Mr. Wilson

a novella

While what follows is fiction, some aspects of the stories of the people and places are true, and are based on newspaper accounts, public records, family oral histories, and interviews conducted by the writer.

"There are years that ask questions and years that answer."

Zora Neale Hurston

Eastern Long Island/circa 1950

He is an old man who has spent decades living in sheds or abandoned chicken coops, in squalid farm labor camps, or in shacks once home to generations of the enslaved, including his own people. He will not wake up in the morning, on any morning, well before sunrise, and greet the coming day with hope and optimism.

On this morning, Wilson wakes up surprised he isn't dead. For him, being alive is mostly good news, but in no way a reprieve from the past that has shadowed his day-to-day existence for decades. Nor does being alive at this moment address his life's unanswered and unresolved questions that he knows one day he will have to face down before his life comes to an end.

Some mornings, before his brain clears itself of all the confusion, he is so certain death has arrived that he hears the dirt clods and rocks landing on the cheap wooden coffin lined with burlap in which his rotting body has been placed. Some mornings are further tainted by the night's nightmares: visions of his past that arrive unbidden and unwelcome when the brain is shutting down.

Rain tinkling the window behind the cast-off chair in which he sleeps every night is a good sign, since dead people don't hear rain falling. He's sure of that. His eyes wink open.

I made it through another night, he thinks

He pushes the blanket off his chest and legs. He tries to stand, but dizziness strangles him. His legs have great difficulty holding him up. They're close to useless anymore. Feet, ankles, knees, hips, they've all gone to hell. He falls back, letting out a groan that could he heard

elsewhere in the shed if there were still people sleeping on their cots. But they are gone. He is alone.

A recent fire destroyed the farm labor camp, scattering everyone, sending them out into a world they had not been a part of, with the impossible task of finding their way back to wherever they were from. Assuming they knew.

Frank and Oliver said they were going to make their way south, to South Carolina or Georgia. Neither was sure where he was from, or if any of their people were still alive. Neither had a dollar between them, and packed whatever they had in a couple of trash bags. Clara walked away from the camp after the fire and Wilson had no idea where she went. Bea was found dead in a government apartment, murdered by a man with a knife. The local newspaper wrote it up: "A woman who spent her life in farm labor camps was found dead in her apartment. No arrests have been made."

Pain stabs the right side of his abdomen. The pain has been there for weeks, well before the fire, doubling him over at times. He stands up again, gripping the arm of the chair until he is steady on both feet, then hobbles to the bathroom in the corner of the shed.

Standing over the toilet, he leans his head against the wall and concentrates his aim so the stream stays inside the toilet and doesn't spill over on the floor. He groans painfully, louder. His urine is flecked with red. So be it. He's wobbly as he zips up his pants.

Adding to his misery is anxiety over the coming days, when he will have to turn his life upside down and retrace his own history, what little he knows, and to try to answer the tangled web of unanswered questions: Who am I? Where do I belong?

Going over old ground has long been something he's avoided, but the fire forced it on him. He has no choice but to look backwards, and to find his life back there. The South. The Deep South.

He has lived his long life with an unresolved past. No history, personal or otherwise, has ever settled on him, guiding him as he got older when he found the challenges of life far more daunting. For him, there is no past to stand on.

What he knows is scant: there is a tiny hamlet in southern Georgia, tight to the Florida border, but that is all he knows of his beginnings.

What he does remember is every aspect, day by day, of the trip north.

Ormond, Florida/early 20th century

The crew boss was a foul-tempered Black man named Kemp. Wilson never knew his first name, if he ever heard it. He had a wood lot in town. Each spring he put men, women and children into the back of his truck and drove them north, dropping them off at farms that needed field work, and had sheds, chicken coops, shacks of all kinds, for them to live in while the harvest was on. That's how he made his money.

Each night on the trip north, Kemp camped in woods away from towns and villages so as not to draw attention to himself and his group. They were never by themselves; the size of the group grew as they moved north and he picked up homeless stragglers or passed-out drunks half-dead in the street.

So many men, women, teenagers, old people carrying babies, unsupervised children, were on the road, an American exodus like the Hebrews fleeing Pharoah. People camped in woods, in fields, sleeping in buses, trucks and cars, refugees all of them, so many they were small cities.

Kemp was careful not to go where his people weren't allowed. Their proscribed world was tiny, enclosed by the high wall of the not-to-be-broken social rules. The rules were there for all to know and follow, and he followed them as if they were religious instructions and getting into heaven depended on keeping them to the letter.

He never went into a town he didn't know to buy food. He knew enough roadside places run by his own people where he could buy food and other supplies. Several times they stayed days in the same wooded place, shitting and pissing on the ground, while Kemp made repairs to the truck, or went off to look for drunks he could gather up and bring with him as they moved north.

One night they stayed in South Carolina in woods filled with hundreds of other people. Everyone slept on the ground, cooked on stick fires, or ate their food out of cans and greasy paper bags. The air smelled of human waste, and wet wood burning, and unwashed bodies. There were children, some as young as three or four, and babies in the arms of old women.

The boy from Ormond who believed he was about fourteen (he'd never been sure), explained to Kemp he was alone and was trying to get to New Jersey to pick blueberries.

"Can you help me get there?" the boy asked.

"What's your name?"

"Wilson, sir."

"Where's your momma?" Kemp asked.

"She's dead," Wilson said.

“How about your daddy?”

“I don’t know anything about him.”

“You got food? A change of clothes?”

“I got nothin.”

Kemp turned away from the boy.

Somewhere in Virginia, Kemp stayed in a forest because his truck needed repairs. Again. They were near railroad track. One morning Wilson got up to relieve himself and as he stood there a train passed. Hundreds of ragged men stood in the open doors of the rail cars. For years, Wilson remembered that morning so well it took on a mystical quality, like seeing a ghost train.

Later in the morning Kemp went looking to buy a fuel pump. When he came back, he said some white men had come after him and told him to go back and live in the woods, you piece of shit. Another time he went into a shanty town of other refugees and returned with three drunk men who had become lost trying to get to Philadelphia. He said he’d drop them off at a farm in Delaware he knew.

He crowded them in the truck with everyone else. The old woman who sat next to Wilson under the tarp in the back of the truck on the way north said the three men had been Shanghaied. It was the first time Wilson had heard that word: Shanghaied.

“Crew bosses, they pick up men who don’t know better and can’t do nothin for themselves and drop them off at farms for a fee, money under the table,” she said. “I seen it with my own eyes.”

She said her husband had been Shanghaied years ago in Alabama or Mississippi and ended up picking apples somewhere in upstate New York. One spring morning she buried him on the back of a farm in Maryland. She made a cross out of sticks and jammed it into the ground. Around her was a field of crude crosses and wild flowers and freshly-turned earth. A make-do graveyard that would soon be overgrown and forgotten.

“Keep goin north,” she told Wilson. “Find somethin you can live with and stick with it.”