

Chapter Thirteen: Lost in New York

In Chapter Thirteen, titled "Lost in New York," the narrative explores the tumultuous period within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as Stokely Carmichael's rise to leadership creates a divide in the civil rights movement. Carmichael championed Black pride and self-reliance but triggered backlash from predominantly white donors and allies. Letters of disappointment flooded into the SNCC Atlanta office, criticizing Carmichael's rhetoric, which varied from polite disapproval to outright racism. Despite his efforts to clarify his intentions, Carmichael often exacerbated tensions with incendiary statements linking Black Power to a radical dismantling of Western civilization, prompting a departure of key SNCC figures, including Lewis, who lamented the shift towards a more militant approach.

As press coverage painted Carmichael's doctrine in a negative light, the organization experienced a significant loss of personnel. Following a riot incited by Carmichael in the wake of police violence against Black citizens, SNCC's reputation suffered further, leading to fund shortages and internal discord. Lewis expressed concern about the movement's shift from its peaceful roots, linking it to a rising trend of extremism. As tensions grew, Lewis was perceived as disconnected from the new direction, which strayed from the principles he cherished.

Transitioning to life in New York, Lewis took a position under the Marshall Field Foundation, marking a significant increase in salary while navigating feelings of isolation in a bustling city. He sought to maintain a broader vision of civil rights, emphasizing that the movement should transcend merely addressing "Negro's rights." While securing his new job, he also pursued his education, striving to complete his degree from Fisk University, reflecting on the movement's relationship with organized religion and its role in fostering civil rights activism.

While Lewis adjusted to his new life, he faced profound loneliness despite some connections in the city. He took solace in reminiscing with former colleagues and engaging in conversations about the civil rights movement's trajectory. Nevertheless, the lingering disarray within SNCC weighed heavily on him as ideological differences grew, leading to a notable schism regarding its strategies, which Lewis regarded with disappointment. His experiences underscored a transformative year marked by both professional growth and personal introspection amid the evolving landscape of activism.