

## I

## “WHAT ARE ALL YOU WHITE PEOPLE DOIN’ HERE?”

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I was about to be blindsided by a burly, big-shouldered black man named Spencer Perkins.

It was December 1981. A skinny freshman named Michael Jordan was starting his first college basketball season. One year of a Ronald Reagan White House had Jesse Jackson contemplating a run for the presidency. *African American* was a good ten years from the national vocabulary. And I was finishing up another fulfilling day after three exhilarating months in the heart of one of America’s most daring and enduring interracial projects.

The warm winter evening in Jackson, Mississippi, was just turning dark as I turned my rusty white Peugeot sedan onto St. Charles Street. I was headed to a hastily organized gripe session, with people who had inspired as much scribbling in my new copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as there was in my trusty old Bible.

Meetings here never started on time. I’d gotten over being irritated, but my stubborn internal clock still had me right on schedule as I turned into the parking lot past the lit-up sign in the grass that said “Voice of Calvary Ministries.”

Across the street I noticed a dozen or so adults and children milling in front of the notorious gray house where a drug-dealing, anything-stealing family lived. Having traded America’s whitest state for its blackest and a rural village for a five-month volunteer commitment in the urban “hood,” I found west Jackson a world apart, a planet apart, from my student life at Middlebury College in Vermont.

Here neighborhood kids called my old Peugeot a hoopty, definitely not a cool epithet. Here Voice of Calvary people casually referred to convenience stores as Stop ’n’ Robs. Discussing the latest break-in to someone’s house seemed as normal to them as dissecting the previous Sunday’s big football game.

My action that night was instinctive as I stepped out of my car: *Better lock up. Even a hoopty with a hole in the floor might be fair game tonight.*

Dean Cousar was climbing out of his old but well-preserved brown van. I greeted him with a “What’s up?” While the standard stay for white transplants like us was only a few months, Dean was a *long-term*, which meant he’d been here for a few years and didn’t plan to leave.

Bearded and thickly built, an Illinois native and musician, Dean was wearing one of his way-out-of-style loud polyester shirts with a wide collar. He had worn one just like it in September during my first Sunday in Jackson, when he sat at a piano during the worship service and pounded out his song “I Really Care,” blasting religious hypocrites who ignored the world’s poor. “I really care, but I’m not called to go and feed the poor,” crooned Dean, who always got right to the point.

I really care, don’t you know I’ll give, if they come to my front door?  
I really care, but I’m not called to forsake all like *you* folks do.  
I really care, I’ll do my share, I’ll pray for you.

*These Voice of Calvary folks are intense*, I had thought to myself.

Dean and I walked toward the Fellowship House, a sprawling, two-story brick residence with wraparound porch. It was headquarters for community development projects that ranged from a health center to housing renovation, from business enterprises to youth development. Much more than a hub, the Fellowship House was an icon, Voice of Calvary’s Plymouth Rock, its Alamo, its Wittenberg door. This was where Voice of Calvary was founded in 1973, where black and white staff broke bread over lunch every day, and where we gathered—as we were tonight—for tribal meetings.

To our right, behind the Fellowship House, was another piece of Voice of Calvary’s urban beachhead, a small, former barn converted into offices. I noticed the light was off in the second-story office of Lem Tucker, only twenty-nine years old, the energetic new president of Voice of Calvary Ministries who had taken over in June. *Lem’s probably working at home*, I thought. *He just doesn’t quit.*

From the rumblings I’d heard in this tight-knit world, most of tonight’s meeting would focus on Lem’s leadership.

It wasn’t that anybody questioned Lem’s commitment. From his black middle-class upbringing in Norfolk, Virginia, to his degree from prestigious William and Mary College, to his nomination as an Outstanding Young Man in America, and from his seminary training in Philadelphia

to his sudden plunge into west Jackson in 1977, Lem had come a mighty long way in downward mobility. I had seen that a few days after I arrived.

My first night at Voice of Calvary had been spent a few blocks from the Fellowship House, in what they called the Study Center, a huge, two-story, rambling building. There, alone and terrified, I listened all night long to the din on the street. Big-engine cars with broken mufflers zoomed past, music pounding through open windows with the ba-boom, ba-boom of the bass cranked up. *Why*, I wondered, *were people shooting off firecrackers?* Then I thought, *those aren't firecrackers; they're gunshots.* I'd never heard them before. My body lurched at each unfamiliar noise, and I kept jumping to my bedroom window, sure that my car would be gone.

Later during that first scary week, Lem had stopped by to get a book from the Study Center library. Underneath his small, neat Afro and thin mustache, he had cracked a wide and gentle grin. "Did you know I almost got killed in this building?" he said nonchalantly as he browsed a shelf.

"Noooooooooooo," I said, not exactly eager for more information.

"A guy broke in and attacked a girl, a volunteer, in there," he said, pointing toward the next room. "Just then I was walking into the Study Center. I heard screams, and I rushed down the hallway into the room. The guy fired a gun straight at me from four feet away and ran out. He fired twice. But there's only one bullet hole." I looked where Lem pointed. Yup, there it was, above the door. *Oh. Great.* "I have no idea where that other bullet went, or how it missed me. A guardian angel, I think." Lem said good-bye and left.

Lem's visit had left me shaken but inspired. I was quickly enraptured by Voice of Calvary's peculiar breed of die-hard activists who accepted both danger and divine presence as everyday and normal.

Now, on the night of the meeting, Dean and I strode into the Fellowship House's large meeting room. I stopped to talk with my friend Tressa Knutson, who was also making a brisk adjustment to this unfamiliar world.

Tressa pronounced her native state's name "*Woos-gone-son*," as though her fingers were pinching her nose. Her sturdy build, dogged determination, and last name had ice-and-snow surviving Norwegian written all over them. I could picture Tressa helmeted, standing at the front of a Viking boat with spear in hand, her sandy blonde hair blowing in the wind.

Waiting for the meeting to start Tressa and I laughed about the day before, when we'd driven house to house near the Study Center, rounding up a group of neighborhood kids for our weekly group, the Good News Club. It amazed me how the children flocked to us, though I wasn't sure what drew them. Our two hours of undivided attention? The Bible

stories we told? Or the Kool-Aid and cookies? The kids were wiggling into my heart.

I told Tressa how three of them—Shamika, Tawanda, and Dwan—had waved me down on my way to tonight’s meeting. I had stopped and rolled down the window.

“Mistah Chris,” Shamika had said, “is we fittin’ ta go ta Gu Noo Cluh?”

I did a double take, still slow on my translations of local talk. *Fittin’ ta*, I realized, meant “fixing to,” and that meant “about to.” In this slower-paced Mississippi culture, people actually said things like “I’m fixin’ to start to get ready to go now.”

I had smiled. “Good News Club was yesterday, Shamika—remember? Me and Miss Tressa will come pick you up next week.”

After our laugh I left Tressa to find a seat and saw Derek Perkins walk in. Derek was what the neighborhood called a *bruthah*, a black male, as in “bruthah-man,” “hangin’ with the bruthahs,” or “my bruthah!” followed by a palm slap (female counterparts were *sistahs*). I was twenty-one, Derek was twenty-two, but he was more hero to me than peer.

During my newcomers’ tour a staff member had opened my eyes to class differences in the neighborhood, taking me to Derek’s old outpost. It was in one of the roughest parts of town, about a mile from the Fellowship House and a stone’s throw from Jackson State University, Mississippi’s largest historically black university.

“You see, there’s poor,” she had said with a chuckle as we had driven into an alley lined with crumbling shacks, “and then there’s what we black folks call po’.” *Po’*, I saw, was trampled front yards littered with trash, toys, and jacked-up, wheel-less cars, constant loud music, and parent-to-child screams like “Git in dis house fo’ I tear yo’ butt up, boy!”

“That’s the house Derek moved into,” she had said, pointing. A thick wooden cross stood in the tiny yard. She told me how Derek and a white comrade had brazenly entered a hangout down the street called Velma’s Purple Pantry. Inside was a drug-running crowd of teenagers hustling pool, including thirteen-year-old JJ. Disarmed by Derek’s boldness, JJ accepted an invitation to dinner. Soon, as the story went, JJ started coming to Voice of Calvary and then surrendered his life to God and pledged to give up gangsterhood for good.

Voice of Calvary wasn’t out just to “get folk saved.” They were after *disciples*: committed, believing followers. As Kenyan boys were formed into Masai warriors by their tribe, here disciples of Jesus were made, in community. Becoming a Christian meant becoming apprenticed to fellow disciples and being initiated into a new culture. And nobody did all that initiating better than Derek. A few blocks from headquarters, he had

started up Harambee House (*harambee* was a Swahili word that meant “let’s get together and push”), where JJ and several other boys lived with him around-the-clock.

And now here came Derek with JJ, as always, trailing along behind: grinning, slapping backs, loudly chatting with everybody. I avoided eye contact. Derek was warm and friendly to me, but JJ—only fifteen—was already my nemesis.

JJ was the poster boy for what Lem memorably dubbed “Harvard minds with ghetto opportunities.” He grew up, he’d tell you, “on the screets.” JJ got to eighth grade without learning to read or write, aided and abetted by absentee parents, teachers’ low expectations, high intelligence, and his tall, lean, and very cool charisma.

JJ soaked up Derek’s full-time attention and a steady stream of Voice of Calvary tutors, odd jobs, and second chances. He was a hard and tireless worker, often making himself indispensable and amusing everyone with his verbal antics. “Derek,” he’d say, “that’s *unimpossible*, man! You know I can’t do that!”

But JJ knew exactly how to get under anybody’s skin, and white volunteers like me were his favorite targets. We’d had several run-ins at Voice of Calvary’s Thriftco clothing store, where I worked in the warehouse every afternoon sorting clothes. *Mr. Unimpossible*, I thought, *is gonna be a royal pain over my last two months in Mississippi*.

I finally took a seat near Donna Wheeler, in her customary clogs and jeans. Another white transplant to Voice of Calvary, Donna was Lem’s assistant. A few minutes after my arrival in Jackson she had routed me like a boot camp recruit. “Do this. Go there. Next.” A week later she barked orders to me and other volunteers to set up chairs before a city-wide fundraising banquet. I don’t know whether it was a latent bias against take-charge women or being handled like an army private, but Donna kicked my highly competitive nature into overdrive. *How is Miss Runnin’ Things going to react, if Lem gets raked over the coals tonight?*

Thirty-odd people filled the room now, evenly split between whites and blacks, all of us in our twenties. We were descended from Protestant and Catholic, from “frozen-chosen” just-war Presbyterian to pacifist Mennonite legacies, from stiff Lutherans to choir-rocking Missionary Baptists, from the suburbs and “the screets.” Most of us worked at the Ministries, and all of us were members of Voice of Calvary Church. Sorting out the ties between those two entities of Ministries and church wasn’t easy, but it was crucial for understanding almost anything that happened around here.

Voice of Calvary Ministries was a million-dollar community development corporation with paid staff, while Voice of Calvary Church was a separate voluntary association of about 275 weekly worshippers. But the Ministries and the church were like two siblings in one family, with the church affirmed as the family’s soul through its fellowship, worship, and relationships. Structural and personal requirements solidified the family tie: Ministries staff, for example, were required to attend the church, whose pastor was Phil Reed.

Phil was also conspicuously absent tonight. Like Lem, he wasn’t invited by the upstarts who organized this gathering.

An Indiana native, Phil Reed had arrived in 1975 as a recovering alcoholic and know-it-all seminarian. He was shocked to find Christians who embraced both racial justice and a resurrected Jesus, and who brashly confronted his skepticism about the latter. “Phil, you just need to know Jee-zus,” said a black church member one evening, as if his personal friend—God in the flesh—was waiting outside the door. That night, said Phil, he let Jesus in. A few months later, in 1976, the church asked the seminary dropout to become its first official pastor. Choosing a white pastor in a black neighborhood was part of an unusual racial logic I was still trying to unravel.

What was clear to me was that any conflict here had huge ripple effects in the overlapping spheres of work, play, and fellowship. The people you worked with, you worshipped with. If people were ticked off at the Ministries, they vented at home and at church to fellow employees and church members with major responsibilities. If the Ministries got the flu, the church got sick too, and vice versa.

Even church members who didn’t work at the Ministries saw themselves as its stakeholders. Case in point: Derek’s older brother Spencer, who worked at a local fast-food restaurant. I noticed him as the meeting was about to start.

Spencer sat where he did in every setting, it seemed, toward the back of the room, next to one of his brutish housemates from Valley Street two blocks away. Spencer’s linebacker build made me look like a skinny placekicker. He sat stone-faced, with body language I read as “Handle with Care.” Spencer was the polar bear next to Derek’s teddy bear, a militant enigma to me, unfriendly and unapproachable. *What’s his interest in this meeting?* I wondered.

One of the white volunteers who pulled the meeting together stood up and kicked things off. “There’s been a lot of talk about problems around here,” she said. “We called this meeting so we can air stuff out, get it on the table.”

You never had trouble getting people to talk at Voice of Calvary, and someone spoke up immediately.

“Lem is making things too corporate around here.”

I thought of the charts and graphs filling Lem’s office. Of his thick annual plans, crisp white shirts with three different-colored pens neatly arrayed in the pocket, and references at weekly staff meetings to “managing the vision.”

Other voices chimed in.

“I agree. Lem ain’t relational enough.”

“Yeah, we’re losing touch with our neighbors,” said another. “Lem is making Voice of Calvary into just another impersonal *agency*.” Heads nodded.

The Lem I knew had turned down twice the salary from a respected black church in Philadelphia to work at Voice of Calvary. He was a patient nuts-and-bolts builder who was imposing businesslike discipline upon the Ministries.

But the people speaking up didn’t want to work at a streamlined institution. Corporate. Management. Agency. Those were like four-letter words at Voice of Calvary. I felt a little twinge. What was this peculiar vision that seemed to be at stake tonight, this culture that had sucked my passions into its idealistic orbit?

“Let’s face it, y’all,” griped another person in the room. “Lem ain’t no JP.”

*Whoa*, I thought, *nobody is JP*—*Reverend John Perkins*, the founder of Voice of Calvary, our apostle to the poor with an international reputation. What St. Francis was to Franciscans and Mother Teresa was to the Missionaries of Charity, JP was for Voice of Calvary. He was Lem’s beloved predecessor, and he was Derek and Spencer’s daddy.

At age fifty-one John Perkins was a veteran of the Mississippi civil rights movement, a survivor of its brutal violence, and a high-octane community organizer. The third-grade dropout and self-described son of “sharecroppers, bootleggers, and gamblers” had advanced justice for the poor and racial reconciliation through three books, a broad speaking platform, and Jackson’s living laboratory. The “beloved community” that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had preached, some said, JP had turned into grassroots flesh and blood. And most of us were in this room because of him, because of being hypnotized at some point by JP’s spellbinding talk at a far-off college and deciding to come to Jackson to volunteer. A few days or months might turn into longer stays as volunteers got pulled into some glamorous-sounding project, endured routine break-ins, poor living con-

ditions, and puny salaries, and soon were happily over their heads doing a job they had never, ever done before. Such was the power of JP that many of the long-termers had ended up ditching their graduate school, two-car-garage-in-the-suburbs plans.

But JP’s great gift was creating, not maintaining—and he knew it. After eight years in Jackson, having launched the Voice of Calvary Church and the multitude of Ministries projects, having wed the two into a close confederation, having developed a highly committed layer of leaders throughout, having inspired dozens to move into the neighborhood and dozens more inside to see success as staying put or coming back, JP handpicked Lem to succeed him and was starting all over again in an inner-city neighborhood in an unlikely place—Pasadena, California, just a couple miles from the Rose Bowl.

Tonight’s meeting signaled something about this turbulent post-JP era, but I wasn’t sure what. I knew somehow that more was stirring than criticism of Lem. The meeting was turning into a free-for-all, with people standing up, one after another, voicing concerns. All kinds of concerns.

A tall, white, dark-haired woman named Nancy Horst spoke up. “What does it take,” she asked, “to get a guy to ask you on a date around here?”

I was impressed by Nancy’s passion and confidence. She wasn’t raising this important matter for herself, but for all the singles in the room.

Nancy had grown up wearing a white-laced head covering which—outside of her Pennsylvania Mennonite upbringing—made her look like she’d dropped in from a time warp. It was long gone, put to rest during a volunteer stint in Nicaragua. When Nancy first arrived in west Jackson, she had said she heard black girls talking about putting “steak sauce” in their hair. After a couple of weeks Nancy realized the girls were referring to Stay Soft, a black hair care product. I was sympathetic. White folks had expected a different culture, but not a new language.

Nancy’s question tonight pushed my thoughts toward romances inside the Voice of Calvary tribe. While tonight’s meeting had drawn the singles crowd, many of Voice of Calvary’s married couples had met here. Even some in the room tonight were likely to match up.

Oddly though, there wasn’t a single interracial marriage. There was even a curious public silence about it. A brief unsympathetic paragraph in the Ministries’ policy manual basically amounted to “We neither confirm nor deny interracial marriage. Enter at your own risk.” Given all the racial intimacy, this cryptic opposition seemed strange.

People wanted to release tensions tonight, not resolve anything, and nobody responded to Nancy’s question. There were other gripes to make.



An earnest white volunteer from Illinois named Tom Brown stood up. “I think those of us who work in less glamorous roles get slighted around here,” said Tom. He worked at People’s Development, Inc., the housing renovation crew.

Tom turned to my hero. “Derek, I especially feel slighted by you. You act like our work is less important than yours.”

A load of Voice of Calvary idealism was packed into Tom’s challenge: the expectation that blacks and whites would push each other and that no position, education, economic status—or even being a Perkins child—made you better than somebody else. Still, Tom’s in-your-face comment made me uncomfortable. But it wasn’t unusual at Voice of Calvary. They called it “holding each other accountable.” It was what they were doing with Lem tonight.

Derek stood, faced Tom, and answered calmly. “Listen, brother, I don’t feel that way at all. Each part of our body here is just as important as any other.”

Body. Folks here loved that word. They saw themselves as a local expression of what the apostle Paul called the body of Christ, as people with a claim on each other. We were bound in sickness and health; the well-being of the whole depended upon the gift and growth of each part, and no one could say to another member, “I have no need of you.”

“Look, Tom, I’m committed to working this out with you. Let’s get together after the meeting, OK?”

Tom agreed. I admired how Derek was trying to understand, not write off, this white volunteer.

I admired Tom too. He was one of the many white college graduates who scorned their middle-class options for a simple lifestyle. So was his roommate, Phil Eide, with his endless pairs of dusty Hush Puppies. Tom, Phil Eide, and I were giving ourselves up for something, and the camaraderie energized us and, I guess, others. I spent mornings as an assistant at the Study Center, the Ministries’ training arm, where hundreds of students and grassroots leaders streamed in from across the country and world each year to glean inspiration from Voice of Calvary.

None of tonight’s honesty or the disagreements it pointed to made me question interrupting my Middlebury education to spend five months here.

As I saw it, people in meetings like this one tonight dispensed with politeness because so much was at stake. The disgruntlement with Lem had nothing to do with being worked too hard or paid too little. Nobody was calling for Lem’s resignation. The argument was about how, not who, about the best way to accomplish our mission. The feuds here were fam-

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ily feuds. I found this profoundly energizing, like having coal shoveled into the furnaces of my purpose.



Then Spencer Perkins rose from his seat at the back of the room.

Until now I had only seen him on the fringes of Voice of Calvary life, streaking around the neighborhood on his jet-black Suzuki 1000 motorcycle and being fairly subdued during the lively upbeat worship services. At age twenty-seven his aloof disposition seemed strange, considering he was the founder JP’s oldest child. In three months I’d never heard Spencer utter a word in public. Finally, I was going to hear something that would put flesh on his cryptic public persona.

Spencer’s eyes narrowed. His voice was gruff, defiant, and confident. “What I want to know,” he said, “is, what are all you white people doin’ here?”

That’s all he said. And then he sat back down. He gave no diplomatic smile to temper his bluntness. He offered no explanations.

All lessons about how to win friends and influence people went right out the window. With one quick sentence, Spencer Perkins iced over the sunny land of my racial idealism.

On the one hand, the answer to Spencer’s question was so simple. *Why am I here, Spencer? Dub. To do racial reconciliation. To help the poor. To be the hands and feet of Jesus among “the least of these.” Isn’t that why all of us are here?*

But Spencer asked his question so matter-of-factly, I was sure I was missing the point.

Who was the accused *you* of “all you white people”? I couldn’t imagine which whites in the room he was talking about. *What*, I wondered, *did white long-termers have to prove?* Dean’s music wasn’t exactly easy listening, and people like Miss Runnin’ Things and Phil Reed, the pastor, had endured all kinds of trials. Was he talking about them? Or was he talking about white short-termers like me, who weren’t staying beyond a few months to a year? Was Spencer insinuating that Tressa, Phil Eide, and I weren’t welcome, that we couldn’t be trusted until we signed up for the long haul? Every week some long-termer asked me, “How long are you here for?” or more bluntly, “So when are you leaving?” *Leaving* seemed to be like another four-letter word, better translated as “desertion.” The attitude was “We’re fighting a war here. Are you in or out? Can we count on you?”

I wasn't prepared to make a commitment like that. I was headed back to Middlebury with a notch for racial progress in my belt.

The meeting quickly moved on from Spencer's question. But I didn't.

Why did this militant's words matter so much to me? I found Spencer decidedly unlikable. Not all blacks here had his rough manner or spoke with that edge.

Yet there was something about Spencer that made me want to please him, to win his respect, to be granted absolution. Partly it was his commanding presence. Mostly it was that he was a Perkins. As the oldest of JP's eight children, Spencer had an almost mythic standing in my eyes, a larger-than-life stature that grew out of the story that Voice of Calvary lived by.

I knew Spencer grew up on the all-black side of small-town Mendenhall, Mississippi, thirty-five miles southeast of Jackson, where JP spent a tireless decade organizing among rural blacks. I knew Spencer carried the scars and authority that came with frontline duty during those years growing up in the civil rights movement. For two horrible years he and his sister, Joanie, were soldiers of integration in Mendenhall's all-white high school, enduring countless humiliations.

I knew about Spencer's strong black consciousness. He and Derek returned from a 1980 Kenya trip with JP armed with the Harambee self-determination concept, and soon Spencer had launched a blacks-only group of church peers, both male and female, who had mostly grown up together in Mendenhall. They called themselves *Jamaa* (meaning "cooperation" in Swahili). With only volunteers and a shoestring budget, Jamaa had done an end run around Lem and the Ministries, launching a weekly after-school program called the Harambee Christian School of Business.

I knew by heart the bold and brash Harambee Creed that Spencer wrote and forty-plus neighborhood youth shouted in unison every Wednesday afternoon, a pledge of allegiance to a "completeness in Christ" strong enough to "stand against the social and economic injustices of our time." "We are what we make of ourselves," the kids proclaimed. "We will no longer fit into the mold that has been prepared for us." Spencer had peppered the creed with *wes* and *ours* that meant "us blacks." It ended with fists punching the air, "Harambee! Harambee! Let's get together and push!" The no-nonsense message was blacks helping blacks, without a hint of a call to racial harmony.

Being black gave you legitimacy at Voice of Calvary, but being indigenous like Spencer and Jamaa gave you more. Here *indigenous* meant "I grew up among the black poor, if not poor myself; they see me as one of them, and I can identify." Many in Jamaa, armed with college educations,

were on their way to becoming doctors and lawyers, business owners and professionals. Yet Spencer and his peers rejected the trappings of success. They lived in the neighborhood among youth like JJ, who saw them and believed “I can be like you.”

I knew all this about Spencer. Yet there was something that Spencer did not know about me.

He didn’t know what declared me racially innocent.

He didn’t know about my bloodline. He didn’t know about my father’s perilous trip to Mississippi seventeen years before mine as a civil rights movement volunteer. He didn’t know about my twelve years growing up in a third-world country as a missionary kid or my parents’ work for social justice and for “the least of these.” Surely if he knew, he would see that my parents were on the side of good. This was the legacy I claimed, that made my blood pulsate with righteousness. It brought me onto shared turf with Spencer, and it surely declared me innocent.

Black folks here talked about “good white people” and “whi’folks,” pronounced not as two words—*white folks*—but one, as if it were one idea, a single force and foe, a form of shorthand because it was used so much. *Whi’folks* were the mass of white people who were not “on our side.” For Voice of Calvary, *them* and *us* was “us” who lived in the neighborhood versus just about “all them whi’folks” outside it. I was “good white people.” At least I thought so.

When the gripe session ended after two hours, I climbed back into my hooty and headed back to my apartment at the Study Center, consumed by new thoughts and questions.

Voice of Calvary’s whites and blacks had shared eight years in Jackson. Whites weren’t just on the sidelines passing out towels and cups to black leaders, and black transplants like Lem had major roles. Lem was black and in power. But he was not one of the highly venerated “indigenous.” And only Spencer was the apostle’s oldest child, with the birthright of heir. When JP had been here, everybody knew who was in charge. What about now?

Spencer’s Jamaa was the one group of blacks I was most uncomfortable with. Their years of interaction with white outsiders had honed bloodhound instincts that sniffed out shallow motives and sent flighty dogooders running up trees. Whatever Spencer’s meaning was, his terse words and icy body language left a distinct impression: Don’t do us black folks no favors by being here.

Only a few blocks separated his house from mine. I felt as if it might as well be the Great Wall now. Life in this black neighborhood, where I had begun to feel at home, had suddenly become confusing. One minute I was on the right side, the next I felt accused of being a mole for the other side.

“What are all you white people doin’ here?” Was it possible to establish a kind of trust that made such a question unnecessary? I was too shy and intimidated to ask Spencer.

But it was all academic. I was out of here in two months.