



VINTAGE

BLUESMAN

ANDRE DUBUS III

Contents

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Andre Dubus III
Dedication
Title Page
Prologue

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Copyright

ABOUT THE BOOK

It is the summer of 1967 and, with one more year of high school to go, Leo Suther still has a lot to learn. He's in love with Allie Donovan, the beautiful girl who has turned his head ever since she moved to his small Massachusetts town. And he feels a real draw to the blues his father has taught him. Leo soon finds himself in the middle of a consuming love affair - and an intense testing of his political values by Allie's father, who challenges him on the escalating Vietnam conflict and forces him to examine just where he stands in relation to the people in his life. Throughout his - and the nation's - unforgettable 'summer of love', Leo is learning the language of the blues, which seem to echo the mourning he feels for his dead mother, his occasionally distant father, and the youth that is fast giving way to manhood.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andre Dubus III is also the author of *The Cage Keeper and Other Stories* and, most recently, *House of Sand and Fog*. He lives in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

ALSO BY ANDRE DUBUS III

The Cage Keeper and Other Stories
House of Sand and Fog

*For my wife, Fontaine,
and for my son Austin.*

Andre Dubus III

BLUESMAN

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

HEYWOOD, MASSACHUSETTS

The Connecticut River sounded different every season; it was a gushing stone roller during the spring runoffs, a narrow and quiet flow in the summer that in the fall receded to a thin clear wash leaving banks of leaf-covered mud and sunken tree root until winter, when the Berkshire snows came, and the ice formed over the rocks, and the water gurgled beneath it all as though behind a mask.

On its west bank, halfway through the trees up Saunders Hill, Jim Suther picked the guitar most every night. Though he was a white man he only sang blues songs, songs by men like Big Bill Broonzy, Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, and Champion Jack Dupree. After a supper he would cook for both himself and his seventeen-year-old son, Leo, Jim sat in the parlor on a stool in front of the window overlooking the woods and he'd start to play. He sang all kinds of songs, some fast that Leo could hear in the kitchen while he was cleaning up or doing his homework and he would tap his feet, or else slow ones like "Lonesome Road," "Up, Sometimes Down," and "Motherless Child." Most times they were slow like that, and Leo would sit in the parlor and listen for a while.

He liked to watch his father's face. That was easy to do because most times Jim kept his eyes closed while he picked and sang. Leo liked how soft it got around the mouth under his mustache, how tender-looking. And Jim was a big man. Not tall and lean like Leo, but wide with thick legs, rounded shoulders, and upper arms that always needed more room than his shirtsleeves gave them.

Wednesday nights, four or five men from Jim's union at Heywood Paper Products would drive up in their Ramblers and station wagons to play poker at the kitchen table and drink cold Narragansetts out of cans. Leo was already taller than some of the men and they rarely talked to him like he was a junior at Heywood High School, graduating class of 1968.

One man, Lars, who was bald and had a clean-shaven pink face, he was always telling jokes about men screwing women who weren't their wives. Sometimes he'd tease a punch as Leo passed the table on his way to the fridge and he'd say: "Hey Einstein, tell your pop to play some white music for a change." Leo would smile and raise his Coke in a mock toast, then go out to the parlor where Jim was bluesing it with Leo's Uncle Ryder. That's what he liked Leo to call him, though he wasn't really his uncle. One night Lars said to Ryder: "You're so skinny I can smell the shit in you, Stillwell." And Ryder was skinny. He also favored his left leg a little bit when he walked, and every day he wore his fake lizard-skin cowboy boots, even to the mill. But Wednesday nights he played the most wonderful instrument Leo could imagine on this earth: a German-made, M. Hohner Marine Band harmonica; The Harp of the Blues, Ryder called it.

He owned nine of them he kept in a wide leather harness around his waist. Most of these were in different keys though Leo knew four were in C, a bluesman's standard. When Ryder played he liked to stand and he never opened his eyes at all, just cupped that silver mouth harp in his two hands, the left never moving, the right opening and closing, or staying still depending on the effect he was trying for. When Leo's dad sang a train song, Ryder's harp sounded like a freight liner chugging down the rails. He'd suck out a long wah-wah whistle like you imagine hearing after midnight when a diesel's pulling through town with no one to appreciate it unless it makes some noise. Then when Jim

picked and sang a Saturday night special like “Whoopin’ the Blues” or “Sittin’ on Top of the World,” Ryder would rock back and forth on his feet and put both lungs to work with trills and flutters, throat pops and hand smacks, all the while staying in perfect time with Jim’s guitar.

On songs like that, loud Lars and the other men would come in from the kitchen with their beers and smoking cigars. They’d tap their feet and let out a holler or two, and Jim and Ryder showed their appreciation by quickly sliding into two or three more room-movers. But with the blues, Leo noticed, you couldn’t go too long without coming back to a slow one that either made you sweetly downhearted, or else reminded you of when you were. After one or two of those, Don’t-Mistreat-Me or All-Alone-Blues, Lars and the others would either go back into the bright smokey kitchen to finish their game, or else stub out their cigars, drain their beers, and call it a night.

But the best part of Wednesday nights was right before all that happened, when the parlor was full of people with their eyes on Ryder and Leo’s dad, when Jim Suther’s guitar and wavering alto voice didn’t just match Ryder’s harmonica, but rose above it so that Ryder was huffing to keep up and the more he did that the more Jim seemed to sit back because now it was the number itself that had come alive, the walling woowahing Oh-She-Up-and-Left-Me beauty of it, as if the song was now gentle flesh and blood that Ryder and Jim had no more hold on than moist-eyed smiling Lars or the foot-stomping, hand-clapping rest of them.

And while Leo clapped his hands in time, he would sometimes watch those faces that were soft with beer and wonder, even gratitude, in his father’s house. Leo thought about girls and women then and how content they’d be in this room too, how sad it was that there never were any. And children, six or seven of them jumping up and down or curled up under blankets on the floor asleep.

1

Tonight, after the paper mill men had all gone home and Jim was placing his guitar in its case, Ryder sat on the couch and sipped a fresh Narragansett. He glanced over at Leo still watching him from the corner chair near the window. The only light in the parlor came from the kitchen and when their eyes met, Leo looked away and swigged his warm Coke.

“Heads up.”

Leo caught it just as he saw it, a cool metal-worn Marine Band.

“It’s a C. Next week I’ll come over early if you want, show you a few tricks.”

Which he did. His Impala pulled into the yard just as Leo was in the kitchen sopping up the last drippings of clam chowder from his bowl with a slice of Wonder Bread. It was mid June. The sun had just slipped behind Saunders Hill so the bark on the pines was gold and orange like there was a big fire nearby. Leo got up and rinsed his dish. He could smell the coffee his father had brewed before pouring it over ice and going outside for his after-supper stroll down to the river. Ryder walked in with his harmonica harness hanging over one bony shoulder, a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon bottles in his hand.

“I’ve been thinking about you on the way over here, Leo. Thinking about how to start you out on the harp of the blues, you, a very smart kid. And it came to me the big thing you should know up front.” Ryder opened the fridge and put the beer inside. He walked to the stove and poured himself some coffee.

“Yeah?”

"You see, Young Buddy, the way I see it, there are thinkers in this world, and there are feelers. Sometimes there's a little bit of both in one but those fellas don't do much." Ryder sipped his coffee and looked at Leo. "You understand?"

"Yep."

"I was afraid of that."

"*What?*"

"That you'd get that concept right out of the chute. Thinkers are like that. Feelers take longer, but then they come up with a painting or a poem or a blues riff to show you what they see and hear."

Leo shrugged. "But you play the blues like no tomorrow and you just thought that all up."

Ryder sipped his coffee. He looked at Leo over the cup. "All right then, shitcan my theory. But look, you have to start from scratch. When you play you gotta *feel* something, not think it. That's all I'm saying. Now go get your harp before Larsmouth and the others show up with their piggy banks."

In the parlor Ryder cinched the harness in around his waist and pulled an A harp from its sheath. "First thing you want to start doing, Young Buddy, is to listen very closely to everything you hear. Concentrate on this song; it's gonna be your cherry-breaker." He put a foot up on the windowsill and began to suck and blow the first few notes of a tune Leo had heard many times before. After Ryder played the intro, he sang the first verse,

"My baby says she's leavin' me, and I ain't done nothin' wrong,

My eyes on you baby, you can't do me no harm,

I got my eyes on you, I got my eyes on you,

I got my eyes on you woman, there ain't nothin' in this world you can do—"

Ryder cupped the harp back to his mouth and played a popwailing riff that was so pure and heartfelt Leo's eyes got wet and he had to look down at the floorboards. Ryder's playing was a lot better than his singing, and when he finished the song, Leo said, "Teach me a number I don't have to sing in."

"What have you got against croonin'?"

"Nothing. Jim does it good. But I want to play, not croon. Show me some tricks."

Ryder shook his head. His red chin stubble caught the dusklight and looked gold. Leo couldn't tell if he was smiling or not.

"Go look up *trick* in the dictionary and I'll bet you'll find the word deception in there somewhere. Hear me, Leo: when you enter the world of music, *real* music, like from Beethoven on up to Big Bill Broonzy, you're stepping into Truth City. That's what it's all about, so no tricks, all right? Technique, yes. Tricks, no."

"*You* said tricks last week. You said you'll come over and show me some tricks."

"Forget last week and forget technique for now too. When you hear a song you want to play, I want you to crawl inside it like it was a sleeping bag that maybe has a snake in it. What kind is it? How'd it get in there? What's it gonna do now? You want to learn to play from the inside out. If you do it the other way then you'll be pretending and even somebody as thick as Lars will see that."

Ryder smiled and tilted his head to better see Leo's face. "See, musical people are important. If we can take what's in the air—pleasure or pain—and push it back out in a sound that lets people touch what they themselves are putting out, then you can call us bridges to Truth City. I like that: 'Bridges to Truth City.' And that's hands down better than being a party to lying, don't you think?"

Leo nodded.

“Okay then.” Ryder pushed his harmonica back into its harness. “Put yours away too. First lesson’s over. I want you to walk around all week trying to *feel* the meaning of things.”

“We’re not gonna play anything?”

“And when you find something that you’re feeling strong about, Young Buddy, throw together a couple verses on it. Forget ‘I Got My Eyes on You,’ you tell me what *you* got *your* eyes on, then we’ll present that to Mr. Harp of the Blues. Next week, not tonight. First things first.”

2

This was easy. This was a thing that didn't have to be thought about: Allie Donovan. Also a junior at Heywood High School, she was the only one who wore those bell-bottom jeans that were all floppy from the feet to the knees but from there they straightened up and got very tight, hugging her thighs and round soft-looking butt, even cleaving in a little at her crotch.

She had green eyes, a tiny nose, and a wider-than-average mouth that was always either talking, laughing, or else being very quiet and still when no one else's was. She wore baggy white T-shirts that she tucked into her jeans, and even though she dressed like a boy, she was prettier than Nancy Titcomb and AnnaMaria Slavitt combined.

Nancy's old man ran the bank or Heywood Electric or something. And AnnaMaria, who wore imitation pearls to school a lot, was one of Tony Slavitt's Chevrolet kids. Girls like that always dressed in skirts and blouses and dresses, period. They were still girls, hardly women, but they wore their hair like Lady Bird Johnson, who wore hers like Jackie Kennedy, who Leo figured wore hers like Ann-Margret or Liz Taylor. And in a strictly untouchable sort of way, these were good girls to look at; but it was the kind of good you feel when you see something new, Leo thought, like a gleaming red Schwinn bike, or even better, one of Slavitt's sparkling white-walled four-on-the-floor supremes: the exact moment you pause to appreciate its clean, beautiful newness is also the precise second you feel it pull away from you.

It was Thursday, late June, and Leo sat three desks back from Allie, watching her. The air was hot, and even with the windows open the room smelled like desk wood and B.O.

sweat. The trees were leafed out green outside and Leo heard a squirrel scampering up a trunk, down a limb, and off it to another. Most of the kids were asleep with their foreheads resting on their folded arms, but Allie was drawing something with three colored pencils. Her blond hair was pulled back in a single braid. Her neck was long and already tanned too. Whenever she dropped one color for the other, she'd turn her head sideways and look at her picture before she started up again. Leo lifted his chair when he scooted back so he wouldn't make any noise, then he walked up the aisle, stood a desk's length behind Allie, and looked over her shoulder.

With a blue pencil she was sketching in a smoke trail that curled up from the chimney of a three-story house. It had four white porch columns on the front like those mansions in the Civil War chapters of the U.S. history book, and to the right of the house was a huge tree with a noose hanging off one branch.

"Is Allison's work more intriguing than yours, Mr. Suther?"

At first Leo didn't match "Mr. Suther" up with himself, but when Allie looked at Mr. Jewett, then up and back into Leo's face, Leo stared into her slightly startled green eyes and said, "Yes. It is," and he walked back to his desk and sat down.

A few kids lifted their heads to see what was up. One of them was Leo's flat-topped buddy, Gerry Poitras. He glanced at Leo and Mr. Jewett, before going back to his nap. Allie Donovan turned around quickly but quietly. She smiled at Leo a good four seconds.

That afternoon, while his father was still at the Elks, Leo sat at the kitchen table with his notebook and pen:

That Allie's got a neck,
a neck so fine,
I want to kiss it,

Kiss it all the time.
We got a house,
Me and her on the hill,
It's got a porch
bigger than the paper mill.
Sometimes when we hug
I feel like I'm gonna explode,
But then we do what we have to
Up there in our Love Abode.

He signed it and called it "The Love Abode." The following Wednesday he handed it to Ryder who held it up in the afternoon kitchen light and read it out loud. When he got to the part about exploding and doing what we have to, he laughed and shook his head, then laughed some more.

"Now it's my turn." He showed Leo first how to hold his harmonica, how he should wedge the bass-notes end of it between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand so his right would be free to cup in around the harp, making an echo chamber in there he'll want to use later. Leo had long thin fingers. Ryder's were long too, but meaty. He said short fat fingers were best for the blues harp, the kind you get working with your hands your whole life like cotton pickers or mill workers, something like that. But Leo being only seventeen, he shouldn't worry about that because he was his father's son and was bound to flesh out more soon anyway.

Right about then Jim showed up in the kitchen doorway. He held a tall iced coffee with milk and between his fingers was a smoking Lucky Strike. The sun was getting low behind Saunders Hill so Leo couldn't see much of his face too well. Jim watched while Ryder showed his son how to find do re mi, then how to choke the mi note into a maw sound by constricting the air flow in the throat. All of this Leo picked up on by the second or third try, which surprised Ryder until Leo reminded him he'd been

watching and listening to Ryder play since he could remember.

"Your boy's a songwriter too, Jimmy. Did you know that?" Ryder started to unfold "The Love Abode," but Leo touched his hand. Jim let smoke out his nose and walked over to the two of them near the window. He looked up at Leo. "I'll take a little credit for the music you might have in you but whatever wordsway you conjure, you're getting from your mother. She was a poetess. I never told you that." Jim turned his back on them, then he took his guitar out of its case and started to tune it up on his stool. Ryder winked at Leo and put the song back in his front shirt pocket behind three Heywood Paper Products ballpoint pens.

Without glancing at his old man, Leo left the parlor and the house and walked down Saunders Hill Road. In the early evening light, the river was a slow-moving brown and blue. Its pebbled bank was pink in some places, gold in others, and Leo picked up three stones. He threw one in a high arc into the trees. He threw the other two downstream. One hit a boulder and bounced off it into the water. Leo didn't see where the other went and he couldn't see why his father didn't have another woman yet either. Jim wasn't the only man to ever lose his wife. Gerry Poitras's mother left his dad to go live with a phone lineman in Springfield. That was when GP was nine or ten. But he had a new mom now, a blonde woman with big breasts whose name was Betty. Gerry's old man had met her on a train to Boston on business. She had no kids of her own and she seemed to like Gerry and his little sister Ruth as if she had invented them herself.

And Mr. Poitras wasn't nearly as handsome as Jim Suther; he didn't have the muscle, he didn't have the thick black mustache, he probably couldn't pick a tune or sing a note. He just had a flattop haircut like his son, a fat close-shaved face like Lars, and a big round gut that always made his neckties look short and his pants too low. But still, he had

Betty, and Jim had nothing but this piece of the Connecticut River every day at sundown.

Leo wedged his sneaker under a softball-sized rock, picked up the stone, then threw it as far upstream as he could. It made hardly a splash, just got gulped into the current. A family of birds was making all sorts of sound above and behind him and Leo thought he should get around to learning their names and migrating habits and stuff like that. Then he saw one up in an alder branch. The bird was all black except for the tips of its wings which were bright red. Leo heard cars parking behind the house up the hill, the slamming of the screen door, Lars's laugh. When the door slammed again, the bird flew off the branch, out over the river, and into the trees on the other side.

Ryder and Jim were playing already. The parlor windows had to be open because it sounded like the two men were standing right there behind Leo. It was a slow song too, one he hadn't heard before about a man who loses his family in a fire and keeps asking God how come hell came calling, Lord? How come? Jim was singing clear and to the point, like he wanted an answer tonight. When Ryder's harmonica came sweeping in behind Jim's voice, it sounded like a chorus of Yeah, tell us, Lord, why don't you tell us, tell us right now?

Leo began walking up the road, though he didn't want to get any closer to the poor-me chorus. He kept on until he reached the top of the hill where the gravel ended at Paper Boulevard and he went right because a quarter mile later was downtown where on this side of the road was an Esso Station with two red pumps, then the Hungry Pioneer Inn and the red brick courthouse with the police station in the basement. Across the street, all on a raised concrete walkway with the same long slanted roof over their doors was the hardware store, B&G Grocery, and Shorty's Billiards. Down the steps and farther down the sidewalk was the Fremont Theater where *The Cincinnati Kid* with

Steve McQueen had been playing all week. Then came Thompson Green, a square park surrounded by white wood rails in granite posts, named after the town's only family to lose all five sons to Confederate cannonballs. This time of year the grass was thick and soft to sit on. There were a few trees but not so many Leo and Gerry couldn't throw a football around if they wanted to. And in the middle of the park was a wooden gazebo that later in the summer would hold a string quartet from the Ladies Auxiliary League, or a six-piece brass section of fat guys who practiced in the American Legion building next to the Elks Club on the other side of town. They'd play songs like "Greensleeves," then "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" followed by "Home on the Range." But past the Green and the goofy gazebo was where Leo was hiking to: Beatrice's UFO Show. That's what it was called, though the only thing UFO-ish about it was that it was silver and metal and on top of the cash register was glued a plastic model of a flying saucer.

By the time Leo got through town and to Thompson Green, the sun was down and he was sweating. When he saw all the Buick Wildcats and Ramblers, even a motorcycle in Beatrice's lot, he wished he'd gone back into his house to change into a fresh shirt and comb his hair, which lately he'd been letting grow out at the top. Gerry's after-school shift got over at seven and Leo was going to meet him at the back door so they could pal around awhile, maybe go to Gerry's house which was only a half mile back through Heywood and down the same road the school was on. He hoped that's what they were going to do. It was a weeknight so he would only be able to stay an hour or so, but that would be sixty minutes in a living room where the whole Poitras family was gathered together until bedtime.

GP's father would be in the big chair under the standup lamp. His shoes and tie would be off, his white shirt unbuttoned past his T-shirt collar. Sometimes he'd have a bunch of papers laid out on his briefcase in his lap. Gerry's

sister Ruth, who was twelve and pudgy but cute in the face, she'd be in her pajamas already, laying belly down on the rug watching Danny Kaye or "The Patty Duke Show." Betty always sat on the side of the couch closest to the kitchen in case anybody needed anything. Most times when Leo was there with Gerry, she'd bring them tall glasses of cold chocolate milk and a plate of warm oatmeal cookies. Once Betty patted Leo's arm and remarked how nice it was having him over. She went back to her knitting and Gerry whispered in Leo's ear how she just found out he didn't have a mother—who knows, maybe she'll let you touch her boobs.

From the parking lot, Leo could hear the jukebox playing inside Beatrice's. The Box Tops, it sounded like, though with all that laughing and talking going on in there he couldn't be sure. He walked around to the kitchen door out back. Somebody had stuck a mop handle under the knob to hold it wide open, and Leo smelled fry grease and dish soap, heard meat sizzling, something else getting water-sprayed. He poked his head inside and looked left down at the pots-and-pans sink because where else would a night manager who thinks he's funny put a kid named Poitras. But it wasn't flat-topped tubby Gerry Leo saw there. Instead he found himself looking at a girl's back. Her blond hair was tied off in a braid, her apron strings dangled right along her round and soft-looking butt.

"Hey Suther, look." Gerry stood to the right of the door in an all-white fry cook uniform. On his blocky head was a white cap with "UFO" printed above the visor. He held both arms out and turned around in a circle. "Promotion of the summer, man. More money, more grease, *no* pots. I'm in training so I'll see you later, my old man's picking me up at eight." Gerry went back to the fryolator next to the grill and Beatrice's huge thirty-year-old brother Sidney who always sweated and never smiled.

At the wash sink, Allie Donovan was untying her apron, smiling at Leo as she did.

"Since when do you work here?"

"About an hour. My real shift starts next week, you know, when summer starts."

"Oh."

She dropped her apron in a canvas hamper and smiled at him. "Come to walk me home?"

"Where's that?"

"Spoon Hill."

Spoon Hill was a mile north of Beatrice's on the other side of the river. The closest way across was back through town to the covered bridge built out behind the Hungry Pioneer Inn and the courthouse building. Leo and Allie walked through the parking lot to Thompson Green. She jumped over the white rails onto the grass, and when Leo did the same she called him a copy cat, walking backwards, smiling.

"Who, me?"

"Is Allison's work more intriguing than yours, Mr. Suther?"

"Maybe."

Allie turned and ran to the gazebo, her braid bouncing and swaying against her neck. Leo couldn't believe his good luck and he wasn't going to jinx it by running after her either. The night air smelled like pine sap and the fryolators from Beatrice's. He walked slow and straight as Big Bill Broonzy.

When he got to the gazebo steps he stopped and watched Allie up on the floor swinging her arms in little semicircles like a conductor. She stopped almost as soon as she started, though. They were both quiet a second.

Leo put his foot up on a stair. "You want to live in that mansion you were drawing?"

"Want? Do I *want*? That's immaterial, Mr. Suther. You like that word? I just learned it, I love it. I'll probably have to

use it down in Mississippi. Jackson, to be precise."

"Jackson?"

"Oh yes, didn't I tell you?" Allie jumped again, this time over the steps onto the grass. "My dad fixes up old houses. Everybody talks about having a new home but, you know, Leo, a lot of people out there like old houses more. They don't admit it, though." Allie put her hand loosely inside his and they began walking across the grass to Paper Boulevard. Leo wondered when she thought she would have told him anything, being this was the first time they'd ever said two words to each other. Once or twice her hip rubbed his and Leo felt the beginnings of an erection that he hoped wouldn't point in any sort of way noticeable.

"You're *moving* moving?"

"Yep. My mom and dad and three-year-old brother and me. All four of us, and we're going to be living in a trailer home on this grand plantation while my dad rebuilds a real Southern mansion with a bunch of other men."

"Then you'll come back."

"Come back? *Why?* What in the world is going on in Heywood, Massachusetts? Do you know I'll probably meet some disgusting Ku Klux Klan men face to face? And with all that waterhosing and dogging going on down there with the Negroes, why, I'll be in a very exciting place, Leo. Very exciting."

"Waterhosing and dogging?"

"Don't tell me you don't watch the news, Leo Suther. You're one of the smartest kids around."

"We don't have a television set."

"Us either, but I bet you read the whole newspaper every day."

"Sometimes." Which was true. If he was finished with his homework and if Jim was done with the *Globe*, had maybe gone to bed already, Leo would sit at the kitchen table with a Coke and glance through the pages about this and that; what Governor Volpe was doing at the State House, what

movies were coming out, and he had seen things in the national news section about trouble in the South and lately Michigan and New Jersey, even Boston—but he found himself most interested in U.S. soldier stories over in Asia, stories With headlines like U.S. PLANES POUND CONG, RIOTS RIP SAIGON, YANKS HURL BACK BIG RED FORCE. And there were lean-and-mean sounding army maneuvers with names like Operation Nathan Hale, Operation Paul Revere, and Operation Junction City. “I read about the Asian conflict a lot.”

“You mean war. I know we haven’t declared one but my dad says when we bomb people and send in the army to shoot who’s left, that’s war. You burn your card yet?”

“Don’t have one. My birthday’s in August. How come you drew a hangman’s noose in your picture?”

“Because I did.”

They walked quietly now past the Fremont Theater. In glassed-in windows were posters showing next week’s movie, *That Darn Cat*. At the ticket booth a man licking an ice cream cone bought himself and his wife tickets to the seven o’clock show of *The Cincinnati Kid*.

Leo stopped. “You like Steve McQueen?”

“In an immaterial sort of way, yes.”

“Would you like me to take you to this immaterial movie, then? Immaterially speaking?”

Allie held her chin up. “I don’t see why not.”

There were only a dozen people or so in the theater. Leo and Allie sat off on the right side and shared a bucket of popcorn through the show. It was a good movie, Leo thought. And McQueen was real slick with a rifle. A couple times, when the action scenes were going on, Leo turned his head just a little in Allie’s direction and watched her watch the movie. She ate her popcorn one piece at a time, real slow. Her hair looked yellow. When the lights came up she smiled over at him with a sleepy face.

They crossed Paper Boulevard and walked down the short darkened street between the courthouse building and the Hungry Pioneer Inn to the river. There was a single lamp hanging over the center of the covered bridge entrance and there was another light as you came out on the other side, but inside was black as a cave. When they stepped into it, walking over the wide heavy planks that felt as solid as the earth, Allie stopped.

"You like me, huh?"

Leo could tell by her voice that she was looking straight up at his face. The bridge smelled like wet wood and dust, and with Allie standing so close, he could still smell Beatrice's too. "Sure thing."

Allie placed her hands on his hips, and Leo held her shoulders to keep her from rubbing right up against the full-blown erection that until this moment no other human being had ever been so close to.

"Do you just like me, or do you really *like* me?"

"I really like you." His mouth had gone dry and it was a good thing the river was gurgling beneath them or else she'd hear his heart bucking for sure.

She pulled herself in until Leo felt his erection press high on her flat stomach. She didn't budge. She kissed his neck and chin. He lowered his face. His first kiss landed half on her nose, half on her cheek. The second touched the corner of her mouth. But the third met soft lips that parted for the sweet-tasting tongue she slid along his.

On the river road they stopped every few feet to kiss some more and they hardly spoke. From the mailbox at the foot of Spoon Hill, Leo could see lights on in the house up on the ridge. There was a line of trees there, black against the stars. "That's yours?"

"Yep, you can see the whole town from there."

It was a steep climb, and Leo knew he'd walk up better if he had both arms free to swing but he didn't want to let go of Allie. Somehow that would be a mistake, to let go of each

other just before they said good night; it would mean all this kissing was just something to do on the way home, not anything they were both building up to they could keep for later.

Up near the Donovans' house there was a night breeze that cooled the sweat under Leo's T-shirt and blue jeans. He was breathing hard. He turned around with Allie and looked out at Heywood below. Beatrice's seemed to be the only light down there, that and the top of the Fremont Theater marquee. She put her arm around his waist and he turned and kissed her on that long tanned sweaty neck.

She whispered that her daddio was sitting on the porch behind them. "See him?"

Leo did. He sure did, and as soon as he straightened up he heard him too.

"How'd it go, Allie Cat?"

"Super cool." Allie led Leo to the porch steps. He wanted to slip his hand out of hers but their fingers were intertwined and she wasn't letting go. When her father stood up it was too dark for Leo to make out his face, but he could see that he had wide shoulders and he wore glasses that were catching the window light behind them.

"Want to meet my new beau?"

"If he rates."

"Course he rates. This boy just published an essay in the *Monthly Writer*, can you believe it?"

"What about?"

"His name's Leo Suther, Dad. Leo, this is my dubious father."

Mr. Donovan offered his hand. Its skin was dry and so callused it reminded Leo of a dog's padded paw. "Chick Donovan. What are your writings about?"

"We all wrote some, sir. But our teacher, Mr. Jewett, sent mine in."

"It was real good, Dad. About blues music."

"Blues music." Allie's father said it slowly, nodding his head like he either just understood something he hadn't before, or else wasn't listening at all. "Good, good. Come on in a minute, meet Allison's mother."

The inside of the house was one big room and Leo noticed the walls were made of blond logs with beige chinks in between.

"Dad built this himself. I can't believe he wants to sell it out of our lives."

Her father smiled and walked up wooden stairs with no railings to the second floor. Allie led Leo to the couch which faced a huge knit rug in front of a coal-black fireplace. Above the mantel was the painted portrait of a man with a squared-off bushy beard. He was dressed in a brown jacket and vest. His shirt was buttoned up under his chin and he was looking off towards his left like someone in that direction had just insulted him. At Leo's right, on a wood plank floor, was a picnic table and two benches. In the middle of the table was a brass candle holder for eight candles, but there weren't any in it, or even any melted wax. Beyond that, the wood floor ended and the red brick floor of the kitchen began. Scattered in a corner were red, yellow, and blue building blocks, and a bright red ball. Leo could see a radio on the counter near the gas stove. All along the walls between the windows were unframed paintings of lakes, trees, sunrises, and sunsets. Beneath those were three-foot-high shelves full of hardcover books.

"You like it?"

Leo nodded at the portrait over the fireplace. "Is that your grandfather?"

"That's one of the great minds of the nineteenth century," Allie's father said from behind. Leo stood as Mr. Donovan walked down the last few stairs with Mrs. Donovan following him. Leo had seen her before; on mornings she drove Allie to school when Allie missed the bus. She kept her long brown hair tied back in a single braid. She was

wearing a red-, orange-, and yellow-flowered robe that she held up over her bare ankles as she walked down the stairs.

"And this is one of the great hearts of the twentieth century: Tess Donovan, Cleo. Cleo—"

"Leo, Dad, not Cleo."

"Oops. Sorry, amigo." Mr. Donovan turned and walked back to the kitchen. Mrs. Donovan smiled and said he looked much more like a Leo than a Cleo. She sat on the other side of Allie. Leo sat down too.

"So was it awful in that kitchen, hon?"

"Whether it was awful or not is immaterial, don't you think? Dad wanted me to know what working is like so now I'm learning. Isn't he alluring, Mother?"

Mrs. Donovan looked past Allie at Leo and smiled again. She asked Allie more questions about her new job which Allie answered in one or two words, all the while smiling at Leo. Then Mr. Donovan walked across the knit rug carrying a pine wood tray that held a full pitcher and four glasses. He set it on the coffee table, poured each glass full of something that looked like iced tea with no ice, and sat down in a rocking chair near the fireplace.

"You graduating this month, Leo?"

"No sir, I should be but I started kindergarten a year late, after my mom died." Leo reached for a glass and sipped what he thought would be tea but was instead apple cider and his mouth was so surprised he didn't swallow at first and now his cheeks were flushed and he had no idea why he just offered such a personal piece of history to Allie Donovan's parents.

"Wow, Leo, I didn't know that." Allie's fingertips touched his knee.

He swallowed the cider and shook his head. "No, I was a little kid, I hardly remember her."

"How did you get hooked into blues music?" Mr. Donovan was looking at him like he was surprised he was truly

interested in what sat on his couch next to his daughter and wife.

"My dad plays it, sir."

"Call me Chick."

"Yes sir, I mean Chick."

Allie's mother laughed. Leo let himself smile, then, to somehow balance what he just said, he added: "He plays the guitar, but I play the harmonica myself."

"So you appreciate Negro culture."

Leo nodded and sipped more cider.

"This civil rights struggle is just the beginning of things as I see it, as *he* sees it." Chick nodded up at the portrait of the bearded man above the mantel. Leo glanced at Allie. She was staring at the empty glass she held in her lap.

"Have you got summer work yet?"

"I'll probably get something at the mill, where my father works. You know, cleaning the trucks."

"Full time?"

Leo shook his head. Chick Donovan drained his glass and stood up. "Well look, I need one strong kid for the summer to be an all-around laborer and helper. I was going to give Allison a 'help wanted' sheet to post at the high school, but if you think you're the man, why then we'll cut a deal tonight."

"I can do it," Leo heard himself say, though getting a job had occurred to him only vaguely and that was because Gerry had one.

"Super fine. I'll pay you the minimum, a dollar and a quarter an hour, but you can count on cash; we don't pay war taxes in this family. When does your vacation start?"

"This coming Monday."

"Meet me here next Monday morning at seven."

Leo took this as a sign for him to drink up and go. He stood and reached down past Allie to shake her mother's hand. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Donovan."

"Likewise, Leo."