

The Third Part

by Barry N. Malzberg

Beyond the woods, Jeb could see the burning, the thin haze from another level of darkness arced the trees, the denser hidden spaces. Birds emerged from this haze in little straggles, their chirps like screams. He squinted but could not find their color against that darkness; the flight was tumult in the dangerous air. He did not know where to go. He was not lost, not exactly, but the fire-haunted town and its people were behind him, and he did not know if he could return, if they were looking for him.

Presently, two black men Jeb had never seen before struggled from a space between the trees, their clothing disheveled but their faces, as they tumbled toward Jeb, curiously neat and blank as if their features were a bad artist's approximation of human facade. They were gaunt, their arms beckoning grotesquely. The taller might have been close to seven feet; the shorter, in a peculiar hunched-over position, might have been any height at all, might have been deformed. The cloak which covered him made his aspect mysterious. "Mister," this shorter man said, "we need water. We need help. Him there, that's Clayton. Me, I'm Damascus."

There's going to be another lynching tonight, Jeb thought. The thought was like a caress, something strange and soft enticing his mind as it entered then flapping through like one of those birds in sudden flight. Those folks back there, maybe coming for me now, they are not going to like this.

"Don't have water," Jeb said roughly, that tone the only warning the men would get. If they were too dumb to take it, he couldn't be blamed. They should have known.

"Thirsty," Clayton said. He was elongate, but there was no bulk; it exaggerated his helplessness. He was panting in his overalls. His open mouth as he talked revealed teeth as black and twisted as the smoldered trees, rotting incongruously under the orderly lips like the trees under the flat, gray sky. "It's burning; everything is burning. My mouth is burning."

"Told you there's no water here. Fire burned it up." Jeb patted his water bottle, swaddled secretly like an infant under his jacket as a bird whispering *lynch, lynch* sped through his senses again, fluttering its wings against his brain. Dumb all right. Dumb right out of the fire. And going back for good, so soon.

"Now we seen—" Clayton said and stumbled and fell. Damascus rolled toward him as if to hold the man, but halfheartedly, like someone reaching for milkweed as it billowed away in the summer breeze. "It ain't nothin' like we ever seen," Clayton said, holding the ground. "It be hellfire and damnation but worse."

"Water," Damascus said again as if it were a sacred word. "We gonna die right here without water. We out of the fire but we gonna die."

Yes, Jeb thought, yes, you gonna die. A lynching might take the people's minds off him.

Might take his own mind off what he had seen: that once-flat field beyond the bowed trees swollen like a pregnant woman, fire and lava spewing forth in molten red-and-black fury, drowning the Monroe farm, the Belton farm, his own Weston Farm, the Church of the Redemption, Reverend Smith's parsonage, the old red brick schoolhouse where he had labored and grunted over the useless sums and readers, the run-down shacks of the sharecroppers and beyond all of that, beyond to the horizon and the unknown behind that.

"You too," Clayton said. "You another. You don't care."

But Jeb did care: that was what had broken him. Casting his mind back, he still could not understand how it had happened, even though there was a word for it: Volcano. He had learned about volcanoes in that very same schoolhouse, old Miss So and So peering over her spins and spectacles as he and Tommy Lee Adams passed dirty pictures in the back of the classroom. He thought about Mary Lu's boomers. Miss So and So had said there were no volcanoes in the Southern U.S., not since the geological evolution. But ever so stupid Mary Lu had started to cry when she heard about the hot lava and would not stop until Miss So had promised that volcanoes never grew here. Maybe in the Pacific States and Hawaii and Italy. Or Krakatoa. Now there was a name. Grew like Krakatoa.

Grew. He still remembered that word. As if a volcano were a living thing like a tree or an ear of corn that could be planted. Mary Lu had stopped crying, he and Tommy Lee had gone back to staring at her boomers, and Miss So had returned to the blackboard, her hands shaking as lava bubbled in the core of a volcano.

He had not thought about that schoolroom or Mary Lu all these years. She had run off with some traveling salesman decades before the trouble, and there were rumors she was dead. Old Maid though was probably still alive in the nursing home upstate. Maybe she was looking at the volcano right now through the cracked windows and realizing how wrong she had been.

And she was wrong, because Main Street had been engulfed by the lava. A volcano had grown in Georgia after all. And not just anywhere in Georgia: not in Atlanta, the city too big to hate; not in Milledgeville, with the museum; not in Macon, where Herman Talmadge had walked the earth to the statehouse; but right here in Edgetown, where the cows still walked through the streets and Reverend Smith's hellfire could graze the dead in the two cemeteries. It had happened in Edgetown three weeks ago, and no one could say where or how it had started. It was just there. A mountain appeared from nowhere, jutting out of the earth, grotesque as a monstrous boil. Then the birth, as the mountain heaved and convulsed her vile poisons onto the landscape and the town. The circle and the fire had cut them off from the world, left Jeb and three hundred others in this carcass of a damned town, shut away where now Clayton and Damascus, a stretched black man and a lumpish one, had staggered from the woods, crying for water.

Once word came that they were here, it was clear what would happen. Beware the darkness, the Reverend had screamed in the fire's first advance, and here, here was the darkness itself, settled on the big man and little man before him.

Maybe it was they who had brought it.

Jeb fixed his full attention on the two men, trying to perceive real faces behind the smog and blank features, but there still was nothing distinct, only his savage and difficult repulsion. Now both were on the ground, jackknifed toward one another, and Jeb thought, watching the struggle from awkwardness and thirst, soon someone is going to die. But he could not move from this astonishment and fixity until it was broken suddenly by the voices on the hill.

They were the voices he had feared, the voices behind him from the town in pursuit of . . . But it was not Jeb, but the blacks they must have seen or somehow known would be there. They must have known because as that cloud of pursuers half-resolved into individual and familiar faces, Jeb could measure their purpose, a purpose which at the beginning of their flight might have been diffuse but was now utterly focused as all of them melded into a single entity with a single intent.

Before Jeb could speak, before he could warn them, Damascus looked up and saw them. One moment Damascus had been looking at the ground and muttering something about dust and dust to ashes, and then, with his recognition, the blank face suddenly erupted like the very earth itself, the rutting terror transversed, then shifting to a molten, swollen stream, a stream true and burning.

Damascus kneeling, reached up toward Clayton, his mouth open in fierce prayer or entreaty or warning, but no sound came out: all he could do was tug at the other's sleeve and point.

"Mister," Clayton said. His voice was the peep of baby birds engulfed by smoke in the nests, abandoned by avian parents of strong wing and greater terror. "Don't let them hurt us."

"We didn't have nothin' to do with—with what happened," Damascus said. His voice had returned but sounded like the rusty groaning of the old well bucket handle.

Jeb said, "Then who did?"

"The Lord," Clayton whispered.

"Tell that to them." Jeb pointed at the mob advancing, closing in, fists raised, their open mouths great black spoons doling out the red lava of hate.

"Won't do any good, Mister," Damascus said. "Us talkin' to them and all. They won't listen. But they listen to you. You like them."

Dumb, oh so dumb. "And why should I talk to them?"

"Because we know," Clayton said. "They gotta listen 'cause we know."

Jeb frowned at these two cowering and trembling on the ground before him. "You lie," he said. "You just said before you don't know nothin' about all this." His tone, as it imitated the identical voices, was as stern and sharp as Pa's whip, was meant to sting like Pa's whip. "Why did you lie?"

Damascus looked at the ground, but Clayton said, "That's 'cause we was afraid to say the truth." With good reason, Jeb thought. The crowd was almost on them.

"Five minutes," Clayton said. "Make 'em stop just five minutes. We got somethin' to say."

Jeb considered this.

"Five minutes," Clayton said again. "Then they can do what they want."

Jeb put up a hand, signaling the people, and they shuffled to a stop, all of them. It was surprising, the force that his hand had upon them: It was like lightning. Not hours before, they had been out to get him. Go figure. He knew these people, and yet he did not know them. Five minutes earlier he could have picked anyone out of that crowd, but now they seem as blurred and indistinguishable as the features on the two black men.

Indulgence, Jeb thought, and: I seem to have the power. "They want five minutes," he said from the slight rise on which they stood. "Give them five minutes." Why not? What was planned could wait. He felt the power in him now, a strange and mighty power. They had the rest of the night and tomorrow night and tomorrow night and all of the fires of the volcano, once Clayton and Damascus had been dispatched, everyone would again be left with the horror, the fire, the unleashed, consuming serpent of dislocation and despair. Why not have something then to look forward to instead of something that had already taken place, even if it was for another five minutes?

"Okay," he said to them again, feeling the power. "Listen to them," he said to the crowd. And smiled for the first time since the volcano had come. His hand was still high, and he brought the other up with it, gesticulated like Reverend Smith had when he said he had seen holy fire. "Stop! Wait!"

The people, his townspeople who had come out here to kill, looked at one another, confused. Hiram Monroe was brandishing a charred branch; old Franklin Wallace was shaking a fist. Soon they would be roaring. Reverend Smith would be preaching now if they hadn't taken care of him last week, calling him a false prophet. That had been the first lynching.

"Let them speak," Jeb said again. "Five minutes. Then you can do what you want."

The crowd bellowed. Hiram Monroe cursed. But then a convulsion passed through them like a sigh, and they were still standing there, the gap between the three of them and the crowd unbreached. "Now," Jeb said to Clayton. "You'd better have your say right now."

Clayton stood slowly, stretching, tilted, pulled a Bible from his jacket and started to read.

"And there were voices, and thunderings and lightnings, and an earthquake, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the Earth, and the third of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up, a great mountain burning with fire."

The Book of Revelation. Pa had used to read it to him on those nights, long nights in front

of the fire, Mama's needles poking in and out of the fabric, Pa's voice sonorous like it got before his rage, then terrifying in the flickering shadows. Clayton's voice had become sonorous too and wait, this wasn't supposed to happen. Something had changed. Gone was the whispering, the simpering, sniveling dialect of ingratiation.

"And the third part of the ships were destroyed, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as if it were a lamp, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the day shone not for a third part of it."

The people were as silent as the gray and charred tree trunks although more than five minutes had already elapsed.

"And there arose a smoke from the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace."

The ships destroyed, the fallen star from heaven, the pit, the furnace, and now Jeb knew who had arrived on the ships, who had planted the star and why Clayton and Damascus with their shuffling, their leading drawl, their odious cringing, deserved to die. It was a suddenness of fury like lava sprinting across the sky. "Kill them!" someone said. Jeb did not know if it was his voice or another's. "Kill them now!"

The crowd lunged, daggers of flame and tongues of razor. Jeb reached into his jacket and took out the secret flask, words of hate spilling onto the once-blank faces like the scalding water of baptism from his bottle gone fiery.

"And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone," Jeb said, their dissolving faces, the redness and blackness running into each other like tributes to a rite of redemption.

Then from the center of the flailing crowd he heard Clayton say, "And death and hell shall deliver up the dead, and they will be judged every man according to his works."

And Damascus: "It is done. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely, and he shall inherit all things."

Now Clayton again. "We are not dead. We are written into the Book of Life. It is you who shall be cast into the lake of fire."

But no. They were dead: Clayton and Damascus. The crowd had seen to that before dispersing, whoops and cheers fading into the darkness, the shattered bones and clotting blood a triumphant testimony to their accomplishments. But the voices continued. From what fissure in the earth, from what seam in the heavens were they speaking?

"We shall thirst no more. We have been given the fountain of the water of life freely."

"You are dead," Jeb said fiercely to the mangled remains. "So shut up and return to your rightful place."

Still speaking. "We are the two, but you are the third part."

"You are dead. You can't talk like that. Not to me, not to anyone."

"We are not dead. We are written into the Book of Life, and you are the third part."

"Apostates!" Jeb shouted, trapped in the gauze of a dream. "Liars! You speak not! Shut up!"

But the voices grew louder, ever louder, echoing in his head, bouncing in the air, racing with the fire, thrashing in the mucilage of memory. Clayton and Damascus now soft and sibilant, now sonorous, now harsh, the voices that could not be silenced. *We are not dead. We are written into the Book of Life. We have been given the fountain of the water of life free. And you: You are the third part. We are not dead. We have been given the fountain of the water of life. You are the third part—*

He stumbled away, but their voices followed relentlessly: *We are not dead*, merciless the sun and the darkness: *You are the third part*, the fire and the lava swelling, receding, receding, swelling: *We are not dead*, running through all the corridors and corners of his consciousness, his world, with their thunder and fury.

Jeb was the third part.

The End