28. The Last Love

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid.
I will provide the chapter now.

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The Last Love
nna Morse, owner of Morse's Funeral Home, had decided to move out of Linfield, Pa., many times since the passing of her husband three years ago. Running a funeral parlor was too much work, and good help was impossible to find. Just managing her building, a flamboyant brick structure at the edge of town that housed her apartment upstairs and what she called the "works"—the mortuary—on the first floor, was a headache. White workmen refused to work for a colored woman. Colored workmen had other ideas, hoping to fall in love and find themselves in a monied future. That's why when she needed repairs on her building, she always called on her old worker, Nate Timblin. Nate was a sweetheart. Dependable. Solid. No matter what hour, no matter the job, he always came. Knowing he was available was one reason she had decided to keep her business in Linfield.

Thus, she was happy to oblige when Nate called that Saturday afternoon of Memorial Day weekend asking for a ride out to Linfield, which was just north of Hemlock Row, to visit a friend. Hemlock Row was just a mile from Pennhurst, and Anna guessed his intent immediately. He wanted to visit that nephew of his. She'd read the papers. A twelve-year-old colored boy, deaf, attacking a white woman? She had her doubts. But then again . . . trouble fell on the Negro like raindrops. She was sorry it happened to Nate and Addie, two of the best folks on the Hill.

It was a quick twenty-minute ride to pick him up and she was in a good mood, for no one, so far, had decided to die that weekend, though four possibilities—two in Chicken Hill alone, one in Royersford, and another in Reading—were percolating. The one in Reading concerned her most, because that was a good twenty miles away, and the only other colored funeral home in the county was in Reading, and whoever reached the howling family first usually won. But Anna knew the pastor in Reading, and the colored doctor, plus she had a cousin there who had invited her to come over for the Memorial Day weekend, and she'd decided to take her up on it. It would be fortuitous if the customer died while she was in Reading, God's will. But a troublesome leak in her building gave her pause. Water was seeping through the second-floor bathroom wall, and the night before had stained the ceiling of the viewing room below. That was unacceptable. The idea of tiny water droplets plopping onto the head of the deceased during a viewing gave her the willies. She planned to have Nate take a look.

He seemed unusually quiet as he sat next to her in the gleaming Packard as it rolled down Pottstown's High Street and cruised south toward Linfield.

“You been busy?” she asked.
“A little,” Nate said.
“Can I help in any way?” she said, careful to avoid the subject of his nephew.
“You helping me now.”
Anna didn’t press the point. Nate was never one to talk much anyway. Silences were part of who he was. So she said, “You need a ride back?”
Nate shook his head. “I’m staying overnight on the Row. I’ll be all right getting back tomorrow.”
She wanted to ask “Where are you staying on the Row?” for she knew just about every family on the Row. Instead, she saw an opening.
“Nate, I got a leak. I think it’s coming from the roof down through the upstairs bathroom and into the viewing room below it. You got time to take a look?”
“Course. I’ll look at it right off before I head out.”
“You mind if I leave you? You know where everything is. I was thinking of running up to Reading. My cousin and her husband’s frying up a turkey.”
“Go ’head. I’ll walk over to the Row when I’m done. It’s just up the road.”
“You ain’t afraid of the dead, are you?”
“No.”
“Well, there’s a cot in the storage closet over the little vestibule in the viewing room. The closet where I keep things. You’re welcome to sleep there if you want.”
Nate shook his head. “I got a place to stay.”
“You sure I can’t help, Nate?”
“I’ll look at the leak right off and be on my way.”
She nodded, satisfied. “Nate, when you’re ready to make some real money, come back and work for me. I’ll pay you good enough to buy a car.”
Nate nodded absently, gazing out the windshield at the passing farmland. “I don’t need no car,” he said.
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HE WORKED AT Anna’s house until close to seven, first climbing to the roof to clean leaves out of the overflowing gutters, then repairing the small stain in the bathroom and viewing-room ceiling. He knew where Anna stored everything and the job was easy. The work calmed him and gave him time to think. He was in no hurry. He was early, for Miggy said to meet her at eleven thirty after her shift, and Hemlock Row was only twenty minutes away by foot. He had nowhere to stay hidden at the Row for four hours if he got there early.
After he was finished, Nate returned the tools, then stepped into the empty viewing room. He moved to the vestibule in the back where Anna stored bodies waiting for funeral services. She always had one or two, as she liked to joke, “lying about.” He found two open coffins, both men, lying in repose waiting for final viewings, their coffins lined up like railroad cars, one behind the other. The closest to him was a middle-aged man with his hands neatly folded on his chest. Atop his hands lay a brand-new neatly folded janitor’s shirt with a specially printed label above the pocket that read “Herb’s Diner, in honor of our Ted S. Culman.” The second was a younger man, seventeen or eighteen. Nate stared at them both for a moment, stepped past them into a back closet, selected a few items, then set out for the Row.

Miggy would take him to the Egg Man and leave. That was the arrangement. He thought it through again as he made his way down the dark two-lane highway toward Hemlock Row. Miggy wanted him there at eleven thirty sharp. No sooner. No later. Then she planned to take him to the Egg Man named Bullis, who she said would leave for a nearby farm at 4 a.m. to get his eggs, which to Nate meant that the Egg Man had to get out of bed by three to get to work on time. But where? Was he a Hemlock Row man, a Lowgod? He hoped not. There were a few Lowgods on the Row who might be looking for him. If they discovered him, it would not be pleasant. Miggy assured him no one would see him coming or going from her place. But what if she got cold feet? What if she'd already spread the word about him? Nate Love is alive. He ain't in jail. He ain't down South either. He's right over there on Chicken Hill. He'd thought about it carefully. Why should she take a risk and help him?

He trudged forward, uncertain. He didn't like it.

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IT WAS TWO THIRTY when Miggy, still dressed in her hospital whites, finally rose from the front window of her home on the Row. She opened the front door, removed the lantern hanging from the hook on the front porch, and closed it. She peered out the window another ten minutes, then gave up. She went to her back door, left the house quietly, and moved down the row of houses to the fourth house, where the illumination of a bare light bulb could be seen through the window. She tapped on the back door and an old man in a white beard and somber face answered.

"He ain't coming, Bullis," she said.

"Just as well," Bullis said.

"You think he got stuck or waylaid along the way?"

"I hope somebody popped him with a pistol," Bullis said.

"You ain't gonna get far with them kind of thoughts."

"What kind'a thoughts am I supposed to have?"

"You made a deal."

"With that pretty young friend of yours, the one you call Paper. I ain't make no deal with him. I ain't losing my job over him—or that evil young 'un out at Pennhurst."

"Has any of my futures ever gone wrong on you, Bullis?"

Bullis frowned, then said, "I was hush-mouthed about Nate. I didn't tell a soul about him. Didn't throw out no giveaways to nobody, as God is my witness. But truth to tell it, I'm glad he ain't coming."

"I had some words with Son of Man yesterday," Miggy said. "He did not take it well."

"You ought to steer clear of him."

"Can you wait five more minutes?" Miggy asked.

"No, I can't. You said eleven thirty. It's almost three. I got to get moving to the farm. I'm late now."

He closed the door and Miggy turned to walk home.

Something, she thought, is wrong.

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FOR BULLIS, the walk from Hemlock Row to the farmhouse where he picked up the cart and the eggs usually took thirty minutes, but he was late, so he cut through the farmer's cornfield, careful not to disturb the growing stalks, for his boss would notice and not be pleased. He arrived at 3:10 a.m. Not bad. It was a forty-five-minute ride to Pennhurst with the horse pulling a cart full of eggs and a coffee urn. The horse, named Titus, was an

Appaloosa that, at fourteen, was nearly blind, but Titus was a dependable soul. He knew the work and the trail, and the two got along.

Bullis found the horse in his stall, tossed him some hay, let him eat, then led him from the barn to the chicken coop, a long rectangular building that stank of chicken shit. The door was locked with a hasp to keep out foxes and other critters, and the cart was parked in the middle of the building. Bullis pulled Titus in, fastened his trace and harnesses, then quickly moved to the eggs, which he'd carefully crated in stacks the day before. He stacked the crates into the cart on shelving rigged for that purpose, one atop the other.

He worked quickly, but after a few minutes, he realized that the chicken coop was oddly silent. The roosters, who normally began crowing at that hour, were silent. He heard several pigeons in the rafters fluttering, and the hogs in the nearby pen were gathering near the far corner closer to the pasture, all unusual. Were those signs of rain, he thought, or had Miggy gotten mad and mojoed him? Would she do that?

He dismissed those thoughts as he climbed onto the cart, grabbed the reins, and called out, "Har!"

Titus had turned toward the gate and moved forward several feet when Bullis suddenly pulled the reins and said, "Cuss it, Titus . . . I forgot something."

At the tip end of the wagon was a large silver urn that held hot water for coffee, which he drew from a hot-water heater at the coal furnace house every morning on the way to the lower wards. The trip to the furnace house was the first stop every morning. He put the coffee in place and poured steaming hot water from the giant hot-water heater, and the five minutes that it took him to hit the first wards allowed the coffee to brew so that it was just right by the time he reached them. He was careful to clean the filter every day, for the hot water from the heater sometimes held ash and grit. He wasn't supposed to use hot water from the water heater, but who at Pennhurst knew the difference?

The old man dumped the contents of the filter in the nearby hog pen, then made for the well pump at the far end of the chicken coop to wash it clean. As he reached the well pump, Bullis heard Titus offer a surprised whinny and snort, but he ignored it. He had to hurry. He washed out the filter, put it back on the urn, trotted to the warehouse where the farm owner kept the ground coffee beans, filled the filter with freshly ground coffee, then climbed up and sent Titus onward.

The horse seemed restless and unsettled. Bullis wanted to push him to move faster, but the old steed did not seem to like it.

"C'mon, Titus," he said. "I'm old, too." But Titus went at his own pace.

At Pennhurst's huge wrought-iron gates, Bullis waved at the gate guard and made a beeline for the lower wards, guiding the horse along the winding single-lane road. When he reached the lower wards, a good mile from the main entrance, he came to another gate and waved at a second guard before passing through, then he followed the road as it wound down a slope to the giant coal-fired furnace house. He stopped outside, ran a hose to the spigot on one of the giant water heaters inside, filled the coffee urn with steaming hot water, then drove Titus back up the pathway. But instead of turning toward the lower wards, he drove behind Ward V-1, where the path wound toward the railroad track, and from there, out of sight of both wards. He drove the horse and cart into a thicket that contained a rarely used path through the woods, which was overgrown with thistles and brush.

They didn’t have to go far. Ten feet in, the path arced toward a slight hill that sloped down toward the railroad yard below where the train depot was. Titus, despite being nearly blind, picked through the thickets easily, bumping the cart only slightly. When they reached the edge of the small ridge, out of sight of both the train below and the ward behind them, Bullis leaped off the wagon, stepped into the thickets, and removed two long planks and placed them by the cart’s wheels. From there, he carefully drove the horse over a set of old unused railroad tracks, placed the wood planks aside out of sight, drove a few feet farther, dismounted from the cart, and pushed aside some bushes and thistles, revealing a thick, old wooden door with rusted strap hinges.

The tunnel.

An old railroad tunnel, used in the days when the Pennsylvania Railroad train dropped coal directly from a freight car to the old furnace house near the lower wards, which was now a vacant weedy field between Wards V-1 and C-1. He slid back the door, lit his lantern, and drove the horse in. Titus picked his way across the buckling cement and potholes, the floor occasionally revealing the tracks beneath, which had been cemented over. Bullis again noted that Titus was laboring, and he became alarmed. Was the cart full of eggs and coffee that heavy?

“All right, Titus. We’ll lighten this load soon enough.”

Titus plowed on, but the horse was clearly laboring. Bullis eyed him, concerned. The horse was fine yesterday. Could it be, Bullis thought again, that Miggy mojoed me? He’d never seen Titus so tired—he seemed exhausted. Should Titus collapse and die in that tunnel, they were both ruined. He was out of a job and out of a friend.

Did Miggy mojo him? She wouldn’t do that, would she? Not for a goddamned . . . He wouldn’t even say the man’s name. It was bad mojo. Instead, he said aloud, “Miggy didn’t put a spell on you now, did she, Titus? C’mon . . . har up!”

Titus responded, pulling hard as he turned a tight corner in the dark tunnel, and finally they were at the first door. There were only three doors down there, each leading to the lower basements of Wards V-1, V-2, and C-1. He delivered to the first two wards without incident, for the attendants there seemed always eager to get away from their wards and sometimes tried to chat with him. He never did, so they quickly hauled their eggs and coffee inside, pouring coffee from his giant urn into the smaller urns they had hauled downstairs, and Bullis moved on to his next stop.

But at the last ward, when he leaped off the cart and moved to the door to knock, he paused a moment, slightly afraid.

Bullis knew Son of Man. He had heard rumors about him, many of them unsettling. But Bullis was not a man to speak out. He was an old man who lived in a world of wrong. He just delivered eggs. Still, when he delivered to C-1, he always made it quick. Son of Man never said much, and Bullis hoped today would be more of the same.

But when he knocked and the basement door opened and Son of Man’s smooth, handsome face was silhouetted in the gleam of the lantern light as the door swung wide, Bullis saw that today was not going to be normal. Son of Man was smiling. He’d never seen the young man smile before.

“Morning,” Son of Man said.

Bullis grunted a greeting, produced a wooden wedge from his pocket, and slid it under the door to keep it open. Then he moved to the cart to grab a crate.

Son of Man withdrew the prop and closed the door, sealing off the light from the basement, leaving the tunnel lit only by the lantern on Bullis's cart. His face was tilted oddly, his gleaming white teeth showing.
"That's a neat trick, old timer, bringing your cart to escape somebody."
"What you talking about?" Bullis demanded, trying to sound fierce.
"Miggy was on my ward last night, talking harsh and packing a bag for a boy."
"I don't know nothing about no boy, nor no bag."
"No horses is allowed in this tunnel. No people at all. You know that, right? You ain't supposed to be here."
"Don't tell me how to do my job, son. I been doing it long as you been living."
"I ain't your son, old man."
"Don't be a sass, boy."
Son of Man smiled. "You ought not talk to Son of Man that way."
Bullis sucked his teeth, irritated. "Someday when I learn to write, I'm gonna put some wee little old letters on cards and call myself Al Capone and pass 'em out to folks. Then I'll have a fancy name like you. Now could you step out of my way, please?"
Bullis stepped toward the door to push it open, but Son of Man blocked it. "You could go to jail for breaking somebody out a state hospital," he said. "For a lot of years."
"I ain't got years," Bullis said. He sighed. "Son, I'm just an old man trying to make a dollar change pockets."
"What about my pocket?"
"What about it?"
"My pocket's full of lint."
"I ain't here to clean your pocket."
"This is my ward."
"Do this building got your name on it?"
"Keep talking sideways, old man, and I'll send you outta this tunnel hooting and hollering."
Bullis's temper snapped and he felt the blood rush to his face. "You ain't sending me no place, ya ragged little skunk! You got no respect, talking to an elder like you is. Now move your skinny ass aside." He spun around, grabbed a crate of eggs, and shoved past the young man, kicking the door open wide with his foot and stepping inside.
As he did, he felt something hard crash into his skull and his knees gave out. He fell sideways against the doorjamb, the crate flying forward into the room as he fell. Eggs spattered everywhere on the basement floor.
"My eggs!"
He tried to stand up and felt something strike his head again and found himself on the floor. He spun on his back and then saw what hit him. A packed sock, which this time landed on his face. He raised his arms to cover himself, but the young man was strong, pinning Bullis's arms to the floor with his legs and sitting on his chest, raining blows with the sock and talking calmly as if he were a father spanking a child.
"Old!" Whap!
"Black!" Whap!
"Squirrely!" Whap!
"Bastard . . . comin' in my house!" Whap, whap, whap.
Bullis knew then that Miggy had put the mojo on him, for as the dazzling pain washed over him and through his nerve endings, he was seized with

the humiliating knowledge that the young attendant was beating him as if he were a patient, using a sock because it left no mark; and in the blinding flashes of white pain, he saw over the young man's shoulder a pair of feet suddenly burst out of the built-in cabinet of the cart, still parked in the tunnel and visible through the open doorway. The cabinet, which sat beneath the shelves that held the eggs, was about two feet high and covered the length of the five-foot cart. It was handy but he rarely used it. It was big enough to hold scythes and shovels and big farming tools. Big enough for a man to squeeze in. Big enough, even, for a ghost.

The ghost that wriggled out of it was not a normal-looking ghost. It was a settled-aged black man with a face set in calm silence and eyes that bore a hurricane beneath them. It was a face that Bullis had not seen in thirty years, but even so, after all those years, the face, aged now but still carved in grim purpose, was instantly recognizable.

"I left you behind!" Bullis cried.

The ghost didn't answer. Instead, he moved like a swift gust of wind, stepping into the room with deft speed and grabbing Son of Man's wrist as it was raised high for another blow.

"I wish you had," Nate said.

Son of Man looked over his shoulder and found himself looking into Nate's eyes. What he saw made him freeze, and he remained there, like a statue, his right wrist held in the grip of a hand that felt like iron, the other hand out of his line of sight. He could not see what was in Nate's right hand, but he understood it. Still, he sat where he was, atop Bullis, his right hand holding the sock high like a torch, an odd Statue of Liberty, the torch held with the help of a Negro brother—Give me your tired, your poor . . . yearning to be free—and he felt all of those things, for the eyes gazing at him were not filled with hate or anger but rather with sympathy and hurt. Son of Man looked into Nate's eyes and saw beneath the swirling pools of iridescent calm both Nate's past and his own future and the future of the community that they both had left behind and even the reasons why. The sight stunned him and he felt for a moment as if he were blinded by a great light.

Nate, for his part, had endured the punishing cart ride with gritted teeth. He'd wanted the elders from his past to speak to him as he rode, for he was terrified. Not of being discovered, but of being in a position where someone would unleash the evil poison in him. He'd spent his entire adult life running, ever since he was thirteen—just past Dodo's age—for he was thirteen when he, too, experienced his own accident, his own explosion. Not from a stove, but from a father who had dragged his family from the perilous Low Country of South Carolina to the promised land of Pennsylvania only to discover that despite living on Hemlock Row among the peaceful Lowgods, justice and freedom had as little currency in the new land as it had in the old. The white man despised him in Pennsylvania as much as he did in the Low Country. The difference was that the white man in the South spoke his hatred in clear, clean, concise terms, whereas the white man in the new country hid his hatred behind stories of wisdom and bravado, with false smiles of sincerity and stories of Jesus Christ and other nonsense that he tossed about like confetti in the Pottstown parade. Living without means, surviving without hope, dependent on God to even matters. Son of Man indeed. Son of Man was better than Nate's own father, who had been destroyed by the move north, who in turn took a pipe to his mother, and who in turn was delivered to grace by his own son after he ordered the

boy to bring along a crosscut saw and walk with him into the woods to cut down a tree. The child took matters into his own hands then and evened out matters. And it was all for naught, for there the reckless life of an abandoned child who lost to death both parents became the last legacy of the Loves, once one of the finest families in the Low Country, for Nate was the last Love on Hemlock Row who had come north to live among the Lowgods, who somehow forgot him and plunged him into a childhood of begging and stealing. And when the later years of earning a living as a grown man by laying suffering on any human for a price was stopped by a trip to the penitentiary that was visited upon him for the killing of a worthless rapist and thief who would have otherwise been laid low by some righteous man, it was as if that killing became Nate's only redemption, if there was such a thing, as he came to hope that perhaps God might forgive him and find a purpose for him. When he emerged from prison and met Addie, who dipped her hand into the pool of injury and hurt that was his heart and drained it of every evil and refilled it with love and purpose, he became sure of it. She cleansed him. And he'd lose it all now. He didn't want to lose it, but he knew it was gone.

"It ain't your fault," Nate said to Son of Man.

And with that, he plunged the kitchen knife he held behind him in his right hand deep into Son of Man's heart.

As the man fell off him, Bullis heard in the distance the whistle of the morning train bearing coal and supplies. And the ghost before him, bloody knife still in hand, spoke calmly.