

LOS ANGELES, 1968:
HAPPY RANCH TO WATTS

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Monday came fast, and Allen was heading for Watts—not to pass by on the way to some ballgame, and not because he would take a wrong exit off the freeway. *Rolling on down there on purpose—like it was nothing.*

He had twenty-five minutes before his ten-thirty a.m. appointment with a teacher who was supposed to be his mentor. He drove his grey-primered '51 Volvo down the off-ramp from the Harbor Freeway; it was about eight blocks to the school, right through the heart of Watts. *You can still turn around.* Before Allen came down to a green light at the first surface street, he cranked his windows most of the way up, locked the doors, then made his turn.

The neighborhood looked similar to an area he'd once ridden by to play JV baseball in a different part of South-Central L.A. The houses had that same post-Depression stucco-or-frame-with-a-dash-of-Spain architecture as his neighborhood, Los Feliz. Some places were well cared for but seemed to be under siege from the surrounding ramshackle houses with dirt yards, scrounging dogs, and trash of all kinds around discarded appliances and vehicles.

The school district secretary had told him it was an “inservice day between semesters,” so there were kids everywhere making the best of their day off, chasing around and having fun as if the whole neighborhood were just a run-down playground.

A few adults wandered past a guy with an Afro the size of a beach ball; he watched Allen's car from the stoop of a small shopworn market. A siren shrieked from the next block, but hardly anyone bothered to watch the cop car go by.

He made a turn and there were the Watts Towers, just ahead. Allen had only seen the seventeen spires on TV, but he grew up hearing about them from Los Feliz bullies . . . *gonna tie you kids to one of 'em and leave you down there for the boogies.*

Now the actual towers seemed less menacing, like a

pointy skyline on some gaseous planet visited by Flash Gordon. He still drove by as fast as the law and traffic allowed. Allen had to stop for a red light, where a boy in his early teens, perched on a fire hydrant, blasted Motown from his portable stereo. A fair-skinned woman in heavy makeup and a thin dress—she could have been thirty or sixty—slouched in the remains of a phone booth. She was trembling, though it was warm for the beginning of February, even for L.A.

The DTs—Jesus. “Who were you expecting—Aretha?”

A black man in the next lane heard Allen speaking to his windshield. Behind the wheel of a brand-new white '68 Chevy, company logo on its door, he was in a suit and tie. The salesman looked down his nose at the old Volvo, then at Allen, who glared back. The man turned away.

Allen didn't have to stop again before his turn onto Harding Place; the school was just ahead, its front building almost a city block long and attached to eight-foot chainlink that surrounded the grounds. There were only two cars out front; he didn't see anyone walking around as he pulled to the curb.

The building was another of L.A.'s three-story, flatroofed halls of learning, except it was more worn out than his schools, and the windows on the bottom two floors were covered with army-green steel grating. The chalky whitebrick exterior was cracked in places; illegible black initials had been sprayed over two blotchy stains. Behind a yellowing lawn, half-dead arborvitae covered in spider webs stood tall along the front of the school like a line of dusty dark-green sentinels.

He turned the other way to another fence, this one drooping and only four-feet tall around three sides of a paved but potholed city lot guarded by a large windowless security hut. Its crude Dutch door bolted and padlocked, the shack could have once been a mother-in-law cottage.

The parking lot was about two-thirds full of vehicles. Allen entered, took the first open spot and turned off the motor. Still with more than fifteen minutes, he looked at the school, shaking his head.

The interview panel he'd faced before the weekend

consisted of five veteran teachers and a vice-principal named Godina, the only one who introduced himself; the others just read aloud the brief questions. The entire process took twenty minutes. They had three hours to hire eight emergency teachers for Thurgood Marshall Junior High, recently renamed from Warren G. Harding, Godina said, “to honor the first Negro Supreme Court Justice.”

When the vice-principal asked Allen why he wanted to teach, his answer was, “Maybe I can help some kids with skills they need to make it through school.” *Pretty good for BS I made up on the spot.* Only Godina and an elderly redheaded woman didn’t seem to scowl at his answer. He was sure that an honest vote would have gone against him, including the only black teacher; she was glaring at Allen by the time it was finished. He began to doubt his decision as soon as he accepted the job.

Now he was gazing at the nearby cars—a rusty T-Bird, a renovated Chevy from the late ’40s, a new ’68 Bug—maybe they would tell him something about the people in the school. *Stalling—move it, chicken-shit.* He reached for his windbreaker, but it was getting very warm, so he left it and got out. With some difficulty, he tucked his new Pittsburgh Pirates T-shirt into the snug size-38 belled black jeans he’d bought the day before.

Allen locked the car, then entered the crosswalk at the end of the driveway, carrying a book he’d been reading. He crossed slowly, went up a few steps to the front door and peeked through a pane at a dozen or so kids and parents, all black, standing in line, likely to get something solved for the new semester.

He backed off from the door and turned around to the lot. His dilapidated car, familiar and comfortable, seemed to beckon him. Before Allen moved forward or back, a drowsy boy opened the door, looked around, and said, “It’s open.”

“Yeah, thanks.” The kid didn’t answer and got back in line as Allen entered. The hallway, clean but scuffed, had a glass trophy case and a lot of old wooden trim. He looked up at a clock protected by thick wire, then read some of the chintzy trophies and photo captions from as far back as the ’30s.

Allen sighed, then ambled toward the office. A woman in line grimaced at him as if he had just crawled out of the L.A. River. He nodded to her and said, "Morning." She turned away, and he entered the office. She was probably the first black person he had spoken to since he last chatted with the mailman.

A secretary, about five-four and in her mid-twenties, stood behind the far end of the counter, quietly preoccupied with two families. She had flawless café au lait skin, slightly pointed ears and nose, striking dark eyes and a short, neat, light-brown Afro. He couldn't help but notice how nicely she filled out her pastel-yellow pantsuit. Surreptitiously, he watched her answer the phone, listen to a parent in line, and shuffle papers—all at once. *Hell, she's the one who should be teaching.*

Seeing no one else in the office, he checked the time on a wooden clock that had Roman numerals and a pendulum. Hopefully his mentor would be that redheaded lady from the interview who seemed to be on his side.

The secretary hung up the phone and looked at him pleasantly. "May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm supposed to meet Mrs. Dorsey now."

"She's probably just leaving her meeting. I'm sure Miss Dorsey will be right down." She turned to the people in line.

"Thanks." *Man, that smile.* He leaned on the counter and opened his paperback covered with two glossy pages from a Dodger Stadium program. He found where he left off with Ray Bradbury, then tried to read, but his mind wandered—first to the cute secretary, then to the out-of-the-blue phone call from his friend, proposing that he apply for some teaching jobs.

"So what's the desperate emergency, Dan?"

"The openings are in ghetto schools—teachers quitting at midyear, or they already left."

"They're going to send an untrained white guy to East L.A.?" *To get the living crap beat out of him?*

"There, or South-Central."

Allen snapped out of his recollection as the same black teacher who'd glared during his interview walked toward him from an interior corridor. She was about five-ten and

stick-thin; he had maybe four inches on her and enough pounds to make another small adult. She wore a white top under a plain tan suit made of heavy twill, and her skirt, right out of the '50s, was below the knees. The lady came closer; an old-fashioned brooch was pinned to the lapel of her open coat, and a small gold cross hung in front of her high-buttoned blouse by a thin necklace.

“Mister Greene.”

Mister. His tongue sticking to the roof of his dry mouth, Allen just nodded and attempted a smile.

“In case you do not recall, I am Miss Dorsey.” Her words sounded intentionally formal, the *Miss* made very clear.

Moistening his lips, he reached out to her. “Miss Dorsey.”

As if he were contagious, she barely grasped his fingers. She seemed to look askance at his spare tire, made worse by the tight jeans. She saw his paperback. “A baseball book?”

“No, science.” *With Martians.*

“This way.” Holding a folder and a small grey purse, she led him out a side door into the empty hallway. Her skin wasn't light or dark brown, but almost raven; she was the darkest black American he had ever seen in person. Before she'd read aloud in the interview, Allen half-expected her to have an accent like some of the African students at his college.

Dorsey was around fifty, with a countenance somewhere between plain and homely. She had straight black hair that stopped abruptly at mid-neck in a hint of a wave; her mouth, nose, eyes and cheeks seemed disproportionately compressed like a puppet with a partially flattened head. Maybe her face would fill out if she ever smiled.

She turned but looked past him. “Where is it that you live, Mister Greene?”

“Los Feliz, just before Glendale.”

She made an even deeper scowl. “I have heard about Glendale.” They entered a conference room. Dorsey stopped at a table and turned, sneering for a moment at his long

curly black hair, full moustache, and mutton chops. “With so many applicants last Friday, I do not remember much about your college background other than your English degree.”

“Valley College, my BA’s from L.A. State.”

“Yes, no education courses or student teaching, if I recall correctly.”

“That’s right.”

“And how did you find out about our openings?”

“A friend of mine teaches math. He just finished student teaching in East L.A.”

“Oh? We are still one teacher short, and it happens to be in mathematics. I assume he has a job.”

“Yes, he does.”

“And what was it that you have been doing since college?”

“Delivering flowers mostly.”

“Flowers. Please have a seat while I get your materials.” She practically marched to the far end of the long conference table, her medium heels clicking in cadence on the buffed linoleum floor.

Allen’s last answer had him mulling over his omissions and fibs since Friday. For starters, he had been delivering flowers for only a month and still had the part-time job. On the district application, he obfuscated the fact that his degree took six years, and he didn’t list a post-college two-month stint in the Peace Corps, quitting after “medical” problems.

She started back to him with folders, a binder, and a textbook in her twig-like arms. *Did I mention, Miss Dorsey, that I hated school since sixth grade?*

She put the materials down and sat one chair away from him, priggishly stretching her long skirt over joined knees.

“Is there something troubling you, Mister Greene?”

“No.”

“You appear to be upset.”

“Just a little nervous.”

“Not surprising.” Her face changed from serious to cross. “Before we begin, I need to clarify some things.”

Allen just nodded again.

“I do not support the idea of placing untrained staff in

our lowest track, but no one in the department would switch. To be direct about it, I agreed to mentor you and Mister Fife to get the extra planning time, and because I don't want our school to end up with more . . . pardon me, it is not my place to say that." She made a frustrated sigh, then continued.

"Anyway, I cannot teach you to be a teacher—one either finds a passion for it, or one does not. If a prospective teacher has indeed made a conscious choice to help students—I am sorry to say that some have not—I believe he or she can learn through experience. You see, without genuine expectations for students or new teachers to learn, we can be very sure they won't." After that rare contraction, Dorsey paused again.

He took paper from the back of his book and began to take notes.

"Now, if you are here just to draw a check, I will use my time with you to make sure you do what is required until June, if you last that long. Then you could go sell cars or join a commune. I don't care."

"Um—"

"Excuse me, but you do not need to respond to that, your actions will show your motives. My responsibilities will be to observe your instruction, review lesson plans and answer questions. Mister Godina will occasionally be with me for official evaluation. Do you have any questions so far?"

"Not yet."

She reached for the thick LANGUAGE ARTS book. "Seventh-grade instructional goals correspond to this text. For track-one students it is not necessary to use it all of the time, especially if there is an effort to teach them basic grammar and phonics. Most of our track-one students want to read. Some will even pretend to be reading when just looking at pictures. . . "

Dorsey soon transitioned into a description of materials, equipment and a lack thereof, followed by several more minutes to explain some obvious recordkeeping. ". . . and teachers *must* turn in report cards on time." Handing him the three-ring binder, she frowned at the eye-patched Pirate logo

on his shirt. “. . . you will find the school rules in here and also posted in every room. This handbook is required reading, and I suggest close attention to the section on professional guidelines, including facial hair, dress . . . ”

He waited for her to pause. “This isn’t what I would wear tomorrow, Miss Dorsey.”

“I did not expect so, Mister Greene.” Dorsey went on to the subject of discipline. “. . . the key is to have clear consequences. When a teacher is firm but fair, a few students will complain, but most will respect it. Later on, the teacher can begin to ease off a little. A permissive approach . . . ” She raised a brow at Allen’s clothes again. “. . . or downright meanness—neither extreme *ever* works here. Most of our students will behave if given a chance.”

She seemed to be reading his body language, staring coldly at Allen for a moment, as if daring him to differ. “In twenty-two years, Mister Greene, I have never had one class in which I did not think most of my students were taking care of business, which I define as *trying*. Unfortunately, trying to learn does not always translate to academic success. Willing but low-achieving students deserve as much time as we can give them.”

He jotted again. “And the ones who aren’t trying?”

“Our apathetic students include a few individuals in special education, but many in that program are hard workers. Most students who don’t try have normal IQs or higher and have been convinced over the years that they are dull—I believe it is the teacher’s job to disabuse them of that notion.”

Dorsey drew a breath and removed a hankie from her pocket for a quick and proper nose wiping. She turned to him, almost wistfully. “And we do have a small number of openly aggressive students who have mostly quit on themselves *and* everyone else. They can be both destructive and self-destructive—their attendance is usually poor, although their abilities also vary. We cannot give up on them either, but a teacher must be practical and not allow a student who is acting up to disrupt learning or abuse the other students or . . . the teacher.”

“And how often, um, would you expect those kids to -- ”

“That also varies.” She looked at him askance again. “It is not unusual to have two or three students in each class with records of aggression, plus one or two more who might cross that line with peer pressure. The procedure for emergency assistance is outlined in the handbook. The reality is that the more a teacher requests it, the less quickly they will respond.”

“So if a teacher really needs help and calls, then nobody shows up, what does he do?”

“His best, Mister Greene. Prevention is our most effective tool. As I said, it is imperative to establish concrete consequences, and then be firm but fair. Keep saying that to yourself, and it will go well most of the time. You will need to be especially strict in homeroom—seventh-grade boys from all three tracks, some of whom do not see each other all day, except in there. Discipline is also supported by good time management—using more than a minute or two just to get started is a waste of time that invites chaos . . .”

She explained some basic methods for starting class, and then said, “That’s about it, except for your questions. See the secretary in the morning for keys and your attendance—”

“The one who’s there today?”

She glowered at his eager question. “No, she’s Miss Watson—Mrs. Venable is the head secretary. Miss Watson mostly handles reception, registration, supplies and orders. By the way, if you need something that is not already in the school, she probably will not be able get it for you. Other questions?”

“Can I see the room?”

“Not with Mrs. Venable out today, unless you care to run down someone who has a master key. The room is like any other. I have told you what to expect to find in there.”

“Okay. What about the Creative Writing class?”

“Yes, I did forget to mention that.”

“Are they all track-one kids too?”

A faint pallor materialized on her flat nose. “I am sure you are aware, Mister Greene, that a *kid* is a baby goat. The *students* in that class will be seventh graders from all three tracks, some of whom did not get the elective they

requested. The handbook has broad goals for Creative Writing, but the teacher decides the activities.”

“How *creative* can the writing be?”

Her glare endured. “As some of them won’t be able to write a complete sentence, that might be a logical place to begin. So, do you still want the job?”

He stared at her.

“Well?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” As they stood, she handed over everything with a scornful crease of a grin that did not fill out her squashed features. “Very well, then, Mister Greene, perhaps we will see you tomorrow.”

Yeah, perhaps. “Thanks for your help.”

