

Chapter 2

It was mid-October, leaf-peeping time in our north country, except there were few leafs worth the peeping, not yet, anyway. It'd been a hot, dry summer and autumn, and the old saw, about the last of the leaves dropping by Halloween, no longer applied. The leaf-peeping had been pushed back into November, which was a good thing for us. The foliage tours included stops at the camps and it was humiliating and infuriating, busloads of condescending right wingers snapping photos and gawking and pointing at us as if we were sub-humans. With a shortened window between summer and winter, with just two seasons instead of the traditional four, there wouldn't be so many buses.

Outside, we went to the right, north. It was a comfortable, with an evening breeze.

Our dining hall was located near the center of the camp, part of the cluster of Admin buildings, and as we walked away, we went past a building that was set apart from the rest. It was an imposing concrete turret, four-stories tall, rounded like a tower and with concertina wire, electrified, around the crenellated rooftop.

There were shouts out of the building, obscenities, as we went past, and Jesus walked over toward the building and tilting back his head, stared up at it.

"What is this?" he said.

"The Citadel," I said. "It's a prison inside of the camp."

He stared some more.

The windows had iron bars, no glass. Come winter, the men inside would stuff the windows with cardboard and blankets. For now, the windows were filled with faces, angry young black faces shouting at us. It was hard to know exactly what they were saying. The Citadel had evolved its own dialect, unintelligible to outsiders, but there was no mistaking the venom in their voices. Seeing how uncomfortable it was for Jesus, I walked away, thinking he'd come along. He stayed there, staring up at those abusive kids.

I walked back to him.

"Come on," I said, and I was grateful we were standing slightly back from the building. Up close, the stench was overpowering.

"A prison inside of a camp?" he said and he was angry.

"We've got a Supreme Court with a sense of humor," I said. "See, some liberal lawyer who's probably in a camp now had the temerity to go before the court and argue about equality for the blacks behind bars. Most of the blacks were in squalor camps. Those are American gulags, fields surrounded by fences and ditches and with stick huts and with nothing but rain barrels or a stream for water. The Court agreed with the lawyer and Homeland Security flooded the camps with ghetto kids. The blacks caused a lot of problems and it upset the Corporation and the stockholders. The whites pay the bills but it would have been unconstitutional to evacuate the blacks, so the Corporation put the blacks into Citadels. Every camp has at least one. It's the only place in the camps where the men are behind bars instead of fences and legally it's integration, not segregation."

"Even though everyone in there is black," Jesus said.

"Yeh," I said.

"I'm black," he said. "Why aren't I in there?"

"You're brown, not black," I said, "and besides, it's mostly kids in there."

"Kids?"

"Not kids, I mean, young men," I said. "Ghetto kids."

"African-Americans," he said.

He looked some more, listened, and it was becoming more raucous with banging drums and with the kids scraping metal cups across the bars and with howling, ululations. The kids in there didn't appreciate getting gawked at, no more than we did.

"Innocent children," Jesus said. "Locked up and abandoned."

He shook his head and we walked away.

"They maybe went in as children," I said, "and some went in as innocents but getting locked up in a dungeon for the crime of being black can be a life-changing experience. Especially at such a young age."

"What'd you mean," he said, "about the whites paying the bills?"

"It's the camps' dirty little secret," I said. "All the camps, for all the talk of our being profitable, we aren't. Or we wouldn't be, if we were still making stuff. See, the camps were started as factory camps but we can't compete with third-world slave labor, so what they do, they make us pay to live here."

"With chits," he said.

"Hard money," I said. "Dollars. Somebody on the outside pays for us, the wife, parents, a friend who remembers the old days. The men set up trust funds before they come in, if they've got the dough. They sign it over to someone on the outside and hope they don't get stiffed after they come in."

"Nobody's paying for me," he said.

"Sometimes it's done anonymously," I said, "so you might not know if someone was paying for you or not, but someone must be, or you'd be in a squalor camp instead of in here."

He shook his head.

"I wouldn't allow it," he said.

"Maybe your father is paying for you," I said, a lame joke.

He looked at me, more stern than angry.

"Don't do anything so stupid," I said, "as to try to figure out who's paying for you, and don't make noise about it. You maybe don't like it, but it's not something you can afford to disavow."

The grounds opened into sweeping lawns with groves of trees and shrubs, like islands or oases in the lawns, and it was like departing the city for the country. The houses were in clusters scattered around, like villages, the buildings mostly one- and two-story duplexes and with some newer high rises, four- and five-stories. Gravel paths connected the different villages.

We walked through one of the villages.

"Onondaga," I said. "It's one of the largest."

Onondaga was twenty-five Quonset huts, like Iroquois longhouses except the siding was aluminum, not elm bark. The longhouses had double doors at either end, opened now, and inside, along the walls, three-high bunks alternated with tiers of footlockers. Two hundred inmates lived in each longhouse and Onondaga Village had its own dining hall.

Now, the time between supper and the evening roll call, free time for the men, and with the inside of the houses sweltering from the sun beating down on them all day, the men were outside, on benches and tossing horseshoes and playing badminton and croquet, and in groups, chatting. Some of the men nodded and spoke to us as we went past.

The lawns outside of the villages were yellowed and crinkly; here, inside the village and with sprinklers tossing soft water, the grass was green and perfectly cut. There were flowers everywhere — lining the sidewalks, in boxes on the window sills, climbing trellises, planted around half-buried rocks too large to be removed. There was music out of speakers mounted on posts, and at the tops of some of the posts, bird feeders. It was suburbia without the moms or kids or minivans.

My Black Jesus

“The camp,” I said, resuming Jesus’s tour and after we’d emerged from the village, and who was more qualified than I was to conduct a tour? I’d been here since the founding, seventeen long years, and had seen the camp from tents and barbed wire to houses and barbed wire, “is in the shape of an hourglass.”

“It’s beautiful,” Jesus said. “Bucolic, I mean, if you could forget for a minute what it is.”

“You’re never allowed to forget,” I said, “and it’s only beautiful because it’s a show camp. Most of the other camps aren’t so pretty. Ours is a mile long and shaped like an hourglass. A mile maybe seems like a lot, but remember, it’s a camp, not a prison. It’s five hundred yards wide at each end and only about a hundred yards wide in the center. Camp McCarthy was one of the first and one of the smallest. They’ve got mega-camps now with more than twenty thousand men. Or women.”

“Business is booming,” he said.

“Our population is around five thousand,” I said, “not counting the Citadel. They didn’t realize, when they started, just how many of us they were going to have to incarcerate.”

A little farther along and the road curled around a knoll, not too high, but it stood out, there on the flats, and because of what was at the top — a Victorian mansion. Seriously. Not a sprawling mansion, it couldn’t sprawl up on the hill, there wasn’t enough room. It was more imitation than real, except it was real. The rooms were small, or so I’d heard, I’d never been in there. It was three-stories, stone on the bottom, blue shingles above the stone. The mansion had a turret and gables and a wide front porch.

“Who lives up there?” Jesus said. “The warden?”

“Mr. Big,” I said, and I explained: “Charlie Waters. He was one of the ten richest men in America, a billionaire on the outside, dot-com or something. He got all of his money out of the country before they arrested him and moved it to France where the Corporation can’t get at it and they want it, boy, do they want it, and they’re getting it the only way they can, a little at a time.” I laughed. “A little at a time means tens of thousands of dollars every month.”

“Pocket change for Mr. Big,” Jesus said.

“The Supreme Court said France had to give up the money,” I said, “but Mr. Big has dual citizenship and you know how France hates us. It’s been going back and forth for years and with an army of lawyers on either side, and until they can reach a deal, Mr. Big gets his way in here and he’s, well, he lives pretty comfortably. They say he’s got a butler and cable TV.”

“Money talks,” Jesus said.

“Amen,” I said and he looked at me.

“Figure of speech,” I said.

“Oh,” he said.

“They say we could go to war with France over it someday,” I said, “which a lot of people on the outside would like to do anyway, regardless of Mr. Big, so if we did go to war, Mr. Big might just be an excuse. I mean, imagine going to war over a man’s bank account.”

“Cable TV,” Jesus said. “Think he watches football?”

“You like football?”

“Love it,” he said, “but not as much as I love baseball.”

We went around the knoll and I pointed north, and in the distance, away from the fences and concrete watchtowers, a broad river flowed from our left to our right. Beyond the river it was swales and rolling hills. It was postcard-pretty farm country, villages, genuine villages with church steeples, and countryside with pastures and acres of corn and red and yellow barns with metal silos glinting the evening sun.

And with people, free people.

“The Promised Land,” I said.

He looked at me, that stern look again.

“I’m not making a joke,” I said. “That’s Canada on the other side and Canada seriously is the Promised Land. It’s how you’ll see things soon enough, Jesus or not.”

“Would you like to go to Canada?” he said.

I didn’t want to talk about Canada. It was too depressing, sort of like pining for a lost love, and was my love Canada or was it the old U.S. of A.?

“For most of the camps,” I said, not a tour guide now and instead a dejected prisoner, “Canada and Mexico are distant dreams. It’s worse for us here, having to look at Canada all the time.” Then: “Come over here. This is important.”

We had, since exiting Onondaga, been walking down the center of the camp. Now we veered right, east, and approaching the gravel strip that abutted the perimeter fences, I squeezed Jesus’s shoulder.

“This is as close as you ever want to get,” I said.

There were two identical chain-link fences, parallel one to another and fifteen yards apart. The fences were thirty feet high and had coils of concertina wire across the tops, the wire strung along metal rods that rose above the fences and slanted inward at forty-five degrees so a man climbing, did he get to the top, would find himself beneath a daunting eave. There were towers at intervals along the fences and lights at the tops of tall stanchions, for sweeping the camp at night. A gravel strip abutted the inside of the interior fence. Along the inside edge of the gravel was a tripwire, an innocuous metal strand fifteen inches off the ground and threaded along the tops of metal rods.

“Go over the wire and into the strip and you’re dead before you get anywhere close to the fence,” I said. “Get too close to the wire and they’ll figure you’re up to something and kill you for it, or kill you for the hell of it and say afterward you were up to something. Oh, and the fences are electrified. Touch them and you’re a cooked goose. Now come on. Let’s get away from here. It makes me nervous.”

We walked away, going southeast now.

“Anyone ever try to get up and over the fence?” he said.

“It happens,” I said. “Usually when they get bad news from home. But it’s suicide, not escape.”

“Shame on them,” he said.

“What can you do?” I said. “They’re a sadistic bunch.”

“They go up there because they’re tired of life,” Jesus said, “and they want to get out of it.”

I looked over at him. I was incredulous, angry, too.

“The men trying to escape are the bad guys?” I said.

“Is it so terrible in here?” he said.

“It’s your first day,” I said.

“Life is a gift from the father,” he said. “The most precious gift. I understand the suffering of the men, but it doesn’t give them the right to throw away all the father has given them.”

“Bunch of ingrates,” I said.

“The greater the suffering,” Jesus said, “the greater the reward.”

“The good Christian folks on the outside,” I said, “must just be so envious of our suffering.”

“Do you ever think about going up onto the fence?” he said.

“I’m not ready to go,” I said.

“Not ready to die?”

“Yeh.”

My Black Jesus

“Has anyone ever escaped?”

“Anybody serious about getting out,” I said, “would find some better way of doing it.”

“Tunnels?” he said.

“Sometimes,” I said. “We’ve got a lot of educated fellows in here, scientists and engineers, men who can busy themselves working on intractable projects. One time, they catapulted some men right out of here and into Canada.”

“Serious?”

“They built their catapult in sections,” I said, “and assembled it one moonless night and shot the men over the fences and across the river. The men had parachutes, to break their fall. The first few men landed in the river, though, and their parachutes dragged them down and they drowned but they got four or five guys out safely before the twanging of their big rubber band woke up the guards in the towers.”

“The brochure says no one has ever escaped,” he said.

“That’s what it says.”

Ahead was a grove of tall basswood trees, the trees predating the camp by more than a century. We went through the trees and on the other side was our recreation complex.

Jesus was startled, then mesmerized, seeing it.

The complex consisted of the sports’ office, a one-story wooden building painted a dark green, three outdoor basketball courts, some handball courts, a running path, a batting cage, a latrine, and what got Jesus’s attention, two softball diamonds, both with games in progress.

We had arrived along one of the left field lines and watched as a batter lifted a fly ball in our direction. The left fielder drifted into foul territory, toward us. He pounded his glove, reached up and caught the ball.

We watched a few minutes more and resumed walking along one of the paths and with the fences still to our left. The sun, an engorged orange globe, was to our right, away in the distance, and was nearly gone, with just the rounded top showing over the mountains. There was a pink western sky and with the air cooling and with the breeze picking up and carrying to us the scent of the towering northern white pines that were scattered around the camp.

“I love ball,” Jesus said.

“Did you play sports, back when you were a kid, the first time?”

“Not so much,” he said.

“Too bad,” I said. “You’d have been really good.”

“You think so?” he said.

“Well, yeh,” I said. “You’re God.”

“Son of God,” he said, then: “I didn’t have the time for sports and games. I was too focused on preparing myself for my destiny, even as a boy.”

“Did it make you feel cheated?”

“Some,” he said, and I thought it maybe explained how he seemed more...detached, this time.

“It must have been weird,” I said. “Being Jesus and being a kid.”

Jesus smiled, remembering.

“It was wonderful,” he said. “We were a big family with a lot of love and a lot of laughs, and all the times were precious, especially for Mary and me. We didn’t know exactly what was coming but we had an awareness.”

“Did you have brothers and sisters?” I said.

He looked at me as if it was an odd, or dumb, question.

I shrugged.

"It's bothered people for a long time," I said. "Wars have been fought over it."

He sighed.

"Don't I know it," he said.

"So, did you?" I said.

"Is it important to you?"

"No, not really," I said. "...Did you?"

"My father's house was full of children," he said.

"I didn't mention it before," I said, "but I'm coach of our team. I could get you on the roster, if you really want to play."

"You could get me on for this year?" he said, excited.

"Yeh," I said.

"You said before how it was too late and I'd have to wait until next year."

"I can grease the league secretary," I said.

"I changed my mind," he said.

"You don't want to play?"

"I'll play next year."

"But you want to play this year, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And you won't," I said, "on account of a little bribe."

"It's wrong."

"It's a way of life," I said. "A handful of chits or cigarettes. Come on, Jesus. It's how things get done in here."

"Next year," he said.

We walked some more.

"We have to get back for evening roll," I said. "I can show you the rest of the camp tomorrow, although down below is about the same as what's up here."

"More villages," he said.

"And our gardens," I said.

An armored vehicle came along the path and with two helmeted guards, a driver, and a gunner on a swivel seat in the back, behind his machine gun. We stepped off the path. The guard vehicles didn't slow down for prisoners. Our safety was our responsibility, not theirs, and they left us in a cloud of dust.

We arrived back at Admin, around the front now, by the main entrance to the camp.

Imposing triple fences cordoned the Admin compound off from the rest of the camp and from the outside, too. The entrance was an electronic metal gate. There were sharpshooters in parapets along the tops of the interior-most and exterior-most fences. The sharpshooters had high-powered rifles and with the two of us standing up close to the fence, some of the guards probably had us in their crosshairs.

In the center of the compound was a fifteen-foot tall statue of Joe McCarthy. Pigeons preened themselves on the senator's head and shoulders. Behind the senator were three flagpoles with the stars and stripes flying from the center pole and flanked by the corporate and camp flags.

Just beyond the fences, adjacent to the gate and surrounded by a much shorter fence, was a parking lot for the guards and clerks and administrators. A metal stairway rose up from the lot and went to an enclosed walkway, the walkway crossing high above the compound and entering into the third floor of the four-story, fortress-like main Admin building.

We heard an air raid siren, a wail.

My Black Jesus

“That’s our cue,” I said.

It was the evening whistle and without permission slips in our pockets for a ball game or a special work detail or anything else, we had ten minutes to get back to our section before the second whistle and roll call. I’d planned our tour so we’d be back in time.

We detoured around the buildings, on a beaten path alongside the fences, and headed home.