance. He was one of them now.

Elwood got sick of looking at his new pants sitting there on the chair. He folded them up and stuffed them under his mattress.

The big radio over by Dr. Cooke's office played all day, competing with the noise of the metal shop next door—electric saws, steel on steel. The doctor thought the radio was therapeutic; Nurse Wilma saw no reason to coddle the boys. *Don McNeill's Breakfast Club*, preachers and serials, the soaps Elwood's grandmother listened to. The problems of the white people in radio shows had been remote, belonging to another country. Now they were a ride home to Frenchtown.

Elwood hadn't heard *Amos 'n' Andy* in years. His grandmother turned off the radio when *Amos 'n' Andy* came on, with its carousel of malapropisms and demeaning misadventures. "White people like that stuff, but we don't have to listen to it." She was glad when she read in the *Defender* that it had been taken off the air. A station around Nickel broadcast old episodes, haunted transmissions. No one touched the dial when the old reruns came on and everyone laughed at Amos and Kingfish's antics, black boys and white boys alike. "Holy mackerel!"

One of the radio stations sometimes played the theme to *The Andy Griffith Show*, and Turner whistled in accompaniment.

"Aren't you worried they'll know you're faking it," Elwood said. "Whistling happy like that?"

"I ain't faking—that soap powder is awful," Turner said. "But it's me choosing, not anyone else."

That was a dumb way of looking at it, but Elwood didn't say anything. The theme music was stuck in his head now,

and Elwood would have hummed or whistled but he didn't want to look like a copycat. The song was a tiny, quiet piece of America carved out of the rest. No fire hoses, no need for the National Guard. It occurred to Elwood that he'd never seen a Negro in the small town of Mayberry, where the show took place.

A man on the radio announced that Sonny Liston was going to fight an up-and-comer named Cassius Clay. "Who's that?" Elwood said.

"Some nigger about to get knocked down," Turner said.

One afternoon Elwood was half dozing when the noise paralyzed him—the keys like a wind chime. Spencer was on the ward to see the doctor. Elwood waited for the sound of the leather strap scraping the ceiling before it came down . . . Then the superintendent was gone and the sound of the radio commanded the room again. He sweat through to his sheets.

"Do they do it like that to everybody?" Elwood asked Turner after lunch. Nurse Wilma had distributed ham sandwiches and watery grape juice, white kids first.

Out of the blue, but Turner knew what Elwood was referring to. He rolled over in the polio chair, lunch in his lap. "Not like what you got," he said. "Not that bad. I've never gone down. I got smacked across the face for smoking once."

"I have a lawyer," Elwood said. "He can do something."

"You already got off lucky," Turner said.

"How come?"

Turner finished his juice with a slurp. "Sometimes they take you to the White House and we never see your ass again."

It was quiet on the ward except for them and the buzz

saw next door, keening. Elwood didn't want to know but he asked anyway.

"Your family asks the school what happened and they say you ran away," Turner said. He made sure the white boys weren't looking. "Problem was, Elwood," he said, "you didn't know how it works. Take Corey and those two cats. You wanted to do some Lone Ranger shit—run up and save a nigger. But they punked him out a long time ago. See, those three do that all the time. Corey likes it. They play rough, then he takes them into the stall or whatever and gets on his knees. That's how they do."

"I saw his face, he was scared," Elwood said.

"You don't know what makes him tick," Turner said. "You don't know what makes anybody tick. I used to think out there is out there and then once you're in here, you're in here. That everybody in Nickel was different because of what being here does to you. Spencer and them, too—maybe out there in the free world, they're good people. Smiling. Nice to their kids." His mouth squinched up, like he was sucking on a rotten tooth. "But now that I been out and I been brought back, I know there's nothing in here that changes people. In here and out there are the same, but in here no one has to act fake anymore."

He was talking in circles, everything pointing back at itself. Elwood said, "It's against the law." State law, but also Elwood's. If everyone looked the other way, then everybody was in on it. If he looked the other way, he was as implicated as the rest. That's how he saw it, how he'd always seen things.

Turner didn't say anything.

"It's not how it's supposed to be," Elwood said.

"Don't nobody care about supposed-to. If you call out Black Mike and Lonnie, you calling out everyone who lets it happen, too. You ratting on everybody."

"That's what I'm telling you." Elwood told Turner about his grandmother and the lawyer, Mr. Andrews. They'd report Spencer and Earl and anybody else up to no good. His teacher Mr. Hill was an activist. He'd marched all over—he hadn't returned to Lincoln High School after the summer because he was back organizing. Elwood wrote him about his arrest but wasn't sure if he got the letter. Mr. Hill knew people who'd want to know about a place like Nickel, once they got ahold of him. "It's not like the old days," Elwood said. "We can stand up for ourselves."

"That shit barely works out there—what do you think it's going to do in here?"

"You say that because there's no one else out there sticking up for you."

"That's true," Turner said. "That doesn't mean I can't see how it works. Maybe I see things more clearly because of it." He made a face as the soap powder gave him a kick. "The key to in here is the same as surviving out there—you got to see how people act, and then you got to figure out how to get around them like an obstacle course. If you want to walk out of here."

"Graduate."

"Walk out of here," Turner corrected. "You think you can do that? Watch and think? Nobody else is going to get you out—just you."

Dr. Cooke gave Turner the boot the next morning with two aspirin and a repeat of his prescription that he not eat the food. It was only Elwood on the ward then. The curtain

that had been around the nameless boy was in the corner, folded flat into itself. The bed was empty. He'd disappeared sometime in the night without waking anyone.

Elwood intended to follow Turner's advice, and he meant it, but that was before he saw his legs. That defeated him for a spell.

He spent another five days in the hospital, then it was back with the other Nickel boys. School and work. He was one of them now in many ways, including his embrace of silence. When his grandmother came to visit, he couldn't tell her what he saw when Dr. Cooke removed the dressings and he walked the cold tile to the bathroom. Elwood got a look at himself then and knew that her heart wouldn't be able to take it, plus his shame in letting it happen. He was as far away from her as the others in her family who'd vanished and he was sitting right in front of her. On visiting day, he told her he was okay but sad, it was difficult but he was hanging in there, when all he wanted to say was, *Look at what they did to me, look at what they did to me.*