



A FORGIVING FIRE

Sample

CHAPTER 6-- JUNETEENTH

A homesick Johnnie Roy Houston, a soon-to-be father, arrives in Bastrop to celebrate his favorite holiday—Juneteenth. A bus fire on the way up was a foreshadowing of a day short of a hell—a day that would change his life forever.

6—Juneteenth

Thursday, June 13, 1946. Eight months had passed since coming to Corpus Christi, Texas. Work was nonstop at the Osage Motor Company, and with big brother Immer who had started his own company on the side—The Houston Motor Company, 1219 Sam Rankin Road—fixing and turning over used cars Osage didn't want to bother with. Juneteenth couldn't get here fast enough for me. I needed a break.

I sent Juanita on ahead to help with the cooking, not that she was in any condition to help much. Juanita was eight months pregnant—big and napping all the time—carrying in her belly my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

I planned to come up on the bus from Corpus Christi the following Tuesday because— with a baby on the way and all—I wanted a bigger payday. Immer wanted me to stay over the weekend to finish up some bodywork needed to be done. As I “Bondo-ed,” buffed, and beat out dents, all I could think about was barbecue brisket, pink lemonade, and fireballs. There would be plenty celebrating left when I got home, plus I would see Momma.

Tuesday, I took the last bus out headed north. The hum of the tires against the road and the whirr of the diesel bus engine lulled me into a half-sleep. I call it a “half-sleep” because I drifted in and out of sleep so much sometimes it was hard to tell when I was awake or dreaming. I swear I could smell, taste, and touch things in my sleep.

I guess you could call them dreams “half-dreams,” too. What was real and what was conjured up swirled together like the Colorado River's swift and quiet waters. All I know is it didn't take me long to drift back to Juneteenth. I could see the strange fire of them coal-oil balls of rags—how they lit up the sky with orange-yellow tails when you tossed them as high as you could, and how they would crash to the ground, cinders flying everywhere. I could hear my

mother holler out, “Go get you another, baby.” I could smell the sweet smoke. I always wondered about this strange fire that gave you enough time to throw without burning you, like the fire of those fire eaters you see in the circus. They spit fire and nothing happens to them.

In this half-dream, I was already at the bottoms. There was tables and tables of food: ribs, sausage, corn on the cob, pies, pies, and more pies—peach, pecan, and lemon meringue—all lined up in a pretty row. In big, old barrels full of chunks of ice was fire-engine red Kool-Aid, and pink lemonade so sour it would lock your jaws up. All the spirits was moving on the waters of the Colorado, too: homemade chock and Johnny Walker Red. The Holy Spirit, thank God, was there to keep things in order because, as one of the old-timer domino players would say as he slammed big six down, “It’s too good to be good.”

Joy hovered over the face of deep, swirling the waters of the Colorado and stirring up the hearts of browned faces and feet. I could hear the clang of horseshoes crack like lightning and the thunder of dominos slammed down by old men with hearty laughs. I could hear those same old men spin tall tales made taller with every drink. I could hear the cries of babies spooked by all the noise. The thick, wet night air mixed with the sweat of browned bodies running, dancing, laughing, and lying. There wasn’t two sides to Bastrop there—the “haves” and the “haves little”—divided by the M-K-T tracks. Everybody there wanted for nothing. It felt good.

I dreamed all this in a half-dream as the hum of the old diesel engine and the rhythm of State Highway 304 rocked me like my momma. In half-sleep, I could see her round face, lit by my uncle’s truck headlights, and I could smell the smoke of Juneteenth fire.

“Smoke! Smoke! Hey, son, wake up. Wake up! You smell that?” Choking and coughing, the elderly woman in the seat next to me shook my shoulders. Smoke had filled up the back of the bus. It smelt like burning leather.

“Hey, stop the bus! Something’s burning back here,” I hollered at the bus driver. I ran up there and grabbed him by the shoulders and yelled, “Hey man, something is burning back here.” He pulled the bus off the road and slammed the doors open.

“Everybody out! Up front! Up front!” he shouted. All the passengers—it was about thirty of us—spilled out onto the side of the road, eyes watering, mouths spitting up soot, lungs burning. Smoke poured out of the luggage compartment from underneath, near the rear wheels. The driver ran back and got one of the fire extinguishers, but it was too small. By then, the smoke had grown thicker and blacker and had drifted over to the other side of the road, making it hard for cars on both sides to see. As I helped the old lady find a place to sit to catch her breath, I thought there’s gonna be a wreck if they don’t get this fire out. The driver got on his radio and called somebody to call the fire department.

Finally, two fire engines pulled up and put out the blaze, but the bus wasn’t going nowhere. I overheard the driver and the firemen talking, saying it looked like somebody had forgot to close the lower compartment that separated the luggage from the engine batteries. Some of the baggage had shifted and shorted out a battery—that’s what they figured.

We sat there for about an hour till another bus showed up to take us the rest of the way. I couldn’t sleep the rest of the trip. The fire rattled my spirit. I had a bad feeling after that. I told myself ain’t nothing but the devil trying to steal my joy. We finally rolled into the Bastrop bus station around midnight. Then it didn’t matter. I was home.

I slept in late but not too late. The rattling of pots and pans woke me. Today was Juneteenth. I was at Juanita’s folk’s place, and they had already started cooking for the night. You know how they start cooking early for those big days—the cakes and pies first, the meats on pits later. Juanita cut me a big piece of buttermilk pound cake for breakfast and gave me a big

old buttery kiss on the lips and asked, “You want to go to the store and pick up some things?”

“Yeah. What you want?”

She came back with a list and the keys to her daddy’s ’39 Ford. I gave her a big buttery kiss back and a pat on her baby belly. The Red & White grocery, here I come. First, I stopped by my momma’s house to see if she needed anything. She gave me her list, then I was on my way. I took my time. With the windows down and a song on my lips—not sure what I was singing, but it was happy because I was happy, happier than I had been in a while—I eased on down Main Street to Mrs. Rosanky’s place. That’s what I called the Red & White because she was the owner and clerk.

The grocery market sat off Main Street, right in front of the bank. It hadn’t changed in all them years we’d been trading there. It was a combination grocery store, feed store, and luncheonette. There was long aisles of canned goods, cereals, breads, candies, sugar, flour, and beans stacked from floor to ceiling. In back, there was a long meat counter. We traded there because, of all the grocery stores in Bastrop, she treated brown people like they was people. She didn’t holler at you to hurry up or make you go to the back of the line. Maybe she was fairer because she was German. I figured her people was glad to be here—being strangers and all—and she might have understood the strangeness of how coloreds was treated—worse than strangers. Her people was all over Bastrop, Elgin, Smithville, and Taylor. They had a hand in everything, too: corn mills, cotton gins, blacksmith shops, and grocery stores. With her thick accent and smile full of teeth, she’d speak to you liked she knew you—really knew you. Everybody had credit. It was good business as far as we was concerned. The Houstons didn’t have much, but we did have a good name. If we said we’d pay, we paid. It might take a while, but we was good for it.

Today, it wasn't going to be credit. I had money in my pocket from working at the Osage Motor Company. It would feel good to walk through the aisles and fill up my basket and order what I wanted at the meat counter without having to suck up my pride and squeeze out those words, "Could you please put it on our account? Momma will be in as soon as she gets paid." No. Today it was going to be cash.

The bell above the door clanged as I pushed it open. She was busy at the checkout counter. She didn't even look up as she spoke, "Can I help you?"

I said in Czech, "*Jak se máš* (How are you?), Mrs. Rosanky?" I always liked to speak what little strange language I had picked up from working for and with the strange foreigners who were all over the place, in all types of businesses around here. I didn't know if Mrs. Rosanky's people—the Germans—and the Bohemians understood each other's words or not, but I figured it was good for my business, too—getting work where I could—by using a word or two of their words. She seemed to like it and understood me. "I ain't got one list—I got two," I said.

She looked up when she heard my voice. "Well I'll be, if it ain't Mr. Johnnie Roy. *Jak se máš.*" She always said my name with my first and middle name and a mister in front of it. I guess it helped her keep me straight from my brother. Whatever the reason, I liked how she called me.

"We're getting ready for Juneteenth, so I got a lot," I said.

She smiled, "Well, I tell you what, Mr. Johnnie Roy, you give me what you want from the meat counter, and I'll get it while you get the rest on your list." So, she went on back, and I went down every aisle. It felt good—free—to not have to put something back on the shelf because it cost too much. I was a humming and a picking, a picking and a humming, even reaching for a Hershey chocolate bar, telling myself, "I bet Juanita would like this," knowing good and well it was really me wanting my favorite candy. Today was going to be that kind of

day—a Hershey bar day.

With everything on my list in the basket, me and Mrs. Rosanky met back up at the front counter about the same time. She added it all up and gave me her big German smile. “*Das* will be twenty dollars even, Mr. Johnnie Roy.”

With a grin as wide as Smithville, east, to Taylor, west, I handed her a crisp twenty-dollar bill. I thanked her and strutted out the door with an arm full of groceries and a chest poking out with pride.

This was going to be a good—no, a great—day. It was Juneteenth.

When I got back in the car, I looked at the gas gauge and saw it was almost on empty, so I stopped at the filling station a block from the store and got some gas. Four dollars was enough. I filled her up with ethyl and drove to the house. With the car window down, my arm hanging out, and my hand tapping on side of the door to the sound of Ray Charles’s “I Got a Woman Way over Town” on the radio, I cruised down Main Street. I wasn’t much for singing, but I wasn’t studden who heard me. I felt like singing, with “not-as-hot-as-it-could-be” June air blowing my singing right back in my face. It didn’t take long before I drove up to Juanita’s folk’s house, radio blasting, ready for some dominos.

Before I could even get out of the car good, Juanita, with her mother, Lenora, right behind her, ran out crying, “The law looking for you!”

“Looking for me?” I asked. “What they looking for me for? I ain’t did nothing.”

Juanita was in tears, “I don’t know.”

I asked, “Who? Who come up here looking for me?”

She stammered, barely getting the words out, she was so upset, “Sheriff Cartwright, Norman Owens, Dude Milton, M. A Justice. All of ’em!”

I got out of the car hollering. “What they said they wanted?” I didn’t mean to yell, but it didn’t take much to set off my temper.

“They asked if you was here. They was looking for you, and they said they was looking for Ray, too.”

I asked, “For what?”

She said, “Beating up and taking some money off somebody. I told them you had gone down to the Mrs. Rosanky’s. You didn’t see none of them downtown?”

I said, “Naw. I ain’t seen none of those laws. Well, I’m gonna go back down there and see what they want.” So, I got back in the car and burned rubber to City Hall and went inside. There wasn’t nobody in there. I went on down to the courthouse, a few blocks down, and drove around back to the jailhouse parking lot, and knocked on the rear door where the jailer stayed. There wasn’t nobody there. One of them prisoners hollered down from the third-floor window, “They all gone. They out looking for somebody.”

I walked around to the courthouse, all the while my heart was trying to throw a piston. My mind was racing ninety-to-nothing. I knew if Owens and Dude Milton and ’em was looking for me, it wasn’t good. They was the same laws who ran up on us at the swimming hole, messing with us, threatening to take us to jail for nothing. It was their way of putting fear in us so when we got older, we’d know our place. It worked, because I was scared. I had no reason to be. I hadn’t done nothing.

There wasn’t nobody in the courthouse, either, so I got back in the car and took off to my daddy’s house. He lived about three miles out of town. When I drove up, he came out of the barn and walked to the car. I asked, “Daddy, you hear anything about Ray or somebody robbing somebody, beating somebody up?”

He said, “Naw, I ain’t heard a thing.”

I told him I was looking for the laws because they was looking for me and Ray. My daddy said, “Well, son, I don’t blame you. You doing the right thing. You know you ain’t did nothing. You ain’t got nothing to be running for. Just stick around down at the jailhouse. You’ll run into some of them soon enough.” My daddy had his own run-ins with the law for no reason, except for too much drinking, so I knew he could tell me what all this meant, but “Just stick around” didn’t set right with me. “Just stick around” was what I saw old black men do around here who had given up, who let Bastrop get the best of them. I wasn’t sticking around waiting for something bad to happen, but something still tugged at me saying, “Don’t run. Don’t run.” So, I went back to the car waiting for whatever.

I didn’t have to wait long.

Down the road came a big old cloud of dust like one of them August dust devils that popped up when the cotton fields was bare and bone dry. It was a car—not a police car but a civilian car—moving like there was no tomorrow. It had those little red emergency lights in the front grill, flashing. There was another car—this one a police car—High Sheriff Ed Cartwright’s car—running close behind. It didn’t look like they was going to stop in time before they hit me or the barn. The front car fishtailed one way, and the rear car, the other way—barely missing one another, kicking up rocks and dirt as they came to a stop. Out of the cloud jumped Norman Owens, eyes fixed on me like a bloodhound on a rabbit, his straw cowboy hat pressed half-cocked up his forehead. Before he said a thing, I walked up to him and asked, “You looking for me?”

“What’s your name?” he shouted back.

I shouted back at him, “Y’all know my name. My name is Johnnie Houston, Johnnie Roy

Houston.”

“You doggone right we looking for you, nigger. Where you been?”

I said, “I been running all over town trying to find out why y’all looking for me. I ain’t did nothing.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. Turn around and let me handcuff you,” Owens said out the side of a mouth dripping with tobacco juice. “Turn around here now. Don’t give me no trouble.”

“You don’t need no handcuffs on me, man. I ain’t did nothing.” My voice went high in my nose like it always did when I got agitated. I was a firecracker ready to pop. “If I had done something and wanted to get away, I could have been to Mexico by now.”

“Well, we gonna play it safe. Now turn around,” Owens barked. Sheriff Cartwright didn’t say a word. He watched as Owens handcuffed me, put me in the car, and raced to the jailhouse raising up a bigger cloud of dust. I wasn’t believing what was happening: one minute I was toting arms full of bags of groceries to celebrate Juneteenth, and the next minute I’m riding in the back of a police car, hog-tied. The fire on the bus had been a sign. Something bad was going down.

Those other flunky deputies, Dude Milton and M. A Justice, sat in the back with me like I was gonna jump out and take off running in handcuffs. No one said a word except for Deputy Owens, who kept talking like he was in charge. It was the longest three miles of my life. All I could think of was I ain’t done nothing wrong. This will be over as soon as I tell them where I been all day—with my in-laws and at the Red & White store. They carried me back downtown to the courthouse, up the long stairs to a little room the sheriff used as an office, and sat me down there. Sheriff Cartwright looked me square in my eyes with his face an inch from mine. I could

smell the tobacco and bourbon on his breath. “Well, you want to tell us about it?”

I asked, “Tell you about what?”

“About the man you beat up and robbed out there in the country early this morning.”

I said, “Man, I ain’t beat up nobody and robbed nobody this morning. I was at my father-in-law’s house in bed with my wife. I didn’t get up till round about seven o’clock. Then I went down to the Red & White store to get meat and stuff for my wife to get ready for the Juneteenth. When I got back to my father-in-law’s house, I met them standing at the door crying, talking about the law had been there looking for me. I knew I ain’t done nothing so I told them I was going on downtown to find some of y’all to see what y’all was looking for me for.”

“Well you might as well come on out and tell us because we know you did it,” Owens snapped back. One of the other deputies, Dude Milton, got up and opened the door and said, “Why don’t you run? Why don’t you get up and run? Run on out the door; the door is open.”

I said, “Man, what’s the best I get for jumping up and running? Y’all will shoot me in the back saying I was trying to escape. If you going to shoot me, you might as well shoot me right here where I’m sitting.” Deputy Eskew joined them. I was a coon up a tree, surrounded by bloodhounds.

Eskew said, “Well, we’re going to carry you over to the jail and lock you up. You better be ready to make a confession when we get you up there, or we’re going to kill you.”

They carried me to the third floor where all the cells was. “All right everybody. Rack up,” Eskew shouted. Everybody up there who was in the “run-around” where inmates was allowed to congregate freely had to get back in their own cells. They locked them all up. Then Eskew opened up a cell at the far end and said, “All right, nigger, come on out of there.” There he was—Ray. He walked out—my brother—not saying a word. He looked long and hard at me

with those trouble eyes. On his face was a grin I had seen a million times, but this time, it felt different. I knew his look. When he took the meat off my plate when we was boys, he had that look. I knew he was mostly playing back then. When he would run off to Rufus Jackson's to gamble and I had to go get him, he had the grin. It meant he was aiming to get his way, but today, the look was mixed with something I had never seen before—it was mixed with “sorry.”

I looked at him just as hard. As we met each other at the cell door, we was no more than a foot apart, so close I could reach out and grab him and ask him, “Ray, what have you done?” I didn't ask. He walked right by me, and we traded places. I was led in a cell; Ray walked out to freedom. As the guard slammed my door, they opened up all those other cell doors, and let those other guys back out in the run-around area.

That was the beginnings of my Juneteenth. About thirty minutes later, I heard keys rattling at my cell door. My favorite day was about to go from bad to a hell I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.