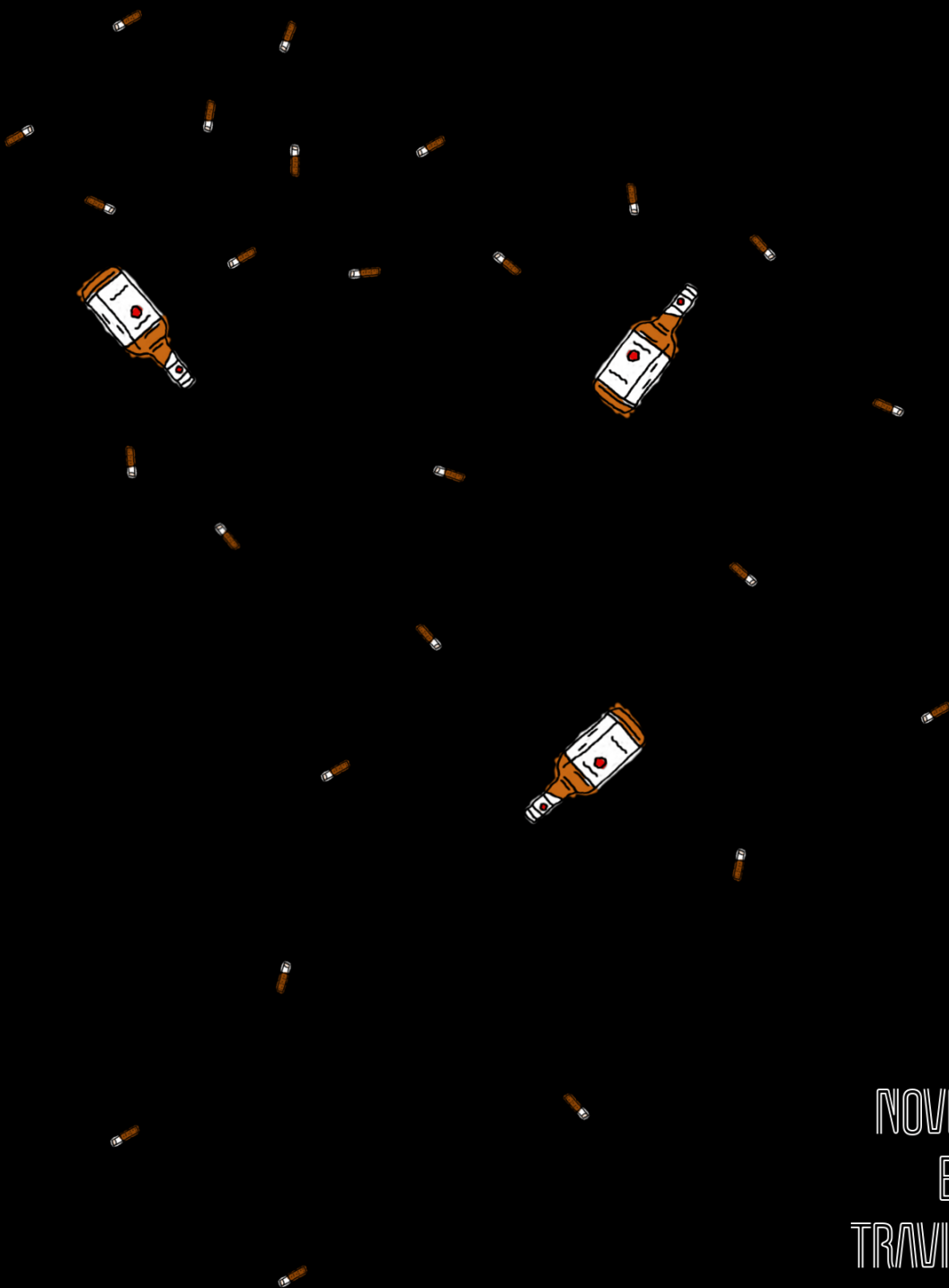


BETWEEN  
THE  
LINES  
OF  
MEN



A  
NOVEL  
BY  
TRAVIS  
RUSSELL

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A note from the author:

I, for one, like to know exactly what I am getting into before I embark on an adventure, unless of course the night is young and my judgement marred by substance. If you are not this type of individual and enjoy surprises, however jarring they may be, then by all means skip this short note and begin. Do not worry; I believe you to be just as astute as any other reader.

For those of you who fall into the former camp, I'd like to bring to your attention the fact that this is a novel of historical *fiction*. Most of these characters do not exist, and those that have, either placed in my novel on purpose or by some accident, are purely figments of dramatization. This isn't to say it is all untrue; I will leave it up to the reader to make that distinction. Unlike most historical fiction novels, however, this is not some hulking beast of a novel in which the author tries to squeeze every last drop out of a certain moment in time. This isn't even a novel that aims to transport you to a faraway place; I can guarantee the reader that my description of a Mississippi morning is beyond flawed (I apologize profusely to the locals).

Above all else, this novel is the story of a man. Some of you will find him appalling; some relatable; a great deal many of you will find him both. I truly hope you enjoy his journey as well as your own between the lines of men.

Travis Russell

## Between the Lines of Men



## Part I





# I

The clock upon the wall struck eleven, but nobody seemed to notice. It was not a particularly hot day in Stanford, in fact it was rather cool and damp, but this did not deter beads of sweat from forming in the underarms and upon the brow of every man in the room.

The room itself was large and plain, as far as rooms go. A large filing cabinet sat in the corner, and a few chairs littered the floor here and there, all taken. Cigarette smoke filled the air. The most intriguing thing about the room was not a physical characteristic or object, but rather the invisible partition that seemed to exist straight down the middle of the room.

On one side stood maybe ten or twelve men, all wearing white shirts and black ties, all carrying notepads and pens, and all with their gaze fixated on the situation unfolding across the invisible partition. Every once in a while one of these men would light up a cigarette, or look at their watch, or make an attempt to shuffle closer to the small window located at the back of the room, but not once did any emotion cross their faces.

On the other side sat two men sitting across from each other. One of the men was an exact counterpart to the others, with their white shirts and black ties. This final man was an odd specimen. In contrast to the appearance of everyone else in the room, he was dressed informally, wearing military boots and a green shirt that was half tucked into his faded blue jeans. His face was worn, despite being

only eighteen or twenty, and it looked as though he hadn't shaven or showered in weeks. Remnants of a meal eaten at an earlier time were still found at the corner of his mouth. His eyes were glossy and his whole face had a look of serenity about it, as though he possessed no thoughts of worry or doubt. The man across from him opened his mouth.

“What country do you currently reside in?”

“The United States of America.”

“Where are we now?”

“Stanford University, California.”

“Who are you?”

No answer. The look on the unshaven man's face had turned from serenity to confusion, and the lines on his brow tightened while he searched for an answer.

“Who are you?”

Again, no answer. A look of despair had crept upon the man's face, his eyes wide, his mouth quivering. The man across from him jotted some notes in his notepad and opened his mouth again. The clock struck noon.

“Do you believe in God?”

The man asking the questions had transformed. He was no longer dressed in a white shirt and black tie, but in the robes of a priest. His pen and notepad had been replaced with a crucifix, and his unemotional gaze had turned into one of anger and contempt. The unshaven man sunk back into his chair. He realized he was now facing the inquisition, and with one wrong answer he could be

deemed a heretic and burned at the stake. He would have to be careful.

The inquisitor moved on, but the unshaven man did not. Between pauses, question after question was posed, each one met with silence, each one prodding deeper and deeper into his personal beliefs. The man did not ignore these new questions out of fear, however; it was that the first question was still churning in his head.

*Do I believe in God?* He thought to himself, his thoughts clear, his decision not. *How can there be a God watching over a world such as this? When there exists such poverty in the world, such war, such injustice, how can this be? Would God claim responsibility for this? Would He let this happen? Would He not try to change this?*

The man gulped and looked around the room, aware that the gaze of everyone in the room was fixated on him. He turned back to face the inquisitor, his mind still racing.

*The whole of man is responsible for these crimes, and in turn, would this not make God responsible? And what kind of God would that be? We do not possess proof of God, only proof of the evil of man. But should I say this? Do I want to die? Is the truth not more powerful than God and man?*

The man began to turn green and convulse, the endless questions in his head weighing upon him like the world entire, his mind spinning out of control.

“Do you believe in God?” the inquisitor returned to the first question.

Another voice crept into the man's head now, an unfamiliar one of confidence and clarity. *Say it.* He looked deeply into the soulless eyes of the inquisitor and a flash of anxiety waved over him for a split second. It was as though he was drowning in the blackness of those eyes, as if those eyes were responsible for all the sins of man. He gave his response.

“Man is God.”

A look of serenity began to creep across the man's face once again, his mind calming. He looked to be completely at peace, as though he knew the fate that awaited him. He was content.

The inquisitor's crucifix began to melt away in his hand, taking the shape of a pen and notepad once again. He scribbled down his verdict and parted his thin, peeling lips to speak.

“Very good. Put down your pens and papers everyone, it's lunchtime. I expect everyone to be back here within the hour. We have much to discuss.”

## II

I took a deep inhale of my cigarette and looked down at the blank piece of white paper before me. Exhaling slowly, I repeated my question.

“How much did you give him?”

“About 400 micrograms.”

“And he’s dead?”

“As a doornail.”

I paused to take another inhale. Fuck. This complication was not to be dwelled on long, however. There would be no consequences; just a mark in a file, a lesson learned, and one sad mother. Not even the media would get their grubby hands on this story. The government had its ways.

“So can you explain to me exactly what happened?”

“Well, there’s really not much to be said about it. We administered the dosage, 400 micrograms, at ten o’clock sharp yesterday. We waited an hour, and questioning began at half past eleven.”

“And how did that go?”

“Fine, I guess. We didn’t get much out of him, but that’s becoming more and more common as we’ve been increasing the dosages. Just after noon we broke for lunch, and let him go home. He seemed content enough. Then just this morning we got a call saying he was dead, found in bed by his buddy.”

“Suicide?” It wouldn’t have been the first time; our collaborating team at McGill University in Canada had reported several. I had always thought of suicide as more of an intellectual pursuit, but these results had somewhat challenged this belief.

“We can’t rule it out, in fact it’s very possible. I still can’t fucking believe it. I can only imagine the amount of bullshit paperwork the higher ups are going to expect because of this. I hope you don’t expect me to handle it.”

I tried my best to keep a straight face. Jimmy could be a real lazy twat when he wanted to. A subject under his supervision dies, and the first place his mind goes is the paperwork. No wonder his ass hadn’t made the grade in med school.

“Alright. Let me know if you hear anything else. And close the door behind you, wouldn’t ya?”

I let out a sigh and butted out my cigarette in my ashtray. It was a nice one. Sterling silver, from Tiffany’s. My aunt had given it to me as a gift for a birthday, or graduation, or some other occasion years ago. I had another just like it at home, along with a whole chest of similar gifts given to me at such empty events. To me, my whole life previous to this had been a series of gifts and meaningless milestones. Luckily for both me and my legacy, this was no longer the case.

Project MKUltra; the first time I’d heard of it was about 2 years ago, during the summer of ‘56. The United States government was recruiting graduate students and post docs all across the country

and I was one of the (un)lucky few that signed up. Now, at only 27, I was one of the heads of the project at Stanford.

The project itself had started out as a product of the Cold War. After the synthesis of lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD as it was called around campus, the United States government was eager to put it to the test as a mind control drug or some kind of truth serum. What we were testing was a weapon of war.

The first test subjects were for the most part military, but since then they've come from everywhere. Mental patients. Convicts. And once word got out around campus, every longhaired freak and fruit wanted to be a part of it. It was a circus. We actually had *willing* participants for this. Get that.

The kid who had died this morning had been one of those types. Naïve, eager, bright eyed, ready to “expand his mind”. Just look where that got him. I can't help but have sympathy for the kid, though. Lord knows I didn't have my head on completely straight at that age. He hadn't even seen it coming; one extra drop from an eye dropper was all it took.

*Ringggggggggg*. Unlike the kid, I had the gift of foresight. I knew that this was coming. *Ringggggggggg*. The higher-ups had heard about the death, now they (or I) would have to clean up their mess. *Ringggggggggg*.

“Hello.”

“We heard about your little mishap.”

“Yes sir. Must have been the dosage sir. Won't happen again sir.” I hate saying that fucking word.



“It better not happen again. This is going to be a mess.”

“I understand sir.”

“I expect a full report on the subject in question sent up to Washington by the end of the week. Truth is, we’re growing tired of your antics down in California. This is a project sanctioned by the government of The United States of America, not some fraternity house community project.”

“I understand sir.”

“Good. On that note, I expect a full report on all your recent findings sent up here by the end of the week as well. And it better be significant.”

“Yes sir. Will do sir. Bye.”

I slammed the phone down on the receiver and lit up another cigarette. Three days. Three fucking days. How was I supposed to write two full reports in three days? Sure, I had my staff, but most of them were useless. On top of that, we had almost nothing to show for our past few months of work besides some incoherent notes and a corpse. As I exhaled it seemed as though the smoke waltzed across the room, mocking me to my face. I knew we were close; we just had to fix the dosage. There was promise, especially in the earlier subjects. I wasn’t about to let my name and work be tarnished by this hiccup. We were going to have to make this a fly by night operation. Picking up the phone, I dialed the rotary. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Jimmy. We’re going to need a new participant for tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Because the old one is fucking dead and Washington just called, they want a report – two actually - by Friday.”

“Are you serious? We have nothing!”

“I know, I know. Just get it done. Make sure Keith knows. I’ll be there for this one.”

“Alright boss. I’ll see what I can do.”

A smile crept across my face as I heard the word boss, especially from a guy like Jimmy. I might be the captain of a sinking ship, but I was still the captain. Butting out my cigarette, I propped my feet up and sat back in my chair. My gaze was fixed on the door across from me, but my mind was elsewhere.

I’ve always been a daydreamer. From the earliest I could remember I would fantasize about being a hero; getting the girl; changing the world. I guess that’s probably why I can be such an asshole. I set my expectations so high and each time they don’t come true I lose a little more faith in mankind and myself.

Today I was fantasizing about winning the Nobel Prize. I could see it in all its golden glory. I might spew some bullshit to a broad I’m trying to impress or my friends or cousins about how I work at Stanford for the “pursuit of knowledge” and “academic opportunity”, but in the end all it comes down to is what I leave behind. The thought of failure sends chills down my spine.

The buzz of a television set from a few rooms over interrupted my dream. Snapping back to my empty office, I cursed the thing. Not since the Middle Ages had a plague spread so rapidly throughout the known world. Television was nothing but a distraction, a box filled with talking heads whose voices were programmed to rot the brain. Turning my frustration into a sigh, I stood up and put on my jacket.

There was nothing left for me to do on campus. Jimmy would find a new subject for me; some of the others would put together some questions. I'd go home and prepare the report we'd send to the feds, and probably end up bullshitting my way through half of it. After all, I had the imagination of a scientist, but lacked the precision of a poet. The higher-ups knew it. I was no author, except in flashes of brilliance. I only hoped there would be no setbacks.

Thinking about what I could make for dinner, I sped down the spiraling stairs leading to my escape. With such a cushy job, and my life seemingly in check, one would probably imagine that I'd be returning home to a warm meal, a loving wife, and Fido, but that was not the case. Despite numerous advances from a wide array of women in my life, I had yet to find one I thought fit to marry (though that wasn't to say there'd been flings or yearnings; I'd given it the old college try). I wasn't looking for a housewife with painted lips and a winning smile; I was looking for someone who could make me smile. And while I wasn't sure she existed, I hoped crow would be on the menu in the near future.

The air was cool and calm as I stepped outside and began my trek home. There wasn't a single person out and about around

campus. It was almost eerie, like the calm before a great storm washed everything away. As I sparked another cigarette and put it to my lips, my mind began to wonder yet again.

Never before in human history had the future been so bleak and uncertain. Rumbblings from Russia and threats of a nuclear strike poured in almost every day. Rumbles from the South, where newly communist Cuba was set to make a play on the world stage painted the papers. Rumbblings from all over America, where civil rights issues were beginning to come to the forefront and protests were rampant. All this strife, and I didn't care one bit.

The idea that Russia or Cuba would actually start a war with America was laughable. In a war that assured mutual destruction, there would be no victors. Despite this, the fear would continue to be perpetuated by idiots and warmongers, but I wasn't complaining. I received my livelihood and would eventually derive my legacy from these chumps. As for the movement going on in America, I could care less. Call me selfish, but I felt it didn't affect me one bit, and I wasn't about to stick my neck out to win a fight I didn't have a dog in. The reason the future of the planet was so bleak wasn't because of these events, but because of the idiocy, fearfulness, and selfishness of the people living on it.

Arriving at my address, I tossed my cigarette into the gutter. Climbing the concrete steps to my abode, I opened the door to an empty house. This world was changing, however, there was no doubt about that. Even Stanford's campus was changing dramatically; just two or three short years ago you were hard pressed to find somebody

not dressed in a suit and tie walking around campus. These days, the campus was full of every manner of beatnik like the test subject who'd died earlier today. They would make a point to play music and discuss literature and poetry in public so that every passersby could hear them. All of us working on the project hated their attitude, though we did find redeeming qualities in them occasionally. Jimmy would have his pick of the litter for the test tomorrow.

Opening my fridge, I found nothing but leftovers from the night previous. They would have to do for dinner. I didn't have particularly high standards when it came to food, but at a restaurant you'd better believe I'd order the caviar. Sitting down at my desk, I pulled a chain and turned on my lamp. It was time to get to work.

### III

I awoke to the sound of my phone ringing. For me, it had been another dreamless night. I couldn't recall the last time I had dreamt; it had probably occurred sometime long ago, before I had even the faintest ideas of my ambitions. Now that they were so close, my dreams had turned to reality, or rather my reality had turned to dreams. My dreams took place during the day rather than the night. Rolling over in bed, I attempted to find my watch, instead only finding my ashtray and a half-empty bottle of bourbon.

Fumbling around, I finally grabbed hold of it. It read quarter past eight. I usually wasn't in the office for another hour; who was calling? Whoever it was, it had better be important. Jumping out of bed, I sprinted across my dark apartment to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey boss. Listen, we're really up the creek on this one. I tried to find another test subject for today but we're shit outta luck. I can't find anybody. The idiots 'round campus must be smartening up." What a call to wake up to. Jimmy couldn't even handle a simple task.

"What do you mean, you couldn't find anyone? If we can't find any volunteers, we find somebody and we fucking tell them they're going to be our test subject."

"Look, I've tried everything. I've talked to the state mental hospitals, and they have nobody we can use. Everyone I've inquired about either has a family who won't let us run the tests or is incapable of questioning. We could get a convict or soldier in by tomorrow, but

there's a shit stack of paperwork that would need to be filled out." Ah, good old paperwork, the bane of our existence. Sometimes I thought that if ethics were less important in modern science, we'd have an answer to the atom bomb and a man on the moon.

"And what about the volunteers? Don't we have a list floating around the office?"

"Tried them all. No answers. And to make matters worse, some Washington big shot just showed up about fifteen minutes ago. He wants to talk to you and Keith since you guys are in charge. I'm trying to stall him, but you need to get down here."

The bad news just kept coming and coming. I hated dealing with those stuck up bureaucrats from Washington. They were always giving orders, asking questions, and poking their noses where they didn't belong. I could do a better job of running the country than those assholes.

"Nobody answered? You've got to be kidding me. I thought you said getting one of those beatnik freaks would be a cakewalk. Listen, we need a test subject and we need one now. I don't care how you do it. Set up a recruitment booth outside the labs; paste a big picture of that smug bastard Uncle Sam on it. Tell the people it's their civic duty. Find some homeless junkie and offer him a twenty. In any case, get it done. You got that Jimmy?"

"I'll try, boss."

"No, you don't try. You fucking do it. I'll be down to the labs in half an hour." I slammed the phone down and let out an expletive. Today was going to be hell. The kid better come through. This was

my neck, and more importantly my chance to make it into the history books.

I went to the bathroom and shaved as quickly as I could, still half asleep. Falling asleep and waking up were the hardest parts of my days, but today I had to look at least somewhat presentable for the brass. In sleep I lost my genius, and when woke I had to regain it. Putting on my white shirt, I tied my black tie the same way I did every morning. Quickly, I grabbed a piece of bread and shoved it into my mouth just so I'd have something in my stomach. There was no time for coffee now. Grabbing my jacket, I headed out the door and slammed it behind me.

Pulling my cigarette pack from my pocket, I was reminded that the morning cigarette is either the best or worst one of the day. On most days, when I wake up carefree and content, I look forward to nothing more than a cigarette and a cup of coffee after breakfast. It allows me to relax without remorse. On other days, the cigarette only acts to amplify my stress. It clouds my mind and forces me to wallow in self-judgment. I was playing a game of Russian roulette. As I lit my cigarette and inhaled, the nicotine rush hit my brain like a bullet. I'd lost. Tossing the still intact cigarette into the gutter, I quickened my pace to a jog.

In contrast to the emptiness of campus the evening before, today it was an epicenter of culture. Professors walked along side students pondering both the mysteries of the universe and simple calculus problems. Our overrated and overpriced football team



practiced on the quad. Everyone was bustling save the beatniks, who simply sat lying in their own grassy grove, flowers in their hair.

I just didn't get it. My entire life, I'd aspired to be the best at something. The first time I'd read a history book, it had set my mind aflame with possibilities. At that tender age, I had no idea how I'd make it into such a book, but I knew someday my legacy would be doused in the musty odor of a tome. That wasn't even a question.

Elementary school had been tough for irrelevant non-academic reasons involving my mother, but high school was when I had really started busting my ass. I love to bring attention to the fact that I'm intelligent, but I would be lying if it didn't take a hell of a lot of hard work and sacrifice to make it here. Society, and more importantly my schooling had given me a neat little box that, after years of conditioning and contortion, I could finally fit into whenever I wanted. And these people couldn't even bring themselves to color between the fucking lines.

Looking at my watch, I found myself arriving at the psychology department in almost record time, for me at least. I could have driven, but I preferred to walk (or in this case jog); it gives me time to think about bombs and beatniks. Flushing the dribble out of my mind, I quickly made my way over to the portion of the department where the labs are located, all the while preparing a speech for our visitor from Washington. I was glad I'd spent most of the previous night bullshitting a report; hopefully the bourbon I was drinking hadn't overly affected my inhibitions. These men usually

weren't the easiest to please, but I'd have to try. Both my future in this role and my legacy depended on it.

I opened the doors to the lab and was greeted by the faces of Jimmy, Keith, and the scariest bastard I'd ever seen. He looked like the villain from some romantic espionage novel. His face was scarred, and he towered over everyone in the room by at least six inches. I looked at Jimmy, hoping for a positive sign; a nod, a thumbs-up, anything, but as I approached he looked at me with dead eyes and slowly shook his head. God damn it.

"Dr. Fremont, I presume?" The visitor reached out his hand. At least he had the courtesy to call me doctor.

"You'd be correct in that presumption. And you are?" I reciprocated his handshake and nearly had my hand crushed.

"Mr. Anderson. I've been sent from Washington to supervise you and your team today. I was wondering if there was a more private place where you, Dr. Keith, and I could discuss some details." He flashed his CIA badge. It was almost as though the badge gave him permission to be an asshole.

"Sure. My office is right this way." Turning around, I headed out of the lab.

I knew this was going to be a bloodbath. We were going to get it, and get it bad. I was glad that I had Keith in my corner at the very least, being one of the few people in this place that I actually had a shred of respect for. Keith was about fifteen years my senior, and he had the same kind of no bullshit attitude I aspired for. He was a man of science; a man of reason. He was actually the original supervisor of

this project, but had left it in what he called “my capable hands” after he had decided to spend more time on his personal research. The three of us piled into my office and I closed the door.

Taking a seat at my desk, I quickly sparked up a cigarette. I knew it wouldn’t make me feel any better, but I viewed it as a petty act of defiance to our guest. I hoped he would view it as the same. Keith took a seat across from me while Mr. Anderson remained standing.

“Boys, I’ll give it to you straight. Washington is not pleased with what you eggheads have been trying to pull down here. Half the time we get no reports, and the other half of the time we get an incoherent mess! What kind of show are you chumps running?” Mr. Anderson asked, surprisingly calm, though obviously irritated.

“Listen, Mr. Anderson. We’re dealing with new chemicals here, new techniques. You just can’t expect us to get perfect results exactly when it’s convenient for the old boys up in Washington.” Keith responded, more eloquently than I would have.

“Oh, I understand. You need time. Well, here’s the thing: we’ve already given you two years, and copious amounts of funding. What the hell are we paying you for? We’re paying for results!” Mr. Anderson slammed his fist on my desk. He continued talking, getting louder and louder as he did. “And then you went and let some little puke die. If the media gets ahold of this, we’ll have every Joe Blow reporter and his posse making the rounds, both here and in Washington. I can see the headline now: “Government Killing Its Own”. Whether you choose to accept it or not, we’re at war.

Dissension is the last goddamn thing we need right now.” There it was. I knew it was coming. He was trying to make us feel guilty by appealing to our patriotism. Unfortunately for him, the only allegiances I held were to bourbon, Marlboro, and myself. I simply nodded.

“We understand. And like I said, we’re doing our best.” Keith again took the burden of responding.

“I’m not quite sure if you two understand the importance of this project. It has the potential to save the lives of millions! With your results, we will have the ability to better interrogate and defer Russian spies! This could give us valuable information, even end the war!” I laughed silently at the thought. With people like Mr. Anderson in charge, wars would not cease. If the current conflict with the Russians ended, America would simply find a new antagonist. The vicious cycle would continue. And we would all keep our glamorous positions and continue to get paid. I felt like giving Mr. Anderson a standing ovation for his performance, but decided I’d rather keep my job. It was my turn to speak.

“We do understand, Mr. Anderson. I have a report prepared for you, and I believe you’ll find it satisfactory. Dr. Keith and I care just as much about the cause as you do, and we’re willing to do anything to support it.” I opened my briefcase and retrieved the folder containing my forged report. Sliding it across the table towards Mr. Anderson, he began to chuckle.

“Dr. Fremont, I appreciate the thought, but we are well past the point where a simple report will satisfy Washington. Sure, you can

send it up there. Distribute it amongst your colleagues. I'm here to witness your techniques, to see what the American taxpayers are paying for! And we should be getting started soon, shouldn't we? Unless there's a problem?" I looked at Keith and then at Mr. Anderson.

"Of course, sir... If you'd follow me back to the lab, we can begin within the hour." I got up from my desk and started towards the exit. Before I could reach the door Mr. Anderson had already opened it and was heading back towards the lab. Both of us letting out a sigh, Keith and I started after him. We didn't exchange a word.

I am not a god-fearing man. I do not and have never found solace in a higher power. In fact, I think it's almost idiotic. Despite all this, in times of need, I have been known to say a prayer. This was one of those instances.

Just last month an old friend had dredged himself up from the depths of high school. He must have crawled out of whatever hole he was hiding in, as he had always been prone to do. He asked me for money and for help. I gave him a small pittance, but ultimately let him go. He needed to help himself before I could help him, and even then it was a stretch. As I prayed, I imagined that if God did exist, he must feel like what I did then, with me taking the role of my lowly friend. I didn't blame him if he didn't answer.

I entered the lab at Keith's heels, surprised to see that Jimmy was having a nice chat with Mr. Anderson. Together we walked over, both bracing for the news.

“Well, Dr. Fremont, it sounds to me like you and your team don’t have a subject for today’s tests. Did you know about this?” My heart sunk. My prayer must have gotten lost.

“I had some idea sir. I had given James here that task and it seems he’s failed it.” Jimmy looked down at his shoes.

“Don’t place the blame on anyone else, Dr. Fremont. You’re the man in charge. You take the blame if there’s blame to be had. That’s what a good leader does. He steps up to the plate when he’s needed.” So it had come to this. Receiving a lecture from an ignorant monster.

“I’m sorry, sir. I agree completely. We’ll have to run the tests tomorrow or on Friday; there’s just no way we can do them today, not without a subject.”

“I came here to witness a procedure, doctor, and that’s just what I’m going to do.” What was he getting at?

“Like I said, there’s no way. Who or what are we going to test the drugs on? Jimmy’s cat? Yourself?” Mr. Anderson began to laugh. I’m glad he thought this was funny. I was probably toast.

“Dr. Fremont, did you not say just moments ago in your office that you would do anything to support our plight? Did you not just agree with me when I told you that real leaders step up to the plate as their plans crumble around them?” Suddenly, it all clicked. There was no way. Was he joking?

“You...you want me to be the test subject? That’s preposterous! Who would run the experiment? This can’t be legal!”

My heart was beating at a million beats a second. Not only was Mr. Anderson an asshole, he was insane.

“The legality of this is not up for debate, Dr. Fremont. Remember with whom you’re dealing with. Dr. Keith is fully capable of running the experiment, wouldn’t you agree?”

“There’s no way. There’s no fucking way I’m doing this. Some kid died on this stuff just yesterday!” I was starting to shake.

“You’re going to do it, or else you’re out of here, and I will personally make sure your name is so tarnished within the academic community that your next job will be as a bus boy!” Was this God’s funny way of punishing me for not being a better person? Was this *all* a joke? Keith and Jimmy had been silent thus far; they had no power here. I looked over at them, fishing for something, anything. Keith opened his mouth to speak.

“Listen, Don. That kid was the first death out of countless other subjects. You’ll be fine. Take a risk. Do you think Marie fucking Curie cared that she was dying of radiation poisoning as she conducted her experiments? Hell no! She did it because she believed in what she was doing, and now she’s heralded as a hero. We know her name; she towers over all of us. You say you believe in what we’re doing; well show us! You’re in the big leagues now. Just think of what we could discover...”

I gulped. Keith knew that was the exact speech I needed. If I did this, I would be a legend in the scientific world. They say that great men aren’t born great, but that greatness is thrust upon them. This was my chance, and I had to seize it. But it didn’t mean that I

couldn't be anxious. After all, anything could happen. With the sternest face I could muster, I turned back to Mr. Anderson.

“Fine. I'll do it.”

“Fantastic. I knew you'd come around. And a big thank you to Dr. Keith for that stirring speech, it was greatly appreciated. Let's get this show on the road, I'm not waiting around any longer.” Mr. Anderson said as he twirled his finger in the air as though he owned the place. Keith grabbed a clipboard and a pen and started shouting orders. This was not a drill.

“Alright. Jimmy, prepare the drug. We don't want a repeat of last time, and we don't want Don to be an incoherent mess either, so you better make it around 250 micrograms.” 250 mcg. Was he serious? The last patient we had given that much to had said he had seen Jesus in the flesh. The guy before that had mentioned something about pink elephants. I raised my hand to protest, but Keith continued barking orders. “You two over there! Grab your pens and clipboards, we're getting started! You, start filling out a formal report! We're not fucking around today! Don, follow me.”



## IV

Once again, an invisible partition divided the lab in two, just as it had two mornings previous. On one side of the room sat two men; on the other stood about ten or twelve. Today, however, everybody in the room looked the exact same. Everyone was dressed in white shirts and black ties; everyone held pens and notepads. The only discernable difference was the fact that one of the isolated men held a glass of clear liquid in his hand.

“Alright, Don. This is it. Are you ready?” The older of the two isolated men asked. The other took a deep breath.

“Can I please have a cigarette? Can you make an exception? For me?” The other pleaded, visibly anxious.

“No, Don, I told you. We can’t make any exceptions. This is the real deal. We don’t want the nicotine to alter our results in any way.” The two sat silently for another minute.

“Well, if that’s the case, bottom’s up.” Don said before downing the drink in his hand. The drink was tasteless; it tasted exactly like a glass of water should. In fact, the only real difference between it and an ordinary glass of water was a dose of LSD that amounted to less mass than a grain of sand.

“10:25 AM: Subject ingests 250 micrograms of lysergic acid diethylamide.” The older man said aloud. After five minutes had passed, the other man began fidgeting in his seat.

“Listen Keith, I don’t think I can do this. This is going to be too much. Let me throw it up. Let me leave. Please!” Don asked,

upset. Second thoughts were common throughout the study. There was no need for panic.

“Don, it’s already in your system. Just relax; you’re in a safe place. I’m here; Jimmy is right over there. We’re not going to let anything happen to you. Sit back, enjoy the ride, and answer our questions.” Keith said calmly, putting Don at ease. The pair sat in silence for five minutes, ten minutes. The room was completely silent save for the occasional scribbling of pens. After twenty minutes, Keith spoke again.

“Twenty-five minutes after ingestion. Don, how are you feeling?”

“I...I can’t say I feel anything yet. I mean, I don’t feel any different than I normally would.” Don answered. And then it hit him. A feeling of ecstasy so strong that he doubled over in his chair, smiling.

“Don? Are you okay? How are you feeling?” Keith asked again. Don could hear him, but he wasn’t paying attention. Instead, he was fixated on the foreign object that had just appeared above Keith’s head. It was faint at first, but it had become more and more pronounced as Keith talked. Although Don had never seen anything like it in his life, he wasn’t alarmed.

It seemed as though the top of Keith’s head was emitting a beam of light, though this beam was not transparent; it almost seemed dense. It was what Don imagined that pure energy would look like. On either side of this beam was a void of darkness, of the unknown. Looking around, Don realized that not just Keith, but everyone had

such a beam emitting from their head. Some beams were brighter than others, some wider. In what he considered a flash of brilliance, Don realized what he was looking at.

*Could it be? Is what I'm seeing real? Is this all our life here on Earth comes down to? Is it all simply a crack of light between infinite darkness? The unknown? Am I seeing the souls of these men? I feel as though I can perceive these things as they truly are, not as they are viewed through the haze of reality. The fog has burned off. All we are is light, and it's beautiful, oh so beautiful.*

“Don, how are you feeling? What are you seeing?” Keith repeated his question.

“I...I...” Don was at a loss for words. He wanted to tell Keith what he was seeing and how he was feeling more than anything in the world. All he wanted was for Keith to experience the same euphoria he was. “I can’t explain it, I just can’t. Can’t you see it? It’s glorious...”

“I’m sorry Don, I can’t see anything. I’m not quite sure what you’re talking about. Do you think you could maybe describe it for me?” Keith asked, taking notes all the while.

“I...I almost feel sorry for you.” Don stammered out. This was bliss; this was everything. Had all of his past subjects felt like this? Was this what he’d been responsible for? He had almost felt bad before, but now he felt something like pride.

*This is incredible. The fact that I gave those kids, those convicts, those misfits a way to see reality, to open their eyes to the truth. I'm no doctor; I'm a modern day mystic.* Don shook his head.

*Listen to me. Even know I'm singing my own praises. This experience is almost spiritual... These lights, these colors, these thoughts, if only I had known... I can hear bells ringing. This is peace. This is serenity.*

"I feel fantastic...almost like I'm not me..." Don muttered.

"Good, excellent. Where are you?" Keith asked.

"Stanford University."

"What's the date?"

"The date? There is no date... there is no time..." Don answered, trailing off. To him, time and all of human existence was merely a patchwork of visible light and darkness.

"What do you mean by that?" Keith asked. Don didn't answer. He had come to a sudden epiphany.

*Time...So much could be said about time. Time is what we build our lives around, what guides us, what ends us. But time is simply a manmade construct; something realized by our ancestors as simply another boundary for us to adhere to. What about that recently discovered tribe in South America I read about who possessed no concept of time? Their language had neither tenses, nor words for past, present, or future. It was said they aged differently than us; is it possible?*

*This light, this crack of light is so narrow, so brief, that even if time didn't exist, it might as well. How luminous this light becomes, this is how we are measured. And this luminosity can emit light into other people's lives as well as one's own. Life is not about living, but having something to live for. My goal, my goal... I won't let the darkness win. I will leave light behind.*

“Don?” Keith wanted an answer, but Don couldn’t give him one. He was too busy thinking of his existence. He thought of his friends, his patients, everyone. He thought of how miserable he’d made them all, how every single thing he’d done since he could remember had been for himself. All in pursuit of his goal. *Is it worth it?* Looking up, he noticed the light emanating from his head was barely there; a faint glow. This was his soul, and it was pathetic.

“Alright, another question. Don, what do you think of death? What do you want to leave behind?”

Suddenly, Don’s heart felt like it dropped into his stomach, and an overwhelming feeling of dread took over. His heart began racing, and he could hardly breathe. It felt as though some kind of claw had taken hold of his brain, piercing it on all sides. The dark had overtaken the light. His vision was pulsating, and he was hyperventilating. His thoughts had completely derailed, like a train off its tracks. But unlike this metaphor, no comparisons would save him. Like a true scientist, he would have to give his answer straight.

“Don? Don? Are you okay? Talk to us. What’s going on?” Keith asked, worried for both his colleague and his study. Don still couldn’t bring himself to speak. He felt as though he was going to die; no, he was certain he was going to die.

“I...I...I’m going to die....” Don managed to croak out. His thoughts were racing at a mile a minute.

*This is it. This is how it ends. Or is it? What lies within the dark void beyond the light? Is it simply darkness? Or is it more than that? I’ve been taught all my life that there’s some kind of afterlife,*

*but is there? Is there a heaven? If so, why worry about it? I could spend the rest of eternity in divine paradise...*

Calming down, Don began breathing easier. He was at peace. If this was how it were to end for him, so be it. His colleagues all looked on at him with what looked to be concerned faces.

“It’s okay, I’m okay. I’m at peace. No need to panic...” Don said as he tried to put their minds at ease, but a single thought had brought him back to ruin.

*Heaven? HEAVEN? There’s no way Saint Peter would open the gates for me! I’m a murderer! I killed that poor kid only two days ago! I’m a fucking murderer! Don began sobbing. Hell. I’m going to fucking hell. What have I done?*

Don’s thoughts would not be contained. He tried to stand up, but couldn’t. While he had been free moments earlier, heavy chains now bound him to his chair. He no longer possessed the ability to move. He was trapped.

“Let me go! Help! What are you doing?” He screamed, but nobody seemed to hear him. “What is this? What are you doing to me? What’s going on?” No response.

Keith no longer sat in the chair in front of him. In fact, all his colleagues had left the room. The only figure that remained on the other side of the room was that of Mr. Anderson.

“Mr. Anderson! Help! Get these chains off of me! We have to leave!” Don yelled. Slowly, Mr. Anderson walked towards him. “Faster! What are you waiting for?”

Mr. Anderson continued towards Don without any sense of urgency. When he reached Keith's now empty chair, he simply sat down and smiled.

"What are you doing? This is outrageous! Let me out!" Don continued to plead, but to no avail.

Mr. Anderson sat silently for what seemed like an eternity. All the while Don continued to plead. Finally, hearing enough, Mr. Anderson opened his mouth to speak.

"Dr. Fremont. Don't you know why I'm here? Don't you know why I've come all the way from Washington to see you?"

"Yes! You're here to watch us work! You're the one who put me in this mess. I know we've done a terrible job, but will you please set me free? Will you please undue these chains?"

"Wrong, wrong, wrong. You must be mistaken, Dr. Fremont. I'm not here to watch you work. I'm afraid my motives are more of a sinister nature." As Mr. Anderson talked, his skin began to melt away, revealing a grotesque face that could only belong to something spawned in the fires of hell. With beast like talons he grabbed onto Don's face and looked into it with black, empty eyes. A forked tongue flickered in and out of his mouth as he continued talking. "I'm here for your soul, of course. It belongs to me, and no one else. It's your time."

"My soul? Why should I give you my soul? You're the ones that have turned it the way it is. You're the ones who made me kill. This isn't fair!"

“Oh, please. Even if you hadn’t killed that boy I would have come eventually. Nobody even cared about that kid! Your colleagues showed little concern for him, as did you. Your soul has been as dark as night since you were born. You have always taken so much and given so little, all in the name of a legacy that has amounted to nothing. You truly belong among the damned. Even now you place the blame me, not on yourself for your shortcomings. You’re a pathetic excuse for a man.”

Don realized that everything that was being said was true; he couldn’t change what had happened, how he had lived his life up until this point. In this moment, all he could do was pray.

*Please, please, don’t let my soul be taken from me; I ask forgiveness for everything. I have sinned, I am a sinner, and I will sin again. I’m only human, bound by the constructs of death and time. Please, I ask forgiveness.*

“Why are you praying? There is no God. You don’t believe in him. God doesn’t exist anymore. Nobody can save you.” The demon hissed. The room was ablaze. Backing up, the demon laughed maniacally. “You’ve been working so hard to have people spit on your grave once you’re gone. If there’s a silver lining, at least you’ll get to see your precious mother again – I’m sure she’s dying to talk to you about all you’ve done.”

“You leave her out of this, you monster! Leave me be!”

Don closed his eyes. This couldn’t be it. He wanted to be forgiven. He wanted to repent. If God wouldn’t help, he had but one option. He had to free himself from the chains that bound him. With



all his strength, he tried to stand. One by one, the links of the chains broke as though they were made of paper.

Opening his eyes, the demon was gone. Keith was once again sitting across from him, a blank expression on his face. He had done it. All these questions about death, life, and time were meaningless. He didn't need the answers.

"Don? Are you okay? How are you feeling? Sit down." Keith asked, anxious to continue the study.

"I'm fine. I'm fine. I can do this. Ask me anything." Don responded. After being to hell and back, he sat back in his chair and let wave after wave of euphoria hit him. He didn't care if he was swept away.

Had it all been a dream? Had I finally dreamt for the first time in years? It couldn't have been; it was all too vivid, too real. What I experienced had really happened, even if I couldn't remember half of it. Sitting in my office and smoking a cigarette, I tried to make sense of the events of the previous day. The only conclusion I could come to was that I'd never be the same again. Before I could explore my psyche further, there was a knock at my door.

"Come in!" I yelled.

"Hey boss. Just wanted to see how you were making out."

Jimmy entered the room slowly. The kid probably expected me to bite his head off.

"Hey Jimmy. What the hell happened yesterday? I'm a laughing stock now, aren't I?" I asked, exhaling smoke.

"Not at all boss. You were pretty tame. It wasn't anything we hadn't seen before. You went on a rant about time and space, but I mean, so did half of our previous subjects." I could tell he was brownnosing.

"Sure. So I made no mention of pink elephants or any such nonsense?"

"No sir." Jimmy laughed, though I couldn't tell if it was at me. "Like I said, you were pretty tame."

"Was Mr. Anderson happy?"

"I'll let you take that up with him, sir."

"Very well. Thanks Jimmy."

“No problem boss.” Jimmy said as he left, closing the door behind him. The kid could be an ass, but at least he tried.

To be honest, I didn’t really give a fuck if I was a laughing stock. People could talk in circles and form their own twisted opinions of me all they wanted, but I knew firsthand that the thoughts and feelings of death could turn the mind of any man into a nest of scorpions. They had no idea. I really didn’t give a damn about what Mr. Anderson thought of the experiment, either.

I felt odd, as though my experience had changed the chemistry of my brain; I had a new perspective, a new outlook on life. Though the voices of my demons still whispered in my mind, I agreed with them. If I were to stay here, the only legacy I would leave behind would be a pile of rotting bodies, with the boy’s skull crushed at the bottom and my bloated corpse sprawled out on top. All day I’d been having visions and flashbacks; I couldn’t stick around these parts. I didn’t have all the answers, but I sure as hell knew they weren’t here.

A crash from the far side of the room made me look up. Without warning, Mr. Anderson and Keith had burst into my office. My introspective moment had been interrupted yet again.

“Is this what you have been doing down here all this time? Interviewing brain dead incoherent zombies? All I got yesterday were a few good laughs! Is this all you have?” Mr. Anderson barked, spewing spit all over the office. Seeing him made my skin crawl. Fortunately, for now he took the form of a human, though his eyes told a different story.

“Mr. Anderson, calm down. You can’t rush the scientific process. Sometimes you can’t simply throw money at a problem to fix it. We need time. We need luck. There’s still plenty of things to test: dosage amounts, different drugs, female subjects, the list goes on!” Keith said, hands up.

“Useless! This is all useless!” Mr. Anderson looked at me. I shuddered yet again and attempted to focus on his wicked face. “What do you have to say for yourself? Do you think this drug could be used to defer a Russian spy? Used as a truth serum? Is it poison?”

I didn’t know what to say. Its use as a truth serum was doubtful at best. But could it be used to defer a soldier? It seemed to have done a number on me. But was it truly the drug that caused my change of heart? Or was it something deeper within me? In any case, my new mindset would not allow me to condone the use of the drug as a weapon. It was useless to him.

“No sir. My thoughts were scrambled, but not in the way you’d want them to be. Everything was a mess; I couldn’t make heads or tails of reality.”

“There you have it, straight from the horse’s mouth!” Mr. Anderson put up his hands in the hair in an exasperated manner. “You better believe Washington will hear about this. I’m not going to shut this project down right away, but you are all on thin ice. More inquiries will be made.” Mr. Anderson left and slammed the door behind him. Keith sighed and turned to face me.

“You were lying to him, weren’t you?” Keith asked calmly.

“...No, why do you ask?” How did he know? Did I have a secret tell I wasn’t aware of? Had I said something during the experiment?

“Yesterday, when I was asking you those questions, I could tell by looking at your face that something had happened, something had changed. You had a serene look about you that I’d never seen you have before.” Shit. Confronted, I might as well come clean.

“I...I just don’t know if I can do this anymore, Keith. What we’re doing here is wrong. We’re working to serve ourselves, not others. I can’t keep working for people like Mr. Anderson. If we do, the cycle will just continue. It’s just so... unfulfilling.” Did I really just say that? Keith was laughing at me.

“It’s taken you this long to figure that out? Really? You, the genius?” Keith wiped his eyes and straightened his face. “Don, academia is a sham. I thought you knew that. Here, circular logic is king because it creates more papers, more positions, more money. We have access to the brightest minds on the planet, yet we’re forced to have them try their hardest on bullshit dead end projects like MKUltra. But, if one works diligently enough, there’s always time to indulge one’s true passions. That’s why I passed the project to you. Scientific progress doesn’t come easy, Don. We’ve all done things we’re not proud of.” I shook my head, but he was only confirming what I knew to be true. I was already aware of the reasons I and the others were here. It was my confrontation with death that had swayed me.

“No, well, I suppose I’ve always had a hunch. Just yesterday I even endorsed it. I guess now I just want to change it. We’re responsible for the death of a kid, Keith.” Keith rolled his eyes. I tried to explain myself. “Look, I know it sounds crazy – but the LSD, somehow it’s opened my eyes. You have to believe me. Try some yourself.”

“I wouldn’t touch that stuff with a ten foot pole. It’s poison.” Keith’s mind had been made up long ago. Pausing for a moment, he continued. “I think what you’re doing is at least somewhat noble, but I can’t say I feel the same. Am I to take this as your resignation?”

“Do I really have to decide right now?”

“Well, you just lied to a government official, which could be possibly construed as treason, not to mention the conflict of interest you just admitted to having. Frankly, you’re a liability. I can’t have you here ruining everything I – no, we – have worked for. Either you can resign now, and be out of here by the end of the day, or we can go further with this, which could mean jail time or expulsion from the academic community. It’s your choice, Don.”

I knew Keith had a no bullshit attitude, but I’d never expected this. All those years of hard work mean nothing. There was no point in fighting; I’d never win. I was up against a man protecting his livelihood and I no longer wanted mine. The only thing I could do was accept my fate. I was done praying and had to take this like a man.

“Fine. I resign.”

“Smart choice, Don. You have until the end of the day to pack and get out of here. I can’t say working with you has been a walk in the park, but you got results. Despite that, I can’t have a loose cannon like you around the department. I’m sorry.” I thought Keith would leave the room, but he didn’t. “I shouldn’t have to say this, but don’t go running your mouth or there will be hell to pay. Keep quiet and you should be fine.”

“I will.”

Keith left, closing the door behind him. There was no point dwelling on what had just happened. I thought about feeling sentimental. Looking around my office, I tried to search for a good memory to reminisce about, but found nothing. Maybe it was a good thing I was leaving. The truth was that I wasn’t upset at all. In fact, I felt free. It was as though my chains had truly been broken yesterday. But where could I go? What could I do? How could I vanish? There were always other universities that would hire me, I supposed. I could work on my own medical research, invent the next polio vaccine! I laughed. The thought was nothing more than a pipedream.

Glancing over, I noticed a newspaper from a few days prior teetering on the edge of my bookshelf. Grabbing it and opening it up, all I found was the same mass produced hysteria as usual. Russia had a new prime minister; the West was scared. America was beginning to put more money into space exploration, as they wanted to both show up the Russians and find some way to exploit space as a weapon. It certainly had more promise than LSD, but I was no spaceman. The

entertainment portion of the paper reported that Elvis had been drafted into service. How cute.

Turning the page, something caught my attention. I knew that trouble had been brewing in the south for some time now, but I didn't know to what extent. Here, it said that blacks were trying to enter universities in Mississippi but the state wasn't allowing them to; they would not desegregate the schools. This had led to several small protests. Tempers over this and other injustices were flaring in Mississippi, all over something beyond the control of man. They were reaching a boiling point, and fast. In my mind's eye I could see the Southerners, sipping their mint juleps, fanning themselves and the flames around them, continuing to instill a habitual and trivial hate that had been around for generations and fuel the cycle of oppression.

Education had always been important to me, and this plight could actually be something that I could help with. No matter what Keith said about academia, no schooling meant no opportunity for many. And if it was such a sham, surely everyone had the right to be conned. Instead of working against the people, I could be a champion for the people and set my demons at ease.

I've been told many times that there are only a handful of decisions one makes that truly have consequence in their life; I tend to agree. My choice to have a cigarette and toast for breakfast this morning probably had no bearing on my life, though one can never be too sure. The decision I was making now, however, would have lasting implications. Like an alchemist, I would turn tragedy to triumph and forge myself a legacy.



This was my chance to make things right, my chance for redemption. My chance to be remembered. The longing for the future would propel me forward, just as it did all things. This was nostalgia in reverse. This was the epiphany I had been waiting for. The South was calling to me, but first I would have to answer another call.

## VI

I exited my office and made my way to the labs. Before I left, I would have to procure some items. If the LSD had altered my consciousness once, it would again. I needed more. I wanted nothing more than to feel that tortured serenity again.

To my dismay, no samples had been haphazardly left out. I would have to go to the storeroom and retrieve some myself. Luckily, Keith hadn't asked for my keys. This would be easier than taking candy from a baby. Of course, I couldn't just take a vial of the stuff. The average dosage we used was so miniscule that it required precision technology to measure. A miscalculation would probably end in death or a stay in the madhouse. How the hell was I going to transport this shit?

Looking around, I noticed some litmus paper that we often used to measure the pH of different chemicals. Perfect. I could simply measure out a dose and use the litmus paper to absorb it. When the time came, I would simply consume the paper (or multiple). Taking out my keys, I walked over to the far side of the lab and unlocked the storeroom.

Measuring out the dosage was easy enough; all it took was a steady hand. If I had taken 250 mcg last time, it would make the most sense to make each dose about 100 mcg. Using a tiny eyedropper to transfer the drug to the litmus paper, I carefully measured twenty doses. The litmus paper turned red as I transferred the drug, indicating

acidity. It was a stark reminder that I was dealing with a manmade chemical, not with something of the divine.

After I was done, I brought the acid back to the storeroom. Placing it on the shelf, I realized that I had free reign of all the chemicals in the lab, not just the acid. I could take whatever I wanted.

A popular experiment in the lab was to administer small amounts of cocaine to our lab mice and watch them run through mazes. Sometimes, we'd even place bets on which mouse would solve the maze first. The difference between a sober mouse and mouse on cocaine was staggering; the mouse on cocaine could cover almost four times the ground the sober mouse would over the same time period.

Though I'd heard some of our younger students protest against their use, I never really felt bad for our mice. I didn't like cutting them up, but that's because I was slightly squeamish, not because I felt sorry for them. They were mice. It's what we bred them for. We were essentially their gods; we brought them into the world, and we'd take them out. We had complete control over their lives from cradle to grave. Even now that I thought about it, I didn't feel anything for them. They spent their lives running through mazes just as we did, and in the end all that was promised was some form of darkness.

I looked at the cocaine, wondering if I should take some or leave it lie. Fuck it. In for a penny, out for a pound. It couldn't hurt. I felt like a beatnik on the quad. The feeling was fleeting.

The cocaine was divided into eighth-ounce samples; I managed to stuff four into my pockets before realizing I was no

longer alone in the lab. I instantly froze. I had to make up some kind of an excuse. I was returning some chemicals I had in my office. I was looking for something I thought I might have left there earlier in the week. Anything would do. I turned around to find Jimmy standing in the doorway.

“Hey boss, what are you doing in here?” He asked.

“Didn’t you hear the news? I’m not your boss anymore. I’m leaving.” I answered. Keith must not have told anyone.

“No, I heard the news. Must just be the force of habit. Keith’s been making the rounds, letting everyone know you’ve resigned.” So Keith had told everyone. “You know, you could probably do something about this. I know you didn’t resign on your own accord. They made you take the substance. That’s not you, boss.”

“Do something about it? Go up against the American Government? Jimmy, there’s no way. Besides, I’ve come to terms with it. I’ve got other plans.” The kid had no clue.

“Like what, boss? Where are you going to go?”

“Mississippi. Want to come along?”

“Mississippi? Why Mississippi? Have you ever been to Mississippi? The people there are stuck in another time, boss. You don’t belong with them. They’re rubes.”

“Jimmy, yesterday opened my eyes. This project is finished. It’s over. Mr. Anderson’s headed to Washington and he’s going to get this shut down. There’s nothing here for anyone. All we’re doing is creating a weapon of war; we’re not doing anybody anywhere any favors. I need to get out of here. I want to do something with my life;

I want to change the world for the better.” Jimmy started clapping. Over the course of my speech his face had turned from a naïve smile to an almost sinister smirk. This wasn’t the Jimmy I knew.

“Bravo. You’re one helluva guy, boss. You know, I’ve been under your watch for nearly two years now, and you’ve been nothing but an asshole for the entirety of it. You’re a piece of shit. This isn’t about changing the world, this is about you and your fucking ego.” He’d been waiting for this. I shouldn’t have expected any different. Deep down, I always knew everyone here was playing a part, but to hear these words spoken aloud stung. “Unless, of course, the departmental badass has suddenly been struck by a fear of God. You were pathetic yesterday. You must have said that you were going to die a thousand times. It was hilarious. The whole department had trouble containing their laughter.”

“Fuck you, Jimmy. Maybe you are right. Maybe this isn’t about changing the world; it’s about changing myself. In any case, I’ll be changing something while you and everyone else here continue to walk in circles. Get out of my way; I’m leaving.” I pushed past Jimmy and walked out of the lab.

“Enjoy your cocaine!” He needed to get in one final jab. Despite my deepest desires, I didn’t turn or answer back.

Bypassing my office, I didn’t bother to pick up my things; I had no need for psychology journals or fancy stationary. I exited the building just as the sun had begun to set and the sky was beginning to turn from its natural azure hue to that of a violet fire. Sighing, I began my final walk home from Stanford.

Making my way home, my mind was only filled with what was next. The thought of the unknown didn't scare me; I was ready for anything. I felt as though I had died and been born again, baptized within the sterile confines of a lab using manmade chemicals in place of holy water. If the drug had made me insane then I wished to never be cured.

Arriving home, I began to pack. There was no reason to stick around. A few shirts, some pants, my razor, some paperwork, my checkbook. Was it cold in Mississippi this time of year? I hadn't a clue. In any case, I could buy anything I needed as the needs arose. In mere minutes, I was finished packing. I always found it so surreal seeing your whole life in a suitcase, but that was simply a symptom of living in the modern age. We fill our homes with things we don't need, and once it's gone we don't miss it at all.

Walking over to my cabinet, I retrieved three bottles of bourbon. Opening one, I took a swig and then closed the bottle. The burn was satisfying. Locking up, I walked outside and tossed both the bourbon and my suitcase into the backseat of the car. Removing the cocaine and LSD from my pockets, I stuffed them into the cramped glove compartment. With a slight bit of nostalgia kicking in, I exited the car for one last cigarette. Stanford had been my home for years, after all.

Looking around the quaint college town, I couldn't help but think of the evil that lurked just beneath its surface. This was the evil I was a part of only days prior, enticed by promises of fame and wealth. These were the plagues of every town in America, enchanting

everyone from the lowliest member of the seedy underbelly to power drunk bureaucrats with grandiose visions of war. I couldn't stay here, even if I wanted to. Those same men had seen to that.

There was a storm brewing, a storm that would rock the beliefs and values of millions, one that had the potential to rock the very foundations of America. That much was certain. My intent was to be the eye of it.

As the sun faded completely from view, lamp posts lit up and illuminated the streets with their glow. Now was as good a time as any. Stomping out my cigarette, I got into my car and drove until there was darkness.

## Part II





# I

The highway can be a very lonely place. On certain nights, the only company given to the asphalt would be the chirping of crickets and the light of the moon. On this night, however, the black asphalt was given the gift of a prisoner, but one who was not bound by its white and yellow lines.

Slowly, two headlights, a lit cigarette, and a wayward soul were making their way across the country on the Interstate 40 near Flagstaff, Arizona. The soul was the most interesting character in the travelling party; it was one that had been born under the eyes of God, but no longer remained under such vision. The second most interesting character was the cigarette, as it was a Marlboro Gold, which wasn't smoked often in Arizona. The headlights were just a pair of average headlights, belonging to a red Ford or a black Chevrolet.

Unlike the cigarette and headlights, the soul belonged to no corporation; the subject's given name was Don Fremont, and he'd been driving for over 12 hours. Under his fingernails was cocaine; on his breath was bourbon; above his head shone stars. While the highway was tame and monotonous, his mind was aflame.

*How long do I have to go? How fucking long? 1400 miles. How far have I gone? 800 miles. Fuck. I'd love to have Anderson in front of me right now. I'd punch his fucking teeth in. But what would that achieve? To achieve peace, what is necessary? I feel like shit. Do*

*I have a fucking fever? How hot am I?* 215.8 Fahrenheit. 102.11 Celsius. Delirium was setting in.

The last time he had a fever was when he was five years old. He could vaguely remember his mother tucking him in bed, kissing his forehead, his window shades billowing like blue sails in the background. That night he was blessed with one of the most vivid dreams he had ever had. And while both the dream and his mother had passed, their memories still dwelled deep in the recesses of his mind. Reaching into his glove box, he pinched some white powder between his fingers, put it up to his nose, and snorted.

His mother had been beautiful. Whenever he pictured her, he saw her in a blue-checkered frock with red painted lips. She held his hand; he was still quite young. They were on a picnic, which was unfortunately interrupted by a lightning storm. His mother had been struck, and had never recovered. The sound of the rain and thunder still haunted him, as did the contents of his fever-induced dream.

The dream itself was beautiful in its own right. He had gone to sleep in Woodside, California with a fever and had awoken, spry and well, in a field of location unknown. The sky above him was purple, and his shadow seemed to stretch towards infinity. Fireflies danced in the air. The only discernable landmark was a tree far off in the distance; a tree that seemed to be calling his name. Slowly, he began running towards the tree, the pitter-patter of his small legs breaking the serenity of the scene. As he got closer and closer, its calls grew louder and his feet moved faster.

Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks. He couldn't move any further; it was as though he had hit an invisible wall. Looking around the field, it now appeared that the ground was covered with endless glowing lines. Some were orange, like the fireflies. Some were purple, like the sky. Others were green, still others red. Every color he could imagine was there. The lines crisscrossed erratically; they followed no set pattern. It was as though he was standing on a giant circuit board. Looking down, he realized that he was standing on the edge of one such horizontal line. This was what was preventing him from reaching the tree.

Frustration began to creep over him. He had to get to the tree, but how? There was no way to cross the line. Taking a few steps back, he ran towards it. Just as he was about to reach it, he leapt off the ground. The line passed under him and he let out a cry of success. He had made it! Trying to take another step forward, he realized he couldn't. Once again, he found himself stuck. Looking around, he realized he was in the same spot he was moments before. Tilting his head downwards, he realized he was still trapped by the very barricade he had just thwarted. Impossible!

Beside him lay a rock. Reaching down, he picked it up and felt its smoothness against his still unblemished skin. If he couldn't leap over the barrier, he would break it. Getting down on his knees, Don raised the rock above his head and struck the glowing line. The ground began to rumble, but his obstacle still remained. Letting out a roar, he raised the rock above his head for a second time and brought the rock down on the line with all of his might. The ground shattered

beneath him like glass. He felt himself falling. Slowly, the tree drifted further and further away until it was no longer in sight, and nothing remained but darkness. As a child, this is what he imaged death was like: pure emptiness. Back in the present time, he was unsure.

Driving along the Interstate 40, he saw the same ley lines glowing throughout the desert as he had in his dream. Their light reflected onto the road, lighting it like Las Vegas. It was wonderful. Unlike his dream, however, he was now able to pass through them without consequence. It was as though they no longer possessed their fantastic powers; he was free. Swerving back and forth across the yellow line of the highway, Don let out an expletive. *Where the fuck am I? I've got to be getting close. I'm not tired. I can go for another twelve hours. Fuck it. Let's do it. Let's fucking do it.*

The sun was beginning to rise, bringing new life with it. In a few hours, the heat would be almost unbearable. The cacti on the side of the road didn't mind. Up ahead on the horizon, Don spotted a green sign with large white letters. Getting closer, he realized they spelled out "Navajo Nation".

*Navajo fucking nation. The biggest Indian reserve in the United States of America. Heh. Grade school knowledge does come in handy.* Grinding his teeth, Don lit up a cigarette. *Those poor bastards. They don't even get a civil rights movement. Just a bit of white guilt. If I knew what I could do, I would help.* The cigarette made Don feel like shit. Tossing it out the window, it hit the desert floor and rolled along the sand until it found a resting place next to a cactus. And while this cactus looked like any other cactus in the

desert, the fact was that this was no ordinary plant. This cactus was known in the scientific community as *lophophora williamsii*, in the common tongue as peyote, and in certain Native American tribes as a deity.

For thousands of years, peyote had been used as a method of soul searching and soothsaying. It was thought that the hallucinations and thoughts induced by its consumption were messages from higher powers, and that one could even talk directly to gods under its influence. Tales have been told of young men walking far into the desert with naught but a satchel of peyote and returning as men of purpose.

It was the arrival of Europeans in the New World that created a cloud of notoriety around the plant. The conquerors sought to destroy and assimilate every part of Native American culture, and peyote was no exception. Deemed “satanic trickery” and thought of as a way to contact evil spirits, the Catholic Church set out to punish all who chose to participate in the peyote ritual. Those who resisted were forced to flee to the hills.

It was the chemical compound mescaline that caused these visions, a compound that differed only slightly from the lysergic acid diethylamide found within Don’s glove compartment. Don was partaking in a ritual that was older than the United States of America, older than the Catholic Church, older than the asphalt beneath his wheels. Just as the Native Americans had done for thousands of years, Don was on a quest for purpose. And it had just begun.

## II

Water. I needed water. My mouth was as drier than an upstanding bar in the time of prohibition. I couldn't remember when I'd passed out, but at least I'd had enough sense to pull far off of the road. I was lucky nobody had stopped to check in on me and steal what little I had.

Looking down at my watch, it read one o'clock. If I had to guess, I'd been out for five or six hours. Taking off my jacket, I grimaced, realizing it was drenched in sweat along with the rest of my clothes. My fever was gone, but by no means did I feel well. My body ached, and my mind felt heavy. My sinuses were so clogged I could hardly breathe. Opening the car door, I spat a mouthful of speckled phlegm into the sand. Closing the door, I laid back. I always viewed the morning after a drunken stupor through darkly tinted glasses, but often with good reason.

It was too hard not to think of what I'd left behind; slowly the voices of my demons were creeping back into my head. The bourbon I'd drunk last night had lubricated my mind just enough so not to hear them. I'd almost thought they were gone, but now I realized they'd be sure I wouldn't forget my mistakes. The boy. Keith. Jimmy. Anderson. Everything. Luckily, hunger interrupted my thoughts before I could lapse further into a depressed state. I wondered if the doped up mice back in our lab were this self-loathing.

Growling at me, my stomach sounded though it was eating itself and I decided I needed food in addition to water. Rummaging

through my backseat, I searched for anything I might have had the foresight to pack. I found nothing except a bottle of bourbon that's very sight made me throw up in my mouth. I hadn't prepared for this awakening at all. Turning around, I put my keys in the ignition and started the car. I had to be close to some sort of civilization.

The highway to wherever I was headed was nearly empty. Every so often I'd see a car pass by in the opposite direction. Whenever this happened, I'd try to make up a story for the passengers to take my mind off both Stanford and my hunger. The travelling salesman; the young couple in love; the murderer on the run (that was me). I wondered if I'd ever guessed right.

Though my haze, I noticed something big and pink coming up on the right side of the road; it wasn't a sign, as it was moving. As I got closer, I realized that it was a woman. As a matter of fact, it was a black woman in her Sunday best making her way through the desert. Her back was hunched over and she was dragging a travel bag on wheels behind her. How'd she get all the way out here? As I passed her, I put on my left blinker and pulled onto the shoulder of the road. If I were to be an agent of change, I might as well start now. Sticking my head out the driver's side window, I yelled back to her.

"Excuse me, ma'am? Do you need a ride?" No answer. The woman continued her torrid pace towards the car. I only hoped she wasn't a mirage. "Ma'am?"

I hopped out of the car and ran over to the passenger side door, opening it up and making a motion with my hands for her to get in. As she reached the back bumper of my Chevrolet, her eyes finally



turned upwards. Fanning her face with a gloved hand, she opened her mouth to speak.

“I see my chariot has arrived. Thanks for stopping, I’ve been walking fo’ miles.” I smiled and again motioned towards the passenger seat. Bending over, her large hat barely made it through the door. The car sunk nearly three inches as she let out a sigh, transferring her exhaustion to the axles of the Chevrolet. Tossing the travel bag in the back seat, I walked back to the driver’s seat and slammed the door behind me.

“Where to ma’am?” I asked, my eyes on the road.

“Albuquerque, New Mexico. I suspect we’re not far. Just keep on the highway. You’ll see the sign.” She could tell I wasn’t from around these parts.

“Albuquerque it is.”

Playing the role of chauffeur, I smoothly let off the brakes and merged back onto the empty highway.

“So, how’d you get all the way out here?”

“I should be asking you the same question, child. I passed by your car just hours ago; I was surprised there weren’t buzzards circling ‘round it. I would have woken you, but a man in your state needs all the rest he can get.” I smiled to myself. If only she knew the half of it. “I can tell you’re lost out here, child, but you’re not alone. Many a lost soul winds up out here in the desert.”

“And are you one of them?”

“Lord no, child. I know where I’m headed. To Albuquerque, like I told you.” I laughed to myself. “Though I have been lost out

here more times than I'd care to admit. One has to be careful not to get too lost, however, especially a woman in my shoes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The winds of change are blowing, child, but there are some benign orchards in this desert that are immune to such things. I pray someday sense will find them; but until that day, one has to take proper precautions." The woman nodded towards me and reached behind her seat for the travel bag. After a moment of digging, she turned back towards the front of the car with a green book in her hands. "I hold here a gift for you. In this book, you'll find the names and maps of all towns in these parts friendly to people such as you and I. Keep it close; you never know when it might come in handy."

The woman placed the book on my lap. "The Negro Traveler's Green Book" was spelled out in large font on the cover; it was only the size of a pocket book. I was sure its maps did not contain Hattiesburg.

"I thank you kindly, ma'am, but won't you need this more than I? I'm not sure if you can tell, but I'm a white man." The woman cackled with laughter.

"Child, you're whiter than the desert sand surrounding us. But you picked me up, and that means something. They sell these all over the place; you just need to know where to look. I'll find another soon enough." I slipped the book into my jacket pocket, exited to explore its contents at a more opportune time. In my mind, I thought how much of a coincidence this meeting was. And as my mother used to say, coincidences always came at once. Suddenly, a gloved hand

broke my line of sight and train of thought. “The exit to Albuquerque is coming up.”

She was right. Just on the horizon, a large green sign that read “Albuquerque, New Mexico” was visible. I took a left just as the rumblings in my stomach began again.

“I’m sorry ma’am, but would you mind if I found a dinner? I’m starving.”

“Of course, child. Do as you will. I will not be joining you, however. Would not be wise.” I opened my mouth to make an argument, but a kind, stern glance of the woman made me rethink such a thing. We sat in silence for another moment or two until we reached the city and a dinner came up on our right hand side. The dinner looked as though it would serve up a decent meal; It wasn’t the Ritz, but I’d get filled up for a couple of quarters. I threw on my turn signal, made the right, and parked the car.

I got out, rubbing my legs as I did so. Walking around to the passenger side of the car, I was surprised to see my newfound friend was already out and standing with her travel bag behind her. Looking towards me, she moved to place both of her covered hands on my face; I recoiled out of habit, but she was too fast.

“Child, be careful now. And know that you are capable of great things; this old woman can feel it in her aching bones.” I gazed into her worn eyes, and they gazed back with an unfathomable sincerity. She was right. As she turned to leave, I called to her.

“Why are you in Albuquerque, anyway? You never said.” Hearing my words, she turned back to answer with a smile.

“For my father’s funeral, child.” Raising her gloved hand, she said goodbye. “To new beginnings.”

“To new beginnings.” And with that, she disappeared into the urban oasis. Turning, I entered the dinner, my stomach singing songs of salvation.

### III

The diner itself was void of any customers. I reckoned all the regular customers would be at their place of employment at this hour, but who really knew? I supposed it could be a sign of bad food, but at this point I'd eat rubber. An American flag hung behind the counter over the standard diner fare; coffee pots, a griddle, a turned-off radio.

I was seated by a middle-aged woman whose face was caked in makeup and who smelled of a tropical perfume. The smell reminded me of some girl I'd been sweet on years before, one whose face I hardly remembered. Caught between a memory and the present, I managed to crack a smile at the waitress. She stared blankly back.

"Rough night last night, hun?" she asked, handing me a menu. It was a fair question, I supposed. I hadn't washed myself in a couple of days. I probably reeked of cigarettes and bourbon, but I imagined half her customers did.

"...Yeah. Listen, do you guys still serve breakfast?" I asked. The server made an unenthusiastic motion with her pen towards the corner of the menu. It enthusiastically read "All Day Breakfast!". What was her problem? "Thanks. Yeah, I'll get the bacon and eggs, a coffee, and some water. Eggs done over easy, please. Do you guys have any newspapers around?" I needed something to keep my mind from reverting to darkness. My hitchhiker had filled my mind as best she could, but now I'd need something else. The waitress picked up my menu and turned towards the kitchen.

“Newspapers are over there. They’re a nickel apiece. You read it, you bought it.” She pointed at a stack of papers near the entrance as she walked away, her scent still lingering. I momentarily travelled back to my memory once again.

Some people believe that music gives the strongest link to memories; for me it has always been scent. The smell of my dead mother’s apple pies; the odor of a long lost lover’s perfume. We consume these smells, just as we sometimes consume our lovers. While a symphony can awaken recollections of some dull waltz, the smell of a lover can awaken visions of two entangled entities becoming one as though you were both witnessing the shadowy scene on top of being a part of it. Shaking off my distant past, I broke free from my cobwebs by standing and retrieving a newspaper. I can become such a romantic when I’m hungover; too much so. Sparking a cigarette, I opened it, only for my memory to remind me I had something else to read.

Setting down the newspaper, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the book gifted to me by my kind hitchhiker. Running my fingers over its textured green cover, I wondered what secrets were held inside. Instructions on how to survive my journey? Secrets never possessed by my kind?

Opening the book, I was struck with disappointment. Turning page after page, my excitement faded until I realized I held nothing in my hands but a glorified map, one not too dissimilar from the one in my glove compartment folded neatly beneath my stashed substances. The deserts of New Mexico and hills of Mississippi looked less than

impressive on paper. Finding myself at its end, I let out a sigh and returned the tome to my pocket. Picking up the newspaper, I began reading, hoping for better news.

Castro had marched into Havana, somehow a blow to freedom in America and not Cuba. Protestors were calling for the banning of nuclear weapons across the pond in merry old England. Only three short days ago I would have disagreed with these protestors and thought them imbeciles. I still think it not unreasonable to make the argument that these bombs are not weapons; in fact, in a cruel twist of irony, one could argue that their existence is preventing death. However, drawing comparisons between Project MKUltra and The Manhattan Project, which birthed the atomic bomb, I couldn't help but see the similarities. People had died during their creation; in the case of the atom bomb, worlds had been destroyed. Hell, President Truman was probably still trying to wash the blood off his hands, just as I was. These bombs were not something to be celebrated.

Turning the page, I found what I was looking for. News from Mississippi. Before I could start, the server was back with my coffee and water. Without any hesitation, I gulped down the water as fast as I could. The waitress shook her head and moved along. Lighting up another cigarette, I took a sip of coffee. Sometimes, coffee gave me a feeling of impending doom; today, I felt fine. Mentally and physically prepared, I began reading.

The man who had first attempted to be enrolled at Mississippi Southern College had been arrested and sentenced to seven years; on trumped-up charges no doubt. The university's president, one Dr.

William David McCain, was taking a no bullshit stance towards the whole movement. There was probably a stick shoved so far up his ass he couldn't walk straight.

I shut the newspaper. My bacon and eggs had arrived. I nodded my head towards the server in thanks. It was worth my two quarters. As I ate, I began to contemplate my mission. I finished quickly.

My plan was simple enough; I would first try to get a job at the university and infiltrate it from the inside. With my credentials, I would have no problem. Of course, I would first have to meet with community leaders, preferably in secret. I'd always loved a good scheme. If I were to be a champion of the people, I would first have to understand them and their plight. I would no longer be dealing with academics or bureaucrats, but instead with everyday people. The old woman I'd picked up was a blessing in disguise, even if her book was near worthless. Her words had given me hope that I was on the right path.

"Are ya done?" I looked up to see the server standing over me.

"Yes."

"Alright, that will be forty cents please."

"Does that include the newspaper?"

"Forty-five cents." I handed her my two quarters.

"Keep the change." She turned and walked away without even a thank you; was she being rude on purpose, or was this just how people acted in the modern world?



Standing up, I glanced at my watch and decided it was time to get back on the road; I was halfway to my destination. The rest of the journey would be a walk in the park. Taking a step towards the doorway, I started blinking profusely. Something was wrong; slowly but surely, my vision was fading to black. It was as though all the blood in my body had rushed to my head. What had started as a few specks had become a blanket of darkness, and after a few moments I couldn't see anything. I couldn't even think. My shoulders felt as though they couldn't support the air above them. As I came crashing down, I knocked a ceramic plate off a nearby table. It shattered into countless pieces. Why did I have to drink that coffee?

“Sir! Sir!” I couldn't answer. “Sir?” I stayed on the ground. I was conscious, but I couldn't move my arms or legs. I took a deep breath. “Sir, you have to leave.” Feeling returned to my body and I managed to slowly stand using a chair for support.

“Sorry...sorry...” I managed to stutter. There was a large mirror hanging on one of the walls. Glancing over, I caught a glimpse of my reflection. I looked like my own ghost.

“No needs for sorry, just get out. I'm tired of you riff raff coming in here and messing the place up. I saw you fraternizing with that Negro out there, and I didn't take too kindly to that. ‘Least ya didn't bring her in. Besides, you reek of booze and shit. Be gone with yah.” A wave of anxiety rushed over me. Was this what I had become? What was I doing to myself?

Over the course of three days, I had gone from a distinguished scholar to being accused of smelling of shit. Was this a symptom of

madness? No. I knew I was doing what I needed to do. It was the world that had gone mad. And I'd seen the writing on the wall.

“Get outta here! Shoo!”

Stumbling out on to the street, I basked in the fresh air. I momentarily thought of lighting up a cigarette, but I couldn't smoke, not now. What did that bitch know anyway? She had no idea who I was, what I'd been through, what I'd accomplished; she was probably some rube who'd never stepped foot outside of Albuquerque. I opened my car door and sat down inside, slamming it behind me.

The voices in my head were flaring up once again. My old mode of thinking had returned and taken over my brain like a poison. What I'd been through? My accomplishments? I had a long list of them, the most recent being murder, and unfortunately not that of my ego. I had been naïve to think a drop of some lab-produced acid could change a man so utterly and completely. At least I wasn't blind to it.

The judgment of others was beyond my control, and on this journey I would face it time and time again. A sore ego was the least of my worries. For now, I could lose it. Opening my glove compartment, I reached in and retrieved my soiled litmus papers. One would do for now; it would make the drive more interesting at the very least. I put one of the papers into my mouth and tossed my head backwards in a goodbye to the world.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my key and inserted it into the ignition. There was no turning back now, ego be damned. I started the engine and drove out of Albuquerque, continuing towards my vision of redemption and rescue.

## IV

I couldn't say how long I was being followed. The acid had worn off for the most part some time ago, and it was only then that I realized that the blue Oldsmobile behind me had been trailing me for what seemed like forever. The driver looked strikingly like Mr. Anderson, though I couldn't be certain, as his size was dwarfed by the vastness of the highway. In the passenger seat sat an older gentleman who resembled the decrepit Mr. Magoo from my Saturday morning cartoons; his face (save for his oversized nose) was hardly visible above the car dashboard. In my head, the two formed a slapstick comedy duo, which I had dubbed "The Misters".

My time on acid had been a subdued yet pleasant one. My thoughts were clear and my vision had been almost unaffected save for some kaleidoscopic shapes in the sky. Perhaps the dosage had been too low, or perhaps I was growing a tolerance to the drug; was such a thing even possible? I wasn't sure. I'm sure the answer was buried somewhere back in Stanford. In any case, my purpose was clear. I was coming up on Dallas now, and would be entering the open arms of the hospitality state in mere hours.

The Misters had been riding my ass for the past thirty or forty miles. If they were trying to follow me stealthily, they were doing a piss poor job of it. When I had first spotted them, I had been paralyzed with fear. Surely they were sent to kill or detain me. The first hour had been excruciating; was this how my journey was to end? The more I thought about it, however, the more hilarious it

became. Perhaps it was the acid still lurking within my blood stream; perhaps it was the absurdity of the entire situation. Either way, I had a smile on my face.

Mr. Magoo believed that the Texas sand was actually snow and they were moving their way through the great white north. In his mind, the peaks and ridges of the Texan desert were the towering mountains of the Alaska Range. With each passing comment, Mr. Anderson would smack him upside the head in a no nonsense kind of manner. It had continued this way for hours. On more than one occasion, Mr. Magoo had mistaken the gearshift for his cane and had attempted to dislodge it, causing the vehicle to stall and sputter. Mr. Anderson continuously shouted expletives at him as they barreled down the highway.

Chuckling to myself, I lit up a cigarette. I'd have to lose these buffoons at some point, and I'd rather it be sooner than later. I began to slow. Switching on my turn signal, I pulled over onto the shoulder of the road. The misters sped past in their Oldsmobile coupe, Anderson laying on the horn, Magoo shaking his cane out the window. Letting out a sigh of relief, I was glad they were gone for now. Using this lapse in time to my advantage, I made sure I was still on track. Opening my glove compartment, I navigated my hand past the drugs within to find my road map.

Unfolded, the map was nearly the size of my entire windshield; it was almost cartoonishly big. The thing was a nightmare to read. Cursing Rand McNally under my breath, I slowly traced my

route. It seemed as though everything lined up. I was now on the interstate 20, which would take me right on through to my destination.

In the distance, I heard the sound of screeching tires. Bringing the map down from my eyes, I looked out my windshield. It was the misters, and they were racing back towards me, black smoke billowing behind them in contrast to the clear desert sky.

“Shit.” I grabbed one of the bottles of bourbon from the back seat and took a swig. This was it. I wouldn’t go out in a flash of glory or leave any legacy behind. I’d never truly loved. I hadn’t gotten my shot at redemption. I had done nothing. And was it really that bad? I took a puff of my cigarette. There was no point in fighting it. If I tried to hightail it out of here, they’d just find me in another place, in another time. I was destined to become a bullet-ridden corpse on the side of the interstate. This was my punishment.

Taking the biggest gulp of bourbon I could stomach, I let out a laugh. Surely Anderson would do the deed; he wouldn’t trust Magoo with a firearm. The duo was getting close now. Taking a deep breath, I slowly folded my map back up and put it in the glove compartment.

While just days before I had been terrified by the prospect of death, now I was relatively calm. For a split second the possibilities crept into my mind. In death, would I have to explain myself to my maker and to the boy I’d killed? Would I be greeted by the patchwork of light and darkness I’d seen at the onset of my hellish vision? Would I be omniscient, all seeing and all knowing? Some things I didn’t want to know.

Faced with infinite options, there was no point in contemplating further. No point in prayer. I would have an answer soon enough. The Oldsmobile sped past my Chevrolet, then quickly pulled a U-turn and pulled off the road behind me. This had all been a mistake. My journey of nonviolent beginnings would be met with a violent end.

Reaching upwards, I fiddled with my rearview mirror so I could see exactly what was going on behind me. The passenger door of the Oldsmobile opened and Magoo stepped out. He was just as short as I'd imagined him; he couldn't have been over five feet. The driver side door remained closed as Magoo made his way forward at a snail's pace. His bald head glistened in the sun; he was missing his characteristic top hat. As he got closer, I could see every single wrinkle on the man's face; he looked to be at least eighty. I was surprised a desert predator wasn't stalking him.

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally reached my window and tapped on it with his cane. Rolling down my window, I stared into his small, beady eyes. This is the man they had sent to do the job?

"Hello sir! Top of the morning to ye!" Magoo said as he reached up as though to tip his hat, although he was wearing none. It was the late evening.

"Same to you." I flashed him a grin, though he probably couldn't see it. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Trouble? No trouble, at least on my end. I was about to ask the same of you. My companion and I have been following you for

the past few miles, I'm not sure if you've noticed, but when you pulled off the road we thought something might be wrong. Or at least he did. I wasn't sure what happened, you see, as I had my nose in our map at the time. We're headed to Baton Rouge to visit some relatives, you see. Ain't no place like Louisiana, if I do declare. I think we took a wrong turn a bit of a ways back though, and my companion is trying to figure it out now. Yep, we just wanted to make sure you were okay, that everything was fine. Wouldn't want you stuck out here overnight, these can be some pretty tough spots." What game were they playing?

"Well sir, I do thank you kindly for stopping, but I actually pulled over to check the map myself. Things got a little confusing right outside of Dallas, like you said."

"Dallas? No, we're going to Baton Rouge. Dallas is back that way!" Magoo pointed west.

"No sir, not Dallas, I'm headed to Hattiesburg! I thought I got lost near Dallas! I believe I'm fine now. In any case, I thank you for your concern, and have a nice trip!"

"Well, if you're sure! Best of luck to ye!" Magoo again attempted to tip his phantom hat and began waddling back to the Oldsmobile.

I let out a deep breath. What had just happened? Surely this was simply a bumbling old man and not some government agent. He could hardly tell what I was saying, and I doubt his sight was any better than that of his namesake. I glanced up at my rearview mirror and saw the Oldsmobile pull another U-turn and head back towards Dallas.

Lighting up another cigarette, I threw my head back and laughed. For the third time in less than a week I'd been certain I was going to die; at least I'd gotten the hang of it now. Grabbing the bottle of bourbon, I put it back to my lips, this time in celebration rather than reflection. Taking a gulp, the sunset smiled at me from the back of the bottle. As the warming alcohol began to course through my already warm body, my mind began to wonder.

Magoo had said they were going to Baton Rouge; in that case, why did the car head west towards the setting sun? Surely there was a better option than to head back to Dallas and set out anew on a different highway. I opened my glove compartment and once again spread out my map. Finding myself, I traced along the I-20. Sure enough, they had countless options. Why had they turned back?

Thinking back to our conversation, it suddenly struck me like a truck full of bricks. Magoo wasn't a bumbling fool; I had played exactly into his hands. The misters weren't on a mission to terminate me; they were on a mission to study me. The research I had been conducting at Stanford truly was useless; I was the real test subject, a mouse trapped in a cage. Caught with my guard down, I had told him exactly where I was going. Magoo wasn't some sidekick; Magoo was a mastermind!

Shit. I couldn't believe it. It all added up; Anderson hadn't left the car because he was certain I'd recognize him. The way Magoo was without protest after I'd given him my destination. I could just imagine the pair of them now, cackling at my stupidity. Fuck! I slammed my forehead against the steering wheel. Without looking up,



I reached inside my magic glove compartment and pulled out the cocaine. Filling up my palm, I put it up to my face as though I was feeding a horse. I inhaled with all I had, sending white powder went everywhere. Brushing it off the dash and my pants the best I could, I quickly gave up as I gradually became filled with an excitement for something that wasn't there.

“Well, what the fuck am I going to do now?” I asked myself aloud. There were really only two options: continue on to Hattiesburg and Mississippi College, or end my odyssey prematurely and head somewhere else. Mexico. Canada. Somewhere those bastards wouldn't be able to find me. Was there such a place?

A cocaine cloud was beginning to form in my head, and with it came stormy fronts. There was no way I was going to turn back now. I'd do exactly as they wanted me to do. I'd be the perfect fucking test subject. And if lady irony had her way, I would be the next victim claimed by MKUltra. There would be no more flip-flopping on my part. Enough was enough.

Looking up at my rearview mirror again, I found an empty highway in lieu of Magoo and Anderson. Did any normal folk drive these days? Opening the door, I stepped out of the car. The sun had disappeared, and all that remained were some streaks of reds and pinks on the western horizon. To the east, the sky was filled with countless stars. A coyote howled in the distance. Taking a few steps into the desert, I undid my belt buckle, unzipped my pants, and let loose. I looked to the heavens (or lack thereof) and sighed. This was all so damn beautiful. With my cigarette resting in the corner of my

mouth, I realized that for the first time in my life I was taking solace in a piss.

All was calm in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The sky was clear. The trains were all on time; the clock tower that presided over them read 8 o'clock on the dot. The school bell had rung, and all the little Susies and Joeys were now subject to another day in the classroom which would begin with a rendition of the pledge of allegiance. The men and women of the town weren't bound by such a notion; they each had their own morning routine as they settled in for another day in Hattiesburg.

Far from the hustle and bustle of Main Street, a black Chevrolet was slowly weaving its way throughout the side streets of the sleepy town, as though the driver wasn't quite sure where exactly he was or where he was supposed to be. A trail of cigarette butts lay in his wake. He had been trapped in this maze for hours, but now, as if by magic, his blinker turned on. He'd found his exit. In one fluid motion, the car turned off the road and parked.

Slowly, the door opened and a man stepped out. His appearance was haggard, and he carried himself as though he was aware of this fact. His underarms were stained yellow, as were his teeth. His greasy hair shone in the morning sun. In a valiant effort to appear at least presentable, he tucked in his shirt, threw on his jacket, and slicked his hair back, all with an unsteady hand. Carefully putting one foot in front of the other, he made his way from the parked car to a tiny building surrounded by a white picket fence.

Reaching his destination, he opened the door and stepped inside. A tiny bell rang above the door to signify his entrance, as if he was expected. In front of him was a desk, at which sat an overweight woman who was probably in her mid to late thirties. This was a woman without a morning routine; she had been sitting in the same spot for hours.

“Howdy and welcome to tha Speakeasy Motel! How can I help y’all today?” She asked in a high-pitched squeal. The man looked around, certain he had entered by himself.

“I’d like a room, please.” The man said softly after a pause, as though he was concluding an extraordinary long sentence.

“Excellent! And how long will y’all be staying with us?” The woman was beaming.

“Y’all? It’s just me.” The man responded to the local turn of phrase, making him seem even more out of place. Realizing this, he quickly retracted his question. “A week.”

“Great. At five bucks a night, all-inclusive, your total will be thirty-five dollars! Would ya like to pay now or later?”

“Now.” The man opened his wallet with a poof of white dust and carefully extracted forty dollars.

“Cash! We ain’t used to dealing with cash here, usually everything is done with checks! You mus’ be on the run!” She teased, winking at him. The man winced slightly.

“Just had it on me. Always wise to have some on you, just in case.” He smiled. In reality, he had visited a bank in Texas the

previous evening just at closing time. He had withdrawn his entire savings. The teller had been thoroughly unimpressed.

“Smart man. We don’t have ‘nough of them round these parts.” She giggled. “Now, before I give y’all yah key, we just have to fill out a little bit o’ paperwork. If y’all could kindly give me your name?” With every “y’all”, the man looked more and more at unease.

“Mr. Robert Wilson.”

“Alright Mr. Wilson, I just need y’all to fill out your current address and sign here, then we’re done!” She placed a sheet of paper in front of him. Under the space marked address he wrote down a street that didn’t exist. At the bottom of the page, he signed an X and slid the paper back towards the waiting receptionist who readily accepted it.

“Thank you, sir. Here’s your room key, y’all are in room number eight. If y’all need anything at all, just come right on down here and I’ll be sure ta help y’all. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you. Is there a motel bar around this place by any chance? I mean, the name of the joint is the Speakeasy.” The man asked, chuckling.

“Well, not exactly. Every Thursday evening we host a bridge tournament and that can get pretty darn rowdy...” She motioned towards a table and chairs off to the side of the room. On the table sat a bottle of Jack Daniels with about a quarter of the whiskey missing. “In any case, I’d be happy ta show y’all ‘round town, I’m sure we could find somethin’ that would tickle your fancy there.” Another wink.

“Thanks... I’ll keep that in mind. I’ll be back if I need anything else, or have any questions.” The man exited the small building as the receptionist yelled a goodbye after him. He was caught in a town that embraced the romanticism of the taboo, but not the consequences. Without a glance around, he made a beeline for his car to retrieve his luggage.

First came a meager suitcase, followed by two bottles of bourbon, each of which found a home within his jacket pockets. Slamming the door shut, the man raced to the passenger side to retrieve some various packets and canisters that had been stowed away in his glove compartment. With a look of satisfaction on his face, he turned towards the motel. By either a stroke of luck or his own genius (the man chose to believe the later), he had managed to park directly in front of room number eight. Taking two steps forward, he inserted his room key into the lock and entered his temporary sanctum.

A flick of a lamp switch illuminated the very plain room. There was a large bed, a desk and chair, a phone, an ashtray. A portrait of a mockingbird hung on the wall. The curtains were drawn, causing the silhouettes of the objects to stretch and make the room appear more cluttered than it truly was.

In a matter of seconds, the man’s clothes and belongings lay in a heap on the ground. Wearing only his undergarments, the man walked to the door. While a less solicitous man would have simply locked the deadbolt, our subject proceeded to retrieve the chair from

beneath the writing desk and jammed it under the doorknob for good measure.

Turning back towards his bed, he began in its direction before pausing in the center of the room, his shadow taking up valuable real estate upon the wall, his face skewed in contemplation. In one dangly lounge, the man returned to the door and began to double-check all the locks. After securing the door chain for a third time he was satisfied. He could finally rest. Returning to his bed, he closed his eyes and collapsed onto clouds. Our subject was lost to anything and everything of earthly consequence.

The sun set and the sun rose. Another day had set in for Hattiesburg, but to our subject it mattered naught. He was walking the line between reality and the realm of dreams, which to him was nothing but darkness, as it had been for years. It was not until noon of the following day that he finally jolted from his slumber. His eyes opened wide as he tried to piece together what had happened, where he was, and how he had gotten there. Holding his head in shaking hands, his mind attempted to process each question, and with each answer he sunk further and further into the bed.

After lying silently awake for nearly an hour, our subject finally decided that it was time to urinate. On wobbly legs, he slowly made his way to the bathroom and proceeded to relieve himself in the toilet and on the surrounding floor as a consequence of his shaking hands. Delerium tremens had set in. With aching muscles, he made his way back to bed and cursed beneath his breath.

As anyone who has ever experienced depersonalization knows, it can be a very strange and curious thing. To our subject, the real world was now an unknown and frightening place. The person he had known, the person he was thought to be was no more, and this chilled him to the bone. Anxiety was building in his chest, but he couldn't figure out just where to place it. That wasn't his anxiety; he wasn't really there. This was his world now.

The man turned over in bed and let everything sink in. He was here, he was on a mission. In a moment of clarity, he realized just what he had to do. The phone sat on the bed stand next to him. Rolling back over to face it, he propped himself up. Reaching over, he opened the drawer of the stand to reveal a bible and a phonebook. One was useless to him; the other held what he needed. He opened the phonebook and began flipping through its thin pages. Unable to find exactly what he was looking for, he tossed it across the room in frustration. Both books were useless to him.

Picking up the phone, he put it to his ear and dialed zero. A young woman on the other end picked up almost instantaneously. Licking his dry lips, the man uttered his first words of the day.

“Mississippi Southern College please.”

“Yes sir. One moment.” After some brief shuffling in the background, he heard a ringtone. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four rings.

“Hello, you've reached the office of the registrar, Southern Mississippi College. How may I help you today?”



“Good afternoon, Ma’am. My name is Dr. Donald Fremont. I’m a professor of psychology, formerly based out of Stanford, and I’ve just made my way to your lovely town. I was wondering if I could arrange an appointment with the university president, Dr. McCain?” More shuffling.

“And what would this meeting be about?”

“I’m interested in lecturing and conducting research at your institution. I’ve always had a fascination with the south and the lovely schools you have here, so I thought I’d attempt to secure a position.” Lies.

“I’m sorry Dr. Fremont, Dr. McCain is extremely busy these next few weeks; he wouldn’t be able to meet until next month at the earliest. We actually aren’t currently hiring professors; that is traditionally done in the early spring.”

“I understand that, Ma’am, but I thought an exception could be made for a distinguished professor such as myself. I’d love to meet with somebody and show him or her my credentials, even if it did mean not beginning to teach until the fall. And I’d like to do that as soon as possible, while I’m here.”

“Well, sir, I’d be happy to arrange a meeting for you with the chair of the psychology department. He might be of service to you. Just give me a moment, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you, that would be much appreciated.” His eyes towards the ceiling, the man sat and waited. The cries of children could be heard outside his window. He hadn’t realized the motel was

situated near an elementary school. His stomach growled in hunger. He didn't hear a thing.

“Alright sir, I've just consulted with the department of psychology, and it looks like the Chair will be free at around 10 a.m. tomorrow morning. Does that work for you?”

“Yes, it does. Thank you very much, you've been most helpful.”

“Excellent! In that case, he will see you then. Enjoy your time in Hattiesburg, and I hope you enjoy your trip to the college!” The man put down the phone. The sinking feeling in his chest remained, yet his mind was clear. He thought of retrieving the bourbon, but ultimately decided against it. Rolling over, he closed his eyes and attempted once again to dream, but to no avail.

## VI

Fuck. I'd cut myself for the third time and threw down my razor. My hands had been shaking for days now. I couldn't stop them; they had become their own entity. Cleaning myself had been bliss; scrubbing off dead skin, washing the grease from my hair, cleaning my stained teeth; my skin felt as smooth as the day I'd exited the womb. Now, trying to shave, I felt like a child with no mother or father to mentor him, like a soul without guidance. I picked up my razor, clenched my teeth, and attempted to finish molding an acceptable face.

Anxiety still lingered in the back of my mind like a haunting specter, though after sleeping nearly two days it was all but gone. Still, I knew my demons were only lurking in the shadows, certain to jump out at any given opportunity. Carving the final hairs off my face, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I was confidence personified. This would be a breeze. Go through the motions.

Wiping the crimson mixture of blood and shaving cream from my face, I exited the bathroom. Opening my suitcase, I picked out a familiar uniform: white shirt, black tie, black slacks. Earlier that morning I'd discovered a flatiron under my bed, so I thought I'd put it to use. My writing desk playing the part of a makeshift ironing board, I began to crease my trousers. Finishing the left leg, I doubled over in pain. My stomach ached; I hadn't eaten in three days. Hunger cramps had been striking periodically since I'd awoken. Cigarettes had stopped doing the job hours ago; I'd need to get something.

It was the cramps that had awoken me the night previous. They hurt something fierce, as though Satan himself was plunging a fiery knife deep within my abdomen. Jumping out of bed in a pain induced stupor, I'd managed to hastily get dressed (with my jacket on inside out, no less), and marched myself down to the motel receptionist's office.

After an irritatingly pleasant greeting from the receptionist, I'd timidly asked for a restaurant recommendation, which she took as an open invitation. Preferring my pain to her company, I attempted a menagerie of different excuses to prevent an outing. I realized I forgot my wallet; she offered to pay. I was meeting a friend; she would call one of hers from out of obscurity. It was only when I violently faked ill that she finally let me depart. It wasn't her looks that deterred me, but rather the sickly sweet coating she drizzled on every last one of her words; it just wasn't natural. Alas, I returned to my room with little to show for it and resumed my slumber.

Adding the final creases, I held up the finished product to admire my work. Perfect. I quickly ironed my shirt and put it on carefully, one button at a time. Next came the tie, followed by the trousers. My watch completed the ensemble. A week on the road and in bed had not derailed years of routine. Replacing the flatiron beneath the bed, a glimmer caught my eye from across the room. A beam of sunlight was illuminating one of my bottles of bourbon, giving it an almost otherworldly glow. Picking up the bottle with two hands, I revealed my treasure trove of mind-altering substances beneath it.

For a single second, temptation reared its ugly head. I could feel the smooth bourbon trickling down my throat, the numbness of the cocaine, the serenity of my cursed cure. My only wish was that it would never end. Suppressing these feelings, I stowed the drugs beneath the bed to lend their company to the flatiron. Not today. Dusting off my knees, I realized I would appear rather unprofessional if I arrived at the college empty handed. My eyes darting around the room, I noted my suitcase had the appearance of a rather large briefcase. This could easily be added to the illusion; whatever lies within a closed briefcase is anyone's guess. Exiting the motel room, I locked the door behind me.

My skin sizzled in the Mississippi sun. Not wasting any time, I quickly hopped in my trusty Chevrolet and started the engine. Throwing the shift into neutral, I began to carefully back up. Catching movement out of the corner of my eye, I looked over just as a familiar shrill voice hit my eardrums. Fuck. I rolled down my window and did my best to put on a smile.

"Hello! How are y'all on this beautiful morning? Feelin' better?" the receptionist asked, eyes twinkling.

"Yes, much better, thank you. I'm actually late for an appointment at the college, so I don't have much time to spare. Have a lovely day!"

"Ah, the college! You're a professor?"

"I'm kind of in between positions at the moment, but yes, you could say that." I had to let her know who she was talking to.

“Wow! A professor! Well, let me know how that appointment goes!” I hardly let her finish her sentence as I sped onto the road. This time I wasn’t making up fibs; I was late, and I still had yet to eat. Keeping my eyes peeled for a diner or coffee shop, I made my way closer and closer to the heart of the city.

I lit up a cigarette. After today, the first step of my plan would be complete. There was no point in thinking any further at the moment or of getting heated over politics. For today, my sole focus was to secure a position at the college. Exhaling a cloud of smoke, I noticed a small coffee shop coming up on my right. I slammed my breaks and pulled over. Sustenance at last.

A sign that read “Whites Only” hung over the door of the coffee shop. I pushed open the door and reminded myself that I would need to be in and out quickly. A bruised elbow and ego remained from my previous trip to a diner; I wouldn’t allow the past to repeat itself. I walked up to the counter to place my order.

“Hi there. Could I please get two plain doughnuts and a coffee, black, in a paper cup please?” I gave an enthusiastic nod to the young man behind the counter.

“I’m sorry sir, but we’ve actually gone and run out of paper cups.” Fuck. I looked at my watch.

“Well then sell me a fucking mug.” The boy looked aghast. This town was benign.

“I don’t think I can do that sir...” He managed to sputter out, his voice cracking on every syllable.

“Fine. Then just give me the coffee, and be quick about it.” I placed a nickel and dime on the counter. The boy spun around, nearly tripping over his own feet. In a matter of seconds he had returned with my coffee and a pair of pastries that I was certain had a name of romantic origin. I let out a heavy sigh. Taking my coffee in one hand, I downed it in a single gulp and chased it with my “doughnuts”. A look of bewilderment crossed the boy’s face. Tossing him an extra nickel, I turned and exited the shop. My stomach satisfied, I returned to the road.

My watch struck 9:30 as I crossed the threshold onto campus. I was early. I was surprised; I had almost forgotten what it was like to live in the realm of clocks and calendars. Parking the car, I decided to take a scenic stroll on route to the department of psychology and my first true test.

The campus was reminiscent of Stanford, but smaller. It was all the same song and dance; youths reading on the grass, silver haired professors in tweed, the hustle and bustle between classes. Here, the landscape was absolutely vibrant and the buildings were a wonder to behold.

It was during the late eighteenth century that the Deep South had successfully revived the architectural traditions of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Now, standing beneath these pillars, I was in awe. These pillars were delicate yet powerful; the perfect symbol of strength.

Cue the daydream. Dr. McCain ruled over these grounds as Caesar, a dictator for life. It was he who made the rules, he who

decided who would be educated and who would not. But this Caesar was no Populares, man of the people; he was a Republican in the truest sense. For now, rule would be made with an iron fist. But, as any student of history knows, no emperor's reign can last forever.

A mockingbird's call snapped me out of my daydream and I found myself at the doors of the psychology department. Glancing at my watch, it read 9:50. Perfect timing. I entered the department with all the gusto I could muster.

The department itself was rather drab. At Stanford, our walls had been covered in diagrams of the brain and body. Here, the walls were empty. A pretty young lady typed away at her typewriter to my left. I turned to her.

"Hello there, miss. My name is Don Fremont, I believe I have a meeting with the chair?"

"Yes, Dr. Fremont. I'll let him know you're here. If you'd kindly take a seat, he'll be right out."

"Thank you. Is smoking permitted here?"

"Yes, of course." The secretary left her desk and walked away as I admired her figure. I'd never made it high enough at Stanford to have my own personal secretary, but I'd always aspired to. Now the thought seemed insignificant.

I took a seat and lit up a cigarette. I'd always found the psyche of an interviewee to be a very fascinating thing. Some people absolutely dreaded the thought of speaking to a stranger about personal matters, while others relished in it. I had always fallen into the latter category; it was like second nature. There was no need for



preparation; I knew just what to say. I butted out my cigarette and twiddled my thumbs in anticipation.

Looking to my left, I noticed a young man sitting down, most likely waiting for an examination or some other meaningless evaluation. His sparsely bearded face still bore red blemishes of adolescent bloom. Staring at him, I couldn't help but to be reminded of the face of the boy at Stanford. It was a face I'd only seen once, but one that was etched into my memory forever more. A face I wish I could forget, if only it didn't serve as a reminder to my wrongdoings. Turning away, I shuddered. I hoped the look of youth wouldn't always serve me this way.

Pushing unpleasant thoughts from my mind, I replaced them with thoughts of the busty young secretary. I was sure her full figure was the talk of town. She was a woman I could show off; a woman whose face I wouldn't mind seeing after a nine to five day. We'd be a handsome husband and bride fit for Hollywood. Paparazzo would stalk us wherever we went. Move over Lucy and Desi.

Walking out of my thoughts and into the room, the secretary emerged from the hallway followed by whom I presumed to be the chair. The man was, in simplest terms, a dandy. From his gold tipped cane to his perfectly sculpted facial hair, it was clear the man aimed to be aesthetically pleasing. The only piece of his ensemble that was understated was his plain white socks. As a psychologist, I wondered if it had ever crossed his mind just what this said about him; to me, it screamed that he was an actor, a fraud, a man compelled to amaze and

astound. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd slipped some French into his research papers. This would be easier than I had hoped.

"Ah, Dr. Fremont." he said drolly with a bow.

"Yes, sir." I nodded.

"Charmed, as always. If you'd kindly follow me, we can retreat to my office where we can converse away from prying ears." He said, turning tail and heading back down the long corridor. After several twists and turns, we finally ended at his office. I took a seat and waited for him to speak.

"Could I offer you anything to drink? Iced tea? Hot tea? Lemonade? All three?" He pronounced lemonade as lemon-add.

"No, sir. I'm fine."

"No, I do insist. Let me fetch you some lemonade." Again. The dandy darted out from his office but quickly returned with a glass of ice-cold lemonade. "Freshly squeezed."

"Thank you."

"You are very welcome. If you need anything else, just let me know, you hear? I am at your beck and call. Now, am I under the correct impression when I say you are here looking for a teaching position?"

"Yes sir. If you take a look at my previous works, I'm certain yo-"

"Dr. Fremont, I'm quite well versed in your works. I attended your talk on the behavioral side effects of stimulants in rodents at Harvard – I specialize in the behavioral side of things as well, you see." Perhaps he too had his hand in the cookie jar and his choice of

dress was the unfortunate side effect. I doubted it. “I introduced myself after the talk,. Don’t you remember?”

“Of course I do! How could I forget? I just simply meant to reiterate the fact that my work is highly regarded in the field...” I had absolutely no recollection of the man or his ridiculous attire. I hoped he wouldn’t prod.

“As well you should; I’m not usually one to give compliments, but I must say you are one of the finest specimens Stanford has put out in years. Thus, it deeply pains me to inform you that we are not currently in the business of hiring professors. Alas, we do not have the means. This college has become a beacon of fine arts, not of the sciences. They prefer the known to the unknown, tradition to discovery. Even I get wrapped up in it all on occasion.” the man sighed. I’d seen this all before; it was a classic. The sob story. By playing at my convictions, he would be able to hire me for a reduced salary. Reminder to self: this wasn’t about the money.

“Sir, with all due respect, this isn’t about the money. Frankly, I’ve fallen quite in love with your little town and I’d love to raise my children here. A meager salary would do just fine; I’m sure that in the future things will improve. Who knows what you and I could accomplish in the fine name of this university?”

“A noble gesture, Dr. Fremont, but the lack of funds is much too great. To be perfectly honest, money around these parts is sparser than the hair on my grand pappy’s head. There’s no funding at all. I do agree that our town has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, but so does

Stanford. As both a gentleman and as a scholar, I'd recommend staying there." This prick was still playing hardball.

"I'd do it for a pittance."

"I'm sorry Dr. Fremont, it just is not feasible at this time."

What? Was he being fucking serious? He'd turn down one of the most established young researchers in the field? This asshole must think he's the next coming of Freud or Jung. "Now that we're done with that whole affair, seeing that you're here, would you like to discuss some academic matters?"

My calm demeanor was becoming unhinged. I was less than lucid. Was this dandy doubting my abilities? Or did he simply want to remain the sole big fish in this small, small pond, washing away my less than well laid plans as a consequence? I'd let my ego do the talking.

"No, actually, I'd rather not. I'd much prefer to talk about why you won't give me a fucking job."

"Excuse me?" a look of confusion swept over the face of the chair as though he hadn't heard the word before; if I had gotten a job here, I'm sure it's a face I would have seen often.

"You heard me. What is it? Is it that our research interests are too close in proximity? Is it that I'd steal all your glory, take over the department, become the hero of Southern Mississippi?" My voice was raising now. "I'm twice the psychologist you are, twice the man. Now, could you please answer the fucking question: why won't you give me a job?" My last few words approached a yell. I was standing

now, breathing heavily. The chair looked up at me with beady eyes, his look of confusion diminishing. With a stern face, he answered.

“I gave you my reasoning, Dr. Fremont. An outburst such as that is not very becoming of your character. I suggest you leave before you say anything that could damage your reputation further.” I put on a smirk. This wasn’t worth my time; the old coot was too far gone. He obviously didn’t respect me or my convictions, and I didn’t care to make him. Soon enough he would be buried along with his archaic methods. I calmly turned and walked out into the hallway leaving my plans in ruin.

I mean, the man hadn’t even heard about my departure from Stanford. I doubt he had any significant connections in academia at all; he was a nobody. Giving me a big “fuck you” had probably been the highlight of his career. What was I supposed to do now? Stumble along the eastern seaboard of America, looking for some other shit town to save? I was ruined.

Managing to navigate my way backwards through the maze of hallways, I found myself in the departmental lobby. An escape to this madhouse was in sight. Stopping momentarily to dig my cigarettes out of my pocket, I was surprised when a firm grip took hold of my right shoulder. Expecting a disgruntled dandy, I spun around, but instead found myself staring into a reflection of my own eyes.

The man I found before me was exactly my height, but much stockier. The shine of his aviator sunglasses matched that of the badge tacked on to his beige uniform. His skin was well worn and toughened, giving the impression that behind his sunglasses lay eyes

that had seen far too much. The prominent gut sticking out over his belt embodied power, not sloth. He opened his mouth to speak.

“Morning.” He said with a slow, southern drawl. I paused, waiting for more, but that was it.

“Good morning, officer. How can I help you?” Under these circumstances, politeness was the best course of action.

“I was just in the area this morning, responding to another call, when I caught wind of some yelling and threats being uttered ‘round these parts. I was just wondering if you had anything to do with that.” Threats? Really?

“Yes, officer. I take responsibility for the yelling, though the threats were rather farfetched. I was simply in an argument in an academic situation; no more, no less. We academics can get rather heated, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“No doubt about it. Like I said, I was just in the area and thought I should investigate. You gave Miss Bush a start is all.” He nodded towards the pretty receptionist.

“I apologize profusely.” I repeated the officer’s notion and nodded towards the receptionist. She didn’t acknowledge. If she became upset this easily, I wasn’t interested. But why was he here in the first place? “Like I said, it was an argument of academics. If I may ask, what brought you here in the first place? I’m currently inquiring about a job here, and I’d hate for there to be complications on campus.” The officer’s face twisted into a scowl.

“Sir, I feel you’re a bit too late for that. I’m sure you’ve read about it, but some nigger has applied here and when they denied him

and ‘is friends got angry. I just booked one of ‘em for disturbing the peace just down the street. If these niggers think they’re above the law, they got another thing comin’ to ‘em, that’s for damn sure.” He snorted and spit on the ground of the lobby. “Trust me though, they won’t last long round these parts. Ya got nothin’ to worry ‘bout, far as that goes.” I feigned a sigh of relief. This was my shot! A chance to pursue the cause, stir up the establishment; I could bail this poor sap out of jail, and win over the freedom fighters. Become one of them. “By the way, I’ve never seen you ‘round these parts before, and like you said, you’re looking for a job.” How perceptive. “Where ya hail from?”

“California.” All he needed to know.

“Californ-i-a, eh? Well, I’d be careful if I was you, the great people of Hattiesburg don’t take kindly to certain things. We’re hospitable ‘round here, but don’t get on our bad side. I always keep my eye on outsiders, and you’ll be no exception. Don’t try anything.” He said it as though he knew I would.

“Understood, sir. I hear you loud and clear.” With a farewell nod, the officer moved past me and out the door. What a stroke of luck!

It seems, at least in my limited experience, that if one is truly drowning, life will always throw them a life preserver either moments before they drown or moments after. When such a preserver does come, it can take any form imaginable (even that of a synthesized hallucinogen), and it is always unexpected. A God fearing man could claim the former case as divine intervention; a man of science could

use the latter case to rationalize the occurrence. In any case, I was neither. I was but a man who had never learned to swim, and this time my preserver had taken the form of a beacon. With my mind craving cocaine and solace, I raced towards the door.



## VII

The only thing separating myself from the Officer's cruiser was a shiny new Ford. It was a beautiful off-color orange; tangelo or tangerine, or some other such manufactured shade designed by a marketing executive in a slick suit.

I had made the calculated risk of following the officer, as I knew very well this could be the only ticket towards my goals. Easing my foot onto the brake, I gained some breathing room; unlike Magoo and Anderson, I wanted to go unnoticed. Thinking about it, I wouldn't be surprised if the bumbling pair reared their heads soon. Every storybook town needs some good villains, though this one seemed to be doing just fine in that regard.

One by one, the toy roofs of suburban America passed by outside my window. I was enchanted by their monotony. Every so often their spell would be broken by the interruption of an obnoxious steeple or flat school top, though this was only temporary; the charm would always return.

Finally, the hex was broken for good. Up ahead, the police cruiser made a left hand turn into a parking lot, leaving the driver of the tangerine ford and I as the only two souls on the road. A white sign that read "Hattiesburg Sheriff's Office" stood in front of a brown, plain building. I drove a block further and pulled over.

In an attempt to force the stale air from the car, I rolled down my window. The scent of lilacs and freshly cut grass was in the air. I took a deep breath and cherished the smell before ruining it with a

cigarette. Putting my feet up on the dash, I set in for a long stakeout. I'd have to wait until Officer Bigot left the building to make my move; like I said, I wasn't in the business of getting on the coppers' bad side. Yet.

I flicked on the AM radio and Elvis' boisterous voice filled the car. Perfect. A man drove by on his bike and gave me a wave. I returned the favor, then tossed my butt towards him as he passed. He didn't notice. The lit end of the cigarette exploded as it hit the pavement, giving the walkers by a mini firework show. Leaning back in my seat, I turned down the radio.

I wasn't usually one for naps, on account of being unable to turn off my thoughts, but I decided to lay back and close my eyes all the same. In truth, I was still pissed off about the incident back at the college. The fact that I wasn't hired was just another testament to the ignorance of this state. That backwards southern dandy would remember the day he crossed me, I'd make sure of that.

Slamming my fist on the dashboard, I spun around. My throat was dry and I'd been sober far too long. I had an itch that needed scratching. Scanning the back seat for some bourbon, I found none. All three bottles were tucked in snugly beneath my motel bed. Fuck. Already knowing the outcome, I swung open my glove compartment door in search of something else. Nothing. Running my finger along the inside of the cubby, I collected an indecipherable mixture of paint rust and fairy dust. Sticking my finger up my right nostril, I inhaled. Leaning back, I waited for bliss. It didn't come. I would have to find another way to occupy my mind.

Slowly, my thoughts wondered west. I'd been gone from Stanford a week, but it felt like an eternity. This untamed life almost seemed natural to me now. While I was never good at adapting to change, this was proving to be the exception to the rule. I'd been so fucked up that even my remorse was beginning to fade.

Back in Central California, a mother was weeping for the loss of her son. She didn't know exactly what had happened; she wasn't given that right. To her, it was a suicide. A call for help she desperately wished she could have answered. Now, her baby was doomed to become a footnote in the obituary section of the local newspaper.

The whole town was abuzz with the news. The poor woman couldn't leave her home for fear of whispers following her, mocking her, blaming her. She was cursed to spend her days alone on her sofa cherishing the better times, the times when she had the company of her son and not just a bottle of merlot.

Or maybe there was no mother and the boy and I shared a deeper bond than I knew. Perhaps the body was dumped in a nameless grave in Palo Alto, never to be spoken of again. Perhaps my conscious was the sole remaining link between the boy and the world of the living. Perhaps someday his name would appear in print, published alongside the names of countless other guinea pigs, myself included.

The screech of a siren pierced the quiet air of Hattiesburg. Coming out of my fog, I turned my head just in time to see my law-enforcing adversary racing away in a storm of blue and red. Wasting

no time, I cut Buddy Holly short by switching off the radio and hopping out onto the street. Tightening my tie, I turned and made my way towards my destination.

What looked to be fifty paces turned out to be twenty-five, and I found myself unpreparedly standing outside the Sheriff's Office. No "Whites Only" sign hung above these doors. Without any discernable plan, I made the decision to improvise a story. My best bet was to act the part of an agent or detective. In a cruel twist of irony (there seemed to be an awful lot of those lately) I would don the cap of Magoo or Anderson, No matter what, I'd have to be cautious. At least my lingering fear of authority was a sign I hadn't gone completely mad (or was it?). I gulped and pushed open the doors.

A young man in uniform greeted me with a smile. He had to be close to my age; I wouldn't have pegged him for over 30. He sat at a wooden desk. Filing cabinets and gun racks lined the walls.

"Howdy partner. What can I do for you today?" the young officer asked enthusiastically.

"Good morning, sir. I –"

"Good afternoon, I reckon. Noon bell rang just 'bout four five minutes 'go. Anyways, you were sayin'?" he interrupted. I smiled and gave a lighthearted laugh. I hoped it didn't sound too forced.

"You got me." I raised my hands in the air in a mock holdup. The officer howled with delight. "The name's Detective Wilson. This morning I got a call about a young man who was arrested on college grounds this morning for disturbing the peace. I was wondering if I

could have a word with him in his cell, you know, figure out what him and his cronies have got planned.” Would he bite?

“Who you with? The feds?” he asked, one eye closed. I nodded. “Well, if that’s the case, guess that ‘splains why I haven’t seen you ‘round town. Y’all look the same, with your ties and whatnot.” Hook, line, and sinker, like he’d just fallen off the turnip truck.

“Yep. Just stepped into this beautiful town about half an hour ago. My, it’s a wonderful place, isn’t it?”

“Just arrived eh? That so? Well then, welcome to Hattiesburg I suppose. You ever need anything, we’re right here. I haven’t been here too long myself; transferred down from good ole Kentucky ‘bout a year ‘go now. I’m sure you’ll enjoy the town just fine, I have been for the most part. Nothin’ much to complain ‘bout ‘cept the niggers, but I’m sure you got ‘em wherever you hail from. I’m not sure ‘bout this bunch though; I ain’t never seen a group of niggers this uppity in all my life. Back home we’d just lynch ‘em, send ‘em a message. Ain’t nobody got the balls to do that ‘round these parts. It’s almost 1-“

“Sorry to interrupt, sir, but the prisoner? I’m running short on time, and I need to talk to him.” I could feel my IQ dropping just being in the presence of this buffoon.

“Oh right, sure thing. The nigger is in a cell just down that there hall. I’ll let ya in.” The officer said, pointing towards a closed door using his thumb. He stood up from his desk and revealed a large keychain around one of his belt loops. Walking over to the door, he

unhooked the keys and inserted a particularly large one into the door. With a twist, the door came open.

“Down five cells to your left.” What?

“Aren’t you going to accompany me?”

“Nah, we just shipped a bunch ‘o prisoners up to the big house. The place is completely empty ‘cept for your nigger. Just make your way down to the end ‘o the hall and you’ll see ‘im. I’ll be out here fillin’ some ‘o these got damn forms.”

I took a step inside and began walking down the brightly lit hall. The officer was right; every cell appeared to be empty. I heard the clang of the door closing behind me. How perfect. I’d expected to have an officer over my shoulder for the duration of the visit, but now I had the chance to have an uncensored conversation.

Expecting silence, I instead heard a faint humming echoing throughout the hall. It was to the tune of some old gospel song I’d heard long ago but had since forgotten. Reaching the end of the hall, I turned to face my would-be ally.

He was a small man. Despite the fact he was sitting, it was clear he was at least a full head shorter than me. His face was gaunt and his dark skin was cracked despite his overall youthful look. While he had only been arrested today, his appearance gave the impression that he was a permanent fixture of the jail; that he had called that cell home since the very first spark that ignited the universe. As I approached, he didn’t turn or take any notice of me. He simply kept humming. Clearing my throat, I hoped to gain his attention but failed.

“Hello?” I asked, unsure how to proceed. Still nothing. “I’m here to help you.”

This caught his attention. The humming ceased and the man began to chuckle to himself, his white teeth contrasting his dark skin and dreary cell. His gaze remained fixated on the wall. Did he think I was joking?

“An’ just how do ya plan on doin’ that?” he asked, still chuckling. “This ain’t the first time I’ve heard that ‘un. Let me guess. Were ya sent by Jesus?”

Jesus? Did he mistake me for a Mormon in my black slacks and tie? He wasn’t even looking at me.

“No, sir, I don’t believe in Jesus. Or God.” His chuckling had turned to a full-bodied laugh.

“Don’t believe in Jesus? Don’t tell anyone ‘round here that, or next thing ya know they’ll toss ya in here with me.” I glanced down towards the other end of the hall. Through a tiny window I could make out the shape of the officer scribbling away at his desk; he couldn’t hear us. “Few weeks back we had a visitor much like yourself. Said he was here ta help, said he was gonna change things. Pastor I think, or something like it. Always spoutin’ the word of God at us. Always tellin’ us what we was doin’ wrong, never what we was doin’ right. I believe in Jesus; I believe in God. But I don’t believe that he’d choose to speak through a self-righteous middle aged white man.“

“So what happened to him? The pastor I mean?”

“Things went real south real fast. Few of us went and got arrested, just like I did. One of us is missin’ and presumed dead. Probably had a run in with the Klan or some bad cops, though ‘round these parts that prac-tic-ally means the same thing. Last I saw ‘o the pastor he was high tailing it outta Hattiesburg, headed for the land ‘o milk and honey.” The man turned to face me. His laughing had stopped. Our eyes locked for only an instant, but it was long enough for me to recognize the gleam in his eyes as one of resilience. He looked me up and down. “So, before me stands a man who don’t believe in the Lord. Tell me this; do ya ever fear him? Do ya ever fear his wrath? Do ya thoughts ever wonder towards heaven and hell?”

I shuddered. I could tell what this man was doing, as I’d done it to hundreds of others in my trials; he was testing me. And it was working; as his words hit my ears it felt as though a shadow had been cast over my thoughts. He had opened the floodgates of my mind and now everything came rushing through; what had been repressed was set free. In my mind’s eye I could see the flesh melting from Anderson’s face; feel his wretched claws on me. I felt the fear, the panic, the lunacy I’d felt when I realized I was at death’s door. On that day, I had feared God.

“Sometimes. Yes.”

“See, that there’s the problem with you white folk; ya fear ‘im, but you don’t really listen to ‘im. You’re too busy following some set ‘o rules ta gets to heaven instead of gettin’ the true message. Instead of ya treatin’ us like neighbors, ya treat us jus’ like dogs. Ya fear ‘im ‘cause ya don’t know what it’s like ta be persecuted like dis.” The



man sighed and hung his head. My visions of hell had dug their way back into the nether regions of my mind for the time being. My focus was entirely on the man in front of me. We stayed in silence for a moment before he spoke again. “So, it was tha fear that brought ya here. I can tell a lost man when I sees one.”

He was right. It was fear and guilt that had propelled me to this place. I was here for my salvation rather than his freedom. Reaching into my pocket, I dug out my cigarette pack, took one, and then held it through the steel bars dividing us. Looking up, the man slowly reached out his hands, accepting my offering. Putting the cigarette in his mouth, he motioned for a light. Striking a match on the rough limestone wall, I lit my cigarette’s end and leaned inwards, meeting his cigarette through the bars with my own. Content, we both took audible inhales.

“You’re right. I am here out of fear and guilt. I’m here because I’m a selfish prick. I’m here to build myself a legacy.”

“Selfish? Is stealin’ bread for your starvin’ family selfish? Your soul is starvin’. You’re here because it’s what ya think ya need to do. Better yet, you’re here ta help. There’s still hope for ya yet.” The chuckle had returned. I was at ease. “It’s ironic, isn’t it? It’s fear that’s caused this whole mess between white folk and black folk, fear ‘o the unknown, fear ‘o assimilation. And yet it was fear that brought ya here.” I cracked a smile. Since when could a man of God be this rational? He had reminded me I was here with purpose. He made me feel as though maybe I wasn’t as doomed as I thought myself to be.

“You’re honest. I like that. Don’t see much of it ‘round here, much as the good folks would like ya to believe. I think I will let ya help us.”

The time for introductions had arrived; I was deemed worthy. The man stuck his large, angular hand through the bars. I took it in mine and shook. His grip was powerful.

“Don Fremont.”

“Michael King.”

“Well, Michael, let’s get you out of here.”

## VIII

I knocked on the solid metal door dividing the prisoner and his captor. Rattling the door handle, I found it to be locked, either on purpose or otherwise. I collected my thoughts as I heard the jingle of keys on the opposite side.

The oaf left in charge of this place would be easy enough to swindle. My only fear was that Officer Bigot would return to the station in all his glory, resurrected from whatever small town splash had kept him sidelined from spoiling my plan. I could tell the man had a penchant for sniffing out bullshit, and I wasn't ready to test him.

Suddenly, the door swung open, revealing a familiar boyish face. I stepped forward as he locked the door behind me. Putting on a grimace, I turned to face him.

"The news isn't good." The boy officer's face turned from an expression of what looked to be ignorant bliss to one stirred by a startling revelation.

"Whadya mean?" He leaned in closer. "Whatta they got planned?"

"Big things, my friend, big things." I leaned in even closer and placed my arm across the officer's broad shoulders. "Here's what I propose we do. You give me the nigger. Put him over into my custody. I'll take him out back to the bayou, and boy oh boy, you won't ever see that boy again."

The officer's gears were spinning. As he glanced over at me I gave him a wink to convey exactly what I was implying. The wink was returned and the officer pulled away.

"I hears ya loud and clear. And here I was thinkin' there weren't no fine folks around these days to do that kinda work. It's the Lord's work, that's what that is. I wish the lawmen in this town were as bold as you, good sir. I mean, we've been know ta..." The officer turned and reinserted his key into the iron door, his voice trailing off as though he was hiding something. Before twisting it all the way, he turned back to face me. "Now if I let this here nigger out, you're responsible for 'im, you hear? No ifs ands or butts. If his ass ends up back on that cell bench, I'd lose faith in tha law." Join the club.

"Deputy, I've done this hundreds of times. Trust me. The nigger is better than dead." And so the door swung open and the officer disappeared down the hall with a face of admiration.

I smiled to myself. I had never considered myself an artist, though I supposed all good scientists did blur the line between art and science. Now, in this jail house, I was becoming the most delicate artist of all; that of the con. And these past days had been the first brush strokes of my masterpiece.

Michael was the first to materialize out of the darkness, the absence of light accentuating his slender figure. Behind him was our boyish officer, his rosy cheeks and red nose lighting a small portion of the hallway. Michael marched forward in a martial manner with his hands swinging by his sides, a stark contrast to the bumbling trot of the officer. Despite the apparent difference between the graces in their

stride, it was Michael's shoe that caught an uneven stone in the floor of the jail. Stumbling forward, Michael nearly caught himself, but not before the protruding gut of the boy officer had caught up to him. With an almost comical *kerplunk* sound, Michael bounced off the stomach of the officer and fell to the floor.

It took a few silent moments for the officer to register what exactly had occurred, but those silent moments were followed by ones of boisterous laughter. Looking down at Michael, I saw a flash of pain cross his face as he hoisted himself up on one knee using his chained wrists. Instincts kicking in, I lunged to grab his shoulder to help him up, but quickly recoiled as my memory scolded me. With a grunt, Michael returned to his feet and exited the hallway, the officer not far behind. Wiping tears of gleeful hate from his cheeks, the officer walked over to his desk to retrieve some papers.

“Damn nigger, can't even walk...” He croaked out between laughs in a whisper audible to everyone in the room. Finding what he was looking for, the officer spun and set a piece of paper down on the table. Taking a deep breath to regain composure (of what little he had), he clicked open a pen. “Alright, I'm just gonna have ta get ya ta sign here. This here document just states that this here Negro is in your custody, that you're bailin' him out. Standard stuff, as I'm sure ya know. I wouldn't worry too much about him runnin' off, though, on account of his two left feet.” A laughing fit looked to come upon the officer yet again, but he managed to stifle it. He had more self-control than I had previously thought. I grabbed the pen and signed

(with an X of course). Without even looking at the document, the officer filed it beneath his desk.

“Well boys, that’s Adios. You’re free ta go.” I glanced down at Michael’s chained hands then back at the officer.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” I asked, motioning towards the handcuffs binding Michael’s wrists. In typical fashion, the officer required a moment to process what exactly I was talking about.

“Oh, those! Those are going ta make your job a helluva lot easier. I thought you wanted them on.”

“Oh, yes, you’re right. Good thinking.” Come on, Don. You’ve done this hundreds of times. Luckily, the oaf’s brain had more holes than my story.

“Glad I could be of service. You need any more help, jus’ let me know. I’d be more than happy tah. Here, I’ll walk ya to the door.” Michael would have to wear his physical chains a while longer.

With a grunt, the officer stood and I quickly followed suite. The finish line was in sight, but I knew that unseen hurdles often lurked within those final steps. Grabbing Michael’s arm and hoisting him out of the chair, I guided him to the door. I couldn’t be sure if he trusted me or not, but he didn’t have a choice. The only way to build trust is to trust. With a tip of his cap, the officer opened the station door and we stepped outside.

The afternoon Hattiesburg sun blinded us as we heard the station door click shut behind us. I breathed a sigh of relief and reached for a cigarette. Motioning to Michael if he’d like to join me in

quiet celebration, he shook his head. After giving me a few moments to enjoy my victory lap, he opened his mouth.

“Ain’t no windows in a cell. The sun and moon could come an’ go hundreds of times, but when I get out it’s all the same. Ain’t nothin’ changed.”

“Well, let’s hope you’re wrong this time Michael.”

“I pray ta God that I am.” For both our sakes, I prayed he was too. Taking a deep inhale, I looked out over the town from atop the steps. Looking to the North, I did a double take. A police cruiser had inched its way out of an enchanted hiding place and was making its way towards the station. It could only be the sheriff.

Throwing my cigarette to the wind, I looked over at Michael. His wide eyes verified that he too had seen our black and white harbinger. My heart dropped. With all the rapidness and focus only a criminal on the run could muster, I found myself at the bottom of the stairs headed for the sanctuary of the Chevrolet. Hand reaching for the door handle, I was startled by a call of my name from behind me. Spinning around, I saw a limping Michael, hands still bound, struggling to get down the steps. Further in the distance, the patrol car loomed ever closer.

Rushing back across the street, I reached Michael in with what seemed to be record timing. Putting my arm around him, I shifted what weight I could onto my shoulders and walked forward.

“I’m sorry Don, I went and messed up ma leg when I tripped.” We were almost there.

“Save your apologies for when they’re necessary, Michael.”

Opening the passenger side door, I almost threw Michael inside the vehicle before running around to the driver’s side. Slamming my door behind me, I heard the crushing of gravel as the cruiser (and presumably Officer Bigot) pulled into the station. By either chance or circumstance, we had not been seen. Not wanting to be near the station for even another moment, I pushed my foot to the gas pedal and we sped off, leaving the smell of rubber behind us.

Fishing my cigarette package out of my pocket, I replaced the half smoked one I’d had to toss away. Handing the package to Michael, this time he decided to join me. After sitting in smoky silence for a minute or two, I realized I was driving on a road to nowhere.

“So, where we headed?” I broke the silence by cutting right to the chase. It was an innocent yet essential question. Michael may have had a hunch, but now he knew I was clueless.

“We’re headin’ out to the bayou. Little place called the Wooden ‘Gator.”

“An old haunt of yours?”

“You could say that. We’ll be safe there. The coppers and the Klan know better than ta come out that way. Just make sure ya gots everything ya need, it’s a ways out.”

A flash of light. The smell of bourbon. Was I to disturb my crutch, my very reason of being here from its slumber and expose it once again to the light of day?



“Turn left right here, that’ll lead us there.” The drugs could wait. Like stalwart companions, they would be waiting for me when I returned. Switching on my turning signal, I veered left taking the last exit out of Hattiesburg.

## IX

The forested hills of rural Mississippi passed by without a word. The beauty and wonder of what I had just accomplished far surpassed that of Mother Nature; her charm was lost on me. Even if I had been interested, my mind was far too occupied to concern myself with landscape. Questions and thoughts swirled relentlessly in my head. As the sun began to set, I decided it was time to speak.

“You could have taken a run for it back there.” Michael twisted around in his seat. Although his eyes had been aimed at the rolling hills, they shifted back and forth in paranoia. I knew he was suffering with the same affliction I was, but far worse.

“Well, a ‘cuffed Negro with a busted knee ain’t gonna get far in that town. I didn’t have much of a choice.” He chuckled almost forcefully, reminding me that he was, in fact, still chained at the wrists. “Sides, like I told ya before, I believe ya wants ta help, I truly do. But I do gots questions.”

“Well, now would be the perfect time to ask.” I decided it was time for another cigarette.

“Well, back in tha jailhouse you made it sound like you’re runnin’ from somethin’. What are ya runnin’ from?” What *was* I running from? I was running from crimes and funeral chimes. There were countless entities on my trail – the feds, time, my own ghost, all of which could be summed up with one cliché notion.

“I’m running from my past.”

“As all smart men tend ta do. I already know you ain’t a preacher, so let me take a stab at it. With the way ya handled that copper, I’d guess ya know the law.”

“Knowledge of the human condition is more invaluable than knowledge of the law ever will be, my friend. I was – no, am a psychologist.”

“Interestin’. So do ya know what I’m thinkin’ right now?”

“Nothing in psychology is ever sure. It’s all just one big guess. And I’d guess you’re pretty damn scared, but you’re trying not to show it.”

“Good guess. Maybe I am a little scared, bein’ chained in some car headin’ down to de Bayou with a white man I jus’ met. But luckily I got faith. An’ you still ain’t told me what in your past that you’re runnin’ from.”

“I was working with the government, and things went sour.”

“You were workin’ with the feds?” I could feel tension in his voice. If Michael had ever had any faith in the governing body of this country, it was lost now. And who could blame him? This was a government that had persecuted him and his ancestors for generations. We were members of a nation divided by thousands of lines, and I had to prove to him where I stood. “Well, what ‘appened?”

“Things... things just didn’t work out. We were conducting a project and I got overzealous. Some kid died because of me. I... I was only following orders.” There was no way to sugarcoat it. I tried my best to sound as though I had conviction. Michael gulped, fully aware he was sharing a vehicle with a murderer. Now, he was letting his fear

show. Sweat beaded upon his brow. “It was an experiment gone wrong. To me, he nothing but a name on a file folder. Now, he’s a name on a tombstone.”

A temporary lull in the conversation gave me time to light another cigarette. I cracked my window open slightly to rid the car of the warm, tense air that had been circulating between us.

“Well, what changed? What made ya decide ta leave? People today, they ain’t friendly ta change. I can’t say if people ever were. What changed in you?”

Michael was right. I’d seen it first hand at Stanford; academics content to debate the ideas of long dead Greek philosophers, scientists standing upon the shoulders of giants. Innovators were a dying breed, so he was right to ask what had sparked my personal revolution. I gave the only answer I could.

“I can’t tell you, but I can show you. You just have to trust me.” Michael shifted in his seat.

“Any man who says they ain’t afraid of death is a liar. I can’t say for sure if the opposite is true, but I guess that’s all I gots ta go on. I’ll stick with ya. And boy, if ya are lyin’ to me, you’re about to find yourself in tha lion’s den. That’s the ‘Gator up there on the right.”

Without even noticing, bright lights had appeared in front of us like apparitions in the Mississippi fog. Forgoing my blinker, I slowed down and pulled into a parking spot amongst the menagerie of cars, tractors, and trucks that had all converged upon this speck of the bayou. Turning off the car, I exited, walking over to Michael to see if

he needed my help. Shaking his head, Michael slowly withdrew from the vehicle and limped ahead of me.

“I’d be killed on site if they saw you helpin’ me like that.”

Falling into line behind Michael, the bar slowly came into focus. I’d gotten wind of these joints out West - they were the kind of establishments frequented by ruffians, the kind of place where an outsider was liable to be struck with a bottle upon his skull. I’d heard white folks refer to them as honky tonks, but I was no expert on the etymology of southern drinking culture, nor was I about to become one.

Two black farmers in overalls and straw hats sat on a bench outside the entrance, painting the picture of a postcard one would send to their mother or girlfriend who would deem the scene charming enough to hang on their refrigerator without a second thought. Nodding at the farmers, I received a grunt in return. Despite the eons separating us and our ancestors who had used these primitive sounds as their sole form of communication, a grunt could still encapsulate things words could not. As the doors came ever closer, the overwhelming smell of alcohol assaulted my nostrils. As though it could smell it too, the change in my pocket jiggled in anticipation of a new owner. Pushing open the doors, we stepped inside.

I wasn’t sure what I had expected. Images of black and white films were burned into my mind; a newcomer enters a smoky bar; the music stops; everyone looks to him. The patrons of this bar offered no such awkward exchange, at least upon entrance. Instead, most seemed

utterly spellbound by the blues music on a far stage and the drink in their hand. Michael motioned towards the bar and I took a seat.

“Listen, you stay put here. I’m gonna run out back and get rid ‘o these.” He held up his handcuffs. I nodded and turned to face the bar. Pulling a fistful of nickels and dimes out of my pocket, I placed them on the counter. The clang of change gained the attention of one of the bartenders who slowly made his way over to serve me. Placing both his hands on the countertop, he towered over me and the rest of the bar. His arms were the size of tree trunks. This was a man that I would not like to meet in a dark alley. We stared at each other in stony silence until I realized he was awaiting my order.

“Uh... a bottle of bourbon please.” The burly bartender took my change without counting it and placed it in his till. Without a word, he grabbed a large jug marked “XXX” from the top shelf and placed it in front of me. I nodded thanks, but he was already gone.

Uncorking the bottle, I took a large gulp. My throat thanked me. Giving a nod to the bar patron next to me, he slowly raised his glass and had a long sip, a coaster sticking to its bottom. Letting out a belch, he preceded to spit on the sawdust floor. Setting down my jug, I realized my own reflection was staring back at me from behind the bar. I’d always wondered why bars set mirrors behind their bottles; by the power of deduction, I reasoned it was either to give the illusion of a larger room, or more likely that people drank more when in the company of their own pitiful reflections. Before I could contemplate more about mirrors and their monstrous qualities, I felt a tap on my

shoulder.

Spinning around on my bar stool, I found myself surrounded to the left, the right, and the front by three large black men. The one to my left plopped down on the stool beside me. Reaching back for my bourbon, I took another swig with a death grip around the bottle neck. This couldn't be good.

“So, whitey needed a drink. I hope ya weren't plannin' on finishin' that.” The man directly in front of me, who I could only assume to be the ringleader, spoke. With almost supernatural speed, the man sitting beside me lunged out with his hand, snatching the bottle of bourbon from my clutches. Taking four large gulps, he downed the entirety of the bottle with little more than a sound. “Now you listen here, and you listen well. We don't take kindly to white folks comin' an' pokin' their heads in where they don't belong. If ya don't want trouble, ya better scram.”

I looked into the eyes of the man in front of me, and I could tell that his cool, calm demeanor was a façade that was about to break down at any second. Still, I stared, unmoving. The man before me did nothing but stare back. Behind him, the band erupted in upbeat song as I felt a hand grab my shirt collar. For a smart man, I could be awfully stupid.

I felt the earth come out from under me as the men beside me hoisted me into the air. Now, I was playing the part of the coaster on the bottom of the drunkard's pint glass. Opening my mouth to protest,

my voice got caught within the lump in my throat. An unfamiliar fear had taken over. This was not the fear of god and the unknown, but rather of man and his machinations. As I struggled back against the men, I could only curse the cocaine hidden beneath my bed; without it, I was a coward. In mere moments they had me at the door, the banjo playing my funeral march all the while.

Bursting backwards through the entrance, the men threw me into the dirt parking lot. Vertigo overtook my senses. Looking up, the picture perfect farmers were gone. There would be no witnesses. As I lifted my arm to shield my face, I heard a call from inside the bar. Lowering my arm, I could faintly make out a figure standing in the doorway, the light pouring out from the bar creating an angelic silhouette. He called out once more, this time in an unmistakable voice. It was Michael, unchained and unbounded.

“Stop.” The three men turned and saw the vision that was unfolding before my eyes. This was no hallucination.

“Michael? Is that you?” The ringleader spoke up. Taking a few steps forward, Michael’s face became visible. This was the grand reveal. “I thought you were up at the big house. Heard ya got taken in by the head honky.”

“Ya heard right.” One at a time, each of the men approached Michael and gave a hearty greeting in a way they only knew how; this was a secret handshake to a club of which I was not yet a member.

“‘Ole Mikey flew the coup. How’d ya do it? Ya kill one of the bastards?” The ringleader flashed a grin at the thought. Michael shook his head.



“Brother, you know that ain’t what I’m about. Crackin’ the skull of some cracker ain’t gonna change nothin’. Only gonna make things worse.” Michael walked over to me and offered his hand, followed by the gaze of his three comrades. I pulled myself up. “This here is Don Fremont. He was tha one who freed me. Says he’s here ta help.”

The men stood in silence for a moment, unsure of how to react. Slowly, the ringleader approached, sizing me up with new eyes. Satisfied, he turned back to his henchmen, then back to me.

“Well, if Mikey says it, I believe ‘im. I know he ain’t soft for no cracker ‘less he has damn good reason ta be. Sorry about the roughin’.” He stuck out his hand for me to shake. I took it. I’d take anything I could get. “I’m Big Ed. That there’s Charlie, and that’s Walt.” Nods and grunts in the background. “We’ll replace tha whiskey.”

I brushed myself off and pulled a crushed cigarette from my pocket. Cracking a goofy smile, I lit the cigarette, surprised once again that fate had deemed me worthy to continue on my mission. I felt invincible. Enveloped by a cloud of smoke and dirt, I motioned to the door.

“You’d better.”

## X

The silver moon hung high in the Mississippi sky, burning off all but the densest of fogs below it. Its light illuminated the peaks and valleys of the great state, reeling only from the hidden crevices it failed to tread. Just like man, the moon sought naught for what it could touch, but rather for what it could not. In one such crevice, a gathering was taking place.

Past the weeping willows, past the bogs and bayous, past the old dirt trails in the backwoods, there stood a tall shack. Though the shack itself was dilapidated and lifeless, the party inside was anything but. From the front entrance stumbled an old drunk into the darkness, perhaps never to be seen again. His kind lay littered throughout the shack, some singing, some dancing, all enjoying merriment around a table after a hard day's work. Only one table near the far back seemed removed from the revelry. They spoke in hushed tones, surrounded by empty bourbon bottles, the residue of white powder beneath their fingernails. This was a table of schemers and dreamers; a ragtag bunch, brought together by fate or some other unseen force.

“All I'm sayin' is we hafta do somethin'. I ain't sittin' around any longer.” The gaunt man who sat with his back towards the corner spoke with animated hands. He had been doing most of the speaking up until this point, though this was about to change. Across from him sat three men who looked as though they could be brothers, each with broad faces and broader shoulders. Beside them, seemingly removed

from the conversation, sat one of the more interesting patrons in the bar.

This particular specimen was not interesting in that he was particularly charming or told tall tales, but rather that he stuck out like a sore thumb, his light skin contrasting that of his company. In his mouth drooped a cigarette, in his a hands he fiddled with playing cards. Two aces, two eights.

“But what’s the point Michael? Ya saw what happened to ya today. We gots mouths to feed – we ain’t riskin’ our livelihoods, let alone our lives for some crusade ya conjured up in ya mind.” One of the triplets had decided to speak.

“Don’t ya want better for those mouths yah feedin’? Can’t you see a future where ya children or yah children’s children ain’t stuck in some job that ain’t much better than cotton pickin’? Ta have ‘em stuck sitting ‘round a bar every damn night, drinkin’ and snortin’ like us? Ain’t the whole point ‘o havin’ kids is ta leave them better off than you was?” The gaunt man slammed his fist on the table, knocking over a stack of poker chips in an attempt to rally his troops. “I was ‘lone today, ‘least until Don showed up. I hate soundin’ like some broken record preachin’ all the time, but if we stick together, we can get done what needs ta be done.”

“And gettin’ ‘em into some fancy university is gonna do that, huh? Didn’t Don say he ran away from one of them schools jus’ a week ago?”

The eyes of the man seemingly removed from the conversation woke up. He set down his playing cards and held out his

cigarette over the ashtray, giving it a long overdue tap. He gazed out at the bar, his pupils slightly dilated. In his mind, visions of diplomas and lab coats danced in calculated circles.

*He's right. How could I ever condone such a thing after what I've seen and done?* The man grabbed a bottle of bourbon and took a small swig to wet his tongue. The others looked at him for a response, but he did not make eye contact. *Come on Don. Come up with something. Come up with something you can use for the introduction to your biography.* The man cleared his throat and turned to his tablemates. He was ready to speak.

“It was neither my education nor the school itself that made me run. It was my convictions. I had a thirst for power and fame stronger than I’ve ever fucking had it for bourbon, and that’s where it all went wrong. I blame nobody but myself; I’ve known many good men who’ve walked down those halls. Your sons and daughters have good mothers and fathers; they will not make the same mistakes I have. Just think – when you’re dead and gone you’ll know you’ve done something good for your children – no – the world. Think of the legacy.”

“Here, here.” Michael raised his glass. Two of the triplets followed suit, with the third slowly raising his last. Every drunkard loves a toast, even if it leaves them unsatisfied.

“I ‘jus still don’t know. It seems like an awful lot ta lose, and little ta gain. I ain’t convinced. God will give us whats we need. I ain’t worried ‘bout no legacy.”

“Forget about God. Do this for yourself, not him.” Michael hushed Don with his finger before the triplets could react.

“Baby steps, Ed, baby steps. Listen, I want all you want. I wants a home, a family, and food ta feed them every night. Some nights that ‘jus ain’t happenin’. We need this. You’re right, God is on our side, but we has ta do the work.” Michael looked at Ed with sincere eyes. With a sigh, Ed finished his glass of bourbon and reached over, taking one of Don’s cigarettes from their resting place on the table. Lighting it, he blew a smoke ring into the air and gave his answer.

“I’m in. Ya got what you wanted Mikey. Now what we gonna do?”

“Alright. Now here’s tha plan.”

With a smile on his face, Michael leaned in towards the table and motioned to his four companions to do the same. Amongst the smoke and alcohol fumes, their voices turned to whisper as the stage faded to black.

About an hour later, the triplets burst from the entrance of the shack, the two smaller fellows holding the bigger one between them. With a wave goodbye and a call to the sky, they hobbled off. Less than a minute later, the two remaining members of the party also exited into the warm, calm night. Looking onwards at the three figures doused in darkness, Don lit a cigarette.

“You think we’ll see them tomorrow?”

“You better believe it. There goes three stubborn Negros, I’ll give ya that. But they’re loyal.” Michael reached out for a cigarette and Don obliged.

“Were they around when that preacher you told me about came to town? The first time you tried to pull something like this?”

“Nah, they didn’t go for it. That’s why I think we got a fightin’ chance this time.” Michael exhaled and slowly made his way down the steps to the dirt below. “Come on. I’m mighty tired, I could sleep fo’ weeks. We ain’t in no condition to drive, either of us. Let’s sleep in tha car and head ta town tomorrow.”

Don followed Michael down the steps obediently, which was peculiar considering he wasn’t used to taking orders. Tonight, his mind was in no shape to consider such things.

“How’s your leg?” Don asked, proud for remembering one of his friend’s burdens.

“I’m fuckin’ drunk, can’t feel a thing.” Michael grinned, as would have Don if the response would have fallen on sober ears. “By the way, I remember what ya said, how you was gonna show me how ya changed perspective, how ya made the decision ta come down here. When ya gon do that?”

Michael had reached and opened the passenger side door. Don was currently in the process of crawling through the driver’s side window, as he couldn’t find his keys, although the door was unlocked. Laying down in the driver’s seat, Don rolled over so the side of his face sat on the leather headrest. *The LSD. That fucking*

*feeling. It's too late now. I need sleep...* The man who never stopped had deemed it quitting time.

“When, Don?”

“When it's time, Michael, when it's time.”

That night, the agent of sleep came quickly, quietly, and intensely. Within moments, the pair had retreated to the unreal estate of their minds. The sound of car engines starting did little to disturb them; after some time, they were the sole inhabitants of a near empty lot.

For Michael, who thought only of the future and hope, tonight's sleep would merely be an inconvenient stretch of emptiness. Tomorrow was what he longed for, his exhausted body the only thing keeping him from it. For Don, however, it was his many pasts that haunted the edges of his mind, and, sometimes, as is known, the agent of sleep does not consider which past to reveal. Tonight, Don had been deemed long overdue for such a dream.

It began as most dreams do: in the middle of something. Don was running. Leaves crunched beneath his feet and dust kicked up into the air, creating an arid fog which almost completely obscured the sun, though shades of orange and yellow still peeked through. All around him stood mighty redwoods that stretched to the sky. Where they stopped, nobody knew. This was a familiar place; California, draught season.

Don trekked through the dust and the trees with a solemn look on his face. He was a boy when he'd last been here; now he appeared as a man, dressed in his white shirt and black slacks, his tie loose like

a noose that hadn't yet been fastened. Heat emanated from the ground, but a cool breeze gave some relief.

Suddenly, there was a crash and a boom. A cry. The hellish hues of the sky had dampened to those of navy and aquamarine. Don sped off, certain of his bearings, but uncertain of what he'd find. Mossy rocks littered his path, but he jumped from one to another without taking as much as a glance at his feet. Finally, he found himself standing at the edge of a ravine.

A flash. *Don*. Silent lighting. The smell of burnt flesh. *Don*. Sobbing. Tears mixed with raindrops. *Don*. A lipstick case. Sirens. *Wake*.

Don jolted awake to the pitter-patter of rain outside his window, his dream retreating to distant consciousness. Looking upwards, he realized he'd left his window open overnight and his feet were now swimming in fresh water. Peeling his cheek from the leather headrest which he had become one with in the night, Don reached over and rolled up his window. Opening his door, he drained his manmade sea.

"Michael..." Don reached over and prodded his companion, but he did not wake. His eyes remained closed, and his chest calmly raised and lowered itself in the stupor of sleep. Lighting a cigarette, Don inserted his keys into the ignition and put the vehicle into reverse. Their dreamy Chevrolet was making its way backwards to Hattiesburg.

*My fucking head. Yet another tour de force in Mississippi. They sure treat a man right down the bayou. Doesn't even compare to*



*Stanford.* Contradicting his earlier actions, Don rolled down his window, once again letting water into the car. Cupping his hands, he created a pool of water which he then splashed on his face, rejuvenating his spirit but extinguishing his cigarette in the process. He repeated this action, this time splashing Michael, who did not stir. Once again, Don shut his opening to the outside world.

*Today's the day. I hope Michael's boys show in spades, we're going to need it. It would be better if we were in better shape, but if I've learned one thing, it's that a broken man can be as good as any.* Taking another jab at Michael, Don gave up any chance of waking him. *Well, this is it. I'm doing the right thing. I have to be.* Lighting another cigarette, Don hit the gas without a hint of regret, leaving the shack in the woods as but a speck in his memory.

## XI

The sky was as gray as my mood as we pulled into Hattiesburg. Though the rain had let up, large puddles had formed along the sides of the road, and, try as I might to miss them, I did manage to drench some unfortunate passersby wearing yellow raincoats. At least they were prepared.

Michael remained sleeping beside me, silent for the duration of our trip. While the lack of company had been dampening, his lack of protest to an additional stop on our route was welcome. He was immune to the Siren's calls sounding from the Speakeasy Motel.

It was quarter past seven as I pulled into the motel parking lot, my black Chevrolet gliding on the wet pavement like some sort of phantom returning for one final fright. While I had been dreading being welcomed back with open arms by the motel clerk, it seemed she was busy tormenting some other lost soul searching for a cheap night's stay. A cute little convertible was parked outside her office.

"Don... we at the school yet?" Michael rolled over, eyes wide. Perfect timing.

"Not yet Michael, I'm just stopping at my motel to grab a few things."

"Hurry ya ass up, we don't wanna be late for our own funeral." Michael sat up straight and grabbed a cigarette from my dashboard stash.

"Don't worry, I'm counting down the minutes." I hopped out of the car only to feel the squish of wet socks under me; I still

couldn't believe I'd left the fucking window open. Trudging my way to the door, I opened my room to find it more pristine than when I'd left it.

More worried about the unseen portions of my room than the seen, I leapt down to the ground like some ferocious jungle cat after its prey. For a split second, my breath halted. The drugs were gone, certainly taken by that cow of a motel clerk. Cursing loudly, I reached further under the bed, knocking over the flatiron that I'd set as a silent guardian of my trove. Reaching further still, I found what I was looking for, thus ending my stretched second. The flatiron had done its job; it was I who had fallen for a trick set by myself.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I rose to my feet and looked upon my discovery. My treasures were just as I had left them. I longed for a taste, just as my stomach longed for a meal and my skin and soul longed for a hot shower to wash myself clean. Now was not the time. I placed the drugs in my pant pockets before realizing they'd be safer from prying eyes and hands elsewhere. Lifting my pant leg, I wrapped the drugs tight and placed them in my left wet sock, the wonders of manmade plastic protecting them.

I exited the plain motel room to the plainer parking lot, slamming the door behind me. No lock was necessary; the room no longer held anything of value.

"What were ya cussin' at in there?" Michael stuck his head out the passenger's side window.

"Nothing." I shook my head. "Myself. Now let's get this show on the road."

The ride from the motel to the college grounds passed in the blink of an eye and four cigarettes. As we reached the entrance sign, I pulled over. We would march to our outpost.

“Do we have signs or anything? Or are we just going to yell a whole bunch?” I knew we’d discussed our intentions the previous night, but they’d long since been pissed away along with the bourbon.

“Oh, we gon’ yell. And we got signs, the others will have ‘em. Don’t you worry yah head.”

Michael and I set off down the paved drive leading into campus. It was hard to believe both of had been here just yesterday; me, applying for a job, a touch more naïve; Michael, fighting against injustice, just as he was set to do today.

I’ve heard it said many times, mostly by small minded fellows, that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results each time. That’s bullshit. First off, insanity cannot be defined any more than a madman’s diatribes can be deciphered. Second, there is and always will be uncertainty in the universe, the universe being the big umbrella that encompasses people, cats, dogs, plants, everything. I didn’t judge Michael one bit for trying again. Besides, I was just as insane as he was.

“Campus seems ta be pretty empty, eh?” Michael snapped me out of my thoughts. It is never wise to dwell on insanity for too long. Looking around, I realized he was right. I could not spot a single soul

among the usually lush campus, today muted by overcast skies. Was it fucking Saturday?

“Michael, did we come here on the fucking weekend?” I couldn’t believe it.

“Calm yaself, Don. It’s Tuesday. Jus’ makin’ an observation. Don’t worry yah head.” My head could take it. Glancing down at my watch, I realized it was only forty past seven.

“You’re right. It’s only early yet. The kids and professors will be running to class soon for the quarter past bell.” Some things never change. Just over the horizon we could see the dome atop the office of the registrar; this is where we would take our stand. Making our way over the cusp of the hill, it was apparent we were the first to arrive. We were to begin the dissent.

“They’ll be here Don, don’t worry yah head.” I was beginning to worry. Before I could open my mouth to voice my concern, however, the dense, silent campus air was broken by the sputtering of struggling engines. Looking past Michael, I could see three rusted pick-up trucks making their way down the path.

“Tha cavalry has arrived.” And boy it had. While I had just expected Ed, Charlie, and Walt to join us in a five-man revolution, it seemed they had recruited half the backwoods for our plight. As the trucks drove closer, I could see their cabs and beds teaming with brothers, sisters, cousins, mothers, fathers, at least twenty souls strong.

The trucks stopped and Ed hopped out, once again taking the position of leader. Michael beamed and walked over, this time

forgoing all formalities and giving him a bear hug, to which Ed responded with laughter. I couldn't help but smile. After giving the pair a moment to talk things over, I walked over.

“Hey boss. How you feelin' after las' night?” Ed stuck his hand out and I took it, attempting to match his death grip.

“Never been better.”

“Good, good. Ain't too often I meet a white boy who can drink like that.” Ed laughed as he gave me a pat on the back.

“Anyways, we got work to do. You two best follow me and grab some signs, we was up all night makin' 'em.”

Ed led us back to the truck driven by Charlie, who greeted me with the tip of his cap. By now, all the others had slightly dispersed and were all talking amongst themselves in quiet circles. Jumping up into the truck bed, Ed slammed his fist against the top of the cab.

“Listen up everybody!” Ed yelled out over his people. “I know this ain't gonna be easy. If things go south here, you can make the choice ta run or stand your ground, Lord knows I won't judge ya. The important thing is that we're here now, and that we're all here together.” He paused. There were cheers and nods in the crowd. “I ain't no preacher, I'll leave that business to Mikey. But what I will tell y'all is to remember why y'all are here. Y'all are here ta make a better life for you and your children, and that's something worth fightin' for. Now come grab a sign an' give 'em hell.”

Ed bent down, coming back up with fists full of homemade signs, which he then began doling out to his audience. I stood back in

admiration. This man who had seemingly been on the fence for the entirety of last night was now a beacon for the movement.

The signs themselves were simple in nature, but they would get the job done. A young girl in front of me held one that read “Education is a Right!” while the men handled the ironic, cliché American doctrine “All men are created equal.”. When Ed was finished, he hopped out of the truck and headed in my direction.

“I can’t believe this, Ed – what happened? What convinced you?”

“I guess it was you an’ Mikey. I got home an’ started ta think, and the two ‘o you made a helluva lotta sense, ‘specially Mikey. He’s tha preacher, we’re the apostles, an’ you’re just stumblin’ through.”

“Didn’t you sleep? Making these signs, getting everyone together, convincing them...”

“We ain’t got time for sleep. Besides, I didn’t finish all tha signs.” Ed smiled and handed me the sign I assumed he was holding for himself. Turning it over, I realized words had yet to be written on it. “This ‘uns for you. I sure as hell wasn’t sure about ya last night, and I still ain’t sure what ya doin’ here. Your past ain’t paintin’ any pretty pictures neither. But, I see tha good in ya. You believe what yah say. So here’s a blank slate.”

Ed was right. I did believe in what we were fighting for here. At this moment, Stanford seemed to be lifetimes away, as did any thought of death or legacy. The only remnants of those thoughts came from the feel of a plastic bag against my foot. I was here in the present, and for once I was doing the right thing.

“Thank you Ed. I’ll figure out what to write. We play our cards right here, and we’re on easy street.” Ed flashed a large smile and walked past me towards the main office doors. The protest had begun.

Looking over, I saw Michael motioning for me to come nearer. Without wanting to waste time or thought, I scribbled down the first thing that came to mind on my vacant protest sign: “Shift.”. One simple word. Poets of flowery prose do not make good protestors, and this word encapsulated everything I wanted it to. My journey, Michael’s journey, everyman’s journey. As men, we are able to shift between the realms of dreams and reality, but as man entire we must learn not just to shift between these realms, but rather shift and never look back. No man truly dreams of hatred, despair, and inequality; some men have just simply forgotten how to dream.

I raised my freshly painted sign to the morning sun, which was just barely visible between thick clouds. Try as it might, it could not break through. Even the sun fails sometimes, in all its massive glory. Taking my place with the rest of the group, Michael nodded at me and took his place at the front facing us. Expecting a sermon, I lowered my sign. Clearing his throat, Michael opened his mouth.

“Oh, freedom!” He belted out, his usual jumbled, jagged speech replaced with that of heart and soul. The crowd repeated him.

“Oh, freedom!” I held up my sign.

“Oh, freedom over me.” I shouted.

“And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave!” The campus clock tower sang with us as it struck eight.



“And go home to my lord and be free.” The students had arrived.

The first few students stared at us with wide eyes, unsure exactly how to proceed. These were the keeners, the ones who would be early for class, unsure if it was us or them who were doing something wrong or out of the ordinary. Whispers started. Finally, one of the larger male students crossed the line that divided us and attempted to get through. Moving for him, we let him run right into Big Ed.

“Jus’ where do ya think you’re headin’?” Despite the height of the student, Big Ed was nearly a full foot taller.

“I’m headin’ to class. I’ve heard tell of you niggers, what you’re all about. It’s disgusting.”

“Boy, I’d watch yah language ‘round these parts.” Big Ed stuck his sign into the wet ground and cracked his knuckles. “Wouldn’t want anybody ta get hurt.”

The boy slowly backed away, once again crossing the invisible line made in the dirt. Raising his hand, he pointed at Big Ed, his black and gold letterman jacket crinkling.

“I ain’t gonna be the one that gets hurt. You just wait ‘til the president an’ the cops show up. Ain’t gonna be pretty for you niggers.”

“Boy, I ain’t scared of nothing save a future run by crackers like you. Get outta here.” Picking his sign back up, Big Ed turned and faced our flock.

“No more weeping!” The soul song had begun again.

“No more weeping!” I shouted back.

“No more weeping over me.” We swayed back and forth as our audience grew and grew.

“And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave!” A pristine black car had pulled up behind the onlookers.

“And go home to my lord and be free.” The president of the university, one Dr. McCain, had arrived.

Hopping out from the backseat of his chauffeured carriage, Dr. McCain looked only forward. Though I’d never met him, I could decipher exactly who he was by the ambiance of arrogance he brought to our gathering. He was larger than life, compensating only for his small stature and archaic moral code. Raising his hands and cane, the sea of students parted, leaving us as the sole reflections in his spectacles.

“Well, what do we have here?” Dr. McCain asked in a soft tone, which only became softer as he inched closer. “It seems my students have been complaining about not being able to attend their classes on account of some Negros. You must be the culprits?”

It was Michael’s turn to address our adversaries.

“Yes sah that would be us. And we ain’t movin’ ‘till we’re heard.”

“Why, aren’t you the boy who was here just yesterday? The boy who was taken away by the police? I heard you alright. You and your kind want to attend my fine establishment here.” Dr. McCain raised his hand and spun around, bringing attention to the campus surrounding us. “Well, I’m sorry to say, that’s not going to happen.

There's laws in place preventing it, just as there are laws preventing you from rioting here on this beautiful campus."

"We ain't rioting. We got a right to peaceful protest."

"Well, you see, you're trespassing. Y'all got rights on public property, but I own this land, just as I surely owned your grand pappy at some point." Michael clenched his fists as the president smirked. Pausing for a moment, Dr. McCain tilted his head. I had caught his attention. "Oh. I see you have one of ours with you. How unfortunate. What sad mess have they been whispering in your ear, son? You belong over here. You're different. You're on the losing side of this line you've drawn."

I remained silent, replying only with the flick of a match and the puff of a cigarette. I had nothing to say to him. His university didn't respect me as an academic, nor my friends as people. Big Ed placed his hand on my shoulder.

"We ain't moving." Michael's fists remained clenched.

"Very well. The police should be here momentarily. They may be oafs, but they'll get you out of my hair." And with that, the president moseyed back to his car, tipped his hat and shook his cane, and was gone, his tire tread marks soon covered by more onlookers. Michael turned back to us.

"No more worry!" I belted back out as loud as I could.

"No more worry!" They had begun shouting back at us.

Violent racial epithets filled the air.

"No more worry over me." Michael paced back and forth, urging us to sing louder.

“And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave!”

Louder still.

“And go home to my lord and be free.” Half the town had arrived.

Peering across the way, I could only stare blankly. Men and women, both young and old peered back, their faces twisted in fits of rage. Those who had any thought of supporting or defending us covered their faces and scurried away like the mice they were. There weren’t many.

I gazed into their faces. Some I recognized. The round face of the motel clerk, once cheerful and bubbly, now plain sickly rather than sickly sweet. The face of Miss Bush, the diligent debutante secretary of the psychology department, her beautiful lips parting in the form of an “N”. The silent face of her slave master, the dandy chair of the psychology department, looked only at me, his eye brow raised, his mouth curled in pure revulsion. Their hatred was not just a burden on our side of the line, but upon themselves and all of man as well.

Taking an inhale of my cigarette, I flicked it across the way, narrowly missing Miss Bush’s pretty face. Walking towards the line, I turned my back to their stares, raised my free hand towards what Michael would consider the lord, and sang as well and as loud as I knew how.

“Oh, freedom!” I closed my eyes.

“Oh, freedom!” I wept.

“Oh, freedom over me.” I opened my eyes.

“And before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave.” The familiar spectral hues of red and blue.

“And go home to my lord and be free.” The police had arrived.

“Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em.” Michael spoke to no one in particular. I lit another up.

There were no sirens, only flashing lights. By now, the crowd extended as far as I could see. The sky was still overcast. I wanted to run, but couldn’t. We all simply stood there, singing, waiting for the long arm of the law to reach us as it pushed its way through to the battle lines.

The first to break through was, of course, the sheriff. Officer Bigot had arrived fully prepared, sunglasses and all. Next came his cronies, including the doofus I’d duped only the day before. Gone was his half-witted smile, replaced by a death stare aimed only at yours truly. There were five in total, each toting a shiny badge and a shinier pistol. Taking one step forward, Officer Bigot spread his arms wide and raised them above his head so all could see. His wish was the crowd’s command. For now, it was silence. We obliged.

“Y’all were warned not to come ‘round here. Y’all know it’s ‘gainst the law. You’re tresspassin’ on private property an’ disturbin’ the peace, and I don’t take too kindly to that.” The sheriff lowered his arms and spit, his chewing tobacco indistinguishable from the mud beneath him. “Now I don’t got room for fifteen, twenty people down the station. So I’m gonna play good cop today. I’ll let the lot of ya go.” He raised his finger and pointed to Michael. “Except you.”

Heeding the advice of my picket sign, he shifted his arm towards me. “And you. The rest of you can go home, so long as you promise never to come back.”

Shit. No matter which way things went, I was fucked. My only hope was to run. But I couldn't. Not this time. Behind me, some of the younger members of our faction began whispering. Across the way, nobody spoke.

“I ain't goin' nowhere.” Big Ed's deep, southern drawl broke the tension. The sheriff painted a smile on his face, his skin cracking near its edges.

“Sure, I can hold three of ya's. Anyone else?” Nobody moved. The sky was still overcast. The air was dead. I had to run. I couldn't. “Alrighty.”

Crossing over into enemy territory, the sheriff removed a pair of hand cuffs from his belt and started towards Big Ed. Accepting his fate, Ed extended his hands. One loop done. Ed's wrist looked as though it would burst through the metal. Not a wince crossed his face. Grabbing his other hand, the sheriff set the cuffs to finish the job, but never did.

Aviators flew in the sky. The sheriff lay on the ground, Charlie on top of him. Next came Walt. There were screams and shouts. Before I knew it, we were all on top of him, including the other four officers. A shot was fired. There was true anarchy. It was time to run.

The shot had stirred the primal survival instinct in nearly everyone. Whites were mixing with blacks. People were running

north, south, east, and west. I found my lane and took it, opposite from the law. I couldn't look back. I couldn't look back. I looked back. Big Ed was gone. Charlie was wrestling with two of the cops. Michael was dealing with the stupid bastard we'd escaped from yesterday; this time he wasn't getting free. Blood poured down his face from a wound I could only assume came from the butt of a pistol. I turned back towards my escape route and froze. From across the chaos, a top hat and a monster of a man were making their way towards me.

I couldn't believe it. They'd found me in pandemonium. Both the sheriff and the feds were on my trail; the only place safe enough for me now would be some cave up in the hills of Utah. It was Magoo and Anderson alright, and they were here for one thing. Their days as a comedy team were long over. I looked back at Michael then back to Magoo, each of his wrinkles almost visible.

While Magoo was hobbling in an off kilter direction, Anderson was on a crash course for me, his face lined with the undeniable look of an animal after its prey. Today, I was going to be taken by someone, and I'd been granted a choice. The choice to die for something, or die for nothing. The question didn't even need to be posed.

Glaring one last time at the duo, I turned and sped back towards Michael. I'd never tackled a man before, but I figured there wasn't much to it besides hitting him with as much force as I could muster. I'd try to crack a rib. As the officer raised his pistol above his

head in preparation for another blow, I dug my shoulder into his backside. The pistol leapt from his hand and the officer crippled over.

“Go! Go!” I shouted at Michael. Wide eyed, he hesitated. “Go! They’re not going to lynch a white! Get out of here!” I didn’t quite believe myself.

Michael picked himself off the ground leaving a pool of silt and blood. Looking back at me one last time, he ran and jumped into Walt’s truck, which was filling with others. These were not the times for goodbyes or thankyou’s. As I watched, my head was shoved into the ground from behind. The dirt was the only witness to my grin as I heard the truck speed away.

“That’s fuckin’ enough!” The bastard behind me yelled as he put my hands in shackles. Hoisting me to my feet, he looked into my face and spit in it. “That’s for yesterday.” A punch to my gut doubled me over. “And that’s for today.”

I didn’t know what awaited me, and I was scared to find out. Raising my head to take inventory of the battlefield, I let out a gasp. It was empty. The only body left on the ground was Charlie. He was breathing, for now. The sheriff had long since picked himself up and brushed himself off. He didn’t even look at me. Another officer took my arm and led me to a cruiser, the doofus bringing up the rear.

Treading through the mud, the drugs in my sock itched at my ankle as though they were talking to me. They didn’t want me to forget them. They would have to wait for another time, another place. Perhaps another life. I only prayed they wouldn’t be found, and I



would be alright. Ducking into the backseat of the cruiser, I laughed aloud at myself. Once again I was praying in chains.

## Part III

I walked over to the newsstand with glee. There it was. My face staring back at me surrounded by a blood red box, “Man of the Year” written in large font below my winning smile. A little perkier and more pristine than I’m used to seeing it, but it was me all the same. Beside me, a young boy looked back and forth between my face and the one plastered on the rack, unsure if what he was seeing was real or a figment of his childish imagination. I tossed a coin to the stand owner and removed one of my faces from the plethora. Flipping through the pages, I found my article. I was a hero.

My heart jumped for joy. Elation filled my lungs. I’d done it. My face would linger in landfills and waiting rooms until well after the passing of my physical shell. I was invincible. I was god. My name would grace the lips of generations until the inevitable end of humanity, be it by accident or otherwise.

Spinning around, I walked down the street, passing eyes looking at me in admiration, men wanting to be me, women wanting to fuck me. I could have any one I wanted. Whistling a happy tune, I pulled a cigarette out of my pocket and lit it up. Turning a corner, I faced a stone wall. Only a stone wall.

“So, word ‘round town is there’s gonna be a lynchin’ tonight.” The harsh words of the likely inbred officer snapped be back to my cell. A cigarette still hung from my mouth. They hadn’t taken them away, for whatever reason. I suppose they figured I needed them. They were a right. “For yer friend, anyways. Of course, once word

gets out ‘bout you, there might be two.” Or my last supper. “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

The officer turned and walked out of the hallway, closing the big iron door behind him. Down the hall, Charlie paced in his cell.

“Don’t worry boss. They know betta than ta lynch a white. There’ll be hell ta pay if they let that happen.” I stood up from my wooden bench and walked over to the steel bars guarding my escape.

“You want a cigarette? I can toss one down.”

“Nah, you keep ‘em. I ain’t one for smokin’ ‘less I’m on the drink.”

“If I had some bourbon I’d offer it.” I didn’t mention the contents of my socks; they’d avoided detection thus far, and it would stay that way.

“Yeah boss, that’d hit tha spot.” I sat back down and tried to continue my daydream, but to no avail. As I lit up another cigarette, the iron doors opened.

“I didn’t want ta leave you two alone fer two long. Two men alone like this get desperate, start schemin’. Just ain’t good fer nobody.” The voice of the sheriff echoed down the hall along with the clicking of his boot heels. Trotting his way down the line, he halted in front of my cell. He stood there for a moment, eyes focused only on me. When he got his fill, he opened his mouth up to antagonize.

“So, let me get this straight. You came into my town an’ though you could pull the wool over my eyes, boy? You thought you could just waltz on in here, break a nigger out o’ jail, incite a riot, and everything would work out jus’ hunky dory?” The sheriff spit on the

ground. “Let me tell you somethin’ boy. This is my town, I own it. And in my town, I always win.”

“Don’t let ‘im get to ya boss. Don’t pay no attention ta what he says.” Charlie yelled from down the hall.

“Shut up, nigger! I don’t even hafta say anything, you know what gon happen to you.” The sheriff turned his face and yelled, then came back to me. “I did a bit ‘o diggin’ while you were waitin’ in here. Turns out you gotta bit ‘o a rap sheet, boy. Missin’ drugs in the state of California. Fraud. The whole bit. You’re goin’ away for a long time.” He cracked a grimacing smile. “Or not, if the townspeople have their way. An’ I jus’ might let ‘em.”

So they’d reported the missing cocaine. They’d have to, I guess. The inventory was monitored, the numbers wouldn’t add up, I was a fool. But at this point, I didn’t give a shit. In for a penny, out for a pound. That’s what I’d thought when I took it, wasn’t it? They hadn’t reported anything else; of course they hadn’t. The government was sanctioning murder, and I’d be executed for my part disguised as petty crimes. Deep down I was afraid, but the reaper would be the only one I’d allow to hear my begging pleas. Doubts and demons were beginning to creep back; I couldn’t quite admit it to myself, but this whole thing beginning to look like a big mistake.

“Yep, I’d say you’re jus’ about knee deep in shit.” The iron door at the top of the hall creaked open. “What is it?!”

In my mind’s eye I could see the head of the young dumb officer poke its way into the cellblock, the door blocking the only part of him that was worth a damn.

“We’ve got a visitor.”

“Who’s got a visitor? Me? Whitey here? The nigger? Your dumb ass?”

“Dr. Fremont, sir. The white one.”

“Who the fuck is it? Tell ‘em to scram. This one ain’t takin’ no visitors.”

“Sir, I think you should come see.” The sheriff turned and walked down the hallway, cursing under his breath.

A visitor? Who did I know in this town? Someone from the university? Surely it wasn’t Michael or Big Ed, unless one of them were looking to be lynched. Was the motel clerk looking for another date? I stood up as the realization dawned on me.

It was Magoo and Anderson. It had to be. They’d followed me this far, and they weren’t about to let some small town folks steal all their fun. The sheriff was checking their credentials at this moment. Magoo was probably digging through his pockets in search of his badge, pulling out all mannerisms of unique and bizarre trinkets. A watermelon. A cat. A baseball. A fucking fuck. The feds would get their hands on me yet.

The iron door slammed open. The clicking of two pairs of boots echoed down the hallway now; one heavy, one light.

“Daisy, you can’t barge on in here. I ain’t gonna stand by while you just- “

“Cram it, Jim. I’ll bloody well do as I please. An’ if you lay yer mitts on me, just watch.” It was the unfamiliar high pitched voice of a woman. “Where’s he at, Jim? Let me see ‘im.”

Slowly, she came into view. She was older, but not too old. She wore a sundress and sun cap despite the absence of sunlight. I could tell by her charm exactly who she was. A member of southern aristocracy, the last of its kind. A cocktail of old age Europe and foolish new age America. A woman who was privy to say “ahn-velope” instead of “envelope”, with a mint julep on the side. And she was here to see me.

“You Don?” She asked as abruptly as a southern belle could.

“Yes.” I was.

“Jim, I want him outta this cell this instant.” Who was this woman besides my savior? Was I to be a part of some new scheme, with roles reversed?

“Daisy, it ain’t gonna happen.” The sheriff came into view, his usual tan face an unusual shade of red. Daisy turned to faced him, ready for business.

“Jim, you know who I am. You know who I know. We can go about this the hard way, or the easy way. It’s really your decision.” The sheriff laughed.

“Jus’ because you were bed fellows with the governor at some point don’t mean I’m gonna just let you take this prisoner off my hands.” Daisy raised her eyebrow.

“Oh, what would you know about that, Jim?” The sheriff paused for a moment, regaining his composure. I had no idea what was unfolding before me.

“Listen, all I’m sayin’ is that the governor ain’t gonna just let some race rioting fools go scot free. You and I both know where he stands on this ‘un.”

Daisy let slip a coy smile.

“Well, Jim, I do suppose you are right. But if that’s the case, maybe instead of calling up the governor about this one here I’ll just have to make a little phone call about you.” The sheriff took a step back.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, but I would Jim. Just let him go and there won’t be any problems.” The sheriff stood silent for nearly a minute, silently contemplating my fate. I was enjoying this. Finally, a decision was made.

“Alright, I’ll let you have yer way this time. But just as I know who you know, you know who I know. The backwoods of Mississippi will burn before the night is over. You’ve crossed the wrong man.”

“Really, Jim? A threat? I’ll have to write that one down.” The sheriff only grunted. “Now, open the cell door and let this man walk out of here.”

The sheriff slid over and inserted a large key into the door. Sliding over the bars, I stood up and walked into the hallway. Despite only being in the cell for hours, it felt as though I’d felt freedom for the first time. I turned to Daisy.

“I have so many questions.”

“I know, I know. Just save ‘em for later. It’s gonna be okay.” There was one question I couldn’t save for later.



“What about Charlie?”

“Charlie will be fine, just let me take care of it. Now, you head outside, I’m gonna stay in here for a ‘lil bit.”

The sheriff stood by in stony silence as we talked. Turning back towards the door, I began my walk towards the cell block exit. Behind me, Daisy fell into line, followed by the sheriff.

“You gotta be shittin’ me.” I emerged from the cell block. Before me was the big, dumb, confused face of the deputy. “Boss?”

“Jus’ let it go. We’ll take care of it later.” Daisy and the sheriff exited behind me. I couldn’t see the face of the sheriff, but I was certain it was sore.

“Don’t say a thing. Just keep walking.” Daisy whispered in my ear, and I took her advice. I didn’t even glance sideways. Putting one foot in front of the other, I made it to the exit and turned the doorknob.

The overcast sky from earlier in the day had burned off leaving a beautiful Mississippi evening in its wake. The low lying sun took up almost the whole horizon, its rays emanating in victory and blinding me in one last act of defiance for the day. Blinking repeatedly, my eyes finally gained focus and my surroundings took shape. Putting the blur of what had just happened behind me, I looked down the station steps. Before me stood Michael, his face beaming brighter than the sun, one hand on an idling cream colored Bentley. Was I dreaming again?

“I see they let ya out.” Michael chuckled, his face showing joy despite its bruises.

“Michael – I, uh... How? What’s going on?” I didn’t know what to say. Even my mind was at a loss for words.

“Just repayin’ the favor.” Another chuckle. “Gotta smoke for me?”

I removed my cigarette pack from my trouser pocket and handed it to Michael, only now noticing his new clothes. His torn, mud soaked rags had been replaced with fine linens, white to match the car we were leaning on.

“Where’d you get the clothes? The car?” I didn’t even have time to give a compliment. I needed answers.

“Car belongs to Miss Daisy. Clothes too, used ta be owned by her late husband. I don’t care, if the old bastard is gonna haunt me for ‘em then I say bring him on.”

“Who the fuck is Miss Daisy?”

“Why, she’s that nice woman that jus’ got ya out of prison.” Michael’s smile widened. He was fucking with me.

“You know what I meant.”

“Of course I did.” Michael slapped me on the back and motioned for a match, which I gave him. Striking it against the bottom of his new left shoe, he lit his cigarette and mine. “Relax, ya jus’ got outta jail. Daisy’s a friend, no need ta worry.”

Taking a puff of my cigarette, I blew the smoke up into the fresh air. Michael was right; this was a moment to relish in. I’d get my answers soon enough.

“You seem awful chipper for the organizer of a failed protest.” Seeing Michael’s face had reopened the day’s events in my mind. In

jail, it had only been occupied with thoughts of the future and what it had in store for me and Charlie. My stint had given me second thoughts; if the universe had turned the other cheek, I'd still be rotting in that cell. It was only after being released and seeing Michael that I realized that it was not only the two of us facing death, but also his ideals. His smiling face, however, was not that of a man defeated.

“Failed?” Michael laughed once again. “Failed?” Repeating himself, he held his cigarette in his mouth and leaned into the open window of the Bentley. Flicking a few switches and turning a few knobs, the sound of the radio broke the relative peace surrounding the police station. “Listen.”

*Today, Southern Mississippi College was the site of a protest, a growing trend in these United States. Upwards of twenty blacks stormed the grounds and demanded the right to a university education. They didn't mention the white. Things began peaceful, but the protest quickly disintegrated – Another turn of a knob. –Don't got no idea where them niggers get off. They're the gosh darn problem with this country. I'm as progressive as the next folk, but I jus' don't see- Another turn of a knob. Well, I think it's about time something is done. They're not second class citizens. I'm surprised the pot didn't boil over until no-* The flick of a switch gave silence. Michael pulled his head out of the car, his smile having not left his face. I tossed my cigarette butt to the side and waited.

“You hear that?” I nodded. “The whole damn state is buzzin' about our little escapade. Three towns over they've got another demonstration goin' on. We did it, Don.” So that was it. We were the

spark that had ignited the powder keg. This had never been about us. And that was fine. Michael was fighting for the freedom of his people, and I had no clue what I was fighting for. This was only the first stepping stone.

“The winds of change are blowing.” Michael smiled at me and took my hand into his.

“You got that right, brother.” I paused and leaned back onto the hood of the Bentley. Brother. I liked that. Some only children long for a brother or sister with all their being; others resent the thought of it. I fell into the later camp, but today, it felt right. After our massive success, there was only one question to ask.

“So, what’s next?” Before Michael had time to answer, the doors of the police station burst open, and out stepped Daisy, queen of the Mississippi. Slowly walking down the stone steps, she called out to us.

“Quit leanin’ on the car! I didn’t save your neck to have ya scratch up my old girl!” I quickly stood up straight, but that was the least of my worries. In unison, Michael and I both made the same query.

“Where’s Charlie?”

“What, you boys twins now?” Daisy turned back her head and laughed, her curly hair falling from beneath her sun hat. I couldn’t tell if it was blonde or grey. “Charlie will be fine. They ain’t gonna lynch him. Worst he’s gonna get is a slap on the wrist.”

“How can you be sure?” I didn’t trust this debutante, even if she had just turned me loose.

“Well Don, what choice do you have?” She was right. I wasn’t about the set fire to the police station. Michael didn’t have an issue. I bit my tongue. “Anyways, let’s turn tail and get outta here. Best not to hang ‘round these parts too long.”

“Who’s driving?” An innocent question. I assumed Michael and I would sit in the front, one of us playing the role of chauffeur to the lovely Miss Daisy.

“I can drive my own car, thank you very much.” She was a new aged old age gal. I began to walk over to the back seat door, but Michael had beaten me to it.

“Probably best if you ride up front, Don.” I nodded and walked around the rear of the vehicle to take my place. Opening the door, I was greeted by luxury. Wooden panels, gold plated accents, white leather interior. Holding her cigarette holder, surrounded by white, Miss Daisy looked like a Norman Rockwell painting on cocaine. Pulling away from the police station, I lit up my own cigarette and took a deep breath. Now was the time for answers.

“Alright, alright. No need to get rambunctious. Ask me whatever you like, but do be polite. I am a lady after all.” As if reading my thoughts, Daisy had given me permission to begin. “And you will address me as Miss Daisy.”

I cleared my throat and sat up straight.

“Well, Miss Daisy, who are you exactly besides a lady?”

“Well, Dr. Fremont, I am ever so glad you asked. I am the third of my name, daughter of the indubitable James Compson,

descendant of one Jason Compson, purveyor of the once mighty Compson Plantation.”

The great great granddaughter of a slave master. Great.

“So, uh, why did you help us?” Miss Daisy shifted gears as we veered left, out of town, back towards the backwoods and the Wooden Alligator. She took an inhale through her cigarette holder and exhaled out through her nose.

“Dr, Fremont, the past is a funny thing. You or I or anybody else can’t do a darn – excuse my language – thing about it. I didn’t have one single thing to do with that Compson Plantation, but it bears my name, so I feel guilty. I feel guilty ‘bout the things my late husband made me too when he was still kickin’, even though I didn’t really have a choice. I even feel guilty ‘bout pushing him down the stairs, though I know I shouldn’t.” Miss Daisy turned to me and winked with a coy smile I didn’t quite believe. The number of murderers in this car was somewhere between one and two.

“Anyways, my point is that I’m only here to set things right, even if it don’t make much sense. And ‘round these parts, you’ll find most things don’t make much sense.”

From my experience, I couldn’t disagree on any account. The past was funny, this state was strange. Guilt drowned us all. From the backseat Michael spoke up.

“I’ve known Miss Daisy for as long as I can remembah, and Miss Daisy, she knows near everyone from here to Timbuktu.” Miss Daisy threw back her head in laughter.

“Timbuktu, no. Banjul, maybe.”

“My momma was one ‘o tha help for the Compsons. Daisy would come and tell the children stories, teach us, bring us things. Never met nobody as kind.” So Michael and Daisy were thick as thieves. Why hadn’t he told me before? She could have helped earlier today. She was the secret weapon we needed, and Michael had possessed the blueprints all along. Stupidity.

“Wait a minute here. So you knew Daisy all along? Why didn’t you tell me? If we have resources, we should use them.”

“Whadya think, Don? That Miss Daisy was gonna make a stand there in the mud with us today?” The pair shared a look and a grin in the rearview mirror. “Sides, I only jus’ met ya yesterday.”

I lit up another cigarette and replaced the burnt out butt in Daisy’s cigarette holder. She thanked me kindly. I didn’t respond to Michael; he knew I knew he was right. Daisy had done her duty.

“So, where are we headed?”

“Well, I think you boys need some time to regroup and lie low. The Compson Plantation is just about 50 miles outside ‘a town, so y’all should be safe there. Been near a hundred years since it was last occupied. I’ll make ya’s comfortable, then I’ll turn tail back into town ta see what’s ta be done about Charlie. The spiders will keep ya company.”

I nodded slowly and looked out the window. Some time to lie low would be nice. I could gather my thoughts and attempt to figure out exactly what I was doing. Deep down, however, I knew that wouldn’t happen. I had an itch in my sock and on my mind that needed scratching.

## II

The long and dusty road that led us to the Compson Plantation was occupied only by the unseen ghosts at its sides. The sun had just about set as we pulled up to the main house, which had long passed its ownership to the weeping willows surrounding it. A hint of decadence remained, but it could only be viewed through cobwebs and stained windows. As Daisy shifted the Bentley into park, I lit a cigarette and stepped out of the car and back in time.

“There she is, boys.” Michael walked around back and opened the car door for Miss Daisy. “James used to drag me down here all the time. He always thought about fixin’ it up, but never got ‘round to it. Truth be told, we didn’t have the money. Jus’ decayin’ symbols of status.”

I let Miss Daisy lead us up the large white staircase and into the house. The cracked wooden doors creaked in either warning or greeting. A cobweb brushed against my face as I stepped inside the pitch black entrance. Venturing into the darkness, Daisy disappeared save for the glow of her cigarette. The snap of a match against flint was heard and the room was illuminated, sending shadows sprawling across the wooden floor. Lifting the match above her head, Daisy found the wick of an oil lamp, exposing our temporary home.

“That’s better.” I had equated the word abandoned with desolate, but that was not the case. Beautiful paintings lined the walls. Sturdy, oaken furniture was still laid out, covered in dust and whatever insects and spiders had left behind. Brandy decanters lay out



on a table against the far wall, some still full, calling my name. I walked over to take a sniff.

“They’re all yours boys. Probably ain’t too bad, either – they get better with age, ain’t that right?”

I uncorked a bottle. It smelled fine, but sweet. A drink of high society. I put the bottle to my lips and took a small sip. It tickled the back of my throat just right.

“Good stuff.” Daisy laughed and flashed me a smile. Turning to Michael to give him a taste, I found he had already left the entrance way and begun his exploration.

“Michael! Where did you go?” I yelled, my question echoing down the hallway.

“I’m down here, Don!” The yell came from the room to my left. Brushing more cobwebs aside, I walked past them and entered the room.

Like everything else about the house, it was large. A writing desk stood in one corner, quill and all. The other corner was occupied by a chair and ottoman. Between them, a fireplace stood, the half burnt log within a sign it wasn’t just for show. Why a fireplace was needed in Mississippi, I’d never know. In the middle of the room stood Michael, staring up at a portrait of who I could only guess to be the respectable Jason Compson.

“You boys must be starvin’. There’s some vittles out in the car I’m going to grab. I fired up the stove in the backroom, she works like a charm.” Daisy poked her head through the doorway. Food. I’d almost forgotten it.

“Thank ya Miss Daisy.” Michael thanked her and I nodded. Waiting for the click of the front door behind her, I walked over to Michael and placed my hand on his shoulder.

“I think it’s time.” Michael turned and looked at me in confusion.

“Time fo’ what?” What did he think?

“I’m going to show you what changed me.” Michael’s face quickly turned from confusion to understanding. Reaching down, I pulled out my bag of tricks.

“Dope? You gotta be kiddin’ me, Don.” The cocaine had moved its way to the outer edge of the bag, hiding the truly valuable contents inside. Removing and pocketing the powder, all that remained were the tried and tested litmus papers.

“That’s for later. This is for now.” Reaching into the bag, I removed four papers and handed two to Michael, a donation for the cause. Taking them in his rough hands, he looked first at the papers, then at me. They were as foreign as Farsi to him. “Don’t worry about it. Just swallow them.”

Putting the papers in my mouth, I held them for a moment before swallowing. They’d keep the butterflies in my stomach company. Taking a deep breath, I let my anxiousness subside. I couldn’t help it; the unknown still frightened me. Michael stood unmoving.

“Just take them. You can trust me.” Michael smiled.

“Well, lemme see. Since I’ve met you, we’ve both been tossed in jail, I got a few broke ribs and a black eye to match ma skin, you

nearly got killed by Charlie ‘n Ed, and we’ve drunken nearly ‘nough bourbon to kill a horse.” Tilting his head back, Michael downed his dosage. “Sounds good ta me.”

The effects wouldn’t kick in for another half hour at least. Then, who knew. I heard Daisy slam the front door behind her as she reentered the house. Poking her head in the room, she looked us up and down.

“Just checkin’ in.” Out she went, her echoing footsteps following her to the kitchen. Michael walked over the vacant chair and sat down, propping his feet up on the ottoman, leaving the writing desk as my refuge.

“So when am I sposed to feel somethin’?” He was used to the instant gratification alcohol, dope, and modern life provided. He’d have to wait, but it would be worth it.

“About an hour or so. Hard to say, really. Maybe less.” I removed the quill from the comfort of its inky resting place and began drawing on a piece of parchment left behind by a previous tenant. Unable to think of what to draw, I practiced signing my name over and over again until it had lost all meaning. My mind had not yet reached its creative peak.

Michael sat patiently, staring off into the distance. Putting the quill back to rest for another hundred years, I pulled out a cigarette and tossed my pack to Michael.

“How long do ya think it’s been?” I looked at my watch for the first time in days.

“I couldn’t tell you. Ten, fifteen minutes? Twenty?”

“Ya sure we took enough? I ain’t feelin’ a thing.” It was uncertainty, not curiosity that had killed the cat.

“Relax, Michael. I told you. It’s going to kick in any minute now. You sure as hell won’t want any more.” Michael turned his head and resumed staring blankly at the wall. Perhaps he was seeing things without even realizing it. This substance had the uncanny ability of sneaking up on you before letting loose a stampede of elephants within your mind.

“Boys, I got some bad news.” Daisy was at the door once again. I hadn’t heard her come in; like the LSD, Daisy also possessed the virtue of stealth. “The stove out back burnt out, and I can’t seem to get it back up ‘n runnin’. Looks like I’ll be servin’ up some half cooked grits.”

Daisy walked over and handed plates to Michael and I. An unappetizing, watery mess graced them. Filling my spoon, I took a mouthful and attempted to chew the rock hard grits. Unable to, I gulped and swallowed them down. Nevertheless, my stomach growled thanks. Michael simply set his plate aside.

“Sorry ‘bout that, boys. I was hopin’ we’d have a real southern dinner.” Daisy sighed and took a step backwards. Her hat had returned to her head. “Well, on that note, I guess I should inform you boys I’m leavin’. I know I said I’d stay, but I got a big day tomorrow, an’ at this age I need ta get my beauty sleep in my bed, not one infested by dust mites. Enjoy yours, though, of course - you boys are welcome to lay yah heads wherever you’d like, but do make sure ta check for bugs first. I’m sure you boys gots loads ta talk ‘bout. I

know, I know, ya don't want me ta leave, but I'll be back in three or fou' days. That should give ya plenty 'o time to cook up a good plan – one better than these grits at the least.”

Looking up from my plate at Daisy's smiling face, I nodded, not at her, but rather at the vibrant, kaleidoscopic shapes swirling upon the wall behind her. Watching her leave the room, I sunk into my chair and felt the drip of saliva on my chin. As an engine started outside, I was all but gone.

### III

The house had known many names over the years. Some called it the big house; others the haunted house on the hill; still others, home. If its walls could talk, they would weave stories of wonder, sadness, horror, and triumph, just as any old walls would. Built on soft, fertile Mississippi soil, it now rested on the shoulders of the past. Sitting forsaken for nearly a century, tonight the walls would have a new tale to add to their repertoire.

Past drawn curtains, two men were conversing inside. One subject sat silent and studious, like a scientist studying an old dusty tome in an attempt to uncover some veiled secret. The other stood, never unmoving, giggling like a child who was reading his very first storybook. Waving his arms in exasperation, the giggling man made one more attempt to convince his companion of possible yet impossible facts he was certain were true.

“I jus’ don’t get it, man. I saw you singin’ them hymns with the rest of us. I bet you even said a prayer right when you were gettin’ put in the back ‘o that cruiser. And you’re sittin’ here, tellin’ me that ya don’t believe in not just my god, but any god?”

The other man sat with his hands on his face, a pensive look in his eyes. The pillars outside held in a modern day Aristotle. Finally, his concentration broke.

“I don’t know what the fuck I believe.” His adversary smiled and raised his hand in the air with all the glee of an a-ha moment.

“Then why don’t ya just believe in what’s good ‘n right? The thing that teaches right from wrong, and how ta live a life of virtue? Then, if all is good and well, you’ll be up in heaven laughin’ at the fools down here when it’s all said and done.”

“Have you read that book you’re preaching about? I’ve only read bits and parts, but you’re speaking of a god that has committed and sponsored genocide after genocide after genocide. You’re talking about a book that the residents of Hattiesburg live and die by, and look how they treat you!” The other man wasn’t listening; he was enticed by the wallpaper. “Michael!”

The other man spun around. Somewhere in the walls, a mouse sneezed.

“The people ‘o Hattiesburg?” He had been listening. “They don’t know shit. They jus’ go ta church, thinkin’ that’ll get ‘em a ticket to the good life. That ain’t the way it works. You gotta read what the book really says. Jus’ another example ‘o somethin’ good ruined by crooked white folks.”

“Another example? What else have they ruined?”

Michael paused for a moment before answering.

“Watermelon.”

“Watermelon?” Don laughed at the absurdity of the answer. “*Watermelon?* You’re up in the clouds.”

“Nah, hear me out. Do us black folk like watermelon?”

“I mean, I’ve heard it been said...”

“Exactly. Did ya know that watermelon was one ‘o the first crops that could be grown by free blacks? That it was once a symbol

‘o freedom?’ Don shook his head. “These days, crooked white folks went and turned it inta somethin’ negative. Same goes for the bible; it ain’t ‘posed ta be oppressive. It’s really about love and how ta treat your fellow man.”

“Is it necessary though? I mean, I don’t read the bible but you don’t see me going around raping and plundering.”

“Well, maybe not you, but I’m sure ya mother taught ya right from wrong, and where do ya think she got it from?”

“My mother died when I was young. I didn’t learn much from her. Not that I can remember, anyway.”

“Well, then maybe that’s why ya killed that kid.”

The room went silent. The man who was calm became more or less than calm. Standing up, he paced up and down the room before finally resting upon the mantle of the unlit fireplace. Staring into absent flames, he pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and produced a flame of his own with a struck match. Lighting the cigarette, he blew smoke into the vacant air. Chuckling to himself, his companion attempted to break the tension.

“Ya know, my momma always used ta tell me a story ‘bout how shootin’ stars were actually the butts o’ cigarettes smoked by angels. Up in heaven they’d be smokin’ ‘em, and when god walked by they’d have ta throw ‘em away.” The smoking man turned and gave a half smile. Michael returned it with a preposition. “You wanna do some of that dope?”

“Now that’s something I do believe in.” Walking over the corner of the room, the smoking man pulled out a worn, oaken chair



from the comfort of the corner while Michael worked on the padded chair from the opposite side. Meeting at the table in the center of the room, the smoking man pulled a packet out from his left sock. Yet again, Michael chuckled to himself.

“Jesus, Don. Why are ya still keeping that in your damn sock?”

Barely acknowledging the previous question, Don emptied the contents of the packet onto the table with a straight face.

“Because it’s safe there.”

The packet had given birth to smaller packets containing a white substance, as well as some small, blank pieces of paper stained red. Pushing the paper and all but one packet to the side, Don emptied its white, powdery contents onto the table. Its chemical smell wafted into the air, polluting the organic ambiance of the manor.

“There anything around here we can use to split this? A knife or razor?” Don looked at the powder before him in anticipation, his hands trembling.

“I’ll go ‘n check. I’ll be right back, gimme two minutes.”

Michael stood up from his padded seat and turned towards the door. Seeing only his back, Don licked his finger, stuck it in the powder, and brought it towards his nose. Inhaling deeply, Don laid back in his chair and enjoyed the stories the shadows played on the wall.

Two minutes turned into twenty minutes turned into twenty two minutes. Time waxed and waned between the exponential and linear curves dancing in Don’s head. More wet fingers. More deep breaths. At twenty seven minutes, Don realized Michael had been

gone far too long. Standing up, he walked into the hallway in search of his partner, and, more importantly, a way of splitting up the white substance coating the table behind him.

Upon the large table in the hallway, three once full brandy decanters had mysteriously turned to two. Michael was nowhere to be seen.

“Michael! Where the fuck are you?” Don called down the empty hallway with no regard for any possibly sleeping residents of the house, human or otherwise. Waiting a few seconds with his hand to his hear, he was answered only by silence. Sighing in frustration, Don marched down the hall with all the force of a stampeding elephant. “Michael! Are you fucking kidding me?”

Further down the hall, a sliver of light peeked out from beneath the door of an adjacent room. Pushing the door open, Don was greeted by the sight of Michael staring at his reflection in an old, cracked mirror. Beside him, the empty brandy decanter lay alongside an old straight razor. Michael had discovered the most necessary room of the house; the bathroom. It was from a different century. These days, it was nothing but rust. Turning his head, Michael acknowledged his visitor.

“Hey boss, found that razor you were lookin’ for.”

“What the fuck have you been doing? You’ve been down here for a fucking hour!”

“Sorry boss. I guess I jus’ got stuck lookin’ at myself in the mirror. My eyes, my skin... Is there somethin’ wrong with it?”

“No, your skin is fine. Grab that razor and let’s go split up that cocaine.”

“Nah, I mean is there somethin’ wrong with it bein’ black ‘n brown?”

“You’re fine. It’s just the drugs. Let’s get the fuck out of here.” Don grabbed Michael’s shoulder and forcefully pried him away from the mirror. Not forgetting what he came there for, he brushed past Michael and grabbed the razor.

The walls were melting as Don made his way back to the main room. Sitting down, he got to work. Halves became quarters became eighths, all before Michael had even taken his seat. In the end, the razor had cut ten perfectly parallel, straight white lines. Taking a five dollar bill out of his pocket, Don rolled it up and got to it. One line gone. Passing the bill to Michael, he closed his eyes and rubbed his nose. Two lines gone. The pair passed the bill back and forth like a game of hot potato until the table lay bare.

“I hope you don’t thank god for this one. That was all me.”

“Yep, I gotta give Satan his dues.” The two laughed until they were unsure what they were laughing about. Shaking his head free of invisible bugs, Michael sunk further and further into his chair until they were a singular entity. “This is wild, Don. I ain’t never felt like this before. So this is what made yah change?”

Don stared back at Michael. His simple question had dredged up demons of the past, both literally and figuratively. *No*. Don began shaking uncontrollably. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a cigarette. Bringing it to his mouth, the cigarette tore in half between

his fingers, both halves tumbling to the floor in a beggar's worst nightmare. *Not again.* The portraits hanging from the walls were laughing. His whole body convulsing, Don fell to the floor.

"Don! You ok?" Michael leapt from his seat. Putting his hand on Don's shoulder, he tried to stir his friend but to no avail. Slapping him across the face, he repeated his question. "You ok? Don!"

The room shrunk until the only thing it held was the two men in its center, the oil lamps hovering above them acting as their halos. From the clouds above, the holy trinity watched over one, while the trinity of matter, space, and time ruled over the other, though it was unclear in this moment which man fell where. Michael ground his teeth until he couldn't anymore. Finally, Don's eyes fluttered open.

"Can you get me a smoke?" Don croaked, the last thing he needed being the first thing he asked for.

"'course boss." Reaching into Don's pocket, Michael retrieved his packet of cigarettes and lit one for each of them. Unable or unwilling to use his hands, the cigarette drooped between Don's lips, ash falling on his already stained white shirt.

"Back from the dead again." Don sighed as his cigarette smoke rose and kissed his forehead in a mock baptism.

"I feel you. I feel jus' 'bout everything." Michael stood up, brushing the ash which had spilled onto him. Walking over and sitting on the window sill, he looked at the mess of a man sprawled before him. "Don, why'd ya come here?"

Don closed his eyes again.

“I guess I wanted to make something of myself. Have people remember me once I’m gone. Don’t you think about it?”

“So you want people to remember you once you’re gone, but you believe death is some dark abyss ya can’t crawl out of. Ain’t that funny?”

“I don’t fucking know.”

“I’ll tell ya what I believe. I believe that the ones that love you will ‘member ya, and that’s that. I’ll remember ya... That is if I live much longer in dis cruel world.”

“I wish it was that fucking easy.” Michael shook his head and smiled. Standing from his spot on the sill, he spun and peered out into the darkness. Suddenly, he took two steps back, his face twisted in terror. Don spoke up from the floor.

“What’s wrong? You look like you just saw the devil himself.” Smoke poured from his nostrils.

“It ain’t the devil.” Michael backed up even further, his voice quivering. “But it definitely ain’t of this world, either. Spooks. ‘N I bet they’ve come for me.”

“Spooks? As in ghosts?” Michael nodded his head. “It’s just the drugs. This old place is playing tricks on you again.”

“Come ‘n see.” Don let out an expletive under his breath and slowly propped himself on his elbow, then onto his feet. Stumbling over to the window, he took a quick glance outside. Turning back towards Michael, a look of confusion crossed his face. Glancing back out, his heart dropped.

“Well, I’ll be damned. I see them too.”

## IV

Ferns cowered beneath the shoes of men in the moonless Mississippi evening. Slowly, ten mysterious figures were making their way down the side of a steep hill in single file, visible only to the vultures flying above them. Where they had come from, only the night knew. Dressed in all white and carrying the flag of their father's father upon their backs, these masked men roamed the darkness for both business and pleasure.

Coming to the bottom of the hill, the men spread out, their robes coating the grass like a Mississippi snowfall. Making their way around boulders and dilapidated farming equipment, the men made short work of the field before them and found themselves at their destination. Raising his hand, the foremost figure halted, causing the others to follow suit.

Pulling up his hood, the leader spit a mouthful of chewing tobacco and saliva onto the ground. Surveying the mammoth of a house before him, he let his hood fall back in place, once again becoming faceless. Putting his hands to his hips, a pistol poked out from the holster at his waist. From the rear, one of the other men rushed to his side, nearly tripping on his robe in the process.

“So ya think the nigger and his lover are in there?” The leader spit on the ground once again, this time nearly hitting the robe of his fellow shadow.

“Don’t talk so loud, ya fuckin’ nitwit. I swear, if you get us in any more trouble, you’ll be hangin’ up there in the trees with the nigger and his pal.”

“Sorry boss.” This time, the second spook spoke in a barely audible whisper. Taking one step forward, the leader crouched down and took some soft soil in his hands.

“I’d say they’re in there. Lights haven’t been lit in the Compson place for nearly a hundred years. Tonight, these boys are gon’ get more than she bargained for.” Taking a deep breath the leader stood up. “This is the spot alright.”

Tossing his handful of dirt aside, the leader turned back to face his cohort. Silently, he raised his arm, exposing his hand from his sleeve. With a twirl of his finger, he set the group into motion. As though a spell had been cast, the men produced axes and hacksaws from nowhere and scuttled off to haunt the forest surrounding them.

One small, branchless tree fell down into the clearing without warning. In seconds, another followed. With the kind of unison only obtained by practice, the ghouls bent down and hoisted the timber onto their backs. Walking to the center of the clearing, they let down one of the fallen trees and returned for the other of its kin.

The second spell of the evening conjured up a hammer and nails. Crossing one tree over the other, the leader, now indistinguishable from his cronies, walked over to the point where the logs crossed and set a nail. Raising the hammer over his head, he struck the long nail through the wood with one blow. Setting another

nail, he repeated the motion while the others hacked away at the ends of the trees in an attempt to make their woodwork uniform.

Standing back to admire his work, the leader cast the final spell of the evening by summoning a shovel and a can of petrol. Handing the shovel off to his deputy, he walked to the top of the newly formed cross. Tilting the rusted petrol can, he began coating the wood with the clear, fragrant liquid. Making his way from head to toe and back, he made sure not one inch of the timber was spared. At the base, a deep, cylindrical hole was being dug.

“Watch it there boys, just give it a second or two ta soak up.” Producing a cigarette from underneath his robe, the leader stuck it through his mouth hole. Finding a match, he lit the cigarette and carefully extinguished the flame before tossing it in the opposite direction of the wooden creation. Lining up on both sides of the cross, the infantry silently awaited their command. After two drawn out inhales, the order was given. “Alright. Raise ‘er up.”

Slowly but surely, as if they were undoing the damage they’d wrought before, the cross rose above the pointed hoods of the men. When it stood completely erect, the man with the shovel continued to undo their damage by filling in the hole he’d dug, allowing the cross to stand on its own accord. Patting down the final shovel full of dirt, the rest of the men eased their grip on the cross and carefully backed up from it, leaving their leader and his deputy as the sole souls at its side.

Taking a final inhale of his cigarette, the leader turned to his shovel wielding deputy and nodded, signaling for him to glide back to



the rest of the group. Tossing his shovel aside, the deputy obeyed. Wedging his cigarette between his thumb and index finger, the leader flicked the butt towards the cross. Spinning through the air like a firefly in the night, the butt hit its mark, erupting in a shower of sparks which turned into flames fueled by irony. The glowing cross lit the night, casting shadows upon shadows.

Unmoving from his place beside the burning rood, the leader of the group took on the role of master of ceremonies and threw his hands up to the night sky. One by one, the members of his troop began circling the ancient symbol they'd carved out, their master watching all the while, a chant forming under his breath. There were no words, only sounds reminiscent of a time long passed. Gradually, all the men joined in, the almost other worldly noises filling the vacant space between them.

“Brothers!” The hypnotic ritual came to a halt as the master addressed his flock. “Y’all know why we’re here today. I ain’t gonna waste time talkin’ like y’all don’t know we got a big problem in our town, a problem that needs ta be squashed out. So tonight, we gon’ squash it. That nigger in that there house wants ta go ta school, so I say we take ‘im ta school!” Cheers erupted from the crowd. “‘N ya know what I say, if ya ain’t with us, you’re against us. So let’s show his nigger lovin’ friend what’s what!”

The cheering died down as the chants began again, though this time, the men stood still, their arms crossed and their eye holes fixated on the mansion before them. Inching forward towards the entrance, the master walked with one hand on his pistol, one hand on

his heart. Behind him, his deputy had tied a noose which was anxiously awaiting a neck. Taking one step further, he stopped as the door to the mansion creaked open.

“What the fuck we gon’ do, Don? I know theys out there fah me, ain’t no way ‘round it. What the fuck we gon’ do?” Michael’s voice trembled as I tried to fight off the fear with all the weapons of my mind. Logic. Reason. It was the drugs. It had to be. There weren’t any ghosts out there in the night. That was impossible. If only they didn’t look so god damned real...

“Don’t worry, Michael. Just stay inside. They can’t hurt us in here. Let’s sit back down and get back to talking.” I tried my best to put on a brave face, which did nothing to subdue Michael’s cowering. “It’ll be okay – this will pass. Jus-“

Suddenly, our window to the madness outside lit up with a spectacular flare of light. Looking outside, I saw a vision I could only describe as hell. Fire burned as shadows danced around it, all the while speaking in tongues. I closed my eyes and asked Michael to pray.

“Pray, Michael. Please pray. God won’t answer me. You have to pray!” Tears rolled down my cheeks as I fell to my knees, tugging at Michael’s shirt. He could save us. I knew he could. This would be a miracle worthy of canonization.

“I ain’t gon’ take it anymore! Theys callin’ for me, Don! I gotta tell ‘em to stop!” Michael removed his hands from his ears and made his way to the door, dragging me along the splinter filled floor. Letting go of his shirt, I pulled myself up to window’s level just in

time to see him step outside into the pit of waiting demons. He was met only by silence, as though he'd spooked the spooks.

"What d'ya want! Why have ya come?" Michael yelled out over the spirits before him, displaying more courage than I'd ever seen him show. Cops and frat boys didn't have anything on demons. Stepping forward, the foremost ghoul confirmed his fears.

"We've come fer you." He spoke with a southern twang. I'd always imagined the devil came from the south, if anywhere.

"Well, you ain't getting' me. Be gone, spirits, be gone!" As if possessed by the Holy Spirit, Michael was pacing back and forth across the veranda, all the while screaming his lungs out. Our miracle could still happen yet. "Be gone! Be gone!"

The ghouls in the background looked among themselves in confusion, as if unsure of what supernatural deed to do next. Finally, their leader spoke out.

"Quit dilly dallyin' and get that nigger!" Behind him, four ghouls came out from the flames and headed straight towards Michael, who had frozen in fear. The Holy Spirit had left him, if it was ever there, and he was now reduced to a blubbering mess. As the ghouls entered the physical plane and laid their hands on him, he called out towards me.

"Its my time, Don. Get Miss Daisy 'n run! Run I say! Get outta here!" One of the ghouls cracked him in the jaw.

"We're here fer ya friend, too. Ain't no 'scapin' this time!" So they had come for me as well. There was no running. I'd beat demons before, and I'd have to do it again. As the white ghosts led Michael

towards his doom, I burst through the door, throwing myself at them. Tumbling down the stairs, we landed as a pile of blood, flesh, and rags. Breaking myself free from the tangle, I stood up and looked down at the ghosts at my feet only to realize they now had faces.

With slow, smooth motions the ghosts eerily rose from their place in the soil to levitate above the ground. Turning their heads towards the flames behind me, I could only look on in horror as a familiar face revealed itself to me.

“You thought you could run away like a coward? You thought I wouldn’t find you?” A forked tongue slithered in and out of his mouth. “Did you forget? I owwwwwwwwwn you.”

“No. You don’t anymore.” Mr. Anderson circled around me, whispering devilish words in my ears. This time, there was no Magoo to hinder him. Closing my eyes, I tried to end the lunacy, but it was of no use.

“You selfish, pathetic man. You thought you could come down here and forge yourself a legacy based off the suffering of these people?” Stepping aside, Anderson revealed a sprawled out Michael lying face down. “You know nothing of their trials or tribulations. You were fed with a golden spoon and you couldn’t even eat properly!”

I wanted to speak and call out his evil lies that I knew were truths. I couldn’t find the words. Reaching out, Anderson placed his claws on my face and pulled me in close. His breath reeked of mustard gas. I turned away, but his stench and gaze followed.

“You’re minnnnnnnneeee.” I’d had enough. Pulling back with all my might, I ripped free from his beastly embrace and screamed.

“YOU DON’T OWN ME ANYMORE!” My fist flew out from beside me, propelled by all the powers of contempt and disgust. Pushing its way through the humid air, my haymaker stopped inches from Anderson’s face.

Only it wasn’t his face. The wrinkled, scarred face of Anderson had melted away. In its place was the youthful, bearded face I’d only seen once before through the window of a waiting room door. The face of a boy that would haunt my dreams if only I dreamt more often.

“Why?” He looked upon me with eyes which had not seen countless sights unfold. Eyes that a mother had once looked upon as she whispered *my baby*. Eyes that were searching for something somewhere out in the ether. “Why did you take what was mine?”

I didn’t have an answer. That wasn’t true; I had many, but I couldn’t give any. Fame. Fortune. Excess. Legacy. They were all meaningless to him. He was no longer swayed by the desires of mortals.

“Why?” He asked again, this time with anger crossing his face. I could do nothing but stare. “WHY?”

I fell to my knees and looked up at my making. Tears digging trenches in my cheeks, I tried to respond.

“Anderson made me. I... I had no choice. The government is cruel, evil. They’re the problem in this world. Did every fucking nazi get executed? I don’t know, I don’t know. They made me. I tried to

stop. I tried to stop them. No I didn't. I wish I had, but I didn't. But I left. I'm good now, see? Do you see what I've done? Can't you see?" Blubbing. Nothing but blubbing.

"LIES."

Taking his robe in my hands, I placed my face in it and wept. I wept like I'd never wept before. Tears were caught in my throat. All I could do was whisper.

"I...I just wanted to be somebody." Silence. "I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

I looked back up, hoping to see a boyish face of forgiveness, relief, anything. Instead, I found the face of an angel. Falling backwards, I caught myself, mouth agape.

"Donny..." It was my mother, aglow with celestial light rather than that of lightning which marred her. She was just as beautiful as I remembered; more so. "Donny... what's happened to you?"

"Mother...I...I...what do you mean?" I couldn't believe it. This was my miracle. Was this heaven? Had I been wrong all along?

"My precious Donny... I wish you could see yourself the way I do. You are so smart, so kind, so brave, so much more than what you've done. You've got heaven in your hands, if only you knew how to use them... How have you become this?" In a way only a mother could do, she'd put my heart at ease then tore it out. Reaching down and placing her hand on my shoulder, she continued. "Even when you were a child you expected such great things of yourself. You demanded much of the world, as though it owed you something. It was hard, so hard. But I never thought it would be like this."

“Mother, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t. I was a five year old boy again with only a pile of ashes to raise me. All the resentment, teasing, loneliness, fear, emptiness, and hate came up as I threw up a slew of acid on the ground. Looking up at my mother with a face stained with blood, sweat, and bile, I asked for the only answer I’d ever desired from her. “This is your fault! Why’d you leave me? Why’d you leave? Why?”

A ray of light from the night sky beamed down upon us, evaporating ghosts and demons in its wake. Leaning down, my mother kissed my forehead and smiled.

“I never left.” And with a cliché, she was gone, returned to whence she came. Still processing what had just occurred, I looked around to see that light had once again left the Compson Plantation, leaving only darkness and flames behind.

Suddenly, I felt the grip of a hand on my shoulder. Spinning around, expecting to see Anderson or the face of some other demon from my past, I found only a faceless ghost before me. Grabbing my other shoulder, the ghost began pulling me across the damp ground.

“NO! LEAVE ME BE!” Flailing my limbs, I tried to break free from the strong arm of the phantom, but to no avail. Turning my head, I bit down on his hand until I tasted blood. These were not ghosts, but men. Both the angels and demons had left; purgatory was all that remained.

“Why you little...” Taking something hard and shiny from his belt, the man dressed as a ghost smacked me across the face. His supernatural powers all but gone, I responded by spitting crimson



blood across his white smock. “That’s it. You ain’t even worth hangin’.”

A click. A bang. A sharp pain in my abdomen. Warm, red liquid everywhere. Laying back, I could only stare at the face incapable of expression above me and smile. What else was there to do? Another click.

As if in slow motion, a shovel came through the air, toppling the man before me over like an ivory tower crumbling under the weight of ignorance. Struggling to keep my eyes open, I saw Michael bring the shovel up and down until the man beneath him moved no more. He turned to me, rage rendering his face almost unrecognizable, his mouth opened wide.

“RUN!” Struggling to my feet, I stumbled towards the shelter of the unknown woods surrounding me. More bangs. Screaming. Falling down, I raised myself back up and ran as best I could, hoping upon hope that no more visions would come to me tonight.

## VI

I woke beneath the branches of a weeping willow that was crying for someone, but not for me. Rain water dripped down from its drooping branches, providing me with a make shift alarm clock. Wincing in pain, I looked down to see a blood stained mess where my abdomen should have been. Somewhere in that mess was a lead bullet, my souvenir from the old Compson place. Turning my head sideways, I was as relieved as I could be to see Michael in a heap beside me. As if on cue, he opened his eyes.

Looking past me, Michael raised himself up and stretched himself towards the dreary sky, his white linens now stained red and brown. Walking over to the small pond beside us, he bent over and took a drink. I tried to get up and join him, but the pain was unbearable. I was stuck in the mud.

“We went toe ta toe wid the devil last night. Doubt Joe Louis himself coulda done a better job.” Michael plunged his head into the pond and brought himself back out, the pond water dripping from his face indistinguishable from that of the rain. “Jus’ how many times is that I’ve saved ya now? Debt’s gotta be repaid.”

“I couldn’t count. Thank you.” I sincerely meant it, but at this point, it might have been better to be hung out to die. “You know where we are?”

“Nope.” We were lost, I was dying. It was all hopeless. Michael flashed me a crooked smile. Something was eating him from inside other than his stomach. I just needed something for the pain.

“Michael, reach into my sock and get the drugs. I need something for the pain. It’s...It’s...” I felt a sharp pain throughout my body as I turned my head straight. Walking over to me, Michael lifted my pant leg and removed what I needed.

“Ya want these? Well, you ain’t getting’ ‘em. I mean damn, Don, these things nearly got us killed las’ night. They made me kill las’ night. I ain’t gonna stand by and watch your selfish ass take ‘em no more. It ain’t worth it.” Clutching my cure, Michael flung the bag as far as he could into the pond. I tried to protest, but my abdomen wouldn’t rise. As the bag flew through the air, being pelted by raindrops, I cursed in my mind. With a kerplunk the drugs hit the water and sent waves rippling towards us. They now existed only to give aquatic visions of heaven and hell to fish and pond scum.

Endless Seas. Goldfish bowls.

“Can I at least have a cigarette? Please” I gasped out, begging for Michael’s mercy. Sighing, Michael sat down beside me. With what little strength I had, I pulled myself further into the shelter of the willow. I felt the bullet move inside me. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my pack of cigarettes and box of matches. Miraculously, they were dry.

Taking two cigarettes out of the pack, I put them in my mouth and lit them. Handing the second off to Michael, I breathed in a sigh of relief.

“We’re fucking lost, Michael.” I let my cigarette hang from my mouth. I didn’t know how this happened; I was so fucking stupid.

I'd come to change the world, but only succeeded in changing mine and Michael's for the worse. My demons were right.

"We may be lost, but 'least we alive. Well, dunno how much longer you'll be." Michael exhaled a smoky breath and looked down at my wound. "We better off than Charlie, that's fer sure. Daisy too, who knows what that gal is gonna say when she finds here ole place is a murder scene. You jus' focus on stayin' alive. Let's get ya somewheres safe."

"But where, Michael?" Michael offered me no solace by shrugging his shoulders. Tossing his cigarette in the pond as another treat for the fishes, he stood up and looked around.

"Dunno. Got any ideas?" I was fresh out, and that was probably for the best. Reaching down, I began rubbing my wound. If I could claw out the shrapnel inside, I would. Grinding my teeth, I rolled over on my side. "Damn, that looks like it's gettin' worse."

Bending over me, Michael took off my sopping wet jacket and began fashioning a makeshift tourniquet. Flipping the jacket over and inside out, something fell out of the pocket to the ground, its emerald exterior poking through the mud like a patch of moss.

"Michael..." I pointed out the object to Michael, who was too wrapped up in his nurse's handiwork to notice. Bending down, he picked up the rectangular object and brushed it off, revealing writing on the outside.

"The Negro Traveller's Green Book..." As Michael read out the cover, I'd come to the realization of what he held in his hands. A gift I'd received when my lunacy was in its infancy from a guardian

angel. Opening it up, Michael flipped through its white pages. “I heard tell o’ these, ain’t never seen one before. There’s a bunch ‘o maps in here. I think I can pick out where we at...”

Laying my jacket at my feet, Michael crawled up beside me beneath the tree. Opening the book wide for me to see, the map now looked more like Oz than Mississippi. Carefully, Michael began tracing out our yellow brick road.

“See, Daisy took us a bit east, a bit north from Hattiesburg... An’ I think we ran South las’ night. That’d put us right about here.” Michael tapped his finger on a vacant portion of the map. “’cordin’ to this, there’s folks that oughta help us ‘bout a day’s walk south.”

Standing up, Michael squinted upwards at the sky, trying to pick out exactly where the sun was hiding behind the clouds. Turning, he pointed in the direction of a path already marked by weeds and pussy willows.

“That there’s the way.” I lifted my head, wincing as I did so. I’d bitten my tongue up to this point, but I needed some relief.

“Are you going to doctor me up or what?” Looking down at the jacket, Michael quickly bent down and grabbed it.

“Sorry, boss.” Tearing the jacket into long, even strips, Michael wrapped the makeshift bandages around my midsection the best he could, constricting my breathing but putting some soothing pressure on the wound.

“Alright. Ya ready ta get goin’?” Nodding, I let Michael put his arm underneath me and slowly prop me up. Standing up, Michael grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet in one fluid motion.

Something tore beneath my bandages. On wobbly legs, I took one lunge forward, then another. Leaning on Michael's shoulder for balance, we lifted our feet high and waded our way out of the muck.

While I'd expected my torso to cripple under the weight of my head, I was happy to find it was much lighter than I'd thought. One advantage of this drug fueled stumbling through life was that it was simple and easy to forgive past transgressions. They piled up until they were meaningless, each new one cancelling out the one before. The previous night had faded into the distance, a dream just beyond my reach, a dream that would not be my last if only I continued to live.

Yet again, the Mississippi country side slowly passed us by just as it had on our highway journeys, though this time not through the glass pane of an automobile window. The stale air of my Chevrolet had been replaced by the lush smell of dew and dandelions. Our spastic conversations dictated by silence and clamor had been replaced by the chirps of birds neither of us could translate. Our tired, sore legs were compensated with the chance to sit beneath the quickly moving clouds and stare, lit cigarettes hanging from our mouths.

Whenever I felt the cold grip of anxiety attempt to wrap itself around my brain, I tried to breath. Michael was right; what we needed to do now was just try to stay alive, then figure out what the fuck we were doing. Without a next step planned I felt hopeless. All I could do was put one shoe in front of the other.

Rock by rock, scummy pond by scummy pond, cigarette by cigarette, the day passed us by until the night was upon us once again.

The clouds had scattered away, scared of what lurked below them, revealing the moon as a halo to hang over whatever (un)holy machinations were to take place this evening. Still joined to my hip, and still reeling from last night, Michael scanned the shadows surrounding us for any ghost or goblin that would dare to jump out onto our path. The sharp pain in my stomach had become a constant I had learned to live with. Barely able to keep my eyes open, I broke the silence binding us by asking Michael to stop.

“Michael... I need to sleep... I can hardly keep my head up, I keep dozing off...” Trailing off, my head fell to my chest. Realizing what I was doing, I snapped awake before the agent of sleep could catch me.

“Jus’ stay awake another hour. We almost there. Ya fall asleep, ya might not wake back up ‘gain. ‘Sides, there’s coyotes ‘round these parts, and we don’t want none ‘o that.” I couldn’t tell if he was serious or not, and I didn’t care. My bandages had loosened long ago, and a few had fallen off. A trail of blood lead to us. I didn’t matter if a thousand coyotes or a thousand pissed off rednecks followed it, I needed to rest.

“I’m sitting down. Michael, I have to.”

“Alright, alright. We can have a smoke. Let’s jus’ be quick about it.” Sitting down on a boulder that could very well be my tombstone, I again completed the fire lighting ritual. Completely ignoring the cosmic ritual above our heads, I laid back and closed my eyes. Turning my head, I released a throat full of smoke and began drifting towards another shore.

“Don! Don!” Michael shook my shoulder, speaking in a yell dressed as a whisper. My cigarette had fallen into the bushes beside me, but that wasn’t what Michael was on about. Putting his finger to his lips, he motioned for me to listen to the voice of the night.

Perking my ears up, I could only make out the chirping of crickets and the murmur of the warm night breeze. Shaking my head, I laughed in Michael’s frightened face.

“There isn’t anything out there. Calm yourself. How long was I out for?” Sometimes a man on his deathbed could be the best voice of reason. Disregarding my question, Michael’s eyes moved back and forth in an attempt to decipher the noises in his head.

“Nah, listen. There’s somethin’ out there.” Again, I put my ears to the wind. Slowly something else rose above the sound of the wild. A melody accented with the unmistakable sound of human voices. Michael was right. “It’s gotta be the klan again. I don’t know how they tracked us, but they’s out there.”

I reached down into the bushes and retrieved my half burnt out cigarette. Lighting it again, it slowly drained the life out of me as I tried to make heads or tails of our current situation. Nothing coming to mind, I looked back at Michael.

“I’m gonna go have a peek up ‘head. You jus’ stay here. I’ll be back soon.” With a rustle he was gone, swallowed by the undergrowth. My cigarette’s flame reaching its toxic filter, I spit it into the bush once again, this time for good. My eyes demanding I shut them, I laid my head back and awaited Michael’s return.



For a split second, my thoughts wondered back to Stanford. I was sure nobody missed me. The only thing I missed was my bed. Imagining my rock as a mattress, I relaxed my body completely. Before I could nod off, hurried footsteps interrupted my journey to the domain of dreams. Shaking my shoulder for the second time in a short while, Michael's face had turned from fright to frenzy.

“Don, you gotta come see this. You ain't gonna believe it.” Ever my aid, Michael reached down and almost lifted me from my stony bed. Not wasting one second, he nearly carried me through the trees. As we walked, the melody stalking us became louder and louder.

The sound could only be described as a sound I'd never heard before yet I'd heard thousands of times; the kind of sound that would make a more naïve man believe in past lives. It fed my soul, stirring my dying heart.

Leaving the beaten path, Michael created his own, taking steps I'd never be able to retrace. In the darkness, everything looked the same; the only marker was the sound of the sirens beckoning us. Stopping in front of a large shrub, Michael set me down and parted the brush before us, unveiling a sight for my blurred eyes.

For the second night in a row my eyes had been exposed to fire. This time, it burned not in a shape forged by man, but rather danced whatever way it pleased. A procession of six, maybe eight figures circled their way around the flame, mirroring its sporadic movements, their dark skin contrasting the white ghosts of the night

previous. They were naked as the day they were born, their bare breasts bouncing up and down in hypnotic fashion.

Only feet from the dancers sat more men and women, clothed, the source of the otherworldly sounds which had called us to them. Drums, flutes, instruments whose music had long been forgotten to man were all present. I looked to Michael, his gaze reflecting the scene before us.

“Second night ‘o flames. Mama always used ta say that bad things come in sets ‘o threes, but I like the looks ‘o this.” I nodded and looked back to the undiscovered world I’d been exposed to. It was hard to look away. “I know these folk. One ‘o them used to live at the Compson’s old place. She was old as dirt. Swore she could bring people back from tha dead. Spooked the Jesus right outta me, though I always thought there may be somethin’ to it. They call it Hoodoo.”

A page from some dusty old encyclopedia flashed in my mind. I’d heard of these people as well; I’d only thought they existed as some old wives’ tale. This was my proof. The scientific method hadn’t been lost to me yet.

A sharp pain broke my concentration. Looking down, I found that a stick had found its way into my bandages during our romp through the forest. Pulling it out, I winced hard. Before I could dwell on the pain further, new movement brought my attention back to the spectacle at hand.

A new figure had appeared from the darkness, her hunched back carrying what seemed like the weight of the world. In one hand

she held a walking stick, in the other, a pouch. Making her way to the top of the clearing, she stood atop a boulder, increasing her stature by double. Even from our vantage point, it was possible to make thick, dark dreadlocks running down her back and strange, foreign markings tattooed onto her skin. Bones hung from her neck. Opening her mouth, she revealed a toothless grin.

Raising her walking stick, the music faded and the dancers turned their backs to us. When all was quiet, she spoke, but in a language and accent I knew not. It could have been English for all I knew.

“Pssst...Michael...You understand that?” I nudged Michael in the hopes it was some language his mother had taught him. He shook his head.

Continuing on, the woman motioned for one of the dancing men to come to her stone altar. Pulling something from her pouch, she handed it to the man. Walking over to the still burning flames, he tossed whatever it was to a fiery death. Suddenly, a giant puff of smoke rose from the pit, and the blaze began to turn from its tired and stale colors to hues I hadn't seen since I was young. Mesmerized, I reached into my pocket for a cigarette before realizing now was not the time.

Pulling my gaze away from the fire and back to the man, I realized he was looking straight at me. Looking first to his left, then to his right, I realized every open eye in the clearing was focused on Michael and me. My heart skipping a beat, I tried my best to cover

my face as if it would render me invisible. From the top of the clearing, the old woman spoke, this time in words I could understand.

“Brothahs, sistahs... Say ‘ello to ah visitas.”

## VII

There was nowhere to hide. We had been caught red handed, like young voyeurs privy to a scene we could not yet comprehend. Michael and I simply stared back at them waiting for what was to come next. It was a standoff.

Finally, the old witch drew first. Raising her walking stick, she waved it back and forth, motioning for us to come nearer. Weary that we'd stumbled onto a tribe of cannibals, I looked up at Michael, mouthing words I didn't quite have the strength to say. Michael simply shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the silent crowd.

"What choice do we got?" I gulped and realized he was right. My strength was failing fast. Propping myself up with my hands, I fell backwards onto my back. Grinding my teeth, it felt as though I'd been shot again. From below in the clearing, the old woman spoke in her thick accent.

"Bring de white boy ta me." Unable to move my head to look downwards, I heard rustles in the bushes. Soon, two giants loomed over me, they too covered in markings reminiscent of some exotic country I'd probably never get the chance to visit. One grabbing my arms and the other my legs, I found myself lifted far above my imprint in the soil.

A set of cobblestone steps appeared from nowhere, leading us down from the vantage point to the clearing below. I felt like a tied hog being carried to its roasting pit. Crossing the threshold made by fire, the giants let me down before the rock upon which the witch

stood. With my head tilted to its side, I could make out Michael standing at the perimeter of the gathering.

“You dere, you betta come ‘ere too.” The witch once again beckoned with her walking stick, this time only at Michael. Slowly, he made his way through the crowd, sure to catch a few glances at the now seated females confining him. I tried to laugh, but the pain in my abdomen wouldn’t let me.

Jumping down from her perch, the old black woman placed the back of her hand on my forehead. From down here, she looked even more haggard than before, a soul who had been a spectator to far too much. Moving down my body, she unwrapped the remaining bandages around my midsection and took a look. I was unsure if she was trying to help, or determining which parts of my body would be fit for her witch’s brew. Standing, she turned to face Michael.

“‘ee’s in rough shape. ‘Ow long ee’s been like dis?” She asked, rummaging in her satchel for another magic powder or potion.

“‘Bout a day now. We got into some trouble last night.” Bending back down, the old woman sprinkled a powder into my wound. I doubted it was cocaine.

“I know. De river ran red and tha woods were res’less. Tha moon deen’t even come out ta see eet.” Removing my old bandage, the woman motioned to one of the men who produced some cloth for her open hand. Ripping it into strips, she redressed my wound, trapping my guts and whatever substance she’d applied inside. When she was done, she looked up at my face. “Can ‘ye speak?”

I tried to summon something from my lungs to my throat to my mouth, but nothing came. I shook my head as only a mute could. Placing her hand back on my face, she smiled.

“Good. Dat means ‘ye can’t cast any spells.” Tilting her head back and cackling, she stood and turned towards her crowd, reminding me of the onlookers before us. Raising her cane, she addressed them. “Brothas, sistahs, on dis night of de pale moon, we must end our sermon short. Power be ta god, Amen.”

The words met my ears and caused my brow to furrow in confusion. Why had the woman given what sounded like a Christian prayer? Had my ears deceived me? Where these the members of some converted tribe?

My pondering ceased as I was raised once again into the air by the same two giants as before. On all sides of me men and woman dispersed into the night, their dark skin fading into the dark underbrush, leaving nothing but a handful of us behind. Lining up, our parade began, marching deeper into the forest with the old witch as the lead.

At this point, I knew I was done. When one is truly dying, they question everything except death itself, a question answered long ago by the same fools who decided the meaning of human existence. One asks questions about the afterlife. Questions about others. Meaningless questions of relevance long passed. Inhaling and letting out a gasp, I attempted to ask one such question. Sensing my intention, the old woman dropped back to walk beside me.

“Don’t worry ya head, child. In Hoodoo, we believe dat err thang is de plan of god. Dis ees happenin’ fo’ a reason. What’s fo’ you, you’ll git it.” I gulped and hoped she was wrong. What was for me could only be bad. Exhaling, I finally gained the strength to speak and managed to croak out my question.

“You...believe in god?” The witch threw back her head and let loose one of her cackles.

“Dat’s eet child? Dat’s what you’ve been strugglin’ ta ask all dis time?” The woman went silent and produced a pipe and a sprig of cursed tobacco from her satchel. Lighting the pipe with a tool I couldn’t see, she inhaled and sent the smoke tumbling towards my nostrils. The witch was teasing me. I would have killed for a cigarette. Displaying her clairvoyance for the second time, the woman bent down and pressed the pipe to my lips. Taking a deep breath, I immediately started coughing, causing the two giants at either end of me to almost lose their grasp. If I couldn’t smoke, I think I’d rather be dead. Looking back at her, I realized she hadn’t answered my question. Again, she read my thoughts.

“Yees, child, I believe in god. Us hoodoo folk, we’s take beliefs from all ova. Beliefs my great grandmotha had een Africa. Beliefs my motha ‘ad aftah she came ova on de slave ship. Beliefs I ‘ave aftah livin’ on de bayou for long as I ‘ave.” The woman took another deep inhale of her pipe. “’N dat meens we believe in god, ‘n Jesus if dat was what chew were askin’.”

“...why?” I could only gasp out one word, but it didn’t matter. It was the only one I wanted to say.



“Why not, child? Eet gives us ‘ope.” With that, the woman quickened her pace and returned to her rightful place at the head of the line. I wasn’t finished with the questions, but she was. I tried to get her to come back, but I was spent. Flopping my head to its side, I decided to forget the questions and enjoy the moonlit wilderness.

The path was littered with tree bark and mossy rocks. Silver snakes slithered between them silently. Past the trees and the tall grass was a swamp, certain to be inhabited by things I wouldn’t want to meet in the dark. The moonlight shone upon its murky waters as though they were hiding a treasure long lost to man. Excalibur. Something to cure me. The Holy Grail. Before my mind could dive deeper into the shallow swamp, the voice of the witch brought me back to my current state.

“Don Freeman, Michael King... Welcome.” I hadn’t noticed until now, but the giants holding me had come to a halt. As they turned slightly, I could make out a wooden shack just ahead.

The cabin was beautiful in an imperfect way. It had a front porch, with a rocking chair. A few window panes, no glass. It was slanted, so that one side stooped just a bit lower than the other. Beside it babbled a brook, bringing fresh water to the swamp we’d just passed. Around it, no trees stood. The star filled sky above it met the fireflies below it, giving the impression that this simple place was the spot where the earth met the heavens.

Starting back up again, they carried me over the brook, past the rocking chair, and through the door of the cabin. Setting me down on a table, I noticed I was surrounded by all the manner of hoodoo

trinkets, none of which interested me. The pain in my abdomen had gone completely, either on its own accord or with the help of the witch's powder.

One by one, the remaining members of our small procession came through the door. Michael brought up the rear. Giving him a smile, he approached me and placed his hand on my shoulder, returning the gesture. Slowly raising my hand, I placed it on top of his. Relaxing my body, I closed my eyes for what I expected to only be a brief second. When it came time to reopen them, I found I could not.

## VIII

It was an average night on the bayou; the crickets chirped, as per usual. The old cabin stood on its sinking foundation, not one inch out of place. No coyotes howled at the moon above it; no alligators crawled for refuge beneath its beams. It was a calm night, as far as nights could go.

Inside the cabin, however, was a different story. What had once been the refuge of a solitary witch had become a refuge for a handful of others. Oddities filled the shelves around them; shrunken heads, the pickled hearts of snakes, potions and powders of unknown origin. The real oddity, however, was the invisible partition that divided the room.

On one side sat six, maybe seven souls, all sporting skin of the same color, all silent as the calm night. Markings and clothing divided them, but if one sat in the room amongst them, it was certain they were kin in both purpose and being.

The other side was home to two other souls; one, a counterpart to the others, with dark skin and an appetite for the unknown, though it was very well known to her. Words forming beneath her breath, she stood over her patient, the last soul to be described.

This last soul, if one could call it that, took the physical body of a long, white male sprawled across a table, his toes hanging over its sides. He was a pale specimen; his blood had retreated from his upper most layers, leaving his skin to illuminate the room with an intensity greater than the light of the moon. The most glaring difference,

however, between his body and those of the other souls, was that his chest did not rise and fall. Amid the throbs and thumps of the others, his stood still, indifferent to their beating. This was a soul that should be well known by now.

In a violent motion, the woman standing above him looked up to the ceiling and cast aside her walking stick. Sprinting from one side of the room to the other, she gathered a small collection of tokens. Plopping one jar on the table, she forcefully removed its top, her reward taking the form of a fistful of newt's eyes.

Finished her errand running, she reached down and plucked a single hair from the head of the man in front of her. Mixing her ingredients with the tools by her side, she took a step forward and carefully poured them down the throat of the lifeless body. Finishing her bizarre ritual, she retrieved a gold tinted necklace from her pocket and placed its chain around his neck, a leather talisman dangling at its end.

Across the room, one man sat wide eyed, certain of something, but not of what he had just witnessed. To him, these were foreign sights, yet familiar in their own way. He understood their ebb, but not their flow. His blood ran in their direction, but followed a different course.

“God, oh all seein’, all mighty, all powaful, come to us now. Dis boy here may not be da answa to anyone’s prayers, but I know you ain’t finished wit ‘im yet. Let ‘im take dis gris-gris, and let ‘im live ‘gain.” Raising her hands high above her head, the woman spoke,

bringing all attention to her. Now, everyone joined in. “Let ‘im live ‘gain. Let ‘im live ‘gain. Let ‘im live ‘gain.”

After the chant was finished, the woman bent down and placed her forehead upon that of the pale body, her dreads forming a veil between their faces and the rest of the room. There she remained for what seemed like hours, her energy slowly being channeled from her body to the next. Finally, she raised her head and toppled over onto the floor, her body as still as that on the table.

Slowly, each soul sitting on the other side of the room stood and formed a line beside the pale body. Still unsure of exactly what to do, the wide eyed man took up the rear, a look of confusion smeared across his face. The leader of the line, a man of origin unknown, placed his right hand on the forehead of the pale man, muttered something under his breath, and walked around the table and out the door. One by one, the others followed and the line dwindled, until only the final man remained.

Standing alone, his eyes weren’t quite as wide as they were before. Foregoing the tradition set by the others, the man reached out his hand, bypassing the pale man’s forehead and reaching into his pants pocket, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and a small book of matches. Flipping open the cigarette pack top, he removed one, tucking it behind his ear, and replaced the pack, leaving them so the sprawled body would have some way to pay its toll to cross the river Styx.

Looking away from the body, the last man rounded the table just as his peers did, but did not exit. Instead, he walked over towards

the far wall of the cabin, which was littered with an assortment of items. Pulling a long, tall bottle from the wall, he uncorked it and let its smell waft towards his nostrils. Nodding, he tossed the cork to the side, narrowly missing the two bodies left in the room. Taking a large swig, he now deemed it time to make his exit, leaving the room and its contents behind him.

Standing on the cabin's front porch, the man looked out through the trees towards the tranquil swamp. Not a trace of the others remained. They had returned to where they were needed; some to their so called normal lives; others to their part of the bayou. Taking another swig from his bottle, the man struck his match on the porch handrail before leaning on it. Removing his cigarette from its perch, he lit it and slowly inhaled then exhaled, forcing the fireflies floating around him to disperse. The smoke rose far above his head like an ancient signal that nobody was around to see.

Backing up, the man took a seat in the rocking chair in an attempt to relieve his body and mind from the expected and unexpected events of the day. Sucking back his cigarette to its filter, he placed it on the ground and stomped out its flame.

Taking another swig of his drink, the man extended his neck and peeked through the entrance of the cabin. Just as there had been moments before, there was no movement inside. With a look of sadness on his face, the man took another swig and another sigh. Gently rocking back and forth in his chair, he closed his eyes and waited for sleep to find him, the babble of the brook beside him acting as his lullaby.

## IX

Just as I had every day for the past twenty seven years, I awoke. As my first thoughts of the morning drifted in, it struck me that my whole journey could be described as a series of sleeps and awakenings, each one different from the last. In fact, one could describe life itself in such a way.

This time, I awoke with my back feeling strange and my stomach feeling stranger. Straightening myself out, I realized I'd spent the night on some wooden table; posture be damned, my underside felt like shit. My stomach, however, felt brand new. The crimson scarring I thought would haunt me forever was gone; there was skin where there wasn't skin before. Placing my foot on the floor, I turned and stood up.

I was in a deserted wooden cabin; that much I knew. Looking to my left, then to my right, I was surprised to see nothing but wooden planks. The walls and shelves were bare. Searching for some other soul, I made my way around the cabin only to find no one.

Taking a moment, I made sure everything was in place. My keys to the Chevrolet, my only way out of Mississippi; check. My passport, the only form of identification I had left; gone. My cigarettes; check. Feeling my way around the dark front room of the cabin, I found nothing but a door to the outside. Opening it, I saw the blinding light of the sun for the first time in what felt like ages.

Blinking my eyes, my lapse in vision ended as the sights and sounds of the Mississippi bayou poured in. I could see everything.

Mosquitos dancing around the swamp; fish jumping from the water in attempts to eat them; fireflies finding their home after a long night of flight. The smell of fresh dew. Pulling a cigarette from my pocket, I took the in the picture as though I was preparing to write a travel book. Despite the beautiful view, I doubted I would make Mississippi sound appealing even if I tried.

Spotting movement out of the corner of my eye, I turned and slumped my shoulders in relief. Sleeping in a rocking chair sat Michael, the gentle bayou breeze swaying him back and forth as though he was weightless. Walking across the wooden patio, I leaned down and tried to shake him awake. Ever the stubborn sleeper, he turned his face away from me. Leaning over further, I placed my hand to his ear and brought my mouth to meet it.

“MICHAEL!” I belted out, causing a flock of mockingbirds to make a quick exit from the swamp. Jolting awake, Michael half opened his eyes and turned to me, his mouth open in a yawn. Staring at me for a handful of seconds, he closed his eyes, his head once again slumping to its side.

Suddenly, as if a fire had been lit between his ears, Michael’s head spun around, nearly coming off his neck. Completing the most pronounced double take I’d ever seen, he opened both his mouth and eyes wide, nearly popping them out of their sockets. With a furrowed brow, he picked up his jaw and spoke as he had when he’d last seen a ghost.

“Don?!” One syllable had never sounded so unsure. Nodding my head, I returned his confused look with a grin.



“You were expecting somebody else?” I tossed my cigarette butt off the porch.

“No, I...I uh...You uh... Last time I saw ya, ya wernt breathin’...” His look was beginning to make me uneasy, but I did my best to laugh it off. “You was dead, Don.”

“Dead? Nope, not me. Takes more than some klansman’s trigger finger to take me out. Hell, I’ve had hangovers worse than this.” Michael continued staring at me until he finally shifted his gaze out towards the wilderness, though his expression did not change. Reaching into my pocket, I took out another cigarette and lit it, placing it between his fingers. “See? Is this cigarette real enough for you?”

Shaking his head, Michael put the cigarette filter to his mouth and began puffing away. After several short breaths, his gaze returned to me, his face more excited than before.

“I know what it was. It was like that ole hoodoo woman said, ya know? That every last dang thing on this earth happens because it’s part ‘o god’s plan. He wasn’t finished with ya, Don. He brought ya back.” Reaching right back into my pocket, I pulled out another cigarette, this time for myself. Careful not to roll my eyes, I leaned back on the porch railing. Michael was at it again. If the church had half a mind, they’d have sent Michael to the jungle as a missionary long ago. Not only would he get to convert the natives, but it would probably be safer for him there than it was here. With the smoke from my cigarette meeting the smoke from Michael’s between us, I began to set him straight.

“Michael, listen. I’m not going to pretend I wasn’t scared last night. Sure I was. When I closed my eyes, I thought they would be closed forever. For a split second, I did wish there was some kind of afterlife.” Taking my cigarette from my mouth, I spit between the planks supporting us. “But then, I realized there wasn’t. The darkness I saw was all there would ever be. That’s when I got really scared. I got so scared *I* pulled myself right out of that darkness, Michael. Not you, not god, not anybody else. *I* wasn’t finished.”

Michael sat perfectly still. His chair no longer rocked; he looked ahead in silence, his cigarette smoking itself in his right hand. All the excitement had drained from his face. I wasn’t sure exactly what he was doing; if he was searching for some retort, or if I had been the one to finally convert him. After some time had passed, I had decided I’d done enough waiting. The Mississippi sun would only get hotter and I was finished with this place.

“Come on, Michael. Let’s get going. I’m starving, we need to find a town. That little green book said there was some help somewhere around here.”

“I think we found the help, Don.” Barely listening, I’d left the porch and had begun stepping away from the cabin. Hearing a sigh and some shuffling behind me, Michael walked beside me before I knew it, rounding out our duo of two off course explorers searching for the route they’d lost.

Stumbling upon something that looked like a path, I took the role of leader for our expedition. Without a compass, I relied only on my newly healed gut instinct and my first mate Michael to guide me.

If I ever stepped out of line, a grunt or a nudge would bring me back to center. In my mind, we were heading due south, just as the little green book had told us to do before we veered off into uncharted territory. In reality, I had no idea.

Hunger pains set in around midday. With the sun in the center of the sky, chain smoking had begun doing nothing but make us thirsty for water we didn't have. Half an hour earlier, I'd mistaken the sounds of Michael's stomach for the growls of a stalking predator on our trail, silent until then.

Despite the inevitable hunger, however, both my body and mind felt sounder than they had in weeks. With all the spryness of a small child, I jumped from mossy rock to mossy rock, careful not to touch the molten ground below. I felt as though something was bubbling under my surface, ready to pop at any moment. Michael, in contrast, moved slower and more haggard than usual, as if some weight was bogging him down.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you back there, Michael. I know I shouldn't be questioning your beliefs." I didn't think my tongue had been that sharp.

"Nah, don't worry 'bout that. I'm jus'...tired. Been a long, long week." I wasn't convinced, but I also wasn't going to prod further. I would try to take his mind off it. About to open my mouth to make small talk, I caught my words as Michael and I stepped out from under a branch and onto a dirt road.

Free from the shelter of trees, the intensity of the sun caused my shirt to become soaked in sweat almost instantaneously. The grass

beneath us had turned to newly dried sand we could draw pictures in with our feet. Jumping for joy, I embraced Michael, which he dully accepted. We had found civilization.

My small celebration was short lived, however, as it quickly dawned on me that the road was simply a sign of civilization, not civilization itself. Looking around, all I could see was blue sky, flat earth, and miles and miles of telephone poles connecting souls hundreds of miles apart. This truly was the age of miracles and wonder.

Looking at Michael for some clue as to which way to walk, I found he had found the time to become shirtless and shoeless. Following suit, I removed my soaked articles of clothing and tossed them in the shallow ditch strangling the road. The sand burned my feet, but before I knew it I could feel nothing. Squeezing dirt between my toes, I opened my arms and let my skin breath in the air.

“You gon’ burn, white boy.” Shrugging my shoulders to Michael’s warning, I turned to him as a breeze hit my back. Knowing what I was after, Michael simply pointed in a direction and began walking, taking my captain’s hat from me (if I’d ever had it to begin with).

Propelled by smoke and visions of food, we made our way down the dusty road, searching for some sign we were headed in the right direction. None revealed themselves to us. Bored from the barren scenery, I began whistling to myself, which Michael quickly ended with a leer. At around three o’clock, when the sun was hottest, we found ourselves at an unmarked crossroads. Looking from north to

east to south to west in some order, I hadn't the faintest idea which path to follow.

"What do you think, Michael?" Michael too was spinning in circles. Stopping in the center of the cross and looking back the way we came, he spoke to me in a defeated tone.

"I don't know. All looks the same. Not sure which way ta go. You choose." I'd shoulder the burden, but not the blame. Cycling through our options one more time, I caught a glimpse of something on the far horizon. Walking towards it, I began jogging, trying to catch it before realizing it was only a trick of the eye. Walking backwards, I retraced my steps back to where the roads met. Michael hadn't moved an inch.

"I have no idea, Michael. I can't decide." I paced back and forth with my hands on my hips and a heat blister forming on my shoulder. The sweltering sun wasn't doing us any favors. Wiping my brow, I clarified myself. "You choose."

"I told ya, Don, I have no idea. I ain't choosin'." And so we were deadlocked. Sighing and placing my head in my hands, I plopped my ass down in the sand, kicking up a cloud of dust. Mirroring my movements, Michael walked to the opposite side of the road and did the same, looking at me all the while. Not in the mood for an awkward silence, I opened my mouth and spoke my mind.

"What's gotten into you, Michael? You don't seem right. Remember when we woke up under that tree yesterday morning? You said we had to keep on going. We had two feet and a heartbeat, and that's all that mattered. What happened to that Michael?" I tried my

best to motivate the seemingly broken man sitting across from me. Turning his head and looking out into the blue, he paused before responding.

“I dun know, Don. I jus’ don’t... I saw a miracle today, but you said it yahself. Maybe that wasn’t the work ‘o god. Maybe that was just you. Maybe I was jus’ seein’ things. Maybe there ain’t no plan, and all this grief jus’ happens fo’ no good reason. But maybe not.” I kept my mouth shut. I wasn’t sure what to say. He knew where I stood on such things. Laying back onto the dirt, Michael began talking again, this time to the sky.

“My momma used ta tell me a story ‘bout the crossroads. In fact, mighta been this very one. Said she used ta know a man who claimed he met the devil one night where the roads meet, under cover ‘o darkness. Said the devil offered him a bargain; anyone one ‘o his earthly desires in exchange for his soul. Well, this fella had a soft spot for women and the blues, so he asked fo’ the best guitar playin’ hands in tha south. Of course, people didn’t believe ‘im at first, but once he started playin’ they did. Said his pickin’ could woo anyone, guy or gal.” As Michael ended his story, I reached for my cigarette package, only to find he wasn’t done. “What would you do if the devil was at these here crossroads right now? What would you give fo’ ya soul?”

The unexpected question caused me to retreat my hand from my pocket and place it on my head as a pensive reflex. What would I give my soul for? Better question: what was a soul? By biblical definition, was it not the decider between heaven and hell? A marker of good and evil?

Standing up, I walked over to Michael and then back again. Finally reaching into my pockets, I fished for my cigarette package to complete the same smoky ritual I'd completed nearly a million times. Finding my pack, I pulled it out in dismay. Giving it a shake, it was clear it was empty. Not even opening it, I cast it aside like a love letter by someone too afraid to read it. Craving something to do with my hands, I knelt down and took a handful of sand. Standing, I slowly let it filter through my fingers and be taken by the slight breeze. Across the way, Michael piped up.

"Ya know what I'd trade mine for? A world where I'd be free. A world where my son will be free, and his son, and his son. I'd trade my eternity for an eternity o' peace and freedom on this earth. All this violence, hate, everything could jus' disappear. An' if my soul is what it takes, then I guess that's that." Sighing, I paced back and forth in an attempt to come up with a response.

Again, by biblical definition both our souls were gone. We'd both committed murder; me, in California; Michael, on a fateful fiery night in the bayou. With a chisel, one could mark off each of the Ten Commandments between us. Words written thousands of years ago had condemned us to hell. Was it not my soul that made me a man, however? A record of my trials and tribulations? Everything I took responsibility for as a member of the human race?

And that's when my answer became obvious. God, racism, and all the other chains which bound Michael and most of mankind were no less manmade than the research chemicals that spawned this journey, manufactured in the early hours of history in a lab not too

different from the one I frequented at Stanford. Any semblance of death and legacy was the same. Man was everything; everything was man. And although man couldn't change his actions, he could change his mind.

Ready to give my answer, I faced Michael and opened my mouth, not to give my response but instead to bring his intention to the dirt hurricane forming behind him. It was a blue Oldsmobile, driving at least fifty miles per hour. Jumping to his feet, Michael stepped back and watched as the car got closer and closer.

The driver was almost too big for the car; his features were visible from hundreds of feet out. His passenger, however, was tiny, and wore a black hat. Both were clearly men.

“Get ‘em to stop!!” Michael called out, waving his arms and screaming unintelligible sounds at the top of his lungs. The car didn't slow. It simply drove right between us, leaving us in their dust. Catching a glimpse of their faces, they looked familiar, but not quite familiar enough, like doppelgangers from an experiment gone wrong.

Not accepting our fate, Michael chased after the car, his bare feet no match for their tire tread. After thirty seconds of sprinting, Michael finally slowed, the distance insurmountable. Laughing to myself, I slowly walked in his direction. Taking back my captain's hat for the last time, I passed him and kept walking. Out of breath, Michael managed to keep up. We weren't about to stop. After a moment of reflection, he asked his question once again.

“Well, what'll it be, Don? What would ya trade for?” Smiling, I looked only forward.



“Nothing.”