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Underground Airlines

Written by Ben H. Winters

Published by Century

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UNDERGROUND AIRLINES



BEN H. WINTERS



Published by Century 2016
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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First published in Great Britain in 2016 by
Century
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781780894300

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for my kids, and their friends

"No future amendment of the Constitution shall affect the five preceding articles; . . . and no amendment shall be made to the Constitution which shall authorize or give to Congress any power to abolish or interfere with slavery in any of the States by whose laws it is, or may be allowed or permitted."

Article XVIII of the United States Constitution. The last of six amendments which, together with four resolutions, make up the so-called "Crittenden Compromise."

Proposed by Senator John C. Crittenden of Kentucky on December 18, 1860 and ratified by the states on May 9, 1861.

Part One

NORTH

It is a strange kind of fire, the fire of self righteousness, which gives us such pleasure by its warmth, but does so little to banish the darkness.

—Augustin Craig White, from "The Dark Tower", a pamphlet of the American Abolitionist Society, 1911

1.

"So," said the young priest. "I think that I'm the man you're looking for.

"Oh, I hope so," I said to him. "Oh Lord, I do hope you are."

I knitted my fingers together and leaned forward across the table. I was aware of how I looked: I looked pathetic. Eager, nervous, confessional. I could feel my thin cheap spectacles slipping down my nose. I could feel my needfulness dripping from my brow. I took a breath, but before I could speak, the waitress came over to pour our coffee and hand out the menus, and Father Barton and I went silent, smiled stiff and polite at the girl and at each other.

Then when she was gone, Father Barton talked before I could.

"Well, I must say, Mr. Dirkson—"

"Go on and call me Jim, Father. Jim's just fine."

"I must say, you gave LuEllen quite a start."

I looked down, embarrassed. LuEllen was the receptionist, church secretary, what-have-you. White-haired, apple-cheeked lady, sitting behind her desk at that big church up there on Meridian Street, St. Catherine's, and I suppose I had behaved like a wild thing in her tidy little office that afternoon, gnashing my teeth and carrying on. Throwing myself on her mercy. Pleading for an appointment with the father. It worked, though. There we were, breaking bread together, the gentle young priest and myself. If there's one thing they understand, these church folks, it's wailing and lamentation.

But I bowed my head and apologized to Father Barton for the

scene I'd caused. I told him to please carry my apologies to Ms. LuEllen. And then I brought my voice way down to a whisper.

"Listen, I'm just gonna be honest with you and say it, sir, I'm a desperate man. I got nowhere else to turn."

"Yes, I see. I do see. I only wish . . ." The priest looked solemnly at my face. "I only wish there was something I could do."

"What?"

He was shaking his head, and I felt my face get shocked. I felt my eyes get wide. I felt my skin getting hot and tight on my cheeks. "Wait, wait. Hold on, now. Father. I ain't even—"

Father Barton raised one hand gently, palm out, and I hushed up. The waitress had come back to take our orders. I can remember that moment perfectly, picture the restaurant, dusk-lit through its big windows. The Fountain Diner was the place, a nice family-style place, in what they call the Near Northside, in Indianapolis, Indiana. On that same Meridian Street as the church, about fifty blocks further downtown. Handsome, boyish Barton there across from me, no more than thirty years old, a tousle of blond hair, blue Irish eyes, pale skin glowing like it was scrubbed. Our table was right in the center of the restaurant, and there was a big ceiling fan high above us, its blades turning lazily around and around. The bright sizzling smell of something frying, the low ting-ting of forks and knives. There were three old ladies at the booth behind us with high-yellow faces and red lipstick, their walkers parked in a neat row like waiting carriages. There was a pair of policemen, one black and one white, in a corner booth. The black cop was leaning halfway across the table to look at something on the white one's phone, the two of them chortling over some policeman joke.

Somehow I got through ordering my food, and when the waitress went away the priest launched into a speech as carefully crafted as any homily. "I fear that you have gotten the wrong impression, which of course is in no way your fault." He was speaking very softly. We were both of us aware of those cops. "I know what people say, but it's not true. I've never been involved in, in, in those

sorts activities. I'm sorry, my friend." He placed his hand gently over mine. "I am terribly sorry."

And he *sounded* sorry. Oh, he did. His calm Catholic voice glowed with gentle apology. He squeezed my hands like a real father, never mind that I was a decade or more his senior. "I know this is not what you wanted to hear."

"But—wait, now, Father, hold on a moment. You're here. You came."

"Out of compassion," he said. "Compassion compelled me."

"Oh, Lord." I leaned away from him, feeling like a damn fool, and dropped my face into my hands. My heart was trembling. "Lord almighty."

"You have my sympathy and you have my prayers." When I looked up his eyes were straight on me and steady, crystal blue and radiating kindness. "But I must be truthful and say there is nothing else that I can offer you."

He watched me unblinking, waiting for me to nod and say, "I understand." Waiting for me to give up. But I couldn't give up. How could I?

"Listen. Just—I am a free man, as you see, sir, legally so," I said, then charging on before he could interrupt. "Manumitted fourteen years ago, thanks to the good Lord in Heaven and my master's merciful will and testament. I have my papers, my papers are in order. I got my high-school equivalency and I'm working, sir, a good job, and I'm in no kind of trouble. It's my wife, sir, my *wife*. I have searched for years to find her, and I've found her. I tracked her down, sir!"

"Yes," said Father Barton, grimacing, shaking his head. "But—Jim—"

"She is called Gentle, sir. Her name's Gentle. She is thirty-three years old, thirty-three, thirty-four. I—" I stopped, blinking away tears, gathering my dignity. "I'm afraid have no photograph."

"Please. Jim. *Please*."

He spread his hands. My mouth was dry. I licked my lips. The

fan turned overhead, disinterested. One of the cops, the white one, thick-necked and pink skinned, reared back and slapped the table, cracking up at something his black partner had said.

I held myself steady and let my eyes bore into the priest's. Let him see me clear, hear me properly.

"Gentle is at a strip mine in western Carolina, sir. The conditions are of the utmost privation. Her owner employs overseers, sir, of the cruelest stripe, from one of these services, you know, private contractors. And now this mine, I've been looking, Father, and this mine has been sanctioned half a dozen times by the LPB. They've been fined, you know, paid millions in these fines, for treatment violations, but you. . . . you know how it is with these fines, it's a drop in the—you know, it's a drop in the bucket." Barton was shaking his head, gritting his teeth emphatically, but I wouldn't stop—I couldn't stop—my words had become a hot rush by then, fervent and angry. "Now, this mine, this is a *bauxite* mine, and a female PB, one of her age and, and her weight, you see? According to the law, you see—"

"Please, Jim."

Father Barton tapped his fingertips twice on the table, a small but firm gesture, like he was calling me to order or calling me to heel. The compassionate glow in his voice was beginning to dim. "You need to listen to me now. We don't *do* it. I know what is said of me and of my church. I do. And I believe in the Cause, and the church believes in the Cause, as a matter of policy and faith. I have spoken on it and will continue to speak on it, but speaking is all that I do." He shook his young head again, looked quickly at me and then away, away from my frustration and my grief. "I feel deeply for your situation, and my prayers are with you and with your wife. But I am not her savior."

I was silent then. I had more words but I swallowed them. This was a bitter result.

I got through our brief supper as best I could, keeping my eyes on my plate, on my fish sandwich and cole slaw and iced tea. God

only knows what I'd been expecting. Surely I had not imagined that this man, this *child*, would be so moved by the plight of my suffering Gentle that he would leap to his feet and charge southward with pistols bared; that he would muster up a posse to kick in the doors of a Carolina bauxite mine; that he would take out his cell phone and summon up the army of abolition.

For one thing, there is no such army. Everybody knows that. Everybody with sense, anyway. No such thing as the Underground Airlines, not really, not in any grand organized sense. No command center in the deserts of New Mexico, like in that movie they did a few years ago, no paramilitary force with helicopters and flash bombs, waiting on the orders of a mighty antislavery general to rush into motion.

There *are* rescues, though. There *are* saviors. It's piecemeal, it's small-group action, teams of northerners, daring or crazy, making pinprick raids into the Hard Four, grabbing people up and hustling them to freedom. There are ad-hoc efforts, small organizations, cells, each running their own route of the Airlines. You just gotta know the right people. And this man, this Father Barton here, he was supposed to be the right people. The man to get with. Everything I had heard, all the information I had collected, it all said that here in Indianapolis, in Central Indiana, Father Barton up at St. Cat's—this was supposed to be the man.

And now here I was, helpless, watching him eat a hamburger with a paper napkin tucked into his clerical collar, fussily dabbing ketchup from the corners of his mouth. Listening to him assuring me in his soft voice, "to allay any concerns," that everything on the menu had been certified by the North American Human Rights Association, a Montreal-based outfit that inspects supply lines. I nodded blankly. I murmured "oh" into my coffee. "Oh, good." Like it mattered. Indiana was like most states, a "Clean Hands" state, with a law on the books barring places of public accommodation from serving anything out of the Four. All of the rest of it, all the Canadian supply-chain auditors, all the independent inspectorates

and "cruelty-free" certification programs, well, that's all marketing. Fancy-sounding words to gin up donations for the antislavery nonprofits. But Father Barton, he pointed his skinny finger at the little gold seal on my menu like it was some kind of consolation prize. *I can't get your beloved out of shackles, you poor bastard, but I can assure you that your tomatoes weren't harvested by a shackled line.*

When dinner was done, Barton took out his wallet and I put out my hand and laid it over his.

"Hold on, now." A little tremor rolled through my voice. "I'm gonna get this."

"Oh, no." Father Barton shook his head and didn't pull away his hand, and we held that pose like an artwork: white hand on a brown wallet, black hand on the white hand. "I can't let you do that."

"Come on, now." I peered at him through my spectacles. "I wanna thank you for taking the time, that's all. It was good of you to take the time."

The priest exhaled, nodded slightly, slowly removing his hand from our little pileup. Here's what he was thinking right then, he was thinking *go on and let the man pick up the check—it's a gift to him, to let him feel he's done something*. I do not want to sound crazy or something, but I do believe that I have this strange power, in certain situations. To read minds, I mean. Not to read *thoughts*, not exactly, but to read *feelings*. To read *people*. To know how people *feel*.

I dug a few crumpled bills from my coat pocket and smoothed them out on top of the check. Then I pushed a piece of paper across the table, a smudged scrap of napkin. "Here, though. That's my mobile phone number right there. Just in case you change your mind."

Father Barton stared at the napkin.

"Please, Father," I said. "Would you please just take it?"

He took it, and he rose and adjusted his collar, and for a split second, I *hated* this man, this confident boy. *And I believe in the Cause . . . as a matter of policy and faith . . .* Go to hell, son, I was think-

ing, just for a moment, just a bare half of a moment. With your pity for me and your stiff collar and your alabaster cheeks. *You go to hell.* I didn't say it, though. Nothing of the sort. I did not raise my voice or bang a closed fist on the table. Anger wouldn't help. All it would do maybe was draw the attention of those two cops, the white one with the thick neck and his laughing black partner, maybe cause them to amble over here in that slow cop way, and ask Father Barton if everything was OK. Ask me if I wouldn't mind providing my paperwork for them to have a peek at, if it wasn't too much trouble.

I excused myself to use the bathroom, and hurried away, just barely keeping it together.

Once I saw a businessman on TV, the owner of a Midwestern football franchise, and this very wealthy man was proclaiming his personal abolitionist sentiment, while defending his use of the infamous "temporary suspension of status" to add PB muscle to his defensive line. "Do I like the system?" the man had said, shaking his head, in his thousand-dollar suit, his hundred-dollar haircut. "Well, of course I don't. But I'll tell you what, this is an opportunity for these boys. And I love 'em. It's a bad system, but I love my boys."

I hated that man so much, watching him talk, and I hated Father Barton the same way there in the diner. Slavery was a game to this child, as it was for that slick team owner, as it is for all the football fans who tsk-tsk about the black-hand teams, but watch every Sunday in the privacy of their living rooms. Declaring hatred for slavery was easy for a man like Father Barton, not only easy but useful—gratifying—*satisfying*. And of course its cold and terrible grip could never fall on him directly.

My anger swelled and then it drained, as anger does. By the time he hugged me consolingly at the door of the diner, by the time the priest was on his way to his car, by the time he stopped to cast a troubled glance back toward me—as I had predicted he would, as I had known he would—that glance found me stand-

ing perfectly still in the doorway, a humble man, broken by pain. I had taken off my glasses and there were tears slipping slowly one at a time down my weathered cheeks. The waitress poked her head out, reminded me that she had the rest of my supper for me, all boxed up, and I could barely hear her, so busy was I composing this face of grief.

2.

I've been free since I was fourteen years old, and on this particular evening, as my dashboard GPS navigated me through the unfamiliar streets of Indianapolis, I was approaching my fortieth birthday.

The great bulk of my life then, had passed outside the Hard Four, in the free part of the land of the free. But even after all those years, I still found myself daily astonished by the small miracles of liberty. Just walking out of a restaurant with a clear head and a full stomach, holding a styrofoam box with more food inside of it. Just lingering in the parking lot a minute before getting in the car, smelling the wet asphalt, feeling a light drizzle as it condensed on my forehead. Just knowing I could take a walk around the block if I wanted to, go to a park and sit on a bench and read a newspaper. Just getting in that car and feeling the vinyl give under my ass, feeling the cough and purr of the engine. All of these things were small astonishments. Miracles of freedom.

I was in a modest Nissan Altima, with a serviceable 175 hP engine and a dull tan interior, but I enjoyed driving it a whole lot. For most of my driving years you couldn't get a Japanese car in the US, because the Japanese were signatories to the "European consensus," barred from trading with the United States. Lucky for me, a new prime minister had been elected in 2012 and switched them over to a policy of "stakeholder influence," a phrase borrowed from the Israelis. Hate the sin, love the sinner. Open markers mean open dialog, that whole line.

I don't give much of a shit about international diplomacy, but I fucking loved that Altima. It started up with no trouble, and the

heater worked and the wipers worked, and the brakes and the windows and the tape deck.

I drove carefully north on Meridian Street, away from the Fountain Diner, away from Father Barton and his empty apologies. The world I heard described on the radio was the same as the one I could see through the streaky window of the car: grey and ugly, redolent of violence and the fear of violence. This was the week of the Batlisch hearings: fulminating in the Senate, furor in the streets. This woman's nomination had "ignited a firestorm," as the radio liked to hype it. Protests and counter-protests in Washington, D.C., and in the nominee's hometown of Philadelphia, and plenty of other places besides. Violence—violence and fear.

Local radio was a minor controversy around a fundraising effort called Little Suzie's Closet: folks getting together in church basements to make care packages for the plantations, blankets and candy bars and all that kind of thing. First they had on a local advocate for the homeless, asking why our attention should be down there, "when there's so much suffering right here at home!" Then came a spokesman for the Black Panthers, denouncing the campaign as "mere ameliorationism," calling Little Suzie "naive". Which struck me as a little harsh, the girl being nine years old and all.

It was all the usual stuff—all the new stories just the old stories again.

I turned off the radio and fished a Michael Jackson cassette out of the glove box. The tape hissed when I pushed it in. It was a mix tape, which I had made myself, many many years before. Soon, they were saying, new cars wouldn't have tape decks anymore, since the American market was finally catching up with CDs. Not yet, though.

I turned up the volume. MJ sang "Human Nature," from *Thriller,* and I sang along.

I was stopped at a checkpoint on my way back to my hotel, which I'd been expecting. Tensions were high because of the Batlisch busi-

ness, along with a couple nasty incidents up along the 49th parallel. Indianapolis, like a lot of cities, had declared a "heightened security environment" so cops were free to pull over black drivers when they felt like it—not that they ever needed a reason, in particular. It was at 79th Street and Ditch Road when I heard the *bloop-bloop* of the sirens and I got out slowly, giving no trouble, showing my hands, standing where they told me, staring blankly into the doorway of a grocery store while I got frisked by a beefy patrolman with bad breath and razor-burn.

He looked closely at my papers. My papers held up just fine. The sun was almost done sinking. A yellow smear against a dishwater horizon.