

Chapter 10: Operation Confusion

The next day, Monday, I awoke to one helluva storm. Hailstones the size of pingpong balls ricocheted off the cars in the lot. My muscles and bruises hurt less so dressing wasn't as torturous. Most of the chatter at the Redneck was whining about the Miracle of the previous evening and how the firemen didn't have the guts to hose down "those hifalutin niggers". They considered the firemen mutineers for disobeying their hero Bull Connor and even he caught some flak for that malarkey about not wanting to ruin the Negroes' Sunday dress clothes. Even these people knew that was bunk. Sunday they'd been disappointed they weren't allowed to beat up the Freedom Marchers, today it was the Miracle. It was always something with these people.

And this day would be another downer for them. One last bit of misinformation you might come across regarding the Sunday Miracle was that, after it, no dogs or hoses were used. That is simply not true, as will be seen. It was true, however, on Monday, which turned out to be a repeat of Thursday, the first day of what became known as The Children's Crusade. The kids marched out of the church straight up to the cops who sent them off to jail. It was all quite formalized. The big event of the afternoon was over and done within fifteen minutes. Comedian Dick Gregory in a shiny Italian suit led the first batch of kids out of the church, bantered with a big shot cop, was arrested and hauled off.

The weather was nasty, ninety degrees and muggy as hell. Bull Connor mopped his brow and grumbled a lot. Gone was the suit and tie. I'd heard he recently said "They'll know Bull Connor for many years in this world". Yeah, Adolf Hitler too. Gus

also told me Connor once said, “Ain’t gonna segregate no niggers and whites together in this town”. Sort of the asshole’s Yogi Berra.

There was a carnival atmosphere about today. The kids laughed and sang, their toothbrushes sticking out of shirt pockets. Some wore bathing suits, some shadowboxed with the cops and dogs. At one point a group was dancing and singing a freedom song to the tune of *The Old Gray Mare*. The people on the porches on 6th Avenue were swaying and singing *We Shall Overcome*. There were truckloads of sandwiches and snacks for the cops, firemen, and press. It was becoming routine. At the first sign of unruliness by the surrounding black adults a passel of ministers shooed the kids back into the church. Then one came out and announced, “It’s all over for today”. The paper the next morning had a front page story about a woman being rescued—from her bathtub where she’d gotten her toe stuck in the faucet. Ho hum. Another day at the park.

It started to rain again and Charlie and I ducked into his car. Pete, off somewhere nosing around, came running back, hopped in.

“We need to go to the fairgrounds,” he said. “It’s like a concentration camp there. Kids behind fences getting rained on.”

“Do you know where it is?” asked Charlie.

“No,” said Pete. “But I’m guessing they do.”

He pointed at the CBS truck pulling out.

By the time we got to the fairgrounds we were part of a long caravan. News trucks, cars, even a couple cabs. We all piled out. Some of us had rain gear, I did not. Well, I thought, this is why God invented towels.

Pete's description of the fairground wasn't far off. Tall chain link fence topped with a roll of razor-like barbed wire. The kids inside were in some sort of stockyard huddled together, shelterless, some holding scraps of newspaper over their heads. On this side of the fence a crowd of what I assumed must be parents were throwing blankets and bits of food and candy bars to the kids. Charlie and Pete were moving around snapping photos. I was soaking it all in, no pun intended.

Was this America, I found myself wondering. Auschwitz, Maidanek, Belsen, they were just eighteen years earlier, images were still fresh in the public mind. I found myself wondering what if the Nazis had had blacks—would it have been them being gassed in those camps rather than the Jews? Did American Jews catch a break with slavery? If American racists had their way where would they stop, where would they draw the line? Would they draw a line? We already saw the horrific things slave owners did to their own valuable property, and we'd already seen the mutilations and lynchings of the Jim Crow era. White people could do anything they wanted to black people and no jury in the southern states would convict them of anything. What if those people had control of the national government? What if those people made the laws? How different were American racists from German racists? Were American racists less murderous solely because it's all they could get away with?

Then there was a commotion. I turned, saw several newsmen, including Charley and Pete rushing to a car that had just pulled up. Pete dove into the crowd to carve out space for Charley, still hobbled by his bruised ankle. Out of the car stepped Martin Luther King and his wife Coretta. Both were immediately surrounded, but some burly men from the car were able to get them close enough to the fence so Coretta could toss a

few loaves of bread over it. After a bit, the Kings were hustled back into their car and left. I started walking along watching the parents and their kids.

Then, not six feet away, I saw Ophie and Gus talking to a teenaged boy through the fence. Gus held an umbrella, closed, down at his side. Cleon was getting drenched on one side of the fence, his parents on the other. Should I say hello? That somehow felt inappropriate, intrusive. I suddenly became acutely aware of my whiteness, and not just my whiteness—my not being of this family. I backed away, found Charley and Pete and we drove back to their hotel.

The dining room was full of newsmen. Reporters, photographers, and assorted hangers-on like me. Most were northerners, but even most of the southerners were sympathetic to the cause. There was a TV behind the bar, something I hadn't seen before, and we all gathered there every evening for the six o'clock news. Whenever a clip or story filed by one of the men in the room came on there was hooting and teasing. It seemed like the same thing every night. Dogs, dogs, dogs. Firemen with hoses, cops bullying. We saw the same cop get the same headlock on the same protester every night. Kids running in streets, in the park, away from the water. The scenes in the park seemed other worldly in black and white. The water enveloped and obscured and you'd see groups of three or four kids, grainy dark ghosts with attenuated limbs like those dancing Matisse cutouts fleeing, slipping, crawling, then either fading away if the water engulfed them further or taking full, 3-D shape if they emerged from the water back into the world.



At one point there was a scene where cops were dragging high school girls to a paddy wagon while a woman with a purse on her arm walks blithely by. This particular night Walter Cronkite said something about the Negroes wanting to be first class citizens and that set off a reporter from Montgomery.

“Does a first class citizen deliberately trespass on the property of others?” He asked the TV. “Does he force himself into the company of people who don’t want him? Does he try to attend services at churches where he knows he’s not welcome?”

A New York Times reporter everyone called Johnny Apple spoke up.

“Do you hear yourself?” he said. “Churches, Christian churches, where he’s not welcome? Jesus would be okay with that?”

“They’re not going to these churches to actually worship. They’re just going to cause trouble.”

“So you’re saying that if a Negro went to one of those churches and genuinely wanted to worship, he could?”

“But they’re not! They have their own churches where they can worship. The only reason to try to get into a white church is to try to embarrass the people there.”

“But what’s the embarrassing part? Blacks in the congregation, or whites refusing them admittance?”

“C’mon. You telling me they’re not out to cause trouble?”

“Of course they are. What you’re forgetting is they can only cause trouble because of the whites. Blacks go to a church in New York, no one even notices.”

“But that’s New York. We got laws here. Is a man a first class citizen when he defies the duly made laws? Or when he devotes his time to agitating others to violate laws?”

“Oh,” said a guy at another table. “You mean laws like the Fourteenth Amendment?”

“This Warren Court has misinterpreted that Amendment,” said Alabama.

“I see,” said Apple. “But that Plessy court interpreted it correctly I guess?”

“Look,” said Alabama. “I’m no shyster, I don’t wanna get into to all that. All I know is there are a lot of Negroes back in Montgomery and even here in Birmingham who are first class citizens. And the vast majority of them would be too if these outside troublemakers stayed out of it.”

As soon as he said “outside troublemakers” everyone started to laugh.

“Here we go,” someone shouted. “The outsiders!”

But Alabama kept going, trying to talk over the hooting.

“All their howling about being second class,” he said. “They ain’t even that much. They’re not interested in building a peaceful community, their bread and butter comes from roaming all over the county stirring up trouble.”

Charlie stood up.

“Well,” he said. “I’ve heard all this rabble rousing outsider BS before. I’m gonna go soak my ankle.”

“Yeah,” said Pete. “I’m done too. You need a ride?”

But the rain had stopped by then so I walked back to the motel so I could call Aunt Charlie on the way.

I did not like what I found when I got to the motel. Edgar, Trixie, and two younger guys were in the office—staring at me. They didn’t say anything or do anything. They just stared. Once I passed the office I had my back to them, and unlocking my door and opening it I didn’t turn around. But going in I snuck a peek. They were still staring at me. I stood inside the closed door for a few seconds. Had I been outed? Why should I be surprised? Ophie had told me that Trixie and Edgar had listened to my call with Aunt Charlie that first night. I tried to remember what had been said and couldn’t. But whatever it was it was the reason I had only called from phone booths since then. I moved to the window and eased the blind aside just a smidge. Edgar was still behind the desk in the office but Trixie and the younger guys were gone.

There was a note from Ophie under the mattress. Another precaution because of what the Hornsby’s knew about me. Make sure my photographer pal was downtown

tomorrow at noon. Around 19th and 2nd, I knew enough of Birmingham by now to know that was where the big department stores like Loveman's and Pizitz were.

I had two dreams that night—nagging, niggling, low-key nightmares. I had someone else's suitcase and was trying to find him to give it back. I was in a hotel and got into an elevator that started to go up, then went sideways to a separate wing. I went up some stairs into a room that led into another room and more stairs and more rooms that kept getting smaller and smaller until I hit a dead end in a room too small to turn around in. That one woke me up.

Toward morning there was a fish tank I had forgotten about and now it was not only coated with algae but most of the water had evaporated leaving only a few murky inches in which lurked a big-headed catfish with absurdly long whiskers and gaping mouth that looked out at me with bulging, doleful eyes. Then suddenly there were other fish as well, smaller tropical fish like guppies and angel fish but they were swimming to and fro in the air above the filthy water.

Leaving my room that morning I noticed a lot more cars and pickups, and a couple guys out and about, going into the office or sitting outside their rooms. I ate at the Redneck listening to the usual hogwash. I had just shoveled in some hash browns when I suddenly thought, "Fish out of water". Was my dream self telling me I was a fish out of water? And the suitcase. Someone else's baggage? Someone else's clothes? Was I headed for a dead end? I looked around. Yeah, I did not belong here. But no one here but the waitress paid me any mind. Back at the motel though...

When I got to the hotel, Charley and Pete headed over to the Gaston Motel where MLK was giving a press conference. I went to the courthouse for Cleon's hearing but it

was all over by the time I got there. Ophie and Cleon went past me without seeing me. They did not look cheerful. I figured I might as well check out what was going on.

The next defendant was Grosbeck Parham, age 15.

“I’m going to let you go,” said the Judge, a benign grandfatherly type if I ever saw one. Kind eyes, smile, white hair. “Your mother must have been mighty worried when she couldn’t find you. Why did you tell the officer you were 17? That’s why they put you in jail instead of bringing you here.”

“I said I was 15,” said the boy.

“Well, anyway,” said the judge. “I’m letting you go. By the way, you have an unusual name. Where did you get it?”

Grosbeck’s mother explained that his father had named him after a white man, Dr. Grosbeck Walsh who everyone seemed to have heard of. She said that Walsh had taken her husband in when orphaned and helped him get the education he needed to become a druggist.

“Now Grosbeck,” said the judge. “You know violence in the streets is not the answer to this. Just the other day Attorney General Kennedy said this problem ‘won’t be solved in the streets’. And I often think of what one of the founding fathers said: ‘There is no freedom without restraint’. Now I want you to go home and go back to school. Will you do that?”

Neither Grosbeck nor Mom had anything to say to that. Me, I wanted to smack that judge in the kisser with a chocolate cream pie.

Getting no reply, the judge asked Grosbeck, “Are you mad at me son?”

“Can I say something?” said Grosbeck.

“Anything you like,” said the judge.

“Well,” said Grosbeck. “You can say that about freedom because you’ve got your freedom. The Constitution says we’re all equal but Negroes are not equal.”

“But,” said the judge. “Your people have made great gains and they still are. It takes time.”

Oh brother.

“We’ve been waiting over a hundred years,” said Grosbeck.

“I’ve been to legal conferences,” said the judge. “Working there with Negro judges and attorneys. We were all equal there, not because the Constitution says so, but because we are equal in our profession.”

Huh? What the hell was he talking about?

“May I say something?” said Mom. “I don’t approve of street violence either. But after a civil rights meeting we did try to get in touch with city officials and they wouldn’t see us. And I know this, Judge—these younger people are not going to take what we took. If I’m going to spend my money in the stores, I think I should have the right to sit down and eat a sandwich in them.”

“Mrs. Parham,” said the judge. “What do you think of Booker T. Washington?”

“I think he was a fine man. But his day is past. The younger people won’t take what we did.”

“Well,” said the judge. “I expect we could talk all day about these things. I want you to go now, Grosbeck, and I still hope you’ll go back to school.”

Mom thanked the judge. Grosbeck did not. As they passed me I heard him mutter, “Thanks for nothing.”

Hooking up with Chaley and Pete I learned that King had said they'd keep going until they got what they wanted. No surprise there. Tuesday was to be a day of surprises, however, whether King knew it or not.

One guy who was certainly in for a surprise was Bull Connor. He was a stupid man, perhaps stupid enough to believe he was calling the shots, making the rules in this game with the blacks of Birmingham. After all, he had the cops, the billy clubs, the jails, dogs, and hoses. He was the one who decided where to blockade, he defined the perimeter within which the blacks were allowed. He thought.

But anyone paying attention would realize it was the blacks who decided key features like the start and end times of the demonstrations, the number of kids sent out at any one time, the intervals between successive waves of kids, and where those kids would come from. It was the blacks who started at 1 PM and ended around 3. It was the blacks who sent the kids out in chunks of fifty or fewer. It was the blacks who politely didn't send out the next batch until the cops had handled the last. And it was the blacks who decided the starting point was the 16th Street Baptist Church. Break any of those conventions and, well, things would be very different. So what would happen if the blacks broke all of them?

Charlie had been dubious about Ophie's message, but Pete pointed out that there would be plenty of time to get back to the park at 1 if it was a fizzle. So there we were in the white shopping district hanging around not seeing anything worth seeing. Or so we thought. We did see here and there small groups of black kids, just two or three at a time, and I did wonder about that. What were they doing here? Shouldn't they be either

in school or over at the church? But even so, it never occurred to me what was up. And then it was noon.

Suddenly there materialized seemingly out of nowhere hundreds of kids with signs and banners roaming around singing about freedom. Where the hell had they come from? Turned out it was those groups of two or three we'd seen, just waiting for go time to gather at cars driven my Movement moms, and get the placards and banners hidden in their trunks and back seats. And presto, as if by magic, the demonstration sprang up in the heart of the city's economic center.

As soon as the word got back to the cops and firemen caught flat-footed at the park they saddled up and headed downtown. And that's when a horde of over a thousand more kids poured out of the church and streamed around and through the cops, racing them to the target area. So Charley got his pictures. The kids flooded the zone as we say today, invading the white department stores, holding up traffic. It was chaos. The kids were like guerrillas or the waves on the beach. They would rush a target like a department store lunch counter, then abruptly veer off, and melt away to reorganize for another feint elsewhere. There seemed to be kids everywhere at once with cops chasing, trying vainly to herd them this way or that, trying to corral them, to contain them. Firemen would hurriedly hook their hoses up to hydrants only to find their targets now a block away. Traffic was at a standstill. Business was at a standstill. No sales were made that afternoon, no store turned a profit. It was a lesson to white Birmingham. We can bring this city to its knees any time we want. It amounted to a biracial boycott of the white shopping district since neither whites nor blacks would or

could go there to shop. And the threat of it happening again tomorrow or the next day promised to keep those shoppers at home.



The local papers typically referred to MLK as the mastermind of all this, but it was James Bevel behind the Children's Crusade, and it was Bevel and James Forman behind Operation Confusion. Not long after it started Forman found King at Room 30 of the Gaston Motel in pajamas and robe digging into a room service steak, apparently oblivious to the events.

The riot in the park started about 2:45. This was no longer the kids. Most of them had returned to the church by now. This was black adults who'd had enough and had been emboldened by the kids. Maybe courage is contagious. But more likely now they had much less to fear. For now the jails were full and they were much less likely to be

arrested, identified, and lose their jobs. Connor's white riot car drove up and down 16th Street, loud speaker blasting, cops chased people down alleys and beat them with their billy sticks. Firemen knifed people with their water. Connor himself could be seen rushing here and there screaming obscenities. "Get them damn niggers!" He shouted for more hoses, more dogs. Soon ministers came out of the church and circulated in the crowd imploring them to leave. One was shouting, "You're not helping the cause!" I wonder if that was really true, or if maybe this was exactly what the nation and in particular the administration needed to stir them into action.

As it was finally calming down, Fred Shuttlesworth was about to go down some stairs leading to the church basement when some firemen spotted him. One of them yelled, "Let's put some water on the Reverend", and they did, knocking him down the steps and slamming him against a wall. When Bull Connor heard Shuttlesworth had been taken away in an ambulance he said he wished it had been a hearse.

And then it was over. With the kids gone the black audience evaporated, the cops headed downtown where there were still small groups of kids roaming around trying to get arrested. Only the firemen remained, and they were doing the damndest thing. After blasting the church and any blacks they could find they started to pump out the flooded church basement. Fire Chief John Swindle, the guy who claimed on Sunday not to have heard Bull Connor scream for water, told a newsman, "We put the water in and we're going to get it out."

Charley, Pete, and I headed back to their hotel for dinner. We were just finishing our first sidecar when a waiter told me there was someone outside that needed to speak to me. It was Gus. He said that some rednecks at the White Motel had vandalized my car

and it was time I got the hell out of there. When I told Charley and Pete they insisted on driving me to the motel. Gus parked a block away—if he was recognized it would jeopardize Ophie’s position at the motel, which was as much about intelligence gathering as it was being the maid.

At first when we arrived there was no one around, except Edgar in the office. We parked next to my car. There were various obscenities painted all over it with the words “NIGGER LOVER” in large white letters all along both sides. We popped the hood to see if anything didn’t look right. Pete got down and examined underneath. Gradually, a crowd started to gather. Let me tell you, being glared at by about twenty men and women is unnerving. Charley decided he’d take their picture and started to get his camera out of his car, but Pete said to hold on a sec. These people had a history of attacking photographers and smashing their cameras. He said I should just get my things and get the fuck out of there. So the two of them stayed outside watching the mob watch them while I threw my belongings together.

As we were leaving, Charley and Pete in their car, me in mine, Trixie stood outside the office and blew me a kiss. I hadn’t stayed for the number of days I’d paid for but I wasn’t going to ask for a refund.

It’s funny. That was the last I saw of Charley and Pete. None of us had really thought about what was next, so we didn’t say goodbye. Of course, we didn’t know at the time that the demonstrations were over, that Operation Confusion had sealed the deal. The white powers-that-be finally understood who was running the show and came to an agreement. So they went back to their hotel while Gus and I went to his house. Where

else but in the black part of town, in Dynamite Hill, could you have a hearse with NIGGER LOVER painted all over it?

As soon as I got there I called Aunt Charlie. Leave now, she said. Get the hell out of Birmingham. But I couldn't go driving through the South with my car like this. Repaint it, she said. But how long would that take? And where would I stay in the meantime? Gus said I'd stay at his house and tomorrow we would paint over the graffiti. If all went well I'd be able to leave on Friday.

I didn't get to meet Cleon. He was having a sleepover with some of the kids he'd been in jail with.

We adults had much to talk about. Gus had been one of the drivers who had picked up nineteen New York rabbis at the airport that day.

"The local Jews aren't pleased," he said.

"I bet they aren't," said Ophie. "Might not be myself."

"You don't want help from the Jews?" I asked.

"Not what I meant," she said. "They're worried. They're okay when the Klan is focused on us, but now these New York guys are gonna remind them that there are Jews here too. So what I meant was if the shoe was on the other foot and the racists were focused on the Jews and nineteen Negro ministers stuck their noses in, I might not like that."

"But," said Gus. "I like to think we'd pitch in and support the Jews."

"Maybe," said Ophie. "Maybe not. Easy to talk brave, harder to be brave. Hell, we have Negroes right here that ain't supporting the demonstrations. For that very reason—

don't make a fuss, don't attract attention, don't rile 'em up. Gaston kinda like that. He was doing alright for himself, then along comes Martin and all them."

"He come around though," said Gus.

"Yeah," said Ophie. "After he saw the dogs and hoses."

"Some folks need to see it to believe it."

"Or see it to get past not wanting to believe it."

There was a knock on the door. Both Gus and Ophie looked at me. Then Gus went to a window and peeked out.

"Sarah," he said moving to the door.

A black woman in her forties came in, stopped dead at the sight of me.

"This here is AJ," said Ophie. "He's okay."

"Sarah lives a couple houses up," Gus told me.

"How's Annie?" said Ophie once Sarah sat down.

"Oh, that girl," said Sarah. "She's all ready to go again tomorrow. Just outta jail and fixing to go right back in."

Ophie tsked and Gus said, "Wow."

I couldn't tell if they were exasperated with Annie or proud of her. Maybe both.

"Five days," said Sarah. "With twenty other girls in a six by six room. Whenever the guards didn't like what they was doing, like when they talked to newsmen or sang, or even if they was just in a bad mood, they'd pour water on the floor so the girls couldn't sit down. Once Annie fainted and they dragged her outside and squirted her with a garden hose."

“They kept Cleon in the stockyard,” said Ophie. “And he smelled so bad when he come home I wanted to hose him down in the yard, but then I thought better of it.”

Gus laughed.

“Yeah,” he said. “Might get you a job with the fire department.”

The papers were always going on about how well the kids were being treated, getting plenty to eat, even getting seconds and thirds. It was downright mollicoddling, to hear them tell it. But Annie and others had even been put on bread and water for a day or two. Barbara Deming, a white activist arrested for marching with the kids, was thrown into a cell with some hard-boiled white women who were encouraged to beat her up, later said she could hear the girls in the Negro section singing and the guards and matrons shouting at them. Instead of getting beaten up Deming made friends with her cellmates, which she said was not hard to do since every one of them was sick or in trouble. Most were in for drunkenness, disorderly conduct, or prostitution—they were poor basically. Most of them needed medical attention which they were denied. Each would leave the jail sicker, poorer, and more desperate than when she entered.

Surprisingly, MLK had fared better during his stay, though on second thought, I guess that's not so surprising in view of his access to the national press. Even so, he wrote his Letter from Birmingham Jail on paper that had to be smuggled in and out. When one woman joked to Deming that she should be out there marching with the freedom marchers Deming told her that is exactly what she should be doing.

At some point the conversation turned to events that afternoon in Scratch Ankle. This was the black shopping district a couple blocks south of the park. It seems to have gotten its name from the itching welts left by the leg-irons used to bind workers in chain

gangs back in convict leasing days, something I knew about from my own family history. There was a shoe shine parlor run by a bootlegger named Rat Killer Barnett and his wife Mama Cat. It seems Rat Killer was arrested by city police, which was surprising since, in addition to providing free home grown booze to them and pimping for them, Rat Killer was an informant for Bull Connor and therefore untouchable. Until today. Did his arrest signify a change in the attitude of the police department toward Connor?

“And will Jennie Beal be next?” Said Sarah.

“She runs a cathouse down there,” Gus told me.

“Plenty of white customers too,” said Sarah.

“Only fully integrated place in Birmingham,” said Ophie laughing.

Then Sarah looked at me.

“You must belong to that hearse parked in the street,” she said.

“That reminds me,” said Gus. “You got any old paint?”

Between Gus and a couple neighbors we scrounged five cans of paint, none of them even half full. I hadn't thought much about the next day. I just sort of figured I'd hook up with Charley and Pete again, check out whatever was happening at the park or wherever the blacks went next, and take care of the car at some unspecified time.

As we were saying goodbye to Sarah, however, my plan for the next day was made for me. A police car crept up the street like a bad intention. It stopped next to my hearse. We couldn't see into its streetlight reflecting windows as it crouched there glistening like a giant slug for almost ten minutes.

“That's not good,” said Gus as it oozed away.

“No,” said Ophie. “Those cops probably know the clowns at the motel and will tell them you’re hiding in Dynamite Hill.”

“At this address,” I said.

They both looked at me. After a long moment Gus said, “We need to hide that car.”

And then that damn cop came creeping back down the street in the opposite direction. I ran out and made sure they saw me drive away. They did. They followed me, two headlights glaring at me in the rearview mirror. With no idea where to go or which way to turn I took the first big street and it ran into US 78, so I took that. Those headlights stayed with me. It wasn’t till I was a ways out of Birmingham that they turned away. I was now in a small Alabama town in a hearse with “NIGGER LOVER” painted on both sides. I parked behind a strip mall whose stores were closed, walked around front where there was a phone booth, and called Gus. He gave me an address back in Birmingham where we could hide the car while we repainted it. He met me there and drove me back to his house for the night. I slept on the couch in the living room and in the wee hours was awoken by lights playing on the ceiling. I started to get up.

“Don’t move,” said Gus from somewhere in the shadows. “It’s cops again.”

This time they had gotten out of their car and were peering in the front window. Fortunately, the couch faced away from the window so they couldn’t see me. Eventually they left and Gus said it should be okay now, but no way was I going back to sleep. I kept watch the rest of the night. Damn if I was gonna be the reason Ophie and Gus got bombed.

In the morning I could tell they both knew I hadn't slept. We loaded up Gus's car with the paint and drove to the hearse. We scraped the windows and windshield and had just enough paint to cover the graffiti on the body. We had to use all five colors and the old hearse looked like a botched job of camouflaging when we were done.

Gus said for me to come back with him but I wanted none of that.

"You shouldn't be driving after not sleeping last night," he said.

"And if I go back to your place it'll just make two nights without sleep," I said.

"Besides, I gotta get on US 11 and I can't drive across town to get there. Even tarted up like this the hearse is still recognizable. I'll have to circle around north of Birmingham then back south to get on 11. Once I manage that I'll stop for the night. Tell Ophie goodbye for me and thank her, and yourself, for all your help. I hope everything works out for Cleon."