

misfits inc.
no. 5

the
protester's
song

mark
delaney

*To my buddy BJ
who knows me well
and likes me anyway*



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prologue

Saturday, April 11, 1970
Trenton State University Commons

Joshua Quinn picked his way through the crowd on the commons. A blond woman, her hair parted in the middle and falling past her waist, sat on the shoulders of a black man and held up her fingers in a V sign for peace. A pregnant girl of about seventeen sat on the grass playing a flute. Joshua saw someone scowl and raise a middle finger, but he also heard singing. The sun warmed Josh's back, and a breeze tousled his ponytail. A National Guardsman waved the barrel of his rifle at the man who'd raised his finger, warning him.

The crowd was not yet out of control, but Joshua feared that it could be. His skin tingled as though a charge of static electricity were passing over it. The crowd at today's protest was angry, and the National Guard was armed and watching. Last night a group much like this one had stormed the downtown, overturning cars and throwing rocks through the windows of banks.

2 From nearby a young man screamed something, his face contorted with anger. Josh couldn't hear him over the crowd, but he watched in fascination as the man's expression turned hard and his eyes flashed.

Luna aimed her 8mm home movie camera at the scene before them: A singer stood on a small bandstand, his shoulders hunched and his mouth almost chewing the microphone as he sang. His name was Dylan McConnell. Joshua had never heard the name before this morning, but he understood that McConnell was a "name" in the folk movement—that many believed his whisperlike voice and passionate lyrics would soon make him a major artist like Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, or Carole King. McConnell wore ratty jeans, leather sandals, and a long-sleeved shirt cut from an American flag. His brown hair fell to his shoulders, blending into the fullness of his beard. He fingerpicked an old guitar—one a little smaller than most guitars Josh had seen. A few scratches and dings marred its aged, golden surface. Even from here, Josh could see them—scrapes blackened by grime that had worked its way into them over many years. The round edges of the guitar, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, glittered where the sunlight caught them.

*I never doubted love or God or country
I swore I'd lift my hand and do my part
I sang my anthem, spoke my pledge
I pressed my tiny hand upon my heart
But today I hear the lies that all my leaders tell me...*

At certain moments during his song, McConnell closed his eyes and his head swayed in time to the music. At those times, it looked to Joshua as if the singer were whispering “no” to all the images in the song: no to the war in Vietnam, no to President Nixon, no to the values of an entire older generation of Americans: Hatred of Communism. Unquestioning devotion to country. Were these so wrong? Josh wondered.

Joshua’s T-shirt, which he wore under a Levi’s jacket, bore the words Question Authority in rainbow colors across the front. Luna had bought the shirt for him. Until two days ago, Joshua had *never* questioned authority. In high school he had been the basketball star who always listened to his coach, the senior class president who smiled and nodded obediently to administrators and teachers. His three years at Trenton State had been much the same. He was a B-plus student, active in campus government, starting guard for the basketball team—a little short for basketball at five-ten, but quick enough and blessed with a killer jump shot and an eye for the open man.

Smiling, he squeezed Luna’s hand and continued studying the singer on the stage.

Joshua had always listened to rock bands—The Rolling Stones, The Beatles, The Who, The Byrds—but folk music was so different. This singer stood alone; no bass, no drums, no electric guitar pounded behind him. Only one other instrument filled out his sound. At the end of each chorus, the singer blew into a harmonica

4 that hung from his neck in a wire-framed halter. The halter allowed him to play guitar and harmonica simultaneously. The two instruments, chiming together, somehow reminded Joshua of the dusty clay road outside his parents' farm in Georgia—and of his grandpa's hound dogs resting in the shade beneath the porch.

“You know what, Josh?” Luna asked. Her real name was Katie, but since arriving at Trenton State two years ago she had started calling herself Luna. She was new in Joshua's life, a romance of two months. “—I *hate* Nixon. I really do.”

Josh nodded, not wanting to disagree. For months President Nixon had been saying that the war in Vietnam would soon be over, but it *wasn't* over. Two days ago the U.S. had invaded Cambodia, Vietnam's neighbor. Josh's number would soon come up in the draft. Now he couldn't put his hand on his wallet without feeling the weight of the draft card inside. Any day, he knew, the letter would come. *Joshua Aaron Quinn, report for basic training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky...*

Images played across his mind almost daily. He felt the scrape of the razor across his scalp, the slap of a folded uniform against his chest, the weight of heavy boots on his feet. Every night on the news he saw footage of soldiers lifting body bags onto helicopters.

The singer began a new song. The tone of the piece, with its sprightly rhythm and bouncy harmonica fills, was light and mocking.

*Say, Mr. President, tell me why I'm here,
Tell me what I'm doin' with this gun in my hand
I signed some papers and stepped on a bus
Now they're sendin' me off to Vietnam...*

From behind Joshua, several voices began cheering. Someone pressed fingers to lips and shrieked out a whistle. Several people screamed the song's lyrics and waved their fists in the air. A handful held up their draft cards and set them alight with matches. Joshua, uncertain about what was happening, glanced at Luna and waited for an explanation. She said nothing, only pointed the movie camera at McConnell.

"What's happening?" Josh whispered.

Luna smiled. "I guess you haven't heard this before. He calls it 'The Vietnam Rag.'"

*After a while, I wrote my ma a letter
And I sent it right on home through Uncle Sam
I said, "I gotta go, Ma, and kill me a Commie"
'Cause that's what we do in Vietnam...*

As the song went on, the shouting and catcalls grew louder. The electricity Josh had felt a few moments ago shot up a notch. He turned and was surprised to see how large the crowd had become. The whole time he and Luna had been listening, lost in the music, students had filtered to this area from all over campus. Two hundred, three hundred—Josh no longer had a sense of the size of

6 the crowd. The fliers sent out by the Students for a Democratic Society had worked. Many of the protesters carried simple signs and banners: a green peace symbol against a white background, a stenciled hand with two fingers raised in a V. Others held hand-painted works of art—a silhouette of a soldier holding a dead infant, his head tilted down in shame, or a field of wildflowers over which appeared the words War is Unhealthy for Children and Other Living Things.

“You’re gonna burn your draft card, right?” asked Luna.

Josh laughed, scuffing his toe against the concrete. Luna had been pushing him, needling him for days. Not wanting to disappoint her, and not really sure how he felt about the war, Josh had done everything he could to avoid answering.

So mama don't expect me to come home soon

the singer cried

*I can't seem to wash this blood off my hands
My uniform's torn, and the flag's all dirty
We're all dyin' in a jungle in Vietnam...*

As the song ended, someone shouted, “Hell no, we won’t go,” and the crowd picked up the chant. Their shouts echoed eerily against the concrete buildings nearby. Josh remained silent, watching and listening.

Governor William Rose, stunned by the violence of the recent protests and the demonstrations that had shut down classes at the university, had called on the National Guard to secure the town of Trenton. That was the reason Guardsmen lined the campus commons even now. Three armored personnel carriers and several jeeps sat nearby, Josh noted; the Guardsmen, though at attention, glared at the protesters like snarling dogs on a thin leash. Josh couldn't hate these young men—any more than he could hate those whose anger against the war led them to shout and paint signs. Strangely enough, he felt—he *knew*—that he belonged in the center of one of these groups, but he had not yet decided which one.

Hell no, we won't go! Hell no...

The shouting put the Guard on alert, and Josh watched as they formed a skirmish line, shouldering their M1 assault rifles and readying themselves for the order to break up the protest. One of the Guardsmen, wearing the three stripes of a sergeant, grabbed a bullhorn and stepped on the hood of a jeep. "This is an illegal assembly," he called out. "You are ordered to disperse."

Before the sergeant even finished speaking, a bottle arced through the air, whirling in seeming slow motion before smashing into a diamond spray against the grill of the sergeant's jeep. The crowd of protesters began shouting louder. *Hell no, we won't go! Hell no, we won't go!* Luna let go of Josh's hand. She hurled a rock at one of the Guardsmen and screamed an obscenity when it bounced off his helmet.

8 Then she was gone.

The crowd surged forward, and Josh lost her. In the sudden scuffle, and with the bodies pressed against him, he saw only a whirlwind of images: the scowling face of a young woman, a clenched fist, a dazed man wiping blood from a cut above the eye. Moments later Josh heard a sudden loud puff of air, and the sound repeated itself—*shoof, shoof, shoof, shoof!* Canisters the size of soup cans fell from the sky and landed among the protesters. The canisters trailed plumes of smoke. At first Josh didn't understand what had happened, but then he knew. The Guard had fallen back and were lobbing tear gas into the crowd.

Tufts of white fog billowed from the ground where the canisters landed. Josh felt a stinging, then a searing sensation in his eyes and nose. The spring breeze dissipated the gas quickly, but not quickly enough. When Josh could make out the other protesters, he saw that most already had glistening red eyes and tears streaming down their cheeks. Several tore past him, hands or jackets clamped over their faces. Josh wanted to run too, but Luna—where was Luna? He looked for her, blinking helplessly and rubbing his eyes, but seeing only a blurred image of the Guardsmen marching back toward him, ready to finish the job the tear gas had started.

Luna...

As Josh turned, one of the National Guard jeeps exploded in a burst of orange and yellow flame. Josh saw the fireball, then felt a wall of hot air slam into him and lift him off his feet, tossing him against a tree. A

second explosion followed—muffled this time by a pain and ringing in Josh’s ears—and then a third. Josh felt something like needles, dozens of them, stabbing into his leg, and he watched as the hood of one of the jeeps flew over his head, blackened and trailing flames. He slid to the ground, the leg of his jeans suddenly heavy and wet.

Strangely, the pain in his leg faded. After a few moments the leg began to feel numb, then it turned icy cold. That was a good sign, wasn’t it—no pain? Two Guardsmen ran up to Josh and leaned over him. He saw their mouths moving but couldn’t hear what they were saying. He tried to talk to them, to tell them he was all right, but he couldn’t think. His head ached so. One of the Guardsmen held a handkerchief to Josh’s ear, and it came away smeared with blood. The other Guardsman peeled off his uniform shirt and began wrapping it around the injured leg. No, Josh thought, not quite able to force out the words, *I’m all right. Really. Where’s Luna?* The coldness in his leg began to spread throughout his entire body, and Josh shivered.

His vision, which had been faintly blurred, came into a little better focus. He looked around—at the group of protesters a hundred or so yards away, at the three burning jeeps—then his gaze fell once again on the singer. For a moment McConnell stared down at him. Josh saw a faint bobbing in the singer’s throat as he swallowed, and the man’s gaze was wide and unbelieving. He started shaking his head as he had while singing; it was that same motion, Josh remembered: *no...no...no...* Then

10 the man threw his guitar into its case, snapped the latches, and ran.

Josh felt several pairs of arms lift him onto a stretcher. He stared up at the sky, past the faces of the men looking down at him. One of the men spoke, but Josh couldn't hear what he was saying. His thoughts were on the singer, Dylan McConnell.

It was you, wasn't it, Josh thought. You're the man who did this to me...

From inside the ambulance, the siren sounded faint and very far away.