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The Way the Ball Bounces

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## PROLOGUE

At a time when the United States was enjoying a large prosperous white middle class, Aaron's family was so low down the economic ladder they didn't even see it.

Aaron was a member of a family of four kids, the father a talented fine artist, and a mother born of working class Jewish immigrants living in Brooklyn. Mama was his father's model before they married, and they lived in Bohemian Greenwich Village.

They lived in Brooklyn until 1950 when they moved to find a better place for Aaron's father to be a fine artist. They took a Greyhound bus to Miami.

After moving in a rented single-family house in South Miami, they were startled in the night by a large flaming white cross on the front lawn. The flames flared out wide illuminating the white wooden sides of the house. It was a mystery how the Klan knew there was a Jew living in the house.

They moved into a three-room dwelling in a poor Miami neighborhood. Nearby, was a field with palm trees occasionally bouncing coconuts to the ground. Aaron and brother Mike learned how to punch holes in the coconuts and drink the sweet juice; they opened the coconut with a hammer and brought home the white meat. There were mango trees with much fruit to pick. The kids played hopscotch drawing a grid with chalk on the sidewalk beside the house.

In the summer of 1950, a bowling ball rolled on the downtown Miami sidewalk would hit nothing.

They moved from Miami and for the next five years travelled on Greyhound buses from city to city, usually moving when Mama could not get along with the neighbors. The family visited the Alamo and Canal in San Antonio and then lived in New Orleans for a year. Mama stood in front of the Jackson Square statue with Rich's paintings propped against the white steel fence. Their New Orleans dwelling was so small, Aaron and his brother were forced to sleep outside on the iron balcony overlooking the French Quarter. They went north again as far as Providence, Rhode Island where hurricane Carol provided interesting sights of fallen trees and flooded streets. They returned to New York and were forced to stay in the homeless shelter. Mama and Aaron's father, Rich, had a passionate argument in the homeless shelter. Rich left the shelter. Mama sent Aaron out to follow him. Aaron walked beside Rich begging him to return to the shelter and was successful.

They moved to Chicago and stayed there three years. Aaron grew to the age of 11 in Chicago; he hustled opening car doors at the swank Gold Coast hotels for tips. Later, he helped A&P supermarket customers carry home groceries in a Radio Flyer wagon owned by a friend until the manager caught him stealing and returning empty soda bottles from the back of the store for deposit money. The family of six lived in one room for a while. Aaron was 10 when he met an 8-year old girl who was affectionate and enjoyed kissing Aaron in the hallway.

Mama hung out at night clubs trying to sell Rich's paintings. Rich sat inside a club drawing charcoal portraits of patrons, hoping someone would notice and offer to pay for one. Otherwise, the family was forced to live on Rich's Army pension.

They next moved to Seattle in winter into an old two-story unfurnished house that sat on a barren hill. Having no bed or other furniture, they slept on the floor with sleeping bags and a few blankets. Rich found a job unloading trucks for a short time until he couldn't stand it anymore. Aaron walked in the snow for three miles every morning to school. A friend in school showed him the "white stuff" that comes after playing with his penis for a while. One day, Aaron didn't want to stay with this friend after school. While walking away in the snow, his friend shouted after Aaron; as he turned around, a rock slammed into his mouth knocking loose two front teeth.

Aaron turned 12 in Seattle and was in the sixth grade. By summertime, there were new friends whose everyday activities were called "messing around." They wandered the streets targeting unsuspecting pedestrians with the sting of folded paper clips shot from rubber bands stretched between thumbs and forefingers. They hung around the Lake Union waterfront borrowing rafts for trips on the lake. An older friend let him watch as he masturbated.

The Seattle summer neighborhoods were abundant with Bing cherries and apples hanging low for picking. Aaron and friend would fill bags of cherries and sell them for 50 cents a bag. Rows of blackberries grew beside the roads and were good eating. Apples were picked and apples were eaten. The summer was full of free places to eat; Aaron and his friend were never hungry.

Once Aaron's friend decided to pretend he was a paratrooper. He climbed on the roof of a barn, opening an umbrella, then jumped off the roof. His ankle was hurt really bad.

The family next moved to San Francisco. They lived in a small apartment on Ninth Street, up from Market. Aaron's favorite toy was a balsa wood airplane bought for a dime that would dive and soar when thrown from his hand. Mama and Aaron would walk on Market Street browsing the variety of stores. They would go to the movies that gave away silver dollars in a drawing at intermission. Laurel and Hardy, The Three Stooges, and even old Charlie Chaplin movies were the usual fare.

They arrived in Los Angeles in December 1955. The Harbor Freeway was under construction. Aaron turned 13 and finished sixth grade at 32<sup>nd</sup> Street School. They lived on South Vermont Avenue in a predominantly black area. Aaron attended junior high school at John Adams, more than a half-hour walk from where he lived. The football practice fields of the University of Southern California were on the way. John Adams had, including himself, less than a handful of white students. His friends were a fat kid and a German kid who used German cuss words to describe the black students.

On clear or cloudy days without rain, he hated changing into tee shirt, shorts, and tennis shoes to play games outside. He found it painful and embarrassing standing naked in the locker room and showers in front of others.

Aaron's grasp of spelling and vocabulary was way beyond the other students; they would ask him how to spell words. On the asphalt field, the teacher remarked how he might be smart, but he still had to strip into shorts and play outside.

Walking down the classroom corridors, watching the large breasts of the girls walking by, his fat friend says,

"There's a lot of tit at John Adams."

"Yeah, there sure is," replied Aaron.

John Adams Junior High School was the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. Aaron didn't have a girlfriend, didn't go on dates, and didn't go to parties. His only sexual

experience was with himself and with his fat friend who would bully him into helping him jerk off.

Beginning in February 1959, Manual Arts High School was his next school destination. He was given instructions at graduation time from John Adams about how to report to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. There was only a normal weekend separating his leaving John Adams and his first day at Manual Arts because winter classes did not get vacations between semesters.

## MANUAL ARTS HIGH SCHOOL

A white refrigerator, its two doors chained with a padlock. This is Aaron's good morning scene. Sleepy eyes slowly become aware this is the first day of 10<sup>th</sup> grade at Manual Arts High School.

"Mama, you gonna make my lunch?"

Pimples are bright red in the bathroom mirror, hair messed, then smacked down in place with Murray's Pomade. He pees, goes back in his room, puts on pants, green-striped polo shirt, a jacket, and sneakers, grabs the brown sandwich bag on the table, and leaps down the stairs to the front door and a chilly walk in the foggy air.

It is February 1959. Aaron is going on 16 and looks too young for his age. He gets in the movie theater, saying he is under 12 without a challenge. His curly, wavy, brown hair, and brown eyes, complete with facial acne, marks his outer appearance. He is shorter than average, yet he easily runs and plays games with kids his age. Aaron has an urban ghetto personality with some leftover New York accent of his birthplace; he is somewhat intellectual, with a touch of rowdy.

It is a 25-minute-walk north past the dull storefronts of South Vermont Avenue to the front of Manual Arts High School, a two-story cement building with a block-wide front lawn. He enters the hallway with wall lockers on both sides and stops in the Administration Office busy with clerks and vice principals. A clerk gives him instructions how to find his homeroom.

His homeroom is large and holds over 50 boys. Taking attendance is its main purpose. The homeroom teacher warns that anyone being late past eight AM, will get a swat with a large, flat wooden paddle for each tardy. The homeroom teacher calls the paddle "The Board of Education." The victim must bend down with hands on knees in front of the class. Aaron's behind feels the sting of the paddle more than enough times during the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The first day, he is given a map of the campus, guiding him to his classes.

His first class is in the classroom building at the far end of the campus. He climbs the stairs and walks between students crowding the hallway to his second-floor classroom. Opening the door, he sees the old English teacher loudly shouting and failing to get the attention of her students. He takes a seat in front of the teacher's podium where her voice seems as if she is shouting only at him. No instruction takes place, and the noise fills the room for 50 minutes.

In his Social Studies class, the students try listening to the teacher over the loud voices of a gang of boys pitching pennies at the back wall. The closest penny tossed to the baseboard wins all the other pennies. The kind teacher doesn't try controlling the penny pitchers. Raising his voice, he leans over his table and asks students what they would like to do after high school. Aaron loves baseball and reading the box score after every game. His answer is

"Statistics."

Aaron's next class is algebra taught by a strong teacher who demands the students pay attention. The class being a requirement for graduation aids the relative calm. His math skills have not progressed past the fundamentals. He believes that only basic math is needed for a normal life. The teacher has the class work on solving equations.

At lunch time, he earns a nickel trading his banana and buys a carton of milk that washes down his two soggy sardine sandwiches on wheat bread with mayonnaise and chopped onions.

After eating, Aaron joins a semicircle of boys on the first few steps of the stadium. In the center are two contestants, staring each other down, and their feet shuffling. This is a game of "woofing." Two boys tell "Yo mama" jokes, such as,

"Yo mama is so short she sued the city for making the sidewalk too close to her ass!"

"Well, yo mama works for Bendix, she bends dicks."

"I hate to talk about yo mama, she's a good old soul, she gotta Cadillac pussy, and a rubber asshole, she runs on water, she runs on gas, and if you don't like it, you can kiss my ass."

A scorekeeper marks in a notepad and gives a score for each woof measured by his decision and the reaction of the bystanders. Prestige and notoriety go to the winner.

Typing class is next, and he is the only boy. The room is filled with rows of Royal, Underwood, and Smith-Corona typewriters. His lessons are printed on sheets of paper on a tray. He increases his typing speed to 55 words per minute.

In Study Hall, his algebra textbook is open on his desk. There is a lot of chatting, with notes passing between desks. The Study Hall teacher reminds students she will detain after school those caught misbehaving. Unobserved, he dozes off with his face flat against his desk waiting for the three o'clock bell. Drool wakes him sliding across his cheek; he wipes it off by lifting the neck of his shirt. When the three o'clock bell rings, all run for the nearest exit.

## HOME LIFE

Aaron walks back to his family's apartment at 30<sup>th</sup> and South Vermont. He opens the front door and runs up the flight of stairs to the second-floor landing. The chain and padlock hanging on the white refrigerator doors greet his arrival.

At the end of the landing on his left, a back porch with window screens looks out over the building's asphalt roof. A stairway leads to a narrow dirt yard that holds a cement incinerator with a cast-iron gate for burning garbage. From the top of the back stairway, walking out onto the roof is easy. The roof provides a handy location for shooting pictures with a Kodak Brownie box camera.

The back porch is his younger brother Mike's workshop. Lying across a long table are a soldering iron, coils of silver solder, and televisions with their backs open exposing vacuum tubes. Mike, now 13, taught himself how to repair televisions and radios. Mike has no interests in common with Aaron. Mike has no interest in sports. Aaron loves sports. A few years before, they played together, but not anymore. Mike and his friend scavenge the dumpsters of the local electronic supply stores for spare parts.

Aaron's father occupies a cot in a narrow area facing the front windows where he stays most of the time. None of the kids call him father, or dad, or daddy, or pop, or papa; they call him Rich. Mama and Rich never demanded he have a different name. Rich is blind, caused by unattended cataracts. His belief in Christian Science was the reason for declining surgery offered by the Veteran's Administration. Rich taps his cane in front of him aiding his way to the bathroom on the other side of the apartment.

Aaron and Mike sleep on a bunk bed in a room to the right of Rich's cot. In baseball season, Aaron does his homework when necessary and listens to Dodgers games on a tabletop radio with the voice of Vin Scully, the longtime Dodgers play-by-play announcer. Vin's partner, Jerry Doggett, adds color. After the games end, he listens to rock and roll and doo-wop music.

His two sisters, Barbie, 11, and Karen, 9, share a bedroom with a bunk bed at the opposite end of the main hallway. Barbie has inherited Rich's artistic talent and draws charcoal portraits and watercolor scenery. Karen, a cute and playful little girl, blond with blue eyes, loves playing with dolls.

The one bathroom in the rear hallway has a bathtub, no shower, one toilet, a sink for washing hands, and a mirror for squeezing pimples. One time, Aaron browses through a Sears Roebuck Catalog showing women in underwear. Rich is heard outside the bathroom door telling Mama that he smells him masturbating. Startled, he is left wondering how Rich could possibly smell him masturbating.

Mama's room holds a double bed with bedposts head and foot, bedside table and lamp, desk of drawers, and a closet full of her clothes. A steamer trunk is at the foot of the bed, its contents unknown. The trunk remains from an aborted steamship trip to Europe close to the start of World War II. A large stuffed easy chair faces a console TV. Round and overweight, Mama is four-feet, 11 inches tall. Aaron thinks she is as protective of her children as a mother lion is with her cubs.

The front door opens. Mama holds two bags of groceries. Barbie and Karen run up the stairs to their bedroom. Aaron meets Mama on the stairs and carries the grocery bags. Mama lumbers up the stairs, stands in front of the refrigerator, drags her keys from her coat pocket, and opens the padlock. The heavy chain noisily grates through

the door handles. She gives the chain and padlock to Aaron and takes the groceries. She opens both doors wide, empties the grocery bags, takes the lock and chain from Aaron, pulls the noisy chain through the fridge doors, attaches the padlock, and clicks it shut. Aaron asks,

“When we gonna eat?”

“Later, I’m gonna lay down for a while.”

Later, the aroma of skillet-fried ground meat stuffed with chopped onions brings Aaron to the table. Mama wears a housedress with a flowered pattern covered by an apron. She scoops out chunks of meat from a bowl and squeezes the meat in both hands until she has a hamburger ball then drops the ball in the skillet. She presses down on the meat with a spatula creating patties. She flips over the patties with chopped onions peeking out the tops and on the sides and lays them on a plate when done. Aaron pours a cup of coffee leaving just enough room for some milk and stirs in two spoonfuls of sugar.

Mama asks,

“Where's Mikey?”

“He wasn’t here when I came home.”

Mama shouts,

“Barbie, Karen, come eat!”

The girls run to the table. The pleasure on their faces shows their love for Mama’s hamburgers.

Rich was injured and discharged with a disability while in the Army Air Force during World War II. When asked by anyone how he feels, he tells everyone he has pains in his chest. He has difficulty urinating. Mama makes him a cup of maté tea.

The household income is a total of Rich’s pension plus City, County, and State assistance. Mama watches her favorite television soap opera “General Hospital.” She likes taking walks, having her photo taken with the Kodak Brownie box camera, shopping, and going to an occasional movie.

## SCHOOL CONTINUES

The school year moves on and baseball season starts. Paul Blair, the future famous major league all-star outfielder, plays outfield on the Manual Arts baseball team. Aaron shouts to Paul Blair,

“Spit on the bat, Paul!”

He hangs out with the team as a volunteer water boy and batboy.

He goes to the City Championship basketball game with his athlete friends from the Track and Football teams. The athletes are always fun and a protective shield from bullies. The game matches Manual Arts and Poly High in the San Fernando Valley. Unlike the Poly side, the Manual Arts side dances throughout the game. They dance the Slauson Shuffle, a routine known to those from South LA and Manual Arts: sway to the left, sway to the right, sway back to center, raise the knee, slowly kick out, flex the leg to the knee, and slam the leg to the floor. “The Duke of Earl,” by Gene Chandler accompanies the dance, blasting loud through the court speakers. Aaron and his friends are heartbroken when Manual Arts loses the game due to an unstoppable jump shot from the future UCLA Bruin and LA Lakers guard, Gail Goodrich, scoring 29 points.

After the game in the parking lot, someone taps a Poly student on the shoulder and says,

“Nice game, Poly!”

When the Poly student turns around, a fist smashes into his face. Aaron expresses his disgust at this with his friends; they agree that it wasn't right, and they all quietly walk on to the car.

Jim Blewett, a gray-haired senior, whose looks are the template for football coaches, coaches the Manual Arts football team, ranked number one in the City, and number four in the nation. His yearly winning record gives him nationwide attention. The Manual Arts mascot is The Toiler, a purple cartoon man, grinning while flexing his huge purple muscles. The Toiler has a cement block atop his head, inscribed with a large letter M. The Manual Arts colors are purple and gray. Aaron is sometimes called “gray boy,” which is how a few black boys refer to white boys.

He is a drummer in the band and struggles keeping his place in formation staying in line and playing the complicated cadence. During the game, the band plays the fight song and makes noise supporting the cheerleaders. His eyes follow one cheerleader, Gloria, the best-looking girl at Manual Arts. Her beauty reminds him of the famous Disney star on the Mickey Mouse Club, Annette Funicello. George is her boyfriend, is also a cheerleader, and is Aaron's friend. Gloria and George are both Mexican-American. Aaron admires George and thinks he has everything including the looks Aaron doesn't have. George has a sculpted face with jet-black hair and brown eyes. Aaron often hangs out with George at his family's small house with a white picket fence and a front porch, a few blocks from Manual Arts.

Aaron joins the orchestra and has an opportunity to stand out by playing the xylophone in a concert. Standing in the center behind the orchestra and xylophone gives him a clear view of the audience. His one task is very important: playing the nine notes that end the concert. Repeatedly practicing these closing notes, he can almost play them with his eyes closed. When the time comes, his hands perfectly move the mallets, and the notes ring out through the hall. The audience gives loud approval. He

stands at attention, and crosses the mallets in front of his chest. A warm and relaxed feeling fills him with this huge load lifted.

Business is Aaron's major. There are few male students; most believe learning office skills are for girls. He is not interested in welding, machine shop, auto-body shop, or any other shop.

Reading a newspaper article listing statistics about the number and background of students attending high schools in South Los Angeles, his attention is taken by percentages. The paper lists Manual Arts as 94% black, Asians three percent, Hispanics two percent, and Caucasians one percent.

## AFTER SCHOOL, SUMMER, AND EXPOSITION PARK

Every day, throughout the summer, Aaron and George agree to wear the same pair of Levi jeans. They rub hamburger, taco, and burrito grease on the pant legs. Their goal is to get the pant legs so stiff that they stand up on their own. They ride their bikes over 15 miles from Vermont Avenue to Venice Beach. With their Levis on, they run and jump in the surf. The pant legs remain faithfully greasy.

They play baseball on the grass near the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum in Exposition Park. George, Aaron, and other boys complain to themselves how it isn't fair that the city doesn't have ball fields set aside for play. Nevertheless, everyone usually finds a few other kids for playing catch, hitting pop flies, or playing a game. The "baseball diamond" faces a tall wide tree in center field. Pieces of cardboard mark the bases. Aaron doesn't feel the ball coming off the bat; he hits a hard line drive, the ball smacks in the middle of the tree and bounces back to the pitcher. He believes if the tree wasn't in the way, he hit a major-league home run.

In the fall, they play full-contact tackle football. The players wear tee shirts and jeans or khakis with sneakers or tennis shoes. Aaron plays with reckless abandon and tackles ball carriers on defense. Running to just before the goal, he and a ball carrier, a much larger player, are alone. He jumps on his back and wrestles him to the ground. With another tackle, his left shoulder is strained, making it difficult to reach around his back. The players don't talk about injury. On offense, Aaron stays close to the line and blocks for George who always plays quarterback.

Using park benches separated at about the same distance as on the track at school, Aaron creates hurdles. Jumping over every bench is like launching himself and flying. He challenges other kids in bare-footed sprints and usually wins. Two reasons stop him from going out for the Manual Arts Track Team or Baseball Team: most of the time, he doesn't believe he is good enough; when feeling he is good enough, Mama will not sign the permission slip, fearing he might get hurt.

Exposition Park offers opportunities for romance. He meets an attractive black girl from Compton who loves making out with him. At night, he and Jackie huddle in bushes. He stands close to her body, feeling her warmth, holding her face in his hands, their lips touch, and they French kiss. He slides his hand under her dress and up to the front of her panties, squeezing with his palm and fingers. She tells him she cannot have sex until married. He wants to tell her he doesn't want sex, just a feel, but he doesn't push it and moves his hand away. He doesn't ask her to touch him. Another time, they sit near the top of the empty Memorial Coliseum. He glances at the stadium clock at the start of a French kiss. When they pull apart, the clock reads 45 minutes has passed. This kiss lasts a lifetime.

Throughout his three years at Manual Arts, Aaron doesn't have a girlfriend on campus. Other students have boyfriends and girlfriends and easily blend in. Aaron imagines his place is that of an outsider. However, none of this matters when meeting Jackie at the park. Being with Jackie, there is a little fear, but no drama and no pressure for commitment. Jackie tastes delicious, she loves to get close, and he is always happy being with her.

Exposition Park can be dangerous. Walking alone beside the museum, he comes even with a young black couple. Smack! A fist slams into his left upper lip. The owner of the fist gives an explanation:

"Why did you look at my girlfriend?"

Aaron walks on holding his bleeding lip. The scar remains.

His other friends are one overweight Mexican, a light-skinned black kid nicknamed Hammerhead because of his flattop haircut, and two brothers from El Salvador. At the brothers' house, a few blocks away from Aaron's apartment, they play a game of baseball on the floor. They invented this game putting together pieces of cardboard boxes for the field and for the fences. They use marbles as baseballs and cloth-wrapped ice cream sticks as bats.

On weekend nights, they get drunk on quarts of ale, running and shouting on the street. The two brothers have an older brother who sits alone in a room, drinking beer while singing and playing Mexican love songs on his guitar. Aaron visits Roberto, shares a quart of ale, listening while drunk, and loving the music even more.

A 24-hour burrito stand is one of the best things about the Vermont Avenue neighborhood. The thick and juicy burritos are wrapped in a soft tortilla filled with chicken or pork and refried beans. The burritos fill up Aaron and cost only fifty cents. Aaron first hears Little Stevie Wonder singing "Fingertips" on a transistor radio while waiting for a burrito.

The fat Mexican's nickname is Fat Man. Aaron's nickname is Pink Man. Armando, the younger of the two brothers from El Salvador, is a natural leader; he has no nickname and is confident and popular with girls. Fat Man suggests they pretend they will be a gang named "Los Convicts" (The Convicts). Just for fun, and because it is what gangs do, the Fat Man comes at night and spray paints "Los Convicts," their nicknames, and other Spanish-word additions customarily found on gang graffiti, on the front and side walls of the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum. The next day, they sit in front of the museum, smoking cigarettes and admire the spray painted graffiti.

Aaron and George go to a Friday night house party. The dark apartment's only light comes through a door leading to the kitchen. An ice bucket, a few bottles of liquor, orange juice, club soda, and plastic cups cover a table blocking the kitchen with a sign asking for donations. Aaron mixes a glass of vodka and orange juice and lays a quarter on the table. Couples slowly move about the floor, their hips grinding together. "Dedicated to the One I Love," by the Shirelles, plays on the record player. George guides a girl onto the floor and holds her close as if they were lovers. Aaron asks for a dance and leads a girl onto the floor. He is nervous and clumsy and tries grinding with her but she pushes him away. He moves back to the wall and sees George grinding his ass off. His confidence gone, he decides against anymore dancing.

## GRADUATION

Aaron graduates with a C average. In his three years of high school, he gets a handful of B(s) and one A. Aaron's marks for Cooperation and Work Habits are mostly Satisfactory (S). There is many an Unsatisfactory (U). Aaron works hard at something he likes and gives a once over to the rest.

On a cold February 1962 graduation night, Aaron stands in cap and gown on an outside stairway to the auditorium waiting to enter the ceremony. He stares at the lights and the length, to the north, of Vermont Avenue. He feels empty and uncertain about the future. The motto of Manual Arts comes to mind: "It Can Be Done."

## HUSTLING

Aaron gets a chance to make money working as a “hustler,” what street peddlers call themselves. He meets Charlie Ross at his peanut and souvenir stand on a corner with the heavy traffic of fans walking to the games at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Charlie Ross, married, middle aged, with no children, takes a liking to Aaron, who visits every game day. In time, Charlie tells him all about his souvenir and peanut business. He would otherwise not do this; it went against an unwritten rule against revealing business secrets to “chumps” (strangers). Noticing a man taking too long for browsing, Charlie turns to Aaron and whispers in his ear using pig Latin:

“BC, umpchay on the eary!”

This means

“Be quiet, a chump is listening!”

Charlie trusts Aaron’s honesty; he allows him to watch the stand while taking breaks. Aaron puts aside any money he takes in; he doesn’t steal a nickel.

Charlie sets up Aaron with his own stand on a corner of a Chevron gas station. Aaron shouts,

“Hey, peanuts, they’re 10 cents, three for a quarter; they’re cheaper than on the inside!” “Hats, pennants, souvenirs!”

After the games, Charlie, his wife, and Aaron work the “blow off.” This is when the crowd goes home offering a second chance for selling souvenirs and peanuts. When the crowd is too small, they don’t wait for the blow off.

Quina, is Charlie’s wife, a naturalized immigrant from Guatemala. She is just as good a hustler as Charlie is. She has excellent business sense; anyone attempting a con receives instant rejection. Her skin is dark with lines weathered by the sun and her long black hair is tied back. Her warm, polite nature makes everyone feel comfortable. She speaks Spanish and attracts Spanish-speaking customers. Colorful sheets of tasseled material cover her long table.

Beside her table is a barrel of pennants that stands at the wall of a swirled-vanilla ice cream store with walkup windows. Charlie parks his trailer in the back, holding the goods they sell. Quina and Charlie are good friends of the owner and employees and know them by name. Charlie fills up his van at the Chevron station across the street. They are friendly with the attendants who allow them space on the sidewalk for their souvenir stands. When a car pulls in the station, the attendant pumps the gas, checks the oil and air pressure in the tires, and cleans the windshield. Charlie, Quina, and Aaron conveniently use the gas station’s restrooms.

While working, Aaron wears a dark-blue apron sewn by Quina from old denim. The apron has two wide deep pockets with denim strings that tie around his waist. It holds five-dollars in quarters, dimes, and nickels, so that he has change ready for a first customer. After work, he separates the five-dollar starting money and gets a 25% commission for the remaining money. He usually returns home around 11 PM. Mama is waiting with her hand out. He cannot always give her money at the times when he makes very little himself.

Aaron is a natural and fits in as a street peddler just as a fish fits in the ocean. He works sports events at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum and the nearby Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena, the site of the 1960 Democratic National Convention. He works

at parades in surrounding suburban communities. The New Year's Day Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena is the biggest event of the year. He stays overnight at Quina and Charlie's apartment. Before sleeping on the couch, he helps Quina bag peanuts. From a 100-pound bag, he scoops out peanuts and stuffs them in red-striped paper bags. He taps the peanuts down, leaving enough of the bag empty so that the two ends twist into "pig ears." They leave at 3:30 AM for the ride in Charlie's van to Pasadena. At the parade route, Aaron slings a box secured by canvas straps around his shoulders. He carries peanuts, flags, and tiny Rose Queen dolls.

They walk in front of the crowd until five minutes before the parade starts when the parade officials demand they move behind the crowd for the rest of the parade. At a special display area after the parade, the public comes to view the award-winning floats. They work at the display area until the crowd thins out, about 9 PM.

Aaron sells jumping doggies, small furry windup toys that bounce on a hard surface. The jumping doggies sell well because they also bark. He uses a clever act of ventriloquism that makes the barking sound by placing a cardboard and metal diaphragm (a "whistle") behind his upper teeth. Holding it with his tongue, he uses both breath and tongue, softly blowing and manipulating the whistle. The doggies bark, whine, and yip. The buyer later finds the whistle with instructions included inside the box. The jumping doggies sell for 50 cents. Aaron usually earns \$50 and more at the Rose Parade feeling happy and satisfied having that much money at one time. It takes more than 15 hours, not including preparation. When he returns home, he hands Mama a twenty.

He becomes a jumping doggie expert. During Christmas season, sitting on the sidewalk with Christmas shopper traffic, he has barking doggies running around in front of him. He grinds it out for a 12-hour day and uses half a dozen or more of the mouth whistles. He is an immortal jumping doggie hustler.

## HITCHING

In mid-October 1962, Aaron and James hitchhike from South Central Los Angeles to New York City. James is a light-skinned African American, but at the time, he is a Negro. They stand on the concrete of the eastbound on ramp with their thumbs stretched out, only vaguely aware of the Cuban missile crisis. They have two dollars and a carton of Marlboros. Being 19, they are not thinking of any further preparation. Being from the warm climate of Southern California, they are not wearing warm clothing. Being 19, they feel they can endure whatever they might encounter.

They hear war talk from nearly everyone picking them up, and they don't give it much thought. They have a dream of seeing New York City, getting good jobs, and living as playboys in a nice apartment, always full of pretty girls.

The next night, it is cold, and windy. They huddle in bushes on the median of the highway somewhere in Texas. The lights from a coffee shop shine across the highway. They casually walk in the coffee shop and sit in a booth next to the front window. The server comes over. She takes one look at James and says,

“We don't serve Negroes in here.”

Without hesitation, James says,

“I don't eat Negroes anywhere.”

She drops her eyes, ignoring James, and says,

“You'll have to eat in the kitchen.”

She escorts them through two swinging doors to the kitchen. They sit at a large table covered with a clean white tablecloth and order two grilled-cheese sandwiches and two Cokes. After eating, they apologize and tell the server they don't have enough money and cannot pay. She tells them they have to work washing dishes to pay or she will call the cops. An hour later, she allows them to leave.

They huddle in the bushes on the median again and fall asleep. The next day, they catch a few more rides. In Missouri, a young man around their age picks them up in a four-door, pounded-up car. He reaches out and shoves the front door open. He says,

“Come on, get in.”

They sit in the front seat. Aaron looks to the back seat; he sees a girl rolling around, moaning, seemingly unaware of her condition. The driver leans over. He shouts,

“Jamie, why the hell do you want to go?”

He doesn't say 'where' he says 'why.' He repeats the plea several more times. He doesn't say “Jay Me,” he says “Ji-e me.” They roll through the bumpy backwoods Missouri countryside. The driver drops them off at the next highway on ramp. They feel cold from the sudden drop in temperature.

After a few more rides, they stand at a truck stop near the Pennsylvania Turnpike with 18-wheelers scattered around. The air smells foul with a mixture of oil, gasoline, and industrial waste. A middle-aged minister wearing a white collar and driving a black four-door sedan picks them up. He asks them their ages, their names, and where they came from. He gives them friendly advice on how to be careful and survive. They talk about the possibility of war and President Kennedy. They conclude they cannot predict

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