

LBRIS

We know
books

Percival
Everett

JAMES

PICADOR

LBRIS

We know
books

PART

ONE

CHAPTER 1

THOSE LITTLE BASTARDS were hiding out there in the tall grass. The moon was not quite full, but bright, and it was behind them, so I could see them as plain as day, though it was deep night. Lightning bugs flashed against the black canvas. I waited at Miss Watson's kitchen door, rocked a loose step board with my foot, knew she was going to tell me to fix it tomorrow. I was waiting there for her to give me a pan of corn bread that she had made with my Sadie's recipe. Waiting is a big part of a slave's life, waiting and waiting to wait some more. Waiting for demands. Waiting for food. Waiting for the ends of days. Waiting for the just and deserved Christian reward at the end of it all.

Those white boys, Huck and Tom, watched me. They were always playing some kind of pretending game where I was either a villain or prey, but certainly their toy. They hopped about out there with the chiggers, mosquitoes and other biting bugs, but never made any progress toward me. It always pays to give white folks what they want, so I stepped into the yard and called out into the night,

"Who dat dere in da dark lak dat?"

They rustled clumsily about, giggled. Those boys couldn't sneak up on a blind and deaf man while a band was playing. I would rather have been wasting time counting lightning bugs than bothering with them.

"I guess I jest gwyne set dese old bones down on dis heah porch and watch out for dat noise 'gin. Maybe dere be sum ol' demon or witch out dere. I'm gwyne stay right heah where it be safe." I sat on the top step and leaned back against the post. I was tired, so I closed my eyes.

The boys whispered excitedly to each other, and I could hear them, clear as a church bell.

"Is he 'sleep already?" Huck asked.

"I reckon so. I heard niggers can fall asleep jest like that," Tom said and snapped his fingers.

"Shhhh," Huck said.

"I say we ties him up," Tom said. "Tie him up to dat porch post what he's leaning 'ginst."

"No," said Huck. "What if'n he wakes up and makes a ruckus? Then I gets found out for being outside and not in bed like I'm supposed to be."

"Okay. But you know what? I need me some candles. I'm gonna slip into Miss Watson's kitchen and get me some."

"What if'n you wake Jim?"

"I ain't gonna wake nobody. Thunder can't even wake a sleepin' nigger. Don't you know nuffin? Thunder, nor lightning, nor roarin' lions. I hear tell of one that slept right through an earthquake."

"What you suppose an earthquake feels like?" Huck asked.

"Like when you pa wakes you up in the middle of the night."

The boys sneaked awkwardly, crawled knees over fists, and none too quietly across the complaining boards of the porch and inside through the Dutch door of Miss Watson's kitchen. I heard them in there rifling about, opening cabinet doors and drawers. I kept my eyes closed and ignored a mosquito that landed on my arm.

"Here we go," Tom said. "I gone jest take three."

"You cain't jest take an old lady's candles," Huck said. "That's stealin'. What if'n they blamed Jim for that?"

"Here, I'll leave her this here nickel. That's more'n enough. They won't 'spect no slave. Where a slave gonna git a nickel? Now, let's git outta here befo' she shows up."

The boys stepped out onto the porch. I don't imagine that they were hardly aware of all the noise they made.

"You shoulda left a note, too," Huck said.

"No need for all that," Tom said. "Nickel's plenty." I could feel the boys' eyes turn to me. I remained still.

"What you doin'?" Huck asked.

"I'm gonna play a little joke on ol' Jim."

"You gonna wake him up is what you gonna do."

"Hush up."

Tom stepped behind me and grabbed my hat brim at my ears.

"Tom," Huck complained.

"Shhhh." Tom lifted my hat off my head. "I's jest gonna hang this ol' hat on this ol' nail."

"What's that s'posed to do?" Huck asked.

"When he wakes up he's gonna think a witch done it. I jest wish we could be round to see it."

"Okay, it be on the nail, now let's git," Huck said.

Someone stirred inside the house and the boys took off

running, turned the corner in a full gallop and kicked up dust. I could hear their footfalls fade.

Now someone was in the kitchen, at the door. "Jim?" It was Miss Watson.

"Yessum?"

"Was you 'sleep?"

"No, ma'am. I is a might tired, but I ain't been 'sleep."

"Was you in my kitchen?"

"No, ma'am."

"Was anybody in my kitchen?"

"Not that I seen, ma'am." That was quite actually true, as my eyes had been closed the whole time. "I ain't seen nobody in yo kitchen."

"Well, here's that corn bread. You kin tell Sadie that I like her recipe. I made a couple of changes. You know, to refine it."

"Yessum, I sho tell her."

"You seen Huck about?" she asked.

"I seen him earlier."

"How long ago?"

"A spell," I said.

"Jim, I'm gonna ask you a question now. Have you been in Judge Thatcher's library room?"

"In his what?"

"His library."

"You mean dat room wif all dem books?"

"Yes."

"No, missums. I seen dem books, but I ain't been in da room. Why fo you be askin' me dat?"

"Oh, he found some book off the shelves."

I laughed. "What I gone do wif a book?"

She laughed, too.

THE CORN BREAD was wrapped in a thin towel and I had to keep shifting hands because it was hot. I considered having a taste because I was hungry, but I wanted Sadie and Elizabeth to have the first bites. When I stepped through the door, Lizzie ran to me, sniffing the air like a hound.

"What's that I smell?" she asked.

"I imagine that would be this corn bread," I said. "Miss Watson used your mama's special recipe and it certainly does smell good. She did inform me that she made a couple of alterations."

Sadie came to me and gave me a kiss on the mouth. She stroked my face. She was soft and her lips were soft, but her hands were as rough as mine from work in the fields, though still gentle.

"I'll be sure to take this towel back to her tomorrow. White folks always remember things like that. I swear, I believe they set aside time every day to count towels and spoons and cups and such."

"That's the honest truth. Remember that time I forgot to put that rake back in the shed?"

Sadie had the corn bread on the block—a stump, really—that served as our table. She sliced into it. She handed portions to Lizzie and me. I took a bite and so did Lizzie. We looked at each other.

"But it smells so good," the child said.

Sadie shaved off a sliver and put it in her mouth. "I swear that woman has a talent for not cooking."

"Do I have to eat it?" Lizzie asked.

"No, you don't," Sadie said.

"But what are you going to say when she asks you about it?" I asked.

Lizzie cleared her throat. "Miss Watson, dat sum cone-bread lak I neva before et."

"Try 'dat be,'" I said. "That would be the correct incorrect grammar."

"Dat be sum of conebread lak neva I et," she said.

"Very good," I said.

Albert appeared at the door of our shack. "James, you coming out?"

"I'll be there directly. Sadie, do you mind?"

"Go on," she said.

I WALKED OUTSIDE and over to the big fire, where the men were sitting. I was greeted and then I sat. We talked some about what happened to a runaway over at another farm. "Yeah, they beat him real good," Doris said. Doris was a man, but that didn't seem to matter to the slavers when they named him.

"All of them are going to hell," Old Luke said.

"What happened to you today?" Doris asked me.

"Nothing."

"Something must have happened," Albert said.

They were waiting for me to tell them a story. I was apparently good at that, telling stories. "Nothing, except I got carried off to New Orleans today. Aside from that, nothing happened."

"You what?" Albert said.

"Yes. You see, I thought I was drifting off into a nice nap about noon and the next thing I knew I was standing on a

bustling street with mule-drawn carriages and whatnot all around me."

"You're crazy," someone said.

I caught sight of Albert giving me the warning sign that white folks were close. Then I heard the clumsy action in the bushes and I knew it was those boys.

"Lak I say, I furst found my hat up on a nail. 'I ain't put dat dere,' I say to myself. 'How dat hat git dere?' And I knew 'twas witches what done it. I ain't seen 'em, but it was dem. And one dem witches, the one what took my hat, she sent me all da way down to N'Orlins. Can you believe dat?" My change in diction alerted the rest to the white boys' presence. So, my performance for the boys became a frame for my story. My story became less of a tale as the real game became the display for the boys.

"You don't says," Doris said. "Dem witches ain't to be messed wif."

"You got dat right," another man said.

We could hear the boys giggling. "So, dere I was in N'Orlins and guess what?" I said. "All of a sudden dis root doctor come up behind me. He say, 'Whatchu doin' in dis here town.' I tells him I ain't got no idea how I git dere. And you know what he say ta me? You know what he say?"

"What he say, Jim?" Albert asked.

"He say I, Jim, be a free man. He say dat ain't nobody gone call me no nigga eber 'gin."

"Lawd, hab mercy," Skinny, the farrier, shouted out.

"Demon say I could buy me what I want up da street. He say I could have me some whisky, if'n I wanted. Whatchu think 'bout that?"

"Whisky is the devil's drink," Doris said.

"Din't matter," I said. "Din't matter a bit. He say I could hab it if'n I wanted it. Anything else, too. Din't matter, though."

"Why was dat?" a man asked.

"Furst, 'cause I was in dat place to whar dat demon sent me. Weren't real, jest a dream. And 'cause I ain't had me no money. It be dat simple. So dat demon snapped his old dirty fingas and sent me home."

"Why fo he do dat?" Albert asked.

"Hell, man, you cain't get in no trouble in N'Orlins lessen you gots some money, dream or no dream," I said.

The men laughed. "Dat sho is what I heard," a man said.

"Wait," I said. "I thinks I hears one dem demons in the bushes right naw. Somebody gives me a torch so I kin set dis brush alight. Witches and demons don't lak no fires burnin' all round 'em. Dey start to melt lak butta on a griddle."

We all laughed as we heard the white boys hightail it out of there.

AFTER STEPPING ON them squeaking boards last night, I knew Miss Watson would have me nailing down those planks and fixing that loose step. I waited till midmorning so I wouldn't wake any white folks. They could sleep like nobody's business and always complained to wake up too early, no matter how late it was.

Huck came out of the house and watched me for a few minutes. He hovered around like he did when something was on his mind.

"Why you ain't out runnin' wif yo friend?" I asked.

"You mean Tom Sawyer?"

"I guessin' dat da one."

"He's probably still sleepin'. He was probably up all night robbin' banks and trains and such."

"He do dat, do he?"

"Claims to. He got some money, so he buys himself books and be readin' all the time 'bout adventures. Sometimes I ain't so sho 'bout him."

"Whatchu mean?"

"Like, he found this cave and we goes into it and have a meeting with some other boys, but we get in there it's like he gotta be the boss."

"Yeah?"

"And all because he been reading them books."

"And dat sorta rub you da wrong way?" I asked.

"Why people say that? 'Rubbing the wrong way?'"

"Well, the way I sees it, Huck, is if'n you rake a fish's back wid a fork head ta tail, ain't gone matter much to him, but if'n you go ta other way . . ."

"I git it."

"It seem sumtimes you jest gotta put up wif your friends. Dey gonna do what dey gonna do."

"Jim, you work the mules and you fix the wagon wheels and now you fixin' this here porch. Who taught you to do all them things?"

I stopped and looked at the hammer in my hand, flipped it. "Dat be a good question, Huck."

"So, who did?"

"Necessity."

"What?"

"'Cessity," I corrected myself. "'Cessity is when you gots to do sumptin' or else."

"Or else what?"

"Else'n they takes you to the post and whips ya or they drags ya down to the river and sells ya. Nuffin you gots to worry 'bout."

Huck looked at the sky. He pondered on that a bit. "Sho is pretty when you jest look at the sky with nothin' in it, jest blue. I heard tell there are names for different blues. And reds and the like. I wonder what you call that blue."

"'Robin's egg,'" I said. "You ever seen a robin's egg?"

"You right, Jim. It is like a robin's egg, 'ceptin' it ain't got the speckles."

I nodded. "Dat be why you gots to look past the speckles."

"Robin's egg," Huck said, again.

We sat there a little longer. "What else be eatin' you?" I asked.

"I think Miss Watson is crazy."

I didn't say anything.

"Always talkin' 'bout Jesus and prayers and such. She got Jesus Christ on the brain. She told me that prayers is to help me act selflessly in the world. What the hell does that mean?"

"Don't be swearin' naw, Huck."

"You sound like her. I don't see no profit in askin' for stuff just so I don't get it and learn a lesson 'bout not gettin' what I asked fer. What kinda sense does that make? Might as well pray to that board there."

I nodded.

"You noddin' that it makes sense or don't make no sense?"

"I'm jest noddin', Huck."

"I'm surrounded by crazy people. You know what Tom Sawyer did?"

"Tells me, Huck."

"He made us take an oath in blood that if'n any of us tells

gang secrets, then we will kill that person's entire family. Don't that sound crazy?"

"How you take a blood oath?" I asked.

"You're supposed to cut yer hand open with a knife and shake with everybody else what done the same thing. You know, so your blood gets all mixed and mashed together. Then you're blood brothers."

I looked at his hands.

"We used spit instead. Tom Sawyer said it would do the same thing and how could we rob a bank wif our hands all cut up. One boy cried and said he was going to tell and Tom Sawyer shut him up wif a nickel."

"Ain't you tellin' me yo secrets right naw?" I asked.

Huck paused. "You're different."

"'Cause I'm a slave?"

"No, taint that."

"What it is, den?"

"You're my friend, Jim."

"Why, thank ya, Huck."

"You won't tell nobody, will ya?" He stared anxiously at me. "Even if we go out and rob us a bank. You won't tell, right?"

"I kin keep me a secret, Huck. I kin keep yo secret, too."

Miss Watson came to the back screen and hissed, "Ain't you done with that step yet, Jim?"

"Matter fact, I am, Miss Watson," I said.

"It's a miracle with this here boy yakking your ear off. Huckleberry, you get back in this house and make yer bed."

"I'm jest gonna mess it up agin tonight," Huck said. He shoved his hands in his britches and swayed there, like he knew he'd just crossed a line.

"Don't make me come out there," she said.

"See ya later, Jim." Huck ran into the house, running by Miss Watson sideways like he was dodging a swat.

"Jim," Miss Watson said, looking back into the house after Huck.

"Ma'am?"

"I hear tell Huck's pappy is back in town." She stepped past me and looked at the road.

I nodded. "Yessum."

"Keep an eye on Huck," she said.

I didn't know exactly what she was asking me to do. "Yessum." I put the hammer back in the box. "Ma'am, what I s'posed to keep my eye on, zackly?"

"And help him watch out for that Sawyer boy."

"Why fo you tellin' me all dis, missum?"

The old woman looked at me and then out at the road and then up at the sky. "I don't know, Jim."

I studied on Miss Watson's words. That Tom Sawyer wasn't really a danger to Huck, just a kind of little fellow sitting on his shoulder whispering nonsense. But his father being back, that was a different story. That man might have been sober or he might have been drunk, but in either of those conditions he consistently threw beatings onto the poor boy.

CHAPTER 2

THAT EVENING I sat down with Lizzie and six other children in our cabin and gave a language lesson. These were indispensable. Safe movement through the world depended on mastery of language, fluency. The young ones sat on the packed-dirt floor and I was on one of our two homemade stools. The hole in the roof pulled the smoke from the fire that burned in the middle of the shack.

"Papa, why do we have to learn this?"

"White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don't disappoint them," I said. "The only ones who suffer when they are made to feel inferior is us. Perhaps I should say 'when they don't feel superior.' So, let's pause to review some of the basics."

"Don't make eye contact," a boy said.

"Right, Virgil."

"Never speak first," a girl said.

"That's correct, February," I said.

Lizzie looked at the other children and then back to me. "Never address any subject directly when talking to another slave," she said.

"What do we call that?" I asked.

Together they said, "Signifying."

"Excellent." They were happy with themselves, and I let that feeling linger. "Let's try some situational translations. Something extreme first. You're walking down the street and you see that Mrs. Holiday's kitchen is on fire. She's standing in her yard, her back to her house, unaware. How do you tell her?"

"Fire, fire," January said.

"Direct. And that's almost correct," I said.

The youngest of them, lean and tall five-year-old Rachel, said, "Lawdy, missum! Looky dere."

"Perfect," I said. "Why is that correct?"

Lizzie raised her hand. "Because we must let the whites be the ones who name the trouble."

"And why is that?" I asked.

February said, "Because they need to know everything before us. Because they need to name everything."

"Good, good. You all are really sharp today. Okay, let's imagine now that it's a grease fire. She's left bacon unattended on the stove. Mrs. Holiday is about to throw water on it. What do you say? Rachel?"

Rachel paused. "Missums, that water gone make it wurs!"

"Of course, that's true, but what's the problem with that?"

Virgil said, "You're telling her she's doing the wrong thing."

I nodded. "So, what should you say?"

Lizzie looked at the ceiling and spoke while thinking it through. "Would you like for me to get some sand?"

"Correct approach, but you didn't translate it."

She nodded. "Oh, Lawd, missums ma'am, you wan fo me to gets some sand?"

"Good."

"'Gets some' is hard to say." This from Glory, the oldest child. "The s's."

"That's true," I said. "And it's okay to trip over it. In fact, it's good. You wan fo me to ge-gets s-s-some s-sand, Missum Holiday?"

"What if they don't understand?" Lizzie asked.

"That's okay. Let them work to understand you. Mumble sometimes so they can have the satisfaction of telling you not to mumble. They enjoy the correction and thinking you're stupid. Remember, the more they choose to not want to listen, the more we can say to one another around them."

"Why did God set it up like this?" Rachel asked. "With them as masters and us as slaves?"

"There is no God, child. There's religion but there's no God of theirs. Their religion tells that we will get our reward in the end. However, it apparently doesn't say anything about their punishment. But when we're around them, we believe in God. Oh, Lawdy Lawd, we's be believin'. Religion is just a controlling tool they employ and adhere to when convenient."

"There must be something," Virgil said.

"I'm sorry, Virgil. You might be right. There might be some higher power, children, but it's not their white God. However, the more you talk about God and Jesus and heaven and hell, the better they feel."

The children said together, "And the better they feel, the safer we are."

"February, translate that."

"Da mo' betta dey feels, da mo' safer we be."

"Nice."