

## Escape

Their ankles itched. More than the mosquitos, the horseflies, the webs of gnats and the stink, the sodden, salty stink of the marsh that sucked them further down, their ankles were sore, chaffed with dried mud, rubbed raw, swollen with insect bites and malarial rot that this land sweated off so that anyone who was foolish enough to find himself in the middle of it, might regret the thought ever came to them.

But the other option was doing a two-year bit in a detention camp just far enough south of Mason-Dixon that the guards took some satisfaction in referring to it as 'the south' even though, really, it was just Maryland and they, really, were mostly flat-footed academy dropouts who might play a monthly stint in the National Guard. Ever since Rodney King they had a chip on their shoulder. That was the way that it seemed, because they brought it up weekly, even though it had been over three years and twenty-seven hundred miles ago. But they didn't beat you down. Not really, unless you really put it over on them.

"It's been six hours or something by now," Smith was saying as if Willy wasn't keeping track. "You think they got dogs out after us?"

Willy's patience had been running out. That and, his bowels had been pinched to razors. "You seen too many movies, man. They don't have dogs out here. They just sent out reports to the sheriffs and every other bumpkin-motherfucker from here out to the Atlantic to keep an eye out for a black fool and a stupid white boy wearing jailhouse whites slogging through

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nowhere headed toward more nowhere. We'd be so lucky to have them come get us too. Take us to some county holding with A.C and sandwiches and Kool Aid and shit."

"Speak for yourself," Smith said. "I'm getting my ass on up to New York. Nobody'll find us there. I lived in a squat in the village up there for a bit. Running water, electricity and the cops only came around when they smelled some shit but mostly they let us be." He was winding a string of sheath-grass around his finger. "You ever been up to New York?"

"Once, back in the seventies maybe. Had an uncle or somebody up there. Went and saw the Statue of Liberty and all that shit. Looked a lot like Baltimore...but a bigger version."

The detention center had been overcrowded, pushing the inmates into barracks full of makeshift cots. There had been so many prisoners that they had run out of work details and the landscaping crews had doubled. This was where Willy and Smith spent their day sneaking smokes. The guards wanted to be there about as much as the prisoners and paid no mind if they passed around a pack of Newports. Sure, it was contraband, but what harm was it really? So long as they didn't start any fires and picked up the butts with the rest of the trash. When they had arrived (within a week of one another back in May) only about a dozen or so were put on this duty but now there were nearly thirty. Where were they going to go anyway? The next town had to be five to ten miles away at the least.

Willy stopped and peeled his socks down over his shins and then his ankles. His face contorted. The mottled skin had lightened to the color of the sock.

"You got swamp rot," Smith said. "I got it travelling. You gotta tend to it or it festers."

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“We’ve only been out here since the morning. Isn’t swamp rot. Damned if we’ve been walking five miles.”

“Thought we’d maybe hit some tracks. That way we could follow that to some shade and wait it out, maybe hop a freight. I did that for a year. Criss-crossed the country.” Smith undid the buttons on his shirt. Splotches of ink stained his chest.

“That the plan? I thought you knew things out here. Didn’t they get you in a hot car not too far from here?”

Smith seemed to ponder this. “I thought so. I was closer to the beach though. Almost made it to Ocean City. But there’s a train line out here. That’s for sure. I heard it at night.”

Smith slipped his shirt off and slid it into the waist of his pants. “We didn’t give this too much thought huh?”

For some reason that Willy regretted now, he figured that Smith might have someone to call, someone to drive in from some place with changes of clothes, bags of hamburgers, maybe a stick of weed to suck on. People like Smith had money, or someone down the line did who would be willing to let bygones and give a second chance and everything else. Boys like him always seemed to. They’d show up down near the homes or out in the Westside slipping in with the rest of the junkies, cozying up to one who took them under their wing for a kickback, and then, one day, they’d disappear, back to county rehab with county insurance. That’s what he figured. What’d it matter to him? Sure, he’d sold some crushed Hydrocodone to white boys in station wagons, but mostly he stuck to weed to make ends meet. He might as well have been selling dope because it didn’t seem to make much difference. Out here, in the sticks, this was meth country, white trash sorts of drugs rigged together like the cars they drove.

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Willy didn't talk much and so Smith filled that void because silence got in the way of things, allowed people to overthink each other. Smith cringed as he drew those greying socks back up. He thought about sitting on this upturned bucket, once full of plaster paint or pastry cream, and take a break but they'd need to keep moving. So long as they kept moving, they were bound to run into something, anything, even if it might be the ocean or the highway. "You think they're looking for us?"

"Guess so," Willy said. "What? You want them to be?"

There was something in Willy's voice; condescension. That was it. Smith kicked over the white bucket and something scurried out underneath. "Hey, why they call you Willy?"

"Why they call you Smith?"

"That's what they call you when you don't have any I.D." Willy stared at him until he continued. "I threw it away."

"Lot of good that did you."

They trudged onward. Here and there, they could hear something scuttle in the brush or one of them would curse as a briar nipped at their clothes. Their steps were careful so that they might avoid any snakes, which, they had concluded, could be down there anywhere under the grass so high that Smith said it might have been sawgrass, the same shit he saw down south that could be sharp enough to shave your whiskers. "You still didn't say why they call you Willy when everyone else goes by their surname."

Willy walked ahead, each step like he was lunging forward for something. But really, it seemed to Smith, that he was actively avoiding the question. "You really been all over?"

"Tried to get as to as many places as I could."

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“In a hurry for something?”

“Shit man, aren’t you?” Smith swatted at another mosquito, common as dandelion seed that rose, fell and lingered in the late-day sun so dense that it seemed to stymie movement.

“All we got is a little bit of time, better make it last.”

“And here you are, making it last with me out here in a field, the cops somewhere behind ready to whoop our asses after they get the dogs on us.” Willy might have been high. Something must have been off with his decision-making if he considered this a good idea at any point. Right now, he’d be stretched back in his bunk, marking off another day (eighty-seven by now) of the two years until he’d be out and ready to step foot in the world again.

But this was the world. This existed didn’t it? Sort of like that Huck Finn story, or that’s how the county boy probably saw it. Smith was back there singing lead and backup on some song he might have improvised and all at once, Willy stopped, rose his hand like he might have seen some general do in some war movie.

“What?” It was like Smith had an engine that sputtered when it idled. It just never stopped and now he was talking about something, about Louisiana and...who really gives a fuck? “You hear something, cuz all I hear is all these fucking bugs and-“

That stopped him. Stopped his thought and heart at the same time. Out beyond the high grass, embedded in the knees of the cypresses, there was a small house, maybe a toolshed or cabin but that wasn’t what caught their eye but that there was someone, a girl, slightly stooped, leaving the building quickly so there must have been a walkway of some kind. She was within shouting distance but if she were talking to someone else, there would have been no

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way of knowing. "Do you think she could see us?" There was no way of knowing but Smith still thought he would ask.

Willy remained still. This could be a good thing. The place was small, sure but it might be a good place to lay low for the night, at least out of nature and the bugs and vermin and everything else. The girl was leaving in that sort of hurry would only mean that, in all likelihood no one would be returning. That, and there must be something inside.

"Let's get the fuck out of here, go the other way," Smith was already heading off in the other direction while Willy, follow him or not, was going toward the building.

"What if someone's in there?" Smith nearly pled. "Could be some redneck hunter in there and that was his wife running away from him. Ever think about that?" The whisper became nothing more than another hiss of an unseen bug. And so it startled Willy when he spoke up in plain voice, saying, "I'm not going in there."

Willy turned. "Go away if you want."

"What do you think you'll find in there; a gun some hunter left behind?"

Willy tried to keep his composure. "What would I want a gun for? You think I want to get deeper than I am already? First off, someone's been in there so it's not just some hunter shack. Second, there might be something like food, or clothes. You think we can jump back on the street dressed like we just came in off the work crew? Like we can just go into McDonalds and order up a Big Mac, all shirtless with bug-bites and shit all over us? Not to mention we don't have money but..." He paused, and allowed the site of them in the last throws of light, clothes streaked nearly to camouflage, their fingers unconsciously scratching their arms and ankles. "We're a goddamn mess. So, at least, let's try and sit down for a minute and get our

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heads straight. Maybe they got some food in there. If there's people coming and going out of there, there's got to be something. Right?"

Smith didn't want to follow but feared being alone more. His body was sore. He didn't have any other sort of solution. He shrugged.

As they moved closer to the building, it became clear that beyond the shack were more trees, more high grass, and the moon out there glowed like a streetlight without promise.

Willy expected resistance, but the door swung right open. The smell was the rind of the marsh left out to dry on a cutting board. That and cat piss.

"There isn't shit in here," Smith said. He didn't like the bugs either but it was still, really still in this room and all he could make out were shelves nailed into the walls. "Someone's been cooking up crank around here." He picked up an empty bottle of Drano and cold pill boxes. "This is the thing out here in the country."

On top of the shelves were some boxes that Willy was already rifling through. "You want to look around for shit we can use?" Smith was standing in the doorway like the dumbstruck imbecile he very well might have been. But, he listened.

The boxes were mostly garbage, but Willy managed to find a couple of flannel shirts that smelled like jarred tomatoes. At least it was something and he kept digging through newspaper and old magazines until everything stopped as if a shot had been fired. But the fragility of this sound might have been worse, might have needled into the cores of their nerves and they were both silent, anxiously waiting to see if it repeated or if the tinny sound might have been phantasmal and just liquefied into the air. After all these hours, the country might fuck with them to that extent. In those seconds, in those ticks of a clock that might have each popped like

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mercurial bubbles, Willy might have convinced himself of that. Until it sounded again, this time, distended, cut short and punctuated by a gurgle and then a choke. There was no mistaking that something living was buried in this place.

They turned to one another. Willy held the shirts like surrendered flags and Smith had something, a can of creamed corn, clutched in his hand.

Willy might have said something or just swallowed a breath. As he gathered himself, Smith moved was over by the windows, leaned into one of the boxes and pointed before stepping away and covering his mouth as though he might vomit.

Willy dropped the shirts and moved forward. He would control the situation here if need be. For a second it was only a doll. It was very small with features pinched like it was about to sneeze. It seemed pale but it was hard to tell. But, sure as the moon stood outside, it made noise to confirm that it was a baby.

“It doesn’t look well, man.” Smith said. He was able to step forward now that what he had seen had been made real. “Do you think that lady left it in here?”

Willy shrugged. “Guess so. What else would she be doing out here?”

“Checking on it maybe. She’s got to be around here someplace. Maybe she just put him down and was going to come back. That must be it.”

The baby seemed to recognize Willy. It stopped crying for a moment. Its fingers curled in its palms. There was a blanket underneath of it.

He had held a baby before. He had cousins and had even changed diapers a couple of times. This baby didn’t quite feel like those. It felt smaller, more delicate and quiet when Willy lifted it and drew it into his chest. It wasn’t soiled either.

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“What are you doing? Man, let’s get the fuck out of here.” Smith couldn’t keep still. He was trying to pass his anxiety on as contagion.

“And just leave a baby in here? Look around, man. There’s no one here.”

Smith slipped one of the flannels shirts on and was using the dregs of an old watering can to pour over his head and smooth his hair back. “I’m not taking on no baby. We’re going slow enough as it is. What the fuck are we going to do with it?”

“We can’t just leave it out here. I’m a grown-ass man and I’m getting worn down out here. How you think a baby’s going to carry on?”

Smith was trying to cool off. If he could just bring down his body temperature he might be able to respond. He practiced breathing and composed himself while Willy fashioned his work shirt into some sort of sling. He loaded the baby into it, allowed his arms to fall away to test its worth and inspected Smith, offering only the same disapproval. “You know why they call me Willy,” he said. “Because, I stick to it. When they call me Jones, I tell them that’s not my name. There’s probably ten Jones in that place just like there’s ten Smiths. That don’t work for me. I’m Willy. Always have been. Always will be. You tell people something long enough and they’ll listen. They’ll know who I am.”

Smith probably looked foolish, all slicked over with oily water that was already making the itching worse. “You think that matters to them any-fucking-way?”

“I don’t know and I don’t give a shit.” Willy straightened himself and adjusted the sling. “All’s I know is I’m going to do what I need to do and you can come along or get. Don’t matter to me.” At this, he stepped outside the shack, leaving the door open behind him.

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There was only one trail. And it was either back toward the prison or...whatever lay in the opposite direction. It would be better that they stick together. Or maybe it wouldn't. Smith could have stayed behind while Willy carried on with that baby. But, ultimately, if Willy got caught it would only be a matter of time before they hunted down Smith.

Maybe Willy was right. That woman had to come from someplace. They would return the baby to her. She would have forgotten or changed her mind about a very bad decision. She would be young, confused, beyond her depths. She had made mistakes. Jesus, had she made mistakes but this one was living, part of her, and so she would take it back and they would be the wise men minus the third wheel. She would see this and offer them food, maybe a lift down the road. They were all young, so very young, and their tribulations so very vexing.

Smith didn't have any ideas. They hadn't crossed any tracks and the horn he heard lowing at night very well could have been further south or any direction. He had never been much good with navigating. Or, for that matter, being alone. Nobody was truly at their best when they were alone. It was in how they responded and correlated with one another. And Willy, Willy might very well need him. If they went down, they went down together.

A jagged ridge of trees beyond another squalid patch of sodden earth. Progress was a panicked stutter. Just where had that woman gone? It must have been midnight by now, yet Willy could still ring out his shirt and sling with moisture. The baby had been quiet, still. "How far you think we've gone?" It was the first time he had acknowledged Smith since the cabin an hour, maybe two ago."

Smith took a moment to gather himself. "Mile or two since the shack I'd say." If Willy hadn't said anything, he very well might not have noticed the lights up there, tiny freckles of

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light so dim and distance it might have been match-heads flickering. He didn't need to say anything. Willy strained to breathe but caught sight of the same lights.

"We got to check it out," Willy said. "It's got to be that lady."

They stood side by side. Smith noticed that he hadn't heard the baby in some time. He thought to ask about it but it didn't matter. At least, it didn't matter to him. If the child would get them further, then it would all be worthwhile. If it meant more to Willy, then so be it, but for Smith, it was just a talisman at best, something to blame or celebrate in the weeks to come.

Every muscle was as damp as his spirit. Smith didn't care. Any plan would be a good one at this point. Yet he forced himself to ask. "We just going to break in? What if they saw us on the news? I'm sure they got a bulletin or something, right?"

"What that woman did wasn't any better though was it? We got to leave the kid somewhere."

"Maybe on the porch?" Smith imagined boosting a car if need be. From here, he couldn't see to the driveway but surely there was a late model something over there that he could tweak to life.

"Nah. Look at this place."

Smith might have brought up their own preservation. But he didn't. Instead, the house was taking on shape, the light effusing from holes in a gap-shingled surface. Somewhere beyond, he could hear the push and pull of cars and knew that road could only be a bit further. And that car was taking on shape, a Taurus, beat within an inch of its life, parked askew on a strip of balding grass that must've been the driveway.

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Willy walked ahead as if he might know what to do. The baby was still. It was probably more tired than he was. Regardless of what happened it would be alright. The idea of going back to jail had evolved into something comfortable, proper even. And this was something that needed to be done. This was responsibility. It was this thing that dragged him off the crew, put into the wilds of Maryland. Had he got religion? Something must have drawn him out there to shine a light on him. This, this right here, might have been the first truly significant thing he had been able to do in his life.

They were so close that they could see the wallpaper, the faded splotches of flowers or...something stamped in patterns across the jaundice surface. The television cast a bruised glow. A metallic smell hung in the air like someone might have been stewing a pot of pocket change and...cat piss sharp as the claws on a feral tabby.

Willy wouldn't hesitate. The lawn was overgrown and he stepped on something, a sun-bleached soda or beer can embedded into ground like bone. And then another. This time, a blown-out can of WD-40 and then a plastic bag that caught on his toe.

A motion sensor flicked on. Willy almost lost balance. The light burnt his eyes. He froze and stood. The house seemed to shudder, as if a crowd inside had all stood at once. The smell of cigarette butts, of flooded ashtrays and further in, of meat crusted onto baking pans, of sodden woodwork. Each odor rose like an acquaintance and Willy knew that he was alone.

Smith was walking, walking as though he'd been here a dozen times before, walking out to the driveway to the Taurus that he could now see was crippled, one wheel tipsy on the edge of a cinderblock. He cursed to himself. Flattened boxes of kitchen matches covered a picnic table and a plastic bag filled with...plastic tubes, slick and deadened with mold. He kept moving,

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further, out the driveway until he saw something and, before he could think much further, his legs jolted from under him and, very quickly, he was once again encased in darkness, feeling out the world in front of him with only instinct.

No one had appeared. Willy knew someone was in there, or further, where Smith had disappeared out toward the road. The baby was stiff and silent as if it knew there was something unfortunate to expect. All the smells, now of the wood, of the woodpile crumpled to mulch along the side of the house, of all the condiments of a night undone, all hacked apart and spewed into pieces. There was nothing singular to fix his focus. And in the sensorial violence of that moment he thought to look at the baby he was carrying. It was still. It was so still. And dense. Everything inside, all that ebb and wash and churn all dried up and now it was just this, just this frail, hardened mass of humanity.

The man at the door took off so fast, Willy thought his legs might crack and split under the weight of the swollen cannonball of a torso rolling on top of it. There was someone else there, hovering there in the doorway. It was a woman, a girl really, not yet Willy's age. Maybe the age of some of the girls he'd seen down the way. All sewn up with something like sympathy, pity or mourning. He couldn't quite tell but she was zipped shut, her mouth clenched so tight that if she opened her mouth he'd expect blood and broken teeth. "I didn't want to. I hated myself for it but I just didn't know what else to do."

The police appeared in shocks of red, blue and then white light. A couple of them went after the man who took off out of the doorway. Something crashed and there was yelling.

The girl didn't tell Willy to approach. But she also didn't slam the door and disappear back into the house. Her attention drifted to his chest. He couldn't quite peel his arms away to

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show her. In the sudden tremor that seized her, she acknowledged his gift. And it wasn't shock or even disbelief, but something, something like the way he felt, something imminent.

He took one last look onto what he was holding before he turned out beyond where Smith had landed with a knee in his back.

They were shouting something at him, things he'd heard before. Didn't matter where. Country or city. Language didn't really matter all that much when it came down to what happened in these sorts of moments.

In another moment, in another place, he might have raised his arms.

It must have been everyone in the town. The guards, from the work detail were there with pistols cocked like this was their shot at the majors alongside a couple of local cops who were probably pulled out of bed and another couple from the jail Smith recognized. Willy was out there in the spotlight, facing that girl, who couldn't have been more than sixteen, and he had that baby tucked into his arm like a football. Smith was trying to tell them, trying to tell them a baby, that's what he was carrying; a fucking baby. But they had their guns on him and he wasn't obliging them as they wanted. One of them, probably from the jail was calling him by name, "Willy, you motherfucker..." But Willy just stood there, flinching from the light while the girl in the door drifted back into the house as though something or someone were pulling her. "Set it down. Set it down."

The man from the house was led back to the cars and he was spitting, long strings of chaw-spit or something swinging from his mouth.

"Don't you worry about him. Don't you mind him," One of the cops was saying. "You just set it down. Are you fucking deaf? How easy this whole thing goes depends on you."

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Willy held the baby tighter, even as they closed in and the first one closed in so Willy could make out the dents in his cheeks where adolescence had scarred him, drew out his club and the group fanned out. Willy stood. He would not move. Even when the first blow struck and his leg began to buckle, he raised himself up the best he could. He tucked his chin into his chest and, took another blow, reducing him to one knee. The pain dulled to nothing but a constant hum after the first few. Willy curled inward. One of them was pulling at his arms but it wasn't until another helped did they manage to pry him open.

There was silence as Willy fell back to the ground. One of the police who had fallen as well, cursed and kicked his shoulder with his heel. It must have taken them a moment to realize what it was they were looking at. They might have prodded her. But the girl, somewhere up above them, cried out as if she'd just been woken. "My baby," she cried. "What did he do to my baby?" And then Willy could sense her closing in on him and then the men around him, bearing down, until everything went silent.

His legs weren't holding him up. Smith could see that much from the back of the car. He just laid there for some time, his body twisted into a comma dovetailed into the ground. He wasn't moving. That girl was smoking cigarettes and eyeing the man that was standing by the van and eyeing her in return.

Smith could overhear the police talk. From what he could gather, the police knew both the fat man and the girl. The only two words that stood out were 'drugs' and 'kidnapping'.

Willy might have been alive but Smith couldn't seem him blink. His face was all lit up and swollen, pressed to the back window of a cruiser. Smith had his eyes locked on Willy's but there wasn't any recognition. There wasn't anything really. They would be going back where they

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started or, worse, somewhere where they wouldn't see the sun or hear the promise of the world beyond the walls. Things would only get worse now. Only moments ago, there might have been promise, a new day, the ocean, the unfolding miles of train tracks in front of them. But now the engine caught and the cruiser he was packed into grumbled into life. In only that glare he knew that tomorrow would only be the next of many.

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