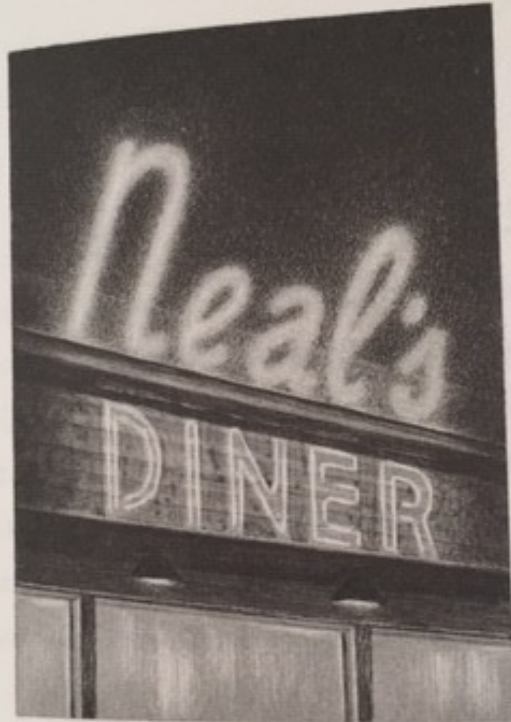


CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THE DINER WAS CALLED NEAL'S. The word was written in big, red neon letters that flashed on and off. Inside, it was warm and bright and smelled like fried chicken and toast and coffee.

Bryce sat at the counter and put Edward on a stool next to him. He leaned the rabbit's forehead up against the counter so that he would not fall.

"What you gonna have, sugar?" the waitress said to Bryce.

"Give me some pancakes," said Bryce, "and some eggs, and I want steak too. I want a big old steak. And some toast. And some coffee."

The waitress leaned forward and pulled at one of

Edward's ears and then pushed him backwards so that she could see his face.

"This your rabbit?" she said to Bryce.

"Yes'm. He's mine now. He belonged to my sister." Bryce wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "We're in show business, me and him."

"Is that right?" said the waitress. She had a name tag on the front of her dress. *Marlene* it said. She looked at Edward's face, and then she let go of his ear and he fell forward so that his head rested against the counter again.

Go ahead, Marlene, thought Edward. Push me around. Do with me as you will. What does it matter? I am broken. Broken.

The food came, and Bryce ate all of it without even looking up from his plate.

"Well, you was hungry for sure," said Marlene as she cleared away the plates. "I reckon show business is hard work."

"Yes'm," said Bryce.

Marlene tucked the bill under the coffee cup. Bryce picked it up and looked at it and then shook his head.

"I ain't got enough," he said to Edward.
"Ma'am," he said to Marlene when she came back and filled up his coffee cup, "I ain't got enough."
"What, sugar?"

"I ain't got enough money."
She stopped pouring the coffee and looked at him.
"You're going to have to talk to Neal about that."

Neal, it turned out, was both the owner and the cook. He was a large, red-haired, red-faced man who came out of the kitchen holding a spatula in one hand.

"You came in here hungry, right?" he said to Bryce.

"Yes, sir," said Bryce. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

"And you ordered some food and I cooked it and Marlene brought it to you. Right?"

"I reckon," said Bryce.

"You reckon?" said Neal. He brought the spatula down on the counter with a *thwack*.

Bryce jumped. "Yes, sir. I mean, no sir."

"I. Cooked. It. For. You," said Neal.

"Yes, sir," said Bryce. He picked Edward up off the stool and held him close. Everyone in the diner had

stopped eating. They were all staring at the boy and the rabbit and Neal. Only Marlene looked away.

"You ordered it. I cooked it. Marlene served it. You ate it. Now," said Neal. "I want my money." He tapped the spatula lightly on the counter.

Bryce cleared his throat. "You ever seen a rabbit dance?" he said.

"How's that?" said Neal.

"You ever before in your life seen a rabbit dance?" Bryce set Edward on the floor and started pulling the strings attached to his feet, making him do a slow shuffle. He put his harmonica in his mouth and played a sad song that went along with the dance.

Somebody laughed.

Bryce took the harmonica out of his mouth and said, "He could dance some more if you want him to. He could dance to pay for what I ate."

Neal stared at Bryce. And then without warning, he reached down and grabbed hold of Edward.

"This is what I think of dancing rabbits," said Neal. And he swung Edward by the feet, swung him so that his head hit the edge of the counter hard.

There was a loud crack.

Bryce screamed.
And the world, Edward's world, went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



IT WAS DUSK, AND EDWARD WAS walking along a pavement. He was walking on his own, putting one foot in front of the other without any assistance from anybody. He was wearing a fine suit made of red silk.

He walked along the pavement, and then he turned onto a path that led up to a house with lighted windows.

I know this house, thought Edward. This is Abilene's house. I am on Egypt Street.

Lucy came running out of the front door of the house, barking and jumping and wagging her tail.

"Down, girl," said a deep, gruff voice.

Edward looked up and there was Bull, standing at the door.

"Hello, Malone," said Bull. "Hello, good old rabbit pie. We've been waiting for you." Bull swung the door wide and Edward walked inside.

Abilene was there, and Nellie and Lawrence and Bryce.

"Susanna," called Nellie.

"Jangles," said Bryce.

"Edward," said Abilene. She held out her arms to him.

But Edward stood still. He looked around the room.

"You searching for Sarah Ruth?" Bryce asked.

Edward nodded.

"You got to go outside if you want to see Sarah Ruth," said Bryce.

So they all went outside, Lucy and Bull and Nellie and Lawrence and Bryce and Abilene and Edward.

"Right there," said Bryce. He pointed up at the stars.

"Yep," said Lawrence, "that is the Sarah Ruth constellation." He picked Edward up and put him on

his shoulder. "You can see it right there."

Edward felt a pang of sorrow, deep and sweet and familiar. Why did she have to be so far away?

If only I had wings, he thought, I could fly to her.

Out of the corner of his eye, the rabbit saw something flutter. Edward looked over his shoulder and there they were, the most magnificent wings he had ever seen, orange and red and blue and yellow. And they were on his back. They belonged to him. They were his wings.

What a wonderful night this was! He was walking on his own. He had an elegant new suit. And now he had wings. He could fly anywhere, do anything. Why had he never realized it before?

His heart soared inside of him. He spread his wings and flew off Lawrence's shoulders, out of his hands and up into the night time sky, towards the stars, towards Sarah Ruth.

"No!" shouted Abilene.

"Catch him," said Bryce.

Edward flew higher.

Lucy barked.

"Malone!" shouted Bull. And with a terrific lunge,

he grabbed hold of Edward's feet and pulled him out of the sky and wrestled him to the earth. "You can't go yet," said Bull.

"Stay with us," said Abilene.

Edward beat his wings, but it was no use. Bull held him firmly to the ground.

"Stay with us," repeated Abilene.

Edward started to cry.

"I couldn't stand to lose him again," said Nellie.

"Neither could I," said Abilene. "It would break my heart."

Lucy bent her face to Edward's.

She licked his tears away.