

Free Sample!

BRAVE IN SEASON

a novel of race, railroads, and baseball

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Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

—A. E. Housman

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed.
I, too, am America.

—Langston Hughes

THE DOUBLEMINT TEST

The boy looked upwards, into the most astonishing face he had ever seen. A face of outsized features—fleshy nose and huge brown eyes with veins slightly yellowed, and a crown of tightly curled black hair. The boy's hand raised to point at the face, which smiled, and a big hand pointed back at him. For long seconds no one moved. The boy's mother yanked him to her side with unusual vigor, and the boy wanted to cry. But wonder overcame hurt, and he continued to stare, open-mouthed.

The man had come in the door of Marchon Mercantile and paused by the mail window, next to the wall of darkly gleaming brass mailboxes, each with its own combination knob. Except for the boy, the patrons avoided looking. Farmers scrutinized dry goods and cleaning products. But they noticed him, all right. A colored man, right there in Julian. Well-dressed, too, with his blue shirt buttoned up to his neck.

It was late May after a wet March. The corn was planted, and the terraced hills were alive with slender stalks as tall as toy soldiers, as tall as the trophies in the window of Marchon Mercantile. Winning more trophies, that was the normal thing to be talking about now, when the season was as young as the corn, and as green with promise. Just last night, the boys had gone up to Nebraska City and demolished the best team in the county. So it brought a sense of general relief when Jack Scarborough bounded in, barely glancing at the stranger as he shouted joyously, "Game over! Hornets rule the world!"

"Rule Otoe County anyway," said Dave, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Great game," hollered Nicholas Reilly, brandishing a new broom. "You showed those city boys."

"Hush, Uncle Nick," said Millie Littman, still clutching the boy to her skirts.

Jack got down on one knee in front of the boy. “We gave ’em a spanking, didn’t we, Timmy? Cause we’re the champions!” Jack ruffled his hair, and Timmy giggled.

“Season’s just started,” said Dave. “Let’s take ’em one at a time.”

Jack straightened up. “Now Davey . . .” he began, but thought better of chiding his brother’s modesty. Jack was three years out of high school. Dave had done two tours in the Pacific, and owned a Bronze Star for valor. Tall and easy-going, Dave had come home just in time to buy the store from old man Marchon, who’d gone senile during the war. People kept telling him to hang his own name out front, but here it was 1950 already, and Dave still hadn’t got around to it. Didn’t seem much point, when everyone already knew him. And they did. As family man, as proprietor, as big-hitting first baseman.

Jack pulled a quarter from his pocket and flipped it through the air, calling out, “Change for two bits?” He saluted Dave’s catch with a radio announcer’s twangy, “And he’s out at first!”

People laughed and Jack grinned. He wasn’t the best player. He wasn’t even second-best in his own family. Middle brother Ernie had been a genuine phenom before the war. Jack was what people called a “character.” Stocky and cheerful as catchers are supposed to be, he kept his teammates loose, the home crowd happy, and the other team off balance with an endless stream of chatter.

Jack pulled open the top of the pop machine, slammed a dime in the slot, and yanked out a Dr Pepper. He drank half in one swig, and gave a satisfied belch. But his grin faltered. The colored man was still standing over by the mailboxes, and he was looking at him. Jack turned away from the man, and with dogged cheerfulness sang out, “Hey Davey, how about when you gave that boy a shoe-topper? I thought you broke his nose!”

“Got lucky on that one,” Dave replied. “Looked like an error to me.”

“Error, heck! Pee Wee Reese himself would have kicked that ball.”

“Right,” laughed Dave. “Or Jackie Robinson himself.”

For a long moment, the only sound was the squeak of the swamp cooler hanging in the corner. Jack’s arms dropped to his sides. It had been awkward enough trying to pretend things were normal, and Dave had to go and say that.

The stranger was a big man of middle years, with close-cropped hair showing a few flecks of gray. He’d been there for a couple of minutes now, and he apparently wasn’t going away. Nobody knew quite what to do about him.

Having burst the bubble of invisibility, Dave called out, “Hiya there. What can I do for you?”

The man nodded toward post office boxes, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet. “I came to check if any mail come for me, by general delivery.”

“Just a jiffy, and I’ll have a look,” Dave answered. “For that, I need to have my postmaster hat.” He took off the white apron and laid it over the counter. Once inside the cubicle, he put on a battered green visor, to nervous chuckles from the farmers. He leaned forward and addressed the stranger through the small window with the vertical gold bars.

“Now, what name would I be looking for?”

“Wallace,” said the man. “Jerome Wallace.”

“Wallace, Jerome,” Dave said, rifling through a small pile. “That be a normal letter size?”

“Normal, yes.”

“Hmm.” Dave looked up. “I am sorry.”

The man showed no reaction. “One other question, if you don’t mind.”

“Shoot,” said Dave.

“If I was to get it set up with the bosses,” he said, “can you work it so my pay can be sent to an address in Omaha?”

“You don’t want to send cash money through the mail, is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s it, yes.”

Dave scratched his head. “I’m not rightly sure how that’s done. I could maybe get it up, but I don’t know . . .” He paused again. “You’re with the gandy crew?”

Jerome nodded.

“And you’re going to be in our town how long?”

Even the sacks of flour seemed to be holding their breath.

Jerome gave a small glance around. “Until the section is done,” he said. “The foreman could give you a better sense how long we are going to be in your town.” He slowed down on the last two words, creating an emphasis that some townfolk would find amusing and others would call something else. In any case, everyone was suddenly checking merchandise again.

Dave Scarborough took his elbows off the counter. “I could maybe get it set up,” he said again, soberly. “Best if I talk to the foreman. Did I hear right, that’s Moose Burdock?”

“He goes by that.”

Dave gave a can-do nod. “I’ll bring it up when Moose comes in.”

There was a pause. It seemed a long pause, while everyone waited for the colored man to leave. But the man took a step farther in, a board squeaking under his foot. “Now,” said Jerome, “I might take a pack of that Doublemint Gum.” He pointed in the direction of the cash register. “That is, if you don’t mind to put your other hat back on.”

Jack erupted in a nervous giggle. Nick Reilly wore a mischievous smile. The farmers' wives looked frightened. Did they serve Negroes at Marchon's? As far as anyone knew, this was the first one ever to come in the store. There was a collective intake of breath.

THE ROOKIE

The appearance of the colored man at Marchon Mercantile was, in fact, not entirely a surprise. The mess car and three faded yellow Pullman sleepers had been hauled in by a switch engine the night before and left on the side track. Those same coaches had been parked at Auburn, ten miles south, for the last four weeks. Before that they were in Falls City for a spell, and before that in Hiawatha, Kansas. Julian was the logical next stop on the main line to Omaha. Word had gotten around that the whole crew was colored. Not the foremen, of course. But still. People looked at each other, shrugged, and reckoned that must be the way the Mopac was doing things now. You just never knew. Since the war ended, change was in the air everywhere. And in Julian, change rolled in on the iron wheels of the Missouri Pacific Railroad.

Julian was a train stop before it was a town. Generations were born, grew up, and died, with the smell of cinders in their noses. In the 1940s folks started hearing a new word, Dieselization. The steam locomotives were being sidetracked into history. In their place came powerful, reliable diesels. The new engines were heavier, so dieselization also meant replacing the 90-pound rail with 115-pound rail all the way from Kansas City to Omaha. This was not a job for local crews. For this job the Missouri Pacific brought in a veteran system gang from the White River, Arkansas, division. The foreman was a white-haired man of thirty-five years' experience, Mr. H.H. "Moose" Burdock, of Cedar Falls, Iowa. For assistant foreman and time keeper, they tapped a roundhouse manager from Wichita, Ivan Tarp. The rest of the crew comprised a dozen men, plus a cook and a caller. Besides the cook, every one of them hailed from Conway County, Arkansas. Except for one.

Jerome Wallace had never wanted to be a gandy dancer. He was an Omaha bricklayer by trade, and a damn good one. Worked his way up from scrap

boy to hod carrier to apprentice to journeyman. Laid the south side of the Timmons Building practically by himself, and that was tricky work, what with those cornices. He was doing all right, almost too good it felt like. Married to Lucy, finally. Jerome Junior, now four years old. Owned his own home on the north side. In one day it all unraveled. He did not start the fight, and he never intended to hurt the man. Lies were told to the police. An inflammatory headline in the *World Herald*.

The lynching of a Black man in Omaha was in living memory. In 1919 a frenzied mob hanged Will Brown in front of the Court House, riddled his hanging corpse with gunfire, cut him down and dragged the body through the streets, poured oil on the corpse and burned it, and dragged the charred remains around town some more. Every person of color in Omaha knew the story of Will Brown. And Jerome Wallace knew it was a good time for him to get out of town. He was supposed to be grateful that Lucy's brother, Malcolm, who worked for the Missouri Pacific, had managed to get him on a gandy crew at a decent wage.

It would only be until things cooled off in Omaha, but Jerome knew how things worked. He could spend years living in retired sleeper cars, ripping and replacing rails, swinging that spike maul until his arms ached. And all the time worried sick about Lucy, especially with the things Malcolm was saying.

As Jerome left the store and headed back to the Pullmans, he looked around, shaking his head. This was the smallest town yet. One-block main street with one general store and a one-pump gas station. The other storefronts were boarded up. He saw buckets and boxes through the few remaining windows. The street wasn't even paved. Number two white gravel, by the look of it, from the quarry up by Ashland.

It wouldn't be half so bad if he could get home on weekends. But the foreman had them working nearly every Saturday, and in six weeks on the job, he'd only been able to get home just once. That was contrary to what the union said when he signed on. He had tried to get the other men riled up over this, with no luck. They welcomed the extra hours. It wasn't like they could go clear to Arkansas anyway.

And so, week after week went by, with Lucy at home with JJ, and the troubles mounting. If she couldn't find someone to mind the boy, she might lose her job at the nursing home. They'd taken out a loan to fix the oil furnace just weeks before Jerome got sacked. The bills kept coming, and Jerome was having a devil of a time trying to get money home to Lucy.

Nowhere Nebraska. He unwrapped a stick of gum and put it in his mouth. He called it the Doublemint test. When he came to a new town, buying gum

was how he took the temperature of the place, sort of like the flow table test for wet cement.

He got to where Main Street met the side track. Straight ahead was the train station, a small building with a shallow peaked roof and generous eaves. To his left, a rumbling sound came from the grain elevator complex, along with a scrim of smoke. Jerome sniffed the air. Not smoke. Dust. Dust from that wheat or corn or whatever they were moving around over there.

Jerome headed up the side track to where the crew-cars sat. A new flat-car had been delivered, stacked with railroad ties, and the oily odor of creosote hung heavy in the air. Damn, he hated that stuff. It made oil slicks on your clothes. It burned your skin, and the stink didn't come off in the shower. He was going to kill Malcolm. He remembered his last conversation with Malcolm, over a scratchy phone line from Auburn to Omaha. Malcolm's sing-songy voice: "You tell them it's right there in the union rules. You get two consecutive days off. Plus you're entitled to free rides home on the Eagle. If you want to come home, that is." And then the snicker, the implied nudge and wink, the attitude that infuriated Jerome.

As Jerome made the last stretch, Ice Cantrell hurried up to him, smiling a broad, gap-toothed smile. "Hey Omaha, what you get?"

"Didn't get nothing."

"You went up to that store for something. Let's see."

Jerome held up the pack of gum.

Ice walked alongside of Jerome, too close. "Don't tell me that's all. I told you we got rookie rules. When the new guy goes uptown, he brings back something for the old guys, something in a bottle. It's the a-rrangement."

Ice liked big words, and he had a habit of drawing out the syllables to the point he sounded like a stage Negro. Jerome had to guard himself from mocking him. In clipped tones, he said, "We settled this in Atchison. I'm too old for games. The only rules I follow come from God, Mr. Mopac and the BMWs."

Ice moved closer, and in a menacing whisper he said, "Don't see no Bro-tha-hood of the Maintenance of Way Em-ployees doing much for you out here, O-ma-ha."

"Get off me," Jerome said, shoving Ice back.

Ice stumbled. He faked a punch and smiled mirthlessly when Jerome flinched. "You a rookie. That means you have no notion what trouble looks like out here. Un-for-tunate accidents happen all the time. You think about that." Ice glared for a moment longer, capped it with a smile, and peeled off to go over where a couple of the boys were tossing a baseball.

Rookie, they called him. Jerome was ten years older than any of them, but he knew the score. Those boys had come up the hard way, position by position, nothing for free. This was system gang, the top of the heap. It was obvious from the first day Jerome knew nothing of gandy dancing. He was here because he knew somebody. And they were right. He knew Malcolm. And from the start, he put them all on edge, provoking the foreman with union this and union that.

The dislike was mutual. The Arkansas accents sounded ignorant to Jerome. Some of them, like Delran, seemed genuinely slow-minded. But it was more important to be strong than smart. The new rails were thirty-nine feet long and weighed 115 pounds per every three-foot. That was one thousand four hundred ninety-five pounds a rail. And Delran, Jerome had to admit, Delran held rail tongs like he was holding a fishing pole. And he moved so smooth, like he was dancing.

That's where the name came from. The caller, Charly T, gave Jerome that lesson the first day. On their way to the site, Charly fell in beside him, limping like he did. "Gandy dancers," Charly said with some eloquence, "taken from the male of the goose species, known as the gander. That bird has a fine mating dance it performs to attract the female of the species, known as the goose."

When Jerome actually saw them doing it, with Charly T singing the cadence and the men moving together like in some old-time movie, he was appalled. Did those southern boys think they were still on the plantation? No self-respect among the lot of them? Jerome swore that as long as he had this god-forsaken job he would never, ever, act in such a degrading fashion in front of fellow human beings.

On this point, Jerome had been wrong, dead wrong, and he got humbled fast. It took about twenty seconds lifting his first rail to realize the dance was anything but clowning. It was an absolute necessity if the men didn't want to drop one thousand four hundred and ninety-five pounds on themselves. Twelve men on a rail, three sets of tongs at each end of the 39-footer. That came out to a buck and quarter a man—as long as the weight was balanced. Either you got precision or you brought that rail down on you and everybody else, with mashed feet, broken legs and everything else. No matter what kind of grudge you had against another man, when the rail was moving you worked together. You did not even breathe out of time.

Charly T himself got that limp from a dropped rail. Turned himself into a caller to keep his job with the crew. Otherwise the company would have made him a watchman or crossing guard at half-pay, like they did with all the men they busted up working on the railroad.

So Jerome learned to dance almost as well as the next man, and to appreciate the coordination and the power in moving and setting rails. Cantrell was the one that made him wary. With the diamond-shaped scar on his cheek, and a constant defiant grin on his lips, “Ice” was no stranger to trouble, and Jerome wanted none of that.

Jerome saw Sam sitting five feet off the ground in the crooked branch of a tree, reclining with his nose in the pages of a small book. Strange kid. But Sammy had some brains in his head, even if he didn’t have a clue what to do with them.

“Jerome,” Sam called out. “What’s rue?”

“I told him,” Cook shouted, swinging down from the mess car. “I did.”

Sam read slowly from the book. “With rue my heart is laden, for golden friends I had.”

Delran started snickering and calling Sam a sissy. Sam was the youngest of the crew, and the only other rookie. Jerome was shocked that Sam was just sixteen. The kid was strong—you couldn’t be otherwise in this job—but he was skinny. Sam was a boy who shot up to his man height, but was taking longer to fill out his man shape. There was something childlike in his face, too, a face as delicate and beautiful as a girl’s.

“Rue,” Jerome said slowly. He felt an almost paternal affection for Sam, but tried not to show it. The kid got picked on enough without being the Omaha troublemaker’s friend.

“Cook says it’s a sauce, but I can’t feature that.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Cook said impatiently, waving a wooden spoon. “What’s that other word, laden? It’s like ladle.” He demonstrated ladling. “When something is close to your heart that means you like it. The man approves of his sauce.”

“I don’t know . . .” Sam frowned.

“What’s the next line, Sam?” Jerome asked.

Sam’s eyes went to the book. “For many a, uh, many a rose-lipt maiden, and many a light-foot lad.”

“That r-o-o?”

“R-u-e.”

“No,” cut in Cook. “I believe you’ll find it’s r-o-u-x. It’s Cajun for sauce.”

“But that’s not what’s here,” Sam protested.

“That ain’t my problem, now is it?” Cook said. “I know what I know.”

Cook was from New Orleans, and never let anyone forget it. He had even more contempt for the Arkansas boys than Jerome did, and he didn’t try to hide it.

“When I get back home,” Jerome said, “I’ll look that up for you.”

“Thanks, Jerome.” Sam hopped out of the tree and stopped to stare down the tracks at the elevator complex. “That place on fire or something?”

Jerome shaded his eyes from the late afternoon sun. “It’s dust. We used to get something like that off the dry mix at the cement plant. Only here, it’s from grain, most likely.”

Sam’s big eyes stared at him unblinking, his head nodding a little, like a boy to his daddy. If he and Lucy had got married when they should have, they might have a son this age. But there were money problems, and then came the war. Anyway, Sam had more on the ball than the rest of them, even if he was shy and peculiar, always carrying that little poetry book around.

“There’s a whole mess of buildings,” Sam said, pointing at the grain complex. “But that one tower stands up so high. Why is it so tall? They must do something important there. Look how it shines. How’s it work, Jerome?”

“It’s for storing grain, and shipping it out in rail cars. But don’t you go snooping around there. It’s not your business.”

As Jerome turned away toward the bunk cars, Ice sidled up to him again with that grin. This was his ingratiating side, but the mission was the same, as he started wheedling for Jerome to go back to the store for beer. Jerome said no, and added, “Anyway, it looks like a dry town to me. Go ask them yourself.”

“Naw, man, I told you how it is. Ice comes round, all they see is the scar. You’re lighter. You’re good at all that ‘sir and ma’am’ talk. You from around here.”

“Not here.”

“Omaha or whatever.”

Jerome climbed into the bunk car. It was late afternoon hot, but he lingered anyway. He got out his pen and two sheets of lined paper from his locker. He sat on his bunk. He looked at the top sheet, where he’d already written “My Dearest Lucy,” but had not continued. What was there to say? He sighed, and after a time he began to write.

“Another Saturday, and Burdock had us working again past two. I agree Mrs. Randolph is not the best for JJ. If your mom and you worked out your schedules, maybe you could hand off the boy between you. As to Mr. Prosser at the bank, if you can just explain. Let them know we have the money. I know Malcolm says I could get home if I want to but he’s wrong. He thinks being here is some kind of holiday, and I’m gambling or what have you, but I promise it is not the case. Today I went to the store in town, but the man said he didn’t know how to send money. I swear to you I am trying my utmost to get home to you by every means . . .”

As if to mock him, the train whistle shrilled close by. The Missouri River Eagle roared through every evening at this time. The closest station was Nebraska City, ten miles away, where it stopped at 4:20 on its way to a 5:40 arrival at Omaha. He knew the schedule by heart. He was supposed to be able to get on that train and deadhead to Omaha every Friday and come back to work Sunday. That was how it was supposed to work.

It was a bitter irony that the same train that was supposed to take him home was the reason he couldn't go. Every morning they had to stop what they were doing and get the track passable for the 9:15 Eagle to go through southbound, on its way to Kansas City. And every afternoon they had to knock off early to get the track in shape for the Eagle to come through northbound. They'd hold up the freight trains for the track work, even the Red Ball Express, and creep them through one after another on slow orders at night. But the passenger train had to be on time. All that down-time was the reason Burdock gave for making them work on Saturdays, union be damned.

Jerome crumbled the letter and threw it on the floor. He couldn't be saying that to Lucy about her brother, not in a letter anyway. Jerome had been deeply provoked with Malcolm, almost from the first day Malcolm told him about the job. The way he grinned and poked his elbow into Jerome, as if getting away from your family for drinking and carrying on was just about the best thing that could happen to a man. Lucy knew how Malcolm was. And she knew her husband better than to think of him that way. But still. A man shouldn't be saying things like that in front of a man's wife. If she heard it enough, she couldn't help but wonder if some of it was true, especially when they first said he'd be coming home every weekend. Then Malcolm had the nerve to turn around and act like Mr. Union Steward, telling Jerome to stand up for his rights and all that.

He picked up the letter, uncrumpled it, smoothed it across his knee, and looked over what he'd written. He should be writing to her every day. Every day. But this sounded whiny and weak, like he was making excuses. He would try again later.