

Chapter 9: By The Rivers of Babylon

A few days before Labor Day, a tropical wave appeared off the coast of Africa but no one thought it would interfere with Billy's party. It was a slow mover and two waves had already dissipated in the middle of the Atlantic, one end of July, and one the second week of August. At Declan's Pub everyone said that was a good sign. Maybe all the storms that year would be a bust. They were the year before. Two years ago, a Cat 4 headed to the Gulf via Florida took a turn and missed the East Coast altogether. L'il Debbie, a big woman so named for her facial resemblance to the child on the pastry label, spoke up from the rearmost table of the pergola. "Look here, I don't wish a 'cane on my worst enemy, but thank the Lord we weren't the target that time." Everybody else said, "Amen."

Sure enough, the sun rose on Labor Day in a cloudless sky accompanied by a gentle breeze that barely disturbed the palmettos and caused not a rustle of oak leaves. The air was thick enough to swim through but the Beckers had become accustomed to humidity. Abigail spent the morning making two trifles and a tiramisu. "I hope Billy has a place in the house we can keep them until dessert time," she said. Joe bought extra ice to be safe along with a big bottle of Woodford Reserve small batch. He bought something else, too. When Abigail saw it she couldn't help but laugh which hurt his feelings.

"Do I look that ridiculous?" he asked, turning about in his party outfit, a spanking new Panama hat, short sleeved shirt, and seersucker shorts. He wore canvas loafers and no socks. He'd clipped a star-spangled bow tie on the shirt collar as well.

"The tie's a little much, especially for Labor Day," Abigail said. "Save that for fourth of July. As for the rest. . .hmmm. . .it's not bad." She came up to him to put her hands on his cheeks. "I'm sorry I laughed. I'll get used to the new you."

"No really. Are my legs all right?" He was uncomfortable in everything. He worried the hat was too big, that his limbs looked too long, too spindly. He hoped his feet wouldn't sweat. He gave her a penetrating look. "I thought you liked men in shorts."

"Joe. You look fine. Your legs are one of your best features. Very shapely. They're much better than Billy Euston's. He's got piano legs on steroids and that man never struts around in anything but shorts. . ."

He exhaled. That last was good to hear.

". . .but they're awfully white. At least Billy's are tanned. Better use sun screen and stick a tube in your pocket for later on."

He promised to do so.

Along the approach to Billy's, pick-ups and sedans were parked on the side of the road at the edge of a drainage ditch. Abigail gave up counting them after twenty. They passed the equipment barn, where seven Harleys were parked, one after the other. "Too bad we missed that parade," Abigail said and Joe agreed. They came to the smoker and the gardens, then the spot where they test shot Billy's armory. Around the old bandstand, three tents were set up housing tables for food and drink service along with eating tables and chairs. More tables and chairs were

set up outside them. Everywhere there were people of the town, black, brown, and white. Most knew each other. There was an abundance of hugs and high-fives. They walked hand in hand or elbow to elbow, chatting, laughing, drinking, sitting down to eat from sturdy paper plates. They waved and smiled at the Beckers whether they knew them or not. The scents of smoked pork and marijuana wafted through the air pungent as a vast field of gardenia and roses combined.

Joe drove Abigail up to Billy's front door so she could unload the trifles and tiramisu without mishap. It took three trips for her to bring them in. "Ella's in there," she said between trips, clearly excited to spend some time with her, to get to know her role in Billy's life better. At least, that's the way her husband saw things. Joe left to park at the end of the car line then set off for the long walk back to the house. He carried his big bags of ice in one arm and cradled the Woodworth in the other. The bags were heavy, so cold they burned. One or the other slipped out of his grasp twice. When he picked them up again, he hugged tight, branding his new shirt with damp Billy Euston dirt. He hefted the ice bags up higher to keep them from slipping until between the ice and the bourbon, he could barely see in front of him. He figured it was a miracle he didn't trip and fall and then, at the threshold of Billy's house, he did, landing on his hands and knees, his mouth kissing the foyer floor. The ice bags skittered ahead of him slamming hard into a pair of muscular brown calves. The bourbon thumped onto an area rug unharmed.

"Are you alright?" Abigail asked with alarm.

"I'm ok," he said, picking his head up to see that Abigail wasn't speaking to him but to a large, young black man with a shaved head branded by a curved five inch surgical scar on one side. He sat in a wheelchair near the refrigerator, two bags of ice between his feet.

A hand tapped his shoulder. Ella Price crouched by Joe's side, offering to help him up. She wore a red sundress with braided straps threaded in gold. Her black hair with its remnant of red tips sprung from underneath a bright green and yellow bandana tied in a bow at her brow. Around her neck was a thick gold chain. There were a half dozen bangles of gold on each of her wrists. Her expression was soft and warm. She nodded encouragement that he might stand. Her benevolence put him into a kind of trance and he forgot the humiliation of his entrance. He stood, never taking his eyes off her.

"Look at you, you're a mess," Abigail said.

Her voice seemed to come from another room. He glanced down at his shirt and tried to dust it off with two hands, making two dark streaks across his chest instead. His hat was missing. He wondered where he'd lost it along the way.

"Sorry for that entrance, Miss Ella," he said.

She touched his arm and squeezed kindness into it.

"Not at all, Joe," Ella said. "I've been telling Billy forever he needs to fix that threshold. You see there how it bows up? A trap for the unwary."

"At last, something I can blame him for," Joe said.

Ella laughed. Her regard made him feel taller, tougher than he was which was why he next went straight to Big George, his steps strong and sure despite the fact that he'd just landed flat on his face while near wounding the man. He stuck out his hand to Big George who gripped it and shook.

“Big George, I presume?” The man in the wheelchair nodded. “Joe Becker. I see you’ve met my wife.”

Abigail came over to her husband’s side. She put an arm around his waist. Out of the corner of his eye, Joe noticed that Ella’s lips pursed in a manner he could only absorb as not hostile exactly but at the very least not amused or maybe anxious.

“Only just,” she said.

Big George looked from one to the other of them with a quizzical expression. He opened his mouth then quickly shut it. Billy Euston had entered his home which for everyone in it and for reasons either undisclosed or not understood, felt an intrusion. He did not notice.

“Ah! The beautiful Beckers!” Billy said. Whiskey breath came out of him in a cloud large enough to envelop them all. “Come’ere, girl.” He went to Abigail and wrapped her in his arms, landing a noisy smack on her cheek. “And you, too, brother, come’ere.” He spread out one arm and beckoned to Joe come join them. Joe had no choice. He joined his wife in her admirer’s embrace. Billy smacked him on the cheek as well. Joe didn’t look too happy about it.

Ella interrupted them.

“Weren’t you going to play some music today, Billy?”

Billy hopped a little away from the Beckers and slapped his thigh.

“Lordy, yes I am, yes I am. And it’s gettin’ to be that time. I best tune up. . .”

Billy left. Joe breathed easier. Ella took her latest batch of mac n’ cheese from the oven. Abigail stood stock still looking at Big George who did nothing but look back at her. His large intense eyes bore into her like nails into wood.

“You’re the ones, aren’t you,” Big George said.

His mother dropped a metal mac n’ cheese pan on the counter. It made a clarion sound like a cymbal or a bell.

“George!” she said. Her eyes filled. She knew what came next. Her son could not be contained.

“I know you’re the ones,” Big George said. “You can’t hide it from me. The Lord give me a gift to know. Oh, my, yes. The devil comes in pretty disguises and I’m willin’ to bet he don’t make ‘em no prettier than you. . .”

“George, don’t!” Ella said and then because he ignored her, she shouted out, “Billy! Come’ere this instant!”

Abigail backed into her husband’s arms, frightened of the man in the wheelchair but unable to look away from him. Her throat went dry. She struggled to speak.

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do.”

Billy came into the room carrying a banjo.

“What’s goin’ on?” he demanded.

“They’re here,” George said.

“Who’s here?”

“The Jews,” George said. “The goddamn lyin’, cheatin’, stealin’, flesh eatin’, blood drinkin’ Jews.”

Suddenly, Billy Euston stood between Big George and the Beckers.

“He don’t mean it,” he said.

He tapped his head.

“Since the shooting, he’s just not right.”

Big George interrupted.

“Oh yes I do. I cannot deny the words the Lord speaketh unto my mind.”

Meanwhile, Ella Price sank onto a stool by the countertop, put her head down, and wept silent tears of shame into hot mac n’ cheese. “Forgive him,” she mumbled over and over but whether she called upon her God or Joe and Abigail to do so was in question.

The Beckers escaped to the outside. Abigail trembled. Her breath came hard and shallow. She leaned on Joe’s arm to keep upright while they descended Billy’s front steps.

“I’ve never. . .” she said, “in all my life. . .never. . .”

Joe leaned over to kiss the top of her head.

“I know, baby,” he said.

“We need to go home.”

Joe thought it over.

“No. You saw how upset Ella was. It’s like Billy said. Her son’s not right. There’s something wrong with him. We can’t leave or it looks like we’re blaming her. She’s a good woman. We’re going to stay.”

He tugged her along to one of the food tents. They got in line. He took a chicken leg and a few slices of brisket then heaped mac n’cheese and cole slaw on the rest of his plate. Abigail was too upset to have appetite, but she took some salad in poppy seed dressing and a square of cornbread to be polite. The whole time her eyes stung with bitter tears but she’d resolved not to let anyone see her cry. She choked her tears back, stuck her chin up and out. Joe’s shirt dried a little. It didn’t look too bad but he remained self-conscious about it. The phrase ‘dirty Jew’ came to his mind. He’d lived his life making sure he never gave anyone an excuse to say it. Now here he was in a damp, stained shirt, in a place possibly hopping with anti-Semites, a live offering to any who cared to notice. Still the two managed to exchange frozen smiles with a few acquaintances, and then the music started.

Like all good music, it transported them and just when they needed it. They’d loved the Cottonwood Boys that first night at Declan’s and over time come to love them more. The boys sang *Rueben’s Train*, *Long John Dean*, and later on Billy Euston and his banjo joined them. When he took his place on the bandstand, party-goers applauded wildly. A few yelled out “Go, Billy!” and “Whoo-eee!” He put up a hand to shield his eyes and looked through the crowd for Joe and Abigail. Finding them, he pointed to get their attention. He nodded, raised his eyes to heaven, shrugged, and waited for them to signal that if all were not forgiven, it was at least

understood and no blame attached to their host himself. Joe grimaced and shrugged back. It satisfied. Billy lit into *Pretty Polly* which fired everyone up even more. Next, he said,

“I want to dedicate *By the Rivers of Babylon* to a couple of friends of mine. They know who they are. . .”

He looked Abigail straight in the eye when he said it. People followed the path of his gaze and turned to smile at her and nod at Joe. She wanted to hide but there was nowhere to go. While they recognized from the title the sentiments on which the song was based, neither of the Beckers knew the song itself. Everybody else did. From its first notes, most people sang along, clapping in rhythm like Pentecostals in full, crying out the chorus.

*By the rivers of Babylon
There we sat down
Yeah, yeah, we wept
When we remembered Zion
Then the wicked carried us away in captivity
And required from us a song
Now how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*

It gave Joe and Abigail an eerie sense of comfort. Maybe they were in the presence of Christians who wanted the Jews restored to glory in Jerusalem that they might build the third temple and fulfill the promise of Jesus' return. They could live with that. Their friends up North would caution those same Christians thought Jesus² would smite the Jews for not following him. The Beckers figured they'd worry about that when the time came. Other maybes occurred.

Maybe Big George was more than damaged. Maybe he was an anomaly. Then again, maybe people just liked a good reggae hymn.

There was a lot of whooping and hollering when the boys were done. They thought it the climax of their set, they might as well take a break and refuel, so Jukebox Jackie came up to the bandstand to rock out his signature blues. Jackie was a short stout man black as printer's ink with a trim grey beard. A thick scar starting at the corner of his left eye created a jagged line of bundled flesh that ran down his cheek through his beard to the underside of his neck. He was a man who looked like he'd climbed a rung or two out of the mire in his day which lent authority to his songs. He plugged his guitar into one of the amps, fiddled with knobs, slipped a steel slide on the ring finger of his left hand and straightened up.

“I'm gonna start this off with a song for Big George,” he announced. “Where is our guest of honor anyway?”

Joe twisted his neck, left, right, then looked behind him. No Big George anywhere. Abigail huddled against him, looking around as well. Uncle Dan was in a cluster of people a ways behind her. He lifted his hand up close to his mutton-chopped cheek and made a mini-wave with his eyebrows raised, his lips pursed almost to a kiss. Close to the house a circle of black folk congregated. Lillibelle was among them, straight-lipped and narrow of eye. Despite the rivers of Babylon, the sting of Big George's words resurfaced, pricking them under the skin. They felt conspicuous, ill at ease. They felt alien. They felt like Jews.

Joe thought about getting away and out. He took a step backward straight into Adam, the daytime bartender at Declan's. He apologized, too profusely. Meanwhile, Jukebox Jackie strummed chords, stretched notes out glissando with the slide, and waited.

Four strong men, three black, one white, appeared at the top of Billy Euston's stairs flanking Big George's wheelchair in which the man sat, shoulders square, chest out, beaming bliss at the assembled. His rant against Jews had faded from his mind. It was in the past, over, until the next time it rattled through his injured brain. That was the way it went with him nowadays, in bursts of hot fire followed by benign calms. He'd worn Ella down to a nub. 'You can't be serious,' she'd say when he threatened to ignite. 'What have the Jews ever done to you?' and he'd give her a recitation of the perfidies of the sons of Abraham, their acts and plots against the gentile world, conspiracies of which she had no experience or knowledge. Sometimes when she entered her home, she felt she'd entered a madhouse and they'd locked the door. After weeks of his confinement, she had not the strength to battle the fire anymore and reveled in the calms, throwing herself into them, devising soothing measures to elongate them, deepen them that the calms might promulgate and smother the flames unto death.

The men carried Big George and his wheelchair down the stairs. Lillibelle pushed him over to the bandstand. There wasn't a ramp for him to get on it so Jukebox Jackie leaned over the edge and shook his hand.

"Here he is," Jackie said in a big, booming bass. "Know what this man is, people? He's a hee-ro. A home-grown, pork-fed, son of the marsh and the blue sky hee-ro. We all know of his honor and his deeds. We love you, man. We're so grateful that the Lord spared you and brought you back home. I don't know about all them all out there, but I'd follow you into hell."

People whooped and hollered again. Some threw their hats in the air.

Big George's handsome features made a silent 'aw-shucks'. His hands made a 'no-no-no' gesture out of modesty. He smiled and flashed his mother's perfect teeth. Jukebox Jackie opened his mouth. *Stand By Me* came out, first in a purr and then in a blues man's wail.

*When the night has come
And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we'll see
No, I won't be afraid
Oh, I won't be afraid
Just as long as you stand
Stand by me*

At the chorus, everyone joined in, singing as strong and loud as they'd sung *By the River of Babylon*. The Beckers whispered together and decided that it was a good time to leave. Surely, they'd made enough of an appearance to assuage a sorrowful mother beset by a son with a mind whacked by tragedy. Joe took a step backwards and this time landed against Tim Lynch, who owned the tack shop next to Declan's. "Sorry, sorry," he said, although Tim, in the midst of singing "*Darlin', Darlin' . . .*" as earnestly as any of them, didn't seem to care. Joe moved sideways, holding Abigail's hand. They inched their way out past friends and strangers, muttering "Sorry, sorry". When they were clear, they walked around the back by the eating tables to the driveway and the road out. By that time, sweat poured down their faces and trickled down their sides, their thighs. But they were out, apart, safe. They marched onto the road with

grim purpose, kicking up dust that clung to the damp skin of their calves until from the knees down they were covered in a thin coat of grit. They felt in the very hell to which Jukebox Jackie would follow Big George.

They were nearly to the car. Three motorcycles roared past them, raising more dust. They squinted to keep specks out of their eyes. Someone called out their names. Joe turned to see a runner enveloped in a cloud of dust. It was too thick to determine his identity at first. He came clearer the closer he got. It was Billy Euston, his arms making windmills to attract their attention. Through a scrim of dust, they were like the wings of angels or demons, they didn't know which. They steeled themselves.

By the time he reached them, Billy had ingested too much dirt. He leaned over their car, his hand braced against the trunk. He coughed and coughed and coughed some more then hacked. Phlegm dripped from his mouth. He wiped it with the back of his hand, wiped that on his shorts, and said in his signature rasp exacerbated by shortness of breath, "You can't leave like this. You just can't. Please."

Abigail wasn't sure how Joe wanted to respond so she said nothing. Joe didn't know what to say. He needed time. They regarded Billy in quiet. He took it as critique.

"Look. I know. Big George was hateful. I'm sure it stung. But you can't believe Ella or me think that way. Please. None of us do. He's but brain broke."

Joe tilted his head in doubt.

"None of you?"

Billy tilted his in the opposite direction.

"Well, maybe Lillibelle to some degree. But you can't go by her. She hates most people, especial if they're white. And I can't say some of the boys don't hate just about anybody who's not. But it's not like . . .like. . .a thing. 'Round here, we judge the individual not the race."

Joe opened the passenger door for Abigail then gestured she should get in the car. She did.

"It's ok," he said. He closed her door. Just before he entered on his own side, he said, "Don't concern yourself." He ducked in, shut the door hard, and started the engine.

It felt like a brush off and it was. Euston was clearly crushed. His whole body drooped as if the earth had opened up to draw him down into the dark.

Abigail noticed. She opened her window. She waved her arm and waited for Billy to draw near. When he was close enough, she reached out and touched his cheek with tenderness.

"We don't blame you for what someone else said."

It took Billy all the restraint he possessed not to stick his head in the window and kiss her, despite her husband sitting right there. Not that he didn't love Ella Price. He did. Deeply. Ella deserved to have a loyal, true blue man at her side during her current troubles. But this l'il gal, this sweet beauty, could tie his insides up in a knot with the simplest touch. Yes, he thought, life is that complicated, that difficult, that goddanged covered in thorny roses. He thanked them both and watched them drive away.

Once they'd turned off Cap'n Jack's Spit, Joe lit into her.

“Why’d you do that? Why’d you let him off so easy?”

Abigail was taken aback. Joe’s cheeks were red. They flexed in and out. His hands gripped the steering wheel with knuckles gone white. His foot was heavy on the gas and his tone loud and sharp. Over seven years, she could count on one finger the times Joe had yelled at her and that time was now. She had no idea what to say, what would defuse him.

“I dunno,” she mumbled.

“That’s not an answer!”

One of her stored up tears broke through the wall of her resolve to roll down her cheek. He frightened her. She had to think of something.

“I guess. . . I guess because he looked so upset,” she managed.

Joe slapped the steering wheel.

“Oh, he looked upset. How do you think I feel? Did it occur to you I might be upset? We only know what they tell us, Abigail. How do we know they’re not all a pack of rabid anti-Semites laughing up their sleeves at us? Don’t you comprehend how ugly that was?”

“I . . .uh. . .” she mumbled again in a small voice.

Joe slapped at the steering wheel again, only harder. She jumped in her seat.

“Do you?” he demanded.

Unable to speak, she nodded and hoped he saw.

“Ok,” he said to himself, “ok.”

His lips were still tight, his cheeks yet flexed, but his color went back to normal. By the time they got home, he appeared returned to himself.

At first, they didn’t speak to each other. They were each shattered a little around the edges. No matter what either said, it would have been the wrong thing. It wasn’t until the night when they were going to bed after watching bad television which helped to calm them, to dull their emotions and intellects, did they confront the day.

Joe lay with his arms crossed above his head. His chest was bare. She laid down then put her head over his heart and placed a hand next to. Normally, he would have dropped his arm and held her tight. But that night he didn’t. She craned her neck until she could see his eyes. They were dark slits looking down at her. She was afraid he was still angry so she spoke first, offering an apology to defuse him.

“I’m sorry if you think I didn’t consider your feelings above Billy’s,” she said. “It’s hard sometimes to think of you as separate from me. Whatever I feel, I figure you feel too. I don’t know why that is. It’s probably because I love you so much. . .” She tried to give him her most adorable smile. It came out a little cracked, but that probably melted him more than a bright grin would have done. “. . .and believe me, I was still shaking inside from what Big George said. I was.”

He turned out the light. His arm came down to caress her.

“I believe you. I’m sorry, too. What happened was unexpected. We’ve been welcomed here and now this. I’m not sure how to feel, how to react. But what did we think? That there was some place in the world that loved Jews?”

She sighed. Up North, neither one of them had ever experienced more than casual anti-Semitism, the social gaffes of the insensitive. They’d met people who said ‘Jew ‘em down’ in their presence without hesitation or wanted to know why they didn’t have a Christmas tree (‘Just because you’re Jewish? But that doesn’t make sense!’). They pretended that Jewish jokes were always funny, just to get along. In Boston, cemeteries were desecrated every so often, gravestones smashed, swastikas painted here and there by kids who, they imagined, had no idea what they were doing. Each time it happened, they chalked it up to ignorance, shook their heads, and moved on. They knew worse things happened to Jews in other places, other countries, especially Israel. They donated money to the Anti Defamation League and the Simon Weisenthal Center when they could. But no one had ever accused them directly of wanting to rule the world or make matzah from the blood of babies.

“You have to ask yourself, Abigail, how much do we really know about the people we’ve got close to here? Maybe we rushed things along because we were new and we were lonely. I mean how tight are we really with Billy Euston and Ella Price?”

“Ella. We hardly know her. But like you said today, she seems like a good woman.”

Joe shifted in the bed so that they were facing each other. It was dark. But he wanted to try to see her expression.

“What about Billy? I like and admire him but I could say goodbye. Sometimes I wonder about you. You seem pretty damned attached. Tell me, Abigail. How tight are you with Billy?”

She sighed again. He couldn’t see her face, couldn’t judge the meaning of that soft, full exhalation of breath. It frustrated. He nearly turned a light back on.

What a question, Abigail thought. She didn’t know how much to reveal to him. Did he need to know Billy made her blood race? That she ate up every word out of his mouth? She loved that rough voice of his. Sometimes, she didn’t care what he said as long as he kept talking. There were things that happened between her and Billy that really were none of Joe’s business, as far as she was concerned. If he knew, he would regret the knowing. So it was a difficult question to answer, she considered what to say for a long while, making her husband anxious. She wanted to be as honest as she could, so framing her response took as much time as it took. At last, she said,

“I think very, but not in a way that should worry you. I’m attached to Billy the way I ‘m attached to my friend Esther up North, for example.”

Abigail doted on Esther. Their friendship was an ardent attachment, the kind women without sisters form with each other. Even after Abigail moved South, the two talked on the phone for an hour twice a week. But she’d never let their friendship interfere with her marriage. He thought about it and bought her comparison.

“I can live with that,” he said, “as long as Big George’s ideas don’t come from him.”

“Oh I can’t believe that.”

“I guess.”

They discussed whether or not Big George was to blame for a madness he did not choose. They discussed whether the degree of his moral culpability mattered if he were a danger to themselves and others. They came to no conclusions on that one.

“Speaking of danger,” Abigail said, softly so as not to irritate him, “when you lost your temper in the car, I thought you might drive into a tree trunk. I need you to promise you won’t do that again. You lose your temper, you pull over.”

“My eyes were on the road.”

“Joe. You could have run over someone.”

“There’s no one out that way. I wouldn’t have done that.”

“Animals, then. You might have killed animals.”

Joe thought about it.

“You’re right. I won’t do it again,” he said. He kissed her and rolled over for sleep.

“I hope not,” she said.

Soon enough, Joe’s breath came deep and even. He snored some. Abigail lay on her back and stared at the ceiling trying to decipher the mysteries of her heart. It was hours before she slept also.