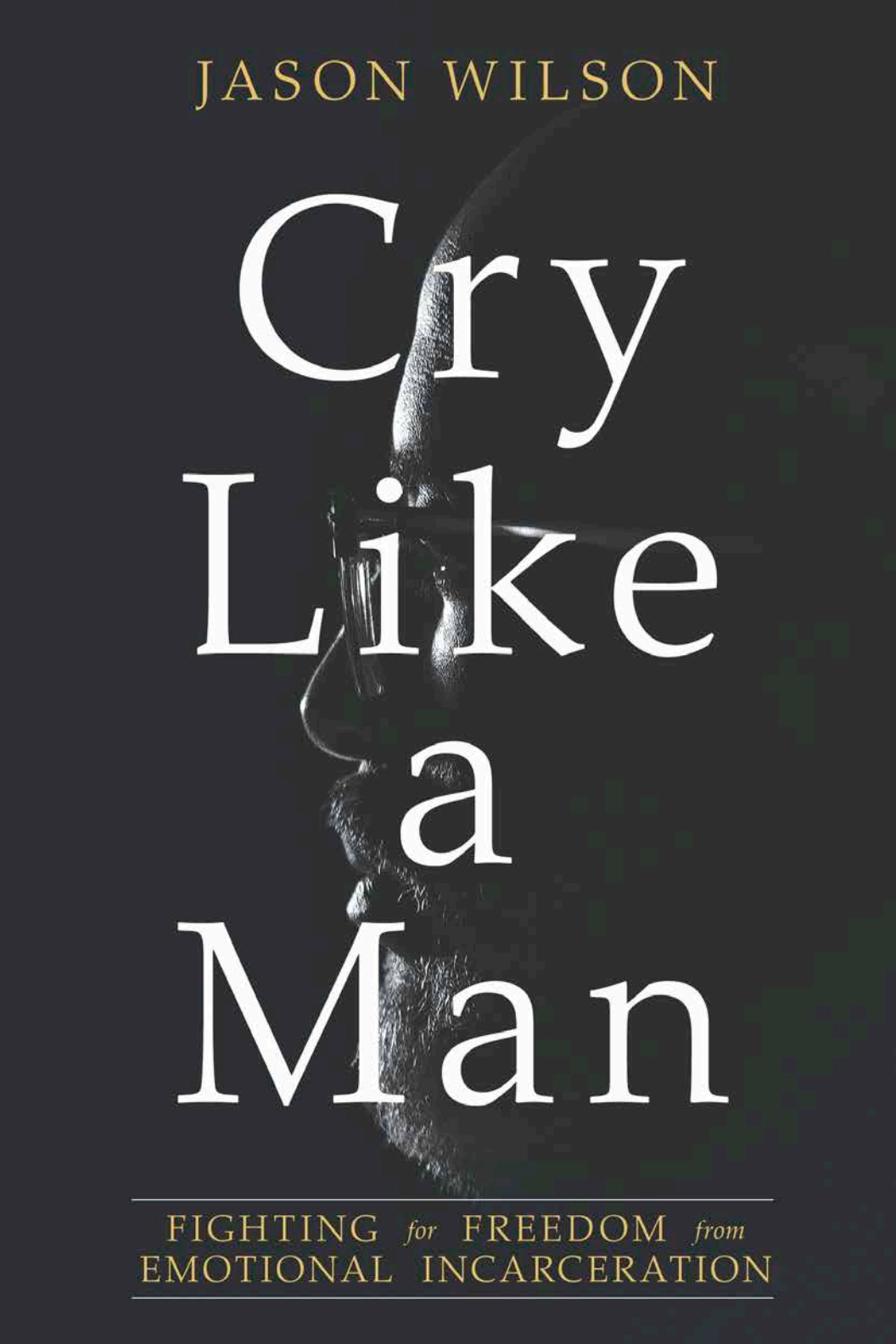


JASON WILSON



Cry  
Like  
a  
Man

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FIGHTING *for* FREEDOM *from*  
EMOTIONAL INCARCERATION

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# THE CONVICTION OF ESTES WRIGHT

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*No one is born hating another person because of the color of their skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate. And if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.*

Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*

Like red ink spilled on a black-and-white page—so black and white—the blood of Estes Wright poured out. His face, disfigured from the sustained and brutal beating of six white men. His fiercely loyal heart pulled and stretched beyond its pain threshold with its labored pounding growing weaker as the authorities stood over him, watching. It was 1935 when Estes lay dying in the jailhouse in Fort Pierce, Florida. A fresh cord of trauma scarring his neck squeezed

a death rattle from his throat as the life drained from my grandfather ... *and no one did a thing to stop it.*

Estes Wright had the kind of charisma that was hard to miss—a blessing or a curse depending on the company. A fruit picker by trade, Estes, unlike his peers, had a dynamic personality and strong sense of self that left a lasting impression on everyone he met. But on no one more than his young, impressionable brother-in-law, James.

Estes and his wife, Margaret, were in their midthirties and expecting their sixth child. They had grown up in caring, church-going families that kept them loved and protected, if only within the safety of their homes. The couple were radical Christians, though Margaret was more religious and Estes less conforming. Her passionate relationship with Christ went well beyond weekly Sunday school and the annual homecoming potlucks. It was her devotion to God that reinforced her husband's identity in the One who created him—the One who created everyone in His own image and equally loved them. An image with no dominating color, only brilliant hues of humanity.

Estes believed in the dignity and integrity of every individual, no matter how light or dark his or her skin—a dangerous ideal for a Negro in the pre–World War II Deep South.

There was no questioning that Estes was fearless, at times unapologetically. It was this strength and determination that a man of color could regret. But Estes couldn't be anything less than what God made him to be. He wasn't the type of person to drop his chin and talk to the floor when a white man asked him a question or to do what he was told simply by virtue of his race. No, that would never do for a man like Estes Wright. And while his peers admired him

for having the courage that disregarded both prevailing racial lines and the tension that came with looking a white man in the eye, his conviction would be tested.

It was common knowledge Estes carried a gun; it was less common for a black man to bear arms in those days. He was confident, clever, and filled with a dignity that got him noticed—on both sides of town but for two very different reasons. I think that’s probably why he kept that revolver tucked away but always close at hand. To condone Colored condemnation and white superiority went against every fiber woven into Estes’s soul. But skin color and social stature had little to do with the way Estes treated others. The fact was, he treated everyone with the respect—or contempt—that person showed him.

My grandfather’s indomitable spirit was never more noticed than during the Great Depression when the United States government began to distribute surplus food to the starving masses. People were suffering regardless of their color, gender, age, or religion. Suddenly the great divide was shrinking as the basic necessities of life disappeared, leaving black and white equally deprived. From coast to coast, long lines formed outside soup kitchens, bringing all walks of life together—closer than many preferred.

Two lines—“Whites Only” and “Coloreds Only.”

During these turbulent times, Negroes waited obediently for the white townsfolk to fill their gunnysacks with food before they were allowed to enter the building to pick through the scraps left behind. But deep in the pit of his stomach, Estes knew no one had the right to tell him to “mind his place.” There was only one place for him, and that was beneath the almighty hand that bore the nail scars for

all humankind. To wait in a segregated line was more than offensive to Estes. It was an abomination. To Estes, pain and poverty held the same unbearable degradation for all.

Estes wouldn't stand it. Maybe it was the press of the crowd or the sweltering heat of the Florida sun, but I suspect it was the shame seared into each face of color bending beneath the weight of daily humiliation. He felt and saw their desperation—shoulders bowed, nerves frayed, and spirits broken—and it pushed Estes into brave defiance as, time after time, he strode past the queue of blacks, then the whites, and finally past the sheriff standing next to the provisions.

Estes, with his brother-in-law James, boldly filled their bags with all the food they needed, without resistance. The sheriff remembered the gun within Estes's pocket. Then the two would walk out with groceries in tow to the disgust and anger of the fairer citizens still waiting in line. James learned much from Estes's courage—lessons depicted in the acclaimed book, *The Golden Thirteen*. It wasn't long after that when the indelible courage of Estes Wright would challenge the status quo once more.

Whether by established law or small-town edict, it was a crime in Fort Pierce for a Colored to fish off the town's bridge after dark, one of the many restrictions placed on the black community in that troubling time. But in true Estes fashion, he believed he had every right to fish from that bridge or any other whenever he pleased. And armed with his revolver and with James by his side, he went down to the bridge one night. An hour hadn't passed before three white men appeared.

“What the [expletive] are you niggers doing down here fishing at night?” one spouted.

“Because we want to,” Estes answered as he pulled out his .38. “I’ll give you ten seconds to get off this bridge. If I ever see you again ...” Estes took aim at the man’s head.

That was enough to send the men running, knowing Estes was never one to bluff.

I’ve sometimes wondered what I would have done had I been there—hearing those racial slurs, receiving that kind of hate, fighting the social order in a highly charged and dangerous America. Would I have reacted the same way as my grandfather? Was his defense worth it? Was this one tiny moment of prejudice, in a lifetime of equally oppressive moments, worth Estes’s strong response? Would the repercussions of that small victory on the bridge and his fight against bigotry and intolerance make a meaningful contribution to the push and pull that finally arrived in the form of civil rights thirty years later?

Yes, of course. Freedom will always want to fly. Peace will wrap its arms around fear until it is smothered. Love will always outshine hate until only the brilliant light of truth remains. And a man’s life will always find its purpose in battle, just as Estes found his.

As another day dawned much like any other, Estes grabbed a ride from a friend, and together they drove through streets of familiar faces and friendly waves. Soon the blocks changed as the hospitable smiles gave way to the predominantly white center of town. As they slowed and stopped at a traffic light, six white men suddenly converged on the car.

They pulled Estes out of the vehicle and dragged him away as onlookers did nothing. I figure those watching must have felt one of two things: either they were too frightened to help him, or they



wondered what took the town's white men so long to rein in the "uppity nigger" too high and mighty for his own good. The men beat him so savagely that the bones in his face and head shattered. They attacked him until the blood disguised him; his swollen eye sockets and torn flesh took away his identity. Generations of hate came to bear on Estes until he was unrecognizable.

But everyone knew it was Estes Wright—a man humiliated, beaten, and about to be hung on a tree. On a day that started out like any other day, six men viciously strung up my grandfather with a rope and lynched him in broad daylight in Fort Pierce, Florida, in the United States—the world's greatest beacon of freedom and democracy.

He was a black man who lived life as if he had every privilege of a white man, and *that* was unforgivable. He was secure in his own skin yet unprotected. He was strong in who he was yet never enough. He was confident in his color yet still subject to the offense it caused. He had every attribute any man could hope for yet was still inadequate to withstand the racism that ruled the era.

Estes Wright hung by the neck, but they hadn't killed him. Not yet.

The news of the violence quickly spread through town, and James and his sister Carrie reached the jailhouse along with several hundred people after Estes's limp body had been carried into the building. By the time they had dropped him on a hard wooden bench, his life was leaving him. James and Carrie entered to find him there, grotesque, unconscious, and slipping away. Carrie tried to wipe the blood from his face, and James noticed how his head was as "soft as cotton" from the relentless beating. They were both thrown out by the sheriff to

leave Estes to pass from this life without family, friends, or pastor present. Just surrounded by men who hated his very existence.

I still think about the authorities bringing him back to the jail. Not the hospital. Not the morgue.

The jail.

Estes wasn't a threat. He wasn't a criminal. He was just a man—one who knew his own worth and had the righteous audacity to forego the color lines and the back of the bus and brave the town bridge after dark. He was a human being struck down simply by virtue of his pigment and lineage. I go over it in my mind, and as I reflect on everything they did to him in his last hours on earth, I keep coming up with the same question: *What made them cut him down?*

I wish it was pity, but history tells me that's a false hope. Dead black bodies hanging from Southern trees was not an uncommon sight in the Jim Crow South. Even the songstress Billie Holiday solemnly sang about it in her 1939 recording titled "Strange Fruit."

Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees<sup>1</sup>

These evil men may have been finished with my grandfather, but the struggle wasn't over. It had only changed into something else. It became obvious that law enforcement and the murderers were cut from the same cloth, and my grandfather's family was harassed night after night by the police. They pounded on their door to intimidate them in case Estes had planted his ideals in the minds of his relatives. Even private citizens of Fort Pierce—racist whites—would kidnap Estes's brother-in-law Sam in the middle of the night

for joyrides. They threatened him, threw him into multiple cars to lengthen the ordeal, and on some occasions locked him in a jail cell for “safekeeping.”

Months of aggression finally took their toll on Sam. He was taken to South Carolina to recover from a nervous breakdown. The family’s neighbors stopped speaking to them, anxious that they would soon become the next target. The aftermath of Estes’s murder created panic throughout the black community, resulting in the alienation of Estes’s family. My family. Everyone was terrified, and the stress of simply living became an enormous burden.<sup>2</sup>

Neither the police nor the murder suspects were ever charged with a crime.

The only conviction was that of my grandfather Estes Wright.

## NOTES

1. Billie Holiday, vocalist, “Strange Fruit,” by Abel Meeropol, recorded April 20, 1939, single on Commodore Classics in Swing, Commodore Records, 78 rpm.
2. James E. Hair, “Son of a Slave,” in *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the First Black Naval Officers*, ed. Paul Stillwell (Annapolis, MD: Bluejacket Books, 1993), chap. 10.