

# **Michael Bettencourt**

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## **Ain't Ethiopia**

Block & Tackle Productions Press



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**Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt**

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**To María Beatriz - always in all ways**

## **Pennsylvania**



## Scene 1

“Now, about the niggers...The Slavs, the Poles, I can take 'em - dumb, maybe, can't tell, but they work hard and stay to themselves - don't try to push their strange foods around, what passes for religion with 'em is, well, it is what it is, but they keep it indoors. But the niggers...we need 'em but I don't like 'em - some with a - sense - of themselves, know what I mean? I know we need 'em, but...I think you know what I'm saying.”

Said by the banker.

Said by the barber.

Said by the trolley-operator.

By the grocer.

By the coal-hauler.

The honey-bucket boy.

Minister.

Police Chief.

Burgess.

Open Hearth slagger.

Nearly all.

All.

## Scene 2

Their house up in the Spruces had nothing much to recommend it: warped planks over a bowed-back framing that invited in drafts and dirt, pit-privy out back, a well not always well-placed away from the pit privies around them, garden as small as the back of a hand (but Jesse coaxed sweet greens out of it that leavened their rice and their beans, got some carrots to bustle up, a few beets and potatoes to infiltrate). Inside, furniture pried from roadsides and the dump-off over the bluff - a deal table, some fruit boxes for chairs, a half-veneered armoire that held their workclothes, a mattress without bedframe. A one-spigot soapstone sink that vented its greywater into a runnel that swilled toward a common drainage ditch. A stove they'd rigged from scrap steel at their jobs and lugged together the half-mile-or-so from The Steel Company, Zack fortified with his perpetual gin (which made him laugh, which made him stumble, which made Jesse curse and feel caution for him), fed by coal and wood scraps scarfed alongside the railroad bed. They had a life, Jesse Carlton and Zack Walker, niggers up the in the Spruces.

Only one thing Jesse didn't like about the house: Zack's cheap handgun kept in a drawer in the armoire, lying there like a snake. For protection, Zack insisted. Jesse kept the bullets somewhere else.

But they did not live like some of the other shaved-off sad-sacks resident in the falling-down row-houses around them, the ones with families they couldn't feed or injuries they couldn't cure or an illness they couldn't shake or debts that nailed them - the ones where desperation ate their guts out like indifferent wolves. They did not have much, Zack and Jesse, but they did make having each other work out.

The bluff, facing north - nice in late summer, sitting on it, watching out from it, if a person could bend his eyes around the steaming foul smudge otherwise known as The Steel Company that filled up the Pennsylvania dirt and air between Striders Road and 1st Avenue and instead catch the hills past the town center and the train viaduct that soaked in the sunset scraps to make a golden pleasure owned by nobody, safe even from The Steel Company's endless clutch.

At least Jesse thought about it that way. And, sometimes, Zack, too, when they stole a break from their exhaustion to sit there and eat, the two of them, their black skins sloughed off by the moment, not niggers, not slag, not strangers tolerated from Virginia - not anything in particular and nothing to worry about.

Then Jesse could feel Zack's anger let up, the open hearth in him cool down, the need for gin fall off. Sometimes Zack spooned off his plate into Jesse's mouth and laughed. Jesse would spoon him back. Jesse ached for moments like that. More moments like that.

They did have a life.



### **Scene 3**

August. August inside The Steel Company. Hell lost all bragging rights in August - all Hell had was lost souls to fry - it had nothing like the blast furnace and the ladle and the tributaries of singeing steel running into their molds for flat plate or I-beam or ingot or rod or rail. Inside The Steel Company: darkness made visible, a chaos of sparks and skin-cutting shrapnel and heat and ear-hardening noise and heat and bone-crushing weights craning through the air like scythes and the tang of spit filings at the back of the throat and heat and sweat and shackles and heat and heat and heat and heat and heat.

But like Hell and Heaven - choirs of the elected. And no one with black skin (that is, black skin after washing, since everyone on the job looked embered and sizzled and niggered) played seraphim or cherubim. Not even white skin always got sent upward if the skin spelled Polish or Lithuanian or from some country that the hirers and managers couldn't pronounce. Black skin went down, kept down, stayed down - nothing to the owners but muscled slag with a spine and some obedience.

Jesse and Zack worked the mill scale pit, shoveling into buckets the rust that fell off the hot bars of steel, then having those buckets hauled up and emptied by other black or Polack or Slav hands and swung back down to them. When they didn't do that, they got sent down to the sewage hole to muck it out, the only place lower than the mill scale pit, and there, at the bottom of the Company Hell, shoveling out the waste of the world, they had no one but each other to brace themselves against the outflow of shit and rust and hatred above them.

They didn't only do those two jobs - The Steel Company had plenty of fouled-up, repetitive, bruising work to dole out to the thousands of its drones. And the plant hummed all day every day, except for the obligatory (but begrudged) holidays, making the metal bones of a world most of those inside The Steel Company would never see and which would (will) crush them if they ever tried to see it.

But August in The Steel Company - the Christian hell could take lessons on how to improve its operations from the Company's Board of Directors. Never enough air to breathe, never enough water to saturate, never enough time to gobble down the brought lunch, never enough shirt-cloth to soak up the sweat, never enough handkerchief to filter the mouth and nose, never enough time to piss or shit, never enough shoe leather to cushion the bones. Yet each day they

came - most of them, the ones not sickened or crushed or discarded or too-angered - and no one complained about anything out loud - Hell had its hounds, and The Steel Company had its goons and stoolies. Talk sifted around about organizing - the CIO had set up something called the Steel Workers Organizing Committee out in Pittsburgh, looking to union-up the steel workers, and their reps had tried to convince them to join, mingling with them on Friday nights on Main Street after the pay-envelopes had been dealt out (and before the pay had been spilt in a dozen directions) to worry them with the benefits of joining, of all hands together ("workers united can never be defeated") - but the workers knew who the stool pigeons were - the canaries, the finks, the snitches - and kept mum even if they knew - some knew - that the arguments rung right, the strike the only wedge against the clean-jowled suits in the headquarters building bricked-linteled and granite-columned and cream-painted in the middle of its manicured grounds.

But these buzzing words spat out by the union reps never buzzed close to Jesse, to Zack, to the other dinges - the union that would represent "steel workers" would not represent them. So Zack ignored them and kept to his gin, and Jesse - Jesse wondered how the world would spin if the buzz phrases actually included them, if a unioned world actually included them. Maybe then Zack could crawl out from his gin-fog and not live the kind of angry that seeped out of his bones, etched them deep and made them ready for the fuse. Jesse would pay whatever dues it would take to make that happen.

August in The Steel Company - hell at full throttle.

## Scene 4

August Saturday night. Finally.

Jesse and Zack made their end-of-the-workweek way, as they usually did on Saturday, down to Main Street. Like everyone else did, trying to live and escape at the same time. Around 1st Avenue and Main, and for a few blocks on either side, clustered the hotels and saloons, those sump pumps that vacuumed up the week's pay from the pockets of the exhausted, but the hydraulic pressure of the crowd pushed people like wood chips on water up and down Main Street and as far left and right as 3rd Avenue one way and Strider's Road the other.

They strolled, as best they could against the crush, past the A&P (with window signs for "Fyne-Taste Soft Drinks" and "Par-T-Gel"), past Mast's Department store (displays of Romper Suits and Shirley Temple Sheer Dresses and Latonia Sheets), past the Palace Theatre (with "Hell-Ship Morgan"), past The Auditorium ("healthfully air-conditioned"), past Boston Shoe Store ("X-ray fitting"), past Sears and Roebuck (Zack liked the Silvertone radio in the window, but no electricity at the Spruces), past a poster for a Lancaster fair featuring "The Dance of Death" by a world famous troupe of skydancers, past the Ford Funeral Service next to Braunstein's Furniture Store, past Long's Drug Store (the NEET Diplatory next to Anefrin next to Coty's Summer Eau de Cologne next to Atlas White Shoe Cleaner next to Munez-Wurth Aspirin).

The air stank of car fumes and the electric tang of the overhead trolleys and sweat and the ever-present metallic char from the Company's smokestacks, and the coagulated voices lunged up and down like a single piston and the crowd itself snaked like a conveyor belt piston-driven. The police stationed there and here and about tried to look like they had everything under control, pretending a calm they perhaps didn't feel but couldn't show they didn't feel.

Zack, smiling, angling through, face up-tilted and sweat-shined, his shirt wet-barred where it touched his spine, wet-mooned under his arms - Zack in his rumbling element, Zack happy. And, thus, Jesse happy.

Up ahead, something in the crowd pushed outward, spreading people away like a boulder dropped in a lake, and Zack, sensing the sudden adrenalin zizz zipping through the people, hurried forward, Jesse ("Sorry, sorry, didn't mean to step on....") coursing in his wake, his heart suddenly jumpy with worry.

"Zack, slow down, man."

"I think it's you who better hurry up."

They both reached the rim of crowd's inner circle - the eye of the crowd's hurricane - together, in time to catch what had thrown the piston off-kilter, and Jesse saw what he had feared to see. A Polack (could've been a Polack, or a Litvak, or a Hunkie, or one of those Slavs, but Jesse could never parse their accents into distinct geographies) and a Negro lammed into each other with the fury of alcohol and stupidity. Immediately, bile boiled up from Jesse's gut as he watched the black man make the ultimate mistake: forgetting how bullseye the color of his skin made him. Within seconds the Polack's buddies pulled off the Negro and pummeled and kicked him while the crowd of mostly white faces brayed into the Quaker air of Pennsylvania "Kill the nigger! Kill the nigger!"

Jesse could see the police moving in, batons out, and as soon as the Polack's chums saw them move in, they hoofed it away, dragging their friend along, leaving the Negro wadded up on the street. For a moment, for a two-breath gap in time (Jesse's heart slammed against his ribs), the Negro lay unprotected with the white knives hanging above him - then the police and their whistles, then the carting away, then the sergeant bellowing to the left-behinds to move it along, then Jesse pulling on Zack's waistband to move him back from the edge, then Zack playfully slapping his hand away and, full-smiled, laughing out, "You like a mama hen!" and only Jesse able to hear the disappointment back of the smile that Jesse hadn't taken the leap to the Negro's side and gone down while fighting to stay up. "Gin," Zack said, and off they went for gin.

They didn't stay long downtown - after a while even the noise got to Zack - the more gin he drank, the more quiet he wanted - so they made their way along Strider's Road back to the Spruces, The Steel Company on their left - passing the hospital on their right, its lighted windows perched up on the hill like a ship on a wine-dark sea, the road night-thick, the air finally thinned-out and bearable.

Even the gin-smell smelled sweet to Jesse now that they had gotten themselves shy of downtown and headed back to safety. Zack hummed, his hum underscored by the insect buzz from the trees. Then, from somewhere, the gun appeared in Zack's non-gin-bottle hand (how had Jesse not known he had it on him?), and before Jesse could grab it away, Zack fired into the air, laughing as he did. "Put it away!" Jesse hissed, and Zack shot back, "Put yourself away."

Just at the moment they passed the Company's guardhouse, and Edward Brown appeared in the doorway, silhouetted by the electric light behind him. "What's going on?" he barked out.

"Nothin'," said Jesse, his voice dropping to an automatic deference, at the same time trying to get Zack to put the gun back in his pocket. Zack shrugged him off and moved forward, bottle tilted throatward, gun up like the Statue of Liberty's torch.

Brown moved out of the doorway onto the road. Jesse could see Brown's baton beat against the side of his leg as it hung from his belt. "I said, what's going on?"

Jesse stopped, let Zack walk ahead into the darkness, away from Brown. The electric light from the guardhouse sheened both of them, both of them half-lit and half-dark.

"Just Zack Walker," said Jesse. "You know, gin."

"Who is Zack Walker?"

"Works here - both of us work here- we're just headed back to the Spruces, to home."

"He can't be carrying a gun."

"I tell him that all the time," Jesse said with a half-laugh. "Might as well tell a bull he can't grow horns."

"He can't be carrying a gun."

"I'll make that point with him, sir - now, I gotta go."

"I can't let it go - I've gotta take the gun off of him."

"It's okay, sir, really - he's nothin'."

"He's a law-breaker."

"No disrespect, sir, but you're not a policeman - just a Company guard."

"He's on Company property."

"Not really."

"He is if I say he is."

"But he isn't here, is he, to be on Company property? He's down there somewhere on the public road." Jesse lowered his voice. "Just let it go - let him go."

But Brown didn't lower his voice. "I can't let it pass. I used to be a policeman."

"But you're not one now."

Brown pulled his gun out of his holster and let it hang by his side. "And who are you to tell me who I am?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Zack kept walking, the gin-fumes soothing his head, the gun-weight in his hand comforting, the burnt-powder taste sharp on his tongue. It took him a couple of seconds, and then a couple of seconds more, to realize that Jesse - Where did Jesse go?

Zack stopped, the mist of his own sweat around him, and he let the silence drift into his ears. He pivoted on his right heel to look back up the road, and he could just make out Jesse talking to Brown, who had come out of the guardhouse to say something - something - his ears couldn't make the words out from he stood, what with the cicada buzz going on and the gunshots still ringing.

But what he saw next he knew he saw right: Brown pulled his gun out of his holster. Jesse stood in front of a man with a gun in his hand, and Jesse didn't have a gun. Only Zack had a gun, and at that moment Zack did not stand next to Jesse.

Without knowing a decision had made itself, Zack threw the liquor bottle away and made his first steps back toward Jesse, the gun now part of his arm's length, his eyes fixed on the man who had Jesse in his sights.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesse heard the crunch of Zack's coming-back steps on the road, louder and quicker and heavier.

"I'm not trying, sir, to tell you anything at all - just let us go, that's all."

But too late - Zack stepped into the thrown light from the guardhouse doorway, the glare flicking off his gun's metal into Brown's eyes. Brown spun to face him, and the two men, guns hanging from their hands, squared off. "Give me the gun," said Brown.

"Go fuck yourself," Zack said without any heat in his voice. "No one makes a threat to my friend. Come on."

Jesse edged toward Zack, and they both edged away from Brown.

Brown followed them. He unhooked his baton, and with a speed that surprised them both for a man built like a hogshead, Brown surged forward and, with a rap of the baton, hit Zack in the back of the knee to bring him down.

Zack buckled but didn't fall. He grabbed Jesse to steady himself, and with a wrench, he flung Jesse back behind him, in the same motion moving toward Brown.

Brown, taking a step back, made another swipe with the baton, this time cracking it against the upper arm holding the gun.

The gun stayed in Zack's hand.

Brown kept backing up.

Jesse saw two other people, white people, walk into the square of light thrown by the guardhouse.

And just as they entered the light, he saw Brown raise his gun and point it at Zack.

Zack did the same and fired. Once. And again.

The two bullets pitched Brown onto his back. Perhaps a twitch or two, and then nothing settled into his body.

All five of them pinned to the moment. The earth frozen on its axis. The cicadas dumbled to silence. The dust floating in the indifferent light.

The world forever changed.

Then things began again.

The two white men turned tail and headed back into town. Jesse came out of the darkness and stood next to Zack, and they both looked at the dead Brown. "He would've shot me," Zack said. "Would've shot you. Feeling no more than that baton of his."

"Maybe," Jesse said, though he knew what Zach said was true and that what Zach said made no difference anymore.

Zack turned to Jesse, faced him squarely. "You have to go. Go now. We have to split up. You know this as well as I do. Pennsylvania is now Virginia."

"I can't leave," said Jesse.

But Zack hadn't waited for how he knew Jesse would answer. He bolted into the darkness and fell away forever.

Jesse stared at Brown. Brown stared back. Not the same thing at all.

## Scene 5

An account, from the journal of \_\_\_\_\_:

"It was - is - enough to shake a man's faith that anything good resides in the human heart.

"I have spent the last two days speaking to everyone I could speak to about the events of that Saturday night, trying to puzzle together what it was that drove - crazed? - people to do what they did. This is the best that my efforts can do to piece together a narrative - not that it explains anything but at least may set a benchmark against which an explanation can be measured.

"The two men who had witnessed Zack Walker shooting Edward Brown ran back to town and directly to the police station, where they blurted out what they had seen to Police Chief Olmstead. Of course, the police chief was not the first person they spoke to, instead seeding the story through the crowd as they ran to the station, and by the time Olmstead understood what they were saying (they were Slavs, after all), knots of men were already butting up against the station demanding that 'something be done to the nigger.'

"Olmstead dismissed the two men. From what he told me, he stood at his desk listening to the howls from outside and realized that with his small force, there wasn't much he could do to make that crowd quiet down and go home. In fact, he said, by the time the two men had finished their story, he felt that the situation was already out of his hands - though, officially, he couldn't say that. Even if he put in a call right at that moment, the state constabulary wouldn't make it to the city for several hours, by which time, who knew what would have occurred.

"The only thing he could do was to find Zack Walker as quickly as possible and grab him from the jaws of the crowd before it devoured him.

"Olmstead has come in for some blame for what he did and didn't do, but I sympathize with the man. The city had been tense for a long time - the blacks had been brought in to work in the Company as a way to break labor's effort to unionize, but they were hated by all the whites - and the whites split themselves between the long-time natives and the foreign-born (who seemed, and did, make up at least half the city's population), and the natives distrusted and disliked the foreigners. And even among the natives there were divisions, a class war, between those who made money off the sweat of the Company and those who had their sweat taken by the Company.



"E pluribus unum" was not an operating principle except for, perhaps, the 4th of July. And Olmstead, though not an educated man, knew this, knew the short fuse sticking out of the powder-keg. Zack Walker threatened to be the spark.

"So when Olmstead walked to the station door to address the crowd, he had already decided that he'd better create his own search parties for Walker to head off the crowd creating its own vigilante posses. Which is what he did by calling in members of the Brandywine Volunteer Fire Company (Brown had once been a member of the crew) and more or less deputizing them under his control.

"And out into the darkness they went, leaving the crowd to seethe and rumble but at a level less than volcanic.

"It took them - I should say 'us,' since I was out with them as well - all that night and into the next day to find Walker - drenching rains had come, which damped down the crowd but made the pursuit a slog through mucky fields and soaked forests. But a young boy had discovered Walker hiding in his family's barn and sent out the cry, and they finally cornered Walker hiding up in a cherry tree in Silman's orchard. Walker, knowing that the jig was up, put his gun to his head and fired (he had one bullet left, having shot three into the air and two into Brown), but only succeeded in fracturing his jaw - painful but not life-threatening.

"Olmstead bundled him off to the hospital to get the wound dressed (Dr. Carmichael, the head of the hospital, did the honors), and to make sure Walker wouldn't escape or try to kill himself again, they put him in a straitjacket and chained his left foot to the metal bedframe. Olmstead left Stanley Howe, the newest and youngest man on the force, to guard him, and we all went back into the city.

"Olmstead then returned to the station, feeling pretty good that the work had turned out all right. To be sure, even though it was Sunday, the crowd still surged up and down Main Street, talking of nothing else but the capture and the crime - Walker freely admitted to killing Brown, saying he was 'too quick for him' and that he 'killed him easy,' but he also argued that Brown had raised his gun first and that Walker was only acting in self-defense. But Olmstead felt that the situation was under control, his control, and that it was going to stay that way until the District Attorney got around to indicting Walker for Brown's murder.

"But a crowd has a will of its own - the mob is a beast as corporeal as any other animal - and it fretted the story of the murder and the capture over and over, winding up its indignation on each re-telling until its righteousness

threatened to explode. Olmstead, to his discredit, seemed not to see this happening - pride, perhaps, or over-confidence. Instead, he spent the better part of Sunday mingling and regaling anyone who would listen with the story of how he commanded the capture of Walker and was the one who actually cornered Walker in the tree and put him into the ambulance. Several of the more sober citizens implored him to address the talk of lynching that now percolated through the air as well as to meet with the growing crowd gathering around the hospital, but after the fourth or fifth reiteration of this, Olmstead turned on his speaker with 'you may be goddamned popular, but you cannot run me.' He dismissed the talk of a mob by saying that 'it was a lot of young fellows and some of them don't know how to carry a gun.'

"That night would prove Olmstead tragically wrong.

"The mob at the hospital grew during the day. The only people in the hospital, besides Walker and Howe (Walker was in a ground-floor room), were Nurse Townsend and her small staff and the handful of patients in the hospital - no doctors, no other men at all. Perhaps it was the fact that Olmstead never showed up to talk to them which seemed to give the crowd some sort of permission, but at some point, by a subterranean process known only to the crowd itself, several men marched to the hospital's front door, their faces covered in handkerchiefs, and demanded that Howe open the door. He refused, but he might as well, like King Canute, have tried to command the ocean's waves to cease as to stop the mob once its leaders had made their demands. Even as he was saying 'no' to the troupe on the doorstep, others were battering at the metal screen covering the window to Walker's room, tearing it from the wood frame, and before Howe could make it back to Walker's room, both the front door and the window had been forced open, and people poured through like water through a broken dam.

"Walker was trussed up in his straitjacket and shackled to the bedframe, not to mention in pain from his wound, and was clearly no threat to anyone, but the crowd, blinded now by a mix of exhilaration and fury, tried to detach him from the bed. When they couldn't do it (for some reason, Howe didn't have, or couldn't find, the key to the shackle), they simply ripped apart the bedframe, using the now-freed footboard as a handle to drag Walker from the room and out of the building, his head rapping against the steps and then ground against the dirt of the road as they hauled him away.

"They took him down the hill and across the road to the Newlin farm (technically just outside the jurisdiction of the city police), where they bound him

to a rail fence and stacked hay around him taken from the Newlin barn (with Jack Newlin's assent) to get a fire going. (It had rained the night before, so dry wood was in short supply - but the intrepid crowd managed to find some old rails that would do just fine.) As they trussed him up, Walker supposedly shouted, 'For God's sake, give a man a chance. I killed Brown in self-defense. Don't give me a crooked death because I'm not white.' His plea did him no good as several from the crowd poured oil over the mash of hay, wood, and human, and set it on fire.

"By now, according to some estimates, the crowd had grown to 5000 people - and they watched the immolation, as some said to me, as if they were watching a ball game or county fair cooking demonstration. No one swore, and men escorted women to the better vantage points. Cars drove up and disgorged their passengers as politely as letting them off in front of the drugstore.

"Walker fought to the end. He tried to escape once, and the ringleaders prodded him back into the flames with pitchforks. He tried a second time, with the same result. And, believe it or not, a third time as well, all the while the air split with his screams of agony. There was no fourth time.

"When it was clear he was dead, not everyone left. Some did, retiring for refreshments at the Candy Company on 3rd Avenue and Main Street, but others hung around until the fire cooled. Then with pliers, knives, and bare hands, people picked apart the skeleton for finger and toe bones as souvenirs. One young man in a plaid waist coat held up what he said was a pinkie bone that he was going to attach to his key ring as a charm.

"By the time Olmstead arrived (having finally believed what people were telling him), all he could do was to tell those who remained to disperse, which they were more than ready to do. They took what was left of Walker (his leg bones and charred skull, packed into a soap box) to the morgue. So thorough had the souvenir hunters been that the pile of ashes had been spread around until all that remained of the incident was a blackened patch of earth.

"A few said that Walker lived with another Negro, a fellow-worker, up at the Spruces, and that they should get him as well, but nothing came of the talk - it wasn't even clear if Walker had any friends at all.

"I was not there that night - all this comes to me by confession or interview or hearsay. And yet a stench seems to cling to me - imaginary, of course, but nonetheless powerful for that. And as can be imagined, life in this city is, and is not, the same. The District Attorney is daily threatening arrests, the Governor

is daily threatening to bring down his wrath, the state constabulary is patrolling the streets (a little bit like the horse and the barn door) - the Company is still producing steel, the Hunkies are still hated, the Negroes are still lower than the Hunkies, and Zack Walker is remembered by no one and forgotten by all.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Not by all.

A miracle they hadn't come for him.

But then Zack had led them away. Zack had put the scent on himself.

After they split up that night, Jesse made his way back to the Spruces to grab what little money they had squirreled away and to cram a waxed-paper packet of crackers into the pocket of the jacket he threw on. He took nothing else. He now had to run as light as possible.

And he knew he should go on the lam, burn off like the river's morning fog, but he couldn't, not yet, not with the crowd out there hunting Zack to ground, though also Jesse knew (glass-shards in his heart knowing this) that he couldn't do a thing to help Zack - no rescue would, could, come from Jesse's aching heart and desperate hands.

The rain came as a relief - it might give Zack (he hoped he hoped he hoped) enough cover for an escape. Jesse sat in one of their rickety chairs under the tight roof that he and Zack had plugged and shingled waiting and waiting while the rain drummed out its incomprehensible morse code. His ears listened hard for footsteps.

The dawn light leaked in pale and deflected. Jesse started, not aware he'd fallen asleep. The chair rail dug into his middle spine, and he stood to let the stiffness drain away. No Zack.

He moved out of the house, aware that most likely he - they - would never come back. No matter - not important - now only Zack.

Jesse moved out to the bluff; from there he could see action on the road - a few cars scuttled along, discharging men with guns, their voices garbled by distance and adrenalin as they fanned out into the woods and fields. He waited to hear any shouts of triumph, and when they didn't come, he moved off the bluff and down the garbage-cluttered hillside toward the backpaths that would take him through treelines and hedgerows and bracken to get closer. He needed to get closer. He needed to know.

At the bottom of the hillside he headed toward where he had seen men and voices spill off the road, cutting along faint path-lines that wove through the backsides of truck gardens and yards and Company out-buildings. It didn't take long before he heard what he had not wanted to hear: a gunshot, then mob-voices crowing, Zack's name (his last name, not his first) snarled out, engines revving. Jesse snuck as close as he could, past caution, past black-skin fear, slinking behind a pile of thrown-away logs, and what he saw chilled him despite the thick humid clamminess around him.

Zack lay on the ground, his head bloodied - the gunshot, Jesse thought, someone had - but now he could see that Zack still lived because he could hear his groans as Olmstead bundled him up in an oilcloth and several men hefted Zack into the back of a car - the driver looked none too pleased but a deputy stood by the driver's side to make sure he complied. Olmstead barked out orders to another deputy to make sure to get the gun off the ground and bring it along for evidence, then thanked everyone for their help and commanded them to go back to their homes and go to church (Sunday morning, Jesse realized). By now a couple of hundred men had logjammed their way into the orchard, craning to get a glimpse of the man who had shot down Edward Brown in cold blood. They shouted all sorts of things in Zack's direction (by now they had bundled Zack into the backseat of the car - the mob couldn't see him, but they knew he could hear them), and Jesse heard the word "lynch" rocket outward.

The car started up, and Jesse knew that he had to go now - once Zack left, once their hatred didn't hold them to a single focus, the men would begin to wander around. Keeping his eyes forward, Jesse slunk backward, the dew on the grass soaking everything, until he had gone far enough to get upright and slide away.

The hospital - they had to take him to the hospital with all that blood - and Jesse pointed himself in that direction.

He got to the hospital grounds just as the commandeered car, with a pack of other vehicles trailing in its wake, pulled up the long driveway and swung around to the front door. Jesse slunk along the treeline that rimmed the hill behind the main building, then scrambled down the hill to hide himself behind a small gardening shed the groundskeepers used. From there, peeking around the corner of the shed, he could see Olmstead command four others to wrestle Zack out of the car, then lug him up the stairs and into the hospital, the door held open by a white-dressed nurse. As they did that, Olmstead planted himself

at the top of the stairs and spoke to the herd milling about below him. Jesse couldn't hear the words, only the sound of Olmstead's voice and the voices of the others arguing back to him. From what Jesse could see, from the way the crowd surged and eddied, Olmstead didn't have all the control he might have wanted. The men didn't leave, the men didn't move off the steps, the men held their guns.

One of the men who had hauled Zack inside came out and whispered something to Olmstead. The other three men came out as well, and together the quartet walked down the stairs into a roiling crowd that engulfed Olmstead and his cronies. Jesse could see one policeman planted outside the front door, the white-dressed nurse next to him. The crowd, like a school of restless fish, agitated itself at the foot of the hospital stairs - but no one, yet, traveled up them to go face-to-face with the policeman.

Jesse, his face patina'd by sweat, swung back around the corner and leaned back hard into the wooden wall. He couldn't catch his breath - it rattled in and out, and no matter how hard he tried to slow it down, he felt as if a rope dug into his neck tighter and tighter.

So loud did his own breathing echo in his ears that he never heard the footsteps come along the path and end up three feet away from him, skidding to a stop. Jesse looked up and found himself looking into the black face of a black man dressed in blue denim overalls wearing heavy scarred workboots - a black man, a black man's face surprised and slathered in fear just like his own.

"Don't say anything," Jesse begged in a whisper.

"What'd you think I am?" the man whispered back in a rough-edged voice.

"I don't know - just don't - please."

"What're you doing here?"

"Tell me your name."

"What're you doing here?"

"Just tell me your name."

"Tobias, all right. I get called Toby."

"Tobias - Jesse - I'm - "

"I get how it works. And I'll ask - "

"Toby - I - "

"For whatever reason I am finding you here, you have to leave."

"Can't."

"That's why I'm back here myself, covering my precious ass."

"I can't, Toby. I can't." Jesse gulped his breath down. "I can't."

They both looked up as the low howl of the crowd-voice suddenly jumped up in volume. They both snuck a look around the corner of the shed only to see the pack still eddying back and forth - if any change at all, now bigger with added wolves. They pulled back.

"You know him? Know that poor son of a bitch?"

Jesse nodded yes.

"I'm coming back here to hide my balls because I've seen this before, too often. They get a taste, doesn't matter who they eat."

Jesse shrugged, nodded again.

"That includes you, especially if they think that you and that poor bastard in there's got a friendship." Toby paused. "But you ain't going, right?"

"Can't."

"Won't."

"Doesn't matter."

"What's him to you that you would get yourself butchered?" Tobias asked. "I wouldn't ever hold someone that close - too dangerous."

"In for a dime, in for a dollar."

Tobias gave Jesse a long searching look.

"That's not from any Bible I know. Look, if you're going to squat here, you need better protection." Tobias fished a key out of his pocket and held it up. "To this shed. I got an extra, so you can lose this when you're done." He handed it to Jesse. "Get inside. It'll lock with you closing the door." He took a few steps away from Jesse. "I'm going home. I can't deny the truth - maybe the beauty - of what you're feeling, but I won't let myself get killed on account of it."

"Thanks," said Jesse, but Tobias had already headed out.

Jesse peeked around the corner, saw that the crowd had clotted into groups that swirled into and out of each other, and so slipped around the protective

edge to the shed door, and for the five panicked seconds it took to slip in and turn the key then thrust open the door and close it behind him, Jesse imagined a thousand shotgun pellets rip his back apart. But, unbloodied, he pulled the door tight to make sure the lock's bolt sat snug and put the key in his pants pocket, and in the dim musty interior of the shed, he seated himself on fertilizer bags in front of a small smeared window that he cleaned off with his jacket sleeve surrounded by the smells of lime dust and dead roots and oil and dirt and looked over by shovels, rakes, a pitchfork, pruning shears, gnarled leather workgloves, a 1936 calendar with pictures from Spain, a Pennsylvania farmer's almanac, a canteen that held warm ripe water which Jesse gulped down without a first or second thought.

Jesse waited. Hidden. Helpless. His stomach grumbled, and despite everything, Jesse had to laugh - in the midst of terror the body went along with its usual routines: Zack would appreciate the joke. He dug the crackers out of his pocket and while he watched the crowd through the blotched window (like watching microbes hustle under a microscope), he bit, chewed, swallowed until the grumbling disappeared. He put half the packet back into his pocket - didn't know if he might need to eat again.

His breath had finally calmed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nothing much happened through the afternoon, but as the August Sunday afternoon slipped into dusk, and it got increasingly harder to see things through the window, Jesse decided that he would have to leave the shed and trust to the coming darkness.

So he slid the deadbolt back, angled the door open degree by degree, ready to slam it home if voices suddenly speared out of the dusk to nail him. But no one noticed. Jesse slipped outside, pulling the door shut behind him and locking it, then ducked behind the shed. The cooler air brought his senses back and dried his sweat. What next? he wondered. What next? he feared.

All of a sudden the crowd-voice jumped decibels, and its hook drew Jesse from behind the shed just in time to see a knot of men, handkerchiefs swaddling their faces, glide up the stairs and crash through the front door, the howling of the crowd pushing them from behind like a whip.

With the sky now full dark, Jesse, half-crouching, crept toward the hospital, completely unsure of what he did or why except that he had to do something,



looking for deep shadows wherever he could find them but moving moving moving forward.

And then - and then -

His poor Zack. His poor poor Zack. Several barrel-shaped men pulled the metal footboard with Zack fettered to it out of the hospital, Zack swaddled in a straitjacket, trailed by the single useless policeman and nurse whose shouts did nothing to hold anyone back. Zack yanked down the steps, his head in blooded bandages bouncing on the stone, then Zack towed down the gravel road with the jackal-crowd heaving itself forward to follow. With Jesse, with sickened heart, heaving himself forward to follow.

Slithering around the backside of the crowd as it barreled ahead, keeping to copses and culverts, he carried himself along, the vision of Zack dragged and gored gouging out his eyes. They came to a fence rail and several men rough-handed him up against the splintered grey posts. Others bustled in with hay from some barn somewhere while other hauled in dry lumber, and together they packed it around Zack.

Jesse, half-blinded but trying to watch where he walked and keep his eyes on Zack at the same time, slammed into a low-limbed pine tree. He swung himself up into the shield of its needles, the pitch gumming his hands, and rose until the crowd gushed underneath him and he could see Zack cocked against the post. Jesse watched as more men with handkerchief-covered faces emptied canisters of what smelled like kerosene on the hay and wood and Zack and then flicked flaring matches onto the heap, the pyre catching immediately, and just as immediately the peal of Zack screams.

Jesse forced himself to watch, forced himself to count as Zack pulled himself out of the fire once (shoved back), twice (shoved back), thrice (shoved back), allowed the charred embered bindle that had been Zack's bones and body brand itself on his eyes, its topography now Jesse's only map.

It didn't take long for the crowd to disperse once the fire died down, especially after Olmstead drove up to survey the scene and suggested, in a half-hearted voice, that everyone go home. Some with rakes (where did they get those? Jesse wondered) worked the smoldering ash pile, pulling out finger and toe bones, which they held aloft like treasure finds. Others promenaded as if at some kind of social event which had just concluded with a flourish and fanfare. Bit by bit the people moved away until, after an hour or so passed, the late-night

quiet and dense darkness pressed down everywhere, pressed Jesse out of his tree to the ground, pressed his heart as he stared at the deeper darkness that had once added up to Zack. He took a deep breath laced with singe and ash, held it hard so that his lungs would not forget, then exhaled it back to the night sky.

Someone had left a rake. He grabbed it, dug through the ashes until he came up with something that shone a dull white in the gathered dark: a bone. He took it, jammed into his pocket along with the key from Tobias, slunk away.

It took Jesse a long time to make his way to the train viaduct because he had to outflank the crowds that still popped and sizzled downtown. But he made it, and walked a mile or so along the tracks outside of the city so that no one could spy him. Then he waited. The next train he knew would make its way to New York City. With him on it.

The stones of the railbed bit through his thin leather shoes as time passed. Finally, the train waddled east over the viaduct, and when it ambled past Jesse, he scrambled up the gravel bank and latched a hand onto the bottom rung of a ladder bolted to the side of a freight car. Up he went, hand over hand, the smell of char in his nostrils, his heart the color of ash.



**New York**



## Scene 6

Gabriel Lumet, tall, dark-skinned, rough-clothed, a scar along his left cheekbone, patrolled the edge of the seething crowd at 125th and Lenox the way a border collie knits up the ragged hem of a flock of sheep. He had his eyes (well, one eye) on the young man perched atop a 5-foot tall wooden stile where he (following Gabriel's instructions) barked out a call to arms for black folks to go fight Hitler and Mussolini in Spain. The speaker handed out pamphlets as he spoke: "Unite Against Racism! We Will Not Let Them Pass!"

"Brothers and sisters, the fascists have taken over democratic Spain!"

He had his other eye on the cops doing their own herding along the opposite side of 125th - not many at the moment, but he knew the paddy wagons would show up soon because they'd already cleared about a dozen cars from the curb to make space (and to keep out of the way of trolley line running down the spine of the street). They always did that - their "tell." Only last year - 1935 - the same year Joe Louis slammed Max Baer to the mat - the street exploded after a mob, thinking a white storeowner had killed a 16-year old black boy caught shoplifting, rampaged back and forth from Fifth Avenue to Eighth Avenue busting out windows (626 said the Mayor's report) and let split apart, like the bursting of an overripe fruit, the rage that had seethed underneath Harlem's skin - about the evictions, the endless need for endless rent parties, the parasite landlords, the infested apartment-buildings, even the lingering poison of the Scottsboro boys - the schizophrenic life that had Harlem as its name, between "hot jazz" for the downtown whites who glided in and out looking for the "thrill" and the sharp lash of the Depression across the back of every black-skinned unfortunate crammed into the overstuffed and starving blocks north of Central Park.

"Mussolini, who raped our people in Ethiopia" - the young man's voice rang out - "And Hitler, with his ideas about the supremacy of white people - "

"Why the fuck should I care about Spain? About white people?" another voice barked back. The woman next to him whacked him. "Keep a clean tongue - "

"Don't be whacking me!"

"If we don't stop the fascists in Spain - "

"Keep your ham-hocks to yourself - "

"Brother, sister, please."

Gabriel always had a third eye in reserve, the one that sensed movement and patterns rather than saw them, and the Lumet third-eye caught a rag-coated young man skulk-slinking through the crowd with more than a lean and hungry look upon his face. The third eye also noted that the police, now reinforced, had migrated across 125th Street and the trolley tracks and had started sharking around the crowd's edges.

Just as the skulker saw it, Gabriel, watching the skulker, saw it, too: what looked like a dollar bill sticking up out of a man's back pocket. The skulker sidled up closer to the back pocket, his face (definitely a "he" - whiskered, ash-grey exhaustion tinting the ebon skin) periscoping around to see who saw what he didn't want anyone to see.

Gabriel whistled at the young speaker, then circled his upraised right index finger in the air as if to say, "Round it up." The young speaker nodded. "Watch your backs, my friends - we got our own fascists coming in - " In the same motion, seeing a policeman working his way toward the doomed pickpocket, Gabriel hustled over, and just as the doomed hand reached out for the damning bill, Gabriel grabbed the hand and pulled it and the arm attached to it into a close embrace that pivoted the pickpocket around and forwards into an escape route. "My man!" said Gabriel with full cheer and a big grin, "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

By now the speaker had vacated his platform, shoving pamphlets into people's hands as he wriggled through the crowd and past the cordon. For his part, Gabriel steered the saved felon out of the reach of the police's long arms as they baton'd their way through the black knot of black people and sent them floating away like used-up cinders.

When they'd gotten clear of the diaspora, Gabriel stopped and made the smelly, raggedy-ass man next to him stand up straight and look him in the eye.

"Gotta go," the man said, but Gabriel still had his hand, and so he didn't go far - he didn't go at all.

"What'd'ya want? Lemme go."

"Virginia, right?"

"What?"

"Your voice."

"So what? I gotta go."

"You've got to thank me first," Gabriel shot back.

"I gotta go," but between "gotta" and "go" the man suddenly slumped against Gabriel, and past the reek of unwashed clothes and uncleansed skin, Gabriel recognized the other smells - of hunger, of fear, of (yes, of course) sadness.

"You gotta go eat is what you gotta go do," said Gabriel, gently mocking the man's drawl. Without waiting for an answer, Gabriel steered the man down the street and into a store with a sign that said, simply, "Luncheonette" with "Candy" printed over it and "Soda" underneath it.

Inside, Gabriel felt no resistance as he tucked the man into one of the black butt-scuffed chairs shoved under a table covered with a ratty red/white checkered tablecloth. He turned to the waitress staring at the two of them and said, "Eggs scrambled, ham, toast, coffee, oatmeal, and sooner rather than later would be best for my hero here." As the short-order cook started in on what the waitress had transcribed, Gabriel sat down in the other chair at the two-top.

"Hey," Gabriel said, not hard, not soft.

The man lifted up his head to look at Gabriel the way a man lifts his head out of the water as he takes the last breath he will ever take before he drowns. Gabriel noticed the gash on his left temple that had scabbed over.

"What's your first name? I'd like to have the first name of the person I'm going to save."

And then, in his usual deliberate way, Gabriel waited for an answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

The food hit Jesse the way a shot of adrenalin kick-starts the heart - Gabriel had to put a brake on Jesse's fork-hand to keep him from eating so fast that he'd make himself sick. Jesse took the advice and slowed his plowing through the food and coffee and juice and milk, forcing himself to finish one mouthful before he shoveled in the next. He hated how much he looked like, and felt like, an animal.

The waitress came back with the coffee-pot. Jesse shook his head no, and Gabriel thanked her as she drifted over to the few other customers in the shop. The toast-cleaned porcelain plate in front of Jesse - heavy, with a blue line around its rim - stared its whiteness back at him as he kept himself from looking Gabriel in the eye. He let his gaze wander over everything else - the "Coke" sign, the adverts for Babe Ruth and Milky Way, the shined spigots at the soda



fountain, the ripped leather on the stools at the counter - except the face of the man who called himself Gabriel and who had just fed him for no reason that Jesse could understand.

Finally, he let something out. "I gotta go," he said as he shot up from his chair.

"I lied," said Gabriel.

"What?"

"I lied. You do have to pay me something."

"I got no money. I got nothing. You know that. I gotta go."

"You have a last name?"

"Everyone's got a last name."

"Then give me yours."

Jesse said nothing.

"You tell me your last name, and I'll tell you why I fed you and didn't let the cop take you away."

Jesse could sense on his skin the waitress and the cook watching the scene play out, so he sat back down. He suddenly realized, as the air of his descent rushed up past and into his nose, just how rancid he smelled, and embarrassment rippled through him again as he felt how much like an animal he had become.

"Colton," Jesse said. "Is that enough?"

"Of course not," said Gabriel as he leaned forward. "In for a dime, in for a dollar. Because I want to know how you ended up in New York City, in the great ghetto of Harlem, in full stink, ready to steal from a brother with about as much grace and talent as a broken Scootles doll." Gabriel leaned in even closer. "I am very curious, Jesse Colton, about all of that."

Only then did Jesse find what he needed to raise his eyes to Gabriel's face direct and keen and hiss out, "I got a story that'll make you weep."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel did not weep. Neither did Jesse. But they did weep at that diner table.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Gabriel finally got out, suddenly re-noticing the clatter of the fanblades against their cages that had dropped away as Jesse spun out Zack's story. "I am very sorry for your loss." Gabriel pushed his chair back. "I can give you a chance to fight the bastards who did that - if you're interested. But first things first. You need a place to stay. You need to get that gash cleaned and bandaged."

Gabriel signaled the waitress, who brought the check - Gabriel gave her a dollar bill and told her to keep the change.

"Let's go."

Jesse did not move. He picked up the salt shaker and toyed with it.

"C'mon, Jesse - "

"I didn't - didn't do - nothing to stop them. I just ran and ran and ran and ended up here and - "

Gabriel waited for more, and when nothing more came, said, "At some point, Jesse, whether you have to pee or they shut the door on you, you are going to have to get up from this table and figure out something to do with the rest of your life."

Jesse dropped the salt shaker. Gabriel picked up a pinch of the spilled salt and tossed it over Jesse's left shoulder.

"Now you're protected. C'mon."

Jesse stood up, and Gabriel, taking hold of his right elbow, guided him through the tables and out the door into the September Harlem air filled with auto horns and trolleys grinding up and down the rails and scheming merchant voices and the late-summer oven-heat and the reek of desperation. Gabriel, his hand still on Jesse's elbow, steered him across the broad street and up north on Lenox Avenue, and the street scene swallowed them up with ease.

## Scene 7

They hadn't tromped far when Gabriel, still holding onto Jesse's elbow, bundled him across Lenox at 131st Street toward a building whose signs made no sense to Jesse (not that anything in this asphalt sump had made much sense to him in the three days he'd wallowed here - three days?" - the clammer and grind of the place made the steel mill seem a rest home by comparison). First floor had a sign over the doorway and the big glass display window that ran the width of the building and blared out "ORTHODOX RELIGIOUS & DEPARTMENT STORE." A black man wearing a white coat with dark lapels busied himself cranking open a white, mint green, and candy pink awning that hovered out over the display window that held (this surprised Jesse) some of the usual Jesus-pointing-to-his-bleeding heart statues but also a Virgin Mary with a black face. Next door "D.Saftler" ran a plumbing and heating shop, with a grocery store jammed-in next to that.

Above Jesus and Mary, on the second floor, in letters bigger than the church store, beacons out a sign that said "The Harlem Workers' Center," with three broad windows looking out onto Lenox.

"That's where we're meeting tomorrow," Gabriel said as he pointed to the second floor and nodded to the church clerk at the same time the two of them glided east along 131st.

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," Gabriel repeated to himself, then, louder, "But first things first, friend."

"I ain't your friend," sulked Jesse even as he allowed Gabriel to tow him along.

About half-way down the block they stopped in front of huge roll-up garage door; someone had cut a smaller door into the bigger door, and Gabriel rapped his knuckles against the ratty metal in what sounded to Jesse like a code.

A few counts of nothing, then a knocking code came back to Gabriel from the other side.

Gabriel answered with another code.

Preceded by a carillon of deadbolts bashed home and padlocks unlocked, the door swung open to reveal someone who truly terrified Jesse on the spot.

"This is Tom Milocz," introduced Gabriel.

On a face both swarthy and rubbed-raw, Tom wore a black eye-patch over his left eye. On the eye-patch he (or someone) had painted a red hammer and a red hand-scythe - they looked like the ones he, Jesse, had used back in Virginia. This Tom also had on a tee-shirt with a picture of Jesus holding a book (Jesse couldn't read the title) and a line underneath which said, "Getting Advice."

"I'm the three-headed dog," Tom shot back in an accent that sounded like the Polack who had worked with Jesse raking up scrap filings. Tom stepped aside and waved the both of them in with a sharp jerk of his head. Then, with a quick scan left, then right, he slammed the door shut and sealed it with four deadbolts.

They stood in a cramped office with a door in the back wall that led into what felt like a larger darkness. A single light bulb back-and-forth'd overhead, moved by the blades of an asthmatic fan. Tom stared at what looked like a chart on his desk, and while he scanned it, he raised his right hand without looking up and touched the bulb to quiet it. The shadows stopped hopping around. Jesse also noticed that Tom had spread-leaved a book open on the desktop, spine up. Jesse got as far as reading "The Communist Mani - " before Tom's slavic burr of a voice pulled him away.

"Fifth row, ninth one in - 'sgot his name on it."

"Good," said Gabriel. "His name is Jesse Colton. He has a story that will make you weep."

"Only half the tear output from me," Tom said, tapping the patch. "If he gets anything out of me."

Gabriel turned to the door and began unlocking the deadbolts.

"Wait!" yelled Jesse. "Just wait!"

Tom and Gabriel waited.

"None of you knows me from Adam's off ox."

Gabriel flashed Tom a look, then re-focused on Jesse. "We already know you," he said.

"No you don't."

"Know all about you and your kind," added one-eyed Tom.

"Besides, why do we have to know you to do something for you?" Gabriel gave a half-smile with his words.

"I wouldn't. I never did."

Tom laughed the way a raven caws. "Don't'cha just love 'em when they're raw and fresh?"

Gabriel, looking at Tom again, pointed to his own left temple, nodded at Jesse.

"When am I going to see you?" Jesse murmured, barely able to squeeze his voice out.

"You know the building we passed, on the corner."

"With the black Mary?"

"That always gets 'em," Gabriel laughed. "Yes, that one - second floor, 10 tomorrow morning - if you want. And with that -"

Gabriel slid out the door, and Tom immediately again locked it tight.

Jesse and Tom stared at each other in the sudden silence.

Tom pointed at the book on the desk.

"Ever read this?"

"What?"

"Can you read?"

"Enough."

"Then you should read this?"

"What is it?"

"The Communist Manifesto."

"No, I never read that."

"You can read, right?"

"Yeah - I said that."

Tom reached over to a bookcase filled with copies of the Communist Manifesto. He tossed one to Jesse, who caught it like a man catches hot metal in asbestos gloves. Tom pointed to his missing eye. "This is what reading the Manifesto got me."

"Why would I read it, then?"

"What's an eye for the truth? Sit down."

Jesse sat. Tom reached into a drawer, pulled out gauze and a bottle of alcohol, gestured for Jesse to lean in. As Tom cleaned his temple, Jesse winced but said not a word. How many times with Zack had he - Tom closed the bottle and threw away the gauze. Then he reached into the drawer again to put away the bottle, and his hand came back out with a toothbrush and a tube of Colgate toothpaste, which he shoved across the desktop to Jesse.

"Your breath stinks. Now leave me alone," he growled as he went back to his reading. "Ya got a shower back there - suggest you shower now before the other beasts get here and run out the hot water. Towels, soap - cot's got a sheet and blanket, probably won't need the blanket. We go next door for dinner at 5 PM. Go."

Jesse started to move through the door, but Tom's bark brought him back.

"Look at my shirt," he said as he barrel-chested out the figure of Jesus reading. "What's the guy got in his hand?"

Jesse leaned in and scanned the book cover in Jesus' hands: *The Communist Manifesto*.

Tom laughed and pushed Jesse toward the back door.

Jesse stumbled through the open door into a cavernous echoing warehouse, with natural light falling through the grimy skylights overhead. He could make out rows and rows of neatly planted cots, each with a pillow and a grey blanket, a sheet wrapping a thin cotton mattress.

Tom's voice churned the dust-moted quiet: "Fifth row, ninth one in." Which Jesse found, sat on, waited, breath suspended. Tonight the place would fill to the brim - he knew what that would mean: a place chorused by farts and snores and creaking and shuffling and nightmare screams and the whimpering of anger unpublished. But, for now, peace.

"Like I said, I'd get to the hot water right away," Tom rang out, "these guys are like locusts. Just leave your clothes there - I'll get 'em."

\* \* \* \* \*

When he got out of the shower and walked back to the cot, the only clothes he'd had with anything of Zack on them had flown - probably already in the burn

barrel. In their place, a pair of denims, a shirt, socks, fresh underwear, and worn-toed boots. And Zack's bone.

Jesse put everything on, laid down on the cot, rested the Communist Manifesto on his sternum, and promptly crashed into a deep sleep that carried him through the ruckus of the late afternoon ne'er-do-well flow that washed past Tom into the warehouse and sloshed around Jesse but never touched him at all. His missed dinner. He didn't seem to mind.

## **Scene 8**

At 9:30 AM he stood in front of the display window looking at the black Mary - he'd never seen anything like it. He didn't know what he felt about it, but he knew it hit a something he didn't have any words for. The clerk stood in the doorway, cranking open the awning, watching Jesse stare at the statue.

"What are you looking at?" the clerk asked. Jesse couldn't place the West-Indian accent right away in his ear, so he had to say "Sorry?"

"I said, what are you looking at?" this time with a bit more articulation. "Can you hear me now?"

"Yeah - loud and clear - sorry - I'm looking at that."

"The statue."

"Uh-huh."

"Why?"

"I don't know - never saw a thing like it."

"It's the truth, you know."

"What is?"

"That Mary was black."

"I never saw a picture of her as such."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"Proves I didn't know."

The clerk stopped cranking.

"That's a humble statement to make."

He started cranking again.

"So was Jesus. Black"

"I didn't know that either."

"Yes, he was - the Bible says it."

"I don't know the Bible," Jesse replied. "Well, a little - can't help that - but not a lot. Not that, what you just said."

"White people don't want to believe what's true. That's in the nature of white people. They don't listen to people like Marcus Garvey - "



"Marcus - "

"- when he says, ' Look to Africa, for there a king will be crowned.' Africa!" the clerk snorted, "Africa for white people is a coming storm."

"I don't know a thing you're talking about. Who is -"

The clerk pointed upwards to indicate the second floor.

"They have their books, I have mine."

Jesse pulled the Manifesto out of his back pocket. "You mean this one?"

"I see they have already gotten you," the clerk said, snapping the awning open.

"No one's got me - gotten me." He slipped the book back. "I was just staring at the statue, and you - "

"Maybe you will be the king that will be crowned!" the clerk snorted again, "such people usually come from babies - or from people like babies." He unhooked the crank handle and held it upright against his shoulder like a spear. "It is hard to tell if there's hope for you yet," the clerk replied. "I have to do the rest of what I have to do. You can stare as long as you like." And with that, he slipped back into the store.

A doorway opened to the left of the display window. As Jesse peered into its dimness, he could make out a stairway, which, he thought, must go up to the second floor. So he stepped into the murk, planted a foot on the first step, and rose upward tread by tread, his hand sliding up the palm-smoothed banister, until he stood in front of the only door on the landing. Knuckles up, he rapped three times.

Nothing. Maybe he'd come too early.

Knuckles up again, but this time he used the code Gabriel had used on the warehouse door (or at least he used what he remembered, which may or may not - )

Before he finished the thought, the door popped open, and there stood guard-dog Gabriel, who stepped back and waved Jesse into a small cluttered office, but cluttered in an organized way, with boxes of pamphlets, a mimeograph, typewriter, filing cabinets, desks, chairs. On the walls Gabriel (or someone) had pinned up posters, some in a language Jesse didn't recognize, about coming

to fight for a place called Spain against a man named Franco and for the “democratically elected government” (whatever that meant).

“Grab a chair,” which Jesse did as Gabriel walked over to a table bearing an electric coffee pot and a paper bag with grease spots. “‘Grab a chair’ also means that you can sit down in it. Coffee?” Jesse nodded yes. “All we got is black.” Jesse nodded yes again. “A color of which I am sure the man downstairs would fully approve,” Gabriel added as he poured the coffee into a rim-chipped off-white diner mug. “Did he give you Garvey? Jesus is black?” He handed the mug to Jesse. “Well, at least they keep him company. Doughnut? They’re a day old, but I think you can still chew them.”

“Yeah - sure. Thanks.”

Gabriel flipped a doughnut over to Jesse, which he caught in his left hand, and Jesse tried really hard not to wolf it down - but he failed.

“Another?”

Jesse nodded in an embarrassed way, and this time Gabriel brought the second doughnut to him. And this time Jesse ate it more slowly as he sipped his coffee in between bites.

“Now that I have your coffee-and-doughnut attention” - Gabriel grabbed a chair, straddled it backwards - “that demonstration yesterday - know what it was about?”

“No - I couldn’t hardly hear my own breathing yesterday.”

“Because your stomach was growling so loud.” Gabriel gestured to the posters on the wall. “It was about Spain. You know Spain? We - Communists - that’s what I am - a Communist - organized it, to raise support. That word bother you - Communist?”

“No. You’ve been nice. Don’t know Spain, neither - not much call for anything called Spain where I’ve been.”

“And where you’ve been has never left you.”

Gabriel popped out of his chair and paced.

“The democratic government in Spain, a government elected by the people, has been attacked by a general named Franco.”

“Can I have another doughnut?”

Gabriel stopped, shot him a half-smirk. “Third one you get on your own.”

Jesse went to the bag, extracted a doughnut, started chewing it like cud. Gabriel re-started his pacing.

“Franco’s connected to the church and the big landowners, who want it the way it was in the middle ages.”

“What’s the middle - ”

Gabriel tapped the posters with his finger as he talked.

“Those ‘middle ages’ have got everything to do with you.”

“How’s that? I don’t even know where this Spain is.”

“Yes you do.”

Gabriel moved aside a pile of papers, perched himself on the edge of a table.

“No I don’t. And why would I care - ”

“Franco is the ‘massah’ - know that word?”

“Course.”

“Franco and his fellow ‘massahs’ want to keep the plantation just the way it’s always been - that sound familiar?”

“As common as a cat.”

Gabriel flowed off the table, straddled the chair again.

“Sit down. And what, Jesse Colton - what have you ever done about ‘massah’?”

“Cain’t do nothing about ‘massah.’”

“You do, they burn you up, right? Right?”

“Beat you, burn you, cut your balls off - ”

“Make you less than a man.”

“To them, you less than a man before you’re born.”

Gabriel gave Jesse a sharp but affectionate look. “You’re not stupid.”

“I wasn’t always like this.”

“If you could fight back - you’d fight back? Fight back for Zack?”

Jesse stared into the grounds at the bottom of his coffee cup.

“I would like to think I would.”

“Me, too. That’s why I went in the Army for six years - thought I could fight my way up and out that way. But black buck private in comes a black buck private out.”

Gabriel got out of his chair, and his frame threw a shadow across the room.

“In my dream, Jesse, I take all the motherfuckin’ ‘massahs’ in the world” - “motherfuckin’” hung in the air, sharp-edged - “man and woman and even child, and wipe the place clean of ‘em. Give the rest of us in the world a goddamn break. You want to know me in a nutshell - why ‘Communist’ - that’s what I want.”

Just as quickly, Gabriel slid back into his genial self.

“You up for some honest work today, now that you’ve had three of my doughnuts and coffee?”

Jesse nodded yes. Gabriel strode to a table, snatched up three bundles of pamphlets tied with string and, in the same motion, tossed them one by one to Jesse, who caught them like a man catches a salmon by hand. Jesse scanned the cover.

“What’s “fask” - “faskism” - ”

“Fascism.”

“Fascism.”

Gabriel hoisted three bundles for himself.

“Just a fancy word for what happened to Zack. You got any lungs on you?”

“Lungs?”

“Lungs!”

“For what - why are you yelling?”

“Lungs for yelling. Let me hear ‘em loud.”

“You crazy?”

“I don’t work with light-weights out there. Yell it.”

Jesse turned the bundle over and over.

“Last chance.”

“Fascism.”

“Cat makes more noise spitting up a hairball.”

"Fascism!"

"The guy up the avenue beats up his wife with more style. 'Like to think I'd fight back,' I heard you say." Gabriel stuck his face right into Jesse's and hissed, "Then say the fucking word."

"FASCISM!!!"

Then Jesse spewed out the word over and over and over again, as if the word had raised a floodgate in him. Again and again and again until Jesse found himself dissolved in tears.

Gabriel came to Jesse and simply held him.

"I think that'll do. Now, get your game face on, and let's go."

Jesse backed out of the embrace, not quickly, not slowly, wiped his eyes.

"Zack woulda - "

"Zack can't. You can."

Jesse just nodded.

"All right."

\* \* \* \* \*

When they reached street level, they found the clerk guarding the doorway, his hands clasped behind him and rocking - heels, toes, heels, toes - like a minor metronome. Gabriel walked over to him, held out his hand, which the clerk took, and they shook hands with just the slightest pump but with a firm grip.

"How is the great Satan today?" the clerk asked, face completely straight.

"How is the opium of the masses doing?" Gabriel asked back, his face the deadpan image of the clerk's.

"We're doing a brisk business in comfort," the clerk measured out in his West Indian syllables.

"We're going off to do the same," Gabriel replied in his Harlem meter. "Is today the day for the Apocalypse?"

"Not today, brother, not today - but soon."

"Soon indeed." And they gave each other a small goodbye salute.

To Jesse's questioning look, Gabriel gave back, "Sometimes following a script is the safest way to keep the disagreements civilized." They crossed

131st and headed south down Lenox. “He’s god-full, I’m god-less, and still we have to share the world - so, we share. Besides, he knows where to buy the best meat patties.”

As they strode down Lenox toward 125th, Jesse noticed how many different kinds of places they passed: a driving school, a beauty salon (next door to the barber shop), a photo studio, a church over the barber shop (someone had chalked a Bible verse on slate hung under a stained-glass window - Jesse didn’t catch it), a grocer, restaurants, a drug store - and stoop after stoop leading up to doors that, if Jesse had taken himself through them, would have led to the cramped and filthy and over-priced apartments from which people hung out their windows over the depressed bustle of the streets, where families took in lodgers for a bit of extra cash and where sometimes men rented a bed only during the day or during the night, depending on their work-shift, keeping the bundle of what they owned stashed in a wooden fruit crate or crumpled in a pile on the floor.

No one looked happy, thought Jesse as he tagged after Gabriel, his pamphlet bundles bunging against him. Everyone looked ground-down, flattened.

“You seeing it, Jesse?”

“Seeing what?”

“In the eyes? In the bodies?”

“You mean like me the other day?”

“The other day?” Gabriel laughed back at him. “You mean all of yesterday. You’re right, though - just like you.”

“Worn out.”

“Worn out. Know why?”

And as they moved past 130th Street, then 129th Street, and so on and so on, Gabriel gave Jesse his first primer about living in Depression capitalism with blackened skin in New York’s - maybe the country’s - biggest simmering stewpot of a ghetto. The basic lesson: almost everyone didn’t have enough to make one end meet the other, to help the left hand wash the right, to borrow from Paul to pay off Peter. They played numbers, took in strangers to lodge on their floors, distilled illegal liquor and sold it (and drank it), played the numbers, held rent parties, picked up gifts, swiped a little from an insurance policy, borrowed and swapped and swapped and borrowed, prostituted bodies (and maybe even threw in their souls), tapped the gas meters and electric lines, sopped up a

little relief (WPA, PWA, CCC, UNIA, YMCA, YWCA - the alphabet combos spilled out of Gabriel's mouth) - and for most all of this added up to not enough, never enough, so that if the rent came due, the food fell off, and if the baby got sick, the gas bill got "forgotten," and if the girl needed a new dress so she could go to school without being laughed at, the father slipped another layer of cardboard in his shoe to cover over the hole in the sole. And Negro got hired last, fired first; police-bashed first, questioned later (if at all); an automatic "no" for any offer-up of "Can't we have some more?", the plantation now built up out of bricks and asphalt and disease-full and desperation-full and anger-full. "Not that there's not life here, money here, style and looking-down-your-nose here, music and books and dancing and a 'great ol' time, ha-cha-cha-cha'" - and Gabriel made Jesse laugh as he cake-walked a little and opened wide his eyes until all-white circled his dark irises, the Negro clown face. "It's a full-court-press universe here," Gabriel said, "full-on universe - but man, it is hard!"

They reached 125th Street, and the assault of it whammed Jesse again whole-body: the metal-on-metal screek! of the trolley cars, the throat-drying tang of car- and truck-exhaust, the smells of restaurants and sweat-in-motion and uncleaned street gutters and garbage cans, and the letterpress of bodies printing themselves on Jesse - so many black people on the move, on the march, more black people than Jesse had ever seen in one place at one time swirling past without having to look over their shoulders or duck their heads or hide their faces.

Zack would have loved all of it.

Gabriel dropped his bundles on the sidewalk, freed a few pamphlets from under the twine, and faced Jesse. "Work time, brother, work time and show time. Put those down, grab some of those pamphlets, and do as I do."

Gabriel's booming voice cut through the street noise and hustle.

"Fight against fascism! Couldn't do it in Ethiopia, but we can do it in Spain. Join us in our fight." As he spoke, Gabriel handed out pamphlets right and left, throwing out "Thank you, ma'am" and "Thank you, sir" as he did. Jesse hung back.

"Just jump, man!" Gabriel shot at him. "Just jump!"

Taking a deep breath, Jesse let out a bellow that caught everyone on the street by surprise. Gabriel laughed.

"Just don't break their ears!"

Jesse, smiling, started handing out the pamphlets and thanking people. His voice fit itself into the soundscape. People took the pamphlets looking at him or not, reading them or stuffing them in pockets. "Fight against fascism!" he announced, and for the first time in - days? years? - he felt good, he felt solid, he felt anchored.

He handed a pamphlet to a man, who took it and without reading it threw it away. Jesse ran up to him, another one held out to him.

"You dropped this."

"Get that trash away from me."

"It's really important - "

Gabriel kept an eye on Jesse.

"Get that trash away me, you fucking - "

"Look, man, this is all about the plantation - see, fascism, that's what it's all about - all about the 'massah' - we know all about this, you and me - "

Without a warning the man roundhoused Jesse to the pavement. The crowd, taking no pause, slipped around them.

"Don't be calling me a nigger!"

Jesse rose from sidewalk, nursing his face.

"Mister, I been told - and I'm telling you - we'll all stay niggers if these guys win."

The man gave Jesse a shove back. Jesse held out a pamphlet. The man grabbed it out of Jesse's hand and walked down the street - and he didn't throw it away. Jesse looked at the people looking at him as he restarted his carney bark.

"Help us fight fascism, just like him. Get the master off the plantation. Thanks - thanks - "

Jesse looked at Gabriel, who smiled at him. Jesse smiled back, wiggled his jaw back and forth to show himself intact. Now, Zack would have laughed himself to crying at the whole scene. Jesse held that thought in his mind, managed to make it past the sadness it raised him, kept handing out the pamphlets.

\* \* \* \* \*



In the flophouse, Jesse lay on his back, surrounded by a democracy of breaths, farts, murmurings, and snores - the common humanity at rest.

He sat up.

He saw Tom at his desk, reading under his single light bulb. He got up and made his way past the shoals and reefs of cots and cot-dwellers until he stood in front of Tom, who looked up at him one-eyed and raised the eyebrow over the eye-patch like a "Well, what do you want?"

Jesse held up his book. "Mind? Can't sleep."

Tom nodded yes. Jesse pulled up a chair, sat, opened his Manifesto, and read. They read together.

## Scene 9

Even in New York City, even in Harlem, the 1936 autumn had started in: cooler nights, milder days, no more having to drag the mattresses out onto the fire escapes, not having to use the clanking fans as much (if a body had a fan - maybe they cost only a buck and half from Sears, but if a body didn't have a buck and a half - and if that same body had electricity that the company hadn't shut off).

But in the basement of the church at East 132nd Street, the heat from several dozen bodies seated on folding wooden chairs collected, even though the outside air hung cool in the night sky, the heat added to by a film projector throwing scenes of war onto a white bed sheet.

Next to the bed sheet stood Gabriel; next to him stood Jose Luis Alonso, wearing a red bandana; and next to him stood Rev. George Baker, black-suited with vest, white shirt, and tie. Black people of all ages jammed the room, Jesse among them. Sidewalk-level windows opened inward to invite the air to refresh those inside.

Tom ran the projector, keeping his one eye on the audience over whom washed gruesome pictures from Franco's attack on Spain.

Jose Luis, in an English smoothed by a Barcelona accent, gave a running account. "Francisco Franco rapes our country - has taken away our government, elected by the people. People like you. And Benito Mussolini is now doing in Spain what he did to your people in Ethiopia."

At the mention of Ethiopia, murmuring rose from the audience and heads nodded in knowing ways. On the screen trooped in images of Franco's Moors from North Africa.

"And, like you can see, Franco uses Africans to kill our people - the Army of Africa, it is called." The murmuring continued, now louder, a bit more seismic. The film continued through its final credits until it ran off the sprockets. Tom switched off the projector and switched on the room lights.

A voice offered up an "Amen, brother." Jose Luis gave a confused look to Gabriel.

"That's a good thing," Gabriel reassured him, and Jose Luis smiled, his Adam's apple bobbing against the red bandana. "You might want to give him one back."

"Ah. Amen, comrade, to you, too. I am touched you listen to what is happening to my country. We need people who love freedom to fight for us."

"And so we come to the pitch, folks, what we're doing here tonight - thanks to Rev. Baker for the use of the space. Hundreds of volunteers, folks, from the world over, have been coming to Spain to fight" - Gabriel pointed at the bed sheet - "that plantation mentality."

"Your government will not help us - "

"Our government," Gabriel chimed in, "actually supports Hitler and Mussolini - "

"But we know the people are not the same as the government. I know your hearts love freedom - that is why I am here - to ask you to stand shoulder to shoulder with us."

Vernon Sutton, old, grizzled, with work-gnarled hands and rheumy eyes, called out. "Gabriel?"

"Brother Vernon?"

"Am I hearing right?"

"What are you hearing?"

"He means fight for white people?"

Murmurs, head nods.

"He means fight for freedom - bigger than white, bigger than black, bigger than any color of us." Gabriel shook Jose Luis' hand as he continued to talk to Vernon. "This man's come a long stretch to talk to you - and his cause is good. I love his cause. I truly do. But what you say is true, Vernon. Spain's a long way from 132nd Street. Why fight there when we got our own battle out there?"

"That's what I'm saying, Gabriel."

Gabriel gestured to Rev. Baker. "Reverend, if you don't mind, I have one more to testify."

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside the church, in the falling-in darkness, a dozen or so police officers offloaded from a paddy wagon and a couple of squad cars, their blue wool uniforms turning black in the lowering light. A police captain lit a cigarette,

tossed away the match. His sergeant watched him, watched for the nod of the head that would tell him what to tell the men to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel pointed to Jesse and crooked his finger to get him to stand up, which Jesse did, unfolding himself in front of everyone turning around to see who Gabriel had picked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

The officers fidgeted, surveying the tiers of stacked apartment windows, knowing that the people inside the apartments spied down on them without letting the officers see them back. Not that any of them felt scared about the situation - not like the riot a year before, when 125th Street resembled some war zone - store windows shattered, people whipping themselves into a rage about some Puerto Rican kid stealing a pen knife from Kress' and then believing he'd been killed (he hadn't been, but it took hours and photos from the Mayor's office showing the brat standing next to a cop in his mother's apartment to get everyone to quit and go home) - and then the bullshit commission report on the causes of the riot, which they used as ass paper in the precincts' bathrooms.

Nothing like that now - just breaking up a meeting of some Reds in the basement of a church of one of those loud-mouthed Bible-spitting preachers - a few knock-downs, the captain bashing their ears with some legal crap, maybe dragging off a hothead for a bit of show-time, and then they can get home at a decent hour.

They glanced at the captain; the tip of his cigarette burned red off-and-on, like one of those lights on top of a radio antenna. But he didn't say anything, so they waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesse made his way to the front of the room.

"This is Jesse Colton, newly come to us. He has a story to tell you. About his former life in our neighboring state of Pennsylvania." As Jesse joined him, Gabriel murmured to him, "You got the lungs for this?"

Jesse smiled, nodded yes. His face seemed to shine.

Gabriel turned back to the congregation. "I think, no matter where any of are from, you'll know his story." Gabriel stepped back and left Jesse up front by

himself. Jose Luis, a quizzical look on his face, whispered into Gabriel's ear, and Gabriel, in turn, whispered back to him about testifying.

"Give him an amen," intoned Rev. Baker, and they give him an amen.

"My name is Jesse Colton."

"Welcome, Jesse," several people offered back to him.

"My story? Plain and simple. They burned Zack Walker, my friend, to death - roasted him like a suckling pig."

Jesse let this image settle into his audience.

"They dragged him from a hospital bed down a road into a field, tied him to a fence, piled wood around him, kerosene'd him, then watched him die like they were at a Sunday picnic."

He let this settle in as well.

"I know what you're talking of," Vernon offered up.

"Not much different than the pictures our friend Jose Luis brought us."

"Amen" from Rev. Baker, with an "Amen" from everyone else.

\* \* \* \* \*

Night had dropped. Other than streetlights and scattered glows from windows, only the scuffed boots worn by the police officers had any real light on them, lapped by the glow coming out of the open basement windows.

An "amen" floated out of those same windows.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabriel watched Jesse closely, how his breathing raced, his body tensed, as he leaned in to connect with the people.

"Just like the way Mussolini lynched Ethiopia. Just like this Franco - " Jesse's right arm shot outward in a "Heil." "Il Duce' and the 'Generalissimo' - they ain't nothing but the masters on the plantation - ain't they? They ain't nothing but 'the boss.'"

Jesse breathed heavily, his eyes ablaze.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Say it, brother" floated out the windows and over their boots.

\* \* \* \* \*

"My old thinking?" Jesse continued. "White people murdered my friend. My new thinking? I don't think it's white or black, white against black. I think it's about those that got wanting those who ain't got to never get anything. And how's that gonna stop? Because it's gotta stop." Jesse paused to catch his breath. "It's gonna stop when we say it's gonna stop. When 'we' say it -

\* \* \* \* \*

The captain took a few more drags, then flicked away the butt, a disgusted look on his face. He gave a slight nod to the sergeant, who raised his baton to signal everyone to move in. "I hate this shit," he muttered as the men filed past him.

\* \* \* \* \*

A young man next to Vernon looked up at the windows and noticed the row of boots moving past. "Don't mean to interrupt, but - " he said, and everyone followed his outstretched finger.

Rev. Baker ripped down the white sheet. Tom grabbed the projector and shoved it underneath the table, then he hustled Gabriel, Tom, Jesse, and Jose Luis to the rear of the hall as he hissed "Get in the back room!"

Gabriel and Tom guided Jose Luis to the back of the basement and into a small room, where Tom took both of them inside and shot the door shut. Jesse remained. Gabriel remained. "The both of you, too!" Rev. Baker barked out, but Jesse shot back, "I'm not sitting it out for no one." Gabriel, smiling, concurred: "Gotta protect my witness."

Several heavy thuds on the basement door froze everyone. Rev. Baker turned to Jesse. "You're my deacon - shut up and look holy," and to Gabriel, "Get 'em singing. 'Down By The Riverside.'" Then, to the man who had first seen the boots: "Open the door," which he did just as Gabriel, in a deep baritone, began singing: "Gonna lay down my sword and shield - "

And everyone responded with "Down by the riverside - "

The police piled into the room. The people continued singing, Jesse singing the loudest.

"Down by the riverside, down by the riverside - "

"Gonna lay down my sword and shield - "

The sergeant lobbed his voice into the mix with an "Everyone shut up!" that everyone ignored.

"Down by the riverside - "

"I said shut up!"

"Ain't gonna study war no more - "

Rev. Baker held up his hand, and the people fell silent. "Amen," he gave out, and the people replied with their own "Amen." Then, all innocence, Rev. Baker turned and said, "Sergeant?"

The sergeant turned to the captain, who, with a hangdog tired look scanned the black faces scanning him. "Just tell me where they are. The reds. The Communists. We know you have 'em here."

"In the Lord's house, nothing is hidden," Rev. Baker answered back.

Vernon piped up. "Let's offer up Psalm 90," and everyone launched into "Who considers the power of your anger?"

The captain, in a low voice, told Rev. Baker, "Tell them to be quiet," but Rev. Baker ordered nothing from them. The police looked tense - supposed to a simple in-and-out, and now -

"So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."

The captain, now in a voice with low menace, repeated, "Tell them to shut up."

"They just want to pray," Jesse popped back in a tight voice.

"Deacon - "

"Turn, O LORD!"

"Button it!" the sergeant ordered as he bodied his way toward Jesse.

"How long?" the people asked.

"We're just praying for you!" Jesse answered.

Rev. Baker put a hand on Jesse, but Jesse leaned forward.

"Have compassion on your servants!"

"Back off!" the sergeant warned.

"Praying is just wasted on you, though - "

Without hesitation the sergeant cracked his baton against Jesse's head, and Jesse dropped to the floor like a stone down a well.

Everyone went silent. Everyone went still. Gabriel and Rev. Baker exchanged a quick worried look.

The captain let out a long disgusted sigh as he peered down at the bleeding unconscious Jesse. He reviewed the black faces boring into him. He sucked his teeth, then nodded to the sergeant. The sergeant gestured, and the police thundered back out the door.

The captain shot the Rev. Baker a sharp direct look, then followed the sergeant out.

Immediately Gabriel knelt by Jesse. Rev. Baker nodded, and someone opened the door to the small room. Tom and Jose Luis emerged. As Jose Luis stared at the laid-out Jesse, Tom said to him, a voice loud for everyone to hear, "Welcome to America."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesse didn't know who had laid him out on the couch and shut off the lights or bandaged his head and left a glass of water for him on a small table, but the darkness soothed him and the water cooled his throat after he sat up and drank down the entire glass. Before he fell back onto the couch (the pain rammed against his skull less hard flat out rather than upright), he noticed the angry voices coming in from under the door along with the light from the other room.

He also found Jose Luis' red bandana in his hand.

"Handing out those pamphlets is bullshit - "

"You got an army you ain't telling us about, 'cause if you do - "

"I'm so goddamn tired of - "

"We got to keep the work going - "

And on and on, and Jesse would have given anything to stay there in the half-darkness and let the voices ramble on forever and give his body a long undiluted unobligated rest - but he knew he couldn't, knew he had to lug his head off the pillow and plant his feet on the floor and lever his reluctant body upright and walk into that next room and add his voice and get on with getting back into the flow of time and the pain of deciding.



So he managed to stand up without keeling over despite the cascade of hammering inside his head and the urge to puke. One step, then another and another until he could put his hand on the doorknob and twist it open to a wham of light and Rev. Baker saying “You cannot meet anger with anger - ”

Everyone fell silent as Jesse emerged. Rev. Baker, Gabriel, Tom, and several men and women from the congregation he couldn't recognize stared at him the same way they would have stared at Lazarus.

Jesse held up the red bandana.

“We took him back to his group,” Gabriel said. “He gave you that and an amen.”

“He called you ‘el toro,’” one of the men offered.

“Yeah, the bull in the china shop,” a woman added.

“Leading with his head,” Tom chipped in, “the part least likely to get hurt.”

Small laughter. Jesse clutched the door jamb to steady himself. Then, with shaky but determined hands, he tried to tie the red bandana around his neck. Gabriel glided over to help him, then patted it down flat against his chest. Jesse felt a stupid grin take over his face as he admired it around his neck. Then he looked back up at Gabriel.

“You told me once - seems like years ago - I had to figure out something good to do with my life.” He looked at the others. “Spain ain't Ethiopia - but it'll do.” Back to Gabriel. “Can you get me there?”

Gabriel squeezed Jesse's shoulder, looked into Jesse's eyes. Everyone else in the room swallowed their voices and waited.

“It ain't Ethiopia, like the young bull says - but it'll do. And I'll do.”

And so Gabriel saw that it got done.

**Spain**



## Scene 10

Jesse had time to think - he had nothing else but time to think as the convoy truck he rode in (herded into more like it) lurched and banged and lumbered and shuddered along a bomb-gouged road in a thick deep darkness only once in a while speared by the truck's low-beams as the driver flicked his headlights on and off in a heartbeat's space (so that he wouldn't become the target of any bomber lurking overhead or ambitious artillery officer) to get a half-glimpse - a quarter-glimpse - of the hellbent road in front of him.

Every body on that truck, and on the trucks in front of and behind it - Jesse had heard the number "400" named as the number of bodies cattled along in their 40 trucks - had time to think since they had 150 miles to go from Villanueva de la Jara up to the Jarama Valley, where their commanders had told them they would engage in the defense of Madrid - a city Jesse had never seen and could hardly pronounce in a proper Spanish accent but part of whose fate lay in the nervous and grimy hands of the Internationals.

Cold biting down to the bone - only the press of the men around him caused any warmth, and that just barely - and any of that got ripped away as men, not able to hold it any longer, had to edge their way to the truck's slatted sides to piss (no bathroom breaks on this excursion). And they clutched their rifles, still slick with Cosmoline and older than most of them, like hard-spined lovers. If anyone had cared to ask, most of them would have said "No" to the question "Have you ever fired a gun?"

These defenders of Madrid, these fighters against fascism - some god somewhere had a loose sense of humor.

Jesse tracked back over the links that had formed the chain of how he had come to sit jam-packed in a wheezing truck on the way to shoot a gun he had never shot before in defense of a city and a country that, seven months ago, he didn't even know existed. The Zack part rang clear. The classes in theory and Marx and the Communist Party and the October revolution and the Negro problem and oppression and colonialism and imperialism and capitalism - all those still rang clear as well. But when he stumbled out of the Reverend's library into the light of their argument clutching Jose Luis' red bandana - then things took on the kind of velocity that smeared the lines of time and place and space so that, on one level, he knew the sharp reality of his present moment, sardined

and gut-nervous, itchy with lice, recovering from dysentery, but on another level, it all took on the illogic of a dream, agendaless and smelling of ether.

That November the Communist Party USA had started its recruiting for Spain. Gabriel had snagged Jesse an interview on the “Ninth Floor” - the euphemism for the CP’s headquarters on East 13th Street - where three men didn’t press him very hard for information and seemed glad they had a genuine Negro in hand for their troubles. Jesse couldn’t - didn’t - pretend to understand Gabriel’s sketching-out of the politics of it all - Comintern, Stalin, Popular Front, the damnation of Trotskyites - but he could latch on to (what he thought of as) the deeper meaning behind it all: becoming a foot-soldier in a worldwide working-class army privileged (as that British commissar had said) “to open their war against world fascism on the battlefields of Spain.” (Said to them as they drilled at the Ukrainian Hall down on East Third Street - even Earl Browder showed up.) And that just thrilled him - to play a part, to have an effect, to know a purpose.

Their “training” - some marching, some crawling around, some stabbing the air with broomsticks as simulated bayonets - nothing that would prove useful once their shoe soles touched Spanish ground, but they didn’t know that at the time. They also met their political commissar, Phil Bard, and their military commander (when they got to Spain), James Harris. Jesse never quite got the commissar/military commander split (the commissar acted something like a cheerleader to keep their minds focused on the bigger political scheme of things so that they would always understand not only what they fought for but why they fought for it), and they could overrule the military commander’s authority.

Then, in December, 100 of them, including Jesse, became the first contingent selected for Spain, to sail out of New York for Le Havre on December 26, 1936. Jesse remembered all the leaders’ calls for secrecy, the \$10 they handed him to get his passport (and telling him he had to make up a reason to leave the country - Jesse said he planned to go to Africa to study Zack’s family background), the trip to the Army-Navy store to get his \$50 worth of equipment (the clothes he wore right now along with a sheath knife and a leather pouch to keep his valuables in, all suggested by Gabriel), the send-off party at the Second Avenue Yiddish Theatre (they each received a carton of Lucky Strikes - the CP liked the “strike” reference - a Gillette razor, Palmolive soap, and a tin of G. Washington coffee, “the easier kind of coffee”), and then the departure from the New York pier on the day after Christmas, a Saturday - somewhere church bells rang out (though probably not for them).

They pretty much had the boat to themselves, except for the Folies Bergères girls - their white skin made Jesse nervous, but they seemed to like him, and their attention, and the fact that he could enjoy it without fearing that he would get lynched for liking it, made the long sail over (and the seasickness the first few days out) easier to take. The men played poker for matches to pass the time (who had any money anyway, and the commissar frowned on even playing for matches, dubbing poker “a bourgeois affectation” - but then again he also didn't drink), jollied the Folies girls, argued about the news (posted by the purser, who knew exactly who he had on board) that the American government planned on making enlistment in a foreign war a crime, did their muscle-building exercises, read dog-eared ROTC manuals (which had helpful advice about how to shoot down an airplane with a rifle), and waited for the coast of France to slide into view.

Which it did, as most coasts do.

At Le Havre, the customs officials, with a wink, waved them through, and Bard scattered them to their pre-arranged cheap hotels and boarding houses. Jesse did get a chance to troll the red-light district as they all waited for the train to Paris (more white flesh that didn't promise a lynching or a whipping) and learned, to his amazement, that the women held union cards. In Paris, after gulping down what two weeks ago they would have considered an inedible meal (hunger lowered their standards considerably), Bard and others shepherded them onto the train for Perpignan, the embarkation point for Spain. On the train, Jesse rode in slack-jawed astonishment at the multinational parade crammed into the third-class compartments and marveled at “The International” sung in a dozen languages at the same time.

Their train (someone had named it “The Red Express,” though it didn't travel very expressly) rattled over the Rhone past Valence and then through Avignon and Béziers and Narbonne until it rattled into Perpignan where they transferred to kidney-breaking school buses that took them through a gap in the Pyrenees and finally lurched to a stop in Figueras, Spain. The Spaniards who greeted them greeted them with a song none of them knew until someone named it: the Republican national anthem, “Himno de Riego.” Jesse realized that they had come all this way to defend this country but didn't even know its national anthem. On January 3, 1937, he didn't know what to make of what he had just realized.

Inside the Castillo de San Fernando, a massive pile of fortified stone with a moat and walls eighteen feet thick, Jesse and the ninety-five other Americans milled about with Germans who'd escaped what Jesse heard called concentration camps and Austrians still in ski suits who had shooshed down Alpine ranges and even a couple of Swiss women (white-skinned, blond-haired) who hoped to enlist, all of them trying to find enough space in the maze of stone buildings that ringed an expansive parade ground to lay out their few belongings and not be cordwooded one on top of the other.

Their first meal consisted of goat chops served from a skillet twenty-five feet wide and beans dished out from a washtub. Commissar Bard had forbidden them (again) to drink, and so they didn't drink, much as they thirsted to do so, until an Anarchist officer came over to berate them for not grabbing the long-necked purones like real men would do and shooting a thin stream of wine right down the gullet. When their translator tried to explain to the man that they could not drink on moral grounds, not because they didn't have a taste for Spanish wine, the man just shook his head like a lop-eared mule and refused to believe that men who had come to fight for his country didn't have the stomach for drinking that country's wine - and everyone could see "insult to Spain" brewing behind his clouded face. They all turned to Bard, whose own thin asthmatic face sagged tired and confused, and Bard, for his part, turned to Harris, who, now that they trod Spanish soil, technically had ahold of their leash. "Okay, guys," Harris barked out, "drink - as guests!" And so they did, to the Anarchist officer's (and their own) delight.

A few days later, all of them herded onto a train so slow that someone described it as having "flat wheels" to move on to Barcelona, where the people there greeted them with cries of "¡Hermanos! ¡Hermanos!" and no one, really, in front of these Spaniards, kept themselves from choking up at what felt like the brotherhood and the new world they'd hungered for and traveled to find. They managed to grab a meal at the Lenin Barracks (realizing too late that the men and women cooking their food also held membership in the POUM, the dreaded and reviled Trotskyites - but no one's throat got cut and Karl Marx's lions and Leon Trotsky's lambs enjoyed each other's company without blood-letting - this time).

Then back on the train, past Tarragona to Valencia, where the Spanish government had landed when it flew from Madrid, catching another meal, this time in the abandoned plaza de toros across from the train station (their

arrival heralded by torn bullfight posters flapping in the wind), then on south and upland to the meseta, where the mild Mediterranean gave way to the winter winds whipping down from Aragon. They stuffed paper and clothes and whatever else they had into the gaps and holes of the train cars and tried to sleep on the wooden slatted benches or underneath them until a bruised dawn showed them a barren and starved landscape of croplless fields and evaporating villages, where children besieged them at every stopping for tobacco, money, bread, money, tobacco. In the space of a few days, the mad fervor of early-war Barcelona and Valencia had slipped back and back in their memories until it now felt more and more like a quarter-remembered dream in the face of these faces, hunger-thinned and pain-savaged - these faces they had come to save, to liberate, to renew, and about whose lives they knew nothing.

On January 8, the train with flat wheels finally pulled into Albacete, the nerve center of the International Brigades. A band served up the anthems of various countries - Jesse caught rag-ends of The Star-Spangled Banner - as they detrained and got marched through the town past the grand hotel and through the dens of the prostitutes (the *barrio chino*) to their barracks near the bullring, which they smelled before they saw, since it had no sewers but only pit privies (not deeply or expertly drilled) for the international shit and piss of dozens and dozens of international men.

Someone had prepared food for them (they hadn't eaten since Valencia), but, as usual, the speeches came first. The one Jesse remembered strongest, not for the words but for the person the words came out of, spilled from the mouth of a bulbous man wearing a black beret that looked like, someone said, a "soggy black flapjack" - André Marty, who nattered on about spies and Trotskyites and "political deviates" (all of it filtered through the translators turning his French at a gallop into *tapas* of multiple *lingos*) - it all went over Jesse's head, even though Comrade Marty supposedly held some high rank and carried some weight (other than his ponderous gut) around the place. All that Jesse knew his stomach and body told him: time to eat, time to get some sleep, time to feel afraid, time to hide feeling afraid.

They didn't stay in Albacete long - a good thing because provincial Albacete did not offer much to do. The smokers suffered - tobacco had become more valuable than gold - and their so-called training, run by some French officers who spoke a military argot even the French volunteers couldn't understand, got them nothing but sweaty and cranky and confused. The *jefes* of the International



Bridges took up rooms at the Gran Hotel and all the other office buildings around the Plaza de Altozano, and it didn't take long before everyone got the message that only certain chosen ones got to get inside to see those on high - not the rank and file, not the ones soon to tromp toward Franco's teeth, but the well-fed ones with proper winter coats who had come to strategize with Comrade Marty. All things Marty - he held the only vote in Albacete.

After a week or so, someone with orders from someone else roused them onto trucks that headed northwest away from Albacete toward Villanueva de la Jara, their training camp. As they left, someone spotted bombers overhead - intricate arguments ensued about whether Loyalist or Nationalist pilots flew them. It didn't matter to Jesse - bombers meant war, bombers meant that the war had now crept closer to them on its cloven feet. Just like a lynch mob.

\* \* \* \* \*

Villanueva de la Jara had "disaster" written across it from the moment they piled off the trucks: never enough of anything, from food and water on up to getting real training with live weapons. The Brits and Irish decided not to get along in the most nasty of ways, their sopping consumption of alcohol fueling long-simmering grievances and hatreds, and the Scots, Welsh, and other stragglers in from the Empire made their own arrangements as well. Boredom ate away at their good natures. James Harris, their supposed military commander (Bard had stayed back at Albacete with asthma), tried to get a training program up and running, but nothing he did got up and ran, in part because, like a broken faucet, new volunteers poured in every day to fill a bucket full of holes. When Robert Merriman arrived along with Sam Stember, the new commissar (Bard, his asthma severe, stayed at Albacete), they all thought something would start jumping since Merriman had actual military experience (true, ROTC in college, but still), but whatever got started up also got bogged down in in-fighting between Merriman and Harris (Merriman had made his moves to edge Harris out, which only angered those who liked Harris - and even those who leaned toward Merriman had, because a lot of them came from union backgrounds, a grudge against the supposed privileges of the "college boy"). The upshot: none of them had acquired anything that would keep any of them alive for very long in a street fight, much less in a battle.

A situation which had not shifted one bit when those forty trucks pulled up on the morning of February 15, and they hauled whatever they had in their

hands and brains on board and waited for the devil to take them in its arms and squeeze.

## **Scene 11**

Dawn.

“Look!”

Someone's voice roused him from the stupor induced by hours of truck-lurching to raise his eyes to the sky away from the tangle of boots and sneakers and street shoes splayed out on the gnawed floorboards of the truck.

Dawn, yes - and for some reason the slash of color on the other side of what he could see turning, little by little, into the low scoop of a valley siphoned off his weariness - at least enough of it for him to stand up and make his way to the truck-edge to see better, to smell better.

“Not bad, huh?” the voice continued.

At the steel mill, they'd sometimes get a fake light like this, from the smelter, when the mills ran through the night. Jesse liked this a lot better.

Standing up like this, with the sky throwing down more and more light, Jesse could see, linked in front and back, the chain of trucks waddling up the road - this mighty army snaking up toward an enemy Jesse had no vision of in his mind - not only faceless but bodiless and nameless and flat - ghosts, but with guns - dreams with bombs.

Jesse also now saw that the trucks oozed through a town - forms in the thin darkness flitted from building to building along the cobbled streets, dogs skulked alongside the trucks angling for any dropped food, smoke sliced upward from some of the houses, faces scanned them from the balconies. Someone to the back of him (the Puerto Rican guy, Jesse remembered, from the Bronx, a somewhere in New York he had never got to see) called out the name of the place: “Chinchón - that's what this guy - ” But Jesse never heard the rest of the sentence because the low grumble of what someone identified as artillery coming from the other side of the valley turned his ears away. A thunder sound. A sound with only one definition.

The trucks didn't stop inside Chinchón (much as the men wanted to vault off the trucks and get back the use of their frigid bones and muscles) but continued through the Plaza to beyond the city. There the trucks grumbled to a stop in a scooped-out quarry. Harris and others walked down the line of trucks, rousting the sardined bodies out of their bins - no one dawdled, and soon the place filled with men unkinking knees and stretching arms and blowing off farts and

shooting snot out of one nostril, then the other, and milling around trying to look like they knew the who, what, where, when, how, and why of their situation.

Finally, Harris, with Merriman next to him, herded them up and announced that each man would get a five-clip cartridge for test-firing their rifles against the limestone walls behind him. (Someone grouched that maybe they should stick both of the officers up against the wall to really test things out; someone else added that they hoped no one's gun exploded, what with the Cosmoline still gunked up inside the guns' guts.) As Harris passed him his cartridge, Jesse blurted out, "I ain't ever fired a gun."

"You ain't alone," Harris growled back.

Merriman, holding a rifle, the sun glinting off his glasses so that he looked like he had only shining disks for eyes, clambered up onto one of the trucks and told them to listen up.

"It's easier than you think," Merriman barked. "The big trick: squeeze, don't jerk. Think of having a woman's tit in your hand. And if you haven't had that opportunity" - the men, despite their brittle nervousness, laughed in relief - "well, then, think of your own something that you like to squeeze because making the gun work right is all about the squeeze." Merriman planted the gunstock against his shoulder. "Seat it firm, but don't be hard about it - the gun's going to kick, and if you don't roll with it" - here, Merriman mimed what would happen if someone held the tit-gun too hard and didn't roll with the kickback - "you can break your shoulder. And then the only thing you'll be good for is nothing."

Harris, along with the company and section leaders, marched the men into lines. The rifles, light in the hand and not well-balanced unless they had a triangular needle-shaped bayonet clamped to the barrel-end, kicked back mule-hard against those who never even suspected that guns kicked-back at all, which made their shots jump high. Harris and Merriman prowled the lines, showing the ungunned how to seat the stock against the shoulder, how to cushion the recoil by making the shoulder roll with it, not against it.

Jesse devoured everything they said, practicing making his shoulder absorb the kick-back, practicing breathing in, then half-out as his finger (at least in his head) squееееееzed the trigger back against the trigger guard. But when he stepped up for his turn and settled the stock against his shoulder, he got the rude shock of reality bunging up his mental prep: hard wood bruising soft flesh and fragile bone, the bullet-explosion jammed into his ear, burnt gunpowder

snarling up his nose, the adrenaline bite bitter in his throat - and that after just one shot, and that shot high and wild.

But that one shot broke the dream, and with his second, the gun spoke less with its own mind and more of Jesse's, and by the fifth shot, when the bullet whammed into the limestone wall where Jesse had aimed it, the gun had allowed Jesse to tame it, at least for a while. As he pulled out of the line and let the next people step up, Jesse enjoyed in an odd way the bruise-throb in his right shoulder: not quite a wound but still a confirmation.

Later that afternoon, after a quick wolf-down of bread and olive oil washed down with water, they re-packed themselves into the trucks, and the trucks gunned forward down the valley road toward Morata, the staging area for troop movements up to the front line. The front line. Jesse chewed on those words; his eyes counted up the evidence: they passed burned-out vehicles in ditches, hundreds of men ebbed and flowed, all with dirt and fear and exhaustion and hunger inscribed across them. And then, oddest of all to him, out in the fields he saw farmers whacking olive trees with long poles to make their harvest, the war not more than a mile away but less a war and more like so much bad weather hurrying them to get the crops in before nature took its cut.

In Morata, the trucks dumped them out - from there on, by foot. Just as they climbed down, enemy bombers popped up over the ridge above the town and started dropping their loads. Jesse didn't run, didn't hide, and most of the others didn't either, though everyone else around them scrambled for any cover they could find, because experience hadn't yet written into their bodies the rules concerning "bombers" and "bombing" and "death by bombs." So, stun-faced and body-frozen, they looked up and watched not only the bombs fly down (way off their mark, out into some hapless olive grove) but also six snub-nosed fighters chase them off, sending one of them spiraling down in flames. And then, just as pushed and pulled as a doll on strings, Jesse found himself cheering along with the Spanish soldiers at the downing of the plane, shaking his rifle over his head and jumping up and down.

"You understand what just happened?" Merriman asked him as he and the other officers shepherded them along.

"No," admitted Jesse.

"But it felt good, right?"

"Yeah."

"Be careful with that feeling," Merriman said as they all moved toward the field kitchen in the plaza mayor, "it'll make you think you can conquer the world."

"Why we're here, isn't it?" Jesse asked, his body already beginning to sag a little as the adrenaline peeled away.

"The world's a big place," Merriman answered as he walked away. "You should get something to eat first."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesse now knew exactly what Merriman meant.

They had spent most of the day taking their guns apart and finally giving them the cleaning they needed. And then waited. And sagged. And waited. And feared. And waited. And bitched/complained/whined/carped.

One thing Jesse noticed about the men with whom he felt he'd already passed years even though they'd only kipped together for a couple of months: they didn't seem to make much out of his skin (or the shade-tinted skins of William White or Douglas Seacord or Alonzo Watson or Douglas Roach or Oliver Law or even of those other men whose pigmentation ran to the darker if not African side - Puerto Rican, Cuban) - even the ones who had some of the South in them, from living there or traveling there, made no mention of the fact. He had a sense of the "why" of this because Gabriel had explained how the CP had made Negro liberation a big goal, a top goal, in the United States - the CP chose to see black people much like an oppressed nation, a country with its own kind of mapping and history that America had colonized in order to suck the life out of it. Jesse didn't make out like he understood all of what Gabriel had laid out for him (he still got a little dizzy when words like "theory" and "praxis" got slung around), but if what the CP set out to do made the white men treat him like a human being - well, then, who wouldn't give a slice of his heart and a small piece of his soul over to the CP for that?

And because he felt no hate or disgust rolling off them, Jesse also found himself talking about Zack - about Zack! - when seven months ago he never never never would have dared to take something he held inside himself and put it out in the day's full light in front of white people. But Zack's death dug into them down deep (he could see how the story of that played out on their faces - amazing thing to see!) - Zack seemed to mean something to them, and Jesse, for telling the story, seemed to matter to them as well. Jesse realized that the big new world he said he'd come here to fight for also included (maybe added up

to nothing but) these men who gave him, a more-or-less stranger, their ears and (maybe) some room in their hearts.

But some lightness, too, as they waited - the image of the immolated Zack echoed too much the fact of the war around them (even though they hadn't seen any of "the war," really, yet), so Bill Harvey (he'd changed his last name from Horwitz to Harvey to Americanize himself, he pointed out), a furrier who'd gotten to Spain by way of his union boss, told how, in his Ninth Floor interview, when he got asked if he'd ever fired a rifle, he said "Yes" because he'd had a fair amount of practice at a shooting gallery he hung out at in Coney Island. (He managed not to kill anyone and took a prize in the bargain - and, like he said, "They didn't ask me what kind of rifle, and I didn't feel the urge to give 'em much detail.") Marty Hourihan, a Roman Catholic from upstate New York (Tonawanda - Jesse let the Seneca word roll around in his mouth), got to where he sat in front of them by way of skipping out from home at the tenderized age of 15 to join the Wobblies so he could go to sea. "My poor mother," he said - always a constant disappointment to her because he didn't become a priest like her dead older brother - "like my dead priest uncle, God (which I don't believe in) rest his soul (which I also don't believe in)." Joe Gordon, Bill Harvey's pal, had deserted from the army (from the U.S. Horse Artillery, he explained, where only the horses put out more shit than his commanding officers) and called himself "a man's man and a Communist's Communist."

Alonzo Watson, a Chicago-born painter, spent time in the Illinois infantry during the Great War - a tough ride for any soldier, and even an tougher ride for a black-skinned soldier, "even if I did come from the state that gave Emancipator Abe Lincoln a home and a spot in a cemetery." He and Gabriel had known each other from New York, where Watson worked the east side of Harlem for the CP. Doug Roach shone dark as a pair of black shined shoes and just about made five feet tall, but in college he won himself some bragging rights as a star wrestler and even put food on his table during hard times doing a combination of part-time CP organizing and professional wrestling gigs. Bill White got kidded for being an "old man," but at 44 years old, he maybe should have stuck with his plumbing skills rather than run himself ragged in Spain - but pride overcame the argument of age, and fighting for Ethiopia in Spain made sense to him. Texas-born Oliver Law had done some agitation work in Chicago about Ethiopia - got himself jailed, got himself a name, and thus got himself loved up by the Communist Party, always on the lookout for blacks they could use to build up their image of solidarity among the races.

And so the stories went round and round as they tried to make a virtue out of their waiting.

The officers - Jesse still didn't know what to make of them, in part because he didn't really know yet what officers did or even completely understand how someone somewhere took the 400 or so of them and divvied them up into a battalion, then companies, then sections. He tried to parse out it by thinking of the steel mill and how the owners had bosses, who had sub-bosses, and so on down to him and Zack picking up the scrap - except here, a body could get executed if an order came down and didn't get obeyed.

James Harris, the commander (a Polack, someone called him, which sounded like "poleax" to Jesse, which confused him roundly until Harvey explained the word), had worked as a seaman and (supposedly, though no one had any hard proof about it) had done military service in China as a Marine sergeant training soldiers in the Chinese army - the basis, in fact, for why the New York CP had named him battalion commander. Built square and solid, he looked just like a Marine sergeant, ex- or otherwise, should look - but he had almost no bark, that is, didn't talk much, and when he did, he always sounded rusty, like he hadn't used his voice muscles in a long time. At Villanueva de la Jara, he'd done his best to turn the mob conditions into something like a real training camp, but the flood-tide of new people plus the fact that all Harris knew he'd learned a generation before in the Great War (and the fact that the Americans in the camp turned marathon bitching and complaining into a high art form) made it impossible to turn them into anything that looked, moved, and worked like an army.

A lot of the men liked Harris, the men who had forged themselves in union work by strikes and organizing - he came across to them as real salt with no bullshit. Like the time he'd brought them into the chapel for target practice, putting items on the altar for them to shoot down - not because he disrespected the church but because he wanted them to hear what bullets sounded like when they blew by close to their ears at a shattering volume. It'd made Jesse jump in his skin - it'd made Jesse appreciative, too.

But a lot of them also backed Robert Merriman, Harris' adjutant, a college graduate from the University of Nevada who had also worked in a paper mill and a funeral parlor. (Morris Mickenberg, something of the battalion's court jester, said that the combo of college boy and proletarian gave the CP a wet dream, Merriman as the perfect poster boy for the Party.) Merriman had commanded an



ROTC company, which gave him more military experience than almost everyone in the battalion, and he'd gone to Russia to study collective farming, which gave him Communist credibility. Everyone smelled the ambition coming off him - the fact that André Marty liked him didn't necessarily put a "plus" by his name with many of the men - and it didn't take long before Merriman started moving in on Harris - first, with the lectures on tactics, then drafting the daily orders, then his trips back to Albacete to argue about equipment and training, all done to "help" Harris.

Harris vs. Merriman just added one more topic for argument to the simmer, along with lice, dysentery, lousy food, absent tobacco, and no alcohol.

And then Sam Stember, their commissar - commissars, the strange animals in their world, commanded to improve their political understanding of the struggle so that they would fight harder because they held principles about justice and revolution - but Stember seemed the least likely man in the universe to inspire them, looking, as he did, like a sponged-up clerk and sending out an almost real odor of exhaustion and dullness - some people even called him "The Jello." And the way iron goes to a magnet, or the pup goes to the alpha dog, Stember started working with Merriman and bypassing Harris.

Intrigue, intrigue, intrigue - until, almost as a shock, with the sun going down, Harris and Merriman came along to tell them all to get ready to move out. The time had come, though no one knew what the time would bring.

## **Scene 12**

The Austrian who led them up the mountain pointed out the beauty of the sunset (blood-red) in a thick English that fought with the rumble of the Russian tanks moving down the road back to their base. To their backs, the valley, cut through by the Rio Tajuña, blossomed with pear trees in bloom and whitewashed houses and mills and the shimmering poplars that lined the river. Forward into the blood-red; behind them the sweep of beauty and home. Not that they had much chance to pay attention to anything as they scrambled up the mountain in the lowering darkness.

Before long the sky went out completely, drowning them in pitch-black. The Austrian's voice guided them along a mule path that crossed a railroad used for the mines burrowed into the mountain and then onto a plateau of sorts, full of briars that pulled at their pants legs. The Austrian's English coming out of the tar around them explained that the enemy (somewhere, out there) held a ridge on higher ground, a mile or so to the west (somewhere, out there). "All right - dig in!" And then his voice trailed away as he left.

"Dig in!" the officers' voices echoed.

"With what?" someone answered back. "And where?" chimed out another voice.

"Whatever you got and wherever you can" came back the answers, which meant bayonets, helmets, hands, and the dirt nearest where they stood - Stember, who could have brought them spades, had stayed back at the cookhouse, and curses floated his name up into the night along with the steam of their exhaled breaths. Jesse used the battered and nicked rim of his helmet to stab the ground, and before long the fingering cold air froze his sweat the moment he stopped digging - stuck between the digging making him warm and the digging agonizing his arms and back.

Old Man Bill White, not that far from Jesse, had struck himself a soft spot, and he jetted his dirt back out like a badger tunneling for home until he had himself a foxhole deep and roomy. "Gimme a hand, please" Jesse asked him, and Bill, without hesitation, hopped over, and the two of them carved out enough earth to at least get Jesse's head and body below ground level - at least below bullet level. "Thanks, man," Jesse wheezed, fear and exhaustion cutting down his air intake. Bill Harvey (Jesse could recognize his accent), hissed "I've worked

- as a farmer - out in Michigan shoveling manure - and just about everything else, but I'd rather do that - than this - my fucking hands are just beat up!"

And so for hours they drilled into the earth through the utter darkness, having only a ghost directional sense of where someone called "the enemy" also hunkered down in trenches, someone that they would have to kill and who planned to kill them - and yet for all of them, regardless of sides taken, their lives, swaddled by the obscure night, suddenly grew equally serious and terrifying - with nothing for anyone to do but wait for the morning's light to read them out the rest of their scripts.

When sunrise came, it limned a row of apple trees bordering the line of rails they'd stumbled over just hours before. To their west unfolded higher ridges; about a thousand yards away, shielded by grayed olive trees, snaked the enemy's trenches. Behind them, in the valley, they could see smoke unbraiding out of the cookhouse chimney and lines of mules cargo'd with ammunition and (their stomachs hoped) food beginning to trudge up the mountain towards them.

And thus began their first mistake of the day concocted during the night: digging their foxholes along a skyline. Someone over on the enemy line saw them and called in artillery, and while the men huddled and waited, a small covey of shells arced through the sky and exploded far beyond them. One guy (Jesse couldn't locate the voice) yelled out in a high falsetto, "What the hell are they trying to do, kill us?", punctuated by some laughter cut off immediately by the next round of explosions landing considerably closer as the enemy spotter narrowed down the range, and without the need of orders from the officers, everyone now paid loving attention with bayonets, helmets, and hands to their suddenly-not-deep-enough foxholes.

Then a new noise added itself to the soundtrack: the clipped crack of machine-gun tracer bullets, swarming overhead from the ridge to their west. At this point Stember finally managed to deliver some shovels and picks to them (maybe thirty or so, not enough - and they noted that he didn't stay around to swing any of them into anybody's hole), which they now had to use laying flat on their bellies.

Jesse, sandwiched between death over his head and death creeping up the hillside, dug as fast and hard as he could, not knowing as he shoved dirt to one side then the other if what he excavated would save him or instead embrace him as a grave. Charles Edwards, about 10 feet away from Jesse's boot-soles, got handed a pair of binoculars by John Scott, commander of First Company (at least

the officers along with Merriman and Harris stayed with them all), with the order to find out where the machine-gun fire hailed from. Jesse watched him creep up toward the ridgeline and begin jack-in-the-boxing up and grabbing quick glances before diving back to the ground. On his fifth, maybe sixth, try, the enemy sniper who must have noticed him and tracked his movements, timing Edwards' up and downs, took his shot and hit Edwards square in the forehead, blowing out the back of his skull and sowing his brains and blood in a five-foot semicircle. Hands reached out to pull the corpse away, and several men scurried down the hill with Edwards in tow to get him (what a fucking waste, thought Jesse) to the first aid station, which meant to bring him nowhere to get nothing of any help.

As Edwards slid away, Marty Hourihan yelled out "Chelebian got it!", and Jesse periscoped around to see the body of the man who spoke an English so thick with an Armenian accent that the most any of them remembered him saying concerned the death of his wife (they thought he'd said "wife"), which seemed to make up the main and sole reason he'd come to Spain. Stephen Daduk, commander of Second Company, ordered two men to drag Chelebian away, which they did, hotfooting it down the hill not far behind Edward's corpse.

Now, Jesse thought, Mr. and Mrs. Chelebian would have a lot in common for eternity and amazed himself at thinking up the joke because something that had such an acid edge to it also made him laugh inside. Two men dead in the space of one of the break-times they let him and Zack have at the mill, and here he lay, chewing dirt, and making a joke. He'd come a long way from somewhere.

Bullets overhead, 75s (someone said this) coming up the hill - and now the planes. Seacord, commander of Third Company, the machine gun corps, had done nothing since the sun came up but bitch out whoever had ordered them to dig in on this ridge because it put them below the enemy, just like junk fish in a junk barrel. Everyone knew that part of Seacord's anger came from having to nurse along Oliver Law, his adjutant, who no matter how much the Communist Party loved him and his black skin, Seacord considered nothing more than a watermelon darkie with the brains to match. When Seacord saw the planes slip up over the horizon (Capronis, he thought, but said nothing to Law, figuring the word would mean nothing to him), he shouted as foghorn-loud as he could for everyone to hug the ground and eat some dirt. The bombers came in so low that anyone who cared to look could see the bomb-bays open up their maws, and as the bombs gave in to gravity and wobbled their way down, Law, face cocked back, yelled out, "Not a problem, boss, they're dropping leaflets!"

Seacord turned a dumbfounded face to Law as he reached over and shoved the man to the ground. "They're bombs, you asshole, and keep your worthless motherfucking head down."

The first run of bombs missed everyone and everything, so the planes banked for a second run, and Bill Harvey, who until now had kept a tight rein on himself, fetal-curled himself on the ground and balled himself up as tight as he could. But the second run turned out like the first run, with the bombs blooming up a couple of football fields away. The bombers pulled away, the artillery shells fell less and less, and as long as everyone stayed horizontal in his foxhole, the sun could slide along overhead without them losing anything anymore.

Which the sun did, as it usually does, until nightfall.

A few of the men had light wounds from rock slivers and other debris; two men had shot off their own toes off to get mustered out. The rest of them, now blooded, now exhausted from terror, ate their bread and drank their cold coffee and pissed and shit where they thought they could get away with it and waited for someone to tell them the "why" behind the day that had just passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

They waited like this for five days - the barrages came but killed no one, the sniper fire gnawed at them but killed no one. Somewhere Harris, with Merriman at his side, argued with the International Brigade commanders (someone named Copic, Jesse had heard) about what would come next to grind them up - and Merriman (though none of them knew this because they had no way of knowing it) had lined up Harris in his sights and made ready to move him out so that he could finish taking over the command. No one felt any better knowing that, technically, they lay in a third-reserve position and thus not really at the front - that only meant that at some point, real soon, they'd go from third reserve to second reserve to front line and from there to hell, heaven, or somewhere in between.

And so they waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

Someone had dubbed their locale "Suicide Hill" - but that only showed a deep ignorance about how these things really worked because even though their position had its exposures and weak joints, it lay behind the front line, not on the front line, and their bravado about really wanting to mix it up with Franco's fascists came out of knowing that the bully worked his beat somewhere else.

On February 21, all that changed. Merriman let them know that the battalion had its orders to move up to the front to relieve the Dimitrov Battalion and keep up the series of probes and punctures the Republic had planned to see if it could find a slit somewhere along the stalemated line and break through Franco's half-clutch of Madrid. "Suicide Hill" suddenly seemed a place too good to leave behind as they gathered their gear and moved across the San Martín road into a blasted landscape of too-shallow trenches and crippled olive trees and the pain-etched and hard-tired faces of the Dimitrovs who passed them on their exit. No one said anything because nothing needed saying.

Four hundred yards away, the fascists breathed the same air they breathed.

Two days later, Merriman laid out the attack plan with his company commanders and section leaders (someone in the line ranked this "probe" on the level of what proctologists liked to do with rubber gloves on their hands): Russian tanks would ram through the olive grove and knock out the enemy's sniper and machine-gun nests. The battalion, behind this curtain of armor, would sprint the 400 yards to flood the enemy trenches and then lay down fire on the fascist positions south of the San Martín road.

A snap.

Which happened to Stephen Daduk, Second Company commander, the moment Merriman finished his briefing - snap. He babbled that Copic and General Gal wanted to use the battalion as cannon fodder, that Harris came from the Soviet Union to spy on Merriman - his ravings unnerved Jesse and everyone else, and Merriman and Stember nabbed him before he could spread the fear-infection any more and bundled him off to Albacete. Merriman appointed Eugene Morse in his place, whose only military experience came from trying to set up a Communist cell in a Louisiana army base, which flopped, forcing Morse to become a cab driver instead of a provocateur. Jesse knew enough to know that Daduk's unraveling and having a former hack driver as his boss did not make for a good omen. That made him suspect that the line fed to them by Marty's and Copic's commissars about how the fascists would melt away in the face of their advance because the Francoists had nothing messianic to carry them along would somehow just not turn out true.

The time for growing up had arrived, and Jesse wanted to wrench back the clock.

They spent the daylight in their shallow ditches toying with their bayonets - and even then, at their rest, disaster struck. Bill Harvey worked with his machine-gun crew to set up their Maxim (all this going on down the line to Jesse's left), talking loud about how he wanted to make sure it would work this time (their Maxims all came from some military boneyard - "museum pieces" Harvey dubbed them). As Jesse watched him step around the gun to find a better position, a sniper's bullet drilled into him like a sledgehammer, and Jesse found himself, without thinking a thought about doing it, beetle-scuttling down the trench toward Bill, getting there just as his crew dragged him back and away.

Jesse knelt beside Bill, hearing voices saying such things as "poor Bill" and "he's dead," but Jesse could see his eyelids flickering, and he barked back, "He ain't dead," and just as he said that, Bill opened his eyes and worked his mouth, though no sounds came out, just hisses and wheezes. By this time, two men from the aid station had scrambled up to the line with a litter, and Jesse helped his crew shovel Bill's body onto the rough green canvas. As they started to haul him back, Bill grabbed Jesse's hand and pulled him close, forcing words to come out of his mangled voice: "Long...live..." But Jesse never got to hear what had to have long life because they slid him out of Jesse's reach.

His crew went back to fiddling with the gun and said nothing. Jesse slithered back to his post.

At nightfall, the tanks lumbered up the San Martín road right on time - Merriman, out of character, let out a "Christ, I don't believe it!" They gouged through the olive grove, their 45mm cannon and Dichterev machine guns hammering the enemy parapets, and Merriman and Harris and company commanders and section leaders all swung into action as they fed the battalion into the firefight section by section.

Jesse slipped over the rim of the trench and rabbitted like mad, his curses and yells (and the curses and yells of everyone else) propelling him forward like a high-octane fuel. He knelt and fired (at what, he didn't know, since none of them could see any of the enemy), then stumbled forward, knelt and fired again. The tanks' rounds acidified the air and Jesse found it hard to focus with all the concussive waves ramming into his body - his vision blurred, his breathing serrated his throat. What he did notice, when he could notice anything (he wondered if any of the men creeping forward on his right and left noticed this as well) - the enemy didn't seem to be firing back. Maybe the commissars had spoken the truth - maybe the fascists had melted away in the face of their

implacable ideology-fed advance. At this point, in the clutch of this ripped-up craziness, Jesse felt primed to believe anything.

The men moved from tree to tree, all their half-learned underbaked training dropping away in favor of finding something to hide behind hard enough to stop a bullet. Covered by the tanks, they snaked through the grove until, as Jesse found out, the grove stopped, giving way to a vineyard on a slight upslope that did not hold, for its entire 200-yard width, a single thing that would give a man-sized body any decent cover. But the enemy had not yet really responded, so with the tanks banging away, the advance soldiers, including Jesse, could do nothing except slide into the open space and pray to (fill in the god of choice) that what had gone on before would continue on after.

And then all hell and its hounds broke loose.

The first hound, in the shape of an anti-tank round, gutted one of the T-62s, and the spectacular flame-geyser lit up everyone in the area, making them perfect shooting-gallery targets for the second hound of interlocked machine-gun fire plowing through dirt and bodies with wild abandon. The other tank stopped, turned, and retreated with wild balletic grace, leaving everyone behind in the spume of dirt thrown back by its treads. By now, any momentum stopped, and everyone, Jesse included, did what they could to save their asses and all other body parts. Those who hadn't moved out of the olive grove into vineyard stayed there or started to retreat back to the trenches. Those out in the vineyard hugged the rough-barked grape vines or shoveled mounds of dirt in front of their heads or compiled corpses into barricades or just compressed themselves as thin as they could, bending every effort to mix their molecules with the dirt and thus become one (but still alive) with the earth. The pain-screams of abandoned men sawed through the night air, and the enemy used those torments as targets - Jesse heard more than one shriek cut off in mid-syllable by the crack of concentrated volleys.

Like many in the battalion, like the tank carcass still flaming in vulcan brassiness, the attack had died.

Jesse, spread-eagled on his stomach out in the vineyard, rifle clutched in his right hand, felt butterfly-pinned to the ground underneath him. Left cheek against the dirt, his breath stirred the dust, which settled in a gritty film on his lips and teeth. (The stray thought shooting through: glad I got black skin so nothing shines like a target in the night.) The tank's burn-light skimmed the bodies around him - none of them moved, whether bullet-plugged or possum-



dead like himself, he couldn't tell - but none of them moved. Now that the adrenalin that had coached him up and over the trench-lip and step-step forward into the grinder of the olive grove and beyond had ebbed, he found himself shivering in a combination of spent fear and February cold. And to top it off (or bottom it out), he pissed himself.

As the fire in the tank burned off, Jesse, trying to stay as flat as a flounder, started rotating himself so that he could inch back to the trenches headfirst, with each move imagining himself having no third dimension, as ironed-out as a pencil-sketch. Finally, when he'd swung his body 90 degrees, his ass now the face he presented to the enemy, he dirt-swam toward home with a lizard-like back-and-forth motion. The enemy fire still chattered the air over him. He forced himself to go slowly, even stop once in a while and blend into the darkness, and reject the panic-voice that urged him to get his balls out of this vice as quickly as possible. Now he focused everything on getting back to the olive grove. He told himself - he even whispered it into the dirt that companioned him - "I'm coming back, Zack," and that turned out to be the lie that got Jesse out of the vineyard and back among the safe-making olive trees. From there he rose to a low crouch and sped along until reached the trenches and log-rolled himself over the edge, landing on his back looking up into the indifferent stars.

Without moving at all Jesse could hear other bodies thudding into the trench, their grunts and curses as captions. Jesse didn't hear Merriman's voice, didn't hear Harris' voice, didn't hear Stember's voice, just the voices of those returning non-dead. He smelled his own piss-wet pants. Tears leaked out.

If the fascists had counter-attacked that night, they could have waltzed through the line and on down the Valencia-Madrid road. No one would have stopped them. But they didn't, and so the road held. Irony of ironies.

Nothing left to do but wait.

### **Scene 13**

By the time day's first light sieved through the cloud cover to fall down on them, the screams, cries, gurgles, throat-rattles from the abandoned on the killing field had tailed off to silence.

Jesse lugged his body upright and lifted his eyes up to the trench ridge, part of him waiting for the sniper bullet to blow out his brains, and scanned what looked like mounds of dirt but which (he knew) carried the name of corpse and cannon fodder and ground meat and people he had barely come to know anything about. He wondered if any of the corpse-mounds still had any breath in them, and in the same space of that thought came another that guilted him with its truth: "Better them than me."

Down the trench from him Jesse could make out darker smudges against the coming light - they stirred, they groaned, they cursed - Jesse flashed back to scenes from the mill, when the mill ran at night, and the workers swam through the molten-steel glare; they had always looked like ghosts to Jesse, souls unlinked from bodies, less than human yet all the more human for being so lost. Down the trench from Jesse the ghosts made ready to surface.

Joe Gordon - the man's man, the Communists' Communist - slid over to Jesse. "You okay?" he whispered.

"You okay?" Jesse answered back - he found that he didn't want to talk about anything inside himself.

"Shit, who knows what 'okay' is right now, eh? My heart's still beating."

"Maybe mine, too - not too sure."

"Yeah," Joe responded with a chuckle.

By now, the morning had come up full - by now, the corpse-crop in the olive grove and vineyard made itself as common as day.

"I wonder what they're doing - over there," Joe said.

"I don't have a face for them," Jesse replied, after a pause. "I can't make a face out in my mind."

"Know what you mean," Joe grunted as he shifted his weight. "Felt like I was shooting at ghosts - never knew if anything got hit."

He started to lift himself up.

"What're you doing?" Jesse hissed, grabbing Joe's shirt to pull him back down.

"Just want to see."

"Too much light" Jesse started to say, but Joe just continued upward until his head rose to the trench edge. "Naw," he said, "they're probably just getting their coffee over - "

He never got the last word out because the sniper's bullet sliced into his left eye and pitched him down as if someone had popped him in the back of the knees. Jesse scuttled over to him and saw blood leaking out from the exit wound behind his ear, and as he lifted Joe's head to cushion it, trying not to stare at the mulched-up eyeball in the left socket, trying not to throw up at the sight of the mulched-up eyeball, Joe opened his right eye, looked Jesse right in the face, and said, "I think I gotta go down to the aid station, right? Tell me, right?"

"Yeah," Jesse managed to squeeze out, "I think you're gonna have to get that looked at."

And with that, Joe rolled onto this side, then onto his knees, then, like the way Lazarus must have inched his way out of the grave, wormed his way over the back wall of the trench and down the hillside toward the aid station, moving forward under his own power, his left side enameled in his own blood, Jesse and the others watching him with nausea and awe.

With the sun now full-up bearing down on them, the men had nothing to do but wait. No breakfast snaked up the hill towards them, no officers walked the line explaining to them what had and had not happened, the fascist snipers stitched the trench edge just often enough to convince everyone that a head kept down made for a head well-saved.

By noon some cold rice and cold coffee had made its way up to them, and they passed it up and down the trench the way a priest lades out wafers. The fascists hadn't finished with them, though. Bob Norwood, reaching forward to scoop out a cup of coffee for himself, got drilled by a sniper's bullet through the temple, brain matter blended into the coffee. A runner in Marty Hourihan's section took a sniper slug in the forehead, and his brain spilt all over the rice. One man, cursing, scraped off the unwanted seasoning and continued to eat.

Official numbers for the dead and wounded made their way back to Copic: 20 and 40. For Jesse and everyone else, the numbers didn't matter - they had a different calculus. "Back there," said Hourihan, jerking his head towards his right

shoulder to indicate Gal and Copic holed up in their comfortable headquarters, “they called this a probe - I call it a shaft.” No one disagreed.

Not long after a single word floated down from Gal and Copic on high: Pingarrón, a jagged upfinger of rock between the Jarama and Tajuña rivers held by Franco's Moors. Gal believed that if they could expel the Moors, spit them back across the valley, that would become the first domino to fall in Franco's invasion, reversing his stranglehold on Madrid, and winning, for Gal, the coveted chance to get sent back to Russia and out of the hell-hole of Spain. “At all costs” (and for Gal's greater glory) they must liberate Pingarrón. Copic, of course, agreed with his boss. Merriman, as commander, didn't have any choice but to agree with what he privately considered a suicide mission that would do nothing to Franco and everything to shred the men under this command.

On February 25, sixty-five fresh American faces showed up, many of them still wearing street clothes and Ked sneakers. They had come to kill fascists clutching guns and ammunition (handed to them by Merriman) they obviously knew nothing about how to use. Robert Gladnick, a “vet” of one week, with help from Jesse, took them through a crash-course of breaking down, cleaning, and putting the rifles back together. When they asked Jesse about firing it, he just told them to hold it tight against their shoulders so it wouldn't break their arms. (How much older he felt than these “kiddos” who had ages no younger than his own - he had lived in Spain for all of six weeks yet he felt qualified to judge these newcomers with a cynical pity (he had seen bullet-smashed brains) laced with sadness because to him, they all resembled Zack, and he didn't want to lose a one.)

Gal and Copic set Pingarrón for February 27. Snow came down as they moved south of the San Martín road and dug in, making themselves the extreme right flank of a line that ran south toward the proposed battle site. On the morning of the 27th, under an overcast sky swollen with unfallen rain, Merriman briefed his officers on the assault, who then passed the information down to everyone else. The Americans had to create a diversion while Republican forces to their left and south would throw the Moors off Pingarrón, which in Gal and Copic's meticulous theorizing would start the fascist retreat that would send Franco packing. Copic promised Merriman air, artillery, and tank support.

Everyone got into position as the clock hands moved toward 7 a.m.

Jesse dug out the red bandana from underneath the layers of mismatched and matted shirts he had on, the bandana he had worn from the time they left

the pier in New York. He thought of Gabriel, of one-eyed-jack Tom, of Jose Luis, thought of all of them, then through them back to Zack, Zack before the fire, Zack unmarred.

He tucked it back in.

They waited for the first bombers to slice through the sky and rain down destruction.

## **Scene 14**

Which of course did not happen.

Which meant that Merriman had to delay the attack until the promised artillery barrage came.

Which of course did not happen.

Which meant that Merriman had to call Copic to ask him about this (and about the tanks that Copic had also pledged to the battle) and bear listening to Copic who accused him and the Americans of cowardice because he knew for a fact that the 24th Brigade of Spaniards had already advanced 700 yards (this said as Merriman, field glasses in hand, could see the 24th hunkered down in their trenches under a blistering fire that pinned them as pointedly as insects to a board).

Which Merriman argued about.

Which made Copic, again, call the Americans cowards and Merriman a coward and liar before ringing off.

Which meant that Merriman had only one choice if he himself didn't want Marty and Gal to execute him for insubordination.

Jesse heard the whistles calling them all to fight world fascism and liberate the world from social injustice. Jesse heard the whistles calling them to madness. Jesse could no longer tell the difference between the two.

\* \* \* \* \*

EXT. TRENCH - DAY

Scott, company commander, looked down the trench as Jesse and the others

SCOTT

Pingarrón - that's where we're headed.  
Pingarrón. Say the word - Pingarrón - get  
it in your mouth, guys. Pingarrón.

Jesse can hear Spanish vowels bastardized into a dozen different American accents.

SCOTT

We command that, we control the road. It's

that simple. That's our job.

Scott checks his watch.

FROM SCOTTS'S POV

The second hand sweeps the watch face.

TRENCH

Scott looks up. Overhead, the clouds break and sun suddenly floods the land.

As if this were a sign, the WHISTLES BLOW.

SCOTT

(shouting)

Let's go!

With with a RAGGED SHOUT, First Company pours over the parapet into a hail of bullets.

Jesse passes Merriman, whistle in his mouth, prowling the parapet of the trench urging them all to move along, move along. He sees Merriman raise his left arm. Just as he does, a bullet tears into Merriman's left shoulder and throws him back into the trench.

No time to keep noticing this, no time to keep witnessing, have to move, have to move, have to move.

EXT. PINGARRÓN HILL - BATTLE

Jesse and SEVERAL OTHERS beeline for a clump of stunted trees. Right and left Jesse sees men sawn in half by machine-gun fire, limbs shattered by sniper bullets.

They make the shelter of the trees, even though the constant curtain of fire shreds their ragged bark and thin trunks.

JESSE

(pointing)

We can't bunch up. Go over there. You  
three, over there. Move it, move it, move  
it, move it!

They actually listen to a black man giving them orders,  
and they peel off to find other protection.

Jesse bolts for a fold of ground. Several bullets  
rip through his coat. He sees the others make for a  
boulder. Oliver cuts between them towards another  
mound of dirt.

Jesse looks to his left, see another MAN pounding his  
gun with his fist, crying. Jesse crawls toward him.

MAN

(pounding it)

Fucking thing's jammed, fucking thing's -

Jesse goes to take the gun, but the man grabs it back.

MAN

Mine! Mine!

JESSE

Gonna help you -

MAN

Keep away from me, nigger!

The two glare at each other, the air around them  
shaking with the THUD of explosions and the CRACK of  
rifle fire.

The man, sudden realization in his face, hands Jesse  
the rifle. Jesse knocks the bolt loose and digs out the  
jammed shell. He hands it back.

JESSE

There you go, cracker.



The man, hyperventilating, takes the gun, cackles at Jesse's "cracker."

JESSE

Gotta go.

MAN

Yeah, yeah -

Jesse rolls to his right, then scuttles forward, hugging the ground, jamming his face into the dirt as a fierce swarm of bullets cut the air just above him.

FROM JESSE'S POV

His breath kicks up a small puff of dust as he looks directly at a small, withered, yet definitely yellow flower, no larger than a dime. And crawling up a blade of dead grass is an ant calmly going about its business.

As he stares, the SCREAM of bullets and men muffle into a distant roar, like waves on a beach.

JESSE

(to ant and flower)

Gotta go. Sorry. Gotta go.

Almost immediately, the air SNAPS back into focus with the SHRIEKS of dying men, the HOWLING BUZZ of machine-gun fire.

JESSE

Gotta go, gotta go -

Jesse's face lifts from the dirt, leaving a small dent. The ant makes it way down into the impression.

APPROACH TO PINGARRÓN

Jesse dodges, zig-zags, rolls, dives, fires, scuttles, scampers, fires again. At one point, pitching himself to the ground, he finds that the only cover is a corpse

- the man whose gun had jammed.

Jesse pulls it close to him, rests his gun on the unresisting shoulder, and fires.

SKY

Overhead, a gray pall falls over everything.

BATTLEFIELD

To Jesse's right and left he sees corpses splayed on their backs, cut into pieces. Those still alive fire again and again.

Without warning, the skies open and heavy rain spills down. For a moment the firing ceases and there is nothing but the RUSH of water turning the dry ground to mud.

Jesse sees the men pull back. Jesse pulls back. The bullets begin CUTTING the air again.

ON THE WAY TO THE TRENCH

Jesse, completely soaked, slithering low, comes across a WOUNDED MAN, his left leg a bloody pulp. Bullets kick up mud, but the density of the firing is much less. The wounded man holds out a hand for help.

Jesse drops flat.

JESSE

Get on my back.

The wounded man rolls himself on top of Jesse, and Jesse dragging his gun, slithers his way toward the trench.

EDGE OF THE TRENCH

Jesse snakes up to the edge of the trench and rolls the wounded man off his back.

IN THE TRENCH

Two first aid men drag the wounded man away.

EDGE OF THE TRENCH

Jesse rolls himself over, falling into the mud.

TRENCH

Jesse gets to his hands and knees, then rises stiffly. He pats himself all over to see that everything is intact.

He unbuttons his pants and pisses into the mud.

Then, with slow heavy steps, he makes his way to the rear.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - COMMUNICATION TRENCH

A narrow steep goat path leads to the dressing station. Clogged with men bleeding, vomiting, COUGHING, RAVING, dying, it is a gantlet of the damned. Jesse finds himself stepping on bodies too exhausted to stay upright and ground underfoot in the pools of mud and blood. No one makes a move to take the corpses away. The living lean against the trench walls glare-eyed and stunned.

Jesse passes them all by.

MEDICAL UNIT

A cluster of makeshift tents and shelters. Men lie everywhere SCREAMING, CURSING, CRYING, LAUGHING.

The DOCTORS work without anesthetic, the AIDES bandaging, splinting, carrying off body parts, piling up corpses.

FROM JESSE'S POV

Jesse's fatigue blurs his eyes and ears so that everything looks and sounds as if he is in the middle of a nightmare.

REAR OF THE TENTS

Ambulances and trucks carry off the wounded to the hospitals.

Jesse sees Merriman being loaded into an ambulance, his left arm splinted, his undershirt bloody and torn. Jesse rushes up to him.

JESSE

Sir?

The aides continue loading the wounded into the ambulance, knocking Jesse out of the way to get past him.

JESSE

Sir?

Merriman, his glasses fogged, turns what look like blind eyes to Jesse. Jesse takes off the glasses, and using Merriman's tee-shirt, cleans them and puts them back on.

MERRIMAN

Sorry, I don't know your -

JESSE

Colton. Jesse. From Pennsylvania.

MERRIMAN

Long way.

JESSE

Yes sir. Your arm -

MERRIMAN

Bullet in the left shoulder - bone just

pfft. You?

JESSE

Still one piece.

The aides finish loading the ambulance. They go to close the rear doors. Jesse stops them.

JESSE

Sir - yes or no?

MERRIMAN

It's still our road, Jesse.

The doors close and the ambulance, belching blue smoke, pulls away. Jesse watches it pitch back and forth over the rough ground, then make the road and disappear.

From behind, Hourihan's VOICE.

HOURIHAN (O.C.)

Jesse Colton.

Jesse spins around and sees Hourihan. Jesse walks to him. Hourihan hands him a rough cloth. Jesse wipes off his face, leaving a smear of blood and dirt. He tucks the rag in a pocket.

Hourihan, using his right index finger, moves aside Jesse's filthy ragged clothes and uncovers, under the tee-shirt, the red bandana stained with sweat. Hourihan's mouth laughs but not his eyes.

HOURIHAN

Your good luck charm?

JESSE

What're you going here?

HOURIHAN

Making sure the guys in my section get some of the excellent medical care they got back here. I gotta go back.

JESSE

How many dead?

Hourihan, grabbing Jesse's elbow, turns him back towards the communication trench. The background score of SCREAMS and SHOUTS continues.

HOURIHAN

Come on, walk with me - we gotta get back -

Jesse shakes off Hourihan's hand.

JESSE

How many?

Hourihan stops, and for what seems like hours but which is really only moments, the two of them stand completely still and silent as the madness of the aid station swirls around them.

HOURIHAN

As far as I can figure it, almost everybody's dead, Jesse. They almost wiped us out. Maybe 80 or so of us left.

JESSE

Out of four hundred -

HOURIHAN

It's a horrible math. Come on.

Jesse, holding his gun, his coat soaked, his boots muddy, his breath steaming, simply starts to cry.

Hourihan doesn't move, doesn't touch, doesn't urge Jesse along.

SCREAMS. The rain falls. The mayhem continues.

## Scene 15

If the fascists had decided to do it, they could have waltzed through the Americans' line in three-four time without any opposition. The dawning of February 28, 1937, found the living remnants on the dead ground behind the trenches huddled around a bonfire of ammunition boxes - they did not want to do anything, and they certainly did not want to do anything suggested by the brigade officers circling around them and poking them with their officious voices to get back to the trenches and clear out the dead.

That same morning goat chops and *coñac* had made their way up to them from the cookhouse, and whatever energy they felt came not from ideology or rationality but from the liquor, which warmed their bodies and re-tooled their anger and terror. Jesse squatted on the ground, hugging his knees, his mud-gummed rifle next to him, and watched his fellows argue and orate and complain about the incompetent peacocks who had led them into slaughter until they had lathered themselves into a dense, exhausted mob, retribution-ready.

Jesse wanted to match their heat, but he could only feel a dark ball of pole-axing horror sinking through his guts - even the sight of the tortured corpse of the burned-over Zack could not match what he had seen the day before as the officers - the blind leading the blind having been misled by the equally blind, he now knew, officers with no maps and no reliable military back-up goaded by sightless generals and colonels embedded in a dacha miles away on the bank of a river - told them to move forward against all odds, those odds coming in calibers and hand-grenades and mortar rounds with vertical downward screams. Save the world from Fascism? Save themselves first from the butchers with shoulder braid and the Communists who seemed more interested in making the world safe for themselves than saving the Spanish Republic or seeing the working-class take its rightful place on the historical stage - the echoes in his head of all of Gabriel's tutoring now rang sour and cringing.

The growl and snap of eighty men suddenly standing up brought Jesse up out of his plunge, and the rattle/rush of their moving down the slimy trails to the cookhouse with voices raised and guns in hand brought Jesse to his feet. He trailed, not sure what to do, pulled along in their wake. He scurried to join up with Bob Gladnick, whose grim face cut the air like a cleaver.

"What's going on, Bob?" Jesse breathed out, trying to talk and run at the same time.

"Don't know, don't care," Bob shot back, the Russian accent usually just barely hinted in his American voice now strong and forward, "but if they're thinking like I'm thinking, I'm headed for France."

"France?" Jesse gaped.

"Time to go home."

"Home?"

"You planning to repeat everything I'm saying?"

"I wouldn't know - " but he didn't get to finish as Bob shot ahead, his gun now raised over his head (like one of those Russian posters displaying the ideal outlines of a working-class grunt) and his voice bellowing, "Let's get the fuck to France!"

Jesse now brought up the rear of how many men he didn't know making their way down the highway to Morata de Tajuña, determined, as Bob had said, to "get the fuck to France." Jesse didn't know what to do, so he bobbed behind them in their wake, ignoring his lice-itch and wet clothes and too-thin boots in order to try to make sense of what he saw before him: a mutiny, a pure rejection of what had shipped them across the Atlantic Ocean to defend perfect strangers against - But even for Jesse, for this one who had found salvation in Gabriel's sure hands, this one who hungered for justice for Zack, the rhetoric rang hollow, the words had no more lift or uplift in them. There seemed a disconnect between the high words and the lower bowels, and since Jesse didn't how to mend it, it split him with doubt.

They didn't make it far down the road. Before long (obviously alerted by the brigade officers), a squadron of brigade cavalry (half men/half horses, they appeared to Jesse), bristling lances (lances!) and automatic rifles, blocked their way. Several heartbeats of stand-off, fidgety impasse, then the riders, urging the horses forward, started herding the men backward, their leader barking out "Put down your guns!" in the same kind of Russian-accented English Jesse'd heard coming out of Bob Gladnick's mouth. The men, all the heat knocked out of them by the weight of this cross between medieval knights and cowboy thugs, dropped their rifles and started withdrawing to where they'd started their advance.

Jesse, having lingered far behind the pack, found himself surrounded by the retreating wave. He saw Gladnick talking to one of the horsemen, and as he sidled up to them, his ears surprised him by hearing Russian (he'd heard enough



of that since he'd gotten to Spain to know it as Russian even if he didn't grasp any meaning from its syllables).

"How do you know - that's Russian, right?" Jesse asked Bob.

"Know it since my mama - English came later, when I got to the States. These guys," he continued, cocking his head toward the cavalry, "they're doing this to get back to Russia - they got booted after the revolution - part of the White Army - "

"White Army?"

Gladnick ignored the history lesson. "They don't give two shits - they just want to get home - " The man leaned down and said something to Gladnick, which made Gladnick laugh. "He's a Cossack - Ataman - 'sbeen driving a taxi in Paris for seventeen years - "

But Gladnick got cut off by the brigade officers, specifically Captain Van den Berghe, whom Copic had sent up to complete the roust of the men and to announce that this very day Copic had convened a tribunal to punish them for "cowardice and desertion in the face of the enemy." Jesse could see that Van den Berghe hated what Copic had commanded him to say - the men liked Van den Berghe, liked what some of the Brooklynites called his "moxie" (Van den Berghe had commanded the Sixth of February Battalion, where some of the machine-gun crew had spent time, and they witnessed his cool under fire, the way he had had his men wait to gun down the Moors attacking them until the Moors had gotten close enough to the Battalion's lines to stand ripe for their coming slaughter - nerve the man had in large measure) - and so they didn't take what he said personally. Instead, they laved their anger and hurt on Copic, a man they'd never met but who from the safety of his maps and his dacha had used them the way a butcher grinds meat.

Van den Berghe, backed up by troops from the brigade, ordered them to follow him. They did, not seeing any other choice, especially since their guards had no inclination to stand in solidarity with them as fellow working class -

The White Russians turned their horses away and sprinted back down the highway.

\* \* \* \* \*

Copic.

He had a full name and a rank. Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Copic. Gladnick, who had hung around some of the Russian tank commanders, knew a little about him, which he spun out as they waited in the place Copic had chosen for their “trial”: a high-vaulted cave, a bodega, where the local vintners stored their wine. Copic’s staff had already set up a table and chairs in the main area; the guards had crammed the eighty Americans into one of the cavernous wine cellars in the bodega, where they waited.

“Copic,” Gladnick spit out as he paced, “a cock-kisser from way back in the Great War. Came from Croatia, fought with the Austro-Hungarians, got himself captured by the Russian army. He’s got fingers like sausages and this little divot in his chin.”

“I remember seeing him one time,” piped up Hourihan, “tarted up in this big leather coat, map case slung here, fucking holster there. Little weenie beret - like Marty. He scowled like this” - Hourihan scrunched down his eyebrows, squinted his eyes, clamped his jaws - “trying to look tough. He looked a like fire hydrant with constipation.”

“That’s the bastard,” Gladnick echoed. “He got himself exiled to the Soviet Union for political activity, and now he’s trying to salvage his ass by working for the Soviets here, hoping they’ll love him up enough to kick him back to the motherland a Soviet citizen.”

“Where the fuck is Stember?” a voice piped up. “He’s supposed to be here defending - ”

“Warming his cockles in the cookhouse, probably, like always.”

“And Merriman?”

“You mean ‘Murderman’?”

“Last I saw him,” Jesse chipped in, “he didn’t have much of a left shoulder.”

“Nice that he gets sent back to get fixed.”

“Yeah, well,” Gladnick said, “there’s one kind of fixing for officers, and then there’s this kind of fix for us.”

Gladnick sat down. Silence wormed its way in. Then someone said, “I don’t know about any of you, but I don’t think I’m ever going to be as scared again in my life as I was yesterday - I don’t think I have the balls to be that scared ever again.”

Silence. Then another voice: "I can't do it, guys - I know I promised, but - "

"Promised what?" This from Morris Mickenberg, who stood up to talk. "Promised who? You're on, Hourihan - 'constipation' is right - but the cramps are in the CP - it should be called the Constipated Party - Communist Party, my ass - the Community 'Potty'" -

"Can the bad jokes, all right?" someone piped in.

Mickenberg didn't miss a beat. "Because what has the Party done for us except get us sent over here, and then they turn around and nail our asses to the cross because we got just a little bent out of shape about being massacred by fuck-ups and time-wasters? I don't care what Co-prick does to me because I don't know owe him or anybody anything."

"How about owing us?" Jesse asked, surprised at the voice coming out of his throat.

Mickenberg spread his arms wide. "My comrades, my fellow dupes and dopes and cheated ones, I salute you."

As Mickenberg's sarcasm rang off the cellar walls, the door slammed open and a half-dozen soldiers, rifle-armed, marched in. One of them, in a mucky Slavic accent, read off names: "Hourihan, Mickenberg, Flaherty, Colton, Gladnick, Wolk, Tumilson, and Wheeler - step forward."

"Why?" asked Mickenberg. "We getting extra treats?"

The name-reader pulled out an M-1911 .45 pistol and aimed it straight at Mickenberg's chest. "Name!"

"Mickenberg - you can call me Morrie."

"I shoot him if no one else makes a step."

"Fellas, I didn't really mean it about dupes and dopes and cheated ones - perhaps now is the time to act in a spirit of forgiveness?"

The other seven stood up and, in a parody of a military drill, stepped forward together, and Mickenberg made a joke about international solidarity. As he watched these deadly dances play out, Jesse found that while a part of him still hummed with the terror that had flooded him during the attack and retreat, another part of him had turned into, if not stone, at least something hard - if the soldier had shot him at this moment instead of Mickenberg, he might not regret the bullet. And even odder - the weight of this lithic heart didn't press the

breath out of him. In fact, he felt stronger than at any time during his Spanish picaresque because he felt like he had nothing to lose - and he felt more free than he had ever felt before. He wondered if Zack had found that as the fire digested him, a point when he became absolutely free as everything became absolutely lost.

The soldier flicked his pistol, and the eight of them filed out, the other guards trailing them. The door slammed shut, the lock shot home. The remaining men looked at each other. Someone said, "You know - they did lock us up with the wine." Someone else laughed. Then they all laughed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The eight of them walked into a high-ceilinged room already chock-full with men working hard to look important, festooned with leather trappings and swathed in clean pressed uniforms. Seated at the table, the man with the cleft chin - Gladnick muttered "Copic," and they all nodded. Seated on either side of Copic - other officer-resembling men, unknown to the eight grunts. No one had set up chairs for them, so the eight of them stood where they stood, watching aides bustling in and out with papers and folders, Copic conferring with the two men on either side of him. All the commotion and ritual looked like a play going on for an audience of eight.

Finally, Copic sat up straight, which also seemed the agreed-upon signal for the proceedings to begin. He spoke in something like Russian, which a translator transformed into an odd English. Also, Jesse noted some Spanish officers as well, so Copic's words had to undergo renovation into that language as well. The essence: the Americans had mutinied, and as mutineers the brigade had the right and duty to execute them. But, as a sign of mercy, only every tenth man - in short, the eight of them out of the eighty of them left - would get the firing squad. He would assign the rest of the insurrectionists buried in the wine cellar to labor battalions, to dig trenches and drag corpses off the battlefield and muck out the latrines and lead suicide attacks, work, Copic orated, fit for pigs and cowards like them.

The translating took time, which took a little heat off the blister of Copic's insults, but his insistence on their execution made even Mickenberg's sarcasm take a pause. The man to Copic's right, Lieutenant Colonel Hans Klaus (he punched his name out with a thick German stamp), reiterated Copic's point along with some impossible-to-follow rant about the role of the German labor movement in the proletarian revolution (the translator scrambled to keep but never had

a fighting chance). The man to Copic's left introduced himself, in English, as George Aitken, the brigade commissar and, as he said, a founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain - credentials which impressed none of the eight, though they impressed Aitken - and he spoke in favor of something like mercy, if only because the Americans' complaints about getting thrown into two back-to-back battles without adequate training, guns, and support had some truth to it, a point which Copic, this time speaking for the even more distant and god-like General Gal, denied, calling the Americans "spoiled bourgeois brats" and "capitalist whiners." Aitken, not at all intimidated by Copic's spew, calmly ignored it and went on to repeat his point about extenuating circumstances.

The back and forth went on and on. At one point Copic pointed to the eight of them and asked them if they had any defense to offer. The octet exchanged glances that, if translated, would have come out as "What the fuck do we say now?" But Jesse found himself stepping forward, much to his own surprise, and his voice, when it came out, came out stronger and more linear than he thought possible. "I speak - we speak - to you man to man, not as - " At which point Copic barked out, "I am the commander of the brigade, you are in the brigade," and Jesse, without raising the decibels in his voice, barked back, "In a People's Army, if the leaders can't lead, then the men have the right to - "

"People's Army!" Copic snorted, at which point Aitken added, in his strict tea-time English accent, that the "American Negro" had it right, that the fight here in Spain, for the eight of them, and for everyone else, had to focus not only defeating the fascists but also on building a new way of doing what the old ways could no longer do. With a wave of his sausage fingers, Copic gave the sack to Aitken's point, while Klaus, arms crossed, nodded his approval of the dismissal. Then, pointing a stubby forefinger at Jesse, he once again accused the Americans of imperialist infections and declared that no matter what the black man said, it would do them no good.

Copic, a piggish smile on his face, leaned back in his chair and gave the eight what he must have thought would come off as a withering apocalyptic stare. Jesse, out in front of the others, stared back into that face, then turned to Hourihan and said, "You're right - he looks like a fire hydrant with constipation." Then Jesse turned to the translator and said, "Don't translate that - we're in deep enough as it is."

Just as Copic leaned forward with a force that said, "I will now make my godlike decision," Jesse caught in the corner of his eye the blur of a body forcing

itself into the room, and as he focused his eyes he spied a large uniformed man followed by a posse of equally large uniformed men making a beeline for the troika at the table, a brazen voice with honed Russian syllables cutting the air in front of it like a plow through sod. "What's he saying?" Jesse asked Gladnick, amazed at the smile creasing Gladnick's face.

Gladnick didn't answer at first, enjoying the scene of (what he identified as) the head of the Soviet tank corps in Spain - "General Pahlev," Gladnick rolled out of his mouth - smart-mouthing Copic up one side and down the other. The other men gathered around Gladnick, eager to hear the subtitles to the argument going on in front of them.

"Remember the Cossack I palavered with - Ataman? Well, he told Pahlev that Copic was putting a fellow Russian on trial - just outraged the General that a rag like Copic would even dare blacken the reputation of a Russian with his garbage Hungarian fingers." The eight of them turned to watch Pahlev grab Copic by the lapels, scream insults into his face ("he just called him a jackal," Gladnick piped in), kick over the table (causing Klaus to back-pedal away), and shout "Von! Von!" ("Out, out!" offered Gladnick).

As Pahlev and his entourage stood there, clearly not going to move until Copic and his entourage backed off, Copic smoothed down his manhandled uniform and announced that the trial had concluded, that he now ordered the Americans to go back to their trenches and get on with the work of cleaning out the dead and fortifying their positions.

"Does that mean we're not guilty?" Jesse asked. Copic didn't answer him, but the translator said yes. Pahlev, satisfied, turned to the Americans and said, in Russian, "Where's the Russian?" Gladnick glided forward, and Pahlev shook his hand and embraced him. In the meantime, Copic, Klaus, and Aitken disappeared, leaving the flunkies behind to pick up the table and chairs, and retrieve the scattered papers.

Pahlev turned and signaled his men to follow him out, which they did. Gladnick joined the group.

"What'd he say?" said Mickenberg.

"He doesn't give two shits about you guys, the Americans - just couldn't abide Copic mishandling me. He told me that if I wanted to come join the tank corps, I could."

"You could do that?"

"Course I could."

"You gonna?"

"Any reasons why I shouldn't?"

"Other than that we love your ugly mug?" Mickenberg shot back, "and you love ours?"

"Nice - but not enough," Gladnick replied. He turned to Jesse. "You doing okay?"

"I feel great," Jesse said, and realized as he said it that he, indeed, felt great.

"Yeah, speaking up while I'm tap-dancing on the gallows always gives me a thrill, too," Hourihan added with a lopsided half-smile.

"What'd we have to lose?" Jesse said.

"Other than body parts, not much," Tumilson said in his Belfast Irish accent.

"I mean it," said Jesse, "I felt like I had nothing to lose."

Tumilson gave Jesse a hard, straight stare, then shook his head. "Let's get the others and get the fuck outta here."

They started for the door. Jesse flagged the translator and told them that someone needed to release the rest of the Americans in the cellar, that Copic said to do it. The translator left. They exited the bodega into the winter light, and as the adrenalin of the trial drained away, they started to fidget and slip back into their now-customary wariness and protective semi-paranoia, aware that they had just escaped, by the thinnest of the thinnest of margins, several large caliber bullets ripping through their hearts. "You know," said Wheeler, a New York teamster whom Jesse barely knew until now, "Copic's right - we did what he said we did - we did mutiny - we ran away."

"It ain't 'mutiny' when you're trying to save your ass from being shot off by the decisions of stupid people," Mickenberg declared.

"Yeah, but technically - "

"Technically, we're not even soldiers - technically, we never took an oath to the Spanish government - technically, we're not even technically an army. Who is Copic to tell us to do anything? Christ, Wheeler, you're a teamster - when do you guys ever do anything anyone tells you to do?"

As Wheeler laughed at Mickenberg, the rest of the Americans trickled up from the cellar - and showed clear signs that they had enjoyed the various vintages available to them during their custody. Wolk started rousting the souses for the trek back to the trenches. "Come on, you bastards," Wolk encouraged them, "you can thank us later for saving your sorry hides." The other seven did the same, helped out by a few of the Americans who hadn't drowned their nerves in the grape, and before long eighty dirty, odorous, disheartened, undeluded, still-terrorized men made their way down the Morata highway back to their plateau - the only ones left out of the 400 originals, all the others either dead or wounded or lost or deserting their way back to Valencia.

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The aborted court-martial didn't end anything, of course. Copic didn't trust the Americans, had never trusted them, seeing them only as cowards and spoiled capitalist whiners, so now he sent waves of commissars and military officers to "whip them into shape - or, failing that, just whip them" (no one knew if Copic had said those words, but they all knew he thought them, and so the saying went viral throughout the group). The men, playing out their now-assigned parts as recalcitrants and muckraisers, refused all convincing, refused all doctrine except the blooming of their own minds. Stember, appearing from the cookhouse now that bullets did not fly and bombs did not fall, tried to hardnose his way back into authority - he even waved his pistol about, but the men paid him only insults for his performance. Merriman, recovering somewhere in some hospital far away from them, now had his name become, for all time, "Murderman," and as a group the men agreed that they would never again obey the orders of the ill-prepared and the bloody-minded and the over-privileged and the career-hungry.

Van den Berghe, whom the men liked, showed up later that day to take an accounting of guns, men, and ammunition and to reconstitute them back into something that looked and acted like a battalion, and they let him do his ledger-work, but they also told him flat-out that they had run out of fight and needed to get away from the trenches, which he arranged, having the Franco-Belge Battalion - the one to which he belonged - take their places.

But they didn't rest because they continued to wrestle with the dark angel of why - why hadn't their officers, the men they had trusted to lead them, called off the suicidal attack when it became clear that it had no chance of getting anywhere near the thing named success? No answers came down, not from the commissars or officers or Copic or, over him, General Gal - only "courage" and



“obedience” and “discipline,” terms all hollowed out of any meaning or force, filtered down from on high.

And so the dark angel took up residence among them and its torturing unanswers would not leave them alone.

In the end they elected their own officers and commissars (Copic and the Marty clique at Albacete took this as further evidence of their capitalist entitlement and political naïveté) - but not without weaving for themselves a wrenching narrative of remembrance, the Jarama massacre as bloody anti-epic, as unheroic myth. Dr. John Simon, the battalion doctor, a competent man with the kind of willpower that made him seem crazy and reliable at the same time, took notes, amazed/appalled at seeing grown men cry as they recounted how their guns wouldn't work, how one tried to dig a hole with his muzzle, how another tried to pile up mud to stop fascist bullets that sliced the trees around them, then sliced the men hiding behind those trees - but most of all how their war-directors worked from pre-drafted scripts in places not the trenches, not the killing fields, to send them forward into a witless death. If only they could rest assured that the dying and suffering of the dozens of dead and wounded at Jarama had added up to something worth adding up to - but they couldn't make it turn out that way, and so the telling gave them no rest, and, restless, the certainty that had carried them to Spain morphed into acid and anger.

And, if possible, something even darker. Mickenberg again brought up his point about whether the name “soldier” applied to them, which sparked a debate about whether they could just leave if they wanted to. “Why not?” said Mickenberg. “We didn't sign any contracts, put a right hand on Das Kapital and swear to keep the Spanish republic intact - we chose to come, we can choose to leave.” Wheeler chipped in, “How can we be deserters? What're we deserting from?” But others talked about the rumors they'd heard about an International Brigade prison near Albacete, where the muckety-mucks in that town had tossed people they considered “deviants” - even word of executions, both in the field and in firing squads - Dr. Simon said he'd heard the same. Mickenberg looked stunned at the news, his astonishment damping down his habitual sarcasm. “So who are the real fascists here?” he said, unable to keep the dismay out of his voice.

Hourihan became the battalion commander - he'd take tutoring from Van den Berghe. Arthur Madden got named co-commissar, an action that Stember railed against but dared do nothing about except throw around a little bluster

and pistol-waving and go whining off to the brigade command. Gladnick, Wolk, and Flaherty would continue as section leaders.

The dark angel had found a permanent home, but Jesse put the face of Zack upon it so that he could continue to make it through his time without the fear completely hollowing him out. If he had to sit next to death, if he had to take its warm/harsh embrace, he preferred it wear the face of a friend as it crushed him.

## Scene 16

On March 14, another battle slunk its way toward them, which came to bear the name of “the battle of the Dead Mule Trench” - a skirmish, really, not a full-out battle, but the fact that they had repulsed the Moors and mounded up the fascist dead like haymows made them all feel better - a bit - why Jesse found himself energetically numb during the battle rather than rattling with terror. When Jock Cunningham, a commander of the British battalion, got himself chewed up by a machine-gun burst, his chest and arms spraying blood like a fountain, he didn't think twice about helping Copeman, Cunningham's adjutant, drag Cunningham back from the trench so that the medics could snag him and patch him back to one piece. He watched the pain in Cunningham's bushy-browed face as death tried to seep in to close it down and he fought it to a stand-off - and Jesse found his own blood calm, his nerves attentive, his muscles under command. Death still terrified him, but it didn't ream him out - a redemption, of sorts.

Back at the trench, after dropping off Cunningham like so many potatoes in a sack, he moved forward, Mills bombs in his hands and pockets, which he tossed with the sure eye of a baseball pitcher, until everyone he ran with came up against the dead mule in the trench. To get past it, they would have to go up onto the parapet - the very thing that the machine-gunned Cunningham had done. A group of quintos, from the La Pasionaria Battalion, which had, at the start of the battle, skittered into the background (on the reasonable assumption that doing that would give them a slightly better chance of coming out alive), now rallied themselves to scrape out a cross-ditch that stopped the Moors' advance.

By the time the battle had smoked itself away, they could see shoals of enemy dead without turning around and seeing their own laid out like so many defunct hyphens. They had “won” - whatever that meant. Jesse didn't know what it meant. For the moment, it didn't matter that it had no ready meaning.

Later that March he got a letter from Gabriel, full of chat and politics - Jesse preferred the chat. Jesse wrote back (with great labor - putting down words felt the same to him as handling the toothed edges of scrap steel), aware that all the letters got reviewed and censored, so he kept the news light, the myth-making high. He hated cheating Gabriel like this, but the brigade leadership had become more and more paranoid about spies and “deviationists” and “Trotskyites” (though the leadership ran its own spies through the camps - everyone knew them and enjoyed feeding them all sorts of claptrap that would get passed up the food-chain to Albacete and beyond as serious “intelligence”

- great fun, but the leadership didn't always get the joke, and rumors trickled back about the increasing numbers of people dumped into the labor battalions to do the brigade's suicidal scutwork, like digging trenches in no-man's land or hauling back the maggoted carcasses of the dead, and of the growing denizens of the brigade's prisons - prisons! thought Jesse, for people who'd volunteered to come to Spain to escape all sorts of prisons, spiritual and physical, like he had done himself) - so he kept the news newswy and bland, pumping up the party line, feeding the fairy tale about the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (a name they hadn't even picked for themselves but had had stamped on them by CP leaders back in New York - and "Brigade"! - ha! they made up, at best, a battalion, and a raggedy-ass lice-bitten one at that).

One thing he didn't dare tell Gabriel concerned "the rise of Oliver Law" - not something that the men liked at all. He remember when Doug Seacord (it seemed years ago since Jarama chewed him up at the same moment Merriman had gotten decked by that bullet through his shoulder - but, really, only a matter of weeks) called Law a watermelon darkie with the brains to match - and Law hadn't gotten much better: wrong in his military judgments most of the time, stubborn, thin-skin easily pricked by opinion. (He certainly couldn't tell Gabriel about how Ray Steele and Jim Katz and Marty Hourihan had brought Law up on charges of incompetence for causing the death of a soldier through a stupid order about removing sandbags from the trench parapet - an order directly disagreed-with by Katz and Steele because it would expose them to sniper fire - that immediately got the soldier killed by, yes, sniper fire. The board of inquiry, packed with "comic-stars" and Party men, reprimanded Steele and Katz for questioning Law's order.) After that - no stopping the rise to power. No long after the inquiry, Law - upon command from the CP in New York - got tagged as adjutant-commander, one step down from Hourihan and one step away from becoming the full king of their tribe. Not to mention the propaganda value of having a black man second-in-command of a predominantly white military unit - the CP orgasmed at that.

Off the letter went, misspellings and misgivings all.

The rains arrived in March - cold, bone-damp, sinus-clogging, with ankle-deep mud sucking at rotting leather boots and sneakers and sandals. Never cold enough to freeze the mud and never warm enough to bake it dry. They learned about duckboards and proper drainage (Dr. Simon flew in like a harpy all the time, nagging them to drain their trenches so that they didn't eat and sleep

in a latrine and get dysentery for their lazy indifference). They ate mysterious food and drank cold coffee. And they bitched - as a matter of course.

April came - now, instead of rain, they had to deal with the fine red dust of Jarama as the sun finally wicked away the March deluges. The trenches had come to look like the Hoovervilles in the United States - villages with staircases and roofings and avenues and byways carved into the below-ground-level. Trench-line sentries, posted every 20 yards (Jesse had had more than his share of playing look-out), scanned the horizon for Franco's army (without any of them knowing that Franco had changed his plans of strangling Madrid from the southwest and had started to wheel his forces to the northwest), while everyone else, ground-hogged away in their encasements, wrote letters, read, snoozed, dreamed of sex, obsessed about cigarettes (tobacco having become as extinct as the dinosaurs) - and then started the whole round again.

Desertion had become a brisk alternative. Discipline became harsher and, as it became harsher, had less and less effect. Boredom trumped everything.

Hourihan finally managed to get them some relief. One morning in April he gathered them together at the car park, and they watched as a waddling squad of trucks pulled in. "Up you go!" he shouted, and the men didn't have to have a second command - they scrambled on board like squirrels up a tree. "I don't care where the fuck we're going," said Mickenberg, "as long as I can get my ass away from Jarama." "I second that," someone said. "I third that," chimed in Jesse. "I two-hundredth that," someone else piped up.

The trucks ground their way away and headed north, following the line of the Jarama River, which they could see off to their right. The beauty of the Tajuña valley finally ratified the old travel-brochure nonsense about "Sunny Spain," with the apple trees pushing out their apples and the olive groves starting to fruit.

After an hour or so, word came along about the plans in store for them (Hourihan had started it in one truck and smiled, in his usual hard way, as he watched the daisy-chained message work its way back even in a convoy of moving trucks - these guys, if nothing else, knew how to pass along scuttlebutt). "Someplace called Alcalá de Henares," Mickenberg spouted, "west of Madrid - we're gonna march in a May Day parade!" "Damn it!" someone moaned, "I forgot my tux and marching pumps"

More and more comments flew around like a murder of crows looking for its rookery. Jesse didn't care - he didn't care if every mud-infested stitch of

his clothes threatened to rot away and leave him naked, didn't care about his ventilated shoes, didn't care about the lice in his crotch - he just felt glad that he had enough life in him at the moment to enjoy the prospect of a new place, a new time, a new taste and had not, as he jounced along in the truck, found himself so hollowed out that he could not longer take any carbonation from life.

When they finally pulled up to the dusty arcades of the plaza mayor and leapt off the still-moving trucks, they found that the Franco-Belge XIVth had gotten there ahead of them. "Come on," said Mickenberg, "we'll never find any booze if they've got a jump on us."

But Hourihan had anticipated them. Before they could fan out in their hunt for alcohol (after all, they deserved a binge, even if the binge would mostly likely do them in and make them a sorry sight at the parade the following day), he made them gather in the church where they would stay (the first roofed building they'd inhabited in over two months) while he barked out what he called his "rules of engagement" - not only about booze but also women (and animals, one wag joked) and about the reason they had come to Spain in the first place - and Hourihan meant it, every word of it, which got Mickenberg to shut his yap for a moment.

Then, after making them memorize the location of the church so that they could make their way back from wherever they had gone, he released them.

Jesse didn't quite know what to do with himself. He had no taste for liquor (memories of the many times he tried to keep Zack sober, and didn't), and as for women - well, he just didn't know about that yet.

So, by himself, he picked up one foot, then another, and set off, his leather pouch banging against his left hip.

He passed out of the plaza mayor, dominated by a statue of someone he didn't know, even though he read the name on the plaque - Cervantes - then down the first broad street he found.

The city really took his eye as he wandered - the buildings looked nothing like anything he'd seen in New York. And they stood really close together, with some of the streets barely able to contain the coming-and-going trolley tracks that cut down their middles. And old - everything felt old, oozed old, with arcaded façades and filigreed stonework and porticos lined with shops (though most didn't have much to sell because of the war). Across one street hung a banner: "No Pasarán - Madrid Será La Tumba Del Fascismo." He knew enough Spanish

to know what that meant, and the words still gave him a chill - good, he thought, with relief.

And, on top of one of the buildings, the biggest bird he had ever seen settled into one of the biggest nests he had ever, made of sticks and straw and who knew what else. He stared at it, head tilted back, mouth slightly open. "Las cigüeñas," a voice spoke to him. Jesse lowered his face to look at a small, squat man wearing an equally squat black beret clamped to his head. Jesse smiled, shrugged. "No entiendo, Hablo ingles solo."

"Ah," the man gave back. He pursed his face and brow - the act of thinking. Then he unpursed them as what he sought came into view. "Storks," he announced. "Storks. En ingles - storks."

"Storks," Jesse repeated, then, as an act of equal courtesy, he tried to pump out the Spanish vowels. "Las cigüeñas," he managed to mangle. The man smiled, repeated the words in his richer accent, and Jesse, trying hard to imitate him, re-repeated the words. "Bueno," the man offered in return, gave Jesse the anti-fascist salute, and continued on his way.

"Storks," Jesse whispered to himself. "Las cigüeñas."

He continued down the street, allowing his feet to take him somewhere. People looked at him, then didn't look him, hurrying on about their business - a relief to him to walk among white people and not have them gawp and give him the slit-eyed once-over that told him "you don't belong here."

He passed under an arch that linked one side of the street to the other (with a passageway on top of it because he noted that the arch had windows), which brought him into another narrow street full of arcaded buildings, another plaza. He enjoyed the looseness of wandering a little lost, enjoyed the fact that he knew so little and didn't that much care.

His feet took him to churches, to parks, past more churches and chapels (the architecture of which mystified him - ornate, fussy, a little suffocating, but also calming - the insides of the places settled the nerves, dampening the ear-fracturing bang of the war not more that 30 kilometers away), through small and large plazas until his feet demanded a rest and his body demanded something other than air and wonder to sustain it. The first he could give his feet - the second, not sure how he would make that work out.

The bench he sat on offered itself under an arcade, out of the sun. Behind him ran a row of shops, one of which (amazingly enough) turned out to be a

café with people in it drinking out of coffee cups - in wartime. He sat facing a building across the street. On the grounds of the building he saw children playing, shepherded by several women. More children ran in and out of the building - he could just see through the open door into a courtyard. The sounds of their voices tumbled across the street, and he enjoyed the lightness and punch of the sound echoing off the cobbles in the street. For the moment his stomach stopped growling, his mind stopped growling - for the instant he felt at something like home.

"They sound lovely, don't they?"

The voice, from behind him and to his right, made him flinch, despite the soothe layered through the Spanish-accented English syllables - Jarama still marbled throughout his nervous system. He turned to see who had snuck up on him and met the gaze of a young woman looking down at him.

"Lovely?"

"Yeah - I mean, yes - nice on the ears."

"May I?" Her left hand patted the back of the bench.

"Sure - of course."

She sat herself, pulling the hem of her brown woolen skirt towards her knees, hugging herself inside a tattered woolen sweater. Her right hand shot out. "Luz Baroja y Nessi."

Jesse hesitated, more out of the uncertainty of the etiquette than nervousness (is it all right to shake a woman's hand? he'd never done it), then followed her lead and offered his own right hand. They shook - firm, not hard, friendly.

"Jesse Colton," he offered back.

"Jesse Colton," she repeated. "Now say my name."

He chuckled to buy a little time, then admitted, "I'll just mangle it."

"So mangle it."

"Luz Baroja y Nessi," Jesse mangled away.

"You can make do with 'Luz' - that should be easy enough."

"Even for me." Jesse found it no problem at all to answer her back. "Luz."



She nodded toward the children. "You're fighting for them, you know - I know who you are. From America."

"I am, on both counts."

Luz didn't respond right away - she stared at the children, at the young women moving among them. "Some of them - orphans - in part because of the war - men must go and do their fighting - " A pause, her face in a tight scowl, then, "Some also from before the war - the natural course of losing things. Some - abandoned. Never loved, maybe, or the parent, or parents, found it too hard or too much trouble to make a necessary living. In any case - on the doorstep they went - "

"I'm sorry to hear that." Jesse felt stupid saying that, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"The women you see - orphans, too, in a way - their men out - there - somewhere - so - " and here Luz gave a grand wave of her hand " - we've banded together, our band of sisters and children, to wait while the men - " She left the thought unfinished. "The owner of the house, who has decided that living outside Spain right now might be good for his health, has let us use it for what we need - the government gives us some money and food - " She turned to him. "What about you? Did you have a good childhood?"

He thought about it for a long moment because no one had ever asked him to think about it, even Zack. "I never had what you'd call a childhood," he concluded - a truth he had never had the luxury to admit to himself until just that moment. The same with Zack, when Zack offered to talk about himself at all - maybe that became the link that linked them, born without a childhood, born without a reprieve from the adult world.

Luz nodded. "I had too much of a childhood."

He didn't know that meant, and he didn't feel confident enough to ask her what it meant.

"Would you like to meet them?"

Jesse felt a grin take over his face, the first in quite a while that didn't have sarcasm or irony as its engine. "Sure," he said. "That'd be great."

Luz stood, crooked her left arm and offered it to him. "You have to escort me, Jesse Colton."

He stood, and his body said everything about how he did not know how to do what Luz had asked him to do. She slipped her left arm through his right, pulled him to her side (but not too familiar), told him to rest his right hand against his stomach to complete the proper posture for a promenade, and then, together, they made their way across the cobblestones. "A paseo," she said, and made him repeat it, which he did, without too much of a mangle.

They only had to navigate four or five meters, but to Jesse, it felt like they had shipped themselves off across one of the wide mesas he'd crossed to get to Jarama. He imagined that everyone playing in the yard, child and adult alike, had stopped to gaze at the white woman escorted by the black man across an old street in a small city in Spain - and, in his nervousness, Jesse had the sudden and crazy and stupid thought that he'd prefer snipers' bullets to all the attention he believed people directed toward them, toward an act that in his own country would have most likely gotten him killed.

"You're nervous," she said.

"This is not a thing a black man in America does - that's in my bones."

"Then it's a good thing you're - we're - not in America."

They reached the other side. Luz did not let go of his arm but instead guided him onto the grounds of the building. "You like this?"

"Yeah - yes - I do - ain't at all like what I've been living in." He turned his head to look at her. "How come you know English really good?"

"More on that mystery later," she replied - with a faint smile.

They glided through the open wrought-iron gate and along the path that split what Jesse would have called the front yard. Everyone - everyone - gaped at them, and Jesse felt like a metal duck-target at the county fair shooting gallery. Luz stopped them, and while Jesse stared anywhere but into the eyes of his onlookers, Luz explained the man who stood beside her. "¡Mujeres! ¡Niños! Cuando tengamos otra vez un presente de libertad, de paz y de bienestar, igualmente sentido por todos los españoles, entonces den le gracias, el Amricano, el guerrero." To Jesse's amazement and, following that, his delight, and, following that, his returning embarrassment, and then, following that, a mix of everything, everyone broke out into applause and gathered around him to sling Spanish at him he didn't understand, including people from the inner courtyard, whom he had glimpsed earlier from the bench. He looked at Luz for explanation and felt instantly put at ease by the smile on her face.

Slipping her arm out of his, she started shooing everyone away, mock-chasing a few, calling out to others, flapping the sleeves of her over-sized sweater to roust them back to their play. Then she slipped her arm back through his and guided him into the courtyard.

“What’d you say to them? Whatever you said - ”

“I told them the kind of truth they want to hear these days.”

“Mind telling me?”

“In a moment.”

She sat him on one of the benches facing what she described to him as the eight-sided opening to a well that the house-builders had built about three hundred or so years before - “I can never keep the dates right,” she chuckled - and from which they still got their water. Then she disappeared through a doorway into the house itself, leaving Jesse to scan the scene and think. The children here scuttled off to play with others out on the front lawn, leaving him mostly by himself - mostly, except for one child, a girl, who scrunched herself against the wall of the well and stared at Jesse.

Several rooms led off the courtyard. Above him rose another floor, with a gallery going around it, and the open sky overhead. So different from the stacked, crammed cubbyholes in New York - here, the builders had let in light, air, sky, all made private from the street - no chance for people to get in your business, to butt their noses in. He looked at the girl, who looked at him but didn’t move. “Hola,” he said, trying out one of his single-digit number of Spanish words tucked away. “¿Que tal?”

“Here we are,” said Luz, bringing out a tray on which she balanced glasses and what looked like - and then Jesse’s nose convinced his eyes that she indeed carried in - coffee. “Don’t get your hopes up too high - it’s not 100% coffee, but it’s got enough in it to make your taste buds remember.” He took the tray from her and set it on the bench; she sat with the tray between them and began pouring. “The milk we keep for the children - when we can get it - but I do have a little sugar.”

“Black’s fine,” he said - and even if he had wanted sugar, he wouldn’t have taken it, not with the eyes of the young girl on him. “El Americano” could do without sugar. Jesse let his eyes drift to the little girl, and Luz followed his gaze.

"Ah," she said, and motioned for the girl to join them. She did, but in a slow walk, as if she decided to take each step through a process of elimination between curiosity and fear. Finally, she leaned against Luz's knee. Luz put her right hand on the small of the girl's back and rubbed in small circles.

"Magdalena," she whispered; Magdalena did not reply. "She has not spoken since we found her. We know she hears because, well, we know. We only found out her name because someone had sewed it into her sweater." She looked at Jesse, sipping her coffee. "We don't have a last name."

"She can have mine," Jesse blurted out, not sure where the blurt came from but feeling no desire to take it back.

"Magdalena Colton?" Luz turned to the girl. "¿Y tu qué piensas, Magda?" In response, Magdalena started playing what looked like, to Jesse, a game of patty-cake with Jesse. They did the first couple of hand-slaps together before Magdalena ran out of the courtyard to the front lawn - and letting out a shriek as she did. Jesse picked up his coffee and took a sip - a welcome warmth all the way down.

"Well," said Luz, picking up her own cup. "El guerrero makes an impression."

"Okay, now you have to tell me what you said."

"All right, if you insist."

"I insist."

"'Women! Children! When we have once again a present of freedom, love and well-being, felt equally by all Spaniards, then give thanks to him, the American, the warrior.' You like it?"

"Why do I get the feeling that you don't mean it one hundred percent?"

"I mean it."

"I said, one hundred percent."

Instead of answering, she rested her cup in her lap.

"Do you know whose house this is?"

"I don't."

"It is the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra - does the name - "

"I don't know the name."

“Well, that’s all right.” She lifted her cup to her lips. “What are you doing here?”

Jesse would have had to have had stone ears not to hear Luz’s tone of sarcasm, weariness, and concern, but he decided to keep it light. “I am having coffee with - ”

But Luz persisted. “What are you doing here?” She made a gesture that included all of Spain. “Here? In our God-forsaken - ”

“Wait.” He put down the cup on the tray to free up his hands. “I am fighting to keep your government alive.” At the moment he said that, he felt exactly like Gabriel must have felt during those first days he sat Jesse down and tried to pry the wax out of his ears in order to pour in some workable truths,

Luz arched an eyebrow and smiled. “You are as bad as all the others. Next you will say ‘fascism.’”

“In fact, yeah, fascism - ”

“See - I told you. Fascism - a noun. A word. A gobble-gobble-gobble like a turkey. And this ‘word’ - this is why you were put on this earth? To come save a government full of tired depressed old men, like my father, the diplomat - ”

She bit her tongue, but not for long. “The president of our Republic, Manuel Azaña, comes from here - so did my father - they’ve always known each other, rose together - you don’t have time for a history lesson - ” She took a deep breath to calm herself. “You will go off and be killed for old bones and rusted nails - ”

Jesse pulled his leather pouch around and dug out his Communist Party card and then, with only the slightest hesitation, the bone relic of Zack, and put them on the tray.

“It’s not just your ‘government,’ Luz Baroja y Nessi - ” He tapped the Party card with his finger. “It’s bigger than just ‘government’ - it’s about a whole world - ”

Luz picked up the bone and studied it. “This is a human bone - ”

“It is.”

“From another world - ”

“My friend there - murdered - burned to death - by people where I come from - ” Luz’s finger traced the outline of the bone. “People who don’t have a dime’s worth of difference between themselves and this Hitler or Mussolini - ”

Luz put the bone on top of the Party card, her face mixed with tenderness and disgust. Jesse put them back into his pouch.

“Maybe why I’m on this earth is to ask you why you’re on this earth.”

“You know what we say about Communists?”

She hawked up a gob of spit and expertly arced it into the air. The dust of the courtyard immediately absorbed it when it landed. This took Jesse completely by surprise. She smiled at him.

“Spit anywhere around here, you hit a Communist.”

“Glad it went out there - ”

“Only the anarchists ever really know what’s what.”

Jesse looked at the gob of spit, still fascinated. Luz gave him a direct playful Cheshire Cat half-smile.

“I have many other such anarchist skills.”

“And you know I’m supposed to hate anarchists. I heard about what happened in Barcelona - ”

“Hate all anarchists?”

“Maybe it’s not a good idea to hate anarchists at all.”

Luz put her hand on his forearm, patted it, rested her hand there. Jesse looked at the hand, then at Luz.

Luz gestured to him to lean towards her. Hesitantly, Jesse leaned toward her. She touched his hair.

“Hair - the mind underneath it - ” She wound a piece of Jesse’s hair around her finger. “It’s so - ”

“Nappy - it’s called nappy - ”

“Nappy!” Then softer: “Nappy.”

Luz hesitated, then stroked his cheek, his nose. “Not only about ideals, Jesse Colton.”

Jesse leaned into her touch, then pulled slowly away. "Maybe the ideals come out as stupid to you - "

"No - "

"But in the time I been here - I have felt more like a man than ever. That, Luz Baroja y Nessi, is not nothing."

Children and their keepers began trickling into the courtyard.

"It's time for their lunch. When do you have to leave?"

"Tomorrow, I think - we have to march in the May Day parade - "

"Can I show you something afterwards?"

"You can show me anything."

"First the children, then you." Luz got up, taking the tray with her, and walked away toward (he now guessed) the kitchen. The children paraded past him, whispering and pointing, while the women moved behind them like border collies, rounding up the strays and keeping the jostle headed in more or less the right direction.

He got up and followed them into a dining room, where they had set up several trestle tables edged with chairs and crates and anything else on which a human being could sit. The children took their places while the women hustled into the kitchen just off the dining room. Jesse barely had time to note the woodwork and white plaster and tile work before Luz popped out of the kitchen and asked him, "Could you give us a hand?"

"Sure thing," Jesse replied and ran over to grab a large cast-iron pot of steaming white rice from the hands of one of the women - "Ludovica, este es Jesse" - Ludovica nodded a "gracias" as she turned back to the kitchen. Jesse plonked the pot down on one of the tables, turned just in time to take another one from Ludovica's hands, and plonked that one down as well. Pots of rice on the tables, then bowls of beans on the tables, then (Jesse wondered where they had gotten what they needed to make it) loaves of bread and pitchers of water along with big metal spoons for dishing out the food and plates - some ceramic, others wooden or metal - and flatware and cups of every design and size. Before long, everyone - women and children and Jesse - tucked into their mess of beans and rice and bread and water.

"We scavenge a lot," Luz explained as Jesse enjoyed the simple meal, enjoyed as much watching the children eat and chatter as the food itself. "The

city government provides some as well. We beg. A little stealing everyone once in a while - " she wiggled her fingers - "the 'five-fingered discount,' eh?"

"I know it well."

"We pack them into the rooms upstairs for sleeping. We teach them - we set up school in the courtyard or, when it rains, inside the rooms. Would you like more?"

"No, no," Jesse protested, "I feel guilty enough eating what I ate. And on top of that, the coffee - you all need it more than I do."

Luz took his plate and spoon. "If you can't be gracious when the world turns savage, then what's the point?" She turned toward the children, said something to them that Jesse did not understand, and they all took their plates and stacked them one on top of the other, put the utensils in one pile, herded the cups together, then returned to their seats and bowed their heads for what Jesse counted as a couple of minutes of digestive silence. Then several of the women took the children outside; three stayed behind.

"You want to earn your keep, Jesse Colton?"

"At your service."

Luz handed him a bucket. "Start pulling up some water."

Jesse's buckets filled several tubs of water in a row on one of the trestle tables. At one end, a child and a woman dipped the plates into the water and, with rough rags, wiped them clean, then handed the plates or cups to the next child and a second woman at the next bucket, who rinsed them and then handed it to the third child and another adult, who used rags to dry them. Except, in this case, Jesse handled one of the rags, taking the hand-offs and swabbing them dry with expert swipes of his cloth. Then came the pots. Wash, rinse, swipe - done.

When they had finished, while the children put everything away, Jesse carried the tubs of water out to the street and emptied them, watching the water soak through the dirt between the cobbles and even how the cobbles gleamed, for a moment, with their water sheen.

He hadn't felt this happy in a long time. A long time.

When he got back to the kitchen, the women thanked him for his help (which he sort of got from their tone but welcomed Luz's translation as well). All he could say back was "de nada," but that seemed to suffice. Then, after offering



the women words of her own, which brought smiles to their faces, she slipped her arm through his and, while guiding him out of the courtyard and back to the street, said to him, "Now, for what I promised."

They walked along streets lined with old, lived-in buildings, their feet uneven on the uneven street, Luz explaining the history of the spaces through which they moved - the convents and chapels, Azaña's birthplace - about Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra and Don Quixote - and Jesse explaining back to her about Jarama and Zack and Gabriel and black men.

They turned onto a street called Calle San Bernardo and entered what Luz called "Jardines de la Paz" - the gardens of peace. "Not these days," she couldn't help commenting but quickly added, "but that doesn't matter - here," she continued as they walked into what Luz named Plaza Bernardas - Jesse felt overwhelmed at the number of buildings around them, which Luz quickly described as palaces and monasteries and convents, all built by the Catholic Church. "But that doesn't matter," she said again as she hurried them towards a small corner at the junction of two buildings, where Jesse saw a gathering arranged sitting and standing around a man who, he realized on second glance, had the blank dull eyes of a blind man.

"Ciega?" he whispered to her, and she nodded "yes" in reply.

But even though the man's eyes did not hold a light, his voice did as he recited a cascade of aromatic and fluid Spanish of a kind that Jesse had not heard during his short time in the country. The people ringed around him either looked at him as he spoke or they let their eyes drift away to some middle distance, but every ear there cupped every syllable of his speaking the way a parched throat welcomes the water. Next to him, on either side, forming something like a protective cadre, sat altogether a dozen old men like the speaker, faces mapped by creases and flaring eyebrows and earlobes like pendants, bodies angled toward the speaker like swords held in readiness overhead.

As Jesse and Luz stood there, watching the audience, the people laughed at something the old poet said. Luz smiled but didn't translate for Jesse; instead, she whispered in his ear, "They call him El Caballero - the Knight, the Gentleman."

"What's he talking?" Jesse whispered back.

"He's reciting Don Quijote de la Mancha. By heart. When the fever comes upon him, he just has to speak it out to us - look around you - the way everyone,

for the moment, is - isn't this beautiful? All at once listening to this beautiful old man - at peace - "

She pulled Jesse around to face her directly. "This is why I was put on this earth. This is why."

She turned away from to give her attention to El Caballero, and Jesse, deaf to the poetry but not to the music, let these moments quiet his terrors and bring Zack's face back into view.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dinner, the children gathered in the courtyard while several of the women read to them out loud. Jesse and Luz, sitting out front, could see them through the door.

"You can stay here tonight," Luz said. "We have some straw mats we can throw down for you - not luxury, but - "

"Tomorrow we have the parade," Jesse said, "the reason why we - "

"And then - "

"And then, back we go." Jesse paused, then repeated, "Back we go."

"What if you didn't go back?"

Jesse pondered, then answered, "I have to go back."

And without warning or prelude, Jesse began to cry - from despair or relief, he couldn't tell. Not that the reason mattered. Not that his embarrassment mattered, either - though he sensed that such a thing did not faze Luz in the least. Which it didn't. She simply took his right hand and spoke to him: "Porque el del vicio de la virtud, angosto y trabajoso, acaba en vida, y no en vida que se acaba, sino en la que no tendrá fin - " She laid her other hand on his hair and stroked it. "For the narrow and exhausting road of virtue, Jesse Colton, ends in life, and not momentary life, but in life which has no end - sssh, El Caballero."

Her calling him "El Caballero" made Jesse laugh, and that laugh came from relief, from release. "How's my nappy hair?" he chuckled, using his sleeve to dry his eyes.

"As springy as the mind underneath it."

He put his left hand on her hand that held his right hand, and she put her other hand on top of the huddle of their three hands, and they let their eyes meet and not look away.

"The straw mattress sounds great," Jesse finally said. "A lot better than what I've been bunking on over the last few months."

"Then your parade in the morning - the parades - May Day - solidarity!" she sarcasmed out with a short pump of her arm into the air.

"At least in the parade I'll know where I'm going," he grinned. "You see, it all depends on what you've been through."

Luz stood up, pulling Jesse to this feet. "Ven conmigo, Sancho." They walked to the doorway to the courtyard and stood there, framed by it, watching the story-teller and the story-hearers.

"Wait here," she said as she moved into the courtyard.

"Not going anywhere."

As Luz ascended the stairs to the second floor, Jesse rested his gaze on the children, some seated, some standing, some with the heads of friends in their laps and stroking their hair, others on their backs gazing into the sky. The young woman reading held a heavy book in her two hands. No one paid any special attention to him, which suited him just fine.

Luz came back with a cloth bag in her hand and handed it to Jesse. Jesse opened it and slipped out a figurine made of old house keys welded together. "Don Quixote," she murmured to him, "for your good luck. It's what she's reading to them."

Jesse gazed at the figure, with its elongated body and pointed beard and upheld lance. "I'm gonna have to get a copy of that book when I get back."

"I like that phrase."

"Which phrase?"

"When you get back."

"Always been my intention." Jesse slipped the sculpture back into its bag, and then slipped the bag into his leather pouch. An awkward pause, where Luz could read on Jesse's face that Jesse wanted to make some other gesture but couldn't decide what to do. In the end, he stuck out his right hand; she nestled her right hand into his; they shook.

"Thank you," he said. "Gracias."

“De nada,” she handed back to him. “It’s time. Excuse me.” As Jesse stepped forward, Luz swung the heavy door from against the wall and set it home in its frame, then bolted it shut.

“There,” she said, and they went back to listening.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesse slept well that night.

The coffee in the morning tasted ambrosial.

Jesse touching her cheek - his fingertips remembered.

Luz grabbing his hand and laying it against her face - his hand remembered.

“Adios, Caballero.”

“Adios, Luz Baroja y Nessi.”

Everything remembered.

\* \* \* \* \*

The parade.

Despite the fact that most of the Americans had shown up half-paralyzed from their overnight drinking binge, they made a passable showing as they marched through the city to the reviewing field, got reviewed by well-tailored officers cantering by on well-tailored horses, and then marched back to the Plaza de Cervantes to board the trucks back to Jarama.

Which they did. Which took them back. To.

## Scene 17

"Fucking Christ!"

That single phrase told it all.

Eighteen days earlier they had traipsed down from the cool July hillsides of Valdemorillo to play their part in the attack on Brunete, the Republican government's decision to stop playing defense and go on the offense against Franco and the Nationalists.

Brunete sat northwest of Jarama, almost due west from Madrid - the Brigade command had decided, in their usual monarchical way (and without any real experience in conducting an offensive campaign against the better-supplied Francoists), to lob the International Brigades down from the north to push Franco south and relieve the siege-pressure against Madrid.

The plan relied on two completely untested tactics by the attacking army: secrecy (moving and then hiding close to 50,000 soldiers in the pine barrens and craggy foothills of the Guadarrama Mountains) and surprise (troops movements, tank attacks, and bombing runs all to run on schedule at the same time in one harmonious dance).

As Ray Steel said, "This is going to be one big cock-up."

Mickenberg snickered and accused Steele of sounding like an optimist.

Jesse liked Ray Steele. Back at Jarama, when Oliver Law got bumped into the command slot of the machine-gun company, which included Steele, Jesse admired the way Steele (and along with Steele, Hourihan, the then-battalion commander) fought against Law's incompetent command. Even though Law and Jesse shared the adjective/noun "Negro," Jesse thought of himself as different than Law. While Jesse knew that he, Jesse, didn't possess any great shakes of what Gabriel called "intellectual brights," he had done his reading, he had thought hard and long about the ideas that Gabriel (and Tom, and all the others) had drilled into him, and he never stopped remembering (this came from Zack - and a little from Luz, too) that no matter how much better he thought he had become, what he had left to do to improve and improve and improve himself made any progress feel small and inconclusive.

Not Law - he had the kind of anxious soul and unsharp mind that took any gift of power, no matter how small and limited, as a sign that he had the right to lord it over anyone underneath him - not understand, not collaborate with,

not feel sympathy for, but to exploit, belittle, and dispose of. Until someone or something really challenged him, at which point he fell back on bluster and blame. Mickenberg labeled him a bully, a sheep in wolf's clothing, and Jesse had to agree.

When Law had made a decision, as the machine-gun company commander, that ended in the death, by sniper, of a soldier - an unnecessary death, a death that would never have happened if Law hadn't made the soldier move some protective sandbags out of the way - Steele and Hourihan, along with Jim Katz, another gunner, filed a charge of incompetence with the élites back in Albacete. But Law got off because, as everyone knew, the commissars and Party men on the review board needed the propaganda leverage of touting that a black man had the command of a company of white troops - the CP's way of making itself look four-square American and progressive - and couldn't afford to have the charges stick. Instead, Hourihan and Steele got reprimanded (Law pig-piled on that one by calling Steele an "undisciplined troublemaker") - and the word got out that the battalion had taken the radical step of allowing a black man to lead white troops, something, as the CP kept hammering out, that the supposedly democratic United States had never managed to accomplish.

Things hadn't gotten any better with Law - he continued to puff himself up as he moved through the ranks until, just before the announcement of the battle plans for Brunete, Law got slotted into the command of the whole battalion when Hourihan got bumped upstairs as the regimental adjutant - and, as Steele remarked, Law had now reached the highest level of his incompetence. Law did not wear the robes of authority well (in part, as Jesse suspected, because of the terror Law felt at having command of something he knew he really didn't have the talent or brains to command as well as having no way to say "no thanks" to the promotion without having to wear the label of coward and shirker), and the chip always on his shoulder only got bigger and mouthier. The Americans kept their mouths shut - even though they had had enough of commanders who knew little or nothing about commanding them in ways that would keep them alive, they also didn't want to get tarred with "racist" or, worse, Trotskyist. So they let Law bumble along, a law unto himself.

During the month the Americans had spent in Albares to repair themselves away from Jarama, Steele - and only Steele, a huge club-footed handsome warrior of a man - had managed to get himself engaged to one of the local beauties - the village's chaperones had managed to block all the other men's

access to the much desired and urgent treasure of a good romp with - followed by a quick goodbye to - the town's daughters. Jesse saw how Steele treated the young woman - gentle, smiling, restrained - and it reminded him about the nourishment of affection - a needed reminder because it had gotten harder each day to bring Zack's face back into focus, to feel the blood and flesh of his friend's former aliveness, and even Luz's touches had begun to fade.

But now, July 24 - Ray Steele's cock-up had come to pass and left the Americans - now three hundred, where eight hundred had started out - flattened in retreat against the buildings and streets of Villanueva de la Cañada, a village they had passed through on their way eighteen days earlier to join the disastrous assault on Mosquito Ridge, a high-point they needed to take to make the offensive successful but which the Nationalists never gave up while meat-grinding the men who launched assault after assault against its summit.

The Spanish July heat had fried all fight out of them. In the long flat valley between Villanueva and Mosquito Ridge, the furnace-sun evaporated water and sense from them - so bright blasted down the sunlight that it caused a solar equivalent of snow-blindness, wrenching the eyes to slits and rimming them with dried salt and dirt. (Apparently the commanders had never learned, or chose to ignore, that "Guadarrama," a former Arabic word, translated into "river of sand" - the soldiers, their canteens empty, had to dig down at least ten feet in the dried-up streambeds to pool muddied water that smelled of fish and rotted corpses - which they drank anyway.)

And on the approach to the Ridge, the sun never let up - it became a sniper that complemented the Nationalist snipers and aided the mortar-men who lobbed high-velocity shells almost straight down into the barrancas that creased the valley floor and hillsides and provided the only usable barricades for the shit-scared soldiers. The sun sucked away the oxygen, the sunlight withered common sense and judgment, the heat cauterized willpower and clear-headedness. Law got gunned down well below the Ridge summit, Hourihan had had his thigh smashed by a sniper's round - the list, as Jesse knew, would stretch on for hours if he named all the names one by one that Brunete had consumed.

Finally, someone had enough intelligence to see that what had started with great fanfare and massed power had withered and died and that the emphasis now fell on the words "retreat" and "hold" - they retired the word "advance" from the lexicon. And so the Americans did just that as best they could, what with the sky filled by the black diagonal crosses of the Nationalist bombers,

the incendiary bombs they dropped firing the dried brush, the water long gone, their feet long shredded by the sand that got inside their socks and boots, their pants split up the rear so that they wouldn't have to waste time pulling them down when the dysentery struck. Smoke hung a thousand feet over Brunete and turned the sun the color of dried blood.

And in this manner they tramped back into the ruins of Villanueva de la Cañada with orders to fortify it against the Nationalists breaking through the front, back to where only a couple of weeks before they had crept in, along with the Dimitrovs and the Brits and a Spanish brigade, to route out and gun down the Falangists and immolate the machine gunners in the church tower by throwing in bales of straw and setting them on fire and then listening to their screams as they died. (How could Jesse not have thought of Zack as he watched the flames sever their lives? He had thought of Zack.)

As the sun began to set and they set themselves up to stay the night (the next day they would make it towards Valdemorillo, and then move east back towards Albares and Madrid), Steele began to talk about seeing his novia back in Albares, which brought a big smile to his face and pumped laughter out of him. Someone told him he should stop walking around like a cock rooster and sit down so that they could get some sleep, but Steele wouldn't have any of it - he made a point of giving them all a mock-serious account of his yet-to-come wedding night, and just as he let out the relish of the thought in a series of comic groans, a high-velocity shot cracked the dusk, and Steele managed to get out "Fucking Christ!" before the sniper's bullet riddled his heart to shreds.

For some reason Jesse hadn't looked at Steele as he talked but instead had let his gaze wander out into the lowering light, lost in some thought even as he smiled at Steele's vaudeville act, and he saw the muzzle flash and heard Steele's curse at almost the exact same moment. He knew the web in which the sniper hung. He knew.

Jesse turned to see Steele's long body laid out on the ground, the helpless men strung around him as the blood drooled from his chest, and instead of joining them and their gathering wail, he picked up his rifle and moved in the direction of the sniper. Someone called out to him asking where the fuck he thought he - but Jesse ignored the voice. Jesse ignored everything.

In the top rational layer of his brain he knew the stupidity of his action, of separating himself from the battalion, of deserting his post, not to mention that the sniper, if well-trained, would not be in the same place by the time Jesse



reached him - assuming that he could even find the sniper's nest in the falling day's light.

But something other than calculation drove him - a kind of going-unhinged bred from sun-blindness and shriveling thirst and dysenteried guts and the butchery of good people - his friends - caused by stupid commanders and political cockfighting and posers and leeches and frauds and cynics all come to get a safe slice of glory and scuttle back home.

To Jesse's fevered eyes the village ruins looked like a graveyard, with stones upturned and skeletons dancing, demon spirits with serrated shadows, blood turning the sand into a slurry that sucked at his feet and threatened to swallow him down into darkness. He pressed on, he pressed on through the simmering lunacies, his rifle light and heavy in his hand, body crouched low and arrowing forward. Always in front him: Ray Steele's heart in tatters, Zack's tortured body in ashes.

His madness made his senses sharper, and as he moved closer to where he thought the sniper had nested himself, he slowed himself even more, his ears cupped for any incriminating sound, his eyes iris'd open for any shift, any shape, any edge.

And, against all the odds, in a way that even the top-layer rational brain gave itself pause as it pondered the amazing fact, Jesse saw the sniper - at least his outline against the western dusk, tucked into a fork of tree branches, about 20 feet off the ground. And his ears caught this very human, very tell-tale sound - a long exhale, as if from boredom and exhaustion, as if from fright and disgust - as if from Jesse himself.

As he raised his rifle to do what he knew he would do, had to do, he found his vision blurred by a wash of sweat and tears - here, in this moment, he knew he would kill a man with deliberation and exactitude, something that had not happened on the battlefield, where he shot bullets through the air without ever knowing if they missed or hit, slashed open a gut or fell into the dirt to turn later into rust and scrap. Here, in this moment, madness companioned him, demons caressed him, and Jesse, squeezing off a round, had shifted from soldier to murderer.

Except that reality, in its sludgy frustrating way, did not make Jesse's transformation clean or easy. Perhaps an equal long exhale from Jesse, or a noise from raising the gun, or a smell on the wind, alerted the sniper, and as

Jesse fired, the sniper turned away so that the bullet didn't cut a neat slice through his life's thread but instead hit him hard enough to topple him, still alive, out of the tree and slam him against the stones on the ground.

Jesse sleeved away the sweat-tears from his face and stared at the breathing crumpled lump on the ground, and where before he had felt sympathy even as he set the sniper in his sights, he now felt anger that the sniper needed finishing off - why couldn't the bastard just have taken the bullet through the brain, died instantly, and let Jesse feel relieved, sad, vindicated, wretched, heroic, lost - but have the goddamned dirty business finished!

And that anger, more than anything, rammed Jesse forward to the sniper, the rifle dropped from his hand and replaced by the sheath knife that Gabriel had made him buy and which had always hung from whatever he could scrounge up to belt his pants. The air still smelled molten from the day's heat, and, for some reason of nature's own devising, the air began to fill with the sunset thrum of insects.

Jesse knelt by the body and turned it onto its back, and found himself staring into the terrified dark sweating face of a Moor - from the Army of Africa. He wore the red and yellow of Franco's army pinned above his heart. His legs twisted underneath him, his head cocked at a grotesque angle. Jesse rested the hand holding the knife on his thigh; the sniper saw it; his eyes widened.

Nothing moved through the thick air except the saw of the insect chorus. Jesse's mind, with little left of rational thought perking in it, knew he had limped and stumbled into hell; at the edges of his eyes demons swirled, and in his ears the stones on the ground murmured their gravestone litanies - and the whole world waited.

The sniper whispered, in a ragged voice, "¡Mi cuello! ¡Está roto!"

Jesse touched the point of the knife to the palms of the sniper's hands - no response. He touched the knife-tip to the sniper's neck - no response. He moved the head a bit to the left and saw the swollen lump of the broken neck, then let the head roll back.

The sniper tried again. "Negro. Negro. Hermano. ¿Si?"

Jesse said nothing, signaled nothing. Instead, he placed the knife tip against the colors over the sniper's breast and rammed the knife through the slit in his ribs and into the sniper's heart.

A look of utter surprise filled the sniper's face as he let out a sharp exhale before the life flamed out of his eyes. A shudder, then nothing.

Jesse stared at the open dead eyes, at the dark blood staining the sniper's blouse. As he did, the woods around him erupted with buzzing and chirping and rasping, louder and louder and louder and louder, and Jesse would have sworn, if he had had a mind left and the presence of it to work the thought through, that this sound echoed the rotted shredding of his own soul.

Jesse stood up, knife in hand, stunned, lost. He slipped the knife back into place, then walked back to his gun and picked it up, then instead of heading back to his fellows, he headed off through the woods, the gun butt bumping on the ground behind him as he dragged it over the ground by its barrel. He had no image or idea or word in his mind to guide where his body wandered. He had nothing left of the human in him - he tumbled along like trash in the wind.

As he moved through the dark woods, the woods themselves became an opera of the damned. Faces loomed up out of the glomming, and Jesse swore their eyes burned like live coals. He saw carbon-black shadows slice through the darkness around him, circle him, and as he squinted to try to see better through the now-arrived night, he watched the shadows dance together in grisly rhythms, soldiers and villagers, torn and pulverized, in a crushing embrace circling around him.

His breathing tore apart his lungs, his heart crashed against his ribs, as he pushed through the woods away from everything he'd known for the last seven months, accompanied by the gimp-stepped dancing of his now fellow-demons. Blinded now by both night-time and nightmare, Jesse shuddered ahead without the hope of understanding anything.

So it didn't surprise him when, in one ear and then the other, he heard the sniper's voice (speaking in English, for some reason). And as he heard the first words - "You and I are brothers, no?" - he felt the weight of the sniper's body hanging on his back - a burden he accepted almost with relief, carrying a rotting cross, sin as soul-mate. And as they slipped through the darkness, the sniper kept up a running tirade about the state of Jesse's corrupted soul, and the guilt of it lulled Jesse through the darkness.

He had never felt more free or more alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time he got around to collapsing, exhausted by the sniper's weight and emptied out by the sniper's judgments, he had wandered northerly toward Valdemorillo, though he had gotten nowhere near it. Instead, he found himself on the side of the road that had brought them all there weeks before, now a chaos of trucks and tanks and men in retreat counter-flowed by troops brought up to jam the front-line breaches closed, all of this underscored by the occasional uncontested fly-over of fascist Junkers or Capronis (gifts of Germany and Italy) chucking bombs down on the wriggling mass. Jesse headed east against the flow, cloud-headed and mad-thirsty and gut-hungry and bent-backed. He managed to tear some bread and olives away from someone somewhere and slake his throat with warm brackish water - but the clouds in his head stayed the way a hook sets in a fish's mouth.

By now, the load of the sniper on his back (the stench of his decaying hide now added to his litanies of abuse) felt so natural, a hump grafted to Jesse's body, that Jesse expected every passing soldier to point and vomit and run away because how could they miss something so plain and horrible? But no one did. The sniper played Sancho Panza to Jesse alone.

Less than a ghost, less than dust, he drifted through the chaos uncut. He took in, dimly, the rout of Brunete, the shards of the smashed Republican army wheeling around him, but the way an ear takes in the dull roar of far-off waves - nothing tied him to anything any more, nothing tied him to anything that made a sense he could use as guidance and lighthouse. Lost. Lost. Lost.

But even swaddled in his dense misery, Jesse still managed, clutching his leather pouch, to get some food and drink, take passage through the war havoc, dodge the cavalry scouring the road for deserters, shit and piss with something like human regularity. He stank, his hair clotted with dirt and pitch from pine trees, his clothes more like whispers of cloth than actual threaded garments - and yet he moved on. To where? His misery had eased enough for that to pester him - to where? "Where are you going, you maggots?" the sniper pissed into his ear. "Who would take you in, butcher?"

He had only one choice.

### **Scene 18**

Though the news of the defeat at Brunete had reached Alcalá de Henares, the city had not panicked. Though Franco's army had blunted the effort of the government to squeeze it west of Madrid and thus ease the siege of the city and relieve the pressure Franco had brought against the Basque country, it couldn't break the Republican retreat, and after three weeks of fighting and tens of thousands killed, the battle lines hardened right where they had started.

But the mood had shifted - the smell of the end threaded the air, singed the nostrils, dried the throat.

When Jesse slouched into the city, he did so at night - he had no way of knowing how or if things had changed since he'd left. He kept to the shadows as much as possible (not difficult since wartime rationing of power had left most of the city in darkness) - but even though he moved as if he had recovered his physical powers and his rational faculties, he couldn't shake off the sensation of slouching through a dreamscape, a spectator part of his mind watching this shamle named Jesse go through the motions and pretenses of a living person and, as it watched, barely able to keep from laughing at the clownish muddled character struggling to stay alive in the midst of such comic butchery, laughing at the figure's belief that somewhere something made a sense that would rescue him from the madness and deliver him from evil. Not in his right mind at all - he knew this but could do nothing about it.

As he slipped along, he also knew that he didn't quite remember where to go to find the house of Luz - landmarks and street signs he had only glanced at as she took him to hear the old man recite he now had to find in the dark using half-remembered images dredged up from a dismembered memory. So he guessed and floated along until, by a grace (or a luck) he didn't know he had or deserved, he stood, on exhausted legs, in front of the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. Of course Luz had locked the door and barred the gate.

But that didn't matter, not one bit.

As the house floated into his field of vision, as it registered in his unright mind, he felt peace seep through him - the dead weight of the dead sniper on his back eased off just a bit, its constant whispered damnations in one ear, then the other, died away, and when he fell to his knees, then flat-out onto the sidewalk, he did so not because the guilt-weight had driven him to earth but because he

had come (even though the spectator part of his mind knew this as an illusion) home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Except not home - at least not as he remembered any version of it.

When he came to, instead of staring up at the sky from the courtyard or at the whitewashed plastered ceiling of a room, he found himself staring at bobbing leaf patterns on canvas. His clothes had changed - someone had cut off his rags and replaced them with worn but clean clothes - a new pair of boots waited at the foot of his feet. He lay on a thin mat made out of two or three thick blankets.

Most blessed of all, when he rolled onto his back, he felt no sniper lump. His ears only took in the mild breeze that made the leaf-patterns jump and the tent canvas belly - and voices. Laughter. Arguments - mild, unabrasive.

With an effort he propped himself up on his left elbow so that he could look down the length of this body through the tent slit. But nothing showed itself to him. With a groan he sat himself upright, slipped on the boots (tight but whole), got on his hands and knees, crawled to the tent opening, and popped his head through.

"Like a babe from his mama's twat." Laughter.

Both insult and laughter from a rough-hewn man. "You can call me James," the man said. "From Belfast. That's in Ireland, by the way."

Jesse said nothing.

Another voice chipped in, in Spanish-accented English, from his right and out of his line of vision. "A niño, yes - he wants to fight to protect the government."

By now four others had come up and ringed the tent opening, three men and a dark-skinned woman - all five of them staring at Jesse as if at a species of unknown but harmless animal. Jesse noted that they all had guns, all dressed as fighters.

Jesse knew the voice to his right, but when he looked in that direction, the sun blinded him, and he could only see a silhouette against its glare.

"Hey, nappy." The voice of Luz made Jesse smile, and her face, when she stepped out of the sun's halo and knelt on one knee in front of him, made the smile broaden. "I told you it was going to be a new world." She stood, and Jesse

scrambled out of the tent, standing upright in such a hurry that he momentarily lost consciousness and stumbled forward. Luz caught him.

“They know you, but you don’t know them. That’s Pierre, from France - Romulo and Remo, locals - James you’ve already had the pleasure of meeting - and Awagu, from Ethiopia.”

“Where am I?” Jesse asked. “Why am I here?”

“‘Why’ you’re here,” drawled James, “is that we didn’t kill you because Luz here knows you and likes you.”

Awagu spit into the dust. “Another American.”

At the mention of the word “American,” Pierre looked around. Jesse looked around with him, and noticed, for the first time, that they had camped out in the countryside. “Where is our Hemingway?”

“Hemingway?” Jesse asked.

“A wanna-be,” James spat out.

At that moment, a shouted “Hey!” cut through the air, and instantly, everyone, including Luz, had guns in hand, and their sudden snap into combat-ready reminded Jesse that, yes, the war still governed them. He slapped his side instinctively reaching for the knife and, like magic, it appeared in his hand - his dresser had thought enough of him to include with his new threads.

Like a kite pulling along a young child, the “Hey!” pulled into a view another young man, in his 20s (Jesse guessed - not much different age-wise than himself) tromping along with a dead rabbit in each hand, rifle slung across his body, a battered gray fedora on his head, and the broadest grin Jesse had ever seen anyone give out to the world. “Raise high the roofbeam, carpenter - enter Dewey Marlowe.”

Dewey joined the group, his smile never flagging - the smile of a man completely happy. Jesse found himself infected by it, his tired face revived.

“Dinner,” he announced, holding the two rabbits high like torches.

\* \* \* \* \*

Making the meal took no time at all. Romulo and Remo, a rabbit each, skinned them as easily as a card-shark deals out cards. The others boiled potatoes and made a quick flat bread from flour and water and the rabbit fat that they cooked on a makeshift grill over the fire, and before long, under the

scanty shade of the trees, the six of them wolfed down their portions the way fire moved through dried brush. Luz ate hers slowly, and Jesse, still uncoiling from his rescue, picked at the food, still not sure enough of his aliveness to trust eating. He realized that his back still expected to feel with sniper's weight.

The first to finish, Marlowe dropped his plate to his side and pulled out a notebook and a pencil from his kit bag. He flipped through the pages to a blank one, licked his pencil tip, and got himself ready to write.

"Oop, here he goes," said Pierre.

"Careful," Dewey shot back at Pierre, "mind at work here - not something you're used to. Now you guys save this black man's bacon from the Franco-ites - Franco-ists - "

"This white man just called you a pig part," James said to Jesse.

Luz smiled

"Did not."

"He-ming-way," Pierre interjected, rolling the syllables around his tongue.

"I've told you, 'Dewey Marlowe' is gonna be bigger on Broadway. Now - "

Luz answered Dewey. "The local Falange - Carlistos - "

Dewey wrote. "Falange - right - "

Luz looked over at Jesse. "They wait for Franco their Savior - they hide in the shadows - don't announce - "

Romulo spit. "Falange - viboras."

Jesse looked at Luz. "Snakes, right?"

"Right," she replied.

Remo companion-spit as well. "Viboras, sí."

Dewey finished writing" Falange, Carlistos - great. Now, Brunete - "

Jesse counted the seven faces looking at him. Suddenly he felt incredibly hungry, and he scooped in a mouthful of rabbit and bread without embarrassment or apology. The grilled meat stung his throat with its lean and raucous taste, and he didn't so much swallow the food as have his stomach pull it into his body, so suddenly did the body flood with a desire to live and testify.



As he chewed, he noticed everyone waiting for him to speak, waiting for him in a way that didn't force him to speak at all - patient, respectful. He took a second bite, much less feral, and chewed it through and through before letting it slide away.

"Brunete," he repeated. "Brunete," he said again, this time with more scorn than he had expected, more anger than he knew he carried in his bones. He took in more food in order to claim a moment to calm himself. "This is all I'm gonna say."

As he spoke, he could hear Luz's underscoring voice translating for Romulo and Remo.

"In the beginning, it was the usual fuck-up." He finished his food and put down his plate, then made a gesture as if swiping away flies. "But that wasn't the worst - we were used to that - used to officers that didn't know shit from shinola, that sort of thing." (At "shinola," he saw Luz give him a quizzical look, as if to say "We don't have Spanish for this," and Jesse gave her back a half-smile, which she returned with a half-smile of her own.) "Sorry - 'shinola,'" he said to Luz, "just tell 'em they didn't know shit about anything." Which she did. They nodded - they had suffered from their own versions of such incompetence.

"Where it hit me?" Jesse paused. "As usual - the guy next to you, that's who you're really fighting to save, even if you hate his guts - Ray Steele - I didn't hate his guts - we're in retreat, setting up camp - Ray is getting ready to go back to his novia, got permission to do just that - and then he got snipered - bam - shredded his heart."

Jesse shifted himself to face Dewey straight on. "Write this. Here was my Brunete. I saw the muzzle flash - I saw it because the sniper didn't have the right kind of rifle, this muzzle flash as it was getting dark - I went for him - found him - shot him out of his tree - he fell - broke his neck." He looked over at Awagu. "A black man, like me - a Moor, maybe. Africa." Awagu's face didn't register anything on the surface, but her body stiffened just the slightest bit.

Jesse swung back to Dewey. "No danger to anyone. I knew that for a fact - could see his neck - no feeling in his limbs. But I took this knife" - he touched it on his hip - "and I shoved it through his heart."

Marlowe's pencil scored the words into the paper.

"He was the enemy you came to fight," James commented with a shrug.

"The thing that was the right thing to do," added Awagu. "He killed your friend."

Jesse nodded, then said, "So why do I feel like an animal?"

No one had an answer for this until Romulo piped up. Jesse listened to the torrent of Spanish until Romulo finished pouring it out, Remo nodding in agreement, and then looked at Luz for help. "I got, maybe, five words outa that."

"Romulo said - I'll give the highlights - that you felt like an animal because you were feeling exactly what you were - you were an animal - that's what this war has turned people into." Something shifted in Luz, moving past impartial translator into personal witness, and her voice became molten, scouring. "He himself has seen a lot of evil - he saw Franco's beasts take 400 Republican soldiers and shoot them down, then cut off their legs - cut off their legs! For what did they do that? Pure cruelty. And the Republicans - no better. Shooting priests and storekeepers, executing prisoners on the spot. They're all pigs - and that's an insult to the pig." Luz let her breathing ease off and her body relax.

Jesse noticed that all of them, even Dewey, who never stopped scrawling his notes, had a strict doom-laden cast to their faces, as if once again disappointed by the fallen state of fallen mankind - the way Jesse remembered when he had gone to church as a young boy how the people looked, listening to the pastor roll through the sins of the ages and their own lives, saddened and horrified at how low humanity could sink.

"So why are you all here?" he finally blurted out, the pressure of their gloom too much to bear at the moment. "Why are you camped up here and letting him" - indicating Dewey - "walk around with a gun?"

Jesse's questions broke the mood. James snickered, Luz smiled, Awagu shook her head as if to clear it (Pierre did the same), Romulo and Remo stood up to shake out their legs, and Dewey aimed his pencil like a pistol at the horizon, fired it, and mock-blew the smoke away from the barrel.

"I guess I should explain," said Luz. "We're a dying breed in this country."

"Did you hear about, down there in Jarama, what happened in Barcelona, last May?" James asked.

"I heard something," said Jesse.

"Remember, he's been trained to be a Communist through and through," Luz warned, but in a light-hearted voice. "Better red than dead for him."

“What do you think happened?”

“Easy - your Communist buddies engineered a little civil war in Barcelona inside our bigger civil war here.” James looked at his listeners. “Being anarchists, we were on the losing side on that one - the losing backside, so to speak, since we got our asses handed to us.”

“We were - ” Luz chimed in.

“Are,” James corrected her.

“Are,” she repeated, “all - ”

“Except me,” Marlowe chipped in.

“Except him,” Luz added, “connected to the CNT, the Confederación Nacional de Trabajo - anarchists, to make it simple enough to understand.”

“The ones I’m supposed to hate,” said Jesse.

“We came here to fight two things,” Awagu added. “Well, for me, three - fatpig Mussolini for raping my country, fatpig Franco for raping Spain, and the fatpig Spanish government for being full of bourgeois fat pigs sucking off the people - ”

“I second that,” Pierre chirped, raising his right hand in testimony, “I third it. Tromp tromp tromp over the Pyrénées - or the Pirineos in castellano - or the Pirineus in Catalan - and getting here for the revolution within the revolution - the French love their revolutions - ”

Dewey never stopped writing, Jesse noticed, even as he gave his head several disbelieving shakes as his fellows talked or he chuckled at something someone said - focused, Jesse thought, a dog with a bone.

Jesse pointed at Romulo and Remo. “Them, too?”

“Homegrown anarchists out here in the country,” Luz explained, “I’ve known them forever, since my father - government official that he was - had a secret sympathy for the anarchists - maybe because they hated wearing shirts and ties, as he did - he gave them work.”

“Don’t go trying to wrap your head around this shamble,” James advised Jesse. “It’s enough to know we’re anarchists - ”

“Anarquistas!” chanted Romulo and Remo together, both giving the clenched fist salute. Dewey laughed.

"Somos anarquistas!" James rang out in solidarity with the twins, then turned to Jesse. "We're anarchists, and you're not - doesn't matter if you're a friend of hers, you have to make a choice about sticking with us or making your way back to the brigades - lucky man, you get to choose your slaughterhouse." James started to say more but got cut off by a yell from someone beyond the curve of the hill on which they sat, someone on horseback coming up the rise. Romulo and Remo shot up and ran past Dewey to meet an old man with streaming white hair riding an emaciated nag bareback up the hill to their camp. "Our Quixote," Luz whispered to Jesse as everyone grabbed a weapon and moved to meet the old man now cantering in under the lead of the twins.

"Soldados," he wheezed out between lips that exposed his toothless gums. "Fascistas."

Romulo handed the old man his canteen, and he slugged water down his parched throat.

"So it's started," James said.

"We're still in the Republic, technically," Luz explained. "But Franco's been sending probes down from the north - these troops probably got caught, didn't expect to find any resistance."

The old man handed the canteen back to Romulo and, his throat re-greased, started to bellow. "Nos defendimos. Nos defendimos! Francotirador. Arriba, en la iglesia. En la torre. Otros, atrincherados en las casas. Vengan! Necesitamos ayuda! La lucha!" the old man barked out as he turned his horse and rode away. Jesse gave Luz a quizzical look. "He's our lookout."

Behind him, the others had already started to break camp, getting ready to move out.

"What's going on?" Jesse moved alongside Luz, who moved to join the others. "What did the old man say?"

"He said that the townspeople have defended themselves against Franco's soldiers" - she rolled up her bedroll and tied it to her knapsack- "there's a sniper up in the church tower" - she slung her knapsack over her shoulders - "other soldiers have barricaded themselves in some houses" - she kicked dirt on the fire's embers - "and they want us to help them, like we said we would."

"Why this town?"

"It's where Romulo and Remo grew up. They help us, we help them." She brushed back her hair and slipped a beaten-up garrison cap on her head. Her doing that made Jesse look at everyone else's headgear: Dewey's fedora, James' canvas rainhat, Pierre's beret, Awagu's battered panama, Romulo and Remo's Moorish turban-style hats (which, Jesse learned, they'd pulled off dead Moors after an attack) - not a helmet among them, nothing military about them, and yet readied to go battle the professionals. If fighting in the brigades now seemed an idealistic stupidity in the main ring of an international circus tent, this take-up of arms seemed the freak side-show outside the main tent of clowns, fools, and the wicked ringmaster.

"What are you going to do?" Jesse asked Luz as he trotted beside her, everyone now moving in the direction that the old man took when he wheeled away.

"We'll see when we get there," James offered. "What else can we do?"

"Be nice to have some better facts," Jesse shot back.

"Facts," said James, "are over-rated."

"Do I at least get a gun?" Jesse replied.

Dewey came over to Jesse and handed him a rifle. "You had this in your hands when we found it - so back home it goes." Again, Dewey's wide grin surprised Jesse, and he said so. "It doesn't get any better than this," Dewey offered, "doesn't get any more alive." Then, in a lower voice: "Luz told me your story - I want to hear more later."

"I don't have to give you nothing," Jesse said, not sure why he suddenly felt exposed.

"Who said anything about 'have to,' man? We're all about liberty around here - even if it kills us. Come on - let's go get some stories."

By now they had crested the hill and looked down on the town. Below them fields clustered around a core of houses and other buildings, which themselves huddled around the church and the plaza mayor. Smoke coiled upwards from some burning buildings, and even from here they could see that the streets had emptied out. Gunshots cracked now and then, sounding at this distance like sticks breaking.

"Well, me hearties," piped up James, "what say you all?"

And down the hill they scurried.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they approached, they all, by instinct, doubled over into a running crouch, making themselves a smaller and mobile target, and as they got closer, they sighted a small group of men knotted behind a wall that ran around the side and back of the church.

An old man saw the ragtag group running toward him, and he shouldered an old Mauser as he shouted at them “anarchista, comunista, o socialista?”

Luz approached him with her raised hand holding a black bandana. “Somos anarquistas, hermano.”

The old man lowers his gun. “Buena respuesta. Necesitamos su ayuda.” Romulo and Remo stepped up beside Luz, and the old man, recognizing them, embraced first one, then the other. “Bienvenidos, hermanos.”

While the twins and Luz conferred with the old man, the rest of them piled up everything but their guns against the wall, stripping down for what would come next. Then the brothers turned to them and rattled off a long artillery of Spanish that left Jesse in the dust - but that didn't matter as much as what he saw Dewey pull out of his knapsack: a camera.

Jesse pointed at it. “That a hand grenade?”

“Me and my Leica are gunning for Robert Capa, too.”

“Whoever, and whatever, the fuck that is.”

“His huevos are bigger than his brain,” Pierre offered.

“That wouldn't be hard,” James muttered as he counted the bullets in his ammo pouch and checked over his rifle.

Romulo and Remo grabbed their crotches and gave them a pump as they pointed at Dewey and joked out, “Huevos!”

Luz joined them. “He's what you might call the mayor. Sniper up there. Soldiers in the bakery - they have the baker's family. Other soldiers in the patrón's house - he's a sympathizer.”

“They got cut off?” Awagu asked. Luz nodded.

“So, nothing for them to lose,” remarked Pierre as he knelt and cinched his bootlaces tight.

“I know how that feels,” said James as she shouldered his rifle. He pointed to Romulo and Remo. “Bueno. Sígame. Vamos a buscar el pan.” To Jesse:

"We're gonna go get some bread - you know, for dinner." A flash of his broad smile, then the three of them low-ran over to the to the Mayor for a brief chat, then moved out.

Pierre and Awagu, rifles in hand, looked at each other. "We French are good at getting the aristocracy," Pierre commented. Awagu nodded. Pierre turned to Luz. "Your services, madam, so we can know where we're going."

Luz walked them over to the Mayor, and the Mayor described the location of the patrón's house. "Wait for me," she said to Pierre and Awagu.

As she returned to Jesse and Dewey, Jesse gave her a look that held a hundred questions about time, place, purpose, meaning. But instead of flooding them out, he clenched his jaws and turned with her to survey the steeple, the top of which they could just spy over the line of the wall. Dewey hovered around them, camera in hand, a camera bag slung over his shoulder - if eagerness had a smell, Dewey reeked of it.

"I know about this," Jesse whispered.

"I know you know," Luz replied.

"The only way - I'll have to get inside." Having said that, he allowed one of his questions to escape. "And why am I going to do this?" Dewey couldn't help himself - he leaned forward to hear Luz's answer. With an impish grin tossed to Dewey, Luz put her lips up to Jesse's ear for Jesse's ear only. Dewey fidgeted - he wanted to hear!

"You have been re-born, Jesse Colton - you have found me again - you're fighting for something real now - don't let your friend - your friends - die for nothing - how much better do you want life to be?"

Luz pulled away, and despite his every effort to keep his features grim and tight and serious, Jesse's face relaxed, the way it relaxed when he and Zack, plates of rice and beans in hand, liquor by Zack's foot, water by his, sat on the decrepit porch of their decrepit Pennsylvania house and let the steel-company fatigue roll away to nothing as they shared what they shared. "You got a way with words," Jesse remarked.

"I lived in Cervantes' house - how could I help it?"

Dewey could restrain himself no longer. "Do you guys mind - not polite to whisper - "

Luz laughed. "The eager little puppy."

"I want in on this - I have to go with you."

Jesse pointed at the camera. "Got any dead bodies in it?"

"Not up close."

"Christ." Jesse untied the sisal cord that held up his pants (he made sure the knife didn't slide off), tucked in his shirt, re-tied the whole affair, then took up his rifle. "Tell the Alcalde," he said to Luz, "on my signal, have everyone pour fire up there for cover."

Luz nodded, then slid her way back to the Mayor. He saw her slip away, with Pierre and Awagu and three other citizens.

He turned to Marlowe. "Get in my way, I will shoot you. Then I will take a picture of you."

"You won't shoot me - you need me. You don't know it yet, but you need me."

"Just stay out of my way, white boy."

"You're so full of shit." But Dewey's words fell in the dirt behind Jesse because Jesse had already started his advance, hugging the wall until he came the end of it that bordered the road going into the town. He raised his hand, gave Luz a direct look, then made his signal. As the gunfire erupted, the bullets hammering the stone tower, Jesse and Dewey slipped around the wall-end and rabbited for the church itself, bent-over and awkward. They gained the outer wall, then slid along it, Jesse scanning, scanning, scanning for some way to slip inside.

At the back of the church, Jesse stopped at a window covered by wooden shutters. Across the middle gap he could see an inside latch holding the shutters closed. He slid out his knife and slipped the blade into the gap - not much different than the slick insertion between two ribs. He eased the latch up, up, up until it spun around clockwise and swung free. With the knife-tip, he pushed the shutters inward - they gave him no resistance at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

The bakery - squat, whitewashed brick with a massive chimney that spewed no smoke.

James, Romulo, and Remo skirted the back of the building until they huddled underneath a window cut into the wall.



At a signal from James, Romulo jack-in-the-box'd his head over the sill. He held up four fingers. "Soldados," he whispered. Then Remo did the same, held up five fingers. "Familia." James pointed to their left: the back door. He scuttled to it, put his hand on the dowel-handle sticking out from the latch, and lifted. To his surprise it rose without complaint. James cracked the door, and he could see the flour-dusted floor tiles. He grinned at Romulo and Remo and cocked his head as if to say, "Let's go, mates."

\* \* \* \* \*

The patrón's house - low, white, with overhanging eaves covered with tejas, courtyard in the center. Luz, Awagu, and Pierre, followed by the three villagers carrying hand scythes, slipped around the corner. Luz ran her hand over a line of tiles embedded in the wall's plaster - abstract designs curling out of one tile into the next making a ribbon of uncoiling beauty. Her heart squeezed at the touch, at the sight.

Steps on the roof over their heads made them all flatten against the wall, breath shallow. Luz found the faces of the Pierre and Awagu and the villagers, all of them sheened by sweat.

One of the villagers, frightened by the fact of the nearby soldier, flinched, and the spasm rattled his scythe against the wall. The footsteps stopped, then move toward the roof edge. They heard him kneel down and stretch out his body on the seething tiles, and together they saw his upside-down face descend like a setting sun over the eave-edge.

Without hesitation, the villager who had flinched grabbed the soldier's shirt and jacket collars and pulled hard, joined in a flash by the other two villagers, and before Pierre, Awagu, and Luz pieced the scene together, the three had scythed the man's face to shreds, opening the jugular on both sides for the dirt to suck down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesse and Dewey, sliding like sand out of bucket over the window sill, found themselves in a room behind the altar, lined with wooden closets with white and colored robes hanging in them and counters holding cups and bottles of wine and rosaries and many other things they didn't take time to notice.

The tower lay at the other end, and the two of them crouch-walked down the aisle, looking down the length of each pew to make sure no ambush would spring up at them, taking no notice of the statues in their wall niches looking

down on them with blank eyes, the unlit candles in their bronze risers under the statues, the nicking quiet of the settling wood and the almost unbreathable baked air of the locked-up church.

At the stairway to the tower, Jesse gestured for Dewey to get behind him. Dragging a sleeve across his eyes to clear them of the sweat stinging them, he inched his left boot-sole onto the first stair-step and eased his weight up onto the ball of his foot, then lowered the heel and his weight onto the step while lifting the right foot up to the second step and levering himself up and onto it. Nothing squeaked. Sweat oozed.

At Jesse's fifth step, Dewey took his first, and together they cut through the deadened air up toward the sniper.

After ten steps, Jesse's eye-level came even with the floor of the tower, and he caught sight of the sniper's boots. One step more, and now he could see the whole of the sniper, standing in the lee of the wall between two openings - could see the line of dark sweat on the sniper's jacket running the length of his spine, with dark wet half-moons under his arms, could hear the shallow stuttering of his frightened murderous breathing.

A hail of bullets ate at the stone of the tower, and the sniper swung his back against the wall for protection - as he did, his eyes caught Jesse's eyes, and he jerked his rifle up and fired at the same moment that his boots slipped on the dirt-slicked floorboards and his sweated back slid down the rough stubbling of the wall.

The shot hit high.

Jesse, his gun shouldered and aimed, climbed the rest of the stairs, Marlowe quick behind, his camera up. Jesse shook his head "no" at the sniper as he oozed forward, gesturing with the barrel of his rifle for the sniper to slide his own gun out of reach. The sniper, his face twisted by terror, put his gun on the floor and pushed it with the heel of his boot away from him. Then he raised his hands.

Without preamble, Jesse shot him through the forehead.

"No!" Dewey yelled.

The moment froze between the two of them, their eyes locked, Dewey's face a register of fear and disgust.

"You bastard - "

Jesse nodded toward the corpse.

Dewey, face still skewed by the clash of his feelings, nevertheless lifted his camera and took shot after shot from different angles and distances.

Jesse stepped to the parapet and waved. Dewey could hear a faint cheer from below as Jesse stepped away. Jesse put his gun down, then moving Dewey out of the way, he took the sniper by the lapels of his uniform and slid him up the wall.

“What’re you doing?”

Jesse didn’t answer as he worked the body along the wall to the tower opening, then tipped it backward on the sill, ready to tumble it over the edge.

“You can’t do that!” In response to Jesse’s dead-eye stare, Dewey repeated himself: “You can’t do that!”

Marlowe capped the lens, stuffed the camera into his bag, then walked over to the body and grabbed it by the lapels, right next to Jesse’s hands. He jerked it out of Jesse’s hands and heaved the body over his shoulder.

“He was somebody’s son. He’s still a goddamn human being.” Jesse watched Dewey move to the stairs, ready to go down. “You fucking guys all talk about your fucking ideals - ” He eased his foot along the top step, balancing the two weights, then edged forward, balancing the corpse on his shoulder while steadying himself with a hand on the wall and a hand on the railing. Jesse watched the two bodies diminish, heard Dewey’s breathing labor and break with each descended step, made no move to help.

Dust motes collided in the sunlight as Jesse turned back to the window. He watched Dewey struggle out of the church cradling the body, watched the crowd rush forward and drag the body from him and off through the dust, hacking at it as they did. He picked up his rifle, clomped down the steps, carved his way through the thick air of the church, and swam through the dense sunlight to stand next to Dewey. They looked at each other - they looked at each other - then together walked toward the dismembering crowd.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the bakery, James and Romulo led out the baker’s family. The baker carried a cleaver and a soldier’s severed head. Inside, Remo surveyed the aftermath: four Nationalist soldiers, one beheaded, on the bakery floor, their blood mixing with the white flour.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the patrón's house, Luz, Awagu, and Pierre held several soldiers at bay while the three villagers escorted the oligarch, his wife, and their daughter out of the house. The soldiers followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everything - everything - converged at the plaza.

The baker raised up the severed head, and cheers rose up with it.

Luz, Awagu, and Pierre marched the soldiers into the plaza along with the oligarch's family. In a frenzy, the villagers rushed forward and grabbed the soldiers and the family, wrestled them up against the first available wall, and summarily executed them, the Mayor giving the order to fire.

Dewey, disgusted, nevertheless took more than enough pictures.

Jesse, Luz, and the others watched, exchanged looks, said not a word.

\* \* \* \* \*

The villagers crowded into the patrón's courtyard, some open-mouthed at what they considered the luxury around them. The Mayor commandeered a large table and its chairs from inside the house and had them set under the shade of the trees. Then the Mayor sat, the elders sat, and the rest gathered around. At a gesture from the Mayor, the baker put the severed head in the middle of the table.

Jesse, Luz, Dewey, and the others hung to the outside. Luz translated for them; Romulo and Remo watched with serious faces. Marlowe took his notes.

With a work-hardened palm slapped on the table, the Mayor declared, "The head of the hydra is gone - we cut it off, it stays off!"

Laughter and smiles rippled all around.

"Get rid of it!" the Mayor commanded, and the baker palmed it in his broad right hand and lobbed it high over the roof. A watermark of blood remained on the table. The Mayor banged the table again to get everyone's attention.

"All right - here are my words. The priest is gone, Don Valera is gone, but the land is still here. What do we do?"

At the challenge, everyone fell silent, no one meeting anyone's eyes - the calculations to even up the scores had begun.

James leaned over to Jesse and drawled in a mock Southern whisper, "They're breakin' up the plantation, boy - in Ireland we'd call it the estate, but it comes to the same thing." Jesse looked at Luz. Luz nodded yes. James nodded yes. Jesse turned back to the villagers, his face softening for the first time in a long time.

Finally, a man wearing a vest raised his hand.

"Largo, hombre," said the Mayor, "don't hold your tongue."

Largo leaned forward on his elbows. "The patrón's land - we could divide it up - " His word caused ripples of agreement. Largo, encouraged, went on to say, "And give a piece to Francisco over there, and Juan - "

A grizzled old man, eye-patch punctuating his right eye, hissed in disgust.

"Belarmino," asked Mayor with faux innocence, "you have something to say." More statement than question.

Belarmino pointed to his eye-patch, then at Largo. "I got this in Asturias, in 1934, and it gives me the right to call you a shit!"

The crowd gasped in shock and pleasure at the confrontation.

"Alcalde," Largo appealed, but Belarmino cut him off. "Of course Largo wants to chop it up and give it out to everyone who's already got land because he really wants to be a Don Valera himself. Always with his airs - "

At this a woman, kerchiefed, slammed her hand down. "Isabel?" the Mayor asked, again all innocence and making no effort to hide his smile.

"And always a goddamn pissing contest between you two."

Largo bellowed, "I have the right to keep my land and get more if I can!"

Isabel pointed a knife-sharp finger right at Largo. "Not any more!" every syllable snapped out hard. Then, to the crowd, "And you all know it, too. Not going to do it that way any more."

The crowd settled down, thinking, nodding yes or no, whispering among themselves. Largo glared at Isabel. Isabel gave him the anarchist salute, then slapped the table again. "The choice is as plain as the hairs in your noses."

"And what choice is that?" Largo asked with exaggerated patience.

"We either do it the old way or we don't. My choice? You know my choice - wipe it all away!"

“But people like me,” Largo argued, “owning what we own, we can be more efficient - ”

“And make more money,” Isabel shot back, “that’s all you and Francisco and Juan - ”

“What’s wrong with - ”

Isabel ignored him. “And the ones like you want - ”

“Like I said, what’s wrong with making - ”

Isabel made no attempt to restrain the sarcasm. “‘Make more money’ - there are better things in life. There is working together for the greater good - ”

A voice leapt out of the crowd. “Oop, now she’s in her pulpit!”

Isabel laughed. “A nasty thing to say to an atheist!”

And everyone laughed with her.

Except Belarmino. “Pay attention!” He pointed upward. “You think Franco’s shits care about fine points? They want the old ways, and they’ll kill us to bring ‘em back. I say this: the patrón’s land belongs to all of us. It has always belonged to all of us because it was our sweat that made it rich. And I say this, to you, Largo - your land belongs to us - Juan, Francisco - yours, too. No more private property - collectivize!”

“That’s not right!” Largo protested as he turned to the Mayor. “That’s not right!”

Everyone talked at once, Largo appealing, Isabel and Belarmino also making their points.

The Mayor, evidently pleased with everything going on, pounded on the table again and again until a tense silence fell, filled only by the rustle of the leaves and Luz’s whispering commentary to her comrades.

The Mayor turned to Jesse, Luz, and the others. He pointed to Jesse as he spoke to the crowd. “Este hombre fue un esclavo en su patria y vino a luchar con nosotros, por nuestra causa.”

Luz repeated: “This man was a slave in his own country and he comes to fight for us.”

The Mayor continued. “¿Que opinas tu?”

"I know what that means," Jesse said. "What do I think they should do?" Luz nodded yes.

Even the leaves of the trees held off as the rough faces of the villagers peered at him and waited.

"Help me out here," Jesse pleaded with Luz.

"Go on," she said, moving him forward with her hand on the small of his back. "Say what you want to say."

Jesse began, pausing only to let Luz shift his words into Spanish. "I don't think I have the right to say anything here."

The Mayor stopped him and spoke to Luz. "Luchó por nosotros y eso lo hace uno de los nuestros. "

Luz turned to Jesse. "You defended them - that makes you one of them."

Jesse again surveyed the faces turned to him, and the moment morphed into one of those moments in life when the swirling bladed randomness of life gravitated together and the internal fusion glowed forth a clear and piercing and scouring light. For perhaps the first time since his sojourn in Spain, Jesse felt grounded and whole.

"Let me tell you a story, then - you can do what you want with it. Once I had four uncles - cuatro tios - with my father they owned land together. They shared everything - good, bad, money, sorrow - everything."

As Luz finished translating the sentence, Jesse scanned the experienced faces turned up to listen to him.

"All I can tell you is that it was the happiest time of my life. Not easy. They fought like dogs about everything." He waited. "But nobody was at the mercy. Nobody was alone. Nobody went hungry."

"¿Qué les sucedió?" Belarmino asked.

"What happened to them?" Luz said.

"Our own fascists took the land from them," Jesse explained. "It's an old story in my country."

The Mayor and the rest of them took in Luz's words. The Mayor pointed to the rest of the crew. "¿Qué va con el resto de ustedes?"

James, laughing, gave the anarchist salute, and Pierre, Romulo, Remo, and Awagu give the salute as well. Luz, looking at Jesse, also gave the salute.

Many in the crowd also gave the salute. The Mayor, slamming the table again, stood.

“¡Vale! La hora ha llegado. Votamos, eh? ¿Tierra y libertad, o tierra y dinero?”

“Freedom or money, right?” said Jesse to Luz, who answered, “Yes - they’re going to vote.”

“That’s not fair!” Largo protested.

The Mayor ignored him. “¿Tierra y libertad?”

Almost all the hands shot up.

“¿Tierra y dinero?”

Largo and a few others raised their hands, defeated.

“¡Colectivizar!”

Applause, shouts of approval. Jesse looked at Luz, and she smiled the smile of one wholly satisfied.



## **Scene 19**

Despite the offers to stay in the village, the eight of them decided to camp themselves outside - a caution, perhaps, that came from fighting, a preference for having more than one or two ways to escape if they needed one or two ways to escape.

And they needed to talk.

They had built themselves a fire, had eaten food brought to them, passed around a long-necked purón full of dark wine. Romulo and Remo, having visited friends and family, now curled around each other, asleep. Jesse, James, Luz, Awagu, and Pierre stared into the fire. Marlowe, fedora'd, scribbled in his notebook.

From overhead, at a great height, the growl of planes sifted down to them.

"Heinkels," James said, his head cocked to one side. "Not good." He turned to Jesse, continuing saying something to him that the planes had interrupted. "So, friend, that's what your fellow communists, your comrade Stalinists, are doing."

"James - " Luz cautioned.

"That's not true. That can't be true."

"The man," James replied to Luz, "does not even know himself."

"Leave him alone."

James ignored Luz's request. "They're killing off the anarchists, chum - they're cutting the balls off the socialists, and even cannibalizing themselves - "

"You're wrong."

"Tell it to those poor bastards in Barcelona - they're killing off the revolution."

"That can't be true."

"Then let it not be true for you." James shifted his attention to Dewey. "Hey, Hemingway - "

Without looking up, Dewey said, "He only answers to 'Marlowe' - "

"Who in the land of pig-faced capitalism is gonna want to read about a bunch of anarchists? They shoot anarchists there, too!" James looked hard at Jesse, then wagged his head. "I got the wine in my tongue - "

"And your head," Awagu added.

"- but the tongue still speaks true. You watch - " he pointed to them all " - you know we're on the chopping block. We are all alone out here."

James indicated for Pierre to pass the purón to him, which he did, but James didn't drink right away. "It's hard when you love something so much - an idea you'll die for - then to have these fucking 'comrades' - "

"I just want to kill Italians for Ethiopia," Awagu offered with a shrug.

"Germans for me," said Pierre, "for the Great War."

James laughed. "In my jaundiced eyes, they're all Brit wankers from northern Ireland." To Jesse: "And you? Who are these guys to you?"

Jesse stared into the fire, then surveyed them all. Luz laid a hand on his arm. "White people burned my best friend down to ashes. Tied him up, burned him up." He reached into his ever-present pouch and pulled out Zack's bone. "Meet Zack."

As everyone gawked at the yellowed bone in Jesse's fingers, Dewey closed his notebook and leaned forward, eyes sparking like the fire. "That - that is why they're not going to want to know about any of you suckers. A Negro whose friend was burned at the stake now fighting for freedom in a foreign land against white folks - that is prime stuff. Primo"

Jesse shoved Zack's bone back into his pouch, then shot to his feet and walked off into the darkness.

"Your bedside manner's a fucking marvel," James said to Dewey.

"I learned it all from you."

The fire crackled. Romulo and Remo snored.

Luz got up to follow Jesse.

She found him peering up at the stars. She stood next to him, put her arm through his. "Remember my doing this?"

"Is James telling the truth?"

Luz sat on the ground, patted the space beside her for Jesse to sit. "Yes. Jailng and killing all the anarchists they can get their hands on - orders from Stalin - militia units like ours either have to join the army or we get no weapons,

ammunition, supplies - I'm not supposed to even be carrying a gun - yes, me! - women are being turned back into maids - "

Jesse lowered himself to sit by Luz, still stared into the darkness. "I am so far from home."

They both glanced up as Marlowe came to them. "Mind if I join you?"

"You're already here," Luz observed.

Marlowe knelt, resting his hands on his thighs. "The world out there thinks this is 'the war for ideals.' 'The war of poets.' There's no revolution here - the Communists have choked that off."

"Not all of it."

Dewey pointed down to the village. "How long do you think they'll last, Luz? Franco could spit on us, he's so close. And the Communists will be coming from Valencia soon enough."

"Enough!" Jesse spat out. He turned an angry face to them. Luz put a hand on him, then got up, brushed off her pants, and walked back to the fire. Marlowe watched her walk back.

"I wrote about a lynching once - " Dewey began. "Yeah. I am really sorry about your friend, Jesse. What a country, huh?" Dewey got up, started to walk away, then turned back. "Today - up in the tower - "

But he heard Jesse sob and so shut himself up. He squatted in front of Jesse, pulled down his own shirt sleeve, and used the end of it to wipe Jesse's face. Jesse moved Dewey's hand away, but not in anger, and not right away. "You write all this down. Everything. All of it."

"I'm gonna write the truths that people tell me. I'm hoping that covers it." Dewey got up. "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable - that's me. Come on, let's go back."

As Jesse grabbed Dewey's outstretched hand and Dewey pulled him to his feet, they both heard the sound at the same time: a convoy of trucks. They hustled back to the fire in time to see everyone standing, peering into the gloom trying to see a line of trucks traveling down the road with their headlights turned off. Every once in a while the lead truck popped its headlights on to get its bearings - like, and not at all like, a firefly dancing in the darkness. Pierre shook Romulo and Remo awake while James kicked dirt on the fire to put it out. "The fascists have arrived," he muttered as he and the other shouldered their gear.

"But they're coming from Valencia," Marlowe shot out as he hefted on his own gear.

As the trucks moved into the town, they popped on their headlights, and as the eight of them scurried back down the hill they had come up hours before to pitch camp, they could just make out soldiers catapulting themselves off the truck beds and scattering throughout the streets as they roused people from their homes. Before long, gunfire and screams kicked in, and fire started to take down the buildings.

They all stopped. They all waited. Their exhaled breaths disappeared into the sky. The dark erased them.

"We can't stay here," James said, saying what needing saying. He turned to Romulo and Remo, whose blunt eyes took in the carnage. "No podemos quedar aquí, amigos." They nodded, simply nodded, as they watched the flames hunger up the buildings and listened to the shouts and screams of people they knew.

"So where do we go?" Dewey asked, asking what needed asking.

"It doesn't matter," Pierre answered.

"At Brunete," Jesse offered, "I got to you guys by leaving the fighting behind to take care of itself. The same?" To Luz: "Can we make it back to Quixote?"

"We can melt away there," Luz replied, "at Alcalá."

"Including me?" asked Awagu, and no one missed the sarcasm in her voice. "And him?" indicating Jesse. "Our skin is against us."

"We'd be better off in a bigger place, that's true," James mused.

"So why don't we go back down the road from where these guys are coming?" Jesse offered. "Against the grain. Goes to Valencia, right?"

"Whatever we do, we can't stay here," Dewey warned, "because they're gonna send out patrols before long to see if anyone got away."

And so, without a clear plan, they slid through the darkness toward the road, away from the mayhem, and started against the grain toward Valencia.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the sky took on its dawn light, they moved away from the road and hid themselves in one of the many barrancas that cut across the land, which kept them below any eyes moving on the road. Before long, as they knew it would, the

convoy came shambling back, its heavy motors sawing through the air, and they tried to melt into the ground to keep out of its reach.

What they had not expected arrived along with the trucks: a dozen cavalry riders with the job of scouring the margins of the road for deserters and anyone else it could clean up looking down on them, the horses impassive, the riders indifferent.

“Shit,” James muttered as he stood up along with the others, hands behind their heads, guns unreachable. Four of the riders nudged their horses forward to herd the eight, while the rest wheeled away to continue their search.

They stumbled toward the road, the four riders hemming them in; the convoy had come to a halt to watch them make their entrances.

As they got closer, they could see the individual faces of the individual soldiers, all of them slack from a lack of sleep and a hard night of assassinations and arson. Flags of the Republic hung straight down. From the cab of one of the trucks stepped out a clear officer, a colonel at least in appearance, his military cap bearing a red star, his uniform fitted and spiffed, followed by his aide, who summoned a half dozen soldiers from the truck with a brusque snap of his fingers. They all wore the red star on their uniforms.

The soldiers hustled the eight of them up to the colonel, then forced them to kneel. The colonel waved off the riders, who spun and headed back into the fields, then turned what he hoped came across as a cold stare on them. For emphasis, he spit into the dust.

“Anarquistas.” More statement than question. He turned away to look at the line of trucks to his left, then his right, pulling at the skirts of his uniform jacket to straighten and settle it on his body.

Luz, in a fierce whisper to Dewey - “Say something or you’ll die with us.”

The colonel snapped his head back and barked at Luz: “Cállete, puta.”

Before Dewey or any of their guards could do anything, Luz got up and stepped forward, right up to the colonel.

¿Qué piensas hacer con nosotros?” she asked.

The colonel let an odd smile cross his lips, then, in one smooth unhesitating motion, he pulled out his pistol and shot Luz through her left eye, blowing out the back of her head. Life fled before the body hit the dirt.

The colonel turned to his aide. "Mátalos a todos," he ordered.

Dewey, without knowing his mouth would do this, shouted at the colonel, "I'm a journalist! Periodisto! I'm a journalist! From the United States! ¡Los Estados Unidos!" With his head he nodded down at the camera bag still dangling from his right shoulder. "Soy escritor," Dewey added.

The colonel took a studied turn to examine Dewey. He wagged his hand at one of the soldiers, who jammed a rifle barrel into Dewey's spine to prod him to stand and move forward. The aide opened Dewey's bag and showed the colonel the camera and the notebook; the colonel nodded. The aide rummaged through the rest of the bag, then shoved Dewey back.

The colonel spoke - in English. "You know Paul Robeson?"

Dewey fought the impulse to look back at his comrades, at Luz's body, kept his eyes on the colonel. "Robeson? Not personally. But I've heard him sing."

"He sang to us, here - he's a good Communist." The colonel shifted his gaze over Dewey's shoulder to Jesse. "He American, too? The Negro man?"

Before Dewey could answer, Jesse answered. "Yes."

"You look just like Jesse Owen - a very fast man - I love jazz. Harlem."

The colonel's aide whispered in his ear. The colonel spoke to the soldiers as he pointed to Marlowe and Jesse. "Estos dos - al camion." Two of the soldiers, shouldering their rifles, wrestled Dewey and Jesse toward the colonel's truck.

Dewey started shouting over his shoulder, shouting as loud and as hard as he could. "Colonel, Colonel, they all work with me - they're my assistants - "

Five simultaneous gunshots cut Dewey off. James, Pierre, Awagu, Romulo, and Remo pitched forward into the dust. From the truck bed, leaning against the fencing, Dewey and Jesse stared at their bodies.

The colonel's truck ground its starter and slouched forward. It didn't take long for the six corpses to disappear from view.

\* \* \* \* \*

Somewhere, the colonel dropped them off, and with a wave of his hand southward and a vague mention about the base for the International Brigades - "you should reach it without much trouble. Say hello to Paul Robeson for me" - the colonel's truck moved on, followed by the other trucks in the convoy, until they all passed out of sight.

In the heat and silence, Jesse and Marlowe stood very still.

From his pouch Jesse pulled out the red bandana, knelt, and scooped a handful of rough rocky dirt into it, then tied it up and put it in his pouch. He also took a long look at the Quixote statute Luz had given him, then he scooped a deep hole in the dirt, laid in the statue, and covered it over.

Jesse started walking down the road.

Dewey hitched up his gear and followed Jesse.

Jesse stopped, turned to face Dewey, then took his camera bag off Dewey's shoulder and slung it over his own. They continued moving forward.

## Scene 20

They came across extraordinary luck in their returning. Instead of heading to the International Brigades, where Jesse knew they'd brand him a traitor and probably pack him off to the IB prison or dump him into a labor battalion, they moved toward Barcelona to see if they could ooze through the blockade the French had buckled around their border. In Barcelona, they hooked up, through drinks along with tobacco and American dollars Dewey had stashed inside film canisters, with an Andorran smuggler who took them to France through the speck-sized country of Andorra, avoiding the usual routes through the Pyrénées used by the International Brigade recruiters. (In neutral Andorra, they tempted themselves with the idea of staying there, tucked away in some valley - but French troops circulated around, and they knew that Franco would eventually slither his way in - neither of them had any illusions at this point about the Republic surviving itself.)

In France, he handed them off like packaged goods to a network of fellow smugglers - by that time, they'd told him their mixed-together stories, from the death of Zack to the death of their comrades, and he told his compatriot criminals to treat them well - they carried damaged goods.

The network bundled them to Le Havre. Jesse had never given up his passport to the commissars when they had come around to collect them (only less than a year ago?) - he'd stuffed it in his underwear and told them it had gotten lifted by someone on the train ride through France. Dewey had secreted his in a false bottom built into one of his camera bags. The documents made it easier to get past the French customs officials, who, in any case, wanted to shuffle them through as fast as possible - these volunteers had become an irritating addition to their workload, cutting into their naps and coffee and creating a lot of political annoyances they would prefer not to attend to. One of them opened the bandana of dirt Jesse has stowed in his knapsack. He gave Jesse a hard but not unfriendly look-over. "Espagne?" he muttered, tracing a fingertip through the dirt. Jesse nodded yes. The official used a corner of the bandana to clean his fingertip, then retied the bandana and lowered it back into Jesse's hand.

They caught a ride back to the United States on the very same *Normandie* that had brought Jesse there. They kept to themselves, not sure who patrolled the decks, not sure of the politics circling them - but keeping to themselves proved not an easy thing to do, with a black man and a white man traveling



together back to the United States in what looked like complete equality. Their little world on the ocean proved no less treacherous than the one ruled by Soviet commissars and the razor hand of Josef Stalin.

Jesse planted himself at the railing for long stares over the Atlantic, Dewey next to him, his hand clamped on his ever-present fedora to keep the wind from snatching it. Dewey didn't know Jesse well enough to know what thoughts tumbled around in his head, but he could make a good guess, because, really, what did Jesse have to return to? Nothing in Pennsylvania, even less in Virginia, his birth state - maybe something in Harlem - maybe - At least he, Dewey, had yards and yards of stuff to write about, the chance of a career, but Jesse - especially Jesse without Zack - what future did the future hold for him? Nothing clear that Dewey could see.

But what Jesse thought didn't spill out during the many hours they pinned themselves to the railing but only as they hunkered down in their steerage cabin, the only one they could afford - a cramped space, with metal bunkbeds bolted to one wall and a small table and chair and one indifferent lightbulb planted overhead.

Jesse lay on the lower bunk while Dewey sat at the desk and wrote - tried to write. He listened to Dewey's sighs, Dewey's grunts, Dewey's muttered "fuck," until he heard what he knew would come next: Dewey throwing down his pencil, pounding his fist on the metal desktop. "I can't fucking get it to work!" He rifled through some papers. "Notes, impressions, but it's like - Hemingway's just churning it out - "

Jesse, eyes tracing the metal netting of the upper bunk, the stripes of the dirty mattress ticking, played out his words.

"You know what?"

"What?"

"What you need - "

"What do I need?"

"You need a real story about Spain."

"I have real stories. What they don't have is a real writer to write them."

Jesse kept his eyes tracing the metal mesh overhead. "I'm gonna quote you something from someone you know."

“Okay.” Dewey’s voice had just a touch of a question in it - he didn’t know Jesse’s heading on this.

“Listen close: ‘A Negro whose friend was burned at the stake now fighting for freedom in a foreign land against white folks - that is prime stuff. Primo.’ Know who said that?”

“I got an idea who said that.” He heard Dewey twist in his chair to face Jesse. Jesse swung his legs over the side of the bunk, ducking his head to miss the upper frame. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. They had maybe a foot between them.

“What is Jesse Colton suggesting?”

“I’ve decided.”

“Decided what?”

“I’m going back.”

“To?”

“To Pennsylvania. Yes.”

Dewey took this in. Then he took it in even deeper. “You can’t do that.”

The needle on the volume meter in Jesse’s voice never left “Calm.” “I went all the way to there just to fight the people who live here.”

“That’s crazy. What - you gonna bang bang? They ain’t like the guy in the tower.”

“That’s not what I’m going to do.”

Dewey and Jesse peered into each other’s faces, perhaps for the first time taking a good deep soak of eyes, nose, mouth, color of skin, set of jaw. And even as Dewey scanned the face of this man who had become his friend not just by chance but also by a circling human closeness born out of shared pain, he knew, in some back but alert part of his mind, that even though he protested as Jesse’s friend his friend’s return to the place that might - would probably - kill him, his voice also hid a tinge of excitement about the possibility of covering such a raw and pulsing story - the hypocrisy born of the wrestling match between affection and ambition.

To cover the discomfort of his hypocrisy, Dewey had prepared to deliver a second even stronger protest when Jesse threw down his trump card. “I’ll need a friendly witness.”

The words withered away Dewey's objection. The air between them filled with the sounds of the ship slicing its way back to the New World.

"Think about it - "

Dewey felt obligated to re-protest, even though he knew, in his heart of hearts, that he really really wanted to write this story. "You're just using me," he stated with as much conviction as he could muster.

Jesse smiled - he knew Dewey's hungers. "Front page - all American - "

Dewey re-obliged himself to re-protest. "Like I said, you're just using me."

Jesse sidestepped that. "Yet strange, too, you know - love, death - you'll get it all - "

Dewey redoubled his efforts at being sincere. " You could go anywhere - Paris - the women will love your ass to death there."

"Uh-huh."

"Africa - South America - Caribbean - "

"But I want to go home. I want to go home to Zack. They've killed, I've killed, and it ain't done anything for either of us." Jesse leaned even closer to Dewey. "You said, afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted, not me - "

Close enough for their breaths to entangle. Close enough for each man to smell the other.

"I didn't say yes."

Jesse smiled. Dewey turned back to his writing.

"I didn't say yes!"

But Dewey didn't pick up his pencil and write. He stared at the blank paper. The paper gave him his answer.

Jesse stretched out his body on the mattress, closed his eyes, let the first calm feeling he'd felt since they all died with bullets through their brains fill him from nappy hair to thin-soled boots. He fell into a light sleep to the sound of Dewey's pencil scratching out a destiny for both of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trainyard in New York City.

Jesse and Dewey trotted alongside a boxcar, then heaved themselves through the open door. Faces, pale in the dead slatted darkness, lifted to check them out as they crawled in, then fell away.

"The bulls been here?" Jesse asked. Dewey didn't move far from the door in case they needed a quick flying exit.

One of the hobos barked back, "Kicked a nigger off."

"I'm his replacement," Jesse barked back, which made Dewey smile - Jesse had picked up some sass since his flight from Spain.

"The dining car's closed for the night, though," the hobo shot back, then melted back inside himself.

Jesse and Marlowe scrunched themselves against one of the walls. Jesse surveyed the hoboes pitching back and forth as the train plowed through the night the way the *Normandie* had cut through the ocean.

\* \* \* \* \*

They didn't have a long train ride - the hometown of The Steel Company squatted only an hour or so from New York. They rolled out of the car just before the train crossed the viaduct, then scrambled down the hill to the main drag. The storefronts closed, the place slumped into its dead sleep - no welcome home for the man who had fought fascists to save the world from devouring itself. Which suited Dewey just fine.

"What now?" Dewey asked him.

"There's a boarding house, two blocks down - get yourself a room there."

"For how long?"

"A day - maybe two."

"And you?"

Jesse pointed the opposite direction down the main street. "Police station is down that way - can't miss it. This morning, all right, 10 AM - be there."

"And - "

"And we'll see what we will see. Go."

"Where are you going to stay?"

"I've got where I'm going to stay - I'll be fine."

And with that Jesse started walking backward down the sidewalk. "Boarding house that way, police station that way."

"I remember."

"Good."

And with that Jesse turned and walked away from Dewey into the darkness.

Dewey, his camera bag jangling, slouched down the main street toward the boarding house. He caught his reflection in one of the store windows, limned by the streetlight, and he stopped for a moment to observe the hobo'd wreck that stared back at him, every joint in his clothing threadbare, his hair matted under the grimed fedora, his face scored and drained, comical and sad. Not bad, he thought, used but not used-up, the dew knocked off the rose.

At the boarding house (shingle hanging out over the stoop: "Rooms for Let" under a single lightbulb - reminded him of the cabin on the ship), he rang the doorbell, and it took five minutes before Dewey could hear the shuffle of footsteps in the hallway, and then a finger crimping the sheer curtain covering the door to one side and a pasty face staring back at Dewey's stubbled face. "What do you want?" a voice demanded.

"A room." Dewey fished out his film canister with money and held up several bills. "I can pay."

The lock unlocked, the door swung in. Dewey stepped through. The door re-closed, the lock re-locked. He followed the dim figure into an office, where the figure sat down, flipped on a desk lamp, and opened a ledger. Dewey couldn't see his face.

"Name?"

Dewey gave him "Dewey Marlowe."

"How long?"

"Day or two."

The lighted hand wrote out the information.

"Three dollars. Bathroom's in the hallway."

Dewey handed the outstretched hand three one-dollar bills, and the hand handed back to him a key with a metal tag on it: 14.

"Top of the stairs, take a left. Hall light's on the left, towels on the bed."

"Thank you." But the light had already gone out, the ledger closed.

"Breakfast at seven."

The figure stood up, opened up the door that led up the stairs to his room, flipped on the light, and gestured for Dewey to move along. Dewey moved along. At the top of the stairs he turned to see if he could get a glimpse of the keeper, but he had already shut off the light and closed the door. Dewey found the hall light, located door 14, opened the door, turned the hall light off, and entered the room, shutting the door behind him. Ten o'clock at the police station: the instruction burned his brain as he thought it.

He switched on the lamp squatting on the plain deal table next to the bed and humped his bags off his shoulders. He let the silence dress him. He let his fatigue soften his sadness. He perched on the edge of the bed and tried to imagine where Jesse had planted himself. He had no picture of that. He brought up the image of himself in the store window - a slouched mild savage - but even that leaked away.

He pulled up his camera bag and took out his lenses in their lens cases and his cleaning kit and began, with deliberate blankness of mind, to brush and wipe and make ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

At first Jesse thought he'd take himself back to the house in the Spruces, but after a year who knew who'd taken it over, and besides, anything of Zack that it held time had purged without second thought.

Then he remembered the key Tobias - Toby - had given him, to the shed at the back of the hospital, and figured it would be as safe there as anywhere until morning came.

Once inside, the door pulled tight closed, he sensed in the darkness that not much had changed: the same smells of lime dust and dead roots and oil and dirt and probably still looked over by shovels, rakes, a pitchfork, pruning shears, gnarled leather workgloves, still the 1936 calendar with pictures from Spain, still the Pennsylvania farmer's almanac.

He didn't expect to find another body in the place, who, when he snapped the door shut, stirred, then leapt to its feet.

"Who the fuck - "

"Toby."

"Who the fuck knows my name?"

"Don't know if you remember Jesse, but it's Jesse."

Silence filled with thought.

"From that poor bastard a year ago - "

"Zack."

"You still got the key."

"I've been gone a long time, and I have it."

Toby slid back down to the ground. So did Jesse.

"What're you doing here?"

"Was going to ask you the same thing."

"You first."

"Times being what they are, I lost my job. Lost my place to stay. Still had a key to a roof over my head. You?"

"That calendar of Spain still in here?"

"Still - never changed."

"That's where I been."

"I read about that - fighting."

"You could say that."

"And you came back here."

"Long and the short of it."

"I don't even know where Spain is."

"It's not that far."

"You kill anybody?"

"I did."

"Make a difference?"

Jesse didn't answer right away.

"Dying always makes a difference."

"That's a stupid answer."

"True."

"Did it make you different?"

Jesse didn't answer right away. Then he didn't answer at all.

They both sat silent for a while.

"Your friend - "

"Yeah - Zack Walker."

"Zack Walker - they buried what was left of him. I can show you where."

"Maybe after - "

"After what?"

"Just after. For now I need to sleep."

"We spend eight hours out of every twenty-four sleeping - what difference does it do us?"

Jesse thought about this for a moment.

"It ain't about us - it's not about us getting a break - it's about the world catching a break, from us. Only so much wear and tear it can take."

Toby went quiet, then said, "Never thought of it like that."

"We do work the place hard."

"That we do. Good night."

And with that both of them made it into sleep without too much of a problem.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dewey, perched on the edge of his bed, stared at the one blank window in his room. Sleep seemed nowhere in the neighborhood. The camera bag, neaten and buckled shut, waited by his ankle.



## Scene 21

The dense air in the shed woke Jesse - he found his lungs working hard to get in his breathing. And it smelled, too - two funky men in an unaired room did not make for the pleasantest of aromas. He unbent himself from against the wall where he'd slept and stood. Toby, hearing him, cut a snore in half as he, too, unkinked himself into standing up.

Toby took a deep breath. "Nasty."

Jesse unlocked the door and shoved it open, and morning light, just flecked with the sun's rising, spilled in, mote-full, open-ended. The two men looked at each other, and Toby laughed. "About a hundred years of washing and a cistern of perfume might bring us back to being human."

"It's be a start. Any place we can wash up?"

"Spigot outside."

So they found the spigot and cupped their hands and doused their faces and necks and rinsed their mouths and took off their shirts and splashed themselves under their arms.

As they re-dressed themselves, Toby said, "Now at least I don't feel like a mile of rutted road." He buttoned his last few shirt buttons as he asked, "What're you gonna do now?"

Jesse didn't answer right away, busy buttoning up his own shirt. Only when he settled his gnarled tweed cap on his head, mashing it down over his overgrown nap, did he speak. "What happened after?"

"After - "

"Yeah."

Toby unroped his pants (belt had long ago disappeared) and tucked in his shirt. "Had a trial - lawyer from the capital came down, they did investigations - dozen people, maybe more, up there."

"And?"

"You tell me what you think happened."

"They found every last person who had a hand in the death of my friend and sent them to jail - right?"

"That's exactly what happened."

And they both laughed. They walked back to the shed.

"Which makes me ask again - what're gonna do now?"

"I'm going to pay a visit."

"I can show you where they buried him."

"That's all right - that's not what I mean. It isn't him, anyway."

Jesse hauled his kit bag over his shoulder, then reached inside and pulled out the red bandana. Holding it in the palm of his right hand, he asked Toby to untie it, which Toby did. "Take one of the rocks." Toby picked out a walnut-sized stone, then Jesse re-tied the bandana. Jesse put it back into his bag. "That's from Spain. Don't know if it'll bring you luck, but it's all I got to give you."

Toby clenched it in his fist, shoved it into his pocket.

"I have to go," said Jesse. And with that he turned and walked down the driveway to the road, then turned and made his way to the main street and the police station.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Dewey got there about ten minutes to ten, he saw what he knew he would see but wished he wouldn't have to see: Jesse planted on the steps of the police station holding silent vigil. He didn't do anything but stand there, hands crossed in front of him holding his cap, bag slung across his shoulder, rough pants and rough shirt hanging off his thin frame - but people still gave him a wary eye as they went in and out of the building, never speaking to him, easing around him just out of his arms' reach.

Dewey planted himself at the foot of the steps.

Somebody must have said something to someone inside because, just about the stroke of ten, a police officer stepped out of the door, his leather sash cutting across the buttons of his jacket, his gun-belt bisecting his gut (gun perched on his right hip), capped tipped back. Dewey noticed that he didn't look Jesse in the eye as he spoke to him but looked over his head, at the people passing and pausing on the sidewalk, even right at Dewey, as if Jesse didn't deserve any kind of courtesy from a white man to a black man.

"What're you doing?"

"I'm waiting."

"I think you've waited enough. Either go inside or go away."

"I'm waiting for Chief Olmstead."

"And why would he want to talk to someone like you? Just get yourself along, boy - you're blocking - "

"Zack Walker."

"What?"

"Zack Walker - I want to talk to Chief Olmstead about Zack Walker."

"No one here by that name."

"I know that - you know that. The Chief knows that. That's what I want to talk about."

By now a small clot of passersby had gathered, drawn to the small scene of the bedecked police officer speaking to a black man who did not immediately move along when the officer commanded him to move along. Dewey watched everything hawk-eyed, knowing he'd have to give witness at some point of what here and now transpired. His fingers itched to take out his journal, but he calmed them, made his brain instead the blank page filling up with prose.

The officer, his eyes flicking sidelong to the people on the sidewalk, hitched up his gun-belt and made himself stand taller: no nigger had ever got over on him, and this one would not either, with his cocky look and no speck of fear in his eye. He had already decided to slip out the baton and jack him down the steps when Jesse, having rummaged in his bag, pulled out Zack's bone and held it up for all to see. The officer paused, unsure what Jesse had in his hand, and, unsure of that, unsure what to do next.

"Do you know what this is?"

The officer calculated - if he answered, then that would mean a conversation, something between equals; on the other hand, he could probably get away with hustling the bastard to the curb, but by now a crowd had collected, including some of the blacks who used to work at the Company but, made jobless in the past year, wandered the streets untethered and sullen. A crowd, any crowd, could spark, could harden - and the guy had used Walker's name - that piece of crap business at the trial, the state troopers crawling up everyone's ass looking for those who did it - everyone knew them, no one ratted them - the way that nigger even dead made everyone's life miserable - and now this guy lets Walker's name loose with the chance of re-agitating everything - maybe Olmstead did have to make this call after all.

And what did the guy have in his fingers? A bone? A bone?

“Zack Walker’s finger bone,” Jesse said, reading the officer’s face. He made sure to show it to everyone now congregated and raised his voice as he repeated the words. “Zack Walker’s finger bone.” He slipped it back into this bag. “Tell Chief Olmstead that I’ve come back to get the rest of Zack Walker’s bones.” Jesse paused, then, straight look eye to eye. “Go on, go tell him.”

The officer made his own pause, just to make sure no one there made the mistake of thinking that the nigger had just told him what to do and that he would jump to the nigger’s tune. Then, without a word, the officer turned and disappeared through the station door. Jesse let a light glance fall on Dewey, then rested his eyes on the other people there, then let them rise to the carbon’d hulks of the Company’s mills - Zack’s sweat there, his sweat there, so much waste and pain.

Dewey heard “Zack Walker” tossed back and forth among the congregants - Jesse had loosed the word, the name, and whatever would happen had started to happen. He finally gave in to the itch in his fingers and snagged his journal - his pencil raced to hunger up the empty lines. He also dug out the camera, hung it from his neck - and when he could without drawing attention clamped it to his eye for focus and shot what he could shoot.

The police station door swung open and inward, and out stepped Chief Olmstead - a rotund, round-faced, brass-buttoned barge cutting toward Jesse, trailed by the ugly tugboat of the officer.

The crowd now had one face pointed at Chief Olmstead.

Olmstead came right to the edge of the of the landing, but he didn’t take the first step down that would bring him closer to Jesse. Instead, he gestured for Jesse to join him at the top of the stairs - a waggle of the sausage fingers on his left hand while he directed his gaze over the heads of everyone: the summons of the imperious.

Jesse, of course, didn’t move. Bombed, artilleried, starved, machine-gunned, near-executed - fat Copic-like fingers waved in his direction by a small-bore fascist made no dent whatsoever.

Dewey, anchored at the bottom of the stairs, heard his heart pound, his breath whistle in and out, felt sweat trickle from his underarms over the rill of his ribs.

Olmstead's fingers, having failed to do what they had set out to do, settled on his hip, matching the other hand on the other hip, arms akimbo - just the shape, Jesse thought, of Il Duce in the photos passed around by the commissars. The species infected everything.

"What do you want?"

Jesse pointed to the officer. "I told him. Didn't he tell you?"

"He told me."

"Then you know - I'm here to get Zach Walker's bones."

"Come inside - "

"I saw everything that night - you know who did it."

"We had a trial about that - "

"Anybody locked away inside there? Anywhere?"

Dewey turned to the man at his left. "Trial?"

The man turned his vulpine face to Dewey, cheeks beard-stubbed and sunken, onyx eyes. "Yeah."

"And?"

"Seems Zach Walker just burned up by himself - couldn't lay a finger on anyone." Half the man's face lifted in a snarly grin. "The miracle of flames. Spontaneous combustion," the snarly grin said as the man turned his face away.

"But you know," Jesse said, "and I know - and I've come to get Zack Walker's bones and take him away - "

"He's been buried."

"Don't lie because that's not all of him - dogs - human dogs and just dog dogs - they've buried his bones around. Dog dogs I don't blame - can't blame dogs for being dogs. But the human dogs - the people in your line of work, Chief - they're always a problem - and I'm gonna try to solve that problem."

Jesse lifted himself up one step closer to Olmstead. "I won't be leaving until I find every bone."

Then Jesse reached into his bag, and as he did, Olmstead's right hand came to settle on the gun butt jutting out of the holster squeezed against the liberal fat of his hip. Jesse flashed his blue Party membership card into the air. He turned and pointed to Dewey. "Sir, could you give me a hand?"

Dewey, suddenly feeling like a quail flushed from cover, moved up the stairs to Jesse. Jesse urged the card toward Dewey, who took it. "Would you bring it up to the Chief?" Dewey nodded and made his way up the rest of the stairs and stood next to the Chief.

"And who the fuck are you?" Olmstead asked Dewey, shooting the words out of the corner of his mouth.

"I'm not anybody."

"You're a nobody with a camera."

"Great modern invention - lots of people have 'em."

Dewey held the card out toward Olmstead. "I don't want to be out here as much as you don't want to be out here."

Olmstead gave Dewey a fuck-you look, but Dewey could see the doubt behind it - Olmstead knew he had to take the card, but he'd take it on his own time, at his own pace - forced into it, yes, but not let himself get strong-armed by a nigger and this camera'd bastard most probably from New York. Dewey held the card out for everyone to see.

"I'm a member of the Communist Party, Chief - that's my card."

With that, Olmstead had no choice. He snapped the card from Dewey's fingers. Dewey made his way back down the stairs, Jesse throwing him a "Thank you, sir" as he passed by.

Olmstead made a big show of tearing the card into bits and letting them flutter down like blue snow. "Just wanted you to know who you had," Dewey offered up to Olmstead. "You got a real Commie bastard here."

The crowd around Dewey started a good strong murmuring with that one. Dewey could feel the orbits start to pitch and yaw - the Commie line set up force-fields, Jesse's color, connected to "Commie," set up other force fields, and all these sparring with each other set up still others until small gales of prejudice and stereotype and judgment mixed with the common winds of anger and spite and boredom began to buffet people into motion, something both Olmstead and Jesse, tuned as their lives had tuned them, could sense without even looking at the crowd itself.

"Go home," Olmstead said to Jesse.

"I am home," Jesse answered back. "I'm staying out by the hospital. Where Zack Walker had stayed. In case you're interested."

Olmstead looked over Jesse's head to the crowd.

"Go home," Olmstead barked out, "go to work, go wherever, but get yourselves moving along." He snapped his fingers at the officer behind him, who dutifully pulled out his baton and made his way down the stairs crowing as he did, "Come on, move along now," and wading into the thick jostling pack.

"I'm not going away, Chief." But Olmstead had already turned his back on him and reentered the station. Dewey watched Jesse come down the steps as the officer bullied people along behind him, and Jesse, his face and body suddenly going all-Negro, did a high-kicking cakewalk from step to step, fists on his hips, head held high, while singing "The Internationale."

Dewey, in spite of the clashing and the shoving and his own internal gut-wrenching, smiled a broad open smile at Jesse's antics. Olmstead, looking at Jesse through the slats of the blinds over his office window, did not smile. Did not smile at all.

## **Scene 22**

It didn't take long, as Jesse knew it wouldn't.

As dusk came down, Jesse and Toby, sitting outside the shed, heard the growl of several pick-up trucks coming up the drive.

"You gotta go, man," Jesse said, and Toby wasted no time melting into the coming darkness, only taking a moment to give Jesse's hands a squeeze between his own.

By the time the first truck pulled up to a rocking stop, Toby had disappeared completely.

Jesse could see the silhouettes of people scuttling off the trucks as they pulled into the yard, then morph into forms as they stepped in front of the headlights. Jesse just caught Dewey's terrified face bobbing in the mix when a lasso flew out of the sunset-tinted sky and snagged Jesse around the throat. Jesse got his fingers around the rope just before the thrower wrenched it tight and dropped Jesse to his knees.

The crowd swirled in an eerie silence, a silence dutiful and uninspired.

By now the jackals surrounded him. One put his foot between Jesse's shoulder blades and shoved him to the ground. Another two ripped Jesse's fingers from the rope and twisted his arms behind him.

Dewey had forced his way to the front - witness witness witness witness.

One of the hyenas handed Dewey a small length of rope. "Loop it around his wrists - be good for that thing you're gonna write." Dewey's hands quivered so hard he couldn't make them do what he told them to do, so the vulture took the rope and did a quick figure eight around Jesse's wrists and cinched it tight. "Proper way to tie a hog."

With Jesse trussed and necktied, another of the wolves wrapped the end of the rope around the bumper of the closest truck, then jumped into the cab and pulled away, dragging Jesse behind him. Dewey rushed with the others to get into one of the other trucks, and as they sped out of the hospital parking lot in a boil of dust, Dewey, propped up against the cab and looking down the road, could see Jesse's body in the truck headlights dragged behind the truck in front of them. Dewey could look at nothing else. Dewey could see nothing else.

\* \* \* \* \*



The office had a high ceiling; a ceiling fan made slow cyclones out of the heat-thickened air. Dewey, fedora cradled in his hands, sat in a gnawed wooden chair; a worn leather knapsack sagged against the chair leg like a reluctant guard dog. Through the open windows came blaring car horns and the sizzle of tires on hot asphalt. His shirt clung to him from the body's sweat-points: down his spine, under his arms, the small of his back.

The man across from Dewey, his forehead and hands oddly dry, leafed through a typed manuscript that only moments before Dewey had laid on his desk amid the rampikes of piled papers and bookmarked books. To one side lay several 8x10 photos of a corpse in a flash's glare hanging from a tree. The flash also caught the pale faces of onlookers in its net, some grinning, some startled, none ashamed. The man let out a long, long sigh as he read.

The barbell-shaped phone behind him held its tongue. The dictaphone to his left also played it close to the vest.

The ceiling fan milled the air.

"It's been rejected by some of the best," Dewey offered. "They've been polite, but - "

"You're pissing uphill on this one, that's why," the man offered back, not lifting his eyes off the page.

"Yeah," Dewey replied, looking down at his hands, "and I ain't got rubber shoes."

Still not lifting his eyes up. "Gavagan's anti-lynching bill's going nowhere - Roosevelt needs the Southern Senators for his Court scheme, so - "

Finally, the man leaned back in his chair - it squeaked as it took his inclined weight. "But I don't mind a piss or two uphill. I can't pay you - much at least."

"Doesn't matter."

"My accountant loves it when writers say that," the man said without humor. "And you know we ain't among 'some of the best.'"

"Doesn't matter." Dewey's right eye stung from a thread of sweat off his eyebrow and he wiped it and his forehead clear with his shirt-sleeve, the moisture dampening the faded blue cotton into a deeper blue.

"We'll run it."

"Great," said Dewey. "Great."

\* \* \* \* \*

Wandering through Union Square, knapsack slung over his left shoulder, Dewey found himself caught in a rally for the support of Spain, looped around the park pavilion. A rally for Spain - Dewey shook his head in amusement and amazement. He mixed with the crowd, peered into the faces of the people listening to a woman ask for money to bring medicine and ambulances to the Republicans.

He didn't stay long.

He'd done the two things he'd come to New York to do: tell Gabriel about Jesse and get the article accepted for publication.

Now what?

Dewey did what a wandering uncertain man in Union Square did in a society mostly out of important and useful work to do: he found a bench and sat on it, not knowing how long he might occupy this rung on the downward ladder.

Actually, he had a third thing to do, and now had come the time to do it. He opened his knapsack, took out Jesse's bandana, and, setting it in his lap, untied it and fanned out its ends across his thighs.

Right on cue blew in the breeze, that rarest of breezes, a breeze to soothe the molten New York City summer. Dewey leaned back against the slats of the bench, feeling the wood dig into his knobbed spine-bones, and spread his arms north and south along the bench's top rail so that he sat in comfort as he watched the small fingering breeze transport the dry dirt of Spain toward the rallyers-for-Spain by the pavilion. No way to resist: Dewey laughed out loud, laughed double-hard - one for him, one for Jesse. He lifted the ends of the bandana and flipped the dust into the air, watching it stream away to nothing.

The laugh did not go unnoted.

A voice barked behind him.

"Gonna use that?"

Dewey turned and caught the eyes of a natty bum wearing a worn-out suit and vest, loafers without socks, a cock-eyed derby, and a grimy bow-tie.

"You gonna use that?" The bum slipped his fingers in and out of the breast pocket. "Could use a handkerchief to complete my ensemble. What say?"

Dewey weighed Jesse's bandana in his hand. "You take this, you're going to have to fight for justice, you know."

"Mister, just as soon as I get a meal."

Dewey handed him the bandana. While the bum folded it neatly and put it in his breast pocket, Dewey dug out two dollar bills. He held up one.

"Your meal."

The bum, giving Dewey an arch look, hesitated just long enough to signal to Dewey that he, the bum, took the gift not out of need - out of desperation - but to make Dewey feel good about his, Dewey's, philanthropic impulse. Then he reached to take the dollar bill, and as he did, Dewey pulled it away - his own form of hesitation. He held up the other dollar bill.

"Find someone as bad off or worse than you."

"Give it away?"

"Give it away."

The bum stared with hard eyes at the two bills, then held out his two hands. Dewey placed one in one, and one in the other.

"Don't mess with your promise."

"I wasn't always like this."

The bum left - one bill slipped into the right jacket pocket, the other slipped into the left.

Dewey watched the crowd listen to the speaker. He knew Jesse's dust had settled.

He leaned back against the bench, arms out north and south along the top rail.

He waited.

## About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also look collaborates with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

*Elfin Frederick Vogel* (Producer/Director) -- Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

*Michael Bettencourt* (Producer/Writer) -- Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to Maria Beatriz. All his work (including longer versions of these essays and all stage scripts) can be seen at [www.m-bettencourt.com](http://www.m-bettencourt.com)

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