

Return to Dixie follows five complicated protagonists on journeys of struggle and perseverance, a fast-paced thriller about overcoming the relentless forces of prejudice and repression that threaten to suffocate decency and respect.

Return To Dixie

By Truscott Jones

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TRUSCOTT JONES

RETURN TO

DIVIDE

— WHEN LOVE CROSSES THE LINE —



RETURN TO DIXIE

Truscott Jones



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Prologue

July 4, 1888

The sixteenth President of the United States eyed his guest carefully. Given the host's advanced age, reputation mattered to him more every day. A good reason to be wary. But 23 years absent from the apex of power, relevance was equally important.

This is why the young yet intrepid reporter for the *New York Tribune*, Robert Cassio, was worth the risk. His paper possessed the widest circulation of any in the northern union of states. And though banned in the South, its pages still somehow found a way there too.

"Mr. President, I cannot thank you enough for agreeing to speak with me," the journalist had said, visibly surprised the old man himself opened the suite's door – no aide de camp, no executive assistant, not even a personal secretary. It would be the two of them, exactly as the cagey politician wanted. Intimacy and exclusivity, he calculated, may serve his purpose.

"I am glad we could finally meet in the flesh, Mr. Cassio, and on such an august occasion," he replied, smiling perfunctorily. The ex-president and the reporter had corresponded amiably for months, an exchange initiated by Cassio with the hope of writing an exposé of the forgotten leader's single, unelected term. When the Lotos Club invited Hannibal Hamlin to preside over its Independence Day festivities, the interview was sealed.

Hamlin, of course, was unaware Cassio arranged the very invitation which made the meeting unavoidable. The Lotos Club was founded "to promote social intercourse among journalists, artists, and members of the musical and dramatic professions, and representatives, amateurs and friends of literature, science and fine arts." Cassio, among its leading members, correctly suspected the spotlight would be irresistible

bait for the near octogenarian. Plus, the posh accommodations offered here at the Grand Hotel supplied a nice break from his modest estate in Bangor, Maine.

“Mr. President,” Cassio began, basting his subject with the honorific, “as I have shared in our many letters, I am most impressed, and intrigued, by your time in office.” He paused, his next words likely determinative of whether he would gain anything of value today. The two men faced one another from identical Philadelphia Queen Anne chairs, burr walnut veneer polished to a high gloss, exquisitely embroidered roses ringing their softly upholstered cushions, ball-and-claw feet flaring outward. Hamlin sat regally erect, his brown shoes firmly planted.

“One can neither appreciate nor understand your accomplishments, however, without the context of the beginning.” Opaque, yes, but the slight uptick in Hamlin’s woolly brows assured Cassio the intent was received. Since leaving the White House in 1865, Hamlin had never publicly discussed the events so circuitously suggested. There was no guarantee he would now, in which case this entire endeavor was in vain.

Cassio leaned forward, placing the delicate porcelain tea cup the ex-president provided – another gracious act of hospitality – on the small table between them. “If I may,” he continued, “we live in perilous times, as I know you recognize. Tensions between the Union and our estranged sibling to the south have never been higher.” Hamlin nodded, his fleshy face softening with equal measure of sadness and regret.

“This is why, in my humblest of opinions, sir, I believe your voice is required. We elect a new president four months hence, and the reflections of a statesman bearing your knowledge and wisdom could, for many, inform that choice. Indeed,” he pushed, “it by all rights might be the difference.”

Hamlin exhaled slowly, caressing the lapels of his ditto suit. Cassio noticed his ample build stretching the forgiving navy-blue fabric of

both vest and trousers, wondering why the man adopted this popular attire over the careful dress of the dandies' era. Was the informality a vote-getter's instinct for the fashion of the times – or merely age's submission to comfort?

Number 16, a derisive moniker bestowed by those who considered Hamlin a failure, cleared his throat, a preamble of sorts. "My dear Roberto," he smiled. The wily politician had done his homework, uncovering a forename long abandoned by Cassio in an effort to dampen his ethnicity and broaden his appeal. "The subject," the elder man continued, "or 'The Beginning' as you so judiciously phrase it, is one upon which I have never spoken."

"I am aware, sir." Cassio had a trio of arguments, sound retorts to the former president's inclination to forever hold his peace. His lips parted, the first point primed, but Hamlin gently waved him off.

"As my march toward eternity hastens," he lamented, "I have reconsidered the wisdom of that course." After absent-mindedly brushing the tops of his large thighs, Hamlin pushed his bulk out of the chair and slowly walked to the large rectangular window overlooking 31st Street, six stories below. It was a glorious afternoon, the incessant crack and bang of fireworks hours away. Yet the anticipation of those noxious and foreboding sounds filled Hamlin's brain. They, as always, returned him to that dreaded day.

Hands in his pant pockets, back to the eager scribe, he said as much to himself as anyone, "Are you ready?"

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Three trains over three days had taken Hamlin from his home in Maine to Chicago. The title "vice president-elect" merited no "Direct-" or "Express-Special," or even his own private car. He did at least receive first-class accommodations, traveling in near anonymity, cocooned by his own small entourage.

Nonetheless, descending the steps of Michigan Southern and Northern Indiana's "Wednesday Regular" from Toledo, near sunset on November 21, Hamlin was exhausted. Still, duty called. He had been summoned two days after the election by his new superior, one Abraham Lincoln:

"I am anxious for a personal interview with you at as early a day as possible. Can you, without much inconvenience, meet me at Chicago? If you can, please name as early a day as you conveniently can, and telegraph me; unless there be sufficient time, before the day named, to communicate by mail."

The request was, of course, reasonable. The two men had never met, despite overlapping in Congress, Lincoln's single term in the House beginning late in 1847, Hamlin entering the Senate in June the following year. Regardless, that was over a decade ago, and now they were chosen to lead a troubled nation on the verge of fracture – or, in truth, Lincoln was so anointed. Hamlin's role was to be determined, something he hoped to crystalize with his principal. The early signs were not good.

"Were it not for the sincerity, all this approval might be too much," Lincoln now whispered down to Hamlin, a twinkle in his eyes giving away his true meaning. They stood side-by-side just beyond the entry to Tremont House's ornate Ambassador Ballroom, having tended this receiving line for nearly an hour. Hamlin smiled, unsure whether, or how, to reply to the awkward man. The next guest offered her bejeweled hand, saving him.

It had been this way ever since the Maine politician's arrival the evening prior, whisked by carriage from the La Salle Street Station to the stately Tremont eight blocks distant, straight up to Lincoln's palatial parlor, others left to tend his meager luggage. "The Old Man

awaits your company,” he was told urgently by Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, an ardent Lincoln ally who greeted – or was it retrieved? – Hamlin at the terminal. *Your company*, Hamlin thought, not *your counsel*, and filed it away.

He and Trumbull served a dozen years together, senate desks right next to one another. More acquaintance than friend, the vice president-elect thought, but at the moment *his* counsel, being close to Lincoln, could be beneficial. Unfortunately, his somewhat dramatic colleague offered plenty of news but no intelligence during the short ride to the hotel. Hamlin arrived no greater prepared for his *début*.

They hustled through the lobby and mounted the main stairs, faster than either of their physique’s preferred, to the top, fifth story, accompanied by the hotel’s proud manager, George Gage. “We wish we could have accommodated you on the same floor as the new president, Senator Hamlin,” Gage said between the third and fourth levels, he alone easy in his breath, unaffected by their brisk climb. “But the arrangements were all so...sudden.” Hamlin focused on his feet and the rising treads.

Eventually they reached the long hallway to Lincoln’s Suite C, into which Trumbull burst without knocking, guiding Hamlin into its empty salon, thanking and excusing Gage with the same nod. “Let me find him,” he announced, as if the next leader of the United States had simply been misplaced, disappearing through a carved white door into the private quarters.

Hamlin studied the small sitting room, later wondering if the horrific events of the next day influenced his memory of its contents: a pair of aubergine-colored porcelain Hu vases, flambe-glazed with gently flared feet, perhaps of the Qing dynasty. Each rested upon small Louis XV end tables of rosewood marquetry flanking an indistinct burgundy settee. Facing the sofa, two intricately carved, richly stained walnut armchairs were embroidered with fruits and flowers in

such blood pigments as to join their companion pieces. And most searing in later years, hanging on the near wall, Peter Paul Rubens' *Henry IV at the Battle of Ivry*, a violent portrait depicting the Good King's decisive victory in the Wars of Religion, a step on his journey to reunify France as the first Bourbon monarch – only to be assassinated. Ignoring the ultimate ending, Hamlin mistakenly took it a good omen for his own superior's quest to unify their nation.

"I have caught you admiring my regal lodgings," Lincoln said, entering the room with a smiling Trumbull at his side.

"Abe, have you met my dearest comrade, Senator Hamlin?"

"I do not believe I have been so fortunate," Lincoln said, crossing the room in a gait, all wobbly and disjointed, that reminded Hamlin of a past entertainment his family relished, a man on stilts juggling bright orange balls. "But I remember distinctly," Lincoln continued, placing a large hand on Hamlin's suddenly inadequate shoulder, "while I was in Congress, to have heard you make a speech in the Senate. I was very much struck with that speech, Senator – particularly struck with it – and for the reason that it was filled, chock up, with the very best kind of anti-slavery doctrine."

Hamlin was a tall man at six-foot, and of solid build, accustomed to being the dominate physical presence. Yet from the second Lincoln reached him, towered over him, seized him with his magnificent paw, he felt small.

"Well now," Hamlin replied when he had refilled his lungs, "that is very singular, for my one and first recollection of yourself is of having heard you make a speech in the House – a speech that was so full of good humor and sharp points that I, together with other of your auditors, was convulsed with laughter. And I see that you and I remain in accord on our anti-slavery principles."

Lincoln's face was pleasant, but neutral, clearly sizing up his new partner's initial words. He turned to Trumbull who, accepting the cue,

bowed. “I shall take my leave, as you two gentlemen have much to discuss.”

They sat, Lincoln on the couch, his uncooperative knees riding high, Hamlin opposite on the near chair. All the visitor’s urgency evaporated, his rush to arrive snuffed out by the rail-splitter’s plodding, meandering discourse.

“Your given name causes me some curiosity, Senator. Is it to do with the great Carthaginian?”

“Indeed, it is. My grandfather, Eleazer, was a well-read man, especially favoring military history. His sons were thus called Scipio, after the Roman general, Cyrus – my father – after the great Persian conqueror, and Hannibal. Likewise enthralled by the general whose elephants crossed the Alps, Cyrus bequeathed me with his brother’s title.”

“My father was not quite as well-read,” Lincoln chuckled, though Hamlin noticed his expression lacked any mirth at the recollection of his forebear. “The Bible, of course. Thus, I am inspired by the other Abraham.”

Hamlin was unsure what to make of this. Apparently lost in memories, Lincoln rubbed his long, angular jaw, presently shaded by a faint, rough stubble – the beginnings of a beard, his guest wondered? Hamlin’s father was a Harvard-trained physician, Lincoln’s an itinerate carpenter. This was a topic to be avoided, he decided. “What hear you from Buchanan?” he asked instead, referring to the incumbent.

“Oh, him,” Lincoln sighed. “I believe my imminent predecessor is satisfied to offer me his congratulations, which he did, and his problems...which he will.” There was a wry upturn to the corner of his mouth. “What hear you of the Senate?”

“We are adjourned until Monday next. I am told there will be efforts to resolve matters before you are sworn.”

“By whom?”

“Seward, of course. But others as well.”

“No doubt you will be shunned,” Lincoln observed, a tactical seriousness having washed away his gaiety. “You must nonetheless convey, as our most high emissary, that they entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the extension of slavery.” Lincoln’s torso lifted, now barely seated, extending his lengthy frame toward Hamlin. “The instant you conciliate, they have us under again, and all our labor is lost. Douglas is sure to be again trying to bring in his ‘Popular Sovereignty.’ Have none of it. The tug has to come, and better now than later.”

“And Carolina?” Hamlin referred, of course, to the Palmetto State, whose General Assembly called a secession convention only four days after the evil Yank’s election.

Lincoln’s malleable face contorted, reaching a place somewhere between agony and annoyance. “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. Our very platform, my dear Hamlin, upon which we two were elected, clearly holds inviolate the right of each state to control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment. Have I not denounced the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any state or territory, no matter under what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes?”

He spread his giant hands, palms up, the country lawyer’s invitation to reason. “No state, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union. I therefore consider that, in view of the Constitution and the laws, the Union is unbroken. And to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed. Unless my rightful masters, the American people, shall in some authoritative manner direct the contrary.”

“Therein,” Hamlin interjected, boldly curious as to his opinion’s worth, “lies the rub.”

“How so?”

“You say we shall not interfere, but then seem to pledge intrusion.”

Lincoln nodded, slowly, appearing to absorb the point and then reject it. “No. No. In doing this there needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it be forced upon us. All the power at my disposal will be used to hold, occupy and possess all property and places belonging to the government, and to collect duties. But beyond what may be necessary for these objects, there will be no invasion of any state, no using of force against the people anywhere. This course must be followed with a view and a hope of a peaceful solution of the national troubles.”

Hamlin fixed his expression, concealing displeasure at what he perceived as duplicitousness. How could one claim deference to autonomy and sovereignty, while demanding obedience to the national project? Lincoln read him anyway.

“You are not convinced.”

“I am not unconvinced,” he temporized.

“And what troubles you?” Lincoln asked.

“Should South Carolina remove herself from the Union, as appears more than possible, mustn’t our response be one way or the other? Either opposed or complicit?”

“We cannot remove our respective sections from each other, Senator, nor build an impassable wall between them,” he deflected. Hamlin remained unclear as to the next president’s intentions. Again, Lincoln surmised his confusion.

“Suppose you go to war,” he proposed with a shrug, as if it were not a worry. “You cannot fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides, and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions, as to terms of intercourse, are again upon you.”

Lincoln fell back upon the settee, elongating his arms until the fingers spanned its full length. “My advice,” he continued, “is to take time and think calmly and well upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. Nothing worth preserving is either breaking or burning. Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him, who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust, in the best way, all our present difficulty.”

Advice to whom, Hamlin wondered. To our southern brethren? To me? What an obtuse way to put things. So, he pressed. “And if she leaves, and perchance others as well?”

“Then I shall say, ‘In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war.’ The government will not assail them, lest they first assail it. There can be no conflict, Hamlin, without them as aggressors. With them, and not with me, is the solemn question of ‘Shall it be peace, or a sword?’”

Hamlin was disconcerted by the little-known man from the prairie’s commitment to no particular course of action. Lincoln was an enigma.

Nonetheless, by the time he said his final good night, Hamlin did grasp at least one principle from the new commander. War must be avoided, and if there were to be violent conflict, it must be the South’s doing.

As for his own place in the coming storm, Hamlin could only pray the next few days would yield clarity.

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Temperatures plummeted overnight, a white quilt over everything outside. Undeterred, the people came, an unceasing line of visitors shuffling across the hotel’s Lake Street entrance, cheerful, curious, anxious to press the hands of the new chief executive.

Hamlin had served numerous such receptions over his political life, many more than Lincoln, who appeared delighted by the attention, and intensely interested in each of his guests, especially the occasional old friend or foe who turned up. This created a bit of a quandary.

The dour mayor of Chicago, also a Republican, fronted the receiving line, helpfully engaging with each visitor before passing them along to Hamlin, with Lincoln next. Everyone in the mostly local crowd knew old John Wentworth, and though he never cracked a smile, addressing His Honor was consequential. From there, proximity and awe drew all eyes to the tall Mr. Lincoln. In between stood the anonymous Hannibal Hamlin. Compounding matters, the president-elect was in no hurry, intimate with each and every soul.

Which left a bottleneck, and, for the number two, one uneasy encounter after another. The tedium of small-talk was oppressive, and Hamlin's mind wandered to the full day ahead: a tour of "The Wigwam" where Republicans nominated their ticket back in May (neither had seen it), then the courthouse, the brand new post office, and the customhouse; a grand feast at Tom Andrews Head Quarters Restaurant, reputedly the finest in Chicago; and, finally, more private meetings, where the vice president-elect was intent on Cabinet recommendations and furthering his stock in the new administration.

"J. S. Moulton, master in chancery," Wentworth broke into Hamlin's reverie, introducing a well-dressed man with whom he had been chatting. "Quite the fellow here in town." Obviously so, as the mayor had been mostly unimpressed with everyone else.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Moulton said, extending his arm. But before Hamlin could engage, the loudest guffaw burst forth to his left, Lincoln himself stepping into their space, grabbing Moulton's hand, pumping it hard, placing his other arm around the man's shoulder and pulling him out of the line. "You don't belong in that line, Moulton," he shouted, "you belong here by me!"

The lack of formality confounded Hamlin, but was endearing to the large crowd witnessing Honest Abe's unrestrained jocularity. "He is a Seward man, through-and-through," Wentworth whispered to him as they looked on with amusement. "Thought Lincoln's campaign a bit of a joke."

"Apparently," Hamlin replied, "all is forgiven," and nudged Wentworth with his elbow, alerting him to another man approaching. As Hamlin was about to resume witness of the president-elect's easy kindness, his skillful, enthusiastic engagements, he was instead drawn keenly to that next caller. Something about him seemed out of place – not his attire, as many were dressed as inexpensively, nor the disheveled, tangled black curls enlarging his smallish head, or even the sweat glistening on his brow, as the packed room was uncommonly warm.

What Hamlin would always remember with clarity, however, were those eyes. Intense, dark, black with mendacity. This, and his furtive manner, his disinterest in the powerful mayor of Chicago greeting him.

Hamlin glanced nervously down the opposite way, to Mary Todd Lincoln gracefully receiving guests. Why, he was never sure. Was he tapping her intuition? Seeking her confirmation that something was amiss? Did he want her to direct her husband away? His digression made no sense to him.

Precisely then he felt the sharp thrust of the strange man's elbow, knocking Hamlin back as the assailant surged toward Lincoln, right arm extended past Moulton, the clear shimmer of a pistol in his hand, the hammer fully cocked – a .44 caliber Philadelphia Deringer, they would later report. The weapon angled up from the shorter attacker to the taller target, pointed slightly to the left of Lincoln's sternum, the heart, his father's anatomy lessons rushing home.

Although the items reaching Hamlin's senses must have followed a logical progression, he could not remember which first registered. A

cloud of smoke which obscured Lincoln? The scent of burnt powder? A percussive pop followed instantly by a thunderous bang? They all seemed of one.

Yet the sensation dominating the moment was the expanding crimson stain emanating from a small black indentation in Lincoln's white shirt. Its tiny cotton fibers absorbed the pulsating blood, pulling it concentrically outward, underneath the vest and up toward the collar. Lincoln's mouth was frozen in a perfect "O" as his knees trembled, then buckled, the giant collapsing to the ground in slow movements like he was trying to sit.

Shock in the crowded assemblage gave way to chaos, those stirred by threat or ignited by danger buffeted by still others gripped by fear. Screams. Jostling. Shouts. Fainting. Yowls. Ducking. Movement in scattered tracks. Finally, a policeman knelt aside Lincoln's head. The Chicago department had formed only five years past, Station No. 1 on State Street between Lake and Randolph, literally around the corner from the Tremont House. Two officers had been assigned the reception, one to keep an eye on the mayor, the other to help control the crowd. Neither was allocated to Lincoln, and certainly not to Hamlin, as neither yet held any office meriting protection. The very brazenness of the act, *in Chicago* of all places, was unthinkable.

The officer placed a hand on the wounded president-elect's shoulder, as if marking him for some purpose, but kept his eyes peeled for further threat – again to an end Hamlin could not fathom. The assailant had fled. No one had tackled him or impeded his escape in the slightest.

Finally, *finally*, someone shouted, "Surgeon! Is there a physician nearby?"

Hamlin, mute, was at Lincoln's oddly crooked left knee, Wentworth opposite him holding the wounded man's limp hand. Wedged between Hamlin and the policeman was Gustave Reich,

weeping, a friend, as all people thought themselves Lincoln's friend, but also his barber when visiting this city.

Across from the officer, Moulton lifted Lincoln's head an inch or two from the carpet, another action without apparent design. It lolled until Moulton caught it more firmly with both hands.

A tightly packed throng encircled the still victim. From behind them, a wail. "Oh, my dear husband. Oh, my dear husband." Mary. Held up by others, unable to compel herself forward in any event.

A burly man muscled his way past Reich, his long gabardine coat covered by droplets of melted snow as he must have just been outdoors. "I am Dr. Talbot," he announced. "Please make way."

Talbot carefully unfastened two buttons near the bullet's entry, examining the wound, palpating its rough edges, inserting a finger to feel for the treacherous round lead ball. He then placed an ear to Lincoln's chest, felt for a pulse at the neck.

The physician looked up, dejected, searching for a face he recognized, someone proper with whom to share his desperate conclusion. Wentworth.

He set upon the mayor, communicating first without words. Then, "There is nothing to be done. He is gone."

Hamlin heard the words, closed his eyes, and in that darkness, slowly stood.

One

The clever young student was impatient. He knew she would find him.

From deep in the McKinley Amphitheater's well, Dr. Petra Orlova carefully scanned the semi-circular rows cascading high above her. Each tier contained between twelve and eighteen identical desks, divided by an imposing, red-carpeted central aisle. An eager Cincinnati Polytechnic University junior occupied each chair, not a cell phone in sight.

She never tired of the view, and it was in no small part the professor's enthusiasm, the energy she drew from these undergraduates, that made her *Union History 301* the most popular course on campus. Only 120 were lucky enough to take it – the exact number of seats in the hall.

In the fourth row up, in the middle of the section to Orlova's left, sat Mateo Chen. He looked at the digital clock on the wall behind the instructor, glowing amber numerals flashing closer to *09:00:00*, the official start of class. Without turning around, Orlova instinctively knew within a few seconds when it was time. Mateo was ready.

He was always ready. His father, an alumnus who once sat in this very room, was a software design genius coveted by Silicon Valley giants, whose keen mind demanded precision and rigor. His mother, an eloquent political animal on the Palo Alto city council, personified organization and grinding energy. No college course could match the interrogations at their dining room table– what most families called dinner – endured by him and his older sis growing up.

Good genes or not, Mateo was also prepared because Dr. Orlova could call on him without warning, and he'd be damned if she was

going to embarrass him again. The last time was a fluke, he told himself, and quite disingenuous on her part.

“In 1860,” Orlova started, a mere seven seconds past the hour, “the great unwinding of the old United States began.” The assigned readings for today’s lecture included a text chapter, “Birth of the Confederacy – America 1856-60,” as well as links to selected letters, speeches and news articles from notables of the era. Mateo went further than the prescribed resources, searching the internet for deeper material, hoping for a rebound. He’d never said slavery was justified, as Orlova framed his answer last Friday, only that it was a “viable” economic system. He had meticulously chosen the word for its exact meaning. *Viable*. Not valid, not desirable, certainly not acceptable.

Yet, Orlova’s raised eyebrows, her repetition of his terminology, as if it didn’t mean what it meant, set off a firestorm among his classmates. They all knew, and presumably she did too, he was a leader in the campus *Égalité* chapter, the anti-Confederacy movement opposing the South’s vile racial policy called “Apartness.” All the more reason for their manufactured outrage, he decided.

“What if,” the professor now continued, “Abraham Lincoln wasn’t assassinated before he could be sworn in?”

A few hands shot up. The usual crowd. Not Mateo. He didn’t want to appear overly eager for redemption. Plus, Chen knew her routine. She’d rake through a couple of volunteers, then strike out among the rest. He wanted to see where Orlova was going with this, confident she’d eventually find him – the professor was big on second chances.

A girl on the front row, always done up like a cheerleader with everything but the uniform: “Well, in the readings,” as in, *I did the homework, where’s my happy face sticker*, “they all said he was, like, not *pro*-slavery, but super clear on not getting into the South’s business, so ...”

“Which would explain,” Orlova smiled, “why South Carolina’s legislature, only four days after the election, called for a convention to consider secession.” The girl’s vacant face reflected unfamiliarity with rejection. “Ms. Martin,” she addressed her without even a glance at the seating chart – she made it a point to know her students – “did you consider, as you worked through the assignment, Mr. Lincoln’s view of the Constitution? Whether he considered that states had a right to secede at all?”

“He said they couldn’t.” Her expression was searching, trying to decipher what the professor wanted to hear, her influencer’s brain a binary world of “correct” and “incorrect.” The thing was, Petra Orlova could care less about right and wrong. It was a major source of the teacher’s popularity, her belief in her charges as thinking human beings. The mission, as she saw it, was to coax the kids into independent thought, considering wide arrays of contingency. To hell with “Right” and “Wrong.”

Ms. Martin was, sadly, not acquainted with nuance. “But Lincoln never said what he’d do about it,” she pleaded, then went to safe ground by applying her social acumen to the never-was-president. “He didn’t seem the kind of guy, you know, who would pick a fight, especially on their territory. He, like, you know, just wanted to get along, I think.”

It failed as deep analysis, but Orlova nodded sagely, appreciating the effort.

“Do you agree,” she asked an incredibly young-looking African American man, also on the front row, also with his hand raised.

“There was no way the Confederates were going to give up their slaves,” he said matter-of-factly. “I mean, it’s been over 150 years. Apartness, slavery, call it whatever you want, people like me still aren’t free down there.”

“Very true, Mr. Jenkins, but also non-responsive.” There were about a dozen Black men and women in this class, and the professor

challenged them rigorously. “I’m interested in a Lincoln administration, how *he* would have responded to the South’s insistence on its system of forced labor.”

Jenkins’ features contracted with deliberation. Then, tentatively, “He was against letting slaves into the territories, so maybe he does like President Hamlin did, moves some soldiers out that way and then cuts a deal.”

“In other words,” she summarized, “you’re saying ‘status quo.’ Lincoln does nothing different, and we end up exactly where we are today.” Orlova frowned, pushing him with her glare.

“I guess I’m sayin’ it didn’t matter what Lincoln did,” he lashed back, frustrated. “The stuff you gave us said only forty percent of the country even voted for him, and basically no one in the South. There were plenty of abolitionists who talked a lot, but not a whole bunch who wanted to die in Tennessee or Virginia. And the folks in Dixieland? They were damn sure ready to protect their own, and I think even Lincoln knew that.”

The academic in Petra didn’t agree – her doctoral dissertation included research on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two sides, and she was convinced the North had the industrial heft and larger population to carry the day. But the *teacher* loved it, loved this student having a damned opinion, and a rational, if not empirical, basis for it. She smiled at him, a warm *Good Job* clear on her face. Then she pivoted, head up, scanning the rows.

Okay, Mateo thought, watching Orlova contemplate her first draftee. *Here we go!* He’d seen that look before. They all had, thus the audible shuffling as some sat up straighter, while others slouched as low as they could.

“Mr. Tennyson,” she drolly quizzed, “Ms. Martin suggests Mr. Lincoln would have lacked the...what do you use in your sport?”

A wide receiver for CinPoly's mediocre football team, Tennyson, in the top row, stared vacantly at his professor. A few titters sounded here and there, and like a bag of popcorns seeds in the microwave, those tiny bursts grew more frequent and spread, filling up the hall until Tennyson himself got the reference. "Balls?" he said, and the auditorium exploded in laughter. The young man, who normally carried himself as a star, blanched.

"I was actually thinking 'courage,' but okay." Now scattered applause accompanied the guffaws, and Orlova moved her palms up and down to quiet the class. "Mr. Jenkins, on the other hand, proposes the South as too entrenched, the North as too timid, and Lincoln aware of both facts."

She placed her hands on her hips, slowly traversing the polished wood of the apron, letting those propositions sink in, anticipation growing. "So let me ask *you*, Mr. Tennyson, was there ever really a chance for a war between the states?"

Still feeling the brunt of mockery he didn't fully understand, Tennyson answered not from reason or study, but pique. "Yeah, for sure, 'cause Lincoln was just this country dude. He wasn't as smart as Hamlin, who had, like, more experience and stuff."

"So, you're saying ..."

He cut her off, not nearly done with his show of vigor. "Dixie wanted war, and I think they could have tricked him into it. You know, like the other guy said ..."

"You mean Mr. Jenkins?"

"Yeah. Moving troops into one of the territories, only the Confederates would have smelled weakness with Lincoln. They knew he wasn't no Hamlin. They would have brought in their own guys, and like Christi said," of course the two knew each other, Mateo quietly snorted, "they were playing defense, like on their home field in a way,

and ‘Boom.’ There would have been war for sure. And the South would have kicked Lincoln’s...butt,” he chuckled. No one else saw the humor.

“And we’re back to anatomy, I see,” Orlova sighed, generating a few more giggles.

Tennyson is such a tool, Mateo thought. No surprise he would blather on about the Confederacy as jock and Lincoln as nerd. He was seriously *hot*, though. Chen noticed him on the first day of class, back when it was still practically summer, thick air off the Ohio coating the campus in humidity, producing lots of shorts, flip flops and tank tops. The athletic footballer was all sinew and definition, wavy brown hair falling lusciously across his brow, knotted biceps and calves beckoning with each graceful movement. His macho imbecility, however, was intolerable.

Rather than toy with Tennyson’s bravado, Mateo sensed the professor searching for more fertile ground. He squared up, ready. She owed him this.

And she delivered. “Mr. Chen.” Orlova paused, letting the invitation linger as all eyes settled on him. “Our discussion so far seems far too speculative. Care to add anything a little more...*factual*?”

Mateo hated the Confederacy and everything for which it stood, spending every spare hour, even some he couldn’t afford, posting and livestreaming, organizing marches, protests and boycotts, all to fight for the freedom of the South’s oppressed. The *Égalité* movement was his passion.

Which was precisely the test Orlova now offered him. Could he avoid squishy emotionalism, the kind of sensation-based wallowing rendered by his classmates? Chen had not expected his teacher to focus on such an obscure political figure as Abraham Lincoln. But, okay. Challenge accepted.

“I haven’t seen any speeches or letters from Abraham Lincoln that tells us he had any special passion for freeing the slaves. Christi Martin

is actually correct, in that he tried really hard to convince the South he wasn't a monster. He knew they'd never vote for him – he wasn't even on the ballot everywhere in Dixie – but he wanted them to at least accept the election if he won, and work with him.”

Mateo made a demonstration of pointing to his iPad's screen, a signal he wasn't finished. “That said,” he quickly added, “I was relieved to hear you bring up the Constitution, because there's tons of material proving he *did* care *a lot* about that. And to him it was a no brainer. The southern states had no right to secede.”

“You are correct, Mr. Chen. Lincoln did speak often and with great devotion about the sanctity of the Union.” Hundreds of fingers tapped away, memorializing the exchange, certain they were finally being told what to think. “Still, that leaves us in a quandary as to our original proposition: What if the duly-elected sixteenth president of the then United States wasn't assassinated before he could be sworn in?”

Mateo felt trapped. He knew there was no ironclad basis for an answer. He didn't want to make himself an easy target, Orlova picking apart his response, throwing his words around like feathers from a torn pillow. Nor did he want to offer meaningless speculation. On the other hand, Chen had to accept the gauntlet thrown by his professor. He *needed* to re-establish his reputation.

Mateo held her eyes, not letting go, until...until he had it – a middle course, something specific and logical. His features relaxed, not cocky like Tennyson, but determined. “There's no way to know for sure, but if we take it step by step, there was a lot of property in the South belonging to the United States government. Post offices and customs houses, and especially forts and ships and military equipment.”

The slightest trace of approval emanated from Orlova. Encouraged, Mateo went in for the landing. “It's kinda hard to see,” he said in an easy way, keeping his distance from certainty, “how the leaders down there, as angry as they are and as scared as they are, don't try and take

it all. Probably by force, and why not, it's right there in their own backyard.”

“And then Lincoln ...,” she prodded.

“And then Lincoln has no choice but to try and protect them, or else he looks like a weak failure. Exactly how everyone talks about Hamlin.”

The thing with Professor Petra Orlova was, she never pampered her students. She refrained from gold stars and praise for simply doing your best – that was a baseline she wanted these young adults to adopt before its more severe form found them in the real world.

Instead, she bestowed the greatest praise of all, respect, here with a slight tilt of her head, gaze cast to the heavens, pointedly absorbing Chen's words, then a nod silently indicating approval.

“The honest answer is,” she eventually said, bleeding off a bit of her students' anxiety, “we don't know what would have happened if Lincoln had become president.” She paced. “We know so little about him. There are a couple of very old books that do a passing job of covering his meager political history, but nothing terribly in depth. So many of his words, his correspondence, his speeches, have been lost to history, not considered worth maintaining or collecting because he never held power. The Illinois lawyer, one-term congressman, and failed senate candidate, despite being elected to the highest office in the land never fulfilled it. He remains mostly an enigma, and any speculation as to what he would have done is just that.”

Back at her podium, she sighed. “As we have established many times in this course, history truly is written by the victors.” She turned to the next page in her binder.

Two

It is 473 miles from Professor Orlova's McKinley lecture hall in Cincinnati to Loblolly Street in Hoover, Alabama. Pretty much a straight shot by tracing the length of the Cumberland Plateau's northern edge.

Micah Bligh thought about that distance striding down his boyhood street's sidewalk, in and out of the light-speckled shade cast by its namesake yellow pines. This daily trek from football practice to his childhood home was a good time for thinking. Today's ruminations were particularly intense.

He'd calculated the span to Cincinnati a week or so back, thinking ahead to the International Football Champions Tournament being hosted up there, *Up North*, at the end of the month. It would be his first ever visit to Union territory, a prospect simultaneously exciting, and stressful.

His father, the Sheriff of Shelby County, was at first furious the International Federation of Football allowed the Union to host its premier event. He had a point. The North's passion was for an inferior adaptation of the game, where players wore pads all over their bodies and ridiculous helmets on their precious heads – not the authentic, masculine contests of the *true* sport born in England, also called rugby, and now played the world over. For some indecipherable reason, the Union went off on a tangent with its unnatural, guarded version, only recently imitating its Confederate and Canadian neighbors with a few genuine football programs. The IFF said it wanted to encourage the United States to complete the transition.

Daddy eventually came around, and now thought it was a great idea, a glorious opportunity to show the dirty Yanks – for *his* son to show them – the “superiority of the Southern race.”

Micah considered this, and a few other ideas he needed to sort out, before stepping through the front door. Once he crossed that threshold, independent thought ground to a halt whether or not Daddy was home. The man's permeating spirit was like quicksand.

So, he slowed his pace. Sweat trickled down his spine and over well-formed pectorals, pronounced by heavy backpack straps tugging his shoulders up and pulling his skin taught. Red Cahaba University shorts were darkened with perspiration. Micah was compact: five-foot-ten and 180 pounds of pure muscle, made more menacing by the severity of his close-cropped ginger hair and, at present, the ferocity of his concentration.

He didn't fear the trip. Confederates went to the U.S. on occasion, and though episodes of harassment got big play in the Southern press, most people privately reported decent treatment. Besides, as part of an international delegation, Micah and his teammates would be well protected, their movements tightly monitored. And therein was the problem.

As the star flyhalf for Cahaba's highly ranked team, Micah was accustomed to scrutiny. He was its captain, its field general, its public face, a star recognized from Arizona to Virginia and widely expected to be the number one pick in the professional league's next draft. There were few places he could go unnoticed, thus the scowl he so often wore as a kind of force field.

The thing was, Micah needed to escape. "Far away" was his best opportunity.

The first time was Sydney, Australia. He'd just turned 18, senior year at Jefferson Davis High, selected as the youngest member of the national team. He wasn't as well known then, and their trip to the World Cup was a first taste of freedom from the Dixie culture's condemnation of his authentic self as both wicked and depraved.

Micah was attracted to men, irresistibly drawn to the male form as he had been from the first allure of sexual desire. Homosexuality, officially, did not exist in the Confederate States of America. But in the cyberworld, where anyone under 30 knew how to avoid the government's firewalls, gay life was alive and well.

So it was that Micah Bligh of Hoover, Alabama, found Dockers' Bar, a short Uber from the team's hotel, and experienced what he would never dream to seek in his hometown. He arrived around 11, well past a curfew half his mates also ignored – plenty of time to do many of the things on his fantasy list.

"You're beautiful," the other man said, older but not old; handsome but not like the video studs Micah was surreptitiously ogling by age 12.

He'd never been called beautiful before. "Hot," according to his best friend's telling of what Marissa, the eventual prom queen, had said of him junior year. "Stud," once, he forgets the source. Enough, in other words, to confirm to Micah he was indeed attractive, a boost of confidence for this game he'd never played.

"Thanks," was all he could conjure in the Dockers' bathroom that night, "You too." His ineloquence was, looking back, irrelevant. The adroit, practiced man who reached into Micah's pants and up his shirt, giving him pleasure he'd never before tasted, the decent looking man Micah allowed to grope him for seemingly hours, though in reality less than 30 minutes, that man was there for the ridges of Micah's abs, the orbs of his buttocks, and the pure taste and smell of him – not his verbal skills.

Unimportant, this lack of personal connection or genuine intimacy. Micah experienced pleasure in ways that transcended even the intensity of his imaginings, years' worth of expectation exceeded in a grimy stall at the edge of the world.

Sneaking back into his room as dawn broke, his roommate fast asleep and the chaperones unawares, Micah practiced horribly that day,

unlike the older guys who knew how to party and still hold enough reserve to perform on the pitch. Micah claimed he'd eaten something disagreeable. Coach sneered, then screamed. None of it mattered. Micah wanted more.

There'd been other road trip encounters since Australia: with his second national squad he hooked up with a gorgeous member of the Irish team in Johannesburg; several times when Cahaba traveled out west to the Confederacy's less strict places, like Phoenix and Albuquerque, Micah discovered where to look, and what to find.

But Cincinnati? This wasn't a safe place like South Africa or New Mexico. This was *the United States*. The C.S.A.'s nemesis. The enemy. For all of his 20 years, Micah was instructed in the evil of the godless, debauched North. And even if he could evade what would certainly be heightened security for this particular expedition, wouldn't a Yank consider him as repulsive as he was expected to feel about them?

This was Micah's disposition as he crossed Holly Drive, a block from the glorious white house with the wraparound porch at 501 Loblolly. A block from the "Yes sirs" and "No sirs" of addressing his father as he paid respects in Daddy's study, where the old man always was early evenings.

Claudia, the housekeeper, would be there too, which halted Micah mid-stride. He took off his backpack and retrieved from it a worn Cahaba tee, pulling it over his head and covering his naked torso. That was a measure of respect one showed even to Blacks, he'd been taught, part of our fair and compassionate society. What we are forced to show the world, Daddy conceded. Simple decency, Mamma long said before she passed. Besides, Micah loved Claudia, with whom he'd spent more time than both parents combined.

As he made his final approach, Bligh shifted focus, transitioning from his plans and desires abroad to his role as dutiful son. He'd figure it all out later, he told himself, too rational to believe he might make

this trip, *especially* this trip, without adventure, without quenching his thirst for validity...and, well, yes – sex.

For now, he'd be the Good Boy.

<^>

“It’s a damned shame you won’t be here, son,” Cotton Bligh said. He was slouched into an easy chair that, after years of use, conformed to him, divots in its frayed fabric accommodating his ample backside. “The King is an impressive fellah, what with how he’s held them tiny islands together all these years.”

Micah actually wished he could meet King Ka‘uhane, for whose state visit Daddy was tapped to oversee security during the Birmingham-Hoover swing. The High Chief of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i was legendary, defeating efforts by the Japanese, British, and of course the imperialist United States to dominate his remote islands.

The surprising thing to Micah, however, was that his father would share in that admiration. King Ka‘uhane, a massive and powerful man even at 78, was as dark-skinned as a good chunk of Dixie’s underclass.

“Will you actually get to talk to him, Daddy?”

“Course ah will. I’ll be not five feet from him start to finish.”

“You should get a picture with him, then.”

“Oh, there’ll be plenty of that. It’ll be all over Channel One,” the government’s main media outlet, “wall-to-wall coverage, I’m sure.”

“No, but I mean like, just tha two of you. Intentional, you know. Posed.”

Cotton regarded his son for a moment, then lifted up the newspaper he’d lowered when Micah entered. An actual newspaper. How quaint, Micah thought, but fitting for a relic like his old man.

“Plenty of those already,” the Sheriff said, and sure enough on the long oak credenza against the far wall were framed shots of Daddy with all manner of notables – the Queen of England; the President of the

Confederacy; legendary Cahaba coach Paul “Grizzly” Hyatt; every *White* celebrity you could imagine.

“Anyhow, won’t have time for that. Gonna be plenty occupied just gettin’ him one place t’nother.” He snapped the paper, then licked his thumb and carefully turned a page. “Be a thousand and one Nigras wantin’ a look,” he lamented. Micah cringed. The phrase, plus worse he’d heard his father utter, was decidedly not in the modern South’s public relations playbook. Worse, it showed a frightening contempt that seemed to endorse some of the rumors about Sheriff Bligh’s uneven view of justice.

“I’m gonna go get cleaned up,” Micah said, excusing himself.

Cotton grunted, then as Micah reached the door, called out. “Son,” he said, “stay here jus’ a minute.” He methodically folded up the paper, placing it in his large lap and reaching for a tumbler on the side table. Michter’s Kentucky Bourbon. Neat. Micah had fetched the bronzed liquid for him many times. “Ah wanna say something ‘bout your trip.”

Here we go, Micah thought. The speech.

“You ain’t never been up North before,” he began, ignoring that the notorious Sheriff of Shelby County wouldn’t dare cross the Ohio River himself, “and ah wanna make sure you appreciate your responsibilities.”

Micah could predict almost to the syllable what was coming, so half-listened to the anticipated script – all while maintaining a respectful gaze.

You represent your nation. Your every word and action will be scrutinized. The Yanks are hoping for some bungle, some offense they can take, some argument they can make that we Southerners are inferior, or bigots, or trash.

“So, sucking off a Union boy is out of the question?” he asked in his head, resentful his father would think him unaware of the stakes. Micah drifted off further, revisiting his own needs, placing a toe in the

wallowing pool of self-pity, the unfairness of the boundaries imposed upon him.

“They’re sure to ask ya ‘bout tha Darkies.” Cotton’s words broke through, and Micah deflated, embarrassed by both Daddy’s slur, and his own hedonism. As the father embarked on a summary of the justifications for racial superiority, the son chastised himself for daring to lament his privileged predicament. He received adulation from sports fans far and wide. He basked in the glow of his exalted father, the respected icon of north central Alabama. He reaped all the benefits of his status and his skin.

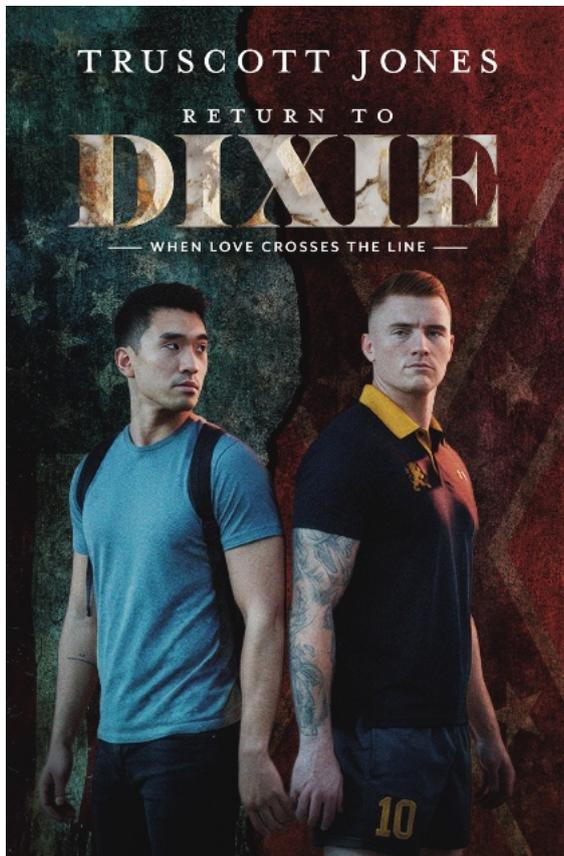
Meanwhile, Claudia and her husband and their children, including a son Micah’s age, were the victims of a legalized subjugation, the “Apartness” system the Sheriff wholeheartedly endorsed and brutally enforced. Am I seriously going to compare my erotic frustrations to their daily degradation?

“Boy! You listening to me?” Cotton barked, raising the soothing aged potion to his lips as he glared.

“Yes sir,” Micah answered earnestly, and blocking further interrogation, “I’m proud to represent my nation, Daddy, an’ I know what it means to you.” Then, just in case, “I know what it would have meant to Momma, too.”

Cotton’s intensity waned, his features falling at her mere mention. “That’s good,” he said softly. “We’re both proud of you, Micah.” He looked deep into his glass, swirling it abstractly. “Jus’ can’t help but worry about you some. She’d expect that, ya’ know.”

“I know, Daddy.” He added, “I’ll be okay up there. Plus,” he grinned, “we’re gonna do most of our talking on the pitch.”



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