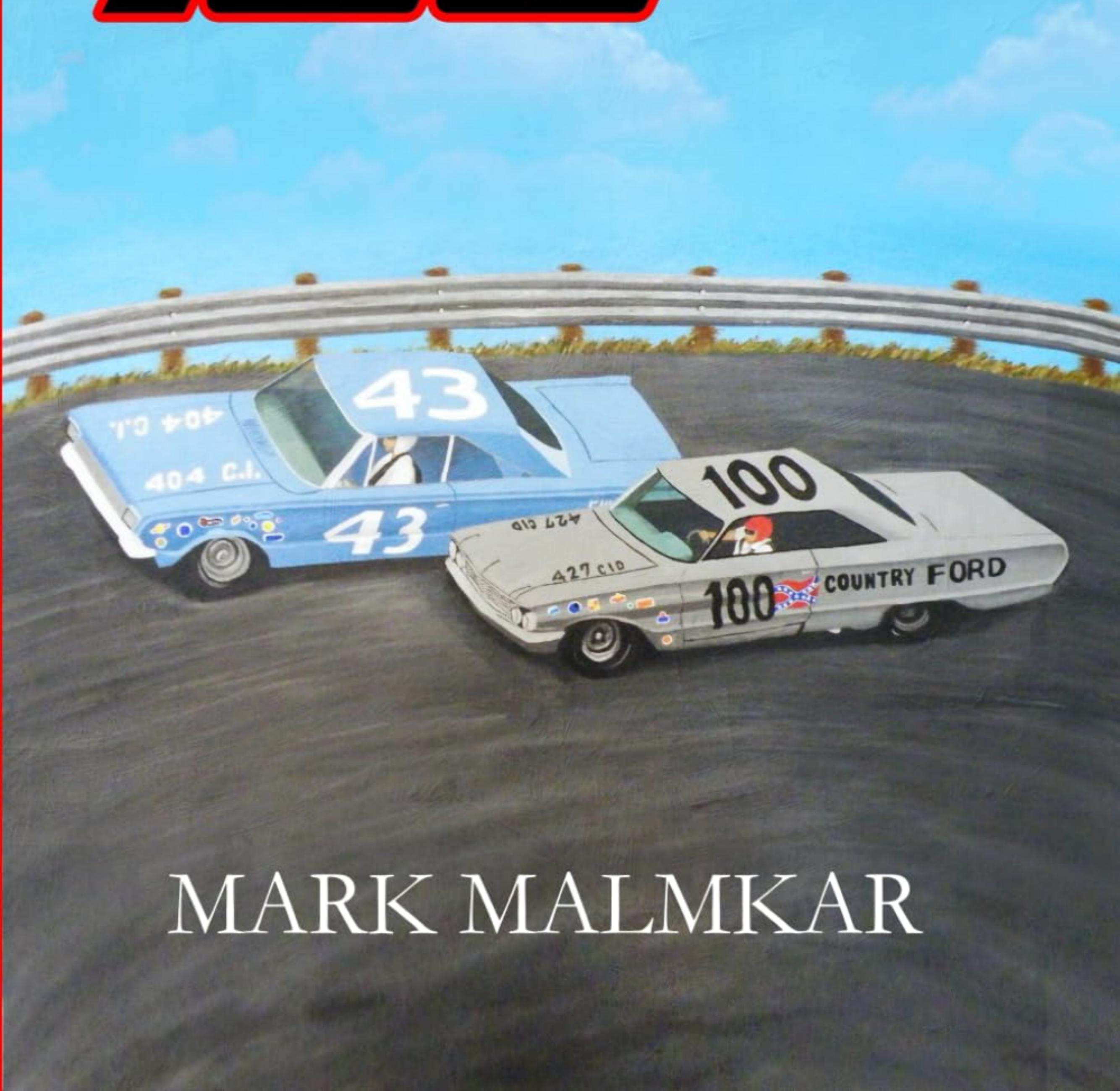




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Prologue

Near Athens, Georgia, 1996

“Will there be snakes down there?” little Natalie asked. She was in the middle of the line of people walking single file down the gradual slope towards the shed.

“No, sweetie,” her grandfather assured her. Natalie Karras was six. Walking behind her was Victor, her fifty-five-year-old grandfather. “The car is inside a building,” he explained.

“The weeds around the building have been mowed,” the leader of the small troop assured her, “There are no snakes down there.” Jack Owens, owner of the farm, led them downhill from the house, past the four bay concrete block shop building, towards the long, sheet metal clad pole building. Now sixty-eight, Jack was gray-haired with a bald spot. Vic, too, had a bald spot and was sporting gray sideburns in his brown hair. The farm was twenty miles south of Athens, Georgia. It was summer, 1996, and Jack’s father, Harvey, had passed away early spring, at age 84.

“No snakes,” her eight-year-old brother said, turning around from where he was walking just ahead of her. “But you have to watch out for bears!” He raised both arms above his head and roared.

“Stop it!” Natalie snapped. She gave him a deserved punch in the chest.

Vic smiled but did nothing to discipline the two children of his oldest son. They were pretty good kids. Their sibling rivalry was normal and didn’t get out of hand. Their mother did a good job of keeping them in

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line. The boy, Lance, was sharp and didn't seem to miss anything. Little Natalie quickly spoke her mind.

Jack Owens reached the front corner of the metal pole building. Once shiny and galvanized, it was now a drab gray with large patches of rust on the roof. Vic hadn't been to the farm in twenty-five years. He thought the building was at least seventy-five feet long, open front, gravel floor, with a post about every twelve feet. He counted six bays before he saw the car.

The four of them briskly walked past the old red pickup in the first bay and ignored the John Deere hay baler in the second bay. The car was in the next to the last bay; all the others empty. Jack had informed them at the house that the shed once housed six racecars.

"Is this it?" Natalie ran around the front fender and stopped abruptly. "It's wrecked!"

"Yeah, it's wrecked," Vic breathed out slowly. Until Jack invited him over, he had no idea the car he had driven still existed.

All four slowly circled the gray 1964 Ford which had its rear bumper backed nearly up to the back wall, its front end facing out into the grassy pasture. It was obviously a racecar at one time, a two-door hardtop, but both doors were welded shut. Under the coating of dust, the gray paint looked old. But the dust could not hide the big black **100** on the door or the bigger black **100** on the roof. The dent in the door and the long, scraped streak down the left side of the car did not obliterate the big red and blue Confederate flag painted as if streaming out from the last zero. The right side looked mangled. Upon examining that side one could barely see the Confederate flag streaming back from the large numeral one. The right side was caved in from the headlight to the taillight. Black streaks highlighted the gray paint. Much of the number **100** and the flag were scratched off.

"This side is worse," observed Lance.

"The Darlington Stripe," commented Jack.

"Turn four," Vic added, remembering the 1966 Darlington race.

It really did look forlorn, sitting there with four flat tires on skinny regular car wheels. There were no headlights, nor taillights: instead, flat round metal plates covered those openings. There were no glass windows in either side, only the windshield and rear window.

On both rear quarter panels, at the ends of the rebel flags, were the words "Country Ford" in black. Country Ford was the major sponsor. Other sponsors advertised their donated products on the fender around the front wheels. Decals and tags advertising spark plugs, oil, carburetors, tires, intake manifolds, headers and the like speckled the gray sheet metal around the front wheels.

"Is this the car you raced, Grandpa," Lance asked.

"Yes, it is."

"Don't you remember the picture of this car in Grandpa's den?" Natalie scolded.

"That's Grandpa in the picture, when he was young."

"We were all younger then," Jack smiled, "weren't we?"

Vic forced a smile. "We get too old, too fast." The race was thirty years ago. *How much can I remember?* he asked himself.

"That picture was taken before Grandpa wrecked it," the little sister added.

Vic winced a bit. *Could I have driven it differently?* he wondered.

Vic bent down and peered into the dust-covered interior. All the door panels, carpets, seats, and other upholstery had been stripped out long ago, a few days after the car was purchased new. The cheap blue Econoline van seat was still there with the padded brace attached to the right side. The brace kept him from sliding off the seat in the turns. He could see holes in the blue vinyl and clumps of foam and paper where mice had made nests. The black belts of the shoulder harness were still hanging from the roll cage. His eyes followed the white pipe tubes of the roll cage wrapped all around the inside of the car, over the windshield, around the doors, behind the seat, and down to the frame in the back. The chrome gearshift lever still stuck out above the four-speed transmission. An inch below the black knob at the end was a short tee grip for the reverse lockout. The driver pulled up on it with his third and fourth fingers when shifting into reverse. It prevented him from shoving the transmission into reverse at the wrong time.

"The four-speed and shifter are still there," Vic looked to Jack.

"The transmission is kaput, remember?" Jack said.

"I remember." Vic was just surprised they hadn't junked it out.

"What's left of the engine is still there," Jack said, walking to the front of the car.

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There were three large pins sticking up through the hood with click pins attached with cables holding them to the car. Only one click pin was attached. Jack pulled it free from the hood pin and reached under the big gray hood and lifted it. He propped it open with a stick.

"What is **CID**?" Lance asked, pointing to the black lettering on each side of the hood. It was lettered **427 CID**.

"Cubic Inch Displacement," Vic answered. "That's how big the engine is."

"Four hundred twenty-seven cubic inches?" asked Lance.

"Yeah,"

"Is that big?"

"It was in its day," Jack said.

"Bigger than today," Vic noted. Now the 1996 NASCAR engines were smaller by regulation.

"The carburetor was robbed a long time ago," Jack pointed to the top of the engine. Amid the grime and dirt, they could see the four uncovered holes on the top of the intake manifold. Paint on the sheet metal around the engine compartment was burned black.

"The air box is gone." Vic noticed the sheet metal housing around the air filter usually attached to the back of the engine compartment was no longer there. Only a narrow oval opening remained into the cowl where the windshield wipers usually were located. Air was ducted through it to the carburetor from where pressure built up in front of the windshield.

"Dad took out the radiator, and the fuel cell, too," Jack went on. "They were useful on the 67 Fairlane he ran."

"He ran that—for what—two years?" Vic noticed the blank area where the special aluminum radiator was once bolted in.

"Yeah, two years."

"I see the Edelbrock intake manifold is still here," Vic observed. "I'd have thought he would have used that somehow."

"Couldn't, for two reasons," Jack answered, pointing to the top of the engine. "First, there's a hole blown between ports seven and eight." Vic looked where the valve cover had been removed on the left side of the engine, exposing the valve train and its broken springs and rocker arms. The right-side valve cover was still in place, covered with dust and oil, but housing undamaged parts. "Second," Jack went on, "Dad went

with a 428 engine in 1967. The intake manifold is not compatible between a standard 428 and a 427-medium riser.”

Vic fondly remembered Harvey and his John Deere hat that seemed to never leave his head. Harvey was the epitome of a good old farm boy.

Lance was standing beside his grandfather, looking intently at the engine. “Will it run?” he asked.

“Never again,” Vic replied. “I’m surprised that your dad kept it all these years.”

“He had cars before, and cars after,” Jack reminisced. “This one was special for him.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of special to me, too.” Vic thought.

Jack placed an 8 x 10 framed photograph he’d been carrying on the fender by Vic.

“I thought you might like to see the ‘before’ picture.” The whole crew was pictured around the pristine Confederate 100. The picture was taken outside the concrete block shop building up the hill from where they were. The shop was where Harvey and his crew built their racecars, including the 100. The picture was taken three days before the Darlington race.

Natalie pushed her way in front of her grandfather and pointed to the picture.

“That’s you, Grandpa!” Vic looked at the image of his younger self in the white coveralls, kneeling down in front of the 100 on the door, his red helmet on the concrete in front of him. The whole crew was pictured standing behind the Ford. That was thirty years ago. He was a newlywed then, not married a year. His oldest son Kevin—Natalie and Lance’s father—hadn’t even been conceived yet.

Jack and Vic took turns naming the crew standing behind the NASCAR Ford in the picture.

“Left to right, standing beside me, remember him?” Jack asked.

“Engine mechanic, Kenny Frasch,” Vic replied instantly.

It was Jack’s turn. “Front tire changer, from your SCCA crew,” Jack shook his head. “But I don’t recall his name.”

“Vilas Dowd. My turn,” Vic said. “This one is easy, your son Kermit, front tire carrier. How old was he then?”

“Nineteen.” Jack looked at the picture again. “By the windshield is the Crew Chief, Gary Franzen.”

They called the racetrack at Darlington “the track to tough to tame – the Lady in Black.”

In April of 1966, Vic Karras found out for himself how tough the track was. The NASCAR race that day was called the Rebel 400. Four hundred grueling miles of noise, heat, distractions, vibrations, pit stops, worn tires and over thirty other drivers gunning for the same path around the egg-shaped oval.

His car was a 1964 Ford – a hand-me-down from another race team. They painted it gray, painted a rebel flag on each door and numbered it 100. The engine mechanic guaranteed the new 427 engine to last four hundred miles. As that goal, and the finish line got closer, Vic wasn’t so sure.

When a driver lost control and side swiped the twin Armco guard rails, it was said that he got his ‘Darlington Stripe,’ dents and scratched paint on the right side. Early in the race, Vic Karras earned his ‘Darlington Stripe.’ It got worse from there.

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