

**CARL VERSUS THE MEN FROM
MARS**

Also by John Lawrence Sheppard

Midnight in Monaco

Bad Men Driving

CARL VERSUS THE MEN FROM MARS



Bombast, drivel, odds and ends

John Lawrence Sheppard

Writers Club Press
San Jose New York Lincoln Shanghai

Carl versus the Men from Mars
Bombast, drivel, odds and ends

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For my brother Tom.

Ah, good taste! What a dreadful thing!

—Pablo Picasso

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Badinatorium Sophistarum

*H*ere's what my life is like.

I was arguing with a customer, a guy I call “the Carpenter,” about whether or not it’s patriotic not to root for the Yankees. His argument was that if I were to root against the Yankees, it would be like rooting for the Taliban. I countered with, “It’s my God-given right to hate the Yankees, and I will continue to do so.”

I’m from Sarasota, which used to be the Spring Training home of the Chicago White Sox. Like any good Sox fan, I despise the Yankees. Now I live in Chicago, and can go see Sox games anytime I please—um, during the season.

Anyway, as I was making my point, a capillary burst in my cheek and blood coursed down my face to the underside of my chin and dropped in great drizzling splats onto the middle of my chef’s smock.

I’m a grill cook, thank you very much.

The Carpenter—thick pencil resting above his ear, house plans spread out before him, Menard’s hat on head—looked horrified. I thought it was my logic that was getting to him, but I was wrong. He pulled a wad of paper napkins out of the chrome dispenser and handed them to me.

“What’s this for?” I asked, receiving them.

“Don’t you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“My God, look at your shirt!”

I looked down and saw that the middle of my smock had turned bright red with blood.

“Your cheek!” the Carpenter like about howled. He pointed to the side of my cheek, and I pressed the napkins up against it.

Isn't that a fine how-do-you-do?



And another thing.

I was on my way home from work, walking along, minding my own business, when this old girl comes stumbling out of this hole in the wall called Barb's. I pass by it every night. The old girl was a conglomeration of black velvet hair, scarlet nails, shiny beaded clothing, and tobacco and beer scents. She grabbed hold of the front of my smock, steadied herself not so well, and, catching sight of the blood, let loose with, “I killed him! Lord Jesus, I killed him!”

Just like that.

Then she ran off, tripped over a fireplug and knocked some guy off his bicycle. This guy was all duded up like a serious bicyclist, too, wearing stretchy clothes with corporate logos, and helmeted and such. It was a wondrous thing for a small town boy like me to see at two o'clock in the morning.

I tend to run into a lot of whores this time of night, too.



I live in a boarding house, in what was once a two-flat.

Two-flat, two-flat, two-flat, two-flat. I could say that all day.

My landlady gets no end of pleasure out of talking to me. She keeps telling me, “Carl, you a strange man. I ain't never met no strange man like you.”

And I say, “Thank you very much, Land Lady.” She keeps trying to tell me her name, but what fun is that? To me, she’s Land Lady, and I aim to keep it that way.

We play Chinese checkers sometimes. I like to say, once I hop a marble or two toward the other side of the metal board, “King me!”

“Ain’t no kings in Chinese checkers, fool!”

“Queen me!”

“Carl, you a strange man. I ain’t never met no strange man like you.”

“Thank you very much, Land Lady.”

It goes on and on, this snappy repartee.



I share the top set of rooms with a sad-eyed, brain-damaged veteran named Buzz. His voice is slurry and all the veins in his arms are collapsed from chemotherapy. A strange shock of colorless hair swirls from his head. When I find the hairs in our sink, they look like clear glass fibers. He had a brain tumor, which was removed by the VA at their medical center downtown. He claims that a lot of memories were cut out along with the tumor, and that he’s glad that they are gone.

“I used t-t-t-uh,” he said to me this morning.

“Yes?” I replied. Two, three hours of sleep is getting to feel normal to me again. I was studying my face in the mirror. There was no sign of a cut on my face. Where did all that blood escape from?

“Headaches!” he shouted. He wanted to impart something important, but couldn’t. It was gone. He’s on total disability. “Gulf war,” he noted. “Shots.” All the news about anthrax on TV has him agitated. His friend from the army, now retired and living in Berwyn, told me that Buzz was sure that the anthrax inoculations he received before going off to battle had something to do with his cancer.

His friend from the army—a huge, loping mass of a man with a sly grin—was going to come over later. He always comes on Tuesdays. He checks up on Buzz, makes sure that he has plenty to eat.

A lawyer comes by about once a week, too, at odd intervals. He has slicked back hair and a tiny, broomish mustache that he combs over the sink while counseling Buzz. He wears shiny suits featuring slightly off colors. He rolls his eyes at Buzz, like he can't believe that his ambulance chasing has led him to this drooling, semi-paranoid man. But the lawyer must see dollar signs floating around him. There are documents to be signed, weekly. When the lawyer leaves, I take a look down at him from our second floor perch. He dusts himself off like he's leaving a leper colony.

Buzz comes from Sarasota, too. We went to different high schools and never knew one another down there, but there's something about coming to a huge place like Chicago and finding someone from home. Even if that guy can't remember home.

Buzz collapsed slowly to the floor, pooling himself at the bathroom door. He rubbed his temples with the heels of his hands. "No more," Buzz said, his eyes closed, his mouth open and gasping for air wetly.

I quit studying my face. It was no use. "You need some help getting up, Buzz?" I asked him.

"Life," Buzz noted and jerked his shaking hands toward me. I grabbed his elbows and he grabbed mine, and up he came.



Walking to work, I stopped at Rahim's Internet Grocery and Lotto. Rahim put the word "Internet" in his store's name so the bank would lend him money. I bought a Mountain Dew to swig on my little walk. A panicked woman came stumbling in and asked Rahim if he sold American flags. Rahim said no, and she ran right back out.

"So you see what I have to deal with, Carl," Rahim said.

"Noted," I said.

A rotund gentleman in a wheelchair rolled up. He was missing both legs above the knees and was wearing a bowler from a British banker's head. The rest of his clothing did not suggest that it should be topped off with a bowler. I slipped my wallet back into the front pocket of my pants and picked up my soda-pop. "That's right!" shouted the wheelchair-bound bowler man. "Hide the money!"

"Oh, be quiet," I replied. Then I turned to Rahim and said, "So, you see what I have to deal with, Rahim."

And Rahim laughed.



And it was back to the same old argument with the Carpenter. He spends more time at Swizerski's Diner than I do. Old Man Swizerski sat at his station behind the register. Business was slow, so he didn't mind my bullshitting with the Carpenter.

"We all have to get behind New York after what they've been through," the Carpenter said. He took a sip of coffee. He likes his coffee fresh and insists on watching a new pot being made when he comes in the door.

"I don't think that applies to baseball," I said. I was being careful not to get too excited. I didn't want my face opening up again.

"Uh, oh," the Carpenter said. "Look out."

I could see Suzie Swizerski out of the corner of my eye. I'm not peripherally blind. We have this little game we play. She tackles me, and I get tackled. She is a big, blond girl—the type of girl they call "healthy" in the Midwest. When she comes on shift to take over her father's post, she sneaks up behind me and tosses her big arms around my chest and head. Once I'm dropped to the floor, she noogie-patrols my skull. It's the biggest thrill of my day.

But now the Carpenter's warned me, and the game is over. I turned around and said, "Thought you could sneak up on me, huh?"

She picked up a frozen brick of hash browns, weighed it in her hand, and chucked it at the Carpenter's head, nailing him on the cheekbone. "Ow!" the Carpenter went.

"Rat," she said. She arched a significant eyebrow at me. I keep waiting for her to invite me back to the dead meat cooler for some smoochie-coo action. She walked over to relieve her dad. I watched her beautiful bottom bounce. She is a sight.

I'm about to say something to the Carpenter when he gives me that horrified look again and starts pulling out the napkins.

Blame

Hux sat next to me in Mr. Bight's first period Junior Chorus Class. Mr. Bight asked each one of us to stand up and explain why we wanted to be in the class. "I like to sing," said Hux, when he stood up. We were sitting in the tenors' row. Behind us were the altos and sopranos.

I joined the class because I'd heard that the chorus had gone on a trip to Czechoslovakia the year before. My dad kept telling me that we were Czechs—Bohunks, he called us—and he said that my great-great-*etc*-grandfather was a famous Bohemian general who had invented camouflage and had his eye poked out. "‘Good Old One Eye’ is what his men called him," said Dad. Before the Second World War, the future communists built a statue of him. Then the Nazis tore it down. Then the communists became communists and put the statue back up, and built a huge, ugly mausoleum to keep famous communist corpses in. A concrete recreation of "Good Old One Eye" was outside sitting on his horse next to a cannon, protecting all those dead guys. I wanted to see that.

"I like to sing," I said when I stood up, and sat down.

"I like to sing, I like to sing!" sang Mr. Bight. "You already sound like a chorus." Mr. Bight was not a happy man. He'd shaved his head bald like Kojak and wore a dark suit from the 1960's. Jack Webb could have worn that suit. He looked at us as if we made his teeth hurt.

An aroma like burning socks and pickles filled the air. Mr. Bight tapped a blanched, wooden stick on his black, metal podium, which was stamped with: “PROPERTY OF BROOKSIDE JUNIOR HIGH. DO NOT REMOVE.”

“La la la la, la la la la, laaaaah!” sang Mr. Bight in his gigantic, baritone voice.

We all looked at each other, confused.

“Sing after me,” he said. Then he sniffed the air and ran to the back of the room where the emergency fire exit was. He pushed the door ajar and revealed two of the big kids smoking pot. The fire alarm went off and we all had to file out to our assigned positions in the middle of the football field, under the legend: “Brookside Junior High School. Home of the Fighting Barracudas.” There was a frightening-looking fish professionally painted next to that, and an unprofessional bubble coming out of its mouth that said, “Holy shit, I’m a faggot.”



Kippy Watson told me that my soul came pouring out of my eyes like water out of a firehose. She wanted to me drop acid with her and talk to her life-size black velvet portrait of Jimi Hendrix. “Jimi answers all questions, big and small,” Kippy told me. We were in Mr. Forest Rogers’ American History class. Everybody called him “Trees.”

Trees was telling us about the American involvement in China during the early 1900’s. “Apparently, some people don’t care about our history. Apparently, some people think they can talk all the way through class,” he said.

Kippy said, “Sure, Trees. You bet.”

It was a badge of honor to get detention, but Trees never gave it out, knowing this. “Don’t smart off to me, young lady,” he said. He had a little dog named Bippy that he sometimes brought to class with him and put up on the podium. The dog was brown and threadbare. It shivered and sometimes let out a tiny yip.

Trees had a head that was as square and solid as a block of granite. “What’re you going to do, Trees?” a punk near me asked.

Trees wouldn’t lower her grade because getting a “D” was considered a mark of distinction, and getting an “F” made you a folk hero. “Maybe I’ll give her extra credit work to do,” said Trees. He was pretty as a purple mountain’s majesty, and had long, flowing hair that cascaded down his back when he unknotted his ponytail. Some of the girls were in love with him, which made the guys want to kill him, or at least pour sugar in his gas tank, or rig M-80’s up in his desk.

Trees would say, “I know all of you by sight.”

And, “I have a fingerprinting kit. Watch out.”

Kippy wasn’t in love with Trees, though. She was four foot two and weighed seventy-eight pounds. Kippy was in love with Hux, my best friend. He was too cute to talk to, she said. She wanted to run her fingers through his sparkly red hair, and kiss his tiny, pink lips. I think she hoped I’d mention this to Hux in English class, or during lunch hour, when we sat together inside the school cafeteria and ate out of our brown bags.

Trees went back to teaching, and we went back to talking. “Do you really drop acid?” I asked her.

“All the time,” she said. She opened up her Partridge Family notebook and pulled out a piece of paper full of squiggly lines. Her hands were covered with rings out of gumball machines. The gold paint flecked off them, and I could see the white plastic underneath. “I drew this last time I dropped acid,” she said. “It’s a picture of Jimi’s soul.”

She must have drawn it with one of those pens that had four ink cartridges.

“That’s what a soul looks like?” I asked.

“That’s what Jimi’s soul looks like,” she said. “Yours is completely different.”

“What about Hux’s soul?”

“It’s bright orange and green,” she said. “Like a pumpkin.”



Hux had second period gym and, because he was small, he had to run for it when the bell rang. The gym coach, Mr. Withy, had painted a huge white line where his responsibilities ended and others’ began. “When that bell rings,” he told all his classes, “you’re on your own.” One of his legs was shorter than the other due to a college football injury. He liked to play foursquare with the kids and wing the ball as fast as he could. “Bruises make the man,” he was fond of saying.

Hux had to stand right on the line, his bag slung over his shoulder, waiting for the bell to ring. The big kids would stand a few paces behind him because that was sporting. When the bell rang, Hux would take off running. So would the big kids. If they caught him, they would pound the daylight out of him.

I’d like to say that this experience made Hux so fast that he became an All-State track athlete, but that would be lying. There’s only so fast a guy the size of Hux can go. He was often caught halfway between the gym and the English classroom, and beaten with fists and feet. He’d curl up into a ball and eventually even the meanest guy would have to stop kicking and get on with the rest of the day’s atrocities, like shoving little kids’ heads in toilets, and tossing them into mud puddles.

Hux begged me not to help him. “I must try to be a man,” he said, all bruised up.

I was standing in the doorway to the English classroom when I saw Hux huffing his way toward me. The big kids were losing ground, and a couple dropped out of the race, probably due to heavy smoking. I held the door open for him so he wouldn’t have to slow down, or get caught trying to open it. He zipped past me and into the classroom with one of the big kids on his tail. The big kid

stopped in front of me and peered around. “See you tomorrow, chump-chump chicken!” he called, and continued on his way.

I went in and sat in the desk next to Hux.

“I live to see another day,” said Hux, puffing and red.

“Kippy Watson has the hots for you,” I said.

He gasped in for a second. “Not Kippy the Hippie,” he said.

“The one and only.”

He plunked down in the seat across from me. “What did she do? Read her tarot cards and decide that my moon’s in Venus, or something?”

“Hey,” I said. “A girl’s a girl. Be thankful, dumbass.”

He looked up at the acoustic ceiling tiles. “Thank *you*, God.”

Mr. Sciezka’s voice boomed over the loud speakers. “Dean of Students, here,” he said. “Fourth period classes are cancelled due to a pep rally. All students must attend. I say again, attendance is mandatory. That is all.”

“My life’s a living hell,” said Hux, full of dread.

And Mrs. Mancini, our English teacher, gave Hux detention for swearing in class.



The pep rallies were always announced the period beforehand so none of us could plan something awful for during them. We all dutifully filed into the gym under the watchful glare of Mr. Withy, who never let his guard down even for a second. He said he could hear us whispering during health class about how we were going to get him and make him pay. He knew us, he told us. He knew us better than he knew the terrain of his wife’s body. A lot of the films he showed us had to do with acne and its prevention and treatment. “Masturbation!” he’d shout during those oozing, puss-drenched films.

Once the entire student body was jammed in the gym, Mr. Sciezka walked up to the lonely microphone planted in the middle of the

barracuda's eye. "Stop that," he said in a dull monotone. "You know what I'm talking about. Don't try to look innocent."

Hux was looking all around, trying to figure out where the next threat to his life would come from.

"Let's give a hand to the cheerleaders," droned Mr. Sciezka. The microphone rang shrilly, causing him to back up a step and look at it.

The cheerleaders ran out and did backflips and splits. The big kids yelled, "Take it off, bitch! Take it off you little whores!"

Mr. Withy, who was always at a slow boil anyway, exploded in rage. He ran to the microphone and pushed Mr. Sciezka out of the way. "You want to go to class? Huh? Is that what you want? Because we can send you there right now! You hear me? Either applaud, or keep quiet, or go back to class."

He stepped away from the microphone. Somebody behind me coughed into a fist. A little kid sniffled five rows down.

The cheerleaders did that two bits, four bits cheer and then asked everybody who was for the Barracudas to stand up and holler.

At first, there was nothing but silence. "Yay," muttered a guy behind me. Someone else dropped a pencil under the bleachers, and it plinked against the metal supports as it dropped down below us.

"You know, you all should show some support," said Missy Watson, Kippy's sister and the head cheerleader.

"Take it off," said Johnnie Lee Levitt, head tough guy, and head head.

"Screw you," said Missy, who seemed a lot more mature than just thirteen. She could have been a waitress at Bob and Edith's Diner, by the look of her.

"Come and try me, baby," said Johnnie Lee Levitt. His hair was as big as a bush, and black as Joey Ramone's was, and he was dressed just like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with a bic clic.

"I wouldn't touch you—" she said, hands on hips.

But Mr. Sciezka ran up behind her and clapped his hand over her mouth. She was an honor student and he would have none of that trash talk out of her.

Mr. Withy waded up through all the kids—who had by this time gone berserk—and snatched the cigarette out of Johnnie Lee Levitt’s mouth and stuck it in his own. He grabbed Johnnie by his white, polyester collar and dragged him out of the gym. “Stayin’ alive, stayin’ alive!” shouted Johnnie, stumbling after the angered coach.

“Go to lunch!” shouted Mr. Sciezka over the noise; his hand still tightly gripped around Missy’s mouth. “Go on! Get out of here!” And the mob scene clogged through the doors, struggled to the outside and on down the sidewalks between all the ramshackle buildings that composed our school.



Before I entered the lunchroom, I felt a pull at the seat of my pants, and turned around. I thought a girl had pinched my butt, and I planned to thank her for it. Instead, it was one of the big kids, and he was holding a pair of pliers in his hand. The orange Levi’s tag from my back pocket was gripped in its teeth. “I got it now,” he said, and took off running. I was much bigger than Hux, and therefore was a potential threat.

“What did he do that for?” I asked Hux.

“The word is that if you get eighteen of those, they give you a pair free,” said Hux.

“Drag,” I said, suddenly lamenting the loss of the little tag.

Hux turned around. “They already got me,” he said, waving his tiny bottom at me.

“I figured that already,” I said.

We pushed through the side entrance of the lunchroom, the non-lunchline side. The lunchroom was already packed, except for the middle table where only the toughest kids sat. It was self-segregating. All the black kids sat on one side, and all the white on the other. The

least threatening kids sat as far as they could from the center. There were five long tables stretching across the lunchroom, all parallel to each other. The middle table was always a toss up. Whoever got there first, white or black, could claim bragging rights for the day.

Augustus Hightower was the first big kid to come into the room. A hush fell over us for a moment. Hux and I sat down on the farthest edge of the far table and watched. Augustus was thirteen-years-old and five foot ten inches tall. He shaved. He was wearing flared designer jeans and a silk-type shirt depicting a riverboat. His head glittered with afro-sheen and his eyes sparkled with malice. A tiny, black hand rose out of his back pocket, which was probably attached to an angel food cake cutter, as my mom liked to call those combs.

Augustus walked along the lunchline staring out at all his lessers. They parted before him, black and white alike, as he carried his green tray along the line collecting spoon after spoonful of inedible food from the disinterested lunch ladies whose hands and heads were wrapped in clear plastic. He nodded to a couple of his lieutenants, who got up from one of the safe tables and moved to the middle one. Augustus sat between them, and began to carefully examine his meal with the tines of his fork.

Johnnie Lee Levitt came in after Augustus, picked up a fork, and walked over to the table. He stood across from Augustus, on the white side of the room, and was clearly in a bad mood. "You're in my seat, *nigger*," he said.

"What you talking about, you crackerass motherfucker?" demanded Augustus. He placed his palms flat on the table and slowly rose to his feet.

The white kids stood up.

The black kids stood up.

Johnnie stuck the fork through Augustus' hand, pinning it to the table like a butterfly. Augustus shrieked in rage, and soon food and utensils were being exchanged in a wild barrage. When the heavy weaponry came out—knives, chains, and straight razors—Hux and I

stood up and ran out the door. We abandoned our lunches, which for me was just as well, considering that mine contained a cold left-over spamloaf sandwich. Others, both black and white, also abandoned the lunchroom, and many of us found ourselves in the place we were trained to go to in case of emergency: the football field.

Kippy ran up to Hux and me. She made Hux look tall, even in her clear, Plexiglas high-heels. She was wearing a peasant dress, but didn't look at all poor. "Come on," she said. "Let's go."

Mr. Sciezka's voice boomed out over the school, we could hear it even in full gallop. I had to keep slowing down for the two tiny people. I had to fight the urge to put one under each arm and run. The voice urged calm. "We know who to blame," the voice buzzed. "We are rounding up the usual suspects."

We stopped running when we got to Bee Ridge Road, and casually walked up to a bus stop. An orange and white SCAT bus stopped. We dropped the exact change into the little hopper and sat down. The only other passenger on the bus was an old man wearing Bermuda shorts and a golf shirt. "I'm not an actor, but I play one on TV," he said, then chuckled to himself.

We got off the bus five stops down and walked the rest of the way to Kippy's house. She lived on a six-acre estate secluded in the woods away from all the busy traffic on Bee Ridge. The house was huge, hidden between trees and shrubbery that resembled farm animals. One was a cow, another a chicken. A small pond was behind the house. A small, wooden pier jutted out into the pond.

Kippy took off her heels and shrank another six inches. She walked in front of Hux, who was now a full head taller than her. Hux turned his head toward me and smiled strangely. I thought for a second that he was full of static electricity and that if I touched him I would be electrocuted.

We walked in circles around the estate single file along a narrow dirt path. "What's with all the farm animals?" I finally asked.

"What farm animals?" asked Kippy.

“The shrubs,” I said.

“They’re not farm animals, Carl. They’re circus animals. My dad’s a supervisor for Ringling operations in Sarasota.”

“So what’s that cow supposed to be?” I asked.

Kippy stopped walking and stared at it. We stopped behind her. “Lion, I guess.”

We followed her up to the house. She opened a bank of sliding glass doors. “Dad? Dad?” she called. “Good, he’s not here,” she said. The room we entered was as big as a basketball court. We could have set hoops up at both ends and played. The mantle looked like an avalanche of boulders with a fireplace hole cut into it. Ceramic circus clowns danced on top. An Emmett Kelly original painting hovered above them. The walls were clad in posters. Elephants danced while girls in tights spun impossibly above them. A man in a tuxedo and top hat shouted into a bullhorn. The walls sang sweet circus dreams to me, a bullwhip here, a seal there, and clowns all around.

“I know,” said Kippy. “Gross, right?” She was behind the bar, mixing up some drinks.

Hux hoisted himself onto a stool while Kippy poured various liquids into a blender.

I walked around the room and allowed it to dazzle me. I touched the bullwhip and the frames around the posters. I couldn’t imagine living this close to it all.

Hux said, “His grandmother was in the circus.”

“Oh,” said Kippy. She disappeared into her room, and came out a minute later with three postage stamps. She handed me one that had a picture of Mickey Mouse on it. Mickey’s eyes spun round. “Lick it,” she said.

Hux licked his. Kippy licked hers.

“Here goes,” I said. I licked mine.

Kippy poured our drinks out in frosty beer mugs she retrieved from below the counter.

“Nothing so far,” said Hux.

“You have to wait,” said Kippy. She sipped some of her drink.

I lifted my mug up to my nose. The smell was familiar. “What is this?” I asked her.

“It’s called a Manhattan,” she said.

One of the ceramic clowns asked the time. “I don’t have a watch,” I said.

“So what?” said Kippy.

A few minutes later, I stuck my hand through the counter and touched a squirming fish. “There’s a fish in your counter,” I said. “Reach down and touch him.”

We all touched the fish.

“There’s a lesson in this,” said Hux.

Kippy was in her room. We could see her through the wall. “She’s talking to Jimi,” I said.

“Jimi’s playing the guitar,” said Hux.

And so he was.

Outside, the sun turned on and off. God was up to His little tricks. The sun was gone. The shrub lion moored. “I knew it,” I said.

“What?” asked Kippy. She was sitting under the avalanche of rocks. I dove down and saved her. “Your soul burned a hole in my skin,” she said. There was a round hole in her arm. “Careful, careful,” she said.

Hux cried. “The cars. They’re alive, man. They’re on their rubber feet, and they dance and live and are warm. But we kill them, they die when we turn them off.” He wept. His tears formed a river that flowed out to the Gulf of Mexico. “Cold,” he said.

We decided to go swimming. We took off our clothes and were naked. Air particles touched us, prickled every square millimeter of our bare skin. We joined arms and formed a triangle. We waded into the water. The water slept around us, it didn’t know we were there.



I was standing next to a tree near Bee Ridge Road, stark naked and covered with tiny cuts that stung. “Oh my God,” I said. What if my mother found out? I put my hands over my tiny penis and ran back toward Kippy’s house. My mind raced furiously. Where exactly was the house? It was dark. Twigs snapped under my feet, and rocks dug into them. I saw lights up ahead. I lost my balance and regained it.

Every light in the house was on. I went around the house to the back, where the pond was. Something about the pond? I found my clothes back there mixed in with Kippy’s and Hux’s. Her little dress was picked up by a gust of wind and blown a few feet away. I put on my underwear, and pants. I put my socks on backwards, but got my shoes on the right feet. I tugged my tee-shirt over my head. I tried to tie my shoes, but couldn’t remember how.

I picked up as much of Hux’s clothes as I could find, and chased down Kippy’s dress.

I could see people moving around in the big room. I stumbled up to the plate glass window, and was amazed by what I saw inside. Johnnie Lee Levitt was kissing Missy. They were rolling around on the couch, and one of Johnnie’s hands was up underneath Missy’s micro-cheerleading skirt, yanking down her panties. I could see it all. His other hand was over the “B” in “Brookside.” I turned away from the window, and blinked my eyes. I touched the wall. The wall was real. I looked back inside. They were still in there, still doing the same thing. Johnnie’s cuff was bloody. He had Missy’s panties around her knees now and was trying to unzip his pants with one hand, not very successfully, while jamming his tongue into Missy’s mouth, successfully.

I turned away from the scene, and ran around the side of the building, trying to remember which room was Kippy’s, and hoping that she and Hux would be in there, and not out in the woods.

The ground rose up and smacked me in the jaw. I got back up on my feet. I grabbed a windowsill and chin-upped. The room was dark. I ran to the next. I chin-upped again. I saw Jimi Hendrix floating purplely on the wall. He was almost playing his guitar. Down below him I saw, through dim light, Hux and Kippy. They were seated facing each other, the soles of their tiny bare feet touching, their hands joined. I banged on the window, lost my grip, and fell on the dewy grass. I pulled myself back up. They were still in the same position. “Hey,” I shouted. Neither moved.

A pair of headlights illuminated a giant sheep near the window I was hanging from. My hands were empty. I didn’t remember what I did with all the clothes. I must have dropped them, I thought.

Keys jangled. The front door clunked. There was no saving anybody now, I thought. Except me. I ran off toward Bee Ridge Road through the trees.



“Mom,” I said. I was at the Gate Food Post near Kippy’s house. My voice shook uncontrollably, as did the hands I had wrapped around the pay phone. A bum nearby was throwing up on the side of the building. I felt sick.

“Is that you, Carl?” she asked. “Where have you been? Where are you? Are you all right? You didn’t get hurt in that riot, did you? It’s been on the news all afternoon. Where are you? Tell me you’re not hurt!”

“I’m fine,” I said. I told her where I was.

“What’re you doing way out there? Why didn’t you call before now? We have the police out looking for you, you know that? Your father is very upset. Here, talk to him. I’m coming to get you. Don’t hang up,” said Mom.

“Hi,” Dad said.

“Hi, Dad,” I said.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said.

“*The A Team* just ended. You missed a good one,” Dad said.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Well,” he said.

“Um,” I said.

“Goodbye,” Dad said. And he hung up.

I put the phone back in its cradle, and walked over to the plate glass windows surrounding the convenience store. The reflection I caught was frightening. Spider webs hung off my uncombed hair. My torn shirt was half-tucked in. Tiny cuts bled on my arms and face. This would be hard to explain, but not impossible.

I wondered how Hux and Johnnie would fare. They were in the same boat, and that boat, by this time, had sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Drowning, drowning, oh!

The sidewalk surrounding the Gate Food Post wobbled down under my feet and changed color. It went from white to black. It was a trampoline! I stopped shaking and started bouncing. The first jump got me as high as the roof before I drifted back down. I flexed my knees, allowing the trampoline to fully dimple downward before my next jump. I timed it perfectly. I vaulted up into the air and closed one eye, soaring above the store, over the roof. I spread my arms apart, and formed a cross like I was almighty Jesus tacked to His boards of doom. “Scuse me, if I kiss the sky!” I sang. I was the one-eyed human cannonball, flying up to touch the face of God.

A Cubs Fan's Notes

I've never spoken up in my life. Not really. I speak in a low mumble. It's my way.

My father Frank, sitting in his easy chair, barked at me, "What? What did you just say?" He always manages to sound offended.

"I asked you to go to a game with me. The Brewers," I said.

"Why the hell would I want to go to Wisconsin?" My father thinks that Wisconsin is a nightmare tourist trap.

"It's a new ballpark, Pop," I said, hopefully. "I got tickets."

"It's preseason," he replied, snapping his newspaper. "Who cares?"

Better than just sitting there, reading the paper, I thought. I said, "C'mon. You'll like it." For me, it's something to do while waiting for the real season to start. The tension sometimes gets to be too much to bear near the beginning of the season, which was still a week away. It's Monday, the 26th. The season begins Monday, the 4th. It's horrible, the waiting. Inside, I was vibrating like a struck tuning fork. Kerry Wood's fastball was clocked at 101 miles per hour, reconstructed elbow and all. Ron Coomer, the new first baseman, looks like one of those guys who play 16-inch softball in a beer league. Sammy Sosa just inked a new deal, and looks happy enough to hit 70 home runs.

"Sure you can take time off from your *bakery*?" he scoffed. He's never liked the idea of my working honestly for a living. He worked as a clerk at the Hurston Candy Company (makers of Hurston's Sweet Chews) for 30 years, and as a mailroom clerk at the Carson's in

the loop for ten more before retiring completely. And by retiring completely, I mean that the man rarely moves from his easy chair. He barks commands to my mother, the warbride, who pretends she can't hear him from way over in the kitchen, about 10 feet away. She spends most of her day in there, hiding from him.

My father's theory is that your body is like a battery. You're only given one charge, and the charge has to last you for life. Inactivity is a method of keeping you from using up that charge. Once the charge is used up, you drop dead.

His father worked the killing floor at the stockyards after coming over from the old country. My father hates the idea of working with your hands. That's why he saved up and sent me to the U of C. That's the only reason I have an engineering degree. Otherwise, I would have just skipped college and gone right to work. I like working with my hands. I like the feel of hard work. There's nothing wrong with that.

"Yeah," I said, pretending he didn't just insult me. "I think I can spare the time. Rich'll stand in for me."

My bakery is just south of Foster, on Clark. When I created it, ten years ago, it seemed like a bad idea to everyone but me. My wife despised it. "I married an engineer," she informed me. "Not some damn baker." A friend of mine from work, Rich Lara, who was the speechwriter for our global company's globetrotting president (and other less active board members) threw in with me, even though he thought it would fail just like everyone else.

I'd saved most of the money up from the five years I'd worked in Saudi Arabia, employed by Aramco. The Arabs pay obscene amounts of money to technical people. They have plenty of cash to toss around. I had enough money not only to lease the storefront, but to buy the ovens, the Hobarts, the little glass display cases, and a two-flat nearby, which I was now standing in, talking to my father in. He and my cockney Mum live in the downstairs, and I and my wife and my daughter live upstairs.

My mother is an English warbride. Everything she says is phrased like a question, just like she's on *Jeopardy*, and you are Alex Trebek.

My wife's name is Cupcake. Okay, not really—but that's what I've always called her. She invited me to call her Cupcake when we first met. A baker's wife—Cupcake! How natural is that?

Cupcake was in the process of divorcing me, by the way. She hadn't unassed our apartment yet, which she'd stockpiled with ornate furniture, and useless gee-gaws from the Home Shopping Network. But she'd informed me that she'd be leaving soon—dumping me for a dentist, Sam, who lives in Winnetka. She just needed to make the final arrangements.

I was so desperate for familial companionship that I asked my father to accompany me to a preseason baseball game up in Milwaukee, where they've built a new ballpark that can snap shut like a giant clam to keep out the Nanook-like weather. I needed my father for the expedition because I don't own a car, nor do I have a driver's license. And the train doesn't go that far north anymore. It stops in Kenosha, roughly halfway to Milwaukee from where I was standing on the North Side of Chicago, pleading for a ride—for fatherly companionship, neither of which my father was big on.

My daughter, Tiffany (don't blame me, my wife named her), was going with us, too. My wife informed me that she would leave Tiff with me, as Sam the Dentist from Winnetka has no use for children. Mum thinks that Cupcake is not much of a mother for doing such a thing, that only a heartless human being could leave her very own daughter behind with a man she despises so much that she breaks his heart. It took my parents 16 years of trying to have me, their only child.

I heard my wife stomping around above us. Pop looked up, involuntarily. *Thud, thud, thud*. "Jesus," said Pop, wiping his mouth with a paper towel. "There goes old leadfoot." Mum baked him some scones this morning, the only English eats he likes. For years, Mum tried making him other English confections, but Pop wouldn't touch

them. Actually, most human beings with active taste buds find English cuisine a little iffy. Fifty years ago, he sent Mum over to my grandmother's house to learn to cook Czech food. She doesn't do a remarkable job on the Czech food, but can still make a dandy kidney pie. The English are obsessed with organ meats and blood. Mum was in the kitchen, noisily cleaning up.

"Elwin! Have a scone, would you?" she sang out. "Your father can't eat them all, can he?"

"He can try, Mum," I replied. "Before you say no," I said to the obstinate geezer, "think about it. Okay, Pop?"

"Hell," he said, and snapped to another page in the *Sun-Times*. Ignoring me. He was an Army clerk in an ordnance-maintenance company in the Good War. He landed at H-plus-eight at Omaha Beach, set up his folding desk and portable typewriter, and promptly began clacking out forms. That's the kind of guy my father is. Nose to the grindstone, even under enemy fire.

I pushed through the door into the kitchen. Several scones were cooling on a rack on the kitchen table. Mum was scrubbing down the stovetop, humming something that is, no doubt, English. I didn't recognize it.

I picked up a scone. It was barely warm. I took a bite from it. It was light and golden, with just the right amount of unsalted butter. She'd added a trace of nutmeg to the dough, I noticed. My wife stomped through the kitchen above, rattling the kitchen light fixture.

"Oh, that witch. She's a crafty one, isn't she?" Mum said. She stopped burnishing the stovetop for a moment. "It's too bad your father isn't Italian, isn't it? He could have a few of those lads drop by for a little chat, eh?"

"That's still my wife you're talking about, in case you've forgotten," I said. "You should come work for me," I said, cleverly changing the subject. "Just come by and make some scones in the morning. All those richies from Andersonville would love them."

“Oh, our Richard makes them their tortes, though, doesn't he?” she said.

“Yes, he does,” I said. It's odd—two over-educated guys employed by an engineering company downtown in the Loop, both half-and-halves (Rich is half-Polish and half-Mexican), and both obsessed with baking. Rich is a master torte baker. He makes these tiny Sacher tortes, four inches in diameter, perfectly round with “Sacher” written on top in dark chocolate—and here he is with a master's degree in English from Notre Dame. And he's from Chicago just like me, but sounds like a British lord when he orates to our bun and coffee crowd. I met him at the engineering corporation after eating one of his tortes. He would bring them to work and leave them near the coffee machine, then slump off toward his office to write loathsome speeches with phrases like, “in the coming fiscal quarter” and “paradigm shift” and “we have to be proactive” in them. He hated it.

I hated engineering. I was on a proactive, paradigm-shifting team helping to design a new sprocket in time for the coming fiscal quarter and spent most of my day in a cubicle pouring over specs and charts and diagrams. My wife was overjoyed with the job, but I abhorred it. After work, most days, I'd go to a bar adjacent to our crumbling building on Near North Michigan Avenue and drink myself silly. Then I'd go home and trip over some new acquisition from a shopping channel.

It was killing me.

So one day I looked up Rich Lara, and said to him, “We could make a million dollars off your tortes.”

He replied, “It will be a day marked by revelry when I quit this berth of excruciating torment.” I liked him immediately. Little chocolate crumbs fell from his beard, cascading across his belly, covered over by the standard Oxford button-down shirt, and a stained regimental tie.

That's the day my new life started.

But on this day, another new life—this one I had no use for—seemed to be barreling down the tracks toward me. I'd come home on my lunch break to reason with my wife. But as soon as I'd walked up to the two-flat, my stomach clenched. I found myself unable to go upstairs, beg her, "Please stay." Instead, I dropped in on my parents. I left the half-eaten scone on the cooling rack and stared over at my mother's back. I wiped my hands off on my cute chef's pants festooned with dancing cartoon muffins. Here's the rest of my life, I thought. I lightly grasped Mum's shoulders and she accepted a kiss on the cheek, and I left her there. She probably cleaned the stove twice more.

I walked out the door, putting on my coat as I left. "Think about it, Pop," I said. He didn't acknowledge me; merely snapped the tabloid to the next page. "Mayor to Press: 'Go to back to the suburbs!'" He may not have heard me.

It was nearly the end of March, and the first official day of spring, but the wind still howled along and it was 15 degrees outside, if you counted the wind chill factor, and the weather guys always do. Frozen green spittle twinkled on the sidewalk like emeralds. It was still flu season, but soon allergy season would arrive. Trash blew along beside me, racing me toward the bakery, accompanying me up Clark. I was worried about Rich because he didn't react well to customers, especially if there was more than one to wait on. I pulled open the door and hurried inside to find him arguing with a squat old woman, probably a lifelong drunk judging from her skin tone—like a summer squash—and the busted capillaries on her bulbous nose.

"Madam," Rich said, puffing up his chest, "I assure you that we do not now, nor have we ever, sold lottery tickets."

"I bought some here yesterday!" She wore mushy gray orthopedic shoes with Velcro straps, sagging hosiery, a well-worn woolen skirt—fraying, an Afghan off somebody's couch—and a hat composed of beer cans and yarn. A lit cigarette dangled from the side of her poorly painted mouth.

"Ye Gods, woman!" Rich howled.

"Next door, lady," I said, thumbing.

"What?" she yelped, spinning around quickly.

"You were in here yesterday. Next door, I told you. Remember?"

"Oh, yes," she said, surprised at herself. She pushed past me, out the door. Ding-a-ling.

"Oh, I do feel for the penurious public swarming amongst us," Rich said, sweating heavily. "But—" He stopped himself. "Must I go on?"

"You must not," I said. "Ye Gods, you must not."

"Don't mock," Rich said.

"I shan't." I took my place behind the counter. A queen-sized bed would completely fill our storefront. Behind the counter, barely enough room existed for two men to stand side-by-side.

"Shall we dine?" Rich asked. This was our code for *Shall we smoke cigarettes?* a habit that we shared, and that neither one of us will give up no matter how much my daughter harasses us. At school, they are teaching her to be a zealot for worthy causes instead of teaching her to read and add and reason. I would send her to a Catholic school, but most of them are shutting down. Besides, she has to learn to deal with regular people if she wants to get through life. She did manage to talk my mother into giving up smoking, one of the few joys of her life, by repeated asking her to please stop killing herself. She tried this tack with my father and his cigars, but he laughed at her and mocked her tiny voice, a little girl version of mine, "*Please don't die, Grampa! Ha, ha, ha!*"

"Let us dine," I said, and I slipped past him to our smoking table, set up directly behind the thin wall separating the actual bakery from the section where we shill our wares. I tapped out two cigarettes from our pack of Marlboro 100's and handed one to Rich. We simultaneously lit them with our matching Zippo lighters, emblazoned with the slogan for our bakery: "The Full Moon. Elegant European Pastries." The slogan was Rich's idea, back when the bakery was

bleeding money. He not only came up with the slogan—and painted it on the green vinyl awning hanging out front—he insisted that we double our prices and serve five-dollar-a-cup flavored coffee. I went along with the plan, and soon we couldn't keep the Andersonville yuppies out. Because of Rich, we are both fabulously well-to-do.

A sports commentator on the little radio on the smoking table was going on and on about the Cubs' dismal, he said, prospects. "Dey won't finish in da top tree in da central," he barked out.

"Sox fan," I snarled. "Dirty rotten Sox fan."

"Huh? What's that?" Rich said, looking up. I'm six-foot-two and 155 pounds. He's five-foot-six and about 220. We're the Mutt and Jeff of the Chicago baking world.

"Nothing," I said. "This guy pisses me off."

"Honestly, I don't fathom why you listen," Rich said, thumbing the chin of his beard. "Sports! I once devoted my heart, slavishly, to the Bears, and now look at them."

"It's all the failure that kind of sucks me in," I said, puffing away, making a pig of myself with the cigarette. "I don't understand it."

"I think back to the 1984 Bears. In this town, it's all we've got," he said.

"What about Jordan?"

"Ah, Jordan," he whispered softly. We both leaned against the wall, eyes dreamy with past victories.

Ding! went the bell.

We both stubbed out our smokes guiltily, like our mothers had caught us masturbating in the hall bathroom, and pushed toward the front to wait on whatever yuppie was waiting for us there.



We sat three across in my father's 1973 Dodge Dart Swinger, a rusting two-door heap with bench seats in the front and a mountain of rubbish in the back. It's a rolling gaper's block. My father's habit is to drive along consuming food and cigars and pop, and tossing

wrappers and other remains over his right shoulder. He cleans his car out about once a decade.

We were moving along the Dan Ryan at a scary clip, at 40 miles per hour, while frighteningly large and fast automobiles, SUVs and trucks barreled past us, leaning on their horns. This was one of the many downsides to begging a ride off my father. Another was Pop's reaction to all the horn blowing, which was to tell them all to burn in hell, or accuse them of being rats' asses. I had to fight the urge to cover my daughter's ears. She sat between us, oblivious to all the danger and swearing, twirling the knobs on the ancient AM radio encased in the middle of the dash. She was far too small for her age, with wheat-colored hair, bouncing her feet merrily in front of her. She had on jeans, pink gym shoes, a Cubs sweatshirt, and a Cubs ballcap that was much too large for her head. I was bringing her up right. She was only eight, but already a diehard like me. Go ahead and ask her sometime how many homeruns Ernie Banks hit. She'll fire right back with, "At Wrigley, or overall?"

I was always small for my age, too, growing up, except for my eyes. They were huge and brown—and soulful, I was told. Grown women who I had never seen before would walk up to me on the street, my mother by my side, ask if I was hers, then kneel down and pinch my cheeks—or worse yet pick me up from under my arms. It got to be so I couldn't stand to be touched with all these strange people handling me. "Look at his eyes," these strange women would say. "He's a doll. He's precious! Oh I could just take him home." It was frightening. I looked to my mother, who would beam approvingly at all this kidnapping-talk. To this day I don't like being touched, grabbed at. Pawed.

I was small until my teenaged years, and even then I never got really big, just taller. And still, the damned eyes got me more attention from older women, mostly teachers, or the married women who were customers of the butcher shop that I made deliveries for.

The eyes also got me undue attention from high school jock-types, which looked for weakness wherever they could find it, and found it in my eyes. “Hi, Elwin,” they’d say in a girlish falsetto, then slam me into a locker, laughing.

My female teachers loved me. “I can tell you’re sensitive,” they’d say.

“No I’m not!” I wanted to scream. “I’m not!” I never spoke up. Never said a word.

I took to practicing at home in front of a mirror. I studied other kids at school, trying to develop that sullen, distant look they all had. I stared into my own eyes, working on dulling them. I practiced scowling. “Normal, normal, normal...” I whispered to the abnormal reflection.

It worked.

“God,” one of the girls who deigned to date me said, “for a while there we all thought you were some sensitive artist, or something.”

“Naw,” I said, scowling, looking away. “Not me.”

I looked down at my daughter. I realized that I rarely touch her. Through the windshield, Miller Park loomed. I tapped her lightly on the shoulder with the tip of my index finger, then pointed out the ballpark.

“Yuck,” she said, then covered her mouth with her hand, pantomiming that she might throw up.

Let me make this clear:

Outside, the new Brewers home is a monstrosity. It is beyond ugly, like a giant spaceship from the Planet of SteelWorkers Local 505 has crash-landed in America’s heartland, probably in search of beer. And a brat to go along with that beer. Through the haze of late winter, early spring, we saw the thing nestled in a pit of destruction. The rubble came from the old stadium, which had a tacky charm to it until the wrecking ball smashed it to bits.

Inside, the Brewers had somehow managed to transfer a bit of the charm of the old ballpark to the new. We took our seats, and a cere-

mony was performed with the construction workers who had built the stadium. Then a bricklayer sang the National Anthem off key, which was actually kind of nice. As a rabid baseball fan, I hear the National Anthem more often than most people do. I've heard it sung as a soul song, as a blues ballad, as a screeching howl, as a barbershop quartet song, as a folk song... Pretty much every which way. And frankly, I still can't make heads or tails of the lyrics. But I've found the song is always best when sung by a regular Joe accompanied by a pump organ.

Frank, my father, turned to me afterward and said, "Jeez, you would have thought they'd have gone and found a pro to do it."

"It wasn't that bad, Pop," I said.

"It was okay," Tiff said. "This isn't really a bad stadium."

"But it isn't..." I prompted.

She coughed into her tiny fist, then orated: "But it isn't Wrigley." She's a peach, my daughter!

At the end of a disappointing, slow game, they opened up the roof. It crept open like a titanic ladybug unfurling its wings, slowly, over about 15 minutes, while a Strauss waltz blasted over the loudspeakers. From an engineering standpoint, it was marvelous. But, I'll tell you, from a baseball standpoint, I didn't like it. Part of baseball is getting rained out. It's a fact that every team should have to live with. Plus, getting rained out creates doubleheaders. Nothing like a doubleheader.



"Shoot me now. It would be a mercy killing. Two pitches, two runs. Is that any way to start off a season?" I had bolted a TV set into the wall above the counter. I didn't go to engineering school for nothing.

"He never says a word, and now he won't shut up," said an old veteran, waiting for an out-of-season paczki. Paczkis are only supposed to be made directly before lent. But I always have a supply on hand

for a few select customers, just because they'd asked me to. The Polish-American League would probably have my ass if they ever found out.

"The Cubs," Rich said. It was all the explanation he had to give during this wonderful time of the year. "The Cubs."

Covered with flour, racing out of the room between innings to check on the ovens, then racing back up front to watch more. It's a sickness, but a good one. You can love things worse than baseball.

The Cubs came roaring back in the sixth, tied up the game on a grounder by Girardi, the venerable catcher from the 1989 season, who'd returned from New York to help lead us to the promised land. "And Lieber!" I shouted. "After the first two pitches, he calmed down. He'll be a workhorse in the season ahead."

Baylor tapped his left arm, bringing Heredia out of the bullpen.

"Heredia!" I shouted.

The old veteran was unimpressed. "Bah! Dere still da Cubs." Then Girardi, right above the old man's head, tossed a perfect strike to second to nail a stealing Vladimir Guerrero, the Expos' lone superstar.

"Nailed him!"

"I'll be back when baseball season is done," the old man said. He left with a ringing of bells above his head.

The game flailed along until the Cubs lost. I had the white flag with the blue "W" on it ready to display in the bakery window, but had to fold it back up and slide it under the cash register for another time. I flipped off the set and leaned dejectedly on the counter.

Jimmy the Cop and his partner Mike the Cop came by to taunt me. Both are White Sox fans. "Da years of futility continue," Jimmy went, laughing.

Mike said, "Oh da glorious pain! Hey, didja hear how Wells shut down da Indians?" David Wells is their new pitcher, a large biker-type guy who I kind of like, despite his being part of the hated enemy club.

"Yeah," I said.

Jimmy and Mike were both big guys, due at least in part to a constant supply of heavy pastries donated by me for the greater good of the South Foster business community. I feel safer with the two of them hanging around, obviously, despite my mostly yuppie clientele. Rich and I make regular old doughnuts and other sweets for them, and they reciprocate by razzing my Cubs every chance they get.

Jimmy tells me, "Jeez, Elwin. Yer killin me wit dem good doughnuts."

"Least I can do for a good Sox fan, Jimmy," I replied.

"Where's dat white flag?" Mike asked. "You won't be needing it, and I need ta blow my nose."

"You'll need a bigger hanky than that," I told him. Jimmy laughed hard. Mike's a little sensitive about his big Greek honker.

"Saw yer daughter walkin ta school da udder day," Jimmy said. "She's gonna be a heartbreaker dere Elwin. But, jeez, she don walk wit no one. She din even look up when I honked my horn."

"She's a little shy," I said.

Mike piped in. "Ah, dey grow outta dat."

"Before I forget," I said. I ducked into the back and brought out some doughnuts in a big white box. "Try these out. We've been noodling around with a slightly different recipe. Also, I tossed in some mandlova hmota."

"Dat's 'marzipan,' you Greek fuck," Jimmy said to Mike.

"Fuckin Bohunks," Mike said.

Rich came out of the back swathed in a swirl of tobacco smoke. "Oh," he said. "I didn't realize you gentleman were here."

"Hey dere," they both said.

"We got ta blow," Jimmy said. "Tanks fer da sweets. Dey might not make it back to da station house."

"Yeah," Mike said. "Dis here fat bastard'll eat em up before we get in da cruiser."

We all laughed. Rich waved goodbye. "I don't think they like me," he said.



Cupcake left the apartment early, with a sack of clothing under her arm. She was moving out, bit-by-bit. I don't work on Saturdays. I watched her from half-closed eyes, cramped up on the living room couch, where she's exiled me until her departure. I waited ten minutes, then got up and rechecked the train schedule on the Internet. I had ten minutes to get down to the Ravenswood station. I had plans.

I pulled on a pair of jeans, and kissed my sleeping daughter on the forehead. She knew enough to go downstairs and hang out with Grampa and Grandma when I was gone. I slipped a note under my parents' door, just to make sure they'd go up and check on her, then jogged down to the train station. I arrived about a minute before the train. I saw Cupcake's big tangle of blond hair bobbing on the other end of the platform, and nodded to myself.

"So it's off to Winnetka," I muttered to myself. "To punch Sam the Dentist in the face."

I brought along a tiny radio with headphones in case I couldn't make it back in time for the 12:05 start.

I planned to catch them together. I planned to pull him off my wife and slug him right in the kisser. It was vivid in my head, the scene, playing over and over. I would teach him a lesson about monkeying around with some other guy's wife. I imagined him having a thick, black pompadour, for some reason. And wearing one of those old fashioned white doctor's smocks with buttons along the breast. I would make him cry in front of Cupcake. I would say to Cupcake, "There's your big man." Or something like that. I wasn't thinking clearly.

I thought, "Boy did Kerry Wood's fastball look live on Wednesday. I think he's pitching again Monday."

I sat in an upper deck seat and bought a weekend pass ticket from the youngish conductor, who had a tiny pigtail poking out from

underneath his conductor's hat. I was in the lead car, and Cupcake, I'm pretty sure, was sitting in the back car.

I met Cupcake on my way back home from Saudi Arabia. It was my final trip. I'd quit Aramco, and wasn't sure what I was going to do next. She sat down next to me on the London to Chicago run. She told me she'd just finished backpacking through Europe after graduating from Loyola, where she'd earned a degree in business. I nodded a lot, like I always do with people. She talked about herself, sometimes in the third person, "Cupcake learned a lesson that day, I'll tell you," she said at one point. "Cupcake appreciates what a good listener you are," she informed me.

"Thanks," I said. Actually, I'd tuned her out after the first hour, and just stared at her. She had these magnificent lips and tiny button nose. And she was built like Jayne Mansfield. My heart jackhammered. I thought it might explode.

"What?" she went.

"Thanks." I spoke up a little.

"What do you do?" she asked me. We were three hours into the flight by that time.

"I'm an engineer," I said. "Just getting back from Saudi."

"That's so fascinating," she said, and launched into a soliloquy about an engineering student she knew who was making six figures now working for the Brits in the North Sea.

I desperately wanted to feel her up. As she spoke, her wonderful breasts bobbed up and down. Her bra wasn't up to the task, and my mind wandered a bit about how to construct a better bra.

I hadn't had sex since a trip to Bahrain a couple years before that, where I'd met an Irish nurse. I'd promised to call her, but things didn't pan out. You know.

At the end of the flight, Cupcake and I swapped phone numbers; I gave her my parents' number. They were still living in Cicero at that time. I soon bought the two-flat, and got my job at the engineering firm down in the Loop. We began dating, mostly going to malls or

strolling down Michigan Avenue. We took in many big Hollywood movies. I was hungry for normal American culture having just returned from a pretty strict religious place. Before I knew it, she was picking out suits for me to wear to corporate outings and parties, to which I escorted her. She had no job. She lived with her parents in Berwyn, but never let me pick her up out there. I was always to meet her at some trendy coffee shop or other near where I worked. I found out later that she was embarrassed that her parents worked for a living. Her mother was a housekeeper, and her father a bricklayer.

One day, about four months into our courtship, she told me she was pregnant. I did the right thing and dropped to one knee. We were married at the Schaumburg Marriott in an elaborate, but secular, ceremony, and jetted to Las Vegas for our honeymoon. I paid for everything. Her father was grateful. During the reception, drunk, he told me that if we ever got divorced, he'd definitely take my side. "I love her," he slurred. "But she's a piece of work." And he slapped my back.

Two years later, our daughter Tiffany was born.

"Long pregnancy," I noted in my usual, unheard mutter.

The train hissed to a stop in Winnetka. I stumbled out the door and realized that we were the only two getting off here. I leapt behind a trashcan, a junior Maxwell Smart. She tromped away at the opposite end of the platform. I followed at a discrete distance, humming the theme song from *Secret Agent Man*. The wind picked up and began to move objects along the street. I noted that a tree had blown over and was being stripped of its few budding leaves. We were in a tony neighborhood now, now leaning against the wind. My Cubs hat jerked off my head and tumbled behind me. I ran after it and found, upon retrieving it, that I'd lost my wife. I stumbled against the wind, my hatbrim stuffed in the back of my jeans, eyes watering. From behind a brick and mortar palace, a stop sign came tumbling along and bounded, end-over-end, toward me. I dodged a moment too late and was bashed square in the forehead. I found myself on my knees

atop a carpet of brownish grass, holding my head and feeling blood dribbling between my fingers, dripping into my eyes, blinding me. Two pairs of hands helped me to my feet and hustled me indoors.

"It's my husband," my wife stated blandly above the howling wind. "He must have followed me."

"Let's get him to the bathroom, see what kind of damage we have here," a youngish voice said. I thought it must be Son of Sam, but Doctor Sam doesn't like kids. They sat me on the toilet and cleaned my face with a wet washcloth. I opened my eyes and saw an earnest young man, black hair and white teeth. He was wearing a Pavement tee-shirt and smiled tenuously at me.

"Sam?" I asked him.

My wife bandaged my forehead with a white square and surgical tape.

"You're not going to hit me, are you?" the boy asked.

"No," I said, my plan changed suddenly. "I just wanted to meet you."

He held out his hand and I shook it. "Sorry," he said.

"About my forehead?" I asked.

"About everything," he replied earnestly.

"Sam!" a matronly voice demanded.

"Yes, mother?"

"Do you have more visitors?"

"Yes, mother." He shot me an apologetic glance, a wince, and left the room.

"His mother thinks Cupcake's a harlot," my wife said, affixing more tape to the sterile pad.

"She's right," I said.

Cupcake cuffed me in the ear. "You really yelped when that sign hit you," she said. "Loudest sound I've heard from you in ten years." I shrugged.

"That's your answer to everything," she said disgustedly.

"It's not nice to be mean to a cripple," I said.

“Muh-muh-muh, muh-muh-muh, muh-muh-muh,” she muttered mockingly, pretending she couldn’t hear what I said.

“I need a cigarette,” I said, blinking some residual blood from my eye.

“You can’t smoke in here,” she snapped. “These are *nice people*. Well-to-do people.”

“Christ,” I said.

“Don’t ruin this for Cupcake,” she said. “And don’t call me ‘Cupcake’ either. Call me ‘Prudence.’”

“Your name isn’t ‘Prudence.’ It’s ‘Catherine.’”

“So what?”

“Um...”

“That’s what I thought. In fact, let’s just get you out of here.” She stood me up and dragged me by the hand down the hall, away from the voices, like I was an errant child. We passed by the Polish maid, who was, as it turned out, my future ex-mother-in-law. “Katerina,” I said, nodding.

“What’s he doing here?” she asked, plump and angry.

“Leaving,” the wife said. And I was shoved out the back door.



Midway through the season, my wife made her escape. The Cubs were, shockingly, in first place in the Central. Sam the Dentist had graduated from Northwestern’s dental school, and became an actual dentist instead of a student one. He and my wife had met at a They Might Be Giants concert at the Aragon Ballroom, a few blocks from my two-flat, the year before.

My wife has no interest in music, especially anything involving accordions, which smacks of being lower class or ethnic. I suspect that Katerina had something to do with the chance meeting, perhaps finding a ticket in his coat when she was doing his laundry, or overhearing dinner conversation. Katerina probably provided Cupcake with a photo. I’m just imagining this. I have no hard proof.

I realize that I may have made her out to be a villain, but Cupcake had been a good companion to me over the years. Her business degree came in handy more than once for the bakery. She was mostly kind to Tiffany, and me too. She bundled us up when it was cold, was unfailingly cheerful for the most part, and supportive in her own modest way of the whole bakery thing. Plus, she's a Cubs fan despite her father's loyalty to the Sox. I wouldn't have wanted a mixed marriage.

But I suppose my mother-in-law found me lacking in suitability once I left engineering. My wife agreed. They found a new professional, and one young enough to be cowed.

Sam was to take over his uncle's dental practice in Sarasota, Florida, soon, where old people's teeth are rotting out of their heads at a preposterous rate.

I came home from work, dusted with flour, needing sleep. My father-in-law was standing outside, a Sox cap crumpled on his head. "How's Wells working out?" I asked him.

"Ah, shut the hell up," he grumbled good-naturedly. He gave every appearance of a man who was embarrassed. He couldn't look me in the eye. Wells, by the way, wasn't working out. Maybe that embarrassed him. He rubbed the tip of his scuffed work boot against the colored chalk drawing of Ron Coomer that my daughter had rendered on the sidewalk. Coomer was batting in the drawing. Coomer was shaped like a Cubbie-blue meatball, a teardrop of tobacco-spittle ejecting from his round mouth. "Ptooiie!" she'd written above it, in case somebody may have missed the point. He was a great bubble of ballplayer in home blue pinstripes. "She's a heck of an artist, our Tiffany," he commented.

"Yes, she is," I said.

"Didn't I tell you?" he said, looking up at me. "Didn't I try to warn you?"

It took me a moment to change gears. "At the wedding," I said.

“Why’re you bringing up my granddaughter to be a Cubs fan? You want her heart to be broken, over and over?”

“Maybe that’s helpful,” I said. “Maybe it’s good practice for the rest of life.” He had to lean in close to hear what I said. He shook his head at me like I was an idiot, then gave me a timid smile. “You’re always welcome here, Al,” I said, using his first name for the first time.

“Thanks, Elwin,” he said, slapping a callused hand around the back of my neck like he was going to give me a hug. He left it there for a second, then withdrew it.

“Dad!” I heard from the second floor.

We both looked up. It was Al’s daughter, not mine. I should have known. Tiffany never yells.

Sam the Dentist pulled up in a U-Haul. He tried double-parking on the street until a horn-blast convinced him he should do otherwise. Suburbanites never know how to park in the city. I told him to pull around back to the alley. At least I was going to get rid of all of Cupcake’s useless crap now.



“Now, I don’t want you to take your mother’s leaving personally,” I advised Tiffany. We were in the upperdeck, section 523, next to the press box. We were both wearing our complementary Cubs giveaway sunglasses, even though it was drizzling. The Kansas City Royals were out on the field, last place in the AL Central, making the Cubs look like losers, even though they were still in first in the NL Central. Kerry Wood was throwing hard, but had no movement on his fast-ball.

“It’s not my fault,” Tiffany said. “I know that.” She was standing on her seat so she could speak into my ear. “It’s yours.”

I jerked back as if struck. She was smirking at me. At some point in your life, you realize that your kid is smarter than you think. In fact, you realize she’s smarter than you are.

I laughed and gave her a hug. That's my girl! It was a strange, awkward moment for both of us. It was our first hug.

Crack! We both looked out in time to see the ball leap out of the yard, out onto Waveland Avenue. The Royal sprinted around the bases. The ball, as is the custom, came flying back onto the field, to the cheers of the crowd. Some ballhawk out there had a tremendous arm.

"Give dat guy a contract!" a fat guy shouted behind me. He had an Old Style in one hand and a brat in the other. He and five other gents were wearing monk's robes that were Cubbie blue. They all wore the floppy hats from Floppy Hat Day. They were all rotund gentlemen.

A half-inning later, we found out who they were. Ron Coomer ambled up to the plate, spitting, adjusting himself. We heard behind us a low chant. "COO-MER, COO-MER, COO-MER, COO-MER," and turned around to find that the six men had stood up and pulled open their robes to reveal their bare, painted bellies. C-O-O-M-E-R. All in red. Each jiggling belly a letter. Each man with a mystical devotion to Coomer. Coomer took a strike. The chants grew louder. Coomer took a ball. The chants continued to swell. Coomer popped a fly into the left field stands behind the Cubs' dugout. The chants became shouts. Coomer peered up in our direction, shielding his eyes from the misting rain. The Coomer monks went wild. The next pitch was sent into left center, and Coomer chugged into second safely as sloshed beer rained down on my daughter and me. "Yay, Coomer!" my daughter shouted, the loudest I'd ever heard her. She didn't cry that loud when she had colic as a baby.

The Coomer monks all gave her a pat on the back with their brat hands, swilling beer at the same time. It takes talent to be a Coomer monk, I noted. And girth. I had a lot of work to do if I wanted to be one of them. But standing there at Wrigley Field I was, at that moment, willing to give it a try.

My daughter's back was speckled with mustard and pickle relish, and she loved it.

Ammo Dump, or Your First Forty-Eight Hours in-Country

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The Army Sing-a-long Page

Ain't no use in going back
Jody's got your Cadillac

Ain't no use in calling home
Jody's got your girl and gone

Ain't no use in feeling blue
Jody's got your sister too

Mama Mama can't you see?
What the Army's done for me

Mama Mama can't you see?
This Army life is good for me...

Pebbles and Bam-Bam on a Friday night
Trying to get to heaven on a paper kite
Lightning struck (BOOM) and down they
fell (AHHH)
Instead of getting to heaven, they went
straight to hell...

Drip-drop, drip-pi-ty-drip-drop
Sit-tin' on a hill-top, raindrops on my head
My baby left me, she left me for dead...

PFC Wiley Lighthouse was dreaming of an orange creamsicle when he was bounced awake.

“Motherfucker!” shouted the PFC sitting in front of him on the Mercedes-Benz 40-passenger bus. The PFC had been swearing non-stop, it seemed, since they’d landed at Rhein-Main Air Force Base.

When they’d landed, the PFC had been forced to load all of the soldiers’ duffel bags into the back of a pale-green Army schoolbus. There were some 70-odd soldiers milling around the airport terminal, all of them looking a little shell-shocked from the long flight over the Atlantic. A sergeant had pointed directly at the little PFC and told him to up-load all the arriving soldiers’ duffel bags into the back of the school bus, behind the emergency exit door.

“Me!” he shrieked at the sergeant. “It’s always me!”

No one seemed to notice how angry he was.

The bus traveled all of a hundred yards, over to the 21st Replacement Depot headquarters building, across the street from the airplane terminal. The sergeant pointed at the PFC again and told him to off-load the bags. “Jesus Fucking Christ!” shouted the PFC, and he began tossing the bags from the back of the ancient, wheezing vehicle.

The rest of the soldiers were shepherded upstairs into a massive waiting room filled with row-upon-row of metal folding chairs, which they all plopped into, one each. Lighthouse was in the middle of the crowd, staring off into space, relaxing. He'd always found it easy to relax, especially after popping a couple of valiums. He peered around the room through his blue-gray, expressionless eyes, trying to take in something, anything. He floated off, imagining himself on a charter boat in the Gulf of Mexico, drifting across a wide expanse of gunmetal-colored water, maybe feeding some seagulls that had followed the boat from shore.

As the line moved along, each soldier would butt-hop to the next chair. Then when they got to the end of a row, they'd pop up and move up one row. It was all very orderly, thought Lighthouse. He smiled. He'd forgotten who'd given him the two precious pills, but whoever it was, he felt warmly disposed toward him. Or her. He'd gone to Fort Benjamin Harrison for his advanced training, and most of the personnel there were females. Come to think of it, he was in one of the only male companies in his battalion when he was in basic training at Fort McClellan.

"Next! NEXT!" shouted a corporal from behind one of the cubicles in front of him.

"Whoa," went Lighthouse. "I'm next." He was seated in the first chair and hadn't realized it. "Cool."

"Get your ass over here, private! I don't have all day!" shouted the corporal. He didn't seem very tall. But what he lacked in height, he made up for in rage. Everyone in the Army seemed enraged, like someone had bilked them all out of their life's savings. Lighthouse walked over toward the corporal, but before he got there, the corporal had ducked behind the flimsy walls of his cubicle and sat down.

Lighthouse had wanted to stand next to him and compare heights. "Oh, well," he sighed. "Another lost opportunity."

"So you're a PFC, huh?" asked the corporal, not expecting an answer and not receiving one.

Lighthouse reached over and felt the single stripe and rocker on his arm as if the corporal's question was a revelation.

"Lemme see your orders," said the corporal, and he snatched the sheet of paper out of Lighthouse's hand. The corporal pecked into a little keyboard attached to what appeared to be a 9-inch television with tiny pea-green lettering dancing across the screen. The corporal slapped the orders onto the desk and slid them over to Lighthouse.

Lighthouse blinked rapidly. He hadn't realized that he had had the orders in his hand when they *were* in his hand. And now they were being slid over to him on the desk, an ugly metal and Formica Eisenhower-era desk. What were these guys doing with all the money Reagan was tossing their way? Lighthouse reached over tentatively, as if unsure that the orders were really his.

"Seventy-one-lima, huh?" asked the corporal. Another theoretical question. His name started with an SCH, but Lighthouse couldn't make out the rest. He squinted over, but couldn't force his eyes to focus on the corporal's nametape, stitched onto the front of his woodland camouflage BDU blouse. "Me, too. How is old Fort Ben these days? Man, I miss it. I really do. There's no better place in the whole fucking miserable Army. You'll find that out. Shit, what I wouldn't give for some orders sending me back there, maybe as an instructor. You got pussy, and explosives. You can't go wro—" And the computer beeped at him. "Hey, you already had follow-on orders. You don't see that every day. Especially for a PFC." He stared into the tiny screen. "You poor motherfucker," he said. "I'll print out your new orders and make a few copies for you."

Lighthouse was staring out the window at the American flag, which had wrapped itself around the flagpole. It seemed to be humping the flagpole. "What?" he said, suddenly brought back into the building.

"You're going to Camp Fuckhead," said the corporal. "Hey, at least you get remote location pay."

“I’m at the end of the line! Of course!” Lighthouse heard the angry PFC shriek behind him somewhere, out in the massive waiting room. “Typical!”

Later, they had to watch a video called, “Your First Forty-Eight Hours In-Country,” which made the specious claim that you could control your own destiny through the way you acted during your first two days in your new unit. “Your conduct during this crucial time will determine how your new leaders will view you. Do you want to make it to the next paygrade? Remember your bearing!” “Bull-fucking-shit,” noted the angry PFC. He glared around the room, challenging someone to disagree with him. He received bored stares in reply.

Now the two of them were on the same bus, heading down to Mannheim. The PFC shouted at the driver, an elderly German civilian, “Hey, buddy! You think you can hit a few more potholes?”

Lighthouse considered giving the PFC one of his precious valiums. He’d found an entire vial filled to the brim in his musette bag. The label had been peeled off, which explained the mysterious gummy residue under his thumbnail.

He thought about tangy orangeness wrapped around a creamy center. It was wonderful. His mouth watered. What he wouldn’t give for a creamsicle right now. He scratched the stubble on the side of his head, where he used to have long, sunbleached hair that cascaded down to his shoulders. None of his stoner buddies from New College would recognize him now. As far as all those people back in Sarasota, Florida were concerned, he may as well have disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Maybe he had. “What is a man?” Lighthouse asked the angry PFC in front of him. “Is he just an assemblage of tics and mannerisms? A haircut and clipped toenails?”

“You haven’t said a word in, what, twelve, twenty-four hours, and this is what you have to say? It sounds like crap philosophy to me!”

he raged. The little Pfc.'s eyes were wild. Someone with a sense of humor had issued him a Class A uniform one size too big.

"I'm just saying, am I the same man who joined the Army six months ago, or has the Army transformed me into something else?" Lighthouse asked. He had been a philosophy major in college, had graduated with honors from the honors college of the state of Florida, and this sort of drivel was all that was left five years and a thousand joints after graduation. For a moment, Lighthouse knew that what he said was beneath freshman philosophy, and that it wasn't even remotely deep. It was stoner philosophy, something to be expressed over a bong in a dorm room while everyone was tripping.

"Somebody shoot me!" demanded the PFC. Spit flew from his lips. "You, there! You shoot me!"

"I would, if I had a weapon and a round," said a second class private. "And, of course, if I could get away with it." He was picking his teeth with a matchbook. The mess hall back at the 21st Repo Depot had served beef that was closer to jerky than the Steamship Round that had been advertised.

Another part of Lighthouse's college education drifted through his brain. "Dostoyevsky."

"Crime and punishment," said the angry little PFC. "Heavy on the 'punishment.'" It sounded like he was grinding his teeth.



PFC Lighthouse and his enraged traveling companion were dropped off unceremoniously at the Mannheim USO. They stood outside for a moment, unsure whether or not to go in. Neither man had had to make a single decision for himself for what seemed to be ages. "Damned if you do, damned if you don't," said the angry PFC, and he barged through the chipped and fading doors and into the dark interior of the club. Lighthouse picked up his bags and followed him in.

A chubby teen girl snapping gum and wrapping it around her finger sat behind a welcome desk. “Welcome,” she said, and giggled mirthlessly.

“Look at this!” the PFC declared. “She looks like the whole rest of my life.”

“The whole rest of your life?” the girl asked.

“We’re new here. What do we do?” asked Lighthouse.

“New?” the girl asked.

“Someone competent?” the PFC went, peering around the girl toward the rear of the club. “Hello?”

“What unit are you going to?” the girl asked Lighthouse.

“I dunno,” Lighthouse replied.

“You got your orders?” she asked him. She was wearing a bulky Snoopy sweatshirt, Lighthouse noticed. Snoopy smiled behind dark sunglasses. He leaned against a light pole.

Lighthouse looked at his hand, thinking that the orders would magically appear there as they had back at the Repo Depot. His hand was empty. He looked around himself for his bags and found them abandoned on the floor near his feet. He dug into the musette bag first and found a sheaf of papers. They were all the same. The corporal back at the Repo Depot thoughtfully had made fifty copies of his orders. Lighthouse handed one to the girl.

She looked at it, then him. “Too bad,” she said. “You’re kinda cute.”

“Are they executing me?”

“Close. They’re sending you off to Camp Fuckhead,” she said in her sweet little voice. “It’s really too bad.”

In civilian life, he wouldn’t have given her a second look. But this was the Army, and she wasn’t half-bad by Army standards. “Maybe I can look you up when I come into town,” he offered.

“Yeah,” she replied, “but you won’t. Because you’ll never make it back here.” She picked up the receiver of an ancient-looking phone.

Something out of the 1950's, by the look of it. And she dialed a number with many digits.

Lighthouse grooved on the sound of the rotary dial. It reminded him of when he was a kid. He reached up and removed the garrison cap from his head and shoved it under an epaulet.

"Yeah," the girl said into the phone. "We have another one here for you.

"Uh, huh.

"Uh, huh.

"No, 71 L. A clerk-typist, right?

"Yeah. Uh, huh.

"Okay.

"Lighthouse.

"Yeah, like a lighthouse. Like on an ocean, or something.

"Uh, huh. First initial 'W.'" She smiled up at Lighthouse. She sucked the gum off her finger and continued chewing and popping it. "Okay," she said finally. "He says it'll take him about two-and-a-half hours. You wanna go somewhere? We can go over to Anthony's and get a couple of slices."

"What about the other guy?" Lighthouse asked.

"Screw him," she said. "He's a jerk. Let him find his own way over to his unit."

Lighthouse looked around. The PFC had disappeared. "Do you know where I can get a creamsicle?"

Four hours later—after Lighthouse and the chubby girl had consumed an entire box of creamsicles, giggling and occasionally holding hands and kissing—a Spec-Four showed up in a dull-green, rusting, Army-issue pickup truck.

He stood with his hands on his hips inside the twin doors of the USO, blunted gray light passing over his head and between his legs. "Where that Lighthouse Dub-yoo at?" he asked.

"That's me," said Lighthouse. He kissed his girlfriend goodbye and picked up his two bags.

“Shee-it. That can’t be right. No fucking way that’s right,” he said, glaring at Lighthouse.

“No, that’s me,” Lighthouse said.

“Fuck *me*. Ain’t you supposed to be a 71-lima?”

“That’s right.”

“But you ain’t no female?”

“No. No I’m not,” Lighthouse said.

“There gonna be some pissed off motherfuckers when we get back to Camp Fuckhead. That’s all I got to say,” he said. And he didn’t say another word during the four-hour trip up through the hills and green valleys and gray drizzle and rustic towns that featured cherubic, rosy-cheeked children and on through the winding lane-and-a-half road that lead to a place called Camp Smith. A sign next to the guardpost said so. The sign also warned against photography. A bored MP smoking a soggy cigarette waved them through the gate. Mist drifted down through the dead twilight air, from a sky of indeterminate height. Dying trees rustled. After the first gate came a second one, and then they were cruising through familiar enough territory. Shabby barracks on the left, and a shabby mess hall on the right. Other buildings were clumped together somewhere past the mess hall and beyond them were more barracks and a motor pool filled with diesel trucks of varying sizes.

“Out,” said the Spec-Four, breaking the silence.

Lighthouse hobbled out and grabbed his bags out of the bed of the truck. They were sopping wet from the drizzle. The pickup zipped away revealing a group of men who reminded Lighthouse of television drug fiends from *Dragnet*, or maybe *Kojak*. A dozen or more men were standing out in the rain hugging themselves and groaning. Lighthouse stood there for a moment. They all recognized him at once for what he was not.

“Tell me you’re not the new 71-lima,” said a tall, thin man with an angular face and tiny round glasses with thick lenses that had steamed over a bit.

“Goddamn it,” said another man. “They promised. *They promised!* This is infamous!”

“*They*, apparently, were fucking with us,” the thin man, Murphy, said. Spec-Four Murphy. His nametape and the rank on his collar gave him away. “I wanted a blond. A big juicy blond.”

“A blond!” another soldier hoarse-whispered.

“Oh!” another one let out.

A jet roared overhead. Murphy checked his watch. “It’s 1800 hours.” He cranked his watch to the correct time.

Lighthouse looked up and saw an A10 Warthog Tank Killer muscling its way through the darkening sky.

“Nothing to worry about, new guy. Just our pals the Air Force practicing to blow us to smithereens,” Murphy stated blandly.

The rest of soldiers stumbled away, grumbling, slamming through the front door of the barracks, and swearing softly under their breaths.

Murphy said, “I suppose I should find you some quarters for the night. Maybe issue you linen.” He walked back toward the barracks. Lighthouse followed him toting his heavier-by-the-minute bags. “Fuck, man. I was really looking forward to that blond.”

“So. Tall dude,” said Lighthouse, “what’s the deal here?”

“Deal?” Murphy asked. “And you can read, can’t you, Lighthouse?” He turned and shoved his nametape into Lighthouse’s face for a moment, then continued on.

“So Murphy, what’s the deal?” Lighthouse asked.

“The deal is we’re 50 miles away from anything resembling an actual town. The deal is we’re in the Army, which is composed of ten-percent females in non-combat units, yet we have a company of 203 men, 204 including you now, and two females. The MP unit that protects this place from all 12 communists who are still at large here in West Germany—and the occasional Green Party types who think we have chemical and nuclear munitions here and protest outside—that MP unit has one female. Their First Sergeant. Who is the tough-

est human fucking being I've ever met on God's green earth. Stay away from their First Sergeant. She can kill you with her eyes alone, and bust you to bits with her bare hands," said Murphy.

He led Lighthouse into the orderly room, and Lighthouse signed the book. He signed into the company, Bravo Company of the 888th Ordnance Battalion (Ammo).

"Wiley?" Murphy went. "That's your first name? What the fuck kind of first name is that?"

"Yeah, dude. That's my name. What's yours?" Lighthouse asked.

"Vincenzo," Murphy went. "And don't shorten it, if that's what you decide to call me. I'm not 'Vinny-Boy,' or 'Vince.' I'm certainly not 'Vin.'"

"So you're sensitive about the name. No problemo," Lighthouse said, leaning on the plywood counter that was coated in uneven globs of latex paint. "So is this where I'll work, Vincenzo?"

"This is it, Wy, my man," Vincenzo said. "I'll be your supervisor until I leave in about six months, then you'll be the company clerk."

"Copacetic," Wiley said.

"You're not from California, are you?" Vincenzo asked suspiciously.

"No, dude. I'm from Sarasota, Florida. Home of the sugar white sands of Siesta Key Beach, bright-blue water and Manatee-killing speedboats," Wiley said. He smiled, showing off his dingy, pot-stained teeth.

"You're not stupid," Vincenzo said with a hint of astonishment in his voice. "But if you're smart, you won't let anyone know how unsmart you are. No one likes a smart guy in this here man's Army." He narrowed his eyes at Wiley. "You've got a degree, don't you? In something useless?"

"Well, as a matter of fact—"

"No, let me guess. I'm good at this." Vincenzo studied him through his tiny goggle glasses. He smiled. "Anthropology," he said finally.

“Philosophy, dude,” Wiley said.

“So close!”

“Specialized in Germans, matter of fact. Late 18th to mid 19th century. Check it out, I write and speak German, too,” Wiley said.

“Don’t even breathe a word of this to anyone else,” Vincenzo said. “This may come in handy.” He grinned evilly thinking of the many things Wiley could be useful for. “One of the many happy duties of a company clerk is deciding quarters assignments. You’ll be bunking with me, Wiley.”

Specialist Four Vincenzo G. Murphy had joined the Army because he was bored and couldn’t think of anything better to do with his time. That was his story and he was sticking to it. He never told anyone the real reason he joined the Army, which he was afraid would make him look chickenshit.

His last job before the Army had been in the only record store in No Trees, Texas. His father had moved the family there after he had retired from the Army as a master sergeant.

We’ll pause for a moment and contemplate Vincenzo G. Murphy. Vincenzo likes big, blond women. Big, big, big blond women. They tap-dance clumsily in his dreams at night and torture him with their juicy bodies during the day—when he’s allowed seeing one, that is.

That’s his Achilles heel.

Vincenzo met a girl named Sandra at work one day. She was oh-so-wonderful. He would think of Sandra’s jiggling body—oh my, oh my, lordy, lordy—and get all squishy inside. He’d run around in circles outside on his father’s ranch, leaping through the air, whirling his arms. His father wanted to be a cowboy, and bought a ranch. Vincenzo ran outside the ranchhouse one night, out past the fences, out onto the open prairie and shouted, “Take me out and shoot me! Take me out to dinner! Take me somewhere and wrestle me to the ground and toy with me! I’m yours!” He wanted desperately to tell that to Sandra, except she was his boss’ wife.

The next morning, she sauntered up to him, him sweating behind the counter, cleaning the vinyl records with a lint-free rag. He couldn't restrain himself any longer and called out: "Lordy! Jiggling!"

She pretended she was annoyed with him after that. And she spent a lot more time in the record store. "Stop looking at me!" she yelled at him while feigning a study of the cover art of Steely Dan's latest release.

"I'm a native son of Texas," he came back with. "Remember the Alamo. Remember Nolan Ryan. Remember the Red Raiders. Keep it coming."

She brought her lunch in one day and ate it in the breakroom, watching Vincenzo on the little TV that was attached to the secret camera. New blood was hard to come by in the tiny West Texas town. Sandra had grown up with, and known, the same people all her life. Vincenzo was different. She couldn't put a finger on it how he was different, but he was.

"My father, Gus, grew up in Texas, but I didn't," he told her one day, while she flipped through the Jazz Instrumentals section.

"I don't care," she snapped at him. Nobody ever came in the record store, hardly. Vincenzo had no idea why it was still open, or why Bondo and his juicy wife needed him to man the register.

"I grew up around the world, the Army world. I'm the first of two kids," he told her. "Woo-eee!"

"Leave me alone," she said, pretending to be interested in a musty record whose cellophane had ripped.

"Stop scrunching your nose up like that. I ain't got the stink!" he shouted at her. He looked out the big glass windows. No one even walked by. Tumbleweed rolled past. "It was luck that got me born in Texas, God's country. I was born at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. *Alamo*. Beat *that*. My brother dropped down the chute in Italy, where my mama was born."

“Please,” she said. “I’m trying to read.” But she wasn’t reading. She was thrilling. She could feel her heart ready to explode. And he wasn’t even her type, whatever that was.

“I’m six foot four and weigh a hundred and sixty-four pounds soaking wet. Hell, a hundred and sixty-four pounds with a bucket of water in each hand. Bony cuss, am I. It’s a body built out of an erector set.”

“Vincenzo,” she said. “Isn’t that your name?”

“You know it’s my name, baby,” Vincenzo said. He was standing next to her now. Now, in front of walls of sheet windows through which anybody in the world could see what they were doing, which was kissing. Kissing hard and deep.

She gasped for air, said, “This isn’t—um. I need—um. What if—”

“Lip lock, sweetie,” Vincenzo said, smiling the smile of the damned. “That’s what you need.”

And they kissed some more.

On a breather, she said, “What if someone sees us?”

“Who? Who the hell’s going to see us?” And he looked out the front window just in time to see her husband, Bondo, glaring in at him. “Bondo!”

“Ack!” Sandra went.

And Vincenzo Murphy galloped out the back door of the No Trees Record Emporium. His father put him on a bus for Midland the next morning, where Vincenzo promptly joined the US Army as a clerk.

“You never even made love to me before you took off running,” he read, sitting across from the new guy, his German-speaking, surfer-stoner-dude-clerk. Specialist Murphy had had another one of those nights, dreaming of a vast prairie populated by a herd of Sandras.

“Check it out. Everywhere I go in the Army, man, they serve the same stuff for breakfast,” PFC Wiley Lighthouse said to him. He did not look well rested. Maybe he never looked well rested, not with those droopy eyes. It usually took a few nights to sleep the jetlag out.

Vincenzo carefully folded the letter up. He'd had it in his constant possession since basic training, had been reading it over and over since that mail call at the rifle range over three years ago. He could smell lilacs in the pages of the letter, and cordite. He put the letter into a plastic sheath and on into the cargo pocket of his BDU pants and continued eating the shit-on-a-shingle that was glommed out before him on the standard serving tray. "Yes, well, my advice to you, Wiley old man, is to never set foot on an Air Force base," Vincenzo said, scraping a hunk of whitish substance onto his fork and forcing it into his mouth.

"Why's that?" asked Wiley.

"The Air Force has *everything*. You'll only end up torturing yourself thinking about how you should've joined the Air Force." Vincenzo had only been in the military for a few years, but considered himself an expert on all aspects of the service, thanks mostly to his Army brat years.

"That's gotta be her," Wiley said, peering over Vincenzo's shoulder.

Vincenzo turned around on the bench and looked toward the beginning of the chow line. The MP First Sergeant was there. He quickly snapped his head around. "Don't look too close," Vincenzo said. "You may turn to stone."

"What time's formation?" Wiley asked, having eaten everything on his tray.

"Banish the thought," Vincenzo said. "We're headquarters. We don't *do* formation."

A soldier sat down next to Wiley, across from Vincenzo. "So, Murphy. Who's your new friend?"

"Private Wiley Lighthouse, meet Special Agent Bob Smith of the CID," Vincenzo said.

The soldier laughed loudly, pounding the table. "You kill me, Murphy. You really do," he said without a hint of jocularly in him.

“He won’t tell us his real name, so I just call him ‘Bob Smith,’” Vincenzo said dryly to Wiley, discussing the other soldier as a lab specimen.

Wiley, Vincenzo noticed, was inching away from Smith.

“The name’s Pete Jackson, Spec-Four, from Omaha,” said the soldier, proffering his hand.

Wiley did not shake it, and continued moving away.

“Sure it is, Bob,” Vincenzo said. “Don’t let Bob here bore you with his cover story,” Vincenzo advised Wiley. “If you have a criminal background, Bob already knows about it. Maybe that’s why Bob is sitting with us today. Bob, is Wiley already in trouble?”

“You know, you’re going to go too far with this CID bit one of these days, Murphy. Then I’ll be in trouble with all the other fellows,” the man claiming to be Pete Jackson, Spec-Four, from Omaha said darkly.

Wiley vibrated visibly now, which Vincenzo decided was a good sign. “Bob showed up on the heels of another CID agent, after that agent caught the USO director embezzling funds from the Christmas kitty. The two of them have almost identical 201 files because cops have no imagination. Almost the same dates on all their identical awards,” Vincenzo said. “Besides, look at the guy, Lighthouse. Come on.”

Lighthouse studied the man from his vantagepoint, a full two ass-lengths away. The man claiming to be Jackson was pretending to enjoy his breakfast, pretending to ignore the two soldiers. “You’re right,” Lighthouse said finally. “He *is* a narc.”

“Ha, ha!” the man claiming to be Jackson went. “Very funny! You two fellows have had your fun! Now don’t go starting any vicious rumors about me. You promise?”

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” PFC Wiley Lighthouse said, grabbing up his tray, jogging away, and dropping it on the rack near the poor slobs on KP. “No offense, Mr. Agent, sir,” Wiley said from the door, before jogging out into the perpetual gray drizzle.

“Despite the fact that you’re not a jiggly blond, I’m glad you came,” Vincenzo said, as the two of them zipped up their field jackets against the cold, moist breeze. “If for no other reason than today is Monday.”

“What happens Monday, asks the dude, not wanting to know,” Wiley said.

“Why, today is Article 15 day,” Vincenzo said, taking out a clove cigarette, not lighting it, and putting it away. “Do you smoke? If not, why not?” Vincenzo reached into another pocket and produced normal cigarettes along with a neon-colored, throwaway lighter.

“Well, I used to smoke, but not tobacco,” Wiley said. “I may be in a little trouble back home.”

“Here, have one,” Vincenzo said, tapping out a Marlboro. “At first, you’ll hate it. But after a while, it’ll be your constant friend. Tobacco is like Catholicism, I think. You can smoke for forty years then give it up and all is forgiven. Two, three years down the line after giving up the cigs you have new lungs. Just like living a life of sin then heading to the confessional. Ain’t life sweet?”

Wiley took the cigarette and Vincenzo lit it for him. He took a deep, joint-like drag and blew the smoke out his nostrils. “Nothing so far.”

“It matters not,” Vincenzo said, putting away the smokes. “Only the habit matters. I get all the best intel around this joint hanging around the butt can.”

Wiley took a deep drag before the cig tip ember winked out in the cold drizzle. He tossed the cigarette down to the wet gravel that composed most of the flooring of the post.

“Why is this place called ‘Camp Fuckhead’ anyway?” Wiley asked him as they entered the barracks through a side door.

“Read the guy’s bio next to the sign out front. You know, the scribbling before it tells you not to take a photo. It reveals all,” Vincenzo said, shaking out of his field jacket and hanging it on a hook on the wall. A line had formed outside the CO’s office, next to the

orderly room, where the two soldiers worked. “Article 15 time. Get ready for some typing.”

Eight soldiers stood at an approximation of parade rest in the hallway. Vincenzo and Wiley skittered past them. The CO sat behind his desk. Vincenzo and Wiley reported. Wiley was introduced to the CO, Captain Raphael Clark. He wasn’t a terribly tall or good-looking man. His face was acne-scarred. He offered Wiley a little out of his packet of Red Man, and after Wiley declined he jammed some more into his mouth and spat lustily into the standard metal trashcan next to his desk. Nailed to the wall, surrounding the men, were a dozen animal traps of varying sizes, all in the set position.

“I see you’re admiring my collection,” Captain Clark said.

“Yes, sir,” Wiley said, scratching his chin. “Interesting.”

“Oh, hell. They’s just *mean*. Traps is mean,” Captain Clark said, squinting at Wiley.

Wiley couldn’t tell if he was fucking with him. “I suppose so, sir.”

“You two boys ready to get to typing?” Captain Clark asked.

“I’ll take first shift, sir,” Vincenzo said, sitting down to the IBM Selectric, which was like set a court stenographer’s, with a little stand and a swivel chair behind it. Vincenzo sat down before his instrument, made a great show of stretching his fingers out, and cranked a standard Army form into it, along with its half-dozen sheets of carbon paper and duplicate copies. “Fire in the hole, sir.”



The secret of Vincenzo’s transformation from a Texas-born yuck with no vocabulary beyond “Lordy! Jiggling!” to a verbose semi-intellectual is that he had to type the same report eight or ten times every Monday and it bored him.

His first few weeks of typing the Monday Article 15’s had been somewhat entertaining. Soldier(s) get in vehicle on Friday night, buy booze, crash into tree. But after a while, he tired of using the same words to describe the same situation, over and over and over. He

wondered if he was a ditto machine. He decided he was not, that he could add some panache to the ordinary. So he went to the library in search of words.

They actually have a library on the tiny outpost. It's next door to the Bombs Away Bowling Alley, which only has a lane-and-a-half of bowling space, and requires an extra soldier to play pin monkey, as there is no modern bowling infrastructure in the Bombs Away.

There was a DA civilian librarian in the library, a lonely ex-GI GS-7 who doubled as the post educational officer. Neither job garnered him any friends, or acquaintances, or even an occasional conversation. Soldiers who had been at Camp Fuckhead six months or more still didn't know he existed. His name was Charles. It said so on the scratched and faded nametag pinned to his threadbare Mr. Rogers sweater. When Vincenzo entered the library/educational center on his third week at Camp Fuckhead, Charles was flipping through a ten-year-old copy of *Army Times* that he'd found under a bookcase that had collapsed in on itself due, perhaps, to entropy. Charles had pushed the whole mess out the back door of the library and onto a similar larger mess of books and collapsed bookcases that had been rotting out back since the end of World War II. He then picked up the old *Army Times* to relive old Army times. The headline on the front of the faded tabloid screamed: DRUG STASH FOUND AT OLD GUARD BARRACKS.

Charles peered up from the newspaper when Vincenzo arrived, a tiny bell ding-a-linging over his head. "Bowling alley's next door," Charles said. He'd been contemplating jerking off in the latrine. He lived in the back of the library, sleeping on a musty Army cot and bathing on odd days at the small gymnasium near the MP barracks.

"I'm looking for the library," Vincenzo said.

Charles blinked several times. "Library," Charles repeated.

"Yes, library," Vincenzo said. "I'm fixin to read a shitload of books."

“Well, well,” Charles said, outwardly calm and inwardly vibrating like a tuning fork.

It began.

Charles took on the project. He fed Vincenzo a constant supply of bookage. He even ordered new books, something he hadn’t done in so long that he had to look up how to do it.

Charles made him read Tim O’Brien, James Jones, Stephen Wright, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow and Evelyn Waugh. Then he led him on a journey through Nabokov, Bukowski, Kerouac, Barry Hannah and Lewis Nordan. Finally—before Vincenzo discovered mail order, and before Charles’ desperate loneliness began to grate heavily on him—Vincenzo was made to read Immanuel Kant. The heavy German philosophy sent Vincenzo crashing out the door. But Charles’ mark had been burnt upon him.

Vincenzo wrote increasingly bizarre accounts of the mundane drunken crash-and-burn Article 15 stories that were fed to him through the testimony of nervous, punchy, horny, overfed, hungover teenaged soldiers. And he noticed that the Texas twang had gone out of his voice, replaced by something else—something that seemed appalling and foreign to him, and that distanced him from the other soldiers more than being company clerk had already done.

In Charles, he saw someone he might someday become—a lonely, twisted crackpot who vapor-trailed behind him a scent that reminded Vincenzo of well-used litterboxes. One day, very deliberately, Vincenzo stopped going to the library.

Charles looked out the window for him for a few days. Then he gave up. The moment he gave up, another bookcase gently collapsed behind him, startling up a pleasant mini-zephyr filled with bits of yellowed paper and dust mites. He pushed the mess of former literature and furniture out the backdoor with a snow shovel and returned to listless normalcy.



For Vincenzo, there was nothing new in Captain Clark calling out: “Will our first contestant sign in please!”

But PFC Wiley Lighthouse leapt back and jerked his head around.

A monumental human being strode in the door. “Corporal Idaho Chambers reporting as ordered, sir!” he boomed, saluting.

Captain Clark returned the salute and asked, “So what brings you here this fine morning, corporal?”

“Sir, I done fucked up, sir!”

“There’s a goddamned shock,” Captain Clark muttered. “Tell your story, boy. Don’t leave out the juicy bits, if there are any.”

“Well, first thing we did, sir, was stop at the Class VI store to load up for our trip to Frankfurt...” There are ten classes of supply in the Army. Number V, for instance, is ammunition, which is the principle occupation of Camp Fuckhead. Number VI is booze, the principle recreation. “Ol’ Jack O’Neill, he rented the Citroen from Klaus, this Kraut who works in the mess hall. We was driving along pretty good—”

“Y’all got good and drunk before you left though, right?” Captain Clark interjected.

“Oh, no, sir—”

“Don’t lie to me, boy! I got the MP report right here,” Captain Clark said, rustling some random papers.

“Well, we wasn’t *that* drunk, sir,” Corporal Idaho Chambers said.

“Drunk enough to drive into a tree,” Captain Clark countered.

“Oh, but sir. That was the Old Kraut in the Road,” Corporal Idaho Chambers said, throwing his paws up in the air.

PFC Wiley Lighthouse arched an eyebrow at Vincenzo, who was steadily typing through the whole exchange.

“Don’t bring up that old saw!” Captain Clark shouted, frustrated.

Vincenzo shrugged at Wiley and nodded his head at Chambers, who blustered out, “It was him pure as daylight, sir! Standing in the

middle of the road with his spiked helmet on. And he had a Rottweiler on a leash! He looked like he just come out of the trenches!”

“With a rottweiler on a leash?” Wiley asked him.

“It’s a ghost story the men use here to try to sham out of their drunk driving convictions,” Captain Clark explained.

“I swear to God, sir. On a stack of Bibles, if you have a stack!” Chambers went.

“Was it a ghost Rottweiler?” Wiley asked him.

“Lighthouse, don’t encourage him,” Captain Clark said.

“You the new guy?” Chambers asked Wiley.

“Yes, corporal,” Wiley said. They shook hands. “Was it a ghost dog, big dude?”

“I believe it was a ghostly dog,” the corporal said. He wiggled his massive fingers out in front of him to try to evoke a ghostly ambience.

Captain Clark groaned loudly.

The typewriter clacked away. Vincenzo wrote: “I’m a little bumblebee. Bumblebee. Bumblebee. Bumblebee. Listen to me buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz. I alight on a flower and quaff its sweet nectar. Bumblebee. Bumblebee. Bumblebee.” Vincenzo was past his heavy period, when he would write things like, “There soon creeps in the misconception of already knowing before you know,” or “The finite has no genuine being,” or “I am a living seeing.” No one ever read what he wrote, and he’d pretty much given up trying to stretch his boundaries.

The only item on the Article 15 paper that anyone ever read was the fine, usually \$100 that went to the Christmas kitty, and the sentence, usually scut work at the mess hall, a.k.a. KP. Vincenzo ripped the form out of the typewriter and handed it to Captain Clark, who immediately signed it. Corporal Chambers signed it. The original went into his 201 file. A copy went into the company files. The rest were placed into a shotgun envelope and mailed to the 1999th Personnel Company in Mannheim, where they would be distributed

amongst many file drawers. All would be destroyed when the soldier left the command, unless the soldier committed a serious infraction. Then they would be used against him.

But how do you use “I’m a little bumblebee” against anyone?

“Next!” Captain Clark shouted.

Wiley sat down and cracked his knuckles. Vincenzo thought, *he will learn.*

Only seven more to type.



Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown nervously counted the standard Army watches again. Black faces, glow-in-the-dark numerals. No batteries, wind-up. Nylon bands. Someone, somewhere along the line had screwed him. He was sure of it. Not only did he *not* have an assistant—according to the Table of Organization and Equipment he was supposed to have an E-4 supply clerk assigned to him—he was also lacking one standard Army watch (one each).

Any other supply sergeant in the US Army would have written it off as a field loss the next time the unit went on an exercise, but Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown had a formidable, probably fatal, disease—a conscience. It plagued him at night, when bills of lading floated one-by-one through his head, tormenting him with their exactness and their appalling errors. A missing bayonet scabbard here. An extra box of condoms there. Any other supply sergeant in the Army, he told himself, would have written off or made money off of all those errors. But, Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown was different.

He hated himself for it. Sometimes he imagined cutting his conscience out of his body with one of the bayonets in his care. He imagined his conscience having the exact same dimensions as a ripe nectarine and the same fruity odor. He would hit it with a baseball bat and it would splatter into vapor, and he would be free, free, free. Wonderful freedom!

Why couldn't he be like his peers? He remembered when he brought up ethics during a seminar at the Senior Enlisted Supply Academy at Fort Lee, Virginia. He remembered the gales of laughter blowing past and through him. He remembered weeping when he went back to the BEQ that night, alone in his room, sitting on his rack with a bottle of gin, drinking out of the glass thoughtfully provided by the BEQ management. Halfway through the bottle, he decided that he would steal the glass. It would be a good start on his new Army career—*theft*. In the morning, when he checked out of the BEQ, he left without the glass. He'd even gone so far as to clean it and replace it carefully on the sink where he'd found it.

Each time a new soldier arrived in the unit and descended to Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown's basement kingdom to be issued TA-50, the nerve-racked supply sergeant would try to impress on the new member of Bravo Company the need to take care of, and keep track of, the items that the Army lends you. Most of the men laughed in his face. He pretended that he didn't care, that he was a hardass.

And now another new guy. And here he was only halfway through counting the watches for the third time. "I heard there was a new guy in. Welcome, welcome!" Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown said. And the sad part was that he meant it. He genuinely liked people, and he counted it as yet another failing. He tried his hardest not to like people, but he always found something in them that was seemly. He liked "Lighthouse, Wiley, Rank PFC, Paygrade E-3" immediately. And immediately, he kicked himself for it.

When he was nervous, he rubbed his scalp with both his hands and blabbed loudly: "UM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM!" What little of the red hair that remained on top of his head was wild from this constant rubbing. He was rarely not nervous.

"Hey sergeant. What's happening? Mondo gothic basement, dude," PFC Lighthouse said.

Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown's hands shook. This was part of his condition. "So, here to pick up your TA-50, are you? That's good.

Good!” He smiled at Lighthouse, whose half-closed eyes and casual demeanor made him suspect him of being a man who may not respect government-issued equipment.

“Most excellent, sergeant-dude,” he said.

Was that supposed to be an answer to his question? Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown wondered. “UM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM!” he went, jogging off on a round robin of equipment grabbing. First he picked up a B-bag, then he scooped up some web gear. He ran back and picked up the clipboard, then tore back and dumped the web gear in the B-bag and checked it off, shouting, “WEB GEAR, ONE EACH.” He went through this same procedure for all 25 pieces of equipment, including the shelter-half tent, tent pegs, protective (gas) mask, MOPP gear, M16A1 cleaning kit, kevlar helmet, helmet cover, and on and on.

Wiley thought that the dude could definitely do with a valium. But there was no way he was getting any of his.

With the last piece of equipment, “UM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM-MUM!” and red hair flying around, and finally something to sign. “But first, you should go through this list and make sure you have everything.”

“I trust you, sergeant-dude,” Wiley said, and he almost signed.

“Lighthouse!” shrieked Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown. “Dump it out and look at it! *Count it!* You can get screwed! *And you’ll have to pay for anything that’s missing!* Don’t you understand?”

“Sarge, man. Relax. I trust you,” Wiley said, and before the sergeant could stop him again, he signed the piece of paper and shoved it over the chipping plywood counter.

“You shouldn’t trust people,” Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown whispered. “Oh, this is too much. Too much.” He walked over to his dinged-up steel desk and sat down on a wobbly swivel chair.

Wiley lifted up the hinged counter and walked over toward Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown. He wanted to comfort him, or something. Dude could have a heart attack. On his way over, he felt something

under his boot and stopped himself from stepping down on it. He picked up the object and handed it to Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown. "You gotta take better care of your watches, dude," he told him, walking away. "Someone's liable to step on it."

That's when Lighthouse noticed the recruiting command patch on Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown's pocket. "Whoa," he said.

"Now there's no need to react in any such way to that patch," Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown assured him. "I'm not a recruiter anymore." His dark secret was in that patch. His one ethical-moral lapse. "Go! Get out of here!" he howled. "Stop looking at my patch!"

"Okay, okay," Lighthouse said, backing up. He scooped up his gear and left out the door. He didn't have the heart to ask the dude to issue him his rifle.

PFC Wiley Lighthouse sauntered on down the basement hallway, whistling a half-remembered Jimmy Buffet tune. He was a parrot-head of the first order, but some of Buffet's tunes came too late in the set, and he was wasted, totally, by that time. Lighthouse had never bought an album, nor owned a radio. All that he knew about music came from hearing it live. Canned music, from a radio or a stereo, man, it was like canned food. "Canned food totally sucks," he said aloud, blissfully cognizant that canned and other processed food was all that he had been eating since he'd been in the Army.

He wondered what he was supposed to do with this big bag of junk. He guessed Vincenzo would tell him. In the meantime, he figured he'd toss it in his wall locker then catch a few pre-lunch Z's. "In Spain, they call it *siesta*," he said to the empty hallway. Then, "Olé!"

He stole up the stairs, two at a time. His rack was calling out to him. "I'm coming!" he replied.

He blasted through the door and banged into his quarters and locked the door. On his rack he found five unit patches (one in color, four in green and black) that looked suspiciously like Chrysler logos, and a note from Vincenzo: "GET THESE SEWN ON. DON'T SLEEP. Lovingly, Big Vee-Vee, your King." This would, most assuredly,

would involve more walking. Some friend that Vincenzo was turning out to be. “Man, this totally blows,” he went, and kicked the big bag of junk that Staff Sergeant Jeffrey P. Brown had given him. He opened up his wall locker and tossed all that Army crap in. He took out his Class A jacket and his other three BDU shirts and pocketed the patches, but not before giving them another suspicious glance. “That Reagan dude totally sold us out to the corporations.”

He took the bundle of clothes out the door with him.

In front of the barracks, through the drizzle, he saw a line of big rig trucks, each towing a container, like a big box. They were convoying through the front gate and toward the sylvan forest behind Camp Fuckhead proper, but within the double rows of concertina-topped storm fences. It was like working next to a national park. Lighthouse glanced down the gravel road leading into the park. He felt a sudden urge to take a nice walk, and followed the urge down the road alongside the trucks that were streaming in. He could hear them up ahead, grinding gears and hissing hydraulic brakes. There were other noises, too. Mostly men shouting instructions. Drizzle wet his cover, a soft cap made of the same material as his shirt and pants. He felt his shoulders getting wet. His boots got muddy as he trudged along the trail.

“Hey, soldier! What’re you doing?” an immense man shouted at him. “You’re not allowed back here! Not without head protection!” The man walked over to him. He had a yellow construction helmet on with a Cubs logo glued to the side of it. Stenciled on the front was SGT O’NEILL.

“I’m new here, sergeant,” Lighthouse said lamely. He shuffled his heavier-by-the-minute laundry from one arm to the other.

Sergeant O’Neill fixed a hard hat on Lighthouse’s head. “So, you’re interested in ordnance!”

“Um,” Lighthouse went. “Yes, sergeant.”

“You’re that new clerk,” Sergeant O’Neill noted, one eyebrow arched. “The one that was supposed to be a girl.”

“I guess so,” Lighthouse said, shrugging.

Sergeant O’Neill wrapped an arm around Lighthouse, like Lighthouse was his long-lost buddy, and maneuvered him over to an ammo bunker. “I like to see the new men taking an interest in ordnance. Firepower for landpower, don’t you know.”

Lighthouse could feel his feet leaving the ground. Sergeant O’Neill situated him in front of the ammo bunker. Two soldiers were emptying it out with forklifts, placing the huge crates away from the massive metal doors, leaving a corridor in-between. The bunker was built into the ground, with grass on top. It was a too-perfect hill. Sergeant O’Neill said, “This is called a magazine. Don’t you ever let me hear you call it a bunker. If you call it a bunker in my presence, I’ll make you drink the contents of one of the shells in that crate. You understand me?”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“God, military discipline. It’s hard to come by around here. You’re going to make it, Lighthouse. Now what do you think we’re doing here?” Sergeant O’Neill gave Lighthouse an exacting stare.

“Um, taking out old ammunition?”

“You see, we have to *rotate* the ammunition. Like bread, ammo can go bad over time. Once we take all the old ammo out, and return the oldest ammo in these Milvans—”

“Milvans?”

“The fucking big boxes on the trucks, Lighthouse. We never send them back empty.”

“Okay,” Lighthouse said, scratching his nose with his free hand. He wondered when Sergeant O’Neill was going to let go of him.

“Okay?”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“That’s more like it. We’re going to get along fine. Chambers vouches for you, don’t you Chambers?” he shouted over truck noise and the noise from the two forklifts.

“Huh?” went Corporal Idaho Chambers, driving a forklift with a huge crate of ammo on its tines.

“Pay attention to your work, you dumb hillbilly!” Sergeant O’Neill yelled.

Lighthouse’s arm was starting to go numb where Sergeant O’Neill had it in his death grip. “Sergeant, I—”

“Then, we put the new ammo in the back of the magazine. Don’t ever let me hear you call it a bunker. Once we get that done, then in goes the old ammo, in the front. So it gets used first. Rotation. It’s grocery store stuff. You ever work at a grocery store?”

“No, sergeant.”

“Good. I hate people who work at grocery stores. My ex-wife worked at the Jewel then, pow, she starts fucking the produce manager. Son of a bitch. I beat the shit out of him and tossed his ass in the Chicago River in the middle of a snowstorm in January. Then I joined the Army. You like beating the shit out of people, Lighthouse?”

“Not really, sergeant.”

“You ought to try it sometime, Lighthouse. Gets the old cardiovascular system working.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Where do you think those old crates of ammo go, Lighthouse?”

“No idea, sergeant.”

“They put ‘em on a container ship, which goes out to the Pacific Ocean, to Johnson Atoll. Miserable fucking place and a tropical paradise. No cooze within a thousand miles. Watch the same three videotapes over and over and read the same three books. Almost like here. Johnson’s where they burn that shit. Lousy job. Believe you me.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Is your curiosity satisfied, Lighthouse?”

“Yes, sergeant.”

“Good, because if I ever catch you back here again, I’ll break your kneecaps good and proper, just the way we used to back in good old Cicero, Illinois.” Sergeant O’Neill let go of Lighthouse, who dropped to the ground, landing on his ass. O’Neill plucked the hardhat off Lighthouse’s head. Lighthouse scrambled to his feet and jogged away, with Sergeant O’Neill’s voice ringing in his ears: “Double-time it, boy. Get right!”



Lighthouse dropped off his patches and shirts at the laundry then walked over to the Bombs Away. He thought he saw someone peering out at him through the blinds in the building next door. The building claimed to be the post library. PFC Wiley Lighthouse had his doubts. He stepped in through the front doors of the Bombs Away and walked smack into the brick wall that was the MP first sergeant. “Sorry, Top!” he said, nose to nose with the daunting female.

“Sorry?” She seemed to consider the sentiment, then tossed it away like a snotty Kleenex. “Sorry don’t cut it, new meat.” Her hair was razorcut close. Her breath was stained with onion rings and cheap German beer. From his vantagepoint, two inches from her nose, he could make out a bleached mustache. “What’s the matter with you, boy?”

Lighthouse sidestepped out of her way and came to the position of parade rest.

She took the opportunity to inspect him. She looked at his boots, inspected the crease in his trousers, then cast a cold glance at his sewn-on name. “What would you say, Lighthouse,” she asked him, “if a woman you were dating said she had only one breast?”

Lighthouse stared at her, dumbfounded. “I, um,” was the best he could come up with.

“Let’s just say you were dating a woman,” she said. Lighthouse peered past her. The place was empty, save for the counterman, possibly German, who was wiping out a lone, liter-sized beer mug. “And

before you had the opportunity to feel her up, she told you that she was missing a breast. Would you shrink back in horror? Or would you drive on and complete the mission?”

“The mission?” Lighthouse asked.

“She still has another breast you can feel up, cheesedick. So what would you do?”

“First sergeant,” Lighthouse said. That was it. That was all. A long, still silence followed.

“Three hundred people on this post. Three hundred. And not one man,” the first sergeant concluded. And she stomped out the door.

Lighthouse walked over to the bartender. “I’d like two, size-nine shoes, please.”

“No bowling. Just have a root beer, pal,” said the bartender.

“You’re American?”

“I’m a GI, just like you. I work part-time for the PX when I’m not on duty guarding ammo,” he said. He reached over the counter. “Gavin Pecked. Sergeant. MP Corps. How do?”

“Lighthouse, Wiley. PFC,” Lighthouse said, shaking his hand. “I’ve come from distant lands, Sergeant Pecked, to have a drink.”

“Better not. Have a root beer instead.”

“But, dude, she was drunk as a preacher on a Sunday morning,” Lighthouse said.

“Yeah, but she’s a first sergeant, and you ain’t. Where you from talking like that? Bakersfield, California? You sound half-hick and half-surfer.”

“Sarasota, Florida, man.”

“Better watch yourself, Lighthouse,” Pecked said. He had a blunt head and a blocky body. His hair was black. A tattoo on his arm said, “Death From Above.” His Molly Hatchet tee-shirt was dotted with food stains. He stroked his little Hitler mustache. “My first sergeant has the hots for you, I think.” He smiled, then let out a little hee-hee. Pecked leaned over the counter, said conspiratorially, “Last guy she had the hots for—motherfucker ended up in Landstuhl Army Hos-

pital. Body cast. IV drip. Sad trooper.” He laughed again, this time more harshly. “Love ain’t no picnic.”

“Dude,” Lighthouse started, then he was at a loss for words again.

“Onion rings?” Pecked asked him. “Root beer?”

“Um,” Lighthouse said. He slumped into a stool next to the counter and plunked down his elbows. He gripped his skull in his hands. His fingers plowed through what was left of his hair. “This whole Army deal has me bummed.”

“If God meant soldiers to be happy, He wouldn’t give them so much to bitch about,” Pecked said. “I’m a squad leader now. Bitch, bitch, bitch, that’s all I hear all day from my soldiers.” He popped open a bottle of root beer, warm, and set it in front of Lighthouse. Then he slid over a basket onion rings, cold. Pecked ate a few of the onion rings. “Lane-and-a-half bowling alley. I ask you, what the hell constitutes half a lane? You tell me.” Pecked munched a couple more onion rings. “My damn wife is living the high life over in Frankfurt, and I only get to see her twice a month, if I’m lucky. I’m working two jobs. And what does she do all day back in the married quarters all by her lonesome?” Pecked took a long swig of root beer. “I mean, I can’t afford for her to live in Bad Schweinfurt with all those senior enlisted wives and officer wives. They just don’t have the space. And I don’t have the money. Dumb town’s only got twenty people in it, and most of ‘em are Americans.” Pecked finished the onion rings off and swallowed down the rest of the root beer.

“I didn’t see a town coming in here,” Lighthouse said.

“You blink and you missed it. It’s basically a group of condos built to house American soldiers and their wives. It’s a scam. If you can’t afford one of the teeny-tiny apartments, which they charge an arm and a leg for, then your wife ends up living 50 miles away in Frankfurt in the married housing quarters,” Pecked said. He picked up the wax paper lining the onion ring basket and licked it clean of crumbs. He ran a paper napkin over his face. “Two fifty,” Pecked said.

Lighthouse paid him and left, more depressed than he'd ever been.



First Sergeant's Time
Day Room
US Army Ammunition Supply Point 191
Camp Smith
Federal Republic of Germany

Listen up, you shitheads.

Wars are not won by machines, weapons, and radiation and chemical burns, but by soldiers.

At ease that shit back there. Yeah you. Specialist Murphy, quit fucking around. I mean it.

Even the best equipped Army in the world—and that's what we are thanks to President Reagan (thank you very much, sir, for the massive pay increase)—can't win a war without highly motivated and skilled soldiers.

Yeah that's you. Soldiers. That's what I said. What the fuck? Am I talking to the sonofabitching wall?

If the US Army is to win the next war, and I think all of you know exactly who I'm talking about—

No, not Grenada. You think that's funny, Murphy? I bet an Article 15 would be real funny right about now.

That's what I thought.

When those dirtbag Soviets come pouring through the Fulda Gap—which could happen tomorrow, next week, or ten years from now—we have to be ready. According to current intel estimates, they have ten tanks to our one. And our one is in the shop. So it's going to come down to each and every one of you swinging dicks doing your fucking job.

Yeah, I know we're ammo handlers. But our ammo job ends at H-plus-4, after all the ammo is given out. After that, we're soldiers. We fight. We don't give a goddamned inch.

Hey, somebody wake up the FNG. Give him a good shake. Murphy, I swear to God, one more word out of you, Murphy, and you'll be standing tall before the man.

If you have any comments after this little pep talk, submit them on DA Form 2028, and address them to me, your humble and lovable First Sergeant. And I'll put them in the secret documents shred-and-burn bag, post haste.

By the way, the words "he," "him," "man," and "men," when used during this lecture, represent both the masculine and feminine genders, unless otherwise stated. I hope you three coozes heard that, 'cause I'm not going to repeat myself.

Having said that, let's get started. And will somebody wake up the FNG?

Murphy shook Lighthouse awake.

Stuck on the Cow Catcher

Hux and me were walking along the railroad track—me on one rail and him on the other—knowing full well that the circus train could come along any minute and thump the both of us. Hux’s flaming-red hair was cropped low on his sunburnt head.

“What would you do if that train was to hit me, Carl?” he asked.

“I guess I’d have to perform CPR on you, if you were to die.” I chewed my stick of Juicy Fruit thoughtfully, rhythmically.

“But what if I was to get stuck on the cow catcher?” asked Hux, losing some of his balance, and regaining it, all in a second. A cloud shadow sped across a field full of rustling palmetto bushes behind Hux and engulfed him for a second, then me, and went on.

“I’d have to chase after the train shouting, ‘Stop, stop!’” I said, and I jumped off the rail and started running beside the track to demonstrate. I waved my arms over my head and barreled along, shouting, “For mercy’s sake!” I rolled to the ground near an anthill and turned over on my back. “If there is a God in heaven,” I whispered out of breath, my eyes half-shut, “hear my prayer, oh God.”

Hux crunched over the railroad gravel and stood above me, and for once, I was looking up at him. “Then what?” he asked, leaning down, hands on knees. “Just out of curiosity.”

“Well,” I said, sitting up. “I suppose I wouldn’t be able to eat for days.”

“Weeks, I expect,” said Hux. He shaded his eyes and gazed toward the horizon in a crouch, peering toward where the rails seemed to meet. “No train yet,” he said wistfully.

I hopped to my feet, and balanced there for a moment before getting adjusted to uprightness. “You think there’s snakes in those palmetto bushes?”

Hux picked up a rock and tossed it into the bushes. They rustled slightly upon impact. “Probably,” he said, watching them.

I started walking back toward home, then stopped and turned around. Hux was staring open-mouthed into the scrub.

“C’mon, Hux,” I shouted. “My mom probably has dinner on the table already.”

“Your mom,” he whispered half-like. He closed his eyes for a moment, like he was imagining her. That got him thinking about moving. His eyes opened back up, and he twitched his head toward me, then toward the potential snake pit, then me again.

“Let’s go!” I insisted.

“Jeez, Carl,” he said. “You got me all turned around.”



The summer I turned 13, my cousin Mel came to Sarasota to visit with my mom and dad, my Grandmom Rita, and me so he could tell his friends back in Ohio that he had run away to the circus.

As far as he and my Uncle Larry were concerned, we *were* the circus. “He’s my brother, and she’s my mother, God bless ‘em, but don’t let them rub off on you,” my uncle counseled his son. Mel repeated this wisdom to me right before he shaved every hair off the top of his head and wrote up there, where he had made it smooth as a river stone, “See Rock City.” He performed this task with a black magic marker while staring at himself in a handheld shaving mirror.

“You got the ‘K’ turned backwards,” I told him.

“Ah, well, fuck it,” said Mel, who seemed to find profanity thrilling. I could tell when he was about to swear because his lips trembled in anticipation.

“Why’re you shaving your head and writing stuff on it?” I asked him.

“You’ll understand when you get older,” said Mel, who had turned 14 just recently. “Where’s the little bitsy dumbfuck you always hang out with?”

“He’s in the kitchen, drooling at the dinner. I invited him over,” I replied.

“So you agree he’s a,” lips quivering, shaking, “dumbfuckity-fuck.”

“Look,” I said, standing up next to my bed, “you know my mom doesn’t like you using those words.”

“Mama’s boy,” said Mel. “Sniff your fingers, sniff ‘em good, Mama’s boy.”

“I’m not sure what that’s supposed to mean, about the finger sniffing and all, so I don’t think I’ll respond just yet,” I said. “But if it’s something bad about my mom,” I said, striding over to the closed door and flinging it open, “I’m telling.” And I exited that scene nicely.

All the kids in Mel’s immediate family were named after Nixon cabinet members. His dad considered himself a patriot in troubled times, and was quite taken by Mr. Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia. “Some guts,” he noted to his wife while she was in labor. Two hours after his comment, she gave birth to Mel, named for Melvin Laird, the then defense secretary.

I found Hux out in the kitchen crouching next to the stove, trying to look in the little window, which was caked with grease. “It smells like chicken,” said Hux, flicking the light on. The light made the greasy window glow.

“Today’s Friday, so of course it’s chicken,” I said. “Monday, Wednesday and Friday are chicken; Tuesday and Thursday are meat-

loaf. Saturday's leftovers. Sunday is theme night, where my mom gets to go a little crazy because it's a sit-down."

"What did she do last Sunday?"

"Beefy macaroni and cheese," I said.

"That doesn't sound crazy," said Hux.

"With Manwich sauce in it? Huh? That's a little nutty, or at least that's what my dad said. He said, 'Doris, you've really lost it this time.' And laughed and laughed."

"Your dad's got some sense of humor," noted Hux, shuffling nervously.

The greatest day of my father's life was the day after they came out with Heinz ketchup in a plastic squirt bottle. He'd spent years pounding on the bottoms of upturned Kegs o' Ketchup, and expounding on the need for somebody to do something about this. Usually, when my father watched TV, he just would lie there on the floor because of his tender back condition. But when the ad for the squirt ketchup came on, he practically leapt to his feet. It would have been a leap if he'd been a hair faster. He ran out the door, got in the car, and sped down to the supermarket to get a bottle without saying a word to any of us. He brought it into the house in a skinny, brown paper bag, like it was a special wine from the liquor store. The next day he discovered that when scrambled eggs are cooked in a microwave oven, they puff up like cake. He squirted half an ounce of ketchup on his cakey eggs and took a bite. "Bury me now," he said, eyes closed in ecstasy, "I'm already in heaven."

The front door swung open and brought me back to the present. My dad strode in, still decked out in his everyday postal attire. "I'm famished," he stated with his characteristic half-smirk, hanging his postal hat on the coat tree next to the door. "Absolutely esurient!"

"Hey there, Dad," I said, waving to him from the kitchen.

"The heir to the throne and his sidekick," said Dad jauntily. "How goes the bitter lash of summer worklessness?"

"A-okay," I replied. "Pipe and slippers, oh my papa?"

“As if,” he said, turning grumpy suddenly. “Your Grandmom’s two Fidos up and ate my slippers sometime before sunrise.” He gingerly lay down on the living room floor, staring up at the ceiling fan. “The view from here could stand some improvement,” he declared.

The two dachshunds, Bill and Earl, came hurtling out of my parents’ bedroom right then. They jumped over a clothesbasket, weaved past the round, oak veneer coffeetable, and dumped themselves on top of my father, their favorite human being on earth. “Wow, wow, wow,” they said, lifting their little brown heads in exultation.

“Get off me, off!” Dad shouted. The dogs lapped his face with bologna-colored tongues.

“Now, now,” said my mother, emerging from the master bedroom wrapped in a pink towel, her long, platinum hair sopping wet. She looked over at Hux and me and said, “Boys,” then padded her way back into the bedroom, the two dogs trotting faithfully behind her.

Hux was red.

“Oh, my back,” said Dad, and we heard some vertebrae clunking into place.

“Doug, I need some help in here!” shouted my mother.

“Your wish, etceteras, etceteras, my lovely lambchop!” Dad called back. “Give me a hand up, will you, boys?” He stuck his arms perpendicular to his body.

We hoisted Dad up, each on an arm, and he moaned and winked an eye. “I regret that I have but one back to give to your mother,” he said once up, then patted each of us on the head, and staggered into the master bedroom, one hand placed in support of his hunched back.

The door boomed shut.

“Is your mom a natural blond?” asked Hux sheepishly, his head bowed, staring at the green shag carpet.

“That depends on what you mean by ‘natural,’ I suppose,” I replied, shrugging my shoulders.

“I mean does she dye it or not?” said Hux.

“I think not,” I said, rubbing my chin as if I was giving it some actual thought. “You hot for my mom? Give it to me straight, bud.”

I didn’t think Hux could turn any redder, but he did.

“Why, Hux, you old dog!” I said hotly. “That’s why you’ve been spending endless evening hours at the old hacienda!”

“Quit it, Carl. I’m not hot for your mom, all right? Jeez, I’m just hungry for some real cooking. You know what my dad feeds us.”

“Beanie wienies can get old,” I noted, and went back to rubbing my chin in mock thought, keeping an eye on Hux, whose attention was riveted on my parents’ closed door.

The front door swung open again, this time revealing Grandmom Rita wearing her rhinestone-studded cape and tiara, and holding onto a rack filled with knives. The jackboots she had on went up to her knees, which were covered over with her floral-print dress. She adjusted the black, horned-rimmed glasses balanced on the nose that is shaped, she says, like a damned turnip. “Amen and alleluia,” she said. “Home at last.”

Her dogs scratched at the bedroom door, yapping and hollering.

“I’ll let them out,” said Hux, and he sprinted to the door before I could reach him. He jangled on the knob, but luckily, it was locked.

“Whew,” said Grandmom Rita and me at the same time.

“Last time I did that, I got the surprise of my life,” I told Hux.

We heard a shoe, or something, hit the door and the dogs yipped, then quieted down.

“Put the dishes on the table, and let’s get started,” said Grandmom Rita. And she whipped her cape off like a bullfighter, twirling it around and around her head.

Her tiara dropped to the shag and bounced once, resting near the palm stump in an orange clay pot—which used to be a living potted palm until my mom and her famous brown thumb got to work. In those days, she’d kill entire gardens with her loving care.

Frankly, Mom had about the same effect on food, though you couldn’t tell my dad that. He thought she was the greatest cook on

earth, and told her as much all the way through dinner most nights. “Why sugardoodle, this meatloaf couldn’t get any better,” he might say, even though the meatloaf tasted like particleboard. “Plato might call it the form of the meatloaf, the meatloaf on which all meatloaves are predicated.”

Cousin Mel came walking out wearing ripped jeans and a torn up tee-shirt with a big red and black “DK” scrawled across the front of it in permanent marker. Mel loved the Dead Kennedys, whose best song, he claimed, was “California Uber Alles.”

“Where you going dressed like that?” asked Grandmom Rita, who was standing in the kitchen, her knuckles pressed against her hips.

“None of your business, Grandma,” Mel said, curling a lip up in disgust.

A knife came spinning out of the kitchen, end over end, and thunked into the wall next to Mel’s head.

“Holy”—lips atremble—“motherfucking shit! You could’ve killed me with that!”

She smiled broadly, and turned her head slightly to the left. “If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead,” she said. “And, by the way, it’s *Grandmom*, you little turd.” She strode out to Mel, winked at him, and yanked the knife out of the wall.

Hux and me had the table set in a dash, dropping two sets of salt and pepper on the table because of all the guests. Usually, it was just I and my parents. None of the plates matched because my father would buy them two at a time from the five-and-dime store. By the time he was ready to buy two more, the five-and-dime changed patterns, and Dad would say, “Time to start over again.” I always ate off the Martin Van Buren plate from the “Meet the Presidents” series. We had two of those. The other was Gerald Ford, the last in the cycle. That Van Buren had some mean-looking chops braided down the sides of his face. Even when half-obscured by runny gravy and creamed corn, I knew he was down there staring up at me.

“Doris, you wouldn’t believe it, but they got the table all set out here,” said my dad, who was thudding across the kitchen wearing tan cut-offs and a v-necked tee-shirt. His gut protruded out of the bottom of the shirt and the top of his shorts, just a bit, like a tongue slightly sticking out of a mouth and looking like a third lip. I watched his legs for signs of twitchiness. Sometimes he had spectacular leg palpitations, due, again, to his bad back.

He refused to go under the knife, even though Dr. MacDougald, our family physician, recommended it.

“Mmm-hmm,” said my mother, who came out wearing her housecoat and fuzzy slippers, “and what does this mean, hmm?” What she meant by asking what it meant was that she thought we had a guilty conscience about something. The “mmm-hmm” meant that she was going to get to the bottom of it, whatever it was, by asking the same question over and over. That question was: “What did you do? What did you do? What did you do?”

“I told them to, Doris,” said Grandmom Rita. “Don’t blame them, blame me.”

“For what?” asked Mom.

“The knife hole in the wall, Auntie,” said Mel. He pointed it out to her.

“What have I told you about throwing knives in the house, hmm?” my mom asked Grandmom. “Please refrain? Isn’t that it? I try to keep a clean house,” said Mom, kicking the basket of clothes out of her way, “but what do I get in return? A knife in the wall.”

Mom breathed out and turned to Mel as she entered the dining room. “Well, you’ve shaved off all your hair and written something on your head, haven’t you? Mmm-hmm! Won’t your parents be proud! Heck, they might have a homecoming party for you, streamers and all, hailing the conquering hero who shaved off his hair. Bend over, let’s take a look at what you—” She stopped. “No, I’ve decided I don’t want to know.”

But Mel had already bent over. “Read it, Auntie.”

“No, no profanity! I won’t have it in my house. And what does that ‘DK’ mean? Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know.” She fluffed up her now nearly dried hair and sucked in her lower lip, then stuck it out.

Hux hiccuped.

Grandmom Rita brought the roasting pan in from the kitchen and dropped it on the middle of the table. She lifted off the lid, revealing a bird carcass with meat dripping off the bone surrounded by unpeeled potatoes cut in half, whole carrots (complete with green stems) floating in chicken grease with two half-dissolved bouillon cubes bobbing near the surface.

“*Su-preme*,” my father declared, and he, and the rest of us, rushed to sit down. Dad sat at the head of the table, my mother the foot. The rest of us sat at the wings, me and Hux across from Grandmom Rita and Mel. “This is living with a capital ‘L,’” said Dad, and we all simultaneously reached for the food, our forks gripped and pointed toward the tubers we wanted.

The phone rang, and Grandmom Rita got up to answer it, fork still in hand. “It’s long distance for you, Mel.”

“Who is it?” he asked, his mouth half full of peel-covered russet.

“Your brother Spiro,” she said, waving the phone back and forth. “Hurry up, you’re wasting money just sitting there.”

Mel wiped his mouth and steered his way to the phone, still chewing.

“Yeah,” he said into it.

“Uh-huh,” he said, swallowing.

“You bet,” he replied.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said, and hung up.

“What was that all about?” asked my dad.

“Nothing,” said Mel.

“While you’re up,” said Dad, and he waved an empty beer can under Mel’s nose.

“Got it,” said Mel, and he stepped into the kitchen, past the two panting dogs, whose excitement over the food had manifested as a puddle on the linoleum, which Mel stepped in. “Fuck,” he said.

The world quieted.

The oversized tureen of bird carcass was in my unlucky hands now. I held it still, not breathing, waiting for my mother’s reaction.

“Well, well, well,” she said, teeth agrit.

My arms were about to give out with the weight; they shook as I went into muscle failure. I set the poultry down with a thud, and chicken remains slopped over the side and onto the red and white checked tablecloth that my mother had had since she was a girl.

“You think chicken grows on trees?” snapped my mother, turning suddenly to me.

I considered the idea for a second, then shook my head.

“And look at my beautiful tablecloth, mister.” And she went on like she always did.

Mel, in the meantime, did not emerge from the kitchen. I saw him on his knees in there, mopping up the dog mess with a paper towel.

Dad grabbed the tongs up from the center of the table and—like *he* always did—plucked the entirety of the remains of the chicken from the pan and plopped the steamy sopping clucker onto the middle of his plate. He immediately stuck his head down and sucked meat and sinew into his mouth, rising up occasionally to take a breath. And with each breath, chicken grease ran down his chin and onto the middle of his v-neck T, forming a yellow wet spot. The V seemed to point out the stain for the little dogs, who later would camp out on his chest and lap at the shirt while he lay on the carpet watching the Evening News with Walter Cronkite.

Dad and Walter didn’t get along, but that’s a whole other story.

“You make the best chicken,” said Hux, over the top of Dad’s slurping sounds. And he blushed again, staring into his lap.

My mother smiled, and reached over to pinch his cheek. “Aren’t you the sweetest boy.”

In an instant, I went from guilty party to angry mob, and slugged Hux on the arm, knocking him off his seat.

“Oww!” he yelped from his floor position, and gripped his injured arm with the opposite hand.

“I want you to go to your room this instant, young man!” said my mother, now standing up, now pointing.

“But, Mom!” I shouted, pleading my case, “he wants to see you *naked!*”

“Liar!” yelled Hux, and he was on his feet now, tears coursing down cheeks, still hanging onto his arm. He stood shaking for a moment, his gaze wandering around the room, then settling on me. I read his face. It said, “Betrayer.”

I felt bad for having said what I said, but just for a moment. “She’s my *mom*,” I said.

Hux ran to the front door, flung it open, and ran out into the twilight.

“Close the door,” said my mother calmly, almost imperceptibly, through the hand placed over her mouth, “then go to bed.”

I closed the door, and went to my room, shutting that door as silently as possible. I left the lights off in my room and sat down on the floor, facing the open window. Bugs glittered on the screen, and searchlights from Taylor Lincoln-Mercury Jeep stirred the night sky.

What would Hux do if I got stuck on the cowcatcher? I wondered. He could do nothing, I knew, just like I wouldn’t be able to do anything. I would have to ride the train to uncircus places far from Sarasota, where tidy white frost makes everything hard, and Sunday is never theme night.

Manhattan

When I got home from school, I noticed my Grandmom's two wiener dogs slurping out of the Apollo 13 commemorative glass, again. They were standing on their stubby hind legs on the bar-calounger, their front paws next to the drink, which was situated on the Map of the World TV tray somewhere near Southeast Asia. Their little tongues worked in tandem, each rhythmically popping up and down into the brownish liquid at the same hurried pace.

They stopped for a moment when I came in the door, and regarded me with their steely dog eyes, before going back to work.

"Mom! I'm home!" I shouted. I dropped my bookbag to the slick linoleum foyer with a thunk.

She came out of the master bedroom in her flowerprint housecoat and pink, push-off slippers.

The two dogs immediately leapt to the floor and curled into balls near the green-cloth easy chair.

"Come give your mother a hug," she said, unfolding her arms from her chest and spreading them out like she was ready to catch a falling baby.

I walked over to her cautiously, not wanting to upset her because she was in her nightclothes, always a bad sign. "Hi, Mom," I said.

She pinched my nose and turned my head to the side, then grabbed my ear and kissed my cheek. "Mwah!" she went, letting go.

I could smell a thick, sugary scent on her breath, like a nectarine gone bad.

She trod over to the TV tray. “I don’t remember finishing this,” she commented. “Oh, well.” And she took the NASA souvenir into the kitchen so she could fix herself a fresh one. “Come in here,” she said. “I want to show you something.”

“Can’t I go outside?”

“Get in here, I want to show you this,” she said in her very patient voice. “I’m trying to be nice.”

She had the little silver meat-tenderizing hammer clutched in her hand, her knuckles a little whitish. She had filled a Ziplock sandwich bag with ice cubes, and now, when I got into the room, she lifted the little hammer above her head and brought it down on the bag. It busted open and tiny slivers of ice streaked across the kitchen, some over my head. “This is how we make a drink, make a drink, make a drink,” she sang, then hummed some more of the song under clenched teeth, as she gathered the ice that was left on the counter into a pile, then scooped it up into the palms of her hands. She turned her hands over above the glass and most of the ice clinked in. In the refrigerator she found two bottles—one big, and shaped like a wine bottle, and the other small, like the Tabasco sauce bottle except it was a different color. She took out a jar of candy red cherries, poured a little juice from the cherries into the glass between her fingers, which she used like a strainer, and put the jar down. She tipped some liquid from the little bottle, then the bigger, into the drink, and swirled her index finger around in it. “Done,” she proclaimed. “You know what this drink is called?” she asked, shaking her fingers dry like she was resetting an oral thermometer.

“No, I sure don’t,” I replied.

“It’s a Manhattan, named after part of New York City.”

“Can I leave?”

She sighed and said yes.

Outside, it was a coolish fall day, and crisp for Florida, not so damp as usual. I found my Frisbee in the back yard, hidden in the tall crabgrass and the cabbage-sized weeds that Dad said he would

definitely get around to pulling one of these days. Mom's theory was that Dad was waiting for the first freeze of the year so he wouldn't have to. The Frisbee was pocked with tiny toothprints, a sure sign that those crummy little dachshunds weren't just invading my mother's private space.

I tossed the plastic disk up into the breeze. It arced up, and stopped for a moment, spinning in place like a plate at the end of a stick. It dropped back down to my outstretched hand. I threw it again, and harder, and again and harder still, but that last harder was just too hard. It went way high and when it came back, it curved over my head and onto the roof.

"Well, that just beats all," I muttered to myself.

I waded through the grass over to the aluminum ladder that had been tilted against the house in the same place longer than I could remember. Near the top of the ladder, where it leaned against the eaves, was the spot where Dad had given up painting. I could see the last brushstroke clearly, where the old tan gave way to new green. "That stucco sucks up too much paint, see, son," he explained to me one day. "So I ran out of paint, so I went to the Sherman Williams and they had run out my color, so what was I supposed to do? Right? So I put it on order and they were supposed to call me the minute it came in, but, you know those factories," he said, and left it at that.

Dad was sure that the "Sherwin Williams" store was named after some guy named "Sherman," and that there was some sort of typo made and nobody had the guts to say anything to the printer. He assured me that he, my father, was no grim-faced corporate automaton.

I climbed up the ladder, which was nice and steady because it'd had so much time to settle into the ground and wear notches into the side of the house. The world changed slightly when I got up there, so I stopped to admire the view. I could see the neighborhood pond two streets away, and all the fresh cut lawns, and the little neighbor lady feeding the ducks that pecked at each other and beat their wings

ving for her moldy crusts of bread. I could see old Charley, the escapee alligator, cruising the pond near the ducks, waiting for one of them to come closer so he could bite it in half, leaving bloody feathers to gather near the edge of the pond.

That Charley always came back no matter how many times the fish and wildlife wardens took him away.

I pulled myself up onto the roof and, leaning against its tilt, stepped carefully over to where my Frisbee was. Beside my toy, the roof had bubbled up, and the shingles about stuck into the air. I didn't think it was right, so I stomped on the dome shape. I did not realize that the roof there was rotten.

I dropped through the roof and through the drywall ceiling and landed in the living room next to the oak veneer coffeetable, a bucket half-full of water attached to my foot. I was more surprised than hurt, I think.

Mom, reclining in her command chair (that's what Dad called it), did not look terribly surprised. I had caught her in mid-sip, and she finished her swig. She put her glass down on the TV tray and said, "I told him to fix that leak and look what he did. A bucket!" She pushed the lever on the chair down, and the little footstool retracted. "Are you all right, honey?" she asked, getting up.

I thought, *she's not mad, so I better start crying to keep her that way.* Unmad, that is. I wrinkled up my face in a bold effort to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. Instead, I looked down at the bucket on my foot and began laughing in great snorts. I squished my toes around inside that wet shoe, and howled so hard that the tears did come and a little mucus out of my nose.

She took this as sad crying, and stepped through the chunks of plaster, drywall, shingles, tar paper, rusted staples, and rotted particleboard and hugged me close to her. When she pulled back, I saw a blot of blood stuck to her housecoat like a 2-D tomato. She saw the blood oozing out of my forehead and said, "This'll need stitches. Take your foot out of the bucket, honey."

My Frisbee had landed near our feet.

“So this is what you were after. That lazy bum,” she declared, picking up the toy. “Oh, sure! I guess I have to leave him a note.” She went into the kitchen as I pulled the bucket off my foot. She came back out with the Frisbee still in her hand. She had written on it, in black magic marker, “Doug—Don’t forget to pick up Tommy (my brother) at Chess practice. Took Carl to hospital. Dinner in freezer. Love, Doris.” She turned the bucket upside down and placed the Frisbee on top of it, and we left.



I thought of Frankenstein’s Monster while I was spread across the tissue paper sheet on the clean metal table. Or, I felt like cold cuts at the deli. Maybe the stitches in my head would look like someone had inserted a new brain. Maybe I’d turn green. The possibilities!

The doctor wore a blue smock and had a mask hanging around his ears. He felt my body up and down, and squeezed my legs hard. His smooth, long hands nearly wrapped around my thighs.

My mother stood nearby in her bloodstained housecoat sucking on a knuckle. “How is he?” she asked, her voice strained.

“Nothing broken as far as I can tell, but we can X-ray him after I put some stitches in his head,” said the doctor. He had a pointy beard and bristly moustache wrapped around too-red lips. He put his hand next to my head, his thumb next to my ear, and peeled off the bandages that the attendant in the emergency room had half-circled my head with. “Nice one,” he said.

“How many stitches, you figure?” asked Mom. She pulled her coat up around her throat tighter with one hand, and hugged around her waist with the other.

The doctor stared over at her, and regarded her with his medical-school-trained, medical eyes. He stepped over to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, his index finger about touching her collarbone. “Were you ever a cheerleader?” he asked solemnly.

“What?”

“Were you ever—”

“No! What are you talking about?” she snapped, her patience jarring loose.

“Nothing,” he said, and picked up a bedsheet with a square hole cut near the top. This he placed over my head. “What you will feel is a needle,” he told me. “Don’t be alarmed.”

And I closed my eyes as the first pinpricks touched me. I drifted off to a leaden sleep.

I woke up in the backseat of the station wagon. A sterile bandage covered over the doctor’s stitchery. “Where are we?” I asked.

“Almost home,” said my mother. She looked back at me and smiled. “You go on back to sleep,” she said. And she turned her attention back to piloting the auto.

I stretched my back, squeaking the vinyl, and tried to close my eyes. It was pitch-black up between the streetlamps. Those lamps cut streaks of lightning in my eyes as we passed beneath them.

“I see a string,” said Mom. “In the middle—”

The passenger’s side window across from her exploded; emeralds of safety glass were stuck in her hair, twinkling in the glare of all the night-lights above us. The tires squealed as she slammed on the brakes, and I rolled out of the seat. My bottom struck the center hump, and my body arched over it. The engine died.

“They rigged up a garbage can!” she declared in disbelief. “Those little punks! They’re running!” She got out of the car and tippy-toed up on the lawn we had halted on. Little spines of glass shined in the fabric of her housecoat.

She bent down and looked in at me. I had pulled myself upright by this time, and was staring at her clothes, and her arms, where capillaries had opened up, and countless droplets of dark red blood had pushed their way out of her pale skin.

“Mom, you’re bleeding,” I said.

“Are you okay?” she asked, then said, without waiting for a reply, “I’m going to try and call somebody. You lock the back doors and stay put.” She pushed down on the lock and slammed her door shut.

I locked both the back doors, and leaned over the front seat to survey the damage. I reached out to touch the jagged peaks of glass still rising out of the passenger side door.

“I’m not crazy!” I heard my mother shout. She was standing outside the front door of the small house in whose yard we had come to a halt.

“Go away or we’ll call the police!” shouted an elderly voice from behind the cracked door.

“Please do!” my mother replied, and the door thumped shut.

I retracted my hand from the window edge and sat back down.

My mother pirouetted round and headed back for our car, marching angrily along. Her arms were folded across her chest, her chin jutted out. The bloodstain from the afternoon had dried into a dark combat patch sewn deep into the front of her mom uniform. She tapped twice on the window next to her lock with a pink, chipped middle nail.

I pulled up the lock and she got in. She started the stalled engine, then slammed the car into gear. “All this,” she growled as the tires spat up green and brown chunks of the old people’s lawn, “and *cramps, too.*”

I caught her radioactive eyes in the rearview and slid meekly down. I did not move until the car pulled into our driveway.



From my bedroom that night, I heard the argument:

Dad: “Which street did you take?”

Mom: “Webber.”

“How many times have I told you never to go down Webber?”

“Not once, Dougie-darling. Not a single time,” snarled Mom.

“You’re kidding me, right?” he said, volume boiling down to half-shout.

“Oh, no,” she said, her voice slightly muted, but going in for the kill, “not a single time.”

“Well,” said Dad, defeated. “I meant to.”



The next morning I was awakened from a sound sleep by the roar of the industrial vacuum cleaner in the garage. My head throbbed and I felt dizzy. Wasn’t it a school day? What time was it? I looked out my window and saw that a new day was approaching, stars began to fade. I put on my bathrobe and slippers and went out to the carport.

My father was leaning into the station wagon, accompanied by the long hose of the vacuum cleaner. I could hear glass pieces clinking into the metal canister, and the motor straining as he ran the mouth of the hose over the length of the front seat. He glanced up and saw me standing on the Astroturf welcome mat next to the washer and dryer. He pulled himself out of the car and clicked off the vacuum.

“What were you doing up on the roof?” asked my father. He was wearing his salesman suit. Brylcreme glistened. He kept a grip on the end of the hose with one hand. “How many times—” he began, then stopped himself. “Okay, maybe I never told you not to go up on the roof. But, I mean, common sense would dictate, right? Not to?”

“Jeez, Dad. I’m only eight.”

“Sometimes, I think, me too,” he said. He dropped the hose next to his foot. “Let’s go inside.”

And we went inside.

And we made my mother breakfast, as if that would be enough.

Leave

*T*here was no dead man's zone, just some red-tipped poles separating us from the commies. I spent two years in the 11th ACR, up on the border between East and West Germany, living in a compound that was about the size of a football field, really, with idling tin cans on tracks burbling around me. We manned tower in the middle of our compound 24-7. A lot of lonely nights were spent up there when I had the duty, four on and four off, staring at the Potemkin Village about half a click away, where nothing much moved except military vehicles. A storm fence into which we weaved camo netting surrounded our compound. The commies had an immense, clunky camera on a heavy wooden tripod not five feet from the fence, pointed into the camo, occasionally manned by some joker in jackboots and a saucer cap who never waved back at me, just clicked away.

I almost started an international incident when I stole that camera using a Zebco rod and reel I bought at the PX. I plain old lassooed that sucker.

I admit it: I love making trouble.

S-2 came by and snatched the camera from me and I never saw it again. You should have seen those commies howling when I reeled that sucker in! Some fun.

I was reassigned for a few weeks to Mannheim in the rear areas helping commie refugees, setting up tents and shit like that. The Berlin Wall fell down and all the fun was over.

I get all nostalgic thinking back on the Cold War.

I was reassigned to the Pentagon after my tour was up. I took a week's leave between assignments. I had something like 60 days saved up. Two and a half years worth of saved-up leave, minus some I took for sightseeing in France and Italy.

I didn't really want to go back to Chicago. Seeing my folks seemed like a step backward. Who needed them? They were like some sort of prelife memory. Like all that non-Army stuff happened to someone else. Chicago. Hell, the Cubs were in Arizona. And the Ditka's Bears had just finished up. Maybe I'd take in Jordan's one-man show at Chicago Stadium, I thought. I had to go somewhere and heckle someone. It's my nature.

After landing in Delaware, I caught one of those van limos to the Philly airport, in a hurry to get my damn leave over with, despite this gaunt sergeant's warnings about no flights leaving Philly, Philly's all socked in with snow. I lit up a menthol and the limo driver, some sort of foreign fuck, started yelling at me. While I was out of the country, someone had outlawed smoking. "I single-handedly defeated communism for this?" I said. It did no good. No one was hearing it. I dusted the butt out on the bottom of a low quarter and pocketed it for later. A woman and her rugrats sat in front of me scowling and coughing significantly.

I saw a Seven-Eleven and almost teared up. American cars roared past. Green road signs in English. A big black dude playing a saxophone on a street corner with ice and snow shimmering down.

One day we were ready for the commie hoards, the next the commie hoards were knocking down the Berlin Wall with sledgehammers, and it was all over. The East Germans came over on trains, debarked in Mannheim, where I was stationed so as not to cause another international incident. The reds gawked around like hillbillies. It was fucking hilarious. I laughed. Many cried. Many midcareer officers cried, their careers disappearing along with the Warsaw Pact.

Trabants and Ladas chugged down West German streets, filled with rubbernecking Eastern block-types.

A filled Trabant pulled over and yelled at me while I was walking to the PX one day, about a week before I would DEROS back state-side. I was in uniform. They all wanted to give me a hug so I let them. They took pictures with me like I was the guy in the Mickey suit at Disney World. A woman with a mustache made an effort to ask me to marry her. I turned her down, and continued on toward the PX. A bird flew out from behind a bush and smacked me in the head, dazing me for a moment. The world had turned sick and weird.

The only flight leaving Philly was one to O'Hare, and I bought a ticket. Suck it up and drive on, that's my motto. The plane was near about empty, though the airport was entirely full. People were sacking out on the floors, sleeping like the homeless, like the East Germans who'd escaped over to our side, the winning side, there before the end. The German reststops were full of them, and the bus stations and the train stations were sloppy with them—all of them covered with moles and warts and facial hair, and farting sauerkraut.

I was still in uniform, and the airline people were strangely deferential to me, like I was some kind of honored citizen.

The flight attendant was nice, even. It was freaking me out, man. She gave me a beer on the house, not even checking my I.D., which I was prepared to show her, having produced my vinyl wallet, my green I.D. card smiling under shiny transparent plastic. She wasn't that bad looking either. I thought about plunking her right there on the plane, doing the old in-out, in-out by the chemical latrines out back, but gave up on the idea. She was losing her luster, and I was bone-tired, even after that weak American beer.

We touched down at O'Hare. I hadn't called my parents to warn them I was coming home. I hadn't spoken to them in about a year and a half. I hadn't written them in months. They bored me. Their bowling league lives sickened me.

My duffel bag ejected from the turnstile door and I snatched it up and headed for the Blue Line L. No use wasting money on a cab when you've got your black Cadillacs on your feet.

Rode the Blue Line downtown and switched to the Red Line, and headed for Uptown. Sitting there with my duffel between my feet, humming this old Patsy Cline song in my head, still wearing my green retard suit, replete with shiny metal doo-dads and colorful ribbons.

Get off at the Lawrence stop, start walking. A Chevy pulls up along the side of the road and this guy offers me a lift.

"Fuck you, homo," I go, and drive on down the road.

Uptown is where I grew up, in a dilapidated three-flat, surrounded by my father's hillbilly relatives who all moved up from bum-fuck Kentucky to work in factories.

Yeah, Uptown was hillbilly heaven back then. Now it's mostly hookers and junkies, but my parents won't leave, will probably never leave until they croak and Ma heads up to Polack Catholic Heaven and Dad heads to Hillbilly Hell.

I'm out of steam, and stop at the corner of Clark and Lawrence, drop my duffel to the bare pavement. No snow on the ground, though a dirty crust rims the street and is turning to slush. I go in Barb's Tavern and sit at the bar, sure that the soldier duds will be good for a beer and maybe something harder. I light up a menthol, stop and look around, hoping that the antismoking types haven't gotten to Barb, but no one says a word about the cigarette.

"I'm always walkin' after midnight, searching for you," I say to Barb. She's behind the bar, in front of a Budweiser mirror.

"Hey you," she says. "Little Joseph." She knew most of my father's family when they were all still alive, before asbestosis and other infirmities felled them.

"Beer and a shot," I say.

She brings me a bottle of Bud and a shot of whiskey in a glass that's chipped on the bottom. I down the whiskey and chase it with

half the beer without putting down the menthol. I smoke it down to the filter.

“Took up smoking in the Army, I reckon,” she says.

“Sweet dreams of you, every night I go through,” I say. “Why can’t I forget you and start my life anew instead of having sweet dreams about you?”

She goes to the jukebox and puts on some Patsy just to shut me up, sure. I drink my beer in silence. After Patsy comes Roy Acuff, and then some Johnny Cash.

“How long’s it been?” Barb asks.

“A while,” I say.

“You home for good?”

“No,” I say with conviction. I light another cigarette and realize that I’m no dilettante smoker, the way I’ve imagined myself, that I’m a real-live addict, and I like it. It’s like I’m surrendering myself to a higher power, to my instincts. I study my smoking hand and fingers after I finish the butt. I like it, the stain. It’s essential. My teeth are stained too, I see in the mirror behind Barb. I see my grandfather in the mirror, old paw-paw, and it’s me, and I don’t completely like the flash of recognition. I remember the old man, how he growled, how skinny and vicious he was, his scratchy rhythmic voice. My father never smoked. It was his way of trying to purge the hillbilly in him. Me, I wasn’t even aware of any hillbilly until now, in this moment, in this bar, staring at myself past the *Anheiser Busch, St. Louis, Mo.* logo. It makes me feel powerful, like the sixth week of basic training when I scored a perfect 40 hits on the rifle range—that inner calm that comes from the certainty that you can kill, and kill well, if called upon. But still, there’s something in you that makes you not want to know that about yourself.

“Well, Barb,” I say, standing and reaching for my wallet.

“Your money’s no good here, soldier boy,” she says, and winks at me. Who knows how old she is, but she still has that shine to her.

I smile sheepishly and walk back out into the world, two blocks from home. I pick up the duffel, which no one has touched, and start marching again.



Soon enough I was in front of the three-flat and at my home of record. I wondered what kind of tenants we had now. Sometimes they were good old boys from way back yonder, and sometimes they were Poles from the old country, with old country ways and odors. I looked up at the building, then down and caught sight of a Chicago police cruiser in the reflection of my mother's polished basement windows, slinking past like a blue-white-red shark. They used to roust me back when I was in art school, walking around the neighborhood with my portfolio and boxes full of paints and crayons, and my easel. *Artist=Druggie/Faggot*, I guess. They didn't stop me now. Now I was giving off authority airs in my green Elvis suit. Rockin good. I walked up my old steps and stopped at the door. I could have unlocked it; I had keys in my pocket. But I didn't. I pressed the button next to my last name and waited.

"Who is it?" went my mother's voice.

"It's me, Ma," I said.

There was a moment of silence. "Joseph?"

"Roger that," I said, "who the hell else would it be?"

Then the door buzzed open, but before I could drag my ass in, she was bounding down the steps toward me to smother me with her love.

She was wiping her powdered white hands on her apron, clomping down. Her nose was bigger. Her own mother had warned her about that—that her nose would grow the older she got, and so would her belly. Ma never looked all that ethnic to me before, when I was a pee wee, but now she looked like all the Eastern bloc types who'd crowded past the border guards and danced on the Berlin Wall. She seemed old to me, too.

“Do you have company?” I asked.

“Such a question,” she answered, grabbing onto me with both hands, gripping me tight. I’m not all that tall, but I felt as if I was towering over her. I patted her on the head. Her hair felt like straw. She was old! It was shocking. She couldn’t be much over 50, but now she was an old lady, and I suddenly felt much older because of it, even though I was only 24.

“Who’s over?” I asked her.

“My sister Bertha and your uncle Ignatz, and your cousin Suzie, who’s a young woman now,” Ma said.

“How’ve you been?” I asked her, pushing her away gently.

“As if you care,” she answered. She pulled a Kleenex out of her apron pocket and dabbed at her eyes, and blew that big honker. “You’re too skinny.”

“I’m *not* too skinny,” I said.

“You’re too skinny and don’t argue,” Ma said, grabbing me around the waist and pulling me inside the apartment building. “That bag is too heavy for you. Let your father carry it.”

“Ma—”

“Father!” she shouted into the apartment. “Joseph’s home! Come carry his bag!”

“Carry his bag,” my father muttered gloomily from inside the dark hallway. He stepped out into the half light, the day was dying, and said, “Jesus Christ, *you’re* a sergeant?”

“Just because you whacked a couple of hippies for Daley in ‘68 doesn’t make you a veteran, old man,” I said with more than a bit of hostility. Like all active duty soldiers, I hated part timers—National Guardsmen most of all. Worthless fucks. My father, if I haven’t mentioned it before, did 15 years in the Guard. Other than beating a hippie or two at the Democratic Convention one time, the most strenuous thing he did in the military was hand out C-rats from the supply room. And steal with both hands, it should go without saying.

He got off on my rage, though. He was more hillbilly than he knew. “They made a man of you after all,” he said, maybe with a little pride seeping through.

I handed him the duffel bag and he tilted over, just about, from the weight of it. He adjusted and carried it up the steps to our first floor flat and tossed it inside. Two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom and an eat-in kitchen. That’s where I grew up. The floorboards creaked under my feet. Same worn out carpets tossed here and there. Same strange mix of heavy, ornately carved, old world furniture and cheap cardboard furniture.

“You stop at Barb’s on the way over here?” Dad asked me. He could smell it on me, I think.

“Just for a beer. It was a long flight,” I said. I took off my garrison cap and shoved it under an epaulet.

“How long were you on the airplane?” Ma asked. I peered around the corner into the kitchen and could see the guests, two fat ethnic people and an attractive girl straining their necks for a look around the corner but not getting up.

“Hey, Suzie,” I said. I’d known her a bit when we were kids. The three of them lived, with the rest of my mother’s family, in Cicero. Suzie and I shared being the only child of our respective families, and having doting mothers. Suzie waved at me, crunching on a kolatcky.

“Is that Joseph?” Aunt Bertha asked.

“Our little Joseph?” Uncle Ignatz asked.

“Fucking A,” I answered, then cringed, realizing my mistake. Gotta watch the language around the civilians.

Uncle Ignatz laughed, though, which broke the five-second silence. “Jeez,” he said, “woulda though you was in the Navy with that kinda mouth.”

My mother was making pierogie and kielbasa and sauerkraut. She was boiling the cheese dumplings in a big pot. When they floated to the surface, she skimmed them off the top with a slotted spoon and

dropped them in an iron skillet bubbling with butter. After they were brown, she dropped them on a plate and served them up with dollops of sour cream and a couple of shakes of fresh ground pepper.

There was too much food.

We were drinking Old Styles and laughing, and eating too much. I took off my jacket and put it in my room, which seemed strangely familiar to me, and came back out and drank more beer. Uncle Ignatz clapped me on the back and my father actually seemed to like having me around.

“How much longer ya gonna be round?” Uncle Ignatz asked. His face was shiny and red under the yellow light above. My mother hadn’t eaten a thing yet. She was working hard to cook all the food we were slopping down.

“Week,” I said. “Gotta new assignment. Gonna work in the Pentagon.”

“Sheesh,” Uncle Ignatz said. “Dint realize we were sittin witha big shot.”

“Ain’t no big shot,” I said, all beer drunk and stuffed with warm food.

My father clapped a big hand on my arm and said, “A sergeant. I just can’t believe it.” He was actually proud of me.

“Ma, you gotta sit down and eat somethin,” I said.

“Don’t worry about your mother,” Dad said. “This is just her way.”

“I’ll eat when I’m ready,” Ma said.

“What was that big medal you had on your jacket?” Suzie asked. She’d become a beautiful dumpling when I was gone. She was a knockout.

“What medal?” I asked.

“It was like a tea saucer,” she replied.

“*Schutzenschnur*,” I said perfectly, though I was drunk now, and full of sweet sauerkraut and lard and flour and white dairy substances. I leaned back in my chair and loosened my belt. I patted myself down for cigarettes and found none. They were in my Class A

jacket, I figured. Too much effort to go get them. They were all looking at me, waiting for more. This was a new experience. Even though I was an only child, and doted on, no one much cared what I had to say before. My father liked me to keep my mouth shut during dinner, and I usually did. Now I had the floor. “It’s a competition that the Krau—the German army holds. Lots of weapons, and you get to fire them all. I was picked out of our unit to go there because I’m a real deadeye dick.”

“You—?” My father, again incredulous.

“Tha’s raht, paw. Ah kin kill a gnat at 400 meters,” I drawled in my grandfather’s voice. I was one of only two Americans to pick up the medal that day. The other guy was on the Army Rifle Team, had flown over from the Land of the Big PX just for the competition.

Not that I’ve made a fetish of my proficiency with firearms, mind you.

We were all pretty drunk. At some point, the evening ended.



Suzie, as it turned out, lived in the apartment upstairs. My gorgeous little cousin, banging around up above my head, while my drunk made the room spin. I listened to her loud footsteps above me, trying to imagine what she was doing. I reached for my Class A jacket, thinking about my menthol-flavored addiction, then decided against it; I’d probably just end up vomiting all over the worn out rug next to my bed. I dragged my duffel bag into the room, found my gray Army PT sweats and put them on, and fell asleep thinking about plump little cousin Suzie all snuggled in above me.



“Have you sobered up? Hmm?” Ma was wearing a ragged housecoat and slippers, something left over from the sixties, back when

dad used to buy her nice things. Something green was on her face, not completely washed off.

“Something green’s on your face,” I said.

“It’s an algae mask,” she said.

“Algae mask,” I repeated.

“What? Does that sound so improbable?” she asked. I handed her a postcard I’d been looking at. “I’ve seen this before, you know. I sent it to you.” She placed it on my bed next to me.

“I’m just showing you how much I care,” I said.

“You already done that with your drunken display last night,” she said.

“What did I do?”

“You, with your demonstrations on how to shoot people. Handing your uncle that piece of pipe and making him balance a dime washer on it,” she said.

“Cool,” I said. I must have blacked out.

“Yes, *cool*,” my mother said. She sniffled a bit. “You were so sensitive before. Now, look at you. Talking about killing people like you’re a soldier or something. It’s disturbing and you don’t even realize it. You don’t even realize what you’ve lost in the Army.”

“I guess I don’t. I guess I feel like I’ve gained something instead. Something that I needed all along,” I said. I sat up on the bed, and put my hands palms down on my knees, like I was sitting at the position of attention. I glared coolly at my mother. Unwaveringly.

She glared right back. “I don’t like this,” she said. “I’m not sure I like you.”

“You don’t have a choice,” I said.

“Who does?” she asked.

I looked across the room at my bureau, all chipped and scuffed up. It seemed foreign when I came in the last night. Now it seemed as if I had never left. I was sitting on my bed getting lectured by my mother. Nothing ever changed.

“You’re still worried about me,” I said.

“You’re going to get right up and leave again,” she said. “Go back to your Army.”

“I signed a contract,” I said. “It’s my duty to go back. It’s not like I got a job at a mill, and that I can decide I don’t like it. I enlisted. I only have six months left on this enlistment. Big deal.”

“On *this* enlistment?” my mother said, her voice keening. “On *this* enlistment? Are you going to reenlist?”

I looked up at her. Her face screwed up.

“Maybe,” I said.

“You are! Don’t lie to me. I’m your mother. You can’t lie to me. You are going to reenlist! Aren’t you?” She was angry now. Maybe angrier than when I originally enlisted.

“Yes,” I said, calmly. Coolly. “I’m going to reup. I’m going to make the Army my career.”

“Ach!” she went. Like a German. She stomped out of the room, slamming my bedroom door shut behind her with a bang. “He’s going to reenlist!” she shouted at my father.

“Great!” my father shouted back. “Good!”

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“I can’t tell you how proud I am.”

“This is terrible. And it’s probably your fault!”

“I’d love to take credit for it, but—”

“But what?”

“But nothing,” he said. “Now what’s for breakfast?”

“Go to Dunkin Donuts!” she screamed. “Go to hell!” There was some slamming around. I didn’t move a muscle, just sat there. I wanted to hear it all. I guess I just liked causing trouble, really. I loved getting them all riled up.

Dad walked up to my door and knocked.

“Enter and speak,” I said.

The door swung open. Dad was smiling at me. “Well, you heard her. Let’s go get some doughnuts.”

“You’re awfully chummy all of a sudden,” I said.

“What’re you talking about?”

“This chumminess of yours,” I said. “It seems sudden. Seems like we’ve talked more in the past twelve hours than in the past 23 years or so.”

He stared at me hard for a moment, his eyes boiling. “You have to spoil everything, don’t you?” he accused me finally, his fists balled up like some petulant two year old, then stomped on out of the room and past my cringing mother, the door exploded behind him.

My mother appeared at the door. “What did you say to upset your father?”

“Why have we spent our lives living in fear of that man?”

My mother considered this for a moment. The question had never come up before. “He’s your father,” she said.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I said.

“I can hear Suzie in the shower up above,” my mother noted. “She should be done in a moment.” And then she nodded to me. “Okay, she’s done.” We only had one tiny boiler in the basement for the steam heat and the hot water. It was a pain the whole time I was growing up, waiting for the tenants to finish. Using the facilities in the in-between times.

I pissed like a racehorse, then took a long shower, the first shower I’d had in a long time in a private bathroom. I luxuriated in my aloneness. You’re never alone in the barracks.

I listened to Suzie pattering around in the bathroom up above. She’d announced last night that she was considering becoming a vegetarian, though not a vegan because she wasn’t a kook or anything. She was going to try it for a week, maybe lose some weight, she announced to us all, while Uncle Ignatz balanced a dime washer at the end of a piece of pipe that my father had fished out from under the sink. Now I was remembering some of my aberrant behavior from last night. I smiled.

“You don’t need to lose weight, honey,” Aunt Bertha assured her. She was right. Suzie had the weight in all the right places, in a kind of

big woman from the 1950's look, like Mamie Van Doren, but without all the bullshit glitziness. I liked the way she looked, and was drunk enough to tell her so right in front of my family.

My father liked the comment, but the rest of them didn't seem to. I guess leering at your cousin is no sin among hillbillies, but it is among Cicero-bred Polacks. Maybe my father liked it because it proved I wasn't gay, which was always his concern, what with me getting doted on by my mother the whole time I was growing up and wanting to be an artist and all.

I recalled all this while standing in the shower—sometimes black-out memories come back to you that way—the last dribbles of hot water mixing with ice cold Lake Michigan beating on my back. I leaned down and grabbed my ankles, then stretched toward the ceiling. And I got out of the shower, dried myself, wiped off the mirror and studied my reflection. Was it old Grandpa staring back at me? No, it was me, and not some wizened hillbilly factory worker. I sat down on the toilet seat and realized that I needed a cigarette in the worst way. And maybe a doughnut. And some coffee, definitely some coffee.



I found myself knocking on Suzie's door. It shouldn't have been surprising to me, but it was. Was I trying to get some action off my first cousin, or just in need of sane company? I was already regretting coming home from the Army, thinking that I should have gone straight on to my next posting instead of detouring into Civilianland. Jeez! I think I felt less tension when I up on guard post duty, sitting in a tower looking out toward our enemy like a staked-out gazelle waiting for a lion to come by and eat me. One day home, and now Army life seemed foreign to me. I hoped that I would never have to go overseas again, but in a 20-year career you're virtually guaranteed some shit duty. At least I was going to the Pentagon now. No more field exercises for four or five years, depending on how long

they let me linger in the Military District of Washington. That's what I was thinking, standing there outside Suzie's door, waiting for her to come answer it. Then she did.

"I thought it was going to be you," she said smiling and not uncomfortably.

"I hope I didn't make an ass of myself last night," I said.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "All is forgiven."

"How very Catholic of you to say so," I said.

"Oh, no. If I was being very Catholic, I'd tell you to get your ass to church and go to confession."

"That wouldn't be very Vatican II of you," I said.

"Aren't you hungry or something?"

"I *am* hungry."

"Let's go get doughnuts. I know just the place," she said and brushed by me out her door, closing it behind her without locking it. She was wearing a cotton dress with flowers printed all over it, and sneakers, and she smelled like Ivory soap. She was wearing a German army parka, too.

"Shouldn't you lock it?" I asked.

"What's the point?" Suzie shot back. "Your mother is up there all the time anyway, hunting for drugs or something. She's sure I'm no good." And Suzie was smiling happily, glad that someone thought of her as no good.

We walked down the street, talking, not really saying much, just gossip about our relatives. Who in my father's family was in jail, and who just got out. My cousin David just pulled a stretch in Joliet. He'd graduated from low crimes to more respectable crimes. Cousin Dougie just got arrested for bigamy. He was a train conductor with a wife at both ends of the line. He gave one wife his other wife's number in case of emergencies, and such. Dougie wasn't much for brains.

My Polish relatives were all doing the same as always. Their constancy was amazing. They would die doing the same things they did as sober 14-year-olds. They were as sexless as eunuchs and still man-

aged to have at least five kids per couple. Baboo and Zadzo, my great-grandparents, were still living in their basement. The upper floors had furniture covered in plastic and clear plastic runners all over the plush carpets and not a speck of dust in the air. Suzie and I on visiting days, when we were brought over as kids, would dare each other to put a perfect little fingerprint on the coffeetable, or to touch the cat, a 20-year-old Persian that never moved ever. It didn't even blink. We laughed now, walking down the street.

Suzie had really blossomed into a fine young woman. She carried herself with more than a little pride, too, which I like. She grabbed my arm and pushed me into a Polish bakery, the bell above the door dingling. Two squat women with great big honkers and dotted with moles—even on their eartips, moles—asked us what we would like. We ordered a couple of huge cream-filled doughnuts and a couple of those tiny bottles of Coca-Cola. We sat down at a little table. I didn't want to look at her all of a sudden. I felt myself blush and gazed up and away just to look at something. I was looking at a cuckoo clock that had to have been carved out of one of those old growth trees. The wood was almost black. It was quarter past the hour. The little bird popped out for a moment, said something, then disappeared back into the hutch.

I drank some of my pop, and caught Suzie staring at me. “You *are* different,” she said. Her eyes were warm, almost syrupy. She drank her pop, not taking her eyes off me.

“I'm not really different,” I said. The words felt shaky coming out.

“You were always such a boy,” Suzie said. “Now you're not.”

“We all grow up,” I said.

“Not all of us,” she said.

“You have,” I said.

“Thanks for noticing. Nobody in our family notices that. They all treat me like I'm twelve. I'm 21, for God's sake.”

“You're definitely not twelve,” I said. I wolfed down the doughnut in about four bites, and swallowed hard, chasing it with the pop.

“When did you start eating so fast? Last night, you couldn’t eat fast enough.”

“It’s the Army,” I said. “They don’t encourage tasting your food.”

“Let me see your hands,” she said, holding hers out, palms up. They were pretty hands, unadorned by jewelry or nailpolish.

I placed mine in hers and they were soft and cool and she turned my hands looking at the backsides, then the palms, then the backsides again. “What happened here?”

“Concertina wire.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s like barbed wire, except it has tiny razors in it instead.”

“That’s awful. What about this?”

“Bayonet.”

“And there?”

“Bayonet again. I cut myself inspecting this woman’s trunk for bombs.”

“With a bayonet?”

“I didn’t like her.”

“These calluses.”

“Digging holes, filling them in.”

We were like lovers, leaning over the table, holding hands. I suddenly felt sinful and pulled my hands away.

“Yeah, I know,” she whispered to me, a tiny giggle, leaning toward me. “It did feel dirty for a moment. You always pretended not to like me—”

“That’s not true—”

“—but you *do* like me.”

“I like you,” I said. Then quickly: “You’re the sister I never had.”

“You’re like my brother, sort of. A cute little brother. Look at how short your hair is! It’s never been that short, ever!” She finished off her doughnut and clapped the powdered sugar off her hands. “When do you have to go back?”

“I have to report to my new unit next Monday,” I said.

“That gives us a weekend then, doesn’t it?”

The morning sun, which had been blocked by a semi-tall building until now, came pouring in through the front window. A shadow blockletter A splashed across her face. Alliance Bakery. Her eyes sparkled. I turned away. The cuckoo popped out, said his piece, went back in. The Polish ladies behind the counter were smiling at us. Ah, the guilt.



Somewhere in there was a trip down to Rush Street in Suzie’s clunker. There was a drinking contest. I am making excuses. There were many drinking contests, some involving dropping quarters off your nose into a shotglass. Some less skill-involving.

There was eating of nachos, and vomiting of same.

We rearrived at Ma and Father’s three-flat at three a.m. Suzie dropped her keys on the steps and we laughed loudly, then dropped them again. She dropped them a third time to far less laughter.

I sang “knock three times” and promptly forgot the rest of the lines. Suzie caught on and said, “Famous people die in threes.”

We stumbled on up the stairs, making a ruckus. Who cared? Maybe my parents had broken up over me. It would be a sad thing, to be sure. I leaned against a far wall and watched Suzie fumble with her keys.

“It’s open,” I said. “It is unlocked.”

“You do like me,” she said, smiling back at me all radiance and powdered sugar and raspberry filling. She was a gorgeous doughnut filled with liquor and womanliness and wrapped in translucent cotton, all fleshy and vibrant.

Didn’t Byron have sex with his very own sister? Isn’t that right? I’m an artist, I thought. Artists are allowed certain privileges. Isn’t that right? Of course it’s right. Goddamnit. Of course. The door swung in, and I swooped in behind her, sniffing at her neck.

Army. Ar-meee.

“Ar” is the preparatory command, “*meee*” is the command of execution. Fall in you shitheels. Fall in on me.

Drunk. You fucking civilians don’t even know what I’m talking about. It’s not worth explaining it to you, you worthless slacker motherfuckers.

Feeling her arms, I was. Sliding my hands up and down them, my nose stuffed in her neck crease, snorting down bucketfuls of femaleness. I wanted to move on to the breasts, but was awaiting confirmation of orders to proceed to target.

She giggled. I kicked the door shut behind me.

Roger that, said brain. Charlie Mike to bravo-romeo-echo-alfa-sierra-tangos. Good luck. Headquarters out.

“No!” she shouted out.

I leapt back. “Sorry, I—”

“Not before you kiss me.”

Bah-dah-bing, bah-dah-boom. There I was kissing her.

And, right on cue, the front door slammed open and there stood my Ma in all her slavish Catholicism, replete with rosary in clenched hands and threadbare housecoat and formerly pink slippers. And cold cream on face. And hair in curlers. Threatcon Delta. The Spetznaz is inside the wire and is definitely pissed off. We pulled apart, me and my fetching cousin. First cousin. A string of spittle shared between us snapping like a downed telephone wire. Sober all of a sudden. Leave cancelled.

“What do you think—” Ma started.

“At ease that shit, Ma.”

“Don’t you tell me to—”

“Shut the fuck up, Ma.”

She did, for a moment. “You’re coming with me right now,” she said when I didn’t say anything more. She reached out and grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room and into the hallway. The rosary was pressing into my hand. I was clearheaded. I didn’t stum-

ble going down the stairs. Suzie called out, “Don’t tell my Ma! Please don’t!”

“You’re moving out!” Ma roared back. I’m certain, somewhere inside her, she was exalting. Somewhere inside her, Tiny Evil Ma was hurrahing, saying, “This is the finest moment of my life.” She had the goods on me forever and ever, she figured. No better way to keep me in line, keep me at home. Keep me, keep me, keep me.

This was the most trouble I’d ever caused in my life. Worse than when Ma caught me masturbating. It was wonderful. Heady. I felt myself going back to drunk again, a fantastic drunk. The day was just starting. Oh wonderful day! Maybe Dad would slug me. Wonderful blood in my mouth! Wonderful fucking blood!

Fifty Pink Candles

I was walking down to the Gate Food Post, three blocks away from where I lived, when I was accosted by a Labrador retriever. He was a beautiful dog, and happy, too. He had something to show me, and spat it out on my foot. It was a baby shoe, one of those white, hard numbers that people often bronze. The lab sat down. I guessed what he expected me to do, and I did it. I tossed the shoe as far as I could. He bounded after it and that was the last I saw of him.

A little further down the street, I saw a Volvo station wagon containing three people: Mom, Junior, and Baby. Junior had the window rolled down in the back seat and was shouting, “Buster! Buster!” He looked at me as I walked by. “Have you seen Buster?” he asked me.

I pointed behind me.

“Thanks, mister,” he said.

And as Mom turned the car around, I peered into the back seat at Baby’s feet. One of them was, indeed, missing a shoe.



The woman I was living with—let’s call her Dee Dee—was a volunteer firefighter for Sarasota County, Florida. We lived in a trashy section of town called Circusland. After every time we made love, she’d carry me around the room slung over her shoulder in a kind of post-coital celebration.

Dee Dee had a baby by an ex-husband who was once in the Peace Corps, but was thrown out after he committed crimes against the people he was supposedly helping. He drove a jeep into this small town and began running over people's houses, just smashing them down. He was drunk, mostly.

Thing is, he and I got along great. We'd sit down on Dee Dee's front porch and sip cold beers and talk, mostly drinking stories. I told him about the dog and the shoe and he loved it.

He told me all about running over those people's tar paper shacks. "Nobody appreciates nothing," he said. "We were helping those poor bastards out but we couldn't get one damn gracias out of them."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"I mean, if just one of them would have said hey thanks, that would have done it for me." He walked inside the house and got himself another cold one, then came back outside. He sat across from me in a big wicker chair shaped like a satellite dish. Sometimes I'd sit in that chair with Dee Dee on my lap and say, "Calling Venus. Venus, come in." She thought I was a riot.

"You were saying," I said. I leaned on the rail surrounding the front porch. The whole house was a tinderbox. Paint flecked into my fingernails.

"So I drove into town," he continued. "Town was full of people, but nobody was in the streets, see." He took an unhealthy long swig of beer. I imagined his liver dancing out of his gut in a St. Vitus' limbo. "I shouted hey you bastards, come on out and give me a kiss!"

"No response?" I asked.

"Not a one," he said, disgusted. He rolled his eyes right then left. "I see ghosts in the corners of my eyes sometimes," he whispered. He pursed his lips. He said, "So I start to knocking down their damn homes. One by one, I just backed into 'em." He made a creaking sound and held his hand up perpendicular to the ground. He dropped the hand and it smacked his leg. He spat in the corner. "God damned people." He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

This was supposed to be the time he was spending with his son.

That day was my mother's birthday. Dee Dee and I and the baby were going to head on over to Mom and Dad's house after the ex-husband left. I shook him awake. "Hey Jimmy," I said. "Hey, Jimbo." That was his name and the baby's, too.

He woke up and looked at me as if he'd never seen me before. "Woo, shit," he said. "Sparklers."

"Time to go, bub," I said. I always tried to be nice to him. He appreciated it, seemed like.

"Time flies," he said. He dropped his half-empty beer to the porch floor. The thirsty boards sopped up the foam and all.



I used to work a graveyard shift at the Waffle House near the interstate. The job and I didn't get along, hours wise. One day, I discovered I'd gone sleep driving.

I was sitting on a toilet staring down at my beige pants, which were hanging around my ankles like an apron around a Christmas tree. There was a terrible urine smell in the air, and happy tunes were being piped in through speakers in the ceiling. I stood and pulled up my pants. Some graffiti in front of me claimed, "Bippy Eats Cow Pucky." I stepped outside the stall and over to a mirror. There were dark rings around my eyes and deep cuts in my face where I had shaved. The blood running out of those cuts was dark brown and crumbly and streaked down my chin and throat. My hair was wild. I had a five o'clock shadow.

I was in a Stuckey's in North Carolina.

In my car, I found dozens of pecan roll wrappers and crushed, empty cola cans. Apparently, sleep had caught up with me in a dangerous way. While I was standing there contemplating all that must have transpired, a trucker honked his horn and flipped me off.

I drove the thousand some odd miles back down to Sarasota and checked myself in at Five Palms Treatment Facility for Co-Dependent Conditions.

I sold my trailer off. I needed the cash to pay for my medical bills, and the whole damn thing just smelled like mold.

I met Jimmy when I was selling my trailer. He came over to look at it, and was half in the bag, I could tell. After all, I was a recent graduate of the Five Palms.

Jimmy knocked on my trailer door and shouted, "Is anyone home?" He then let himself in by tossing a brick through a window. I found him leaning half in the window. He offered to pay for the damage with a six pack.

"How about buying the joint instead?" I asked, and helped him the rest of the way through.

He did buy the joint, and moved out on his wife and newborn son. When we closed the deal, his wife came over to me and said, "Thanks, mister, for breaking up our beautiful family."

I asked her out on a date, and pretty soon was living with her.



I knew Mom was waiting, so I did my best to lug Jimmy out to his car. I tossed him in the back seat and hid the keys inside the ashtray, figuring that if he was sober enough to find the keys, he might as well drive.

Dee Dee came outside with the baby wrapped in her arms. Jimmy Junior was swaddled in a blue blanket with pictures of bunnies and horses all over it. I imagined all those bunnies turning into bunny mush under the hooves of those horses. Dee Dee was wearing a butterscotch-colored sundress and Birkenstocks, and her hair was tightly cinched into a ponytail. She was bronzed and muscular, just like a model from a JC Penney's ad. She bounced Jimmy Junior on her hip. He made bubbles.

“We’re going to be late,” said Dee Dee. “I don’t think your folks like me to begin with.”

“Not to worry,” I said.

“Your mother’s awfully judgmental,” she said.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Come on, Carl. Get the car started.”

Dee Dee’s car was a 1970 VW Bug. My father had tried to buy it from her a year before, but she refused to sell it to him after he told her that he would chop it up to build a kit car. The final product was going to look like a Porsche Speedster from the 1950s. Dad bought the kit at an auto show in Orlando five years earlier and loaded it into the carport in its crate.

It sat there for the longest time.

Mom told him she was going to have the garbage men come by and haul it away if it didn’t become a car soon, so Dad looked all over for someone to sell him a VW.

“I’m tired of parking on the street,” Mom told him.

Two years back, he had retired from swindling people with co-op scams and was looking for something to do—so, instead of building the kit car, he signed up for construction classes at Sarasota Tech. Dad turned the carport into a garage using his own two hands. It took him a year and a half, and the final product was somewhat ungaragelike, but Dad was proud of himself nonetheless. He traded his vintage Dodge Dart for a broken down VW, which he placed in the back yard.

I started Dee Dee’s car. She and the baby got in, and we buzzed off toward my parents’ house. At a red light on Fruitville Road, Dee Dee caught me checking out a pair of fat girls wearing bikinis. They were holding up car wash signs and shaking their bottoms.

“Stop that,” said Dee Dee.

“Sorry,” I said.

“I thought you were out of that phase,” she said.

“I am, I *am*.”

“I mean, really.”

And the baby burped like a Marine, and blew a milky bubble out of his mouth. It rested there on his lips like an orb. He sat behind us strapped in his little barcalounger, studying his toes. Dee Dee turned around and wiped his mouth with a dish towel.

“He’s picking up your manners,” she said, wiping. “I brought some beer nuts and diet Pepsi for the party. Do you think that’s enough?”

The light changed. We drove past the girls. I could see them out of the corners of my eyes. “Dad will thank you,” I said.

When we got to the house, I spotted a brown Chevy van in the driveway. Next to it was my lifelong friend Hux, who was painting something on the side. I parked the car up on the grass, a habit Dad likes because he figures it kills off the grass and then he doesn’t have to mow it.

“Hey, Hux!” I shouted. I got out of the car. “What’re you painting there?”

“Hey, Carl. Dee Dee,” he said. “Come take a look.”

Dee Dee pulled the baby out of the back seat. We walked over as a threesome.

Hux was finishing up the “g” in “Doug.” “It’s going to read: ‘Doug’s Construction. You Bet We Can Build It!’” said Hux. He was wearing a long-sleeved Cub Scouts shirt and khaki trousers. He wiped his pale forehead with the freckled back of his hand. He had a wolf and a bear patch on the shirt. “I sure could use something cool.”

Dee Dee handed me the baby and went to the car. She fished a cold diet Pepsi out of the red cooler, closed it, and brought the can to Hux. He popped it open and took a swig. “Beer nut?” asked Dee Dee. She shook the can at him.

“Better save them for Doug,” he replied, and went back to painting. I handed Dee Dee Jimmy Junior.

“Oh, the baby!” shouted Mom from the front porch. She was wearing her tan housecoat and a pair of flip-flops. Her once blond

hair was up in rollers, and her face shined with petroleum jelly. “Gimme, gimme, gimme,” she said, waddling out toward us.

She threw her arms around me and kissed me on the chin. She regarded Dee Dee and the child. “Oh, hi, Dee Dee,” said Mom in a more subdued voice. “How are you?”

“I’m—”

“That’s nice. I see you brought your little love child, hmm? And how is the little love child doing,” she said, tickling his chin. “Where’s daddy?” she asked him.

Jimmy Junior drooled and coughed.

“Come on in,” she said. “You, too, Huxley. It’s almost time for dinner, and I’ve made something special, this being theme night and all.”

Hux shot me a terrified glance. “I think—”

I grabbed him by the collar. “No, no,” I told him. “Come in and enjoy the hospitality just like the rest of us.”

“But the paint—”

“No squirming out of this one, my friend. You always *liked* my mother’s cooking, didn’t you,” I said. Actually, no one but my father likes my mother’s cooking. Hux pretended to like it as a child because he had a crush on my mother, which I suppose I will never forgive him for. We followed Mom into the house.

We could hear the pit-mouse barking and frolicking around in there with my Grandmom Rita. “Get your bunny, honey!” shouted Grandmom. “Go on, Doris, get the damn bunny!”

“Will you quit calling that stupid dog Doris!” shouted Mom. “You know very well that’s my name, and I’m not sharing it with a poodle.”

“Don’t get yourself in an uproar,” said Grandmom.

The tiny white dog growled with a fuzzy pink stuffed rabbit clutched in its mouth. It hopped around, smashing the rabbit on the floor. The dog resembled a short, psychotic lamb. Dad had surgically removed the squeaker in the rabbit at my mother’s request.

I kissed Grandmom on the forehead. “Oh, it’s you, Carl. Mr. I-Can’t-Hold-A-Job is here! Mr. Mental Hospital is here! Three cheers for the prodigal.”

“I missed you, too, sweetheart,” I said.

Strands of white hair flew wildly out of her head. She seemed to be swallowed whole by the chair she was sitting in. “How’s the dog?” she asked.

“Okay,” I said.

“I like that dog.”

“You shot him with a water pistol every chance you got!”

“Oh, hell, Carl. That’s just *love*. Look at my hands,” she said. She held them out for me. They were knurled and spotted. Her nails were thick and yellow. “Can’t hold a knife anymore.”

“It’s just as well,” I said. “Your aim was going.”

The pit-mouse leapt into her lap, the bunny clamped in its itty-bitty jaws.

“Carl, come here,” said my dad. He was standing in the doorway to the garage. He waved his hand at me. It was covered with white bandages that had pictures of dinosaurs on them.

I followed him out to his garage, to what he called his workstation. It was a lop-sided bench made out of pieces of wood left over from his garage construction project. He clicked on a lamp. On top of the workstation was a car battery and strands of brightly colored wires connecting the battery to a motor of some kind.

“Watch.” He clamped an alligator clip to a fuse box and started the motor. A stump of metal spun round. “Magnificent.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Windshield wiper motor,” said Dad proudly. “And your mother says I can never finish anything.”

We watched it spin a while, then Dad turned it off and we went into the house.

Hux was setting the table while Mom and Dee Dee played with the baby who was performing his flipping over trick. Someone had

brought in our cooler. It perspired in the corner of the room. “Gah,” said the baby.

“He just called you Grandma,” said Dee Dee.

“Didn’t sound like ‘Grandma’ to me,” said Grandmom Rita. “Sounded more like ‘gum.’”

Mom rolled her eyes. She went into the kitchen.

Dee Dee sniffled a bit. She told Grandmom Rita she was mean. Dee Dee said we should leave because no one in my family liked her.

“I like you,” said Grandmom Rita.

Dee Dee stared over at her. “That’s only because I irritate your daughter-in-law.”

“Good call,” said Hux, placing the last dish on the table and sitting down.

“Time to eat,” said Dad. He sat down at the head of the table.

“Let’s not fight,” I told Dee Dee. “I mean *look*.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said, resigned to the situation. She picked the baby up and brought him to the table. The baby sat in her lap.

I sat next to Dee Dee. Grandmom Rita managed to work her way over to the table and sat next to Hux, across from me. Mom brought in a huge, black pot with shiny, chrome handles. She plunked the pot in the middle of the table and sat down.

“Well, how-dee!” said Dad. He stood up. “Father Christmas!” he declared staring into the pot. “I’m a human fly!” he said, spooning a heaping glob of red mush onto the center of his Andrew Johnson commemorative plate.

“Keep your comments to yourself, Mr. Fix-It,” said Grandmom Rita. “Let’s see what today’s monstrosity is.” She grabbed the front of the dining room table to steady herself, and wobbily rose to her feet. She glared into the pot, and then, as if she could not endure the sight any longer, clamped her eyes shut. Her hand rose to her face to rub the bridge of her nose; she lost her balance and plopped back into her chair. “Damn it,” she said. “Holy Christ.”

“Cut the melodramatics, Rita,” said Mom.

Mom believed in adding in all the ingredients at the same time. In the case of her spaghetti and tomato sauce, the ingredients included the tomatoes, canned and whole, the garlic, whole, a quart of water, a tree's worth of bay leaves, and the uncooked spaghetti, one box. Let simmer for four hours and serve.

For a while there, Mom was a member of the Everything's-Better-With-Canned-Whole-Tomatoes school of cookery.

Dad's head hovered over the top of his plate while he spooned the spaghetti into his mouth. His lips turned red. We could hear him sucking it down.

He brought his head up once and said, "By golly, yes!"

Mom ate salad. She was watching her figure. The rest of us ate as little as we possibly could, then feigned fullness.

Dad hopped up while we all sat back rubbing our stomachs. "I hope you saved room for dessert!"

"Oh, Doug," said Mom, her face warming into a smile. "You shouldn't have gone to all the trouble to buy me a cake!"

"Buy?" asked Dad, with genuine puzzlement. "Why buy when you can make it yourself?"

"You didn't," three or four of us said.

Dad was perplexed, taken aback for a moment. "It's out in the garage," he said. "Under my work station." He stepped out the door.

"Carl," said Mom, her hand rising to her mouth, her head shaking. "Stop him. Oh, God, please stop him." She was tittering, laughing.

I got up from the table, pushed open the door to the garage and saw my father out there. He had on welder's goggles, and, using a butane torch, lit the tips of a forest of pink candles planted on the rough terrain of a brown-frosted cake. The cake, bulging with tumorous growths on all sides, sloped away from him. It might have been Los Angeles during fire season, with dozens of pink buildings aflame sliding into the Pacific Ocean on a wave of mud.

"I didn't believe you could get fifty candles on a cake," I said.

He turned off the torch. “Me, neither,” he said. “Your mother’s lived every one of those years, and half with me. She’s *earned* them, Carl. She has a *right* to them.”

The candles were half-melted down already. Pink rivers coursed through brown frosting. “Go on, Dad. Take it in,” I said. I held the door for him.

Dad proudly carried the cake past me. I watched fifty tiny flames devour fifty tiny candles leaving black, ashen wicks in their wakes.

Grandmom Rita started to sing “Happy Birthday to You.” We all sang along. Mom made a wish and, with a mighty exhale, blew out most of the candles.

The doorbell rang out the William Tell Overture. “Lone Ranger’s coming,” said Grandmom Rita.

I went to the front door. It was Jimmy, wobbling on unsteady feet. A little bit of blood oozed out of the corner of his mouth. “I want you to thank me, you ungrateful bastard,” he said.

“Huh?”

“You have my wife, my house, my damn kid! I want you to thank me!”

“Thank him, Carl,” said Grandmom Rita. “Then come get a piece of this chewy cake.”

“Um,” I said.

“I’ve had it!” he declared. He turned and stumbled out toward his car, jangling the keys in his ash-sooted hand.

“Thanks!” I shouted after him. “Thank you very much!”

“Too late!” he howled back over his shoulder. “Not enough *feel-
ing!*”

He got in his car, and it burbled to life. The car sat still for a moment, shaking in place as he revved the engine harder and harder. Finally, he ground it into gear and backed it through the garage wall, then drove away with a piece of aluminum siding dragging sparks behind him.

“Fifty pink candles,” said Mom. “He really thought I wanted that.”

“It’s not all that bad,” said Dad. He was standing in the doorway to the garage, staring out at the damage. “It’s not that big a hole.”

The pit-mouse ran between Dad’s feet clutching the pink bunny in its lamb fangs. Dog and bunny disappeared out the hole in the garage wall.

“Come back,” Dad mumbled, almost whispering. He whistled after the dog like he was a little bird.

Look at me now

*L*ook at me now, will you? I am, by training, a mathematics teacher, but my degree is useless. These days a lot of things are.

I keep telling myself: I am happy; I am content. And who's to say it isn't true but me?

I make my living as a day laborer at construction sites, and live in my late brother-in-law's RV in Cleveland, Ohio, "the best location in the nation." I figured it was either this or life at home with my mother. I am 32. People were beginning to talk.

One of the first jobs I had in construction was hauling away scrap. Today, I hauled away scrap. Tomorrow, same thing. Sometimes I get to repair a roof, or help put drywall up in a house, but most of the time it goes like this: a bunch of us hop into a truck at a central location and are taken to somebody's decayed house or business where we knock it down and load pieces of the former building into the bed of the truck. It drives away once it's full and returns maybe a half-hour later empty, primed and ready for us.

My mother, in contrast, is a cardiac-care nurse. Up until a couple of years ago she was a housewife, but then my father was laid off by Ford—FO-MO-CO—after they shut down part of the Lorain plant. Before that, he worked for the state of Ohio, printing up unemployment forms. He said he'd never seen irony up close before. "But now I've seen it," he said. He spent his time on his back after that, on the living room floor, staring up at the ceiling.

"Aren't you going to get up?" Mom asked him one day.

“No,” he replied, exhausted.

She went down to Cuyahoga Community College and signed up for classes. This was before I got laid off from my job teaching. “Always a need for nurses,” Mom said. She studied out in the living room right in front of my father.

“You hate me,” he said.

“No, Craig.”

“You’re taunting me,” he said.

“Do you mind?” she asked. “I’m trying to study.”

He went out to the garage at three in the morning and loaded up his staple guns, hammers, dremel, and lathe, his power drills, torque wrenches, into his baby-blue Ford Econoline van. The empty pegboards are a testament. When he finished, three hours later, the van must have been piled full. He tiptoed upstairs to pack his bag.

I was awake, standing in my doorway, watching.

“You’ve been out there three hours,” Mom said.

“You’re awake,” Dad said, stuffing his bag.

He walked over to the bed next to where my mother was trying to sleep and dropped to his knees. “You wouldn’t believe it, but I managed to get all my stuff in there,” he whispered. He kissed her on the forehead, finished packing his bag, and left.

We tracked his progress, Mom and I, by his credit card purchases. We knew where he ate, the motels he stayed at, where he filled up the tank. The van was using a lot of gas. It must have been the weight of all those tools, and Dad always did like to pick up hitchhikers.

“Should we pay these?” I asked Mom, holding the bills in my hand.

“You can if you want,” she said.

For a while, I did. I got bills from Wyoming and Nevada, Texas, Utah, then a handful from Afebrile, California. I stopped paying then. When the bills arrived I wrote, “Moved to Afebrile, CA” on them and placed them back into the box. His bills stopped coming

shortly thereafter. I even called directory assistance and got his phone number out there in case any bill collectors called.

That's when my sister's husband Roy, the one with the RV, died. His lungs suddenly collapsed during his coffee break at the pickle cannery, where he was a foreman. The coroner said it was the Winstons that did it to him. The pickle cannery picked up the tab for the funeral—that my father did not show up for, even though I called and left a message on his answering—and my sister moved back in with my mother, bringing her two kids. The RV pulled up into our driveway, and out popped my sister's two kids, Sal and Lyle.

Lyle said, "My daddy's dead." He was slurping on a half-melted Atomic Bomb Pop. Red and blue syrup was running down his face. It was a patriotic mess.

Sal said nothing, kicked at a stone. Then she asked when she was going home.

I told her she was home.

"No I'm not. I'm at Grandpa's."

My sister, Laura, got out and handed me the keys. "It was Roy's, and I never liked it anyway," she said.

That's how I got the RV. It is all *use* now. It is no longer *recreational*.



I, like my father before me, got laid off. Along with everyone else in Ohio, it seemed.

"The whole family's here now," Mom said.

"What about Dad?" I asked.

"He doesn't count, he resigned his position," Mom said.

She kept going to school while Laura and I and the kids lounged around her house. Laura collected on her husband's policy and I collected unemployment. The kids collected smooth stones from around the house and colored them with brightly tinted chalk. Technicolor pyramids encircled our home, dotted our lawn. Occasionally

I touched up the paint, or caulked holes, or cut the lawn. But all my attempts to keep the house from decaying were doomed to fail. The tools were all gone, and our house was determined to die. When I did cut the lawn, I made sure I went circumvented the pyramids, trimming the grass around them with a weed whacker.



Mom's first job as a nurse was at Cleveland Presbyterian, even though we're Catholic. Dad was a Methodist and that's why it came as no surprise to Mom when the divorce papers showed up from California. Mom told us to be on the lookout for that part of us that wasn't Catholic, that knew no commitment. She tossed the divorce papers in a drawer, saying that if our father wanted to marry some rich widow, he wasn't going to get any help from her. She stood before us in her white nurse's uniform, her arms crossed, stethoscope hanging around her neck.

Laura said that Mom should get the divorce, that it was a matter of financial responsibility. "What if he blows all his money, Mom? What if he runs up a lot of bills and goes bankrupt? You don't want to be responsible for that! We could lose the house."

"Honey," Mom said, placing her palms flat on the breakfast table, "that is what the sacred vow of marriage is all about."

"But you said he resigned," I complained.

"I didn't expect you to understand," she said, and walked out the door.



The day my father called the house, I was the only one around. Laura and the kids were at Vermilion, sunning themselves next to Lake Erie. Mom was at work.

He said, "By the time you get out here I may be dead."

"Hello?" I said. "Hello?"

He said, "You know where I live," and hung up.

I counted up all the money in my wallet and checked my bank-book. I was tapped out. The unemployment had come to an end. But this was the man who had taught me catch. He was dying.

He said so.

I called Mom at work. "Uh, huh," she replied, "and what does this mean? Hmm?"

I said I didn't know except that it seemed like he wanted me to come out there.

"Then have him lend you the money," she said.

"Maybe, if he's dying—"

"He owes you," she said. "If you recall."

I remembered being seven-years-old and going to my first ball game with him. The Indians had won, and we played catch afterward, and invited the neighbors over for a barbecue. I went down to the garage to see if the mitts were there. They were gone, he had taken them with him. The barbecue, too.

So I checked around the house and found an extra set of credit cards in a bureau drawer upstairs. The bills were being sent to him now, so I would be borrowing back what I'd paid in, essentially.

I drove out there, staying at small motels and eating at cafeterias. I still had my Escort then. That was before it was repossessed, before I went bankrupt, belly-up, as we say in Cleveland.

Johnny Cash sang "Folsom Prison Blues" on the radio as I pulled up to Dad's rented bungalow. Johnny was right at the part about shooting a man in Reno. Dad was out front watering the lawn with a garden-hose, using his thumb to make the water spread and shoot out farther. "You look okay to me," I said, getting out of the car.

"Imagine that," he said, clamping down his thumb, water firing out at the mailbox.

"The glasses are a new addition."

He slid them up his nose with his index finger, squinting at me. "They're part of the problem," he said. "Brain tumor. I figured it out

last week right before I called you. Saw it on TV.” Then he smiled, squirting some water on my sneakers.

I spent the night with my father. There were no hot little dishes in his house, no ancient wealthy widows lurking in the corners. There was just me and Dad and a nearly empty house. There was a coffee table with a statuette of a man’s arm giving you the finger; there was a portable TV on top of its box. In the refrigerator, there was nothing but a lump of ground beef wrapped in foil and labeled with a china marker: “GROUND BEEF.” The freezer had some ice. There was a flea-bitten davenport with masking tape hiding its holes, and that was it. I slept on the floor, wrapped in a blanket I stole from a Motel Six in Sheridan, Wyoming.

“Dad, what happened to the tools?” I asked.

“I sold them,” he said. He was sprawled across the couch, staring down at me.

“What about the barbecue?”

“I traded it for the TV set.”

“My catcher’s mitt,” I said, sitting up. “Don’t tell me you sold that.”

“Pawned it in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. Got a good price for it, too.”

I stood up, rubbing the back of my head. “Dad—”

“Is it so bad, to want to see your own son?” he asked.



I drove back across America in my subcompact, past decaying small towns and abandoned farmhouses. The whole country was falling apart, from the looks of it. The Second Great Depression, or Great Depression II, they were calling it on TV and the radio. On the way home, I listened to the news. A man had burst into a food bank in No Trees, Texas and shot ten people. He shouted, “Is this what you wanted? Is it?” People stood on the side of the road, waving at me,

trying to flag me down. I was a wealthy man in comparison. I still owned something substantial.

When I got home and walked in the front door, I gave my mother a hug. She wasn't looking any younger. I caught my reflection in the mirror next to the front door. I wasn't looking all that young, either. Mom pointed out the front window, and my Escort was repossessed while my mother and I watched.

No surprise there.

Mom didn't even ask about Dad. "How was your trip?" she asked, while we watched the repo man break into my former car.

"I've hit rock bottom," I said. The tires of the Escort squealed on the brick road.

"Be a man," she said.

The next day I walked down to a convenience store to get some coffee and was hired by a man in bib overalls. He wanted me to help him tear down a house. I did.

Now, I go to the convenience store every day, and most days someone will hire me. I'm not going to leave here. The whole town can tear itself down, but I won't leave. I know that there is no place to go.

I found baseball mitts in an abandoned house to replace the ones that were missing, but the kids won't play catch. They have their own games.

I found a barbecue, too, but no one likes to clean it, so it sits in the garage gathering rust.

Nobody can afford cable TV anymore, so the cable TV companies went bust. There's only one TV station left in town. It's run by the government, and all it does all day is tell us not to panic, that everything will be okay.

I don't know anyone who's buying that.

Carl versus the Men from Mars

I bounced off the circus train after we passed through Anniston, Alabama. Smoke gurgled out of smokestacks. It is an ammunition-manufacturing town, I was to learn later. I was most of the way through urination, standing on the back of the back of the train, when we hit a bump. I flew from the caboose, face down with my wiener hanging out, like I was copulating with the tracks. I sprang to my feet, plenty of spring left in me, and I was Piecar Carl no more, no more a circus cook, just like that.

Funny how life works. I buttoned up my fly.

I wondered what I would do now with the train chugging away from me, leaving me behind in Alabama.

“Daddy, look!” A child was pointing at me. He was wearing bib overalls and so was his daddy. Daddy was chewing and spitting, glaring at me through mint-tinted spectacles. A glistening mole twinkled at me from his nose. Early morning dew. A melancholic blackbird pecking at the needy ground. Straw hat tumbling brimwise across a dirt road.

“Fell off that train,” Daddy said. He spat black without turning his head.

“Put him to work,” the child said, sloppy blond hair whipping in the breeze.

“Caw,” the sad blackbird commented, and lifted himself up off the ground slowly—slowly rising, up above a dying tree that was a barren twig.

“I have money,” I said.

“Reckon we can let you eat,” Daddy said.

“Put him to work, Daddy. Put him to work,” the blond child demanded.

“Shut up, girl. Git,” Daddy said to her. To me, “What you waiting for, boy? You a retard?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“All right,” Daddy said. “Come along.”

The girl stood beside her father. When he moved, she moved. I followed them across a field, through stunted corn. Through blight. Past more blackbirds unafraid of humans. They didn’t move when we walked past. The girl turned to look at me. It was a curiously uncurious look, curiously unhostile. Her face was as round and white as the full moon on a clear winter night.

“How old are you?” she asked me.

“Thirty,” I said. “You?”

“That’s none of your business,” she said, without anger, “Mister.” She was older than she at first appeared. She may be a very short teenager, I thought.

“You have a name, train man?” her father asked.

“Carl,” I said.

“You talk too much,” the girl said.

It’s not every day that a man wearing clown pants and a Grateful Dead tee-shirt drops urinating into your back yard, I reckon. We crossed a railyard whose foremost feature was orange rust. Splintery wood was a lesser feature. A shack leaned against itself beside a watertower. Daddy stopped, spat into each hand, then climbed the ladder attached to the tower. His daughter imitated him and followed.

When in Rome. Spit, spit. Climb, climb.

Up top, on the little balcony surrounding the water container—whitewashed white and graffitied, then whitewashed over again—I had the opportunity to look out toward Anniston. There were a lot

of storefronts out there, it seemed. A pair of binoculars was chained to the railing. I pulled them up and peered through them. I saw pawnshops and prostitutes, gun dealerships and a replica of the car from “The Dukes of Hazard.” I saw a replica of the car from “Starsky and Hutch.” I saw what might have been Jim Rockford’s car from the “Rockford Files.”

“You folks sure are devoted to your TV,” I said.

But they were inside now. I could see them through the window they’d blowtorch-cut in the side and decorated with drapes sashed with red ribbons. I let the binoculars drop. Daring bungee binoculars, swinging. The girl inside was kneeling on a milking stool cooking a bubbling kettle of beans atop a potbellied stove. Daddy sat down on an upended wooden crate and watched her. I could see a couple of army cots in there with green blankets and lumpy pillows.

I reached down into my silly pants and found one of my rolls of bills. It was mostly twenties with a couple of ones on top. I had a feeling I was going to be leaving a lot of that money here. Which was okay considering I had lined my shoes with folding money, too. I had \$2,218 on me, by my last estimate. I could get back to Sarasota in style if I so desired. It dawned on me that that is where I wanted to go now, home.

The beans had a sickly sweet scent to them. The girl stirred and stirred with a wooden spoon. Her old man removed his hat and searched along his close-shorn scalp with the tips of his fingers. Maybe he was feeling for scabs. Maybe bugs. Maybe he was treating himself to a scalp massage.

He put his hat back on and peered out the window toward me. “C’mon, boy. Supper’ll get cold.” It was morningtime. Shouldn’t it be breakfast?

I circled around the catwalk until I found the door. It was a Navy-type door with a steering wheel in the middle of it. I gave the wheel a spin and it clunked and squealed open.

“Mmm, beans,” the old guy said, shaking his tin plate at the girl.

“Patience, daddy,” the girl said, spooning the beans onto it.

I ducked inside. Kerosene lamps and sticky sweat. An emerald horsefly buzzed my shoulder-backs.

“Grab a plate,” the girl said, her voice bounding around us metallicly. She nodded toward a washtub in the corner. “After we eat, we’ll go down to the bus station. I need to take a shower anyhow.”

I walked over to the washtub, floor clanging beneath me, tinsounds echoing around me, and dug out a beige-plastic school cafeteria lunchtray featuring a hairline crack. I dug around some more and found a big, metal tablespoon. She clapped some beans down onto my plate and I sat cross-legged on the dusty-gritty floor and dug in. The beans were surprisingly good. The old man slurped and groaned. He reminded me a bit of my own father, who also enjoyed food loudly, and whose death had made me a quarter-millionaire. The old man licked his plate clean, asked, “Where you heading to, train man?”

“Back home, I guess,” I replied. “Sarasota.”

“Sarasota circus fuckers,” the old man commented.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” I said.

The girl wasn’t eating. She stood on the stool staring at me. It was a neutral stare, like she was sizing me up a bit. An unblinking neutral stare. “You done yet?” she asked when I got down to my final spoonful of beans. “Hand daddy the plate.”

I handed him the tray. He licked mine clean, too.



“That’s the post office, that’s the ammunition factory out that way, and that’s Fort McClellan over there,” the girl said. She took two strides for my one. “Anything else you need to know?”

The hookers were leering at me. It was probably my unusual pants. “Clothing store?” I asked.

“C’mon,” she said. And I followed her to a feedstore.

I bought two pairs of bib overalls, stiff, a green laundry bag, two red pocket t-shirts, two pairs of brown boxer shorts, two pairs of green wool socks, and a baseball cap that gave the impression that I was in Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 48th Infantry. “Go Army” arched over the plastic teeth strap in the back of the cap. I adjusted for my headsize, rolled the brim and plopped on the hat, brim forward. Into a changing stall I went, and emerged wearing a set of my new clothing a few minutes later. My residual clothing all went into the green bag. All that it cost me was a couple of twenties. I’d left two twenties back in the watertower, so that left me with \$2,178.

She walked me over to the bus station. A busload of pre-recruits was milling around outside, nervously chatting with the bus driver, laughing uneasily. “What’s basic training like?” they pestered him. He shrugged. “Like the movies,” he said finally. “Just like that.”

It wasn’t enough for them, they wanted to know more. One of them spotted my cap and sidled up to me as I stood in line. “So what’s it like?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I replied.

“But what about the hat?”

“I bought it at a feedstore.”

“Fucking civilian,” he concluded and walked away.

When I was almost up to the window, the girl said, “You’re buying me a ticket, too, right?”

“I am?”

“Sure you are,” she said. “I’m free, white and 21, and I can do as I please.” She meant it.

“What about your father?” I asked.

“He ain’t really my daddy,” she said. “And I’m sick of him anyhow.”

“What do you figure to do in Sarasota?”

“Not live *here*,” she said.

It sounded reasonable enough, so I bought her a ticket.



Brandy decided I wasn't a bad sort after I bought her a ticket and didn't attempt to molest her. We sat in the back of the bus, which hiccuped and sputtered its way toward Florida down straight-narrow roads, past stunted trees and corpse mines, abandoned drive-in movie theaters and dusty naked kids, waving.

This part of Alabama was so dusty we couldn't see the sun. Old Sol glowed through the dry haze, shimmering in the orange-yellow sky. The bus gasped and groaned to a stop in front of the Bloody Williamson Diner. The driver yanked open the door and stepped out without saying a word. The commentator on the broke-antenna, transistor radio duct-taped to the dash said, "Some men take to violence as a way of life. It was foretold." Passengers glanced around at each other, wondering what to do. Brandy stood up and stretched. An older lady wearing fancy gloves and a hat pinned to her whitish hair followed Brandy's stretching lead. A jailbird snorted, his new, cheap suit of clothes did not fit him well. In his lap was a box that formerly contained cans of cling peaches. He rubbed his five-o'clock face with one hand. His other, tobacco-stained at the index and middle fingertips, caressed the box. Probably everything he owned was in there.

The bus driver hopped back on. "Twenty-five minutes," he said, and re-debarked. Coughing and shuffling we lurched from the bus and streamed into the tiny diner in twos and threes. Brandy and I sat in a two-person table in the corner. She kept her back to the wall. The waitress—Dee Dee her nametag announced—brought us two cups of coffee, black. A cup-size, metal pitcher of half-and-half was already on the table. Heinz ketchup slopped in a bottle, half full. Saltshaker with more rice in it than salt. No peppershaker. Filled glass and chrome sugar dispenser. Dee Dee, hands shaking, makeup smeary, waitress uniform food-spattered, asked, "Ready?"

"Patty melt medium, fries and a malted milk," I said.

“Ribeye steak rare, fries and a coke,” Brandy said.

“Lah-dee-dah,” I commented.

“Hey, you’re paying,” Brandy said, handing Dee Dee the plastic-slipped menu. “And you’re loaded. I seen that roll you’re carrying.”

“Announce it to the world, why don’t you,” I said.

“Don’t get all pissy with me,” she said, pouring most of the sugar into her coffee. “You don’t own me just cause you’re paying the freight.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me that you’re going to pay me back,” I said.

“I ain’t,” she replied, swirling her spoon through the coffee sugar slurry. “Cause you and me both know that ain’t true.” Ting, ting, ting.

One taste of the coffee convinced me that Brandy had been here before. It was as bitter as the grave. I dumped a fair amount of the sugar that Brandy had left me into my cup and spun the spoon around in it pretty good.

Another bus pulled up outside and ground to a halt. Our bus driver strolled over to talk to his comrade. They seemed to be sharing a good laugh, each with a hand on the other’s shoulder. Passengers debarked. The diner wouldn’t hold them all.

Our food arrived. The rye bread on my order was soggy with blood and untoasted. The burger was rare, the onions raw. I ate about half and gave up. I didn’t even try the fries. I slurped a little of the malted milk, but whoever made it didn’t bother to stir it enough. I felt a headache coming on from behind my eyes. I missed the click-clack of the railroad under my feet.

Brandy was almost finished. She ripped through her tough piece of meat like a tiger and sucked on the fat. She spat the fat onto the plate and reached over for my fries, and devoured them. Then she gobbled down the rest of my patty melt.

“Don’t lick my plate,” I said.

“I ain’t daddy,” she said, her mouth circled with blood and grease and yellow cheese. “Why you rubbing your eyes?”

“I get these headaches sometimes,” I said.

She wiped her mouth on her shoulders, first one side then the other, ran her hands down her pants lap, and stood up. She walked around behind me and ground the heels of her hands into my temples. “Don’t move,” she said. “And try and relax.” She karate-chopped my shoulders and neck, kneaded my neck and the base of my skull, all the time telling me to relax, relax, Jesus just relax. How are you supposed to relax with someone yapping at you to relax and that person is attacking you at the same time? She finished up by grabbing the hair on the top of my head and shaking my head yes. “That ought to do ‘er,” she concluded.

I was about to disagree when I realized I didn’t have a headache anymore. “That’s amazing,” I said.

“My mama got migraines real bad,” she said, “before she up and died.”

“That’s a shame,” I said.

“About the headaches or about the dying?”

“Both, I suppose,” I said.

“Nothing nobody could do about it, so all you can do is cry and go on,” she said. She stood next to my chair and was looking me level in the eye, probably for the first time.

I pulled a napkin out of the napkin holder and handed it to her. “You missed a spot,” I said. “Your whole face, that is.”



The walk across the parking lot had left us passengers orange dusty. We pounded the dust off ourselves the best we could, choking the bus cabin with Bama dirt. “I believe I could take a nap,” Brandy informed me before nodding off. Her bleached head reposed on my arm, then slid down. She curled up next to me in the seat, foam rub-

ber escaping from a knife-slit next to her head. Afternoon faded and the sky cleared as we gurgled and sputtered closer to Florida.

I noted a book-shaped bulge in Brandy's side-pocket. I finger-tipped the book in there and slid it out without waking her. It was *Everything is Well Below Par*, of course, my famous brother's prickly memoir about how much he dislikes humanity. I flipped the heavily dog-eared paperback over to see which author picture this edition had on it. Turned out to be a photo of Tom in Southeast Asia, grinning horribly at the photographer, scruffy beard on sallow cheeks. Part of Tom's legend is that he disappeared into the jungle and was never seen again. Maybe cannibals ate him, or he died of some dread disease that turns your guts into pudding, went the legend. The legend insisted that he preferred a grim death to having to live in despicable Western civilization. The book was in its eighth or ninth printing. Something like that. I'd lost count.

We were rapidly losing sunlight, but had emerged from the Alabama dust bowl. The sky was primer-putty gray. Trees had a bit more life to them.

Tom wasn't dead. In fact, he was living in Sarasota again, married to a woman he was supposed to believe was Thai. She was actually from Texas, a devoted follower of his who tracked him down at the Angkor Wat, and then pretended not to know who he was, speaking to him in a simulation of broken English. A best-selling book allows you to buy all sorts of information and private detectives. Tom brought her home to Sarasota, married her, and amused himself by allowing her to continue to speak in a bad imitation of an Asian accent. Yoshii Nakamura—our lawyer, who is known to viewers of late-night television in Sarasota as Ninja Assassin! Lawyer—drew up the prenuptial agreement papers that allow Tom to keep all of his angry book money in case she decides that living with a world-famous author is not her cup of decaf. Tom wrote all of this to me on Bahai Hut stationery. The two of them lived in the North Tamiami Trail Best Western across the street from the Sarasota-Bradenton

International Airport, and took all their meals at the Bahai Hut, which is the Pacific Island-themed restaurant attached to their hotel.

“Living a lie,” I said aloud. The letter from Tom was on the circus train, in Marietta, Georgia by this time.

The bus hissed to a stop and the door swung open. Three portly gentlemen wearing identical tee-shirts boarded the bus. They were wearing Native-American warpaint and brown-leather head bonnets festooned with red and blue plastic feathers. I watched them situate themselves in the seats directly in front of ours. Their tee-shirts informed me that they were Men From Mars, and that the Men From Mars Retreat in Tungsten, Alabama was their fourth annual retreat. One of the Men From Mars had a pair of bongos.

The bus lurched forward, gagged on something, and picked up speed after spitting whatever it was out with a loud pop. The sun disappeared suddenly, leaving the cabin in pitch-blackness.

“Ay-yee-ay-oh,” the Men From Mars low-chanted, while the bongo guy bongoded softly.

A pair of headlights bobbed up and down, beaming in from behind us. The beams went from ceiling to shoulders and back again, like someone had a pair flashlights taped to his head while he performed endless pushups. The Men From Mars picked up the rhythm of the headlights with all their drumming and chanting. The effect was causing seasickness in me.

I tried to slip the book back into Brandy’s pocket without waking her, but failed. “You trying something funny?” she asked me.

“No, just reading your book. I was bored,” I offered.

“Oh,” she said, brightening. “That guy’s crazy.”

“Try telling *him* that,” I said.

She knuckle-rubbed her eyes awake. “Daddy,” she said, whipping around in her seat. She was on her feet now, hands death-gripping the seatback, staring at the bobbing headlights. She didn’t seem scared, only miffed.

“Is he, or is he ain’t, you daddy?” I asked.

“Step-daddy,” she said.

“Married mama, pre-death?” I asked.

“Huh?”

I’d had enough of the drumming. I thumped the bongo player in the back of his head. “No more drumming,” I said.

They stopped. Heads pivoted round. Angry glares seen in the on-off-on-off headlight beams. “We’re reasserting our maleness,” the bongo player told me.

“That’s plain asinine,” I said.

“He’s a doubter,” sloppy haircut guy, far left, said. His beard could have used a combing out.

“Daddy, why? Why won’t you leave me be?” Brandy whined.

“How old are you?” I asked her.

“I told you it’s none of your business, and I meant it,” she said.

“Rituals help us reattain what we have lost in modern society,” the middle guy said.

“I don’t want to be arrested for transporting a minor across state lines,” I said.

“I’m 21,” she said. “Happy?”

“Do you have a fake ID to prove that?” I asked.

“The day is coming when men will have to be men again,” bongo guy, far right, said.

“Our Y chromosome is pleading with us,” crappy beard guy said.

She dug around in the pocket opposite the book and found a wallet with a Mr. Smiley Face glued crooked on it. She handed the wallet to me. Inside were a crumpled and ironed to crispy five-dollar bill and an Alabama state ID that backed up what she’d told me.

“I’m in the clear,” I told bongo guy.

“Our lives must have purpose,” bongo guy replied. “It’s the hunter-gatherer in us.”

“Hunter gatherer?” It was the freshly sprung jailbird. He sounded a little enraged. “I’ll show you hunter-gatherer, you pussies,” the jailbird said. We all turned to look at him. His face strobed into view,

slipping closer with each flash of daddy's headlights. Dark eyes and dark stubble. The hands reached into the bongo guy's lap and wrenched free the offensive drums. "Don't even move. I'll kill you fuckers." He meant it. I guess I wasn't the only one who didn't enjoy the bonging. He reached into his cling peaches box and produced a shank. It could have been from prehistoric times, that shank. It looked like something a Neanderthal would use to cut up a rump roast. He tore into the bongo skins with relish, shredding them. Bongo guy made a half-move toward him. Or quarter-move. It wasn't much of a move. The jailbird brandished the makeshift knife. "You want some of this?"

Bongo guy backed down. Then he turned toward me. "*You* started this," he squealed.

The bus jerked to a halt, air pissing from brakes. The lights clicked on over our heads. The driver shambled back, hunched over. "You and the midget," he said to me, thumbing. "Off."

"Off?"

"Pronto."

I didn't argue. I picked up my green bag from the overhead rack and grasped my traveling companion's hand, like I was a boy scout leading her across the street, my good deed for the day, and we trundled to the busfront while the other passengers wearily jeered. "Troublemakers," the hat lady snorted as we passed by.

The bus left us on the side of the road under a solitary, mercury vapor lamp. We weren't stranded for long. Daddy pulled up in his vehicle, an amalgamation of auto parts strung together with baling wire and welded together, and maybe superglued, too, for all I knew. Chevy and Ford and Datsun. In the pickup truck bed, a plush velour seat bolted down and facing the rear. A full-sized cab from a sedan. A truck tire, two car tires, a tiny tire from a subcompact's trunk made up its footing. And a Mercedes medallion sprouted from the hood. "You done fucked up, train man," daddy said.

"Don't I know it," I replied.

“You set in the back. I got to have personal words with my girl,” daddy said.

“I ain’t going nowheres with *you*, daddy.” Her arms crossed defiantly.

“Blossom, I don’t see where you have a choice,” he said, leaning across the front bench seat. The back seats were a pair of sporty red and white bucket seats from a Ford Torino.

I climbed into the pickup bed and strapped myself into the luxury seat from a Lexus, my green bag in my lap.

“For the millionth time, my name ain’t ‘Blossom,’ it’s Brandy!” She got in with him, the door groaned and slammed, then slammed again, then the third time was the charm with a satisfying thunk.

Daddy expertly whipped the car thing around until we were heading back toward where we came from. I was smart about strapping myself in. The ride was not unlike that of a mechanical bull. I held onto my green bag tightly.

An hour later, maybe more, we were back into the dustbowl. I was feeling sour. I’d had enough of this ride. I unstrapped myself and was quickly flung from the rear of the amalgam car to the side of the road. I tucked and rolled and was back on my feet, watching the car lurch and grind away from me.

Up ahead I saw the lights from the Bloody Williamson Diner. I dusted myself off, picked up my bag and started walking. They needed me desperately. I would soon convince them of that.

About the Author



John Lawrence Sheppard was born in Ohio, grew up in Florida, and served in the U.S. Army in Germany. Now he lives next door to a graveyard in Chicago. If you liked this book, you should blow more brass on *Midnight in Monaco* and *Bad Men Driving*.

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