

"RIVETING ... a stirring story that follows a tortured man's moral journey." —*Kirkus Reviews*

MISSISSIPPI RECKONING

MITCHELL
ZIMMERMAN

A NOVEL

MISSISSIPPI RECKONING

The frame story: After witnessing his client's death in the gas chamber, attorney Gideon Roth is shattered. His career, marriage and life collapse as he is overcome with guilt and despair. But soon he finds new purpose: he will drive to Mississippi to revisit the scenes of his youth—and to slay the KKK members who got away with murdering civil rights workers 30 years earlier.

During Gideon's road trip to Mississippi, flashbacks reveal the personal histories that set him on his path of vengeance. The back stories include the legal team's investigation of the life history of his executed client, the killer Kareem Jackson. The team delves into his family history to try to understand – so they can explain to the court – what formed Kareem: How did an innocent child turn into the kind of man who could commit a brutal murder?

The family saga begins with the experiences of racial oppression of Kareem's grandfather, Joshua Jackson, a black World War II army hero who had served as a machine gunner on a tank.

The following chapter describe what happened to Joshua upon his return to Mississippi in 1946, events that were to have a profound impact on his vulnerable son Jason and ultimately on his grandson Kareem.

was home, and his short struggle for a new dawn would soon begin. He laughed, and gently held Fannie Jo in his big hands, and he kissed her.

31

December 1946. The last six weeks had been worse than Joshua Jackson had expected. He had returned from the war with skills and expectations. He did not mean to go back to hoeing cotton. He knew he was good for more than toting crates in a warehouse. He was a fine truck driver. His four months with the Red Ball Express had given him more experience than most truck drivers in the States got in four years! He also knew about engines from his work on the trucks and the tanks.

He was entitled to a skilled job. And if one suitable to his skills was not available, he was entitled to a full year of unemployment while United States Employment Services (USES, it was called) helped him to find the right job or the job training he needed.

The sign on the door read: "Hours: 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Closed Noon to 1:15 p.m." Jackson had been there since 0822 hours. (He still wore his uniform and still thought in military time.) By a few minutes before nine, the center had still not opened, but three young white men, also in uniform, had arrived. The white soldiers talked quietly to each other, and did not return Jackson's nod or "Good morning."

At nine a young white woman unlocked the door. The four men entered, and she took her place behind the desk in the reception area. Jackson was at the head of the short line, but the woman said politely to Jackson, "Would you sit down for a moment, on that side?" While Jackson waited, she spoke with the three whites, took their names, and gave them forms on clipboards to fill out. She directed them to a line of chairs on the other side of the small room.

As they sat down to fill out the forms, the young woman called to Jackson, "You can come over now, boy."

"What can we do for you today?" she said.

"I'm a veteran. I was a trucker and then I was an assistant driver on

a tank in Europe. I'd like to find work as a truck driver or a mechanic, maybe get some more training as a mechanic."

"Well, we surely do not have very many tanks here in Greenwood, but I think we can find something that suits you. Please fill this out. One of the counselors will be with you as soon as they can."

He sat down and filled out the forms, handed them back to the receptionist, and resumed his seat.

By 9:30, another dozen former soldiers had arrived, and the room was starting to get crowded. Four of the newcomers were Negroes, and Jackson knew one of them, Eli McGee from Itta Bena, who'd spent the war in the Signal Corps. He had also known where the Southern crossed the Yellow Dog. They talked some, but by 10:00 a.m., when still more people had entered, Jackson realized that eight or ten whites had been sent through to meet with the employment counselors, but none of the Negroes. *He thought, I don't want to make no hullabaloo with these people. But I'm not gonna wait forever either.*

"Scuse me, Eli, I got to talk to the lady." He went up to the desk, and after a moment she looked up at him.

"Miss, I was the very first one here before 8:30 this morning, but quite a few men who came in after me have gone in. Isn't it my turn?"

"Well—" (she looked over at his form) "Joshua. Those men were . . . interested in areas of employment the counselors were handling first. But just you be patient, it won't be but a minute more." As Jackson sat down again, she picked up his card and went through the door to the other room. A few minutes later she came out.

"Now, Joshua, Mrs. Black can see you. Just go through the door. She's in your second cubby on the right."

"Thank you, ma'am."

The room Jackson entered was large, and divided into cubicles with wood and glass dividers around each station to afford a measure of privacy. He looked quickly around. Mrs. Black was white, as were the five other counselors. There was a plastic plaque next to the second cubby with her full name, Gladys Black. Her face looked familiar. He might have seen her around town before the war. She was a few years older than he,

mid-thirties he thought, and thickening at the waist. She had washed out straw colored hair.

Jackson put on a big, positive, confident-looking smile, and greeted her first.

“Good morning, Mrs. Black. My name’s Joshua Jackson, and I want to work.” He was careful not to offer to shake hands.

“Good morning, Joshua. So nice to see you home safe from the war.” She looked at his form. “Well, I see that you did truck driving and machine gunning and such like in the Army. Let’s see what we can do for you.”

“Yes, ma’am. Actually, on the tank, I was an assistant driver as well as a machine gunner. I was a truck driver first, with what they called the Red Ball Express.”

“The Rebel Express? Over there? Well, did they teach you any rebel yells, Joshua?”

“Oh, no, ma’am, what I said was”—he articulated more carefully—“the *Red ... Ball ... Express*. That’s what they called it, our trucks was running night and day, day and night, to supply the front line.”

Mrs. Black did not seem to like to be corrected. “Well, whatever it was, Joshua, we don’t have one of those here. Let me look and see what might suit you.”

“Anyway, ma’am, I want to be a mechanic or a truck driver—I did repair work on the trucks and the tanks, and I know engines. With some training, or if I can learn on the job, maybe I could get work as a mechanic. And I’ve got a lot of experience driving trucks.”

“First, let me make a card for you.” There was a small wooden box for file cards on her desk, with alphabet tab dividers. Jackson noticed that all the cards were white or yellow, mostly white. Mrs. Black neatly wrote Joshua’s name in large block letters at the top of a yellow card, put a “C” in a circle next to it, then wrote down some more information in her looping handwriting.

Mrs. Black next looked into a small loose-leaf binder, which evidently had available jobs. There were quite a few pages in the binder, and she would flip rapidly through some, pause, hum to herself, then riffle through some more.

“Well, this will be just the thing for you.” She pulled a two-part form out of a drawer, and began filling it out.

“What is it for, ma’am?”

Mrs. Black finished writing without answering, then briskly tore apart the form, handed him the yellow copy from the bottom, and threw the carbon paper into her trash basket. She attached the other part of the form to his file card with a paper clip.

“It’s at the Jameson Automotive plant, down on Carrollton Avenue just past the tracks, and you just see if they don’t get you back to work right fast.” She stood up, but did not offer her hand. “It’s been a real pleasure, Joshua. You give it your best try, and you’ll be at work in no time, earning an honest living. Right glad we could help you.”

Jackson was uneasy. What was the job? Was this what he wanted? But he would be rude if he questioned her now, she was plainly telling him to go.

He walked four blocks down to Carrollton Avenue, and out seven more to Jameson’s. It was a new plant that hadn’t been there before the war. It looked as though it had turned out parts for jeeps. He walked into the office.

“What can we do for you, boy?” a heavy set white man in a tie asked.

“Mrs. Black from the USES center sent me here. I’m looking for a job.” He handed the man the yellow slip. “I’m looking to work as a truck driver or a mechanic.”

“We don’t have anything like that for colored people. What I need is a boy to stock shelves in the warehouse. The pay’s thirty cents an hour.”

“No, thanks,” said Jackson, and walked out. He walked back down to Main Street, where he sat on a bench near the USES center. Then he walked over to Mabel’s, a private house that was a sort of club or bar, on Percy Street, and got a beer. Eli McGee came in after a while.

“Any luck?” said McGee.

“I told them I had experience to be a truck driver or a mechanic. They tried to give me a job stocking shelves,” Jackson said.

“Well, I’ve been going through it with them for months. I worked for the Army Signal Corps for three years, stringing and repairing communication lines. They told me they couldn’t find anything for me. I heard later

they sent white vets over to the Mississippi Power & Light. They told me if I didn't take a 'suitable' job, I couldn't get no unemployment pay.

"They made me take a job as a porter," McGee went on, "but I keep coming back, trying to get something better. Now they tell me that they are trying to take care of those veterans first who don't have any jobs. The skinny is that for folks with black skins, the USES is useless."

"Well, I'm going back," Jackson said.

Over the coming weeks, Jackson was steered toward a variety of menial jobs which he refused. Dish washing at a cafe. Sweeping at the mill. Wood chopper. "What about job training?" he asked. There was no job training for mechanics anywhere around here. When he pressed, Mrs. Black sent him to Greenwood Cabs, a Negro-owned taxi service that put him to work as a driver, with the promise of on-the-job training as a mechanic. In three weeks, the only time he saw an engine was when he opened the hood of the 1938 Studebaker to put in some oil. He quit again.

Hoping to learn some kind of skill, any skill, he let them put him into a training program at a large bakery. In two weeks, all he did was grease pans, fetch supplies and stack loaves of bread in racks for the delivery drivers.

Eli McGee told him he was thinking of heading for Chicago with his family.

"This state is bad news. We got no future here," McGee said.

"Look," Jackson said, "this is my home. My family is here, and my wife's family is here. We don't want to leave. We shouldn't have to leave."

"Well, hell, that's just the way it is."

"A lot of us are in the same boat," said Jackson. "We fought, and we're entitled to the benefits. Maybe we should get together some of the other guys and start talking about what we can do."

Joshua Jackson's house was a two room shack on a dirt road past the edge of town. Jackson, McGee and three other Negro vets met several times over the next few weeks. They talked about life in Greenwood for colored people. Mississippi's economy had been changed by the war. The farms and plantations had revived from the Depression. War industries had come in, making new kinds of jobs that paid better than cotton. But colored people were going to have to fight for their fair share.

“Either we’re gonna leave this state, or we’re gonna make changes,” Jackson said. “Jobs are just part of the problem. What kind of future can our kids have, in third-rate schools where they never see a new textbook—only old books the white schools stopped using ten years ago? Why do we have to be afraid a deputy’s gonna beat up on us just for fun? How come we can’t even find a place with a bathroom we’re allowed to piss in when we’re downtown, spending our money at their stores?”

They discussed registering to vote. “Dammit,” Jackson said, “three-quarters of the people in Leflore County are Negroes. We the majority, and we ought to have *some* say in how things go.” But only a handful were registered, and few of those were bold (or crazy) enough to actually vote.

McGee had heard of a Negro group called the Mississippi Progressive Voters League, in Clarksdale, but the Voters League didn’t seem eager to send someone around to talk to them about starting a chapter in Greenwood. They talked about hooking up with the NAACP. But first, they decided, they would quietly see if they could just register to vote without marking themselves as part of any organization. Then they could consider what next.

On Tuesday at eleven in the morning, five of them met in front of the County Courthouse, walked up the steps together, and went into the Registrar’s Office.

“We come to register to vote,” Jackson said to the woman behind the counter. She looked at him incredulously, then walked away without saying a word.

Ten minutes later the Sheriff appeared. He was a heavy-set, but powerful man, known for his violent temper. His face was flushed.

“What is this, some kind of god damn darkie parade? What are you boys doing here?”

“We just come to regis’ to vote,” Jackson said in a soft voice, showing a big smile.

“Well, the Office is closed. Niggers don’t vote in this County, and they ain’t gonna start now, so you can get the hell out of here.”

Jackson opened his mouth to say something, but the Sheriff interrupted him: “Didn’t you hear me? Your black ass is gonna land in jail if you

don't about face and get out of here. I don't know what kind of shit you niggers got away with in France, but this is Greenwood. You don't talk back when a white man tells you something."

They left. None of them spoke a word to the others as they went their separate ways. That night, Fannie Jo told him that Miss Penny, the white woman she took in washing from, told her she heard that Joshua was making trouble downtown, and what was that about? Maybe the washing would be stopped. When Joshua told Fannie Jo what had happened, she came around the table and hugged him.

"He was telling me I was a dog, Fannie Jo, and I couldn't say a word back. What can we do in a place like this? How can we raise Jason to be a man here?"

The next day, Joshua Jackson went back to the USES center. After a wait, he was at Mrs. Black's desk again.

"Mrs. Black, I'm quitting the bakery. I'm not learning anything there, and it ain't training for nothing. I want a proper job or unemployment until I get one."

"It's not our responsibility, Joshua, to see to it that you learn if you are not able to. You're been given a chance, and you're not getting unemployment to laze around and drink, when we're offered you suitable work."

"I'm a trained truck driver, Mrs. Black, and you send me to a place where I'm greasing pans. Greasing pans isn't training. Greasing pans isn't skilled work. I know there have been truck driver jobs that you keep for whites. They filled one at the bakery two days after I started."

"Well, you already had a position then, Joshua."

"Dammit, *I* should have had the truck driver position, Mrs. Black," Jackson said, raising his voice. "You've known for weeks that I wanted a position as a truck driver, and I got the experience. At least I should have heard about it, so I had a chance."

"Joshua, don't you use that tone of voice with me," Mrs. Black said in a loud but trembling voice. "I'm not here to be scolded by colored boys."

"Don't you call me a boy no more, *Gladys*, because I ain't no boy," Jackson responded. "I'm a man. I fought and bled and killed for this country while you and your hubby were having mint juleps at garden parties,

and I'm entitled to be treated fair. And, *Gladys*," he fairly yelled, leaning forward, "if I call you Mrs. Black all the time, I don't see why you can't call me Mr. Jackson."

Mrs. Black grew pale and shrank back away from him. She was trembling and her eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," he began, lowering his voice.

"Don't you touch me," she cried loudly. "Don't touch me you dirty black . . . you filthy nigger." Her voice failed.

Jackson realized that everyone in the room was looking at them, and two red-faced white veterans were advancing on him. The office manager got between them and Jackson, and made an effort to restrain them.

"Nigger," one of them said tightly, "get away from that white woman right now before I kill you. Niggers don't talk to white women that way, ever. If you raise your voice to her again, if you lay a finger on her, you filthy God damn black bastard, you are going to be hanging from the light pole outside this office in five minutes."

"We don't want any trouble in here," the office manager said to the white men crowding behind the soldiers. As he slowed them, Jackson made his escape. *Now I'm in it*, he thought. *This is the end of Joshua Jackson and Greenwood, Mississippi.*

32

July 1964. Susan worked in the Freedom School, teaching children about Negro history from what she had taught herself in the spring. Then teaching basic literacy to adults during the evenings and helping with the voter registration classes. She seldom went out to do freedom registration, only on occasion, when she could be paired with Gideon or another white volunteer.

But Gideon went out. He went door to door, farm to farm, and he learned the introductory patter quickly. How to introduce himself politely, and ask wary black men and women, most of them much older than himself, to sign a freedom registration form and come to a meeting. Over the weeks, he learned how to appear fearless when a police car trailed them. Then he realized that he was actually becoming less afraid.