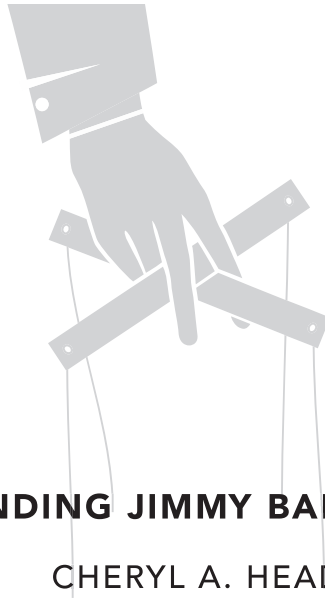




FINDING JIMMY BALDWIN

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June
1954

The bell over the door jingled. A thin, light-skinned woman, her gray hair pulled back in a net, pushed through the swinging gates of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a cotton apron decorated in a fruit-and-vegetables pattern.

“Hi, Miss Shirl.”

“Hi, Baby. Go ahead and sit. I’ll bring you your coffee.”

Roy slid into Jimmy’s booth. That’s what regulars at Shirley’s Cafe on 130 at Lenox called the seat at the far end of the front window. An homage to the neighborhood’s favorite son.

“I’m running late. I thought he’d be here by now.”

Shirl shook her head, placing two cups and a small container of milk on the table. “I got excited when I saw you. Thought maybe he was right behind you. He wasn’t here yesterday either.”

“No?”

Roy stared at the cockeyed cat clock on the paneled wall. Its swinging tail marking the seconds. It was 12:15. He and Jimmy had a standing lunch appointment at Shirley’s. Noon on Tuesday. They’d picked up the routine a month ago when Jimmy returned from overseas, but it had begun a dozen years before that. Back when Roy and Jimmy were a couple of teens trying to figure out their space in the world.

At 12:30, Roy ordered the meatloaf plate and watched the front

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door. He was halfway through the mashed potatoes when they caught in his throat. A patrol car had pulled to the curb in front. Two cops exited the car, adjusting their duty belts as if they were about to do some real work. Roy recognized one of them. Everybody on 130th Street knew Sgt. Peterson.

Peterson reached up to silence the bell as he entered. He stood wide-legged in the open door, hands on his hips, like Columbus returning to Queen Isabella to report he'd discovered America.

"Can I help you, Sergeant?" Shirley asked from behind the counter. "You mind closing the door. I don't like to get no street dirt mixed up with my food."

Peterson signaled the junior officer to get the door as he sauntered to the counter. *You Send Me* wafted through the jukebox speaker—Sam Cooke and the whining ceiling fan making the only sound in the cafe. Peterson hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"Investigating a missing person's report. One James Arthur Baldwin. He might have been abducted, and his sister claims she hasn't seen him for a couple of days."

"Well, I haven't seen him myself since last week," Shirley responded with an involuntary look at the back booth. "We was just talking about that."

The policeman swiveled his head, and Shirley dipped hers in regret as she and Roy made quick eye contact. Peterson ambled to the rear of the cafe. Passing tables and booths, staring brazenly at those holding suspended forks and unswallowed food. He'd always loved using his power to intimidate Black folks. He'd been at it for two decades.

Peterson had more citizen complaints than any other officer in the 32nd precinct. He was known for accosting groups of loitering teens, driving them to Morningside Heights to walk home, putting one or two in the back of a patrol car for a beating, or worse being carried to the precinct. As a rookie cop Peterson had picked up Roy and Jimmy on their way home from a movie theater in the Village and drove to an alley near Colonial Park where he used a Billy club on them. Jimmy's mother walked to the precinct that same night, but was turned away without even the pretense of someone taking her citizen complaint. Then, and now, the police honchos hadn't seen fit to free central Harlem's residents of this brutal cop.

"Well, if it ain't Roy Willoughby. Haven't seen you since you got back from the Army."

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"The Marines," Roy corrected.

Peterson squinted and sucked his teeth. "Heard you made Corporal. I was surprised. Didn't think you'd even have the discipline to do your full stint."

"I'm full of surprises, Peterson. Did I hear you say you talked to Jimmy's sister?"

"I'm asking the questions here. You seen him?"

"No."

"You two used to be thick as thieves. A couple of pansies in fairyland."

Roy stared at the policemen and tapped his thigh. Sometimes, the tapping stopped his head from doing its thing. The young officer's hand was on the butt of his revolver.

"I told you I don't know where he is," Roy said in an even tone.

"Don't think I believe you, Willoughby. I'm getting all kinds of grief about finding your girlfriend. If you ask me, it's a waste of time and money, but the Commissioner is busting our balls about that little . . ."

Shirley's arrival stopped Peterson in mid-slur. She slipped her wiry body between the cops and began wiping the table. She handed Roy a paper bag. "Got you another meatloaf to take home. You better go on over and check on Gloria." Shirley gathered condiments, addressing the two interlopers without looking at them. "Like I said, Officers. Nobody's seen Jimmy. We've been wondering ourselves where he was off to."

Gloria lived in a six-room flat at 128th that had been purchased twenty-five years ago by the Baldwin patriarch—a Pentecostal minister. Even then, with three bedrooms, the apartment was barely large enough for Jimmy and his eight brothers and sisters. The other siblings had fled the crowded quarters and their violent father as soon as they were old enough, but Gloria stayed on to take care of her parents. Her faithfulness paid off when the flat was left to her in her father's will.

Roy climbed the stairs, stepping over discarded children's toys, trash, and a couple of needles. He didn't remember the hallway being this narrow, but he hadn't visited in years. Not since Jimmy had left the neighborhood to be part of that book crowd he desired so much.

Leaning his ear to the door first, Roy finally knocked. Children

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shouting “auntie” over and over changed the previous silence into a commotion of voices, scraping chairs and shuffling footsteps. Roy waited the two minutes it took Gloria to make it to the door, view him through the peephole, and fling it open. He hadn’t seen her for several years and caught himself when he realized shock had widened his eyes. He tried to play it off with a smile, but Gloria winced before she met his gaze again.

“Gloria, baby,” he recovered. “It’s been too long.”

“Well, I been here, Roy.”

“I know. I know.” Roy waggled his head, then removed his cap.

“Work and everything keeps me kinda busy.”

Gloria stepped aside. “I was hoping you’d come. You heard?”

Roy nodded somberly.

The flat was smothered in furniture and stale air. The framed family pictures hanging in the vestibule were as he remembered, and Roy would swear the plastic-covered sofa that centered the living room was the one he’d sat on twenty years ago. Now, it was surrounded by tables and chairs of all types and sizes. On the other side of the entryway was a dining room with French doors—he’d eaten hundreds of meals in that room. But now the door was closed and covered by heavy drapes.

He completed his scan of the living area. Only the dim light gave it grace.

Roy sat in a stuffed chair, avoiding the wire spring that protruded from the upholstery near his leg. Gloria sat on the couch joined by three kids—a boy and two girls. The boy appeared to be about ten. The girls younger. Their brown, sallow faces proved they were siblings. The boy sat between the two girls holding their hands and staring at their visitor.

“Those are Ruth’s kids. I keep them for her sometimes when she’s at work.”

“I can see the resemblance. Gloria, what’s happened with Baldy? That asshole Peterson came down to Shirley’s this afternoon looking for him.”

Gloria reached for a tissue in her robe pocket to stop the sudden tears streaking her cheeks and causing her nose to run. She was the youngest sister but looked twice as old as Jimmy. Her thinning hair reached in all directions, and the once caramel complexion was blotched with dark spots. Her crying had shifted the boys’ stare to a menacing glare. Roy stuck his hands into his leather jacket to hide

his finger taps.

"He's been staying in the dining room. I fixed it up nice with a sleeping cot, and he was using the table for his desk. We've had some good days together since he got back. The kids love him, and he's been helping me out with a few expenses." Gloria sniffed, wiped at her nose, and leaned forward. "He said you all had picked up just like old times."

"Today was our lunch meeting at Shirley's. I waited over an hour for him." Roy shifted in the chair, careful not to snag his pants on the sharp coil. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Sunday morning. He got dressed. Said he was going to church, and he'd be back with supper. I talked to Reverend Wilkins. Jimmy never even made it to church."

Roy looked at the kids again, and then around the living room. He considered that the children and the space could use a good scrubbing. "Gloria, how are you doing with bills and things? You need anything?"

Gloria leaned back on the sofa and pulled herself together. She stood. Adjusted her robe. "I'm doing just fine, Roy. You don't need to concern yourself with me. It's Jimmy I'm worried about. I haven't seen or heard from him in two days. The police said he might be kidnapped. Who would want to do that?"

Roy didn't respond, and for a while, they kept their own thoughts.

"The police also think he just decided to go back to Europe, or to be with his friends downtown." Gloria shook her head. "But Jimmy told me he found himself a place on West 96th. All his stuff is in the dining room, and he left his typewriter. He wouldn't go nowhere without that typewriter."

Gloria began to cry again until she was sobbing. The little boy jumped from the couch and wrapped his arms around his aunt's thick legs. The two girls were also crying. "You know that, Roy. He'd never leave without his typewriter."

Roy inhaled a flood of air when he got outside. He scanned the street, a habit he'd picked up even before his military training, and pulled his cap down firmly. It was windy. Pieces of paper swirled under the parked cars, and around the legs of pedestrians and loiterers on both sidewalks. The corner store was busy this afternoon, and the women coming back from the sidewalk market held onto their canvas bags

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and purses with one hand, and their skirts with the other. Roy looked up when he heard piano music wafting from one of the open windows in the apartment building across the street. He unlocked the Ford Country Sedan and sunk into its upholstered seat—way better than Gloria’s lumpy chair. He rolled down the window halfway to catch the breeze. According to Gloria, Baldy wasn’t leaving. But, that’s not what he’d said.

Roy merged in behind a delivery truck going up 7th. Traffic was light today. There was little he didn’t know about cars or driving or the street addresses of Harlem—it was his business as the owner of a jitney cab. He’d been picking up passengers for eight years. First, driving for the Jewish man who owned the limousine company, then after starting his car service four years ago. He owned two cars now. The Pontiac and the six-passenger Ford station wagon. Sometimes, his regular clients required rides to and from church, and the big car was paying off.

Roy was a few blocks from home when he confirmed that he was being followed. Probably that dumbass Peterson or one of his squad. He didn’t want to lead the cops to where he lived, so he headed to the garage where he kept a small office. It was risky. Gomez—his mechanic, second driver, and friend—would be there if things went badly, but Gomez wouldn’t be happy about Roy delivering NYPD to his place of business.

Roy parked the station wagon in front of the open bay door, grabbed the bag Shirl had packed, and stepped into the shadows of the garage. He turned to see what the black Plymouth would do. It slowed, then moved down the street.

Gomez rolled out from under a red Chevy Deluxe. “Hey man. Whatcha, doing?”

“I thought maybe I was being followed.”

“Were you?”

Roy shrugged. He and Gomez had been through some life-or-death situations in Iwo Jima, and a few times out of loneliness and need they’d serviced each other. It was common between young soldiers who counted every day as their last. All of that ended with Gomez when they got back to New York, but there was still no one he trusted more.

“I’m going up to the office for about an hour,” Roy said. “But, I got a booking for tonight. I might want to take the Pontiac.”

“Okay, I’ll change out the cars. Then I’m gonna lock up early. I got something tonight with Ynez and the kids.” Gomez sat up on the

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creeper and stared at Roy. "I hear your old buddy, the writer, is AWOL. The police say he's been abducted. They've been all up and down the Avenues, harassing people and asking questions. I guess 'cause he's famous or something."

"Yeah. I know," Roy said, heading up the backstairs to the office. He unlocked the door, stepped into the dim office, and relocked the door. He went straight to the closet, withdrawing the .38 from his waistband, and slowly opened the door. Jimmy's bulging eyes were staring up at him. Conscious now, but still gagged.

"Stop fighting," Roy said lifting Jimmy from the floor. "Don't you see I have a gun? I'll remove the gag, but you better not make any noise."

Roy undid the rag and restraints, led Jimmy to the bathroom, and watched him pee. When he pulled the seat down, Roy stepped out of the room, leaving the door open.

It had been an impulse to take Jimmy. But what else could he do?

They'd been having lunch at Shirley's last Tuesday when Jimmy told him about the actor he was in love with—a man five years his junior from a wealthy Parisian family. The boy had arrived in New York that morning to convince Jimmy to return to Europe. Roy had seen the ticket. Passage to Le Havre on the Île de France for the following Monday. They'd argued about it.

"Why do you want these white men, Baldy? To them you're just something exotic. A show pony. Don't go back with him. You belong here with your family, and the people who really love you."

Jimmy shook his head. "We're both more than we were—two misfits who didn't seem to belong, except to each other." Jimmy waved his hands as he talked. Cigarette smoke circling the table. "Two ghetto kids scurrying like roaches and rats looking for a refuge. You found yours in cars. Mine was in books and writing. You understood that. It's why I moved to the Village."

"But Greenwich Village isn't across the sea. You came back to help your people. You always did. You said yourself that

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Gloria needs you."

They paused the quarrel to sullenly eat their food and smoke. Shirley came to the table to top off their coffee and gave them both a curious look before retreating. Roy broke the silence. "I've seen the stories about you in the magazines, Baldy. It's just like they used to say about you at school. You're some kind of genius. But does that mean you have to belong to white people?"

Jimmy stubbed his butt into the ashtray and immediately lit up again. He studied his friend. Roy had always been taller, more muscular, more masculine. And certainly, more handsome. They'd felt an attraction for each other even before they understood the words for it. Jimmy used his thumb to trace the scar on Roy's forehead.

"Gloria wrote to me when you joined the Marines. And again, when you were injured. You and I were always proud of each other, Roy. You never tried to make me feel guilty. I guess you've changed more than I realized."

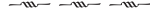
"No more than you, Baldy," Roy mumbled stubbing out his cigarette. "Maybe you just hate us. Maybe you hate yourself."

"No." Jimmy slammed his hand on the table. "It's a simple equation. I love Black people. It's America that hates us. Our ancestors had no agency over their enslavement, and I have no agency over the systems that shackle my hopes and ambitions. I can't breathe here. In Paris at least I have the freedom to find myself. To understand where my blackness ends, and my manhood begins."

Roy lit a Camel and stared at his friend. There was never a time Jimmy wasn't like this. Talking about things none of the kids ever thought about. His nose in a book that hadn't even been assigned by the teacher. Weaving abstract images with his words—the school principal called it a 'silver tongue.' Roy loved him for it. But then he'd always loved Jimmy.

"It may not make sense to you, Roy. But ideas are erupting inside me," Jimmy splayed his slender fingers on his chest, "demanding their release because they're not mine to keep. They're meant for the world."

"And that means you're leaving again." Roy shoved the cruise ship ticket across the table. "Back to your white people."



After dropping off the Robinsons and their two kids at church, Roy saw the blue Ford pull up with Jimmy in the passenger seat. The white driver was talking and gesturing. The church doors had already closed when Jimmy tried to leave the sedan, but the man reached across and held the door. They seemed to be quarreling until the driver began to caress Jimmy's head and then his face. Their heads tilted together in a kiss.

As soon as Roy saw Jimmy in the car, he started the tapping. The VA psychiatrist said the technique might help ward off the headaches so he wouldn't have to take so many pills, but it wasn't working this time. He reached into his pocket for one of the yellow pills and swallowed it dry. For a few seconds, he could hardly breathe. And then the violent pain began crowding his brain. He clung to the steering wheel until the drug began doing its work. His vision cleared in time to see the Ford drive away from the church. Roy followed the pair.

They weren't careful. A mixed-race couple drew attention. Even in Harlem. Especially if they were in a flashy new Ford. Roy knew what they were up to as soon as the car entered the park and drove the long stretch of unpaved road leading to the river turnoff. Roy had been there himself. Many times. In passionate entanglements with delicious dark-skinned bad boys, he'd picked up at a bar or one of the private homes where his kind gathered. But never in broad daylight on a Sunday morning. Cops knew about this place, and there was always the risk a vice squad car, and a paddy wagon, would roll up the wooded road to arrest another group of homos. The joke was that half those conducting the raids and roundups were probably gay themselves.

Roy parked at the edge of the road only a few minutes before deciding. He reached into the glove compartment for the small dark bottle and a rag, then tucked the handgun into his waistband. Dipping in and out of the trees, he stopped when he reached the overlook. There was only the Ford parked near the twelve-foot, chain-link fence that separated the grand view of the river from the careless or suicidal. As Roy drew closer, he saw the white boy in the front seat. His head bobbing. Roy yanked open the passenger door and slugged the driver with the butt of his pistol. The man's face fell onto Jimmy's lap.

Stunned, Jimmy could only utter a momentary protest before

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Roy leaned his weight to confine him and pressed the rag against his mouth and nose. Roy winced at the sweet smell of the chloroform and watched Jimmy's shocked and pleading eyes go dim and finally close. He lifted Jimmy's limp body over his shoulder and carried him into the woods.

Jimmy gulped water from the small sink then stumbled out of the bathroom, his legs still cramping from being holed up in that tiny closet. Jimmy resisted before finally allowing Roy to help him to the desk chair.

Roy placed the paper bag in front of Jimmy. "Here. Eat. It's from Shirley's." He sat on the edge of the desk. The gun on his lap.

Jimmy hadn't said a word to Roy. And he didn't speak now. He tore open the bag and consumed the meatloaf with his fingers. Still dressed in his church suit, he paused a second before wiping his fingers on his shirt.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Roy asked.

"Why?" Jimmy's voice was hoarse.

"You can't break a person's heart over and over again," Roy said, sniffing at the tears trying to form. "You just can't, Baldy." Roy wiped at his face. "Is it true what Gloria told me? You're staying? You got a place?"

Jimmy had avoided Roy's eyes, but now looked at him. "I thought about what you said. Gloria *does* need me." Jimmy paused. "Is Philippe alright?"

"Who? Oh. The white boy. He must be. The police think you've been kidnapped, and he's the only one who could have told them."

Jimmy's anger spilled over. "Why the fuck did you do this? You're a goddamn animal."

Roy couldn't stop the tears this time. "I couldn't stand to lose you again." He covered his face with his sleeve. The tears continued, and he rushed to the bathroom, leaving the gun on the desk. Jimmy watched the gun as if it might have its own life but didn't touch it. Instead, he searched the desk for paper and a pencil. When Roy returned Jimmy was scribbling so frantically he didn't notice.

"Baldy. I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. Do you hear me?"

"I'm desperate for a cigarette, Roy. Do you have one?" Jimmy asked

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still writing. "And I need a drink of water."

Roy lit a cigarette and put it in an ashtray on the desk. He found a glass and filled it with water. Then he paced. He heard the bay doors slam shut when Gomez locked up. Roy looked at his watch then stood near Jimmy who was hunched over the desk.

"Baldy, I need to get you out of here. I'm sorry I drugged you and hit that guy. I just lost it. I don't know how else to explain it. You have every right to turn me in if you want to."

The light from the half-boarded window was dimming, and Jimmy's face was all eyes and gap-toothed smile when he responded.

"We were two boys adrift, you and I. You were once my sanctuary. How could I turn you in?"

"Come on. I'm taking you back to Gloria's."

"Not yet. We'll need a story. The police will ask questions. So will the papers. I've been writing some notes. Our cover story. I'll tell them I wasn't kidnapped, that I needed to get away to think. That being back in this country after so many years away brought up all the old terrors I felt about being an American Negro."

"What about your boyfriend?" Roy asked dourly.

"I'll smooth things over with Phillipe. I'd already told him I was staying in New York a while longer." Jimmy's face went soft. "He's really a very sweet man, Roy. I think you'd like him."

Roy tapped his thigh.

Jimmy stood. His legs shaking. "I can call the *Times* and *Harper's*. I might even give the story to *Amsterdam News*," he said excitedly. He looked down at the condition of his clothes. "If they send someone to interview me tonight, I'll need to change."

"You really think they'll buy it? That you just wanted to disappear for a few days?"

"Agatha Christie did it. So why shouldn't I?"

Roy clutched Jimmy's elbow steadying him as they descended the backstairs into the garage. A blue Caddy was up on cinderblocks in the first bay. The red Chevy was ready for pickup in the second, and the station wagon was parked next to it. That meant the Pontiac was waiting for him outside.

Roy moved to the side door and turned off the overhead light. He

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helped Jimmy through the door and turned to lock it. Then he heard approaching footsteps.

"Be still. Both of you," Peterson warned. "No. Don't turn around until I tell you, Willoughby."

"You're the one who's been following me," Roy stated.

"That's right. You've been lying since you were fifteen years old, why would I start believing your sorry ass now? I thought I'd find you two girls together, eventually."

Peterson wasn't in uniform, and it was the Plymouth, not a patrol car, parked in the side lot. He angled a small-caliber pistol back and forth until it stopped at Jimmy. "Boy, you've caused me a whole lot of grief," Peterson snarled. "Maybe you and the others think you're important now, but to me, you're still a piece of shit." Peterson took a step toward Jimmy. "I'm taking your black ass to the precinct so all those bleeding hearts at city hall can take a breath. But, before you get there, you might suffer a fall and . . ."

"Like the ones we had when you used to knock us around in the precinct basement?" Roy challenged; his back still turned. He'd been tapping his thigh since he heard Peterson's voice, but now he was having difficulty getting air.

"Shut up. You're in enough trouble as it is. Kidnapping, obstruction..."

"Wait a minute," Jimmy interrupted. "There's been no wrongdoing. It was me. I left for a while to clear my head."

Roy suddenly tossed the keys onto the gravel. The clatter caused Peterson to turn and fire, but not before Roy's shot caught him square in the chest. Peterson was dead before he hit the ground.

Roy fell too, writhing and holding his head. "Where'd he hit you?" Jimmy shouted.

"I'm not shot. Call Gomez. His number's in my pocket."

Gomez was at the garage within twenty minutes. Before he arrived, Roy's headache subsided to a dull thud. That's when he insisted Jimmy leave the scene and drive the Pontiac to Gloria's to initiate the cover story.

Using gloves, Roy and Gomez carried Peterson to his own car and dropped the body into the trunk. While Gomez raked the gravel in the side lot, Roy dumped one pair of gloves, and the two guns, into a vat

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of motor oil. He donned the second pair to drive Peterson's Plymouth to the river overlook. Roy kept an eye on the rear mirror. Gomez, calm and armed, followed.

The only other vehicle at the overlook left even after Roy gave the signal. Lights off, then on, and then doused again. When Gomez drove away, Peterson was still in the Plymouth's trunk. The keys in the ignition.

It was almost nine o'clock when they drove past Gloria's building. Roy's Pontiac was parked at the curb, but so was a patrol car. From around the corner, Roy made his way to the back entrance. This time Gloria answered Roy's knock immediately. She smiled, looking ten years younger than earlier.

"He's home. He said you'd be coming."

Roy accepted the beer Gloria offered and was back in the menacing chair. Jimmy, on the sofa and dressed in fresh clothes, had his arm around the little boy who was sleeping.

"You called the newspapers?"

Jimmy nodded. "There might be something in the *Times* tomorrow. The police were here, too. They seemed relieved when they left."

"They're still parked outside. Maybe in case you get another notion to go off and find yourself."

The two old friends laughed. Roy finished his beer, and Jimmy lit a cigarette.

"Don't ever ask me any questions about tonight, Baldy."

"I won't. But I have something to say to you, Roy. There's a price this republic exacts on every Black man or woman walking. That's the real crime. And we paid that price long before tonight. Remember that."