

BETWEEN THE WALLS OF TIME

Between the Walls of Time
A NOVEL

Michael Stafford

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“The main qualification of the political class is they know the system.”
– Cyrus Kohler, 2014

Book 1

The Giant Killer

Chapter 1

Sometimes to understand the present we have to examine the past. No one becomes a giant killer overnight.

After his war ended, Cyrus Kohler came home to a different world than most returning soldiers. When the Illinois Central began its long descent down the Alto Pass, deep in the Southern Illinois hills, Cyrus saw people standing near the rail line as it stretched through those solitary miles.

“Those people must have used a McGuire rig to get here,” thought Cyrus, knowing that for some of them it had been a long walk. Cyrus waved, and all along the rail line, in sporadic clusters, wherever they might be, people waved back. The whole trip was surreal. These were his people and would be as long as he breathed. They were blue collar or no collar. The train rounded a sharp bend and approached the cemetery where his old friend Red Kerley was buried. This final resting place for a few hundred rural folks overlooked the rail line cut a couple of hundred feet below. A small limestone cliff ran at a 45-degree angle away from the tracks sloping towards Route 51 which ran respectfully past its now silent guests.

Cyrus walked outside to stand on the caboose’s back porch.

Saluting, he murmured, “Rest in peace, old friend. One day we’ll all be with you, and that is a certainty. But you don’t have to save my place just yet.”

Cyrus saw no mass-produced flags as the train moved steadily southward, just arms in the air. Standing on the small back platform of the caboose, Cyrus reflected on the politicians who had come before him. Unlike them, he had nothing to sell. The train slowed as it prepared to stop in River City.

“Cyrus, Cyrus Kohler.” He heard his name and turned to see a small, elderly lady in a white dress, from flapper days by the look of it. She must have been at least in her eighties. They locked eyes, and as they did, she raised two fingers over her head and gave him the peace sign.

“Peace back,” Cyrus yelled over the engine noise, returning her greeting, his hand lifted to the sky. A small grove of pine trees came between them, and she was gone. Time had decelerated on his big trip, as he liked to call it. Although unwilling, Cyrus had done his duty. The war was a national disaster whose portrait was so skewed, the lie so great, it betrayed America. The Age of Violence that began in the 18th century escalated into the 19th and fairly exploded into the 20th, gained traction as it chugged along under a full head of steam, welcoming home, in close procession, drugs, weapons, and myriad other evils.

Cyrus thought back to the eulogy he had written for his fellow 1st Lieutenant Jim Wolfe, whom he had met in OCS. They called him “Coyote” because he was a taciturn, lonely sort of boy. Quiet. He had fallen in the house-to-house fighting around the Citadel in Hue.

Cyrus mouthed the words. "In our early years, with futures undecided, we traveled west. In that ancient land, we became friends for life. Now my friend is gone, passed on to the other side of that wide river which, living as it is, sets its course, leaving us behind, yearning for days now gone. Warriors, whose weapons are silent and will fire no more in this place, stand by the river and pay silent vigil to a soul who joins their gathering, swelling their ranks by one. May the angels greet this presence. We will meet again there, in that faraway place."

Cyrus had sent his thoughts to Coyote's widow, but she never responded. Maybe she hated him and the war. Perhaps the woman was tired of living. She must be tired of something. All that was past now, and he was home in one piece. It was time to find Susan Jackson.

Chapter 2

“Cyrus Kohler, you get your big butt over here and skate with me,” were the first words out of the mouth of Susan Jackson that Cyrus could remember. They were freshmen in high school when they first laid eyes on each other at Puffy’s Roller Rink.

“I’m gonna be a roller babe,” she said as they held hands and skated around the crowded oval, careful to miss the two poles in the middle that appeared to support nothing.

Jax was all of 5' tall with long auburn hair that reached down to her waist. Her eyes were blue-green, always appearing to be wide open, except when they weren't. Cyrus was gangly, still growing into his 6'3" frame.

“I like tall guys, Cy,” she had said early in the game.

“They’re all that to you, Jax,” he replied, almost instantly wishing he could take it back.

“Listen, you big shit,” she said, becoming the first girl Cyrus ever knew to swear in public, “just because I like you a little doesn’t mean you can be rude. You are a rude boy; I can see that.”

In those years, most of Jax’s small sermons were delivered with a big smile that made you wonder if she was serious or just having fun at your expense.

“Don’t think you can say anything just because you’re bigger or a man,” she said, as forcefully as possible.

“Just because I like to make out with you, Cyrus, just because I give you a cop here and there, doesn’t mean you can take anything for granted, get it? He did.

“You’re the one who’s fooling everyone, Cy. No one’s figuring you out, including me sometimes,” she said, pulling him close and kissing him like she meant it. Jax loved to French kiss, and it got Cyrus hot. She knew that and, in the last pew, almost out of sight in the big Methodist church they were sometimes forced to attend, Jax perfected her technique.

You know what, was bound to happen, and one night it did. Driving back to River City, they decided to visit the old trestle bridge hidden deep inside Massac State Park, on the banks of the Ohio River. The fort had a long history, but Cyrus and Jax were out to make their own. Parking their car at the trailhead, they walked the quarter mile back onto the trestle. No sooner than their blanket had hit the ground than Cyrus managed to get Jax semi-undressed. The next step was pretty obvious, even to the uninitiated.

Cyrus and Jax were good students, athletic enough to get scholarships, and in love from the start. Jax was a pianist and gymnast, Cyrus played football and basketball. Whatever they had going on worked and was thoroughly beta tested four years later when Cyrus graduated from college and was drafted into the Vietnam War.

Cyrus exited the train, shaking hands with people he had known his whole life, and began the five-block walk up River Street to Jax’s house. Her house looked deserted. There was only one car outside, and Cyrus didn’t recognize the black ’57 Chevy sedan at the curb.

The year was 1972.

Just then, the door burst open, and noise erupted onto the street.

More people than Cyrus could imagine charged out the front door. Leading that stampede was his beautiful girl, the one he had hoped, in all those cold, wet, dark, terrifying hours, to see again.

Just like that, Jax flung herself into the air and executed a flying back dismount straight into the arms of her big Ranger. She kissed him hard on the lips, and he kissed her back. She must be somebody's baby Cyrus thought, and, just like that, he transformed from a man who had just spent a year living in lice-ridden, rat-infested hooch's, into Easy Rider.

“Whoa soldier,” Jax murmured in his ear, “your orders are to move forward with extreme caution, I repeat, extreme caution. What I feel happening down there is not caution, I repeat, not caution.” Cy kissed her again and hugged her so tightly Jax gasped. “Big Dog,” she whispered, reaching down to straighten her skirt, inadvertently rubbing her hand over an undiscovered country.

Cyrus took a deep breath and asked, “Got a room?”

“Oh yeah, dude,” Jax said, “rented it for 24 hours.”

After all the welcome home food and catching up, Cyrus and Jax headed straight for the Holiday Inn. They did not pass Go; they did not collect \$200. One day they'd be old hippies, but now they were in the moment, one that had teetered on permanent interruption for the past three years.

Cyrus kissed her from the lobby to the room, conveniently located on the first floor. They hit the bed together and began with a ferocity they would never again duplicate. Between bouts, they held each other tighter than possible. They cried together, ordered room service, and made love like there was no tomorrow. Then they did it again until they couldn't.

“I'm done dude,” Jax finally moaned. “One more of those and I'll give you a field boot.”

“What about me, what about my mean mile,” Cyrus replied, looking at her with more tiredness than lust in his eyes.

“You look like you’re finished, soldier,” Jax said, propping herself up with an elbow. “You want a bozo button?” she asked, laughing.

“Not me, Nudeen,” Cyrus replied. He called her Nudeen whenever they were in the sack, or she was walking around naked, trying to stir up interest, which it usually did.

“Let’s rent an apartment, get some jobs, get married and go to school,” Cyrus said.

“We’ll call it The Plan,” said Jax, and from that moment forward it emerged. One day six years later, Cyrus Kohler became a doctor of philosophy with an emphasis in political science. Not long after, Susan Kohler became an associate teaching professor in the School of Music, teaching piano.

The two young professors eventually moved to Lost Lake and bought a two-story fixer-upper on a two-acre peninsula that jutted into Lost Lake. Time flew, Robert and Sara were born. Thirty years passed. The Age of Violence continued to roll along on the rails of destiny. Cyrus kept busy teaching, writing, and building a political philosophy he called New Rationalism. He started a fledgling organization which he named ‘The Front.’ He hoped that one day it would take its place in the world of American politics.

Changing America’s political system for the better is a daunting task at best. Cyrus called The Front an evolutionary roadmap that would turn the two-party system into a triumvirate. It would surely upset the status quo. Cyrus Kohler willingly took that risk.

Chapter 3

Cyrus was a cloud watcher. It helped clear the confusion inside his head.

For the past 30 years, he had been a professor of philosophy at Southern Illinois University. The small lecture room in Faner Hall, where he taught many of his classes, began filling up as his 20-student class took their seats. Philosophy 515 A-B, a two-semester five-hour graduate school course covering advanced concepts of philosophical movements throughout recorded history, emphasized Rationalism.

As far back as Parmenides and Plato in 427 BCE, continuing to Descartes and on to present times, Rationalists preferred reason and logic over the experience based teachings of the Empiricists. The class turnout was about what Cyrus had expected, what with all the campus talk about The Front. As he looked around the classroom, there were a few recognizable faces. One of those was Reese Kerley, a tall, slim, gorgeous brunette with auburn hair falling in a cascade to just above her waist. All 5'8" of her athletic body attached to a piercing set of brown eyes. Reese was combative, but had a reputation among her undergrad professors as an excellent student. She exhibited the same affinity for winning in the classroom as on the court. Reese was a shooting guard who had just finished her final varsity season with the Lady Salukis, winning the Missouri Valley Conference Championship for the third year in a row. Already in possession of her undergraduate degree in philosophy, with a minor in journalism, Reese was well on her way to completing a two-year philosophy master's program in a year-and-a-half.

Cyrus had big plans for Reese. He needed a journalist, social media type, to organize and manage the daily activity of The Front. He planned to offer Reese the

website management job, one of The Front's most demanding tasks. The Front was a startup, no getting around it, and was turning out to be the most significant effort of Cyrus's civilian life.

Without a national buy-in The Front would not succeed, but, that said, the opportunity to realign America's path was huge. There would be no mistaking the differences between The Front and their adversaries.

Like most Americans, his students had varied interests. Some wanted a diploma, others a job, a family, a life. Those expectations were becoming less reachable as the social tribes grew increasingly rigid and class separation widened the chasm between the haves and have-nots.

Actually, in the political arena, self-preservation was altering its territorial equation as it reengineered job retention while simultaneously satisfying the demands of party and promises made to their PACs and lobbyists. As a result of decades of improving this model, the USA was swallowing its GDP and growing bloated from excessive pork. Cyrus had fought for his country, and would again if need be. It stunned him to think of the pitifully low qualifications now needed to run for political office.

He had asked several of his students, "What qualifies a guy who barely graduated from college and butchered the King's English to be president? How can America tolerate a persistent liar and narcissist in the White House?"

"For most of us seeking an entry-level job, it would be a disqualification," one had answered.

“Yes, it would,” Cyrus replied, “but here the answer revolves around the genetics, territory, and tribal loyalties of the aspirants.” The student nodded in understanding.

As Cyrus was beginning to realize, the primary qualification for our current political class was their knowledge of the system. Once selected by their tribe, obedience superseded rationality and common sense. It was difficult to miss our beloved government’s complicity in the events that built their platform. The Deep State, as Cyrus liked to call it, was more than a matter for educational debate. The most powerful of the powerful would not surrender the throne easily. The battle to institute changes at this level would be fierce. If you’ve never fought, Cyrus knew better than most; you don’t know what it’s like to be in a fight, or when to quit. That would be a weakness he could exploit. Very few of the elected class ever served.

Instead, they raised money and supported the brilliant, amoral individuals who wrecked Wall Street. What other reason than money and power would induce individuals to spend their lives working long hours in a crowd of rude humanity, in a time continuum, where it is dark when they arise and return. Money. The political and financial power brokers destroyed all the rules. They did more than rob a 7-Eleven and did less if any, time. The Front would deal with them sooner or later. Coming out time was fast approaching.

Cyrus backchannelled those thoughts in deference to his biggest worry. At this stage, the self-centered, modernist kids he was looking at through his 65-year-old eyes, the twenty-somethings who had never sacrificed diddly-squat, never had to serve anything except occasionally their meals, were a question mark. They were a spoiled and pampered lot

with unlimited minutes, and yet Cyrus knew they held a trump card that money and privilege could not buy. These Millennials seriously distrusted the government. They had occupied Wall Street because they could while simultaneously texting and tweeting their fingers off. Their aversion to confrontation was mitigated by the relative distance and anonymity of e-mail campaigns and petitions, but severe frustration at the system gave them energy. The young were proving to be more liberal than their elders and might embrace the platform of The Front, which was fiscally conservative and socially liberal. In Cyrus' opinion, the Millennials would become powerful conduits for gun control and climate change, two of the lynchpins he would support. They might or might not be confrontational when the time came for that, but there was no mistaking their call for change. If the Middle and the Millennials embraced The Front and became a part of it, their support would ensure a fighting chance. Cyrus was banking on their IQ level rising above their predecessors.

Once The Front became known, the establishment would tell the public just the opposite and spend millions of dollars selling their point of view on Duck Dynasty. The time to buckle up was at hand.

“All right guys, settle in, settle down and listen up,” Cyrus said, looking over the classroom full of young faces. Everyone knew Dr. Cyrus Kohler. His classes were 10-minute sellouts; he was a rock star professor, a former Ranger lieutenant, warrior, writer, philosopher. The kids liked him, Dr. Kohler was straight up and didn't grade on the curve. Do the work, and get rewarded. The professor was someone you could trust.

“Your reason for being here is for me to find out,” Cyrus said, laughing with everyone else. “Many of you will be going from here to other universities or maybe your first real job. I will be teaching one of your final classes. In addition to the classics, you will also learn about my philosophy of New Rationalism, which I assure you has nothing to do with Marx, Lenin, Khrushchev, or religious extremists.”

Cyrus smiled as he walked between the aisles.

“Just here doing penance, Professor,” said an unidentified voice from behind.

Cyrus turned as laughter filled the air, but there was no admission of guilt forthcoming. God, he loved it when kids were engaged.

“The slackers among you,” he said, “must realize that comments reflecting on your professor will not get you a personal recommendation.”

“Just joking,” said another voice.

“Tell us about The Front,” said another.

“The Front wants to gouge out the middle of America and bring the independents and moderates into a position of authority. If that happens, our society will have a more significant opportunity to evolve as our organization impacts social, political, and scientific solutions and puts forth a new perspective toward issues and subjects that today seemingly have no answer. Our philosophy redefines the process of selecting political leadership that is unbought.

“We need to rethink, folks,” Cyrus said to his class in his most serious voice, “how candidates for high public office are selected.

“In this class, you will learn about the ‘The Process,’ ‘The Age of Violence,’ ‘The Doctrine of Limited Rights,’ and ‘Social Congruence.’ These concepts ground the Front. You will be asked to think differently than ever before. You cannot be a Democrat or a Republican, a

Conservative or a Liberal. You must resign yourself to common sense, reason, and a desire to do what is best for the country. You must consider the middle. Entertain what is possible and refuse to accept what has not worked.

“A question I cannot answer myself,” said Cyrus, stretching his lanky frame as he sat down on the front of his old oak desk, “is whether our society is willing to change. Being poorly evolved and self-centered is a high hurdle. I have little faith, kids, in humanity as a whole. My view is based solely on observation, but even if we cannot affect this change because of the lack of intelligence in our world, we must try. Grace and kindness still exist among the American people. Perhaps this emotion will carry the day.” Some would say a man’s word is his bond. Few now possess the trait. Let’s see if we can rebuild that engine.”

“Take out two pieces of paper and spend the next 40 minutes telling me who you are, where you are from, how you got here, why you came, and what you had to do to stay. What do you plan to do when you leave? At the bottom of your essay give me an address where you can be reached, a phone number and e-mail address. When you are finished, deposit your paper by the lectern. Pick up the outlines on The Front I have left there.”

It was quiet in the room. Cyrus could sense that their antennae were fully extended.

“I am going to walk around, as is my custom, while you are writing your essays, and take each person’s picture with my phone,” said Cyrus, pulling out his iPhone.

“I will keep your picture and attach it to your essay binders, which I create for all my students each semester. It helps me to refresh my aging memory should any of you call me for a referral as your future unfolds. I do not refer below a B, so go to work. Convince me, start writing,” Cyrus barked. “I’m taking pictures. Smile! You have your first job interview.”