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Black Water Rising

Written by Attica Locke

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BLACK WATER RISING

ATTICA LOCKE

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If we are blinded by darkness,
we are also blinded by light.

—ANNIE DILLARD

Part I

Chapter 1

Texas, 1981

The boat is smaller than he imagined. And dingier.

Even at night Jay can tell it needs a paint job.

This is not at all what they discussed. The guy on the phone said "moonlight cruise." City lights and all that. Jay had pictured something quaint, something with a little romance, like the riverboats on the Pontchartrain in New Orleans, only smaller. But this thing looks like a doctored-up fishing boat, at best. It is flat and wide and ugly—a barge, badly overdressed, like a big girl invited to her first and probably last school dance. There are Christmas lights draped over every corner of the thing and strung in a line framing the cabin door. They're blinking erratically, somewhat desperately, winking at Jay, promising a good time, wanting him to come on in. Jay stays right where he

is, staring at the boat's cabin: four leaning walls covered with a cheap carport material. The whole thing looks like it was slapped together as an afterthought, a sloppy attempt at decorum, like a hat resting precariously on a drunk's head.

Jay turns and looks at his wife, who hasn't exactly gotten out of the car yet. The door is open and her feet are on the ground, but Bernie is still sitting in the passenger seat, peeking at her husband through the crack between the door and the Skylark's rusting frame. She peers at her shoes, a pair of navy blue Dr. Scholl's, a small luxury she allowed herself somewhere near the end of her sixth month. She looks up from her sandals to the boat teeter-tottering on the water. She is making quick assessments, he knows, weighing her physical condition against the boat's. She glances at her husband again, waiting for an explanation.

Jay looks out across the bayou before him. It is little more than a narrow, muddy strip of water flowing some thirty feet below street level; it snakes through the underbelly of the city, starting to the west and going through downtown, all the way out to the Ship Channel and the Port of Houston, where it eventually spills out into the Gulf of Mexico. There's been talk for years about the "Bayou City" needing a river walk of its own, like the one in San Antonio, but bigger, of course, and therefore better. Countless developers have pitched all kinds of plans for restaurants and shops to line Buffalo Bayou. The city's planning and development department even went so far as to pave a walkway along the part of the bayou that runs through Memorial Park. The paved walkway is as far as the river-walk plan ever went, and the walkway ends abruptly here at Allen's Landing, at the northwest corner of downtown, where Jay is standing now. At night, the area is nearly deserted. There's civilization to the south. Concerts at the Johnson and Lindy Cole Arts Center, restaurants and bars open near Jones Hall and the Alley Theatre. But the view from Allen's

Landing is grim. There are thick, unkempt weeds choked up on the banks of the water, crawling up the cement pilings that hold Main Street overhead, and save for a dim yellow bulb at the foot of a small wooden pier, Allen's Landing is complete blackness.

Jay stands beneath his city, staring at the raggedy boat, feeling a knot tighten in his throat, a familiar cinch at the neck, a feeling of always coming up short where his wife is concerned. He feels a sharp stab of anger. The guy on the phone lied to him. The guy on the phone is a liar. It feels good to outsource it, to put it on somebody else. When the truth is, there are thirty-five open case files on his desk, at least ten or twelve with court time pending; there wasn't time to plan anything else for Bernie's birthday, and more important, there hasn't been any money, not for months. He's waiting on a couple of slip-and-falls to pay big, but until then there's nothing coming in. When one of his clients, a guy who owes him money for some small-time probate work, said he had a brother or an uncle or somebody who runs boat tours up and down the bayou, Jay jumped at the chance. He got the whole thing comped. Just like the dinette set he and Bernie eat off of every night. Just like his wife's car, which has been on cement blocks in Petey's Garage since April. Jay shakes his head in disgust. Here he is, a workingman with a degree, two, in fact, and, still he's taking handouts, living secondhand. He feels the anger again, and beneath it, its ugly cousin, shame.

He tucks the feelings away.

Anger, he knows, is a young man's game, something he long ago outgrew.

There's a man standing on the boat, near the head. He's thin and nearing seventy and wearing an ill-fitting pair of Wranglers. There are tight gray curls poking out of his nylon baseball cap, the words BROTHERHOOD OF LONGSHOREMEN, LOCAL 116, smudged with dirt and grease. He's sucking on the end of a brown ciga-

rette. The old man nods in Jay's direction, tipping the bill of his cap.

Jay reaches for his wife's hand.

"I am not getting on that thing." She tries to fold her arms across her chest to make the point, but her growing belly is not where it used to be or even where it was last week. Her arms barely reach across the front of her body.

"Come on," he says. "You got the man waiting now."

"I ain't thinking about that man."

Jay tugs on her hand, feels her give just the tiniest bit. "Come on."

Bernie makes a whistling sound through her teeth, barely audible, which Jay hears and recognizes at once. It's meant to signal her thinning patience. Still, she takes his hand, scooting to the edge of her seat, letting Jay help her out of the car. Once she's up and on her feet, he reaches into the backseat, pulling out a shoe box full of cassette tapes and eight tracks and tucking it under his arm. Bernie is watching everything, studying his every move. Jay takes her arm, leading her to the edge of the small pier. It sags and creaks beneath their weight, Bernie carrying an extra thirty pounds on her tiny frame these days. The old man in the baseball cap puts one cowboy boot on a rotted plank of wood that bridges the barge to the pier and flicks his cigarette over the side of the boat. Jay watches it fall into the water, which is black, like oil. It's impossible to tell how deep the bayou is, how far to the bottom. Jay squeezes his wife's hand, reluctant to turn her over to the old man, who is reaching a hand over the side of the boat, waiting for Bernie to take her first step. "You Jimmy?" Jay asks him.

"Naw, Jimmy ain't coming."

"Who are you?"

"Jimmy's cousin."

Jay nods, as if he were expecting this all along, as if being Jimmy's cousin is an acceptable credential for a boat's captain, all the identification a person would ever need. He doesn't want Bernie to see his concern. He doesn't want her to march back to the car. The old man takes Bernie's hand and gently guides her onto the boat's deck, leading her and Jay to the cabin door. He keeps close by Bernie's side, making sure she doesn't trip or miss a step, and Jay feels a sudden, unexpected softness for Jimmy's cousin. He nods at the old man's cap, making small talk. "You union?" he asks. The old man shoots a quick glance in Jay's direction, taking in his clean shave, the pressed clothes and dress shoes, and the smooth hands, nary a scratch on them. "What you know about it?"

There's a lot Jay knows, more than his clothes explain. But the question, here and now, is not worth his time. He concentrates on the floor in front of him, sidestepping a dirty puddle of water pooling under an AC unit stuck in the cabin's window, thinking how easy it would be for someone to slip and fall. He follows a step or two behind his wife, watching as she pauses at the entrance to the cabin. It's black on the other side, and she waits for Jay to go in first.

He takes the lead, stepping over the threshold.

He can smell Evelyn's perfume, still lingering in the room—a smoky, woodsy scent, like sandalwood, like the soap Bernie used to bathe with before she got pregnant and grew intolerant of it and a host of other smells, like gasoline and scrambled eggs. The scent lets him know that Evelyn was here, that she followed his careful instructions. He feels a warm rush of relief and reaches for his wife's hand, pulling Bernie along. She doesn't like the dark, he knows; she doesn't like not being in on something. "What is this?" she whispers.

Jay takes another step, feeling along the wall for the switch.

When the light finally comes, Bernie lets out a gasp, clutching her chest.

Inside the cabin there are balloons instead of flowers, hot links and brisket instead of filet, and a cooler of beer and grape Shasta instead of wine. It's not much, Jay knows, nothing fancy, but, still, it has a certain charm. He feels a wave of gratitude—for his wife, for this night out, even for his sister-in-law. He had been loath to ask for Evelyn's help. Other than his wife, no one seems more acutely aware of Jay's limits than Evelyn Annemarie Boykins. She's been on him for two weeks now, wanting to know was Jay gon' get her baby sister something better for her birthday than the robe he bought Bernie last year, what cost him almost $30 at Foley's Department Store. He couldn't have done tonight on his own, not without his wife suspecting something. So he was more than grateful when Evelyn offered to pick up some barbecue on Scott Street and blow up a few balloons. Everything will be ready, she said. In the center of the room is a table set for two, a chocolate cake on top, with white and yellow roses, just like Evelyn promised. Bernie stares at the cake, the balloons, all of it, a slow smile spreading across her face. She turns to her husband, reaching on her tiptoes for Jay's neck, pressing her cheek to his. She bites his ear, a small, sweet reprimand, a reminder that she doesn't like secrets. Still, she whispers her approval. "It's nice, Jay."

The boat's engine starts up. Jay feels the pull of it in his knees.

They start a slow coast to the east and out of downtown, beads of water rocking and rolling across the top of the air-conditioning unit. The moist, weak stream of air it offers isn't enough to cool an outhouse. The room is only a few degrees below miserably hot. Jay is already sweating through his dress shirt. Bernie leans against the table, fanning herself, asking for a pop from the cooler.

There's a Styrofoam ice chest resting in one corner. Jay bends over and pulls out a soda can for his wife and a cold beer for himself. He flicks ice chips off the aluminum lids and wipes at them with the corner of his suit jacket, which he then peels off and drapes on the back of his chair. Next to the cooler is a stereo set up on a card table, black wires and extension cords dripping down the back and onto the floor. Jay kicks the wires out of view, thinking of someone tripping, a slip or a fall. Bernie soon takes charge of the music, fishing through Jay's shoe box, passing over her husband's music—Sam Cooke and Otis, Wilson Pickett and Bobby Womack—looking for some of her own. She's into Kool & the Gang these days. Cameo and the Gap Band. Rick James and Teena Marie. She slides in a tape by the Commodores, which at least Jay can stand. *Just to be close to you* . . . the words float across the room. Jay watches his wife, swaying to the music, dancing, big as she is, the tails of her two French braids swinging in time. He smiles to himself, thinking he's got everything he needs right here. His family. Bernie and the baby. All he has.

There's a sister somewhere.

A mother he isn't talking to.

Old friends he's been avoiding for more than ten years. He hasn't spoken to his buddies—his comrades, cats from way, way back—since his trial. The one that nearly killed him. The one that drove him to law school in the first place. He started missing meetings after that, skipping funerals, ignoring phone calls, until, eventually, his friends just stopped calling. Until they got the hint.

He counts himself lucky, really.

A lot of his old friends are dead or locked up or in hiding, out of the country somewhere; they are men who cannot come home. But Jay's life was spared. By an inch, a single juror: a woman and

the only black on the panel. He remembers how she smiled his way every morning of the trial, always with a small nod. It's okay, the smile said. *I got you, son. I'm not gon' let you fall.*

After the trial, after he'd checked himself in and out of St. Joseph's Hospital, he learned the juror, his angel, was a widow who stayed out on Noble Street, down from Bernie's church, the same church where her father, Reverend Boykins, had loaded a bus with half his congregation every morning of Jay's trial. They were women mostly, dressed in their best stockings and felt hats and cat eye glasses with white rhinestones. They rode to the courthouse every day for two weeks simply because they'd heard a young man was in trouble. No questions asked, they'd claimed him as one of their own. They sat through days of FBI testimony, including a secret government tape that was played in the hushed courtroom—a tape of a hasty phone call Jay had made in the spring of 1970.

The prosecutors had him on a charge of inciting a riot and conspiracy to commit murder of an agent of the federal government—a kid like him and a paid informant. They had Jay on tape talking to Stokely, a phone call that ran less than three and a half minutes and sealed his fate. Jay, nineteen at the time, sat at the defense table in a borrowed suit, scared out of his mind. His lawyer, appointed by the judge, was a white kid not that much older than Jay. He wouldn't listen and rarely looked at Jay. Instead, he slid a yellow legal pad and a number 2 pencil across the table. Anything Jay had to say, he should write it down.

He remembers staring at the pencil, thinking of his exams, of all things.

He was a senior in college then and failing Spanish. He sat at the defense table and wondered how old he would be when he got out, if they gave him two years or twenty. He tried to imagine the whole of his life—every Christmas, every kiss, every

breath—spent in prison. He tried to do the math, dividing his life in half, then fourths, then split again, over and over until it was something small enough to fit inside a six-by-eight cell at the Walls in Huntsville. Any way he looked at it, a conviction was a death sentence.

He remembers looking around the courtroom every morning and not recognizing a soul. His friends all stayed away, treating his arrest and pending incarceration as something contagious. He was humbled, almost sickened with shame to see the women from the church, women he did not even know, show up every day, taking up the first two and three rows in the gallery. Never speaking, or making a scene. Just there, every time he turned around.

We got you, son. We're not gon' let you fall.

His own mother hadn't come to the courthouse once, hadn't even come to see him in lockup.

He didn't know Bernie then or her father, didn't know the church or God. He was a young man full of ideas that were simple, black and white. He liked to talk big about the coming revolution, about the church negro who was all show and no action, who was doing nothing for the *cause* . . . a word spoken one too many times, worked into one too many speeches, until it had lost all meaning for Jay, until it was just a word, a shortcut, a litmus test for picking sides.

Well, he's not on anyone's side anymore. Except his own.

There are other American dreams, he reasons.

One is money, of course. A different kind of freedom and seemingly within his reach. If he works hard, wears a suit, plays by the new rules.

His dreams are simple now. Home, his wife, his baby.

He watches Bernadine, moving to the music, wiping sweat from her brow, pasting stray black hairs against her bronze

skin. Jay stands perfectly still, lost in the sway of his wife's hips. Right, then left, then right again. He smiles and leans over the cooler for a second beer, feeling the boat moving beneath his feet.

An hour or so later, the cake cut and the food nearly gone, Jay and Bernie are alone on the deck, trading the hot, humid air inside the cabin for the hot, humid air outside. At least on the deck, there's the hope of a breeze as the boat travels west on the water. Bernie leans her forearms against the hand railing, sticking her face into the moist night air. Jay pops the top of his Coors. His fourth, or maybe his fifth. He lost count somewhere near Turning Basin, the only spot between downtown and the Port of Houston where a boat can turn around on the narrow bayou. They are heading back to Allen's Landing now, but are still a few miles from downtown. From the rear of the boat, Jay can see the lights of the high-rise buildings up ahead, the headquarters of Cole Oil Industries standing tall above the rest. To the rear of the boat is a view of the port and the Ship Channel, lined with oil refineries on either side. From here, the refineries are mere clusters of blinking lights and puffs of smoke, white against the swollen charcoal sky, rising on the dewy horizon like cities on a distant planet.

Between the refineries and downtown Houston, there's not much to look at but water and trees as the boat floats through a stretch of nearly pitch-black darkness. Jay stands next to his wife on the deck, following shadows with his eyes, tracing the silhouette of moss hanging from the aged water oaks that line the banks of the water. He finishes his beer, dropping the can onto the deck.

They are about to head back inside when they hear the first scream, what sounds at first like a cat's cry, shrill and desperate. It's coming from the north side of the bayou, high above them, from somewhere in the thick of trees and weeds lining the bank. At first Jay thinks of an animal caught in the brush. But then . . . he hears it again. He looks at his wife. She too is staring through the trees. The old man in the baseball cap suddenly emerges from the captain's cabin, a narrow slip of a room at the head of the boat, housing the gears and controls. "What the hell was that?" he asks, looking at Jay and Bernie.

Jay shakes his head even though he already knows. Somewhere deep down, he knows. It wasn't an animal he heard. It was a woman.

The old man ducks into the main cabin. A few seconds later, Jay hears the music stop . . . then silence, nothing except the soft whisper of water lapping against the sides of the boat as they creep slowly along the surface of the bayou.

The old man emerges from the main cabin. "Y'all heard something?"

"Over there," Bernie says, pointing to the brush along the embankment.

Jay strains to make out any buildings behind the trees, trying to place where they are. He makes quick calculations, judging their distance from downtown with his eyes, trying to gauge how long they've been drifting westward. But in the darkness and with his drunken sense of time, he can only guess. They are somewhere near Lockwood Drive, near Fifth Ward, that much he can tell. He can see part of the Freedman's National Bank clock from here, rising high behind the trees. It's late, he realizes, just shy of midnight.

He's had a couple of cases come out of Fifth Ward. Property disputes and petty theft. But also fistfights and holdups and one

kid who knifed another one just for playing his music too loud. Jay knows they are floating through the back side of the one of the roughest neighborhoods in the city.

Bernie turns to her husband. "Something's wrong out there, Jay."

Behind them, there's another scream, a howl really, a plea.

A woman's voice, shaped into two very distinct words: *Help me.*

Jay feels a slight flutter across his chest, a tiny hiccup of dread.

Bernie's voice drops to a whisper. "What in the devil is going on out there?"

The old man disappears into the captain's cabin.

A few seconds later, he emerges carrying a flashlight. Bernie and Jay clear the narrow deck, giving him room to pass as he starts for the rear of the boat. He shines the weak light into the brush on the north side of the bayou, calling out into the darkness, to a face none of them can see. "You okay out there?"

There's no response. The old man waves his light through the trees. They're traveling at an even clip, creeping slowly, but surely, farther away from her. The old man calls out again. "Hey . . . you okay out there?"

A gunshot cracks through the air.

Jay's heart stops, everything going still. He has a fleeting, panicked thought that . . . *this is it.* He actually looks down to see if he's been hit, an old habit set off by firecrackers and bad mufflers, a holdover from his other life.

There's a second shot then. It echoes and rolls across the air like thunder.

The old man lets out a low, raspy moan. "God in heaven."

Bernie mutters a prayer under her breath.

Jay grabs for his wife's hand, pulling her toward the door to

the main cabin, away from the open deck. Bernie yanks her hand free of his, the movement strong and decisive, the force of it causing her feet to slide a little on the slick surface of the deck. She steadies herself on the railing, turning to face the old man in the baseball cap. "Sir, I think you'd better turn this thing around."

The old man in the baseball cap stares at Bernie, sure she's not serious. "I can't," he says to her and Jay. "The bayou's too narrow. 'Sides the basin, ain't no place to turn her around 'til we get back to Allen's Landing."

"Then stop the boat," Bernie says.

The old man shoots a quick glance in Jay's direction, making it clear that he intends to take no instruction from the pregnant woman, not without her husband's say-so, which only infuriates Bernie. "Stop this boat," she says again.

In the end, the old man relents, starting on his own for the captain's cabin.

Jay grabs his arm. "Don't."

"Somebody's in trouble out there, Jay!"

"There are *two* people out there, B," he says. "The girl and who or whatever it is she's running from." He's picturing a street fight or a knock-down, drag-out between lovers or something worse . . . much, much worse.

"Leave it alone," he hears himself say.

Bernie stares at Jay, her voice hushed. "What is the matter with you?"

Her disappointment in him, no matter how it cuts, is not the point.

"Somebody's shooting out there, B," he says. "You got me and him on this boat . . ." he says, pointing to the only other able body on board, a man almost seventy. "And my wife," Jay adds, lowering his voice to match hers, trying to get her to see it his way. "I, for one, am not willing to put you or myself at risk to step into

some trouble we don't know the first thing about. We don't know that girl, don't know what kind of trouble she brings," he says, hearing the cynicism in his voice, hating it, but feeling pressed to speak it anyway. The oldest con in the book, he thinks to himself, is the damsel in distress, the girl with the flat tire by the side of the road, the one with a boyfriend waiting in the weeds to jump you as soon as you stop to help. "Just leave it alone," he says.

Bernie stares at him for a long, painful moment, squinting around the edges of her eyes, as if she's trying to place him, someone she used to know. "Oh, Jay," she say with a sigh.

"We'll call the police," he says, deciding it just then.

It's a good plan: clean, simple, logical.

The old man is sheepish, slow to move, shuffling the ball of his right foot on the deck's floor. "We ain't got a city license to run this thing after hours."

"What?" Jay says.

"Oh, God," Bernie mumbles.

"Call the police, man," Jay says firmly.

The old man sighs and walks to a dirty white phone that's smudged with oil and grime and resting outside the door to the captain's cabin. He lifts the phone, what looks more like a walkie-talkie or a CB receiver. He dials, then pauses, listening, straining, it seems. Jay and Bernie wait, watching as the old man punches the buttons on the phone a few times. Hearing nothing, he finally slams the receiver in its cradle. The phone, apparently, is not working.

"Fucking Jimmy," the old man says.

There's another scream, closer this time.

Bernie grabs the flashlight from the old man's hand, swinging the cloudy white light toward the embankment in time to see a flash of motion in the trees, a rustling in the brush. They watch as a body drops, rolling zigzag down the steep bank, bumping

up against weeds and uneven soil. It rolls all the way down the embankment, then . . . it disappears. Jay hears a quiet splash, a sucking sound, the bayou swallowing something whole.

Then . . . nothing. For what seems like an eternity.

Bernie looks at Jay. He can hear his own heartbeat, low in his throat.

A moment later, a ripple breaks the still water, its waves spread like arms offering an embrace. "Somebody's moving out there," the captain mumbles.

There's a burp and gurgle of air. Something surfaces on the water.

Jay hears splashing, then a cry, hoarse and starved for air.

Bernie waits for no one's permission. She marches into the captain's cabin. The old man makes a move to stop her, then thinks better of it. Bernie can barely fit her body inside the small captain's cabin. She has to reach past her belly to touch the key sticking out of the control board, turning it to the left.

The engine sputters, then falls quiet.

No one on the deck moves, no one says a word.

Bernie and the old man are both looking at Jay.

He moves quickly, without a word being said, removing his watch, but not his wedding band, thinking to himself that this is one of those times when being a man, or rather trying to play the part to any convincing degree, trumps his better judgment. He's not exactly a big guy to begin with, and the years have softened his once wiry frame. He kicks off his shoes, then lifts his shirt from his pants, past the slight paunch around his middle. He starts to take it off, but changes his mind. He makes an awkward climb onto the deck's railing, takes a deep breath, holding it tight and precious in his chest, and jumps.

The water is warm and bitter. It comes in everywhere, in his mouth and throat, through his clothes. Beneath the black sur-

face, the bayou is alive, pulling at him, tugging at his arms and legs. He feels twigs and leaves and what he hopes are only fish brushing against his arms and legs. He has some vague sense of the light from the boat, but his eyes are burning. It's impossible to see clearly. He moves blindly through the darkness, reeled in by the sound of her voice.

When he feels something stringy in his hands, tangling around his fingers, he knows he's found her; her hair is in his hands. She's gurgling, spitting and coughing. He wraps an arm around her sternum and pulls. He turns toward the boat, momentarily disoriented by the white light shining in his eyes. He pulls and swims, swims and pulls, until his legs burn, until his arms ache, until he is sure they will both drown. Within a few feet of the boat, he pushes harder, past what he thinks is his limit. When he reaches a thin ladder at the back of the vessel, he strains to lift her body overhead. The captain reaches over the side of the railing to help lift the woman, weak and limp, onto the boat's deck.

Jay is bent over, his hands on his knees, trying to line up one breath after another, trying not to pass out. Out of the corner of his eye, he gets the first good look at the woman he carried across the bayou, the life he's just saved.

She's white and filthy.

There's black dirt coating her skin, dead leaves clinging to her arms. She's terrified, shaking, staring at a room full of black faces, each of whom is staring back at her. The boat's cabin is still and quiet except for the AC unit buzzing in the window and the drops of water raining off their bodies, hers and Jay's.

"He follow you?"

It's his first question, before her name, before he asks if she's okay.

She can't, or won't, speak. She sits on the edge of one of the folding chairs at the table, her teeth chattering, blue and yellow balloons swaying incongruously over her head. Bernie, in the other seat, reaches across the table for a stack of wrinkled paper napkins. She offers them to the stranger, who is soaking wet. But the woman won't let go of her purse long enough to take one.

"Are you okay?" Bernie asks gently.

Jay's eyes skim the woman's body, her arms, her legs, her face.

She has not been shot, he sees right away. The skin beneath her neck is red and swollen, but Jay can't be sure if that was his doing—when he grabbed her in the water—or someone else's. Other than that, there isn't a scratch on her. She looks up, aware that Jay is watching her, and tightens the grip on her purse, as if she half-expects him to make a clean snatch and run away with it. He senses this white woman is afraid of him. He ignores the insult, stuffing his rising anger, an emotion that will in no way serve him.

"Where is he?" he asks.

Still she doesn't speak.

"Where *is* he?" Jay asks again, harder this time.

"I don't know," she says, opening her mouth for the first time, her voice sweet but raw, like a rusty church bell swinging on its hinge. "I ran, I just ran."

Jay, still thinking there's a gun somewhere close by, turns to the old man in the baseball cap. "Start the boat," he orders the captain. "Now."

The old man slips through the cabin door, and a few moments later, Jay hears the engine start. He turns back to the woman. "What happened to you?"

She lowers her eyes, her face taking on a hot, crimson color.

She is too shamed, it seems, to look him in the eye.

"He attack you?"

"Jay," Bernie says softly. She shakes her head at her husband, a silent suggestion that whatever went on behind those trees, maybe this woman, terrified and shaking, is not ready to say it out loud, in mixed company no less. Jay nods, backing off, but he doesn't take his eyes off the stranger. She lost her shoes somewhere in the water, but Jay can tell by the cut and fabric of her dress that it isn't cheap. She's also missing an earring. Its twin is round and gold with a diamond in the center. There's a diamond on her ring finger too—right hand, not left—a rock three times bigger than the one Bernie is wearing. Her purse, the one she won't let go of, has little *G*'s printed all over it. It's Italian, Jay knows, like the ones those rich insurance company lawyers carry into the courtroom.

Eyeing the clothes and the rock, Jay asks, "Where were you?"

"Excuse me?" the woman says, a surprising edge in her voice.

"Where were you coming from?"

She stares at him blankly, as if she doesn't understand the question, but Jay catches an unmistakable flash of recognition in her copper-colored eyes. He thinks she knows exactly what he's asking: what was a woman like you doing in a neighborhood like this, 'round about midnight, alone?

She cuts her eyes away from Jay, turning to Bernie instead. "Is there a washroom I can use?"

Bernie points to a swinging door across the room. It stops short of the floor, offering little privacy except for a small painted sign that says OCCUPIED, a smiley face drawn inside the *O*. Bernie offers the paper napkins again. The woman is slow to move, her body stiff, like a broken doll, held together at this late hour by sheer will, as if she's afraid that any tiny motion might break her

in two. And she won't let go of her purse. Bernie reaches for the handbag, as if to set it on the table for the woman. But the move startles her. She lets out a small cry in protest, her eyes alight with a kind of panic. Bernie lets go of the purse instantly, and the bag tumbles from both their hands. They all watch as it falls onto the floor, landing with surprising softness. Its mouth open to the room, the purse, Jay sees, is empty. It contains nothing, not a lipstick case or a book of matches, not even house keys or a few coins. Like her missing shoes and earring, it seems the contents of the woman's purse were lost somewhere in the bayou. Lost, or *dumped*, he thinks, the word occurring to him unexpectedly, lodging itself stubbornly in the back of his mind, like a sharp pebble in his shoe.

Bernie and the woman reach for the purse at the same time.

"Don't touch it," Jay blurts. "Don't touch a thing."

Just leave it alone, he thinks.

The woman picks up her bag. She stands, turning her back to them, and slips behind the bathroom door. Jay can hear the metal latch catch on the other side. The old man is now leaning against the cabin door, smoking another cigarette, pinched between his thumb and forefinger. He nods toward the white woman, her legs showing beneath the bathroom door, then looks at Jay and shrugs. "Ain't nothing to do now," he says. "Just ride her on in, I guess."

Jay watches her in the rearview mirror.

She's in the backseat, eyes closed, turning her diamond ring over and over, fingering the icy stone as if it were a talisman or a rosary, something to bring luck or a promise of redemption. They're only a few blocks from the central station. They ride in silence, the stranger in the back and Bernie in the front passen-

ger seat. Jay keeps the Buick Skylark at an even thirty-five miles an hour, careful not to draw any undue attention. He's keenly aware of the irony, his fear of being stopped by cops on his way to a police station. But driving a strange white woman, whose name he never got, at this time of night, in *this* city, makes him edgy, cautious. He wouldn't have offered to drive her at all if Bernie hadn't insisted. His clothes are still wet with the stink of the bayou.

There's no one in front of the police station when he pulls up to the curb.

Jay parks the car, but leaves the engine running.

Downtown's central police station is an older building, a rarity in a city that has a curious habit of razing its own history. The station was built in early midcentury, before the city was a boomtown, before the postwar explosion of American highways made gas the most coveted commodity in the country, before 1973 and the embargo, before the crisis, before oil made Houston.

"Should we go in?" Bernie asks, her face turned to her husband.

The woman in the backseat opens her eyes. They meet Jay's in the rearview mirror. "I'm fine from here." Her voice is mannered, calm. "Thank you."

She steps out of the car and walks up the first steps to the police station, then stops. She's gathering her strength maybe, or, Jay thinks, she's stalling.

"You think she's okay?" Bernie asks.

Jay puts the car in drive, fresh sweat breaking across his brow.

Just the idea of being anywhere near a police station at this time of night, looking like a ragged dog, tangled up in some white woman's mess makes him more than a little dizzy. He knows

firsthand the long, creative arm of Southern law enforcement, knows when he ought to keep his mouth shut.

He locks the doors and pulls away from the curb, stealing a final glance in his rearview mirror. He watches the woman standing alone in front of the police station and wonders if she's going inside.