

To Do Justice

By Frank S Joseph

Chapter I

Pinkie

Ever since I'm little I be wondering who my momma is.

It ain't Jolene. Jolene's been raising me but I ain't her blood. Reminds me of it every chance she gets. Picked me out of a trash pile one day, that's what Jolene says. Like a maggot out of a garbage can.

If I'm trash I say, why you done it? Just teasing she says, you be worth real money, check for \$102.80 on the first of every month. Calls it her Pinkie check. Long as the Welfare keeps sending the Pinkie check, that's all she cares about, Jolene.

Jolene just laughs when I ask about my real momma. One day I be finding her though. See does Jolene laugh when that day comes.

Jolene don't treat Bettina no better than me even though Bettina be blood and flesh to her. Bettina asks who her poppa was but Jolene pretends she don't hear. Poor little thing, Bettina, bumping into things like she does. Jolene says Bettina was born with a caul, that's why she so clumsy. I know better though. Bettina can't help it. Something wrong inside her head. She plenty smart all right, just something inside there don't work how it's supposed to, like a doorbell is busted or a toaster don't pop.

All Jolene cares about is the money though, \$102.80 a month for me and \$94.73 for Bettina. And Bettina'll be worth more soon Jolene says, worth as much as you gal, \$102.80 a month when she turns nine. Then in September when you turn twelve, you'll be worth \$106.35, and Jolene grins.

No wonder Jolene gets so happy when she talks about the money. We're her most valuable property. That's why I got to protect my baby sister best I can. Bettina's my most valuable property. Till I find my real momma, Bettina's the closest thing to kinfolk I got in the world.

Should've protected Bettina better than I did though, the day things got turned upside-down.

That day must've been a hundred degrees out. Was a Monday—Monday, July 12, 1965, summer hardly started. Jolene says, "Gal you ain't seen hot yet. Wait till it gets August, then we'll see about hot." Sitting in the window all the while, electric fan blowing in her face.

"Pinkie," she says, "you feel all that hot, go cool off in the hydrant with your baby sister." That's what folks do on Morgan Street in hot summers, open a fireplug so kids can play in it. Can't go to the Taylor Pool, been closed for years. I hear there's city pools open in other parts of town but not on the West Side, not around Morgan Street anyhow. City don't spend no money here. Trash sits in garbage cans till it turns ripe. My school, Galileo, it's got holes in the roof. Walk down the wrong hallway while it's storming and you get wet without never leaving the building. Nossir, no Taylor Pool since I'm little and no sign when it'll open again, if it ever does.

It's too hot to watch TV even. I put on cutoffs and thongs, what Jolene calls sandals only they're made of rubber tires not leather. I can play in the hydrant if I want. I ain't twelve till September.

Outside, sun's like a furnace on my neck. Fireplug in front of our building goes spraying every which way, onto the cars, kids, grownups too. Plenty grownups out on the street, some cooling off in the water their own selves and laughing like they're kids all over again, others sitting on folding chairs drinking Olde English 800 malt liquor out of paper bags. Don't matter it's a Monday or a Sunday or what it is, grownups be out on Morgan Street in summer. Why not? Ain't got no jobs to tend to, today nor no other day.

Bettina sings out *Pinkie! Come on in!* I smile, duck my head and dash towards her, slipslipping on the street tar. Wouldn't care if I slipped and fell, the cold water on my hot skin feels so good.

Someone's throwing an old rubber ball back and forth, someone else got a Frisbee. We toss them with the other kids till the spray catches the ball and carries it into traffic. Bettina goes chasing behind. I shout *Careful gal don't get yourself hit by no truck* but it's so much fun splashing I forget to keep an eye on her. Forget about Bettina altogether till I hear the siren.

It's a squad car, blue cherry spinning around. Cop gets out the driver door and waves Bettina over. I throw down the Frisbee and run to where they're standing.

Cop, he's one of them greaseball Italians that run things around here. Do their business in them social clubs and ice cream parlors over to Taylor Street and Racine. Walk around smoking cheap cigars and acting like they own it all. I hear the Irish and the Polish got the cop racket sewed up in other parts of town but around here it's the dagoes. Doubt if the colored be in charge in any part of town.

Don't know what this fat pig wants with an eight-year-old colored gal though. I walk on over, ask what's up.

He says, "Who you?"

"Her sister."

He says to Bettina, "That so? Sure don't look like the two of you are related. Tell me little girl, what for you got a white sister?"

"She's colored too," Bettina says, sticking up for me.

Cop looks me over. "Maybe you are," he says. "Little bit at least."

I ask what Bettina did wrong. Cop shakes his head, says he's just trying to get information.

"Then ask me," I say. "I be twelve in September."

Cop turns from Bettina and smiles down. Seen all kind of cops in my life—angry cops, tricky cops, cops that act friendly till they get what they want. Think this one be the last kind.

I ask what he's looking after. Says there's been complaints about the hydrant so he ordering it closed.

"It's a hundred degrees out Mister."

Cop don't care. Says it's against city law to open a hydrant. Says what if there's a fire on the block, you leave the hydrant running ain't going to be enough

pressure to fight the fire. Says anyhow the fire marshal wants it closed so he done called in a fire truck. Going to close it whether you kids like it or not.

Cop asks who opened it in the first place. I wouldn't tell and get someone in trouble even if I knew though I surely don't. I say we're just kids trying to stay cool on a hot day. Cop says baloney, he knows how things work, everyone on this street knows everyone else so tell who opened it if you know what's good for you. Gives us one of them cop looks. Bettina she's scared but I know better. He's just a wop in a cop suit, throwing his weight around. I take Bettina by the hand and walk her back to the apartment.

Half an hour later the fire trucks roll in and things start going crazy.

The fire trucks like to tear your ears out with their sirens and horns, the red fire cherries spinning around and the motors going *varoom varoom*. What makes it ten times worse though, the firemen ain't by themselves. Got six or eight squad cars coming in behind. How come they got to fill up the whole street with a hook-and-ladder and a dozen firemen let alone a cop army? To turn off a fire hydrant on a bunch of raggedy-ass colored kids? How scary we be looking?

The firemen jump out first. Look funny in them red helmets but ain't nothing funny about what they're doing. One fireman got a monkey wrench about five feet long, what he uses to shut off the hydrant. Others got fire axes in their hands. Firemen go to waving them hatchets like they're fixing to chop us to pieces.

Then the cops jump out the squad cars and some got guns in their hands. Folks start to yelling. One guy in a blue work shirt shouts to put away the guns around little kids. Gal in a head rag yells, "This here's an invasion!" Another woman, think she lives on our second floor, sings out, "Yes sister and we be the Viet Cong!"

Even so folks draw back. You got a dozen white Chicago cops waving pistols and the thermometer through the roof already, ain't no telling what might happen.

A cop with sergeant stripes yells into a bullhorn to clear the streets, *you people are in violation of City Ordinance Something or Other*. He comes up on Tom Davidson and pushes him down on the sidewalk.

Everyone on Morgan Street knows Old Tom. He don't harm a soul, just sits on his piece of sidewalk rain or shine shooting the breeze and drinking Mad Dog 20/20 from a brown paper sack. Tom ain't so healthy, done lost a few toes to the diabetes. I

know because one time he took off his shoe and showed us. Anyhow, when the cop pushes him Tom falls backward. Might've been the Mad Dog made Tom lose his balance, might've been the missing toes. Whatever, I hear his skull hit the pavement fifteen feet away.

Gray-haired old lady standing near to Old Tom falls down on him crying. Woman beside her, one of them likes to sit out with Tom, she starts shouting and cussing at the sergeant. Don't take no time at all, rest of the folks go to screaming too. They get round the sergeant in about two seconds. *What'd that old man ever do to you?* and *Pig!* and cuss words and other nasty stuff.

Rest of the cops come charging in swinging their night-sticks and waving their guns. Folks at the edge of the crowd get hit first. I see a couple men fall, see an old lady go down too. Folks in the middle though, they're so busy getting up in the sergeant's face they don't notice the cops with clubs till it's too late. Then they're down on the sidewalk too.

But now the commotion done drawn dozens more. Folks come pouring out every door, seems. Police had the best of it but now things is going the other way and getting worse every second. I see colored folks carrying big rocks and chunks of cement, some swinging clubs of their own, baseball bats and two-by-fours. Never seen a crowd angry like this. Ain't nothing new that cops mess with folks on Morgan Street. They get away with it on account they got guns and billy-clubs and squad cars. Today though things be different. Man still has his night-sticks and guns but this time he's outnumbered.

That sergeant in the middle, somehow he ain't gotten hurt, not yet, and his bullhorn still works. He shouts orders but the other cops got scared looks. They beat it back to the squad cars fast as they can run. Fire truck switches on the siren loud to make you deaf and starts trying to back out but it ain't no easy trick in a narrow street, not with a forty-foot hook-and-ladder behind. The crowd bellies up to the fire truck, throwing things and cussing while the driver goes trying to figure some way to escape.

Most of the cops be hiding in squad cars now. Even so they ain't safe. Folks go to rocking the cars side to side, cops locked inside looking scared as old ladies. The folks, they notice. The scarer the cops look, the stronger the folks look.

Every now and then a cop car busts free and a gang of colored folks go running after. Grownups, kids too, waving and screaming and cussing. Got to say I

feel angry my own self. Poor Old Tom, he don't mean no harm. Keeps Tootsie Pops in his pockets for Bettina and me. I go chasing after a cop car myself, south toward Roosevelt Road.