

7

CHOKING FUMES FROM THE GREYHOUND BUS MANEUVERING INTO ITS designated parking space overwhelmed the line of waiting passengers on the dimly lit platform. Some coughed; some wiped their eyes, while others held their noses. Reggie stood stoically and kept his eyes on the suitcase his mother bought from the Goodwill. The suitcase told a truth about him that he wasn't ready to reveal to new people, but what was inside told a different story. His only regret was that he didn't have the tailor-made pants, now folded neatly in the suitcase, for the homecoming game when he could have showed off like the other students. But now he would be able to show white students he had style.

Reggie boarded the bus and headed for the back. He took a seat next to the window and exhaled. The adrenalin that had been pumping in his body since the day before was beginning to wear off, leaving him exhausted. He slumped back, closed his eyes, and began to slow down his breathing.

Yesterday the gang met at Harlem House and said their good byes. Arnold was going to Howard University in Washington – his first choice; Beverly was headed for Lakeland College in Minnesota and Alfred was staying close to home and attending Lane College. Everybody was excited about their new adventure and there was no criticism or jokes about Reggie's choice. Beverly was considered the real winner because she was going to college in the North. Rev. Bailey's message at the baccalaureate service was that they would face great challenges as they left their communities and entered the larger world, but "If you can take it you can make

it” was his message. He reminded those going on to college that many of them would be the first generation in their families to do so and that would require them to pave the way for those coming after. He concluded his sermon by saying, “Whatever your future, the preparation given you at Booker T. Washington and the nurturing you have received from your parents and neighbors have given you the foundation to take it and make it.”

Mr. Ball, the white superintendent of schools, paused at one point during his graduation speech as he looked over the class of the graduates. He finally said, “You students,” but they swore he was about to say, “you niggers.”

Reggie was number five in a class of three hundred fifty and his friends told him they would vote for him when he ran for president.

Reggie already missed his friends and began to wonder what Christmas would be like when they were all together again. He wondered what it would be like if Mona were still around. She had left for Barnard a week earlier and her first letter had already arrived. He reached into the brown bag his mother had prepared for his trip, shoving aside the securely wrapped fried chicken, slices of loaf bread, sweet potato pie and tea cakes until his hand felt the envelope. He pulled out the letter and read it again. She had arrived safely in New York and was trying to adjust to a college in the middle of the city. Her roommate was a white girl named Ellen Sawyer from Westport, Connecticut. The two hit it off immediately. The Sawyer family had been in New England since the 1700s. She had already traveled extensively in Europe and Africa with her parents and had gone to a boarding school with a few wealthy Negroes. Mona said that Ellen loved New York and was excited about exploring the city. Reggie sensed Mona was as excited about New York as Ellen but was down-playing her excitement for the sake of his feelings. She told him how much she missed him and she looked forward to Christmas.

Reggie remembered his father was edgy on graduation day and kept telling everybody to hurry up so they would not be late. He had squeezed Reggie’s hand after the ceremony but said

nothing. His mother couldn't stop hugging him. Somewhere in the middle of retracing those warm memories of the last few days, he drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke, the bus was racing down the highway. As he looked out the window, he noticed how fast the images on the landscape came into and then disappeared from view. It was sobering. He began wondering if he would be able to develop meaningful friendships with white students. Was he prepared academically to handle a white college? What would it be like living away from home? Could Rev. Bailey be right?

The sign on the highway read, "Welcome to Danville." Reggie felt excited but a bit nervous. Suddenly it occurred to him he was about to enter new territory where he didn't know a soul. As the bus snaked through the streets towards the station, he noticed that the town seemed quieter than Smoky Mountain. There weren't as many stores or as many people on the streets. The bus rolled up to the station that was in what must have been the center of town. Across from the station was a café with no signs of life except the blinking neon sign. Two blocks north, Reggie could see a sign for Rexall Drugs and to the south was a Kresses Five and Dime store, both familiar sights. Two blocks east of the station was a street that was probably the main street. There were city buses picking up and discharging passengers. Reggie collected his belongings and walked through the station to the opposite side and onto the street where he found a few taxis lined up. A driver asked, "You need a taxi, young man?"

"Yes sir," Reggie quickly answered, wondering how much this ride would set him back. The driver was a Negro whose dry skin made him look like he was in his seventies. He asked Reggie where he was going and where he was from. Reggie answered and the driver went silent for the remainder of the trip.

The ride to Davis took Reggie through a neighborhood with stately homes and spacious lawns that reminded him of the neighborhood surrounding the country club in Smoky Mountain where he once worked. As the taxi drove onto the campus, he noticed the ivy laced buildings, the spacious green grass campus,

the Gothic architecture interwoven with modern designs and students milling around. "One day," Reggie thought, "they will call me a Davis man."

"This is where you wanted to go ain't it?" The driver asked as the car stopped in front of the dormitory.

"Yes, sir," Reggie said.

"Well here it is." There was a note of disgust in his voice.

Somebody else must have made the driver mad and he hasn't gotten over it, Reggie decided. Reggie looked up at this light grey stone brick building with tall, polished wooden doors. He smiled. It looked like a mansion. The doors swung open and a couple of students fanned out. Reggie stepped in before they closed and was greeted by a friendly student who seemed to be in charge. Before he could ask a question, the friendly student said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Morton. My name is Jeff Anderson and I'm the dorm counselor. Welcome to Davis. I hope you had a pleasant trip." The friendly greeting from this baby-faced guy with dark red hair helped Reggie begin to relax. He smiled and reached to shake the counselor's hand.

"How do you do Mr. Anderson? I had a nice trip."

"Very good, I will help you get settled. First, why don't you go over to the desk and let them know you have arrived. They have a package for you with all the instructions you will need for the next few days, including your room assignment. If you have questions, I am here."

Reggie thanked him and walked to the reception desk, which was crowded with large brown envelopes and a pile of numbered keys. A jolly boy wearing a name tag that read Fred Lewis reached for Reggie's hand and said, "This is where it all begins," then patiently explained what was in his package and invited Reggie to return for any questions he might have.

Reggie's room was on the third floor with a view of the Southern end of the campus where he could see faculty housing. Below his window was a parking lot for dorm residents. The room was sparsely furnished with two of everything, but it was clean. The mattress on the bed was thinner than the one he slept on at

home but it was comfortable enough. Reggie couldn't believe he had his own desk. He immediately claimed the space next to the window before his roommate arrived.

By the time he was settled-in, his stomach began to growl. Foregoing the brown bag his mother had prepared, he decided to check out what was being served at the student union. He entered this spacious dining room with booths lined against one wall and tables for four scattered throughout. On the side opposite the booths was the cafeteria-style serving station. A line of students were passing through, choosing dishes and chatting. Very few tables had been occupied. Reggie marched to the long line and selected his food. He noticed none of the servers were Negro which surprised him and made him a bit nervous.

By the time he was ready to find a seat, nearly half of the tables had been taken. He spotted one near the entrance and sat down. There was not another Negro face in the whole place. At one time or the other, just about everyone in the cafeteria stared in his direction with what looked like stern curiosity, but nobody greeted him. He felt scared and began to consume the hamburger faster than he would have at Harlem House while thinking that maybe he should have stayed in his room and cleaned out that brown bag his mother had prepared. As soon as the last French fry was entering his mouth, he pushed back his seat, deposited his tray and tried to walk out at a normal pace, though he could feel himself quickening. When he got outside, he wanted to run, but figured that if someone saw him, they might think that he was a stranger than usual Negro.

As he walked back to his room without losing any time, it suddenly occurred to him that his roommate was probably white. What if he dislikes Negroes? The possibility was so disturbing that Reggie dismissed it. He opened the door and found the room was the same as he left it. The roommate would probably arrive later that night or the next day, he concluded.

It had been a long day and he was feeling exhausted so he lay on the bed to relax for a few minutes before his roommate probably

arrived. When he awoke it was very quiet. He looked at the clock on his desk. It was a half-hour past midnight.

He was wide awake now and the events of the day began to play back in his mind. Why had the taxi driver reacted the way he did? Had someone killed one of the Negroes that enrolled here last year? He felt his face flush. It dawned on him that Jeff called his name before he told him. How did he know who he was? Did he know all the students in the dorm by name? Surely, there was at least one other Negro living in the dorm? Come to think of it, he couldn't recall seeing any Negroes yet. Take it easy Reggie, take it easy, you have only been here a matter of hours, he told himself.

Reggie was awakened the next morning by the sound of foot steps and chatter in the hall. After collecting his thoughts and realizing where he was, he searched for the schedule of activities for the day. There was nothing scheduled for the morning. At 1:00 P.M. there were Greek House receptions. He had received an invitation from Omega Alpha about two weeks before arriving on campus. He was very impressed and had looked forward to going, but was having reservations after last night, but it was too early to start dodging things. After all, they did send him an invitation. There was the freshman dance at eight. Maybe by that time a friendly roommate would have arrived.

He hauled himself out of bed, grabbed his robe and headed for the shower. A very pale boy was wrapped in a white towel shaving. Reggie said good morning and the boy turned towards him with a look of shock and said, "Good morning."

Reggie stepped into the shower. He relaxed under the pulsating motion of the water over his body. He grew up taking baths and he wasn't used to showers. It felt so good that he lingered for a while. Once he could focus through the steam he heard whispers, but could not discern what was being said. He then began to notice every few seconds someone would walk past the shower and turn their head in his direction. It happened so many times he was sure it was deliberate.

After finishing his shower, he leaped into his robe and marched straight to his room. He noticed that the shower room

was full of students just milling around. Back in his room, Reggie began to feel angry. He was no freak show there for the amusement of white students. He didn't want to go to breakfast where he was sure the show would go on. However, his hunger was more powerful than his pride. As he was about to cross the street on his way to the student union, a car passed driven by a white woman with a Negro sitting next to her in the front seat and a white girl in the back. Another Negro, thank God. He watched the car, hoping it would stop and he could see who got out and how they interacted, but the car turned the corner out of sight. As he approached the door to the student union, a girl in front of him stumbled and dropped some books. Reggie picked them up and handed them to her. She smiled and said, "How clumsy of me. Thanks for your help."

Reggie felt a moment of joy; someone had acknowledged him and said a kind word. It didn't matter that it was no more than thanks and a smile. He walked into the student union feeling a slight rise in confidence. The roving eyes continued through his meal and he avoided them by looking at his plate. He walked back to the dormitory expecting to find his roommate.

Unconsciously, he began to whistle the tune, "What a friend we have in Jesus," a song he learned in Sunday school. When he realized what he was doing, a smile crept through his lips. Maybe I am receiving a message from on high, he pondered.

His return to an empty room wiped the smile off his face. Maybe his roommate was an upper classman and they were not due on campus for two more days.

Reggie remembered the reception at Omega Alpha and felt unsure. Maybe if Jeff figured out who he was before he arrived, there was a good chance Omega Alpha did too. Well, at least I have to give it a try, he decided. He began pulling out those tailor made pants and coordinated shirts, trying to decide which would make the best impression. The navy blue pants and the white-striped shirt won. He took one last look in the mirror and turned left and right while adjusting his belt, then strolled out and headed

towards Greek Row, feeling the effects of anxiety bubbling in his legs.

Greek Row was a very clean street with no debris anywhere, lined with manicured lawns and mansions bearing Greek lettering on their facades. Reggie was awed but still nervous. He turned from the street and started up the walkway to the house with the Omega Alpha sign. It was a two-story red brick building with tall white columns adorning the entrance at the end of a concrete walkway. Reggie took only a few steps up the walkway when a tall, slim, white guy in blue jeans and a Davis sweatshirt, with a look of disgust plastered on his face, rushed out to meet him.

“We don’t pledge Negroes,” he blurted out without any kind of greeting. “If you received an invitation to the reception it was a mistake, sorry.” He turned around and walked back into the house.

Reggie felt like he was worth less than a penny. He didn’t know what to do or say. He stood frozen in his tracks for a moment under the roving eyes of some students watching the incident from their windows. Finally he felt secure enough to walk without stumbling. He lifted his head and looked straight forward trying to disguise his humiliation. Anger swelled in him. Who do these no-color, poor-hygiene peckerwoods think they are? They are no better than the crooked cops in Smoky Mountain. Maybe Alfred was right: there would be no welcoming mat into white heaven.

The day was bright and sunny. Reggie decided to walk around and cool-down instead of returning to his room. As he explored the walkways, he found himself in a beautiful garden around a pond separated from the main campus by a wooded path. The lingering blossoms from summer flowers stood in strategic locations. The scene was tranquil. All he could hear was the sound of hissing bugs, singing birds and splashing water.

Reggie took a seat on one of the benches spread over the garden. He closed his eyes, rested his head on the trunk of a tree behind the bench and gave in to the tears that were tugging to be released. Nobody was around so he let them flow freely. After a few moments, he opened his eyes. The sun overhead was almost blinding. “Dear God”, he prayed. “Please help me cope.” At that

moment the face of his mother entered his mind. His heart beat slowed and the anger seemed to dissipate. What if things get worse and I can't study. Returning home after flunking out would be horrible, he pondered. That will not happen he vowed.

As Reggie started up the steps to the dorm, Jeff was coming out. He greeted Reggie and asked how he was doing. Reggie was not about to spill his guts to Jeff, so he choked it back and said that he was doing just fine. He asked Jeff when his roommate was due to arrive.

Jeff looked up with a nervous smile and said, "Mr. Morton or may I call you Reginald?"

"Call me Reggie."

"Well Reggie you are one of the lucky students on campus. You do not have a roommate. You have your room all to yourself. How about that, a freshman with his own room. The student we assigned to be your roommate decided at the last minute not to come to Davis. So you became a lucky freshman."

Reggie felt like another hammer had hit him in the stomach. He knew Jeff was lying. It was written all over his face. Reggie thanked him and headed to his room. Maybe it wasn't all bad. It might be good to hide in his own room while recovering from the many insults that he anticipated facing. What if the guy was as prejudiced as those at Omega Alpha? Maybe this is the answer to another one of Mother's prayers.

Reggie remembered the freshman dance and wondered if he could stomach any more humiliation that day. The dance could be a real embarrassment. "The hell with it all," he shouted in his room. "I can take it and make it without being a martyr" He laid back on the bed thinking what to write to Mona. He wanted to tell someone about what was happening to him, but that kind of news might worry her. She seemed to be having the opposite experience and he didn't want to spoil that. He drifted off to sleep. When he awoke he felt rested and energized. He decided he was not going to hide in his room. He would go out and face the enemy.

As Reggie left the dorm and started to walk towards the gym where the dance was being held, a group of students began whispering and laughing behind him. They appeared to deliberately stay behind. It made him angry. He was sure they were talking about him. *They can kiss me where the good Lord split me and if one of them tries something they are going to get everything I have upside their lily white heads*, he said to himself. He tried to maintain a normal pace to camouflage his fear. As he approached the entrance to the gym, the group rushed forward and surrounded him. There were six white girls all smiling. He recognized one. She was the girl who slipped on the steps to the student union and dropped her books and smiled at him when he picked them up. She looked at him and said, "Let's go dance."

Reggie felt weak in the knees, but he commanded his legs not to give out on him now. Sweat appeared on his forehead, but he was too embarrassed to wipe it. Excitement swept through him like an electric charge. He entered the gym like a king surrounded by the court's ladies-in-waiting. The music greeted them and they fell into a group of square dancers. Country music and square dancing was not Reggie's idea of having a good time, but he was glad to be with friendly faces and he wasn't about to complain. He stepped in rhythm with the music although he had never square danced before. He felt silly. What would his friends back home think if they could see him now? When it finally ended, the group of girls seemed exhausted and decided they needed something to drink. They asked Reggie to join them as they headed for the refreshment stand. He fell in the long line of thirsty dancers immediately behind the girls.

Another group of girls came over and began to chat with the six girls accompanying Reggie. They inched their way into the line, pushing Reggie further back. He looked out at the crowd and found many eyes on the girls and him. He didn't know whether to be proud or scared. He quickly turned his eyes towards the refreshment table. He didn't want to express any discomfort that might turn off the girls. They got their drinks and stood waiting for him. While Reggie was collecting his drink, the music

started again. As he approached the girls a group of white boys rushed over and took the hands of each of the girls and pulled them to the dance floor. Reggie was left standing alone, one hand holding his drink and the other in his pocket.

As he stood there surveying the place and wondering what to do, a group of dancers swayed to their left, leaving a view of the other end of the gym. Reggie was startled to see three Negroes, one boy and two girls. He felt like running over and hugging them. They were looking in his direction, but when they realized he had seen them, they quickly turned their heads, pretending they hadn't noticed him. That slowed Reggie down a bit, but he was not about to let that deter him. He didn't know what to do about the six girls that escorted him in the dance. However, he figured those boys that dragged them onto the dance floor were making a statement and he was relieved to let them make it.

His heart pumping in high gear, Reggie strolled over to the Negro students and introduced himself. The boy extended his hand, and said, "I am Ron. This is Sandra, and Nancy." With an artificial smile and her nose slightly upturned, Sandra asked, "Where are you from?"

"Smoky Mountain. I live in the dorm. I arrived yesterday. Where are you from?"

"We live in Danville," Sandra answered.

"How did you end up in Davis?" Sandra asked, looking like a fly had just landed on her face.

"I have a scholarship. What are you majoring in?" Reggie asked.

"Elementary Education."

"What about you Ron?" Reggie asked.

"Well, I'm working this year and if I am not drafted into the Army, I plan to go to Tennessee State next year."

Reggie was thankful that Ron was there. He thought the girls were acting like he was wearing bad deodorant.

Sandra let out a belly laugh and said, "Can you believe that?" She pointed to a black/white couple dancing unrestrained around the floor. Reggie was surprised. He recognized them both. It was

the Negro he saw in the car with the white family driving onto the campus when he was heading for breakfast. The girl was the one in the back seat. It looked like they both were students and it appeared they were a couple that didn't give a damn about the roomful of stares they were receiving. They danced like no one else was around. Reggie asked who they were. Nancy looked as if she just remembered he was around. She said, "We don't know." She looked at Sandra and Ron as if they were an exclusive group that didn't trust Reggie.

The music became more amenable to jitterbugging and the four paired off and began to dance, Reggie and Nancy, Roy and Sandra. As the evening went on, and the music permitted, they continued to dance, but they were not focused on each other. Like everybody else, their eyes continued to follow the mixed couple.

After the band played its last song, Reggie said good night and he looked forward to seeing them all again and that he would look out for Nancy and Sandra on campus. He was feeling better than he had since arriving. As he walked to the dorm, he began to think about everything that happened to him that day. Could Negroes and whites get along despite the history of segregation or were the students at Omega Alpha the norm? How was he supposed to react to the prejudiced whites he interacted with daily?

Maybe he was overreacting, he thought. With exulting noise coming from the hall, Reggie sat in the security of his room and wrote to Mona about the freshman dance; the Negroes he met; and how he square danced for the first time.