

# **The Long Road Home**

by

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## **Chapter 1**

### **The On Ramp**

“Give me a ride, pleeeeeease,” Dean pleaded, swinging his thumb through the air with each passing car. Blake grinned and kept his thumb near his hip, his pinky finger curled through his belt loop. The year was 1980.

The afternoon winter sun reflected brightly off the cars, and off the scattered patches of snow mixed with gravel where the road met the weeds. The two sixteen-year-olds shivered on the road’s shoulder, their green aluminum-framed backpacks leaning against the guardrail. Dean faked a wide smile as he watched the long line of cars winding their way slowly up the ramp to the Pennsylvania Turnpike just outside of Pittsburgh. He hoped the line of heavy traffic was a sign that their trip would be swift and rides would be forthcoming, but after exposing his face and gloveless thumb to the cold wind for a while he was having doubts.

The cars climbed the entrance ramp to the top of the hill, where they fanned out into a multitude of lanes, some swerving across the wide expanse in search of the shortest route to one of the many tollbooths. There were at least twenty tollbooths lined up in a

row--each no bigger than a bathroom--all covered with one long thick slab of steel. Between each booth passed a lane. Upon entering you'd simply pull up to a green-lighted booth, a machine would spit out a card, the gate lifted up, and off you'd race to where the multitude of lanes reunited into a bottleneck as the ramp wound its way towards the turnpike.

After a time Dean and Blake began marching in place to keep warm, steam puffing from their mouths. "What the hell is wrong with these people?" Dean complained, his smile drooping.

"I think your hair is too long," Blake said, whose own hair hung past his shoulders, and was longer than Dean's. They chuckled two billows of steam.

No sooner did their breath dissipate when a rusty red pickup truck pulled up behind them. The truck was an old 1950s model. Its body was a series of round curves, from the smooth curved hood to the large rounded cab to the rusty oval fenders. The truck's only angles came from a small rectangular bed planted squarely behind the cab. The boys tossed their packs into the bed, and squeezed into the front seat.

"How ya doing?" Blake greeted the driver, a man with long hair and a worn denim jacket.

"Where you fellows heading to?" the driver asked, wiping his oversized mustache with one hand, while with the other he placed a cylindrical canister of snuff tobacco into the breast pocket of his jacket. As Dean slammed the door, the three of them were pushed together tightly, shoulder to shoulder in the truck's small cab.

"We're on our way to Greensboro, North Carolina," Dean answered.

The driver raised his eyebrows. “Greensboro?” he said. “That's a ways to go in the middle of winter. Afraid I'm only going to Johnstown.”

“Every bit helps,” Dean said.

As they rode, the steep tree-lined hills along the side of the highway gave way to grassy rolling mounds, and they soon found themselves passing through farm country where the odor of fresh manure permeated the air. The driver turned on the radio, moved up and down the dial a few times, then switched it off with a sigh. “So what's in Greensboro?” he asked, gripping the steering wheel with his thick motor oil-stained hands.

Dean jerked from the passing landscape at the man's question. He plumbed his brain in a hurry for a safe simple answer, and settled on imaginary relatives: some cousins living in Greensboro.

“We're going to . . .” Dean and Blake uttered at the same time, interrupting each other. Before Dean could continue, Blake spoke up: “We're going to smash the klan!” he blurted with a wide smile, raising his fist in a power salute, accidentally jarring the rearview mirror. “Oops, sorry about that,” he added meekly.

Dean shut his eyes and took a deep quiet breath. He wondered what the hell Blake was doing.

“You're going to do what, now?” the driver asked, adjusting the mirror so he could eye both of the boys.

“Smash the klan!” Blake responded with even more excitement. “Didn't you hear what happened last November?” Blake didn't wait for an answer. “Well there was this march against the klan down in Greensboro, and some of the klan showed up and they

shot five members of the Communist Workers Party. They murdered them in cold blood, and the police didn't show up for over half an hour, so they're probably in on it too. And now there's gonna be this big protest march on Saturday, and we're going down there to stand up against the klan.”

The driver watched the road, while Dean, peering sidelong through the rearview mirror could see the man's eyebrows bunch up and his lower lip jut out in a scowl from under his long bristly mustache.

“Don't tell me you're a bunch of commies,” the driver said.

“No way,” Dean piped in, giving Blake a soft dig in the ribs with his elbow.

“We're not commies. We're, uh . . . Democrats, but we're not old enough to vote yet.”

“I hope not,” the driver said. “Because I fought against commies in Vietnam.” His voice got louder. “And I fought for your freedom, and I'd hate to think I did that for nothing.”

There was a long uncomfortable silence followed by the swooshing roar of the wind as the driver rolled down his window. He worked his tongue around the snuff in his lower lip, then spit out the window, but the wind blew the brown juice back, splattering his cheek. “Now look what you made me do!” the driver complained, brushing his face with his sleeve.

“Sorry about that,” Dean apologized, although he didn't like being blamed for the man's incompetent spitting skills, but figured it best not to argue. A ride is a ride. Dean attempted to repair some of the damage Blake had done. “We're really going down to Greensboro to see my cousins,” he explained, eyeing the driver through the mirror. “But

we heard about this, uh . . . march, you know, and we never been to nothing like that before, so we figured maybe we'd take a look, and see what it's all about, you know.”

“You don’t say?” the driver said questioningly, returning Dean’s gaze through the rearview mirror. Dean nodded, then shifted his eyes to the road. “Speaking of cousins,” the driver continued, “that reminds me. I've been meaning to see my cousin, Willy. He lives right up off this here exit, and would you believe it, today’s his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. I almost forgot.”

“You don’t say?” Blake said, mimicking the driver's tone.

“I sure do. He lost a leg in the war, but me and Willy still like to do a little coon hunting when we can.” The driver wore a sinister smile. “Afraid I can't take you fellows all the way to Johnstown, after all,” he said, as he clicked his turn signal for the upcoming exit ramp. “But I’m sure glad I picked you guys up. Otherwise, I might have forgot about Willy’s birthday.”

“You don’t say?” Blake said again. The driver flashed his eyes hard at Blake through the mirror.

Dean broke in abruptly, “Yeah, well thanks anyway.” He now preferred standing in the cold to remaining in the truck.

“Don't mention it,” the driver said, as he pulled up to the booth to pay the toll.

Once past the booth Dean and Blake hopped out of the truck, and when they reached into the truck bed for their packs the driver suddenly pulled away forcing the aluminum frames to clang against the tailgate. The boys hurriedly yanked them out.

“What the hell!” Dean yelled.

“Bastard!” Blake said, shaking his fist at the driver as the truck raced away down the ramp.

The boys inspected their packs for damage. Seeing none they hoisted them and trudged across the lanes. The little warmth they'd accumulated on the ride was quickly blown away by the hard wind of the flat farm country.

## Chapter 2

### One Booth Town

Dean and Blake peered down the length of the entrance ramp. There were no cars. This was a one tollbooth town, and all was quiet against the background rumbling and whistling coming from the turnpike traffic on the far side of a wide man-made treeless mound.

“Why did you have to go blabbing about smashing the klan, and all that stuff about the communists?” Dean asked, adjusting his collar in response to a sudden gust of wind.

“How was I supposed to know he was gonna get weird on us?”

“You got to size people up before you start telling them what we're doing.”

“Well, I thought he was cool,” Blake said, burying his embarrassment behind the top button of his coat. “I mean, he had long hair and a jean jacket and all.”

“Yeah, well Charles Manson had long hair too, and so did General Custer. So next time let's just be cool.”

“Fine with me.” Blake turned his back with a sigh.

Dean pointed down the entrance ramp. “He's coming back.” A red 1950s pickup truck was headed toward them, up the eastbound ramp to the tollbooth.

“Maybe we enlightened him,” Blake offered, looking hopeful. “You know, maybe we raised his consciousness, and he's changed his mind.”

“Or loaded his gun,” Dean suggested.

Blake waved his thumb eagerly at the red pickup truck moving up the ramp; the driver honked his horn and waved a return greeting as he drove right past them toward

the tollbooth. The boys' heads moved with the truck as it rolled past, and Blake's mouth hung open.

"Look, he's got a rebel flag bumpersticker," Blake said.

"Damn, and we're not even in the South yet"

"Well, the next time we won't take a ride from nobody with a rebel flag," Blake said confidently, as if he'd received a revelation.

"Well, you might say that now, but it's getting pretty cold out here, man," Dean said, shifting his shoulders up and down. "I might be willing to take a ride from damn near anybody. But remember, we're going to my cousins."

"But what if we get a ride from a guy wearing a white hood and a robe?" Blake smiled.

"Well what if he's going all the way to Greensboro?"

"Tough call," Blake answered, stroking his chin. "I'll have to think on that one."

They both laughed a stream of steam.

The sharp wind slowly chipped away at Dean's spirit of adventure. Of the four cars that drove up the ramp in the next half-hour, two were pickup trucks with rifle racks driven by middle-aged crew cuts, and two were station wagons loaded with young families. Dean wished he could trick these people into picking him up. He imagined flashing an NRA or a 4-H card like a TV cop would flash a badge. They'd take to him like one of their own, and while he rode with them he'd discuss the finer points of hunting and farming. But he didn't have a card to flash, and his long hair was no asset, and he didn't know a damn thing about hunting or farming.

When the boys got tired of standing, they sat on the guardrail, their legs stretched out in front of them. When sitting proved too cold they paced and jumped in place.

Dean kicked his tennis shoe on the road, scattering gravel. "We're never gonna get a ride," he grumbled.

"Let's go down to the turnpike," Blake suggested. "That's where the action is."

"But what if a state trooper comes by?" Dean looked up and down the ramp as if a cop might show up right then. "I don't want to get busted. Plus, I got the weed on me."

"But we got to do something, man, because this place ain't happening. Listen to all them cars going by down there. We're bound to get a ride in no time. Come on, man, let's go." Blake grabbed his pack and began marching toward the tollbooth.

"Whoa, hold up!" Dean yelled. "We can't go that way. We can't just walk past the tollbooth. What if the guy calls the cops?"

"Well, how else are we gonna get down to the turnpike?"

Dean looked around. "Let's go back the other way." He pointed down the ramp away from the tollbooth. "Maybe we can find a way down from there."

The boys hiked down the ramp, and turned at a two-lane road that bridged the turnpike. The tollbooth was now hidden behind them by the wide treeless mound. From the edge of the overpass they scrambled down a steep embankment, fighting with thorny blackberry bushes along the way. At the bottom of the bank, only a few yards from the turnpike, they encountered a chainlink fence. The fence had no horizontal metal bar across the top to grab hold of, only twisted points of sharp wire. Blake volunteered to go first. They removed their packs, and Blake began to climb up one of the metal fence posts, placing the tips of his shoes between the small metal links on either side of the

post. On the top of the post was a smooth round nub that reached a few inches above the sharp wires. When Blake climbed high enough he palmed the nub and vaulted over in one swift movement, stumbling as he landed on the far side. Dean carefully handed the packs over the fence to Blake, lifting them high to avoid tearing them on the spikes. Dean followed up the fence, but on the way over the top he snagged his pants on a piece of sharp wire, ripping a gash in his jeans. He wasn't cut, but he suddenly felt a cold gust blow up his leg.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Dean yelled as he hit the ground. “I ripped my fucking pants!”

Blake calmly inspected the tear. “That ain't too bad. Now you look like one of the Ramones. Deannie Ramone.”

Dean fingered the tear in his jeans then shook his head. “Let's just get on with it,” he grumbled.

They stepped over the guardrail and stuck out their thumbs. There were fewer cars than Dean expected. The echoes bouncing off the hill and the overpass had amplified the sound, making it seem like there was more traffic.

“Pull up a chair,” Blake said, nodding towards the guardrail. “I'll get us a ride.” Dean leaned against the rail, while Blake marched in place. As he marched he began singing under his breath.

“What's that you're singing?” Dean asked.

“I'm just trying out one of those chants. Tell me what you think of this one.” His murmuring got louder:

*The cops and klan are just the same,  
the only difference is the name.*

Blake repeated the chant, marching in time to the rhythm. Dean joined in, and they began dancing stiffly on the side of the road.

After they exhausted that chant, Dean broke in. "How about this one? he offered:

*The cops and klan they stink like shit,  
crack them with a crackin' stick.*

"That's pretty good," Blake said, "but what the hell's a crackin' stick?"

"It's what you crack the cops and klan over the head with," Dean said, "because they stink like shit." The boys burst out laughing. They sang the cracking stick chant, and entertained themselves with a few more comical choices.

Blake suddenly stopped singing, and turned around. "G-man, at twelve o'clock!" he yelled.

Dean and Blake turned to watch a state trooper pull off to the side of the turnpike in front of them. The trooper stepped out of his car and walked towards them. The first thing Dean noticed was the cop's wide-brimmed hat, and then his sidearm. The boys looked at each other. Dean was thinking about the pot he had in his pocket.

"What do you two think you're doing?" the officer asked, studying them.

"Uh, hitchhiking," Dean replied.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

"We're graduated," Blake said, lying.

"I see," the trooper remarked. "You know, it's illegal to hitchhike on the turnpike. You're going to have to go back behind the tollbooth."

"But we'll never get a ride from there," Blake complained, waving his thumb in the general direction of the tollbooth hidden behind the man-made hill.

“Well that's not my problem now, is it? You should know better. Don't you boys know that hitchhiking is dangerous? There's all kinds of maniacs on the road, and you don't know who's going to pick you up. Believe me, I know. You should have taken a bus.”

The boys lowered their heads in defeat. Blake said, “Do you think you could at least give us a ride to the next exit, sir? This is the middle of nowhere.”

Dean wondered whether the state trooper was insulted by Blake's comment. The trooper might be content to live in the middle of nowhere. He might not take kindly to having his white picket-fenced house with its perfectly manicured lawn, and fresh-baked apple pies cooling on the windowsill called ‘the middle of nowhere’ by some smart-assed, longhaired, know-it-all city kid.

“Can't do it,” the trooper replied, shaking his head.

“Well how about taking us back up to the tollbooth then, if you can't take us to the next exit?” Dean asked, trying to make the cop feel guilty for refusing what he probably considered to be two unfortunate misguided youngsters. Plus, he wasn't looking forward to climbing back over the fence.

“It's illegal to pick up hitchhikers on the turnpike,” the trooper said brusquely.

“But you're a state trooper,” Blake argued.

“All the more reason not to break the law. Now I suggest you boys crawl through that hole there, and climb back up,” he said, pointing to a tear in the fence that Blake and Dean hadn't noticed on their way down. The boys nodded and bent low to crawl through the hole that was more like a slice in the fence where one of them had to pull the opening wide for the other to squeeze past. Once through, they waded up the bank under the

blackberry brambles, and finally returned to the entrance ramp near the tollbooth. The trooper didn't bother to help them through the tear in the fence. When the boys reached the top of the hill, the trooper returned to his car and drove away.

Back by the tollbooth there were now fewer cars than before, and as if to replace them, there appeared small unstable whirlwinds of dry snow and floating black road dust dancing along the road. Snow whirls mixed with dust whirls, and some whirled alone, but there was always more white that fell on their faces, and as it melted it dripped water down their cheeks. These miniature funnels lived for only a few moments until exploding into chaotic squalls along the guardrail, scattering their disorderly remains into the boys' faces. Two hours passed as they fought off these adolescent twisters.

"Hey Blake," Dean said, shoving his chin deep into his collar, "did you hear about Carter's State of the Union Address?"

"You mean State of the Onion: peel back the thin skin of liberty and justice for all, and there's rotten layers of poverty, inequality, and fascist imperialism. I read that somewhere, the Worker's World or something."

"Well, did you hear what Carter wants to do? He wants to bring back the draft, or at least make us register for it when we turn eighteen," Dean said.

"You gotta be kidding," Blake said. "What a fucking idiot. Did he forget Vietnam already? Hell, I'm barely old enough to remember it and I haven't forgotten it. I thought he was supposed to be a Democrat."

"He's tripping on the Ruskies in Afghanistan, and the hostages in Iran."

"That figures," Blake said, "blame it on the Ruskies." Blake stood up straight, waving his finger up and down in front of him as if addressing a class full of wide-eyed

school kids. “Now remember children,” he said, “There’s only one lesson Uncle Sam wants you to learn: America good, Russia bad.”

“And don’t forget Iran,” Dean said, rubbing his cold hands together “America Held Hostage: Day three hundred and fifty five thousand two hundred and twenty nine.”

“Free the American Hamburgers!” Blake yelled.

“Free the American Hamburgers!” the boys chanted in unison, pounding their fists in the air.

After the chant fizzled, Dean turned to Blake with his arms folded, and said in his best mock southern accent, “What the hell kinda ‘merican are you, boy? Are you some kinda goddam commie?”

“That’s pinko commie to you, mister. And don’t forget it,” Blake replied. They both laughed steam.

“But seriously,” Dean said, “I don’t think I’m gonna register. I think I’m gonna take my chances. If they bust me I’ll be a conscientious objector, and if I can’t do that, then I’ll be a political prisoner . . . or maybe I’ll run off to Canada first.”

“Well how old are you now?” Blake asked.

“Almost seventeen.”

“That’s still a ways away. There might even be a revolution before then,” Blake said cheerfully.

“More like a fascist revolution, the way things are looking,” Dean said. “What are you gonna do about it . . .you know, registration?”

“I don’t know,” Blake said. “I guess I’ll decide when I get there. I mean, registration’s one thing, but giving me a gun and sending me off to shoot some Ruskies

or Iranians is something else. When they come over here trying to shoot me, that's when I'll pick up a gun."

"I know, it's like that bastard in the pickup truck, talking about fighting for my freedom. Who's freedom is he talking about? Did you hear about any Vietnamese invading America?" Dean asked, scanning the wide farmland bordering the ramp.

"I heard about them boat people," Blake said. And with all them boats they might be a threat to our good old U.S. Navy. We better build us a few more battleships, just in case."

"Aye Aye, Captain," Dean said, offering a salute. Blake saluted back.

The sun slowly moved towards evening as Dean and Blake stood rampside near the tollbooth pleading with the few cars that rolled by. The wind picked up again and they turned their backs to the ramp for protection.

"We gotta do something," Blake said desperately, as the biggest gust of wind clawed its way down his neck. "Once it gets dark, there's not gonna be any cars driving up this God-forsaken ramp."

"Maybe we can roll out our sleeping bags under some bushes or something," Dean suggested.

"No way, man. This ain't camping weather. I don't have one of them super polar bear sleeping bags, and I don't want to be found lying here next week frozen solid by some highway cleanup crew, looking like one of them arctic explorers with ice all over my beard."

Dean laughed, pointing his finger from within his coat sleeve. "You call that spotty patch of peachfuzz a beard?"

“Well it might not be as big as yours, Pops, but I’m not ready to be the iceman just yet.”

Dean looked up the road at the tollbooth and at the man behind the glass. “Well, what can we do?”

“Let’s head back down to the turnpike,” Blake said, nodding his head in the direction of the highway. “It’s the only way.”

“But what about the cop?”

“He’s probably in Harrisburg by now. But we got to risk it, man, because we’re never gonna get a ride up here.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Dean muttered.

The boys hoisted their packs and returned to the turnpike, this time crawling through the hole in the fence. They stood at the side of the road for about ten minutes when they both jumped in response to a loud sound coming from behind them. “Pick up your bags and come over to the car!!” squealed a high-pitched metallic voice. When they turned they saw a state trooper's car behind them in the median strip. It was the same cop. He put a little square box to his mouth and the loud sound screeched again from the bullhorn on the roof of his car: "Pick up your bags and come over to the car!" The boys did just that. They crossed the eastbound lanes to the median strip where the state trooper stood next to his car with the back door open. But as the boys were back at the guardrail grabbing their packs, Dean reached into his front pants pocket and pulled out a small black film-canister of marijuana. With his back turned to the trooper he gently pitched the canister under the guardrail into the weeds.

“Get in,” said the trooper, pointing to the back seat of his car as Dean and Blake approached. The boys climbed in the back seat with their packs, then the trooper closed the door and sat in the front. There was an uncomfortable pause before the trooper finally spoke. “I thought I told you boys it was illegal to hitchhike on the turnpike,” he said, turning around in his seat.

Dean and Blake nodded their heads, avoiding his gaze.

“You thought you could fool me, didn't you? You thought I wouldn't be back?”

The boys said nothing.

“I knew the minute I laid eyes on you two, that you had no respect for authority. So I came back the other way, and caught you just like I expected.” The officer laughed.

Blake returned a smile

“You think there's something funny about breaking the law, Mister?” he barked at Blake.

“Uh no, no sir.” Blake said, straightening his face.

The trooper frowned. “I didn't think so. Look, I don't have the time to waste on you two delinquents. Now listen close: I'm taking you back to the tollbooth, and that's where you'd better stay until you get a ride. If I see you down on the turnpike again then I guarantee you, you'll both be in jail.” The trooper raised his voice. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes sir,” the boys replied.

“You boys should be working, or in the military, or even in college. For the life of me I don't know why you want to travel around like vagabonds, begging for rides, and

in the middle of winter of all things. If you were my boys you wouldn't be out here, that's a fact . . . and you'd have decent haircuts.”

The trooper drove them back up to the ramp. At the tollbooth he whispered something to the attendant. The booth attendant grinned at the boys and shook his head.

Once past the booth the trooper opened the back door. “Remember,” he said, “the next time you're going straight to jail.”

## Chapter 3

### The Grand Illusion

The two boys stood by the side of the ramp defeated. Evening was coming on and the temperature was dropping when Dean suggested returning home.

“We can't go back,” Blake said. “We've barely started.”

“That's the whole point. At this rate we'll miss the march. And I'd rather not go at all than get there after it's all over.”

“But it's only Thursday,” Blake argued, “and the demonstration isn't until Saturday morning.”

Dean stared at the ground, shaking his head. “I'll give it another hour, but if we don't get a ride by then I'm heading back.”

Blake rolled his eyes with a sigh.

“I gotta take a piss,” Dean said, stepping over the guardrail and walking behind some bushes. While relieving himself he heard a car coming up the ramp, then the sound of gravel as if the car was pulling over.

“Alright! Dean, we got a ride, man!” Blake yelled.

Dean quickly zipped up, and ran out from behind the bushes. He saw Blake walking up to a sky blue van, and followed. Blake opened the passenger door and they both peered in smiling. The first thing they noticed was that the man driving had long hair, and he looked a little confused.

“Hold on,” the driver ordered, pushing the palm of his hand out toward the boys. “Is this some kind of trick? Is that how you get rides, one of you hitchhikes while the other hides in the bushes? I'm not sure I can take the both of you.”

“I was just taking a leak, I swear.”

The driver frowned. “I don’t know,” he said doubtfully.

“Please give us a ride, man, please,” Blake begged. “We've been here for hours trying to get a ride. We went down to the highway twice but a cop busted us both times, and he says the next time we're going to jail.” Blake placed the palms of his gloveless hands together in supplication. “Oh man, please. It's freezing out here, and I don't wanna get stuck here all night, please.”

The driver gave a grumbling sigh. “All right, all right, get in. I guess I could use some conversation to keep me awake.” Blake slid the side door open and climbed in the back with the packs. Dean sat up front. To their delight the heater in the van pumped plenty of hot air. The van’s interior was laid out like a genuine 70s love-making van. The entire ceiling and parts of the walls were decked with wood paneling, while the remainder of the walls and the floor were covered by a blue shag carpet with orange shag paisleys. And tucked behind Blake in the back there rested a small but comfortable-looking bed. “So where are you guys headed to, anyway?” the driver asked.

“To Greensboro, North Carolina,” Dean said immediately.

“I can take you as far as Richmond, Virginia.”

“Sounds good,” Blake said from the backseat.

As they wound their way down the ramp towards the turnpike, Dean inspected the driver closely. “Say, uh . . .” he stammered, “Do you uh happen to smoke . . . uh, pot?”

“I've been known to,” the driver replied, as he accelerated the van down the on-ramp to the turnpike. “But I don't have any if that's what you're thinking.”

“Well actually, I got some,” Dean said. “But I had to ditch it by the side of the road when the cop picked us up. If you pull over after this underpass I'm pretty sure I can find it.”

“What are you talking about?” the driver asked suspiciously.

“Look, it's now or never. I had to toss the pot because of the cop. But it's right up here.”

The driver looked over at Dean. “Where?”

Dean pointed through the windshield. “Right up here.”

The driver pulled over, and Dean jumped out. He scoured the ground behind the guardrail until he found the film canister, and then ran back to the van, where he flashed the canister at the driver as proof. Dean rolled a big joint, and the three of them smoked it as they traveled down the turnpike.

“So you're going to Greensboro,” the driver said. “Is that where you live?”

Dean jumped in instinctively. “Were going to visit my cousins.”

“Some old friends of mine in Richmond are going down to Greensboro too, the driver said. “For that march against the kkk.”

“Really?” Blake said from the backseat. Dean turned to look at him. Blake shrugged his shoulders. Dean nodded in return.

“Well actually, we're going down to Greensboro to march against the klan too,” Blake said. “We just tell people we're going to Dean's cousins just in case they don't understand.”

“I used to do that kind of stuff,” the driver said. “You know, protests and marches. And then I realized that it's the inner journey that matters, the spiritual journey.”

“What do you mean?” Dean asked, not understanding why the spiritual journey and the political journey were incompatible.

The driver took a slow deep breath, and made a long drawn-out humming sound as he exhaled. “It's all attachment,” he said finally. “The desire to change the world, the desire for justice and freedom, it's all an illusion.”

“What do you mean it's all an illusion?” Dean asked. “Didn't those people get murdered by the klan? What's more real than that?”

“Life is an illusion, death is an illusion, you're an illusion, I'm an illusion. The universe is all one. It's all energy and there are no parts, no individuals, it's just one big cosmic dance. And when you lift up the veil of illusion . . .” The driver paused, staring blankly through the windshield. “What was I saying?” he asked. “Oh I know. You see, I've evolved my consciousness to a higher plane . . . through years of spiritual practice. Call it enlightenment, if you will. And once you reach a higher plane you discover that what we call reality is just a creation of the mind. It's taken me years of self-discipline, but I've transcended the dualities of life and death, good and evil, freedom and oppression.”

“I just smoke me a little weed, and I can create my own reality too,” Blake said, laughing.

Dean turned to the driver. “I don't think I understand,” he said seriously. “The klan killed those people, and that can't be right. How can we just ignore that, or call it an illusion? I mean, chanting or meditation or whatever might help, but how does that change things, change the world? Doesn't it just change your state of mind?”

“I can see you still have a way to go yet on your spiritual journey,” the driver said.

“Probably so,” Dean conceded. “But I'll always believe in equal rights and justice. And I don't think I can have faith in any spiritual journey if I can't stand up for what I believe in.”

“Well, that's because that is your karma,” the driver said in a soothing and instructive voice. “That's where you are in this life, and those are your attachments.”

“Once I was attached to this girl named Melissa,” Blake added, “and then she dumped me for somebody else. Man, that was a bummer.”

“Exactly,” the driver said. “That's why I've worked to transcend my desires, because it all leads to suffering in the end.”

“Well maybe you're just too attached against suffering,” Dean suggested.

The driver tilted his head and ran his fingers through his hair thoughtfully.

Dean continued. “But what about the big stuff like the Holocaust, and Apartheid, and the klan and all that? How can we just ignore it? I mean, it's easy to rise above it all when it's somebody else, some strangers packed into a cattlecar riding the rails all the way to a concentration camp, or getting beat up and shot at. But somebody has to stand up to the fascist pigs. And I'm sure the nazis would be the first ones to tell you to go ahead and transcend what they're doing, because then it'd be easier for them to get away with it.”

“You believe that because you don't yet see that everything is one, that difference is an illusion. The oppressor and the oppressed are part of a singularity. Some call it the

godhead, some call it nirvana. And that kind of enlightenment, my young friends, is humbling.”

“That happened to me once when I was doing acid,” Blake said. “I was in the woods and I became one with the trees. Man, it was a trip. Whenever I breathed out the leaves breathed in and puffed up, kinda like blowfish or something, and when they breathed out I breathed in; because, you know, they make oxygen and we make carbon dioxide, and it's all connected, all one.”

Dean turned to the driver, ignoring Blake. “What if it's just a cop-out? You know, like a way to ignore oppression because it's a drag, or because it might bum you out or piss you off, but you want to be happy instead? And what about them people getting oppressed? How do they feel when they get treated wrong?”

“There is no right and wrong, or good and evil, it's all the same thing. Once you peel back the illusion, it's all one, there is no discrimination.”

“Well that's cool,” Blake said, “because I'm all against discrimination.”

Dean wrung his hands together in frustration. He wanted to call the man at the wheel an idiot, but he didn't want this ride to end up like the last one.

“But what about . . . Look out!” Dean yelled suddenly, pointing to a large brown lump in the middle of the road ahead of them. The driver immediately swerved the van into the left lane to avoid the lump, sending Blake hard against the side door.

“Shit! That was close,” the driver exclaimed, as he returned the van to the right lane.

“What was it?” Blake asked.

“A dead deer,” the driver said, wiping his freshly damp brow with the back of his hand.

“Are you sure that’s what it was?” Dean asked. “Maybe it was an illusion?”

“No, it was a deer,” the driver said simply.

Dean shook his head. So much for everything being an illusion, he thought.

As the night settled in the boys could see nothing outside the bounds of the van’s headlights, except for the piercing bright beams of the oncoming cars. Before long Dean heard Blake softly snoring in the back seat. Soon his own eyelids began to droop. His head fell forward a few times, jerking him momentarily back to waking, until he too finally slept.

“We’re coming up on Richmond,” the driver announced suddenly.

“Huh?” Dean said, startled into wakefulness.

Blake yawned. “I must have crashed out.” He raised himself up on his elbows, poking his head up from the small comfortable bed behind the back seat.

“I almost fell asleep myself,” the driver said. “A lot of good you guys were at keeping me awake with some conversation like you promised.”

“Sorry, man,” Blake said, crawling out of the bed into the back seat. “It must have been the weed. I didn’t realize how tired I was until we smoked that joint. It put me right over the edge.”

“Me too,” Dean agreed.

“Well, this is where I get off,” the driver said, pulling off the road just short of the exit ramp.

“Where are we now?” Dean asked, as the boys climbed out of the van.

“We're just north of Richmond on route 95,” the driver said. “This isn't a toll road so you can probably hitchhike on the highway. Once you get about 30 miles below Richmond you'll want to go south on 85 and that'll take you straight to Greensboro.”

The boys hoisted up their packs, thanking the driver.

## Chapter 4

### No Call for a Whuppin'

As the van pulled away, the boys found themselves in darkness. To the east and south a dark blue hue inched its way slowly above the horizon, while the winter birds chattered and whistled, confirmed that morning was on its way.

"Damn, it's cold," Blake complained. He blew smoke rings out of steam. "I thought it was supposed to be warm down south."

"This is Virginia, man, not Florida. But like the man said: good, evil, hot, cold Virginia, Florida . . . it's all an illusion anyway."

"Yeah, but it's one goddam cold-assed illusion." They both chuckled under their breath.

Few cars traveled down the highway in this early morning freeze. The cold forced the boys to walk, so they trudged uphill along the road's shoulder, leaning over underneath the weight of their packs. Whenever Dean and Blake heard an engine rumbling behind them, or saw beams of light passing through the mist above their heads, they'd halt and turn to await the oncoming car. When the lights approached they'd stick out their thumbs, only to watch the car drive by without them, the red taillights fading into the distance. Dean and Blake tramped on for over an hour, by which time it was light enough to call it morning, though the sun had yet to rise above the horizon. As the sky grew bluer the traffic grew heavier, and so they turned to walk backwards. They soon became tired and warm from walking up the hill backwards, and agreed to stand still on the road's shoulder.

After some time the boys heard a loud engine working its way up the long winding hill. It wasn't the sputtering hum of a high school kid's hot rod, but the spluttering ker-plunk of an old car on the brink. Coming into view around the bend there appeared an ancient black pickup truck. The cab was an upright angular box, like a square top hat, with an equally square cab behind. The headlights sat on fenders apart from the front hood like two steel bowls with glass lids. As the truck coughed and spluttered up the hill toward the boys, it picked up speed. The engine finally kicked into a smooth flutter when the old pickup pulled over, some distance down the hill from them. The truck was older than any they'd ever seen before, except in old silent movies. The front bumper--having been replaced--was now a long wooden two-by-four screwed to the body, and along the sides hung rusted running boards.

"Do you think he's giving us a ride, or is he just having engine trouble?" Dean wondered aloud.

"Only one way to find out," Blake said, as the boys moved towards the truck. "Do you need some help, or something?" Blake asked loudly as they came near the truck.

An old black man who looked even older than the truck he was driving poked his head out the window. "With this ol' thing?" the old man asked. "She's just fine," he added, patting the steering wheel affectionately. "Needs a little warmin' up, that's all. I figured you boys was the ones might be needin' a little help."

Dean and Blake smiled at each other, then at the old man.

"Well don't just stand there grinnin' at me, get on board if yu'all want a ride," the man said, shaking his head. The boys tossed their packs in the back of the pickup truck and hopped up front into the ancient square cab. The old man's skin was cinnamon

brown, and his tight curly hair was mostly white, speckled with dark remnants of his younger days. His short spotty beard was the same, rough and wiry in places yet still dignified and dapper.

Dean sat between the old man and Blake, and because of the tall stick shift in the middle of the floor, Dean had to adjust his legs whenever the man changed gears.

“Where yu’all aimin’ to go?” the old man asked, as the truck rumbled up the hill, picking up speed.

“We’re going to Greensboro,” Dean answered.

The old man grabbed the gearshift with his thick calloused fingers. “Well I’m about thirty mile outside of Greensboro, I can take you that far.”

“That’s cool,” Blake said.

The old black man looked over at the two white boys sitting next to him. “You boys don’t sound like you from around here. Where yu’all from?”

“Pittsburgh,” Dean said.

“Pittsburgh? Now what brings you so far from home?” The boys paused and looked at each other. “Don’t tell me ya runnin’ from the law.”

“No,” Dean answered. “Nothing like that.”

“Actually, we’re going to the klan rally,” Blake said.

The old man burst out laughing. “Lord help us. I must say, yu’all most certainly is the funniest lookin’ klansmen I ever did see.” He slapped the steering wheel a few times in his amusement.

“No, it’s against the klan,” Dean corrected. “We’re going down to march against the klan.”

“Well, I guess you’re in luck then,” the old man said. Dean saw him inspecting the light copper-colored palms of his large hands, “because now I won't have to give yu’all a whuppin’ after all.”

Blake smiled. “No need for that. We hate the klan. That's why we came down here.”

The old man eyed the boys gravely. “To tell you the truth, I don't know what's more crazy . . . two young white boys from the North coming down here and marching *with* the klan, or marching *against* them. Either way, you bound to upset somebody.”

“What do you mean?” Blake snapped. “We got the right to march. It's not against the law.”

“Nobody said you ain't got the right to march, but right don't make might. And some of these white folks ‘round here don't take kindly to nobody standin’ against them, especially Northerners.”

Dean and Blake looked at each other without a word. The old man shifted in his seat. “Ain’t you boys supposed to be in school?”

“Yeah,” Dean admitted, “but we’re only taking a couple of days off.”

“I see. So what grade yu’all in?”

“Eleventh,” Blake said.

“And yu’all get good marks in school now, do you?”

“Mm hmm,” Dean mumbled.

The old man chuckled. “You don’t sound too sure of yourself, son.”

Dean blushed. “Well, I guess I get mostly B’s, and sometimes C’s.”

“Ever get a D?”

“Yeah,” Dean sighed.

The old man scratched his short scraggly beard. “I got me a C-minus once, in grammar, but I never went past the eighth grade. Had to quit school.”

“I thought everyone had to go to school until they were at least sixteen,” Blake said.

The old man shrugged his shoulders. “Nobody complained . . . except me. But it didn’t change nothin’. Being the oldest of seven like I was, there was a lotta mouths to feed, so I had to find work. Did a little sharecroppin’ for a while, learned how to fix engines. I even helped build this highway.”

“Did you get to drive a steamroller?” Blake asked.

The old man gave a hearty laugh. “Nah, only white folks did that. I mostly cracked rocks with a sledgehammer, makin’ gravel. Worked sixteen hours a day. And I remember how at the end of the day the white bossman would come by and measure how big was your pile of gravel. If it was too small you didn’t come back the next day.”

“Wow,” Dean said. “I can hardly imagine that.”

“I reckon not.”

“How much did you get paid?” Blake asked.

“Oh, I don’t recall exactly. I figure the pay was all right, but I handed all my earnings over to my mother, and she always saw fit to give me a little somethin’ for myself.”

The truck rolled at a modest pace down the highway as the morning brightened. After a while the old man asked if the boys were hungry.

“I’m starving,” Blake answered at once, patting his belly.

“Well that’s good timing on your part,” the man said, steering the truck into the right lane, “ ‘cause there’s a Popeye’s chicken up off the next exit.”

The boys didn’t respond.

“Don’t worry about it.” The old man guessed at the cause of their silence. “I’m buyin’.”

“I appreciate it,” Blake said, “but you see, we’re, uh, vegetarians.”

“Hmm,” the old man pondered. “I reckon yu’all can have yourselves some mashed potatoes and hush puppies if you want, but me . . . I’m havin’ me some fried chicken.”

“Me too,” Dean voted.

Blake turned to Dean with a twisted face.

“I’m hungry,” Dean said defiantly. “You know, it’s just like them Buddhist monks, they’ll eat whatever you offer, as long as you don’t go killing any animals on their account.”

The old man chuckled. “Them chickens is already kilt, boys, and I don’t know what yu’all eat up north but you cayn’t last for long down here if you don’t eat no meat.”

“All right,” Blake conceded.

Everyone ordered chicken. The old man paid, and directed them to a table in the corner, near the rear exit. The boys thanked him repeatedly. The few black and white customers gazed curiously at the three of them from time to time.

“I heard there’s gonna be thousands of people at the march,” Blake said, biting greedily into a chicken leg.

The old man gently pulled his palm above the edge of the table and shook his head. "This ain't a good place for that kinda talk," he said softly. "People's already lookin' at us funny as it is."

After eating they returned to the truck, and back to the highway. "I been thinkin'," the old man said. "I wasn't plannin' on drivin' all the way to Greensboro, but I don't feel right droppin' you young fellas off short. Ol' Bubba might spot you standin' on the side of the road, and the Lord knows yu'all don't look like you from around here. I reckon itta be dangerous on the outskirts of Greensboro, coming up on this march and all."

Dean glanced through the windshield at a passing pickup truck driven by a white man. "Wh . . . what do you think might happen?"

"I don't wanna go scarin' you now, but yu'all could use a little dose of common sense. This ain't the North, and you boys is just a little too carefree for your own good--like yu'all was on vacation. So I'ma take you down to Greensboro. It's only about thirty mile out of my way. The Lord knows I couldn't live with the thought of nothin' bad happening to you innocent young . . . uh, fellas on my account."

"That's great," Blake said. "We really appreciate it."

"Probably not enough, I reckon," the old man conjectured. "But don't mention it."

Blake turned to the man. "Well, what kind of bad thing do you think could happen?"

The old man was stern. "Don't be a fool, now!" he declared. "You know well enough what these klu kluxers is capable of. And another thing is they ain't all wearin' white sheets, so you might not know who's givin' you a ride till it's too late. And don't

think on accounta you're white they'll leave you be. In their mind yu'all's nothing but traitors, traitors to your race. And the only thing worse than a uppity nigger is a white traitor. So keep that in mind."

"I'll try," Dean said.

"Good. Now, do yu'all have a place to stay down in Greensboro, some place to go?"

Dean pulled a folded piece of poster paper out of his back pocket. "There's gonna be a meeting at the Greensboro Community Center tonight at seven," he said after reading the poster. "And it says there's supposed to be some people there offering places to stay for anybody who needs one."

"Well . . . all right then," the old man said in a fatherly tone. "I know where it is. That ain't far from that little Methodist college. Should be safe around there during the day."

When they reached Greensboro, the old man found his way to the community center. "This is it," he said. "Yu'all still got a long while before that meetin' starts, so I recommend you head over to the college. It's only a little ways down this road," he said pointing. "They got a little cafeteria in there, where you can stay warm and get yourselves a little somethin' to eat for cheap."

"Thanks a lot," the boys said, bowing slightly to the man as they stepped out of the truck.

"And one more thing," the old man said, "after this march is over you might want to ask somebody to give you a ride, at least thirty or forty mile outside of town."

“All right,” Dean said. “Thanks for everything. Oh, by the way, I’m Dean and this is Blake.”

“Nice meetin’ you fellas. Most folks call me Williams, but my friends call me Moses. Yu’all can call me Moses. Now you boys keep an eye out, and don’t forget, ya ain’t on vacation,” he added, before steering his ancient pickup truck down the road.

## Chapter 5

### Walls of Color

Dean and Blake stood quietly for a while in the empty parking lot of the community center in the cold morning sun.

“Let’s head over to that college.” Dean said.

“Sure, but let’s try and find that famous Woolworth’s, you know, where them black college students refused to give up their seats at the lunch counter. Maybe we can buy a postcard or something.”

“Damn, Blake, didn’t you hear what the old man was saying? We ain’t on vacation.”

“I know,” Blake said, “but I don’t think we’re gonna get lynched in the middle of day in the middle of town.”

“All the same,” Dean said, “he got me thinking . . . maybe this trip is more dangerous than we thought. Maybe we should just take his advice and head to the college.”

Blake agreed reluctantly.

The two boys entered the warm cafeteria sporting their bulky aluminum-framed backpacks. The cafeteria sat low on the first floor of an old historic building, where, despite the white-columned portico and the antique red brick exterior, the room itself was a sterile fluorescent cafeteria, surrounded on three sides by windows built to stay shut. Since lunch was still a couple of hours away, the boys found themselves walking into a near-empty room. But it was clear from the stares of the twenty or so black students that Dean and Blake didn’t attend the Methodist college. The boys stepped up to the steam

table. A young black woman was busy laying out food for the eventual lunch crowd rush, and she didn't look as if she wanted to be bothered. When she finally made herself available the boys each ordered two small rubbery-looking hamburgers and an order of greasy french fries. They carried their food on red plastic trays to an isolated plastic table near a corner window.

They leaned their packs against the back wall, then settled into their meals which they smothered with ketchup from the handfuls of little packets they'd grabbed at the cash register. "So much for being a vegetarian," Blake uttered, as he bit hungrily into his burger. Ketchup oozed out from between the buns, flowing onto his fingertips. Dean piled french fries and ketchup onto his burger, forming a frenchfry hamburger.

The boys sat in silence when halfway through their meal Dean spoke up. "Don't look now but there's two black guys standing over there staring at us."

"I guess we are a sight, if you think about it," Blake said, through a mouthful of hamburger and ketchup.

"I don't know. They keep whispering to each other, then looking over here like they got something on their mind."

"Well maybe they're just wondering about us. You know, wondering where we're from, and if we're down here for the march."

"Hhnh," Dean said.

Blake intentionally flicked one of his paper napkins off the side of the table. When the napkin hit the floor he swung around on the end of his plastic bench, and bent over to pick it up, trying to be inconspicuous as he looked sidelong at the two black guys eyeing them. "They seem harmless enough. Like college students."

“Here they come,” Dean whispered.

The two black men walked swiftly over to Dean and Blake’s table.

“Excuse me,” said the taller black man dressed in a dark suit, and an off-white button-down shirt. “I couldn’t help but notice that you all look like you’re camping or traveling or something. We don’t meet too many . . . uh . . . travelers around here, and we were just wondering where you’re from. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, that’s cool,” Dean said. “We’re from Pittsburgh.”

The second man--who was shorter--wore old jeans and a college-logo sweatshirt. He aimed his eyes at Dean. “Pittsburgh Steelers!” he exclaimed. “That’s one of my favorite teams. You know, Terry Bradshaw, Franco Harris, Lynn Swan.”

“And don’t forget Mean Joe Green,” added the taller man in the suit.

“Oh yeah. You can’t forget him,” the shorter man replied.

After a moment of silence the taller man spoke again. “Are you all hippies?”

The casually dressed man elbowed his friend in an exaggerated manner. “Damn, man, don’t be rude.”

“Oh I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude,” the well-dressed man said, leaning over and placing his hands on the plastic table near Dean and Blake’s food.

“No problem,” Dean said, pulling his tray closer toward himself. “We’re not really hippies. That’s kind of outdated, but I can see how you might think that with our long hair and all.”

“Did you all come down here for that march?” the shorter man asked.

Dean and Blake looked at each other. “As a matter of fact, we did,” Dean said.

“Are you two going?” he added.

“Oh yeah, me and Clarence are going for sure,” the shorter man said looking at his friend. “Ain’t we, Clarence?”

“Uh huh. Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he replied. “By the way, I’m Clarence,” said the tall suited-man extending his hand, “and this here’s Hilton.”

They shook hands as Dean and Blake introduced themselves.

“Do you mind if we join you?” Hilton asked, waving his hand toward an empty space on the plastic bench next to Blake, while stepping toward it.

“Feel free,” Blake said. “Have a seat.”

The men sat down next to the boys. “I was wondering,” Clarence said, adjusting his tie, “if you all might be in need of a little weed . . . seeing as you’re from out of town. We got a couple of joints if you’re interested.”

“We’re cool,” Dean answered matter-of-factly.

“Oh, you already got some then?” Hilton asked.

“A little.” Dean replied.

“Hmm, well how about some acid, then? We can get you some if you want,” Clarence said.

Blake raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Oh yeah, some of the best blotter around.”

Blake stroked his chin for a moment then eyed Dean. Dean shrugged his shoulders.

“How much is it?” Blake asked Clarence from across the table.

“Five bucks a hit.”

“Five bucks? That’s kind of expensive, don’t you think?”

“That’s because it’s so good. It’s like acid from the sixties,” Clarence said.

“And we’re not making a profit on it,” Hilton added. “That’s what it costs us, but I’m telling you it’s worth it.”

“O-kay,” Blake said cautiously, “we’ll take two hits.”

“Awright,” Hilton said. “We’ll be back in about ten minutes.”

Hilton and Clarence returned to the table within five minutes, where Hilton revealed a small piece of folded aluminum foil in his palm. He carefully opened it on the table, uncovering two tiny squares of white paper, each with a round purplish dot in the center.

“That’s ten dollars,” Hilton said.

“Let me check that out.” Dean reached for the foil, sliding it across the table, concealing it alongside his food tray. He examined it closely then pushed it back to Hilton. “I’ve never seen any blotter like this.” The blotter acid that he’d had before was on thicker paper, and the edges were perforated. This looked like someone took a pair of scissors to a piece of writing paper and drew two small circles in the middle with a runny purple felt tip pen.

“What’s wrong with it?” Blake asked.

“It just doesn’t look right. It looks fake.”

Hilton looked over at Clarence, then at Dean sitting by Clarence’s side. “Maybe it’s different than what you all have up north,” Hilton said, “but me and Clarence, we were tripping our brains out last weekend on this stuff, weren’t we Clarence?”

“Oh, man, we were way out there, out in the stratosphere.”

“I don’t know,” Dean said, shaking his head.

“Maybe you all’ve had some bad experiences with black folks before,” Clarence spoke up. “I can understand. A lot of them brothers up north are bad news, but we’re different down here. We don’t come from the ghetto. And we got no reason to cheat you. We’re just two young black men going to college, trying to lift ourselves up, trying to be what the klan doesn’t want us to be, men with hope and a future. And if we can’t trust each other what hope do we have for the future?”

Dean felt glum. Maybe these were genuinely nice guys who had gone out of their way at no profit to themselves in order to be welcoming and hospitable. They’d taken a big risk, and now he had insulted them, suggesting that they were trying to pass off bad LSD, and that they were con men. Maybe Clarence was right, what hope is there for race relations if we can’t trust each other? Isn’t that why he and Blake had come down here in the first place?

“Well, I guess if it’s only five bucks a piece,” Dean said. Blake agreed and they gave Clarence the money.

“You won’t regret it,” Hilton said, as the two men stood up. “And we’ll look for you tomorrow at the march.”

“Thanks a lot,” Blake said. Dean simply nodded.

After the two men left, Dean looked down at the two purple-dotted white squares resting on the foil. “When should we do it?” he asked

“Let’s do it now.”

“But what about that meeting at the community center?” Dean asked. “We’ve got to be straight enough to find someone who’ll give us a place to stay.”

“But that’s not until seven tonight, and it’s not even noon yet.”

“Oh, what the hell,” Dean said. He slid the foil to the middle of the table, and each boy put one of the little paper squares onto his tongue.

Blake peered out the window. “Let’s get out of here. I’d rather be somewhere else when this kicks in.” The boys hoisted their packs and left the cafeteria.

“Maybe we can find an isolated place with some trees or something,” Dean suggested, as they stepped out into the chilly air. He tried out a bad Southern accent adding, “I reckon it’s so cold that none but a damn fool Yankee’d be standin’ outside in this here weather. Am I right, boy?”

“Yes sir. Yer right, all right. Why, I reckon it’s so cold it’d make an icicle put on a fur coat.”

“Why, it’s so cold it’d make a penguin fly to Florida.” Dean flapped his elbows up and down

“Why, I reckon it’s so cold it’d make a polar bear’s dick shrink like a raisin.” The boys laughed thin wisps of steam, knowing that this cool weather was nothing compared to what they’d already suffered.

They walked around the campus hugging the tree-lined perimeter. Near the far end of the school grounds they spotted a wooden bench under a huge oak tree. They sat calmly on the bench waiting for the acid to kick in, like stargazers might wait with patience and concentration for a glimpse of the first shooting star that heralds the coming of a long anticipated meteor shower.

“Feel anything yet? Dean asked softly, breaking the silence.

“I’m not sure. I keep thinking I can feel that tingling in my jaw I get when it starts to kick in. Then it goes away.”

“I don’t feel nothing.”

“It’s been about an hour. If it hasn’t hit us yet, it probably won’t . . .”

“What a crock of shit!” Dean said at once. He shook his head and rolled his eyes in disgust.

“That sucks,” Blake agreed. “It’s only five bucks though, could be worse.”

“It’s not the money that matters much,” Dean said. “It’s just that they conned us in a fucked up way. I mean, they knew we were down here for the march and that didn’t mean shit to them. We were just some dumb hippie whiteboys who they could fool. And they used it against us, talking about the black man trying to lift himself up and the klan trying to hold him down.”

“Yeah, and don’t forget that bit about hope for the future, and trust between the races,” Blake added.

“That reminds me of what happened to Steve. Do you remember he got mugged by those four black guys in Garfield, and they kicked his ass and stole his leather jacket? Well, he had that Martin Luther King button on his jacket, and he always wondered if they felt ashamed later when they recognized who was on the button.”

“Yeah,” Blake said. “And he still can’t remember anything about what happened after the first guy punched him in the side of the head, and that was over a year ago.”

Dean sighed. “But these guys already knew what side we were on, and they still ripped us off.”

Blake sighed. “Maybe they were really poor,” he suggested half-heartedly .

“They’re going to college; at least I guess they are. And ten bucks isn’t going to make a big difference one way or another. Shit, if they would’ve asked for some money I

might've given it to them. Maybe that was our mistake, expecting more from them because they're black."

"Well, I guess if blacks can be as smart as whites, they can be as fucked up as whites too."

"Yeah, I guess so," Dean said. "But it still sucks. That guy Clarence really had me fooled . . . if that's even his real name."

"Well the other guy was called Hilton. Do you think that's his real name? Did his mother name him after the hotel?"

"Maybe she had high hopes for him. Better than calling him Cadillac, I guess." They laughed.

"Let's smoke some pot." Blake suggested. Without a word Dean fished the film canister out of his pack. It was a poor but welcome substitute. They smoked together on the wooden bench under the old oak tree, sharing a pipe in solemn communion. The nearest people were on the far side of the wide grassy field, walking quickly from one building to the next.

Blake rose from the bench and drifted over to the trunk of the old oak tree under whose leafless branches they'd been resting. He touched it with the tips of his fingers. A thick bark with deep jagged vertical valleys ran up the side of the tree like miniature Grand Canyons. Blake raised his head following the trunk slowly upward, where the canopy of branches still held a few clinging remnants of once living leaves--now brown and lifeless--yet not willing to release themselves to the earth. Blake slowly inched his way around the tree's wide berth.

With the tree between them, Dean heard Blake exclaim, “Hey, what the hell’s this shit?”

Dean walked over to where found Blake staring at a flat official-looking rectangular piece of metal near the ground. It was standing face-out upon two cylindrical steel spikes driven deep into the earth. “Check it out,” Blake said. “Some kind of historical thing.”

Dean looked down. It was a plaque of solid metal with solid letters that rose from the surface. There, smothering the letters of the plaque lay a thick blob of dried black paint. The paint filled the gaps between the raised letters, making the words hard to read. Dean could make out some of the words near the top. “In Memory” and what looked like, “War of Northern Aggression”.

“Is that what they call the Civil War down here? The War of Northern Aggression?” Blake asked.

Dean nodded. “It’s some kind of memorial to Confederate soldiers, I think.”

“Looks like someone didn’t appreciate it,” Blake said, fingering the thick blob of dried black paint.”

“Good,” Dean said firmly. “I know if I was black I sure wouldn’t appreciate it.”

“Kind of gives me the creeps. The memorial, not the paint job. Let’s get out of here.”

“Where to?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go into town,” Blake suggested. Dean hesitated at first, but then agreed. The boys retrieved their packs and walked slowly back through the campus towards town, keeping to the perimeter as they had before.

## Chapter 6

### The Revolutionary Fantasy

Soon the boys found themselves traveling down a sidewalk lined with storefronts. There was an electrical excitement in the air. Dean detected license plates from New York, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Tennessee, Ohio, and a half-dozen other states that weren't North Carolina. And plenty of people strolled about on this cold, middle-of-winter Friday afternoon.

With their packs on their backs the boys drifted past a small diner, a bakery, and a Chinese restaurant. On the corner up ahead was a bookstore where a man and a woman stood outside holding newspapers, motioning to the passers-by.

“End capitalist oppression!” the man barked as the boys approached.

Holding up a newspaper entitled *The Revolutionary Worker*, the woman yelled, “Fight for the revolution of the proletariat!”

Dean and Blake halted. They squinted, trying to read the large print on the newspaper that the woman was rapidly waving.

The woman scanned the boys up and down for a moment before stopping the newspaper. “Here for the march?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah, we, uhh, are,” Dean answered, tripping over his tongue as he took a close look at the electrically stunning woman in front of him. She was a petite woman with long shiny black hair, and her eyes were brown and warm and shaped like almonds. The woman had strong cheekbones with the smoothest olive skin that Dean ever imagined possible. Almost exotic, he thought, and she can't be much older than me, but as he looked again he realized she could have been anywhere between eighteen and

twenty-eight, such was her face. She dressed plainly in bluejeans, a thick blue denim jacket with a white sheepskin collar, and sturdy black boots. On her head sat a black beret tilted slightly. Practical and not flashy, Dean said to himself. She was the kind of woman he liked--comfortable and casual, with a stunning natural beauty that called for no further embellishment. Erotic urges tugged at his imagination, and he relented without a struggle. He pictured himself sliding his fingers lightly along her curved shape. Hard desire drew his mind's hands from the tight flesh of her rib cage down to her waist and out to her hips. He sensed a slight swelling in his pants.

“We came down to smash the klan!” Dean heard Blake declare.

Dean turned back to the woman as she continued. Her voice had an air of authority, but her eyes seemed to look through the boys as if she were recalling some long practiced speech, or reading large cue cards behind them.

“By destroying the fascists and other reactionaries we hasten the inevitable revolution of the proletariat. Although in the final analysis, national struggle is a matter of class struggle. And among whites in America, it is the reactionary ruling circles who oppress black people . . . .”

Dean's attention wandered, and the sounds coming out of the woman's mouth soon failed to register. Yet he was mesmerized by the movement of her lips, her soft sensuous lips. He wondered if this tall guy with her was her boyfriend, and if he wasn't, maybe the two of them could get together. She might have a place to stay with some privacy, he thought. He returned to picturing what her body looked like beneath her heavy coat. Dean felt his face buried under her dark hair where he kissed her smooth and delicate pale neck. She quietly moaned . . . *and they can in no way represent the workers,*

*blah blah blah, farmworkers, revolutionary intellectuals and enlightened blah blah the overwhelming majority of blah blah blah . . . . He envisioned gently caressing her small firm breasts, warm and soft. He was soon moving his lips and tongue with anticipation down the length of her quivering receptive body, now kissing her stomach, inching his way slowly and with reverence towards the holiest of temples, that warm moist darkness where even the gods are drawn and worlds revolve. She moaned louder in approval . . . class antagonisms are irreconcilable blah blah blah the liberation of the oppressed class blah blah impossible without a violent revolution blah blah blah . . . .*

There was a short lull before Dean heard Blake intrude abruptly upon his fantasy. “Well, what about rock and roll, and smoking pot? I always wondered if they had a place after the revolution comes,” Blake said to the woman.

The woman responded at once. “Marijuana dulls the mind and saps the energy. It is counter-productive to the ultimate goal of raising the consciousness of the masses, whether before or after the revolution. As for rock and roll, it depends on whether it serves to further the interests of the proletariat.” She took a deep breath. “All art is for the masses of the people, and all artists must eventually move over to the side of the workers by going into their midst and into their practical struggles through the process of studying Scientific Socialism. Bourgeois decadence is the enemy of the people, and those artists who cannot fit into the revolutionary machine will require re-education.”

Blake’s mouth hung open. “Wh...what about The Ramones?” he asked timidly. “Will they be allowed to keep playing after the revolution?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never heard of them,” the woman said curtly. “Preparing for the revolution doesn’t leave me much time for . . . diversion.”

Dean knew the sacrifices would not be easy, but he was willing to give up pot, and even quit listening to The Ramones. He'd endure marching music and dull anthems that sang the praises of the workers of the world if only he could be with this lusciously scrumptious woman, if only he could usher in the revolution at her side. And after a long hard day of raising the consciousness of the masses, the two of them would sweat even more together at night, making love, where they would bring each other through wave upon wave of passionate ecstasy.

The man standing next to the woman spoke. Dean felt his hard stare. "True revolutionaries must put the political criterion first and the artistic criterion second. Ultimately what we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary . . ."

Dean tuned the man out when it occurred to him again that he might be her lover. He felt a jealous knot in the pit of his stomach. But there was no comparison between himself and the man, Dean quickly concluded. The man was far too tall for her. He was lanky and bowlegged, and had a square Frankenstein head. He probably dances like a giraffe, Dean thought. He suppressed a laugh as he imagined the man buckling his big knobby knees, and swaying his long skinny neck back and forth like a giraffe as he danced. Still, Dean felt a desperate urgency to have the answer before going any further, before sacrificing his beloved music and his pot. Without thinking he blurted the question that was foremost on his mind. "Is he your boyfriend?" he asked the woman point blank. They all stared at him, confused. Even Blake tilted his head and wrinkled his eyebrows in wonder.

"What did you say?" the woman asked abruptly.

“You know, are you two, like, together?” Dean repeated.

“No,” she said with resolve. “We’re comrades.”

Dean felt relief. The woman continued. “There is no time for personal relationships until after the revolution. Furthermore, romantic love is a bourgeois invention designed by the leisure class, and marketed to the working class as a distraction from revolutionary agitation . . .”

“Well, we’re looking for a place to stay,” Dean broke in, “and if you know anyone that has some bedroom, I mean, some room, we’d really appreciate it. And we got some pot if you want.”

Again they all glared at him with furrowed brows. Blake included.

“I’m flattered,” the woman said dryly. “But your questions are . . .” she paused as if trying to remember something. “They are the product of inexperienced youth and overexposure to the bourgeois media.” She halted again. When she continued, her voice changed. It remained cold and authoritarian but there was a subtle personal quality as if she couldn’t find the right script and was forced to improvise. “There’s a meeting at the community center this evening. You should be able to find someone there to give you a place to stay. And no, I don’t smoke pot, but you would’ve known that if you were paying attention, and weren’t so stoned yourself.” The woman turned away from Dean and Blake towards a black couple walking past. “Fight for the revolution of the proletariat!” she uttered.

Her comrade held up a copy of *The Revolutionary Worker*. “End capitalist oppression!” The black couple smiled politely as they walked past.

The two boys gave each other a knowing glance. “Nice meeting you,” Blake offered, as the boys moved down the sidewalk.

““Maybe we’ll see you tomorrow,” Dean said with hope, drinking up one last eyeful of this beautiful woman who would never have time for him until after the revolution. The comrades nodded.

## Chapter 7

### Coffee Break in Time

Dean and Blake wandered aimlessly around the commercial district until they finally moved to kill some time in a coffee shop. The boys sat at a booth by the front window where they rolled and smoked cigarettes, and drank refill after refill of thin brown coffee.

“Can we have some more cream?” Blake flicked the metal lid of the empty creamer as the waitress filled their cups for the fourth time. The waitress rolled her eyes, and returned shortly with a full creamer, and an empty ashtray.

“Are you all sure you all don’t want nothin’ to eat?” she insisted in an impatient grandmotherly voice, adjusting the elastic band on her hairnet.

Dean relented. “We’ll have some french fries.”

The waitress yanked a checkpad from the hip pocket of her worn pinkish-white uniform dress. “Two orders of fries,” she confirmed.

“Uh, just one order,” Blake corrected. “We’re not that hungry.”

She sighed and walked away. After a long wait she returned with the french fries and the coffeepot. “You young boys are here for that march, or what have you,” she declared, uncovering a mystery. Dean and Blake nodded slightly.

“Well, I’ll have you know we treat our colored folk just fine down here, thank you very much.”

Dean figured he’d simply let the comment pass without a fight. He felt sorry for the old woman. She was a struggling old lady trying to squeeze out a living as a waitress in a dingy coffee shop in Greensboro, North Carolina.

But she kept on. “I don’t know where you all come from, but it’s different down here. We been livin’ with the colored for a long time, and we know how to treat them like they deserve.” Dean froze with his coffee cup at his lips. “Now don’t get me wrong,” the waitress explained, looking down at him. “Most of ‘em’s good folks, mindin’ their own business. But there’s always a few bad apples that spoil the barrel.” The waitress shifted her head, spying left then right, then she bent over whispering. “And it ain’t always safe for white women.” She searched close for recognition in Dean and Blake’s eyes.

Dean knew what the waitress was doing. He’d seen it before, and not south of the Mason-Dixon Line either. This was a plea for white solidarity. A code between fellow whites, one to one, white to white. It was the belief that hidden deep down in every white American was a dark distrust and deadly fear of black people. It was an unspoken truth, that despite the unfair treatment they sometimes received, blacks were by nature irrational and prone to violent acts of barbarity, and had to be kept in line. And when it came to black men gaining access to white women . . . . But maybe the waitress was only aiming for a meager tip, Dean thought. It might never have occurred to her that fellow whites might reject the code that she’d believed in all her life.

“But what about the klan?” Blake whispered back to the waitress. He tilted his head quizzically, looking like a confused white kid whose head was only recently crowded with wild and weird new ideas.

“There’s no klan anymore,” she whispered back, waving her hand dismissively through the air. Dean pursed his lips in doubt.

The waitress noticed immediately. “Well of course there’s bad white folks, that can’t be helped. Ever since Man went and rejected God in the Garden of Eden there’s

been evil on this earth. But it's different with the colored. They fall to temptation easier than white folks do. I can't explain it, but it ain't no big mystery. Just look at them. Fathers lying with their own daughters, children having children--and out of wedlock too, and the way their menfolk is always lookin' at white women . . . that can't be right on no account, North or South."

Dean sipped up his last drop of coffee, and rapped his empty cup abruptly on the table. "I heard that slaveholders raped their slavewomen. And that's why there's light-skinned blacks."

The waitress wrapped her white knuckled fingers tight around her pen. "Are you suggestin' I'm not all white?" she said accusingly.

This thought hadn't occurred to either of the boys. Dean was simply pointing out that in the history of America white men had violated black women more than black men had violated white women. But now that the waitress mentioned it, her nose was flatter than it could be otherwise, and her skin was rather tan for winter.

"Why? Are you part black?" Blake asked, studying her face.

The waitress turned her back and huffed away.

The boys looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. They asked for no more refills, and got none. On their way out they stopped at the cash register to pay where the waitress took their money without a word. The early darkness of winter had already fallen by the time the boys left the coffee shop. Dean had left a three dollar tip on the table.

## Chapter 8

### Thumbing for a Place to Crash

When they finally arrived at the community center, the meeting was in full swing. The room had no windows, but was illuminated by bright fluorescent lights that hung down from the cracked and peeling ceiling. People sat packed in rows of folding metal chairs, while many stood along the side and back walls. At the far end of the room opposite the front doors stood a raised wooden platform with a small podium and a microphone. At the podium stood a white man in a dark suit and tie, and his hair, barely breaching his earlobes, looked like it could withstand hurricane force winds without budging. When the boys entered the room a heated argument was in progress. Lots of people were talking loudly.

“Please!” the man on the platform said forcefully into the microphone. The voices in the room faded to mumbling. The man continued. “The permit agreement with the city of Greensboro requires that there be no weapons. Weapons are in direct violation of the agreement, and the police have made it clear that weapons will not be tolerated. The police will use whatever force is necessary to contain anyone in possession of weapons. This is to be a peaceful demonstration--without weapons--and we shall not fight violence with violence. We’ll send a stronger message to the Ku Klux Klan if we are united against them in peaceful solidarity.”

There was clapping in the audience, and the speaker smiled. A man stepped out from the side wall and lifted his arm high.

“Yes sir,” the speaker said, pointing to the man.

“You can save your campaign speech for when you run for city council, Mr. Jackson,” the man said from along the wall. “It was our comrades who were murdered in cold blood last November. And where were the police then? Why didn’t they arrive for over half an hour, until after the murderers were long gone? I’ll tell you why. Because in this city the cops *are* the klan. The police aren’t neutral, they aren’t protectors of the peace, as you’d have us believe. They’re protectors of the interests of the ruling class and the status quo, just like the klan. Therefore, we refuse to accept any stipulation about weapons unless the police are also willing to come unarmed.” A small group of people cheered loudly.

Dean couldn’t remember if the people killed by the klan last November belonged to the Communist Workers Party or the Communist Party of America or the plain old Communist Party. He wondered if the man speaking was in a different party from the two comrades he’d met in front of the bookstore. Weren’t they in the Revolutionary Communist Party, he wondered, or the Revolutionary Socialist Party, or was that the Socialist Revolutionary Party?

The speaker on the platform put his hand to his chest. He eyed the man standing by the wall. “Are you saying that you’re going to bring weapons to this march?”

“We refuse to say whether or not we’ll carry weapons.”

“If that’s the case,” the speaker said, pointing at the man, “then I’m afraid I must inform you that your organization can no longer be considered an official participant in this demonstration. And furthermore, you should be aware that there may be undercover officers at this meeting, who are now aware of your plans.”

Many in the audience twisted in their seats and scanned the crowd. Blake turned his head slowly from side to side.

“I’m sure your friends are here . . . at your invitation, no doubt,” the man by the wall said. “But you’re missing the point. We want the police to know we might be armed. They’ll think twice this time, won’t they? And we don’t give a damn about your official participation because we’ll be there whether you like it or not. Our comrades weren’t murdered in cold blood so that you could promote your opportunistic agenda.”

The man by the wall clapped his hands, then thirty or more people followed him out the door in procession.

The discussion at the meeting soon moved on to less contentious matters, and as the meeting wound to a close the speaker on the platform asked if there were any final matters to be discussed. No one responded.

The speaker continued. “Well, if that’s everything . . .”

“Hold up,” Blake loudly interrupted, waving frantically. All heads turned to face him. “We came all the way down here from Pittsburgh and we’re looking for a place to stay.” He motioned with his hand between Dean and himself.

“Well you’re in luck,” said the speaker. “As a personal member-in-good -standing of our local chamber of commerce, I can assure you that Greensboro offers some of the finest accommodations of any city of comparable size.”

Blake laughed. When it seemed clear that the man wasn’t joking, Blake continued. “But we can’t afford to stay in a hotel. We hitchhiked all the way down here, and we heard we might be able to find a place to crash.”

“I see,” the speaker said. “Well, if there’s anyone here who can provide these gentlemen with a place to *crash*,” he said the word with a nervous laugh, “please see them after the meeting.”

The meeting ended and people began leaving. Dean and Blake stepped toward the door, looking with pleading eyes at the passers-by, many of whom avoided making eye contact. As the crowd filed past, Dean felt a natural urge to stick out his thumb as if hitchhiking for a place to stay. When the room was nearly half empty, a tall man with a friendly smile approached them.

“So you guys hitchhiked all the way down from Pittsburgh? It must have been cold.”

“It sure was,” said Blake.

“My name’s Joel,” the man said, reaching out his hand. Shaking hands, the boys introduced themselves. “If you need a place to stay,” he continued, “you can stay at my house.”

“That’s great,” Dean said, relieved.

“I don’t have an extra bed, although I do have a couch, but I see you guys brought sleeping bags.” He nodded to the rolled up bundles tied to the bottoms of their packs.

“We don’t need beds or nothing. We can sleep right on the floor,” Blake offered eagerly.

As Joel drove Dean and Blake to his house, not far from the community center, he cracked the window. Cold air rushed in

Joel asked, “How long ago did you guys leave Pittsburgh?”

“We left yesterday afternoon,” Blake said.

“When was the last time you two had a shower?” Joel asked.

“I don’t know,” Dean said. The thought occurred to him that Joel might be into teenage boys. “Why?” Dean asked accusingly.

Joel was abrupt. “Because you both stink,” he said, rolling his window completely open.

“Oh,” Dean said.

“No offense,” Joel continued. “But I have to insist that you both take a shower when we get to my place. Otherwise you’ll stink up my house to high heaven. You can wash your clothes there too. I’ve got some old clothes you can wear in the meantime.”

Blake lifted his arm and took a whiff. He shrugged his shoulders. From the back seat of Joel’s car, he leaned forward to where Dean was sitting and made a loud sniffing sound. “Hooweee! Good lord almighty, Dean. You’re one stanky monkey. No wonder that girl wouldn’t have nothing to do with you.”

“You got a lot of nerve.” Dean turned to Blake. “I can hardly see you back there with all that funk rising off you. Damn man, you’re fogging up the windows.” They both laughed.

Back at Joel’s place the boys showered and washed their clothes. They were sitting on Joel’s couch wearing Joel’s oversized old clothes when Dean asked about the events at the community center.

“What was all that talk about weapons and stuff?”

“Well, it’s no secret that some of the police in this town have affiliations with the klan,” Joel responded. “I’m inclined to believe that the police knew what the klan were

planning last November, and turned a blind eye. I don't trust the cops, and I can't blame those who want to be prepared to defend themselves."

"Do you think there's gonna be a shoot out tomorrow?" Blake asked.

"No, I don't think so. But it never hurts to be prepared." Joel said. "This is definitely gun country," he added.

"Are, uh, you bringing a gun?" Dean asked timidly.

Joel smirked and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it's time I hit the sack. I'll see you guys in the morning," he said, dismissing himself to his bedroom.

After Joel left the room, the boys looked at each other with uncertainty, but said nothing. They crawled into their sleeping bags on the living room floor.

The morning of the march dawned, and Joel was up early making breakfast. He walked into the living room and opened the curtains. "Rise and shine. It's going to be a long day," he said, as the bright morning sun flooded the room. Dean and Blake groaned and pulled their sleeping bags over their heads. Eventually the boys rose, and put on their freshly cleaned clothes. After a breakfast of warm thick oatmeal with bananas and molasses they all prepared to leave.

"You guys are welcome to spend another night if you want," Joel said. "But either way, you might as well leave your packs here for now. And I figure we're better off walking to the march; it's only about fifteen minutes, and that way you'll know how to get back later if we're separated. Here's a key," Joel said, offering it to Blake, "so you won't have to wait out in the cold if I'm not here when you get back."

The boys put on their coats, and Joel zipped up his puffy down-filled jacket. As they headed out, Joel paused. "One second," he said, turning back to his bedroom and

shutting the door behind him. He appeared a moment later zipping up his jacket again.

With their backs to Joel, Dean and Blake glanced at each other knowingly from the corners of their eyes.

## Chapter 9

### The March

Dean and Blake and Joel walked towards town in the brisk morning air. When they arrived at the staging area, there were already a few hundred people, and more were pouring in. The event was to begin and end here, where there would be speakers before and after the march. The stage was a long flatbed trailer from an eighteen-wheeler truck. Above the stage flapping in the wind was a dark green plastic canopy that rested on tall metal poles and extended the entire length of the flatbed trailer. The stage was equipped with a large sound system, and standing up there in front of a microphone was a man playing an acoustic guitar and singing a Bob Dylan song.

“What year is this?” Dean asked, turning to Blake, then the stage.

“We’re stuck in a time warp,” Blake said. “I guess you just can’t have a right proper protest without the sixties showing up.”

“There are some people I need to talk to,” Joel said to the boys. “If I don’t meet you after the march, I’ll see you at my place. You remember how to get there?”

The boys nodded.

“It’s on Davis, just off 18th Street in case you forget,” Joel said, then disappeared into the crowd.

After the acoustic guitar player finished covering sixties protest songs, a black man climbed up the stairs attached to the side of the flatbed stage. He spoke to the crowd both energetically and with calm. The speaker reminded them of their reasons for being there. He spoke of justice and brotherhood, peace and freedom. The audience clapped and cheered the man. It was then that Dean noticed there were a large number of black

people in the crowd responding loudly with affirmations and confirmations to the speaker's words. Although some whites and blacks intermingled, the crowd was mostly segregated into pockets of blacks and whites throughout. Dean and Blake slowly inched forward, as if drawn unwittingly, toward a large group of thirty or more black demonstrators. There was a dynamic energy that pulled them, a gravity of solidarity that was stronger than in the white pockets. Dean and Blake soon stood like two pale gulls in a dark sea, and before long they were so swept up by the flowing spirit around them that they didn't notice their difference. Images of over four hundred years of suffering and oppression, hope and strength, cascaded over them. This feeling, this entity, was unlike anything Dean had ever known, yet it felt strangely familiar. His skin tingled as the crowd swayed. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, as he also rocked slowly from side to side to the subtle music hidden within the black speaker's oratory. Dean heard his own voice swell up from within him as if it belonged to someone else. It offered affirmations and acknowledgments in response to the words. A few folks near the boys eyed them. Dean smiled and nodded back. In his mind he was no longer a white person surrounded by black people. He didn't know what he was, except that he felt alive and a sense of belonging. Whatever else he was, didn't seem to matter.

When the speaker on the stage concluded, the crowd applauded loudly. Once the joyful noise had quieted, Dean felt the eyes of a few more black people nearby looking at him. The looks were neither friendly nor hostile, but simply curious. And then, as if a spell were suddenly broken, Dean felt his old self emerging. He didn't feel threatened or uncomfortable, but the oneness he'd felt only moments ago was lifting as if an ancient

and powerful spirit were drifting from his body, and from the bodies of those around him. Dean and Blake found themselves walking slowly to the edge of the black crowd.

After a few more speakers, the march commenced. The crowd slowly uncoiled, and began moving along the parade route. Some joined the crowd haphazardly while others formed groups. Dean and Blake walked a block up the street and stood to the side waiting for a good place to jump in. The march was nearly as wide as the street, and different chants and songs paraded past with the various groups of marchers. There was always a place in the wide column of marchers that was the center of a song or chant, and as that group marched by, the song would grow louder then eventually fade as they passed. But just as one chant disappeared it would soon be replaced by another.

Dean and Blake stood watching and listening from the side when they heard a familiar chant come into range:

*The cops and klan are just the same,  
the only difference is the name.*

It must have been a group of revolutionaries, because Dean noticed the man from the community center who refused to say whether or not his people would carry guns. He also saw the beautiful dark haired woman he'd met yesterday, and her comrade the dancing giraffe. The boys stepped into the crowd just behind the dark haired woman, and chanted along with the revolutionaries.

After the marchers marched a few blocks, Dean saw ahead two rows of police lined up on each side of the street. They stood in groups of twos or threes wearing riot gear, which included helmets with face masks, riot sticks, and transparent plastic shields with the word POLICE written across them in bold black letters. Every few yards along

the parade route stood another group of two or three officers, and another and another. The police stood along both curbs, watching stern-faced. The parade route, as far as Dean could see, was contained on its sides by this sporadic line of police clad in riot gear.

Many of the marchers were carrying signs that read *Down With The Klan*, or *Smash The Klan*, or *KKK—No Way*. These signs were stapled to pieces of wood for the marchers to hold. They resembled lawn signs that people might put in their yards in support of a political candidate. Blake wondered where everyone got their signs because he wanted one too. As he marched he saw ahead of him a sign on the ground that someone had dropped. He picked it up. The sign read *Smash The Klan*, but it was folded over, hanging upside-down from the bottom staple on the stick. Blake ripped the sign off and tucked it under his arm. He pulled a folding knife from his pocket and began whittling at the end of the stick. He figured that if he shaved one end down to a point he could poke two holes in the sign at the top and bottom, and simply weave the stick through. It might not look perfect, but it would do.

After Blake had finished whittling the stick to a sharp point, he decided to cut two slits in the sign with his knife to slide the stick through. He handed Dean the pointed stick to hold while he cut the slices in the sign. As Blake was slicing, a strong gust of wind caught the sign and yanked it out of his hands. It flew to the side of the street at the feet of three riot-clad police officers. Blake decided against pursuing the sign. The officers looked up to see where the sign had come from. Blake, holding a knife, and Dean, with a sharpened stake in his hand, looked back at them. The officers spoke to one another, and one of them pointed toward the boys.

The next thing Dean knew something hard was clamping down on the back of his neck bending him over and dragging him away from the marchers. He instinctively struggled, and immediately felt his legs tackled from under him. He hit the ground sliding chest first. He dropped the wooden stake as he tried to cushion his fall with his hands. Next, a heavy weight landed sharply on his back just below his neck, while the side of his face scraped against the road, inches from the curb. His arms were forcefully pulled behind his back and clamped together. From the ground Dean could see Blake a few feet away in the same position, with a cop's knee in his back.

“Get up!” a cop ordered Dean, hoisting him from behind. He was hustled down a side street to a police car, not knowing if the revolutionaries had responded to his being abducted by the police.

“What d’ya got?” asked a top cop in the police car.

“We got us some commies with weapons.”

“Good job. Bring ‘em down to the station.”

The boys were frisked and placed in the back of a squad car, with two cops in front. The cops had placed their helmets and shields in the trunk, but kept their long hard plastic clubs with them.

“What’s going on?” Blake asked. “What did we do?”

“Shut up,” said the cop in the passenger’s seat, as he pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat that issued from under his flat-top hair and ran down his neck.

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” Dean added.

“I said, shut up!” the cop yelled, turning in his seat and poking Dean hard in the chest with the tip of his club.

“Ahhh,” Dean grunted painfully.

The cop at the wheel, who was mostly bald, with a slight trace of short gray hair around the rim of head, laughed loudly.

“What the hell!” Blake said. “What kind of fascist shit is this?”

“You’d know about fascists, you goddam commies,” said the flat-top cop. He pulled out his sidearm and gently placed it on the dashboard for Dean and Blake to see. “Better dead than red, is what I always say. Now shut up if you know what’s good for you.” Dean and Blake said nothing. The bald cop laughed some more.

At the police station the boys had their handcuffs removed, and were ordered into chairs next to a weary-looking desk sergeant. The march was making for a busy day at the police station, and cops were swarming in and out. The sergeant checked their identification, and when he discovered the boys were only sixteen he led them to a small empty cell within view of the main room.

The boys paced around the empty cell for a while before sitting together on one of the metal beds built into the wall. Blake broke the silence. “What do you think they’re gonna do to us?”

“I don’t know. But after that pig butted me with his stick and flashed his gun, anything could happen.”

Blake agreed.

“I just hope they don’t take us out to some field and blow us away.”

“Or turn us over to the klan.” Blake began nervously walking in circles in the jail cell. “What are we gonna do?”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Dean said, “unless you know how to break out of jail. But if we get outside somewhere and they don’t put the cuffs back on us, then I say we make a run for it.”

“And if they start shooting,” Blake said, “then try to zigzag in an unpredictable way. I saw that in a movie once.”

After about ten minutes a different cop appeared at the cell door with a prisoner. “You’ll make a good babysitter,” the cop said, shoving the prisoner into the cell with Dean and Blake. The prisoner was a large husky man with long scraggly hair and a big beard. He wore a thick but worn black leather jacket, stained bluejeans and heavy black boots. The boys sat close together on their metal bed. Dean imagined they must’ve looked like scared little monkeys desperately trying to comfort each other. Dean looked fearfully at the husky man as he sat heavily on the metal bed across the cell.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” the man said in a gravelly voice. Dean quickly averted his eyes. After a moment’s silence, the man spoke again. “So what the hell are you all in here for?”

Dean shrugged his shoulders in answer.

“Are you fucking deaf?” the man growled. “I said, what are you in here for?”

Dean looked across the cell at the huge man’s half-open bloodshot eyes. His teeth were brown and there was a gap behind his upper lip where one was missing.

Dean forced a deep manly voice. “Weapons. They busted us for weapons.”

“What kind of weapons?”

“A knife,” Blake answered, “. . . and uh . . . a sharp stick.”

The prisoner laughed. “What did you do? Try to rob a little old lady or something?”

The distinct smell of alcohol wafted across the cell. “It was at the march,” Dean said.

“You should have stabbed them,” the prisoner said, wiping his overgrown mustache with his sleeve.

We should have stabbed who? Dean thought. The marchers? The klan? The police?

“You better watch out for these pigs,” the prisoner said. He leaned forward, pointing to a jagged hairless line on the top of his head. “Do you see this?” he yelled. “And this?” he added, exposing his missing tooth with a wide twisted grin. “They fucked me up back in 77, outside of The Barley Hole. But I got one of them real good.” The man raised his fist. “Busted his jaw.” He then said something incoherent, swung his feet up on the creaking metal bed and lay down. Soon he was snoring loudly.

The desk sergeant finally returned, unlocking the cell door. “All right boys, let’s go.”

The prisoner on the bed stirred. ‘Remember what I told you,’ he mumbled, as the boys were led out of the cell.

“Where we going?” Dean asked.

“You’re going home,” the cop answered. “I talked to your mothers. They wired down money for bus tickets. We’ll see that you get on a bus. But God’s truth to tell, I don’t know which one of you two to feel more sorry for: You, Mr. Thomas,” said the cop

looking at Blake, “whose mother didn’t even know you was out of town. Or you, Mr. Mullen, whose mother gave you permission to come down here.”

The desk sergeant returned their wallets, and handed the boys over to the two arresting officers, who escorted them out to the back seat of their squad car. This time the boys were not handcuffed.

“What about our packs,” Dean asked from the back seat.

“Your what?” demanded the flat-top cop in the passenger’s seat.

“Our backpacks. We stayed at a guy’s house last night and that’s where we left our packs,” Dean said.

“One of your comrades?” asked the bald cop at the wheel.

“We need our packs,” Blake whined, ignoring the cop’s comment. “All our clothes and stuff are in them.”

“I’ll tell you what you need,” the flat-top cop said. “You Yankees need to mind your own damn business. We got tradition down here, and a proud heritage. You think you’re so high and mighty coming down here telling us how to live. Well you don’t know shit.” The cop turned to look at the boys. His face was red and he wore a mean scowl. “You think you’re better than me, don’t you?”

Of course we’re better than you are, Dean thought. Who isn’t better than an ignorant racist pig? But Dean and Blake said nothing.

The cop driving chuckled.

The flat-top cop pulled out his nightstick and smacked it against his open palm. “Now what makes you think you’re better than me? Is it because you don’t mind if some disgusting black ape shoves his dirty black dick between your sister’s legs? Is that what

makes you better? Huh? Is it because you think lazy shiftless welfare niggas should live off my hard earned money? Is that what makes you better? Huh?” The cop whacked his nightstick against the dashboard leaving a visible dent.

Dean glanced sideways at Blake. Would the cops deliver them to the bus station like they said they would? That’s what the desk cop said they were supposed to do. No. They were going to beat the living shit out of them, to teach them a lesson. And then, if they were in a good mood, they might throw them on a bus instead of leaving them for dead.

“Where’s your commie friend live?” the bald cop asked. “Because I’d sure like to meet him.”

“Uh, I don’t know the exact address but it’s on Davis Street,” Blake said. “Davis and uh . . .”

“Davis and Fifteenth,” Dean interrupted. “There’s a park right across the street from his house.”

“I know where that is,” the bald cop said. “Jefferson Davis Park. All right, we’ll swing by and see what we can find.”

Dean knew that Joel lived at Eighteenth and Davis, not Fifteenth and Davis. They drove down Davis Street, and as they passed Joel’s house at Eighteenth Dean lightly kicked Blake in the leg. Blake eyed Dean with a knowing glance.

“Which one is it?” the bald cop asked as they passed Sixteenth Street.

Dean looked out the window and selected a house. “That one,” he said pointing. “That red brick one on the left.” The car pulled over and parked across the street from the red brick house. The cops let the boys out of the back, still uncuffed, and all four of them

walked calmly toward the house. The flat-top cop walked in front of the boys and the bald one behind. Suddenly Dean yelled “run!” and darted to the right, and Blake immediately zagged to the left. The boys fled back in the direction of the police car, running past it and over the curb. The soles of the cops’ shoes pounded after them on the street.

“Halt!” one of the pursuing cops yelled.

“Stop where you are . . . now!” the other one commanded.

Dean and Blake raced even faster into the park across the street from the red brick house. Dean looked back over his shoulder to see the cops giving chase. He didn’t look long enough to notice whether they had their guns drawn, but he imagined they did and ran even faster. The boys ran harder than they had ever run before, lifting their legs high, and swinging their arms vigorously along the sides of their lithe tight-knit bodies. They passed through an open field, a basketball court, and up a hill toward a stand of trees. Once in the trees the boys stopped briefly to look back. The cops were lagging behind, struggling up the hill. As they followed they waddled at the hips from the weight of their weapon belts and from their own cumbersome weight. Dean and Blake turned and fled further into the woods. The wooded area was large, and they ran through the trees, over a small ridge and down in the direction of a ravine.

## Chapter 10

### The Direction of Home

Far within the woods the boys came across a dense thicket of tall leafless trees surrounded by a barrier of short holly bushes. They squeezed between the outcropping of young tree trunks, and beneath the prickly holly bushes that scratched their faces as they crawled into the center of the mass. It was a tight, awkward fit. Dean's legs poked out from under the thicket, so he piled handfuls of dry leaves--the remnants of last autumn--on top of his feet and legs. And there the boys hid, catching their breath. They waited and listened. The wind was blowing through the tree tops above them where the spindly leafless branches clacked together loudly. Across the ravine beneath them and up a steep slope in the distance, they heard the unmistakable sound of trucks on the highway. The boys tensed up in anxious anticipation of the sound of footfalls in the woods that might break through the distant roaring and windy rattling. They remained hidden in this dense thicket for what seemed like hours before finally emerging.

Dean stood up stretching his sore legs. "The highway's up over that hill," he said, pointing. "Let's just get out of here, man."

"But what about our packs?"

"To hell with our packs. It's too dangerous. Casualties of war, man."

"But my sleeping bag," Blake complained. "It's the only one I got. My mom got it for my sixteenth birthday. And what about the weed? Where's the weed, man?"

"It's in my pack." Dean confessed.

“Come on, Dean,” Blake pleaded. “We can’t hitchhike all the way back home in this freezing weather without the weed. That’s torture, man. It’s illegal--cruel and unusual punishment.”

Dean conceded with a sigh. “All right, all right. Why don’t you just go get the cops and nark on me, for Christ’s sake.”

The boys traveled for a short distance on a barely visible path above the ravine before turning back towards Davis Street. Inside the wood’s edge they could now see Joel’s house across the way. Below them and across an open clearing lay a short row of thick bushes lining Davis Street. Bending low, the boys dashed from the trees to the line of bushes, sliding feet first upon their arrival. They crouched behind the bushes waiting for the courage to make a break for Joel’s house.

“Let’s go for it, man.” Blake said. Dean agreed, and the boys stood up.

“Get down!” Dean shouted, just as they reached their feet. “It’s the pigs.” He tossed himself face first onto the ground behind the bushes, grabbing Blake’s coat sleeve and pulling him down alongside. Peering out from under the tangled scrub they saw a police car cruising down the street. It was the same car with the same two officers. The boys lay as low as they possibly could, pressing their cheeks into the dirt. They watched the pigs roll slowly by. After a few blocks, the car turned and disappeared up Fifteenth Street.

“Now’s our chance,” Blake said, as he stood cautiously. “Let’s go!” The boys sprinted across the street and up the steps to Joel’s house. Dean struggled with the knob but the door was locked.

“Do you got the key?” Dean asked impatiently. Blake pulled the key that Joel had given him out of his pocket and fumbled with the lock. “Hurry up,” Dean said. “It won’t go in.”

“Well turn it upside down. Come on, man . . . before the cops come back around.”

Blake finally fit the key in the lock. The boys burst the door open. Once inside, Dean pulled the front curtains closed and peered out between the slit. No cars came by.

The boys put their packs on and stood by the door. “Let’s get out of here,” Blake said, as he opened the door wide.

Dean slammed the door shut. “What are you doing?”

“What?” Blake asked, perplexed.

“We got to wait for the right time . . . until after they drive by again. Otherwise they might see us.”

Blake rolled his eyes. “They might never come by again. And for all we know they could be ten blocks away.”

“Well let’s just wait for a while and see, because I don’t want to fall into a trap,” Dean said, peeking between the curtains. The boys waited.

A police car shortly came into view, inching slowly down the street. “See, here they come,” Dean said, as he pulled the curtains even closer together while spying with one eye on the cops. “And there they go,” he reported, as the car drove down the street and out of view. Dean tightened the shoulder straps on his backpack. “Let’s give them a minute.” The minute passed.

“Ready?” Blake said.

Dean nodded, and took one last look between the curtains. “Holy shit! Another cop car.”

“What!” Blake said. “Are you sure it’s a different car, and not the same one?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I can’t tell from here . . . unless maybe it backed up or something while I wasn’t looking.”

“Well now what are we gonna do?” Blake asked, pacing around the living room.

“Same thing,” Dean said, peeking at the police car moving slowly down Davis Street. “We’ll give it a minute and make a run for it.” The minute passed, and from between the curtains Dean saw that the road was clear. “Let’s go!” he said.

The boys stepped timidly onto the front porch where they could see further up and down the empty street. “The coast is clear,” Dean reported, turning back to look at Blake who was again fumbling with the key at the door. “For Christ’s sake, what are you doing?”

“I’m locking the door.”

Dean shook his head.

“What do you think I should do with the key?” Blake asked.

“I don’t know. Stick it under the mat.”

“But that’s so obvious. It’s the first place a thief will look.”

“Come on, Blake. There’s no time for that shit, man.” Dean took a few steps down the stairs, then turned to Blake on the porch. “Come on!” he commanded in a whispering yell. Blake slipped the key under the mat, and ran after him.

The boys raced across the street, past the row of bushes, through the open field and up the hill, sometimes stumbling and crawling on all fours as they went. Their

sleeping bags were tied to the bottom of their packs and bounced off the backs of their legs making it difficult to run. They didn't stop to see if they were being followed, but kept on running up the hill and into the woods until they reached the bottom of the ravine.

There was no path or trail up the far side of the steep ravine. The boys labored up in a zigzag fashion, going left up the hill for a while, then turning right, then back left. Their shoes slipped on the wet earth, and all the while their bodies were bent far forward under the weight of their backpacks.

Blake breathed heavily when they finally reached the top of the slope. "This calls for a bowl," he puffed. They removed their packs and sat under a tree where they rested and smoked some pot. Above them they heard the loud roar and rattle of trucks, and through the trees ahead they could see the flat raised bed that was the highway.

Once the boys were through smoking, they clambered up a short steep slope toward the highway, and peered out from behind the guardrail. There were no police cars.

"We'll be sitting ducks out here if the cops come by," Blake said. They lumbered back and sat down, hidden from view behind the guardrail.

"Well, there's nothing we can do, unless you want to head back and ask the pigs for those bus tickets."

"Maybe we should ask them for some plane tickets, instead." They both laughed.

"Man, I'm tired," Dean said, breathing a big sigh.

Blake's eyelids were drooping. "Me too."

With their packs still on, the boys leaned back against the outside of the guardrail. They both became quiet, and Dean soon slipped into a semi-conscious state. A loud bang startled him from his slumbers. "No!" he yelled.

“No what?” Blake asked, yawning.

“Shit, I must’ve dozed off. I thought it was the cops . . . shooting at us.”

“Just a car.”

They heard another bang followed by the loud coughing of an out-of-tune engine sputtering up the highway. Dean jumped again. He sighed, then leaned back against the hidden side of the guardrail.

“Do you think the klan ever showed up at the march?” Blake asked.

“I doubt it. The cops probably told them to stay away this time. It’s bad PR, especially with all the people and reporters around.”

Blake leaned forward from the guardrail and shrugged his shoulders “Let’s get on the highway,” he said.

Dean stroked his chin. “I don’t know. Maybe we should just sit here for about an hour. By then, the cops might stop searching for us.”

“Let’s make it half an hour,” Blake bartered.

Dean agreed.

The boys sat back peacefully, looking back over the wooded area they’d just climbed out of. Cars whizzed past behind them, and the occasional truck roared by, kicking up dust in its wake.

“Well . . . what have we here?” said a clear voice coming from behind.

Dean and Blake jumped instinctively. And with their hands and feet they quickly rowed their backsides down the long embankment towards the woods. The cops would have to chase them down or shoot them, Dean thought, as he he crawled fast like a crab down the muddy hill.

“Now hold up, fellas,” the voice behind them yelled.

Dean thought this was the end, that the cop had him in his sights, and if the boys didn't hold up now, it'd be all over. Still sliding down the embankment, he glanced cautiously over his shoulder towards the highway. There stood an old man in overalls gazing down. It was the white-haired old man. The one who drove out of his way to deliver them to Greensboro. It was the same old man who fed them fried chicken, and warned them that they weren't on vacation. It was Moses.

“A little voice told me I might find you boys somewheres around here,” the old man said from the shoulder above.

Dean and Blake looked at each other in disbelief, and then back up at the man.

“Well, c'mon now. I'm headin' back to Richmond if yu'all want a ride.”

Dean and Blake scrambled up the slope and followed the old man along the shoulder of the highway to his ancient pickup truck. They tossed their packs in the back and squeezed up front. The truck banged and spluttered as it accelerated up the highway.

Dean looked sheepishly over at the old man. “Can I ask you a question?”

“What's on your mind, Son?”

“Well, what did you mean when you said a little voice told you where we were.”

The old man gave a mysterious grin, then pointed to a small black box with wires hidden underneath the ashtray. “My police radio,” he said laughing. “I just traded for it, down at the junkyard in Greensboro. It don't hurt to know the whereabouts of the police around here. But yu'all was just lucky . . . I reckon. I turned it on a while back, and heard about these two young fellas fittin' yu'all's description who done escaped from the police

into them woods back behind Davis Park. And I figured if I was you I'd make my way up to the highway through the woods."

"But how did you know when we'd get there?" Blake asked.

"I didn't. I figured yu'all might lay low for a while, so I went to get me somethin' to eat. Then I drove by. Just good timin', I reckon. But yu'all's lucky I spotted them green rucksacks of yours tucked behind the rail. That's why I pulled over."

"You're a lifesaver," Dean said, making room with his legs for the old man to shift gears.

"Yeah," Blake added. "A lifesaver."

The old man nodded. "But tell me," he said. "How was yu'all's vacation?" He burst into a hearty laugh, and the two young men joined in. Dean and Blake told him all about their vacation. Sometimes the old man shook his head and sighed, and other times he chuckled. A few times he stopped them to ask for more details. But mostly he just listened as the old pickup truck rolled down the highway in the direction of home.