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The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace

A BRILLIANT YOUNG MAN WHO LEFT NEWARK FOR THE IVY LEAGUE

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Chapter 1

“WHY IS THE AIR NOT ON?” Jackie Peace asked from the back of the car.

“It wears the engine,” her mother, Frances, replied from the driver’s seat. “You can’t bear it for four blocks?”

“He just feels hot to me, real hot.” And then, when her mother chuckled: “What’s funny?”

“You’re a brand-new mama and that’s why you have no idea.”

“Idea of what now?”

“Babies are strong. They can handle just about anything.”

Robert DeShaun Peace, the baby in question, lay sleepy-eyed and pawing in Jackie’s arms. He was a day and a half old, eight pounds, ten ounces. When he’d first been weighed, the number had sounded husky to her. Now, outside the hospital for the first time, he felt nearly weightless. The street outside the car was dark and empty on this swampy late-June night in 1980. The last of the neighborhood children had been called inside to clear the way for the hustlers who governed much of the greater Newark, New Jersey, area, and particularly this township of Orange, during the wilderness of the nocturnal hours.

As Frances had noted, St. Mary’s Hospital was indeed less than half a mile from 181 Chapman Street, where the Peace family lived. They were parked outside their home within two minutes. Chapman Street was about a hundred yards long, dead-ending on South Center Street to the west and Hickory to the east. These bookends actually protected the 100 block from most of the neighborhood’s nightly commerce; dealers found the short stretch claustrophobic, and they were slightly wary of Frances, who never hesitated to march outside at any hour and tell them to get the hell out of her sight.

Jackie carried her son inside, past the rusty fence and weedy rectangle of lawn, up the five buckled stoop stairs, across the narrow porch, and through the open front door, where the ceiling fan made the air cooler. The street had been deserted, but the parlor and dining room were crowded with family. She had eight siblings, enough that she couldn’t keep track of who was living in the house at any given time. Still dizzy from labor and first feedings, she didn’t bother to count how many were there tonight as she reluctantly let the baby be passed around the living room, from her father, Horace, to her sisters Camilla and Carol to her brothers Dante and Garcia. Then her son was crying, and Jackie took him back and carried him to the room on the second floor where they could be alone, which was all she really wanted right now.

“Swaddle that baby and he’ll stop the crying,” her mother called as she ascended the stairs.

“I told you I’m not swaddling anything in this heat!” Jackie called in response. And to Carl, who was something like an adopted younger brother, “If you see Skeet out tonight, tell him to get back here.” Skeet was Rob’s father.

She laid the boy naked in the center of the mattress with a towel spread beneath him, and she lay beside him at the edge of the single bed to let him feed. They fell asleep that way, with her hand pressed against his back, holding him against her. His cries woke her in the early morning, and she raised her head hoping that Skeet would be there—he had left the hospital room abruptly a few hours after the birth, saying he had some “things to take care of”—but she and the baby remained the only warm bodies in the room.

* * *

ASIDE FROM A few failed attempts to strike out on her own, Jackie Peace had lived on Chapman Street in Orange, New Jersey, since 1960, when she was eleven. The house had first belonged to her uncle and had been left in her father’s name when that uncle died of lung cancer. Back then, the Peaces had been one of two black families on a block of middle-class European immigrants, mostly Italian, and their race hadn’t bothered anyone. In that climate, people didn’t think much about race, at least not outwardly. They thought about work. They thought about family. They thought about property. Men woke early and rode buses and

car pools to the factory jobs that were the lifeblood of the greater Newark economy. Women stayed home and raised children. Neighbors, in silent and efficient understanding, kept an eye on the homes on either side of theirs, most of which were turn-of-the-century clapboards with peaked roofs set atop fourth-floor attics—attics packed with old photo albums and records and dishware, remnants of the passing down of property from generation to generation beginning in the early 1900s. The homes were narrow and close together, but inside they felt big enough, with high ceilings and wide portals between rooms and long backyards shaded by native willow oaks. Police made regular patrols and were known by name.

Central Avenue, a thoroughfare one block south of and parallel to Chapman Street, connected downtown Newark to the pastoral townships farther west: a succession of Italian, Polish, and Jewish grocers, pharmacies, clothing stores, flower shops, funeral homes, and local banks. On the south side of Central Avenue, Orange Park stretched out in ten green, rolling acres shaped like an arrow, its grounds bright with mothers gossiping and children playing. Though dense and urban, Orange could feel very much like a small town where all needs—social, domestic, financial—were proximate and easily sustained. Because factories were the central commerce of greater Newark, and because the workers in those factories lived in places such as Orange, families like the Peaces could feel vital, as if the history of the city of Newark were moving through them.

If Jackie looked east on Central Avenue, in the direction of downtown, she could see in the distance the first of those brick, boxy towers known as “slums in the sky.” The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development had erected sixteen of these projects in the 1950s to manage the influx of southerners seeking industrial work—mostly poor and mostly black. These communities had been intentionally segregated by race, in accordance with the common wisdom of urban planners at the time: if people were going to be stacked in such an uncomfortable way, they’d likely be more comfortable stacked with others of their own kind. The towers also served to segregate the urban problems of drugs, violence, and extreme poverty. With such signals largely contained behind those sheer walls and barred windows, people like Jackie and her siblings could drive wide around them, windows up and doors locked.

Jackie’s father, Horace, worked at Linden Assembly, a General Motors plant three towns away. She didn’t know what he did exactly, only that his work involved simple mechanical tasks that he performed over and over again, all day, every day. She’d always figured this repetition to be the source of his sternness, his absolute insistence on correct manners and etiquette. To him, life was lived successfully by getting the small things right every time. If he grew lazy on the job, he’d be fired and replaced by someone else who wouldn’t, any one of the thousands of workers who could do what he did. Likewise, if Jackie or her siblings forgot to say, “May I please . . .,” when asking for something, they’d be slapped—once, hard—on the back of the head. Days were about doing your chores and schoolwork quietly, keeping questions to a minimum. Nights were about staying out of Horace’s way—also quietly, which was harder to do as younger siblings (Jackie was the third of nine) kept being born every two to three years. That house came to feel quite small indeed once three people inhabited each bedroom. As the number of bodies increased, so, too, did the financial and physical strain, shared by all except the very youngest, of keeping everyone fed.

Jackie knew from a young age that she didn’t want a big family. As a girl, in church and school lessons, she was taught that Love was a boundless and ever-expanding entity. As she grew into her teens and found herself increasingly responsible for taking care of a generation of children she hadn’t herself conceived, she learned that there were limitations even to Love. She understood those limitations definitively: her mother out for milk, her father working a second job, her two older siblings gone with friends, and fifteen-year-old Jackie in the living room, tasked with keeping six stir-crazy little brothers and sisters from breaking anything, including their own bones. She didn’t have enough Love in her to avoid losing her mind at certain points. And in the back of that mind lay the knowledge that once she’d seen all those children grown and positioned out there in the world, the time would come not long thereafter when she’d be responsible for her parents in their place.

She wanted a family of two children, that was all: two children who would be hers, plus a man capable of fathering and providing for them adequately.

* * *

JACKIE HADN'T BEEN told that Carl's friend Skeet might show up, but there he was: not tall but barrel-chested and dark-eyed with a particular coil-like hunch in his posture, the kind of man whose presence was noted by all patrons when he walked into a bar—all except Jackie, even as Skeet approached her directly. She was well accustomed to eluding these sorts, men who relished playing the heavy.

The year was 1979, and Jackie was thirty years old. She'd lost her job at a soul food restaurant on South Orange Avenue, which meant that she'd moved back into her parents' house from the East Orange apartment she'd been sharing with two high school girlfriends. Carl, a friend of the family who had more or less grown up at 181 Chapman Street, felt sorry for her, as she had neither a man nor a baby and was no doubt hearing about it from her mother all the time. Still, Jackie hadn't been leaving the house much lately. Carl considered that a shame, because she was a striking woman with small but intense eyes, a tall brow, an angular chin, thin lips, and short hair (she refused to spend money on a weave) that cumulatively projected an immovable conviction. Carl, when they hung out, got a kick out of the way men would approach her over younger, more classically attractive, easier women; these men seemed drawn to the challenge that Jackie's countenance most surely offered. Jackie was fun, too, and he'd convinced her to meet him at Passion Sports Bar & Café in the Grove Terrace section of Vailsburg, just west of downtown Newark, a conveniently located stopover for the mostly black workers commuting home at the end of the factory shifts. For many, these stopovers could very easily become all-nighters, and the room grew rowdy around nine or ten o'clock, which was when Jackie and Carl found themselves at the bar, talking about work, money, friends, and how to get her out of the house on Chapman Street.

Carl had met Robert "Skeet" Douglas a few months earlier on a factory demolition job, both grunt laborers who manually cleared the debris too fine for the diggers. They'd gotten along well—Carl was quiet and reserved while Skeet was a witty leader of men. Their acquaintance had led to a loose partnership hustling cocaine. "Making movements," Skeet called what they did, nothing major or particularly dangerous in the great scheme.

At the bar, Skeet eyed Jackie and smiled disarmingly. She ignored him; there were plenty of girls at the bar who would be susceptible to his clearly well-honed charm, girls who didn't know any better. She said she had to get home to make sure her youngest brother had finished his schoolwork.

"What's the assignment?" Skeet asked.

Jackie replied that it was a biography of Frederick Douglass. Skeet proceeded to lay out, from memory, all the key moments and dates of Frederick Douglass's life. The smooth talk vanished as he explained, humbly, that he'd always had a knack for remembering things.

Jackie let him give her a ride home. He happened to live on Pierson Street, just two blocks north of Chapman. She listened to more biographies on the way; anyone she could name, he knew his or her story. Of his own story, however, she didn't learn much that night, or any of the nights that followed.

* * *

"YOU SPOIL THAT child."

Jackie heard these words from everyone. She heard them during her four-week maternity leave from St. Mary's Hospital (in addition to having given birth there, she worked in the basement kitchen), and she heard them after she went back to work. She heard them from her parents, from her siblings, from her friends, and most often from Skeet. "You never put him down. Whenever he wants something, you give it to him. He sleeps in the bed with you!" Skeet would say, not angry but incredulous in a way that only Skeet could get. "Now I see why you won't marry me, because you're married to a six-month-old—"

"There's nothing bad about him feeling safe."

"There's something real bad about him getting everything he wants when he wants it. The boy's never had to struggle for anything in his life."

"If I have my say, he never will."

She talked back to Skeet, and that was one of the reasons he liked her.

She didn't know as many facts as he did, and so didn't have the capacity to rebut arguments as he took such pleasure in doing. But she could often shut him up with just a few words, Jackie's basic confidence in her own sense trumping all of Skeet's verbal tricks and back doors. She never let him talk her in circles like he did with Carl; she never let him be right when he was wrong.

The stance that most flummoxed the man was her refusal to marry him, because of the precise and intractable way she'd thought it through. Her older sister Camilla had gotten pregnant at nineteen, married the father, and had the baby. Two years later, the father was gone but the baby remained. Her best friend, Janice, had done the same thing, as had so many others. Jackie believed it wasn't the baby that drove a man to abandonment; she'd observed the bond between a father and his child and knew it to be a true and powerful force. In her estimation, the union of marriage was what ultimately severed the union of family: the arguments over housing and money and time, the ribbing by unfettered friends, the inexorable waning of years and freedom. Men were aggressive creatures by nature, she believed, and as strongly and skillfully as they could push for immediate satisfactions such as lovemaking, they could just as strongly (though less skillfully) push past any obstacles they saw as being in the way of those immediacies.

The baby had not been accidental. She was thirty-one and he was thirty-four; she was strong and he was smart; each enjoyed the other more than anyone else in their orbit; they challenged one another in a positive way; they both had incomes; they were ready. But she'd been clear from the start that she wasn't going to marry him. Knowing that he trafficked in drugs—and intentionally not knowing to what extent, where, or with whom besides Carl—she refused even to move into his home on Pierson Street, which, like Jackie's home, had been in his family for decades. But she still, two years and one child later, couldn't make him see that her decision was for his own good. He could live his life, and all he had to do was help provide, spare what time he could, and treat them well when he was around. She wanted him to expend whatever doting instinct he possessed on the baby, not on her. Of course, this orchestration wasn't entirely selfless. She had her own freedom to consider, too. Before Rob was born, she thought this would mean going out and meeting new people on her own terms, without the curfew of a possessive husband or the baggage of having been abandoned by one. However, the moment she first held her son that fantasy evaporated and a freedom of a different kind coalesced in its place: the freedom to raise her child the way she, and only she, desired. Jackie hadn't been out socially since the birth, and she had no inclination to do so.

People looked down on her with pity and even with scorn for this fundamental, atypical decision. She could bear their opinions, some of which were silent, some not. She had a baby boy, and she never saw a trace of pity or scorn in his eyes.

* * *

NEWARK AND THE Oranges were not the places Jackie had known as a child. During the 1970s—her twenties—she'd been vaguely aware of the things people talked about when they talked about Newark. There were the riots of July 1967, incited by the alleged brutality inflicted on a black cabdriver by white policemen: five days of burning, looting, sniper fire, and rage, at the end of which twenty-six people were dead, more than seven hundred were injured, fifteen hundred were arrested, and the texture of the city was forever changed. On one of those nights, Jackie and her girlfriends had ventured toward the city; they'd wanted to see for themselves what was going on, like a party they would regret missing (they'd been turned away by National Guardsmen at a checkpoint). There was also much talk about how the communities were no longer defined by the factories where people worked or the countries from which their grandparents had come seeking that work. Instead, they were increasingly defined by skin color: black, brown, or white. But very little of this talk had happened at her own dinner table, where Horace had presided from the contained space his soul inhabited. She'd seen teenagers throwing stones at squad cars and then fence hopping through the backyards of Chapman Street. She'd seen white-black fistfights break out in broad daylight on busy streets, and she'd stepped over the gore of teeth and bloody gum tissue left

on the sidewalk in their wake. The men her girlfriends dated were too often angry and muttering about oppression. One of the reasons she took to Skeet later in life was that he never went to that place; he believed with a firm positivity that he didn't need to waste time resenting real or imagined social constructs because he would always be ahead of them. The individual, not the people, was responsible for success or failure. Skeet aimed to succeed.

After the riots came the phenomenon of white flight, which wasn't discussed—not yet—but was observed when she rode the bus to her first job after high school, working in the mail room of Orange City Hall: FOR SALE signs, three and four to a block. In 1973, the western spur of the I-280 was completed, a freeway that channeled beneath the Oranges (just four blocks north of Chapman Street), connecting downtown Newark to suburban enclaves in Morris County and the Watchung Mountains. Transits that had previously taken more than an hour on surface thoroughfares like Central Avenue now took fifteen minutes. In the wake of the racial tensions that had erupted with the riots six years earlier—and that hadn't ebbed much since—this highway provided a corridor by which people who felt threatened or simply uncomfortable near the city's impoverished alignments could coast through them at sixty miles per hour.

One thing her father did talk about, contemptuously, was the crooked real estate market, specifically realtors who profited off the civic unrest by convincing white homeowners that, once one black family moved onto the block, more would follow, and their home's value would only decline if they remained. Jackie did in fact notice—more as a feeling than an empirical observation—that neighborhoods like Vailsburg, Irvington, and East Orange were becoming “blacker”: house by house, block by block, moving west from downtown Newark over the span of decades. In 1960, when Jackie's family had moved from Elizabeth, the population of East Orange was 39 percent black and 53 percent white. In 1980, when Rob was born, the population was 89 percent black and 4 percent white, and the area was known colloquially as “Illtown.” But as a young woman existing in the day-to-day, Jackie didn't concern herself too much with demographic shifts; she was simply happy to have a job when she could find it, to help pay for fun when she could have it.

Her father, too, was happy to have a job still, because the city's factories were concurrently shutting down in great swaths. All across America but particularly in port cities like Newark, St. Louis, and Chicago, improved transportation capacities caused manufacturing companies to gravitate toward cost-efficient real estate far from urban centers. Japan and China became major exporters of cheaper goods. American companies outsourced jobs to foreign labor. The service economy of the United States grew steadily while the industrial economy tapered and then, beginning in the late '60s, steeply declined. For these reasons and many others, the factories closed, one by one, and the closures came with massive layoffs. Tanneries, glass, plastics, industrial machine parts—over six hundred factories in and around the city, which had made the port of Newark the busiest in the nation for decades, shut down between 1970 and 1980. With public housing already at capacity and unemployment rising steadily, the dangerous side of urban culture began to spill down and outward from the project towers into the spaces left vacant by the fleeing working class: across the wards in the north and west of Newark, and then still farther, into East Orange and, ultimately, past it.

The Peace home lay just over the boundary separating Orange from the traditionally more dangerous East Orange. A half mile west sprawled the affluent neighborhoods like Tuxedo Park and the Seton Hall campus that still made Orange, on paper, a far more diverse and desirable place to live. Because of the technical remove of her address—because Orange was not generally associated with the slums to the east—Jackie couldn't have imagined while growing up that the ethnic grocers on Central Avenue might one day be replaced by liquor stores and check-cashing centers, or that any of the houses on Chapman Street would be abandoned and boarded up, or that the crack of proximate gunfire could interrupt their dinner table talk. But the blight did come, inexorably overtaking Chapman Street, South Essex Avenue, and Lincoln Avenue before the suburbs west of Scotland Road formed the retaining wall that town lines drawn up in City Hall could not. This tide progressed slowly throughout the 1970s, and by the time it was complete, its effects had been sewn into the neighborhood's fabric almost as a given. At any rate, Jackie's physical life had always been based primarily in East Orange, where her friends lived, where she worked and shopped and felt comfortable, and where Skeet Douglas conducted his business. So, too, was Rob's.

During Rob's early childhood, East Orange represented the second-highest concentration of African Americans living below the poverty line in America, behind East St. Louis. The violent crime rate of thirty-five hundred per one hundred thousand people was almost six times the national average of six hundred, and eight times that of adjacent South Orange, which stood at four hundred. The figure meant that any given person in East Orange had roughly a one-in-thirty chance of being violently robbed, assaulted, raped, or killed in any given year; an equivalent person in South Orange, half a mile away, had less than a one-in-two hundred chance of experiencing the same. Horace held his job, though, and the family remained in the house, as they always had, keeping it open to anyone in the family who needed shelter.

Around this time, a resident of the North Ward coined what would become Newark's informal nickname: "Brick City." Depending on whom you asked, the moniker referred to the hardness and resiliency of its people, the bricks that paved many of the older streets downtown, or the easy availability of brick-shaped packages of crack cocaine.

* * *

SKEET PLEADED WITH her to stop working, move in with him, let him support her even if she wouldn't let him marry her.

"I'm not moving to your house," she told him.

"Why not?"

"You know exactly."

He looked at her as if she were the most cynical person on earth.

"You think I'd ever put my son in danger? Or my woman?"

The kitchen job at St. Mary's was the first in which she earned an annual rather than an hourly wage. The wage still amounted to the national minimum of \$3.10 an hour: a little more than \$6,000 a year. The work itself was awful, mixing industrial quantities of low-grade animal products into stews ingestible by straw, portioning out endless lumps of Jell-O onto paper plates from huge vats of it, boiling vegetables to paste. Yet the pride lay in knowing that when she left work, work would still be there tomorrow, and that she'd receive a check on the first and fifteenth of each month. The hospital had a program through which, when the time was right, she could opt to attend night school for a management degree, qualifying her to supervise a kitchen. She'd worked in the cafeteria at Orange High School for credits, so a career in food service represented something like a linear trajectory, more than what many of her friends who ricocheted from job to job had. The money was important, but not as important as the ownership of her life apart from the other lives with which hers was entangled. Fundamental to that ownership was not becoming dependent on a man who dealt drugs, even if she loved that man. Jackie and Rob remained on Chapman Street.

In that house, Rob read. Rather, Jackie read to him, but she felt as if he were reading along with her. With the opening of a book, a shift occurred in his eyes and he nestled an inch deeper into her lap while angling his chin upward, and he seemed to age a year or two. Not a reader herself, Jackie went to the local library for the first time and pulled the popular titles: the Berenstain Bears, Richard Scarry wordbooks, Dr. Seuss, Eric Carle. At a year, he began pointing his index finger at words as she spoke them. At two, he was memorizing simple sentences after he'd heard them once. Always he was entranced by the pictures, the successive turning of pages, the rhythm of his mother's voice. With her job, housing situation, and relationship status, Jackie could sometimes feel as if she had no right to have borne a child. But during those hours, she was meant to be a mother.

Skeet, once he caught wind of the reading obsession, was righteously opposed. In his estimation, a toddler who spent all his time sitting in his mother's lap immersed in fairy tales wasn't getting any better prepared for life. A child, especially a boy, needed to be out and about, around real people, growing skin. "He can do all that when he's with you," Jackie replied. "Me, I'm reading to him." Skeet picked Rob up from day care on the days he wasn't working. He tended to avoid spending time on Chapman Street, where

he often clashed with Horace and Frances—despite or maybe because of his gregariousness, they were suspicious of him, and they also seemed to blame him for the no-marriage clause. Instead, he'd drive Rob around town to show off his son to various friends. These regular rounds were never drug related; he knew better than that. Skeet simply loved people—talking with them, eating with them, helping them fix things—and it wasn't uncommon for him to eat six separate lunches over the course of an afternoon. He wanted to instill that sociability in his son; he believed that being curious about people was one of the few crucial life skills that could be fully nurtured in a place like East Orange.

Jackie's hypothesis regarding fathers and sons had proved correct: the boy had a powerful connection with his father, and Skeet was generous with his time and money. But what she hadn't accounted for was the fact that, by the architecture of her design, the three of them were rarely together. Rob was at day care, or with her and her family, or with Skeet. And so the mannerisms he picked up from each of them appeared abruptly, often abrasively, to the other. The toddler's mind had incredible suction, as his father's did. When he spontaneously recited *Go, Dog. Go!* rhymes in Skeet's car, his father came back to Jackie wondering loudly why his son's head was being saturated by stories involving canines picnicking in tree canopies (dogs around here were often fierce creatures bred for their aggressiveness, not to be treated so lightly). When Jackie put Rob to bed with a book and heard him instead singing himself to sleep with Grandmaster Flash and the Fabulous Five lyrics, she winced. Skeet saw his three-year-old son being bullied on the playground, timid around older people, quiet when other boys were loud; Jackie saw the same son pushing another child at day-care drop-off and grabbing his toy truck.

Like any two parents, they fought. These fights happened mostly on the Chapman Street front porch at night, sitting in the plastic chairs that were chained to the wooden railing, Skeet's cigarette making loops of smoke as he waved his hands around. The neighborhood became desolate after dark, aside from a few clusters of young men passing periodically, smoking and murmuring. Some of them would offer nods of recognition to Skeet, a telepathy between men from which Jackie was glad to be excluded. Jackie's and Skeet's voices would echo off the cracked sidewalk. She didn't care if these street thugs or neighbors or her family could hear, so long as Rob, asleep upstairs in their room, could not. They concentrated on the particulars, the minute details of books and music and diction and schools. Deeper in their hearts, they were debating what kind of man they wanted their son to be.

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