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Down to the Low Country
An Excerpt from *The Bluffton Charge*

Four tires hummed along a strip of asphalt that cut like a black river through the South Carolina swamp. An unbroken wall of cypress lined the gravel bank, a sound barrier protecting the dark world beyond. A layer of kudzu acted as mortar, sealing the swampland like a fortress from outside intruders. Every so often, a break in the trees revealed whiskey-colored water standing stagnant where the earth should have been, reflecting gnarled roots and the dull shine of a hazy mid-August sky.

Inside the car, a 22-year-old Nashville woman with high cheekbones and sad, brown eyes sat in the passenger seat and focused on those paths as they flashed by, holding onto each image after it was re-absorbed by the wall of green. She was strikingly beautiful, long legs and a figure that showed through her clothes. She was sexy but also dignified, a characteristic she had picked up from her mother, who had done her best to raise both her girls into proper Southern ladies.

Bev stubbed out a cigarette in the Plymouth ashtray and rolled her window down an extra few inches to see more clearly into the gaps. She focused her eyes there, tried to hold the picture still as long as she could, to turn her head and look just as the gaps zipped by. She was looking for alligators. Somewhere back behind the thick green she imagined them waiting between exposed roots for the broken sunlight to fade to shadow. Then they would slip into the water and slide through the undergrowth, afraid of nothing. She looked for the outline of their heads and long, scaled bodies in the momentary clearings, but all she could make out were patches of grass, fallen logs, the shadows of trees reflected in the brown water.

She turned from the scene outside and stared at her 25-year-old husband behind the wheel. He was a square-jawed, Mississippi preacher, his high forehead topped by thick, curly black hair, receding slightly at the temples. His eyes were blue and unreadable, staring out at the world through a pair of black-rimmed glasses. His

hair was cropped short along the sides and his face was shaven clean. He had a muscular build and a self-confidence that was evident in the way he watched the road with his mouth zipped closed and his eyes unmoving.

Ahead, a new life awaited them. It lay at the edge of the continent, far from the progressive atmosphere of the university where they had met and married in Atlanta in the shadows of a rural land that neither of them had so much as visited. It was there, in a small town deep within the low country of South Carolina that John, fresh out of theology school, had been appointed Methodist minister. He and Bev had been married for just over a year, formed a bond in the wake of a Supreme Court ruling that outlawed segregation in public schools. To them, the two events were intrinsically tied. They were connected as much by their will to promote social change as their love for each other. Or more accurately, their dedication to bring about Christian change in the South is part of what made their bond together so powerful. They were married to each other and to this mission.

At Emory's Chandler School of Theology, John wrote practice sermons to his fellow students about discrimination and what it meant to lead a Christian life. The South was bracing for a decision against segregation from the Supreme Court and anticipation was growing about how people would react. John foresaw the potential crisis, but within the turmoil he saw an opportunity for Christian change. He placed the responsibility for fostering that positive outcome squarely in the lap of the South's ministers.

"The Chinese write the word 'crisis' with two characters," he wrote. "One means danger and the other means opportunity! Whether this situation will be a threat to the goal of brotherhood, or whether it will be an opportunity for progress toward the Christian dream of brotherhood, DEPENDS ON YOU!" He urged his classmates to "inform" their congregation of the Christian imperative to overcome prejudice, to "show" their congregations that "prejudice against the Negro has its roots in emotion not reason." And most importantly he called on his fellow theology students to "live" their faith. "Cultivate friendships with Negroes or Negro ministers," he wrote. "If you yourself have no personal contact with Negroes, how can you hope to encourage others to do so?"

It was a time of uneasy tranquillity across the country. Americans were coming back down from the long hurrah that marked victory and the end of W.W.II, realizing that the last devil had not been defeated

with the fall of Hitler. A new threat was on the rise in the east. In 1955, three out of four Americans believed an atomic war with the Soviet Union was only a matter of time. Images of mushroom clouds were everywhere, exploding across magazine pages, newspapers, and the newest medium—television. Films featured special segments about covering up, where to go if the bombs fell, all punctuated by that flowering bomb blast, that awful, wonderful expanding broccoli cloud that they were expected and prepared to survive.

Meanwhile, the South was bracing itself for another kind of battle, equally menacing and anticipated. A year after the Supreme Court handed down its unanimous decision outlawing racial segregation in public schools, *Brown II* called for Southern states to move with "all deliberate speed" toward a "prompt and reasonable start toward full compliance" with the ruling. In the deep South, the ruling had been expected and prepared for. Southern politicians taught their henchmen how to duck under tables and chairs, how to survive such an explosion if it were to occur.

In South Carolina, Gov. James Byrnes was in the midst of a $100 million school improvement plan. If separate was not equal in the eyes of the Supreme Court, Byrnes was going to do everything in his power to make it so. In Georgia, Eugene Talmadge took a more direct approach, declaring that whites and blacks would never go to the same school as long as he was governor. Across the South, politicians and sheriffs and business owners and parents were gearing up for a second stand against northern agitators who neither understood the South nor cared to. The easy giant that is Southern racism was stirring between the roots of cypress, preparing to rise up once again with all the fear at its heart and anger in its blood.

It was bright but still cool when John and Bev left Atlanta early that morning. They drove out of the city and turned toward the sun. The Black Belt of central Georgia spread out around them and the balance of their thoughts tilted from where they had been to where they were going, from college cafes, seminars and term papers to anticipation of a new life that was now only a car drive away. The faces of college friends and mentors, professors and graduate students faded into miles of cotton fields, black farmers guiding mules through the mud, white silos on the horizon. They motored across the area once described as the Egypt of the Confederacy, the heart of the Cotton Kingdom, passed the shantytowns of

Jeffersonville, Danville, Allentown, Rockledge, through the counties of Twiggs, Treutlen, Candler, and Chatham, past forests of pine, oak, ash, hickory and poplar.

They slipped from Georgia into South Carolina, talking excitedly about their plans and expectations. They listened to the radio hoping to hear news about folk singer Pete Seeger's scheduled appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington. At age 36, Seeger was among the many entertainers and Hollywood stars who had been publicly accused of Communism. The Red Scare was moving across America like wildfire. Bev was apprehensive about the reactionary stance people were taking to root out Communist sympathizers, as well as the Red label that was being attached to many liberals in the South who voiced support for integration. John thought the whole thing was ridiculous.

Seven years earlier, when he openly opposed the Dixiecrat Movement in Jackson, John had himself been branded as a Communist. *We've heard a lot of talk about black and white, and red, white and blue,* one of the State's Rights advocates said after John's friend delivered a speech condemning the fledgling party as racist. *We've heard all the colors in the spectrum mentioned except for one. And that color is pink. That's what I think these boys are, a bunch of pinko communists!*

In Washington, Pete Seeger was taking a light-hearted approach to his new Communist label. During his testimony at the Capitol, he offered to play his banjo for the Un-American Activities Committee. The committee members politely declined. It was the kind of display John could appreciate, a logic that remained logical even as it flew in the face of accepted decorum. After all, Seeger was a folk singer. If someone would be kind enough to hand him a banjo, he was more than willing to prove it. Bev said she thought Seeger was treading on dangerous ground. People had been exiled after all. It wasn't unprecedented. John said he sure would have liked to see the look on their faces when Seeger offered to play his banjo.

Also of interest to John in the national news in the summer of 1955 was an upcoming fight between Rocky Marciano and Archie Moore for the heavyweight championship of the world. John held a high regard for those who battled in the ring, remembering first-hand how his arms felt like rubber, his hands as heavy as stone after three rounds of punishment when he was a teenager vying for the Golden Gloves Championship of Mississippi. He privately compared his own

crouched-down fighting posture to Marciano, who could work his way into his opponents and then devastate them with hooks and upper-cuts at close range.

John's nostalgia for boxing was not something he shared openly with his new wife, at least not unless he wanted to rile her up. What had been to John a test of manhood seemed to Bev a ludicrous act of violence, self-destructive and childish. He could preach with all the forcefulness of a prophet, but she would have none of his stories of fisticuffs. When John recalled how his nose had been broken and remembered how hard it was late in the third round to keep his hands up above his waist, Bev would turn and stare at him. "Horrible," was all she would say, as she turned back out to survey the changing scenery.

From open fields and plows in the morning sunlight, by noon, John and Bev were sinking into a sub-tropic terrain. An hour into South Carolina, they looked out and found themselves tunneling through an explosion of uncontrolled growth. Rows of trees immersed in kudzu stumbled through iron-rich water toward them, blanketed in suffocating green. Below, new life sprung up, fed by old life falling into it. Homes and businesses opened out of this growth as if the vines had been pulled back to make way for it.

The lush beauty around them combined with the weight of the air slowed the senses of the two newcomers to a thick pulse. On the back seat behind them, a mass of boxes, lamps, books and clothes rose up toward the car roof. To passers-by, it must have looked as if the two-door Plymouth was filling up with water from the back, a wave of liquid assets about to overtake the unsuspecting couple. At the leading edge of this surreal tragedy sitting on the front seat between John and Bev was a panting, year-old German shepherd named Jeff, water dripping steadily from his extended tongue.

Bev found her enthusiasm tempered somewhat by the muggy weather. She looked down at the road atlas spread out on her lap. On the national map, South Carolina was a well-placed triangular shim stuck into the underbelly of the East Coast, a triangular piece of green and brown hammered in between Georgia and North Carolina to hold the Eastern seaboard in place. At the spot where the wedge gave way to light blue, where salt water crumbled it into islands and deltas, Bev's finger stopped. Bluffton was a small red dot bordered on the South by a meandering brackish river that cut into the land like an advancing crack in the ice. The water curved in from the ocean around islands large and small, cut between Hilton

Head and Dafuskie, into the Calibogue Sound, littered with more islands, Buck and Marsh and Bull and Page, and then turned left and branched into the mainland.

Bluffton stood on the edge of the May River's primary path, along a wide elbow turn, separated from the water by a high bluff. The town had been founded by planters in the 1800s looking for higher ground to escape the yellow fog that swept across the low country in the early mornings. Miasma they called it, and the common belief was that it caused malaria. Above the banks of the May, they built giant mansions, towering white behemoths with white columns and wide porches, tin roofs that rose toward the sky and tall windows that provided a view of the water and the land that provided their livelihood.

Bluffton was a town that prided itself on its Confederate roots. Natives claimed the very idea of seceding from the union began there in 1844, when Congressman Robert Barnwell Rhett, known in the North as "the enfant terrible," gave a volatile speech to a crowd of 500 under one of Bluffton's great oaks condemning northern imposition into the South's affairs. "I proclaim to you, if you value your rights," Rhett told the crowd, "you must resist and submit not." Sixteen years later, in 1860, South Carolina became the first state to formally remove itself from the union.

During the Civil War, Bluffton was used by Confederate troops as a lookout spot to monitor movement of the Federal Fleet from Hilton Head up the May River. Union troops apparently got word of the spying and on June 4, 1863, the town was set ablaze. An article dated two days after the event in *The Mercury*, Charleston's newspaper, described the "burning of the beautiful town of Bluffton" and listed the "forty private residences and nearly one hundred outhouses, stores, etc." consumed by the fire. According to the account, 1,000 Federal troops landed on Hunting Island and marched along the bluff, "their gunboats steaming along up the river abreast of the troops." The invasion caught the Confederate regiment camped outside of Bluffton off-guard and by the time skirmishers could be sent to the front, Federal troops had already taken the town. "The enemy soon came in sight, having obtained possession of the town unmolested, and exchanged shots with the line of skirmishers; soon after the town was fired in the lower part, near Colonel Stoney's, and the wind blowing fresh, soon sent the flames broadcast through the town." Only two churches and 15 homes escaped the fire. Two

thirds of Bluffton was burned, including many of the towering plantation homes that stood lookout over the May River.

In 1955, the "Secession Oak" was still standing in Bluffton as were many of the fables and legends that had resulted from the South's great stand against northern aggression. Blufftonites were independent and self-sufficient, hard-working farmers and fishermen with a great sense of pride in their family and town history intermixed with wealthy retirees who bought columned plantation homes set back off the road. The quiet day-to-day living was given an edge by this historical pride, the lost cause, the Southern way of life. Locals were wary of change, too close to the past to consider social progress as anything other than a surprise attack on the lives and land they held dear.

After an hour or so of winding roads and an occasional road-side business, the trees began to give way in bite-sized chunks, buildings appearing like snapshots between the flow of green. John eased the car onto a road of crushed oyster shells that marked the edge of Bluffton. The wheels of the Plymouth hit the shells with a roar and Bev started awake. Behind a windshield splattered with bugs and caked with a film of dirt, she peered out at the world they had just entered. Along the edge of the road, dark-skinned black women with bags of rice and flour balanced on their heads walked side by side, conversing in a language that flowed in and out of English like a half-heard conversation. Chains of children in torn clothing raced across dirt yards. Behind them, rows of dilapidated, one-room shanties with slanted tin roofs squatted in the dirt, gap-toothed smiles in the siding big enough to fit a hand through.

Bev absorbed the scene without comment. Although she had grown up in the South, she was not accustomed to this kind of poverty. As a child in Nashville, she watched blacks on their way to church, dignified men in tan suits, women in flowery dresses, beautiful black girls with their hair in tight braids, boys like miniature soldiers marching along the sidewalk.

On trips to Union City, Tennessee, to visit her grandmother, Bev pleaded with her Uncle D. to take a detour through "nigger town," because her imagination had already created it, mirrored its surface from the church-going families and the maids and butlers waiting at the bus stop. At home, she asked the family maid, Martha, if she could go home with her for the night, knowing there was a

separate world beyond the edge of her domain that was fascinating and mysterious. Bev had already conjured up that world like a daydream, how neat and tidy it must have been, all those white shirts and aprons, perfectly dressed children, dignified older men and nurturing nannies. She knew what was out there on the other side. She could not understand what was keeping her from experiencing it.

Outside the two-door Plymouth, the low country landscape did not lend itself to contemplation. Driving into Bluffton left Bev with the feeling not of being above the world, but thoroughly within it. The beauty of the landscape was in its richness and its immediacy. Cars and machinery rusted over and broke down more quickly in the thick low country air. Branches and vines overtook homes, grass and weeds grew up between cracked pavement and broken chunks of sidewalk. The low country thrived in a pulsing rhythm that lived just as surely and steadily as the people who came amidst its progress. This place was what it was, it had no delusions and offered none, no mercy to the broken tree that still had some life in it, the home whose corners had not been lifted far enough away from the living soil.

"Look, John," Bev said excitedly, gripping his hand and inhaling an audible gasp of excitement. Ahead, huge white homes emerged like a fleet of ghost ships through the fog. They were massive and weighty, peaked roofs rising up above the trees, some with wide, wrap-around porches, others with flat roofs and huge white columns framing the front door. Shading their windows and porches were 100-year old oaks that rose up and mushroomed out into the sky above. Along their lower branches, tufts of Spanish moss hung down weightless, like brush strokes of gray paint blurring the scene into a dream-like vision.

"Would you look, John," Bev said again, even though she knew he already was. "Look, darling. Look how lush."

John stuck his opened hand at an angle out the window in hopes of coaxing more air into the car. He appreciated the scene, but for different reasons than his wife. John saw things for what they were—he saw craftsmanship in the rounded columns and shuttered windows of the plantation homes, he appreciated the massive lower limbs of the oaks because they looked strong enough to hold a swing. Despite his idealistic moral vision, John was pragmatic about life. He did all his bank business at the bank and mailed all his letters from the post office, even if he had a mailbox 20 feet from his front door.

While Bev was mesmerized by the richness of Bluffton, the

ghostly antebellum homes, rumbling under a live oak canopy along a road of crushed oyster shells, John looked out the window at his new town and saw evidence of strongly drawn class lines—wealthy retirees, working-class white farmers, and black workers only one step beyond slavery. He saw a Southern town operating under the same economic system that had formed it—white bosses reaping profits from the labor of black men and women who picked rice and cotton, harvested oysters, fished the bays, and cut timber from the land. He saw a place where things were often left to rust in yards and paint was allowed to peel from the sides of mansions. He saw a place in need of revival.

John turned right down Calhoun Street. The Plymouth rolled past more old homes with wrap-around porches framed by huge oaks and squat palm trees. On the left side of the road a painted white church stuck out above the trees. John pulled over and peered out at the scene. A sign planted squarely in the mowed churchyard read:

WELCOME
Rev. John and Beverly Howie
to the
Bluffton Methodist Church

John's new charge was made up of three towns—Bluffton, Hardeeville and Pritchardville. Connected, they formed a slightly dipping line across the southern tip of South Carolina, about 45 miles north of Savannah. At the edge of Bluffton, a brackish river wandered inland toward Columbia or out toward the Atlantic depending on your perspective. From Bluffton, it was hard to tell which way the water was moving, or whether it was moving at all. Sometimes, it too appeared to be merely sinking downwards into its wide elbow turns, childish scribbles in the thick low country swampland.

The Bluffton Methodist Church was just up from the May along a road of crushed oyster shells. It had been burned to the ground by troops from a Federal gunboat during the Civil War, and toppled sixty years later when a violent hurricane twirled into town off the Atlantic. The building that stood in the 1950s looked as if it had been constructed with this history in mind, an unspoken knowledge that it too would eventually fall. It was white and Lego-plain. The corners of the roof were supported at the front by two square columns. Concrete steps as wide as the building led up to the church door and tall, narrow windows

lined the sides of the church. They led around to the back and across a shaded yard to the parsonage—their new home.

John and Bev stepped up to the screen porch and took in the array of discarded furniture that stared back at them like a family of misfits—dining room chairs missing legs and upholstery, an old rocker half-stripped of paint. A dusty glass door led from the porch into their new living room. It was littered with an assortment of chairs, tables and sofas that took on strangely demonic characteristics in the dim light. The floors were pine boards, 12 inches wide, that creaked under foot. Looking through open knots in the floor, you could make out the faint outline of grass. Similar holes in the walls let in narrow tubes of dust-filled sunlight. In the coming days, the air would get so thick that both the walls and floors would sweat sap.

The front hallway led back to a small kitchen with decorative edging dipping down from the cupboards like a gingerbread house. There, waiting for the new minister and his wife on a square aluminum table was a mountain of food—one-pound servings of flour, sugar, butter, milk, meat, bread, fruit, vegetables and canned goods. John and Bev had received their first official pounding.