

John Michael Cummings

Award-winning author of *The Night I Freed John Brown*



ugly to start with

Advance reading copy ~ not for resale

The World Around Us

On our way back from town, Mom and I spotted Ernesto, the new artist in Harpers Ferry, walking along the highway. We shot past, and I begged her to stop. She looked at me as if for the life of her she couldn't understand me. Then, she took her foot off the gas and began signaling over.

"I don't know about this, Jason," she said.

I stuck my head out the window and peered back down the highway. Ernesto was trying to catch up, but the large sheets of paper he was carrying in the grip of one hand bent in the wind whenever he hurried. I told Mom to back the car up, but she said that was too dangerous to do on the shoulder.

He reached us at last.

"Jason?" he said, smiling.

He knew me from the streets of Harpers Ferry, where I was always following the artists around. Then he looked in at my mother, and I turned and watched her look at him for the first time.

He had difficulty fitting the large paper into the backseat, so my mother offered to open the trunk. But he solved the problem by bowing the paper until it fit between the seats. Then he squeezed himself

in to one side, and Mom pulled away as if we were now hauling something fragile.

Everyone was quiet at first. I looked back. He had that same warm smile and tanned face under white stubble.

“It is nice of you, Jason,” he said, “to have your mother stop.”

His accent. It always made me think of someplace far away, and that was strange, imagining a faraway place while in our old West Virginia car.

“Were you just back at Merrimack’s?” my mother asked, glancing in the mirror.

I was turned around in the seat so that I could watch both him and Mom without moving.

He said he must confess that he did not know what “Merrimack’s” was.

“Our office supply in town?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, smiling.

I saw a gold tooth in the corner of his mouth. He said something else, but it was lost in the sound of air coming in the window.

Mom wound up her window a little.

“They have a nice selection there, don’t they?” she said. “My son gets all his art supplies there.”

“Yes, Jason likes art,” he said. “That is very good, Jason. You must show me your work sometime.”

I kept looking at him. His voice was full of strange, beautiful sounds.

“Jason has always had an interest in drawing,” Mom said, speaking up toward the mirror as if it were a microphone attached to a speaker in the backseat. “He gets it from his father.”

I looked over. Why did she have to say that?

“His father is an artist?” Ernesto asked.

“Well, no, not exactly. He painted some years ago, when he was younger.”

I thought of my father, not so young any more, working this afternoon and every afternoon, doing nothing with his life.

“My father was also very talented,” Ernesto said. “He made little statuettes out of alabaster.”

“Oh, are you from Italy then?” Mom said.

“Yes, Florence.”

“Oh, how beautiful.”

“You have been there?”

“Oh no, but I’ve seen pictures.”

For my mother, pictures were as good as the real thing. She had a coffee table book of Italian pottery, which included the pictures she was talking about.

“This,” Ernesto said, looking out the car at the hills outside Charles Town, “reminds me of the northern vineyards in Tuscany.”

Mom let her foot off the gas. “*This?* Jefferson County?”

The only other time she let her foot off the gas was when she remembered something she had forgotten to get at the grocery store for Dad.

“There is a slight resemblance, yes,” he said.

Mom looked sick—Jefferson County resembling the beautiful vineyards in some far-off land?

I was surprised she was acting this way. She always said how beautiful our county was and always talked about how awful it was that the National Park Service was taking over all the farmlands. I thought she would like hearing that our county was as beautiful as some far-off place. But she was looking in the mirror at Ernesto as if she didn’t need to see the road anymore.

“I was surprised,” he said, leaning forward so that we could hear him, “to find out that they have no bus service in this region.”

“Oh, no, nothing like that,” Mom said back. Her face was full of questions. “Are you staying here in town?”

“Yes,” he said, “at the Hill House. I am with a group of teachers from the Corcoran.”

“Oh, the Corcoran Art Institute? I’ve certainly heard of that.”

“Yes, well, we thought the hotel would provide shuttle service. Then, I was told it was only a few miles to that town.” He laughed a little.

“Oh, no,” Mom said, “Charles Town is too far to walk. It’s a full eight miles.”

She was embarrassing with her little facts. So what if it was eight miles? I looked out at the cornfields.

Actually, how far it was from Harpers Ferry to Charles Town had been a little matter of dispute in our family. The signs said eight, Dad said six, our speedometer said five, sometimes seven, but everyone else, including Grandma, thought it was at least ten. And for some reason, the county, when they made this new highway, didn’t put in all the mile markers. So we settled on eight miles, since Mom couldn’t imagine that the county would make such a mistake in math.

“You have been to the Corcoran?” Ernesto asked her.

“Oh, once,” she said, “but long ago.”

I looked over. “You did?”

“With my mother,” she said, not to me but to Ernesto. “But that’s been years.”

“I was about to ask,” he said, leaning forward some more, “do the school children in this region go into the city, to visit the museums?”

“Oh, no,” Mom said back, as if he had just asked her something that around here no one ever questioned, like why the liquor stores weren’t open on Sunday.

“But why not?” he asked.

Mom and I looked at each other.

“It seems a short drive to the city.”

“Oh no,” Mom said, “it’s sixty-five miles.”

That was something else in question. The sign at Harpers Ferry said sixty-five miles to Washington, D.C., but the one in Charles Town said seventy-six, which couldn’t be right if it was eight miles from Harpers Ferry to Charles Town.

Once, we tried to check the distance between Harpers Ferry and Charles Town using Mom's wristwatch. My brother Andy knew from science class that when we were going sixty miles per hour, we were going a mile a minute. So we timed it and ended up with twelve minutes. But that wasn't really accurate either, because half the time Mom was afraid to go the full five mph over the speed limit, to say nothing of how many times she kept getting stuck behind slow cars. So we settled on sixty-five miles, just as we had settled on eight miles, because that's what the sign closest to Harpers Ferry said and because it was the easier number for everyone to remember, being exactly ten above the speed limit.

However many miles away the city was, it wasn't far. If you shut your eyes and counted, it was counting to sixty, sixty times. If you went by minutes, it was only a little more than an hour, and a little more than an hour was nothing, just "Bewitched" and "I Dream of Jeannie" back to back.

"Yes, I suppose it is a long drive," Ernesto said.

I looked over at Mom. "It's only an hour."

"Oh, Jason, it's longer than that," she said.

I gave her a quick glare. The city wasn't far for tourists or for anyone who wasn't afraid to drive to new places. Dad tried to say that the tires on our car were too old for long trips. But we could have taken the Amtrak or the Greyhound out of Frederick to the city. It wasn't the old tires. It was us.

And as far as it taking "longer" to get to the city, Mom was thinking back to when the roads between here and there were all twisted up and narrow and you couldn't go fast or pass, when they all had double lines and "Road Narrows" signs everywhere.

Today, though, there were brand-new car bridges around town and a new highway all the way to Frederick, where there were even bigger roads that led to the city.

This highway we were on was new. Whenever we took it to the

shopping mall in Frederick, we saw more and more signs for Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. Mom called it “the metropolitan area.” There was a jumble of ramps and overpasses, everything crossing and criss-crossing, somehow coming together, then branching out in every direction. It terrified her.

I looked over at her, determined to win our little argument, even if there was somebody else in the car.

“Dr. Reynolds said it takes an hour,” I said. He didn’t really say this, but she didn’t know.

“Well, he probably drives too fast,” she said back.

“It takes Mr. Powell an hour,” I said right back.

She gave me an impatient look. “Jason, I know it takes longer. Now stop.”

It took Greg Lucas’s father only an hour by Amtrak. A couple of times he even took a bus from Frederick, and that took even less time.

Mom looked in the mirror at Ernesto and said with that kind of smile that only made me madder: “I don’t know where my son gets these ideas.”

“It’s twenty minutes to Frederick, Mom—you said so!”

I didn’t mean to raise my voice. But she couldn’t argue with me about that. We had timed that, too. About twenty minutes for twenty-two miles, or a mile a minute.

She looked out at the roadway, at the dashes that passed us every millisecond.

“Well, I guess you’re right,” she said, “cause it’s another forty miles or so beyond that.”

Ernesto leaned forward and said in his thick, Italian voice, “As I understand it, the proximity of Harpers Ferry to Washington, D.C. was its value in the Civil War, and that led to the arsenal being erected there.”

Mom didn’t know what to say to this.

“What he means, Mom,” I said, rolling my eyes, “is that it was always close.”

She gave me a sharp look. But I ignored her, opened the glove box, and took out the Texaco map. I spread the map out on my lap, despite her telling me to put it away because the wind would just blow it around. I knew just where to find Harpers Ferry on it. It was written in italics, as *Harpers Ferry Historic National Park*, and was crowded in by places I had never heard of before, places apparently right beside me all my life. Cumberland Village. New Brighton. Kingston. Rt. 340 was nothing more than an itty-bitty blue line that went nowhere by itself. It ran into a zillion bigger blue and red lines that twisted around and met with other blue and red lines that came in from everywhere. According to this, the city was all around us. Washington, D.C. was half a pinky away, and the Atlantic Ocean was not much farther. We could see Baltimore, even Philadelphia. I couldn't believe all the thick roads. I-270, 495, 95 North. On and on. There was this huge, filled up world all around us that I couldn't see.

Mom went on looking straight ahead. We were coming up on the Harpers Ferry exit. Here the highway seemed especially wide and sunny. I liked the feeling of the world coming through here. Around us were trucks from Virginia and Pennsylvania. I even saw a sports car with Delaware plates. Lying along the shoulders were burnt up, fallen-off mufflers and shreds of truck tires, stuff that made the highway seem like a racetrack every car and truck in America was on.

I turned around in the seat.

“What are you gonna draw?” I asked.

He looked at me as if it took a moment to bring his mind back from wherever it was.

“This is for a project I have planned, Jason. A drawing of the Lockwood House.”

Mom changed her grip on the steering wheel. “I’m sorry you had to walk so far.”

“Oh, I do not mind,” Ernesto said. “The countryside here is so beautiful.”

She looked up in the mirror. “You really think West Virginia looks like Tuscany?”

He smiled and nodded.