

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

A Mississippi Modernization

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

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- V. 10 Charles Spear, Essays on the Punishment of Death
- V. 11 Fyodor Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment
- V. 12 John L. O'Sullivan, Report in Favor of the Abolition of the Punishment of Death by Law (forthcoming)

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

V. 11

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

A Mississippi Modernization

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

Edited and Modernized by

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This volume is an adaptation and not a translation. It follows the structure and argument of Dostoevsky's novel in the editor's own words, checked against the English translation of Constance Garnett, London, 1914, now in the public domain.

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CONTENTS

FRONT MATTER

Foreword

Editor's Note

Epigraph

THE NOVEL

Part One

Chapter I · Chapter II · Chapter III · Chapter IV · Chapter V

Part Two

Chapter I · Chapter II · Chapter III · Chapter IV · Chapter V

Part Three

Chapter I · Chapter II · Chapter III

Part Four

Chapter I · Chapter II · Chapter III · Chapter IV

Part Five

Chapter I · Chapter II

Epilogue

I · II · III · IV

EDITORIAL APPARATUS

Definitions and Terms

Further Reading

About the Editor

FOREWORD

I came to *Crime and Punishment* the way most people come to it: too young and too certain about things. I was nineteen, between semesters, working a summer job I hated, reading whatever I could get my hands on in the hours between shifts. The novel hit me the way a train hits something on the tracks—not with grace, but with finality. I had never read anything like it. I did not fully understand it. I have been rereading it ever since, and I am not sure I fully understand it yet, though I understand more than I did, and the understanding has cost me something.

Raskolnikov's theory—that there are extraordinary men for whom the ordinary moral law does not apply, that history is made by people who are willing to step over what holds others back—is not an obscure philosophical position. It is the logic of every prison system I have ever walked into. The man who designed the sentencing guidelines and the man who received the sentence have both, in their different ways, operated inside some version of it. The people who built the death chamber and the people who die in it are bound together by this same terrible idea about who matters and who doesn't. Dostoevsky understood this in 1866. He understood it because he had nearly died by it.

I have spent most of my adult life on death rows. Not as a condemned person—though I have stood close enough to that experience to feel its specific gravity—but as a minister, a witness, a companion for people the state has decided it has the right to kill. I have held hands through glass. I have prayed in rooms where the air has a quality I cannot describe to anyone who has not been in them. I have walked out of those buildings

into ordinary city air and stood in the parking lot trying to remember what ordinary felt like. And always, doing this work, I have thought about Raskolnikov: about what it means to believe that some lives matter more than others, and about what happens to a person who acts on that belief and then has to live with having acted on it.

The question at the center of *Crime and Punishment* is not whether Raskolnikov is evil. He is not, in the ordinary sense. He is intelligent, he is capable of feeling, he carries genuine compassion alongside his theory. The question is whether his theory is correct—whether there is a category of person who stands above the ordinary moral law, whose capacity justifies what ordinary people are forbidden. Dostoevsky's answer, worked out over six hundred pages of extraordinary prose, is no. Not because the extraordinary man doesn't exist, but because the category itself is wrong. Because the women Raskolnikov killed were real. Because Lizaveta, who came in at the wrong moment, had a face. Because a theory that cannot accommodate the full reality of other people is not a theory about humanity—it is a theory designed to exempt the theorist from humanity.

I have met Raskolnikov on death row. Not one person, but many. Young men, mostly, who arrived at their crimes through some version of the same logic: that they were special cases, that the rules were for other people, that necessity justified what they did. And I have watched, over months and years of visiting, what happens when that logic fails the test of reality—when the person who held it has to live inside the consequences of it, in a six-by-nine cell with nothing to do but think. Dostoevsky knew what that process looked like. He knew because he had been there. Four

years in a Siberian prison camp taught him things about the human capacity for self-knowledge that no amount of philosophy could have provided.

What the novel understands, and what I have come to understand through different means, is that punishment is not the opposite of crime. It is not the answer to it. Cleaves's two life sentences at Parchman Farm—Raskolnikov's eight years of Siberian hard labor in the original—do not undo what he did. They do not bring back the women he killed. They do not even, for most of the epilogue, produce in him anything recognizable as remorse. What they produce, slowly and at great cost, is something more fundamental: the collapse of the theory. The moment when the idea that had structured his thinking becomes something he can no longer hold, because he has come to see Lizaveta's face and understand, not abstractly but as a fact about the world, that she was real. That she was the center of a life that was as absolute as his own. That there was no theory that could make her death into something other than what it was.

I set this novel in Mississippi deliberately. The Delta has a relationship to crime and punishment that is as old as the state itself, and as specific: the history of Parchman Farm, which was built on convict leasing and operated for most of its history as a continuation of slavery by other means; the soil of a place where poverty and violence and religion and the slow ruin of human potential have been braided together for so long they are nearly indistinguishable. Dostoevsky needed St. Petersburg: its stench, its impossible distances, its contrast between misery and grandeur. I needed the Delta: its flatness, its heat, its enormous and indifferent river, its churches in every county, its specific weight of history. The landscape is not decoration. It is argument.

Sonia—Sophie Honeycutt in these pages—is the figure I return to most. In the original and in this version, she is the person who makes it possible for Raskolnikov to begin the process of understanding what he did. Not by explaining it to him, not by forgiving him, not by any act of dramatic moral instruction, but by being fully, consistently, unsparingly real. Her letters from Clarksdale to Parchman Farm are small. They are about the Capers family's dog and Polly's reading level. They are about the world continuing while he is not in it. They are, I think, the most important thing in the novel: the steady insistence, delivered in envelopes, that the world is full of people who are real, and that this is something worth knowing.

I have tried to be faithful to Dostoevsky. The structure is his, the characters are his, the moral arc is his. The theory is his theory, stated as explicitly as he stated it, and answered as rigorously as he answered it. What I have done is move the setting, update the language, and trust that what was true in St. Petersburg in 1866 is still true in Clarksdale and Parchman Farm in our own time. I believe it is. The question Dostoevsky asked—can a man learn the value of a human life?—has not become easier or less urgent. It is the question I carry with me into every visiting room. It is the question this novel asks, and does not quite answer, because some questions require more than a book to answer. They require a life.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood
North Little Rock, Arkansas
2026

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Author

Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was born in Moscow, the second of seven children of a military doctor who was later murdered by his serfs. He studied engineering in St. Petersburg but abandoned a military career for literature after the success of his first novel, *Poor Folk* (1846). Three years later, in 1849, he was arrested as a member of the Petrashevsky Circle, a group of intellectuals who met to discuss utopian socialism and literary theory. He was convicted, sentenced to death, and taken to the Semyonovsky Square to be shot. The execution was a staged commutation: at the last moment, with the condemned men already bound to their stakes, a courier arrived with a reprieve. One of the prisoners went mad on the spot. Dostoevsky never forgot.

He served four years at hard labor in Siberia, followed by years of compulsory military service. He returned to St. Petersburg in 1859 with epilepsy, debt, a failed first marriage, and an understanding of poverty, confinement, and human endurance that no amount of study could have produced. The great novels followed: *Notes from Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *Demons* (1872), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). He died the year after completing *The Brothers Karamazov*, at the age of fifty-nine. He was followed to his grave by a vast public procession. He remains, by

most measures, the most widely read Russian novelist in the world.

The Original Novel

Crime and Punishment was published serially in the Russian Messenger throughout 1866, appearing in monthly installments. The novel's Russian title is *Prestupleniye i nakazaniye*. It was written under severe financial pressure—Dostoevsky had sold the rights to a predatory publisher and was producing the novel against impossible deadlines, simultaneously dictating another novel (*The Gambler*) to meet a separate contract. He worked in poverty, in a rented room in St. Petersburg, surrounded by the city's particular squalor of overheated apartments and drinking establishments and the desperate poor. The novel is saturated with that world, and with the philosophical arguments that occupied educated Russians in the 1860s: nihilism, utilitarianism, the question of whether moral law was binding or historically contingent.

The source text for this adaptation is the Constance Garnett translation, first published in 1914. Garnett's translation defined *Crime and Punishment* for English-speaking readers for most of the twentieth century and remains the version most closely associated with the novel in the Anglo-American tradition. The working text for this edition is Garnett's, as issued by William Heinemann in London in 1914 and long since in the public domain.

The Adaptation

This adaptation relocates *Crime and Punishment* to the Mississippi Delta in the present decade, and it

abridges as it relocates. The spine of the novel is intact. The rehearsal visit to the pawnbroker, the chance encounter that reveals the victim's schedule, the fever and breakdown after the crime, Razumihin's loyal friendship, Porfiry's psychological cat-and-mouse, the Marmeladov scene and Sonia's sacrifice, the Lazarus reading, the confession, the Epilogue's painful and unresolved movement toward something that might be redemption: all of these are present, set in Clarksdale and Parchman Farm rather than St. Petersburg and Siberia. What has been compressed is the social machinery around the crime: Luzhin's courtship of Dunya, Svidrigailov's pursuit and his suicide, the long middle movement of drawing rooms and creditors and family negotiation. Those absences are deliberate. This edition is built for readers who come to the novel for its argument about punishment, and that argument is carried by three people—Raskolnikov, Sonia, and Porfiry.

The moral argument at the center of the novel—Raskolnikov's theory of the extraordinary man who stands above the ordinary law—has been rendered as an academic seminar paper in philosophy. This is not a change in substance. The argument is Dostoevsky's, restated in the idiom of contemporary academic moral philosophy, which is precisely the idiom in which such arguments are made today. Cleaves at Ole Miss writes what Raskolnikov in St. Petersburg thinks: that there are people for whom the ordinary moral law does not apply, that history belongs to those who are willing to step over what stops everyone else, that the louse he proposes to eliminate is not a person but an obstacle.

The setting was chosen for its theological density. The Mississippi Delta has more churches per capita than almost anywhere in America, and a relationship to sin, judgment, grace, and punishment that is woven

into its public culture in ways that St. Petersburg's Orthodox Christianity was woven into Dostoevsky's. Sophie's Bible, her reading of the Lazarus story, her letters from Clarksdale to Parchman: these require a setting where religion is not a private matter but a fact about the landscape. The Delta provides that.

Parchman Farm replaces Siberian penal servitude not as a loose equivalent but as a specific parallel. Both are agricultural prison colonies at the edges of their respective countries. Both carry a history of racial subjugation into their founding. Both have a particular relationship to forced labor in flat country under enormous skies. Dostoevsky used Siberia because he had been there. Parchman is chosen because it is what Siberia looks like in Mississippi—what it has always looked like.

Setting the novel here required a decision Dostoevsky never had to make. Coahoma County is majority Black. Parchman has been majority Black for the whole of its existence, and it was built to be. A version of this book in which race went unmentioned would have been a version in which the Delta was scenery, and the Delta is not scenery. So Rodney Cleaves is a white graduate student from the hills, the two women he kills are Black women in the Sunflower district, the investigator who works the case is a Black man who knows exactly what his county does with a case like this, and the district attorney withdraws his notice of intent to seek death for reasons that have very little to do with the dead. None of this is imposed on Dostoevsky. It is what his question—who counts as a person, and who decides—looks like when it is asked in Mississippi.

The characters have been given American names. A man in Clarksdale is not called Rodion Romanovich, and a reader should not have to translate twice in

order to hear him. Where it could be done, the new names were made to carry the old freight: Raskolnikov, from the Russian *raskol*, meaning schism, becomes Cleaves; Razumihin, from *razum*, meaning reason or good sense, becomes Reasoner. A full key to the names appears in Definitions and Terms at the back of this volume.

The Series

This volume is the eleventh in The Abolition Classics, a series published by Complicit Press dedicated to making the essential texts of the abolitionist tradition available in contemporary language to students, practitioners, clergy, and anyone willing to think seriously about the state's right to kill. The series runs from Socrates and Lactantius through the Enlightenment arguments of Pelli, Beccaria, and Rush; through the criminal law reform tradition of Livingston and Romilly; through Montagu's anthology of the authorities; through the American antebellum abolitionism of Spear. It carries, alongside these, the tradition of abolitionist fiction: Hugo, Darrow, and now Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment* has always been, among other things, a novel about what the state's violence does to the people it touches—not only to the condemned but to everyone in the room. It belongs in this series.

EPIGRAPH

*And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of
thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the
ground.*

— *Genesis 4:10*

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

On an exceptionally hot evening early in July, a young man came out of the room he rented at the top of a house on Washington Street in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, toward the levee.

He had successfully avoided meeting his landlady on the stairs. His room was a converted storage space under the eaves of a three-story Victorian that had been carved into apartments after the cotton money ran out. The landlady, Mrs. Fontenot, lived on the ground floor, and every time he went out he had to pass her kitchen window, which was always open. Each time he passed it the young man felt a sick, frightened feeling that made him walk faster and stare at the pavement. He was three months behind on rent.

This was not because he was cowardly or weak—quite the contrary. But for some time he had been in an overstrained, irritable condition, verging on something he would not name. He had become so completely absorbed in himself, and isolated from his fellows, that he dreaded meeting not only Mrs. Fontenot but anyone at all. He had given up attending to practical matters. Nothing his landlady could do had any real terror for him. But to be stopped at that window—to be forced to listen to her soft-voiced, inexorable reminders, to the running account of what he owed, to have to manufacture excuses and stammer apologies—no. He would rather slip down the back stairs and out through the yard.

This evening, however, coming out into the street, he became suddenly and acutely conscious of his situation.

I want to attempt a thing like that and am frightened by trifles, he thought, with a strange smile that looked wrong on his face. *Hm. Yes. All is in a man's hands and he lets it all slip from cowardice—that's an axiom. It would be interesting to know what men are most afraid of. Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what they fear most. But I talk too much. It's because I chatter that I do nothing. Or perhaps it is that I chatter because I do nothing.*

His name was Rodney Cleaves—Roddy to the few who had known him well at Ole Miss, Rod to nobody, because he did not allow it. He was twenty-three years old. He had been, until a year ago, a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, where he had distinguished himself in his first year with a seminar paper on moral exceptionalism that his professor had described in a letter as “genuinely troubling in the best sense.” He had not returned for his second year. He was now in Clarksdale with no particular explanation and eleven dollars in his checking account.

The heat in the street was brutal. Even at seven in the evening the sidewalk radiated stored warmth through the soles of his shoes, and the air smelled of the river, of asphalt, of the exhaust from the cars idling outside the casinos down by the water. He was poorly dressed—jeans worn thin at the knees, a gray t-shirt faded to near-white, shoes that had originally belonged to someone else. In the Sunflower district of Clarksdale, where the houses leaned and the pavement buckled and the air hung thick with the specific poverty of the Delta, a young man dressed this way attracted no particular notice. He walked along not

observing what was about him, muttering occasionally under his breath, as he had fallen into the habit of doing.

He had not far to go. He knew, in fact, exactly how many steps it was from his door to the house on DeSoto Avenue: four hundred and twelve. He had counted them once, in a different frame of mind, when all of this had seemed like an abstraction, a thought experiment, a fantasy to occupy the long featureless days. Now, a month later, he had begun to look at it differently. He was going, this evening, for what he thought of as a rehearsal.

At every step his excitement grew.

The house on DeSoto Avenue was a small shotgun house set back from the street, the kind that had once housed sharecroppers' families and now housed whoever could scrape together three hundred a month. But one end of it—the front two rooms—had been converted into a kind of shop. The woman who ran it was named Alma Booth, though she was known in the neighborhood simply as Miss Alma, and she was not a pawnbroker in any formal or licensed sense. She was simply a woman of sixty-five or so who had accumulated, over a long life in a poor place, a certain amount of cash money, and who lent it out on the security of objects, at rates that were her own business. She had a reputation for being shrewd about value and unmerciful about interest.

Cleaves knocked. There was a silence, then the sound of slow deliberate movement inside.

The door opened three inches, stopped by a chain. An eye appeared in the gap—small, bright, colorless as a winter sky.

"Who is it?"

"It's Cleaves. I was here last month. About a watch."

A pause. Then the chain came off and the door opened.

She was a small, desiccated woman, the kind of thinness that is not the result of illness but of constitution—all gristle and intention. She wore a housecoat despite the heat and moved with the careful economy of someone who has never wasted a motion in her life. She had keen, mistrustful eyes and a sharp little nose and she studied him without embarrassment.

"Come in, then," she said, and turned back into the dimness of the room.

He stepped inside. The front room was crowded in a way that was its own kind of order—shelves along two walls holding electronics, small appliances, guitars, a camera, a child's bicycle hanging from a hook in the ceiling. Behind a glass case on a table, smaller items: rings, watches, a tray of old coins. Everything was clean. Everything was tagged with a small rectangle of masking tape on which a number had been written in blue pen.

A window-unit air conditioner ran somewhere in the back of the house but did not reach this room. The heat was intense and still.

"The watch," she said. It was not a question.

"Yes ma'am."

"The month is up. You owe the interest before I look at anything new."

"I know. I was hoping you might give me a few more days."

She looked at him. "I'm not a bank. I'm not a charity." She paused. "What did you bring me?"

He reached into his pocket and produced a ring—his grandmother's, a small cluster of garnets in a gold setting that had gone dark with age. He had carried it

from Oxford when he left and had not quite been able to sell it until now. He set it on the glass case.

She picked it up without ceremony. Held it to the light from the window. Put on a pair of glasses she produced from the pocket of her housecoat and examined it more closely.

"Garnets," she said. "Ten-karat setting. Old."

"It's worth more than that."

"To you, maybe." She set it down. "Thirty dollars."

"Thirty." His voice was flat.

"You can take it somewhere else."

He stood very still. He was not looking at her. He was looking past her, into the back room, which he could see through a curtained doorway—a small room containing a chest of drawers, a bed, a table. He was noting the position of things. The chest of drawers was old, dark wood, with a lock on the top drawer. The bed was against the far wall. There was a gap between the chest and the wall, perhaps eighteen inches. His heart was beating in a careful, measured way that frightened him more than ordinary fear would have.

So the sun will shine like this then, too, he thought, without knowing why he thought it. The light was very level and particular, the evening light of the Delta in summer, gold and horizontal.

"Where is your sister today?" he asked. He had met her once before—Lizzie, a large, slow-moving, gentle woman who helped Miss Alma on certain afternoons and who had a wide smile and the trusting manner of someone who had never quite learned to be afraid of anything.

Miss Alma's eyes sharpened. "What business is she of yours?"

"No reason. I just wondered."

"She'll be back by seven-thirty," the old woman said, and immediately seemed to regret it. "You want the thirty dollars or not?"

He took the thirty dollars. He left the ring.



On the way home he stopped on the levee and looked down at the Mississippi River in the last of the evening light. The water was brown and enormous and moved with a patient power that seemed entirely indifferent to the affairs of men. On the far bank, which was Arkansas, the trees were a dark line.

He stood there for a long time.

Can I? Can I possibly?

No. It's nonsense. It's rubbish. And how could such an atrocious thing come into my head? What filthy things my heart is capable of. Yes, filthy—loathsome and disgusting—and for a whole month I've been—

But no words could complete the thought. He walked down off the levee and went into a bar on Sunflower Avenue, a dark room with a ceiling fan and a television showing a baseball game with the sound off. He ordered a beer and drank it quickly and felt his thoughts begin to clear, or what passed for clearing.

All that's nonsense, he thought. It's simply physical derangement. A glass of beer, a piece of bread—and in one moment the mind is clearer, the will is firm.

But even then he had a dim foreboding that this feeling was not normal.

CHAPTER II

There were few people in the bar that evening. Two men playing pool in the back. A woman at the far end watching the television with the sound off. And a man alone at a table near the window who had been looking at Cleaves since he came in.

Cleaves looked back the way you look at a dog that has been watching you from across a yard. The man was around fifty, heavy through the shoulders, with a face that had been handsome once and had since gone soft at the edges. He wore a short-sleeved dress shirt that somebody had ironed with care, and it was already showing dark at the sides. He held his glass in both hands.

"I'm going to say something to you," the man said, loud enough to carry over the two empty tables. "I want you to know up front that I don't want anything."

"I'm bad company tonight," Cleaves said.

"So am I. We're even." The man got up and moved to the next table with his beer, taking the trouble to move his chair quietly, the way a man does when he has been asked to be quiet in a lot of rooms. "Sam Honeycutt. Samuel Zachary. I was an LPN at the county medical center until the twenty-second of March."

He said the date the way people say dates that have been written on paper about them.

"You're a schoolboy," Honeycutt said. "Don't tell me different. I can tell by how the poor sits on you. It don't

fit yet. Folks that's always been poor wear it different, they've had it took in."

"What do you want?"

"To talk. My wife won't have it and there ain't but so many places left." He turned the glass. "I've got a girl. Sophie. She's nineteen."

He stopped. He looked at the television.

"Her mama passed when she was nine. I married again. Kathleen." He said the name carefully. "Now understand me. Kathleen was raised with something. She was a schoolteacher's daughter, she was married to a man in the Guard before me, she come to me with three babies and no money and too much pride, and I was drinking then same as I'm drinking now. She had nowhere. That's the whole of it and I've never told it any other way."

"Go on," Cleaves said.

"She's sick. TB is what they think. She won't go and be seen about it because we lost the insurance in March along with everything else. The babies are little. We're two rooms on Fourth and we're behind. We owe her sister. We owe four people I can name." He drank. "Back in the winter Kathleen said to Sophie that she was going to have to help. Not in those words. But there's not but one way to hear it."

He was quiet a while. The pool balls knocked in the back.

"Sophie's a good girl," he said. "She reads her Bible every night of her life and she has never once wished harm on a living soul. She went out the next morning. She come back at nine o'clock and laid four hundred and thirty dollars on the kitchen table in front of Kathleen. She didn't say where it come from. Wasn't any need."

Cleaves said nothing.

"Kathleen cried," Honeycutt said. "Wouldn't touch it. Held it in her two hands and cried over it. Then she took it, because the babies had to eat." He looked into the glass. "Sophie's got a room over on Issaquena now. It's better that way, is what we tell each other. She comes to see the children. She brings what she's got. She don't talk about it and we don't ask her to."

He set the glass down and looked at it.

"Friday I took forty dollars off her dresser," he said. "I told myself I'd put it back. I'm sitting here on the end of it right now." He looked up. "I'm not telling you so you'll say something kind. I'm past that. I'm telling you because you've got a look on you like a man carrying a bucket."

"You don't know anything about me."

"No sir, I don't." Honeycutt smiled, and it was a wreck of a smile, and there was something underneath it that had survived. "But whatever it is, it's heavy, and you're the only one holding it, and I know what that looks like because I've been the man holding it my whole life."

Cleaves did not answer.

"I used to believe a man could be got back," Honeycutt said. "That there was some one thing he could do, some line he could get across, and after that the life behind him was behind him." He finished the beer. "I don't believe that now. Or I do. I couldn't tell you. I expect it depends on the man."

He stood up with the deliberate care of the very drunk and squared himself.

"I'm going home," he said. "To be hollered at, most likely. To be cried over, possibly. To face my Kathleen, certainly." He put his hand flat on the table a moment, the way you touch something to make sure of it. "God bless you, young man. Whatever it is you're studying on."

He went out into the heat.

Cleaves sat there a long time. He ordered another beer he could not pay for and drank it slowly, and thought about extraordinary men, and did not once think about the four hundred and thirty dollars on the kitchen table.

CHAPTER III

He had written, in the spring of his first year at Ole Miss, a paper for a seminar on moral philosophy. The paper was titled "On the Permissibility of Transgression in Persons of Historical Significance." His professor, a careful man from Chicago named Albright, had written in the margin of the final page:

This is either the most sophisticated thing I have read from a graduate student in fifteen years, or it is something I am glad exists only on paper. I am genuinely unsure which.

The argument, stripped to its simplest form, was this:

History divides human beings into two categories. There are ordinary people—the vast majority—who exist to perpetuate the world as it is, who live by the law and die by the law and whose function is essentially reproductive, social, conserving. And there are extraordinary people—rare, perhaps one in a million—who possess the capacity to alter the world. To reshape it. To drive history forward by the force of their vision.

The ordinary law—moral law, legal law, social law—was made for ordinary people. It was the necessary glue of the ordinary world. It constrained ordinary people from destroying each other, and this was its purpose and its value.

But extraordinary people stood in a different relation to the law. Not outside it, exactly. Above it, in the sense that a river is above the ground it has cut.

The law could not have been written to accommodate them, because they were precisely what the law could not anticipate. They were the force that history required. And history required, sometimes, that they do terrible things.

Napoleon. Alexander. Lincoln. The argument was not that they were good men. The argument was that they were necessary men, and that the category of necessity was prior to the category of goodness. Lincoln suspended habeas corpus. He did what the law said he could not do, because the law had not been written for the moment he was in. And the world was better for it.

The paper went on for forty pages and ended with a question rather than a conclusion:

If a man of extraordinary capacity—a man who could see clearly what the world required, and had the will to provide it—found himself obstructed by a small, mean, parasitic obstacle, by some louse of the human species whose existence was net negative, whose removal would harm no one and free resources that others genuinely needed—would his action in removing that obstacle be, from the standpoint of genuine moral philosophy, a crime at all? Or would it be simply an act of history, judged rightly by its consequences?

Albright had written beside this paragraph:

You are describing murder and I think you know it.

He had given it an A-minus.



Miss Alma was not the reason. He wanted to be clear about that, even in his own thinking. She was simply the available instance. She was the specific obstacle that happened to be in his specific path. The money

she held—hoarded, really, in that chest of drawers with the locked top drawer, money extracted from people who had nothing to spare—was money that could, in the right hands, change a life. His life. Perhaps other lives. He was twenty-three years old and he had a mind that, under other conditions, under any conditions that were not this, could do things. He knew it the way you know your own height.

The question was whether he was the kind of person he believed himself to be.

That was the only question.

He lay on his mattress in the heat of the evening and thought about it until the thought dissolved into sleep and the sleep dissolved into a dream about an old horse being beaten on a road, a horse beaten past endurance, beaten to death by laughing men, and he was a small boy in the dream, watching, and he wept the way children weep—completely, with the whole body—and he threw himself over the horse's neck and someone pulled him away and the horse's eye was open and dark and enormous.

He woke at two in the morning with tears on his face and lay still for a long time.

Thank God, he thought, it is only a dream. What a horrible thing. Could I take a hatchet and actually strike her? Could I? Could I actually?

He trembled and went pale.

No. Never. Such a fantasy.

CHAPTER IV

A week later he met Lizzie at the Dollar General on State Street.

He had gone in for a bottle of water. She was at the back of the store, examining a display of children's vitamins with the serious concentration she brought to everything, a large woman with a wide face and the slightly unfocused gaze of someone who processes the world a beat slower than others and more thoroughly. She recognized him when he came down the aisle.

"Hey," she said, smiling. "You the one come to see my sister. About the watch."

"That's right."

"She's got a ring of yours now too," Lizzie said. She was not being unkind. She kept accounts the way her sister did. "Garnets. My grandmother had a ring like that."

"I'm going to get it back."

"I know. They always are." She said it without irony. She put the vitamins back and looked at them again. "These are too expensive. The store brand is the same thing." She picked up the store brand.

They walked to the register together, because the store was nearly empty and there seemed no reason not to. He learned, in the way you learn things in a small city, that she worked the evening shift most weekdays at the Dollar General and sometimes helped her sister on afternoons when Miss Alma had appointments elsewhere.

"Miss Alma don't go out in the evening," Lizzie said. "Not ever. She's in that house from five o'clock on, every single day. She doesn't like to be out at night." A pause. "I'm usually at the shop Tuesdays and Thursdays. Afternoons." She was giving him her week the way you give somebody your week. "But I'm doing some work out at Sunflower Landing this Tuesday. All afternoon and into the evening. I won't be back before seven-thirty."

He was very still.

"I'll tell her you were asking," Lizzie said.

"No," he said. "Don't bother her. I'll come by when I have the money."

He paid for his water. He walked home. His hands were entirely steady.



He pawned his laptop that Saturday for forty-five dollars and used the money to buy, at a secondhand store on Yazoo Avenue, a short-handled hatchet of the kind used for splitting kindling. He handled it for a long time in the store, testing the balance. The blade was sharp. He paid eight dollars for it.

He spent Sunday constructing, inside the lining of an old tweed sport coat he had kept from Oxford, a loop of duct tape in which the handle of the hatchet would sit securely against his left side, the blade concealed against his ribs. He practiced reaching inside the coat and drawing it out. Practiced it until the motion was smooth.

He did not think about it more than that. When thoughts came—of the old woman's eyes, of her sister's wide smile, of the dream about the horse—he turned away from them the way you turn away from a sound that is going to get louder whether you listen or

not. He had made his decision. Thinking further was not preparation. It was simply suffering in advance.



On Tuesday he ate a piece of bread and drank water and lay on his mattress until five in the afternoon. Then he put on the tweed coat—absurd in the July heat, but the only coat he had—and left the house and began counting steps.

CHAPTER V

He knocked at the door of the shotgun house on DeSoto Avenue at five forty-seven.

The street was empty in the way the Delta empties out in the last hour of a July afternoon, everybody inside with the units running, the light coming down the road level and gold and full of dust. Somewhere behind the houses a mower was going.

He had made the bundle the night before: a length of broom handle wrapped in electrical tape, then in a sheet of newspaper, then folded over and taped again, heavy enough in the hand to be believed. He held it out low where the eye could see it.

Footsteps inside, slow, deliberate.

The chain. The eye in the gap, small and bright and colorless.

"I've got your interest," he said. "And I brought you a silver piece. I thought you'd want to see it before I carried it somewhere else."

The eye went to the bundle and stayed there a moment.

The chain came off.

The front room was as hot as a shut car. She had the lamp off to save it, and the only light was what came through the window over the glass case, and it came in flat and yellow and lay across the shelves. The child's bicycle hung from its hook. The masking tape tags with their blue numbers hung still.

"Set it down," Alma said.

"I'd rather show you."

"Then show me."

He held the bundle out and she took it, and it was heavier than she expected and she said, "Hm," and turned it in her hands looking for the end of the tape, and to get the light on it she turned toward the window.

She had her back to him.

He had thought about this part more than he had thought about any of the rest of it, and none of the thinking was any use to him now. His right hand went inside the coat and found the handle where the loop of duct tape held it against his ribs, and it came free clean, the way it had come free every time he had practiced it, and his arm went up.

He turned the hatchet in his hand as it came, so it was the flat of the head and not the blade.

He brought it down on the crown of her head.

The sound was not what he had prepared for. He had expected something sharp. It was a dull sound, close, almost soft, and it went up the handle into his arm and his shoulder and stopped somewhere behind his teeth.

She did not fall right away. She stood with the bundle still in her two hands and her chin came down toward her chest, slowly, as though she had been asked a question she wanted to be careful about. Then her knees went and she went down sideways against the leg of the table, and the bundle went out of her hands and rolled, and one of her house shoes came off.

He hit her twice more, on the same place, because he was not certain, and because the first thing his body had learned in the last three seconds was how to do it.

Then he stopped and stood over her with the hatchet down along his leg.

The room was completely quiet. The window unit was running in the back of the house and had been running the whole time. A car went by on DeSoto without slowing.

She was small on the floor. That was the thing he had not accounted for, how little of her there was. Sixty-five years of a woman had come to eighty-some pounds of housecoat and elbows on a linoleum floor. Her eyes were open and the near one was already changing, going flat, losing whatever it is that makes an eye different from a stone.

The blood came slower than he had imagined and there was more of it than he had imagined, both at once. It went into the seams of the linoleum and traveled along them in straight lines, following the pattern, turning square corners.

He noticed that he was counting. He did not know what he was counting.

He knelt and put his hand in the pocket of the housecoat and found the keys, warm, on a loop of shoelace, and the warmth was the worst thing that had happened yet, worse than the sound, and he made a noise in his throat and got up fast and went through the curtain into the back room.

The large key. He had guessed right. The top drawer of the chest came open and the smell of it came up at him, old wood and camphor and paper money. An envelope, folded over twice, with a rubber band. Cash. A freezer bag of jewelry, rings and a chain and a man's watch. A spiral notebook with columns of figures in blue ink, every loan she had ever made, every name in the Sunflower district that had ever needed forty dollars on a Thursday. He picked it up and put it back down, and he could not have said why, and he thought about it for years afterward.

He put the envelope inside his shirt and the bag in his coat pocket.

Then he heard the key in the front door.

He was through the curtain and behind it in the dark of the back room before the door was open, with the hatchet held up against his chest and both hands on it.

Lizzie came in.

She came in the way you come into a house you have come into a thousand times, half turned, saying something before she was through the door, "—said they'd let me off at the corner but they never—" and then she stopped.

She did not scream. He had prepared for a scream and there was none. She stood with the door open behind her and looked down at her sister on the floor and her whole face changed by degrees, the way weather changes, and she said, "Oh," and then she said, "Alma," and started forward.

He came out from behind the curtain.

She turned and saw him and she did not run and she did not scream then either. Her arm came up in front of her chest, bent, the palm out. It was not a defense. It was the gesture a person makes when they are about to be told something.

"You the one come about the watch," she said.

He hit her with the blade.

It went in above the left eyebrow and her arm was still up and it stayed up for a second afterward, and then she went back against the shelf and the child's bicycle came off its hook and came down across her, and she was on the floor under the bicycle with her arm still bent, and it was done, and the whole of it from the door opening had taken perhaps four seconds.

He stood in the middle of the room.

There was blood on the toe of his right shoe. He looked at it.

He had killed two people and the room looked almost the same as it had looked eleven minutes ago when he had been standing in it thinking about how the light was.

Somewhere out on the street a truck downshifted.

Then somebody knocked at the door.

He did not move. He had not shut the door all the way and it stood open two inches on the chain that Lizzie had not put back, and through the gap he could hear two men on the step.

"Miss Alma." The knock again, three times, patient. "Miss Alma, it's Cochran."

"Door's cracked," the second one said. He was younger. "Look, it's cracked."

"She don't leave that door cracked."

The younger one pushed and the door came against the chain, and there were two inches of July light standing in the room, and Cleaves was behind the curtain with the hatchet in both hands and the blood going down the handle onto his wrist.

"Miss Alma!"

"Something's wrong," Cochran said. "Go get Marsh. He's got the back."

"He ain't back there, his truck's gone."

"Then go get somebody."

Their feet went off the step, one set running, one set going heavily down the two boards to the yard, and the voices moved off toward the road.

He came out from behind the curtain and did not look at either of the women and went through the little kitchen to the back of the house, and the back door was standing open with a fan in it, and the smell of paint came at him, and in the rented half of the house a roller was lying in a tray on a spread newspaper and

a wall was half done in a color somebody had chosen for a room they meant to be happy in.

He went out through the back and across the yard and through the gap in the fence into the alley, and he made himself walk.



He left the house at six-fifteen. He walked steadily, not fast, four blocks to the levee, and then along the levee south for six blocks, and then down to the riverbank, and there—with movements that cost him something he could not name—he put the hatchet into the river and watched it go. The envelope of cash went into his inside pocket. The bag of jewelry he pushed under a broken slab of concrete in a vacant lot on Issaquena, meaning to come back for it, and knowing even as he did it that he never would. Then he walked home.

In the last block a woman he did not know smiled at him from a porch and said, "Hot one," and he said, "Yes ma'am," and climbed the back stairs of his building and locked his door and sat down on the floor with his back against the bed.

He sat there a long time.

After a while he noticed that his hands were not shaking, and that they should have been, and that this was worse than shaking would have been.

I've done it, he thought. I have done it.

He waited to feel something the size of the thought.

The room was quiet. The fan ran. Down on the street a car with a bad muffler went past.

He got up once, later, and washed his hands and his wrist and the toe of his right shoe, and put the shoes in a grocery sack and put the sack under the bed, and lay down on the mattress without undressing and stared at the ceiling and waited for morning.

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

He was ill for eleven days.

He knew the number afterward because Donna told him. During the eleven days there was no number. There was a ceiling with a water stain on it shaped like Arkansas, and the stain moved, and he understood at some point that he was being asked to account for the movement of the stain and that his answer would matter.

There were long stretches in which he was conducting a defense. He could not have said to whom. The room had the character of a hearing. He explained the difference between an obstacle and a person and he explained it well, better than he had ever explained it on paper, and each time he finished the explanation it was necessary to begin it again from the start, because the hearing had no memory and would not adjourn.

There was a horse in it somewhere. There was a bicycle coming down off a hook, very slowly, turning over.

There was a period he came to think of afterward as the accounting, in which he was required to say a number out loud, and the number he said was always wrong by one, and the correction was administered as heat.

He surfaced sometimes.

Donna's face close to his. She had left their mother in Memphis with a neighbor to come down, and she said so twice, not as a reproach but because it was the

kind of fact she needed to keep straight. She had her hand flat on his forehead and she was talking to somebody behind her about a thermometer.

A man in the chair by the window with his boots off, reading. Mitch Reasoner, he understood later—two years ahead of him at Ole Miss, dropped out of law school for reasons he had never fully explained, drifted down to Clarksdale for a weekend to help somebody move and stayed, which is a thing the Delta does to a certain kind of person. He sat in that chair for days. When Cleaves opened his eyes at three in the morning Reasoner was in the chair.

Once, the sound of the river, or of something he decided was the river.

Once, with complete clarity, the thought: *they will come while I am like this, and I will tell them, and it will be a relief, and that is the only way it will ever happen.* He held on to the mattress with both hands until it passed.



At some point a doctor came. A young woman, Dr. Zoe Sims, out of the medical center in Jackson, working her service years in the Delta because the loans had been forgiven on that condition. She sat on the edge of the mattress and looked at him with the flat patience of somebody trained not to be surprised.

"You need to eat," she said. "And you need to stop doing whatever it is you're doing to yourself."

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're running yourself down to nothing. That's a thing you're doing." She took his wrist. "Fever, dehydration, you haven't eaten in a week. That part I can fix."

"What's the other part?"

She let go of his wrist and looked at him for a moment longer than a doctor needs to.

"Not mine," she said.

She left prescriptions that Reasoner filled at the Walgreens on State Street with his own money.



"You look terrible," Reasoner told him, on the morning of the fourth day.

"I'm aware."

"You want to tell me what happened?"

A pause. "I got sick."

"Before that."

Cleaves turned his face toward the window. "No."

Reasoner nodded, as though this were an answer he had come prepared to receive. "All right. You want soup? Mrs. Fontenot made soup. She's not charging you rent right now either, by the way. She said—" He stopped.

"What did she say?"

"She said she's got a son in Memphis." Reasoner picked at the arm of the chair. "She said she's got a son in Memphis and she's quit asking him what he does."

Cleaves closed his eyes.



Donna went back to Memphis on the twelfth day.

She had used up the days she could use up. She stood in the middle of the room with her bag already on her shoulder and looked at the mattress and the hot plate and the one chair.

"Come with me," she said.

"No."

"There's the room off the kitchen. Mama's got nobody in it."

"No."

She stood there. Donna was twenty-six and had been handling things since she was fifteen, and she had a way of taking a breath before she said the hard sentence that he had known his whole life.

"Roddy. Whatever it is you've got yourself into down here—"

"I'm not into anything."

"Then you're sick, and sick people go home."

"I'll come at Christmas."

She looked at him for a long moment and then she gave it up, because giving it up was the only move she had left and she had always known when she was out of moves.

"Call her Sunday," she said. "Not Monday. She sits by it Sunday."

He said he would.

He did, twice, in September and October, and both times his mother asked whether he was eating and he said he was, and both times she told him about the roof and about the woman across the street, and both times he got off the phone in under four minutes and sat on the floor afterward with the phone in his hand."

CHAPTER II

On the tenth day, sitting up for the first time, he read in the *Clarksdale Press Register* that the Coahoma County Sheriff's Department was investigating the deaths of two women—Alma Booth, sixty-five, and her sister Lizzie Booth, fifty-eight—whose bodies had been found on the evening of July the fifteenth at a residence in the Sunflower district. The article ran nine inches on page three. It called it an apparent robbery. It said the investigation was ongoing. Under it there was a photograph of Lizzie from a church anniversary program, and she was smiling, and somebody had gotten it out of a drawer and handed it to a reporter.

He set the paper on the floor beside the mattress and looked at his hands.

He had believed, in some part of himself he had not examined, that seeing it in print would do something. It did not. It stayed exactly as real as it had been and no more real, and that was worse than horror would have been.

He picked the paper up again and read it through twice.

No suspects have been identified.

He turned the phrase over. *No suspects.*

He had expected—not hoped, expected—that by now there would be a suspect. That cause and effect would have worked itself out faster than this. Not knowing what he was facing turned out to be a labor of a kind he had no training for.

He lay back. Outside the window a mockingbird was working through its catalogue on the telephone wire, a dozen songs in ten minutes, every one of them borrowed.



Two days later he got up, put on clean clothes, walked out of the house, and went to DeSoto Avenue.

He did not decide to. He went down the stairs meaning to buy a bottle of water and turned right at the corner instead of left, and after that it was a matter of walking.

The yellow tape was gone. There was a strip of it caught in the fence at the property line, going gray. The front door had a padlock hasp screwed into it that had not been there before, screwed in crooked, the wood split around the top screw. The window over the glass case had been covered on the inside with something white.

He stood on the sidewalk across the street with his hands in his pockets.

A woman came out onto the porch of the house next door and looked at him.

He crossed the street and went up the two boards to the step and put his hand flat on the door.

"They been through it twice," the woman called over. "Ain't nothing in there."

"I know," he said.

"You family?"

"No ma'am."

"You owe her?"

He turned around. She was about seventy, in a housedress, with a fly swatter in her hand, and she was not curious in the way people are curious about a

stranger. She was curious in the way of somebody taking a census.

"I owed her thirty dollars," he said.

The woman made a sound. "Half this street owed her thirty dollars." She swatted at nothing. "You know what I keep on thinking about? She had that book. Wrote everybody down in it. Every dime." She looked at the padlocked door. "Whoever it was, they never taken the book. That's what I can't get past. Take the money and leave the book, so it's all still wrote down, and now don't nobody know who to pay."

Cleaves stood on the step of the house where he had killed two women and had a conversation about a ledger.

"Lizzie's the one," the woman said. "Lizzie never had a thing to do with none of it. She'd come sit with me when my knee was bad." She looked at him. "You all right? You look peaked."

"I've been sick."

"Well." She turned to go in. "Go on home then."

He walked back to Washington Street and got as far as the bottom of the stairs and had to sit down on them for a while before he could go up.

CHAPTER III

Reasoner brought news from outside with the appetite of someone who has always loved news and has found, in this particular news, something that interests him more than usual.

"They've got someone they're looking at," he said one afternoon, three weeks after the deaths. He sat in the chair by the window with his boots off. "This is from Whitfield."

Porter Whitfield was the chief investigator of the Coahoma County Sheriff's Department and who happened to be Reasoner's second cousin on his mother's side, a connection Reasoner had mentioned once in passing and never elaborated on.

"Someone called in," Reasoner continued. "A man named Cochran, and a student who was with him—they were at the house the evening of the fifteenth, they knocked on the Booth woman's door and didn't get an answer, they thought they heard something. They didn't report it until five days later because they'd been drinking and weren't sure what they'd heard. Now they're saying there might have been someone inside when they knocked."

Cleaves kept his face still. "What do they think they heard?"

"Movement. Or they think they did. One of them is sure he heard footsteps. The other one is less sure." Reasoner stretched. "Whitfield says they're looking at a man named Duane Marsh—his brother rents the

back half of the house. He had a way in, he had a prior, small stuff. But Whitfield doesn't think it's him."

"Why not?"

"Because he has an alibi that three different people corroborate, and because—" Reasoner paused. "Because Whitfield says a man like that wouldn't do it like that. He says the way it was done—no forced entry, no apparent signs of a struggle from outside, everything deliberate—he says that suggests someone who planned it. Someone who'd been in the apartment before."

Silence.

"What does he say about motive?" Cleaves asked.

"Robbery. But the weird thing—" Reasoner frowned. "The weird thing is that whoever did it missed the most valuable stuff. There was more cash in a different drawer. There was jewelry in her coat pockets. Whoever it was took some things and missed others, or didn't have time to look properly."

He hadn't had time. He had heard Lizzie's key.

"Hm," said Cleaves.

"You should come and meet Whitfield," Reasoner said. "He wants to talk to people who knew the old woman. He says he's talking to everyone in the neighborhood."

Cleaves looked at him.

"I didn't know her. I went there once about a watch."

"Then that's all you have to say. Come anyway. He's interesting. He's one of those people who makes you feel like you've already told him more than you meant to."

Cleaves looked out the window.

"All right," he said. "I'll come."

CHAPTER IV

Porter Whitfield had the office of a man who was not trying to impress anybody. Two desks pushed together, one under paper and one under something that had been coffee, a shelf of statute books and printed guidelines, a row of empty energy drink cans standing in for bookends. He was compact, early fifties, a Black man with a clean-shaven head and pale brown eyes that moved slightly all the time, the way compass needles move. Short sleeves, khakis, wedding ring. He came around the desk to shake hands and his grip was brief and dry.

"Mr. Cleaves. Sit down. I appreciate you coming in on a Saturday."

Reasoner sprawled in the chair by the window, at home, the way he was at home everywhere.

For the first twenty minutes Whitfield did not mention the case.

He asked about Oxford. He asked what a philosophy program actually consists of, and listened to the answer with what appeared to be real interest, and asked a follow-up question that was better than the answer deserved. He said his daughter was at Delta State and had come home last Christmas talking about Kant and he had not been able to get a foothold in it.

"She'd tell it to me and I'd say, all right, but what does a man *do* with that," Whitfield said. "And she'd say, Daddy, that's not what it's for."

"She's right."

"That's what I told her. I said, then it's the only thing in this world that ain't for something." He smiled. "Coffee?"

"No thank you."

"Wise."

He asked, then, in the same tone, whether Cleaves had ever had occasion to be at the Booth house.

"Once. In June. About a watch."

"Inside, or at the door?"

"Inside. Ten minutes, maybe."

"Front room only?"

"Front room."

Whitfield nodded and wrote nothing down.

"Reason I ask is I've got a floor plan I don't like," he said. "That house has been cut up three different times since 1940. I've had four people describe it to me and I've got four different houses." He turned a page on the desk without looking at it. "You notice anything about the back of it? Doorway, curtain, anything?"

There was a curtain. There was a chest of drawers with a lock on the top drawer, eighteen inches from the wall.

"There was a doorway," Cleaves said. "I didn't look through it."

"No reason you would."

Whitfield sat back.

"You know what I've been doing for two weeks?" he said. "Going down that street asking people what they owed her. That's my whole investigation right now. Nobody wants to say. Not because they did anything. Because it's shameful to a person to say out loud what they had to borrow forty dollars for." He looked at the window. "Woman kept a book. It's all in the book. I've got the book and I still can't get one person on that street to say the number to my face."

"Is that relevant?"

"Everything's relevant till it isn't." He looked back. "Can I ask you something outside of all this?"

"All right."

"Your paper." Whitfield tipped his head toward the desk, where, under two other things, there was a printed copy with a paperclip on it. "The one about persons of historical significance. I read it Tuesday night."

Cleaves kept his face where it was. "How did you come to have that?"

"Your friend's people," Whitfield said, meaning Reasoner, who did not look up. "Small county."

"It was a seminar exercise."

"Sure. And your professor wrote in the margin that he was glad it only existed on paper." Whitfield said it lightly, with no weight at all. "I thought that was an interesting thing for a man to write and then give an A-minus to."

"He was being dramatic."

"Maybe so." Whitfield turned his cup a quarter turn. "I'll tell you what got me. Not the argument. The argument's old, I've heard it out of a governor's mouth. What got me is you never once wrote down what the other one would look like. The louse. You've got forty pages and the man's got no face on him, no age, nothing. He's just the thing standing in the road." He shrugged. "I do this work, I notice when a person doesn't have a face. That's all. Occupational."

The room was very quiet.

"It's a category," Cleaves said. "Categories don't have faces."

"No sir," Whitfield said. "They surely don't."

He stood up and put out his hand, and the meeting was over, and Cleaves was on the sidewalk in the sun before he understood that he had not been asked a single question he could point to.



Walking back to Washington Street afterward, Reasoner talked the whole way—about Whitfield's method, about what the department did and did not have, about a detail he had gotten from somebody about the tape at the door.

Cleaves walked beside him and said very little.

He hasn't got anything, he thought. *He's got a floor plan and a book of debts.*

And then, at the corner of Yazoo: *he has read the paper twice.*

He could not identify why that produced in him something adjacent to satisfaction.

CHAPTER V

Four days later a man spoke to him on the street.

It happened at the crosswalk at Second and Delta, in the middle of the afternoon, with the light going and traffic stopped. There was a man standing at the corner in a straw hat, sixty or better, thin, holding a plastic bag from the drugstore, and as Cleaves came up beside him the man turned his head and looked at him and said, distinctly:

"Killer."

The light changed.

Cleaves did not move. The man crossed with the rest of the corner, unhurried, the bag swinging, and got up onto the far curb and kept going down Delta Avenue without looking back.

Cleaves stood on the corner through the whole cycle of the light.

Then he went after him.

He caught him in front of the barber shop and got in front of him and said, "What did you say to me?"

The man stopped. He looked at Cleaves and there was nothing in his face at all—no fear, no recognition, none of the thing Cleaves had come down the block to find.

"Say what, now?"

"You said something to me at the corner."

"I don't know you," the man said, and there was a slowness in the way he said it, in the way he was standing, and Cleaves understood two things at once: that the man was not entirely well, and that he had

been saying whatever he had been saying to everybody who came up beside him at that corner all afternoon.

"I'm sorry," Cleaves said.

"You want a mint?" the man said, and held out the bag.

Cleaves walked home. He got up the stairs and got the door locked and then he was on his knees on the floor with his forehead against the edge of the mattress, and he stayed like that until the light went out of the room.

It was the first time since July that his hands had shaken.

He understood, kneeling there, that he had gone after the man in the straw hat at a dead run, in the middle of Delta Avenue, in front of forty people, in order to be told that he had been recognized.

So that's what I am now, he thought. A man who runs toward it.

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

It happened on a Thursday in the middle of August, at the corner of Sunflower and Second, at the hour when the heat has quit coming down out of the sky and starts coming up out of the pavement instead.

Cleaves heard it before he understood it. Brakes, and then a sound a car does not otherwise make, and then the particular quiet of a street where thirty people have stopped at the same instant.

A box truck stood at an angle across the near lane with its door open and its flashers going. A man was in the road in front of it.

Cleaves got through the people and went down on one knee before he saw the face.

The shirt was pulled up around the ribs. There was blood coming out of the mouth in a thin steady line that ran back along the cheek toward the ear, and that was the detail he could not afterward stop seeing. The eyes were open. Honeycutt was conscious the way the badly hurt are conscious, present and elsewhere at once.

"I know him," Cleaves said. "Sam Honeycutt. He's three blocks over on Fourth."

"You don't move a man like that," somebody said.

"Then call them and tell them where he'll be."

They moved him. Two men off the sidewalk and Cleaves, and a woman who ran ahead to hold doors, and a neighbor's pickup for the three blocks, all of it done with the improvised competence of a street that has learned not to wait on anybody.

The two rooms on Fourth were exactly as he had pictured them from the bar, which unsettled him more than finding them different would have. A box fan in the window pushing hot air across hot air. A dish towel over a chair back. Three children against the far wall—two girls and a small boy—holding still in the total stillness of children who have worked out that this is not a good moment to be noticed in.

Kathleen came out of the back. She was thin in the way that is not thinness. She looked at her husband coming through her door on a door and made a sound with no words in it, and then began giving orders. Clear the table. Get the sheet, the old one. Polly, take them out on the step. She coughed between sentences into a rag she kept balled in her fist and she did not stop giving orders in order to cough.

"He was drinking," she said to Cleaves, not looking at him. "He walked out into the road. Do you hear what I'm telling you. He *walked out into it*."

It was not grief. It was the fury of a woman who has been made ridiculous in front of her neighbors for eleven years and is being made ridiculous one last time in front of the whole street.

Somebody had gone for Sophie. Somebody had gone up to St. Elizabeth's for the priest.

Sophie came first.

She came up the outside stairs in the clothes she worked in and stopped in the doorway when she saw. She did not scream and she did not go faint. She crossed the room and knelt at the head of the table and took her father's hand in both of hers and put it against her cheek.

His eyes went to her.

"Sophie."

"I'm here."

He worked at getting something out and did not get it. Then: "Forgive."

"There's nothing to forgive," she said.

It was a lie, and she said it so levelly that for a moment it was not one.

He died about four minutes later, before the priest got there and before the ambulance did.

Kathleen stood at the foot of the table with the rag in her fist and looked at the length of him.

"Twenty-two years," she said. "And what am I to bury him with?"

Cleaves took the envelope out of his inside pocket.

He had carried it a month without spending any of it and had told himself several different things about why. He set it on the corner of the table under the salt shaker. He did not count it. It was two hundred and eleven dollars.

"For the burial," he said. "And the rest for them."

Kathleen looked at the envelope. Then at him, with open suspicion, because nothing in her experience had ever been given. Then she took it, because the children had to eat, and it was the same motion her stepdaughter had watched her make in this room in the winter.

He went down the outside stairs into the last of the light.

He was into the second block when he heard feet behind him. It was Polly, the oldest, ten years old, barefoot on the hot sidewalk.

"Mama says what's your name."

He stood in the street and looked at her. Her feet had to be burning and she was not moving them.

"Rodney," he said.

"Rodney," she said, taking hold of it carefully, the way you take hold of something you have been sent for.

“Go on back. That concrete’s hot.”

She looked down at her feet as though she had just been told about them, and then she ran back.

He walked home. Somewhere around Issaquena he noticed he was breathing differently. For the length of two blocks he had been entirely inside other people’s lives and had not thought about himself once.

Then he thought about where the money had come from.

He stopped walking. A car went by with the windows down and the music up. On the corner ahead of him was the vacant lot with the broken slab in it, and he stood and looked at the lot for a while, and then went home and lay on the mattress and did not sleep.

CHAPTER II

Sophia Honeycutt—called Sophie by everyone who knew her at all—rented a room from a family named Capers on Issaquena Avenue, in a house that necessity had divided into four dwellings, all of them too small. Her room was upstairs at the back. It had two windows onto the alley and neither of them kept out the smell of the dumpster below.

She had made it as tidy as a room can be made when it contains almost nothing. The furniture had come with it—a cot, a table, two chairs, a chest of drawers, all of it old and none of it matching—and she kept it clean. On the chest there was a Bible, a framed photograph of her mother, and a candle.

Cleaves had not meant to go there. He thought about her in the weeks after the funeral, about her face in that doorway on Fourth Street, about the particular quality of a life lived in complete submission to necessity. He did not intend to go. And then one evening in September he was on Issaquena, climbing a dark staircase, knocking on a door.

She opened it herself.

She was small and pale, fair hair pulled back, with the slightly braced look of somebody who is always about to be told bad news. She had a transparency about her—you felt there was very little insulation between her and whatever was coming at her next.

"It's Cleaves," he said. "I was in your father's room. That night."

Her face changed. Not to grief; she had been grieving steadily for a long time before Honeycutt died. To something more like recognition.

"Come in," she said. "I've got about forty minutes."

That was the first thing he learned about her, and it turned out to be the important one: her time was cut into pieces and she knew exactly how big each piece was.

He sat in one of the chairs. She put water on a hot plate and made instant coffee in two jelly glasses and gave him one and did not apologize for it. Through the wall he could hear the Capers children being got ready for bed, and a television, and a dog.

"They gave you the money," he said.

"Kathleen buried him with it. There was some left." She sat down across from him with her hands around the glass. "I want to say thank you for it in a way that isn't just saying thank you and I don't know how, so I'm going to say thank you."

"Don't."

"You don't get to tell me not to." She said it without heat. "That's mine to do."

He looked at the table.

"How is she?"

"She's dying," Sophie said. "Not soon enough for her and too soon for the children." She turned the glass. "She's got it in her head to bring a suit against the trucking company. She's been to two lawyers. One of them told her the truth, which is that Daddy was drunk and walked into the road and there's nothing. She won't hear it. She's got the second lawyer's card in her Bible like it's a novena."

"What happens to them? The children?"

"There's an aunt in Shelby." Sophie said this the way you say a thing you have already decided you can live with. "She'd take them. She's sixty-one."



He went back several times through September and October.

He told himself, and it was true, that he did not know why. She was not beautiful in any conventional way. She was not easy to talk to. She said very little, and most of what she said was about other people—the Capers girl who was failing algebra, a woman at her church whose lights had been cut off, Polly's reading. When she spoke about her own life it was in the form of arithmetic. Rent was two hundred and forty. She gave Kathleen what she could. There was a night she had cleared nothing at all and she reported this to him without any tone in her voice at all, the way you report weather.

Twice he was there when she had to go. She would look at the clock, and stand, and say, "I have to get on," and go into the corner behind the curtain to change, and come out in different clothes and different shoes, and hold the door for him. She never once apologized for it, and she never once made a joke about it, and she never dressed it up in a word.

The third time, on the stairs, he said, "How long are you going to do this."

"Until Kathleen dies and the children are placed."

"And then?"

"Then I don't know." She locked the door behind them. "You want an answer that's got a plan in it. I don't have one of those."

He found the silence in her room different from other silences. Less like an absence. More like being in a room with something very old and very patient that has already heard everything you are about to say.

One evening in the last week of October he said, without planning to: "I want to tell you something."

She looked up.

"I don't know why I want to tell you." He stopped, and started over. "I want to tell you who killed those women. The ones on DeSoto Avenue."

Sophie went very still.

"It was me," he said.

He said it the way you say a thing you have rehearsed: correctly, completely, and without the weight it should have had.

CHAPTER III

She looked at him for a long time. Her face did not do what he had prepared for. There was no horror in it and she did not move away from the table. She looked the way she might have looked if he had told her he was dying of something.

"Why," she said.

"I had a theory." He heard how it sounded and he said it anyway. "About people who can act outside the law. That the law is a fence built for the people the fence is for."

"And you thought you were the other kind."

"I thought that was a thing you could find out by doing it."

"Is that all of it?"

"I needed the money."

"That's different," she said.

"Yes. That's what I found out."

The dog was going through the wall. Somewhere below them a screen door banged twice.

"Lizzie Booth," Sophie said.

"She came in. She wasn't supposed to be there."

"Lizzie Booth used to bring a sack of oranges up here at Christmas," Sophie said. "To this house. To the Capers, and to me, and to the man downstairs that nobody speaks to. Every year." She was not crying. Her hands were flat on the table on either side of the jelly glass. "She had a niece in Greenville. She used to go on the bus."

He had not known there was a niece.

"I didn't know that," he said.

"No," Sophie said. "You wouldn't have."

He put his hands over his face.

He heard her get up. He heard the chair, and her feet, and the small sound of the chest of drawers, and for a moment he thought that she had gone for the door and that the next thing would be the stairs and the street and whatever came after that, and he found he was ready for it and almost glad.

She came back and sat down and put the Bible on the table.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"I'm going to read you something."

"I don't want—"

"I know what you want," she said. "Sit still."

She turned to the eleventh of John and read it to him in her low level voice, straight through, without commentary and without the kind of inflection people put on Scripture when they want you to arrive somewhere:

Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha.

She read the sisters sending word. She read the two days Jesus stayed still in the place where he was. She read the disciples arguing about whether to go back into Judea at all, where the people had just tried to stone him.

Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.

She read Martha coming out to meet him on the road while Mary sat in the house. She read Martha saying the hardest sentence in the chapter: *Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.*

Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.

Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?

Her voice did not change on that line. She read it the way she had read the part about the town of Bethany.

She read Mary coming out at last and falling down at his feet and saying the same sentence her sister had said. She read the groaning in the spirit. She read the two shortest words in the book.

Jesus wept.

She read the stone, and Martha objecting to the stone on grounds of the smell, because Martha was practical and it had been four days. She read the loud voice.

And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

She closed the book and held it in her lap and looked at the table.

Neither of them said anything for some time.

"Four days," she said at last. "He'd have been four days in it. That's the part I always think about. That's not a man taking a nap."

"Why did you read me that?"

"Because you think you're at the end of something," she said. "And you're not at the end of anything. You're four days in with a stone in front of you and everybody standing around outside talking about the smell."

"That story has a miracle in it."

"It's got two." She set the Bible on the table. "The dead man comes out. And then a room full of people who have been standing there being afraid of him are

told to go over and put their hands on him and get the wrappings off. Nobody ever preaches the second one." She looked at him. "It's the harder one."

He said, "I don't know what you want me to do."

"You know exactly what I want you to do."

"Turn myself in."

"Yes."

"It doesn't bring them back."

"No."

"Then what's it for?"

"It's not for them," Sophie said. "They're past anything you can do. It's for you. It's the only door in the room."

"You want me to suffer."

She looked at him with something close to impatience, the first he had ever seen in her.

"You *are* suffering," she said. "You've been suffering since July and it hasn't cost you one thing and it hasn't done you one bit of good. There's suffering that's just weather. And then there's the other kind, where you go and stand in front of it and say what you did out loud to somebody who's got the power to do something about it." She folded her hands. "You've been having the first kind. I'm telling you to go get the second kind."

"And if I can't."

"Then you'll go on like this," she said, "and in ten years you'll be my daddy at a table in a bar telling a stranger about it. That's the other road. It's a real road. People take it."

He sat with that for a long moment.

"I'll lose everything," he said. And then, because it was not what he had meant: "You'll lose—whatever I —"

He stopped. He had not intended to say that.

She looked at him. Her look had in it something he could not read, not pity and not love exactly, something that took in both and went past.

"I lost everything when I was nine years old," she said. "What I've had since is extra."

He put his head down on his folded arms on the table.

After a while she reached over and put her hand on his hair, lightly, like a benediction, and left it there, and did not say anything else at all.

PART FOUR

CHAPTER I

That winter, Whitfield came to see him.

He came alone, without calling first, and knocked on the door of the room on Washington Street at two in the afternoon on a Tuesday in November, three months after the conversation at the sheriff's department. He came in and sat in the single chair and looked around the room with the same open curiosity he seemed to bring to everything.

"I'm not here on the county's time," he said. He had brought two gas station coffees in styrofoam. He set one on the table by the mattress. Cleaves did not touch it.

"Then why are you here?"

"To see you." Whitfield turned his cup in his hands. "I've been thinking about our conversation. And about the paper. And about you sitting up here in this room since July."

"You've been keeping track of where I sit."

"I've been keeping track of a lot of people. You're the one that came to me." He let that lie there. "Ordinary man does not come down to the sheriff's department on a Saturday to help out with a woman he saw one time about a watch. But you did. And then you called Reasoner twice in September to ask him what I'd been saying."

Cleaves said nothing.

"I've seen it," Whitfield said. "People circle the middle of a thing. They can't get away from it and they can't go into it, so they go around it. They come stand

near the fact of it, because if they don't it starts going unreal on them." He drank some of the coffee. "That's not evidence. I want to be plain with you. I've got no evidence."

"Then this is a social call."

"This is me telling you something you're going to need in about three weeks." Whitfield set the cup down on the floor by his shoe. "I have got a man. Nick Tolliver. He was working two blocks off DeSoto that week. He's got a history—he's been in and out at Whitfield, the hospital, not the family, no relation, everybody makes that joke and I've quit correcting them. He turned up with a bag of jewelry out of the Booth house and he has confessed. To both of them."

A silence.

"He didn't do it," Cleaves said.

"No," Whitfield said. "He did not."

"Then why is he confessing?"

"Religious, I think. He's got something else on him he thinks he's owed for, and this is how he's paying it." Whitfield looked at the window. "It happens more than you'd suppose. Man wants to be punished bad enough, he'll go find something to be punished for."

"What happens to him?"

"His confession won't hold. He's got the sisters in the wrong rooms and he can't say what took him to that lot. It'll come apart inside a month and then I'm back at the beginning with a stack of paper." Whitfield turned his head and looked directly at Cleaves for the first time since he sat down. "But understand me. If it didn't come apart—if he was a little more convincing and I was a little more tired—that man goes to Parchman for the rest of his life. And there's a version of this county, not far back, where he does not get to Parchman at all."

"You're not going to let that happen."

"I'm going to do everything I can to keep it from happening. That's not the same sentence." He picked the cup back up. "Two Black women beat to death in the Sunflower district. You know how many times the phone has rung in my office about this case? Four. Two of them was the newspaper." He said it without any particular emphasis. "If it had been two white women out on Clark Street I'd have had the state in here in July and I'd have had a task force and I'd have had a man in custody inside of ten days, and I'd like to tell you he'd have been the right man."

Cleaves looked at the floor.

"I'm giving you a window," Whitfield said. He stood. "It's not open long. Come to me on your own. It counts for something. It counts for more than people think." He put his hand on the doorframe. "I've been doing this twenty-three years. There's two kinds that come to me at the end. The ones who can't hold the weight of it anymore and need it to stop. And the ones who have finally worked out what it is they did—not the idea of it, the thing itself, with the faces in it." He looked back. "You're not there. I can wait."

He went out and pulled the door to behind him.

The coffee sat on the table until it was cold, and then it sat there another two days.

CHAPTER II

Kathleen Honeycutt died at the end of October, six weeks after her husband, and Cleaves was in the room for the last part of it because Sophie asked him to help carry a chair up the stairs and then did not ask him to leave.

The county had put the death down to natural causes when it came to it, and in the sense that anybody meant anything by that, it was true. It was the tuberculosis. It had also been the eleven years, and the two rooms, and the fact that nobody in Coahoma County had laid eyes on her chest in eighteen months because the insurance had gone in March with the job.

She spent the last two days on the daybed in the front room with the windows open, because she said the back room smelled of him.

She was not peaceful and she was not brave. She talked almost continuously. She talked about the second lawyer, and about a letter she meant to write to the trucking company, and about a woman at the church who had said something to her in 2011 that she had never gotten over. She told Polly four separate times to mind about the little one's shoes. She got the years of her first marriage confused with the years of her second and corrected herself with fury.

"They think I'm a woman who married a drunk," she said, to the ceiling, to whoever was in the room. "That is what they will put on me. That is what they will say at that church. I was raised by a

schoolteacher. Do you understand me. My mother taught school for thirty-one years."

"I know it," Sophie said.

"You don't know it. You never saw her."

"No ma'am."

Toward the end of the second day she got hold of Sophie's wrist and would not let it go.

"I want you to say it," she said.

"Say what."

"That I didn't sell you."

The room was quiet. The box fan turned in the window. The children were on the step with a neighbor.

"You didn't sell me," Sophie said.

"Say the rest."

Sophie's face did not change at all.

"You asked me to help and I helped," she said.

"That's all that happened in this house."

Kathleen let go of her wrist and lay back and closed her eyes and after a while she said, "You were always a good girl," and then she said something about the shoes again, and then she did not say anything else that anybody could make out.

She died a little after four the next morning.

Cleaves went out onto the step at some point before it got light. Polly was there in a blanket, awake.

"Is she gone," Polly said.

"Yes."

Polly nodded. She was ten and she nodded like a woman on a porch.

"Sophie's going to be all right," she said. "Sophie's the strong one."

"I know."

"Everybody says that about her," Polly said, "and then they go on off."

The burial was paid for out of what was left under the salt shaker. There was not enough for a stone and Sophie said they would see about a stone later, in the tone of somebody filing a thing under a heading she already knew to be empty.

The three children went to the aunt in Shelby on the second Saturday in November. Sophie rode out with them on the bus and came back the same evening and worked that night.

CHAPTER III

He went to her the evening after Whitfield came.

She was already at the table with her hands folded, as though she had been expecting him, and it occurred to him that she probably had.

"The investigator came to my room," he said.

"What did he say?"

"That he knows. That he can't prove it. That he'll wait." He sat down. "And that there's a man in a cell right now who has confessed to it."

Sophie's hands came apart.

"Who?"

"His name is Tolliver. He's not well. Whitfield says the confession won't stand up."

"Says."

"He says it'll come apart in a month."

"And if it doesn't?"

Cleaves did not answer.

"Say it out loud," Sophie said.

"Then a man who did nothing goes to Parchman for the rest of his life."

"For what you did."

"Yes."

She got up and went to the window and stood with her back to him and her arms crossed, and it was the first time in three months he had seen her be anything other than still.

"I have been telling you to go for your own sake," she said. "Because you can't live like this and I've watched what it looks like when a person tries. And

you've been sitting at this table weighing it up like a man deciding about a car." She turned around. "Well, now there's a man in a cell. So you can quit weighing."

"Whitfield says—"

"I heard what Whitfield says." She came back to the table but she did not sit. "Do you know what happens to people like Tolliver in this county? They get believed exactly as long as it's convenient and then they get put down someplace and forgot about. That's if it goes well." She put both hands on the back of the chair. "And you would let it. That's the part I want you to look at. Not July. July's done. *Tonight*. You would sit up in that room on Washington Street and let it happen and you would find a way to think about it that let you keep on eating."

"That's not—"

"It is exactly what you did with those two women," Sophie said. "You found a way to think about them that let you go on. You are doing the same thing right now with a man you've never met. It's the same act. You just don't have to swing anything this time."

He sat with his hands on the table and did not look up.

The dog was quiet through the wall. Down in the street somebody was calling a child in.

"All right," he said.

"Don't say all right to me. I'm not the one."

"I know who you are." He put his palms flat. "I'll go the first of December. I want to see the children first. I want to put something in the mail to that aunt in Shelby for them before they take everything I've got and put it in a bag."

Sophie sat down then.

"That's a real reason," she said. "Ten days."

"Ten days."

They sat there. After a while she made the instant coffee and they drank it and talked about Polly's reading, which was two grades behind and coming up, and about whether the aunt in Shelby would keep the three of them together, and about nothing.

At the door he stopped.

"Will you write to me?"

She looked at him as though he had asked whether the river would be there in the morning.

"Yes," she said.

CHAPTER IV

Reasoner came on the last night of November with a sack of tamales from the man who parked at Fourth and Yazoo, because that was the way Reasoner had of announcing that something was going to be said.

They ate on the floor with the sack between them. He talked about the archive. Somebody had brought in four boxes out of a church basement in Jonestown, minute books and a burial society ledger going back to 1938, and two of the boxes had gotten wet at some point and he had spent nine days separating pages with a spatula.

"They wrote down everything," Reasoner said. "Who was sick. Who paid dues. Who couldn't pay dues and what was decided about it." He wiped his hands on his jeans. "Eighty-six years later a man with a spatula is the only reason any of it exists."

"That's a good job."

"It's the only job I've ever had that I'd do for nothing." He balled up the paper. "Which is convenient."

Then he sat with his back against the wall and looked at the window for a while.

"I'm going to say a thing and then I'm going to leave," he said.

"All right."

"I've been in this room since July. I've filled your prescriptions and I've paid your light bill twice and I've lied to your sister on the phone one time, which I

didn't like." He kept looking at the window. "And I've never once asked you."

Cleaves did not say anything.

"I want you to know that's on purpose," Reasoner said. "Not because I'm stupid. Because there's two ways this goes and only one of them's got you in it, and I decided in August I'd rather have the one with you in it." He turned his head. "So. I'm not asking."

"Mitch."

"Don't." He got up off the floor. "Whatever you're going to do, do it in the morning, because if you do it tonight I'll have to sit up."

At the door he stopped and put his hand on the frame the way Whitfield had.

"Porter's my cousin," he said. "You know that. I've known him since I was six years old and he taught me to drive a stick in the lot behind the Baptist church." He looked back into the room. "He's a good man and he's a police, and them's two separate facts that live in the same body, and I've spent five months hoping you'd never need to learn the difference."

He went down the stairs. Cleaves listened to him go all the way to the street.

Then he got up and put the room in order, and it took eleven minutes, and he had expected it to take the whole night.

PART FIVE

CHAPTER I

Tolliver's confession came apart in the last week of November, exactly the way Whitfield had said it would.

Reasoner brought the news the way he brought all news, sideways in the chair with his boots off. The man could not say what had taken him to that lot or when. His account of the rooms was wrong in two particulars that could not be talked around—he had put the old woman in the back room and the sister in the front, and it had been the other way. They had let him go on Wednesday to a cousin in Marks.

"They're back to nothing," Reasoner said. "Whitfield says they're back to exactly where they started."

Cleaves listened to it the way a man listens to a clock.



He confessed on the first of December.

It was cold, the first real cold of the year, the sky over the Delta the color of a nickel and the wind coming across the flat with nothing between it and Oklahoma. He got up at five and could not eat. He put the room in order—squared the books, folded the two shirts, stripped the bed and folded the sheet on the mattress, which took eleven minutes and which he had somehow expected to take the whole morning.

He had mailed the money order to Shelby on Friday. It was ninety dollars. It was everything he had.

He wrote a note to Donna and left it on the table under the salt shaker, and then took it back and tore it up, because every sentence in it was a sentence designed to make her feel a particular way, and he could not write one that was not.

He wrote instead: *Donna. It was me. It was in July. Do not come down here until somebody tells you what to do. Tell Mama however you think is best. I am sorry. Rodney.*

He went down the back stairs. Mrs. Fontenot's kitchen window was shut against the cold for the first time since he had lived there, and he stood outside it for a second, and then went on.

Sophie was at the corner of Washington and Third.

He had not asked her to be and she did not pretend it was a coincidence. She had on the coat and the green shawl. Her hands were in her sleeves.

"I'll walk you as far as the courthouse," she said.

They went up Washington and over. Clarksdale was doing what it does on a cold Monday morning—a man scraping a windshield, the lights coming on in the window at the bakery, two cars at the light. They did not talk. At Delta Avenue she took his arm, which she had never done, and they walked the last two blocks like that.

At the corner across from the sheriff's department she stopped.

"This is me," she said.

"Sophie."

"Don't say anything to me right now that you're going to want to say again later." She let go of his arm. "Go on across the street."

He went halfway and turned around. She was standing where he had left her with her hands in her sleeves and she did not wave and she did not go anywhere.



Inside, it was warm and smelled of burnt coffee and floor wax. There was a woman at the window with a sliding glass panel and a laminated sign about hurricane preparedness taped beside it that nobody had taken down since September.

"I need to see Investigator Whitfield."

"He's not in till nine-thirty. You want to leave your name?"

"I'll wait."

He sat in a plastic chair. There were three other people in the waiting area: a young woman with a folder, an older man asleep sitting up, and a boy of about seventeen in a football jacket who kept looking at the door.

At nine-twenty a detective came out from the back—a young man, Elias Patton, who had been at the desk the Saturday in August and who looked at Cleaves now with an expression of confused recognition.

"You waiting on somebody?"

Cleaves stood up.

His legs were not entirely reliable. He had thought about the sentence for four months and he had constructed it a hundred different ways, and what came out was the shortest of them.

"It was me," he said.

Patton looked at him.

"Sir?"

"I killed Alma Booth and her sister Lizzie Booth. On the fifteenth of July, at the house on DeSoto Avenue. I went there to rob her. I'd been inside before and I knew the layout." He heard his own voice from a small distance. "I used a hatchet I bought on Yazoo Avenue for eight dollars. I put it in the river below the levee six blocks south. The jewelry is under a broken slab in the

vacant lot at Issaquena and Fourth, unless somebody's moved it."

The room had gone entirely quiet. The woman with the folder had stopped moving. The boy in the football jacket was staring.

Patton said, "Sir, I need you to—"

"I know what you need me to do," Cleaves said, and put his hands out where the man could see them.

CHAPTER II

The notice came on the nineteenth of December.

He was in the county jail in Clarksdale by then, in a cell with a man named Ordell who was waiting on a hearing about a violation and who slept nineteen hours a day. A jailer brought him a manila envelope through the tray slot and said, "You want a pencil?" and he said no.

It was four pages. It said that the State of Mississippi intended to seek the death penalty. It listed the reasons it was permitted to: that the killings had been committed while he was engaged in the commission of robbery, and that he had knowingly created a great risk of death to more than one person.

He read it three times. Then he sat on the edge of the bunk with the pages on his knees and understood that he had never once, in July or since, imagined this.

He had imagined confessing. He had imagined the room and the desk and the moment of saying it. He had spent four months imagining the moment of saying it and had never given ten seconds to what came after, and here it was, in Times New Roman, with a certificate of service on the back.



Two lawyers came up from Jackson in January, from the office the state maintains for people who cannot pay for their own defense in capital cases. The first chair was a woman named Carla Meese, fifty or so, in a

cardigan, with a rolling case of files. The second chair was a young man named Berry who took notes and did not speak for the first hour.

They met in a room with a table bolted to the floor.

"I want to tell you where you are," Meese said. "Not where you feel like you are. Where you are."

"All right."

"You've confessed on video, twice, in detail, with facts that were not public. You told them where the hatchet was and divers went and got it out of the river in December. You told them where the jewelry was. There is no version of this case where we try guilt." She squared a folder. "So there is one question in this case and one only, which is whether the State of Mississippi kills you."

He heard himself say, "All right," again.

"The district attorney has filed. That's not a decision, that's an opening position. Between now and April he'll make an actual decision, and I want you to understand what goes into it, because you're going to hear a lot of language about justice and it will not be about justice."

"What's it about?"

"Twelve people in Coahoma County." She said it flatly. "He has to convince all twelve to vote for death, unanimous, and if one of them won't, he's tried a two-week capital case and gotten what he could have had in an afternoon. So he sits down and he asks himself what a jury drawn out of this county does with the defendant he's actually got." She looked at him. "You want me to say the rest of it or you want to say it?"

He did not answer.

"You're twenty-four," Meese said. "You're white. You're from Corinth. You have no record, not a speeding ticket. Your mother is sick in Memphis and your sister will sit behind you every day in a church

dress. You have a master's-level education and a professor who will say you were the best student he had in fifteen years. And you walked into that building on your own feet, on a Monday morning, and said it out loud before anybody was looking for you." She put her hands flat on the folder. "There is not a district attorney in this state who wants to stand up in front of Coahoma County and ask twelve people to kill that."

The room was very quiet.

"And if I weren't," Cleaves said.

"Say it the way you mean it."

"If I were a Black man from Sunflower Avenue with a record and no confession."

"Then we would be having a different conversation," Meese said, "and I would be a great deal more frightened than I am, and you would be a great deal more likely to die." She did not soften it and she did not dress it up. "I've done this work nineteen years. I can give you the numbers on Mississippi and you can look them up yourself. But you don't need the numbers. You already know it. Everybody in this building already knows it."

Berry stopped writing.

"So it's arithmetic," Cleaves said.

"It has always been arithmetic. What it has never been is arithmetic about the two women." Meese unclipped a page and turned it around and slid it across the table. "That's the aggravating circumstances. Read the language. Robbery. Great risk of death to more than one person. Notice what's not in there."

He read it.

"Their names," he said.

"Their names are in the caption. That's the only place they appear in the whole apparatus." She took the page back. "I'll tell you the thing I have never

gotten used to. This entire machine is built and financed and argued about in the name of victims, and I have watched it run for nineteen years, and it does not know who they were. It knows what statutory box they fill."



The state withdrew the notice on the fourth of February. He pled the same morning, in the courtroom on the second floor of the courthouse in Clarksdale, to two counts of murder.

It took nineteen minutes.

He stood and said yes sir when the judge asked whether he understood, and yes sir when the judge asked whether anyone had promised him anything, and then he was asked to say in his own words what he had done, and he said it, and it took less than a minute and a half, and it was the fourth time he had said it out loud and the first time he had said it in a room with the family in it.

There were seven people on the left side of the gallery. Donna was one of them. His mother was not well enough to come.

On the right side there was a woman of about forty in a gray coat who had driven over from Greenville. Her name was Denise Wilkins and she was Lizzie Booth's sister's daughter, and the court gave her leave to speak, and she stood up with a piece of notebook paper and did not use it.

She said that her aunt Lizzie had raised her from the age of eleven when her mother could not.

She said that Lizzie had come on the bus to Greenville the first Sunday of every month for nineteen years and that she had never once come without something in a sack, and that the sack was usually

oranges, and that nobody in her family especially liked oranges and that she would give anything on this earth for one more sack of them.

She said that she had been told the man was going to get the death penalty and then she had been told he was not, and that nobody from the district attorney's office had called her either time, and that she had found out the second time from a woman at her church who had seen it on the internet.

She said, looking at him: I don't want you killed. I want you to say her name. Everybody in this room has said Alma's name and nobody has said hers.

The judge asked whether the defendant wished to respond.

He stood up.

"Lizzie Booth," he said.

He had intended to say more. There was more, he had written some of it down, and he found when he was upright with the room looking at him that the rest of it was for his own benefit and not for hers, and that he had no right to spend her time in that courtroom on it.

He sat down.

He was sentenced to two life terms, to be served concurrently, and he was twenty-four years old, and the whole of it was over before eleven in the morning.

EPILOGUE

I

Mississippi. In Sunflower County, off Highway 49W, in the flattest country in the state, sits the Mississippi State Penitentiary, known as Parchman Farm. The land around it runs to the horizon in every direction in cotton, and the sky over it is so large that it seems to be a fact about the universe rather than a fact about Mississippi. In the first year of his sentence, Cleaves was transferred there from the county facility in Clarksdale.

Two life terms, concurrent. Twenty-four years old.

He had understood the arithmetic of it in a room with a table bolted to the floor, and he went on understanding it every day at Parchman: that the machinery assembled to kill him and then set down again had never at any point been about Alma Booth or her sister.

He had expected—something. He was not sure what. Some rupture in the nature of experience, some crossing of a threshold after which things would be different in kind rather than degree. There was no such rupture. He got up. He went to assigned work—the fields, in summer; in winter, a workshop where they made furniture. He ate in the common hall. He slept in the building they called a barracks, though it was older and worse than that word implied.

The other men were mostly not what he had expected. They were young, mostly, and from the Delta, mostly, and they had, many of them, done things that were by any measure worse than what he had

done, and they wore this fact with a casualness that disturbed him more than confrontation would have. They were not monsters. That was what disturbed him. They were simply men for whom the world had arranged certain inevitabilities and who had, one way or another, fulfilled them.

He did not fit in with them and they knew it. He was one of six white men in a unit of sixty-one. They called him College and left him alone, mostly, except when they were not in the mood to leave anybody alone.

He learned the arithmetic of the place in his first month, the way everybody learns it. Almost every man in that barracks was from a county like Coahoma and almost every one of them was Black, and better than half of them had taken a plea, and the ones who had gone to trial were serving longer for it. He had taken a plea too. He had killed two people and taken a plea, and a good many of the men around him had taken theirs for a great deal less, and nobody in the barracks found this remarkable enough to comment on. That was the part he could not get past. Not that it was unjust. That it was ordinary.

He did not repent. That was the thing he could not explain, to himself or to anyone. He understood what he had done. He could reconstruct it, with complete clarity and completeness, from beginning to end, including Lizzie, including the look in Lizzie's eyes. He could reconstruct the theory—the extraordinary man, the ordinary law—and see it for what it was. He knew it was wrong. But knowing it was wrong was not the same as feeling, from the inside, the full weight of what the words meant. He had taken two lives. He turned this sentence over in his mind regularly, turned it and turned it, and it would not become real. It was true and it would not become real.

He began to think, carefully, about why this was.

II

Sophie wrote him letters. This was not a surprise—she had told him she would and he had believed her—but the letters themselves surprised him. They were not about what he expected them to be about. They were not about religion, or redemption, or forgiveness. They were full of small specific facts: that the Capers family had gotten a new dog, that there was a woman at her church who needed help and that Sophie had been helping her, that the winter in Clarksdale was mild and then cold and then mild again. That the children—Kathleen's children, who had been taken in by a great-aunt after Kathleen died—were doing well; that Polly, the oldest, was reading above her grade level.

He read these letters many times. He began to understand, gradually, that they were a form of care. She was telling him that the world continued. That there were people in it who were not in prison. That these people were doing ordinary things, ordinary and specific and real.

He wrote back, at first grudgingly and then with increasing attention. He found that writing to her required him to be specific about his own experience in a way that thinking about it did not. Writing required him to say: *today the foreman, whose name is Williams, told me that I would be working the east fields through March*. Writing required him to say: *I am well, or not unwell, and I am thinking about something*.

I am thinking about why I cannot feel what I should feel. He wrote this in one of the early letters and then held the pen for a long time before he sent it, because it was the first true thing he had said since the confession.

She wrote back: *Maybe feeling what you should feel isn't how it happens. Maybe it's more like something that finds you when you stop trying to make it happen.*

He reread this enough times that the paper softened at the folds.

III

In his second year, Whitfield came to see him.

He came on a Saturday afternoon in March, when the Delta was beginning its complicated shift from winter to spring—cold mornings, warm afternoons, the fields starting to show the gray-green of early growth. He had driven an hour and a half from Clarksdale and he arrived looking the same as he always looked: compact, clean-shaven, pale eyes moving slightly. He sat across the table from Cleaves in the visiting room and turned his coffee cup in his hands.

"How are you?" Whitfield asked.

"I'm all right."

"Are you?"

A pause. "I'm not suffering in the way people think I should be."

"How should you be suffering?"

"Guilt. Remorse. The full felt weight of it." He looked at Whitfield. "I don't have that. I have—" He considered. "I have the knowledge of it. The fact of it. I can see it completely. But it won't become—" He stopped.

"Real," Whitfield said.

"Yes."

Whitfield nodded slowly. He seemed to be considering something. "I've been doing this a long time," he said finally. "And I've noticed that what people call remorse—the burning feeling, the anguish—it usually comes when people feel sorry for themselves. For what they've lost. For what's

happening to them." He paused. "Genuine remorse—the kind that actually changes something—doesn't work like that. It's quieter. It's not a feeling. It's more like—a knowledge that starts to live in you rather than just sitting in your head." He looked at Cleaves. "I think you're waiting for lightning. I don't think that's how it works."

Cleaves looked at the table.

"Those two women," he said. "I still can't—" He stopped.

"Tell me."

"I can see Lizzie," he said. "More clearly than the other one. She had done nothing. She had—there was nothing in her life that had led to any of this. She came in at the wrong moment." He was quiet. "I think about her face." He stopped. "That's the nearest I can get to it. I think about her face and I can see that she was—that she was real. In a way I apparently didn't understand before." He looked up. "Is that something? Or is that just—nothing?"

"It's something," Whitfield said. "It might be the beginning of something."

He was quiet a while. Out through the window the fields went off flat and gray-green to the tree line.

"I'll tell you what I carry out of it," he said. "That district attorney filed to kill you in September and pulled it in February and he never once come down to that street. Not one time. Didn't sit in Alma Booth's front room and didn't sit in her sister's church." He turned the cup. "He was never trying to do right by those two women. He was working out what a jury in Coahoma County would do with a white boy from Corinth with no record who walked in on his own feet and said it out loud." He looked up. "And he was right about that too. That's what I can't put down."

"You think I should have been killed."

“No,” Whitfield said. “I’ve been in that room at Parchman one time in my life and I don’t intend to go back in it.” He set the cup down. “I think the machine ought not to exist. As long as it does, it’s going to keep on working the way it worked on you, and the way it would have worked on Nick Tolliver, and those are two different ways, and both of them are the same machine.”

IV

In the late spring of his second year, a week after Easter, Sophie came to see him.

She had been saving, she told him in a letter, since before the plea. She had come down Highway 49 on the bus as far as Tutwiler and had gotten the last twelve miles from a woman at her church whose cousin was inside. She arrived in the late morning and sat across from him in the visiting room and they looked at each other for a moment in the way that people look at each other when they have been writing letters for the better part of two years and are now, suddenly, in the same room.

"You look better," she said. "Better than I expected."

"Than you feared, you mean."

She smiled slightly. "Yes."

He looked at her. She was thin, as she always was. She wore her good dress, the one she wore to church—he knew this from a letter in which she had described it, in the way she described everything, with complete specificity. The green shawl she'd mentioned was around her shoulders. She looked tired from the bus.

"You didn't have to come this far," he said.

"I know."

"Thank you."

She nodded. She folded her hands on the table and looked at them.

"How are the letters?" she asked. "Are they useful?"

"Yes." He paused. "The one about the Capers dog."

"He's gotten bigger."

"I know. You described it well." He paused again. "You're a good writer, Sophie."

She looked up at him, surprised in a way that was very specific—the surprise of someone who is not used to being told they have done something well, who receives it carefully, like something fragile.

"I just write what happens," she said.

"Yes. That's why it's good."

They sat in the visiting room for the full allotted time. They talked about Polly's reading. They talked about a woman at Sophie's church who was going through something, and what Sophie thought could be done for her. They talked about the farming work—the fields, the early crops, the way the Delta looked in spring from the level of someone working it. He told her things about his life here that he had not put in letters, small things, the names of men he had begun to talk to, the particular quality of the light at six in the morning over the flat fields.



She had moved in the spring.

She wrote it to him the way she wrote everything, in the middle of a letter, between the Capers' dog and a woman at church: that she had given up the room on Issaquena and taken one in Tutwiler, twelve miles from the gate, and gotten on at a nursing home on the day shift.

He read that paragraph eleven times.

He wrote back and told her not to have done it and told her it was too much and told her she had a life to make, and he mailed it, and he lay on his bunk that night knowing exactly what he had done, which was to

say a thing he did not mean in order to be told again that she meant it.

Her answer came in nine days.

I didn't do it for you. I did it because there wasn't one thing left in Clarksdale for me and there is work here and the work is honest and I am tired. You are twelve miles up the road from where I sleep, and that is a fact about the map and not a fact about you.

I will see you on Saturdays.



When the time was over and they stood to leave, she held out her hand.

He took it. She had small, cold hands, even in spring.

"I'll come again," she said.

"I know," he said. And then, because it was true and because she had always understood true things without explanation: "It matters. What you do. Coming. The letters. It matters to me. I didn't think it would, and it does."

She held his hand a moment more.

"I know," she said, and let go.



His mother died in the winter of his second year, in Memphis, in the room off the kitchen. Donna wrote it in a letter that was two pages long and completely factual, the way she had done everything since she was fifteen: the date, the hospital, who came, what was said. At the bottom she had written, *She asked about you at the end and I told her you were doing well and I do not feel one bit bad about it.*

He was not there to sit with her. He had known for eleven months that he would not be, and he had thought that knowing it in advance would do some of the work of it, and it had not done any of the work of it at all.



He went back to his bunk. The barracks were loud in the evening—men talking, the television someone had arranged to have brought in, the sounds of the facility going about the business of containment. He lay on his back and looked at the ceiling and did not think about the theory of the extraordinary man. He thought about Lizzie's face. He held it in his mind without turning away, and he stayed there with it, and it was difficult, and he did not look away.

This, he thought, might be the beginning.

He did not know what it was the beginning of. But he understood, in this moment, something he had not understood before—not abstractly, not as a theorem, but as a fact about the specific weight of things: that the world was full of people who were real. That Lizzie had been one of them. That Sophie was one of them. That Mrs. Fontenot downstairs with her son in Memphis was one of them. That the men in this barracks—the young men from the Delta who had fulfilled their inevitabilities and were lying in their bunks thinking their own thoughts—were real, each of them, with their own separate and complete interiors, their own faces, their own names that they had been called by other people who loved them or feared them or needed them.

He had written a paper, once, about the extraordinary man. About the man for whom the ordinary law did not apply.

He understood, now, that the paper had been wrong in a way that was more fundamental than its argument. It had been wrong in its premise. The premise was that certain people stood outside the world—above it, beyond it, exempt from its ordinary claims. The premise was that extraordinary capacity created a kind of separation. That to be capable of something more was to be something else.

But there was no such separation. There was only the world, and the people in it, each of them real, each of them the center of a life as absolute and complete as his own. Lizzie Booth, who had come in at the wrong moment, who carried a sack of oranges up a staircase on Issaquena every Christmas of her life, who had a niece in Greenville and rode the bus to see her. His own mother, who had died in Memphis in the winter, and whom he had not been there to sit with. Sophie, who had nothing and gave everything.

He was not an extraordinary man. He was simply a man who had done an ordinary and terrible thing and would live, for the rest of his life, in the full knowledge of it.

He thought: *This might be what repentance is. Not lightning. Not anguish. Just this—the world becoming real.*

Under his bunk, in the small box they allowed him, was the New Testament Sophie had sent him in a package the first month. He had not read it. He had not been ready. He reached under and found it with his hand and held it on his chest in the dark without opening it.

Can her convictions not be mine now? he thought. *Her feelings, at least. Her way of looking.*

He did not know. But that it was a question—that it was a real question, one that mattered, one whose answer was not yet fixed—this was already something.

The barracks quieted. The television went off. Through the high window above his bunk he could see a strip of Delta sky, very dark, very full of stars.

He lay there with the book on his chest and looked at the stars and waited for morning.

That is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life. But our present story is ended.

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

A Note on the Names: In Dostoevsky's novel the names are Russian and several of them are arguments. Raskolnikov comes from *raskol*, meaning schism or split. Razumihin comes from *razum*, meaning reason. Marmeladov is built out of the word for marmalade, which is a joke that stops being funny by the end of Part One. This adaptation gives the characters American names, chosen where possible to carry the same freight into English. The correspondences are these.

Rodney Cleaves — *Rodion Romanovich*

Raskolnikov

Sophie Honeycutt — *Sofya Semyonovna*

Marmeladov, called Sonia

Samuel Zachary Honeycutt — *Semyon Zakharych*

Marmeladov

Kathleen Honeycutt — *Katerina Ivanovna*

Marmeladov

Polly Honeycutt — *Polenka*

Porter Whitfield — *Porfiry Petrovitch*

Mitch Reasoner — *Dmitri Prokofich Razumihin*

Donna Cleaves — *Avdotya Romanovna, called*

Dunya

Alma Booth — *Alyona Ivanovna*

Lizzie Booth — *Lizaveta Ivanovna*

Dr. Zoe Sims — *Zossimov*

Elias Patton — *Ilya Petrovitch*

Nick Tolliver — *Nikolay*

Duane Marsh — *Dmitri*
Cochran — *Koch*
the Capers family — *the Kapernaumovs*

Rodney Cleaves (Raskolnikov): The protagonist. A former philosophy graduate student at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, now living in poverty in Clarksdale. Dostoevsky's name for him comes from the Russian *raskol*, meaning schism or split, and signals his divided consciousness from the novel's first page; the surname here was chosen to carry the same fracture. His theory of the extraordinary man is his own, worked out in an academic paper, but it is also the theory of every system of punishment that decides some lives matter more than others.

The extraordinary man theory: Cleaves's philosophical position, stated in his seminar paper: that human beings divide into ordinary people, who live by the law and whose function is conserving, and extraordinary people, who possess the capacity to alter the world and for whom the ordinary law is therefore not binding. Napoleon, Alexander, and Lincoln are his examples. The theory is Dostoevsky's sharpest critique of a certain strand of Enlightenment rationalism—the idea that consequences justify means, that utility can override individual rights, that the exceptional man is exempt from what constrains ordinary people. The mistake is not in his intelligence. It is in his premise.

Sophie Honeycutt (Sonia): The daughter of Samuel Honeycutt, a nineteen-year-old woman who has been driven to prostitution by her family's

destitution. In both the original and this adaptation she is the moral center of the novel—not because she preaches or argues, but because she is fully, consistently real. Her letters to Cleaves at Parchman Farm are the instruments of his gradual moral opening. Dostoevsky modeled Sonia on the women he observed in Siberia who followed condemned men into exile out of love.

Alma and Lizzie Booth (Alyona Ivanovna and Lizaveta): Two sisters in the Sunflower district of Clarksdale. Alma lends money on the security of objects at rates that are her own business, and keeps every loan she has ever made in a spiral notebook that her killer picks up and puts back down. Lizzie helps her on certain afternoons. In Dostoevsky the pawnbroker is a principle before she is a person and Lizaveta is barely more than an interruption; the risk in any adaptation is to leave them that way. What the novel finally requires of Cleaves is that these two women stop being the occasion of his theory and become what they were, which is two women with a niece in Greenville and a sack of oranges at Christmas and a street full of people who owed them thirty dollars.

Porter Whitfield (Porfiry Petrovitch): The chief investigator of the Coahoma County Sheriff's Department, and second cousin to Mitch Reasoner. He corresponds to Porfiry Petrovitch in the original, one of the great detective figures in literature. His method is entirely psychological: he does not accumulate evidence so much as he creates the conditions in which the truth will emerge. His conversations with Cleaves—in the office in August, in the rented room in November, in the visiting

room at Parchman two years later—are the novel’s intellectual spine.

Nick Tolliver (Nikolay): A man with a psychiatric history who finds the stolen jewelry, confesses to both killings, and is held for several weeks on a confession that does not survive contact with the facts. He corresponds to Nikolay the painter in the original, who confesses out of a religious impulse toward expiation. False confession is not a literary device. It turns up again and again in the exoneration record, and it falls hardest on people with mental illness and intellectual disability. Tolliver is the reason Sophie stops arguing with Cleaves about his soul and starts arguing with him about a man in a cell.

Samuel Honeycutt (Marmeladov): A former licensed practical nurse, now unemployed and drinking, who accosts Cleaves in a bar on Sunflower Avenue. His account of his daughter’s sacrifice establishes the novel’s moral stakes before the crime, and his death under a delivery truck in August is what carries Cleaves into the two rooms on Fourth Street and into Sophie’s life. He is one of Dostoevsky’s great self-aware sufferers: a man who understands exactly what he is doing to his family and does it anyway, not from malice but from the specific weakness that the novel calls, without sentiment, the human condition.

Parchman Farm (Mississippi State Penitentiary): The Mississippi State Penitentiary, in Sunflower County, established in 1901 on land acquired from a plantation. For most of its history it operated as a convict leasing operation, requiring incarcerated people to work the cotton fields without pay. It has

been described by historians as one of the most brutal prison systems in American history. In this novel it serves the function of Dostoevsky's Siberia: the place where Cleaves must finally confront, without the distractions of the city, what he has done and who he is.

The Lazarus reading: Sophie reads to Cleaves the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John, entire, in Part Three of this adaptation and in Part Four of the original. Dostoevsky was in earnest about this passage: the possibility of resurrection, of a person becoming genuinely other than what he has been, is the answer the novel proposes to the theory of the extraordinary man. Sophie's reading of it is her own. She takes the miracle to be double—the dead man walks out, and then the people who have been standing outside the tomb being afraid of him are told to go put their hands on him and get the wrappings off—and she tells Cleaves that the second miracle is the harder one. The King James text is used throughout this volume.

The confession: In Part Five of this adaptation, and at the end of Part Six of the original, Cleaves confesses to the police. The confession is not produced by the investigator's cleverness or by the accumulation of evidence. It is produced by Sophie, and by a process of internal reckoning that takes months. He confesses not because he has been caught but because—as she tells him—he does not have a life without going through this. The confession is the novel's structural climax, but the Epilogue makes clear that it is only the beginning of something.

Dostoevsky's own experience of punishment:

Dostoevsky's mock execution in 1849 and his four years of hard labor in Omsk are not incidental to *Crime and Punishment*. They are its source. He knew what it felt like to stand in front of a firing squad. He knew what it felt like to spend four years in a penal colony in the company of murderers, thieves, and political prisoners. He knew, from the inside, what punishment does to a person and what it does not do. When Cleaves arrives at Parchman and finds that the other men are not monsters but simply men for whom the world arranged certain inevitabilities, that is Dostoevsky remembering Omsk.

Capital punishment in Mississippi: Mississippi is a death-penalty state. Two killings in the course of a robbery make a case capital under Mississippi law, and the district attorney in these pages files notice of an intention to seek death before withdrawing it in exchange for a plea. That is how most capital cases in this country actually end: not in an execution but in the shadow of one, with the threat of death doing the work that a trial is supposed to do. The state's primary method is lethal injection, with nitrogen hypoxia, electrocution, and the firing squad standing behind it as statutory alternatives. Mississippi has a long record of wrongful conviction, of inadequate counsel for capital defendants, and of racial disparity in who is charged capitally and who is sentenced to die. Cleaves does not go to death row. He is spared it by a calculation that no one ever says out loud in front of him, and Whitfield says it out loud to him at Parchman in the second year. That calculation, and

not the execution chamber, is where the death penalty does most of its work in America.

FURTHER READING

On Dostoevsky

Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*. Princeton University Press, 2010. The abridged version of Frank's five-volume biography—the definitive scholarly account of Dostoevsky's life and work. Essential background for understanding what the novelist was doing in *Crime and Punishment* and why the novel took the form it did.

Kjetsaa, Geir. *Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Writer's Life*. Translated by Siri Hustvedt and David McDuff. Viking, 1987. A more accessible biography, particularly good on the early period and the Siberian experience that shaped the novels.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The House of the Dead*. 1862. Dostoevsky's fictionalized account of his years in the Siberian penal colony. Essential reading alongside *Crime and Punishment*: the earlier novel documents, in novelistic form, exactly the experience that the Epilogue of *Crime and Punishment* compresses into a few pages.

On Crime and Punishment

Peace, Richard. *Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels*. Cambridge University Press, 1971. The most detailed chapter-by-chapter analysis of *Crime and Punishment* available in English,

particularly strong on the novel's philosophical sources and structure.

Jones, Malcolm V. *Dostoyevsky: The Novel of Discord*. Barnes and Noble, 1976. Reads *Crime and Punishment* as a novel structured around irresolvable contradictions—a reading that illuminates the novel's refusal to provide easy answers.

Wasiolek, Edward, ed. *Crime and Punishment and the Critics*. Wadsworth, 1961. An anthology of critical responses to the novel from its publication through the mid-twentieth century, useful for tracking the conversation that the novel has generated.

On Punishment and the Death Penalty

Prejean, Helen. *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. Random House, 1993. The most widely read personal witness to capital punishment in American literature. Read alongside *Crime and Punishment*, it is a record of the same question—can a person learn the value of a human life?—answered from the other side of the glass.

On Mississippi and Parchman Farm

Oshinsky, David M. *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. Free Press, 1996. The definitive history of Mississippi State Penitentiary, from its founding on a former plantation through the civil rights era. Essential reading for understanding what Parchman Farm is and what it represents in the landscape of American punishment.

Cobb, James C. *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*. Oxford University Press, 1992. The standard history of the Delta as a cultural and economic formation. Provides the context for understanding why the Delta is not simply a setting but an argument.

Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*. Scribner, 2011. A novel set in rural Mississippi that captures the specific quality of Delta poverty with which this adaptation is in conversation. Ward is the writer who has done most to make the moral landscape of Mississippi available to contemporary fiction.

Companion Volumes in This Series

Beccaria, Cesare. *An Essay on Crimes and Punishments*. 1764. Edited and modernized by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The foundational Enlightenment argument for criminal law reform, published a century before *Crime and Punishment* was written. Beccaria's argument that the state cannot rightfully take life is the philosophical companion to Dostoevsky's novelistic argument that the individual cannot rightfully take life in the name of a theory.

Spear, Charles. *Essays on the Punishment of Death*. 1844. Edited and modernized by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The American antebellum abolitionist argument, theological and philosophical. The companion to *Crime and Punishment* on the question of what punishment is for.

Livingston, Edward. *Argument Against Capital Punishment*. 1833. Edited and modernized by Jeff

Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. Livingston's argument from Louisiana—a state with a particular relationship to the administration of criminal justice—focuses on the right of the state to take life and the historical evidence that it is unnecessary.

Darrow, Clarence. *An Eye for an Eye*. 1905. Reset in contemporary St. Louis by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. Darrow's novella about a working-class man on death row, retold in contemporary St. Louis. Where *Crime and Punishment* is concerned with the psychology of the killer, Darrow's novel is concerned with the social conditions that produce him. The two texts together constitute a complete account of how a person comes to commit murder and what happens afterward.

Hugo, Victor. *Under Sentence of Death*. 1829. Reset in contemporary Iran by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The first-person diary of a condemned man. Hugo's novel, written nearly four decades before Dostoevsky's, is the oldest fiction in this series and the most direct antecedent: the story of a person waiting to be killed by the state, told from the inside of that experience, in the idiom of a person for whom the death penalty is not an abstraction.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood is an Old Catholic priest, an author, and an abolitionist. For fifteen years he has walked with people condemned to die in the United States, serving as spiritual advisor in thirteen executions, including executions by nitrogen hypoxia. He is the founder of the Execution Intervention Project, the Institute for Death Row Correspondence, and The New Theology School, and he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2025. He edits The Abolition Classics for Complicit Press.