
Opening Extract from...

The Secret of Magic

Written by Deborah Johnson

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The Secret of Magic

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For my grandfather Joe Howard Thurman
and his great-grandson
Matthew Thurman Schumaker,
with love

The Secret of Magic

I.

October 1945

G*otcha!*

Joe Howard Wilson jerked and his hands went straight to his face, and then to his body, for his gun. Groping. Feeling. Saying his prayers. Checking to make sure that he was awake and what had happened in that forest in Italy, all the killing, was over. Checking to make sure it wasn't happening now.

'You all right, mister? Need any help?'

Did he need help?

He opened his eyes then, but he didn't turn them to the voice, didn't answer it, because it was a child's voice. Light, like L.C.'s voice had been in the dream. And Joe Howard didn't want to go back to the dream. Instead, he put a hand on the hard thing right in front of him and realized it was nothing more menacing than a window and that this window was on a courier bus and that this courier bus was passing through Alabama on its way to Mississippi, and that it carried him home.

Outside, it was coming on night. Twilight. 'The magic time,' his daddy called it, 'the make-a-wish moment between the dark and the light.'

And the dusk, the gritty Southern grayness of it, its harsh gathering, stopped Joe Howard from seeing out beyond the solitude of his own reflection, a soldier's reflection: dark hair, a trimmed mustache, eyes he didn't bother looking into, and farther down from them, the ghostly shadow of a khaki uniform, of lieutenant's bars and a medal. There was no brain, no blood, no bone, no friend called L. C. Hoover sprayed all over this Joe Howard Wilson – at least not anymore.

Other than that, it was already too dark to see much of anything, but Joe Howard didn't mind. This land wasn't foreign to him. It wasn't war. It wasn't Italy. He knew the ways of it, the slow progression of Alabama as it gave way to Mississippi. At its own pace, red clay soil gave place to black, trees grew greener, hills flattened themselves into plain and prairie, into delta.

'Mister?'

At last, Joe Howard turned to the boy. They'd been sitting side by side since the two of them had gotten on the bus together in Birmingham. He had promised the boy's mother to see to it that her child got safely to Revere, Mississippi, all in one piece. The boy's mama, who had worked at the Mobile Dry Docks during the war, was on her way out to Oakland, California, to see what the world might hold for her there. She was sending her son back to her parents in Macon, Mississippi, for what she called 'The Duration,' until, she told him, she could get herself established.

No way was she ever going back to Mississippi to live. No way was she going to have her son grow up there. Onto the front of his clean overalls, she had pinned a piece of sack paper with his name on it. Manasseh. 'Came straight out of the Bible. Revelations,' the boy had told Joe Howard. Below that came Manasseh's granddaddy's name, Preacher Charles A. Lacey, and his granddaddy's address, Short Cut Road, Macon, Mississippi. All of this neatly spelled out in looping capital letters. Manasseh still held tight on to the lard can that had once contained his lunch – a cold baked yam, some corn bread, a Ball jar of sweet tea that he'd offered to share. He was working on the stick of Juicy Fruit gum Joe Howard had given him as the bus pulled out of Birmingham. The taste must have long since been played out of it, but still the boy chewed on.

Manasseh had politely motioned Joe Howard to the window seat. His eyes rounded as he stared at Joe Howard's uniform, at his bars, at his medals. He didn't need to see out, he'd said. Joe Howard didn't tell him that when he was a boy, when he was this boy's age, he'd made this trip many times himself.

'I'm well,' Joe Howard said now, finally answering. He yawned,

looked out the bus window again. He might know Alabama, but he didn't recognize a thing. 'Where are we?'

'Coming into someplace called Aliceville.'

'Aliceville?' Joe Howard thought he'd remember every little town they'd pass through going from Tuscaloosa to Revere. Carrollton, Gordo, Reform, Vernon, Mitchell, but he couldn't for the life of him place Aliceville in the mix.

'They said we had to make a detour. I heard the bus driver tell the white folks that.' The words lisped out of Manasseh's mouth through the space of two missing front teeth. Joe Howard didn't have much experience with children, but he guessed this boy must be about six. The same age he'd been in the dream he'd just had, and the same age L.C. had been in it. He knew that when he told his daddy this, his daddy would assure him, with grave wisdom, that sitting next to Manasseh had summoned poor, dead, blown-apart L.C. to his mind.

'Called him back.' His daddy, Willie Willie, would have nodded sagely as he said this. His daddy with his old-timey, magic ways.

Joe Howard looked past the boy now, to the front of the bus. The colored section was full, but there weren't that many white folks. No other uniforms, either. Since the war, Joe Howard noticed military uniforms as quickly as he noticed skin color, and as necessarily. Army, Navy, Army Air Corps, Marines – it didn't matter. They all made him feel safe. But there was no serviceman, no ex-serviceman, on this little interstate vehicle, making its slow way from east to west and south.

Instead, there was a young redheaded woman with two little boys. Twins, probably – at least they looked that way to Joe Howard. The driver took his eyes off the road and turned back to say something to her. She was right up at the very front of the bus, and so Joe Howard couldn't see her face, but the flow of her hair was pretty, the way she'd tied it back with a dusty pink bow, the way it danced around when she tossed her head. Joe Howard saw this but lowered his head, glanced quickly away. He did not want to be caught staring at a white woman.

Her children saw him, though; they watched him – those look-alike, little twin boys, who had on identical shirts and brown short pants, gray sweaters. Without a word, now that they had his attention, they got up and started to the back of the bus, jostled side to side and against the seats by its movement. When they reached Joe Howard, they still didn't say anything, but they stared at his uniform, at the lieutenant's bars on it, at the medal, just like Manasseh had done. Then, together, they looked up into his face.

Joe Howard reached into his pocket and pulled out his yellow pack of Juicy Fruit. He offered each boy a stick and each took one. He thought their mother, who was looking back now, would call out to them, would stop them from taking something from a Negro. But she didn't.

It was the bus driver who shouted out. 'Hey, Henry! Hey, William!' Preening, Joe Howard thought, with the knowledge of their names. 'Come on back here!'

He watched the boys go to their mother, not to the man. He watched her lean each boy close to her and kiss his cheek, ruffle his hair. And he thought: I wonder what it would have been like to have a mother. But then, just as quickly, the thought was swallowed up by a burden of love for his daddy. That burden was always with him. Joe Howard said aloud, 'I got to call him. Let him know I'm close now, almost home.' His daddy was a good son of Mississippi, and, as such, he held Alabama at a distance but always in shadowed, distrustful view.

The first time Joe Howard had crossed the state line going east, he'd been maybe a little younger than Manasseh, five years old. His daddy had been driving the Cackle Crate then – probably he was still driving it now – and their green Ford pickup had been following a Ford pickup just like it, except for its brown color and its Alabama license plates. Revere was the last Mississippi town you went through before you got to Alabama, and the two of them, Joe Howard and his daddy, had been on their way to Tuscaloosa so that his daddy could buy him some new school shoes.

His daddy traded only where they let you come in, make your pick, try on what you wanted. Like a man. Like the *special* man Joe Howard would grow up to be – his daddy knew it! But there were no stores like this in Revere.

The truck they followed had had thirteen Confederate flags on it, if you counted all the decals. And Joe Howard had counted them. He knew all about the Stars and the Bars. Judge Calhoun had already brought him into Calhoun Place and shown him the flag that the judge's own granddaddy, Colonel Robert Millsaps Calhoun, had managed to scavenge out of the shambles that had been the Battle of Gettysburg. Sitting under that flag, teaching him how to read, Judge Calhoun had told Joe Howard about that great war, that righteous freedom-seeking war. His bourbon breath had been warm upon the names of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, and General Stephen Lee and General William Barksdale, warm upon battles lost at Vicksburg and Jackson and Shiloh – fought, actually, the judge assured Joe Howard, for the armaments and the train depot here in glorious Mississippi, right up there at Corinth – conjuring myths that beatified soldiers and made them heroes, and canonized their glorious lost cause.

'And not a black man among 'em. Not in any of the tales the judge might be telling. Not in anything he has to say. Not down here,' Joe Howard's daddy had whispered, tucked in tight beside him on their shuck-stuffed mattress, on their tiny bed at night. 'Don't worry about it, though. You'll be the first. You'll be in the *history* book. I'm seeing straight to that.'

So when Joe Howard had signed up at eight o'clock on the morning of December 8, 1941, for the Army, both his daddy and the judge had each thought he knew why, because of coming glory on the one side and past glory on the other.

But they'd both of them been wrong.

The bus lumbered off asphalt onto gravel and groaned to a stop. Again, Joe Howard looked out of his window, and this time the twilight had formed itself into a sign: ALICEVILLE, ALABAMA. That's

when he remembered about Aliceville. There was a prisoner-of-war camp here, for Germans. He'd read about it, probably in *Stars and Stripes*. This was a good out-of-the-way place for something like that. Joe Howard pried down his window so that he could see the sign better and so that he could smell the earth and the trees. He squinted out but didn't see any trace of a camp. There were no low buildings, no barbed wire. Alabama wasn't like Italy, at least the Italy he knew, where every hill, every valley, every stretch of land had something man-made on it – a barn filled with straw, a stone house, a fence. Someplace that a German could easily hunker down behind, hide under. Until the time came to cry out:

Gotcha!

'You getting off?' he asked Manasseh.

Manasseh, carefully instructed by his mother, shook his young head.

'Not even to go to the bathroom?'

No, not even for that.

Joe Howard didn't feel much like getting off himself, but he had to call his daddy. He'd promised. Nowadays, these little interstate buses took forever to get where they were going. They stopped where they wanted to, stringing little half-known towns in Alabama and Mississippi together like so many beads on a rosary chain. With first the fury of war and now the slow discharge of its dismantlement causing so many detours, there was no telling when a person would actually get where he was going. Even the printed schedules had started summarizing arrival times as 'around' and 'about.' But 'around' and 'about' were not good enough for his daddy. He'd want to know more precisely than this when Joe Howard would actually get to Revere.

'You call me when you get close, now, son. Let me know, because I want to be there at the station to greet you, and the Church wants to be there – Reverend Petty's bringing the Mothers. And all the folks . . . all the folks . . .'

His daddy's voice had choked up then, an amazement to Joe

Howard, who was used to thinking of his daddy's love for him as a force, capable of overcoming all obstacles, not as an emotion that might weaken him, might make him cry. So he'd said, a little too quickly, 'Last stop in Alabama, I'll call. I promise.'

So now he got up, walked off that bus, and went in an old-fashioned screen door under a turned-off electric sign that proclaimed: DR PEPPER – IT'S GOOD FOR YOU. He hadn't had a Dr Pepper in a while, and he'd grown up on them, on them and on RC Colas and on the treat of a honey bun when he worked in the fields. He thought about ordering one now, but there were no colored people in the bus depot, and his was the only military uniform. He decided it might be better to make his telephone call, get it over with, get back on the bus.

The air in the depot smelled just like everything Southern he remembered. Even inside, no matter where you were, there was always a hint of the earth and the things that died on it. You could not get away from the scent of things, from the richness of them, if you had lived, like he had lived, so near to the ground. Joe Howard couldn't quite make out exactly what track it was he was pulling in – maybe a deer passing, maybe the dead-end of the summer's kudzu decaying on the vine – but if his daddy were here he'd be able to call it out, to tell what it was that was tickling at their minds. Willie Willie knew all about the earth and its ways.

The telephone booth was up flush against the door. There was nothing written on it, at least that he could see, saying NO COLOREDS. He had a friend in Atlanta who, in an uncertain situation like this, always pulled out his gun and put it up on the telephone so that everybody could see it. He said there was nothing like a loaded revolver to help clarify things. Joe Howard had laughed right along with everybody else when he'd heard this – a bitter laugh. The laugh had been bitter for them all. But Joe Howard had packed his pistol – a service .45 – in his rucksack, and his rucksack was out there somewhere deep within the belly of the bus.

Nobody seemed to be paying him much attention and maybe,

even if there was a sign someplace that he'd missed, they might cut him some slack. He still wore his Army uniform, after all, and the war had just recently finished.

The way to reach his daddy hadn't changed for the whole of Joe Howard's life. He dialed the operator, passed the Calhoun number on to her – 1353W – and answered her question that, no, the call was not collect. He had money and, at her drawled instruction, dropped twenty cents' worth of nickels into their slot. He shut the cabin door.

Static at both ends, in Aliceville and in Revere. The fault of worn-out wiring and county systems too poor to change it out. It had been like this even before the war. Plus everything in their part of Mississippi still operated on a party line. By the time ancient Miss Betty Jo Hillman at the post office got the call through to Calhoun Place, at least three other households would have picked up and be listening in, too.

The telephone at home was black, heavy, and screw-mounted to the wall. Old-fashioned. And, like a lot in that house, once it was bought, it was expected to last. The Calhouns did not like change, and that instrument, as Miss Mary Pickett called it, had been in their kitchen for as long as Joe Howard could remember, since before Miss Mary Pickett's daddy, Judge Calhoun, and even her mama, Miss Eulalie, had died. The call rang through, and somebody would eventually answer, that new girl, Dinetta, Miss Mary Pickett had written him about or one of the help-out maids, maybe even his daddy. If he was lucky, it would be his daddy to answer. Joe Howard didn't feel like talking to anybody else.

Instead, the voice he heard was Miss Mary Pickett Calhoun herself shouting, 'Hello? Hello? Joe Howard, is that you? Hello?'

'Miss Mary Pickett?'

'Joe Howard? Is that you?'

For just a moment the static eased and she could have been right beside him, strong-voiced as ever, shouting her crystal-clear words right into his ear.

'It's me, Miss Mary Pickett,' then, just in case. 'Joe Howard.'

He said this though she had already called him by name so she knew who he was. 'Is my daddy there?'

'Sweet Jesus! Let me run on back outside and see if I can find him. Oh, Joe Howard, he's so excited you're coming home. Are you all right? Did those Germans . . . Did they . . . Did they do anything to you? Did they *hurt* you? It'd just about tear your daddy up if they did.'

Germans. Did they do anything to him? Did they *hurt* him? He wanted to tell her, 'Well, of course they have. We have battled. We have been at war.' He wanted to shout these words at her, but he couldn't do that.

And it didn't matter, because Miss Mary Pickett hadn't waited for his answer. She'd dropped the receiver and it bounced, on its electric cord, against the cream-colored walls of her kitchen. Joe Howard could *see* it. He was so close now. He was almost there.

He heard Miss Mary Pickett's high heels tapping against the black and white tiles of the kitchen floor, heard the back screen door slamming, heard her 'Willie Willie! Willie Willie! Come on in here quick!'

She'd be down the veranda steps now and among the raised flowerbeds in her backyard. She'd run along the path of her prize rosebushes, then around the back of the cottage. Her calls to his father grew fainter and fainter in Joe Howard's ear.

He reached into his pocket for a cigarette but discovered he'd left his Camels, like his pistol, somewhere back deep in the bus. The jukebox had switched over from Harry James to Benny Goodman. He recognized the band, but he'd been gone a long time and didn't recognize the song they were playing. Still, he started humming along. Something caught his eye – a uniform. Not a soldier, though, a policeman. Maybe. Joe Howard wasn't sure. He'd looked away too quickly. Policemen were like white women. He'd learned a long time ago not to let his eye linger on them, to ease his gaze right on away.

But Joe Howard was tired tonight. His eyes and his thoughts didn't skip forward as quickly as they might have. They slowed

down. They moved back. Past the war, even, to the nights he'd walk the streets of Atlanta, going from Morehouse College to his job sweeping out the newsroom at *The Atlanta Journal* and then walk back from *The Atlanta Journal* to Morehouse College. After dark. Because after-dark work was the only kind of work he could find and still maintain the studies that Judge Calhoun was paying for and that his daddy was paying for and that Joe Howard was trying to keep up himself. The streetcars didn't run late and he didn't have a car and he didn't have any money. So he'd been forced onto the streets. Alone. Every night.

And every night he'd meet a policeman. Sometimes one, sometimes another. Maybe he'd seen them before; maybe they were strangers. It didn't matter. They all knew him. They all stopped him. They all said to him: 'Where you goin', nigger, to some whorehouse, out this late?' And he'd say, 'No.' And then, 'Sir.' It didn't matter what he said. Nobody was listening. This is just how they got around to saying what they really wanted to say, which was, 'Look here, nigger, you take off y'all's hat when you talk to a white man. Don't you know that, you ignorant coon?' He'd take it off. Then. Not until they told him to, but once they did tell him he'd do what they said. Every time. Because he had his daddy, his good daddy, who was back there in Revere, working hard and plotting and planning, so that his son could go on, get an education, get out of Mississippi, at least for a moment, and make something of himself in the wide world.

So Joe Howard would take off his hat to his daddy.

Once he had it off, the policeman would knock it into the dirt, sometimes with a billy club, sometimes with bare hands, and he'd be forced to bend down and pick it up from the street. He'd be let go then, with a curse and a 'nigger,' and he'd be free to continue on. They never really *hurt* him. They didn't even intend to *hurt* him. Joe Howard knew this, but as soon as his face was turned away from them, he'd start to cry. A man, a grown man, walking through the streets of a big city, crying like that, like a damn baby. Secret and shameful. But he couldn't help it. He hated those

big-baby tears, and he hated himself for letting those stupid-ass white men get to him and for crying those rivers of tears.

Now, waiting for his daddy, Joe Howard cleared his throat, once, then twice. He was less than thirty miles from home and he had made it and his daddy had made it. They were both alive. They would see each other soon, and that was a blessed thing and a great one. In Italy, he was sure he'd never make it home.

Sometimes, when he was out on patrol, especially in the last months before the war ended, Joe Howard had been scared to death his daddy might die before he got back. He knew soldiers who had lost their mothers, lost their fathers, lost their wives, lost their children, even, while they were gone fighting. You never thought of that, but it happened. In foxholes, behind trees, in the bodies of dead animals and dead men, in the cratered earth, would hide the terrifying thought that he would somehow get back to Revere and that his daddy would be gone, that he'd never see his daddy again.

But Willie Willie was alive. Joe Howard heard him now, running up the back steps to the telephone, coming in from where he had been working – keeping up the garden, fixing things that broke down, telling his tall tales and his stories, driving Miss Mary Pickett, who couldn't drive, all over town in the old Calhoun Daimler. His daddy took up the receiver, breathing hard and shouting into it, just like Miss Mary Pickett had done.

'That you, son? You okay?'

'I'm well, Daddy.' He put the telephone receiver between his ear and his shoulder and reached, again, for a Camel before he remembered, again, that he didn't have one. 'It's taking longer than I thought. They got us caught over here in Aliceville.'

'Aliceville?' Willie Willie was plainly astonished. 'Why, son, Aliceville's not on the way home.'

'Close, though. Thirty, thirty-five miles. Maybe less. At least that's what they say.'

His daddy said, 'But it's an *unknown* way. Don't get yourself in any trouble. You know how folks are over in Alabama.'

Joe Howard laughed. They both laughed. This was their joke, talking about how things were over in Alabama, as though they weren't the same way in Mississippi, as though Alabama was a whole world away.

'I should be there in an hour, maybe less.'

'Just get here quick. Everybody's excited. They got your picture up all over Revere – at least all over the colored parts of it. Miss Mary Pickett's got hers laid out, too, up there in her office. She told me so herself. You know that snapshot she took of the two of us – you in your uniform and me right beside you? Well, she kept hold to it.'

'She did?'

Joe Howard didn't know whether he was pleased to hear this or not. Mostly not, he decided, because he knew the picture. Him all fresh in his new uniform and his daddy in old overalls, and they were leaning right into each other, holding on to each other like each was the only thing living that the other had left, which was true enough. And they were grinning, both of them. Hard. Except *grinning* wasn't really the right word. *Radiant* was better. Willie Willie and his son, Joe Howard Wilson, radiating love. Willie Willie looking prouder even than he had looked when Joe Howard had graduated from Morehouse College and the judge had sent him over to Atlanta – his first time in Georgia – on the Greyhound to see that blessed event.

Miss Mary Pickett had taken the picture and kept it to herself for some reason. She'd been going through a phase back then, still talking about writing a new book after that one about the forest and the old Mottley sisters, even after all the mischief that first one had caused. She'd told everybody who would listen that she'd soon be putting out another, was working on it, typing away on her old Corona. But Willie Willie said most of the time she was just out with her little Brownie camera snapping pictures, snapshots of the Negroes – in the fields, in their stores, on their porches, out and about wherever Miss Mary Pickett could find them. Nobody knew why. Nobody knew the reason for a lot

of things she did, she just did them. And she could get away with doing whatever in the world she damn pleased, just like her daddy had before her, because their last name was Calhoun and that name had stood for something rock solid in Revere, Mississippi, for going on a hundred years.

'Proud of you,' his daddy said out of nowhere, in case the son somehow hadn't heard.

'Not much to be proud of,' said Joe Howard. He knew things that his daddy didn't. 'I only did what they told me to do.'

His daddy came right back on this. 'You did it good, though. Got yourself medalized.' Joe Howard grinned. His daddy was good at making up his own words. *'"Lieutenant Joe Howard Wilson of Revere was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for leading Negro troops to a decisive victory last April at the Battle of Castel Aghinolfi in Italy,"'* Willie Willie continued. 'That's what the *Afro-American* newspaper from down Jackson had to say about you. Miss Mary Pickett read it out to me and I told it out, word for word, to all the folks down at Stanley's Lookin' Good Barbershop myself. *"Lieutenant Wilson demonstrated exceptional bravery in helping to clear Italy from the Fascists and the Nazis when he did not and does not have the right to vote here in Mississippi, his natal state. Lieutenant Wilson is the son of Mr Willie Willie Wilson of Revere."* Course, they got my name wrong. Folks don't know us personally, they always do that.'

Willie Willie chuckled just like he had when Joe Howard was little and he'd told him story after story about the dark things that, for once, were the good and true things and that hid out in the magic woods and floated at night on the magic river. And, against all odds, somehow managed to triumph before *The End*.

So Joe Howard asked him, 'You been working out any more tales?' Shouting almost and hoping his daddy would shout, too, so he could hear him. The static was back again in force.

'Oh, a few. A few,' cried out Willie Willie. 'I'll tell you some once you get here. Real soon. But you watch out for yourself. Come straight home now! Watch out!'

This admonition was the last thing from his daddy that got through to Joe Howard distinctly before the crackling roiled up and took over the telephone lines.

'Daddy?'

Not wanting to hang up, listening hard, Joe Howard thought he heard something about ladybugs taking over the whole place, like usual. Ladybugs were a problem in Mississippi in deep autumn. They pestered on things and could be a complaint. Maybe Willie Willie said something about the winter coming on strong because the squirrels were taking over in the attic in his cottage. Getting ready. And maybe he said something about the cotton crop. Joe Howard thought he must surely have had something to say about the cotton crop. Everybody always had something to say about that. But he couldn't really hear now, so he couldn't be certain.

One last, 'I love you, Daddy' – probably useless, but called out just in case.

Joe Howard hung up the phone.

He walked out of the booth, looked around, and still nobody seemed to be paying him any attention. Nobody rushed him for being in the wrong not-for-coloreds place. His mind turned to Manasseh, waiting patiently on the bus, and the thought came that he might get him something, some candy. A few Sugar Daddys, maybe, or Red Hots. But he was still the only Negro inside the depot, and he decided it was probably better not to push his luck.

Joe Howard kept his eyes straight ahead as he climbed back onto the bus, but out of the corner of the left one he thought he saw somebody he knew. Somebody from Revere. He slowed his pace so he could study her without looking like he was doing it. He was almost sure she was a woman his daddy used to do odd jobs for once the cotton had been got in out at Magnolia Forest plantation and the household moved back into town. She had one child, a boy, about his age. Joe Howard recognized her because she was the only mama he'd ever known, even when he

was little, who dyed her hair with Mrs Field's blue rinse. It always reminded him of a little piece of clear sky hovering over the cloud of her white face. Her name was Miss Anna Dale Buchanan, if he wasn't mistaken. But Joe Howard thought he *could* be mistaken. She was bent over a book, didn't see him. Her hair wasn't as bright as he remembered it, either. And she was a white woman. Joe Howard decided it was better not to speak.

Manasseh was still behind the sign that read COLORED ONLY, still behind the makeshift separating curtain, still there in his seat, still clutching his lard can, still wearing the pinned-on paper sign that gave him a name and a place in this world. He looked relieved when he saw Joe Howard, and the biblical solemnity of his face broke up in a smile.

Joe Howard smiled back.

'You know, I been out to Macon,' he said, settling into his seat once again. 'Lots of times. It's a nice place. You gonna like it. My daddy used to take me over there, to the forest. The Magnolia Forest – ever heard about that? It can be dead of winter everyplace else still in Mississippi, there's always gonna be at least some little speck of green. Grass peeking up through the snow in January. Full-bloomed bushes hiding out behind the skeletons of old oak and pecan trees. Christmas, and my daddy would take me out there, would point to the highest gray branch in the tree and say, "See that, son? That's mistletoe. Breathe on it. Sigh on it. Let it kiss you." You know what, Manasseh? I'd do just that. Blow a soft breath straight up and the mistletoe would come down to kiss it. It would float against my cheek and kiss me. Right there in Macon – that's what would happen.'

But Manasseh did not look convinced.

'And ladybugs. Everywhere you look, ladybugs. Did you know there's magic in a ladybug? One touches you – why, son, it's good luck.'

This, at last, was something Manasseh had heard before and remembered. He nodded. He smiled.

The bus started filling up again. Joe Howard saw the twin boys

from before. He waved at them because it was safe to wave at white children, especially little boys. They looked at him shyly. One waved back. Their mother was still laughing with the driver but with a little less animation. Joe Howard wondered when the two of them would stop their flirting so the bus could get going again. He was looking down at his Longines, a little irritated, when he heard the driver say, 'Hey, well now. It took you long enough to get them. How all y'all doing?'

From the front of the bus there came a faint rustle. A movement and a shifting that seemed purposed to draw everyone's curious attention.

White men got on. There were a lot of them: five or six, from what Joe Howard could tell, but he couldn't see much from the back of the bus. Most of them were still in the well, and the courier heaved slightly under their weight. Manasseh perked up, curious now, too. He stopped chewing on his dead gum.

The first man was in a uniform Joe Howard knew was not military, but the man seemed to know the driver, to be on good terms with him. The two of them chuckled together for a moment. The driver introduced him to the mother of the twins. She said something and the uniformed man pointed to the other men behind him. The woman nodded as the men finished their climb and started down the aisle.

It was then that Joe Howard realized that the first of them was some part of the law. If not exactly a policeman, then close. Joe Howard started paying attention. The men he'd led into the bus and were now passing right through the white section and coming on into COLORED ONLY were prisoners. There were red *PW*s on their belts. When one of them turned around to whisper something to the man behind him, something that caused both of them to smile, Joe Howard saw a big *P* and a big *W* stenciled large as life on the back of his cotton-fleck shirt. What looked to be a deputy brought up the rear.

Germans, thought Joe Howard. *Prisoners of war.* Maybe about to go home, just like he was going home. Joe Howard settled

back into his uncomfortable seat. He didn't see how these men had a thing in the world to do with him.

Until they stopped. Until he heard the guard say, 'You coloreds get on up. Give over these places to these here men.'

All around him Joe heard the slow shuffle of people gathering their things to move. A woman groaned to her feet behind him; across the way, an old black man reached for his pine cane. Even Manasseh, who had not budged even to go to the bathroom, started gathering his lard bucket together. Started shuffling. Started to obey.

Joe Howard could not believe it. *He could not believe it.*

'You want us to get up and give our places – that we paid for – to some German prisoners?'

The guard's face flared into a mottled map of angry affirmation. Could this be a black man talking back to *him*?

Yes, he damned well did want that. 'What I want,' he said, talking slow now, and loud, 'is for you niggers to get up and give these here places over to white men.'

When he said them, the words sounded as reasonable and as inevitable as the fact the sun would rise again in the east the next day. It was just simply the way things were, the way they had always been, the way they were always going to be.

L.C. calling out, 'Come on, Joe Howard! Catch up! Catch up!'

Joe Howard close behind him now. Running straight into the night forest.

'I'm not getting up,' he said, as he actually jumped to his feet and stood there, blocking the way with his uniform. 'And nobody else back here is getting up, either. Not for some Nazis.'

The other deputy came up from behind fast. He stared at Joe Howard, at his uniform, at his bars and his medals.

'Well, look-a-hear, Leroy,' he began, 'Maybe . . .'

Compromise was in his voice. But the man called Leroy was having none of it.

'I said move aside here, nigger. Give these white men your place.'

'And I said that I'm not moving, and neither is anybody else.'

Each word clear and distinct, and with the feel of his friend L.C.'s blood fresh on him again, the warm, iron smell of it, the sticky drained life. Joe Howard felt those always-near tears well up in him, threatening his eyes, threatening him, just like they had so long ago on the streets of Atlanta and just like they always would. It was the tears that told him that the war – his part in it, the long horror of it – hadn't changed one thing.

By now all the white folks had turned around and they were looking, too. Joe Howard saw the one he thought he knew, Miss Anna Dale. It *was* her. A prim lady in a lace collar, in a polka-dot dress, in a green hat with lilacs blooming on it. With a polished gold star pinned to her ample bosom. He saw all of that now. She stared at him with dark, deep eyes. Joe Howard heard her whisper, 'Oh, dear.'

Be careful!

Words, using his daddy's voice, slipped into his mind.

'Are you safe, son? Come on home safe!'

But Joe Howard had no use for those words. He closed his eyes. They disappeared.

He found his own words. 'Aren't these Germans? Aren't these *Nazis*?'

And even one of the Germans – light of hair, light of eye and skin, a stranger in this place – seemed anxious to help.

'It's okay. We can stand.' His words accented but still clear.

'You'll shut up if you know what's good for you, you lousy Kraut,' shouted Leroy. The German shut up.

And Joe Howard thought, clearly, distinctly: *Why the hell am I doing this?*

Manasseh, who in his short life had only left Mississippi to journey over into Alabama, knew what was coming next. He didn't need his mama to tell him. He shifted in his seat. Joe Howard had been nice to him. Manasseh *wanted* to get up. Joe Howard had to lay a heavy hand on his shoulder to keep him down. Things were just so much like always. The little colored

boy getting up automatically, and the little white boys, ahead, just as automatically turning back to see what was going on but staying put.

Manasseh moved again, and Joe Howard looked down at him and he said – because he'd promised the boy's mama that he'd watch out for him – 'Everything's going to be all right. You'll see. Things are going to be different now. We just fought a war. *We* fought it, too – and that means nobody anymore's got the right to take our paid-for seats from us.'

He turned slightly and let his battle-sharpened gaze sweep on over the other Negroes – some already on their feet – on past them to the whites at the front where the woman had clustered her children close beside her. And where the bus driver had decided just what needed doing next.

He looked over at the mother of the twins, puffed up his chest, started back. Outside, the electric Dr Pepper sign still twinkled. Its brilliance flashed over the little depot and illuminated it with the purity of the Bethlehem star. But not all the lights on it worked, and Joe Howard heard the sizzle and crackle of currents trying to connect. He realized that he still was holding on to Manasseh, holding on to him too tightly. He might be hurting the boy. He relaxed his hand.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered. Manasseh from Revelations in the Bible nodded, but with that white bus driver lumbering back like thunder, he was too scared to look up at Joe Howard now.

The guard named Leroy said, 'You'll do what I say, boy . . .' creating a dangerous situation.

The driver drew close. His name, Johnny Ray Dean, was scripted in bright blue thread on his gray uniform. 'What's all this? I don't want no confusion.' His words were drawn out in a thick Alabama hill-country drawl and there was a glint in his eye that said he was aware of and happy that he had the redheaded woman's full attention once again. Happy that such a really pretty woman would see how good he was at solving nigger problems.

'There *is* no confusion,' said Leroy. 'This here boy's just got to let folks do what they been told to do.'

Joe Howard thought, *If this cracker calls me nigger one more time, I'm going to kill him. Kill him outright.*

Joe Howard said, 'And I have told this fucking white man I am not getting up out of my seat for some prisoner, for some goddamn German. For some goddamn fucking Nazi.'

He'd cussed now. Around him, all the old women, both colored and white, gasped.

Joe Howard said, 'I've had . . . My friends . . . The war . . .'

But what friends were left? They were all dead now. And these people – could they care about the war and what had happened to him there?

Around Joe Howard, the whole bus grew silent as a grave and the driver looked at him for a long moment. Eyes narrowed, fists bunched. Then he smiled. He opened up his mouth and he said, 'Hold on there, I don't want no trouble. There's another bus due in. It cleared out of Birmingham right after we left Tuscaloosa, a bare couple hours behind us. Why don't I see if I can get you and these here prisoners on that one, Leroy? Avoid all this confusion.' He said this even though the white part of the bus was half empty. But, of course, they would not put these German prisoners up there. Not with the white women. Not with the white children.

Johnny Ray Dean leaned in and whispered something to the guard, a few quick words that Joe Howard could not hear, and then added, 'I'll climb on down. Make the call myself.'

'Yeah, Leroy,' said the young deputy. 'Let him do that.'

Leroy paused over this, considered, though Joe Howard could tell this was only a ruse and that his mind was already made up.

Johnny Ray said, 'There's other ways to handle this; let this boy be for now. Just don't give me no more ruckus. GIs all coming home and they want everything they can get their hands on. I get trouble on this bus – somebody might think to give my route to one of them.'

Again, Leroy appeared to cogitate. 'Well, sir, you sure there's another bus coming?' Whatever the driver had whispered privately seemed to have calmed him down, made him stand tall again, at least for the moment. Still, there was face-saving to do.

'Oh, I'm sure,' said the driver. 'There be plenty of ways to skin a coon.'

The white men – all of them: guards, prisoners, and the driver – trooped to the front of the bus, the Americans whispering, the Germans behind them. The German who had spoken up earlier turned back. He caught Joe Howard's gaze and then quickly looked away. Joe Howard watched as all of them got off the bus. Johnny Ray climbed down with them. The blacks still had their seats, but Joe Howard felt like he always felt when he'd come out of a battle – that same strange alchemic mixture of relief and shame.

'Daddy wouldn't want me cussing,' he said out loud. His daddy wouldn't want him talking back to white men with guns, either, but there was no helping that now.

He made up his mind he was going to apologize to Manasseh; maybe even to some of the ladies, especially to that one who wore the gold star that told the world she had a son who'd been killed in the war. Maybe she might understand.

'Miss Anna Dale,' he whispered her name. Sure of it now.

Joe Howard sat back down again. He touched his face and his shirt and his arms and his hands, just as he'd done when he'd wakened from his nightmare, and found himself on this bus going home. He tried, but he could no longer see his face in the window. It had grown too dark for that.

Johnny Ray Dean climbed back on, the courier shifting under his weight, and the whole thing was over. He started up the engine, pulled out onto the asphalt road, but if he had thought he could win his maiden's admiration by swaggering back and taking control of things, he'd been much mistaken. He tried talking to her, and then after a silence tried again, but even Joe Howard could see she was no longer paying attention. She sat hugging

her children. Except for the flame of a match and the burning coal of a cigarette being smoked farther up, the bus rolled on, silent and dark.

It eased on down a road free of traffic, ambling along until it finally crossed the state line. Manasseh hadn't said a word since he'd first seen the Germans. Now Joe Howard remembered something – another tale, another legend from his daddy – and he bent close so that he could whisper it into the child's ear and comfort him with it.

'You see that sign – see how it says JEFFERSON-LEE COUNTY WELCOMES YOU? All white on green and pretty? And see the one stuck up behind it, WELCOME TO MISSISSIPPI? These two painted boards, coming one right after the other, mean you enter the county before you enter the state. Twenty feet between them, and those twenty feet are magic – because nothing owns it. Not Alabama. Not Mississippi. It's a special place. Free. That's what my daddy always said to me. And anything can happen on this magic land. My daddy told me if you make a wish here . . . If you make a quick wish here, why, the mistletoe might find you . . .'

It was in that place of magic that the Bonnie Blue Line interstate courier bus shuddered to an unscheduled stop. From his place in the back of it, Joe Howard saw Johnny Ray Dean crane his head to look at him and then slowly, slowly crank the bus door, opening it onto this special make-a-wish place.

Where Joe Howard heard voices. Where he saw men.

Where he blew his breath into heaven and let mistletoe float down from the sky to kiss him one last time upon the cheek.