

'I was on my way home.'

He turned to the other cop. 'Let him go?' he asked.

The other cop shrugged.

The first cop flashed the light into the car, looked about the seats, pulled open the glove compartment, and brought out the pistol.

'Aha!' he said.

The other cop took me by the arm while the one with the flashlight locked the car ignition, rolled up the windows, and locked the doors. Then they got on each side of me, walked me back to the cruiser. One sat in the back with me; the other one drove.

They held me at the desk. Finally a lieutenant came out and looked at me. 'Aren't you the boy they want in Pedro for that rape at Atlas?' he asked.

I didn't reply. He slapped me.

'Answer when I speak to you,' he said.

I still didn't answer. He looked as if he was trying to decide whether to get rough with me or not, then turned impatiently to the cops who picked me up. 'What we got on him here?' he asked.

'Gun in his car,' the copper said.

The lieutenant turned to the desk sergeant, 'Lock him up and call Pedro. We'll let them have him first.' Then he stood there, looking important for a moment, and went out through a door.

The desk sergeant motioned the jailer to take me away. He took me back and locked me in a cell with a guy with a cut head. He lay on his bunk, moaning slightly. I imagined he was more scared than hurt. I stood there, leaning against the bars, not thinking about anything at all. Some time later, I don't know how long, the jailer came and took me out again, and two other policemen took me out past the sergeant's desk again and put me in a car and drove me down to San Pedro.

They put me in a cell by myself this time. It was a dirty grimy cell, stinking of urine, sweat, and filth. The cotton mattress was bare, stained in several spots, looked as though it might be crawling with lice. I didn't give a goddamn; I stretched out on it. I didn't think I'd ever sleep again.

## CHAPTER XXII

I DREAMED that when I came to Johnny Stoddart's house it was dark and I walked up to the door and pushed the bell then I rapped on the door panel and shouted, 'Western Union,' and a light came on inside and the door was unlocked and I put my left hand on the knob, pulled my gun with my right, and rode it in.

Johnny Stoddart's eyes popped and his face drained colour and he stood in rigid amazement all dressed up to go to work and over his shoulder I saw his wife coming from the lighted kitchen to see what it was all about. I put the gun to his heart and pulled the trigger three times, the sounds exploding in the house and echoing in the street, and the slugs knocking him back a little. He kept clinging to the knob of the door as he started going down, crumbling slowly to the floor as if he was squatting down and it was painful and finally his hand let loose the door-knob and his chest hit his knees and he pitched doubled-up at my feet.

I looked down at him and knew he was dead and felt a crazy exultation, as if I had conquered the world and gotten past, gotten through, wrapped up in the glory of immortality, as free, goddamnit, as Thomas Jefferson, aw, goddamnit, you had me, but I'm out now—out—I'm broken out, and now all you white sons of bitches can go to hell. It was all I could do to keep from emptying the gun into his body.

Then I saw the woman's face and it was stretched in vertical lines with the mouth opening and closing soundlessly as she stood in the kitchen doorway with her hands held rigidly in an odd pose in front of her and I turned and walked slowly back

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to the street and all inside of me felt swollen and bursting with joy as if I'd just hit a hundred-thousand-dollar jackpot. I wanted to run and leap and shout and roll in the goddamned street.

I walked past houses and felt good, fine, wonderful, and felt something heavy in my hand and looked down and saw the gun and without being aware of what I was doing sat down on the curb and took out my handkerchief and began wiping it carefully for fingerprints then thought of the white boy falling dead at my feet and all of a sudden just burst out laughing like hell.

The woman ran out into the street and began yelling, 'Murder! Murder! Murder!' in a high hysterical shriek and I jumped up and dropped the gun and started to run and the woman kept screaming, 'Police! Catch him! There he goes! Murderer!' and the voice pushed me on.

After a moment I heard footsteps behind me and looked over my shoulder and saw the biggest man I ever saw in the uniform of a Marine sergeant with rows of stripes and decorations on his chest and I turned and dove for his legs but he leaped over me and turned on the balls of his feet and I staggered to my feet and dodged him and ran around the corner and a dog came out of the shadows and started barking and in the distance I could still hear the woman screaming.

The Marine was trotting along behind me chuckling to himself and after we'd run about a block I stopped and wheeled around and swung at him and he caught my arm, twisted it behind my back and put a half-nelson about my throat and marched me down the street. I didn't struggle. I knew it wasn't any use. We came to an alley and he pushed me down it and stopped and turned me around to face him releasing his hold and I couldn't see his face but his breath smelled like a gin barrel.

'Whatcha do, boy, kill somebody?' he asked in a husky chesty whisper and I knew he was reeling drunk. 'Yeah, I killed the son of a bitch, what you gonna do about it?' He asked, 'Was he a Jew?' and I said, 'Naw, he was a goddamned peckerwood like you,' and for an instant he didn't move, didn't make a sound. I couldn't hear him breathing and I looked for him to hit me, probably beat me to death, and I didn't give a goddamn. Then he began chuckling and I could smell his breath on me

again and he asked, 'Whatja kill him for?' and I said, 'He called me a nigger.' He laughed louder and louder until his big booming laugh woke up the neighbourhood and he said, 'That's right, you kill 'em every time.' He laughed some more then he said, 'I always wondered 'bout you folks whether you ever wanted to kill us like we wanna kill you.' He stopped and panted and wiped the tears out of his eyes and said, 'I'm from Florida and ev'ybody I knew said they'd killed a nigger or two—at least one nigger—and I used to b'lieve 'em and I got to packing 'round my rifle looking for a nigger to kill till my old man found out what I was doing and said I couldn't kill no niggers until I got to be twenty-one and by that time I'd joined the Marines so I ain't never got to kill a nigger.' He sounded regretful looking at me and I got to wondering if he was thinking about killing me so I told him, 'I raped a white woman too,' and that tickled him all over again and he laughed loud and long and said, 'Hell, I've raped all kinda women, white women, black women, yellow women, red women, and the only reason I ain't raped no green women is 'cause I couldn't find none.' Then he stopped and laughed again and said, 'I done killed all kinda sonabitches, raped all kinda women'—pointing to the decorations on his chest—'see these, the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star, the Presidential Memorial Citation, even a Good Conduct Medal. I got these for killing a lot of sonabitches I ain't even seen until after they was dead.'

'Hell, boy, so you killed a man because he called you a nigger,' he said and laughed, 'and raped a white woman all in one night. Was she the man's woman you killed?' 'Naw,' I said, 'she don't even live nowhere near here,' and that started him off again. 'Goddamn you're some boy,' he said, 'rape a white woman in one part of town then run clear across town and kill a white man 'cause he called you a nigger.' He stopped and wiped the tears out of his eyes, and said regretfully looking at me, 'I ain't killed a nigger yet.' Then he drew slowly back and let it go and I saw it coming big as a house but there wasn't anything I could do but wait for it. . . .

I woke up on the floor. Somebody was banging on the bars, saying, 'Damn if you didn't fall right off your bunk. They musta been after you.'

I must have thought he was the Marine because the first thing

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I felt was I didn't give a damn whether he killed me or not; I had made it. Then I saw he was the jailer and the day came back. When I tried to stand up nothing worked; I tried three times, finally made it by pieces. I was sore, stiff, ached in every joint. My head throbbed and the wound beat with my heart. My mouth felt useless, swollen shut; my tongue felt too big; I was thirsty, lousy, and really beat—low in the mind as a man can get. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes with my knuckles, stood blinking at him.

He unlocked the door. 'Come on,' he said. 'You're lucky. Judge Morgan wants to see you in his chambers.'

I stepped into the bull pen, followed him dumbly. We went through some gates, down some corridors, came into an office with a big ornate desk and some big maroon leather chairs. There was a deep green carpet on the floor and two windows with clean white venetian blinds. In the distance was the harbour in the high bright sun.

'We'll just wait here,' he said, standing.

I stood a little away from him without replying. The dream was so real I kept thinking they had me in for murder. Then I began remembering the incidents of the day before, the stretch of Madge's big brutal mouth yelling, 'Rape,' the hammer floating at my head and not being able to dodge it, coming to on the hospital cot. Then the break, the drive back to town. When my mind came to the talk with Alice I tried not to think about it, but it came back anyway. Now she'd know once and for all. They had me and they were going to throw the book at me. I didn't have any hope at all of beating it; I didn't even feel like making the effort any more; I'd just as soon take a plea and get it to hell over with. I felt like a different person, I didn't have any fight left, didn't even hate the peckerwoods any more, didn't have anything left in me at all any more. What I hated most about the whole thing was I had to keep on living in the goddamned world.

Two men entered the room through the other door and broke my train of thought. One was a short, squat, quick-motioned man with a heavy-featured, pallid face and a half-bald head. He had on tortoiseshell glasses, a wrinkled brown suit, and talked in a brisk, rapid voice, slurring his words. He took the seat behind the desk, motioned the other man to be seated, looked

over at me, and asked the jailer, 'Is this the boy?' all at the same time.

The other man was big, grey-haired, athletic-looking, more deliberate in his motions. He was poised, immaculate in an expensive-looking grey flannel suit, with a thoughtful, serious expression on his face. He lowered himself carefully in the chair beside the desk, crossed his legs, and studied me.

'Yes, Your Honour, Robert Jones,' the jailer replied to the squat man behind the desk, taking hold of my arm at the same time.

'You needn't hold him,' the judge snapped. 'He's not going to bite us.'

The jailer let go my arm, stood away from me again.

The judge said, 'The president of Atlas Corporation, Mr. Houghton here, has interceded in your behalf, Jones. He has come down here expressly to talk to you.' His rapid, casual voice got sharp. 'I want you to listen to him.'

The first time I tried my voice wouldn't come at all, then I tried again and lisped, 'Yes sir,' in no more than a whisper.

Mr. Houghton cleared his throat and got on a look of deep concern. 'I talked with Mrs. Perkins last evening and again this morning,' he began. 'She is a tolerant and intelligent woman, I am happy to say, capable of weighing personal vengeance against national good. She realizes that, should she press charges against you, it might in all likelihood create racial tension among the employees and seriously handicap our production schedule, so she has consented to withdraw her charge against you, and Judge Morgan has informed me that this is permissible.' He had a cultured, scholarly voice, authoritative but unemotional. 'It is a patriotic gesture comparable only to the heroism of men in battle, and I have the highest admiration for her.'

I knew right off what had happened; they'd grilled Madge and learned the truth, or learned enough to guess at the rest. His conscience bothered him too much for him to let me take a strictly bum rap, but he'd never come right out and say it; he'd cover for her till hell froze over and make himself believe that he was doing it for the best. But I didn't care how he played it—I was beat.

'I genuinely regret that circumstances permit you to escape

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subject



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punishment,' he went on, 'for you, more than any criminal, should be punished. You had no motive, not even an understandable excuse. Yours was a crime of uncontrolled lust—the act of an animal. And for it to be you, out of all other Negro employees at Atlas, to commit this crime is doubly disheartening, not only to the people of your race but to those of us who have always had the welfare of your people at heart.' He paused and got out his I-trusted-you look. 'You were given every opportunity to advance. You were the first Negro to be employed in a position of responsibility by our corporation and you were in a position to represent your race, to win for them advantages heretofore denied. You were selected because you were considered the highest type of Negro. We made you a leader of your people, such as Joe Louis, the prize fighter, Marian Anderson, the singer, and others. We had confidence in you. To do a thing like this, at a time when Negroes are making such rapid progress, when Negro soldiers are earning the respect of the nation, and when Negro workers are being employed in all branches of industry is more than a disgrace to yourself, it is a betrayal of your people. . . .'

He was very, very smooth, but I wanted him to hurry and get it over with.

'Mr. MacDougal and Mr. Kelly both tried very hard to make you a success on that job,' he went on. 'They wanted you to set an example for other Negro employees, to open the way for those with more than average skill. I, personally, am anxious that Negroes make a good record in industry, and it is indeed regrettable, I assure you, to learn that you are not to be trusted to work alongside white women employees.'

'That is all I have to say to you,' he concluded, rising. 'But I hope, seriously, that you will think about it.'

He had to say all that, I thought, just to cover up for a no-good cracker slut who just happened to be born white instead of black.

He turned to Judge Morgan. 'Good morning, Your Honour, and thank you.'

'Delighted,' the judge mumbled, half rising.

Mr. Houghton went out.

'And let that be a lesson,' the judge said briskly, and began shuffling some papers on his desk he had brought in with him.

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'I see they want you in Los Angeles for carrying a concealed weapon,' he remarked, then looked up at me. 'Suppose I give you a break, boy. If I let you join the armed forces—any branch you want—will you give me your word you'll stay away from white women and keep out of trouble?'

I wanted to just break out and laugh like the Marine in my dream, laugh and keep on laughing. 'Cause all I ever wanted was just a little thing—just to be a man. But I kept a straight face, got the words through my oversized lips. 'Yes sir, I promise.'

'Good,' he mumbled, standing up. 'Don't worry about that charge in Los Angeles.' He shook his finger at me, said, 'Make a good record, get an honourable discharge. It will do you a lot of good after this war.' Then he spoke to the jailer. 'Have somebody go along with this boy to the recruiting station.'

'Yes, Your Honour,' the jailer said, taking me by the arm again.

We went out, back through the corridors, kept through to the desk this time. 'Judge Morgan wants to send somebody with this boy to the recruiting station,' the jailer said to the sergeant on duty.

The sergeant didn't even look at me; he called over to a cop by the door in a bored, indifferent voice, 'Here's another soldier.' 'Come on, boy,' the cop said.

The two Mexican youths he had with him grinned a welcome. 'Let's go, man, the war's waiting,' one of them cracked.

'Don't rush the man,' the other one said. 'The man's not doing so well,' and when I came closer he said, 'Not doing well at all. Looks like this man has had a war. How you doing, man?'

They were both brown-skinned, about my colour, slender and slightly stooped, with Indian features and thick curly hair. Both wore bagged drapes that looked about to fall down from their waists, and greyish dirty T shirts. They talked in the melodious Mexican lilt.

'I'm still here,' I lisped painfully. ~ but as what? what is the here?

They fell in beside me and we went out and started up the hill toward the induction centre, the three of us abreast and the cop in the rear. ~ ecological socialization

Two hours later I was in the Army.

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ecological  
socialization  
fear ~ wake live  
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