

## The March

### 1

I was tense and tired after a long day on the road. Street lamps burned my eyes; everything looked over-bright and garish; bebop blaring from the apartment blocks made my temples throb. My neck ached. At every corner sullen men gave me *the look*; the air felt laden with threat. I broke out into a cold sweat, imagining that the free-floating anger against Whitey, The Man, the Blue-Eyed Devil downtown would suddenly focus on me, Bill Heath, a brown-eyed college boy from Ohio. To avoid the beltway I had decided earlier to cut across the city to Georgetown, where my friend Dan Brock lived. Everything went smoothly for a mile or two until the road narrowed into a funnel of flashing yellow lights that ended in front of some workers ripping up the pavement with pneumatic jackhammers. A man languidly waving a red flag directed me into a maze of one-way, identical-looking side streets. I take pride in my sense of direction and ability to read maps (skills I learned from my father), but in that gridlock of ticky-tacky row houses I lost my bearings.

Eventually the row houses yielded to what looked like an abandoned army base: a jumble of outsized packing crates impersonating bungalows, plywood eye patches on every window, not a soul in sight. A bold-faced sign on each door read: TO BE DEMOLISHED. A chain-link fence surrounded several blocks of rubble. Close by, an orange earth digger, its huge dirt scoop tucked up like an elephant's trunk, squatted smugly beside its handiwork: a muddy hole. The blackened skeleton of a stripped Chevy crouched by the curb in mute warning.

In the middle distance shafts of glass and concrete were going up, some developer's dream of high-rise rapacity. The common man, no doubt, was happier the higher off the ground he lived, breathing stale air and afraid to ride the elevator. Three leftover workers, their hardhats flashing in the

last sunlight, balanced themselves on steel girders to finish their riveting. I watched one casually toss a beer can neatly into a pushcart twenty floors below.

I turned onto a wide street with red-brick duplexes, three-story affairs with sprawling porches and gingerbread trimming. Black, brown, beige and cream-colored people were everywhere, smiling, talking, and calling out to friends. Older men sat on the stoops playing cards, smoking cigars and shooting the breeze. The women stayed back on the porches, shadows within shadows, but I could hear their throaty laughter. The kids swarmed on the sidewalk and out into the street: the boys, wearing white T-shirts and Washington Senators baseball caps, shadowboxed and shoved each other; the girls, chanting and clapping, jumped rope in dresses the color of the curtains in the windows. In a park across the street young men clustered around a transistor radio, grooving to the Motown sound. A few whistled and yelled at three women sitting on a bench at the bus stop. Others tussled beneath a bent basket without a net, playing a shirts and skins game of chuck and duck. At a red light a hook-nosed man with a wild tangle of West Indian hair called out in my direction, “What do you need now, mahn! You name it now, I got it.” He placed one sandaled foot on the rear bumper of a parked car and pulled from the trunk a carton of Lucky Strikes and an electric alarm clock. “Hear me now, hear me, you like whiskey? What’s your shoe size?” He spread his hands wide in response to the suspicion in my eyes. “I ain’t stole it, mahn,” he cried as I drove off.

I was surprised to see so many people on the streets in the evening. In my old neighborhood if you weren’t manicuring your lawn or tending the holy barbecue pit, you stayed inside—except for us kids riding our ponies or playing hide-and-seek in the Anderson’s orchard, and we had to be home by dusk. Back then the only time I saw “Negroes” was when my father would drive my buddies and me down into Youngstown for the Saturday matinee. Noses pressed to the car windows, we watched for drunks in the doorways along East Federal Street. On occasion one would fall away from a building

and stumble to the curb, waving a brown-bagged bottle in the air and calling out orders to invisible armies. As if it were a stunt for our benefit, we jabbed each other, screaming, “Lookee, lookee, lookee—look at that gigaboo!” Then laughed so loud we drowned out my dad’s scolding.

My father was the principal of Hayes Junior High School in Youngstown. His district was a Marxist parable: mansions by the park for the owners of the retail stores downtown or the dark, satanic mills along the Mahoning River; block after block of well-kempt neighborhoods of Irish, Italian and Slovakian steelworkers; a run-down black slum, so close to the blast furnaces that everything was gray with soot and grime. He would come home from school with cautionary tales about how many kids he’d had to paddle that day to keep the peace. Often the worst offenders were big-for-their-age black girls who would stage a battle royal at recess in defense of their boyfriends. Once when I visited his office he pulled out a drawer crammed with confiscated switchblades, blackjacks, even a zip gun. On the wall hung two thick wooden paddles perforated with air holes to sharpen the smack. His assistant principal was a deep-voiced black man at least as large as my father; between them they ran a tight ship and kept the respect of most of the parents.

My high school in a suburb named Poland was lily white. The only discipline problems we had (other than the time Sarah Lou Paine stabbed an English teacher with a pencil) were the black-jacketed corner gang guys smoking in the lavatories or rumbling with their rivals in the neighboring suburb of Boardman. One time Jim Lewis climbed out on a third-story window ledge and threatened to jump if Miss Graves gave us a Latin quiz. Not until college could I make the liberal’s proudest boast: “Some of my best friends...”

Before long the orderly blocks of duplexes gave way to a wasteland of wrecked cars, burned-out buildings and vacant lots. Suddenly, a mangy yellow cat darted headlong in front of my wheels. I heard the dull thud, slammed on the brakes, and scanned the rearview mirror for the body. The cat

was stretched out in the middle of the road, perfectly still, but as I debated whether to take a closer look it roused itself, hissed in my direction, and scampered off into the night.

The wasteland ended in a ramshackle district of old tenements, eerie in the glow rising from dozens of ground-floor shops. Here Goodwill clothes, People's drugs and Safeway foods competed with pool halls, pawnshops, palm readers and Pentecostal churches. One window contained a crude sketch of a black Jesus and beneath it in block letters: "GOD DAMN WHITE MAN." On every corner was a seedy bar or a carryout joint. The display window of a department store was shattered and a headless mannequin lay stripped to the pink on the sidewalk. An angry-eyed black man came out of an all-night Laundromat, shouting obscenities in my direction. The atmosphere was hot, oppressive, smelling of overripe garbage, overused cooking grease, and exposed sewers. The black section of Youngstown was merely a slum; this was a real ghetto.

At the intersection a peddler in a sleeveless orange jersey was hawking "icies," cups of crushed ice coated with thick, brightly colored syrup. He stood in front of a faded-brick building that had a six-pointed star carved into the façade but an Abyssinian Baptist Church sign out front. As I waited for the light to change I watched an impeccable young man, his attaché case color coordinated with his vest, rush up, buy one, and try to slurp it down without dripping on his fancy duds.

I pulled in at a small, dimly lit plaza, hoping to find a drug store where I wouldn't be afraid to ask directions. All the shops were dark and barricaded shut except for a liquor store with a "Cold Beer" sign flashing on and off in the window. I parked beside a battered taxi with a bumper sticker that read: "We're Not Yellow, We Go Anywhere."

The inside smelled of cigarette smoke and beef jerky. Concave mirrors surveyed the contents from every corner. A bare-chested man in purple pants, his hair held down by what looked like a nylon stocking, was arguing that sixty cents was too much for a bottle of "Dirty Bird" wine.

“You better stock up, Ray,” a tall man behind the cash register said. “Everything’s gonna be shut down tomorrow.”

“Why’s that?”

“The march.”

“I don’t give a good goddamn about no march.”

As soon as the customer left I stepped forward and asked directions from a bearded man who had been ripping open cartons and stamping prices.

“My old man used to work in a shoe factory out that way.” He wore a tight red jacket with white lapels and a logo patch over his pen pocket. “He knew a shortcut.”

“A shoe factory near Georgetown?” the cashier scoffed. “Aw, man, you don’t know what you’re talking about. Don’t listen to him. His old man’s factory wasn’t even *near* Georgetown.”

While they debated the names of streets and the number of traffic lights, waving their hands in each other’s faces and drawing imaginary maps on the air, a thin, unshaven black guy in a bulging army jacket entered and stood by the door. He held a beer can against his chin as he listened to the discussion, sizing me up with a lazy glance.

“Hey,” he mumbled, “I’m headin’ that way. You can follow me.”

“There you go,” the tall man behind the counter said, looking relieved that the problem was solved. “He’ll show you where it’s at.”

He followed me into the parking lot.

“Where’s your car?” I asked.

“I ain’t got one, man.” He looked me in the eye and added, “It’s cool.”

I shrugged assent, too exhausted to size up the situation.

As soon as I opened the door he flipped down the driver’s seat and climbed in back.

“Is it far?” I asked, hesitating.

“A few minutes, man, that’s all. Get in.”

I got in.

“Nice wheels,” he said softly in my ear.

“It’s only a Ford Falcon. Where to?”

I looked at him in the rearview mirror as he pointed out the window.

Before I could start up I heard a rapping sound on the car roof. I turned and saw a red jacket; the bearded man from the liquor store was motioning for me to stay put.

“Be easy, now,” he growled at the man in the back seat. “Out of the car.”

“What’s damadda witchew?”

“Let me set you hip, I’m a cop. Get out of the car and keep your hands where I can see them.”

I made a quick exit and stood behind the undercover officer. After all my fantasizing about the dangers of The Ghetto, I had been blind to a real threat.

“Aw, man, whatcha doin’, huh?” Army Jacket whined. “I’m jus’ tryin’ to help this dude out and you givin’ me a hard time.”

“I’m not asking, man, I’m telling. Get out. Now!”

“God damn, man, I didn’t do nothin’.”

He clambered from the car, cast a furious look at me, then turned to the cop to plead his case.

“Don’t badmouth me, bro,” he said, extending his hand.

“Hey, don’t touch me,” the cop commanded, “we ain’t friends.”

He spun the man around, spread-eagled him against the dashboard, and gave him a quick frisk.

The army jacket was stuffed with dirty clothes and beer cans, but other than a nasty looking metal bottle opener, he found no weapons.

“What’s your name?”

“Andre.”

“Andre who?”

“Andre Givens.”

“What were you planning to do in that man’s car, Andre?”

“Nothin’, man. I was jus’ tryin’ to help.”

“Next time do your helping someplace else. I don’t want to see you around, you hear?”

“I’ll remember this one, baby,” Andre said with outrage blazing in his eyes. “You’re in my book now. I ain’t takin’ this shit.”

“Don’t step outta line with me, I’ll cut you down. Now get your ass out of here.”

Andre pointed his finger at the cop. “It’s your ass that’s grass, man.”

He took a few steps toward the street, then turned and shouted back, “What the fuck do you think you doin’ stickin’ yo’ neck out for a white man that ain’t never done shit for you?”

The bearded man scowled, a muscle in his jaw tightening, but made no reply. He simply stood with his arms crossed, staring at Andre’s back until he had disappeared in the dark. In the sudden silence I could hear my heart thudding like a triphammer.

“You don’t want to let yourself get set up like that,” he said, poker-faced. “Not around here.”

“I thought he had a car,” I offered in explanation.

“So did he,” the cop said, breaking into a smile. “So did he.”

## 2

Dan’s folks lived on a hill behind Georgetown University in an apartment complex that looked like a pile of gigantic flashcubes. The narrow streets were bumper to bumper with parked cars; I

finally found a space on a dark side street several blocks away. I walked back and rang the penthouse. No answer. I went outside and looked up at the top floor. No lights. I sat on the steps and waited until I couldn't keep my eyes open. Nobody came in or out. Too tired and short of cash to hunt up a motel, I decided to take a nap in my car and check back later.

My car was cramped: the steering wheel bumped my head and my knees hit the dashboard. Then I got the bright idea of opening the door next to the sidewalk, retrieving my two suitcases from the trunk and stacking them outside as an extension of the front seat, and using my laundry bag and raincoat as a pillow and blanket. I was parked beside the dark playground; the nearest streetlight was on the corner; at that late hour, I assumed no one would see me. Proud of my ingenuity—I hadn't been a boy scout for nothing—I slipped off my shoes and snuggled into my makeshift bed. I awoke to cold raindrops hitting my feet. I extracted myself stiffly from the car, stashed my suitcases in the trunk, and headed for the apartment. Everything looked desolate in the misty drizzle; all was silent except for the sound of my tennis shoes slapping the wet pavement.

I rang the penthouse until Dan buzzed me in.

“That’s your room,” he mumbled groggily, “we’ll talk in the morning.”

Dan and his parents breakfasted on the patio; you could see the crenellated gray towers of Georgetown University, sailboats on the Potomac, and in the far distance the shining white marble of the Washington Monument and the dome of the Capitol. Dan’s dad, a dapper, rosy-faced man with a bald spot on top of his head and a trig silver mustache, worked for the State Department. He looked up from the *Washington Post* and asked if I planned to go on the march.

“What march, sir?”

“What march?” Dan howled. “Where the hell have you been all summer?”

“The Adirondacks.”

“Bill, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but our Negro citizens have been experiencing a pattern of sub-par civic behavior in Dixie these days—the shit has really been hitting the fan.”

“There’s no need to be vulgar, Dan,” Mrs. Brock said. “Why are you always so sarcastic?”

I had been following the civil rights movement with interest, but since that day in early June when I settled into a cabin on Schroon Lake next to a dozen clay tennis courts it had been hard to keep up with the news. Dan was enthused about a group of black and white militants who had been involved in a shootout in Cambridge, a racially troubled town on the Eastern Shore. They called themselves the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, “Snick” for short, and one of Dan’s prep school friends, Chad Collins, was a member. A Freedom Rider, he had been beaten up in Alabama and jailed in Mississippi. Now all the major civil rights organizations were gathering in Washington for a massive march designed to capture the conscience of the nation and compel Congress to pass President Kennedy’s civil rights bill.

“Is Martin Luther King going to be there?”

“Naturally,” Dan said, “and so will Dylan, Baez, Odetta, Peter, Paul and Mary.”

I was a believer in the gospel according to Peter, Paul and Mary; Odetta singing “Lowlands” or Baez “East Virginia” gave me gooseflesh; and in the scratchy voice of a gaunt kid who blew ghostly riffs on a harmonica between the stanzas of his songs I thought I heard the voice of a true prophet. I had used my only weekend pass of the summer to go to the Newport Folk Festival where Dylan stole the show. A black corduroy Dutch boy’s cap riding a ratty halo of unruly hair, standing a little bow-legged in his blue jeans and battered desert boots, Dylan warned that a hard rain was gonna fall. The combination of harmonica and acoustic guitar was a novelty to me, but the real mystery was his raucous, twangy voice, all snarl and bite and unexpected emphasis, which made his surreal images as

vivid as a mystical vision. It wasn't pretty; but it was unforgettable. To hear King speak and Dylan sing, I was willing to endure an all-day mob scene in the sun.

"We can drive down in my car," I said.

"No. No. I'll take you as far as the White House," Mr. Brock replied. "Thanks to the march, I have the day off. If you need anything from your car, we can stop on the way."

As we drove I described humorously my previous night's adventures, but they didn't laugh.

"You were fortunate there was a policeman on duty in that liquor store," Mr. Brock said gravely.

"I can't believe you went to sleep with your car door open," Dan added. "What a dork!"

"But this is Georgetown."

"Where people get mugged every night," Dan replied. "This is what is called a city, Bill. The natives are restless."

Dan's warning grated on my nerves, but I kept my mouth shut.

"See that wreck over there," Mr. Brock announced, pointing out the window. "That's an example of what Dan's talking about"

I gasped in disbelief.

"God damn it to hell, that's my car! Look at it!"

We stopped and I scrambled out, swearing comprehensively as I circled the damage: tires stolen, windows broken, front and back seats ripped out, steering wheel gone, the trunk and hood jimmied open; no suitcases, the engine missing.

"They took every god damn thing," I cried. "All my stuff. Dad's gonna kill me!"

Dan held my arm and tried to calm me down. What had been my car was now tilted at an angle that exposed the jagged edges and gaping cavities of any old junker.

While we were gazing in awe at the wreck a squad car pulled up to investigate. The cop eyed the havoc in admiration. I wondered if he was going to file a report or submit my car to an art gallery.

“They left the ashtray,” I noted morosely.

“I guess they don’t smoke,” Dan added.

“That gives me something to go on,” the cop laughed and jotted on his clipboard. He asked me the usual questions—at least usual for him—then returned to scrutinizing the damage and scribbling away.

I felt a rush of blind self-pitying rage. Black crime, I seethed. Why my car? Why me? Didn’t they know I was going on *their* march?”

We returned to the apartment to call my insurance company. I told the agent that my car had been stripped and totaled.

“Stripped and totaled?” her nasal voice objected. “Look, hon, it’s either stripped *or* totaled, not stripped *and* totaled.”

“I know the difference.”

“I’ll bet you do,” she snapped, sounding so much like my fourth-grade teacher that I wanted to ask her name. “I’ll send one of our men over this afternoon to make an estimate.”

My mind was still brooding on my car when Mr. Brock dropped us off on Pennsylvania Avenue. Traffic was so light I thought the march had been canceled, but then I saw the waves of people streaming toward the Mall.

### 3

Dan and I joined the crowd headed down 15<sup>th</sup> Street. The Ellipse was packed with buses, more lined Constitution Avenue all the way to Capitol Hill. The Washington Monument, jabbed into the

sky like a rocket ready for blast off, loomed straight ahead; its base seethed with people and bobbing placards. We plunged into the throng, trailing behind a fat black woman in an orange dress, who paused at every step to catch her breath and comment on the signs. I was handed one that read: WE DEMAND DECENT HOUSING NOW! Music on loudspeakers blared in all directions.

On a stage in the shadow of the Washington Monument Odetta was intoning the last refrains of “Pastures of Plenty” in a voice that ached for every migrant worker stooping in the hot fields. Then Pete Seeger, an angular scarecrow of a man with his chin held high like an indomitable Don Quijote, sang “This Land is Your Land” with foot-stomping gusto. Joan Baez, tossing her long black hair, did the ballad of “Joe Hill” as passionately as if she *had* seen him last night in her dreams. In a grand finale everybody backed up Peter, Paul and Mary singing “Blowing in the Wind.” Dan, who knew more about the folk music scene than I did, called out the names of faces he recognized—Josh White, Leon Bibbs, Theodore Bikel—but my eyes were on Dylan, a bemused smirk on his face as thousands of voices in the crowd picked up the words of his lyrics and sang along:

*The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.*

*The answer is blowing in the wind.*

I was so elated I wanted encore after encore, but at that point the crowd began to drift away. Spontaneously, without any signal I saw, the march had begun.

Dan and I were swept down Constitution Avenue. Apparently the organizers were taken by surprise, because the loudspeakers on top of the green and white headquarters tent began to whine: “We’ve lost the leaders’ delegation. They are hereby instructed to join the march and go to the Lincoln Memorial. Will the leaders’ delegation please sound off?” I had to laugh at the thought of the stuffy old civil rights leaders walking double-time to catch up with their followers.

Mostly people were silent, but the spirited singing I'd left behind still echoed in my mind and filled me with a strange solemnity. Nobody was in a hurry; we walked slowly in amorphous and sporadic lines; for long stretches all I heard were the whisperings of serious conversations and the shuffling of thousands of feet. An army of stragglers, our formations would never pass muster, but we shared a discernable sense of purpose and direction. When we passed the television cameras, mounted on small platforms held up by metal pipes, people became more animated, waving to the viewers back home, shouting "Freedom Now!" or "Pass the Bill!" A group in front of us from Danville, Virginia, wearing white sweatshirts and black armbands, started clapping and chanting:

*Move on, move on, move on with the freedom fight;*

*Move on, move on, we're fighting for equal rights.*

Then a group behind us, black teenagers in Hamilton-Madison House T-shirts, got rolling with "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." They were led by a guy with a Mitch Miller goatee and a impish grin who called out the name of a different civil rights villain for each stanza: George Wallace, Bull Connor, Jim Eastland, Ross Barnett. When everybody tired of that, the Virginia group began an invocation and response that kept building in rhythm and excitement as they went on:

"Freedom train's a comin'."

"Here it come."

"Time to get on board."

"Right now."

"No more segregation."

"No, sir."

"Make everybody happy."

"Yeah, man."

“Are you satisfied?”

“Satisfied.”

I had been so intent on seeing the singers and listening to the songs, it wasn't until we were well on our way down Constitution Avenue that I took note of the composition of the crowd. I had never seen so many black people in my life, so smartly and elegantly dressed, with a general flare for style that made most whites look drab. I was ashamed of my T-shirt, blue jeans and tennis shoes, but it was impossible to feel remorse for long in that intoxicating holiday atmosphere that both soothed and excited me like a soft breeze. I felt an overwhelming sense that biracial brotherhood was no idle dream. Dan and I walked beside the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of America, hard-nosed blue-collar guys from Minnesota who probably spent their average workday swinging cleavers and spattering gore, but today they were joshing with a group of black women from a Baptist church in Albany, Georgia as if they had known them all their lives. The friendly, festive mood reminded me of the Canfield Fair. I wouldn't have been surprised to see high-stepping majorettes twirling batons, their short skirts whirling over silken panties—hardly the kind of images the march was intended to invoke.

The walk of one symbolic mile to the Lincoln Memorial took about an hour. Except for the marshals with their golden armbands and walkie-talkies and the ever-present reporters, few watched our parade; I do remember one stricken-faced man waving an end-of-the-world sign at us just as we turned the corner onto Bacon Drive. The marchers divided and dispersed down both sides of the Reflecting Pool, pressing forward until the barricades in front of the speakers' platform brought them to a stop. Dan and I found a shady tree to lean against about twenty-five yards off to the side, as wave after wave of people came pouring in.

Slowly it dawned on me how huge the march was: even though the crowd had spread out in an enormous semi-circle that surrounded the Reflecting Pool, back at the Washington Monument thousands hadn't even begun the walk. The temperature was in the eighties, the sky was cloudless and a light breeze blew off the Potomac. As the sun beat down those near the pool removed their shoes and socks, rolled up their pants or lifted dresses, and soothed their weary feet in the cooling water until the entire rim was dangling with white and brown legs.

"That water will never reflect again," Dan quipped.

Old Abe frowned down on us from his Greek temple.

I was so caught up in the spectacle, I barely paid any attention to the music, even when Peter, Paul and Mary sang again. I felt at once light and lazy. The heat was intense but there was something sustaining about the voices and smells, the bracing proximity of so much humanity. Up on the speakers' platform my eyes were drawn to one tall, black girl in a white cotton dress, flanked by four men in denim shirts.

"They work for Snick." Dan's voice came from miles away. "They've been in prison."

"That girl's a knockout."

As they broke into a hand-clapping mixture of gospel shouting and Delta blues called "I Want My Freedom Now," I watched her rock back and forth and exuberantly call out her part in the complex harmony.

"I wouldn't mind doing time with her," I said.

"In a Mississippi jail?"

"Anywhere, anytime."

"It could be arranged."

Dylan sang a ballad about the murder of Medgar Evers, “Only a Pawn in their Game,” which didn’t seem to register with the audience. Maybe the blacks didn’t like his affected, rusty-dusty Okie twang or the rambling lyrics, or maybe they weren’t in the mood for white music. They didn’t respond to Joan Baez’s lullaby “All My Trials,” either:

*If living was a thing that money could buy*

*You know the rich would live and the poor would die,*

*All my trials, Lord, soon be over.*

And yet I couldn’t forget those words; they seemed to contain some secret about the march I couldn’t articulate, or maybe it was their hint to me that the un-lived life was not worth examining, that today I was finally doing something that truly mattered.

#### 4

Before the official speaking began, we went searching for food. It wasn’t easy squirming and twisting our way out of that human crush, but everyone made room for us if they could. Eventually we came out behind the Memorial where hundreds of people, equipped with camp stools, thermos jugs, blankets and picnic baskets, were spread out on the grass. We found a stand selling bag lunches—a cheese sandwich, an apple, a slice of pound cake—and hunted up Cokes and a shady tree where we could lay back and enjoy the view. Behind us was the Watergate, across the tidal basin the Jefferson Memorial; nearby I noticed a rear door the celebrities used to access the speakers’ platform. I saw Burt Lancaster towering over Sammy Davis Jr., a bronzed Paul Newman looking like a walking Greek statue, and Marlon Brando brandishing what appeared to be a metal baton.

I felt a migraine coming on from the unrelenting sun and my lack of sleep, so I curled up on the grass, wedged my head under my better-housing sign for more shade, and took a nap. Despite a

loudspeaker droning from a nearby tree, I dozed off to dreams of a black girl in a white dress twirling a baton in front of a liquor store and promising me she wasn't going to Africa. Dan nudged me awake when John Lewis, the Snick leader, was introduced.

An unpolished orator, with no sense of pause, modulation or inflection, he shouted each angry word as if it were a declaration of war. He told the marchers they had nothing to be proud of, because so many others who work for starvation wages couldn't be there; he said Snick had great misgivings about the march and grave reservations about Kennedy's civil rights bill, which didn't really offer protection to the poor sharecroppers of Alabama and Mississippi. "One Man, one vote' is the African cry," he asserted, "it is ours, too. It must be ours." He then denounced the immoral compromises of both the Republicans and the Democrats. "Where is our party?" he asked in an anguished voice. "Where is the political party that will make it unnecessary to march on Washington?" He called on all of us to join the social revolution that was sweeping the country and he closed by vowing that Snick would keep marching until segregation was splintered into a thousand pieces and the South was reconstructed in the image of God and democracy, shouting at the end "Wake up America!"

By the time John Lewis finished, I was wide-awake and even shaking from the force of his righteous anger. A minute later Dan saw Chad Collins striding away from the crowd and called to him; he glared at us as if we had just shouted an insult, and then walked over clenching some legal-size pages in his fist.

"The bastards made John change his speech," he snarled. "He had to drop the stuff about Kennedy's cop-outs."

"I thought it was a pretty strong speech," I replied.

“Kennedy’s bill is crap.” Chad spoke as if the taste were on his lips. “The man has blood on his hands, our blood. John wanted to say that Snick was gonna take it to the South, like Sherman did, and burn the mother down.”

“That would have been a hit with the Dixicrats,” I remarked.

“Who gives a shit about Congress? This whole march is a farce. A bunch of black bourgeois in their coats and ties showing how nice they can be when they go beg Ole Massa for a favor. Snick wanted to shut this fucking city down until the real issues of jobs and freedom are dealt with.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“What always happens? The Uncle Toms and the Liberals got involved. You know the kind: ‘Hi, my name is Bob Liberal, wanna compromise?’ and before you know it everthing’s a joke. They turned this whole march into a celebration of marvelous Jack Kennedy, the Camelot Kid, and his wonderful civil rights bill for the less fortunate. The guy ought to get an Oscar for Best Director.”

“I’m glad you’re not bitter or anything.”

“Fuck you, Dan. If you’d come with me to Mississippi you’d see why I’m bitter.”

“Sounds risky to me,” I said.

“If it isn’t dangerous, you’re not in the right place.”

Chad’s remark stung me to the quick. I’d had my taste of danger last night, and I didn’t much like it.

“Here, check out John’s original speech,” Chad said, “you’ll see what they cut. Julian Bond’s been distributing it to the press. Why don’t you drop by the Statler Hilton where all the Snick people are? In fact, come right now.”

“Naw,” Dan said, “maybe later. We want to hear Martin Luther King.”

“Christ,” Chad said with undisguised scorn, “you guys are out of it. I’ve heard ‘De Lawd’ speak too many times already.”

Dan and I circled to the front of the Lincoln Memorial and angled into the multitude. I hadn’t felt so packed in since we “stuffed” two hundred people into a dorm room at Hiram College one day last winter as a prank; then I had felt claustrophobic, gasping for breath; here I felt comforted, freedom was in the air. No one seemed to mind the inevitable pushing and bumping; everything was “excuse me” or “I beg your pardon.” I even liked being jostled, taking pleasure in touching and being touched. The closer together we were the more aware I was of our growing numbers. There’s something insatiable about a crowd, a hunger to absorb more and more people until everyone is equal. It occurred to me as I was being pressed on all sides by strangers, that maybe being an individual wasn’t all that life was about; the more important thing was to be a part of mankind. I wanted the world to be a better place because I had passed through it.

“I love everybody,” I told Dan.

“Likewise, asshole, if you’d stop stepping on my toes.”

My elation swelled when Mahalia Jackson sang “I’ve Been Buked and I’ve Been Scorned.” I clapped and swayed along as she unleashed her incredible voice, which stretched from joy to sorrow in a single note and lifted me as it soared. A short black woman in a floral print dress stood next to me laughing and crying at the same time.

“I feel so proud,” she exclaimed. “I’ve never felt so proud of my people. This day gives me hope.”

I wanted to hug her and say encouraging words, but all I could do was give her a broad smile.

Then Martin Luther King arose to speak and a tremendous roar went up. The woman beside me put her hand on my shoulder and tried to vault herself up, but she was too short and I was too tall for her to get the proper leverage.

“Oh, I want to see him so bad,” she sighed.

Dan and I crossed our arms and gripped our hands. Without the slightest hesitation she took the seat we offered and, buttressed by people on all sides, we were able to raise her high enough to see.

I didn't much care for Dr. King's opening, a jumble of money and nature metaphors, as if he were searching for the exact figure he wanted. A lesser speaker would have lost me at that point, but his surging rhythms pulled me along. I felt proud when he praised the thousands of whites who had joined the march, telling the predominantly black crowd, “We cannot walk alone.”

Then the speech really took off. Compared to the droning Methodist preaching I had heard all my life, King's vibrant voice hit me with all the force of a religious experience.

“I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”

I repressed my doubts that this prophecy might not come to pass and hollered my approval with the rest, while the woman perched in her human chariot cried out, “Yes, Jesus,” “Sho Nuff,” and “My Lord!” at the end of King's every phrase, as if Dan and I were carrying her to kingdom come.

“I have a dream...” Thunderous applause. “...that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.”

Tumultuous cheering. Shouts from all sides to “Dream on!” A dog in the crowd barked wildly. And dream on he did, until it was hard to tell where Martin Luther King left off and the Bible began:

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

By now the crowd had turned into one huge congregation, clapping and shouting “Yes” to everything King said. Now each line seemed a fitting capstone to the speech, but he kept building to one climactic sentence filled with joyful prophecy:

“When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty we are free at last!’”

The crowd cheered on and on; they were still applauding when we lowered the woman to the ground. In the excitement of the moment I hadn’t noticed her weight; she had placed an arm unself-consciously around each of our necks to keep her balance; now I felt a sudden soreness in my wrists.

“That was wonderful,” she said, beaming up at us, her face radiant with expectation. Then she added without a trace of irony, “It was just uplifting. He said so much.”

“I wonder if Lincoln was listening.” Honest Abe hadn’t cracked a smile all afternoon.

“The dead know more than people realize,” she said solemnly. “I believe that this was the day this Memorial was meant for.”

“At least it should make people more aware,” I added.

“I know it will,” she said smiling. “You’ve been real kind. I never met two white boys so nice.”

“She was something,” I said, watching her move off through the crowd.

“If we stick around,” Dan remarked, “they’ll start passing out loaves and fishes.”

“I can’t take anymore. My head is killing me.”

“Martin Luther King has a dream; you have a headache. Maybe ‘De Lawd’ might consent to some laying on of hands.”

“We better go. I still have my damn car to deal with.”

Even after a long, sweaty day in the sun most people looked like they were headed for church; a majority of men had kept their coats and ties on and many of the women wore flower-brimmed Sunday bonnets. When I accidentally bumped into a woman and promptly apologized, she smiled, patted me on the arm and replied, “That’s all right, honey.” With my rumpled clothes from yesterday’s trip, unshaven face, and splitting headache, I felt like a bum at a wedding. On our way back up 15<sup>th</sup> Street I stopped to buy a button to prove that I had actually been there; it said:

**March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom**

**August 28, 1963**

and pictured a black hand clasping a white hand.

“I’m glad I came,” I said. “In spite of this headache.”

“When we get home I’ll give you some aspirin.”

“I feel like I need a spinal tap.”

## 5

The taxi dropped us near my car. Three small black boys were climbing onto the roof and then belly-flopping on the raised hood so that crashed down with a satisfying smash. They held their arms out like wings to keep from chopping off their fingers. It was a wonder they didn't cut themselves on the broken glass, but they clamored over the car, laughing and shouting all the while, as if it were merely a variety of Jungle Gym. As I watched them a bent-over blind man in a long trench coat, dark glasses and a cane slowly made his way down the sidewalk. Dan nudged me with his elbow in anticipation. The man stopped by the car, cocking his head to listen to the noise of the children. Then with surprising agility he stooped into the car, grabbed the ashtray, jammed it in his pocket, and tapped off down the street.

“How did you know?”

“He's a local character,” Dan said. “I've caught his act before.”

“He isn't blind at all.”

“He is sometimes—if he's had enough to drink.”

When we got back to the apartment Mrs. Brock gave me two Aspirin and a cold washcloth to put on my forehead, but even lying down in a dark room I found it hard to relax; when I shut my eyes I saw the shining silver silhouette of the Washington Monument and snatches of songs and speeches rang in my ears.

I was still reliving the day's events when Dan told me the insurance agent was on the phone.

“Your car really was totaled!” she admitted, still sounding like my four-grade teacher. “Our man said he hadn't seen one like that since he worked the South Bronx.”

The company promised to send a check to my home in Ohio.

The Brocks were watching television coverage of the march. I crouched up close to the set, scanning the crowd for my face in that sea of faces. Among thousands of placards held aloft, bobbing like a river regatta, I saw many identical to mine, but I was not among the people holding them. I felt vaguely cheated, as if what I had done hadn't happened unless I saw it on the screen.

Much of the footage was of a different march than the one I remembered. No mention was made of Dylan or the other folksingers, rather they did a feature on Josephine Baker, describing her as "the ageless Negro chanteuse and former Folliers Bergere star." She had come all the way from Paris in her trim blue uniform of the Free French to be at the march. I must have been napping when she told the crowd, a glorious smile spreading across her face, that they were "together as salt and pepper," as they should be. I didn't remember seeing A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin either; although they were the men who planned the march in the first place. Randolph introduced some members of Congress (none of whom I had seen), while the crowd shouted, "Pass the bill! Pass the bill!"

When the camera panned in for King's speech, which was even more powerful on second hearing, I hoped to catch a glimpse of two Hiram College boys holding up a black woman between them. Instead there was a shot of a woman who had fainted being passed hand by hand over the heads of hundreds of people to a waiting stretcher. To me, my headache was the major medical problem of the afternoon, but the television pictured dozens of people in hospital tents being treated for sun stroke, diabetes, epilepsy and appendicitis; a few had lacerated legs from tripping over tent pegs. One man had a heart attack; one woman was stung by a wasp. The news commentators agreed that this was the largest and most peaceful demonstration Washington had ever seen. I felt proud to have taken part; my only regret was that we left before the end, when everyone on the speakers' platform and in the crowd had joined hands to sing "We Shall Overcome."

Dan's parents listened to our account of the day with interest. Mr. Brock asked to read our copy of John Lewis's original speech to see exactly what had been cut.

"I've got to hand it to Jack," he said, lighting his pipe and leaning back in his recliner. "He really pulled this one off."

"Kennedy wasn't even there, Dad," Dan objected. "Why give him all the credit?"

"That's the beauty of it. Jack isn't present at the march, so if anything goes wrong he can say it wasn't his baby. But if it's a success, he can invite the leaders over for tea and sympathy and praise their dignity and restraint. He's a real politician."

"Maybe that's his problem." Dan looked disgruntled. I could tell that he and his father had had this debate before.

"Oh, I have to hand it to the Negroes, too," Mr. Brock said. "You know people on the Hill remember the Bonus Army back in the thirties; they thought this march might turn ugly. Jack was worried; he had four-thousand troops on first alert across the river in Virginia."

"Ed's been on the phone half the afternoon," Mrs. Brock said, smiling at her husband, "getting the inside scoop. What's funny is that neither Jackie nor the President knew what to serve Dr. King and the others when they came to the White House. Do you know what they finally chose?"

"Cappuccino and cornbread."

Mrs. Brock knew when to ignore Dan's smart-ass remarks.

"Cherry cobbler." She obviously savored that as the best detail of the day. "Isn't that delightful!"

"King's speech was the showpiece," Mr. Brock insisted. "My god but that man is eloquent! Some of the boys over at the Bureau think he's dangerous—a commie, a demagogue, a tom cat—but I don't know what the civil rights movement would do without him."

“What about Roy Wilkins, dear?”

“I’d rather watch a fly walk up a drape than listen to him talk. For my money, they should have had some singing, let Dr. King speak, and called it a day.”

“What about John Lewis’ speech?” I asked, still thinking of how upset Chad Collins had been about the last-minute changes.

“He’s just another angry young man with no sense of delivery. Whoever revised his speech improved it. What’s the point of criticizing the President and insulting the South? Don’t these SNCC kids know how the game of politics is played? Don’t they know who their friends are? Do they want to cut off their nose to spite their face?”

“But what John Lewis wanted to say is true,” Dan insisted. “The party of Kennedy is also the party of Eastland and the other reactionary Dixiecrats.”

“That’s right,” I added. “What good are civil rights bills if Kennedy appoints racist judges to enforce them?”

“Jack’s got more on his mind besides civil rights—the Russians, for example. I admit that Judge Cox had no business on the bench, but he was Senator Eastland’s roommate in college; Eastland is the head of the Judiciary Committee and Kennedy needs his support.”

“But don’t you see how corrupt that is?” Dan shouted.

“Politics is the art of the possible; when you have seen it up close all your life as I have you’ll understand that it’s a messy business. Take your civil rights march today. There may have been some manipulation behind the scenes, but when a quarter of a million people present a petition in the flesh for redress of grievances, the message is delivered. Those congressmen up on the Hill aren’t saints, but they can count. That many voters can’t be ignored. I’ll bet a lot of them who were sitting on the fence this morning are trying to get on the bandwagon to support the bill now. The odds are good that

Jack will get a portion of it passed. So you see, you accomplished something. As Winston Churchill once said, ‘Democracy is the worst of all possible political systems—except for all the others!’”

Mr. Brock couldn’t resist smiling at Churchill’s worldly wit, but I felt exasperated by his self-satisfied professorial manner.

“Well I say it stinks,” Dan insisted. “Where’s the sense of simple justice? If only five people had shown up for the march, segregation is still wrong. Snick has the right idea. Let the people themselves decide what they want and then help them to get it. That’s what Snick is all about. That’s why John Lewis should have told Kennedy off. To hell with his tea parties!”

The nation had been impressed as they watched 250,000 people, black and white together, on their best behavior, act out an afternoon of human brotherhood. In retrospect, the message of the march was more delusional than real in its suggestion that we as a people had turned a crucial corner and our racial troubles would soon be over. In truth, it wasn’t the march but the assassination of President Kennedy that compelled Congress to pass his civil rights bill in 1964. The next year President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, accomplishing the primary goal of the movement—the end of legal segregation in the South—but the manifold problems of black people across the nation, especially in the major cities, remained un-addressed. Of course Johnson’s Great Society programs were intended to solve those problems—we all know that story. Vietnam, God damn!

Forty years later, we again gathered at the Lincoln Memorial on the anniversary of the march; tents were set up where people could discuss issues and suggest solutions, but the media decided that no one had said anything very memorable; President Bush, vacationing in Crawfordville, Texas, paid no attention; the nation followed his example; a plaque was unveiled where King once had a dream; of the original speakers, only John Lewis, now a congressman from Georgia, is alive; he’s still waiting for his country to wake up.