



an
Ambition
to
Belong

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S N I E C H O W S K I

LEAVING HOME TRILOGY BOOK 2

An
Ambition
to Belong

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Inspired by
Real Life Events

CHAPTER 1 ~

FIRST NIGHT AS A LANCER

“What ta’ fuck you lookin’ at?” Donny hissed, his black eyes hard and fixed.

“What?”

“What the fuck you mean ‘what’?” My question threw him off guard, rankling him even more than whatever seemed to be pissing him off. Though I sensed danger, a danger I could feel but not identify, I watched myself smile.

I was only thirteen and had little more than a basic elementary school education overseen by Polish Catholic Franciscan nuns, many from Poland, what my people called the *Old Country*, to help me navigate the unpredictable streets of my then seventy-year-old inner-

city Detroit neighborhood. I'd smiled for no other reason than the way Donny ran the words together "Whatthefuckyoumeanwhat?" struck me as funny.

"You think this is fuckin' funny?" His eyelids closed down to an even more threatening stare.

I was now the one off guard.

The early-September humidity smelled of rain. I became hyper-aware of the moisture in the air pressing up against my cheeks and heard two thoughts fight to be first in my awareness: 'Does it make me look like I'm sweating?' and 'I don't want to look like I'm sweating.'

The rocks under my feet suddenly felt hostile, pointed, sharp, and aggressive. They were the scattered remnant of the gravel laid down years before on the empty lot next to The Circle, a small eight-stool hamburger joint on Michigan Avenue the Royal Lancers, a street gang I had just been accepted into, used as their hang-out.

"You fuckin' deaf, asshole?" Donny forced the words through clenched teeth.

Second in command of the Royal Lancers, Donny held the title "War Counselor," an apt designation given what I'd been told about his rabid belligerence. In my adolescent fantasy, his rank was one I imagined someday to achieve.

In 1955, the Royal Lancers was an entry level street gang into the underworld of Southwest Detroit. I had to be thirteen to even be considered. At sixteen I could move up into the Dictators and then at twenty-one, if I'd proven

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myself, I would be marked on the inside of my left forearm with the tattoo of a long thin blade, a skin flag declaring my membership in the Stiletto.

Each gang level required more and more proof of willingness and daring, beginning with simple shoplifting, through breaking and entering, upward to felonies like grand theft auto, and beyond. Some of the Stiletto had been sentenced to federal prison; two I'd heard about had been convicted of murder and received life terms.

I'd passed the initiation into the Lancers by breaking into the glove-box of several cars in my neighborhood, just three blocks away from my house, demonstrating I had what it took and prompting an impressive buzz when I'd brought my haul to the gang—an old railroad pocket watch, a fishing reel, and, best of all, two U.S. Army service medals along with a snub-nosed flare gun the owner must have brought home from his military duty. That was the real prize, exciting every member of the gang. They told me they would consider my membership and get back to me, but I knew by the way they looked at me I would be accepted. Three days later I was in.

Earlier that evening, as I approached The Circle for the first time as a proud full-fledged Royal Lancer, ready and anxious to be part of whatever would happen, I felt the pumped-up goose bumps on my arms and took them as a sign of triumph. I'd done it. I'd made it. I'd proven myself and was acknowledged, respected, and accepted. The light of day, its strength fading, was becoming muddy against

the oncoming darkness. I saw through The Circle's large plate glass window that I was the first of the Lancers to arrive so I decided to wait in the small lot next to the building finishing the cigarette I was smoking, a Lucky Strike. That's when I first saw Donny at the back of the building using the wall he pressed up against not as a support but as a prop, part of the steely pose he struck. A shadow slashed across the bottom of his face leaving his eyes to reflect the light from a nearby streetlamp. I had to stare to be sure it was him.

"You fuckin' deaf, asshole?" he said again and sucked in a large drag of his cigarette.

The unexpected tension I felt facing Donny distracted me and I'd inadvertently smoked my Lucky all the way down to the hot nub end which I suddenly felt burning between my fingers. My right hand snapped, launching the cigarette half way across the lot. Donny watched it bounce toward him. When the lit end crashed head-on into one of the rocks and flashed, I could see him visibly stiffen.

"You're nothin' but a punk."

Feeling my stomach muscles tighten I said, more from curiosity than aggression, "What do you mean 'punk'?"

"You callin' me a punk?" He thrust himself off the wall and stood, shoulders flared, making himself as wide and dominant as he could.

I'd first met him when I delivered my stolen booty. The Lancers who'd recruited me told me some about him and I

heard some around the neighborhood. But he didn't know me other than my triumph with the stolen loot so I didn't understand why he was calling me a punk.

"No. I'm asking you why you're calling me a punk?"

He stepped toward me, bristling, bringing to bear all of the fourteen years he'd been alive. Although just out of pre-adolescence he was reputed to be purposely cruel. One rumor had him taping together the tails of two cats and tossing them over his mother's backyard clothes-drying wire and delighting in watching them tear at each other trying to break free. I'd heard he told that story to show how dangerous he was, but no one had witnessed it, and no one was certain if he'd actually done it. But that mattered little. Donny was not particularly liked, but his story, which had reached a mythical status and influence in the adolescent underworld of lower class southwest Detroit, had conferred on him a high degree of defensive respect.

Out of the left corner of his mouth, he spit the toothpick which jutted there as a constant accessory. I remembered he had one in his mouth during my loot display. It was a marker of his character and control. He bragged how it never disintegrated--a word he would say with force and bravado asserting he'd learned it from his 17-year-old brother Dicky.

He almost never removed the toothpick, even when soaked with his saliva, unless the circumstance demanded, and, evidently, whatever I'd done demanded it.

“What’d you say, punk?” his words strung out on a rope of contempt, stressing the word “punk.”

My surprise and confusion mounted. His menace startled and hurt me because I’d expected a welcome from him, believing he was an ally.

When I didn’t respond, a jagged smile began in his eyes and distorted his mouth as he flicked his cigarette against the patched plaster wall of The Circle, causing the tip to explode in a sunburst pattern, and then he slowly and deliberately reached behind his back.

I thought of the two cats and felt a thrill run through my body: it might have been fear or it might have been rage.

He withdrew from the back pocket of his Levi jeans, which he wore low around his hips, a switchblade knife and, without ever breaking eye contact, tossed it from hand to hand. “Say hello to George.”

“George?” The absurdity of calling his knife *George* added to my growing apprehension.

He raised his knife, pressing the release button and the blade came lunging out of the front end of the handle, bayonet style. I could see the handle of the knife was covered in white.

“You know Patton, punk?”

Of course, I did. But the alien-ness of what was happening--that he would give his switchblade a name and a stupid name like *George*--was not clever or cool but unimaginable. I couldn’t clear my mind of the thought that if I had a

switchblade, I wouldn't give it a name. That would take away from its power.

"Jesus, you're fuckin' dumb. General Patton, asshole. He had two pistols with ivory handles. I got an ivory blade. Say hello to George." He leveled the knife toward my head.

He'd heard about General George Patton from his brother Dicky who'd taken the knife as the prize from someone he'd mugged and, having his own stash of lethal knives, he gave this one to Donny.

Dicky was a Dictator, well built and especially sadistic. So when Donny flexed his threats everyone knew he had his brother behind him.

"You like George, punk?"

My face flushed in prickles which spread through my whole body, and I fell into a whirl of risk and alarm. I knew I'd crossed an invisible, undefined line, which he took as a challenge, but I had no idea what I had done.

"Can't talk, huh?"

Donny styled his thick jet black hair straight to the back of his head where he sculpted each side toward the back-center and parted them with a deep groove from the crown of his skull to the nape of his neck creating what we called a DA, a "Duck's Ass." In truth, Donny had the best Duck's Ass in the Royal Lancers. He used Dax Hair Shaper pomade to keep every strand in place so that his "do" precisely framed his pointed face which pitched out from his skull mirroring the blade end of "George." His beaky

nose, sharp cheekbones, spiked chin, and his slightly crossed eyes all merged into a countenance that always seemed on the verge of attack--a reptile with a Duck's Ass.

"Thought you was bad, huh? A bad ass. You fucked with me...now you got nuthin'."

He was right. I had nothing. Just over five-feet-one-inch tall and one hundred pounds, plus or minus, I'd never been challenged so directly. I'd never been in a fight, ever, or any kind of physical conflict, except for wrestling with boys my age done mostly for fun and pleasure. From nowhere in my life history or from anywhere in my fantasy of being a Royal Lancer could I draw an understanding of what was happening and what to do.

Watching his blade glint weakly from the light atop the lamppost nearby, my mind raced back through the terror-laced bravery I felt when I raided those glove-boxes, a fear I'd never felt before, but a fear I nonetheless overcame. Once in that first car, I felt a sense of strength, of courage, of manliness, like I had been changed, branded, grown up, even though I knew I was committing a crime. But face-to-face with Donny's aggression I felt only an urgency to piece together a chain of understanding that could explain his challenge.

"You fuckin' with me or what?"

"No. I'm not." I blurted, void of anything else to say.

"Yeah?"

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Donny had been expelled in the middle of the eighth grade because of his attitude and his learning deficits which bordered on retardation. His mother had placed him in several other schools but his behavior didn't change and she gave up.

But his brother Dicky graduated from high school with a diploma he couldn't have cared less about. Dicky's native intelligence allowed him to get through school and succeed in his gang life, quickly rising to leadership, a gift Donny resented, admired, longed for, envied, but mostly depended upon. On the one side Donny spent most of his waking hours flanked on one side by his fierce need to be seen as bold, tough, and smart, and on the other side, terrified by a gnawing insecurity that, without his brother, he was nothing.

"You think you're somethin', don't ya asshole? Big fuckin' man. Big gun, huh? It's a fuckin' flare gun, you little dick. A pussy gun. It can't do shit."

"You're pissed off about the flare gun?"

"Fuck you what I'm pissed off about. And who says I'm pissed? You're so fuckin' stupid, you know. You got no balls. What d'ya do, steal that pussy gun from your pussy old man?"

My relationship with my father was one of arm's-length at best but he was no pussy. The stories I'd heard of his youth painted him as a fierce fighter, someone who would not back down and someone who was known to finish off anyone who tangled with him. He would not kill them but

he'd make sure they had nothing left to continue. Again Donny had no idea what he was saying and yet he said it with such certainty that, even though I knew he was wrong, absolutely wrong, his insult crossed a line I didn't even know was there.

'And what about me?' I thought: The fear, the risk, the letdown my father would have felt and what he might have done had I been caught stealing from the cars of people he no doubt knew, and that I pushed through all of that anyway, what about my courage? Images and feelings jammed into my awareness along with a rush of literal heat stoked by Donny's contempt. He saw my face redden with rage.

He shouted, "Let's stop fuckin' around. Come at me, punk. You got balls? Come." He stood, feet apart, arms spread wide to his sides, the knife in his right hand. "Come on, punk, or do you need your pussy old man to do it for you?"

Knife or not I couldn't stand there and swallow his disrespect. My stomach tightened to the point of pain and I felt the impulse to throw myself at him, with no idea of what might happen, when a woman's voice shouted into the standoff.

"What's going on here? Donny, you acting crazy again?" The scene froze. She then looked at me. "Who are you?"

"He's a fuckin' punk."

"Donny, shut up," the woman laced into him, "and put that away. You want the cops to see you?"

Donny obediently pressed the lock button and the blade fell back into the handle.

"I said who are you?" she ordered, but I was reeling with images of attacking Donny and stabbing him with his own knife so I didn't hear her clearly.

"What's the matter? You can't talk?" Donny let loose again.

"Donny, I'm tellin' ya, shut up and go inside." The woman possessed some kind of power because Donny, to my amazement, crossed the lot, eyes to the ground, and disappeared into The Circle.

"You okay?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Did he scare you?"

I turned away.

"He did, didn't he?"

I could feel tears reaching to answer her. The last thing I wanted was to cry.

"It's over now. Just go where you're going."

"I'm going here."

"What?"

"I'm going here. I'm a Royal Lancer."

"I don't know you."

"I got accepted in two days ago."

She sighed, a long weary sigh as she moved closer. "What's your name? Just your first name. I don't want to know last names."

"Jim. I was comin' here...for the first time."

She wore an apron and her hair held close in some kind of net that lay flat against her head. She looked at me as if she was trying to see inside of me, trying to find a point of connection, consolation, maybe advice.

She finally said, "The Circle's my place. I own it. My real name's Dorothy, Dottie, but everybody calls me Ma. You need anything?"

"I...uh...no."

"Follow me." She walked toward the back of the building, checking over her shoulder to see if I was behind her.

I hesitated. The trust I'd arrived with had been violated and the shadowy area behind the building was dark and gloomy.

"It's okay. You're safe."

I hated that she said safe like I was a girl who needed to be protected.

Yet her warm, soothing voice slipped past the barriers of my hesitation and pulled at me, asking for my trust. But still in the aftershock of Donny's assault and even though I hated to admit it, the idea of protection felt good. I moved to the back door.

"This leads into my place," she said as she stopped at the back door. "I'm going in. You wait here, okay? Just wait here," and she disappeared inside.

I didn't know what I was to wait for and my tears were demanding their own time. I squeezed my eyes just as she returned, a bottle of Coke in hand.

"Here. For you. Drink it. When you're ready, come in. Okay?"

I didn't want her to leave. But I didn't want her to stay. "Okay," I whispered. As she disappeared into The Circle, I wondered if the Coke was a gift or pity.

Orange light from the lone and weary street lamp at the back of the lot labored to reach my spot, a reach that sucked out what energy the lamp had to give in heaving waves like an old man coughing. I looked at the ice-cold Coke bottle. It might as well have been an alien. An unknown thing. The stinging cold felt hot. The barely visible fizzing bubbles looked like steam from something boiling. Its murky color deepened in the advancing dark. For a moment, I was mystified.

'How did this bottle get into my hand?' I thought. Light from a passing car flashed along the wall and I looked up. 'How'd I get here...in this empty lot?' Pieces of a large and complex puzzle that had been wildly scattered and became utterly unrecognizable left me completely bereft of any idea what to do next.

All at once, as though someone slipped a slide into the projector, my life snapped back into place. Where was I? At the back door of The Circle. Who was I? A Royal Lancer. Why was I there? To be celebrated for my success. To be introduced to everyone. To belong. My tears broke over. I couldn't stop them.

Horrified I might be seen I moved further into the shadows behind The Circle and discovered a set of five cracked and chipped cinder block stairs leading to a door. A basement door? It wouldn't open.

"God damn it," I snarled and then slumped onto the fourth step, my back against the stairwell wall. I felt movement in my hand. The Coke bottle was slipping from my grip. I set it down, carefully, not wanting to make any noise, and sat still, deeply still, focusing on the rough surface of the cinder blocks on the wall opposite showing through the coat of plaster meant to cover them from the bruising of weather and time.

What had happened? I'd done nothing. Even so the night I'd been looking forward to, the night I would know what it was to like be a member, a Royal Lancer, had crashed in on me with the punch of a malicious deceit. What I'd imagined this night would be like not only crashed, I felt like a fool, a boy, a weakling.

Donny's pearl-handled knife flashed on the screen inside my head followed by a moment-to-moment rerun of my stand-off with him, replaying only what I didn't do. I didn't charge him. I didn't call him a punk. I just stood there.

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Words shot up from the back of my head, and screamed *What a coward*, followed by *You didn't fight*, and then *You're a loser*, and finally *Donny's right, you are a punk*, each belittlement crowding in on the others forcing their way to the forefront until they all fused into a long, frozen, painful noise.

I knew that Voice. I'd heard it many times before. I bolted up the steps to get away and the inside of my head fell silent--not an ally, just not an enemy.

"Should I go home?" I asked aloud. All I needed to do was leave and that would be that. But the risks I'd taken and the fears I'd vanquished would then be a waste.

I imagined the man, whose flare gun I'd stolen, opening his glove box to discover it missing. I didn't know him but I could clearly see him sitting in the rider's seat of his Buick Roadmaster. Would he have known immediately that it was gone? Would he have cursed whoever had taken it? Or would he have searched the rest of the car, and perhaps inside his house, wondering if he'd misplaced it, disappointed in himself for his carelessness. I was rushed with a deep sense of sadness for him and for what I'd done, and decided, at that moment, that I would go home, probably ending my Royal Lancer career. But voices from the front of the building redirected my attention. I pressed up against the back wall and glanced around its edge to see Tony and Richard, two more Lancers, arriving for the evening. I felt a moment's relief. They were present at my display of the stolen loot and lauded my courage. "It'd be

stupid to go home," I whispered. "That would really make me a punk."

"Who you talkin' to?" I heard from behind me and spun around, jolted out of my thoughts.

"Huh?"

"You were talkin'."

Mickey Vee, the leader of the Royal Lancers and, at sixteen and six-foot-two, the biggest, strongest, toughest guy in the gang, was smiling at me.

The Lancers called him Mickey Vee, or sometimes just "Vee," because of his difficult name--Mikalojus Vasilauskas. When I heard it for the first time, I asked him where he was from. He made certain to say he was an American but that his parents had emigrated from Lithuania. "Not Russia," he emphasized. "Not Russia."

I had a World Atlas at home and loved looking at the maps so I knew where Lithuania was located. "It's not Russia," I said.

"You know where Lithuania is?"

"Yeah."

"You can show me?"

"Sure."

"I want to see that. I hate Russians. Some of my people died...not enough food...worked to death." He told me they had been imprisoned in a Siberian labor camp that was

part of the *Kolyma* Russian gulag system. So to say or imply he was Russian in response to his last name put a person at serious risk.

It had happened that Mickey Vee was once harassed by two much bigger Ukrainian men. They reviled him for being Russian, garbling and insulting his name. Vee erupted and not only beat them up, but he also put one in a hospital with broken ribs. The Lancers held that story as a sacrament, ritually asking Vee to tell it again and again and then retelling it among themselves. The more they retold it, the more they elaborated the details until even Vee wondered if he'd remembered it correctly. But he never challenged their version.

Yet, for whatever reason, he'd never been shown where he could find Lithuania on the map. If I could show him, he said he could show it to others and they'd know he was not Russian.

"Okay?" He beamed.

"Okay." I smiled and gained his favor.

"Who were you talkin' to?" Vee's smile seemed friendly.

"Huh? Nobody. Nuthin'." I felt heat in my cheeks being caught talking to myself and glad the light was not very powerful so I couldn't be seen.

"What're you doin' out here?"

"Uh, takin' a leak," the only expression my father ever used for pissing.

“Why didn’t you go inside?”

“Ah...well...you know...had to piss.”

“Come on, let’s go in.”

At first, I hesitated, knowing Donny was inside The Circle and I had no idea what to expect. But Mickey Vee had been especially encouraging and respectful during my display of stolen loot so I, at least, had him as a buffer.

The empty lot beside the building measured about fifty feet from the back door to the sidewalk in front. But because of my anxiety, it felt like two steps. We’d just begun and all at once we were there. Vee thrust open The Circle’s metal frame door and strode in motioning me to follow. Everyone turned and smiled.

“Cheeseburger, Ma,” Vee shouted out.

“Already cookin’,” Ma smiled. She’d tossed the burger onto the griddle which had always been the centerpiece of The Circle’s kitchen. It had absorbed twenty-three years of juices from hamburger meat, steak, onions, liver, hash browns, eggs, and whatever else that now inspired what was being cooked with all of that history and flavor.

“Yours are the best, Ma.”

Mickey eyed the stool at the far end of the counter where he could sit with his back to the wall. He’d seen a movie about Billy the Kid and knew the Kid’s demand that, whatever saloon he was in, he always sat with his back to a wall to protect against being ambushed. Vee’s preference had nothing to do with fear.

At thirteen he'd been hired, through the connections of one of his uncles, to work part time on a construction job hauling buckets of cement. Eager to prove himself he pushed too hard and didn't see a patch of wet ground. When he hit it, his right foot wrenched out to the side and he twisted his back, an injury he never had anyone look at let alone treat. Although his standing posture didn't indicate his pain, whenever he sat he tended to sink into himself and aggravate his compromised muscles. Sitting up straight, supported by the wall, he could ease the ache in his back and also maintain his leader's pose.

"It's yours, man," Richard smiled. He'd been sitting on the stool and he deferred to Vee. Every Lancer knew the protocol. They could sit on that stool but only until Vee arrived.

"Thanks, man," Vee smiled. Richard nodded.

There wasn't much space on the customer side of The Circle's counter. In addition to the eight stools, Ma had brought in an electronic two-person Skee Ball machine; a 10-foot ramp along which balls were rolled toward a set of circles each one representing a certain number of points, the smallest and most difficult circle to drop a ball into was worth the most. A yellow and red flashing calculator mounted above the circle end of the ramp tallied the scores of each of two possible players. Placed alongside the large front window, the Skee Ball game stuck out into the room by two feet, leaving only five feet between the sidewall of the game and the stools. At ten cents a game, twenty cents

for two, The Lancers competed feverishly in matches that would last a week. The highest score on Saturday night became the weekly champion.

At the end of the space opposite the Skee Ball game blinking green and blue lights lit a cigarette machine that offered Kools, Kents, Pall Malls, Camels, Lucky Strikes, Chesterfields, and Marlboros beneath the words--Your Smoke Shop--etched on a rectangular mirror the Lancers regularly used to keep their hair in place. At twenty-five cents a pack, cigarettes were a premium. Even so the phrase "You got an extra cigarette?" was a regular feature of Lancer life.

The interior of The Circle, except for the griddle and the vent over it, gleamed in shades of white: white countertops, white vinyl stool covers, white napkin holders, white walls, and a white tile floor, all of which Ma kept impeccably clean. It looked more like a hospital ward except for the muddle of colors from the Skee Ball and cigarette machines that would ricochet around the space. At just the right angle our faces and the faces of the other customers who made The Circle as much a home as the Lancers looked like faces in a funhouse.

Ma made a meager living from her food and the percentages she received from the Skee Ball and cigarette machines. But her nickname "Ma" reflected her openhearted care and generosity with the Lancers. For Donny, most notably, she served as the mother he never

had. So her Lancer name "Ma" was more of an affection and tribute than a tag.

We never knew her real age. We guessed at forty. "Are you crazy? She's older than that." Someone said seventy. "That's stupid. If she was that old, she'd be almost dead." So it was decided that fifty is what we would believe. When we asked her she wouldn't say, even when Donny said shyly and somewhat embarrassed, "Ma, I don't want you to die."

"Okay," she smiled, "if I think I'm dying I'll tell you. But not yet."

At five-foot-three and thickset, burly like a work animal, she'd never known finery and had long since accommodated to her life's position--a widow with no children, alone in the world but not whining.

I'd been told about her childless widowhood the night I'd brought my haul to the Lancers. Even though Donny had been described as cruel and perhaps lethal, not someone for whom care came easily if at all, he'd made a point to tell me about Ma and he did so with surprising tenderness. She was held dear by every Lancer but especially Donny. By telling me about her life, what he knew of it, he intended to assure I would treat her with respect, and more emphatically as a warning that if I in any way offended her or if my behavior toward her offended him, I would have to deal with him.

"You got what I'm sayin'?"

"I think so."

"You fuckin' better."

She'd been married once. In their fourth year of marriage her husband, Andy, who worked on a truck dock, loading and unloading forty-foot trailers, tried to lift a box of nuts and bolts, 6 by 6 by 24 inches weighing 135 pounds, which had fallen off a cart near the edge of the dock. As he applied muscle to the weight, something he'd easily done many times before, his ankle freakishly snapped sending him off the dock head first to the pavement six feet below. When he hit, his skull cracked open and he died instantly.

Ma, who was Dottie then, was carrying their first child, a boy. The shock of the news caused her to miscarry and the double loss sent her into a deep depression from which she never fully recovered. Friends urged her to remarry, but she said, "A woman loves once. Just once. To one man. Just one man. My man was Andy."

She adjusted to her reality and, like most working class people, she'd resigned and made peace with it; a sign of feral strength, plodding endurance, and the lack of seeing any other options. For Ma work was more than a task, it was an identity.

No one knew how Ma came to The Circle but that part of her life was not important to us. That she was there and with us was all that mattered.

"Your burger, Vee," Ma smiled, "extra onions, little mayo."

Vee looked at the burger with the same affection Ma expressed in giving it to him. "Thanks, Ma," he took his first bite.

I scanned the room. Ma was scraping the griddle's surface. Richard sat on the edge of the Skee Ball machine smiling as he watched Vee eat. Tony, the most handsome Lancer, squatted a bit to see himself in the mirror on the cigarette machine and ran a comb through his hair.

I expected something a little more gang-like, although I had no idea what that might be. I'd seen Marlon Brando in the movie *The Wild One* at the Senate Theater three blocks away where I spent almost every Saturday. Brando played Johnny Strabler, leader of The Black Rebels, a motorcycle gang who ride into a town and take it over. I was inspired by him. Awed actually. I wanted to be like him. I wanted to be him. He and his guys had each other's backs. I wanted that.

"Hey new guy," Ma called out. Looking at me she followed with, "What's your name again?"

I heard Donny, who was at the door, toothpick in mouth, whisper, "Punk."

I was about to turn to him when Ma demanded, "I said what's your name?"

"Uh...Jim." I still wanted to look back to Donny but Ma's eyes, wide and intense, commanded that I keep connected with her. "Jim," I said again.

She placed a cheeseburger in front of me. "For you."

"I didn't order it."

"It's on me...your first night as a Lancer."

"Ma does it for everyone," Tony joined in turning away from the mirror.

"Her burgers are great," Richard said smiling. At five-foot-three and almost 150 pounds Richard's body testified to the hamburgers he relished, usually with fries and a Coke.

I looked to Vee, who nodded his approval.

"Oh, okay, Thanks."

I drew a quarter from my gray corduroy pants and placed it on the counter. I was embarrassed by my corduroys. I wanted Levis, with the little red tag sticking out from the right-side back pocket, but corduroys had to do. "Can I get a Coke, Ma?" my way of saying Thank You for the burger.

"Sure." She opened a bottle, poured some into a glass she'd set on the counter in front of me, rang up my quarter, and gave me fifteen cents change.

Richard was right. Ma's burger was the best I'd ever eaten.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Uh huh." I smiled and heard the door open.

I turned to see Donny step outside and lean against the wall abutting the door jamb; then a flash of light when he lit a wooden stick match, which he did by raising his right thigh parallel to the ground drawing the denim of his Levis tight against his leg. He swiftly scraped the match head across

the rugged twill of his jeans and it burst into flame. He lit his Kool mentholated and filtered cigarette, the brand his brother smoked, flipped the matchstick into the street, and placed the Kool to the right side of his mouth so as not to disturb his toothpick.

Seeing that Tony said, "Hey Richard, let's get a smoke."

"Okay," Richard smiled. They left and stood near Donny.

Richard often smiled. In fact, he smiled most of the time. He'd passed his initiation into the Lancers by stealing candy bars from the local Kroger supermarket. Tony went with him to watch because no one thought he would go through with it. When they returned everyone gathered at the back of The Circle. Richard unloaded his stash revealing 3 Mars bars, two packets of Switzer's licorice sticks, a bag of lemon drops, a handful of Tootsie Rolls, and one packet of Bit-O-Honey. He smiled without ceasing throughout his entire display.

He was given the test of stealing candy bars because of his sweet temperament. No one knew for sure if he was always happy or just simple minded. To find out Donny chose Kroger's because their security system was very sensitive. They were known to severely prosecute even minor cases of shoplifting so Richard's test contained real risk. "He smiled every minute," Tony burst out, "I couldn't fuckin' believe it."

Ma busied herself with small work behind the counter, washing Vee's plate, checking her stock of ground beef, washing her hands and wiping them dry with her apron.

Vee withdrew into himself and stared off at a spot behind me. It didn't seem right to intrude. So I finished my initiatory burger, pulled a napkin from its holder, and after I had wiped my lips I considered keeping the napkin as a souvenir of the night but heard the Voice: *You're fuckin' kidding me, right? A souvenir?* I crumpled it and left it on my plate.

I put the straw in my mouth to get what was left of my Coke and unconsciously pulled so hard I made a loud slurping sound. Ma looked up.

"There's always more," she said gently. The sadness in her eyes startled me. I didn't want her attention and I didn't want to see the flat spirit that revealed itself from behind her otherwise workaday face.

"I'm sorry," I said, deflecting my embarrassment and quickly looked away.

Ma went back to her chores. Vee either hadn't heard or hadn't been affected because his gaze hadn't changed. *It's a good thing he didn't hear,* the Voice said. *Saved your ass.* I pushed the glass away toward the back of the counter. 'It'll be easier for Ma to reach,' I thought, in an attempt to redeem myself.

The room fell silent. I felt a pressure inside my ears. I looked to Vee, who hadn't moved, as if all the movement in his body had been drained away. As Ma reached for my glass and plate, I saw them bang together. Normally that would have produced the crisp click of durable restaurant china colliding, but I didn't hear a sound. None.

It's your ears, man, the Voice said as I pressed my forefingers into my ears to relieve the pressure.

Ma put the plate and glass into the stainless steel sink behind the counter and turned the hot water spigot. Water gushed, crashing against the china as well as the bottom of the sink, and there was no sound. Something had sucked the air out of the room leaving nothing behind to carry the sound.

I jerked back, spinning the top of the stool, throwing me off forcing me to reach out for the side of the Skee Ball machine to brace myself. Through the plate glass window I could see the traffic light at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Martin Street about five car-lengths away, the street I would use to walk eight blocks to my house.

"Where you going?" Vee asked.

"Huh...what...uh, nowhere. No...nowhere. Just getting off my seat." I clenched my fists and drove my fingernails into my palms, embarrassed that this was the second time that evening I stuttered in Vee's presence.

"Looked like you fell off," Vee stepped off the stool and arched his back, stretching it.

"No...uh...just got off." To recapture myself I asked, "Anything happening tonight?"

"Like what?" Vee stretched again.

"I don't know. Anything."

"No. Why?"

"Just wondering...my first night and all. Just asking."

"If anything's happening you'll know." Vee stood, turned his back to me, placed his hands on the wall at the other end of the room, pushed hard, and arched his head back over his shoulders.

I was expecting much more than the nothing that was happening. In *The Wild One*, when Johnny and his gang took over a bar in town, there was a lot of action. My first night as a Lancer was anything but. It was only The Circle, not a bar. I knew that. But still.

Except for the trouble with Donny, which had never fully quieted inside of me, and even though Ma's hamburger was really, really good, warm and welcoming, nothing happened.

"Hey Ma," Vee called out, "I'm gonna head home."

"Your back?" Ma asked.

"Yeah."

"You want an aspirin?"

"Nah, it's okay."

"You don't have to suffer. The aspirin'll help." Ma had deep respect for Mickey Vee. She treated him like a man.

"It's best I just get home."

"Okay. You gonna sleep?"

"Hope so."

"Here," she reached out to him. "Take these." She dropped three Bayer aspirin into his hand. "Just in case."

"Thanks, Ma."

"Sure. You sleep now."

"Okay."

Watching the way she treated Vee I felt a pain in my chest, a pain I'd never felt before and knew nothing about. A stab in my right side. I drew the wrist of my left hand up to my side and pressed, not wanting to be detected. I didn't want to appear weak.

As Vee moved toward the door, I followed him.

Ma called out, "You leaving, Jim?"

I stopped. She called me by my name. She called me *Jim*. For a moment, I felt she treated me like she treated Vee. My feelings shifted from pain to puzzlement. I didn't know what I was feeling, I only knew I liked that she called me by my name.

"Yeah. I guess so."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I'll be here."

"Okay," she smiled.

I caught the open door behind Vee and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Hey Vee," Donny asked, "where you goin'?"

"Home."

"Hey man, why?"

"My back."

Tony looked at me. "You goin' home too?"

"Yeah." I hadn't known until that moment that I was headed home. As far as I knew, I was just following Vee.

"See you tomorrow, man," Tony said, flipping his Chesterfield into the street.

"Yeah. Tomorrow."

Richard smiled.

Donny scowled through squinted eyes and a tight grin and muttered,

"See ya tomorrow." I could hear the challenge in his voice.

"Yeah." I threw my response over my shoulder and sped up to catch Vee, who hadn't stopped to chit chat.

I caught up with him at the corner of Michigan and Martin. I knew he would turn right and I would go left. Just as he began his turn I said, "Take those aspirins, man." He stopped and looked me directly in the eyes. I couldn't read his expression. After a moment, he whispered, "Okay," and walked away.

Earlier that evening, on the way to my first night with the Lancers, I reached the corner of Michigan and Martin and could see The Circle across the avenue. My stomach cramped, flushing out a rush of anxiety, forcing me to turn

away from the green light that would've let me cross and instead I looked through the display windows of Zielinski's Appliance Store in the two-story red brick building at the corner. I could see Zenith televisions, a Magic Chef gas range with a fake baked turkey displayed in the open oven, and a Bendix washer/dryer combination with a crimson-colored box of Dash laundry detergent mounted on top--the detergent my mother used. But then, being so near to The Circle, I realized a Lancer might see me looking at home appliances and I quickly turned away crossing Michigan even though the light was red and I had to jockey my way through the traffic.

After Vee had faded into the shadows, I crossed Michigan Avenue. I could hear the sounds of bowling pins crashing and men cheering coming from the MichMar Lanes on the second floor above Zielinski's.

Bowling, a gathering of men only, a treasured respite from the women, the principle source of the emotional contest in the neighborhood, enclosed its own world. Teams in various leagues were pitted against one another. To intimidate the opposition team members made certain to have team shirts embellished with patterns of various colors and on the back the logo of the team sponsor, usually a local merchant or bank or small factory--an expense that for some businesses was a luxury but without which their team would not be permitted to join. Interleague rivalries matched the best against the best for the sought after prize the owner of the MichMar lanes held out as the goal--a three-foot high trophy with the winning team's name, its

sponsor's name, and the names of the team members etched around its metal base.

At MichMar, the men expressed themselves in ways they did not in any other environment--not on the street, not in their homes, not at work, and certainly not in church or at church sponsored events. Bowling was an urban hunt where the hunters focused on, pursued, dominated, and crushed their prey. Even though the overall team scores were not usually very far apart, every win was held over the loser and glorified weighing life itself hung in the balance.

Any individual score of 200 plus, and the most exalted, a perfect game of all strikes for a score of 300, which was rare, very rare because the men were not so skilled, any such score was chased with all the ferocity of emotion not permitted them in the rest of their daily lives. At the end of a game had anyone scored above 200 the entire team would rush to the cooler provided by the owner, pay for a round of beers and celebrate with raucous, hard, and sometimes painful backslapping.

The MichMar Lanes contained ten alleys and had been a kind of home for me when I was eleven. I joined a team in the Juniors league, no shirts needed, and worked myself up to a reliable 110 per game score--not the best but not the worst--and at twelve I worked as a pinsetter in the pit at the end of the lanes resetting the pins. I worked on Sunday mornings when most everyone else attended church.

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As an altar boy--a duty my mother insisted on--I volunteered to serve at the 5 a.m. Sunday mass so I could have my mornings free.

Two groups of people attended that early mass: those who were pious so that waking at dawn gave evidence of their devotion and for them the mass could not be too long nor too pious; and others who'd been awake all night carousing and wanted to fulfill their Catholic obligation and avoid the threat of mortal sin for missing Sunday mass. For them, the mass couldn't be over fast enough.

The carousers mocked the devout and the devout had contempt for the all-nighters and the tension between them could be felt through the unconcealed whispers from the devout about how "they're filthy, smell of whiskey, an insult to Jesus," and the farcical prayer-poses, stiff and absurdly proper, the all-nighters would strike to belittle what they called the "Assholes with tight assholes."

The priests, not wanting to lose either group, found a way to accommodate them. Without being obvious they sped through the mass, performing the ritual as quickly as possible: except for the passage of the Consecration, when the small, thin, round wafers are changed, transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ, and the Communion, when parishioners, mostly the pious, received the hosts into their mouths thus taking into their bodies and souls the Living Christ. That satisfied both sides: the pious felt respected and valued and the party people got out quickly to go home to sleep.

At the MichMar, starting at 10 a.m. and paid twenty cents a lane, on a good Sunday I could make \$1.20 before Noon, the limit to which the owner would permit me to work; a lot of money for an eleven-year-old.

I loved the name “MichMar.” It seemed to be upper class. I imagined if I went to Grosse Pointe, where the Henry Ford family--Edsel Ford and Henry Ford II--and the wealthy of Detroit lived I’d see names like MichMar. But going to Grosse Pointe was as far from my life as living there so I never got to see those *Angielski* names—*Angielski* is the Polish word my family used to describe the upper class. It simply meant “English,” or those English people, or more to the point, not Polish.

After Vee had disappeared into the night I turned the corner and headed up Martin Street toward my house, humidity coating my cheeks, the scent in the air forecasting the coming rain.

I thought about Vee and how he looked at me just before he walked away. He wanted something, something he couldn’t say. Whatever it was, I wanted to give it to him. I whispered, “I’ll do it for you, Vee,” and felt a flash of hope and value followed by a surprise: the stab in my side I’d felt in The Circle but this time much more demanding. I actually had to stop walking and stand for a moment, bent over to my left to ease the pain.

Talkin’ to yourself again? the Voice started up. *Some people’d call that crazy, you know, and they’d be right.*

I'd covered about a block on my way home when Our Lady Queen of Angels the cathedral-esque neighborhood church, a poor man's vision of hallowed grandeur, loomed on my left. It had been constructed five years earlier and scored the status of the premier church building in the diocese. In the darkness, the front of the building shapeshifted into a haunting almost forbidding face.

Two stained-glass windows at the third-story-level transformed into a set of piercing eyes. A four-foot wide round medallion just beneath and between the eyes jutted out in relief about eight inches from the brick wall and became the nose. Within the medallion, a mosaic image of Mary encircled by the words *Sancta Mater Conceptit Sine Peccatum Ora Pro Nobis*. I knew *Sancta Mater* meant Holy Mother and *Ora Pro Nobis* meant pray for us. I had no idea about the other three words. Beneath the medallion a dark double-door main entrance assumed the form of a gaping sinister mouth, simultaneously seductive and foul.

'Had it always been there?' I wondered.

Sure it has, the Voice broke in. It's the front wall of the church, for Christ's sake. Always been there. Do you think it showed up just for you?

My neighborhood, a Polish immigrant ghetto, provided safety for everyone to be out at night including kids so I had passed by the church in the dark many times but I had never seen that face. 'Why not?'

Why not, the Voice challenged me. Why not, it mocked me. In almost a whisper it asked, Why not?

I'd had my fill of being challenged for one night; Donny, the Voice, and now the church. "Just leave me alone," I whispered, "leave me alone." The church returned to its brick and mortar facade. The Voice went silent. I sighed and started toward home again.

The thought of home did not hold out much comfort but for some reason, I doubled my pace. 'How could home comfort me?' I thought, when my evening, except for the time with Vee, had been anything but comforting? But I kept up my pace anyway, almost falling forward as I moved.

Especially that prick Donny. He ruined it. Why?' I thought, more hurt than angry, expecting the Voice to fire more of its contempt. But it remained silent. 'Why?' I wondered. The Voice had always been relentless, particularly when I felt confused, when I didn't have answers or didn't know what to do. About a block away from the church I turned to look back. It was as it had always been. Normal. What I'd known. Just a building.

I lived on Mercier Street, in the house my grandparents owned and lived in for fifty years and my father moved into to live with my mother just after they were married. I still had six blocks to go.

Martin Street bordered our neighborhood on the east as Parkinson Street closed it in on the west. I knew the names of many of the people who lived along Martin but few of them personally. If they'd had a son or daughter in my grade level at Queen of Angles elementary school, I might

be invited in. Otherwise, the closeness of the community was circumstantial, an accident of the timing of their arrival at Ellis Island and the following journey to those areas of Detroit where they had connections with Polish people already settled in.

I turned onto Clayton Street, one block before Mercier, and used a shortcut through the alley that served as the garbage collection route between Clayton and Mercier. A mixture of garages and old barns lined the alleyway. As a holdover from the days when farms dominated the area, the barns were intriguing because of what I imagined they had contained--horses, wagons, mules maybe--and because I knew that for the farmers the barns had been almost sacred structures. Their homes possessed some value but their barns meant everything.

One afternoon the old man who owned the barn six lots west of our house let me in. Hand-hewn wide-slat wooden walls painted farm red, with powerful six-by-six beams supporting a vaulted ceiling, it had the same cathedral-like feel for me as Queen of Angels church plus it had the history I could only imagine. When he opened the door, I felt like I walked into the past.

A long-handled scythe, the kind I'd seen belonging to the Grim Reaper, hung on the wall beside a horse's yoke. An anvil like I'd seen in movie westerns used mostly for shoeing horses, stood next to an old 4x4 plank workbench with square wrought-iron nails scattered loosely across the top. A dung fork leaned against the far wall. Toward the

back of the barn, a large object covered by a piece of canvas filled the space. The owner asked me to help pull away the draped material. I was so intent on removing the cloth it wasn't until it fell to the floor behind the object that I saw an old cloth-top car.

"What is it?" the words leaped from my mouth.

"A 1915 Ford Model T coupe." Filled with pride, he might as well been describing his secret invention, a device that would allow everyone, or at least him, to fly.

"Does it run?" I hoped.

"Nope," the man said. "Dead for years." But that didn't dampen his enthusiasm.

I spent the afternoon with him listening to his stories as I continued to press him for more details which he gave with the delight and enthusiasm of Santa Claus.

Shortly after that, he died of a heart attack and, even though I repeatedly asked and finally begged, the new owners would never let me in again.

As I neared the back gate of our house, a typical three-story wood-frame structure painted white and trimmed in battleship gray, I could see a light shining in the closed-in porch my family had built onto the back of the house. My father demanded that we turn off lights when we were through with them so I wondered if he was on the porch. If so that would cause a problem.

Even though he smoked Camels, my father had forbidden me to smoke at all. Against his forbiddance, I did anyway

but only minimally, mostly for show, especially when I felt awkward among the boys my age, most of whom smoked regularly. I didn't want to be caught with the pack of Luckies in my corduroys so I waited for the light to go off.

I was supposed to be home no later than 9:30 p.m. and since it was my first night with the Lancers I didn't want to test my curfew. Being late or being caught with Luckies, I didn't know which would be worse. I walked through the gate and up to the back door, putting on as innocent and carefree as show as I could, watching for any sign of him on the porch. I could see through the glass door that he wasn't there. I quickly moved to one end of the closed porch under which my father had designed a storage bin for my mother's yard tools.

I kept a Maxwell House coffee can with a rubber snap-on top hidden in one corner of the bin where I stashed my cigarettes. It was too risky to hide them in the house so I had to wrap the pack with a large old cloth, stuff it into the can, snap on the rubber top, hide the can in a corner, and with another piece of soiled cloth to cover the can itself trusting the disguise would work.

The bin door was latched with a swivel hasp. Instead of a padlock my father ran a 4-inch 16-penny nail through the eye of the hasp to hold the door shut. All I had to do was slip the nail away and, with the slightest tug, the door swung open under its own weight. It normally made a scraping sound as the bottom dragged against the frame but I knew to lift it as it opened to keep it silent. When

hiding my Luckies, I had to be constantly on the watch for any movement on the still-lit back porch.

Once I'd closed the hasp with the nail, I went inside the house, assuming it must have been my mother who'd left the light on.

Entering the kitchen I could see my father at the far end of the dining room in his rose-beige Barcalounger watching television. In May that year, he'd purchased a 21-inch Philco TV in a mahogany cabinet which stood on four dowel legs. When he heard me, he looked up, not at me but past me to the clock on the wall above the kitchen table. I followed his gaze. The clock read 9:27. Without a sound, he went back to whatever he was watching.

"Where's Ma?" I asked.

"Downstairs," he muttered without looking away from the screen.

"What's she doing?"

"Go look."

It didn't really matter what my mother was doing, whatever it was I would likely not be interested. Instead, I toasted two pieces of rye bread, covered them with butter and strawberry jam, poured a cup of coffee from the pot my father constantly kept warm and sat at the table. I didn't like coffee but didn't want him to see me drinking milk, so I added more jam to counteract the bitterness of the coffee and began to eat.

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The first thought that came to mind was Donny. 'That shit. What had I done?' The jam only partially masked the bitterness of the coffee so I added more.

My father, who normally awoke at 5:50 to leave for work at 7:00, rose to turn off the television and came into the kitchen.

"I thought you didn't like coffee."

"It's okay."

"Since when the big change?"

I looked up at him. He seemed huge. Distant. Far away. I blinked.

"You like coffee now...since you started shaving?"

Several days before, he'd found me using his straight razor shaving for the first time. I had no beard to speak of and I hadn't anticipated being caught; but I foolishly left the bathroom door open, perhaps wanting to be seen. He said nothing. He didn't have to. His face said it all.

"I just like it," I managed.

"Yeah. I'll bet."

He unplugged the coffee pot, spilled the remaining coffee into the sink, washed the pot and re-stocked it with grounds in preparation for his early morning ritual. He stepped into our small bathroom and shut the door behind him. I could hear urine plunging loudly into the toilet bowl. I could do that too but I had to apply pressure. I wondered if he forced it.

JAMES SNIECHOWSKI

My mother came up from the basement. "Hi, Jimush." I had long given up asking her not to call me by that baby name.

"Mom."

"Just get home?"

"Yeah." When I closed the back door, I made no attempt to be quiet. Still she hadn't heard. "What were you doing down there?"

"Reading."

"What?"

"Gone With the Wind."

"Again? How many times you read that?"

"Three now."

"Why?"

"It makes me feel good."

After she had read it for the first time, I asked her, "What's it about?" She recounted the story in great detail, her eyes tearing up during the part when Rhett Butler, the role Clark Gable played in the movie, asked Scarlett, the woman who loved another man, to marry him. Toward the end of her re-telling, she seemed to drift off as if she saw something, or felt something, not in the room.

My father opened the door coming out in his blue boxer shorts and a cotton undershirt with straps over his bare shoulders. He looked at us for a moment and left the kitchen for their bedroom at the front of the house. My

mother followed him with her eyes and then she entered the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

It didn't take keen insight to see the distance between them. I felt sad for her. I understood her loneliness. I couldn't tell if my father liked us, liked me. Maybe he was lonely as well.

I tapped on the bathroom door. "I'm going to bed."

"Okay," my mother said. "Didya brush your teeth?" She hadn't stopped treating me like a child.

I hadn't. But if I said so she would insist and I had no interest. "Yeah, I did."

"Okay."

My bedroom, with enough space for a three drawer chest of drawers, a single bed, and a closet at the foot of the bed, placed me at the furthest distance from my parent's bedroom. I loved my small space at night. In the dark it became an entrance into a world away from the world, a portal beckoning my imagination toward another realm, a place of no resistance, without confusion, without compromise, a degree of freedom that existed nowhere else for me except maybe in the pit at MichMar. My space and mine alone.

I undressed and lay on top of the covers expecting I would soon be following the meandering path of thoughts and images I enjoyed--like watching a movie. But not this night. Donny's face would not be moved aside. Like in the lot at

The Circle, he kept challenging me, except this time I knew it was me who was imagining it.

“What the fuck you lookin’ at?” he sneered.

At first, I froze not knowing what to say. Even though I knew I was imagining the dialogue between us still, my mind went blank. I did think to say, ‘What’re you doing here?’ but where was *here*? At The Circle? In my head? Where?

Donny’s face kept repeating--“What the fuck you lookin’ at?” “What the fuck you lookin’ at?” “What the fuck you lookin’ at?” until his words became a blur, the sound progressively garbled—Whatta’fuckyoulookin’at?” “Whwhereoolookint?” “Whafuyoulint?”

The inside of my head felt like a whirlwind, spinning--fast, faster, FASTER. I opened my eyes thinking that would stop the spin but I just felt dizzy. I grabbed the sides of the bed, holding on but the spinning kept spinning until I roared in my head--‘I’M LOOKIN’ AT YOU.’

Suddenly, the spinning stopped. Donny’s face froze, his mouth open as if he was slugged in the throat. I lay motionless, startled by the power of my own response and shocked by the quiet.

‘I’m lookin’ at you,’ I thought. ‘Yeah. Right. All I did was look. He was in the dark. I wasn’t sure it was him. That’s all. It was hard to see him. That’s it. I couldn’t see. That’s all I did.’

Donny's face began to move. Not much. But he still looked right at me. I shifted my eyes but his face followed my gaze and there he was again. I could feel the tears I felt earlier and the Voice intruded...

Punk. That's what he called you right? Punk. Punk with tears.

I shut my eyes to get away from the derision, and for a moment, the blessed empty darkness returned. But only for a moment.

'You fuckin' deaf, punk?' Donny reared up again.

I flinched as I might've if I were being punched.

You don't know nuthin' about being punched or punching, do you? You don't know nuthin'.

"I don't know nuthin', okay," I whispered, tired and wanting it all to go away. With that confession, Donny faded away. My shoulders ached.

Whenever I felt down, sad, or depressed, just wanting to feel better, I would turn on the Regency TR-1 Four Transistor Pocket Radio I kept in my room. Small enough to hold in my hand I could place it next to my ear and listen without anyone knowing. The radio cost me fifty dollars which I paid for from my pinsetter job. A lot of money, but my Regency was more than a radio. It was a friend, a way to explore the world beyond the boundaries of my home and neighborhood.

I tuned into WCHB. They played mostly black blues music, what people in my neighborhood called "jungle music." When I was sad, and especially then, the blues made me

feel better. I felt a connection with the rhythm, a sense they were singing about me, about my life. The rock and roll side of the music was fun but I enjoyed the ballads and the blues the most.

I waited for songs like “Maybe” by the Chantels, “If I” by Nolan Strong and the Diablos, “Life Is But a Dream,” by the Harptones. The music had a pull, a deep yearning at the heart of it, a throb and pulse I felt deeply. When the men sang falsetto, there was such a sense of loss like they were crying. When the base parts were strong, I pictured an edge, like a shoreline, or fog, or the horizon. Out beyond the edge, something waited, something impossible to identify. It felt like heartbreak, relentless reaching. I’d feel tears in my eyes and amidst the tears, I felt like I was among friends.

All at once, lightning flashed turning my room stark white, followed by a welcome clap of thunder. I loved storm energy, crashing, clashing, and shaking the house. “Thank you,” I whispered. Then the rain fell. The intensity of the thunder coupled with the soft stroking sound of raindrops embraced me, soothed me, and rose up in me from my feet through my heart to my head. It settled me down.

Because of the storm, WCHB began to crackle. I tried to find just the right spot on the dial but the storm won out. I didn’t mind. I had to get up early the next morning to go to school, the Jesuit-run University of Detroit High School. I’d taken the entrance exam, a test Queen of Angels elementary school had no way to prepare me for, and passed, accepted

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into the top third of my freshman class. The morning would bring my first day of classes so it was best that I fall asleep, which I did in a matter of minutes.

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