

## Chapter 1

August 1967 marked a pivotal moment in Frank Thompson's life, the day he stepped into the recruitment office and enlisted in the Army. The Navy wasn't for him as he couldn't see himself confined to the steel walls of a ship, and the Air Force didn't have the opportunities he was looking for. It seemed one had to be either a mechanic or a pilot. He had just completed two years of college earning an associate degree at the local community college. His family, although comfortable, didn't have the money to send him to a four-year college. Their income was just above the bracket for financial aid. Driven by a blend of patriotism and a desire to forge his own path the papers were signed. In the end his service would get him that bachelor's degree through the GI Bill.

Telling his family and then his girlfriend about his enlistment was the next step, and he knew it wouldn't be easy. His decision would come as an unwelcome surprise to them all. His parents had always stressed the importance of education, viewing it as a direct path to a secure future. They had seen Frank's completion of his associate degree as a steppingstone to further academic achievements, not as a prelude to military service.

Sitting down with his family at the dinner table, the atmosphere was initially casual, filled with the usual exchanges about their days. However, as the meal came to an end, Frank's demeanor shifted; he took a deep breath, signaling the gravity of what he was about to disclose. "I've enlisted in the Army," he announced, his voice steady yet laden with a mix of excitement and apprehension.

The silence that followed Frank's announcement was deafening, the only sound in the room was the electric coffee percolator. His mother, Rose, covered her mouth in shock, her eyes widened as tears began to well up, spilling over in silent streams down her cheeks. The news had struck a chord deep within her, awakening a flood of emotions and memories she had long buried. Images and feelings of despair echoing the day George, her husband, had announced his own enlistment decades ago, right after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. That was a time of uncertainty and fear, a period when the future seemed a shadow, filled with the threat of loss and heartbreak. Now, her son's words had resurrected those fears, casting a shadow over the present.

George, always the stoic figure in the face of adversity, furrowed his brow, the deep lines etched on his forehead the only sign of his surprise and concern. He looked at Rose, and in that moment, a silent communication passed between them, a shared understanding born of years of companionship and the trials they

had faced together. He knew exactly what she was thinking, the memories that Frank's announcement had stirred within her, the fears for their son's safety that now mirrored the anxieties of a past war.

Jack looked up from the last remnants of his dinner, his gaze shifting from his plate to Frank in a frozen stare. The shock was evident in his eyes, reflecting a mix of puzzlement and apprehension. The Army was a world away from the life they had known, a leap into the unknown that Jack had never fully considered for himself or his older brother. He was very aware of the troop buildup in Vietnam, the history of the country, and also the reasons the government claimed were there. He did not support any of those claims.

"The Army?" Rose finally managed to whisper, her voice a fragile blend of confusion and concern, breaking the silence. "But Frank..." Her words trailed off, laden with the weight of unspoken fears. The idea of her son heading into the military, potentially in harm's way, was a reality she was unprepared to face.

Frank's resolve was assessed in the face of his family's reactions. He understood their concerns, the fears that his decision had sparked within them. He had anticipated the shock, but the depth of their worry was more profound than he had imagined. It was a moment that required not only justification of his choice but also reassurance. He needed to convey the sense of duty he felt, and most importantly, his conviction that this was a step towards a future he believed in — one where his service could pave the way for his educational goals and beyond.

The dinner table, once a place of casual family banter, had transformed into an arena of family discourse. Frank found himself navigating a delicate balance between affirming his commitment to his decision and addressing the concerns and fears of those he loved most. It was a conversation that would linger long after the plates were cleared, a moment of family unity tested and reshaped by the prospect of change and the challenges of the future.

Frank cleared his throat, gathering the courage to address the heavy tension that enveloped the dinner table. "I know this comes as a surprise," he began, his voice steady yet instilled with empathy for the turmoil his decision had unleashed within his family's hearts. "And I understand your concerns. But this—joining the Army—it's not the end of my objectives. It's a different path to the same goal."

Rose, her hands trembling slightly, began collecting the dinner plates on the table and stacking them. Usually, they all removed the dishes from the table, but this was her way to distract herself, hiding from the fears she was

experiencing, she spoke with a voice tinged with a mother's worry. "Frank, we've always wanted you to get that degree, making a life better than... than this uncertainty. Can't you see, the world out there—it's not safe. And the Army, it's not just another job. It's war."

George, who had been silently processing his son's announcement, finally spoke. His voice was firm, reflective of his own experiences. "Frank, your mother's right. The military... it's a commitment unlike any other. But" he paused, glancing at Rose before returning his gaze to Frank, "I also understand the pull of duty, the desire to serve something greater than oneself. Tell us, son, why now? Why this way?"

Jack, who had been quietly observing the exchange, chimed in, "Yeah, Frank. You could've finished college first, couldn't you? There are programs, scholarships even. Why choose to leave everything behind? You know your going 'Nam now regardless of what the recruiter promised you."

Frank, detecting the underlying dissent in Jack's tone, felt a twinge of frustration. Yet, understanding the importance of clarifying his stance, he composed himself before responding. "Jack, believe me, I've turned every stone. Full scholarships? They're not just lying around for the taking. The ones I found were so competitive, it was like aiming for a royal flush. Our family's income—it's in that awkward bracket. Too high for financial aid that would make a difference, yet too low to handle the tuition on our own. I want that degree as much as anyone. He continued, a hint of disappointment in his voice, not so much at Jack's skepticism but at the situation itself. "But at what cost? Years of debt for us? I couldn't do that to Mom and Dad. The military... it's not an easy out. It's a commitment, sure, but it's also a path. A path that leads to what I want without sinking us financially.

Frank met his family's gazes, one by one, his resolve bolstered by their concern. "It's because I believe I can do more. More for myself, and more for our country. And with the GI Bill is a chance for me to continue my education without the financial burden on us. And yes, the risks are real, but so are the opportunities—to grow, to lead, to make a difference."

Jack stood up abruptly and grabbed whatever leftover dishes he could reach, carrying them to the kitchen sink. He spun around facing his brother, his emotions high. "Listen to yourself Frank. You sound like a recruitment ad for God's sake." He waved him off as Frank started to respond and left the room. His father called his name out, "Jack!" From a distance Jack shouted, "I'm going for a walk." The screen door slammed as it always did.

In the wake of Jack's abrupt departure, the room was silent, the kind that speaks volumes. Frank sat back, the weight of the moment settling heavily on his shoulders. He hadn't anticipated Jack's reaction to spiral into such raw emotion, yet here they were, a family at a crossroads, each member grappling with the implications of his decision.

Rose, always the heart of the family, her face set with concern. "He'll come around, Frank," she said softly, attempting to bridge the gap torn open by the heated exchange. "Jack's just scared. We all are. But he loves you, and he just needs time to understand."

George, having called out after Jack to no avail, turned his attention back to Frank. The sternness that had momentarily flashed across his face gave way to a more reflective expression. "Frank, your brother's reaction... it's not just about the disagreement over your decision. It's about the uncertainty of it all. We're living in tumultuous times, and your choice brings that uncertainty right to our doorstep. His convictions about this are just as strong as yours are. The two of you are going have to acknowledge that."

Frank nodded, absorbing his parents' words, the truth in them undeniable. "I know it's hard. I just wish I could make him see that I'm not blind to the risks. That I'm doing this not just for myself but for all of us."

George held up his hand in a stop sign motion. "You have to stop saying 'for all of us' Frank. This decision is about you and you alone. You know your mother and I have been in talks with other members of the family, both sides of the family, hoping to piece together funding for your tuition. You were already accepted at a couple of schools so that's not the problem. It's the beginning of August and there's still a couple of weeks before it all had to be finalized. We were close to having it all done. But none of that matters now. What you do need to do now is write Rutgers and write Penn State that you have decided to fulfill your military obligations first and you look forward to enrolling after that obligation. This way, they'll have on record what your intentions are. It will come in handy when you reapply."

Frank's resolve wavered momentarily under the weight of his father's words. The revelation that his parents, along with other family members, had been quietly working behind the scenes to secure the funds for his tuition was both heartwarming and guilt-inducing. He had been so focused on finding a solution that wouldn't burden his family financially that he hadn't considered they might be doing the same in their own way. The realization that his decision affected not just

his own future but also the collective hopes and efforts of his family added a new layer of complexity to his choice.

"I... I didn't know you were all doing that," Frank admitted, the conflict evident in his voice. "I appreciate it, more than you can imagine. It's just, I felt like this was something I needed to handle on my own. I didn't want to be a burden."

“Your mother and I talked about telling you. We decided to wait until it was done because if we weren’t able to do it then there would be disappointment. But either way we would have told you about it. We’re to blame Frank. We should have considered the way you jump sometimes before you look. You’ve always been like that.”

George's expression softened, understanding his son's intent but also emphasizing the need for open communication. "Frank, wanting to stand on your own is admirable. But you're never a burden to us. We're a family; we support each other. That said, the decision's been made, and we'll stand by you. Just make sure you communicate your plans clearly with the universities. It's important."

Frank nodded, the wisdom in his father's advice clear. "I will," he said with determination. "I'll write to Rutgers and Penn State today. I'll explain my situation and my commitment to serving. Hopefully, they'll understand and keep the door open for me."

Rose reached across the table, squeezing Frank's hand. "Just be honest and clear about your intentions. And remember, this isn't the end of your education; it's just a detour. You made a mature decision, even though you could have waited a little longer, it's just a shock for us."

The conversation illuminated the importance of family communication. Writing to the universities would be his first step in taking responsibility for that decision, ensuring that his academic aspirations would not be forgotten but merely postponed, with the hope and expectation of returning to them enriched by his experiences and service.

Jack returned about a half hour later, the air had cleared somewhat, the earlier tension replaced by a quiet understanding. His walk had given him time to cool down, to reflect on Frank's words. The screen door announced his return less dramatically this time, as he stepped back into the family fold.

"Sorry," he muttered, not quite meeting anyone's gaze. "I just... needed a minute."

Frank met his brother halfway, both physically and metaphorically. "I'm sorry too. Certain things came to light after you left, and I did jump too soon. This isn't easy for me or any of us. But it's something every fiber of my soul was telling me to do."

The room fell into a thoughtful silence as the family absorbed Frank's words. Rose and George exchanged glances, their expressions a mixture of concern and pride for their sons' steps towards reconciliation and understanding. The earlier discord had given way to a more profound dialogue, one that acknowledged the individual journeys each of them was on yet underscored by the unshakeable foundation of family support. So Rose and George hoped anyway.

In their own ways though, at that very moment, the brothers knew the paths they were on were opposite each other. Just as Frank's soul told him to do this, every fiber in Jack was telling him he could never follow that path no matter what. It was going to be impossible to reconcile their differences given the circumstances. At the very best they could only acknowledge each other's opinions and try to respect them. Vietnam was 9,000 miles away, but it might as well be right there in the living room.

Rose and George shared a look, one filled with a blend of concern and pride, hopeful that their sons had found a way to bridge their differences through the evening's conversation. They believed in the power of family unity to overcome any obstacle, even one as daunting as the war that loomed 9,000 miles away. To them, the dialogue that had unfolded was a step towards mutual understanding and respect.

However, beneath the surface of apparent reconciliation, an unspoken truth lingered between Frank and Jack. In the silence that had settled over the room, a silent acknowledgment passed between them—a recognition of the profound divide that Vietnam had carved into their relationship. This divide was not one of mere disagreement over dinner; it was a chasm that ran deep, touching the very core of their beliefs and convictions.

Frank, his decision to enlist born out of a call he felt in his soul, knew without saying that Jack could never stand beside him on this path. There was an understanding, a painful realization that their journeys were diverging in ways

that words could not bridge. Frank's resolve to serve, to him, felt like the only way forward, a way to honor his values and commitments.

Jack, on the other hand, carried within him a tumultuous sea of dissent and disbelief. The war, in his eyes, represented a folly, a tragic error that he could not condone nor participate in. His brother's choice to enlist was a path Jack knew he would never tread, a line he could not cross. This understanding between them, unspoken yet crystal clear, was a testament to their bond—a bond that allowed for such profound differences to coexist in silence.

Rose and George, unaware of this silent exchange, continued to express their hopes for unity and understanding. They spoke of the importance of family and the strength it provided, unaware that the brothers, in their hearts, had already come to a silent agreement to respect their diverging paths, even as it pained them both.

The conversation gradually shifted, not to dismiss the discord but to understand it, to navigate through the emotional turmoil that lay ahead with the compassion and empathy. Something that had always defined their family. They spoke of hopes and fears, of the changes that Frank's enlistment would bring, not just for him but for them as a family unit.

As the evening light faded into twilight, the family found themselves engrossed in a detailed discussion about the logistics and expectations surrounding Frank's imminent departure for the Army. The room, filled with the soft glow of the table lamp, seemed to shrink under the weight of the reality they were facing, yet there was a palpable sense of unity among them.

Frank, trying his best to outline the process as it was explained to him by the recruiter, admitted, "I don't have all the answers yet. The recruiter mentioned that the first step is receiving a notice for my physical examination, which should be happening in the next couple of weeks." He paused, noting the concerned glances exchanged between his parents. "After that, I'll get the official notification for induction. That's when it all really starts."

Rose, ever the mother, interjected with a question, her voice steady but filled with underlying concern, "And what happens after basic training, Frank? Do you have any say in what comes next?"

Frank shook his head gently, "Not exactly, Mom. It largely depends on the results of my aptitude tests. Those scores will determine my specialty and the additional training I'll need." He could see the worry in her eyes and added, "But it's not just about where they think I fit best. I'll have a chance to express my interests, and hopefully, there's alignment between what I want to do and where they see my skills being utilized effectively."

George, leaning back in his chair, added a layer of practicality to the conversation. "It's important to go into this with an open mind, Frank. The Army will find where you're most needed, and it's an opportunity for you to learn and grow in ways you might not expect."

Jack, who had been quietly listening, finally spoke up, "So, it's really out of your hands after basic? Seems like you're rolling the dice."

Frank nodded, acknowledging Jack's point, "In a way, yes. But it's a calculated risk. The Army offers a lot of opportunities, not just in terms of career but also education and personal growth. I'm going in with the intention of making the most of it, no matter what my specialty ends up being."

I have one question Frank, "Why the Army? I mean why not Air Force or Navy? They might offer an opportunity not to get your head blown off." Jack's tone was direct and cutting.

"Jack!!" his mother cried out in protest. George shifted his weight in his chair as words were forming on his lips.

Frank was quick to respond, holding his hand up in a gesture to stop. "It's OK Mom." He turned to face Jack directly. "That's three questions Jack." Frank fired back with a slight grin on his face. "I went to the Navy, and I went to the Air Force. With the Navy I didn't want to be confined to the steel walls of a ship for months at a time. And the Air Force? They're basically looking for guys to train as pilots and mechanics to fix them. That's not me. And for the sake of argument, I went to the Coast Guard too. They're actively involved in 'Nam doing port security and river patrols in what they call swift boats getting into fire fights with the Viet Cong. So I went to the Army, last, I might add. They have their hands in everything and in a lot of places besides 'Nam. Germany, South Korea, Japan, Italy, Philippines, and Panama are all possibilities." Frank gazed into the eyes of his parents and then back to his brother's. "There's a chance I may not end up in 'Nam but the recruiter was honest with me, I think. He said based on current needs and the build up of troops I more than likely would. As an enlistee I'd have a better chance to go somewhere else than a draftee."

Rose was the first one to speak after an eternal moment of silence. “Well, none of us woke up today thinking the day would end like this that’s for sure. I think we should take a break so we can all digest this until tomorrow. Frank, you should call your girlfriend, Robin, and let her know what’s going on but please, do it in person, not over the phone. My head is spinning, and I’m exhausted.”

The suggestion to take a break and reconvene with clearer heads seemed to resonate with everyone in the room, a temporary reprieve from the intensity of the conversation that had unfolded. George nodded in agreement with Rose's suggestion, the weight of the discussion pressing heavily on his shoulders as well. "Rose is right. Let's all take some time to think things over. Frank, your mother's suggestion about talking to Robin in person is wise. It's important she hears this from you directly."

Jack, still wrestling with his mix of emotions, remained silent but met his brother's gaze with a complex look—a mixture of concern, and frustration. He finally spoke, his voice softer than before, "Yeah, maybe a break is good. We all need to clear our heads a bit. Pausing, a mischievous glint appeared in his eyes as he added, "Plus, I think Mom's meatloaf from dinner is starting to wage its own war in my stomach. Maybe that's the real enemy we should strategize against tonight." The room, previously thick with tension, eased as a collective chuckle broke through, a welcome reminder of Jack’s ability to find moments of humor even in the midst of serious discussions. “Only Kidding Mom.”

Frank acknowledged his family's input with a nod and chuckled at Jack’s timely humor with the gravity of the situation not lost on him. "I'll talk to Robin," he assured them. "Face to face. She deserves to hear it from me, and I owe her that much." The idea of sharing his decision with Robin brought a new wave of realization about the ripple effects his enlistment would have on the people closest to him.

As they each stood up from the table, the emotional toll of the evening's revelations was evident in their weary expressions and slow movements. They shared a quiet understanding that while the night had brought challenging discussions and painful acknowledgments. In the quiet that followed, each member of the Thompson family retreated into their own thoughts, contemplating the future and what Frank's decision would mean for all of them. Rose lingered at the table for a moment longer, her mind racing with thoughts of her son's safety, the unknowns of military life, and the hope that, somehow, everything would turn out alright.

The night had indeed ended far from how any of them had imagined when they woke up that morning. As they separated to find solace in the solitude of their thoughts. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges, but for tonight, each grappling with the realities of a decision that would forever alter their family.

The next morning around 10:00 Frank called Robin at her work. She worked as a student intern in a blood lab. She always said it was ok to call her there. He felt a little apprehensive doing so but put the feeling aside. She earned college credits for working there and plus got paid too on her journey to become a lab technician. They agreed to meet at a quiet park overlooking the back bay around 4 in the afternoon. As Frank ended the call, he felt a surge of nerves. The prospect of sharing his decision with Robin loomed large, a challenge he knew he had to face head-on.

Robin's arrival, her brown hair glinting in the late afternoon sun, her style a blend of the conservative and the subtly modern, always had a way of grounding Frank. Today, her presence was a much-needed anchor.

"Hi," she called out, her voice carrying a warmth that eased some of Frank's tension.

"Hi," he returned the greeting, trying to mask his apprehension with a smile. "Thanks for coming. There's something important I need to discuss."

"I changed my clothes at work, I didn't want to wear my lab whites," she chuckled.

Jack smiled at that. "Let's talk," as he motioned her to walk with him. "There's something important I need to discuss."

Taking a deep breath, Frank dove into the heart of the matter. "Robin, I've enlisted in the Army," he confessed, pausing to gauge her reaction.

The surprise that danced across Robin's face was brief, quickly replaced by a quiet attentiveness that encouraged him to continue.

"It might seem sudden," Frank elaborated, "but I've thought this through. The Navy, Air Force, even the Coast Guard—I considered them all. Yet, the Army resonated with me."

Robin absorbed his words, her calmness a testament to her ability to take in life-altering news with grace. "This is a big step, Frank," she finally said. "You know there's a war going on right? Why?" Her stance on the war evolving from full support to maybe neutral. She didn't understand it much and politics was something she had little interest in.

Frank looked down to the ground repeating her question softly. "Why. I tried to convince myself in part, I was doing this for financial reasons to help my family avoid going into debt paying for my college tuition. Last night I learned I was wrong. The real truth is I have a need to serve my country and defend it. I can't explain it very well. I've done two years of college and still don't know what I want to do. Maybe teach or something? The Army has a full range of aptitude tests to find what fits me best and afterwards there's the GI Bill that will help me finish college. Chances are I'm going to 'Nam. There's an outside chance I won't but 'm not counting on it."

Robin's response, when it came, was measured, a delicate balance between her support for Frank and the dawning realization of what his departure meant. "I've always admired your courage, Frank. But this...this is different. This is real." Her eyes, a mirror to her soul, reflected a mix of emotions—fear, love, uncertainty—all mingling in the space between them. "How did your family react?"

In an effort to hide the intensity of last night's announcement and discussion he chuckled slightly. "Shock really. A lot of emotions. Concern, worryment, questions. They didn't exactly stand up and cheer you know, but in the end, I know I have their support. Jack though, well that's a different story.

Robin looked up to him as they walked and saw the tense expression on his face. "What happened with Jack?"

Shrugging his shoulders a bit and looking back at Robin. "Jack disagrees with me to put it mildly. He's totally against the war and all the politics that go with it. He thinks the government is lying to us about the reasons that were there. As brothers, we've had our clashes, but we've always been close. I don't know. I think this a great divide for us that can't be fixed. There were no words exchanged but I felt it. Like our paths are going in different directions. Maybe he doesn't love this country as much as I do."

They walked together in silence for a few minutes. Robin absorbs Frank's words and Frank replays all that happened last night in his mind.

Robin finally spoke up choosing her words carefully. “You may be right about the divide and different paths Frank. Sometimes, well, this stuff happens. Jack has to do what’s right for him, and you have to do what’s right for you. Otherwise, you’re not living your own life. My father and his brother rarely talk to each other. I don’t what happened between them. Nobody’s talking. It’s sad” There was a pause as Frank listened. “As for the love of country, I don’t believe that about Jack. Somebody once said to me, or maybe I read it, I don’t know, that everybody expresses their patriotism in their own way.

Frank nodded, taking in Robin's perspective. Her words, both comforting and wise, helped to ease the turmoil churning inside him. "You're right, Robin. It's just hard, you know? I've always been close with Jack, and part of me hoped he'd understand, maybe even be proud. But I guess we're just seeing things too differently right now."

Robin reached out, placing her hand on his arm in a gesture of support. "It's okay to feel that way, Frank. It's a big sudden change for everyone involved. Maybe with time, Jack will see your side of things, respect your decision or it could go the other way with you not respecting his. Brothers and sisters too go through tough times. Don't write it off yet. There's something else too. Our times are changing. Just turn on the radio and what do you hear? 'Light My Fire, Strawberry Fields, White Rabbit, Purple Haze,' where did all the dance music go?" Robin shook her head.

Frank smiled weakly, not knowing what to say about the radio but was comforted by her optimism regarding his brother. "I know it's changing, and I hope you're right about my brother. Thanks, Robin, for being here, and for listening. It means a lot to me."

Robin squeezed his arm gently. "I'm here for you, Frank, no matter what. We'll get through this together." Her smile, warm and reassuring, was a beacon of hope in the uncertainty that lay ahead. “How much time before you have to go?”

Frank looked into Robin's eyes, finding comfort in her unwavering support. "I've got about a month before I leave for basic training," he replied, his voice a mix of resolve and underlying apprehension. The reality of his imminent departure hung between them, a reminder of the challenges they would soon face.

Turning to Robin, his expression a blend of determination and vulnerability. "So, about the service commitment," he began, pausing to choose his words carefully. "When I signed up, I committed to four years with the Army. That includes two years of active duty and two years in the reserves."

Robin nodded, signaling him to continue, her face a canvas of mixed emotions—concern, curiosity, and support intermingling.

"The first part, active duty, means I'll be fully immersed in military life. I could be stationed anywhere, depending on the Army's needs, and yes, there's a real possibility I'll be deployed to Vietnam." Frank's voice was steady, but the weight of the reality was palpable between them.

"And after those two years?" Robin asked, her voice steady but laced with concern.

"After that," Frank continued, "I'll transition to the reserves. It means I'll be back, sort of living a civilian life, but I'll still have obligations. I'll need to report for duty one weekend a month and two weeks a year for training. It's like being on call—if there's a need, I could be activated and deployed again."

Robin took a deep breath, absorbing the information. "It sounds like a long time, but I guess it's not just about the time, is it? It's about what you'll be doing, the experiences you'll have."

Frank looked at her, admiration, and gratitude in his eyes. "Exactly. It's about serving, about the chance to do something meaningful. But I won't lie—it's also about the benefits, like the GI Bill. It'll help me get my degree without putting financial strain on my family or me."

The conversation shifted slightly as Robin sought to understand the deeper motivations behind Frank's decision. "And you're okay with all this? The risk, the time away? Do you get to come home at all?"

Frank took a moment before responding, his gaze drifting to the horizon. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared. But I believe it's the right thing for me. I'm hoping it'll give me a direction, help me figure out what I want in life. Robin, I know it sounds like a long stretch, being committed for two years of active duty, but it's not like I'll be gone without any break," Frank explained gently. "The Army gives us leave—basically, vacation time. I'll earn about 30 days of leave every year, which I can use to come home and spend time with you and my family."

Robin listened intently, the information a small comfort amidst the uncertainty of Frank's enlistment.

"There's also something called R&R—Rest and Recuperation leave—especially for those of us deployed overseas. It's a chance to take a break from the

deployment, to recharge a bit. If I get deployed, and if the situation allows, I could potentially use R&R to come back home for a short visit."

Frank paused, searching Robin's face for signs of how she was taking the news. He wanted to be honest but also offer her hope.

"Of course, all this depends on where I'm stationed and what my assignments are. The military's needs come first, and sometimes that can mean changes to plans or delays in taking leave. But knowing there are these opportunities to come home makes the commitment feel more manageable for me."

Robin's grip on his arm tightened momentarily, a silent acknowledgment of the countdown they were now on. "Then let's make the most of it," she said with a determined smile. "We should do all the things we love, visit all our favorite places, and create a bunch of happy memories to carry with us."

Frank nodded, inspired by her positivity. "That sounds good. And when I'm away, we'll write to each other, right? I want to hear about everything you're doing, and I'll tell you all about my experiences in the letters."

"Of course," Robin agreed, her smile softening. "I'll write you so many letters, you'll get tired of reading them." Her attempt at light-heartedness did not completely mask the hint of sadness in her voice, but it brought a shared moment of levity.

As they continued to walk, the conversation flowed between plans for the coming weeks and reflections on what the future might hold. There was an element of uncertainty. Robin was grateful for Frank's honesty and straightforwardness but heard stories about how a man can be changed by war. It happened to one of her mother's brothers who fought in Korea. Before he left, he was outgoing, even funny and when he came back just not the same. Serious, not talkative, seemed disconnected socially. Robin didn't remember him before Korea, she was too young. She wondered what it would do to Frank even as they talked about the short plans before he left. She knew the times were changing. The music, the growing protests about the war, the flower children, or hippies in San Francisco. What kind of world was Frank going to come home to in two years?

## Chapter 2

Jack Thompson often came to this place when he wanted to be alone, and no one could find him. It was an old broken wall of a boathouse washed away by decades of storms and high tides. The wall served as a good wind breaker especially in the winter when the northwest wind could cut to the bones. Plus, it was a good backrest with ocean about 100 yards in front of him. Here he could think, write, or just let the Atlantic Ocean take his thoughts to faraway places. But this was the beginning of September and the early dawn temperature felt close 70 degrees. With his feet nestled in the sand, back against the wall. The sun was just breaking the horizon with gold and reds illuminating the clouds and sky. Just enough light to take out the pen and notebook from his ragged canvas messenger bag and begin a long overdue letter to his brother in Vietnam.

*Dear Frank,*

*It's been one crazy summer here. I apologize for not writing for so long. I've read your letters to Mom and Dad. You sound like you're in good spirits. They were really happy to hear your voice when you called. Mom said she felt so much better just to hear your voice even though you couldn't talk more than a few minutes. Dad doesn't say much as usual but when Mom brought up your conversation his eyes lit up. I know he's proud of you.*

*Anyway, I was invited to join a band just as the summer season got underway here. Even though I don't play an instrument or anything, they wanted me behind the scenes doing the light show, taking care of the equipment and in general running the stage. I learned a lot. Especially from the other groups that came in. There's much to it. Much more than I thought to make things work properly. The thing is I really enjoyed it and it didn't seem like work at all to me. I think this is the direction I want to head in. You know how I am about sound and music. I just hear things most people don't.*

*My girlfriend Jill left for L. A. about the same time the band was getting together. It really hurt to see her go. I call and write her as often as I can. She says it's amazing there and is urging me to come out.*

*Didn't make it to Woodstock. The New York State Freeway closed before we could get there. Traffic was backed up to the G.W. Bridge. The Atlantic City Festival was great though. Afterwards on Saturday, we looked for a place to eat. Dig this, we ended up at Giberson's Diner in AC waiting in line with Jefferson Airplane. The host asked Marty Balin how many, and he said "everybody." They kept on passing us LSD tabs under the table. Crazy.*

*I'm just not sure where I'm going to live now that the summer season is over. The band is splitting up I think because we have no gigs to play at present. Money is tight. We'll see what happens. I really don't want to go back home.*

*I decided not to go back to college this fall. I talked it over with Mom and Dad and of course they are disappointed. But let's face it. My courses in Business Administration just don't hold an interest for me. Talking to my guidance counselor was useless. I wanted to change my major to music or psychology, English, or something, but I was told I couldn't. Remember how excited I was to jump English 102 and go to Creative Writing just by taking an exam? Bob, I can't get through accounting 101! What's the point? What worries me the most is the draft and losing my school deferment. There's a lot of talk about this new draft lottery coming up in December. Maybe I'll draw a high number with a little luck.*

*I'm sure you're hearing about all the protests going on here. I don't know if it's doing any good, but it seems like more and more people are changing their minds about the war. I know we are miles apart about this. We barely spoke before you left. You volunteered and I'm trying to avoid it. You are my older brother and I respect and love you. Do what you have to do there and come home so we can argue face to face. Just know there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think of you and hope you are well.*

*Miss you, peace*

*Jack*

*September 8, 1969*

The morning was pushing on. Beach walkers were already dotting the shoreline, some with their dogs. It was time to go. He put the pen and notebook back in the bag, stood up brushing the sand off his clothes, picked up his low laced sneakers and headed for the bulkhead steps just a few yards away. Once on the street side of the bulkhead he continued to brush the sand off his clothes and feet. With the sunup now it was getting warmer. He took off his army fatigue jacket, slipped on his sneakers and headed down the street to his car.

Jack grew up in this little summer resort, just a few miles south of Atlantic City. He looked at the large 3 story houses packed so tightly next to each other separated by a driveway with usually a one car garage on one side and a narrow

walkway on the other which usually led to a side door and then continued to the rear of the house. He didn't think much of it, just noticed things as he passed. Occasionally he would see the morning paper lying on a lawn and would pick it up and toss it on the intended porch covered with canvas awnings. At least the paperboy put the morning news in a plastic cover protecting it from the dew of the grass.

His old 1962 Dodge Lancer stood ready. Unlocked the door, rolled the window down. The engine started right up as always, pushed the “D” transmission button, and headed towards the band's apartment in Atlantic City. The cops love to pull over long haired hippie types for any reason, or no reason, so he was mindful of his speed even though most vehicles were passing him.

The apartment building was very old and stood as a testament to a bygone era. Built on a corner of the main business thoroughfare and a residential street bordering an area known to the locals as “Ducktown.” This neighborhood, once a vibrant enclave for Italian immigrants in the early 20th century, derived its name from the duck houses they meticulously built along the bayfront for raising poultry and waterfowl. However, following the pattern of many American ethnic neighborhoods, the conclusion of World War II marked a turning point. Residents began to chase the allure of automobile-accessible suburbs, leaving Ducktown to face a slow, inexorable decline. This was quite evident by 1969. Some of the houses closer to the beach were rented by summer vacationers; Usually, large families from Philadelphia or New York.

The street was heavily laden with traffic during the daytime as delivery trucks, public buses, and regular cars were going to and from whatever their destinations were. Also, it was the main route for emergency vehicles such as fire trucks and ambulances creating an abundance of noise through the business hours. It was rumored the owner paid off the building inspectors. Mario was adamant about not wanting any trouble with the police and for good reason. A few complaints and the building could be condemned. On the street level was a cigar store. Entrance to the first apartment level was on the main street side, a flight of wooden stairs attached to the outside of the building. Sometimes, the rich, smokey aroma of the cigar store seeped into the hallway immediately above. There were two apartments on that floor, and stairs on the inside leading to another two apartments on the third floor, and one apartment on the fourth floor which was his, shared with the rest of the four-member band. The apartment building, steeped in years and whispered dealings, kept the city inspectors at bay. The stairway to their floor was a narrative in itself, each step creaking a song of the building's years, groaning underfoot with a sound that was as familiar as it

was foreboding. Although the hallway lights were dim, it was bright enough to prevent a trip or fall. It was best to watch your step as the saying goes.

Nevertheless, it was home for the last 3 months. Jack believed the walls of this old place held stories enough to fill books, tales of a summer that seemed to stretch beyond the confines of time. Yet, as all things do, it was time to move on. The entrance to the apartment revealed its quirky heart immediately, opening onto the central room that defied traditional layouts. This central room was used as a bedroom, so it was an odd entryway. To the left was another room with the bathroom and kitchen on the side and to the right was the back room which served nicely as a bedroom. The ceilings were slanted following the shape of the building’s roof as it was the top floor. Jack heard the faint sound of a radio playing in the back room.

It was a station Lee, lead guitarist and vocalist for the band usually listened to too. That told Jack he was still sleeping in the back room. The signal was that if the back-room door was shut it was in use. Lee, a brilliant Black guitarist known for his incredible solos and stage presence, had a style heavily influenced by legendary guitarists like BB King, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Les Paul. With his wild hair and flashy clothes, he's the face of the band. There was no one else in the apartment which was a refreshing treat. Tired from being up all night, Jack took his shoes off and laid down on his mattress in the middle room. He looked at his watch to note the time and it was just after 9:00 AM. The mattress was given to him by his girlfriend Jill before she left for California. He couldn't help but think of her as he quickly drifted to sleep.

A few hours later, Jack was awakened by Lee’s movements through the apartment. He dragged himself up and headed into the bathroom to wash his face and freshen up a bit. He waved to Lee sitting on one of the cushioned chairs in what was deemed as the living room.

Rubbing his eyes and yawning, he muttered, "Morning, Lee. Or, well, afternoon, I guess."

Glancing up with a wry smile, sipping his orange juice, Lee replied, "Afternoon, Jack. You look like you've been in a battle with a couple of tangled microphone cords."

Splashing water on his face, then leaning on the door frame, Jack said, "Feels more like a wrestling match with a freight train. This apartment... it's been the center of our universe."

"Ah yes. The expanding universe.?" Lee mused.

Sighing, Jack admitted, "Doesn't look like it. We're hanging on by a thread here, Lee. No gigs, thinning out cash... What's our next move?"

"Last night I went to a few clubs to see if we could fit in anywhere," Lee revealed.

"And?" Jack prodded.

"Well, I've been thinking. If we can't find work for the whole band, then maybe we can find a band that needs a couple of pieces. Like a lead singer, a guitar player, and a bass player," Lee suggested.

"Really? Doesn't sound too good for me. You know how the stages are in the bar clubs. Small stages, fixed lights," Jack noted.

"You've become a wizard with the backstage stuff. Lights, equipment... You made our shows alive, Jack," Lee complimented.

"Thanks for that. When you asked me to join, I had no experience at all. With us as the house band was an advantage. I learned the stage and learned from the roadies of other groups that came in. All the acid helped too," Jack said, smiling.

Lee, smiling back, added, "Music's not just about summer and crowded beaches. We adapt, we change the tunes. Besides, we know how this town works. The band knows it too. We're all from this area. Winter has always been about adapting to a new direction."

"A new direction, huh? A new adventure," Jack reflected.

"Yes. Remember the cheers, the energy? We can build on that. Keep the spirit alive," Lee encouraged.

"You're right," Jack agreed.

"Whatever happens, fresh ideas are needed. Something to keep the place buzzing. And hey, you're the mastermind behind those epic shows," Lee paused a moment before continuing, "That brings us to here. We need a plan."

"I'm going to go talk to Mario at his produce store today. He's been good to us. I'll tell him the situation and we're in the process of getting our things out of here, and we might go over the due date for the rent here. It'll give us a couple of extra days anyway. At least we don't have a lease to deal with. Month to month with Mario and always cash only. Besides, I'd like to keep the connection with him," Jack resolved.

"Good idea. Something will come up. I have a feeling. At the worst, just ride out the winter and come back stronger," Lee supported.

They shared a moment of resolve, the weight of their decision settling in. Jack headed back to his room, the familiar sounds of the city outside. He gathered some fresh clothes and headed back to the bathroom to shower. He stopped at the doorway for a moment with one more thing to say.

"I think that no matter what happens this is the direction I want to go in. This stage management thing is something I really enjoy. I want to learn it all," Jack declared with conviction.

Lee smiled widely and nodded his head in approval as Jack entered the bathroom, closed the door, and turned on the shower.

When Jack finished in the shower, Lee had already left. It was strange to have the apartment to himself. Kind of eerie in fact. He wondered where the rest of the band was and what they were doing. In the beginning they all agreed not to question each other unless it was invited. Show up for rehearsals, show up for the gig, and occasional band meetings were about the only demands on each other. Even though there were five guys living in a basically a 3-room apartment and each one had their own groupies, respecting each other's privacy had to be honored as best as the situation would allow. A huge smile came across his face and even an outright laugh as he already felt reminiscent recalling some of the craziness that went on these floors with the half a dozen mattresses strewn around the place. Jack got dressed, locked the place, and headed down the creaking stairs to the street walking the three and a half blocks to Mario's Produce store.

Mario Augustino was the owner of the building. He was easy to spot. He always wore a full white apron covering his chest down to his knees neatly tied around his waist. Standing at about 5'8" his height shouldn't be confused with his somewhat stocky yet broad shoulder frame. At 60 some years old he was lucky to still have a full head of hair even though it was more salt than pepper and his hairline receded a bit. He combed it straight back forming a noticeable "v." Even though he was born in the United States he maintained that his slight Italian accent was a result of his non-English speaking parents.

Jack pushed open the door of the produce store, the familiar tinkle of the bell announcing his entry. The air was alive with an intoxicating mix of scents that greeted him like an old friend. The sweet, almost sugary fragrance of fresh strawberries mingled with the zest of citrus fruits, while the softer, floral scent of peaches wove through the earthier tones of leafy greens, all subtly accentuated by the fresh aromas of basil and mint. It was a veritable symphony for the senses, each note perfectly in harmony with the next. The vibrant colors that filled the space only added to the experience, with greens, yellows, and reds blending in a visual feast that could rival the masterpieces of Van Gogh or Picasso. Jack often thought about the surreal experience it might be to wander through this sensory paradise under the influence of a psychedelic trip, imagining the colors and smells intensifying into an overwhelming, beautiful ball of confusion as the colors swirled and melted into each other.

Mario was right there, as usual, standing behind the counter, his white apron slightly soiled from the day’s work and his hair combed back in that distinctive "v" that Jack had come to recognize from a mile away.

Mario looked up, his eyes crinkling in the corners as he spotted Jack. "Ah, Jack! My favorite tenant and local rock star. What brings you here today? Looking to trade a guitar solo for some tomatoes?" His tone was playful, but there was a genuine warmth there.

Jack chuckled, running a hand through his own long, somewhat unkempt hair. "Hey, Mario. I wish I was here on better terms, actually. I've come to talk to you about the apartment."

Mario's expression softened, a hint of concern replacing the mirth. "Oh? What's the matter? Trouble with the band or the rent?"

"It's a bit of both, to be honest," Jack admitted, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. "Our summer gig wrapped up, and, well, the coin isn't flowing as we hoped. We've got to move out, Mario. But here's the thing—we need a few extra days to get our stuff together and out. The rent's due in two days, and I was hoping... maybe you could give us five more days?"

Mario leaned back, eyeing Jack thoughtfully. "Five days, huh? You young folks and your optimism. Always thinking time will bend for you."

Jack offered a sheepish grin. "Well, you know us 'hippies'—always hoping for a little more sunshine."

Mario's lips twitched into a smile at that. "Yes, I've noticed. Between the flowers in your hair and the peace signs, I'm surprised you don't all just photosynthesize."

Both men shared a laugh, the tension easing slightly.

"Look, Jack," Mario said, adopting a more serious tone, "you've been good tenants. Always paid the rent on time, until now. I respect that. And I respect the hustle, the music... It's not easy, I know."

Jack nodded, grateful for the understanding.

"So, here's what I'll do," Mario continued, "I can't give you five days. But I can give you three. That should be enough to get your affairs in order, shouldn't it?"

Jack began to feel a calming relief flooding through him. "Three days? I was hoping for five but it's fair, Mario. Thank you, really. We'll make it work. And who knows? Maybe we'll come back next summer, hit it big, and buy out your entire stock of tomatoes."

Mario chuckled, shaking his head. "I'll hold you to that, Jack. But for now, just make sure you leave the place tidy, eh? And maybe cut that hair—you'll save on shampoo."

Jack laughed, nodding in agreement. "Deal. Thanks again, Mario. You're a lifesaver."

As Jack turned to leave, Mario called out after him, "And Jack? Keep playing that music. Who knows where it'll take you."

Jack spun around raising his hand just above his head, smiling showing the two-finger peace sign. Stepping out into the sunlight, feeling a little lighter. Mario watched him go, a small smile playing on his lips. Maybe, just maybe, the kid and his band would make it big after all.

Jack headed back to the apartment. It was 4 in the afternoon already. He felt he could get a couple more hours of sleep before nighttime. There was one thing that puzzled him about what Mario said: “Favorite tenant.” How could five band members be living in a three-room apartment with people coming and going smoking pot and tripping in the wee hours of the morning never got busted? One night Jack stood on the street corner looking up to the apartment watching clouds of pot and cigarette smoke pour out of the open screenless windows. Across the street, a famous pizza restaurant, open 24 hours, drew huge waiting lines with a couple of cops controlling the line and traffic. Jack shook his head, half smiling as he walked knowing that the cops were aware of us. Somebody said hands off us or somebody got paid off. Whoever it was Jack whispered to himself out loud, "thank you."

Once back at the apartment, Jack took off his shoes and shirt then laid down on his mattress. A hundred or so thoughts went racing through his head. The city was sinking into the hues of an early evening when Jack's thoughts finally began to slow, the relentless pace of his mind giving way to a tired calm. The sound of keys jangling and the door creaking open signaled the return of his bandmates. Their voices, a blend of laughter and exhaustion, filled the apartment, breathing life into its worn-out corners. Jack slowly pulled himself up and joined them in the front room. It was already dark outside, and Jack figured he'd slept for about three hours. The room, once a cradle of aspirations and music, now echoed with the somber reality of their situation. Jack broke the news about the need to vacate the apartment and clean up by Saturday, casting a shadow of finality over the group. The silence that followed was heavy, each member lost in their own thoughts about where they would go next, what they would do. The air was thick with unspoken worries until Lee cleared his throat, shifting the atmosphere with the prospect of a new opportunity, albeit an unconventional one.

"I talked to a guy I know, plays down at The Dive," Lee started, his voice cutting through the tension. "He's looking to shake things up, wants a new lead guitar and to replace his bass player. Says we can fill in."

Danny Mitchell was the youngest member of the group and the bass player. He raised his eyebrows but didn't say anything. If that were the case and the only option, he would try it out, but it was becoming clear to him the band was breaking up.

Lee's voice took a somber tone, "Look, tomorrow never knows but I don't have anything else right now. I think we're all open to keep playing together, so if anybody has any ideas let's hear them, please? One thing is clear, we have to be out of here in five days."

Billy Collinswood nicknamed "BC" whose drumming keeps the band's rhythm tight and drives the audience wild with his powerful drumming was the first to speak up. "I don't know if this would work or not, but offshore there are a few clubs with live bands. Mostly weekend gigs this time of the year though.

Marcus Williams, the talented Black rhythm guitarist who provides the band's solid foundation was the only one to speak up after a moment of pause. He's known for his catchy riffs and harmonious backing vocals. "I know those clubs BC. Mostly the same bands switching from club to club. Beer head patrons mostly. Motorcycle gangs in the mix too. They bands play a lot of Credence songs."

The silence that followed Marcus's words was heavy with realization and the underlying tension of their precarious situation. Each member of the band was grappling with the reality that their tight-knit group might be on the verge of dispersing, their dreams of making it big together slowly fading away. The mention of the offshore clubs by BC and the type of crowds they attracted brought a new angle to their dilemma, yet it was clear that options were slim.

After a moment of contemplation, Jack finally spoke up, his voice steady and imbued with a leadership that sought to navigate the uncertain waters they found themselves in. "Okay, here's what we can do," he began, capturing the attention of his bandmates. "Marcus and BC, you guys could go check out those clubs offshore. See what the scene is like, talk to the owners, find out if there's any room for us, or at least for some of us to get gigs there. It's worth a shot, right?"

Marcus nodded, a look of determination settling over his features, and BC gave a short, affirmative grunt, his usual way of signaling agreement.

Jack turned his attention to Danny and Lee. "Danny, Lee, you two head down to The Dive. Meet with Isaac, get a feel for the place, and see if it's something we can work with, even if it's just temporary. Lee, you've got the connection there; make it count."

Danny, though reserved, showed a hint of resolve. It was clear he was willing to explore every avenue to keep playing, even if it meant stepping into unfamiliar territory.

Finally, Jack addressed his own role in their strategy. "As for me, I'll float between the two. I can help where needed, maybe even talk to some other places in town. If you need to get in touch, just call my parents' house. Leave a message if I'm not there. I'll probably be staying there for a while, considering... you know, we have to be out of here soon.

His admission, spoken aloud, made the situation all the more real. Yet, in the face of uncertainty, Jack's plan provided a semblance of direction, a way forward that offered a glimmer of hope. The group nodded in agreement, the resolve in Jack's voice instilling a sense of purpose amidst the chaos of their current predicament. They were a band, a family in music, and though the future was uncertain, the bond they shared, the love for their craft, would drive them to explore every possibility.

Oh one more thing," Jack paused looking at BC and then Marcus smiling. "BC, don't get into a fight with those beer heads, and Marcus, don't mess with any of those biker chicks."

"They're gonna love me." Quipped Marcus with a sultry smile on his face.

BC just muttered a few words half smiling "I'll try, I'll try, I hate those loud rowdy beer heads."

As the meeting concluded, each member felt a mix of apprehension and determination. The road ahead was fraught with challenges, but for now, they had a plan, a course of action that promised at least a chance at continuation, if not together, then at least in the spirit of the music that had brought them together in the first place.

Jack walked into the center room and started riffling through his duffle bag. Lee followed him. Danny, BC, and Marcus stayed in the room they were in. Jack was searching for the small clear baggie containing the last of his pot and a pack of rolling paper. He turned to Lee and said, "We might as well end this on high note."

Lee smiled. "There's something I didn't mention," Lee's face getting a bit serious. "Yeah, about The Dive," he hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "Some of the dancers are transvestites. It's part of the act, you know? Draws a crowd."

Jack paused mid-rummage, his hand still inside the duffle bag, and looked up at Lee, processing the information. A moment passed before his face broke into a grin, the initial surprise giving way to amusement.

"Seriously?" Jack chuckled, pulling his hand out of the bag, now holding the small clear bag and pack of rolling paper. "Well, that's gonna be an eye-opener for Danny. Of course you haven't told him yet?"

Lee shook his head, a sheepish smile spreading across his face. "No, not yet. I thought I'd let him discover the... uh, local talent on his own. Adds to the charm of the place, right?"

Jack laughed; his earlier concerns momentarily forgotten in the light of this new revelation. "Oh, man, I can't wait to see his face. You know, we should probably give him a heads up. But let's do it right."

Lee nodded, still smiling. "How do you suggest we break it to him? Through interpretive dance?"

"Nah, too subtle," Jack replied with a smirk. "Let's just sit him down and tell him straight. But let's make it sound like it's the highlight of the gig. 'And Danny, just so you're prepared, The Dive prides itself on its unique entertainment. Think of it as a cultural experience.'"

Lee chuckled, imagining the conversation. "Yeah, 'It's not every day you get to play alongside such... diverse talent. Embrace the adventure, Danny.'"

Both men shared a laugh, the tension of their uncertain future momentarily lifted by the prospect of springing this surprise on Danny. It was moments like these, filled with levity and camaraderie, that reminded them why they had all come together in the first place.

Jack rolled a joint, lit it, and passed it to Lee. "Here's to new experiences, unexpected adventures, and keeping the band spirit alive, no matter where we end up."

Lee took a hit and passed it back. "Amen to that. Let's make these last few days count. And hey, who knows? The Dive might just be the start of something unexpected. Could be the making of a great story."

They returned to the other room and Jack rolled the last of his pot, enough for two more joints passing it around. As the smoke filled the room, their laughter mingling with the haze, Jack and Lee found comfort in their shared sense of humor and the unbreakable bond of their friendship. Regardless of what the future held, they knew they could face it together, one unexpected twist at a time.

With their tasks laid out before them, the band members prepared to face the next few days with a renewed sense of purpose, each path diverging yet connected by the shared hope of finding their place in the music scene, against all odds. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was better than just sitting there and letting the walls close in.

### Chapter 3

Nestled in the heart of the down beach community of Margate, just a stone's throw from the bustling life of Atlantic City yet worlds away in spirit, stood Jack's family home. A charming two-story wood frame house, a post-WWII era design, complete with a practical carport leading to a quaint single car garage. Though the years had rendered the carport deck a memory more than a usable space, it added a character to the home, telling tales of sunnier days and family gatherings now past.

The house, like many in this cozy corner of Absecon Island, was wrapped in aluminum siding, a testament to the architectural trends of its time. Yet, it was the maple trees lining the street, their branches, a canopy of green in the summer and a spectacle of fiery hues in the fall, that truly welcomed one to this serene locale.

Stepping inside, you were greeted by a modest foyer, where a mahogany-like table stood sentry, a catchall for keys and the day's mail. It was a simple space, but one that immediately spoke of home, of a place where the bustle of the outside world fell away in favor of domestic tranquility.

The living room, with its large picture window, was bathed in natural light, offering views of the peaceful street beyond. The arrangement of Queen Anne-style furniture, though more for show than comfort, added a touch of elegance, their gold cushions catching the sunlight in a warm embrace. Across from it, the main sofa offered a welcoming respite, its cushions soft and inviting, surrounded by a collection of cherished knick-knacks that told the story of the family who lived here.

The dining room, accessible through a clever pass-through window from the kitchen, held the promise of family meals and celebrations, its presence more formal yet no less part of the home's heart. Most meals, however, found their place in the kitchen's cozy confines, where a four-chair table sat snugly against the wall, its simplicity belying the many moments of laughter and conversation shared around it.

At the kitchen's far end, the small utility room and adjacent powder room served their purpose with quiet efficiency, rounding out the main floor's thoughtful layout. It was a home that, while not grandiose in design, was rich in warmth and hominess, a shelter from the storms of life and a testament to the family's enduring bond.

Jack's family home was more than just a structure of wood and siding; it was a haven of memories and a foundation for future dreams. In every room, in every well-worn piece of furniture, the essence of the family's love and history

was woven into the very fabric of the place, making it not just a house in Margate, but a true home.

The familiar aroma of a home-cooked meal filled the air as Jack took his seat at the family dinner table, a place that simultaneously felt like a refuge and a battleground. His parents, Rose, and George exchanged tentative glances, aware of the undercurrents that had been swirling around their family since Frank's enlistment and Jack's subsequent departure from college. The aura of the house was conservative in nature. His parents were of World War II generation and as children they grew up during the depression of the 1930's. Their income was moderate yet sustainable for their needs, George was an insurance salesman and Rose worked in a fancy dress shop in Atlantic City. The best way for Jack to communicate with them was by being open and honest, leaving all the hippie stuff at the door.

"So, Jack, tell us about your plans," Rose began, breaking the uneasy silence. "Are you thinking of staying with us for a while?"

Jack nodded, his gaze shifting from the plate in front of him to meet his mother's concerned eyes. "Yeah, I might need to, at least until I figure things out. The band's going through some changes, and... well, the money just isn't there to meet the rent. The owner is giving us a couple extra days to get our stuff out. Maybe by the weekend I'll need to come back."

George, a man of few words but deep convictions, set down his fork, his expression unreadable. "And what about the draft now that you dropped out of college?"

Jack tensed, knowing this topic was a minefield. "We discussed this a couple of times Dad. Business Administration just isn't working for me. I went to speak with my so-called advisor during this fall's semester registration period with the idea of changing my major to English or something in music. He said I can't do that for a bunch of reasons I didn't understand. I just don't see a point struggling miserably through what I'm supposed to be majoring in. It's my mistake for taking those courses in the first place but I should be able to change it." Jack paused, looking down at his dinner plate. Then looking up, finding his father's eyes he continued, "I'm against the war, Dad. You know that. I don't know what's going to happen with the draft. Some hard choices might have to be made. I don't know. If I was of age in your era Dad, I have no doubt I would be enlisting for the same reasons you did. But Vietnam is not Japan." It's not like when you were in the Pacific. This is different. Nobody bombed Pearl Harbor, there's no Hitler rampaging across Europe."

The tension in the room was palpable as George's jaw tightened, a visible sign of the discomfort brought on by the mention of his wartime service. His words were heavy, filled with the weight of personal experience and the unspoken

memories that lingered in the shadows of his mind. "But it's still your country calling."

Jack's response was sharp, a burst of frustration that cut through the air like a freezing wind. "And therein lies the problem," he snapped, his voice laced with a bitterness that seemed to hang in the space between them. "Who's telling my country to call me? Lockheed? Boeing? Dupont? Dow Chemical? Exxon? Do you remember what Eisenhower said before Kennedy took over?"

George's reply was a murmur, a quiet concession, "I know it's different."

Rose, ever the mediator, tilted her head, her eyes filled with a mix of curiosity and concern. "What did he say?" she asked, her voice soft but insistent, urging the conversation into deeper waters.

Jack exhaled deeply, the sigh escaping him like steam, his gaze softening as it met his mother's. "I can't quote him word for word, but basically what he said was to watch out for the military and the companies that make weapons getting too cozy and powerful. If they get too much control, they might push the country into making bad decisions, like spending too much on weapons or getting into unnecessary wars and running the show." Pausing a moment and looking away, then looking back into her eyes, "I think that's exactly what's going on." Jack glanced over to his father and then started preparing his next bite of dinner with his knife and fork.

As Jack's words filled the room, George leaned back slightly, a subtle shift that seemed to put distance between him and the painful truths his son was laying bare. "You don't know that for sure, Jack," he said, his voice a mix of defense and doubt.

Jack's eyes sparked with a fire fueled by conviction and frustration as he set his eating utensils on the plate softly. "Dad, we have the most powerful military in the world. Land, sea, and air. We're pumping out more weapons than ever before. We have a half million soldiers there, and yet we just go 'round and 'round never losing, never winning. Something's wrong, terribly wrong, and someone is getting rich, very rich."

The air felt charged with Jack's impassioned plea, a call for recognition of the invisible forces shaping their reality. The silence that followed was thick, each family member lost in their own thoughts, grappling with the complexity of their feelings and what could be undeniable truths that Jack was theorizing.

As the weight of Jack's words settled over the dinner table, Rose glanced at the faces of her family, each one etched with the marks of deep contemplation and concern. She knew the importance of keeping the family strong, even in the midst of such heavy conversations. With a gentle smile, she decided to steer the conversation towards lighter shores.

“Well,” she said, breaking the silence with a tone of warmth, “no matter what’s happening out there, I’m just glad we can sit here together as a family. Let’s not forget to enjoy this meal I’ve spent all afternoon preparing.” She winked at Jack, a playful nudge to lighten his spirits.

George, picking up on Rose's cue, offered a small smile of his own, his earlier tension easing. “You know, your mom always did make the best pot roast in the county. I’d say that’s something we can all agree on, right?”

Jack, despite the heaviness of the earlier conversation, couldn’t help but crack a smile at his father’s attempt to lighten the mood. “Yeah, Mom, you do make a mean pot roast. Maybe that’s the secret weapon we need,” he joked, earning a chuckle from George and a soft elbow nudge from Rose.

Sensing the shift in atmosphere, Jack chimed in with a playful grin, “I think we should volunteer Mom’s pot roast for diplomatic negotiations. Peace talks over dinner, how about that?”

Rose laughed, delighted by the banter. “Oh, I can see it now. World leaders signing treaties over my dining table. I’d better start perfecting my dessert recipes, then. World peace might just depend on it!”

The laughter that followed was a relief to the earlier tension, a reminder of the resilience of their family ties. As they continued to enjoy their dinner, the conversation flowed more freely, touching on lighter subjects like plans for the weekend, funny stories from George’s work, and Jack’s latest escapades with his band. Of course, not all the escapades.

By the time dessert was served, the atmosphere was filled with warmth and camaraderie. It was a testament to their ability to navigate the complexities of their differing views with love and respect, coming back together over the simple joy of a shared meal. In that moment, the challenges outside the walls of their home seemed a little less daunting, overshadowed by the laughter and love that filled the room.

As dinner ended, Jack and George rose from their seats, gathering plates and utensils to help clear the table. The act was a familiar routine, a silent agreement of shared responsibilities that had always been part of their family dinners. George took his place at the sink, turning on the warm water and adding a squirt of soap to create a frothy mixture, while Jack stood beside him, a dish towel slung over his shoulder, ready to dry.

The clinking of dishes and the running water filled the room with a homely soundtrack as father and son worked side by side. It was a simple task, yet in the quiet moments of washing and drying, there was a sense of connection, an unspoken understanding that transcended their earlier disagreements.

George handed Jack the first plate, freshly washed, and Jack took it, carefully drying it before placing it in the stack. "You know, Jack," George began, his voice thoughtful over the sound of splashing water, "I may not always understand your views, but I respect your passion. You've always stood up for what you believe in."

Jack paused, a plate in hand, touched by his father's words. "Thanks, Dad. I know we don't see eye to eye on everything, but it means a lot to hear you say that."

As they continued their task, the tension that had lingered from dinner began to dissolve, replaced by a mutual respect. They spoke of lighter topics, reminiscing about past family vacations and sharing jokes, the laughter echoing in the kitchen.

With each plate, cup, and utensil that passed from George's hands to Jack's, the distance between them seemed to close. It was a reminder that despite their differences, they were still family, connected by love and a lifetime of memories.

Once the last dish was dried and placed in the cupboard, George wiped his hands on a towel and turned to Jack with a small smile. "How about we call it a night, huh? I think we've earned a bit of rest."

Jack nodded, returning the smile. "Sounds good, Dad."

Together, they turned off the kitchen lights and made their way to the living room, where Rose was waiting, a sense of peace settling over the household. In the simple act of clearing the dishes, father and son had found a moment of reconciliation, a reminder that at the heart of their family were capable of weathering any storm. Yet family and obligations were one thing and standing up for one's own beliefs was another. There comes a point where something breaks. As Jack followed his father into the living room, the laughter and warmth of the moment couldn't fully chase away the shadows that lingered at the edges of his thoughts. The evening of shared tasks and conversation was important to him, a break in the turmoil of his young adult life. Yet, as he settled onto the couch the specter of the draft loomed like dark clouds on his horizon.

He found himself glancing at his father observing the lines of experience etched into his father's face, a living testament to the sacrifices of a previous generation's war. Jack respected and admired his father's service. There was one thing not mentioned at the dining room table and that was the reason we were in Vietnam in the first place. That argument was yet to come but he was well prepared for it. In the meantime, he needed to focus on the issues at hand. The band, money in his pocket, and a roof over his head.

Settling into the warmth of the living room, Jack felt the weight of his parents' concern for his future, a concern magnified by the uncertain climate of the draft and his recent departure from college. Rose, with her ever-compassionate gaze, invited Jack to share his thoughts, sensing the turmoil beneath his calm exterior.

Jack leaned forward, his hands clasped together, searching for the right words to bridge the gap between his dreams and his parents' worries. "I know it seems like I'm at a crossroads," he began, his voice steady, "but this summer with the band... it opened my eyes to a world I never knew I needed. Behind the scenes, making the shows come alive, there's a kind of magic there. It's not just about the music; it's about creating experiences, moments that people remember."

George, ever pragmatic, raised an eyebrow but listened intently, recognizing the passion in his son's voice. "I understand that, Jack. But passion doesn't always pay the bills. What's your plan for making this a real career?"

Jack nodded, expecting this question. "I'm aware I'm just starting out, pretty much a rookie in the industry. But everyone starts somewhere, right? With the summer over, it's tough. The band's struggling to find steady gigs, which makes it hard for us to stay together, let alone make a living."

Rose, always the nurturer, reached out, placing a gentle hand on Jack's. "We just want to make sure you have a path, Jack. Something that leads you to a future you can be proud of, even with all these uncertainties."

Jack met his mother's gaze, a mixture of gratitude and resolve in his eyes. "I know, Mom. And I appreciate that. I'm not walking into this blindly. I'm researching, talking to people in the industry, learning what I can do to grow from a 'rookie apprentice' to someone who really makes a difference behind the scenes. It's not just a dream; I see it as a potential career path, despite the challenges."

The concern in George and Rose's eyes didn't vanish, but it was tempered by an understanding of their son's determination and the clarity with which he viewed his chosen path. The conversation drifted into more practical discussions about immediate next steps, potential contacts, and ways to navigate the uncertain job market in the entertainment industry.

As the conversation wound down, a quiet resolve settled over Jack. The reality of his situation was clear: to chase his dream in the unpredictable world of music and production, he might need to ground himself with something more stable, more conventional, in the meantime. The idea wasn't thrilling, but it was practical, a concession to the realities of adult life that he couldn't ignore.

"I'm thinking I might need to find a regular job," Jack finally admitted, the words feeling like a surrender but also a strategic retreat. "Just something to keep me afloat while I figure out how to make this work. I can't just rely on the band gigs, not if they're this sparse."

Rose's expression softened; her eyes filled with a mother's understanding. "Jack, you know you always have a place here," she said gently, reinforcing the sanctuary their home provided. "This is still your home, no matter what. We want you to succeed, to follow your passion, but we also want you to know you're not alone in this."

George nodded in agreement; the unspoken worries of a father etched in the lines of his face. Yet, his voice was firm, supportive. "That's right. Use this home as your base, your fallback. There's no shame in taking the time to build your future, even if it means stepping back to move forward. We're here for you, son."

The offer was a respite to Jack's worried heart, a reminder that no matter how far he strayed in pursuit of his dreams, the path back to his family, to his roots, would always be open. It was a safety net, one that didn't bind him but rather gave him the courage to leap.

As he nodded, accepting their support, a sense of gratitude washed over him. "Thanks, Mom, Dad. I can't tell you how much that means to me. I'll find something, I promise. Something that allows me to keep working towards what I really want."

As Jack mulled over his next steps, Rose interjected, a slight change in her tone catching his attention. "Oh! Jack, you've got some mail," she said, moving towards the small credenza in the foyer, the designated spot where new mail was placed before being sorted. She returned with two pieces of mail in her hand—one from the college and one from Jill.

The sight of the envelopes sparked a mix of emotions in Jack. The college letter could be anything—a reminder of his recent decision to leave, perhaps, or some administrative matter. But it was the letter from Jill that caused his heart to skip a beat. Since her move to L.A., their communication had been a lifeline for him, a connection to someone who understood his dreams and fears, even as she pursued her own path far from their hometown.

Jack took the letters from his mother, thanking her with a nod. He turned the college envelope over in his hands, feeling a twinge of regret mixed with resolve. Whatever it contained, he knew that chapter of his life was behind him, at least for now. His focus, however, lingered on the envelope from Jill. Her handwriting was familiar, each curve and line a reminder of the countless notes and letters they'd exchanged over the years.

With his parents watching, a silent question in their gaze, Jack decided to open Jill's letter first. As he unfolded the paper, his eyes scanned the words, a smile slowly forming on his lips. Jill's message was filled with updates about her life in L.A., the challenges and small victories that came with navigating a new city. But more than that, it was a reaffirmation of their connection, her belief in

his determination, and her encouragement for him to keep pursuing his passion, despite the obstacles.

The warmth from Jill's words was a momentary escape from the uncertainty that clouded his thoughts. He looked up at his parents, the smile still playing on his lips, and shared a brief summary of Jill's adventures and her support for his choices. As with all of her letters, she spoke of how great it is there and how he should really come and discover California, signing off with a ban-the-bomb peace symbol and a couple of hearts. Folding the letter along its original creases Jack returned it to the envelope feeling a renewed sense of strength.

Jack then turned his attention to the letter from the college. Opening it with a steadier hand, he found it to be a formal acknowledgment of his withdrawal, along with information about the process should he decide to return in the future. It was a door left ajar, not closed—a reminder that while paths might diverge, they often offered a way back, a chance to revisit decisions made in the heat of a moment. It was a good option to have but one he doubted he would use.

As he shared the contents of the college options with his parents, and then just summarized the letter from Jill by a request from his mom. The conversation shifted towards the future, towards possibilities and plans yet to be made. Then his mom turned the subject to Jill.

“Jack, just a word of advice about Jill.” Her tone was somber yet firm in a mother’s way. “We never met her but I’m sure she’s a lovely girl and it’s obvious you have feelings for her. No matter how square you think this is, a woman is looking for security and stability in a partner. It’s built in with us. Yes, you can build a future together, but she must know that you can provide the financial security and emotional stability that it takes to build in. A woman may love you but walk away because your future seems insecure to her. She’ll never tell you that Jack, but it is the truth. I just don’t want to see you get hurt and not understand it.”

"I understand, Mom," Jack responded, his voice tinged with a mixture of resolve and vulnerability. "We've talked about the future, basically, but maybe not in as much detail as we should. So far, it's just been about what she's doing and what I'm doing and that I should come out there. To be honest, since I decided to continue the music industry thing, I haven't thought about it that way. Maybe I should be."

Rose's expression softened as she listened to Jack's acknowledgment, the lines of worry around her eyes revealing her deep concern for her son's emotional well-being. "It's a good start, Jack, talking about your daily lives and plans to visit each other. But real commitment involves deeper conversations, especially when it comes to building a life together."

Jack absorbed his mother's words, the significance of their meaning dawning on him. It was more than just sharing dreams and aspirations; it was about creating a shared vision for the future, one that included practical considerations and mutual support.

"You're right, Mom. I need to have that conversation with Jill," Jack admitted, a newfound determination in his voice. "I want to be someone she can rely on, not just emotionally, but in all aspects of our life together. I guess I've been so caught up in the idea of making it in music that I've overlooked the practical side of things."

Rose nodded, pleased with Jack's willingness to see the bigger picture. "And it's okay to dream big, Jack. Just remember that stability doesn't mean giving up on your passions. It's about finding a balance, making sure you're both moving towards a future that's not only fulfilling but also secure."

George chimed in, his tone supportive. "Maybe think about ways you can leverage your passion for music into something that offers more stability. There are many paths in the industry that could provide a good living while allowing you to stay connected to what you love."

It was all good advice and food for thought. Jack had to keep in mind their conservative generation's view. It was becoming a common practice now for a couple to live together instead of getting all tangled up in legalities. There were so many different directions to go in today's world. His parents' advice was a set of good building blocks but there was more. A lot of women were seeking their own professional careers not wanting to be in the kitchen and changing diapers all day. This was all part of the social revolution taking place in his generation.

The conversation gradually shifted to more constructive avenues, with Jack's parents offering suggestions and ideas on how he could navigate his career in the music industry with an eye towards long-term stability. Even though they knew little about the industry, they talked about potential jobs that could be related to music production, teaching, or even branching into the business side of the industry. All in all, it was a good conversation and a good visit with his parents.

“There Was a Time” by Steve Barasch