

## GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

every word of Tom P. Brady's *Black Monday* and all the other racist rhetoric that had circulated in Mississippi since the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. They'd been waiting for trouble, for a "glib young negro" from Chicago or New York to step out of line. When he did, they made sure to make an example out of him.

An example that no one would ever forget.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE BOY FROM CHICAGO

Emmett Louis Till lived and died in the middle of the twentieth century, a dynamic period in American history that came after the invention of telephones, industrial assembly lines, and motion pictures but before the development of cellular telephones, DVDs, and personal computers. His brief lifetime spanned a number of large and small events that permanently influenced American life: the Second World War and the first atomic bomb; the Nazi Holocaust and the establishment of Israel as an independent country; the presidential administrations from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Dwight D. Eisenhower; the GI Bill and the baby boom; Elvis Presley and rock and roll; McDonald's and Disneyland; color TV and sitcoms; the polio vaccine and fluoridated toothpaste; integration of Major League Baseball and the beginnings of the civil rights movement. It was a turbulent, progressive era of unprecedented achievements and changes.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, on July 25, 1941, Emmett was the only child of Louis and Mamie Till. Less than five months after his birth, the Japanese attack



Downtown Chicago, 1953

on Pearl Harbor forced the United States into World War II, the war that drew Emmett's father into the army. Shortly before Emmett's fourth birthday, his father, accused of rape and murder of Italian civilians, was executed by order of a U.S. military court. For years, family members, Louis Till's army buddies, and scholars of the case have suspected that the execution may have been racially motivated.

Emmett, nicknamed "Bobo," spent most of his childhood in Argo, Illinois, a suburb about ten miles southwest of Chicago, living with his mother near

her extended family, including her grandmother Nancy Jane Carthan. As a five-year-old, Emmett fell victim to the nationwide polio epidemic—polio vaccinations would not be available until 1955, the year of his death—but he recovered without any of the permanent physical disabilities that afflicted thousands of American children in the 1950s. A speech defect that often caused him to stutter was the only lasting effect of the sometimes fatal disease.

When he was twelve, Emmett and his mother moved to an apartment on the South Side of Chicago, where she worked as a civilian procurement officer for the Air Force, earning about \$3,900 per year, slightly less than the average income for Americans at the time. He enrolled in the seventh grade at James McCosh Elementary School on South Champlain Avenue and quickly made friends among his classmates. It didn't take long for Emmett and his mother to settle into their new home and neighborhood and to begin to appreciate life in the big city.

In 1954, Chicago had a population of more than three and a half million, making it the nation's second-largest city. Over five hundred thousand of its residents were black, most of whom had arrived in the great migration from Southern states. From 1900 to 1950, African Americans from the South had flocked to Northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia seeking greater opportunities and better living conditions, and the migration had a significant effect on the size and nature of these cities. The black population of Chicago in 1950, for example, was twelve times larger than it had been just forty years earlier.

Life in the sprawling, windy metropolis on the shore of Lake Michigan wasn't easy, but in nearly all cases, it was better than it had been in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, or Georgia. A major hub of American business and transportation, Chicago had a steady need for workers, and most new residents

found jobs quickly. As its African American population grew, businesses sprang up to meet the needs and tastes of the newcomers, offering many forms of employment, education, and entertainment that were not available to African Americans in the South.

In addition to everything else the Windy City offered, Chicago was also a year-round sports city. Fall, winter, spring, or summer, at least one of the city's four major professional sports franchises would be in action: the Chicago Bears of the National Football League, the Chicago Blackhawks of the National Hockey League, and two baseball teams, the Chicago Cubs and the Chicago White Sox.

Emmett loved the White Sox.

The Brooklyn Dodgers' Jackie Robinson had broken Major League Baseball's "color barrier" back in 1947, and now many professional teams employed black players. In the summer of 1954, as Jackie Robinson neared the end of his all-star career with the Dodgers, several other black ballplayers were making their marks in baseball. Willie Mays of the New York Giants won the National League Most Valuable Player Award, future Hall of Famers Ernie Banks and Hank Aaron made their first major-league appearances, and Emmett's favorite player, the White Sox' star Minnie Minoso, enjoyed one of his best years in baseball, hitting .320, knocking in 116 runs, and leading the league in triples.

No doubt Emmett was disappointed that his White Sox finished third in the 1954 American League race, seventeen games behind the first place Cleveland Indians. It's unlikely that Emmett could have afforded to attend many Sox games at Comiskey Park, so he would have listened to the radio play-by-play of Bob Elson on WCFL radio and read the box scores in the *Chicago Tribune* or in the nation's largest black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*. Like other diehard sports fans, when he wanted in-depth sports coverage, he might have read *The*

*Sporting News*, the leading source of sports information, or a new magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, which began publishing in 1954.

In addition to following the wins and losses of his White Sox, Emmett enjoyed an active life in his Chicago neighborhood. He had many friends and became known to parents as a benevolent ringleader of the local kids on St. Lawrence Avenue. His friends and cousins remember him as a fun-loving kid who enjoyed pranks and a good laugh. "Emmett loved jokes," said one cousin. "He would pay people to tell him jokes." Others remember that despite his stutter, or perhaps because of it, he sometimes would make wisecracks to people, but his friends knew how to take his comments. In general, Emmett's peers liked him for his sense of humor, his easygoing personality, and his ability to keep the peace among other kids.

In the summers, Emmett and his buddies hung out in the neighborhood or played baseball at Washington Park, with Emmett usually taking the mound as pitcher. His mother regularly drove a car crammed full of Emmett's friends to the park to play baseball. "It's a wonder I never got pulled over by the police," she said. "The inside of the car would be loaded with kids everywhere but in my lap, and some would even ride in the trunk, hanging on to a tin tub that I had filled with ice and pop." Once at the park, she sometimes even got talked into umpiring the boys' games. When the boys finished their play, she'd wait while they helped themselves to a cold drink from the car's trunk and bragged about who'd played best in the game. Then she'd drive them all back home.

Emmett and his mother enjoyed a close relationship, and he worked hard to please her. One day when he was twelve, he said, "Mama, if you can go to work and make the money, I can take care of the home." From that day on, he took over most of the household chores, including the laundry. He used the new Tide detergent in one of his first clothes-washing attempts; the package

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advertised that the clothes wouldn't need rinsing, so Emmett ran them through a wash cycle and hung them up to dry. "When I came home from work," laughed his mother, "I found all the laundry out on the clothesline, stiff as a board."

He once came home with fifteen dollars and handed the money to his mother. When she asked him where he had gotten so much money, he told her he had earned it cleaning a neighbor's apartment. Thinking the neighbor had overpaid her son, she went to the woman's home to see what kind of work Emmett had done and found that he had washed and painted a hallway and cleaned the entire kitchen all by himself. By all accounts, Emmett prided himself on neatness, and it showed in the fastidious way he kept the house and in the attention he paid to his own appearance.

Emmett's helpfulness soon spread outside the home, and on hot, humid summer days, he would haul neighbors' groceries home in his wagon. Some winter afternoons would find him outside braving the icy winds from Lake Michigan, shoveling snow from neighbors' sidewalks and stairways. Summer or winter, Emmett spent most weekends in Argo at his great-grandmother's house, running errands or helping her around the house and in her yard. The visits meant a lot to Emmett and to his great-grandmother, and his mother learned that if she needed it, the best leverage she had to discipline Emmett was to forbid him visiting Argo.



**Emmett's mother,  
Mamie Till Bradley**

## THE BOY FROM CHICAGO

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that stirred up so much trouble in the Southern states in May 1954 was hardly noticed by Emmett and his friends. Life in their working-class Chicago neighborhood, though segregated, was pretty good, and the twelve- and thirteen-year-old kids weren't much interested in the politics of the Supreme Court or of the Deep South. Even Emmett's mother didn't appreciate the significance of the Supreme Court's announcement at the time. Of course she was pleased that the United States had made a bold move against segregation, but she didn't expect that ruling would have much direct impact on her and her son. "It was so far from me," she says. "I didn't realize it at the time that the next thing on the scene was going to be Emmett."

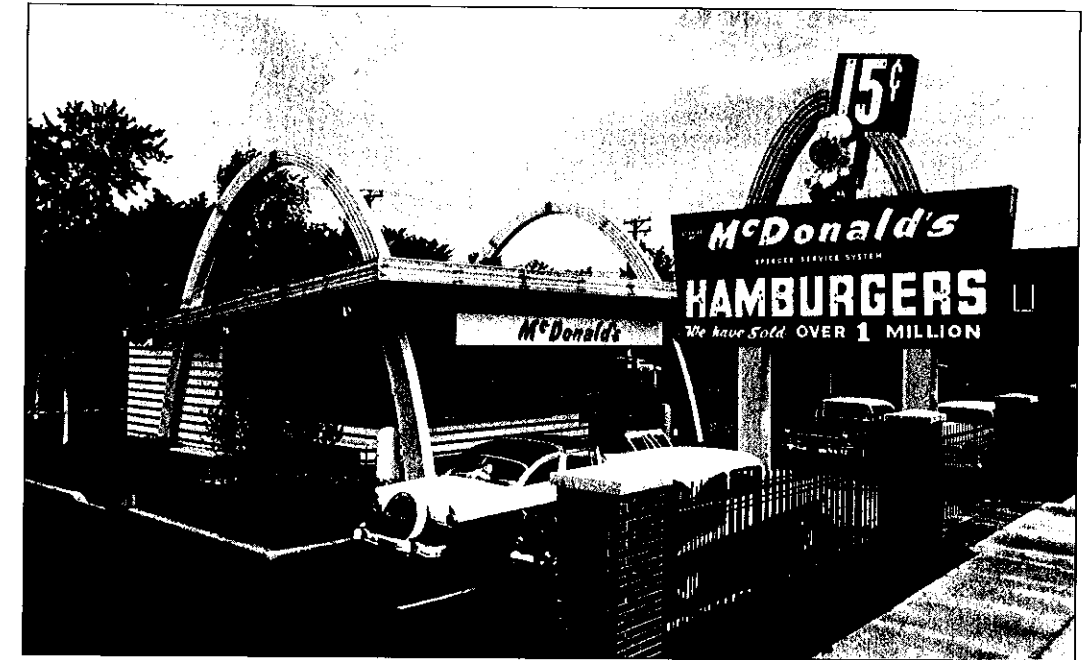
The integration order had no immediate impact on their neighborhood, and Emmett began the 1954–55 school year as a thirteen-year-old eighth grader at his all-black school, McCosh. During that school year, his social studies teachers probably discussed the *Brown* decision and speculated about how it might change America, but it was a topic that didn't much interest Emmett. In English class, he may have read some of the brand-new novels that would go on to become classics: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. His English teacher might have also devoted special attention to the work of Ernest Hemingway, winner of the 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature. Of course, books weren't always the first thing on a teenager's mind, so if Emmett needed a break from school, he could have watched popular programs like *Lassie*, *Dragnet*, and *The Lone Ranger* on the new TV set in their living room. If the TV had to be off, he and his friends probably spent time listening to the hottest new songs on the radio, including "Rock Around the Clock," "Maybellene," and "Ain't That a Shame."

In April 1955, Richard J. Daley was elected mayor of Chicago; he would go on to become the first Chicago mayor to be elected to four consecutive terms.

That same month, a new hamburger franchise, the first of its kind, opened in the nearby suburb of Des Plaines. At the time, neither Emmett nor anyone else in Chicago dreamed that the new hamburger joint, McDonald's, would ever amount to much. Emmett and his friends from Chicago's South Side probably didn't even know about the new fast-food hamburger stand in the white suburb. But the big local news that April wasn't the mayoral election or McDonald's; it was the White Sox' blazing start to the 1955 season. By the end of the month, they occupied first place in the American League standings.

On May 31, 1955, Emmett and his classmates at McCosh Elementary were wrapping up their school year, getting ready for eighth-grade graduation, and making summer vacation plans. National politics was the last things on their minds, and the McCosh students probably weren't even aware that in Washington, D.C., the United States Supreme Court issued a follow-up to its landmark desegregation ruling of 1954. Chief Justice Earl Warren inflamed the already broiling racial tensions in the South when he announced that all states had to integrate their schools "with all deliberate speed." To Emmett and most of his friends and family in Chicago at the time, the announcement seemed to have little effect on their lives.

A handsome teenager, stout at 160 pounds and slightly shorter than many of his classmates, Emmett Till graduated from McCosh and looked forward to a summer of fun: He and his mother had planned a trip to Omaha to visit family; Minnie Minoso and the White Sox were playing well; and he had all of June, July, and August before he'd have to go back to school. But Emmett's trip to Omaha got canceled when his great-uncle from Mississippi, Mose Wright, came to Chicago with two of his grandsons. "Emmett heard that Uncle Mose was in town," recalls Emmett's mother, "and two of the boys that he grew up



The first McDonald's franchise opened near Chicago on April 15, 1955

with. They were going back to Mississippi. That's what [Emmett] wanted to do. It messed up our plans completely. After a lot of pressure, my mother and I decided it would be all right to let Emmett go to Mississippi."

Emmett's mother worried about her son traveling to Mississippi, but her uncle assured her that conditions in the South had improved and that Emmett would be safe. Wright had, after all, cleared \$250 that year for his sharecropping work, and for the first time he owed nothing to the plantation owner. Life in Mississippi had never been better, Wright said, and he knew that Emmett would enjoy spending time with his cousins down on the farm. Still, Emmett's mother worried that her son wouldn't know how to treat white people in the Jim Crow South and warned him before he left for Chicago: "If you have to



Emmett Till in a photo taken around Christmas 1954, about eight months before his kidnapping and murder

get on your knees and bow when a white person goes past, do it willingly." As a former resident of Mississippi, she knew the penalty that could come with violating a Jim Crow law.

With his mother's permission, Emmett and his cousin Wheeler Parker set up the trip. They'd leave Chicago on Saturday, August 20, a few weeks after Emmett's fourteenth birthday, and travel by train to Money, Mississippi, the tiny country town near Mose Wright's farm. Emmett agreed to meet Wheeler and Mose at the Central Street station for the trip to Mississippi, but on the appointed day, he got to the station late and missed the train. He would never have made it to Money that summer if he hadn't caught up with the Illinois Central at the Englewood station, several miles away from Central Street, just before the train pulled out. Out of breath and excited, Emmett found Wheeler on the train, and the cousins settled into their seats for the long ride to Mississippi.

Money was a tiny rural community on the eastern edge of the Mississippi Delta. The dusty hamlet, population fifty-five, wedged between the railroad tracks and Old Money Road, had never lived up to its name. Its main reason for existence was its cotton gin, a large corrugated metal building that housed the equipment used to process harvested cotton. Over time, a handful of businesses—three stores, including Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market, and a gas station—came to town, setting up on the west side of Old Money Road, just south of the cotton gin. Across the road and behind the train tracks was the elementary school. A few homes were scattered along gravel side roads that branched off Old Money Road and divided cotton fields, and farther away from the "town" of Money, sharecroppers' shacks dotted the edges of farm roads.

Money was nothing like Chicago: It had no city parks or baseball fields, no movie theaters or dance halls, no restaurants or department stores. The air in that part of the Delta hung heavy with sweltering humidity, only occasionally

stirred up by weak breezes, and the steady buzz of locusts seemed to magnify the stifling Mississippi heat. Most black people worked in the fields and lived in beat-up cabins owned by white landowners. The state of Mississippi had the lowest per capita income in the nation, and, ironically enough, the people in "Money" were among the poorest in the state. Mississippi's racism was perhaps the greatest difference from Chicago, and the white people in and around Money vigilantly enforced Jim Crow segregation laws. Just a few weeks before Emmett's arrival in Money, a black teenage girl had been flogged for "crowding" a white woman in a store.

From the moment Emmett and his cousin arrived on Sunday, August 21, the visitors from Chicago brought excitement to the sleepy little town. Emmett's Southern cousins and their friends marveled at the ways the Northern boys dressed and acted, and at the stories they told about life in the North. One of the local boys, John Milton Wesley, lived near Money and was seven years old when Emmett arrived in 1955.

He remembers that Emmett Till was different from the rest of the Chicago boys. He seemed more mature, and he talked a lot, keeping Wesley and his Mississippi friends "spellbound with stories of white girlfriends, the forbidden fruit." Emmett wore a straw hat and had "funny-looking, light colored eyes" that the local girls found attractive, but it was the stories of life up North that got the most attention from the kids in Money. Wesley said that Emmett and his friends from Chicago "relished their ability to dazzle us with their lack of fear of white people. It never occurred to us at the time that they always made these boasts when there were no white folks around to challenge them."

The local kids made an eager and gullible audience. Poverty and racial segregation dominated their lives, so the kind of life the Chicago boys talked about seemed as foreign and incredible as the land of Oz. Lacking the sophistication

of their more worldly and better-educated friends from Illinois, the Mississippi boys believed every story they heard, no matter how wild it seemed. The children of poor sharecroppers imagined that anything might be possible in the wonderful world up North.

One of the things that impressed Wesley and his friends most were the photos of white women, cut out of magazines, that the boys from Chicago carried in their wallets. The Mississippi boys believed the photos were real and that in the North, black boys could have white girlfriends without any trouble. A society without racial boundaries was almost impossible for them to comprehend. Wesley said, "We imagined racial bliss and integrated movies where blacks didn't have to sit in the balcony. . . . We could only marvel at what we imagined their lives must be like in a place where your seat on the bus was determined not by the color of your skin but by the availability of a vacant seat."

For his first few days in Money, Emmett had a great time. His cocky personality and fantastic stories about life in Chicago made him a local celebrity among the Mississippi kids, and his Southern vacation was even more fun than he had expected.

But the fun came to an abrupt end on Wednesday night, August 24, when Emmett crossed a Jim Crow boundary he never really understood.