John Michael Cummings

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Vandalia Press

MORGANTOWN 2011

To the memory of my brother Joe

Contents

The World Around Us

* * *

On our way back from town, Mom and I spotted Ernesto, the new artist in Harpers Ferry, walking along the highway. We shot past, and I begged her to stop. She looked at me as if for the life of her she couldn't understand me. Then, she took her foot off the gas and began signaling over.

"I don't know about this, Jason," she said.

I stuck my head out the window and peered back down the highway. Ernesto was trying to catch up, but the large sheets of paper he was carrying in the grip of one hand bent in the wind whenever he hurried. I told Mom to back the car up, but she said that was too dangerous to do on the shoulder.

He reached us at last.

"Jason?" he said, smiling.

He knew me from the streets of Harpers Ferry, where I was always following the artists around. Then he looked in at my mother, and I turned and watched her look at him for the first time.

He had difficulty fitting the large paper into the backseat, so my mother offered to open the trunk. But he solved the problem by bowing the paper until it fit between the seats. Then he

squeezed himself in to one side, and Mom pulled away as if we were now hauling something fragile.

Everyone was quiet at first. I looked back. He had that same warm smile and tanned face under white stubble.

"It is nice of you, Jason," he said, "to have your mother stop."

His accent. It always made me think of someplace far away, and that was strange, imagining a faraway place while in our old West Virginia car.

"Were you just back at Merrimack's?" my mother asked, glancing in the mirror.

I was turned around in the seat so that I could watch both him and Mom without moving.

He said he must confess that he did not know what "Merrimack's" was.

"Our office supply in town?"

"Yes, of course," he said, smiling.

I saw a gold tooth in the corner of his mouth. He said something else, but it was lost in the sound of air coming in the window.

Mom wound up her window a little.

"They have a nice selection there, don't they?" she said. "My son gets all his art supplies there."

"Yes, Jason likes art," he said. "That is very good, Jason. You must show me your work sometime."

I kept looking at him. His voice was full of strange, beautiful sounds.

"Jason has always had an interest in drawing," Mom said, speaking up toward the mirror as if it were a microphone attached to a speaker in the backseat. "He gets it from his father."

I looked over. Why did she have to say that?

"His father is an artist?" Ernesto asked.

"Well, no, not exactly. He painted some years ago, when he was younger."

I thought of my father, not so young any more, working this afternoon and every afternoon, doing nothing with his life.

"My father was also very talented," Ernesto said. "He made little statuettes out of alabaster."

"Oh, are you from Italy then?" Mom said.

"Yes, Florence."

"Oh, how beautiful."

"You have been there?"

"Oh no, but I've seen pictures."

For my mother, pictures were as good as the real thing. She had a coffee table book of Italian pottery, which included the pictures she was talking about.

"This," Ernesto said, looking out the car window at the hills outside Charles Town, "reminds me of the northern vineyards in Tuscany."

Mom let her foot off the gas. "*This?* Jefferson County?"

The only other time she let her foot off the gas was when she remembered something she had forgotten to get at the grocery store for Dad.

"There is a slight resemblance, yes," he said.

Mom looked sick—Jefferson County resembling the beautiful vineyards in some far-off land?

I was surprised she was acting this way. She always said how beautiful our county was and always talked about how awful it was that the National Park Service was taking over all the farmlands. I thought she would like hearing that our county was as beautiful as some far-off place. But she was looking in the mirror at Ernesto as if she didn't need to see the road anymore.

"I was surprised," he said, leaning forward so that we could

hear him, "to find out that they have no bus service in this region."

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Mom said back. Her face was full of questions. "Are you staying here in town?"

"Yes," he said, "at the Hill House. I am with a group of teachers from the Corcoran."

"Oh, the Corcoran Art Institute? I've certainly heard of that."

"Yes, well, we thought the hotel would provide shuttle service. Then, I was told it was only a few miles to that town." He laughed a little.

"Oh, no," Mom said, "Charles Town is too far to walk. It's a full eight miles."

She was embarrassing with her little facts. So what if it was eight miles? I looked out at the cornfields.

Actually, how far it was from Harpers Ferry to Charles Town had been a little matter of dispute in our family. The signs said eight, Dad said six, our speedometer said five, sometimes seven, but everyone else, including Grandma, thought it was at least ten. And for some reason, the county, when they made this new highway, didn't put in all the mile markers. So we settled on eight miles, since Mom couldn't imagine that the county would make such a mistake in math.

"You have been to the Corcoran?" Ernesto asked her.

"Oh, once," she said, "but long ago."

I looked over. "You did?"

"With my mother," she said, not to me but to Ernesto. "But that's been years."

"I was about to ask," he said, leaning forward some more, "do the school children in this region go into the city, to visit the museums?"

"Oh, no," Mom said back, as if he had just asked her something that around here no one ever questioned, like why the liquor stores weren't open on Sunday.

"But why not?" he asked.

Mom and I looked at each other.

"It seems a short drive to the city."

"Oh no," Mom said, "it's sixty-five miles."

That was something else in question. The sign at Harpers Ferry said sixty-five miles to Washington, D.C., but the one in Charles Town said seventy-six, which couldn't be right if it was eight miles from Harpers Ferry to Charles Town.

Once, we tried to check the distance between Harpers Ferry and Charles Town using Mom's wristwatch. My brother Andy knew from science class that when we were going sixty miles per hour, we were going a mile a minute. So we timed it and ended up with twelve minutes. But that wasn't really accurate either, because half the time Mom was afraid to go the full five mph over the speed limit, to say nothing of how many times she kept getting stuck behind slow cars. So we settled on sixty-five miles, just as we had settled on eight miles, because that's what the sign closest to Harpers Ferry said and because it was the easier number for everyone to remember, being exactly ten above the speed limit.

However many miles away the city was, it wasn't far. If you shut your eyes and counted, it was counting to sixty, sixty times. If you went by minutes, it was only a little more than an hour, and a little more than an hour was nothing, just "Bewitched" and "I Dream of Jeannie" back to back.

"Yes, I suppose it is a long drive," Ernesto said.

I looked over at Mom. "It's only an hour."

"Oh, Jason, it's longer than that," she said.

I gave her a quick glare. The city wasn't far for tourists or for anyone who wasn't afraid to drive to new places. Dad tried to say that the tires on our car were too old for long trips. But we could

have taken the Amtrak or the Greyhound out of Frederick to the city. It wasn't the old tires. It was us.

And as far as it taking "longer" to get to the city, Mom was thinking back to when the roads between here and there were all twisted up and narrow and you couldn't go fast or pass, when they all had double lines and "Road Narrows" signs everywhere.

Today, though, there were brand-new car bridges around town and a new highway all the way to Frederick, where there were even bigger roads that led to the city.

This highway we were on was new. Whenever we took it to the shopping mall in Frederick, we saw more and more signs for Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. Mom called it "the metropolitan area." There was a jumble of ramps and overpasses, everything crossing and crisscrossing, somehow coming together, then branching out in every direction. It terrified her.

I looked over at her, determined to win our little argument, even if there was somebody else in the car.

"Dr. Reynolds said it takes an hour," I said. He didn't really say this, but she didn't know.

"Well, he probably drives too fast," she said back.

"It takes Mr. Powell an hour," I said right back.

She gave me an impatient look. "Jason, I know it takes longer. Now stop."

It took Greg Lucas's father only an hour by Amtrak. A couple of times he even took a bus from Frederick, and that took even less time.

Mom looked in the mirror at Ernesto and said with that kind of smile that only made me madder: "I don't know where my son gets these ideas."

"It's twenty minutes to Frederick, Mom—you said so!"

I didn't mean to raise my voice. But she couldn't argue with

me about that. We had timed that, too. About twenty minutes for twenty-two miles, or a mile a minute.

She looked out at the roadway, at the dashes that passed us every millisecond.

"Well, I guess you're right," she said, "cause it's another forty miles or so beyond that."

Ernesto leaned forward and said in his thick, Italian voice, "As I understand it, the proximity of Harpers Ferry to Washington, D.C. was its value in the Civil War, and that led to the arsenal being erected there."

Mom didn't know what to say to this.

"What he means, Mom," I said, rolling my eyes, "is that it was always close."

She gave me a sharp look. But I ignored her, opened the glove box, and took out the Texaco map. I spread the map out on my lap, despite her telling me to put it away because the wind would just blow it around. I knew just where to find Harpers Ferry on it. It was written in italics, as *Harpers Ferry Historic National Park,* and was crowded in by places I had never heard of before, places apparently right beside me all my life. Cumberland Village. New Brighton. Kingston. Rt. 340 was nothing more than an itty-bitty blue line that went nowhere by itself. It ran into a zillion bigger blue and red lines that twisted around and met with other blue and red lines that came in from everywhere. According to this, the city was all around us. Washington, D.C. was half a pinky away, and the Atlantic Ocean was not much farther. We could see Baltimore, even Philadelphia. I couldn't believe all the thick roads. I-270, 495, 95 North. On and on. There was this huge, filled up world all around us that I couldn't see.

Mom went on looking straight ahead. We were coming up on the Harpers Ferry exit. Here the highway seemed especially wide

and sunny. I liked the feeling of the world coming through here. Around us were trucks from Virginia and Pennsylvania. I even saw a sports car with Delaware plates. Lying along the shoulders were burnt up, fallen-off mufflers and shreds of truck tires, stuff that made the highway seem like a racetrack every car and truck in America was on.

I turned around in the seat.

"What are you gonna draw?" I asked.

He looked at me as if it took a moment to bring his mind back from wherever it was.

"This is for a project I have planned, Jason. A drawing of the Lockwood House."

Mom changed her grip on the steering wheel. "I'm sorry you had to walk so far."

"Oh, I do not mind," Ernesto said. "The countryside here is so beautiful."

She looked up in the mirror. "You really think West Virginia looks like Tuscany?"

He smiled and nodded.

Two Tunes

* * *

My family felt the whole house tense up that morning Marty Howell pushed the front door all the way open just by knocking on it. The brick that had been behind the door, holding it slightly open so that smoke from the wood stove could clear out, slid off the step and clunked on the floor. Dad, half behind the door, half in front of it, trying to tuck in his shirt while holding a gun behind his back, had do a little dance to keep from having the brick tumble over on his toe.

Just like that, Marty was inside our house. He was probably the only man in town who could kick my father's ass. A few years back, he had taught karate up at the Jefferson Training Center on Wednesday nights. But in this situation, that didn't seem to matter. Nor did it matter that he was my history teacher at the junior high school, or that he was a park ranger in town in the evenings and on weekends, or that he was a local boy. No one came into our house. All of Harpers Ferry knew that. Dad's rule. Maybe Grandma Jennings came in, if we let her, but nobody else. Maybe Uncle Dave, too. Dad *had* to let him in, not because he was his brother, but because he had let him in from the start. That was the only way anyone got into our house, by having done it before.

Dad told us he didn't want anyone seeing his precious, restored guns. Word would get out to the wrong people, he said. But the real reason was he was ashamed of the house, of how small it was and especially of the condition of the kitchen, with its rotted plasterboard walls and wet-stained ceiling from a leak around the commode upstairs—problems he could have fixed if he had just put his mind to it, Mom said.

Our front porch had a real hillbilly look, too, but that in itself was never a problem. We had a maple tree out front to keep tourists from seeing the dirty plastic covering the windows, the white extension cord holding up the rain gutter, and the junk stacked everywhere. We had that tree to hide the heaps of ugly firewood thrown up on the porch and the Band-Aid tan paint Dad mixed from several leftover paints and used on the porch railing and window trim. We had that tree to cover the strange damp stain across the rock face of our house, a stain somehow caused by the moldy hillside behind us. We had that tree to cover up our dog Barfy, too—named for what he did best, running the flower bed bare, choking himself on his own chain, then throwing up. We had a tree for all this. One big tree.

What we didn't have was a way to cover up the raw sewage smell. Dad had put our sewage line in himself years ago, but he built it above ground, using plastic pipes that not only came apart when Barfy stepped on them but, when the sun shined on them, were see-through. If you were on our front porch when someone flushed the toilet, not only could you hear water flowing all around, but you could see gray shapes running through the pipes, especially around the elbows, where the stuff got slowed down. Sometimes we'd come outside and find the pipes knocked apart and blue Charmin tissue all over the ground and that smell in the

air. Whenever this happened, Mom threw down peat moss to try to cover everything up.

With Marty Howell in our house, I barely had enough time to scramble up the stairs and out of sight. My brothers were already waiting for me at the top.

"It ain't me this time," Andy, the oldest, whispered first. He looked at me, the youngest, then at Greg. "What'd you do, Greg?"

It was a kind of game we played when trouble was near, one of us blaming the other first, as if by being blamed and by the rules of the game, that person was guilty.

"It's not me," Greg said back.

No, it probably wasn't Greg. All he ever did was exactly what Dad told him, while showing an aptitude for everything Dad admired, from sharpening saw blades to identifying different kinds of trees.

Andy looked at me, his eyes widening. "Jason!"

I couldn't say it wasn't me because lately I had lost track of the things I had done wrong. But we didn't have much time to point fingers. Downstairs, Dad was going into his "personality routine." That's what we called it, when he tried to be all smiles and jokes. It was his disguise, his way to make himself seem happy when inside he was as ornery and twisted up as a piece of petrified hickory—twisted up from all those years working at the post office and living among tourists in Harpers Ferry.

He was talking loud, too. That was his way of alerting Mom to keep the kitchen door shut so that Marty couldn't see in.

When I began crawling down the stairs on my stomach like an alligator, Andy and Greg backed up. As I peered down into the living room, I saw Marty's tall body cramped down under our low ceiling. Every time he started talking, he'd stand up straight, and

when his ranger hat hit our ceiling, mashing down over his head, he'd duck down again.

He was the tallest ranger in Harpers Ferry, and we were the shortest family. We lived in an armory worker's house, which were known to be small, so small you could cross our living room in three, maybe four stretched-out steps. Our kitchen was half that size. Marty could cross in two at most. There was nothing else on the first floor, just these two small rooms stuck together, and a sticky old back door that, like the front door, popped like a can of vacuum-sealed peanuts whenever opened.

"Bill, all your blinds are drawn," Marty was saying, with an annoyed glance toward the ceiling, "I wasn't sure you were home."

Our blinds were always drawn. Marty knew that. He was just embarrassed for having lurched his long legs into our small house without being asked. He might have played in our backyard as a boy, but he had never been in our house before today. He knew better.

Dad picked up the brick and placed it out of the way. Then he gave the front door a shove, shutting it tight. In his other hand was his gun. Dad held it out for Marty to see. He clicked the safety on.

"Marty," he said, "you know how things have gotten down here. We've had damn tourists trying to walk right in on us."

He handed the gun to Marty by its grip, and Marty looked it over, impressed by the grooves and thick barrel.

"They come right up to our door," Dad went on, "thinking we're another shop. Why, just the other day, a damn fellow, I think he saw all my guns and figured this was a gun shop. Well, I grabbed my .45—that Army model right there—and I yelled, 'Here, get the hell out, you son-of-a-bitch, this is a private residence!'" He broke into his wheezing, pipe smoker's laugh. "You should have seen that bugger run!"