



a blow to the head

they drove and they drove, buoyantly did they drive, drove all the

way to 37401, yes they did, drivin' in a 1960 cadillac, more boat than car, ridin' high the emotional waves, out of date, out of time, but not out of fashion, drawin' the eyes of townspeople, especially the young, heads turnin' as they glided through jerkwater town after jerkwater town—thorp 12345, 25115, 37369, 70068—villages, hamlets, settlements—57611—one horse towns, cross roads, driftin' through the business districts, passin' one and all the business cards of rural America, as though these towns and whistle stops were harbors, and their arrival was greatly anticipated—fanfare—as if they were at the head of a parade, ridin' with the white canvas top rolled down, radio blastin' out the gyratin' sounds of the newest hip hop twistin', shakin', rattlin' rockin' rollin' music—**WKST, WKBN, WIBU**—bangin' out all the funkadelic rhythms on the dashboard, sit dancin' side to side on the plush naugahyde, back roads, side roads, service roads, the sensuous, lonng gleaming lines of the lean maroon Antoine Laumet de La Mothe, sieur de Cadillac, the automobile of Mount Olympos, fittin' the road snugly, filling their lanes skintight as they filled their brains with the topography of the sensuous world surrounding them. the Preacher Man and his long tall moll Jackie began their trip in Brooklyn New York, they did, driving across the newly christened Verrazano-Narrows

Bridge, all four thousand two hundred sixty feet of it just cuz he'd never seen it before, drivin' slowly to the consternation and exasperation of all those behind honkin' like geese heading south to the New Jersey shore (for the winter?) huggin' the coast as best they could, him often rising from the seat half way to have a good look around, wavin' at passersby's. kids in the cars passin', sittin' in the backseat, turned their way, enthusiastically waving back, their chins glued to the top of the backseat, staring dreamily out the rear window till their daddies sternly drove on past, their forbidding faces fully afront.

North Carolina, the Outer Banks, him preachin' along the way, camping in the dunes runnin' up and down the beach naked, into the surf full long, melting upon the white sand, out to sea, rushing to the oncoming waves, laughing and carrying on like the children of god they were. they took the ferry from Ocracoke Island throwing the last of their Brooklyn bagels to the gulls. back on land they drove into Jacksonville where he preached amongst the jar heads hangin' around downtown, drinkin' beer with 'em, him and Jackie dancin' the hoochie coochie in some juke joint till the sun rose red splayed across the morning sky, sailors be warned, their bleary eyes rheumy with fiery water. without a wink a sleep continuing inland across the Tar Heel state, through a long flat land marked by endless miles of piney woods, past potential coffins, tar, pitch, turpentine—Fayetteville, Lumberton, Southern Pines, Whispering Pines, Rockingham, Mon-roe—till they drove smack dab into Charlotte. they were in the Piedmont now where the rivers dropped east behind them, back across the coastal plain, their waters rushing to the Atlantic; the Great Smoky Mountains afore them, rising along the Tennessee-North Carolina border, precambrian schist, gneiss, exposed red clay, yellow birch, tu-lip poplars, sugar maples, water on the other side tumblin' west—the Clinch, Powell, Holston, Nolichucky, French Broad, and Pigeon, rivers, rivers, the rivers of our lives runnin' before us. he'd hiked extensively in the Smokies in his youth, a post adolescent, embracing the land he found so utterly and ineffably mysterious, beguiling and altogether seductive—home of the Cherokee, land of a vast compendium of fables, myths, tales and legends. he'd find an obscure, old and abandoned campsite near a creek, deep in the woods, set up, take a meal, rest, then hike at nite, bushwhacking the terrain using only the moon and the stars as his guide. got terribly lost one nite descending Tusquitee Bald. it was the rhododendron, and mountain laurel, their shallow but fast root systems that saved his ass from tumbling miserably a thousand feet to his peril. wound up in a campground just in time for breakfast with two young ladies, the only campers for miles around. they couldn't a been more surprised. he was a mess. they sat him down, fed him, combed out his braids, hair snarled and gunked up with twigs, leaves, insects and whatnot. got him washed up and lookin' presentable. oh, he was a sight for sore eyes. he adored being fawned over, and those gals were much obliged.

they'd a starved if Ms. Jackie'd relied on him to prepare food, that, or they'd be eatin' outta tin cans mornin' noon and nite, a man he was, of the beloved sardine. loved those norwegian pilchards kept alive in stainless steel tanks till their guts were empty, then smoked right before being beheaded, packed in olive oil in a can that opened by winding the lid around a key that was packaged with the can, accompanied, of course, by a loaf of good solid west coast sourdough bread, something he could mop the oil up with. weren't

no sourdough bread to be found in the entire state of North Carolina number one, and Ms. Jackie was downright sick and tired of canned fish, so while he was plottin' his next move, she'd whip out the coleman stove and start preparin' a decent meal. she was the doyenne of pasta, yesiree. ravioli was her favorite, but she could make one helluva 'n eggplant lasagna, let me tell ya. there'd be a long line a rounds cut and pounded like veal, salted and set out on paper towels dryin' in the sun to perfection, practically surrounding the caddy, while she was busy creatin' this highly sensuous sauce she became known for. she was a very innovative cook mind you. got it from her father, so she said, who'd been a cook aboard a naval vessel during the first big one. according to her father, qualifications for a man to become a cook in the navy were quite simple. the basic rule was a sailor who hadn't lost an eye or a leg in battle was eligible for the position, though all were required to have two arms. whether or not a man could cook was apparently overlooked. an exalted position it was though, for all the men tried to get on the good side of *cookie*, while in private, less complementary nicknames were used. i bet those boys never had aubergine the likes of which Ms. Jackie's inspired hands made?

she didn't mind a bit. enjoyed cooking and camp cooking was the very sort of challenge she was up for. to celebrate their arrival in the piedmont, she rolled some ravioli. she'd forgotten a rolling pin. no problem. simply used a metal number ten can emptied of its tomatoes. we take metal cans for granted, but there was a time, yes there was, when a man would sell a fine lookin' pelt to get his hands on a metal object. the can worked just fine. the rolled lips of the can, top and bottom, put cool lines in the ravioli which became her signature while they traveled. once they were ready, each ravioli was stuffed with an out of this world pumpkin filling, pumpkin mixed with grated asiago, ground almond biscotti, melted butter, and nutmeg. you betcha. the Preacher Man was beside himself. he could hardly sit still. one bite into a tender warm ravioli and he was up like a jack in the box, exuberantly walking in circles, movin' his arms around and around like an ostrich, moaning like a cat in heat, expostulating in a nearly unfathomable tongue, on his favorite of all themes, *what does it mean to be an American?*

it was the big question which he unloaded on his audiences from time to time when he was feeling feisty, argumentative, knowin' he was bound to get on somebody's nerves, get under their skin, make the hairs on their heads bristle. the answer is obvious ain't it, till you actually open your mouth and describe what it means for you, personally, in a fundamental way. when the answers thrown at him were abstract, related to flags, pies, hot dogs, baseball, or even worse, football, he'd put it to 'em for an explanation. he didn't let 'em off the hook. he was fishin', and he wanted a catch, a good catch, even if it was as little as a sardine.

"my fellow Americans, what does it mean...to be an American? what does it mean to be a part of the land, this land, the land of America? is it necessary to become a part of the landscape to be an American? and what does it mean to become part of this American landscape? and i don't mean usin' it, abusin' it, building upon it one more absurd lookin' mall, wall, sprawl, fishing trawl, taking all the fish out of its rivers, depleting its mink, marten, beaver, no; no, what i mean is becoming an intimate part of it, an appendage so

to speak, assisting Nature in fulfilling its destiny, rather than fulfilling some doctrine manifest in our history, which has not in the least served Nature, nor us. what does it mean to be an American in this light?"

"come back to the picnic table...sit down, your food's gettin' cold. here's your plate, enjoy the ravioli...if you can."

"whatya mean, i love this ravioli." he turns, kisses the cook on her cheek, "i love a riavvolgere. with you, any time, my dearest." another couple of bites, and just at the moment one observing, thinks, finally, he'll sink into the bench and relax, satisfied by the warmth and deliciousness of the meal, captivated by the sumptuous cuisine, up like a jack in the pulpit,

"i stand before you a mere spec a dust, a dream, a foolish dream at that, a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn and dispirited among the empty eternities. we have not come far a'tall, since the days when men and women were enslaved. life today, has become this strange new fruit of individuals evolved through corporeal mergers and symbiosis, forever trying to assert their individuality, and find new ways in which to exploit the souls of others. Nature has spread a great and bounteous table for all of us—everyone. any system of society that denies a single person the right and the opportunity to freely help themselves to nature's bounty is a damn unjust and iniquitous system that ought to be abolished in the interest of a civilization worthy of the name...if we allow ourselves to surrender our souls to the comforts of convention, the customs of society, the unspoken agreements one generation hands the next, more often than not only to prop up those who wield amongst us power, whose desire is to control the abundance of wealth Nature has so beneficently provided, small cracks begin to appear in our hearts' resolve, and with time, with time, these cracks my friends, become fissures, gaping fissures—pure emptiness—an emptiness that begs filled. this...my fellow Americans, describes the times in which we are living, and the seeds of what we are living, they were sown long, long ago. every seed contains the entire fabric of our future. we cannot separate our awareness of current events from what has transpired, and if we properly analyze what has taken root, we can better understand the road we are walking along, and where it might take us—what shall become of us. (brief pause) i say unto you...what seed are we attempting to harvest? is it the seed of greed? greed, American style, the sort of greed which allows a corporation (corporeal, cereal) to control the seeds of our food so that these seeds are now engineered and can only be purchased from this corporation, and can no longer be harvested because the seeds of the seed are sterile? will they one day control our semen? will we no longer be able to spill our seed where we desire, or share them with whom we choose?

"success at any cost, is that the seed we are planting?"

returns to the picnic table, kisses the cook, wiggles his body doggie style, "ymmm, hmmn," stuffs his mouth and resumes, while chewing,

"Jackie, i fucking hate success, i do, ambition, the push and pull, and draw of the material—the plush office, the successful's expensive threads, their distinctly polyestrous odor, their sharp gray scale, the accompanying fat silk ties far too wide for the get up—for a clown maybe—yet those at the top set the style,

those smelling of success, exotic lotions, glittering wrist bands, time pieces and the like, they are the ones influencing the impressionable, hungry, juvenescent youth of America, demanding imitation in a culture striving for promotions, who have become obsessed with the climbing of aluminum ladders rather than the scratchy bark of trees with unpredictable limbs, where nesting amongst the foliage is truly possible—tree houses, shacks, swings—each rise up through the vegetation new, and exciting, rather than indistinguishable from the rung below. all a new rung can offer, my sweet, is a removed view of the bottom, and perhaps that is the goal—height, no breadth (out of breath) nothing intimate, nothing to touch or become affected by, lacking spontaneity, bereft of any relationship with squirrels, lizards sunning themselves, coons—especially—none of this is to be found on the ladders of the most prestigious corporations. looking up, those at the bottom cannot fathom a thing, and for those on the ladder's top rung that's just as good, cuz hey, they're busy, they got both hands workin' to line their gilded pockets with as much of the company's gold as they can git.

“i hate success, ambition, the drive toward bigger, better, more, toward things, wealth, titles...”

“i know you do dear. that's why we're here...”

“Jackie...i love you.”

“i know you do dear, that's why i'm here...i love you too.”

“i remember having an argument with my father when i was a young whippersnapper, a teenage stripling. i was dating the daughter of a friend of my father's, a man i referred to as Mr. Raven. he was a dentist though, not a crow, but squawk he did—and just like a dentist, don't ya know! wanted me to call him by his professional title—my father thought so too. i was not very patient. he was looking for something...more, i don't know—another filling perhaps—since i was dating his daughter i thought a certain familiarity ought to be in vogue. i thought Mr...Raven was respect enough. okay, i wasn't dating him. he wasn't even my dentist. maybe that was the problem? after six months his daughter wasn't even my girlfriend. its the view from above, the way those below crane their neck to look up, and those on high peer over the tops of their rims. it's the phony boundaries, and the limitations placed from on high, the unchallenged ways, the unspoken protocol, business the way business is and oughta be conducted—rules—because yes, in fact it is good, it is necessary, and it is upright (like a ladder), forthright, fortnight, got it right, right right honorable reverend sir, absolutely and incorruptibly.

“fuck it...i hate success, ambition, striving with every footstep, the struggle, the endless scrambling, groping your way, the competition, the fight for position, promotion, the in fighting, the back biting, putting up a good fight, up with your dukes, fight or flight, fighting a losing battle, the strain and stress of the effort, and all the synonyms— combative, aggressive, pugnacious, truculent, belligerent, bellicose, scrappy, as opposed to the single antonym—peace. most of what i hate about success, ambition, fighting for one's turf, is the control those acquiring begin to exert over others, their sense of entitlement over those who have helped them, or are less fortunate, or, who've no interest in corporate ladders whatsoever, or simply can't climb—injury, illness, disability—and or, no longer wanna learn how, have no interest, or simply don't

understand the concept, especially when climbing every mountain gets in the way of family, friends, visiting your mother and father, spending time with your children, not less, and not later, and not just on wednesday nite and every other weekend. that's what i hate about it. that's what gets my goat...yeah, that's what raises my blood pressure; that's what ruffles my feathers and gets my dander up, especially when i see those who have, those who risen, or those who were born on third base thinking they hit a triple, take advantage of those who do not have, those with success in their pocket playing on the insecurities and fears of those on the margin simply to suit their agenda. that's what rubs me the wrong way.”

the Preacher Man pauses, quickly scans his audience, adjusts his pants, tightens his belt, runs his left hand through his hair, and resumes,

“what i hate most (extending his right hand)—stay with me here—(hand rising, index finger punctuating the words with a trenchant emphasis) the world revolves on this axis (motioning in circles around his head) increasingly, more and more, creating ever more mass and weight, inducing more consumption, waste, more, always more, and more. the world of capitalism as we know it in this country has become increasingly encompassing, drawing in the rest of the world—the first world, okay, but the third world?—like a band tightening and (emphasizing) tightening as more and more people are uprooted forcing farmers in India to decide whether to choose to allow chattel—cattle—to roam across heretofore agricultural fields since times gone by dictated by the demands of Old McDonald had a farm, ee ei ee ei oh! or starve, nary a market for their crops. farmers for more generations than we can begin to imagine in this young country, squeezed and squeezed, all of a sudden plugged into a global economy, taking orders from self absorbed meatheads half way around the world. the farmers whose land doesn't fit with McDonald's plan find fewer markets for their crops, often losing their precious family farms to the streets of Calcutta, starvation for them and their children.

“i ask you, what does it mean to be an American?”

after a few days luxuriating amongst the plunging waterfalls of the rugged River Gorges, sheer rock walls of granite containing the abundant and vigorous flow of water, along with a rich community of ferns, mosses and liverworts growing in the moistness abounding within the chasm, rare species clinging to the spray covering the cliffs, their journey continued west by southwest from the Piedmont into the Smoky Mountains—Cataloochee, Oconaluftee, Sugarland—simply rendering them speechless, enticing them to make love in impenetrable woodland places not to mention in and around towns and villages, at a crossroads, in the alleyways, and parks, and of course, as always, in the backseat of their dark magenta cadillac. once, in a ditch just beyond the shoulder of some busy high speed thoroughfare, passing cars seemingly driving overtop their intertwined bodies. they drove through the Smoky Mountains—Cullowee, Franklin, Hiwassee—crossing the border into Tennessee, to an old Indian village now called Chattanooga where he spoke to the troops, hobbling and bandaged, gathered at the railway depot.

“hey Jackie honey, i ask you, is this what it means to be an American?”

he squirmed through the crowd, past a beleaguered encampment of folks beset with affliction. it was an annual function the Preacher Man had been attending for a number of years, a way in which he could honor those who suffer, who reside amongst us, the blind, those without limbs, those with some sort of disease, unknown ailments, maladies for which there are no cures, folks who continued to hold their heads up with dignity and grace. “i wanna thank you for comin’ my friend. thank you, and you sir. what can i do to make your stay more comfortable? yes, i will. thank you for asking. my pleasure, please. don’t be shy, that’s what i’m here for, that’s why i’m here, to provide you a little assistance. it’s the least i can do. thanks for coming. you have a wonderful smile young man. how has it been for you? i understand. i hope you’ll be able to get around a bit better after a while.”

“and where are you from son?”

“i’m from here, Chattanooga.”

“and your family, have they lived here a right while?”

“my folks were born here after their folks left Sand Mountain.”

“Sand Mountain?”

“yessir, Sand Mountain. it’s not far from here. down in Alabama, in the northeast part of the state, around Guntersville Lake if ya know where that’s at. it’s pretty rural.”

“i don’t know Guntersville Lake. i am pretty savvy son, but you must know, i’m not from around these parts.”

“true. well...ya follow the Tennessee River outta Chattanooga south by southwest into Alabama where ya get on route 72 which more or less follows the river, and when ya get to Scottsboro—you remember Scottsboro?”

“yes i do. i remember the Scottsboro boys...very sad episode in the history of the south...and there’s plenty to choose from.”

“you got that right. anyhow, once you’re in Scottsboro, you’re kinda in the heart of Sand Mountain.”

“i thought it was a town. i didn’t know it was a swathe of land.”

“welll...it’s a few things. there’s the geological formation known as Sand Mountain which is a sandstone plateau sandwiched between the Tennessee River and the Sequatchie Valley, an’ there’s the general vicinity known as Sand Mountain, a rural area, largely agricultural, a mix of chicken, cow, and potato farms, large expanses of rolling pastures and scruffy forests.”

“sounds nice off-a your tongue.”

“it is. the plateau is an extension of the Cumberland Plateau which we’re standing on, so it isn’t a whole lot different down there than up around here, ‘cept for the fact ya got the river between, which over the last few million years has cut a pretty wide valley.”

“i am very impressed. you know your geography. most people, young’uns, don’t know how to locate the little hole at the bottom of their digestive tract, let alone some god forsaken hole in the wall in rural southern America.”

“i don’t know. when me and my buddies were old enough to drive, we were all over the place explorin’ the countryside. for us Chattanooga was the center of a large square, with Knoxville, Nashville, Atlanta, and once in a blue blue moon Birmingham as the focal corners.”

“and what kinda trouble did ya’ll get yourselves into, may i ask?”

“well sir...let’s put it this way, the area’s quite gorgeous as ya know, so more often than not we were out explorin’ the land—did a lot of hiking, camping, rafting, that sort of thing—and bein’ that it was the 60’s, yeah, well, you know, lotsa journeys were made...alfresco style.”

“esattamente. i know of what ya mean.”

“at any rate, from Scottsboro ya veer west and head toward Woodville, another little town in northeastern Alabama. the community of Sand Mountain was between Woodville and Pleasant Grove just to the north.”

“alrighty, ya got me there. now that i’m there, standin’ in the midst of rollin’ pastures with a grand panoramic view of a plateau, potato, and chicken farms, exactly what am i lookin’ at?”

“pretty country. it’s one of the high spots in Alabama. after the fog lifts from the valleys and canyons you’d have the pleasure of a most spectacular view. more’n likely you’d be able to see the sharp green ridge of Lookout Mountain, site a one of the ugliest battles of the Civil War, but there’s also the placid farmland of northeastern Alabama to look upon and this slender blue shape—Lake Guntersville—stretchin’ itself northward. i’ve only been a few times, but the area’s made a pretty big impression on me. the soil’s real loamy which i think is how it got its name.”

“soil, elevation, great view...what’s the draw? i mean, did something famous take place there? or is it simply a place of uncommon beauty?”

“both really. first off, it’s the birthplace of Sequoyah...”

“wow, impressive, the dude who created the Cherokee syllabary?”

“you got it.”

“pretty impressive accomplishment.”

“sure was. i read somewhere he spent a whole year tryin’ to come up with somethin’ that would work. left his fields unplanted. friends and neighbors thought he’d lost his mind. his wife is said to have burned the initial work thinkin’ it was witchcraft. but he persisted till he had something he could teach his daughter. from there it went smoothly until practically the entire Cherokee Nation was literate. as a matter of fact, and i found this little statistic simply bewildering, the Cherokee, and this was about 1825, had a higher literacy rate than the Americans livin’ in the surrounding area.”

“just goes to show...”

“land of the free and the home of the Brave.”

“touché. what other tidbits you got?”

“welll_p (poppin’ the p), durin’ the civil war the Sand Mountain counties of northeastern Alabama voted against secession.”

“how’s that? the very counties where Scottsboro resides? i find that pretty daggone interesting.”

“yeah, the folks livin’ up around there proposed breakin’ away from Alabama altogether, and joinin’ up with some of the counties in East Tennessee to create a new Union state called Nickajack.”

“Nickajack!? you gotta be kiddin’!”

“no, really. Nickajack was the name of the area before Sand Mountain. i don’t know its origin, but there is some history to it, and ironically it’s related to the Cherokee language. the thing about this area is, it was dirt poor. the folks livin’ in northeastern Alabama, they had no slaves, and they saw secession as a rich man’s game, *a war for the rich, fought by the poor* is how they described the so called Civil War, which they figured was gonna follow on the heels of any kinda secession.”

“man oh man, you are filled to the gills with colorful, historical information.”

“ehhh, most folks around here know this stuff. it’s kinda common knowledge.”

“i think you’re bein’ modest, but hey, well and good...so, Nickajack became Sand Mountain, and about when did that occur?”

“great question, the answer to which i do not know. i don’t believe anybody does. i’ve always known the area as Sand Mountain. Nickajack is just somethin’ i picked up. never heard anyone actually use the name. sometime after the war probably, when the folks who inhabited the area died off, and their kin and the generations that followed simply dropped Nickajack, or forgot all about it, and picked up on Sand Mountain. geologists and what not may have had somethin’ to do with it.”

“could be. could be. much nicer name. Nickajack...sounds like some, tobacco substitute...jeesus. speaking of which, what was the draw for your grandparents and the rest of the group that settled up there in Sand Mountain?”

“undoubtedly the view, though i really don’t know. cheap land? i think someone knew someone in Chattanooga and that led to buyin’ land in Sand Mountain, which is kinda half way to Birmingham where there was another Jewish community. my grandfather migrated to the States in 1903. he wasn’t off the boat five minutes when he met these two fellers who told him they could get him a job. *cool*. at a shirt factory. *awright, let’s go*. before he knew he was travelin’ to Alabama by train—clickety clack, just like that—the shirt factory turned out to be on top a Sand Mountain.”

“Van Heusen?”

“huh?”

“Phillips van Heusen, the shirt company. you don’t know the soft collar? world’s smartest collar. nu, what’sa matter you? a Jewish immigrant from Poland, a rabbi no less, living in nowheresville Pennsylvania, starts a little shirt company. his wife sews flannel shirts and he and his son sell them from pushcarts to the coal miners nearby. business is good, they move the operation to New York City where they meet this Van Heusen fellow, a Dutch immigrant. they take a liking to one another, and become partners. the company goes gang busters with this patent for the soft folding collar. ya with me? in ‘21 they take their act to Wall Street where they’re traded publicly on the New York Stock Exchange. company still exists.”

“whoah! talk about historical poop scoop dope dirt...you are down with the shirt, man oh man.”

“i make it my business to know what i need to know.”

“what’s that mean?”

“we can talk more about that in a bit. first, i’d like to know more about this Sand Mountain Commune or whatever it was.”

“whadya wanna know?”

“let’s just say i’m a big proponent of the relationship between people and the land they inhabit, the subtle influences exerted by the landscape, the way people respond. for me it’s kinda like the way dog owners resemble their dogs. ya know what i mean? who exactly settled in northeastern Alabama?”

“well...let’s see...a bunch a different ethnic groups settled there over the years.”

“yeah, like who? anyone i’d know?”

“hmm HMMM hmm. i don’t know, who do you know? way back when, Sand Mountain was part of the Cherokee homeland like i said. obviously they settled there. early on, meanin’ around the turn of the 19th century, Scottish folks from up north started driftin’ in. soon enuf, the Cherokee were bein’ displaced. then, a course, came Andrew Jackson and nearly every Cherokee was forcibly removed to Oklahoma during the infamous Trail of Tears. the area was poor. white trash. and nothin’ much changed up through the Civil War and the remainder of the century. by the turn of the 20th century there still wasn’t much happening when this group of Jewish immigrants arrived. they started this communal farm called Sand Mountain. it didn’t last but a couple three, four years.”

“what happened? homesick for bagels?”

“partly i guess. ya gotta know, back then, Sand Mountain was pretty darn isolated. forget bagels. there wasn’t a large town within a hundred fifty miles, let alone another Jewish community...”

“people coming from nowhere, winding up in the middle of nowhere.”

“that’s about it. these folks though, were very idealistic, at least the ones who started the commune. after a while i think, they got ta bickering. you know how it is, for every two Jews there’s three opinions. between the limestone soil, not at all conducive for agriculture, the long hours slavin’ away for next to nothin’ in the shirt factory, discord was inevitable. the project was abandoned and everybody relocated, though some stayed in the area, although i don’t think too many. most moved up the road to Chattanooga. that’s where my grandparents went. and that’s where my folks were born.”

“and that was it?...no more Sand Mountain?”

“well, Sand Mountain’s still around, but the communal farm, no. other folks moved in and settled in the area, i guess. over the years folks musta bought the land, tore down what buildings there were, and made a go of it. the area’s remained quite poor. i’ve never made an effort to find the exact location of the commune. really wasn’t all that interested. i simply went to have a look at the lay of the land. went once with my folks who were sorta curious about what had happened—i guess they wanted to see what their memories had preserved—and a couple other time by myself.”

“seems i might have to head on down and check this magnet out for myself...say, what’s your name son?”

“my name is Ami, sir.”

as he extends his hand, “you can call me Preach.”

“i’m glad to make your acquaintance.”

“likewise. i take it you rather enjoy rummaging around in the past?”

“well, yeah. i do like history, especially American history. what i enjoy though is tracing patterns—i like to hunt for the seed and watch its germination, learn how the seed becomes a plant.”

“something like—gold diggers arrive in marshland, land is swampy, isolated, offering only limited space, plagued by mosquitoes and brackish tidal river water, unsuitable for drinking. they find nothing, not a nugget. after a year, most are dead. the persistent few discover tobacco thrives under such dreadful conditions. Africans—slaves—are brought to work the land. slavery proves to be the gold the original settlers were lookin’ for. so on, and so forth. from gold diggers to black niggers, one man’s gold...’s another’s man’s gofer.”

sheepishly, “that’s about it.”

“so some of the Jewish people stayed, and i’m supposin’, over the years they mixed with the people who were already there, them bein’ black folks, some, but more so with the Scottish dirt farmers, and a bunch of leftover Indians, et voila, a new race of people is born?”

“pretty insightful.”

“it’s my callin’...mergers are my strong suit—the father, son and the holy ghost...”

as they convulse in laughter...they each take a step toward the other...

“very funny. you’re quite a character.”

“i aim ta pleas..”

“by the way, this phenomenon you so astutely hit upon, has a name. geneticists call these folks who have traits from three sources, Melungeons. i don’t know the origin of the word—sounds terrible though, doesn’t it?—from what little i’ve read, Jews are only a small part of the DNA down around Sand Mountain. for the most part it’s the white European component, the Scottish genes, that dominate.”

“three’s the thing—the trinity. we see historical precedence for change, transformation, takin’ place at a nexus of three—the past as the present yielding to the future—three strands commingling to become one. Amen.”

“Amen.”

“check these trinities out: Dutch, Jews, and Indians; the church, business as usual, and the mighty politician, and over the years as the church receded in power and influence, Madison Avenue stepped up, displacing the church to become part of the American triumvirate, just as the robber barons displaced business as usual, or rather, became business as usual, changing in our time once again, to mighty wall street. that’s the new trinity, the one governing our lives today—wall street, the well heeled politician, and

madison avenue—and by the way young man, did you know—you probably don't—Trinity Church in New York City, once the de facto church of America, and one of the largest landholders in the city of New York i might add, an Episcopalian denominated house of worship, is located at the very end of Wall Street with a bird's eye view of the New York Stock Exchange. *now ain't that clever?*"

"i guess i shouldn't be surprised. i can dig the triumvirate of Wall Street, Madison Avenue and the King. i can see them sittin' aside one another, tridents in their hands, three tined spears, bearded, muscular, robes half clad, proud progenitors of the American Dream, but what about that other ménage à trois? i'm not too up on the intimacies of Dutch history—the Dutch, Jews and the Indian, little teepee of three?"

"yes, yes, that one's a bit...how shall i say, ephemeral, and rather...vague, certainly less publicized and discussed, less a fact of colonial life—actually, pre colonial life—and short lived, born during the middle of the 17th century from an influx of Jews from various places, predominantly from South America—Brazil—which the Dutch had *owned*, until the Portuguese regained control and expelled the Jewish population, though in reality, they departed on their own, and rather quickly before the Portuguese could enforce one of their infamous pogroms. once in America, and nearly everyone who emigrated arrived at the little Island of *Manahattoes*, they began to have relations with the local population, which at that time, was still largely Indian, and of course, Dutch."

"by any chance did that include sexual relations?"

"could have. i'm not saying it necessarily did, but these three groups were intimately involved with one another. i would actually love to know how so. historical records certainly indicate relations of economy, but i think there's more. at the moment i do confess i knowest not the precise avenues, or ways of their intimacies, but i do have a hunch and like the proverbial itch, it won't be takin' leave anytime soon, not until i know with more certainty."

"i'd love to help you scratch your itch."

and in that very instant The Preacher Man's eyes light right up like those on Broadway, 79 Broadway, "why, that's right kind of you. you're not just humoring me are you? be honest now."

"well, i mean..." stammering. "i was...well, you know, maybe we can do something...together. i mean, i've got a little something i can use some help with."

"yesss, pray tell, what is your little something?"

"okay, well, okay. okay, here's my story in a nutshell. i was born in Brooklyn New York a couple years after my folks decided Chattanooga wasn't for them. they'd always felt a certain discomfort, ya know. the south between the wars—it wasn't the most egalitarian place in America—there were issues regarding racism—segregation—which they never got used to, but there was a fair amount of anti semitism at the time as well, and my father, what he'd heard about Europe—and what his father had gone through at the turn of the century in Russia—he didn't wanna be around it. so after he got married, he and my mother decided New York City was where they should be—Brooklyn—around their own kind, so they took themselves to the shtetl of East New York—Lefferts Avenue—and that's where i was born and raised, leastwise, until i was six

or seven and things got kinda grave financially. my father had graduated high school, but he wasn't a student of the classroom. he liked rollin' up his sleeves, and gettin' familiar with the work at hand. it was his misfortune all he could land was a series of no end jobs, none of which were really satisfying—installing storm windows, driving a coca cola truck, working for a moving company—he wanted something...ya know, wanted to control his destiny. he and my mom, they just got by—by the skin of their teeth. something would come up and they were immediately behind the eight ball. i never knew a thing about any a this. i mean, i was just a happy go lucky little snot nosed kid runnin' around havin' a good ole time. my uncle, my father's brother, extended an invitation to my father to come on back, get involved in the so called, family business which was supposedly meetin' with great success. after a few such offers, and no change in their financial status, my folks decided to return, which was met with delight by everyone. after an absence of about eight years, woo, woo, Chattanooga here we come."

nodding his slantwise head prodding a booger from his nose, the Preacher nonchalantly inquires, "and what exactly was, or is the family business?"

"well, my father's brother had a music store. it really wasn't doin' all that well—my uncle simply wanted, hoped he could goad my father into returning. it was a nice gesture really, cause he knew how much he and my mom had been struggling. it was no great secret. once my father showed up the business took right off. all of a sudden they were offering all these additional services—like tuning pianos, something my father had fortuitously picked up in his spare time. they also began renting pianos to schools, leastwise those that were not well off enough to own one, and theatres where concerts were often held—places where folks like Liberace, who was popular at the time, played, places that needed a piano for a nite. that kinda thing. it wasn't just pianos though. all instruments. it was a music store. they lined up folks who gave lessons. the store provided the space, and received a small recompense. it wasn't much, but all these little things added up. at any rate, to jump ahead, the store became a huge success and when my father got older, he trained a younger feller to do the tuning and he took his place inside on the floor. my mom began helping with the books after my Uncle's wife died. they wound up living a pretty good life. recently they started traveling, visiting places they'd always heard about but could never afford to visit."

"so what's the gig kid? whatya wanna do with the rest a your life?"

"i wanna be like you, Preacher Man."

head shakes slightly side to side considering the comment, lips puffed up, eyebrows raised, "that ain't a smart move..."

"for the longest time i have had, i dunno, this longing to return to my birthplace, my biological place of birth. when my folks left Brooklyn, they never looked back. all their friends and relatives were here in Chattanooga, so there was no need to concern themselves with Brooklyn. for the past year or so, i've had these really strange...i don't even know what you'd call them...dreams i suppose. they occur while i'm sleeping, but they're supra real, and very disconcerting. while i'm dreaming i feel like i'm wide awake. i'm looking around like one sometimes does in a dream, but with much more clarity, as though i'm looking for

something in particular. a couple of times this unnerved me to such an extent, i woke with a start. (slight pause) i've had two handfuls of these dreams or whatever ya wanna call 'em in the last twelve months or so, and each time it feels like i'm returning to the same place, some time in the past, and i don't mean my past, onnh onh, further back, much further back. the past, as in, well, at first i wasn't sure, but lately i've had indication it's the 17th century, and the place i'm visiting is largely unsettled, mostly woodland, virgin forest. Native Americans inhabit the area, but not entirely. i've seen them—i mean, i've caught glimpses of them. so far i've never interacted with anyone. i'm just an observer. lately i've been doin' some research in American history, readin' up on the colonial and pre colonial time period so i have a better understanding of my experience. it's a time white folks are startin' to arrive. i'm almost positive the area's the Brooklyn of the 17th century. i just have a feeling, but if it ain't Brooklyn, it's somewhere in the area, leastwise from the lay a the land, the kinda trees, and general ecology, anywhere from central Connecticut down to northern Virginia, the land of the Lenni Lenape.”

“the Lenni Lenape? whenever i hear that name, i feel this wonderful, wistful little tug. i fondly recall a book from childhood—Light in the Forest by Conrad Richter—ever read it?”

“i did, yeah. i think we read it in 7th grade. can't recall much. it was about a white kid who was captured by the Indians, right—the Lenape—and grew up as an Indian? he was returned to the white folks, no, no, he never went back...i don't know. i can't remember.”

“not bad. True Son was the boy. he'd been captured by the Lenape, and grew up with them, but when he was older, an adolescent, for some reason, which i'm vague on myself at this point, they made an effort to return him. it was supposed to be an exchange. something occurred during the swap, and he returned with the Lenape, but in the end True Son was forcibly returned to the white folks after he'd betrayed his Indian family. two cultures at odds with one another. unfortunately, in the end each one held onto their opinions about the other. they really had no choice i suppose. circumstances reinforced their beliefs. each culture acted in the ways they were expected to act. i'm biased—wouldn't ya know? i believe the Indians tended to be fair, far more open and accepting of foreigners than their European counterparts. when they arrived, they were fairly dependent upon the Indian, truly livin' off their kindness, from Massachusetts Bay down to Jamestown Virginia. once their footing on the land became firm, they thought nothin' of stabbing their benefactors in the back. the English, the Dutch, and especially the Spanish, couldn't think beyond the self centered dualism they had brought with them —good-bad, god-devil, christian-heathen, civilized-savage.”

“yep, i know first hand what you're speakin' on. it's why my parents left for greener pastures. opinions, beliefs, judgments, like sticks stuck fast in thick mud...”

(silent digestive pause) “hey Preacher Man, you think it's possible to be in more than one place at a time?”

“now we're talkin' boy. as a matter of fact, i do. i do. i take a quantum view of things, and in a quantum world, all the rules about the universe we inhabit change, and change dramatically. quantum particles are everywhere and nowhere at the same time, leastwise till they know they're bein' watched or experimented

with. they behave differently if the camera is on or off. sometimes things are nothing until you say they are something, and then (snap of fingers) instantly they become that thing. here's the world according to the Preacher Man, objects exist in a suspended state—everywhere and nowhere in the same instant—until observed, when they collapse into just one outcome. paradoxically, whether events happened in the past, may not be determined until sometime in your future—and may even depend on actions you haven't yet taken. you with me?"

"sorta, yeah, yeah...does this imply traveling in time?"

"yes and no. if all events simultaneously exist, and they would in order for something in the future to exert influence over something in the past, we may not have to travel at all, but simply shift our thinking, and the focus of our thinking. in fact, thinking isn't even what's required, attention is..." (he's rarin' to go and just about off and runnin' when...

"fuckin' A. say not another word. let me get this straight. you are suggesting—wait! on what level are you making your assertions..."

"sub atomic. that's where the research is. i am merely transposing—extrapolating, ya know, shifting the information, the attention. scientists are terribly far behind, don't ya know—it's western civilization that's the cause, but hey, i respect their work. the thing is, in other cultures they've been down with this sort of thinking for a long, long time. take the Buddha. the big fat Buddha maintained *time does not exist*, and that was what, a couple thousand years ago? the past and future are illusions, nothing more. to be more precise, Time exists only in the present. the past can be the future, and the future can be the past. in meditation one can exist entirely in the present, clearly and thoroughly."

"all this reminds me of that famous zen koan, *what is the sound of one hand clapping*. i hear you talking and it's like i'm in a very dark place, absent of light, sounds, smells, little or no sensory input, in meditation perhaps, though not necessarily, traveling through the so called time-space continuum into some dimension that enables me to experience effect before cause, and clearly visualize their relationship, in a dimension in which time does not exist."

"i think you've got it. here's a little something though which may help put things in perspective, else totally confuse you. in France, these here scientists shot photons into some sort of an apparatus—and i've no idea what such a contraption might look like, nor how you can control a photon, so don't even ask, but they did, and what they learned was, these photons could retroactively change something that had already happened, as in the future influencing the past. seems when these photons passed a fork in the apparatus, they had to decide whether to behave like a particle, or a wave when they hit this beam splitter. later on, well after the photons passed the fork, the experimenter could randomly switch a second beam splitter on and off. It turns out that what the observer decided at that point, determined what the particle actually did at the fork in the past. at that moment, the experimenter chose his history. ya got that?"

"oh, i got it alright, but it's a bit much man...however, while you've been talkin', i've been lettin' your words sift through the sieve of my experiences and the dreams i told you about, tryin' to line up my

experiences with what you're saying, and decide if these dreams in some way are examples of this oversimplified quantum mechanics business you're suggestin', and i think what you're tryin' to let me know is, time travel is possible. it's not a physical re location thing, more an experiential one. has to do with decisions and definitions or maybe only observations made in the present, how the observer experiences the world of the past, and how these observations can alter the past, or the future simply because...well, i don't know..."

"don't matter—you're on the right track. i certainly ain't no expert.

"i'm really impressed though. when i wandered into your open air tent, i never thought i'd be talkin' this sort of thing. i guess that's an example of what you're sayin'? things are happening in the present we aren't paying attention to, and don't often, if ever, avail ourselves of, lettin' them pass by, but they could, they very well could make a difference in our lives, changin' the course of things. so i guess if we apply this to the past, there's no reason not to believe as we open ourselves up to history, that little things will surface that may thoroughly alter our perception of the way things were, and those little things and that small change in perception, will have bearing on us, in the present, which of course is the future to those past events."

"you can change history, young man. do you understand that?"

"i am beginning to feel that's possible...but is it probable?"

"probable shmorable, that's of no importance. the important thing here are your dreams. they are real, and they seem to be the very sort of experience i'm talkin' about which is the very sort of thing you were wonderin' if they were—they're about travelin' in Time. i'm bettin' your subconscious mind has taken it upon itself to send you hither, to the very piece of real estate you've been hankerin' over for quite some time—Brooklyn New York. only thing is, for some reason, your return is deeper in the past, well before your familiarity with that particular landscape. howsoever, it is my further belief your return has a touch of the fortuitous about it. there might just be a reason you've been visiting 17th century Breukelen, not that there's some kinda deevine manipulation here, and you've somehow been singled out to do you know who's work, some grand plan, you in the middle. no, no, not at all, but you have made a return, and more than once, so...you have a choice. you can return and figure out what's up, if anything, or simply take your rest, enjoy the scenery, sleep the good sleep and forget the whole thing."

"somehow i thought as much. knowing someone else knows what's been happening, and understands, and has...well, a theory for it, makes a difference. the uncertainty of what i was experiencing feels like it's vanishing. hell, i'm ready to hit the hay."

the Preacher Man bends, picks up a long lost limb virtually peeled from a nearby beech tree, "i did hear you indicate joint venture, didn't i?"

"did i? i don't recall."

"scratcha my back, i scratcha yours."

dry, graying, beginning of moss around the notches, spreading along the wood. the Preacher holds the piece to his nose and smells its length, the branch from the beech tree, while listening to Ami stammering,

“i, i, yea_sss, i, mean, yes, well, you have helped me, and now...i suppose you have it in mind how i can help you?”

the smooth gray moss covered branch is placed between his legs, coming nearly to his waist, upright, a fine looking walking stick, rubbed smooth, the slightly thicker end on the ground, where it is rotated, and leaned on like the cane of a tap dancer, carmine coat tails billowing slightly, taken by the passing air as the Preacher lifts himself on the balls of his feet, smiling, each of his words enunciated clearly, “i do. i do.”