

DREAMLAND BURNING EXCERPT

The cold, dark air hit my hot cheeks like a tonic, busting through my muddleheadedness enough so I could steer myself homeward. I cradled my hand against my chest and took a few steps.

“Will! Will, wait!” Clete hollered from somewhere behind me. I turned, trying to find him in the scant moonlight. But when I finally managed to make sense out of the shadows, there were two figures coming at me instead of one. I closed my eyes, shook my head, and looked again to make sure the Choc wasn’t making me see double.

Sure enough, there were two: Clete, and a policeman who grabbed my elbow when he got to me, saying, “Hold up there, fella. Your friend here tells me you’ve been attacked by a Negro.”

He spied my wrist and grabbed it, and the sound of my yelp tumbled down the street.

“Can’t see a thing out here,” he grumbled. Then we were back inside the Two - Knock. Me, Clete, and the policeman.

The place was still as a tomb. Even though Prohibition was in full swing and drinking was every bit as illegal as thieving, most coppers would turn a blind eye to it so long as speakeasy owners kept free booze and cash bribes flowing their way. Still, every man and woman in the Two - Knock that night could’ve been arrested on the spot.

The cop looked at my wrist, tutted, and said, “I hear a colored boy assaulted this young man. That so?”

Not a soul in the room moved save for Clete, who was practically hopping up and down, saying, “Course it’s true! It’s like I told you — he went after Will here just ’cause Will told him he shouldn’t be pawing all over a white girl!”

The cop’s lips pulled back from his teeth like the notion of such a thing made him sick. “Which white girl might that be?” he asked, looking around.

“She ... she left,” mumbled a moon - faced boy no older than myself. And the cop stared him down so hard I thought that boy would crack. Then the cop said, “Ladies and gentlemen , I’m runnin ’ out of patience here . Where. Did. She. Go?”

Clete cleared his throat, and for half an awful second, I thought he might just be riled enough to give Addie up. Instead, he said, “I don’t know about the girl, sir, but that Negro said his name was Clarence Banks. Will, here, was just trying to get him off of her, and that boy started cursing and going after him like a mad dog. Ain’t that so, Will?”

My wrist hurt so bad I couldn't think straight. My head ached. I needed to throw up. And, God forgive me, I croaked out yes. The policeman looked around, asking if anybody could corroborate Clete's account. And when a few white heads bobbed in the affirmative, he said, "What about it, Ed? Was the boy called Clarence Banks?"

The bartender's eyelid twitched. The cop shook his head sadly. Said, "You're a good Negro, Ed. Never missed a payment for all the protection I give you. But now that I think about it, last week's envelope felt a little light ..."

Well, that big old bartender's jaw clamped tight as a vise, and one of the veins in his neck near popped through his skin as he took the cash box from behind the bar and handed over every last cent inside. The cop stuffed bills and coins into his pocket and said to me, "Young man, I suppose we'd best take you down to the station and get a statement before we telephone your folks."

I panicked at that, stammering how I was fine and could get myself home and there was no reason to phone anyone, no reason at all. That made the cop smirk so that I felt about two inches high, which, in retrospect, was an inch more than I deserved. "In that case," he said, "I'll just head on back to my patrol."

To which I mewled *yes sirs* and *thank yous* until the cop was near out the door. Then that fool Clete yanked off his cap and slapped it against his knee, shouting, "Wait a minute! Is that all you're gonna do? You gonna let that boy get away with attacking a white man? You just gonna leave?"

The cop's eyes narrowed, and he stalked back and grabbed Clete by the collar and yanked him onto the tips of his toes, growling: "You oughtn't question how an officer of the law goes about his business, son."

Clete shrank inside his clothes. Even still, that boy was so stubborn and cussed that he squalled like a stuck pig, saying, "I just want him to pay for touching a white gal, is all!"

The cop let go of Clete's collar and watched him work to catch his balance. "We take care of our own in this town," he said. "Understand?" And his voice was so low - down and ugly that Clete finally hushed. Then the cop took his billy club from its belt loop and aimed it around the room in a slow circle. "You all remember that," he said. "The law around these parts takes care of its own." And he smacked the club against his palm and gave me and Clete a dead-eyed stare that chilled us to our toes.

Now, soon as the door closed behind the cop, the bartender told me and Clete to clear out before we got someone killed. And Clete, knowing then that the big man was a Negro, went off halfcocked, spouting nonsense about him not having any right to tell us what to do. That's

when I grabbed hold of Clete's arm with my good hand and steered him out, saying to the bartender how very

sorry we were, and that we'd never trouble him or his establishment again.

But he turned his back before I finished, indicating in no uncertain terms that he'd had his fill of us. Which was fine, for my thoughts were already drifting towards the selfish matter of how I'd explain my wrist to my parents. It never did cross my narrow little mind that I should worry about Clarence Banks or be bothered by the fact that I'd just unleashed the full force and fury of Tulsa's crooked police element on a Negro.

And an innocent one, to boot.

—Jennifer Latham

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