we can't run away from here

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by Robert Martin Sorensen

$2.00

WE CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM HERE

by

Robert Marion Seton

The mangled, tortured, hardly recognizable corpse in a house besieged by bigotry and racial hatred is that of a young Negro who has dared to offend the Ku Klux Klan in the South by protesting against segregation . . . and, in the house, his two friends, in agonizing suspense, await their own doom. . . .

WE CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM HERE is a symbolic novel that penetrates to the heart of the racial strife convulsing the South. Dramatic, searingly realistic, yet without bitterness, it exposes the fears as well as the courageous resolution of the young Negro fighting for true democracy in his native land.

But WE CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM HERE does more than that. This novel of introspection intends to

(*Continued on back flap*)

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We Can't Run Away From Here

A NOVEL BY

ROBERT MARTIN SCREEN

VANTAGE PRESS NEW YORK

WASHINGTON CHICAGO HOLLYWOOD

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LABADIE
COLLECTION

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For Mama, Who Made It Possible

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Acknowledgment

To Neil Sokolowski, For His Constructive Criticisms

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This is a work of fiction, and any incidents referring to actual places and events, or people living and dead, are purely coincidental.

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We Can't Run

Away From Here

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I

This is like the war my father told me about. Sometimes it would be quiet on the front, I remember him saying, and then suddenly it would explode heavily in great bombardments and blood was spilled and lives were lost. And then it was quiet again. But the wounds were always there.

We have been in John's house since dusk. We thought it best to be together. We started out that way. But we did not start out in war. We started out in peace—very humbly—hoping that there would be some respect for the law of our land when it said we could go to their schools—hoping that our deep and sincere yearning for knowledge would take precedence over the mixture of our blood and the color of our skin. But we were wrong about that, and we must not brood over it now.

We are surrounded here. Already a stone has splintered through the front window with a note attached to it, *"You smart niggers won't get away!"* There is little we can do besides wait. But we can't run away from here. We cannot flee from what is just and what is right. We cannot flee from what God intended us to have. We believe in these things because we believe in God, and because we believe in the great men before us who saw the truth in these principles and the right in them and wrote them into our Constitution.

They are getting stronger. They seem to be coming from every direction. And there are just three of us—John, Emmett, and myself, Edward Just. There were four of us earlier. John's Aunt Lucy was here. But she has abandoned us, as all of our people did, because we would not "stay in our places." I do not blame Aunt Lucy. Nor my people. It is not

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their fault. They have lived so long in a mythical world, they cannot see another. All their lives they have served this land and its god. They have washed his clothes and cooked his food and cared for his children. In turn, they have been cared for and repaid in a way they have accepted—a Saturday off when they could go into town, and a Sunday for their big church meetings. They have accepted this way of life because they are black. And in this land, black is a symbol of repression. Even in the larger towns where my people have gone to school there is not much difference. For them we should all cry. They have gone to the East and to the North to be educated, many of them, and they have come back and resigned themselves to a complacency which, to them, is a high existence. They have settled for their homes and cars and their barrooms and dance halls. This is their disillusioned success. They want nothing more. To them, and to my people who work in the earth, we are martyrs. We are so because we have upset their existence. We have attempted to surge forth with a principle which to them is new and absurd—the equal rights of men. Down here my people are not prepared for this. They are not prepared because they have accepted the decadence bestowed on them, the secondhandedness, the offensiveness which parallels the word "black." They are not prepared, because they are afraid. They do not want to oppose the hand that feeds them. I understand this feeling very well. It is not that my people could not exist without this hand. Yet they believe this. But there is something more—something strange and unpronounced. It is a love that binds them this way—a thing which neither would admit. I know this love, for I have seen it. I have seen it in their faces when their crops came up full. I have seen it in their hearts when they trusted their children with my people, and their homes and their lives. For how can there be trust without a basis of love? When there is hate there is always fear—and mistrusting and misjudging. It has never been this way between the two down here. And on a lower level, I have seen it in the checker games at the country stores, at gather-

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ings on the porches of shabby homes. I have heard him say "Nigger," and say it again, and mean it the same as my people mean it when they say it so often to each other. And I have seen it in their torment, in their bitter confusion, when young men like John and Emmett and myself awaken from this complacency and attempt to find our equality. Suddenly they are stirred by a force. It is something wrong and evil and they know it. But they are forced into ties with this force because they cannot fight it. They cannot be set aside and lose their identities. They cannot be called "Nigger-lovers," and they would have to leave this land or stay and fight a losing battle. They would not want that, for this land is their life and they lost it once before. So they join the forces of violence. They hunt my people down and persecute them and beat them and lynch them. They cover the earth with the blood of my people. But they do not mean what they do, I am sure. It is this evil force. If they did mean it they would not cover their faces. They would not hide their guilt when faced with accusations. And in this land, where the power is theirs, they do not have to hide. When it is all over, the restlessness must be unbearable. The suffering inside them! I can imagine such suffering. Regardless of our races, we are all human. There is one thing common to all of us—we have to live with ourselves.

I cannot settle John. He moves about unquietly, overwrought with fear. He breathes deeply and very hard, and he emits sounds from his throat which are strange and full of terror. He tries hard not to cry. He thinks himself a man. I can feel the agony which rages in his mind, and I can understand it. It isn't easy for John. I know him well. He does not want to die, and he is not convinced that what we have done is right. He turns to me and he trembles.

"What are they going to do?"

I look at him. "I do not know," say I.

John is not satisfied with this. He turns to me in anger, as though I were his enemy. "You don't know!" he says. "What

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do you mean—you don't know? You started this. You got us into all this—and you don't know!"

"Please, John. . . ."

I cannot stop him. He is so full of his anger and his fear that he is crying now.

"You don't care about us. All you care about is yourself. You had to prove something to yourself. That's why you made us come along with you today. You had to prove to yourself that just because you aren't as black as we—you *are* colored." He holds his arms up against mine. "Well, didn't you? Why don't you say it's true? You *know* it's true!"

I do not answer John, for I know he does not mean this. He is not himself. But my silence only infuriates him more. I can feel a burning inside him. Before I am able to come back with an answer, he raises his hand and swings in my direction. The blow lands solidly on my mouth, and my lips begin to bleed slowly. John looks at me with a foreign stare. He throws his head on the table and begins to cry with greater pain. His words are not strange to me.

"I don't want to die," he cries. "I don't want to die!"

I rest my hand on his head.

"None of us wants to die, John," I say, "but we must believe in what we have done."

John jerks his head from under my hand.

"What for?" he cries. "What's the good of believing in anything if you're dead? Nobody's going to know what we've done anyhow—*nobody!*"

"That's where you're wrong, John," I say.

"Then who? You tell me then—who?"

"They will."

He pauses for a long moment as these words find their way inside him. But nothing can fasten him securely, and he turns to Emmett now.

"Emmett!" He raps him on the shoulder. "Tell me I'm right, Emmett. Tell me we shouldn't've gone there today. Tell me we ought to run out there and ask them to leave us alone—that we won't go back again."

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Emmett is silent.

"Answer me, Emmett! Answer me!"

Emmett is quiet, still.

John says, "Then why are you crying, Emmett? Why are you crying?"

Emmett answers very softly, "Because I am afraid."

John's face widens with content. "Then come with me, Emmett. It still isn't too late. We can tell them . . ."

Emmett trembles. "No," he says.

John is broken by this. "I thought you were afraid."

"I am," Emmett repeats.

"Then why won't you come with me?"

Emmett is slow in answering. "Because there is no substitute for right," he says.

A feeling of great loss sweeps through John. He reaches out at Emmett, trying to come back with words. But he is so alone. He cannot find his words, because he is not strong enough, because no words wise enough could replace the principle we lay before him. He finds the chair again. He sits down quietly and covers his head on the table. He is throbbing. He is wounded by a feeling which absorbs him. But he is not aware of it in full, because life has meant very little to John besides living. He is typical of so many of my people. I try to whisper something into his ears.

"We are all afraid, John," say I.

His eyes are very full. "You?"

"Yes. I, too."

John's lips tremble. He cannot put his lips together for the words he wants. Then he says loudly, "Then why don't you act like it? Why do you just sit there—looking the way you do? . . ." He cannot finish. He does not fully understand himself.

I say, "And would it help any if I cried, John?"

He does not answer me.

"No," I say to him. "It's just that we all react to fear differently. You—violently; Emmett here—quietly; and I—hardly at all. Yes, John. I am just as afraid of dying as you

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are. But I have learned we have something to die for—a principle. And as long as this principle lives—as long as they remember it—it will not matter whether we live now or whether we ever lived at all."

John is gripped with a sudden horror. He makes me believe that he has not heard one word I have said to him. He stands up from the table. His chair falls to the floor. He stumbles over to the center of the room and looks toward the front. His veins begin to grow and his fists are clenched. He shouts in a wild voice, "I hate you—dirty white trash! I hate you! Do you hear me—*hate* you!"

"John!"

Another stone crashes a window—the same as before. Soon there will not be much left of it, and that is not good for us.

John runs over to our table and falls to the floor on his knees. He is frightened to coldness. I hold his head against my leg and try to still his shaking.

"John . . ." Emmett's voice comes. "You don't mean what you say. You don't hate them, John. Edward and I are afraid, and we don't hate them. They are a mob, John—angry and forced. They came—most of them—against their wills. They came because they didn't want to be left out—because they had to live on this land again. There are women and children out there, John. Do you hate them, too? And—and you must remember, John, all of a sudden we set about to change their lives—to take away the glory that they have known so long. What would you do, John, if someone took away your glory? Would you—think before you rebelled?" Emmett touches John. "Do you hear me, John?"

But John is wracked with tremors. He keeps his head on my leg and he sobs.

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II

We have quieted John down some now. But he is still aching. His body quivers as though in a chill. We get a blanket from John's bed and wrap it around his shoulders. It is better for him.

We cannot tell what they will do. I have no other thought but that they are just here to frighten us. That is the way it has been done in the past, I have heard. We have no reason to believe differently.

They are all hooded and very quiet, as though in a meeting or at some secret ceremony of theirs. They are gathered around a tall man in front of them who talks with his hands. He seems to be their leader. I look at Emmett and Emmett looks at me. We are both wondering if they are planning a strategy to frighten us. Yes. I make myself believe this. They *want* us to be afraid. They do not want our blood. They just don't want us to go back to the school again.

Emmett speaks. "It is strange to me, Edward, that their confusion is my confusion. I suppose that is why I don't hate them."

"How do you mean, Emmett?" I say.

Emmett says, "Some of them will go to church on Sunday —most of them, in fact. There will be nothing unreal about it, Edward. It will be just as sincere as our going will—as though tonight had never happened."

I nod. "Yes, Emmett," I say softly. "That is the confusing thing about the South to me. How they practice Christianity and segregation at the same time."

Emmett asks, "Do you think they are aware of any difference?"

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"No, Emmett," I say. "I don't. Segregation to them is a custom—a tradition—a way of life. It has no other implication. It has no relation even to the practice of Christianity."

Emmett thinks very hard. He has always been this way. He says, "Then at school today, why didn't they bother us? Why didn't they act then as they are acting now?"

"That is where our thinking is always wrong, Emmett," I say. "We always think that because they are a majority, and we are a minority, they are always willing and anxious to lose blood to subdue us. This is not true, Emmett. They were just as afraid of us today as we are afraid of them."

Emmett smiles. This is the first smile I have seen all night. "You are right," Emmett says. "What you say is so simple, so clear and logical—and yet we never think of it that way."

"But that is just a thought, Emmett," I say. "I am not saying it is the only reason they did not threaten us. You must realize that we are older than they. I am nineteen, and you and John are eighteen. We are older because we have worked the land all our lives. But for what we have done today, perhaps, too, they think us a bit wiser than the rest—a different kind of Negro."

Emmett says, "I don't like to think of it in terms of their wanting to threaten us all the time, Edward. The students there—we know them. We have walked these country roads with them. We have picked berries together. We have fished on the river and in the creeks as one, and we swam in its muddy waters naked, side by side. It is not easy for them to strike up against us at once. If we were in a larger town—just a town—it would be different, I know. But there are no social barriers here. There is no fear of miscegenation, I believe their greatest fear. These people are innocent of all this."

"You are right, Emmett," say I. "You are right."

We are quiet for a moment. Emmett looks at me with calculating eyes, which I feel even in the darkness. He says, "You like the South, don't you, Edward?"

"Yes, Emmett. I like it."

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"You would stay, even after this?"

"Yes," I say to him, "even after this."

Emmett's eyes fall away from me. He speaks very humbly. "And I would not. I would not because I am—I am too much for myself, I suppose, or probably I feel that—that I could help my race if I were in a better position. Yes, that is it."

Emmett holds his head. He says again, "Oh, I don't know, Edward. I seem to be so clear in so many things. Yet there is so much about myself that causes me to worry. I am just not as strong as you."

"You *are* strong, Emmett," I say. "You are just as you say —not clear about yourself."

"Then tell me, Edward," Emmett says, "why wouldn't you run?"

"Because this is our land," I say. "Our fathers and their fathers before them helped to build this land and make it rich. *They* would not want us to run. They would not want us to run, because in this land is the fullness of their souls. Their blood and their sweat are here—their black spirits, digging beneath the soil, and raising a carpet from which greenness comes—and life. Their humbleness is here—their weaknesses and strengths—their victories and defeats—their cries for freedom. They would want us to hear these cries, and they would want us to amend for them, not by hatred or violence, but by growing stronger than they. And here, too, are our father's masters. They are a part of this land, just as much as we. But they are misinformed, for they think all the land is theirs. They are not aware of us—of our need for this land—of our role in it. They have not been told that love is born in building land, as our fathers, living in bondage, could not express their love. But we must express it for them. We must make them aware. We cannot run away."

Emmett looks at me hard. "You are analytical, Edward. You see things with a vision—much clearer than I."

I touch Emmett's shoulder. "Look at me, Emmett," I say. "Look at me. I have known you a long time, and I know you are just as wise as anyone I have ever known. Now tell

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me the truth. Most of what I said has been in your mind before, hasn't it?"

"Yes," says Emmett, "but you say it so well it sounds new again."

"That is because you are at war with yourself, Emmett—trying to clear yourself."

"And you, Edward," Emmett says, "how did *you* clear yourself?"

"It was my father," I say to Emmett. "He helped me to clear myself. He was not like your father and John's father, who worked on this land and were consumed by it. He fled away from here. He rebuilt himself and became a doctor and never returned again. Through him I could see how our people could rise up from bondage—how years before us there would have been those to do what we are doing now. If only they could have seen my father, there would have been a turning inside them, a yearning that would have set them off, a realization of their eminence. But my father never looked back. I have always denounced him for his selfishness."

"You didn't hate him, Edward?"

"No, I didn't," say I. "I think I never could have—not since I don't hate the others. You see, Emmett, he belonged to another group—not to our people in the earth, nor our people living under their disillusioned successes. He was from the running class. All his life he ran and he never found a stop. We are black, Emmett. We are black-black and white-black and yellow-black and brown-black. But we are still black. From this we can never hide. And wherever we go, whatever we do, for better or worse, we will never be unconscious of this until generations upon generations have passed. My father found this out, I am sure, before he was killed in the war. He was listed—not as a lieutenant, Emmett, but as a *Negro* lieutenant."

Emmett is quiet for a moment, and now I feel him smiling. His hand touches my arm and his voice comes with fulfill-

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ment. He says, "It's a good feeling, Edward, to be proud of oneself."

"Yes, Emmett," I say. "It's a good feeling."

It grows darker every moment. The candle which we keep on the floor beside us is almost out. And there is not another. We would not want it to go out before they leave. We would fall and stumble about John's house and make noises and give ourselves away when we moved, and we have to be prepared to move. They could sneak up quickly on us from the back, or from the sides or front, and we would not know what had hit us. They could light explosives and throw torches or more stones, and we would trample over each other in an attempt to escape. We expect the worse to happen. We pray that nothing does.

Their meeting in secrecy has ended. Their white garments make them easy to see in the dark. They are angry and loud and wild. They are a mob once more. All the planning has ended. They have a new war which they are about to wage against us.

Their voices come up in a wild, angry bellow: "Hang them! Hang them!"

John jerks himself up with sudden fear. "Edward!" John says. "Listen!" His mouth is hanging, and his eyes are surging forth with a glitter that shows in the darkness.

"What, John?" I say. I am hoping with vain hope that their voices will not come again. But this is foolish of me. Their voices come again, louder this time, stronger, and with greater anger. "Hang them! Hang them!"

John is wild with rage. "We've *got* to get out of here. They'll kill us!"

"No, John," says Emmett. "This could be a trick. We must stay here. If we run we have no place to go. At least here we could put up a small defense."

But John does not listen. He tears away from us like a wild boar. He is heading for the back.

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"Stop him!" Emmett screams.

The darkness is not an obstacle any more. Nothing is an obstacle. And there is no stopping me when my trousers are torn and my flesh is opened by a nail which hangs from the bed I brush by.

John is panic-stricken and cannot open the door. I reach him just in time.

"Stop, John," I say, and I hold on to his neck and his arm and try to pull him away. But his strength is like that of a madman as he hurls me over his back and against the wall. I am now his enemy. His hands grasp my neck and his thumbs press into my throat. I gasp. I cannot breathe. The room goes around in the darkness.

My eyes are open and the room is the same. I cannot account for time. I feel a hand against my forehead. The hand begins to lift my head. And then a voice. "Are you all right, Edward?"

"Emmett . . ."

Emmett starts to help me to my feet. I look down and see John's body beside me, sprawled against the floor. I look at Emmett.

"I had to hit him," says Emmett. "He was—he was mad. He might have killed you."

"Will he—will he be all right?"

"Yes," says Emmett. "John is too strong to hurt."

I can still feel the pain in my throat from John's hands. It is hard to believe that I came so near to death from one of us. But that is war, too, my father wrote. Even though he was not on the front himself, he learned from the men he treated how blood was spilled in vain.

Outside the voices come up again, in great shouts of unrest. They roar at intervals, a sound that has no meaning to us. In between the roar, we hear the sound of a whip, and then the angry roar again, louder than before. We are more frightened now than we have ever been. We look out. They have hung us in effigy from a tree. They have formed a file,

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and they come up in threes and stand behind each of us with a whip; and when they get the great roar of approval, they slash across our bodies. They whip until all our clothing is severed from our bodies in small strips. They throw stones at us. They take us down from the tree and walk over us. They cut up our faces. They cut off our arms and legs and chop them into small pieces and scatter them about. We cannot look any longer. We grow weak inside.

Emmett goes over and sits at the table now. He lowers his head on the back of his hands. I follow Emmett quietly. But I will not say anything to him. This is not a time for talking. Emmett feels my presence. He looks up.

He says: "I'm not crying, Edward. Even if I did, it wouldn't be for myself."

I smile. I do not answer. I look over at John, whom we have placed on the bed now. He is not unconscious, but he is breathing very softly.

Our window crashes again. They have hurled something inside. It leaps to the air and about the room like a chicken in a dying contortion. It is headless, and blood splatters everywhere. We get a closer look at the small animal and we see it is black and white, but the white is coming off. Emmett holds my arm.

"Edward! It's a cat—!" He almost loses his breath. Then he says, "It's a black cat, Edward, and it's been painted with white!"

The animal leaps no more. Slowly, we watch it die. I pick it up from the floor and the blood flows onto my chest and down my leg. I sit down with it. A note is tied to its tail. The note reads: *"Last of the white niggers."* I give the note to Emmett, and he reads it and crushes it in his palms.

I hold the cat across my leg and rub the paint from its body. I am crying now.

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III

Our candle is gone. Suddenly I am besieged with a feeling that causes the bottom to fall from my stomach—the feeling that one gets when, in a dream, he climbs to the top of a hill, and then falls down from it into some never-ending space. But I must take hold of myself. I am the strongest of the three, and I know this. If I were to lose control now, everything will have been done in vain.

We must not lose our silence. Silence is all that we have. It is our greatest strength. For as long as we are silent, as long as we are composed, they will not strike in violence. Even though they are a mob, they, too, must have a cause. We cannot give them one. The moment we run, the moment we lose control, they would know we did not believe in our actions, had no faith in them, and they would attack us . . . perhaps. But now they do not know, and our silence has them worried. I have thought many times that I would go out and surrender myself and try to explain myself to them. But I have decided against it. What defense could I offer for what is right and what is true? Right is right and truth is truth, they are the sublime. I am too meager to defend them. What right have they to protest them?

I often think of men in war and the shapes and forms their minds take when they are on the front. They must live a lifetime, I am sure, rebuilding their childhood into manhood, and attaining for themselves a greatness which would have never been possible were they so preoccupied with the present. It is clean, this greatness. And it is filled with glory. This is so because it is attained on a foundation of kindness and small necessities which come back into their lives. They

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learn to humble themselves before God, to beg for forgiveness, and to forgive. They are restored with love and selflessness. And in their building they are concerned with a purpose, and not with a common pride. It is the same with us here. How clear the future seems to me! I visualize no obstacles. There I stand atop a mountain, looking into the valley of my people. My voice goes out to them and they raise themselves from their helplessness and climb the mountain alone. But I would not shout at them or preach to them or even denounce their masters. I would magnify their wants and glorify their needs and reveal to them their essence. I would destroy their self-pity through admiration, and I would erase their banal acceptance of themselves by identifying them with their own history. How fine my writing would have to be! How straight and clear and prudent! For I would write about all that is familiar and I would give it meaning. I would make it profound with all that is true and right. And I would make it abundant. This is the art of what I would want. This is the all of it. And I would fail only if I attempted to judge. I shall never attempt to judge.

There is something strong we have on our front—stronger than in war. We cling only to principle and to right, for we know they will live longer than any defense. We have faith in these things because we have faith in people, and time will help the people. There are no allies behind us to strike back at our enemy and scatter them. There are no planes above that will bury them in the soil. There is no planned strategy that will chase them away from us. We want our enemy to come, to expose themselves to our find. And when they are here, they will no longer be our enemy. We will be one and together. We will be an end that can never face defeat or oppose each other again. And this is the difference from war. Wars are made too much of means, as the ends are never in sight. For if this were so, war would cease to end, or never begin at all.

It is good to hear John's breathing. But even so, it sounds too loud to us, now that they are quiet. They must never

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learn that there is one of us here like John. It would surely spell our end. Emmett's breathing is hard. He is fighting desperately for control of himself, and his hand reaches mine. I close my hand over his.

"What is it, Emmett?" I say. "Emmett, are you well?"

His voice is heavy. "Let me hold onto your arm, Edward," he cries. "Let me be as strong as you are." His body is quivering and cold, and he grips my arm so tightly that I cannot loosen him.

"I am here, Emmett," I say. "I will not leave you."

I watch his silent convulsion. I am unable to help him. I can only hope that he will not get worse. I reach for his head with my free hand and rest it on my chest and try to still his shaking. I am wet from his crying and his perspiration. His voice cries in a mumble, "Hold on to me closely, Edward. Don't let me run away. I am not strong enough that I can believe and not run from death. I am worse than John, Edward, and I know it. John does not believe—but I do." He is more desperate now. "Help me, Edward. Help me!"

My face falls. "It is not your fault, Emmett," I say. "If we had made ourselves, we would all be as strong as we wanted to be. We cannot blame ourselves for the way we are." But Emmett does not answer me again. I press his head upon my chest and I absorb the fever inside him.

And so it is with Emmett. This darkness is so appalling to him that he clings to me for strength. But little does he realize that his strength is in his wisdom. It is good that I am here with Emmett and John—that we decided to stay with each other. The holding together that has fallen upon me has made me stout and unflagging. I wonder how adamant my reaction would be if I were here alone. I wonder. But I will not become wounded by this wondering, nor will I become annoyed. For I am content and pleased with this, that our fear will not make us traitors. Emmett has not learned this yet, and John is too weak to be concerned.

The darkness and the quiet descend upon us. We have no conception of time. I cannot see them clearly now, as they

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appear to be scattered about. Something new is in the making. Something that I fear. But this feeling of horror which pervades me now is so great that I am suddenly callous. That which was fear has now turned to impatience. This is even worse.

We wait for something to happen. An explosion. Stones crashing through our windows again. Voices bursting in indignation. Fire. But time falters in its lowest gear. It is for us and against us. It is greater than life itself. It is like snow on the peak of the highest mountain. It will remain long after we have plunged from its sinking slopes. Time is essence and truth and the gospel. Yet the only thing we fear of it is time itself. We cannot win against time.

The earth is showered with red. There is a sinking inside me that will not let me respond. I have a feeling that this fire has some meaning for us. An end is drawing near. That we should retreat is out of the question. But how shall we defend ourselves? Or shall we defend ourselves at all? I cannot think clearly any more.

John is awakened suddenly as he sees the great blaze outside. He leaps from the bed and runs halfway toward the front; and he screams, "Edward! They're burning a cross. *Ed*-ward!" He staggers backward against the wall, delirious with terror. I run toward him and grab him by the collar and shove him against the wall.

"Stop it! Stop it, John!" I shout. But John screams in my face and struggles with me and tries to get away. I am stronger now than before. It is almost my duty. I strike him in the face with my hand. I strike him again and again, until I feel the flow of blood on my fingers, until I have ceased his maddened screaming. His head falls over limply to one side and I am frightened. "John!" I shout at him. "John!" I shake him and try to recover his senses. Then, suddenly, he falls upon me and grips me tightly as before.

"Help me, Edward," he cries. "Please don't let them bother me!" He is on his knees.

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"Stand up, John," I say. "Stand up." But then I realize that my words are wasted. John is not well enough for this. I lean over and look at him and I say, "Then I'll help you, John. I'll help you to stand. I'll show you how to be as strong as you want to be."

He fights against me still. He tries to break away again. But I am determined this time to hold on. If I don't, it will mean the end of us. I am standing with him now and I am holding his wrists with a firm grip. We struggle toward the bedpost, where I want him, and I call, "Emmett! Your belt!" But Emmett does not respond to me, and I feel myself losing strength. I call him again, "Quickly, Emmett—*your belt!*" I feel as though I am trying to manage an army and the army is out of control. Emmett has not answered yet. And I cannot see him in my struggle with John. He must have gone and left us. It is hopeless. Their weaknesses have defeated us. I will release my hold on John.

"No, Edward, no! Don't let him go!"

"Emmett—"

He falls over John as John is about to get up from the bed. My strength is renewed. I hold John firmly now, and I place his hands around the bedpost, and say to Emmett, "Now tie him, Emmett—*hurry!*" Emmett ties him soundly, and he takes the belt from my trousers and we strap his waist to the bedpost. Suddenly, his convulsions are gone. He does not have the strength. Nor have I. I am tired. I am dizzy. I feel that I have lost something, or that I have never had it—some strength of character or purpose. But that is the way it is when you are fighting for something and are trying to be a leader. You weaken—almost to the breaking point. But once your end is revived in you, once you remember what you have given up already, you have to hold on again. Your losses—just your losses—would make it impossible for you to turn back, away from yourself and your end.

I feel a strange sensation—like insects crawling over my bare skin. I try to regain my balance. Emmett holds on to me. "Here, Edward, let me help you," says Emmett. He helps

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me to the table and I sit there, holding my head in my hands, feeling at once the impact, the seriousness, the nearness to the end we just escaped.

Emmett says, "It would be better if John and I were dead."

"Don't say that, Emmett."

"But it's true," says Emmett. "We are beginning to take some of the strength out of you. I can see it in your eyes."

I touch Emmett's arm. "Strength, Emmett? Only physical strength, and we all expect to weaken physically when we are in war. But not in courage—not in faith. If you and John were not here with me now, what cause would I have to stay?"

"You are a good leader, Edward," says Emmett. "You will draw respect and fear from them wherever you go when you leave here."

"I am not a good leader," I say.

Emmett says, "You are modest."

"No," I say to him. "I am not. I am speaking frankly."

Emmett says, "Then explain it to me, Edward. Why aren't you a good leader?"

"Because I am not the type," I say. "I am poor. I am dependent. I have nothing to stand on if the bottom fell from under me."

"But what difference would that make, Edward, as long as the people would follow you?"

"But that's just it, Emmett, they *wouldn't* follow me. It's lopsided thinking, I know, but economics means that much. What security could I offer them? What protection? Even to my own people I would be just another youngster trying to make a name for himself. Our leaders must be strong men, Emmett—independent men—men who are free of economic reprisal—men whose words can reach the great masses of people—men who know that a strong basis for our fighting, for our victory, must be love. Yes, love is the answer. We must win with *love*."

Emmett is confused. "Then who, Edward? Who?"

"Our ministers," I say. "We must fight through our min-

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isters. We must win through them. They are free of economic reprisal, pressures of the South, and they hold in their hands the great masses of the people—the washwomen and maids and cooks and porters and gardeners. They hold in their hands the people who will fight, once they know what they are fighting for. Their voices are big down here. Their backgrounds, developed in an atmosphere of love, will carry us through."

Emmett is calmer now. He says, "It is sad, Edward, that we cannot depend on our educators to carry us through—our teachers and our principals. I often wonder how many of them would be willing to sacrifice their jobs to fight for the practice of the principles of this land."

"I wonder, too, Edward, and it isn't easy. Jobs are not all that they sacrifice. They would sacrifice the children they teach, and learning would cease. Learning is our biggest weapon. We must never cease to learn. And they would sacrifice their homes and their lives, and be forced into an existence so low that their fighting would be useless. You can fight better when you are equal. At least the fight is shorter. If there were more professional people among my people down here—more doctors and lawyers—if my people owned some of the land instead of just working on it—or even if we were hired in industry—but they keep us back, lagging behind. They deprive us of our rights. They force us into a livelihood dependent on them and use it against us when they tell the world that we are content with things the way they are."

Emmett is saddened. "Sometimes I am so beaten, Edward—so depressed—I want to cover my face. I want to run away and vanish from the earth. We hear so much about democracy and we see so little of it. In my prayers I ask for God's hand, but He seems so far away. I feel so helpless, Edward—so guilty of being—of being born black. Sometimes I think it's a sin."

"Yes—yes, I know exactly how you feel, Emmett," I say.

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"It saddens all of us. But you must remember this; they are the ones who are in sin—not us."

Emmett says, "That's not easy to believe, Edward, when we are persecuted the world over."

"I know," I say. "Nothing is easy to believe when you are hurt and everything goes against you. But what has happened to us is not a sin, our being born black—but rather, a growth, an association that developed with the years. As far as we can remember, being black has been associated with inequality; therefore, everything we attempt to achieve will be difficult, if not for any other reason. And even if this were not true, the word 'race' itself carries a kind of lingering curiosity that causes people to wonder, that causes you to be conspicuous. It sets up a block that shapes various forms of acceptance and rejection even before people can present themselves. Only time can change this, Emmett."

Emmett's voice is breathy. "Yes, Edward. You have said this before. *Time!* And I am afraid of it. I am faithless of it because the only time I can perceive is that within my own life span. My foresight is shallow and narrow, Edward. I wish I could look beyond."

The cross continues to burn. A wind blows in from the north and mixes in with the flames, and the flames begin to grow. They are wild now—spreading and out of control. They close in on us with a pumping sound that beats against the wind, reaching for our porch and our rooftop, reaching for our lives. It is not a strong wind, but strong enough. One flame upon this house and we are through. This wood is dry and old.

They scatter away from the cross. They are afraid at first for themselves. Then they are aware suddenly of the danger for us. Their horror is lessened and transformed suddenly into a buoyant joy which overcomes them. It is strange to see them frightened; and once they escape their fear, rejoice when it falls upon us. You wonder what they are made of.

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A tree catches fire—the only tree in our yard. Its dry and dying limbs hang over the edges of our roof. There is nothing we can do. We watch the blaze spread up the dry limb until we cannot see it any more. We wait. Soon our roof will fall in, and our porch; then we will follow. A thudding, cracking sound hits the ground. The limb has fallen, and it still burns. It was so dry that it collapsed before the fire reached the top. We are saved for a while. We are lucky. But we are not out of this yet. The flames are still reaching toward us. The wind. If only the wind would change its direction! The wind is our only hope.

It is hot in here—hot from the fear and the tension—hot from the angry flames that surround us. Our perspiration hangs from our foreheads and condenses on our upper lips in great, thick beads, and is sour on our tongues. We need air that is fresh and we need it quickly, as the hot air that is pushed in by the flames is not good for our lungs. We look toward the windows, knowing there is something beyond—some life. And this is the thing that aches inside us, that tears us away inside and causes us to lose our faith—faith in ourselves and in our country and in our God. Freedom and justice and liberty and equality! How vague these things seem to us! No boldness is required to say this. Only the greatest remorse.

John is coughing. He has not moved since he collapsed from his convulsions. He is prostrate in body and spirit. Even if we did not tie him, he could not move. I want to help him, to strengthen him again, as it is almost unbearable to see him suffer. But I cannot. It is not against my will, but it is against my duty. John will not change. It is far too late for that. Rather than see him any other way, I'd prefer to have him dead.

There is but a thin line that separates life from death. It is a line made by time, for time makes everything. We see the truth in this now, the mark of it—for as quickly as the wind had come from the north, it dies. The flames back away from our house, their angry and painted edges dying among

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themselves. The cross burns slowly and steadily, but it is still hot in here. It burns with the same evenness as hot coals in a fireplace in the middle of winter. We are saved from the hungry fire—at least, from its striking alone.

I hear John coughing again. I can't stay away any longer. I go to him. I hold his head in my hands. He is hot, and I can feel the sickness in him as the heat goes through my hands and into my blood. I take my hand and wipe the sweat from his face and dry it on my trousers. I do it again, but his body is saturated with wetness and continues to spill out moisture. I unbutton his shirt from the top and spread his collar open. I look into the whiteness of his eyes; and his eyes are pleading with me. I cannot bear this pleading. I have to turn away. I go back to the table and sit, and Emmett sits with me. I am heavy with remorse. I think that nothing I do is right. And I have no way of knowing—of convincing myself of this.

Emmett says, "Maybe we should? . . ." He does not finish.

I look up. "Yes, Emmett?" I am weary. My voice is irritable, as though I would explode at any moment. I am too full with all of this. I have grown weak by it. I know what it is that Emmett is going to suggest, and Emmett knows that I know, and that I disapprove. He lowers his head.

"Nothing, Edward," he says. "It was foolish of me to think of it anyway."

I do not answer Emmett. It is pointless and unnecessary that we should talk about it. Though I am swaying within, my duty holds the highest precedence. How crude are the wages of war!

I wonder how close to the end we are. It is hard to say, but I do have a feeling that something will follow the burning of this cross. Either they will come for us, or they will go away. Again—time will tell.

Emmett speaks again, "What does it mean, Edward, this cross-burning?"

"I am not sure," I say. "Some purification, I suppose."

Emmet is confused. "But how, Edward? How could this be?"

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"They burn themselves pure," I say. "It is a symbol. They cleanse their race by burning all the evil exposed to them—all that is un-white in color and principle is unpure to them. All that refutes the myth of their supremacy. Mainly, you would say, Negroes, Jews and Catholics. They burn themselves pure of these—of *us*."

Emmett says, "And it purifies? . . ."

"No, Emmett," I say. "It doesn't. It contaminates. It is like the water that sweeps in from the ocean when the tide comes in. We think of the water as a purifying agent—an agent that purifies the shore. But it doesn't purify the shore. It contaminates it. It brings with it the algae and other slimy ingredients and waste from the bottom of the ocean; and they find their place on the embankments and remain there, never to move until the tide comes in again, and they are replaced with their likeness. The same is true with this cross-burning, Emmett. They do not purify their race. They contaminate it! They sweep ugliness into it—and injustice—a stain that spreads from land to land and brings with it ridicule and animosity and hatred; a stain that is a target for communism and a weak defense for democracy."

"But they believe in it, Edward," says Emmett.

"Yes," I say to Emmett. "It is this myth in which they believe."

The cross is not burning well. As its slow and even burning is about to die, we can see the rushing of the hours, shown to us by a thick black sky. We wonder what time it is. We have no watches here. Surely it must be ten—or at least nine by now. If so, that is good for us. We can breathe freshly and think of freedom. Their men must go to work tomorrow. Their children must go to school. But midnight? Suppose the time is midnight, or shortly before or shortly after? We would not hope much longer. Their intentions would be clear to us.

The humidity grows in here. We are reeking with our own sweat. We are gasping for breaths of fresh, clean air.

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There is a different air, perhaps, in the tiny kitchen beyond us, yet we are hesitant to make a move for fear that John may run. Even with him tied, we fear this. A hot night in the South is bad enough by itself—but to have it set off with flames is persecution.

Now we are becoming increasingly aware of an odor—a nauseating and foul stench that comes from the direction of the fireplace. Then it comes back to us! The carcass of the cat lies there. We had no other place to put it. We had not expected an odor so soon. Of course, this is something unnatural. It is this hot night—this rising humidity, and the burning of the cross which has caused this smell to come so quickly. The decaying odor of this animal will weaken us inside and make us defenseless. We must do something.

Emmett holds his stomach. I feel something is wrong with him. Some sickness, perhaps. He is bending over, and he reaches out his hand for me. He cries, and his voice is filled with pain, "Help me, Edward," he cries. "I—I feel—faint."

I reach him. "What is it, Emmett?" I say. "Is there any pain?" I hold his forehead and he is hot.

He cries, "My stomach. I feel a churning, a rising inside me. I am going to . . ."

He cannot hold it any longer. A big, gurgling sound rises from his throat. He gags. He pukes over my chest and onto the floor. I hold his forehead tighter and grip him close to me. He pukes again. It flows onto the floor, a hot, sour-smelling liquid, the odor of which is stronger than the odor of the cat. He drools from the mouth. I force two of my fingers down his throat and make him gag again. He is empty. He is weak. I sit him in the chair and rest his head on the table. My head spins. This rank and nauseating odor has caused the same rising inside me. I can feel it coming. I can taste it—hot and sour and stinging and weakening. I try to force it out, gagging myself with two fingers. It will not come. I feel as though I have won some victory at the moment. I must act quickly before it is too late for all of us. I rip my shirt from my chest. It is drenched with vomit and sickness.

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I rip off Emmett's shirt as he rests over the table, and I wipe my body dry. I must begin to clean the floor. Then I must do something about the cat.

I hear John mumbling. He must be regaining his senses. But I do not listen closely as I start to clean the floor. Then he mumbles again, and his voice is clearer this time. He is saying, "Let me help you, Edward."

I try to work on with the same swiftness, as I know that I too will become sick if I do not disperse this odor. But I cannot. His words ring into my ears and my conscience. He makes me feel guilty that I have tied him down. I thought I had grown strong with all of this—that I would never give in. But I have not. It has made me weaker instead—more conscious of the fact that alone I would be worthless. What we want to do is not designed for the self. I can never forget this, no matter how weak some of us may be. We must fight and we must mold loose ends until we have won. And we must *love!*

I hear his voice again. "Untie me, Edward," he cries.

I tell myself that I won't. Then I ponder it again. We tied him down because we thought it was right. It was for the cause we fought. I look outside. What they are doing to us, they think is right also. We are confused by all of this. Right—it has so many shapes and forms, so many varying degrees. But there is one thing about it we must remember. Right is not right if it takes away the self. A man is unto himself a man. It was God's wish that man have a will. And if in his will he does not wish to be free, we cannot force it on him. Of this I am aware. Yet I still believe that the will must take direction. It is the product of our years, of our growing and learning and training and living. John's will has been malformed by the life in this land. I cannot help to shape his will by tying him down. Bondage is harmful, and physical persecution refutes our teaching. John would never see our principle. He would resent it. I have thought over this long enough. Now I have no other choice. John must be untied.

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He says, "I won't run, Edward. I won't run. I promise you I won't run." His voice is weak. His pleading is unconvincing. He is breathing hard.

I say, "Of course, John, I know. You won't run."

I untie him. He feels his wrists and rubs them. He wipes the sweat from his brow. He cannot look at me, and I am standing directly in front of him. I will not take my eyes off him. I wait for him to run. But I will not stop him this time.

He says, "I will take the cat and bury it."

I say, "Where will you bury it?"

He looks around. "There is a loose plank in the floor of the kitchen," he says. "I can drop it down through there. At least it will help for a while."

I nod. We are like strangers to each other. We hear each other's words, but we do not hold them in trust and faith. We both know it and feel it. We are almost afraid of each other.

He walks toward the kitchen and I do not watch him. I only wait to hear the door slam . . . when he will run away from us.

The odor is still bad. It will not pass quickly. But at least we can bear it now. Much of this is in our minds. Just because I cleaned the floor gives us the feeling that the odor is going away.

I turn to Emmett and feel his forehead. He is hot with fever. I say, "You should lie down, Emmett."

He holds my arm. "No," he says. "I want to stay here. I want to be up with you if something happens."

We hear a noise behind us, the slapping sound of a loose plank against the floor. Emmett quivers. "What is it, Edward?"

I rest my hand on his shoulders. I say, "It's John. He's burying the cat under a loose plank in the kitchen floor." I do not take my eyes from Emmett. I am trying to convince Emmett and myself that I can trust John now. But I am tense. I am not doing a good job of it.

Emmett says, "How will tomorrow be, Edward?"

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"How do you mean?" I say.

He says, "About our people. How will they be if we do not come out of here alive?"

"They will inherit a fear," I say, "and the fear will make them strong. Soon the myth will be forgotten and they will look back on this day. They will say to themselves, 'The same could happen to us,' and they will not serve their masters with the same devotion as before. They will think of ways to get out—of ways to get even—to fool them; and they will fight."

"*Fight?* But how can they fight?" asks Emmett. "They have no leaders, no education or skill."

"Yes, I know," I say. "But they will fight by running away; and if our people run away from here, this land will go to waste."

Emmett says, "It would be a victory, Edward, but not the kind you would want. You say we must not run."

"But it would not be a victory, Emmett," I say. "We cannot win unless we win through love. In running, we build up hate. It would only be a start for our people until some leader found them. Then the hate would go."

There is silence. Then Emmett says, "And if we do come out alive, how will our people be then, Edward?"

"They would be the same, Emmett, except for an indifference toward us, as we would not 'stay in our places.' But they would still be conquered by the myth."

Emmett stands up. He grips my shoulders and he trembles. His breaths pant hard upon my face. "Edward!" His voice is full of some new terror. He calls me again. "Edward!" He loosens his hold on my shoulders. Now he weeps in pain. He says in a broken voice, "Then—then the only way for our people to be helped—is for us to—die."

I nod. "Yes, Emmett," I say. "That is the only way."

John stumbles from the kitchen. We turn around quickly and he comes toward us shaking and pointing some object in

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our direction, beckoning us to move away. I see the shining inside the barrel. John has a gun in his hands.

"Now move out of my way!" he shouts. He is sick. He is worse than before. He has no control of himself. "Move!" he shouts again in a big voice that draws a silence from the night. "Move!" I take Emmett's arm and jerk him aside. He is cold with shock.

John says, "You didn't know I had a gun under that plank, did you? But I *did*. I did! And now nobody's going to tell me what to do any more."

I try to win his trust in me. "Of course, John," I say. "I knew."

He shouts at me, "You're lying! Nobody knew that. Nobody but Aunt Lucy and me!" He takes a big step forward and points the gun at my face. Then he says, "You *know* you're lying."

This is not a natural anger. I realize I cannot win him with understanding. I am afraid for my life at his hands now . . . and for Emmett's.

I say, "Do you want to kill me, John?"

"I'll kill you," he shouts. "I'll kill anybody who tries to stop me from living—anybody! Now—sit down!"

Emmett and I sit at the table. We are frightened. We can hear our hearts beat and our knees rattle. We can hear our own saliva as it hits the bottom of our stomachs, and swallowing comes hard to us. We wait for the blast—for the sudden, unbearable pain—for the moment when we will see blood splattered if it comes upon the other of us first . . . and then for the moment when it will happen to us. We often wondered what death was like. What visions would grow before us. What strength we would have to hold a last breath. What horror we would find in the rising or falling into the depths and vastness of a darker world. These things we will know some day. But we are closer now than ever before.

He storms past us in a rage of madness. He reaches the front window and smashes it with the barrel of his gun. He

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looks out. He screams in a wild voice that is full of terror, "Listen to me! I've got a gun. Do you hear me? A gun! I'm going to get away from here, and you're not going to stop me. So—spread out. Leave! I'm coming out!"

He stands there, waiting. But they will not move. I wanted to say it to him, but he might have killed me for it. If only I could help him! There must be some way. But I am crying again. Why do I cry this way? It never mends a wound. Yet, when you have done it, you feel you have given your all. That is it. You have given yourself. In a way, it is like a prayer.

He is screaming again. He is pleading. "Why do you just stand there? Why don't you leave? Leave! Leave! *Leave!*" He is shaking.

A shot roars from his gun. Then another and another until his gun is dry. Women and children scream. He cannot stop himself. It is over before we can move.

He stands back, throbbing. He looks at his gun. He drops it to the floor. He looks at his trembling hands and visualizes some terrible evil in them and he tries to stop the twitching. He cannot stop it and he falls into a fit, his voice straining with sounds of horror. He runs for the wall away from the front and tries to find the corner. He hides in it and he screams. He turns around and tries to climb the wall, pounding with his hands, beating and scratching against the dry wood until his hands are wet, and I know he is bleeding. He looks at his hands and he cries, full of pain. I stand to go toward him, but he sees me and runs away. I feel Emmett's hands pulling on my arm, asking me to sit. John is against the wall again. He moves alongside it slowly, going towards the rear. He is breathing hard at first, then very softly. He wants to get out unnoticed.

I turn my head away. I put my hand against Emmett's eyes so that he will not watch. It will be better if he does not see. The door slams. John is gone.

The quiet falls upon us. It is strange and new. We see the

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trees from our windows, and there is no wind that moves their leaves. The sky is empty of stars. It is black and strong and abstruse. We cannot hear our breathing. We cannot sweat any more. We cannot move. The silence is heavy. It is like death.

And then John screamed.

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IV

It came from a distance, a trembling, tortured wail that broke the quiet of the night. It came again, rising to the sky, filling the earth with a strange cry of dark fear that faded off into the bayou and was lost in its endless reaches.

We are chill-filled with the suddenness of this terror. In his cry we hear the oppressive and anguished note of doom. We feel it. We grasp our bodies with our quivering hands and try to remove the blood and the pain. We draw into ourselves as though those outside were reaching for us. We wait for the cry again; and when it does not come, we shudder from the thought of it.

Emmett grips my arm and cries out, "John!" He is full of panic. He is cold and hard. I hold him tightly and press my hand against his lips so that he will not scream or cry out again. But Emmett does not struggle with me. I feel his crying in my hands and the throbbing warmth that heats up his body and I loosen my hold on him. His breathing is hard and forced and his voice quakes when he asks me, "What are they doing to John?"

I say, "They are torturing him, and they are trying to torture us. They want us to run as John did."

"And if we don't?"

His question is so sudden for me. I have thought about it often, and I have tried to evade the truth in the answer that has come to me. It is not easy to visualize the end of oneself, especially when it seems inevitable. It is like thinking of tomorrow, and knowing that tomorrow will never come.

"It will not matter," I say. "They will come for us anyway. You see, they have a reason now. John fired on them.

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He probably injured some of their women and children—or probably killed some of them. There is no way out for us."

Emmett draws into himself, and he is unusually calm. He says, "Yes, you are right, Edward. There is no way out for us."

It is strange, the way he answers, the way he reacts to it now. I had expected him to rage, to cry—to lose control of himself. But he is without emotion. He sits at the table and falls into a trance and looks toward the front again. It is odd the way we respond to death. The closer we are, the less we fear it. For death pulls a curtain down before our eyes, and all of the horror and the pain of life are forgotten, as we know the end is here, and in this end we cannot experience these things any more. But in life, when death is dark and far away, misfortune and sorrow and pain are components of our pattern of fear; they upset the tempo of life and cause us to shudder when the thought of death appears.

I look at Emmett and I say, "If you want to, we can separate. You could go and sit behind the little cabinet in the kitchen and I could stay here. At least it would take time for them to reach us this way, and hiding is the only defense we have."

Emmett says, "No, Edward. Let's stay together. Let's stay here and fight as we should."

"But we can't fight, Emmett. Enough blood has been spilled already. We must be passive and we . . ."

"And we must love," he says.

"Yes, Emmett," I say. "And we must *love*."

John's cry comes up again, throbbing with a grinding pain. Its echo is soft and quivering and far away, and then it is gone. We know we will not hear it again.

I hear Emmett's voice. "What will happen, Edward, if we are found dead? What will our people do?"

"I do not know," I say.

Emmett says, "But you say we must love, Edward. In war we love, but we still fight. And this is like war. Then why shouldn't we fight back? Why shouldn't our people revolt

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against this land so that they would know what we mean when we ask for our rights?"

"But that is the difference, Emmett. If we revolted against this land we would revolt against the good, against so many who are for what we want and for our getting it. This is not like war. If ever our people revolted, it would be against the few down here who deserved it."

Emmett looks to the front. "Like *them?*"

"Yes," I say. "Like them."

"We stand alone," says Emmett. "Their presence is not condoned in this country, and yet they continue to exist, to prowl and haunt us and make a mockery of democracy."

"And not only democracy," I say, "but legislation. For they laugh at legislation. What difference does it make to them if they are called subversive? They regard the laws of our land not as moral judgments, but as forced and bewildered conclusions of overanxious politicians. They make us a mark for the communists. They belittle our ideals and our God, and they continue to have their way—killing us, running us from our homes, and denying us the freedoms that are ours." I sit at the table with Emmett and hold my head. "I feel so tired, Emmett—always wanting, always fighting for what God intended me to have. I am growing old from this, but I will never stop. Some day it will come."

Emmett says, "If we cannot win with legislation, and with love, how can we win then, Edward?"

"There is no other way I know. We are fighting a moral problem in this country, Emmett, and we are fighting it with legislation. And this is no answer if legislation itself is corrupt—if it is infested with politicians who are dishonest and morally unsound; and they give us no other way to think of them. They play with a bill that concerns freedom and justice and liberty as though it were a toy, and they do not know they are playing with our lives. They do not work *with* a problem. They work *on* it. And this is selfish."

Emmett touches my hand, and he says in a dubious voice, "You are angry, Edward. . . ."

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I try to calm myself. "I am not angry, Emmett. I love my country too well, and I am too aware of the strength of its foundations ever to become angry. I am just blind—and weak and futile—so that it makes me want to lash out at someone. But I am too full of sorrow and pain to be angry. I am just—helpless. I feel now that whatever I do or believe is so little to aid our cause that it would not matter if I existed at all. Everything seems an ideal; but nothing ever—*is!*"

"But *you* are the ideal, Edward. You are what seems. You are the hope of our people. You are the new Negro. But you must begin here first and then go on, so that what you are made of will root itself in the smallest of us."

"But who can see such an ideal? Who can see what seems? My own people are afraid of me. They make me doubt myself."

"You have said it before," says Emmett. "They can! That is why you are here."

We were never young. Youth is cheerful and strong and striving, rich with wild passion and new discovery and animal freeness. Youth is like a carousel, whirling and spinning and singing, unaware of the fulfillment it brings to squealing children, of its inevitable defeat when it is old and worn and rusty and out of use. Youth is ever-spring and never-autumn. It is something—forever! It is a rising hill with no falling sides. It is the sky, the clouds, the birds fluttering through the air, the wind blowing. Youth is a poem, a feeling! It is endless!

How much of this we have missed! Instead of the feel of the water that came from the green pools, our bodies reeked with sweat. Our hands are swollen and sore with labor, while theirs are made painful only by the thorns of a rose. We have watched them picnic on sloping lawns, play in vast fields with high, brick fences, play on long green fields with small holes and flags and sand traps, and on courts of moon-yellow clay . . . while we have stolen, barefooted, to the creeks and swamps and fished on the stumps. And that was our fun.

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Oh, these mellow years, these soft and warm and laughing years, filled with sunlight and never sunburn, with moonlight and never darkness, with climbing and never falling, with do-now and never how-now, with love and vigor and hope and certainty—they have passed us by! For we are old men. We have lived in judgment and in council. We have lived in fighting and in pain. We have lived in bondage. We are weakened by the burden of it. We are strengthened by the wear of it. We do not cry any more. We do not look to another day. Pray God, what man is so old?

Ah, but as I think of it, we have not much to want. For us death is no sorrow now. If we had lived as they, if we had laughed and loved, we would have sunk to incredible depths if all of our laughter and love, when once converted into wisdom, suddenly hastened to death. And that is the way with youth, when wisdom, so strong, so bulging, the core of life itself, suddenly fades away and is no more use in life. I say what a crime this is! What a poisonous drink from the cup of life! Who must make amends?

But we have learned through wisdom. It is all the youth we have had. There has been no lingering in our lives, no ever-spring, no wind blowing, no hastening on to death. When we were young in age, our bodies were decayed. What life we had was death itself. We were always dying. We were always learning. We have no fear, no pity, that our wisdom will go for naught. And there will be no sorrow after death, as it must be for all, who cannot make use of wisdom.

We shall remember these years. And before the vastness and the darkness of death subsides upon us, we shall bequeath our wisdom to the world. And when the light of our new life has unfolded, we can look back upon this earth and say—it is good.

Silence hangs hot and heavy, as oppressive and all-engulfing as the humidity that sustains it. The very quiet of the night increases until it is a throbbing, humming sound in our ears. And then a new sound becomes evident. It is a faint, al-

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most indistinguishable sound. But it is there, outside in the dark, slowly mounting in volume. Scraping, shuffling, it moves closer. It is as though someone or something is sliding over the loosely packed earth in front of the house. The muffled plop of feet mingles with the sliding sound, and it becomes distinct that two or three men are approaching. But what is that sliding, dusty sound that comes with them?

Emmett hears the movements and stands upright. His feet begin unconsciously backing away from the door. He retreats to the wall and melts to the floor, his mouth open in terror at the approaching unknown.

I sit rigid in the chair, rooted by fear, by an overwhelming sense of duty that will not let me run. I tense and watch the door with fixed horror.

Then, suddenly, the footsteps and the sound stop. A dull thud on the porch reverberates through the empty house and is felt in the rotting planks of the floor; it is absorbed in our bodies and becomes a part of us. As the footsteps fade, silence comes flooding back, stronger and more powerful than before.

Emmett comes to me and clutches at my shoulder. He knows, as I do, that something has been dropped on our porch. His eyes are closed. He has learned to expect the worst without panic. I touch his hand. I say, "It has come, Emmett. This is our sentence."

Silently, I arise and walk to the door. I stand and listen, cautiously aware of the silence and the lack of movement on the other side of the door.

Emmett stands frozen and then he cries, "No, Edward, no! Don't leave me here alone."

"It is the only way, Emmett. They have come because it is *me* they want—not you. They believe that if they destroy me, they will destroy everything; but you must prove them wrong, Emmett. You *must*. That is why you must stay here."

He comes toward me slowly. His lips part, and I hear the faint sound of my name in his voice. He holds his hand out to mine. We stand here a part of one another. We stand here

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in finality, in life and death. He throws himself forward and we embrace. There are no tears in our eyes. We break without sight of one another. We do not want to become acquainted with remorse again.

Then I open the door and peer out into the night. There is a large heap on the porch that hangs over down the stairs. Emmett gasps behind me as we both realize the heap is John. He is lying on his back, with his feet toward the door and his head in the dust below the bottom step. No one is around. John does not move. His arm is twisted under his body in a strange, misshapen position.

I reach down and take one of his feet. The shoe is still on. But the other foot is covered only with a ragged sock. Emmett takes the sock-covered limb and we pull him into the house. As his body moves into the light on the porch, we can see that John is naked. His stomach and groin are a mass of blood running in little trickles over his thighs and buttocks, staining the porch a deep red.

Emmett recoils and drops John's foot. He steps back in horror, and I reach out for him. Then he reaches down again, and we drag John's body into the house. He has been castrated. As his head bumps against the top step, something rolls out of his eye socket and tumbles down the steps into the dust. It rolls a few inches and stops. A coating of dust forms on the piece of flesh that was once one of John's testicles. He has been blinded also, and his testicles placed in the empty sockets. The empty, gaping hole stares vacantly upwards, and a string of muscle from it clings to his bloody cheek.

We quickly drag the rest of him into the house. As I begin to close the door, I see again the round object in the dust, and the pools of red on the wood, and the tracks of the body where it was dragged to the house.

I have seen the worst. I do not shudder from the horror now. I cannot feel any pain. Pain—how strange it is to me! Once the thought of it, the memory of its past inflictions, sent tremors through my body. But now, I am so saturated with pain, I am immune to it. I can look at this blood and

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walk in it, and it will not daunt my nerves. I can hold the dissected pieces of John's body in my hands and put them back into place again and not begin to cry. And I can look into John's face, into the holes that were once his eyes, and be cleansed of sorrow. For I have reconciled myself to this—that in death there is an end!

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V

It starts all over again, this humming, murmuring silence that rumbles through the night. But it will not last long, I know. There is not enough time. Already a cluster of gray parts the black sky in the east, and now some light is coming into our room. Something will happen soon. It is inevitable.

Emmett kneels on the floor beside John. He holds John's head in his arms. Slowly he strokes John's forehead as though John were alive, and I see a peculiar expression on Emmett's face, one I cannot understand. It is not one of remorse and horror, but rather, of loneliness. It is as though he were wishing they had gone away together. Suddenly he becomes aware of the light that breaks through the night. He looks toward me and says, "What time is it, Edward?"

"It must be past two."

"It will have to come soon, won't it, Edward?"

"Yes."

"And it won't be the same with us, Edward. They will not take us separately. They will all come—in a mob—and it will be like a storm sweeping over us. And then—then it will be over."

"It will be better that way. There will be less pain."

"But I am not afraid of pain now, Edward. I would rather go like John. If we go quickly, there would be less memory of us here. But if we go like John, piece by piece, they could never forget our being. Day after day, night after night, we would come back to them. Our crying would be in their souls and in their ears, and our blood would forever be on their hands."

"And would they love you then, Emmett?"

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He is quiet. He looks at me hard. Then he says, "I want to be like you, Edward. I want to think like you and be as strong as you, and I have never believed that I was wise enough to think differently from you. But I must say this—that from some of them we can never win love, no matter how hard we try. We began much too late. And the images that our deaths would bring are not from our own doings—but from God's. This is war, Edward. You have said this. In war lives are lost and even love is lost. But you never stop loving mankind and life because of one war. God intended it this way. We do not fight war because we want to or because we hate, but because we have to. Nor do we want them to fear us because we hate them, but because sometimes fear breeds love."

I turn away from Emmett. "Possibly you are right," I say, "and I am all wrong. It is hard for me to say now. I feel all twisted in my thinking."

"You are *not* twisted," says Emmett. "You have just oversimplified the meaning of love. You believe in fighting with wisdom and honesty and truth. You even believe in sacrificing your own life. But you would not take theirs. You would not have *them* suffer. This is not fair to yourself, Edward—nor to your people. If men can suffer under God for their misdoings, then there is no evil in it."

"But God can judge. We cannot take His place."

We hear voices coming through the darkness. We hear the sound of the earth moving, a shuffling, restless and impatient sound that grows in volume as it comes nearer to us—the sound of a crowd moving, pounding and scraping the earth. The sky is colored with crimson flames. They reach high and fall again, hungry to stay alive, to fill the heavens with their fire. Now they are upon us. They are massed as one great flame that burns before our house, surrounding us, moving in closer toward us. The earth does not move any more. The voices grow strong and more restless. We can see them, clad in their hooded white, each holding his angry torch, shouting in great, wild voices words we cannot make

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out. At last they have come to take us! And they have come so quickly that we cannot think clearly. We cannot think at all. We know why we are here. We know why we will die. We will be numb to all thinking, to all feeling. We shall close our eyes and let happen what will. We are blinded by the burning crimson. The earth spins in our heads, and suddenly we see the flames spreading, leaping and flying through the air with their red wings, as they fling their torches toward us.

Our house is on fire. It roars like a big explosion, like the sound of angry waves beating up against the shore. It is fortunate for us that it began on the other side. The sudden explosion of the flames would have killed us immediately. But it will spread quickly and the end will come. We are not afraid of this, but we must save this house if we can. We are thinking of John's aunt who will return when we are gone. This house is all she has. We run into the kitchen and retrieve two pails and turn on the faucet and begin to fill our pails. Back and forth we run to the other room, to the other side of the house where the fire rages. We pour and pour. Nothing seems to stop it. We are exhausted. Emmett falls back against the wall and is about to give up. He drops the pail to the floor.

"There is one last chance," I say. "Let's fill this room with water, and this doorway. Maybe this will stop the fire from coming in." I reach down and pick up his pail for him, and we start all over again. We work with greater fury now, fighting off a death we had waited for and prepared for, once more postponing what for us is impossible. But the fire still comes through to us. Nothing can save this house. But I am not defeated with this little fate. We can still delay it for some time. I go back to the kitchen for another pail of water. I hear the sound of wood cracking, a tearing sound that comes from above—the sound of a roof collapsing. And then I hear Emmett scream. I run to him.

"Emmett!" I call to him. "Emmett, where are you?" I cannot see him. I am blinded by the smoke, my eyes burn, and I am coughing hard. I go through the door where the fire is

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still burning, but quietly now, and I keep calling his name. Still he does not answer me. As a thick cloud of smoke rises before my eyes, I see a pile of fallen lumber on the floor. Somehow I am able to struggle through, my lungs filled with smoke, and in the center of the fallen lumber I see an upbent knee. It is Emmett. Slowly I begin to remove the wood, piece by piece, until I can drag him out. Strangely his legs are not wounded. But his upper trunk has been crushed and his arm twisted and broken. When I have him at the other side of the house, he begins to cough. Blood flows from his mouth. I put my head to his heart to learn if he is still breathing. He is, but it is very faint.

He tries to talk. "No, Emmett," I say. "Don't try to talk. Talking will bring you pain. I will wet a rag for you and place it over your brow." When I bring the dampened cloth back from the kitchen, I say, "There, is that better?"

But Emmett is still trying to talk. His lips pucker. He brings his tongue out between his teeth, and now he forms his words. He says, "This is our country, too."

I nod. "Yes, Emmett," I say. "This is *our* country, too." His eyes close, and I am frightened. "Emmett!" I say. He is still breathing, much to my surprise. I fight my way through the heavy smoke toward the kitchen. I want to wet the cloth again. This cannot last much longer. I cannot leave Emmett here in this condition, and soon the fire will crash through the walls and be directly upon us.

I have the cloth wet again. I look down where Emmett was . . . and he is not there now. The smoke is getting heavier. I am getting weaker. What has happened to Emmett? Suddenly I have visions of a vague form moving across the room, moving closer to the corner nearest the wall. I hear a hissing sound. "Emmett!" I call. "Come back! Don't go near that wall. But Emmett does not stop. He is bent over, one hand holding his aching chest, the other hanging loosely behind him. He drags his feet as he walks. Then he falls to the floor, and I come out of my dumbfounded state and start out behind him. Suddenly a thundering explosion roars from the

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floor. It booms through the rooftop. It rips the wall that sets us apart from the fire. I rock and I shudder with the mighty roar as it reverberates in my body; and I can hear my bones rattle through my skin. The thunder pounds into my ears, never stopping, roaring like a mighty machine, forcing into and tearing apart what were once my eardrums, and now my world is silent. I feel wounded inside. I swallow what must be a muscle or a tendon, a stringy, bitter and gagging thing that seems to choke me. And even when my choking has stopped, I cannot forget its bitter and blood-tinged taste. It will remain on my tongue forever. Wood and splinters fly everywhere, beating each other as they sail through the air and then pound viciously on the walls. And the walls, from the force of the wood and the angry cry of the explosion, scream with a loud crack, like the cracking sound of lightning during a storm, and they are gone. The fire pushes back and in. It is wild as the wind catches up with it. I cannot imagine how I am alive. It I had gone one step farther, I would have been shattered like the walls and the floor and the roof. Through the smoke and the flames and the open walls of the house, I can see them spreading, running away. But they do not run in a state of fear—not even the little ones. They have been swallowed up by the evil and the fire, by the sight of blood and the wails of pain. They are obsessed with a sadism I have never known, a sadism aroused by the mob; and as long as the mob exists, man will cease to exist also. All of the visions and images and qualities which we attribute to him will be invisible. The monster and the demon in man will rule him and his state of being, and injustices—lynchings and bombings and violence—will forever rule the earth.

How I wish I could hear a voice from them—not their shouts and their jeers—but *a* voice, *one* voice from amongst the crowd, a voice set aside from violence, a voice unguided by the blind force of the mob which thinks it does the will of their God and their land—a voice soft and clear, a voice with a heart and with visions and love. If I could hear such

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a voice, I could die with greater strength, with a firm belief in my land and its people. If once the mob were extinct, justice would always be done. I am set aside from sound, yet I know such a voice is there. It is present in those who will run home tonight, fall on their knees and pray, and say they are sorry for our deaths. It is present in those men who will return to their families this morning, and when they are asked where they were at such an hour, will not have an answer. These are the voices I want to hear. These are the dark shadows and hidden interiors that must be uncovered—where good lies, overwhelmed by myth and fear.

I must find you somewhere, Emmett. I must find you now. You gave your life away that I might live, knowing all along that I would never run. I cannot leave you unfound, regardless of your shape or form now. I must hold you close to me. I must feel this new substance that flows inside you, that has suddenly made you stronger than mountains. I must become a part of this substance, and it a part of me; for all that I have said and all that I believe, I have never been tested as you.

I am not afraid as the house crumbles above me, partly because of my deafness. I do not even look at the destruction. I know that when the time comes for me, I will be hit, and there is nothing that I can do. I come upon him, lying in the corner. I drag him out a bit, and I kneel down beside him. His head has been blown from his body; and where it once joined to his neck, a thick flow of blood pours out, and soft muscle and tendons and torn bits of skin overlap to his shoulders. I reach down and lift his trunk and hold him close to my chest. I hold him very firmly as I try to receive some of this new strength which suddenly became a part of him. I feel a rising inside me, the weakness and the pain gone. I feel a new birth coming—a new life. His strength has made me well. I am bulging over with this feeling . . . so full of it that death will not come soon enough.

I look down at Emmett and I say, "But how must they know it, Emmett? How shall they know that we are *not*

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doomed—that our principles are just beginning to live in this life? That our being is not banal or undefined or a misplacement? How can I say it, Emmett? What words can I use to express myself? Shall I begin with the Holy Scriptures, with the Constitution, with the Bill of Rights—with words of proof on paper, honest words and just—words which they twist and deform for their own advantage, whether it be the word of God or the word of the law? And they go on believing as they always did—thinking and feeling and acting as though these words were never there. Shall I begin with science, which says there is no difference between blood and the color of a man's skin? With education, which proves that a man, because he is black, is not condemned to a low intelligence or a feeble mind? With sociology, which shows that any race of man, mistreated, mistrusted, misjudged, deprived of economic advancement, forced into the lowest level of living, is subject to the same misdemeanors and crimes, and, eventually, the same slow advancement? Should I defend these truths, Emmett, or should I let them remain and be weighed with the new years—the years that will look beyond our skin, when the truth will draw response from justice and freedom?

"Perhaps I should begin with ourselves, Emmett, during the days of our early youth. The days we strolled up the long clay roads and sprawled under the big oak trees, and sat on the stumps beside the swamps, peering into the water, and with faith and with hope imagined the good we would bring to our land."

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VI

He died just before dawn. When the sun rose, a deafening silence hung over the land. A rooster crowed and the earth moved. And the earth had forgotten. The day . . . went on.

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About the Author

Born in Augusta, Georgia, Robert Martin Screen was graduated from Haines Institute, in Augusta, took his B.S. in English at Hampton Institute, in Hampton, Virginia, and his M.A. in Speech Therapy at New York University.

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WE CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM HERE is the young author's first published book.

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