

BLOOD
in the
PROMISED LAND





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A novel

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g u t t e r

Blood in the Promised Land

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For Florence, who always loved to read





PART I

The Journeys

*There is a time for departure even when there is no
certain place to go.*

—TENNESSEE WILLIAMS



Chapter 1

ROOSEVELT TURNER

The passenger train rumbled through the backcountry entrails of central Alabama, a desolate landscape of rolling farmland, timbered ridges, and broad valleys that bled into the fertile Black Belt heartland of the 1940s South.

It was well past nightfall by now, and Roosevelt Turner, cloaked in darkness, was riding in the colored coach of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. The railway car was jam-packed, soupy with heat and quiet but for the rhythmic clickety-clack of the train wheels on the rails. Most passengers were asleep, shadowy apparitions stretched out in seats, gangways, and aisles. Overhead bins bulged with baggage. Everything Roosevelt owned was stuffed into a tattered gray satchel at his feet.

Another hour, Roosevelt figured, and he'd arrive in Ozark, where he could bed down for the night and pick up a couple of days' work before heading to Montgomery, where jobs were plentiful for young black men like him. In a month or so, with luck, he could make it to Birmingham, cut his teeth in steelwork there, learn about city life and how it might feel to live up north. The North, though, was still months away. Far from reach. Nothing more than a siren song. A dream.

Roosevelt flitted in and out of sleep, his train zipping past soybean and tobacco fields, peanut farms and cotton plantations, whistle-stop towns

and faded remnants of the southern slave trade. The passing countryside, he imagined, looked much like Florida, the only state he'd ever truly known. But he couldn't tell for sure. The train moved swiftly; the night was black as pitch. All Roosevelt could make out through the window of his rickety coach were dense thickets of longleaf pines, the bony silhouettes of telegraph poles, and farmhouse lights glinting like stars in the inky, somber hills.

But there was more out there, Roosevelt thought. Had to be.

America was out there too, he thought, a brilliant kettle of light somewhere beyond the ocean of darkness, aglow with possibilities, forever lighting the land. After all, that's what waves of southern blacks were saying, pinning their hopes on, fleeing the South to find. That's what most of them believed. Wanted to. Needed to.

Maybe they were right, Roosevelt thought. Maybe there really *was* an America like that, a place people like him could journey to, somewhere north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Maybe it was in Pittsburgh, where he was headed, up there in the factories and steel mills. That's what black folks were saying too. You could flee the rural South, they swore, migrate to northern cities like Pittsburgh, and there it would be: a whole other world; a better, richer life. No more Jim Crow. No more Klan. No more lynching. America the way it was *supposed* to be. A land of promise and hope. For all people.

Even blacks.

Roosevelt wondered if all that could really be true. Then again, he thought, here it was 1943, the country was at war, and he was twenty-eight years old, far from a boy. Maybe he'd *already* found America. Maybe it was rooted, like he'd been, in Mississippi and Florida and the other places he was running from now. Maybe the South was really all there was to America and all the talk about a great northern utopia—a so-called promised land—was simply idle chatter. Maybe America was nothing more than an idea gone bad, a vaporous wish of the desperate and deluded. A rumor. A mirage. A myth.

Roosevelt shuddered at that possibility. It couldn't be true, he thought; it was too noxious, too deceptive, too cruel. But he pondered it nevertheless, as he stared into the chasmal emptiness of the Alabama countryside, imaginings of the North flooding his mind.

"Somethin' t' eat?"

A porter was passing through the railway car, an offering of food set

on a rolling metal cart. He was ebony-skinned and stooped, with a peaked blue cap and sunken, dewy eyes.

Roosevelt looked up. “Whaddaya got?”

The porter gestured at an assortment of sandwiches, loosely wrapped in wax paper, and several pint-bottles of milk, sweating in the nighttime heat.

“Wha’ kinda san’wiches is they?”

“Ham on white.”

“That it?”

“Uh-huh.” The porter nodded. “Got a coupla D-ration bars too. Same Hershey choc’late they feedin’ our GIs. Don’ melt, even in heat.”

“How they be?”

The porter smirked. “Taste ’bout like a boiled potato, I’d say.”

Then he tapped a pouch on his faded leather vest. “Course, I might be able t’ find ya a Baby Ruth too.” He winked. “Fer a *special* price.”

“Em the ones wit’ the nuts?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How much?”

“A nickel.”

“An’ the milk? It be cold?”

“T’ain’t bad. Had it on ice.”

“Whaddaya get fer that?”

“Two cents.”

Roosevelt pondered the price and then fished through his pants pocket for some loose change.

“I’ll have me a bottle of milk,” he said. “An’ one of ’em Baby Ruths.”

Roosevelt handed over the change, and the porter passed him everything he’d be eating that night and for most of the next day too. His pockets by now were as empty as his stomach. He was living mainly on hopes and dreams, visions and prayers—wondering how far they’d carry him, how long he could possibly make them last.

The journey by then was still in its early stages—seven weeks old—having kicked off in Gainesville with Roosevelt hitching a ride to Tallahassee and then catching the Seaboard Air Line Railroad from the Florida state capital to Chattahoochee for a connection to the Louisville & Nashville, which ran passenger and freight service due north, clear up through Alabama.

Already, there’d been sojourns in Dothan, Clanton, and Troy. Ozark

was next. There'd be other stops after that, including a long layover—a month, maybe more—in Birmingham. From there, Roosevelt would make his way to Tennessee, through the Great Smoky Mountains to Athens and Sweetwater, and then to Knoxville and Chattanooga, before moving into Kentucky, the fringes of West Virginia, and finally the sprawling industrial landscape of western Pennsylvania.

Traveling north. Always north.

It was early in January now. By the middle of May, Roosevelt figured, he'd make it all the way to Pittsburgh. That was the plan: six months on the road, traveling northward in stages, picking up odd jobs along the way, sleeping wherever he could find a bed, staying on the move.

In that final regard, Roosevelt was hardly alone.

World War II was in its second year now, and America, awash with the mighty twin currents of transformation and combat, was in a state of frenzied, churning motion. Troops were shipping out to fighting fronts overseas. Recruits were heading to military bases and boot camps. Tenant families were traveling to seasonal work in lumber, farming, and mines. And legions of southern blacks were hitting the road, breaking with their rural past, and streaming into northern cities.

The war had set them in motion. Defense jobs were the lure.

With America fully immersed in the fighting, the nation's manufacturers had shifted most production from civilian goods to war materials. Shipyards were churning out naval vessels. Automakers were building aircraft, tanks, and other military vehicles. Factories were producing ordnance, weaponry, and other supplies. Sleepy, obscure towns had become bustling defense centers. Industrial cities were booming.

But even as demand for defense workers soared, traditional labor sources were being choked. The military draft had depleted America's factory workforce; immigration quotas had halted the flow of foreign-born labor. Companies attempting to meet heightened military demands were strangling on work orders. Vacant positions were begging to be filled. Factories were hiring whatever manpower they could recruit—even unskilled, impoverished blacks from the hardscrabble croplands of the Deep South.

Men like Roosevelt.

By 1943, the demand for black labor outside the rural South, like the war itself, had peaked. Northern recruiters combed the countryside like prospectors mining for gold. Newspapers were cluttered with want ads.

Job notices were tacked to fences, tree trunks, and store windows. Labor agents offered monetary incentives, made grandiose promises.

And their efforts were bearing fruit.

Each day, thousands of southern blacks were being drawn into the war-induced labor vacuum; uprooting themselves from a life of sharecropping and tenant farming; moving from field to factory, country to city; abandoning the reality of the South for the promise of the North; chasing a dream.

And, like Roosevelt, grateful to be escaping.

Not every migrant, after all, was so lucky. Roosevelt knew that all too well. He'd seen it near the start of his own journey. In Chattahoochee.

The final stop in Florida before the Alabama state line, the Chattahoochee railway station was little more than a ticket booth, splintery wooden platform, and leaking water tower. Roosevelt had just made his connection to the Louisville & Nashville, but the train was being held. No one knew why—until three white men boarded and made their way to the colored coach.

"Name's Bobby Lee Swaggert," one of them announced. "Sheriff here in Gadsden County."

Lumbering and beefy, Swaggert was clad in an umber police uniform, revolvers bulging from matching holsters. He nodded toward a pair of men posted at each end of the coach.

"Em there's my deputies."

"*Deputies?*" a passenger near Roosevelt snickered. "Em crackers ain't nuthin' but a coupla mutherfuckin' hillbillies."

They certainly looked the part. Both men worked at the Florida State Hospital for the Insane, right there in Chattahoochee, and could've easily been mistaken for patients. One, clutching a coiled bullwhip, was dressed in bib overalls and a grungy T-shirt, his eyes swimming about like loose marbles. The other, with a twelve-gauge shotgun slung over his shoulder, grinned, bovine-like, through tobacco-stained teeth.

"Wha's this 'bout?" A conductor waddled up, nearly breathless.

"Judge's orders." Sheriff Swaggert flashed a piece of paper.

"We here t' pull one of these niggers off ya train," the sheriff said.

No one dared utter a sound. Most passengers stared straight ahead, barely drawing a breath. Roosevelt slumped low in his seat, heart fluttering.

He'd run into southern sheriffs like Bobby Lee Swaggert before. Nothing good ever came of it. Nothing.

"Nigger we lookin' fer is travelin' illegally," Swaggert declared.

The conductor squinted. "Illegally?"

"Ya fuckin' deaf?" Swaggert scowled. "Or maybe jus' stupid?"

The conductor backed off.

"That's better," Swaggert said and began scanning the coach.

What was happening was commonplace. Southern business interests were up in arms. With their profits dependent on a captive workforce of cheap black labor, the mass northern exodus was hitting them in the pocketbook. Households were losing servants. Factories were sitting idle. Shops, hotels, and rental properties were standing vacant. White students were being pulled from classrooms to help with fieldwork. Landowners feared a collapse of the tenancy system, the final curtain on plantation life.

"Crackers scared shitless," Roosevelt's seatmate whispered. "They doin' anythin' they can t' keep us colored folks anchored in the South."

That, too, was common practice. Landowners in particular had gotten desperate. Some were hiking wages in a last-ditch effort to retain black workers. Others were pledging improved conditions, donating money to black charities, planting stories of hardships up north, bribing pastors to convince parishioners to stay in the South.

And still other business interests were going even further.

With nothing short of their economic future at stake, some southern states had passed laws to halt black migration entirely. Labor recruiters were being denied access to black communities. Railroads were being banned from honoring travel passes issued by northern employers. Ticket agents were turning black migrants away. Departing blacks were being jailed on trumped-up charges.

That, Roosevelt and other passengers figured, was what was happening now. They were right.

"Nigger we lookin' fer goes by the name of Sam Harding," Sheriff Swaggert said. "Like I tol' ya, he's travelin' illegally."

Swaggert moved down the center aisle of the coach, eyeing passengers one by one. Mole crickets chirped in the heavy brush outside. Dragonflies flew in and out of half-opened windows. Clouds of steam belched from the locomotive's undercarriage. Nothing else moved. Or made a sound.

Swaggert made his way to midcoach, where Roosevelt sat, eyes expressionless, body taut. Men like the sheriff terrified him, always had.

And with good reason. Roosevelt had long ago learned his place as a black in the southern social order. He'd learned how fragile civility was; learned, as a means of survival, to practice the body language of the meek and submissive; learned to pay close attention to every nuance of behavior among whites in power; learned how physical cues—a curl of the lip, a dip of the shoulder, a narrowing of the gaze—could signal a sudden, unprovoked attack.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched for any such signal now.

"*Harr-dingg.*" Swaggert's voice was mocking, singsongy. "C'mon, boy. Now, where ya ass be hidin'?"

Just then, one of the passengers no more than blinked. Swaggert was on top of him in a heartbeat.

"It's *you*—ain't it?"

The passenger sat upright, unmoving.

"Y'all Harding! Ain't ya?"

Guardedly, the passenger nodded. He was old and weathered, his face as knotty as tree bark.

Swaggert growled. "Ya comin' off this train, boy!"

Harding looked up. "But I got me a ticket."

"Oh? An' where that be?"

Harding pointed at a seatback where a ticket stub protruded from a metal holding rail. Swaggert yanked it out—and promptly tore it in two.

"Well, now ya ain't got no ticket, do ya?"

"Hey—" the conductor blurted.

Swaggert dropped a hand onto his revolver.

"Look, we don' wan' no trouble," the conductor said.

"Then butt ya fat ass out!" Swaggert barked. "This ain't none of ya fuckin' business anyway."

"But we ... got a schedule t' keep," the conductor stammered. "We got soldiers 'board this train that need t' git where they're goin'. There's a war on, ya know."

"Ya schedule can wait," Swaggert said. "So can the fuckin' war."

His attention swung back to Harding.

"Now git ya nigger ass off this train!"

"But I free t' come an' go as I please," Harding protested. "I ain't no slave."

"That right?"

"Yassir. Sho' is."

"Well, ya a sharecropper, ain't ya?" Swaggert inquired. "Worked on a farm belongin' t' Mr. Earl Taylor, didn' ya?"

"I tenant-cropped," Harding said.

"Oh? An' wha' was the deal ya had?"

"I paid Mr. Taylor rent. We split proceeds we earned from the crop."

Swaggert raised his voice so everyone could hear.

"That's exactly right! An' ya was 'posed t' pay Mr. Taylor a half-share of the crop at the end of the growin' season, wasn't ya?"

"A third—not a half."

"An' why's that? Ya own a mule an' plow?"

"I *did*."

"Don' no more?"

"Nope. Sol' 'em t' buy a ticket fer this here train."

"Well, ain't that a goddamn shame!" Swaggert clucked. "Wit' no mule or plow, how ya gonna find a way t' work off ya debt?"

"But I ain't ... got no debt," Harding said.

Swaggert shook his head. "That ain't wha' Mr. Taylor says."

The sheriff pressed Harding hard now, like a prosecutor in court.

"Mr. Taylor—he gave ya acreage, didn' he?"

"Uh-huh," Harding conceded.

"An' he extended ya credit—t' buy fertilizer, seed, tools, food? Even clothes fer ya family?"

"We bought all that at his commissary," Harding said. "T'was in the contract."

"An' Mr. Taylor—he honored *his* end of the contract, didn' he?" Swaggert asserted. "He gave ya credit fer all 'em expenses—right? Cash advances too?"

"Uh-huh."

"Ya couldn' git no loan from no bank, could ya?"

Harding stared away, speechless.

"But Mr. Taylor extended ya credit, right?" Swaggert grinned. "Never once cut ya off—did he?"

Reluctantly, Harding nodded.

"Was his interest rate fair?"

"Guess so."

"Was his prices fair fer the goods he sol' ya?"

Harding shrugged.

"Was his record keepin' accurate regardin' proceeds from the crops?"

"T'was."

"Did ya always have 'nough workin' hands in the field?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I don' understand, boy," Swaggert spread his arms in puzzlement. "Sounds t' me like Mr. Taylor treated y'all pretty damn fair!"

"He was all right," Harding conceded.

"Fair t' all his tenants?"

"Suppose so."

"Gave everyone bank accounts?"

"Yeah."

"Helped 'em through hard times?"

"Done that too."

Swaggert's eyes narrowed. "So tell me: why ya runnin' out on 'im?"

"Ain't runnin' out," Harding said. "Jus' fixin' t' leave Florida."

"Oh? An' where ya headin'?"

"Cleveland."

"An' why's that?"

"Jobs there. They lookin' fer workers in the shipyards."

Swaggert swiveled his head, as if in amazement. He wanted everyone in the coach to hear him now.

"An' ya think 'em jobs in Cleveland is better 'n the jobs in Florida?"

"Dunno," Harding said. "Plannin' t' see."

"Well, ya ain't seein' *jackshit* so fast!" Swaggert drew in tight. "Mr. Taylor claims ya ain't yet settled ya account—ain't paid 'im fer all the supplies he advanced ya."

Harding was taken aback. "Say wha'?"

"Ya heard me," Swaggert said. "Ya boss man claims ya still owe 'im money."

"How much?"

"Two hun'ed dollars!"

"No!" Harding shook his head. "Cain't be!"

"An' why not?"

"Not much of a harvest last fall. Frost killed the crops. Left most of 'em in the field."

"Well, is that Mr. Taylor's problem—or *yours*?" Swaggert chortled. "Ya still owe 'im the money, right? Crops don' go t' market—okay, that happens. But ya still carryin' the debt. 'Em supplies ya was advanced—they's jus' like a loan."

Harding stood mute, eyes darting about, as if seeking an ally or means of escape. Neither was anywhere in sight.

“Now my job,” Swaggert said, “is t’ collect the debt ya owe—or bring ya back t’ work it off. Way Mr. Taylor sees it, y’all have t’ contract wit’ ’im fer two more seasons.”

“*Two seasons?*”

“Ya heard me!”

“But t’ain’t fair! T’ain’t right!”

“Well, that ain’t fer *y’all* t’ decide, is it?” Swaggert laughed. “Shit, no! See, ya may not be an actual slave no mo’—but ya sure as shit’s a slave t’ the contract ya signed!”

Swaggert then yanked out his revolver and aimed it squarely at the side of Harding’s head. The deputies inched forward. Passengers fidgeted in their seats. Roosevelt closed his eyes, his leg twitching, his heart pounding as if it would rip through the walls of his chest.

“Ya comin’ wit’ us—whether ya walkin’ or we carryin’ ya. Makes no fuckin’ difference t’ me.”

Swaggert cocked the trigger of his gun, the metal-on-metal click loud as a clap of thunder.

“Now, *move!*”

“But—”

“Don’ tell *me*, boy!” Swaggert bellowed. “Tell it t’ a fuckin’ judge!”

Then he reared back and thwacked Harding on the head with the butt end of his revolver. Harding lurched sideways, blood spewing from his temple. Then Swaggert clubbed him again, even harder, across the back of his head and the old sharecropper crumbled into the center aisle of the coach.

“Dear Lord!” an old woman exclaimed. “Merciful God almighty!”

Other passengers gasped and quickly went silent. The old woman clutched her hands and prayed aloud. From somewhere in the coach, an infant wailed.

Then Swaggert’s deputies moved in, propped Harding under the arms and dragged him to the end of the coach, where they flung him bodily from the gangway, laughing as he landed face-down on the platform, sprawled in a writhing, gangling heap.

“I oughtta haul *all* ya fuckin’ asses off like that!”

Swaggert’s eyes were ablaze now, his lips snarled and frothy.

“I oughtta throw all ya fuckin’ no-good niggers in jail!”

No one moved. Roosevelt, his body slack, lowered his eyes and shuffled his feet submissively, fearful of so much as flinching. Rivers of sweat ran from his face. Silently, he prayed.

Please, dear Lord! Please—

With all his might, he prayed he wouldn't draw Swaggert's attention. Or his ire.

Thankfully, he attracted neither. Instead, Swaggert backed his way down the aisle, glowering at the passengers, spitting his words.

"Y'all think white folks in Florida jus' gonna let you niggers git on a goddamn train an' take off fer the North?" he bellowed.

"Y'all think ya can up an' 'scape the South—*jus' like that?*"

He shook his head in contempt.

"Shee-it, there ain't no 'scapin' the South!"

Then he laughed.

"South's gonna be wit' ya niggers the rest of yer miserable fuckin' lives—don' y'all know that by now? South'll be burned into ya souls ... wherever ya sorry asses go!"

Then, as abruptly as he'd arrived, Swaggert spun around and departed, his scathing message echoing through the railway car long after he was gone. As long as forever.

The sheriff could be right, Roosevelt thought. The South may well be something he could never truly shed, no matter how desperately he tried, how far he traveled, how fervently he wished. It might be part of him always. Burned, like Swaggert said, deep in his soul.

But that was okay. At least he was fleeing it now, getting out. After all the years of dreaming and wondering, wishing and hoping, planning and praying—after all he'd lived through, all he'd seen, all he'd felt—he was finally heading north.

"Halle-lu-jah!" a passenger shouted out as the train began to move.

"Hallelujah!" Roosevelt whispered, allowing himself at last to breathe.