

EXCERPT · REDEMPTION: THE TWO LIVES OF HARRY BROOKS

Prologue

Most biographies and works of historical fiction are about famous people or famous events, but this book is about neither. It is instead about a fascinating man who committed grievous sins in the first half of his life and hid them from the world in the second, when he otherwise lived a virtuous life.

The man was my grandfather, Dr. Henry Felgar Brooks. Identical twins Margaret and Marjory, the last of his ten children, were born minutes apart in March 1921. Margaret, whom my sister and I called Mama, was my wonderful adoptive mother. Dr. Brooks, who went by Harry, was a gifted preacher of the Word of God. During the Great Depression, he served as the senior minister of the church where I was baptized two decades later, the First Methodist Church in Tupelo, Mississippi.

This book necessarily contains elements of fiction because Harry died nearly eighty years ago, and many details of his life, including the secrets he kept to himself, died with him. But the core of the book is the unvarnished truth based on historical records. Notes at the end detail what I know to be true in each chapter and how I learned it. The notes are preceded by an introduction explaining choices I made for parts of the book that I don't know to be true.

I never met Harry, who died nearly fifteen years before I was born, though I learned some things about the second half of his life from Mama. Until recently, however, I knew nothing about the first half of his life because she knew nothing about it either—or at least nothing that was true.

But one afternoon, in the spring of 2019, my education about the first half of Harry's life began. I was at my desk working on *Fortunate Son*, my memoir about my adoption and discovery of my birth mother's identity, when my phone rang. The caller identified himself as Lee Cheney from Fresno, California. Lee said he had learned that he was my first cousin. He knew I was adopted and said he was adopted too. Like me, he had discovered the identity of one of his biological parents. His birth father was Edwin Brooks, Mama's older brother. Harry was thus Lee's grandfather too—biological in his case, adoptive in mine. Shortly after Lee was born in 1956, he was adopted out of our family. When I was born a year later, I was adopted into it.

That I had a new cousin in California was not the most intriguing news I learned from Lee. Starting with our first call and continuing over the months that followed, he shared with me an extraordinary story he'd learned through a year-long search of census reports, old newspapers, genealogical records, and other historical documents. It was the story of the first half of Harry's life, the story Harry took with him to the grave. Part of the story is the false birthdate etched on Harry's gravestone in Carlton, Texas, which is fourteen years later than the real one.

When Lee told me the story he'd learned, I knew I wanted to write it. With his blessing, I have now done so. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Lee, without whom I never would have learned the story you're about to read.

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CHAPTER ONE APRIL 29, 1937 TUPELO

The parsonage was a beautiful white clapboard home a hundred feet west of the sanctuary. Broad steps rose to a wide covered porch that looked out over Main Street. A swing hung from chains on one side of the front door; two rocking chairs sat on the other. Harry was inside, seated behind the walnut desk in his study, putting the finishing touches on his Sunday sermon. Behind him were bookshelves filled with Bibles, books about theology, works by his favorite authors, including Twain, Dickens, and Emerson, and a collection of famous speeches. Harry often reached for a volume to find a reference to use in a sermon. Even alone behind closed doors, Harry neither took off his coat nor loosened his tie. He was not a casual man.

It was late in the afternoon on the last Thursday in April, the 29th, a date Harry would never forget. He rose from his chair to close the blinds. The massive oak trees that had provided shade on the west side of the parsonage were no longer there. Like nearly all of the trees on West Main Street, they had not survived the devastating tornado that destroyed much of the city a year earlier.

Something had seemed different when spring arrived this year, and it took Harry a while to realize what it was. It was the silence. The trees outside the parsonage were gone, and so were the birds. Harry considered birds one of the most glorious of God's creations. In the spring, he listened to the mating calls of male cardinals and watched robins scratch in the grass for worms. He admired the industry of

Carolina wrens as they built nests for the new families they would soon have. When he needed a break from his work, he would walk to the open window of the study, watch and listen to the birds outside, and tilt his head the same way they did. Sometimes, one would detect movement in the study and stare back at him.

When he had the time and energy, Harry would drive the family Plymouth west of town and walk alone in the woods along the sunken Natchez Trace, listening for the call of barred owls as dusk came on. He was good at imitating them, and they would often call back in response. One evening, an owl swooped down to investigate and glided past on its silent wings only a few feet away. Harry loved pileated woodpeckers and thought their call was the wildest sound in all of nature. When he heard one in the woods outside Tupelo, he was reminded of a different place and the most exciting time of his life, when he was a younger man and could walk farther and faster.

When the birds came alive in the spring, Harry saw them as evidence of the hand of God. Birds, like all that God had created, were a miracle. In the Sermon on the Mount in the book of Matthew, Jesus reminded his followers that God feeds the fowls of the air. God still feeds them, Harry thought as he looked through the open window, just no longer outside my study. The silence reminded him of his time in Pittsburgh three decades earlier, of the three long years he spent without seeing or hearing a single bird.

Harry was a good writer. He had a talent for a turn of phrase and was pleased with how this week's sermon had come together. He was a

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gifted speaker as well. More than two years earlier, shortly after moving to Tupelo to become the minister of the First Methodist Church, he was chosen from among all the town's preachers to deliver the invocation when President Roosevelt came to town. A massive crowd estimated at 75,000, more than ten times the population of the city, gathered in and around the high school football field on the corner of Church and Jackson Streets to hear the president speak.

The reason for Roosevelt's visit was to congratulate Tupelo on becoming the first community in America to be powered with electricity generated by the Tennessee Valley Authority, a New Deal agency that was building hydroelectric dams on rivers across the South. The success of the TVA provided a rare glimmer of hope in the midst of the Great Depression. After Harry's prayer, the president rose from his wheelchair and gripped the lectern. Despite his polio, he always stood when he spoke. He looked out at the ocean of faces and smiled. His first words were, "I shall not make a speech to you today." He then proceeded to make one.

A year and a half after FDR's visit, Tupelo was struck by the fourth deadliest tornado in the nation's history. Nearly 300 residents were killed, more than a thousand were injured, and much of the town was destroyed. Church Street School, just to the south of the football field, was reduced to rubble. Two weeks after the storm, Harry wrote a moving essay about Tupelo's recovery from the tornado and how the tragedy had brought the people of the town closer to God and to one another.

Harry returned to his desk and the sermon. The subject he had chosen was a delicate one, at least for him. It was the biblical admonition for Christians to confess their sins not only to God but also to each other. He had chosen three passages of Scripture from his worn King James Bible to make the point. The first was James 5:16: "Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed. The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working." The second was Proverbs 28:13: "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: But whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall obtain mercy." And, finally, Psalm 32:3: "When I kept silence, my bones wasted away through groaning all the day long."

Harry drew on the three verses to support the theme of his sermon. He would explain to the congregation that the grace of God and the road to salvation may not require Christians to acknowledge and confess their sins to one another, but doing so is necessary to achieve peace and contentment in this life. Making a secret confession to God is not enough. The sinner must also confess his sins to those he has sinned against and from whom he has concealed his wrongdoing. He must seek forgiveness not only from God but also from them. Harry then considered another famous passage. Though it was not from the Bible, it was often in his thoughts. In *Table Talk*, a book nearly three centuries old, English scholar and author John Selden was quoted as saying that preachers tell their congregants to "do as I say, not as I do." For Harry Brooks, it was ever thus. He sighed and put down his fountain pen.

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There was a knock on the door of the study. Harry said to come in, and the door opened. There stood Margaret, one of the twins. The children were under strict instructions never to interrupt Harry while he was working on a sermon. He wondered what could warrant this exception to the rule. Margaret had an odd look on her face. She did not accept his invitation to come in but instead stood in the doorway.

“Yes?”

“There’s a lady at the door.”

“Who is she?”

“I don’t know; Teresa or Tressa, something like that. Her last name is Soles. She says you’re her father.”

Harry’s heart skipped a beat.

“Where is she? Is anyone else home?”

“No. Mama and Marjory went to the grocery store. Danny’s at school getting ready for graduation. I asked the lady to wait on the porch. Who is she, Daddy?”

“How should I know? You stay here till I get back.”

He motioned to his chair and waited for Margaret to sit. After he left and closed the door behind him, he took a deep breath, then walked to the front of the parsonage. At long last, after all these years, it was time to confront his troubled past. He opened the door, and there she was.

“Triss.” It had been three decades, but there was no doubt.

“Father.”

“You never called me Father.”

“I haven’t called you anything in thirty years.”

He reached to embrace her, but she pulled away.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry? That’s it? Thirty years, and that’s it?”

“I don’t know what to say. I made a terrible mistake. I suffered the consequences.”

“You suffered?”

“I’m sorry. How is your mother? Please tell me she’s well.”

“Dead. In the ground more than twenty years. She never got over it.”

He took another deep breath. “And Katherine?”

“Dead too. Year before last. Consumption. I’m the only one left. I can’t believe what you did.”

“I can’t believe Katherine is gone. She was just a child.”

“She was a child when you left. Almost forty when she died.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Triss. All men are sinners.”

“Some worse than others.”

“I want to make it up to you. What can I do?”

“Make it up to me? After what you did and how you left?”

“I had no choice about leaving. There was nothing left for me there.”

“Just two daughters who adored you. Or at least two daughters who had adored you.”

“But I wasn’t permitted to see you.”

“I would have seen you. I was a grown woman.”

“But I wasn’t allowed.”

“So you didn’t try.”

“My wife doesn’t know about you.”

“I bet there’s a lot she doesn’t know. I know about Ethel. She and I were born the same year.”

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“You have a right to be angry. Why did you come? What do you want?”

“All I want right now is to hear what you have to say. Then I’ll decide. I think I want to spread the news. I want your wife and your children—it’s strange to call them that because you already had a wife and children—but I want them to know what you did and who you are. And not just them. I want the members of your church to know the truth about the man who stands in their pulpit and lectures them about sin. I want the whole world to know.”

“You can’t do that, Triss, I beg of you. We need to talk, but it can’t be here, and it can’t be now. Please let me tell you my side of the story. Please get a room for the night.” He reached into his pocket.

“Here’s some money to pay for a room at the Hotel Tupelo.”

She pushed his hand away. “I don’t want your money. I don’t need it.”

“Alright, but please get a room at the hotel. I’ll meet you there for breakfast at eight o’clock.”

“Why? Why should I do anything for you?”

“Don’t do it for me. Do it for my wife and children. You have no reason to hurt Ethel. Or Margaret and the others. Margaret’s the one who came to the door.”

“She seemed nice. What is she? Fifteen? Sixteen? I’m fifty, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I know how old you are. She and Marjory turned sixteen last month. They don’t deserve to be hurt, Triss. Please give me a chance to talk to you before you tell anybody.”

“Alright, I’ll wait for now. I’ll do it for your children and the poor

woman who married you, the second poor woman who married you. I already have a room at the hotel.”

“Thank you. I truly am sorry. I lost my way, and there was no going back.”

“So you ran away. Twice. First to England, then to Texas.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’ll see you at eight.”

Harry watched as Triss descended the porch stairs and turned east on the sidewalk. A black Buick Limited was waiting at the corner of West Main and Green. The driver got out and opened the back door for her. She climbed into the back seat, and the car pulled away. Harry then returned to the study and found Margaret sitting on the edge of his leather chair. She waited for him to speak. He didn’t, so she did.

“Who is she, Daddy?”

“We can’t discuss it right now. I can’t talk to you about it, and you can’t talk to anybody else about it. Not yet anyway.” He looked at her. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir, but why?”

“Because I can’t talk about it yet. I will, but not now. And you can’t mention it to your mother or Danny. Not even Marjory. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. Leave me alone now, please. I have a sermon to finish.”

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