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FOREWORD

It is the unleashing of power greater than the human ability to understand, and the subsequent fear, the same things that moved Robert Oppenheimer to murmur about its unleashing of such powers in 1945 after seeing the first nuclear bomb test, when he invoked the Bhagavad Gita: "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds". And those were the words that came to mind for me when I read Mark Waid and J.G. Jones' epic take on race, heroism and horror, *Strange Fruit*. Certainly, *Strange Fruit* is the answer to Waid's previous take on such themes—well, two of them anyway—in 2009's *Irredeemable*, in which an indestructible blond, blue-eyed savior has his soul subsumed by paranoia and goes about destroying Earth in a cosmic tantrum. The god-like figure in *Fruit* has no name, and no words to speak. And without the bookend of *Irredeemable*, he could be looked upon yet another iteration of the Magic Negro that has made up so much of popular culture—in the last twenty years alone, right-thinking figures such as Stephen King and Robert Redford have made this figure the center of their works, and have quite rightly been pilloried for it.

But although I have my issues with some of the liberties taken here, such as the use of the word nigger, it would be just as naive to pretend that such language wasn't used in Mississippi in 1927 (or now, for that matter) along with other equally lacerating epithets. (My Mississippi-born and bred grandmother wouldn't watch *The Andy Griffith Show* because she wondered what happened to the black people who would've logically populated a small Southern town, a question that chilled me as a boy, stuck with me and kept me from ever paying much attention to it.) In his collection, *Play It*, the critic Clive James reflected on this conundrum when he wrote, "It goes without saying that you must tread carefully if you want to republish *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* under its original title, even though a great writer wrote it." To shy away from the institutional brutality of the era leaves one with something along the lines of the 2000 film *The Patriot*, which was so embarrassed to depict slavery in its story of the familial conflicts caused by the Revolutionary War that the movie ignored slavery altogether—another way of admitting that pop culture often can't balance two contradictory ideas in a single scenario. Or, as they call it in other places: conflict. Or, yes, drama.

More importantly, let's acknowledge the fact comics rarely deal with race head-on and when the medium does turn towards it, the tropical storm level of self-congratulation almost threatens to overwhelm the effort. Because of this, I can't help but laugh when the racism from an unforgivably large slice of fantasy fandom spurts out, such as the reaction to Michael B. Jordan playing Johnny Storm, the seething towards the idea of Donald Glover as Spidey, or the criticism of Leslie Jones in the *Ghostbusters* reboot. It took Walter Mosley to crush it when he recently observed something many black comics fans (myself included) ***felt***—Spider-Man was the first African American superhero; he picked up on a joke Glover made that set all this into motion in the first place. Or when guys I'm thrilled to call friends, Kyle Baker and the late (and much missed) Bob Morales, turned the Captain America myth on its head by mixing it with the bilious stew of the Tuskegee experiments (bet I'm not the only one still wondering when Marvel is going to get around to making that movie).

I consider Mark a friend, as well, which is why when I was asked to write about what he and Jones accomplished with *Strange Fruit*—with its echoes of *Blood at the Root*—I was glad to step into the conversation. By marrying the visual grammar of Norman Rockwell and the government financed art of the photographs taken by Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks (those grim, unforgiving faces formed by poverty and anger) for the Farm Security Administration, Jones gives his artwork both muscle and grace. It may be fitting that *Strange Fruit* came to a close in the winter of 2016. The series becomes

part of the tumult, alongside complications such as the reaction to *The Birth of a Nation* and Donald Trump whipping up frothy post-Tea Party frustration originally set into motion by what many hoped would be the beginning of America's first post-racial movement, the election of our first black President (and Barack Obama's election connected to the shocking growth of the number of hate groups, according to law enforcement organizations). All of these things are connected. And this is a dialogue that comics shouldn't be excluded from.

For me, it's part of a continuum that Mark has been building for some time. The white-hot fury of *Irredeemable* was also about intolerance, and how that anger and paranoia caused by that same intolerance creates world-wide misery; that series felt to me, as much as anything, as if it were commenting on race. (*Irredeemable* was a recommendation from pop-culture maven and co-creator of the series *Mom*, Eddie Gorodetsky.) This Superman-as-a-horror-story tableau reminded me of Jules Feiffer's boiled-down assessment of the Submariner from his prescient 1965 comics/pop culture disentanglement, *The Great Comic Book Heroes*; there, Feiffer wrote Prince Namor was a step away from being the Black Muslim of comic books as a way of summarizing the character's justifiable hair-trigger temper.

The wrestling over how to lead their lives by the black characters during a crisis, all the while suffering through the quotidian onslaught of racism, is part of *Strange Fruit*, too; McCoy trying to explain himself and what needs to be done to save Chatterlee from extinction to the Senator who sees himself as right-minded work so well that I wanted to see more of that played out. There are other things to note here as Jones sneaks in references from less serious sources; a panel from chapter two pays tribute to Ray Walston pouring over tickers in *The Sting*. The big homage is to another alien being who crash-landed on Earth—that's the late Dwayne McDuffie's creation, Icon. Invoking a character who should've played a bigger part of the landscape—and who has instead been folded into what feels like footnote status gives *Strange Fruit* the chance to comment on how comics deals (that is to say, badly) with black characters. It feels like the alien cynosure of *Fruit* is silent because Icon never had a voice scaled to his potential impact. There's plenty going in *Strange Fruit*, and it's determined to keep shouting out a perilously undervoiced thought—the place of race in comics.

Elvis Mitchell
Los Angeles, 2016

Elvis Mitchell is an award-winning American film critic and host of KCRW's nationally syndicated pop culture and entertainment show, The Treatment. *Born in Highland Park, Michigan, Mitchell has served as a film critic for the* Fort Worth Star-Telegram, *the* LA Weekly, *the* Detroit Free Press, *and the* New York Times. *He was a pop culture commentator for* Weekend Edition *on NPR and hosted* Elvis Mitchell: Under the Influence *on Turner Classic Movies. In 2002, he gave the prestigious Alain Locke lectures on African American culture at Harvard University, and subsequently, has been a visiting lecturer at Harvard in Visual and Environmental Studies, and in African American Studies. A WGA Award nominee for his work on* The AFI Lifetime Achievement Award: Sidney Poitier, *Mitchell has also served as editor-at-large at* SPIN *magazine and is currently special correspondent for* Interview *magazine. Mitchell is also the producer and co-creator of* The Black List, *the NAACP Image Award-winning documentary film series about race, culture and the seeds of success, with director Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. Mitchell currently serves as the Curator for the Film Independent program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and as Film Scholar at the Department of Film at University of Nevada, Las Vegas.*

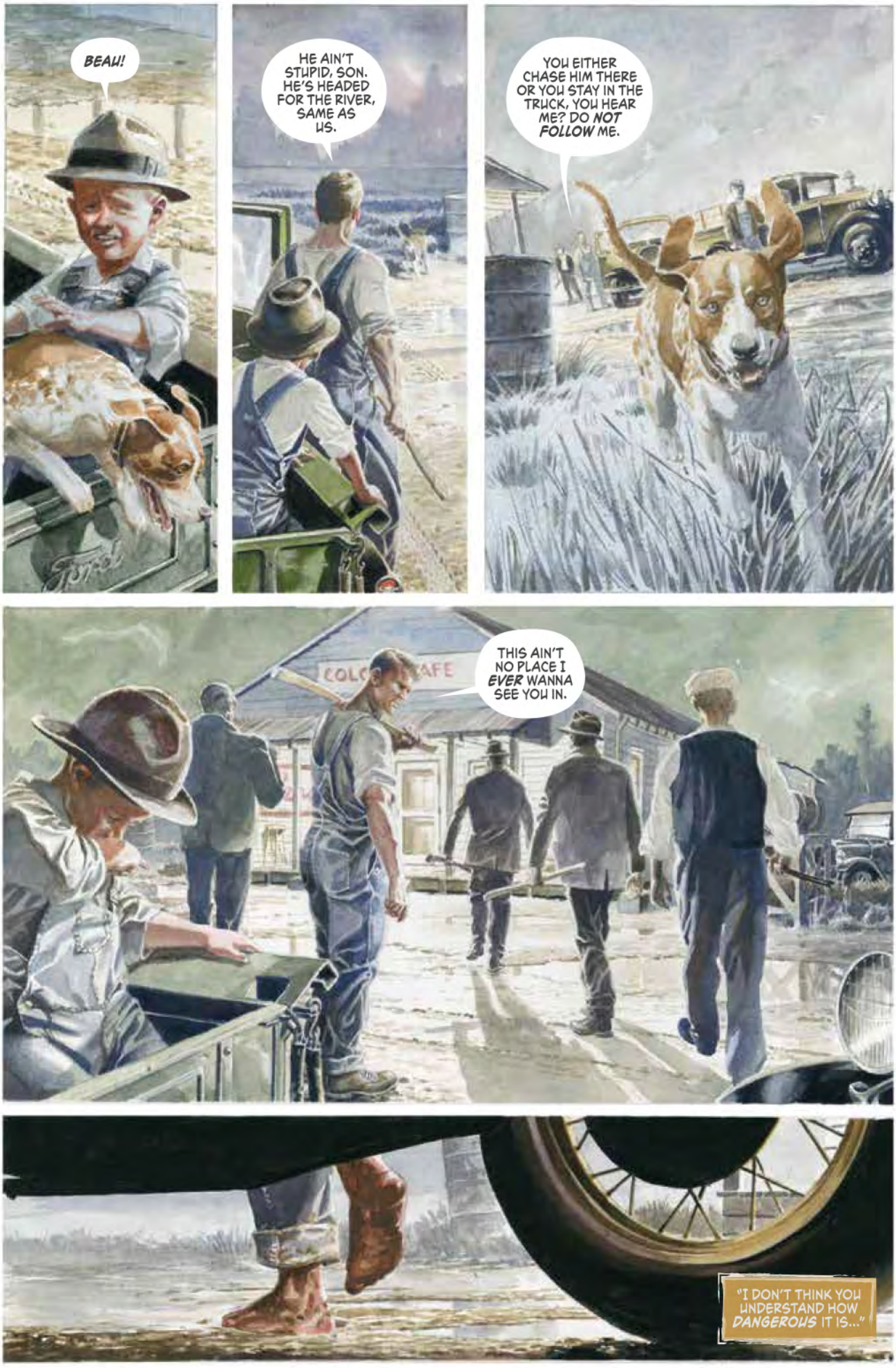
CHATTERLEE, MISSISSIPPI
APRIL 1927

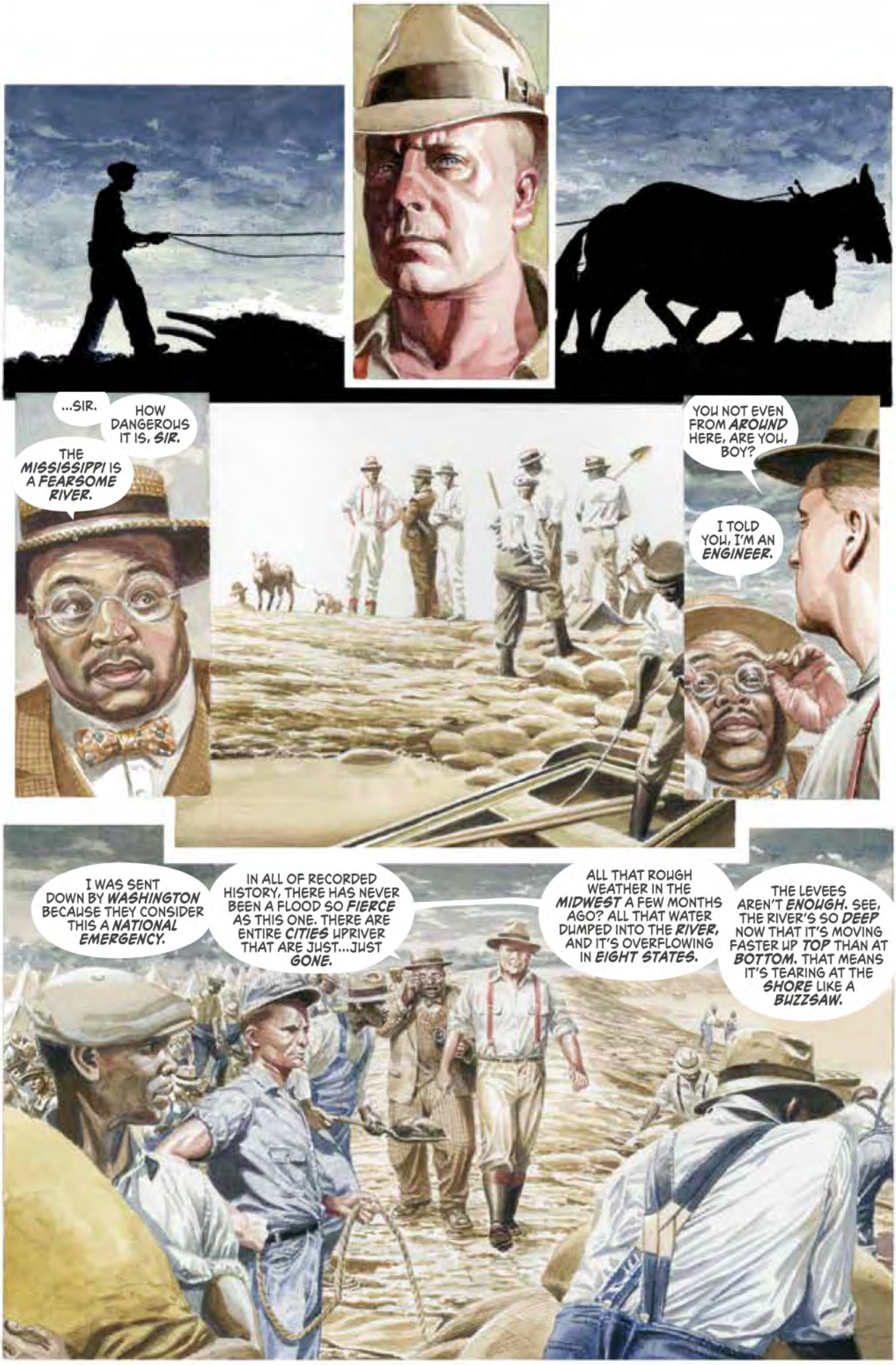

...CAIN'T HARDLY REMEMBER WHAT THE DAMN SUN LOOKS LIKE...


TEARS O' GOD...
OH, DON'T START WITH THAT AG'IN, ELLIOT. YOU EVER BEEN UP T' SEELEY? THEY'S AS GOD-FEARIN' AS THEY COME.
DIDN'T KEEP 'EM FROM LOSIN' THE WHOLE TOWN WHEN THEIR LEVEE BROKE. AND THEY DONE NOTHIN' T' ANGER THE LORD.


WE AIN'T GONNA LET THAT HAPPEN HERE. OUR LEVEE'S GONNA HOLD.
WON'T IT?

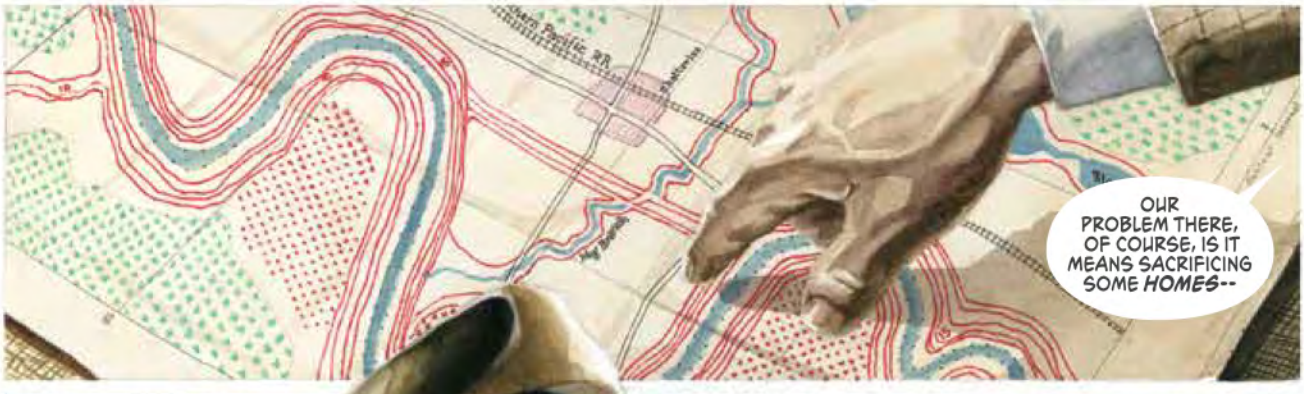

IT WILL IF WE KEEP EVER'BODY PROPERLY MOTIVATED.
COLORED CAFE
Ford
026-516


BEAU!
HE AIN'T STUPID, SON. HE'S HEADED FOR THE RIVER, SAME AS US.
YOU EITHER CHASE HIM THERE OR YOU STAY IN THE TRUCK, YOU HEAR ME? DO NOT FOLLOW ME.
THIS AIN'T NO PLACE I EVER WANNA SEE YOU IN.
"I DON'T THINK YOU UNDERSTAND HOW DANGEROUS IT IS..."


...SIR.
HOW DANGEROUS IT IS, SIR.
THE MISSISSIPPI IS A FEARSOME RIVER.
YOU NOT EVEN FROM AROUND HERE, ARE YOU, BOY?
I TOLD YOU, I'M AN ENGINEER.
I WAS SENT DOWN BY WASHINGTON BECAUSE THEY CONSIDER THIS A NATIONAL EMERGENCY.
IN ALL OF RECORDED HISTORY, THERE HAS NEVER BEEN A FLOOD SO FIERCE AS THIS ONE. THERE ARE ENTIRE CITIES UPRIVER THAT ARE JUST...JUST GONE.
ALL THAT ROUGH WEATHER IN THE MIDWEST A FEW MONTHS AGO? ALL THAT WATER DUMPED INTO THE RIVER, AND IT'S OVERFLOWING IN EIGHT STATES.
THE LEVEES AREN'T ENOUGH. SEE, THE RIVER'S SO DEEP NOW THAT IT'S MOVING FASTER UP TOP THAN AT BOTTOM. THAT MEANS IT'S TEARING AT THE SHORE LIKE A BUZZSAW.


WE HAVE TO BE PREPARED TO EVACUATE THE *AREA*--
THIS *TOWN* CANNOT *SURVIVE* WITHOUT ITS *WORKFORCE*, BOY.


--OR AT LEAST BE READY TO CARVE OUT A *RELIEF CHANNEL* TO THE *EAST*.


OUR PROBLEM THERE, OF COURSE, IS IT MEANS SACRIFICING SOME *HOMES*--


OUR *PROBLEM* IS THAT WE GOT TOO MANY [redacted] 'ROUND HERE WEARIN' *SUITS*...


"...AND NOT ENOUGH FILLIN' SANDBAGS."


LISSEN UP! Y'ALL AIN'T NOTICED, IT'S POWERFUL NASTY OUT THERE T'NIGHT, AND THAT LEVEE AIN'T NOWHERE NEAR FINISHED!


Y'ALL ARE BEIN' PAID GOOD MONEY, AND YOU HAD YOURSELF ENOUGH OF A BREAK! I WANT ALL THE ABLE-BODIED MEN IN HERE ON THEM TRUCKS!


WE GOT WORK T'DO!
LET'S GO!


SON OF A [redacted]...
SONNY.
OH, [redacted]


SHERIFF'S BEEN LOOKIN' ALL OVER FOR THIS BOY! HE GOT A LOT T'ANSWER FOR, THIS LI'L THIEF!
F'R WHAT? I DIDN'T TAKE NOTHIN' FROM THAT OL' RUMMAGE STORE! THASSA BULL[redacted] CHARGE!
THASS WHAT Y'R POSSE'S HERE FOR? T'DRAG ME OFF?
PICKENS, CALM DOWN.
SON, NO ONE'S "DRAGGIN'" ANYBODY. AIN'T NOBODY OWNS YOU. IT'S A GOOD WAGE--
BULL[redacted]! SIX BITS A DAY, SUNRISE TO SUNSET! WE MAKE MORE'N THAT PICKIN', AND PLUS, AIN'T NONE OF US SIGNED UP, WE DRAFTED!
Y'ALL CALL IT WHATCHA WANT, IT STILL PLANTATION DAYS IN LEVEE COUNTRY! AIN'T THAT RIGHT?
I SAY, LET THAT OL' MAN RIVER TAKE THIS WHOLE DAMN DELTA!
YOU WATCH YOUR MOUTH, BOY! WE ALL DO OUR PART--
--BUT IT DON'T MAKE NO SENSE F'R GOOD WHITE FOLKS T' BREAK THEMSELVES WHEN THEY'S SO MANY BUCKS C'N PUT A BACK TO A HOE!
WE NEED EVER'BODY--

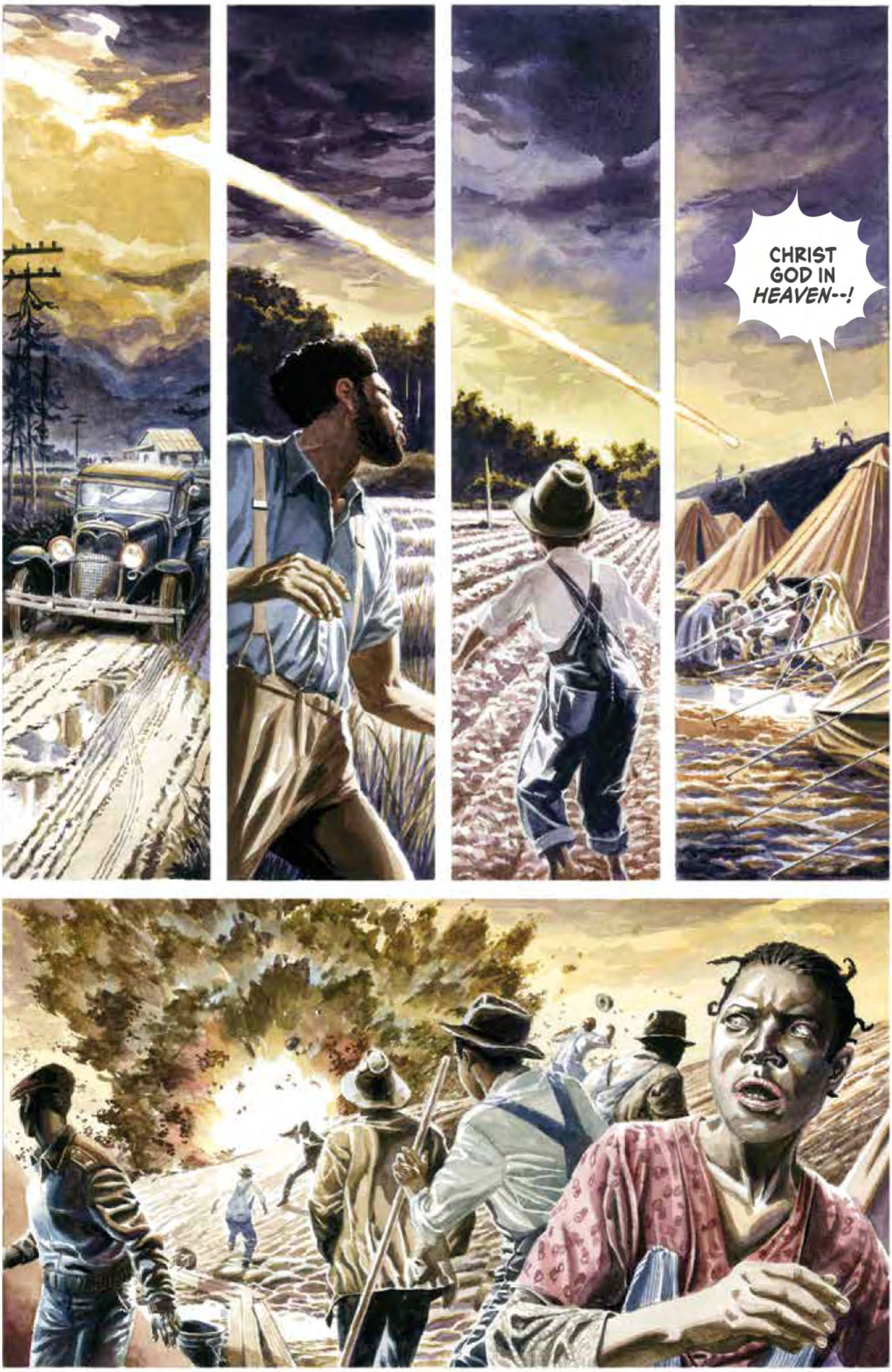

--AN' ANYONE DON'T WANNA FALL IN LINE'S GONNA BE DECORATIN' THEM OAK TREES ON OUT MY FARM, Y'HEAR--?


ANDY, F'R JESUS' SAKE--!
PUT THAT THING AWAY AND GET YOUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT!


WE GOT MORE IMPORTANT MATTERS T'WORRY ABOUT RIGHT NOW'N ONE BUCK!


EVERYBODY BACK T' WORK!


Y'ALL GO ON.
I GOT SOMETHIN' ELSE I GOTTA TAKE CARE OF.
COLORED CAFE


CHRIST GOD IN *HEAVEN*--!


WE GOT A BREACH!
MORE BAGS! NOW!
WHAT THE SAINT WAS THAT?
LIKE WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH FALLING OUT OF THE SKY, NOW IT'S FIRE AND BRIMSTONE? WASN'T LIGHTNING!
DIDN'T SEE IT M'SELF.
GRAB A SHOVEL. LONG AS WE C'N GET THAT HOLE PLUGGED--
"--IT WON'T MUCH MATTER WHAT IT WAS."