A BRIGHT AND BLINDING SUN

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A BRIGHT AND BLINDING SUN

A WORLD WAR II STORY OF SURVIVAL, LOVE, AND REDEMPTION

MARCUS BROTHERTON



Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston London

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Everything I understand, I understand because I love.

—*Tolstoy*

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BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd vi 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

Contents

Map ix

PART I

1. Little Bird Walking 7
2. Last Days of Boyhood 15
3. Where Sea and Sky Meet 28
4. Lost Babes in the Woods 43
5. The Girl Named Perpetua 57
6. She'll Make You a Star 72

PART II

7. Horizon of Hurt 93
8. Digging the Ashes 110
9. Ache from the Hacienda 125
10. Final Days of Bataan 135
11. So Utterly Alone 148

PART III

12. Prerogative of Madness 169
13. The Bilibid Prison Respite 186

Little Brown and Company

14. Three Ships from Hell 199

15. Under the Cold Ground 212

16. Emancipation 227

17. A Time to Heal 236

Acknowledgments 259

A Note on Sources 261

Notes 267

Little Brown and Company

BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd viii 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM



THE PHILIPPINES/EAST ASIA IN WORLD WAR II

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PART I

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I was in a whorehouse in Manila, trying to steal a prostitute, when I was fifteen years old.

It was a shit night, I remember. Rain's beating a steady rat-tat-tat on the roof. Last Saturday of September 1941. War ain't broke out yet for us. There I was, top of this old wooden staircase, peering down the dusky hallway into the gloom. Whole place smells like cheap perfume and an old Army boot.

I says to the lady, "She still here?"

Mama Rosa's her name—the madam—and she knows exactly which girl I'm talking about. Mama Rosa's a big heavy lady with huge bosoms who works all the girls at the joint. But she doesn't own the place, right? That's a thug named Manny Tang. I only met him once—him and his goons. You cross Manny Tang and he'll slit your throat. But anyways I says to Mama Rosa, "I'd like to take her out on the balcony first, for a bit, if that's fine by you." I give her my dollar.

"I'll go get her," Mama Rosa says, her voice all sugar. "Don't be outside for long. It's too cold for the girl tonight."

Couple minutes later, the girl comes out of one of the bedrooms, being led by the madam. Perpetua's her name, and damn if she ain't beautiful as always. Slender. Short. Wearing this thin gown with a ropey shawl across her shoulders. Whole face beams when she sees me. I hug her tight, and she hugs me right back.

Mama Rosa turns away so she can attend to another soldier, and I lead Perpetua by the hand toward the balcony. There I glance over my shoulder and see that Mama Rosa's disappeared into the dark again at the far end of the hall.

That's our chance.

Real gentle, I place my finger across Perpetua's lips and say,

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"Follow me." Her eyes grow wide. I whisk her toward the back door, and before she can say a word we're climbing down the rickety steps that lead to the alley behind the brothel. An old Filipino driver is standing there, where my buddy Frisco had arranged for him to meet us. Driver has a calesa—one of those little one-horse-carriage things. I get Perpetua aboard, then climb in next to her. The driver gives the pony a click and a hiss and we're off. But Perpetua's shaking. Shivering. Wet from the rain.

"What's happening?" she whispers. "This isn't allowed."

"Don't be afraid," I say. "You want to go, right?"

She nods.

"Everything's set. You won't have to work there no more."

Her whole body's trembling, and I wrap my arms around her to keep her warm. The pony's clip-clopping down the street at a fast trot. At most, we have twenty minutes before Mama Rosa discovers she's gone.

"I can't leave," Perpetua says to me. "The streets have eyes."

"You'll be safe," I say. "Promise."

She starts to cry, and I hug her closer. Rain's pelting us now, hammering the canopy of the calesa. Water pouring in from front and sides. We're getting soaked. Hushed, our driver hurries us through the city to this tall, brick building near the base. It's got a big wrought-iron fence around it. I tap the driver on the shoulder, and the calesa stops. I help Perpetua out. Driver clucks his tongue again and hurries away.

My heart's beating like a jackhammer. Me and Perpetua are standing in front of the building's tall steel doors, and I bang against the door with the flat of my hand. Once. Twice. Three times, all in sequence. I pause. Then bang one more time. That was the knock, see? The one I'd arranged.

But no one's coming.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," I mutter. "Answer the damn door."

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BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 4 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

I bang the sequence again. This dog starts barking—gonna wake the whole neighborhood. I see a porch light flicker on down the street. We're caught for sure, and I don't know what to do. I'm looking this way and that, tense as a steel rod, positive I'm gonna see Manny Tang spring at us with his knife. Bracing myself to fight back. Hell—

Perpetua was only fourteen.

No bullshit. The world can be a broken place, my friend, and it took me a while to understand that. She made some regrettable choices, and she had her reasons. Weren't many options back then for a young girl with no family, no support. Your stomach gets empty for long, and you get desperate. I made my share of regrettable choices too, and I made a few of them with Perpetua at the start. Every damn one of us needs redemption. It took me a while to come around, to wise up, to see that Perpetua was important. She might've been a teenage prostitute halfway around the world, but she was important. Besides, I wasn't saving her. She was saving me.

Now, I didn't know if I'd die that night in the rain with the door not opened to us. But if you're a soldier you got to be willing to die for the folks you're called to protect. Looking back on it all now, I can't say I was always willing. I ain't no hero. Neither then nor now. Scrapes I been in. No way I should've been in the Army at my age, and no way I should've been inside a whorehouse in the first place. No way any kid like me should've been standing up to what was coming next for all of us—civilians and soldiers alike—full invasion of the country by Imperial Japan. And after the Philippines fell, well . . . when a boy grows up in a prisoner-of-war camp—working as slave labor for one of the most vicious enemies the world has ever known—a lot changes for him on the road to becoming a man.

You ask: How had I gotten myself into this trouble?

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BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 5 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

How did I ever manage to survive?

Folks have told me my story is one for the ages. One that sounds so far-fetched you have trouble believing it's real. But it ain't fiction. Every damn bit of it happened. If you're gonna read about me, you should start at the beginning. It's a survival story and love story like no other.

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BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 6 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

CHAPTER 1

Little Bird Walking

Memphis, 1933

From the front of the classroom, the teacher calls his name in a firm, chirpy voice. The boy is seven years old and doesn't move, though he feels a sudden urge to pee. Parents, grandparents, and students shift in their seats and stare at the boy. Each child has written an original poem. His turn has come to recite for the audience, and he is proud of his poem, but his resolve has vanished, his legs locked as if in irons. His teacher calls his name again.

"Joseph Johnson. Joe?"

One drop. Two. His underwear dampens. The boy squeezes his thighs together while his eyes dart back and forth, searching for escape. The door to the hallway is shut tight. The chalk-dusted walls of the second-grade classroom at Christine Elementary School are wainscoted with hard yellow pine. Someone coughs. The boy's attention snaps back to his teacher. She is tapping her foot. He wills himself to stand, walks to the front, and faces the crowd.

At the back of the classroom, Joe's mother, Edna, leans forward in her hard-back chair and fidgets with her pocketbook.

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BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 7 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

Next to her sits Joe's aunt Ethel. His father has been gone from the family for three years. Edna lays her pocketbook flat on her knees, folds her hands on top, and beams toward her son.

Joe shifts his weight from one foot to another. His mouth stays frozen. The teacher's voice is cheerful yet urgent. "Tell us the name of your poem, dear." But stage fright has overtaken the boy. She prompts again. "The title, Joe. What's your poem called?"

For one long moment he stands speechless in front of the audience, his mouth gluey, his heart hammering, then he blurts: "'The Little Bird.'" And begins to read, "Once there was a little bird. . . ." And stops, because no more words will come. Seconds tick by like forever. Finally the teacher speaks again.

"And what was the little bird doing, dear?"

Joe tries to read beyond the first line of his poem, but his eyes blur and he cannot connect to the page's print. He knows he needs to say something. Anything. Finally he glances toward his teacher and without reading further answers her in a high, quavering voice, "He was walking down the road, just walking down the road!"

His classmates burst into laughter. So do some of the parents. Joe looks out into the sea of staring eyes and sees his mother and aunt burying their faces in their hands. Whether to keep from crying with embarrassment or laughing, he never knows.

Joe shakes his head, drops his chin, returns to his seat. His mother pats him on the shoulder but the damage is already done. In that flicker of a moment, a seed finds root in his heart, a vow he points toward himself and much later learns to identify as resolve. *Never again,* he thinks.

Never again give in to fear.

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BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 8 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

Joe's upbringing is shaped not only by the Depression, but by the hardships of an absent father—his dad went looking for work when Joe was four and never returned. By 1938, when Joe is in sixth grade, his mother has grown lonely. Sometimes at home Joe discovers her crying. She is tall and slim with long legs and beautiful golden plaited hair. Every morning she leaves the house at 6 a.m. and rides a streetcar across the city to her job with the Works Progress Administration. Rent is ten dollars a month, and she earns ten dollars a week at her job sewing flour sacks into dresses. Sometimes she can't make rent, and when the landlord comes around to collect, the family hides in the middle room of their three-room shotgun duplex until he leaves.

Each night after work Edna returns at 6 p.m., exhausted. By then Joe has returned from school, done his homework, chopped wood, carried coal, looked after his two younger siblings, put on a pot of beans, fried up a batch of hot-water corn bread, and made up the beds. They're a team. Joe's a responsible boy and a good student. His favorite subjects are history and geography. A music teacher encourages him to appreciate classical music and has him memorize the words to "La Marseillaise," the French national anthem. Joe sings it word for word with gusto. His favorite composers become Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. He devours books and dreams of great things ahead, but life's hardships are holding him down.

One family ritual is never overlooked, poignant in its display of austerity. On a blustery Saturday evening, Joe stokes the coal-oil stove in the duplex, heats water in pots and pans, and ladles it into a large washtub in the middle of the kitchen floor. The duplex has no designated bathroom, although a plumbed

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BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 9 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

commode sits in a planked-off area on the back porch. Joe leaves the kitchen and shivers. The March wind blows cold outside, and the rest of the house is chilly. A few chunks of coal smolder in an open fireplace in the middle room, where the beds are kept. He moves closer to the fireplace, where his younger siblings linger in the warmth, and turns his back to his mother while waiting his turn. Edna steps out of her simple dress and underthings in the kitchen, stands with goose-pimpled skin in the radiant heat of the stove, then slides into the hot soapy washtub for her weekly bath.

She has borrowed a red dress from her neighbor, a black woman, because races mix without qualms in this part of Memphis's sooty slums. When Edna's bath is finished, she dons the borrowed dress, bundles into her old coat, gives her children a finger wave, and heads to a nearby beer joint, where she quickly sheds the poverty of her outer layer and smiles at the proprietor, a one-legged man named Mr. Jake.

Meanwhile at home, Joe heads into the kitchen and strips, dips himself into the same water, and sighs with anticipated pleasure. Joe is thin and bony, with brown eyes and a shock of dusky hair that hangs over his forehead. He can't afford hair oil, so each Monday morning he rubs lard on his palms, then smears it through his hair to keep it slicked in place. By Wednesday of each week, his hair smells. Kids at school wrinkle their noses when he walks down the hallway. Joe is embarrassed by the odor. Each week, he can't wait until his Saturday-night bath. When he is finished, his little brother, Charlie, jumps into the same water. The water is dirty and tepid by the time their little sister, Betty, takes her turn. Coal oil is required to heat fresh water, and coal oil costs money.

Joe's mother stays out late in the loud jukebox evening. Elegant on a barstool, she taps out a long cigarette from a pack of

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BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 10 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

Chesterfields, inserts the tip into her mouth, and leans across the counter so Mr. Jake can light it for her. He obliges with a smile. Anytime young Joe is out walking in the neighborhood, he searches for clean, discarded name-brand cigarette packages. Edna buys tobacco for a nickel a pouch at the grocery store. Joe rolls her cigarettes on the kitchen table using a hand-operated rolling machine. He trims the ends neatly with scissors and carefully places the cigarettes in whatever clean package he last found. He knows his mother likes to look stylish.

Mr. Jake takes care of Edna's hamburger and beers, even though he is married. His wife is not happy that her husband is offering free food and drinks to a divorced woman, and tonight's free meal is not the first Edna has received at the joint. Edna comes home half-tipsy, and Joe hears her stumble in the early hours of Sunday morning. Mr. Jake and his wife live on top of the beer joint with their three sons. On Sunday afternoon the husband and wife argue fiercely, and she kicks him out of the house. Mr. Jake tells himself he has nowhere to go. On Sunday night he knocks on the door of the Johnsons' duplex and asks to come in.

Edna has met other men at the beer joint. Most drink too much, and once in a while a fellow walks her home, and she needs to fight him off at the front door. But Edna likes Mr. Jake's look, so they start going together. Late that first Monday afternoon when Joe comes home from school, he discovers the new arrangement. He slips out the door into the backyard and throws rocks at the coal shed for hours, muttering under his breath until he can throw no more.

For the next several months Joe tries to live like nothing's changed, even though he knows it's a lie. Mr. Jake's wife has

Little Brown and Company

BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 11 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

commandeered the beer joint, so he is now out of work. His three sons go to the same school that Joe attends now—Humes, a combination middle school and high school that later becomes famous for graduating a young warbler named Elvis Presley. Mr. Jake's sons harass Joe and spread playground rumors that his mother has broken up their once-happy home. Joe can't decide whether the boys are louts or if they're simply as despondent as he is.

For the time being, he shrugs off the allegations. He needs to focus on his work. School lets out, and the hot, sticky Tennessee summer begins. Every two weeks he pulls his wagon to the city auditorium to pick up surplus government food. Edna qualifies because of her low income. Refrigeration and storage are a problem at the auditorium, and the food's never anyone's first choice. Joe brings back rancid butter, wilted apples and cabbages, dried milk and flour crawling with weevils. Neighborhood kids taunt him on the walk home.

Fortunately, Edna finds a union job at RKO Pictures, inspecting movie reels for damage when they're returned to the studio from theaters around the mid-South. The new job comes with better pay, so Edna moves them a block up the street to a house with two bedrooms and a bath. She and Mr. Jake take one bedroom. The children sleep three to a bed in the other.

One Saturday morning, as usual, Joe stands outside the grocery store with his wagon along with other neighborhood kids, all hoping some kindhearted homemaker will take pity on them and choose a child to haul home her groceries. A good tip is a dime. A lousy tip is a nickel. An even worse tip is a cookie and half a glass of milk. Joe knows the best tippers and has high hopes. He makes two trips with his wagon and earns fifteen cents. When the day grows long, he talks to the grocer to see if he

Little Brown and Company

BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 12 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

has a loaf of day-old bread to give away. Edna likes her work sandwiches made with bread. If there's no bread, Edna will make sandwiches with biscuits—but biscuit sandwiches get old, she complains to Joe more than once.

On the way home from the grocer with two stale loaves under his arm, Joe heads to the railroad yard and hunts for coal along the tracks. A worker yells at him for trespassing and chases him out of the yard. Joe waits in the shadows until the worker disappears. He slips back inside and keeps scrounging until his wagon is full.

He likes being the man of the family and doesn't like Mr. Jake lounging around. Often they argue, and the friction between the boy and the newcomer only grows. Mr. Jake looks for a job, but it's the Great Depression, and jobs are as scarce as hen's teeth.

Seventh grade begins for Joe in the fall of 1938, and Mr. Jake's three sons start up their needling again. Joe feels harassed from every side. His mother won't listen to him, if ever he tries to explain his feelings. Mr. Jake's no help. They're arguing nonstop now. Edna tells Joe to simmer down; Mr. Jake's not going anywhere. To top things off, little Charlie has begun to wet the shared bed nearly every night. A faraway thought begins to invade Joe's mind and take shape: *Surely my family would be better off without me*.

His Aunt Ethel has moved to San Antonio along with others from the extended Johnson family. Joe keeps Ethel's address stuffed deep in a pocket. The person he really wants to find is his father, a carefree wanderer who collects silver dollars to give away and works as an itinerant horse trainer and sometime commercial chef. He's been known to kill a fifth of whiskey like it was Coca-Cola, but Joe remembers him with fondness. The

Little Brown and Company

BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 13 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM

father has disappeared. Maybe Aunt Ethel will know his last location.

Early one morning in late fall 1938, without telling a soul, instead of heading for school, Joe makes a beeline for the railroad yard. He finds an empty boxcar heading toward southwest Texas, looks both ways, and jumps aboard.

Joe Johnson is twelve years old and venturing into the great unknown, as blind and unsuspecting about where the road will lead him as that little bird walking.

Little Brown and Company

BrightAndBlind_HCtextF1.indd 14 2/17/22 5:57:58 PM