

THE
TRANSFORMATION



1948-1949

BEFORE STEVE MOVED from his chair they had burst into the room, seized him, clapping a hand over his mouth, and now they carried him, limp with terror, out of the small yellow apartment. He saw the cracked ceiling plaster pass over him. Twisting his head violently he broke his mouth free, and, instantly, as they struggled him out the door, he saw the walls of his retreat, thumbtacked with pictures of strong men from *Strength and Health* and, on the floor, wildly strewn by the brief fight, the copies of *Flash Detective* he had been reading when their footsteps sounded outside his door.

He hung like a dead man between the four of them now. For a long time he was so sick with fear that he couldn't move,

he was a dead weight they carried out into the night air. And Steve thought, This is all wrong, this is the South, I'm white, they're white, and they've come to my place and grabbed me. This can't be. Things like this don't happen. What's wrong with the world when a thing like this can happen?

The sweating palm clung to his mouth as they jolted him drunkenly across the lawn. He heard a casual laughing voice say, "Evening, Miss Landriss. It's our friend Steve Nolan. Drunk again, ma'am. Yes, *ma'am!*" And everybody laughed their pretending laughs.

He was thrown into the back of a car, and the men plunged in around him, pressing him among them like something closed into the pages of a book on a hot summer evening. The car lurched away from the curb, and then the voices were talking, and the hand came away from Steve Nolan's mouth so he could lick his lips and look at them with jittering, glassy eyes.

"Wh-what you going to do?" he gasped, stiffening his legs against the floorboards, as if to stop the car by this action.

"Stevie, Stevie." One of the men shook his head slowly.

"What you want with me?" cried Steve.

"You know what we want, Stevie boy."

"Let me out of here!"

"Hold on to him!"

They rushed down a country road in the dark. Crickets sounded on both sides and there was no moon, only a great number of stars in the black warm air.

"I didn't do nothing. I know you. You're them damned liberals, you're them Communists! You going to kill me!"

"We wouldn't think of doing that," said one of the men, patting Steve's cheek with a deadly soft pat, affectionate.

"Me," said another. "I'm a Republican. What are you, Joe?"

"Me? I'm a Republican too."

They both smiled cat-smiles at Steve. He was very cold. "If it's about that nigger woman Lavinia Walters—"

"Who said anything about Lavinia Walters?"

Everybody looked at everybody else, so surprised.

"You know anything about Lavinia Walters, Mack?"

"No, you?"

"Well, I heard tell something about how she had a kid recently. Is that the one you mean?"

"Now, now, look, boys, look, stop the car, stop the car, and I'll tell you all about this Lavinia Walters—" Steve's tongue moved, trembling over his lips. His eyes were frozen wide. His face was the color of clean bone. He looked like a corpse propped between the sweating, pressing men, out of place, ridiculous, gaunt with fear.

"Look here, why just look here!" he cried, laughing shrilly. "We're southerners, all of us, and we southerners got to stick together, now ain't that right? I mean now, ain't that the truth!"

"We *are* sticking together." The men looked at one another. "Aren't we, boys?"

"Wait a minute." Steve squinted at them. "I know you. You're

Mack Brown, you drive a truck for that carnival down at the creek. And you, you're Sam Nash, you work the carnival too. All of you from the carnival, and all local boys, you shouldn't be acting this way. Why, it's just the summer night. Now, you just park at that next crossroads and let me out and, by God, I won't say nothing about this to nobody." He smiled with wild generosity at them. "I *know*. Hot blood and all. But we're all from the same place, and who's that up in the front seat with Mack?"

A face turned in the dim cigarette light.

"Why, you're—"

"Bill Colum. Hello, Steve."

"Bill, I went to school with *you*!"

Colum's face was hard in the windy light. "I never did like you, Steve. And now I don't like you at all."

"If this is all over Lavinia Walters, that damn nigger woman, it's silly. I didn't do nothing to her."

"Nothing you haven't done to a dozen others over the years."

Mack Brown, up front, at the steering wheel, drooped his cigarette in his trap mouth. "I'm ignorant, I forget. What about this Lavinia, tell me, I'd like to hear it again."

"She was a nervy, goddamn sort of colored woman," said Sam, in the backseat, holding Steve. "Why, she even had the goddamn nerve to walk down Main Street yesterday carrying a little child in her arms. And you know what she was saying, Mack, out loud, so all the white folks could hear? She says, 'This is the child of Steve Nolan!'"

"Wasn't that *dirty* of her?"

They took a side road now, off toward the carnival grounds, over bumpy road.

"That ain't all. She went in every store where a Negro had never been in years, and she stood among the people and said, 'Looky here, this is Steve Nolan's baby. Steve Nolan.' "

The sweat was pouring down Steve's face. He began to fight. Sam just squeezed his throat hard and Steve quieted. "Go on with the story," said Mack, in the front seat.

"The way it all happened was Steve was ambling along the country road one afternoon in his Ford when he saw the prettiest colored girl, Lavinia Walters, walking along. And he stopped the car and told her if she didn't get in he'd tell the police she stole his wallet. And she was afraid, so she let him drive her off into the swamp for an hour."

"Is *that* what happened?" Mack Brown drew up beside the carnival tents. Being Monday night, the carnival was dead, unlit, the tents flapped softly in a warm wind. Somewhere a few dim blue lanterns burned, throwing ghastly lights on huge sideshow signs.

Sam Nash's hand moved before Steve's face, patting his cheeks, pinching and testing his chin, pinching the flesh on Steve's arms gently, approvingly. And for the first time, in the blue light, Steve saw the tattoos on Sam's hands, and he knew the tattoos went up the arms and all over Sam's body, he was the Carnival Tattoo Man. And as they sat there, the car silent,

the trip over, all of them drenched with sweat, waiting, Sam finished the story.

"Well, Steve here made Lavinia meet him twice a week in the swamp, or else he'd turn her in, he said. She knew she was colored and wouldn't have much chance against a white man's word. And so yesterday she had the unmitigated nerve to walk down the main street of the town saying to everybody, *everybody*, mind you, this here is Steve Nolan's baby!"

"There's a woman ought to be hanged." Mack Brown turned and looked back at the men in the rear seat.

"She *was*, Mack," Sam assured him. "But we're ahead of our story. After she went through town saying that bad thing to everybody, she stopped right in front of Simpson's Grocery, right by the porch, you know, where all the men sit, and there was that rain barrel there. And she took her baby and pushed it down under the water, watching the bubbles come up. And she said, one last time, 'This is Steve Nolan's child.' Then she turned and walked off, with nothing in her hands."

That was the story.

Steve Nolan waited for them to shoot him. Cigarette smoke idled through the car.

"I—I had nothing to do with her being hung last night," said Steve.

"*Was* she hung?" asked Mack.

Sam shrugged. "She was found this morning in her shack by the river. Some say she committed suicide. Others say somebody visited her and strung her up to make it look like

suicide. Now, Steve—" Sam tapped him softly on the chest. "Which story do *you* think's the right one?"

"She hung herself!" screamed Steve.

"Shh. Not so loud. We can hear you, Steve." Gently.

"We kind of figure, Steve," said Bill Colum. "You got pretty mad when she had the nerve to call your name and drown your baby on Main Street. So you fixed her for good and thought nobody would ever bother you."

"You should be ashamed." Steve had his false bravado up now, suddenly. "You're no real southerner, Sam Nash. Let go of me, goddamn it."

"Steve, let me tell you something." And Sam ripped all the buttons off Steve's white shirt with one twist of his hand. "We're a damn queer kind of southerners. We don't happen to like your kind. We been watching and thinking about you a long time, Steve, and tonight we couldn't stand thinking about you no more." He tore the rest of the shirt off Steve.

"You going to whip me?" said Steve, looking at his bare chest.

"No. Something far better than that." Sam jerked his head. "Bring him in the tent."

"No!" But he was yanked out and dragged into a dark tent, where a light was pulled on. Shadows swayed on all sides. They strapped him on a table and stood smiling with their thoughts. Over him, Steve saw a sign. TATTOOS! ANY DESIGN, ANY COLOR! And he began to get sick.

"*Guess* what I'm going to do to you, Steve?" Sam rolled up

his sleeves, showing the long red snakes printed on his hairy arms. There was a tinkle of instruments, a sound of liquid being stirred. The faces of the men looked down upon Steve with benevolent interest. Steve flickered his eyes and the TATTOOS sign wavered and dissolved in midair, in the warm tent. Steve stared at that sign and did not look away. TATTOOS. Any color. TATTOOS. Any color.

"No!" he screamed. "No!" But they unloosened his leg straps and cut his pants off with a pair of shears. He lay naked.

"But yes, Steve, yes indeed."

"You *can't* do that!"

He knew what they were going to do. He began to shriek.

Quietly, mildly, Sam applied some adhesive tape over Steve's lips just after Steve screamed, "Help!"

Steve saw the bright silver tattooing needle in Sam's hand.

Sam bent over him, intimately. He spoke earnestly and quietly, as if telling a secret to a small child. "Steve, here's what I'm going to do to you. First, I'm going to color your hands and arms, black. And then I'm going to color your body, black. And then I'll color your legs black. And then, finally, I'm going to tattoo your face, Steve, my friend. Black. The blackest black there ever was, Steve. Black as ink. Black as night."

"Mmmm." Steve shrieked inside the adhesive. The scream came out his nostrils, muffled. His lungs pumped the scream, his heart pumped it.

"And when we're done with you tonight," said Sam, "you

can just go home and pack your clothes and move on out of your apartment. Nobody'll want a black man living there. Regardless of how you got that way, Steve. Now, now, don't shake; it won't hurt much. I can just see you, Steve, moving over to nigger town, maybe. Living by yourself. Your landlord won't keep you on; his new tenants might think you were a nigger, lying about your skin. Landlord can't afford to risk tenants, so out you go. Maybe you can go north. Get a job. Not a job like you got now: ticket agent at the railway, no. But maybe a redcap job or a shoe-shine boy job, right, Steve?"

The scream again. Vomit erupted in two jets from Steve's nostrils. "Rip off the tape!" said Sam, "or he'll drown himself."

The adhesive came off, biting.

When Steve was through being sick, they replaced the tape.

"It's late." Sam glanced at his watch. "We'd better start if we want to finish with this."

The men leaned in over the table, their faces wet. There was a humming electric sound of the needle purring.

"Wouldn't it be a joke," said Sam, high up over Steve, pressing the needle onto Steve's naked chest, sewing it with black ink, "if Steve got shot for rape someday?" He waved his hand at Steve. "So long, Steve. See you in the back section of a streetcar!"

The voices faded. Deep inside, as Steve closed his eyes, he was wailing. And he heard the voices murmuring in the sum-

mer night, he saw Lavinia Walters walking down a street somewhere in the past, a child in her arms, he saw bubbles rising, and something hanging from a rafter, and he felt the needle gnawing and gnawing at his skin, forever and forever. He squeezed his eyes tight to fight his panic, and suddenly he knew only two very clear, certain things: tomorrow he must buy a pair of new white gloves to cover his hands. And then? Then he would break every mirror in his apartment.

He lay on the table, crying all night long.