

TO LOVE MERCY

Frank S. Joseph

Mid-Atlantic Highlands

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The font used to set the text of this book is Georgia.

For Carol,
Sam and Shawn,
here on earth,

and for
Nate and Dora,
Irwin and Marjorie,
somewhere in heaven.

Author's Note

This novel was born in workshops at the Writer's Center, Bethesda, Maryland, under the wise guidance of Barbara Esstman, Tim Junkin, Ann McLaughlin, John Morris and Carolyn Thorman.

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I couldn't have reconstructed the Riverview Park of 1948 without the help of Elliot Greene, who mis-spent huge portions of his childhood there.

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—Frank S. Joseph

This is a work of fiction, not fact. The events, characters and circumstances in this novel may have been inspired by persons living or dead; but what you read portrayed herein are the pure products of the author's imagination.

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The voices of Timuel D. "Tim" Black, Charles Branham, Junius "Red" Gaten, Marion Hummons, Samuel Stevens and Delores Washington, quoted in the historical Afterword, are excerpted by permission of the Chicago Historical Society from tapes and transcripts of the Douglas-Grand Boulevard Neighborhood Oral History Project of the Chicago Historical Society, 1995.

הַגִּיד לְךָ אֲדָם מִה־טוֹב וּמִה־יְהוָה
דוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת
חֶסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לִפְתֵּי עַם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

What doth the Lord require of thee?
To do justice, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God.

Micah 6:8

1
Steve

Tuesday, June 15, 1948

*B*y the time I get back, Dad and Grandpa are standing in the gangway, smoking. They're talking about Earl Caldwell's single, the one that won it, but they look nervous. I know Dad is going to be mad because I took so long with the autograph. But something else is the matter too.

Dad just says Let's get a move on. It's almost midnight.

We'll be OK Grandpa says.

Yeah. When we're in the car with the doors locked. Come on Pop. Come on Steve.

I'm ready to go anyway. I wanted Luke Appling's autograph or even Taffy Wright would of been OK, but when I get to the dugout Appling and Wright are in the showers already and who the heck is left? Then just when I'm turning around I bump into Seerey. Really, he's standing there and I kind of walk right into him. He's fat for a ballplayer. I say Sorry and he says That's OK kiddo do you want me to sign your program and I'm sort of embarrassed because one, I don't have a

program with me, and another, I actually didn't. I wanted Appling, not Seerey, who's this new guy from Cleveland that Frank Lane traded for Bob Kennedy and Al Gettel, he's supposed to be a power hitter but he hasn't done much yet and the White Sox are way last, sixteen games out, they're going to need a lot more than Seerey. Though he did get that single in the third. They beat the Yankees nine to eight tonight but it took eleven innings. Rickie says they're crummy and he's going to start rooting for the Cubs.

But now I've been waiting half an hour so I say Sure. Because I think at least I should have someone's autograph for when I get back because it's so late and Dad's going to be mad, which he was.

So give me your program kid.

I pretend I don't hear him and reach into my pocket but all I've got on me is the new Appling card. I gave Rickie a Bill Wight for it and then he wanted my old torn Appling card too and I had to promise to buy him ten Mary Janes at the school store and they're a penny each so that's a dime.

I hand the card to Seerey and he writes PAT SEEREY LEFT FIELD BATTING .253. All over Appling's face.

Then I get back and there are Dad and Grandpa all alone. Everyone else is gone home. Well, a colored guy with a push broom. Dad says Did you fall in? I say Huh? and he says Skip it let's just get a move on by the time we drop your grandpa off it'll be one o'clock your mom'll kill us.

I couldn't help it though.

So we're walking along Thirty-Fifth Street and

there's nobody out here either. All I can hear is our shoes. They've got their hands in their pockets and their heads down. Dad's saying Pick it up Pop. Dad calls Grandpa Pop, not Dad, but I call Dad Dad. I guess I could call him Pop. But I never have.

Grandpa says We'll be all right there's attendants. But when we get to the parking lot there aren't any. Just one or two cars left. The Buick is all the way on the far side, over where it's the most dark.

I run ahead and swing around a lamp pole but Dad says Cut it out. I say Why? He says You're making me nervous.

But there's no one else out here.

He says That's why.

I don't get it.

Grandpa says You don't know. The *shochers*.

I still don't get it.

The *shochers*. The *shvartzes*.

Now I get it maybe. Sometimes Grandpa talks those words, I don't know them, but they're bad words or maybe not bad but you've got to say them in Yiddish not English. I don't know if that makes them bad. But it might.

I heard Grandpa say one of them before. Not the other. I never heard the other. They probably both mean the same. I think I know what the one means. *Shvartze*.

Negroes?

He says Yeah Negroes except he says it like knee-grows. What do they teach you in school anyway?

I don't feel so good. My stomach hurts. Maybe it's

just I've got to pee. I should of gone after Seerey ruined the Appling card but I didn't because of how late. I'm sleepy too, even though I stay up this late sometimes reading comics by the hall light and they don't know it unless they catch me but I stuff the comics under the bed when I hear them coming so they don't catch me very often. I'm going to be real sleepy at school tomorrow. Mom almost didn't let me come to the game because of school and she wouldn't of except it's Tuesday and school's out Friday for summer. And I haven't seen a White Sox game yet this year. And maybe because it's my birthday Saturday. I'll be ten. Maybe that's why she let me.

Then out come those kids.

I don't even know where they came from. There wasn't anyone else in the parking lot but us, that's what I thought anyway. Maybe they were hiding. Behind the Buick maybe.

There's about eight of them, seven or eight. I can't tell because it's so dark over there by the fence. But the thing is, they're *kids*, like me. The oldest might be twelve. The girls are as young as me, fifth grade, one of them anyway, and the boys sixth grade, except the tall one might be in seventh.

The tall one says Got a dime? Only it sounds like Gaah dahm because he's colored. They're all colored.

They're all colored at Grandpa's theater too, the Calumet. I guess everyone down here is colored. There aren't any colored on the White Sox though. The Indians just signed Larry Doby but Dad says there won't be any colored on the White Sox ever, not with Chuck Com-

iskey running it.

The tall kid says Gaah dahm again and he's smiling kind of. His face is pushed close to Dad's. He's about the same size as Dad but skinny. Dad could take him easy. He's real skinny even though he's tall and besides he's just a kid. He doesn't seem scared though. In fact now he's laughing. It's Dad looks scared.

The kids are dancing around us now singing Gaah dahm Gaah dahm Gaah dahm and asking for ice cream. One of them puts out his arms and scoots around us going eeeaaaarrnnhhhh like an airplane. Another one starts singing Cement Mixer Putty Putty like they sing it on the radio, SEE-ment MIX-uh PUTT-tee PUTT-tee. He sounds like Dora. They all sound like Dora.

Dad shouts Go away and reaches into his pocket. He's got a lot of coins and the keys to the car. He reaches out to the tall kid but then the kid playing airplane bumps into him by accident and he drops all of it. The money and the car keys. The kids start laughing and shouting Money Money Money and scrambling around in the dirt. The girls too.

Then this one kid, he grabs for Grandpa's coat. Little bitty kid.

The kid says Take me back to Comiskey Park old man, buy me some cotton candy. He starts to dance. He jiggles up and down then he reaches for Grandpa's hand. Hey old man you want to dance? Let's you and me dance he says.

I'm standing next to Grandpa so this kid's standing right in front of me. He's got on a checked shirt. His

face is thin, almost like a girl's. I look at him and he looks back, right in the eye because he's only a little taller even though he's probably a year older, probably sixth grade. He's got big eyes or maybe it's just because he's skinny they look so big.

Let my grandpa alone.

Aw I'm just playing with him hee hee.

But then I see something, corner of my eye. It's the tall kid. I turn around and he's sneaking up behind Grandpa. He's crouching down like nobody could see him but I see him. He's sticking his hand under Grandpa's jacket.

The little kid sees him too. He starts yelling at the tall one. He calls him Nubby. Get the hell away Nubby we didn't come out here to pick no pockets you're going to get us all arrested you damn fool. He's using cuss words too, the little kid, worse ones than hell and damn.

So what happens next, I've been trying to figure it out exactly but there's some parts I just can't tell because it was so confusing and dark too.

First, Grandpa turns around fast. He must of felt the tall kid reaching into his pocket or maybe he figured it out from the little kid cussing.

The little kid is still holding onto his jacket. I guess he just doesn't have time to let go.

I'm standing right next to Grandpa and he bumps into me, the little kid, and I slip. It's real easy to slip because that parking lot is just gravel and cinders.

I fling my arm out for balance and it hits him. Right in the throat. He goes Gurk because I hit him

pretty hard. Real hard. But it was an accident.

Then I don't know, I'm slipping in the gravel, I hear other people slipping and shouting and someone goes Oof. Grandpa.

Dad's yelling Steve, Pop, are you OK? He's helping Grandpa and me up.

The other kids, all of a sudden they're gone. Disappeared. Except the little one.

He's lying on the ground where Grandpa just got up from. His nose is all squished over to one side of his face. He's bleeding too and his left hand is twisted up underneath him, but his nose. Jeez.

He's out cold.

Dad says to call an ambulance but there aren't any pay phones. Grandpa says Let's just get in the car.

I'm looking at the kid lying on the ground and I can't tell if he's breathing or not. Maybe you can't breathe when your nose is all pushed over like that. He isn't moving at all.

Don't leave him lying there. Please.

You're shivering Dad says. What's the matter Steve you want my jacket?

Then he looks down at the kid. Grandpa looks at the kid too. They look at each other. Finally Grandpa shrugs.

Dad says We're going to have to take him over to Mercy. Come on Pop give me a hand.

Dad gets down on his hands and knees and pushes the gravel around until his keys clink. He gets up and brushes off his pants. He hands me the keys. Steve open the door he says.

He grabs the kid under the shoulders and Grandpa picks him up by the knees. They lug him into the front seat and prop him up then shut the door quick. So he won't fall over.

2
Sass

Got a Dime?

*I*m eating my breakfast, my oldest brother Darius comes says Sass get your monkey butt out of my chair, and he gives me a lick so hard my head starts spinning. Where's this chair say it's got your name on it I ask, trying to talk back like he ain't nothing big, like I ain't scared of him, but my head starts hurting something terrible. That was the start of my bad day.

I go to school, teacher's talking about long division, can't understand a thing she says. My head still hurts, Darius gave me such a poke. I get big some day I'll show him what it feels like, sneak into his bed with a two-by-four and lam his fool brains out.

Now I'm lying in this hospital bed, my head hurts worse than it did then. Wonder who brung me here? Last I recall, we were coming up on the white folks, me and Witchie and Sawbuck and Herm and them gals and that damn fool brother of mine Nubby. Nubby thinks he's slick but he's so slow he can't hardly tie his own shoes. Nubby is the reason I'm lying here.

We're out on the sidewalk lagging pennies, Witchie

says, Let's get us some pop. So we go down to the corner, ask old man Levy would he give us a Green River. Levy says Get out of here you no-'count children, you ain't got no money for no Green River nor no Royal Crown neither. Sawbuck, he answers back salty-like. Levy starts yelling at Saw instead of paying attention to me like he should of done. I grab a bottle of Green River out the crate and run out of Levy's store. Sawbuck and Witchie come running out too. Old Levy, he like to bust the screen door trying catch us but we're too fast for his sorry legs. Levy's yelling about the police and shaking his fist, we're laughing and running because we know he ain't going to leave his store for no damn bottle of pop.

We get into the alley, Witchie says Give me some of that pop Sass I'm thirsty from all that running. But we ain't got no opener so Sawbuck runs up to his place and asks his momma for one. She comes out on the porch yelling down at us What kind of trouble you children getting into? But Sawbuck says Oh Momma we're being good go on back inside and he brings down the opener. We pass the bottle around. Sure tasted good while we were panting and laughing and cutting up on old man Levy.

Along comes Mavis and her girlfriends. Mavis says Give me some of that Green River too. Ain't no more girl get your own, that's what Witchie says to her. She says How did you get it? We stole it from Levy's store Witchie says. Oh I'm going tell your momma on you Mavis says, she's such a sissy. You'd best not or I'll tell your momma how you ditched school Thursday and

went to the Calumet with Sally Louise and Portia, Witchie says back. So they argue back and forth about who did the worst thing and whose momma'll be giving who a licking, like they do, and me and Sawbuck joke back and forth about their sorry selves, like we do, and along comes Nubby. That's when it started.

Nubby says You ever seen a White Sox game? Of course we ain't seen no White Sox game. We ain't even supposed to cross Wentworth Avenue, how we going to get tickets to see the White Sox? I listen at Bob Elson on WJJD but I don't hardly see how anyone cares about that trash anyhow, he's the most boring white man I ever heard. He says There goes Tony Lupien making a line drive out to deep center field like he's talking about This here fried chicken's getting a little cold. Can't tell if he's calling a baseball game or trying to get some sleep.

Then he talks about that Friendly Bob Adams, Friendly Bob Adams and Beneficial Finance going to make you a loan. Man makes me want to laugh. Down here in Bronzeville, ain't no one making no loans to no body. Ain't hardly no banks and anyway all they want to do is take your money, Poppa says, not make you a loan to buy you a car or nothing. All I seen around here are them currency exchanges to cash folks' checks for a quarter. I ain't seen no Friendly Bob Adams, except on the matchbooks.

I'm going to show you how to get into Comiskey Park Nubby says, standing up big with his chest puffed out. Aw go on you're bragging Mavis tells him, but Nubby says No come on with me I know a way. Them

girls start chattering like Nubby is something big but they ought to know him like I do, they'd know the only big thing he is, is a big bag of wind.

Never mind that. They all go running off. Sawbuck and Witchie and Herm, they say Let's go, so what am I going to do? I chuck the Green River bottle against the wall and go running after them. Was a fool to do that.

We get to the ballpark, people are already starting to come out. What did you bring us over here for, Witchie says to Nubby. Even if you sneak us in we ain't going to see no ball game, they'll be finished playing in a few minutes. We're nodding our heads.

Don't you want to see my secret way in, Nubby says.

OK, long as we're here, go ahead and show us your fool way in I say.

Nubby goes up to the ticket box and says to the white man Excuse me my daddy works on the grounds crew and I got to get a message to him. We're ducking behind a souvenir cart giggling so much we can't hardly hear what Nubby says next. What message? I'll see he gets it says the man. Nossir I got to talk to my daddy myself it's real urgent says Nubby. What's your daddy's name, man says. Soames sir, Elbert B. Soames Nubby says back. What's the message, man asks. I'd rather give it to him myself sir it's about my baby brother Nubby says. That gets me hot! What business does he got talking about me? Gets me in trouble with his damn fool plan, I'll see to it he pays the price.

The man gets tired of Nubby's shenanigans. Ain't no Soames works here he says. You're trying to sneak

in and see the game. Get your black ass out of here he says. Nubby tries to argue but of course it don't work so he walks back with his head down. He tries to pretend nothing happened but even the girls start making fun of him.

Nubby tells them to shut up. He's getting that look on his face, all hot and righteous, like You can't do that to me don't you know who I am? He's acting like he did last year when the principal expelled him for setting fire to the toilet paper. He'd of been smart, he'd of admitted it and taken his suspension. But no, stupid Nubby's got to go get raucous and try to hit the principal, so they give him a week instead of a day. That's what he's like. He's dumb as a post and the only one don't know it is Nubby.

But them girls went and embarrassed him and now he's got to make himself look good. He says Follow me and tails off down Thirty-Fifth. There's trouble coming sure. Can't count on Nubby when he's acting like this.

First he starts talking about reefer, going to get some reefer. Now I know he's talking big. Nubby ain't never smoked no reefer, him twelve years old, he don't even know what reefer looks like. He hears them winos on the corner talking about it, even they ain't got no reefer nor no money to buy it neither. I tell him that to his face. That gets him madder still. The girls shaming him is bad enough, Nubby don't want to hear no more sass from his baby brother. But that's why they call me Sass and I ain't ashamed of the name.

We get to State Street, Nubby says Let's get us