

Prisoner's Song

Alabama, September 1961

I brought up the right throttle, pushed the left rudder hard, and held the brake. The airplane swung around on the grass with the cargo doors facing the dirt road leading to the hangar. I parked the brakes and pulled the mixtures to cut off. The Beech 18's Pratt and Whitney 985s spluttered and clacked to a stop. After flipping off the mags and master switches and opening the small side window, I unbuckled my belt and left the cockpit to the whine of the gyros spooling down.

The flight from Jones Field in Huntsville to this small grass airstrip fifteen miles east of the city had taken only minutes. Why I was here for a freight pickup and not at the city's main airport was a mystery. The company's owner—my boss—was away on a weekend passenger charter to New Orleans, so his wife had taken the call. As usual, she hadn't bothered asking the client for many details and therefore had few to pass along to me. Their marriage was on the rocks and Meg was too occupied with their kids to give a damn about Rick's flying business—or so he said. I suspected there was more to the story: Rick's wandering eyes, his penchant for taking all the layover trips. "It's a *charter*," she'd snapped when I'd asked what I'd be hauling. "Just *be* there."

As the engines cooled and ticked, I walked aft to open the two doors. The tiedown straps and nets were stowed in the back compartment, where I'd leave them until the freight arrived. I'd sort out what I'd need then. Opening the doors, I hopped out onto the grass and glanced at my watch. I was thirty minutes early for what would be an easy day. The weather along the entire route from Huntsville to Montgomery and back was forecast to be good and since most freight moved at night, a day trip like this was a joy and an outlier. No battle against sleep, no passengers to please, only crates and boxes.

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The morning mist was lifting with the dawn, the air sultry and still, the scent of dew and newly mown grass rising with the sun. I had fond memories of this little airfield and was pleased to be back and see it unchanged. Next to the hangar, two ratty J3 Cubs were tied down, grass growing up around their tires with blackened bare spots beneath their engines from leaking oil and gas. Near the old wooden hangar, sun-bleached and canted, there was a rusted-out travel trailer that was used as the office, the same unlocked padlock on its door. Near the runway, a threadbare windsock hung limp. A Carolina Wren claimed it as a perch and atop the pole it sang its *TEA-kettle* song.

I'd learned to walk right here in 1940, Daddy repairing his Huff-Daland duster, Mama kneeling on the grass with her arms spread wide to encourage me, my first stumbling steps into her warm embrace and laughter. I smiled at the memory of her telling me that.

I'd first soloed here, too. It was on my sixteenth birthday in 1955, Daddy so proud, Mama looking more terrified than happy. I was beaming while taxiing in after my third landing. My instructor cut off the tail of my shirt, wrote the place and date on it in pen, and pinned it to the wall of the trailer. The walls were covered in those remnants, a history of first flights written on rags. This place was a touchstone in my life, and those memories are bittersweet now with Mama and Daddy gone. I needed to come back more often. Maybe they could use a part-time instructor?

I ambled toward the hangar for a peek inside. Squeezing between the sliding doors and slipping in, I felt the air still cool from the night before and redolent with 80 octane avgas, butyrate dope, and engine oil. Sparrows chirped and fluttered among the rafters, the hangar their aviary too. In the corner, a classic black and orange Stinson Reliant was parked with its cowling removed, and adjacent to it was a Stearman in Army colors, blue and yellow. A silver Luscombe polished like a diamond was parked opposite them both.

I paused to take them in, and my thoughts returned to my parents. It had been five years since Daddy was killed in a crop-dusting accident. I loved and missed him beyond words. Mama too,

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who couldn't bear it and died last year of a broken heart. I was a single child, and now more single than ever.

I turned around and squeezed between the doors to go back outside. Standing in front of the hangar with my hands in my pockets, I yawned and gazed toward the rutted road that connected the airport to Route 72. There was no sign of the charter, so I walked back to the airplane to get my thermos of coffee. I sat on the cargo floor with my legs dangling over the grass and sipped my brew from the thermos cup. There was no other place on earth I'd rather pass idle time than here amid the peace and solace of this little airfield.

At 09:10 I was swinging my legs, humming "I'm Walking to New Orleans" by Fats Domino, and staring blankly at the grass. I heard the trundling of a heavy vehicle along the road, the gears grinding, and looked up.

Moments later, a black Ford-Wayne bus—D.O.C. painted in white block letters on its flank—pulled up to the airplane with four men seated inside and one standing by the door. It came to a stop with a screech of its brakes, and the door opened with a thump. A tall, lean man with a chiseled jaw and cruel gaze came down the stairs and strutted toward me with a commanding air. He was wearing a Stetson and a brown leather belt with ammo loops and a badge. On his hip, he wielded a 12-gauge, short-barreled Remington.

At first, I figured they must be lost and in need of directions. But the appearance of this lawman striding toward me with such purpose suggested it was something else.

I put my thermos cup on the cabin floor and lowered myself to the ground. I stood there smiling and gave him a little wave—stupidly, in retrospect—as he continued toward me.

"Cap'in," he barked loudly.

I jumped at the commanding tone. "Yes, sir," I said, clearing my throat. "Can I help you?"

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“Yes, suh,” he drawled, and with a sideways glance at the bus, said, “Me and these convicts are yo’ people. Let me know when you’re ready and we’ll load ‘em up.”

I looked at the bus and saw the men inside with their white uniform shirts. The driver was still seated and looking in my direction. “I’m sorry?” I sputtered. “I mean ... I wasn’t told I’d be hauling people, officer. This airplane’s a freighter. I can’t fly people. We’ve got no seats, no seatbelts ... it’s against the law.”

He looked aside, let loose a stream of tobacco juice, then turned and leveled his gaze at me, his shotgun pointing up. “The law is what the judge say it is, not you, cap’in. These boys are to be transferred to Kilby for their sentences. Now, you wanna argue with the judge, that’s up to you, but you do, suh,” he warned, “and I’ll be seeing you in my jail and real soon ... am I *clear*?”

Kilby? Kilby prison was infamous. It was the site of the state’s electric chair, “Yellow Mama,” the site of all its executions. If those men were being transferred for execution, that would explain moving them by an expensive air charter rather than by bus. Kilby was where the nine Scottsboro boys were sent to die for the rape of two white women. It was at Kilby in 1934 where five men were executed in just thirty minutes, all of them black. Over time, it had come out that most of the men executed at Kilby were black, many after poor legal representation, and many others were later found mentally incompetent. Kilby was a brick and turreted edifice of Jim Crow justice and I wanted nothing to do with it.

I looked back at the airplane and ran my fingers through my hair as I weighed my options. Seats and seatbelts were only specifically required for takeoff and landing. What about people parachuting? We’d flown them on weekend drops in the freighter with the cargo doors removed. On one occasion it was for an airshow and the FAA was present to observe. The Feds never raised an issue about seats, and without the regs on hand, I had nothing to stand on. I was faced with a

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Hobson's choice: tempt a hanging judge for overruling his orders or deliver these men to Montgomery regardless of my conscience.

I cravenly chose self-preservation. "All right," I relented. "Okay ... we'll go."

The officer turned to the bus and gave the driver a nod. The driver got up, went back, and unshackled the three convicts from their seats. Once released, the driver stood aside and they stumbled out, chains clanking around their hands and feet. When the three men were assembled on the grass, the officer in charge stepped back and indicated with a nod that they should move toward the airplane.

They hobbled toward the cargo doors and stopped, their heads down as they stared at the ground.

"Step back!" the officer commanded them as he approached the airplane. "MORE!"

They shuffled further aside.

"I'll enter first, then you boys follow," he told them. Pointing toward the aft bulkhead, he added, "I want yo' backs up again' that wall."

I looked at him and straightened. "No!" I told him. "They can't sit there. They've got to be upfront, up against the forward bulkhead by the cockpit. The airplane won't fly with all that weight so far aft."

He narrowed his eyes and looked at me with palpable contempt for having contradicted him. I understood that an explanation was in order. "It's true," I assured him. "If they're all seated together, then they have to be upfront. It's a problem of aerodynamics: weight, and balance."

He studied the airplane a moment as if trying to divine its secrets, then turned and let loose another stream of tobacco juice. He looked at me with an icy glare and said, "Then I'll be in back." His jaw jutted at the aft bulkhead.

"That works."

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The officer signaled the driver to come towards us. He left the bus holding a large ring of keys.

Remembering how the men had been shackled to their seats, I pointed to the keys and asked, "What are those for?"

"To secure these convicts to the airplane. Yo' boss lady say it was possible."

I hate bullies and this bastard had bully written all over him. I summoned my courage. "No," I declared. "I don't know what you told her was being shipped—and she probably didn't ask—but if she said you could tie down men like crates she was wrong. No shackling to the airplane," I insisted. "If we have an accident these men couldn't escape. They'd burn to death if there was a post-crash fire. This is an airplane, not a bus."

He sneered. "Make no difference how they git where they goin' does it? Jus' git there a little sooner. Besides, like I told you ... *judge's* orders."

"It makes a difference to me, goddamn it! The judge commands his courtroom—but I command this airplane. *NO* shackling to the floor. Besides, like I told you ... FAA orders."

He glared, and I glared back. I wasn't backing down. "Your call officer: put 'em on the airplane or put 'em back on that bus ... but no shackling to the floor. Period."

He looked aside, spit, and then looked at the convicts. "You heard the man!" he snarled. "Git yo' asses in that airplane, and sit where he tells y'all to sit. Now git to it!"

The Beech 18 is a taildragger, which means its third wheel is under the tail and not the nose. On the ground, the airplane's tail sits lower than the nose and that creates an uphill angle for the cabin floor. One by one the men brought their waists to the bottom edge of the cargo floor, bent over, and put their bellies on the deck. Like snakes, they slithered into the cabin with their elbows on the floor and, once inside, rolled onto their butts. They pushed themselves uphill toward the front

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with their feet. I had to look away. I couldn't stomach such rank humiliation of anyone—prisoners or not.

At the front of the cabin, one of them sat on the floor on the right and behind the cockpit, the other two on the left.

The officer was seated on the floor as well, his back against the aft bulkhead with his knees bent and his arms folded over them, the shotgun sideways across his lap. He regarded me with malice as I closed and secured the doors.

I ignored him and made my way forward, the prisoners watching me with a mixture of awe and curiosity. I passed between them and through the narrow opening in the bulkhead to the cockpit. Taking my seat and buckling in, my hands flew around the instruments and controls as I prepared the airplane for flight. I thought I felt their eyes on me and glanced back, but I was wrong. They weren't looking at me; they were studying the cockpit, its complex array of gauges, levers, buttons, switches, and other controls that the ex-Army Air Corps C-45 had in abundance.

With the engines started and the airplane ready, I taxied for a takeoff to the east. At the end of the runway, I did the runup, ran through the checklist, and taxied into position. I locked the tailwheel and advanced the throttles, my eyes on the RPM gauges and manifold pressures. The engines sang with a loud baritone growl—the sweetest music on earth to a pilot—and I released the brakes. The airplane surged forward and quickly gathered speed, the hangar and trailer racing past us as the main wheels lifted off the grass.

At 6,500 feet, I leveled on a south-southwest course for Montgomery. The sky was clear, the air smooth and wonderfully cool and dry. Below us, a thick summer haze covered the earth like a pall, the ground barely visible. Flight in conditions like this had an ethereal quality and upon glancing back, I saw the men had sensed that too. They were staring out the windows, silent and unmoving. I

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doubted any of them had flown before and I could only imagine what they must be experiencing: no earth at all—no prisons, no chains—only the heavens all around them, endless and free.

Daddy was a fan of Bill Monroe and his bluegrass mandolin. His high, lonesome riff on “The Prisoner’s Song” came back to me, Daddy’s scratchy record on the Victrola.

I looked aside to shake it off.

And then, suddenly remembering the note Rick had left me in the logbook, I reached for the fuel valves and switched the left engine from its main tank to the nose. The nose tank held 77 gallons when full, and Rick had filled it for reserve fuel on a recent flight from Amarillo to home. Most of our flights were much shorter than that, and unnecessary fuel was only an unwanted weight for future trips. Rick had asked me to burn off what remained in the nose tank on this flight. Unfortunately, the airplane’s single fuel gauge was reliably unreliable so we never trusted it; instead, we used time and the fuel consumption rate of 25 gallons per hour per engine to know when to switch tanks from a nearly empty auxiliary to the mains. Failure to plan correctly—or worse, forgetting to do it all together—meant the engines would begin to surge and then quit when a tank ran dry.

Stupidly assuming the tank was full and that I had at least an hour of fuel, I switched both engines to the nose, the left engine first, and then the right after ensuring that the left engine continued to run after moving the valve.

Ten minutes later, while sitting back and sipping what remained of my coffee—my mind back on the men behind me—the right engine suddenly began to surge, and then the left engine too. It caught me by surprise, but knowing what was wrong, I dropped the thermos cup to the floor and quickly grabbed the handle of the wobble pump attached to the bottom side of the copilot’s seat. As my right hand pumped the lever feverishly, I glanced back at the men being tossed about by the yawing of the airplane. They yelled in fear and grasped frantically for any handhold they could find.

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As I pushed and pulled the handle, what meager fuel remained was fed to the engines and suddenly they were roaring evenly again. The big man seated behind me had his head through the cockpit passageway. With his eyes wide and glued to my hand on the lever, he commanded, “*PUMP DAT MUTHAFUGGAH!*” in a panicked voice. “*PUMP DAT MUTHAFUGGAH! PUMP DAT MUTHAFUGGAH!*” The engines continued to bellow.

At the same time that he was yelling and I was pumping, the fingers of my left hand were blindly groping for the fuel selector valves. When I felt the valve on the left, I turned it to the engine's main tank by memory and after ensuring the engine kept running, I turned the right engine's valve too.

The big man eyed me nervously as I slowed my pumping and tested the reliability of the fuel feed.

With the engines running smoothly, I released the handle, straightened in my seat, and let out a sigh. “Sweet Jesus,” I muttered as I got the airplane back under control. The rule was never both engines on the same tank if it could be avoided, but I'd allowed myself to become distracted. That's a *big* mistake in this business, and I silently chastised myself for screwing up.

I turned and gave the men a reassuring wave. “Sorry,” I shouted with a Howdy Doody grin. “Just a minor problem. All fixed!”

Their faces exposed their doubt. Whatever awe they'd felt about me earlier had vanished. The only positive outcome was that the bully in the back had taken an even worse beating than the men, his hat out of reach on the floor, his shotgun akimbo, and his face ashen. His arms were spread wide and his hands gripped the tie-down rings like clamps. I turned back around and smiled at his distress. Asshole.

Half an hour later we landed at Montgomery. The ground controller directed me to the cargo area where I saw another black Ford-Wayne bus—D.O.C. on its side—waiting for us at the

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vacant edge of the ramp. I parked the airplane close to it, opened the doors, and jumped out. As the men slid down the floor and disembarked, I thought, *God help them if they're innocent—and their victims if they're not.*

Once they were collected on the ramp, they were driven onto the bus by the officer and shackled to their seats.

I watched sadly as it drove away.

Daddy used to hire the young sons of tenant farmers to work as flaggers. They'd hold tall poles with pennants on top to mark the crop rows Daddy was dusting. He'd felt for those families, those boys, their hardscrabble lives. "There but by the grace of God go I," he would say whenever we left them at their ramshackle homes at the end of the day.

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It was two years later, early September 1962. I was a new DC-3 copilot with Southern Airways, my dream of a career as an airline pilot fulfilled. The captain, Kevin Williams, and I were having breakfast at a grill across the street from our layover hotel in Gadsden, Alabama. The late summer morning was typically hot and sultry. As the two of us seated ourselves in a booth, a large fan in the corner of the room was blowing a hurricane, the aroma of breakfast suffusing the air. The friendly chatter of the crowd, the slap of the cook's spatula on the grill, and the harried waitress shouting orders gave the place a homey ambiance.

It was the last day of our three-day trip that began at our crew base in Memphis. We were in our short-sleeved uniform shirts and epaulets, our jackets, hats, and ties left draped over our luggage and kitbags in the hotel lobby. The weather was good for the two-hour flight home, and I was hoping Kevin would let me fly it. That was never a given for a new copilot in those days. He was much older than me, mid-forties, a B-17 pilot during the War. Kevin was easy to work with, an

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extraordinary pilot, and pleasant enough but phlegmatic. He wasn't much of a talker. He'd always carried a *New York Times* crossword puzzle, and he went right to it after we took our seats.

The middle-aged waitress came over with coffee, poured two cups, and took our orders. Ignoring me entirely, she gave Kevin a saucy wink when she was done, then turned and yelled the order to the cook.

I spotted a rumpled copy of the day's *Gadsden Times* left on my side of the booth. With Kevin engaged with his crossword, I picked up the paper, slid into the corner of the booth, and opened it to peruse the headlines as we waited for our plates. There was little of interest until I got to page six, and I froze when his eyes met mine.

It was him, and he had that same terrified gaze that he'd had that morning when he beseeched me to keep the wobble pump going. He was wearing a white prison jersey buttoned to his neck. When I read the line across the bottom of the photo, my hands holding up the paper began to tremble.

Elmer L. Douglas was his name. He'd been executed the prior morning.

I was breathless as I stared at the photo, stung by the knowledge that I played a role in his execution. My eyes welled. I wiped them discreetly with my wrist and continued reading.

He'd been a laborer and was convicted of the murder of an elderly man and woman, the owners of a small filling station and convenience store on a rural highway near Delmar, Alabama. The article said they'd been gunned down in cold blood, their cash box rifled through and left open and emptied on the floor.

Anger, revulsion, and empathy were all swirling in me at once. Had he actually done this? I'd felt betrayed by him, and then even more betrayed as I read that the bullets matched the .38 revolver they'd found with him when he was arrested. There were other items too, cigarette cartons, things he'd stolen from the store.

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Though I averted my gaze, I held the paper high to hide my brooding. I remembered my feelings on the flight home alone to Huntsville that morning, the profound sadness I'd felt for those prisoners. What they'd done, what their sentences were, or how fair the justice they'd received, I didn't know. But what I did know was that it's one thing to support something in abstract and another to be a part of it, to look at the faces and eyes of dead men walking and know you played a role in their execution. I'd sworn never again. I'd never accept another flight with prisoners, especially in our C-45 freighter. Later, when I learned that the ACLU was fighting against capital punishment, I became a member of the organization so I could contribute to the cause. My moral clarity and indignation over the death penalty, Jim Crow justice, and that bully who enforced it dominated my view of the matter.

But then came that morning in Gadsden, and all my moral clarity melted away like butter on a cook's grill. I pictured the old man and his wife behind their shop counter in Delmar looking as terrified as Douglas was behind me that morning in the Twin Beech, and I felt sick.

The waitress brought our plates and plunked them down on the table. I folded the paper still in shock and saw her looking at me. "Are you okay, sugar?" she drawled. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I put on a smile. "Oh ... no. No," I replied as I shifted my gaze and reached for my plate. "I'm okay."

She looked at Kevin and changed the subject. "You boys need a refill?" she asked with a smile.

"Please," Kevin answered cheerfully. He'd barely given me a glance.

When we finished breakfast, Kevin picked up the tab, a gesture I truly appreciated. Copilots were on probation pay for their first year and every dime of my per diem I could keep to pay bills helped.

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As we crossed the street to the hotel, my thoughts returned to Douglas the laborer. I thought of Daddy's flag boys, those sons of tenant farmers, the hardscrabble tenor of their lives. "There but by the grace of God go I, Sam," Daddy had counseled me. I tried empathizing with Douglas, the life that had led him to that terrible crime.

But later, while flying back to Memphis—a blue, cloudless sky, Kevin allowing me to fly that leg—I wondered, if we had to show compassion for the living, then why not the dead? As much as I despised capital punishment and especially that bastard warden, what about fair and equal justice for that poor shopkeeper and his wife? Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their dead." Is justice then only for the living?

I had no answer that day, and thirty years later, I still don't.