

Willie had heard plenty of the older folk say it, that if you don't like the weather in the Delta, just wait five minutes. But he never understood that. It was hot. Either hot or very hot. Sometimes unbearably hot. When it got like that, the sun was a weapon, some evil thing boring itself right through the top of your skull and into your chest, burning up everything inside of you, melting all that jumble of organ and such until it was pouring itself out of you in streams down your face and back, down every inch of you. I mean, who knew that you could sweat through your kneecaps?

When it got like that, when the men told that other joke they liked to tell—except it wasn't a joke, not really—when they said, I'd trade Mississippi for hell any day, it was hard to remember that sometimes it gets real cold here, too. Nights where you just fold yourself up best you can, wrap your long johns around your head, slip a pair of socks on over your hands and ball up your fists inside. Those nights you watch your breath rise and fall from your mouth, feel the ache inside and the way the ends of you—your toes and your ears and the tip of your nose—how they stay raw and red and tingle and they never catch the faint warmth that lingers deep inside your middle. Those nights go on forever and you praise the first gray light of dawn when you can stumble out of the bed you've huddled into all night with no relief, and head out to the field where the sun will soon come and burn off the frost.

Last night was one of those nights and so Willie jumped out of bed at first light and headed out. It was a Saturday, but there would be none of the usual work, and Willie knew why. It was the day they were strapping old Marvell Smith to the chair. And Willie's daddy said he'd go down to the courthouse. "Bear witness," his daddy'd said. "Old Marvell has no one in this world, so we'll take the rest today on account of him and I'll go over and be close."

Willie went down to the creek. He wasn't sure what took him there, only that he needed to be away from the house. His mama and daddy weren't talking. Just walking around each other without a word. It was cold and tense and so Willie ran out, hoping to escape from it all, find some warmth somewhere.

When he first saw the ice, he wasn't sure if it might have been something he was still dreaming, still so close to getting out of bed. The edge of the water, where it met the mud, was frozen. Little angled pieces of ice clinging to the mud. Bits of the bank mingled in with the ice and it was dark brown, but as it spread toward the middle of the water, it became clear, un-dirtied, glass in little patterns like spears, spreading its fingers to the center. Willie tilted his head, taking different angles on it: tiny rainbows trapped in the ice skipped along the surface. Rippling colors when he moved his head a little this way, a little that. Actual rainbows, there in the ice, there on the water, there in Mississippi. Who knew of such a thing?

He knelt down, ignoring the cold mud on his knees. Reached over. Ran his finger along the ice. Smooth and cold and wet. Elation at something new, something unexpected, something he couldn't conceive of existing in this world. Ice. On the day they were going to kill old Marvell.

Strong, silent Marvell. Strongest man Willie had ever seen. Once saw him lift a horse. Dragged him out of the mud he was stuck in; lifted him up and placed him down on the grass. Without a word. Never said a word. And that skin. Like tar. "As black as melted midnight," his daddy once said about old Marvell. Accused now of raping a white woman. Who knew if he did it or not. Didn't make any difference. If they said you did it, you did it: his daddy used to tell Willie, "There's only one way to tell the truth. But a thousand ways to tell a lie." The thought of Marvell, strongest man alive, forcing himself on some white woman, well, it was a miracle he was still alive and waiting for the chair and not hanging by his neck out in the tupelo groves. But the rich folk outside of town, the gentry out there in their mansions, they liked to call this corner of Mississippi

the most civilized in the state and so they frowned upon the lynch mobs and declared that justice would be served under the bright shining light of the law.

Willie pressed against the ice and it broke off. The shards slipped into the water and then became that water. The ice stopped being itself and moved back into what it once was and joined the flow downstream and the ice was gone. It made Willie almost want to cry. Something deep, some awful feeling of regret, of a world way beyond his control.

Old Marvell.

Willie moved further down the stream, where there was a large shaded spot, and more ice, much more of it, three feet out easy and this time when he bent to touch it, he was careful, like stroking a newborn chick and the ice stayed firm and he ran his fingers along the crinkled edge and even cut the very tip of his finger. A tiny pinprick of blood. It didn't hurt and even if it did, so what: the mysteries of the universe—how a river can cut you. Sometimes, even in the places you know so well, sometimes there are things you don't know at all.

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The sun came up bright and heavy and already there was heat, a return to normal. You could tell by the sky, the great big emptiness of it, and the way the air was thickening already, that the heat would be coming back full. Willie ran from the creek into town. His daddy hadn't told him he was forbidden to come, so he went to see it. He got there just in time to catch the truck coming down main. It crunched down the street, a slow lumber as if sidling from one side of life to another. It was a huge thing, high in body, what Mister Johnson called the "weirdest rolling stock that ever streaked down a highway." Most vehicles bounced something terrible on that road, but this truck came on square and true like it was showing off, a bull in a pasture of cows.

It stopped in front of the courthouse. Out came a man so thin he was like a skeleton, with sunken cheeks and a scrawny neck rippled with big tracks of veins engulfed by his huge collar. He climbed down off the running board, his bony knees dimpling his oversized pants. Bald head, adam's apple like a golf ball riding up and down his neck, top button of his collared shirt fastened; he had a real air about him.

But he wasn't fooling anyone. Willie could tell with one look that this man was trash, all got up in his ill-fitting suit, like some kid at a birthday party dressed up by his parents.

He circled around back of the truck, loosened some levers, and opened it up to the world. The chair part was recognizable: solid wood, the swirl of tree ring still in it. Oak, most likely. But that's where it stopped being an ordinary old chair: the connected straps at the feet, the waist, the wrists, the neck, around the chest, all black oil and gleaming, buckles of glinting metal—that made it something else altogether.

The man tugged on the chair until several older men came and gave him a hand. And that old man continued on like he was the most important person in the world—Jefferson Davis himself or another. No smile, no nod, no words. No nothing. All official business and you could tell just by looking at him that he was some dumb old failure of a guy who'd somehow gotten himself into this job—delivering the rolling electric chair from town to town so that niggers could get fried. You just knew it: he'd once been that kid who was told, a hundred times probably, that he'd never amount to a thing. And look at him now: attracting the whole town, even the women, though they stood on the sidelines and murmured and didn't let the excitement show on their faces. But they shared in it. Otherwise, why be out there at all.

They offloaded the chair, then the electric contraption, switchboard, generator, cables—all wires and metal. A tall thing when upright, looking almost like a coffin. They tugged, the sweat popping out on their heads, and that dopey old man still never changed expression. The boys crowded round, hair combed over and held firm with oils, the excitement pouring out of them.

Willie couldn't hate them for that; they were boys. Death was exciting. Probably'd have the same look of wonder and eagerness about them if the man to be sitting in that chair, sitting for the very last time, was a white man like their pappies. But he knew better; he knew who it was for, and when those white boys saw Willie standing there, they all smiled at him, and no words were necessary. This thing was in town and if you step out of line, well . . .

Once everything was off the truck, it all sat out on the street by the curb for a good long time while the men mopped their foreheads and jammed the rags in their back pockets the way they do, with a corner hanging out for easy grabbing, and they drank lemonade brought out by Mary Cairns who worked in the courthouse and had watched the whole thing from the window.

A dark presence, some evil thing, waiting, its only purpose in this world to take a man out of it. While the men exchanged pleasantries, the boys dared each other to get close and eventually one of them went up and touched it before that dumb old man in the big suit yelled him off—Willie knew the kid as Davey Brown, nice enough kid, Willie reckoned, but had a glint in his eye that suggested some kind of future danger or worry. He'd seen it before in other boys. Come into this world with a gentle spirit and then churn his way through the Mississippi mud and end up spitting fire.

As one, the men handed back their empty glasses and stepped back into the street and wrestled that chair and the evil-looking generator onto a dolly and took it into the courthouse. Mrs. Cairns held the door open for them. The generator almost fell to the ground as they maneuvered it over a step, but all the men rushed to catch it, caressing it as you would a small child, careful of its edges. All this time the man who came into town with the thing in his truck kept up his stony-faced silence, and kept up also his air of authority. The heavy doors closed behind them and then the excitement was over.

Willie's daddy arrived, saw his boy and told him to head on back, that his mama needed his help. As Willie walked toward home, he heard a man say to another that rapists needed "more voltage than others. Because of their strength and sexual drive." The other man nodded at this, as if it was a fact anyone with any brain knew.

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Folks had started trickling in early in the afternoon, carrying picnic baskets and hauling chairs. Many dressed in their church clothes and had been there for hours by the time the first stars had appeared in the sky. They laid down their blankets, claimed their spaces, unpacked their crackers and cheeses, and buzzed with excitement. The vendors had arrived, some local, others no one had ever seen before, hawking tonics and tamales. By eight p.m., the courthouse square was filled. Two local politicians, rivals for a county seat election, held a civil but impassioned debate on the courthouse steps. Each had his vision for the future of Mississippi, one a populist extolling the virtues of the underclasses, the "hardworking Miss'ssippi farmer who has more common sense in his pinkie toe than all the bureaucrats in Jackson combined," the other a scion of the privileged class, grandnephew of an ex-governor with leadership coursing through his blue blood. But one thing they could agree on was the necessity of righting wrongs. The electric chair, though certainly not a pretty thing, was a necessary one. In this case, taking justice out of the hands of the mob and putting it under the more enlightened auspices of the state: that these two men, in a rare show of unity, could agree upon. It was called being civilized.

The clock edged toward midnight. Boys chased each other in circles about the lawns until exasperated fathers threatened the belt. Girls walked off into packs where they could gossip. The anticipation fed on itself, from person to person, as if that machine was in there whirring to life, spending its excess by shooting its current through the courthouse dome to outside, where it snapped and buzzed and gave life to the very air itself.

The crowd hushed, waited. Then, at 11:53 p.m., the streetlights dimmed, held for thirty seconds or more, crackled off altogether, came back on, still dim, and then sprung back to full life. It was over. Some hollered in celebration. Others simply shook their heads and cleared up their places. Drink had infected some and they tottered and grinned, tiptoeing around the patchwork of congregants now heading home. Show over.

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Marvell had stood stock still, his chin up high, eyes steely. He could look a white man straight in the eye and not worry about the result. Not anymore anyway. His fate had been sealed. The one time he could look a white man in the eye, and he would take it. So he fixed the sheriff square before they put the hood on.

“You ready?” the sheriff asked.

Marvell swallowed once, kept his chin up, and said, “One time is as good as another.”

They’d seen others scream and holler and beg and cry. Others called on the lord for mercy. But everybody knew the lord had no interest in bestowing mercy upon a nigger who’d raped a white woman. And so it was all a spectacle in the end and something that would come to no use. Best to take it well. And Marvell had. “Probably the longest sentence he uttered in his lifetime,” said one deputy. “He wasn’t much good at living,” the sheriff added, “But he knew how to die.”

The men packed Marvell into a rough wooden coffin.

Willie’s daddy turned toward home and walked away. He could hear the noisy procession of drunken revelers following the coffin to the black cemetery where the hole had already been dug.

Marvell was tossed into the ground and piled over with dirt, no stone to mark the place. While the sheriff and the deputies shoveled on the dirt, the drunken white men swayed back and forth with their arms flung over each other’s shoulders and sang, “Bye, Bye, Blackbird.”

When Willie’s daddy got home, he took off his hat and went to lay down. He’d skipped dinner that night, the one and only time Willie could think of when he’d seen that. But that wasn’t all. As his daddy walked past, without a word, Willie saw a single drop running down his cheek.

Ice in the morning, a tear at night. He would never see either of those two things again.