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SEAWALL

A Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in the Department of English

The University of Mississippi

by

KIERAN LYONS

May 2015



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ABSTRACT

*Seawall* consists of two self-contained selections of fiction from a larger project. *Seawall* follows a young man named Million Horizon from the moment he arrives in Galveston, Texas, in September of 1900 along with the historical hurricane that would come to be known as the Great Storm of Galveston. This thesis is narrated in a close third-person focused on Million. Although much of the setting and some of the characters are based on historical fact, this thesis often diverges significantly from historical truth and includes fantastical elements.

In the first section, Million is conscripted into a largely black crew whose duty is to recover corpses from the wreckage of the city. He meets several pivotal characters and eventually manages to escape into the custody of Henry James Moody, Jr., a wealthy businessman, who places him on retainer for future jobs.

In the second section, Million settles into his house near the black district of Galveston. He takes part in the mysterious disappearance of his former foreman. He partially fulfills an assignment from Moody to convince the residents of his neighborhood to sign exploitative insurance contracts. His house is burned down and mysterious assailants assault him. Finally, he discovers an uncomfortable truth.

For my parents.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express deep gratitude to my committee members: Tom Franklin, Chris Offutt, and Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra. The support of the faculty, staff, and students in the English Department has been invaluable. I would like to express special thanks to those who read portions of this project in workshop. As always, thank you, Vanessa, for believing in me.

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BOOK 1: MILLION, 1900

## CHAPTER 1: MILLION ARRIVES IN GALVESTON

Million took the rails until he could smell the ocean. During the day he had baked in the empty boxcar but the early night turned cool and humid. He sat on the floor with his shoulder against the shuddering wall, watching puddles and saltgrass whip dimly by through the crack of the door. The train began to slow. He supposed it must be approaching the train yard. Once he could see individual stalks of grass rather than a gray-green blur, he forced the door open enough to squeeze his head and shoulders through the gap. Ahead of the train he saw the low-slung lights of a small city: Galveston. He held his breath and slipped one leg, then his hips, and then his other leg out of the boxcar. He clung to the door with one hand and jumped clear of the rocky berm into silt and brackish water.

After the caboose streaked past, he climbed up the berm on all fours and began to follow the tracks on foot. He soon lost the red marker lights of the caboose among the distant lights of the city, which was much further away than he had thought. He stepped from railroad tie to railroad tie. Salt flats stretched out in the darkness as far as he could see. The points of light spread slowly along the horizon as he walked. After nearly ten minutes, he reached a bay with the lights of the city on the other side, at least a mile away. On a map of Texas, long since lost, that he had found in a shuttered filling station outside Belton, the island was a sliver of fingernail stuck to the coast. He pored over it until the shapes of words like GALVESTON, LEAGUE CITY, and GULF OF MEXICO bedded down and made themselves comfortable in his head. He had imagined that the narrow blue gap between the mainland and the island spanned the width of

an old river. Instead, it was wider than any lake he had seen. That blue expanse that had spilled off the southeast corner of the map must be nearly infinite. Galveston was the dry world's end. It beckoned like the verge of a cliff.

The railway continued over the water on a causeway barely wider than the tracks. If a train came while Million was crossing, he would have to dive into the water. He could not swim. He saw no road, no automobiles nor wagons, but still he hoped he would happen upon a bridge. Million scrambled down the berm and followed the thin rind of sediment that separated the bay from the salt grass. Several times he fell into waist-deep water where the bay had dug through the barrier and seeped into the marsh. The water was warm as urine. A cool wind gusted from the land and the grasses clicked like thousands of skittering crabs. It began to rain. He walked on, the city lights to his right dimming as the rain fell harder. Eventually he found a small abandoned sailboat in the salt grass and climbed inside its cramped hold to shelter from the rain. It seemed more or less watertight, if not quite dry. He supposed he could row across the bay if the morning light did not reveal an easier passage. He fell asleep in the boat's damp belly among fossilized coils of rope. Crabs and sea lice fretted over his sleeping body.

He dreamt of the splintered boards of the boxcar swaying under his body. The swaying did not stop when he opened his eyes. He pushed the hatch open and climbed onto the deck. The rain had slackened; the tiny drops seemed to drift rather than plummet. Low clouds pressed down on him. A film of green light spread over the water that now surrounded the boat. All Million could see was a cluster of four small buoys floating in the water about fifteen feet off his beam. The closest began to move jerkily toward the boat, trailing a tiny wake. As it came closer, Million saw that it was the head of a man that just barely cleared the water. His skin was black

but in the strange light shone green. His eyes were barely open. He was not swimming but walking; he moved as if pushing through a crowd. The other shapes were people too. One man stood head and shoulders out of the water, his sodden white shirt plastered to his skin. The water came up to ears of a woman who had tipped her face toward the rain to keep her mouth and nose clear. Gentle waves lapped at the chin of a second woman. He thought this must be a dream, but the rain stung his eyes and the boat felt solid under his feet.

The first man disappeared under the bow. The other three began to half-swim, half-walk toward the boat. Their eyes were fixed on the gunwale; they did not seem to notice Million. He realized that they intended to climb aboard. Four negroes and him aboard one little boat: that would not do. This was his boat now.

A hand clutched the gunwale, then another. One was missing its ring finger. Million steeled himself for the man's head to appear. The hands clenched and released in a way that made them seem to pulse, but the man did not pull himself up. The tall man reached the boat next. The shortest woman trailed behind him, her face still turned toward the sky. He must have been leading her by the hand.

The tall man took hold of the gunwale as well. The boat rocked with their weight but no one climbed aboard. Million leaned over the side to see what they were doing. The two men clung to the boat. The smaller woman held fast to the tall man's shoulders. The men kicked and strained, their arms shaking with effort, but failed to lift themselves out of the water. Each time they tried to pull themselves aboard, the beam of the boat sank closer and closer to the water.

The other woman, now only a few feet from the boat, finally noticed Million. She croaked something indistinct and the others looked over him as well. They released the boat and stretched their arms out toward him. He threw himself back onto the deck, where they could no

longer see him. The desperation of their synchronized gesture unnerved him. If he got within their reach, he knew he would die. Two by two, six hands appeared on the gunwale.

Million rolled onto his back and brought his boot heel down as hard as he could on one of the hands. A groan, more frustrated than agonized, came from the other side of the gunwale. Million stomped on each of the hands. Fingers snapped and wood splintered, but each time he forced one hand to withdraw, another returned. After a long while, no hands remained. Million lay on the deck, breathing heavily. Rain fell in his open mouth.

Eventually he sat up and peered over the side again. The four people huddled together a few feet from the boat. Only the taller woman looked at him. Her lips moved but if she made any sound, Million could not hear it. A swell came with a sound like a hand run over silk. The shapes slipped under. The wave bore the boat away from the green light into darkness so complete he did not know if his eyes were open or if he was awake. Rain crashed down as if poured from buckets. Million groped for the hatch and retreated into the cabin.

A fierce wind rose. Its howls filled the small space. The boat rose and fell on tall waves. Million could not convince himself that the people in the water had been a dream, nor could he make sense of what he had seen. All he knew was that a storm had picked up his boat and borne it away. Twice during the night the boat struck something and tossed him around in the dark. This was a comfort: at least not yet been swallowed by the endless, empty gulf.

Eventually, the violence of the storm subsided. Pinpoints of light peeked through the hull. He opened the hatch onto a blue sky and climbed out. He stood in a vast, sandy field strewn with rubble that stretched in front of him all of the way to the brown line of the Gulf and almost as far as he could see in every other direction. He had reached the island somehow. In the

direction of the bay, a bristling wall of wreckage ran down the island like a spine. Beyond it rose three and a half church towers and the roofs of two mansions. There was no structure more substantial than a fencepost between him and this wall. Out of its own substance the city had erected a barricade against him.

When he stepped down from the boat, he found that what he had taken for earth was actually a flat expanse of debris, mostly wooden boards that overlapped like scales on the flank of a giant fish. Stepping from board to board, it took him almost twenty minutes to reach the wall, which was really less a wall than a wave of slate roofing, battered boards, boats and wagons that rose gradually to about thirty feet above Million's head. The wave peaked around two blocks from where he stood. He walked alongside it, hoping to find a way through or around, but found none. He looked over his shoulder to see how far he had trekked from the sailboat. He could not pick it out from the chaotic jumble of wreckage. Distracted, he trod on something yielding. He stumbled, then turned to see what had tripped him. He saw a man, unmistakably dead, buried to his waist in an eddy of shredded lumber. The man's torso was bare, his back arched, his throat bared to the sun. Million realized that he had stepped on the man's shoulder. First one ant catches your eye, then the grass teems: he now saw that the field was littered with bodies.

He quickly turned away and began to climb the groaning debris. The slope was gentle but at times Million was forced to navigate the slick and shifting fragments of houses on all fours. Occasionally he found solid footing--a telephone pole, a section of a slate roof--and managed to walk a few paces. A briny, loamy stench rose from deep beneath him. When he reached the peak of the wave, the remains of the city bared themselves to him. Nowhere was earth, grass, or concrete visible. Warped buildings rose out of a wooden sea. A wagon wheel hung from the

bones of a house. Ahead of him, between the few large buildings still standing, he made out houses and even oak trees on higher ground about half a mile away. Evidently, some of the island had been spared. Past that oasis, beyond the crumbling churches and shredded homes, he could just make out the bay. Something was wrong with its color. It looked dull and rough, not like water at all. He looked along the wave in both directions. To his right, the wave dwindled as it approached the northeast end of the island, beyond which he could barely make out a channel and what seemed to be another island. To his left, the ruins of the city stretched for a couple of miles before ending at a marshy bayou fed by the bay where copses of hardy trees stood like sparse and stubby teeth against a sky devoid of clouds. Among the trees perched a sailing ship. Its bare masts jabbed the sky. On the other side of the wave, a narrow strip of land carried on to the horizon.

The air stilled and thickened as Million descended into Galveston. He made out troughs where roads were buried. Million followed one of these troughs away toward the high ground that he had spotted. Many buildings stood along the cross street, their doorways blown open and their windows bare. A gun roared from behind a nearby building. Million, not knowing what else to do, followed the sound. He came what seemed at first to be a clearing but had once been the foundation of a large building. At the far end, he saw a long-haired man in a suit standing on the belly of an upturned automobile. The man's back was to Million. Million saw him raise a rifle and snarl a word that he had never heard before: *ghoul!* The rifled barked like thunder. Somewhere beyond where Million could see, a man screamed.

When Million took a quiet step backwards, a sharp, familiar pain tugged at his throat as if he had swallowed a fishhook. He could almost see the line streaking toward the yellow-headed man. He took a deep breath and marched ahead.

## CHAPTER 2: MOODY SHOOTS A GHOUL

A man stepped out of a shop doorway carrying a box. Henry James Moody, Jr., leveled his 30-30 and drew a bead on him.

"Ghoul!" he shouted.

The man dropped the box, tripped over it, died face-down.

A man in a rain slicker crept along the wooden wave, stage-whispering a name into the wreckage as if he was too embarrassed to shout. Perhaps his voice was gone?

"Ghoul!"

The stranger found his voice and wasted it on screaming.

Further down Broadway, a woman peered into the open mouth of a corpse.

"Who are you to take a tooth?" Moody shouted. The woman looked up. "Ghoul!" She bolted down an alley holding her throat.

Moody caught a glimpse of movement in the corner of his eye. He turned. A young man of seventeen or eighteen trudged toward his perch on the overturned auto. His trousers were filthy and his shirt, which must have once been white, was stained brown up to his stomach as if he had been dipped in tea. His black hair was of medium length and no particular style. Moody had seen negroes with lighter skin than his, and whites with darker. An Italian, maybe. No one lived in this part of town. There were only two reasons to be here: to loot or to shoot looters. His hands were empty but surely his pockets were not.

Moody leveled his rifle at the man. *Ghoul!* The man's baggy shirt jumped as if someone had tugged it. Moody worked the lever and brought the rifle to his shoulder. The man stood less than twenty feet away. Moody could hit a seagull at a hundred yards and expected to have ample occasion as the corpses began to rot. He was not certain that this one was a ghoul but he considered it a rule to never kill anyone halfway. He fired again and again the boy's shirt jumped.

"What's ghoul?" the man shouted.

Moody could not have missed. He ejected a cartridge and caught it. He worked the lever again but the magazine was dry. Two shots at the Italian, five dead ghouls, and one unfired cartridge made eight: the gun had not misfired. Moody was briefly ashamed that he had doubted the fine rifle that had never failed him before. He was not superstitious. Moody had not failed, neither had the rifle. Whether Providence or luck, something was looking out for the stranger.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

There would be no public outcry if Moody staved his head in with the butt of the rifle. As dawn broke, Moody had shot his first ghoul. In the man's pockets were five severed fingers with rings still on them. A dead indigent was nothing next to that.

The man's expression, at once helpless and determined, reminded Moody of a photograph a cavalryman had once shown him. It showed a bloody Indian brave shredding his own flesh to extricate himself from a barbed wire fence. To worsen one's pain for a chance at survival, at revenge--he found that admirable. Of course, the Indian was executed and left to hang from the fence. There was a lesson there, he supposed. Moody asked the boy his name as he fed the cartridge into the chamber.

"My name is Million," the boy said.

"You are going to satisfy my curiosity about something, Million," Moody said. He stepped onto the underside of the auto's running board, raised the rifle, and fired. The gun spit a glob of blood onto the front of Million's shirt. Million sat down in the sandy road. Moody hopped down from the car and crouched in front of the boy. The finger-sized hole in his chest tempted Moody to Biblicalities. Moody could see that the boy's eyes had gone dark. His body was drawing its energy from its periphery to its core, like a mother wolf curling around its young in the winter. Moody had been there himself, all of his concerns whittled down to three demands: *heart, keep beating; lungs, keep filling; blood, don't go*. When the boy finally sighed, Moody thought he had died. He had never fired on such a close target before. The exit wound, he thought, must be tremendous, so he stood to check now that it would be less of an imposition.

There was no exit wound. Unbelieving, Moody ran his hand over Million's slumped back. His friend, a doctor to the wealthy, had once told him a story about treating a man who had been shot in the neck with a small-caliber pistol. There was a pucker where the bullet had gone in, like a navel, but no exit wound. Despite his efforts, the bullet seemed to have vanished. Three days later, the man pissed it out into his commode.

But Moody's fine rifle was no rabbit gun. It turned birds into puffs of feathers. He had once shot a friend's front door open while standing on the lawn. He set the rifle down and laid both hands on Million's back to feel for ribs broken from the inside. The muscles of his back were smooth and hard as driftwood. His skin was warm. It seemed a shame to leave such a specimen in the street for the ghouls. But then again, unlike their namesakes, these ghouls did not actually eat corpses and the boy had no rings to steal. No gold teeth, either, at least not that he had noticed. He thought it would be unseemly to check his mouth but he allowed himself to slip a quick hand in the boy's pockets. In one: a damp scrap of paper with a few blurred lines on

it. A Chinese symbol, he thought, but it seemed too familiar. It was a map, simple enough that it might have been drawn in the sand. A few intersecting lines for roads--no, railroads; there were a few cross-ties drawn in--that led to a curved line he supposed must be the gulf. Moody wondered whether he had died at the end of his journey or before he started. A map this crude would be of little use either way. He slipped the paper back into the boy's pocket. In his other pocket he found two damp, kinked cigarettes. He tucked one back where he had found it and dried the other with a match as he walked away. It was hand-rolled and cheap--not his brand, naturally--but it would drive away the briny funk of seaweed that had filled his nostrils all day. He hiked toward his father's mansion on Broadway; he had a feeling that the day would call for more bullets.

### CHAPTER 3: MILLION WORKS THE DEAD CARTS

Million had not felt the impact of the slug. Instead, he had the sensation that an awful seed had been buried in him, so bitterly cold that it had taken all of his focus not to panic. The man's warm hands on his back had helped. He now felt only an ache and a gnawing itch under his heart. Now that he could spare the energy, he opened his eyes. He looked down. A red delta fanned out over its lower half of his shirt. At its peak, just below his solar plexus, a red hole passed through his blood-soaked shirt and flesh alike. He filled to overflowing with frustration. He sobbed a hiccupy sob: all of this and he still did not know what *gool* meant. It hurt him more than not knowing his birth name.

He lay back in the road. It was just another word he did not know. It was nothing. The sky was blue as an eye and smooth as a tooth. He had lost nothing but a cigarette and had gained something new: a rich man who knew his name.

He was beginning by fits and starts to understand that whatever force had carried him to the island had swept most of the city away with it. That he had slept through it made him feel complicit, as if it was his arrival that had ruined the city. He had come for no reason other than the word of a man who told him that in Galveston millionaires walked the streets alone and no one owned coats. He had been hungry his whole life. Though he might go hungry here, too, at least he would be hungry and warm. But, as always, a wave had come to sweep everyone away and leave him standing alone.

Insects hopped and buzzed around his body. He kept his eyes and mouth shut tight against them and rested his hand over the hole in his chest. He explored its crusted edges with a fingertip. This was no dream. He heard voices calling and willed himself not to hear what they said. The sun dried his sweat into a glaze and lit up the blood in his eyelids so that his vision was red. Something terrible had happened to the city. It had nothing to do with him and he could have nothing to do with it as long as he kept his eyes closed. He would leave after sunset. In the night he would not have to see anything. The smell of baking slime would be blown away by a fresh breeze from the gulf. The people screaming from beneath the rubble would lose their voices and let themselves die.

He heard someone squelching through the slime toward him. He opened his eyes. Searing white gave way to blue. He thought it must be Moody, his millionaire, but when he sat up he saw it was three red-faced men in martial uniforms. They froze when he moved. Each held a long rifle with a bayonet gleaming on the tip. Their pants were coated in slime to the knees. The soldier in front wore a battered straw hat that shaded his freckled forehead. He looked as though he rarely needed to shave his pale cheeks. He scrutinized Million as if trying to place his face. The soldier's blue eyes darted to his bloody shirt, to his hair, to his nose. All at once, Million felt part of the soldier's attention shear off and fall away like a calving glacier.

"Can you stand?" the soldier asked.

Million pushed himself to his feet. He saw that the soldier furthest from him was not carrying a rifle at all but what looked like a broom handle with a metal hook at the end. About twenty feet away stood a small group of men in tattered clothes. A few whispered to each other but most watched Million with mild interest. A fourth soldier stood several paces away on the far

side of the group with his rifle slung over his shoulder. He appeared to be guarding the ragged men.

"What happened to you?" the soldier in the hat asked Million. Million heard weary concern in his voice, or perhaps curiosity.

"You aren't soldiers," he said.

"I told you about the hat," one of the other men said.

"Were you shot?" the soldier in the hat asked.

"I don't have anything," Million said.

"All I want," the man said, "is to know who shot you and why."

Million stared at the hook. The rifles and the bayonets did not scare him but he knew, somehow, that the hook's purpose was to keep him in this place. It would snare him if he ran. The man who held it would bury it in his calf and drag him down the street.

"You aren't soldiers," he repeated.

The man in front tossed his hat into the muck with his free hand. His hair was red and airy except where the hat had plastered it down in a sweaty ring. "No, we're not," he said, squinting against the sun. "We're Coast Guard. Now, if you don't tell me who shot you--"

"Gool," Million said. The word felt like a curse, in both senses. "Gool shot me."

"Ghoul? You mean--do you mean a looter shot you?" the man asked. "Why?"

"He took my cigarette."

The man wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "How is it that a man sees a corpse and wonders what it can do for him?"

"What's a corpse?" Million asked.

"A dead body," the man said. "A ghoul eats corpses."

"When he shot me I wasn't a corpse," Million said.

"That's sensible," the man said. "Are you sure you aren't going to die? We can leave you alone if you'd like."

"I'm not going to die."

The man glanced over his shoulder at the other three. When he turned back to Million he looked troubled.

"I am Captain Pastor of the United States Coast Guard," he said. "You're going to have to come with us."

Evidently, this was a cue. One of the men standing with the leader, the one with the rifle, broke away from the other two and began to circle around Million. Million searched for somewhere to run but found none. Even if there was, there was no solid surface to support a dash, only unstable wreckage and boards that sprouted nails like weeds. He was less afraid of the rifles than the hook. That its bearer seemed half-lost in a daydream meant nothing. Million joined the captives.

They set off down the side street. The leader and the man with the hook walked ahead of the captives and the other pair took up the rear. The buildings on either side had staved off some of the debris; they walked on bare, muddy ground. A young white man with a closed-off expression walked alongside Million.

"What do they want?" Million asked him. The man shrugged.

On Million's other side, a man too short to keep pace walked in a brisk waltz: one long stride followed by two short.

"You," Million said. "What's happening?"

"They're taking us to help," the squat man said, slightly out of breath. He flashed a proud smile.

Million lowered his voice. "Is this a chain gang?" he asked.

The man's red nose wrinkled peevisly. "Absolutely goddamn not," he said.

Million looked around. Most of the men trudged along with their heads down. "Sure looks like a chain gang," he said.

"I wouldn't know," the man muttered.

The leader halted and held out a hand for them to stop. A row of skeletal storefronts lined the left side of the street. In the middle of these splintered ruins was a single, miraculously intact storefront. Its only street-facing window had been boarded over. A word had been painted directly onto the wood of the door. The word's shape looked familiar to Million. He tried to match it to a memory.

The leader and the man with the hook walked up to the door. The leader knocked politely. One of the ragged men sniggered. The leader knocked harder, then tried the handle. It was locked.

"What does the door say?" Million asked the short man. The man ignored him.

The leader leaned his rifle against the wall and began trying to kick the door down. He was not very strong. He bounced off the door with each kick. The man with the hook walked a few paces away, down what might have once been a sidewalk. He stopped in front of the ruins of the store's former neighbor. All that remained of it, whatever it had been, were a few beams of lumber and a doorframe. He stuck his head through what had once been the front wall and looked around, then called and gestured for the leader to join him. The leader surrendered to the door's strength and walked over to the man with the hook. They exchanged a few words that

Million did not catch. The man with the hook pointed toward what Million assumed was the wall that the intact store had shared with its less fortunate neighbor. The two Guardsmen stepped into the wreckage, then simply disappeared behind the intact storefront.

"Did they find a hole?" Million asked the short man. The man ignored him. Million turned to his other neighbor, who shrugged.

The two Guardsmen reappeared in the skeletal building bearing a limp body between them. One of the Guardsmen, who had been guarding the civilians, hurried over to help. They eased the body against the storefront. It was an old man with craggy features and a tonsure of gray hair. The leader crouched next to the man and placed a hand on the man's upper arm, as if he had simply fallen. Their faces were inches apart. Million could not tell from this distance if the old man was alive. The attention of the three Guardsmen was completely absorbed by their discovery.

Million turned so that he could observe the fourth Guardsman from the corner of his eye. The man had moved closer to the far side of the group of captives for a better view. He called out to the others in a language that Million did not know, though he recognized it as a question. The man with the hook looked over, barked two syllables in rebuke and turned back to the old man. Million's captor blushed and spoke no more.

In Enid, Oklahoma, Million had snuck into a baseball game between some negro barnstormers and a local team. He had been fascinated by a black player who managed to steal four bases. Each time it was the same: he edged slowly away from the base, his movement scarcely visible, until he suddenly started sprinting, five or ten feet from the base before the even the baseman noticed. This worked until the crowd learned to scream a warning when the man so much as glanced toward the next base. Million thought of that man as he took a backwards step

to the edge of the group of men, then another. He made ready to dash the moment the Guardsman looked his way. He half-crouched, steeling himself for his escape, when the short man looked his way. The man's hand shot into the air like an overzealous pupil's and he let out an absurd yelp. All four of the Guardsmen looked over.

Million ran. He took loping strides, planning each footfall in advance to avoid rusty nails and ankle-breaking snags. He made it about twenty feet before something hard and heavy struck him between his shoulder blades. He fell. He tried to push himself up but it felt as though his back would tear down the middle. As two of the Guardsmen grabbed him, he saw what had hit him: a red brick. The rifle lay at the feet of the third Guardsman, who still stood near the captives. Either his rifle did not work or he did not possess the strength to kill Million. The other civilians saw it too.

The Guardsmen led Million back to the group. Their leader marched over.

"Perhaps I haven't been clear," he said. "You aren't prisoners. You have been conscripted into the service of your city. You're free to leave so long as you understand that any person we encounter on the street who doesn't surrender to us will be considered a looter. To steal at a time like this is a crime against mankind."

He cleared his throat.

"Do any of you speak Russian?" he asked.

If anyone did, they did not speak up. The leader looked over his shoulder at the old man slumped against the wall.

"Well," he said, barely loud enough for Million to hear. "I don't suppose it matters what he had to say." He squinted at Million, regaining his focus. His forehead was bright red and his freckles looked like sores. "Listen," he said, raising his voice again. "There is nowhere to run.

The bridges are gone. You'll receive food and water for your service. Hundreds died last night. All I ask is that you do your duty when the time comes. When there are two dozen of you, you can leave to work assignments. And rations. Until then, no bolting."

Captain Pastor knocked on the door of each intact building and collected every man who had the use of his limbs, most of whom joined without comment or question. The few who tried to close the door on the captain without a suitable excuse (two children and a dead wife, for instance, or an inability to stop screaming) were dragged out by his men and marched along in front of the guardsmen in back, who said nothing but seemed to take grim amusement in nicking the backs of their recalcitrant captives' calves with their bayonets. They seemed both bored and mournful, like Catholics at Mass. The captain grew more anxious and sunburned the further they marched. He waited less and less time for tenants to answer his knocks. Eventually it seemed that his knocking was a formality. He seemed disappointed, even saddened, when someone answered, although he took the men he found anyway. Their path crept closer and closer to the oasis of oak trees and intact houses that Million had glimpsed earlier.

Million grew frustrated with inactivity. Captain Pastor had said that they would be given food once they had gathered twenty-four men. In the hour since Million had been conscripted, the group of civilians swelled from six to twenty, each of whom had received the same information from the captain, but recruitment appeared to be slowing. They had not found a single person--male, able-bodied, or otherwise--in the previous twenty minutes. The hole in Million's chest burned whenever his stomach growled. He had not eaten anything since he finished off his last pilfered can of creamed corn on the train the morning before.

"Captain!" he called out to Captain Pastor's back. The captain looked over his shoulder at Million. His face was red and puffy with tiredness, like Million had just woken him from a nap.

"This is going slow," Million said. "Let us knock too. It will be faster."

"No." Captain Pastor turned his face away.

"Captain," Million said. "Captain." Pastor ignored him.

"Shut up," one of the civilians hissed.

"Captain," Million said. "There's no one here. Let's head up to where the trees are. There must be people still there."

Captain Pastor gave no response, but at the end of the block he turned right and led the group toward high ground.

Soon they found themselves walking down an oak-lined boulevard. The stout man called it "Broadway" in a tone of admiration. Fallen branches littered the street and the soggy grounds of the mansions on either side, many of which had broken windows, but the scene was otherwise serene. Million had been ejected from plenty of neighborhoods like this before. This was the first time he had ever been led into one.

The smell of wet wood filled the street. Million's face itched as if the air flocked with tiny splinters. Only Captain Pastor and the man with the hook had the privilege of knocking on the doors of these mansions. They left the rest in the street while they walked down the paths to the front steps, branches flexing under their boots. Million watched from a distance, unable to hear what they were saying whenever someone--invariably a maid or butler--opened the heavy double doors. Sometimes they rejoined the group empty-handed. More often, the doors closed and then reopened a few minutes later, revealing a minor servant or two who the masters of the house had

volunteered in their place. After three stops, the group had swelled to two dozen members. When Million alerted the captain to this, he snapped that they were headed toward the docks and might as well pick up a few more volunteers on their way. Million drifted along in a haze of hunger. He thought they might ask the rich folks for some food but could not convince anyone else to back him when he made his case to the captain.

Soon, they reached a mansion larger than any of the others they had seen. It stood on an intersection. Its stonework was ornate in a brutal, bulging way, as if the blocky eaves and cornices were the building's attempt to extend itself as far as possible into the surrounding air. Captain Pastor and the man with the hook approached the front steps with hesitation. For all of its bulk, the building seemed fleshy and fallible, like a massive growth of fungus. Million was almost surprised when the steps held firm under the captain's weight. Pastor knocked.

A butler answered the door promptly. The front door of this mansion was close enough to the street that Million could hear their conversation. The owner of the house was unavailable, the butler said. Pastor asked him if that meant dead. It did not. Pastor and his men took the butler instead. They allowed him to leave his coat.

As the Guardsmen and the butler spoke, Million caught a flash of movement in a third-story window: a man drawing aside curtains. He recognized him as the rich man who had shot him. The man peered down at the two Guardsmen as they led his butler down the path, then seemed to look directly at Million. The curtain closed.

Million wanted to shout something but knew that he had already begun to be perceived as unstable--slow at best, insane at worst--and he did not want to call additional attention to himself. He had never known how to act. But he had never regretted keeping silent, so he did.

That afternoon, the Coast Guardsmen reached the docks on the bay side of the island with twenty-nine civilians in tow, including a volunteer fireman who could not stop sobbing, the surviving members of what had once been a set of triplets, three drunks, two butlers--one white, one black--and young, bloody Million, who was neither the youngest nor the bloodiest. Pastor handed them off to nervous-looking foreman named Baxter, who parceled the civilians out to various work crews. When Million's turn came, Baxter asked his address. "Main Street," Million said. Baxter pointed to a group of mostly black men standing next to a mound of bodies. It looked as mundane as a pile of sandbags. A pair of white men in white shirts stood talking apart from the rest. "I hope you don't have a problem with negroes," Baxter said. "Go on."

The men in white shirts, who seemed to be the foremen, glanced at Million as he approached. One flicked a hand toward the workers. He joined the group of dirty men, who stood looking in every direction except for the heap as if they were guarding it. A seagull cawed at him from atop a dead man's head. The bodies did not shock him. The water that had stained them all the same mottled brown seemed to have washed something else away as well. How terrible a mound of men and women in clean clothes would seem, he thought. How strange the foremen's white shirts looked against the sand, slime, and rubble. He had never been to a funeral but he had heard that men were buried in suits and women in dresses. Death must be such a surprise to a man who owns a suit and tie.

Million crouched on his heels. His legs ached from the strain of walking on uneven ground and his spine between his shoulder blades throbbed with a slow, thudding pain. When he tried to roll his shoulders, it felt as though his back yearned to split down the middle.

"What happened?" someone said. Million looked up. It was a sturdy-looking black man whose short hair had just begun to gray.

"I don't know," Million said, unsure what the man was asking. In his exhaustion and hunger, he felt outside of himself. He seemed to hear the words secondhand.

"It looks bad," the man said. Million realized that he was talking about the hole in his chest.

"I don't want to talk about it," Million said. "Where's the food?"

"I figured you for a looter," the man said. "Is that right?"

Million just shook his head, too tired to argue or explain.

"Anyway," the man said, "they already gave out the food for today."

Million sized up the man with renewed interest. The man was bigger than him and looked strong but his hands and jaw shook when he was not using them.

"They just gave it out all at once?" Million asked. The man was wearing simple, worn clothes with few pockets. At his feet, Million noticed a bundle made of a shirt or light coat tied around something.

"I don't think they planned on it," the man said. "All of it was gone fast."

"Did you eat yours?" Million asked.

"Hard to eat after handling these all day," the man said.

Million had noticed that whenever the wind shifted, the men swiftly moved to stay upwind of the bodies. He could not imagine that they smelled any worse than the rest of the island. At least not yet.

"Reckon I could have some?" Million asked.

The man gave him a long look. "You ask a lot of questions," he said finally. Then he picked up his bundle and moved away.

Million turned his attention to the foremen. One was tall, with a wide, thin mouth and blue eyes. The other was short. His eyes bulged below sparse eyebrows. His lips were full and pouty. Million disliked him immediately. The pair discussed how to dispose of the bodies. The short one was of the opinion that the bodies should be burned as soon as possible to prevent the spread of disease. The tall one thought that a burial at sea would be best. "Bodies don't burn," he said, "they cook." The short one thought that feeding the sharks with our brothers and sisters, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons would be the giving the gulf what it wanted, that we should boil the water out of their lungs and the salt off of their skin and let them go unto the heavens. The tall one asked where he thought the ash was going to land. And so on. At last it was agreed that the bodies should be cast into the sea, the gulf having already claimed them and funeral rites being properly an act of acceptance, not of defiance.

The foremen instructed the workers to throw rocks at any seagulls that approached the bodies while a barge was brought around. At first, the men seemed glad to have orders and an enemy. They ranged out like ants from the mound and, since there were few stones, brought back bricks and pieces of boards to throw. The projectiles that landed on the pile made soft sounds like apples falling in an orchard. An occasional splash announced those that had missed the mound entirely and landed in the bay. Million felt the muscles of his face loosen and he was almost smiling, his hunger forgotten, as he threw debris at the indignant birds, whispering "ghoul" under his breath as he released each chunk of tile or piece of pipe. The shriek of stricken gulls rose to a cacophony until all at once they took flight. Through the swirling white and gray, Million made out a dark shape. When the gulls departed, a huge vulture perched atop the pile, facing them. Someone whipped a length of rebar at it. It missed and stuck in an eye socket. The

men saw then the damage they had done to the bodies. The mound was dark with seeping blood and craggy with debris. The vulture fanned its greasy wings.

The taller foreman, who had wandered off on some errand, walked up behind the man who had thrown the rebar and kicked him between the legs. The man yelped and fell to his knees. The vulture, watching, primly folded its wings against its body.

"There is no *barge*," the foreman said, kicking the man in the stomach. "There is no dry *wood*."

"We will bury them," the shorter one said.

"For the next storm to exhume?" the taller one snarled.

"Look," Million said, pointing down the bayside shoreline. A small barge, flat as a tile, darted around a small bend toward them.

"They said there was no barge," the taller foreman said.

As the barge raced toward the docks it became clear that it was not attempting to moor. Million noticed for the first time how fast and quiet the brown water between the island and the mainland flowed, like a kite string slipping between fingers. In the few hours since Million had last seen the bay, the flotsam that had covered it had disappeared. Million had not even noticed. The barge slammed into the remnants of the nearest dock, which collapsed onto its deck and were carried away with it, down to the end of the island and around the bend into the gulf. The only sound was the polite snapping of wood and the distant shouts of other work crews.

The foremen fell to arguing again. Million sat in the dirt. The man with the satchel walked back over to Million and sat down next to him. Something about the spectacle with the barge seemed to have softened him.

"I'm Andy," the man said.

"Million."

Andy laughed. "That's some dago shit there."

"I ain't no dago," Million said. "It's just my name."

"You mulatto?" Andy asked.

Million did not know that word; he thought it must mean something like dago. "I named myself," he said instead of answering.

"Well, someone's got to do it," Andy said. He laid the bundle on the ground between the two of them and unwrapped it. Inside was a rectangular tin with words on it and a cracked blue jar half-full of water. The tin held a few strips of dried beef and a chocolate bar. He parceled half of each onto the lid of the tin for Million, who snatched them all up together and held them in both hands as one would a captured bird. He brought both hands to his mouth with each bite. Though he was grateful, he offered no thanks.

It was decided that the bodies would be dumped into the current in hopes that they would go the way of the barge and disappear forever. Million and the rest of the crew gently, gently dumped the corpses off of the end of a jetty pier into the rushing current, which stole them away. By then, the sun had begun to set behind the wooden wave. The overseers, having exhausted what seemed to be their only task for the day, allowed the men to sleep on the floor of a large white tent near the docks.

"Shouldn't there be a colored tent?" Million asked Andy, clearing a space of the bare dirt of rocks with his foot.

"This is the colored tent," Andy said. "You just in it with us."

At first, Million did not understand. Soon, he noticed that the black men spoke to each other in worried voices about their families and their homes while the few white men barely spoke at all. A blonde fellow lay on his side, facing away from the dying red light of the sun that jabbed sideways through the open door. Million cornered him and asked him where he was from. The man gave a curt reply in a language that Million could not identify. He found another white man.

"You," he said. "Where do you live?"

"Here," the man said.

Million soon realized that, like him, none of the other four white men had been able to give a satisfactory response to that same question when Baxter, or another like Baxter, had asked it of them.

Million lay down in his patch of dirt. Though he was tired, the itching in his chest kept him from sleeping. The red light inside the tent faded to a warm black. In the absence of city lights, the night was as dark as any Million had ever known. Million fell into a shallow sleep. He dreamt that ants crawled into the hole in his chest and lived in his veins. The queen nestled under his heart in place of the bullet.

He woke to a gunshot. He sat up in pitch darkness. Nervous chatter filled the tent.

"What's going on?" he spoke into the darkness where he had last seen Andy.

"Daniel try to leave," came the reply. "He got three kids and ain't seen them since yesterday."

Million heard footsteps approaching the tent door.

"That you, Daniel?" someone called.

"Yeah."

"You shot?"

"Nah. Just a warning."

"Don't you stomp all of us tryna get back to your spot."

Million heard the man lie down by the door. He too lied down. He slept.

The next day, they found the same bodies they had dumped in the current lounging on the jetty rocks like revenant mermaids. The storm had reshaped the currents around the island. A strong current now coursed through the bay, flowing in opposite directions during ebb and flood tides. Soon, crossing was only attempted at low and high tide, when the water settled briefly into glassy stillness before changing direction.

The work was ceaseless and dull. There were usually two high and two low tides a day, during which time as many boats as could be gathered ferried corpses to the mainland or brought supplies to the island. During the ebb and flood tides, day or night, Million's crew trudged through the streets alongside a train of three carts pulled by two wheezing, swaybacked horses. Some of the nimbler men clambered over the wreckage in search of bodies. The searchers whistled when they found exposed or shallowly buried bodies and the overseers would send two men to exhume them and stack them on the wagon. The overseers took to sending Andy and Million together to recover bodies. Both were strong and Andy was clever at using boards as levers, so they were able to recover more bodies than most. Bodies that were too firmly pinned or too deep under the rubble were marked with a piece of driftwood bearing a little banner of cloth. The overseers said that a crew with heavy equipment would come by for those remains later. "Bullshit," Andy whispered each time, and each time Million would nod. Bullshit or not,

their crew never came back for those bodies and the wagons never stopped creaking along except to wait for men with axes to clear a roadblock.

When the crew came upon a business or a house with an intact front door, the overseers would knock. If someone appeared in the doorway (a woman, an old man) they would ask for a body count and then send twice that number of men in to add those corpses to the wagons. If there was no answer, a big man named Orso would break the lock with a sledgehammer and a few men would search inside. Either way, the overseers would draw an X in chalk on the door as they left. On the second night, rain washed away all of the marks. After that, it seemed to Million that some of the faces in the doorways looked familiar and the overseers waved them past buildings he was certain they had not searched.

Down side streets and over barren plots, Million caught glimpses of the wooden wave that ran down the center of the island. He saw figures picking over the wreckage, but whether they were ghouls or other crews he could not tell. No one had heard of any crews sent to Freedmenstown, where most of the black folks lived, nor beyond the wave to that scraped-flat wasteland that now flooded with every high tide. On the second day, Andy asked the taller foreman, Mr. Smith, when they would make their way to Freedmenstown. Mr. Smith told him that they would make it there soon but that the areas nearest the docks must be scoured first. Andy then asked the shorter foreman, Mr. Derry, who told him that there were other crews there now.

The men were permitted to rest if they returned the laden wagons to the docks with time to spare before the low or high tide. The policeman who had fired a warning shot at Daniel was never spotted in daylight, nor did he return on subsequent nights. Late the second night, through the wall of the tent, Million heard Andy and another man whisper to each other and then pad off

together. When dawn broke just before low tide, there were several black bodies atop one of the wagons. The next morning there were even more new bodies piled on the wagons and the black men went about the day's work red-eyed and bleary. Many had chosen to spend the night with their families in Freedmenstown or the tent city that the Army erected on the gulf side of the island. Others, evidently, had taken it upon themselves to recover the bodies of their friends, family, and neighbors themselves. While relieving himself against a low wall, Million spotted two wheelbarrows hastily hidden on the far side. Wherever and however they spent the night, they all returned before the tide began to turn. The Army withheld rations from able-bodied men who sat idle, while men who tried to stay in Freedmenstown were roused from their homes and marched back to work with billy clubs and rifles. If the men wanted to eat, they had to go to work. Million had nowhere to go, so he stayed where the food was.

The foremen said nothing about the black bodies that sprouted on the wagons overnight. On the fourth morning the wagons groaned under the weight of so much extra flesh, which by then had begun to putrefy. Generally, the crew's work was done once they delivered their terrible cargo to the docks. A separate crew would load the barge. This time, however, they were to do it themselves. The foremen offered no explanation for the change, though Andy supposed that the dock crew might have stolen a boat and fled. Foul liquid dripped through the boards of the wagons and left a spotted trail in their wake as the horses strained to pull them toward the beach. The tidal range was once only a few feet but now the high tide lapped at the underside of the piers and the low tide exposed a hundred feet of stinking sand and seaweed. It was low tide, so the wagons were to meet the barge where the sand met the bay. The barge had not had time to

return during the last high tide, so it had anchored in the shallows across the bay to await low tide. Million and Andy sat on a fallen telephone pole and watched the barge cross the still water.

Million heard a familiar voice behind him. He turned to see Captain Pastor talking to Mr. Derry, whose eyes bulged more than usual in the presence of authority. The captain had found a new hat. It looked, at least, more military than the other; Million realized that it was a policeman's cap. The captain spoke quickly and quietly, giving Mr. Derry no time to respond, then walked a short ways off to await the barge alone.

The overseers ordered the crew to lead the wagons onto the beach. Million and Andy stood and walked alongside the carts just as they had every day. The wagon train had barely made it onto the sand before its wheels began to sink. The horses' eyes bulged as the workers whipped them with belts and shoes. One and then the other collapsed onto the sand, but the men did not stop beating them until Mr. Smith shouted at them to carry the bodies. They stopped abusing the horses but made no move. The barge came to ground in the shallows and laid out a ramp. A dozen or so men were already onboard. They began to unload it of crates. "Those the ones who used to take the bodies from us," Andy said. "They got lucky." Captain Pastor eyed the horses as he walked past. He spoke to the barge captain and then walked up the ramp.

"Carry them, you cocksuckers!" Mr. Smith shouted. He strode to the last wagon and hoisted the body of a woman in both arms. He was a strong man; his gait was easy as he walked toward the shoreline. The woman's swaying arm pointed toward the sand as if she was asking to be set down. Andy, who, like Million, had taken no part in beating the horses, stepped onto the running board of the wagon and handed a body down to Million. He hooked his arms under the body's armpits in an embrace. It was a boy, heavier than he looked, with spongy skin. As Million toddled toward the barge, the boy's mouth opened and breathed a rotten stench into Million's

face. A mounting gurgle came from deep in the boy's throat. Million thought with horror that something was working its way up to the boy's mouth as he was jostled by the rhythm of walking. The boy's mouth filled and overflowed with black liquid. He spit up like an infant on Million's shoulder. Million began to run, the boy's head lolling in the corner of his vision. He looked over his shoulder and saw the other men stumbling after him with loved ones and strangers in their arms.

On his way to the island, he made camp beside a slow river. When he woke in the morning, he saw people with children in their arms wading into the water where a man in white robes pushed their heads under one by one. These men on the wet sand behind him and Mr. Smith in the shallows ahead of him looked almost the same. Some of them wept.

When Million reached the shoreline, Mr. Smith had already laid his burden down on the barge. The foreman raised a hand for Million to stop running. The water snagged Million's ankles and he fell down on top of the boy with a splash. Mr. Smith lifted Million to his feet. He gave Million an inscrutable look, then stooped to pick up the boy. Million saw that his white shirt was mottled with brown and black. Mr. Smith waded out to the ramp and laid the boy down next to the first corpse. Captain Pastor, who stood imperiously on the deck of the barge, gave the boy's body only a cursory glance.

Andy helped Million carry the next two bodies. The first was an ancient white man so pale and well preserved that Andy suggested that someone must have been keeping him on ice. One of his hands was gloved in a milky film of scar tissue. Million took the man's knees and Andy held him under his shoulders; they were afraid that he would fall apart if they took his wrists and ankles. He was cool to the touch.

"Is ice expensive?" Million asked as they walked crabwise toward the barge.

"You never had a ice box?" Andy asked.

Million shook his head.

"Ain't free but it could be worse," Andy said. "Don't imagine we'll see ice round here any time soon." He gazed over at the barge. "That soldier keeps looking at you."

"He's the one brought who me to the docks," Million said.

"Could be that," Andy said. "He makes me nervous."

They dropped the body off at the barge with little fuss. As before, Captain Pastor barely glanced at the body, but this time Million saw out of the corner of his eye that the captain was watching him. The next body was a brown-skinned woman with an extra joint in her arm.

"She look familiar," Andy said after they laid her out on the sand to wait for the ramp to clear. "Look, don't she look familiar?"

"I don't want to," Million said, but he did. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was half-smiling. She was younger than he had thought at first, and she did look familiar.

"She look famous," Andy said.

He was almost right, Million thought, but he knew he had never seen her before. Yet she did seem familiar. He imagined that her lips were no longer the same dun color as her face and that her neck was strong and erect and he knew that he had heard the voice that once came from them.

"She sang," he said.

Andy nodded. "Black and famous," he said, "She musta sung. Or kilt someone."

When the ramp was clear, they carried the singer up and laid her down atop the other bodies.

The wagons were empty by the time they reached them again, so they sat upwind out of the carrion plume and watched as Mr. Derry and Mr. Smith shouted back and forth with the pilot of the barge. Captain Pastor had disappeared.

"The pilot don't want to cross now," Andy said, "but if he don't, he ain't gonna make it back in time at high tide. We wait too long on the next bodies, we gonna need to carry them in buckets. Might as well pour them in the sea because ain't no way they make it to a graveyard."

"That where they're taking them?" Million asked. "A graveyard?"

"That's the word," Andy said. "I don't believe it. If I die, let them know they can bury me here. I'd rather do my rotting in the dark."

The tide was beginning to come back in. The barge pilot made a vicious gesture at the overseers and returned to his barge. His crew lifted the ramp onto the deck. The overseers and a few other men, waist deep now, put their hands on the hull of the barge and shoved. It came loose of the bottom and dropped low in the water; evidently it had been perched on a sandbar. It drifted sluggishly away from the shore. The water of the bay, which had been so still, slithered to life. The barge struggled to maintain course, its sail grasping at the feeble westerly wind as the current tried to drag it toward the eastern tip of the island. Million saw a strong gust ruffle the water like thousands of silver fish swimming against the current. When it reached the barge, the full sail billowed with a snap and the mast tilted. The barge hung in equilibrium for a moment, the current pushing its keel eastward and the wind pushing its sail westward. Then the pile of bodies shifted and quietly, like the horses, the barge lay down on its side. Million closed his eyes as the gust struck him with a blast of sand.

When he opened them, bodies bobbed around the barge. The crew splashed toward the shore, pushing the corpses out of their way. Everything, all of them, barge and bodies, were borne together by the implacable current.

"I can't swim," Million said.

"It don't matter," Andy said. "It's up to them now."

One by one, then by the dozen, the bodies began to splash and struggle as if mocking the crew's efforts to reach shore. Million looked at Andy.

"It ain't that," he said. "It's sharks."

"What is sharks?" Million asked.

"They're fish," Andy said. "Big fucking fish. Don't you know anything?" He began to cry.

Million looked out over the bay. Some of the men onshore had begun jogging alongside the water but it was impossible to keep pace with the current. They shouted and waved to the barge crew, who began thrashing furiously for shore. One of the swimming crewmembers let out a short, despairing scream that raised the hairs on Millions arms. He sank under the water with his eyes open. The movement of the others grew gradually jerkier and slower. The bodies, crew and cargo alike, shook and shook and shook and one by one went under until all that was left was the capsized barge on its lonely course to the sea.

## CHAPTER 4: MILLION MAKES A MOVE

Soon it became expedient to track down overlooked corpses by smell. First, the men in front of Million would press rags to their noses. Then the horses' nostrils would flare and finally the air would go waxy with the stench and Million's eyes would water. He had torn his stained shirt into pieces and wrapped them around his face. The smell was so dense and solid that he felt as if he might inhale someone if not for the cloth.

After the incident with the sharks, the overseers distributed jugs of whiskey. The men passed them around, lifting the cloths that covered their faces to take large swallows. Andy splashed whiskey onto his face wrapping to overpower the smell of rot.

"This ain't no better," he said. "Now I smell both."

Million was amazed by how many bodies they had missed. He found one reclining against a street lamp. They discovered others on roofs, their limbs hanging over the edges like vines. They took to wrapping the bodies they found in linen before attempting to move them. The bundles spread and shifted on the floor of the dead carts as if they were filled with something less than solid. Sometimes the stench came from deep within piles of rubble or from stagnant pools of opaque water. They did not bother to mark these.

Because there were fewer bodies, the crew began to collect the furry remains of dogs and cats. They left horses and mules to bloat. When they could not find anything by smell, they followed the vultures.

The cold point below Million's heart ached. He took a swig of whiskey to warm it, then another. His throat burned and heat trickled into his stomach but the cold point did not thaw. He turned to Andy.

"Why're we doing the work of vultures?" he said.

Andy shook his head. "Imagine your daughter finds a skull in the grass while she's playing."

"Do you have one?" Million said.

"A daughter? I do."

"Does she know what a skull is?"

"One time, when she could barely walk, we went to the beach for the day," Andy said.

"She got something in her mouth. I stuck my finger in to get it out. It was a yellow dogtooth."

"Teeth is teeth, no matter whose," Million said. "No reason to be afraid of bones."

"I take it you ain't the family type," Andy said.

"You could go to her," Million said. "Why're you still here?"

"I suppose I don't know how to tell her," Andy said. "I want to tell her that God made this happen, but I can't believe it either. Why *you* still here?"

"I'll be gone soon," Million said.

Million had stayed with the dead carts so long only because there seemed to be no other option. But he had seen a shopkeeper sweeping broken glass from the sidewalk in front of his business. Church bells had begun to ring at the hour. The island would soon come back to life, he figured, and he wanted to be in the right place when it did. He knew where that was: among the oaks and mansions, looking down. He would not be welcome there on his own. He needed an escort: Captain Pastor.

Million expected to make his move when he next saw the captain at the docks. He did not have to wait that long. Half an hour later, the dead cart slowed to a stop. Anticipating another encounter with a fragrant stranger, Million and Andy adjusted the rags over their faces. The overseers walked ahead of the cart toward the four Coast Guardsmen who had collected Million off the street. Captain Pastor's forehead had peeled to reveal raw skin, pink in the sunlight. He spoke a few words under his breath to the foremen and walked past them and up to the first cart, near Andy and Million. He stepped up onto the wheel and craned over the side of the cart. The stench must have hit him all at once; he jumped back down and stumbled when he landed. He leaned over to spit in the dirt.

Million crouched in front of him.

"I know where to find him," Million whispered.

Captain Pastor looked up at Million's face, then the hole in his chest. It was open like an eye. He stood up straight. "What are you talking about?" he said.

Million had noticed that the captain took much longer to inspect certain bodies than others. He scarcely glanced at black folks or women. The old man with the icy skin had not interested him, nor had young boys. The man's attention had lingered on the bodies of white men with black hair and, although Million himself did not seem to be of interest, Pastor's gaze lingered on him when he thought no one was looking. He was looking for someone, of this Million was certain, but he still did not know if his next move would be the right one.

"You're looking for a man who looks a lot like me," Million said.

Pastor drew himself up to his full height. He was rangy, even scrawny. His face was nearly blank but Million saw something trembling in the muscles around his eyes and mouth: the

beginnings of a smile that he would not or could not express, along with a deep terror. Million's lips drew back from his teeth. He was right. Million had never known happiness, but he had known the feeling that Pastor was trying to hide. It was joy.

## CHAPTER 5: MILLION GETS GOING

Million knew that Pastor was looking for a man who looked much like him. He knew that the Guardsmen's guns were not loaded, or at least he hoped they still were not. He just had to convince Pastor to take him to that oak-lined boulevard that Andy had called Broadway. Then he would pay a visit to his millionaire. So, when Pastor dragged Million aside and asked him what he meant, Million told him a story.

He began with the truth: he had not been shot by a looter but by a man who was hunting looters. The man had thought he was someone else, he said. He had called out another man's name to Million and opened fire when Million turned. "He said something to me when he thought I was dead," Million said.

"What did he say?" Pastor asked.

"He said, 'I thought I'd killed you already.'"

"Who was this man?" Pastor asked.

Million did not answer.

"What name did he call you?" Pastor asked.

"Could have been any name," Million said. "I just heard him call and I turned."

"So it might not have been a name at all?" Pastor asked.

"It was a name," Million said. "I know the sound of a name. It was just not mine."

"This is useless," Pastor said. "You don't know anything."

"I know where he lives," Million said.

"Where?"

"I'll take you."

"That's ridiculous."

"He shot many people," Million said. "Maybe he shot the man you're looking for. I'm offering a small hope."

"Who else did he shoot?" Pastor asked.

"I don't know. Just others," Million said.

"Others like you?"

"No one is like me."

"Looters?"

"He thought they were."

"Do you think they were?"

"They were all looking for something," Million said. "I don't know what it was. Like you. We loaded them into the carts. Two men and a woman."

"What did the men look like?"

"One was white and fat. Fatter when we found him again," Million said. "This might even have been true; he did not remember what the ghouls looked like. The other was small. They weren't the one you're looking for. Why are you waiting? Let me take you to the man who shot me."

"Why did you tell me this?"

"I want away from this death for a while. I want to walk under some trees. I want to look in the eyes of the man who tried to kill me," Million said. "And you want to know if I'm lying. We'll find all that we're looking for in the same place. Let's go."

Pastor left with Million in tow. The captain and the man with the hook walked alongside him and the other two followed. Million led them toward the trees. They spoke very little as they walked, though the pair behind Million carried on a quiet conversation in a language that Million did not know. At one point, Million paused when they reached a place he remembered, where bright blue sky winked through bare doorways.

"You said that a ghoulish eats corpus," Million said. "Corpusus."

"The word is corpses," Pastor said.

"Corpses. I'll never get the taste out of my mouth," Million said, and walked on. He led them uphill to Broadway.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Pastor asked.

"Yes," Million said.

"This is a wealthy district," Pastor said. "What were you doing here?"

"I wasn't here," Million said. "I was down in the city."

The man with the hook spoke up. "Pastor," he said. "We cannot just arrest a rich man." Million noticed for the first time that he had a Spanish accent.

"We aren't arresting anyone, Crís," Pastor said.

"So you will just say, 'Sir, did you shoot at a man who looks like this? We promise not to arrest you,'" Crís said, gesturing at Million with both hands like a salesperson.

"I will think of something," Pastor said. "We had better be close--what's your name?"

"Million."

"We had better be close, Million."

They were. The rich man's bulbous mansion loomed ahead of them. Million had intended to simply bolt as soon as he could and then seek the rich man's audience. As they walked, it had occurred to him that rich men must have ways to keep certain people from seeking their audience. These Guardsmen, then, would assure him not only safe passage to this utopia but an audience with the man who had tried to kill him. It all depended on whether anyone answered the door.

No servant attended to Captain Pastor's rapping on the front double doors. He kept knocking until the man with the gaff hook, Crís, reminded him that they had taken the butler with them. He tried the doors. They did not even rattle. They walked around to the back of the mansion.

The back doors were coated in a purple-black mold that was dark as night even in the daylight. Crís slipped his hook around the handle and pulled. Locked. Million watched the hook, fascinated. He was not afraid of the guns or the bayonets; he had been shot and lived and, besides, he believed that the guns were not loaded. But the hook was different; it could trap him, snag him, pull him back. The rifles could only kill him, if that. Crís twisted the hook to free it of the handle. Its outer curve touched the mold and sank in as if it was tar. Crís yanked on the handle but the hook did not budge. Captain Pastor took hold of it as well and pulled. The hook sank deeper. The door engulfed the metal.

Pastor took the handle from Crís and wrenched it downward. The wood snapped. The handle came free in his hands, just a broomstick now. He tossed it into the yard and sat down heavily on the step.

"He's here," Million said.

"No," Pastor said. "I don't believe he is. I hope you've enjoyed this."

"You still need me," Million said.

"I'll find another way," Pastor said. "Even if you're telling the truth, this was a flight of fancy. I recognize this house. It's the Moody mansion. The man who shot you--what did he look like?"

"His hair was long and yellow like a woman's," Million said.

"Old?" Pastor said.

"Older than you," Million said. "Not old."

"The son, then," Pastor said. He nodded to himself. "I'll find a way."

"Knock again," Million said.

Pastor looked over the yard. Across the grounds was a white gazebo spattered in mud. The yard was littered with tree branches. Otherwise, it was as if the storm had simply passed over this area.

The door creaked open. They all turned. A girl of ten or twelve stood in the doorway. The captain scrambled to his feet. The girl had light brown hair and mousy features.

"Hello," she said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Captain Pastor of the Coast Guard," Pastor said. "I'd like to speak to Mr. Moody. Is he your father?"

The girl looked at Million.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"I'm Million," he said. "Tell your father that I'm back from the dead."

The girl looked at Million's face, then Pastor's, as if committing them to memory. Before anyone could move, she closed and latched the door. They all stood as if stunned. The girl had appeared and disappeared in a flash, no more than ten seconds.

She reappeared scarcely a minute later.

"Please come in, Mr. Horizon," she said.

Pastor moved to follow Million through the door. The girl raised a tiny hand to stop him.

"My father says that he does not know you, Captain," she said. "Please contact his office to schedule an appointment. In the meantime, he wanted to remind you that you are trespassing on private property."

Million stepped inside and turned to watch Pastor's face through the closing doorway. His expression had gone totally blank. Pastor slipped a few words through the crack of the door before the girl shut it completely: "Please, ask him."

Million would not do any favors for the man who had led him to the dead carts. Besides, there was nothing to ask.

The girl led Million swiftly upstairs to an office where Moody sat on the far side of a heavy desk with a double window behind him. Million could not see his face but he knew it was the same man as surely as if he had smelled him.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Moody said. "Come in." Million stepped into the room. In the center of the room lay a thick circular rug; Moody stepped from behind the desk, took Million by his elbow, and arranged him in the middle of it. He half-crouched to inspect the hole in Million's chest.

"So," he said. "You lived."

"Do you remember me?" Million asked.

"Yes. Million," Moody said, returning to his chair on the far side of the desk. "I owe you a cigarette and an apology."

"That isn't why I'm here," Million said.

"You're here to kill me."

"What's your name? All of it."

"Henry Jasper Moody, junior," he said. He rummaged in the top drawer of his desk. "Do you have a last name?"

"Horizon," Million said.

"Million Horizon. That's fucking absurd. Wonderful. 'Million Murders Millionaire Moody.' Did Dick put you up to this? Are you slow? Are you a ghost? Are you the vengeful spirit of the goddamn island?"

He took a pistol – very fine, very heavy – out of the drawer and placed it on the desk in front of Million before taking a seat.

"In regards to the last question," he went on, "might I suggest, mighty avatar of the island, that you wait until my father comes back and slay him first? He's your dredger, pillager, silt-despoiler. I just sign things when he's away."

"That's not why I came either," Million said.

"Well?"

Million blushed. He had never expected to get this far. Until this moment, he had not really known why he was here. The answer--the question he wanted to ask--was embarrassing.

"How do you get rich?" he asked.

"You have to know the right people," Moody said.

"Who?"

"Rich people. In my particular case, my parents," Million said. "Am I a hostage?"

"What's a hostage?" Million asked.

"Do you want money?" Moody asked. "Well, of course do you, but do you want my money?"

"No."

"It was an offer."

"Then yes."

"Just some of it. It's the least I can do."

"Why?"

"How long have you been on the island?"

"Days."

"Do you know anyone? Was anyone expecting you?"

"No."

"You have yet to do a single thing that matters in your entire life. Your only accomplishment is that you haven't yet died," Moody said. "May I offer you a job?"

## CHAPTER 6: MILLION GOES SHOPPING

By the end of the day, Moody had arranged for Million to rent a room in Greenstown, little more than a humid closet above a dry goods store. Slowly, Million built an image of the island in his head. The island was shaped like a tadpole or spermatozoon swimming northwest; the city filled its head. Freedmenstown and Greenstown sprawled along the saltwater bayou on the western edge of the city. The latter, which was closer to the Gulf, was a white area; the former, near the bay, was black. Both were poor. Million's one window faced the road that separated the two quarters. Beyond the bayou, the island's tail stretched out for twenty miles before dwindling into a sand bar. For most of its length, the island was a grassy strip of dry land one hundred yards wide with a beach on one side and a salt marsh on the other. A stitched hem of barrier islands succeeded the island down the edge of the gulf. To the northeast of the island was a false barrier island, a poor excuse for a peninsula connected to the mainland at the far end by an umbilical isthmus that almost disappeared during high tide. Ships passed between the island and this peninsula and through a series of successively smaller bays on their way to Houston. On the mainland across the bay, a town with ambitions of becoming a port had sprung up a decade before the storm. Its lights shone across the water on clear nights.

Moody left Million with two hundred dollars in cash. He called it a retainer. Million's job, he said, would start soon. Whatever Moody called it, Million had never held so much money before. The first thing he bought was an icebox, which he filled with fish and steak, food he had little means and only slightly more intention of cooking. Eventually the icebox began to leach an

evil odor into Million's room. He never noticed; his sense of smell did not fully return for years after his time working the dead carts. He bought a double-breasted suit in unfashionable bright blue, a white shirt with French cuffs, gold cufflinks engraved with his initials, a brilliant red silk tie, and a pair of patent leather shoes that came to a vicious point like a scorpion's stinger. He paced in tight circles around his little room, his tie more square knot than half-windsor, his shoes clacking on the floorboards. But Million could never rid himself of the idea that any man in a suit is half a lizard, so he never wore the suit outside of his room. Moody had been the first man in a suit who had asked Million's name without then writing it down on a form.

Million ate out every meal for months. He liked to sit at busy counters for hours, from breakfast through the lunch rush until someone turned the OPEN side of the sign around to face him. He took to drinking coffee, black but treacly with sugar, until his vision blurred and his back hurt. At his favorite diner there was a mirror across from the counter. He liked it when other men came in alone and sat at the counter and he could see all of them together in the mirror, in a row with them, of a kind with them, hunched over, facing ahead, dirty fingers hooked through the handles of their mugs. Glimpses of the young waitresses' legs scissoring under their uniforms and the cook's arms flexing as he worked the griddle tugged a hook in his gut. He loved mosquito bites on ankles, bruised knees, razor burn, stocking runs, the patch of dark hair on the back of the cook's right arm, one waitress's lisp and another's limp, the down on their forearms and cheeks. He wanted to lap up the sweat that beaded their philtra. When the girls leaned over the counter to speak to him he tumbled down the front of their uniforms.

Million was not accustomed to being welcome. He was used to occupying the ground on which he stood with insolence, fear, or defiance. He felt as though some part of him had turned to vapor, filling his little room and the diner where waitresses he had never met already knew his

name. In his daydreams he gave home invaders righteous thrashings; he thought grimly of what might befall a man who asked him to move from his seat at the counter. These fantasies held none of the desperate viciousness of long-ago barfights when he would assert his body's right to exist by violating the bodies of those who disagreed. Once he had punched, sliced, bitten as if to say *all I have is this body and this body can take away all you have*--but now he had more, increasingly more, and now his name, not his body alone, claimed his space.

BOOK 2: MILLION, 1902

## CHAPTER 1: MILLION BUILDS A BRIDGE

Million's stilt house, a gift from Moody, lay between Freedmenstown and the white districts of the city. The grade-raising project ended behind his property; his rear windows looked out onto a dike. Million pried boards from one of the city's many impromptu boardwalks and laid them between his porch and the rocky wall. Moisture seeping through the dike rendered the ground under and around his house a sodden marsh. He stole more boards to form a footbridge from the dirt street to his entry stairs. This path--road to boards to stairs to porch to boards to dike--was for many inhabitants of Freedmenstown the most direct route to 57th Street, or rather the boardwalk that had borrowed its name until the dredgers finished belching slurry and the raised buildings once again rested on solid ground. Almost all of Million's neighbors worked in the city proper: Andy shined shoes in a department store on 40th, trying to save enough to replace his fishing boat; the Browns, an elderly couple who lived across the road, each cooked for a different family on Broadway; the Shaw children roamed the boardwalks armed with fishing poles, charging ten cents to recover hats that had blown into the slurry. Within a stone's throw of Million's house, only two residents worked in their own district: Daisy Robbins, who ran a saloon in her living room, and her sister Clem, who plied her trade in the back room.

The sun had just risen out of the gulf on the morning after Million assembled his wooden walkway when he heard footsteps on his stairs. He was wearing his suit and smoking his second cigarette of the morning. He had not slept well: the money was almost gone and Moody had not

come up with another job for him. Wearing the suit made him feel like the sort of man who never worried about the money running out. The cold point in his chest seemed to hum underneath his tie, which was tied in an uncharacteristically faithful imitation of a full Windsor. Two weeks before, he had stared at the knot in Moody's tie until the man untied it and tossed it at him. "It's from Italy too," he said. He had intended to sell it but he could not bring himself to, nor could he bring himself to wear it. It hung in his closet.

Million heard the boards of his porch creak. He snatched the straight razor from beside the sink and slipped it up his sleeve. There was a knock at the door. He opened it. Andy stood on the porch in a vest and shirtsleeves, a cap on his head and a wooden box under his arm. Million had not seen him since their time working the dead carts, though he knew that he must live nearby. Million did not spend much time abroad in Freedmenstown. His favorite diner was in Greenstown area down the road, where his skin color was generally taken as the mark of a laborer, not a mulatto or Italian.

"Good morning," Andy said, looking Million up and down. He gave his shoes a pointed look and grinned. "Shoeshine?"

Million had shined them himself two days earlier, after he had walked an hour to Moody's only to find that the millionaire was not home. They shone like glass.

"It was a joke," Andy said.

Million invited Andy inside. Andy sniffed the air as he walked in. Million hung his jacket by the door and offered Andy a cigarette. They sat at the table.

"You got an icebox," Andy said.

"It's empty," Million said, then felt doubly embarrassed at the implications: only a wealthy or very poor man keeps no food at home, and he was not sure which he was. "How's your daughter?"

"Tired of eating fish," Andy said. "There's so many out there, a fisherman can't starve but can't make no money either." He pointed at his cap, which had a word embroidered on it that Million recognized from a department store. "I'm doing this to save up for a boat so I can sell to white folks. Restaurants don't buy fish from negroes carrying buckets. What about you? You're a driver?"

"More or less," Million said.

"Daisy says she saw you at Moody's place," Andy said. "That's the man who's building the wall? Raising the city above our heads, too."

Million's cigarette was almost gone.

"Didn't you say he shot you?" Andy asked.

"I said he missed," Million said.

"Mighty Christian of you to forgive him," Andy said, standing. "Since I'm already up here, how about I use your bridge?"

Andy began to stop by six mornings a week. Each time, they spoke a few words over cigarettes and gritty coffee. Andy needled Million about his relationship to the rich man who had tried to kill him, but Million had not seen Moody for weeks. Whenever he came by the mansion, he was told that Moody was at the office. Whenever he came by the office, Moody was in a private meeting. Million suspected that Moody felt he had paid his debt. Perhaps the silk tie had ticked Moody's mental tally into the black. Staring at Andy across the table, Million grew certain

that a man could not be friends with both a poor coon and a millionaire. Million might own a suit, but he did not live behind the seawall.

The weight of those days following the storm still pressed on Million's chest at night. Since Andy returned to his life, Million had begun to dream of the boy he had carried to the barge. It was always the same: the boy would come to life in his arms, clutch Million with terrible strength, and vomit some ancient, evil substance down Million's throat as Mr. Smith, his shirt spotlessly white, would watch from the surf. When he woke from these nightmares, the hole in his chest would ache and throb with cold. He had rarely had the luxury of hating anyone as much as he came to hate Mr. Smith.

One morning, as Million stood on his porch, two young boys, caps in hand, asked permission to use his pathway. He brimmed with magnanimity as he waved them up. He held the board steady for them. They waved before ambling away down the dike. That night, the sound of someone trying not to be heard woke him. From his kitchen, he could see the dark shapes of the two boys clambering down from the railing to the porch. He coughed. They looked at the window, unable to see inside. After a moment's hesitation, they waved and then dashed down his stairs.

A few days later, Andy brought someone with him, a short man with skin as blue-black as a raven's feathers. The man declined a cigarette and nodded vigorously whenever Million spoke, though he had little to say himself. The next morning, after Andy had left, the man walked across Million's porch, nodding and touching his brim at the window without stopping. Million burst onto the porch. The man was already on the dike. He turned and shouted "Thank you!" He continued on with the stiff legs and neck of someone determined not to look behind. Million watched him go.

More children passed through his porch, mostly boys with fishing rods or shoeshine boxes. A woman wearing a maid's uniform wished him a nice day through his open door. A steady drip of strangers flowed through his property, mostly up to the dike in the morning and down to the road at night. Everyone greeted him as if they were passing in the street. Some called him Mr. Horizon, though he had never introduced himself with his last name. At times, woken by someone stumbling on the stairs or people speaking in hushed voices, he resolved to end it. My house is not a road, he thought, failing to whip himself into a rage. In truth, he felt welcoming and welcomed, more so than he did at the diner, and strangely powerful: he was a kind gatekeeper, a bridge-builder, a part of everyone's day. He thought of Moody's desire to bring the world to his hotel. Million brought Freedmenstown to his porch instead.

One afternoon, two boys met on the board heading in opposite directions. Their shouting brought Million outside. When they saw him, both moved to clear the board. The boy who had been heading toward the city planted his foot in thin air and somersaulted off the board. He landed on his back in the mud below. Million craned over his railing. The boy stared up at him like a stunned fish, then began to cough. The other boy ran down the board with his arms out like a bird and flew down the stairs to check on his fallen foe.

The boy was fine; he had simply backflopped in the mud hard enough to spatter Million's back wall with brown flecks. Million widened the pathway with more boards and nailed them all to his railing.

One evening, a white man followed two women down the dike as if pulled along by their wake. Million sat at his kitchen table in the dark. As the sun fell, restlessness had risen in his chest like panic. The cold point ached again; it had begun to plague him at night. He had one shoe on and his bottle of whiskey was half empty. He had been trying to decide whether to trek

over to Moody's, or even venture to Daisy's, or to finish the bottle and sleep it off. The women tiptoed across his porch, glancing nervously at the dark windows, and were gone. The man stopped at the top of the board, swaying, before taking a tentative step, his eyes down. Million waited until he was halfway across before stepping onto his porch. In the moonlight, Million could see the man's face clearly. It was heavily lined, though he seemed no older than forty. He looked familiar.

"Good evening," Million said.

The man looked up, then glanced nervously back at the dike and almost keeled over. "Is this the way?" he asked.

"Sure," Million.

"To Niggertown?"

"Yeah."

Million's mouth was dry. He felt like a wine glass made to sing. He recognized this man: it was Mr. Smith. Million climbed onto the railing, blocking the path. "I'll never get the taste out of my mouth," he said.

"What?"

"There's a toll," Million said.

"Well, how much?"

"A dollar."

"You didn't charge those negroes," Mr. Smith said. He glanced down at the drop.

"I don't charge negroes," Million said.

"I don't have a dollar and I wouldn't pay it if I did."

"I know you've got it," Million said. The straight razor was heavy in his pocket. "You're on your way to Daisy's. How much does her sister charge?"

"I'll find another way," Mr. Smith muttered. He began to shuffle his feet in an exaggeratedly cautious attempt to turn around.

"Wait," Million said. "Do I look familiar to you?"

"No."

"I was one of your vultures," Million said.

Mr. Smith put a hand in his pocket, feigning ease. "Thank you for your service," he said.

"You're finally looking for black bodies." Million asked. "Is this what you meant when you said we'd get to Freedmenstown soon?"

"We could've stopped the niggers from bringing those bodies," Mr. Smith said. He stood up straighter. He seemed more sober. "Did you think we didn't notice? We should have stopped them. The sea got everyone because of them. They dragged us down. A dozen white men devoured alive for the sake of dead niggers and none buried in the end."

"You didn't get your fill of black meat," Million said.

"What do you care?" Smith asked. "An Italian in Niggertown. Bet you have the taste too."

Million took a long step toward him. The wood was rough under his shoeless foot. Mr. Smith stepped backwards into thin air. The boards bucked when he caught hold. His feet dangled above a garden of rough stones at the base of the dike. The landing would break an ankle, at least. Million crouched and drew his razor across Smith's fingers. The man screamed and released his grip. He disappeared into the shadow of the dike.

A short whistle came from the porch. A woman stood there. She was taller than Million, taller than most men, with broad shoulders. Her hair was long, black, and straight, as if someone had cracked the night sky over her head. He could not tell if she was white or black. Her straight, handsome nose and dark features made her look like someone in an old painting, a model of beauty from another time and place. Million had never seen her before.

"I saw you," she said.

"I tried to help him up," he said.

"The cutter's still in your hand," she said.

Million opened his hand and the razor fell away, flashing in the moonlight.

"I was shaving," he said.

"Do I look familiar to you?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Who are you?" Bile rose in his throat and he coughed. It tasted like biting into a whole lemon. An interrogatory whistle came from somewhere, too brief to tell the direction or distance. The woman whistled in return. She began to walk down the steps. He lowered himself onto the porch. She looked back over her shoulder at him.

"I know what you've done, Million," she said. "Don't follow."

He watched from the top of the stairs as she walked away in the direction of the bayou, slipping between and beneath houses, until he lost sight of her behind a shaggy oleander. The night was quiet. He remembered Mr. Smith. He ran down the stairs and stepped into the mud. The stilts of his house seemed to rise from an inky pool. Mr. Smith was gone, as if the mud had swallowed him whole.

## CHAPTER 2: MILLION GOES TO GROUND

Million had the sense that somewhere far away a gear had begun to turn or a great eye had opened. Whenever he felt this way, he knew that it was only a matter of time before disaster would find him. He should leave, but how? He had a home and a name that others knew, a suit and two silk ties. He felt that his history--his real history, not those years of scrabbling in his memory--was buried on this island, not like treasure but like a seed. No, he could not leave.

Maybe, he thought, Mr. Smith would not recognize his house if he took down the bridge. Million tore down the walkway and left the boards by the side of the road. They were gone in twenty minutes. After a pair of men knocked on his door to ask where the bridge had gone, he removed the boards in front of his house as well. Anyone who wished to visit him would have to walk through the mud. Million steeled himself for a knock on the door; he knew what it would mean. He hoped that Mr. Smith woke up in a ditch somewhere, his knuckles sliced to bone, and thought he had been robbed. He would be too ashamed to tell the police that he had been in Freedmenstown after midnight. It was an unsafe place for men with red cheeks and fat checkbooks. Million realized that he had no idea what Mr. Smith did now that cleanup was over. He had thought, in some vague way, that Mr. Smith still spent every day shouting at sweaty men to pick up corpses.

Mr. Smith did not know Million's name, but that woman did. She must live in Freedmenstown (even now, the thought that his name reached so far sparked a buzzing in his chest) but he knew he had never seen her before. Who had she whistled to in the dark? Had Mr.

Smith come to visit her? The edges of the world had become knives and it was getting dark. He had been happy, even bored, for too long. He should have known it could not last.

Million waited for Moody at the hotel construction site. Two more stories had gone up since he had seen it last. During the day, he patrolled the perimeter of the site, watching the workers clamber around the gestating building. He slept at the base of the seawall and woke covered in dew. Because this quarter of the city had been razed by the storm, it was the first section to be raised by the dredgers. The buildings were all new. Many were still under construction. When Million first visited the lot, the grade raising was ongoing. He had seen workers building a house on piles that plunged ten feet down into churning slurry. That house was now lost among the new buildings that had risen in a chaotic jumble: workers put the roof on a townhouse while next door a store displayed naked mannequins in the window, the lettering on the glass so new it looked wet. Million, standing at one end of the new promenade that cut across the island from the Hotel Galvez to Broadway, gulf to bay, was too distracted by the bright mortar and flashing windows, ringing hammers and the shouts of workers to realize that he stood in the exact place that he had first set foot on the island--rather, ten feet directly above it.

After the workers left that evening, Million ranged out into the city. The larger buildings along the boardwalk to either side of the Hotel Galvez were largely unfinished. Many of the businesses had begun selling carnival food and trinkets on the street while buildings rose behind their stalls, the workers' labor hidden by giant, colorful advertisements for the attractions to come, but at night the boardwalk was dark and quiet except for the sound of waves. Million's only companions were scattered indistinct figures alone and in pairs. Red eyes of cigarettes rose, bloomed, and fell in front of manlike shadows on the seawall. He heard the sound of glass breaking and then a woman's laughter, manic and untraceable. He walked back to the hotel and

turned onto the promenade. Electric lamps illuminated carriages and knots of people in evening clothes outside of restaurants and saloons, some of them in buildings whose upper floors remained unfinished. Million had the sense that this quarter was growing from the bottom up. He brushed the sand off of his trousers and headed up the street, nodding to people as he passed them. No one paid him any mind.

Million spotted a familiar sight down a side street. The sign for his favorite café in Greenstown was lit up by bright lights. From a distance, the café looked about the same as he remembered, but as he approached it seemed to distort: the windows on either side of the double door were too large, the blue paint was too fresh, and the doors had glass panes with the name written on them. Through the window he saw that the lunch counter was on the wrong side of the room. It was empty. He did not see an OPEN-CLOSED sign. A bell chimed as he entered.

He took a seat in the middle of the counter and waited. Sand dropped from his sleeves onto the counter. It was not so strange that two restaurants would share a name. When he rode the rails, next to countless train stations he had seen buildings of all shapes and sizes that bore the same two words. A fellow drifter called them Harvey Houses. Even so, he felt as if he were in a dream. Just the night before, he had dreamt that his front door opened into Moody's study, which was bare-walled and empty but for the desk. The dark-haired woman sat behind it. She wore his suit with the tie that Moody had given him. A wet sound came from beneath the desk; only then did he notice the pale bare feet and hairy ankles of someone kneeling in front of the woman. She watched Million with disgust. He backed out of the room and woke on the wet sand.

It occurred to him now that he might not have really woken. He heard quiet voices from behind the kitchen door. "I'm here!" he called. The voices kept on. He thought that maybe they had not heard him or, perhaps, what he heard was a music machine like the one Moody kept in

his parlor. But no, that gold-trimmed box was a rich man's toy, perhaps the only one in the world.

He called again. This time, the voices fell silent. Muffled laughter seeped from under the kitchen door. The restaurant he knew lacked a door there. He liked to watch the cook sweat onto the griddle through the open door. He felt lost in the world and hungry. This island was the end of the line. If he could not discover a real life here, he never would. He reached into his pants pocket and drew out a handful of sand. He did not know what to do with it. No sounds came from the kitchen. He had the terrible feeling that there would be no one behind the kitchen door if he opened it. He left a pile of sand on the lunch counter as payment and skulked back to the beach, where he fell asleep with his back to the surf and his face to the seawall.

### CHAPTER 3: MILLION FINDS A JOB

The next day, it rained. Construction went on regardless. Water ran off the edges of the vast foundation like an overflowing cup. Million watched the workers from underneath the awning of a soon-to-be toyshop with windows papered over from the inside. The workers shouted and splashed, slipped and cursed. The foreman held a black umbrella and stood on a cinderblock to keep his boots dry. Million had been watching him over the last few days. Whenever he shouted orders, the workers would reply "yes, sir!" and continue exactly as they had been before. The day before, Million saw him flinch when a worker began hammering near him. The man had no idea what he was doing, which meant that he had probably gotten the job as a favor from Moody. He had thought of talking to the man, but decided that the risk of being kicked off the site or arrested for vagrancy was too great. Million did not know why Moody had stayed away from the hotel for so long. He had known the millionaire to visit every other day, at least on his way to some event. What business could be more pressing than the greatest hotel in the world?

As, on the far side of the island, Pastor watched the tugs drag a line through the bay, a motorcar with a canvas canopy pulled to the curb in front of Million. The driver wore a rain slicker. In the back, where it was drier, sat Moody.

"Get in," he said.

Million's trousers soaked through when he sat on the wet seat. The driver eased the motorcar back into motion. The foreman with the umbrella waved as they passed by.

"Ever been in one of these before?" Moody asked.

"Never," Million said.

They drove along the seawall. The boardwalk was deserted, though some of the stores had lights on. Gusts of wind drove rain underneath the canopy.

"I need another job," Million said.

"I sent someone to talk to you," Moody said. "Twice. Three nights ago and a week before that. The first time, he said you weren't at home. The second, he didn't come back. Then you pack up and leave and I find you here."

"I haven't seen nobody," Million said. "I've been trying to talk to you."

"I'm fucking busy. Send a letter."

"Do you have a job for me?" Million asked.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Moody said. "But yes, I do. I have two. Firstly, there's another storm coming. The moment it's over, you're going to knock on every door in Niggertown and sell them storm insurance. Tell them whatever you want. Just get the contracts signed. Don't mention the flood waters, none of that. I'll send you a stack when it stops raining.

"Secondly, Burl Smith went to Niggertown and never came out. He's my wife's favorite cousin and foreman at the hotel. His replacement--you saw him--isn't worth shit. Find him. You're my wolf among the darkies, Million. Do this for me and I'll find you a place on high ground."

"What do I get paid?" Million asked.

"Sell the tie," Moody said.

They soon reached the end of the seawall. The car stopped. Greenstown was half raised and half not. Someone had built a makeshift wall of sandbags that began where the seawall left off and curled around the bayou side of Greenstown in a one-armed embrace. Past Greenstown, Million saw the western fringe of Freedmenstown where it spilled into the bayou. The largest house in the black part of town sat by itself on an anomalous rise at the intersection of the bayou, Freedmenstown, and the bay. He did not know who lived there; he had only ever seen it from a distance.

"The contracts will arrive tomorrow," Moody said. "Get out."

## CHAPTER 4: MILLION GOES DOOR TO DOOR

Million woke to a knock. The cotton mattress clung to his damp skin as he pushed himself out of bed. He opened his front door. No one was on the porch but someone had left a small wooden crate by the steps. Freedmenstown had flooded as far as he could see. Stilt houses and sullen shrubs poked out of a flat, brown plane of water. A man was attempting to pole a small boat down the flooded street but the water was too shallow. The boat kept grounding. Eventually, the man left his shoes in the boat and began walking, pulling the boat along on a rope like a child's toy. The water barely reached his ankles. He glared at Million, the audience of his defeat. Million waved.

He hefted the crate into his living room and closed the door behind him. The crate was made of flimsy, unfinished boards nailed indifferently together. He pried the lid off with his bare hands. The bright new nails slid readily out of the wood. Inside sat neat stack of papers: the contracts. A smaller piece of paper sporting a few jaunty, handwritten words lay atop the contracts. Million sat down at his scarred table to decipher the note. He had to guess at some of the letters. He read it aloud, slowly, backtracking each time he stumbled: "As much as they will pay. No less than \$2 a month. Whatever it takes." He set it aside and laid one of the contracts out on the table. His damp fingers smudged the crisp black shapes of the letters. He could not follow the lines of tiny text. He poked and prodded at each line and paragraph. They remained impenetrable. Finally, he forced his way into the first paragraph by reading each word aloud as best he could. This document, he read, bound (there was a line here) and (a string of long words

here, the last of which he understood to be "company") in some sort of agreement. If there was wind--if there was a windstorm--and the house was (a word he did not know), then (those long words again) would pay for...

He found himself on the first line again and stopped. He understood that this paper bound a person to Moody. They would pay him two dollars--*two dollars, as much as they will pay, no less*--and, in return, if a storm came, Moody would pay for--what? Fixing the house? Million did not understand how this made any sense for Moody. Storms blew in every year and two dollars would not even buy a window. Moody had told Million about his charitable work. When Million asked him why he gave money to churches, schools, even public bathhouses, Moody told him that the money always came back. "And sometimes," he said, "if you toss them enough, they put your name on a building. Once that happens, they're on your side. They don't want to re-christen a building."

So Million had begun to understand what charity meant to the rich, but this deal still seemed odd. There must be so many ways to defraud Moody with these pieces of paper, and all for two dollars a month. But Moody knew best and besides, he supposed, it must be two dollars per person, not per house. That number felt better. In any case, it would not hurt to return to Moody with a little extra in his pockets.

Million put on his cleanest trousers and shirt. He set out down the watery street with a stack of paper in his arms and no shoes on his feet. In his pocket, he carried his razor and a fountain pen that he had discovered at the bottom of the crate. He had ruined a contract and stained his table when he fiddled with the pen and unexpectedly spurted ink like a squid. He shortly managed to coax a few tame lines and shapes out of it but treated it warily from then on.

The warm water felt good on his feet and ankles. Freedmenstown looked better under a foot of saltwater. No dirt or litter, just tall houses standing at cautious distances from each other like boats at anchor. His neighbor's house was a cheerful shade of yellow that reminded him of pansies. In Oklahoma, he once snuck into a botanical garden at night and ate all of the pansies he could find straight off the stem. The yellow ones tasted best but he found the blue ones more beautiful. They glowed in the darkness. One day he would paint his house that exact shade of blue. He climbed his neighbor's yellow steps, which led directly to her door. He knocked. She recognized him and invited him in. She wore an apron that matched the color of her house. Behind her, a pot sat on a sputtering oil stove. He could hear the sound of something boiling. The pot gave off a rich, marine smell. His stomach growled.

"How can I help you, sir?" the woman said.

The honorific caught him off guard. He stammered out everything he knew about the contract, which did not amount to much: *for two dollars a month, Henry Jasper Moody, Jr., will fix your house after storms.*

"Personally?" she asked.

"What?" he said.

"Will he come down here himself?"

Million froze.

"It's a joke," she said.

He smiled stiffly. "Well, what do you say?"

"You track mud into my home. Then you ask me to sign a piece of paper and pay you for the pleasure. All for a man who shot you and sent you out here to live with us Negroes. No thank you, Mr. Horizon."

"Well, can I have some of that?" he said, pointing at the pot.

He could not.

He had no luck at the next house, or the one after that. The front window of the house on the corner was broken in. A young woman stood just inside of it, knocking out the jagged remnants of glass with the handle of a gravy strainer. She looked up when he approached the house and opened the front door before he reached it. She was younger than he had thought at first, barely a teenager. She must have been on her tiptoes in the window. Million recited the terms as he understood them. She asked if Moody would fix the broken window. He made a show of looking at the contract. There was an eagle in the logo at the top that he had not noticed before.

"Yes," he said.

"Do I need to pay you now?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"I only have two dollars right now," she said. "Is that enough?"

"Yes," he said. "We can handle the rest later."

She disappeared into the house and returned with just about two dollars in coins, which he pocketed. He held a contract against the doorframe and directed her to sign above the first line. She scratched out an X, the pen dribbling ink down the blocks of text and onto the floor. Above the blank lines at the bottom, he drew a snakelike "5" for the number of people in the house, a zig-zagging "M" for his name, and the words "PAYED \$2." He held out the contract to her.

"Keep it safe," he said. He imagined it framed on a wall, a talisman against harm.

She took it from him, drawing a fat black smear across it as she did. "You gonna fix the window?" she asked.

"What?" he said. "No, not me. Someone will come by." He was not sure, actually, whether he was supposed to fix the window himself or not. He would have to ask Moody.

The girl began to cry, the corner of the ink-soiled contract gripped in her small, stained fist as if it was a handkerchief. "I mucked it up," she said. She wiped her eyes and the sockets darkened as if someone had beaten her.

"You did good," he said, hastening to gather the rest of the contracts. He wiped the pen on his trousers and slipped it into his pocket. "Show your ma that paper," he said. "You did the right thing."

Million hurried away from her wailing, skipping the next house entirely. The image of the crying girl unnerved him. He did not know for certain what he had led her to do. Whatever these contracts really meant, he would not stop. It was best not to know. His nervousness burned off as the sun rose. It was easy to tell who would sign and who would not. Women rarely signed, so he learned to avoid houses where he thought a mother might be home. Girls left in charge of the house would usually sign, though a few young women who could read shouted at him after he showed them the contract. Boys, more baldly defiant, did not sign unless he told them there was no choice. When one spit at his feet, Million hammered him on the ear until he signed his name in cramped cursive. Old men and women never signed unless they were both senile and literate. There were few of those. He could not tell whether those who refused to sign were simply mistrustful of a white man asking for money or had divined something sinister lurking under the surface of the contracts. It did not matter as long as enough of them signed. He left contracts with their signers and slipped blank contracts under the doors of houses where he

received no answer. He took whatever money they had and noted the amount on the contract. The stack of contracts grew smaller and smaller. As the day wore on, his feet had begun to prune and then itch. In the late afternoon, when some adults had begun to trickle home from part-time work, he too padded home over the marshy streets, pockets distended with coins. Moody would be very pleased.

By the next day, the water had retreated entirely, leaving behind a brown waterline that encircled the house stilts, the bottom steps of entry stairs, and the trunks of the few small trees that grew in the sandy soil. The line stuttered over the dense, waxy foliage of a magnolia. Standing in at the foot of his stairs in his suit, he half-expected it to wrap around his calves. His feet itched in his pointed shoes. He had woken to find his soles stippled with hard black dots. He cut across Freedmenstown to where he had left off the day before. Some people were stacking fallen branches and wooden debris into piles in their yards. Someone, somewhere, was cooking cornbread for breakfast. The next house in Million's route did not have stilts. Instead, it was jacked up on round sections of some massive tree. Million could not imagine that such a tree grew within a hundred miles of the island. An old man in overalls was cleaning the waterline off of one of the stumps with a patchy straw broom. Million called out to him and he turned. His eyes were amber, so light they were almost yellow.

"Good morning," Million said, stepping closer to the man. "I see the storm drew a line on your stump. For only two dollars each month, Henry Moody Jr. will help--"

The man brushed Million's face with the broom. A piece of the straw set Million's eye to watering. The man was old but looked strong. His expression was more than impenetrable; it pushed back against Million's gaze. It was hard to look at for more than a moment. Million's fascination and confusion left no room in him for anger.

"I'm Million Horizon," Million said. "I live by the dike."

The man turned back to the stump and began sweeping it.

"You haven't heard of me?" Million said. "I live by the dike."

The man went on sweeping. Million tapped him on the back.

"Don't you talk? Who are you?"

"I've heard of you," the man said. "Dark-skin white boy, lives by the dike, figures he's rich and famous. No one knows if he's got money because we don't ever see none of it. Maybe you're rich. You ain't famous. Maybe you didn't know that everybody knows everybody's name here. So, what's my name?"

Million did not know. He had never seen the man before. Or maybe he had; old men all looked the same. He took a guess.

"George," Million said.

The man lowered the broom. "What's my last name?"

"I don't know it," Million said. "I just know you're George who's got a nice house a block from the bayou."

"Ain't no one says that," George said.

"I've heard them. How else would I know? And now that I've seen it, I know it myself."

"It is a nice fucking house," George said. "I made it that way."

"For just two dollars every month, Henry Moody will protect your house."

"I protect my house."

"From storms?"

"Yes."

"From wind and rain?"

"You see any broke windows? If Moody wanted to protect our houses, he'da kept the seawall going. He'da raised our houses above the swamp like he did with the rest. Get out, mouse. I don't need your help."

Million welled with anger at this. What did Moody owe these people? Let them build their own seawall. He slipped the pen out of his pocket.

"Sign," he said.

The man shook his head. With a flick of his wrist, Million sprayed ink all over the man's lower face, throat, and chest. When the man tried to wipe his mouth, the flecks of ink grew tails like a shower of tiny meteors. Million sprayed him again. He flinched and closed his eyes. Lashing the pen like the handle of an invisible whip, Million chased the man inside his house.

Million continued along his route. At many houses, nobody answered the door though he could hear voices and smell stewing greens inside. He sold only a few contracts to children and fearful-looking elders. No one else so much as invited him inside. It seemed that Freedmenstown had turned against him. He leaned against a rusty gate that stood by itself next to the road and examined the contract again. He saw nothing new. He returned home while the sun was still high with only a few dollars in the pocket of his suit. He laid his suit on the bed. Shirtless and barefoot, he sat on the upturned pickle bucket that served as his patio chair. The sun warmed his hair until he could smell it. His eye felt puffy. He took a dollar from the pocket of his suit and walked up the street to buy a bottle of whiskey from Daisy. Million drank away the afternoon and fell asleep with the sunset.

He woke in darkness, in midair. He hit the floor on his back. A boot stomped his belly. He tasted stomach acid. He instinctively clutched a hand over the hole in his chest. Whenever he tried to get his hands under him, a kick swept them out. He could not make of the features of his

attackers. The one wearing boots loomed over him. Another smaller figure appeared and reappeared in the doorway as if flickering in and out of existence.

"Wait," Million said. "Let me up." His voice sounded as if it were coming from another room. The bigger figure above him buried its boot in his stomach again. Million curled his body around the pain. He had been beaten before: by police, by railyard bulls, once by a hotel lobby pianist. This was different. The figure above him administered blows carefully, without glee, hesitation, or fear. Whenever he tried to move, he was chastised by a fresh bloom of pain and nausea. When he finally held still, the figure took a step back out of his reach. A short whistle came from the main room. The figure walked out the bedroom, giving Million a wide berth.

Million dragged himself over to the bed and sat up against it. The room seemed darker than before. His head had begun to pound. With each beat the darkness pulsed red and he felt weightless, as if lifted up by a wave. He heard voices in the kitchen but could not make out the words. He suspected that he was missing entire sentences, maybe whole minutes; time was playing it loose, like in a dream. He heard, or really felt, a thud against the wall. A shout like a bark. A plate breaking. Sounds and words that Million could not arrange in a way that meant anything. Eventually there was silence. The first light of dawn drew familiar shapes out of the darkness.

Million stood up. He felt as if a great wave had rolled him, ground him against the rocks, but left him standing. He was certain that he should not have survived the night. He had felt this way many times, and each time he looked around to see that the destruction that had been meant for him was meted out on someone else. Feeling guilty and blessed, he surveyed his kitchen. His only plate lay scattered in pieces across the floor like the teeth of a giant shark. The box

containing the last of the blank contracts was gone. The door was open. Mosquitos roved the room and alit on his bare arms. He could not feel their bites.

He walked onto his deck. A breeze blew from the bay, carrying the smells of fish and waves. The houses of his neighbors were beautiful in the cold light. The waterline had been erased from many. It snaked around the houses of the poorest and the oldest, the shanties with flaking paint and water-warped steps. Maybe, he hoped, some of them were waiting for Moody to brush it away. But his neighbor had been right. Moody would never set foot in Freedmenstown. That was Million's job.

No stranger's footprints disturbed the perpetual mud at the bottom of his steps. A fluttering white shape caught his eye. It was a contract caught in the mud, its corner snagging the breeze. He craned over his railing. The rest of the blank contracts were scattered in the mud below, along with the crate, which had proven sturdier than it looked. He placed his shoes on the bottom step while he tromped around in the muck to recover the contracts. Those that had come to rest lightly or on dry spots he stacked in the box. Those that floated in puddles or had knifed into softer mud he brushed cleaner and draped over the edge of the box to dry. The muscles of his stomach spasmed each time he straightened.

He put his shoes on, hoisted the box, and began the long walk to Moody's. Freedmenstown was quiet. Million supposed that those who worked in the city or on the water had left before dawn. The road that separated Freedmenstown from Greenstown was busy. A family in a wagon that had arrived from somewhere down the tail of the island was accosted by a young man who insisted that he could fix the wagon's clunking wheel. The father, who was driving, gestured at the man with his whip, while the daughter gazed haughtily at a knot of men on the black side of the road.

He saw a couple walking down the street. It took him a moment to realize that it was the cook and one of the waitresses from the diner. She was wearing a blue dress and her hair was down. He wore a clean white shirt and pants that were slightly too short for him. Million passed a group of old white men sitting outside on crates. He smelled whiskey in their coffee. The old men leaned in to each other. The daughter on the wagon looked away from the black men, her face now young and troubled as if she had seen something she had not meant to. The cook looked blankly ahead as he led the waitress by her arm; Million could tell that he did not want to turn his head toward the old men or the black side of the street. Secret tensions roped the air as though everyone on the street shared a history to which he was not privy.

No one paid Million any mind. He supposed he must look like a newsboy or a deliveryman. He followed the road up the hill to the raised part of the island. He heard a dredger churning somewhere to his left, but for the most part the raising seemed complete. He walked through commercial districts, past a park with a statue of a man on horseback, past empty lots between buildings whose owners refused to sell or rebuild. As the sun rose higher, close-packed buildings gave way to large houses splayed out on vast lawns. He reached Moody's bloated mansion.

The butler told him that Moody was out. Million thanked him, walked around the house, and let himself in the back door. Back when he had spent much time in the mansion, he had habitually unlocked doors and opened windows. Usually, he did it without thought. When he caught himself, he could not easily account for his actions. It could be that he did not want to be trapped inside, or that he wanted to leave himself a way back in, or that Moody's supposed security in his mansion rankled him. He suspected that the butler trailed him, locking what he had unlocked and closing the windows he had opened to the world. Moody never seemed to

notice--the man never seemed fully present in any room--and the butler must have kept quiet out of some kind of vulture loyalty that never softened into warmth. It occurred to him that he had been too drunk to lock his own door last night.

He climbed the servants' staircase to the top floor. Moody's office door was open and he was sitting behind his huge desk. Million set the box of blank contracts on the chair across from him.

"Your butler said you were out," Million said.

"My butler died after the storm," Moody said. "A house fell on him, I believe. You spoke to him?"

"Yeah," Million said.

"Tell him to find employment elsewhere," Moody said.

"I thought you didn't believe in ghosts," Million said.

"Did I say that?" Moody said. "Show me the contracts."

Million hefted the ragged, stained stack of blank contracts out on the box and set it on the desk. Moody inspected them.

"These are blank," he said.

"Right," Million said. "Those are the ones that no one signed."

"And the others? The signed copies?"

"What do you mean?"

"I need the signed contracts, Million. I can't do anything without them."

"Yes," Million said. "Of course, Moody. This was just the first box. I could not carry any more. I'll come back with the rest."

"Call me Mr. Moody," Moody said. "My driver will take you home. Give the rest of the contracts to him."

"I can walk," Million said.

"I won't wait."

The car bounced and jostled over the road separating Freedmenstown and Greenstown. The driver knew the way. They did not speak. The car rounded the corner. Where Million's house should have been crouched a black, spidery shadow. Wisps of smoke rose up from the burned skeleton of his house. The exterior stairway, untouched, led to thin air.

"Was it like that when you left it?" the driver asked.

"Let me out," Million said.

"Let yourself out," the driver said.

Million fumbled with the door latch until it opened. He stepped out. The stilts stood as they always had but the black husk atop them was as much his house as a ribcage is a man. As he watched, a smoldering section of floorboard fell into the mud. Sparks rose when it hit. It hissed like a cat. There was no one around.

"Were the contracts in there?" the driver asked through open passenger door.

"Take me back," Million said.

"Where are the contracts?" the driver asked.

"I ain't got them," Million said.

The driver reached across the passenger seat, pulled the door shut, and drove off. Million turned his back on his former home and began to walk south. He had never been one to ask why. He had cash and a razor in his pocket. His shoes had no holes and a rich man knew his name. For most of his life he had had less. More people knew his name than ever, even if they hated it. He

would make them choke on it. For the first time in his short life, Million felt that he could shift the future. Moody would get his contracts. First, Million would see if he still had a friend.

## CHAPTER 5: MILLION FINDS HELP

Million knocked on Andy's door. He heard the voice of a young girl but Andy did not answer. He knocked again, first with his knuckles and then with a length of rebar that he found in the street. Andy opened the door.

"What?" he asked.

"Lemme in," Million said.

"My daughter's here," Andy said.

"Where's your wife?"

"Gone," Andy said, looking at the rebar. "Nacogdoches. Shreveport. Bombay. Ain't my problem where. What you fixing to do with that?"

"My house is gone."

"Wasn't me."

"Who was it?"

"Don't know, don't matter."

"That was the only house I've ever had. Why did they burn it?"

"You sumbitch."

"I don't understand."

"You stupid sumbitch," Andy said. "Don't you know what you been selling?"

"Insurance."

"Against what?"

"Storms."

"That ain't what it says."

"Sure it does. Two dollars, Moody sends someone to fix your place."

"It don't say 'storms.' It says 'windstorms' but that ain't what it means. It means 'wind.'"

"So?"

"You only get paid if wind busts your house."

"So?"

"That's the fucking trick, Million. House fills with water? Wind didn't do it, the water did. Piece of wood breaks your window? Wind didn't do it, the wood did. Tree falls on your house? Wind didn't do it, the tree did. Wind blows your place over? It's 'cause of the rain or it musta been built wrong. Or they find termite holes. You say they lying, they say you did it on purpose. They take everything you got. Like that banker. You try to stop paying or you don't have enough, they take your house. Any time in ten years you can't pay or don't, they take your house. That's what you been selling."

"I need those contracts."

"No, you don't. People been burning them, anyway."

"You niggers sure love burning things that don't belong to you."

"No one else needs to lose their home, Million."

"I suppose that's up to me," Million said. "Ain't that right?"

Million walked south toward Greentown with the rebar slung over his shoulder. The sun was low in the sky. The people of Freedmenstown watched from their yards and front steps. The crowd in front of a leaning church parted for him. He crossed the street that divided

Freedmenstown from Greenstown. The old white men had not moved, though one appeared to be asleep.

"I have a problem," Million said to them.

"This problem," one said, "is it colored?"

"It might be," Million said.

"The Pearl's right over there," the man said, pointing toward a side street.

The Pearl was easy to find. The red sign out front was a rounded triangle with a word in the center and three blue Xs on top. The cursive gave Million trouble, but he made out the P and L, fanciful as they were, and one of the smaller words: "Beer." He left the rebar outside.

The air inside was heavy and stale. The bulky wooden bar on the left was empty. Flies buzzed around the free-lunch table in the back. As his eyes adjusted, Million made out a few figures scattered between the tables against the right wall. One was the bartender. He stood and walked behind the bar without saying a word. The lights were off. It was almost too dark to see.

"I'm willing to pay for help with some negroes," Million said.

A man coughed. Million could not see any of their faces.

"There will be more people in here tonight," the bartender said. His voice was hard to make out, as if the dim light muffled the sound.

Million said that he could not wait, but he did. Customers trickled in as the sun set and the saloon grew louder. Unseen people jostled Million. He repeated his offer periodically but no one responded. Once the sun was almost completely down, the bartender lit the lamps. The room was packed.

Million went from man to man. "Help with some negroes," he said. "I'll pay." Most ignored him. One refused on the grounds that it was the day of rest. A red-faced man smiled and

poured some of his beer into Million's glass. Million had already turned away from a hard-eyed German when the man asked what kind of help he needed. Million explained and offered him ten cents per contract.

Million went door-to-door again, this time with four men at his back. If a contract was produced, the men moved along to the next house. Otherwise, Million ordered the men to break windows until he had a contract in his hands or they ran out of glass to shatter, whichever came first. If no one answered, Million beat on the door with the rebar until it splintered. By the time they reached the twelfth house, people had begun leaving the contracts outside of their front doors. Many of these contracts had been ripped to pieces and reassembled like jigsaw puzzles; others weren't the original contracts at all but handwritten renditions that grew more and more sophisticated as the night wore on. Million offered the hard-eyed man, who the others called Dutch, two cents for the damaged and fake contracts. Dutch took the stack of contracts from one of the other men and leafed through it. He accepted.

Million grew uneasy as they moved deeper into Freedmenstown. He did not know these men. He could not see why they would not just roll him as soon as it seemed like they could get away with it. He had done it many times when his pockets were empty. It was easy enough alone. Four on one would be easier than sneezing. He walked ahead of the men, close enough to hear them if they whispered. He struggled to control his limp. Soon, it became clear that these men--the German excepted-- were not so savvy. They took a blind joy in this work: they smashed windows even when a contract waited for them on the stoop, shouted threats through front doors, hurled rocks against the underbellies of stilt houses. Million felt that his leisurely time on the island had allowed him to cool and harden after years of desperation. These men

were red-hot and soft. The way the rebar stung his hands when he brought it against a door was sweet, he could not deny that, but his anger was a place inside him now. He could visit or leave it whenever he pleased. Dutch was unlike the others; the pleasure he received was that of a job well-done. He shouted like a demon but his mind was on the contracts. Whenever someone tried to surrender a contract that was signed with an X, Dutch helpfully took down their name.

Million sidled up next to Dutch as the other three hacked at a house Million suspected was abandoned. "What's the count?" he asked.

"Sixteen originals," Dutch said. "Forty-three otherwise. Two dollars and forty-six cents."

"I'm starting to think I gave you a raw deal," Million said.

"Could be," Dutch said.

"You figured you'd go along with me long enough to see what this was about," Million said. "Find out whether I have the cash on me. Slit my through soon as that sounded like a pretty idea."

"Could be we can renegotiate our pay," Dutch said.

"Fifty and ten when this is over," Million said. "The same again when I deliver these contracts. Share it or don't, it's nothing to me. More jobs could come from this long as I'm above ground."

The men collected contracts for hours, leaving Freedmenstown only when two policemen with flashlights shouted down at them from atop the levee. Million felt menace in Freedmenstown's hush. He was angry. They had taken the first home he had ever had. All he had done was bust a few windows and snatch back some pieces of paper that were never theirs in the first place. They were lucky he was not vengeful. He felt Freedmenstown's reproachful glare against his back.

"Feels like I trod on a cat's tail," Million said to Dutch.

"Or kicked an anthill," Dutch said. "Only thing to do is move away."

Outside of the Pearl, Million and Dutch exchanged money for contracts. "Find me if your boss needs anything done," Dutch said as he left. Million had never mentioned Moody.

It was too late at night to pay Moody a visit and Million had no home to which he could return. The door to the Pearl was unlocked. The bartender moved a wet rag in lazy circles on the bar. Everyone else had disappeared, leaving only broken glass and sticky puddles behind. The bartender sold Million a bottle of whiskey, which he took outside. He sat on one of the crates that the old men had occupied during the day and stared across Stewart Road at the darkness that enveloped Freedmenstown. They had only broken some glass but, if Andy had told the truth about the contracts, they might as well have used torches. He could not blame fate this time. Things that had seemed like parts of a dream now felt real: the people in the water whose fingers he had peeled away from his boat, the unseen people screaming to be saved from the rubble, Mr. Smith's knuckles opened to the moonlight, the buildings in flames, the strange visitors to his home, the barrel of Moody's rifle spitting lead at ghouls and then at him, all of the dead he had sent to uncertain ends. And now all of these people, his neighbors, whose fates were scrawled on pieces of paper that neither he nor they could read. None of it would ever make him a rich man.

He would burn the contracts. He would pay the men with the money in his pockets, burn the contracts, and leave the island. He had knocked on every door on the island asking for corpses, signatures, contracts, and found nothing but people waiting to be hurt. He was tired of ghouls and ghosts, sharks and vultures. He would go back to the mainland, where his actions had no significance and no one, least of all rich men, knew his name, and he would keep moving.

He sat on the crate, his whiskey forgotten, until the sky began to lighten. Million bought a pack of matches at a general store that had just opened for the day and made his way toward the marshy edge of the bayou. Rain misted down. It took Million several tries to light a match. He brought it to the corner of one of the contracts. It burned slowly and without flame as if dissolving into ash. Past the stands of saltgrass and the occasional scraggly tree, the mainland was a forbidding line against a deep gray-blue sky. He imagined stepping onto the far shore and found he could not conceive of taking a second step.

Million heard the sound of riffing water. From behind a screen of saltgrass only twenty feet away came Andy in his small boat, rowed by a familiar-looking young man. Million stood. Andy approached within spitting distance. A small fish broke the water and a white heron eyed it. The young man stuck an oar into the silty bottom to hold the boat in place. Andy and the young man turned sideways on their respective benches to face Million as if he had interrupted their conversation.

"This is my nephew," Andy said.

"Have you been following me?" Million asked.

"He signed one of those pieces of paper at your feet," Andy said.

"Good for him," Million said. "I'm taking them to Moody right now."

"Wrong direction for that," the nephew said. His voice was higher than Million expected. Million remembered him. He was the boy with the pretty cursive, the one whose ears Million had boxed. There had been three other children in the house when Million first came around, and when he came around with the three men there had been another child but still no parents.

"The storm didn't leave much for us," Andy said. "You might know what it's like to have nothing but you don't know what it's like to have nothing but a family to care for. I loaded this boy's ma and pa on the dead carts while you was asleep. You know what the right thing is."

"To tell the truth, I was gonna burn these papers," Million said.

"I *tole* you," Andy's nephew hissed.

"Okay, Million," Andy said. "I'll let you go on."

"I was going to," Million said, "but now I'm not. On account of I remembered that I don't have a house no more. If I burn these, I won't ever have a home again."

"You'd take ours so you could have yours," Andy said.

"Only if you don't pay," Million said. "More of a chance than I got."

"What if I told you who did this to you?" Andy asked.

"Who burned my house?" Million said. "I'd pay to know that."

"Just throw all that paper into the water and I'll tell you," Andy said.

"Maybe I could spare one or two," Million said. "No more."

"All of them," Andy said. "Half an evil is still evil."

Million had seen plenty of bad but the only evil he ever saw was dying, and he had never killed anybody on purpose, at least not recently. "Three, like the genie's wishes," he said.

"Half," Andy said.

Million stooped and picked up the damp stack.

"Okay!" Andy shouted. The boat rocked. "Only five. The cruelest ones. It might save you some in the eyes of God." Million turned his back. "Three!" Andy called. "Just three. But let me choose them."

Million set the papers back down and sat on them.

"What's God's name?" he asked.

"What is this?" Andy asked.

"What's God's name?" Million said. "He's got to have one."

"What do you want me to say?" Andy asked.

"The truth."

"God's name is Jehovah."

"Jovah."

"And Jesus Christ is our Lord."

"I don't care," Million said. "I just wanted the name."

"First one is his," Andy said, gesturing at his nephew. "Forrest Brown."

Million knelt next to the stack of paper and shuffled through it, looking for a familiar, graceful shape in the corner. He found Forrest's contract and held it up. Andy and Forrest leaned closer at the same time, almost tipping the boat.

"That's it," Forrest said.

Million balled it up and tossed it over the boat. It spun slowly in the still water. The heron moved its head from side to side to get a better look at it.

"Next one is Sadie Samson," Andy said.

Million looked for snake letters on the signature line. He found a particularly sinuous shape and held the paper up expectantly.

"Ain't it," Forrest said. "That's Samuel Sanders."

"Ain't that what you said?" Million asked. He looked at the face of the contract as though it meant something to him. Three big crooked shapes punctuated the figure in front of him along with a spiky M like the one he had used to sign.

"I said Sadie Samson," Andy said. "S-A-M-S-O-N. Like in the Bible."

Million shuffled through the contracts again. The signatures meant no more to him than the shapes formed by logs in abandoned campfires. All they said was, *someone was here*. He did not need to do this. What did he owe Andy? Andy had given him the word "sharks." Andy helped him carry the bodies of strangers. If Andy was any kind of friend, he would have told him who to blame.

"God damn, Million," Andy said. "How hard is it to find one piece of paper?"

"It ain't here," Million said. He knew it very well could be. Even if he could find it, he would not give it to Andy. He had spared Andy's house. He had heard a street preacher tell a story like that, of God passing over the houses of his faithful. Mercy was divine but his was running out.

"Bullshit," Andy said.

Million shook his head.

"No Samson at all?" Andy asked.

"Not a one," Million said.

"Forrest, why don't you help Mr. Horizon?" Andy said.

"Either of you steps foot out of that boat, I'll say you robbed me," Million said. "The truth ain't so different."

"Just two more names. I'll pay you," Andy said.

"It's getting hard to recall if you're my friend or not," Million said. "Why don't you tell me who burned my house before your names end up in this stack too."

A cloud passed behind Andy's eyes. "After all we lost in the storm, you think you'd be kinder."

"I didn't lose shit in the storm," Million said. "When I lost was when some uppity negros decided I was to blame for them signing a piece of paper. From here on out, if either one of you says a name that ain't attached to someone who torched my place, I'll add a new one to these sheets. Got plenty of extras."

Andy and Forrest glanced at each other. Million saw something pass between them like a squirrel jumping from one tree to the next.

"I tried to be a Christian," Andy said.

"Tell me who did me wrong," Million said.

"Lord knows I did try," Andy said. He reached down into the boat and brought up a long, rusty rifle and set it on his lap. Million turned sideways and ducked his head to make a smaller target. He squinted as if rain was blowing into his eyes. "I've been shot before," he said.

"We're gonna take those papers," Andy said.

"You take these, you're taking away my home again," Million said. "I'll have to leave the island."

"You ain't even from here," Andy said.

"I could be," Million said.

"My mama was pregnant with me when General Granger told us we were free," Andy said. "He read the order on 24<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. I have lived on the bayou for forty years. Now, where were you born?"

"I'll kill you before I leave this island," Million said. "I truly will."

"This could go two ways," Andy said. "You try to run off with those papers and I'll kill you likelier than not. I'll give you to the sharks. You leave them where they are, you're welcome"

to come back for me when you please. Either way, I'll die on this island. Either way, you'll leave it."

Forrest, who the men had both forgotten, sat up very straight. "You got to do it," he said to his uncle. "They'll kill us. He'll write our names down anyway and come back to kill us."

"They can do whatever they want to us," Andy said. "Don't mean we got to help them fuck us." He turned back to Million. "I've tried to keep you alive. More than you know. Now it's getting mighty difficult to see how I can keep that going. Help me here, Million. Please. I got this far without doing no evil." Andy looked exhausted, angry, and scared all at once, the way he had when the sharks began tearing at the floating bodies.

Million was not sure that he could survive a bullet he deserved. He had not planned on dying yet. When he died, it would be in the papers. Women would weep. His friends would refuse to believe it. There would be someone left to say his name. It was not his time, not yet.

He could beg Moody to forgive him. He was not proud in that way. But he would not hide or flee. Moody was his ticket, the only thing he had now that he had never had before. The house came from Moody. His name spread because of Moody. He could not go back to him with empty hands.

"I'll give you half of 'em," Million said. "I'll take the rest and tell Moody that's all there was. The rest of you can help the bad-luck ones pay so they don't lose their houses. I come back with none, Moody will send someone else."

"Could be," Andy said.

"Jovah will judge you if you shoot me," Million said. "And Moody will send someone worse than me too."

"I ain't scared of God," Andy said.

"Then shoot," Million said.

"I've seen so many people dead," Andy said.

Million picked up the top half of the stack. "Take these," he said.

"How do I know you won't just write them again?" Andy asked. His hands were shifty on the rifle as if it were heating up.

"I can't read so well," Million said. The heron looked at the papers in his hand as if considering whether they were another bird.

"What?" Andy said, startling the heron into flight.

"I can't read the names," Million said. "I don't know what they say."

Andy slumped in his seat. Forrest's expression was triumphant.

"Did Moody tell you what you're selling?" Andy asked finally.

"I figured it out myself," Million said.

"He ask you to do something, you don't even ask what it is? What kind of man are you?" Andy said.

"That question never has bothered me much," Million said. "And the exact nature of my friendships shouldn't bother you none either." He began walking toward the boat. Andy raised the rifle and tracked him as he approached Forrest and extended the half-stack of papers to him. Forrest took it in both hands and began tearing it apart. Million took a step back.

"Tell me who it was that burned my house," he said.

The rifle wavered as Andy sighted down it. "Forrest, row," he said. The oar slurped as Forrest pulled it out of the mud. He shoved off. Andy aimed over his nephew's shoulder until they were a good twenty feet away from Million, then dropped the rifle.

"Please, Andy," Million said, raising his voice to carry over the increasing distance. "I didn't mean to hurt nobody. I can't stand not to know. Who did this to me?"

Andy raised a hand for Forrest to stop rowing. The boat yawed silently in the still water.

"I did," Andy said.

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