

Chapter 1

I still had to talk to Jbo about the trip. Neither one of us had driven cross-country before by ourselves. It would be a long drive. Even more, I had to convince his mother that the trip would be safe. So after I left *UPS*, I drove up to the car wash to see where his head was at. When I arrived he was in the middle of washing a car.

"What up boy?"

Jbo replied, "Shit. What it do?"

"Trying to see if you wanna make a drive with me"

"Where we going?"

"I'm headed back-to-school, you rollin' wit' me?"

"To Cali?"

"Yeah man, I'm trying to make my way back to Tiger and 'em. If you down?"

"That's a long ass drive."

"You know I got what you need."

"Let me talk to moms and I'll let you know."

I always envied Jbo and his mom's relationship. His mother had that old blood in her. She was of the old stock mixed with Navy discipline. To this day, I don't know what she did in the Navy. She was a short little lady full of fire. I remember we were the only kids in the neighborhood who had siren calls to come home. Most kids had to be home by a certain time or when the streetlights came on. I knew that when my mother wanted me she would call my name: Theroooooon! I could hear her from blocks away. The kids used to say my mom sounded like she had hot oatmeal running down her mouth when she called me. And Jbo's mom, she would

whistle when she wanted his attention. Shit was crazy. Jbo was her only child though and they were very close. I often wished that my mother and I had such a relationship. You would have thought that they were brother and sister as opposed to mother and son. And it's funny, because my mom and I were closer in age than Jbo and his mother. My mother had me when she was 17. She was not of the old stock. She was part of that World War II, post-baby boom generation. Had everything given to them. *Leave It to Beaver. Happy Days. The Waltons.* Our time together was anything but. While my mother's generation was raised on *Leave It To Beaver*, I was born during the time of *The Mack*: maybe that explains my father's fascination with trying to be a pimp. I guess it didn't matter much anyway; I was raised by my grandmothers. So I had a little *Happy Days* in me. But Jbo and his mom, they did everything together: traveled, cooked, went to church, told jokes (and about other people, in public!).

I guess that I was eight or nine when I first met him. He had lost his dog, Patches, and was looking for him. I joined in the search and every since then we have been as thick as thieves. Even when I moved away from the old neighborhood, we still kept in touch. When we first met, I was in the third grade. Now I'm a sophomore in college.

Jbo was my best friend, so if I couldn't get him to drive to Cali with me I didn't know what I was going to do. I had never driven to California by myself and I didn't want to start that fall. It was just like my uncle to bail out at the last moment. If I wanted my car on campus though, I would have to drive: no if, ands, or buts about it. I told Jbo I would call him later and I went home.

When I arrived home, I still had a lot of packing to do. I had to get all the *UPS* boxes packed up and I still didn't know if I would have a co-pilot with me. I would have to leave tomorrow in a 1965 Ford Falcon. I mean, I had just gotten the brakes fixed but I didn't know

how the car would respond on the open road. When I first bought the car it was falling apart. Broken motor mounts. Bent axles. Oil leaks. Faulty carburetor. And I spent the whole summer repairing all of that. By the time the fall arrived, I was in the middle of redoing the interior. All of the insulation had been taken out. Placed new carpet. Got a new paint job. The car was looking pretty sweet. I had visions of dates off campus. Little did I know that this journey would make me not want to drive a car for a long, long time. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

So, I finished packing the car. I had quite the organizational scheme: in the trunk would be all of the clothes I would use on the trip and most of the shoes that I liked; I would pack all of the big boxes in the back seat. I had brand-new pairs of Jordan's, Rodman's, David Robinson's, Tim's, jogging suits, *Guess* jeans, all that shit, in the trunk. The backseat of the car was packed from seat to roof: TV, VCR, iron, ironing board, microwave, fireworks, t-shirts, blankets, sheets, pillows. So basically, the trunk contained all the clothes I would change into during the trip and everything else was on the backseat. Now this was a 1965, so it had bench seats and I left the front seat completely open for me and Jbo during the trip. I mean, if he came along. I still had some convincing to do. Plus I still had to go holla at JG. But that could wait for tomorrow. I was tired and needed to get some sleep. So I did what I normally do, which is a problem to this day, and waited for tomorrow to get here.

I woke early the next morning. Ran some early morning errands and started calling Jbo. I finally caught up with him about 1 p.m.

"So what's up man, you go make this a trip with me?"

"Ahhh, man that's a long drive, like 2000 miles," was Jbo's reply.

I could sense the hesitancy in his voice. I would drop the whole situation, but by this point I had spent so much money I couldn't afford to fly back to Cali. So, whatever it took I had to convince him to go along with me.

"Look, I am going to get like at least a half and we can just drive and smoke, drive and smoke, and before you know it we'll be there."

Still sounding unsure, yet reflecting the good friend that he was, Jbo said, "let me chop it up with my boss and I'mma roll with you."

"Dude, you done saved my life. You don't even know."

I don't know what I would've done if Jbo had not driven with me. I had already spent most of my summer earnings: between car repairs and preparing for the trip I didn't even have enough money to buy an airline ticket. At that point I had to drive. It was either that or miss the first quarter of school. That fall wouldn't be the first time Jbo would help me out of. And it wouldn't be the last.

Now, the last time I drove to California I had to have been eight years old; so that was like 11 years ago. And most of the time when I went I drove to LA, but we were going to the San Francisco area. The last thing I wanted to do was drive through Texas to get to San Francisco. Hell, it took at least three days to get through Texas from St. Louis. I was not trying to turn this into a five-day trip. It was already September 19, and school started on the 23rd. So I needed to get some maps that would show us the shortest route from St. Louis to Palo Alto. I went to the Amoco near the Riverview circle and I purchased four boxes of Swishers and three maps: one map of Missouri, one map of California, and one map of the western United States.

Now I never claimed to be Lewis or Clark, but I figured I knew how to read a map. As I scoured over the map of Missouri and compared it with a map of the western United States, I

figured the best bet would be to take 70 West. It looked as though we could take interstate 70 west until it ended somewhere near Denver. We would have to make a few detours to pick back up with 70 in Utah or something like that, and then we'd have a straight shot into the bay area. Or so I thought. At any rate, we would figure that out on the road. I still had to holla at JG and get some sleep before we took off. I figured we would leave at about three o'clock in the morning.

JG was one of those good dudes from the block. Didn't tolerate any foolishness and didn't try to lead you down a wrong path. He always had words of wisdom for us. Sometimes it got on my nerves though. I always thought JG was trying to relive his glorious high school days through us younger folk. I played football in high school and JG was always telling me I should try out for the team at college. I had no intentions of playing college football. I barely survived high school without breaking up everything in my body. And college players were a lot bigger than high school players. But when I see Desean Jackson running up and down the field with the Philadelphia Eagles though, it always makes me wonder what could have been. At any rate, I had my mind set on owning a team, not playing for a team. I hit JG up at about 1 a.m.

"Hello?" He sounded as though he was sleeping.

"What it do big homie?"

"Theron?"

"Yeah. I need to come holla at you."

"You can come through, I'm up."

"I'll be there in a minute."

"To the gods."

"To the gods."

It took me about ten minutes to get to JG's house. When I got there, he was barbecuing in the backyard. JG always made the fire wings. I figured I could get some good and a doggie bag to go. This trip was starting off well and I hadn't even left St. Louis yet.

"Man, you barbequing at one in the morning?" I asked.

"Stomach don't know no timeframe," said JG.

"Yeah but you do own a microwave don't you? I mean, you out here with charcoal and chicken and shit in the wee hours of the morning."

"Boi, what do you want?"

"Let me spend this with you and... you could let me get some of that chicken to go."

I passed JG \$120 and grabbed a wing off the grill. When I tried to grab another he smacked my hand with the spatula.

"Keep ya hands off my shit till it all get done," he yelled.

"Damn...you ain't have to hit me with that greasy thing. I can wait, but you gone have to let me take some of them with me. I'mma need something good to eat if what you got now is halfway as decent as that shit you had the last time."

"Take some with you, where you goin? You not gone kick back with me for a minute?"

"Ah man, you know I'm headed back to school."

"When?"

"Tonight...today. That's why I need that. I got a long drive ahead of me."

"You driving? That's a long ass drive from here to Cali."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Who rollin' witchoo? I know you not drivin' by yourself."

“Well, my uncle was ‘spose to ride wit’ me, but he flaked out at the last minute. So, I’m hoping that Jbo gone roll wit’ me. He said he would, but I don’t know. He ain’t sound all that excited.”

As I was lamenting the fact that I really didn’t know all the finer details of my impromptu excursion, JG disappeared from the backyard to the entrance of his basement through the garage door. I could hear him muttering something in the distance, but could not quite make out the words exactly. As he got closer, I began to make out his words.

“...if he don’t roll with you, let me know. I will. I always wanted to see the bay area anyway. Take this *and* this.”

“Right on, JG! I appreciate it big homie. I ain’t sharing this barbeque though.”

We continued to exchange some pleasantries, put one in the air and then I departed. I was already starving by the time I made it back home, so the barbeque did not make it. While I had envisioned eating it when out on the road, I ate it almost immediately upon returning to the house. It was about 2am. I would need to call Jbo soon.

BRRRRRRRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINNG!

The alarm clock clanged in my dark and silent room. The time was 3:15am. If I was gonna get this journey started, then I needed to get up and get Jbo and get the hell out of the Steez – that was what I called St. Louis every since I was a little kid. I had no idea why and never tried to figure it out either. No one in my family ever referred to the city as such and none of my family members could tell me where I picked the word up from. So, St. Louis, the Steez,

the STL: they were one and the same to me and my time in the city had once again come to an end. I rolled over in my bed and phoned Jbo.

“Hello?” he said, half sleep in what sounded like restful slumber.

“What the deal playboy? You ready to blow this cowtown?”

“Right now? You don’t want to get a good night’s sleep and hit the road later in the daytime hours?”

“It’s already gone be a two, three day trip. If we don’t get out of the here soon, I’ll be late for the first day of the semester and probably get dropped from my classes. I ain’t trying to go through the hassle of getting registered all over again. That shit’s a pain in the ass. Plus, I’ll take the first shift, so you can sleep in the car,” I said.

I did not realize it at the time, but it would be difficult for anyone to get some sleep in the car. Perhaps if I had managed to have both the back seat and the front seat clear, then we could have both had a place to stretch out and get some semblance of sleep on the trip. But as things stood, there was an open spot for the driver and an open spot for the passenger: that was it. Every other inch of the passenger compartment in that 1965 sedan was packed full with clothes and books and appliances.

I could sense a feeling of ambivalence creeping into the situation. I knew that if I didn’t make some forceful suggestions soon, it would be 5pm in the afternoon before we left St. Louis.

“Look, I’mma finish twistin’ this what I got from JG and then I’m headed to ya house. I already got everything packed in the car. All I need is my co-pilot. Get ya ass up and let’s do this.”

“Alright already.”

“I’ll see you in a minute. To the gods”

“To the gods.”

When I got to Jbo’s, I had hoped to avoid going inside the apartment; I was hoping to simply pull up, blow the horn, and have him come out. But that's not how it went down. When I honked the horn, he came out and waved to me to come inside. I found a parking spot and went inside. He and his mother were sitting in the living room.

"Moms wants us to pray before we hit the road," said Jbo.

“That’s cool by me, can’t hurt.”

His mom was really religious. I remember I had a really bad headache one day and instead of giving me some aspirin she rubbed some holy water on my head. And, would you believe my headache went away? So when he told me she wanted us to pray, I had no qualms about it. The three of us gathered around in a circle and his mom said the following:

“Dear Lord, please watch over these boys as they travel from St. Louis to Palo Alto. Please give them strength and guidance and let no harm come to them. Keep them on the righteous path Lord. Please see to it that the car operates correctly, that the breaks stop, that the accelerator goes, that the coolant cools and that the oil doesn't leak. This I ask in the name of the father and son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

In unison both Jbo and I replied, “Amen.”

After a short, awkward silence Jbo’s mom said, "Now I want you all to call me every morning and let me know how you doing.”

"Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, ma’am, Mrs. Bancroft. I will make sure that the first thing he does every morning is give you a call to let you know where we are and how we're going," I said.

"Now you boys have maps and enough money and spare tires and tools and everything?”

“Mom, could you please stop calling us boys? We are young men.”

“I’m sorry Jefferson, but you and Theron will always be two boys to me. But you are right. You two are growing up. Becoming men. And this is definitely a journey of men that you two are undertaking. I want you to be safe, you hear me baby?”

That was just like his mom, to call us growing men in one breath and babies in the next. You could tell that she was worried. Who could blame her? We were about drive over 2300 miles without a game plan in sight. We were headed west like the pioneers. No Calistoga coaches, just a 1965 Ford.