

Crossing Grove Street 1967

A novel excerpt

Terence Cannon

At 9:13 Jimmy O'Shea reached the border where the bars and discount stores ran out and parched wood cottages and time-eaten Victorians began. The boundary was a street of crushed asphalt, sand, and limestone, brown-black, potholed, and Grove by name. Across the street, in a blink, another country.

But slow, Jimmy, as you cross these bounds. Respect this street as you would a mighty river, the Liffey, Thames, or Niger, bearer of sovereignty, definer of peoples. The river Grove flows with multitudes. You see Cathy aboard the runningboard of a jackknifed semi, skewed from the bank. You see DC Baines on the far shore, signalling.

Walk slowly; you have been borne through canyons of roaring organized discord from stone to brick to brownstone to wood, scaling down, decaying to where you are.

It takes years to cross Grove Street. Your deep friend DC Baines beckons you from the other side.

The Peterbilt Cathy has boarded is parked askant, the driver's door open, its engine shut off, another so-called inanimate object that has joined your side.

DC Baines raises his clenched fist. You may cross in a moment, Jimmy, but right now take all the time in the world. Back up five years. You're 22.

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**Int. Community Center, 125th Street, Harlem.
1962.**

A bare ruin'd hallway, light and noise at the end. JIMMY, a lapsed Quaker and conscientious objector, enters the light of a space that serves as gym, dance hall, meeting place, activity room, makeout parlor. Black teenagers roam, group, talk, toss basketballs.

JIMMY

(To an older man who seems a counselor)

Hi.

MAN

(smiles)

Aboo abjob mainy lobo do.

JIMMY

(smiles. His shirt sweats pearls of purest white)

What do I do?

MAN

(pointing to group of teenagers in the corner)

Yaka mor yas wif solodito bah.

JIMMY

What do I say?

MAN

Kaka boom drop.

JIMMY walks to the teenagers. Stands, looks, stands, looks, stands. Takes his hands out of his pockets, rubs them. Smiles. Smiles. Smiles knowingly with dignity and strength. Pisses oyster sweat.

JIMMY

(to all and none)

Hi. I'm Jimmy. I'm

TEEN

Barn! Omimomo go.

JIMMY

from the American Friends Service

TEEN

Hip boyan chit no mahmind.

JIMMY

I'm here to help.

TEEN

Achabachabacha harm. Acha harm achabachaharm.

JIMMY

I thought maybe we could

Roars of laughter, faint as from a packed stadium blocks away where a comedian, Red Foxx or Moms Mabley, performs an hilarious routine based on white boys from St. Louis who come to do good in Harlem.

• • •

It takes years to cross the River Grove because in its asphalt and sewer drain manhole incarnation, Grove

Street is less real than the line on the city map that represents it, which in turn is less real than the real line that cannot be seen, but the planetary tug on either side can indeed be felt, can only be felt, and Jimmy, waving back to DC Baines, feels it like tide and undertow, for it is the *color line*, which runs smack down the middle of Grove.

On the west bank of Grove live the people other people who were not white when they came to America became white in order not to be. The people who by not being white define white as the color they are not. The people who by their color define ALL color, as in *colored people* and *people of color*. The people who by people not “of color” were by color foremost thought. The people for whom whiteness was invented in order not to be. The people who say of those people who think they have no color, being white, that they “show their color” when they show their fear and hatred of those who cannot shed their color and be white like them. In short, “Negroes,” that race of humans that exist nowhere else on the planet, only in America.

That the people in West Oakland were not of one color, but all the colors of the deserts from which the One Gods came—tan, sienna, umber, basalt, asphalt, ebony, alabaster, gold—paled, as it were, before the political fact that people who were not mostly pink lived there. The color line accomplished that.

Appropriately, on top of that line a mighty struggle raged. To the blighted hopes of J. Edgar Hoover, who believed that on one side of that line lived Americans and on the other side lived *conniving, criminal-minded, monkey-like, sullen, loudmouth dopeheads*, the battle was not between whites and blacks. Instead, smack dab in the center of the street, on the dotted line in the too bright Technicolor sun, Cathy stood rampant on the Peterbilt cab step, dexter forearm raised in fist triumphant, Cathy Cohen, Jimmy’s Cathy, waving toward people on the far side of the barricaded intersection. Jimmy stepped to the lower rung. Cathy’s messenger, a kid from Berkeley High, nodded to Jimmy, loped north.

“Wow,” said Jimmy, or How? or Woh! intended to be respectful, affectionate, admiring, unpresuming, comradely, and intimate. He could do a lot with tone. DC Baines watched them closely from across the street. “The teamster tried to drive through us. I jumped up on the runningboard. He said What’s going on? I said We’re trying to stop the War. He told me the Teamster contract says if his life is threatened he doesn’t have to cross a picket line. I told him definitely his life was threatened. He said I was the best-looking piece of ass who ever threatened his life, pulled the keys out of the ignition, tossed them down the storm drain and walked off. That’s when everyone came out to help.”

“White or black, the truck driver?”

“White.”

“What people?” He was blinded by the truck.

“Over there, *darling*.” She pointed beyond the chrome hood to the people of varied hues building barri-

ades. “I have to go. They say the cops are moving west on 16th. Someone heard Governor Reagan’s called out the National Guard.”

He held her arm to help her down.

“Oh, are we friends?” she asked.

“Forever.”

She twisted and was gone. Music dwelt in Jimmy’s mind.

*I’ll be there,
To love and comfort you oo*

The Four Tops on the trucker’s radio.

• • •

As Jimmy crossed the River Grove street, the color line vanished, a trick of the sun. DC Baines greeted him on the western shore with a grip of pumice stone. A lowrider slid up Grove on the wrong side, slowed before them. Young men in afros, do-rags, hung out the windows. “You did it!” they yelled. DC slapped the young men’s hands.

The word was out. West Oakland, a small southern town, responded, a forest of uncollected garbage, mattresses, tires, baling wire, appliances, car parts, making its way from backyards and basements to the street. A teenager struggled past them dragging a box spring. Jimmy took the other end; they propped it against an ancient truck axle assembly in the center of Grove. Five college students crossed over, helped a family haul a bathtub up the block. Jimmy rested against the curb, wondered how long the Dexamil would last. A middle aged man came up to him, three concrete blocks under each arm, said, “Thought you could use these.”

“Sure could.”

“Cornell,” the man told his son, “You boys get the refrigerator.”

“Mr. Benson,” DC said, “You haven’t finished paying for it yet.”

“Too true,” said Benson. “But it’s broke, can’t be fixed, and more use out here than in the yard. Make the city haul it off free. Besides, I don’t want him,” indicating his son, “in no, excuse my language, white man’s war.”

“You don’t have to be polite,” said Jimmy.

“Yes, I do, son. I’m not like you kids nowadays.”

• • •

One Year Earlier

Ext: Lowndes County, Alabama, 1966. Night.

A two-story wood house off the semipaved road. Cricket buzz and hum of night.

POV; the front porch. The house is whitewashed, neat. POV; a front window. Between drawn curtains we see

into the parlor. The walls are floral patterned, not covered in layered magazine pages, indicating the status of Mr. and Mrs. Hayle, he a sanitation worker in Montgomery, she a teacher. Mrs. Hayle is the candidate for County School Board on the ticket of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) in the first elections since 1872 in which black candidates have run and black people voted. When the polls closed tonight, the Klan attempted to murder one of the LCFO leaders at the courthouse in Fort Deposit. It is assumed they will attack other black leaders and candidates during the night. SNCC workers and volunteers from around the country are assigned to protect them.

Int. The Parlor. Night.

A flashlight and a kerosene lamp, wick dimmed, on the floor of the dark room. We see the parlor by the light from the hallway, which runs from the front door to the kitchen in the rear.

DC BAINES rests on the floor, his back against the seat cushions of the couch, drags on a cigarette, blows the smoke into the lamp, where it curls and is carried to the hall by a draft from the front door. The double barrels of a shotgun rest against his knee and the arm of the couch. He crumples the empty pack.

DC
That's it.

JIMMY (v.o.)
Save it. I got eight.

They speak in low tones. The Hayles are asleep. JIMMY takes four cigarettes from his pack of Pall Malls, hands them to DC, who smooths out his pack, inserts them.

DC
Mighty white of you.

They chuckle, sotto voce, nervously.

DC (con't)
I think they will come

JIMMY
If they come

DC
from the front so they can get back on the road fast and get out. They ain't gonna run around back of the house in the dark.

JIMMY
If they come through the back, they're smack in the hall light.

DC

Nah. They're gonna shoot from the road or throw a firebomb. They shoot and keep driving, nothing we can do, everybody's safe away from the windows. Firebomb, they got to get up on the property. Can't throw it from the car.

JIMMY lights a cigarette. His hand and the flame waver.

JIMMY
Dynamite?

DC

Crackers start throwing dynamite around they'll blow themselves up. Way I see it, any car that slows or stops on the road gets a load of double-ought in the door. There is no presumption of innocence.

JIMMY
And if they get out?

DC

They're on Hayle property with intent to kill and fair game. I suggest since buckshot is not traceable, you give me first crack. But anybody gets inside the house, anybody we really have to kill, I don't know how crazy these fools are, you got the 45.

JIMMY
You go low, I'll go high.
And we cover each other.

DC
Like black on skin.

The crickets stop. The silence resounds. They listen. Creak of a bedspring above them.

JIMMY
You know I used to be a pacifist.

DC
Yeah well don't backslide on me.

The sound of a car on the road. DC and JIMMY jump to the window, which is cracked open a few inches. Headlights break among the trees. The car does not slow down, passes.

JIMMY
Anyone out tonight's an idiot.

DC
I'd hate to shoot someone for being an apolitical fool.

Fade out.

Int. Parlor. Night. Later

JIMMY in a chair by the window. DC in a rocking chair.

JIMMY

One side of my family owned slaves.
By marriage.

DC

Oh well that's ok then, by marriage.

JIMMY

The Collier side owned slaves. The O'Sheas
were indentured servants.

DC

So where was this O'Shea Plantation?

JIMMY

Collier Plantation. Virginia.

DC

I got folks in Virginia. A rape here, rape there,
we could be cousins.

JIMMY

An honor.

DC

To you or me?

JIMMY

Fair enough.

DC

So here you are on the slave side. No middle
road for the O'Sheas.

JIMMY

No middle road, period, far as I can tell.

DC

All I care, if the Klan comes through that
door and holds down on me and you shoot
the motherfucker and don't waver on
account of what side of the line you were
raised on, you're the best human being I
ever knew, and that's the full writ.

JIMMY

Suits me.

• • •

Grove Street on Friday morning was a zone of peace
in the war brought home, a mingling of people black and
white in which no one contended and nothing contend-

ed with them. A white Teamster—perhaps a racist per-
haps not—had tossed his keys down the storm drain, laid
his semi, which no number of cops could beat up, across
the path of the Selective Service System. By blocking the
street, the rig declared the street blockable, roused resi-
dents to the west, demonstrators to the east, made all
things possible, made the mattresses, transaxles, refriger-
ators, baling wire on Grove Street the Q.E.D. of an idea,
the phrase at the end of an argument that says it has
been proved.

And what an argument it was that raged the summer
of the Q.E.D.! From the womb of all truths— emotional
fervor, false assumptions, vague early assays, detours,
misconceptions, and mistakes — there arose a five-word
idea: shut the Induction Center down. People associated
its four-word version, “ Shut the mother down,” with
Jimmy O'Shea, who by October was happy to claim
authorship, but Jimmy had not invented the phrase, first
shouted in anger by a man leaving a room.

**Int. Meeting Room. Four Months Ealier. Movement
Liberation Front Room.**

A bare room, folding chairs, twenty people,
slouched, standing, poisoned by despair: the war will not
end; nothing they do will stop it.

COSMO

What will another demonstration demon-
strate—that we can still stand upright?
Quod eres demonstrandum? Allow me to
demonstrate this incredible kitchen utensil.
Not only does it cut, scrape, filagree, mash,
mince, and mangle, it cleans up after itself
and feeds the dog.

JIMMY

You're not helping, Cosmo.

MEMBER OF
CHEERIOS FACTION

This kind of cynical militant posturing is
what's destroying the anti-war movement.
I'm fed up with people who can't be satis-
fied with anything less than shutting the
motherfucker down.

(Stomps out, slamming the door)

Even he, the departing Cheerios factor, did not
pluck these words from air. *Stopping, shutting, closing
down* had circulated in the radical thought-collective of
the Bay Area for years. San Francisco, a labor town, was
the site of not just any strike, but the mother of all
American strikes, the Big Strike, the 1934 General
Strike, Harry Bridges its folk hero, still alive, still a
force.

And yet.

Shutting down a government facility for the sole purpose of shutting it down—wasn't that subversive to all previous assumptions? Wasn't that less like moral protest and more like war?

Over the summer, the idea circulated in varying forms—let's epoxy the Center's doors, chain them, burn it down—as radicals and activists grappled with the notion of a mass activity not intended to demonstrate anything but power. Each variation conserved a central liberating thought: the Induction Center was not a banal mute object but something they could act upon. They scouted the streets around the Center, drew maps, designed plywood shields. The community of those who spoke the idea and those who listened increased steadily. The Induction Center talked to them, the shields talked to them, the arrangement of streets, the location of parks, West Oakland itself, entered the conversation. Grove Street participated, not as a line on a map, but a tripwire.

**Int. Community Room of a Church in Berkeley.
Summer.**

LEADER,
WHEATIES PARTY

You propose to bring thousands of white demonstrators to within blocks of the ghetto.

CATHY

We plan to bring them to the Induction Center.

WHEATIES

Which is next door to West Oakland. Your entire opportunist scheme is a plot to lure the Oakland Police into the ghetto without asking permission of those who live there.

If West Oakland the victim wasn't convincing, there was West Oakland the mugger.

MEMBER, SHREDDED WHEAT
COLLECTIVE

What about your plans for violence?

CATHY

What plans for violence?

SHREDDED WHEAT

Recruiting black people. Your entire opportunist scheme is a plot to lure the Oakland Police into the ghetto to create a riot to further your agenda for violent revolution.

But mostly, in the many words of the delegate from

SPECIAL K

HOW are you going to shut it down? How?
How? How? How? How? How? How? How?
How? How? How? How?

REPRESENTATIVE,
GRAPE NUTS GANG

What forces will this strengthen, what message prevail, what will it lead to, what declare?

RICE KRISPIES CADRE

I think Jimmy's right. How many here were at Sproul Hall?

(Some hands go up)

Have we forgotten already? "There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels and you've got to make it stop."

Jimmy didn't know where the gears and wheels of the Induction Center were exactly. They couldn't walk in and take it over like Sproul Hall. He imagined some kind of human high-pressure zone, a homo sapiens typhoon, an anthropoid cold front with severe turbulence.

In the end, *Shut the Mother Down*, defeated *how*. "We Declare the Oakland Induction Center Closed," rendered the doubters worse than wrong, irrelevant. Now on a Friday, the people of West Oakland and the demonstrators from everywhere had made shutting down the Center a *fact*, made the organizers of Stop the Draft Week as of now retroactively *right all along*. Some opponents, particularly the Wheaties Party, insisted the idea was not "correct." They were right, it was *pre-correct*. No success exists until it's already been, at which point everyone who supported it was *right all along*. Circulated among thousands, altered and modified, their idea rose alchemized into a tractor-trailer skewed across an intersection, trashcans, bus benches, flat tires, potted trees, a refrigerator with payments still due.

Terrence Cannon is a former SNCC field secretary and one of the "Oakland Seven" antiwar conspiracy defendants. He was founder and editor of *The Movement* newspaper and *Tricontinental News Service*. He taught writing at City College of NY and now lives in Santa Monica, CA, where he writes non-fictional fiction.