

PECK FINCH AND THE HANGED MAN

A Peck Finch Novel

*Jerome Mark Antil*

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“Promise of Liberty lacks measure to the despondent. Until we care enough there will never be a free America. We must curb the pallor of desperation—the stem of human trafficking. Until basic food and shelter are a fundamental right in defining freedom—there will always be slaves in America. Freedom of speech is mute when one has no voice.”

JMA

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Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely  
coincidental.*

Recognizing:

Mayor LaToya Cantrell, New Orleans  
Lt. William “Billy” Hare, retired NOPD  
Robert Williams – RANCH HANDS RESCUE, Denton Texas

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THANK YOU  
JUDGE LAURIE A. WHITE



# 1.

IT WAS JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT when Peck found a space around the corner from the law office and parked. The elevator to the second-and third-floor offices was locked after hours so he climbed three flights of stairs and let himself in.

His usual routine was a shout-out of his name so he wouldn't alarm anyone who might be working late. Switching on the third-floor lights, his next routine, if it wasn't raining, was a jaunt down to the dark second floor to open Lily Cup's window to air out her cigar smoke. Then it was back up to the third floor, scrubbing the coffee room, the bathroom and bowls, dusting baseboards and emptying wastebaskets. Finishing the third floor, he turned the lights off and stepped down to the dark second floor.

Reaching for the light switch was when he heard the scream.

He left the lights off and followed the street sounds in the dark and made it through the front rooms to Lily Cup's office window. He cautiously stood back, watching Carrolton Avenue below. A white man wearing a brown fedora with a heavy gold-chained band and a double-breasted black sport coat stood between two white girls. A black Mercedes was parked in idle with its lights on. One girl was leaning on the driver's seat of a pedicab. The man was gripping the upper arm of the girl standing on the sidewalk.

"Whatchu' doin' over here? Why ain't you workin'? Why you peddling around with this bitch?" He back-handed her jaw. The girl muffled a scream and lost her balance.

Peck knew if he shouted, he could trigger deadly violence, but his primal instincts kicked in, and he knew if he didn't shout out, he might be able to track this bad man.

"Don't hurt her," the girl on the pedicab shouted. "She's got a job with me. It's a real job. Why can't you just leave her alone?"

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The man pulled a polished stainless steel .45 caliber semiautomatic from his back belt, cocked it and pointed it at the pedicab girl's face.

"Cuz I'm her real job, bitch"—he touched the point of the gun to her forehead—"and this here's my boss."

"No," the girl on the sidewalk begged. "Don't do it. I'll go with you."

"What you say, bitch?" the man asked the pedicab girl. "You want to piss my boss here off, or you gonna' mind yo' own fuggn' bizness and pedal yo' ass on out of heya?"

"I'll go," the girl begged. She tried to start pedaling. The man put his foot on the tire, impeding its movement.

"Cuz of you my lady ain't earned me nuthin' tonight. Who's gonna pay?"

"Don't shoot. Please."

"Who's gonna' pay, bitch? My boss ain't happy. See? He's getting twitchy."

"Take my money. Take it."

With the gun hand he unzipped her purse and pulled out the cash. He threw the purse into her pedicab and flipped the gun, lowering his leg and motioning her to take off.

Shaking and in tears, the girl stood and pedaled a U-turn and headed toward the French Quarter without looking back. The man stood motionless, watching her pedal out of sight. He slipped the pistol under his belt, clenched his fist and slugged the girl in the stomach, doubling her over. She fell to her knees gasping.

"Don't you ever disrespect me."

He kicked her. He leaned and grabbed her hair, lifted her head and stuck his face into hers.

"Don't I feed you good?"

"Yes."

"Don't I give you a bed? Don't I buy you pretty things?"

"I'm sorry. Really, I'm sorry."

He pulled the revolver from his belt and pressed it to her ear.



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“You step out of Storyville without permission again and your little sister in that foster home up in Georgia ain’t never g’wan to see ‘nudder day. I know where she lives. Understand?”

“Fire ant,” Peck said to himself.

Peck carefully pushed the window closed without a slam, and with instincts he learned on a pirogue in a swamp filled with deadly alligators he made a dash to the stairwell and jumped down two steps at a time, repeating a quiet cadence of guttural sounds all the way down.

He reached his pickup, started it with the lights off and crept to the corner. In idle he watched with the patience of a crawfish snake waiting for its prey to come by.

“C’mon fire ant ... show Peck your mound.”

Peck watched the man yank the girl to her feet and push her into the back seat. He memorized the license plate. The man removed his hat, showing a diamond stud in his left ear and a two-inch bright red tattoo of a dollar sign on his neck. He got in the back seat and the car sped off. Peck began following as if he was in a swamp, tracking a gator. He didn’t have revenge in his eyes; he was tracking for a future hunt, but he was likely remembering being abused as a young boy, slaved and chained under a porch by the gator man. He likely remembered Lily Cup’s talking about how the pimps always seemed to get off in court because of legal technicalities or bad copping, or by no one knowing their secret hideouts. Peck wouldn’t take anyone down that night, but he had a long memory. All he wanted that night was an address.

He followed the car into Storyville. It came to a stop idling with lights on. Without slowing he drove past it. Through his rearview mirror he could see the man and girl walk toward a three-story townhome with a boarded-up storefront on its first floor. Peck turned right, pushed his headlights off, and made a quick U-turn and waited at the corner. The man had sunglasses on, and diamonds were in both ears. He couldn’t see the man’s face clearly, but he

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could see the tattoo and he saw a reflection off the girl's nose ring.

The Mercedes drove off and turned left on Basin Street.

"The mound," Peck said to himself, memorizing the street address. He followed the car, keeping a distance. After various turns, it entered a parking garage of a trendy high-rise hotel on Canal Street.

Peck passed by and drove back to the law offices. He finished cleaning and went home to his bedroom, where he lived with Gabe in a classic shotgun in the Garden District. Stacks of books in his bedroom were monument to his phoenix from illiteracy. A reading lamp on the floor in the corner lighted his favorite place to lie on his side and read his books. When Millie wasn't in town, he'd sleep alone but next to the bed on the floor under an open window, looking up at the moon for hours. He picked up his John Steinbeck novel from his desk and sat on the floor, thinking. He looked up through the window blinds. There was a full moon that night and Peck had a lot on his mind.

## 2.

HAVING BEEN SLAVED IN A BAYOU SWAMP in his early childhood, Cajun French Peck knew what it was like to be alone, with no one to turn to. His only go-to support between the age of five and an illiterate young adulthood was his imagination of full moons, with his mamma looking back at him and his discovery of the Mass, after learning the Christ child grew up to hang on a cross. It was still dark when Peck got up off his bedroom floor and went to Gabe's bedroom.

"You awake, Gabe?" Peck asked.

He nudged the bedroom door ajar.

"Captain, I need to talk. I made some chicory."

Gabe, a retired army captain who had served with distinction in both Korea and Vietnam, yawned, pushed himself up to a sitting position, then stepped over to his easy chair in the living room and waited.

Peck came in and handed Gabe a mug of chicory.

"Captain, I couldn't talk about this until I give it thinking time," Peck said.

"My brother. Whatever it is, I'm here for you. What time is it?"

"It's five in the morning, ol' man. Sorry."

Peck sat, sipped and swallowed while gazing at the framed picture of Gabe's dead son in uniform on the mantle. Peck watched Gabe's eyes.

"Gabe, you remember about me being slaved when I was at Bayou Chene?"

"I remember," Gabe said. "You were a child."

"Gabe, you knew gator man who slaved me. He got killed by a man from Angola prison, right?"

"I'm sworn not to speak of it, my brother, but yes, I've heard the story."

"Gabe did you know my own daddy was shot when he tried to kill Dr. Pontelbon in that fishing boat?"

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“Peck, let’s not dredge up these memories, we have a good life now. Just look at you— we’re all so proud.”

“Did you know, Gabe? About Daddy bein’ shot like that?”

“The man fathered you by raping your mother, son. He was never your daddy. He deserved to be shot.”

Peck stared at the ottoman and reflected.

“Gabe, last night I watched a man slave a girl.”

“What do you mean?”

“This girl, Gabe. She couldn’t be maybe twelve or fourteen— was on Carrollton Avenue. He beat her and took her away with a gun.”

“He kidnapped her?”

“He said she was his whore and he slugged her hard.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Peck.”

“Gabe, it was good I saw it, I say.”

“Good? Why?”

“You teach me to always pay back, Gabe.”

“I do teach that, son.”

“Gabe, I have to help that girl.”

Gabe sat up in his recliner, accidentally splashing coffee on an arm of the chair. Peck pulled his T-shirt off over his head and tossed it to use as a towel.

“Help?” Gabe asked.

“*Oui.*” (“Yes.”)

With seasoned military eyes Gabe stared at Peck.

“And you’ll do anything to save her?”

Peck didn’t respond.

“With all you’ve gone through, Peck, a dirt poor Cajun French kid on your own since you can remember. You’re white but you understand and know poverty—maybe you can imagine what being black is like in America—”

“Nah-nah, Gabe. Not even close to what you been through, my black frien’. I’m sorry.”

“What it feels like knowing white eyes objectify you as a thief or a crack head, a worthless parent?”

“Ah *oui.*”

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“Well son, sex predators objectify kids the same way. Boys, girls, they don’t care, they look at them as pieces of meat.”

“Is that what *objectify* means, Gabe?”

“That’s what it means, son. Looking through a human as if they’re a toy or a tool or worse—a nobody.”

Peck stood, took Gabe’s coffee cup and the coffee-blotched T-shirt, and stepped out of the room. He reentered wearing a fresh T-shirt and with a cup of coffee in his hand for Gabe.

“Will you listen to some advice, son?”

“*Oui.*”

“I know how serious you are about this, Peck, and as smart as you are, I have a feeling you’ll succeed in getting this girl out of the mess she’s in.”

“I will, dass for true, Gabe.”

“I just have one suggestion.”

“Okay.”

“It’s an important one, son.”

“Okay.”

“Before you do anything, have a talk with Lily Cup. She knows this world you saw last night. It’s the world she lives in and works in every day.”

Peck nodded. He leaned in like he wanted to whisper.

“Secret question, okay, Gabe?”

Gabe lowered his head and looked over the tops of his reading glasses at Peck and rolled his eyes—as if Peck knew better than to ask if he could count on Gabe’s secrecy.

“Somebody kidnaps a little girl to sell for sex, would you conk him, the one what steals the girl to sell for sex or would you conk the money what buys the girl for sex?”

Gabe lifted his coffee.

“Sex slavery is a dangerous game, son.”

“How, Gabe?”

“There’s a lot of money in it. Big money.”

“Okay.”

“Did you actually see them kidnap her, or were they catching her not working the streets?”

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“She was running.”

“You mean she was running away from a pimp?”

“Ah *oui*. The pimp he said she worked Storyville, but he found her on Carrollton, trying to run away.”

“She’ll never get away from them. They’d just as soon snuff her as look at her before they’d let her set a bad example for the others by escaping.”

“Snuff?”

“Kill.”

“I’m goin’ to get her out.”

Gabe studied the gray of conviction in Peck’s eyes.

“You remember my stories, son? My army days in Kentucky when buddies and I caught buses into Newport and went to those second-floor whorehouses?”

“Ah, *oui*. I remember.”

“Those whorehouses were run by the mob, Peck. We thought it was exciting, a normal part of life in the big city. Every man jack of us thought those women did it because they liked sex. It never entered our mind they were slaves and couldn’t leave those beds even if they wanted to. They probably all died in their twenties or thirties from syphilis or some other VD.”

“Ah-yee,” Peck said.

“Every time me and the fellas put up our twelve dollars for a roll on the sheets with one of them, we were giving the mob reason to enslave more girls. Me and my army buddies were financing sex slavery. We were the traffickers in those days, son. We just didn’t know any better at the time.”

Peck didn’t respond.

“I spent a lot of time in ‘Nam and Seoul, South Korea and saw it big time. Sex slavery preys on poverty. I heard about parents selling their kids off for cash.”

“This girl needs my help, Gabe.”

“You need me for anything, son— you come to me.”

“Gabe I’ve got to read some and then get ready.”

“But you’ll talk to Lily Cup first?”

“*Oui*.”

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“How about we do Charlie’s tonight. The ladies will be there. It’ll give you a chance to talk with Lily Cup,” Gabe said. “Just talk with her before you do anything.”

“Okay. I’ll come back and take you to Charlie’s.”

“Come back? Where are you off to now, son?”

“Gabe, I’m going to Mass and then I go to see my mamma.”

“That’s a long drive Peck, are you sure—?”

“I need me some advice, Gabe. Mamma give me good advice. I need to hear about gator man again, is all.”

“And you’ll come back tonight, son?”

“Sun coming up, Gabe. There’s a morning moon. I go to Mass, then drive to see Mamma and talk and I come back and take you to Charlie’s.”

“My brother. Be safe.”

Peck went to his bedroom. He picked up his John Steinbeck novel and stepped over to a window and looked out. He looked at the corner of St. Charles Avenue and watched a streetcar go by. He mumbled to a world of evil he was seeing for a second time but through a new set of eyes. Then as if he was talking to the enslaved girl.

“I’m coming for you, bébé. Tell red dollar tattoo man, I’m coming for him too. He ain’t going to see another full moon and dass for true.”

Gabe was napping in his recliner when Peck stepped into the kitchen on his way out. Gabe heard him and raised his head.

“Gabe, after Charlie’s tonight if you don’t see me a few days, don’t you worry, frien’, I’m good. Somebody’ll be lookin’ in on you.”

“My brother,” Gabe whispered. “Just promise me you’ll talk with Lily Cup before you do anything, Peck. Can you make me that promise, son?”

“I promise, Gabe. I see you tonight when I get back. We go to Charlie’s.”