

Prologue

A sliver of pale moon hangs on in the empyrean night, but the pounding of feet has already begun, moving to the beat of production. Sunrise to sundown has been blurred by an endless movement of muscles and material. The work begins when they punch in. Feet move mechanically to their assigned positions. The sixteen-wheelers pull up to the loading dock. The driver passes through the factory gates like the boatman ferrying souls across the River Styx, wondering if this may be his last trip. But the fields are endless. The harvest beckons. The sweat of ancestors lurks within those bales streaming off the cargo bed, traces of the bloodied fingertips that tore life from the boll and tossed it into homemade sacks dragged across the latticed plantations. After the picking became mechanized, the levers of control were not dismantled but reengineered.

Inside the gates, faces hide in the darkness as carts are wheeled to the truck and filled to the brim. The dim red glow of the truck's bumper lights illuminates the blurred outline of a pupil, scarred and sleep deprived as it scans the haul, or the flash of white teeth, clenched and straining as the body flexes to lift and dump, lift and dump, rinse and repeat. The workers savor the last of the outside breeze and the fresh morning dew, hesitating slightly before pushing their loads beneath the aluminum awnings, where the air is trapped between concrete. It thickens and swelters as they push the bags into the willowing room to be wrenched open. They stand amongst piles of the fluffy white fiber flecked with debris, twigs, critters, calcified dirt, things once under the sun now destined for the rubbish pile or the capillaries of lungs. The carding operators cough and grunt, sneezing and clearing their throats, but cannot rid themselves of things they cannot even see.

A Working-Class Hero is Something to Be

Thursday October 2nd 1975

The drop-top Chevrolet Caprice raced down the cracked Carolina highway. Its wheels rumbled over a tar sealing, launching the bright red automobile a few feet off the ground, and the car's occupants were suspended in the air, weightless for an eternal second before the tires touched back down on the pavement.

Besides pushing 90 on a 65 single-lane at dusk, Robbie Kandinsky was making the getaway task even more challenging by refusing to depart with his half-smoked Newport. He kept it snugly between the pointer and middle finger of his left hand, which grasped the top side of the steering wheel, while his right controlled the gearshift. Cranked all the way to 4th, he popped the Newport between his lips and grasped the wheel with both hands as the Caprice shot over another bump, the car inches from careening into the marshland bordering both sides of the decrepit country road.

Dex Conway, bracing himself with a hand on the car-roof and another beneath his seat, kept his eyes glued to the rearview mirror, sometimes turning his whole head around to make certain no blue lights were flashing behind them. Robbie side-eyed Dex, moving his cigarette across his lips and letting it rest in the corner of his mouth.

"Anything?"

"Nothing. Haven't seen another car since we tore off that main street."

"Well, keep looking. The town's so small they probably had to call in the county sheriff. Might take 'em some time to catch up."

"Sounds to me like the cavalry isn't coming! Daytona, here we come baby!" Dex hollered out the window. Robbie's released his foot from the gas pedal a touch. Maybe he could relax for once,

savor the moment. He took a pull from the Newport and gazed out through the windshield, relaxing his stare. The horizon was fading away and the gloaming seeped in from above.

Dex the dashboard giddily with an open palm. He was like a child on Christmas morning. The way his words tumbled and spilled out from his gap-toothed smile, as if his mind had just chosen them at random, gave the impression he hadn't passed the 10th grade. Technically, he hadn't passed the 9th grade either. He kept the black suitcase secured tightly under his legs, running his hand regularly over the case's leather handle to confirm its existence. It takes some time for those unaccustomed to large sums of cash and unacquainted with the ambiguous responsibility it bestows to firmly believe that the rug won't suddenly be pulled out from under them and that they'll be back to saving pocket change and filling the tank with regular instead of premium. And the two of them were intimately aware of how fast money came and went. One minute it's behind a one-inch-thick plate-glass window, resting snugly in a drawer beside a smiling teller. The next, it's mangled and stuffed into a large valise, some Franklins caught between the edges of the suitcase when it was hurriedly closed and now hanging on for dear life, and others left floating in the bank lobby in a haze of glory, falling on the tiled floor just in time for the awestruck teller to pick up and tuck deftly in her purse before the manager rushes out from his office. The story of money is always en media res. Hell, two days before Dex and Robbie were rubbing nickels together just to book a room at a Standard Eight Motel outside Raleigh. Fortuna's wheel spins and spins and from one moment to the next, everything can change.

Robbie flicked his cigarette butt out the window and glanced into the side mirror. The Dennis Hopper look was etched in his face. Half-outlaw, half-hippie, ray bans perched on top of a head sporting shoulder-length jet black hair tied back in a ponytail, wearing a black leather jacket over a white tee, and the faintest whistle between his teeth before he spoke. He reached into his pocket and pulled out another smoke, rubbing the thin tube of tobacco between his fingers before

stabbing it into the car lighter. His eyes moved horizontally across the dashboard. Speed, acceptable. RPM, out of the red. He glanced at the mileage. Fifteen thousand. He remembered when that number was one digit less. Last November, when they were still paying for toll booths with money saved from dead-end summer jobs. A few weeks later, sharing their last supper, Dex had proposed stealing from the low-lit diner.

“Just enough to get home,” Dex had said.

“Just enough...we don’t got a choice really, besides starving,” Robbie resolved, more to himself than to Dex, whose eyes had already begun to glaze over. The moment of doubt fell upon him later as he waited outside the diner, psyching himself up for the big moment. The engine idled and the windows were fogging up. He tried picturing himself walking in, repeating the practiced words, and turning on his heels out the door, but he couldn’t even reach for the car door handle. He wiped the condensation off his side window and saw the late-shift waitress inside clearing tables. Probably had the tip money already tucked in the hem of her skirt. Money that she needed as much as him. You’ve still got other options. You don’t have to do this.

Some voice had spoken to him that night. Not his voice, but one lodged deep inside him, one he hadn’t heard in a long time. He had pondered the alternative, rolled it over his tongue and chewed on it. Then Dex got out of the car, hood drawn over his head, and Robbie pulled the keys out of the ignition and followed him inside. Sometimes he wished he’d been busted the first time. It only got harder and harder to quit.

They started with liquor stores and roadside gas stations but soon graduated to midsized bank branches. It was like apples hanging from the tree, once you grabbed the lowest hanging fruit, you wanted to prove you could reach them all. One job became two became three, and so on and so on. And when nothing had yet separated the outlaw Robbie from the the law-abiding, check the weather today, future neighborhood block-association member Robbie but a series of choices, now

some insurmountable gulf had been dug between him and the normal, sedated life. As he stared up at the ceiling at night, he wondered if it was possible to hit the reset button. Nightmares of 5 by 8 cells and Kojak reruns all said it was impossible, that he had been irrevocably changed. He wanted to believe he was like everyone else. That he too had emerged from that same ambiguous conglomeration of cells that had the bright idea of assuming consciousness, was stumbling blindly down the same maze of life, and had as good of a chance of robbing a bank as saving someone's life.

But the doubt lingered, the belief that karma would catch up to him whether it was some form of the law, a vigilante customer with a Smith and Wesson hidden under his shirt, or the red and blue lights which now pulsed distantly behind them on the darkening highway, growing brighter and brighter in the rearview mirror.

"Shit," Robbie muttered under his breath.

"What?" Dex asked before peering backward himself. "Motherfucker!"

Those telescoping beams were like the grim reaper's scythe cutting across the horizon, aimed at their heads. Every job before had gone off without a hitch. No unruly security guards or wannabe heroes inside, out in three minutes or less, and never having to run to the getaway car. They walked briskly to Caprice, driving below the speed limit and off into the distance, and laughed over beers later that night about how robbing banks was a thousand times easier than starching clothes or delivering newspapers. But that was the way it went Robbie figured. Everything would either go perfectly well or perfectly terrible. No warning signals or close calls. Not a fade to dust but a highspeed burn-out.

As Robbie tried to push his foot through the gas pedal, his mind went to a childhood memory of Wallace, his cocker spaniel back in Queens. The skies above were an endless azure. Wallace pranced and barked in the front yard. Robbie's father had raked a pile of leaves together

which he was preparing to jump into. All of a sudden Robbie, of course without being consciously aware of how the receptors and synapses in his brain worked, sending chemical signals in a frenzied manner, releasing doses of adrenaline and cortisone into the bloodstream, had the acute feeling that the weight he'd tried to shed since leaving home was, in fact, a shadow he could not outrun. He flung his Newport out the window and clenched the steering wheel tightly with both hands.

Dex, reaching under his seat for the six-shooter he'd grown so fond of, tried to reengineer the robbery in his head but his mind was blank in multiple spots, like several pictures from a time-lapse of his memory had been forcibly removed. He remembered standing in the bank lobby, like Paul Newman, with his short cropped blond hair and blue eyes. Dex in fact had a crooked nose, broken too many times to count, and a rather pronounced chin, making him anything but a movie star, but his overzealous imagination tended to get the best of him. There was Robbie, calmly directing the teller to empty the cash register, a greying old man behind them in line, grumbling to himself about the wait time, and then a door to his left, no to his right, opening, or was it closing? Dex stared blankly at the suitcase resting between his legs, trying to recall. The jingle of keys, a shout, he recalled, and he turned, pulling the gun from his waistband and. Nothing. Beads of sweat trickled down his head.

"Not going out in handcuffs, Robbie, just so know."

"Listen, you didn't kill nobody, you grazed the guy's shoulder. I don't even think you hit him."

"I ain't saying it again."

"That's why I said no shooting. Ever. Look how it's got your brain scrambled."

"Little too late for that now, huh? Hey, pull off over there."

A barely marked turnoff appeared about twenty yards ahead of them. Robbie swung off the highway and onto the unpaved road, down-shifting to a crawl. The last traces of twilight had faded.

Wind rustled the loblolly pines and whispered over the hood of the car. Wheels crunched over gravel pebbles. The car stereo crackled and sputtered out. A pale mist settled over the thin stretch of road before them; it hovered in the headlight's glare and obscured even the closest gulley or tree branch.

"Kill the lights" whispered Dex. The Caprice crept forward at a snail's pace. Robbie and Dex scanned the horizon for any sight of movement, but the shifting shadows along the edges of their vision were as likely to be a red-tailed fox slinking after its prey, the grim reaper's cloak rippling in the breeze, or just the paranoid manifestations of two scared Yankee buffoons at their wits end in the North Carolina wilderness. Dex prayed for the blue lights to roll past them back up on the highway. Up ahead, Robbie noticed the road quickly unfolding into a parking lot. He could see several pickup trucks parked up and down the embankment of the swamp and at its far end, a rough-hewn wooden building standing desperately yet wholeheartedly alive.

Inside the house of God, a world unto itself roared. He, she, them, the ether, Jehovah, the patterns of mandalas you see if you close your eyes hard enough, whatever description fit best, was hard at work. The room was a bubble separated from the outside world, a forcefield radiating an energy that changed the elements inside. The air was denser, breathing more difficult, so people held their breaths for as long possible. Even moving across the aisle felt more strenuous, like the gravity was stronger there. The lights were unexplainably bright. There were only a few bulbs placed sporadically along the walls, but it felt like the sun was shining right through the front window.

Ron Carlson, a cotton weaver for 19 years and 4 months at the J.T. Stevenson textile plant, by and large, the single biggest employer in the county, was being laid out to rest. Graying and solemn grandmothers packed the first few rows, their grandchildren in tow behind them, sucking on their thumbs. The young ones didn't have to be told much. Struck silent by the somber faces

looming above them, they intuitively grasped the sense of mourning. Assorted family members, neighbors, and friends, of which some were all three, were spread throughout. Redstone's entire black community had come to say a final goodbye to Ron, laid out serenely in his casket with a picture of his mother folded into his hands and a Union badge pinned on the lapel of his earth-bound suit jacket.

A communal spirit resonated from both the pulpit and the pews. It wasn't the punch to the gut felt when standing in St. Patrick's Cathedral, where the soul meekly bows its head in the grand halls of Popes, wondering why it must feel so small in order for God to feel so large. Down in a Southern revival, half the spirit came up through the floorboards. A collective energy. Several Marxist dreamers present that night, known far and wide as the greatest of the materialist, nothing in the night sky but satellite beams and transistor radio waves crowd, conceded they too felt the holy-spirit, so much so that several swore the dearly departed himself was about to open his eyes and hop out of the coffin in a Lazarus-like fashion.

A crew of men, dressed in loose button-up t-shirts and suspenders, caps in their hands, wiping the sweat off their faces, stood in the back. Some had come straight off the line shift at three. In past years, they might have felt ashamed of the cotton smell, the traces of soot and mildew, and gone home to clean their clothes and scrub their skin, but now they accepted it, wore it as a badge of who they were, who Ron was. Standing at attention on a small stage erected next to the pulpit was a generously large chorus and full band, including the regionally famous Smokin' Sam Vinson, fresh off a tour promoting his famous but unfortunately hard to locate soul-punk single, 'Soul Not for Sale,' sitting placidly beside his b-fifty-two organ.

Several electric fans ping-ponged the humid air back and forth across the room. The worn-out floorboards creaked as an impossibly large man made his way to the pulpit. He had on a pair of large, black-rimmed glasses, sporting a small afro and a loosely trimmed goatee to go with. Wearing

a thin vest jacket over a button-up t-shirt, he dressed almost like he could've been one of the workingmen standing amongst the congregation, aside from the fact that he stood well over six feet tall. At the same time, he had the ability to hold his head in such a way that it always felt he was looking at you and never over you. There was no microphone because the man, Reverend Hawkins, had a voice which could fill a stadium.

“Ronald Carlson was a friend of mine. He was a brother of mine. He grew up right down by the Crescent line just like me. Watching the passenger trains coming up and down the tracks.” The front rows murmured in agreement. “Yes, sirs, you right,” and “oh yeahs” greeted the Reverend’s sermon. And he took his time with his words. Each one had its purpose and movement.

“Now y’all know what I’m talkin’ about. We lived on the other side of the tracks. Down a road you never would stumble on even if you tried. Man, I still remember when...” The Reverend paused to wipe his forehead with a handkerchief, tucking it into his pants pocket before continuing. “I remember back in middle school when brother Ron got caught with a girl behind the church. This very church right here. I ain’t gonna name no names now, but he got caught and came running over to me inside, yelling help me! Mama’s got the switch out!”

The crowd laughed in unison, smiles merging with tears. The Reverend had the kind of gift Jesus stumbled out of the desert with after forty days. He paused again. He rested his arm on the podium for a moment and looked over at Ron’s flower arrangement, gardenias and carnations and deep-red roses. The framed portrait resting above. Where his eyes went, the eyes of his people went. He pointed to the casket.

“Now that was Ron, and he was the same Ron back then as the one who got a job at the plant after he came back from the war. The same one who showed up to work on time on Mondays, to juke nights on Saturday, and to church on Sunday.”

“And he was still living on the other side of the tracks, but he worked hard, and his wife Denise, she’s here to attest to that fact. And he saved up all his life. Saved so maybe his daughter, and her kids didn’t have to breathe in that garbage he did each day for 19 years and 4 months. Day in...” Reverend Hawkins looked up again. A force was rising from the pulpit, working its way into arms, and legs, and hearts. He slammed an open palm on the table.

“And day out! It wasn’t my plan tonight to try and whip up a storm. I came to pay respect to a friend. But I have to say, I must say, and I know Ron would have wanted me to say, that for every single day he came to work down at the plant, for more than half his life, like so many of us here tonight have done, he didn’t get as much as a single day’s pay or even a damn get-well card when he was laid up in bed coughin’ his lungs out!” The men standing in the back stomped their feet. A woman in the front stood up and clapped.

“Now I know you’re ‘bout tired of hearing the damn same thing, but if any of y’all feeling like you got all this anger inside you, and you feeling lost, I ask you, come talk to me, and come see my friend Mister Z back there, who I think some of you might know.”

The Reverend pointed to a sharply dressed man in the back, one of perhaps two or three white people in the whole crowd, who gave a curt wave. He should have stuck out like a sore thumb, but his ease of stature, dropped shoulders, chin held upwards, exuded an ease of being, a self-awareness and lack of timidity that calmed the nerves of those around him. The man wore a closed lip smile, neither haughty nor fraudulent, as if to say he also felt the pressure of the moment, the gravitas of a people on the brink of implosion or explosion, that he too felt tied to the man lying in the coffin before them.

Now it happened that just as Reverend Hawkins was finishing his speech and the choir was about to break into another song, Robbie and Dex were pulling up outside. Robbie killed the engine

and stepped out of the car. A faint siren whistle reached his ear. The scythe was close behind. All just a matter of time. He started immediately for the church door. Dex hopped out, suitcase in tow. He sprinted to catch up and caught Robbie by the arm. "Wait. You can't just bust in there."

"I ain't busting in anywhere. It's a church, all are welcome."

"Even a Jew boy like you?"

"I'm an American. Looks like we ain't got a choice now. I need you to be cool, okay, be cool."

"I'm cool I'm cool"

"Wait, your mask."

Dex and Robbie both reached into their back pockets and once again donned black bandannas over their faces. As the choir was in the refrain of "Sign of the Judgment", shouting out "Hail O the time draws nigh," clapping and stomping on the downbeat, and people were spilling out into the aisle, their voices ricocheting off the plywood walls, the floorboards bouncing and groaning and threatening to crack, the very spire on top of the church moments from shooting off into the sky, Dex and Robbie burst through the front door and froze in their tracks.

The band and choir stopped abruptly, screeching on the brakes mid-rhythm, their instruments squealing like tires burning on pavement. Somehow, Sam Vinson didn't get the message. He hammered away at the black and white keys for another second before realizing he was the only musician left playing. He lifted his head in wonder and tilted forward so his sunglasses fell down his nose. He blinked to make sure his eyes weren't tricking him and in disbelief plopped his hands down on the keyboard.

An f-sharp hung in the air; it's sine wave slowly dissipating into a silence that filled the room. The absence of noise was more disturbing than the largest cacophony. When a forest becomes silent, the creatures know a predator is in their midst, they feel the instinctual presence of danger.

Dex's pistol hung off his waistband for all to see. A few of the congregation's eyes went straight to their twelve gauges and hunting rifles slung up on the wall. Mister Z, whose real name was Michael Zywicki but on account of the difficulty of pronouncing his surname correctly in a southern drawl had shortened it to a plain Z, calmly approached the two boys. The Reverend ambled towards them as well.

"Welcome my brothers. If you don't mind, we ask please just hang your weapons up on the wall. Anyone is welcome here." Robbie nudged Dex.

"See I told you."

"You don't feel like the sheep in a den of wolves?"

"I ain't worried."

"I always pegged you for the brains."

"Well, my mother always said just come with open arms."

"Well Robbie, she was lying. Now we've got about 10 seconds to bust out of here. Don't you hear them bells, it's all coming down. Here take this." Dex handed Robbie the suitcase and pulled the six-shooter out.

"Everybody back the fuck up and shut the fuck up!"

Reverend Hawkins kept walking closer. "This man ain't listening, he's got a damn death wish," Dex whispered. Everyone held their breath, holding on to their life by any means necessary. The police sirens grew louder and louder. Dex shifted his eyes between the Reverend and Mike Z, who kept coming closer and closer. Robbie could hear the white fellow, now within a few feet of them, addressing them in an unflappable but strangely inviting tone, like an angel from above. "We're friends here, no need for violence," the man kept saying. Robbie could see Dex's whole body trembling.

"Fuck it, Robbie, I told you I'm not made for a cell. You with me right?"

“Dex, don’t do this.”

“Last one

“Dex, look at me, buddy, do not go out there.”

“Robbie, I’m already out there in my mind. This is the end, my friend.”

Between the devil and the deep blue sea was Robbie Kandinsky. ‘Just to get by’ had been his reasoning from day one. He tried sticking to the rule from one robbery to the next. Their bounties never lasted more than a few nights of hotel room service, casino roulette tables and late-night romps with girls whose names rotated between Shirley, Candy, and Cherry before they were on to the next score. He even convinced himself that bank robbery was a net-positive to society. The bank customers were already insured, they never lost a dime either. The boys had simply taken a page right out of the Republican party’s economic strategy, create wealth and reinvest it back into the community.

The whole time Robbie kept one foot in crime and the other out. Stuck in the naivety of childhood, when good and bad guys were easily recognizable toy-action figures, he wasn’t ready to commit to one side yet. He was the first to propose rules like no shooting, of anybody. Ever. And no mom-and-pop stores. He held onto his moral compass, hoping it could point him back to the right side of the law one day. Sure, the outlaw life had its appeal, especially when it was portrayed on hundred-foot screens at the drive-in down the road from them in Valley Stream. For years, Robbie and Dex watched John Wayne decorate men’s fringe jackets with bullet holes, The Duke promising with his winsome ‘hey pilgrim’ smile that there was still a wild west out there; but Robbie hadn’t come out of a midnight screening of Badlands and suddenly desired to feel the real weight of a loaded pistol or the adrenaline rush when he pointed it with purpose. He was fascinated by the sheer pomposity, the desire to embrace one’s ego with open arms, but everything still had to be out of necessity.

The same might not have been said for Dex. Robbery was his idea after all. As an eight-year-old he could have been found practicing his gun-draw stare in the mirror, eyes bloodshot from watching back-to-back westerns, a Dirty Harry poster of Clint Eastwood scowling, the hammer of his .44 magnum cocked back, hanging above his bed. When a snooty kid from up the block had laughed at his black and white television, he sent him crying back down the street with a broken nose. Television didn't make him violent; it just revealed his true colors much quicker. He left a mother addicted to Nardil and Johnny Carson and prone to unexplainable absences and a father whose belts wore themselves out much too quickly. The road behind him stretched back much further and darker than what lay ahead. Even if him and Robbie were brothers of the road, even if they had each other's back since the days of stickball in the side streets of Queens, they were oarsmen rowing in opposite directions. One was looking for the coastline and the other was headed straight into the tempest.

The police cars were pulling into the parking lot. Dex turned around and barreled his way through the front door. Robbie, suitcase in tow, scrambled in the other direction, down the aisle, through the small sacristy behind the altar, and out of the church via a small backdoor. He heard a couple of shots ring out but refused to look back as he sprinted blindly into Carolina woodlands.