

Journey

By Andrew Gillett

"How are you exactly going to build this?" my brother asked me one cool June day in 1963. "Steal from the neighbors' garbage?"

"That isn't a bad idea," I answered with euphoria. "I suppose I might have to *ask*, instead of steal. Our neighbors are fairly nice, they'd probably say yes. Anyway, I don't think something as straightforward as a little welding will be too difficult."

A long pause ensued between us.

Ever since I was a boy I had always fancied inventing things from whatever scraps were around. This didn't always cause the joy I hoped for----often instead the reactions were cooked and blazing. Nevertheless, I decided to attempt another "invention"----a last, final hope for something that might bring my status in my family somewhat.

A long pause ensued between us.

"I need one last chance to get this all right, Jack," I said, breaking the silence. "I'm tired of the way things are----I need to show them I can be someone, even though they won't let me sit at the lunch counter. I want to show them I'm every much as bit a man as they are."

Jack walked up to me and stared me firmly in the face. "You are twice the man those fools are," he said as he walked out of the garage to leave me brooding on his words.

The next day I returned to the garage with a wealth of metal for my sculpture----I don't suppose there's anything else to call it----and began my task promptly. As the hours rolled by, the twisted crags of metal began to form shapes----still not entirely discernible to any eye but my own, but progress nonetheless. The heat from the welding machine snatched at my face and bit into my eyes despite the protection from the mask. Sweat began to pour down past my face, soaking my t-shirt. My hands worked slowly, fashioning the metal into the head of a person.

By the time my mother called me in to dinner, I was drenched in sweat. I stood up and sighed deeply. *One mile walked, a thousand more to go. Still, I made some progress.*

I tossed a rag onto the head of my would-be statue and walked back inside, confident that I was well on the way with my creation.

Days slipped past, turning into weeks, and my piles of metal began to take the form of a person----slowly my progress mounted up and built itself. Then as August rolled in, along with the start of school, the moment finally came.

I had recently returned from school and ran into the garage to continue my project. Taking up the mask and blowtorch, I sat down once more on the cold trash can and started work once again on my magnum opus.

Removing the blanket from the metal parts, I placed the head next to the body and began to weld them together. I'd almost gotten used to the intense heat by now. I stared intently at my object and burned my eyes into the fusing metal. After a number of minutes, I finished with the head and the body. From there the rest was, well, not a piece of a cake, more like cutting through a brick wall----but I managed to carry on until it was finished.

It was done----here, now, I could finally rise above the twisted ideas of my country and show the burning crosses and segregated restaurants, that *I was someone.*

It was done!

I walked inside the house with the metal man and went into my brother's room and unmasked my work.

"I knew this one would be a success," he said, getting up off his bed and walking over to me, placing his hand on my shoulder.

"Well----all thanks to you," I said gratefully. "Thanks for believing I could do it."

"Believing in yourself is more important in finishing the race than what others say," he said, a little too casually. "That's always the first stepping stone to success."

"Still----thank you, Jack," I answered, and left his room.

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The next day, early in the morning, I decided I would bring my sculpture to school to show my art teacher Mrs. Depp---she always seemed to have the right words to make me feel like a real artist, not just a kid. Sometimes, however, when you get caught up in protecting things you forget to protect yourself.

An early winter wind picked up across the ground and blew my jacket at my face. I walked briskly along the sidewalk, fighting the Virginia cold as I went on my way. A group of people started to form behind me----unbeknownst to me----and before I had reached the school campus, I was surrounded by five pale faces and ten bloodshot angry eyes. I turned around in every direction, hoping a way out would still open up to me----and found my situation hopeless.

The tallest boy stepped forward and looked me hard in the eyes. "Whatcha got there, Waltie?" he said with a sneer.

I squeaked out an answer, my tongue cloaked in fear. "It's a sculpture," I whispered softly.

"Oh, wow," he said as he snatched the thick cloth from the metal body, "that's really something"----and before I could react he shoved the iron feet into my stomach.

I staggered and swayed, attempting to stand----and was brought down with a cold punch to the face. My body hit the ground, my lips tasting the dirty asphalt in my mouth and the feel of rough flesh and bone. I began to lift my weary arms, blood running down my face----and felt a boot bite me in the stomach.

"Agh," I groaned as I tried to lift myself, tears of sorrow and pain now flowing from my eyes

"Get *up*, you filthy black dog, get up, you dirty rat!" he yelled as kicks were aimed at my back and head. I struggled to lift myself off the ground, blood and tears clouding my vision. He grinned for a moment, then pulling his arm back, punched me in the face and my world was covered in blackness.

When I woke up, I was lying crumpled on the ground and my head was pounding with pain. The boys, I deduced, had ran away after I blacked out.

"Why," I whispered, "why did all this come to me?"

Standing up slowly, I broke off a branch and leaned my arm on it for support, walking slowly on the sidewalk back home----school would be too much for me today.

I trudged on, my eyelids weighed by weariness and my body quickly fading into oblivion. After much pain and drugged footsteps, I reached the door of my house and upon opening it, fell down on the floor.

“Walter!” my mother yelled as she saw me on the ground. “What happened?”

I pulled myself up and smiled weakly, showing my bloodied face and bruises.

“Oh, good Lord! Ethan, this boy needs to be taken to a hospital,” she said frantically. My father then came into the room, and seeing the blood, immediately called the hospital.

My parents gently helped outside and into the car---from there, however, the gentleness ended as my father sped the car along the road, bouncing me back and forth in the backseat of the car. After what seemed like forever, my father pulled into the hospital.

It was the biggest building I'd ever seen, with giant windows littered across its whitewashed walls. An eerie stillness blanketed the hospital; there was a sad, lonely, feel to it.

A nurse ran to help us, leading me down a long hallway to a bright, sterile room. It was quite dull---the only furniture was a chair, a bed, and a TV sitting in front of the bed. My mother helped me get under the covers and before long, drowsiness washed over me and I quickly fell asleep.

When I woke up, the lights were turned off and my mother had dozed off in her chair, snoring softly. The television was on, flashing black and white and showing a man speaking loudly to a crowd, in front of the Lincoln Memorial---a man whose skin was the color of mine.

Cocoa. His skin was the color of cocoa.

For the first time in my life I wasn't ashamed of who I was.

The man's words echoed from the television. “Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today my friends---so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.”

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood. . .”

“I have a dream today.”

From there I couldn't pay any more attention. My mind was fixed on this dream, this beautiful vision, that one day a country built on the ideals of freedom and liberty would accept all people as they are----people. There was such simplicity, and yet it all seemed so far away----how on earth could a country that had just beaten one of its sons for the color of his skin ever realize the truth?

I sat back in my bed and soaked in an image of black boys and girls going to school with white boys and girls, seeing their smiles and hearing their conversations, sensing that this was a dream worth believing in, no matter how long it might take for the day of jubilee to come.

I have a dream, I have a dream. . .

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The rest of my life has been rebuilding, recovering, healing from the scars of that day. And yet, it has also been full of dreaming, a life that has been full of building on those dreams----dreams that a young man by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. so brilliantly spoke of and acted upon.

It took me a long time----but I went back to my sculpture and began to change the entire idea I had originally had. Now, it was to be an image of four children, two black boys and two white boys, sitting next to each other at a bench, talking and laughing----as friends, as *brothers*.

This new sculpture took much longer than the first, mostly since there were more characters. After toiling for many hours in the garage again, I finished the sculpture and was able to sell it for a large amount of money----and now, so many years after, I still make my living creating art. It continues to amaze me----if I hadn't watched Martin Luther King speaking about his dream on the television in the hospital that August day in 1963, I never would have found the strength or the inspiration to create any art again.

Even today, I still am empowered by the belief and inspiration that drove me since the days I began my artwork----fifty years later.