

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Welcome Table

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The goal of nonviolent direct action, according to King, is to lovingly prick the conscience and to win the friendship of the opponent, beginning by inducing shame but ending with brotherly reconciliation. The stresses of black-white relations, under conditions of segregation and in the face of protests, raise difficult challenges also for decent whites, not least about their own strengths of character and identity. In this disturbing story (1996) by novelist, short story writer and professor of creative writing at Ohio State University, Lee Martin (b. 1955), we see what happens to both father and son of a New Hampshire family that has relocated to Nashville, Tennessee during the time of the lunch counter sit-ins (1960). Richard, the father, changing his identity to avoid recognition for previous disgrace, takes the name of Thibodeaux (“bold among people” or “bold people”), and he with the help of his son Edward, the story’s narrator, help prepare the black students at Fisk University for the insults and torments they are sure to face during the stormy days ahead. Meanwhile, Edward’s mother produces eggshell miniature art, in the hope of beautifying the chaotic world around her. All their efforts are for naught, as they find that they cannot handle the racial trouble that erupts.

Collecting as many details from the story as you can, describe all the characters in the story, and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. How do you explain Edward’s shameful conduct at the sit-in? Is the problem a lack of courage, doubts about his own identity, or latent racial prejudice? Are the sins of the father visited on the son? What does Edward finally learn about his father? About himself? What light does this story shed on black-white relations, and especially on the causes of the behavior of whites? What might this story imply about the usefulness of shame as a means to effecting racial reconciliation? What is the meaning of the title, “The Welcome Table”?

Three nights a week, when I was seventeen, my father took me downtown and made me shout “monkey,” and “nigger,” and “coon.” He made me shout these things, he said, because he loved me. “Put your heart into it,” he told me whenever my voice would falter. “Go on. Get with it. Give it everything you’ve got.”

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It was 1960, a touch-and-go time in Nashville. An activist named James Lawson¹ was organizing students from the black colleges, and because my father sold greeting cards to black-owned variety stores, he had gotten word of the lunch counter sit-ins that were about to get underway. He had decided to hook up with the integration movement because he couldn't resist the drama of it. "This is history," he said to me one night. "The world is going to change, Ed, and someday you'll be able to say you were part of it."

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He had volunteered my services as well because he knew I was at an age when it would be difficult for me to stand up for right, and he wanted me to get a head start on being a man of conscience and principle.

Our job was to prepare the students for the abuse they were sure to get. So, on those nights, in classrooms at Fisk University, we stood over the young men and women, and did our best to make their lives sad. My father was a handsome man with wavy hair and long, black eyelashes. He had a friendly smile and a winning way about him, but when he started his taunting, his face would go hard with loathing.

"Get the niggers," he would shout. "Let's get these monkeys out of here."

At his urging, I would join in. "Nigger," I would say, and my jaw and lips would tighten with the word.

We would pick at the students' hair. We would shove at them and pull them down to the floor.

When the workshop leader would call our demonstration to a halt, we would help the students up, and brush off their clothes, and laugh a bit, just to remind them that we were playacting. But always there would be heat in their eyes, because, of course, it was all different for them.

One of the students was a young man named Lester Bates. He had a reddish tint to his hair, and his hands were broad and long-fingered. One night, during a break, he clamped his hand around my wrist. I was holding a bottle of Coca-Cola, and he said to me, "Don't drop it. Hold, boy. Keep a grip."

¹ During the fall of 1959, James Lawson (b. 1928), a divinity student at Vanderbilt University, taught students how to organize sit-ins and use the tactics of nonviolent direct action. Later, he was a leader in the Freedom Rides of 1961.

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I could feel my hand going numb, my fingers tingling, and just when I was about to drop the bottle, Lester grabbed it. “This is going to get ugly” he said. “You know that, don’t you? This whole town is going to explode.” He took a drink from the bottle and handed it back to me. “Days like this make a body wonder what kind of stuff a man is made of.”

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He stood there, watching, and I did the only thing I could. I raised the bottle to my lips, and I drank.

I wanted to feel good about what we were doing—my father and I—but I hated him for bringing me into those classrooms. I hated him because he made my life uncomfortable. Some nights, on the way home, he would imagine a car was trailing us, and he would pull to the side of the streets just to make sure we were safe. “There are limits,” he said to me once, and he said it in a way that made it clear that he was one who knew those limits, and I was one who did not.

My father was Richard Thibodeaux, but it wasn’t his real name. The previous spring, he had fled a scandal in New Hampshire. He had managed a cemetery there, and in the harsh winters, when the ground was so frozen graves were impossible to dig, the corpses were preserved in charnel houses until the spring thaw. Then, sometime in April, assembly-line burials began: the air shook with the raucous sound of heavy machinery digging the plots, the cranes hoisting concrete liner vaults from flatbed trucks. Sometimes, in the rush, the wrong bodies were put into the wrong graves, a fact that came out when one of the grave diggers spilled the news.

After that, we didn’t stand a chance. It was a small town, and the rumors were vicious. We were cannibals, devil worshippers; we all had sex with corpses.

“How can we live here now?” my mother said one night to my father. “You’ve ruined us.”

So we came south to Nashville. My mother, who had been there once to the Grand Ole Opry, chose it for its friendliness.

“Anywhere,” said my father, “away from this snow and ice.”

Any city, he must have been thinking, large enough to forget its dead.

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Our first morning there, we left my mother in the motor court cabin we had rented, and went looking for a cemetery. “That mess in New Hampshire,” my father said. “Let’s put it behind us.”

Nashville was brilliant with sunshine. My father put the top down on our Ford Fairlane 500, a ’57 Skyliner with a retractable hardtop, and we drove past antebellum estates with guitarshaped swimming pools and manicured lawns landscaped with azalea bushes and dogwood trees. My father whistled a Frank Sinatra tune—“Young at Heart”—and for the first time since we had left New Hampshire, I believed in what we were doing.

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“Don’t think I’m a wicked person,” my father said.

“I don’t,” I told him.

“People make mistakes, Ed.” He lifted a hand and rubbed his eyes. “This must seem like a dream to you.”

“It’s something interesting,” I said. “Something I might read about.”

“That’s you.” He slapped me on the leg. “Steady Eddie. Just like your mother.”

My mother was at a time in her life when her looks were leaving her, but instead of complaining, she had developed a habit of surrounding herself with beautiful things. In New Hampshire, she had learned how to do eggshell art. She would take an egg and poke a hole in each end with a pin she had saved from an old corsage. Then she would insert the pin and break the yolk, hold the egg to her mouth, and blow out the insides. She would soak each eggshell in bleach, dry it, and then spray it with a clear acrylic paint.

The paint strengthened the shell, and my mother could then use cuticle scissors to cut away a section: an oval, or heart-shaped, or teardrop opening into the hollow egg. Inside the shells, she painted background scenery, and then with plaster of paris, she built platforms on which she could position miniature figures, some of them only a quarter of an inch tall, to create scenes she would then name: “Chateau against Snow-Covered Mountains,” “Collie Waiting by Stone Wall,” “Skier Sliding down Icy Slope.” It was a precise and painstaking art, each motion calculated and sure. The shells were surprisingly strong, and she rarely broke one. If one did happen to shatter, she would throw it away

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and start again. “Why curse your mistakes?” she said to me once. “Why not look at them as new opportunities?”

My father had come to Nashville, hoping for a new start at life, and that day in the cemetery, beneath the boughs of a cedar tree, he found what he was looking for: the headstone of a child who had died at the age of two in 1920, the year of my father’s birth.

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“That’s going to be my name now,” he said. “Richard Thibodeaux. It’s a good southern name, don’t you think?”

“What about your old name?” I asked him. “What about my name?”

He said he would go to the County Clerk’s office and get a copy of Richard Thibodeaux’s birth certificate. Then he would pay a visit to the Social Security Administration and apply for a card under his new name. If anyone got curious about why, at his age, he was just then getting around to applying for a card, he would tell them his parents had been Baptist missionaries, that he had been born in Tennessee, but had gone with his parents to South America where he had spent nearly all his adult life carrying out their work.

“What about me?” I said. “What’s my story?”

My father put his finger to his lips and thought a moment. “That’s a snap,” he finally said. “I met your mother, the fair and pious daughter of a coffee plantation owner, an American from New Orleans, married her, and nine months later, you were born. You were a delicate child, given to fevers and ailments of the lungs. Finally, we had no choice but to send you back to America, away from the tropics, to live with your aunt in Memphis.” He put his arms around me and pressed me to him. “And now here we are, united again. You see how easy it is? I’ll tell anyone who gets nosy we’re starting a new life.”

And that’s what he did. Once he had the birth certificate and the social security card, the rest was a breeze. We rented a modest home, and my father became Richard Thibodeaux, region five sales representative for the Glorious Days Greeting Card Company. He finagled some school forms from a print shop he knew and concocted a set of records for me. He gave me a near-perfect attendance record at Memphis East High School, excellent marks in citizenship, better grades than I had ever been able to manage.

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“There,” he said. “Now, you’re set. A completely new profile. *Alacazam*.”

He wanted to make sure no one ever linked our name with what he had begun to call “that misery in New Hampshire.”

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“I lost my self-respect there,” he said to me. “That’s the worst thing that can happen to a man.”

My mother’s eyes sparkled when she learned our new last name. “Penny Thibodeaux,” she said, and I knew, like me, she had fallen in love with the elegant sound of those three syllables.

In school, when teachers called me by my full name—*Edward Thibodeaux*—I answered “yes, sir,” or “yes, ma’am.” I developed a soft-spoken gentility and impeccable manners. The change of climate, my father said, had done us a world of good.

It was a sweet time for us there in Nashville. Saturday evenings, we drove downtown to the Ryman Auditorium and took in the Opry. My father’s favorite singer was Hawkshaw Hawkins. He was tall and lean, and he wore his cowboy hat cocked back on his head. My mother preferred Jan Howard because she was graceful and had a sweet smile. After the show, we would cruise down Broadway, the top down on our Skyliner. We would drive by the music and record shops, and sometimes my mother would slide over next to my father, and I would lay my head back and close my eyes and let the night air rush over my face and give thanks for Nashville and the second chance we had hit upon there.

“The Athens of the South,” my father said once. “Milk and honey. Folks here know style when they see it.”

Each day at noon, whenever he was on his route, he would find a public rest room where he could change his shirt.

“You can tell a man by his clothes,” he explained to me. “A tidy man lives a tidy life.”

He wore suspenders, and linen suits, and wingtip shoes he polished and buffed each night before going to bed. He had monogrammed handkerchiefs and ties. He carried a

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new leather briefcase full of sample cards, and when he swept into stationery shops and drugstores, he doffed his Panama hat, and said to the ladies behind the counters, “It’s a glorious day for Glorious Days.”

The Glorious Days Greeting Card Company specialized in sensitivity cards: genteel messages to commemorate birthdays, anniversaries, weddings. Selling them, my father said, made him feel he was contributing to the general celebration of living. He had been occupied too long with the burying of the dead, with mourning and grief.

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“A gloomy Gus is a grumpy Gus,” he said one day. “But that’s all behind me now. Nothing but blue skies. Isn’t that right, Ed? Hey, from here on, we’re walking the sunny side of the street.”

I know my father didn’t mean to make trouble for me, but of course, that was the way it all worked out. Some boys at school had seen the two of us going through the gates at Fisk University, and before long, the word was out that I was a “nigger lover.”

One day, a boy name Dale Mink said a group was going downtown to stir up a ruckus. He was the center on our basketball team and an honor student. He had already won a scholarship to Vanderbilt. Even now, I don’t think he was a thug; he was just caught up in the ugliness of those days. The way of life he had always known was changing, and he was afraid. “Those nigras think they can get away with this,” he said to me. “You’re either with us, or you’re not.”

The lunch counter sit-ins had been going on for over a week. Downtown, at Kress’s, McClellans, Woolworth’s, Walgreens, black students were occupying stools even though the ten-cent stores had chosen to close their counters rather than serve them.

My father came and went through these stores, selling Glorious Days greeting cards. Each evening, at dinner, he told us how the students sat there, studying for their classes. They were remarkable, he said—“as sober as judges”—the young men in dark suits with thin lapels and white shirts as bright as judgment day, the girls poised, as they unwound their head scarves and folded their duffle coats over the back of their stools.

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Sometimes, my father said, a waitress would call him back to the kitchen and set him up with a hamburger and a Coca-Cola, on account of she knew him as a man on the road who needed a hot lunch.

“You actually do that?” my mother said one night. “You sit there and eat while those poor kids do without?”

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In those days, my father had a smugness about the new life he was inventing for us. He was so sure of the right direction we were taking, he had convinced himself that we deserved special liberties.

“I never thought,” he told my mother. “Call me an idiot. Lord alive.”

My mother was, by nature, a cheerful woman, and once we had left New Hampshire, she did her best to believe her life had been handed back to her. She worked part-time in an arts and craft shop, and afternoons, when I came home from school, she asked me to help her with her eggshells. She sensed, better than my father, how brutal these times would become—how they would ruin people—and she was determined to maintain a certain beauty and delicacy in my life. She showed me how to transform a quail egg into a basket by cutting out the handle and adorning it with pearls and velvet ribbons. Together, we made eggs into cradles and lined them with lace.

This all seemed to me a terribly womanly thing to do, but slowly her optimism won me. When I watched her paint background scenes on the eggshells—amazed at how a few strokes could create trees, clouds, blades of grass—I fell in love with the way vast landscapes yielded to her slightest effort. When I was with her, I believed she could shrink anything that was difficult or immeasurable.

“Proportion,” she told me. “That’s the key. Making things fit.”

Finally, she let me paint scenes of my own, and when I did, my fingers tingled with the delicacy of their motions. In New Hampshire, I had fallen into some trouble—vandalism, truancy, petty thievery—and I convinced myself that each gentle stroke I made was saving me from a life of violence and mayhem.

I rode downtown that day with Dale Mink. In Kress’s, a gang of boys from the high school were prowling behind the students at the lunch counter. The boys’ shirt collars

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were turned up, and their heel taps were clacking over the tile floor. Somewhere in the store, a radio was playing WSM. Later, I would learn that the station's call letters came from its original owner, The National Life and Accident Insurance Company, whose motto was "We Shield Millions." But I didn't know that then. I only knew I was in a place I didn't want to be. I was there because things were getting hot for me at school—"nigger lover"—and like most people, I wanted my life to be easy and sweet.

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The radio went off, and one of the boys stepped forward, closer to the students, and said in a low, steady voice, "Get your coon ass off those stools."

The students refused to turn their heads or let their shoulders slump with shame. I noticed, then, that one of the students was Lester Bates. He closed the book he had been reading and put his hands on the edge of the counter. The girl next to him turned her head just a fraction of an inch, and I could see her lips move. "This is it," she said.

The high school boys were squawking now: *nigger* this and *nigger* that. Some of them were jostling the students. Dale Mink elbowed me in the side. I knew he was waiting for me to join in the jeering. If there is one thing I would want people to understand, all these years later, it would be this: I didn't want to be Dale Mink, only something like him.

So I shouted, "Nigger."

I had done it hundreds of times with my father at training sessions.

"Nigger," I shouted, and I convinced myself it was only a word, that I was only one voice swallowed up by the voice of the mob.

But then the gang surged forward, and I saw Dale Mink latch onto Lester Bates. Dale jerked him backward, onto the floor, and soon I heard the dull thuds of punches and kicks finding cheekbones and ribs.

I'm ashamed to think now of the fear I helped cause Lester Bates and those other young men and women. I have never been able to watch news films from those days, and until now, I have kept my part in them a secret.

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When I got home that afternoon, my mother was waiting for me so we could finish an eggshell we had been working on that week. It was a dining room scene. We had lined the inside of the shell with wallpaper, and had built a table and four chairs from balsa wood. We had upholstered the chair seats with velvet ribbons and made a tablecloth from lace. My mother had brought home three miniature figures from the arts and crafts store: a man, a woman, and a young boy.

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“Here’s your father and me,” she said. She put the miniature man and woman into adjacent chairs. Then she handed the miniature boy to me. “And here’s you. Go on, Ed. Have a seat.”

I didn’t know where to put the boy who was supposed to be me. After the scene at Kress’s, I didn’t know where I belonged. I closed my hand around the figurine and felt it press into my palm.

“There was a fight at Kress’s today,” I said. “At the lunch counter. A bunch of boys from school went down there, and I went along. I said some things, and now I wish I hadn’t.”

My mother put her hand over my fist. “Don’t let yourself get caught up in this,” she said. “Listen to me. People have to live their lives the best they can. We’ve had too much trouble as it is.”

“I can’t forget it,” I said. “How do you forget something terrible you’ve done?”

“You do whatever you have to do to get beyond it.” My mother opened my fist and took the figurine and sat it in the chair whose back was turned to us. “There,” she said. “It’s cozy, isn’t it? Inviting. Let’s call this one, ‘The Welcome Table.’”

“There’s nothing on the table,” I said. “We’re not doing anything.”

My mother thought a moment. “We’re waiting.”

“For what?”

“Who knows?” She snapped her fingers. “Hey, Buster Brown, get out of your shoe. The sky’s the limit. For whatever’s going to happen next.”

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Because my mother worked at the arts and crafts store, she had made some friends. One of them was a woman named Dix Gleason, and sometimes in the afternoons she would drop by for a visit. My mother was thrilled and worried on these occasions, happy for the company, but afraid her hospitality would fall short of Dix's approval. "You'd think she give a party notice," she said the first time Dix's car pulled up to our curb. "Heaven's sake. What do I have in the kitchen? Mercy, let's see. What can I whip up to suit Miss Dix?"

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Dix Gleason was a loud woman who left lipstick stains on my mother's drinking glasses. She called me *Eddie* in a whiny voice like Top Gigio, the mouse puppet on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and she called my mother *Henny Penny*, a nickname I knew my mother despised.

"Like I was some hysterical old dame," she said to me once. "Honestly. The idea."

Some afternoons, Dix brought her husband, The Commodore.

Commodore Gleason was an accident reconstruction specialist for the highway patrol. He was intimate with the facts of crash and disaster. At accident scenes, he measured skid marks, gauged road conditions, interviewed survivors. He calculated the speed of travel, the angle of impact, reconstituted the moment of poor judgment or unfortunate circumstance.

"I can raise the dead," he boasted to us once after he had testified at a coroner's inquest. "I can bring them back to that moment where everything is A-okay. They're driving a Chevrolet down Route 45, just before eight p.m. The road is dry, visibility is fifteen miles, their speed is fifty-eight miles per hour."

If only he could leave them there, he said, happy and safe in their ignorance. But he knew too much. He knew that thirty miles up the road a Pontiac was streaking their way, that they would meet head-on at the top of a hill just before sunset.

"It's a burden to know as much as I do," he told us. "Take it from me: men are fools more often than not."

I was afraid of The Commodore. He had a way of making me feel nothing in my life would ever be safe.

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Once, he came to my school and showed a blood-and-gore film about highway safety and traffic fatalities. He was snappy and regulation in his uniform: necktie firmly knotted, collar tips pointed, badge gleaming, trousers pressed, belt buckle polished. He told us about head-on crashes, decapitations, body bags.

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“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “You’re thinking, this can’t happen to me. That’s what we all think. That’s why we have to prepare ourselves for every hazard. Even you cool cats. Hell, you think you’ll live forever.”

One afternoon, my mother had sent me to the store for ice cream, and The Commodore had insisted we take his car. “You drive, sport,” he said to me.

Before I could start the car, he jerked the keys from the ignition.

“Imagine the moment, Edward.” He shook the keys in his hand as if they were dice. “That instant of horror when you know you’re losing control. Your speed is too high, the road is too slick, the curve is too sharp. You’re at that place you never dreamed you’d be. Brink of disaster, pal. One wrong move, and you cross over. Too late to get yourself back to safe ground. What do you do?”

“Don’t panic,” I said.

“And?”

“React.”

He tossed me the keys. “Okay, Speedy Alkaseltzer. Let’s see if you’ve got any pizz.”

The afternoon my mother and I finished “The Welcome Table,” our doorbell rang.

“Ding-dong,” Dix Gleason shouted. “It’s Dix and The Commodore.”

The Commodore was off-duty. He was wearing a salt-and-pepper sports coat and a bolo tie with a silver horseshoe clasp. His black hair was shiny with tonic.

“Sport,” he said to me. “I’d say you’ve been in some trouble.”

“Trouble?” my mother said. “There been no trouble here.”

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The Commodore pointed to my shirt pocket where a corner had been torn away in the melee at Kress's. "I don't imagine your mama sent you to school with your pocket like that. And that lip of yours. Looks a little fat to me. Like it got in the way of someone's fist."

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"You might as well come clean," Dix said. She was wearing a lavender cowgirl dress with golden fringe along the bottom of the skirt. "You can't put anything past The Commodore."

A stray punch had clobbered me at Kress's, but I didn't want to admit any of this to The Commodore. Luckily, my mother came to my rescue. "Just a scuffle," she said. "You know boys."

"Tempers are on the boil," The Commodore said. "What with the nigras all up in the air. I hear there's been some nasty business downtown today."

My mother was always on edge whenever The Commodore was around, but on this afternoon, she looked close to coming apart. She bustled about, pulling out chairs for Dix and The Commodore at our dining table, going on and on about the eggshell we had just finished and what a funny thing it was that it was a miniature scene of people sitting around a dining table, and here we were sitting around a regular-sized table.

"Like a box inside a box," she said. "Or those hand-painted Russian dolls. Oh, you know the ones I mean. Take off the top half and there's a smaller doll inside. Five or six of them like that all the way down to the tiniest one—no bigger than the first joint of your pinky finger, Dix—and the funny thing is, even though the last one is so much smaller than the first one, their features are exactly the same."

The Commodore picked up "The Welcome Table" eggshell from its ornate stand, and held it with his thick fingers. "I bet there'd be something different," he said. "Something small, practically impossible to pick out. I bet I'd find it."

"Be careful with that," Dix said, and she said it with a hardness to her voice like a woman who had lived too long with a reckless man. "You bust that and Henny Penny might lose her head."

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“It must take a world of patience.” The Commodore set the eggshell back on its stand. “I’d say you’d have to have a ton of love to pay such close attention to things.”

My mother ran her hand over our tablecloth. “Why, thank you, Commodore.” A blush came into her face as if she were a young girl, unaccustomed to compliments. “That means a great deal, coming from someone with your keen eye.”

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It had been some time since my mother had been able to enjoy friends. In New Hampshire, when the truth of my father’s mismanagement became public, she closed our blinds and refused to answer the telephone or the doorbell. Now, despite Dix’s forwardness and The Commodore’s suspicious nature, she was thankful for Nashville and the chance it had given her to be gracious and hospitable. When she came from our kitchen that afternoon, the serving tray held before her, the dessert cups filled with sherbet, the coffee cups chiming against their saucers, she might as well have been offering her soul to The Commodore and Dix, so desperate she was to have people admire her.

The Commodore had gone out on the porch to smoke a cigarette.

“Run, get The Commodore,” my mother told me. “Tell him his sherbet’s going to melt.”

He was sitting on our porch glider, a cigarette hanging from his lip. He was reading a Glorious Days greeting card my father had left there. “Listen to this, Edward. ‘May your special day be filled with sunshine and love.’ Now that is a beautiful sentiment.” He folded the card and tapped its spine against his leg. “Your daddy’s not like me, is he?”

“No, sir. I suppose he’s not.”

“What you have to decide,” he told me, “is whether that’s a good thing.”

I wanted my father to be noble and full of goodness. “He’s been helping the Negroes organize the lunch counter demonstrations,” I said.

The Commodore took a long drag on his cigarette. “How about you? What do you make of that?”

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I touched my finger to my sore lip. “It’s caused me some grief.”

“Understand, I don’t have anything against the nigras.” He flipped his cigarette butt out into our yard. “But people here are set in their ways. I’m only telling you this for your own good. Whatever happens with this integration mess, your daddy has to live here.”

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When The Commodore said that, something lurched and gave inside me. The life we had invented for ourselves cracked and began to come apart. For the first time, I could see the raw truth of my family: we were cowards. If things didn’t work out for us here, as they hadn’t in New Hampshire, we could go somewhere else. We could choose a new name. We could do it as many times as we needed to—move away from ourselves, like opening one of those Russian dolls and finding another one inside. I saw us shrinking with each move we made until we got down to the smallest people we could be, the ones that wouldn’t open, the ones made from solid wood.

The Commodore laid the greeting card on the porch glider. “Edward, your daddy ought to take care. You be sure to tell him what I said.”

We were eating sherbet when my father came home. We heard his car pull into the driveway, and my mother smiled and said to me, “How’s that for luck? Your father’s home early. Won’t he be surprised to see we’ve got company?”

“Your husband?” Dix said. “My stars. We finally get to meet the mister.”

My father came through the door and walked right up to the dining table and sat down across from The Commodore as if he had been expected. He kept his head bowed, and I could tell something was wrong. His hands were on the table, and his fingers were trembling, and the eggshell was wobbling on its stand. We all bowed our heads, as if we were asking a blessing, and for a long time, no one spoke.

Then my mother said, “Richard?” And she said it with the cautious tone I remembered from New Hampshire.

My father still wouldn’t raise his head, and I’m not sure he even knew there were other people sitting at his table, people he didn’t know, and wouldn’t care for once he

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did. “I saw a boy killed today,” he said, and his voice was barely a whisper. “That’s all I want to say about it.”

“Killed?” my mother said, and I think she knew, even then, that trouble had found us.

That’s when The Commodore spoke. “An accident?”

Dix slapped his arm. “Mr. Thibodeaux said he doesn’t want to say any more about it.” When she said that, her voice steeled with warning, I could tell she had never gotten used to The Commodore’s intimacy with accidents and deaths, hated him for it, no doubt, in ways she might not even have known.

But The Commodore wouldn’t keep quiet. “I hope you weren’t involved with it. That’s all I’ll say.”

My father raised his face, and I could tell he was trying to hold himself together. His jaw was set, and his lips were tight, but his eyes were wet, and I could see he was crying.

“Probably some of that nigra mess,” The Commodore said. “Is that it, pal?”

It was clear to me, then, that The Commodore hated something about my father, feared it, perhaps, and I decided it was the fact that my father was a careless man.

“If it is,” The Commodore went on, “you asked for your trouble. Like those hotrodders who think the speed limit means everyone else but them. They don’t see the danger. Buddy, you get out there on the wild side, something’s bound to go wrong. Hell, you know it. I wouldn’t think you’d have any call to cry over that.”

“What’s your name?” my father said to The Commodore. He turned to Dix. “Is this your husband?”

He wasn’t crying now; his voice had that edge to it I recognized from the sit-in training sessions.

“His name’s Commodore Gleason,” Dix said. “We’re friends of your wife. Dix and The Commodore.”

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“The Commodore’s with the highway patrol,” my mother said.

“He does accident reports,” I told my father, hoping to explain The Commodore’s interest in the boy’s death, and somehow make my father feel better about all this.

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“What do you do at an accident scene?” he asked The Commodore.

“I put it all together,” The Commodore said. “Gather the facts, pal. Tell you how it happened.”

“Talk to the survivors, do you?”

“That’s right.”

“Tell them you’re sorry for their trouble?”

The Commodore gave a little laugh. “Say, what kind of a bastard do you think I am?”

“Do you mean it when you say it?” my father asked. “When you tell them you’re sorry?”

“Listen, pal.”

“Do you?”

“I’m there to get at the facts.” The Commodore slapped his palm down on the table, and the eggshell wobbled again, and my mother put her hand to her mouth. “I’m there to get at the truth, pal. It’s my job to know things.” The Commodore stood up and pointed his finger at my father. “Just like I know what you’re up to with the nigras. It’s people like you who’ll ruin the South. Even your own boy knows that. He’s been clubbing niggers downtown today.”

It’s funny how your life slows down the moments you wish you could speed away from and leave behind you forever. I could see the smallest details: the way the gold fringe on Dix Gleason’s dress turned silver in the sunlight slanting through our window, my mother wetting her finger and rubbing at a spot of sherbet that had stained her white

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tablecloth, the way one string of The Commodore's bolo tie was shorter than the other, my father's shoulders sagging as if all the life had left him.

"Is that true, Ed?" he said to me.

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I remembered the way I had shouted "nigger" at Kress's, how I had pushed my way out of the mob once the fighting had started. I had run outside, and had started walking, wanting to get as far away from Kress's as I could. I had walked and walked, and then I had caught a city bus and come home, and now The Commodore had lied about me, and because I felt so guilty about my part in the trouble downtown, because I wanted all this between The Commodore and my father to stop before it went too far, and The Commodore found out all there was to know about us—that our name wasn't Thibodeaux, that my father had made mistakes in New Hampshire, that we had tried our best to bury these facts—I said, yes, it was true.

My father slumped down in his chair. "I'm sorry," he said. "Folks, I'm sorry for all of this."

And The Commodore said, "Damn straight you're sorry. I could have told you that from the get-go."

The boy who died that day was not a Negro as we all had first believed. It was, as I would find out later, Dale Mink. He had come from Kress's, jubilant, the way he was after a basketball victory. He must have been feeling pretty full of himself. He was seventeen years old, a basketball star on his way to Vanderbilt, and he had the juice of a fist fight jazzing around in his head. When he ran out into the street, and saw my father's car, he must have been dazzled by how quickly misfortune had found him.

It was, my father finally told us, something he had played over in his head time and time again after he had told his story to the police: the street had been wet with rain, and the police vans had pulled up to Kress's. The officers were gathering up the black college students, arresting them for disorderly conduct, and the white boys who had attacked them were spilling out into the street. They were raising their arms and shaking their fists. My father glanced into his rearview mirror and noticed the way the skin was starting to wrinkle around his eyes. When he finally looked back to the street, there was Dale Mink, and it was too late for my father to stop.

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My mother and I didn't know any of this when Dix and The Commodore left our house.

"He knows about you now," my mother said to my father. "He'll tell it over and over. And then where will we be?"

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"Were you there?" my father asked me. "At Kress's?"

"I went with a boy from school. I didn't hit anyone. I said some things. That's all."

"You said things? Provoked those poor students? What did you say?"

I let my face go wooden, the way Lester Bates had when he had gripped the lunch counter, and the taunting had begun, "Things you taught me," I said.

My father lifted his hand, and with his finger, he brushed a piece of lint from his eyelashes. I wanted to think that he was an unlucky man—"Trouble knows my name," he had said in New Hampshire—but I could see he was actually a man of vanity. I knew that was a dangerous thing to be in the world. It meant forgetting others and concentrating only on yourself, and, when that was the case, all kinds of lunatic things could happen.

"I'm hungry," my father said. "I swear, Penny. I'm starved."

We were sitting at our dining table, and outside the light was fading. The eggshell was still upright in its stand, and what I remembered was how, when my father had first sat down, we had all bowed our heads and stared at it. I like to believe now that each of us, even The Commodore, was thinking, what a lovely scene. "Inviting," my mother had said earlier. The people around the miniature table seemed cozy and content. We must have looked at them with a desperate yearning. They were so small. They were so far away from us and everything that was about to happen in our home.

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