

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Elwood got out he returned to the yard crew. Jaimie the Mexican had been chucked to the white side again so another boy was in charge. More than once Elwood caught himself swinging the scythe with too much violence, like he was attacking the grass with a leather strap. He'd stop and tell his heart to slow down. Ten days later, Jaimie was back with the colored boys—Spencer rooted him out—but he didn't mind. "That's my life, ping-pong."

Elwood's schooling was not going to improve. He had to accept that. He touched Mr. Goodall's arm outside the schoolhouse; the teacher didn't recognize him. Goodall repeated his promise to find more challenging work, but Elwood was onto the teacher now and didn't ask again. One late-November afternoon they sent Elwood with a team to clean out the basement of the schoolhouse, and he found a set of Chipwick's British Classics underneath some boxes containing calendars for 1954. Trollope and Dickens and people with names like that. Elwood went through the books one by one during school hours while the boys around him stuttered and stumbled. He had intended to study British literature at the college. Now he had to teach himself. It would have to do.

Punishment for acting above your station was a central principle in Harriet's interpretation of the world. In the hospital, Elwood wondered if the viciousness of his beating owed something to his request for harder classes: *Get that uppity nigger*. Now he worked on a new theory: There was no higher system guiding Nickel's brutality, merely an indiscriminate spite, one that had nothing to do with people. A figment from tenth-grade science struck him: a Perpetual Misery Machine, one that operated by itself without human agency. Also, Archimedes, one of his first encyclopedia finds. Violence is the only lever big enough to move the world.

He canvassed but didn't get a clear picture of how to graduate early. Desmond, that scientist of demerit and credit, was no help. "You get merits for behavior every week if you do what you're supposed to do, right off the bat. But if your house father mixes you up with someone else, or he's out to get you—zip. For demerits, you never know." The demerit scale varied from dormitory to dormitory. Smoking, fighting, perpetuating a state of dishevelment—the penalty depended on where they'd sent you and the whims of the local housemen. Blaspheming cost a hundred demerits in Cleveland—Blakeley was the God-fearing sort—but only fifty in Roosevelt. Jacking off was a flat two hundred demerits in Lincoln, but if you were caught jacking someone else off, it was only a hundred.

"Only a hundred?"

"That's Lincoln for you," Desmond said, as if explaining a foreign land, jinns and ducats.

Blakeley liked his hooch, Elwood noticed. The man was half-mast until noon. Did that mean he couldn't rely on

the house father's accounts? Say he stayed out of trouble, Elwood asked, did everything right—how fast could he climb from the lowest level of Grub to the highest level of Ace? “If everything went perfect?”

“It’s too late for perfect if you already went down,” Desmond told him.

Problem was, even if you avoided trouble, trouble might reach out and snatch you anyway. Another student might sniff out a weakness and start something, one of the staff dislikes your smile and knocks it off your face. You might stumble into a bramble of bad luck of the sort that got you here in the first place. Elwood decided: By June he’d climb the merit ladder out of this pit, four months short of what that judge gave him. It was comforting—he was accustomed to measuring time according to the school calendar, so a June graduation made his Nickel term into a lost year. This time next fall, he’d be back at Lincoln High School for his senior year, and with Mr. Hill’s endorsement, enrolled at Melvin Griggs again. They spent his college money on the lawyer, but if Elwood worked extra next summer, he’d make it back.

He had a date, now he needed a course of action. He felt rotten those first days out of the hospital until he came up with a scheme that combined Turner’s advice with what he’d learned from his heroes in the movement. Watch and think and plan. Let the world be a mob—Elwood will walk through it. They might curse and spit and strike him, but he’d make it through to the other side. Bloodied and tired, but he’d make it through.

He waited, but no payback came from Lonnie and Black Mike. Except for an incident where Griff hip-checked

Elwood and sent him crashing down the stairs, they ignored him. Corey, the boy he’d stepped up to defend, winked at him once. Everyone had moved on to girding themselves for the next Nickel mishap, the one that was out of their hands.

One Wednesday after breakfast, Carter the houseman ordered Elwood over to the warehouse for a new detail. Turner was there, along with a young white man, a lanky sort with a beatnik slouch and a greasy spray of blond hair. Elwood had seen him around, smoking in the shade of various buildings. His name was Harper and according to staff records, he worked in Community Service. Harper looked Elwood over and said, “He’ll do.” The supervisor closed the big sliding door to the warehouse, bolted it, and they climbed into the front seat of a gray van. Unlike the other school vehicles, it didn’t have Nickel’s name painted on it.

Elwood sat in the middle. “Here we go,” Turner said. He rolled down the window. “Harper asked who I thought should replace Smitty, and I said, you. I told him you weren’t another one of these dummies they got around here.”

Smitty was an older boy from Roosevelt dormitory next door. He’d hit the highest rank of Ace and graduated the week prior, although Elwood thought *graduate* was a moronic word to use. The boy couldn’t read a lick, plain as day.

Harper said, “He said you can keep your mouth shut, which is a requirement.” With that, they were off the grounds.

Since the hospital, Elwood and Turner hung out most days, killed afternoons in the Cleveland rec room playing checkers and Ping-Pong with Desmond and some of the other even-tempered boys. Turner usually stumbled into

a room as if searching for something, then started bullshitting and forgot whatever errand had brought him there. He was better at chess than Elwood, told better jokes than Desmond, and unlike Jaimie, ran on a more consistent schedule. Elwood knew Turner was assigned to Community Service, but he got cagey when Elwood pressed further: "It's taking things and making sure they end up where they're supposed to end up in the end."

"What the f-f-fuck does that mean," Jaimie said. The boy was not a natural cusser, and his occasional stutter diminished the effect, but of the available vices at Nickel, he had adopted foul language as one of the tamer choices.

"It means Community Service," Elwood said.

The immediate meaning of Community Service was it allowed Elwood to pretend he'd never hitchhiked to college—for a few hours, he was out of Nickel. His first trip out in the free world since his arrival. Free world was prison slang, but it had migrated to the reformatory school because it made sense, transmitted through a boy who'd heard it from a hard-luck father or uncle, or from a staff member revealing how he really felt about his charges, despite the school vocabulary Nickel liked to use for itself.

The air was cool in Elwood's lungs, and everything outside the window dazzled, renewed. "This or this," his eye doctor asked at checkups, a choice between two lenses of different power. Elwood never ceased to marvel how you could walk around and get used to seeing only a fraction of the world. Not knowing you only saw a sliver of the real thing. *This or this?* Definitely *this*, all that the van tumbled past, the sudden majesty of everything, even the falling-down shotgun shacks and sad concrete-block houses, the junker cars half in the weeds in someone's yard. He saw a

rusty sign for Wild Cherry Hi-C and was more thirsty than he'd ever been in his life.

Harper noticed the shift in Elwood's posture. "He likes being out," the supervisor said, and he and Turner laughed. He turned on the radio. Elvis was singing. Harper slapped the steering wheel in time.

In temperament, Harper was an unlikely Nickel employee. "All right for a white man," in Turner's estimation. He practically grew up on the grounds, raised by his mother's sister, a secretary in the administration building. He spent untold afternoons on the grounds as a mascot to the white students and picked up odd work when he was old enough. Painted reindeer in the annual Christmas display ever since he could hold a brush. Now he was twenty years old and worked full-time. "My aunt says I'm a get-along type," he told the boys one shift while they idled outside the five-and-ten. "I suppose I am. I grew up around you boys, white and colored, and I know you're just like me, but you had some bad luck."

They made four stops around the town of Eleanor before the fire chief's house. First was JOHN DINER—a rusty outline attested to a fallen-off letter and an apostrophe. They parked down the alley and Elwood got a look at the van's cargo: cartons and crates of Nickel's kitchen stores. Cans of peas, industrial tins of peaches, applesauce, baked beans, gravy. A selection of this week's shipment from the state of Florida.

Harper lit a cigarette and put his ear to a transistor radio: game on today. Turner handed boxes of green beans and sacks of onions down to Elwood before they brought them into the back entrance of the restaurant kitchen.

"Don't forget the molasses," Harper said.

When they finished, the owner emerged—a porky red-neck whose apron was a palimpsest of dark stains—and clapped Harper on the back. He handed Harper an envelope and asked about his family.

“You know Aunt Lucille,” Harper said. “Supposed to stay off her feet and never stays put for anything.”

The next two stops were also restaurants—a barbecue stand and a meat-and-three joint over the county line—and then they unloaded a store of canned vegetables at the Top Shop Grocery. Harper folded each envelope of cash in half, snapped a rubber band around it, and tossed it into the glove compartment before the next destination.

Turner let the work speak for itself. Harper wanted to be certain about Elwood’s comfort with his new detail. “You don’t look surprised,” the young white man said.

“It has to end up somewhere,” Elwood responded.

“How things are done. Spencer tells me where to go, and he kicks it up to Director Hardee.” Harper fiddled the dial after more rock and roll: Elvis popped up again. He was everywhere. “It used to be worse in the old days,” Harper said, “from what my aunt says. But the state cracked down and now we lay off the south-campus stuff.” Meaning, they only sold the black students’ supplies. “We had this good old boy who used to run Nickel, Roberts, who would’ve sold the air you breathe if he could’ve. Now that was a crook!”

“Beats cleaning the toilets,” Turner said. “Beats cutting grass, if you ask me.”

It was nice to be out, and Elwood said so. In the coming months, Elwood saw all of Eleanor, Florida, as their three-man crew made the rounds. He got to know the back of the short Main Street, as Harper parked by the service

entrances. Sometimes they unloaded notebooks and pencils, sometimes medicine and bandages, but mostly it was food. Thanksgiving turkeys and Christmas hams disappeared into the hands of fry cooks, and the assistant principal of the elementary school opened a box of erasers and counted them one by one. Elwood wondered why the boys had no toothpaste—now he knew. They parked behind the five-and-ten, Fisher’s Drugs, and phoned ahead to the local doctor, who slithered up to the driver’s window with a furtive air. Once in a while they stopped at a green three-story house on a dead-end street and Harper got paid by a well-groomed city-council type in a sweater vest. Harper didn’t know the guy’s story, he said, but the man had good manners, crisp bills, and liked to talk Florida teams.

This or this? Every time he left school property, the new lens popped into place, and all it permitted him to see.

The first day, when the back of the van was empty, Elwood assumed they’d return to Nickel, but they headed to a clean, quiet street that reminded him of the nicer parts of Tallahassee, the white part. They pulled up at a big white house that floated on a sea of undulating green. An American flag sighed on a pole attached to the roof. They got out, and another look in the recesses of the van revealed a canvas tarp that hid painting supplies.

“Mrs. Davis,” Harper said, bowing his head.

A white lady with a beehive hairdo waved from the front porch. “This is so exciting,” she said.

Elwood didn’t make eye contact as she led them around the back of the yard, where a gray, tired-looking gazebo perched at the edge of the oak trees.

“That it?” Harper asked.

"My grandfather built it forty years ago," Mrs. Davis said. "Conrad proposed to me right there." She wore a yellow dress with a houndstooth pattern and dark sunglasses like Jackie Kennedy. She spotted a thin green bug on her shoulder, flicked it off, and smiled.

A new paint job was in order. Mrs. Davis gave Harper a broom, Harper gave Elwood the broom, and Elwood swept the decking while Turner got the paint from the van.

"You boys are so nice to help us out here," Mrs. Davis told them before she returned to the house.

"I'll be back around three," Harper said. Then he was gone, too.

Turner explained that Harper had a girlfriend on Maple. Her man worked at one of the factories and kept long hours.

"We're going to paint?" Elwood said.

"Yeah, man."

"He's leaving us here?"

"Yeah, man. Mr. Davis is the fire chief. He has us out here a lot, doing little stuff. Smitty and I did all the rooms on the top floor." He pointed to the dormer windows as if it were possible for Elwood to appraise his handiwork. "All those guys on the school board, they have us do chores. Sometimes it's some bullshit, but I'll take being out here over any job back at school."

As did Elwood. It was a humid November afternoon and he savored the free-world sounds of bugs and birds. Their mating calls and warnings were soon accompanied by Turner's whistling—Chuck Berry, if Elwood was not mistaken. The brand of paint was Dixie, the color Dixie White.

The last time Elwood had done any painting, he'd given Mrs. Lamont's outhouse a new coat, a chore for which his

grandmother had loaned him out for ten cents. Turner laughed and told Elwood how in the olden days, the school sent teams of boys into Eleanor all the time to do work for the big shots. According to Harper, sometimes it was favors, like this paint job, but a lot of time it was for real money, which schools kept for their "upkeep," same as the money from the crops, and the printing jobs, and the bricks. Further back, it was more gruesome. "When you graduated, you didn't go back to your family, you had parole where they basically sold your monkey ass to people in town. Work like a slave, live in their basement or whatever. Beat you, kick you, feed you shit."

"Shit food, like we get now?"

"Hell, no. Way worse." You had to work off your debt, he said. Then they let you go.

"Debt from what?"

That stumped him. "I never thought about it that way." He stayed Elwood's arm. "You don't want to go too fast," he said. "This can be a three-day job, we play it right. Mrs. Davis brings out lemonade."

When two glasses of lemonade appeared on a bronze tray, it was excellent.

They finished the railings and lattice of the walls. Elwood shook a new can of Dixie White, pried it open, and stirred. He'd told Turner how he got pinched and sent to Nickel—"Man, that's a raw deal"—but Turner never talked about his old life. This was his second term at the school after being out almost a year. Maybe asking about how he got snatched back was a way in. The Nickel undertow sucked up everything, and his friend's past might get pulled into the story.

Turner sat down at Elwood's question. "You know what a pinsetter is?"

"In a bowling alley," Elwood said.

"I was working as a pinsetter in a bowling alley down in Tampa, the Holiday. Most places, they got the machine that does it, but Mr. Garfield was hanging in there. He liked to see his pin boys crouch at the end of the lane like we were sprinters. Or dogs about to go out hunting. It wasn't a bad job. Picking up the pins after each throw and setting them up for the next frame. Mr. Garfield was a friend of the Everetts, where I was living. The state paid the Everetts money to take in kids. Some money, not a lot. There were always a lot of us strays around, coming and going.

"Like I said, it was a good job. Thursday was colored night, and everybody came from all around, the different colored bowling leagues, and that was a good time, but mostly it was these stupid rednecks from Tampa. Some bad, some less bad—white people. I was pretty fast and I find it easy to smile when I'm working, being somewhere else in my thoughts while I'm doing whatever, and the customers liked me, they gave me tips. I got to know some of the regulars. Not like know them, but we saw each other every week. Like that. I started goofing off with them—if it was a guy I knew, I might make a joke when they fouled, or make some clown face like this when they threw a gutter or had some funny-looking split. That became my routine, joking around with the regulars, and I liked the tips.

"There was this old head who worked in the kitchen, his name was Lou. One of those dudes you know have seen some shit. He didn't talk much to us pin boys, he flipped burgers. Because he wasn't too friendly, we didn't conversate much.

This one night I was on my break and I go out for a cigarette behind the grill. And he's there. In this apron, covered with grease. It was a hot night. And he looks me up and down. He says to me, 'I see you out there, nigger, putting on a show. Why you always shucking and jiving for these white people? Ain't nobody ever teach you self-respect?'

"Two other setters are out there and they hear this, they're like, *damn*. My face got all hot, I was ready to punch this old fool—he doesn't know me. Don't know shit about me. I look at him, and he ain't moving, standing there smoking this cigarette he rolled, and he knows I'm not going to do anything. Because he's right in what he said.

"Next time I was on a shift, I don't know, I started doing it differently. Instead of joking with them, I was mean. When they hit the gutter or stepped over the line, there was nothing friendly in my face. I saw in their eyes when they realized the game had changed. Maybe we'd pretended to be on the same side before and it was all equal, but now it wasn't.

"End of the night, I'd been taunting this fucking peckerwood the whole game. This big heehaw meathead. It's his turn and he has to pick up a 4-6 split. I said, 'Ain't that a stinker,' like Bugs Bunny, and that's it for him—he comes charging up the lane. He's chasing me around the place, I'm jumping from lane to lane, up in everybody's business, dodging balls, and then finally his friends hold him back. They come there all the time, they're not trying to make things hard for Mr. Garfield. They know me, or thought they knew me until I started not acting right, and they get their friend and cool him out and leave."

Turner grinned as he acted out the story. Until the last

part. He squinted at the floor of the gazebo as if trying to make out something tiny. "That was the end of it, really," he said, scratching the nick in his ear. "Next week I saw that guy's car in the parking lot and I threw a cinder block through the window and the cops picked me up."

Harper was an hour late. They weren't going to complain. Free time at Nickel on one side, work time in the free world on the other—it was an easy calculation. "Going to need a ladder," Elwood told Harper when he showed up.

"Sure," Harper said.

Mrs. Davis waved from the porch as they pulled away.

"How's your lady, Harper?" Turner asked.

Harper tucked in his shirttail. "Just when you ease into a good time, they bring up some whole other thing they been thinking about since the last time you saw them."

"Sure, I know," Turner said. He reached for Harper's cigarettes and lit one.

Elwood grabbed everything he saw in the free world to reassemble it in his mind later. What things looked like and what things smelled like and other things as well. Two days later Harper told him he was on Community Service permanently. But then, white men had always noticed his industrious nature. The news brightened his mood. Each time they returned to Nickel, he wrote down the particulars in a composition book. The date. The name of the individual and the establishment. Some names took a while to fill in, but Elwood had always been the patient type, and thorough.

CHAPTER NINE

The boys rooted for Griff even though he was a miserable bully who jimmied and pried at their weaknesses and made up weaknesses if he couldn't find any, such as calling you a "knock-kneed piece of shit" even if your knees had never knocked your whole life. He tripped them and laughed at the ensuing pratfalls and slapped them around when he could get away with it. He punked them out, dragging them into dark rooms. He smelled like a horse and made fun of their mothers, which was pretty low given the general motherlessness of the student population. He stole their desserts on multiple occasions—swiped from trays with a grin—and even if the desserts in question were no great shakes, it was the principle. The boys rooted for Griff because he was going to represent the colored half of Nickel at the annual boxing match, and no matter what he did the rest of the year, the day of the fight he was all of them in one black body and he was going to knock that white boy out.

If Griff spat teeth before that happened, swell.

The colored boys had held the Nickel title for fifteen years. Old hands on staff remembered the last white champion and still talked him up; other things from the old days they discussed less often. Terry "Doc" Burns was an anvil-