The Long Way Home



By, A. Nancy Spider

INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows that the Ameriklan system is not about "freedom" or "justice" or "equality." Everyone knows the educational system is meant to teach us to hate having to actually learn the truth to help us become the best possible human being we are capable of becoming. Rather, it is about regimentation, buckling under, being force-fed lies about our history, our political and social reality, so that we will give up our innate yearnings to live a self-directed life of thrilling discovery and genuine growth.

A coercion-based monstrosity such as this is constructed to funnel people in specified directions – conforming to be an ignorant, self-loathing worker-drone, who only cares about personal and material acquisition, who self-censors their thinking and actions, so as not to disturb this carefully built house of lies and genocide. For the "ambitious" a more lucrative paycheck awaits them, if they are willing to become some sort of "professional" and help prop up this ugly beast, and of course, the third track of "gangsta" which are daily collected by the gestapo for their concentration camps – the largest such punishment industry ever concocted.

The last thing the gulag censor trolls and their paymasters want to see is *genuine* self-educated Trayvon Martins taking their lives into their own hands. For, once the key of truth is turned inside a seeking brain, all bets are off, as far as accepting a truncated, frustrating, vague life is concerned. A world of endless fascination and possibilities opens up - and it doesn't cost a dime!

Activists become usefully active. Writers begin to write their asses off, in such a way that cuts through all the skepticism and cynicism and starts busting through the calcified axions and synapses in their readers' brains. New, very real modern-day culture is unleashed. A whole new world, where people actually give a damn about themselves and those around them begins to take shape. Every morning of every day portends excitement and greatness – because it is an unfolding of a life that is purpose-driven by one's own morality. Others catch the infectious wonderment of a reality that is oh, so *real.* Whatcha gonna do on the planet, today?

Of course, your immediate family, will look distressed and vaguely fear for your safety and sanity. After all, you've barfed up the kool-aid, before its had a chance to somnambulize you into the desired stupor. But there are other comrades out there – and their numbers, throughout this tortured world, are growing by the second. These people will become the ones you rely upon, think about, want to be with, so that life can be fully lived, in the here and now. When things get tough, who do you think you will call upon?

One, two – *many* A. Nancy Spiders please! For, in literature, this is the wave of the future. The rejected, the despised, the feared and yes, the hooded, are the brilliant thinkers of today, who have crossed that fear line and have taken the inside of a Bic pen in hand with an actual purpose – to blow the lid off of this diseased society. It's not about sacrificing our hopes and dreams (our very *lives*) It's about standing up and representing. It's real life in real time. It's revolution. It's about self-respect! Solidarity!! Anarchy!!! @nthony

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by A. Nancy Spider

This is the story of my good friend, a good man who becomes a great one through surviving a hard life full of tragedy, and through the faith he finds, which transforms that tragedy into a triumph. He inspires me to this day. Thank you, my brother, for trusting me to tell your story.

-A.N.S., May 1st, 2013

Chapter One

Dawn broke over Carlisle Street, but you would never know it. The street was narrow between the buildings of the Hanover Acres Projects, and those buildings were on the slope of a high hill which cast its shadow on everything. Low rise buildings, made of sturdy brick, alive with generations of graffiti; the third oldest project in the country. Even at the height of the day, some part of this street was still in shadow, still night. But, night or day, Nat Turner Smith and his best fam Q-Man and all the brothers of the Acre Productions crew were on that street and at work, turning grams of crack from a hundred dollars to five or six or eight, depending on who slid by. Cars from close by, and cars from the far suburbs all knew Carlisle Street, knew it was the place to score.

Others from outside the hood came too, sometimes, Bloods and Kings into the territory of the Crips AP crew, and these were times when Nat and Q-Man had to fight. Sometimes it was a fair fight, man against man, knives flashed in duels by Kings or Bloods, face-to-face. Mostly, though, it was drive-bys—the coward Bloods (they called them "Slobs") picking off Crips from far off as their cars sped by, with rifles and revolvers. Nat at thirteen had already lost many homeys, many good brothers, to the hate of his enemies.

Mostly, Nat stayed in the hood, with the AP crew homeys by his side. But sometimes, he found himself a ways away from Carlisle Street, and he'd have to cut through the territories of the Kings or the Bloods. These were dangerous days, dangerous nights, and he'd have to cut through long detours through ruins of buildings and their rooftops, finding his way through tunnels and gangways and lonely alleys—through parking lots long abandoned, cracked pavement full of grass and poison weeds, empty baggies and syringes, dodging rats and stray, rabid dogs—over fences and barbed wire—taking the long way home. He held up Bloods at gunpoint, took their weed and money, he and Q-Man. And they'd caught shit from the Bloods in return. By fifteen Q had already been wounded twice in the same leg, and walked with a limp; and by thirteen, Nat had caught a gunshot to his shoulder, and a long scar from a switchblade on his face. Taking the long way home isn't easy; but sometimes, there's no other way back.

The Crips, and the AP crew of Carlisle Street especially, those seventy or eighty homeys who made up the crew, were Nat's only family. An outcast orphan of the street, Nat had lost his mom to a murderer in dark sunglasses when he was just ten years old. He never had brothers or sisters, and his dad was gone long before he could remember. He'd gone to juvi soon after losing his mom, losing his everything, for robbing a church yard sale of a handful of rings and bracelets. And there, he'd been jumped into the Crips, and met Q.

Q was older than Nat by two years, and was Nat's best fam. They hustled on Carlisle all day long, each selling grams of crack and staying high on weed and 40s,

dodging cops and Bloods who marauded through, ignoring hunger and the rain, trying to keep it together one more day. Just one more day. Every day, they tried for one day more. And the days passed, and the weeks and months and years, and they kept it together by luck or by God, or by some other kindnesses they could not name. But eventually, those things abandoned them, or so they thought; they were separated by pigs who took them from Carlisle Street, stuck them in a lock-up, and sent them away to prisons on opposite sides of the state. It seemed to Nat that he might never see Q-Man again.

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All Nat had in the joint were his memories. Memories of Q, of his other homeys, living large and living hard, times when the very street noise sang with promise, and the hustling had been good, and there was money in their pockets, forties in their hands and ladies in their arms. And there were times when things went bad, and they'd lost a brother to the enemy's bullets, or they themselves had been wounded, and some crippled for life. He still remembered them, those brave and down homeboys he'd never see again—Tank, a great guy who was big and walked with a limp, and got caught in a cross-fire senselessly; Mike King, who looked like he was going somewhere, good in school and great in sports, too—but ended up dead in an alley on Carlisle Street at fourteen years old; and Tall R, an artist on the mike and with the spray-can (were some of his murals still up in the hood now, years after he was shot—or did they paint them all over by now?)—murdered by a Slob's drive-by; yeah, all those fams were still in his blood, years and years later. He sometimes lay awake, cursing, sometimes quietly crying, thinking on the friends he'd lost. But Nat in the joint mostly focused on the good times, and the ladies that he'd known.

There was his first girl, Alicia. Damn she was fine! A couple years older than Nat, she was a little taller, too, her legs long and her hair braided into flowing, ebony perfection down her back. Her skin was a golden brown, her lips luscious and full. Her breasts were small but shapely, sexy as Nat gazed on them that first night he became a man with her, her nipples sharp and soft at once, melting with her grateful sighs in his lips.

Nat spent many nights on the cellblock lost in dreams of that first night, of Alicia, how she'd danced for him, stripping her clothes off slow, boots, stockings, skirt, top, bra, panties . . . as he'd sat there in the corner, his forty drained in his hands, all his clothes still on. The music pumped and boomed from far away in the darkness as Alicia laughed and told him he should strip for *her*, too—*it was only fair.* He'd laughed, dropped his forty to the floor, his pants dropped next, and did her with his jacket and hat still on—a quick release that left her wanting more. They danced some more like that, in the corner at the party, when a lot of people were already asleep, and eventually they were naked on the floor beside their clothes, Nat learning quickly the ways of women in the shape of Alicia, her smooth, long legs hugging him tight as he pumped into her, slow and fine, feeling every soft, wet, sweaty inch of her and swimming in her jasmine perfume. They fucked till the dawn, and Alicia laughed to think he was a virgin before. "Comes natural to you, Nat, baby," she smiled to him. "You're gonna make some girl real happy someday."

But Alicia was not that girl. Soon after touching her, tasting her, Nat got tired of her. She'd slept with half the guys in the AP crew! You can't have a slut like that for your lady! At least, that's what Nat told himself when he moved onto other girls, and forgot Alicia.

But he thought of her a lot now, on the cellblock at night. There was a magic in her dancing, a magic in her fucking, a magic in how she smiled when she said his name. Sometimes, you only appreciate someone when they're gone.

Another girl was on his mind a lot, too, those long nights on the cellblock, though he knew her not much longer than he'd known Alicia. Yolanda was her name. A thick girl of dark skin and a cold smile, her ass and tits were a dream. She'd dated guys in the Kings and the Bloods before, when she'd lived in their hoods; but she'd sworn off those boys, proudly cursing the Slobs, proudly wearing her White Sox hat, its meaning known to all: SLOBS ON EXECUTION. She always carried a knife, and was ready to fight for her life at any time, day or night. She hung with Nat and Q-Man, and sometimes hustled with them—a tough girl, despite her soft and luscious body. Nat respected her, even after he'd fucked her. But when she hit on Q, he dropped her. 5

She hung with them anyway for a time, and it was when Nat was with her that he'd gotten busted. Though not yet eighteen, he'd been sent up as an adult for something he did with Yolanda at his side. Now, the AP crew had a lot of power in their seventy or eighty sets of hands—power that came from the same places the police and the army got *their* power. They had shotguns and forty-fives, 9mm glocks, magnum pistols, P.38s, twin chrome .357 snub-noses and a dozen other styles of armament besides. But what Nat really liked best were the tasers. He had one on him when he and Yolanda suspected they were being set up. Two white men slid by, both middle-aged and square as hell, and in a voice like raw meat one of them said, "Yah got some *hard?*" Nat turned toward Yolanda, who nodded to him; then he pulled out the taser and stuck it in the guy's mouth!

The pig quaked and convulsed—the taser stuck in the back of his throat—while his partner reached for his gun and held it up to Nat's temple. Nat dared the moment a split second more before letting the bastard go—and running away as the gun shot after him! He ran with Yolanda up some flights of stairs in an abandoned project building on the block—cut through some secret passages they'd all tunneled between the derelict apartments years before—to find himself home free—with Yolanda at his side! They found half a bottle of Courvoisier somebody had left in the hideout sometime before, and they split it and a blunt Yolanda had rolled earlier. Then, they'd made love . . .

How could he have been so freaky—to fuck while the pigs were chasing him down—just minutes behind?! Whatever had gotten into him and Yolanda, it was the hottest fuck he'd ever had—with the spice of death mingling with her soft curves and her hard smile.

It was the last time he'd ever gotten laid; they grabbed him, Yolanda, Q-Man, and half the AP crew later on that same night . . .

Long nights Nat spent alone, no money for the commissary for a TV or a radio, hardly enough for cigarettes. But there were diversions, even so. One kindness he learned from the old heads during walks in the exercise yard was a time-honored tradition in the joint—something to keep you strong when forties and weed were denied you. He took an orange that they gave him at lunch or dinner, set it beside the packs of sugar that they gave away at breakfast time, and left it there for three days or so, until it began to rot slightly. He then cut up the rotting orange into slices, eighths, and put two in each of four empty baby powder containers, then dumped the sugar packets one after the other into the containers. Next, he used the fingers from a plastic glove that a prisoner/janitor hooked him up with, and—using one finger per bottle—he broke some pretzel sticks that they sold at the commissary into pieces after taking the salt off of the pretzels with his thumb-nail. For the next step, he filled each empty finger-slot from the glove with the de-salted pretzel sticks; one finger per bottle. Then he tied the finger of the glove into a knot, and slashed holes into the finger with his razor (approximately five slashes). After sitting this inside the empty baby powder container, he then took the orange juice that they gave out at breakfast, and filled the container up. (Approximately three-quarters of the bottle.) The commissary pretzels are used because they are 74% yeast, which is essential to fermenting. Finally, after screwing on the baby powder

container lids, he put them deep in his cell desk cupboard, using other cosmetics as a cover, stacking them in front of the baby powder containers. The longer you wait, Nat had been told, the longer it ferments, and the better it gets. But you can have a nice drink by ten days from this operation. Listen for the sizzling through the holes in the lids! 6

He spent good times talking to the guys on the cellblock, especially fellow Crips from the city he was from, drinking the hooch and sharing hits of the eighty dollar nickel bags the co's smuggled in and sold them. He found a few friends among the young bucks (as the young prisoners were called), and among the old heads, too. But then, there were the long, lonely nights in the cell, with strange sounds and the feeling of being watched, by co's or by the rats and the roaches—many eyes, many voices. It was enough to make a person buggy.

And Nat had already a history by now of being buggy. He'd been diagnosed mentally ill—paranoid schizophrenic with bipolar disorder, specifically, combined with prolonged post-traumatic stress disorder from which he'd never recovered, following seeing his mom get shot. As such, he was sentenced under the legal heading "guilty, but mentally ill," and was made to take pills once a day. Sometimes he took the pills, and felt better; sometimes he took them, and felt worse. And sometimes, he traded them to other prisoners for whatever was in their pill cup. Spending hours in the cell flying on thick coffee, then coming down with somebody else's valium was a great way to spend the day, and many days were spent that way. He'd tried every pill they put out there by the time his first year in the joint was up; but he still had years more to go.

Nat thought with a smile, and a shiver, of another lady he'd known—though he'd never count her with Alicia or Yolanda or any of the others he mused on in his cell. Shirl was a woman who had been more beautiful than all of them combined; it's just that it had been forty or fifty years since she'd been that way. A woman of more than seventy years, Shirl was when last Nat lived on Carlisle Street in the late 90s, someone who Nat and a few other neighborhood brothers hooked up with for her money. She'd call him up and give him seventy or a hundred dollars, and tell him to go get her a sandwich, or some milk from the store. And she'd never ask where the money besides the four or five bucks for the sandwich or the milk ever went. "Keep the change," she would say.

Nat would show up at some spot where his homeys were, and share out the cash. And they'd laugh, "Oh! You saw Shirl today, huh homey?"

And Nat would smile sheepish and say, "You don't know what I got to go through to get that bread, fam!"

And they didn't, because he never really told them . . .

Shirl had been fine, though, once; you could see it in the black-and-white photos she had up in her two-flat. It was the second thing Nat had noticed about her place when he'd paid her a visit after she'd seen him in the neighborhood and invited him over.

The first thing he noticed was her shotgun.

She always opened her door with the rifle in her hand—and had two pistols handy above the lintel of her door, too. Shirl was badass—especially for her age. Though that didn't make what Nat did for her any easier.

He thought of the black-and-white photos of her as he went down on her, and thought about how her pussy probably looked more or less the same as it did when Shirl used to go down to the Savoy and pick up sailors and jazz daddies during World War II in New York. She told him about "The Street"—52nd Street in the city, and all the clubs and bars that used to make that place the most poppin' place in the whole world (so Shirl told him). There were more jazz clubs and jazz bars on The Street than there were *people* on Carlisle Street, she'd giggle like a young, sexy girl—and Nat could see her beauty through the wrinkles and the grays that had grown up between it and the world over the last five decades. Places like the Savoy, the Onyx, the Club Carousel, the Three

Deuces, the Club Samoa, the Famous Door—each of these were a memory, a family of memories, years and years ago. Her hair in the photos was done up in a '40s style, something strangely contemporary, processed and sculpted. Her skin was an umber red so delicious you could almost see its rosy glow in the black-and-white photographs. And the clothes she wore were as hot as any era—hot as the tasseled, skinny flapper dresses of the 1920s that Shirl's own mom and aunties wore in the other photos—hot as the miniskirts her girls wore in the '60s—as hot, surely, as the skin-tight threads Alicia and Yolanda wore in the late '90s, when Nat had been captured and sent away. She told him things, in between kisses, things about life back then, stories of communist organizers in Harlem, the Double-V for Victory campaign and the beginning of the civil rights movement. She told him about racism and Jim Crow segregation, north and south, and how hard it was back then to be a man.

"It still is, Shirl," Nat said soberly.

And she told him he was right.

Nat enjoyed his friendship with the freaky old woman, and dealt with the gentle teasing of his homeys. They only teased him so far, considering they liked her money as much as he did. A couple of them also accepted Shirl's invitations to her two-flat, and did her the lucrative errands she asked them to do, and keep the change. It might have gone on a long time; but Shirl had a need for more than just a little sexual contact between her and the young men of Carlisle Street; she also seemed to need them to have contact with *each other,* too . . .

"Don't you want sometimes to hug your homeboys?" she asked Nat once, and then several times later. "How 'bout kissin' 'em?"

"No," Nat said. "Not really my style, Shirl, you know? Nothin' against anybody who does that, you know what I'm sayin'—but it just ain't *me.*"

"If you and some guy you know did that—I'd pay to see it."

And Nat kind of understood why she'd want that—the same reason he himself might like to see two girls going at it in a porno. Sure, he understood the idea that Shirl had; but that didn't make doing it any more palatable. He loved his homeys, sure—just not ***that*** way!

Still, Shirl's company was not so unpleasant, overall, and Nat spent many hours thinking of her, too, among the many wild women he'd known already by his eighteenth year in the world. He looked through the bars of his cell door through his mirror in his outstretched hand, to catch the corner of the clock that ticked steadily on the cellblock. He looked at the clock, and caught the time; then, he looked at himself, his reflection, getting older . . .

Chapter Two

All these thoughts, happy and funny and silly and sad, were companions for Nat on the lonely cellblock. They kept away the horror that sometimes visited, and could take over for whole nights. That vision, of the Man who'd killed his mother . . .

Tall, thick, strong, and young—but old, much older than Nat would ever be! His head shaved bald, his clothing loose and dark, his wraparound sunglasses hiding forever his eyes, his soul—that Man haunted Nat, and would not let him go. Sometimes, though his lips did not move, the eyeless man spoke:

"I killed her, boy—and soon, I'm comin' for ***you . . .***"

And Nat would see him out of the corner of his eye—following him. He seemed to be helping all his enemies.

One time in the exercise yard, a Blood came looking for him. He was armed with a shiv—a knife made of razor blades buried into the plastic of a toothbrush.

Nat faced him with his fists.

"Nigga—what's *wrong* wit' you?!" the Blood spat in a high, shrill voice —"Don't nobody in here fight a *fist*fight no more!"

And he went for him with his shiv!

The Blood sliced at Nat—catching him on the arm. It sliced clear through his prison shirt and gashed his skin. Emboldened, the Blood waved his shiv wildly—finally pressing toward Nat's neck!

But whether Nat was hopelessly old-fashioned and behind-the-times or not—his fists were sure—and so were his feet. He kicked the Blood in the rocks and twisted the shiv out of his hands—the thing bouncing away into the dirt, its razor blades flying out of its makeshift hilt. Nat got the Blood down in the dirt and pummeled him with his fists—his knuckles feeling strong and hard, as if he still had that fistful of rings he stole from that church, years and years ago . . .

Nat sat in an isolation cell. It had been darkened by the co's spraying some white spray-paint on the slot window of the metal door, and them putting a movable wall in front of the door, to block what light would have come in. This was "the hole," and he was locked in it for the next 30 days—along with the Blood who had started the fight with him. He could even tell where the Blood was on the cellblock—just a cell or two down from him, the ground floor to his third.

The darkness was the first discomfort, but it was not the last. When the co went through in the morning, he passed Nat's cell without sliding his breakfast tray through the pie-hole.

"Hey!" Nat shouted at the co as he swaggered away—"Hey, you goddamn motherfucker! Gimme my FOOD!!"

But the co did not return. And in the evening, the same thing happened—no food for dinner, either. He heard people shouting on the cellblock this time—and could make out what he thought might be the Blood who they had on lockdown, too—the same high, shrill, strident voice among the rest—shouting the same thing—"GIMME MY GODDAMN SUPPER MOTHERFUCKER!!!"

Nat couldn't believe his ears. The Blood's high, sharp voice was unmistakable. Nat might still not know his name, but his voice he thought then he'd always remember. What was the meaning of it? They'd skipped him, and they'd skipped the Blood, too? Side by side they were, in the dark hole . . .

Nat got up on the toilet, and banged on the vent.

"Blood!" he rasped—"Blood, man! Can you hear me?"

There was silence. Then:

"You that lousy Crab I came in here with! Motherfucker—'sthat you?"

"Yeah, man—it's me."

"Well, what the hell you want, nigga?"

"I wanna talk to ya."

"Why the hell you wan' talk to me? Ain't you done enough talkin' to me already, man?"

"They skipped you today, didn't they?"

"What you mean?!"

"They skipped you. For breakfast. And now again for dinner."

"How you know that?!"

"'Cause I got skipped, too."

There was silence again.

"They did that shit to *you*, too?"

"Yeah, man," Nat spat. "They skipped me *again!* I ain't had nothin' since yesterday's dinner!"

"Goddamn punk-ass pigs!"

"Listen, homey—"

"Man! I ain't your homey!"

"You fuckin' is now! You know why?"

"Why?! Tell me, dammit!"

"'Cause we both got the same feelin' in our guts, man—the same hunger."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, man! They starvin' us. To them pigs out there, you 'n' me the same. You dig? We gotta file a grievance."

"Man—fuck that! I don't wanna file no grievance with you!"

"You file, and I file. It's the only way, man. Otherwise, they'll just do it again!"

There was silence.

"C'mon, man!" Nat said. "What the hell you got to lose? We both on lockdown—they got the goddamn lights turned off on us—and they starvin' us out. I mean—"

"Fuck it, man. I don't wanna write up nothin'."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I don't want to!"

"Why not?! Man—!"

"'Cause I *can't!*"

"What ya mean, you can't?"

"I—I can't. I can't sign my name to nothin'. 'Cause I can't—I can't sign my name."

Now Nat was silent.

"You dig? You dig, Crip-man?! I can't *read,* man! Now, shut the fuck up and lemme get some sleep!"

More silence. A long silence. Nat, quietly, broke it.

"I can write it up."

"What you sayin'?!"

"I can—write it up, man. I'll get the form, and I'll fill it out for you. Then I'll send it over in my car and you can put your X on it. Hell, man, that X is about all any of us know for sure anyway."

There was a dry chuckle through the vent.

"You'd—you'd do that for me, man?"

The voice was small, disbelieving, like a child too old for Santa Claus being guaranteed a Christmas present after years without. A present, from a stranger.

"Imma do it for *us,* man. Imma do it for *both* of us."

"Why? Why, Crip-man?"

"Because—*Black man*—I want breakfast tomorrow!"

The chuckle through the vent was wild and free—gone the tension.

"Me, too! Me too. Yeah—yeah, *homey*—I believe you. . . ."

Nat demanded two grievance forms from the co the next morning.

"Why d'you need two, 5446?" the man spat, pale and hateful.

"'Cause I got more than one complaint," Nat said shortly.

"Well, what're they about?"

"You gonna deny me my right to the forms?"

The pale face stretched into a wide, crooked-tooth grin.

"Your *right* to a form? You got no such right, asshole! About all the rights you got is to a drink o' water every day—you want your drink o' water, boy? Here—here's to yer ***rights—!!"***

And the co spat at him.

"MotherFUCKER!!" Nat spat back—cursing the bastard as he swaggered

away.

For a time, that was that. But later on that day, Nat saw a white shirt—a lieutenant—wobbling down the cell block. He called out to him, with a mind to embarrass the co who'd spat at him.

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"Hey, lieutenant! Hey!"

"You got something to say, inmate?" the officious white shirt asked.

"Yeah. I need a grievance form—two of 'em."

"Didn't you get one from the co on this beat?"

"He didn't give it to me. After I demanded it. He denied me my rights!"

"Who's your officer?"

"Krainik. Art S. Krainik."

"Art Krainik? He's been here for twenty years, inmate."

"Well, he ain't done his job today!" somebody else laughed.

"He denied *me* a grievance, too!" another prisoner said.

"Me too!"

"And me!!"

The lieutenant took it into consideration. In a few minutes, so many grievance forms were passed out on the cell block that it might even have been possible to record all the violations of prisoners' rights there that day—*almost.*

Once Nat had his forms, he filled them both out, keeping one, and then passing the other one down to the Blood in the time-honored prisoner to prisoner way. He ripped a thread out of the stitching of his towel with his thumbnail, pulling it into the longest string he could manage. It broke after a while, so he just pulled out another one, and knotted them tight together. Eventually, he had a very long string—long enough to go down two tiers in the cellblock. He took an envelope that had been given him for the month (the allotment used to be 10 per month, but now it was only 8), as well as a staple from one of the letters he'd been given (they opened your mail, then stapled your letters back together again to reseal them). He poked a hole at either end of the envelope with the sharp end of the staple, then made a hook on one end with the staple. He pulled the long string through both holes, securing the envelope into what folks here called your car —or your cadillac. He used a request form, folded up, to give the envelope extra weight. Then, he lowered it through the notches between the metal planks of his floor, telling the Blood through the vent that he was about to send it down.

Slowly, he lowered it—having to go through a cell between them, hoping the prisoner there would leave the car unmolested. Finally, the Blood shouted through the vent that he got it, had signed it, and that it was cool to pull it back up.

All went okay for the few tens of seconds that the car was pulled up—until suddenly, the string pulled taut.

Had it got stuck on something? Shit! The whole thing'd be lost if that fucking string broke now!

But then, it came unglued from whatever had held it, and Nat brought it back up through the notch between the planks of the floor.

He found the Blood's form in the envelope, sealed up safe—with the Blood's scrawled signature—a little more than an X. Nat found the Blood's name was Ty Smith. The same master had inscribed his name into both of their families, so many years ago . . .

Ty's name was not the only thing Nat found out. Some other person's words were scrawled onto the car—the reason for that tension in the line earlier. Somebody had attached his message to the communique between third and first tier cells. The man in the cell between them . . .

The note read: Hello, young soldier! That's a good thing you did. You stand in solidarity against our common oppressor. You may have won an ally in the cell below

me. But you've definitely won an ally in the cell below you. Exercise with me, sometime. I am called Tokay. Long live the freedom fighters!

Nat knew of Tokay. He was an old head who had been on lockdown a long time, probably since the '70s. He described himself as a "freedom fighter," and there was a feeling among some that whatever charge they'd originally got him for, it was a frame-up. But Nat knew a little bit about those times, in the '60s and '70s, from tales he'd heard from his mom before she died, and from Shirl a little, later. It wasn't all just the riots that had burned the neighborhood around Hanover Acres back then. It was real community stuff, free breakfast programs for children and other poor folks, clothing drives, free clinics and even a free school or two. A lot of the folks Shirl's age and her kids' age remembered those times as tough times, but good times, too. A lot of hope back then. And even though Nat had never done anything "for the community" like that himself, he always had respect for the old heads in the joint who talked about it. They were never snitches. And they weren't afraid of nothing.

He came upon Tokay in the cages. As long as you were in lockdown, in the hole, you had to exercise in a row of cages. They had two cages spaced between Tokay and the rest, to try to isolate him, and they had to shout to be heard. Even from far away, Tokay's voice was distinct. A gravelly, deep voice, that buzzed a little, like some wise lizard or dragon.

"Hey there, young soldier!" Tokay called through the cages. "You wanna do some sit-ups with me—matchin' 'n' countin'?"

"Sure," Nat smiled, and got into position on the floor.

"I'll see you—old man!" some young buck called from the cage on the far side of Tokay. "You think you can match *me?!*"

"Just keep countin', young man," Tokay smiled easy, "and we'll see who lets up first."

"Well, ***shiiiiiiiiiiiiit!"*** spat the young buck, and he and Tokay started going at it. Nat kept up, too.

They counted the first hundred. Pulse pumping—air racing—scraping through nose and throat—Nat kept up through sheer determination—150—200—250—sweat breaking—pouring down his back and forehead—getting into his eyes. Meanwhile, the young buck and old Tokay were toe to toe—the young man beginning to curse—and old Tokay was just chuckling.

"Keep it up, young soldier!" he grinned tight as he fiercely pumped his body onward. "What number y'all at?"

"Three hundred!" Nat laughed as he stopped—"And I'm **through!"**

The brother who had challenged Tokay could not give up—the whole line of cages was eying them both now—the young man feeling a little like John Henry against the machine—lean, mean Tokay—chuckling "Keep up, now, son—you can gimme at least five hundred, can't ya?"

He could not. He sputtered into curses, seeming almost to cry as he quit. Tokay meantime kept it up for the whole hour—not stopping till he reached 1200!

"See y'all in the afternoon, soldiers!" Tokay laughed as the co's led them all away. "Y'all should take a long nap—you've earned it!"

That was the first time Nat met Tokay.

The second time, a few days later in the outside cages, Nat was lucky enough to be placed close to Tokay again. He thanked him for his note. But, he wondered what the old head was about.

"I'm a freedom fighter, young soldier," Tokay told him in his gravelly, smiling voice.

"What's that mean, man?"

"You already know. You've always known, young soldier."

"What you mean? *What* have I always known?"

"That you are at war. That all of us—in here, and out there—have been fighting a war for our very survival. We're born knowing that, in this country. Now look at me honestly, and tell me that you *don't* know that."

Nat looked at him.

"Yeah, man," he said after a moment. "Yeah, you right."

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Nat. Nat Turner Smith."

"A great name."

Nat laughed.

"Why you say that?"

"Do you know who 'Nat Turner' was, son?"

"He was . . . somebody from a long time ago."

"Yes. And he's right now, too—in each of our hearts. Nat Turner led a slave rebellion—one that spread far and wide."

"Yeah, but he died—didn't he? Like, he didn't end slavery, did he? Took the Civil War, and Lincoln, to do that."

"Ah, but soldier, there never would've been a Civil War without Nat Turner. And Denmark Vesey. And John Brown. And General Harriet Tubman. And hundreds, thousands, millions of other brave brothers and sisters who rose up against the whip. For three hundred years, there was a slave rebellion somewhere in America, averaging one every fourteen months. By the time of the Civil War, the white supremacist power structure was facing a crisis so bad they were *forced* to deal with slavery—all because the rebellions were getting more and more intense with every generation. And Lincoln? Brother, don't you know that he started out as an *appeaser* to the South and the Slaveocrats? That he was *forced* into being for abolition—and that his much-touted Emancipation Proclamation didn't free *anybody?* He once said: 'If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it.'"

"Oh yeah?" Nat said. "Get the fuck outta here!"

"Yes, young soldier. Lincoln also said: 'I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people. And inasmuch as they can not so live, while they do remain together, there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.'"

"No shit!" Nat said.

"That came to me from the People's History of the United States 1492-Present, by the historian Howard Zinn, an anarchist scholar of great learning who tells the history the Man don't want you to know. Keep in mind, soldier, that the Emancipation Proclamation never freed ***anybody!*** Lincoln had no power over the Southern states by then—and the four slavery-states that sided with the North—Tennessee, Kentucky, Delaware, and Maryland—all got to *keep their slaves*—till the very end of the War."

Nat had never heard of any of this. Tokay went on.

"Slavery is a state of mind, young soldier. It stopped existing when Nat Turner overthrew it, and his comrades ended their bondage by taking up arms. And it goes on to this day—in the hearts and minds of every man, every woman, every person who does not fight against it. It could go on in our hearts and minds, too—yours and mine—if we accept the domination of the oppressor. And it ends in our hearts and minds when we decide the part we will play in this war that is being waged against us."

"What part is that?"

"The part of the soldier—the part of the freedom fighter. When we stop fighting each other—brother versus brother—and begin to fight together, side by side, to free our community."

Nat laughed, a little nervously.

"Yeah, man," he said, "but we still here—ain't we? I mean, we still here in the joint. We still enslaved. What can we do—in *here?*"

Tokay grinned and laughed.

"Lots o' things! Hell yes! Lots of things, young brother. And you've already taken the first step—and I applaud you. You helped a man who you thought was your enemy. And now? Now, maybe he ain't your enemy. Because you're right about one thing: Nat Turner *was* killed. He was *betrayed.* By his own brother—his own comrade."

"A snitch?"

"That's right. A traitor. A poor, duped, foolish man who sold Nat Turner out for the master's pay. Thirty pieces of silver. Or maybe, just a better job on the master's plantation, a better bed to lay in after he slaved for him the rest of his life. We cannot fight against each other, young soldier. Solidarity is a necessity for our survival. Otherwise, we just helpin' tighten the lynchin' noose round *own own* neck."

Nat looked at him.

"All right. All right, Tokay. I'm down with that. But what else can we do—stuck in this shithouse?"

Tokay nodded, did a a few more sit-ups, then said, "Educate yourself. Begin to fight back against the war for your mind. Read the elders, the ancestors past, who've lived and died for us—who left their words to show us the way. And keep up with what people are writin' and sayin' now. Make up your mind, young soldier, that you'll never waste another day of your life without learnin' somethin'. Then the years you spend here can be your training, your schooling—so that, when you do get outta here, and go back to your community—you'll know what you must do."

Nat nodded.

"All right. Where do I start? What do I read?"

"Well, soldier, you can start anywhere—with anything that interests you. The oppressors have banned a lot of good books, you know. But an old head like me still owns quite a few. I could lend ya some things. But *treasure* them. They're more precious than gold in this wasteland we're in . . ."

And Nat promised that he would take good care of anything he was lent—and would return them when he was done.

"I know you're as good as your word, young soldier," Tokay said. "And when you return the books, we can talk about 'em. Would you like that?"

Nat laughed.

"Hell yes! Thank you, Tokay."

"Thank *you,* Nat Turner. You young men are what keep old men like me alive."

And with that he turned away, and did about three hundred more sit-ups before they had to go.

Chapter Three

Nat got books from Tokay, and also requested things of Tokay's suggestion from the prison library, and from the prisoners' resource list he got handed him by Tokay, coming from activists on the outside working with the red heart warrior's society, m.i.m. notes, the right on! paper from the new afrikan black panther party-prison chapter, south chicago abc zine distro, and other groups on the outside. There were political things, historical things, and spiritual things that you could request. His curiosity was as

boundless as an alien visitor from another world come to Earth for the first time—nothing of this new planet was beyond his appetite, his hunger to know everything he could. He began with history—any kind of history he could find—ranging from the ancient civilizations like Egypt to the history of America from colonial times to just a few decades ago. While reading history, he inevitably got into novels set in historical times, as a way of fleshing out the skeletons that history's facts and figures were building for him.

He read voraciously—sometimes two or three books a week! His reading was never really poor; he'd been interested in reading when he was a shorty back in grade school, and his mom used to read to him all the time before she died. But it was still something he had to work at at first, like a muscle that had to be exercised until the aches went away, and he'd become stronger—like his ability to keep up with Tokay's sit-ups and push-ups, which improved over time. In those first weeks after reading Tokay's books, he devoured Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, which poetically dramatized the way Black folks lived in the Old South, and in New York's Harlem in the 1930s; he read anything he could get his hands on by Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delany—all Black authors whose novels touched on history, but also incorporated fantasy and science fiction and stories of human relationships which were beautiful to read. He read writers like Daniel Goines, too, tough, urban novels, and tried Artemis Black for a more contemporary feel. But always he came back to history, reading about the beginnings of racism with writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon—great African writers of history and culture; as well as such writers as Howard Zinn and David Roediger—white writers, who nonetheless were right on about a lot of things. He read other classics, things like Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and his *Discourses on Livy*. And from there, he started branching off into histories of religion, science, and magic.

The magic was something he let himself get into gradually, like trudging up a steep hill; but then, when he got over a certain precipice, he rolled down the other side with a vengeance. He had been raised with a little bit of religion; his mother had been a pretty devout member of her church when he was a little child. But when the Man had killed her, and left him an orphan, Nat fell into a deep, dark place which a Christian writer he came across during his education called "the dark night of the soul." He really wrestled with the need for hope, faith, and love—and the despair his mother's death had caused him. He could not believe anymore—surely not in the God of his mother, who had let her die so brutally, so senselessly. And as Nat grew more mentally ill, and the madness took harsher and harsher forms, he felt more a victim of demons than any of the Christian mystics and saints he skimmed over during his years-long search for Truth.

He read many magical theorists, many magicians. Some of them included Eliphas Levi, who wrote a book called The History of Magic, and Henry Cornelius Agrippa, who wrote a compendium called Three Books of Occult Philosophy—over a thousand pages of knowledge, full of diagrams and illustrations. He studied the Knowledge Lectures of the Order of the Golden Dawn, and The Secret Teachings Of All Ages by Manly P. Hall. He found Madame Blavatsky's work to be very learned and thought she'd been underestimated by the world's magicians. He liked Aleister Crowley's work before he left the Golden Dawn, but found his later work self-serving and egotistical, and more condemning of other magicians than liberating in itself. One quote he loved from Levi's book was, "All who are liberated from the miseries of material life come back no more to contemplate its crimes, or share its errors: once is truly enough." Something he learned from Hall: "To free a man, it is not enough to strike the shackles from his limbs—his mind must be liberated from bondage to his own ignorance."

It was at this time he came across a little pamphlet by a writer named Aurora Wozzeck, called Theometry: The Art of Weaving Angels. It was a small thing, hardly

more than twenty pages, which nonetheless became vital to Nat. It very clearly stated that gods and goddesses were indeed made up; but that did *not* stop them from being ***real.***

"Just like my voices and visions are real," Nat thought aloud one night in his cell, "to *me* . . ."

Just like the Man was real—and lived still, though his mother's murderer might well be dead by now. The Man was real because he lived in Nat's dreams, making them nightmares. And the stray voices he sometimes heard, buzzing round him like static, like feedback from an electric guitar amplifier—these were real, too. But Aurora the author said clearly that this was not the end of the story. Because, she wrote, in addition to voices we do not like, we can also weave voices into being who are our *friends* . . .

In the pamphlet, it spelled out how to do this. Get a piece of paper, and draw your ideal or imaginary friend. She can be a mother-figure, a goddess, a lover, or a friend—or any combination of these things. If you're a woman, it can be your male energy, just as if you're a man, it can grow from your feminine self. Of course, if you love or would rather befriend someone of the same sex, the pamphlet stated, it was fine to draw that out instead, if you're more comfortable with that. And the figure might not even be human; it could be an angel, or an animal-spirit, or even a plant or a mountain. Once you have your figure, though, work on it with all your ability, and then, if you can, work your sexual energy when you're alone to the point where you come—and when you come, focus all that energy into your friend's core. Then, taste the fluid that comes from your coming, swallowing the magic you've made, and share it with your picture with a little dot that you anoint it with, that you can kiss the figure with.

Don't worry about losing the picture; if somebody steals it from you, or it gets destroyed, you can always draw another one and do the same ritual again to "charge" it. She does not "live" in the picture; she lives in *you.* The magic of this friend is to help you fight against demons, those who hurt you inside. Nat thought long and hard over what friend, what goddess-lover he could make. *Knowing* he was making it up, yet still *believing* in her—*playfully,* like a little kid who plays with made-up characters from made-up stories, which can bring real comfort in a dark and haunted night. He knew from Aurora's little book that the friend could serve any purpose he might have, any need he might have. He decided his superhero friend/lover should be here to teach him—to be a gateway to the rest of himself, that he was still afraid to know. Now, all he had to do was find a figure he could consecrate to that purpose.

Nat could not really draw. But one of the pictures that inspired him was the cover of a book he had found through South Chicago ABC, called Chameleon's Morrow by a writer named Sid Prise. It was an epic fantasy book, full of dwarves and elves and dragons—a different sort of book than he'd ever read, recalling the works of J.R.R. Tolkien that was the basis for the Lord of the Rings movies. He found the book surprisingly real, surprisingly true to his life, even though it took place in a world that never was, a world called T'luria. T'luria felt real because, though its history had been full of dragons and fairies, it had developed into a world of gunpowder and high-speed trains—it had racism and capitalism and war and many other things which tortured worlds much closer to Nat's home. There was a character in it called Aurelia of Rasil'yon, and the cover of the book showed a painting of her, naked but for a snake that circled her and covered parts of her, but revealed her full breasts, her long, black hair, and her pristine, entrancing face. She was of a race Nat had never seen. Her skin was gray with a touch of green in it, her ears pointed sharp and high above her head; but like those green women from the old Star Trek series in the '60s who fucked Captain Kirk, this difference from human skin did not stop her from being hot as hell! Aurelia was beautiful, and Nat knew she would be a good model for his own drawing of his angel-lover, whom he traced one night from the cover of the book, and then embellished the

drawing till he had the woman of his dreams.

He dove into the book right away. It was not a book he might have picked up on his own, a fantasy book of elves and dwarves and dragons, empires and magic. But very soon, there were some very hot and powerful sex scenes, which gave him some solace, there alone in his cell. But soon also, there were tales of a goddess of revolution —a strangely named deity called "Pa'aan's'kyy." The races of this world fought more bitterly than the races of the world Nat was in. And their battles were more savage than anything Nat had known in the hood, on Carlisle Street. When an enemy killed you here, he raped your dead body, calling on his gods to haunt and your dead soul and follow it into Hell. And then, he cut off your head, and stuck it on the end of a sharp stick—so all your loved ones would see you that way when they returned to the place of battle.

Aurelia, through her long journey through the world, became other races than the elf she'd been as a girl. She became an orc for a time—a horrible, disgusting creature whom the elves viewed as their deadly enemies. She was forced to face her own elfin racism, and know that there were good orcs, despite their unlovely appearance and brutal culture. She became human, too, over her years, a woman of light brown skin and dark hair that might have been of a number of Earth "races," Southern European, African, Asian, or Latina—and briefly she even became an alien creature—a creature of madness of a race called "the Harrowers"—their appearance like the ghost of a jellyfish. The lesson the book taught was that all forms of racism were bullshit—if Aurelia could embrace something as strange as an orc, with their gray-green skin and long tusks coming out of their mouths—then, what was so very different about different kinds of humans, black or white, brown, red, or yellow? Aurelia faced rape and fought against it, defending others and herself—one time biting the dick off a rapist who was trying to make her give him head. She spat the dick out at the orc she'd thus crippled who was trying to rape her—and then cut off his head and stuck it at the end of his own sword—which she stuck through his maimed crotch with the dick stuffed in his mouth for all rapists to see! Nat was falling in love with this woman; even though he knew that, outside the pages of this book and his own dreams, she never really existed . . .

One night in his cell, Nat invited Aurelia to come to him. He made love to her with his hands and with himself, and came gradually to a place where visions could come. He shot himself with his mind focused on her body which he'd drawn, which he'd traced from the cover of the book. He didn't shoot himself into the rubber glove of his fifi—that wonderful construction of a sock wound tight and moistened with Vaseline attached to a rubber glove, where you could feel the pussy you desired and shoot into the glove so you could clean it up later; rather, he shot onto his hand—and then he tasted the fluid which came, just a little bit, and pictured her taking him in her mouth, to please him, to *liberate* him—herself then someone he could feel in his own mouth, his own body, *loving* him—and he pictured eating out her pussy in the same way as he built up his sexual force to shoot—and then, she became *real* for him, there in the night. Exhausted by the exercise, he wiped the rest of himself on a towel, and soon fell asleep.

And then, *he dreamed* . . .

She came to him, in the beautiful, wild forest where he dreamt. She smiled to him, and brought him into her arms and loved him. She said: "You will be free, Nat Turner Smith, one day soon. Soon, from this prison where you dream, you will be free; but also, from the prison the world has made of your mind—you'll be free from that prison one day soon, too."

"How?" Nat asked her in the dream. "How can I get free, inside and out?"

She smiled to him, a warrior who took his hand in comradeship. *"By loving me."*

And Nat did not understand. But she showed him things, then, books that had been saved from empires of hate—from their book-burnings and purges—and told them

that she would start to bring him the books he needed to read, and that she would talk to him about them, too. And she would, through her magic, let him meet the people he needed to meet to give him the education he would need to transcend the lies the powerful told, that they'd made their nation from, building upon those lies. Though they were in a magical forest in the dream, Aurelia showed Nat visions of other worlds, closer worlds, Earths that had come and gone in the long dream of history. Together, they fought shoulder to shoulder in the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, in Russia and China and Cuba and South Africa—their races changing, their bodies different in each dream—but their souls always the same. She said she would be his goddess of revolution, that she would take him with her on a journey to liberate all slaves from all times—and she showed him a vision of the future, some peaceful place that he should hold in his heart as a vision to inspire him through all the prisons he would ever travel through. A place on Earth, where there was no hate, where racism was forgotten, where prisons had been transformed into liberation schools, where no human being would be denied housing or health care or clothing or food, where the people of the Earth would live as brothers and sisters and be free of the police state which was trying to kill them all.

When Nat awoke, he saw the books Tokay had lent him, sitting in his cell. And they seemed to *glow* there on his shelf.

He opened one of them, a small, thin volume buried in the pile—as if Aurelia was pointing the way toward it. When he opened it, he found a poem there that spoke in an elder tongue of the English language—kind of how Aurelia and her elfin people spoke in sid's book chameleon's morrow. The poem was called anarchy and was by a man named john henry mckay. A strange word it was to Nat, the title; he'd never really seen it so clear, so simply put in print. After the word at the top, it read these lines about the word: ever accursed, accused, never understood—thou art the grisly terror of our age —'wreck of all order' cries the multitude—'art thou and war and murder's endless rage?' O let them cry. To those who ne'er have striven—the Truth that lies behind a word to find—to them the word's right meaning was not given—they shall continue blind among the blind. But thou, o word, so clear, so strong, so pure—thou sayest all which I for goal have taken—I give thee to the future, thine secure—when each, unto their own self, awaken. Comes it in sunshine? in the tempest's thrill?—I cannot tell—but it the earth shall see; I am an anarchist! wherefore I will not rule—and also ruled I will not be . . . Nat could hear Aurelia's elfin voice pronounce the words from back in the nineteenth century, using words like "wherefore," which he knew meant *why.* He looked at the last lines again. To be an anarchist was simply this: I will not rule; and also ruled I will not be. This resonated with Nat in a way that was difficult to explain, even to himself. It was almost like he was reading a lost book of the Bible.

The essay which followed the poem was by a woman named emma goldman and went on, speaking of the psychology of political violence, that is, violent actions taken by people for reasons of revolt. Emma told Nat in Aurelia's voice these words: I would say that resistance to tyranny is man's highest ideal. So long as tyranny exists, in whatever form, man's deepest aspiration must resist it as inevitably as man must breathe. Another book, by a man named peter kropotkin had many beautiful lines in it. Nat's favorite were these words: Struggle! For, to struggle is to live, and the fiercer the struggle, the intenser the life. Then you will have lived; and a few hours of such a life are worth years spent vegetating. Peter went on: the history of human thought recalls the swinging of a pendulum which takes centuries to swing. After a long period of slumber comes a period of awakening. Then thought frees herself from the chains with which those interested—rulers, lawyers, clerics—have carefully enwound her. She shatters the chains. She subjects to severe criticism all that has been taught her . . . These quotes all meant a lot to Nat, and he would memorize this and a hundred other such lines, pacing

his cell at night, or laying in his bunk, looking at his picture of Aurelia. What meant more was to know that these books were forbidden him, the authorities here banning them, denying him access to these wonderful words. Tokay's old head status, predating the banning of the books, allowed him to keep them, and to lend them to Nat. Otherwise, they came through underground channels, smuggled in. Nat could see Aurelia smile—from his picture, and in his dreams. She really was giving him what he needed, freeing him from the prison of his mind.

A book that he'd heard a lot about, first from Tokay, who as an old head imprisoned before the ban on the book, and now by Aurelia, who held her lamplight above it in his dreams like his own Statue of Liberty; a small pamphlet written by a man who'd been a prisoner for many years before he finally got free, a man named lorenzo kom'boa ervin, said things even more succinctly than the first books Nat looked at. On a mass scale, he said to Nat through the pages, I advocate the immediate formation of defense and survival skills study groups, under the guise of gun clubs, martial arts societies, wilderness survival clubs or whatever we need to call them. A thorough understanding of marksmanship, ammunition fabrication, demolition and weapon manufacturing is minimal for everyone. In addition we should study first aid pertaining to the rather traumatic injuries sustained from gunfire and explosives, combat communications, combat weapons, combat tactics for the small group, combat strategy for the region or nation, combat intelligence of police and military activities among other subjects. These subjects are indispensable if you are to live underground or during a general insurrection. Nat tore through this book, as all the books that circumstance and perhaps something more benevolent in the universe than mere chance had provided him; and he felt Aurelia there in the picture he'd drawn of her, smiling on him.

"We elves are hunters and gatherers," she said to him, singing through his mind, "but we are also singers and weavers and storytellers and scholars. Before the society of empire, before civilization, we lived our lives free in our forest; with my help —but with *yours* most of all—the human family can live this way once again . . ."

And Nat knew that he had had a vision. And he would keep his vision the rest of his life.

Ancient Egypt came again and again to him in his meanderings through readings of history and readings of magic. But one thing he never liked about it, though there was so much of glory in its civilization, was the power of the Pharaoh. Maybe it was some holdover of his once Christian faith, tales heard from his mother before she died, linking the slavery of the Israelites to the slavery of Black people in the New World. In any case, as he read more and more of these liberating things, he found himself more and more opposed to the Pharaoh, and all such kings.

But what he learned from Tokay, and from those places where he got literature on the outside, and from the dreams he nightly dreamt, making love to Aurelia, and then sitting there in her forest by a peaceful stream, talking to her, was that even the great civilization of Ancient Egypt was once made up of ordinary people, just like him, just like Aurelia and her elves; peaceful people, loving people, erudite and scholarly people who shared their stories and their food and their defense against overlords who might come out of the desert to harass them. And this led to more reading, which confirmed the path Nat was now treading: the path of Ma'at, the law of righteousness and justice and mental and physical health, which the Egyptians before the Pharaohs stood for and practiced with no police or army to hold them down. And again from lorenzo the words came: one of the biggest lies about anarchists is that they are mindless bomb throwers, cutthroats, and assassins. People spread these lies for their own reasons: governments, because they are afraid of being overthrown by social revolution, marxist leninists because it is a competing ideology within a totally different concept of social

organization and revolutionary struggle. Hearing these words from a man who'd been a prisoner just like Nat gave him faith that all the different visions he was having were connected: the belief in his own gods and angels that he might construct to guide him and be his friends despite his knowledge that it was he himself who made them up; the knowledge that his mythic elves like Aurelia lived a lot like real people had lived in times in the past, sharing their hunting and their gardening to live well in community; and the knowledge of a destiny Nat was beginning to feel in every breath he took, every beautiful thing he managed yet to see.

Everything around him was becoming a vision of goodness, and freedom.

Chapter Four

Nat thought about all the events of his life, how racism and sexism had fucked with him, had made him a prisoner—even before he'd been captured and kept in the joint. He remembered battles he would fight when a young man, not fourteen or fifteen years old in high school, when all the Latino kids and all the Black kids would gather in this one spot not far from Carlisle Street and throw down. Sometimes there'd be twenty on each side; sometimes there'd be forty or fifty. Nat fought for his homeys, who were being attacked by the Latino kids, and he slammed them with sticks and pipes and chains, and sometimes slashed at them with knives. Guns would shoot off, too, and young men on both sides were wounded. A few died. But always, afterwards, when his homeys and he were partying, recovering, the thought would go through Nat Turner's head: *Why?*

Why were poor folks fighting poor folks? What did he have against Puerto Ricans, or Mexicans, or any of the other nationalities of immigrants who were coming into his hood to throw down? Of course, he'd heard the bullshit from his fams: *We've been here for four hundred years—and look at **them!** They come here, and they take our jobs and our wealth—and they don't give nothin' back! And they don't even speak English, goddammit!*

But he saw now, with Aurelia, that there was always something like that motivating men. Some of those Latino guys were probably thinking—*Those fucking black bastards—they're no better than the white bastards who fuck with us—Fuck **them!***

And he started to see things that were bigger than his own life, his own skin, his own history. He started to see the world as if he were a gray-skinned elf from a faraway place like T'luria—dropped down into the mess of this Earth, and seeing everything without the comfortable truths he'd learned over his years. How different were they all from one another? How different they *all* were from *him*—when he was now (in his mind, in his fantasy) a gray-skinned alien from a faraway place?

It was a mental exercise, a playful dream that he played with now. But it was teaching him real things. Here, on the cell block, there were many kinds of people. There were Black people, and Latino people, and white people, and Indians, and even a few Asian folks. They got together in groups like the crips and the bloods and the kings and the ñetas, in religious affiliations like the Nation of Islam, and the Five-Percenters, and various kinds of Christians, and Pagan groups and Native groups. And where he'd been taught to distrust that with which he was unfamiliar, now he welcomed the different kinds; for none of them was as strange, surely, as an orc or an elf or a dragon! All of these people could be his brothers, and he saw that it wasn't what you *are*, but what you *do* that matters.

He began to cultivate friendships with men from all races, all creeds. One man he got to be good friends with on the cellblock was a deaf person, who was also white. His name was Jim. He told him in words spoken in a "deaf accent" about his life—forced by his parents to have implants put in his skull to force him to hear at the age of

eight. They actually *drilled holes* in his head!—and then attached devices in his inner ear that stuck on with magnets. People's voices never got beyond a buzzing sound, which meant that he still could not hear well—but the prison authorities, like his school authorities before him made him deal with life as if he had the ability of a hearing person —refusing to get him translation into sign. He knew a lot of signs, and made Nat laugh when the co's came through; for he had taught him the sign for "dirty pig," and he and Nat would exchange those signs across the tiers in the cellblock when they could see each other. Other people became friends. Nat learned to say "Asalaam alaikum" to Muslim prisoners, and "Blessed Be" to Pagans. He learned a little Spanish, too, and bonded with Mexican men and Puerto Ricans and other folks who came from Latin American countries. Over and over, Aurelia's lesson to him—that all racism, all division between people was bullshit—became the air he breathed. 20

With Aurelia's help, he began seeing visions of past thinkers, past activists, coming into his cell, in his dreams and in his daydreams. They weren't *really* there; but alone in his cell, they might as well have been. Nat knew there was a part of him that was crazy; but now, instead of being afraid of being crazy, he welcomed it. Because he was no longer afraid of himself—any part of himself. He even began to be able to look the Man in the eye.

One time, the Man came for him in a twilight sleep. He was big and frightening and hateful—and he spat hatreds at him and promised to kill him—or send others who would kill him. And, feeling Aurelia by his side, knowing she had his back—*he faced the Man!*

"Take your damn glasses off, fool!" he spat at the figure coming through the darkness. "You just a coward—hidin' behind them damn things!"

The Man stood still. He did not lunge at him. Nat Turner had fucked him up.

"Go on!" he taunted—"Take them damn glasses off!"

And while the Man stood there, losing his courage—*Nat jumped up and grabbed his wraparounds and pulled the motherfuckers off!!!*

And the face that stared at him then was a hollow space. Nat stared it down.

And in a moment, he was staring at the empty space above his toilet—just the plain cell wall. A mirror—a funny-shaped mirror from a clown circus, the standard issue of his cell. He looked at his own self, twisted, and changed.

He'd out-stared the Monster.

And Nat knew he would be free.

Chapter Five

While Nat was coming to peace in his mind and heart, finding a spirituality that was his own based in learning and love, many other men on the cellblock still lived lives of anger, and fear. Despite what he'd read, whom he'd talked to, and the love of Aurelia, newcomer to this world of Earth—the men around him were still in the thrall of racism and all its hatreds. Whether it was a gang fight, or just a racist killing, or some rivalry between the creeds of the prisoners on the cellblock, a man's throat was slit ear-to-ear one morning in the showers. Nat had not been there, and kept on getting different stories about it: one bunch of stories said the man had been Black, and the killer Mexican; but a whole bunch of other stories swore it was a Mexican throat that had been slit, and the hand holding the knife was a Black man's hand. By the next week, it almost didn't matter —because the reverse of this (either way) happened elsewhere in the prison—at least three dead men and more than one injured by the time the long hot summer had drifted into the chill of October. Two co's were walking down the cellblock in front of Nat's cell, later in those hard weeks and months, and were chatting it up. They laughed: "Shit! They wasn't one of ours!" The co's were one Black and the other Latino. It hit Nat

home. The prisoners, of all the races, were different from them; they were prisoners, and those guys could care less about them. 21

Maybe it was just the culmination of years now of building up his educational arsenal, his knowledge and his spiritual understanding, but all it took to push Nat over the edge was that chance comment by those co's. The faith he had in his goddess of love and liberation, even if he'd made it up himself, was real to him, now. And it was not just Aurelia he was thinking about. There was something bigger, *much* bigger than just one girl in his life, one spirit or guardian angel. It was something of a faith that writer had made up for his world, the religion of Pa'aan's'kyy. Even if Nat were the only person in the whole world who professed, who lived by this faith now, he was determined to put that faith into *action.* He began actively to pursue organizing outside of just his own head and his own cell; he began to turn his attention to all his fellow men on the cellblock.

He started by communicating—rapping into the vents in his cell about the politics he'd learned about, and all the readings he'd done. Sometimes he'd read to folks on the cellblock from his books and zines, particularly the banned ones that came in through underground channels, or that old heads like Tokay still owned. And he'd also plot things through the vents with others. Later, he took to deliberately getting himself put in the hole, working alongside a comrade or two. It would go like, "Hey man, let's spread the word about ____" and then pick a fight, gambling that a couple of them, a couple comrades, would be put in different blocks. So, if a comrade got put on C-block, and Nat would find himself on B-Block, they could spread the word about plans they had for protests, commissary strikes, or hunger strikes that they could wage against the powers that be, shouting through the different cellblock vents. He acted in support of an event he heard about called racial solidarity day, to be held on the tenth of October, all over the prison; he began to tell everybody about the hunger strike that other prisoners—folks he'd never met, but still they were his brothers, now, and sisters, too, in their prisons —were organizing. All over the state, and all over the country, men and women and all prisoners were supporting this day with a strike; communications between prisons was accomplished in a variety of ways, most notably by folks who were being shipped around between prisons telling the date to others in transport, or at hearings or trials when people would be herded like cattle between courtrooms and the holding cells—lots of whispers and notes were passed between them.

The message was simple. The group of anonymous comrades took the name 'the short corridor collective,' and they said that they were making a statement that calls for the cessation of all hostilities between groups to commence October 10th of this year, in all the state prisons and county jails. This meant that from this date on, all racial group hostilities need to be at an end. It also calls on prisoners throughout the state to set aside their differences and use diplomatic means to settle their disputes. This short corridor collective states if personal issues arise between individuals, people need to do all they can to exhaust all diplomatic means to settle such disputes; do not allow personal, individual issues to escalate into racial group issues. A great showing of solidarity was felt throughout the joint. Some seven-hundred prisoners of all races took part, out of a population of twenty-five hundred. And whether they participated in the hunger strike and the commissary strike or not, everyone observed the line of inter-group, interracial respect and avoided conflicts based on race. There were no fights in the joint that day, or in the days that followed. Of course, the co's did not take it all lying down; prisoner solidarity, the love and respect of men and women for each other irrespective of race or creed or gender was a love they could not abide. Better for the men and women of the world, and especially on the inside, to hate each other, to fight each other, to do the Man's dirty work and help in their own genocide, then for a God of Love to be reborn in the

world—a Goddess who Nat had a name for, but cared not if others had other names for Her, for Him. The faith was bigger than any one creed, any one race, any one language or understanding. It was a faith in the undeniable freedom of each person to determine their own destiny. And the forces of the enemy were intent on rooting it out and destroying it. And so, Nat was brought down and placed in solitary for his part in it all. And he was to remain in solitary for the next two and a half years.

Chapter Six

Nat had been in an isolation cell before. Even in the general population, owing to his status as Guilty But Mentally Ill, he was forbidden to have a cell mate; so he was always *somewhat* isolated. But after a fight he'd had once with a snitch that turned into an attack on the co who tried to break it up, Nat was kept on the OBS unit for 30 days.

The Observation Unit had been terrible. The floor crawled with rats, mice, and roaches. The only way off the floor was to lay on the concrete slab in the middle of the cell, the only place above it all. They gave you a smock to wear that was made of padded cloth and zipped up the front with a Velcro strip It had no sleeves, and only came down to your knees. Some people called it "the blue dress," but Nat himself referred to it as "the Barney Rubble." It offered no protection from cold or heat; in the summer, you swam in your sweat with it on, and in the winter you froze. When you had to use the can, you had to get permission—because the toilet seat was padlocked on. As you pissed or shit, you could almost watch the eyes of the co watching you through the camera blink as it stared right up in your face.

But this kind of isolation was different. They kept you in darkness not for hours, but for days and nights at a time, spraying that white dusty shit over your door's slab window, and further darkening it with that same damned movable wall they wheeled in front of your cell. The same as before, only *longer.*

But then, when the darkness was done, there was the strobe light. They kept it flashing for hours and hours and days and nights at a time, 24/7. At first, Nat felt like screaming! But then, he developed little games that helped him cope. He began to picture himself in a nightclub, with Aurelia by his side, and they would sit and talk and kiss and dance, ending the evening in a quiet alcove, the music cut but the lights still pumping, and they'd make afterhours love until they fell asleep. And then there was the puppet show—his hands making shapes that flickered and faded in the light. Between these two fantasies, Nat held himself together, and survived the strobe.

One thing a man can do is sleep. Along with eating, drinking, and taking the comforts of a toilet, it is something that will happen to you whether you like it or not—even in the intense hypnotic blaze of a strobe light left on forever. Just give it enough time. And two and a half years is a long enough time to sleep.

At first, it was terrifying, horrific, to be somewhere all alone, to be cut off from other people, to have food and water be denied you for you don't know how long, to be at the mercy of the cold or the heat and even to have the lights left on or turned off on you arbitrarily. But one place no army, no state has ever penetrated is a man's dreams. And Nat learned to take comfort in his dreams, teaching himself over many weeks how to dream them as he wished; how to dream lucidly.

At first it was a matter of documenting the dreams, recording them in his notebooks, as thoroughly and honestly as he could. This was what he did in week one of his exercise. When he'd begin to awaken from a dream, he tried to stay in it as long as possible—look around, try to note everything that was happening. Then, when at last he woke up fully, he wrote it down as accurately as he could—and title and date each dream. The notebook he used for this was sacred to him, and he made a rule for himself that no other kinds of notes could be written in it. He also got a special pen, that he always used

just for the purpose of recording dreams in his dream journal. He made a point of trying to recall each dream in detail, no matter how many times he went to sleep and dreamt that day or night.

In the second week, he repeated all these things, and added the practice of exactly *once a day*—no more, no less often—he would look at whatever was in front of him, and say, "I'm not awake—I'm dreaming." Then, as quickly as that, he blanked out his mind and forgot about it, going on with the rest of his waking day. In week three, he did the same things as the first two weeks, finding that he was recalling more and more of his dreams, writing them down in more and more detail. In the fourth week, he did exactly as he'd been doing, but instead of saying "I'm not awake—I'm dreaming," as he'd done in the second and third week, now he said the reverse: "I'm not dreaming—I'm awake." Again, as in the second and third week, this statement of the fourth week was followed by blanking the mind out completely and going on with the day. After five weeks of doing this, he began to incubate a lucid dream.

What an adventure it was! Armed with his own experience, and the zine he'd read before, Aurora Wozzeck's Theometry: The Art of Weaving Angels, he began "dream-weaving" the "dream-stuff" (the raw, psychic energy) that everyone had in their unconscious into solid forms, solid, magical entities—into friends like Aurelia. Now, Nat recalled how Aurora had talked about dream-weaving while you slept. After the fifth or sixth week of the lucid dreaming exercise, he could conjure Aurelia at will, and they would go on great adventures together, and make love in a million different ways—deep under the sea, in outer space, flying through the air over oceans or rain forests or mountaintops. They would become mythic creatures, dragons, dinosaurs, dolphins, angels, birds of prey and birds of paradise, and things even stranger—clouds, winds, the rain, suns and moons and stars. And they would *make love* this way . . .

The time flew by. He spent a good chunk of it sleeping. When he was awake, he was at the club, partying with emma goldman and peter kropotkin and huey newton and lorenzo and malcolm (he always just drank coffee), with aurelia on his arm, and sometimes when he got really high on the energy of the club, on the strobes and his thoughts, he entertained them with the movies he made with the shadows of his hands on the wall.

Then, there was little Edgar. Edgar, because he was little, and proper, and had little pink feet, like stockings. Edgar was a mouse who came racing in one night, his little face all cut up from fights with rats and other mice. The second he came running into the cell, he turned away from Nat and spent some minutes "standing guard" with his little eyes staring out the cell door. A scared little fellow he was.

"C'mon over here, little guy," Nat invited his guest closer. "I ain't gon' hurt ya. Here—have this potato—wasn't gon' eat it myself, anyway . . ."

And little Edgar ate the lion's share of the bland, cold baked potato like it was a T-Bone steak. Sometimes Nat could feed little Edgar right out of his hand. The little fellow kept Nat company for many weeks, months maybe. But he was not the only new person in his life.

Nat didn't remember when it was he first heard Juliette, but soon, she was speaking to him often. She sat next to him in his bed, always in the corner, by where he kept his fifi. He never *saw* her, as he sometimes saw Aurelia in daydreams when he closed his eyes. But he did *hear* her—in a voice clearer than the Man ever was. Her voice was more than musical—it was ***music itself.*** And she came to give him acceptance, to let him know he was as beautiful to her as she was to him. Aurelia would sit or lay on his other side, and they would talk about Juliette. And they'd sometimes have three-ways together.

Both ladies told him to be strong, to stay beautiful, and that he would be out soon. And they told him another woman was waiting for him on the outside.

"When you get away from here," they told him, "we'll take you to meet her. She'll be very much like you . . . a comrade you can fight right alongside for the rest of your revolutionary life."

And Nat prepared himself.

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They would have to left him out eventually.

And the world would be waiting.

Chapter Seven

Nat would never forget the day he got out of prison. Ten long years had gone by. It was mostly rainy that afternoon—but it seemed the sunniest day he'd ever seen! For a while, they didn't seem to understand that he was maxed out; at one point, they even tried to get him to go back to his cell. He refused to go—and then taunted the cos by yelling up at the cells in the tiers revolution, brothers! long live anarchy! and when the cos threatened him, he just laughed loudly and said Go ahead and write me up!—knowing that they couldn't anymore. He sat around on a couch in the office where the payphones were, and made his calls to old friends on the outside. The very first person he called was Q-Man. Prisoners aren't allowed to write to one another; so for the years he'd spent in jail that Q was also in jail, they'd had no contact. But just the month before, he'd gotten a letter from his old homey—saying that he'd gotten out! He was back in the old hood, trying to make another kind of life for himself, a bit away from Carlisle Street. He'd found a woman so wonderful that he'd just had to marry her. Twin babies were coming in the spring.

Man! There is no replacing old friends! There is no connection as strong as that between comrades—and Q was one of his oldest and best. Q had a new job, so he couldn't get time off to drive across the state it would take to get to Nat and pick him up. He sent him some money instead. With money that Q had sent him, Nat got on a bus, and headed straight for their old hometown and to Q's home, which promised to be the home he'd taken so long to come to, so long to find his way back to. It was small, but it had a little attic with a cot for Nat to crash at for as long as he needed, Q said. You maybe could get some kinda gig, Q told him, when you can, or just rest up until you could find your own place. Nat thought about it all the long day and night the bus took to get him back there.

Some guy started laughing at Nat when he was on the bus. After a while, it got annoying. He took off his earphones, and asked, polite but firm, "Excuse me, brother—but do you mind tellin' me why you're laughing? Is it at *me?*"

"Aw, sorry, brother," the young fellow said, "no offense meant. Just—you been inside a while, ain't ya?"

"Yeah. A while. How you know?"

"'Cause you listenin' to music out a *walkman!* Don't *nobody* listen to *tapes* no more, fam!"

And Nat laughed. Yeah, he thought. It *has* been a while . . .

On the way back to Q-Man's and Carlisle Street, Nat stopped off at a radical zine distro elsewhere in the city. The man who ran it out of his house was a big warrior of a man who had given him a lot of words to live by in the joint. He was a marxist, not an anarchist, but such distinctions were secondary at this point in the struggle, Nat felt. The warrior was a good man, and his zines were popular, all over the country and the world. They hugged and the warrior welcomed him home.

"So great to see ya, out and alive, comrade!" the big warrior smiled, and Nat laughed "Thanks, brother!" and hugged him again. "Now that I'm out, I wanna intensify my part in the struggle—maximize all the possibilities and opportunities that exist, now that I'm free."

"Well, man—if you're itchin' to do some work—here's a bunch! I'm behind man—months and months behind on responding to various prisoners' requests for literature. If you could just take the time to answer a few of these now—it'd really help."

"I'm on it, comrade!"

And Nat went to work. He answered a few letters, writing back, and finding the zines they requested in the big house the warrior lived at. Stacks and stacks, boxes and boxes, shelves on top of shelves—all in a loose but intelligible order, the zines were, and Nat took a while to find the requested ones, and put them in envelopes, stamping them, and sending them on their way.

On the seventh one, but an hour or so later, he stopped. For the normal catchphrases of revolutionary solidarity were somehow not appropriate. The woman who wrote the distro from a prison not far from where Nat had been locked down had such sensitive questions, such beautiful ideas, that Nat was forced to think a long time on how to respond. After a long while, he tried:

"Greetings, Eryka—my name is Nat. I'm helpin out with the zine distro that you have written. I will send you the marxist classics you requested—good to see you diggin the writings of radical thinkers! But, in addition, I will be sending you some anarchist classics, that you might find just as enlightening, if not more so. I am an anarchist, not a communist, and while I think that distinction is less important at this point in history than it has been in the past, I still need to offer you another vision for you to think about while you begin to explore the full spectrum of radical ideas. I trust my warrior friend here won't mind. I will be giving you some writings by people who helped me when I was in the joint, over these last years. They are from my personal collection, and I hope they will give you the same inspiration that they gave me. Yours, Nat Turner Smith."

Within a week, a letter came back from Eryka. Not to the big warrior's place, the distro—but to Nat's own crash-out place in Q-Man's building! She wrote warmly, thanking him for his words, and saying yes, she was more than interested in anarchism—and more than a little interested in him . . .

In the next weeks, Nat wrote her a lot, as he began to branch out into his own work in his neighborhood around Carlisle Street. The projects he'd lived in as a shorty was fighting against an attempt by the city to throw people out—and he soon met comrades whose writings had helped him a lot in the joint, and he formed real good relationships with them. He told Eryka all about it. Here is a letter Nat shared with his friend "Spider" that he sent to Eryka during the first months that he was out:

"Dear Eryka—Greetings of Solidarity! Thanks for your recent message as I've been thinking of you, too—wondering how you are, if the literature has been reaching you, and how you're feeling. I'm doing well (thanks for asking!) The last few days have been pretty much like a blur. Thursday night we had a really enthusiastic meeting in the projects. There were about 25 or 30 of us (I imagine us workin shoulder to shoulder together) Our next meeting is in two weeks & Imma make sure I fill my backpack with zines, organizational tactics for occupying the projects (which is 2/3rds vacant) My good comrade (she calls herself "Spider") and I went to a film on the next night—a revolutionary film on Albizu Campos (who many regard as the Malcolm X of Puerto Rico) which had a good turn out. It was a short but powerful film. One of the most motivating things about the Movement is its ethnic diversity against a common system & the dynamic force which has us who live on the margins linking in highly important and necessary ways. And you know when I speak of those of us who live on the margins of society, I'm referring to all of us—the oppressed, the exploited, the racially profiled & mass imprisoned. We outnumber the few in power inside and out so organizing the way we are is a living & righteous threat to class domination. In lorenzo kom'boa ervin's anarchism and the black revolution, he appropriately points out 'besides the refusal to pay

the slumlords and exploitative banks and property management companies, there should be a campaign of urban squatting to just take over any abandoned housing owned by an absentee landlord or even a boarded-up city housing project' (Imma see if I can slip you a copy—it's a modern classic). Lorenzo kom'boa ervin & I have done a workshop together at a conference here in my hometown & protested the Klan in Memphis together—he regards me as his revolutionary nephew & I call him my revolutionary unc! He's real solid & it'd be cool if I introduced you to him & his wife (Sista Jonina)—they work shoulder to shoulder in the Movement together, too.

(Returning to your letter)

I think of you too (if you haven't noticed yet) Last night, I imagined us walkin together by the lake, holding hands . . . entertaining thoughts that align themselves in our romantic adventure (kissing some more . . .) It's really interesting just to consider the mere fact that you're the only person I think of kissing & I've yet to see what you look like—maybe I've just had enough of superficiality . . ."

There are other things Nat said, but the Spider he told them to will leave it to the imagination of the friends and comrades out there who are reading his story, to fill in the details. Nat waits now for Eryka's release in the next two years, and they seem destined always to know one another . . .

In a dream he had later, Nat was with Aurelia beside a waterfall in the forest—and the waterfall sang with music that was Juliette. But they did not make love. Instead, Aurelia smiled to him, and kissed him, and reminded him of what she had told him years ago: she would free him from the prison he was in—both the one outside, and the one within. And she reminded him of what he had told her—what he intended for her to do for him when he created her out of his love: he wanted her to teach him—to be a gateway to the rest of himself, all that he was still afraid to know.

She had done this for him. And she and Juliette would always be there, blessing him, near or far. But now, Nat was ready for a real relationship with a fellow human being. Not an elf, not a fairy, not an ancestor or elder teacher. Not some trick or booty call he'd used and threw away when he was younger. Now, a comrade, a friend, an equal.

He was a grown man, now.
He was ready for Eryka.

Chapter Eight

Carlisle Street was much the same. Old buildings, shadows, drive-bys, garbage, laughter and welcome. One thing that was different now was that a lot of the projects were being emptied and condemned; it seemed the city wanted to "develop" the area. And when the city wanted to develop an area of poor folks, it was not for poor folks that it was to be developed. The radical spirit was in the air, though, in this new century. People were starting to think of resisting the move, and were banding together to fight.

So much potential was there on Carlisle Street. On the one hand, there were the old folks, the shorties, the moms and dads and church people and the old drunk granddads—the community of people who lived there, and had always lived there, the ones some people might call the "law-abiding citizens." And then, there was the AP crew, which was still in force, all these years later, even though so many had fallen, so many had been stolen and sent away to prisons or to the army. The law divided the first from the second, the "good" folk from the "gangsters." But why should they be

separate? The job of the second was to protect the first. And Nat saw the role the gangbangers could play in community organizing around this housing issue. They could be its armed wing.

Nat talked about this to Q one night when he was home from work and his pregnant wife was asleep downstairs. There in the attic, the two old fams talked, and it was like old times; but it was like new times, too. They sparked a blunt, and passed it between them.

"I learned a lotta things in there, fam," Nat told his old friend, taking a drag, holding it, then letting it go. "Things I think are gonna keep me outta there for life. Man, even if I get put back in there, I'll be free in *here*." He pointed between his eyes, and then down to his heart. "They ain't never gonna put me in a prison worser than the prison I was in before I got this hope I have. This love. This insight."

Q looked dubious, pinching his face and shaking his head.

"What's a matter, homey?" he asked. "You find Jesus in there, or somethin'?"

Nat smiled.

"Nah. Not that."

"Well, what then? *Islam?* You get all militant up in that joint, brotherman?"

Nat smiled and sipped his forty, handing the blunt back to Q.

"Nah. And, yeah. Wasn't no formal religion I learned in there. Hell, brother—wasn't really nothin' formal about any of it. But I have come to a faith of sorts—just, it's a faith in people—a faith in myself."

"What are you talkin' about, Natty?"

"I'm talkin' about the holiest cause I know. And what makes it better than all the other 'holy' causes is that it don't need no God-talk to make it happen. Of course, if you swing that way, there ain't nothin' wrong with talkin' about God—"

"Well, I *don't*. The old girl does—she wants to raise the kids all churchy like she been raised. And that's fine, I guess. But I don't wanna get involved in that stuff myself."

"You don't have to. All you got to do is realize that we are all in this together—the whole human race, whose fightin' oppression and the police state of the rich. They build prisons to lock us up—but as long as we locked up *inside our minds*—we're al*ready* in the joint!"

A smile crept across Q's face. He laughed out his hit.

"Aha!" he coughed. "I know what you got in there! You got a whole bunch o' *communism!* Ain't that right, man? You gone off and become a red!"

Nat laughed, accepting the blunt back.

"There are communists inside there, sure. And a lot of them are great comrades in the struggle. But what I'm talkin' about ain't communism at *all*. The rich and the police, the media, the whole governmental show—they want you to accept authority—*their* authority. The communists want you to overthrow all that—only to accept a *new* kind of authority—*communist* authority. Religious people in general—though not all the time—a lot of the churches and mosques out there—they want you to accept a *Higher* authority. You know what I'm talkin' about."

"Yeah, I do. Like the old girl thinks. I love her, and we agree to differ on that. She loves me, and we're both gonna love these kids. I guess I don't mind too much about some God's authority, as long as it's up to me to decide how to relate to Him for my*self*. Just, the problem I've always had was the *church's* authority—the *Preacher's* authority—becomes more holy than anybody's idea of God. 'Cept maybe the Preacher's."

They laughed and drank.

"All right, man," Q said after a while. "So, y'all ain't communist, and ya ain't a religious person—and you don't accept the Man's authority anymore either. So, what *do* you think makes sense? You seem to be talkin' like you against *all* authority."

"I am. I'm an anarchist, cuz."

He pinched his face and laughed.

"You *are* a red! My homey turned out a red. Goddamn! An anarchist!"

"Damn right, brother. There ain't no other thing to be."

Q pinched his face again, took a swig of his beer. He waved away the blunt, and Nat hung onto it a little longer. "But that can't work. I mean, how do we run our world without authority? You think that could really work?"

"Well, man, look around you. We live on our own, and do what we want to, as much as we can anyway. We smokin' this blunt, and drinkin' this beer—even though the cops wanna take that away from us. Carlisle Street can do perfectly well without the pigs harassin' us—and that's all the pigs have *ever* done—for hundreds of years."

"Yeah, but man—Carlisle Street ain't too pretty—with or with*out* the pigs. Left on our own—we killin' each other!"

"So, let's stop that. What you say? Ain't you had enough o' that kinda life?"

"Enough to last a lifetime. But what do you, uh—you *anarchists* want us all to do? Throw away our guns and just *love* one another—like some hippie cracker '60s song?"

"No, man. Not throw our guns away. *Use* them. For *our own* war."

Q took a long drag of the blunt, and thought.

"Sure, homey," he said. "Revolution. Like old Shirl used to talk to us about, right? You remember old Shirl, right?"

And he laughed, and Nat laughed, too, thinking about the crazy, freaky old lady, and all the times they'd had back then.

"Met a lotta old heads in the joint, though," Nat said, "old as Shirl, some of 'em. Old as my mom woulda been. They told me some great stories, and showed me some things I'm glad they shared. But revolution ain't just some dinosaur trip, man—some old-fashioned '60s thing: it's right now, between us: it's right now, in front o' ya. All you got to do is claim it. And then, bring the message to everybody 'round you."

"All right, Huey," smirked Q. "What's our first order of business, when you take over the neighborhood, huh?"

"I ain't takin' over. I ain't got no ten point program. I got a one-point program."

"Okay, let's hear it!"

"It's this: Each One, Teach One. Or, to put it better—my message to all y'all is: *FREE YOURSELF!*"

Q squinted at him again. But he did not shake his head.

"All right. I'm free, now. 'Least, I declare myself free. So, tell me Nat—what do I do now?"

"Starts at home, man. Starts right in front of ya. For instance, how's your mortgage doin'?"

"Ahhhh, it's shit man. It's a mortgage. Been livin' here less than a year, and we already owe more money than the damn place is worth!"

"Well, Q-Man, I bet you ain't the only one in this neighborhood who's in that boat. People in the projects are fightin' to stay in there. And there's plenty o' neighbors here who are in debt—debts that they can't possibly pay. And besides, ain't you never asked yourself—***Who am I paying, anyway?*** The banks are so big, even a lotta countries in the world can't stop 'em from doin' what they want. They're faceless corporations, living on debt and, if you dig a little deeper, the same ones are also making money offa prisons—meanwhile bankrupting our schools and keeping people outta work and helping this drug economy get stronger and stronger—and buyin' out all the politicians, to make sure more laws get passed to criminalize every damn thing we do. And let's not forget the goddamn war—which only exists to make sure enough people around the world hate

us so that there'll be *more* wars."

"Hold up, Nat. What's this got to do with my mortgage?"

"The money they're demanding from you is money that you put in the policeman's pocket, the prison warden's pocket, the war machine's pocket. So, why give them a damn thing?"

"Because—because you *got* to! What kinda nonsense are you talkin' about, man?!"

"You got to, if you obey *their* law. But if you get together with other people, here in the neighborhood, and all around the city—you can defend them, and they can defend you, against any sheriff who wants to kick you out your home."

"Why would they do that for me?"

"Because, you'd do it for them. It's called Mutual Aid, man—it's one of the guiding principles of anarchism—of human freedom. And community freedom. We got to stop looking at each other as competitors, as strangers—and look to our neighbors as comrades, as friends and family. Only then will we be *strong* enough to defy the pig state."

Q squinted and looked down.

"I dunno, man," he said. "I mean—hell! Ain't half of these houses even *lived in* anymore! It's too *late* to get them folks to fight their mortgages or whatever—the houses are all vacant, left to rot!"

Nat smiled, in certainty.

"Well, brother—there you are. There's so many homeless people; but there's even more empty homes. We get people to resist their mortgages, or defend them against foreclosure and eviction when that happens—and meanwhile, other folks should move into them abandoned properties, and take 'em over."

"Is that—is that what you're gonna do?"

"That's right, man. I met some folks over these last weeks who need a place, a 'squat' some people call it, an occupied or liberated space, others might say. And pretty soon, we're all gonna get together and take over a building—maybe one around here. All these young Crips in the old AP crew need a home—you remember what it was like when we didn't have no place, and had to sleep just anywhere? Well, some of them same folks are gonna get together with me soon to take over a building, so we don't have to sleep in the cold no more."

"But what about pigs comin' to fuck with y'all? What about Bloods or Kings doin' the same?"

"Any crew we get will be a safe zone from the violence. Anybody who needs a place will be welcome."

"Even the Slobs?"

"Even the brothers who've been Bloods, yeah."

"Man! Don't you remember what those bastards did to us?! For years we've been fighting them! You can't just forget all that! What about Tank?! And Mike and R?! You gonna forget them?!"

"Naw, man. I ain't forgettin' nothin'. But I'll tell you this: if we keep killin' each other, those homeys we had will have *died* for nothin'! We gotta build peace. We gotta build community. Or we might as well just turn them guns on our own goddamn heads!"

Q squinted, shook his head, then looked down. Then he nodded, slowly, taking the last puff of the blunt.

"Well what about the 'authorities,' as they say, homey? You gonna let the pigs chase you out?"

Nat smiled, sipped the last of his forty, then set the empty bottle gently on the

table.

"That's why we ain't a hippie song, Q-Man. We more a Panther song. Power to the People is as good a tune now as it was then. Like that song say, 'time to pick up the gun.'"

"All right. All right, Nat, man. I see you are committed to this new line o' work that you into. This activist kinda gig. I wish you good luck in that profession. As for me, I got kids to raise soon."

"I might someday, too, homey. Or maybe I'll just stick around and be an uncle to yours. But in any case, it's for them—for *their lives*, in the future—that I want to bring about this better world."

Q finished his bottle, then clinked the empty glass against Nat's, setting it down beside.

"We'll keep talkin'," he said. "Just, right now, I got to get to bed. Work tomorrow. And I still gots me some lovin' left to do with the old girl, if she awake."

Nat laughed.

"Good night, my man." 30

"Good night, brother. Welcome back."

And that was all they said that night.

Chapter Nine

Nat threw himself into his work. Carlisle Street was poppin'—violence on the rise in the community, among the gangsters on the long blocks between the buildings—but on the rise, too, was a real solution: solidarity. Using what he knew of the gangster life, he made arguments and convinced many homeys not to put their guns away, but to find different uses for them. A self-defense force for the community, rather than a force to prey on it and divide it. It was an uphill battle—and Nat struggles with it to this very day. But the war, like Tokay had told him in the joint, was being waged all the time, whether you liked it or not. The only way to make sense of your life was to become a freedom fighter.

Nat and his homeys and comrades put it together this way—as a manifesto of a group they started called the poor people's liberation front. Their mission statement and aims include six points, which are: one—the providing of free housing through expropriation of unused property, by squatting (homesteading) renovatable buildings. Two—the providing of free food for our communities through our serve the people survival programs. (Such as food not bombs; free breakfast for children; food deliveries to the elderly, and other similar programs.) A third point is the providing of free eduction, in the tradition of Francisco Ferrer and the Modern School Movement, education relating to our culture and not the pro-capitalist economics and nationalist separatism taught today by this country's pro-war educational powers. Fourth point—the revolutionary struggle for the abolition of the prison industrial complex and modern slavery. Five—the uncompromising defense of our people from all forces of coercive domination and structures of political power. And sixth and last (but not least), the p.p.l.f. states that as an organization of the poor *for* the poor—we refuse participation in the politics of the amerikan imperialist (or any other governing) empire. We intimately understand that political power inevitably corrupts; and therefore, to avoid the snares of political corruption—we thoroughly pledge to a life of the people & not to the empire; to never take membership in any government political office. Freedom from our poverty lies in our own hands, and not in the capitalists'—resist with the poor people's liberation front! They distributed the manifesto far and wide, and many people, in many cities, have already joined them . . .

The battle for the Hanover Acres Projects continues to this day—a fight that will go on till the very last family is forced from the buildings, and the buildings are torn down. But even if that happens, the fight will not end; there are far too many abandoned buildings on or near Carlisle Street that are just sitting there, just waiting for people like Nat to take them over and give life to them again, for the fight for housing to end just because a government-sponsored housing program is forcibly abandoned. Nat had discovered a whole new life, and a whole new direction: a housing program, not from above, but from the ground up. A "people's" public housing, now . . .

Maybe we should end our story by giving y'all out there one more "how-to"—this, a how-to on taking over and occupying properties. Scope out some properties in your neighborhood that you think might look promising. Break in there, and see if anybody's taken the copper pipes or the water heater or such things. Make sure to tread carefully, in case there's problems with the flooring, like holes or loose boards; also, it will be probably be dark in there, so bring flashlights. Bolt-cutters work good for popping master locks, and you can get a small one at any hardware store for about 17 or 18 dollars. Look for water heaters, gas meters, electrical hook-ups—these things, if they're still in tact, can be turned to your use. Get a water-key—you can get them cheap at any hardware store, probably under forty dollars, but maybe cheaper depending on where you go. This will enable you to turn on the water. If you can get to a library, you can get on the internet. Once you've established that the place is desirable for you and your crew, check the addresses with this website first: www.[Whatever Country The Scouted Building Is In]assessor.com. This is where you get the house's pin number. Under Search, go to Property Search. After you click Property Search, scroll down and click Search By Address. Then you type in the address, and this will give you the pin number of the building. After you've gotten the pin number, go to the website for [Whatever County You're In] Recorder of Deeds (you might have to look up the site by a google search). This website will give you information on who owns the building. Click on the icon that says Search Our Records, and enter the pin number that you have, at the top of the search page. There are a few words you might come across that are legal terms you might not have heard before. They include: Lis Pendens, which means that there is a case still in court about the ownership of the building. Another word is Mortgage, which if you click on it on these websites, it will tell you the date that the mortgage was issued. You can also go downtown to the Recorder of Deeds Office, and actually read the terms of someone's mortgage which could be a way to find out if it was a predatory business deal on the part of the bank. You should find out quickly who "owns" the place—whether it's a person or family still claiming ownership, or if it's the city, or if it's a bank, like Freddie Mac or Fannie Mae or Bank of America or JP Morgan Chase and so on. Avoid properties that are in dispute, or still have a real live person or family claiming it—you don't want to take something away from someone who is real. If it's a bank who owns it, on the other hand, you're definitely in business! Fuck those bastards—take the place back!!

Once you've got you and your crew, or a family you know who might be interested in taking the place, have them "establish residence." This will take about a month. What this means is that the crew or family who lives there goes over to a currency exchange and establishes water bills, electric bills, and gas bills in their name. That person then goes downtown, and gets a new state photo ID, with the "proof of residence" that these same monthly bills provide. Once you've got that, you've got something to flash at cops who might come and knock and demand you leave, or demand to know what right you have to be there. As far as the cops, you *don't* have to open the door if they knock, you *don't* have to talk to them about *anything!* Technically, you are required to tell them your name and your address, but that's only if they arrest you—otherwise, tell them *nothing!* Remember, they have to have a warrant to enter your

house, and if they don't have one—*they can't come in!* Don't answer their knocks; if they have a warrant, they'll probably kick the door in anyway. If they try to get you to talk to them, ask them: Am I being detained? If they say yes, then you are being arrested, and have rights. Tell them, I am exercising my right to remain silent, and I wish to speak to a lawyer. A good number to have is the National Lawyer's Guild, a group of activist lawyers interested in defending the people's rights. The number of their hotline is 312-913-0039. Other than that, you don't have to say anything—don't let them give you any shit—you now have a *right* to be there—and it will take the county sheriff, not any local police, to evict you.

Talk to your neighbors—always talk to your neighbors! Get them on board. Tell them you're making a home habitable and ready for a family or friends to live there, and not just sit abandoned—and offer your own help, yours and your crew's help, to any of them who might be facing eviction or foreclosure. If you offer to help them, they will be more inclined to defend you—if there is any trouble from the authorities. Plan it as well as you can, get as many people involved as you can. And use the natural connections that exist in the community to defend the occupied homes. Gang war must be turned into class war—and the war for the neighborhood is the most important one we will ever fight.

Nat is coming out of himself as I speak to you. And I—A. Nancy Spider—am coming out of myself. We might have taken the long way home, the long way through years of fighting and struggling; but now that we are back home at last—we know that we will never leave it again!

For that home is in our hearts. Forever . . .

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