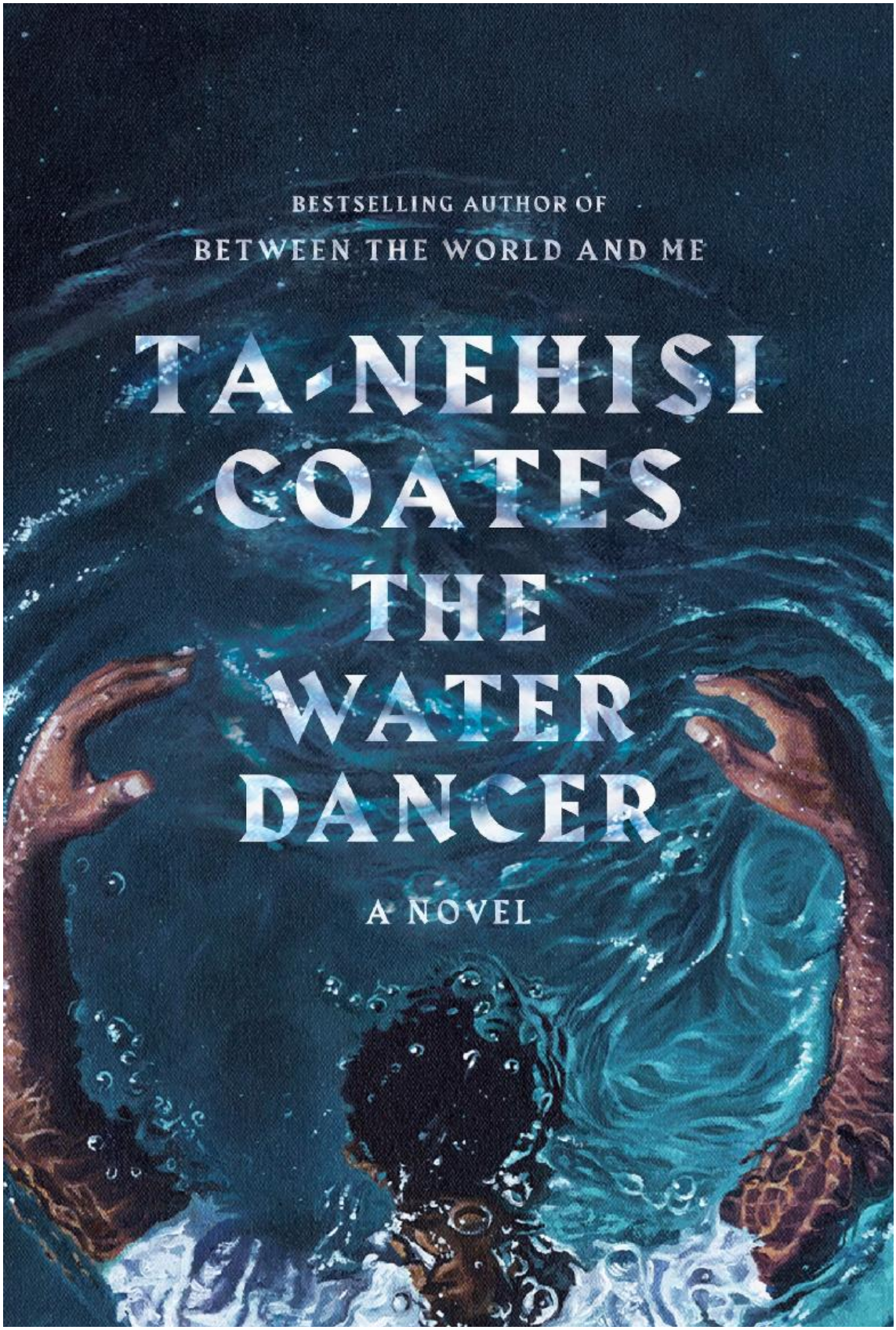
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME
TA-NEHISI COATES
THE WATER DANCER
A NOVEL

Contents

I.

My part has been to tell the story of the slave.

The story of the master never wanted for narrators.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

1

A ND I COULD ONLY have seen her there on the stone bridge, a dancer wreathed in ghostly blue, because that was the way they would have taken her back when I was young, back when the Virginia earth was still red as brick and red with life, and though there were other bridges spanning the river Goose, they would have bound her and brought her across this one, because this was the bridge that fed into the turnpike that twisted its way through the green hills and down the valley before bending in one direction, and that direction was south.

I had always avoided that bridge, for it was stained with the remembrance of the mothers, uncles, and cousins gone Natchez-way. But knowing now the awesome power of memory, how it can open a blue door from one world to another, how it can move us from mountains to meadows, from green woods to fields caked in snow, knowing now that memory can fold the land like cloth, and knowing, too, how I had pushed my memory of her into the "down there" of my mind, how I forgot, but did not forget, I know

now that this story, this Conduction, had to begin there on that fantastic bridge between the land of the living and the land of the lost.

And she was patting juba on the bridge, an earthen jar on her head, a great mist rising from the river below nipping at her bare heels, which pounded the cobblestones, causing her necklace of shells to shake. The earthen jar did not move; it seemed almost a part of her, so that no matter her high knees, no matter her dips and bends, her splaying arms, the jar stayed fixed on her head like a crown. And seeing this incredible feat, I knew that the woman patting juba, wreathed in ghostly blue, was my mother.

No one else saw her—not Maynard, who was then in the back of the new Millennium chaise, not the fancy girl who held him rapt with her wiles, and, most strange, not the horse, though I had been told that horses had a nose for things that stray out from other worlds and stumble into ours. No, only I saw her from the driver's seat of the chaise, and she was just as they'd described her, just as they'd said she'd been in the olden days when she would leap into a circle of all my people—Aunt Emma, Young P, Honas, and Uncle John—and they would clap, pound their chests, and slap their knees, urging her on in double time, and she would stomp the dirt floor hard, as if crushing a crawling thing under her heel, and bend at the hips and bow, then twist and wind her bent knees in union with her hands, the earthen jar still on her head. My mother was the best dancer at Lockless, that is what they told me, and I remembered this because she'd gifted me with none of it, but more I remembered because it was dancing that brought her to the attention of my father, and thus had brought me to be. And more than that, I remembered because I remembered everything—everything, it seemed, except her.

It was autumn now, the season when the races came south. That afternoon Maynard had scored on a long-shot thoroughbred, and thought this might, at last, win the esteem of Virginia Quality he sought. But when he made the circuit around the great town square, leaning back, way back in the chaise and grinning large, the men of society turned their backs to him and puffed on their cigars. There were no salutes. He was what he would always be—Maynard the Goof, Maynard the Lame, Maynard the Fool, the rotten apple who'd fallen many miles from the tree. He fumed and had me drive to the

old house at the edge of our town, Starfall, where he purchased himself a night with a fancy, and had the bright notion to bring her back to the big house at Lockless, and, most fatefully, in a sudden bout of shame,

insisted on leaving the back way out of town, down Dumb Silk Road, until it connected to that old turnpike, which led us back to the bank of the river Goose.

A cold steady rain fell as I drove, the water dripping down from the brim of my hat, puddling on my trousers. I could hear Maynard in the back, with all his games, putting his carnal boasts upon the fancy. I was pushing the horse as hard as I could, because all I wanted was to be home and free of Maynard's voice, though I could never, in this life, be free of him. Maynard who held my chain. Maynard, my brother who was made my master. And I was trying all I could to not hear, searching for distraction—memories of corn-shucking or young games of blind man's bluff. What I remember is how those distractions never came, but instead there was a sudden silence, erasing not just Maynard's voice, but all the small sounds of the world around. And now, peering into the pigeonhole of my mind, what I found were remembrances of the lost—men holding strong on watch-night, and women taking their last tour of the apple orchards, spinsters remanding their own gardens to others, old codgers cursing the great house of Lockless. Legions of the lost, brought across that baleful bridge, legions embodied in my dancing mother.

I yanked at the reins but it was too late. We barreled right through and what happened next shook forever my sense of a cosmic order. But I was there and saw it happen, and have since seen a great many things that expose the ends of our knowledge and how much more lies beyond it.

The road beneath the wheels disappeared, and the whole of the bridge fell away, and for a moment I felt myself floating on, or maybe in, the blue light. And it was warm there, and I remember that brief warmth because just as suddenly as I floated out, I was in the water, under the water, and even as I tell you this now, I feel myself back there again, in the icy bite of that river Goose, the water rushing into me, and that particular burning agony that comes only to the drowning.

There is no sensation like drowning, because the feeling is not merely the agony, but a bewilderment at so alien a circumstance. The mind believes that there should be air, since there is always air to be had, and the urge to breathe is such a matter of instinct that it requires a kind of focus to belay the order. Had I leapt from the bridge myself, I could have accounted for my new situation. Had I even fallen over the side, I would have understood,

if only because this would have been imaginable. But it was as though I had been shoved out of a window right into the depths of the river. There was no warning. I kept trying to breathe. I remember crying out for breath and more I remember the agony of the answer, the agony of water rushing into me, and how I answered that agony by heaving, which only invited more water.

But somehow I steadied my thoughts, somehow I came to understand that all my thrashing could only but hasten my demise. And with that accomplished, I noted that there was light in one direction and darkness in another and deduced that the dark was the depths and the light was not. I whipped my legs behind me, and stretched out my arms toward the light, pulling the water until, at last, coughing, retching, I surfaced.

And when I came up, breaking through dark water and into the diorama of the world—storm clouds hung by unseen thread, a red sun pinned low against them, and beneath that sun, hills dusted with grass—I looked back at the stone bridge, which must have been, my God, a half mile away.

The bridge seemed to be almost racing away from me, because the current pulled me along and when I angled myself to swim toward the shore it was that current still, or perhaps some unseen eddy beneath, pulling me downriver. There was no sign of the woman whose time Maynard had so thoughtlessly purchased. But whatever thoughts I had on her behalf were broken by Maynard making himself known, as he had so often, with hue and cry, determined to go out of this world in the selfsame manner that he'd passed through it. He was close by, pulled by the same current. He thrashed in the current, yelled, treaded a bit, and then disappeared under, only to reappear again seconds later, yelling, half treading, thrashing.

"Help me, Hi!"

There I was, my own life dangling over the black pit, and now being called to save another. I had, on many occasions, tried to teach Maynard to swim, and he took to this instruction as he took to all instruction, careless and remiss at the labor, then sore and bigoted when this negligence bore no fruit. I can now say that slavery murdered him, that slavery made a child of him, and now, dropped into a world where slavery held no sway, Maynard was dead the minute he touched water. I had always been his protection. It was I, only by good humor, and debasement, who had kept Charles Lee from shooting him; and it was I, with special appeal to our father, who'd

kept him countless times from wrath; and it was I who clothed him every morning; and I who put him to bed every night; and it was I who now was tired, in both body and soul; and it was I, out there, wrestling against the pull of the current, against the fantastic events that had deposited me there, and now wrestling with the demand that I, once again, save another, when I could not even conjure the energy to save myself.

"Help me!" he yelled again, and then he cried out, "Please!" He said it like the child he always was, begging. And I noted, however uncharitably, even there in the Goose facing my own death, that I had never before recalled him speaking in a manner that reflected the true nature of our positions.

"Please!"

"I can't," I yelled over the water. "We are under the ox!"

With that admission of imminent death, memories of my life descended on me unbidden, and now the same blue light I'd seen on the bridge returned and enveloped me again. I thought back to Lockless, and all my loved ones, and right there in the middle of the misty river I saw Thena, on wash day, an old woman heaving the large pots of steaming water and, with the last of her powers, threshing the dripping garments until they were damp and her hands were raw. And I saw Sophia in her gloves and bonnet, like a woman of mastery, because that is what her task required of her, and I watched, as I had so many times before, as she hiked the bell of her dress to her ankles and walked down a back-path to see the man who held her chained. I felt my limbs submit, and the mystery and confusion of the events that had deposited me into the depths nagged me no longer, and this time, when I

went under, there was no burning, no straining for breath. I felt weightless, so that even as I sank into the river, I felt myself rising into something else. The water fell away from me and I was alone in a warm blue pocket with the river outside and around me. And I knew then that I was, at last, going to my reward.

My mind journeyed further back still, to those who'd been carried out of this Virginia, out Natchez-way, and I wondered how many of them might well have gone farther still, far enough to greet me in that next world I now approached. And I saw my aunt Emma, who worked the kitchen all those years, walking past with a tray of ginger cookies for all the assembled Walkers, though none for her or any of her kin. Perhaps my mother would

be there, and then, at the speed of thought, I saw her flittering, before my eyes, water dancing in the ring. And thinking of all of this, of all the stories, I was at peace, and pleased even, to rise into the darkness, to fall into the light. There was peace in that blue light, more peace than sleep itself, and more than that, there was freedom, and I knew that the elders had not lied, that there really was a home-place of our own, a life beyond the Task, where every moment is as daybreak over mountains. And so great was this freedom that I became aware of a nagging weight that I had always taken as unchangeable, a weight that now proposed to follow me into the forever. I turned, and in my wake, I saw the weight, and the weight was my brother, howling, thrashing, screaming, pleading for his life.

All my life, I had been subject to his whims. I was his right arm and thus had no arm of my own. But that was all over now. Because I was rising, rising out of that world of the Quality and the Tasked. My last sight of Maynard was of him thrashing in the water and grappling after what he could no longer hold, until he began to blur before me, like light rippling on a wave, and his cries diminished beneath the loud nothing all around me.

And then he was gone. I would like to say that I mourned right then, or took some manner of note. But I did not. I was headed to my ending. He was headed to his.

The apparitions now steadied before me, and I focused on my mother, who was no longer dancing, but instead kneeling before a boy. And she put her

hand upon the boy's cheek, and she kissed him on his head, and she placed the shell necklace in his hand, and closed his hand around the thing, and then she stood, with both hands over her mouth, and she turned and walked off into the distance and the boy stood there watching, and then cried after her, and then followed after her, and then ran after her, and then fell as he ran, and lay there crying into his arms, and then stood again and turned, this time toward me, and walking over, he opened his hand and offered the necklace, and I saw, at long last, my reward.

2

A LL MY LIFE I had wanted to get out. I was unoriginal in this—all the Tasked felt the same. But, separate from them, separate from all of Lockless, I possessed the means.

I was a strange child. I talked before I walked, though I never talked much, because more than anything, I watched and remembered. I would hear others speak, but I did not so much hear them as see them, their words taking form before me as pictures, chains of colors, lines, textures, and shapes that I could store inside of me. And it was my gift to, at a moment's beckoning, retrieve the images and translate them back into the exact words with which they had been conjured.

By the time I was five, I could, having only heard it once, holler out a work song, its calls and responses, and to that add my own improvisations, all to the wide-eyed delight of my elders. I had individual names for individual beasts, marked by where I had seen them, the time of day, and what the animal was doing, so that one deer was Grass in Spring and another Broken Oak Branch, and so it was with the pack of dogs that the older ones so often warned me of, but they were not a pack to me, but each singular, singular even if I never saw them again, singular as any lady or gentleman whom I never saw again, for I remembered them too.

And there was never a need to tell me any story twice, because if you told me that Hank Powers cried for three hours when his daughter was born, I remembered, and if you told me that Lucille Simms made a new dress out of her mother's work clothes for Christmas, I remembered, and if you spoke of that time Johnny Blackwell pulled a knife on his brother, I remembered,

and if you told me all the ancestors of Horace Collins, and where in Elm County they were born, I remembered, and if Jane Jackson recited all her generations, her mother, her mother's mother, and every mother stretching all the way to the edge of the Atlantic, I remembered. So it was natural that I recall, even in the maw of the Goose, even after the bridge fell away and I stared down my own doom, that this was not my first pilgrimage to the blue door.

It had happened before. It had happened when I was nine years old, the day after my mother was taken and sold. I awoke that cold winter morning knowing she was gone as a fact. But I had no pictures, no memory, of any goodbye, indeed no pictures of her at all. Instead I recalled my mother in the secondhand, so that I was sure that she had been taken, in the same way that I was sure that there were lions in Africa, though I had never seen one.

I searched for a fully fleshed memory, and found only scraps. Screams.

Pleading—someone pleading with me. The strong smell of horses. And in the haze of it all, an image flickering in and out of focus: a long trough of water. I was terrified, not simply because I had lost my mother, but because I was a boy who remembered all his yesterdays in the crispest colors, and textures so rich I could drink them. And there I was, awakening with a start to nothing but ephemera, shadows, and screams.

I must get out. This also came to me as a feeling more than a thought.

There was an ache, a breach, a stripping of me that I knew I had been helpless to prevent. My mother was gone and I must follow. So that winter morning, I put on my osnaburg shirt and pants, then slipped my arms into my black coat and tied up my brogans. I walked out onto the Street, the common area between two long rows of gabled log cabins where those of us who tasked in the tobacco field made our homes. An icy wind cut up the dusty ground between the quarters and slashed at my face. It was a Sunday, two weeks after Holiday, in the small hours just before sunrise. In the moonlight, I could see smoke rising up in white puffs out of the cabin chimneys, and behind the cabins, trees black and bare, swaying drunkenly

in the whistling wind. Were it summer, the Street would have, even at that hour, been alive with garden trade—cabbages and carrots dug up, chicken eggs collected to be bartered, or even taken up to the main house and sold.

Lem and the older boys would have been out there, with fishing poles on their shoulders, smiling, waving to me and yelling, "Come on, Hi!" as they headed for the Goose. I would have seen Arabella there with her brother Jack, sleepy-eyed but soon to be plucking marbles in a dirt ring they'd drawn up between two cabins. And Thena, the meanest woman on the Street, might have been sweeping her front yard, beating out an old rug, or rolling her eyes and sucking her teeth at someone's foolishness. But it was winter in Virginia, and all in possession of good sense were huddled inside by the fires. So when I walked outside, there was no one on the Street, no one peering out the door of their quarters, no one to grab my arm, swat my bottom twice, and yell, "Hi, this cold bout to be the death of you! And where is your momma, boy?"

I walked up the winding path and into the dark woods. I stopped just out of view of Boss Harlan's cabin. Was he part of this? He was the enforcer of Lockless, a low white who meted out "correction" when it was deemed appropriate. Boss Harlan was the physical hand of slavery, presiding over the fields while his wife, Desi, ruled the house. But when I sorted through the scraps of memory, I did not find Boss Harlan among them. I could see the water trough. I could smell the horses. I had to get to the stables. I was certain that something I could not name awaited me there, something crucial about my mother, some secret path, perhaps, that would send me to her. Walking into those woods with the winter wind cutting through me, I heard again the seemingly aimless voices, now multiplying around me—

and in my mind turned again to a vision: the trough of water.

And then I was running, moving as fast as my short legs could carry me.

I had to get to the stables. My whole world seemed to hinge upon it. I approached the white wooden doors and pushed up the bolt lock until the doors sprang open and knocked me to the dirt. Rising quickly and rushing inside, I found the elements of my morning vision scattered there before me

—horses and the long trough of water. I came close to each of the horses and looked them in the eyes. The horses only stared stupidly back. I walked over to the trough of water and stared down into the inky blackness. The voices returned. Someone pleading with me. And now visions formed in the

blackness of the water. I saw the Tasked who'd once lived down on the Street but were now lost to me. A blue mist began rising up out of the inky darkness, illuminated from within by some source. I felt the light pulling me, pulling me into the trough. And then I looked around me and saw the stable fading away, as sure as the bridge did all those years later, and I thought that this was it, the meaning of the dream: a secret path that would deliver me from Lockless to reunite me with my mother. But when the blue light cleared, I saw not my mother but a wooden gabled ceiling, which I recognized as the ceiling of the cabin I had departed only minutes before.

I was on the floor, on my back. I tried to stand, but my arms and legs felt weighted and chained. I managed to rise up and stumble over to the rope bed I shared with my mother. The sharp smell of her was still in our room, on our bed, and I tried to follow that scent down the alleys of my mind, but while all the twists and turns that marked my short life were clear before me, my mother appeared only as fog and smoke. I tried to recall her face, and when it did not come, I thought of her arms, her hands, but there was only smoke, and when I searched to remember her corrections, her affections, I found only smoke. She'd gone from that warm quilt of memory to the cold library of fact.

I slept. And when I awoke, late that same afternoon, I awoke full in the knowledge that I was alone. I have now seen a great many children in the same place I found myself in that day, orphans, feeling themselves abandoned and left open before all the elements of the world, and I have seen how some explode in tantrum while others walk in an almost stupor, how some cry for days and others move with an uncanny focus, addressing only the moment before them. Some part of them has died, and like surgeons, they know that amputation must be immediate. So that was me, that Sunday afternoon, when I rose, still in those same brogans and osnaburg, and wandered out again, this time finding my way to the storehouse where I would collect the weekly peck of corn and pound of

pork deeded to my family. I brought them back to my home, but I did not stay. Instead, I retrieved my marbles, my only possession besides the sack of victuals and the clothes I was wearing, and walked back out until I reached the last building on the Street, a large cabin set back from the others. Thena's home.

The Street was a communal place but Thena kept to herself, never joining in on the gossip, small talk, or singing. She worked the tobacco and then she went home. Her habit was to scowl at us children for playing our rowdy games within earshot or sometimes to emerge almost whimsically from her cabin, wild-eyed, swinging her broom at us. For anyone else, this would have brought conflict of some sort or the other. But I had heard that Thena had not always been this way, that in another life, one lived right here on the Street, she was a mother not just to five children of her own but to all the children of the Street.

That was another age, one I did not remember. But I knew that her children were gone. What was I thinking facing her door, holding my sack of pork and cornmeal? Surely there were others who would have taken me in, others who actually enjoyed the company of children. But there was just one on the Street who I knew understood the suffering that was just then compounding in me. Even when she swung her broom at us, I sensed the depth of that loss, her pain, a rage that she, unlike the rest of us, refused to secret away, and I found that rage to be true and correct. She was not the meanest woman at Lockless, but the most honest.

I knocked on the door and, receiving no answer and now feeling the cold, I pushed my way in. I left the ration just inside the door, then climbed the ladder to the loft, where I laid myself, looking down, waiting for her to return. She walked in a few minutes later, looked up, and gave me her familiar scowl. But then she walked over to the fireplace, started it up, and pulled a pan down from the mantel above, and within minutes the familiar smell of pork and ash-cake filled the cabin. She looked up at me once more and said, "You got to come down if you want to eat."

—

I lived with Thena for a year and a half before I got to the precise root of her rage. On a warm summer night I was awakened from the small pallet I maintained up in the loft of the cabin by loud moaning. It was Thena, talking in her sleep. “It’s fine, John. It’s fine.” And she spoke this with such clarity that when I first heard it, I thought she was speaking to someone present. But when I looked down from the loft, I saw that she was still sleeping. I had already gotten into the habit of leaving Thena to her ghosts, but the more she spoke, the more it seemed to me that this time she was in

distress. I climbed down to rouse her. As I got closer, I heard her still moaning and talking: “It’s fine, fine, I told you. Fine, John.” I reached out and pulled on her shoulder, shaking it until she awoke with a start.

She looked up at me, and then around the dark cabin, uncertain of where she was. Then her eyes narrowed and focused again on me. I had for the past year and a half been mostly immune to Thena’s rages. Indeed, much to the relief of the Street, the rages had diminished, as though maybe my presence had begun to heal an old wound. This was incorrect and I knew it as soon as I saw her focusing on me.

“Hell you doing here!” she said. “Little rugrat, get the hell out of here!

Get the hell out!” I scrambled outside and saw that it was almost dawn. The yellow spray of sun would soon be peeking over the trees. I walked back to the old cabin I’d shared with my mother and sat on the steps, until it was time for the Task.

I was eleven by then. I was a small boy for my age, but no exception was made, and I was put to work like a man. I daubed and chinked the cabins. I hoed the fields in summer and hung leaves like all the rest in the fall. I trapped and fished. I tended the garden, even after my mother was gone.

But on a hot day like the one that was coming, I was sent with the other children to bring water to the tasking folk in the fields. So all that day I took my place in a relay of children that extended from the well near the main house of the estate down and out to the tobacco fields. When the bell rang and everyone repaired for supper, I did not return to Thena’s. Instead I took up a safe vantage point in the woods and watched. The Street was by then

lively but my eye was on Thena's cabin. Every twenty minutes or so, I saw her walk out and look both ways as though expecting a guest and then walk back inside. When I finally came back to the cabin, it was late and I found her sitting on a chair by the bed. I knew by the two empty bowls sitting on the mantel that she had not yet eaten.

We had supper, and just as it was time to retire, she turned to me and said in a cracked whisper, "John—Big John—was my husband. He died. Fever. I think you should know that. I think you should understand some things bout me, bout you, bout this place."

She paused here and looked into the fireplace, where the last of the cooking embers were dying.

"I try not to fret it much. Death is as natural as anything, more natural than this place. But the death that come out of *this* death, out of my Big John, wasn't nothing natural about that. It was murder."

The din and racket of the Street had died down and there was only now the low and rhythmic whining of the insects of the night. Our door was open to allow for an easy July breeze. Thena pulled her pipe from over the fireplace, lit it, and began to puff.

"Big John was the driver. You know what that mean, don't you?"

"Mean he was boss of the fields down here."

"Yes, he was," she said. "Was chosen to superintend all the tobacco teams. Big John wasn't no driver 'cause he was the meanest like Harlan. He was a driver because he was the wisest—wiser than any of them whites, and their whole lives depended on him. Them fields, they ain't just fields, Hi.

They the heart of the thing. You been around. You seen this place and all its fancy things, you know what they have."

I did. Lockless was massive, thousands of acres carved out of the mountains. I loved to steal away time from the fields to explore these acres, and what I'd found were orchards flush with golden peaches, wheat fields

waving in the summer wind, cornstalks crowned with yellow silken hope, a dairy, an iron-works, a carpentry house, an ice-house, gardens filled with lilacs and lilies of the valley, all of it engineered in exact geometry, in resplendent symmetry, the math of which I was too young to comprehend.

“Nice, ain’t it?” Thena said. “But all of it start with what’s right down here in the fields, and with what’s right here in this pipe. Master of it all was my man Big John. Weren’t nobody who knew more about the ways and knacks of the golden leaf than my man. He could tell you the best way to dig out the horn-worms, which leaves you s’pose to sucker and which you might like to leave be. So that gave him a kind of a favor with the whites.

Was how I got this big house here.

“And we was good about it. Gave our extra helping of victuals to those who did not have. It was John who insisted on it.”

She stopped to puff again on her pipe. I watched as lightning bugs drifted in, glowing yellow against the shadows.

“I loved that man, but he died, and after that, it all went bad. First terrible harvest I remember came after John was gone. Then there was another. Then another. Folks’ll tell you even John couldn’t have saved us. It

was the land, cursing these whites for what they done to it, for how they done stripped it down. Still some red Virginia left, but soon it all gon be Virginia sand. And they know it. So it’s been hell since John been gone.

Hell on me. Hell on you.

“I think of your aunt Emma. I think of your momma. I am remembered to them both—Rose and Emma. Why, they were a pair. Loved each other.

Loved to dance. I am remembered to them, I say. And though it hurt sometime, you cannot forget, Hi. You cannot forget.”

I looked on dumbly as she spoke, as the full weight of having already forgotten now came upon me.

“I know I will not forget my babies,” Thena said. “They took all five of

’em down to the racetrack, and put ’em in a lot with the rest, and sold ’em, sure as they sell these hogsheads of tobacco.”

Now Thena bowed her head, and brought her hands to her brow. When she looked back up at me, I saw the tears streaking down her cheek.

“When it happened, I spent most of my time cursing John, for it was my figuring that if John had lived, my babies would still be here with me. It was not just his particular knowledge, it was my sense that John would have done what I could not find the courage to do—he would have stopped them.

“You know how I am. You done heard how they talk about me but you also know something is broken in old Thena, and when I seen you up in that loft, I had a feeling that same something was broken in you. And you had chosen me, for whatever your young reasoning, you had picked me out.”

She stood now and began her nightly routine of putting her home in order. I climbed up into the loft.

“Hi,” she called out. I looked back to see her watching me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“I can’t be your mother. I can’t be Rose. She was a beautiful woman, with the kindest heart. I liked her and I do not like many anymore. She did not gossip and she kept to herself. I can’t be what she was to you. But you have chosen me, I understand that. I want you to know that I understand.”

I stayed up late that night peering up at the rafters, thinking on Thena’s words. *A beautiful woman, the kindest heart, did not gossip, kept to herself.*

I added this to the memories of her I’d collected from the people on the Street. Thena could not know how much I needed those small jigsaws of

my mother, which together, over the years, I forged into a portrait of the woman who lived in dreams, like Big John, but only as smoke.

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And what of my father? What of the master of Lockless? I knew very early who he was, for my mother had made no secret of the fact, nor did he.

From time to time, I would see him on horseback making his tour of the property, and when his eyes met mine he would pause and tip his hat to me.

I knew he had sold my mother, for Thena never ceased to remind me of the fact. But I was a boy, seeing in him what boys can't help but see in their fathers—a mold in which their own manhood might be cast. And more, I was just then beginning to understand the great valley separating the Quality and the Tasked—that the Tasked, hunched low in the fields, carrying the tobacco from hillock to hogshead, led backbreaking lives and that the Quality who lived in the house high above, the seat of Lockless, did not. And knowing this, it was natural that I look to my father, for in him, I saw an emblem of another life—one of splendor and regale. And I knew I had a brother up there, a boy who luxuriated while I labored, and I wondered what right he had to his life of idle pursuit, and what law deeded me to the Task. I needed only some method to elevate my standing, to place me at some post where I might show my own quality. This was my feeling that Sunday when my father made his fateful appearance on the Street.

Thena was in a better mood than normal, sitting out on the stoop, not scowling or running off any of the younger children when they scampered past. I was in back of the quarter, between the fields and the Street, calling out a song:

Oh Lord, trouble so hard

Oh Lord, trouble so hard

Nobody know my troubles but my God

Nobody know nothing but my God

I went on for verse after verse, taking the song from trouble to labor to trouble to hope to trouble to freedom. When I sang the call, I changed my

voice to the sound of the lead man in the field, bold and exaggerated. When I sang the response, I took on the voices of the people around me, mimicking them one by one. They were delighted, these elders, and their delight grew as the song extended, verse after verse, till I'd had a chance to

mimic them all. But that day, I was not watching the elders. I was watching the white man seated atop the Tennessee Pacer, his hat pulled low, who rode up smiling his approval at my performance. It was my father. He removed his hat, and took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow.

Then he put the hat back on, and reached into his pocket, pulled out something, and flicked it toward me, and I, never taking my eye off of him, caught it with one hand. I stood there for a long moment, locking eyes with him. I could feel a tension behind me: the elders, now afraid that my impudence might bring Harlan's wrath. But my father just kept smiling, then nodded at me and rode off.

The tension eased and I went back to Thena's cabin, climbed up to my loft space. I pulled from my pocket the coin my father flipped to me just before he'd ridden off, and I saw that it was copper, with rough uneven edges and a picture of a white man on the front, and on the back there was a goat. Up in that loft, I fingered the rough edges, feeling that I had found my method, my token, my ticket out of the fields and off the Street.

—

And it happened that next day, after our supper. I peered down from the loft to see Desi and Boss Harlan talking to Thena in low tones. I was afraid for her. I had never seen Desi or Harlan wrathy, but the stories I'd heard were enough. It was said that Boss Harlan once shot a man for using the wrong hoe and Desi once beat a girl in the dairy with a carriage whip. I looked down and saw Thena looking at the floor, nodding occasionally.

When Desi and Harlan left, Thena called me down.

In silence she walked me out onto the fields, where no one would eavesdrop. It was now late in the evening. I felt the stiff air of summer releasing into the night. I was all anticipation, feeling I knew what was

coming, and when I heard the night sounds of nature all around us like a chorus, I believed they were singing to a grand future.

“Hiram, I know how much you see. And I know that even though we all have to handle the brutal ways of this world, you have handled them better than some of your elders. But it’s bout to get more brutal,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“White folks come down to say your days in the fields is over, that you going up top. But they ain’t your family, Hiram, I want you to see that. You

cannot forget yourself up there, and we cannot forget each other. They calling us up, now, you hear? *Us*. That trick of yours, and I seen it, we all seen it, it got me too. I am to come up and tend to you, and you might think you have saved me from something, but what you have really done is put me right under their eye.

“We have our own world down here—our own ways of being and talking and laughing, even if you don’t see me doing much of neither. But I got a choice down here. And it ain’t great, but it is ours. Up there, with them right over you…well, it’s different.

“You gon have to watch yourself, son. Be careful. Remember like I told you. They ain’t your family, boy. I am more your mother standing right here now than that white man on that horse is your father.”

She was trying to tell me, trying to warn me of what was coming. But my gift was memory, not wisdom. And the next day when Roscoe, my father’s jowly, affable butler, came for us, I had to work hard to hide away all my excitement. We walked up from the tobacco fields, past the field-hands, their songs ringing out:

When you get to heaven, say you

remember me

Remember me and my fallen soul

Remember my poor and fallen soul

And then we were past the wheat fields and crossing the green lawn, and through the flower garden, until I saw, elevated on a small hill, the big house of Lockless shining like the sun itself. When we were closer, I took in the stone columns, the portico, and the fanlight over the entrance. It was all so magnificent. This house, I felt with a sudden shiver, belonged to me. It was mine by blood. I was correct, but not in the sense I thought.

Roscoe glanced back at me, grimacing I think, seeing that shine in my eyes. "We go this way," he said. He led us away from the door, to the base of the small hill on which the house stood, and at that base, I saw the entryway to a tunnel. As we walked through, other tasking folk emerged from side rooms to greet Thena and Roscoe as they streamed past into smaller adjoining tunnels. We were in a warren, an underworld beneath the great house.

We stopped in front of one of the side rooms and it was clear that here was my place. There was a bed, a table, a washbasin, a vase, and a cloth.

There was no loft. There was no under-space. There was no window.

Roscoe lingered at the door with me by his side as Thena put down her bag of things. She didn't take her eyes off of me and I could feel her words repeating in that stare— *They ain't your family.* But after a moment her stare broke and all she said was, "Might as well take him up." Roscoe put his hand on my shoulder and led me back into the Warrens and up a set of stairs, until we faced a wall. Roscoe touched something I did not see and the wall slid away and we walked out from the darkness into a wide room flooded with light and filled with books.

I stood in the doorway, my senses overwhelmed: the flooding light in the room, the smell of turpentine, the gold and blue Persian rugs, the shine of the wood floors beneath them, but the books were what held my eyes. I had seen books before—there were always one or two of us down on the Street who could read and who kept old journals or songbooks in their cabins—

but never so many, shelves from floor to ceiling on every wall. I did my best not to stare. I knew what happened to coloreds who were too curious about the world beyond Virginia.

Diverting my eyes from the books, I saw my father, dressed down to his waistcoat and shirtsleeves, seated in one corner of the room, watching me and watching Roscoe. Turning my head, I saw in the other corner a boy, older than me, and white. By some trick of the blood, I knew at once that this was my brother. My father waved his hand lightly, effortlessly, and I saw that Roscoe recognized in this motion that he must take his leave. And so he turned, as though executing a military maneuver, and disappeared back behind the sliding wall. And I was there alone with my father, Howell Walker, and with my brother, and they both regarded me in curious silence.

I reached into my pocket and found the copper coin and fingered its rough and uneven edges.

3

M Y ASSIGNMENT CAME DOWN from my father to Desi to Thena to me—make myself useful. So each day I would rise before the sun, as did all the Tasked, and walk about the house, fitting in where I could—raising the kitchen fires for Ella, the head cook, fetching the milk from the dairy, retrieving the trays after breakfast—or labor outside with Roscoe, washing and grooming the horses, or in the apple orchard with Pete, grafting saplings. There was always work to be done, for while the needs of the house had not diminished, the numbers of the Tasked had, and that was my first inkling that even here in the house the Tasked could be sent Natchez-way. I worked energetically, more still when, from time to time, I would catch my father glancing my way with a thin sidelong smile. He'd found a use for me.

It was autumn of my thirteenth year, four months after I took up residence in the main house. My father had called for a social to celebrate the season. All day a kind of private fatigue blanketed those who tasked in the house. Early that morning I brought the eggs up to Ella, whose large and welcoming smile I'd come to regard as a natural portion of the morning.

But nature was beside itself this day, so that when I came upon Ella with my wicker basket of eggs, she only shook her head and motioned for me to

put the eggs on the table where Pete stood picking through a bushel of apples.

Ella sidled next to Pete, cracked and separated six eggs, and then beat the whites. She spoke just above a whisper and would not give full vent to her feelings. “They don’t think about nothing and nobody,” Ella said. “It’s wrong, Pete. And you know it’s wrong.”

“It’s all right, Ella,” he said. “It’s worse things to be wrathy about.”

“Ain’t wrathy. Just want some consideration. Is that too much? Was supposed to be small supper tonight. How it spread out to the whole county?”

“You know what it is,” Pete said. “You know what is going on with them.”

“No, I don’t,” Ella said. “Hi, get me that rolling pin. And get that fire going, will you?”

“You got eyes, you know. It ain’t like it was. The gold leaf ain’t what it was. All the old families gone west. Tennessee. Baton Rouge. Natchez.

Them kinda places. Ain’t too many left. And those that’s still here feel a tightness between them. They holding on. Small supper bigger to them now.

Don’t none of ’em know who moving out next. This goodbye might be they last.”

Now Ella laughed quietly to herself but it felt boisterous and mocking, wide enough that I wanted to join her though there was nothing funny going on. “Hi, that thing there, baby,” she said, motioning to the shelves. When she called me baby, I got warm inside. I left the fire and took the dough cutter off the shelf and brought it over. Ella was still laughing to herself.

She looked up and gave that large and welcoming smile.

Then the smile shrank and she looked dead at me, looked through me almost, and then turned to Pete, “I don’t care nothing for they feelings. This boy here know more about goodbye than all of them put together. And he ain’t nothing but a boy.”

All that day there was the same tension among the Tasked as I’d seen in Ella. But neither my father nor Desi knew or cared, and that evening when the carriages and chaises began arriving, all of us were smiles and pleasantries. I was assigned to the waitstaff. By then I had learned how to wash and groom myself until I shined, how to hold the silver tray in my left hand and serve with my right, how to disappear into the corners, emerging

to scrape away bread and then fading again back into the shadows. When dinner adjourned, we cleared away the dishes and stood in the cherry-red drawing room and waited at attention while the guests all settled into the room’s deep chairs and divans.

I looked across the room, meeting eyes with the three others charged with attending to whatever need struck our guests. Then I watched the guests themselves, trying to anticipate whatever need might strike them. I took note of Maynard’s tutor, Mr. Fields, a young man, overly serious with deep-set eyes, drawn back in his chair. It was hard to stay in the moment. I found myself admiring the women’s fashion—their white bonnets, their pink fans, their side-curls, the baby’s breath and daisies in their hair. There was less to see in the men, who wore all black. But still I thought them beautiful, for there was distinction in how they walked, grace in their smallest movements, as when they opened the bay doors and repaired out back, leaned into one of the Tasked to light their cigars, and spoke of gentlemanly things. I imagined myself among them, settled into a chair or whispering into a lady’s ear.

They played seventeen hands of cards. They drank eight demijohns of cider. They ate lady-cake until they could barely stand. Then, just past midnight, a woman with her bonnet on backward began cackling hysterically. One of the men in black began berating his wife. Another nodded off in the corner. The Tasked on the waitstaff grew tense, a subtle tension I was sure the guests could not detect. My father sat staring at the fire and Mr. Fields sat

back in his chair, looking bored. The woman stopped cackling and pulled down her bonnet, revealing a broken mask of streaked face-paint.

The woman was one of the Caulleys—Alice Caulley—a family, many years ago, split in two. Half had gone off to Kentucky while half remained.

I remember her because the Caulleys who left took along those who tasked for them and among that number was Pete's sister, Maddie. I never met her.

But he spoke of her often, and whenever news of her filtered up from Kentucky through the grapevine of tasking folks who moved between the Caulley branches—news that she was alive and whole, united with the remnants of family that traveled with her—his face would light up and remain as such for the rest of the week.

"Give us a song!" Alice snapped, and when no one answered, she walked over to Cassius, one of the men in waiting, and slapped him. Now she yelled again, "Sing, damn you!"

It always happened like this—that is what I had been told. Bored whites were barbarian whites. While they played at aristocrats, we were their well-appointed and stoic attendants. But when they tired of dignity, the bottom fell out. New games were anointed and we were but pieces on the board. It was terrifying. There was no limit to what they might do at this end of the tether, nor what my father would allow them to do.

The slap roused him. My father stood up and looked around nervously.

"Come now, Alice. We have something better than any Negro song," he said, and turned to me, and though he did not say another word I knew what he wanted.

I scanned the room and caught sight of a deck of oversized cards stacked on one of the small coffee tables. I recognized the cards as the kind Maynard used in his reading lessons. On one side the cards were all the same—a map of the known world. On the other side they each featured an acrobat contorted into the shape of a different letter, with a short rhyme underneath. I had overheard Maynard reading from these cards with his tutor. I had with

sideways glances, and a few minutes of study here and there, memorized them, for no other reason than the fact of enjoying the silly rhymes on each side. Now I retrieved the cards from the table and turned toward Alice Caulley.

“Mrs. Caulley, would you shuffle, ma’am?”

She leaned over unsteadily, took the cards from me, and shuffled them in her hands. And then I asked if she would be so kind as to let me inspect them. Having done this, I handed them back to her and asked that she place them each on the table, face-down in any order. I watched her hands until the small coffee table was covered with maps in miniature.

“And what now, boy?” she asked warily.

I asked that she pick up a card and show it to anyone she pleased, except me. When she’d done this, she turned back to me with raised eyebrows. I said, “With the rest he’ll agree, and assist them with a letter ‘E.’ ”

Now her eyebrows retreated some toward their natural position as skepticism turned to pique. “Again,” she said, and then picked another card,

showed it to more people now. I said, “Here he is, twisted and twined, to make an ‘S’ if you do not mind.”

And then the pique turned to a slight smile. I felt the tension in the room slack a bit. She picked another, showed it, and I said, “He’s forced to train hard, less the letter ‘C’ be marred.”

Now Alice Caulley laughed, and when I looked over, I saw my father smiling thin and small, and though the others who tasked like me that evening were still standing at attention, I felt the fear flowing out of their stoic faces. Alice Caulley kept reaching for the cards, flipping faster now.

But I matched her speed. “Here’s a letter ‘V’ to view. You’ll find its shape just like new.”…“With his hands in the air, a letter ‘H’ he does declare.”

By the time the deck was done, they were all laughing and now applauding. The man in the corner was no longer snoring but looked up, trying to understand the sudden commotion. When the applause died down, Alice Caulley, her smile carrying the edge of menace, looked to me and said, "And what else, boy?"

I stared at her for a moment, longer than any tasking man should, and nodded. I was only twelve, but I was fully confident of what came next, a trick I had long practiced down in the Street. Having the guests in my confidence, I requested that they line up against the drawing room wall. I went first to Edward Mackley, who wore his blond curls pinned back like a woman, asking him to tell me the first moment he knew he loved his wife.

And then I asked Armatine Caulley, Alice's cousin, her favorite place in all the world, and then I went to Morris Beacham, and asked him to tell me about the first time he'd hunted pheasant. I went down the line like this until I held a clutch of stories in my head, so many that no one else could remember who had said what and what the particular details were. Only Mr.

Fields, Maynard's gruff tutor, declined. But when I went back down the line, repeating back to each of the speakers their own stories, in every detail, but with drama and embellishment, I saw the tutor pull up to the edge of his seat, and his eyes were aglow like all the others', aglow like those of my tasking elders, down on the distant Street, used to be.

Now even the waitstaff had to break their solemn gaze and smile.

Indeed, among the whole party, only Mr. Fields was able to preserve his customary gruff aspect, save the glow in his narrowed eyes. It was late now.

My father bid each of his guests to quarters throughout the old house and

we were dispatched to make sure each of them was comfortable. When all the guests were settled, we retreated into the Warrens exhausted, knowing that our duties would begin again in mere hours, for all the guests would expect their breakfast prepared and waiting when they arose.

The Monday morning following that party, I was helping Thena prepare the wash when I was called away by Roscoe and sent to see my father off in the side parlor. I first went to my room, washed, put on a set of house clothes, then wound my way up the back stairs until I emerged in the central corridor, and then, walking down that corridor, found my father standing, as if he'd been waiting on me. Behind him, I saw Maynard seated at a desk writing and a gentleman standing over him. The gentleman was Mr. Fields, who tutored Maynard three times a week. He wore a look of pained frustration, and Maynard's own face was stricken.

My father smiled at me, but this does not convey the look he gave, because my father had a variety of smiles—smiles of displeasure, or disinterest, or shock and amazement—indeed he smiled so much it made him hard to read, but I knew the smile I saw that morning because it was the same smile I'd seen, mere months ago, down near the Street, down in the fields where he'd flicked me the copper coin.

"Good morning, Hiram," he said. "How are you?"

"Fine, sir," I said.

"Good. Good," he said. "Hiram, I want you to spend some moments with Mr. Fields. Would you do that for me?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Thank you, Hiram," he said.

And with that, my father looked at Maynard, still smiling, and said,

"Come on, son."

I saw an immediate look of relief extend over Maynard's face as he left his work. He didn't look my way as he and my father left the room. We were, Maynard and I, at a distance at that time in our lives. We spoke only in banalities, with no acknowledgment of what we were to each other.

Mr. Fields spoke with an accent, one I had never heard before, and I immediately imagined it might hail from the Natchez my elders spoke so much of.

“The other day,” he said, “that was some trick.” I nodded silently, still not sure of his intentions. There were penalties for the Tasked who’d

learned to read, and it now occurred to me that my “trick” might bring some sort of wrath. But my trick didn’t hinge on reading, because I could not read. I had simply filed away what I had heard of Maynard’s own fumblings and matched them with the cards left scattered on the table. But Mr. Fields knew nothing of that technique, and I was not quite sure how, or whether, I should explain.

He regarded me for a moment and then pulled out a set of regular playing cards and handed them to me.

“Examine them.”

I pulled cards from the deck one after the other, taking time to examine each one, and furrowing my brow more for effect than out of any sense of labor. When I was done, Mr. Fields said, “Now place each of them face-down on the table.”

This I did in four neat rows of thirteen. Then Mr. Fields took one card at a time from the table so that only he could see the face, and asked that I confirm its suit. This I did with each one. Mr. Fields’s face did not alight.

Now he reached into his bag and produced a box. When he opened it, I saw that it was a collection of rounds, small ivory discs, with a carved face or animal or symbol on each. He laid these rounds on the table face-up, asked me to look at them for a minute, and then he turned the rounds over so their blank bottoms showed. And when he asked me to find the round with a portrait of the old man with a long nose or the pretty girl with long locks or the one with the bird perched on the branch, it was as though he’d never turned them over, and they were right there facing me.