HELL OF A BOOK

Also by Jason Mott

THE CROSSING

THE WONDER OF ALL THINGS

THE RETURNED

THE FIRST

WE CALL THIS THING BETWEEN US LOVE

HIDE BEHIND ME



HELL OF A BOOK

or

The Altogether Factual, Wholly Bona Fide Story of a Big Dreams, Hard Luck, American-Made Mad Kid

Jason Mott

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For All the Other Mad Kids

HELL OF A BOOK



In the corner of the small living room of the small country house at the end of the dirt road beneath the blue Carolina sky, the dark-skinned five-year-old boy sat with his knees pulled to his chest and his small, dark arms wrapped around his legs and it took all that he had to contain the laughter inside the thrumming cage of his chest.

His mother, seated on the couch with her dark hands folded into her lap and her brow furrowed like Mr. Johnson's fields at the end of winter, pursed her lips and fidgeted with the fabric of the tattered gray dress she wore. It was a dress she'd bought before the boy even came into this world. It aged with him. Year upon year, the blue floral pattern faded, one shade of color at a time. The threads around the hem lost their grip on things. They broke apart and reached their dangling necks in every direction that might take them away. And now, after seven years of hard work, the dress looked as though it would not be able to hold its fraying fabric together much longer.

"Did you find him?" the boy's mother asked as her husband came into the room.

"No," the boy's father said. He was a tall man with large eyes and a long, gangly frame that had earned him the nickname "Skinniest Nigga Breathing" back when he was a boy. The name had stuck over the years, lashed across his back from childhood to manhood, and, having never found a cure for his almost mythological thinness, the man had taken to wearing long-sleeved clothes everywhere he went because the empty air held within the sleeves made him look larger than he was. At least, that was what he believed.

He was a man who had been afraid of the eyes of others for all of his life. How could he not want his child to learn the impossible trick of invisibility?

"It's okay," he said. "We'll find him soon. I know it. I'm sure that, wherever he is, he's fine. He can take care of himself. He's always going to be fine." He took a seat beside his wife on the tired brown couch and wrapped the spindly reeds of his fingers around the fidgeting doves that were her hands. He lifted them to his lips and kissed them. "He's a good kid," the father said. "He wouldn't just up and leave us. We'll find him."

"He's the best boy in the whole world," the mother said.

"Maybe he just went off into the woods to find some briarberries. I bet that's where he went."

"You think so?"

The father thought for a moment. "Not sure, but I'm hopeful, Dollface."

The boy's mother chuckled at "Dollface" and dabbed the corner of her eye. Was she crying?

The groundswell of laughter that had been tickling the boy's throat for so long finally—as he sat, invisible and unseen only an

arm's length away—faded at the sight of his mother's tears. His arms tightened around his legs.

He shouldn't have done this. He shouldn't have made them worry like this. They were good parents and they hated worrying about him. A lead ball of regret formed in the boy's stomach. It rang and drummed through his entire body. He needed to stop this trick he was playing on them . . . but how?

What could he do? He was less than two feet from where his parents sat, but guilt over his mother's tears pushed down on the hands that would reach out and touch her and let her know he was there. It weighted down the tongue that would sing her name and free her from fear.

There was no way, his five-year-old mind figured, that he could let them know that it had all been a joke. He could never explain to them that this was all meant to be fun. Not just fun, a celebration! After all, he had done it! For three years now, his mother and father had been trying to teach him to become invisible, to become "The Unseen." That was the name the boy's father gave to it. He said the words with a fantastic tone. He spoke with his hands in the air, sweeping back and forth gently like he was playing some magical instrument. "You will become The Unseen," the boy's father said. He added an almost spooky "Oooooooo" to the end of it sometimes. "You'll be unseen and safe for as long as you live," his father said. ". . . Can you even imagine it?"

It was the words "unseen and safe" that made his father smile. It was the boy's favorite smile, like he was watching his father gain everything he had wanted out of his life.

Unseen and safe.

Sanctified words.

"What should we do?" his mother asked her husband.

"Should we just call it quits?" replied the boy's father. He put a spindly hand on his forehead and looked very dramatic all of a sudden, the way people in movies sometimes did. And, yet, the boy thought he saw the beginnings of a smile hiding in the shadows of his father's face. "I mean," the boy's father continued, "if he's gone, maybe we should make like a banana and split. We could pack it all up and head out west somewhere. I hear they got tons of kids out there who need a fine set of parents like us."

The boy's mother smiled as though her husband had told a joke. Humor was one of his gifts. His jokes painted the walls of his family's home in brushstrokes of laughter.

But, in spite of the fact that he knew his father was trying to be funny, the boy heard his words and imagined his parents leaving him and, once again, the sea of fear swelled up inside of him.

"No, no, no," said his mother.

And just like that, the fear ebbed.

"You're right," his father said. "We could never leave him. He's just too great. No other kid in this world like him. So what should we do?"

"I have an idea," the boy's mother declared. Excitement filled her voice and spilled over into the boy. His mother always had the best ideas.

"We'll cook everything he likes to eat. All of it. One big meal like they used to do back in the old days. And the smell of it will go out all over the world and find him. That'll bring him home!"

The boy almost cheered. A great dinner of all his favorite things. All of it spread out on the kitchen table, one dish after the other. The idea that the smell of the foods he loved could go out into the world and bring him home . . . it was like something from one of the books he read at bedtime: all myth, and dream, and splendor.

The boy's father leaned back for a moment and looked at the mother through squinted eyes. "His favorite foods?" he said, stroking his dark, narrow chin. "You reckon that'll work?"

"I know it will," his mother said. "He'll smell them. The chicken. The macaroni and cheese. Maybe even a sweet potato pie or two. He never could turn down sweet potato pie."

"Pie you say?" The boy's father licked his lips. "You could be onto something with this scheme of yours. It's got legs, I think. Just like you." He kissed his wife's neck and she laughed the light, lilting laugh that she sometimes did late at night when the two of them were alone in their bedroom with the door locked.

"Stop that," she giggled.

"I don't know," the father said, his mouth a wry grin. "I still think we might could go out west and find a new kid. I hear they make some out there that actually like to eat their vegetables."

The mother laughed and the boy almost laughed too. "No," she chuckled. "We'll cook and he'll come back to us. Just you watch."

She stood then and brushed off her old dress as she always did and she went into the kitchen. For a moment, the father stayed in the living room and stroked his chin again. "Well, kid," he mused, "wherever you are in this world I hope that you know that I would never move out west and try to find another son. You're the only ankle-biter I could ever want."

Then he stood and went into the kitchen and began helping his wife.

Before long, the house billowed with the smells and sounds of the boy's favorite food. The chicken fried in a heavy black skillet and the macaroni bubbled and baked in the oven. There were sugared strawberries, and muscadine grapes, and leftover pound cake that the boy had forgotten was still in the house. Even though he

was still hidden, his stomach growled so loudly that he feared it would give him away. But his mother and father didn't seem to hear and so he was able to continue to sit—even with the hunger in the pit of his stomach—and close his eyes and smell all of the dancing aromas.

In that moment, invisible and buried in his parents' love, he was happier than he had ever been. And soon, in spite of his hunger, he was asleep.

He awoke to the feeling of his father lifting him in his arms.

"There you are," his father said.

He carried his son into the dining room, where the table was covered with all of the boy's favorite foods.

"There he is!" the boy's mother screamed at the sight of her son. Then she hugged him so tightly that he could hardly breathe. That was always his favorite type of hug. It was like melting into the summertime earth.

And when the hug was over, his mother kissed him and asked, "Where were you?"

"I did it," the boy exclaimed. "I really did it!"

"Did what?" his father asked.

"I was invisible!"

His parents' eyes went wide as star magnolias.

"No!" his father exclaimed with joy, looking very dramatic like TV people again.

"You really did it?" his mother asked, equally elated.

"Yep," the boy chirped, almost laughing. "I was in the living room this whole time. Unseen just like you said. It really worked, Mama!"

Then his mother hugged him and the three of them danced and laughed and smiled like they never had before. In that moment, the

worries that had always hung over their heads were suddenly gone. It was as though all three of them might suddenly levitate off of the floor, float up into the blue sky that sprawled itself out long and wide above the small country house that the family called home.

The next day, the boy, still drunk on sweets and wonder, asked his father: "You really couldn't see me, could you?"

"It doesn't matter if I saw you or not," his father said. "All that matters is that you felt safe."



The thing to remember is this: above all else, this is a love story. Don't ever forget that.

But now that that's out of the way, let's get acquainted: It's 3 a.m.

It's 3 a.m. and I'm somewhere in the Midwest—one of those flat states where everyone seems nicer than they should be. I'm in a hotel. In the hallway. I'm running. No, actually, I'm sprinting. I'm sprinting down this midwestern hotel hallway. Did I mention that I'm naked? Because I am.

Also: I'm being chased.

About fifteen feet behind me—also sprinting, but not naked—is a very large man wielding a very large wooden coat hanger. Sometimes he holds it like a baton. Other times he holds it above his head like a battle-axe. He's surprisingly fast for a man his size.

The very large man with the very large coat hanger is draped in Old Navy couture: beige straight-fit stain-resistant khakis, argyle sweater vest, brown twill boat shoes that may or may not be faux

leather. He's a family man for sure. 2.3 kids. Dog named Max. Cat named Princess. Aquarium that's on its twelfth goldfish named "Lucky." He drives a Camry and lives on a cul-de-sac in a home surrounded by a picket fence. There's an in-ground pool in the backyard. He's got a healthy 401(k).

He's everything a responsible adult should be.

He looks to be about the same age as I am—leaving the decadent comfort of thirty and reluctantly knocking on the grizzled front door of forty. And for an instant, as the two of us sprint down this luxurious hotel hallway—feet thumping on the carpet, lungs burning, arms pumping like oil wells—I think about stopping and asking him how he built that life. How he made it all come together so perfectly. How he managed to do everything I've been unable to. I want to hear his secret.

But as I take a look back over my shoulder, I see him raise that coat hanger of his into a battle-axe position and shout, "My wife! That's my wife! We made babies together!"

No. This won't be the day I find out the secret of people like him. All I can do now is try to stay ahead of that coat hanger. So I put my head down and try to remember what my high school track coach told me: "High knees. High head. High speed."

It's in moments like this that I remember why I don't have encounters with married women. Inevitably, it leads to encounters with married men.

Anyhow, the angry man behind me has a damned good stride, but I've got better turnover. Being fast is all about turnover. That's another thing my old track coach told me. "Pick'em-up, put'em-down. Bam-bam-bam-bam! Hustle! Hustle!"

And that's what I do. I hustle.

I also like to think that being naked affords me some sort of

advantage as well. Wearing no clothes means you're carrying less weight. That always makes you faster.

And, sure enough, I'm slowly pulling away from both him and his coat hanger. But the problem is, all hotel hallways, like all lives and stories, eventually lead to an end of some sort. Either an elevator or a fire door. In this case, it's an elevator. Those shiny sliding doors peek out from the distance as he and I round a bend in the hallway.

That's where he's going to catch me. At the elevator doors. I know it. He knows it. That large wooden hanger in his right hand knows it.

I'm not generally the praying type, but there are no atheists in foxholes or in the path of a cuckold's rage. So I send up a little prayer and try to focus on keeping my knees high.

I manage to open up a little more distance.

"Our daughter was almost in a Target commercial!" the angry husband behind me yells. "We're a family! You don't boink a man's family!"

In any other context I'd high-five the guy. That's a hell of an accomplishment. I mean, we're talking Target! To almost land that . . . man, that's something!

Just as I'm getting close enough to that dead end where the elevators stand and where I'll have to come to a stop and this angry, large man and his coat hanger will finally be able to have their way with me, just then, the elevator dings and the silver doors glide open just as smoothly as the gates of heaven.

My personal savior steps out of the elevator. She's eighty if she ever danced a jig. Short. Thin. Wispy blue hair crowning her head like dandelion spores. Makeup thick as stucco. Her arthritic back

bent with the burden of two fistfuls of grocery bags and octogenarian existence itself.

Why she's out grocery shopping at 3 a.m. doesn't seem to be an important question just now.

"Ma'am!" I shout.

She looks up. Sees me—my high knees, my high head, my high speed, my nakedness. She sees the man behind me with his hanger battle-axe. She shrugs her shoulders, turns on her heel, turns and steps back into the elevator.

"Would you hold that elevator, ma'am?" I yell.

The angry man behind me shouts something about the high cost of two daughters with braces.

The elevator doors start to close and I kick it into a gear higher than I knew I had. I'm just a blur of knees, and elbows, and naked flesh. Even my genitals have pulled themselves into an aerodynamic tuck.

I'm just close enough to make a dive as the elevator doors begin to close. I take the leap.

It's all slow motion. I sail through the air for what seems like an hour. As I soar past the Blue Hair—just before my face meets the back of the elevator—I can see from the smirk on her face that this isn't her first late-night rodeo. She's been around. She's danced on water in life's late hours.

My face meets the elevator wall a split second before my body does. Momentum holds me there like a bug on a windshield, then gravity shows up again and I thud to the ground.

"Thirty-second floor, please," I say as soon as my naked body has come to rest on the floor of the elevator. The Blue Hair complies and pushes the elevator button.

The two of us watch the doors grind closed just as the husband with bloody murder in his eyes—who probably isn't a bad guy when you really get to know him—reaches the elevator a moment too late and can't do anything other than watch me leave. He shouts something indecipherable as the doors close in front of him. Something to do with responsibility. Something to do with family, and marriage, and love.

Then he's gone and there's just me and the Blue Hair. The two of us watch the elevator count off the hotel floors one by one. I imagine the silence is awkward for her. Most people don't like silences. I learned that at my old job. I used to answer phones for a living. All day long, that job was nothing but talking to people. I'm not what you might call a people person. I hated that job. But the irony is that by working there, I found out how to talk to people really well. One thing I know is how to make folks feel comfortable.

"Hell of a night," I say.

"I could tell you stories," the Blue Hair replies, quick as a whip.

"I'll bet you could. You've got that look about you."

"Life's chaos," the woman says, sounding suddenly like an oracle. "It's all just a runaway mule hell-bent on destruction."

"That's some mule."

"You bet it is."

I give a nod to indicate her grocery bags. "Good haul?"

"Capital," she says. "Just capital." She gives a nod to indicate my exposed genitals. "You wax?"

"No ma'am. Razor."

"Gets that close?"

"Five blades. Pivoting head. Marvel of the modern age."

The woman nods in agreement. Then she clears her throat and

contorts the corners of her thin, old lips into a thin, old frown and says "Did you hear about that boy?"

"Which boy?"

"The one on the TV." She shakes her head and her blue hair sways gently like the hair of some sea nymph who's seen the tides rise and fall one too many times. "Terrible. Just terrible."

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

The truth is that I haven't heard about whatever boy on the TV she's suddenly so sad about, but I don't have to know about it to convey the appropriate amount of sadness and concern. I turn the corners of my mouth into a frown that matches the one the Blue Hair's got. I don't want to frown too much and make it look like I'm trying to make this terrible thing—whatever it is that happened—about me. But I also don't want to not frown enough and come off uncaring. There's an art to knowing how sad you're supposed to be at moments like this.

"A terrible shame," I say. "Just can't believe such a thing could happen in this world." I shake my head.

The old woman sucks her teeth in pointed disapproval. "So sad," she says. "Just so sad."

I don't say anything for a while. I let the air grow cold between us. A moment of silence for whatever boy's sad tale we're both grieving over right now. I want this wonderful stranger to know that I cared about this boy, because caring about people is what good people do. And more than anything, I want people to think of me as a good person.

The elevator chimes, breaking the silence. The doors open at my floor.

"Well," I say, stepping out into the soft, empty hallway that has no angry husbands or wooden coat hangers, "I guess this is

goodbye. Thanks again for your help. And God bless that poor boy." I give one final nod. I feel like I should say something meaningful about chance meetings, the allure of strangers, serendipity . . . all those sorts of things. But nothing comes to mind so I turn on my heel and begin my naked walk back to my room.

After I'm a few steps down the hallway, I hear her call out: "Hey!"

"Yeah?"

"You look familiar. Have I seen you before? Are you famous?"

"Aren't we all?" I say.

She nods and retreats into the elevator. The doors close and I'll never see her again. Not because I don't want to. But just because that's how it goes. Life decides.

I walk the rest of the way back to my room feeling pretty good about life. Tonight's been an adventure. Met a lovely woman. Met her husband—who I'm sure is just as lovely when you get to know him. Even met a sweet old lady with a flair for conversation. I've got fresh air on my naked skin.

What more can a person ask for in this life?

It's only when I get to my hotel door that I realize I've left my key in my pants back in the bedroom of the angry husband's wife.

WITH IT BEING AS LATE AS IT IS, THE HOTEL LOBBY IS NEARLY EMPTY. It's one of those big hotels where the floor is overly polished and the ceiling is so high you can hear yourself breathing if you really stop and listen. It's an eerie place, especially when it's crowded. The whole room sounds like some grand train station. Voices blend together into that familiar assonant murmur, suddenly sounding like every conversation you've ever had has come rushing back to you and, in spite of yourself, you can almost believe that at any moment

a train might come rumbling up right in front of you, right behind the concierge's desk, carrying every person you've ever known. It's strange, but I get that particular feeling six days out of seven in my life.

"How can I help you?" the woman working the front desk asks. From the calmness in her tone, you'd think she's spent every day of her life dealing with naked hotel guests.

"I seem to be locked out of my room," I say.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," she replies brightly, her voice almost in a singsong. "I'll definitely help get that straightened out for you. Which room?"

"3218."

She clicks on her keyboard.

"Do you get a lot of naked people in your hotel lobby at this hour?" I ask.

"Define 'a lot,'" she says, smiling a toothy, slightly crooked smile that's as warm as sunlight in August. After a few more keystrokes, she says, "Now, I'll just need some type of identification."

I reach past her and into the nearby magazine rack. I pick up a copy of *Entertainment Weekly.* My beautiful mug is right there on the cover, larger than life, even overshadowing the headline about Nic Cage's newest Cagetacular film, beneath the looming demi-Helvetica headline: AMERICA'S HOTTEST NEW AUTHOR. I hold the magazine up next to my face and say, "How's this?"

BECAUSE MY FACE AND A COPY OF *ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY* don't qualify as "acceptable identification," the receptionist and I are in the elevator together. I'm still naked. She still doesn't seem to mind. Hotel policy says she needs to see a driver's license, which,

luckily, wasn't in my pants—which are still in the room of a certain married woman and a coat-hanger-wielding husband. So she's riding up to let me into my room so I can show her that I am who I and *Entertainment Weekly* say I am.

She smells of vanilla.

"You smell like apples, Sport" she says, maybe reading my mind, maybe not, and she glances at me with a grin—being sure to keep her eyes above the waist. It's the kind of grin that I sometimes don't know what to do with. The kind of grin that says maybe she likes me. And, believe it or not, I'm never really sure how to act when a woman throws me that kind of attention. So I just stand there, thinking about what a random thing what she said is to say to someone. "I know that's a pretty random thing to say," she continues, continuing to be uncanny. "But I think it's a pretty random thing to experience. You know?"

"I do know," I say. I want to tell her that "a pretty random thing to experience" would make for a fitting send-off on my tombstone one day, but I think that might come around as a bit morbid, and I don't think morbid is what this moment calls for. So, instead of the headstone remark, I just say something along the lines of "It's amazing the things we notice sometimes. Makes us wonder if they've always been there."

"I know what you mean," she says. "Also, I read that if you meet someone and they smell like apples, what you're really smelling are pheromones. You know what pheromones are, don't you, Sport?"

"Pheromones, huh?" I spend a second just thinking about the word "pheromones." A good word, that one. Looks sharp on the page and feels good on the tongue. "Why do you keep calling me Sport?" I ask.

"What's the matter?" she replies. "Aren't you a sporting kind of guy?"

Somewhere around the sixteenth floor I start to figure out that maybe she's flirting with me and even before the sixteenth floor I knew that she was beautiful in that managerial way and so I think it's time I let her know that, hell, I think she's pretty swell too. So I put on my best Bogart brogue and I give it to her right down the middle:

"Nice set of pillars you're standing on."

"They hold me up," she says, not missing a beat. She says it like she's read the same script as me. She's a caricature and so am I and right now in my life that's, well, that's pretty aces in my book.

"I always knew heaven had to stand on something," I say.

"Is that a quote or something?"

"Or something."

This is one of those times when I can't tell how much of this moment—or almost any moment of my life, honestly—is real and how much is imagined. I've got a condition. I've got several conditions, actually. The most interesting one is this thing I got where my mind runs away with itself. It's like daydreaming except it doesn't really go away when I want it to. It lingers. Sometimes people call it a disorder, but I'm a glass-half-full kind of guy so I don't go in on that dime-store wordage.

Basically, I'm a daydreamer. But my daydreams tend to persist longer and more intensely than most people's do. At least, that's what I've been told by every doctor I've ever seen. The end result of it is that reality is a very fluid thing in my world. It's probably the reason I got into this whole writing thing to begin with.

Another thing you should know about me, beyond my tendency

to have an overactive imagination, is that I'm a sucker for old black-and-white movies. You know the type. The ones with fast-talking men and even faster-talking women.

Right now, my imagination and I could easily change the lighting in this elevator and it would be a scene fit for *Double Indemnity.* The same hard-shadowed lighting and machine-gun dialogue. Nobody today talks the way those characters talked in that movie. Maybe they never really did. So maybe this isn't exactly how the exchange between her and me went. Or maybe it is. Like I said, I get the sense that she's read the same script as me. I rarely worry about the facts, only about the reality that my imagination and I choose to see.

"You're confident," the receptionist who smells like vanilla says.

"And a confidant to those who need it. You got something you wanna share with me?"

"You always drive this fast?"

"You should see me in the curves."

And then she smiles.

WE TUMBLE THROUGH THE BEDROOM DOOR. IT'S HARD TO TELL where my body ends and hers begins. It's all just skin, and nerves, and warmth, and those little butterflies that come bubbling up in the pit of your stomach when you know—I mean really KNOW—that you've met someone special. Someone who will endure. Someone whose face you'll see again and again for years and live a life all the richer for it.

She could be *the one.* This could be love.

That's how alive all this feels. But love happens like this some-

times, doesn't it? A lighting strike rather than a rising tide. You meet someone and everything goes warm inside you and when they put their hand in yours, you can feel every inch of their body, like dipping your finger into a river and being able to feel the whole ocean.

And I feel that with this woman. At least, that's what my imagination tells me.

THE MORNING COMES AND I WAKE UP AND STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT midwestern city I'm in and the receptionist is already up and gone and she's left a little note behind on her pillow that reads, "You're a good sport, Sport!" And in the light of this new day I don't feel like last night was love at all, but it was a hell of a fun way to interact with another soul. Think about it: it took over 4 billion years for her life and mine to come together in that elevator. If that ain't special, I don't know what is.

So right now I'm feeling pretty good about fate and kismet and being a good sport, and I'm also feeling pretty hungry. I want pancakes, and orange juice, and maybe a little bit of vodka to get the aforementioned orange juice up on its legs.

I put on my clothes and ease out the door.

DOWNSTAIRS, BREAKFAST IS IN FULL SWING. THE HOTEL IS A BIT ON the swanky side but when it comes to feeding people they aren't much better than the usual Holiday Inn—a fine establishment, by the way; I'm just saying that for $300 a night—even when the publisher's footing the bill—I expected a little more than what's presented to me. But since I'm not the picky sort, I move through the

buffet breakfast line and grab my plate and take a seat in the far corner and I look out into the city—whatever city this is—and I wonder what the day will bring.

It's about this time that I feel myself being watched. It's one of those animalistic feelings. Something that rings of alarm and worry in the softest of ways. Like standing in the shade of an oak tree and getting the feeling that it's all about to come crashing down on your head.

"Hey," a voice says.

I turn to find a kid standing beside my table.

I peg him at about ten years old. A little gangly, meek, and nerdy-looking, you might say. Like the kind of kid who's spent too much time in books and not enough time grabbing life by the short and curlies. Sometimes you see kids and you just know. You can just see their entire future in their eyes. That's who this kid is: he's his entire future seen at a glance.

But all of that is secondary to his skin. It's black. But not just black, he's impossibly dark-skinned. The darkest skin I've ever seen. It's like a clouded ocean sky in the dead of night. It's like burrowing into old caves where sunlight has never set foot. It's the kind of black that makes me think he's got to be wearing some sort of makeup. The kind of black that makes me question if what I'm seeing is real or if I'm in the beginning stages of some kind of ocular or neurological crisis.

His lips are moving but I'm so startled by the color of his skin that I can't hear a word he's saying. "What was that?" I say.

"Can I sit here?" He points to my chair and begins seating himself before I have time to give him permission.

The kid has a plate of pancakes and sausage that's so much like my own I've got to respect it. As he starts eating, I look around,

trying to lay eyes on whoever it is among the rest of these fine breakfast goers that might be his parents. The last thing I want is to have some terrified parent come up to my table screaming at me about why I'm having breakfast with her son. That kind of publicity can kill a book tour.

When I can't find anybody that looks like they might be the progenitor of this dark-skinned splendor, I resign myself to having met a new friend and I jump into the same type of banter I would offer anyone else in this world. "You look like someone who's had his fair share of adventures, Kid."

"Yeah, I guess," The Kid says. He keeps his eyes on breakfast as he talks, which I'm glad about because it allows me to look at the inky depths of his skin without making him feel awkward. It's hypnotic, The Kid's blackness. The kind of thing that has to be seen to be believed. Staring at this kid's skin makes me feel like I'm falling. Like it's pulling me into him. Like I was never separate from him to begin with and his skin—all shadow and shade—is only trying to take me back where I belong so that it can keep me safe.

"It's cool," The Kid says.

"What's cool?"

"Staring like that. It's cool. Everybody does it." He shovels another forkful of pancakes into his mouth and I imagine that they taste like embarrassment.

"Nonsense," I say. "I shouldn't be staring at anyone. I've got no grounds for it. Why just last night I was down here in this very lobby naked for the world to see. Naked as a jaybird, as my dear, departed father might say. If anyone deserves to be stared at, Kid, it's me."

The Kid nods but continues to keep his eyes aimed at breakfast. I know shame when I see it. A twinge of guilt runs down my spine.

"So, to what do I owe the honor of this breakfast?"

As I talk, I look up at the television on the far wall just in time to catch the tail end of a report about some dead boy. Got himself shot by somebody but I don't know who because the television switches to ESPN and suddenly there are grown men slamming their heads into one another and shouting about first downs. "Tired of hearing about that shit," says the gentleman apparently responsible for the channel change. From the reaction of the others in the dining room, they're all a little tired of hearing about that shit too. So I turn my attention back to The Kid, who still hasn't answered my question.

"Well?" I say.

"Just thought it was time we met," The Kid says. "That's all."

"Well, that sounds ominous," I reply with a smile.

"Nah," The Kid says, flashing a smile full of marble-white teeth. Contrasted against the darkness of his skin, it just might be the most beautiful smile I've ever seen. "It's not like that," The Kid says. I begin to hear a drawl in his words. Something southern Black. He's offered up more than a few "y'alls" and "my neck of the woods" in his short-lived life. He sounds like old Cadillacs and boiled peanuts, sweet tea and home. It's as beautiful as his skin and his smile. "I've wanted to talk to you for a while now," The Kid says.

I smile my best "Always good to meet a fan" smile and I say, "Do you want me to sign a copy of your book?"

The Kid grins. "Nah," he says. "Not a fan. Just wanted to meet you."

"Alright," I say. I've met a few fans like this since starting this book tour. I'm learning to roll with it. "Well, it's great to meet you too."

As interesting as this kid is to look at, there's something unsettling about him too. As I watch him eat, I'm filled with the urge to get away from him. I want to go back to my room. I want to go back

to my room, and curl up in my bed, and fall asleep and not see him in my dreams.

I realize that I can't just sit here with this kid anymore. My mind won't stand for it. I keep staring at his skin and I keep telling myself not to do it. I want to stare at him as much as I want to never look at him again. Something about him fills me with an immediate sense of love and hate. I want to hug him and push him away at the same time. And I know that all of this stems from the impossible color of his skin.

I wonder what growing up with skin like that must have been like. Going to school looking like that? Must have been hell. Pure fucking hell.

"Well," I say, "it's been good meeting you and I hope you enjoyed meeting me. I would love to say something about fate and the power of chance meetings, the allure of strangers, serendipity . . . all those sorts of things."

"It's cool," The Kid says. "You ain't gotta stay. I just wanted you to see me. That's all."

"Well, consider yourself seen," I say. I aim a pair of finger guns at him and "Pew-pew!"

I offer one last smile at The Kid in honor of his gentle yet eloquent phrasing. "I just wanted you to see me." That's a beautiful thing to say to someone. I mean, don't we all want to be seen?

Before I leave, I lean in close and say, in my sincerest voice, "I see you."

Then I head back to my hotel room.

I STRETCH OUT ON THE BED AND TRY TO GET SOME REST BEFORE THE next leg of the book tour. The last thing I see in the darkness before

sleep takes me is the darkness of The Kid. I see his skin. It's darker than the darkness of sleep. And then he grins and his pearly whites shine like snow on dogwoods.

Then The Kid fades away. His smile lingers, but then it's gone too.

As sleep finally gets its fishhooks into me, I offer up a heartfelt "Poor kid" for the pitch-black boy I met today. Living a life looking like that in a world that works the way this one does? . . . I wouldn't hang that noose around anybody's neck.