

PEOPLE LIKE US

A novel



Jason Mott

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNING
author of HELL OF A BOOK

ALSO BY JASON MOTT

Hell of a Book

The Crossing

The Wonder of All Things

The Returned

The First

We Call This Thing Between Us Love

Hide Behind Me



PEOPLE LIKE US

OR

The Other Continent

OR

*Johnny Wordcount Stumbles into
a High-End Croissant Bar
on the Seine in Search
of The Kid
& Orders The Big Dream*

JASON MOTT



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To the Ones Like You:

You sing.

You dance.

You bleed like the sunrise sky.

RIGHT OFF THE BAT

Whole fistfuls of this actually happened, sister!

So, to keep the lawyers cooling their heels instead of kicking down the front door with those high-priced Italian loafers of theirs, some names and places have been given the three-card monte treatment and this whole damned thing has been fitted with a fiction overcoat. Some people—and even entire sauce-reducing countries—have been punched up a bit for the sake of laughs and the inevitable hard-sell gut punch, but, just for the record, the Frenchies are actually pretty aces once you get to know them. Really.

Now, if you read this and you think you're not one to be taken in by a con job—I mean, you feel like you know who's really on the chopping block here—and if that particular You-Know-Who that you've got all figured out has enough cash on hand to send the aforementioned loafer-wearing sharks after me because I said something ol' Daddy Warbucks wouldn't like said in public, well, then that part of the story was just coincidence and parody. Straight for laughs.

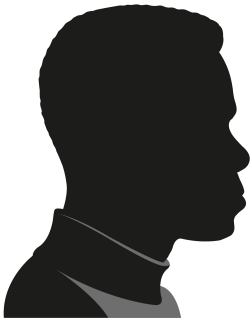
Lastly, if I ever get backed into a corner about some detail I don't want to go into, I'll just offer up a five-star smile and swear on a stack of *Raising Arizona* DVDs that I made it all up. Even if it really happened. So don't even bother.

And if I'm ever asked about whether or not we're all going to be okay in the end?

...Well...cynicism is the refuge of a world-weary heart.

—**THE AUTHOR**

(WITH LEGAL BREATHING DOWN HIS NECK)



Behold. Forty-four-year-old him. A low-budget, Black Jack London shivering in the frozen north called Minnesota.

Not a bad place to be—all points on the timeline considered.

He's at the age of early evening bedtimes and early morning ibuprofen. The muffin top that stalked him for the last couple of decades is finally here to stay but, depending on who you ask, he carries it well enough. This is officially midlife. Gray hair. Gentle whiffs of arthritis. Nothing really heals anymore. Every year on his birthday his doctor sticks her finger up his ass, digging for cancer like it's the last corner of peanut butter in the jar, without so much as a kiss on the cheek or a high five when she's done. Usually, she's out of the room before he can pull his pants up.

Middle age ain't for the faint of heart.

But, it's a decent life.

Outside the Minneapolis airport, he's escorted through the cold of the parking deck to a black SUV, caked with road salt and ice, by a thin-framed

man with one of the best Afros he's ever seen who, from what Soot understands, was the driving force behind bringing him here to speak in the wake of the dead.

"We're so glad you could make it," the man says. "I mean, you really just don't know how much this means to us. Especially after...well, after everything."

Soot nods and smiles. Plays it solemn, because solemn is what it is.

In his defense, the dead weren't dead a year ago, back when he agreed to come. The living only became the dead last week. Unlucky weather.

It's under thirty degrees and dropping. There's a cold blow on the way. Billowing frost. Snow the size of horseflies. Wind that makes you regret life choices. Usual fare around these parts. Foreign landscape for him. "You all get this kind of cold often?" he asks, realizing, as his teeth chatter, that the jacket he brought from home isn't going to cut it.

"It's always on its way," the man says.

"I'm a Southern boy," Soot replies. "To me, dressing for the cold just means 'Add sleeves and pray on it.'"

Laughter.

██████████ College has paid him—in advance—to come here and talk about his book, because that's what he's done for over a decade now. It's simple enough, or at least it's become so: talk about America through the lens of his Black skin, his fear of police, and his loss.

"So, how are people?" he asks the man behind the wheel. The guy holds a phone in each hand as he drives, steering with forearms and knees over the slick roads, both phones chanting different directions at him. The car drifts, only for the guy to snatch it back after a few seconds. For sure, Soot's making conversation in part so that the man will put the phones down and keep the two of them alive.

"So, how are people?" he asks a second time.

This time, the man answers, finally looking away from the two phones and yanking the car back into its lane yet again. "People?" he says slowly, like he forgot what the word means. "People are...you know...we're...we're

resilient.” Soot hates that word. “People are doing the best they can, all things considered,” the guy continues. He grins as he says the words, as if he’s trying to smile to fix something that can’t be fixed, but he’s trying anyway. “I won’t pretend like people are okay. They’re definitely not okay. But what can you do? Things are the way they are.” His voice trembles at the end. He clears his throat. “I’m really glad you decided to come,” he says. “I mean, I don’t think you understand just how much this means to all of us. I don’t think you get just how much we need you.”

“Just trying to help,” Soot says. He still hasn’t recovered from the cold, so he fidgets with the car’s air-conditioning vents and the thermostat. Plenty of heat rolls out, but no warmth.

“You’re definitely going to help,” the man says. “I had some friends who were at Mississippi when those students got shot and you showed up there. They said you really helped out. They said you told them all the things they didn’t know they needed to hear. Like about what happened to your dad, and your daughter. I respect how you can go back to wounds like that and open them up. I could never do it.”

It’s hard for the guy to talk and listen to his two cell phones and steer/slide over the ice and be resilient all at the same time. The car is all over all three lanes of highway and Soot starts to think it might be better to just shut up and let the guy get him there alive.

“Good to know,” Soot says, deciding not to say any more for a while.

“It’s all going to be okay, now that you’re here,” the man says.

For the rest of the drive the two of them ride in silence. Soot focuses on staying warm and on trying not to get overwhelmed by the thought that the SUV might suddenly wind up in a ditch.

The cold blow moves in as promised. It’s not just the ice sliding the SUV around anymore. The wind has signed on, giving more than a gentle nudge and covering the windshield with snow. The road is crowded with cars, even as the night turns white and the windows begin to freeze over around the edges, and the pit of Soot’s stomach starts to flutter as he stares out the

window and imagines what might happen to someone alone in this type of world.

Eventually, Soot and the man arrive at the hotel. It's just off campus and, if it weren't covered in snow, he would see the school colors decorating the outside of the building and he would be impressed.

"Here we go," the guy says as Soot opens the SUV door. The cold grabs him by the leg. "I'll be by tomorrow evening to pick you up for the dinner with the faculty. They're eager to hear what you have to say about all this, you know?"

They shake hands.

"I'll try to do what I can," Soot says.

"Speak truth to power?" the man says.

"What?"

"I was thinking about that. That's what writers do, right? They speak truth to power. But that's not really your gig, though, is it? You sorta speak to grief. So what do you say? To grief, I mean. Something about hope?"

Soot sighs. He knows what the man wants. He doesn't want to wait until tomorrow evening, when he and the others are all together, grieving over the deaths of their students and trying to understand how this thing finally really happened to their school. He needs to start feeling something other than loss. Something other than grief and pain.

The cold keeps moving in. Everything tightens up. Hardens. But he knows he can't get out without giving the man something.

Soot steps out onto the icy ground, grabs his luggage from the back seat, and stands in the door of the black SUV with his hands in his pockets, shivering just a little already, and says, "It all comes out okay."

"You say it like you know for sure," the man says.

"Imagine that I can travel through time. And I know, for a fact, that you'll get through this," Soot says. "And imagine I tell you 'It all comes out okay.'"

The man offers a nervous smile. The kind of smile you give to a bully when you can't tell if they're being sincere or just walking you up to the

moment when they punch your teeth in. “You’re different” is all the man says.

“It helps though, doesn’t it?”

Then he closes the vehicle door and hustles toward the hotel, losing body heat with each step, while the storm blows harder and the snow comes down fatter, and he can barely see his hand in front of his face, and everything behind him and ahead of him disappears. He stops, freezing as he is, and turns and looks back. The light shines in his eyes, centered somewhere ahead of him now, with snow dancing around it like a swarm of moths, and, somehow, Soot swears he hears a type of music buried in the wind, a gentle, delicate song, like wind chimes trying to speak.



You could feel it in your bones. You could taste it on the air. The change, I mean. You could smell it in the vendors standing outside the courthouses selling hot dogs to the angry, raised fists. You could hear the songs bouncing off every surface until they broke your ears and, even if you didn't know the words, you somehow found a way to sing along.

Yessir, sister! There was music riding on the wind! Like the flag herself was trying to speak! I swear on Nic Cage's sanctified hairline, it was one hell of a summer! Pure ticker tape! The American Dream finally came a'knocking and, sister, for once we were all at home and didn't miss out! But, hell, I don't have to tell you; you were there!

Every street in every city was full up to busting with the tomorrow we'd all been holding out for. Milk and honey fell straight from the sky. Buildings shook, from the penthouse ceiling fans right down to the basement wall

sockets. Yes ma'am, all the promises that had been made were finally coming due and everything was up for grabs! And the bad things? Well, they were done for. Finally given a Chicago Overcoat by all of us. And just like everybody else, I was drunk on it. The whole thing was like watching the ocean turn upside down. Like watching a cow body-slam a crocodile. North was South and South was making love to Marilyn Monroe.

And then, when things were shining brighter than they had in decades and decades, then even the big boys got involved. Every John and Jane Bull in the upper crust looked out their tinted C-suite windows and rolled up the shades on their private jet windows and saw which way the wind was blowing. So they got on the phone and made the big calls down to all the little people and they said, "We're getting in the game, baby!"

The dollars flowed.

Money broke out of the banks like it had been convicted of a crime it didn't commit. A neo gold rush flowed from on high. A pure gully washer—as my Old Man might have put it—filling even the lowest crevices, and all aimed at the people in the dark skin.

"Put a sticker on your window, sister, and watch the bucks come rolling in!" the world said. "Hell! Don't even bother with the sticker. Your skin is your sticker! This time capitalism will find you. It'll come knocking at your front door and, even if you're not willing to let it in, it'll kick open the door and swell up the coffers and you'll be in the best state you've ever been in. You'll finally get all the things that you've been promised!"

Yes ma'am, we all know that the way capitalism apologizes for all the things it's done is with even more capitalism. And, in case you weren't there, that summer it was all on the line. It was all flowing from the font of the Amalgamation of Capital and, if you were there, it was something to see! The Summer of The Great Get Back! That's what somebody should have called it.

They never did because that's a terrible name, but you get the idea.

We were all flying high. Things were finally starting to come together. The streets were full of feet, fists, and voices. Pure inundation. Folks piled in like sediment. So much that the traffic of America and, by proxy, America

herself, had no choice but to put on the brakes. Some folks will tell you that it was the plague outside that brought the Great Girl to a standstill. And I won't say that's untrue, but I'll say we did our part too.

Yes ma'am, The Great Nation herself came to a screeching halt and rolled down her windows and looked out to see what game was on the play. And, yeah, some folks in cars shook their fists and cursed certain people's names. But others got out and decided to dance and sing along. Most folks, if I'm being honest, just sat there in the chilly armpit of their air-conditioning and turned up the radio and settled back into their seats and waited for the road ahead to clear and for things to get back to normal. But that's beside the point.

The point here is that it was something to see. It was like watching Sisyphus—a man who never skips leg day—finally get that super-size rock of his farther up that hill than he ever did before. And, just for a second, you can believe that, hell, maybe he'll finally get it over the top. You're looking over at him and you find out, somehow, that drumbeat you're hearing is none other than your very own heart beating in *his* chest. You can feel his muscles straining. You can feel the pressure building with each step. You can't tell if it's him pushing that rock so close to the rim of escape or if it's you. And you don't care which. You're too far in. Too much a part of it.

That's the thing about change that promises to be on the upside: We can't help but buy in. We all love an underdog story.

So folks got onboard. Damned near the whole world got out of their cars, closed the Pornhub tabs, turned off their phones, and cheered. All it had taken to get us here was a few dead bodies.

But regardless of the buy-in, the payout was the same: There we were, watching it all change. Watching it burn with our lumber ready to rebuild it better than it had ever been. This was the turning point in the flesh. This time, when the dust settled, the scar left on Old Glory wouldn't wash off. No ma'am! This time we'd burn a demarcation line into the Stars and Stripes!

This was it. This was the "one day" Al Green sang about.

Near the height of it, during those long days under that summer sun, we ran wild with optimism. We all hugged and kissed, made apologies and promises. Even some of the cynics had to bow down in the light of the dawning day. Lady Liberty looked better than she had since she got strung out on cinematic-universe escapism.

Wooooo! What a time! Enough to leave a body breathless...

...But then the fall came.

That north wind rolled in on us. And, well, the fires turned to embers and the embers faded out, and all those tense muscles everyone had been using to change the world needed a rest.

Try not to blame them. Stamina for this sort of thing takes a lifetime to learn. You can't get it in just a single summer. But while the wind blew and the embers cooled, the streets began to clear and you could hear the old engines of America fire up again and drop into gear. Traffic started moving.

We made a promise that this wasn't a full stop, just a break. Just a chance for those who'd gotten caught up in it all to finally make it back home and cook dinner and throw in a load of laundry and walk the dog and eat a quick meal and fuck—as a way of celebrating, you understand!—and lie there sweaty and panting and still slick with satisfaction and maybe make a kid to commemorate all that they'd done and one day tell that kid about “That Summer We Changed Everything.”

And outside their window, while they lay there, kissing and dreaming of tomorrow, the leaves turned. The oceans rolled over again back into their homes. The mountains we'd leveled picked themselves up and reclaimed their spots, looking down on us. The folks in the C-suites closed their windows. They had calls to take and deals to make.

Eventually, all that was left was a faint whiff, almost like a memory, of smoke in the air. Maybe the taste of blood in the backs of our throats. So easy for so many to wash away with a little wine.

We all went out looking for aloe on account of how The Great American Burn turned out to be nothing more than too much time in the sun. Destined to scab, peel, heal, and give us all a story to tell as the years rolled on.