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PROLOGUE

CHRISTMAS, 1935. Franklin Delano Roosevelt is in the third year of his first term as president of the United States. The Great Depression is in the fifth year of its dismal reign.

It is a time difficult for nearly everyone, but most especially for those who cling precariously to the bottom rung of the economic ladder—the African-Americans or, as they were called until the late 1960s, the Negroes.

Persons of color have never had an easy time in America. A caste system as pernicious and institutionalized as that in India or South Africa takes hold, and a set of pro-white, anti-Negro rules, known as “Jim Crow” laws, proliferates throughout the South.

Whites and Negroes are kept separated—in public bathrooms, swimming pools, phone booths, on trains, buses, schools, sports teams, at drinking fountains, lunch counters, in restaurants, theaters, hotels, and hospitals. Negro doctors do not care for white patients, nor can the blood of black donors be injected into the veins of white people needing a transfusion. Negro preachers do not preach to white congregations. Negro teachers do not instruct white pupils. Negro lawyers do not represent

white clients, nor do Negro judges and jurors decide the fate of white defendants. Negro football and baseball players do not play on white teams. Negro pilots do not fly white passengers.

Negro actors and actresses in films are consigned to minor roles, usually as servants and slaves or as parodies of their own race. With few exceptions, Negro soldiers cannot serve in combat units. Those Negroes who work in offices are employed, more likely than not, to sweep the floors and take out the trash. And just the mere act of a Negro male glancing too long at a white woman in some towns of the South is enough to get him tortured and lynched.

It is a life of general discrimination, segregation, demeaning jobs, low pay, and anti-miscegenation laws that are designed to keep Negroes “in their place,” i.e., at the bottom of the heap. Even in communities where Negroes are in the majority, they are, for the most part, powerless. As a result, Negroes, whether in the North or South, quickly learn where their “place” is, and rarely attempt to cross the line or challenge The System.

In front of their small home in El Dorado (pronounced do-RAY-do), Arkansas, six-year-old Marlon DeWitt Green and his older brother Rudolph know almost nothing of this larger world. They have no concept of race or color, no idea that

they are regarded as “inferior” or “second class” by many whites simply because of the pigmentation of their skin, or because their ancestors were from Africa instead of from Europe. Marlon and Rudolph haven’t yet grasped the idea that they reside in the black section of El Dorado, or even that there are two sections in El Dorado—one black, one white—separate and unequal. But they will soon learn.

In the fading twilight of the soft, southern Christmas evening, they dart about the front yard of the modest home on South Smith Avenue, both with large, tin replicas of the Pan American “China Clipper” amphibious airliner in their small hands, gifts given to them by their hard-working parents, McKinley (“Daddy Kinney”) and Lucy (“Mama Lucy”). They swoop and spin across the patchy lawn, around and around the bare-branched catalpa tree, swinging their arms to and fro to mimic the movements of real aircraft (even flying upside-down and backwards), making roaring noises as if to simulate the sound of four mighty, piston-driven engines, although neither has ever ridden in a real plane or seen one up close.

Mama Lucy calls the boys to dinner, and the two dash for the front porch, each trying to out-race the other, each urging his toy airplane to carry him faster—Marlon knows a spanking awaits him if he is late. As they reach the porch, Marlon takes one last glance up into the sky—a sky full of color—and can only see pink clouds and an unlimited future.

He and his tin plane zoom up the wooden stairs and into the house where his parents, Rudolph, and younger sister Jean are sitting down to dinner. He is right on schedule.

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INTRODUCTION

HIS EYES EXPERTLY scanned the complex array of familiar dials, gauges, and switches before him. Off to his right, muffled by his headset, the grumbling roar of the two four-blade turboprop engines on the starboard wing was a comforting sound, the slight vibration he felt rumbling through the cockpit a reassuring reminder that this was what he had just spent the last nine years of his life fighting for.

As he finished the pre-flight checklist with the captain in the left seat, thirty-six-year-old Marlon DeWitt Green felt the growing tingle of excitement that this moment was about to bring. It had been so long in coming, so wrenching an experience, and so expensive, he could hardly believe it was here.

After the aircraft received clearance by the tower to taxi to the end of runway, First Officer Green looked ahead out the cockpit windshield and saw a long, smooth strip of concrete in front of him, the bright blue Colorado sky and the

warming ball of the sun high above.

The captain released the brakes of the Vickers Viscount 800 that was straining to move, and the sixty-five-seat passenger plane crawled forward, slowly at first, then with a quickening pace, until take-off speed was reached and the 60,000-pound aluminum bird lifted off the runway.

As Marlon continued to scan the gauges and listen for any abnormal sound coming from the engines, he heard the landing gear retract into their wells below the wings and felt his heart soaring into the sky. The exhilaration of flight he had first experienced as an Air Force enlisted man in Hawaii back in 1947, eighteen years earlier, came rushing back to him, a familiar yet ever-new sensation.

He had done it. Despite all the obstacles, road blocks, and dead ends thrown in his path, he had actually done it. As his strong brown hands encircled the steering yoke he reflected on his struggle—his and Eleanor's, and the kids', too—to become the first American of African descent hired as a pilot for a regularly scheduled U.S. airline. There was a swirl of emotions coursing through him at this moment, emotions that needed to be held in check if he were to perform his job to his and Continental Airlines' expectations. If, perhaps, a tear formed in the corners of his eyes, his sunglasses would prevent the captain from seeing them.

And, as he always did when taking off, he said his short, silent prayer to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, France, the patron saint of aviators: "St. Thérèse of the child Jesus, protect us on our flight."

As the Viscount gained altitude and all the gauges registered normal readings, it is possible that Marlon allowed the memory of how it all began to intrude into his thoughts.

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