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NOWHERE, New Mexico

A Novel

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INTRODUCTION

Nowhere, New Mexico

A trip to Nowhere.

The town of Nowhere popped up out of the high desert in post-war New Mexico and marred the face of imperfection forever.

That was it. That was the hook. The line that was supposed to snare you into reading the book. First lines are critical in novel writing, the experts and gatekeepers say. I don't know. A great hook doesn't mean the book will be good. I can bang out a couple better than that right now and I'm not even drunk yet:

“The evening sun, orange-red and glorious in its setting, painted the patio a deep, dusky amber and a wisp of a late autumn breeze ruffled his hair as Chet sat down to eat the last plate of his dad.”

You'd want to read that one. Somewhere in the book Chet eats his dad.

“Corabeth didn't know if her shoulder would be up to the strain, but she dug in her toes and hiked

*up her dress and apron before exploding forward
and pushing Mr. Godsey out the third-floor win-
dow to his death.*

That last one is a Waltons television show deleted scene I just made up right now, but you get the point. Ken Halberson was planning on writing a book about Nowhere, New Mexico, and this is how Ken's book would have started if he'd ever written it. Which he didn't. Now I'm writing the book, so I might as well start it the same way.

* * *

I found Ken Halberson's notes a year ago stashed in a vintage 50s era Samsonite hard-sided suitcase (brown) at the Bonneville mid-century modern furniture store in Coleman, Texas. The suitcase was brown unmarred leather, and it was locked.

Wes is the guy who runs the store, and he knew the notes were in there, but the suitcase was locked, and he sold it to me anyway.

"Aren't you even remotely curious what's in here?" I said.

Wes, generally good natured except on the days when he's surly, shrugged. "I *was* curious," he said. "because I'm not an idiot. I opened it and looked at the stuff in it. It's just a bunch of paper. Worthless stacks of typed notes from the 50s. Some on copy paper and thousands of words handwritten on bar napkins and on the backs of hamburger sacks. Some college kid's dissertation notes maybe, I don't know. I didn't read it. It looked like nonsense. What do I care about it? I'm surprised no one dumped it all thirty years ago. Must have been stuck in someone's attic somewhere."

My eyes widened even as I tried to mask my excitement. A suitcase with a manuscript inside! Was I holding Hemingway's

lost bag? And what if in the bag *was* Hemingway's manuscripts from when his wife Hadley lost everything he'd written on a train car in 1922.

Can you imagine?

In December of 1922, Hemingway was in Switzerland, still a correspondent for the Toronto Daily Star. He hadn't yet published anything, though he wrote constantly. He'd written dozens of short stories and poems, not to mention a full novel. In '22 he was in Switzerland at the Lausanne Peace Conference and while there he'd given some small tokens of his writing to the editor Lincoln Steffens. Steffens asked for more of his writing, so Hemingway sent a telegram to his wife Hadley who was at their home in Paris. She dutifully packed up all of Hemingway's writings, everything she could find—even carbon copies, which back then were laboriously maintained as the only backups to a manuscript—and placed them into a satchel to deliver them to her husband.

Hadley boarded the train in Paris and while waiting for the departure had exited the car momentarily to buy some water to drink on the trip. When she returned, the satchel containing her husband's life work as an author was gone.

If you are not a writer you probably cannot imagine what a disaster this was, but as a lover of literature you should have an inkling.

Only a few works survived. A short story had been sent to an editor and another was buried in a drawer at their apartment, so Hadley had missed it. Hemingway was wiped out, and history shows that he never fully forgave his wife who was devastated by the event.

Everything Hemingway had written up to that point was lost forever.

Was this that satchel?

Well, no, because this ain't that story. No way Hemingway had his manuscripts in a hard-sided Samsonite 1950s era suitcase.

"It's not Hemingway's lost novel, genius," Wes said, as if reading my thoughts. This was one of his surly days.

"I know. But that doesn't mean it's not valuable."

"Just a bunch of notes someone wrote on bar napkins. Probably a manifesto. Like the Unibomber. It's all free with the suitcase. You want it?"

Of course I wanted it.

* * *

Wes was wrong, but he didn't know any better. The work in the bag wasn't just a pile of notes. Sure, some of it was scribbled on bar napkins and hamburger sacks like he'd said, but it wasn't nothing. Ken Halberson was planning on writing a book about a small town in New Mexico, a town I'd never heard of. In fact, it was a town that no one alive had ever heard of as far as I could tell. I couldn't find any information on the town at all. Anywhere.

But I found Ken Halberson.

Halberson was a decorated World War II vet who went to work for LIFE Magazine after the war as a special features writer. Edward Kramer Thompson, LIFE's editor-in-chief at the time, sent Halberson to Israel in 1948, Indochina in 1952, and to Nowhere, New Mexico (instead of Korea) in 1954. I have the letters on LIFE letterhead to prove it. In Indochina he had his leg nearly blown off when a soldier he was shadowing stepped on a landmine and was killed. Halberson, gravely wounded, recuperated in Japan and after 13 surgeries he flew home to a hero's welcome, a big bonus from LIFE, and the bad news that he'd be getting no more dangerous assignments from

the magazine. He was crushed when he found out he wouldn't be covering the Korean War for LIFE.

It was at this time that he began drinking heavily, and that's notable, I guess, if you're looking to study Ken's life. You see, there's a gap in Halberson's story. A huge chasm in his biographical data online that was partially explained by what I found in the suitcase and nowhere else.

Halberson wrote a few books *after* 1960, mostly about baseball and politics, and he became a New York Times Bestselling Author. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Cuba during the Bay of Pigs incident in 1961 (he went there without LIFE's permission; they paid him anyway) and according to Wikipedia he was killed in a car accident in Albuquerque in 1974. If you only look online, there is no clue in the extant information about this famous journalist that he ever made it to Nowhere, New Mexico, that he ever wrote an article or book about the town, and, like I said, even that the place ever existed.

But Ken Halberson was somewhere in 1954. He just disappears from the record from 1954 to 1960.

No, there's no evidence out in the wide world that Ken Halberson ever made it to Nowhere, yet, I have over 300,000 words and notes, many of them handwritten, from Halberson's time in Nowhere and I cannot deny by reading them that he either a.) certainly lived there for a time, or b.) was absolutely crazy for a good part of the middle 1950s, but was then sane enough to win a Pulitzer Prize for journalism in the early 1960s.

* * *

Ken Halberson was tall, ruggedly handsome, erudite, inquisitive, and single. He was the old 50s version of the confirmed bachelor before that term came to hint at homosexuality.

According to the biographies of some of his famous cohorts in journalism and literature, the people who knew him, and according to his own biography sent by him at the request of the Pulitzer people in the early 1960s, he never married, and he was happily heterosexual. The Pulitzer writeup doesn't mention his sexuality, but there is strong evidence from his own writing and from mentions of him by his author friends that he was straight.

Journalism was his life and love and he moved from job to job chasing the story. Women were an occasional delightful sidelight. At least, that what I thought until I read his notes from Nowhere.

What we can gather from the suitcase writings, merging those with what I could learn from the information available online, is that sometime in early 1954 Ken Halberson left his home in Schenectady, New York and took a plane to Albuquerque, New Mexico searching for the town his editor had sent him to write about.

Nowhere.

His plan was this... find the town, live there for a while, and write about it.

Rumor had it that a town had sprouted up out of the post-war desert sands and by all accounts—that is by the only rumors he could find—it was a modern utopia. The perfect town. That's all there was. That was the seed of the story. Edward Kramer Thompson, in his telegram dispatching Halberson to New Mexico had this to say:

Halberson,

They say there is a perfect town in New Mexico. Called Nowhere. Utopia. Doubt it is. Go find out. Take all the time you need. A year or more if need be. Rest, dig in. Have fun. Send us the bills. We want 10k words.

Ed

Halberson's notes from February 1954 were clear, and when he left Schenectady, this is what he knew: The rumor that the town existed, and the rumor that it was perfect. Here is what he did not know: He didn't know where Nowhere was located, and, if it even existed.

The investigation started before the journey to New Mexico, and Halberson kept notes of his inquiries. Nobody alive who'd ever published through the AP or any of the other news wires knew where the town was. A few had heard of it. Roger Claussen of the Chicago Tribune claimed to have heard of it but had never been there. A bartender Halberson asked during a layover said he'd heard of the place and that Ken's information was wrong. It was in Old MEXICO, the barman said. Not NEW Mexico. There were no other records to be found. No high school sports teams ever competed against any team from Nowhere, New Mexico. There were no birth records, no death filings, no marriage licenses, no church records, no record of auto accidents, no lawsuits, nothing. If Nowhere ever existed, it had been expunged from the public memory.

Halberson was supposed to write 10,000 words on a town he couldn't even prove existed. He wrote more than that. Way more. But he didn't write a book. At best he wrote an article that only a handful of people ever read.

I'm writing the book.

So, here's how I'm going to handle this.

You know, writing another man's book, it's not plagiarism. I'm not going to use Halberson's words verbatim. I'm writing my own book. I've studied the notes. I've spent hundreds of hours putting them in some sort of order. I know the story. I've analyzed bar napkins and hamburger sacks and the backs of receipts and reams of typing paper bound together by string or stuffed into manila envelopes. Some of the notes are extensive

and explicit as to the details and conversations. Some are almost impossible to discern. Halberson got drunk quite a lot, and when he did his writing suffered. Sometimes I get drunk too, so I'm not judging the man.

I can tell you this, though. Nowhere wasn't a utopia in the literary sense. I know this because Ken Halberson was in it. Imperfect Ken Halberson. Just like our world isn't a utopia because we're all in it. Imperfect us. There is no utopia this side of heaven, so we ought not take that term too seriously. However, an investigation into a utopia seems to be a worthwhile endeavor, so I'll have to finish Ken's work, which is a confusing thing to do.

At times I'll be writing as me and you'll know it's me. Sometimes I'll write as Halberson, and you'll know that too. Sometimes, like now, I'll break the fourth wall. It's unavoidable. Sometimes I'll fill in missing stuff with my own imagination, like watching a movie that's "based on true events." What you'll get, though, is true, and probably truer than if Ken Halberson wrote it, because I'm not biased by falling in love with the town, or with Kate Laird either. Hopefully, when we get to the end, it'll all ring true enough.

—Michael Bunker
Brownwood, TX
2021

CHAPTER 1

Abe Mendoza

The Legend of Nowhere.

When Ken Halberson arrived in Albuquerque it was just after 5:00 p.m. local time and the weather was cold. An icy wind cut through from the desert valley to the west, swirling against the Sandia mountains up against which the tiny Albuquerque Municipal Airport was built.

New Mexico had been one of the secret heroes of the recent World War. It's plethora of secret bases, testing grounds, installations, and labs brought about the end of the war and, for the first five years or so after the war, had guaranteed the peace. Now the Russians had the bomb too and the race for what the scientists and politicians called "The Super"—the hydrogen bomb—was underway. In a way, New Mexico was the front-line of the new Cold War. Looking around at Albuquerque off to the northwest and the deserts and mountains surrounding it in 1954 felt to Ken like presiding atop the proving grounds of human destructive capacity. Like Adam's holy line standing upon the sacred mountain of God, looking down at the valley of sin where Cain's progeny, unrestrained from engaging in every wicked imagination, slouched inevitably toward God's wrath.

About 120 miles due south of the city, on July 16, 1945, only a week after the military had established the White Sands Missile Range just outside of Alamogordo, American scientists and military men exploded the world's first A-bomb, impacting the course of world history forever. A rainbow cloud of sand, glass, and debris had surged upward to 38,000 feet and only a half dozen minutes later the mushroom cloud was visible from Albuquerque. Residents reported feeling the shock wave and seeing the intense light before the cloud rose into the sky like an omen or a signpost of the changing times. The old world was over.

Ken had read rumors from among the military people familiar with the area that only six months before he landed in Albuquerque, in September of 1953, the radioactivity had finally diminished enough at Ground Zero that an open house had been held at the Trinity Site.

Just to the south and the east of Albuquerque was Kirtland Air Base where America's bomber squadrons, including actor Jimmy Stewart, learned to fly the bombers that would punish Germany and Japan and eventually unleash the A-bomb on the world. The bomb itself was designed and built there at Sandia National Laboratory, housed on the same airfield.

Secret bases and facilities were everywhere in New Mexico, and these were only a few of them. In the land of enchantment, it was like the sand itself concealed dark enigmas and mysteries, and to Halberson, standing pensively in the chill wind, it seemed that the state was littered with rumors and secrets, and rumors of secrets. Here among the machinations of either world peace or world domination (however you chose to interpret it,) the journalist didn't know what that frigid breeze portended. Danger? Epiphanies? Disappointment?

Whatever the case, Ken Halberson, just in from snowy New York, didn't mind the cold. What he did mind was that every bar in town was closed (It was Sunday). No liquor stores were

open either. No grocery stores had alcohol. Ken had grown increasingly dependent on alcohol since his leg had been blown to bits in Indochina. Journalists are inherently addictive personalities and Ken was no exception. He'd steadfastly refused to get addicted to heroin or other pain killers that were common and easy to attain in Asia at the time. No, he truly believed that narcotics would ruin him. Alcohol, it seemed to him, was a manageable habit. Besides, he reasoned, the greatest writers in the world were alcoholics.

The cabbie who gave him the bad news that New Mexico was dry on Sundays also told Ken he'd never heard of Nowhere, New Mexico and therefore it didn't exist. He knew because he'd lived in the state since it was still a territory. He was five years old, he said, when New Mexico became a state, and if there was a Nowhere, New Mexico he'd sure enough know about it. He was, however, willing to drive his fare to a bootlegger's house before taking him to a hotel on the east edge of town where they sat outside in the taxicab and shared the bottle.

Abe Mendoza was the cabbie's name and Abe was the kind of man who liked to listen and ask questions. And he liked to drink, too. The curious sort you might say. As a journalist, Ken liked the rare occasion of conversing with someone who didn't just talk about himself. The curious, according to Ken, were the only authentic humans. A reporter generally learns to get other people talking by a rat-a-tat barrage of relentless queries, and people almost never tire of talking about themselves. But even people who know these essential truths are easy pickings when one of their own begins to prod. Old Abe would have made a good reporter, and it didn't hurt that he oozed warmth and goodwill. Through his heavy Mexican accent, he spoke good and unbroken English, and Abe established himself as an expert on this area of New Mexico. He was also evidently well-learned on public affairs and how those affairs influenced real people.

“Do you remember New Mexico before statehood?”

“No, sir,” Abe said. “I remember life and how we lived it when I was a small child in the territory but the politics of it never impressed me as a child. I am glad we became a state. America is great, and we here are not like those Texans always looking back and pining for something else. I mean, we were part of the Republic of Texas for a while, too. Not in my lifetime, but once upon a time. The treaty signed with Mexico after Texas Independence in 1836 required the Mexican army to retreat to the other side of the Rio Grande, just west of here. We learned of that in school. So, we were Texans too and we have some of that spirit and pride and independence. But we don’t live for those days and we’re glad to be Americans.”

“You know a lot about your history,” Ken said.

“I do. My brain remembers more than my face lets on.”

Ken decided to turn the tables and ask Abe questions for a bit.

“Do you believe there is a perfect place?” Ken said.

Abe took a pull from the bottle then sat for a moment, thinking, letting the warm burn of the alcohol do its work.

“Heaven. Heaven is perfect.” Pause, then, “Yes. Heaven.”

Ken took his turn at the bottle. “This side of heaven? Is there a perfect place on earth?”

A smile played across Abe’s lips so subtle as to almost be missed. He raised the bottle and looked at its label. “If there is, I would not live there. I would visit, but I wouldn’t live there.”

“Why is that?”

“In heaven there will be no sin to mess it up. On earth, an hombre like me could break the world if I was too long surrounded by perfection.”

More silence. Then Abe turned the tables back around.

“What would you do if you visited this perfect place?” Abe asked.

“I would observe,” Ken replied, “to see what made the place tick and what made it perfect.”

“Every observer changes that which he observes.”

Ken must have smiled. Abe knew science too.

“I would try not to break it,” Ken said.

A longer silent pause.

“What do you do, Abe, when you visit the perfect?”

Abe laughed. “Oh, such a place must not exist, but if it did and if I visited it I would be something of a ferryman or a guide. Which is like what I do here. I would take people to the perfect place and then watch their faces. This is, I think, what God does when His children see the sunrise.”

* * *

Halfway through the bottle, Abe had learned whatever he intended to learn from Ken Halberson, his fare and now his friend. With nary a word nor warning he put the cab in gear and started driving. Ken didn't ask where they were going. Halberson, the former Marine who had seen his leg nearly blown off outside Tonkin, was sure he was in no danger at the hands of Old Abe Mendoza the inquisitive and pleasant cabbie. There was a peace about Abe that Ken dearly liked.

The two men, now solidly drunk, still arrived in fair enough condition at Abe Mendoza's humble two-bedroom house just southeast of Albuquerque not far off Route 66. They did not stumble inside. They walked arm in arm like compadres. Despite the late hour, the two new friends ate tamales, beans, and rice served to them by Abe's happy wife Ophelia. She was happy, it seemed to Ken, when she was of service, which means that she was happy when her husband and friends were eating. Ophelia was not five foot tall, not by a stretch, but she was stocky and strong, and she held the full pan and scooped

big ladles of food like it had always been her calling in life. Ophelia kept Ken's plate full and stood and never sat, hoping that her guest would want more. After two portions, her husband pushed away from the table and went into the bedroom. The sound of a drawer opening and shutting, then he returned with a small, packed bag—like a doctor's bag—and turned to look at Ken, who was drunkenly shoveling more rice and beans into his mouth.

“Come amigo,” Abe said. “We'll need to leave now if we're going to get you to Nowhere and I can still get back in time to work some tomorrow.”

Ken Halberson didn't ask questions or protest. Somewhere in his whiskey-soaked thoughts was the indescribable clarity that this was where the conversation with Abe had been going all along. He couldn't say he knew it intellectually, not consciously, but somehow; he still knew.

* * *

The drive was mostly southward and some degree of east, but beyond that I didn't know and at some point I gave up trying to track. The roads were dark and there were no road signs that I could see or read and we shared the bottle as we drove. The wide two-lane narrowed at one point down to a single paved lane and then the pavement disappeared altogether and the car seemed to glide over the desert like a schooner in moderate chop down by Cape Horn, in and around hills and through gaps in those hills, kicking up sand in the tail lights. On occasion Abe would swerve to miss a small animal, a tumbleweed, or a cactus illuminated by the headlights and the hours clicked by as I sometimes slipped in and out of sleep despite what should have been the evident danger of the trip. When I woke again we were still on a dirt road, but this one was wide and

smooth and the grade took us upward in altitude until we were winding on this dirt road through what seemed like mountains interminable. I knew we hadn't stopped for gas, but we'd been on the road for more than five hours and the taxicab was now dangerously running on only fumes and faith.

Somewhere near the peak of the mountains (the dark shapes were still visible only faintly against the stygian sky) the bottle was drained and Abe tossed it into the back seat where it rattled around to remind us it was empty. Then Abe pulled onto an unmarked side road, narrower and steeper in its rise and we wound upward through the last hundred yards of sage and tree cholla before pulling to an abrupt stop just near the peak.

Abe darkened the headlights, then got out. I got out too, not wondering if I was going to be murdered and left for dead, but curious how this was all going to play out.

A feeling of danger would seem to be natural for this circumstance but instead I felt only love and adventure and the dull awkward spin of drunkenness.

I followed Abe through the brush and as we crested the peak I looked and there below us in the distance was a small town, ablaze with gorgeous, sprinkled lights in the pre-dawn darkness, seeming to float like a UFO or a ship floating stoically on the placid deep, or a heavenly Jerusalem, lamps kindled against the encroaching night. The town was set off from everything by the blackness of the northern Chihuahuan desert and it was February and I finally remembered in my drunken buzz that it was cold, but not as cold as it had been in Albuquerque because the wind was still and the silence imprinted itself on me like age itself. Like a blanket of time.

"That town is still a half-hour's drive more," I said, "and I'm sorry to say but I looked at the gauge and we don't have the gas to make it."

“That’s by design,” Abe said. “You aren’t meant to make it from Albuquerque or anywhere else on a single tank of gas.” He produced a small aluminum flashlight, pressed its button, then moved through the sage and tumbleweeds until we came upon a pile, covered in mesh and canvas. Pulling back the tarp, Abe yanked a metal jerry can of gasoline from the stash before re-covering the remaining fuel cans with the tarp, kicking rocks onto the edges to hold it down from weather and winds and then tossing sage branches on top for good measure.

“No one comes up here ever,” Abe said, “and when I return on my next adventure, I will bring more gasoline.”

* * *

The pavement started up again just outside of town and by the time we reached the first buildings in the city the street was wide and clean and there were concrete curbs like in any other town in America. I don’t remember seeing a sign that said, “Welcome to Nowhere,” but I was still a little drunk and giddy from the mystery and excitement.

I’ll describe the town later because it was dark then and I was tired, but my first impressions were that everything seemed to be new and there weren’t adobe ruins or dilapidated buildings like those seen on the outskirts of towns everywhere in the American southwest.

Abe drove me to a new looking motor hotel called the Vacation in Nowhere Motor Inn and I noticed that the sign and the building looked like they had been pirated from the Holiday Inn and Howard Johnson’s motor hotels that were now springing up everywhere due to America’s post-war love affair with the automobile and automobile travel. Turquoise and Orange were the predominate colors of the motel and the

glass windows, large and ubiquitous, were clean and shined in the glare of the streetlights.

We were now far from there but Route 66 ran north of here out of Texas westward through Tucumcari and Santa Rosa before heading through the mountains and into Albuquerque. During the first 10 minutes of this trip, heading the opposite way from Abe Mendoza's house, eastward on 66 out of Albuquerque, I'd seen two motor hotels more-or-less just like this one.

Abe got me checked in (he insisted) and carried my only suitcase into the room, turning on the lights and checking the room as he entered.

"I can't imagine what I owe you," I said to Abe, "but it's all on the LIFE Magazine publishing company and Mr. Edward Kramer Thompson – Editor. Esquire. I can give you a check or cash if you like."

Abe shook his head. "I cannot take your money, Amigo," he said. "Mr. Copeland would never forgive me if I took any money from you at all, and I am paid well enough since I have enjoyed your company."

"But let me tip you, Abe."

"Do not insult me after such a fine adventure, Amigo" Abe said with a gleam in his eyes. He shook my hand solidly. "I will see you again. If not here than in that other perfect place in the sky."

And with that, Abe was gone and I was left alone in Nowhere. I didn't ask him who Mr. Copeland was because it seemed that I would find out soon enough.

I was sleepy and the bed was comfortable and I slept like the dead or a man in a dream who wasn't in a hurry to wake from it.

CHAPTER 2

Leon McClain and Carol Cole

A Day Trip.

Leon McClain was a pleasant looking fellow in his early forties, solidly built, with hair graying at the temples and a habit of cracking his knuckles now and again when he was trying to emphasize a point. He was the manager of the Vacation Motor Inn. Despite Leon's lofty position as the head honcho in the entire establishment: hotel, bar, and restaurant, lunchtime found Leon cleaning tables, sweeping, or running the register in the diner attached to the lobby of the motel. Lunchtime was the hour when Ken Halberson finally rolled out of bed on that first morning after his secret overnight journey to Nowhere.

Leon showed Ken to his table and handed him a menu.

"We'uh glad to see you hereabouts and wasn't wantin' to disturb your sleep after such a long journey. Otherwise, we might've sent you breakfast."

Ken smiled in a friendly way and rubbed his eyes as he sat and pushed into a turquoise-colored booth. "It has been a journey, but I would argue that anyone who arrives in this town has come a long way."

“That’s true. That is certainly true,” Leon said as he wiped down the table. “But you come a particulah long way and we wasn’t wantin’ to disturb ya.”

“Well, thank you. I’ll just start off with coffee.”

“Coffee. Yes, suh.”

Ken noted Leon’s smooth southern accent, like silk and cream, formal but still truncated here and there and colloquial. He placed Leon from somewhere down in Georgia. Savannah perhaps, like Johnny Mercer or Jim Williams in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

A few minutes later, Leon arrived with a small, stainless pitcher of coffee wrapped in some sort of knitted sweater made for the purpose, along with a smaller stainless cream pitcher, a ceramic tray with sugar cubes and a tiny set of tongs, and a coffee cup capped by a saucer.

McClain placed the coffee service on the table, then ceremoniously removed the saucer and placed it under the cup.

“Yes, suh. Yes, suh,” Leon McClain said and cracked his knuckles. “What can I bring ya for eatin’ purposes?”

“I’ll take an omelet. Bacon, egg, and cheese, chives or greens or whatever you have, and keep the coffee coming if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, suh. Yes, suh,” Leon said again. “And ah do hope we’ll have the pleashuh of a social talk once your *appetitenal* cravings are propuhly sated. (He was known to make up words when he found that his own concoctions would work better.) “We do try to welcome our guests and introduce them to our (pronounced like owaa) fair town. Now, ah’ll run and put ya orduh in. What should ah call you, fair suh?”

“I’m Ken Halberson. Call me Ken.”

“Oh, that would not do Mr. Halberson. Informality at this juncshuh would certainly not do. But ah’ll run and fetch that omelet for ya.”

Ken poured himself a steaming cup of coffee and smiled as he thought about Leon McClain's southern manners and how the man knew without asking that Ken had come a long way. Halberson felt like he was an honored guest on another planet. And maybe he was.

* * *

I'll forsake writing out Leon McClain's southern patois. It's painful to write and to read. From here on in when you read his dialogue, because I've told you of it, you'll hear Foghorn Leghorn or Burl Ives as Big Daddy Pollitt in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

While Halberson ate his omelet, Leon McClain sat and introduced Ken broadly to the town and particularly to the Vacation Motor Inn which he operated with his close friend Carol Cole. McClain never said at the time if he was married to Carol Cole, but Halberson suspected as much. Why Carol Cole would have maintained a maiden name was a mystery to Ken Halberson.

"The Motor Inn is our little corner of the universe, the tiny world of Nowhere, and you'll see it's plenty of a good life. Over there is the laundromat and back yonder is the bar, eh... *cocktail lounge*. We call it The Brick House. Cheap drinks there but not watered down and usually fine company. Most folks out to drink and carouse do it downtown where you can walk from place to place, but The Brick House is a fine place to unwind while you're with us. We aren't overwhelmed with visitors here, but we're happy with our business, and our costs are so low that we make out fine. Besides, I make enough from the table at Ben Dobrick's Thursday night game to cover any shortfalls. I like draw poker but I'm good enough at any of 'em."

Out the window in the bright afternoon sunlight, the view could pass for Las Vegas, Nevada another city that sprung from the desert a little less than a decade earlier. Nowhere was a fully realized town with all the traffic and buzz of a real boomtown. The scent on the air in the diner was a harmonious whole, slightly of cigarette smoke and bacon with a hint of maple syrup and coffee. A few shiny automobiles passed by on the highway and palm trees, tall and majestic, fluttered in the breeze. The palm trees, Ken reckoned, would have had to have been planted here entirely grown. An urban style decision. He didn't doubt that such trees could grow at this latitude, but he couldn't remember palms in the pictures of New Mexico he'd seen in magazines and newspapers. No grass grew between the diner and the highway, but the landscaped parts around the newly blacktopped parking were covered with shiny white stone interplanted with flowering desert plants and cacti. Across the highway was more desert, but Ken could see houses in the distance and more palm trees in the yards and along the roads.

"We've been here for four years," Leon McClain said, "which was when we built the place. We first came to Albuquerque from South Carolina and then over to Alamogordo for the dry air, which helps with my breathing."

"Ahh, South Carolina," Ken said. "Makes sense."

Leon nodded, "Yes, sir."

"How did you come to be here or to find Nowhere in the first place?" Ken asked.

"Oh, like everyone else. Someone brought us here. We were with new friends and bouncing from party to party one night and at some point, aimless and listless, one of our guides suggested an adventure. We drove through the night and ended up here. We visited for a week, fell in love with the place, and sent a telegram back home to sell everything and send us the proceeds. And after conversing with Mr. Copeland, Carol and

I decided that what Nowhere needed was a motor hotel for our transient, traveling public visitors.”

“Mr. Copeland?”

“Oh, Mr. Copeland is one of the first gentlemen we met when we arrived. One of our greatest citizens here in Nowhere. A veritable founding father. So helpful and hospitable to strangers. And how is it you come to visit us, Mr. Halberson?”

“A cabbie named Abe brought me.”

“Sure enough good ol’ Abe Mendoza. He’s a good un.”

“He is.”

There were so many questions, but Ken sat quietly for a few beats, chewing his food and sipping coffee. Then...

“What’s the story of this place?” he asked.

“Of the Vacation Inn? Nowhere? Or what?”

Ken used his fork to indicate around. “Either one. Both.”

“I told you the inspiration of the motor inn. We took all our saved money and what we got from selling all our stuff from our old life. Then Mr. Copeland helped us with a loan from the bank with payments so cheap we couldn’t help but do it. We built the place—there was a lot of construction in Nowhere at the time, so lots of extra workers around—and we’ve loved every minute of running it. Though it do keep us busy.”

“I bet.”

“Mr. Copeland was so helpful. Early on we missed a few payments, and he never said a discouraging word. Never charged us fees. Never pressured us. He said, ‘don’t worry about it. Keep plugging away.’ And we did and now we’re doing fine.

“As for Nowhere the town. It’s just here. Most of them construction workers stayed... just by the by. They never went back to where they came from. Anyway, you’ll hear a dozen stories or more about how the town came to be. Maybe they’re all true, or maybe none of them are. The town, as you can

reckon, is young and rife with speculation. The rumor I find most ubiquitous and likely is that it was gold.”

“Gold?”

“Yep. Gold. In this story an old miner name of Lew Bonaventure came here just after the war to look for gold in the basin below those mountains yonder. Word is he found that gold, and a hell of a lot of it. Well... the secret leaked out and people started coming here in droves.”

“Like the 49ers?”

Leon shrugged. “Not really. These weren’t miners coming. Mostly it was regular folk. Maybe people learned the secret lesson that very few of the miners in 1849 got rich. Only a tiny percentage. The people who got rich were the purveyors and the service folk. The middlemen and shop owners and the people selling mining equipment and candles and groceries and burlap and canning jars. Everyone *but* the miners. By contrast, the people who came here—if you believe this version of the story—were merchants, capitalists, architects, road builders, etc. Well... the kind of people you need to build a town. The more the town grew, the more people were needed to work here and keep growing.”

“What happened to the gold?” Ken said.

“Oh, the rumor is that Lew Bonaventure and a few other miners sent, *still send*, the gold to town by couriers, or they cart it to Albuquerque through the mountains. Or they fly it out from a private airfield over by Alamogordo to New York or Chicago and the money comes back clean. Who knows? They certainly don’t consult me. But no doubt people believe the gold is there, and that it’s the gold money fueling the banks and the low interest rates and the growth. I believe it.”

“Makes sense.”

“But here’s the deal. There was so much gold (rumor has it) that they had to handle it *judiciously*. Carefully, you hear? Say you found a mine with all the gold that ever existed in the

world. Why, the gold would be worthless!” (He cracked his knuckles here.) “Just too much of it all at once. Price would drop to nothin’. They’d pave the streets with it. That’s what they say heaven is like. So much gold they had to pave the streets with it. So old Lew and his cronies, they drip and drop the gold out piecemeal-like. To make sure the good times and dollars keep rollin’. So’s they don’t saturate the market.”

“Ahh,” Halberson said.

“Truth be told, whatever story you believe, and there are a million of ‘em, if you ask me, this town is here because of the gold. That’s my opinion. Without the gold no one would be here. We wouldn’t, and you wouldn’t either.”

* * *

I learned that Carol Cole was the brains of the operation, or so Leon said. She managed the cleaning staff, planned parties, and implemented rules to keep the bartenders from giving away too many free drinks. She was a voluptuous woman, curvy, not at all vain or concerned about her looks, but a knockout just the same. All of 5’2” and big red lips, flowing brown hair, and dressed like she was all business. She stopped by the diner while I was talking with Leon, and he recruited her to give me my first driving tour of the town.

We left the diner in Carol’s red Ford convertible (with the top down) on that beautiful February day and Carol had her hair tied up in a head scarf against the wind and I was happy to be there and not back in Schenectady where it was surely ten degrees and wet to boot.

Nowhere was set out in squares but there were four angled streets all cutting toward the main town square just north of downtown. Other than the angled streets, everything else was on the square, with numbered streets running north/south,

and named streets running east/west. The named streets were clustered in groups, so there were ten streets or so named after nuts (pine, walnut, chestnut, pecan, etc.) and then there were ten streets named after American presidents (Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and so on.) I think after the Presidents it was American capital cities, then types of cats and dogs. If you were on an angled street, you were heading into or away from the town square and downtown, and the four angled streets were named after their direction: Southwest, Northeast, Southeast, and Northwest.

Carol started us out on Southwest Drive heading in toward downtown. As she drove along, cigarette dangling from her lips, little children would see her coming and run out into the street waving and she would slow and pull shiny dimes out of the car's ashtray and hand them to the children who would squeal and look at the dimes and shout with joy before running back to their yards.

"Get out of the road you scamps," she'd yell, cigarette bouncing in her lips.

"They'll buy ice cream from the truck this afternoon with the money. Don't worry about it. Their parents don't mind."

Occasionally, we passed beautiful parks and public squares that the town's architects left undeveloped as green areas. Most had a fountain or a gazebo in the center of them, and they were surrounded by houses built in the modern way—all Sinatra and Palm Springs—clean style, low-slung with floor to ceiling windows, brick and stone, exposed beams, and decorative flourishes indicating the rocket age. The colors were Palm Springs or Miami inspired, some were earth tones and white while others were bright turquoise and orange like the Vacation Motor Inn, and there were palm trees, but almost no grass "yards" as we knew them in New York. What wasn't paved was stone or dirt.

Most of the houses, like most of the cars we saw, were new. All of them were post-war and the majority were only a few years old.

“Our town” (Carole did not have the accent that Leon did,) “is quite modern and clean. Everything you see wasn’t here only six years ago. Nowhere sprung up quite like the grass in spring after a rain with explosive growth in the first few years, but lately the people have decided to rein things in a bit, which is wise.”

“Who decides to rein things in?” I asked.

“Well, the people do, silly,” she laughed. “We don’t have much of a government here, per se. Not what you’re used to. I guess you could say that Mr. Copeland is our de facto Mayor but nothing official and I can’t recall that we’ve ever had any kind of election. We have a Town Square but no County Courthouse or government buildings. We never saw the need for them. Everyone pretty much wants the same things, and we just talk it over until we come to a consensus.”

She paused and lit another cigarette, offered me one which I accepted.

“Isn’t this weather nice? So cold yesterday, but warm and gorgeous today.”

“The weather is fine,” I said. The weather had changed drastically between Albuquerque and here. Today in Nowhere felt like a spring day or maybe a gorgeous day in early fall.

We turned south on Walnut just before downtown, then Carole did more of a maze pattern from there, pointing out stores, restaurants, and entertainment spots.

“Polly’s is a big gathering mecca for the men who like to sit around and talk. They serve beer and whiskey and sometimes the owner will bring in seafood fresh from the Gulf of Mexico flown in expressly that day for Polly’s guests. It’s not really a restaurant, but they usually have something there for the men to eat.”

I nodded. "Polly's huh?"

"Short for *Polly Wannacracker's*. You know, like a parrot thing? Everyone just calls it Polly's. It's mainly men in there and no women except sometimes Clara Davies will go in there just to try to get tongues wagging, but no one pays her no mind. Over there is Bannock's Five and Dime and Soda Fountain and next to it is Kenton's Department Store. Bannock's has great malteds and burgers and Kenton's has everything you'll require clothing-wise and for your household needs. If you need a broom or a suit, go to Kenton's."

"You should write their ads," I said.

"Don't think I don't," Carol said without even a sideways glance.

"Ooh," she said, pointing, "There's the Dipsy Doodle. Best hamburgers in town if you don't mind greasy cheese. Which I don't, you can tell."

I don't know why I said it, but Carol's self-deprecation about her size made me think of it. "Why aren't you and Leon married, Carol? I don't see either of you wearing a wedding ring."

"Married? Me? To Leon McClain?" Carol laughed heartily. "Leon is as homosexual as a three-dollar bill. Or maybe it's that he's asexual. Whatever it is when they aren't interested in the opposite sex. Or any sex for that matter." She laughed again, not in derision or scorn, but in authentic joviality. "I've never seen him give *anyone* a sideways glance, sexual or otherwise, except in his normal friendly businesslike way. Believe me, if Leon liked women, I'd know it. Been throwin' myself at him for nine years. Even crept naked into his bed once to try to motivate things. Not a single thing happened, to my perpetual disappointment and frustration. But Leon and I do love each other, I have no doubt at all about it. I love that man like if I were married to him, I surely do, so don't expect me to be presenting myself naked in *your* bed. Unless Leon makes me mad

one night and I get drunk, or maybe he finds himself a man. Not you though, sweetie. I *know* you like ladies. You've already looked me up and down a few times, don't think I didn't notice, and I thank you for it. It feels good to be appreciated, even if it's only to be reported on. No sir, I love Leon, and I think he loves me too. In his own, probably homosexual way. And if some other woman comes after Leon, I'll put her in a hole in the desert."

"Have you two never talked about it?"

Carol waited a beat before answering. She seemed to be pondering the question, though it was a simple one. Then... "No, we never have. Can't say I know why we haven't, but we never have. I know it's the fifties now and everything is more progressive, but I guess there are some things that just don't come out in the open." She looked away and pointed. "Now, over there down the block is the VFW and the Bijou Theatre. And there's a new drive-in, the Regal, out on Southwest. It's packed on Friday nights. We don't get movies until way after they're released, but there's always something playing, and they let you sneak booze in if you aren't too obvious about it. We'll probably get *From Here to Eternity* by *next* Christmas."

* * *

We were sitting at the lunch counter at Bannock's, and I was drinking a Coke with ice while Carol was sipping a chocolate malted through a straw.

"What's your theory on how the town came to be?"

Carol looked up from her malted and smiled. "Leon been filling you with stories of gold in them hills?"

"He mentioned it."

“Well, there ain’t no gold. Not as far as I can tell. Everyone believes there is, but I’ve never seen any of it. I think the Ballad of Lew Bonaventure is mostly a myth.”

That kind of shocked me. “So, you don’t think he’s a real person?”

“No, I’m not saying that. He’s probably a real person. I just don’t think he found any gold. You can write me down as an adherent to the conspiracy theory category of Nowhere creation myths. The rumor I subscribe to is that Hoover sent a G-man here after the war. Old man Bonaventure had been prospecting around and, well, this whole area is littered with secret bases and test sites. You can’t go in any direction and *not* hit some government facility. So, Hoover sends a G-man to figure out if Bonaventure is a spy and why he’s snoopin’ around these government sites. The G-man, we’ll call him Smith..., well, Smith figures out that Bonaventure is crazy and there ain’t no gold, but Smith likes old Lew and the two become fast friends. But Smith can’t drag out this dream assignment forever. He eventually must tell his people back in Washington why he’s been lazy and lollygagging in New Mexico for a year or so just hanging out in a desert oasis drinking homebrew and white lightning from the still with Lew Bonaventure. Smith makes up the story about the gold to satisfy his spook bosses on two counts: 1. That Lew wasn’t a threat., and 2. That he, Smith, was actually doing his job and not just padding his expense account and sleeping on Bonaventure’s couch. Of course, once word of the gold got to Washington, well, that place leaks like a sieve. I mean, that’s how the Russians got the A-bomb, right. Washington can’t keep a secret. They had a spy right there in Los Alamos stole our biggest secret, so you know the gold story was out in about two point five seconds. But no. Ain’t no gold. Not in my version of the story.”

“The whole thing was a legend?”

“That’s what I believe. Then when the word got out, people came out to see what was happening, fell in love with the place like Smith did, like we did, like everyone does, like you will, and bam... boomtown. Self-fulfilling prophecy All the while, the whole thing is founded on the gold standard. Which is the golden lie. So long as everyone believes the gold is there, everyone’s happy.”

“How did you and Leon get together,” I asked.

“I don’t know if I even recall. We were running in the same circles back in South Carolina. I was there in college and Leon was a graduate assistant, quite a bit older, but he wasn’t assisting in any of my classes. We would meet at parties, and I was instantly in love with Leon McClain and hoping he’d fall for me if I stuck around. I think we fell in love then and we were just always together. Like a hand in a glove, as I said, but nothing was ever physical. Ever. Not even a kiss that wasn’t obviously just friendly. I don’t think I reckoned Leon was gay until sometime later and it wasn’t an epiphany or anything like some bolt from the blue. It just settled on me over time like a foggy day. You don’t usually see the fog rise or flow in like a dam just broke. You just wake up one day and it’s foggy and that’s just the way it is.”

“And you never talked about it? Leon’s homosexuality? It never came up? How is that possible?”

“Damned if I know,” Carol said, then pointed through the glass picture window. “Over there across the street is The Regent Bank. That’s Mr. Copeland’s joint. But anyway, Leon and I just fit together like a hand in a glove, you know, and I guess I never wanted to ruin it.”

“I don’t mean to get too personal, but I have to know. Don’t you ever get...,” I looked around to make sure no one could overhear me, then whispered, “...urges?”

“Oh honey, don’t think I don’t already have you on my list for if I decide to have a moral lapse, because I do, but I

don't want to spoil things for you and Kate. Oh, and you're gonna need a tuxedo, sweetheart. Get a white one. We can stop by Kenton's after this and get it ordered. You can put everything on account and I'm sure your paper will want you properly liveried. Tuxedo will make you right edible, Brother Ken. Consumable. You'll be decked up and fine and everyone in this town with working lady parts will want some of you. Everyone dresses up at Bix's and no one wears black around here. Only white. It's too hot in black if you must go outside. You'd stick out like a sore thumb in black. Don't matter if the tie's black though."

"Me and Kate?"

"A small-town woman just has a feel for these things, but let's not talk about it and jinx it."

* * *

Kenton's Department Store was all glass and exposed beams and marble. Carole and Ken were greeted at the door by a smiling doorman, and he handed them a flyer that announced the coming spring styles and promised "Paris in Nowhere this Spring!" Ken and Carol walked to the elevator where an old elevator operator, possibly in his late seventies or early eighties, asked them which floor they wanted.

"4th Floor, Men's," Carol said as she pressed four fingers into the old man's back, and then patted him tenderly. "He's deaf. Stone deaf. He's Margot Robinson's father. She works for Copeland at the bank. She brought him here from Allentown last year. He lost his hearing at the Battle of the Bulge. An absolute hero. But he refuses to sit at home in retirement and he doesn't like the television. She finally got him this job and if you don't know he's deaf and you answer his question about "which floor" without knowing that he's deaf, he just takes you

to the 3rd floor – Women’s Dresses. That way he gets it right 95% of the time.”

There was a loud “ping” and the doors slid open revealing the Men’s Department of Kenton’s through a cloud of cigarette smoke. As Carol exited the elevator she reached and squeezed Margot Robinson’s father’s hand. He turned to Ken and said, “I’m deaf!” and Ken nodded.

“Thank you,” Ken mouthed and then smiled.

The old man smiled back, “Protect your gun, young man!”

Ken could tell that the man felt needed, and that said a whole lot. He had no idea what “protect your gun” meant, but he figured the man was old, so who knows.

Carol put her hand on Ken’s shoulder and nodded toward the clothing racks. A few men were shopping among the racks and shelves, but most of the shoppers were women who had purses hanging from the crooks of their arms and took drags on cigarettes while they looked at casual shirts or slacks for their husbands. “I have to go take care of a few things down at the office. Back toward the back is the tuxedos, and they’ll want to measure you and pin you up and it might take a few minutes. If it’s Lucy Kenton, brunette and legs all the way to the ground, beware of her. I mean it. She’s a maneater. She’ll touch your butt a lot. Maybe even your noodle if she really likes you.”

“I like the sound of Lucy,” Ken said.

“Don’t. She’ll chew you up and spit you out in the desert. Her last husband, Old Man Kenton’s son, had to join the Army because he said Korea was safer than staying with Lucy. Her first husband volunteered to trigger the A-bomb. By hand. In person. My friend, he sought annihilation rather than stay with her. She makes crazy people look at her and say, *‘Well now, that bitch is crazy!’* Anyway, when you’re done bein’ sized up and felt up come back down and I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

“Gotcha,” Ken said as Carol slipped back into the elevator. He glanced as the doors began to close and saw the old man

pull a flask from his vest and hand it to Carol. The old man saw Ken watching the transaction and he winked.

* * *

The tux mission was over without too much trouble. “White,” he’d told Lucy, but she just rolled her eyes. “That’s all we sell.” She examined him thoroughly up and down and for a moment, hand on her chin. Ken felt like a steak on a sailor’s plate or a bear’s first meal after a long winter (“*Oh! You’ll do. You’ll certainly do.*”) After being well measured and having his butt well touched, Ken did the paperwork to open an account to have the bills sent to ol’ Edward Kramer Thompson at LIFE Magazine. Then there were shoes to buy, a bowtie and a belt, pocket squares of assorted colors, and some new undershirts and handkerchiefs. All of these would be sent to the Vacation Motor Inn in the next few days. Ken finally extricated himself from Lucy’s pawing machinations with a lie that he would return someday soon to be more “expertly fitted *if you know what I mean,*” and in the elevator on the way back to the lobby, the old man handed Ken the flask without a word. Ken took a pull. Whiskey, warm and smooth. He thanked the old man and gave him a thumbs up and made a mental note to buy the old soldier a bottle of whiskey—a token of gratitude from a fellow warrior.

“That Lucy is crazy,” the old man said as the elevator doors slid closed. “She probably grabbed your gun.”

* * *

Now they were back in the convertible with the wind in their hair.

The town was how Halberson first imagined it, only more so. More idealized than the imagination initially conceives from afar. Clearly the town of Nowhere wasn't "perfect" in the dictionary sense of being without flaw, but the word can have other meanings. This—what he'd seen thus far—was *cinema* perfect. Not that level of perfection that makes you not believe what you're seeing. It wasn't creepy perfect. Somehow, Halberson just felt comfortable in Nowhere. Like you might say a sweater is perfect because it just feels like home regardless of its condition. Or that feeling you get when the weather is just so, and the colors are bright, and you aren't suffering from *want*. The sensation when you have no lack. Trying to describe it to himself he found his vocabulary insufficient.

Maybe it was the day or maybe it was the gorgeous weather, but for a time, as he was riding in the red Ford Crestline convertible (white interior!) with Carol, it seemed that time slowed down. Like in a picture show. And the images Ken saw as they drove and chatted looked like they were produced in a travel agency or maybe were concocted on Madison Avenue.

Then there was the architecture. Not just of the houses and businesses, but of the whole. Taken individually, the houses were unique, but all were alike in that they were constructed in that modern style that was all the rage in the magazines on the newsstands. Built close together, like those Levittown suburb houses in New York and New Jersey, but these were far from the Levittown mass-produced assembly line boxes. Instead of entry level lower middle-class style, these were more modern, spacious, and expensive looking. There was money here, but not audacious money. Here, the middle class thrived.

They passed one of the open public squares and in this one was a baseball diamond with a low backstop and a dozen young boys with baseball hats pulled on sideways or on backwards were playing ball on the sandlot. Meanwhile, Carol was explaining that Nowhere didn't really want attention, and that

people were perfectly happy the way things were, and that Ken should really think about writing a novel about the war or about murder in the movie industry rather than some silly article about Nowhere.

“Stay here and write a book,” she said. “I’m not sure people are going to like some magazine story about their town.”

“I haven’t decided what I’m going to do,” Ken said, “I’m leaving my options open and letting LIFE Magazine foot the bills. Like Agent Smith sleeping on Bonaventure’s couch, I guess.”

“That’s my boy.”

CHAPTER 3

John Lee Danner

The Brick House.

Later that night I met John Lee Danner and heard the weirdest theory of Nowhere yet. John Lee was a fabulous conversationalist, a bit effeminate, or maybe artsy, casually funny, and possibly insane.

Despite the warm day, it was cooler after sunset, and I wore a sport coat and a hat even though I was only walking the twenty yards to the Vacation Motor Inn's cocktail lounge. The short walk was bracing because, in addition to the cooler temperatures, the wind had picked up and was blowing in my face as I pulled open the door of The Brick House.

The lounge itself was large and comfortable and attached to the main lobby of the Inn by a dimly lit hallway and a glass door. A fire crackled in the fireplace which was, after the modern style, set in the middle of the room, all white painted brick with a large chimney of copper suspended from the ceiling. A few patrons sat at the large wraparound bar on gray leather stools, and others sat at the tables with their drinks. There was a brass footrail and a handrail also of brass that followed the curve of the bar its full length. A small wooden stand by the front door held a printed sign that read, "Welcome to

The Brick House” and under it “Courtesy of The Vacation Motor Inn” but someone had crossed through VACATION and hand-printed VINDICATION, which must have been an inside joke for locals because no one had removed the sign or reprinted it. Graffiti was part of the perfection, I guess.

There was a thick cloud from the cigars, pipes, and cigarettes being smoked liberally, but the thickest of the gray-white smoke hovered along the high ceiling, swirling there lazily and disturbed here and there by invisible currents, so the air at head height and down was clearer. Silver dangling lights with golden accents hung from the ceiling over each table, and recessed lights in the ceiling and under the bar gave the place a golden, ethereal glow. A few faux potted trees stood along the back wall, which was half of glass and half of brick, and the glass portion revealed a view into the courtyard and pool area of the motor inn. The water in the pool glowed electric aquamarine from submerged lights. It was February and only a fool would go swimming, but for some reason the innkeepers left the pool open. Perhaps for this very view. A starburst clock of the popular space-age style was on the center of the brick section of the wall, and on the other there was colorful modern art hanging. I looked around and there was artwork displayed prominently around the lounge, and the most notable I saw from the front door was a large painting of stylized or maybe cartoonized television sets of assorted primary colors set against a sand-brown background. The rabbit-ear antennae of the tv sets emitted stylized lightning, symbolizing electricity, which connected each set with the other tv sets and with the background moon of a greenish yellow hue that looked like cheese gone moldy.

The tabletops were also variously colored, some red and some yellow and others a kind of aquamarine blue, and on each table and interspersed along the bar there were ashtrays, all unique—some of glass and some of ceramic.

I sat at the bar and there were small brass dishes with free cigarettes there, so I picked one and lit it from a book of paper matches emblazoned with a kind of black and white caricature of the front sign of the Vacation Motor Inn. There was a short tag line written on the inside flap:

You're Someone in Nowhere!
Stay at our Vacation Inn, the Best Value Nowhere!

That had to be all Carol.

A bartender in a full tuxedo (black) took my drink order and I wondered where he'd gotten the black tuxedo, obviously not from Kenton's, and whether he was lucky or cursed that he'd procured it without being mauled by Lucy Kenton the serial groper.

"Rum Runner," I told the barman and took a drag on the cigarette deep into my lungs, exhaling slowly as I began to write some quick notes on bar napkins. Mostly of my conversation with Carol from the earlier tour. The drink arrived and I'd already filled five napkins with notes when I saw from the corner of my eye a man pull out the stool next to mine at the bar and sit down.

"John Lee Danner," the man said, sticking out his hand. He was a handsome man, middle aged, thin, and medium height, dressed in slacks and a dress shirt with no tie and no jacket. I shook his hand.

"Ken Halberson."

"Glad to know you, Ken."

"Likewise."

"You must be our writer fella, visiting from that Antichrist metropolis of New York City."

I laughed. "Schenectady, actually, but still New York."

"Well, then... I've been misinformed. I do apologize to you, sir, but not to that Antichrist metropolis at all. New York

City is a hive of mendacity unmatched since the days of Caesar Nero.”

I laughed and John Lee Danner smiled. He ordered a bourbon neat from the bartender and when it arrived, he tipped it to me as a sort of toast.

“Are you from New York City, John Lee? Is that why you dislike it so?”

“Oh heaven’s no. I don’t like to talk about myself, but I’m a Kentucky boy is all I’m willin’ to say. Born and bred.”

I nodded. “Thus, the bourbon.”

“Oh yes, sir.”

“Have you been introduced around to any of the locals, Ken Halberson?”

“I’ve met a few people. I met Lucy at the department store.”

John Lee laughed. “Oh Lord. You’ll need holy water. I hope she didn’t leave handprints. You better order something stronger than that lady’s drink there. Anyway, let’s peruse the situation right here at the Brick and perhaps I can fill in the blanks for your collection of bar naps. Don’t take any of my commentary seriously. I majored in gossip and fully half of what I’m going to tell you is one quarter true.”

We turned around on our stools and leaned against the bar. A trio of musicians had begun to set up on a small bandstand and unpacking instruments, each of them must have played several—a trumpet, an upright base, a trombone, and a banjo—then the bar man rolled a piano over to the bandstand as well. John Lee seemed to ignore the band.

“That delightful couple at the orange table... she’s in the simply stunning red frock and he’s nearly drunk already... they’re the Campbells. Marjorie and Don. Real Estate, but he also has a sideline of losing money to Leon McClain and everyone else at poker. Golf handicap in the neighborhood of 28 or so. Loses money on the golf course too. We have a breathtakingly beautiful course here, though it’s only nine holes.

You play each hole twice from different tee boxes each time. I personally don't play. Bad back. Don Campbell does have a delightful singing voice though. Marjorie bakes cakes that are in great demand at cocktail parties and socials and she umpires baseball games in a dress.

"That tall, dark man standing over by the clock is Cameron Baker. Insurance. Nice enough looking, but plain as tap water. You'll need to punch up his character some in your story, or just leave him out altogether. Nobody will notice.

"Lester Mead is the gentleman in the blue blazer talking to that fetching woman in green, which is his wife, Nancy. Out in the *other world* I like to think Lester was a bank robber. Did some time at Angola after a bank guard got killed accidentally by a nervous getaway driver. In my imagination, Lester has cleaned up his act, as they say, and has not killed anyone or robbed our bank at all, *yet*, though the night is still young. His charming wife (and this part is factual) is the bank secretary for Mr. Copeland, which makes things interesting, her husband being a probable bank robber, and she does cross-stitch and drinks like a fish. Seriously. Don't try to put her under the table in a drinking contest. You'll die."

I wrote rapidly on the napkins in shorthand and pushed them into the pockets of my sport coat but when John Lee paused for a sip of his bourbon I put down my pen to take another swallow of my 'lady's drink.'

Another couple walked into the bar and John Lee pointed with his drink hand. "Here comes Dennis Perez and his wife Candy. Puerto Rican on his father's side and his wife is full-blood Tulsa, Oklahoma cracker. Folks don't seem to mind that she's an Okie. Dennis is the milkman but despite the bad reputation of that sort of employment, rumor has it that Dennis has fathered exactly zero of the children in town other than his own."

I lit another cigarette. “You said ‘out in the other world.’ Would you like to elaborate?”

John Lee laughed. “Oh, you caught that? Well, it’s just a term I use for the world of things outside of Nowhere. That just sounds like bad English. But, you know... (he gestured wildly with his hands) out *there*.”

“Interesting,” I said. “We’ll pursue that in a moment. And what’s your calling, John Lee? If I was talking to another town gossip, what would he or she tell me about you?”

John Lee smiled, obviously enjoying the verbal tête-à-tête. “Well, I don’t like to talk about myself, as I said. In this world I’m just an idle retiree. I don’t rob banks or lose at poker. My handicap is that I do not play golf. On rare occasions I have been known to sing and engage in other frivolity.”

“And what is your theory of how Nowhere came to be?”

John Lee’s eyes lit up markedly. “Oh my! We do get straight to it, don’t we! You want to talk about that? Well, I suppose you’ve heard all the goldmine theories,” (he rolled his eyes,) “of which there are twelve or more versions and sub-versions of those versions, but none of those are true. You see, Nowhere isn’t *there* at all. Unless you mean in the metaphysical sense. It’s *here*, but it’s not *there*.” He beckoned at the bartender. “You’re going to need a better drink, Ken. Let’s get Paul here to pour you some Kentucky magic with a heavy hand on this one.”

* * *

The bourbon burned good and warmed Ken as it went down. John Lee nodded approval as Ken downed the first drink and immediately ordered another.

John Lee Danner’s Nowhere creation story was intriguing if only for its creativity. Danner would have made a good science fiction writer, Ken thought, if he could write.

John Lee believed, or so he said, that Nowhere existed on a completely different timeline—in a different plane of existence—than the outside world where they'd all lived before coming to the town.

“No one is from Nowhere,” John Lee said. “We’re all here visiting from the outside world.”

According to Danner, the first A-bomb exploded at the Trinity Site at the top of a 100-foot tower back in '45 had caused a rip in the “spacetime continuum,” as he called it. John Lee believed the blast had created a portal.

“Not all such explosions do it, you must understand” John Lee said, “oh no, but this one did. It was the rare and unique situation, geographical and technological, of this area that caused it. You see, and this is all top secret, there are four huge space aerials—super antennae—located equidistant from this very location. Twenty miles out in the four cardinal directions. The government uses them to shoot messages into space. You know... trying to find outer space life. Martians, I suppose. Or to let Martians find us.”

Ken Halberson was intrigued. “Go on.”

“They don't let anyone know they're doing it. It's super-high-level-ultra-top-secret. Yes, so when the blast from the A-bomb happened, it fused a lot of the sand into a green glass substance now known as 'Trinitite'. Some of this glass formed on the surface of the ground in the blast crater. A lot of it formed into droplets of glass in the air as the sand that was sucked upward from the explosion in the mushroom cloud was superheated. Those glass droplets rained down from upwards of seven miles up in the sky. So, we had an accidental 'perfect storm' of a radiological wall of superheated glass blowing outward, upward, then downward toward an area that just happened to be surrounded by four mega space antennas! Somehow the power and electrical force of the blast supercharged the Trinitite between the four antennas and zapped

this little piece of sacred ground, the future location of our blessed village... well... it moved that square of desert here.”

Halberson pointed at the painting on the wall. The one with the stylized television sets with the electrical lightning bouncing between the antennas.

“Kinda like that?”

Danner smiled. “Exactly!”

“Did you paint that painting?”

“I do hope you enjoy my work. I don’t like to talk about myself.”

We were several drinks in now and feeling good. After the third drink apiece John Lee instructed the barman, Paul, to leave the bottle.

“The town was started when a couple of government guys figured out the anomaly that’d been caused by the bomb,” John Lee said. “They located this area in the desert where compasses didn’t respond correctly to movements. Then they did some testing. Eventually they discovered what had happened and they realized they had a gold mine, so to speak. That’s where the gold mine rumors really came from. They started the town and figured out how to ferry people, goods, and equipment here.”

“Who were these men?” Ken asked.

John Lee took a swig of his whiskey then stared at the nearly empty glass. “Well, I can’t rightly say. But Copeland is one of them, I bet.”

Ken grabbed the bottle and poured another round.

“As a writer I can appreciate the effort that went into this theory. It would make a good book. But you don’t actually believe it, do you?”

“If you think about it,” John Lee said, “it explains almost everything... like why it’s such a difficulty to get here, to even find this place. Why you can’t get here from anywhere on a tank of gas. Why you must be brought here by someone else

who knows that to get here all the way you must stop just far enough out and put some special gas in the tanks... a gasoline that has Trinitite in it, and why no one in the other world even knows this town exists. It's like in that Broadway play *Brigadoon*, only this town doesn't go to sleep every night and stay asleep for a hundred years. They're coming out with a movie about *Brigadoon*. Supposed to have Gene Kelly in it and it should be fabulous, but we won't be able to get the film here for two years or so. Anyway, admit it. When you first started looking for this place, no one knew where to find it, right? It's not on the maps. Does that seem normal? They say this town doesn't even show up on aerial photos. Well... now you know why."

Ken downed his bourbon. "I asked you a question, though. Do you believe it?"

John Lee laughed. "Of course not."

"So, what's your issue with New York City?"

"I don't like to talk about myself."

* * *

After some more small talk, John Lee Danner excused himself and said he had to leave. He had a date, he said, with a Cocker Spaniel. After he left, I kept writing notes for maybe a half hour, and I was really starting to feel the effect of the alcohol. I looked up and I saw Leon McClain sitting by himself at the other end of the bar, so I joined him.

"How was the tour?" Leon asked.

"Carol was a wonderful tour guide and tell her I appreciate it. I told her so myself, but make sure she knows it," I said. "Of course, I'll want to spend more time exploring, but she did give me a good idea of how everything is laid out. She said there

were quite a few bars and cocktail lounges downtown. I might need to get a car.”

“We also have a nice little walkable bistro and bar area on Chestnut with outside covered seating that can make for a good night of bar hopping, like in *The Sun Also Rises*. I recommend it, though you might want to take a friend or two with you at first. Not because it is at all dangerous. It isn’t. But until you get to know more people around town it can make having fun more fun. I don’t know, maybe you’re the type that doesn’t mind going out alone and who makes friends easily. If you want, Carol and I’d love to go with you. Or, I saw you down here talking with John Lee. I’m sure he’d like a night downtown, though I do need to inform you, not that it’s a problem at all, but I think John Lee is a homosexual and my only concern is that if you are looking for, you know... female companionship... that such a pursuit might be hindered if the ladies think you’re on a date with a man. I mean, I’m not the kind of person that has an opinion one way or another about how another person lives their life. It’s just not my thing, and I assumed it’s not yours either.”

I shook my head a little, not sure what I’d heard. “Wait. *You’re* not a homosexual?”

“Me? Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. I love women. I’m in love with a woman.”

“I think we have a lot to discuss.”

“Later. First tell me what you and John Lee chatted about. I’m sure it’ll be worth hearing.”

I lit a cigarette and poured a shot of John Lee’s bourbon into my glass and offered one to Leon which he turned down. He was drinking a glass of red wine. The band started playing softly, a version of *When Did You Leave Heaven*.

As we each took a drink from our glasses and I a draw from my cigarette, a waiter came by with a rolling cart with several trays of hors d’oeuvres. Oysters, salted and open-faced on silver

trays with ice, another tray with meatballs covered in some creamy sauce with toothpicks, and glasses of seafood cocktails. On a second level of trays there were deviled eggs, sprinkled with paprika and what looked like ground dill or basil, little bacon wrapped sausages, and a nice bowl of creamy salmon dip with crackers. There were plates and patrons filled their plates as the waiter took drink orders. I got it. The food was free, but the prices for drinks went up when the band started. Good business, and the people obviously liked it.

After we each filled a plate with some food selections, I went back to Leon's question. "You asked what we talked about. Well, Mr. Danner gave me a rundown of most of the characters currently in this cocktail lounge, or at least his opinion of them, and then he told me his theory of the genesis of the town of Nowhere, New Mexico."

"Wow. You boys were indeed drinking. Usually, it takes a couple of outings before John Lee will throw out his craziest ideas."

"I might have coaxed him," I said.

"Did he tell you that Nowhere come down from outer space, or that the A-bomb turned everything into green glass and blasted us into another plane of existence using Martian radio antennas?"

"The second one, but I can't wait to hear the first."

"You'll hear it soon enough. He's not the only one that believes that one," Leon said.

"He also told me he really didn't believe the A-bomb theory."

"Of course he said that! He can't have you thinking he's crazy. At least not yet."

I laughed. "He's a nice enough guy. Very entertaining. So... He has the dope on everyone else. What's his story?"

"He'll tell you he doesn't like talking about himself, and he really doesn't."

I was writing on napkins again, which seemed at first to be disconcerting to Leon McClain, but he said nothing of it.

“First, John Lee Danner is not his real name. He adopted that name once he got here, and I’m not at liberty to tell you his real name.”

Now he had my attention. “A mystery? Fantastic.”

“It’s not much of a mystery. He was a famous singer throughout the 1940s. He was 4F in the war because he had vision problems. He really wanted to go over there, but they wouldn’t let him. Broke his heart. Usually, they’ll let a famous singer go in just as an entertainer, you know, to entertain the troops. But John Lee also had a back injury that precluded him from service.”

“How do you know?” I said. “I mean, he seems a little fast and loose with the truth.”

“He doesn’t lie out of malevolence. He’s a storyteller who has this outlet of telling stories. Anyway, he tells you when he’s lying, which is admirable. And he likes you very much. He stopped by after he left you and you were still scribbling on your bar napkins, and he said as much. He said, “I really like that fellow Halberson. He’s a great writer, and I know it because only great writers take notes on beverage napkins, and he doesn’t interrupt a man when he’s telling a story except to write on his napkins, which means he can listen. See? He likes you.”

“I like him too.”

“Oh, John Lee is great. But I know this part—the part about him being 4F—is true for certain because we all got drunk at his little apartment on 8th and Southwest one night and he showed me his wartime papers.”

I looked impressed, or I tried to. I was quite drunk at this point. “You said he was a famous singer How famous?”

“He took over from Sinatra with Tommy Dorsey for a brief time and had his own band for several years. Made records.

Played Carnegie Hall. Had a hate-hate relationship with Tin Pan Alley—thus the hatred of New York City to this day. That was in the peak of the radio years, and he was much in demand. He got out of it before the television really came along. Said he had to quit or he'd die. I never asked him why."

"Do we know all that part is true?" I asked.

"We do. If you ever heard him sing, you'd place him immediately. You know him, just not as John Lee Danner. That's why he rarely sings. I figured it out when we were at his apartment and he was drunk and he showed us his record collection. He had several of his own recordings in there. I recognized him right off."

"I never would have guessed."

The music picked up now, after the food, and the drinks were flowing and couples moved out onto the dance floor. Several more musicians had joined the band. There was a clarinet player now and a saxophone. The band went into *AC-CENT-TCHU-ATE THE POSITIVE* and the dance floor came alive.

"The music seems to be a lot from the forties," I said.

"That's really the way it goes around here," Leon nodded. "It's not that there isn't any rock-and-roll, but we're probably behind the times. There are some practical reasons for that. Not much television here, and we're really off the beaten path. Children still spend time with their parents. They listen to what their parents listened to. And there's not much rock-and-roll on the radio here. I'm sure the kids have a record player and they're listening to some of the new stuff, but I don't think it's anywhere near what it's like in the rest of the world."

The band went into *It's Been a Long, Long Time* and as the music started, I looked up and a beautiful girl had taken a microphone and started singing. She was wearing pants, feminine and high waisted, a deep, dark green swirled or splashed with black. The pants went down to just below the calf leaving

the ankle and foot exposed, and she wore some off-white sandals with a two inch heel. She was short, thin, but had a fine figure. Her blouse was white, short to the elbows and collared. Her hair was quite blonde and pulled up in a ponytail, and she sang like an angel. The trumpet player was every bit as good as Harry James, but I didn't care. I was smitten with the girl.

After the song and a nice round of applause, the girl and another girlfriend made their way through the crowd toward our end of the bar. The second girl was pretty too. More full-figured, but very nicely dressed in aqua-marine pants and a white, backless top. She was blonde too, but not as blonde and she was taller.

As far as I was concerned, there was only one of the two that interested me.

"Very nice," Leon McClain said to the girls. "I didn't expect that. You must have worked it out with the band beforehand."

The first girl, the one who sang and who looked like every good dream I'd ever had, took Leon's outstretched hand. "Carol asked me to. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? I loved it. That was a beautiful job and thank you. Where are you girls headed?"

"We're out to the Bijou. *The Quiet Man* has finally made it to town," the second girl said.

"I love John Wayne," Leon said. "Oh, by the way, this is Ken Halberson. He's a New York Writer of some note. Here to destroy the town."

"Oh, really?" my girl said. "It's nice to know you, despite your nefarious intentions."

"I have no—"

"Are you girls on dates tonight?" Leon said.

The second girl laughed. "Leon, you know there aren't any available men in this town!" Her eyes cut to me as she said it, then she looked down.

“Maybe you two strong, strapping men would like to take us,” the first girl said.

The tall girl squealed and laughed. “You’re wicked! You know Carol will *murder* us if we move in on Leon!”

“We’re not moving in on anyone, Samantha! She’s busy calling Bingo at the VFW and you just know she knows we’d never try to steal Leon!”

“Well,” Leon said. “I think I’m flattered. Or not. I can’t decide, but I simply must stay to close this place down and clean up all the oyster shells. But you should take Mr. Halberson. I’m sure he’d like the fodder for his book or his article or whatever destructive device he has planned for Nowhere.”

“You sing beautifully. Like a nightingale,” I said, “or a siren.”

“The kind on a police car, or the kind that lures men to their deaths?”

“The nightingale, then,” I said.

She laughed. “Well, what say you, Mr. Halberson? To the movie, I mean.”

“I... I couldn’t. I’m really quite drunk by now.”

“Oh nonsense,” Samantha said. “You’re fine. If that’s drunk, you’ll fit right perfectly in Nowhere.”

The first girl put her hand on Samantha’s arm. “If he says he can’t, Sam, he can’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’d love a rain check.” I pulled dozens of bar napkins full of notes out of my pocket and dumped them on the bar. “I have notes to transcribe.”

My girl smiled. “Oh my. The writer’s version of ‘I’m washing my hair.’ Well, enjoy that. But as to a rain check, we’ll see.” Then she winked as she took Samantha’s arm, and they sailed smoothly out of the bar.

Regret flooded over me like the lingering scent of her perfume. Lilacs and strawberries forever. I slammed the last of John Lee Danner’s bourbon.

“Shit,” I said under my breath as the door closed behind them. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Kate Laird,” Leon McClain said, cracking his knuckles. “That was Kate Laird.”

CHAPTER 4

Steve Durant

The Difficulty of Automobile Travel in 1954, and a New Theory.

After almost a week of hanging around at the Vacation Motor Inn, writing and transcribing the extensive notes that became the chapters you have already read, Ken decided that he needed an automobile.

He'd spent most of the week in his room writing and had taken his meals either in his room or in the diner. When he did order room service the staff knew he must be deep into writing, so they didn't disturb him for room cleaning or towels.

After three days when he hadn't left the room at all, he called down to talk to Leon and instead Carol answered the phone. Ken asked Carol if it would be possible for her to get him a bottle of scotch and a bottle of gin and some club soda sent to the room and she said she'd send some down from the bar, which she did.

One night after midnight he'd had way too much to drink from the gin bottle and both the words he was reading in his own handwritten notes, and those that were spewing forth from his typewriter, were mangled garbage or seemed to be, so he walked down through the Inn and past it and then down

Southwest until he saw a park. Walking into the play area of the park he looked up at the towering steel playset. Seated high up and silhouetted against the backdrop of the moonlit sky he saw the outline of a girl and in his imagination he thought it was Kate, although he knew it wasn't her. Or couldn't be.

There is a time after you've been to war or been in imminent danger and later you hallucinate or imagine things and they seem very real even though you are, at the same time, absolutely certain they are not real.

With some difficulty he lit a cigarette and then glanced up again to the woman that seemed to be high up in the sky. His thoughts were scrambled and then for a moment he was back in the hospital in Tokyo looking up at his nurse, past his leg lifted up in traction, her shadowed visage framed in the halo of backlight. Then a flash, and he was back at the park in Nowhere and he heard a voice and it seemed to be Kate again, though he'd only heard her sing and speak once, and she was saying "Come to me," and "why do you wait?" He stumbled backward and then, when he'd caught himself, he stepped back toward her and said, "what do I do?" And she said, "Come to me."

"I can't," he said. And he couldn't.

In the cool of the morning, as the first light of dawn first glowed red and yellow in the eastern sky, he awoke in the park laying in the sand and no one saw him or knew about it, so he'd walked back to the Inn embarrassed and intrigued and with perfect memory of the dream.

On the days he chose to walk to the diner to eat, he had pleasant conversations with Leon McClain and at night, after the writing was done, he'd go to the cocktail lounge and have too many drinks, or on one particular starry night he let Carol take him to Bingo at the VFW, which turned out to be a pleasant respite from the writing. He still hadn't seen Kate Laird again, and this was something he was very eager to do,

especially considering the dream. Ken mentioned to Carol on the way to the VFW that he liked meeting Kate very much and looked forward to seeing her again. Carol had just smiled knowingly, with a special sparkle in her eye—the signature sparkle that marks the eye of every matchmaker in every small town in America—and said “Well, I hope you do get to see her again before she ups and marries someone else, or worse.” Ken didn’t ask what would be worse than marriage, but he’d wanted to.

Anyway, he needed a car, or wanted one, and after a week of seeing mostly the inside of his room and the environs of the Vacation Inn, he was starting to feel a little desperate to get out and investigate the rest of the town. He’d talked to Leon and John Lee Danner about buying a car and here is what he learned:

Buying an automobile in Nowhere can be problematic. Unless you get lucky. There are not many used automobiles available in Nowhere because the town is young and the people who move there tend to sell their property from their old lives when deciding to relocate. Shipping household goods would have been expensive enough (there was only one moving and storage company that delivered to the city,) and there was the problem of the town of Nowhere being too far from any of the closest big cities; Albuquerque, Lubbock, or El Paso, to make it all the way on a single tank of gas for most vehicles. There were no new car dealerships in Nowhere that might ship in truckloads of new or used vehicles for display and for sale. Most new vehicles were ordered in on a case-by-case basis by the only car lot in town, Steve Durant’s Motor Company, and were picked up in one of those bigger cities and driven to Nowhere by pairs of paid drivers who knew the idiosyncrasies of travel to the town. My friend Abe Mendoza was one who would pick up a new or used automobile, usually from Galles Motor Company in Albuquerque and drive it to Nowhere with a friend following

him in Mendoza's taxicab. Then the two would take a room in the Vacation Motor Inn and return home the next day after the delivery was made.

For me, the writer of this novel, reading and decoding Ken Halberson's often hand-written notes, grasping the reality of automobile travel in rural New Mexico in 1954 is fraught with difficulty. Particularly *this* area of rural New Mexico.

Sitting in the lap of the information age, with supercars, electric vehicles, self-driving cars, auto-drive assist, and the like, it's hard to fathom that our story is taking place near the beginning of America's love affair with the automobile. Let me put it into perspective.

This story of 1954 takes place only thirteen years before my birth. My age, as I'm writing this, is equal to the number of years that had passed between the turn of the 20th Century and when the story is set. That is to say, the entirety of the history of the automobile in New Mexico had taken place during a period of time equal to the span of my lifetime. In February of 1900, literally zero percent of New Mexicans owned automobiles, because the first automobile ever to enter New Mexico arrived in Raton, New Mexico later in 1900. It was a steam-powered contraption called the Locomobile purchased in Denver, Colorado. The trip from Colorado to Raton, only 216 miles, took 5 days. Today the same trip takes about three hours. The Locomobile's destination was Albuquerque, but it didn't make it there without help. The machine was fueled by gas but powered by steam. The Locomobile ran out of gas during the trip and the owner had to find fuel (a difficulty at the time,) have it shipped back to the Locomobile, while he himself traveled on to Albuquerque by train.

The fine residents of Albuquerque were not exactly enthusiastic about the arrival of the Locomobile. The self-propelled carriage scared the horses (the main means of travel) and was

dubbed the “devil mobile,” by annoyed residents. The owner, after all of his trouble getting the Locomobile to Albuquerque, was threatened with hanging for the offense, and there was an attempt to ban its use in the city.

The first crossing of America by automobile didn't happen until 1903. In 1906, the speed limit in the state of Alabama was just 8 miles per hour. Henry Ford's moving assembly line wasn't implemented in automobile manufacturing until 1913. In 1919, Dwight Eisenhower (who was the President in 1954) participated in a military trip from Washington D.C. to California that was designed to test what it would take to move a military force across the United States. That trip took over two months.

The Interstate Highway Act wasn't passed until 1956, which is two years *after* the events of our story. After the war, when the prospector Lew Bonaventure, or some lazy G-man, or a couple of Los Alamos government scientists, or Martians, founded the town, the “roads” around this part of New Mexico only existed as rutted dirt trails, most of them used by the military to get from one secret facility or testing site to another. The point is that we need not at this point jump to some of the loonier conjectures about the mysteries of Nowhere, New Mexico. Several of them can be explained merely by the fact that Nowhere had sprung up in the middle of a desert, far from any large city, not on the way from anywhere to anywhere, with little to no infrastructure to support the town. The fact that Nowhere was a cosmopolitan city with all the modern amenities and enjoyments was the miracle that needed investigating.

The question wasn't “why was it so difficult to get an automobile in Nowhere, New Mexico?” but, “why was it so easy despite the evident hindrances?”

Which is all to say... Ken Halberson got himself an automobile.

* * *

It might do here to take a quick side journey to get some context on Ken Halberson's life. Our journalist was a war veteran, well-traveled, and wise to the ways of the world. He'd been seriously wounded three different times, and near death a few more times than that. He'd interviewed many of the luminaries of the day including Joe DiMaggio, Sinatra, and Francisco Franco. He'd talked with Picasso in Seville and had run with the bulls in Pamplona. He'd spent a month running cattle in Patagonia and had gambled at the Nacional in Havana with Meyer Lansky looking on. He could call Liz Taylor and she'd send a plane through the night to pick him up in a field outside of Nowhere to fly him back home if he wanted to. Rumor had it, and the notes didn't admit it—nor would Ken Halberson had ever told anyone (Gentlemen never tell)—he'd had romantic relations with Liz and Rita Hayworth too. The general rule is that Hollywood bombshells are attracted to good writers and bad bullfighters.

Reading the background on everything he'd done and experienced and suffered in his life heretofore, it was easy for me to believe he was—here in 1954—a man of my own age. Mid-fifties. He'd already lived a full life. He was born way back when Calvin Coolidge was President, Hollywood was just getting on its feet, and only four years had elapsed since the first ever broadcast of a radio news program. His mom was born in 1894 and his father was born only twenty years after the end of the Civil War. Ken was ten years old in the middle of the Depression and listened to Roosevelt's fireside chats on the radio. He turned 20 in a hospital in France after being wounded in battle. In a few months hence he would turn 30 living in a small apartment in downtown Nowhere. All of this is to say, that the old veteran writing in his notes about his war

wounds while limping downtown to try to buy a car was only a 29-year-old man.

* * *

The car adventure started with a walk of some length, which is no small thing with my leg blown to bits just two years ago. During the time of the dozen-plus surgeries to rebuild the leg, fragments of bones, ligaments, and other tissue from other parts of my body were sown or grafted or even bolted to parts that had been mauled by shrapnel. Parts that were no longer there were dearly missed, and though the whole thing came back together surprisingly well despite the challenges, there was still some awkwardness when I had to walk more than a half mile or so. In my normal life, walking into a shop or to a cab, you'd have to be paying really close attention to detect any limp. Once I had to engage in a stroll of any length, a slight limp appeared, like when a tire with a bulge can be fine when you're just rolling slowly but will start rattling the car over a certain speed.

I could easily have arranged for a ride to the car lot, but I wanted to surprise Leon and Carol by pulling up under the Vacation Inn's covered front entry with my new automobile. I was under the misapprehension that it would be easy to buy a car and drive it home on the same day.

When you walk on Southwest Drive, the main route from the Inn to downtown, you walk northeast since the angled streets were named for their direction relative to downtown.

The walk wasn't difficult, and the weather was perfect. Blue skies reigned once again with a few, light and puffy clouds and the air was cool, about 54 degrees, but not cold. The streets of Nowhere had sidewalks, and for all the world I could imagine I was in Las Vegas, Nevada or some newly sprawling suburb

in Southern California as I walked. Cars passed me, Fords and Chevrolets and a Nash Metropolitan, and now and then a vehicle would pull over and the driver or another occupant would ask me if I needed help or if I required a ride somewhere. I always thanked them and told them “No, I am just taking a walk,” and they’d smile and wave and pull off while looking back at me in their rearview mirrors with curiosity. Americans are in love with their automobiles and can’t fathom why someone would want to walk.

I looked north while crossing Hazelnut and in a gap between bare trees I could see the faint outline of gray-black mountains in the distance barely peeking up over rooftops and it was my first reminder in some time that the rest of the world still existed out there and that beyond those mountains somewhere was Albuquerque and the possibility that someday I’d leave this place and fly back to New York.

And there was a cart there at the corner of Crow and Hazelnut where a man with a white paper hat sold hot dogs and peanuts to customers coming out of the businesses on Crow and those walking down from the huge papermill on Hazelnut. I had no idea where the papermill got trees to make paper but that probably wouldn’t make it into the article anyway.

At Chestnut I saw the Bistro District that Carol had told me about, and there were cafés with sidewalk seating and flowers and lush greenery, grapevines stretching over gazebo roofs, more colorful flowers in pots and shops with signs like “Margot’s Finery” and “Old Castile Leather and Cheese.” People were seated at wrought-iron tables and ate meals on white plates or drank coffee and chatted and laughed in the warming sun. From one of the cafés I heard the strains of *When the Lights Go On Again All Over the World* which took me back to Paris after the war.

As I walked, I imagined that the sidewalks were paved with gold, but it didn't take much imagination. The whole town seemed golden to me at that moment.

Next, I passed the sandlot with the kids playing ball and when I stopped for a moment to watch, it took me back to my own childhood back in Schenectady before the war and it was the Depression so we'd make a ball out of fish wrap and tape and use sawmill slats for bats.

I watched the boys play for a while before they saw me, then I heard them shout and they were throwing down their mitts and bats and running toward me.

"Mister! Mister!" they shouted. "Hey, Mister!"

One hollered, "We heard you were from New York! Do you know Mickey Mantle? Do you know Whitey Ford?!"

"I don't know them because I live in another part of New York State," I said. "But I do know Gene Woodling. He's in the same outfield with Mickey Mantle. He taught me how to bunt." Which was true. Back when I was young in Schenectady, baseball players didn't make much money and to augment their income they often taught clinics in and around New York.

"Gene Woodling! He taught you how to bunt?"

"Gene Woodling! Can you imagine?"

"Can you get Mickey Mantle's autograph?"

"I probably can't," I lied. Even though I knew I probably could. I made a mental note to telegram Edward Kramer Thompson, Esquire, and tell him the job here required a dozen autographs from Mickey Mantle. But I didn't want to get their hopes up. I didn't even know if there was a telegraph office in Nowhere.

"Aww, Mister! Will you show us how Gene Woodling taught you to bunt?"

So, I spent the next half hour teaching a bunch of sandlot kids how to bunt the way Gene Woodling taught me. Then I excused myself and told them I'd stop by again soon to see how

they were doing, and I promised them that next time I'd tell them the story of how Leo Durocher, the coach of the Giants, had punched me in a bar one night. Just the promise of that story brought squeals and screams of delight, and the little scamps ran back to their game telling themselves the story of the New York stranger who'd been lucky enough to be punched by Leo Durocher.

When I got to Washington Street, just past the Town Square, I crossed over and walked north another seven blocks on Washington to 7th Avenue, then three blocks east to Madison where Steve Durant's Motor Co. was located.

This area was more residential with the exception of the businesses on the north side of 7th avenue which included Durant's. The houses were a little more expensive here and the lots were a little larger. Not much, but a little.

Steve Durant was an interesting fellow, large, just on the heavy side of obese, and a fellow former marine. He educated me on the difficulties of procuring a vehicle in Nowhere, the same basic information I'd learned from Leon and John Lee. Not insurmountable, of course, but difficult.

"Whatever I get," I said, "I'll be charging it to LIFE magazine, and particularly to the account of Edward Kramer Thompson, Prince of an Editor and Master."

"Oh, that's no problem. No problem at all," Steve said.

I figured old Ed might consider it a problem, but he'd go along with it. What did he expect? Me to stay in a town for a year and bum rides everywhere to do my research? He'd argue about it, but in the end, he'd pay the bill because he knew it was something I needed in order to do the job. Besides, when my tour of duty in Nowhere ends, they can always sell the car. I did, however, give myself a budget limit of \$1,500. I knew that a new car in Schenectady would cost over \$3,000 so I set myself a ceiling of half that.

Steve Durant showed me the exactly *three* used cars he had access to. The first was an old '41 model Studebaker that was black and boxy and impractical. The front seat had been pulled out and a sort of ratty sofa had been installed for seating. The second was a rusted 1943 flatbed pickup with a broken windshield. Steve assured me that a new windshield had been ordered up from El Paso, but he didn't expect it for a month. The third automobile was quite nice. A 1951 Packard 250 convertible, kind of a bright canary yellow. It checked off all my boxes except the color, but Steve told me that the unique difficulties of getting a used car to Nowhere, or shipping in a new one, were such that he couldn't possibly take less than \$2,500 for the '51 Packard. The other option would be for me to wait until someone else in Nowhere ordered a new car (which might happen any day) and buy their old car. In which case I still might be waiting from a few weeks to a month for delivery of the new car before I could take possession of the old one. And the price might not be any cheaper at all.

I offered him \$2,250 for the Packard, way over my limit, and he sighed deeply like I was asking for a night with his daughter, then smiled and shook my hand. He said he only took my offer because we were both marines and that he wouldn't have sold it to me at that price otherwise. He called a boy up from the service garage. The boy came up dressed in a service uniform marked by grease and oil and dirt, wiping his hands on a towel that looked to be dirtier than the uniform. Steve threw him the keys and told him to get the Packard washed and gassed up and the oil changed and that we'd be going down to the Dipsy Doodle to do the paperwork and to drive it over there when it was finished.

"And don't get any of that grease on the seats, Bill. Put a tarp down!"

Steve turned out to be a great guy for someone who really and truly believed that he died back in the war. I'll get to that.

The Dipsy Doodle was a drive-up burger joint built in the modern style, with soaring angular roofs jutting upwards and out sharply far over the parking area. The sign was a big multi-colored starburst fired from a rocket with the stylized words "DIPSY DOODLE" spelled out in smaller starbursts. Carhops on roller skates wearing what looked to be stewardess hats moved smoothly in and out of the building deftly carrying red trays loaded with burgers, fries, and shakes. The trays could be attached to the doors or hung from the windows of the cars and music played through the speakers hanging from the high-angled roofs but like in the other venues I'd been to around Nowhere, it wasn't rock-and-roll playing, it was Glenn Miller's *A Pink Cocktail for a Blue Lady*.

Steve parked the car—a newer model Chevrolet Bel Air convertible, (aquamarine with white interior)—and told the carhop we'd be eating inside.

We sat in bright red booths and told old corps jokes while Steve drew up the paperwork, and I provided the information necessary to send the bill and the paperwork over to Ed Thompson. Then I handed Steve a check drawn on the LIFE account for \$250 payable on demand. The money works at LIFE, especially Edward Kramer Thompson, would kick and scream but they'd pay it and that was that. When they were willing to send Hemingway \$75,000 in advance for a book he'd been promising for over a year and might never deliver, I think they can provide me a used car. Let 'em take it out of my pay, I don't care.

I drew a weekly stipend from LIFE that was automatically deposited into my account when I was on assignment. The stipend was to cover my basic living expenses and wasn't a salary. Other than the stipend, I would eventually receive payment

for the article once it was received and accepted. In this case, I could expect to sell my finished article for about \$10,000. Anytime there was any extraordinary expense that was legitimately work related, I could write a check on the LIFE magazine account or, if there was a telegraph office, I could call the magazine and have funds sent via Western Union. In this case I didn't want Thompson to find out about the transaction until after it was too late, so I'd not even inquired about a telegraph office. I'm sure there had to be one.

I ordered a cheeseburger, fries, and a strawberry milkshake. Steve ordered three hamburgers and a Coca-Cola. He told me he didn't worry about overeating or his weight because he'd already died at Iwo Jima in 1945. He'd been part of the 25th Marine Regiment, 3rd battalion landing force on 19 February, and he told me he'd been shot and killed there near the quarry. He believed he died that day and that everything that had happened after that was his purgatory culminating in him arriving in Nowhere in 1950. Which to him was heaven. I suppose people deal with trauma their own way, so I didn't ask how he reconciled selling an old Studebaker with a sofa for a seat with being in heaven. The cognitive dissonance was only mine. He was a happy man with no confusion and that was all that counted. I told him about getting through the war only wounded a few times but then getting my leg being near blown off as a journalist and he nodded and told me, "That was when you died."

He believed everyone in Nowhere was already dead.

I asked him questions about Nowhere to get a better feel of the town, and his answers obviously didn't harmonize with any biblical or historical idea I had about being dead and in heaven.

"Nowhere came down from heaven after the A-bomb detonated, you see? Before that it was on Mars," Steve said. "Lew Bonaventure wasn't a prospector. He was a Martian superintendent. The gold is a myth for stupid people because they haven't

accepted the fact that they're dead yet." He ate fries and looked at me and truly believed and was convinced of all of it.

He told me that heaven wasn't a place where everyone sat around on clouds and played harps. You still had a life to live and when you died in this heaven you went to the second heaven and so on. Each one better than the last.

"That's why I eat whatever I damned well please."

I ordered another cheeseburger and Steve smiled and nodded. I didn't believe I was dead yet, but I liked his certainty, and if I ended up getting a date with Kate Laird I'd agree it was a remote possibility that I was actually in heaven.

CHAPTER 5

Mr. Copeland

The Bistro District and Downtown.

I pulled under the covered entryway at the Vacation Motor Inn to surprise Leon and Carol and they came running out of the office squealing and applauding like I was a fifteen-year-old who'd just passed his driver's test. Clapping me on the back, shaking my hand, and saying "congratulations!" and, "you did it!" And, to be totally honest, I was excited too. Having "the Canary," which is what I'd christened the car on the drive down Southwest, meant I'd be able to explore more of Nowhere, perhaps go to the drive-in movie, even invite a girl on a date. All the same reasons a fifteen-year-old is happy to have his driving license.

But it turned out to be another two weeks, well into March, before I really got the Canary out and about town. I was trapped into my routine and had trouble breaking it. I liked the idea of going out. I thought about it. I planned it. I got dressed and put the keys in my pocket and stood by the door. Almost always I talked myself out of it. I did take the car to the Nowhere Library, to the grocery store (there was a kitchenette in the room,) and to the liquor store. I ordered a bottle of really good bourbon sent to the elevator operator at Kenton's

Department Store. My tux and the rest of my purchases were delivered, and I tried them on and even thought about wearing the tux one night to the Brick, but again I talked myself out of it.

One night John Lee Danner came by my room. I intended to stay in and write that night, or drink and write, but John Lee asked if I would come with him to the Brick and drink with him. "C'mon, Ken. I want to talk with you."

I told him I would not go to the Brick. I was burnt out on it for now and I hadn't seen Kate there since the night I'd turned her down about going to the movies. But if he'd ride with me to the Bistro District I wanted to see the area at night and try some of the famous Nowhere cafés that also served drinks until midnight.

I dressed in my gray suit with a blue tie and we drove over in the Canary with the top down since the night was beautiful. The parking in the Bistro District was in the middle of the street, so we parked and walked first to the Los Alamos Café, which was open and had a buzzing and happy clientele, eating and drinking dessert drinks and aperitifs on its patio. Streetlights low-hummed and arched from cast iron poles illuminating the district with a warm yellow-orange glow and what were made to look like paper lanterns hung from wires across the street giving the whole scene a welcoming feel.

We sat at a small table along an iron railing and the table commanded a good view of both the café and the whole length of the district. Friends and lovers strolled, some hand-in-hand, along the café-lined sidewalks, sipping drinks, and some looking up at the sliver of moon visible above the rooftops. The café vibrated with energy and what I could only conceive of at that moment as "good vibes." There was conversation and laughter, not the uproarious type, but the pleasant titter of people having a good time. A live jazz band played somewhere, and the happy sound reverberated down the street, a hot number I recognized

as *Christopher Columbus* by Benny Goodman's Orchestra. The sharp, sweet ring of the trumpet, like a bullet hitting a bell, was familiar and I remembered it as the man, 'good as Harry James' that was playing along with Kate the night I met her. Somewhere in my subconscious an idea percolated that Kate might be wherever that jazz was coming from, but that idea didn't climb into my consciousness until later.

We ordered a bottle of Kentucky bourbon and John Lee ordered a rare steak, assuming, I supposed, the kitchen was still open, which it was. I didn't order any food but poured myself a heavy bourbon and the waiter brought an ice bucket with small tongs and normally I won't ice my bourbon, but it seemed appropriate because for March it was a nice, warm night. I dropped a big square chunk into the golden liquid and swirled it until condensation appeared on the glass. The scent of moist soil from wetted pots, lily of the valley, rosemary, and cigarette smoke floated on desert air as a delicate breeze danced lightly down the street and through the crowd. This café didn't have free cigarettes like the Brick did, so I ordered Chesterfields from the waiter, and he brought them with a pack of matches and a small plate of mints, nuts, and candies. I lit the cigarette and noticed that John Lee was in the same pleasant reverie. He'd added a chunk of ice to his bourbon too and he was smelling the whiskey, inhaling deeply, and his eyes darted lively around the place and I knew he was eager to identify for me some of the patrons and his favorite gossip, but he restrained himself in honor of the peaceful spirit of the moment.

"This is nice," he said, unnecessarily, and I smiled.

"You should eat," he said. "Don't worry about the bill here, if you are. This night is on me."

"Oh no," I said. "I have an expense account and there is a certain pleasure charging drinks and cigarettes to Edward Kramer Thompson, Pontifex Maximus of New York City, so let me pay."

John Lee laughed. “Well, this is awkward because I don’t like to talk about myself, but I own this café and a number of other similar operations in this town, so clearly you see that I cannot allow my guest to be handed a bill no matter how much he insists. It is a matter of staff respect and order, you understand. It has nothing to do with you.”

I was surprised and wasn’t sure how to respond. Then, “But you wanted to drink at the Brick and I brought you here.”

“I like to dine at The Brick because in that way I support a fellow entrepreneur and frankly I identify more with that crowd as my tribe, if you know what I mean.”

“Well, I’m sorry I dragged you here,” I said.

“All the better for me, since I get to show you my vast achievements in the culinary and beverage industry. As I said, I own quite a few restaurants, cafés, and saloons in town. Also, I would not have allowed you to pay at the Brick since I invited you and have an arrangement with Leon and Carol and this way I get to wine and dine you at cost, which is a great benefit to my bottom line. It is a business expense, you see.”

I didn’t answer for a few beats, and perhaps my eyes narrowed a fraction.

John Lee laughed again. “This isn’t a date, cowboy. You aren’t my type.”

I lifted my drink and we clinked glasses in a toast. “I thank you, then,” I said. “And I’ll make sure to drink enough that you’ll notice.”

“We have the finest whiskeys in the state,” John Lee said. “Inarguably. I insist on it. I even carry the swill that isn’t from my dear home state of Kentucky.”

“Very cosmopolitan of you.”

“And perhaps,” John Lee said, more seriously now, “if I cannot convince you not to write about our fair town, you’ll give a plug to my establishments. I mean, if I can’t retire in

absolute peace and anonymity, I can at least profit from the notoriety.”

I finished my drink and poured another one, dropping a smaller chunk of ice into it this time. “It seems that, at least among the few residents I have gotten to know, that people would rather I wasn’t here, or, at the very least, that I wouldn’t write about Nowhere.”

John Lee’s head tilted slightly. “You mustn’t think that we don’t want you here. That isn’t even remotely true. But it is true that we would prefer you didn’t take up our town as a topic for national discussion. We like things the way they are.”

“What if it’s a light puff-piece? What harm can it do?”

John Lee topped off his glass and as he prepared to answer me, his steak arrived, fully covering his plate such that his sides of a baked potato and some steamed vegetables dripping in garlic butter were brought on a smaller plate. Danner thanked the waiter and told him to commend the chef, and as the waiter turned to withdraw, John Lee stopped him with a touch and asked him to bring a glass of cabernet. He pointed at me to see if I wanted wine, but I was happy with the bourbon and shook my head. There was silence for a few minutes as he cut into his steak.

“Ezra Pound said, ‘It is impossible to talk about perfection without getting yourself very much disliked.’ I take it that this is the topic of your article? This foolish notion that Nowhere is a perfect town? Clearly it isn’t. Not with a fairy like me in it.”

“I don’t think perfection has only one definition,” I said. “And that part doesn’t need to be a part of any article. I don’t find it relevant.”

“You must know that Death and life are in the power of the pen,” John Lee said.

“That’s the tongue. Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

“The pen is just the tongue writ large, far, and wide.”

“To not say what I need to say, for a writer, is death.”

“Sometimes to say it is to kill.”

I downed my drink. “Explain.”

“This steak is delicious,” John Lee said. “You must order one. Or at least try a bite of mine.”

“I eat late when I’m writing.”

“Let’s look at all the possibilities. I don’t presume to know the angle of your article. Is it a genesis story? Why are we here? How did this happen? Or is it a ‘puff-piece’ as you say. I don’t believe that for a moment, but let’s say it is. You are a very well-known writer. And you write in the most popular magazine in America. In the entire *world* some would say. If it is negative, perhaps you damage the very unique ecosystem, the life support, that has allowed this special place to exist. Maybe folks here believe you, and what would that do? How much does it cost to build goodwill and love for our fellow man? What happens when that spirit is damaged?

“Or if your article is positive and the whole world finds out that this little Eden exists?” He shook his head. “America is on the precipice of major changes. So is the world. People are nostalgic. They’re looking for a paradise. Look what’s happening in Las Vegas. In Hollywood. South Florida. The south of France. The mafia, crime, and crass commercial tourism. Route 66? The mass finds paradise and makes it an ashtray.

“People are flocking to every paradise in droves. They have automobiles now, and airplanes, and thank God we’re not on a train line, but there are even worse things that can happen.”

“Worse?”

“This is the time of darkness my friend. I’m not telling you something you don’t know.”

The waiter came by with John Lee’s wine and swapped my drink for a fresh one. This one I sipped straight, without the ice.

“There was a time,” John Lee said, “when man worshipped the volcano as a god. Maybe not as *the* God himself, but as a portal to him or a representation of him. Superstitious man with great ceremony threw whatever he thought was good and pure into its fiery maw in order to satisfy what he saw as a god, whose wrath was raging and uncontrollable and could only be quenched by sacrifice. Virgins. Ponies. Your neighbor. That’s ancient man, mind you. Modern man has made the A-bomb. A portable volcano. It can be carried to your doorstep on the wings of a plane. Hellfire can now be unleashed by politicians, the worst dregs of humanity most of them, the modern priests who cannot abide perfection. We sacrifice to the A-bomb by cowering in fear to the priests holding its power, the people who live far away and who have bomb shelters and bunkers. We sacrifice to it by submitting to every outrage and caprice of those who claim some kind of paternal care over us. In any case, man destroys what he cannot have.”

“You’ve lost me,” I said. “This lesson started out with me unleashing hordes of paradise seekers on Nowhere, and now I’m calling in A-bombs by death priests.”

“Then I haven’t lost you. You understand me perfectly.”

“That sounds a bit hysterical.”

“At any particular moment, my sanity is questionable. That aside, what is required for a paradise to stay a paradise,” John Lee said, “is, first, for the people to believe wholeheartedly in its goodness. To never doubt that it is good when they know it is so by experience. Not to pretend that it is good when it is not, but to know it is good when it is. This is not a theological declaration. It is not perfect (how many times must we say that?) but it is good in that people are free to be happy and not coerced to live in misery for the benefit of the political priests.

“Second, they need to know that the goodness is relative. While the earthly paradise is not perfect, never has been and never will be, it is better than everywhere else... *to them*.

“Third, we know that when people, outsiders, hear of a paradise and hunger for anything better than what they have, they will want to leave where they are to go there. But for it to stay a paradise these people must be educated about its attributes, or they will ruin it.”

I was writing all of this in a notebook and John Lee paused to let me catch up. He wanted me to know this.

John Lee smiled and then waved his hand like he was dismissing the whole conversation. “Poetry is insane, and so is modern man. And so am I when I am getting drunk.”

“No,” I said.

He laughed. “I am a drunk poet and I am coercing my own guest in my own establishment. Hypocrisy! But I must tell you that this steak is marvelous!”

“I get that you’re afraid things might change because of something I might write. Abe Mendoza called it the observer effect. But anything I could say or could not say isn’t going to change the inevitable. If this place is a perfect heaven on earth or if it isn’t, it can’t hide forever. Change is going to come.”

“Perhaps,” John Lee said with a smile. “Still, you could change the name to protect the innocent. Put it in Arizona. Call it Somewhere, Arizona.”

* * *

I finally met the mysterious benefactor Mr. Copeland an hour later a few doors down at Las Lunas Cantina, the restaurant and ballroom from which the live music emanated.

John Lee whispered to the maître d’, a man he called Jack, and we were escorted through the thick crowd to a table in a reserved section of the restaurant with a commanding view of the sunken dance floor and bandstand. The band, all of twelve members including a pianist, was well into the strains of *Blue*

Orchids, a famous Tommy Dorsey song, and couples moved smoothly around the dance floor. The trumpeter, who was also the bandleader—the one I remembered who played like Harry James—sang the solo when the time came. I remembered that Leon told me that John Lee, in his former life, had been with Tommy Dorsey after Sinatra left to go become a superstar and I wondered if hearing the old songs had an effect on him. From the look on his face, it did not.

I was captivated by the scene and tried to capture it in my memory like a motion picture. Like in one of those golden moments when the music swells and the camera pans the ballroom, or one of those halcyon moments of absolute clarity, when the night and its energy takes you and your heart rings in harmony with the music. I lit a Chesterfield and had barely returned my lighter to my pocket when a waiter arrived with drinks, martinis this time.

“You own this place too?” I asked.

“I tend to collect things.”

“This is turning into a cheap night for me,” I said as I took a drag on the cigarette.

John Lee put his hands up in mock surrender. “No agenda here. I said what I wanted to say. My main goal is for you to enjoy all the elements of our hospitality.”

I tasted the martini. Dry and perfect and I saw a face through the crowd, but didn’t identify it immediately, but my breath caught in my chest.

“Leon told me you were a famous singer out in *the other world*.”

John Lee nodded. “I don’t prefer to talk about myself.”

“Gotta get it right for the article,” I said with a smile. “You know I can find out.”

“I did have another life, not relevant to this one, wherein I was a singer of some note. But that life is behind me. Mostly.”

“Ok.”

“I sing,” John Lee said, “when I want to, and when I feel comfortable.”

“Fair enough.”

We were silent for a few minutes as we sipped our drinks and watched the band, which was very good. They went into a Benny Goodman song, but I couldn't remember the name of it. The dancefloor hummed with energy and the swirl of activity looked almost choreographed it was so perfect. I swallowed the rest of my drink and excused myself to go to the men's room and before I could even push my chair back John Lee had smoothly waved to the waiter and gestured to bring us another round while simultaneously pointing me to the right where there was a hallway leading to restrooms.

The crowd split as I walked and I noticed people watching me, and I received approving looks from some of the women and some head nods of greeting from the men. I had the feeling that my residence in town had been noted and perhaps was the topic of some conversation.

There were dark wood phonebooths along the hallway and I found the men's room toward the end of the hall. I had not considered the telephone before, although there was a telephone in my room that I used often to order room service or to tell Leon or Carol when I wanted my room to be cleaned, but now I was thinking that I couldn't remember seeing any telephone lines on the way into town, or anywhere else in town, though it is possible that I just didn't register that I saw them. I thought about placing a collect call to Edward Kramer Thompson right then, but I didn't want to have a conversation about the car I'd bought quite yet.

A restroom attendant held the door for me then returned to his place between two lavish sinks, and after I had used the urinal, he, with white-gloved hands, turned on the water and was ready with a towel to dry my hands. There was a collection of men's colognes there, which the attendant offered to me, but

I declined. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a dollar, which was probably too large an amount for a tip and I didn't have any change, but the attendant shook his head in refusal and smiled. "Mr. Danner takes good care of us," and he offered me a mint from a small tin. When I refused, the tin went back into his pocket and he began to wipe down the basin I'd used with the towel which he then threw into a basket.

Walking back toward our table I heard the bandleader go into a hot Harry James number, and I felt a hand slide in under my arm and begin to pull me toward the dancefloor and I saw that it was Lucy Kenton, full red pouting lips in a possibly inappropriate white dress showing a whole lot of Lucy Kenton and I let myself be pulled along and she put my arms around her, which I allowed, more out of necessity than out of any real desire to dance, and we moved together well enough that I had the opportunity to see more of the cantina and the crowd assembled on and near the dancefloor. The song ended and a slower piece started, *You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Wanna Do It)*, and I felt a hand tapping me on the shoulder to cut in, and I looked and it was a nice looking older man who smiled and said "May I?" I smiled and said "Certainly," turned to Lucy who looked disappointed and her lips got even more pouty as I stepped away in retreat. Just then, I felt another hand slide in under my arm, and this time when I looked it was Kate Laird, and she moved into my arms and we began to move together as if we'd done it before.

"Thank Mr. Copeland later," Kate said.

"I will never be able to repay him."

"I'm still not speaking to you, Mr. Halberson."

"It sounds like you're speaking to me."

"Regardless. I am not."

We danced a full turn around the floor.

"Are you still not talking to me?"

"I still am not," she said.

“May I ask why?”

She stopped dancing and broke the embrace that I was enjoying more than just about anything I’d ever enjoyed before.

“I asked you on a date and you refused me!” She said with her voice in a low whisper so as not to make a scene. I took her hand and walked her off the dance floor.

“That was a date? An impromptu invitation to go to the movies with you and your friend?”

She crossed her arms. “You could have gone with me and we could have talked and gotten to know one another. Instead, you turned me down flat. My feelings were hurt.”

“I apologize. I have no excuse.”

“You do? Apologize?”

“I do.”

“Ok, then.” She took my hand and led me back on the dance floor. She fell back into my arms and I’ve never danced that well or that happily in all my life and my leg didn’t hurt and I didn’t limp.

* * *

Copeland came to their table and Halberson finally got to meet the mysterious man who seemed to have so much to do with everything that happened in Nowhere.

“I suppose I owe you thanks for... well, for just about everything,” Ken said. “You paid Abe Mendoza for my ride here, and you’ve arranged so much of this on the sly, and you just saved me from Lucy. So much that I feel like I should be thanking you profusely and engaging in an inquisition to find out why and what this is all about.”

Kate excused herself. “I’ll go powder my nose. You gentlemen talk and I’ll be back around a little later.”

A waiter delivered more martinis and Ken lit a Chesterfield as Copeland explained that when he heard that LIFE was sending a journalist, that he felt it was his duty as the town's biggest cheerleader to make certain that Nowhere's guest enjoyed the full complement of the town's hospitality.

"How did you hear that LIFE was sending a journalist?" Ken asked.

Copeland asked if he could have a cigarette, and Ken held the pack out to him.

"I usually don't smoke, but it seems appropriate. I don't know why. Anyway, I know people from my former life who know things. Who hear things. It came up in a conversation that LIFE might be sending out a reporter, so I did what due diligence I could to find out when you might be arriving in Albuquerque. I arranged for our mutual friend Abe to be working so he could retrieve you. Abe is very good at sizing up people. A great judge of character. He's a great man himself, and he knows good men. His job was to see what sort of man you are. Abe has an affinity for our town and doesn't want to see any harm come to it. He listened to you and tried to determine if you are a good man or a bad man."

"That seems like a simplistic way to make that kind of determination, Mr. Copeland. And probably unfair to people who make bad first impressions."

"Abe has good instincts. He trusted you, so we trust you."

Halberson puffed on his cigarette. "And what would have happened if I had failed the Abe test?"

Copeland smiled a kind smile. "You would almost certainly have never found this town. No one would have shown you here. Eventually you would have gotten back on your airplane and you would have flown back to New York only to tell Mr. Thompson that the existence of Nowhere, New Mexico is a complete myth."

“So,” Ken said, “I’m a good man but a bad journalist? You don’t think I might have found this place otherwise?”

I looked over to John Lee, who sat silently and sipped on his martini. He shrugged when he saw me looking at him.

“Perhaps you would have,” Copeland said. I meant no insult.”

“I have so many questions.”

John Lee pushed away from the table and excused himself with a smile.

Ken took one of the martinis from the tray and ate one of the olives before downing the drink all at once.

“You have to know that as a journalist this kind of mysterious behavior only intensifies my curiosity. You could perhaps be the nicest person in the history of the world or a Hitchcockian villain who controls this town with an iron fist.”

Copeland laughed. “I could see that. I suppose it is common to assume that there is some pernicious agenda at work. And I’m sure that Mr. Danner has tried to persuade you not to write your story. As for me, I just encourage you to hang around awhile. Do your job. But also ask yourself if by observing this experiment and then opening it up to the world you can negatively affect its outcome. Just an honest request from me to you... that you’ll think about it.”

“Alright,” Ken said, “I will. Now, I should go directly to the horse’s mouth. Which origin story about Nowhere is true? What should I believe?”

Copeland smiled. “Gold, Mr. Halberson. Lew Bonaventure found lots of it.”

Ken wrote that down on a cocktail napkin and thrust it into his coat pocket, and as he did, he noticed that Copeland’s eyes had wandered and now he was staring at the bandstand.

“Oh my word,” Copeland said as a smile grew on his face. “You’re in for a treat.”

Ken looked and there was John Lee Danner standing on the bandstand, holding the microphone in one hand and the other was deep in his pocket. The bandleader counted them in, and the band went into the catchy opening notes of *I'll Get By*. When John Lee started singing, Ken recognized his voice instantly. He'd heard that voice coming through his radio so many times it was like an old friend calling to him.

*I'll get by
As long as I have you...*

"Dick Hager," Ken said, his voice almost shaky in bewilderment. "That's Dick Hager."

"In the flesh," Copeland said.

John Lee Danner/Dick Hager sang the song and he had the audience transfixed and when he finished the crowd clapped and screamed for more, but he just smiled and thanked everyone before leaving the bandstand.

"Well, I'll be," Ken said.

"Not all mysteries are bad or nefarious, Mr. Halberson. Sometimes people just like their little secrets."

"Yet, I'm not supposed to write about this? That Dick Hager, a superstar crooner from the 1940s, who disappeared from public life altogether, is living under an assumed name in a secret town in New Mexico?"

"Well, all I can say Mr. Halberson is that we're all happy that you're here. This town seems to have embraced you wholeheartedly. Most paradises get worse when you actually look into them. This one just gets better and better. Please do enjoy it."

Just then, the music started up again and I looked up to see if John Lee had returned but now it Kate was on the platform holding the microphone. She began singing *It's Been a Long, Long Time*, a song made famous by Kitty Kallen who sang it with the Harry James Orchestra. Her eyes were on Ken.

*Never thought that you would be
standing here so close to me
there's so much I feel that I should say
but words can wait until some other day*

Ken Halberson's heart caught in his chest. Her voice was purely angelic. He was transfixed.

*Kiss me once, then kiss me twice
Then kiss me once again
It's been a long, long time
Haven't felt like this, my dear
Since I can't remember when
It's been a long, long time*

*You'll never know how many dreams
I've dreamed about you
Or just how empty they all seemed without you*

*So, kiss me once, then kiss me twice
Then kiss me once again
It's been a long, long time*

When the song was over the crowd and cheered and applauded raucously, Ken more than them all. Kate, looking embarrassed and happy at the response, muttered a timid 'Thank you' and handed the microphone back to the band-leader, who was still clapping.

When she returned to the table, Ken rose to help her into her chair. He leaned over and whispered into her ear, "That was wonderful."

"Thank you," she said, smiling.

"That'll be our song."

“We don’t have a song yet, Mr. Halberson,” Kate said with a wink. “You still haven’t made up for your previous failure.”

“What must I do?”

“If your better instincts don’t take over, then there is no hope for you.”

“Should I kiss you once, or kiss you twice?” He asked.

“Not your baser instincts, Mr. Halberson. Your higher ones.”

“Invite you to church, then?”

Kate laughed. “Somewhere in between there would be nice.”

