

I'm not your friend 1.

June 1980.

THEY MET when each left his efficiency apartment at the same time. It may have been a sign or a coincidence, you don't know yet, but you will. "Hi, I'm Michael Blumenthal," Michael Blumenthal said, and it was hard for Codell to hear if he said Blumenthal or Lumenthal because his speech was low and thick. He stiffly stuck out his arm to shake hands, and his hand was thick, too, wider and paler than Codell's. They shook hands. Michael Blumenthal's hand was warm and dry, and his grip firmer. He kept shaking too long, like he didn't want to let go of Codell's hand. When he did let go, he kept his arm stuck out for a second or two.

They lived across the hall from each other on the top floor of a roach-infested, four-story tenement in Detroit's Cass Corridor. In Detroit, you were East side or West side, but the Corridor was so close to downtown that the East-West distinction didn't matter much. It was as stark an urban landscape as any American city had to offer, if you consider poverty an offer. It was as stark as the voice in this story. They were pickled in the brine of the Corridor.

After that first meeting, whenever Codell left his apartment, Michael Blumenthal's door would be open, and Michael Blumenthal would come out to greet him. The two were in their mid-twenties, each living alone. Every time Michael Blumenthal greeted Codell, he reintroduced himself the same way, "Hi, I'm Michael Blumenthal," as if they'd never met. Each time he stuck out his big-boned right hand in

the same way. Codell shook hands with him every time, the same way. Michael Blumenthal pumped his hand from the elbow, stiff-armed, always for too long.

After three or four greetings, Michael Blumenthal appended his introduction.

“Hi, I’m Michael Blumenthal. Do you want to come over for a cup of coffee?” His gaze was direct.

“No thanks. Late for my bus.”

“Hi, I’m Michael Blumenthal. Want to come over for a cup of coffee?”

“Maybe next time.”

“Hi, I’m Michael Blumenthal. Want to come over for a cup of coffee?”

“Had too much already. Gotta run.”

“Hi, I’m Michael Blumenthal. Would you like to come over for a cup of coffee?”

Codell squelched a sigh. “Okay. Sure.”

Michael Blumenthal’s efficiency apartment was the same size and layout as Codell’s, but oriented differently. The door opened opposite a small closet. From the vestibule between the door and closet, you entered the one large room. On one side of the room was an alcove for the stove and refrigerator with cupboards above the stove; on another side of the room was an alcove for a bed. Opposite the bed alcove was the bathroom. Michael Blumenthal’s room was furnished more sparsely than Codell’s, having only a card table, folding chairs, milk crates for furniture, and four or five knee-high piles of magazines lining the wall underneath the windows. A large kettle whistled from the stove.

“Here, have a seat.” Michael Blumenthal pulled one of the folding chairs out from the card table and put two empty coffee cups on the table. He dumped a heaping teaspoon of instant coffee into each cup, poured steaming water into them, and put the kettle back on the burner.

“Want some sugar?”

“No, no thanks.”

Michael Blumenthal dumped two teaspoons of sugar into each of the cups and stirred them. Dark froth lopped over the sides and onto the table. Codell looked at him. “O-kay . . . guess I will have sugar.

“How much water you got on the stove? You gonna turn it off before it boils away?”

Michael Blumenthal got up, turned off the burner, and sat again. “I like sugar in my coffee.”

“I see that.” It was silent for a couple of minutes.

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“You got cockroaches in your apartment?”

“All over,” said Codell.

“Is your apartment really hot?”

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“Did you hear the break-in next door?” Michael Blumenthal asked.

“I heard it.”

"You heard it, too?"

"Yeah, I heard it happening."

Codell added, "Did the cops talk to you, too?"

"I didn't answer. I don't do well with people."

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"Where do you get your food?" asked Michael Blumenthal.

"Farmer Jack. On Warren past the medical school. It's new.

"Where do you get your food?"

"My mom."

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"Do you have any friends?"

"I know some people," said Codell. "Do you have any friends?"

"I used to. They didn't believe me about stuff. They told me things were good news when it wasn't." He reignited the burner under the kettle.

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"You been to the Bronx?" asked Codell.

"No."

"You should go. Might do you good to get out."

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"The weather in Viet Nam is hotter than here," said Michael Blumenthal. "A lot wetter."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I was in Viet Nam." The kettle began to hum.

"How's that? You wouldn't have been old enough."

"Sure I was."

"Not even close."

"You sound like my friends."

"I'm not your friend," Codell said. The kettle hum went up to a whistle. "So tell me how you were in Viet Nam."

"I don't have the words."

Except for the tea kettle, it was silent for a minute. "Do you have pictures?" Codell asked.

"I have lots of pictures. I'll show you."

Michael Blumenthal went to the magazines under the window, pawed through a pile, and came up with something glossy. He brought it to the table: *Popular Photography*. The cover featured *Life Magazine's* photo exposé of the My Lai massacre. He flipped through the pages, stopped, and dropped the open magazine in front of Codell. The kettle was shrieking.

"There!" Michael Blumenthal pointed triumphantly at a photograph of corpses strewn on a road. "That's me, the body right in front."

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