

Chapter 7

Camp Rucker and Working Hard

*You load sixteen tons, what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.
Saint Peter, don't you call me 'cause I can't go.
I owe my soul to the company store.*

Excerpt from “Sixteen Tons”
As Recorded by Tennessee Ernie Ford

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*Well, I sat down to listen to the shoeshine boy
And I thought I was gonna jump for joy.
Slapped on the shoe polish left and right;
He took a shoeshine rag and he held it tight.
He stopped once to wipe the sweat away;
I said, “You're a mighty little boy to be a-workin' that way.”
He said, “I like it,” with a big, wide grin.
Kept on a-poppin' and he said again,*

*Get rhythm when you get the blues,
Get a rock'n' roll feelin' in your bones.
Get taps on your toes and get gone,
Get rhythm when you get the blues.*

Excerpt from “Get Rhythm”
By Johnny Cash

In 1942, Camp Rucker opened as a training facility for soldiers going overseas. Many of the soldiers who went to Camp Rucker were from the North, and many blacks were included. A lot of the people working in the cotton mill took jobs at the camp. That left the mill extremely short-handed. The mill was forced to hire blacks. However, they gave the blacks that were hired the worst jobs in the mill, usually in the card room. Not only was there a lot of lint there—more than in the spinning room—but there was also a great deal of dust and dirt. Not having hired blacks before, there were no separate toilets for them. Some of the whites complained that they were not going to

use toilets that were being used by blacks, but eventually they did. It reminded me of the opening lines to the 1927 Broadway hit *Show Boat*, which are really astonishing due to their explicit nature:

*[Negroes] all work on de Mississippi;
[Negroes] all work while de white folks play,
Loadin' up boats wid de bales of cotton,
Gittin' no rest till de Judgment Day.¹*

The colored soldiers who came to Camp Rucker never caused any trouble, though. Unfortunately, a white man in Enterprise killed one. Mr. and Mrs. Mathis, who owned the City Café in the center of town, used to rent out rooms. Well, one day, a colored sergeant went to Mr. Mathis and asked to rent a room for his wife. We were working in the mill when Felda repeated the story, as he had heard it told, to Scrap, me, and a bunch of other workers during dinner.

“Yep. That’s exactly how I heard it. Now, Mr. Mathis, he wasn’t rude ‘er nothin’, but he told the soldier that he wouldn’t rent a room to no colored man. He told the soldier to go away and not come back. Well, not bein’ able ta find anythin’ else, the soldier done returned ta Mr. Mathis an’ asked again ta rent a room fer his wife. Mr. Mathis got his gun an’ shot that soldier dead. The military police picked up Mr. Mathis an’ the City Café done closed down.”

“How can that be?” I demanded. “After all, this was a man who was in the US Army, goin’ to fight for his country and for Mr. Mathis,” I said, reeling from disbelief.

“It’s the real world, Mertice, ‘t’is,” Felda said.

“Yes, it is,” Scrap said, “much’s we hate ta admit it. There’s jes’ a lot o’ hatred an’ evil out there.”

“Ain’t no differ’nt ‘an the incident ‘at happened in Elba, Alabam’, with the young Negro man who’d been accused o’ rapin’ the white woman,” Felda said. “It’s hatred. Hatred’s the root of it, s’all.”

Back then, as we were all aware, an accusation of rape against a black man, when it involved a white woman, could simply mean that he had looked at her.

“Whatever the case, a gang o’ locals done tracked ‘im down with their dogs,” Felda continued, taking another bite of his tomato and baloney sandwich and washing it down with a gulp of Coca-Cola. “When they done caught up with ‘im, they done took ‘im ta the courthouse jail.” He took another gulp of his drink.

“Now, the courthouse is in the middle o’ the town square, with parkin’ all aroun’ it,” he continued. “An’ apparently, the men o’ the town, bein’ that they didn’t feel like waitin’ fer no real trial, the next mornin’, a Sunday, they done dragged that poor colored boy out o’ his cell, tied ‘im up with a chain, an’ tied a rope aroun’ his neck an’ then ta the rear bumper of a car, an ol’ Model T.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Scrap said, setting her half sandwich down on the newspaper that she had wrapped it in. She placed her hand over her mouth, a horrified look in her eyes. All of us around the table put our food down and sat in dead silence.

“I’s jes’ tellin’ it like t’was,” Felda continued. “I don’t condone it, Lord knows, an’ y’all knows it. I’s jes’ tellin’ it like t’was, Lord have mercy.”

We all hung our heads, our hands clasped together in our laps.

“An’ some o’ those men got into the car an’ began ta slowly drive aroun’ the town square. At first, that colored boy was runnin’ behin’ the car. With ev’ry pass, they went faster. It wasn’t long a’fore that poor boy fell an’ was bein’ dragged by ‘is neck. The onlookers, they was a’hootin’ an a’hollerin’ ta cheer on the driver, in a sick-like, frenzied fashion. Some were even laughin’, if y’all can believe it. By the time they were done, they had ‘is neck stretched ever so long. That was jes’ the way they murdered ‘im. Stone col’ murder, ‘s’all t’was. An’ nothin’ ever happened ta them men, neither.”

None of us could finish our sandwiches. We held hands and prayed for that boy’s soul. I was so upset that I could barely concentrate on my work after our work break. As for Mr. Mathis, I never found out what happened to him after the army took him away, but I’m sure they took care of him. We never saw him again after that.

During this time, my boys, too, were learning about love and hatred. Anyone who has grown up with a brother or sister knows that fighting is inevitable. Back then, you fought over what to listen to on the radio, whose turn it was to play with a certain toy, or whose turn it was to help with the dishes. Eudon and T.E. were no different, except, perhaps, in the intensity of their fights. Occasionally, their fights got physical. I don’t just mean wrestling around, although that did happen a lot. I mean that they got into fistfights. They would pummel each other until one or the other gave up, or they were both exhausted. But one particular fight stands out above all others.

It was 1942. The war was raging in Europe and the Pacific, but Eudon and T.E. were hardly aware of it. They were too busy being boys. Eudon was bigger than T.E., and not just because he was older. Eudon was big for his age, while T.E. was a little small for his. That never stopped T.E., though. Whenever they would fight, T.E. would never back down or give up. T.E. and Eudon fought often. Eudon seemed secretly proud of T.E.’s tenacity and the fact that he never gave up. Even though he never told T.E. that, it seemed to give Eudon a good feeling to know that no matter how bad things got, T.E. would always come back for more. Also, if Eudon got into a fight with other boys and needed help, T.E. would jump in and help him.

One mid-summer day, they got into an argument; I don’t remember about what. It was probably something silly, as most arguments were. Anyway, Eudon was chasing T.E. around our house on Bell Street. T.E. was running as if his life depended on it. He ran out back of our house towards one of the trees that stood there. Eudon wasn’t far behind, as T.E. started to climb the tree.

“I’m gonna beat him good this time,” you could almost hear Eudon thinking as he started to climb after T.E. Then he yelled, “I’m gonna wallop ya real good, T.E.”

“No, you ain’t,” T.E. yelled back. He was scampering from branch to branch like a squirrel running from a dog. His voice quavered slightly with fear as he yelled back.

T.E. had climbed into the boys’ favorite tree. A large sycamore, it was in full bloom in the field behind our house. Their exposed skin was golden brown. Their shoes, long forgotten, lay in the house, and the sun shone hot and bright. The sky was a pale blue and not a cloud could be seen. A gentle breeze pushed its way though the tall uncut weeds and grass and cooled their brows, but not their tempers. The sun sparkled through the foliage of the tree, and the cotton mill, visible through the leaves and branches, stood as a silent watcher, observing but not interfering. Amidst that beauty and peace, T.E. and Eudon were having their own private war.

Felda, Scrap and I were visiting in their kitchen, talking about changes at the mill. Walter had asked Scrap to go and retrieve his decorations from the Spanish-American War, and Scrap had just come back into the kitchen from the bedroom when we heard the yelling from out in the vicinity of the tree. Scrap and I stood up and looked out toward the old sycamore.

“Oh, Lord,” I said, ready to head toward the door, but Felda put out his hand and grasped my arm.

“Let ‘em be this time, Mertice,” he drawled, staring out the window into the tree and rubbing the stubble on his chin with his other hand. “Let ‘em be. They’s gotta have this one out.”

As hard as it was for me not to interfere, I knew Felda was right. As we stood there, Scrap tried to carry on a conversation about Walter’s war decorations.

“Pa, show Mertice yer gold medal with the yellow an’ blue striped ribbon,” she said to Walter, who was sitting in his rocker in the corner of the kitchen.

But hard as we tried, all of us, including Walter, ended up gaping out the window at the fight scene.

“Ouch,” Eudon shouted, as T.E. landed a right cross to his cheek. “I’m gonna get you for that!” and then hit him in the stomach.

“You’re not gonna beat me this time!” T.E. yelled, almost in tears. Even from our distance, we could see a fire in T.E.’s eyes that we had never seen before. We could tell that T.E. was not going to lose. Several times during their fight, T.E. lost his balance and almost fell out of the tree. The first time that happened, we were sure that T.E. was going to fall. T.E., after quickly regaining his balance, gave Eudon a good hard punch in the nose. Now Eudon was the one almost in tears, and T.E. didn’t let up in his assault, either. He kept peppering Eudon with punches that Eudon did his best to fend off. It wasn’t a one-sided fight though; Eudon got his licks in, too. The punches flew freely, their breathing grew heavier and heavier, and they both were bruised, cut, and bleeding.

After what seemed like an eternity, they called a truce.

“Had enough?” T.E. asked, panting.

“Yeah,” Eudon said, trying to catch his breath as well. “I don’t want to hurt you too bad.”

“I can barely lift my arms any more,” T.E. said, leaning back against the tree trunk. “They feel like jelly.”

Eudon half smiled, which seemed all he could manage through his exhaustion and heavy breathing.

After a minute, Eudon said, “I know what you mean. Besides, I’m so tired that I’m about ready to fall out o’ this tree.”

“Me, too.” T.E. said. “Call it a draw?” His question sounded unsure, and he had a deeply hopeful look on his face. He didn’t want to be called the loser. He lost fights to Eudon all the time and was hoping that, for once, he could at least be equal with him, if not the winner. Honestly, he had fought very well. A couple of times we thought for sure that T.E.’s ferocity would get the better of Eudon, and we knew that Eudon thought so, too. Of course, Eudon would never tell him that, and probably still hasn’t to this day. So, Eudon put on an expression of superiority and said haughtily, “I guess we can call it a draw.” They both broke out laughing at Eudon’s expression and tone.

They oozed out of the tree. They were tired and sore, so actually climbing down was impossible. They sat on the ground for a few minutes to catch their breath and regain their strength. As

they started the short walk home—only about fifty feet—they looked each other over and it suddenly dawned on them that they were in a lot of trouble. Their clothes were not only filthy, but a little bloody as well. They realized that I was probably going to whip them, first for fighting, and second—and probably hardest—because they bloodied their clothes. They were surprised when I just yelled at them. However, my yelling went on for what seemed like forever.

Now, as bad as my whippings were, I know they felt that my yelling was a special form of torture. Exhausted as they were, I made them stand there and listen to me. They looked like they were ready to collapse at any minute. Even though I knew Scrap was right and that they needed to get that fight out of their system, I still hated to see them beat up on one another like that. Every once in a while, I would stop and just look at them, and ask, “Do you think I enjoy this?” to see if they were paying attention. And if they didn’t answer, they knew I would whip them. In a strange way, it was as though I, too, needed to get some sort of rage out of my system. All the time I was yelling, the switch in my hand flashed between T.E. and Eudon like an orchestra conductor’s baton, ready to strike. My yelling seemed to never stop. Eudon looked as though he was going to pass out, but he didn’t dare. Seeing that switch waving around was probably the only thing that kept him conscious. When I had tired myself out yelling at them, I sent them to bed without supper.

They didn’t seem to mind not getting anything to eat. They were so exhausted that I doubt they could have eaten very much, anyway. They both collapsed on the bed and fell asleep almost immediately. They didn’t even have enough energy for a few quick quips before sleep overtook them.

Eudon did learn something about his brother, though. He learned to never underestimate him, and that he was extremely tenacious. That fight wasn’t the first they had ever had, nor was it the last. However, it was the first time that T.E. had stood up to Eudon so successfully and had fought him to a standstill. From that day forward, Eudon had a lot more respect for T.E. He began to think that maybe they weren’t so different after all. I, however, still knew better.

The next day, something happened that reminded Eudon how different he and his brother really were. Eudon was walking with Bobby Ray Knight and James Sanders, two friends of his who lived on our street, to a vacant lot where they were going to play baseball. All they had was one worn-out ball and a bat; none of them could afford baseball gloves. As they walked down the hill on Bell Street, away from our house, I watched from the bedroom window. A strange feeling seemed to come over Eudon. It was as though he had an impulse to look back. He hadn’t noticed before, but T.E. was sitting on the front porch. He started to come back to him, to ask him if he wanted to play ball with them. After a couple of steps, though, he noticed that T.E. was surrounded by stacks of books, and that he had his nose buried in one of them. Eudon knew what his answer would be, so he didn’t even ask. T.E. looked very peaceful and contented with his books—something to which Eudon could not relate. As Eudon stood and looked at him, T.E. looked up at Eudon. They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Eudon smiled at him. A slight smile crept across T.E.’s face, and then he went back to reading his book. Eudon paused just to look at him for a moment longer, and then turned and caught up with his buddies.

At that moment, it was as though Eudon knew there was a special meaning to what had just happened, but he couldn’t figure it out. Years later, he would know that T.E.’s books were his future, a way out of the poverty that we lived in, and his way to success. Who could have guessed that one day he would earn a doctorate? That’s quite an achievement in and of itself. It’s even more

remarkable since T.E. would only complete the ninth grade. And in a strange way, that baseball bat in Eudon's hand was his ticket to the future, since for him, it was football, not academics, that would lead him out of the ghetto.

I saw something deeper happen to Eudon at that moment, however—something I knew he wouldn't grasp until years later. Even then, I knew that he may not ever realize how profoundly he was affected by that moment. Subconsciously, at that moment, he became aware of the fact that T.E. had something he himself would have to work very hard to attain. It was a strange mixture of sibling rivalry, admiration, and love that had led up to and culminated in that moment and that would affect Eudon's life for years to come.

Mamielee's life, too, took a new direction at that time, as she took a job at Camp Rucker. It was a bittersweet parting and we all shed tears, since she had become part of our family. But we knew that it was a good opportunity for her and we were happy for her. Also, Eudon and T.E. were older by then, and I knew they would be okay without her to look after them. Eating biscuits drizzled with icing that we made from mashed strawberries and milk, we celebrated her good fortune, dried our eyes, and wished her farewell, hoping and praying that our paths would cross often. As a parting gift, I gave her my little fur chubby, wrapped in the torn cover from one of Eudon's old comic books and tied with a piece of jute twine.

Not long after he started selling peanuts, Eudon came home one day having procured his second job. I had noticed him hard at work out in back of the house the previous day, making something or other out of an old apple crate. He had also asked me for some old rags, which I had given to him without asking why.

"I met a Yankee today," he said, rushing in the front door.

"How'd y'all meet a Yankee?" I asked, turning from the bed where I was folding some clothes. "And what's that y'all got there?"

"This here's my shoeshine box. I'm an official shoe shiner now."

Enterprising young man that he was, he had made himself a shoeshine box out of that old apple crate. It had room for all of the polishes and brushes that he bought, as well as the rags I had given him. It also had a place for the customer's foot.

"That's wonderful," I said. "Where are y'all working?"

"In front o' Martin's Drug Store."

"Is that where you met the Yankee?"

"Yep. I was shinin' a soldier's shoes, an' he had the weirdest accent. I found out he was all the way from Brooklyn, New York. We tried to talk to each other at first, but we had a hard time understandin' what each other was sayin'. Eventually, we settled into an easy silence."

Because of Camp Rucker, Enterprise was a lot busier than it had ever been. Eudon figured that servicemen would want their shoes nice and shiny, and he was right. Because he always wanted to be in the center of town, he worked in front of Martin's. Most of the soldiers he met in Enterprise were Northerners, but he still loved meeting them. Most people in town referred to them as Yankees. However, a lot of Southern men referred to them as "damn Yankees." Apparently, even eighty years couldn't wash away the bitterness some Southerners felt about the Civil War.

Eudon had no animosity towards Northerners, especially since a lot of his business came from them. He did find their speech extremely strange. He and his friends all thought that they, as Southerners, spoke normally. None of them had ever heard anyone other than Southerners speak, so they didn't know there were other ways of speaking. Hearing a Northern accent, especially one from Boston or New York, seemed to grate against their ears. The vernacular of Northerners seemed almost vulgar and was difficult to understand. Their cash was good, though, so Eudon never complained. And he came to love being out there on the portico in front of Martin's Drug Store. Anytime he was out there shining shoes, a crowd of people would eventually gather around him. The people would talk and pass on any news they had. And he met the most interesting people, too, like the young black boy, one of his most memorable customers.



Two boys shining shoes using home made shoeshine boxes, similar to the one that Eudon made and used.

“How was work today?” I asked as he came in after work.

“Good. I shined a Negro boy's feet,” he said, setting his work kit down and plopping down in the chair.

“Y'all did?” I asked, surprised. “What'd y'all do that for?”

“He said he wanted a shoeshine, but he didn't have any shoes on.”

“I see,” I said.

“So I said to him, ‘Y'all don't have any shoes on.’ And he said, ‘I knows, but I'd like ta have a shoeshine, jes' the same. So jes' shine my feet, please.’ An' I said, ‘That's okay. Jes' put y'all's foot up.’ So he put his foot up there, an' I jes' shined one an' then the other.”

I smiled at the thought of the little black boy getting his feet shined.

“Holy moly!” Eudon shouted, bounding into the house one day a few weeks later. “Wait'll y'all hear what happened ta me today!”

“What's goin' on?” I asked, coming from the kitchen, where I was putting biscuits into the oven.

T.E. followed Eudon into the house from the porch, where he had been reading up on the latest research that had been done on microeconomic theory and had been developing his own abstract model.

“I got the hugest tip I ever got in my life today!” Eudon exclaimed. He set his shoeshine kit on the floor and pulled a crumpled dollar bill out of his pocket, unraveling it to show us.

“Wow!” T.E. said, his eyes opening wide.

"I can't believe it!" I said. "How'd you manage that?"

"I was jes' doin' my job, shinin' this Yankee's shoes," he said. "Normally, I don't do much talking. I jes' hurry through my customers as fast as I can since I'm tryin' ta concentrate on my work."

I smiled at my young entrepreneur.

"This one Yankee, though, he struck up an innerestin' conversation, an' so I took a little extra time with him so that we could talk. My rate is a dime to shine someone's shoes. An' if they don't have the exact change, I give 'em change fer whatever they give me. This soldier, though, he gave me this dollar an' told me ta keep the change!"

"Wow!" T.E. exclaimed, going up to the dollar and feeling it, then viewing it from various angles as though it were some unique, unidentified scientific specimen.

"I told him the cost was only a dime," Eudon continued, his face serious, "but the soldier said, 'I enjoyed our little talk. Just keep it.'"

"I'd say this calls for a celebration," I said. "How 'bout some fried chicken for supper?"

"Yeah!" shouted T.E., racing to the kitchen.

"An' fried potatoes?" asked Eudon.

"We'll see what we can manage," I said, heading toward the kitchen, where I knew that two small, peeled potatoes were already waiting to be sliced and fried in grease. Even though food and other items were still being rationed and many things were hard to come by, Eudon's extra earnings were helpful in ensuring a special meal every now and then.

Because of all the new people pouring into the area due to Camp Rucker, local businesses were doing well. Some new ones even opened. One of the new businesses was a bowling alley. T.E. and Eudon, now age nine and ten, respectively, had never bowled before, so they decided to try their hand at it. They went to the bowling alley and got some shoes and a score sheet. The man at the counter told them that it cost ten cents a game and that a game consisted of ten frames. I heard the full story from Felda as we sat on the porch one afternoon.

"I saw 'em when I went in ta have me a look see at what was a'goin' on," Felda said, taking short draws on his pipe as he sat in the chair next to me. His lips opened and closed in a sucking motion, as though he were a large-mouthed bass, around the end of the pipe's shank. He drew in as many little puffs of smoke as he could, as if trying not to let any of the precious commodity escape. "They jes' walked up ta the counter, an' Eudon says ta the manager there, 'How do we bowl?' 'Git a ball from one o' them there racks,' he says, pointin' over ta the racks." He took his pipe from his mouth and made a pointing motion with it into the air to the left of him. "'Y'all'll probably want a light one. Y'all jes' roll the ball down the alley an' try an' knock over as many o' them there pins as y'all can with two tries.'"

"Sounds easy enough," I said. The sun was descending in the sky and was just starting to caress the tops of the trees, the leaves of which were creating a lattice-like effect against the backdrop of the sky.

"That manager attendant, he's ever so nice an' hepful," Felda continued. "Problem came when they looked at the score sheet. Now, there're ten rows on the sheet, apparently, which are called lines. Each line has ten boxes. Naturally, as anyone would, them boys thought that each column o' ten boxes represented one frame, which, by their reckunin', meant that the whole score sheet

was fer one game. However, it was actually fer ten games, but like many folks, they'd never bowled a'fore. Now, Mertice, before y'all go jumpin' ta conclusions—an' I know what y'all're thinkin': If'n they were unsure, why didn't they ask?—let me explain. The answer is simple: They weren't unsure. They'd already done asked the manager an' knew exactly what they was doin'—'er so they thought."

"I see," I said, watching the show that the pink, red, and purple glow of the sun created behind the leaves of the trees.

"Well, after purt' close ta an hour, they managed ta get through what they thought was three an' a half frames," Felda continued, drawing on his pipe again with his lips. "But it was actually three an' a half games. Heh-heh-heh," he chuckled, taking the pipe from his mouth and shaking his head. "'S'not so funny, I jes' have ta chuckle, though. They was exhausted, poor young'uns. They decided they'd leave, despite not havin' finished their 'game.' But when they got ta the counter an' told the man that they couldn't finish their game, he informed 'em that they'd finished three complete games an' half of a fourth. Heh-heh-heh."

"Oh, my goodness," I said. "Those poor boys."

"Well, he's very nice an' didn't charge 'em fer the half game 'er nothin'. However, the cost o' three games took purt' near every penny they had, poor things. Leastwise they'll know fer the next time the correct way ta count games."

Although they never mentioned the incident to me, Eudon thought that bowling was really fun—so much fun that he asked for a job at the bowling alley. He got it—as a pin setter—bringing his total number of jobs to three. Pin setting was a completely manual task. There were no racks to put the pins in that would correctly place them on the alley. Instead, there was a lever that he had to push down, which would push spikes up through the alley where the pins would go. The pins had holes in their bottoms. Eudon simply put the pin holes on the spikes, and they were all set. Of course, he had to remember to release the lever so the pins would fall when hit.

He was a good pin setter because of his size. He was tall for his age and had large hands. His height and long arms made it easy for him to reach the pins. His large hands made it possible for him to grab two pins at one time. All of that meant that he was faster than most other pin setters. So he became very proficient at his job. While I was happy that he was having fun doing what he loved and that he was making money, I was relieved to find that he wasn't spending all his time working and that he was still taking time to play and enjoy life. After all, he was still just a child. On the other hand, we at Camp Rucker were finding it tougher every day to adjust to the working conditions.

"Hey, boy," I said to the black soldier who was standing across the way. I didn't know his name or how to address him, so I simply called to him in this way. He turned and approached me very slowly, walking up to me proudly and deliberately, and looking me squarely in the eye.

"I am not no boy," he said sternly. "They don't have boys in Uncle Sam's service."

Red faced from embarrassment, I wanted to crawl under the table from which I was issuing hospital linens. I had left my job at the cotton mill and had hired on at the base laundry at Camp Rucker, since it paid better than my job at the mill. When I had to deliver the soldier's linens to him, I simply didn't know how to address him.

"What seems to be the problem here?" Mr. Tullis, my manager, said in a gruff voice. Someone had gone and gotten him, as well as the soldier's commanding officer, Captain Charles Hood.

“Mr. Tullis, I’m very sorry,” I said, sincerely.

“Appears we have an issue with your personnel not knowing how to properly address our soldiers, Mr. Tullis,” Captain Hood said.

“Miss Holland, see me in my office, please.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Tullis.”

All eyes were on me as I left my post and followed Mr. Tullis to his office.

“Miss Holland, we have a certain protocol that we follow here at Camp Rucker with regard to the dignity of all individuals,” Mr. Tullis began, as he motioned me to the chair in front of his desk. I sat down and looked at him, and I could see little beads of sweat on his forehead beneath his blond hair, which was neatly parted on the side. His green eyes, which were normally kind, were gravely serious, and his brow was furrowed. The starched collar of his white shirt was wet with perspiration.

“Yes, Mr. Tullis,” I said. I honestly thought I was going to lose my job.

“Now, I know that mistakes happen, and that you did not intentionally offend that soldier.”

“Oh, no, sir, Mr. Tullis,” I said.

“But just so you understand the seriousness of this action, I want you to know that because of the way that you and the other ladies have been treating the colored military personnel here, they refuse to come back to this laundry.”

“Oh! I’m sorry!” I exclaimed. “I really meant no harm,” I said sincerely.

“Now, I want you to go back out there and apologize to that soldier, and do it honestly and sincerely. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Tullis. I will,” I said. “And I am sorry,” I said.

“All right. Thank you. That will be all,” he said, and he showed me to the door.

I returned to my post and apologized to the soldier, who accepted my apology.

“How’d it go with Mr. Tullis?” my friend, Vassie, asked afterwards.

“Fine, but I’m so embarrassed,” I said.

“I know what y’all mean,” she said, pulling out her compact and checking the red lipstick that she had previously applied to her perfectly shaped mouth. “But don’t beat yerself up over it. The world’s a changin’ place. It’s not like we’re all accustomed to livin’ together. I know you’s as color blind as I am, an’ Tullis knows it, too. But these changes take time for everyone. Y’all goin’ to the dance next week?”

“Of course!” I said.

Shortly before going overseas, the 81st Division threw a party. Vassie, who had become a good friend, and I looked forward to it. Before the dance started, a white soldier whom I knew, Sergeant Rosaday, came up to us.

“I think you ladies oughta take a drink,” he said, holding out two glasses containing a pale brownish liquid, the ice cubes clinking together in them. From his flushed appearance, he looked like he had already had one too many.

“I don’t want a drink,” I said.

“Y’all’re gonna need one for what I’m gonna tell you,” he said.

“No thank y’all,” Vassie said, pulling out her compact, opening it up and checking out her blond upsweep. Then she licked her ring finger and smoothed down one of her perfectly shaped,

taupe-colored eyebrows. She had on a white dress with little hot-pink rosebuds on it, and she looked stunning.

There were folding wooden chairs set up around the entire perimeter of the dance hall, and the cinder block walls had cardboard-and-glitter war-motif decorations taped to them. There were red, white, and blue crepe paper streamers hanging from the ceiling, along with paper lanterns. Over the loudspeakers, Benny Goodman's "Why Don't You Do Right?" was playing.

I looked over at Vassie, who was buffing her red-painted fingernails on a white lace-trimmed hanky. After we again refused the drinks, Sergeant Rosaday still continued.

"Now, Mertice and Vassie, I want y'all ta listen real good."

Vassie plopped down in one of the chairs, threw one leg over the other, and let out a sigh, sort of rolling her eyes. I sat down next to her, and we looked at Sergeant Rosaday.

"Now, there'll be some colored men out there tonight, an' they might ask y'all ta dance. But that don't mean y'all have ta hug 'em or nothin' like that. Jes' be polite, y'all hear?" he said, totally serious.

I laughed, and Vassie just shook her head.

"Yes, I understand," I said, sarcasm dripping from my voice. "I'll stand way off and dance fast."

We got up and, like the parting Red Sea, one on either side of him, left Sergeant Rosaday standing there holding his two drinks.

The music suddenly picked up speed, switching from ballads, blues, and slow swing numbers such as "Tuxedo Junction" by the Andrews Sisters with Glenn Miller, to faster paced dance tunes like "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy." When Benny Goodman's "Stompin' at the Savoy" started blaring through the speakers, both Vassie and I had an opportunity to dance. We each were asked to dance by colored soldiers a couple of times during the night, who also danced with the few colored girls who were there as well. At one point, we glanced over at Sergeant Rosaday, who was standing at the bar watching us and scratching his head. At the same time, we both waved to him from the dance floor and then burst out laughing.

After the episode involving the soldier to whom I was issuing the hospital linens at the base laundry, the black soldiers eventually did start to come back, and we ladies all welcomed them. As they flooded into Camp Rucker, their wives and girlfriends made headlines as they poured into Enterprise. Businesses and landlords began to desegregate rather quickly. They wanted money more than they wanted to be separate. With the number of soldiers' wives and girlfriends who came to Enterprise, people with rooms to rent were doing a good business. They began to realize very quickly that a black family's money was just as green as a white family's. Restaurant and business owners soon realized the same thing. Whites still didn't socialize with the black people, but they were all too happy to take their money.

1 Text has been modified to conform to a more decent and less offensive standard of expression.