IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE

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IT WAS RAINING THAT DAY HE GOT OFF THE BUS IN ST. ADRIENNE. Not a heavy rain, but a cold, steady, unrelenting rain—one that could go on for days and days. It might stop an hour in the morning, maybe another hour or two in the afternoon, then start all over again.

Two people got off the bus before Robert did. A white man hurried to a car parked under a willow tree on the riverbank side of the road. A white woman went inside the station. Robert started to follow her, but changed his mind when he saw another black man standing in the garage door left of the station watching him.

Parlane Henderson was a mechanic, and he also loaded and unloaded the buses that came in. There was nothing to put on the bus today, and the driver had already signaled to him that there was nothing to take off, so he stood just inside the garage door out of the rain watching the passengers. Now he saw Robert coming toward him. Robert wore an old mackinaw Army overcoat that was too big and seemed much too heavy for his frail slender body. An Army field cap was pulled all the way down to his ears. He had a Navy-blue laundry bag, about half full of clothes, slung over his right shoulder. He carried no other luggage.

“You can tell me where colored live round here?” he asked Parlane.

Parlane made a half-circular motion with his head. “All over the place,” he said. “Anybody particular?”

“Looking for a place to stay,” Robert said.

Parlane took a dirty gray rag out of the back pocket of his blue overalls and wiped his hands. At the same time he was looking Robert over to see if he knew him. Robert was tall, thin, brown-skinned, in his late twenties. His eyes were weak and bloodshot from a lack of sleep. His scraggly little beard grew fairly well on his chin, but hardly at all on the sides of his face. After looking him over a moment Parlane knew that he had never seen him before.

Parlane started to point up the street, when he noticed Fletcher Zeno coming toward him. Fletcher was the only black cabdriver in St. Adrienne, and he was lucky to get more than three fares on any weekday. If he got more than a half dozen on weekends, counting
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Saturday and Sunday, he considered himself more than lucky. Parlane knew this, and he thought he would let Fletcher get the seventy-five cents that he charged to take someone back of town.

"Taxi here, taxi here," Fletcher said.

Fletcher was a small jet-black man with quick motions. Not only did he walk fast or turn fast, but he talked fast, laughed quickly, and stopped abruptly.

"Back of town?" he said. "Up the river? Down the river? The Island? This way. This way."

He grabbed at the blue laundry bag that Robert had slung over his shoulder, but Robert didn't release it. Instead, he asked Fletcher how far was back of town.

"Too far to walk on a day like this," Fletcher said. "You agree there, Parlane?"

Parlane nodded his head. "You'll get wet 'fore you get halfway back there," he said.

"I don't mind getting wet," Robert said. "How far is it?"

"Cost no more than seventy-five cents," Parlane said.

"How far is it?" Robert asked again.

"Mile. Maybe little more," Parlane said. "Mile and a quarter, I reckon."

"Which way?" Robert asked him.

Parlane looked at Fletcher who had started shaking his head. Fletcher shook his head with the same quick motion that he did everything else.

Robert saw what was going on between them, and went inside the station. The bus station was a small office, and four or five people could fill it easily. John LeDoux, the big Cajun from Pointe Coupee who ran the garage and the bus station, was sitting behind his desk talking to the woman who had just come in there. Neither one paid any attention to Robert. But after a while the woman did glance back over her shoulder at him, but said nothing. LeDoux went on talking as if no one else had come in. LeDoux sold you tickets through a window. If the weather was bad he would let some white people he knew come inside and stand by the heater. Since it was his office, and not a waiting room, he didn't have to let blacks in there, and he never did. The blacks could go into the garage where Parlane worked and stand by the heater there if they wished.

After Robert had been in the office about ten minutes the woman looked back at him again and asked him if he wanted to see Mr. LeDoux about anything. Robert told her he only wanted to know where he could find a place to stay. The woman turned and pointed up the street. She told him to walk three blocks, then turn left. After going a quarter of a mile he would see a hardware store, then
a lumberyard. Then after crossing the railroad tracks he would see a big gray house on the left that advertised rooms. Robert thanked her and went out.

"I wonder why they didn't tell him that out there," she said to LeDoux. "It seemed such a simple—"

But she never finished. Because LeDoux had just hollered for Parlane to get in there. It was so loud and abrupt the woman jumped back from the desk patting at her breast. Parlane came inside the office with his cap in his hand. LeDoux had started talking to the woman again, and he went on talking to her another couple of minutes before looking at Parlane.

"I want that car ready tonight," he said.

"Mr. LeDoux, you said I could finish it tomorrow," Parlane said. "I mentioned I had that little business I had to 'tend to tonight."

"That was before I was interrupted," LeDoux said. "Now I want that car ready before you go home tonight."

"I couldn't come in early in the morning—"

LeDoux was talking to the woman again. Parlane turned slowly and went back out. He was not angry with LeDoux, he was not even angry with Robert; he was looking for Fletcher, because it was Fletcher who had brought on this trouble for him. But as usual, Fletcher had quickly disappeared.

II

Virginia Colar was standing in the kitchen looking out of the window when she heard the knocking at the front door. She could see how the wind was blowing the limbs in the pecan tree, and she thought the knocking was no more than a limb brushing against the side of the house. She turned from the window to check the pot of soup cooking on the stove. After tasting it to see if it was seasoned well enough she nodded with satisfaction and lowered the flames.

She heard the knocking again, this time louder than before. She was sure there was somebody out there now, and she went to the front to let him in. When she opened the door she saw Robert standing in front of her soaking wet. Water ran from the cap down his face, leaving crystal drops hanging from the scraggly beard on his chin.

"They told me you have rooms," he said.

"I got—" But she stopped.

She didn't like him from the beginning. He was too thin, too hungry-looking. She didn't like the little knots of hair on his face that he called a beard. She knew he was sick. His jaws were too
sunken-in for a young man. His eyes looked at you but didn't see you. He could have just been released from Angola penitentiary. He definitely looked like someone who had been locked in. They probably had let him go because they figured they had punished him enough already, and they knew he would die soon.

Something in the back of her mind told her to tell him that she had made a mistake about having rooms. She had just rented the last one to a—to an insurance man this very morning. But she asked herself where else could he go. Uptown to one of those back rooms of the white motel? Would they let him in? By law they were supposed to, but couldn't they say they didn't have any vacancy either?

She stepped to the side to let him come in, then she looked outside again. She was looking for Fletcher's cab, but she knew it wouldn't be out there. Because Robert's clothes and the laundry bag wouldn't have been so wet if Fletcher had brought him to the house.

"That's a dollar a day," Virginia said, still holding the door open. She wished he would say a dollar was too much for a room, then she would have a good excuse to send him back out there.

"I want it for a week," he said.

"That'll be seven dollars," she said. "And I 'preciates my money in advance."

She waited until he had reached into his pocket before she closed the door and told him to follow her to her office. Her office was a small desk and a chair that she had setting in one corner of her living room. At the door she told him to stay out there in the hall while she went into the room to get his key and the receipt book.

"Where you from?" she called, from inside the room.

He didn't answer her.

She came back out.

"I asked where you was from," she demanded this time.

"Chicago," he told her.

She looked at him, and at the laundry bag he still had slung over his shoulder. She didn't believe he was from Chicago.

"The money," she said.

He gave her a wrinkled five-dollar bill and some change. The change money was black with corrosion, as if it had not been used in a long time.

"Your name?" Virginia said.

"Robert."

"Last name?"

"X," he said.

She was holding the receipt book against the wall while she wrote down the information. When he told her to put X she drew down one line and stopped. She wasn't looking at him yet, she was still looking at the receipt book, trying to recall what group called themselves X.
She couldn't remember now whether it was the Black Panthers or the Black Muslims.

Something in the back of her mind told her to give him back his money. But something else asked, where else would he go? Uptown? The whites would not let him in there either. They had turned down fatter ones and dryer ones than he; and she was sure no X had ever slept in any one of those beds.

She looked at him now. "I don't want no trouble in here," she told him. "I run a nice orderly place here. I don't bother the law, the law don't bother me. You hear me, don't you?"

He didn't answer her, he wasn't even looking at her, he was looking at the receipt book she held against the wall. She had drawn half of his last name, and he might have been looking at that. Virginia couldn't tell from his gaze where his mind was. She slashed the other line cross the first, and told him to follow her upstairs.

"You must'a walked from the station?" she asked.

He didn't answer her this time either, and after climbing another step, she stopped and looked back at him. He was standing two steps below her, beads of water still in his beard, and that blue laundry bag slung over his shoulder as if he was leaving instead of coming in.

"I'm 'customed to people answering me," Virginia said. "Besides that it show breeding."

"I walked," he said.

"Wasn't Fletcher there? A little ugly black man with red beady—"

"He was," he said.

"He was?" she said. She wanted to say: "And he didn't stick a gun in your back?" or "And he didn't drag you to his cab?" But she didn't say it, because he wasn't looking at her, he was looking past her as though she wasn't even there. Something in the back of her mind told her again to give him back his seven dollars. But something else said, Where else would he go?

She led him up to his room and lit the little gas heater, then she went to the bathroom down the hall to get a bucket of water to set on top of the heater. The water would keep moisture in the room. All the time that she was in the room with him, he stood at the window looking out at the rain. He had not taken the laundry bag from his shoulder, or taken off the cap or unbuttoned the coat.

"The toilet and the shower down the far end of the hall," she said to his back. "I change sheets and pillowcase once a week—Saturday. They already clean, so I won't change them tomorrow. When you get hungry, the best place round here is Thelma's cafe—three blocks farther back of town. Her husband, Wrigley, runs the nightclub next to it—place called the Congo Room."

He didn't seem interested in what she was saying, and she went
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back downstairs to the kitchen. She dished up a bowl of soup and sat down at the table to eat. But she hadn't eaten more than a couple of spoonfuls when she thought about Fletcher, and she went up the hall to her office to telephone him. Fletcher's cabstand was at Thelma's cafe, and Fletcher must have been sitting at the counter or standing nearby, because soon as Thelma answered the telephone, Virginia heard her say: "It's for you."

"Fletcher," he said.
"You rich?" Virginia asked him.
"I see," Fletcher said. "He found his way."
"So y'all did talk?" Virginia said. "And you didn't stick a gun in his back to make him get in that cab?"
"I had Parlane beg for me," Fletcher said. "That don't work neither."

Virginia heard him drink something quickly. It could have been a cocktail or a cup of hot coffee. He did everything quickly.

"You got your money?" Fletcher asked. "He wasn't exactly throwing it away round that bus station."
"I got a week in advance," Virginia said.
"Cold rain do that," Fletcher said. "Make you change your outlook on life." Then he laughed. It sounded like "hee-hee," and stopped.

"Look like any people you know?" Virginia asked.
"Nobody I know, nobody I care to know," Fletcher said. "Say where he come from?"
"Chicago," Virginia said.
"Where?" Fletcher asked.
"That's what he told me," she said.
"And nothing but that blue laundry bag?"
"He calls himself Robert X," Virginia said.
"One of them, hunh?" Fletcher said. "Well, you got something on your hand now."

"What you mean?" Virginia asked.
"You'll find out," Fletcher said, and laughed again.

Virginia hung up the telephone and went back into the kitchen. From the table she could see the rain touching lightly against the window. She could see the soft swaying of the limbs in the pecan tree beside the house. There was not a pecan on the tree, not a leaf, not one bird sat on any of the limbs. The tree was bare and gray—the low-hanging sky above it was the same ashy gray color. The kitchen was warm and comfortable, but Virginia felt sad and cold just by looking out of the window at the rain.

Virginia thought about her tenant upstairs in number four. She wondered if he was hungry. She did not serve food at the house, but
she had cooked much more than she could ever eat. If she ate soup everyday for a week, there would still be some left over.

It was her conscience bothering her again, she told herself. It was not satisfied that it had made her let him into the house, but now it was trying to make her feed him, too.

When Virginia got through eating she dished up another bowl of soup, and put some crackers on a plate, and took it up to his room. After knocking twice, and still not getting an answer, she pushed the door open and went in. She would set the plate on the bucket of water, and the food would still be warm when he woke up. She noticed that he had taken off his hat and coat and had hung them on the closet door. But halfway cross the room she suddenly felt strange, as if she was being watched, and she jerked around to look back at the bed. He lay there wide awake, not watching her, but looking out of the window. Virginia had turned so suddenly that she had spilled some of the hot soup out of the bowl onto the plate and some even on her hand. She was so angry now that she couldn't do anything for a while but stand there and look at him. She didn't know whether she ought to curse him and leave the food there, or curse him and take the food back down to the kitchen.

"I didn't know I was disturbing your honor," she said. "I just thought your honor could be hungry. Your honor look like he been starving to death."

Robert sat up slowly, and reached into his pocket to get her some money.

"It's free," she said. "I don't serve no food here. I just try to be a good Christian."

She set the plate on the lamp table at the head of the bed and backed away. She was at the door when she heard him asking: "Any churches back here?"

Virginia was a short, plump, very black, very emotional woman. But nothing could change her attitude about a person quicker than hearing him mention the church or the name of God. She stopped at the door to look back at Robert who had picked up his plate and started eating.

"Churches?" she said. "We got three—if you said churches. You said churches?"

He nodded his head, without looking at her. He was eating, and looking out at the rain against the window.

"You need to go to church?" she asked him.

"No," he said.

"Just want know where they at, huh?"

He nodded again, but so slightly that if she hadn't been watching him closely she never would have seen it.

"We have two Baptist and a Catholic," she said. "But we don't
have none for the Mus—" she stopped.

"Baptist," she heard him say.

"We got one just up the street there," she said. "Solid Rock Baptist Church. My church. Reverend Phillip J. Martin, pastor. I suppose you done heard of Reverend Martin up there in Chicago?"

She thought she heard him say no.

"No?" she said. "He's been in all the newspapers. On TV. He's the civil rights leader here in these parts. He's our Martin Luther King. Everybody proud of him—black and white. Thinking 'bout sending him to Washington. Would be the first one from round here, you know."

"Must be a good man," she heard him say.

"The people think so. Course there's some 'gainst him—black and white—you find that everywhere; but most of them all for him. He'll be a good man in Washington. He's done some wondrous here."

"What's he done?"

"What's he done?" Virginia said. "What's he done?" she said again. "He's done everything. Everything. Done changed just about everything round here, 'cept for old Chenal up there. It won't be long 'fore Chenal fall, too. He'll fall like all the rest. Old white man up-town, don't want pay the colored nothing for working. Own the biggest store up there, everybody go in his store, still don't want pay his colored help nothing for working. He'll change his mind when Phillip get through with him—mark my word."

"Phillip Martin?" she heard Robert saying.

"He's the man round here. The man we count on."

Virginia saw him nod his head. But he never did look back at her.

That evening just after dark he came downstairs and left the house. Virginia stayed up watching television late that night, but she didn't hear him come back in. The next morning around six o'clock, even before she had gotten out of bed, Fletcher Zeno called her on the telephone.

"Want hear something good?" he asked her.

"No," she said, and hung up.

He called back.

"What you want, Fletcher?" she said. "You know what time it is."

"Five to six, 'cording to my watch," he said. Virginia heard him drink something quickly. She figured he was at home and drinking hot coffee. "Seen your boy sitting behind Reverend Martin's church door last night," he said. "Midnight—on my way home. First, I thought I was seeing a ghost. But I said to myself, 'Man, come on, you know you don't believe in no such thing.' Then I thought maybe it was a dog. But what dog in his right mind would lay behind that.
door in all that rain when he could go under the church and stay dry.” Virginia heard him take a quick sip from the hot coffee again.

“I turned around at Brick O’linde store and came on back to get another look. I got out this time. I thought it might be Dago Jack or Unc Matty sick there and couldn’t get home. Halfway up the walk I seen who it was—your boy there. Slumped back ‘gainst that door with his hands jobbed down in his pockets. Could have been sleeping for all I know. I turned around and went on home. Well?” Another sip from his coffee. “What you think? Think he’s crazy—or just like cold rain?”

“I don’t think he’s crazy, I don’t think he like rain, neither,” Virginia said. “I think you making all that up ’cause you didn’t get them seventy-five cents yistidy.”

All day long Fletcher told the same story to other people, but like Virginia, no one wanted to believe him. Two days later everyone did.

Monday, at Thelma’s cafe, Abe Matthews told the people how he had seen Robert standing under one of the big oak trees in the cemetery. He said it was a little dark, just after sundown, so he was not ready to swear on a stack of Bibles that it was definitely Robert. But if it was not, then it was a ghost wearing a long Army overcoat that was much too big for him and an Army cap pulled all the way down to his ears—exactly like the clothes that the Muslim wore. Evalena Battley, on her way to work at the St. Adrienne Laundry, saw him at six o’clock in the morning on the bank of the St. Charles River. The rain had fallen steadily the past two weeks, and the river was high and rough, flowing swiftly southward toward New Orleans. Robert stood on the bank among the hanging branches of the weeping willows, staring down at the water, oblivious to Evalena, to everything else round him, except the river. And that same evening, Dago Jack, on his way home from Brick O’linde’s grocery store where he had spent the day sitting and talking, saw him standing across the street in front of Phillip Martin’s house. Dago mentioned it to the people at the store the next day, but since they had seen him practically everywhere else already they thought nothing of it.

He had two meals at Thelma’s cafe. On Saturday, the day after he arrived in St. Adrienne, he came into the cafe around noon and sat down at a table in the corner. When Thelma told him what was on the menu for the day, he told her to bring him a plate of red beans and rice, mustard greens, and a piece of corn bread. The next day he came back about the same time and he ordered giblets, rice, greens, and corn bread. He sat at the same table as before, a little red-and-white-checkered oilcloth-covered table in the corner. Neither time did he take off his cap or his coat. Both times he paid
for his meals with change money. The money, quarters, nickels, dimes, was black with corrosion.

Monday, he started buying his food at Brick O'linde's grocery store. Abe Matthews, Tall White, Unc Matty, Dago Jack, and Fletcher Zeno sat or stood round the heater. They had been talking about him just before he came in, but now they were quiet, one, then another, glancing at him at the counter. He bought sausage, cheese, bread, and a bottle of cheap muscatel wine. After he had paid for his groceries he left the store without saying a word to anyone, and went back to his room to eat.

"More that black money?" Fletcher asked Brick.

Brick O'linde looked at the money that he still held in his hand, and nodded his head.

"Hunh," Dago Jack said.

"Mostly peculiar," Unc Matty said.

"You said something, Unc Matty?" Tall White asked.

"Peculiar, peculiar," Unc Matty said.

Later that evening they saw him walking again. He never spoke to them, he never asked about anyone, he never visited anybody that they knew of. But day and night, whether it was raining or not, they would meet him or pass him walking the street. Several people had seen him on St. Anne Street watching the house where the minister and civil rights leader Phillip Martin lived.