

He Woke in Darkness

by Harry Turtledove

Early on a cold and dark December morning—a day after I bought this tale from Harry Turtledove, and long after he'd written it—I was startled by the morning news. The synchronicity of the story on the radio about an arrest stemming from an event of decades past and the unsettling story in this magazine seems to prove that some historical incidents will haunt us for years to come. Harry's newest book, *Settling Accounts: Drive to the East* will be out in August from Del Rey. He recently edited *The Enchanter Completed*, a tribute anthology to L. Sprague de Camp that has just been published by Baen Books.

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He woke in darkness, not knowing who he was. The taste of earth filled his mouth.

It shouldn't have ended this way. He knew that, though he couldn't say how or why. He couldn't even say what *this way* was, not for sure. He just knew it was wrong. He'd always understood about right and wrong, as far back as he could remember.

How far back was that? Why, it was ... as far as it was. He didn't know exactly how far. That seemed wrong, too, but he couldn't say why.

Darkness lay heavily on him, unpierced, unpierceable. It wasn't the dark of night, nor even the dark of a closed and shuttered room at midnight. No light had ever come here. No light ever would, or could. Not the darkness of a mineshaft. The darkness of ... the tomb?

Realizing he must be dead made a lot of things fall together. A lot, but not enough. As far back as he could remember ... He couldn't remember *dying*, dammit. Absurdly, that made him angry. Something so important in a man's life, you'd think he would remember it. But he didn't, and he didn't know what he could do about it.

He would have laughed, there in the darkness, if only he could. He hadn't expected Afterwards to be like this. He didn't know how he'd expected it to be, but not like this. Again, though, what could he do about it?

I can remember. I can try to remember, anyways. Again, he would have laughed if he could. *Why the hell not? I've got all the time in the world.*

* * * *

Light. An explosion of light. Afternoon sunshine blasting through the dirty, streaky windshield of the beat-up old Ford station wagon bouncing west down Highway 16 toward Philadelphia.

A bigger explosion of light inside his mind. A name! He had a name! He was

Cecil, Cecil Price, Cecil Ray Price. He knew it like ... like a man knows his name, that's how. That time without light, without self? *A dream*, he told himself. *Must have been a dream*.

Those were his hands on the wheel, pink and square and hard from years of labor in the fields. He was only twenty-seven, but he'd already done a lifetime's worth of hard work. It felt like a long lifetime's worth, too.

He took one hand off the wheel for a second to run it through his brown hair, already falling back at the temples. Had he dozed for a second while he was driving? He didn't think so, but what else could it have been? Lucky he didn't drive the wagon off the road into the cotton fields, into the red dirt.

They would love that. They would laugh their asses off. Well, they weren't going to get the chance.

Sweat ran down his face. His clothes felt welded to him. The air was thick with water, damn near thick enough to slice. The start of summer in Mississippi. It would stay like this for months.

He had the window open to give himself a breeze. It didn't help much. When it got this hot and sticky, nothing helped much. He ran his hand through his hair again, to try to keep it out of his eyes.

"You all right, Cecil?" That was Muhammad Shabazz. Along with Tariq Abdul-Rashid, he crouched down in the back seat. The two young Black Muslims didn't want the law, or what passed for the law in Mississippi in 1964, spotting them. They'd come down from the North to give the oppressed and disenfranchised whites in the state a helping hand, and the powers that be hated them worse than anybody.

"I'm okay," Cecil Price answered. *I'm okay now*, he thought. *I know who I am. Hell, I know that I am*. He shook his head. That moment of lightless namelessness was fading, and a good thing, too.

"We get to Meridian, everything'll be fine," Muhammad Shabazz said.

"Sure," Cecil said. "Sure." The night before, the locals had torched a white church over by Longdale. He'd taken the Northern blacks over there to do what they could for the congregation. Now...

Now they had to get through Neshoba County. They had to get past Philadelphia. They had to run the gauntlet of lawmen who hated white people and Black Knights of Voodoo who hated whites even more—and of lawmen who *were* Black Knights of Voodoo and hated whites most of all. And they had to do it in the Racial Alliance for Complete Equality's beat-up station wagon. If RACE's old blue Ford wasn't the best-known car in eastern Mississippi, Price was damned if he knew another one that would be.

Of course, he might be damned any which way. So might the two idealistic young Negroes who'd come down from New York and Ohio to give his downtrodden race a hand. If the law spotted this much too spottable car...

Cecil Price wished he hadn't had that thought right then, in the instant before he saw the flashing red light in his rear-view mirror, in the instant before he heard the siren's scream. Panic stabbed at him. "What do I do?" he said hoarsely. He wanted to floor the gas pedal. He wanted to, but he didn't. The main thing that held him back was the certain knowledge that the old wagon couldn't break sixty unless you flung it off a cliff.

"Pull over." Muhammad Shabazz's voice was calm. "Don't let 'em get us for evading arrest or any real charge. We haven't done anything wrong, so they can't do anything to us."

"You sure of that, man?" Tariq Abdul-Rashid sounded nervous.

"This is all about the rule of law," Muhammad Shabazz said patiently. "For us, for them, for everybody."

He respected the rule of law. It meant more to him than anything else. Cecil Price could only hope it meant something to the man in the car with the light and the siren. He could hope so, yeah. Could he believe it? That was a different story.

But Price didn't see that he had any choice here. He pulled off onto the shoulder. The brakes squeaked as he brought the blue Ford to a stop. Pebbles rattled against the car's underpanels. Red dust swirled up around it.

The black-and-white pulled up behind the Ford. A great big Negro in a deputy sheriff's uniform got out and swaggered up toward the station wagon. Cecil Price watched him in the mirror, not wanting to turn around. That arrogant strut—and the pistol in the lawman's hand—spoke volumes about the way things in Mississippi had been since time out of mind.

Coming up to the driver's-side door, the sheriff peered in through sunglasses that made him look more like a machine, a hate-driven machine, than a man. "Son of a bitch!" he exploded. "*You ain't* Larry Rainey!"

"No, sir," Price said. Part of that deference was RACE training—don't give the authorities an excuse to beat on you. And part of it was drilled into whites in the South from the time they could toddle and lisp. If they *didn't* show respect, they often didn't live to get a whole lot older than that.

Larry Rainey was older than Cecil Price and smarter than Cecil and tougher than Cecil, too. He'd been in RACE a lot longer than Cecil had. The Black Knights of Voodoo probably hated him more than any other white man from this part of the state.

But the way they hated Larry Rainey was like nothing next to the way they

hated what they called the black agitators from the North. Even behind the deputy sheriff's shades, Cecil could see his eyes widen when he got a look at Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid. "Well, well!" he boomed, the way a man with a shotgun will when a couple of big, fat ducks fly right over his blind. "Looky what we got here! We got us a couple of buckra-lovin' ragheads!"

"Sheriff," Muhammad Shabazz said tightly. He didn't wear a turban, and never had. Neither did Tariq Abdul-Rashid, who nodded like somebody trying hard not to show how scared he was. Cecil Price was scared, too, damn near scared shitless, and hoped the black man with the the gun and the Smokey-the-Bear hat couldn't tell.

The deputy went on as if the Black Muslim hadn't spoken: "We got us a couple of Northern radicals who reckon they're better'n other folks their color, so they can hop on a bus and come down here and tell us how to live. And we got us one uppity buckra, too, sneakin' around and stirrin' up what oughta be damn well left alone. Well, I got news for y'all. That don't fly, not in Neshoba County it don't. What the hell you doin' here, anyway?"

"We were looking at what's left of Mount Zion Church in Longdale," Muhammad Shabazz answered.

"Yeah, I just bet you were. Fat lot your kind cares about churches," the big black deputy jeered.

"We care about justice, sir." Muhammad Shabazz spoke with respect that didn't come close to hiding the anger underneath. "I do, and Mr. Abdul-Rashid does, and Mr. Price does, too. Do you, sir? Does justice mean anything to you at all?"

"It means I know better'n to call a lousy, lazy, no-account buckra *Mister*. Ain't that right, Cecil?" When Price didn't answer fast enough to suit the deputy sheriff, the man stuck the pistol in his face and roared, "*Ain't that right, boy?*"

Muhammad Shabazz had nerve. If he didn't have nerve, he never would have ridden down to Mississippi from Cleveland in the first place. "We didn't do anything wrong, sir," he told the deputy. "We didn't even break any traffic laws. You have no good reason to pull us over. Why aren't you investigating real crimes, like a firebombed church?"

To Cecil Price's amazement, the deputy smiled the broadest, nastiest, wickedest smile he'd ever seen, and he'd seen some lulus. "What do you reckon I'm doin'?" he said. "What the hell do you reckon I'm doin'? All three of you sons of bitches are under arrest for suspicion of arson. A charge like that, you can rot in jail the rest of your worthless lives. Serve y'all right, too, you want to know what I think."

"You're out of your mind," Muhammad Shabazz exclaimed.

“We wouldn’t burn a church,” Tariq Abdul-Rashid agreed, startled out of his frightened silence. “That *is* crazy.”

“We’ve got no reason to do anything like that. Why would we, sir?” Cecil Price tried to make the deputy forget his comrades didn’t stay polite.

It didn’t work. He might have known it wouldn’t. Hell, he had known it wouldn’t. “Why? I’ll tell you why,” the Negro in the lawman’s uniform said. “So decent, God-fearing folks get blamed for it, that’s why. You agitators’ll try and pin it all on us, make us look bad on the TV, give the Federal government an excuse to stick its nose in affairs that ain’t none of its business and never will be. So hell, yes, you’re under arrest. Suspicion of arson, like I said. I’ll throw your sorry asses in jail right now. You drive on into Philadelphia quiet-like, or you gonna do something stupid like try and escape?”

Cecil Price didn’t need to be a college-educated fellow like the two blacks in the car with him to know what that meant. *You do anything but drive straight to jail and I’ll kill all of you.* “I won’t do anything dumb,” he told the deputy.

“Better not, boy, or it’s the last fuckup you ever pull.” The big black man threw back his head and laughed. “Unless you already pulled your last one, that is.” Laughing still, he walked back to the black-and-white. He opened the door, got in—the shocks sagged under his bulk—and slammed it shut.

“Let him jail us on that stupid trumped-up charge,” Muhammad Shabazz said as Price started the Ford’s engine. “It’ll do just as much to help the cause as the church bombing.”

“I hope you’re right,” Price said, pulling back onto the highway, “but he’s a mean one. The Neshoba County Sheriff’s meaner, but the deputy’s bad enough and then some.”

“You think he’s BKV?” Tariq Abdul-Rashid asked.

“Black Knights of Voodoo?” Price shrugged. “I don’t know for sure, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he goes night-riding with a mask and a shield and a spear.”

In Philadelphia, a few people stared at the car with the white and the two blacks in it. Cecil Price didn’t care for those stares, not even a little bit. He didn’t care for any part of what was going on, but he couldn’t do a thing about it. He parked in front of the jail. The deputy’s car pulled up right behind the RACE wagon.

Another black deputy sat behind the front desk when Price and Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid walked into the jail. “What the hell’s goin’ on here?” he asked the man who’d arrested the civil-rights workers.

“Suspicion of arson,” the first deputy answered. “I reckon they must’ve had somethin’ to do with torchin’ the white folks’ church over by Longdale.”

“That’s the—” What was the man behind the desk about to say? *That’s the silliest goddamn thing I ever heard?* Something like that—Cecil Price was sure of it. But then the other Negro’s eyes narrowed. “Fuck me,” he said, and pointed first to Muhammad Shabazz and then to Tariq Abdul-Rashid. “Ain’t these the raghead bastards who came down from the North to raise trouble?”

“That’s them, all right,” said the deputy who’d arrested them. “And this here buckra’s Cecil Price. I thought at first I got me Larry Rainey—you know how all these white folks look alike. But what the hell? If you can’t grab a big fish, a little fish’ll do.”

“That’s a fact,” said the deputy behind the desk. “That sure as hell is a fact, all right. Yeah, lock ‘em up. We can figure out what to do with ‘em later.”

“You betcha.” The first deputy marched his prisoners to the cells farther back in the jail. “In here, you two,” he told Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid, and herded them into the first cell on the right. He stuck Cecil Price in the second cell on the right. Even at a time like this, even in a situation like this, he never thought to put a white man in with Negroes. That was part of what was wrong in Philadelphia, right there.

After Price and Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid were safely locked away, the man who’d arrested them clumped up the corridor and then out the front door. “Where you goin’?” called the man behind the desk.

“Got to see the Priest,” the first deputy answered. “Anybody asks after those assholes, you never seen ‘em, you never heard nothin’ about ‘em. You got that?”

“All right by me,” the other deputy said. The first one slammed the door after him as he went out. He seemed to have to slam any door he came to.

Cecil Price had only thought he was scared shitless before. Not letting anybody know he and his friends were in jail was bad. Going to see the Priest was a hell of a lot worse. The Priest was a tall, scrawny, bald black man who hated whites with a fierce and simple passion. He was also the chief Neshoba County recruiting officer for the Black Knights of Voodoo. Trouble followed him the way thunder followed lightning.

Price wondered whether Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid knew enough to be as frightened as he was. The Priest had been trouble for years, while they’d been down here only a couple of months. The Priest would still be trouble long after they went back to the North ... if they ever got the chance to go North again.

It must have been about half past five when the phone at the front desk jangled loudly. “Neshoba County Jail,” the deputy there said. He paused to listen, then went on, “No, I ain’t seen ‘em. Jesus Christ! You lose your garbage, you expect me to go pickin’ it up for you?” He slammed the phone down again.

“Deputy!” Muhammad Shabazz called through the bars of his cell. “Deputy, can I speak to you for a minute?”

A scrape of chair legs against cheap linoleum. Slow, heavy, arrogant footsteps. A deep, angry voice: “What the hell you want?”

“I’d like to make a telephone call, please.”

A pause. Cecil Price looked out of his cell just in time to see the deputy sheriff shake his head. His big, round belly shook, too, but it didn’t remind Price of a bowlful of jelly—more of a wrecking ball that would smash anything in its way. “No, I don’t reckon so,” he said. “You ain’t callin’ nobody.”

“I have a Constitutional right to make a telephone call,” Muhammad Shabazz insisted, politely but firmly.

“Don’t you give me none of your Northern bullshit,” the Negro deputy said. “Constitution doesn’t say jack shit about telephone calls. How could it? No telephones when they wrote the damn thing, were there? *Were* there, smartass?”

“No, but—” Muhammad Shabazz broke off.

“Constitutional right, my ass,” the deputy sheriff said. “You got a Constitutional right to get what’s comin’ to you, and you will. You just bet you will.” He lumbered back to the desk.

In a low voice, Cecil Price said, “We’re in deep now.”

“No kidding.” Muhammad Shabazz sounded like a man who wanted to make a joke but was too worried to bring it off.

“They aren’t gonna let us out of here,” Tariq Abdul-Rashid said. “Not in one piece, they aren’t.”

“We’ll see what happens, that’s all,” Muhammad Shabazz said. “They can’t think they’ll get away with it.” To Cecil Price, that only proved the man who’d come down from the North didn’t understand how things really worked in Mississippi. Of course the deputy sheriffs thought they’d get away with it. Why wouldn’t they? Blacks had been getting away with things against whites who stepped out of line ever since slavery days. Times were starting to change; Negroes of goodwill like Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid were helping to make them change. But they hadn’t changed yet—and the deputies and their pals were determined they wouldn’t change no matter what. And so...

And so we’re in deep for sure, Cecil Price thought, fighting despair.

* * * *

The first deputy sheriff, the one who’d arrested them, returned to the jail not long after the sun went down. He walked back to the cells to look at the prisoners,

laughed a gloating laugh, and then went up front again.

“What’s the Priest got to say?” asked the man at the front desk.

“It’s all taken care of,” the first deputy answered.

“They comin’ here?”

“Nah.” The first deputy sounded faintly disappointed. “It’d be too damn raw. We’d end up with the fuckin’ Feds on our case for sure.”

“What’s going on, then?”

The first deputy told him. He pitched his voice too low to let Cecil Price make it out. By the way the desk man laughed, he thought it was pretty good. Price was sure *he* wouldn’t.

Time crawled by on hands and knees. The phone rang once, but it had nothing to do with Price and Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid. It was a woman calling to find out if her no-account husband was sleeping off another binge in the drunk tank. He wasn’t. But it only went to show that, despite the struggle for whites’ civil rights, ordinary life in Philadelphia went on.

Around half past ten, the first deputy came tramping back to the cells again. To Cecil Price’s amazement, he had a jingling bunch of keys on a big brass key ring with him. He opened the door to Price’s cell. “Come on out, boy,” he said. “Reckon I’ve got to turn you loose.”

Price wanted to stick a finger in his ear to make sure he’d heard right. “You sure?” he blurted.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” the deputy said. “I been askin’ around. You weren’t at the church when it went up. Neither were these assholes.” He pointed into the cell that held Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid. “Gotta let them go, too, dammit.”

“You’ll hear from our lawyers,” Muhammad Shabazz promised. “False arrest is false arrest, even if you think twice about it later. This is still a free country, whether you know it or not.”

Although Cecil Price agreed with every word he said, he wished the Black Muslim would shut the hell up. Pissing off the deputy right when he was letting them out of jail wasn’t the smartest move in the world, not even close. But Price walked out of his cell. A moment later, Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid walked out of theirs, too.

The deputy with the wrecking-ball belly at the front desk gave them back their wallets and keys and pocket change. “If you’re smart, you’ll get your white ass outa Philadelphia. Go on down to Meridian and never come back,” he told Cecil Price.

“You cause trouble around here again, you look at a black woman walkin’ down the street around here again, you show your ugly buckra face around here again, you are fuckin’ dead meat. You hear me?”

“Oh, yes, sir. I sure do hear you,” Cecil Price said. That was how you played the game in Mississippi. Price hadn’t promised to do one thing the deputy said. But he’d heard him, all right. He couldn’t very well not have heard him.

“Go on, then. Get lost.”

The first deputy walked out into the muggy night with the white man and the two Northern blacks. A mosquito buzzed around Price’s ear. Price slapped at it. The deputy laughed. He watched while Price and the Black Muslims got into RACE’s blue Ford wagon. Price started up the car. The deputy went on watching as he put it in gear and drove away. In the rear-view mirror, Price watched him walk back into the Neshoba County Jail.

“Maybe they really are learning they can’t pull crap like that on us,” Tariq Abdul-Rashid said.

“Don’t bet on it,” was Muhammad Shabazz’s laconic response. “They don’t back up unless they’ve got a reason to back up. Isn’t that right, Cecil? ... Cecil?”

Cecil Price didn’t answer, not right away. His eyes were on the rear-view mirror again. He didn’t like what he saw. This time of night, driving out of a little town like Philadelphia, they should have had the road to themselves. They should have, but they didn’t. One, then two, sets of headlights followed them out of town. Price stepped on the gas. If those cars back there weren’t interested in him and his black friends, he’d lose them.

“Hey, man, take it easy,” Tariq Abdul-Rashid said. “You don’t want to give the law a chance to run us in for speeding.”

“We’ve got company back there,” Price said. Speeding up hadn’t shaken those two cars. If anything, they were closer. And a third set of headlights was coming out of Philadelphia, zooming down Highway 19 like a bat out of hell.

Tariq Abdul-Rashid and Muhammad Shabazz looked back over their shoulders. “You think they’re on our tail, Cecil?” Tariq Abdul-Rashid asked.

Before Price could say anything, Muhammad Shabazz said everything that needed saying: “Gun it! Gun it like a son of a bitch!”

The old Ford’s motor should have roared when Cecil Price jammed the pedal to the metal. Instead, it groaned and grunted. Yeah, the wagon went faster, but it didn’t go faster fast enough. The two pairs of headlights behind the Ford got bigger and bigger, brighter and brighter, closer and closer. And the third pair, the set that got the late start, might almost have been flying along Highway 19. That was one souped-up set of wheels, and the rustbucket Price was driving didn’t have a prayer

of staying ahead. Before long, whoever was driving that hot machine got right on the wagon's tail.

Desperate now, Price killed his lights and made a screeching, sliding right onto Highway 492. Only in Mississippi, he thought, would such a miserable chunk of asphalt merit the name of highway. But if it let him shake his pursuers, he would bless its undeserved name forevermore.

Only it didn't. The lead pursuer, the hopped-up car that had come zooming out of Philadelphia, also made the turn. Even over the growl of his own car's engine, Cecil Price could hear its brakes screech as it clawed around the corner. Then the pursuer's siren came on and the red light on top of the roof began to flash.

"Jesus! It's that damn deputy again!" Price said. "What am I gonna do?"

"Can we outrun him?" Muhammad Shabazz asked as the beat-up Ford bucketed down the road.

"Not a chance in hell," Price answered. "He's liable to start shooting at us if I don't stop." If he got hit, or if a tire got hit, the car would fly off the road and burst into flames. That was a bad way to go.

"Maybe you better stop," Tariq Abdul-Rashid said.

"Damned if I do and damned if I don't," Cecil Price said bitterly, but his foot had already found the brake pedal. The old blue station wagon slowed, stopped.

The deputy sheriff's car stopped behind it, the same way it had earlier that day. This time, though, the other two cars also stopped. The big black buck of a deputy sheriff got out of his car and strode up to the Ford wagon. "I thought you were going back to Meridian if we let you out of jail."

"We were," Price answered.

"Well, you sure were taking the long way around. Get out of that car," the deputy said. That was the last thing Cecil Price wanted to do. But he thought the deputy would shoot him and the two Black Muslims right there if they refused. Reluctantly, he obeyed. Perhaps even more reluctantly, Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid followed him.

Men were also getting out of the two cars stopped behind the deputy's. Price's heart sank when he saw them. There was the Priest, all right, black as the ace of spades. And there were ten or twelve other Negroes with him. Price recognized some of them as BKV men. He didn't know for sure that the others were, but what else would they be? Some had guns. Others carried crowbars or tire irons or Louisville Sluggers. They all wore rubber gloves so they wouldn't leave fingerprints.

"You don't want to do this," Muhammad Shabazz said earnestly. "I'm telling you the truth—you don't. It won't get you what you think it will."

“Shut the fuck up, you goddamn raghead race traitor.” The deputy sheriff’s voice was hard and cold as iron. “You get in the back of my car now, you hear?”

“What will you do to us?” Tariq Abdul-Rashid asked.

“Whatever it is, we’ll do it right here and right now if you don’t shut the fuck up and do like you’re told,” the deputy answered. “Now stop mouthing off and move, damn you.”

Numbly, as if caught in a bad dream, Cecil Price and his companions got into the back of the deputy sheriff’s car. A steel grating walled them off from the front seat. Neither back door had a lock or a door handle on the inside. Once you went in there, you stayed in there till somebody decided to let you out.

The deputy slid behind the wheel again. The men from the Black Knights of Voodoo got back into their cars, too. A couple of them aimed weapons at Cecil Price and the Black Muslims before they did. The deputy sheriff waved the BKV men away. “Not quite time yet,” he told them.

“This won’t help you. The country won’t be proud of you. They’ll go after you like you wouldn’t believe,” Muhammad Shabazz said. “If you hurt us, you help our side, and that’s nothing but the truth.”

“I don’t want to listen to your bullshit, you buckra-lovin’ raghead, and *that’s* nothin’ but the truth,” the deputy said. “So maybe you just better shut the fuck up.”

“Why? What difference does it make now?” the Black Muslim asked.

Instead of answering, the deputy sheriff put the car in gear. He made a Y-turn—the road was too narrow for a U—and swung back around the cars full of BKV men. Then he hit the brakes to wait while they turned around, too. *Good cooperation in a bad cause*, Cecil Price thought. If RACE members worked together as smoothly as these BKV bastards...

“All right,” the deputy muttered, and the black-and-white moved forward again. Now that he wasn’t chasing people at top speed, the deputy sheriff acted like a careful driver. He flicked the turn signal before making a left back onto Highway 19. *Click! Click! Click!* The sound seemed very loud inside the passenger compartment. What went through Price’s mind was, *Measuring off the seconds left in my life*.

As soon as the deputy finished the turn, of course, the clicking stopped. Price wished his mind had been going in some other direction a moment before. The deputy drove toward Philadelphia for a minute or two, then used the turn signal again. *Click! Click! Click!* Cecil Price cherished and dreaded the sound of those passing seconds, both at the same time. He grimaced when the deputy finished the new left turn and the indicator fell silent again.

“Where the hell are we?” Muhammad Shabazz muttered.

Before Price could answer him, the deputy did: “This here is Rock Cut Road. Ain’t hardly anything around these parts. That’s how come we’re here.”

“Oh, shit,” Tariq Abdul-Rashid said. Price couldn’t have put it better himself.

The deputy wasn’t kidding. Looking out the car’s dirty windows, Price saw nothing but a narrow red dirt road and weed-filled fields to either side. Behind the black-and-white, car doors slammed as the Black Knights of Voodoo got out and advanced.

“I’m gonna open the door and let y’all out now,” the deputy said. “You don’t want to do anything stupid, you hear?”

“What the hell difference does it make at this stage of things?” Tariq Abdul-Rashid asked.

“Well, some things are gonna happen. They’re gonna, and I don’t reckon anything’ll change that,” the deputy sheriff said seriously. “But they can happen easy, you might say, or they can happen not so easy. You won’t like it if they happen not so easy. Believe you me, you won’t, not even a little bit.”

He got out of the car. *Can we jump him when he opens the door?* Price wondered. He shook his head. Not a chance in church. Not a chance in hell.

One more *click!*: the door opening. Heart racing a mile a minute, legs feather-light with fear, Cecil Price got out of the Neshoba County Sheriff’s Department car. The dirt scraped and crunched under the soles of his shoes. *Is that the last thing I’ll ever feel?* It didn’t seem like enough.

Two Black Knights of Voodoo grabbed Tariq Abdul-Rashid. Two others seized Muhammad Shabazz, and two more laid hold of Cecil Price. Another BKV man walked up to Tariq Abdul-Rashid, pistol in hand. The headlights of the cars behind the black-and-white picked out the globe and anchor tattooed on his right bicep.

“Go get ‘em, Wayne,” somebody said in a low, hoarse voice—the Priest, Cecil Price saw.

“I will, goddammit. I will,” answered the BKV man with the pistol. Price happened to know that Wayne Roberts, in spite of the tattoo, had been dishonorably discharged from the Marine Corps. In the Black Knights of Voodoo, though, he could be a big man.

He scowled at Tariq Abdul-Rashid. “No,” the Black Muslim whispered. “Please, no.”

“Fuck you, man,” Roberts said. “You ain’t nothin’ but a stinkin’ buckra in a black skin.” He thumbed back the revolver’s hammer and pulled the trigger.

The roar was amazingly loud. The bullet, from point-blank range, caught Tariq Abdul-Rashid in the middle of the forehead. He went limp all at once, as if his bones had turned to water. “Way to go, Wayne!” said one of the men who held him. When his captors let go, he flopped down like a sack of beans, dead before he hit the ground.

“You see?” the black deputy said. “Hard or easy. That there was pretty goddamn easy, wasn’t it?”

The BKV men who had hold of Muhammad Shabazz dragged him forward. Even as they did, he was trying to talk sense to them. “I understand how you feel, but this won’t help you,” he said in a calm, reasonable voice. “Killing us won’t do anything for your cause. You—”

“Shut up, asshole.” Wayne Roberts cuffed him across the face. “You bet this’ll do us some good. We’ll be rid of *you*, won’t we? Good riddance to bad rubbish.” He shot Muhammad Shabazz the same way he’d killed the other Black Muslim.

“Easy as can be,” the deputy sheriff said. “Easier’n he deserved, I reckon. Fucker never knew what hit him.” The hot, wet air was thick with the stinks of smokeless powder, of blood, of shit, of fear, of rage.

Easy or not, Cecil Price didn’t want to die. With a sudden shout that even startled him, he broke loose from the men who had hold of him. Shouting—screaming—he ran like a madman down Rock Cut Road.

He didn’t get more than forty or fifty feet before the first bullet slammed into his back. Next thing he knew, he was lying on his face, dirt in his mouth, more dirt in his nose. Something horrible was happening inside him. He felt on fire, only worse. When he tried to get up, he couldn’t.

Big as a mountain, hard as a mountain, the deputy sheriff loomed over him. “All right, white boy,” he ground out. “You coulda had it easy, same as your asshole buddies. Now we’re gonna do it the hard way.” He crouched down beside Price, grabbed his right arm, and broke it over his thigh like a broomstick. The sound the bones made when they snapped was just about like a breaking broomstick, too. The sound Cecil Price made ... How the BKV men laughed!

With a grunt, the sheriff got to his feet. With the arrogant strut he always used, he walked around to Price’s left side. With the coldblooded deliberation he’d shown before, he broke the white man’s left arm. Price barely had room inside his head for any new torment.

Or so he thought, till one of the Black Knights of Voodoo kicked him in the crotch. “Ain’t gonna mess with no black women now, are you, buckra?” he jeered. More boots thudded into Price’s balls. That almost made him forget about his ruined arms. It *almost* made him forget about the bullet in his back, except he

couldn't find breath enough to scream the way he wanted to.

After an eternity that probably lasted three or four minutes, the deputy sheriff said, "Reckon that's enough now. Let's finish him off and get rid of the bodies."

"I'll take care of it. Bet your sweet ass I will," Wayne Roberts said. He fired at Price again, and then again. Another gun barked, too, maybe once, maybe twice. By that time, Price had stopped paying close attention.

But he didn't fall straight into sweet blackness, the way Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid had. He lingered in red torment when the BKV men picked him up and stuffed him into the trunk of one of their cars along with the Black Muslims' bodies.

The car jounced down the dirt road, every pothole and every rock a fresh stab of agony. At last, it stopped. "Here we go," somebody said as a Black Knight of Voodoo opened the trunk. "This ought to do the job."

"Oh, fuck, yes," somebody else said. Eager gloved hands hauled Cecil Price out of the trunk, and then the corpses of his friends.

"Hell, this dam'll hold a hundred of them." That was the deputy sheriff, sounding in charge of things as usual. "Go on, throw 'em in there, and we'll cover 'em up. Nobody'll ever find the sons of bitches."

Thump! That was one of the Black Muslims, going into a hollow in the ground. *Thump!* That was the other one. And *thump!* That was Cecil Price, landing on top of Tariq Abdul-Rashid and Muhammad Shabazz. An Everest of pain in what were already the Himalayas.

"Fire up the dozer," the deputy said. "Let's bury 'em and get on back to town. We done us a good night's work here, by God."

Somebody climbed up onto the bulldozer's seat. The big yellow Caterpillar D-4 belched and farted to life. It bit out a great chunk of dirt and, motor growling, poured it over the two Black Muslims and Cecil Price. Price struggled hopelessly to breathe. More dirt thudded down on him, more and more.

Buried alive! he thought. *Sweet Jesus help me, I'm buried alive!* But not for long. The last thing he knew was the taste of earth filling his mouth.

* * * *

He woke in darkness, not knowing who he was. The taste of earth seemed to fill his mouth.

He sat bolt upright, gasping for breath, heart sledgehammering in his chest as if he'd run a hundred miles. He looked around wildly. Tiny stripes of pale moonlight slipped between the slats of the Venetian blinds and stretched across the bedroom floor.

Beside him on the cheap, lumpy mattress, someone stirred: his wife. “You all right, Cecil?” she muttered drowsily.

A name! He had a name! He was Cecil, Cecil Price, Cecil Ray Price. Was he all right? That was a different question, a harder question. “I guess ... I guess maybe I am,” he said, wonder in his voice.

“Then settle down and go on back to sleep. *I* aim to, if you give me half a chance,” his wife said. “What ails you, anyhow?”

“Bad dream,” he answered, the way he always did. He’d never said a word about what kind of bad dream it was. Somehow, he didn’t think he *could* say a word about what kind of bad dream it was. He’d tried two or three times, always with exactly zero luck. The words wouldn’t form. The ideas behind the words wouldn’t form, not so he could talk about them. But even if he couldn’t, he knew what the dreams were all about. Oh, yes. He knew.

He still lived in the same brown clapboard house he’d lived in on that hot summer night in 1964, the brown clapboard house he’d lived in for going on forty years. It wasn’t more than a block away from Philadelphia’s town square.

He’d been Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price then. He ran for sheriff in ‘67, when Larry Rainey didn’t go for another term, but another Klansman beat him out. Then he spent four years away, and after that he couldn’t very well be a lawman any more. Once he came back to Mississippi, he worked as a surveyor. He drove a truck for an oil company. And he wound up a jeweler and watchmaker—he’d always been good with his hands. He turned into a big wheel among Mississippi Shriners.

But the dreams never went away. If he hadn’t seen that damn Ford station wagon that afternoon ... He had, though, and what happened next followed as inexorably as night followed day. Two Yankee busybodies: Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman. One uppity local nigger: James Chaney.

At the time, getting rid of them seemed the only sensible thing to do. He took care of it, with plenty of help from the Ku Klux Klan.

He wondered if the others, the ones who were still alive, had dreams like his. He’d tried to ask a couple of times, but he couldn’t, any more than he could talk about his own. Maybe they’d tried to ask him, too. If they had, they hadn’t had any luck, either.

Dreams. His started even before the damn informer tipped off the FBI about where the bodies were buried. At first, he figured they were just nerves. Who wouldn’t have a case of the jitters after what he went through, when the whole country was trying to pull Neshoba County down around his ears?

Well, the whole country damn well did it. Back in June 1964, who would have dreamt a Mississippi jury—a jury of Mississippi white men—would, could, convict

anybody for violating the civil rights of a coon and a couple of Jews? But the jury damn well did that, too. Price got six years, and served four of them in a Federal prison in Minnesota before they turned him loose for good behavior.

He went on having the dreams up there.

Sometimes weeks went by when they let him alone, and he would wonder if he was free. And he would always hope he was, and he never would be. It was as if hoping he were free was enough all by itself for ... something to show him he wasn't.

Did the dreams make him change? Did they just make him pretend to change? Even he couldn't say for sure. Ten years after he got convicted, he told a reporter—a New York City reporter, no less—he'd seen *Roots* and liked it. When he talked about integration, he said that was how things were going to be and that was all there was to it.

He spent years rebuilding his name, rebuilding his reputation. And then, in 1999, everything fell to pieces again. He got convicted of another felony. No guns this time, no cars racing down the highway in the heat of the night: he sold certifications for commercial driver's licensing without doing the testing he should have. A cheap little money-making scheme—except he got caught.

They didn't jug him that time. He drew three years' probation. But you could stay a hero—to some people—for doing what you thought you had to do to people who were trying to change the way of life you'd known since you were born. When you got busted for selling bogus certifications, you weren't a hero to anybody, even yourself. You were just a lousy little crook.

A lousy little crook with ... dreams.

Two years later, a season after the turn of the century, he climbed up on a lift at an equipment-rental place in Philadelphia. He fell off somehow, and landed on his head. He died three days later at a hospital in Jackson—the same hospital where he'd brought the bodies of Schwerner and Goodman and Chaney for autopsy thirty-seven years earlier, after the FBI tore up the dam to get them out. He never knew that, but then, neither had they.

He woke in darkness, not knowing who he was. The taste of earth filled his mouth.

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