

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-

handed good old boy from a musty corner of Suwannee County who'd been sent to Nickel for strangling a neighbor's chickens. Twenty-one chickens, to be exact, because "they were out to get him." Pain rolled off him like rain from a slate roof. After Doc Burns returned to the free world, the white boys who advanced to the final fight were pikers, so wobbly that over the years tall tales about the former champion grew more extravagant: Nature had gifted Doc Burns with an unnaturally long reach; he did not tire; his legendary combo swatted down every comer and rattled windows. In fact, Doc Burns had been beaten and ill-treated by so many in his life—family and stranger alike—that by the time he arrived at Nickel all punishments were gentle breezes.

This was Griff's first term on the boxing team. He arrived at Nickel in February, right after the graduation of the previous champ, Axel Parks. Axel should have graduated before fighting season, but Roosevelt's housemen made sure he was around to defend his title. An accusation of stealing apples from the dining hall knocked him down to Grub and guaranteed his availability. Griff's emergence as the baddest brother on campus made him Axel's natural successor. Outside the ring Griff made a hobby of terrorizing the weaker boys, the boys without friends, the weepy ones. Inside the ring his prey stepped right up so he didn't waste time hunting. Like an electric toaster or an automated washing machine, boxing was a modern convenience that made life easier.

The coach for the colored team was a Mississippian named Max David who worked in the school garage. He got an envelope at the end of the year for imparting what he'd

learned during his welterweight stint. Max David made his pitch to Griff early in the summer. "My first fight made me cockeyed," he said, "and my farewell fight set my eyes right again, so trust me when I say this sport will break you down to make you better, and that's a fact." Griff smiled. The giant pulverized and unmanned his opponents with cruel inevitability through autumn. He was not graceful, he was not a scientist. He was a powerful instrument of violence, and that sufficed.

Given the typical length of enrollment at Nickel—sabotage by staff aside—most students were only around for one or two fighting seasons. As the championship approached, the Grubs had to be schooled in the importance of those December matches—the prelims inside your dorm, the match between your dorm's guy and the best sluggers from the other two dorms, and then the bout between the best black fighter and whatever chump the white guys put up. The championship would be their sole acquaintance with justice at Nickel.

The combat served as a kind of mollifying spell, to tide them through the daily humiliations. Trevor Nickel instituted the championship matches in 1946, soon after he came on as the director of the Florida Industrial School for Boys with a mandate for reform. Nickel had never run a school before; his background was in agriculture. He made an impression at Klan meetings, however, with his impromptu speeches on moral improvement and the value of work, the disposition of young souls in need of care. The right people remembered his passion when an opening came up. His first Christmas at the school gave the county the chance to witness his improvements. Everything that needed a new

coat of paint got a new coat of paint, the dark cells were briefly converted to more innocent use, and the beatings relocated to the small white utility building. Had the good people of Eleanor seen the industrial fan, they might have had a question or two, but the shed was not part of the tour.

Nickel was a longtime boxing evangelist, had steered a lobbying group for its expansion in the Olympics. Boxing had always been popular at the school, as most of the boys had seen their share of scrapes, but the new director took the sport's elevation as his remit. The athletics budget, long an easy target for directors on the skim, was rejiggered to pay for regulation equipment and to bolster the coaching staff. Nickel maintained a general interest in fitness overall. He possessed a fervent belief in the miracle of a human specimen in top shape and often watched the boys shower to monitor the progress of their physical education.

"The director?" Elwood asked when Turner told him that last part.

"Where do you think Dr. Campbell got that trick from?" Turner said. Nickel was gone, but Dr. Campbell, the school psychologist, was known to loiter at the white boys' showers to pick his dates. "All these dirty old men got a club together."

Elwood and Turner were hanging out on the gymnasium bleachers this afternoon. Griff sparred with Cherry, a mulatto who took up boxing as a matter of pedagogy, to teach others how not to speak about his white mother. He was quick and lithe and Griff clobbered him.

Catching Griff at his regimen was Cleveland's favorite occupation those early days in December. Boys from the colored dormitories made the rounds, as well as white scouts

from down the hill who wanted the skinny. Griff had been excused from his kitchen shift since Labor Day to train. It was a spectacle. Max kept him on an obscure diet of raw eggs and oats, and stored a jug of what he claimed was goat blood in the icebox. When the coach administered the doses, Griff swallowed the stuff with a lot of theater and mortified the heavy bag in revenge.

Turner had seen Axel fight during his first term at Nickel, two years prior. Axel was slow on his feet but as solid and abiding as an old stone bridge; he weathered what the skies decreed. Contrary to Griff's mealy disposition, he was kind and protective of the smaller kids. "I wonder where he is now," Turner said. "That nigger doesn't have a lick of sense. Making things worse for himself, probably, wherever he is." A Nickel tradition.

Cherry wavered and sank on his ass. Griff spat out his mouthpiece and bellowed. Black Mike stepped into the sparring ring and held Griff's hand up like Lady Liberty's torch.

"Do you think he'll knock him down?" Elwood asked. The likely white contender was a boy named Big Chet, who came from a clan of swamp people and was a bit of a creature.

"Look at those arms, man," Turner said. "Those things are pistons. Or smoked hams."

To see Griff quiver with unspent energy after a match, two chucks unlacing his gloves like retainers, it was hard to imagine how the giant could lose. Which is why, two days later, Turner sat up in surprise when he heard Spencer tell Griff to take a dive.

Turner was napping in the warehouse loft, where he'd

made a nest among crates of industrial scrubbing powder. None of the staff bugged him when he went alone into the big storage room on account of his work with Harper, which meant Turner had a getaway place. No supervisors, no students—just him, a pillow, an army blanket, and Harper's transistor radio. He spent a couple of hours a week up there. It was like when he was tramping and didn't care to know anybody and no one cared to know him. He'd had a few periods like that, when he was rootless and tumbled down the street like an old newspaper. The loft took him back.

The closing of the warehouse door woke him. Then came Griff's dumb donkey voice: "What is it, Mr. Spencer, sir?"

"How's that training coming along, Griff? Good old Max says you're a natural."

Turner frowned. Any time a white man asked you about yourself, they were about to fuck you over. Griff was so stupid he didn't know what was happening. In class, the boy struggled over two plus three, like he didn't know how many damned fingers he had on his hand. Some foolhardies in the schoolhouse laughed at him then and Griff stuck their heads into toilets, one by one over the next week.

Turner's assessment was correct: Griff refused to grasp the reason for the secret meeting. Spencer expounded about the importance of the fight, the tradition of the December match. Then he hinted: Good sportsmanship means letting the other team win sometimes. He tried euphemism: It's like when a tree branch has to bend so it doesn't break. He appealed to fatalism: Sometimes it don't work out, no matter how much you try. But Griff was too thick. *Yes, sir . . . I suppose that's right, Mr. Spencer . . . I believe that is the case,*

sir. Finally the superintendent told Griff that his black ass had to take a dive in the third round or else they'd take him out back.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Spencer," Griff said. Up in the loft Turner couldn't see Griff's face, so he didn't know if he understood. The boy had stones in his fists and rocks in his head.

Spencer ended with, "You know you can beat him. That'll have to be enough." He cleared his throat and said, "You come along, now," as if herding a lamb who'd wandered. Turner was alone again.

"Ain't that some shit?" he said. He and Elwood were lounging on Cleveland's front steps after a run to Eleanor. The daylight was thin, winter coming down like the lid on an old pot. Elwood was the only person Turner could tell. The rest of these mutts would blab and then there'd be a lot of busted heads.

Turner had never met a kid like Elwood before. *Sturdy* was the word he returned to, even though the Tallahassee boy looked soft, conducted himself like a goody-goody, and had an irritating tendency to preach. Wore eyeglasses you wanted to grind underfoot like a butterfly. He talked like a white college boy, read books when he didn't have to, and mined them for uranium to power his own personal A-bomb. Still—sturdy.

Elwood wasn't surprised at Turner's news. "Organized boxing is corrupt on every level," he said with authority. "There's been a lot in the newspapers about it." He described what he'd read back at Marconi's, perched on his stool during the dead hours. "Only reason to fix a fight is because you're betting on it."

"I'd bet on it, if I had any money," Turner said. "Some-

times at the Holiday, we put money on the playoffs. I got paid."

"People are going to be upset," Elwood said. Griff's victory was sure to be a feast, but almost as delicious were the morsels the boys traded in anticipation, the scenarios in which the white contender lost control of his bowels or threw up a geyser of blood in Director Hardee's face or white teeth flew from his mouth "like they were chipped out with an ice pick." Fantasies hearty and fortifying.

"Sure," Turner said. "But Spencer says he's going to take you out back, you listen."

"Take him to the White House?"

"I'll show you," Turner said. They had some time before supper.

They walked ten minutes to the laundry, which was shut at this time of day. Turner asked Elwood about the book under his arm and Elwood said a British family was trying to marry off their oldest daughter to keep their estate and title. The story had complicated turns.

"No one wants to marry her? She ugly?"

"She's described as having a handsome face."

"Damn."

Past the laundry were the dilapidated horse stables. The ceiling had given way long ago and nature had crept inside, with skeletal bushes and limp grasses rising in the stalls. You could get up to some wickedness in there if you didn't believe in ghosts, but none of the students had arrived at a definite opinion on the matter so everyone stayed away to be safe. There were two oaks on one side of the stables, with iron rings stabbed into the bark.

"This is *out back*," Turner said. "They say once in a

while they take a black boy here and shackle him up to those. Arms spread out. Then they get a horse whip and tear him up."

Elwood made two fists, then caught himself. "No white boys?"

"The White House, they got that integrated. This place is separate. They take you out back, they don't bring you to the hospital. They put you down as escaped and that's that, boy."

"What about their family?"

"How many boys you know here got family? Or got family that cares about them? Not everyone is you, Elwood." Turner got jealous when Elwood's grandmother visited and brought him snacks, and it slipped out from time to time. Like now. The blinders Elwood wore, walking around. The law was one thing—you can march and wave signs around and change a law if you convinced enough white people. In Tampa, Turner saw the college kids with their nice shirts and ties sit in at the Woolworths. He had to work, but they were out protesting. And it happened—they opened the counter. Turner didn't have the money to eat there either way. You can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other. Nickel was racist as hell—half the people who worked here probably dressed up like the Klan on weekends—but the way Turner saw it, wickedness went deeper than skin color. It was Spencer. It was Spencer and it was Griff and it was all the parents who let their children wind up here. It was people.

Which is why Turner brought Elwood out to the two trees. To show him something that wasn't in books.

Elwood grabbed one of the rings and tugged. It was solid,

part of the trunk now. Human bones would break before it came loose.

Harper confirmed the gambling two days later. They'd unloaded a few hogs at Terry's BBQ. "Delivered unto them," Turner said when Harper closed the van door. Their hands reeked of slaughter smell and he asked about the fight.

"I'll put down some money when I see who shakes out for the big one," Harper said. Betting was small-time when Director Nickel ran things—purity of the sport, etc. Nowadays the fat cats turned out, anyone in three counties with a taste for wagering. Well, not anyone, someone on staff had to vouch for you. "You always bet on the colored boy anyway, though. Be foolish not to."

"All boxing is fixed," Elwood said.

"Crooked as a country preacher," Turner added.

"They wouldn't do that," Harper said. This was his childhood he was talking about. He grew up on those matches, chomping popped corn in the VIP section. "It's a beautiful thing."

Turner snorted and started whistling.

The big match was split up over two nights. On the first, the white campus and black campus settled who to send to the main event. For the last two months, three boxing rings had been set up in the gymnasium for training; now only one remained in the center of the big room. It was chilly outside and the spectators stepped into the humid cavern. White men from town claimed the folding chairs closest to the ring, then came staff, and beyond that the student body crammed into the bleachers, squatted on the floors, ashy elbow to ashy elbow. The racial division of the school recreated itself in the gym, with white boys taking the south

half and black boys claiming the north. They jostled at the borders.

Director Hardee acted as master of ceremonies. He rarely left his office in the administration building. Turner hadn't seen him since Halloween, when he dressed in a Dracula outfit and distributed sweaty handfuls of candy corn to the younger students. He was a short man, fastened into his suits, with a bald pate that floated in a cloud bank of white hair. Hardee had brought his wife, a robust beauty whose every visit was thoroughly annotated by the students, if furtively—reckless eyeballing called for mandatory beatings. She'd been Miss South Louisiana, or so the story went. She cooled her neck with a paper fan.

The Hardees enjoyed a prime spot in front with the board members. Turner recognized most of them from raking their yards or delivering a ham. Where their pink necks emerged from the linen, that's where you strike, the vulnerable inch.

Harper sat behind the VIP row with the rest of the staff. He carried himself differently in the company of his fellow supervisors, dropping his shirker's affect. Many an afternoon, Turner had seen the man's face and posture click into its proper place when a houseman or supervisor showed up. A snap-to, dropping a disguise or taking one up.

Hardee made a few remarks. The chairman of the board, Mr. Charles Grayson—the manager of the bank and a long-time Nickel supporter—was turning sixty on Friday. Hardee made the students sing "Happy Birthday." Mr. Grayson stood and nodded, hands behind his back like a dictator.

The white dormitories were up first. Big Chet squeezed between the ropes and bounded into the center of the ring.

His cheerleaders expressed themselves with gusto; he commanded a legion. The white boys didn't get it as bad as the black boys, but they were not in Nickel because the world cared overmuch. Big Chet was their Great White Hope. Gossip nailed him for a sleepwalker, punching holes in the bathroom walls without waking. Morning found him sucking on his bloody knuckles. "Nigger looks like Frankenstein," Turner said. Square head, long arms, loping.

The opening fight went three unremarkable rounds. The ref, who managed the floor of the printing plant in the daytime, gave the decision to Big Chet and no one argued otherwise. He was regarded as an even personality, the ref, ever since he slapped a kid and his fraternity ring left the kid half blind. After that he bent a knee to Our Savior and never again raised a hand in anger except at his wife. The white boys' second match opened with a pop—a pneumatic uppercut that whisked Big Chet's opponent into a childhood fear. He spent the remainder of the round and the next two skittering like a rabbit. At the ref's decision, Big Chet rummaged in his mouth and spat out his mouthpiece in two pieces. He raised his big ole arms to the sky.

"I think he could take Griff," Elwood said.

"Maybe he can, but they have to make sure." If you had the power to make people do what you wanted and never exercised it, what was the point of having it?

Griff's bouts with the champs of Roosevelt and Lincoln were brief affairs. Pettibone stood a foot shorter than Griff, an obvious mismatch when you saw them toe to toe, but he'd climbed the Roosevelt heap and that was that. At the bell, Griff barreled out and humiliated his quarry with a battery of *zip-zip-zip* body blows. The crowd winced. "He's having

ribs for dinner!" a boy behind Turner shouted. Mrs. Hardee shrieked when Pettibone floated up dreamily on his tippy-toes and then toppled to kiss the dirty mat.

The second match was less lopsided. Griff tenderized the Lincoln boy like a cheap cut of meat for three rounds, but Wilson stayed on his feet to prove his worth to his father. Wilson had two bouts going, the one everybody could see and the one only he could. His father had been dead for years and was thus unable to revise his assessment of his firstborn son's character, but that night Wilson slept without nightmares for the first time in years. The ref gave the fight to Griff with a concerned smile.

Turner surveyed the room and took in the assembled marks, the boys and the bettors. You run a rigged game, you got to give the suckers a taste. Back in Tampa, a few blocks down from the Everetts' house, a street hustler conducted rounds of Find the Lady outside a cigar store. Taking suckers' money all day, weaving those cards around on a cardboard box. The rings on his fingers sparkled and shouted in the sun. Turner liked to hover and take in the show. Track the hustler's eyes, track the mark's eyes as he tried to follow the queen of hearts. Then they turned over their card: How their faces collapsed when they saw they weren't as smart as they thought. The hustler told Turner to beat it, but as the weeks went on he got bored and let the boy hang around. "You got to let them think they know what's going on," he told Turner one day. "They see it with their own eyes, distract themselves with that, so they can't see the bigger game." When the cops hauled him to jail, his cardboard box lay in the alley around the corner for weeks.

With tomorrow's fight set, Turner was transported back

to that street corner. Watching a game of Find the Lady, neither hustler nor mark, outside the game but knowing all its rules. The next evening the white men will put up their money and the black boys will put up their hopes, and then the confidence man turns over the ace of spades and rakes it all in. Turner remembered the excitement of Axel's fight two years ago, the deranged joy in the realization that they were allowed to have something for a change. They were happy for a few hours, spending time in the free world, then it was back to Nickel.

Suckers, all of them.

The morning of Griff's big match, the black students woke up wrung out from sleeplessness and the dining hall bubbled with chatter over the dimension and magnitude of Griff's looming triumph. *That white boy's gonna be toothless as my old granny. The witch doctor can give him the whole bucket of aspirin and he'll still have a headache. The Ku Klux Klan's gonna be crying under their hoods all week.* The colored boys frothed and speculated and stared off in class, slacked off in the sweet potato fields. Mulling the prospect of a black champion: One of them victorious for a change, and those who kept you down whittled to dust, seeing stars.

Griff strutted like a black duke, a gang of chucks in his wake. The younger kids threw punches at their private, invisible adversaries and made up a song about their new hero's prowess. Griff hadn't bloodied or mistreated anyone outside of the ring in a week, as if he'd sworn on a Bible, and Black Mike and Lonnie curbed themselves in solidarity. By all accounts, Griff was unbothered by Spencer's order, or so it seemed to Elwood. "It's like he forgot," he whispered to Turner as they walked to the warehouse after breakfast.

"If I got all this respect, I'd enjoy it, too," Turner said. The next day it would be as if it never happened. He remembered Axel the afternoon after his big fight, stirring a wheelbarrow of cement, gloomy and diminished once more. "When's the next time fools who hate and fear you are going to treat you like Harry Belafonte?"

"Or he forgot," Elwood said.

That evening they filed into the gymnasium. Some of the kitchen boys operated a big kettle, cranking out popcorn and scooping it into paper cones. The chucks chomped it down and raced to the back of the line for seconds. Turner, Elwood, and Jaimie squeezed together in the middle of the bleachers. It was a good spot. "Hey Jaimie, aren't you supposed to be sitting over there?" Turner asked.

Jaimie grinned. "Way I see it, I win either way."

Turner crossed his arms and scanned the faces on the floor. There was Spencer. He shook hands with the fat cats in the front row, the director and his wife, and then sat with the staff, smug and sure. He withdrew a silver flask from his windbreaker and took a pull. The bank manager handed out cigars. Mrs. Hardee took one and everyone watched her blow smoke. Wispy gray figures twirled in the overhead light, living ghosts.

On the other side of the room, the white boys stomped their feet on the wood and the thunder bounced off the walls. The black boys picked it up and the stomping rolled around the room in a staggered stampede. It traveled a full circuit before the boys stopped and cheered at their racket.

"Send him to the undertaker!"

The ref rang the bell. The two fighters were the same height and build, hacked from the same quarry. An even

match, the track record of colored champions notwithstanding. Those opening rounds, there was no dancing or ducking. The boys bit into each other again and again, trading attacks, bucking the pain. The crowd bellowed and jeered at every advance and reversal. Black Mike and Lonnie hung on the ropes, hooting scatological invective at Big Chet, until the ref kicked their hands away. If Griff feared knocking out Big Chet by accident, he gave no sign. The black giant battered the white boy without mercy, absorbed his opponent's counterassault, jabbed at the kid's face as if punching his way through the wall of a prison cell. When blood and sweat blinded him, he maintained an eerie sense of Big Chet's position and fended the boy off.

At the end of the second round, you had to call the fight for Griff, despite Big Chet's admirable offensives.

"Making it look good," Turner said.

Elwood frowned in disdain at the whole performance, which made Turner smile. The fight was as rigged and rotten as the dishwashing races he'd told Turner about, another gear in the machine that kept black folks down. Turner enjoyed his friend's new bend toward cynicism, even as he found himself swayed by the magic of the big fight. Seeing Griff, their enemy and champion, put a hurting on that white boy made a fellow feel all right. In spite of himself. Now that the third and final round was upon them, he wanted to hold on to that feeling. It was real—in their blood and minds—even if it was a lie. Turner was certain Griff was going to win even though he knew he wasn't. Turner was a mark after all, another sucker, but he didn't care.

Big Chet advanced on Griff and unfurled a series of quick jabs that drove him into his corner. Griff was trapped

and Turner thought, *Now*. But the black boy gathered his opponent in a clinch and remained on his feet. Body blows sent the white boy reeling. The round dwindled into seconds and Griff did not relent. Big Chet squashed his nose with a thunk and Griff shook it off. Each time Turner saw the perfect moment to take a dive—Big Chet's rigorous assault would cover even the worst acting—Griff refused the opening.

Turner nudged Elwood, who had a look of horror on his face. They saw it: Griff wasn't going down. He was going to go for it.

No matter what happened after.

When the bell sounded for the last time, the two Nickel boys in the ring were entwined, bloody and slick, propping each other up like a human tepee. The ref split them and they stumbled crazily to their corners, spent.

Turner said, "Damn."

"Maybe they called it off," Elwood said.

Sure, it was possible the ref was in on it and they'd decided to fix it that way instead. Spencer's reaction dispelled that theory. The superintendent was the only person in the second row still sitting, a malignant scowl screwed into his face. One of the fat cats turned around, red-faced, and grabbed his arm.

Griff jerked to his feet, lumbered to the center of the ring, and shouted. The noise of the crowd smothered his words. Black Mike and Lonnie held back their friend, who appeared to have lost his wits. He struggled to cross the ring.

The ref called for everyone to settle down and delivered his decision: The first two rounds went to Griff, the last to Big Chet. The black boys had prevailed.

Instead of cavorting around the canvas in triumph, Griff

squirmed free and traversed the ring to where Spencer sat. Now Turner heard his words: "I thought it was the second! I thought it was the second!" He was still screaming as the black boys led him back to Roosevelt, cheering and whooping for their champion. They had never seen Griff cry before and took his tears for those of triumph.

Getting hit in the head can rattle your brains. Getting hit in the head like that can make you addle-minded and confused. Turner never thought it'd make you forget two plus one. But Griff had never been good at arithmetic, he supposed.

He was all of them in one black body that night in the ring, and all of them when the white men took him out back to those two iron rings. They came for Griff that night and he never returned. The story spread that he was too proud to take a dive. That he refused to kneel. And if it made the boys feel better to believe that Griff escaped, broke away and ran off into the free world, no one told them otherwise, although some noted that it was odd the school never sounded the alarm or sent out the dogs. When the state of Florida dug him up fifty years later, the forensic examiner noted the fractures in the wrists and speculated that he'd been restrained before he died, in addition to the other violence attested by the broken bones.

Most of those who know the story of the rings in the trees are dead by now. The iron is still there. Rusty. Deep in the heartwood. Testifying to anyone who cares to listen.

CHAPTER TEN

Miscreants had bashed in the reindeers' heads. They expected a certain amount of wear and tear after the holiday, when the boys gathered to pack the delicate Christmas displays. Bent antlers, a leg twisting from shreds at the joint. What lay before them was malicious vandalism.

"Look at this," Miss Baker said. She sucked her teeth. Miss Baker was on the young side for a Nickel teacher, with a predilection for simmering outrage. At Nickel, her dependable ire stemmed from the regrettable condition of the colored art room, the haphazard supplies, and what could only be interpreted as institutional resistance to her various improvements. The young teachers never lasted long before they moved on. "All this hard work."

Turner pulled out the balled-up newspaper from the reindeer skull and unwrinkled it. The headline rendered a verdict on the first Nixon and Kennedy debate: ROUT. "This one's a goner," he said.

Elwood raised his hand. "Do you want us to make all new ones or just new heads, Miss Baker?"

"I think the bodies we can salvage," she said. She grimaced and twisted her curly red hair into a bun. "Just do the heads. Touch up the fur on the bodies and next year we'll start from scratch."