



**LOVECRAFT
COUNTRY**

ALSO BY MATT RUFF

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Bad Monkeys

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Sewer, Gas & Electric: The Public Works Trilogy

Fool on the Hill

LOVECRAFT COUNTRY

✧ A NOVEL ✧

MATT RUFF



HARPER

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FOR HAROLD AND RITA





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JIM CROW MILE—A unit of measurement, peculiar to colored motorists, comprising both physical distance and random helpings of fear, paranoia, frustration, and outrage. Its amorphous nature makes exact travel times impossible to calculate, and its violence puts the traveler's good health and sanity constantly at hazard.

—The Safe Negro Travel Guide, *Summer 1954 edition*

Atticus was almost home when the state trooper pulled him over.

He'd left Jacksonville two days before in a secondhand '48 Cadillac Coupe that he'd bought with the last of his Army pay. The first day he drove 450 miles, eating and drinking from a basket he'd packed in advance, stopping the car only to get gas. At one of the gas stops the colored restroom was out of order, and when the attendant refused him the key to the whites' room, Atticus was forced to urinate in the bushes behind the station.

He spent the night in Chattanooga. *The Safe Negro Travel Guide* had listings for four hotels and a motel, all in the same part of the city. Atticus chose the motel, which had an attached 24-hour diner. The price of the room, as promised by the *Guide*, was three dollars.

In the diner the next morning he consulted a road atlas. He had another six hundred miles to go to Chicago. Midway along his intended route was the city of Louisville, Kentucky, which according to the *Guide* had a restaurant that would serve him lunch. Atticus considered it, but any inclination to further delay his homecoming was overwhelmed by a desire to put the South behind him, so after he finished

breakfast he got the basket from his car and had the diner cook fill it with sandwiches and Cokes and cold fried chicken.

Around one p.m. he reached the Ohio River, which marked the border between Kentucky and Indiana. As he crossed the water on a bridge named for a dead slave owner, Atticus cocked his arm out the window and bade Jim Crow farewell with a raised middle finger. A white driver coming the other way saw the gesture and shouted something vile, but Atticus just laughed and stepped on the gas, and so passed into the North.

An hour later along a stretch of farmland the Cadillac blew a tire. Atticus wrestled the car to a safe stop at the roadside and got out to put on the spare, but the spare was flat, too. He was frustrated by this—he'd checked the spare before setting out, and it had seemed fine then—but however much he frowned at it, the spare remained resolute in its flatness. A Southern tire, Atticus thought: Jim Crow's revenge.

Behind him for at least ten miles there was nothing but fields and woods, but looking ahead on the road he could see, perhaps two miles distant, a cluster of buildings. Taking *The Safe Negro Travel Guide* with him, he started walking. There was traffic on the road, and at first as he walked he tried waving down vehicles that were headed his way, but the drivers all either ignored him or sped up to get past him, and eventually he gave up and just concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

He came to the first of the buildings. The sign out front said JANSSEN'S AUTO REPAIR, and Atticus thought he might be in luck until he saw the Confederate flag hanging above the garage entrance. That was almost enough to make him keep walking, but he decided he had to try.

Inside the garage were two white men: a little fellow with a peach-fuzz mustache who sat on a high stool reading a magazine, and a much bigger man who was bent under the open hood of a pickup truck. As Atticus entered, the little man looked up from his magazine and made a rude sucking sound between his teeth.

"Excuse me," Atticus said. This got the attention of the big man. As he straightened up and turned around, Atticus saw he had a tattoo of what looked like a wolf's head on his forearm.

"Sorry to disturb you," Atticus said, "but I've had some trouble. I need to buy a tire."

The big man glared at him for a moment, then said flatly: "No."

"I can see you're busy," said Atticus, as if that might be the problem. "I'm not asking you to change it for me. Just sell me the tire, and I'll—"

"No."

"I don't understand. You don't want my money? You don't have to *do* anything, just—"

"No." The big man crossed his arms. "You need me to say it another fifty times? Because I will."

And Atticus, fuming now, said: "That's a Wolfhound tattoo, right? Twenty-seventh Infantry regiment?" He fingered the service pin on his own lapel. "I was with the 24th Infantry. We fought alongside the 27th across most of Korea."

"I wasn't in Korea," the big man said. "I was at Guadalcanal, and Luzon. And there weren't any niggers there."

With that he bent under the truck hood again, his back both a dismissal and an invitation. Leaving Atticus to decide which way he wanted to take it. The collective indignities of the past months in Florida made it a closer call than Atticus liked. The little man on the stool was still looking at him, and if he'd said anything or even cracked a smile Atticus would have gone in swinging. But the little man, perhaps sensing how quickly he could lose his teeth even with the big man to protect him, did not smile or speak, and Atticus stalked off with his fists at his sides.

Across the road was a general store with a pay phone on its front porch. Atticus looked in the *Guide* and found a listing for a Negro-owned garage in Indianapolis, some fifty miles away. He placed the call and explained his predicament to the mechanic who answered. The

mechanic was sympathetic and agreed to come help, but warned that it would be a while. "That's OK," Atticus said. "I'll be here."

He hung up and noticed the old woman inside the general store watching him nervously through the screen door. Once again, he chose to turn and walk away.

He went back to the car. In the trunk beside the useless spare was a cardboard box filled with battered paperbacks. Atticus selected a copy of Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. He sat in the Cadillac and read about the "rocket summer" of 1999, when winter's snows were melted by the exhaust from a Mars-bound spacecraft. He imagined himself aboard, rising into the sky on a jet of fire, leaving North and South behind forever.

Four hours passed. He read all of *The Martian Chronicles*. He drank warm Coke and ate a sandwich, but mindful of the gaze of passing motorists, he did not touch the fried chicken. He perspired in the breezeless June heat. When his bladder could no longer be ignored, he waited for a lull in the traffic and went behind a sycamore that grew by the roadside.

It was after seven o'clock when the tow truck arrived. The driver, a gray-haired, light-skinned Negro, introduced himself as Earl Maybree. "Earl, just Earl," he insisted, when Atticus tried to call him Mr. Maybree. He lifted the replacement tire from the rear of the tow truck. "Let's get you back on your way."

With the two of them working together it took less than ten minutes. The simplicity of it, and the thought of the afternoon just wasted for no good reason, started Atticus fuming again. He stepped away from the car to compose himself, pretending to study the sun now hanging low on the horizon.

"How far do you have to go?" Earl asked him.

"Chicago."

Earl raised an eyebrow. "Tonight?"

"Well . . . That was the plan."

“Tell you what,” Earl said. “I’m done for the day. Why don’t you come home with me, let my wife fix you a real dinner. Maybe rest awhile.”

“No, sir, I couldn’t.”

“Sure you could. It’s on your way. And I wouldn’t want you to leave Indiana thinkin’ it’s all bad people.”

Earl lived in the colored district around Indiana Avenue northwest of the state capitol building. His house was a narrow wooden two-story with a tiny patch of grass out front. When they arrived the sun had set and clouds were blowing in from the north, hastening the darkness. In the street, a stickball game was in progress, but now the mothers of the players were calling them inside.

Earl and Atticus went inside too. Earl’s wife, Mavis, greeted Atticus warmly and showed him where he could wash up. Despite the welcome, Atticus was apprehensive sitting down at the kitchen table, for many of the obvious topics of dinner conversation—his service in Korea; his stay in Jacksonville; today’s events; and most of all his father in Chicago—were things he didn’t really care to talk about. But after they’d said grace, Earl surprised him by asking what he’d thought of *The Martian Chronicles*. “I saw you had it in the car.”

So they talked about Ray Bradbury, and Robert Heinlein, and Isaac Asimov, all of whom Earl liked; and L. Ron Hubbard, whom he didn’t; and the Tom Swift series, which Earl had loved when he was young but which embarrassed him now, both for the books’ depiction of Negroes and for the fact that as a boy he hadn’t noticed it, despite his father’s repeated attempts to point it out to him. “Yeah, my pop had some problems with my reading choices too,” Atticus said.

Mavis said little during the meal, seeming content to listen and to refill Atticus’s plate whenever it was in danger of being emptied. By the time they finished dessert it was full dark and rain was drumming on the kitchen window. “Well,” Mavis spoke up at last. “You can’t drive any farther tonight in this.” Atticus, past the point of even token

resistance, allowed himself to be led upstairs to the spare bedroom. There on the dresser was a photograph of a young man in uniform. A black ribbon had been tied around a corner of the frame. "Our Dennis," Mavis said, or so Atticus thought. But as she began to put fresh sheets on the bed, she added: "He died in the forest," and Atticus realized she was talking about the Ardennes.

Atticus lay in bed with a book Earl had offered him: more Bradbury, a short story collection called *Dark Carnival*. It was a nice gesture but not really the best bedtime fare. After reading one story about a vampire family reunion and another, very strange tale about a man who had his skeleton removed, Atticus shut the book, gazed for a moment at the Arkham House imprint on its spine, and set it aside. He reached for his trousers and got out the letter from his father. Reading it over again, he touched a finger to a word written near the bottom of the page. "Arkham," he whispered.

The rain stopped at three in the morning. Atticus opened his eyes in the silence, unsure at first what country he was in. He dressed in the dark and crept downstairs, thinking to leave a note, but Earl was awake, sitting at the kitchen table with a cigarette.

"Sneakin' out?" Earl said to Atticus.

"Yes, sir. I appreciate the hospitality, but I need to get home."

Earl nodded and made a little shooin' gesture with his cigarette hand.

"Tell Mrs. Maybree thank you for me. Tell her I said goodbye."

Earl made the shooin' gesture again. Atticus got in his car and drove off through the dark and still-damp streets, feeling like the ghost in whose bed he had slept.

By first light he was well to the north. He passed a sign reading CHICAGO—52. The state trooper was parked on the shoulder on the opposite side of the road. The trooper had been napping, and had Atticus come even five minutes earlier he might have passed by unnoticed, but in the pink dawnlight the trooper sat up blinking and yawning. He saw Atticus driving by and came fully alert.

Atticus watched in the rearview as the patrol car made a U-turn onto the road. He got the Cadillac's registration and bill of sale from the glove box and put them on the passenger seat along with his driver's license, everything in plain sight so there'd be no confusion about what he was reaching for. Lights flashed in the rearview and the police siren came on. Atticus pulled over, rolled down his window, and as he'd been taught to do in his very first driving lesson, gripped the top of the steering wheel with both hands.

The trooper took his time getting out of the patrol car, stopping to stretch before ambling up alongside the Cadillac.

"Is this your car?" he began.

"Yes, sir," Atticus said. Without taking his hands off the wheel, he inclined his head towards the papers in the passenger seat.

"Show me."

Atticus handed him the documents.

"Atticus Turner," the state trooper said, reading the name off his license. "You know why I stopped you?"

"No, sir," Atticus lied.

"You weren't speeding," the trooper assured him. "But when I saw your license plate, I got worried you might be lost. Florida is the other way."

Atticus gripped the wheel a little tighter. "I'm going to Chicago. Sir."

"What for?"

"Family. My dad needs me."

"But you live in Florida?"

"I've been working down in Jacksonville. Since I got out of the service."

The trooper yawned without bothering to cover his mouth. "Been working, or still working?"

"Sir?"

"Are you going back to Florida?"

"No, sir. I don't plan to."

"You don't plan to. So you're staying in Chicago?"

"For a while."

"How long?"

"I don't know. As long as my father needs me."

"And then what?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided."

"You haven't decided." The trooper frowned. "But you're just passing through, here. Right?"

"Yes, sir," Atticus said, resisting the temptation to add, "if you'll let me."

Still frowning, the trooper shoved the documents back through the window. Atticus replaced them on the passenger seat. "What's in there?" the trooper asked next, pointing at the basket on the floor.

"What's left of my lunch, from yesterday."

"What about in back? Anything in the trunk?"

"Just my clothes," Atticus said. "My Army uniform. Some books."

"What kind of books?"

"Science fiction, mostly."

"*Science* fiction? And this is your car?"

"Officer—"

"Step out." The trooper moved back from the door and placed a hand on the butt of his revolver. Atticus got out of the car, slowly. Standing, he was an inch taller than the trooper; his reward for this impertinence was to be spun around, shoved up against the Cadillac, and roughly frisked. "All right," said the trooper. "Open the trunk."

The trooper pawed through Atticus's clothes first, patting down the sides of his duffel bag as if it too were a black man braced against a car. Then he turned to the books, dumping the box out into the trunk. Atticus tried not to care, telling himself paperbacks were meant to be abused, but it was hard, like watching friends get knocked around.

“What’s this?” The trooper picked up a gift-wrapped object that had been at the bottom of the box.

“Another book,” Atticus said. “It’s a present for my uncle.”

The trooper tore off the wrapping paper, revealing a hardbound volume. “*A Princess of Mars.*” He looked sideways at Atticus. “Your uncle likes princesses, does he?” He tossed the book into the box, Atticus dying a little as it landed splayed open, bending pages.

The trooper circled the Cadillac. When he opened the passenger door, Atticus thought he was going after *The Martian Chronicles*, which was still up front somewhere. But the trooper came up holding *The Safe Negro Travel Guide*. He thumbed through it, at first puzzled and then astonished. “These addresses,” he said. “These are all places that serve colored people?” Atticus nodded. “Well,” said the trooper, “if that doesn’t beat everything . . .” He squinted at the *Guide* edge-on. “Not very thick, is it?” Atticus didn’t respond to that.

“All right,” the trooper said finally. “I’m going to let you go. But I’m keeping this guidebook. Don’t worry,” he added, forestalling the objection that Atticus knew better than to make, “you won’t need it anymore. You say you’re going to Chicago? Well, between here and there, there’s *no* place that you want to stop. Understood?”

Atticus understood.

The main office of the Safe Negro Travel Company (George Berry, proprietor) was in Washington Park on Chicago’s South Side. Atticus parked in front of the Freemasons’ temple next door and sat watching the early morning pedestrians and the drivers going by, not a white face among them. There were streets in Jacksonville where you’d rarely see a white person either, but this street, this neighborhood, was home—had, once upon a time, been Atticus’s whole world—and it soothed him like nothing save his mother’s voice could. As he relaxed, the ball inside

him unwinding by slow degrees, he reflected that the state trooper had been right: Here, he needed no guide.

The travel office was still closed at this hour, but Atticus could see a light on in the apartment above it. Rather than ring the buzzer, he went around to the alley and climbed the fire escape to knock at the kitchen door. From within he heard the scrape of a chair and the rasp of the door bolt. The door opened halfway and Uncle George peered out warily. But when he saw who it was he cried out “Hey!” and threw the door wide, drawing Atticus into a tight embrace.

“Hey yourself,” Atticus said laughing, returning the hug.

“Man, it’s good to see you!” Stepping back, George gripped Atticus by the shoulders and looked him up and down. “When did you get back?”

“Just rolled in now.”

“Well come on inside.”

Entering the kitchen, Atticus was struck by the funhouse sensation that had dogged him on his only other visit home since joining the military. Though he’d reached his full growth—just—before enlisting, in his strongest memories of this place he’d been a much smaller person, so that the room seemed to have shrunk. When his uncle had shut the door and turned to embrace him a second time, Atticus realized George had shrunk too, though in George’s case that just meant they were now the same height.

“Is Aunt Hippolyta home?” Atticus asked, curious to take her measure as well.

“No,” said George. “She’s in Wyoming. There’s this new spa opened up near Yellowstone, run by Quakers if you can believe it. Supposedly open to everyone. She’s checking it out.” Early in their marriage, Hippolyta had volunteered herself as a scout for *The Safe Negro Travel Guide*, specializing in vacation resorts. Initially she and George had traveled together, but these days she most often went alone, leaving George home to care for their son. “She’ll be gone at least a week. But I know Horace will be glad to see you, once he wakes up.”

"Horace is still sleeping?" Atticus was surprised. "School year's not over already, is it?"

"Not quite," George said. "But today's Saturday." Laughing at Atticus's reaction to this news: "Guess I don't have to ask how your trip was."

"No, you don't." He held out the book he'd carried like a broken bird from the car. "Here."

"What's this . . . Ah, Mr. Burroughs!"

"Souvenir from Japan," Atticus said. "I found this bookstore outside the base in Gifu, guy had one shelf of books in English, almost all science fiction . . . I thought that might be a first edition, but now I think it's just old."

"Well-traveled," George said. The book fell open to the bent pages; Atticus had done his best to flatten them, but the creasing was permanent.

"Yeah, it was in better shape when I bought it."

"Hey, that's OK," George said. "Should still read just fine." He smiled. "Come on, let's put this in the place of honor." He headed for the bedroom he and Hippolyta shared with their best books.

Atticus followed him partway, stopping outside the apartment's other bedroom to look in on his cousin. Horace, twelve years old, lay on his back with his mouth open, his breath wheezy and labored. There was an issue of *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet* beside his pillow and more were scattered on the floor.

A short-legged easel desk faced the wall opposite the bed. A sheet of construction paper on the desk had been divided into panels containing scenes from an intergalactic adventure: Negroes in capes, wandering through a Buck Rogers landscape. Atticus studied it from the doorway, head tilted as he tried to pick up the thread of the story.

George came back down the hall. "He's getting really good," Atticus said, keeping his voice low.

"Yeah, he's been trying to talk me into starting a comics line. I told him if he saves up enough of his own money, I might go in with him on

a *small* print run . . . So, you hungry? Why don't I get him up, call your father, and we all go out to breakfast together. You seen Montrose yet?"

"Not yet," said Atticus. "And before I do, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"All right. Go make yourself comfortable, I'll put coffee on."

While George busied himself in the kitchen, Atticus went out to the front parlor, which in childhood had served him as both library and reading room. The bookshelves were divided into his and hers, Aunt Hippolyta's interests running primarily to science and natural history, with a smattering of Jane Austen. George gave a nod to respectable literature but reserved his deepest passion and most of his shelf space for the genres of pulp: science fiction, fantasy, mysteries and detective stories, horror and weird tales.

Atticus's shared devotion to these mostly white-authored genres had been a source of ongoing struggle with his father. George, as Montrose's older brother, was largely immune to his scorn and could always tell him to keep his opinions to himself. Atticus didn't have that privilege. If his father was in a mood to debate his tastes in reading, he had no choice but to oblige him.

There was usually plenty to argue about. Edgar Rice Burroughs, for example, offered a wealth of critical fodder with his Tarzan stories (was it even necessary to list all the problems Montrose had with Tarzan, starting with the very idea of him?), or his Barsoom series, whose protagonist John Carter had been a captain in the Army of Northern Virginia before becoming a Martian warlord. "A Confederate officer?" Atticus's father had said, appalled. "That's the hero?" When Atticus tried to suggest it wasn't that bad since technically John Carter was an ex-Confederate, his father scoffed: "Ex-Confederate? What's that, like an ex-Nazi? The man fought for slavery! You don't get to put an 'ex-' in front of that!"

Montrose could have simply forbidden him to read such things. Atticus knew other sons whose fathers had done that, who'd thrown

their comic books and *Amazing Stories* collections into the trash. But Montrose, with limited exceptions, didn't believe in book-banning. He always insisted he just wanted Atticus to think about what he read, rather than imbibing it mindlessly, and Atticus, if he were being honest, had to admit that was a reasonable goal. But if it was fair to acknowledge his father's good intentions, it also seemed fair to point out that his father was a belligerent man who enjoyed having cause to pick on him.

Uncle George wasn't much help. "It's not as if your father's wrong," he said one time when Atticus was complaining.

"But you love these stories!" Atticus said. "You love them as much as I do!"

"I do love them," George agreed. "But stories are like people, Atticus. Loving them doesn't make them perfect. You try to cherish their virtues and overlook their flaws. The flaws are still there, though."

"But you don't get mad. Not like Pop does."

"No, that's true, I don't get mad. Not at stories. They do disappoint me sometimes." He looked at the shelves. "Sometimes, they stab me in the heart."

Standing in front of those same shelves now, Atticus reached for a book bearing the Arkham House imprint: *The Outsider and Others*, by H. P. Lovecraft.

Lovecraft was not an author Atticus would have expected to like. He wrote horror stories, which were more George's thing, Atticus preferring adventures with happy or at least hopeful endings. But one day on a whim he'd decided to give Lovecraft a try, choosing at random a lengthy tale called "At the Mountains of Madness."

The story concerned a scientific fossil-hunting expedition to Antarctica. While scouting for new dig sites, the scientists discovered a mountain range with peaks higher than Everest. In a plateau in the mountains lay a city, built millions of years ago by a race of aliens called the Elder Things, or Old Ones, who came to Earth from space during

the Precambrian Era. Although the Old Ones had abandoned the city long ago, their former slaves, protoplasmic monsters called shoggoths, still roamed the tunnels beneath the ruins.

“Shiggoths?” Atticus’s father said, when Atticus made the mistake of telling him about this.

“Shoggoths,” Atticus corrected him.

“Uh-huh. And the master race, the Elder Klansmen—”

“Elder *Things*. Old Ones.”

“They’re fair-skinned, I bet. And the Shiggoths, they’re dark.”

“The Elder Things are barrel-shaped. They have *wings*.”

“But they’re white, right?”

“They’re *gray*.”

“*Pale* gray?”

After some additional teasing in this vein—and a more serious sidebar on Mr. Lovecraft’s willful misconceptions about evolution—Montrose let it go, or seemed to. But a few nights later he brought home a surprise.

Atticus’s mother was out with a friend that evening, and Atticus was alone in the apartment, reading “The Call of Cthulhu” and trying to ignore a strange gurgling in the kitchen sink. He was actually relieved when his father came home.

Montrose started in right away. “I stopped by the public library after work,” he said as he was hanging up his coat. “I did a little research on your friend Mr. Lovecraft.”

“Yeah?” Atticus said, without enthusiasm. He recognized the perverse mix of anger and glee in his father’s voice and knew that something he enjoyed was about to be irrevocably spoiled.

“Turns out he was a poet, too. No Langston Hughes, but still, it’s interesting . . . Here.”

The typescript his father handed him was like a cheap parody of one of the arcane texts from Lovecraft’s stories: an amateur literary journal, produced on an ancient mimeograph and bound between stained sheets of cardboard. There was no title page, but a tag on the

cover gave its origin as PROVIDENCE, 1912. How it had ended up in the Chicago public library system Atticus never knew, but given its existence he wasn't surprised his father had managed to find it. Montrose had a nose for such things.

An index card from the library catalogue had been used as a bookmark in the journal. Atticus turned to the indicated page, and there it was, eight lines of comic verse by Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

The title of the poem was "On the Creation of Niggers."

Sometimes, they stab me in the heart . . .

"Getting reacquainted with old friends?" George said, appearing with the coffee.

"Yeah." Atticus slid the book back into its place and took the cup George offered him. "Thanks." They sat, Atticus feeling a wave of exhaustion wash over him.

"So," George said. "How was Florida?"

"Segregated," Atticus replied, thinking as he said it that it wasn't the right word, since you could apply it just as well to Chicago.

But George nodded. "Yeah, I didn't think you'd like the South. Didn't expect to see you back so soon, though. I figured you'd stick it out there at least through the end of the summer."

"I figured that too," Atticus said. "And I was thinking I might try California, next. But then I got this." He showed George the letter from his father.

George recognized the handwriting on the envelope immediately. He nodded again. "Montrose asked me for your mailing address."

"He tell you what he was planning to write me about?"

George laughed. "You kidding? He wouldn't even admit he was *going* to write you. Just told me he thought he should have the address, 'in case.' It's been like that since you left: He worries about you, wants to know everything I know, but Lord forbid he should say so. So he'll slip it in, casual, when we're talking about something else: 'Oh, *by the way*, you hear anything about that boy?'"

“That boy.” Atticus made a face.

“Hey, if he used your name it might sound like he cared. And even that much is an improvement. That first year you were in Korea, he wouldn’t even ask. He’d come over for dinner and wait for me to volunteer the information. And if I didn’t volunteer, he wouldn’t say anything, but he wouldn’t go home. He’d stay here till ten, eleven, midnight if that’s what it took, waiting for me to bring up the subject of you. Drove me crazy.” George shook his head. “So what did he write to you about?”

“Mom,” Atticus said. “He says he found out where her family came from.”

“He’s still obsessing on that? Huh.”

Atticus’s mother, Dora, had been the only child of an unmarried woman. Her father’s identity was a mystery and a taboo subject. Her mother, disowned by her family, had in turn seldom spoken of them, as a result of which Dora knew little of her maternal grandparents other than that they had lived in Brooklyn and came originally from somewhere in New England.

Montrose, who could trace his own roots back five generations, had sworn to find out more about Dora’s ancestry. At first, when he and Dora were courting, he had intended this as a sort of love offering, but by the time Atticus was born, it had become a purely selfish pursuit and one of a long list of things about which he and Dora fought.

Atticus could remember lying in his childhood bed, listening to the two of them argue. “How can you not want to know?” his father would say. “Who you come from is part of who you are. How do you just let that be stolen from you?”

“I know where the past leads,” his mother would reply. “It’s a sad place. Why would I want to know it better? Does knowing make *you* happy?”

“It ain’t *about* happy. It’s about being whole. You have a right to that. You have a duty to that.”

“But I don’t want it. Please, just let it go.”

Atticus was seventeen when his mother died. The day of the funeral, he’d found his father pawing through a box of his mother’s keepsakes. Montrose had pulled out a photograph of Dora’s grandparents—the only image of them she’d possessed—and removed it from its frame so he could read something written on the back. Some clue.

Atticus had snatched the photo from his startled father’s hands. “Let it go!” he’d shouted. “She said let it go!” Montrose, rearing back, had recovered quickly, his fury more than a match for his son’s. He’d struck Atticus hard enough to knock him to the floor, then stood over him, raging: “Don’t you *ever* tell me what to do. *Ever*.”

“Of course he’s still obsessing on it,” Atticus said now, in answer to George’s question. “But the thing I need to ask you—you say Pop drove you crazy. What I’m wondering is whether you think he might have finally done the same to himself.” He read aloud from the letter, struggling a bit with his father’s handwriting: “I know that, like your mother, you think you can forgive, *forget*, the past. You can’t. You cannot. The past is alive, a living, thing. You own, *owe* it. Now I have found something, about your mother’s . . . forebears. You have a sacred, a *secret*, legacy, a birthright which has been kept from you.”

“Legacy?” George said. “Is he talking about an inheritance?”

“He doesn’t say exactly. But whatever it is, it has something to do with the place that Mom’s people supposedly came from. He says he needs me to come home, so we can go there, together, and claim what’s mine.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound crazy. Wishful thinking, maybe, but . . .”

“The crazy part isn’t the legacy. It’s the location. This place he wants me to go with him, it’s in Lovecraft Country.”

George shook his head, not understanding.

“Arkham,” Atticus said. “The letter says Mom’s ancestors come from Arkham, Massachusetts.” Arkham: home of the corpse reanimator

Herbert West, and of Miskatonic University, which had sponsored the fossil-hunting expedition to the mountains of madness. “It is made up, right? I mean—”

“Oh, yeah,” George said. “Lovecraft based it on Salem, I think, but it’s not a real place . . . Let me see that letter.” Atticus handed it to him and George studied it, squinting and tilting his head side to side. “It’s a ‘d,’” he said finally.

“What?”

“It’s not Arkham, with a ‘k,’ it’s Ardham, with a ‘d.’”

Atticus got up and stared at the letter over George’s shoulder. “That’s a ‘d?’”

“Yeah.”

“No. A ‘b,’ maybe . . .”

“No, it’s a ‘d.’ Ardham, for sure.”

“Man.” Atticus sighed in frustration. “You know, for someone who talks so much about the importance of being educated, you’d think he’d learn to *write* clearly.”

“It’s not his fault,” George said. “Montrose is dyslexic.”

This was news to Atticus. “Since when?”

“Since ever. It’s why he had so much trouble in school. Well, one reason. Your grandpa Turner had the same problem.”

“Why didn’t I know this?”

“You mean, why didn’t Montrose ever tell you?” George laughed. “Figure it out.” He grabbed a road atlas from one of the bookshelves. After consulting the index in the back, he turned to the map of Massachusetts. “Yeah, here it is.”

Ardham, marked by a hollow dot signifying a settlement of no more than 250 people, was in the north-central part of the state, just below the New Hampshire border. An unnamed tributary of the Connecticut River looped south around it; the map showed no direct road access, though a state highway intersected the tributary nearby.

“Sorry,” George said, as Atticus frowned at the map. “Your dad

hasn't lost his mind. Maybe you should have called before you drove all this way."

"No, it was about time for me to come home," Atticus said. "I guess I'd better go see him. Find out what this 'birthright' is all about."

"Hold on a second . . ."

"What?"

"Devon County," George said, tapping a finger on the map. "Devon County, Massachusetts, that rings a bell . . . Huh. I wonder. Maybe this Ardham is in Lovecraft Country after all . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's go downstairs to the office. I need to check my files."

George had begun publishing *The Safe Negro Travel Guide* as a means of advertising his travel agency's services, and though the *Guide* had ultimately become profitable in its own right, the agency—now expanded to three locations—remained his primary business and source of income.

The agency would book trips and tickets for anyone, but specialized in helping middle-class Negroes negotiate with a travel industry that was at best reluctant to accept their patronage. Through his network of contacts and scouts, George kept up-to-date files not only on which hotels allowed Negro guests, but which air and cruise lines were most likely to honor their reservations. For those wishing to vacation abroad, the agency could recommend destinations that were relatively free of local race prejudice and, just as important, not overrun by white American tourists—for nothing was more frustrating than traveling thousands of miles only to encounter the same bigots you dealt with every day at home.

The files were stored in a back room. George flipped on the lights as they entered and reached for something atop a cabinet beside the door. "Check this out," he said to Atticus.

It was a road atlas, the same edition as the one upstairs, only this copy had been extensively illustrated with brightly colored drawings. Atticus recognized Horace's handiwork: Some of the boy's first art experiments had involved sketching cartoons onto gas station maps. Horace really had gotten good at it, though, and as Atticus paged through the atlas, it dawned on him that what he was holding was a visual translation of *The Safe Negro Travel Guide*.

Major Negro population centers like Chicago's South Side were represented as shining fortresses. Smaller neighborhoods and enclaves were marked with towers or oases. Isolated hotels and motels were inns with smiling keepers. Tourist homes—private residences that lent rooms to Negro travelers—were peasant huts, or tree houses, or hobbit holes.

Less friendly parts of the country were populated by ogres and trolls, vampires and werewolves, wild beasts, ghosts, evil sorcerers, and hooded white knights. In Oklahoma, a great white dragon coiled around Tulsa, breathing fire onto the neighborhood where Atticus's father and Uncle George had been born.

Atticus turned to Massachusetts. Devon County was marked with an icon he'd seen in numerous other places in the atlas: a sundial. Standing beside it, casting his own shadow over the gnomon, was a grim Templar holding a noose.

"Victor Franklin," said George, who'd been rummaging in file drawers while Atticus looked at the atlas. He waved a typewritten sheet he'd extracted from a folder.

"Who?" Atticus said.

"Old schoolmate from Howard. I don't think you ever met him, but the past couple years he's been running the Grand Boulevard office for me. Last September he went back east to visit his folks, and I asked him if he'd take a side trip through New England to check out some new listings for the *Guide*.

"One of the places I sent him was in New Hampshire. Another school friend, Lester Deering, moved up there to open a hotel. Place

was supposed to be up and running already, but Lester had some problems with the local contractors and had to delay—the day Victor came by, he was over in the next town, trying to hire a new electrician to finish the wiring. So Victor shows up and the hotel's not open, nobody's around, and when he tries to rent a room at a motel down the road—”

“No vacancies.”

“Right. Not for him. So he said to hell with it, and decided to head back down into Massachusetts and spend the night at a tourist home.

“So he started driving south, and by the time he crossed the state line he needed to pee. He could have gone to a gas station and asked to use their restroom, but the way his day had been going he could guess how that would turn out, so instead he decided to pull over and go in the woods.

“As soon as he got out of the car, he got nervous. The sun was going down, he hadn't passed another car in miles, and he hadn't seen another colored man since Boston. But he had to go, so he stepped into the woods, just far enough to be out of sight if anyone did drive by. And he was in the middle of his business when he heard something thrashing around farther out in the trees.”

“Shoggoth?” Atticus said.

George smiled. “I don't think Victor would know what that is, but his thoughts were definitely leaning in that direction. ‘It was big, whatever it was,’ he told me, ‘and I wasn't interested in finding out how big.’ So he zipped up in a hurry and ran back out to the road, which is where the real monster was waiting for him.

“County sheriff,” George said. “Victor had been so focused on whatever it was busting branches out in the woods, he never even heard the patrol car drive up. It was just there, parked behind Victor's Lincoln. And the sheriff was leaning against the Lincoln's front hood, holding a rifle. Victor said when he saw the expression on the sheriff's face, he had more than half a mind to turn and run. He said the only thing that stopped him was the certainty he'd be shot in the back if he did that.

“Instead he put his hands up and said, ‘Hello, officer, how can I help you?’ The sheriff started right in with the usual Twenty Questions: Who are you, where are you coming from, why’d you stop here? Victor answered as respectfully as he could, until the sheriff cut him off and said: ‘So what you’re telling me is, you came all the way from Chicago to piss in my woods like some animal?’ And Victor was trying to come up with an answer to that that wouldn’t get him shot in the face, when the sheriff asked another question: ‘Do you know what a sundown town is?’

“Victor told the sheriff yes, he was familiar with the concept. ‘Well,’ the sheriff said, ‘you’re in Devon, which is a sundown *county*. If I’d caught you here after dark, it’d be my sworn duty to hang you from one of these trees.’ And Victor—he said he was so scared he was *calm*, you know that feeling?—Victor looked up in the sky, and he couldn’t see the sun above the trees, but there was still light, so he said: ‘It’s not sunset yet.’ And then, he said, he very nearly fainted, hearing how those words sounded coming out of his mouth, like he was giving sass . . . But the sheriff just chuckled. ‘No, not yet,’ he said. ‘Sunset today is at 7:09. You’ve got seven minutes.’ ‘Well then,’ said Victor, ‘if you let me go on my way, I’ll be out of the county in *six* minutes.’ ‘Not going south, you won’t,’ the sheriff told him. ‘Not unless you speed. And if you speed, I’ll have to pull you over . . .’ ‘I’ll go back north, then,’ Victor said. ‘That *might* work,’ the sheriff said. ‘Why don’t you try that and see what happens?’

“So Victor went to get in the Lincoln, terrified that the sheriff was just toying with him before putting a bullet in him, and then when he opened the car door he had another thought, and he looked at the road and looked at the sheriff and said, ‘Is it legal for me to make a U-turn here?’ And the sheriff smiled and told him, ‘It’s a good thing you asked that. Ordinarily, I’d consider a U-turn to be a violation, but if you say please, I might let it go just this once.’ So Victor said please, and the sheriff ran out the clock some more thinking it over but finally said OK. So Victor got in the Lincoln and the sheriff got in his patrol car

and they both turned around, and Victor went back up the road at just under the speed limit with the sheriff riding his bumper the whole way. He made it into New Hampshire with about thirty seconds to spare.”

Listening to this story, Atticus felt a number of different emotions, but one of the strongest was embarrassment. He’d been so upset by his own encounter with the Indiana state trooper, when the trooper hadn’t even drawn his pistol. “So the sheriff let him go then?”

“The sheriff stopped at the state border. But the road ran straight for another half mile, and when Victor looked in the rearview he saw the sheriff get out of the patrol car and train the rifle on him. He got his head down just in time: The sheriff shot out his back window, and one round came straight through and starred the glass above the steering wheel, right at eye level. Victor kept it on the road, though, and kept his foot on the gas. He went a whole other county without slowing down before he was sure the sheriff wasn’t chasing him. Then the shakes hit him so bad he nearly ran the Lincoln into a ditch.”

“How’d he get home?”

“Through Canada. Quebec border guards had some questions about the bullet holes, but they let him in, and he was able to get the glass replaced in Montreal. And when he finally got back here, he typed up this report”—George waved the sheet of paper again—“saying he couldn’t recommend Devon County for inclusion in *The Safe Negro Travel Guide*.”

“Well, thanks for the warning, George,” Atticus said. “But you know I can’t tell Pop that story. It’d just make him even more determined to go.”

“Yeah, I know. I wouldn’t tell him about the shoggoth, either.”